Raising Home

by TheTypewriterGirl

Summary

To be read between chapters 15 and 16 of Home.

How Robert and Talia met at the same time and place John and Claudia met in 1988, and then how their families unfolded over the years (sometimes even overlapping, but no one noticed). Includes millionaires, grocery store explosions, tiny werewolf costumes, too many Batman stickers, and Derek's leaf collection.

- Inspired by Home by TheTypewriterGirl
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“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Peter mutters slowly, as the limo driver pulls them up to the scene of what is supposed to be their newly-demolished forest.
His brother is good at summarizing shit-tastic situations like that. And this is definitely a shit-tastic situation. The tires roll to a stop behind the bulldozers, revealing a tinted view of the line of trees marking acre one of the thirty acres he and Peter bought, which should be a pile of wood pulp by now. But no, there isn’t any wood pulp, because sitting in his trees are _hippies_. Full on hemp-wearing, weed-smoking, pot-brownie baking, gypsy-clothed, half-naked _hippies_. Probably. He can’t actually see them in detail from this far away, but probably.

They unclick their seat belts in unison and step out of the car, when blinding camera flashes immediately snap at them, along with screaming reporters clawing over each other for a chance to talk to the two rich CEO siblings. But he and Peter are prepared for this; they’re both wearing aviator sunglasses to hide their reflective eyes. And to look cool, because aviators are classy. One has to look cool when you’re a millionaire, and he and Peter definitely look the part in their sharp Bill Blass suits and gleaming Armani shoes.

“Mr. Hale!” One streamlined woman yells at them, trying desperately to shove her CBS microphone down their throats.

“Which one,” he and Peter deadpan in unison, as their security guards push the reporters back to clear a path.

“Robert! Robert Hale! What do you and your brother plan on doing about the current situation?”

“We’ll have our people get back to you once we actually _see_ the situation,” he responds curtly, because honestly, these people. “Now if you don’t mind,” he snaps his fingers and security starts roping off the construction site so the reporters can’t cross the line and ask them a million questions. He hears the news anchor for channel 2 droning rapid-fire into a camera in the background,

“—here at the scene where Hale Associates’ CEOs Robert and Peter Hale have just arrived to confront the protestors, who are blocking chippers ready to clear the forest grounds in order to build residential housing for the county—”

“Goddamn, Pete. Is it so much to ask that our ten-year dream runs smoothly the day we actually make it happen?” He mutes as they walk briskly across the site and up to the trees, where the protestors blur into sharper focus behind the branches.

“Life seldom runs smoothly for those an inch away from winning,” Peter drawls. “That would be too easy.”

“_Hale houses or nature’s glory? Protect the trees, protect the heart of the county!_”

Robert barely resists the urge to growl. There’s about a dozen of them, camped out in the high branches of the line of walnut and pine trees marked for termination—a thin bald man who looks like he rock climbs for a living, a woman who looks like she sunbathes for a living, a younger woman sporting overalls and an atrocious haircut, a burly man with tattoos and a beard, and the rest he stops caring because they are frankly all the most disturbing people he’s ever seen. Most are secured in place on their branches with bungee cords or harnesses, presumably for safety while sleeping. It’s cute, really.

“Really, PR couldn’t handle this?” Peter muses dryly. “Some of them aren’t even wearing shoes.”

Another protestor yells out “_Save the trees of our homeland!_” and Robert glares at them behind his sunglasses. He strides powerfully over to the bulldozers, radiating authority like the professional that he is, and snaps his fingers at a police officer. “Good morning, officer. Would you mind telling us why these people are still sitting in our trees?”
The man turns around with a jiggle of his gut, revealing a ruddy face and greying handlebar mustache. “Ah. Are you two Robert and Peter Hale?”

He and Peter stand a little straighter, clasping hands behind their backs. “Yes.”

The officer nods. "Sorry gentlemen, but this is a peaceful protest. We can’t actually make them come down in a situation like this, unless your company decides to invent your own methods, within the law of course. But between you and me, I doubt these folks will last more than a few days. I’ve seen a lot of strikes like this during my time with the department, and they always give up eventually. It’s just a matter of waiting."

“Yes, and we’ve been waiting for years,” Peter clucks impatiently. “Here I thought flower children were a thing of the sixties.”

“Yep, this is the first big protest we’ve seen from the Kin of Kéyah. Usually they’re more of a bake-sale and picnic luncheon kind of group, but—"

“The kin of what now?” Peter raises an eyebrow behind his sunglasses, and it’s the left eyebrow, which means he’s laughing on the inside.

“Kéyah,” the officer shrugs. “I’m not sure if I’m pronouncing that right, supposedly it’s Native American or something. It’s what they call themselves.”

“The protestors,” Peter deadpans, and this time his eyebrows drop down flat.

“Yep. An organization of Beacon Hills locals who protect the preservation of the county wildlife. They’ve been yellin’ their mission all morning, so I’ve got it memorized at this point. Talia Nata—something is their leader. She says she wants to talk to you.”

Beside him Peter snorts, a dry huff of laughter that means that there is absolutely no chance of this happening. Robert couldn’t agree more.

“Well, she better be ready to hop on down, because I won’t be listening to anyone sitting in a tree,” he voices, adding grimly, “our trees.”

“Right, well. I’m Sheriff Sanders,” the officer introduces, and shakes their hands with pudgy fingers. “I’ve assigned the department’s three new officers to supervise the protest twenty-four seven until the Kéyah members come down. That over there is officer John Stilinski,” he points out a sandy-blonde head beneath one of the trees, “the one by the patrol car is Terry Grey, and that one is Richard Sullivan. They’ll be rotating shifts. If you have any questions along the line, they should be able to help out.”

“Thank you officer,” Robert nods curtly, not mentioning that he has no intention of staying here, nor does his brother. They will sit in their office on the tenth floor of the company building while PR, Montgomery, and the press managers handle the dirty work on site.

“My pleasure, gentlemen,” Sanders tips his hat to them and walks off, leaving him and Peter steely at the edge of the woods.

“Beacon Hills is only one of three California counties left with untouched natural forest, but there is housing almost everywhere you turn!” A thin woman with a long silver braid shouts to the wind, flapping her wrinkled arms like bat wings atop her tree perch.

“Then you must sit in trees on a regular basis, since you clearly have no concept of just how high the mortgage rates are around here,” Robert all but growls, but only loud enough for Peter to hear him.
“Not everyone has the funds to buy a living space in this town, which is why we’re building affordable houses on this lot!”

“Don’t let them get to you,” Peter chastises calmly, as he adjusts his Rolex. “They’ll be out of our perfectly styled hair soon enough.”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” A voice like liquid velvet calls down. ”Are you the ones who want to cut down our forest?”

He and Peter turn their attention up to the largest tree, where the human embodiment of Mother Nature herself is smiling down at them. She’s perched about ten feet up, lounging against the trunk of a great oak as if it were a lawn chair. Silky dark hair spills around her tan face in the breeze, and a beige shawl wraps comfortably around her shoulders, frayed edges fluttering delicately over the billowing fabric of a mile-long, midnight blue skirt embroidered with tiny moons. She is undoubtedly Talia Nat’aanii.

“Are you the one responsible for postponing our construction plans?” He huffs behind his aviators, crossing his arms so the sun glints off his ruby cufflinks.

Talia smiles pleasantly as if receiving a compliment. “Well, we like to think of it as ‘improving’ your plans, but yes. We climbed these beautiful trees this morning.”

“View must be nice,” he raises an eyebrow. “We invested quite a sum to own this acreage so I hope it’s been worth your while.”

“The view is lovely, yes.” Talia smiles again, still refusing to break her calm, sultry tone. “If you have a moment, Mr. Hale and Mr. Hale, I’d like to represent my group and speak to you about how we feel about your project.”

Beside him Peter actually ducks his head and laughs, but Robert keeps his stance erect and defensive. It surprises him because he’s usually the one with the sense of humor.

“We have no intention of hearing what you have to say,” he dismisses curtly. “My brother and I have our plans set.”

“And we are very busy men, so you understand why we have no time to spare for humans who illegally hold up our multimillion dollar project,” Peter adds.

Talia’s eyebrows twitch at ‘human’ but she nods, as if this is fair. “I understand your schedule must be busy, yes. But I will need no more than ten minutes of your time. My friends and I have been sending you letters for months, but since they didn’t seem to make much of an impact, we decided this was the best way to get your attention.”

Robert struggles to maintain a straight face. He and Peter never received any letters. Social Interactions and Management check all the mail first, with strict orders to toss out anything along the lines of charity projects or non-profit campaigns. Top-grossing CEOs don't have time to sit and read fan mail when company plans need organizing.

“Well I’m afraid your plans have backfired, Ms. Natananny. My brother—“

“Nat’aanii, but please. Call me Talia.”

“—and I have no intention of humoring you. Please come down from our trees in swift fashion and we will consider lessening your charges.”
Talia’s smile wanes to something sad, but Robert doesn’t have time to analyze it because he and Peter are already whirling around on their feet, leaving their hippie-infested forest behind. Their strides are powerful and in sync beneath the bright summer sun, and the reporters start screaming at them again when they reach the limo. Security holds the car door open for them.

“Robert Hale, what do plan to do about the protestors?”

“Mr. Robert Hale, did you speak with Talia Nat’aanii? What did she—“

“Will Hale Associates follow through with the construction of Hale Housing? How long—“

“Robert, are the rumors true that you—“

“Robert Hale, local reports state that you and Hale Associates are planning—“

Peter slams the limousine door shut before security has a chance to do it for him, lips pursed as if tasting something bitter. The enclosed interior of the car mutes the reporters to a muffled annoyance, quiet aside from the slick zip of their slacks on the seats, the tap of Robert's fingertips against the door handle.

“What an embarrassment,” his brother broods. “And on such a lovely Sunday morning, too. Shame.”

Robert sighs as he reaches for the bottle of orange bubble water in the ice bucket. “Well how the hell do we get them down?” He mutters, glaring grumpily at the singing hippies.

“We’re millionaires, Rob, we can buy them down,” Peter remarks coolly, shooting a bored glance over the tips of his aviators. “I say we offer them a price and wait three seconds for their grubby green thumbs to snatch up the check and run back to The Shire with it.”

Robert half-chuckles, half-sighs as he takes his glasses off and rubs a hand over his face. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a cigarette and lights up. “And I thought I was the optimistic one.”

“You’re a twenty-six year old business owner who’s featured in Forbes every other month,” Peter locks eyes with him seriously. “You could retire tomorrow if you want, but you won’t. Because this is our dream, and I’ll be damned if a handful of granola-scarfing tree huggers are going to make us wait for it.”

Robert stares out the window as the limo tires pull away, leaving the tree line and reporters in the dust. He sips his orange bubble water. “They’re going down,” he promises.

.o0O0o. June 4th, 1988.

The protestors don’t come down.

It’s day five, and Robert is ready to pull his perfectly coiffed hair out.

Five days of reading Talia Nat’aanii’s obnoxious mission statements printed in bold across the top of The Beacon Hills Gazette, and five days of skirting by the construction site in the limo to spy on the situation. The police officers are still there, as are the bulldozers and chippers they’ve been shelling out thousands to keep on site, not to mention the damn bodies in his trees. Granted thousands are mere pennies to him and Peter, but it really is unfair. He and Peter want to build the homes for a good cause. So why isn’t Karma on their side?
“Smoke bombs are cheap,” Peter voices slyly, flicking a piece of lint off the crisp white shirt beneath his Bill Blass suspenders. “Not that money is an issue for us, but I imagine it would clear them out within a satisfactory number of minutes.”

He, Peter, and Hank are sitting in the meeting room on the seventh floor. Hank has been his friend and advisor (and just Peter's advisor) since they signed the contract for the building two years ago, offering wisdom in his rolled-up sleeves because he always gets overheated, and entertaining Robert with the dry humor of his wobbly jowls. He’s a short, stout man with hairy arms and a kind spirit despite how his face looks a little like those fat, sleepy bulldogs. Hank is the calming goat in this bullpen of hippy-dippy bullshit.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Hank shakes his head. “If one of them passes out and falls twenty feet on their head, you men will be facing some serious lawsuits. And not just from the Kin of Kéyah. You two might be rich, but it’s surprisingly easy for investors to lose their fortunes like that.”

Peter makes a soft noise of disgust, like the fragility of human bone disinterests him.

“Allright,” Robert rubs a hand over his face, as if the motion might erase years of premature wrinkles. They’ve already tried blasting bullhorns at night to keep the protestors awake, but sleep-deprivation apparently bears no weight on people who probably huff incense for lunch. They’ve ordered more police security, but the protestors are infuriatingly peaceful. “So just hypothetically, let’s say we talk to Nat’aanii. What—”

“We are not talking to her,” Peter snaps again, eyeing him sharply over the tips of his Versace loafers, which are crisscrossed up on the glossy redwood table. “There is no quicker way to get unflattering pictures of the company slapped onto the front page of every paper in the county. Not to mention our interview with The Economist next week, which will be a PR disaster if you decide to spare the hobbits an open ear.”


“I’m just saying, it might be in better interest to please the masses,” Robert continues wearily. “People are starting to look poorly upon the company. Did you check with Montgomery this morning? Twelve publishers released articles this past week blaming us for not talking to Kin of Kéyah. They’re all siding with the environmentalists, and if we don’t show some manners soon we’re going to look bad. The whole town wants us to hear them out. How are we supposed to call ourselves a company for the county if we don’t listen to the county?”

Peter regards him coolly from the other side of the table, hands folded calmly atop his chest. “Going out there to listen to those people will only make us look weak. It will make us look like we’re second guessing ourselves, as if we actually stand a chance of being persuaded to change the plans we’ve been building for years. I say we keep waiting. Any day now the Kin members will give up and climb down, and the papers will forget about them in less than a week.”

Robert clasps his hands under his nose as he stares at the table. He can see the carved patterns in the ceiling reflecting off the wood. Peter has a point. “What do you think, Hank?”

Hank scratches at his brow, regarding his notes behind oversized tortoiseshell glasses. “Both of you bring up good points. My advice? The two of you do down to the site and talk to Nat’aanii. You don’t actually have to listen, but the press will be there and they’ll jot down every word of your opener. Take it as an opportunity to vouch for the company and make yourselves look like decent human beings. Your politeness might actually draw in some new investors.”

For a few moments the only sound in the office is the slight squeak-squeak of Robert’s chair as he
swivels nervously, a habit his brother hates. Peter breaks the silence with a sigh and a stretch, thunking his loafers down onto the carpet.

“Well, let’s go get this out of the way then,” Peter rolls his eyes, clapping Robert on the back as he stands. “Cheerio, brother. And fix that squeaky chair. Not like we can’t afford a little WD-40.”

Robert quickly throws his jacket over his shoulder and follows, quietly amazed that Peter didn’t fight on this. It’s a small miracle, but he doesn’t question it; when life gives you lemons, keep the damn lemons. "Coming, sweet cheeks. Hank, page Montgomery and tell him to whip us up an opening statement. I want it legible and ready inside the limo in five.”

Hank grunts into his coffee mug. “Consider it done.”

“That’s what I like to hear! Wait up, Petey. Let’s take the west elevator down, swing by the intern tour and give ‘em a glimpse of some real-life millionaires, eh?”

“Robert.”

Robert spins around at the sound of Hank’s gruff bulldog voice. “Yes, Hank?”

Hank raises an eyebrow, one chubby finger tucked into the ‘2’ of the table rotary phone. ”You’re welcome.”

“Thanks, Hank!” Robert calls cheerfully over his shoulder as he and Peter stride into the hall, chests puffed and shoes clacking expensively on the marble floor. “How’s my hair look, Pete? Wanna look good if we’re gonna show up in the paper tomorrow morning.”

“Debonair as always. But I do wish you’d listen to me about your suit choices,” Peter side-eyes Robert’s grey slacks. “Pink and grey? Honestly, Rob. You might as well just dress up as Stay Puft the marshmallow man.”

Robert can't double-over in a gleeful belly-laugh in front of the company employees, so he giggles heartily into his fist. “You’re kidding me! You finally watched Ghostbusters? Hot damn, I wish I could have gotten that on film! It only took you four years, huh? Did you snort the wrong kind of wolfsbane or did someone just tie you down and hold open your eyelids à la Clockwork Orange?”

Peter rolls his eyes and hauls Robert up straight again, swiftly leading them to the elevator. "It was for business, don’t let it go to your head. I was tired of missing references at company parties. It's our job to look smart and educated in front of potential investors, and for the record it was the most excruciating one-hundred-seven minutes of my life, including that time that son of a bitch Rodney Escobar snuck wolfsbane into my sandwich in middle school.”

Robert is still giggling as the silver doors part, and the sleek office workers inside duck their heads respectfully and step out to give them privacy. His brother elbows him sharply and tells him to stop laughing like an idiot in front of the employees. "Pete, you're such a wet rag," Robert remarks. "And shut up about my fashion choices. You’re just jealous because they always photograph your bad side.”

“Yes, well at least my chin doesn’t look like an ass.”

“Hey, just a wait a couple years until you’re twenty-six. There’s no escaping the Hale butt chin. Besides, women love it!”

“Women love your money.”
“That too. Now let's go make some more,” he straightens his tie as the elevator dings at them.

They step out onto the polished marble of the first floor. Peter holds out a hand and Robert high-fives it, followed by an intricate twisting of thumbs and a fist-bump to end. It’s the 'secret' handshake they created when they were in middle school, and the only silly gesture Peter allows while in their classy company building.

.o0O0o. **May 30th, 1988.**

For his first day on the job, it’s not quite what John expects.

“You boys are going to the edge of the woods today, by the end of Walnut Street,” Sheriff Sanders tells them, laugh lines crinkling beneath his greying handle-bar mustache. “The Hale Associates firm was supposed to start cutting down some forest today, but there’s a group of environmentalists parked up in the trees.”

John exchanges a glance with Terry, who looks just as surprised. Then John tries looking at Richard, but Richard ignores him in favor of standing erect and meeting Sanders’s gaze attentively in perfect robot-like fashion. The three of them make Beacon Hills’s newest police officers.

“Pardon, sir?” Terry asks.

“You newbies are going to stand in solidarity with the tree-huggers,” Sheriff Sanders’s belly jiggles amusedly as he exchanges a smirk with Deputy Coffman, like it’s some kind of inside joke. Like they’ve ‘stood in solidarity’ with protestors before and are delighted that they don’t have to do it again. “For as long as those hippies hang out in those trees, you three men are on duty underneath them. You’ll rotate, two on duty at a time for six hours, one twelve hour overlap, to keep the protest peaceful twenty-four seven.”

For three months of vigorous physical training, week-long tests on gun usage, and getting tasered and pepper-sprayed for educational purposes, it’s a little more low-key than John had in mind. Not that he’s complaining.

“When do we start, sir?” Richard asks.

Sheriff Sanders grins. “Right now, officers. Hope you packed lunch.”

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The tree-huggers are loud.

John’s been standing beneath them for six hours now, and so far he’s memorized their mission, developed a mild headache, and learned the full lyrics to a handful of pop songs they’ve been singing since noon. One protestor in particular clearly has an affinity for Abba, because she’s been belting Dancing Queen for the past hour.

"You are the dancing queeeeen, young and sweet, only seventeen… Dancing queen, feel the beat from the tambourine!”

John is a patient man. But John’s opinion on disco music is somewhere down with eating cold soup and skinning puppies for coats. Her voice isn’t bad, but he and Terry both have working ears by the
police tape line ten feet away, and they would definitely prefer pop groups that don’t include the first two letters of the alphabet.

“Well, hey,” Terry shrugs. “At least Rich isn’t here, otherwise we’d have to listen to him bitch about the noise, too.”

Terry is the oldest and tallest of their group at age twenty-eight, with dark chocolate skin and a radiant smile that makes the white of his teeth glow like neon squares. He also keeps a bit of stubble on his chin because his partner thinks it’s cute, and he only eats the powdered doughnuts from the box in the morning. John likes Terry.

“Actually, he’s due to show up here in about five minutes,” John drawls with a glance at his watch. “But I’ll get to go home when he gets here, so good luck with him.”

Richard is one month older than John but acts like he’s fifty years wiser. He stands attentive and erect in front of Sheriff Sanders but slouches and swaggers when he’s milling the station. He’s also the thinnest with a head of straw-colored hair he typically combs to the side like a German war soldier. His thin lips are always pursed like he’s tasting something sour, and when he smiles it reminds John of the way the Grinch smiles. John doesn’t like Richard.

“Damn, is it three already?” Terry squints at the clear blue sky. “Time flies when you’re babysitting free spirits, I guess.”

"Having the time of your life…! Oo-ooh, see that girl, watch that scene, dig in the dancing queen!"

“More like choir singers,” John muses.

Terry pinches the bridge of his nose. “Man, it’s bringing me back to my high school days, and those are years I’d rather not revisit, ever. I dunno if I can stand another six hours of that teeny-bopper disco crap,” he groans quietly, and looks pointedly at John. “Hey, you think she’d stop for a while if we ask nicely?”

“Only one way to find out,” John pulls a wan smile and leaves Terry to track down the source of the voice, which leads him to the large walnut tree a few yards into the forest. He cranes his head up to find a face, but only catches the soles of a pair of sneakers, and colorful clothing above that.

"You can daaaaaance, you can jiiiiive, having the time of your liiiiiife… Ooooohhh…"

“Ma’am, I’m afraid us officers are growing a little weary of the noise. Do you think you could try to keep it down?”

“But how can anyone sing Dancing Queen quietly?” The girl calls down. He can’t see her face behind the leaves, but her swinging sneakers wiggle a few walnuts loose from the tree. She’s been snacking on them all day long, letting the shells flutter down around him and Terry like rice confetti for weddings.

“A lot of people, I imagine,” He returns dryly, because it’s been a long day and his eardrums are throbbing. “Especially since Abba is a pretty dull rock amongst the diamonds of 70s music.”

Above him he hears an offended gasp, but he’s too distracted by the sleek black limo pulling into the lot to respond. The reporters immediately start shouting and run over to swarm the windows for a glimpse inside; it must be the Hales. John doesn’t know too much about them, but apparently they are very rich and very scary, and they’re just about John’s age.

Two men step out in sleek fitted suits with crisp collars and shiny shoes, both with large aviators
perched on their large noses. The taller one is tanned with perfectly sculpted, glossy black hair and a navy suit complimented by broad shoulders and a strong jawline. His brother is a couple inches shorter with a slimmer build, pale skin and lighter hair, and lips pressed together sourly.

Large security men in dark suits push the reporters back to clear a path for the millionaires, who are walking briskly towards the tree line. John takes a subconscious step back, but is interrupted by the sharp knock of something small and hard bouncing off the back of his skull. He hears a musical giggle several branches above him, and oh, oh that was—

“Ma’am, did you just throw a walnut at me?” He tries to keep his voice deep and authoritative (new officer and all), but he’s honestly so surprised that she just threw a walnut at him that his words curve up in a less-than-manly squeak.

“Abba is a giant shiny ruby amongst the diamonds of 70s music, you heathen!” The girl’s voice declares proudly. John’s eyes widen as he cranes his neck up to (civilly, professionally) give this girl a piece of his mind.

“Ma’am, that is no way to speak to a police officer,” he harrumphs, because really, he didn’t spend a year at the academy and three months as a trainee staring at Sanders’s mustache to have his (accurate) musical opinion dissed. Dissed by a hippie sitting seven feet up.

A raspberry noise above him, and then a small mop of brown hair flops over the branch to peek down at him. “Hey, I have a name, you know.”

The first thing he notices are her moles. A spattering of dark little dots decorating her pale skin like tizzied constellations, around her upturned nose and elfish smirk. Messy chestnut hair cropped short to her jawline sticks out in not-quite-curly, not-quite-straight tufts around her face, which still has a bit of baby fat. A beat-up pair of pink converse with rainbow shoelaces wiggle loosely over drooping ankle-socks, which he can see beneath the hems of her long overalls. Beneath the overalls is a pink striped turtleneck, but instead of a proper jacket she has a red plaid flannel tied in a knot around her waist. He’s never seen so many colors and patterns on one person, but somehow it kind of suits her.

“Ma’am makes me sound like my mother, and she’s a cranky old Polish woman with a grudge against the arts, so call me Claudia.”

John stares at her as she continues to grin down at him, swinging her legs off the branch in an off-beat rhythm above. She has a little gap between her two front teeth. He clears his throat. “I’m uh, I’m not sure if I’m allowed to call you by your first name,” he admits. “This is my first day as an officer, so I think—”

“Oh!” Claudia exclaims excitedly. “Congratulations, that’s mad rad!”

“Oh, very… rad, yeah,” he echoes, and the words sound ridiculous on his tongue. He wonders how old she is to have such an intimate relationship with modern slang.

“Stilinski! You’re off shift for the day.”

A sharp whistle calls his attention to the squad car that just pulled up to the lot, where Richard’s bean-pole form lounges on one gangly arm against the driver’s door. John glances up to the girl in the tree and tips two fingers in awkward salute after he remembers he’s not actually wearing a hat to tip, muttering “that’s my cue,” before turning to leave.

“Hey wait! Don’t go!”

He halts to regard her again, who’s flopped on her stomach over her branch staring intensely at him.
Her pale fingers scratch at her cheek, amusing the moles there. “What’s your name?”

John’s mouth falls open a little. He’s been shadowing Sanders on the streets for months as an officer in training, and no one’s ever bothered to ask for his first name before. He has a little shiny tag on his uniform with an engraved ‘Stilinski’ in all-caps, but ‘John’ never seemed important enough to ask for. He wonders if it will be a regular thing.

“Uh… John,” he offers, and the girl—Claudia, smiles wide and bright, a dazzling display of scrunched nose and that little tooth gap.

“John,” she repeats, like tasting a particularly yummy caramel from a box of assorted chocolates. “Your name suits you! Nice to meet you, John.”

He swallows, distracted by the simple joy in Claudia's smile, the dotted dimples in her cheeks. “Yeah, uh… Nice to meet you, too.”

“Just a reminder, we're here to ordain the law, not make friends.” Richard announces with forceful clap on John’s shoulder, making him jump in surprise. He eyes his coworker wearily, watching the man swing his squad car keys around his finger and snatch them in his palm for show, snapping his gum with a loud crack as they walk by each other. John doesn’t dare look back over his shoulder as he makes his way to the parking lot.

He should really go by Dick instead of Richard, he communicates with his dashboard. It suits him better.

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He goes back to take over for Terry at nine o'clock. The early summer month renders the sky a dark purple with a splatter paint of early stars, unwittingly in a way that reminds him of the moles on Claudia's face. Which is odd, he thinks, since he only saw her face for a total of two minutes that afternoon, and she threw a walnut at him. Yet he catches his thumb absently rubbing circles over the sore spot on his skull twice during the drive to the construction plot.

"Brought you a coffee," John offers when he arrives. It was only a buck extra at Kim's Kettle and he figures he might as well try to make peace if they're going to be working the trees together indefinitely. Not that anything ever happened that killed the peace in the first place, aside from the man’s blinding ego.

"Thanks," Richard smiles his Grinch smile and takes it, sniffing wearily. "Caffeinated?"

John nods. "You'll be here until three a.m., right? Figured you might appreciate the extra energy boost."

"Think I'll fall asleep on the job, Stilinski?" Richard's suggestion sounds threatening, but a second later he laughs and claps John on the shoulder. "Seriously, thanks."

John clears his throat and takes a sip of his caramel dark roast. "So I miss anything this evening?"

"Nah, just babysitting a bunch of nuts. And I don’t just mean the walnuts,” Richard exchanges a look with John, as if letting him in on some inside joke. “These folks are pretty screwy, like real sixties greenies. Some of the girls are pretty cute though, if you can get over the weird clothes and the singing."
John is tempted to ask which protestors Richard thinks are cute, but doesn't. Richard studies him and smirks.

"You got a girl, Stilinski?"

"Not since high school, no," John sips at his coffee. Luane Peterson. The pretty face with fiery red hair and an affinity for baby animals. Cheating too, apparently.

"That's rough," Richard dismisses. "Good thing you and I are officers now, eh? Chicks dig a man in a uniform, we'll have no trouble getting all the game."

*If you can find a girl who can't hear the crap that comes out of your mouth,* John thinks dryly. He frowns at his coffee cup. He's never thought as girls as "game," which has a connotation he doesn't appreciate. His mother had raised him with all the grace of a loose screw with a Bible, but at least basic respect came with it.

Richard apparently loves to hear himself talk, or maybe he just wants to intimidate John. But for the next twenty minutes the man goes on and on about his opinion on Ronald Reagan and The Soviet Union, and spews such vulgar language and insensitive jokes that John has to grit his teeth and try not to crush the paper cup in his hands. John excuses himself after an hour to stand somewhere else.

The plot of trees occupied by the protestors is relatively large, covering about twenty-five yards across and four yards into the forest. It's dull work, for the most part, especially now that the protestors have quieted down with the mission statements since the speculators fled for their homes after sundown. John tips his head back to observe them, tickled by the broad diversity of colors and faces and how they laugh like they're clueless to how different they are—a thin bald man who looks like he rock climbs for a living, a woman who looks like she sunbathes for a living, a burly man with tattoos and a coarse beard, a wrinkled woman with a long silver braid, and the rainbow Claudia chattering happily amongst them all, adorned in bouncy brown locks and a radiant smile. They are the most interesting people he's ever seen, a far cry from the uptight people on the streets of New York and an even further cry from the brash people in his old Manhattan house.

They also seem to be friends, chattering from close branches on their stomachs as they snack from lunch boxes. He watches Claudia stretch high to gather walnuts from her tree and throw them over to other protestors, who catch them and thank her. Later on someone says something so funny that she hunches over in a snorting belly-laugh, and cries out in anguish as mushed Twinkie falls from her open mouth to the grass ten feet below. John chuckles, drawing her attention.

"Hey, John!" Claudia grins down at him. "You're back already!"

He can't help but smile. She remembered his name. "Yeah, we're rotating shifts. I'll be here quite a bit as long as you guys are up there."

Claudia beams in excitement as she pulls another Twinkie out of nowhere and starts unwrapping it. "Oh, this is so exciting! I wasn’t sure if I would see you again after you left since I don’t really know how many police people work here, in the county you know, there could be a hundred I thought, but I saw that tall dark man come twice so I thought maybe you’d come back too, and here you are!"

Claudia finishes by taking a huge bite of her Twinkie and grinning down at him as she chews, and John’s brain needs a minute to process how fast the girl talks. Like a speeding train of thought that barrels into his chest with all the intensity of a real train and the fuzzy warmth of baking chocolate chip cookies. It’s a wonder she didn’t run out of breath halfway through.

"Here I am," John murmurs, more to himself than her.
“Do you get tired having to stand so long? How many policemen are there for this county? Oh! Do you own the police dogs as pets?”

John blinks up at her. She has a faint accent of some sort he can’t pinpoint, a kind of lisp around the ‘th’ sounds and extra emphasis on the harsh consonants.

“Well, the standing isn’t too bad. I figured you guys are probably more sore than us having to sit on all that bark. For the county I think there’s about three hundred officers, but there’s twenty-four of us for the town of Beacon Hills. As for police dogs, they have to stay in the station kennel as much as I’d like to take one home.”

Claudia stares down at him utterly captivated, slowly licking the cream from her Twinkie. A small smear of white sticks to her upper lip. “Wow,” she breathes. “You speak so calmly.”

John blinks at that. He’s been reprimanded by his family for being too shy, told in school that he was too quiet, yelled at in the academy for being too hesitant, and overall deemed boring as a rock for his pushover tendencies. But ‘calm’ is something new, and she says it like it’s something to be revered.

“Uh… Thank you,” is what he comes up with. He stares at her. She giggles and taps her ankles together, scratches at her ear, licks another dollop of white from her Twinkie.

“Hey, have you seen a yellow butterfly around here? It landed on my branch but it flew away before I could name it.”

“I… No, can’t say I have. But if I do I’ll let you know?”

“Wicked, thanks! What’s in your pocket?”

“My pocket? Oh, uh,” John looks down and takes out the wooden rosary from his breast pocket, holding it up by the beads. “It’s a rosary my mother insisted I keep on me during the job… I think she was worried I’d be doing more dangerous police work… New officer and all.”

“Your mom sounds nice,” Claudia sighs.

“That’s one way of putting it, sure.”

“Do you pray, John?”

“Not since middle school, no.”

“What about movies? Oh, oh! Have you seen Who Framed Roger Rabbit? It came out this weekend and I’m totally bummed that I’m stuck up here for it,” Claudia pouts. “Sometimes I wish I had a television up here, wouldn’t that be rad? Or like, a whole popcorn machine! The kind that makes the extra buttery kind. Oh, or kettle corn! Funny how they call that kettle corn and not ‘pot corn’ isn’t it? Since ‘pot corn’ sounds almost like regular popcorn!”

“I…” John is still catching up from the revolving door of topics. “I like popcorn, too.”

Claudia laughs and claps her hands together, squeaking a tiny “whoa!” when she nearly loses her balance off her branch. “Well I should hope so, popcorn is just about the tastiest kind of corn there is!”

“Careful!” He warns as she teeters again. “You’re pretty high up, it wouldn’t be a fun fall.”

She blows a raspberry and swings her legs. “Don’t worry, I’ve got my safety rope, see?” She holds
up a rope which slips through her fingers, unattached to the harness around her waist. She bites her lip as it falls to the ground and lands in a coil. “Whoopsies. Guess I forgot to attach it. That would have been bad, ha!”

John considers throwing his mother’s rosary up to her, since she clearly needs the insurance more. Instead he takes the fallen rope and lassos it to her branch within reach. “I’m serious. Make sure you’re clipped in every few hours. If you need help I’m sure the department would let one of us up to make sure you’re safe.”

“Aw, don’t worry John, I’ve been practicing so I know how to do it! And Rowan rock climbs for a living, so he would totally help me in a pickle. Not a literal pickle, like a problem pickle. Why do we say that? Pickles are food, not problems. We should call it ‘in a wet sock’ because those are problems.”

John finds himself gaping again. His lips twitch to say words but he can’t find any.

“You’re quiet, huh John? I like you. You’re a good listener.”

“I… Thank you. Do—?”

“Hey Stilinski, would you give me a hand with this?”

He’s interrupted by Richard calling for him on the other side of the lot. The man is snaking a new line of yellow police tape around the forest perimeter so John glances back to Claudia, shrugging apologetically. “Guess I’d better go help out.”

“Oh,” Claudia wiggles her fingers at him. “Come back later.”

As he trudges across the forest floor he watches Richard unroll the police tape in the purple light of the evening. At some point it must have ripped, so he takes one end and starts unwinding it in a double-line. Richard snaps his gum extra loud, which is usually a bad sign.

"Did I hear her calling you by your first name?"

An air of unease settles on John’s shoulders. "She asked for it. Why?"

"She should regard you as officer Stilinski, don't you think? You are a professional on the job."

He shrugs. "I figure it's alright. I don’t remember Sanders making it a point that we couldn’t, so…”

Richard makes a vague sound in his throat that signifies exactly what he thinks about that logic, but John doesn’t stick around for him to voice it. He flees to the cluster of Douglas firs on the other side of the clearing and doodles popcorn buckets in his notebook.

At 11:00pm he discards his empty coffee cup in a nearby trash can. Terry promised to bring him an egg McMuffin at 3:00am when he comes to relieve Richard, but John has a couple power bars in his jacket pocket for the next morning. He surveys the trees, pivoting himself East so he can watch the sun rise when the time comes. At midnight he catches Richard yawning.

"If you wanted to catch a few winks, I’d be happy to take first watch,” he offers.

"Are you shitting me?” Richard snorts, startling John.

“Uh… No, I just thought since you look tired you might—"

"I take my job seriously," Richard cuts in. “I won’t risk slacking off. Ol’ Sanders won’t be Sheriff
forever, and when that day comes I'm gonna be there to take over for him.”

John gapes for a minute, taken aback at his colleague's harsh tone. His dream is also to become the Sheriff someday, but he usually uses much different wording. “Alright, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I just thought thought you might like a break, that’s all.”

“Well, if you wanna conk out be my guest. Less competition in the long run,” Richard shrugs. The man made it clear that that’s “here to become an officer, not make friends” since day one of training, so John isn’t really surprised. He goes back to the other side of the clearing and watches the night in solitude from the base of an elm tree.

In the wee hours of the morning the protestors start growing quieter as they settle against their branches for sleep. John imagines it must be terribly uncomfortable to doze off strapped to a bark bed, but the situation does nothing to dampen their good spirits. They shout goodnights across to each other, lines of “good night Rhonda!” “Night, Jean.” “Help me Rhonda, help help me Rhonda,” “Cut it out George, or I’ll start calling you Georgie boy!” “Goodnight Talia, you too Patti!” “Goodnight, Claudia.” “Sweet dreams, everyone!”

John leans against his elm, watching Claudia rearrange her safety harness. She takes off her sneakers and ties the laces in a knot, draping them over the branch to her left. The shoes spin as she lays down and runs her hands over her plaid flannel, softly humming a couple rounds of ‘The Winner Takes it All' before switching to a sleepy verse of 'Dancing Queen' again. She stares up at the stars for a long time before letting her eyes fall closed, dewy eyelashes fluttering to rest on her round cheeks, soft brown curls ghosting over her lips in the warm nighttime breeze.

John looks up at the stars too, but doesn’t think they’re quite as interesting.

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The next day Claudia says hello to him again. John asks how her day is going. She says she’s “great, just hangin’ out,” and doubles over in a fit of giggles.

On day three John watches Claudia chat with the other protestors and toss more walnuts to them. Terry has a pulled pork sandwich for lunch.

On day four Claudia asks John if he plays any instruments. John says he doesn’t, but in middle school his mother made him join the church choir. Claudia finds this information delightful.

They start talking more frequently during John’s shifts when Terry is on guard with him. She usually initiates the conversations since he has the courage of a garden snail, but her enthusiasm and bright smiles have a magical way of tapping on his shell until it cracks and breaks. She tells him wild stories of princes and animal kingdoms, and terrible knock-knock jokes that John laughs at regardless. He tries telling the same jokes to Terry but his friend simply shakes his head and walks away, muttering “uh-uh, your puns are sending me to an early grave, man.”

In the mornings Claudia applies sunscreen liberally to her cheeks and nose, and her arms when it gets hot enough to roll her sleeves up. John watches in fascination every time, especially the time she isn’t wearing shoes and she holds the bottle between her feet as she smears white goop across the back of her neck. She catches him staring and he immediately ducks his head to hide the scarlet stain of his ears, but she just breaks into a shameless grin and waves eagerly at him from her perch. He waves back— the slightest twitch of a raised hand in return.
She starts dropping down to lower branches when John comes over, slowly, shyly, like a wild animal cautiously edging closer to a stranger. When John leaves she wraps her limbs around the trunk and swings back up to the higher branches with all the grace of a monkey bred for the sole purpose, which fascinates him because she’s so clumsy otherwise. She scares the crap out of him when she scales to the top of the tree for fun, sometimes swinging from her arms and laughing, safety harness an unnoticed guardian angel.

She has the face of a cupid, a body lithe as an artist’s freehand, and the heart of a child, and it makes John feel like crying and laughing all at once.

On day seven the protestors start losing their voices.

But this inconvenience does nothing to dampen their spirited song and cry. John watches from afar as Claudia stubbornly continues to shout down information by day and sing Abba at night when the spectators go home. Her voice crackles and grows hoarse with the other members, drawing pitying winces from spectators who start tossing up throat lozenges. The odd part is that she smiles and thanks the people who throw her cough drops, but she pockets them and doesn’t eat them.

“Your voice is sounding rough,” he tells her one day, as he leans against her tree and cranes his neck up. “Why aren’t you eating any of the cough drops?”

“Oh, you noticed that?” The corners of Claudia’s lips quirk into her cheeks, which flush bubblegum-pink. Her bare feet swing lazily above John’s head. “This town seems to have an endless supply of honey-lemon flavor… I only like cherry.”

John thinks it’s both the most absurd and endearing reason he’s ever heard. "You’re pretty stubborn, aren’t you?"

Claudia pops another walnut in her mouth and grins, revealing teeth caked over with brown mush. "Damn skippy." He watches the blackened arches of her pale feet curl in delight as she giggles. It’s another thing he’s noticed— she seems incredibly vulnerable to the contagion of laughter, erupting into giggles at the slightest chuckle from another mouth. Her lips love to smile, even when chapped.

“Do you like my nail polish?” She asks, and points her toes down for John to see. Each one alternates sparkly blue and wild pink, all of them chipped. “I couldn’t decide, so I just did both! My mother doesn’t like nail polish though, so I hide the bottles in my sock drawer. Blue in my blue sock, pink in my pink one, red in my red one and so on!”

“That’s a smart system.”

“I thought so too!”

“You mentioned the first day that your mom has a grudge against the arts,” John ventures. “Does that mean you’re an art major?”

“Totally!” Claudia grins. “Watercolors are my favorite. And colored pencils! Although nothing beats marshmallow peeps. I discovered it on accident one Easter when I tried microwaving them— they got all gigantic and gooey so I smeared them all over a canvas! Super pretty colors.”

“I tried that once in middle school with my dad’s wallet,” John remembers. “It exploded in our microwave and I got grounded for a week.”

Claudia throws her head back and laughs, the most obnoxious hee-haw he’s heard since middle school. “No way! He must have gone totally house on you.”
“House?”

“You know, like—“ She mimics claws with her fingers and “grrr”s at him. “—gone totally livid.”

“Wasn’t anything out of the ordinary,” he shrugs.

.o0O0o. June 9th, 1988.

One night while everyone is asleep, he’s standing awake at two in the morning beneath Claudia’s tree, which he always seems to gravitate towards when he’s on duty.

“Psst, hey John!”

He startles and looks skywards, where Claudia’s crooked smile shines down on him. Her eyebrows stretch high as she waves enthusiastically from her branch. If anyone has so much energy at two in the morning, it’s her.

“Claudia,” He questions on a whoosh of breath. “What are you doing awake?”

“I couldn’t sleep!” Claudia whisper-shouts down to him. “This is just all just so exciting, you know? I mean I’m in a tree, being guarded by a real-life police officer. That’s like being a princess in a tower guarded by a dragon!”

John doesn’t quite see it that way, but Claudia seems to have her own way of thinking. “Last time I checked I couldn’t breathe fire, but thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She chortles, pressing a hand over her lips to keep the noise down like he just told the funniest joke on the planet. “Aren’t the stars beautiful tonight?” She prompts, gazing up at the treetops above her. “Who can sleep anyway with all that up there?”

“I uh, actually can’t see the stars from down here,” he admits. “There’s quite a bit of canopy in the way.”

“Oh,” Claudia looks put out for a second, like it genuinely saddens her that he can’t see the same stars that have been in the sky all twenty-four years of his life. Then she brightens, face lighting up like a garden catching the first rays of sun. “Then why don’t you come up here? You can see a whole bunch of sky from where I’m sitting!”

John licks his lips. He glances to Terry, who’s nodding off against a Douglas fir on the other side of the lot. Then he glances down to the shiny BHPD tag over his breast, and feels his heart beat like a bass drum underneath. “I don’t think I can,” slips past his lips and he immediately wants to grab the words and shove them back down his throat.

Even in the dark he can see Claudia’s eyes roll in a loop-de-loop. “Oh, don’t be such a scaredy-cat. Everyone’s asleep! Just come on up!”

But John is a scaredy-cat. When he was a kid he hid in the bathroom stalls at school so Joe Baumgard wouldn’t take his lunch money. In high school he waited an extra hour to take the L subway home so he wouldn’t run into the group of druggies that hung out in the alleyway down the block. He’s never smoked a cigarette in his life and he hasn’t had the guts to ask a girl out since Luane. He’s a chicken who essentially ran away from home and moved to California to become a police officer, because he’s hoping that having a scary job will make the rest of the world less scary. But it would be so easy to climb up, to see Claudia’s face up close and see the same stars he can see
if he just walks a few yards forward into the open. Climbing up could cost him his shiny new title of Beacon Hills police officer, or it could cost him a hefty hospital bill if he falls and breaks his legs, or breaks his neck. He weighs the possible outcomes carefully, and decides it’s a terrible, terrible idea.

He climbs up the tree.

He's lean and strong from training, but his shoes are slippery against the bark and noisier than he would like. He can feel Claudia’s gaze on the top of his head and tries not to think about how much of an idiot he probably looks like as he scrabbles up the branches, following her whispered encouragement of “that’s it, you can do it!” and “yay John!” And that’s it, he’s really doing this, he’s really really actually doing—

He swings a leg up over Claudia's branch and sits down on the bark, and immediately forgets his own name.

Claudia is not conventionally pretty. Her teeth are slightly crooked and her jawline is undefined, and she smells like eight days without a shower. Up close she has even more moles, tiny smatterings of chocolatey freckles amid creamy skin so white it almost glows in the wane moonlight, and feathery eyelashes that flutter like taupe fans with her rapid blinking. And her eyes— the warmest, biggest brown irises that put the mouthwatering color of Amaretto and caramel to shame, curious and bright even in the velvety dark. He can hardly breathe when she smiles, revealing two dimples beneath the rounded apples of her cheeks. John thinks she might be the most beautiful person he’s ever seen.

"Wow," she breathes, eyes flicking over his face. “Your eyes are so pale up close! I’ve been picturing you with brown eyes this whole time."

John clears his throat, unsure what to do with that. Honestly if he opens his mouth right now he might puke or do something equally mortifying, but luckily Claudia fills the silence for him.

“Oh, goodie! Look! Now you can see the stars!” She gently taps his shoulder —the sleeves of her plaid shirt are too long and drown her wrists, revealing just the tips of her three longest fingers—and he follows her gesture as she points eagerly to the sky.

Which looks exactly the same as it always has in California. But from his seat in the walnut tree as his sixth official day as an officer, the stars seem to twinkle twice as bright against the sky, a dark indigo backdrop dusted with hues of purple and onyx. An airplane miles and miles above them skates by as a tiny red blink in slow motion, leaving no ripples behind in the placid nighttime canvas.

“Talia’s been teaching us about the constellations the past week,” Claudia whispers excitedly, and he steals the opportunity to look at her as she talks. “What a perfect opportunity, isn’t it? When we’re all up here with all of them within reach,” she reaches up and closes an open hand around a cluster of tiny twinkles. “Not literally, of course. Stars would prickle, don’t you think? But right, the constellations! Talia— she’s our group leader, but I’m sure you know that by now, she’s like a library book. A whole library! She knows so much about so many things, especially nature. That up there is the Northern Male, and the Northern Female, and… Oh, those three twinkly ones are the top of Squatting Man! He’s my favorite."

“Huh,” John says. “I’d point out some too, but I’m afraid I don’t know much beyond the Big Dipper."

“That’s okay, we can make up our own,” Claudia proposes easily. “Let’s see… Yesterday I saw some stars that looked like an elephant… Oh! There, see? A big ol’ elephant, wearing either a hat or just with really big ears.”
“Like Dumbo?”

“What’s a Dumbo?”

“Oh. He’s a cartoon elephant with really big ears. From a Disney movie.”

“Oh. Mad rad,” Claudia grins at him, and she’s close enough that he can smell her breath. It’s sweet and warm and less-than-pleasant because she hasn’t brushed her teeth in a week, but he doesn’t mind it. She runs her hands up and down her plaid sleeves.

“Why don’t you have a proper jacket?” he points out.

She shrugs amicably. “Didn’t think about it. My deep dark secret? I totally thought we were supposed to meet here at eight, not seven. Turns out eight was the time the contractors were supposed to get here. So that morning I got a page from Renior— he’s that guy over there with the big nose, his nostrils whistle in his sleep— saying everyone was already down here! And I was totally buggin’, but really excited because this is my first big protest, right? And my brain goes all over the place when I’m excited, so I just grabbed a couple Hostess Cupcakes and high-tailed it down here!”

“You haven’t been living on Hostess Cupcakes this whole time, have you?” He asks her slowly, because sugar was the last thing this girl needed. Although it would explain a lot.

She wiggles her shoulders, reminding John of how a bird might puff up their feathers. “Well, I’ve been eating the walnuts, too. The ones I haven’t been throwing at you, at least.”

John hums. “Mm, well. I’d rather the nutritional content be spent on you, not my receding hairline.”

Claudia makes a raspberry sound. He watches her nose crinkle. “Pssssshh. Naw, what are you, anyway? No, wait, ‘lemme guess!” She adjusts her position, bringing up a freckled hand to stroke her chin as she studies him, scrunching her lips back and forth. “You’re not a day over thirty-five!”

He sputters a little, because Christ, he knew his hairline was going early but he doesn’t look that old, does he? “I’m twenty-four,” he tells her, trying and failing not to sound wounded.

She grins, shoulders twitching with silent laughter. “Of course you are, you dope! I’m just kiddin’ ya. You don’t think I’d invite some old geezer up into my tree, would you?”

”No, I guess not,” John concurs, thankful for the dark cover to hide his heating cheeks. “How old are you?” He ventures.

She licks her lips, an absent curl of pink across her skin. “I turned twenty last April. Which is so old, isn’t it? Twen-tee. Hey, have you ever climbed a tree, John?”

“All before today,” he admits.

Claudia gasps. “You haven’t! Why not? You ought to arrest yourself.”

“Kinda hard to climb trees when you grow up in the heart of New York,” John replies. “Whole lotta buildings, not a lot of nature. Unless you count all the ivy on the side of apartments.”

“Oh wow,” she blinks at him, lips falling open in wonder. “I’ve never been to New York. I’ve only ever been to California, and not even any of the fun cities.”

“But you’re not from California, are you?” John asks. “Your… It sounds like you might have had an
Claudia smiles shyly. “You noticed? I’m from Poland, but my parents and me moved here when I was eight.”

“Wow,” John muses. “You’ve come pretty far, then. I’ve never been to Poland.”

“Olsztyn,” Claudia smiles, eyes bunching up soft and lighted. “Oh John, it’s the most beautiful little city in Poland by a great big river. There are so many lovely people there, and the desserts!” She throws her head back and closes her eyes, as if tasting the sweetness on her tongue. “American food is delicious, don’t get me wrong. There’s pizza here and sushi and all kinds of cakes and ice creams, but nothing compares to makoweic or paczki. Ohhh, paczki. When I was a little girl my tata used to take me to the street corner store on Sunday mornings, and we’d split a rosewater cream and a chocolate.”

John stares in wonder at the girl in front of him, trying to figure out how he can get lost in his own world, too. But her lips droop soft in a sad way, jarringly different from the cheery grin he’s memorized over the past week. “Why did you come to the United States?” He asks.

“Tata— my father got a job here,” Claudia smiles softly, and studies the sleeves of her plaid shirt as she picks at them. She holds out her hand for John to see. “This used to be his shirt, see? So we came to live here, my mother and me and him, but then he found another woman. I’ve seen things like that on television, but not so much in Poland. I was eleven when ‘poof!’” Claudia wiggles her fingers for effect. “He disappeared with her. Funny how things work like that, isn’t it John?”

“My father disappeared, too.” He shrugs. “That’s why I don’t drink.”

“Where’d your father go?”

He points to the sky. “Up there somewhere, supposedly. He died a few years ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Claudia whispers.

“That’s okay. I don’t miss him.”

“Was he an officer too?” She has a way of speaking that plucks the taboo away from any topic. It’s very comfortable.

“Nope, that’s just me. Officer Stilinski, at your service.”

“But you’re so shy,” Claudia marvels, not unkindly. She smiles at him as if she can see right through his uniform, the baton and handgun on his hip, somehow right into his personality. He squirms a little, suddenly self-conscious.

“I prefer the term cautious. A lot of officers tend to jump into things, but I’m more of a ‘dip my toes in the water first’ kinda guy.”

Claudia giggles. “Toes,” she snorts gleefully. Then looks at him wide-eyed. “Say, then why are you with the police? Your job can be pretty dangerous, right?”

John nods. “It can be. But we undergo a lot of training so we know what to do in situations like shootouts or robberies. Truth be told I’d love to be the Sheriff someday, so I can work closer with the folks around here… Help make things better.”

“I think you’ll be a great Sheriff one day,” Claudia tells him seriously, the most serious he’s seen her.
Her eyes are round and doe-like, staring into his own like little pools of golden brown framed by soft brown lashes. They’re so different from his own pair of pale greys.

He swallows and looks away. “Thank you. Although there are a few others on the team that seem to be after the title much more vigilantly than I am.”

Claudia muses at the stars. “Your friend Terry?”

“No, Richard Sullivan,” he offers half-heartedly. “You’ve probably seen him. Tall, blonde. He was here for the noon shift today.”

“You mean Praying Mantis?” Claudia gasps and hunches like a spooked cat, eyes stretching wide. She grips his sleeve with a pale hand, making his heart squeeze and gallop. “But John, have you seen him? He was eating salad on his lunch break! Salad,” she whisper-emphasizes in horror. “Who in their right mind willingly eats leaves?”

He chuckles, running fingers over his chin. “Can’t say I care much for the stuff either. But yeah, that’s the guy. I gotta ask though, why ‘Praying Mantis’?”

“Because he’s long and skinny and stands with his hands curled over his belt like this,” Claudia demonstrates, shifting up onto her knees to bend her wrists on either side of her slim waist. She bares her teeth and bugs out her eyes for effect, and she is the picture of Richard’s stance, which John never realized looks strikingly similar to a carnivorous bug.

“I shouldn’t be laughing,” he chuckles.

“Why? Laughing is fun!” Claudia grins at him and plops back down on the branch, making the surrounding leaves quiver with the movement.

“So, these protestors,” John glances around the trees, surveying the sleeping bodies. “They’re all… It seems like you’re all pretty good friends.”

“Oh, yes,” Claudia whispers, gazing around reverently. “That over there is Patti, with the silver braid. She knows everything about brewing tea you can imagine. And that’s Renoir snoring—I mentioned him before, with the nose—Oh and Rowan, he’s the bald man with the beard and tattoos. Did you know that he’s been married two times? To a pair of identical twins! He has the most radical stories, but he’s leaving with his biker gang to see the country after this.”

John watches her talk, utterly captivated with her energy and hand movement and the sparkling life in her eyes.

“—and in the tree your friend is sleeping against, that’s George, he quit his day job to rock climb around the world! After we save these trees, of course. He’s been to Peru, and the tropics, and one day he wants to visit Kazakhstan. Oh, and in the big Elm, that’s Talia!”

“Ah, right. Your group leader?”

Claudia nods. “She’s beautiful. And so kind, John, I’ve never once seen her lose her temper. Although I’ve only known her for about a month, but still!”

The night floats by on a cloud of side-glances and Claudia’s hushed giggles. She talks with wild arm gestures and animated expressions, and he stares and listens like the quiet man he is. Carnival rides, childhood stuffed animals, favorite television shows and family horror stories are discussed, as well as the temperament of cats and why oranges are called oranges but lemons aren’t called yellows. With just her simple enthusiasm she tickles laughs out of him that he hasn’t heard since middle
school, and her presence is a steady warmth in the cool of the wee hours of the morning.

Around 4:30am Terry stirs against his tree across the lot, drawing their attention. His heart sinks sadly. “I should probably go,” he voices quietly. Claudia’s eyes droop in disappointment.

“Oh. That’s okay, I’m glad you came up! I’ll see you again tomorrow, won’t I?”

“Three o’clock sharp in the afternoon. Although I’m not off this shift until nine this morning. Do you… You don’t have a watch, do you?”

Claudia shakes her head. “My mother says it isn’t ladylike to wear a watch. But I went out and bought *two* of them just to spite her!” She whispers deviously, then sighs. “But I forgot to bring them. Oops.”

“That’s okay, I’ll be around tomorrow anyways. But for now you might want to take this—”

He shimmies off his Force jacket. Claudia’s hands flutter in protest. “Oh, no, I can’t take your jacket!”

“We’ve got a whole closet full of them down at the station, it’s fine. If you’re not freezing tonight, you will tomorrow. A cold front is on the way.”

“Oh, really? Wow,” She gazes at the jacket in wonder, holding it like a precious gem. “Oh my gosh, this is outrageous! One of the maddest, raddest presents ever! Thank you.”

John ducks his head shyly as he climbs down. “Check the pocket, too.”

Claudia cocks her head quizzically and disappears a moment behind her branch. By the time John jumps down to the forest floor, he hears her elated squeal. “Psst, John!” He glances up, smiling when he sees her grinning and waving down at him, revealing a cherry cough drop between her front teeth. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” He murmurs.

Last night he went to Walgreens and then another Walgreens before he found a pack of cherry (“*No sir, I’m looking for cherry. Yes, I know honey-lemon is most popular but—*”) cough drops. He had stood in line for ten minutes behind an old lady counting out $6.37 in change to buy stool softener, which made him late to his shift that day, earning a snide smirk from Richard when Sanders cracked down on him. The grin on Claudia’s face is more than enough to make it worth it.

".o0O0o. June 10th, 1988.

On day nine Hale Associates come back at midnight and blast foghorns.

The protestors flail awake, a couple toppling off their branches but thankfully they’re all strapped in with safety harnesses. John immediately looks to Claudia's tree, but thankfully she's still on her branch, if not a little startled.

The foghorns keep blasting every hour. No one gets any sleep that night.

The following morning he's interviewed briefly for the paper, along with some protestors and Talia Nata-something, who has a very unpronounceable last name. The tension grows as more townspeople get wind of the drama and come to speculate. The Hale's are reportedly getting
impatient, although John’s only seen them come to the lot once.

Until the tenth day.

He’s eating a BLT without the L and extra B beneath Claudia’s tree. She's eating walnuts and a Fruit Roll-up another protestor threw her for lunch, and John listens as she babbles on about her best friend Wendy and the pollination process of bumblebees and how she’s going to paint American flags on all her mother’s blouses one day.

“—earth to John, yo, you in there?” Terry snaps his fingers in front of his face. “Yo mister sandman, listen to your cool friend Terry and look!”

John follows Terry’s finger to the other side of the tree lot, where the Hale brothers are standing and whispering at the foot of Talia’s tree, a crowd of reporters behind them.

“The Hales? What are they doing over here?” He muses.

“Well gee, John, nice of you to finally acknowledge me,” Terry rolls his eyes and lounges against the tree beside him. “I dunno, looks like they might be tryin’ to talk to that leader woman or somethin’.”

“Sorry, Terry. I’ve been distracted.”


“Yeah.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Shh. Can you hear what they’re saying?”

“Man, do I look like I have supernatural hearing to you?”

“What the… Is he—?”

“Looks like it. Can’t imagine they’ll actually listen to her, though. The papers say Hale Associates have been planning this demolition for years.”

“Psst, hey John!”

A walnut bounces off the back of his skull. He glances up to find Claudia’s excited face hanging above his, awake from her nap. “Oh. How’s it hanging, Claudia?” She erupts in bubbly laughter, making him smile. He’s getting better at puns, too.

“Oh man, that never gets old! But hey, did you see the Hale people are here? Do you think they’re gonna let the trees live?” She asks hopefully, eyes shining. John is supposed to remain unbiased about the protest, but he wishes for her sake that Hale Associates decide not to follow through with the construction.

“I don’t know,” he replies, offering a stick of beef jerky up to her. Terry swats his arm away.

“Dude, we’re not supposed to give them food. Unbiased, remember?”

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” John says, and subtly holds the jerky up to Claudia again.

“Oh, yay! Breakfast! Thanks.” She reaches down a pale hand and snatches the entire bag. She’s still
wearing his Force jacket despite how it’s three sizes too big and the air is eighty degrees. Terry elbows him in the ribs.

The day passes like the weather; lazy, warm, and bright. He and Terry tug at their collars and sweat in the shade as summer beats down on them. At this point the protestors have gone almost two full weeks without showers, which means the smell is akin to a neglected petting zoo. The vulture-like reporters grow bored and fan themselves with their clipboards so Claudia entertains them with the plots of all her favorite movies (*The Little Mermaid, An American Werewolf in London, Sixteen Candles, Dirty Dancing*), managing to lull Terry to sleep in the process, and John keeps glancing up worriedly at her dwindling supply of water.

In the late afternoon one of the older protestors suffers heat exhaustion and is whisked away in an ambulance.

She is the first of the thirteen Kin of Keyàh members to leave their tree; she didn’t want to, but Talia and the other protestors insisted her health was more important. The flashing lights of the paramedic team scare the crap out of everybody and the reporters lap it up eagerly for their news channels and journals. Sheriff Sanders arrives with Richard and a few other officers to buffer the legalities and discuss protocol if it happens again. John listens but keeps glancing to the canopies, where he locks worried eyes with Claudia.

“The goal here is to not let anyone die,” Sanders grunts beneath his mustache. “The paperwork is a nightmare and it makes everyone look bad, including the department and Hale Associates. This was too much of a close call for my comfort.”

“But if we can’t make them come down…?” Terry trails off.

“We just have to wait it out,” Sanders sighs. “Honestly I didn’t expect this group to last so long, but as long as they remain peaceful, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Can’t we send them up food and water at least?” John tries again. “Most of them are low on supplies, especially with this heat they should stay hydrated.”

“Weren’t you listening?” Richard cuts in. “It’s a legal issue. By law police aren’t permitted to interfere as a third party in a protest, otherwise it shows bias.”

“Sullivan is right, I’m afraid,” Sanders nods. “As much as I’d love to help these poor folks, our job is to stay neutral and make sure the crowds don’t get out of hand.”

“But that doesn’t seem right,” slips angrily out of John’s mouth before he remembers that he doesn’t usually speak unless spoken to. “As officers it’s our duty to keep people safe and provide for the county, so what use is it if we don’t help the people who need it most?”

“The law is the law, Stilinski,” Sanders pins him with a beady eye. “Perhaps you can change it if you stick around long enough to become Sheriff of this town.”

“Or maybe the law should stay as it is,” Richard quips. “It seems like it won’t be much longer anyway, with this protest. That woman was just the first to drop, but once the Hales get wind of this they’ll know they won’t have to wait much longer for the others to start giving up, too. People can only last so long without basic necessities, you know? No matter how stubborn they are.”

John turns to the tree line with a sinking stomach; as much as he hates to admit it, Richard is right. The protestors are the toughest bunch of people he’s encountered in this town, but they can’t last forever. He guesses maybe a few more days if they stretch their remaining water, but the Hales are
just hawks waiting to swoop in and cut down the trees as originally planned. It’s childish, but all he can think is how unfair it is.

“John, John! Did you talk to the paramedics? Is Patti okay?” Claudia calls out from her tree as he returns. He’s off duty now, but he needs to settle her worries.

“She’s alright,” he relays. “Mild heatstroke, she got some IVs and cold water in the ambulance. She was even joking with the EMTs before they drove off. She said she’s sorry she couldn’t hang on longer with you guys.”

The information is quickly relayed amongst the other protestors via branch telephone. Worried looks soften but still remain. “I’m afraid the department just had a meeting,” he adds seriously. “We can’t provide you with any supplies, so you need to be careful with your rations if you want to keep doing this.”

“Of course!” Claudia blurs. “I’m not giving up due to a little lack of water, and neither is anyone else! We’re going to save these trees!”

He smiles wistfully up at her. “I know. And that’s very rad, but I still worry. Be careful, okay?”

His use of her favorite word earns him a smile in return. “Okay.”

“Alright. I gotta head home now, but I’ll see you in nine hours.”

“M’kay. Bye John. Eat a popsicle for me. A nice cold grape one.”

“You got it.”

The sunset paints the sky pink and purple as he trudges back to the parking lot. He gets all the way to his crappy car before the bliss shatters.

“Hey. Stilinski.”

He freezes, deflating because he generally doesn’t like the conversations that happen between him and that voice. He turns around, where Richard is regarding him cooly, hands tucked leisurely in his pockets, crooked teeth snapping his gum.

“Hey Richard,” he returns casually.

His colleague cracks his Juicy Fruit loudly. He doesn’t look particularly impressed. “Let’s keep it professional, shall we? Sullivan.”

“Alright, Sullivan. What brings you round my neck of the woods?” He voices, internally chuckling at his pun.

“I noticed that a certain protestor was wearing a Force jacket yesterday,” Richard suggests casually, and John’s stomach sinks. “I didn’t give it to her, and I know Grey didn’t because he was wearing his when we swapped shifts. But you,” Richard reaches out a hand to straighten John’s collar, eyes narrowing. “Are wearing a jacket that looks a size bigger than it did yesterday.”

“She was cold at night,” John returns simply. “I wasn’t going to let her freeze.”

“How chivalrous of you. They say chivalry is dead, which means you had something else in mind.”

“Look, Rich— Sullivan. I don’t know what you think is—”
“What I think,” Richard interrupts, taking a cold step forward. “Is that you’re getting a little too close to her, Stilinski. There are a lot of protestors here, but a fresh little ass like that? Tempting, believe me, I’ve noticed. And I plan on asking her out once this whole thing blows over."

John whirls around, eyes narrowing. “You— Have you even talked to her?”

Richard shrugs. “What does that matter? I’ve seen her enough, and she broadcasts ‘ditz’ with a neon sign. And you know what they say about those, Stilinski. It’s been a while since I got some action, and I imagine those overalls are pretty easy to pop open."

John is not a man of violence. John is a man of caution and tact, which is why he is 100% aware of just how tight his grip is around Richard’s wrist. It’s enough pressure to hurt like a bitch, but a few G’s short of breaking bone.

“What, you’ve got it bad,” Richard chuckles, but his voice is tight with pain. “Better get over that, quick. Violence is the kind of thing that gets you kicked off the force faster than you can say, ‘I haven’t gotten laid since high school.’”

John reluctantly rips his grip away, because Richard is right. “I don’t like you, Richard.”

Richard shrugs. “Sullivan. And I don’t like you either, so at least we’re on the same page. See you next shift, Stilinski.”

The man walks away and John watches him go, trying his best to burn two holes in the back of the man’s Praying Mantis head.

.o0O0o. June 11th, 1988.

The number of reporters and spectators has tripled since day one. The roar of voices smacks them like a semi truck as they step out of the limo and smooth down their jackets against the breeze. Robert is… Reluctantly impressed.

But then one member breaks out into song —and it’s Dancing Queen, dear god— and the others join in happily, swaying and smiling on their branches like they’re having a grand old time annoying two top-grossing CEOs. Robert wants to grab an axe and start hacking at the trees himself, but that would be a terrible move that PR might actually kill him for. He glances at Peter, whose eyes flash gold behind his aviators.

The plan is to arrest Nat’aanii as soon as she climbs down. Montgomery, who’s already on site somewhere in the crowd, has relayed the orders to the police officers. Robert just wants it to be over. He wants his houses built so he cross “achieve decade long dream” off his checklist. And make the profit.

”And we arrest her as soon as she comes down,” he reminds Peter.

“Yes, I remember. We can celebrate with cocktails later.”

The other protestors straighten up and look at them as they draw near. Talia is lounging gracefully on her tree branch again, whittling down a piece of branch with a sharp blade.

“Ms. Nat’aanii,” he calls up. “My brother and I here to listen what you have to say.”

Talia smiles wide, and it’s far more dazzling and warm than it has any right to be. “Wonderful.
Thank you, gentlemen. Come on up.”

Silence. Nothing but the click of reporter cameras behind them. Distantly, he hears the faint pop of his and Peter’s mouths falling ajar. Eventually he remembers his importance— “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m afraid I can’t come down,” Talia smiles, followed by a chorus of chuckles from the surrounding protestors. “That would be rather foolish considering the situation, don’t you think? So you two are welcome to join me up here to talk. Unless of course you prefer I call down to you.”

But Talia’s voice sounds worn with use. And no, they don’t need the reporters to hear every word and spin it to make Kin of Kéyah look like well-meaning victims against the big bad Hales. He and Peter turn shoulder-to-shoulder to plot quietly, noses nearly bumping.

“Are you sure it’s not too late for the smoke bombs?” Peter mutters.

“I understand your urge, but no, we’re not doing smoke bombs.”

“Really, because I already have Swarovski under orders to place the shipment with Army&Shoss over the phone. All I have to do is tell Montgomery to call him and two dozen will come, same-day delivery. The limo will drop us back here tonight to watch. We can have Hank pop popcorn! It’ll be fun.”

“Pete,” Robert deadpans, not sure weather to laugh or be concerned. “No. Maybe we should just humor her.”

“Nat’aanii?” Peter’s eyes widen incredulously. “You honestly mean climb up her tree to talk with her? The only element of ‘humor’ will be us, the two fools in thousand-dollar suits trying to ascend her organic may pole. The press will make us look like a couple of idiots.”

“We’re werewolves, remember? We’ll scale that tree in two seconds flat.”

“We’ll be bending to her rules,” Peter’s eyes narrow in warning. “It is essential that we keep the company looking strong. Besides, it’s not like we’re changing our minds, so why give them hope?”

“Mom used to say hope could make people sway their decisions,” Robert points out.

“Mom is off the table when we’re discussing business,” Peter interjects sharply. “But if you want to play that card, why should we fuel their stubbornness? They could decide to sit up there for two more weeks, a whole month even if we give any indication that they might have sway over us.”

“I understand. But you gotta admit they’re pretty damn— admirable, spirited, strange, driven — stubborn. Maybe they’ve earned our ears, yeah?”

Peter’s eyes narrow in warning. “No, Robert. This is where I draw the line.”

“Sorry, but I’m going up. Despite how tiresome they are I think they deserve something for their efforts.”

But as he turns towards the tree— “Robert,” Peter warns, eyes flashing gold.

“Let go, Pete,” he orders calmly, eyes flashing red back in response. “You can mope all you want in the limo, but I’m going to try and hold up our end of the deal. Now I’d let go before they get a chance to snap more pictures,” he warns, eyes flicking to where the reporters are eagerly clicking away to capture the moment of tension.
Peter lifts his chin and lets go. He walks calmly over to the reporters and starts answering the questions they throw at him.

Meanwhile Robert takes a deep breath, purposefully avoids Nat’aanii’s eyes, and hoists himself up onto the first branch. As he climbs up the protestors start whooping and shouting in delight and he can hear the reporters laughing, and the CBS anchor—oh god, are they getting this live? and it’s all Robert can do but bite down on his cheek and try not to turn red.

He swings a leg up over Talia’s branch and sits down on the bark, and immediately forgets his own name.

He takes a moment to assess her. She’s—Okay, she’s beautiful, in a predatory, bohemian kind of way. Which doesn’t even make any sense, but her cheekbones could cut through steel and she isn’t wearing a speck of makeup, allowing the estimated fifty-million freckles spattered across her olive skin to stand out like constellations in a dark sky. Long, silky black hair tumbles down her shoulders like some sort of ridiculous waterfall that coils neatly atop her wool sweater, which is decorated with a migraine-inducing pattern of green, blue, and taupe triangles. The same ruffled, midnight-blue skirt hides her legs with miles of gathered fabric, draping down over her bare ankles. Christ, the woman isn’t even wearing shoes. This is exactly the kind of thing Peter warned him about.

He clears his throat. “Good afternoon, Ms. Nat’aanii.”

“Please, you can call me Talia,” Ms. Nata-whatever cuts in warmly, like her sharp jawline and dark glittering eyes aren’t scary at all. It’s also kind of disappointing, because he had practiced pronouncing her name for a solid five minutes in the limo, and now that was all for nothing. He doesn’t know what to do with the offered use of first names, honestly.

“You can call me Mr. Hale,” he returns curtly, because he’s a businessman. He’s a millionaire, dammit, which seems to impress everyone except her.

“You seem rather young for a Mr. Hale,” she muses calmly, gaze flickering from his buffed Salvatore Ferragamo shoes to his Burberry slacks to his crisp white handkerchief, only lingering for mere moments as if it all bores her. And really, how dare she.

“Yes, well, my age is not the matter at hand here today. But rather the issue of you and your… Members—” he decides disapprovingly, eyeing a ditzy girl in the tree to his right tossing walnuts down onto a police officer. “—who are holding up my company by refusing to climb down. Hale Associates has staked a claim on this land, as well as invested ample time and money into this project so that we can provide affordable housing for the—”

“Mr. Hale,” Talia interrupts calmly, raising an eyebrow. “You came up here to hear me speak, yes?”

His mouth opens and closes silently for a moment before he composes himself. You are a millionaire, he reminds himself. A powerful, composed, unruffled millionaire.

“Of course,” he dips his head in reluctant apology. “Go ahead, Ms. Nat’aanii.”

Talia smiles, dark eyes flicking analytically between his own—right, left, right, left, and it’s terrifying. It’s like she’s looking into his very soul and dissecting him piece by piece until she figures out he’s secretly out of his element and that he tossed a cigarette out of his car window last Thursday without getting fined. Her gaze pinches with interest, lips twitching thoughtfully.

“Tell me, Mr. Hale. Do you smell anything… Unusual?”

Well he’s certainly seeing a lot of unusual things, unusual putting it nicely. He sniffs the air.
“Nothing out of the ordinary for a forest atmosphere.”

She blinks in surprise before cocking her head, offering that warm hint of a smile again. “Go on, start listing everything you smell,” she prompts patiently.

“I… Trees?” He answers, about two seconds from climbing back down because this is ridiculous.

“Nothing else?” She presses, eyebrows sky high.

“No,” Robert snaps, testy and uneasy. “We’re in a tree in the woods, so I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to be smelling here. I beg your pardon Ms. Nat’aanii, but what is the purpose of this?”

Talia gazes at him, pensively and almost sad, which plants a very unsettling stone in Robert's stomach. She speaks quietly next. “I don’t think you even realize, Mr. Hale, just how blinding your life of business is.”

He blinks rapidly, officially offended. “Excuse me?”

“What I mean,” Talia continues, settling back comfortably against the tree trunk. “Is that you cannot smell the motor oil from the bulldozers across the lot, the chai tea on my breath, the body odor on me and my friends, the strong cologne Renoir is wearing in the tree to our left, the cigarette smoke clinging to your clothes and tongue, the buttery walnuts around us, the sweet-sourness of the tree sap, the damp earth fifteen feet below us, the scent of freshly-baked bagels on the breeze from the bakery on Whipple Street, or the fact that I am one of you.”

With the last line Talia’s eyes glow a brilliant crimson, and Robert’s automatically flash back red in response. His mouth falls open in shock. Talia Nat’aanii is an alpha.

“You’re a werewolf,” he states dumbly, and it is seriously one of the dumbest remarks he’s ever uttered.

Talia nods. “That I am. And so are you, but you’ve lost touch with your wolf… Haven’t you?”

Robert gapes soundlessly. It’s like a slap in the face, because she’s right. She’s right and he hasn’t even noticed the quiet retreat of his wolf over the years— He sniffs the air again, horrified to find that he can’t smell anything beyond the faint spunk of nature, can’t smell anything more than what a plain human would smell. When had that happened? He could smell just fine a few years ago when he was in Stanford, right? He had been focusing a lot of time and effort into the company the past couple years— hell, all of his time and effort, but—

He clears his throat. “Are your protestors…?”

Talia smiles. “My friends are not werewolves, no. Humans, and lovely ones, aren’t they?”

He glances to the side, where Atrocious Haircut Girl is gleefully shoving handfuls of walnuts into her mouth, making obscene little happy noises as she chews.

“Very… Interesting, yes.”

“Take a look below you, Mr. Hale. What do you see?”

Dirt. Grass. Frenzied reporters and townspeople. Robert is tiring quickly of her question game. But when he glances down he spies the huge, red spray-painted “X” on the trunk of the tree they’re sitting on. It drips down the bark, looking like blood. Incredibly, his stomach gives a little uncomfortable flip.
"I see you’ve found what I told you to look for,” Talia nods approvingly, and fuck— was his expression really that obvious?

He clears his throat. “Yes, well that’s the construction worker’s doing, not—"

“As werewolves, we are predators, not murderers, don’t you agree?”

Robert stares at her. “…Yes,” he admits.

“And these trees are alive as much as you and me. Even more so these are the trees that provide shelter for our inner spirits; they are the home of your wolf, and the home of mine. Part of what makes Beacon Hills so special is the expanse of preserve here, and the accompanying beasts that are drawn here. Without the forest, we have no place to connect to our animal half.”

Robert feels pinned beneath her gaze, feeling a strange tug from the depth of his chest.

“If you want to reconnect with your wolf, you need to start reacquainting yourself with the forests from which we came,” Talia tells him seriously. “And cutting down thirty acres of our lineage is the same as running away from it.”

Robert swallows heavily, feeling the click of his throat in his ears. He nods curtly at the barefoot woman in front of him.

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Nat’aanii. Hale Associates expects you and your group to come down in a swift fashion for minimum charges.”

He climbs back down the tree.

.o0O0o. June 12th, 1988.

The next morning he’s sitting in the office, haunted by Talia’s meeting. He’s staring out the window, watching the cars drive ten stories below as he runs his thumb over the pen in his fist. It’s a cheery day, a stretch of pale blue sky as far as he can see. Much too cheery for the storm of inner turmoil swirling in his head.

“Hey Pete,” he starts, trying for nonchalance. “Can you… You can smell things, right?”

Peter spins around slowly to face him in his spiny chair, in sync with the slow ascension of his eyebrow. “What kind of question is that.”

It’s probably a good idea to stop while he’s ahead, but he plows on anyway. “Well… I mean you can smell all the stuff at the construction site? Like the bulldozer motor oil, and the… The protestor’s body odor?”

Peter snorts. “Unfortunately.”

Robert frowns. “Even on the ground?”

“ Practically from the limo,” Peter mutters distastefully. “Those people reeked on day one, but now it’s like they all took baths in pickle juice.”

“What about hearing? Can you hear them from the parking lot?”

“Yes. I can also touch my tongue to my nose and I have a black belt in Taekwondo. What’s your
“Just wondering,” Robert says quickly. Too quickly. Peter swings around in his chair again, chewing leisurely on his pen tip.

“Come now, brother. You’re much too young to need hearing aids and Rogaine.”

“My hairline is fine, I just…”

“Suddenly can’t smell this morning? I told you not to snort too much of Jack’s good stuff,” Peter snickers.

“I’m not a cocaine addict, Peter,” Robert sighs. Really, a few times in college is nothing.

“Well then what is it? I don’t have time to entertain your guessing game and neither do you, so wrap it up in ten seconds.”

“It’s not something that… Well…”

“Six, five…”

“Hey, could you cut it out for just—“

“Three, two—"

“I can’t smell anything, Peter!” He shouts, with a flare of anger and wild fear. Peter stares at him. “Up in that tree Nat’aanii made me look like an idiot! She asked me if I sensed anything unusual and I couldn’t smell a fraction of everything she could! I didn’t even recognize that she was a werewolf! I can’t…” he pauses to sniff the air, eyes widening. “I can’t even smell your coffee from over here.”

“Well of course you can’t,” Peter tells him, completely unfazed, as if informing him of today’s weather.

Robert blinks, forehead scrunching. “What?”

“You’ve been losing touch with your wolf since we signed the company papers,” Peter says calmly, spinning back around in his chair to continue marking drafts. “I thought you’d noticed.”

Robert sputters soundlessly, taken aback. “Well, no, not exactly. What—? I’ve just been so invested with the firm—“

“That you haven’t spent any time running through the forest, shifting, or sniffing dog asses,” the back of Peter’s head finishes for him. “Of course you can’t smell things anymore.”

Robert gapes. “Have… Have you been running through the forest? Transforming?”

He can’t see his brother’s face, but he can practically hear the sly smirk creeping across Peter’s lips. “I’m up at five am every morning to jog through the woods by my estate. Meditate too, at the top of the hill. The acoustics are really quite charming that hour of the morning. Keeps the super-senses fresh.”

Robert stares at the back of his brother’s head, dumbfounded. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Warn me.

Peter sighs, as if Robert is a butthurt child who just got his crayons taken away. “I thought you knew, Robert. Why should you care about maintaining strong alpha status while running the most successful firm in the state? It’s not like you can’t pop fangs anymore, so what’s the big deal if your
nose can’t pick up the scent of dirty hippy protestors? That’s really a blessing. I’m almost jealous.”

“But you’ve been keeping your powers in shape,” he counters, bordering on accusation.

Peter regards him with a sly smirk over his shoulder. “That’s because I value power enough to pay a little extra for it, whether that means bribing our competitor’s employees or rising bleary-eyed with the sun every morning to bark at a few trees. Being a human millionaire isn’t enough for me, Rob. I want strength on the werewolf front, too.”

Robert takes a moment to silently study the back of Peter’s head. He’s nervous, dumbfounded, and childishly hurt. He needs a cigarette, or three. For a minute it almost feels like Peter was letting him fall behind on purpose the past couple years.

Rap rap rap. Stephanie pokes her head in the door, sleek black ponytail swishing over her shoulder. “Mr. Hales? Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Montgomery is requesting to see you. He says he has some good news.”

“It’s about time,” Peter sighs, waving a lazy hand towards the table. “Send him in.”

Arnold waddles into the room with his pinstripe tie and trusty, all-powerful clipboard. “Good news, gentlemen. I’ve found a way out of this.”

“Forgive us if we’re skeptical,” Robert sighs, sinking into a chair at the table to join them. “It’s been a long week.”

“I spoke with B&C Landshares today. It took a bit of bargaining, but I managed to squeeze a quote out of them for the plot of land on the northern border of the county, for the woods alongside the railroad. Forty acres of Beacon Hills Watermire Woods for twice the sum you bought the walnut-spruce plot for, but you’ll be able to begin construction as soon as tomorrow. Profit wise, the ten extra acres will earn you an increased profit of 4.6 mil annually once over the seven year mark. In addition, The California Wildlife Preservation Committee will buy the original plot from you for the sum you bought for.”

Robert shoots a quick glance to his brother, whose eyes gleam as Arnold continues.

“Since the agreement is still fresh under wraps, your Kéyah protestors are clueless. You two could move the bulldozers to the new plot tomorrow morning— the protestors will tap dance for joy thinking they’ve won, while your people start chopping down hippy-free trees across town.”

“What’s the catch,” Peter narrows his eyes cautiously.

“No catch. B&C just needs the two of you to sign the buyer’s contract by tomorrow at noon. I’ve got a transcript of the papers here so you can look over the technicalities,” Arnold slides a small stack of translucent golden papers across the table. “I can call the lawyers down here as soon as you like.”

“Splendid work, Arnold,” Peter praises, offering a rare toothy smile. “I love a good excuse to use my fancy signing pen.”

“I don’t know.”

It pops out of Robert’s mouth before he even realizes. The board room grows eerily quiet as Arnold blinks at him in surprise. Peter turns to face him slowly, eyes narrowing.

“You don’t know,” Peter parrots softly. “I hope you mean that in the context of ‘I don’t know how Alfred managed to pull this off for us,’ because otherwise you’re questioning a miracle of a contract
that can simultaneously earn the firm more money and spit in the protestor’s faces.”

“The latter,” Robert returns, meeting his brother’s eyes. “I don’t know, Pete.”

“You don’t know what Robert,” Peter challenges darkly, like he knows exactly what Robert is about to say.

“I don’t know if it’s the right choice for the company.” The right choice for me.

“The company,” Peter rolls the word off his tongue slowly. “You mean the company we busted our asses in college to raise together so we could make a generous profit in our hometown? What the hell has gotten into your head, Robert? There is absolutely no reason we shouldn’t take this! Did you not hear the part about all the extra profit we’ll earn? What’s the problem?”

“I need some time to think.”

He leaves the office with a dull “thud” of the mahogany double-doors.

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He finds his running gear in the back of his closet. He has to throw dozens of suits and silk ties and polished shoes out of the way to reach them, piling expensive clothes in rumpled mountains on his carpet, easily tens of thousands of dollars that suddenly make him sick. Thousands are pennies to him, always have been.

But his feet feel wrong and trapped beneath the mesh lacing of his shoes, and his college tracksuit pulls too tight and short at his thighs. It takes two nervous cigarettes that don’t work before he ditches his clothes with a frustrated shout halfway into the woods, breathing hard through his stupid nostrils that can’t smell a damn thing.

“C’mmon, Robbie,” he pants as he regards his fingertips. “You did it all the time as a kid, nothing stoppin’ you from doing it now…”

The claws come with difficulty. After a quick glance around he goes further, pulling into that rooted source of power beneath his sternum and coaxing it forward. It hurts, slow and painful as the bones pop and his fur ripples thick from his spine—but he does it. When he finishes he’s panting, tongue lolling out over his jaws.

He runs.

He runs as a wolf for the first time in years, and he feels alive. The cold earth beneath his paws, the ripple of wind through his fur, and the exhilaration of the woodland smells hitting his tongue.

After a while he slows to a trot and sniffs at a few berry bushes. He follows the scent of a squirrel to a knotted elm and finds a collection of nuts, nibbles at a beetle, and pisses at the base of the biggest tree he can find. He tracks where the rabbits have pooped and where hikers have gone by with their dogs, and when the setting sun touches the horizon he finds himself in front of a huge house in the middle of the woods.

The mansion is tall and gleaming. The lights inside are warm, gold, and cozy, with a crystal chandelier visible through one of the many victorian windows. He can see a woman inside cooking dinner at a stove, a cat cleaning it’s paws on the windowsill, and a baby drooling in a highchair. Curious, he trots around to the side, belly brushing the ground as he peeks out behind the brush.
The garage door is open; inside what looks like a father and son waxing their car. Robert perks his ears forward to pick up what they’re saying.

“You really thinking of selling this place dad?”

“Yeah, your mother and I were thinking about it. Maybe when you and David go off to college in a couple years. No use in staying in a huge house if there’s only a couple people to fill it.”

Robert feels his ears flatten against his head. He lives in a huge penthouse, and he’s only one person. Sure, it’s spacey, and quiet, but he’s never really thought about that until now.

“Where are you and mom thinking of moving? Hey, maybe the new Hale houses will be finished by then.”

Robert’s ears perk up.

“I dunno, son. The Hale brothers say they want to provide affordable housing to support the county, but they have millions and they haven’t used a penny of it to do some real work.”

He stops breathing, heart pounding. What?

“What do you mean, dad?”

“Well, they’re building these houses once the protestors give up, sure. But they’ll be making a lot of profit on those houses, which is good in business, but they have a great deal of money and they haven’t used any of it for the true greater good. There are a lot of smaller organizations that donate to charity, fund the soup kitchen, the library, even built the homeless shelter downtown, and those folk can’t even afford a decent meal let alone rent for a house, no matter how low the mortgage rate. The Hales are powerful men, James, but men who don’t do anything with their power are powerless.”

Robert doesn’t stay to hear the rest. He’s already running back to his penthouse, tail tucked low and wind streaking cold fingers through his fur.

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He can hear his Rolex ticking loudly as he stares up at his penthouse ceiling, limbs stretched out long and cold atop his king-size bed.

He doesn’t mean to, but he compares it to the tiny mattress he had in his cramped dorm at Stanford, and the tinier mattress he had to share with Peter in middle school for that one dumb overnight field trip to the observatory. But Robert has a lot of money now, so he doesn’t have a tiny mattress anymore. He has so much money he doesn’t really know what to do with it, so he spends it on fancy suits and brand names and big beds that don’t really feel any different from the regularly-priced things he had experience with at college. They feel a lot different from the tree bark the Kin of Kéyah have been sitting on— hell, lounging on for two weeks.

Right. That. He needs to make a decision about that, and voice it aloud to Peter and the board in a few hours.

His Rolex keeps ticking. It hits the wall with a loud crack as Robert grabs it and hurters it across the room. It stops ticking. He can buy a new one.
Before he really knows what he’s doing, his feet are slipping into his loafers and he’s running out his front door into the street. They make clumsy flap-smack sounds against the pavement as a few drunken cars swerve by him on the way home from late night parties. He’s gone through an entire pack of cigarettes today. Robert Hale is an idiot, he decides, as he keeps running past the end of the block and the cross-street that leads to the preserve on the other end of the county. He is the biggest, dumbest, richest idiot in the—

“Talia,” he whisper-shouts up into the tree fifteen minutes later. This is fucking stupid, he thinks wildly. He is a fucking idiot for doing this, he’s in his fucking pajamas. Any minute now reporters are going to spring from the bushes and blind him with lightbulb flashes, documenting his man-slippers and choice of sleepwear for Forbes or The Reporter or whatever magazine of the week it is. Any minute one or all of the other protestors will wake up and see him, God. Fuck this. He should turn around right now and run back to his penthouse before—

“Mr. Hale?”

A movement of silky black hair above him as Talia peeks her head over the side of her branch. Drat.

“Yes, it’s me,” he grits out quietly, because there’s no going back now. “Can I come up?”

“Are you…” Even in the dark he can see her eyes narrowing on him, her eyebrow arching. “Mr. Hale, are you in your pajamas?”

Fucking, fuck, fuckity-fuck his fucking life—

“Yes,” he whisper-snaps, and flinches when one of the Kin members in the tree to the right mumbles in their sleep. “Now can I come up?”

Talia smiles at him, revealing an amused flash of canine. “Of course. Make yourself at home.”

He climbs up, thankful that he’ll heal from the scratches the bark leaves on his bare feet. He sits carefully on the branch.

“Good evening, Mr. Hale,” Talia greets politely, as if their current situation isn’t weird as hell. She’s wearing the same ruffled skirt she’s been wearing for fourteen days now, and the same triangle-patterned sweater. Her long hair is tangled and frankly she smells pretty ripe, but she looks unfairly beautiful for someone who hasn’t showered in two weeks.

“Yes… Good evening, isn’t it,” he grumbles as he glances down at his pajamas. So much for professional image. He sighs. “And you can go ahead and call me Robert, I suppose. You’ve seen me in my pajamas now, so that probably warrants a first-name basis.”

Talia raises an eyebrow at his long-sleeved set, eyes trailing over the pinstripes unabashedly. He squirms, uncomfortable under her gaze. “Well, Robert. It’s refreshing to see a— what did you say? Twenty-six year old? Wearing old-man pajamas,” she comments amusedly, in that soft-calm voice that annoys him to no end. “Odd, but refreshing.”

“These are Bill Blass, and they are comfortable,” he sniffs, slightly put out. They cost him more than most television sets and they are very youthful pajamas, thank you very much.

Talia smiles like she’s humoring him and leans back against the tree. Her hair sways in the nighttime breeze, a few strands brushing over the stretch of her collarbone as she regards him. “Very well. So, Robert. Not that I don’t enjoy spontaneous midnight chats, but what brings you here?”

He licks his lips, adjusting his stance on the frankly very uncomfortable tree bark. “I—“ he starts, but
doesn’t really know where to start. Why did he come here? “I… I need your help,” he sighs, running a hand down his face. He’s been doing that a lot the past couple weeks. “The associates at the company want to let you have the trees.”

“Oh?” Talia voices calmly, watching Robert for more.

“But they want to buy a new plot of trees in the county and cut them down instead,” Robert finishes, averting his gaze to the ground.

“Oh,” Talia says again, still frustratingly passive. “I see.”

“Well I don’t,” Robert snaps. “I don’t see what I’m supposed to do about it, and I’m supposed to have an answer to tell the board in four hours. Do you know what it’s like to be the head of a successful company and be expected to lead seven-hundred employees to a better future? Did you know that even though you’re the co-CEO, you get pulled in fifty different directions from everyone you know—the press, your PR team, your executives, business managers and number-crunchers and an obnoxious little brother who all want you to do the right thing, but how do I know what the ‘right’ thing is? Our company needs these trees, but…”

Silence. Talia watches him carefully.

“I don’t know whether I want to take them anymore,” Robert finishes.

“You don’t know whether to follow your intuition or stay loyal to your brother,” Talia finishes calmly for him, like the freakishly intuitive person she is. How does she even—?

“Yes!” He blurts, because that is exactly it. Then he flinches at his volume, remembering their current under-the-radar position. “Yes,” he whispers. “Peter will never understand why I don’t want to cut down the trees for our housing. He’ll take my side if I ask him to— he won’t like it, but he always supports me when I need him to.”

“Sounds like a good brother.”

“He is. Pete… Peter is my best friend,” he sighs. “We’ve gone through everything together. Our father left my mother when I was two, after she got pregnant with him. When we were in high school she got sick, and had to move into a care home— Early-onset Alzheimer’s. She’s still there, we go to see her about once a month. So I had to really take care of him starting when I was eighteen. He’s really smart. Smarter than me, and more focused.”

“Your mother is lucky to have the two of you.”

“But… This…” He looks at his hands, remembering how they were paws a few hours ago. “This company is the most important thing in my life. It is my life. Pete and I worked so hard to get here, and we have it all now. But the… The schmoozing, the board meetings, sitting in that office every day, but… It used to be so easy,” he murmurs.

“Connecting to your wolf, or leading your company?” Talia asks.

“Both. It’s… It’s both,” he admits.

“But you don’t like your job.”

He blinks at how easily Talia says it. He thinks about his job a lot, but he hasn’t been able to admit it out loud, so—
“Of course I like my job,” he blurs automatically. “I’m a millionaire, who wouldn’t like my job?”

“How long have you been smoking?” Talia asks calmly.

“Just because you say I smell like cigarettes doesn’t mean I smoke,” Robert dodges.

“Whenever your heartbeat speeds up you subconsciously reach for your breast pocket,” Talia voices calmly, still staring at the trees. “Your response to anxiety is to seek a tangible substance chemically designed to repress that part of your brain. And yes, you smell like cigarettes. How long have you been smoking?”

“I… About two years,” Robert admits. *Since we started the company.*

“Hm.” Talia hums. Not even condescending, just musing. He swallows thickly as he stares at her, trying to figure out how she got him to spill so much.

“I saw a house today,” he mentions quietly, as he looks into the forest. “It had people inside.”

“Most of them do.”

He huffs a small laugh. “I know. But this house was big, and it had… A family inside.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah… There was this woman inside cooking, and a baby, and all this cozy furniture, and it just looked… Nice, I guess.”

“I take it you haven’t tasted any of that in quite some time,” Talia tells the wind quietly, giving him an opportunity to study his ringless fingers.

“No. But then there was this… Father. And his son. And they were talking in the garage,” he licks his lips. “And I overheard him say— he said that Hale Associates— that my brother and I are selfish because we have millions and we don’t spend it on anything charitable. Do you… Is he right?”

“Judging by how anxiously your heart sped up when you asked the question, you already know the answer.”

“D’you always have be so goddamn cryptic?” He snaps. “You’re making me rethink everything and it’s threatening to turn my whole life upside down, so kindly stop.”

“I’m just sitting in a tree. You’re the one who chooses to let yourself rethink everything.”

He sighs, laboriously and desperately, and scrubs his hands over his face again. He needs to shave. “What do you and your group do, anyway?”

Talia smiles and crosses her legs over the branch. “We have a picnic in the woods the first Sunday of every month. We clean up trails where we can. We discuss ways to better the environment, but nothing unusual from what friends usually do.”

Friends. Robert doesn’t hear that word too often. He has Hank, his other trusted advisors at the company, and his employees and assistants. He has Peter, who is his best friend, but no real *friends* outside of that. At Stanford he was too busy studying and developing the irrigation system with his brother to really make any. “We’re here to get ahead,” they used to say during high-fives. “*Not to make friends.*”

“Really it’s just an excuse to get together and see one another,” Talia continues.
“That sounds… Nice,” he admits, and immediately purses his lips at how childish it sounds. But her only smiles deeper.

“It is.”

“Do you…” He licks his lips again. “Do you have a family, Nat’aanii?”

Talia stares a long time into the woods. “I consider myself married to the land.”

He doesn’t expect the small sting of disappointment. He nods, and watches her hand rest atop the bark, just a few inches from his own hand.

“I guess I’m married to my job.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“But I’ve never considered anything else.”

“Not too late. You may be living like an old man, Robert, but you’re only twenty-six.”

The dawn creeps slowly into the horizon. His Rolex is at home on his floor, but he guesses it’s almost 5am. The reporters will start arriving any minute to grab the good spots in the front.

“I should probably go,” he mumbles. “Thank you… For… Letting me hang out. No pun intended.”

Talia chuckles, a soft musical sound. “Well then make like a tree and leaf.”

Laughter bursts out of him, and he has to clap a hand over his mouth to keep it quiet. God, he’s missed jokes. He’s missed the sound of his own laughter and it takes a minute before it subsides to giggles, and then a soft smile, until it slowly falls to a frown at the horizon. “I still don’t know what to do,” he admits.

Talia turns to him, a million unreadable messages in her eyes, and raises two fingers to his chest.

“Maybe you should try listening to your heart instead of your head.”

He lands softly on the ground as he jumps from the tree, and runs off towards the rising sun in his Bill Blass pajamas. He listens to Talia’s chuckles follow him for the first mile.

They really are old-man pajamas, he thinks.

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Peter is staring at him with pale blue eyes perfectly round, lips a thin line. It’s that overtly calm I’m-so-pissed-at-you-I-could-kill-you-right-now look that Robert hates so much. It’s not a good shape for his brother’s jawline, they’ve been over this.

“I’m sorry, I think my hyper-sensitive ears might have missed that,” Peter grits out quietly, and Robert internally squirms. “Would you mind repeating yourself, Mr. Hale?”

He sighs. He’s operating on zero sleep, since he spent the wee hours of the morning talking with a barefoot woman in a tree, and then ran home and took a thirty-minute shower before throwing on his suit from the day before. He might have forgotten to put on cologne or brush his teeth, he isn’t sure which. But now it’s 7:05am in the white-walled meeting room in the west wing, and the clock ticks loudly above the long mahogany table, which is imported from China.
“I said, my answer is no. I still think we should call off the project. We can find another area to build the houses.”

“I don’t even know who you are right now,” Peter breathes incredulously. “We’ve dedicated our lives to this, Robert! Hell, the past year we’ve—and within a week you’ve changed your mind because of some tree-hugging hippy with a pretty face?”

“I—” he takes a deep breath. “No, it’s more than that, it’s… It’s about our heritage.”

“We’re whiter than bleached snowballs.”

“No, I mean our heritage,” Robert flashes his eyes crimson. “Talia is one of us, Peter, she’s a werewolf, she—“

Peter cuts him off with a hysterical laugh. “A werewolf! Steve Conwald of Conwald’s mechanics on Tullane Avenue is a werewolf too. So is the fat woman who runs the bakery by the train tracks. Maybe we should consult them for advice on our multi-million dollar firm we established, hmm?”

“Aren’t you listening to me? We need a space to be wolves, it’s what makes the county so special! Chopping down those trees is the same thing as running away from that part of ourselves.”

“Oh my god,” Peter breathes softly, eyes narrowing. “You like her.”

Roberts heart leaps into his throat. “What—? I do not,” he blurs immediately. “I— you’ve got to be kidding, she’s—“ Amazing, patient, smart, intimidating, beautiful, wise, tactful, kind, poignant, down to earth, smells like chamomile and maybe cinnamon—

Peter comes dangerously close, pushing his face within inches of Robert’s nose. “You listen to me, Rob. We’ve busted our asses to get this company off the ground, and it made us the youngest millionaires in the state.” His eyes gleam with the word, the same way they always do when money is mentioned. ”I will not let you ruin our dream for the sake. Of. Some. Girl.”

Robert grits his teeth in frustration. “She’s not just some girl, Pete. I’m talking about the ideas she has, and the valid points she brings up! Did we even look into other locations in Beacon Hills to build housing?”

“No, we didn’t,” Peter snaps at him, eyes narrowing angrily. “Because there are no other locations. That’s part of why the mortgage rates are so damn high here, remember? And why so many local evictees are sitting on the streets, because this county is already packed to full-capacity! Except for the hundreds of acres of damn forest surrounding us.”

“Oh, you’re right, you’re right,” he admits, setting his head down between his arms. Maybe he could make it all go away if he just hung out there for a while. “But what if… What if we started looking into other towns? I’m talking Medina, Chesterton, the neighbor-cities surrounding Beacon Hills,” he tries.

“I’m well aware of what cities surround us,” Peter counters cooly. “But hasn’t it always been our mission to improve the economy here, in the town we were born and raised in?”

“Yes,” Robert admits. “But we could build the housing out of county and use the profit to improve other situations in Beacon Hills. The parks, schools, museums. Whatever you want. It’s a compromise.”

Peter studies him. “Do you have any idea how much profit we’ll lose if we pass up this contract?”
“Yes.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“We’re already millionaires.”

“We could be bigger millionaires.”

“Look, Pete. You’re my brother. You’re my best friend. I value your opinion just as much as my own, you know that, but I can’t just…” He looks at his fingers, remembering how they were paws yesterday. “I don’t think we should cut into the forest. And I know that isn’t what we had in mind, but I’m trusting my heart here. Bulldozing those trees goes against our blood, and I want to respect that. Just like I respect you, and I respect this company. Will you stand by me?”

A long stream of minutes pass by in silence. Peter turns his back and walks to the window, staring out over the town for a long time. His silhouette looks young and lanky. Sometimes Robert forgets his brother is only twenty-four and immediately feels guilty for it. Eventually, Peter speaks up softly without turning around.

“I’m not happy about this, Rob. I don’t know what’s gotten into your head, but I trust you enough to take your word for it. When we open those doors at six you will tell the board about the decision to call off the project. We’ll send the bulldozers and contractors home. Your new hippy friends can resume their lives taking mud-baths and cooking vegan instead of sitting in trees.”

Robert sighs as a huge weight lifts off his back. “Thank you, Pete. We’ll find a new solution, I know we can—“

“But,” Peter cuts him off darkly, and strides over to pin him down with his eyes. “You will get Talia Nat’adilli-whatever out of your head, got it?”

Robert deflates, caught off guard. He automatically goes for innocence. “I told you, I don’t li—“

“I can hear your heartbeat, you dumbass,” Peter scoffs. “The best way to ruin a company is to get distracted. Mrs. Morrison’s Business and Economics class 201 freshman year, remember?”

He sighs. “I remember. I remember her horrible brown loafers, too.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Good. We’re on the same page then. Power stems from the diligence we inspire in others, Rob.”

Robert sighs and spins his chair around to face the window, resting his chin on his knuckles. He can see the tip of the forest line from here, where the bulldozers are still parked. If he looks hard enough, he can imagine a freckle-faced woman lounging back against the bark, long midnight-blue skirt draped in an elegant sweep across the branches.

“I know, Pete.”

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“Hey, John?”

John smiles up at her. “Claudia. You doin’ okay up there?”

“Good as I can be,” she chirps. She’s laying on her stomach across the branch, his jacket still around
her shoulders. “You wanna come up for a bit?”

He glances over at Terry, who’s sleeping against his Fir tree again. The stars twinkle gently above. “For a little bit, sure.”

Once he’s settled by her side on the branch she voices, “You wanna know a secret?”

“As long as I don’t have to arrest you for it, shoot.”

She chuckles, musical soft laughter. Then she leans in close to whisper like they’re the only two people in the world. “I saw Talia with a man last night.”

“You mean… You mean she left her tree?” John asks, confused.

“No,” Claudia whispers gleefully. “A man climbed up to sit with her! I think he was trying to keep it a secret, but I was awake because I was looking at the stars. Such pretty stars,” She adds as an afterthought, shooting a grin skywards. “I didn’t stay awake much long after that, but they were just sitting there talking, like we do!”

“Huh,” John muses. “Do you know who it was?”

“That’s the best part!” She whispers gleefully. “Are you ready?” John nods. Claudia glances around, as if they aren’t twenty feet up in a private tree. She leans in close to his ear, breath tickling the fine hairs there. “Robert Hale.”

John’s eyebrows fly up. “As in the co-CEO of Hale Associates?”

“I know, right?” Claudia exclaims gleefully. “At first I thought, noooo, it couldn’t be him, but then he turned his face so I could see better and it was! With his dark hair and butt-chin and everything!”

“Huh,” John says again. "Terry and Richard were on duty last night. I wonder why they didn’t see him.”

“Richard left after your friend fell asleep,” Claudia says. “I don’t know where he went, but he came back kinda wobbly. It looked like he was…”

“Tipsy?” John ventures. Claudia nods fervently. It’s odd that Richard would leave post to go to a bar after vowing not to slack off, but John wouldn’t put it past him. “Well that’s not good.”

“Are you going to tell on him?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “I don’t have any proof, and it wouldn’t be fair anyway. He deserves a shot at being Sheriff just as much as I do.”

Claudia turns to him, smile blooming until she’s full on beaming at him, starlight twinkling in her eyes. “I like you, John.” She declares with every ounce of certainty. “You are kind. And you have little baby wrinkles on your forehead.”

John thinks it’s the strangest compliment anyone’s paid him. “I, uh…” He clears his throat. “Thank you. You’re… A lot like sunshine.”

Her lips part in a surprised smile. “Really? Wow, no one’s ever called me that before. Hey, have you ever had the mini cherry pies from the bakery on Walnut street? Those taste like sunshine.”

“Can’t say I have. Although when I was younger my mother used to bake cherry almond cookies. She still makes them for holidays but I think she might be switching salt for sugar."
Claudia pinches her lips together. “The only thing I can make is macaroni and cheese. Not exactly
the classic Polish dish my mother would approve of, but it’s pretty tasty if I do say so myself! I
always cut up little pieces of sausage and stir them in, because sausage makes everything better.
American food is so much tastier than what he had in Poland.”

John hums as he pictures it. “Sounds delicious. A lot better than the ramen and canned soup I’ve
been living off of. A single officer living in a tiny apartment with a tinier kitchen doesn’t provide
much opportunity for a home-cooked meal.”

“Oh,” Claudia breathes. Then she startles, looking at him excitedly. “Hey, what if I make you
macaroni sometime once I’m no longer in this tree? I live with my mom in Berkeley, but I take the
train down here to go to classes—I could drop off a pan for you at the station!”

The thought makes him smile, swathing him in something desperately warm. “That would… Yeah,
if you—I’d like that.”

She peers at him thoughtfully, eyes flickering back and forth between his own. “Tell me, John. Are
police officers allowed to kiss on the job?”

He nearly falls backwards off his branch. He stares at her brown twinkling doe eyes, her upturned
nose and pink bow mouth. He’s wanted to taste them for longer than he’d like to admit. He licks his
lips nervously, quickly turning away and shoving down the disappointed flutter inside. “I… No.
They’re not allowed.”

“Mm,” Claudia hums. She gazes up at the stars. “What about holding hands? Can I hold your hand,
John?”

Technically, no. No intimate acts are allowed on the job. Intimate acts are punishable by suspension
or even getting fired. But he’s already sitting next to her in a tree for the third night in a row, so—

He nods. “Yeah, that… Yeah. You can.”

Slowly, gently, she takes his hand. Hers is smooth, slender, soft and cold, spotted with freckles. His
is larger, warmer, calloused. A shiver runs through him, taking his breath away. She sets his hand on
her knee and plays idly with it.

“Your hands are so… Manly,” she murmurs, amused.

“Yours are cold,” John mutters back.

They sit in the quiet for a little like that, staring at the bruising horizon. Claudia finishes examining
and opts for just kind of holding his hand, thumb resting over his knuckles. He tells her about the
best hot dog he’s ever eaten from the street stand near his Manhattan house. She tells him about the
little white dog her cousin owned in Poland and how it would shed all over the couch. The sun
slowly rises.

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Next shift he arrives at noon to take over for Richard. When he sees him leaning against Claudia’s
tree, John moves faster.

"Hey, Stilinski," Richard grins his Grinch-grin. "I was just talking to your friend Clauds, here."
Up above Claudia mutters something in a foreign language. She looks obstinate, but her tight body language and the way her knees are tucked protectively up to her chest betray her unease. John glares at Richard and strides over on a wave of sudden protectiveness.

"Well I'm here to take your spot, so you're free to go," he states.

Richard smirks at him before snapping his gum. He winks up at Claudia. "See you tomorrow, sweet cheeks."

Claudia says something in the foreign language again, but this time she falters a little, cheeks staining rose.

As soon as Richard is a few paces away, "Claudia, are you alright?" John stares up at her. She tucks her legs in tighter and twiddles with the hem of her sleeve.

"I take it back," she sniffs angrily. "He's not a praying mantis, he's a pojeb!"

"Is that Polish?"

"Yes," Claudia grumbles. "I just called him a very bad word. Well not a very bad word… I’m too scared to say the ones my mother uses."

"What did he say to you?" John demands gently.

"He opened nice enough. Chatted about the weather, asked me how I was doing. But then he said he liked my peaches, and I was confused because I don’t have any peaches with me, ‘I’m in a walnut tree’ I told him! And then he offered to..." Claudia grows scarlet, lips pursing in embarrassment. "Nevermind." She says in a tiny voice.

John gapes, at a loss for words. He clamps his lips and curls his fists in wild anger, but reels it back for her. "Claudia, I'm so sorry. That guy is a real jerk, I'm sorry you had to meet him like that. Are you... Claudia?"

He trails off, because Claudia is crying. It’s quiet and half-hidden behind her hands, but he can see the tiny shudders of her shoulders. It’s shocking to see her anything but jubilant. She smiles down at him sadly.

“Ohhh, what a beska I am. I’m sorry, John. I just get embarrassed easily. I'm okay, really.”

“But you’re not okay,” John counters, frustrated at how he’s stuck on the ground. “No one deserves to be talked to like that, you have nothing to apologize for.”

Claudia sniffs, then smiles down at him with sparkly eyes. “Jesteś tak piękna, John.” There’s something sad to it, and something warm there, too.

But she still picks at her overalls, body skewed slightly away. She looks so deflated, and John stares up at her overalls until he can’t stand it.

“I... Hold on.”

He abruptly turns on his heel to jog over to Terry. The man is leaning against his usual tree doodling on his ticket book. “Hey, Ter? I forgot something important. Mind if I leave you for fifteen minutes? I'll be right back.”

Terry chews his quarter-pounder and raises an eyebrow. “Just for you, John. Although we’re not
supposed to leave post, I can't imagine what you forgot that’s so—"

But John is already jogging to the squad car. Through the window he can see Claudia’s puzzled face flipping upside-down to watch him. He backs out of the lot and squeals down the road.

The first stop is his apartment, where he runs up four flights of stairs and spends ten minutes throwing around couch cushions trying to find his cassette player. He finds it on the stack of crime books beside his bed and runs back down the four flights of stairs to the car again. The second stop is Divinity Records on the corner of Renwald Street, where he makes a beeline to the aisle marked with the first letter of the alphabet. He grabs the first tape in the lineup and hopes Terry and Richard don’t kill him for it.

Seven minutes later he’s back at the tree lot stepping back under the police tape. Terry watches him quizzically from his tree, hands shoved casually in his pockets. He lifts a dark eyebrow as if to say, “what was that all about?” and John nods as he strides across to Claudia’s tree as if to reply, “thanks.”

“You’re back,” Claudia cocks her head once he’s standing beneath her walnut tree. "Where did you go?"

"How good a catch are you?” John asks, with a glance to Terry, who’s staring over with interest.

"I... I played tennis in high school?” Claudia supplies in question. John allows himself one second to picture Claudia in a cute little tennis outfit and then says, “alright, I'm going to toss something up to you. Ready?"

"Ready!” Claudia nods, bracing her hands.

He tosses it up. She catches it. There’s a three second pause where she flips it over. "You brought me a cassette player?” She exclaims in equal parts elation and confusion.

"Play it," John prompts.

A click of the button and the sound of Abba’s 'Super Trouper’ erupts loudly from the small machine. Claudia’s squeal that follows is twice as loud, drawing the attention of the other protestors as she flails on her branch, legs swinging wildly. It’s enough to tickle a breathless laugh from John’s throat, even as she starts belting the lyrics with newfound passion, sparking loud harmonies from the surrounding Kin of Kéyah members. Within five seconds the whole tree lot is whooping and singing along with the music, and in ten seconds the crowd of county spectators is shouting along too. Terry looks at him like he’s lost his mind, which is probably accurate.

“This is absolutely, positively, the the maddest, RADDEST thing anyone’s every done for me!” Claudia hollers down to him, grinning breathlessly. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement and all traces of former sadness are wiped away. She’s glowing. “I love you, John Stilinski!”

He smiles up at her, bashfully cramming his hands in his pockets. He feels pink heat flood his face and ears. “Enjoy your shiny ruby of 70s music, miss Górksi."

"Tonight the super trouper lights are gonna find me, shining like the suuuuuun! Sup-p-er group-p-per... Smiling, having fiiuuuu...!”

He walks slowly across the grass back to Terry’s tree, ducking his head happily as the choir washes over him. Terry crosses his dark arms and shakes his head slowly at him. “Rich is gonna kill you, man. If I don’t kill you first, that is.”
John grins giddily. “It’ll be worth it.”

.o0O0o. June 14, 1988.

Peter is standing stiffly behind him, scorching two holes into the back of Robert’s head. Robert faces the crowd. It’s a sea of people with flashing cameras in the parking lot next to the grove of trees marking the start of forest. The construction workers lean forward in their vehicles and squint beneath their hard hats. Montgomery, Hank, and the PR team stand stoically behind him. The protestors sit antsy in their trees, quiet for the first time in fifteen days. He can make out Talia’s purple skirt in the elm by the front.

“On behalf of Hale Associates, my brother and I have decided—“

He meets Talia’s eyes in her tree.

“—we will withdraw our plans to cut down the thirty acres of forest we purchased of the Beacon Hills Newman Norton preserve."

He barely manages to get it all out before the crowd goes wild, cheering and clapping with the protestors the loudest. Behind him Peter turns around and walks swiftly back to the limo. Cameras flash, reporters immediately swarm him, cutting off the view of the protestors.

“Mr. Hale, what made you come to this decision?”

“Robert, Robert! Is that the new—"

Mr. Hale, does your company have plans to—"

He pushes past them, throwing “Montgomery, handle this!” over his shoulder as he brushes forward into the swarm of protestors. They’re all hugging and dancing and cheering and laughing, and their collective body odor is overwhelming but it’s a strangely beautiful sight. He makes a beeline for Talia, and the protestors stop and grin at him as he draws near, as if they have no malice for how he tried to make their lives a living hell for the past two weeks.

“Robert,” Talia nods at him, lips quirked in gratitude. Happiness. Pride for him?

“I—“ he starts, but gapes speechless as he figures out what he wants to say. To thank her for the advice, to wish her a good day, to shake her hand? Then he remembers—

Maybe you should try listening to your heart instead of your head.

“I’d like to come to one of your meetings,” he blurts, and the protestors within earshot stare in surprise at him. “I mean— For the Kin of Kéyah,” he continues, stammering. “I know— I understand if you won’t want me there, but I’d like to… I’d like to come and learn from you. If that’s alright with you… Talia.”

Her smile, already so elegant just as a simple curve, blooms into a dazzling display of white teeth, and he hardly has time to admire it before she steps forward to wrap him in a hug.

His entire world stops. She smells like cinnamon and pine and more than a little ripe, but it’s the best smell in the world, and her sweater is soft as feathers. He can’t remember the last time anyone hugged him; it’s all been professional handshakes for the past six years.
“We have meetings at my house the last Sunday of every month. Seven to nine in the evening, food and drink provided. I’m sure your people can find you the address.”

He smiles. “Yes, I… Thank you.”

“Thank you, Robert Hale.” And she turns away when a friend calls her.

He walks back to where Peter is leaning against the limo. He has his shades on, but Robert can feel his eyes piercing him. “Why were you talking to Nat’aanii?”

He focuses on keeping his heartbeat steady, since he knows Peter is listening. “Just wishing her well. Looks good for the press. What do you say we grab some drinks tonight?”

Peter eyes him carefully. “Sure.”

June 14th, 1988.

John is in an undershirt eating Frosted Flakes when he sees it on the news.

“—here at Beacon Hill’s tree line of the Norman Newton preserve, where Hale Associate’s co-CEO Robert Hale just announced the company will not be cutting down the trees for housing, meaning that the thirteen Kin of Kéyah members are free to—”

His spoon hits the bowl with a loud clank as he jumps from his chair and grabs his jacket. He sprints out the door without bothering to lock it behind him, runs down all four flights of apartment stairs because the elevator is still broken, and drives down to the construction site in record time. When his tires squeak to a halt in front of the tree line he leaps from the car, leaving the keys in the ignition.

He’s terrified she already left, but then she spots her, jumping around and cheering with the other Kin members in the middle of the lot. It’s chaos—news reporters are shouting and cameras are flashing over where the Hales are standing, and the town spectators are cheering amid the environmentalists. John plows through the crowd—A second later she spots him, her eyes wide, and she fights her way free and runs towards him, rainbow shoelaces flapping in the wind.

“Claudia!”

“John!”

She squeals and tackles him in a hug, nearly knocking him over. He catches her without thought and laughs, twirling her around with the momentum. She smells terrible, and she’s a package of joy in his arms.

“John, we did it!” Her smile so wide it’s blinding, infectious. “We did it, we really did it! We saved the trees!”

“I saw,” he grins. “And you pulled it off before eating all the walnuts from your tree, I’m impressed.”

She throws her head back and laughs, pressing her body flush against his. Her eyes jump from his shirt to his jeans and tennis shoes, and his utter lack of uniform. “John,” she says breathlessly, tightening her fingers around the back of his shirt. “You’re not on duty, are you?”

“No,” he responds just as breathlessly.
She beams. “Good.”

And she throws her lips forward to meet his.

For a moment the cheers and chatter of the surrounding crowd fades away, replaced by the warm sensation of her bubblegum mouth, and her arms pressed soft around his shoulders. It’s clumsy and their teeth clack, but it’s the best kiss in the world, he’d bet money on it. They break apart panting and he watches her eyes flutter open, heart pounding impossibly loud. Her cheeks are flush and he’s pretty sure he’s beet-red as well, but their arms are still wrapped tightly around each other. Distantly he knows people are most definitely staring. He grins back at the spectators and locks eyes with Richard in passing, who’s glaring at him from across the lot.

“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” Claudia exclaims breathlessly, gazing up at him with her huge doe eyes. “Does it always make you dizzy?”

“I…” he swallows, feeling faint himself. She probably wants to go home and shower and see her family, but he asks anyway. “Can I take you out for lunch? You must be starving.”

“Oh, yes!” Claudia exclaims immediately. “I could probably eat an entire pizza right now! Two pizzas, even!”

“How about Tozatino’s on Main Street?”

“I would love to!” Claudia gasps, all smiles and joy. “But I’d really love to go home and shower first.”

“Of course, Can I pick you up in half an hour? An hour?” John grins.

“Yes, I would—!” Claudia beams but then her smile drops. “You’re not Polish, are you?”

John blinks, wondering if they’re having the same conversation. “Uh… No.”

“Not even a little bit?”

“I don’t think so. Swiss, mostly. With some Irish, French I think…?”

Claudia shakes her head and pets the back of his hair, bites her lip. “Oh, phooey. Okay, then I’ll have to meet you at the restaurant.”

“Oh,” John stammers. “Sure, although it’s really no trouble.”

“No, it’s not you, it’s—“ Claudia wrinkles her nose. “My mother. Whom you are never allowed to meet, mostly for your own safety. Do you have any paper on you?”

John fumbles in his pocket and finds the receipt for the Abba cassette he bought two days ago. He sheepishly tears it in half and hands it over. “Terry, you got a pen on you?” He calls. Terry saunters over and provides one from his belt, shaking his head at John.

“Man, you two are the cutest love story since Sandy and Danny. It’s disgusting.”

“Oh, and John’s best friend! Thank you, Terry.” Claudia pecks Terry quickly on the cheek, turning his dark cheeks raspberry. “So nice to see you up close for once!” She provides brightly, and uses a stunned Terry’s back to scribble down her address and phone number. She gives it to a breathless John.

“This is my phone number, but since it’s my house, just… Hang up really fast if a deep raspy voice
answers the phone in Polish,” she tells him seriously. “I’ll try to get to the phone first, but it’s very important that she doesn’t hear your manly voice. Because you’re a man, and she doesn’t like me to interact with those. At least ones that aren’t Polish.”

John chuckles and hands her his scribbled receipt. “Great. This is my phone and my apartment number.”

“Yay! Mad rad!”

“Tozatino’s in half an hour, then?”

“Yes! I’ll see you soon, John!”

They pull in for another quick kiss and Claudia runs off towards the parking lot, rainbow shoelaces flapping behind her. “Wait, how are you getting home?” John calls after her. She spins around, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“I have a car, you dope!” And she dances over to an obnoxiously bright candy-blue jeep that must be a decade old, with a black door and a little yellow Christmas tree hanging from the mirror. John never thought he’d see a car uglier than his 300,000 mile Volkswagen, but he learns new things every day.

“That’s a hell of a car,” Terry raises an eyebrow.

John grins, watching Claudia dance across the parking lot and wave from the driver’s seat, nearly running over a pair of reporters in the process.

“That’s a hell of a woman, Terry.”
The story continues.


The house is tall, small, and nestled tightly between other tall, small houses.

The paint is chipped and the porch is made of brick, and it reminds Robert of the orphanage he saw in a Christmas movie once.

So definitely unlike the polished floors and marble penthouses his hand-crafted soles usually stride across. Inside he can hear laughter, a tea kettle whistling, the soft muffle of people shifting positions on fabric couches and chairs. Hesitantly, fearfully, he raises a finger to the cracked yellow paint and rings the doorbell, which hoots like an owl instead of the traditional ding-dong. He contemplates bolting right then and there—if he turns around and runs right now he could make it back to the Maserati and drive back to his penthouse before a single hippie sees him and laughs in his—

“Hi!”

The door swings open, revealing a petite young woman with huge brown eyes and a pale face dotted with what must be a million moles.

Her eyes sweep up his frame and grow impossibly rounder. “Oh, you must be the executive person!” She honest-to-god squeals and clasps her hands together excitedly, and Robert considers correcting her that ‘executive person’ is putting it lightly, as he is fact a celebrated millionaire co-CEO who—

“Claudia, let the poor man in, it’s freezing outside!” A man’s voice chuckles from inside, and the mole girl flails, nearly whacking Robert in the chest. In all twenty-six years of his life, Robert has never been called a ‘poor man’.

“Oh, right! Totally right, come on in Mr. Robert, sir Robert executive. Thank you, by the way, for not tearing down the trees! They are so beautiful, and the one I sat on had walnuts that were simply to die for, not literally of course, but I probably ate enough of them for the rest of eternity so—“

Robert stares in wonder at the girl as she babbles a mile per minute, takes him by the hand—by the hand—and gently pulls him into the house, where he’s bombarded with warm colors and smiles and laughter and the smell of something sweet and spicy from the kitchen, soaps and candles and fruity teas, and—chocolate?

The living room is small. Which shouldn’t be a surprise based on the teeny exterior of the house, but what’s baffling is how there are easily a dozen people crammed into and around the furniture, all sitting cozily and chatting warmly, cradling steaming mugs of tea and coffee, some with what looks like hot cocoa. Robert hasn’t had hot cocoa since he was a kid.

He gazes at them. They’re all vastly different from the people he grew up with at the company; the
company people are somewhat cold, clinical, to-the-point and serious. They wear straight suits and skirts with straight lines and slate-grey colors, sharp blacks and sharper lines of triangular ties and tailored slacks and creases. The company walls are white and so spacious it feels like drowning, with huge windows and skylights that let in pale blue light. There is no music, no decor aside from the artistically-placed potted plant or monochrome abstract art. The only sound is the occasional click-clack of a woman’s slick Versace stiletto purposefully striding across the floor. Everyone is groomed to perfection with sleek ponytails and gelled hair, shiny shoes and serious expressions.

But here the people are loud with laughter and dramatic swoops in tone as they chatter, smiles and funny teeth and frizzy hair, a couple clipped lazily into mile-long braids. There is not a straight line in sight, from the curves and ruffles of brightly patterned circle-skirts and sweaters, broad smiles and relaxed postures. Spines bend into slouches, thumbs curl around colorful mugs and greasy h’ordeuvres, legs criss-cross or tuck to the side like woodland animals. The walls are painted a warm red, with the couch and furnishings mismatched in a wild blend of fabric and scratched wood and color. On the walls hang photos of Talia and presumably her father, artistic renditions of the forest and a few wolves (family? friends?) and a few philosophical quotes. He didn’t even see this level of chaos at Stanford.

“—a giraffe like *that* before, you know? But anyway, let’s sit!”

Robert blinks as Mole Girl leads him cheerily by the arm to a single space left on the beat-up couch, barely enough for one person because Burly Beard and Silver Braid are already there discussing organic gardening probably. He sits carefully, unsure if the thing will collapse beneath the weight of so many people, and as soon as his butt touches the fabric Mole Girl plops down next to him with no conception of personal bubbles, all grins and sugar-breath. Her legs are so short her socks hardly touch the floor.

“Guys, look who came!” Mole Girl exclaims as she pokes Burly Beard and Silver Braid. The pair turn to stare at Robert and surprisingly do not ask him if his shoes are real leather (they are). Instead they grin and reach out to shake his hand.

“Hey, you must be Robert!”

“Thank you so much for sparing those trees, we are so incredibly grateful for your decision!”

“Good evening, I, uh—” Robert clears his throat. He never uses *‘uh’* in the office. “I’m glad my company and your group could find a compromise.”

Silver Braid is willowy with a sweet smile and chocolate skin crackled like corn husk from age. She introduces herself as Patti, and Burly Beard’s name is Rowan. His biceps are huge with colorful tattoos decorating every inch of skin from his wrists to his neck, but his eyes are crinkly warm and he bites into a petit-four in tiny nibbles like how a dainty unicorn might. They smell like soap and calm. Claudia smells like sugar and happiness and has a girlish exclamation for every one of the moles on her face.

But he’s too busy scanning the space for Talia, and his stomach does a funny flip when he sees her in the kitchen laughing with another woman as she pours tea into a yellow kettle. The tea is then brought to the table and everyone dives for it like it’s the elixir of life. Her selection of teas is unbelievable but Robert drinks coffee and honestly has no idea where to start. Talia watches amusedly from the corner of her eye.

“—to our guest?”

“Oh, doi! did I forget to mention my name? What a dope I am today!” She taps pale fingers against
her temple, as if to knock dust out of her ear. “I’m Claudia!” She chirps, revealing a wide grin with a small gap in the middle. “Isn’t Talia’s house so lovely?”

It takes Robert a few moments to realize that the girl is completely serious without an ounce of sarcasm. His gaze flickers to the printed curtains, the rushed paint jobs on the walls, the mismatched furniture that smells like it used to be someone else’s mismatched furniture, and the stains on the carpet.

“It’s quite… Cozy, yes,” is what Robert comes up with, and only because he almost says “claustrophobic.”

Which is when Talia comes floating out into the living room like some ethereal, tan-skinned goddess in a yellow sweater. Somehow her waterfall of dark hair swishes perfectly over her shoulder as she bends down to place the tea on the table, and Robert can’t help but gape stupidly and fight the urge to bolt for the door. He can’t do this, she’s going to look up and see him and he can’t do thi—

“Robert, it’s so nice to see you,” Talia smiles warmly at him, and he thinks he might actually be getting heat stroke. A fever. Something. "Thank you for coming."

He clears his throat. “It’s my pleasure.”

“Huh, could’ve fooled me!” Claudia pokes him on the arm. “Don’t you ever smile, Rob?”

No one calls him Rob except for Hank and his brother.

“When it’s appropriate.”

God, he sounds like such a— Peter. He sounds like Peter. Why can’t he shake the professionalism here?

Talia taps a wooden cylinder against an elaborately painted bowl three times in slow succession, making it ring out softly. She takes a seat cross-legged on the floor, cradling a mug of steaming tea. Her hair is tied back in a loose braid that nearly touches the floor, with bare feet, a pair of soft black yoga pants, and that fuzzy mustard sweater drooping over her left collarbone. And there are freckles— even freckles on her collarbones. She looks stunning.

“Thank you all for joining us today,” Talia smiles, in that soft, lulling voice that fascinates him to no end. “And especially, we should thank our special guest joining us today, Mr. Robert Hale.”

She grins warmly and gestures her hand elegantly his direction, and the other members grin with equal enthusiasm at him. They raise their teacups and erupt into applause, somehow polar opposite of the applause he gets after presentations. Claudia squeezes a hand on his shoulder. Robert feels his ears heating up despite how he’s conditioned himself not to do that, but the warm welcome is so unexpected, so honest, so unlike the way anyone treats him at the company. He wonders if this is what family feels like.

“Kin of Kéyah tradition,” Talia continues. “Is for guests and new members to say a few words about themselves. Where you’re from, your hobbies, things like that. Would you mind?”

Robert clears his throat and swallows as the room goes quiet, awaiting his answers.

“Well… Good evening, my name is Robert Hale. I was born in Beacon Hills County in Greenwald Heights,” and then it suddenly strikes him that he doesn’t actually have hobbies. The company keeps him so busy he usually just has time to eat, catch a basketball game on TV, and crash. So he goes for things he used to do in high school. “I enjoy swimming laps in my pool… And spending time with
“What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?” Claudia whispers to him when he clearly has nothing else to say.

Robert hasn’t eaten a regular ice cream flavor since college. Nowadays when he goes to fancy dinners and social events they serve stuff like ‘lavender creme’ or ‘tart anise,’ which frankly all taste disgusting. “Rocky Road?” He guesses more than answers, hoping that flavor is still a thing. Apparently this answer is good because he gets a few hums of agreement from the hippi—from the members.

“Wonderful,” Talia smiles at him, and the room grows rosy. “As for today’s meeting, Renoir is going to start us off with a list of assignments for the coastal cleanup picnic next Saturday.”

Robert doesn’t actually say anything the entire meeting. At the company he has no problem speaking up, addressing employees, suggesting ideas—he actually does most of the talking, as Peter stands by his side observing reactions and armed with backup in case Robert needs an extra point or joke.

But no, Robert is too busy listening to Talia’s soft voice, letting her calm demeanor wash over him in waves. He watches her movements—the way she absently keeps brushing back the wispy strand of midnight hair that falls over her face, her poised seat on the floor, the way her toes curl and uncurl to some rhythm in her head when she thinks hard, the way her thumbs stroke the sides of her tea mug as if it were a precious animal. She has as many chocolatey freckles as the sky has stars. It fascinates him, so much that it’s like blinking out of a stupor when the cuckoo clock above the couch chirps the arrival of 9:00pm.

“Talia, your stuffed mushrooms were delicious! Thanks again for cooking.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, Rowan. Please do take some home, there’s plenty.”

“Renior? Sorry hun, but I think you’re sitting on my jacket.”

“Oh! Sorry Patti, hope I didn’t wrinkle it—"

The room swirls with people and colors as everyone rises, gathering coats and exchanging soft hugs. Robert sits dumbfounded in the middle of it, feeling like a very cold fish out of water.

“Mister Rob!”

He startles as Claudia runs over and waves goodbye to him. She trips over the carpet but Renoir(?) catches her and she giggles her farewell. But Robert lingers by the door, fingers picking nervously at his thumbs beneath his pockets until he’s the last one there. Finally, Talia makes her way over behind a trail of friends. “Robert, how did you like the meeting?”

Robert thinks. Different, scary, cuckoo, warm, friendly, noisy, nice, new, smelled a little like Christmas—

“It was good,” he voices intelligently. Then clears his throat because he has something stuck there, oh wait, those are words—“I was wondering if I could attend the next one. The next meeting.”

Talia looks surprised but pleased. “Of course,” she smiles. “It’s every other Friday, same time here at my house. You’re welcome to join us for the beach cleanup next Saturday though, of course.”

He nods. “Thank you,” and stands awkwardly before sticking his hand out for a handshake. Talia looks like she’s trying to stifle a giggle but shakes his hand anyway. He quickly leaves the porch to
walk back to his Maserati, tripping over the begonia’s and then stumbling again (Claudia must be contagious) on the sidewalk when Talia voices lightly from the doorway,

“Thank you for coming, Robert.”

.00O0o.

He attends the next four Kin of Kéyah meetings.

Each one he memorizes more of the members’ names, tries a new kind of tea, and learns a new species of endangered wildlife. The weird thing is that he actually… Enjoys it? (But don’t tell Peter), and in the office he catches himself contemplating if he should go to the summer barbecue Gretchen and Dan invited him to. During the third meeting he actually laughs at one of Renoir’s jokes, which makes Talia whip around to glance at him from the kitchen. It’s freaky how comfortable he grows around the people he despised a month ago, but for once he feels more like his high school self, languid and relaxed oppose to his clinical manner at the company. He can’t decide if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

It only takes Peter two Fridays to get suspicious, three to start dropping coy remarks to let Robert know he knows, and four to actually address it.

“Dearest brother,” Peter’s voice catches Robert when he’s two steps from walking out the company door Friday evening at six. A second later Peter’s slim-suited form slides in front of him, blocking the glass door as he twirls his Cobra keys. “What do you say you and I grab some drinks down at Vandermil’s tonight? It’s been a while since we had some fun outside of work.”

Robert tries to keep his face even and nonchalant, even though he knows he’s about to be dissected limb-from limb in about twenty seconds. “Eh, sorry Pete, I’ve got a hell of a headache today. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Oh, you poor sap,” Peter coos sympathetically with as little sympathy as possible, Peter is good at that. “Then please, do get some rest. But you know what’s interesting, is that you left the office early complaining of a headache four Fridays ago. And the Friday after that you said you needed to leave to handle a security alert for your estate. And two Fridays ago you said you were meeting Dwight Melbrook of Carlton’s Real Estate for dinner, and last Friday you left early to go to a dentist appointment. I see a little pattern there, Robbie.”

“Christ, Pete, do you write down every time I take a piss, too?” Robert counters. He should be surprised by Peter’s short leash, but he’s not. It’s nothing new.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Peter dodges coolly. “So where is it.”

“Where is what?”

“Where are you going every Friday at six o’clock?” Peter snaps testily, arms crossed. “Is it some call girl you’re meeting for scheduled playtime? A secret time machine you’re building in your garage? Oh God, you’re not seeing a shrink, are you? Whatever is troubling you Rob, it’s not troubling you enough to see a therapist.”

“No, Pete, now cut it out,” Robert snaps. “You’re my brother and my best friend, but that doesn’t entitle you to know what I do with my free time.”

Peter chuckles. “Oh. But it does, because I’m the levelheaded friend who stops you from doing
stupid crap before the papers find out and sink the company because ‘Robert Hale’ was photographed shirtless and making out with a stripper at a club.”

“That was one time, and that was in college,” Robert sniffs. “Why can’t you just trust me?” Even though I’m lying my expensive ass off and doing precisely what you told me not to do six weeks ago. “What if I am seeing a shrink, huh? Businessmen deal with a lot of stress.”

“Yes, but that’s why there is wolfsbane-spiked alcohol and narcotics and strip clubs and hot tubs and sports cars,” Peter counters. “And we can afford all of those, so you better not waste them to go see some junior-college graduate who will just sell your mental instability to the press.”

“Okay, how ‘bout this,” Robert sidesteps Peter, clapping him on the shoulder. “I’m two years older, so I get to play the Big Older Brother card. Drop it before I’m late to my meeting.”

Peter narrows his eyes. “I thought you said you had a headache.”

“Right. I do. A headache and a meeting to go to. Woe is me, ta-ta now.” He’s almost out the door when Peter speaks up quietly behind him.

“We used to hang out more, you know.”

Robert wouldn’t have turned around if it weren’t for the utter lack of snark in his brother’s voice. It sounds just like Peter’s voice at age eleven, when Robert sat down to tell him that their mother was going to start living in a care home. He turns quietly on his heel, and he knows he’s toast when he sees Peter’s rare display of wounded eyes. It’s just a hint, but it’s there.

“Crap, I know, Pete.” He sighs as he walks back across the tile. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I miss all the free time we used to have to dick around. How about I pop a couple aspirin and we hit Vandermil’s?”

Peter’s thin lips soften to a sly smile. “Only if you promise not to wear that god-awful gold suit. It’s beyond embarrassing.”

“The ladies love it,” Robert dismisses.

Robert sinks into his Maserati and catches his pale eyes in the rear view mirror. Talia won’t mind if he skips one meeting.

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Vandermil’s sucks balls.

Which is strange because it’s usually the most fun Robert has all week and it usually includes a hand on his balls, but this time he feels plastic and cold as he sits beside Peter with his martini and the girl dancing in front of him. When did strippers suddenly stop appealing to him? The music and flashy atmosphere feel synthetic and lacking in something important he can’t quite put his finger on. Or rather, he can put his finger on it, but he doesn’t want to admit it.

“—and so I fired the bitch,” Peter chuckles beside him.

Robert blinks. “Huh? Oh, good, good.”

His brother regards him flatly. “Am I boring you?”
“What? No, of course not!”

“Then why do you keep staring forlornly into your untouched martini like it personally offended you?”

He sighs and scrubs his hands over his hair, messing up the gel there. “Sorry, Pete. I guess I’m not…?”

“Not what? Not ready to loosen up? Look, your favorite stripper is here, why don’t I call her over for you? You can grab a private session in—”

“No!” He blurts, and Peter’s eyes narrow further. “I don’t— look, I just want to chill with you tonight. I’m sorry I’ve been distracted.”

Peter studies him, sucking a long time on the edge of his toothpick. “Alright, I forgive you. Is this place too much for you tonight? We could always go back to my penthouse and watch a movie.”

“Yeah, that sounds great actually.”

“I was kidding, Rob,” Peter stares at him like he’s crazy, which he probably is. “Have you reverted to your teenage self? We haven’t watched a movie together since high school. It was a joke.”

“Oh… Well, I mean it was fun, wasn’t it?” He suggests weakly. “We used to have Martha pop popcorn for us and then fight over the bowl until she popped another bag. And I dunno, it was nice. Just…” Quiet, homey, calm, comfortable, warm—

“I’m starting to think you’ve switched from cigarettes to shrooms. And not the good kind,” Peter ducks back his head and drains his vodka. Robert goes dry but they have a friend at the bar who adds wolfsbane to his brother’s drinks.

“Heh. You, uh… You caught me,” he slaps on a smile.

Peter laughs and claps him on the shoulder. “‘Atta boy. Now help me scan the crowd for a hot girl to fuck.”

But luckily Peter is out of town visiting the state when next Friday rolls around, so Robert can slip out of the office at six without getting grilled again. At the Kin of Kéyah meeting he makes sure to lag behind afterwards until everyone leaves, and finds Talia in her tiny kitchen calmly washing the rigatoni pan.

He leans against the wallpaper for a moment, wondering how she cooks such elaborate meals in the tiny space and feels a confusing urge to buy her the biggest, grandest kitchen equipped with the finest culinary tools.

He clears his throat.

“Hello, Robert,” Talia spares him a glance, like she finds his presence amusing. Her hands are covered in bubbles.

“Talia.”

Awkward silence. Talia looks up again. “Can I help you with something?”

“I was wondering…” Robert pauses. “Will you go out to dinner with me?”

She regards him, pausing with a frustratingly unreadable expression. Her eyes are dark and there are
actually freckles in her irises too, and his stomach swoops uncomfortably.

“We could go to the Bartholomew Restaurant on Broadway,” he ventures ahead, nervous about her silence. “It just opened— it’s very nice, white tablecloths, with a large view of the city, balcony seating on the roof. I know the owners, they can get us the best table and very fine wine, circa 1960.”

Talia returns to washing dishes, as if he hadn’t said anything. “No.”

He blinks, mouth falling open. The kitchen suddenly feels stuffy and hot and his chest just drops like a stone into his gut, which he didn’t even know was possible. Talia’s word echoes in his head and—And God, this— this must be what it feels like to die, what rejection feels like? People never tell him ‘no.’ He’s eternally rich so he’s learned to just buy yeses from people, but this—

“No?” He parrots dumbly. And wow, his voice hasn’t sounded like that since he was an awkward thirteen-year-old.

“No,” Talia says simply, and she’s— she’s not even looking at him.

He stands there, feeling broken. A broken fool is what he is. And he honestly thought that… They had something, didn’t they? Wasn’t this mutual? No. No, of course Talia doesn’t like him. Strong, wise, beautiful, calm, practical, way-kinder-than-anyone-has-any-right-to-be Talia Nat’aanii with the keyboard smash last name that he recites to himself in the car like a holy prayer on the way to work— doesn’t like him. Robert Hale, the co-CEO millionaire with the fancy title that sounds more and more like a tarnished license plate. He’s hardly in the same world as her, let alone her league. Of course she said no.

“You’ll take me on a hike.”

He blinks, heartbeat fluttering. “A hike?”

Talia nods and calmly hands him the empty casserole dish to dry. He fumbles with it, nearly dropping the slippery glass. “We can break for a picnic lunch at the top of Clearwater trail. You’ll pack us the food, I like sandwiches, no mustard. I’m free this Friday. You can pick me up here at ten o’clock, if that doesn’t interfere with your schedule?”

It does. It so, so, does.

“No,” he blurs. “I mean yes, to the picnic, it sounds— yes. Excellent. I’ll see you then,” he stammers, and then—like a fucking nightmare come to life— he sticks out his fingers on reflex to shake Talia’s hand.

Her eyebrow goes through the roof. He curls his fingers awkwardly— god, it really is too hot in here — and yanks his hand back so quickly that it bangs into her fridge and leaves a small dent in the metal.

“Oh, fuc—friggin’ hell. Shit, I mean shoot, I’m so sorry, I’ll— I’ll pay for that, I—“ he trips out of her kitchen, and Talia honestly looks like she’s about to burst out laughing any moment. “Goodbye, Talia. I’ll— ten o’clock. Morning. I— Goodbye.”

He essentially bolts out the door of her apartment, leaving her amused “Goodbye, Robert” behind him. For once he’s thankful for not being able to nab a parking spot up close, so now he gets to burn off the ‘dying a horrible morbid death pain’ by sprinting down the block until he reaches the beautiful shine of his Maserati.
“Oh my god, baby, I am so glad you didn’t have to see that train wreck,” he coos to his car, swiping a hand assuredly over her window. He gets inside, chuckles hysterically to himself, adjusts the rear-view mirror, catches the dark shadow to his right, and screams like a little girl.

“PETER!” He yells, because his brother is sitting casually in the passenger seat of his car.

“Hello, Robert,” Peter returns calmly.


Peter rolls his eyes, holding up and jingling a pair of keys. “I own a Maserati, too, you know. And I have claws that double as lock picks. Honest to God, how did you ever get into Stanford?”

Robert pants against the wheel, sweating as it catches up to him that Peter is here, outside Talia’s house, which means Peter knows exactly what Robert’s been up to. He licks his lips and tries to play it cool— maybe if he just explains everything from the start Peter will understand.

“Okay, let me—”

“So you’re fucking the hippie chick,” Peter cuts in, sounding bored.

Robert blinks, taken aback. “What? No! I’m— Her name is—“

Peter holds up a hand. “It’s fine Rob, I really feel much better now that I know what’s going on. She’s hot, you probably have a secret kink for stale sweat and incense. It’s gross, but if you found a way to blow off steam, I’m happy for you. I’m just glad you’re not seeing a therapist. You had me worried there for a moment.”

Robert sputters, deciding whether or not he should punch Peter in the face or go with it. He decides to stall. “How did you even know I was here?”

“I followed you,” Peter replies casually. “Your left taillight is out, you should probably get that fixed.”

“I… Peter,” is all he can stammer, not sure weather to be impressed or offended.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” his brother shortles. “You’re a picture of yourself in eighth grade when Jeremy Finnegan stole your science fair idea.”

“First of all, Jeremy Finnegan is an ass,” Robert snorts. “Secondly, you are also an ass. A giant, cunning, rich ass who doesn’t know how to respect his brother’s privacy.”

“Privacy doesn’t exist in our world,” Peter replies cooly over the ridge of his sunglasses. "It’s fine. Go home early on Fridays and blow off some steam, stain her biodegradable sheets and come back into the office on Saturday as the dashing young millionaire you are,” Peter adjusts Robert’s tie, a power move. "Just make sure you don’t get too attached."

And with that Peter steps out of the car, leaving Robert sputtering in shock behind. After a minute of debate he caves and fumbles for the pack of cigarettes in the glove compartment and shakily brings one to his lips. He takes a long drag, watches his brother’s Maserati turn left onto the highway entrance, and hits the gas to drive off back to his estate.

He gets pulled over on Lark Avenue because his left taillight is out.
Robert has a problem.

Robert needs to make *sandwiches*.

But not just any sandwiches, sandwiches for *Talia Nat’aanii*, which honestly could range from anything from gourmet grilled cheese to caterpillars and tree bark sauce. But here’s the thing; Robert has never actually had to make his own sandwich. Or anyone else’s sandwich. A sandwich, period.

The house line rings as expected at 7:20am, lighting up in green with Peter’s office extension. Robert lets it ring once, twice, three times before he answers to make it seem like he’s busy getting ready for imaginary events.

"Hi, Pete."

"Dearest brother," Peter answers lightly. "Did you forget to fill up your cars up with gas or did you just fall down a well?"

"Twenty minutes late isn't a crime, you know," Robert stalls.

"It is when you're a top grossing co-CEO. And my opening inquiries were rhetorical. Stephanie says your sick,” Peter drawls, and Robert can fucking hear his brother’s eyebrow creeping upwards.

“Werewolves don’t get sick, Rob. Which means you're getting into something you’re not supposed to. So. Where are you?"

"Relax, Pete. Waterson's Industrial is giving me a tour of their products today," Robert lies.

“Oh?” Peter muses, as expected. “I thought they couldn’t give us an opening until next week.”

“Until a client cancelled on them this morning,” Robert replies smoothly, like he’d practiced in the shower a hundred times last night. "Called me yesterday evening to us know, so I thought I’d just swoop by and humor them today. Badda bing badda boom, get all the boring stuff out of the way."

“We talked about usage of that horrendous Italian phrase,” Peter deadpans. “And you do realize that’s why we have humans, Rob, to—“

“—people.”

“What?”

“People. We have people."

“That’s what I said, aren’t you listening? We pay them to do the boring jobs *for* us, while we network and schmooze and reap the benefits of our success. Why would you drive all the way out to their building, I thought we agreed to have them come to us?"

“Well I felt like getting some air out of the office today, so I decided to take one for the team. You’re still welcome to have them send their team here for a presentation, of course. I’ll let you know if they have anything worth checking back on.”

“You never need air out of the office,” Peter says slowly. Suspiciously. Robert coughs to cover up the *hammer-thump-hammer* of his lying, lying heart.

“I don’t know what you’re implying Pete, but I need to get out of here if I’m gonna beat the morning traffic. Drive should take a while and—"
“Are you taking the limo?”

“Maserati.”

“Limo drop off would look more powerful,” Peter clucks.

“Arriving in my own car is more personal,” Robert counters, as he makes pleading gestures at the ceiling to get Peter to hang up already. “—Anyway, I should be back in the office by two. Think you can handle the building until then?”

Peter hums softly, and Robert pictures him slowly curling his finger around the phone chord like a cat toying with a mouse. “Fine, I'll buy it. Lucky you I can't hear heartbeats over the phone.”

"Lucky me, I've got a brother who cares so much,” Robert chirps good-naturedly, as he quietly victory-dances on the hardwood. "I'll see you this afternoon, two-pm sharp."

"You'd better."

Robert quickly hangs up the phone and nearly collapses to the floor as he lets out a long breath of relief. Okay. Sandwiches.

He slides to the kitchen. He hasn’t even eaten a sandwich since 1981, back when Martha used to pack lunches for him and Peter in middle school— in high school he just had the caterer drop off their lunches hot at the principals office and at Stanford he just bribed the other students to deliver takeout to him, in exchange for doing their child-level essays in his free time.

Now he has a personal chef— two of them, actually, but he has a feeling Talia will probably know if he doesn’t make the food himself and he feels like that’s something he should do for a first date, right?

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters reverently with equal amounts glee and terror. He’s going on a date with Talia Nat’aanii. This is even better than that time he shook Bill Gate’s hand at the California Science and Technology banquet when he was a college junior.

He ducks his head inside his massive fridge— a really massive fridge for just one person, it suddenly occurs to him— and sees absolutely no evidence of appropriate sandwich supplies. There are piles of fresh vacuum-sealed beef cuts and pork, duck, the highest quality venison from the best butcher in town. He has a few fresh vegetables, things like butter and fancy scented oils the cooks use, drawers full of freshly-picked herbs and bottled sauces with fancy names.

The cupboards aren't much better; what seems like a hundred colorful spices in little glass jars, small bricks of exotic baking chocolates and cans of caviar, sealed bottles of colorful sauces and dressings he's never even heard of. Bread? Why is there no sliced bread? And fucking duck in a basket, he’s going to have to go to the grocery store.

Or rather, Call Linda and tell her to go to the grocery store for him.

"Linda!" She picks up on the fist ring. Linda is an excellent personal chef. "I need you to go to the grocer and bring me sandwich supplies."

"What kind of sandwich supplies, Mr. Hale?"

"The usual things," Robert says nonchalantly, as if he is well aware of the broad range of sandwich foods outside of peanut butter and jelly. "Lunch meats... The quality kind, please. And... Lettuce. Tomatoes. Bread. Anything and everything that people eat on sandwiches. I want a wide variety."
"When do you need it, sir?"

"ASAP. I'll pay you double for your trouble."

"Thank you Mr. Hale. I'll deliver everything in thirty minutes."

"Excellent."

He hangs up and runs back to the kitchen. Mostly he eats roast beef and seared potatoes and thick sauces and sometimes things he can’t even pronounce. Sometimes he doesn’t even bother glancing at the little name cards by the silver trays in the buffet room at the company, he just piles it onto his plate and it tastes delicious. Lunchmeat is as foreign a subject to him as home economics.

When Linda drops off the food Robert stares at the ingredients on his kitchen counter. He makes:

- Caviar and fish sauce with avocado. Caviar goes with everything, and he finds the fish sauce in his cupboard of fancy sauces: caviar is salmon eggs, salmon is fish, so they’re supposed to go together, right? So he piles that with green things and some smoked salmon on rye bread to go with the theme.

- Talia is earthy. What if she’s vegetarian? Vegan? He doesn't know what the criteria for vegan is so he just plays it safe and makes a sandwich with all the green things he can find. Pesto, spinach, lettuce, and morbier cheese. He figures the grape leaf ash in the middle of that is as organic as you can get. (Recycled plants)!

- Ham and cheddar with tomato in case Talia hates pastrami. You’d have to be insane not to like pastrami, but Talia certainly marches to the beat of her own drum. If she asked Robert to give up bacon for a year he probably would (okay maybe not bacon but definitely a good ham).

- Pastrami and a weird colorful cheese on french roll; the cheese has some sort of a chewy red rind on it that smells bad, but in his experience the bad-smelling cheeses are usually the fancy delicacies that are supposed to taste good.

- Organic cashew butter and jelly, almond butter and jelly, and peanut butter and banana to cover his bases.

- Basically everything except for tuna, which is disgusting.

By the time he finishes assembling everything he’s sweating and the counter is the aftermath of war. He stuffs everything into the old ice chest he kept from college parties (because he and Peter threw the best parties), glances at the clock, and promptly screams a little maybe.

“Fuck, fuck, fucking, fuckity fuck fuck—“ is his calm mantra as he hops out of his clothes and into the tub for another shower (shut up, he’s sweating a lot). How the hell does it take thirty-five minutes to assemble sandwiches? How do poor people manage to get out the door on time, especially to their schedule-crucial poor people jobs like teaching and being janitors? Poor people don’t even have watches! Their entire existence is a mystery that baffles him.

He discovers his next problem shortly, as he’s standing dripping wet in a towel in his master bedroom and realizes that he has absolutely nothing to wear. He goes through his closet and ends up throwing everything on the floor. He owns 57 suits and 81 dress shirts, 120 ties, 32 dress shoes, and
3 pairs of swim trunks for when he attends party venues with hot tubs. But he can’t wear swim trunks or slacks hiking—

So he calls his trusty advisor.

“Hank,” he whispers when Hank answers the phone. He’s sweating again. “I need to know what you wear when you go outside.”

There’s an expected pause on the other end of the line, in which Robert grimaces. “Uh,” Hank grunts. “I know I’m your company advisor Rob, but I usually offer help with things like insurance and PR mishaps.”

“I know,” Robert scratches at his nose. “I know, but I’m— I’m asking as a friend. I’m going on a… Business trip. In the woods. Like a picnic thing, luncheon, for business— and I just need to find out what kind of things are typical. For picnics. In the woods.”

“Robert… What is going on?” Hank asks in that slow, gruff voice of his, like Robert is his mischievous son that just graffitied the side of a highway.

“Nothing,” Robert all but growls. “Nothing, I just— I need your help. Where do you find clothes that aren’t suits but still have some some amount of dignity to them?”

A pause.

“You’re going out with the Nat’aanii girl,” Hank drawls slowly, and Robert can hear the smile stretching across the man’s face. He wants to reach through the receiver and slap it off.

“Shhh!” He hisses before he can stop himself. What? Fuck. That was definitely not what was supposed to come out. “Is Peter with you? Is he nearby? Hank, you can’t—“

“Calm down, Rob. I’m in the staff break room. God knows your brother would never come down here.”

Robert chuckles weakly (although it sounds more like a relieved sob) and he sinks down onto his memory-foam mattress, dragging a hand over his sweaty face. Gross. “Okay, good. You— Alright, fine, you got me. I’m meeting Talia for a hike. How the hell did you even—? Nevermind, I just— don’t tell anybody. Anybody, Hank, you hear me?”

Hank “hmm”s grimly. “You have my word. Believe me, you’re not the only one who knows that your brother has eyes and ears all over the place.”

Robert sighs. “Good. He can’t find out, Hank. He already told me not to pursue her.”

“Yet you did,” Hank comments with interest.

“I— yes, I did. Now I need your help,” he snaps, rising from the bed so he can pace nervously. “Clothes. What the hell do I wear for this? Where do people like you shop?”

“There’s a place called Nordstroms downtown on Market street,” Hank says calmly. “And Bloomingdale’s at the Stanford Mall. The people there will be able to help you find something appropriate for a hike. They’re very nice stores for a man on my dime, but definitely a couple steps down from where you get your suits. A place like Sears or Macy’s would be better for what you’re looking for, but I don’t think you can handle those yet.”

“Nord-strems,” Robert tries out the name on his tongue. “Okay, great. Do I pull up to the front or the
back for the valet service?’

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He buys a crisp Swarovski button-up, a pair of limited-edition Levi khakis (khakis!), Christopher Nolan swede terrain boots, and a jade sparrow pin for his breast pocket. The helper people at Nordstroms are surprisingly nice for a place without valet service, although they did give him some funny looks when he held his arms out for them to button his shirt. He also finds a tie for sixty-eight dollars— sixty-eight!— with little red sports cars printed on it that is too hilarious not to buy. Peter is going to kill him but it’ll be worth it.

He spends ten minutes deciding which car to pick up Talia in. He favors the Ferrari, of course, although the red is a bit garish. Too flashy? The Cobra and Lamborghini are more inconspicuous black but both have loud motors that might make conversation hard to hear. He picks the Maserati, because he hasn’t been taken her for a spin in a few months.

By the time he pulls up to Talia’s house he’s ten minutes late (but he needed to make sure he picked the right car) and she’s standing on her porch looking equally unimpressed and beautiful. She’s wearing sandals and a flutery brown skirt that brushes over her ankles, and a simple green t-shirt. Hell, she could probably wear a trash bag and still look sexier than the skimpy girls in stilettos that flock to Robert in clubs.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” he greets as he gets out to open the passenger door for her. Talia eyes the car looking bored, which puts Robert out a bit. Girls love the Maserati.

“Actually, I was going to suggest we take the bus,” she informs him. “The last stop is right by the start of the trail. And considering the neighborhood over there, I fear a car like that is begging to get stolen.”

Robert regards his Maserati. “Oh,” he says, disappointed and frankly terrified, because Talia is asking him to get on public transportation. Which would be fine if he’s ever actually stepped foot onto a bus, but he’s been in private cars and limos and jets for all twenty-six years of his life.

“Unless that’s a problem?” Talia inquires.

“No,” he blurts. “No, the bus is good. Let’s do the bus. Where do you buy the tickets?”

Talia hides a small smile. “On the bus.”

“Ah. Right, of course.”

They walk down a couple blocks to the bus stop and sit on a green bench beside a fat Chinese lady. He greets her in Mandarin to look impressive but this only makes her yell, “I speak English, you dumbass!” at him and Talia hides her chuckles behind a graceful hand. He sputters out an apology and mopes over how catastrophic everything is going already, and they haven’t even made it to the trail yet.

The bus arrives with an appalling squeak of tires and a sketchy-looking set of steps they’re supposed to go up. Then there’s a little machine thingy by the driver with big pictures of coinage and dollar bills, and Robert is horrified when he realizes he doesn’t have any change. He hasn’t carried coinage in… Ever? Come to think of it he hasn’t even seen a real-life penny since college.

He opens his wallet and meets the sight of crisp 100-dollar bills and a few William McKinley’s,
which suddenly look embarrassing. His money has never made him feel embarrassed before.

A gentle, freckled hand lightly touches his arm. “That’s alright, I’ve got it,” Talia voices, not unkindly, and slips a few quarters into the dispenser. Meanwhile the bus driver ogles the tightly-packed bills in his wallet, eyes bugging and mouth agape. Robert quickly snaps it shut.

The bus is crowded and smells like wet sock. Talia leads him to a window along the side and they sit on sticky plastic seats. It’s crowded and his sensitive ears make him flinch when the bus squeaks with every stop, mingling with the crowded scents of body odor, twelve kinds of cologne, and… Piss. He’s never seen so many people, dirt, bad breath crammed in one place aside from the tree lot.

“How do you stand the smell in here?” he whispers to her, trying his best not to sound judgmental. He doesn’t mean it like that (not entirely, at least), but his nose is one sniff away from exploding.

“You get used to it,” Talia tells him calmly, looking out the windows with interest. The summer day presents a pleasant blue sky outside but Robert is nervous-sweating again through his Nordstroms khakis. He’d be ten times more comfortable his Maserati. “Your heart’s beating a little fast,” she murmurs, turning to look at him. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he says. Swallows. “This is just… New.”

Talia smiles at him, that little observant smile that crinkles the sides of her eyes, and Robert is so busy staring at them that he doesn’t notice the hand slipping over his wrist. He glances down, blinking dumbly at the freckled fingers on top of his shirt sleeve.

When he looks back to Talia she’s staring out the window again, like she’s checking the passing scenery for idiots axing down trees or something. He sits back, hopes she doesn’t notice his clammy hands, and slowly feels his heartbeat slow down as he realizes there isn’t anything to be afraid of.

When they reach the trail they walk for three miles until they reach a small field overlooking the city. He wants to listen to her talk but she keeps dashing this plan by asking him questions, all of which are very unexpected and have nothing to do with the company or his fortune, like “Will you be watching the Summer Olympics?” and “Why did you decide to keep living in Beacon Hills?” and “These markings look like they were made by Dew pixies, or would you say Bungalow pixies?”

God, it’s like a breath of fresh air. Very intimidating fresh air. And crap, she can probably smell his anxiety. Can she smell his anxiety?

“Can you smell emotions?” He blurts.

“Pheromones, yes.”

“What do I smell like?”

“You smell like aftershave, and new clothes. I’m guessing you bought them today and didn’t wash them before wearing.”

“You can smell my anxiety-sweat, can’t you? And you’re just choosing not to say anything to make me feel better.”

“Yes.”

They hide small smiles. He resists the urge to fling himself off the overlook and instead unzips the Igloo to present the food. “So, ah. These are the sandwiches, as requested. I wasn’t sure what you liked so I made a wide variety, but no mustard, of course. Do you—? Ah, here. I’ll just… Here, pick
whichever one pleases you.”

Talia peers inside the lunch box with that tiny, amused smile like he’s said something funny but she’s too polite to laugh at him. She selects the sandwich on top (he wrapped all of them in ‘cling wrap’ which was very sticky and labor intensive but he thinks he did a good job). “What’s inside this one?”


“And uh… Let’s see, there’s pastrami and cheese, ham and tomato, a vegan composition, peanut butter and banana, cashew butter and jelly… I think that’s all of them.”

“What, no tuna?”

He gapes. “Oh, I— I didn’t make tuna. I didn’t think… I’m so sorry, I would have included it if I had known—” *hell, tuna is probably her favorite.* She’s probably allergic to nuts and hates tomato and goddamn, he is such an inconsiderate idiot—

“I’m teasing,” her eyes crinkle as she unwraps a pastrami and cheese. “This all looks wonderful. Thank you for bringing them.”

“Oh.” His cheeks flare with that stupid red heat again, but then the color drains back to his stomach when Talia bites into her sandwich and makes a face like she’s trying very hard not to spit it out.

“Oh no, what is it?” He asks, terrified.

Talia carefully fishes the chewy red rind from the cheese out of her mouth. “Did you… Forget to peel the wax off the cheese when you made these?”

He blanches, mouth opening and closing silently. “I… I thought that was the rind?”

“No, it’s wax they use to wrap the cheese to keep it fresh. You’re not supposed to eat it.”

“Oh.” Great. Now she’s going to think he’s stupid because damn he is so, so stupid. “I’m so sorry, I really thought… Why the hell do people wrap cheese? What does that accomplish besides confusing people?”

Talia chuckles.

“Really though. There wasn’t a label on it or anything to indicate it was wax, otherwise I would have —”

“It’s quite alright. I imagine even wax probably smells better than most of the rinds on more exotic cheeses.”

“I… Yes. You would be right about that.”

Incredibly he manages to screw up almost every other sandwich as well (despite his deductions caviar and fish sauce do *not* go well together, morbier cheese tastes terrible and is in fact *not* vegan, and apparently tomato makes everything soggy if you put the slices directly on the bread) so they stick to the peanut butter and jelly as he stares moodily at the grass.

It’s silent for the most part, not necessarily awkward, but peaceful because the nature atmosphere is quiet and Talia radiates tranquility 24/7. He tries really hard to think of good questions to ask her — she’s been asking such smart interesting ones and he needs to *impress* her with his intelligence.
and charm, but for whatever reason his suaveness abandons him for the first time in his life.

Which is annoying because he and Peter have been the suave masters since high school, and apparently they are so good at the game in the business world that people refer to them as the “Handsome Hales.” Robert knows he’s handsome; he’s got great hair, a chiseled jawline, the broad muscles of a werewolf, and he’s been told his eyes are “indescribable” but resemble tropical oceans. But he’s also really good at smiling and using charming body language and speaking smoothly, so he concludes that Talia must be working some kind of curse on him for rendering all that a moot point.

Right, he should ask her something— “Do you know how to curse people?”


“Why, is there someone you want to get rid of?” Talia smirks. Shit, she didn’t deny it. She really is cursing him.

He blubbers. “I— no, sorry. I don’t why I said that, it just kind of slipped out. It’s just that I don’t usually— You’re just so—“

“…So…?”

“You seem like you’d be able to curse people,” he blurs.

“What, because I’m Native American?” She side-eyes him. Shit.

“You— no, I didn’t mean—“ God, he’s sweating again. “I was just thinking about how I’m usually really composed with people but with you I can’t think of a single thing to say which is honestly really freaking me the fuck out, like you’re just so poised on smelly busses and you even eat sandwiches gracefully, like how the hell? But I’m sitting here sweating through my khakis —khakis— which is insane— so I thought that you must be putting some kind of curse on me because I’ve suddenly lost my charm I mean I thought that cheese wax was the rind and I’m being a total idiot even though I’m not because I graduated from Stanford, like they don’t let idiots graduate, you know? And holy— I just said all that out loud. I’m still talking out loud and I should really breathe between sentences and please say something to make me stop before I pass out.”

Somewhere in there he ends up sitting criss-cross applesauce with his hands scraping through his gelled hair. Great, his hair is ruined now. He’s sweating and his hair is ruined and he just said all of that out loud to Talia Nat’aanii and he could not possibly sink any lower than this. She’s going to laugh at him and walk away in three, two—

“Lavender.”

He looks at her. “What?”

“Lavender.” She takes a calm sip from her water bottle as she looks out over the horizon. “It helps evoke feelings of calmness. You could try drinking some lavender tea in the morning.”

He stares at her probably longer than he should. She’s like a deer. Or an owl. Something mystical and wise like that. “I… I drink coffee.”

“So try tea.” She softly plucks a dandelion from the grass and twirls it between her fingers. “You’ve tried many new things already.”

He has, hasn’t he.
The walk back down the trail is uneventful. Talia, whom he gets the feeling is not usually one to talk more than necessary, fills the silence for him with soft stories of the trails her father used to take her on. She points to flowers and plants they pass and explains their scientific names. She has a degree in botany and herbal medicine. She teaches a greenhouse course at UC Berkeley. Robert follows her in silent, nervous awe through the forest and sits on that horrible again for the ride back. When they hop off in front of her brick house his Maserati suddenly looks ridiculous. He clears his throat.

“I had nice time with you, Talia Nat’aanii.”

She grants him a small smile. “I had a nice time with you, too, Robert Hale.”

He licks his lips. “Would you maybe like… To do it again sometime?”

“Yes, I’d like that. Perhaps you could take me to that restaurant you mentioned.”

“I… Perhaps.” And then (because he’s insane now, apparently) he blurts, "But I thought we could do something like this again. Like another hike, or something less… Expensive. If that’s alright with you?"

Talia’s small smile blooms into something dazzling. You can’t see her teeth, but one increment of amusement more and they’d peek though. “Fine with me. Next week, same time. I’ll see you then.”

Robert hesitates, unsure whether or not he should step forward for a kiss. This is actually the longest he’s spent with a girl without locking lips, but the first time in his life he’s been nervous at the prospect. But Talia decides for him; she simply does that small smile again, turns around with a swish of black hair, and descends the brick steps to her door. Robert’s brain shorts out and he staggers into his car in a daze.

“Damn,” he whispers.

.o0O0o. August 20th, 1988.

Robert’s never understood the term “see the world through rose-tinted glasses,” but he guesses it’s very similar to seeing the world through Talia-tinted glasses.

It’s weird. Monday he goes to the bank and requests twenty dollars in small bills and coinage, which he thinks annoys the crap out of Deborah the Teller but he’s too busy marveling at the tiny Abraham Lincoln’s on the pennies to notice. Tuesday he gives Linda the day off so he can sit and eat cheese for breakfast, after gleefully peeling the red wax off (and squishing it into a mini wolf sculpture on the counter). One morning he accidentally knocks over a potted plant in the company lobby but instead of getting mad he just looks at the spilled dirt and smiles because it reminds him of Talia’s freckles. Stephanie stares at him and asks him if he’s feeling okay.

On Saturday the 4th they ride the train to Minton’s diner for trivia night. They sit at an obnoxious red booth without a tablecloth and order food that’s less than $9 per dish, and listen to a live band that plays music way cooler than the classical crap he hears at company events. She orders a portobello burger and vodka with three maraschino cherries, and he gorges on a three-tier cheeseburger, chocolate milkshake, and curly fries that she ends up stealing from him. When the trivia starts they make a killer team; Talia knows all the answers to the Science&Nature, Local History, and Mythology categories, and Robert boasts his expertise for the Technology, Math, and Celebrity categories. They take home first prize— two cheesy t-shirts that say “Minton’s Trivia Night Champion” that he sleeps with under his pillow for weeks.
On Sunday the 9th they go to the county fair. He boasts about how athletic he was in high school and then she owns him at ring toss, basketball, and ski ball. By the time they get to ring toss he’s a grumpy sore loser and accidentally uses so much strength that he embeds his horseshoe into the booth wall. He offers to find her a healthier place to eat as the sun goes down since every girl he’s been with basically just ate salad, but Talia throws him an unimpressed look and proceeds to wolf down a corn dog, garlic fries, and a funnel cake. He gets so distracted watching her that his own dinner gets cold, and somewhere in the middle he runs to the bathroom to calm the situation in his pants.

On Friday the 10th he surprises her with a bouquet of asparagus foliage (because she’ll know the symbolic meaning like the botany badass she is) on her doorstep and takes her out for coffee. It’s six in the morning because he needs to get to the company at seven, but she rises early to mediate anyway so she’s wide awake. He trips on the sidewalk on the way because he’s distracted staring at the soft waves of her hair, and in the café he chokes on his espresso a little when she gently strokes her ankle up his leg. She tells him stories of her father, and he tells her how he and Peter used to sneak into movie theaters for free by picking the lock on the back entrance.

When he’s with her he doesn’t think about the company. His muscles loosen and he starts walking with more of a slouch, but it’s one of those happy slouches that happens after eating Thanksgiving dinner or getting out of a hot tub. He goes back to Nordstrom's and buys more sweaters and khakis, and in the office he suddenly starts feeling uncomfortable in his Bill Blass suits, picking at the hems and fidgeting.

“Mr. Hale?”

“Hm?” Robert snaps his head up, realizing that the board is staring at him, waiting for an answer. He feels his ears grow hot, as well as Peter’s narrowed gaze burning into his scull. “My apologies, I’m afraid I was a bit distracted,” he admits.

Mr. Buffer’s eyes narrow. “Am I boring you, Mr. Hale?”

Peter kicks him under the table and slaps on a charming smile. “I apologize for my brother, Mr. Buffer. He’s been getting over the flu and isn’t quite 100% yet.”

“I— right. Please excuse my rudeness, Mr. Buffer.”

The man (who’s the CEO of Buff Industries and a very important potential business partner) nods gruffly and continues explaining the company clause on the table. When the meeting ends an hour later and after they shake hands farewell with the Buff team, Peter corners him, smacking him against the office wall. His brother inhales deeply along Robert’s tie up to his neck.

“Whoa, Pete, cut it out! What—?”

“This is about Nat’aanii, isn’t it,” Peter snarls, lip curling. “Goddammit, Robert, I told you not to get in too deep!”

“Whoa! Cool it, will you? Your grip’s a little tight there, buddy.”

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Fidgeting,” Peter hisses. “You’ve been like a squirming toddler all day. Someone sprinkle wolfsbane into your slacks?”
“No! No, I just have—“

“You just have an uncontrollable erection in them!” Peter snaps, and Robert really did walk right into that one. “For the love of god, Robert, either wake up ten minutes early every morning to satisfy your dick, or tell your booty call that you’re quitting whatever gross thing you have going on!”

“My dick already gets satisfaction every morning in the shower,” Robert counters, making Peter grimace.

“Spare me the details, please.”

“But Talia is not my booty call.”

“Of course she is, you said so yourself when I caught you leaving her house three weeks ago—“

“No, you said that! I never actually confirmed what I was doing at her house!”

“Well it’s not like you two were sipping tea discussing endangered species, so there’s no use hiding it. You like to do the nasty with her and—“

“Pete!”

“—it’s apparently so good that it’s distracting you here in the office, and I will not let you jeopardize the company for some girl you’ve been screwing!”

“She isn’t just some girl I’m screwing!” Robert snarls. “We’re not screwing at all, Pete! We haven’t even kissed yet!”

Peter whirls around incredulously. “Then what on earth are you doing with her?” Like he can’t fathom a single reason why a man would want to see a woman if not for sex. Robert sees red and fists his fingers in his hair, ruining the gel there.

“We go on hikes, we… We eat sandwiches and we talk, Peter! And she makes me… She makes me feel a lot better than I’ve felt in… Well, ever. It’s like— I don’t know, but it’s like she’s digging up this part of me I haven’t been since high school, and it feels amazing. It’s nothing like schmoozing girls at parties or power playing with female executives, it’s— it isn’t like anything here at the company, which is maybe why it feels so fucking great to be with her, because she’s just so… God, she’s real. And she’s smart and so sure of everything and I—“

“I feel human when I’m with her,” he whispers desperately, whirling to a stop as he stares at his hands. “Not a werewolf, not a millionaire, not a businessman. Just… Me.”

Peter slow-claps. “Bravo. Ladies and gentleman, the Academy Award goes to Robert Hale, for best actor in a sappy teen romance.”

“I’m not kidding around here!”

“Neither am I. That meeting just now? That is exactly what I warned you about. That is exactly why I told you not to go chasing after some girl that has your dick in a knot. You’re slipping, you’re getting distracted, and you keep picking at your suits!” Peter snaps, slapping Robert’s hand away from where it’s currently worrying at his hem. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I’d bet every employee salary that this is just some stupid crush that will blow over in a month when you find a prettier girl who makes you fight for her. Snap out of it and get your head back in the company!”
“I can’t just snap out of it! I really— god, I think I might even—”

“She’s only humoring you for your money.” Peter snaps, stone cold.

Robert blinks, taken aback. “What?”

“She’s only seeing you for your money,” Peter repeats. “If she’s allowed you to come over all this time without even kissing, she’s after your money. Women do not fall in love with millionaires, they fall in love with the millions. You’re handsome, you have money, you reap the benefits of glamorous parties and celebrity schmoozing outside the office. The only reason a woman would get close to us is to get a taste of that, get a taste of our dicks, and hopefully marry us one day so they can taste our money.”

Robert takes a step back, mildly noting the change of “you” to “we.” Peter is rarely self-deprecating but he’s always logical; he’s the brain to their brawn and hasn’t failed them once since high school. But Talia never seems interested in his money, she actually acts like she couldn’t care less for his high life. She’s nothing like the girls at the club or the clingy women who slobber all over him at company mixers, which is when he realizes that Talia needs to be kept far away from the company as possible, because she’s too precious to mix with his toxic businessman life.

“I know it hurts,” Peter’s tone suddenly turns gentle and sympathetic. He places a hand on Robert’s shoulder, and for the first time Robert has to refrain from flinching away. “But that’s the price we have to pay in order to have our success. That’s why we have each other.”

Robert stares a long time into those pale blues before deflating. “Alright. Sorry I blew up at you. I’m not saying I’m going to stop seeing her, but I’m never abandoning you here, Pete. You and I until the end, right? I’m sticking by you and the company until my last breath, promise.”

Because that’s Peter’s real aversion to Talia. Peter hides his insecurities in the tiniest darkest crack so no one will find them, but it doesn’t take a Stanford graduate to see that he’s terrified of her stealing Robert away from him and the company.

But Robert still loves him fiercely, so he steps forward to bro-hug it out. Peter rolls his eyes but returns the embrace. It’s a rare treat, one they’ve been exchanging less since they started at the firm. “If you get any sappier I’m going to start calling you a were-tree.”

Robert chuckles. “Let’s meet up at The Fountain for drinks later tonight, okay? On me. We’ll make fun of the lightweights just like we used to.”

“Will you let me order you a Persian Blue?”

“Agh, fine. What the hell. You better hope it doesn’t kill me.”

“If it does I call dibs on your estate.”

“Ha-ha, like you don’t already own two.”

“Wait a minute—“ Peter halts, sniffing the air.

“What?”

Peter strides over to Robert’s desk, peers into the mug sitting there, and sniffs it. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s tea.”
“Tea?”

“Yeah. Lavender.”

“You drink coffee.”

“I… Sometimes tea is nice, too.”

Peter wrinkles his nose and promptly drops the mug into the wastebasket. “Best have you not smelling like a flower, dear brother.”

.o0O0o.

(On Thursday the 19th they walk through the preserve after dinner and find a cliff overlooking the city. They sit and nibble on pistachio cookies Talia baked (which are fucking amazing) and she teaches him how to extract his claws more quickly. She kisses him for the first time that night beneath the stars in a sea of fireflies, and when he blinks open his eyes he’s suddenly on his back in the grass with her face peering down amusedly at him. “I must say, I’ve never had a man swoon for me before,” she tells him, to which he grins dopily up at her and murmurs, “Hales do not swoon,” and pulls her down so he can feel her lips again. She tastes like earth and mint).

.o0O0o. **August 24th, 1988.**

They’ve been together for two months, and it’s the best two months of John’s life.

Claudia swears in Polish under her breath when she gets angry, which has only happened once so far, directed at an eagle that caught a rabbit on a TV nature special. She loves Hostess cupcakes, jelly doughnuts, kettle corn, and pickles straight from the jar. She leaves her windows open at night so “any bugs who get cold can come on in to get toasty” and she has a cowlicked curl that she always blows out of her left eye. Her laughter is tinkling music sprinkled with snorts, and she runs and skips and prances everywhere despite how she’s clumsy enough to trip over her own feet (which happens a lot). John could watch her for hours, and he listens intently when she babbles on about everything that comes to mind.

“Hey, are there any grapes left?”

Today John is in jeans and his crisp white new balances (which he scrubbed with a toothbrush this morning) and a blue windbreaker over a simple cotton shirt. Claudia looks radiant in a bright red summer dress with a sweetheart neckline and spaghetti straps, beneath a straw hat adorned with little fabric roses to keep the sun off her face. She had a striped cardigan over it when she arrived, but she shed that in favor of the hot day, revealing a generous speckling of freckles and moles decorating her shoulders and down her arms. If they weren’t smack in the middle of a crowded park he would have pressed kisses along each and every one of them.

John passes the little bag of grapes to her. He packed a picnic lunch for them and now they’re eating their respective sandwiches on the grass beneath the blue summer sky. Pastrami and swiss for John, fluffernutter on white bread for Claudia because she’ll take sugar and preservatives over real food any day.

“So, uh, I wanted to ask you something,” He voices during a lag in conversation.
“Oooh, sounds serious. Is it serious?” Her feet waggle in the grass.

“Well, I… I was wondering if you’d like to move in with me, into my apartment,” he says. She stops chewing at stares at him, for once without comment. “I know it’s not very big, but I’d really love to have you there with me. And then you wouldn’t have to keep driving down here from Berkeley, and it’s right next to the preserve so we could go on walks, and you could…”

He trails off as he notices her fingers tugging anxiously at the hem of her dress. Her posture clams up, head ducking down shyly but he can still see how her smile drops away. John has seen that expression on Claudia’s face exactly two times since he’s met her: at the zoo when the zookeeper told her Rhonda the Rhino’s baby died, and an episode of ALF where ALF managed to eat the cat.

He’s horrified when she glances up at him with glassy eyes. “Oh, John. I’d… I love you so, so much. More than Hostess Cupcakes, even! But…”

His heart falls to his stomach. His pulse pounds in his ears as his neck and cheeks flush red— he moved too fast. He made her uncomfortable. They had such a perfect thing going on and then he had to go ruin it because he selfishly wanted to see her face in the mornings and buy her favorite cereals for breakfast—

“…But I don’t want to disappoint you.”

He blinks a few times, forehead scrunching in confusion. Disappoint him? “Claudia, what do you…? Clauds, I don’t think you could if you tried.”

Her lips try to smile again before falling. “I just… Moving in means…”

“Leaving your house in Berkeley? I thought you hated—“

“Oh, I do,” Claudia nods vigorously, nose wrinkling. “I hate my room and I hate my mother and I hate our yucky brown carpet.”

“Uh,” he says dumbly.

“Well, you know,” Claudia stalls for time, twisting her stretchy bracelets around and around her finger until they’re a bunch of knots. “Moving in means… Cooking together. And sitting together, and like, drinking from the same glasses.”

“Oh.” John studies her, brow knitting. "We do that all now… Though.”

“But it also means brushing teeth together,” Claudia continues slowly, face falling and growing quieter with every word. “And getting ready in the same bathroom, and…” She shrinks backwards, voice dropping to a tiny squeak. "Sharing a bed together.”

John cocks his head a little, trying to figure out where she’s coming from. Is she afraid of morning breath? Does she hog the covers? Or—

*Oh.*

“Claudia,” he voices gently. “I would never… We won’t do anything you’re not ready to do. I would *never* pressure you to—"

“Oh I know, John, I *know,*” Claudia whispers, smile returning as she cups her hands around his cheeks, gently shaking his head back and forth. “And that’s part of why you are so wonderful. So beautiful. It’s just that most men… Not that you’re *most* men, but most of them expect—“
“I know,” John cuts her off a little darker than he means to, thinking back to Richard’s words at the tree protest. “And they don’t deserve any woman, let alone someone like you. Frankly I spend most of my day wondering how on earth I got lucky enough to be picked by you.”

Claudia grins wide, scooching forward to throw both arms around his neck. She bumps her pointed nose to his larger, uglier one, and he slides his hands comfortably around her waist. “So you don’t mind?” She bites her lip. “You know, if we don’t… You know,” she looks back and forth as if scanning for eavesdroppers, then whispers, “have sex—” in the teensy tiniest voice and John honestly doesn’t think he could fall any harder for her. “—if I move in with you? Because I don’t know when I’ll be ready if ready at all, maybe, but with you— John. My John. I didn’t want you to be disappointed if—“

John interrupts to press a gentle peck to the tip of her nose. She blinks owlishly as if startled, soft eyelashes fluttering, and he takes the opportunity to murmur the cheesiest stream of words he’s ever uttered, only they aren’t cheesy because they are exactly how he feels. “Claudia, you mean so much more to me than that. I would spend my whole life waiting for you, but it’s hardly waiting if I get to go on picnics with you and see your face in the meantime.”

She beams wide and laughs, sudden tears sparkling in her eyes. “You romantic sap, you!”

He grins at her and continues. “Well if you agree to move in with me we can get another bed, or I can sleep on the couch—“

“Oh, no!” Claudia’s mouth pops open in a little pink ‘o’ and she shakes her head vigorously. “Sleep on the couch, honestly, that’s no fun! You dope. Sleeping together is fine, I love jammie cuddles! That what’s pajamas are for, right? Oh, this is so exciting! One bed. One bed is great, I’d love to sleep with you, John. Like the snoring sleep, not the other sleep yet.” He chuckles, making her arms bounce a little over his shoulders.

“Yay!” Claudia squeals and clasps her hands together excitedly. “This is going to be so fun! We’re going to be roommates!”

The seniors on the bench exchange offended looks as Claudia squeals and tackles him, knocking him on his back on the grass with a small “oomph” and a loud belly-laugh as she attacks his face with tiny, eager kisses, leaving a trail of vanilla chapstick along his nose and cheeks.

He thinks he’s never been so happy.

.o0O0o. July 30th, 1988.

The rain patters heavily on the sidewalk as he moves robotically down the street, a cacophony of melancholy tapping against his shoes.

The memories swirl before his eyes until he blinks and finds himself at Talia’s house. He’s drenched, leaking spatterings of rainwater onto her brick porch. When he knocks on her door he catches sight of his watch, which reads 11:02pm.

In a minute he hears her bare feet pad quickly across the carpet. She opens the door, rumpled in a purple silk nightgown with spaghetti straps, clutching a soft beige shawl wrapped around her shoulders. “Robert?” She asks, soft but surprised.
“Can I come in?” He thinks he asks. His voice sounds wrong. Everything sounds wrong.

“Of course,” she steps aside and places a warm hand on his back as he staggers forward, a gesture that nearly breaks him. He slips his shoes off before coming inside. "Yáadilá óolyé, you’re soaked. Let me get you a towel. Go sit on the couch.”

He sinks into her weathered cushions on autopilot, and what feels like only a moment later she reappears with a fluffy purple towel. He takes it and tries to dry off his suit but his hands might be trembling too much. She bends down in front of him, a blur of wide eyes and tousled black hair. She grasps his knee and squeezes to get his attention.

“Robert, what happened? Are you hurt?”

He licks his lips and stares at the little yellow teapot on the coffee table. The words fall out without his permission. They’re blunt and heavy and almost sound like a question.

“My mom died.”

Silence. Three ticks of the cuckoo clock on the wall.

“I’m so sorry.” Talia squeezes his hand again. Her presence shrouds him with warmth despite the freezing ache in his bones. How does she do that? Why does she do that? He’s dripping rainwater onto her couch but her house is warm too, a quiet cocoon of earth tones and gold lamps. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t… I don’t know,” he answers. He doesn’t know how to express his emotions, not since high school. The business world doesn’t have time for emotions. Peter understands that, because when Peter told him the news over the phone an hour ago his brother’s voice hadn’t wavered the slightest. “Mom died,” with the same tone one might use to announce the weather is mild. And really that should be the proper reaction, shouldn’t it? They’d hardly interacted with their mother since middle school. Her state of mind eroded to fragments years ago. So why does he feel like this? All heavy and strange and wrong.

“Sometimes talking about it can help,” She voices gently. Her eyes are luminous brown beneath the shadows of rain from the window. He drowns in them for a moment and looks away.

“You can’t have emotions in the business world, Talia.” His voice isn’t bitter like he expects, just tired and newly fragile.


Just Robert.

Robert dear, come help mommy with the groceries! How’s my little champion doing today?

He swallows thickly, feeling the uncomfortable lump of something foreign swell in his throat. “I… I can’t—“

And then Talia leans forward and gently wraps her arms around his shoulders, cradling him softly in a hug. He stiffens with surprise but melts into her embrace, resting his chin over her shoulder as a shaky breath drags through his nose. Her hair tickles his face with the scent of spice and earth and Talia, and he breathes it in slowly to savor every trace. His hands fumble weakly at her arms, wanting to cling on for dear life but too afraid to let himself touch. To touch would be to let go.
“Yes you can.”

“I don’t want to.” In a pleading whisper that threatens to nosedive with another sentence. Fear courses through him with every thump-thump-boom in his chest.

Talia tilts her head to whisper in his ear, and he feels cold and small in her embrace. She sounds so sure, so calm like she always is, like she trusts her own life with the truth. “Sometimes it feels better to let it go.”

“When Peter and I were younger my… My mom used to read us *Goodnight Moon* before bed.”

He doesn’t know why he says it. But of all the memories of his mom that one always sticks the most. It conjures up all the other memories of his mother like her dark hair scraped back into a bun, her string of pearls and her smooth hands, and her soft voice of encouragement. He sees her smile in his mind’s eye and then he’s crying softly into Talia’s shoulder as she runs fingers through his hair. He—Robert Hale— is crying. He’ll probably be horribly embarrassed about it later but right now he can’t bring himself to care. He hasn’t had this for a decade, and it’s exactly what he needs.

When he finishes he sniffs pathetically, turning away embarrassed.

“See? That was good,” Talia smiles softly, and brushes a thumb across his cheek to wipe away the wetness there. “Why don’t you stay here a little while? I’d offer to throw your clothes in the dryer, but I bet a suit like that would ruin.”

He nods, but he has a million other suits just the same. “Would you be alright if I…? Shifted? I might… I might shed some fur on your couch.”

She smiles and rises. “Make yourself at home. I’ll put on some tea.”

He pushes up from the couch and walks numbly to the bathroom, clutching the purple towel in his hands. He catches sight of himself in the mirror and notes his red-rimmed eyes and red nose; he hasn’t looked like this since high school, apart from when he guzzled too much wolfsbane liquor with Peter that one time. He looks the same but feels better this time.

When he emerges, using his nose to nudge open the bathroom door, Talia is seated on the couch with a sudoku puzzle in one hand and a mug of chamomile in the other. She glances up and smiles at him, one of her wide ones that crinkle the freckles on the edges of her eyes. Robert trots forward slowly, snuffling at her carpet and swiveling his ears. He gives a little shake to help dry his fur.

“My *chánah anidooolíiłgo*, you’re beautiful,” Talia tells him as she bends to eye-level. "My father had fur almost the same shade as yours." His tail wags involuntarily as he snuffles against her palm when she offers it. After brief hesitation he gently licks her fingers and hops up on the couch. She chuckles softly and continues reading, and he watches her from the other end of the furniture until she pats her lap in invitation.

“Come on over. I do bite, but only when I have fangs in my mouth.”

It’s a small couch already but he spins a few times and rests his head gently on her lap. His eyes blink and fall closed as he listens to her heartbeat, smells her sweet scent, and lets his ears twitch with the dizzying comfort of it all. He falls asleep listening to the slow, soft, samba of her heartbeat in his ears.

.o0O0o. *December 23rd, 1988.*
“Johnny baby!”

His mother cries out in delight as she opens the door, loud enough so the whole damn block can know that her good child has returned home, and immediately flings her arms around his neck in an impressive bear hug for such a frail old widow. She’s over a foot shorter than him so he has to stoop awkwardly on the brick porch, but when she pulls back she’s his mother, complete with greying brown hair and thick rimmed glasses. She has a few more wrinkles around her eyes than last holiday.

“Hi, mom,” he returns, sighing when she reaches out with knobby knuckles and pinches his cheeks.

“Heavens, John, look at you, my baby boy— have you been eating properly? You’re much too thin, dear, there’s hardly any face for me to pinch! Have you been sleeping? Hurry up inside, for Goodness sake, you’re letting all the cold air in! Oh— Good Lord, John, those pants look absolutely ragged! What did you spend your birthday money I sent you for? I told you to get some decent clothes, you know I worry about you looking—"

The house is just the same as John saw it last Christmas, and the twenty-four Christmases before that. Walking in the door is like a slap in the face from Jesus himself— the Sacred Mother Mary statue stands in her rightful place over the mantle, adorned with other religious saints and centuries-old faux flowers. The white wallpaper in the kitchen still has the same yellow daisy print, the dining room still has the doilies, the musty drapes, the fake fruit in baskets, the sixties-print furniture, and the old rabbit ear TV. His father never got a say in the decoration.

“—tell the girls at the bingo club. As if my son wouldn’t visit his own mother on Christmas! But I know my Johnny better than that, I said. Boots off in the dining room dear, I had some new flooring put down. Oh! Did you see the new lights? Come see my new lights, John, I just put them in last week. Gives the whole place a warm glow, I think, Dorothy says they’d look better by the windows but I know you’ll agree with me.”

John sighs as his mother hobbles down the hall, leading him to the very depths of his stuffy childhood home. “Sure mom, but do you think I could use the bathroom first? The flight was five hours.”

“Oh! Of course dear, I’m glad to hear you didn’t use the restroom on the plane. Those things are filthy, you know.”

.o0O0o.

They sit down for tea, and the tiny china barely fits in John’s massive hands. His mother proudly presents a platter of her homemade shortbread cookies that taste short on more than just the bread, but he doesn’t have the heart to tell her they taste like straw so he chokes down four.

“Mom, there’s something I need to tell you.”

His mother’s face goes white as expected. “Oh, John, what is it? You’re—“

“Mom, it’s okay, it’s nothing bad—“

“—scaring me! Tell me you me you haven’t joined the army. Is it your job? Did you get shot? Oh, I told your father this was going to happen if we let you fly out to California, I—“

“Mom,” he raises a hand up. “I found a girl.”
“You what?” His mother’s thin eyebrows skyrocket. “I thought you were gay!”

John honest to God chokes on his tea, making it dribble down his chin in hot lines onto the lace tablecloth. He ignores his mother’s “Oh, John, these are my good linens!” to continue sputtering. “What? Mom, I— what makes you think that?”

His mother starts dabbing at the tablecloth with her napkin, shoosing his hands away from the spill zone. “Oh honestly, honey, everyone knows it. You’ve dated one girl in your whole life, and that was eight years ago! Anyone would wonder. And then you wanted to fly out to California, with the hippies and the other gays— it’s not like it was any secret. It took me a few years to come to peace with it, since the Holy Bible says the homosexuals are an abomination, you know, but with guidance from the Holy Spirit and Pastor Daniel—”

“You told Daniel Fairfield? Jesus, mom, he still sends me Christmas cards!”

“Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain, dear. And of course I told him, like I said it’s no secret.”

John pinches the bridge of his nose. “Mom. No. I’m— like I said, I found a—“

“So tell me about this girl you found then!” His mom cuts in, leaning forward. “Go on, I want to hear all about her! Is she Catholic? She better be Catholic, John, I won’t have my son getting married outside a church, although she can always convert for you. Why didn’t she come with you here? Unless it’s not serious, but—“

“Mom,” John tries again, and carefully loosens his grip on his teacup before he breaks it. The last three cost him half a paycheck. “She’s Catholic. That’s not why I fell in love with her, but rest at ease. Her name is Claudia.”

“Claudia,” his mother tries out. “Well that’s not a name you come across every day. Does she have a job?”

“No, she’s in school. She’s a junior at Beacon college.”

“What’s her degree?”

“Fine arts.”

His mother purses her lips over the rim of her teacup. “Fine arts? Oh, John, you know how terrible that is. That’s a field that doesn’t make a lot of—“

“Money, I know,” he cuts in, already annoyed. “But that doesn’t matter, that’s who she is. She’s her own person, and I’ve never been happier. She makes me happy.”

“And you love this girl?” His mother raises an eyebrow.

John nods. “Practically from day one.”

His mother chuckles. “You’re just like your father. Falling hard and falling fast.”

“Don’t compare me to my father,” John grunts. “I’m nothing like him and I will never become him, not if I can help it.”

His mother sighs, swirling a sad thumb around her cup. “I know your father had some… Faults.”

“He was a violent drunkard.”
“But our faith teaches us to forgive. I’ve forgiven him, and I pray every day that his spirit is at peace. The day you forgive him will make me so happy, baby,” his mother reaches out and squeezes his hand, and John sighs, unwilling to venture into this argument again. His father only yelled at his mother when he wasn’t drowning himself in whiskey at the bars, and only acknowledged his son when John’s grades weren’t good enough, which was always. His mother was never keen on defending herself. Neither was John, which is why he jumped plane to the other side of the country as soon as he graduated high school.

“Anyway,” he murmurs, running his thumb in a circle over his mug. “I was wondering… If I could use grandma Mary’s wedding ring to propose to her.”

His mother blinks, then bursts out laughing. “Oh, John, dear, when did you say you met this girl? Six months ago? You young kids move so fast. Honey, that ring is already on your sister’s finger!”

He blinks, nearly choking on his tea for the second time in five minutes. “Carol got engaged?”

“Goodness, you two still aren’t talking to each other? You kids break my heart. Yes, dear, to that handsome lawyer she met in college! Bill Faulkner. Very nice man. He asked me for it last, oh, July was it? Yes, July, at the barbecue party.”

“Mom,” he grits out. “He’s a lawyer! Carol works in real estate and they own a three-story house in Ohio, he could have bought her a ring with the spare change in his pocket!”

“Well, you’re the one who decided to run off to try and pay California taxes on a policeman’s salary,” his mother purses her lips. “Leaving your poor mother here all alone, I don’t know how you live with it on your conscience. You’re still going to church, aren’t you?”

_Not since I stepped foot out of New York._ He sighs. “I— Yes, mom.”

“Good,” his mother nods. “Then have faith in the Good Lord, John. Have a little faith, and he will provide that ring for you.”

John resists the urge to roll his eyes to the ceiling. He learned very early that God doesn’t provide, at least not for him. All the years he spent as an alter boy and getting communion every Sunday earned him zilch, while his wild loudmouth sister was rewarded with a rich husband and a shiny new estate house. His mother had gone to church her whole life, and God didn’t fix her alcoholic husband. Still, at least John is the favorite since this is the fourth Christmas in a row Carol’s made some excuse not to fly down to see mom.

“So?” His mother clasps her hands expectantly on the table, craning her head towards his suitcase. “What did you get me for Christmas?”

_o000o.

John manages to sneak away from the dinner table at seven o’clock. He calls Claudia in the guest bedroom, on his mother’s outdated pink rotary phone. Claudia answers the phone with a breathless “hello?” on the first ring. Her voice is soothing balm on John’s headache.

“Claudia,” he breathes in relief.

“John!” She whispers excitedly, sounding like her day is going just as miserably as his. “Hold on,”
she whispers, and then yells something in Polish in the background, followed by “I said it’s Wendy, mom! I’ll just be a bit, it’s important!” and then, “Oh John, I miss you so much!” Claudia whispers. “How’s your mother?”

He sighs. “I miss you too. She’s got a cross stuck even further up her ass than when I last saw her.”

“John!” Claudia whispers, sounding offended.

“Sorry,” he admonishes. “She’s alright. Loud, pushy, and she only made me choke on my drink twice so far, so much better than last Christmas. Tell me about you, are you okay?”

“As okay as I can be while stuck in the house with the horrible Gremlin that is my mother,” Claudia sighs. “The holidays in Poland were more fun. All my cousins and dziadkowie are over there. Plus there’s snow and makoweic.”

“What’s a mako-week?”

“It’s a Polish cake,” Claudia gushes. He can hear her smiling over the phone. “We used to eat it on Christmas! It has poppy seeds and nuts and icing, but I haven’t found them in California.”

“Well if I see any in New York, I’ll bring some back for you,” John promises.

“Hopefully my mother will be dead by then,” Claudia chirps happily. “Then you could deliver it to my house and we can eat it on my couch!”

“I know you say your mother is difficult, but I might have to meet her some—”

“Ohhhh no! I am keeping my mother as far away as possible from you,” Claudia whispers fiercely. “I’m not kidding, John. She’s horrible! She’s like that that scary guy with the knife fingers from that movie a few years ago!”

“Freddy Krueger?”

“Yes!” She whispers, and John smiles as he pictures her pursed lips, her wide eyes darting over her shoulder. "If you ever meet her she will totally haunt your dreams like that if she doesn’t kill you, or worse, scare you away forever!”

“You’d have to try pretty hard to scare me away from you,” John raises an eyebrow. “In case you forgot you were fifteen days without a shower or a toothbrush when we had our first kiss. I can handle anything.”

Claudia snorts. “You haven’t seen how my mother celebrates the holidays. She sits by the window and laughs when people slip on the ice!”

“My mother still uses the n-word.”

“What is the n-word?” Claudia whispers.

“Er... We can watch Roots when I get home. But it’s bad, Clauds. Very bad.”

“Johnny! You’re being very rude keeping your grandparents waiting!”

“Shoot, I’d better get going,” John glances towards the door.

“Can I call you later?” Claudia asks hopefully.
“Yes, please do. Just be sure to hang up quick if a woman answers with ‘Stillinski residence, Debbie speaking.’ My mother will never let you off the phone. Or worse, she’ll drill you on your Catholic background.”

“Goodie! Aye-aye, captain.”

“Merry Christmas, Claudia.”

“Merry Christmas, John! I love you.”

John smiles. “I love you too.”

.o0O0o.

“You found them!” Claudia squeals when John’s feet are back in California, as she holds up the package to the light.

“It was tricky, but I called around and found them at a bakery in Staten Island.”

“You went to an island to find these?” Claudia’s eyes huge. “I thought you were in New York?”

“I was. Staten Island is a part of New York. You go over a bridge to get there. It’s— We can watch Manhattan too.”

.o0O0o. October 10th, 1989.

One of the many perks of being a millionaire is the parties. Or at least it’s a perk for the first year and then it just gets really fucking annoying.

“I hate to subject you to the banal company experience, and even worse— my brother, but he’s really pushing me to bring a date and I don’t want to go with anyone but you. Will you help me out? You’re welcome to say no, of course—“

“I’d love to come,” Talia turns the page of her novel. “It’ll be fun.”

Robert groans and lolls his head over the back of her couch. “That’s because you’re new to these. Being a millionaire is fun but unfortunately schmoozing is half the business. Parties and Dinners every damn week, it feels like.”

“What do you recommend for attire? I’m afraid I don’t have any real rubies to wear.”

He shamelessly allows himself to entertain the thought of Talia wearing nothing but a ruby necklace for a moment, and chuckles when she smacks him. Its like she has a sixth sense that lets her sniff out whenever he’s entertaining sinful thoughts. “T, you could arrive wearing a trash bag and you’d be the most beautiful woman there.”

“Flattery will get you no where if you continue to put your shoes on the coffee table.”

He pouts and lets his loafers clunk to the floor. “Sorry. I just like to stretch my legs out, you know?”

“You should try yoga.”
“Huh, I’ve heard of that. Would you be doing yoga with me?”

“No. I go to a class at the Y every Wednesday, but that’s my Talia time.”

“Sweet.”

He takes a minute to twiddle his thumbs and stare at her, because she has a profile better than Nefertiti. Her straight nose, the slight twitch of her short lashes as she reads, the speckles upon speckles of freckles that decorate her skin, even on her lips, and the way her hair—

“Are you going to sit there and stare at me until the party next week?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Yep.”

“Well then be useful while you do it.” She hands him a stack of pamphlets from the coffee table without looking up from her book. “I need these ordered alphabetically for the next Kéyah meeting.”

“Yes ma’am,” Robert says, then starts unbuttoning his shirt. He wiggles his eyebrows at Talia until she smirks, straddles him, and kisses him until he doesn’t know which way is up anymore.

.o0O0o. October 17th, 1989.

The St. Cecelia Grand Hotel is the oldest, grandest venue in Beacon Hills County. Built in 1912, it’s adorned with the classic gingerbread scaffolding, tall white pillars, and whimsical ballrooms with giant chandeliers. Ivy and twinkling lights wrap around the terrace and surrounding garden, too, which makes it extra nice for their evening soirée, featuring champagne and every wrinkled investor, society lady, and corrupted politician. It’s a party for the rich, and the rich like to circle fancy venues like sharks.

He tugs on his black tie as the limo pulls up to the front doors. Talia gently squeezes the back of his neck and asks him, “are you alright?”

“Just nervous. This is your debut, after all.”

“And you’re afraid your people won’t accept a middle-class citizen like myself?”

“What? No, everyone’s going to adore you. I’m worried they’re going to speculate because you’re so totally out of my league— I mean hey, I’m a handsome guy, and I’m really rich, but you’re fucking beautiful. And regal. And awesome. Next to you I’m suddenly go from Armani model millionaire to, I dunno, the fourth Ghostbuster guy that no one can remember their name. I’m just afraid people will start to whisper— ‘it’s only a matter of time before she dumps him,’ ‘he must be paying her to be his girlfriend,’ ‘how on earth did he get her?’ and my ego is too fragile to handle that.”

“Well guess what?” Talia leans in and adjusts his tie. He gulps.

“What?”

“You have me,” she says simply.

“…And?”

“And what?”
“This is the part where you’re supposed to kiss me. A kiss for confidence, you know?”

“Not unless you want my lipstick on your face.”

“Ah. Good point.”

Understandably, everyone turns in awe of Talia when they walk into the ballroom— She’s dressed in this slinky red dress that’s sexy yet classy, falling to her knees with spaghetti straps and a small slit up her leg. Somehow she managed to pin up her mile-long hair atop her head in an elegant arrangement with little wispy tendrils falling around her ears, and her heels add an extra two inches to her already 5’9” frame so she’s as tall as he is. For the first time he’s seen, her almond eyes have a shadow of makeup on them, making them pop with her ruby lips and gold ooljie necklace. She is a vision, and she’s on his arm.

“Mr. Hale, so nice to see you again,” Gus Dwight, an attorney Robert met last year, shakes hands with him.

“Gus, pleasure, and please call me Robert. How are the kids?” He smiles his charm smile.

“Oh, they’re just fine! They’re back at home watching the World Series right now.”

“Right, the game! First time both Bay Area teams are battling it out for the title, who could forget? You an A’s or Giants fan?”

“Giants through and through, although Sarah here wants the A’s to win.”

“Sarah, nice to see you again,” Robert smiles and shakes her hand. “Listen, I’d like the two of you to meet my girlfriend, Talia. Talia, this is Gus and Sarah Dwight, our top attorneys for Hale Associates. And they’re married!”

“Nice to meet you,” Talia smiles, and it’s like the whole room lights up.

“Likewise! You’re a lucky woman.”

“I consider myself the lucky man,” Robert insists.

“Say, you look familiar… Did we work with you at one point? Perhaps you work at the company?”

“No, but you may have plotted cases against me last year,” Talia notes amicably. “I’m Talia Nat’annii, the leader of the Kin of Kéyah protest that—“

“That sat in the company trees two summers ago!” Sarah gasps. “Oh my— and you and Robert—?”

“Have been dating ever since,” Robert grins and rests a hand on Talia’s waist.

“Well I’ll be darned,” Gus laughs. “Incredible! Is this why you’ve been hiding her all this time, Robert?”

“Not exactly. The papers will explode when they hear of it I’m sure, but I’ve been greedy in keeping her to myself.”

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you. We’ll let you two move on and greet your other guests.”

“Thanks, Gus. I’ll circle back to you two later.”

He leads Talia to the champagne bar by the waist. “Only one-hundred fifty-two guests left to greet.
You ready?"

“Am I ever not ready?” Talia lifts an eyebrow.

“You’ve got a point, but I meant my brother. No body’s ever really ready for him, and he has a
certain disposition about meeting you in particular, so I’d like to try and lie low before we run into
—"

“Rob, I can pick out the back of your head from a crowd of millions, there’s no use trying to hide.”

They turn around to see Peter calmly sipping from his champagne flute. He’s the picture of charm,
clad in a black suit and dark blue tie that brings out his pale irises, glossy shoes, and a crisp white
kerchief tucked into his pocket. He even smells like money.

“So,” his brother slinks up to them, eyeing Talia up and down. “The famous Talia Nat’aanii in
person. I must say, I don’t know why Robert hid you away from me for so long. You really clean up
well when you’re not sitting in a tree without a shower for fifteen days.”

Peter takes her wrist as if to kiss it but she quickly slips out of his grip and rotates his hand over,
palm-up. She studies him analytically. “And you have rather soft fingertips for someone who claims
to do all the company dirty work,” she smiles smoothly. “Peter Hale, how nice to finally meet you in
person.”

Their eyes meet, Talia’s flashing red and Peter’s lighting up gold. He slips his hand back and uses it
to adjust his collar, making sure his Rolex glints beneath the chandelier lights. He smiles, and it’s
charming. “Callouses aren’t much of a concern when you can afford good hand lotion.”

Talia smiles. “I see.”

“Good,” Peter purrs. “I’m glad to know you can. Some people have rather poor eyesight— just
humans, luckily, not our kind. People like us can see things crystal clear.”

“Indeed,” Talia nods, eyes flicking up Peter’s frame. “It is a gift to have such advanced eyesight,
isn’t it? To be able to see right through appearances.”

Peter holds his jaw a little higher, regarding her. “Yes. That’s why if I ever cross a werewolf whose
vision isn’t sharp— perhaps one who doesn’t see how they’re a thumbtack sitting in the path of an
accelerating car— Well. Then I assume they’re just getting in the way on purpose.”

“Peter,” Robert hisses.

“That’s alright, Robert,” Talia smiles. “Your brother must relate to race cars. Do you own any,
Peter? They’re pretty to look at, but without headlights or airbags they’re hardly functional. Just for
show, really.”

Peter narrows his eyes. “You did shower after climbing down from our trees last year, right? You
still have quite a bit of dirt on your face. And well, everywhere.”

Talia swoops a thread of hair behind her ear, completely unruffled. She smiles. “My freckles? Some
people call them sun spots. You could use a few yourself, seeing how pale you are. Or do you just
pay people to go outdoors for you?”

“Okayyy, that’s enough,” Robert cuts in, glaring sharply at Peter. “I told you to play nice. And you
—“ he turns with a pointed finger to Talia, who raises an eyebrow of doom at him. He crumbles
faster than a rusty drawbridge. “—you did very well. Not everyone can keep up with Peter like that.
I hope you’re present the next time he criticizes my fashion choices, you’ll come in very handy.”

“No offense, dear. But sometimes your tie and suit combinations can be rather… Abstract.”

Peter sips his champagne to cover up his smile. He eyes her over the rim like he approves of that comment but doesn’t want to give her the satisfaction.

Robert scoffs. “I can’t believe you two. Red on white is a great combination. It’s what Al Pacino wore in Scarface.”

“Exactly,” Peter drawls into his champagne, and Talia chuckles at the ground. Robert feels like maybe there’s some hope after all.

After that Peter excuses himself to go find his date —skinny pretty woman #364— and Robert juggles greeting guests and snatching appetizers off the waiter plates that circle around. The Hales never skimp, so there’s a live band, angelic ice sculptures, and a chocolate fountain for dessert. Of course that’s not until after dinner, which is scheduled to be served at seven o’clock sharp. Until then it’s all about being charming and weaning out potential business offers from some of the higher name guests, which Peter makes a point of inviting even if the chances of coming are nil. It works when Bill Buchner, a big name stock broker with incredible ties to Wall Street, seeks Robert out for a chat.

“Mr. Buchner, so glad you could make it,” Robert grins and shakes his hand firmly. “A warm welcome from Hale Associates.”

“The honor is all mine. I’ve been keeping up with you and your brother in the papers for quite some time, I’m quite impressed with your success.”

Bill Buchner is a man as round as Robert is tall, with a shiny balding head and whiskery grey eyebrows. He, like Peter, also smells like money, but perhaps of a more crinkled kind. He seems like the kind of man that smokes a Cuban cigar while watching his world from the window.

“Well thank you, that’s very kind.”

“Listen, I hope we could have a little chat? Not to pull you away from your guests, but it’ll only take a moment.”

“Of course! What can I do for you?” Robert starts leading them to a quieter stretch of wall.

“Well you see, I have many connections back on Wall Street, including my own firm. I really only fly back to California about once a month when the cycle gets quiet, but otherwise I’m in my building overseeing my company. We’ve been extremely successful, tripling our profits in just the last seven months.”

“So I’ve heard, congratulations.”

“Thank you. I see much leadership and skill in you, Mr. Hale. I’d love for you to come join me in New York.”

“You mean… Leave Hale Associates?” Robert blinks.

“I understand you put some work into your company, but I assure you you’ll be making double what you make now. You’ll be my new financial CEO, helping me keep things in running order like I assume you do now. You’ll have an office on the fortieth floor— it’s a beautiful view of Manhattan.”

“Wow, I… I’ll have to talk to my brother and see if it sounds like something he’d be interested in,
“Oh, I’m sorry. I just meant you. Things always run better when there’s one man in charge.”

“Oh.” Robert tries not to look too surprised. “My apologies, I just assumed you meant both of us. We’ve been a bit of a package deal our whole lives, just about.”

Mr. Buchner raises an eyebrow and leans in closer. “There’s a reason all the papers list your name first, you know. Robert and Peter Hale? There’s also a reason Forbes and television stations always pick you for interviews— because they know that you’re the better half of the wishbone. No offense to your brother, but he doesn’t have a certain flare you do. You’re warmer, more genial, more inept to molding business deals the way you want as a people person. That’s the kind of advantage I want in my firm.”

Robert stares across the room to where his brother is chatting with a group of investors. He looks sleek and charming in his suit, the picture of confidence.

“I see,” he says. “Well thank you for the compliment, but my brother and I stick together. We built this company with our own hands and I don’t intend to leave it, or him, no matter how exquisite the offer is. I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening, Mr. Buchner.”

He turns on his heel and reenters the sea of people. A bit of a clipped goodbye, but he can’t find it in him to be sorry about it. It’s not like Mr. Buchner was even rude about it, but nobody says a bad word about Peter, unless that nobody is Robert. It would crush Peter to find out what the world really sees him as.

But he sees Talia standing with her champagne by the wall, looking out over the crowd with her unhappy face, which is really just squinty eyes and a slightly pursed mouth because Talia always keeps her composure. He makes a beeline to her with the drinks.

“What’s up, T?” He slides next to her, champagne wobbling with the movement.

“Something’s wrong,” she murmurs, keeping her eyes on the ballroom. Robert looks around but sees nothing.

“What do you mean?” He asks.

“Tune into your senses,” she instructs. “There’s something off in the atmosphere. Not just the hotel, it’s almost omnipresent.”

He takes a moment to channel the animal inside him, letting his wolf take over. An uneasy tingle creeps up his spine— something is off, almost like a looming darkness. An unsteady balance beneath his feet— His brother strides towards them, looking grim.

“I take it you two are sensing something amiss as well,” Peter proposes seriously, tucking a hand into his coat pocket.

“Yes. I think we might have an earthquake on the way,” Talia answers. “A large one.”

“Really? What makes you think that?” Robert asks.

“I hate to agree with her, but I think your girlfriend might be right,” Peter murmurs into his champagne flute. “There’s something unbalanced coming from below. You can feel the tension if you focus hard enough.”
Robert tries but his senses still aren’t as sharp as they could be. “Shit. Any idea when it might hit?”

“We’re werewolves, not oracles,” Peter scoffs.

“Soon. We should evacuate everyone immediately,” Talia cuts in. “You two might want to think of an excuse to move everyone outside onto the terrace.”

“That’s a little inconvenient, isn’t it?” Peter counters.

“This hotel was built in 1912,” Talia replies sharply. “I can’t imagine their construction standards were as thorough as they are now. Do you really want to risk the lives of innocent people for the title of your company?”

“Well, no, I guess not when you put it like that,” Peter says dryly. “Then what do you propose we do, Sacagawea?”

“Sacagawea was Shoshone, not Navajo,” Talia replies cooly as she sets her glass down on a nearby table. “You two think of an excuse to gather everyone on the terrace and make them stay there, I’ll head to the lobby and tell the hotel manager to page all the residents down for a special announcement, courtesy of Hale Associates.”

“Now hold on,” Peter steps in front of her. “You have no authority to tell our company what to do. We only cater to our clients and the top business executives in the state, to invite down every simpleton from the hotel into our party would be an egregious move on our part.”

Talia’s eyes narrow dangerously as she pushes her face two inches from Peter’s nose. “Do it anyway,” she hisses, and briskly strides off towards the lobby.

“Isn’t she awesome?” Robert grins as he watches her go. “Alright, what’s our special announcement? I’m thinking—”

“For fuck’s sake, I am honestly amazed how you ever graduated from Stanford.” Peter walks around the corner and a few seconds later the fire alarm goes off.

“And that’s why you’re the genius,” Robert mumbles as he stands atop a chair and slaps on a charming smile. “Alright, no need to panic, ladies and gentlemen! I’m sure it’s just a drill, let’s all move outside onto the terrace, bring your drinks. Band members, bring your instruments please, we may outside for a while and I’m sure we’d all love to hear some music.”

Together he and herds the people outside to the garden entrance. It’s almost as charming as inside, with twinkling strung lights and ivy climbing over the brick archway to the hotel. Heels click on the cobblestones and sink into grass as the chatting circles reform, as well as the waiters resuming their rounds with the caviar. It’s the same party, just pulled outside away from potential caved ceilings.

Then Talia comes rushing out towards him and Peter, mouth downturned unhappily. “Who pulled the fire alarm?” She asks.

“I did,” Peter offers shortly. “Much better system to gather everyone outside, don’t you think?”

Talia glares at him. “If I wanted you to go the obvious route I would have suggested it. Couldn’t you smell that someone in the lobby was already—“

“False alarm, people! False alarm!” A man yells from the doorway, waving a smoking popcorn bag. “My fault, sorry! Lost track of how long my popcorn was in the microwave!”
“—Burning their bag of popcorn,” Talia glares at Peter. “Like I said, if you got a little more sun perhaps your senses would be sharper.”

“Write me a novel about it and send it to me,” Peter drawls.

Meanwhile the small crowd that gathered outside groans and starts filing back inside the hotel, including his party guests. The distant rumbling beneath his feet grows stronger.

“So we need that special announcement to stall, quick,” Robert concludes, and moves to grab the microphone by the band.

“No, I’m telling you it’s going to look ridiculous. What reason do we, the highest grossing company firm in California, have for including hundreds of ordinary hotel guests in our dinner party?” Peter snaps. “Say the earthquake doesn’t hit for an hour? Say it hits right now and this hotel doesn’t collapse at all? Say the highest casualty is a single speck of dust shaking loose from the ceiling?”

“And if the ceiling collapses?” Talia challenges. “And half your guests are dead before they can pledge their millions to your company?”

“I’m with her on this one, Pete.” Robert cuts in. “We can’t risk lives like that. If we know that something like this might happen we need to do our best to keep everyone safe.”

“Oh course you take her side,” Peter mutters. “Fine then, go ahead and make an oaf of the company. What are you going to say?”

“I’m gonna wing it,” he says. “Hold my drink, will you?”

“I’m your business partner, not your servant,” Peter snaps as he shoves the champagne flute back. “To that gazebo.”

By the time they make it through the crowd a good handful of hotel residents have already filed back inside. He sees Talia dash in after them, presumably to try and convince them to come outside to hear the announcement, which he’s still thinking of.

“Attention everyone!” He calls from the gazebo steps. “I’d like to invite you all to gather around on the terrace for a special announcement from Hale Associates, the leading business firm in the state of California. Hotel residents included, please,” he adds quickly as people continue to file inside. A few halt and turn to watch him, some already in their pajamas for the evening. Many dressed in Giants and A’s jerseys ignore him to scurry back to their televisions inside.

“Here at Hale Associates we strive to create a better community within our county, the forested stretch called Beacon Hills,” he stalls. “Although sometimes I wonder why it’s not called Beacon Drills for the number of false fire alarms that seem to happen.”

The crowd chuckles. He smiles his megawatt millionaire smile and continues. “My brother Peter and I are honored to have you in our company today, both our building in the heart of downtown and on the terrace of this hotel tonight. As many of you know we love hosting dinner parties to celebrate our valued employees, our business partners, and our friends. But tonight’s party is extra special because…”

He looks out over the crowd. Talia comes back outside with a handful of people and herds them closer. Her red dress glows in the golden light of approaching dusk, catching on her earrings and making them sparkle. She looks up, one wispy tendril of black hair falling across her nose, and he catches her eyes.
“You’re just to good to be true…” He croons into the mic.

Silence, as approximately four-hundred eyebrows slide up. Talia cocks her head at him.

“Can’t take my eyes off youuuuu…” he adds a little hip wiggle for emphasis.

A few excited gasps. Talia stares at him and rearranges her features to convey, “you’re crazy, are you really doing this?” and behind him he can sense Peter’s silent wrath —to let loose and get silly in front of an entire crowd of Big Name Business Bards is financial suicide— But his brother can’t kill him in front of all these people, so Robert figures he safe for a little while at least.

"You'd be like heaven to touch, I wanna hold you sooooo much…”

He steps forward and holds out a hand for her, and people start cheering. She pins him with narrowed eyes for putting her on the spot, but steps onto the gazebo anyway.

"At long last love has arriiiived… And I thank God I'm aliveee…”

He grins at her and wiggles his hips some more, roostering around her. The band picks up their instruments and starts playing, accompanying him with trumpets, drums, tambourines, and the *bum bum* of an upright bass.

"You’re just too good to be true, can't take my eyes off youuuuu!” He declares, and whips off his jacket. The crowd cheers again and Talia’s biting down to keep her smile within reason, shaking her head at the sky. The drummer hits the cymbal and bellows,

"I LOVE YOU BAB’AYYY, AND IF IT’S QUITE ALL RIGHT I need you BAB’EHHhh to warm a lonely night! I love you bab’ayyyy, trust in me when I sayyyyyyy—!

His voice is less than great. There was a reason he decided to become a millionaire and not a singer.

“OH PRETTY BAY’BAAAAaaayyyy, don’t bring me DOWN I pray, oh pretty BAY’BEEHhh, now that I found you STAAAAaaayyyyyyy!”

The band kicks into the well known *BA-DA, BA-Da, BA-da-DA-da* and the crowd roars with applause, some swaying their shoulders. On the gazebo, it’s when he brings back all the dance moves from college— all the moves he hasn’t touched since walking into the company. He snaps his suspenders, loosens his tie, and throws his head back as he twirls her in a circle, and she’s a fantastic dancer. She’s also full on laughing now, hair shaking loose from her updo and spilling down her shoulders.

“I need you BAY-Baaay, and if it’s quite alright I need you BaAY-Bay, to warm a lonely night—“

The music fills the air around them, brassy and joyous beneath the warm October sky and distant whistles. They spin, playing off of each other's movements. He steps forward, Talia steps back. He guides her to the left, she follows and swings her shoulders to the side. It's an unspoken game, a mutual conversation as they tiptoe circles around one another, hands locked together like pieces of a puzzle.

It’s the first time they’ve danced together, and he thinks it’s the single best moment of his life.

“OH PRETTY BAY’BAAAAaaayyyy, don’t bring me DOWN I pray, oh pretty BAY’BEEHhh, now that I found you STAAAAaaayyyyyyy!”

It grows warm; the pink flush in his cheeks has worked down his neck now, a thin sheen of sweat
clinging to his temples. This time Talia swings him out, pulls him close again. His palms are sweaty as he tightens the gap between them and they laugh as their legs get tangled in the microphone cord. They get lost in the last couple minutes of the song, leaving the party behind as they weave circles into the gazebo together.

“**I LOVE YOU BAY’BAAYYYYYYY!**”

They finish with a dip, all smiles and panting breaths. The band wraps up with a triumphant drumroll and cymbal smash, which drowns in the applause of the crowd. He pulls her up by the waist and grins dopily at her, then risks a side glance to Peter— his brother is smiling tightly off to the side. He can’t look angry now since he needs to keep up appearances for the crowd, but he does mumble under his breath, “I’d say you’re high on alcohol except you can’t get **drunk.**”

“Robert Hale, you are a crazy man,” Talia tells him. He grins.

“Crazy enough for a kiss? Or are you still concerned with getting lipstick on my—”

The ground jerks violently, throwing half their guests to the ground. Screams echo as he stumbles against Talia, who quickly rights him with her reflexes. Across the yard the hotel windows wobble with the waves, shaking dust loose from the brick.

“**EVERYBODY GET DOWN!** Away from the building! **GET DOWN!**” He bellows. Beside him Talia springs to her feet, and he follows at her side as they run to help people out of the way. The ground trembles with startling strength, nearly knocking his feet out from under him if it were not for his supernatural reflexes, and from the corner of his eye he sees Peter whip off his jacket mid-run to drape it over his date, who fell close to the hotel door.

“Pull your jackets over your heads!” He commands, just as the hotel windows shatter and glass rains down from five stories up, an unexpected horror that throws his heart to his throat.

“Out of the way!”

“Talia—!”

More screams as the glass hits the terrace with deceivingly pretty tinkling sounds— beside him Talia sprints forward and throws herself over a few guests closest to the hotel. Peter does the same, because werewolves heal from cuts and bruises in a matter of seconds while humans are startlingly mortal.

“**THE HOTEL!**”

“Look out!”

“**UP! Up above—!**”

With an especially violent jerk a chunk of brick from the hotel arch shakes loose and hurtles to the ground. Robert grabs two guests —Rachna Patell and Frank Forbes from Doberstien Delegates— and huddles over them. A piece of rubble hits his back and he grunts, but it’s unheard over the bomb-like crashes of brick hitting the cobblestone.

“Jonathan!”

“Get to the garden, away from the—!”

“Hold on! Hang on everybody!”
“Chrissy! Are you—!”

The hotel walls moan and shudder with the pressure, spewing out dust as they crack. Saskya Cho from the Borges Estate yelps and shields her eyes as a line of string lights pops free from their outlet, showering her in hot sparks. The band members hold their instruments close and huddle by the gazebo— at this point mostly everybody is on the ground in their thousand dollar suits and dresses, filling the air with the sharp scent of fear, shrieking as bricks crash to dust around them, until at last, the shaking dies to a stop.

“Damn,” Robert breathes, craning his neck skywards.

Everyone starts calling out asking if people are alright. Robert looks at the fallen portion of the building and panics for Talia. “Talia?” He breathes in panic,

“Mr. Hale, are you okay?” Ben Quincy, CEO of Pepperidge Financial Offices shakes his shoulder. “Your head, it’s bleeding! I saw you get hit by a—“

“I’m fine,” Robert brushes off and quickly gets to his feet. He absently touches his head and his fingers come away slick with blood, but the gash underneath has already healed. “Are you alright, Mr. Quincy?”

“I think so, but you—“

“Robert, we need ambulances,” Peter calls from where he’s crouched beside a crying woman on the ground. Her forehead is bleeding, matting her hairstyle.

“Is the line at the front desk still working?” Someone asks.

“No, don’t! The building is unstable,” another person counters. “There’s a phone booth on the corner of block near the front entrance.”

“I saw it on the way here, I’ll go,” Francis Yap jogs across the grass to the sidewalk.

“Alright, everybody just stay calm,” Robert announces to the party with every ounce of suave he has left. “Help is on the way— I ask that anyone in fit condition help those who are injured to move as far away from the building as possible. Aftershocks are a concern so we will take caution, but rest assured that my brother and I won’t let anyone else get hurt.”

“Robert.” Suddenly Talia is at his side, eyes wide and determined. “There are still people inside the hotel, I’m going to make sure that everyone gets out okay. Take care of your guests.”

She spins on her heel to bolt inside but he catches her by the arm, heart pounding. “Wait, Talia—”

She narrows her eyes. “What? Go up instead? Because you’re a man and you’ll be stronger and faster?”

“No,” Robert shakes his head. “God no, we both know who wears the pants in this relationship, it’s the exact opposite. I’m the weak one here, T. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

She plants a quick peck to his cheek. “I’ll be fine. Yidiists’a lááttk’yoo’j.”

Protect your people.
“And Barry Bonds takes it ouutttaaa heeeeeeere! Score 1-2 San Francisco Giants vs Oakland A’s this beautiful day at—“

The break room erupts into cheers amid a few hollered boos as the small station television replays the hit. John is impartial as he sips his Pepsi, watching his coworkers slip a few more bills into the betting pot by the peanut bowl. Californians.

“C’mmon, John, you really don’t care who wins?” Terry bumps his shoulder, then tips his head back to drop a handful of crackerjacks in his mouth. “First time in history both Bay Area teams battle it out for the World Series and you’re just sittin’ there like some damn zen buddhist monk. At least join the money pool, the pot is up to ninety-seven dollars!”

“Sorry Ter, I’m a Mets fan through and through. Call me when we see some New York teams up there,” John dotes. But he smiles because the Mets won the Series three years ago.

Terry scoffs. “Suit yourself man. You New Yorkers are such tough cookies.”

“At least our teams have nice-looking uniforms. Orange and black has got to be the worst color combo there is.”

“Ooooh, burn, John! Did you forget I was born in Oakland? Them A’s are killers, we’ve won how many World Series? Oh? Thirteen times you say? And the Mets have won what— two?”

“Well I’ll be watching when the Mets win again next year,” John supplies amicably. “Or the year after that. I’ll be here.”

He’s on duty at the station along with twenty-four of his coworkers, but it’s an especially quiet evening so they’re all crammed into the break room watching the game on the TV. The entire department is made up of huge A’s fans and even huger Giants fans, so it’s an especially intense party. Even Sanders, a self-proclaimed “mega” Giants fan, is huddled in the doorway with eyes glued to the screen and an orange cap atop his head.

“—and he fails to get Dave Parker at second base, so the Oakland A’s take—"

Then suddenly the TV winks out. Everyone stands and begins to cry in outrage over the reception, but then the picture comes back with a high-pitched wane and shows AT&T Park rocking back and forth. Realization dawns on the break room just as the sports announcers’ tinny voices sieve through the speakers: “—hang on, we’re having an—!”

The station jolts, knocking the television to the ground with a crash.

“EVERYBODY DOWN!”

Everyone dives for the floor. He, Terry, and Carson crawl beneath the table, Sanders yells “Get DOWN!” into the hallway and steps in the doorway, Johanson and Rhonda brace themselves against the wall, and everyone else is knocked to the floor. The sound is deafening— rattling blinds and ceiling fans, crashes as glass paperweights jump off desks and smash to the floor, the earth’s thunderous rumbling, and loud bangs as the metal file cabinets rock against the walls. As John’s first real earthquake since moving from Manhattan, it’s terrifying.

“Wish you stayed in New York?” Terry yells to him under the table. The lights flicker out.
“Not a chance,” John bites back.

It lasts about thirty seconds. When it stops the lights flicker back on and everyone scrambles to their feet, brushing the ceiling dust from their uniforms. Of all the shootings and bank robberies they’ve experienced, John’s never seen his coworkers so shaken, all panting with adrenaline and wide eyes. “I thought you Californians were used to earthquakes?” He breathes.

“They’re not usually this big,” Terry admits.

“Is everyone okay?” Sheriff Sanders calls out.

Claudia.

He panics— she’s working at the flower shop, and he jumps for the wall phone but Sanders starts barking orders.

“I need officers armed with medical kits and walkie talkies lined up at the door and ready to go! Johanson, Stilinski, White, Deerwald and Sanchez man the phones, I expect the dispatch lines to overflow as we speak and you will be handling those extra calls, gentleman! Grey you’re with me, I want—“

Phone line A rings. They all turn to it in dawning realization.

“—all off-duty officers reporting here immediately, phone extensions are listed in my office by the calendar! Those on phone duty are to broadcast emergency locations to free police ASAP, let’s go officers! Power may be out and fires may be burning, I want to see everyone—“

Phone line B and C ring.

“Jesus Christ,” John blurts and dives to a phone chair.

“—manned with flashlights and shock blankets! This is what we’ve trained for, it’s our job to respond immediately and efficiently to get these people the help they need! Good luck!”

The station erupts into chaos. John watches his co-workers run across the floor grabbing E-kits and flashlights as he jots down the address of his first call report into the computer. Papers and dust from the ceiling litter the floor, disregarded entirely as boots bolt over them.

“911, what is your emergency?” John says into the speaker. All seven phone lines are already blinking red and ringing.

“Hello I need help, a car lost control during the quake and ran into a telephone pole. It— it caught fire and it’s burning on our street— 672 Whipple!”

John quickly syncs the call with Fillmore’s walkie talkie. ”Can you see the victim of the car?”

“Y-yes, someone else dragged him out but he’s not moving, the c-car is all in flames, god.”

“Sir, I need you and everyone else on the street to move as far away from the car as possible, at least twenty-five feet,” he orders. “Is anyone else hurt that you can see?”

“I— I don’t think so. Everyone’s coming out onto the street, lots of people are crying but I think we’re okay—“

“Alright, just stay on the street. Move to any lawn in case there’s an aftershock so no one falls and hits their head on the pavement. I’m sending help to you and the car crash victim as we speak.”
“T-thank you, officer.”

John clicks the receiver on his walkie talkie. “Fillmore, I need confirmation on the 130 on 627 Whipple, car crash victim and possible code 10?”

“Confirmed. In a car now and on my way, an ambulance has been paged as well.”

“Alright, be careful out there, the car on fire is an explosion hazard.”

“Will do. Out.”

As soon as John hangs up his line rings again.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“It’s my daughter, god, my daughter’s leg is trapped under our television, she’s crying and— oh god—”

“Ma’am, just stay calm. What is your address?”

“4319 Barbara street, I— honey, sweetie it’s okay, just stay still, okay?”

“An ambulance is on it’s way, ma’am, just try to keep your daughter calm and don’t try to move the television yet.”

“John, I got Claudia on my line, she says she’s okay!” Sanchez calls to him. “I told her you’re okay, too.”

“Oh thank god,” he breathes in relief. “Thank you, Kathy.”

The lines keep ringing. The station clears out quickly as officers rush to emergencies, and soon after that Johanson, White, Deerwald and Sanchez are forced to leave their phones one by one as no one is available.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“I’m at the St. Cecilia Hotel with a large party of people, one section of the third and fourth floor collapsed, there are people inside—”

“Are you inside the building, sir?”

“No, I’m calling from a phone booth but I’m part of an event where everyone was outside on the back terrace, about a hundred and fifty people and some are hurt. The hotel windows shattered and some rubble fell as well, there are cuts and some people are still inside the building.”

“Okay sir, I need you to stay outside with the others. Try to herd everyone away from the building. Can you see smoke from any of the windows?”

“No, no fire, the alarm went off right before the earthquake but it was just a drill.”

Odd coincidence, John thinks. “Alright sir, I’m sending you—”

He looks around the station. It’s completely cleared out, with all officer signals marked as already in action. The hotel is just half a mile from the station.

“Help is on the way,” he says, and hangs up the phone. He grabs an E-kit from under his desk and
sprints out to the squad car.

.o0O0o.

On the way there he tunes into a newscast and listens in horror—a 6.9 magnitude quake emanating from the Loma Prieta fault line beneath the Santa Cruz mountains. A chill runs through him when he hears that the double-decker 880 overpass Oakland freeway collapsed, crushing a mile of cars underneath.

The tires squeak to a halt outside the front entrance of the hotel—it’s just as huge and grand as he remembers, except the missing chunks of brick from the exterior wall. The main concern is the huge dust cloud emanating from the plane-size hole missing near the front entrance. He runs up to a small crowd of evacuated people on the sidewalk.


“N-not this section,” a woman stammers. She’s dressed in a floor-length peach dress and a man’s jacket around her shoulders. “It was the ballroom—we were all inside it for a dinner party but we were gathered outside to hear an announcement—otherwise we all w-would have—”

She breaks off into quiet crying. A man in a suit hugs her and looks to John. “The rest of our party is gathered out on the back terrace, but I think the people still inside the hotel need the most help.”

John hurries forward to force open the double-doors. Fire engine sirens blare in the background.

“B-but the building is unstable—!” The man blurts.

“Sir, I’m an officer, this is my job,” John tells him. “You guys should join the rest of your party in the gardens, it will be safer there away from the streets. Tend to each other as much as you can, help is on the way.”

And with that John darts inside and carefully maneuvers up the stairs.

“Hello?” He calls. The electricity is out, and his flashlight is a silver beam amongst the thick dust. It’s a job for the firefighters, but he can still hear their sirens at least a few blocks away still.

“HELLO?” He calls again. “Anybody here?”

He decides to start at a higher floor and work his way down, figuring the most help will be needed near the collapsed areas visible from the outside. On the eighth floor he hears—

“Help! We’re in here!”

He runs over to the door with people banging on the other side. “Hello I’m a police officer, I’m here to get you out.”

“The door is stuck!” A woman’s muffled cry comes through. “We think the ceiling must have buckled and is adding too much pressure!”

John looks around for something to use. Again, this is what firemen have axes for, but the hotel hallway has a few toppled flower vases and tables. He grabs a heavy one, grunts as he hoists it up, and positions himself in front of the door.

“Get away from the door!” He yells. “Back up, can you hear me?”
A moment later, “Yes! We’re safe, we’re back!”

With another grunt John charges forward and rams the table against the wood. He goes again and again until the door splinters and then buckles inward, while he silently thanks the academy for torturing bulging muscles into his arms—all those months of push ups in the rain, pull up competitions in the dorms, and investing in a gym membership have—

_Crack_.

The table breaks through the door in a shower of splinters. He kicks it a few times so there’s a hole big enough, and the people on the other side clamber through.

“Thank you,” the woman says. She’s wearing a Giants t-shirt, as are the man and tween next to her.

“Follow the staircase behind me back down to the lobby, get out as quickly as you can, the building is unstable,” John says.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“It’s my job to stay, ma’am.”

The man thanks him again and wishes him good luck. John throws a “go Giants” over his shoulder despite how it pains his New York heart, just to make them chuckle. In the department, he’s come to learn that humor is essential to keeping your head on straight in dire situations.

He jogs a loop around the eighth floor calling for more people, but most doors are open in signs of evacuation. He pants up to the ninth floor, gasps as he looks up to find a chunk of the hallway ceiling missing, and blinks at the tenth floor visible above him.

“Hello?” He calls again. His throat is raw from the dust at this point. A couple floors below he thinks he can hear the bustle of firemen.

“Over here!”

Another door, this time with smoke wafting out from under it. John curses, darts down the hall to break the fire extinguisher glass, and uses the heavy can to break the knob off the door. He slips his fingers inside the hole and yanks it open, letting the woman inside stumble into the hall with a trail of smoke behind her.

“Thank you,” she coughs. “I was boiling tea and the tea box shook too close to the stove during the quake. It spread to the curtains and my door wouldn’t open.

“I’m more of a coffee man.” John hands her a small oxygen mask from his bag. “Are you burned?”

“No, just—“ she coughs again.

“Take it easy, you’re okay. Can you make it downstairs? There are firefighters who will meet you halfway.”

“Y-yeah, I think I can. God, and to think I was looking forward to a relaxing evening.”

“What, no baseball gear?” He huffs.

“I’m just visiting from New York,” the woman pants. “I’m a Mets girl myself.”

John chuckles. “Same here. This whole—Christ, look out!”
Above them spiderweb cracks bleed into the ceiling, and without warning a chunk of plaster falls over their heads. All they can do is scream and duck, but impact is never made.

“You should pay more attention to what’s above you.”

The woman standing before them must be near six feet tall, and she’s in a slinky red dress that’s smeared with dust. Her skin is tanned hazelnut with even more freckles than Claudia, paired with two dark almond eyes that seem to pierce right into John’s soul. Waterfall-length hair tumbles over her shoulders, and she isn’t wearing shoes.

With a passing “thank you,” John runs into the room to put out the small fire with the extinguisher. Out in the hallway the woman in the red dress waits for him alertly after sending the other girl downstairs.

“Can I help you? Are you hurt?” He asks.

“No, but we need to keep moving quickly if we want to get out of here in one piece.”

Well she’s certainly optimistic.

“Are there more people in your hotel room, ma’am?”

“No, I come from the dinner party in the ballroom.”

“The ballroom? I passed it on the way in, the whole room collapsed.”

Her eyes grow wide. “Yáadila óolyé… Everyone moved outside during a fire alarm.”

“You mean there was a fire before the earthquake?”

“No. Just a lucky happenstance.”

“How many people are up here, do you reckon?” He wipes the sweat from his brow.

“Too many. An announcement was made on the terrace afterwards but about four dozen walked back up to their rooms,” she says grimly.

“Jesus,” John mutters, and hits the radio on his walkie-talkie. “Stilinski to dispatch, I need backup to the St. Cecilia Grand Hotel on St. Celia Avenue, there’s about four dozen people stuck up here and the building looks like it might give any minute, I need firefighters and paramedics, 457.”

“You should get out of here,” the woman tells him seriously. “You could get hurt.”

“Excuse me ma’am, but you’re human too,” John counters. “You should head downstairs, get yourself to safety, it’s my job—“

“—To help people, yes, but isn’t that the job we all have?” The woman counters.

John can see it her eyes that she’s far too determined to turn back now. He coughs a little into his sleeve, nods, and gestures her to follow him. “Alright then, let’s go. John,” he sticks out his hand as they move down the hallway.

She shakes it. “Talia.”

Together they scour the next three floors. Talia seems to have a knack for guessing which rooms still have people inside, almost like she can hear the heartbeats behind the doors. In one they find an
unconscious man and John pages a firefighter from his walkie talkie. The main problem they encounter is jammed doors from the buckled ceilings. His arms grow sore from ramming tables so much, but Talia jumps in and somehow gets the job done in a single push.

“This way,” she says suddenly when they finally reach the fourteenth floor.

“What?

“Listen,” she says.

“I can’t hear anything,” John shakes his head. “There’s no one here, we should—“

“Help us!”

“Yes, we’re inside! What’s going on? The elevator stopped and— coughing— there’s all this dust in here!”

“There was an earthquake!” John calls back.

“What?”

“There was an earthquake! Hang on, firefighters are on their way!”

This is one job that a table ram won’t substitute for. He tries to pry his fingers into the door crack but it’s too small— he attempts to shove open the door anyway with brute strength, but his sweaty hands just slip against the steel. Elevator doors have about fifty pounds of force keeping them together and John can lift one-twenty, so the buckled building structure must be keeping them in place.

“Move,” Talia orders, and essentially pushes him out of the way to brace her hands on the door.

“There’s gotta be a thousand pounds of force keeping those doors together, there’s no way—“

A loud screech hits his ears as she pulls the two doors apart with her bare hands. The people inside shout and scramble out as he grits her teeth and holds them open.

“Jesus Christ,” be breathes.

“Go! Get downstairs!” Talia grits out.

“Hey! You guys okay?” At the same time firefighters finally make it up the stairs. They wave hands by the stairwell. “Over here, everyone! The bottom of the building is about to go, we gotta get out of here now!”

“That’s everybody, come on, Talia.”

With a loud clang she releases the doors and they snap closed again. Together the group of them run lightly down the stairs.

“You a superhero or somethin’?” John pants.

“Blackbelt,” Talia answers swiftly. “In Karate, Taekwondo, and Jujutsu.”
“Man,” he chuckles. “Ever think about joining the police force?”

“I’m a botanist who teaches Greenhouse Medicine at USF.”

Interesting hobbies.

“Hey, any of you named Talia Nattytanny?” A fireman asks. “I’ve got a Robert down on the terrace who threatened to kill me with his bare hands if you didn’t come back down safely.”

“That would be my Robert,” Talia sighs. “He has a tendency for dramatics.”

“Nattytanny?” John pants, as a little lightbulb goes off above his head. “You wouldn’t happen to mean ‘Nat’aanii,’ would you?”

“Yes,” Talia looks at him surprised. “Have we met before?”

“No, but I think my girlfriend used to be in your—“

The building groans. “Come on everyone, hurry it up!” A fireman barks.

They race out out onto the sidewalk just as the bottom half of the stairwell caves in on itself. Three firetrucks are parked with flashing lights outside, as well as two ambulances, Terry, Winston, Smith, and Sheriff Sanders. Men and women are sitting on the sidewalks wrapped in shock blankets, a few of them on gurneys. The city glows with distant fires.

“Thank you for your help,” John sticks a out dusty palm out to shake Talia’s hand. She takes it, and her fingers are surprisingly uncalloused for the heavy weights she’s lifted today.

“Thank you, John.”

“Talia!”

A figure in the crowd comes racing forward. Talia runs to meet them, and the man picks her up and spins her around, kissing her like she’s his whole world.

“Stilinski, Martinez? Anyone free to back me up on the corner of Cherry and Fourth? Telephone pole fell, we should start taping up traffic.”

John hits the button on his walkie talkie, still squinting at Talia and her mystery kisser. In the dark he can’t make out who the man is, but can’t help but wonder if it’s the same Robert that Claudia saw climbing up Talia’s tree June of last year.

“This is Stilinski, I’m on my way now.”

.o0O0o. November 14th, 1989.

“You know, I always pictured taking you on a hot air balloon ride or to the Eiffel Tower for our first anniversary, but this is way better,” Robert says around his chicken chow mien.

He and Talia are sitting on her carpet in her tiny living room, digging into fried rice and broccoli beef straight from the boxes. She set up a bunch of sheets and blankets into a pillow fort, something Robert hasn’t sat in since he was maybe seven, but it’s oddly cozy with the warm light of the lamps glowing through.
“Have you been to the Eiffel Tower?” Talia asks. She even uses chopsticks gracefully.

“Only a couple times,” Robert answers. “My mom used to take me and Peter there before she got sick. She loved Paris, which was part of the reason we learned French so young.”

“Te souviens-tu encore?” Talia asks.

“Comment parler Français? Bien sûr,” he snorts.

“I bet you used it to woo the girls in high school,” Talia smirks.

“Oh, totally. Girls are suckers for European languages.”

“Well,” Talia sets aside her sesame noodles and pulls a package out from behind her. “Consider me wooed.”

“Wow, a present?” Robert exclaims. “Shit, all I got you was a bouquet of roses!”

“And they were lovely. Open it.”

Robert tears the wrapping off and meets a large white box underneath. He lifts the lid, shoves aside the tissue paper, and gapes as he lifts out the leather jacket inside.

“Holy shit, Talia, this is fantastic!” He exclaims, and examines the jacket from the front and back. Polished, soft black leather, hand-stitched pockets, a bronze zipper, and what feels like real suede lining the inside. It’s gorgeous, and exactly something he would wear.

“My father made it himself,” Talia glows. Robert stares at her, grin faltering.

“This— this used to be your father’s?”

“He used to wear it every day.” Talia says it with a certain reverence as she smiles at the carpet. “It’s been hanging in my closet for over a decade, but it seemed like something you would like. Happy anniversary.”

Robert slowly lowers the leather to his lap. His eyes are glued to the woman next to him, radiant in her soft sweater dress, rarely shy as her eyelashes flutter downwards. Her lips are shiny with grease and her breath smells faintly of sweet and sour sauce.

“Goddamn, I was waiting for a more extravagant occasion like a trip to Fiji, but I love you too damn much to wait a second longer,” he announces.

Talia watches him in curiosity as he sighs, fishes a hand into his back pocket, and pulls out the little navy box he’s been holding onto for two months. He carefully opens the lid and watches as her eyes grow wide and soft.

“Talia Oooljé Nat’aanii, will you marry me?”

The ring inside is a turquoise stone nestled in gold. He’s been constructing the design for months.

“Of course,” she answers softly, lips parting to one of her rare smiles with teeth.

“Awesome. Hold out your hand.”

He slips the ring on her finger. She brings it close and admires it, smile growing impossibly wider. “Turquoise.”
“Yeah, I was going to just go for the biggest diamond I could find, but it didn’t really feel like you. On my flight back from New York last summer I made a stop in Colorado and met with a man named Gad who owns a jewelry exchange by a Navajo reservation. I told him I wanted turquoise and he crafted this for me.”

He barely gets the words out before Talia’s kissing him long and hard, stroking a hand slowly over his cheek. He slowly buckles under her weight and lets himself fall back against the pillows, surprised yet pleased at the sudden passion. When they break apart for breath, she stares into his eyes with dewy lashes, hair tumbling down over his face. She gently brushes it away with her hand.

“Ayóó ánúnníshí, Robert Hale.”

He studies her, eyebrows twitching. He’s heard his fair share of Navajo over the years but he doesn’t remember that one. “I don’t think I’ve heard that one before.”

She rests her chin on his shoulder and whispers in his ear. “I love you, Robert Hale.”

It’s the same three words he’s been uttering to her for the last year, but the first time he’s heard them from her mouth. She’s someone who only trusts the whole truth after excessive reasoning, and someone who only lets her inner emotions trickle into the open when death is the only other option.

Robert tips his nose closer against her cheek, inhales deeply, and stokes his fingers down her silky hair. “I love you too, Talia Nat'aanii.”


“SURPRIIIIIIISE!”

“Oomph!”

John startles awake as Claudia belly-flops on his stomach with loose-limbed giggles. He rubs knuckles into his sleepy eyes and blinks at the alarm clock, which reads 8:59am. “Wha’zzit, wha’appen? Did the freezer stop working again?”

“Noope, but I hear it’s somebody’s birthdaaaaay,” Claudia singsongs atop his chest. Her legs waggle happily as she props up on one elbow, beaming at him. She’s fully dressed in her yellow flower dress and little green flats, a cherry red gloss coloring her lips.

“Mmm. Noope, I think you’re mistaken,” John yawns. “It’s not my birthday for another two hours, at which point it will be time to get up. Anytime before eleven on John’s days off is John’s designated beauty rest time.”

“Good thing you’re already so beautiful! Get up, you sleepyhead, it’s time to turn twenty-six!”

John huffs and cracks open an eye to look at her. She’s cheery, beautiful, twice as sunshiny than anyone has a right to be early Sunday morning. Anyone else and he’d whack them on the head for interrupting his sleep. He closes his eye again and buries deeper into his pillow. “Mmf. Can’t you do it for me?”

“Noope! Not for— one, two, no wait, twenty-two twenty-three twenty-four—“ He smiles into his pillowcase as she counts on her fingers. “—Four more years! Now get up, we need to go out to breakfast right away so we can have time to do all the fun things I have planned for us! Nice tasty breakfast, John. Bacon and eggs and Belgian waffles from Stacks, your favorite! Mmmm. Now up!”
John hums appreciatively. He does like breakfast. “Is that why you’re dressed before noon?”

Claudia loves pajamas. Claudia has stated many times that if she were president she would make the nation’s uniform pajamas.

“Yes-siree!” She tries a new tactic and sits on his back, bouncing on top of him to wake him up. This has a rather exciting result downstairs.

“Aeh—! Okay, I’m up, I’m awake. But let’s be back home by noon, alright? That’s when the Mets game is on.”

“I know it is! That’s why we’re going to see it in person!”

He bolts upright in a second. “What?”

“Doi! That’s why we need to go to breakfast right now!” Claudia cheers and throws her arms up. “So we can make it in time to see them play the Giants at Candlestick park!”

“What?” He blurs again.

She beams and reveals two shiny baseball tickets from her cardigan pocket. “Ta-da! Would you like to hold them?”

With shaking fingers he cradles them in front of his eyes—he hasn’t held Mets tickets since he was a teenager. “You— Jesus, Claudia,” he laughs gleefully. “I haven’t been to a game since I was a kid!”

“Woohoo!” She claps her hands together. "I was hoping and hoping that the Mets would make it far enough to play close to your birthday, but then last year was the earthquake so that didn’t work and the year before that I didn’t even know you yet! But this year it’s perfect because we don’t need to fly on a plane! They’re coming to play in the Bay Area!"

“Wait a minute, how did you get these?” He asks her, coming back to earth. “I’d love to— but I don’t know if I have the money to pay for them, Clauds.”

“Don’t worry, it’s already paid for!”

“By who?”

“By me!”

John gapes. “But you don’t have have a job?”

“Psshh. I don’t need a job for money, I just sold all my mother’s old jewelry!” —And when he pales at this Claudia flaps her hands around and rolls her eyes— “Oh! No, not her important jewelry, just the old stuff my tata gave her when they were in love. After he left us she threw it all out, but I secretly snatched it from the garbage and I’ve been saving it for something important like this!”

“Like this?” John echoes faintly.

“Yeah! It’s your birthday John, what’s more special than that!”

A lot of things, John thinks, but he can’t help but smile anyway. His chest floods with warm tightness as he stares between the tickets and the toothy smile in front of him, because she must have been holding onto that jewelry for a decade. Claudia is spending her money on him. Not herself, not a trip to Poland, but John.
“Thank you,” he murmurs as he kisses her. She grins into it sloppily before leaping off the bed.

“You’re welcome! Now let’s go out to the baaaaall game! Take me out to the fieeeeeld! Peanuts and cracker-Jacks and Jills at Candlestick Park, woo! When I came to America they taught us that song before the Star Tangled Banner.”

“You mean ‘Spangled?’”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a word, John. Now get dressed! Oh, and wear your comfy shoes!”

.o0O0o.

They take the jeep.

Because Claudia loves the damn thing and because John’s Volkswagen will probably collapse into a pile of smoking tires if he tries to drive it to San Francisco. She likes to ride with the windows rolled down too, so he holds onto his Mets cap for dear life as they sputter down the freeway, the oldies blasting loudly from the stereo. In the backseat is Claudia’s Panda backpack filled with “necessitates” that he’s not allowed to know about yet, but apparently she has the whole day planned for them and he’s not allowed to spend a single penny.

Honestly, he hasn’t been this excited since the day the Kin of Kéyah won the protest.

Claudia wears her favorite dress; the yellow sweetheart printed with tiny pink roses she found at a vintage boutique, along with a pint of sunscreen to combat San Francisco’s Indian summer. The silver heart necklace John gave her last year twinkles between her collarbones and he can’t take her eyes off of her for a single second as the wind whips her curls and makes her laugh.

They make it to Candlestick in just under an hour, which is good time considering the game traffic. He bounces on his heels like a little kid as they wait in line, and they hold hands so they don’t get separated in the crowd. The seats are even better in person—he and Claudia are just a few yards from the battling cage and he can’t help the elated yelp that flies out when he sees Dwight Gooden himself chucking the ball back and forth with Kevin McReynolds.

“Oh my god, Claudia look!” He grips her sleeve and points to them, then quickly drops his hand in case they notice him pointing like the crazy fan that he is. “This is incredible, they must be less than ten yards away— you can see which ones are chewing gum!”

She giggles as she clicks the button on her disposable camera, blinding him in a flash. “I haven’t seen you this excited since that time I brought you coconut cream pie at the station!”

“That was an exceptional pie. But boy, Clauds, this is incredible.”

“Yay! Oh— oops. I forgot to charge the flash!” The camera clicks as she rolls back the ___ and tries again. “Say cheese! No wait! Say, ‘Mets!’ No wait, then you won’t be making the ‘eee’ sound that makes you smile. Say cheese! Final answer.”

“Cheese.”

“Excellent, I bet that one turned out great,” Claudia grins as she rolls back the flash again.

“You see him? Number sixteen, that’s Dwight Gooden, also known as ‘Dr. K’. He won Rookie of the Year award a few years ago and he’s on his way to breaking the league strikeout record. He’s an
extraordinary pitcher,” John whispers gleefully, like if he speaks too loudly Baseball will lose it’s reverence.

“Wow,” Claudia breathes. Their cheeks ghost next to each other as she follows his eyes across the field. “And what about him?” She points to a tall dark man tossing a ball near second base.

“Daryl Boston, outfielder.”

“And him?”

“Kevin McReynolds, infielder. But he’s better at batting if you ask me.”

“Wow, you’re like a human dictionary! And that guy?”

“The guy with the hot dog? That’s a fan.”

“Oh. I thought maybe he was just a player grabbing a snack. He’s wearing a Mets shirt.”

“I wish Tommie Agee was still on the team,” John mutters in awe. He drums his fingers on the seat in front of him. “I mean he’s an old man now, but when I was a kid I had a prize baseball card with him on it. It was my favorite, until my sister swapped it for some test answers.”

“Oh! That’s terrible!”

“As a fifth grader I was devastated. But boy, that was before I knew I’d get to the see the team this close some day. This is much better.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy,” Claudia squeezes his shoulder and pecks him on the cheek.

“With you? Always.”

The game starts with a roar from the crowd as the national anthem is played. He squints against the sun but Claudia pulls two pairs of sunglasses from her panda backpack— his aviators and her cat-eye shades. She tries cracker jacks for the first time and is thoroughly excited over the prize inside, which is a cheap temporary tattoo of Tweety Bird. She squeals and slaps it onto her wrist and proceeds to make Tweety Bird impressions for the rest of the game.

His blue Mets cap is overwhelmed greatly by the sea of black and orange, but at least Giants fans aren’t as insane as Red Sox fans.

The best part is when Claudia tugs on his sleeve during halftime and points to the LED screen with an surprised, “look, John! We’re on the big TV thingy!” Sure enough they are, faces filmed live inside an animated heart. The stands cheer and John grins as he explains what a kiss cam is. “So we kiss in front of all these people?” “That’s the idea, yeah. Do you want—?” But she’s already mashing her lips against his and wrapping her arms around his neck, prompting a wild roar form the crowd. He smiles into it as he thinks of how embarrassed he would be three years ago to be shown kissing someone live in front of millions of people. But shyness seems to be a dwindling emotion in him since he met her.

At the end the Mets loose 9-14, but he considers it a win in every sense of the word.

“I’m sorry they lost,” Claudia sympathizes as they trek back to the parking garage. John wraps an arm and tucks her close against the crowd of pedestrians.

“Hey, that’s okay. This was amazing, Clauds, really. Thank you.”
“You’re welcome! But our day isn’t over yet!” She does her evil laugh as they climb back into the jeep. “Okie dokie artichoke-y! Ready for phase two?”

“Sure.”

“Common, John! You’re twenty-six! Be exciteeeeed!” She sings, grabbing his hands and shaking them above his head. “Say, ‘I AM JOHN STILINSKI AND I AM HECKA EXCITED FOR PHASE TWO!’”

“I am John Stilinski and I am hecka excited for phase two,” John says.

“LOUDER!”

John doesn’t do loud, but it’s hard not to comply when Claudia is doing her happy screaming for him in the front seat of her jeep. So, “I am John Stilinski and I am hecka excited for phase two!” He yells, sinking back into embarrassed chuckles as Claudia starts the engine and yanks the clutch.

“ALRIGHT! That’s what I’m talkin’ about! Now onwards ho we go!”

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Ten minutes later Claudia gets hopelessly lost.

“Clauds, maybe you want to pull—“

“NOPE!” She flings a stubborn finger up in front of his face. “There will be no pulling over, I can totally figure out where we need to go.”

“I agree, but I thought you might want to know that you’re about to get on the bridge.”

“The bridge?”

“Yes. The big one they call the ‘Golden Gate.’”

“Baloney! Why would they call it that if it’s painted orange? Idioci.”

“Very idioci. But unless you want to go to Marin, pull over quick before you miss the last exit.”

Claudia pouts and cuts off a Chevy as she yanks the jeep over to the side of the freeway. Her eyes are two narrowed slits like she’s trying to set fire to the road and her nose is scrunched like it does when she’s frustrated. It’s adorable, but John tries to hide his smile and be sympathetic.

“Alright, now where is it you’re trying to go?”

“It’s supposed to be a surprise,” she pouts and slumps in her seat, arms crossed over her chest. John offers her a bag of trail mix. She usually just picks out the M&Ms but he figures the blood sugar boost should help her mood.

“I know,” he dozes patiently. "But I lived in a room in San Francisco for six months when I first moved to California, remember? Now that was 1982, so I don’t know the city like the back of my hand, but I knows it enough to remember where all the important districts are. Maybe I could just talk a little and see if it helps?”

Claudia makes a little scrunchy face and snatches the trail mix, then tears it open and pops a blue
M&M into her mouth. “M’okay.”

“Well,” he scratches his head. “The exit in front of us will take us to Fort Point and the Embarcadero, that’s all the piers, the Palace of Fine Arts and Exploratorium, Fisherman’s Wharf… The Castro is the center of the city, that’s the gay district. And uh, Golden Gate Park is a little ways off of Market street I think, and that’ll pass USF and take you to Haight street, which you’d probably like a lot. There’s a bunch of funky vintage shops down there.”

Claudia perks up, cheeks stuffed with M&Ms. “Vint’ge s’ops?”

“Yeah, it’s famous for it. You wanna check it out? We’re not too far.”

Claudia’s eyes sparkle for a moment but then she slumps back down guiltily. “Oh… No, I wasn’t going to take you there. It’s your birthday, John. That isn’t fair to you.”

“Mm. You’re right, it is my birthday,” John side-eyes her. “You know what I think an extra fun birthday activity would be?”

“What?”

“Watching you explore Haight Street for the very first time.”

“Nooooo, John—!”

“Hey, you can take me to wherever you had planned,” he raises his hands and smiles back in his seat. “I’m just saying that I’m really good at holding dresses. And shoes, and hats—“

“Hats?” Claudia whispers hopefully.

“Yep. Vintage ones, with ribbons and flowers, and whatever else frilly-willy things they put on them.”

Claudia nibbles on her bottom lip. She stares suspiciously at him, looking for signs of how much he doesn’t want to go, except that John really does want to go because he knows she’ll love it, and he is happiest when she is happy. When she’s happy her dimples go extra deep and her fists curl in excitement. And he’ll jump at any excuse to see her prance around in pretty, slim-fitting dresses.

“You really don’t mind?” She peeps behind her trail mix.

“Go for it. I’ll show you how to get there.”

A second of giddy laughter and then “You are the best!” as she squeals and launches herself across the seats, hugging him fiercely. “We won’t take long! And when we’re done I can take you to Fisherman’s— oops! No nononono, pretend you didn’t hear that!”

“Hear what?”

“Fisherman’s! I was about to say Fisherman’s Wharf!”

“What?”

“I saaaid— oh. Ha! Okay.”

“Don’t worry, we can always skip the Warf if we don’t have time.”

“Pffshhht. Skippy dippy it, not on my watch!”
“Skippy… Dippy?”

“Sshh, be cool— skippy dippy lemon sippy.”

From the first day of the protest John learned that Claudia has her own style. In 1990 most girls seem to wear flare jeans and tankinis while Claudia pairs bright dresses with bold sweaters and does nothing to tame her wild curls into the blow-dried blonde of the decade. Thrift shops and magenta lipstick are amongst her favorite things, along with buttons, cartoons, and anything with glitter on it. She’s one of those people that people stare at as she walks by, and she’s also one of those people that never notices people staring at her because she’s constantly wrapped up in her own world. But that’s why John likes to walk behind her— so she can lead the way and so that he can see the impressed whispers and awed expressions of the shoppers she leaves in her wake.

But watching Claudia now as she prances from rack to rack, spinning on her heels and raking hands over vintage dresses like they’re precious gemstones, is like watching a dream. Sometimes he accompanies her on trips to the local thrift center but the clothes are nothing like this; puff-sleeve gowns, velvet shoes, wild hats decorated with treasures from the past, fat fake pearls, and rows and rows of pastel dresses from 1970 and beyond.

Every so often she’ll press her face to one and breathe in deep, closing her eyes as she takes in decades of mildew and dust mites and who-knows-what. “This person smelled like lavender” or “the person who wore this smelled like sweat” she says in wonder, and her eyes go impossibly wide as she imagines what the wearer looked like.

The oddest items are like gold to her— a silk paisley ascot, men’s black and white oxford shoes, an orange polka-dot coat and a fuzzy peach hat all make her gasp and sprint across the store to embrace them. “John, John look!” She larks as she holds up whatever atrocious item caught her eye, the best of which is a striped turtleneck sweater with a turtle on it that makes her scream. “Isn’t this the most beautiful thing you’ve seen in your entire life?”

“Definitely in the top twenty-thousand,” John replies each time.

He is the official Clothes Holder. He has “strong manly man arms” since he’s a police officer and uses them like coat hangers as Claudia gleefully drapes dress after dress over him. By the time they make it to the dressing rooms he has to peek over the mountain of fabrics to see where they’re going. He doesn’t mind— she simply pucks a garment off him one at a time and slips behind a curtain, babbling like a bird in springtime as he listens. And when she emerges, it’s like a technicolor dream.

A pale pink dress from 1941 with buttons and a large collar.

A navy tulle evening gown from 1950.

A 1960’s Mondrian dress with black kitten heels.

The striped turtle sweater with high-waisted black pants.

Each one she steps out of the dressing room and twirls around for him, grinning ear to ear. She lifts her pinkies daintily as she touches the fabric and shimmies her shoulders with exclamations of, “I feel like a princess!” and “this is itchier than velcro but I don’t even care it’s so pretty!” and “oh John, thank you so much for letting us stop here!” and he watches her with crinkly eyes and a warm smile that deepens with every outfit.

By the end of the day he insists that she buy her three favorite dresses— the navy tulle gown, the red dotted dress, a tweed rainbow dress, and the striped turtle sweater because the thing is made for her.
Oh, and a vintage black velvet hat with a big beige ribbon because John catches her staring at it wistfully, and he knows how much she secretly wants to be Audrey Hepburn. She turns bright pink and protests profusely with a dozen “are you sure?”s and “but John, I want to spend my money on you!” But he wins her over with a kiss and a reminder that he’s the birthday boy, which means he gets the final say. He pulls out his wallet and buys her the hat.

On the walk back to the jeep Claudia insists on pointing to him and shouting “it’s his birthday!” to every pot smoker and tattooed punk on the sidewalk. Some of them offer him a free joint as a present. Most of them lift an eyebrow and don’t say anything.

“Oh, back on track!” She drums her palms on the steering wheel. “It’s— time, some time, what time is it? Aha! Five-thirty! Five-thirty here, folks, and on to phase three since we just had a new phase, the unplanned phase of mad radicalness— thank you officer John of Beacon Hills— and now to the top secret dinner destination which is most definitely not Fisherman’s Wharf!”

John chuckles and lets his head rest against the jeep seat. He leans in the back, pulls out the Audrey Hepburn hat, and puts it on her head.

The Wharf is glittering as they devour bread bowls of clam chowder on the pier. Salty ocean spray kicks up into the air and showers the decks with sparkling wetness beneath the colorful strung lantern lights. Street vendors call out advertising crepes, hand-knitted hats, clay jewelry and slap-on bracelets, and the scents of bean chile, hot dogs, cotton candy, and cigarette butts. They stop and watch a street performer painted silver from head to toe who break dances to a woman playing guitar. Claudia, to John’s absolute horror, grabs his hand and drags him up to dance in front of everybody. But she has a special talent for loosening him up, so five minutes in his head is thrown back laughing as they do-se-do on the sidewalks by passing cable cars.

The sea lions are Claudia’s favorite part. She bays and barks right back at them until a ranger tells her to stop. They walk along the pier until the sky grows cloudy with famous fog, whereupon they retire with ice cream cones atop the hood of the jeep.

The car squeaks in offense but there’s just enough room for both of them to fit without falling off. It’s parked on Seal Point so they get a full view of the sunset over the ocean, and they watch the waves crash onto the sand from miles away. Baker Beach is nothing to be used in a vacation ad; the sand is dark and dirty, seagulls squawk and pull abandoned sandwiches from the dunes, and the waves are frigid cold and grey. But it’s all beautiful beneath the warm golden glow of the sunset, which paints everything pink and orange as nighttime bleeds overhead.

The flash of Claudia’s disposable camera goes off. “That’s the last one!” She chirps as she winds the charge back until it sticks. “BrrrpfFFFt, ice cream always makes me so cold!” She shivers and fishes a blanket and a windbreaker from her panda backpack. Then she pulls out a beanie, wiggles it over John’s head, and snuggles close as she licks away the remains of her strawberry fudge.

“Sure that’s not just the cold wind we’re sitting in?”

“Oh, yes. Ice cream hypothermia is a real and serious condition, you know. I eat lots of ice cream so I would know.”

“Mm. They say that if you press your tongue to the roof of your mouth you can get rid of brain freeze.”

“Oooh! Like this?”

“I think you need to keep your mouth closed.”
“Mmm Mmpfh?”

“You could teach a class.”

“Can I try a bite of your ice cream?”

John brings the cone to her mouth and she nibbles at his Butter Pecan. The lady at the ice cream parlor told him it was cute that he was getting such an ‘old man’ flavor, even though John isn’t really sure what that means. Claudia “mmm, yummy”s at it and offers him the last bite of her strawberry cone. He tells her “no thank you” and then kisses her when she pops it in her mouth to taste it that way.

Ten minutes later they break apart for breath, panting and giggling as the sun finally disappears behind the line of the ocean, bringing purple twilight with it. It’s a calm whisper of salty air against their faces, the cool caress of the evening, and the quiet twinkle of stars peeking through the sky. She’s tucked under his arm but her feet swing contentedly and her fingers tap tap tap on her lap, drumming some song in her head. Even in the stillest moments she is a bundle of never-ending movement, and he is the happiest man alive.

“You know, I think this is the best birthday I’ve ever had,” John tells her. “It’s getting dark, though… We should probably head home soon.”

“Nope! I have one more surprise for you.” But Claudia beams at him, trilling her shoulders mischievously.

“You’re kidding! But you’ve already done so much for me, what more could you possibly—?”

“Sshhhh,” Claudia shushes him with a sticky strawberry finger to his lips. She lowers her voice and stares seriously into his eyes. “But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it? Carpe, hear it? Carpe, Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary!”

And when John gapes at her in silence she cackles and pokes him on the nose.

“Was that good? I saw that line in a movie once, always wanted to try it. Now lets begin phase five, the best kind of five, woohoo!”

She leaps off the jeep. John follows her like he always does. The car ride is a whizz of colorful traffic lights in the darkened Marina district, and she refuses to tell him where they’re going until they pull up in front of their destination— which happens to be the golden-lit Fairmont Hotel.

John’s breath leaves him in a whoosh as he cranks down the window and sticks his head out. “Don’t tell me…?” He whispers.

“That I got us a room to spend the night at the superduperfamous Fairmont Hotel? Well guess what? I totally did!” Claudia cackles as she pulls the jeep up to the valet men.

“Jesus,” he breathes. “This must have cost you a fortune— Marilyn Monroe and Tony Bennett have stayed here!”

“Yup! And now us!”

“This is incredible,” John chuckles as they walk in the crisp night air to the double doors. Claudia stands erect and points her kitten heels gracefully as she walks in, looping her arm around his.
“Stand up straight,” she whispers gleefully. “We’re rich people! We could be royalty right now if we wanted!”

“But we look the part?” John chuckles at his plaid shirt and jeans.

“Shush! Follow my lead.” Claudia goes up to the front desk and makes her Polish accent extra pronounced. “Good evening, dobry wieczór. I am Princess Claudia Gertruda Górski, Great Governess Lady of Olsztyn, Poland!” She announces primly. “I am ready for my reservation now. And this is—”

“John William Stilinski, Princess Claudia’s Royal assistant,” he steps forward and bows.

“Yes!” Her eyes sparkle. “And we would like our room for tonight, please.”

The receptionist —a man dressed in a sharp suit with sharp eyes to match— looks them up and down. “Of course, Miss Claudia… What was your title again?”

“Princess Claudia Gertruda Górski Great Governess Lady of Olsztyn. And I have miniature ponies.”

“Right. Princess Claudia Gertruda,” the man deadpans as he flips through pages in a guest book. “Room 310, king bed lover’s suite?”

“That’s the one!”

“Your fee is $307 even.”

Claudia fishes into her panda backpack and slaps a stack of bills on the counter.

They race up four flights of stairs to their room, holding hands the whole way. They pass well-dressed man and women as their shoes sink into the plush wine carpet, and the key looks pure gold as they stick it into the lock. The door swings open— she gasps and his jaw drops to the floor.

Their heads swivel in awe as they slowly enter. Large impressionist paintings cover red wine walls and an intricate antique rug lays atop a plush burgundy carpet. Huge vases of wildflowers and pastel doilies drape the mahogany furniture, the center of which is a huge king-size bed with a silk canopy and a mountain of plush white pillows. Soft velvet curtains with gold tassels frame the victorian window, which provides a large view of the twinkling lights of the city. The space is bigger than his entire apartment.

“Look!” Claudia squeals and runs to to the bed, snatching the bag of chocolates off the pillow. “Free candy! And these towels are folded like little swans!”

“You could race horses in here,” John murmurs. “I can’t believe you got us this room.”

Claudia flings herself on the bed, rolling gleefully on the plush comforter. “My tata only bought my mother the best jewels!” She flips over on her side, smiling coyly at him. What shall we do now, O’ Royal assistant?”

“It’s up to you, my princess. Would you like to change into pajamas?”

Claudia grins and jumps off the bed. “I think that’s an excellent idea. I call the bathroom! No wait, there are two bathrooms! I call the one with the pink towels!”

John chuckles as Claudia grabs her suitcase and skips off to the bathroom. It’s their routine: together two years and four months and Claudia is still shy as a butterfly when it comes to bare skin. At the
apartment she slips into the bathroom to change and giggles or blushes on hot nights when he sleeps in boxers and a t-shirt, but he doesn’t mind. It’s a privilege simply to lie beside her in bed, on the couch, sit in the passenger seat of her beloved jeep or play Battleship together at their tiny kitchen table.

He takes a shower and relishes in how large the stall is. The water pressure is a dream and seven kinds of expensive soaps and shampoo line the shelf, of which he samples each one until his toes are pruney and his arms are slippery with foam. He dries off with a plush white towel, slips into the pajamas Claudia packed for him in the panda backpack, and opens the door to the bedroom.

He stares.

Claudia is leaning against the bed frame in a pink silk robe, one that flutters down just above her knee and cinches her waist loosely with a ribbon tie. She smiles as he moves forward like a moth drawn to flame, eyes sweeping down in appreciation.

“Well that’s new,” he murmurs.

“I went shopping last week,” Claudia twirls around for him, making the fabric billow up playfully to her thighs. John feels his ears grow hot as he grins at the carpet.

“Oh?”

“Mhm. Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

“Feel it, isn’t it soft?” She thumbs the edge of her sleeve, inviting him to step closer. John does, swallowing dryly. He runs a few fingers over her offered sleeve, trailing up to her shoulder.

“It’s very soft,” he manages.

“I bought some other things, too,” she tells him, eyes boring into his own. Her long lashes frame her big browns softly, matching the unusual quietness of her voice. It makes his heartbeat rabbit quickly despite the sudden stillness between them.

“Mm. Anything special?”

Claudia’s lips pinch together coyly until they bloom into a shy smile. Slowly, she moves her fingers to her collarbone and gently pushes away the silk robe until it slips off her shoulder, revealing the strap of a pink lace bra.

“You could say that,” she hums.

She strokes a thumb over his pulse point, making him swallow reflexively. His lips part as she comes closer, smiling softly. They’re standing so close that he can feel her warm breath on his chin, smell the vanilla body lotion on her skin.

“Claudia,” he breathes, unable to say much else.

“Would you like to see the rest?” She asks quietly.

John’s fingers tremble as he brushes his thumb over her collarbone, ghosting over the silk of her robe. For the two years and four months they’ve been together, he’s only imagined what she looks like beneath her clothes. The longest column of bare skin he’s seen on her have been her arms in
sleeveless dresses, sometimes a small sliver of her belly when she reaches for the cereal boxes above the fridge and her shirt inches up.

“May I?” He breathes.

“Yes.”

Claudia smiles and slips the silk tie between her fingers, holding it up for John to take. He loops it between his thumb and forefinger, laces his other hand in hers, and gently tugs the ribbon towards him. It slips away easily, and the pink silk falls from her skin like liquid grace, piling around her ankles as a faint blush colors her cheeks.

The breath catches in his throat as his eyes slowly trail downwards, savoring every curve and admiring every dark freckle, blemish, and stretch mark. The pointed dip of her waist, the slim curve of her hips hugged in high-waisted lace panties, the plush, supple skin of her belly and the fine hairs ghosting her arms, and the elegant sweep of her collarbones. Her breasts are two ivory soft mounds nestled in the lace of her bra, thighs so white they're almost translucent with tiny purple capillaries, and her entire stretch of ivory skin dotted with constellations of moles and freckles. Every inch is twice as beautiful as he imagined.

Claudia steps closer and leans up to John to whisper in his ear. “I want you to undress me tonight.”

He gazes at her, hands gently ghosting her arms. He can feel her sweet breath on the nape of his neck as he drowns in the brown of her eyes, lightheaded and warm with the sudden rush of heat in his head and belly. He’s waited a lifetime for this moment, and he hasn’t waited at all. But now, standing with the woman he loves bare and beautiful before him, trusting and proud when she’s usually so shy, fills his heart with all the courage in the world.

“Are you sure?” He whispers, and Claudia nods, smile blooming with a dusting of pink on her cheekbones.

“More sure than anything in the world.”

He slips his hands around her soft waist and kisses her slowly, tenderly, to show her how much she means to him. She's sweet and soft and his entire world in his arms, a pliant dewdrop that tastes like the strawberry ice cream she ate an hour ago. Her laughter is musical when they fall together on the plush bed.

The distant breath of ocean waves sing softly in the background, skin kisses skin beneath the chandelier ceiling, and two hearts beat together alongside the rhythm of their lungs. Two things are certain: he loves the woman in his arms more than he loves anything else in the world, and that today is the best birthday he’s ever had.

“I trust you, John. With all my heart.”

.o0O0o. October 15th, 1990.

“Fuck you, Robert!”

Robert actually takes a step back, bumping against the penthouse wall.

“You said you would stand by me! You said you would support our company until your dying breath, you bastard— You LIED to me!” Peter snarls at him.
Robert gapes wordlessly with wide eyes. He’s in Peter’s penthouse at six o’clock on a Sunday afternoon, and he just told his brother his decision. “Peter, I promise you I meant everything I said back then. But times have changed, I have a wife and a baby on—“

“A baby daughter on the way, yes I know, everyone who reads Forbes and The Economist and every one of your stupid interviews knows, just shut the fuck up!” Peter screams, swiping a clawed hand across his dining table. A silver candelabra clangs to the floor amidst the china plates they ate sushi off of not twenty minutes ago.

“Pete, listen, you can’t tell me you don’t understand why I need to do this,” Robert pleads softly.

“Well I don’t understand!” Peter yells, eyes burning yellow. “I don’t understand how you could do this to me after everything we’ve gone through! Everything we’ve built together! We’ve been best friends our whole lives, and suddenly you start drifting away when you—“

“Don’t say it—”

“When you met that fucking redskin bitch!” Peter snarls, breathing heavily. “We were on top of our game, Robert! We were the dynamic duo, the brothers to be feared, the Handsome Hales until you started chasing after her like a stupid dog! Do you have any idea how much it hurt to have my brother ditch me for some random girl that came along? Did you even notice how we stopped going to parties together, stopped meeting on weekends like we used to, because you were too busy with her?”

“I— I took you to Vandermill’s on New Year’s,” Robert sputters weakly.

“Vandermill’s!” Peter yells, flinging his arms up. “Everybody bow down and kiss Robert Hale’s perfect fucking feet for taking his brother to Vandermill’s! Where were you on my birthday? Or the company dinner when I needed you by my side to make the stock announcement? On Christmas and the anniversary of mom’s death and the company brunch in celebration of my YEB Award!”

Robert swallows. He spent them all with Talia. “Peter—“

“I said shut UP! I let you talk first my whole damn life because I looked up to you, but now it’s my turn,” Peter seethes. “I think your wife is a frigid smartass and she thinks I’m a slimy narcissist, but I came to your wedding dressed as your Best Man anyway because I love you more. I put up with your lovesick blabbering for two years— I stuck my neck out beneath an axe at nearly every business meeting to cover for your distracted ass!”

“I’m… Sorry, Pete.” He knew Peter wasn’t going to be happy, but he didn’t expect this level of anger. It’s like years of contempt and frustration are breaking free, twisting his brother’s face ugly. “But we’re still friends, even—”

“You are NOT my friend!” Peter snarls at him. “Not anymore, not after this. I fucking trusted you, Robert. I let you call off those Bulldozers an entire decade ago because you were my brother and best friend and I trusted you, even though I knew it was a terrible idea! We could have made billions, trillions even if we had just gone through with our original dream, but you had to go and ruin everything!”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up,” Peter wrinkles his nose. “You don’t get to defend yourself. Not after you decide to leave me and the company we spent half our lives building.”

“It’s for our baby, Pete.” Robert shakes his head softly. “I can’t raise a family and run a company.”
“So what,” Peter whispers. “You’re going to leave me to run it by myself?”

“If anyone can, it’s you.”

“This was our dream.”

“It was,” Robert agrees. “But I have a new dream now. And I hope one day you can find something beyond the millions, too.”

“What, slow down and chain myself to a wife?” Peter spits. “You can’t have both, Robert!”

“Yes you can,” Robert concurs softly. "But for the record, I’d give up my fortune in a second to keep Talia. That’s why I hope you’ll find someone to fall in love with.”

Peter chuckles softly. Bitterly. “Get out my penthouse.”

“Pete—”

“GET OUT!”

Without warning Peter grabs an antique vase with his claws and throws it at Robert’s head. It smashes into the wall when Robert ducks and showers him in porcelain, slicing his cheek with a sting and dripping a thin line of blood down his jaw. He feels the cut start to close as he stares in shock at his brother’s livid face, his burning gold eyes, and elongated fangs jutting into his lips.

Robert swallows thickly and leaves.

.o0O0o. February 2nd, 1991.

Robert sits outside the coffee shop downtown, cradling a cooling cup of dry roast as he sits cross-legged on the sidewalk. He's moping. Talia is forgiving when he mopes. Peter would probably kill him if he saw Robert like this, sitting on his ass on the actual ground— but neither of them know he’s doing this, so it’s all good.

He watches people walk by and finds himself wondering how many of them are fathers. The man across the street holding hands with the blonde? The old geezer eating a slice of pie in the bakery window next door? The guy driving his— no, anyone who makes a left turn like that should not be allowed to have kids. Kids. He’s gonna have a pink little baby kid in his arms any day now and suddenly he can’t breathe, the sidewalk really is claustrophobic for being outside, isn’t it? He’d usually pull out a cigarette to calm down but he hasn’t carried them since he found Talia and oh god, he can’t breathe—

The tinkling bells of the coffee shop door startle him as a police officer walks out into the night air, dressed in the khaki department uniform. He has sandy blonde hair and the stature of a strong twenty-something-year-old, carrying a steaming coffee of his own. A shiny name badge and crest decorates his chest and sleeve, but his face is etched with gentle lines and his eyebrows are slanted in a way that reminds Robert of those sad-looking bloodhounds, and decides that the guy looks way too calm and gentle to be an officer. The man slows when he sees Robert, offering a small smile like he’s sat in that same position before.

"Good evening, sir," the man greets warmly. "Hate to tell you this, but I'm afraid loitering will usually earn you a ticket on this street."
"Oh," Robert looks up, disappointed. "Sorry officer, I'll be on my way."

The man chuckles, a soft, dry sound that sounds years beyond his age, even though he looks hardly older than Robert himself. "That's alright, I'm on my break. My colleague tends to be a bit stricter, but I usually find myself sitting on the sidewalk when I've got something pretty heavy on my mind. Mind if I join you?"

Robert releases a soft huff of laughter, because three years ago he never would have allowed a stranger to sit with him. Millionaires are above that, he would have thought. "Sure."

The man sits next to him, sighing as his back slides down the window to the ground, putting a comfortable buffer of space between them. A few moments go by where they listen to the chirps of the evening— the woosh of passing cars, the clickity-clack of heels on the pavement, the muffled chatter of couples from the nearby restaurants. Robert can smell the fresh pies in the bakery next door, and faint traces of cologne and perfume leftover from passing couples. Forgotten cigarettes in the gutter. Every so often the silvery tinkle from the door sounds behind them, followed by dull footsteps going in or out.

"City sure is pretty this time of night," the officer opens.

"Can't say I disagree."

The man pauses, pale eyes pinching on Robert’s face. Here it comes. "Say, aren't you that businessman? CEO of… Hale Associates?"

"Co-CEO," Robert tells his coffee cup. "Used to be, anyway. I actually just quit a couple months ago. But yes, that's me. Robert Hale," he sighs quietly and reaches an arm sideways to shake his hand. The man smiles, a warm greeting that stretches the tanned skin of his cheeks, adding crinkles beneath his eyes. He nods.

"John Stilinski," the policeman answers. "Right, I've seen you from the papers. I was actually at your construction site my first day on the job, with the tree protestors situation."

Robert is caught somewhere between laughing and crying into his caffeine. The day of the protestors, where he met Talia and climbed up a tree in his three-thousand dollar suit to talk to her. When he and Peter were joined at the hip, which feels like eons ago. It only reminds him of his decision to leave the company but he decides to do the laughing, since crying in general isn’t really his forte. He doesn't remember John, but he never paid attention to other people back then.

"What a coincidence."

John’s eyes flick over Robert's khakis, his comfortable loafers from Nordstroms, his cashmere sweater and black leather jacket. Altogether he’s probably wearing less than $400. "You, uh... You look different. I think last time I saw you you were in a pretty fancy suit and sunglasses."

"Yep, that was me," Robert pops the ‘P.’ It only takes him a second to realize how he doesn’t miss it all.

"Back then you also looked a lot less like you had the world on your shoulders," John comments good-naturedly, taking a sip of coffee. "My fiancé is usually the good listener, but I'm not too bad either if you want an open ear."

Robert is unwittingly charmed by John’s laid-back kindness. It’s comforting in a way, like Hank used to be at the company. “My wife would scold me right now for looking so gloomy when there’s nothing to be gloomy about, but I appreciate the offer. Forgive me for assuming, but fiancé… You
wouldn’t happen to have any kids yet, would you?”

John chuckles. “We talk about it. We’re thinking just one, but no. We’re not there yet.”

"How long have you and your fiancé been together?"

"Two years. We actually met the day of that protest— I just proposed to her last week."

"Congratulations," Robert says, surprised that a man of police-level salary could afford a ring. He glances to John’s shoes to see if he’s wealthy, but they look humble and scuffed with age. He sniffs discreetly and detects simple bargain-brand shampoo and no cologne.

"Thank you," John smiles down at his lap, like it makes him giddy just thinking about it. "I want to get the actual ring in a couple years, but I couldn't wait any longer."

“Oh. What did you use instead?"

John shrugs. "Cut a walnut shell into a ring. Told her its temporary until the department salary pays off, but she loves the thing," he chuckles. "She would, though. Says she's going to going to wear it 'forever and ever,' to quote."

Robert thinks it's strange but doesn't press, figuring there’s probably some cheesy reason behind it. Unless the man is actually just that poor and a walnut shell was all he could afford? Regardless, he’s charmed by how much happiness John finds when he has no money.

“My wife and I,” Robert decides to say. "We have a little one on the way… A girl. She’s due in a couple weeks. That’s why I asked if you had any kids."

“You and your wife must be thrilled,” John smiles, but Robert can only meet his joy halfway. “Although to be frank, you look pretty glum around the edges.”

Robert sighs. The man is relentless, but somehow it’s easy to talk to him. “I’m gonna be a father, John. How crazy is that? What’s crazier is that I am thrilled, but I’m probably more worried than anything. I just… I never really knew my dad? He walked out on my mom when I was two, so how am I supposed to raise a whole new person when I have no example to build off of?”

He takes a long drag of coffee and sputters a little with it, surprised that he blurted all of that to a near-stranger.

John hums and shrugs, and slowly tips back his own cup. “My father was an alcoholic.”

“That’s rough,” Robert says. He got drunk once by slipping wolfsbane into a bottle of vodka in college. He vowed never to do it again.

“It was,” John agrees. “So I’m with you there, about not having any example to take from. But I’m lucky I’ve got Claudia in my life. I don’t drink, but if a bottle of whiskey so much as blinked at me she would shoo it away before I could even consider tasting it.”

Robert hums in agreement. “My wife made me twice the man I used to be, even when I thought I was one of the most powerful men in the world. Women are powerful folk.”

“I’ll drink to that,” John tips his cardboard cup and Robert meets it with his vente dark roast, tapping the rims together. They sip, curls of steam drifting up hot over their chilly noses.

“Paging Stilinski and Rodriguez, we’ve got a 10-82 on the north side of poplar avenue, dispatch call
for backup report immediately,” the walkie talkie clipped to John’s breast pocket chatters obnoxiously.

“Mm, disorderly conduct, those are always fun. Guess that’s my cue to leave,” John says, and presses the receiver. “Roger that, Stilinski on my way.”

“You sound pretty important,” Robert mutters into his coffee. John shrugs, smiling humbly.

“Just your average officer that works too many hours. Maybe one day if I’m lucky enough to be Sheriff.”

“Power stems from the diligence you inspire in others, John. I hope that day is someday soon.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind. And I wouldn’t fret about your little girl, I’m sure you’ll make a great dad. Don’t forget you’ve got your wife and your brother to help you out.”

Or just my wife.

"Nice meeting you, John."

"Nice meeting you, Robert."

He watches John walk down the sidewalk. The man tips his coffee and says “good evening” to the first two people he passes, and apologizes to the third when their elbows accidentally knock. They laugh and carry on their way in the cold. Robert can’t help but feel a small pang of envy for John, the human embodiment of “ordinary” with his poor man shoes and humble personality, and the premature wrinkles around his pale grey eyes. He proposed to his wife with a walnut shell.

“Now there’s a man who’s really got his shit together,” Robert murmurs to the cold Beacon Hills air.

December 4th, 1990.

Hey Pete,

Talia and I just moved into our new place. It’s the big mansion out in the middle of the preserve by the interstate—you’d approve, it’s wildly beautiful. Hardwood floors, victorian windows, three stories, the whole shebang. Thanksgiving was more of eating store-bought turkey on the couch since there were moving boxes everywhere, but we wanted to invite you to have Christmas dinner with us. You can come see our new place, get a good look at Talia’s belly (it’s like she’s carrying Mount Everest in there) and hang out like old times. I hope I’ve given you enough time to cool off. Looking forward to hearing back from you.

Your brother,

Robbie


Hey Pete,
Laura Ann Hale was born a few weeks ago. She’s the cutest little bundle of pink skin you’ve ever seen and I pride myself on how she looks just like me (she got the trademark blue Hale eyes)! Talia and I have just about unpacked everything now. She taught me how to vacuum and load the washing machine and some other things… She needs to feed Laura every three hours and in between she’s pretty exhausted, so I’ve been stepping up to keep the mansion in running order. Maybe you could come over sometime and help us decorate? We could really use your artistic eye. And you can meet Laura! Like I said, cutest squirt you’ll ever meet. I hope you’ll consider it.

P.S. (If you ever do your own laundry, only use a cap full of soap or else your whole garage will be swamped in bubbles).

Your brother,

Robbie

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**April 1st, 1991.**

Hey Pete,

Happy birthday! And happy April Fool’s day— I covered Talia’s toilet with plastic wrap this morning but she essentially clawed my eyes out. So I made a note not to include her in future pranks… But yeah, happy birthday! How’s it feel to be 27? I’d say you only have three years left until you start getting the stiff joints of an old geezer, but we’re werewolves! So indulge in your youthful energy for many decades to come. I haven’t heard back from you yet. Maybe your letters are getting lost in the mail? I don’t like to think that you’re still mad at me. But if you are, I really hope you can set aside your anger soon. You can call the house anytime you like, T and I don’t have jobs for the time being so we’re home just about all the time. (520) 555-2447.

Your brother,

Robbie

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**October 2nd, 1991.**

Hey Pete,

So it’s been a year since I last saw you. Talia said I needed to give you more time to forgive me, if you decide to ever forgive me. I hope you do, because while Laura and Talia are two beautiful and fun girls to hang with, I really miss my brother. Sometimes I meet Hank for lunch but it’s just not the same. Laura’s learning to walk already, she’s a really smart kid. Likes to drool on all my sweaters like she knows it’ll ruin the softness… I still really wish you could meet her. You’re invited to come join us for Thanksgiving and Christmas this year. Just give us a call, you have our number.

P.S. (unless you’ve just been burning these letters, in which case here’s our number again: (520) 555-2447).

Your brother,

Hey Pete,

Just letting you know that we’d still love to have you over for Thanksgiving this year. Laura’s almost two now. She has a vocabulary of about a hundred words and seven of them are swear words she picked up from me. I’d love for you to meet her.

P.S. (Talia is pregnant with a baby boy. The doctors say her due date is Christmas Eve. Come meet him soon?)

Your brother,

Robbie


Hey Pete,

Congratulations on winning the International Business Award—Talia and I saw your interview this morning on channel 7 so we flipped to your article featured in Forbes. You look great. I also figured it was a good excuse to reach out to you again, so will you join us for Laura’s birthday this year? She’ll be turning three on February 3rd. I’m not sure if you’ve been reading any of these letters, but you’ve got a nephew now, too. His name is Derek, and he’s small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. Talia and I would love to introduce you.

P.S. (I’m not surprised at your success, but I’m proud of you regardless. I’m sorry for causing the rift between us).

I miss you, brother.

Robbie


“Honestly, Robert, you’re going to give him nightmares,” Talia clucks from the stove, where she’s stirring gravy for the potatoes. She has a snowflake-print apron tied over her dress and she looks like a dream, especially whenever she bends over to check to carrots in the oven. Laura sits at her feet concededly, noisily playing with toy cars on the kitchen tile.

“Who, Derek? Nah,” Robert grins at the baby in his arms, who has a little tuft of jet-black hair atop his head. “We named him Bidziil for a reason, remember? Don’t let his size fool you, T. This little
guy has a backbone of steel.”

He shifts his face to beta form again, making his eyes glow red and his teeth grow to fangs. Derek stares at him with huge green eyes behind feathery dark lashes. Talia says they’re blue. They’re green. “See? He’s totally cool with it. Besides, one day you’ll get to shift into a wolf, huh champ? You’re gonna be so badass and strong, just like daddy.”

“And amá,” Talia adds.

“Right. And amá, your beautiful mommy over there! And you’re a whole year old now, ever since yesterday. Only another decade or so before we’ll be teaching you how to grow claws!”

“Why don’t you let me feed him? I don’t need to attend to anything on the stove for a bit, so it’s a good time.”

“Sure, I’ll take it as an excuse to open these olives—” He hands Derek off to Talia with a kiss and rolls up his sleeves to tackle the jar of gourmet Italian olives Hank sent him. It pops off easily, and he sticks a claw inside to spear one, chewing thoughtfully as he joins Talia in the chairs by the front window.

“These taste just like regular olives,” he concludes.

“I wanna’ one!” Laura whines, and toddles up on a stool to reach the counter. The fun thing about werewolf children is that their balance is that of a gymnast and if they hurt themselves, they heal. He doesn’t know how human parents do it—they probably run after their toddlers all day.

“Go for it, sweetheart,” he grants. A minute later the sound of Laura feasting happily on overpriced olives joins the soft Jingle Bell Rock playing from the speakers. Robert sits and watches as Derek suckles sleepily on Talia’s breast, a sight that he usually finds peace in, but today he’s distracted. Instead, he gazes out at the wintery forest that’s his front yard. “Maybe I should have sent him another letter… Invited him to spend the holidays with us again.”

Talia’s eyes soften sympathetically. “Shihastín,” the Navajo word for ‘husband.’ “I think if Peter wanted to be a part of our lives, he would have done so by now.”

Robert stares sadly out the window. “Yeah.”

The door knocks.

Talia glances up, eyes narrowing. “Robert, I told you not to order pizza. I have a turkey in the oven.”

“I didn’t,” he responds. He wouldn’t, because that would make his wife annoyed and Talia is very, very scary when she’s annoyed. “Believe me, I’ve been drooling in anticipation for your turkey all day. Probably solicitors. I’ll get it.”

He opens the door, and freezes.

He looks older, hairline a little receded and a few new wrinkles around his eyes, which are just as piercing blue as he last saw them three years ago. He’s dressed in a crisp Burberry shirt and slacks beneath his tie and jacket, gleaming dress shoes adorning his feet. He smells like Armani cologne, and anxiety, and sadness, and happiness all at the same time. The man in front of him sighs, eyes flicking up and down Robert’s frame.

“Plaid, Rob? Honestly. With all that scruff on your face you look like a caveman.”
“Peter?” He breathes, then laughs and launches himself at his brother. “Peter!”

“Yes, alright. we’re both werewolves, but don’t forget you’re the alpha here,” Peter grumbles against his shoulder, since Robert is currently squeezing and hugging the life out of him. “Try not to crush my fragile beta bones.”

“You came!” Robert shouts incredulously, still convinced this is some kind of a trick. “You— shit, you’re really here! I… Why?”

Peter studies him. Then releases a long, dramatic sigh of resignation.

“I missed my brother.”

Robert bites down on his bottom lip to keep from ginning like an idiot. Maybe even crying like an idiot.

“Fuck, I missed you too, Pete.”

“Why, what a surprise.”

Her voice is both a soft welcome and a declaration of her presence in the doorway. Peter looks stiffly at Talia, the woman who stole his brother away, and nods. “Talia,” he regards her. She smiles warmly.

“Hello, Peter. It’s nice to see you again.”

And then she steps forward to hug him, a gift of high honor coming from her, and Peter reluctantly relaxes into it, patting a hand tentatively against her back. He clears his throat. “I brought brandy— Grand Mariner, I expect you two will like it.”

“Wow, thanks!”

“Your estate is nice,” Peter redirects, eyeing the glowing redwood porch.

“Nice? It’s fucking beautiful, come inside and see the rest!” Robert says eagerly, and leads his brother inside his home.

The mansion brims with warmth, both in atmosphere and lighting. The house has a certain personality to it that’s cozy and secure unlike his cold penthouse downtown, and it’s perfect for letting his kids toddle around in ample space. The walls are painted soft buttercream and play home to family photos of Talia’s adventures on the reservation with her father, snapshots of her and Robert on dates throughout the years, and their kids. The maple furniture compliments the cherry floors and an intricate antique rug lays beneath the couch in the living room. The kitchen has granite counters and red wallpaper, and huge walls of victorian windows illuminate it all with the forest outside.

Talia in particular has a beautiful hand at decorating for Christmas— garlands of pine wrap the brick fireplace and staircase, the tree towers tall and sparkly by the armchairs, and embroidered gold runners drape the tables. The house smells like cinnamon and coffee amidst the twinkling lights on the frosty windows, but there’s also a hint of peppermint from the candy canes they hung on the mantle alongside two tiny stockings for—

“Daddy, who’s this man!”

Laura toddles up to Peter with her chubby hands on her hips. She’s almost four and she’s the most defiant toddler Robert’s met. Talia scraped her dark hair back into a tiny ponytail with a giant red
bow, which matches her red snowflake onsie, but despite cute appearances she isn’t one to be reckoned with. She frowns up at them with courageous blue eyes.

“You must be Laura. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Peter bends down to eye-level. Robert needs to steady himself as he watches his brother’s usually hardened expression melt to something softer, and then smiles—not the fake charm he slaps on for business partners, but a genuine, warm, toothy grin for his niece.

Laura studies him, and then slowly her glare turns to curiosity as she raises sticky hands to Peter’s face and feels his cheeks. “You look like daddy but you’re not scratchy like him.”

Peter laughs—a beautiful, heartfelt thing that Robert hasn’t heard in years. He cocks his head at Laura and watches amusedly as she continues to pat him down and poke his two-thousand dollar suit, his Bill Blass tie and jade cufflinks. “Yes, well. That’s because I like to keep a cleaner shave than my brother.”

“Yeah, that’s um… That’s true. Hey, uh, did you… I don’t know if you read any of my letters, but—”

“I read them.” Peter stands to meet his eyes. There’s almost an apology there in the blue.

“Oh, okay. Well, uh, then you might know…” Robert gestures for Talia to come closer from where she’s bouncing Derek in her arms. "I want to introduce you to my son, Derek Bidziil Hale."

His brother’s face acquires a certain softness as he looks down at his baby nephew, murmuring something about how he got Robert’s eyes. Slowly, he holds out a finger for Derek to shake, and Derek grabs onto it with tiny, sticky pink fingers. Peter smiles.

“Hello, Derek. I’m your Uncle Peter.”

.oO0o. **August 5th, 1992.**

With just a few months left in office, President Bush sends approximately 25,000 US troops to Somalia to assist the United Nations with the distribution of famine relief supplies, and to protect the locals from Kenyan terrorists. Part of those troops include Sergeant Terry Grey, sent Army Reserve Unit representative for the Beacon Hills county department. Or at least it did, until Terry was shot in the shoulder and sent home.

John is twenty-seven. Sheriff Sanders says he’s young and amongst the fittest on the city force. Terry’s position as sergeant was left open and legally needs to be filled for the remaining service-time, so the department asked John to go to Somalia in his place. John would’ve said no, but Terry has been his friend since day one of training, and position as sergeant will give him an excellent shot at being Sheriff down the line.

“It’s only for six months, Clauds.”

The ceiling fan wobbles gently above them as they lay in bed, brushing warm evening air down onto their shoulders. Their faces are close with noses almost brushing, John’s favorite because he gets a front row seat to stare at all the tiny details in Claudia’s eyes, which have speckles of gold, flecks of chocolatey brown and every hue in between.

Claudia smiles sadly and pokes a finger gently into his cheek. “That’s a long time, John.”
He sighs. He knows. It’s an eternity.

“You’re so brave,” she whispers. “Terry is lucky to have you. I’m so glad you two are best friends.”

“You’re my best friend,” he tells her. "Terry’s just my best friend at the station."

She lets slip a tiny gasp of excitement. “You’re my best friend, too! My best man friend at least, since I have Wendy.”

He chuckles. ‘I’m honored. And you have everything packed for tomorrow? I guess you could always come back with her and grab something, since you’ll still have the key to the apartment.’

She’s going to stay with Wendy in Wendy’s apartment across town. They decided it best since Claudia gets spooked in the dark and grows sad when she’s lonely, and has a tendency to get distracted and forget about food cooking on flammable stoves.

“Yeah,” Claudia smiles sadly and twirls a finger over his chest. “You’re not taking this t-shirt are you? Could you leave it behind so I can sleep in it? It’ll still smell like you for a little while, at least.”

“Course you can. I can only take a change of clothes for the airport, remember? I’ll be in army uniform every day.”

“Oh, right.” She rests her chin on his arm and blinks up at him. “I’m scared,” she whispers. “But that’s silly, isn’t it? You’re the one who’s going to war.”

“I’m scared, too,” he admits. It’s going to be dangerous work; the Kenyans are equipped with heavy weapons and explosives, and John will be leading his men into the desert on foot to protect the Somalian border. They’ll live in tents and do patrols, and it will be his job to communicate conditions back to General Hoff at the main base. “But the hardest part will probably be being nine-thousand miles away from you.”

Claudia shines, then suddenly bolts upright. “Let’s get married!”

He chuckles. “One day soon, I hope. Just as soon as I save enough to buy you a proper ring.”

“No, I mean let’s get married right now!” Claudia bounces on the bed and flings her arms up, beaming. “At City Hall! I don’t need a silly old rock on my finger, I have you!”

John gapes and sits up, heart pounding. “I— are you sure? I thought you were so excited to— you always talk about sewing your wedding dress and going cake sampling, I thought?”

“I sew and eat cake practically every day!” Claudia squeals as she jumps from the bed. “Why not do it tonight? We’ve wanted to for years, John!”

“But I don’t have the money for your ring, yet,” John sputters. "We don’t have a house or a new car, or— I dunno, I wanted everything to be— better. So we could live more comfortably when we get married.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter!” Claudia runs over to him and cups his face. "I have you. And I can’t stand another minute without calling you my husband, John. Not before you leave.”

The room falls silent aside from the charged syncopation of their breaths. He stares into the chocolate pools of her eyes and watches them flick between his own, left right, left right; they always pinch at the bottom when she’s mirthful like this, bunching her caterpillar lashes together like tiny fronds. At this point he’s memorized every soft slope of her body down her toes, the direction of the stubborn cowlick by her ear, and the exact position of all of her moles, and if they can make a constellated sky
then they can make it official in the least official way possible. He chuckles with the spontaneity of it all.

“What the hell. Let’s get married.”

“Yay!” Claudia squeals and hops in a circle, unsure where to go first. “Okay, shoes! We need shoes. And snacks! Oh, and jackets, coats, all the coats! Because it’s cold and we don’t want to get frostbite on our wedding day! Where’s my stripey turtle sweater John, is it in the wash?” As she digs through their hamper and throws clothes all over their tiny bedroom.

“It’s right behind you, on the dresser.”

“Oh! Thank youuuuu.”

“Wait a minute,” John’s face falls in disappointment as he realizes the absurdity of what they’re doing. “We’re gonna need papers. We can’t get married without our birth certificates, and blood test documents.”

But Claudia trips over to her sock drawer and supplies a handful of papers, which she waves triumphantly. “Ta-da! I’ve been saving these in case of emergency!”

John folds over laughing. Only her. “You are incredible.”

“I sure hope so, you’re about to marry me!”

Claudia is so excited she starts to run out the door but John grabs her and pulls her striped turtle sweater over her, and she grabs the wool hat she knitted for him last Christmas and tugs it over his head. They’re suddenly a couple of giggling teenagers, trembling hands and dopey smiles and sneaking kisses as they run out the door.

“Wait!” Claudia skids to a halt. "I need a veil!!"

“A what? You’re in your pajamas, Clauds, you hardly—“

“John Stilinski I will not marry you unless I have a fluttery white veil on my head,” Claudia sniffs and stomps her feet together, sticking her nose in the air.

“Alright, if you insist, your highness,” John stares at his tiny apartment before snapping his fingers. “Ah. I got it, hold on.” He returns with a jumbo coffee filter and bobby pins it best he can to her hair as she squeals and bounces on her heels.

Claudia smooches his cheek and pats the stubbly skin there. “Perfect! Okay, now we can get married! And when you come back from Somalia,” she brings her lips up to his ear and tickles the skin there. “We can have our honeymoon!”

.o0O0o.

Beacon Hills City Hall is open twenty-four seven.

The woman at the front desk looks bleary-eyed and exhausted as they burst in, letting in a sharp gust of nighttime air into the heated building. Her hands are curled around her coffee mug like she’s afraid someone is going to steal it, and as she glances up at them her eyes flick up and down their pajamas judgmentally. She sighs and deadpans, “Let me guess. You two lovebirds want to get married.”
“Ca-CAW!” Claudia screeches. “Yes we do! How did you know? Ca-CAW! Hoot hoot! RreeAAwk!”

“What kind of bird was that?” John side-eyes her.


The receptionist raises an unimpressed eyebrow. "You two aren’t drunk, are you?"

“Oh no ma’am, we don’t drink alcohol,” Claudia informs her seriously.

“Mhm. And the two of your aren’t on any amphetamines, methamphetamine, barbiturates, heroine, shrooms?”

“We had mushrooms on our pizza last night,” Claudia’s eyes widen.

“Portobella,” John specifies.

“Are you not allowed to get married if you eat mushrooms?” Claudia whispers to him.

“She means a different kind of mushroom,” John whispers back to her.

“Oh.”

It takes six minutes to fill out the paperwork, one minute to wait for the ordained official, and three minutes for the ceremony.

The room is small and plain with beige paint and carpeted floor, with cracks in the ceiling and a small desk. As far as John’s concerned, it’s the most beautiful venue next to the Eiffel Tower. He can hardly contain his grin as he and Claudia stand in the center and hold hands, gazing into each other’s eyes like every cheesy rom-com he’s seen on Hallmark. Her hair is messy beneath her veil, eyelashes soft and taupe beneath the ceiling fluorescents. There are faint circles under her eyes from the late hour, and her pajamas are soft and rumpled over her collarbones. She smiles broadly, revealing a small poppyseed stuck to her front tooth, leftover from the muffin she had in the car. She’s never looked more beautiful.

“—And do you, John William Stilinski, take Claudia Gertruda Górski as your wife?”

John smiles and gently lifts the coffee filter from her face. “I do.”

“Congratulations, you are now married.”

They kiss for so long that the orderly clears his throat. They break apart with a wet pop that makes them both laugh like a couple of hyenas, and when they get back to the apartment he scoops her up in a bridal carry and carries her into the bedroom, which makes her squeal in surprise and she buries her face into his neck, giggling against his skin. She falls asleep with her head on his chest, curled around him like a sweet-smelling octopus, but not before whispering,

“Goodnight, husband.”

He stares up at their ceiling and strokes a heavy hand through her hair, blinking slowly until his eyes fall closed and stay that way.

“Goodnight, wife.”

Dear Claudia,

I arrived at camp this morning safely. The soldiers are all very nice and energetic people. There are two women in my troop of thirty-five, Sylvia and Joan. They scare me a little but they are very hardworking. Our dinner tonight is beans and rice with canned carrots, actually not that bad at all. I sat next to someone named Grady and he’s got a knack for cracking jokes. He’s twenty and from Georgia, and he says he wants to start a diner when he goes back home (using produce from his family’s farm). Tomorrow we head out for the Somalian border. I miss you already.

Love,

(your husband),

John


My dear, sweet husband John!

How exciting that I get to call you "my husband"!! I screamed so loud when your letter came in the mail that I made Wendy’s dog start barking! It was very funny :) Grady sounds wonderful! I’m so glad your making new friends and I heard from Terry today! He stopped by to drop off some video cassettes for me and Wendy and said to tell you he says hi and that you better make it home safe and thank you for taking his place. He’s so very tall isn’t he? Tomorrow Wendy and I are going to the library to get some books and then to feed the ducks at our favorite park. I’ll let you know if we find anything worth reading and I’ll throw the duckies some extra bread for you! I told her all about our marrage adventure at City Hall and knocked her socks off! I think about that night every day. Then we watched the premeer of Buffy The Vampire Slayer (not your taste I don’t think) and it was very rad!! And we popped popcorn with lots of butter. Her footon is very comfy although I wished I had a certain someone (hint: named John) to cuddle with on it! I miss you, but I know your doing good work and I am so proud of you! Stay safe, my love.

Hugs and kisses,

(your wife!!!),

Claudia Stilinski

P.S. (Does Grady have goats on his farm? We used to have goats in Poland!)


Dear Claudia,
I wish there was a way to talk to you in person. The mail is painfully slow as you’ve noticed. Grady says he has seven goats on his farm, all named after Snow White’s seven dwarfs. It’s a thought that makes me smile when things get scary here. Sometimes at night we hear sounds in the brush. It’s up to me to decide if it’s just rodents or potential danger. I always play it safe and have us rotate shifts keeping watch to the annoyance of my troop. We’ve encountered a few bands of Kenyans since we started our patrols. No one got hurt, but I’ll admit it shook me up even though I have experience as an officer. The rifles we use here are much louder than the handguns at the station. Tonight I had beans and rice with jerky for dinner. I miss your macaroni with a passion. But I miss you more. How is living with Wendy?

Love,

(your husband),

John


My dearest John!

Happy birthday!!!! XOXO!!! Although when you get this it probably won’t be your birthday any more :( But Wendy and I are baking a cake tonight in celebration! German chocolate (your favorite!!) and I’m decorating it with lots of sprinkles and we invited Terry over for some too but he says he might be working overtime at the station. All your friends must be missing you there. I know I am! Your T-shirt you gave me doesn’t smell like you anymore. I wore it for four days straight before Wendy make me take it off to wash it but it was very comfortable! Yesterday we caught tadpoles at that little creek in the woods — are there any creeks in Somalia? Maybe you could catch some too and then watch them swim around and then you and your troop will forget about the scary-ness for a while. I love you! XOXO

Love,

(your wife!)

Claudia Stilinski


Dear Claudia,

Thank you for the birthday cake and wishes. The troop made a “cake” for me using a cornbread muffin and lighting a stick on fire for the “candle” last month. They made me admit how old I am (28 doesn’t feel as old as I thought it would) and they didn’t believe me because they said I looked 33. Bit of a kick to my self-esteem I must admit but I thought you’d find it funny. Your letter came this morning and we came across a small river this afternoon. I took your advice and ordered the troop to take a break there. We flipped a few of our helmets upside down and used them like buckets to see what we could catch in the shallows. No tadpoles, but a couple salamanders and minnows. Joan
managed to catch the most and won an extra slice of bacon from everyone. It was a small window of fun in an otherwise hot, laborious day. Thank you. Somehow you manage to make me smile even when you’re on the other side of the globe.

Happy Thanksgiving — eat lots of pumpkin pie for me. And try not to name the turkey this year, it’ll make it harder to eat.

Love,

(Your husband),

John


Dearest John!

I named the turkey Grzegorz and got so attached to him that I ate four sausages instead (but lots of pumpkin pie)!! We ate Thanksgiving with Wendy’s family and I’m still so full. Now we are getting ready for Christmas! Wendy has a tinsil tree and it is so beautiful and shiny! I’ve been making ornaments to hang on it and drinking hot chocolate every day since it’s getting so cold here. We are having a rain storm as I write this! I hope the power doesn’t go out. Tomorrow we are having a gingerbread decorating contest and I’m totally going to win! I’ll send pictures in my next letter. How are you my love? Just two more months until you come HOME!!! :) :) xoxoxo

Love,

(your wife!)

Claudia Stilinski

December 30th, 1992.

Dear Claudia,

My family used to have a tinsel tree in our New York apartment. My mom liked it better than fresh trees because it didn’t shed all over the carpet. I hope you had a wonderful holiday and I would love to hear about what presents you got. I wish I could say our Christmas spirit was as bright as yours… Grady died last week during a surprise attack. We were moving camp at dusk and Kenyans started firing at us from the bushes. He was struck in the heart and died immediately. He’s the first casualty in my troop and it’s shaken us up quite a bit, so it cast a shadow on our Christmas. Your letters give me the courage to keep going until February. I just wish I had more than a couple pictures of you to keep me company. Thinking of you always—I love hearing about your days back at home.

Love,

(Your husband)


Dearest John,

Happy New Year!!! I was signing a check the other day and I almost wrote 1992! Funny how it takes a while to get used to the new year number isn’t it? Anyhow for Christmas I got lots of hershey’s candy and new pajamas! My mother gave me a traditional Polish dress which I hate and I will never ever wear it. Wendy and I went on her family’s boat this weekend! Her family is super duper rich with money and they know lots about fishing, and they made us a yummy dinner I can’t pronounce but they said it was a traditional Greek dish. Wendy also starts a new class this semester for her master’s degree so she’s been extra busy with homework which means I have to try not to talk so much. I watched all the Disney movies we have on video and then it inspired me to sew a new dress that looks like Belle’s from Beauty and the Beast! I have a little money leftover from Christmas so it was just enough to get some buttons and trim. Wendy has an old pair of yellow curtains she says I can use for the fabric! Isn’t that neat? What’s the weather like in Somalia now? I miss you lots.

I am so sorry to hear about Grady. He sounded like a wonderful friend. Stay safe.

Love,

(Your wife)

Claudia Stilinski

February 8th, 1993.

Dear Claudia,

Your letters are the highlight of my day. I’m glad you are having fun, say hi to Wendy for me. I’ve never been fishing, but you’re lucky her family's signature dish; you should show her how to make Pierogi. I’m sure your dress will come out beautifully, and that you’ll be prettier than Belle in it. I’ve told my soldiers all about you — particularly how we met at the Kin of Kéyah protest. They love you just from that. The nineteen of us are pretty good friends at this point, even Sylvia and Joan who are not too scary anymore. This group is full of very funny people and we’re sad to say goodbye but also glad to finally be able to come home. Somalia is very hot and dry even in winter. At the end of the day we’re all pretty ripe. No need to send me a letter after this one, I might even get home before this makes it to you. Counting down the days until I get to see your face.

I miss you dearly.

Love,

(your husband),
February 22nd, 1993.

John steps off the platform into the San Francisco airport and starts running to the entrance gate.

His lips huff a breathless stream of “excuse me, pardon me, sorry” as he dodges people and jumps past them on the narrow walkway—the crowds yelp but hold their tongue when their eyes flick down to his heavy boots and camo duffel bag. He stares up at the Gate 23 sign, scans the crowd for a mop of brown curls, and grins as he sees a short figure dressed in a ruffly yellow dress and striped cardigan.

“John!”

Claudia’s smile is the biggest he’s ever seen as she flies forward and flings her arms around him. He laughs and spins her around, breathing in her green apple shampoo and squeezing the soft fabric of her sweater. In another blink they’re kissing furiously, much more furious than he would ever dare do in public, but all that matters right now is that he’s been nine thousand miles away from her for the past six months and now she’s warm and real and in his arms. Vaguely he’s aware of the airport wooing and clapping for them, but he’s too busy melting into his wife to be embarrassed about it. They pull apart breathlessly and peck each other with grinning smooches on the cheeks and forehead and noses before he gets any words out.

“God, I missed you so much,” he breathes.

“Me too!” Claudia squeaks into his neck.

“Damn, John. Did they teach you how to kiss in Somaila?”

John startles at the voice. He whirls around and his jaw drops to the floor when he see’s who standing next to Wendy.

“Terry?” He blurts incredulously, and steps forward to greet him. He grins wide as the clap out a hug. “Jesus, what are you doing here?”

“Honestly John, you go to war for me for six months and you don’t expect me to meet you at the airport?” Terry scoffs and cuffs John on the side of the head. “What kinda friend d’ya think I am? Also, you didn’t tell me you got married? The hell’s the matter with you!” He adds, grabbing John’s ring finger and frowning when he sees it bare. “Where’s the ring?”

“We don’t have rings yet,” he admits. “It was kind of an impromptu thing.”

“The best thing!” Claudia exclaims.

“How’s the shoulder.”

“Healing just fine, thanks to you taking my place.”

“Don’t mention it.” He turns to Wendy. “Thanks so much for housing her, Wendy. Hope she wasn’t too much of a handful.”

“No, not at all. Never a dull moment with Claudia around.”
“Damn skippy!” Claudia grins. “And now we can go on double dates!”

“Oh?” John asks. “Did you find someone special while I was away, Wendy?”

She smiles slyly. “As a matter of fact… I did.” And she holds up her linked hands with Terry, who beams proudly. John gapes.

“Mr. Single Man got a girlfriend?” He gawks.

“Mhmm. Mr. Single Man is now Mr. Wendy’s Man,” Terry winks at Wendy. “Our one-month anniversary is tomorrow.”

John folds over laughing. “You’re kidding, that’s great!”

“See? Double dates!” Claudia squeals and claps her hands together. “This is going to be so much fun!”

“You up for a burger at Bob’s Diner? I imagine you’re probably dying for some real food,” Terry adds.

“I’d love to later tonight,” John declares reverently. His mouth waters on the spot. “But I’d really love to go home first.” And make out with my wife.

“And make out with me!” Claudia squeals as she drags him towards the exit by the hand. “Bye Wendy! Bye Terry! See you later!”

“Wait, where are you going?” Wendy calls. “We drove you here!”

“We’ll take a taxi!” Claudia calls over her shoulder as John smooches her. He’s been Claudia-deprived for half a year and it’s like his mouth is magnetized to her mouth, but he manages a muffled, “thanks again, guys!” before they’re completely out of earshot.

It’s good to be home.
Part 3

Chapter Summary

Meeting the kiddos.

.o0O0o. May 13th, 1996.

"Are you ready?"

He and Talia are crouched outside the playroom with ears pressed to the hallway wall, sleeves rolled up and mouths in grim lines.

"I'll go for Laura, you go for Derek," Talia whispers to him.

"Don't try to get her to sit on your lap first, I did it the last couple days and she'll be expecting it," Robert advises her, peeking around the corner. His kids are sitting side-by-side in the middle of the room, butts squished into the plush white carpet, chubby legs tucked beneath them as Laura dictates "what you're supposed to do" to her three-year-old brother. Tall stacks of alphabet block buildings tower like skyscrapers around them, and intricately-placed wolf figurines litter the carpet. Derek is drooling contentedly on a wooden rabbit toy.

"For Derek, just don't promise to buy him any more toys," Talia warns dryly. Which... Robert may have done a few times. A lot of times.

"And you remembered to put the towels down, right?" He asks, but she shoots him a withering look because of course I did and— "Right, of course you did. Okay, three, two, one..."

Talia rounds the corner first so not to tip the kids off that they're planning an ambush. "Hello my little ma'itsoh," she greets softly, and Robert hears her gliding gracefully into a kneeling position beside their two little runts. "What are you two playing?"

"I'm the wolves and Derek's the rabbit," Laura supplies, not looking up from the miniature canine clasped in her tiny fingers. She hasn't caught on yet, which is good.

"How fun," Talia smiles again and drums her fingers casually against the carpet, Robert’s cue to come in.

He backs up a few steps and strides past the playroom door like he has another location in mind, then doubles back and pokes his head in the room, announcing loudly, "Oh, hey family! I didn't know you guys were in here!"

He earns a deadpan from Talia for his brilliant acting skills as he waltzes towards his children, puffing his chest contentedly. The playroom gleams with color and fresh air from the large victorian window. Painted trees and forest animals decorate the walls, along with bamboo shelves packed with every toy imaginable— shiny building blocks, collector’s figurines of animals and people and superheroes, glossy model trains, airplanes and cars detailed enough to make enthusiasts weep with joy, all five American Girl Dolls with every accompanying outfit and accessory for Laura which she
never touches, puzzles and crafts, glow in the dark stars, top-quality art supplies, and a miniature rocking horse hand-painted from Italy. Two giant beanbags lounge by the window beside a pile of plush animals, soft blankets printed with planets and native plants with their scientific names, and a wall packed with enough children’s books to fill a library.

Robert has money, and he’d spend every penny on his kids if Talia didn’t stop him.

“Whatcha’ guys up to?” He crouches casually behind Derek, who turns around to stare at him with huge green eyes. Talia says they're grey. They're green.

“I just told mommy that,” Laura’s nasally voice quips, but stops playing abruptly when she catches Robert’s fingers inching closer to Derek’s waist. "Daddy," she says suspiciously, and in a flash she’s leaping away from them, opening her mouth to scream—

"GO TALIA!" He hollers, but his wife is already lunging for their daughter’s waist. She misses, and Laura screeches high-pitched and angry as she bolts for the door, which Robert forgot to shut behind him. Goddammit.

“Door, Robert!”

He quickly scoops up his assigned child and rolls onto his back, lifting Derek high above his face as he quickly kicks the door shut with his foot. He uses too much strength (werewolf perks) and accidentally sends a giant crack splitting up the wood, but successfully stops Laura from escaping. He and Talia are faster but the kids are tiny and slippery, and Laura’s ear-splitting battle cry can disorient anyone. Derek also tends to mimic her so he’s wailing too now, kicking and squirming in Robert's grip and dripping drool onto Robert’s chin.

“Gross, bud,” Robert groans but quickly straightens up and scuttles to the hallway, wincing at the giant crack in the door that Talia will undoubtedly murder him for later. His wife quickly backs Laura into a corner, hands poised for capture as their daughter growls at her.

"Laura, come to amá," Talia tries, but she needs to work on her friendly-face, which is currently more like disobey-me-and-I-will-eat-you-face.

“No!” His daughter yells in the tiniest, fiercest little cry of obstinance, which earns a scowl from his wife but makes Robert bite down a smile. Talia’s already won at this point, so she just hoists a furious Laura over her shoulder, trapping Laura’s hands so she can’t pull her mother’s hair or scratch with tiny blunt nails.

“Alright, phase one complete,” he whoops victoriously as they haul their children down the hall, ignoring Talia’s eye-roll. He is cool, dammit.

They have the actual bathtub part down to a science now. The kids fight tooth and nail as he and Talia lock the door and strip them (thank god the claws aren’t in yet) and he twists on the taps with his foot, which took a couple months of practice but he’s a pro now. Talia uses one hand to squirt in the bubbles and then Robert grabs it and adds more because his wife never adds enough.

Bath time used to be at six o’clock sharp every night, but Laura caught onto that and started disappearing at 5:59pm. The hiding spots of fame include the backseat of the Maserati, the dryer, and the bathtub itself. The worst one was when Talia found her on the roof two hours later and subsequently had a mini-stroke, followed by lots of Navajo cussing. Bath time became a surprise attack after that.

“Let me go!”
“T’aa shoodi, Laura, it's not that bad. You get in nicely and I'll give you the squirty toy first,” Talia bargains, as she peels down Laura’s tiny purple pants.

Nice, honey! Robert cheers in his head. That's a new one.

"Before Derek?" Laura stops squirming and narrows her eyes suspiciously.

"No!" Derek yells defiantly in Robert's arms, now down to nothing but his Buzz Lightyear diaper.

“Derek, you can get the squirty toy next time,” Robert promises his son. They actually have a second emergency squirty toy underneath the sink, but two in the bath would be chaos. “If you get in nicely I'll read you a bedtime story tonight."

"You do that anyway,” Derek pouts in his little toddler lisp, and damn it to hell, his son is glancing between him and the tub with round, glassy eyes and a wobbly lip. This is why Talia usually grabs Derek, because she is immune to their son’s sad, teary puppy-eyes of death. Robert is not. Derek is going to start bawling in three seconds flat, and Robert hates everything.

"What I meant," He jumps in quickly with a look to Talia, who narrows her eyes in warning at him. "Is that next time we go to the bookstore, I'll let you pick out a new story."

The words are hardly out of Robert’s mouth before Derek gasps squeakily and fumbles into the tub with a tiny naked splash. He gazes at Robert with a soapy grin and it is totally worth Talia’s evil scowl that he is purposefully avoiding. The tricky part is getting his kids in the bath. Once they're actually inside the water they both have a lot of fun.

Laura, however, insists on waiting until the squirty toy is in her hands before stepping into the bath. She will be a great negotiator with other packs. Robert sticks the ducky washcloth in Derek’s hands when he tries sucking on the side of the tub and Talia squirts a dollop of tear-free shampoo onto Laura’s wet brown curls. She lets her daughter spurt tiny streams of water onto her shirt but scolds her when she tries for the face, and Robert gives Derek a soapy beard and hat with the bubbles while his wife is distracted.

"Robert," Talia sighs when she notices, but she's grinning.

"Whaaat, he hardly has any hair anyway. And this is hilarious, where'd you put the camera?"

They chuckle as Laura sneezes and subsequently blows the bubble beard off Derek’s chin with a tiny explosion of foam. Bath time has become therapeutic like that. When his kids are adequately pruney he and Talia drain the tub and haul them out, wrapping them in little squirmy cocoons of fuzzy towels— Laura has her special Ariel towel, Derek insists on the blue one. They squirm and squeal tiny protests when they rub the terrycloth over their hair, and as soon as they finish his kids take off yelling to their bedrooms in a flash of two tiny pink butts.

Bedtime is usually pretty smooth after that; pajamas, a fresh diaper for Derek, a glass of milk each because his kids have bottomless pits for stomachs. Then supervised teeth brushing to make sure they use no more than a pea of toothpaste, and kisses on the forehead. Derek wants If You Give A Mouse A Cookie tonight, so Robert pulls it from the shelf and reads until his son dozes off in the bunk beneath Laura.

Once the kids are asleep he sinks into the couch sofa beside Talia, exhausted. He glances at his watch. "An hour and ten minutes, not bad, hun."

"The day we narrow it down to twenty minutes is the day these wrinkles stop forming." Talia pouts as she rubs her forehead.
"You're still just as sexy as the day I met you, dear."

"The day you met me I was sweating and in a tree."

"Even sexier." He plants a kiss on her cheek and rests his head on her shoulder, closing his eyes. She chuckles, and he smiles as her shoulder shakes beneath his cheek. He’s almost dozed off in a happy nap until a tiny, high-pitched scream sounds from the bedroom.

"MOOOOOOM, DAAAADDYYYY! DEREK MADE A POOPY!"

They sigh collectively as tiny, lispy shouting sounds from the bedroom, followed by Derek’s wailing cry. He turns to his wife. “It’s your turn, dear.”

.o0O0o. **March 14th, 1997.**

“He has your moles.”

“Look, John, three little freckles right beneath his ear! That’s gotta be lucky.”

“Christ, the kid is paler than a sack of flour. I told you to go out in the sun more, Clauds.”

“John, hush! He’s precious.”

It’s true. The tiny sleeping bundle in Claudia’s arms is the most beautiful child John has ever seen. It’s a boy—a gorgeous, wee baby boy with bubblegum cheeks, dark caterpillar eyelashes, a tuft of downy hair atop his soft head, and rosy bow lips like puffy candies as he slumbers. Tiny chocolatey freckles dot his ivory skin, even a few on the pink skin of his tiny curled hands. He is the spitting image of Claudia.

“My little kiddo,” John whispers, gazing at the tiny sleeping bundle in his wife’s arms. His son’s fragile fingers are wrapped sticky around John’s pinky and hardly reach all the way around. “So,” he voices. “Have you, uh… Decided on what—“

“My dziadek's name, John.” Claudia announces happily, suggesting no room for argument. John looks to the ceiling, because he can’t say no to that.

“You sure, hon? I dunno, he looks more like a James to me. Renaldo-Erickson Gregorz, even.”

“Nope. He’s getting grandpa’s name, aren’t you my little—“ Claudia whispers the atrocious Polish name into the child’s ear. John sighs.

“Well then,” he says, and wiggles another calloused finger into his baby’s teensy, tiny fingers. His son snuffles in his sleep, eyelids twitching. “I better apologize in advance, kid. You’re gonna grow up and confuse the hell out of all your teachers. Better come up with a pretty good nickname before then.”

“John,” Claudia whispers, eyes sparkling with joy as she gazes at their child. Her face is splotchy from labor, skin and eyelashes dewy with sweat. Damp curls hang like silk ribbons around her cheeks, sticking to her forehead in dark strands. She is beautiful, and she had squeezed John’s hand so hard he has purple bruises over his knuckles. “I love him. I love him so, so much.”

“You hear that, kiddo?” He whispers in his baby’s ear. “You’ve won your mother’s heart. Only one other man in her life managed to do that, and I hear he’s a pretty cool guy.”
Claudia giggles. “The mad raddest.”

.oO0O0o. May 1st, 1997.

The stretch marks on Claudia’s stomach are the most beautiful purple ribbons John’s ever seen.

He likes to trace them with his fingers when she lays in bed and breastfeeds their son, but she’s ticklish so it always makes her giggle, which makes John giggle in return. Their baby suckles sleepy through it all, burping over his wife’s shoulder and promptly falling asleep before they get a long enough chance to coo over his big eyes. John likes to count the dark eyelashes beneath his tiny pink lids.

As chilly March bleeds into April rain Claudia dresses in rose-colored sweaters and moccasins, sometimes with fuzzy headscarves wrapped around her hair. She perches by the wall heater in the saggy armchair and hums Abba to their baby, a glowing picture of comfort and coziness. She’s still round with soft curves of baby weight, and those supple pink marks around her belly that John loves to kiss when he catches her reading on the couch. Sometimes they make a baby sandwich by putting their son on John’s chest when he lies down, and then Claudia lays on John’s legs and presses tiny kisses to their child’s creamy little belly. She is an expert at raspberries.

John’s new favorite evening activity is giving his son bubble baths in the kitchen sink. It’s a two handed process even though he’s practically small enough to be held in one of John’s palms, but it’s astounding how little his neck is in comparison to his head (Claudia assures him he will grow into proportion). They fill a few inches of lukewarm water and a squirt of oatmeal shampoo, and together they roll up their sleeves to gently rub washcloths over their squirmy bundle, leaving little soapy tracks over his soft pink skin. It’s almost fun enough to make up for how Claudia will be awake every three hours to feed him at night.

But John pampers her during the day to make up for it, starting with breakfast cooked to the best of his ability. He burns the toast a lot and gets the eggs stuck to the bottom of the pan but she kisses him ‘thank you’ for it anyway, even when he gives in and picks up pastries for them from the bakery on Walnut street.

He gives her shoulder massages and then washes every dish, hangs up every piece of laundry to dry, and vacuums every stray piece of dirt so she doesn’t have to. One time she catches him wiping down the windows in one of her flowery aprons (he was barbecuing and needed it) and she laughs her full-belly snorting laugh and insists on taking a picture. Their baby drools through it all in the bassinet.

When John goes back to work after two weeks he suffers miserably at his desk. Sheriff Sanders barks at him for staring sadly out the window during desk work, and on patrols he finds himself making rounds closer and closer to his house where he knows his wife and child are having fun without him. He talks Terry’s ear off with every detail of his baby’s life, which is little more than eating, sleeping, pooping, and crying. (“Yes John, you’ve told me all about how cute your kid looks when he’s sleeping. Now go, the light’s been green for ten seconds.”)

When their son turns two months old they bundle him up and take him to the station. Claudia cradles him close in her pink papoose and babbles on about “look at the streetlights, my love! Red, yellow, green. Look at you, so sleepy in the car, huh? It’s a wonder because daddy’s car is so loud and bumpy, isn’t it! Vroom vroom, beep beep! Do you wanna to the radio? Let’s put on the oldies. Oldies but goodies is what everyone says!”

At the station John glows with pride as people preen over the tiny bundle in Claudia’s arms. Rhonda,
Greg, Diana, and Silvestri all squabble over who gets to adopt him. Sheriff Sanders takes one look at the kid and splits into one of his rare toothy smiles, lighting up rosy stains beneath his mustache. Some of them have known Claudia since day one of the protest, others befriended her during the days she would drop off John’s lunch in the afternoon, and a few newbies are lucky enough to meet her just now. His friends “ooh” and “aww” and ask him and her a hundred questions and offer a thousand compliments, and Richard broods in the corner sipping his coffee.

“Oi, outta’ the way people, John’s best friend commin’ through! That’s right. Make way—”

“Hey Terry,” John greets as the man elbows his way over. "I was wondering if you got lost on the way to the station.”

“Nah, just stopped by Burger King for lunch. But dang, look at your new little dude!”

John smiles down at his ‘little dude.’ “Yep. You’re lucky he’s asleep right now, the kid cries louder than a squad siren. He just found his vocal chords, too, and babbles a mile a minute.”

“Damn, you two sure made a cute kid,” Terry grins down at John’s baby. “He got a name?”

Claudia croons their child’s name.

“Guesundiet.”

“Ah, that wasn’t a sneeze, actually. That’s his name,” John tells his friend.

Terry’s eyebrow skyrockets to the roof. “You named your kid what now?”

John repeats the name.

“No, John, it’s—“ Claudia cuts in gently, pronouncing it clearly. He was only off by four syllables this time. “But you’re getting better at it!”

“Right, what she said,” John relays to Terry, who’s looking between the two of them like they’re crazy. They probably are. “It’s Polish.”

“Huh,” Terry muses. “Well I’mma call him Casper, since he’s white as a ghost.”

John chuckles. “We’ll be investing in a lot of sunscreen, that’s for sure. If my Irish genes are any indication, this kid will turn red as a lobster if we let him outside too much.”

“Mm. I’ll be sure to educate him on all the modern slang to give him some street cred. You better bring him ‘round the station often so he can hang out with uncle Terry. I always wanted a kid.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Claudia stays for a little while to sit at John’s desk and chat with the other officers. John leans against the copy machine as he prints out reports and smiles into his coffee as he watches her. She lights up the room like no one else can, and everybody adores her. It’s hard not too when she has a way of talking to you like you’re something special; she gives her full attention in conversations even though her attention is so easily scattered by rest of the world, and John can’t wait to watch his son grow up so the kid can see it for himself.

“Goodbye, my love! See you when you get home. I’m making macaroni tonight!” Claudia chirps as she pecks him on the cheek. The station crows goodbyes to her and she blows everybody kisses on her way out the door. John smiles as he watches her leave and floats to the copy room to pick up the
printed ticket reports. He hums to himself as the happy warmth of showing off his kid radiates in his chest.

“That’s quite a kid you got there,” Richard voices behind him.

John turns around, mood immediately dampening. He returns to his papers. “Yep, he’s a cute one.”

“Do you slip bleach into his formula or did you just drop him in a sack of flour?”

"Lay off my kid please, Sullivan. You don’t exactly have a sun-kissed complexion either.”

“What is it you said you named it? It sounded like your wife sneezed, but I didn’t want to insult her culture by saying “bless you,” you know? Sounded like Russian, or Klingon maybe?”

“Polish. Do you have the handouts for tonight’s rounds or should I check with Rhonda?”

“Ohhh, Polish,” Richard drawls slowly, as he chews the end of his pen. “I’m surprised; you know what they say about European babies, ugly as sin, you know? But your little tongue-twister of a babe is a cute one,” Richard smirks, eyeing John. “And man, don’t even get me started on the baby’s mama—”

“Shut your trap about my family. Got it?”

“Shut up.”

“Shut your trap about my family. Got it?”

John straightens up. “I’ve never liked you, Richard. So let’s just agree to disagree, okay? We’re both in uniform for the same reason.”

“Sure,” Richard shrugs. “Except that reason being we both want to be Sheriff, but only one of us gets that position. You think I’m stupid, Stilinski? I know what Sanders has been saying around here. He wants to pick nice, honest, goodie-two-shoes John Stilinski to take his place. And that puts you at the top of my target list.”

“Well maybe if you had spent less time cutting corners on shift, you’d be wearing the badge right now,” John says.

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” Richard warns. “That shiny little star isn’t pinned to your chest yet, either.”

“No, but it will be soon, and I’ve sure as hell earned it,” John dares to say.

“You think a Sheriff’s salary is gonna be enough to support your little runt?” Richard raises an eyebrow. “Is that why you want the position so much? The pay isn’t much better than what we get now, you know.”

“Paychecks have nothing to do with why I want the position.”

“It should,” Richard clucks. “Living in this part of California with two— pardon, three mouths to feed? And what did Clauds say, that she’s a florist? I can’t imagine that makes more than a few pennies, not to mention all the bills coming your way with buying diapers, formula, preschool, middle school—“

“Shut up.”

“—and high school tuition fees are a bitch I hear, not to mention all those darn school books and medical bills. God forbid if you’re injured on the job or your kid ends up needing a prescription
every month, or if one of you needs chemotherapy. You never know. By the time you pay everything, I wonder, will you have anything leftover to put enough food on the table for a hungry growing boy? A college fund?"

John fumes as he stares at Richard’s smirk, fists curling. It’s a sensitive spot, because he worries about it every day.

“If I were you I’d quit now and find a better job to support your family,” Richard shrugs. “That’s what a real man would do, at least.”

“You listen here,” John says quietly. “I will not sacrifice the future betterment of this town, or my integrity, in order to save a few pennies. Claudia chose me, I married her, and now we have a child. We’ve made it happy and without crisis so far, and we’re going to keep living just fine when the badge is on my uniform.”

“You sure it’s a boy? Those little lips looked pretty girly to me. Better be careful he doesn’t grow up into a faggot.”

John grits his teeth as he moves to pick up the file box and leave the room.

“Your wife looks good.”

John slowly turns around to face him.

“Her tits got even bigger,” Richard adds, raising an eyebrow. “God knows I’d pay to see her whip one out to feed that little—"

Richard doesn’t finish, because John punches him so hard he falls to the ground with blood pouring from his mouth. The bastard starts swearing loudly and actually spits a tooth out onto the carpet, attracting the attention of the entire department. John can’t so much as blink before his co-workers flood into the room and yank him backwards off the scumbag in a matter of seconds, gripping him by the arms so he can’t take another swing. There’s shouting and chaos and John swears under his breath once he realizes what he’s done— and then he turns around to see Sheriff Sanders staring murder at him.

“Stilinski. My office, now.”

.o000o.

John sits outside the coffee shop downtown, cradling a cooling cup of dry roast as he sits cross-legged on the sidewalk. He’s moping. Claudia is forgiving when he mopes. His sister would probably kill him if she saw him like this, sitting on his ass on the actual ground— but neither of them know he’s doing this, so it’s all good.

He watches people walk by and finds himself wondering how many of them are fathers. The man across the street holding hands with the blonde? The old geezer eating a slice of pie in the bakery window next door? The guy driving the— no, anyone who makes a left turn like that should not be allowed to have kids. John has a kid, a son who might already be facing starvation because his father lost his temper at work. He’s gonna have to start selling strawberries on street corners.

Or pick a couple organs to sell.

He stares down the street and watches a man walking his direction via sidewalk. His posture is
straight, his shoulders are broad, and he’s the very definition of handsome; a man who is clearly of good conduct who probably doesn’t go around punching people, who’s dressed well and probably has a stable, well-paying job. Now that’s a father. John wishes he could be that man for exactly one second before he realizes that it would mean not having Claudia or his baby.

But as the man gets closer John’s eyes blink in recognition just as the other man’s eyes blink in recognition. They pause— the man mid-stride, John’s coffee cup stalled halfway to his lips.

“Hey, wait a minute, aren’t you—?” they say in unison.

The man’s features break into a large grin with dimples as John stands to shake his hand. Both their palms are warm and callused, the mark of age and fatherhood, and for once John’s hand is not the biggest in the exchange.

“Robert Hale, right?” John asks, remembering a fuzzy day from years ago outside the very same coffee shop.

“Yeah! And you’re John,” Robert grins, a dazzling, handsome thing full of straight, white teeth. John could never afford the dental work to straighten his out, and could never break his caffeine addiction long enough to get rid of the coffee stains.

“Hey, yeah, you remember?”

“Of course! That was the day my daughter was born, wasn’t it? February of ‘91? Damn.”

“Jesus,” John echoes. “In front of this same coffee shop, wasn’t it? Small world.”

“Small town,” Robert shrugs. “Although if I remember correctly, wasn’t I the one moping on the sidewalk?”

John chuckles weakly. “Yeah, I… I guess you were. Nice to see you with some pep in your step this time.”

“Sorry I can’t say the same for you,” Robert frowns, glancing at his watch. “Mind if I join you?”

“Ah, that’s very kind, but you look like you’re on the way to somewhere.”

“Nah, I’ve got plenty of time. Besides, never too late to return a favor, right?”

“Alright, then by all means.” John motions a hand indicating Robert take a seat on the sidewalk. He eyes the man’s nice clothes, catching a glimpse of an Armani tag. “You come from work?”

“Nah, I’m on my way back from picking up some groceries for the wife,” Robert shrugs. He’s carrying a brown bag in one arm that looks muscled, strong, effortless for what looks like twenty pounds of groceries. “She’s baking some new pasta thing that calls for half the vegetables in the state, three of which I have no idea how to pronounce.”

John chuckles. “My wife and I usually just pop in a couple frozen pizzas or order takeout. Although she does make some amazing macaroni and cheese. She puts little pieces of sausage in it.”

Robert groans. “I’d kill for something that unhealthy. But nothing with that much cholesterol gets past my wife. That’s why I gotta eat the good stuff in secret.” And he pulls out a package of assorted doughnuts from his grocery bag, tipping the container temptingly towards John. “Want one?”

“I shouldn’t with this waistline, but you just offered my weakness.” John selects an old fashioned
glaze and breaks a piece off wistfully, imagining that it will probably be his last free donut for a while.

“Isn’t Krispie Kreme evil that way? I swear I could eat a whole bakery if someone didn’t stop me,” Robert adds around a frankly monstrous bite of chocolate donut. He pulls out a small bottle of brandy as well, popping the red seal off the cap with a single thumb, which John didn’t think was possible. “Fancy Irish Brandy with it?”

“No, thanks. I don’t drink,” he admits. His father used to drink too much Jack Daniel’s on the weekends. And the weekdays.

“Suit yourself. Alcohol doesn’t effect me much, but I like the taste.” He glances to John’s plaid button-down and spare jeans he kept in the station closet. “Hey, weren’t you an officer last time we met? You’re not in uniform.”

John sighs. “I’m afraid I might not see that uniform again. Department put me on suspension a couple hours ago.”

“Oh,” Robert frowns. “Don’t you usually have to do something, ah… Pretty intense for that? You seem like a nice enough guy, I can’t imagine you doing anything bad enough to get kicked off.”

John huffs a dry laugh that gives his donut a bitter taste. “I punched my asshole colleague in the face.”

Robert’s eyebrows shoot up. “Shit. Sounds pretty serious.”

“Yep.” He pops the ‘P’.

“So what’d this guy do?” Robert asks, as he fills his mouth with pastry and then tips his head back to soak it in liquor.

“Well. My wife and I just had our kid,” John says.

“Congratulations,” Robert raises his bottle.

“Thanks. He’s the cutest little squirt, looks just like his mother. Richard— the guy I punched, never really got over how she… Well, he was an asshole and my wife, she— he never really got over how she rejected him for me, I guess. He said some stuff about her and my kid, and I… I lost it.”

Robert chews his donut grimly, nodding. “I would have too. Insulting the wife and the kids? That guy’s really asking for a fist to the face.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be at least another ten years with a clean record to make Sheriff now,” John admits glumly. “Department is strict like that. I had a good shot, too. The foreman was going to pick a candidate next week to take over for Sanders. It was between Sullivan and I, and word got around that I was going to be picked for the job. Rich riled me up on purpose so I’d lose my temper. I was foolish to lose my grip like that.”

“Is being Sheriff your dream in life?”

“Since I was about twenty, yeah.”

“Fuck him,” Robert wrinkles his nose. John chokes on his coffee a little at the strong word. “Sounds like a real jerk. People like that don’t stay in power very long. You’ll take over for him one day, and that’ll be even better. Take a picture of his ugly face for me.”
John chuckles weakly. “Sure. So kids plural, huh?”

“Oh, yeah! Talia and I have two little squirts now. Laura and Derek. Cutest little beasts you’ve ever seen. Damn, I love ‘em.”

“Nice names.”

“Thank you, I picked them. What’d you name yours?”

John says his son’s real name as best he can.

“Sorry, what?”

John repeats it. “At least I think I’m pronouncing it right. My wife named him after her grandfather.”

“Well I hope he picks a good nickname before he goes to school,” Robert chuckles. “Can you imagine? A lifetime of teachers butchering those syllables.”

“Yep. That’s the one thing I like about having the simplest name in history. No one misspells ‘John.’”

“I bet. My brother’s a bit bitter because his middle name is Bartholomew. I thought that was a mouthful before I heard your kid’s name.”

“Didn’t you used to work with your brother?”

“Ah, yeah. We were CEOs of Hale Associates for a while, but then I quit to have a family. So he runs the place by himself now, but I’m pretty ecstatic with my decision to leave. I didn’t really like the company as much as I thought I did.”

“Really?” John muses. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Yeah. You seem like you really like your job, John.”

“I do.”

“That’s great. Lucky bastard, you are. I hope you get to go back soon,” Robert brushes the crumbs off his jacket. “A man shouldn’t be kept from something he loves, but sometimes a little break in between helps reboot your passion.”

“Thank you.”

“I talk from experience.”

With that Robert polishes off the last donut, along with the remaining drops from the brandy bottle. John raises an eyebrow. The man doesn’t even seem a little drunk. “How do put all that away and keep your figure?”

The man shrugs, running a sleeve across his mouth to wipe away the powdered sugar. “Fast metabolism. I run too, but not as much as I should. I guess I owe it to good genes.”

John huffs. “Lucky you. It isn’t as easy to squeeze into my tracksuit from high school.”

“Yikes. Considering the fashions back then, maybe that’s a good thing, eh?”

“You’re probably right.”
“Well, I’d better run these groceries home before the milk spoils,” Robert rises to his feet. “Take care, John. Hope that Richard guy gets his ass handed to him someday soon.”

John smiles. “And I hope your wife doesn’t smell the donuts on your breath. Take care, Robert.”

“Will do. And hey, say hi to your little champ for me!”

“Thanks, same to your kids.”

“Hey, maybe they’ll even meet each other some day,” Robert chuckles as he hoists the grocery bags into his arms. “It’s a small town, after all.”

“It is a small town, yeah.”

John pops the last of his donut into his mouth and watches Robert turn on his heel and head down the sidewalk. The man tips his coffee and says “good evening” to the first two people he passes, and apologizes to the third when their elbows accidentally knock. They laugh and carry on their way in the cold. John can’t help but feel a small pang of envy for Robert, the human embodiment of “sophisticated” with his expensive leather jacket and suave personality, and the handsome lines around his pale blue-green eyes. He became a millionaire at age twenty-four.

“Now that’s a man who has his life together,” John murmurs.

He pulls out his cell phone and hits number one on speed dial. She answers with the usual, “hello, my love! You caught us right in the middle of story time.”

“Hi, honey,” he smiles softly. “Do you have a minute? Something happened at work after you left.”

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“Robert dear, you’re late. And I can smell the bourbon donuts on your breath from here.”

He’s met with Talia’s disapproving eyebrow as he carries the groceries into the kitchen. “It’s freaky how good your nose is getting, hun.”

“I just hope you didn’t eat the whole package this time.”

“I didn’t! I shared them, actually, with— Oh man, are you ready for this? Wow, where to start. Okay, remember back in ’88 when we met during the company—“

“Daddy!”

His two kids come thundering down the hallway in shorts and bare feet. Laura’s hair is getting wildly long for a six-year-old and Derek’s four-year-old head is far too big for his body. They wrap their chubby arms around his legs and cling like little octopi.

“Whoa, slow down there, little wild children of mine! You’re gonna knock me over!” He chuckles.

“Derek, shiyázhí, why don’t you show nizhé’é what you made today?”

“M’kay.” Derek toddles over to the rug and points to a tall Lincoln Log tower.

“Wow!” Robert whistles. “Looks like you were busy while I was gone. What about you, little rebel girl? Did you make one too?” He asks Laura as she runs circles around him.
Talia scoffs. “No, she was too busy making a mess in the bathroom.”

“Oh no. She overflow the bathtub again?”

“Squeezed all the toothpaste onto the floor and went ‘ice skating.’”

“Oh, damn. You’re getting creative, aren’t you?” Robert ruffles her hair. She grabs his hand and tries to bite him. “If you want to go ice skating all you have to do is ask daddy and I’ll take you.”

.o0O0o. June 1st, 1997.

Richard Sullivan is elected county Sheriff on June 1st, 1997.

On June 1st, 1997, John punches a tree outside the station and breaks three fingers.

“John,” Terry sighs as John returns from the hospital. He had to sit in a curtained room on that little plastic pink thing that sick people sit on. This was the first time he needed to be treated at a hospital because he doesn’t do reckless things. In fact, that’s pretty much his motto in life: John Stilinski, the most boring man on earth.

“Don’t say it,” John sighs.

“I can’t believe you punched a damn tree,” Terry says it anyway. “And then drove yourself to the hospital!” The man cuffs him on the back of the head. “Idiot.”

“It went numb after a couple of minutes, it’s not like I haven’t driven with one hand before,” he lies. Then he feels bad about it so he adds, “no, that was a lie. I haven’t. I would never drive with one hand, so why am I suddenly doing so many reckless things?”

The two of them are sitting in John’s crappy car parked in front of the station. Terry had been waiting outside on the curb when he pulled up, and immediately made a beeline for the passenger seat before John could even kill the engine. They stare at the peeling duct tape on John’s windshield wipers.

“Punching an asshole to defend your wife’s honor and then punching an inanimate object within the same month is hardly reckless,” Terry dotes. “It’s what most people call normal, actually. Reckless for you is drinking milk straight from the carton.”

“That’s unsanitary,” John mutters.

“Exactly my point,” Terry rolls his eyes. “Quit beating yourself over it. It was stupid, but quit beating yourself up.”

“How am I supposed to shoot a gun like this?” John holds up his casted fingers. “I’m gonna be doing desk work for a month. If Sullivan doesn’t fire me, that is.”

“He’s not gonna fire you.”

“You’ve met him, right? He hates me with a passion,” John broods. “I just got back from suspension and I’ll be out on the street before I can take two steps through that door,” he points his cast to the station’s gleaming double-doors. They look beautifully reflective beneath the early morning sun.

“Damn John, did you eat three bowls of Frowny Flakes for breakfast? If you keep whining about whether or not Sullivan is gonna kick you to the curb I’m gonna kick you out of your own crap car.”
“Yeah, well you’d be worried too if you had three mouths to feed,” John counters. “And now I have an extra three-hundred dollar hospital bill because I punched a damn tree.”

“Well look on the bright side. At least you didn’t punch a coworker again.”

“Thanks.”

“Look. You’re my friend, you know that. But I gotta ask; why do you care so much about this job? I mean it’s nice to be able to wear this shiny uniform, but it’s not like we’re working as the President’s bodyguards or anything. So what, Sullivan is Sheriff. Yeah it sucks, but you can quit anytime you want, John.”

“I’ll eat a damn cactus before I quit this job.”

“Suit yourself, I just don’t understand why——”

“Nine years, Terry! Nine years I’ve been an officer for this town with a dream of being Sheriff for ten, and after all my hard work I have to show up to work and see the badge pinned to his chest!” John snaps.

“Damn John, let’s calm down, alright?”

“I will not calm down,” John scowls. “I blew it Terry. The badge was practically in my hand and I blew it.”

“Look, I hate to be the devil’s advocate here, but why don’t you just quit?” Terry suggests. “I know being Sheriff is important to you, no one’s really sure why, but you——”

“You wanna know why?” John blurts angrily. "Because I saw the kind of abuse my father inflicted on my mother when he had two children running around the house, and how nobody did a damn thing about it! And then I ran away from it like a coward and flew as far away from New York as possible, so I came to California to learn how to be a cop, because then at least I would be doing something to help people. But then I found out that being a cop still doesn’t really enable you to step into situations like that because you have to work under rules set by the Sheriff, and the Sheriff orders you to do patrols and write tickets and tell people to quiet their dogs at midnight because they’re barking, but I want to do more than that, Terry——“

He sighs grimly. “The man with the badge is the one who gets to investigate crimes and handle domestic violence face-to-face with the people, he’s the one who has the power to change laws and order stop signs to be put in where they should, the power to show kindness to the victims who need it, and I want to be that man,” John whispers desperately. "This county was my first real home, and I want to make it better.”

Terry stares at him for a long time. John stares at his cast.

“John, you are the craziest man I’ve ever met.”

He looks up as Terry claps him on the shoulder.

“And this town doesn’t deserve you. That’s why you’re gunna' be the best damn Sheriff this town has ever seen, but you gotta stop punching things first.”

John loses the battle to a small smile. “Thanks… I’ll try not to make it a habit.”

“First time’s an incident, two time’s a coincidence, three times makes a pattern,” Terry smirks.
“Three strikes you’re out, man. Don’t use up your last swing.”

“I’ve always been more of a fan of watching baseball than actually playing it, so alright,” John flexes his hand.

“Mhmm. Well I’ve got some good news for ya’ at least.”

“Seriously? Tell me quick before you jinx it.”

“Sullivan isn’t allowed to fire you,” Terry plays with the buttons by the window. “Ol’ Sanders still thinks you’re the bee’s knees even though you socked Sullivan in the face —said sumthin’ about nine years of service in your favor— but our new ass wipe Sheriff can’t knock you off the force unless you commit a serious offense.”

“But I punched him in the face,” John blinks dubiously.

“Yeah we know, quit braggin’ about it. But technically you punched him before he was instated as Sheriff, so he can’t do nuthin’ about it. Except maybe give you all the crappy shifts and continue being a general jerk to you.”

John scratches his chin. “Huh. Well that is good news. Guess I’ll just have to start kidnapping children and dealing drugs under the radar from now on.”

“Cute, John. But Sullivan will get to keep wearing that shiny badge you love so much as long as he doesn’t commit a serious offense— I’m personally hoping he gets caught stealing sumthin’ soon, because he’s gonna drive everybody crazy ‘round the station, I can see it now,” Terry chews grimly on his toothpick. “There’s a bet pool going to see how many officers are gonna quit in the next three months. My money’s on five, Rhonda and Cisco put twenties on eight. You should join, the winnings are up to $120.”

“Christ,” John mutters. “I’ll add a five to say one will quit, because people need jobs in this town. Just make sure that person isn’t you. I don’t think I’d survive the station without you.”

“Cute. I love you too, John. You’re my favorite white friend,” Terry throws an arm around him and flicks his ear. “Now that’s enough sentimental crap for today. You ready to sign in and start that desk work?”

“I guess.”

“Hey, look at this way. At least you get first pick of the donuts.”

.o0O0o. May 11th, 1997.

“So you’re the pierdolec who knocked up my daughter?”

Claudia’s mother is terrifying.

John has heard stories and mentions over the years, sometimes so crazy that he thought Claudia surely was exaggerating the woman’s horrific tyranny, but his wife’s opening line back in 1988 seems to sum it up short and sweet: “Ma’am makes me sound like my mother, and she’s a cranky old Polish woman with a grudge against the arts.”

The woman is currently engaged in rapid-fire Polish with Claudia in his tiny living room, filling the
house with women’s scorn as John cradles his three-month-old kid close to his chest and tries to disappear against the curtains. It’s not quite eight in the morning. This is the first time he’s met the woman, and her opening line upon seeing him had been a thickly-accented, “So you’re the pierdolec who knocked up my daughter?”

“You cannot just show up here uninvited!” Claudia suddenly switches to English (probably for John’s sake) and throws her arms into the air because she gets extra animated when her emotions are up. Her brown curls are pulled back in a messy ponytail and she’s wearing the pink pajama bottoms with the little question marks on them, and John can’t help but be a little turned on by watching her yell angrily in a foreign language.

“I can show up anywhere I want,” Claudia’s mother huffs, sticking her jowls out in a way that reminds John of a snarling bulldog. She’s a whole three inches shorter than Claudia at 5’ even, and her silver bouffant curls add the top two of those inches. Beady, glittering brown eyes so dark they almost look black are two pinholes in a sea of pale wrinkles, and instead of a widespread constellation of freckles like Claudia she has one mammoth mole with a long silver hair resident on her chin. He can’t remember her name, something that begins with an ‘F’ with a lot of K’s or Y’s or other confusing letters—Franciszka maybe? He’s never seen it written down but when Claudia pronounces it he has an urge to say “gesundheit.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have sent you that letter,” Claudia pouts angrily. “You used the return address to find us, didn’t you? I just wanted to let you know we had a baby, not give you permission to barge in like some czubek!”

Franciszka scoffs, a sound like a death rattle. “Ohh, I get it. No longer my little babisiu now that you’re not under my roof, eh? How dare you treat me this way, the kobieta who raised you, fed you, paid for your college education—“

“You made me pay for that!”

He and his wife both choke when Claudia’s mother calmly pulls out a cigarette and lights up in the living room.

“Mom!” Claudia shrieks, “We have a baby here!”

“I know,” Franciszka narrows her eyes at the bundle in John’s arms, making John subconsciously cradle him closer. “And so you gave him my traitorous father’s name, eh?” She barks a bitter note of laughter that turns into a flemy cough, yet she refuses to stop huffing the cigarette between her thin lips. “Ha! I hope that little abomination grows up to be just the skurwiel your grandfather was.”

“Dziadek was kind to me!” Claudia spits defiantly. “Kindness! I’m sure you must have heard of it? Because you certainly never use it!”

“Hah! Kind-ness? So that’s why you give the little gòwno my father’s name, eh? Must be quite a mouthful for your American pierdolec husband.”

“Stop calling him that!” Claudia screeches, and John has never seen her so angry. He also doesn’t want to know what pierdolec means. “Get of our house! Get away from our baby, get out of my life!”

“Still painting, are you?” Franciszka hums disapprovingly, eyeing Claudia’s watercolors on the wall. “Shame. I told you you’d never make any money. And now look at the cheap house you live in.”

“We like this house! We like it because it’s ours and we picked out the curtains together and there’s
not a stinky old woman living here with us!"

"Jak śmiesz mówić do matki jak—!"

"Mogę mówić do ciebie, jak tylko mi się podoba!"

“Uh, Ms. Gòrski? Przepraszam…” John interrupts nervously from his wuss corner by the window. “Please, if I may?”

They turn to look at him, Claudia’s face a surprised but proud ‘o’ shape, Franciszka’s wrinkled features pulled in a frown. The woman snorts and mutters to her daughter, “his Polish is atrocious.”

“Uh, Ms. Gòrski, I’m John, Claudia’s husband—“

“Yes, the pierdolec who’s fucking my daughter, we’ve been over this,” the woman rasps as she huffs on her cigarette, spilling ash onto the carpet. John sweats through his shirt. His son claws at his chest with tiny, terrified fingers.

“Well, I— it’s nice to finally meet you,” he lies, trying to make himself seem the least amount ‘pierdolec’ as possible. “I— I love Claudia, more than—“

“Stop!” Franciszka raises a bony, wrinkled hand. “Do you have a job?”

John’s heart sinks. Claudia buries her head in her hands, like she knows he’s about to be ripped apart and she can’t stand to see it. “I…” He clears his throat. “I used to be a police officer, ma’am.”

“Oy, used to? What happened?”

“Yes… I’m, uh…”

“Spit it out, pierdolec.”

“I’m currently on suspension.”

“I mój Boże,” Franciszka rolls her eyes. “He’s even worse than I thought, zakuta pala, Claudia.”

Which is when Claudia crosses her arms and stomps over in front of her mother, blocking her view from John and their baby. “Mother,” she states primly. “If you do not leave right now, John and I are going to have sex right here in front of you.”

“I did not raise a slut,” Franciszka narrows her eyes.

“Try me!” Claudia challenges. “Będziemy się pieprzyć hard and fast and nasty right now if you don’t —” John chokes and turns beet red behind her, because she’s never uttered anything of the sort before. “—get out of our house! And we’re going to do it on top of the Polish flag we have kept under the television, right John?”

“Uh— I, y-yes, that’s right,” he sputters.

“Right!” Claudia raises a finger, growing louder as her mother pales. “And we’re going to sing the Polish National Anthem while we do it!”

“Claudia, mój Boże—!”

“And I lied before, John is actually Jewish!” Claudia screams. “He has a funny little black hat and everything! He goes to a temple where they talk about how Jesus doesn’t exist—“
“No! Tępa cipa, I didn’t raise you to—!”

“—and I go to the temple with him and we make fun of the Pope!”

“No!”

“AND EVERY FRIDAY WE INVITE OUR MANY BLACK FRIENDS OVER FOR DINNER!” Claudia screeches.

“Starasz się zabić swoją matkę?!”

“Right NOW, mother, or zobacz nas pieprzyć!” And Claudia grabs the bottom of her shirt and rips it over her head so that she stands defiantly in her polka dot bra, hands planted firmly on her hips. Her mother gapes, cigarette falling from her thin lips and bouncing to the carpet. John is too busy choking to see if it starts a fire.

Which is how Franciszka leaves in a hurry, spewing a stream of Polish all the way out the door and probably down the walkway. The door slams behind her and Claudia huffs, cheeks red with emotion as she picks her shirt up from the floor and puts it back on. A curl falls over her face, shaken lose from her ponytail, and she blows at it in frustration.

John pads over quietly, bouncing his son in his arms, and wipes it away from her forehead to tuck it behind her ear. She huffs a little angry breath, but it honestly comes out more adorable than anything.

“That woman!” Claudia growls. She looks at John and purses her lips. “That was not how I wanted you to meet her. I’m so, so sorry, John.”

John smiles softly, shaking his head. “She’s… Eccentric.”

“She’s a monster,” Claudia hisses, jaw trembling. John nudges his knuckle playfully to her chin.

“Hey, chin up now. You were fantastic! Sex atop the Polish flag? I’ve never been so proud of you. The whole thing was kind of funny, if you take a step back and look at it.”

“She lit a cigarette in our living room!” Claudia whispers wide-eyed, protectively cupping her hands around their baby’s cheeks and squishing them. “In front of our newborn!”

“I saw,” John nods solemnly. “Makes me worry about the state of your lungs growing up with her.”

“We’re going out for pizza!” His wife declares angrily, grabbing her coat off the rack even though she’s still in her pajamas and it’s five past eight in the the morning. “We are going out and eating the most anti-Polish, American food out there, and it will be delicious!”

“Pretty sure pizza is Italian, Clauds,” John says gently.

“Oh,” she frowns. “Then we’re going out for burgers! Right? Good old, fatty, American burgers! And fries, the curly ones! And we’re going to pay for it with our hard-earned American dollars with the little dead white presidents on them! Onwards we go!”

She grabs the little beanie with the fox ears from the hook by the door and wiggles it down over their son’s head, which is starting to sprout a small garden of downy brown hair. John chuckles, handing him off to his wife as he shrugs on a jacket over his flannel pajama bottoms.

“Lead the way,” he smiles.
Autumn leaves dance on the crisp afternoon breeze, scattering the warm scent of barbecue and outdoor spice to the flaking wood bench he and Talia are sitting on. The park on Poplar Avenue is gorgeous this time of year, when the leaves stain golden and litter the playground sand with dots of yellow and vermillion, and the ruddy-faced kids play shrieking games of tag as their parents watch from nearby. Talia sips lemonade by his side, huffing impatiently at how she can't scoot in because her rounded belly (seriously, it's like a mountain) is in the way.

"Hey T, where's Derek?"

"By the big elm, dear."

Robert cranes his head around. Laura is playing loudly with Pietro and Giada's granddaughter, who are visiting from Half Moon Bay for the farmer's market. Laura is nine, and she is the bossiest, most arrogant, fearless little warrior Robert has ever met. Derek is a few meters away, crouched in solitude by a tree lining up fallen leaves with his fingers. He's quietly sorting them into color-piles, red, orange, yellow, brown.

Robert frowns. "Shouldn't he be playing with the other kids?"

"He's shy, Robert."

"He's eight."

"Not for three more months, remember?"

Robert snorts, hiding his concern. "I know he's... Well, he's not Laura, but I just worry he won't make any friends if he isn't social."

"Have you met our son? He's quite the little independent one."

That's true. Derek reminds Robert of a tiny wealthy bachelor in how quiet and smart he is, often meandering away from crowds to play with whatever is lying around in solitude. Or simply clinging to Talia's side. He runs from noise and stimulation while Laura sprints towards it, and he growls at anyone who tries to help him build model train sets. One time Robert managed to slip him into a bow tie and hand him a scotch glass filled with apple juice, and Talia just about killed him. But it was hilarious.

"His teachers don't think it's a problem, do they?" Robert asks for the second time this week, because he's bitter about missing the parent teacher conference due to work and Talia tends to sugar coat things for him.

"No, they say he's just fine for a third grader. A little quieter than some of the other kids, but very bright."

"How can he be quieter around the other kids?" Robert muses. "He's nearly as loud as Laura in the house."

"Well, he's very comfortable around us. Peers are always more intimidating, even at his age."

"Hey, let's place bets," Robert suggests, patting Talia's stomach. "The little princess in there, is she gonna be more like Derek or Laura?"

"Neither," Talia answers. "She's going to be like herself."
“Huh,” Robert chomps on a carrot stick. “You’re no fun. I bet she’s gonna take after Derek. Or at least I hope so, because two Laura’s under one roof would be chaos.”

He’s disrupted by tiny cackling from across the park. Another kid—some freckled runt with a Dodgers cap, figures—comes up and kicks Derek’s pile of leaves with a muddy sneaker. The leaves scatter in the wind and Derek pouts as the attacker giggles like the nine-year-old future delinquent he is.

Robert stands up abruptly in flash of anger. “What the hell, did you see that? Where the hell is that little bastard’s parents? I’m gonna teach them a lesson in supervision, and then I’m gonna make sure that little twerp never touches my kid ag—“

“Just wait, Robert.”

He halts mid-breath at his wife’s command and looks back to the tree, where Derek simply throws some dirt in the kid’s face and calmly resumes piling his leaves.

“Oh… Dear. We should probably go address that. He shouldn’t— Robert? Oh, for heaven’s sakes. You’re just like him.”

"I know, I know I shouldn't be laughing," Robert wipes his eyes, shoulders shaking as he tries to keep his cackling under wraps. "But T, did you see that? He was so calm about it! Amazing. God, we're raising a good one."

Talia rolls her eyes at him, but she's smiling. "Mmhm," she hums. "I told you, you have nothing to worry about."

The brat howls and runs off rubbing at his eyes, and Robert tries unsuccessfully to reign in his laughter. A minute later—

“Dad!” Derek runs over excitedly. “Look at this leaf I found!”

“Wow, that’s a… That’s a leaf, kid.”

Talia kicks him under the table.

“A-a very nice leaf, son,” Robert saves. Derek nods and happily carries the leaf back over to his tree, where he resumes making piles of them. Once he has them all in proper order he lifts them up gingerly in his tiny arms and beams down at them as he escorts them over. He sets them in front of Talia and crawls up onto the bench because he’s short.

“Can we go to the redwood forest tomorrow?” Derek asks as he fingers a purple maple leaf. "I need some lichen for my collection and I think I might find a good specimen there.”

One day last June Derek found a maple leaf the size of his face and decided to start a leaf collection. Not a car collection, not a coin collection, not even a nice boyish rock collection suitable for the average eight-year-old. A leaf collection. Robert thought it would just be a phase, but his son has spent the entire summer reading big picture books on native California plants and running back into the mansion from the woods ruddy-faced and grinning, cradling various leaves in his arms. Talia helped him create a cork board for his room to pin them up. Most of them are brown and shriveled up now, but it doesn’t dissuade Derek the slightest.

“Ah, tomorrow I need to meet with my engineers,” Robert answers. “But, ah… I guess we could go Monday after school, if you really want to.”
“Yeah!” Derek exclaims. “That’s great! Thanks, dad.”

Robert waits for Talia to jump in with a comment about finishing homework first or the fact that Monday’s a school night, but when he looks over his wife is smiling softly at the two of them, like it pleases her that her husband must go on another trip and pretend to be enthusiastic about leaves.

“DAD!” Laura comes barreling into Robert’s back.

“Hey, little rebel!”

She swishes her tangled hair out of her eyes and gazes up at him in her filthy overalls. “Dad, I need a new dollhouse!”

“Oh? And why’s that?”

“Because Gillie and Lorenzo and me are gunna’ have a sandcastle building contest, and I need mine to be the best! So I’m gonna get a dollhouse and cover it in sand.”

“I see. It’s a little late in the afternoon to run to the toy store now, but why don’t you use the stuff around here to build your castle?”

“Aww, but daddy,” Laura pouts, pushing out her bottom lip. “There’s just sticks and leaves and stuff here. I need an actual dollhouse for my castle, the bigger the better! You brought your wallet, right?”

“Laura Ann,” Talia scolds.

“Hey, I hear some of the leaves around here are pretty great. Maybe if you ask nicely Derek will lend you his new purple leaf to make a flag,” Robert suggests.

“Hey, no way!” Derek cradles the leaf away from Laura.

“I don’t want your dumb leaf anyway,” Laura sticks her tongue out at him. “Please, daddy? Talbots is right down the street, I can run down and right back in two minutes!”

“How ‘bout I walk you, Lo?” Robert offers, and swings his legs over the bench. “You’ll need someone to carry the dollhouse for you.”

“Robert.”

“Don’t worry, T, it’s the last thing I buy her for the rest of the month. We’ll be right back! She needs her castle to be the best.”

“No, Robert.”

He turns around to find Talia’s hand over her belly, a watery stain spreading out beneath her on the wood bench. His eyes nearly pop out of his head.

“Oh my— oh shit, shit, now? Are you sure?”

Talia answers with a deadpan.

“Oh oh, right, of course you’re sure, you’re the mother, okay, fuck, okay—“

“I need you to help me to the car, Robert.”

“Right! The car! Kids!”
“We’re right here, dad.”

“Mom, are you okay?” Derek asks, unsure of what’s happening. Bless his naive little eight-year-old heart.

“I’m fine, dear, I’m just having your baby sister now.” Talia answers calmly. Freakishly calm like only Talia can, even when she’s about to deliver Robert’s new tiny baby daughter into the world.

“My new tiny baby daughter,” he breathes, then fumbles to get his keys out and only drops them twice. “Come on, kids! We’re going to the hospital!”

Cora Nidíyílíí Hale is born at 11:32pm that night, and she’s the spitting image of her mother.

“Finally, one of our kids got your tan skin. At least we’re not all doomed to be pasty as fu—“

“Robert.”

“—fuuh-rench fries!” Robert narrowly dodges, as Talia lightly whacks him on the wrist.

“You already soiled the swearing habits of our first two kids, let’s not start early with this one,” she warns lightly.

“Hey, we’re right here you know,” Laura points out, as she stands on her tippy toes to get a better peek at the tiny bundle in Talia’s arms. “Besides, Derek always giggles like a little shit when he swears, he’s not as hardcore as you think, mom.”

“I am too,” Derek throws back automatically, but the heat isn’t there because he’s too busy grinning at his little sister. “This is so cool. Now I’m not the youngest anymore! I’m gonna be the best big brother ever.” Robert refrains from telling him that middle children usually get the short end of the stick.

“Oh yeah, well I’m gonna be the best big sister ever,” Laura announces.

“Too late, you stink too much.”

“Always competing, you two. Your mother just gave birth, let’s just have one evening of peace,” Robert waves a lazy hand over his children. He sinks into his hospital chair. Watching Talia give birth was exhausting. Granted he didn’t pass out like he did when Laura was born, but still. Talia broke his fingers again, which means that he won the bet and she owes him takeout this weekend.

“Can we have ice cream when we get home?” Laura asks.

“You can have all the ice cream you want,” Talia murmurs distractedly. She’s too busy gazing adoringly into Cora’s tiny sleeping face to be rational.

“Alright!” His two kids cheer and high-five, a rare display of camaraderie. “Let’s see who can eat the most without getting sick!”

“So long as you guys clean up the mess,” Robert shrugs. “Now can we go shower our newest Hale with love at home, please? All this hospital is giving me the creeps.”

“Ma’ìitsoh, would one of you please find a paper bag to put over your father’s head while we lead
him out? He’s too much of a spooked horse.”

“I am not.”

“Dad, why don’t you like hospitals?” Derek blinks up at him. He’s got these giant bunny teeth that definitely came from Robert’s side of the family.

“They’re creepy,” Robert shivers and glances around. “There’s all these humans here, being sick and injured and… Dying. I swear it’s like they sneeze and boom, they crack a rib and need to heal up in here for three weeks! They break so easily! It freaks me out.”

“They don’t heal as quickly as we do,” Talia summarizes. “But that shouldn’t be reason for our kind to discriminate against them.”

“I wasn’t, hun.”

“I know, I was informing the children, dear.”

“Well duh,” Laura rolls her eyes as she worms her way into Talia’s hospital bed to see Cora better. “Humans are awesome. Without them, there wouldn’t be anybody slower than us for us to beat in P.E.! Also there’s only like, four other werewolves at school, so we wouldn’t have anyone else to make friends with.” Always the practical one.

They stumble back into the house at twelve-thirty in the morning. The kids beg and plead until Talia agrees to let them stay home from school tomorrow so they can bond with their new baby sister. The five of them (the Hales are a family of five now!) end up sitting squished on the couch and cooing over Cora while the television drones unnoticed in the background. At two Robert orders Derek and Laura upstairs to bed so they can let Talia rest, and Talia falls asleep ten minutes later with their baby sandwiched soundly between them in bed. He stares a long time at their slack, peaceful faces before he drifts off himself, happy tears sticking his eyelashes together.

It’s about three days before he’s quickly reminded of how exhausting it is to raise a newborn.

Of all three of his kids, Cora wins the award for Incessant Crier by far. She wails tiny, high-pitched screams that turn her pink cheeks pinker with the exertion, and no amount of rocking, feeding, cooing, or toys gets her to stop. He starts nodding off in his office at work and the kids grow tired and irritable, but he feels the most for Talia who has to rise every three hours at night to feed her. It all comes to a peak two weeks later as he’s pacing bleary-eyed and grumpy at three in the morning.

“Come on, love bug, please go to sleep,” he begs as he bounces Cora gently in his arms. She continues to wail as he treks back and forth in the kitchen, the farthest location from all the other rooms in the house. But unfortunately werewolf hearing is a curse as much as a gift, and within ten minutes a disheveled Laura and Derek stumble downstairs, followed by an exhausted Talia.

“Was I this bad when I was a baby?” Derek mumbles as he slides onto a barstool.

“Nah, you didn’t cry much as a newborn. Laura was more the wailer.”

“Hey,” Laura snaps, but the effect is lost as she yawns wide.

“Would you shítázhi like some warm milk?” Talia asks as she opens the fridge.

“ Heck yeah.”

“Yes please.”
“Can I have Nesquik in mine?” Robert asks.

“I wasn’t offering to you, but yes.”

“Better make it four tablespoons, I gotta stay awake somehow,” he yawns as he readjusts Cora so she screams into his shoulder. “I dunno, T. I tried cartoons, the storybooks, and rocking. You wanna try feeding her again?”

“I just did that twenty minutes ago, Robert.”

He groans. “That was only twenty minutes ago? Christ. This is it, I’m getting an ulcer. For real this time, Talia. I can feel it.”

“Werewolves can’t get ulcers,” his wife informs him.

“What’s an ulcer?” Derek asks.

“It’s a stomach sore humans get when they’re majorly stressed out,” Robert answers.

“Gross.”

Then Robert asks for some bacon and Talia shoots him a disapproving glare. He pouts. “Well, it’s technically morning,” he mutters.

“I could go for some bacon,” Laura adds sleepily, muffled behind his arms on the counter.

“You have school in four hours,” Taila frowns, her answer for ‘no.’

“Maybe we could just stay home,” Derek tries sleepily. “We haven’t slept in like, two weeks. I’m just gonna fall asleep in class.”

“I’ll talk to Gus tomorrow,” Robert tells the room. “He makes special tattoo ink and claw depressors for werewolves, maybe he could craft some heavy-duty earplugs for us.”

His kids mumble “m’kay”s and make grabby hands as Talia gets the milk glasses out from the microwave. Robert hands the screaming Cora off to the nearest child —Derek— so he can drain his chocolate milk.

“Whoa, sudden baby,” Derek blinks as Cora plops in his arms.

“Oh my god, she’s so frickin’ loud!” Laura whines.

“Just hold her for a minute, Derek, I need to hydrate.” He tips his head back and guzzles the sweet, chalky goodness for three seconds, ten seconds, fifteen seconds before he realizes—

It’s quiet.

The four of them stare at Cora, who’s suddenly silent as a rock as she sits on Derek’s lap. Derek blinks, meets their eyes with a milk mustache above his lip, and blurts, “I didn’t do anything, I swear.”

“Huh,” Talia voices.

“Huh,” Robert echoes.

“What the actual hell,” Laura declares eloquently.
“I guess she… Likes me?” Derek giggles. He grins down at his baby sister and pats her head gently. Cora continues to drool contentedly in utter blissful silence, tiny eyelids dropping with fatigue. “I totally knew I was gonna be the best big brother ever!”

“You didn’t even do anything!” Laura pipes up angrily, but Robert shushes her.

“Shhh! We’ve all agreed that this is super weird, but apparently our own Derek Hale has some sort of magical soothing scent or something because he’s the only thing that’s been able to shut her up since she came home. He’s like a mother duck that has maternal power over her ducklings.”

“Hey!”

“Alright shíyázhí, off to bed now,” Talia smiles softly as she scoops a sleeping Cora into her arms and carries her to the nursery. “Thank you, Derek. You’ll have to start holding her more often.”

“How do babies fall asleep so fast?” Laura whispers.

“You’d be tired too if you’d been busy keeping the whole world awake for two weeks,” Robert crouches down in front of her. “Wanna ride the Piggy Back Express up to bed?”

“Yeah!”

“What about me?”

“Here, champ. Take an arm.” He holds out a muscled bicep for Derek to climb on. Once his kids are safely positioned on top of him he rises and begins the journey to their rooms. They have a sleepy argument over "who will be as strong as dad" when they’re older, and it’s probably Robert’s favorite argument thus far.

Once his tiny brats are in bed he kisses Laura on the cheek and ruffles Derek’s hair gently. “Thanks, champ. We owe you one.”

.oO0O.o. April 12th, 2000.

When John’s son learns to speak, he can’t (much like the rest of the world) pronounce his own name. The closest he can get is “Stiles,” which is a close articulation of the first two syllables of his eight-syllable name. Thus, he starts going by this new nickname much to John’s relief and Claudia’s dismay.

Stiles is four when he asks John about John’s least favorite person.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, son?”

It’s late Monday evening and Stiles is scribbling in a Spiderman coloring book at John’s feet. John is reading In Cold Blood by Truman Capote for the third time, and Claudia is in the shower. He can hear her singing the Carpenter’s ’Top of The World’ from here.

“Our we learned about family trees, like aunts and uncles and stuff,” Stiles croons in his little four-year-old lisp. John’s heart sinks. He knows what’s coming.

“Oh?”
“Yeah. We talked about g’anmas and g’anpas too. Why don’t I have any g’anmas and g’anpas?”

“Well you do have them, you’ve just never met them,” John explains.

“Why not?”

“Well your mom’s mom, grandma Górski, is not a very nice woman. You actually met her when you were just a baby, but it’s probably better that you don’t remember that. Your mom’s dad, grandpa Górski, left many years ago to live somewhere else.”

“Where’d he go?”

“We don’t know, kiddo.”

“Like on a ship in the ocean?”

“Maybe.”

“Like a pirate ship? I like pirates.”

“No, probably not a pirate ship. Just somewhere else with a woman that wasn’t your grandma.”

“Oh.”

“Mhm.”

“Whadda’ ’bout your mommy and daddy?”

“Grandma Stilinski? She lives in New York, where I used to live. She’s afraid of many things, especially since she’s gotten older, and doesn’t like flying in planes. We haven’t taken you to see her yet because plane tickets are very expensive, and we need to save up for one first.”

“Whadda’ ‘bout your daddy? Is he a puh’leeese off’cer like you?”

“No, Stiles. My dad isn’t alive anymore.”

“He’s dead?”

“He’s dead, yeah.”

“Why?”

“He drank too much.”

“Milk? I like milk.”

“No, kiddo. Not milk.”

“Don’t you miss him? I’d be sad if you was dead and you’re my daddy.”

“Nah. I don’t miss him.”

“Hey, did you know that Octopuses have eight legs? Like Doc Oc!”

“Wow. Did you know that centipedes have one-hundred legs?”

“Whooooaa!”
“Yep.”

“No way! That’s like a, a million jillion legs!”

“Just one hundred, son.”

“Wow… I can only count to… Ten? Yeah, to ten! Wanna hear?”

“Sure.”

“Oooone, twooo, threeee… Octopus…!”

“Huh? Octopus isn’t a number!”

Stiles erupts into tiny giggles.

.o0O0o. June 16th, 2001.

Stiles loves bath time.

Stiles loves bath time so much that sometimes he strips naked in the middle of the day and John will find him running around the living room in a towel cape, screaming “I am Stiles, king of the bath!” in his tiny voice, mooning the front window whenever the towel slips to the ground. The neighbors have only complained twice, so John figures he has a little while longer to teach his son about the sacredness of nudity before social services knock on his door.

“I dunno, Claudia. What did we do to make our son love the tub so much?”

“I think it’s the bubbles, my love,” Claudia giggles as she squirts more soap into the bath. They used to go through two bottles a week before they started hiding it in the medicine cabinet so Stiles couldn’t find it. His son used to squirt it all into the sink, plug the drain, and turn on the faucet until a bubble tower overflowed the sink and covered the bathroom floor in slippery foam.

“More, more!” Stiles demands as he watches his mother, splashing happily. John holds up his towel-shield so he doesn’t get spray all over his new jeans.

“I think that’s quite enough for my little bubble monster,” Claudia notes.

“Raaawwrrrr!” Stiles growls and bares his teeth at her. “Amm’i scary?”

“Very ferocious,” Claudia declares.

“Where’s my ducky?”

“It’s right behind you, kiddo.”

“Oh!”

Stiles has fifty million toys in the tub already, everything from action figures to wind-up frogs to clownfish sponges. They get lost in the bubbles as he fidgets and jabbers while Claudia scrubs shampoo into his hair, making John chuckle. He blows bubbles at Stiles’s face for fun and the child squeals with tiny giggles.

“You better get out now before you turn into a raisin,” John advises fifteen minutes later.
“Raisins are GROSS!” Stiles hollers. “NooooOOOOO!” and runs out of the tub.

Most kids learn to walk and then talk. Stiles learned how to run and then yell.

His son’s tiny, slippery, butt-naked body slips past them as he runs down the hall, leaving a trail of wet footprints in his wake on the carpet. John tries to block the door and catch him in a towel but Stiles ducks and slides by. He’s impossibly fast for being so tiny.

He follows the giggles to the living room, where Stiles is standing on the coffee table, chest and butt cheeks stained pink from the bath as he gleefully squirts the rubber ducky at the ceiling fan. John catches him in a towel and carries the squirming four-year-old to his tiny bedroom, where Claudia is laying out the pajamas.

“Alright, kiddo, how ’bout you hand me Mr. Ducky now so he can go back to the bathroom where he belongs.”

“I want a story!”

“Let’s hand over Mr. Ducky first.”

Stiles thrusts the toy at John and “storytime, storytime, story storystorystorystory daddy!”

“How ’bout we get you into your pajamas first, okay little love?” Claudia proposes, and dresses Stiles in his blue footie pajamas as John picks up the room a bit. Damp towels in the hamper, abandoned action figures on the shelf, shoes in the closet.

“Okay, story! I’m ready now, daddy!” Stiles squirms on his mattress, clean and red-cheeked with excitement.

“Alright, lets do our calm breaths first, okay?” Claudia coaxes as she kneels at his bed. “In for one, two, three…” The routine is essential to tranquilizing Stiles for bedtime. If they didn’t take action their son would be bouncing off the walls until midnight. But in a few minutes Stiles is substantially less squirmy, so Claudia kisses him goodnight and turns off the overhead light.

“Can I has a story now, daddy?” Stiles whispers.

John sighs as he sits on the edge of the bed. “Okay. Once upon a time there was a little boy who liked to be called Stiles. One day Stiles squirted his rubber ducky all over his daddy, and the daddy was so tired that he left his son with a family of wolves in the forest.”

“Daddy!” Stiles wrinkles his nose, but his tiny teeth are showing in a scrunchy grin.

John chuckles and pats his son’s knee. “Alright. What story do you want tonight?”

“Um… Ummmm. If You Give a Mouse a Cookie.”

“Ah. Okay.”

He retrieves the book from the shelf and sits on the edge of Stiles’s tiny twin bed. He has the Power Ranger bed set with matching pillowcases, and a stuffed bloodhound named ‘Doggie’ that he can’t sleep without. As John turns to page one, Stiles wriggles around in his blankets until he’s a Stiles burrito with Doggie smooshed to his cheek, big brown eyes blinking up expectantly.

"If you give a mouse a cookie, he's going to ask for a glass of milk,” John reads. He needs to squint since he left his reading glasses in the living room. "When you give him the milk, he'll probably ask
He continues narrating quietly, tipping the pages so that his toddler can see the pictures. Stiles snuffles and nuzzles into his pillow, eyelashes twitching up and down. At one point Claudia appears briefly in the doorway, a smiling silhouette in her slippers and fuzzy robe. She always tells him how great of a reader he is— "Your voice, John, it's so relaxing! You should read to me next time I need to get a shot!"

He tends to get lost in his reading during story time. It’s the end of the day, usually very exhausting days since his kid is a tiny rocket ship, and the bedroom is small and homey in the same way John’s bedroom was small and homey in New York. His heart beats sleepily with the low drum of the fan and the warm light of the Toy Story lamp.

"—which means he'll need Scotch tape. He'll hang up his drawing and stand back to look at it. Looking at the refrigerator will remind him that he's thirsty. So... he'll ask for a glass of milk. And chances are if he asks you for a glass of milk, he's going to want a cookie to go with it."

He closes the book and looks down. Stiles is snoring softly into Doggie’s ear, pink lips hanging open. His dark eyelashes are impossibly long atop his chubby cheeks, and John drinks it all in with a small smile. He quietly stands, turns off the lamp, and plants a small kiss on his son’s forehead.

“Goodnight, kiddo.”

.o0O0o. July 1st, 2001.

“Please tell me that’s the pile of paid bills.”

Sunday evening shrouds the house in the sticky humidity of mid-summer. The rickety ceiling fan in the kitchen whirl-whirl-whirl's above the dining table, where John’s reading glasses keep slipping off his sweaty nose. Claudia is across from him braless in a tank top with her fork tucked into the last cold slice of berry pie from the fridge. Stiles is laying on the carpet in his Buzz Lightyear undies watching cartoons, orange fingers dipping into a bowl and carrying Cheetos to his mouth.

“I’m afraid that’s the pile of paid bills,” John sighs, dipping his head towards the single sealed envelope addressed to the water company. Claudia chews her thumbnail.

“Oh… Fiddlesticks.” She pouts at the top-heavy stack of second notice envelopes and uses them to fan herself. “I was really hoping not.”

“That’s okay,” He says. “We’re okay, we just…”

Claudia looks at him knowingly over her tin pie pan. “How bad is it?”

“We just need to start cutting somewhere.”

John’s recounted everything three times, and they're about three-fifty short. Between registering Stiles for Kindergarten, the Volkswagen repairs, and the unfortunate value of the vase Stiles tipped over at the antique store, the last month has been… Hard.

“No no, we can fix this,” Claudia says determinedly. She shovels the last bite of pie into John’s mouth and perks up. “I’ll get a job!”

“Oh, Clauds,” John looks at her. “I hate to make you do that, I know how much you like staying at
“Nonsense,” Claudia waves her hands. “It’ll be fun to find a job! And it’s seems like it’s time to do that since—‘ she says their son’s real name. —will be off at Kindergarten soon anyway. I’ll see to get something in the mornings so I can still pick him up from school in the afternoon.”

Since the department demands John’s presence so often, she’s been the one to stay at home to take care of Stiles. She’s the heart of the Stilinski household— when Stiles was born she spent all day showering him with love. When Stiles was a toddler they went on adventures together to parks and museums or baking cookies in the afternoon. She floats across the shabby carpet singing Abba along with the cassette player on the kitchen window ledge, brightening the walls and outdated upholstery with her optimism. While John spends long days at the station she does the grocery shopping, moves the laundry and the vacuuming since John’s hand isn’t as good at it, and slowly works her crafty magic to make the place seem less ugly.

“I can see if I can show up to the station a little later so I can drop him off at school in the mornings,” John offers. “What kind of place do you want to look for?”

“I want to be a florist!” Claudia exclaims. He can’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. He had been expecting acrobat, puppy sitter, cake decorator, or one of the people that walk around carnivals dressed as a mime.

“I shouldn’t be surprised, considering how you once spent two weeks living in a tree so you could save said tree.”

“You bet! And flowers, John, flowers! I already have a garden, what more could the florist people want?”

“Nothing. You’re perfect,” John tells her honestly, because you’d have to be an idiot not to hire his wife. She’s talkative, cheerful, artistic, and he has yet to meet a single person who doesn’t like her. She’ll make the best damn flower arrangements Beacon Hills has ever seen.

“Yay!” Claudia claps her hands together. “Oh, I can’t wait! Now how do I find a florist place, John? Are there any listings in the paper?”

“Take a peek,” He says, sliding over the morning Beacon Hills Gazette over to her. “Meanwhile we still do need to cut somewhere, though. I’m thinking either takeout dinners or our air conditioner.” The single, tiny box air conditioner balanced on the window ledge in the living room.

“What about the cable?”

“We never had cable, dear.”

“Phooey. That seems to be the thing people cut first. Well how about my sewing projects? I don’t need to make a new dress every month.”

“No, you keep making your dresses,” John tells her. Claudia looks beautiful in her dresses. “We should probably stop buying Stiles comic books, those things are twenty bucks a pop.”

The two of them look to Stiles, who’s watching TV happily beside a Batman action figure. They look at each other again.

“We’ll find something else.”
Robert frowns at his too-cute-for-her-own-good daughter. It's been an ongoing game to get Cora to say her first word since she popped out of Talia, but now she's a few weeks from turning two and the competition is higher than ever.

Laura had squealed “DA-DA!” at thirteen months old. Derek had mumbled “amá”, the Navajo word for “mother” at fourteen months, which simultaneously drove a dagger through Robert’s heart and made Talia smile smugly. But Cora is approaching twenty-four months and hasn’t uttered a sound more complex than a mishmash of baby vowels. Robert is half-worried his daughter is mute. Talia isn’t worried at all. All of them have started pointing and pronouncing everything in sight, which makes them look like idiots in public when they spend forty minutes shopping because they keep stopping to point at "milk" and "baby" and "idiot" at that one narrowly-missed lawsuit at Great America.

“Come on, Cora. DAA-DEE.” Robert frowns and shakes her chubby arms a little, like it might get her to work better. Today is one of those rare, terrifying experiences where all five of them are at the grocery store because Talia wants him there to decide on the week's meat and they picked Derek up from school which meant that Laura wanted to come too and they can’t leave Cora home alone.

Thus, Robert is taking the opportunity to gain advantage with the naming thing, while Talia is across the store picking shampoos and scented soapy stuff without him because apparently he never picks good ones (even though they all look the same). Which means that he’s left babysitting the baby in the cart by the dairy section. Laura and Derek are stealing grapes from the produce crate behind him and arguing over which ones taste better.

One of the many gifts (pain in the asses) about werewolves is that werewolves have a fast metabolism, as do growing children. Robert eats half his weight a day, but his meals are birdseed compared to what his nine-year-old son packs away. Derek and him often have “second dinner” together a few hours after actual dinner, and if Robert has any more sweets in his secret dessert drawer they meet up again at ten to have "third dinner," which is really just "first dessert."

But that's just Rob and his middle kid. Cora and Laura wolf down impressive amounts of grub considering their tiny waistlines, and Talia is always buying fancy spices and exotic ingredients for recipes. They easily go through $800 of groceries a week, and that's if they don't need to contribute to any bake sales or charity drives, in which Talia always insists on whipping up at least six pounds of meals from scratch. Robert is thankful he has the money to support it all.

“Come on, you little cutie pants, work with me here,” he bargains, then he leans close to Cora's tiny ear and whispers, “mommy and I are tied one-to-one with the first word thing, and you’re my last hope to take her down. Do you realize what a rare opportunity this is for daddy? So please say daddy’s name first, okay? Dad. Da-da. Da-ddy.”
He’s answered with Cora barfing all over his shirt.

“Oh my— shit, oh gross, Talia!” He hollers automatically, only to remember that his wife is at the other end of the store.

“Hey! You kids can’t eat that many grapes!”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“Yes he can, Laura, he’s the manager! Look at his name tag!”

“Oh. Aren’t you a little old to be a manager, Mark? You could probably retire if you wanted.”

Robert braces himself. Those are undeniably his kids. He spins around and pushes the cart over towards the two dark-haired tweens standing opposite the man who must be Mark The Manager, and only realizes how unprofessional he looks with baby barf dripping down his shirt when he gets there. Laura is standing defiantly and Derek is staring guiltily at the three half-demolished grape bags on the display stand. Cora sucks on her fingers.

“Excuse me, are these your kids?”

“Yes, can’t you tell by how beautiful they are?” Robert grins good-naturedly, but Mark The Manager just glares at him. Robert digs into his pocket for a Benjamin and hands it over, offering his apologies. Then makes Laura apologize (I’m sorry your grapes don’t taste that good) and Derek (Sorry, sir).

“Damn guys, can’t I leave you alone for a second?” He voices as he leads them to the yogurts.

“Sorry dad,” Derek offers, as Laura blurs “Of course you can, pop!”

“Ba!” Cora squee in agreement, and Robert sighs and frowns at the spit stain on his sweater.

“Milk,” Laura pronounces clearly as she points to said dairy product.

“No, it’s mulk,” Derek insists.

“Who the fuck says ‘mulk?’” Laura wrinkles her nose and then points to Derek. “Un-edd-yoo-cate-ed.”

Laura’s swearing habit has grown considerably to Talia’s utter horror and Robert’s secret hilarity. They’ve given up trying to change her habits at home, but in public they’re reminded just how obscene it is for an eleven-year-old girl to spew every foul word under the sun.

“You ought to be ashamed for letting your daughter talk like that,” an old rickety woman scolds him from her cart. Robert comes back with, “Yes, well. She scored the winning goal for her field hockey team last week, so we’re proud of her anyway. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go oversee her snack choices now.”

The other edition to Laura’s non-conformative demeanor are the bright pink streaks in her hair. Two weeks ago she came home from a sleepover at Madeline Mac-something’s house with her entire head dyed magenta, courtesy of Madeline who has blue hair. Which Robert thought was very cool, but Talia just about had a stroke. The compromise became pink streaks, but only because Talia’s hairdresser couldn’t get it all out without shaving her head.

“Alright little beasts, pick out some yogurt for your lunches, lets say six each,” He steers his kids to
the dairy shelves.

“But I like to eat them after school!”

"Yeah, and usually eat two because they're so small!"

“Oh, well in that case. Six each.”

“Dad—"

"Hush, you little tapeworms. You can't just live off yogurt. Eat some vegetables."

"Sure," Laura snorts. "As soon as you do."

It's no secret that Robert would probably replace all his leafy greens with extra helpings of steak and potatoes if he could. Or pie. Pie, probably. Speaking of which— he fingers a package of mini cherry pies longingly. “Think your mom will notice if I sneak these in the cart?”

“Yes,” his kids say in unison. And honestly, do they practice that?

“Okay, how about I give them to you Laura, and you just sneak them out under your sweatshirt!” He mocks. "If your mom catches you I’ll give you a Franklin to make up for the grounding."

“Make it two Franklins and you’ve got yourself a deal, pops.”

“Why can’t I do it?” Derek protests.

“Because you sweat when you’re nervous, champ,” Robert rubs his son’s hair teasingly. “And you’d chicken out halfway through the door.”

“Oooh, ice cream!”

Laura sprints to the frozen dessert, followed immediately by her nine-year old brother’s scrabbling shoes. The two wrestle with each other to get the glass door open and dive for their favorites; Laura with the behemoth tub of triple-chocolate peanut butter moose tracks, Derek with a regular tub of plain vanilla.

“Kids, we’ve been over this. Just get the minis, your mother doesn’t like you overdosing on sugar anyway,” Robert reasons even though he would chop off his right arm to get both tubs. But nooo, they’re not allowed to do that anymore because he ate the whole thing in one sitting once or twice, which is apparently “unreasonable.”

“How many?” Derek asks as he already’s scooping three mini vanillas into his arms.

“Lets say three each." Laura scoffs. “Daaad, I’m a growing girl! I need calcium! Do you want me to get osteo-porpoise?”

Robert chuckles and claps her on the shoulder, since she bites people who ruffle her hair. “I think you mean ‘osteoporosis,’ Lo. A condition of ill health, much like diabetes, which I’d prefer you don’t have to deal with anytime soon.”

Laura pokes his stomach with a tiny index finger. “Says the dad who scarfs down entire boxes of donuts when mom isn’t looking.”

“Hey, if we use your beer fridge in the garage could we get five each?” Derek tries. Robert is friends
with Doug Patell and his wife, werewolves who run a wolfsbane brewery to provide liquors that
effect werewolves. Robert gets a discount because he and Doug go back since college.

"What, so you can hide extras in there without your mother knowing?"

"Yeah!" His kids exclaim in unison.

"Ha! No." Robert snorts. "Your mother would kill me if she found out. Or worse, she would divorce
me."

"Dad, can I try the beer in your beer fridge though?" Laura tries, eyes sparkling mischievously.
Definitely got that from Talia.

"Ask me again when you're sixteen."

Laura shrugs and skips off to the poultry section. She goes straight for the hamburger meat and
Derek (Robert’s son in every shape and form) makes a beeline for the prize skirt-steaks. The rest of
the shopping trip almost goes completely without incident; Cora sucks happily on the shopping cart
handle, Robert finds his favorite French cheese in the deli section, and only two people glance
disapprovingly at the baby-barf stain on his cardigan.

Until he turns his back for a minute to pick out some pancake mix, in which Laura and Derek find
the pet aisle.

"Ha! This is your dinner!"

“No, it’s yours!”

He skids around the corner just in time to see his two kids playing tug of war with a jumbo bag of
doggie kibble. The plastic is stretching between their fingers, warping the picture of the labrador on
the front to a something from a Salvador Dali painting. His eyes widen as he spies the man on the
ladder restocking lighter fluid by the barbecue supplies and the woman cooking potstickers at the
free sample table a couple yards away, just as the kibble bag tears and sends tiny balls flying
everywhere.

“How?"

What happens next is like something from an episode of *Seinfeld*, and Robert sees it unfold in slow
motion.

Thousands of pieces of kibble hit the floor and bounce across the linoleum, and the man on the
ladder startles at the noise and loses his balance, knocking over several bottles of lighter fluid. The
lady cooking the potstickers screams and ducks as the bottles hit the floor and spurt gasoline into the
air, a few drops land on the hop-can stove beneath the dumplings, the sample table goes up in a
whoosh of flames with a loud bang, Mark the Manager runs into the aisle and immediately trips over
the spilled kibble, and Talia rounds the corner looking shocked and then murderous.

“HEY! What the hell are ‘ya trying to do to my store?!” Mark The Manager bellows beet-red from
his position on the floor. Swarms of wide-eyed shoppers rush to see the commotion.

“What the—"

“Someone call 911!"

“Oh my God, there’s a fire!”
“FUCK!” Laura screams, to Talia’s utter horror and every shopper’s judgement. Derek stares at it all in silent terror and Robert quickly grabs his family and steers them towards the exit, wholeheartedly avoiding Talia’s fuming expression. No about of millionaire charm and bribery will get them out of this one.

“Robert Hale,” Talia hisses as they bolt towards the door while Mark The Manager screams threats of lawsuits behind them.

“Fucking hell, did you see that? Fuck! FUCK!” Laura yells again and Robert (to his utter shame) throws “Sorry, Tourette’s!” over his shoulder when shoppers gape at her. Talia yells at him considerably for this later. The car ride home is deadly silent. His wife insists on driving the Porsche so Robert knows he’s in deep, deep shit.

.o0O0o.

"Kids, go to your room," Talia orders as she enters the house in a storm. "You're grounded for two months each, no TV, no phone, no video games."

"But mom, we—"

“Three months!” Talia fumes. "If you want to make it four I suggest you keep talking. Now go. To. Your. Rooms."

The kids leave to trudge upstairs, Derek looking like a kicked puppy and even Laura seems sheepish beneath her brooding.

"Hun, don't you think that was a bit harsh—"

“And you."

Talia whirls around, eyes flashing red, and strides over to him like the very embodiment of femme fatale. “Ya’d aliinili, Robert, I leave you for two minutes and you set the store on fire?”

Robert winces. “Well, yes. But not on purpose!“

"It's exhausting, Robert," Talia purses her lips. "To always be the stern one. I know you like to be the fun parent, but you must learn how to discipline our children. I’d like to play ‘fun parent’ once in a while too, but don’t get a chance when you’re already playing the part, and you play it all the time. We need to have balance."

"Aw, geez. I'm sorry T, I just— it's hard to be the tough one! I want them to like me, you know?" Robert rubs his forehead. "The kids already like you, you're all nurturing and fun and pretty!"

"Fun and pretty," Talia deadpans.

He flings his arms up. “Yes! You're like an eagle! Those endangered eagles that are really majestic and awe-inspiring but kinda terrifying at the same time! Like they're peaceful creatures but they'll fuck you up if you cross them, you know? But everybody loves eagles anyway because they’re awesome!”

Talia looks unimpressed. “And if I’m the eagle, then what does that make you?”
That catches him off guard. “Uh… Well, I. I don’t know, I guess I’m… A wolf? A bear, maybe?”

His wife steps forward calmly. “You are a jackrabbit.”

And that’s… Not exactly the animal he associates himself with. “Why am I a jackrabbit?” His voice goes so high it cracks.

“Jackrabbits let their young wander off,” Talia tells him cooly. “They are often so preoccupied scavenging for themselves that they lose track of their offspring, and then the offspring get eaten by other predators like foxes and hunting dogs… Unless the eagle swoops in to eat them first.”

Robert gulps. “Oh.”

"I can't always be the one to enforce discipline. You need to keep them under control if I leave you alone with them," Talia says tightly.

"I was! Or I thought I was, but I turn around for two seconds and they were caught up in their own game! You know how they are—"

"I do, which is why I'm always two steps ahead of them."

"Yeah, but sometimes you have to let them go!" He startles himself by raising his voice. Talia blinks in surprise. "Sometimes," he says quieter. "You have to let the leash be a little longer, no pun intended. But my point is, sometimes it's good to let them do something a little crazy once in a while."

"Setting a grocery store on fire is more than a little crazy—"

"Yes, but now they'll be more careful! They're just kids, T," Robert argues. "This is what they do, don't you remember being one? At Stanford every kid there had spent their teenage years under the hawk eyes of pushy, overbearing, ultra-strict parents who never let them do anything on their own, and you wanna know what happened the second they walked on campus? They went wild! Sex, boos, failing classes on purpose to overcompensate for everything they missed! Maybe if we let our kids have a little slack to learn life themselves, they won't turn out like that later."

Talia considers him, sighing softly. "We can't both be the fun parent."

Robert takes her hands. "Sure we can," he says gently. "But we can also both be the scary parent, you'll just be a little bit better at it than I will. I'll come in when they do something really bad, like when Derek gets a girl pregnant or Laura kills the first construction worker who catcalls her."

"Please, Laura's the one who's going to get pregnant," Talia sighs. "Derek will probably stay at home until he's twenty-five and then he'll leave to backpack around the world."

"And when they do, we'll be there to yell at them," he winks.

He wins a surrender smile from Talia, but he also sees something sad there. For just a second she lets her walls down and he can suddenly see right through her. He brushes a strand of silky hair back from her cheek. “Hey, look at me. Talia, I think you are a smart, sexy, beautiful woman, and I think you're doing an awesome job as a mom.”

Her eyelashes startle with a rare flutter of vulnerably, and he knows he hit her insecurity right on the head. A second later she composes herself, locking her confident mask back over her features.

“Thank you, dear. I think I’ll go for a walk. Please unload the groceries.”
He grins. “Sure thing, honey.”

Fifteen minutes later he’s slumped into the couch staring at the television but not really watching. Cora is down for nap in the nursery, the other two monsters are sulking upstairs in their rooms, and he’s changed out of his baby-barf cardigan and into a sweater beneath his signature leather jacket. He’s raising his kids right, isn’t he? It’s not like they set the store on fire on purpose. And that free sample lady is probably fine. He even made peace with Talia, so that’s good. But sometimes he doesn’t realize how much time he and his wife spend worrying over their kids liking them.

“Pssst! Dad!”

He turns to the window, where his two elder children are knocking on the glass and pointing to the front door mouthing, “Let us in! Open the door you couch potato!”

“What in the—?” He stares them down as he gets up to unlock the door. They giggle and slip around his legs, tossing a brown bag back and forth out of his reach. He whirs around and follows them to the couch. “Holy shit, guys, don’t tell me you escaped from the balcony again? You’re lucky your mom’s not here or she’d have your tails on a platter! Hey, quit giggling, you know laughter is strictly forbidden in this house. And what’s in the bag, drugs? You’d better share the good stuff with me!”

“Dad, dad, ohmigod, stop.” Laura wheezes from her sprawled position on the couch cushions. “You’re a riot, it’s too much!”

“We sneak out all the time, you just never notice us,” Derek giggles from Laura’s armpit. She kicks him and he belly-flops on her back. Robert smiles as he crosses his arms.

“Alright you two, for real now. Whatcha got there?”

His kids wipe their noses and straighten up in their seats. He plops down between them as Laura presents him the paper bag. “We’re sorry dad,” Derek offers. “For exploding the dog food and accidentally setting the grocery store on fire.”

“But don’t worry, we bought these with our actual money,” Laura assures, to which her brother nods vigorously. Because Laura has a history with stealing his credit cards and buying “necessities” like bedazzled jackets and hand massagers.

Robert peeks inside the grease-stained paper and feels his mouth fall open. “You got me mini cherry pies from the bakery on Walnut street?”

“Yeah! Three of them, to be exact. So you can share if you want to, you know. As a courtesy. In fact sharing is highly encouraged!”

“You guys snuck out of the house and risked your mother’s wrath so you could buy me mini cherry pies from the bakery on Walnut street?”

“Did we break him?” Derek whispers to Laura.

“I don’t know, but if we did, I call dibs on his inheritance,” she whispers back.

“The inheritance will be split evenly between my three children,” Robert voices as he pulls out a greasy, puffy pie oozing with cherry perfection. “Also, this is probably the coolest thing you guys have ever done for me.” It’s true. He sort of wants to cry but he would never, ever do that in front of them so he stuffs his face with calories instead.
“Anyway, back to the sharing suggestion,” Laura licks her lips as she bats her eyelashes up at him.

“Sure smells good,” Derek adds. He climbs over Laura to stick his nose into the bag of pies.

“Tapeworms!” Robert declares around his pie as he throws the pastry bag to them. “Evil, tapeworm children! Eating all my pies!”

“Thanks, dad!”

“Yissss, thanks pop.”

“Wow, should we be reckless and eat it on the couch, too?” He proposes as they start digging in.

“Mom’s not here,” Derek plops his sneakers up on the coffee table. Robert mirrors him gleefully.

The next twenty minutes are filled with the sound of smacking, wiping mouths on sleeves, and playful bickering. The pies disappear bite by bite and Robert rests at ease as his stomach grows heavy and his loafers rock happily on the furniture. He forgets all about his former woes— he has pretty good kids. The best, even.

"Hey Der," He says. "How do you feel about backpacking across the world?"

“Sounds kinda lame. Why?”

"Good. Just checking."

.o0O0o. September 5th, 2002.

“Stiles did what.”

John is sitting on a red plastic chair in Mrs. Bonardi’s Kindergarten classroom beside his kid, who’s squirming atop a tinier red plastic chair. On John’s other side is another parent with her son (a small boy with a crooked jaw and a wild mop of shiny black hair) only that boy is sitting still, tiny hands clasped on his lap and looking appropriately ashamed. While Stiles hardly resembles John, the similarity between the woman and her son is striking; both have huge brown cow eyes, tanned olive skin, and heads of wild dark ringlets.

“Stiles stuck a crayon up another student’s nose,” Mrs. Bonardi repeats, clasping her hands seriously. “The student, Billy Reynolds, had to be taken to the emergency room.”

There’s a slight popping sound as John’s mouth drops open in shock; sure, Stiles could be a hyperactive little brat, but sticking a crayon up— Christ, when he offered to attend this impromptu parent-teacher conference so Claudia could go to her job interview, he hadn’t expected this. He sputters, lips flapping soundlessly, and considers dying of shame right there onto the alphabet carpet. Or carting Stiles off to the nearest adoption clinic? Beside him the other mother’s mouth falls open as well, and Stiles, to his horror, giggles.

“Jesus,” John sighs, regarding Mrs. Bonardi apologetically. “Is this kid okay? The parents, God, they must be— is he okay?"

“He’s a poop head!” Stiles pipes up indignantly beside him, and John silences him with one of the fiercest glares he can muster. “Stiles,” he hisses.

“Billy is fine,” Mrs. Bonardi states primly. “The doctors were able to get it out quickly and without
“Stiles, why would you do something like that?” John demands. He didn’t raise his son to assault other kindergartener’s with coloring supplies. How could Stiles even get the idea to be so mean? Claudia is his prime role model and she once cried because she accidentally stepped on a rolly-polly.

“He wouldn’t give them back!” Stiles blurs fiercely in his squeaky five-year-old lisp, effectively spraying John with spit. John wipes it off his cheek and digs his fingers into his impending headache.

“Give what back?”

“The crayons, dad!”

“Stiles, we don’t— Jesus, kid, we don’t do that kind of thing to other people, even if they take your things,” he explains as calmly as he can.

“But dad, it wasn't—!”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Bonardi, but I’ve got a shift starting in half an hour and the parking at the hospital is terrible on Mondays. Could you tell me why my son and I are here, please?” The woman beside John speaks up, eyebrows arched high above her smooth cheekbones. A single brown curl wavers over the shoulder of her puppy-print scrubs.

Mrs. Bonardi sighs, looking like she regrets getting that teaching degree right about now. “Mrs. McCall—“

“Ms.”

“Ms. McCall, your son then joined Stiles in vandalizing our walls.” Which is when she turns around to gesture to the crayon scribbles on the classroom wallpaper. A crude illustration of a frowny-faced Billy is depicted in red, and beside him are two smiling stick figures, one of which has a cape with a shaky bat logo drawn on it. John gapes and looks in utter apology to the mother beside him, who raises her eyebrows at her son.

“Now Scott,” Ms. McCall voices calmly, surprisingly without a single hint of anger. “Why would you do that?”

It’s almost a full thirty seconds of silence before the child says anything. He squirms in his seat, peeking at her shyly beneath dark lashes, pursing his bow lips and chewing them with a crooked jaw. Stiles looks at him and says loudly, “Go on, you can do it!” before John shushes him. Scott mumbles something so soft they all lean forward and strain to make it out, but can’t hear him.

“Louder, honey. Use your outdoor voice,” Ms. McCall coaxes.

“He took my crayons,” Scott voices at a perfect indoor volume, staring at the floor.

“You mean Billy took Stiles’s crayons, and then Stiles stole yours?” Ms. McCall lifts an eyebrow and looks at Stiles, who glares backs her and—

“NOOOOOOO!” His son crows obstinately into the woman’s face, to John’s absolute horror. He grabs Stiles’s arm, afraid his kid will try to run off and start shoving crayons up Ms. McCall’s nose, and Jesus Christ where is Claudia?

“Stiles, you’re being very rude,” he scolds. His wife is really so much better at this kind of thing.
“Alright,” Ms. McCall backs off, raising her hands and redirecting her eyebrow to John. “So then Scott, who did take them from you?”

“BILLY!” Stiles yells as he slips out of John’s hold and jumps from his chair, running over to the scribble-mural on the classroom wall. He ignores John’s orders to come back and sit down, instead whirling around and jabbing a tiny pink finger to the crude illustration of what must be Billy Reynolds. “Billy took them, lady! He took Scott’s crayons and wouldn’t give them back! That’s why he got crayons up his nose, b’cause I’m Batman!”

Stiles finishes by striking his favorite superhero pose, yelling, “Batmaaaaannn! NananaNanaNanana —“ and running around in circles.

Mrs. Bonardi stares in horror, like she’s already formulating her resignation letter to the principal. John slaps a hand over his eyes and hides there, slowly sinking down into his ridiculous Kindergarten chair. Beside him, Ms. McCall stifles her laughter behind slim fingers.

“Quite a kid you’ve got there,” she murmurs to him, sounding entirely too amused.

“You have no idea,” John sighs.

“Scott! Scott, c’mmon, you’re The Flash, remember! Come on you slowpoke!”

Stiles takes a detour from his superhero loop to zip over and grab Scott’s hand. Melissa just sits and watches in interest as John’s little demon drags her angelic boy around the room, shouting about saving the world and beating the poop out of evil Billy monsters.

Mrs. Bonardi flutters her hands. “I— Mr. Stilinski, c-could you please get a handle on your—“

“No, sorry,” John sighs and leans back in his chair. “There’s really no stopping him when he’s like this. The best thing to do when he’s in Batman Mode is to just let him burn himself out. Should only take a few more minutes before he crashes.”

“Huh. Has he always been like this?” Ms. McCall chews on her thumb.

“No, sorry,” John sighs and leans back in his chair. “There’s really no stopping him when he’s like this. The best thing to do when he’s in Batman Mode is to just let him burn himself out. Should only take a few more minutes before he crashes.”

“Huh. Has he always been like this?” Ms. McCall chews on her thumb.

“Just about,” John shrugs. “When he was three he squirted all our dish soap onto the kitchen floor and had a slip’n slide contest with his stuffed animals.”

“When Scott was three he fell asleep in a laundry basket. I almost dumped him into the washing machine with the rest of the clothes.”

Mrs. Bonardi is beyond speech at this point, pale and tight-lipped as they chuckle and swap more stories about their kids. Stiles and Scott run in circles around them until they start to lag and pant, at which point John scoops up his son and thanks Mrs. Bonardi for her time. She tells him and Ms. McCall that due to the crayon-nose incident and the coloring vandalism the boys must leave school for the rest of the day. They both check their watches and sigh.

“Daaaaaddy, stoooop! Put me downputmedown—!”

He lets Stiles gnaw on his arm a little until they make it out to the parking lot. As soon as Stiles’s tiny shoes are on the pavement again he sprints off again, tugging Scott behind him by the hand. He and Ms. McCall watch them run off and try to read aloud the “school entrance” painted in yellow letters on a speed bump.

“Jesus. I’m so sorry my kid dragged yours into this,” John apologizes.
“Oh please, I’ve been trying to get Scott to be less of a wallflower since he learned how to walk,” she rolls her eyes. “Besides, sounds like Stiles was just defending Scott’s honor.”

“In his own way, I suppose. I’m John,” he holds out a hand.

“She looks young, maybe early twenties oppose to John’s thirty-one. She must have gotten pregnant as a teenager, but he doesn’t comment on it. “So you named your kid Stiles, huh?”

“His real name is much more of a mouthful,” he explains. “My wife wanted to name him after her very traditional polish grandfather.”

“Really. What’s his real name?”

“It’s—“

“Moooommy!”

“Daaaddy! Dad! Daddy daddaddaddy—!”

The boys come barreling back. Scott squeaks at Melissa, “Mom, Stiles says he has Batman comics at his house!”

“And Scott says he has The Flash comics at his house!”

“Can I go to his house?” They blurt in unison, then start squabbling in their little kindergarten lisps.

“No, wait, your house!”

“No, yours!”

“You said your house has water guns though!”

“Oh… Yeah! Let’s go to my house first!”

“You mean we get to go to both?”

“Yeah! Daddy, can we go to both houses? Scott, ask your mom!”

“Mom, may we please go to, to, to Stiles’s house and then we could go back to our house?”

“Oh, geez Scott, I’ve got a six hour shift starting in ten minutes,” Melissa frowns at her watch. “I don’t think today is a good day.”

“Aaaww.” The harmonized whimpers from the boys is enough to melt the heart of a serial killer. They stare up at him and Melissa at three feet tall, all chubby cheeks and pouted lips and big brown puppy eyes. Tiny fingers cling sadly to the corresponding parent’s pant leg.

“Well If it’s alright with you, I could take Scott out to lunch with me and Stiles,” John offers with a glance to his own watch. “I wasn’t sure how long this would take so I asked my co-worker to cover my shift for the day anyway. The boys can play at our house, my wife should be home soon, too.”

The boys gasp. “Oh please please please—!”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that—“
“Nah it’s fine, we’d love to have Scott over,” John says, perhaps sounding too eager that Stiles already made a friend. “Stiles and I were just going to hang out at home anyway.”

“Hm. Well… Sure, I guess that sounds fine,” Melissa glances at their two boys, who cheer and run off to dance in victory circles. “I can pick him up a little after seven if that’s okay. Where do you live?”

“Just fine. We’re over on Elmer Ave, by the Mervyn’s shopping center.”

Melissa gapes. “You’re serious? We live on Elmer too!”

He chuckles. "Well I know it’s a small town, but gee, how come we’ve never bumped into each other? We’re on the two-hundred block.”

“The seven-hundred block,” Melissa points to herself. She moves as if to ruffle Scott’s hair, but the boys are crouching on the pavement poking at a half-dead worm and arguing whether to name it Mark or Billy Bob Jr. “We just moved here a couple months ago, actually. From Medina county.”

“Well welcome, neighbor,” John grins. “Nice to know the boys will be able to have playdates without transportation being a problem.”

"Quick, get him onto the grass so he doesn't dry up!” The boys carry the worm across the pavement. "How do you know he isn't dead?"

"Because look! If you poke him he wiggles! Hey, don’t drop him! Quick, pick him up! Don't squish him! Do you like gummy worms? Do you like sour gummy worms? My grandma sent me some for my birthday and they turned my tongue purple! I bet if you ate enough of them it'd be rainbow! I like you, Scott, you don't talk much."

“You know, I gotta admit,” Melissa whispers to John. "I was a little worried Scott wouldn’t make any friends. Like he’s a cute kid and all, but he’s just really shy.”

John grunts in agreement. “In all honestly I was afraid Stiles wouldn’t have an easy time finding classmates, either. He’s a little…”

“YEAAAAAHH! WE SAVED BILLY BOB JUNIOR FROM DRYING UP! I am BATMAAAAAN!! Scott! Scott, go faster! Whoever loses has to lick that car! Nanananananana—!”

“Well, he’s Stiles,” John sighs.

.oO0o.O.O0o.

November 1st, 2002

John learns Scott’s personality quickly, and the kid is the polar opposite of his son.

Scott is quiet and cautious where Stiles is loud and impulsive. Scott likes to use quiet pleases and thank you’s with shy smiles and big chocolate eyes beneath his mop of black hair, and takes his shoes off before stepping into the park sandbox while Stiles cannonballs into the grit at lightning speed. He likes the same boyish things Stiles likes— monster trucks and airplanes and superheroes, but despite his enthusiastic playing he’s still half the volume of Stiles’s screaming sound effects. Both boys love reading comic books, but Scott drinks in the pictures at a fascinated snail’s pace, turning the pages gently with his fingertips while Stiles cackles and narrates and speeds through the pictures so fast that sometimes he rips them from the spine on accident.
John knows in his heart they are best friends for life.

"Hey Melissa, would you mind passing me that cutting board?"

"Yep, here. Nice nail colors, by the way. Very festive."

"Thanks! I couldn't decide so I just went for a little of everything. We should get pedicures together sometime!"

Melissa and Claudia could not be more different, yet they clicked immediately like two peas in a pod.

Melissa is sharp in both tongue and wit, a champion eye-roller, and an all-around tough cookie. She blows wild curls of hair out of her face like they personally offend her, yells insults at idiot drivers on the road, and she can pull the lids off pickle jars that John can’t budge to save his life. Claudia likes bubble baths and cartoons and leaves little marshmallow trails to lead ants out of the house instead of killing them, usually while humming oldies in polka dot pajamas. She (a florist) squeals and squeaks with enthusiasm while Melissa (an ER nurse in training) drones sarcastically and brandishes dark humor, but both women have soft spots for George Clooney, pepperoni pizza, and their sons.

John knows in his heart they are best friends for life.

Play dates and dinner become a weekly thing. The boys run all over their tiny, carpeted home and Melissa doesn’t comment on any of the mismatched furniture or hand-me-down appliances. Since they live just down the block they probably have the same financial situation, so it’s nice to not worry about judgmental eyes. At first Scott was nervous and quiet upon entering the Stilinski home, turning to his mother with frightened eyes when she left him at the door—but it’s hard to stay gloomy when Stiles is around to blabber cheerily, and Stiles loves blabbering around Scott.

Between all three of their jobs they take turns watching the boys depending on who’s off and available; on Tuesdays Claudia brings Melissa lunch on her shift break (ever since Melissa swore the hospital cafeteria food was worse than sewer scrapings) and tonight they’re making his wife’s famous mac n’ cheese with sausage since incredibly, they’re all off work at the same time.

"The key is not to measure how much cheese you add," Claudia chirps as she dumps the whole bag of shredded cheddar into the pot. "You must cook from the heart!"

"If only I had your energy," Melissa chuckles. "Boys, come wash up!"

"Aww, can't we have five more minutes?"

"Yeah, we haven’t beat this level yet!"

"Listen to Ms. McCall, kids," John adds as he places the forks on the table. "Wouldn't want this macaroni to get cold."

Dinner is a flurry of clinking forks and chuckles, discussions of the new Harry Potter movie and their boys asking for more milk. Stiles’s loud, squeaky jabbering takes precedent over the noise; the kid is obnoxious to begin with, but excessively so with Scott for some reason. Claudia says it’s because he wants to impress him, but honestly John is surprised that his son’s hyperactive energy and screaming hasn’t sent Scott (timid child as he is) running for the hills yet.

At this particular dinner tonight Stiles is so disruptive that John has to ask him to settle down three times. At one point Stiles jumps up to run to the bathroom and comes back cackling with twelve feet of toilet paper wrapped around his body.
“Stiles, bud, we’re in the middle of dinner,” John frowns and gets up to unwrap his mini mummy.

Stiles laughs and jumps onto the coffee table to showcase his outfit. “Look I’m a mummy! Scott, Scott! You should try this, it feels so weird!”

“Hey sweet boy, this isn’t the time for playing right now,” Claudia adds as she rises too, but Stiles runs away yelling when they try to catch him.

“Nope, I’ve got it Clauds, you stay with our guests.”

John rolls up his sleeves as he jogs down the hallway after his son. Lucky their house is small so there aren’t many places to hide, but it still takes him a few minutes to corner him in the bathroom and hold the screaming kid down.

“NYAAAAH! LEMME GO, LEMME GO!”

“Stiles, you have got to calm down!”

“MUMMIES AREN’T CALM! NOOOOOOO!!”

John flips Stiles around and grips his shoulders. “Stiles, Stiles, look at me. You are not a mummy right now—“

“Yes I AM!”

“—you are Stiles Stilinski, my son, a human boy who has a friend waiting for you at the kitchen table. We have guests over right now, which means we need to be polite and sit and eat with them, not scream or run away,” John says firmly. He wants to plead. He hates admitting it but he’s terribly embarrassed, and the amount of energy Stiles exhibits in a day is slowing wearing down on him and Claudia.

“I don’t wanna sit anymore!” Stiles purses his lips and tries to twist away but John holds tight.

“Sshhh, shh… Here, how about you lie down instead?”

“Lie down?”

“Yep, lie down on the bath mat, see? Nice and soft. And look, here’s Mr. Ducky, why don’t you hold him as you calm down?”

“Do I get to squirt him?”

“No, no squirting right now. Mr. Ducky is empty because it isn’t bath time.”

Stiles takes the plastic toy and shoves the head in his mouth, biting down hard and slapping his hands against the floor. God knows why. John watches and sighs, clapping his son’s hands and guiding them to tap out a calmer rhythm, left-left right, left-left right, left-left right— they should really get the kid a drum set, but they don’t have the funds or the noise tolerance.

“Alright, good, now I’m going to tell you a story,” John says as he slides to a sitting position. This is his life now. Lounging on bathroom floors is nothing new.

“But story time is only for when I go to bed,” Stiles looks at him with those big eyes as he gnaws on his duck. “Are you gonna make me go to bed?”

“No, kiddo. But I want you to listen, okay?”
“M’kay. Is this the story about the Three Little Pigs?”

“No, just listen. When I was in the army—“

“You were in the army?” Stiles gasps, eyes wide as saucers. “Like in a war?”

“Yep. I was a war sergeant in Somalia for six months before you were even born. I did it because our friend Terry needed someone to do it for him.”

“I like Uncle Terry. He has scratchy hair.”

“I like him, too. That’s part of why I went really far away and lived in tents with other soldiers, and we fought the bad guys together.”

“Like Batman!” Stiles’s eyes shine.

“I guess you could say that. But these bad guys were a lot scarier than the Joker or the Penguin. There were a lot of them, and they all had big guns and weapons. It was very scary,” John says seriously. “It was very loud, and hot, and sometimes my friends got hurt. Some people I knew even died.”

Stiles’s lips part silently. For once, John finally rendered him quiet.

“So I guess you could say that I didn’t want to be there— it was very sad, and frustrating at times, and sometimes we had to wake up in the middle of the night and carry our tents somewhere else, because we were at risk of being hurt. Here at home we get lots of food and clothes, but in Somalia we had to wear heavy suits and could only eat a few meals that didn’t taste very good. And I was very far away from your mother. I missed her terribly.”

He takes a moment to take a breath.

“But the point of my story is, sometimes we need to do things that we don’t really want to do. Sometimes we need to think of other people in order to help us do things that are hard. I really wanted to come home, but I thought of how much Terry needed me there, and how proud your mother was of me, and how being a sergeant would help me become the Sheriff one day…” John pulls a wan smile. “So do you think you can go back out there and eat calmly with us? Because we would all love to have you join us, Scott especially.”

Stiles stares at him, shockingly still. Only his small fingers flex subtly over his duck toy. He nods, puffing out the little flab of baby fat beneath his chin.

“M’kay.”

John closes his eyes in a silent sigh of relief. He smiles and holds out a hand to help his kid up.

“That’s the spirit. I love you, kiddo.”

“Love you too, daddy. Do we have rocky road ice cream left for dessert?”

“We sure do. I’ll let you tell Scott about that.”

“Yeah! I bet Scott loves rocky road!”

Dinner proceeds as cordially as it can with two five-year-old boys at the table. Stiles, while still his loud child-without-a-filter self, acts considerably calmer, which earns John a gracious kiss on the cheek from Claudia. The five of them scrape the macaroni dish clean and then empty the carton of
rocky road; Scott actually doesn’t like chocolate ice cream (an idea that makes Stiles gasp dramatically and then choke on his milk) so he has a handful of gummy bears from the stash Claudia keeps in her sewing room. As the parents do the dishes the boys run back to Stiles’s room and continue making “boosh! Ka-boom!” sounds with whatever they’re playing on the Gameboy.

“I’m so sorry,” John apologizes as the night draws to a close, even though Melissa has been around long enough to know that this is the norm with Stiles. “You know how most kids learn to walk and then talk? Stiles leaned how to run and then yell.”

“Have you had him tested?” Melissa asks.

“For what?”

“ADHD,” Melissa says. “I’m just a general nurse in training, but from what I know Stiles seems to have quite a few signs.”

“Huh… I hadn’t thought of that. Isn’t it usually hereditary?”

“Yep,” Melissa looks pointedly to Claudia, who’s bouncing happily on her toes as she pours some leftover macaroni into a take-home container. A piece falls on her ankle and all her concentration goes into trying to lift her foot up to her mouth so she can lick it off.

“Oh,” John says.

“I could refer you to the hospital pediatric psychiatrist,” Melissa fishes for her phone inside her purse. “She’s really great with kids, and she can run some tests that will determine what level he’s at if he has it. She can also prescribe some medication that’ll make it easier for him to behave in school. And easier on you and your wife.”

“That would be wonderful,” he agrees. “It’d be great to get him on the right track before he gets too far into the school year. Truth be told his conduct report came back and it wasn’t so great. Mrs. Bonardi says he can’t sit still long enough to get through the lessons.”

“Mhm. I bet he has trouble staying on task, too.”

“Yes! She said he only makes it through half a worksheet before he gets distracted and starts doing something else.”

“Well this should help,” she smiles and texts him the phone number. “Let me know how it goes, okay?”

.o0O0o. October 29th, 2003.

The Target at Beacon mall is loud and messy at three in the afternoon.

Linoleum floors gleam waxy beneath harsh fluorescent lights and cheesy hanging Halloween decorations, and the air is thick with the smell of plastic and pet food from the next aisle over. Much of the noise factor can be accredited to John’s kid (what else is new), who is currently firing imaginary “pew pew” finger guns at Scott, who is throwing imaginary “boosh!” bombs back in retaliation. He, Claudia, and Melissa are in tow, although Claudia and Melissa are just kind of chatting and walking calmly in a little exclusive women-couplet. Which means that John is left to run after both kids and try to reign them in and quiet them down before a manager comes and kicks them out.
“Boys, boys!” He lunges low to grab hold of all three feet of squirming, screaming Stiles while Scott politely stops running at the sound of his voice like the angelic child that he is. John’s back cracks as he crouches for a better hold on his flailing son, reminding him of the creaky old man he’s shaping out to be. Meanwhile Melissa crouches down eye-level with her kid without the smallest hint of a wince.

“But daaaaddy, he’s gonna get me, he’s gonna get me!” Stiles protests wide-eyed, wiggling around John’s arms to avoid the stealthy inviso-bombs Scott is throwing at him from behind a rack of hula hoops.

“He’s not gonna get you, not while your in the Dad Shield,” John huffs, and steels his arms tighter around Stiles’s tiny slapping limbs.

“Daaaddy, no! But I can’t shoot like this!”

“Kiddo, you’re not supposed to be playing guns in a store. I need you to settle down, okay?” He chides, gritting his teeth as Stiles’s tiny feet stomp on his shoes. Probably not on accident.

“Scott, you shouldn’t run around so much,” Melissa scolds as she squeezes her son’s tiny hands. “Check your breathing.”

Scott was diagnosed with asthma a few moths ago. Melissa is handling it very well, aside from her quiet worry and the extra medical bills.

Scott obediently takes a deep breath. “See, I’m okay!” Then cranes his head around and meets Melissa’s eyes with an adorably confused expression. “Mommy, I thought you said there were costumes here?”

“They’re at the end of the next aisle, boys. Go slowly!” Melissa calls as the boys cheer and sprint in said direction, slapping at each other to get there first. They only knock over one display of bouncy balls, which is significantly less damage than the Lunardi’s baking aisle incident last June, but it makes he and Melissa sigh and Claudia squeak a tiny, “oh!”

“Let John and I get that, Mel, you look like you could use a break,” Claudia offers gently, as they scrabble to grab the rubber balls before they bounce off to every corner of the store. Melissa smiles wanly and continues helping anyway, all three of their heads swiveling back to keep track of the kids, who are squealing over the costumes. Loudly.

“That’s alright, I’m just getting used to a few extra shifts this week. Nothing I can’t handle,” she dismisses, but the purple half-moons beneath her eyes scream otherwise.

“Hey, I was looking at that one!”

“Not anymore!”

“Stiles!”

“Look, I’m the Flash! Peeeew!”

“No, I’m the Flash, I have a mask, too!”

John springs up to high-tail it over to his six-year-old. “I’m so sorry,” he apologizes to a couple when Stiles nearly barrels into them. They mutter something about “controlling your kid” but John is too busy leaning over to whisper in Claudia’s ear. “You gave him his Ritalin this morning, right?”
Claudia ruffles Stiles’s hair. “Yes, John, with his Eggos. He’s just excited!” Then she crouches to regard Stiles, who immediately stops moving and making noise as soon as she does. His son falls completely silent, staring at her attentively, mouth ajar. It’s freaky. It’s Claudia's superpower. John is secretly jealous.

“Now,” She says their son’s real name with a smile, making Stiles flush and crane his neck back nervously at Scott. “Shh, mommy—!”

“Listen to me, my sweet boy,” Claudia shushes gently, in that calm, melodic voice of hers that could charm The Grinch. "Do you think you can use your indoor voice while you’re looking at the costumes with Scott? It’s very important so we don’t disrupt other shoppers.”

Stiles nods vigorously and looks to Scott again, “m’kay,” and Claudia lets him run off. “I don’t know how you do it,” John sighs.

“A woman’s touch,” Melissa supplies over his shoulder. Claudia giggles.

“Whooooaa! Mommy, daddy, look!” Stiles goes straight for the superheroes and tackles a shiny, impressive-looking Batman costume with detailed plastic armor and a utility belt equipped with tiny weapons. There’s a sticker over the chest that boasts how the bat logo glows in the dark, as do the included “bat boots.” John checks the price tag even though he knows what’s coming, and winces.

“Sorry, kiddo, we can’t quite afford that one,” he says, and avoids his son’s crestfallen expression by selecting another much simpler Batman costume marked for clearance. “How about this one?”

Stiles regards it for all of one second. It’s simple with a tacky plastic cape, and the yellow chest logo is peeling off, probably the reason for markdown in the first place. John wouldn’t want to wear it either.

“But daddy, this one is so much cooler!” Stiles pouts and goes back to the superior costume, hugging it like a long-lost lover. But then Scott pipes up excitedly from the hanging ghouls, calling his mother and best friend to come see a Headless Horseman costume, and Stiles darts over with a tiny "whoa!"

John sighs, frustrated over their financial situation. Still, he considers the expensive Batman costume again as the boys wrestle. “Jesus Christ,” he breathes, and Melissa tsks when he shows her the price tag. “You’d think the belt is made from real gold.”

She flips the tag over for a Buzz Lightyear costume, brows knitting. “Yikes. Since when did Halloween costumes get so expensive?”

John grunts in agreement. “Seems like retail stores are trying to kill us, doesn’t it? Did Scott tell you about those new light-up shoes?”

“Yes,” Melissa throws her head back in exasperation. “I called Payless to ask about them, but the price is ridiculous.”

He sighs. He did the same thing when Stiles gushed about them, and hung up once the store clerk told him the number. “As is the concept of light-up shoes. But apparently all the other the kids in their class got shiny new pairs for back to school, and now Stiles’s sneakers aren’t cool enough. When we bought them he loved them so much he kissed the laces.”

She shares a knowing look and shakes her head. “I envy those other parents sometimes. Granted they probably work jobs that barely let them see their kids, but I wish I could buy Scott more of what he wants sometimes.”
“I know the feeling,” he hums.

“Mom, mommy look!”

Scott’s tiny fingers tug at Melissa’s scrubs, pulling her over to another rack of costumes. He wonders how Melissa does it sometimes, as a single mother with dark circles trying to juggle her kid and double-hospital shifts without any help. John would be lost without his wife.

Scott gleefully picks out the goriest, ugliest mask John has ever seen. It must be the video games, desensitizing their kids to violence. Melissa clucks. “Let’s pick something without a mask, okay Scott? It might get hard for you to breathe if you wear that.”

Scott’s expression plummets. “But mom… It’s so cool. And I take my medicine!”

“I know, honey, but sometimes medicine can’t always help with everything. I want you to be safe, can you understand that?”

Scott’s lip puckers sadly but he nods his head. “Yeah.”

They herd the boys towards the sale racks but it’s clear that neither first grader is interested much in what it has to offer. The reduced costumes are plainer, less impressive, devoid of beloved trademark characters and superheroes. Scott and Stiles pick through them quickly and glance wistfully over their shoulders to the better costumes. Scott selects another mask, a zombie this time, and his face crumples again when Melissa puts it back on the shelf. His chin wobbles and John almost wonders if the kid is about to start crying, but then Claudia bends down with a small smile.

“Hey, I know being a zombie would be pretty cool, but did you know that zombies move really slowly?” She prompts Scott kindly.

The child blinks at her. “I guess.”

“Right. But you know what’s even cooler? Something that movies so fast you turn nearly invisible!”

Scott perks up. “What?” Stiles quickly joins his friend’s side, looking eagerly to his mother and placing a jealous hand on her knee.

“A ninja!” Claudia reveals a simple black costume behind her back with a tiny eye mask.

“A ninja?” Scott repeats, gaping at the costume.

“That’s right. They run so quick that they can even run on water!”

Scott gasps in delight, eyes wide. “Mom, mom! Did you hear that? Can we get this one? Please?”

Melissa smiles. The total is $9.60 and later she mouths “thank you” to Claudia at the checkout counter.

“But mommy, what about my costume?” Stiles blurts, looking betrayed as he paws at Claudia’s skirt. “Can I be a ninja too?”

“Hey, I’ll tell you what,” his mother grins at him and pulls down the cheaper Batman costume. “How about I spruce this one up for you? Your very own, one-of-a-kind Stiles Batman costume! Not a single boy in the whole entire world will have the same costume as you!”

Stiles perks up. “Really?”
“You bet,” Claudia beams.

They buy the costume. The boys crash together action figures in the backseat and the five of them stop for soft-serve ice cream at Dairy Queen. Stiles’s cone drips runny chocolate down his Ninja Turtles shirt because he’s too busy jabbering to lick it before it melts, and Scott squirms when Melissa attacks him with a napkin to get the vanilla off his face. Claudia steals nibbles from John’s cone and Melissa chastises them for being so sickeningly cute in public.

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Later that night John sits on the edge of his saggy mattress, staring glumly at the peeling wallpaper of their bedroom. He’s in his pajamas, the ceiling light has burnt out again, and Stiles has brushed his teeth and gone to bed after too many episodes of Scooby Doo. He listens to Claudia kissing him goodnight, singing a rendition of Dancing Queen before plugging in the little Yoda nightlight. She’s the only one who still addresses Stiles by his real first name, mainly because she’s the only one who can pronounce it.

“Hey,” Claudia squints at him, suddenly in the doorway. She immediately comes over to sit with him, bouncing softly on their bed. “What has my husband so blue?”

John’s fingers find her hand and he runs his calloused thumb over the pale skin there. The moles make a Little Dipper shape on her thumb knuckle. “It’s nothing, I’m just…”

“Did something happen at the mall today?” She inquires softly, looking at him pointedly like she already knows. She always knows because she can read him like a book, and in return John can sense her emotions from across the room. All the way from the police station sometimes.

“I’m sorry, Claudia,” he whispers, ashamed and heavy. “I—I wish I had more to give you. I wish I had the money to buy you… I’d get you a real ring. I want to buy us a bigger house, and a better car. I want to take you to Poland,” his voice cracks on the country, because Claudia’s eyes shine like stars when she thinks of home and it kills John that he can’t afford to give it to her. "And Stiles has been so good lately with his behavior at school, and his chores, I wish we could buy him those light-up shoes he wants so he can be like the other kids, and I wish we could go out to restaurants more often or see a movie every weekend, or…”

He trails off and purses his lips, and his wife gently lifts his chin up with her fingertips. Her eyes are chocolate gemstones in the dim lighting, reflecting gold from the bedside lamp. Deep and warm with an endless depth of unconditional adoration. Only her.

“John,” she says, a whole sonnet in the one name. “They print billions of new dollars every day. But there is only one John, and one little son of ours, and they are all I need to be happy.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” John wonders aloud.

“You’re you,” Claudia giggles and kisses him on the forehead, right over the field of wrinkles he’s so self-conscious about.

“Shucks, Clauds.”

“Really,” she smiles. “Our little boy, too. You should see the way he looks at you when you’re too busy to notice.”

“Pssh. I could never be too busy to not notice that kid.”
“You are when the Mets game is on,” she teases. “Although to your credit that’s just about the only
time.”

“Hey, now. Gotta love them Mets.”

“So I’ve been told! I hear they are very mad rad.”

“The maddest raddest.”

.o0O0o. October 30th, 2003.

“He says he wants to marry Aladdin.”

Which brings him to the eve of Halloween, a chilly Thursday night that is also the eve of when Stiles
will go to school dressed as a one-of-a-kind Batman and parade around with two dozen other
Batmans, werewolves, and princesses. Their tiny tile kitchen is warm with the smell of recently-
delivered Domino’s pizza for dinner, of which Stiles gobbled down two pieces in two seconds and
ran off to his room after squeaking a tiny, “thanks for the pizza, can I be excused?” What the kid
does with his free time is a bit of a mystery. Claudia claims she sees him playing with action figures;
John thinks he’s secretly digging his way into the backyard with spoons.

Claudia nibbles patiently on a third slice as she works her magic on Stiles’s wimpy Batman costume,
humming ’Super Trooper’ along with the Abba CD playing from the counter—her impressive spread
of sewing supplies litters the table, pressing up against the vase of yellow tulips and cardboard pizza
box. John sits across from her and nibbles on a fourth slice as he polishes his fake Sheriff’s badge. It
doesn’t actually need to be polished considering it’s just a cheap piece of plastic from a discount
cowboy costume, but John can pretend.

“I know, isn’t it cute?” She chuckles as she sews a cape to the small superhero costume.

John makes a noncommittal noise. “Maybe. But it’s more of a thing a six-year old girl would say,
don’t you think?”

Claudia throws him one of her rare, condescending eyebrow-lifts. “John.”

“No, don’t look at me like that,” he backpedals, nearly dropping his badge. “I didn’t mean I’d— I
would never, you know, if he was…”

“Gay?” Claudia cheerily fills in for him. John chokes a little on his pizza. “Small bites, honey.”

He wipes a napkin across his lips, leaving behind a streak of orange grease. He sputters, trying to
read his wife’s nonchalant expression. “I— I mean I know he can be a little… Not that I would—
you really think he’s gay?” He blurs, and mentally frowns at the nervous blip-bump of his heart.

Claudia hums. “Mm. Maybe. A little, maybe. We’re all a little gay inside, don’t you think?”

John honestly doesn’t know what to do that. He gets a flashback to his mother’s nasally “I thought
you were gay!” from 1988 and feels himself grow hot under his collar. The conversation is too much
for him. “I— I should go wash up,” he stutters, and rises to head to the bathroom.

Claudia’s shoulders shake with tiny giggles. “And here I thought I was the sensitive one.”

“I’m not sensitive—“ John lies. “I’m just— like I said, I need to wash up. I have pizza grease on my
“Women are pretty creatures!” Claudia hollers happily. “I’d kiss a few if I wasn’t married to you!”

John trips over the rug in the hallway. Which is the precise moment Stiles comes thundering around the corner from his room.

“Hi daddy! Where’s mom? Is there any pizza left? I’m—WHOOAAAA!”

His son’s huge eyes grow even huger, socks slipping on the kitchen tile as he thunders over to Claudia. “MOM! Mommy, this is awesome!” He screams, and starts stripping right there in the kitchen. Claudia collapses in a fit of giggles and John shakes his head, trying and failing to bite down his laughter as Stiles throws his shirt and pajama pants onto the kitchen tile at lightning-speed, making grabby-hands at the batman costume in his tidy-widies.

“We’ve sure got one hell of a kid, Clauds.”

“He’s not a kid, John,” she chastises as she helps pull the fabric over Stiles’s head. “He’s Batman!”

“Yes! I am Batman! I am the niiiiight! I am BATMAAAAAAAN!” Stiles hollers and flails his arms, striking a pose before running around the room in his cape. “Mommy, this is so cool!”

“What do you say to your mother?” John prompts.

“Thank you thank youthankyou thank you!!” Stiles squeals and tackles Claudia in a hug.

“Can I have more pizza please?”

“Sorry bud, we ate the rest of it. But we have some raspberries in the fridge.”

“Ooh, I like raspberries!” Claudia pipes up. “Let’s eat them together, okay sweet boy? We can stick them on our fingers and pretend we’re frogs!”

“Yeah!”

.o0O0o. October 31st, 2003.

Halloween is Robert’s favorite time of year. The air is crisp with autumn leaves, candy is in abundance, and he gets to terrify children without getting arrested.

"Holy shit, T, look at our kid!” He grins in delight, pinching Cora’s perfect, rosy, chubby cheeks. His three-year-old daughter is zipped up in the fluffiest head-to-toe wolf costume Nordstroms had to offer, and he is the happiest man alive.

“Honestly Robert, and you wonder where Laura got her mouth from.”

And Talia. Talia’s curves are draped in this slinky, shimmery black fabric that is probably illegal in several states, fluttering around her wrists and ankles but clinging to her assets like white on rice. A plastic spider ring perches atop her knuckles as she frosts the last of the orange cupcakes, eight batches she’s been baking since noon. She is dressed as Morticia from The Addams Family and it is the single sexiest thing Robert has ever seen.

He secretly ogles his wife’s beautiful ass as he plays with Cora’s fake fluffy wolf ears. "What, that little rebel? She’ll start picking up much worse from the kids in her class soon anyway. So no harm, right?” But Talia shoots him a look that he thinks translates to something along the lines of how on
He fucking *loves* Halloween.

As soon as Laura popped out of his wife Robert grabbed her and practically fitted her into costumes right then and there. He had waited over a decade for a chance to step out onto the streets for trick-or-treating again, and now he has three awkward little children as shiny golden tickets. Talia mans the candy distribution at the house, and *he* gets to take the little beasts out and yuck up all the *oohs* and *aahs* of passerby’s complimenting his “fake” claws, fangs, and glowing “contacts.” It’s the one night a year he gets to walk amongst the public in shift-form and not be judged, or pitchforked. It’s the best.

“Let’s make more kids so we can start raising an army of baby wolves. And so that I can keep dressing up little babies *as* wolves every year,” he proposes as he pokes his little wolfy daughter.

“Robert, need I remind you how difficult Cora’s pregnancy was? Three is enough.”

“Party pooper.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said you’re smart and super. My super smart and beautiful wife.”

“Mhm.”

“And remember that lame costumes get raisins,” he reminds her as he digs a hand through the giant bags of candy by the door. They live in a mansion; the whole county can guess their family is filthy rich, and the rich houses always have the best candy. This year he spent four grand on king-size Butterfingers and Twix, one pound Hershey’s bars, two pound boxes of See’s truffles, jawbreakers the size of baseballs— fun size his ass. Here at Hale manor, he dispenses only the biggest, bestest name brands diabetes has to offer.

“Yes, and the best costumes get the See's,” Talia agrees. But the *real* prizes —Talia’s baked goods— his wife drops off to the homeless shelters.

"Kids, you almost ready?” He calls upstairs. Cora squirms on his knee, trying to reach the binky dropped on the couch.

In a minute Laura comes clunking down the stairs in a pair of giant studded boots. A frilly, lacy, purple dress bounces high above her knees. "This is so *lame!* I’m in 7th grade, dad, I don’t need a babysitter when I go trick-or-treating." She's dressed as some kind… Goth?

"Hey, none of that now, you've still got a few years before you turn into my angsty, eye-rolling daughter,” Robert tells her. But—

“Laura *Ann*!” Talia exclaims, rushing over in a whirl of slinky, sexy black dress. “What on *earth*? What happened to your cowgirl costume?”

“This one is cooler,” Laura shrugs, adjusting her miniskirt. "I bought it with Hanna yesterday after school."

“*Yáadilá óolyé,* don't you want a sweater, or a shirt underneath perhaps?” Talia suggests, eyes bugging at Laura’s rather skimpy ensemble. "Where did you get all that makeup? Is that my *lipstick*? You are wearing way too much for your age, young lady."
"Hey, I think it looks cool!" Robert chimes enthusiastically. "And the makeup is artistic, don’t you think, T?" But apparently that’s the wrong answer because Talia shoots him a sharp glare. "Aheh. Very cool, but not as cool as listening to your mother. Go wipe some off, little rebel."

Laura pouts but trudges around the corner to the bathroom anyway. It pisses Talia off that Laura tends to listen to him much more than her. She was so ecstatic for a daughter, but Laura made it clear eleven years ago that she is daddy’s little princess and mother’s little nightmare. Robert has been considering building a safety Man Bunker (equipped with Doritos and Nintendo for him and Derek) in preparation for the screaming, tooth and nail mother vs. daughter fights that will come with Laura’s teenage years.

He leans over to whisper to Talia as he bounces Cora on his leg. "So, uh... What did Derek decide to go with?"

Talia exchanges a look with him. "The second one, dear."

Robert pulls a face. "Really? He’s a bit of an odd kid, isn't he."

"Yes, but he's our kid, Robert."

“I know, I just worry about his classmates making fun of—"

"IM REAAAAADY!"

Derek’s voice rings out from the top of the stairs, followed by the sound of tiny sneakers thundering down into the living room. He jumps to a halt in front of the couch and they all turn to stare at him, mouths agape in stunned silence. Derek beams and throws his little arms out— he’s drowning in one of Robert’s old sport coats that reaches down to his ankles, with dusty, old-fashioned spectacles perched on his freckled nose, and a fluffy white beard made of cotton balls taped onto his jaw.

Laura rounds the corner and immediately bursts out laughing. "Oh my god, you dweeb! You look ridiculous!"

Derek frowns, tiny eyebrows drawing together in an unhappy ‘V’ shape beneath his bowler hat. “I do not!”

“Laura, don’t make fun of your brother. Derek, that’s a very nice… Er, what are you exactly?”

“Charles Darwin, dad!” Derek exclaims, gesturing to his costume as if the whole thing looks like a naturalist and not Karl Marx.

“Who the hell is that?” Laura sniffs.

“Hey, champ, that’s awesome you put together your own thing but…” Robert purposefully avoids the silent don’t-you-dare glare Talia is drilling into the back of his head. “Maybe you might want to try a different costume? I’ve got some old paint in the garage you can use for zombie blood, whaddaya say?”

“But he discovered the theory of evolution,” Derek says, sounding mildly offended. His tiny hands curl protectively over his beard. “Mrs. Hopperman says without him, we wouldn’t even be here!”

“We? Mrs. Hopperman knows about werewolves?” Robert asks suspiciously.

“No,” Derek rolls his eyes. “Not ‘we’ as in us.” he makes little gestures with his hands to imitate claws. “‘We’ as in people. The human race. Charles Darwin theorized how we all have
common ancestors we evolved from. You guys should think it's great since 'we' as in werewolves can evolve into wolves!"

“How are we even related,” Laura groans, rolling her neck back over the armchair. "Daaaad, do we have to take him? What if other kids from school see us together?”

“Then you will stand tall and be proud that you have such a cool older brother.”

“Dad, I’m younger than her.”

“He was making fun of you because you look like like you’re ninety in that beard!” Laura cackles.

“What are you even supposed to be,” Derek wrinkles his nose. “You look goth.”

“Josie from Josie and the Pussycats,” Laura scowls and crosses her arms. “Which is way cooler than your dumb old man costume.”

The kids continue to squabble in the background as Talia comes over to wipe the cupcake frosting off Cora’s face, shooting Robert a pointed look. “Watch her, Robert.”

“C’mon, Talia. You honestly think I’d lose our three-year-old kid?”

“Yes,” all three of his family members deadpan in unison, which just isn’t fair. Even Cora burps indignantly in his arms.

Robert scoffs at them. “Hey! I am the alpha dad in this family who pays for all your cool costumes, I deserve respect! And you two, taking her side,” Robert jabs a thumb towards his sexy vampire wife. "I ’oughta put you pups up for adoption.”

“And keep Cora?” Laura counters, followed by Derek’s added, “Yeah! She drools. You’re better off keeping us instead.”

“Your father and I are keeping all of you,” Talia voices calmly as she ushers them out the door with her her long sleeves. “Unless you come back and spill a single sticky candy on my floor.”

“Yes, mom.”

“’Kay bye, candy here we come!”

“Love you, honey!”

And the four of them hop out onto the porch and down the trail into the woods, pillowcases in hand; a werewolf, a baby werewolf, Carl Marx, and a goth cat named Josie.

Beacon Hills is chaos on October 31st. The residential areas by the woods are known for their high income and pricey candy, so all the children flock here with parents in tow. The walk from the house to the closest neighborhood is about twenty minutes for a human, six minutes for young, candy-driven werewolves. As Derek and Laura near the crowds at the start of Spruce Street Robert calls them back so they don’t trample anybody.

“Guys, slow down! What’s our rule?”

His kids pant back over to him, cotton beard and cat ears bobbing. “Go fast enough to get as much candy as possible, but not so fast that dad can’t keep up,” they chant in perfect harmony.

“Good,” Robert smiles. “Now go have fun. Don’t steal from anybody, even if they have a king-size
Milky Way in their bag.”

“I won’t, dad.”

“I meant that for Laura, champ. Laura?”

“Yes, dad, no more theft on my record, got it!”

And the two of them run off eagerly, swatting at each other to take the lead. Robert regards Cora in his arms. “Well, let’s go make sure they don’t maul anyone, shall we, pup?” He chuckles at himself and strides after his kids, relishing in how heads turn to gawk at his muttonchops and neon eyes.

The night proceeds as usual. Derek and Laura team up and strategize the best route for the most candy, quickly filing their bags with sugary confections. Meanwhile the public absolutely eats up Cora in her little wolf costume and thinks it’s adorable how her daddy is “dressed” as a werewolf to match. His daughter steals the show this year because she is so damn cute, and Robert is too busy watching her smile to really be jealous. Between Laura’s skimpy outfit and how people keep thinking Derek is dressed as Karl Marx, Robert gets his fair share of judgmental eyebrows as well, but it’s all worth it. He’s with his kids, and his kids are collecting candy, and it’s Halloween.

Until he loses Cora.

It’s towards the end of the night when the three of them are walking (which means Robert is fighting the crowd to catch up Laura and Derek) along the last couple blocks of the rich neighborhood. He’s watching the little cat ears and the bowler hat and then he realizes that he’s missing a furry baby in his arms.

“Guys, where’s Cora?” His heart pounds as he whirls around on the sidewalk.

His kids halt, turning around in unison to stare at him. Derek looks wide-eyed and pale, Laura simply rolls her eyes. “You were the one who was supposed to watch her, dad. We all warned you this would happen, actually.”

“You lost Cora?” Derek looks at him horror-struck, which is creepy in his white beard.

“I did not—I did not lose your sister,” Robert chuckles uneasily, as he quickly starts sniffing the air to catch a whiff of Cora because he lost his three-year-old daughter and holy crap Talia is actually going to kill him this time.

“You totally lost her!” Derek cries, and starts spinning around frantically sniffing the air. It looks ridiculous in his costume.

“Shush, old man,” Robert shushes him as he runs a hand through his hair. There are kids everywhere, bumping past him, filling the air with confusing scents of candy and sweat and cheap plastic costumes. “I put her down I think, when that woman wanted a picture of us, right? You guys saw that? Why didn’t you make sure I picked her back up!”

“Uh, because we were getting candy?” Laura hoists up her pillowcase. It’s as tall as her and nearly filled to the brim.

“Dad, you should call mom,” Derek bites his lip.

“No, no. Nope, no, nononono, we don’t need your mother to find about this.”

“Well how are we supposed to find her!” Laura cries. “No offense dad, but you’re not the best
sniffer in this family. Mom is.”

Robert groans. “Nruuughh, I hate it when you guys are right.” He pulls out his cellphone and gulps at it. “I’ll double back the way we came, you guys pair up and search the next few blocks. Go East where the houses don’t have a second story.”

“You mean the poor houses?” Laura wrinkles her nose.

“Well, they’re not… Yes, the poor houses. Use your skills to find your sister, and call me as *soon* as you do.”

“But we don’t have cell phones,” Derek blinks at him.

“I didn’t say you needed one. It’s Halloween, you can call me the natural way and no one will think twice,” Robert winks. "Now go! Run like the wind, my tiny wolf children!”

“I’m not tiny!” Laura yells back as she and Derek take off down the street, candy bags bouncing behind them. Good. Now they won’t be present to witness his wife murdering him over the phone. He hits number one on speed-dial. She picks up on the first ring. He’s not a religious man, but he blesses himself with the sign of the cross.

“Heeey, honey.”

"Robert,” Talia greets darkly, like she *knows* he’s calling because he screwed something up, and Robert winces. “What’s wrong."

*Ease her into it, like dipping toes into a pool, ease*— “Okay… Don’t freak out.”

"Robert, what did you do.”

*Oh shit, she jumped in, she jumped in! Just—*  

“So… I may have lost Cora.” He scratches his head, pivoting on his heel to see if he can catch a glimpse of his tiny runaway daughter so he can tell his wife *just kiddi*—

“You what.”

Talia’s voice is *murderous*, so terrifying that Robert actually pulls the phone away from his ear in case Talia shoots him through the speaker.

"I swear, I just put her down for a second—"

"Robert Givonne Hale,” Talia hisses, followed by a long stream of Navajo cursing that is way sexier than it should be considering he probably only has a couple hours left to live. “You will *find* her. How long has she been missing? Can you catch her scent?"

“I tried, there are too many people here T, it just smells like hundreds of sticky children and candy and plastic—"

*Ch’iidii igyuuk’kik, Rob, she’s only three years old!”* Talia barks. “How could you—“ A deep breath. “She couldn’t have gone far. I’m coming down to find her, where are you?"

“On Walnut.”

“Meet me on Pine and send the kids towards Elmer.”
“Already done.”

“You’d better hope she’s alright, Robert. Or else sleeping on the couch will be the least of your problems.”

He gulps, suddenly feeling icy cold beneath his muttonchops. He laughs nervously.

.o0O0o  October 31st, 2003.

Halloween night John has the night off at the station. He asked for it a month in advance because that’s what Sullivan demands, and he’ll be working a week of graveyard shifts starting Monday because Sullivan likes to torture him. But tonight is for Stiles so that’s alright.

Speaking of Stiles, Stiles is a very excited Batman. He’s been running around in his costume since his mother handed it to him last night, and he hasn’t taken it off since (except for when John insisted he change into pajamas to go to bed). John is milling about the kitchen in his cowboy Sheriff costume while Claudia completes the finishing touches of her costume in the bedroom. She won’t tell him what it is, but apparently she’s been putting it together for weeks.

“You almost ready, hun?” He calls over his shoulder. “Melissa has a graveyard shift so she wants to start early so she can get a nap in after the boys…”

He trails off as he hears the clicky-clack of kitten heels round the bend to the kitchen. His jaw drops with a wet pop as Claudia spins around for him with a squealed, “ta-da!” in a beaded beige dress with fluttery puff sleeves and a dropped waistline. It swirls around her knees like a cloud, matching the sparkly headband around her hair, which is pulled back in sharp brown waves. Cherry red lipstick clings to her lips as she smiles wide.

"Well, howdy 'do, sheriff," she sways towards him with a coy grin, displaying her best proper Gatsby voice. God, it makes him weak in the knees.

"Careful, ma'am, I might have to arrest you for flirting with an officer."

Claudia swats his arm playfully and laughs, snorting as he slides his hands over her waist and pulls her in close. "John Stilinski, that is the cheesiest thing you've ever said to me."

He chuckles, feeling his eyes crinkle at the corners in that way only his wife and kid can do. Then more seriously, "You look beautiful."

She tilts her chin up and captures his lips in a soft kiss, making his toes curl in his uncomfortable rubber boots. His eyes slip shut happily and they smile into it, his more careful to avoid smearing her lipstick, before he hears a high-pitched "ew!" In the background.

"Moooom, dad! Groooosss!" Stiles yells, nose crinkling even smaller as he curls into a ball on the couch in his tiny Batman costume. “Blegh! Yuck! Alfred! Make these two gross mom and dads get out of the Bat Cave at once!”

John regards Claudia. “Uh-oh, hun. Looks like somebody's jealous.”

"No! No I'm not! Nooooooowww!" Stiles squeals as they corner him by the fridge and attack him with kisses, one parent per soft freckled cheek. John goes for his forehead and Claudia gets his chubby cheeks and neck. "No, stop!! I AM BATMAN! I AM THE NIIIIIGHT!" And they collapse in a fit of laughter as Stiles runs away screaming to his room.
“Guess someone doesn’t want to go trick-or-treating!” John voices loudly. “I dunno, Claudia. Looks like our son disappeared!”

“Oh no!” Claudia plays along. “Guess we’ll have to go get candy without him!”

The sound of tiny, thundering feet down the hallway.

“No! Wait! I’m here, I’m right here!” Stiles skids to a halt in front of them. “I was just getting my pillowcase! Is this big enough? I’m gonna collect fifty-seven million jillion pounds of candy!” He shouts, eyes wide as he throws his pillowcase into the air.

“Good luck, kiddo,” John tells him and claps him on the back, leading him out the front door. “Flashlights?”

“Right here,” Claudia provides.

“Good. Alright, remember what we went over?”

“Umm… Don’t get into stranger’s cars.”

“And hold hands with me or your mom while crossing the street. And if you get lost?”

“Knock on a door and tell them my daddy’s John Stilinski at the police station.”

“And if a stranger offers you candy from their car or house?”

“Kick them in the private parts and scream really loud and run away.”

“Good.”

“Can we go now? Come on, let’s gooooo!” His tiny Batman tugs Claudia’s hand out the door.

“You should have gone as the energizer bunny, kid.”

”Who wants to go as a bunny?”

“Psst, hey Clauds,” he whispers.

“What is it?” She whispers back.

He stands up tall and proudly puffs out his chest, presenting the crappy plastic “Sheriff’s” badge that came with his costume. She leans in close to inspect it, humming impressed noises. “Wow, very cool! It looks just like the real thing!”

“Hopefully one day,” John peers down happily at it.

“MOOOOM, DAAAAADY! We’re gonna be LATE!”

Twenty minutes later the sky is dusky and the five of them are clasping hands like kids playing Red Rover as they cross the street— he, Claudia, Stiles, Scott, and Melissa. Melissa goes as a cat with black pants and a black turtleneck and little painted whiskers, and Scott is an adorable little ninja. Claudia is the belle of the ball and John has to shoot a few ogling mummies some glares as they wade through the streets to the neighborhood with the brand-name candy.

“Awesome! I got a fruit roll up!” Scott squeaks as Stiles rummages in his bag for a one-up.
“Well I got— uh, uh— a whole Snicker’s bar!”

“Whoaaa! I’ll trade you!”

“No way!”

“Scott, honey, tie your shoelace so you don’t trip!”

“Aw…”

“Don’t worry Scott, I’ll help you! Batman always helps those in need!”

“Hey,” a thirty-something-year-old vampire passes Claudia. “Nice costume, Gatsby.”

“Thank you!” Claudia smiles. “Although I think you mean Lucy— Gatsby was a man.”

“You lookin’ for a man?”

“She’s already got one,” John slips an arm around her shoulders, staring Dracula down. “Me.”

“You’re a lucky cowboy,” the vampire clucks and moves on.

“Honest, Claudia, you make me feel like boiled broccoli in a buffet of petit fours.”

“Oh, no, Melissa! You’re beautiful” Claudia gushes. “The prettiest black cat I’ve seen all night!”

“Yeah Mel, you haven’t even hit thirty yet. How’d it go with that lawyer guy last night?”

“Not well. He took one look at my crappy car and made an excuse to leave.”

“Ohhhhh, Mel!” Claudia pouts and hugs her fiercely.


“You mean like to a bar? You guys don’t drink.”

“We like soda!” Claudia pipes up. “John and I can totally order Shirley Temples—“

“I’m not ordering a Shirley Temple, Clauds.”

“—while you drink your beer or whatever, it’ll be fun!”

“Sure,” Melissa chuckles. “But good luck finding a night where all three of us are off work at the same time again.”

The boys last until 8:30pm until they start flagging. Most parents reel their children in early, but John, Claudia, and Melissa have made a pact to let them go as long as they want so when they get home they’ll be tired, and therefore less of a handful. They set a new record this year— all the way to Birchcreek Ave, which is in the neighborhood with the full size candy bars, goodie bags, and obnoxiously expensive treats.

The five of them head back to Melissa’s house since she has more carpet space for the boys to count candy. The Stilinski’s have carpet too, but Stiles likes to spread his toys out all over it and Claudia always forgets to clean up her sewing supplies.

Claudia, however, peels off on the way to go home to bed. She has a six-am shift tomorrow at
Honey Flowers. “You sure you don’t want me to walk you home?” John tries again.

“John! We just live a few blocks away, I’ll be fine! You help Melissa keep the boys under control at her house. Go on!”

“All right. I’ll be home in an hour, then.” He pecks her on the cheek.

“M’kay. I’ll be asleep,” she yawns. “Bye Melissa, bye Scott! Happy Halloween.”

“Happy Halloween” and “Happy Halloween, Mrs. Stilinski!” they wave back.

Watching Scott and Stiles sort candy together is better than watching a Presidential debate.

He and Melissa settle in with mugs of steaming tea at the kitchen table as they watch the boys spread out their candy mountains on the carpet— this year the earning are impressive for two hours worth of candy-collecting. John will have to be on top of Stiles’s teeth brushing for the next year to make sure they don’t run into any cavities.

“I bet I got more Reese’s than you!” Stiles dumps his entire pillowcase out on the carpet. He’s impulsive.

“We should count the good candy first,” Scott says calmly. He’s practical.

After fifteen minutes of Scott’s quiet concentration and Stiles’s verbalizing of every inner thought, both boys have all their candies spread out in piles beside them, like tiny sugary tanks about to engage in war.

“Ooh! You got a Warhead?” Stiles gasps in awe, snatching the candy. “Can I have it?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Awesome!” John’s son pops it into his mouth. It clacks against his teeth and he stores it in his cheek like a chipmunk.

“Remember kiddo, you only get two little candies tonight. That counts as one,” John says.

“M’okay,” Stiles slurps as he immediately pops a gumball into his mouth and proceeds to suck on both candies at the same time. “Tha’s mah sec’nd c’ndy.”

He drools onto Melissa’s carpet. John sighs and quickly throws his napkin down and blots at it. “You’re a real charmer, son.”

“May I please have your peanut M&Ms?” Scott asks.

“What’re you g’unna trade me f’er them?” Stiles narrows his eyes.

“Um… You can have this box of Nerds?”

“Make it three boxes.”

Scott hands over three boxes of Nerds and Stiles snatches them gleefully.

“Stiles, Scott just gave you his Warhead for free,” John frowns. “Be nice and let him have the M&Ms without—”

“No no, don’t interfere,” Melissa hushes him. “This will teach Scott to be more assertive.”
“He’s gonna lose all his candy in exchange for a bobby pin,” John whispers back concernedly.

“Yep. And then in the future he won’t give things away so easily. I don’t want him to be that person who always loans things to friends and then he never sees his stuff again because he’s too nice to ask for it back. Plus I won’t have to deal with a five-year-old on a sugar rush until next year.”

“Tough love.”

“That’s how I roll.”

It’s a heartbreaking disaster. Stiles is a manipulative little weasel and Scott is too nice to say no. Stiles is cunning with his eye on the prize and Scott is a bundle of trusting bones with big, naive cow eyes. He hands over Jolly Ranchers and Twix without persuasion and piles up tall handfuls of candy per Stiles’s unfair trade requests. At the end the kid has a precious full-size Snickers in his hands and three gum balls lined up like pawns in a doomed chess game. Stiles is sniggering on the carpet with fistfuls of candy. Even Melissa looks like she’s regretting not stepping in earlier.

“Gimme your Snickers,” Stiles grins.

“Well… I… I like my Snickers,” Scott mumbles to the bar in his hands.

“But I’m your friend.”

“Um… Okay.”

Scott hands over the bar and Stiles takes it gleefully. “I am the candy Kiiiiing!” He cackles. Scott stares sadly at his three gum balls.

“Stiles,” John frowns. “You can’t keep all that candy.”

“But I earned it!”

“No, you didn’t. Scott gave it to you out of the goodness of his heart. Now look what he has left.”

Stiles stills as he notices the sad slump of his friend’s shoulders. His eyes grow wide. “Scott, you gave me all your candy! That’s dumb! Why would you do that?”

“You asked me to,” Scott mumbles.

“But now you only have three gum balls left!”

“Yeah…”

A moment of silence as the room grows still. John and Melissa hold their breath as Stiles’s mouth purses defiantly, and then they gape in shock as he bursts into tears.

“I took all your candy!” Stiles blubbers as his eyes swell shiny. “I t-took it all! I’m sorry Scott!”

“It’s okay,” Scott says meekly as his chin trembles.

“No, take it all back! Please Scott, take your candy back!” Stiles starts shoving piles of candy towards Scott.

“But it’s all mixed up now, we don’t know which is which!” Scott’s eyes are panicked and glassy.

And both boys start wailing on the carpet, sobbing into each other’s shoulders and babbling
intelligible woes. John is too stunned to really do anything until he sees Melissa stiffing her laughing behind a hand. “This is hilarious,” she mouths to him, and John has to agree. He can’t wait to tell Claudia all about it tomorrow.

“Aw, c’mon kids, it’s alright,” he crouches down beside his son, gently patting his back. “We can split the candy in half, okay?”

“Scott, honey? Why don’t you come sit at the table and take a puff from your inhaler? You’re starting to wheeze a little,” Melissa adds as Scott’s breaths turn reedy from crying. The boys clasp each other’s shoulders and calm down to quiet sniffles as she places glasses of water in front of them.

The solution is to gather all the candy in one big bag and split it in half at random, with promises that they can trade their candies (fairly) after school on Monday. The boys won’t stop apologizing to each other and they clutch to each other in the doorway. They’re still in their costumes, and he and Melissa exchange amused smiles as tiny Batman sniffles “I love you, Scott,” into a tiny ninja’s shoulder.

“I love you too, Stiles,” mumbles Scott in an equally adorable five-year-old lisp.

Alright, Stiles, we gotta go home now. For gosh sake, boys, you’ll see each other Monday for school.”

“You too, Scott. It’s way past your bedtime.”

They end up practically prying the boys off of each other before bidding their goodbyes. The walk home is relatively peaceful since Stiles is too pooped from the evening to keep up his usual level of blabbering, but John’s feet ache from his cheap cowboy boots and he finds himself yawning as well. Six blocks later they arrive at the house and he groans when he sees that his Volkswagen has been thoroughly egged.

“Christ,” he mutters as he uses a fingernail to scratch at the dried yolk. He reckons the punks must have used an entire dozen— but frankly he’s just happy Claudia’s jeep is safe in the garage, because she loves the thing to death and probably would have cried if someone vandalized it.

He peers down at the plastic badge on his chest and allows himself a moment to fantasize about the day the Sheriff’s cruiser is parked in his driveway, and then the local delinquents won’t dare to even say the word egg within a mile of his house.

“Daddy! Why is there a baby at our house?”

John blinks and turns around. A tiny, furry bundle is sitting on his lawn, two brown tufts of ears and a little tail facing them. As he walks over Stiles zips ahead of him and bends down in front of the toddler, cocking his head with a quizzical expression.

"Hey sweetheart.” John greets gently. "What's your name?”

The child doesn’t say anything. Instead she blows tiny spit bubbles, but she looks maybe two or three, definitely old enough to be talking. She’s very cute, with rosy chubby cheeks and huge brown eyes.

"Where are your parents?” He tries again. “Do you know your mommy or daddy's name?”

“Ba.”

The little girl adorably bears her teeth, as if she really thinks she’s a wolf cub. John takes out his cell phone to call the station while Stiles pokes her foot.
“Stiles, don’t poke her.”

“Why? She’s soft.”

“CORA!”

They turn around at the sound of the shout. John blinks as two children jog towards him on the sidewalk—a girl with dark hair and a very short miniskirt, and a shorter boy with huge green eyes and thick lashes. She’s dressed as some kind of goth and the boy is… Karl Marx?

“What the fuck, dude! did you kidnap our sister?!” The girl demands as her sneakers slap to a halt in front of him. John blinks in shock. She looks no older than eleven or twelve—John hasn’t even uttered that word more than twice in his life, and the second time was an accident.

“I— No, of course not,” John says quickly. “My son and I just found her here on our lawn. I was about to call the police station to—”

“Don’t call the cops, you dumbass! They’ll recognize me!” The girl makes an exasperated gesture to the sky like John is an idiot. She doesn’t sound like she’s joking.

“Laura, dad said not to be rude!” The boy, a considerably calmer child, tells his… Sister?

“Shut up, Derek, I’m older so I’m in charge.” She turns to John sweetly, grinning wide. “May we have our baby sister back, sir? Our parents are kind of freaking out. Well, mainly just our dad but that’s because mom is totally actually going to kill him this time.”

John gapes, wondering if he should maybe call social services instead. “I… Of course.” He hands over the child, calming considerably when he sees how gently the girl —Laura— cradles her close. “I’m glad you found her safe and sound.”

“Yep.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“What are you supposed to be?” Stiles peeks around John’s leg, frowning between the two kids. “Albert Einstein? And you just look like a purple cat thing.”

“I’m Josie from Josie and the pussycats,” Laura says haughtily, twirling her tail.

Her brother sighs. “I’m Charles Darwin,” and then a quieter, “why does nobody get that?” He mumbles to his beard.

“Do you kids have, uh… Parents? Where are your parents?” John glances around the street. It’s dark and deserted, probably pushing 10:00pm. Candy wrappers and forgotten costume ornaments litter the pavement. Stiles yawns, stretching his tiny mouth wide. Definitely bed time.

“Our dad sent us to the poor neighborhood to look for her. We should really get back now since we, you know, found her.” Laura rolls her eyes and pokes her little sister’s chubby cheek.

“Ah… Okay. Do you guys have cell phones?”

“Nah. We have a better way.”

“I… Alright then,” John says, brow knitting. He waits to hear their alternate solution but they simply blink at him and wait for him to leave. Talk about strange kids. “You two are welcome to hang inside our house until your parents get here to pick you up?”
“Do you have any soda?” The girl asks.

“Laura, remember what mom and dad said about stranger danger?” Derek tugs on his sister’s sleeve and whispers in her ear.

“Don’t be such a wuss, I just wanted to see if poor people have soda,” Laura whispers back loudly. The baby sneezes in her arms. “Ew! Gross, Cora. And no thanks, cowboy man. We’re gonna go home now. That’s a cool Batman costume, I guess.”

“My mom made it for me,” Stiles says proudly.

“I’m a Sheriff, actually,” John mutters.

“Alright, well uh… I guess I’ll let you two kids get going,” he says uncertainly. The children nod and start walking down the sidewalk, the boy calling a quiet, “thanks again, sir,” over his shoulder.

John shakes his head and steps into his house, herds Stiles down the hall to the bathroom, and hears two long wolf howls echo throughout the neighborhood. He glances out the window and sees Laura and her brother tipping their heads back and baying at the moon. It would be strange on any other night, but it’s Halloween. He turns on the bath and helps his son get ready for bed.

.o0O0o.

Talia Hale makes a very sexy and very terrifying Morticia Addams.

He’s currently pinned under her glare at the kitchen table as she sits coolly across from him, calmly stroking Cora’s fake fur. Cora is still in the wolf costume because it’s adorable, and Derek and Laura are in the next room counting out their candy.

“So you lost our baby daughter,” Talia opens with a calm smile. Shit.

“Yes.” He bows his head in shame.

“Yes, what? Let’s hear it in a complete sentence.”

“Yes, I lost our baby daughter,” he sighs sorrowfully. Shame, so much shame.

“And you will never do it again,” Talia voices smoothly. She smiles at the baby in her arms. “Isn’t that right, Cora?”

“Ba.”

“Laura, Derek. Stop eavesdropping if you know what’s good for you.”

The sound of two tweens quickly crawling away from the kitchen door. “I told you they’d hear us!”

“That’s only because you’re a mouth-breather.” “Shut up!”

Robert rests his head on his arms to blink up at his adorable baby daughter. “Common, cutie pie. You’re three now, when are you gonna say your first word, huh? Da-ddy.”

“Nonsense. She’s going to say *amà* first, aren’t you my little *ma’iitsoh*?”

“Aren’t you worried that there… You know, might be something wrong with her?” Robert suggests again.
“Not at all.”

“I hate to say it, T, but she’s quiet as a rock and children are supposed to start taking between seventeen and twenty-three months.”

“She’s just taking her time,” Talia voices wisely.

Robert chews his lip as he watches Cora blow spit bubbles. “I’m sorry I lost her.”

His wife smiles softly at him. “I forgive you. Now how about we catch the last half hour of The Addams Family marathon?”

“Are you going to stay in that costume?” Robert suggests coyly.

“Perhaps next year, if you manage to keep track of all of our children. I’m going to change into pajamas. Here, you take her.”

She hands off Cora and he changes his daughter into her fuzzy bunny pajamas before heading to the dining room. Laura and Derek are on their stomachs on the floor boasting passionately about who got the best candy. Derek is piling his neatly in little stacks according to brand, and Laura is pawing through her pillowcase and tossing whatever she doesn’t like into a reject pile.

“Gross, Laffy Taffy? Are you shitting me?” Laura wrinkles her nose and tosses a pink wrapper into the reject pile. “Lame. I bet it was that old lady who said my costume was inappropriate. Hey, I’ll give it to you for your Snickers bar?”

“Nice try,” Derek replies calmly, and carefully places another crunch bar atop his neatly-piled stack of eight. “Give me all your Reese’s and you have a deal.”

Honestly, his son could be a diplomat. Or a yoga instructor. He’s the calmest nine-year-old Robert’s ever met.

“What? No way!” Laura cries indignantly. “I’ll give you one Reese’s and all of my taffy. Take it or leave it.”

Derek snorts. “Leave it, obviously. In fact, I think I’ll just eat my Snickers now.”

Laura watches half-wistful-half-enraged as Derek carefully unwraps his Snickers and drags his tongue exaggeratedly along the entire length of the bar to make sure Laura won’t try to steal it. Laura’s eyes narrow dangerously as Derek slowly savors it, eating and moaning and licking his fingers, and Robert wonders if maybe he should step in and restrain her before she murders her brother. But he doesn’t have to when a small voice pipes up from Robert’s lap, surprising them all.

“Der-reck!”

The room falls quiet. Talia pauses on her descent down the stairs. Slowly, all four of their heads turn in unison to the child on his knee.

“Der-reck!” Cora squeals as Robert throws a “guess it's a draw, hun” eyebrow to Talia, who’s smiling amusedly. Derek simply grins a small, smug smile and walks over to his little sister, crouching down to eye level. He taps her on the nose.
“And that’s why you’re my favorite.”

“Bullshit, you like me the best!” Laura chucks a Laffy Taffy at his head.

“Jealous, much?”

“You little snot, you better sleep with one eye open tonight!”

“Or what, you’ll— Hey! Wha-auuugh!”

“AAaaauuAAGHhhhaaaa!”

“Let go of my arm, pickle-breath! Aaaauuughhh!”

“Der-reck! Derreck!”

In the chaos Robert laughs to the point of tears as Laura and Derek wrestle on the floor, pulling hair and trying to keep one another from raiding each other’s candy. Talia selects one of Derek’s Almond Joys while they’re distracted and joins him on the couch, rubbing a loving hand over Cora’s downy hair as they watch the show.

After five minutes or so the kids lose steam and lay panting atop one another on the carpet, at which point Robert bends down and plucks a King-size Reese’s from Laura’s pile. He sighs and lets his head rest back, enjoying the acoustics of his chatty children as he unwraps his candy.

“I fucking love Halloween,” he tells Talia.
Holidays and hardship.

.00O0. April 20th, 2004.

John’s sister visits on April twentieth.

It’s a surprise visit.

“Surpriiiiiiiiiise!” Carol singsongs as he opens the door, in four-inch stilettos and ginormous tinted sunglasses, perfect manicure perched on the handles of two hot pink suitcases. John develops an ulcer right then and there.

“Wha— What the hell are you doing here?” John fumes, because this is exactly the kind of bullshit Carol would pull. Years without contact and then she shows up on his doorstep unannounced like some celebrity diva, which let’s face it, she is—

“Well, isn’t that a warm welcome from my kid brother,” Carol rolls her eyes, and her entire huge blonde head rolls with it. “Real mature John, after I haven’t seen you since what, dad’s funeral? That Christmas mom gave us those horrible sweaters? I couldn’t really remember on the flight over.”

“That is exactly my point,” John hisses, and steps onto the porch to close the door. His son is inside and god knows Stiles will be pressing his ear up against the door to eavesdrop any second. “So what in god’s name are you doing here in California, at my house.”

“Oh. Right,” Carol flips her hair over her shoulder as she unwraps a stick of gum. “Mom died, so we need to do all that funeral stuff.”

“Mom died?” John balks, and steadies himself on the crappy potted plant to his left. This is it. He really is developing an ulcer, or he’s finally gone insane. He must have hit his head on the job and this is just some kind of fever dream. Any minute now he'll wake up and his sister will be buying gaudy jewelry miles away in Ohio where she belongs.

“Yeah, her caretaker found her yesterday morning. Heart attack or something,” Carol sniffs in her nasally voice. Everyone John knows likens it to The Nanny.

“Or something,” John parrots incredulously, barely above a whisper.

“Christ, John, are you always this red in the face? You should get that checked out, might be an ulcer or something. Say, I didn’t know they had so many nice houses in California! How come yours doesn’t look like the two-story ones I saw on the way here?”

John takes a few steadying breaths. “Carol,” he grits out as calmly as he can. “You can’t just come here and— Mom—? Why didn’t you call me first?”
“Oh, you’re such a grump, John, honestly. I’m your sister, I can come over whenever I want! Now let me in already, it’s windy out here— here’s my bag, there’s three more in the taxi.”

“Oh my God,” John murmurs as she shoves her suitcase handle into his palm and steps past him into the house.

“Oh my God!” Carol squeals. "Look at you, you must my little baby nephew!"

That would be Stiles, eavesdropping behind the front door as predicted. “Dad!” Stiles flies past Carol and latches onto John’s pants with his tiny seven-year-old fingers. His eyes are huge, little bow lips dropped wide in horror. “Did grandma really die? Who is this lady? She looks like you!”

He and Carol both flinch.

“Well, son… This is…” He looks to Carol. “This is your last chance to tell me this is just a cruel joke and mom is still alive and well. And that you’re going to leave in the next ten seconds.”

Carol snorts. “I wish. I really don’t have the time to plan a funeral party right now. It’s Paris fashion week!”

“Jesus Christ,” John mutters.

“Why are you in our house?” Stiles yells at Carol. The apple never falls far from the tree.

“Son, this is your aunt Carol. Carol,” John takes a deep breath. So much for keeping his sister away from his kid until he gets a chance to murder her. "This is Stiles.”

“Stiiiiilееess!” Carol draws out loudly, as she bends over to pinch his cheeks with her giant pink claws. “Well aren’t you just adorable!”

“You smell like grape juice,” Stiles blurts loudly, wrinkling his nose. Carol retracts immediately, smile souring.

“That’s called perfume, honey,” in a sticky-sweet voice. “And it’s worth more than all the pretty pearls your tiny hands could hold!”

John rubs his forehead, praying for guidance. This was supposed to be his weekend with Stiles; he even took off work so he could have time to take him across the county and spoil him rotten with father-son activities. The secret plans were set in stone: picking up Mr. Pickles sandwiches to eat at the park for lunch, followed by a little walk up the creek trail. He saved some jam jars so Stiles could catch tadpoles (and then release them), and then later John was going to take them to see *Monsters Inc.* at the theatre. Tomorrow morning he was going to make pancakes and take Stiles out fishing.

“How old are you, honey?”

“I’m seven!”

“Wooow, such a big boy!”

“Not as big as you!”

Carol purses her lips, looking to John. “I’m a size four. Is your son always this… Blunt?” In her best condescending tone.

John shrugs. “We prefer to see it as honest.”
“Say, where’s your wife? I was so excited to meet her!”

“She’s on a spa trip this weekend,” he mutters. _Take the hint take the hint_— “This was supposed to be my special weekend with Stiles, I took the weekend off so we could—“

“Oh, good! So you have plenty of time to help with this, then,” Carol slams the casket look-books down on the coffee table. “Where’s the guest bedroom?”

John doesn’t have a guest bedroom. John spent most of his pennies on a two bedroom house with a tiny living room and a tinier kitchen. He sighs. Carol would squawk if he told her to sleep on the couch, and that would probably be worse than sleeping on the couch himself.

“It’s down the hall,” he sighs, jamming a thumb in the direction of his and Claudia’s bedroom.

“But dad, that’s—“

“Shh. Why don’t you go pick out a popsicle from the freezer and pop a video in the VCR, kiddo.”

“Yeah! Okay!” Stiles runs off. Popsicles are treats, although sometimes John hears the freezer door open at night and in the morning three popsicles will be replaced with hot dog links colored purple with a crayola marker. He’s a tricky little kid.

Carol comments on the sad shape of his house as he leads her down the hall. “Oh, well this is… Cute, now, isn’t it. Christ, John, when was the last time you shampooed your carpet, it’s filthy!”

“That’s the color we bought it,” John lies. “Cafe Mocha,” he lies again, and sweats through his shirt.

When they enter the bedroom Carol raises an eyebrow at the mess. He shuffles forward and grabs all the clothes strewn on the floor. “Sorry, we, uh. Had some guests over last night. I didn’t get a chance to clean up.”

“You don’t say,” Carol plucks his shirt off the ground with a pinky and index nail. “But I recognize this terrible taste in fashion anywhere. This is your room, isn’t it?”

He sighs. “It’s fine. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Of course you will! It’s the dirty sheets I’m concerned about,” Carol wrinkles her nose. “Do you ever open a window in here? It smells like a pigpen.” She starts ripping the sheets from the bed and hands them to him. “Here, wash these and give me some new sheets. Preferably hypo-allergenic, I don’t sleep well on anything under five-hundred thread count.”

“God help us,” John mutters.

“Wow, you still pray, John? No wonder you were mom’s favorite.”

“She died yesterday and you’re already using past-tense?”

“Well, she died, so. Yeah, that’s what people do.”

John sighs. He doesn’t think she’d understand basic human compassion. “I’ll go get the rest of your bags,” he resigns.

His cell phone is out and in his hand just two steps out of the room. He hits #2 on speed-dial and it rings twice before she picks up.

“Hi, John,” Melissa answers slowly, because he never calls this early in the morning.
“Hey Melissa,” he sighs. “Are you around today?”

“Well, I’ve got a shift at three, but otherwise yeah, Scott and I are hangin’ out watching Power Rangers.”

“Ah. Well I was wondering if you’d let Stiles sleep over with Scott tonight? My sister is here and she’s… I’d really love for her to interact with Stiles as little as possible.”

“Wait, your sister?” Melissa says slowly. “As in the mysterious sister who stole your Uno bars every Christmas and then ran off to Ohio to marry the rich lawyer who claimed your grandmother’s wedding ring before you could?”

“That’s the one.”

“Wow,” Melissa muses. He can hear her chewing a thumbnail amusedly. “I’m almost tempted to stop by to see the famous monstrosity in person. You didn’t mention she was coming here, I thought you said you hadn’t seen her in years?”

“Yes well, she’s not a big fan of calling first,” John mutters grimly. “Our mom died and she thought the best way to tell me was to pop up on my doorstep with a stack of funeral plans.”

Melissa swears colorfully. “Seriously?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Geez, I’m so sorry, John,” she sympathizes. “Of course I can come get Stiles. How’s ten-ish sound? I’ll take the boys to the arcade but uh, I can’t do a sleepover tonight. I’ve got a double-shift this evening and I’m gonna be dead on my feet when I get back.

“I completely understand, ten would be wonderful,” he sighs in relief. “Sorry to spring this on you so last-minute, but Claudia’s away at that spa and I’d hate to make her come home for this.”

“Hey it’s fine, I agree she deserves a little vacation time. Hopefully this will help with her headaches.”

“That’s the idea,” he grunts as he lugs Carol’s luggage up the porch steps. “I might have to check in myself by the time my sister gets her ass out of here.”

“Do you want me to bring something to knock her out for you? I have access to all the hospital sedatives.”

“Nah, she’d sniff out anything I try to put in her Vitamin Water. She has a nose like a bloodhound and the heart of Satan. Best to just grit your teeth and hope she leaves before she completely ruins your life.”

“Yikes. Sounds like someone I might accidentally strangle in my sleep.”

“Believe me, if anyone is killing that woman it’s going to be me,” he mutters.

“Because she’s as nasty as you say or because Stiles is driving her up the wall and she might file a lawsuit?”

John huffs. “Oh no, it’s a treat to see Stiles grind her nerves, but the less he equates her with family the better. Thanks for taking him today, Melissa.”

“No problem. I’ll see you soon.”
It takes two more trips to get Carol’s luggage into his house. It should concern him as to how long she plans on staying, but he knows that she packs heavy for short trips. Blow dryers, makeup kits, outfit changes, a separate bag just for shoes while John can fit his whole life in one backpack and be good for a year. He’s always had his suspicions that one of them was adopted, because there is no way in hell they share the same blood. The only thing they had in common was the sandy blond color of their hair before she went and dyed hers platinum.

“Alright, so where shall we do this? The only surface I see that isn’t littered with trash is this. Is this your kitchen table?” Carol clacks her manicured fingers on the table, and there’s the ring— giant and sparkly and it should have been John’s ring, but now that he looks at it Claudia probably wouldn’t have liked it as much.

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s so small though, how on earth do you fit all your food courses on here?”

“We’re only three people, Carol.”

“Well Bill and I are only two people, and we sit at a twelve-seater. How else are you supposed to host dinner parties?”

“Let’s just stick to getting this done,” John sighs as he sits down with the funeral binders.

“Always such a party pooper,” she dotes in her nasally voice. If John hadn’t taught himself to tune it out his ears would be bleeding by now.

“Jesus, Carol, these caskets are ridiculous,” he comments as he pages through one of the cookbooks.

“I think that baby blue one is classy. Or the marble?”

“The price is ridiculous.”

“Oh, hardly. Although the pain in the ass will be flying to New York and seeing the family at the funeral. You know aunt Marge is going to ask a million questions.”

“Why don’t we cremate her?” John asks. “We don’t know anything about what she’d want to wear to rest, or how she’d want the funeral. You know mom, she’s so particular. Might be best to keep her ashes in a nice urn.”

“And then what? Fly the ashes to one of us? Ew, I don’t want mom on my mantel!” Carol wrinkles her nose. “That’s unsanitary! And creepy. You keep her, John.”

John sighs. “Fine. She’d probably rather be at my house anyway.”

“Yes, yes, you were the favorite, we know,” Carol rolls her eyes. “Always such a saint for going out to see her every damn year. Well at least we have all that out of the way.” She snaps the casket book shut. Now we just need to sort out the technicalities with the apartment.”

“Right, mom’s apartment.” John rubs his eyes. “I trust you already found an agent to host the estate sale? I’m trying to find a way around making a trip up there, but it seems inevitable if we’re going to pick out the personal items.”

“I say just let the broker throw out whatever doesn’t get sold,” Carol waves a hand. “I don’t have time to go digging around that musty old dump.”
“How could say that, mom’s whole life is in that building,” John blurs. “Jesus Christ, Carol, don’t you have any respect? What about the photo albums? Our old high school essays in the storage locker? And mom’s china, she’s going to want us to save at least her favorite teacups—"

“Well if you want to cram all that junk into your house, be my guest. But my mansion in Ohio is a nice place, and I won’t be filling it with any crap like that."

He leans backwards and massages the crease between his eyes, mentally counting down the seconds until she leaves. “Fine. I’ll go to New York, I’ll find all the sentimentals, and then I’ll bring them back here and keep them in our attic. You just go back to Ohio and focus on your own life.”

“Thank you. Now, cremation, the obituary, and hiring the estate broker, and the agent, brings the whole shebang to…” Carol clacks out the numbers on her adding machine. "About twelve thousand.”

“Jesus,” John rubs a hand over his forehead.

“Well, that’s not much of a problem,” Carol snorts. “That’s pocket money. Plus the appraisers say the apartment’s worth just under a million, but then there’s the tax payment, the mortgage and the commission, so once it’s sold we each get about three-fifty.”

John halts. He stares at his sister and slowly sets his glass down on the table with a small thunk. “What?”

“Why don’t you listen when I talk to you? Mom owned an apartment in the heart of Manhattan, John, a million is the baseline price for what they go for nowadays. Honestly I’m surprised the estimate is that high considering how gross that carpeting job is, not to mention—"

“Three-hundred fifty thousand?” John cuts in, barely above a whisper.

“Yes, that’s what I said. Hardly enough for a few good vacations, but I guess it’s not too bad. Hey, are you feeling okay? You look pale all of a sudden.”

John scoots out his chair and staggers to the kitchen sink. He slides open the window and leans against the counter, taking deep breaths in and out through his nose.

“Oh my god, John! I’m surprised you haven’t keeled over before mom did! Are you sick or something?”

A hysterical giggle slips from his lips. “I’m fine. I’m… I am really, really fine now.” His shoulders shake with silent relief as he thinks of everything he’ll be able to do now— fix the leaks in the bathroom, replace the moth-bitten couch, treat Stiles to every new comic book he desires, pay off their debts, buy Claudia a real ring, take her to Poland—

“Great. Then while your up fetch me one of my Vitamin Waters, will you? In a glass with ice please, but only if your ice doesn’t that weird refrigerator aftertaste.”

.o0O0o.

A little after ten the doorbell rings.

Ding-dong.
“Hold on, I’ll be right back,” John rises, not wanting Carol to follow. Carol follows, because she loves to stick her nose into everything.

“Who’s at the door, John? I didn’t know we were expecting company.”

“She’s not staying. Stiles! Come out here plea—“

“Comiiiiiiinnnggg!” Stiles zooms pasts his knees with a tangled slinky in hand. “Bye dad!”

“Bye, son.”

He opens the door, lets his kid slip quickly outside, and says “thanks, Mel” to the woman standing on his patio.

“I’ll bring him back before three,” she says as Scott and Stiles skip down the steps to the car.

“That’s fine, thanks again.”

“Good luck, John,” she winks.

“I’ll need it,” he sighs, and shuts the door. Carol peers out the window and starts asking a million questions.

“Now who was that? Why didn’t you introduce me, John, I was standing right here! Why is she picking up your kid? Oh! Is she your wife?”

“No, my wife is on a spa trip, remember? And her name is Claudia. That was Melissa.”

“Oh. Is Melissa your nanny?”

“No, she’s a friend. Stiles is best friends with her son, Scott.”

“She’s beautiful. I thought she might be your wife for a minute but she’s way out of your league.”

John sighs. “Yes, thank you. She’s very pretty.” He tries herding Carol back to the kitchen.

“Is she a doctor? She was wearing scrubs.”

“She’s a nurse.”

“Oh, how adorable! It’s so nice that people are willing to work such unsanitary jobs like that. Say, how come you haven’t shown me a picture of your wife? Claudia, is it? I bet she’s up here in all these family photos.” Carol starts nosing through the collection of frames on the shelf by the door. John grits his teeth as she picks up picture of him and Claudia from fourth of July of 1996.

“Oh! Is this her?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Ohhhh, well she’s… Cute. In a homely kind of way. Cute John, very cute.”

“She’s beautiful,” John mumbles as he snatches the frame back and uses his sleeve to wipe the DNA Carol left on it. It’s a nice photo—they went to a city barbecue in the park and had a stranger take a picture of them with Claudia’s disposable camera. They’re snuggled under a blanket together on the grass with bottles of root beer as they wait for the fireworks to start. The cheap flash makes their foreheads shiny, but neither of them got red-eye and their smiles are genuine.
“—ello? Earth to John? I asked you where your bathroom is, aren’t you listening?”

“It’s down the hall to the left,” he answers. He debates telling her to watch out for the leaky sink (it squirts you in the eye if you try using hot water) but decides she can just find out herself.

The afternoon passes as quietly as it can with Carol in the house. Somehow while crunching numbers and calling real estate agents she manages to complain about everything—his thin towels, his outdated phone, the lack of air conditioning in his house, the peeling wallpaper, the mismatched furniture, his scuffed shoes and even his squeaky swivel chair. At one point she wrinkles her nose at the leaky dishwasher and has the gall to say,

“John, I can’t believe you’re living here! Here, why don’t you let me write you a check for—“

But that’s as far as she gets before John, with his bruised pride, blurts, “Not everyone lives in penthouses and mansions. That doesn’t mean we’re living any worse than you are.”

“Hold on a minute.” Carol stops chewing her gum. She squints at the paper in her hands.

“What? What’s wrong?”

"Says she’s listed as next of kin in your will.”

“Oh,” he frowns.

"Well that won’t do anymore, since she’s dead… I guess that’s gotta be me now, huh,” Carol chews on her pen. She sounds less than thrilled.

“Well then I sincerely hope nothing happens to me and Claudia anytime soon,” John mutters honestly.

“Hey, I’d make a great auntie guardian!” Carol whacks him on the wrist. “I’m fun and beautiful and our house is certainly big enough. I think Stiles would have fun living with me and Bill. We could train him to be our little realtor!”

John’s son is many things, but John’s son is not a realtor.

“Now let’s just slow down here,” he frowns. “What about—“

Grandpa Earl and grandma Ellie passed away just after Stiles was born. His mom had a sister who died last spring from kidney failure, uncle Mark lives in Europe as a cigar-smoking bachelor, and they haven’t spoken to his father’s side of the family since the funeral in 1983.

“Good Lord, you’re the only one,” he realizes.

“Right! So I guess I’ll just put me —Mrs. Carol Faulker and Mr. Bill Faulker— down for next of kin of little Stiles.”

“Great,” he deadpans.

“Oh! The Will, John, I need to call her attorney to see what’s in her Will,” Carol starts flipping through papers. “Oh shoot, who was it? Do you remember?”

“Why do you think I’d memorize her attorney’s contact information?”

“I don’t know, you’re the one who flew to New York every Christmas!”
“Every other.”

“Whatever. Ah! Here it is, Mr. Francis Gimbleman. Here, take this number and call it, will you? Find out if she even has a Will. Hopefully not.”

“Why wouldn’t you want her to have a Will?” John asks.

“Oh Johnny baby, I forget you’re just a naive young forty-year-old sometimes.” She pats his cheek with her claw-nails. "If mom has a Will that means her attorney needs to read it to us in person, which means that I need to fly to New York with you.”

“Oh. Well in that case, please god let there not be a Will,” John mutters and punches in the number. A man answers on the third ring.

“Good evening, Francis Gimbleman speaking.”

“Hello, Mr. Gimbleman? This is John Stilinski speaking, my mother is— was one of your clients. But she just passed away a couple days ago.”

“Oh, well I’m so sorry to hear that, John. Yeah, your mother was a real charming woman, may she rest in peace. What can I help you with?”

“Well I’m here with my sister Carol in California, and we were wondering if my mom had a Will that you know of?”

“Ah, right. Hold on one moment, please.”

“Sure, thank you.”

“What’d he say, John? Does she have one?”

“Shhh. He put me on hold for a minute.”

“Don’t you ‘shush’ me. Remember the last time you ‘shushed’ me?”

“Yes. You killed my goldfish in eighth grade.”

“For goodness sake, John, I did not!”

“Yes you did! I was studying for Algebra and left my room for a slice of pizza, and when I came back he was belly-up with grape soda poured in his bowl! Mom was at work and dad was out at the bar, which means you were the only other one home!”

“Honestly John, you bring this up every time we speak to each other!”

“And I’m going to keep bringing it up until you own up to it!”

“I don’t even like grape soda!”

“In 1977 you did. You used to drink the stuff so much that it practically turned your nose purp—!”

“Mr. Stilinski?”

“Mr. Stilinski was my father, please call me John,” John says into the speaker. He glares at Carol.

“Right. Well your mother does have a Will, but I can’t read it to you over the phone. We’ll need to
“I don’t have an attorney. I think—“

“What is he saying, John?”

“He says she has a Will.”

Carol sighs dramatically. “Here, gimme’ the phone.”

“I will not— hey!”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Gimbleman,” Carol says sticky-sweet into the phone. “Could you mail the Will to my address in Ohio? My husband’s firm has—“

She pauses. John watches as her lips drop to a shocked ‘O’ shape as the man says something on the other end of the line, and then her thin eyebrows scrunch with rage as—

“What do you MEAN I’m not included in her Will?!” She screams. John, amused but not surprised, doubles over and laughs against the table.

.o0O0o.

Everything from then on is wrapped up in just over an hour. The Will is being mailed to him in California and Carol is exceedingly bitter about it, which puts a pep in John’s step for the rest of the afternoon. She’s paying for the cremation and he’s dipping into his reserves to pay the estate agents, but in a few weeks thirty-five hundred thousand dollars will be sitting in his checking account and he has to bite his cheek to keep from grinning like an idiot every time he thinks about it, which is every other second. By the time three o’clock rolls around there’s blood on his tongue.

“Hi daddy!” Stiles flies into the house with a small sticky toy from the arcade.

“Hey, kiddo. Hi Melissa, sorry for the quick send-off this morning. Thanks again for taking him.”

“Anytime. How’s your sister?” She asks. Scott plays with a paddle-ball at her side.

“Finally about to take a beauty rest nap,” he replies. “I really owe you one. But I gotta ask one more favor.”

“Is it quick?”

“Promise me that if anything happens to me and Claudia, you’ll never let Stiles live with Carol in Ohio.”

“Oh shit, she’s the next of kin now, isn’t she,” Melissa’s eyes widen.

“Legally, yes. Even though Stiles won’t go near her with a ten-foot pole.”

Melissa nods. “I promise to do everything in my power to find him a good home, John. God forbid anything happen to you and—“

“Daddy! Am I in trouble?” Stiles tugs on his pant leg.

“What? No, unless you did something I don’t know about,” John frowns, exchanging a worried
glance with Melissa. “Stiles, what did you—?”

“AAAAAEEEeeeEEEeeeeEEEEEKKKK!!!!”

“Oh my god,” he breathes as Carol runs out of her room and down the hallway, screaming bloody murder. He runs inside, followed by Melissa who can use her nurse skills if she’s injured, and Scott stands terrified in the doorway. Most telling is how Stiles watches the whole thing and collapses to a giggling mess on the floor.

“YOU LITTLE BRAT!” Carol screams at Stiles, pointing a bony finger at him. “John you ‘ought to lock him away at a boarding school before he sets your house on fire!”

“Carol, Carol calm down, are you hurt? What happened?” John demands, scanning her for stab wounds or acid burns or something to justify the decibel she’s screaming at.

“MY SUITCASE! He p-put WORMS in my S-SUITC-CASE!” Carol wails. “There must have been a hundred of them! All moving and getting slime all over my CLOTHES! My clothes are RUINED, John! The little brat must have done it before he left this morning!”

John tries. He really, really tries not to laugh, but it’s inevitable when he sees Melissa clamping her hands over her mouth and struggling to stay sympathetic. He snickers, and with Stiles’s giggles it quickly escalates to full-belly guffaws alongside Melissa, who looses it with him.

“Why are you laughing? He put worms in my suitcase, John!” Carol shrieks, face now redder than the ghastly rouge she uses to dust her cheeks.

“Yeah, that seems to be his go-to prank right now,” John agrees.

“Well aren’t you going to punish him?” Carol stretches her neck to her full height. “I could get worm poisoning! I could file a lawsuit!”

“Oh don’t worry, I’m going to punish him immensely for this.” Perhaps with a trip to Great America, John thinks.

“And don’t worry, as a nurse I can tell you that there’s no such thing as worm poisoning,” Melissa adds helpfully, holding out a hand. “You must be Carol. I’m Melissa, John’s friend.”

Carol doesn’t shake her hand. Instead she snarls at John and jabs a finger at him.

“Forget it! There is no way I’m spending the night here let alone another second I am leaving your cramped, god-forsaken house right now!” Carol shrieks. “I’m calling a cab and jumping on the next plane to Ohio as soon as you get all my luggage out to curb, you hear me? Now! Right now!”

“Fine with me,” John says quickly. “I’ll take the worms out of your suitcase, too.”

“I expect nothing less. I’ll be waiting on the porch,” Carol sniffs, swaying her hips haughtily as she makes her way to the door. Scott scoots out of the way in fear and runs to Melissa. “Oh, and John?”

“Yes?” He says cautiously.

“Try not to die anytime soon, okay? Because there is no way I’m taking care of your kid. I don’t care if I need to sign papers to let him stay with some delinquent thug. Not. Happening. Capiche?”

John sighs. “Have a great flight back, Carol.” Because he is the nice sibling.

But that doesn’t mean he can’t flip her the bird when she turns her back to slam the door.
(His mother’s will shows up in his mailbox a week later. She left him all her rosaries, holy cards, and Sacred Mother statues. He sighs).

**November 13th, 2004.**

“Holy shit, you’ve outdone yourself, Talia!”

Outside the November rain slaps against the windows, trying desperately to worm inside his toasty, cozy house, where he sits like a king amongst his beautiful family. Laura knocks her fork against the table in excitement as Talia brings the cake to the table and lifts the lid, revealing a beautifully frosted German chocolate delight decorated with three tiers of moist perfection. Derek grins at it as he bounces Cora atop his lap, and Robert swells with pride at the sight of it all.

“Daaamn, mom, we should have early birthdays all the time! How come I didn’t cake like that for my birthday?” Laura both praises and pouts, gazing wide-eyed at the glistening cake. She inches a fork closer to swipe at some frosting and Robert slaps her hand away, because years of raising that girl has taught him to always be on the lookout for sneaky hands.

“Because you got suspended for putting plastic wrap over all the toilets in the school bathrooms,” Talia suggests pointedly, throwing in a side-glance at their daughter as she sticks candles in. “The girl’s and boy’s bathrooms, if you remember.”

“Ah, right,” Laura leans back and folds her arms behind her head, grinning at the memory. “Good times, that was a good one.”

“Plus dad is extra old now, so he gets an extra cool cake,” Derek adds. His voice is caught in that awkward tipping point of adolescence, caught between his squeaky tween voice and a deep, throaty drawl much like Robert’s own.

“Hey now,” Robert warns good-naturedly, gesturing his fork at his son. “I have a ways to go before I’m an old geezer. I’m still forty-four for another month, remember? Besides, forty-five is the new thirty. Men’s Health magazine says so!”

Derek rolls his eyes with a “sure, dad” and meets Robert’s fork with a metal chink of his spoon.

Derek gets in one more jab with his spoon but stops immediately. That’s the difference between Laura and Derek; Laura likes to ruffle Talia for fun, causing trouble as if it thrills her to push her mother, whereas Derek is a blade of grass, bending and swaying respectfully to Talia’s every worded breeze. Cora is somewhere in the middle, often too preoccupied playing in her room or daydreaming to get in trouble, but when she does she’s usually too cute to really get mad at. They spoil her.

“Hey now, careful of the jacket!” Robert dodges some frosting. “I just cleaned this thing.”
“Yes dear, you clean it every day.”

“And stroke it like you’re having an affair with it!” Laura pipes up around a mouthful of cake. “Moom, dad’s cheating on you with his jacket.”

“I know ahote.”

They sing happybirthday to him; Talia’s soft croon that she thinks isn’t tone deaf at all, Laura’s bellowing voice that dips off-key on purpose to make Cora laugh, Cora’s tiny song which is barely audible around her squeaky giggles, and Derek’s tortured monotone chant that broadcasts how much he hates singing. Robert smiles and conducts them all with his fingers, which Cora tries to chomp at.

“Make a wish, dear.”

“Make a wish, dad!”

“Get in a good one, pops. Ask for a pony!”

“Why would I want a pony?”

“So I can ride it!”

Robert watches the candles burn, tiny flames wobbling atop the wax. Truth be told he hasn’t wished for anything since Laura was born. He has all the money he could ask for, a large house in a great town, a wife who doubles as his best friend, and three firecracker children. But there is always one nagging, missing puzzle piece he wishes was around more.

He blows out the candles.

“Hooray!” His family cheers and Laura dives for the cake knife while Talia is distracted getting the lights. She cuts a mammoth size of chocolatey goodness and hands it to Robert, grinning ear to ear. “For you, my porky father-dearest.”

“Ha-ha,” Robert scoffs around the blessed savory-sweet treasure in his mouth. “I’d ground you for that, but luckily your mother’s cake is making me feel forgivable.”

"Someday I'm gonna walk you down the aisle, so you better pick someone ugly. That way by comparison I'll still be the handsomest."

"Don't worry dad, I'll snag a real Nicolas Cage. But you two stay far away from my wedding menu! It shall be barbecue ribs and chocolate cake and nothing else."

"Your husband doesn't get a say?"

"He'll be too busy worshiping the ground I walk on."

"More like following you with a bottle of Febreeze," Derek quips.

His birthday isn’t for another month, but they’re celebrating now since they’re going on vacation to Fiji in a few days (Where Talia, Derek, and Cora will get tan on the sand and he and Laura will sunburn like lobsters) and Robert has a full schedule at work until Christmas.

“What’d’ja wish for, dad?” Derek asks.

“Can’t tell you,” Robert answers. “Otherwise it won’t come true.”
“Well, they found some excess tissue in her breasts,” John tells Hank. “But the doctors say there’s a good chance it’s just a result of her pregnancy, apparently a common occurrence, so we’re not worried.” Even though John is secretly terrified. “But you know Claudia, she’s all sunshine even on the rainiest days. She insisted she was fine going to the appointment alone, but I just couldn’t find a babysitter for Stiles.”

“Did he scare them all off?” Richard mutters slyly from the corner, and John shoots him a glare.

“He put a worm into our first babysitter’s coffee cup, wrapped cling wrap over the toilet for the second woman, and locked our last girl in the storage closet for three hours,” John informs calmly around his pastry. “So I’d be nice to him. He’s very clever at tormenting people he doesn’t like.”

Richard reconsiders sipping his coffee. He regards Stiles, who’s sitting on John’s desk playing a card game with Terry, raises a disapproving eyebrow at John, and leaves the room, probably to get a fresh cup. John walks over to exchange a smirk with Terry.

“So where’d you put the worm, son?” He asks as he ruffles Stiles’s long hair.

“There’s seven of them, and I put ‘em in his desk drawer so when he reaches in to grab something—bleagh!” Stiles states, not looking up from Terry’s card-shuffling hands.

Terry sniggers into his palm. “Smart kid.”

“Too smart, sometimes” John agrees affectionately. “It’s a shame you didn’t bring your video camera, otherwise we could catch the whole thing on film.”

“Oh hey, Stiles is here!” Rhonda greets cheerily as she enters the station. “Thank goodness, I was out of decaf this morning.”

Terry cackles. “‘Ey, good one, Rhonds!”

“You saying my son omits energy equivalent to dark roast?” John teases. Although the Ritalin has helped immensely. Stiles is still Stiles, just minus the screaming and running around (most of the time). His grades have also jumped up and his teachers say he’s been staying focused longer in class.

“Hi Rhonda!” Stiles gasps and runs over to give her a high-five. “Did you bring your blacklight today?”

Rhonda is their forensics specialist. Stiles likes to write “poopy” and “U suck” with her invisible pen and then giggle when she shines it over to make the words appear. Last month this inspired Rhonda to use the pen on Richard’s Sheriff plaque on his desk so that when hit with the UV light it reads, “Sheriff Shit Sullivan.”

As far as they know it’s still there, a secret declaration of what everyone thinks of their county leader. The nickname stuck and is used frequently around the station when Richard is out of earshot; John usually forbids swear words with a passion, but it may have slipped out of his mouth once or twice to Terry’s extreme pride.

“Everyday,” Rhonda hums. “If I’d known you would be here I would have brought an extra set for you to keep.”
“Don’t give him any ideas,” John warns dryly. “He would use it to write potty words all over our house. The walls, the couch… Probably my uniform.”

“And it would be hilarious,” Terry and Rhonda say in unison, then cackle and fist bump.

“Hey, I want a turn!” Stiles stands on his tiptoes to hold up his fist.

“Remember the way I taught you?” Terry asks.

The kid nods vigorously. “Mhm! Daddy, watch, watch! This is how to be street smart.”

Terry and Stiles bump fists, but when they pull back they waggle their fingers in a little wiggly explosion gesture. “Boosh!” Stiles throws his hands up with enthusiasm and makes two finger guns at Terry. “Terry, my man!”

“Casper, my little homie,” Terry responds in kind with the finger guns. John snorts.

“Thank you Terry, for educating my son on how to be hip.”

“Oh god, John, it’s cool. Use the word ‘cool’ like I taught you! How old are you anyway, I thought you were four years younger than me? ‘Hip’ makes you sound like such an old man. Don’t go embarrassin’ your kid now.”

“Yeah!” Stiles crows as he plucks a police hat from a nearby desk and flips it backwards on his head. It’s so big it flops down over his eyes. ‘I’m cool as H-E-double hockey sticks!’

“Grey, Stilinski! Back to work please,” Sullivan gives them the stink-eye as he returns to the room. “I was generous in saying your kid could stay here if he didn’t cause any trouble.”

“Yes, sir.” He turns bends over to Stiles and lowers his voice. “Alright, kiddo. I need to work now, so you play quietly with the Gameboy you brought, okay?”

“Can’t I play cards with Terry?” Stiles pouts.

“Sorry but not right now, he needs to work too.”

“Aw… Okay.”

“Tha’tta boy.”

“Aaahhhck!”

There’s a loud crash as Richard jerks away from his desk drawer and shakes his slimy hand. The department sniggers into their fists as they catch sight of the pile of worms, Stiles is particular laughing like a smug little hyena. Richard turns dangerously to him with narrowed eyes and points a finger.

“You! I know you did this and I have no tolerance for petty pranks in my office, got that? As for you Stilinski,” his eyes narrow dangerously. “Keep a closer eye on that little brat of yours or I’m kicking him to the curb. Now get back to work.”

John forces himself to wipe the grin off his face. “Yes, sir. Sorry, Sheriff.” He leans down to Stiles and whispers, who’s still snickering quietly into his hands. “Shhh, you heard him, kiddo… But great job.” They exchange a discreet high-five when Richard has his back turned.

The day proceeds as normal. Stiles stays glued to his game and sticks out his tongue in concentration
at the foot of John’s desk. John splits a donut with him but doesn’t eat his half because he’s too anxious about Claudia’s lack of arrival; she’s supposed to swing by after the appointment to pick up Stiles, but the minute hand keeps moving and soon it’s two hours later, and John is itching to call her but it’s not his break yet.

Stiles can only last so long without moving (or causing mayhem, they go hand in hand), thus he starts wandering about the station and poking his nose over desks. Everyone knows him by now and in a way he’s regarded as the Police Department’s surrogate son, so he’s greeted with kindness and high-fives by everyone he says hi to— with the exception of Sullivan.

Sullivan doesn’t like Stiles (partly because Stiles is a brat to him and partly because he’s John’s son) but Stiles shares John’s contempt for the man in return. Unfortunately he slips out of John’s line of sight a few times and Richard hauls him back to the main room by the collar with a warning not to let him wander places he’s not supposed to, but Stiles has already found his way into every private room of the building. Including Richard’s porn drawer.

John’s cell phone rings at five past noon. His stomach swoops coldly when he sees Claudia’s name and looks to Sullivan. “Sheriff, may I take this? It’s my wife.”

Richard waves a hand. “Fine.”

He rises quickly from his desk and moves to the empty break room. Terry looks up from his game of cards with Stiles as Stiles pipes up, “hey, I wanna say hi to mom!”

“No, probably not a good time, squirt,” Terry tells him. “Go fish.”

When John answers the phone Claudia’s voice is shaking. He’s never heard her so scared. “John,” she whimpers, and his heart is suddenly in his throat— is she crying? “I’m so sorry, the doctors were running late and the appointments ahead of me took forever, and then when it was my turn they said a lot of things that didn’t really make sense and I just—”

“What do you— What did they—?” He stutters.

“W-what do you— What did they—?” He stutters.

A beat of silence, and a shuddering gasp from Claudia. “The doctor says you’d better come in.”

He stares at the empty box of donuts. The coffee machine putters softly with a new brew and the florescent lights are too bright. “I’ll be right there. Hang in there, Claudie. I’m coming right now— I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He essentially runs back to his desk and grabs his keys. “Come on, kiddo, we’re gonna go see your mom.”

Stiles hangs back and throws his head backwards over his chair. “But daaaaaady, Terry hasn’t told me how he does his card trick yet! Can’t we stay longer?”
“Next time, Casper.” Terry looks at John with a serious eye, like he knows. John bites his lip and nods at him. “Good luck, John.”

.o0O0o. December 1st, 2004.

Stage four breast cancer.

Claudia is taking it like a champ. John is not. Stiles hasn’t grasped what it means yet.

The past couple weeks have rushed by in a blur of doctor appointments and crying in the bathroom when she’s not home to hear him— you’d think he’d do it on the toilet seat like a man, but instead he kneels before the tub so he can watch the tears slip down the porcelain. It’s an odd distraction that keeps him from completely losing it, and it’s the little things that almost make him lose it: the bottle of Claudia’s green apple shampoo, the scuffle of her slippers against the kitchen tile when she comes out in the morning, the jingle of her jeep keys, and the little basket of nail polish in the bathroom.

Everything about her is suddenly magnified, which isn’t fair because he already pays attention to all her tiny details and it just makes him love her more. People would think he’s crazy if he told them, but he secretly loves the way her fingers flutter over things she tries to open like cookie boxes or envelopes, and the way she likes to prance around braless after work so she can “free the boobies” and how she only reads the comics in the newspaper. He loves how she eats a handful of dry cereal first and then takes a sip of milk, and how she walks on her tiptoes when she gets out of the shower so she keeps her feet clean as possible, the tin of chocolates she keeps hidden in the drawer by the couch and—

“Hi daddy! Guess what we did today in school! We had a science lesson where Mr. Edwards filled up a volcano thingy with some white stuff, and Scott thought it was snow but I was like—”

John startles as Stiles clambers into the car. He’s been waiting in the roundabout to pick him up after school.

“—KABLOOSH! And it foamed all over the table!” Stiles throws up his arms, spraying spit all over the Volkswagen in his enthusiasm. He smells like sweat and pencil shavings, and he grins at John in the rear-view mirror. “Hi daddy! Why are you picking me up today?”

“Your mom has a doctor appointment.” John flicks on the turn signal.

“Again?” Stiles wrinkles his nose. “Man, she’s lucky. Every time I go to the doctor I get a lollypop. Or a sticker!”

“Mm. Well, adult doctors usually don’t give out lollipops or stickers.” Just bad news.

“Really? That stinks! I never wanna grow up! I’m just gonna stay with Doctor Callahan forever,” Stiles declares. “Hey, is mom gonna be home soon? We’re supposed to do a paragraph on our special person in our lives and I wanna ask her interview questions.”

Stiles favors Claudia.

John’s known it for a while. He sees it in how Stiles greets his mom first when they both pick him up from school, and how Stiles hollers for Claudia when he has a nightmare, not John. Stiles runs to her for hugs before anyone else, asks for her when he’s looking for something, makes her drawings at school, and every time it’s a little punch to John’s gut. But John doesn’t say anything, because he loves his kid enough for the both of them. But now he just worries about when—
“She might be a little tired, but you can try. Just let her be if she wants to take a nap, okay? I’m going to bring her back from the hospital as soon as I drop you at home.”

“Why is she so tired all the time now?” Stiles complains petulantly. He frowns out the window. “I don’t want her to be tired, I want her to play the fish game with me on the computer.”

“We’ve been over this, kiddo. Her new medicine doesn’t make her feel well, so sometimes she just needs a little extra rest, that’s all,” John explains as nonchalantly as he can. Stiles makes a sound of indifference and shrugs, already onto the next subject.

“M’kay. Hey, are dinosaurs real?”

“According to fossil evidence, they used to be.”

“I knew it! But then they all died! Do you know how they died?”

John swallows. “An asteroid, we think. Sixty-four million years ago a really big one crashed into the earth and that was it. Bye bye dinosaurs.”

“What happened after that?”

“Well, some forms of life survived. Small mammals like mice and insects, and then over many years they evolved into bigger mammals, and then humans.”

“Then why does Shelby Marcus say that god created humans?” Stiles crosses his arms. “She says that some guy, um, Alvin, was the first human on earth, and that he just popped up out of no where! But if the dinosaurs are a real thing, and they were here before people, then that doesn’t make sense!”

“You’re right, it doesn’t,” John barely refrains from chuckling. Stiles sounds just like him back as a teenager. Only Stiles asked the question years earlier than John.

“Does mom believe in dinosaurs?” Stiles asks.

“Yes. The Land Before Time is one of her favorite movies, remember?”

“But she prays!” His son blurts. “She has the bead thingy by her lamp and she does the weird hand gesture thing sometimes!”

“You can do both, kiddo,” John glances in the rear view mirror. “And it’s called a rosary and the sign of the cross.”

“But rosary people think Alvin was the first person on earth! Shelby said so!” Stiles’ s eyes bug out in utter confusion.

“Not all Catholics go by the book. Sometimes they’re raised to believe one thing and when they get older they decide they’d rather believe something else. And some people start believing new things like evolution but keep other values they learned like the seven sacraments. But anyone can pray if they want to.”

“Do you pray?”

“I’ll probably start again soon,” John mutters.

“Does this mean we have to start going to church?”
“No. Absolutely no. Your mom thinks church is boring. And it makes me want to tear my hair out.”

Stiles giggles. “But you’re already balding!”

“Hey,” John warns, but his hand is already subconsciously rubbing his receding hairline.

“You’re not in your cop uniform,” Stiles cranes forward and pokes his head into the front seat.

“Hey! Get back in your seat, whaddaya doin’? It’s not safe for you to stick your head up here, you could get—“

“Where’s your uniform?” Stiles tries again. “Is it in the wash? You always have your uniform on, or at least most of the time. I like your uniform, it’s cool.”

“I only wear it when I’m on duty,” John reminds him. Stiles bursts into laughter again.

“You said doody!”

“I… I said duty, Stiles.”

More laughter. Tiny, squealy peals of laughter that manage to push John’s lips up for just a second as he pulls into the driveway. He turns off the engine.

“Alright, let’s get inside. I’ll make you a snack.”

.o0O0o. December 25th, 2004.

“Chestnuts roasting by an open firrrreeee… Jack Frost nippin’ at your nose…”

Christmas approaches too soon. He hardly has time to admire the twinkling lights wrapped around the trees downtown, the holly wreaths at the mall or the smell of candy canes in every department store before the holiday lands at his feet. He picks it up best he can and tries not to think about how —

“I gotta hand it to you, Claudia. The peppermint marshmallows really do taste better,” Melissa announces as she stirs her cocoa with a spoon.

The McCalls joined them for Christmas dinner since Melissa’s family is in Santa Monica. Thus Claudia spent most of the week shopping and decorating with help from him and Stiles, so now their family room looks like Saint Nick himself stopped by and dumped out half his bag of goodies. Cinnamon pine cones line the windowsills like tiny soldiers, rivaling the parade of nutcrackers on the shelf by the television. Their tinsel tree sparkles silver amidst hundreds of shiny ornaments (most handmade by her and Stiles), popcorn strings (most half-eaten by her and Stiles), and colorful lights (most chewed on by the rats in the attic). Fake holly garlands wrap around the door frames since they don’t have a staircase, and hand-stitched stockings hang on the fridge since they don’t have a fireplace.

Now it’s nearing midnight and the three of them are sitting at the dining table poking at the last of Claudia’s macaroni and cheese. Scott and Stiles are asleep by the tree surrounded by the toys they opened this morning. They and Melissa coordinated the kids’ presents for maximum entertainment—Scott got a spiderman action figure with the Spider-Man DVD, and Stiles got a batman action figure with The Incredibles DVD since the Batman movie doesn’t come out until next year. Both boys had been ecstatic.
“Aren’t they delicious?” Claudia happily pops another marshmallow into her mouth. “And they’re pink!”

“Gosh, thanks for having us over,” Melissa says, cradling her cup of cocoa. “I was worried this year since Scott’s dad isn’t here, but I’ve never seen him so happy. Stiles is a really great friend to him.”

“Thanks for coming,” John offers back, exchanging a glance with Claudia. “We were really hoping Stiles would have an extra good Christmas this year, since…”

Claudia reaches for his hand and squeezes gently when he trails off. Melissa looks at them with her dark eyes.

“Since… What? Is everything okay?”

Claudia smiles and then switches to squeezing Melissa’s hand. “Well, we have something to tell you. I didn’t really want to do it on Christmas since, well you know, it’s Christmas, but John said it would probably be a good time. I have cancer.”

She says it like someone might announce they painted their toes pink.

Melissa’s mouth falls open. “Oh my god, Claudia. I’m— oh my god,” she breathes again. "What kind is it?"

“The sucky kind,” Claudia chuckles into her cocoa. “Stage four breast cancer, but apparently it metta-sized—”

“Metastasized, dear,” John corrects softly.

“—oh. Metastasized, and now it’s all over me,” His wife runs her hands all over her sweater for emphasis. “Apparently so much all over me that they won’t be able to clean it all out! Too bad this didn’t happen a few decades from now, huh? We might’ve had a cure by then.”

Melissa has grown considerably pale. She’s a nurse. She’s not stupid. She knows what it means. “I… So you…?” Her eyes dart wide between them. "How long do you have?” she whispers.

Claudia shrugs and starts playing with Melissa’s fingers. She has a strange habit of playing with people’s hands if they’re within reach, John’s, Stiles’s, bank tellers— “About a year with treatment. But that’s pretty lucky, right? That’s a whole lot better than six months, or three months, or three weeks, or—“

“We can stop there,” John manages. He grips her arm because he doesn’t want to break right now. He does that too much nowadays when people aren’t watching, so he watches Melissa’s eyes fill with dewy tears instead.

“Oh my god,” she breathes as she grips Claudia’s hands. Her eyes dart to the boys, asleep on the couch by the fire. “Does…?”

“No, Stiles doesn’t know yet,” John says quietly.

Frank Sinatra’s White Christmas continues to play softly in the background. Rain streams down the frosty windows and joins the TV Yule Log with wet pitter-patters. “Fucking hell,” is what Melissa finally decides on after a few minutes of silence. John thinks it sums it up pretty well. “Fuck cancer. I’d punch it in the face for you if I could.”

Claudia grins. “I know you would. But let’s not be so sad, okay? I’m still here and full of cheer! And
it’s Christmas! The best one I could ask for.” *The last one she can ask for.*

Melissa chuckles as she wipes her tears away with her fingers. “I’d say they must have you on the good drugs, but that’s just how you are. Such a ray of sunshine, Claudie. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I eat lots of sugar,” Claudia whispers gleefully.

“It’s true,” John mutters affectionately. “You should’ve seen our dental bill last year.”

The three of them smile weakly as they stare at their linked hands on the table. They look like a somber basketball team about to yell, “gooooo, chemo!” until Claudia breaks the silence and fluffs up her hair.

“Alright, that’s enough of that. Let’s finish this macaroni, shall we?”

“I’ll definitely be fishing out my fat pants when I get home,” Melissa comments as she dives her fork into the pile of gooey golden pasta. “But it’ll be totally worth it.”

“Amen,” John echoes.

“Oh! That reminds me. Can I borrow your purple pants sometime, Mel-Mel? They’re so cute!”

“You mean the jeans I wore last weekend? Sure… They’re very comfortable.”

“Yay! On New Year’s we’re getting in a big lavender shipment for the flower shop, so I want to look the part!”

A quiet ambiance falls. The quiet clink of forks against ceramic sing softly alongside the holiday radio, and three pairs of eyes glancing up and meeting each other silently— grey, almost black, and chocolate brown. The dark rain outside casts an ominous shadow, but John tries to focus on how they’re inside their warm house, safe and full-bellied and cozy in fuzzy Christmas sweaters. He can tell that Melissa is thinking the same, for her movements lack the usual brave confidence. A smile is pulled time to time to humor the sleepy snores from the two first graders draped over each other on the floor, action figures in tiny hand.

Together the three of them pick at the dish until it’s gone.

.o0O0o. **December 25th, 2004.**

“Alright guys, come on down!” Robert hollers as he points the video camera at the stairs.

The fireplace crackles as he and Talia sit in the living room by the tree. The house smells like cinnamon and coffee, the lights around the frosty windows twinkle, and the speakers fill the room with Jingle Bell Rock. It usually takes an hour to open all the presents— every year it’s a challenge because his kids already have everything they could ask for, so he usually goes for upgrading things like bikes and video game consoles. Talia always takes the practical route and gets them fancy school supplies or books. In other words, Robert totally gives better presents.

“Yo, merry Christmas!” Laura salutes as she leads her siblings down the stairs. She’s incredibly confident for a thirteen-year-old, but then again she’s been abrasive since she popped out of the womb.
“Morning,” Derek yawns. He’s incredibly perceptive for a newly twelve-year-old, with a mellow voice like Talia’s and a meekness about him that is opposite of Robert in every way.

“Wait for me!” Cora squeaks as she cautiously descends the steps one at a time. She’s a four-year-old bundle of joy and curiosity, and she follows her siblings around like white on rice.

“Here we are, Christmas morning of 2004, and look at how beautiful the Hale children are,” Robert narrates as he follows his kids with the video camera. He’s sitting in his armchair (or as his kids like to call it, his “manly-man” chair) in his blue wool Christmas robe, and Talia is beside him on the couch with her legs crossed like the lady she is, a warm smile lighting up her freckles. The fireplace crackles merrily and the lights gleam on their twelve-foot tree. The two other trees are in the library and the dining room.

“Can I be first this year?” Cora lisps as she toddles towards the mountain of shiny presents beneath the Douglas Fir. Her bedroom is downstairs, but in her excitement she tried to come out at six in the morning while he and Talia were still wrapping the last of the presents, so they sent her upstairs to bug her siblings for an hour.

“Sure, love bug,” Robert grants, because she’s in her polka dot pajamas and who can say no to that?

“Yay!”

“Aw dad, I like to go first,” Laura pouts.

“So it’s time to give your sister a turn then,” Talia voices wisely. “And next year can be Derek.”

“I don’t mind,” Derek shrugs, ever the patient one. He takes his stocking off the mantle and sits in his usual spot on the floor by the tree. Laura quickly follows with her own stocking and Talia helps Cora take down hers because she’s too short to reach.

“Yeah, but dad promised me last week that I could go first!” Laura blurts.

“I… Oh hang on a minute, yeah I did,” Robert scratches his head. “Sorry Cora, I forgot about that.”

“Awww.”

“Yesss!”

“Alright little beasts, stockings in three, two, one, go!” He announces.

Laura dives into hers like an Olympic champion. She pulls out miles of chocolate, jewelry, gift cards, and a jumbo jawbreaker with a stream of “yes! Alright! Nice try but I’ll be exchanging this one… Fucking yes, this is awesome.” Derek grins as he pulls out a king-size Reese’s pack and quickly tears it open, shoving a chocolatey circle into his mouth with a muddled, “awesome, thanks!” He also marvels at a glow-in-the-dark slinky and laughs at a rubber frog with eyes that pop out. Cora squeals at her own personal box of animal crackers, headbands, new crayons, and a set of glittery bracelets.

“Alright, my turn!” Laura hops up and dives for the presents, tossing aside any that aren’t addressed to her and shaking the ones that are. The pile is a mile high when she finally finds them all.

“To me, from mom,” she reads off a red box.

Talia smiles. “That’s a very special gift, ahote. I used to wear them when I was your age. Perhaps you can wear them to school, or tonight even.”
Their daughter tears into the wrapping and stares at the traditional Navajo moccasins underneath. They’re made with brushed leather that’s cracked with age, lined with old wool, decorated with fringe and embroidery, and are absolutely hideous. Laura’s face falls, but Talia is too wrapped up in her sentimental speech to really notice.

“Uh… Thanks… Mom,” Laura manages weakly, then puts the moccasins to the side. She lunges for Robert’s gift.

Shopping for Laura is tricky; her taste seems to change every minute and she’s extraordinarily picky about everything—she likes denim jackets but only dark ones, and only ones with the “right amount” of studs. She loves purple, is okay with pink, but hates yellow unless it’s a really cute top, or maybe rain boots if they have a superhero logo on them. Books are a crapshoot and trying to buy her jewelry she’ll actually wear is like entering the lottery. She’s very vocal about the bands she likes but already owns very CD and poster, although she loves anything expensive so she can brag about it to her friends. So Robert gives her a shiny silver credit card engraved with “Laura’s shopping card” loaded with a couple grand so she can buy all the clothes she wants for next semester. She screams, high-pitched and jubilant as she launches herself at him.

“DADDYYYY! Holyfuckingshit, dad! this is the best present EVER!” She squeals. “Thank you thankyouthankyou! Oh my god, this is so fucking sick!”

Talia frowns sadly at the abandoned moccasins on the floor. For once Robert feels guilty for winning the “better present” award.

Derek is much slower (and less blunt) with opening his presents. Talia gives him sack of crystal marbles resembling the solar system; he cries out in delight and pops open the black velvet sack, cradling the spheres in his palm and examining each one closely—grey glass for Pluto, a swirl of green and blue peppered with white for earth, dusty red quartz for mars, the largest marble a brilliant yellow topaz for the sun.

“Mom, these are awesome!” He exclaims, green eyes stretching wide. “Where’d you find these?”

“They were being sold at the museum next door to the university,” Talia smiles.

“Nice,” Robert compliments her. He gives Derek an upgraded water gun, new sneakers, the latest roller skates, a new video game console, a signed baseball from Barry Bonds, five DVDs of varying boyish genres, sapphire cufflinks since the 8th grade dance is coming up, and a remote-control rubber dinosaur. While Derek smiles politely and thanks him, his face doesn’t light up like it did for Talia’s marbles, and as soon as he finishes unwrapping everything he goes right back to examining his mini solar system. And that’s unfair because Robert bought him so much more than she did.

He and Talia shop for Cora’s presents together, usually in one long trip to Toy’s R Us after she goes to bed. Together they watch as she opens the entire series of The Very Hungry Caterpillar books, the new Incredibles DVD, candy, fuzzy pink socks, a new set of pajamas, bubblegum lollipops, a giant whale pillow, a new hula-hoop, a jumbo pack of farm animal stickers, a marshmallow shooter, two different Disney Princess board games, glitter pens, new sidewalk chalk since she already wore her birthday package down to tiny nubs, a paint-your-own birdhouse kit, and Butterfly Barbie.

His kids grin happily in their piles of presents. The aftermath is always alarming, as there’s so much wrapping and ribbons leftover that hardly an inch of the floor can be seen. The new challenge is always to find a place to put all their new gifts, since each child’s room is already filled to the brim with possessions.

“Hold on, what’s that one?” Talia points to a small, sloppily-wrapped present at the back of the tree.
Laura gasps and lunges for it. She reads the tag and her face falls. “It’s for Cora,” she says glumly, and tosses the present at her sister.

“For me?” Cora asks in the cutest little question ever. Her eyes grow wide and her tiny teeth show as she gazes at them all, awed at the special attention.

“But she already opened everything,” Talia looks to him in question.

“I got her a little something extra,” he voices, leaning back in his chair. He winks at Cora. “I saw it in a shop window on the way home from work and I thought of you, so I just had to get it. Go ahead and open it— Merry Christmas, love bug.”

Cora, with her tiny, sticky, pink fingers, carefully peels back the wrapping paper and gasps at what she finds inside. Gingerly, she lifts the stuffed rabbit and adjusts the shiny ribbon around its neck. It doesn’t look like anything special and it wasn’t even expensive, just an old-fashioned pink rabbit with floppy limbs and hand-stitched thread nose, but something about it reminds him so much of her. It fits perfectly in her hands.

“I LOVE it!” She squeals, and hugs the thing to her chest with startling gentleness. “I love it I love it I love it! Thank you daddy!”

“What are you going to name it?” Talia asks.

“Pig!”

Babe, her newest obsession. With the movie comes a deep affection for all farm animals.

“Pig?” Laura wrinkles her nose. “You’re going to name your bunny Pig?”

“Yes! B’cause he’s pink and beautiful and Farmer Hoggett says ‘that’ll do, pig!’ at the end of the movie!” Cora squeaks excitedly as she smooths Pig’s ears back. “He is my very best friend forever and ever!”

“Mighty statement for someone who just got the thing half a minute ago,” Robert chuckles, but he’s delighted she loves it.

“Now you guys open your presents,” Derek pipes up from his position on the carpet. He’s still laying on his stomach pushing his planet marbles around with awed fascination.

“You first, hun.”

Talia opens her gifts. Laura and Derek team up and get her a gift card to The Crafty Cook, a new organic kitchen and grocery store downtown, along with a recipe book for exotic dishes and a promise that they’ll help her make them if she wants. Robert gets her a signed copy of the new book by her favorite author he flew in from Europe, and Cora hands her a crayon-scribbled card that says “I love you Mama” inside a crooked heart. He’s a little jealous.

Laura and Derek team up and get him a new paperweight for the office—a glass triangle with the family photo they took last year at the park inside. He’s also delighted to find that Cora made him an identical card that says “I love you Daddy” in her scribbly four-year-old writing, which is the best. And Talia gives him the cardigan sweater of his dreams because she knows him like the back of her hand. He gets more than a little excited at this.

“Oh man, 100% Peruvian cashmere? Talia, this is excellent! And a necessity since the last one was tragically lost during training.”
“Sorry, pop,” Laura offers around her jumbo jawbreaker. She had accidentally swiped him with her claws during a lunge, ripping his old sweater to ribbons. Bloody, unredeemable ribbons.

“Nah, whatever,” he says as he smooches his face into the sweater and rubs the softness all over him. “This is so much softer. Thanks, honey.”

“You’re welcome, dear.”

“Alright! Time for pancakes!” Laura leaps for the kitchen.

Robert finds his two oldest kids moping at the table not three hours later. Laura is sucking on her jawbreaker (only she can manage to shove the whole damn thing into one cheek) and Derek is pushing his marbles around delicately with an index finger. Robert halts and stares at them.

“Uh, what has my children so mopey on Christmas?” He crosses his arms. “You guys just opened a million presents three hours ago.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have a present for uncle Peter yet!” Laura smacks her forehead on the table. “And he’s gonna be here in like, really soon.”

“Well, you’ve got an hour,” Robert glances at his watch. “He’s not gonna be here in like, really soon.”

“Really representing the Hale name with procrastination, huh.”

“We didn’t mean to!” Derek protests. “We’ve been trying to think of something for weeks.”

“Well what’s the problem? You guys have never had trouble thinking of stuff before.”

“Yeah, but we just give him books every year and he gets us really cool expensive presents! We’re older now so we want to give him something better— but he’s a millionaire and already has everything!” Laura throws her arms up.

“Well I’m a millionaire, too,” Robert puffs out his chest. “And I love the books and cards you guys get me.”

“Yeah, but you’re dad. You automatically love everything we give you.”

“I— Yeah, I guess that’s true,” he admits. His kids could give him a stick and he’d probably hang it in his office at work.

“Maybe you could give us some money so we can buy him a gold statue,” Derek suggests. “He’d probably like that.”

Robert laughs. “A gold statue of himself? Yeah, he probably would like that. But I have a better idea — why don’t you guys…” He leans in close and whispers the idea to them.

“You really think he’d like that?” Derek raises an eyebrow.

“That seems a little… Totally weird.” Laura adds.

“Absolutely. He’ll love it. He likes power and traditionally they represent power. Here’s about, oh, I think eighty should probably do it.” Robert hands them a few crisp bills from his wallet. “You know where to get it, right?”

“The pet store next to the Chinese food place?”

“Right. But I know it’s Christmas, huh, so let me call Dr. Deaton, he has the keys to that place for
when he needs to extract venom for his medicines. Just bring it back in a bag, we can keep it in one of our big vases until Peter can take it home.”

“Cool! Thanks dad!”

“Thanks dad!”

His kids jump up and run for the door, barreling into Talia who’s already sixty pages into the book Robert gave her that morning. She catches the novel with her reflexes before it hits the floor and raises an eyebrow. “Now where are you kids racing off to on Christmas day?”

“Hi mom! We’re going to get Peter’s present!” Laura gushes and wriggles around her to the door.

“Now just a minute,” Talia folds her arms. “Laura, are you really going to wear that on Christmas?”

Laura looks down at her turtleneck and jeans, shrugging. “Yeah, so?”

“You look like a rag doll,” Talia frowns at the smudge of chocolate by Laura’s collar. “What happened to the dress I bought you two weeks ago? I expect you to put on something nicer, please.”

“Oh my god, mom! I’m hardly breaking any laws here,” Laura’s eyebrows flatten to an angry ’V’. “I’m just going out to the pet store, I don’t need a dumb dress for that! I don’t even like that dress, you picked it out.”

Derek wisely flattens himself against the windows to avoid the coming explosion. Robert tries his best to calm them both down before it gets ugly. “Hey, uh, T? Look, her jeans are nice, they have little butterflies embroidered along the hem, see? What if Laura just changes her top? That’s a nice compromise, don’t you think?”

“In the store you said you would wear it today,” Talia pins Laura with her gaze. “I raise my children to be true to their word. If you didn’t like the dress, you should have spoken up.”

“I did!” Laura blurts. “I told you I didn’t like it because it was all girly and scratchy and you didn’t listen! You basically guilted me into saying I would wear it!”

“Well you can’t wear that,” Talia gestures to her ratty ensemble. “On holidays we dress up to show respect for our family, and jeans and a dirty shirt is—”

“It’s what I feel like wearing!” Laura snaps. “You always want me to be a lady, why can’t I just be me? Uncle Peter doesn’t care what I look like and neither does anyone else in this house except for you! Way to help my self-esteem, mom!”

“Don’t you dare use that tone with me,” Talia’s eyes flash red. “We both know your ego is big enough to fill a bathtub, so don’t play that card with me. Every morning you spend an hour in the bathroom dolling up for school, so why can’t you put that effort into looking presentable now?”

“Because it’s eighth grade, mom!” Laura shrieks. “I’m a freshman, I need to look good so I don’t get bullied by the other kids! Family is supposed to love you anyway, why should you care if I want to wear this today?”

Talia steps forward dangerously. “You will put on that dress I bought you as soon as you return from the store. If you don’t, then don’t bother coming down to join us for Christmas.”

“You can’t do that!” Laura shrieks, and this time her eyes well with angry tears. “You can’t just make me—“
“Yes I can,” Talia challenges, nostrils flaring. “Every year we go through this, and I’ve had enough. Everyone else in this house is dressed up except for you. You haven’t even taken a shower yet.”

“Well maybe that’s because I want to take a bubble bath later with the bath salts you gave me!”

“Go to your room,” Talia dismisses firmly. “Now, Laura Ann.”

“NO! And stop calling me that!” Laura rages. She grabs Derek’s hand and yanks him roughly out the door, slamming it behind her.

Talia sighs into her hands.

“Hey, uh… T?” Robert tries.

“I don’t know what to do with her,” Talia declares. “We can hardly get through a single day without raising voices like a couple of hyenas.”

“She has your stubbornness. You sat in that tree for fifteen days, remember? Both of you would probably sit in trees until you starved to death before letting someone else tell you what to do.”

“Regardless, she needs to learn to respect me more.”

He bites his lip as she huffs to the kitchen and coldly ties on a “Happy Holidays!” apron covered in gingerbread men. He didn’t know it was possible to coldly tie on a Christmas apron, but apparently she can. She could probably move mountains with a single glare.

“I’ll talk to her when she gets back,” he offers. “You need help chopping the carrots?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Okay. Don’t stay upset for too long… It’s Christmas.” He pecks her on the top of the head and walks upstairs to pick out a tie.

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At six o’clock sharp the doorbell rings and Robert jogs across the living room to answer it.

“Heyyyy, Petey!” He laughs and tackles his brother in a man hug.

“Careful, you’ll damage the presents.” Peter rolls his eyes and claps him on the back. “Honest to god, Rob, I just saw you last month for Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, but that was a whole month ago!” Robert squeezes him tighter. “Did you get the bird?”

Peter holds up a bundle of dead quails. He smirks and spits out a spare feather. “Couldn’t find a turkey out there, so I caught these instead. Hope that’s alright.”

“Oh yeah, nice! Those are fast little bastards, too.”

“Not when you’re on four paws.”

“Touché.”

“Uncle Peteeeeeerrrr!”
The kids holler and come running, shoving past Robert and clinging to Peter’s legs like a pack of jubilant monkeys.

“Merry Christmas, nieces and nephew! And Derek, happy birthday, you turned twelve yesterday, is that right?” Peter chuckles and bends down and wraps his arms around them. He ruffles Derek’s hair, kisses Cora’s hand and does his secret handshake with Laura. Then he sees Talia standing by the door and straightens up—and the usual tension proceeds. “Merry Christmas, Talia.”

“Merry Christmas, Peter,” Talia nods. She’s dazzling in a fitted forest green dress that hugs her legs all the way down to her knees. Her hair is curled in silky black waves and she’s even wearing cranberry lipstick.

“Fresh quail for you,” Peter hands her the bundle of birds with a charming smile. “I can pluck them for you in the backyard. I’m sure you’ll do something delicious with them.”

“Thank you. I have your gift right here.” She gestures to a beautiful potted plant of daffodils, the flower symbolic of egotism. It’s a game they’ve been playing for years—Talia, being a botanist and passive aggressive master, started expressing her contempt for Peter by gifting him flowers with tongue-in-cheek meanings. Tiger lilies for pride, sunflowers for arrogance, etc. Peter caught on quickly and started playing too.

“Why these are simply beautiful, Talia,” Peter says pleasantly as he sniffs the petals. “And for you, I saw these and knew they were a perfect match.”

He hands her a bouquet of freesias and Robert holds his breath—flowers symbolic of delicate women. Talia’s lips purse but she takes them and pulls a tight smile. “Thank you Peter. These will look lovely on the table. I’ll go cut them now.”

“Do you need help?” Peter asks innocently. “Scissors can be quite sharp, and vases rather heavy for such feminine arms.”

Robert steps on his foot. “Play nice.”

“No thank you. I wouldn’t want you to break a manicured cuticle,” Talia replies smoothly, and proceeds to cut the flower stems in the sink. The flower exchange is a large improvement from previous years, when they used to just gift each other petunias, the flower symbolic of resentment.

“Unc’a Peter, come see my room!” Cora tugs at Peter’s arm.

“No, no, come see my room! I just got a new purple carpet!” Laura tugs his other arm. She’s wearing the red velvet dress with lace trim Talia bought for her a few weeks ago—Robert sat down with her earlier and gently explained that yes, they all love her just the way she is, but her mother likes the family to dress up extra special for family occasions.

“But I don’t even like the dress,” Laura had pouted.

“I know, but your mother picked it out for you. You want to know a secret?”

“What?”

“When your mom was your age and living with her dad on the preserve, they made it a tradition to wear special Navajo dress robes on holidays… I think a part of her really misses doing that, so she likes to keep the tradition alive here in California.”

“But I don’t even like the dress,” Laura had pouted.

“I know, but your mother picked it out for you. You want to know a secret?”

“What?”

“When your mom was your age and living with her dad on the preserve, they made it a tradition to wear special Navajo dress robes on holidays… I think a part of her really misses doing that, so she likes to keep the tradition alive here in California.”

“…Because grandpa died before she graduated?”
“Yeah… And she doesn’t like to talk about her feelings too much, but I know she still really misses him. So getting all dolled up with her family is a small way to remember her time with him.”

“Oh… Well fine. I guess I’ll wear the dress but just for tonight.”

“That’s my little rebel.”

“Now lets not rip your uncle in half,” Peter voices. “I need to pluck the quails for your mother first. Then I can come see both your bedrooms.”

“Cool! Can I come watch?” Laura asks eagerly.

“Of course. Good girl, always eager to learn new skills,” Peter smiles approvingly. “Perhaps your brother would like to come, too?”

“No thanks,” Derek winces from the kitchen. “I’m helping mom with the potatoes.”

“Shame,” Peter clucks. “As a wolf you’ll be hunting game. Skinning your kills is an important skill.”

“He doesn’t have the strongest stomach, anyway,” Robert adds.

“Hey! I do too!”

“You throw up on rollercoasters, champ.”

“Yeah, but that’s… They just go really fast.”

“Nerd,” Laura laughs. “Come on Uncle Pete, let’s go pluck some birds!”

The kitchen slowly fills with the smell of rosemary, paprika, mashed potatoes and beef broth. Derek turns slightly green when Laura and Peter return from the backyard carrying the limp newly-naked quails, but the color vanishes when everyone starts laughing over Talia stuffing lemon and breadcrumbs inside the bird butts. “Quail anuses are perfectly natural, there’s nothing to laugh about,” she says tactfully, which somehow just makes it funnier. Champagne bubbles in slim glasses and Laura pops the apple cider bottle and spurts foam all over the floor because she shook it thoroughly beforehand.

The house looks beautiful like it does every Christmas, sparkling with white lights and the fragrant pine garlands Talia likes to wrap around the mantle and the staircase. Cora lined up the nutcracker collection in perfect order atop the fireplace, Laura’s glitter pinecones hang from the ceiling beams, and ornaments made from first grade onward decorate the tree despite the kids’ embarrassed protests.

“Alright, family!” Robert taps a claw against his wine glass to get everyone’s attention. “Your mother’s cleared the kitchen and the birds still have an hour left in the oven, and you know what that means…”

“The Nasty-Gross Drink-A-Thon!” Laura and Derek cheer in unison. They scramble up from their positions on the rug, where they were trading chocolate from earlier that morning.

Regular families have gingerbread decorating contests. The Hales have a competition to see who can create the grossest drink— whoever’s slimy smoothie is the most impossible to keep down wins. Except for Talia, who usually sits out on the couch and watches because she finds the whole thing “amusing but vulgar.” She makes Cora sit on her lap and watch too so her tiny four-year-old body doesn’t get trampled in the chaos— They all take the competition very seriously and sometimes
claws come out.

“Correct! Hales, welcome to the fifth annual Nasty-Gross Drink-a-thon, where the coolest werewolf family in the state competes for the ultimate prize—ownership of the Nasty-Gross Drink-a-Thon trophy for one year!”

He rips aside the silk cloth covering the trophy on the counter, revealing the statue in all it’s solid silver glory. He and Peter ordered it custom made a few years back so they could compete for it; it’s a gleaming figure of a werewolf with topaz eyes holding up a blender, engraved with “Nasty-Gross Drink-A-Thon Champion” on the base plaque. The sculptor had raised an eyebrow, but they paid him three grand for it so he didn’t say anything. It’s a beautiful prize.

“You’re going down,” Laura whispers to Peter, the winner of last year, who smirks.

“Wanna bet?”

“Alright everyone, same rules as always: two minutes to fill your blender with the nastiest concoction you can dream up, no wolfsbane or poisonous chemicals, no bodily fluids, and anything beyond the kitchen is off limits! Are we ready?”

“Ready!”

“Ready!”

“Just hit the damn stopwatch, Rob.”

“Okay… On your mark, get set… Go!”

Robert hits the timer and the five of them sprint off in different directions. He goes straight for the condiment shelf, Peter strides calmly to the seasoning lineup, Derek runs to the cupboard, and Laura shoves them aside to reach the fridge. Cora burps on Talia’s lap.

The next minute and a half is a whirlwind of trash talk and feverish blending. Spices and liquids splash onto the floor and make things slippery, but good thing they all have supernatural reflexes so no one slips. For a moment there’s a snarling match between Derek and Laura as they fight over a particular item from the pantry, but the timer beeps with the twenty second warning so they abandon it to finish their drinks.

Beep-beeeeeeeeeep—

“Andddd, TIME!” Robert hollers as he hits stop on the stopwatch. In his excitement he accidentally smashes it to pieces, but they can always get a new one. “Blenders off! Step away from your drinks!”

Everyone holds their hands up and steps back. Four blenders line the counter like dripping soldiers amidst a colorful mess of condiments. But that’s why Talia picked granite for the countertop, so it can be easily cleaned. Robert hoists the crate of glasses onto the island and starts unloading them.

“Any volunteers to go first?”

“I will.” Laura boldly steps forward and starts pouring her concoction into each of their glasses. It’s a thick mixture the color of an infected eye. “Ladies and gentleman, behold the Dying Cow: milk, wheatgrass, and raw hamburger meat.”

They all sniff their glasses. Robert tries to swirl his like wine but it doesn’t budge.
“Is that the best you can do?” Peter smirks softly.

“I dunno, looks pretty nasty. One, two, three, bottom’s up!” He announces.

The three of them tip their heads back and swallow as Laura watches gleefully. Robert chokes a little on his— It’s like someone took zit pus and mixed it with slimy uncooked cow, and with that thought he quickly runs to the sinks and retches it back up. Laura cheers— This is why they do it before dinner, so no body throws up Talia's delicious meal.

“Allright! One down for me!”

“Nice work, Lo-Lo. That was exceedingly nasty,” Robert compliments as he wipes his mouth.

“Rise it down the drain please, Robert,” Talia voices idly from the couch. She’s playing Chinese checkers with Cora now.

“Already on it.”

“Mine next,” Derek offers, and fills up new glasses with the startlingly purple contents of his blender. “This is called the Purple Death. It’s canned cream of mushroom soup, canned beets, Coca Cola, peanut butter, garlic, pop rocks, and curry powder.”

They all wrinkle their nose as they sniff the glasses. It smells vile. “Wow, you’ve really stepped up your game from last year, champ.”

“My strategy was to use ingredients I know you all hate,” Derek explains, expression creepily serious around his huge green eyes. “Laura hates mushrooms, last year Peter said he hated soda because it’s too sweet, and you always pick around the beets in your salads.”

“Certainly the observant one,” Robert mutters. “Bottom’s up.”

They all make valiant efforts keeping it down. It’s thick and sludgy with a million flavors at once—sweet, sour, bitter, nutty, creamy, mushroom-y, but his son is nothing if not unfairly smart for his age. Robert gets a highly unwanted amount of beet (the evil vegetable of evilness) on his tongue followed by garlic and pop rocks and that’s it, he’s over the sink rejecting it. Behind him Laura and even Peter winkle their faces, lips scrunched white as they struggle to keep it in. He watches in amusement as his brother takes deep breaths through his nose, probably willing himself not to vomit in front of the family because how unfit for a millionaire of my status, but ultimately he succeeds and instead Laura is the one who ends up losing it.

“That. Was gross,” she says as she wipes her mouth with the towel Robert hands her. “Mushrooms should be banned. All mushrooms should be killed. Worse than wolfsbane.”

“Then you’ve never experienced the more potent wolfsbane breeds, my dear,” Peter voices. “Your father hallucinated for two weeks in college after eating a sandwich laced with Cerulean Monkshood.”

“Really?” His kids turn to him with wide eyes.

“Yeah, it sucked pretty hard,” Robert replies. “It was a dare— don’t do dares, kids. They’re stupid. I was quarantined to my dorm because I thought everyone was Stay Puft the Marshmallow Man trying to kill me, so I would scream and try to attack them with a fire extinguisher. Ghostbusters had just come out, so… Yeah. I practically cold-sweated all the water out of my body. Wolfsbane is nasty stuff.”
“Mom, did you ever get poisoned?” Derek asks.

“I was working with some Aconite breeds for my botany degree in college,” Talia answers. “A few times I accidentally handled the petals without gloves on and broke out in hives. But I was never as idiotic as your father was.”

“Well, Wolfsbane sandwich—not worth it. Especially not for a rare baseball card.” Robert plops his blender down on the table. “Now for my creation, the next round of the Nasty-Gross Drink-A-Thon: behold, the Hot Dog-less Hot Dog Deluxe! Ketchup, mustard, pickle relish, Worchesire sauce, garlic powder, olive oil, salt, pepper, honey, and some beef broth to give it a nice silky smooth texture.”

Peter laughs. “That’s a great recipe for a pork glaze.”

“What? No it isn’t, it’s—honey?” He looks to Talia. She nods from the couch.

“You made a barbecue marinade, dear.”

He gapes at his blender. “What? Fucking—No! Why did no body tell me this? Are you sure? Doesn’t barbecue sauce just come in a bottle?”

“Bottom’s up,” Laura grins and tips back her glass. Derek and Peter do the same. He can only watch in horror as the three of them swallow his drink and smack their lips, making no indication that it’s gross at all.

“I kind of like it,” Derek says.

“Needs a little lemon,” Peter adds thoughtfully.

“Hey mom, this is pretty good. Can we use it the next time we have ribs?” Laura calls over.

Robert accidentally cracks his blender in half as he slams it on the counter. He crosses his arms and pouts wistfully at the silver Nasty-Gross Drink-A-Thon trophy. “Fucking hell.”

“Always such a sore loser,” Peter murmurs to his niece and nephew.

“Well let’s see if yours is so much better,” Robert jerks his head to Peter’s blender. It’s a suspiciously clear liquid. His brother steps forward and gracefully pours it into new glasses.

“Peter’s Peppertini: jalapeño and vinegar.”

“And you say you’re not a simple man,” Robert scoffs.

“How much jalapeño did you put in here?” Derek squints at his glass.

“Just a few. Maybe twelve.”

“Fuck, Pete.”

“Bottom’s up,” his brother grins.

The Peppertini is brutal. It hits his tongue like a thousand fire ants and tastes like stomach acid, which in turn makes him upchuck actual stomach acid right back into the glass. Laura and Derek turn beet red and run to the sink to blow chunks as well.

“And it looks like we have a winner,” Peter declares. His eyes gleam as he strides over and swipes
the trophy off the table. “I’ll take this back now.”

“Dammit, that’s the third year in a row!” Robert exclaims. “Are you sure you’re not sneaking ipecac into your drinks?”

“Of course not. But I like your thinking, Rob.”

“Next year! Next year we are so totally taking you down!” Laura jabs a finger at Peter. “Your tongue is gonna fall right out of your mouth!”

“My trophy and I look forward to it,” Peter smirks.

“Alright ak’éí, I need to get in there to baste the quail so I want the kitchen pristine in three minutes,” Talia says.

“You heard my wife,” Robert claps his hands. “Everybody grab a towel and start cleaning! Derek son, you look a little green still, if you need to be sick again let’s do it in the bathroom please. Great work this round family, I look forward to the competition next year!”

In fifteen minutes the kitchen is sparkling with lemony-fresh goodness. His kids are on the floor in front of the fireplace playing Mancala and ignoring Cora who’s whining about being excluded, Talia is juggling hot pans like a champion, Robert is helping her while trying not to get trampled by her, and Peter is standing nearby watching over the rim of his champagne glass.

“Pete, will you add another log to the fire, please?” He asks.

“What am I, your servant?”

“You’re my little brother, which is essentially the same thing. Please?”

“Well. Since you said please.” Peter sets his glass down and heads over to the fireplace.

“How are the birds coming, honey?” Robert asks as he empties the trash.

“About another twenty minutes. Why don’t we open presents,” Talia suggests. She wipes her hands on her apron and closes the oven door.

“Presents!?” His kids shout. They scramble up and tumble over each other, reaching the Christmas tree in three seconds flat. Peter follows them and sits down in Robert’s manly-man chair, and then Robert and Talia on the couch. The presents are distributed accordingly.

“You’re the man of the house. Why don’t you go first,” Peter proposes. “I was in Berlin for a conference and was gifted these by the ambassador of public relations. Thought your sweet tooth might appreciate them.”

Robert inspects the neatly-wrapped box Peter hands him and tears away the paper. It’s a beautiful box of assorted German chocolates peppered with 24-karat gold dust. “Wow, these look— hey. These are sugar-free, Pete.”

“I didn’t say I wanted you getting fat, now. Although you have gone a little soft since our days at the company.”

“I like it,” Talia saves him, placing a protective hand over Robert’s chest as she stares Peter down. “Robert’s cheeks were rather hollow back then.”

“Yeah, Pete. Listen to my wife, she knows best.”
“So I’ve heard,” Peter mutters. “Here you go, darling. Merry Christmas.” He hands Cora a small wrapped present with a large pink bow. Cora takes it and opens it with her sticky fingers, and holds up the object inside.

“It’s a Swiss Army knife.

Talia gapes in horror. Cora asks, “what is this?” and Robert blurts, “Peter, she’s four!” all at the same time.

“It’s a Swiss Army knife,” Peter answers as he takes the knife to demonstrate. He flicks it open and the light gleams off the blade. “Forged with blue steel, it’s a very nice one. You can use it to whittle down whatever sticks you play with, cut open packages, or even file your nails.” He flips it around and does so with his thumbnail.

“She could cut herself,” Talia glares at him.

“She’s a werewolf, she’ll heal,” Peter shrugs.

“What ever made you think this would be an appropriate gift for a toddler?” Talia fires back coolly. Peter splays an innocent hand on his chest.

“My goodness, Talia. My intention was never to rile you up, lividity really isn’t a good look on you. My apologies, I simply wanted to get something practical for my niece.”

“I… Geez. I have to agree with Talia on this one,” Robert takes the knife from Peter and holds it away from Cora, who tries to examine it. “It’s not exactly safe. Maybe I’ll hold onto it for a few years and give it to her when she’s older.”

“I’ll take it!” Laura offers eagerly.

“You too, Robert?” Peter frowns. “Well pardon me, I thought you liked your children to be adventurous and brave.”

Talia shoves a deep breath through her nose. “Laura dear, why don’t you go next?”

Laura doesn’t need to be told twice. She dives into her bag and pulls out a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, circa 1992.

“Holy shit,” Laura breathes… “Uh…”

“Holy shit,” Robert echoes as Talia makes a small noise of distress. “What the hell, Pete?”

“Cabernet Sauvignon, La Romanee Grand Cu from Cote de Nuits in France,” Peter pronounces flawlessly. “You’ll find it goes best with a nice Tête de Moine cheese.”

“That’s a three-thousand dollar bottle of wine!” Robert blurts.

“And she’s thirteen,” Talia turns to Peter in astonishment.

“Yes, why are you all so concerned with ages? She can bring it to a big Freshman party next fall. You’ll be the coolest kid in your class, Laura.”

“Uh… Thanks, Uncle Pete,” Laura says uncertainly.

“What did you get Derek, a flamethrower?” Talia narrows her eyes.
“Not quite.” Peter stabs an olive with his toothpick and pops it in his mouth.

“Whoa…”

Derek uncovers the wrapping of his gift and stares at the three-foot semi-automatic rifle in his hands. Talia swears colorfully in Navajo.

“Holy shit, what’s he going to do with that, Pete?” Robert yells, officially angry.

Peter shrugs. “Shoot things. Birds, squirrels, quail. Just to have some fun until his claws come in.”

Derek stares at the shotgun. “I think I’ll stick to aiming at soda cans,” he says politely, and sets the gun down to the side.

A moment of silence as they stare in shock at the gifts. Robert… Robert doesn’t really know what to say, other than try to read his brother’s flat expression.

“Well, let’s see what you got me, shall we?” Peter holds up a clawed index finger and uses it to neatly slice open the Nordstroms box Robert gave him. He pops open the lid and lifts up the polka dot tie inside. “Polka dots? I’ll have to wear it to my next clown audition.”

“I thought it would be a nice change of pace from your solid colors,” Robert murmurs, still distracted by the boos and weapons on the floor by his children. “It… I dunno, the dots are small and I thought it would match your eyes.”

“Thank you for the thought,” his brother lowers the tie back into the box after inspecting the brand on the label.

“Dad! Can we show Uncle Peter his present now?” Laura tugs on his sleeve. Derek nods vigorously.

“Oh, right… Uh—” he exchanges a glance with Talia. ”Yeah, it’s in the garage. Come on everybody, let’s go for a quick field trip.”

“The garage?” Peter raises an interested eyebrow.

“Yeah! It’s extra special,” Laura says excitedly.

“I look forward to seeing it,” Peter announces.

When the six of them are in the garage Laura and Derek step forward to stand by the covered vase by the Cobra. It’s the tall glass one that used to hold the birds of paradise in the study room, but Robert transferred the flowers into his golf club case for the time being. On the count of three his eldest children rip the cloth off, revealing the gift inside.

“Ta-da!” They cheer.

Peter strokes his chin and steps forward, watching the creature swim around gracefully in it’s tall fishbowl.

"It’s a lion fish!” Laura fills in when he doesn’t say anything.

“They’re generally revered as symbols of power and class,” Derek recites, like he googled the information an hour ago. “And the spines are poisonous and lethal if a human touches them.”

“And they live for sixteen years so it probably won’t die on you anytime soon,” Laura adds. “You can put it in your penthouse or in the Hale Associates building so all your clients can see it, it’ll be
wicked cool."

Peter remains silent as he examines the fish, walking around it in a circle.

“Do you… Like it?” Derek asks tentatively.

They all watch as Peter crouches down and peers through the glass. He slowly extracts a claw and lightly traces it across the glass. The lion fish floats around elegantly, showcasing the vivid maroon and gold stripes on its shimmery white scales. Lethal barbs trail behind it like silk ribbons and the spines atop its dorsal fin gleam with every movement. Peter smiles at the fish.

“I think I’ll name it Napoleon.”

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The table is beautiful as always. They use the dining room table for special occasions because the room is designed for cozy dinner atmospheres with red wine walls and gold lights. Talia placed an embroidered gold runner atop the mahogany, as well as soft maroon placemats and folded napkins, the Christmas china, his mom’s antique silverware collection, small goblets with baby’s breath and red roses, pinecones, candy canes, a holly garland, and Peter’s freesias as the centerpiece. Robert looks at the freesias; well played, he thinks.

And the food—steaming dishes of buttery mashed garlic potatoes, roasted rainbow carrots, crispy pumpkin fritters, sweet cranberry relish, almond green bean salad, cornbread muffins with hearty chicken gravy, and sautéed baby bella mushrooms filled with goat cheese. Bottles of hot apple cider and sparkling pomegranate soda bubble as they’re poured into glasses, and wedges of blood orange sit on saucers for a garnish on the rim. The quails sit in the center of it all, six little golden-brown birds seasoned with lemon, brown sugar, lemon, rosemary, and apple cinnamon breadcrumb stuffing. It smells like heaven, and Cora insists that Pig has a place at the table.

“So Robert, what inspired this new stubbled chin for you?” Peter asks. “Going for a lumberjack look?”

Robert rubs his five-o’clock shadow. “Eh. Got tired of shaving. Thought I’d try out the bearded look.”

“It’s scratchy,” Laura adds. “Like tree bark, but fuzzier.”

“Yeah. Sometimes Talia gets stubble burn on her stomach.”

“Robert Hale,” Talia glares dangerously at him.

“Whoops, sorry kids, that one was PG-15,” he chuckles. “What about you Pete? How’s uh, that girl with the blonde hair you took to the City Council after party? Amy? Amelia?”

“Amanda,” Peter slices his cornbread muffin in half. “I dumped her last week. That nasally voice was driving me insane.”

“I bet we could find you a date, uncle Pete,” Laura pipes up. “My English teacher is single and she’s really pretty. And she wears heels too, not those ugly teacher shoes.”

“Tempting, but I don’t date women with a salary below six figures,” Peter smiles politely.
“What’s six figures?” Cora asks.

“A fraction of what our family has, my dear,” Peter answers.

“We have wealth, but let’s not gloat about it,” Talia warns.

“Why not? It’s just a fact,” Laura gnaws on her quail leg. “Everyone at school knows we’re hella loaded. The whole town, even.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s tasteful to broadcast that information,” Talia challenges her. “Many people don’t have as much as we do. Especially humans, who have costs werewolves don’t like medical bills, eyeglasses, and health insurance.”

“But cold medicine isn’t expensive,” Laura continues, but this time she cocks her head with curiosity. “I’ve seen all kinds of human medicines at the store and they’re just little bottles under twenty bucks.”

“I didn’t particularly mean the common cold. Sometimes humans get more complex illnesses that require them to check into the hospital or get surgery, and those are expensive.”

“Like cancer?” Derek asks quietly. “We learned about that last month in biology.”

“Yes, like cancer. We should be thankful that none of us are stricken with such a deadly disease.”

“Thank you Talia, always the one filled with such cheerful table topics” Peter smiles faintly as he sips his wine. “It’s Christmas, let’s talk about something other than human problems, shall we? Laura, how is field hockey going?”

“It’s great!” She blurts with her mouth full. “The season starts up again in a couple weeks and we’re crazy excited. We also get new uniforms now since we’re in high school and they’re way cooler than the dumb green ones we had. I’m number one, soon-to-be first position for the Cyclones!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, shote,” Talia instructs.

“Ah, good. And are you taking the time now to practice?”

“Yup. Dad takes me down to the field on Saturdays.”

“Excellent. What about you, Derek? Are you trying out for the basketball team?”

“Um… Maybe next year in high school,” Derek picks at his green beans. “Right now I’m kinda busy with stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” Peter asks.

“Just homework and TV and… I dunno, family I guess. I like to go for walks too to see what kind of species I can find in the woods. I want to fill up my field journal before the science fair.”

Peter pauses his eating to study his nephew a moment. Robert sees and knows that he’s about to make a remark about how Derek should be out doing something more useful, so he jumps in quickly with a new topic.

“So Cora honey, why don’t you tell uncle Peter about what you did last weekend?”

Cora blushes shyly and looks to Pig for support. “Uh… Um. I learned how t’uh ride a try-cycle.”
“Oh my, a tricycle, huh?” Peter smiles. “How fun. What color is your tricycle?”

“It’s pink!”

“With little white ribbons on the handlebars,” Laura rolls her eyes.

“Very pretty,” Peter approves. “And did you ride it very far?”

“I pedaled all the way to—"

Beep-beep— Beep-beep— Beep-beep—

Peter mutters something under his breath as he fishes into his coat pocket for his phone. “Goddamn, can’t you people go a single day without needing me?” he curses. “Excuse me, that’s my work phone. I need to take this.”

“Go right ahead,” Talia watches him with speculative eyes as he scoots out his chair and strides to the front porch. He slams the front door a little harder than necessary on his way out.

“Where’d uncle Peter go?” Cora asks meekly.

“He seemed kinda upset,” Laura comments.

“Yeah… I’ll go see if he’s alright in a bit,” Robert eyes the door. “He just went outside to take a phone call, sweetheart.”

“Oh.”

The dinner continues as dinners usually go in the Hale house; filled with banter and bickering, Laura’s loud cackling, and intense fork battles to win the last cornbread muffin. Every so often Robert tunes his ears to see if Peter is still on the phone and still hears him talking. Five minutes pass, then ten, and then twenty-five with Peter still not returned. The food disappears as their bellies expand and Talia, not wanting the leftovers to spoil, eventually tells the kids to clear the plates but to leave Peter’s unfinished meal. They wait. The kids grow bored and skip off to play with their presents from that morning.

As Talia sets the table for dessert Robert realizes he can’t hear Peter’s voice anymore. He peeks outside and finds his brother standing on the porch, looking out at the preserve and smoking a cigarette.

“I didn’t know you picked up smoking,” he announces quietly as he steps outside.

Peter takes a long drag and slowly releases it. The smoke twists away on the wind. “It’s a relatively new habit.”

“Careful,” Robert offers gently. “Took me months to get off of them.”

His brother scoffs. “What? Like it’s going to kill me? I’m not a human, my lungs will heal themselves.”

Away from the distracting scents of the dinner and cinnamon candles, the sour smell of stress is easily detectible as it wafts off Peter. But Robert doesn’t voice that because Peter denies weakness with every bone in his body. So instead he says, “You look tired, Pete. Is everything okay?”

Peter waves him off. “Just a few messy battles at the office. Nothing to concern you.”
“Mm. Well hey, if you need to talk to someone I could—“

“I’ll talk to someone who actually still works for the company,” Peter cuts in cooly, and when Robert falls silent he sighs, rubbing his temples. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. It’s just a little stressful having to juggle the entire firm. It was a lot easier when you were there to help.”

For the first time in sixteen years, just for a moment, Robert feels guilty about leaving the company. He studies Peter’s face and notices the concealer under his eyes to mask the dark circles there, the new wrinkles on his forehead, and the way his lips seem perpetually grim in an unhappy line.

“What if you hire another CEO? That way you—"

“You mean work with a human?” Peter wrinkles his nose. “Please, the majority of them are idiots. And I’ve already checked, the closest werewolf with any kind of business training is in LA.”

“Humans aren’t so bad,” Robert shrugs. "They invented cars and the telephone. I bet you could find a great one that’ll help keep things in running order."

Peter takes a long drag from his cigarette. As he speaks the smoke softly curls out from between his lips. “The fact is, Robert, the company isn’t the same without you. Even after all these years, the building lacks a certain luster without my brother by my side. It doesn’t fill my satisfaction anymore. I want a pack, Rob.”

“You have a pack. You’ve got us.”

“Yes, well. No offense, but I’d prefer to be the leader of my own pack.”

“You mean… You want to be an alpha?” Robert eyes him cautiously.

“That’s the idea."

“Well you’re not gonna go kill anyone for a pair of red eyes, are you,” he jests, but Peter remains eerily silent as he stares at the horizon.

“If that's what it will take. Perhaps.”

A chill seeps into his bones as he stares at his brother. Peter shrugs and claps him on the shoulder with a dismissal of, “Alright, enough of this. It’s Christmas. Let’s be merry.” He flicks his cigarette butt to the damp grass and heads back into the mansion. Robert follows.

Inside he stands a moment and stares at the bright noise of the room. Laura is giving a squealing Cora a piggy back ride around the coffee table while Derek fires at them with Cora’s marshmallow shooter. Talia smirks at them in her green dress as she stirs mugs of cocoa, and Peter chuckles too as he helps her set the apple pies on the table. Buckets of ice cream defrost on the counter beside boxes of See’s candy, marshmallows bounce everywhere, and Napoleon swims undisturbed in his vase by the twinkling tree.

“Let’s be merry,” Robert agrees, and makes a beeline to the apple pie to see if he can pick off a piece of crust without Talia noticing.

.o0O0o. January 17th, 2005.

Claudia shaves her head on New Year’s after taking Stiles shopping for headscarves, calling him her
“personal fashion advisor.” They came back with a Mervyn’s bag full of all kinds of colors and patterns, including a red one with little white kittens that’s her declared favorite. She’s still incredibly cheery about the whole thing and he’s starting to wonder if the gravity of it all will ever hit her one day.

There’s a strange new suspended atmosphere in the house, like time is standing still yet zooming by twice as fast. Everything carries on as normal —Claudia tends to her garden in the backyard, John goes to work and Stiles has playdates with Scott after school— but it’s dreamlike now, maybe because he knows it’s temporary instead of the permanent he was expecting. More often than not he finds himself lingering over his wife’s possessions when she isn’t looking— smelling her perfume bottles, tracing his fingers over her books on the shelf, slipping his hands into her shoes in the closet and marveling over how small they are, folding her socks extra slowly when he does the laundry, smelling her bathrobe and thinking about how he’ll probably keep smelling it when she—

“Mr. Stilinski?”

“Yes, hi I’m still here.”

John is slumped over the dining table on the phone with insurance. It’s nearing eight at night and the bridge of his nose has an imprint from wearing his reading glasses so long. He shuffles through the papers until he finds claim form, because the insurance lady left him on hold for so long that he got bored and started doodling on a piece of scratch paper.

“Thank you for waiting. I’m sorry but you don’t qualify for our benefits.”

He sighs. “Are— are you sure?”

“I’m… Sure, yes.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

He hangs up and sighs heavily, scrubbing his hands over his thinning hair. He’s going to need to start dipping into his mom’s inheritance money sooner than he thought. But the goal is to make sure Claudia’s medical bills are covered so that he can send Stiles to high school and then a good college after that, all while keeping groceries in the fridge and shoes on their feet— and the house. It’s been their house for nine years and it’s the only home Stiles knows, so getting evicted is an unfavorable option.

Noticing the tired film to his eyes he decides to call it a night and flicks off the kitchen lamp. His feet are heavy as he trudges down the hall, but slows to a stop when he hears voices in the bathroom. The door is ajar so he creeps to the edge of the frame and peeks inside, spying in the mirror over the sink. Claudia is addressing Stiles by his real name, because she’s the only one who can.

“—so you found daddy’s razor?”

Stiles bobs his small head, and John sucks in a quiet breath at his son’s reflection. Stiles’s long chestnut hair is in clumps on the floor, leaving messy tufts leftover on his patchy bald scalp— John’s electric razor is in his small, trembling hand. Claudia gently takes it from him and sets it on the counter. Her wrists are already getting thinner.

“Well that was very adventurous of you,” she grants kindly. “Although you know it’s not safe to use tools like this without mommy and daddy’s permission, right?”

“I know,” Stiles bites his lip, eyes huge and brown on his mother.
“Right. So how ‘bout I help you now, if you’re sure this is what you want to do?”

“Yes! I want it just like you!” Stiles nods vigorously, hands curling into Claudia’s pink sweater. She chuckles, a musical sound that’s been the guiding light in John’s life for seventeen years.

“So enthusiastic, my little silly **kochanie**! I don’t know, it looks kinda wacky like this, don’t you think?” She turns Stiles’s small shoulders around to face the mirror and scrunches up her face, tickling his armpits for good measure. Stiles squeals in laughter, revealing his two missing front teeth as he throws his head back and squirms in his mother’s arms.

“Ahhh, no! Moooooommyyyyy-eeeEEEeee!” Stiles bucks with happiness, mingling with Claudia’s giggles in the most beautiful symphony John’s ever heard.

“Okay, okay,” Claudia sniffs, rolling up her sleeves and reaching for the razor. “I just thought you might need a visit from the tickle monster, since your hair looks so **monstrous**!”

John turns around when Claudia starts dragging the hair trimmer in long strips over Stiles’s head, pressing his back against the hallway wall. He listens to the buzz of the razor, Claudia’s sweet voice humming Abba’s “Dancing Queen” as she goes, and Stiles’s tiny, off-tune voice joining in with her. John listens as he clamps a calloused hand over his trembling chin, and prays right then and there for the strength to raise Stiles as perfectly as his wife has.

Stiles keeps the buzzcut for the next eight years.

.o0O0o. **March 5th, 2005.**

He and Talia are setting the table for dinner when all three kids burst through the door, panting hard and giggling with wide smiles on their faces. Dirt and leaves stain them from head to toe, result of their after-school run through the woods, and Robert spares a glance at his wife and flinches in preparation for—

“Dirty shoes OUT of the house!” Talia thunders. His kids immediately drop to their butts and scoot back to the porch with a chorus of “yeah, yeah”s, and then Laura’s loud, “Hey pop!”

“Yo,” he greets with a wave. He hears that’s what all the cool kids are saying now instead of ‘hello.’

“You guys have a good run?”

“Yeah! We found this great creek with really slimy rocks!” Laura impatiently yanks off her boots. “I bet it was like, kelpie saliva or something!”

“It was algae, Laura,” Derek dotes as he carefully unties his sneakers. “Kelpies only live in lakes and swamps.”

“Which connect to creeks! Don’t play smartass with me, their saliva totally could have washed downstream to where we were.”

“Maybe, except there are no lakes or swamps around here,” Derek rolls his eyes. He is really turning into a sarcastic little 6th grader.

“Fine! Then tomorrow we’re going to go back to that creek and follow it upstream until we find where it comes from! Fifty bucks says it’s a secret lake you don’t know about.”

“Fine, deal!”
“Fine!”

“Did you have fun, little Nidyíllíí?” Talia asks.

“Mhm,” Cora’s head bobs as she unstraps her velcro shoes with tiny fingers. In her mouth Pig dangles by an ear, a constant companion 24/7 since Christmas day. She’s kept him surprisingly clean despite how much time she spends in the woods— Robert understands that letting their four-year-old daughter run around with her middle school siblings in the forest is apparently something human parents would never ever do, but they always come home safe. Besides, he and Talia are attuned to their kids’ heartbeats and can hear if they speed up in fear within a mile radius.

“Did you find any critters?” Robert kneels next to her.

“Mhm,” she nods shyly again.

“You know what mommy says about keeping them… Did you bring any home?”

Cora licks her lips and tries to run away to her bedroom. He catches her by the arm and spins her back, trying to meet her eyes. “Cora.”

Slowly, while puffing out her bottom lip and blinking her puppy eyes at him, she reaches into her pocket and gingerly pulls out a worm. She places it into his open palm, and then one by one she pulls out a caterpillar, a beetle, three rollie pollies, and does the same.

“Thank you, sweetie,” he pecks her on the forehead and goes outside to set her friends free.

It’s chaos at the dinner table as usual. His kids are damp and pink-cheeked from their showers and all appropriately ravenous. They’re going through growth spurts so Talia’s been cooking double portions, meaning they eat at the holiday table in order to fit all the food. Tonight is steaming crockpots of turkey chili and rice (three kinds since the kids like sticky white, he prefers super-spicy Mexican, and Talia only eats brown like the health nut she is), caesar salad, cornbread muffins, and a long lineup of toppings in colored bowls— cheddar cheese, parmesan, green onion, tortilla chips, salsa, sour cream, and crushed Cheeze-Its.

As soon as Talia sits down everyone dives for it all, and within a minute the table is a mess and the meal is two-thirds depleted. There’s a lot of grunting and happy slurping sounds as they shovel everything into their mouths, interspersed with compliments and thank yous to Talia.

“So kids,” Robert says around his chili. “What’s new in school?”

“Melanie Dresden tripped and fell on her face in the cafeteria today,” Laura blurts gleefully. “It was hilarious.”

“That poor girl,” Talia clucks disapprovingly. “It’s not very nice to laugh at her, Laura.”

“Yeah, but she fell on her face,” Laura counters. “Like, it was amazing. Her tray went flying into the air and her milk splattered on her head! Definitely a highlight of 8th grade.”

“It looked like it hurt,” Derek mumbles into his cornbread muffin.

“Sorry, but I gotta ask, Lo-Lo— Did you trip her?” Robert asks.

“Ha! I like your thinkin’ dad, but nah, I wish. Although I totally stole her cookie when it rolled across the floor.”
“Laura Ann,” Talia scolds.

“Okay, new topic!” Laura claps her hands together. “Cora, how was preschool today?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Your name is Cora, isn’t it?”

Slowly and stunted in her toddler lisp, “Pig n’ I… Um… We made a farm with th’uh, um, blocks.”

“And do you think your farm properly represented the proportional acreage and economical system of farms in America?” Laura asks seriously, like a talkshow host. She bites a crouton off her fork with a loud crunch. Cora blinks at her a little fearfully while she squeezes Pig tighter.

“Um… Yes.”

“Probably not. But I like that you said your answer with confidence.”

“Stop teasing her, abote,” Talia says mildly.

“I’m not! I’m—" but in her enthusiasm Laura flings her fork across the room, where it hits Derek’s backpack on the couch with enough force to make it topple over. A pink envelope slips out and slides onto the floor.

“What’s that?” Robert asks quizzically.

There’s a tense moment where everyone at the table stops eating— Derek’s eyes grow wide with fear, Laura sees that and smirks, and in a flash both tweens are scrambling over each other in a race to reach the mystery envelope. Laura wins because she’s faster and stronger and essentially shoves Derek out of the way, and she skips over to Robert to hand it to him.

“Here you go, daddy,” she says sweetly, and sticks her tongue out at Derek. Derek glares back at her and tries to swipe at her with his claws, but he just has fingernails. She cackles.

“Ha! Nice try, little brother. No claws until you hit puberty, remember?”

“Shut up!”

“Don’t worry Der, you’re almost there. I heard mom offering to buy you boxers last night.”

“Shut UP Laura!”

“Kids, back to your seats please.” That’s Talia, restoring order. Glumly his son takes his seat and watches mournfully as Robert slips a fat packet out of the envelope.

“What’s it say?” Laura grins.

“Annual Middle School Division Spelling Bee practice booklet?” Robert says slowly, eyebrow raising higher with every word. “Holy shit, Der! Are you in the spelling bee?”

"It's not a big deal," Derek tries to dismiss, but it’s too late.

“Oh my god, you nerd!” Laura screams. “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any nerdier, you go and do this! How are we even in the same family?”

“But Derek isn’t a bee!” Cora cries.
“Calm down, everyone. I think it’s wonderful that Derek is smart enough to be selected as a participant,” Talia interrupts wisely, raising warning eyebrow at them all. “Derek ahbeque, we are very proud of you. And we’ll all be there for you the day of the competition.”

“Hold on, wait, you guys are coming?” Derek blurts, eyes suddenly wide with panic. “N-no, you don’t have—“

“Yeah, says right here it’s tomorrow!” Robert exclaims as he skims the practice booklet. “Wonderful. I’ll call the lab now and tell them I won’t be in until late tomorrow.”

“And I’ll let the university know that I’ll be going in Thursday instead,” Talia cuts neatly into her cornbread.

“Wait, no! It’s— you don’t need to come, I don’t—“

“Don’t be silly, of course we’re coming!” Robert interrupts cheerfully. His son is in the spelling bee. “We wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Can I come, too?” Laura asks with a snide look to Derek. “I wanna catch it on video when you mess up in front of the whole gym.”

“Says here that it’s mandatory for all Beacon Junior High students to attend,” Robert reads.

“Excellent!” Laura preens. Derek sinks into his seat.

“Wow, look at these words!” He continues, skimming the list of practice words. “These are toughies for middle school… Do you know how to spell these, son?”

“Some of them,” Derek mumbles.

“Let me see the list, dad! Spell— ‘excruciation,’” Laura commands.

“E-X-C-R-E-S-C-E-N-C-E,” Derek recites rapid-fire.

They all stare at him. A tiny smile pops up on Talia’s face.

“How about ‘anonymous?’” Robert tries.

“A-N-O-N-Y-M-O-U-S,” Derek says, again just as fast as he stuffs a forkful of rice in his mouth. He doesn’t even need to write it out on his hand.

“Damn,” Robert whistles. “But let’s see how well you do with the challenge section, shall we? Spell, ‘luminescence.’”


“What the fuck,” Laura gapes. “You’re barely twelve! I’m two years older than you and I can’t even spell that!”

“You certainly got your father’s intelligence.”

“And your mother’s humbleness,” Robert adds, as Derek continues to hunch somberly over his food. He refuses to meet everyone’s eyes, opting instead for shoving chili into his mouth. Of all of them, he’s probably the least Hale-like. “You need me to drill you after dinner?”

“No thanks, it’s not for a grade or anything so I don’t bother looking at that,” Derek dismisses.
Robert flips over the packet in his hands. The paper is pristine white and devoid of crinkles or dog-ears, as if Derek hadn’t opened it at all. Yet Derek could spell words most high schoolers can’t spell like he was firing off his own name. Granted the kid reads as much as he breathes, but it’s still awesome.

“Welp,” Robert puts another spoonful of rice on his plate. “Looks like we’ve got another future Stanford student in the family.”

.o0O0o.

The middle school gym is just like Robert remembers it: cramped, smelly, and loud.

Rows of 6th through 8th graders sit in rows along the front of the stage, leaving room for the parents in the back. He and Talia arrive just in the nick of time because he needed more time to gel his hair just right, but several parents jump up at the sight of them and offer their seats.

“Thank you. I’m Robert Hale, and this is my wife, Talia,” He smiles at a couple as they scoot down to make room.

“Oh, we know. It’s nice to finally meet you in person,” the woman gushes —it’s a reaction he gets a lot, since the whole town knows of the Hale fortune, but he introduces himself anyway because it’s charming and polite— The couple introduces themselves as Helen and Kale Māhealani.

“Kale, that’s a cool name,” Robert grins. “How do you spell it?”

“K-A-L-E.”

“Hey, like the vegetable!”

“…It’s Hawaiian.”

“Neat. So which one is your kid?”

“Emma is in 8th grade, she’s the girl with the glasses at the end. She’s going to go to Nationals,” Helen says proudly. He and Talia exchange a glance.

He follows her finger to the girl on the far right of the stage— Emma is tall and extremely well put-together for an 8th grader, with groomed brown hair scraped back behind a headband, glasses like her father’s, and a crisp white blouse tucked into a skirt. She has shiny black flats for shoes and a pretty smile on her face; clean, sophisticated, and intelligent spring to mind.

“Wow. Like Nationals… For the Spelling Bee?” He asks hesitantly, just to make sure.

“He’s top of her class. Our Emma can achieve anything,” the father, Kale, confirms. Robert sizes him up— human, smells of expensive cologne but nothing extra expensive, nice shoes and a button-up shirt probably ironed by the wife. Handsome, but not as handsome as Robert, dark tanned skin, and a pair of Marc Jacobs prescription glasses on his flat nose.

“She wants to get into Stanford,” Helen smiles proudly. He and Talia exchange a glance.

“Emma, or you?” Robert murmurs under his breath, and Talia steps on his foot.

“Sorry, what was that?”
“Oh, nothing, just commenting on how nice the new gym stage looks,” Robert smiles.

“Which one is your child?” Kale asks.

“Derek. He’s the one…”

He trails off as he catches sight of his son. He’s easy to pick out because he’s the smallest one on the stage, clad in a faded orange shirt that says “Pi a la mode” (and 3.14 in the shape of an ice cream scoop) from when he went to science camp two summers ago. His ears are wildly out of proportion from his skinny body and stick out like two spoons, there’s dirt on his pants from his scuffle with Laura this morning, and his shaggy hair hasn’t even been combed. Robert reviews his options for answering—the one with the Dumbo ears? The one with the dorky shirt? The one who looks like he’d rather be drowning in hot lava?

“The first one in the lineup, right hand side,” Talia offers. The parents look over and raise their eyebrows.

“Well… Good luck to him.”

“Thanks. Emma, too.”

“Attention, ladies and gentlemen!” Mr. Escobara, Laura’s English teacher, says at the podium. “Thank you all for coming, we are pleased to announced that the Beacon Middle School’s 43rd annual Spelling Bee is about to begin!”

The gym claps, the students on the floor less enthusiastically than the parents. He and Talia smile for Derek’s attention but he keeps his eyes planted firmly on his shoes, so instead they scan the floor and find Laura’s pink and brown head sitting with her friends.

“Just to review, there are three students selected from each grade, 6th through eighth, who have the highest English grade amongst their peers. Each student will come to the podium and spell out the word given to them by our judges, which include Ms. Jan Whittemore, Mrs. Gale Wazorski, and myself, Mr. Stanley Escobara. If a student fails to spell the word correctly, he or she will be eliminated. The final student remaining will be sent to the regional competition, where they will have a chance at the state championship and then Nationals.”

Emma’s parents smile with puffed chests.

“I will pronounce each given word twice. The student has the option to ask to repeat the word, ask the definition, origin, or root of the word, or to use the word in a sentence. The words will start easy and gradually get harder as we commence the competition. Now without further ado, let’s start with our first 6th grader, Derek Hale.”

Laura whoops loudly from her seat as Derek quickly scuffles up to the microphone. His hands are shoved nervously into his pockets, making his shoulders appear even more angular than they are. His eyes flick out to the crowd, catch sight of his parents, and quickly drop back down.

“Puzzle,” Mr. Escobara pronounces from the judges table. “Puzzle.”

“P-U-Z-Z-L-E,” Derek mumbles, then scurries back to his seat. The crowd claps politely.

The other girl in his grade is nearly a foot taller than him, which sparks mild chuckles from the students when they need to raise the microphone considerably. In particular Laura’s cackles, determined to be the loudest, reach Derek’s ears and make him glare her direction. One by one the participants stand and recite words like “business” and “weight” with smiling overachiever faces.
“Successful.”
“S-U-C-C-E-S-S-F-U-L.”

“Island.”
“I-S-L-A-N-D.”

“Necessary.”
“N-E-C-E-S-S-A-R-Y.”

“Malicious.” “Character.” “Rhino.”

Then slowly more challenging, like “faux” and “discrete.”

“Incessant.”
“I-N-C-E-S-S-A-N-T.”

“Mirage.”
“M-I-R-A-G-E.”

“Possessor.”
“P-O-S-S-E-S-S-O-R.”

“Vivacious.”
“V-I-V-A-C-I-O-U-S.”

Until—

“Embarrass.”

The buzzer chirps. The 6th grade boy at the microphone flushes with (ironically) embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, that is incorrect,” Mr. Escobara announces. “The proper spelling is E-M-B-A-R-R-A-S-S. Let’s give our contestant a round of applause.”

The boy scuttles off the stage and returns to his class section on the floor, where his friends tease him for being the first one out. But his humility is saved by a seventh grade girl a few rounds later, who accidentally spells out “S-H-I-T-T-E-D” for the word “Sighted” and is promptly escorted off the stage by the principal.

“Metallic.”
“M-E-T-A-L-L-I-C.”

“Extraordinary.”
“Foreign.”
“F-O-R-E-I-G-N.”

“Attractive.”

“That’s you, hun,” Robert whispers, and wins a quiet smirk from Talia. The Māhealani’s look disapprovingly at them.

Eventually more contestants slip up and walk off stage. Derek correctly spells “ministry, yacht, and tangible,” and is amongst the six remaining students on the stage alongside Emma, a twiggy 6th grader, and three very Asian seventh and eighth graders, although Talia kicks his shin when he makes a joke about it.

“Handkerchief.”


Which leaves Derek, Emma, and the three Asian kids.

“That seems a little unfair. I didn’t even know there was a ‘D’ in there and I graduated from Stanford,” Robert comments as he claps politely.

“The ‘D’ tends to fall silent in American culture,” is Talia’s wise commentary. “But handkerchiefs are kerchiefs small enough to be handheld, so it only makes sense for it to be spelled that way.”

“You’re so smart,” Robert hums. He nudges his shoe against her leg and wiggles his eyebrows.

“You know where else there’s a ‘D?’ It’s a big one, too. I could introduce you later tonight.”

“Why is it you always get so inappropriate during public school events,” Talia bats his arm away, but she’s smiling.

“Because they’re so boringgg,” he whisper-whines to her. “The kids are cute but it’s been like half an hour and there’s still five of them left.”

“It’s not that boring.”

“Yeah? I heard your pulse slip,” he whispers. “Whattaya say we run to a classroom for a little fun? We’ll be back before Derek wins.”

“Honestly, Robert.”

“Like it’s nothing we haven’t done before,” he mumbles in her ear. “Laura’s second field hockey game, the 3rd grade talent show, the back of the Maserati during back to school nigh—“

“Shh, you’ve made your point,” Talia shushes him. “If you’re good I’ll see what I feel like when we get home.”

“Yessss. Home. Okay, home is good. Very good.”

“Shh. Now watch the spelling bee.”
“Yes ma’am.”

Emma steps up and correctly spells “fastidious.” Asian kid #2 spells “thoroughbred.” Laura whoops so loud for Derek when he spells “accumulate” that her teacher chastises her. Ten minutes later Asian kid #3 is defeated by the word “flamboyant,” and five after that Asian kid #2 is apparently so nervous that he faints (ironically while spelling out “swooned”).

“Well looks like we’re down to our final two students—Derek Hale vs. Emma Māhealani. The first student to misspell a word is out, meaning the other—”

“Is the winner, we get it!” A pubescent voice yells from the eighth grade section of the gym. A teacher scolds him as the kids laugh.

“The winner, right—Emma, please step up to the microphone. Your word is ‘constitution.’”


“That is correct.” When Derek steps up, “Anxious.”

“A-N-X-I-O-U-S.”

“Technology.”

“T-E-C-H-N-O-L-O-G-Y.”

“Scholastic.”

“S-C-H-O-L-A-S-T-I-C.”

“Belligerent.”

“B-E-L-L-I-G-E-R-E-N-T.”

“Potpourri.”

Derek licks his lips, cocking his head at the ground.

“P-O… T-P-O-U-R-R-I.”

“Damn!” Robert whoops as the gym roars extra loudly.

“Wow. Is he cheating?” Mark raises a teasing eyebrow at him, but Robert can tell there’s a hint of accusation there.

“Nah, Derek would jump off a cliff before he does something morally wrong, he’s a real goodie-two-shoes,” Robert waves off. “I knew he was smart, but man, this is a whole new level. Potpourri, Talia!”

“Well you insist on putting the stuff in every bathroom. He’s probably read the labels a hundred times while washing his hands,” Talia answers wisely.

“Perks of being rich, eh?” Mark Māhealani chuckles, like he and Robert share some inside joke. Another glance to the man’s Rolex and they probably do.

“Surveillance.”

“Quintessence.”

“Q-U-I-N-T-E-S-S-E-N-C-E.”

“Reconnaissance.”


“Mnemonics.”

“M-N-E-M-O-N-I-C-S.”


“Unbelievable.”


“As in it’s unbelievable that a sixth grader is keeping up with an eighth grader,” Robert’s ears pick up from somewhere across the gym. Talia catches it too, and she sends a glare to a blonde parent on the other side of the bleachers.

Again and again more words are dealt out like cards in a deck, and Emma and Derek spell them, going back and forth like a nerdy tennis match. She recites them slow and practical like she memorized them from a dictionary. Derek is quicker and more instinctual, like he’s just logically sounding out the words and the letters that might match—he also asks for the origins a couple times, and uses the answer to feel around what might be silent ’T’s or ’S’s. It almost seems like he’s getting into it, despite how his practice book was white and unwrinkled like he didn’t bother opening it once.

“Rhythm.”


“Omniscience.”


The crowd starts giving bigger cheers for Derek than Emma—perhaps awed by his talent, or they think it will be amusing to see such a small 6th grader beat a near-graduate. Emma’s parents grow stiff and her heartbeat under the microphone starts thumping faster, betraying her nerves. In addition her eyes flick over to Helen and Mark more often, but instead of encouraging smiles she gets adamant purses instead.

“Paleontology.”


“That is correct.”
“She’s losing her focus,” Mark comments under her breath.

“Don’t worry, she’s been studying for this since December. I’m sure she’ll win this,” Helen assures him, but her heartbeat stumbles when she says it.

“Orthopedist.”

“O-R-T-H-O-P-E-D-I-S-T,” Derek spells, while glancing at Emma. She doesn’t meet his eyes, tapping her shoes nervously.

“Correct.” The crowd erupts into applause again as he takes his seat.

“Consequence.”

“C-O-N-S… E… Q-U… E-N-C-E,” Emma stammers.

“Correct.” Polite clapping. Derek walks to the podium, again staring at Emma as they pass each other.

“Luminescence.”

“L-U-M-I-N-E-S-S-E-N-C-E.”

The buzzer chirps. Emma startles in horror before the microphone.

“I’m sorry Emma, that is incorrect,” Mr. Escobara says. The Māhealani’s gasp beside he and Talia and Emma claps two woeful hands over her mouth. The rest of the gym falls silent. “This brings us to the sudden death question— If Derek can spell luminescence correctly, he is the winner.”

“Shit, Talia, he won!” Robert whispers excitedly. “That’s the word I gave him at the dinner table last night! He spelled it faster than his own name, remember?”

Derek swallows before the mic. His eyes dart to Emma in the awaiting silence of the gym, then to Robert and Talia, and then back to the ground. He bites his lip and blurts rapid-fire into the speaker.

“L-U-M-E-N-E-S-C-E-N-E.”

“I’m sorry, that is incorrect,” Mr. Escobara stammers. “This means Emma, you are still in the competition.”

Robert’s mouth opens and closes silently. Talia squints in confusion. The Māhealani’s sigh in relief and Emma gasps. She stands on shaky legs and walks to the microphone.

“Cosmic.”

“C-O-S-M-I-C,” she spells.

Derek takes his place center stage and slips his hands into his pockets, staring at the ground.

“Werewolf.”


He and Talia gape. Emma and the rest of the gym blinks in shock.

“That is… Incorrect,” Mr. Escobar stammers. "Which brings us to sudden death again. Emma, if you
can spell werewolf correctly, you win the Spelling Bee.”

She steps up to the microphone, a tentative smile on her face. “W-E-R-E-W-O-L-F.”

“Congratulations, Emma Māhealani is the Beacon Middle School spelling bee champion! From here she will move on to—“

But Mr. Escobar’s words are drowned by the clapping of the crowd and the commotion of eager students standing to go home. Helen and Kale beam and race over to where the school photographer is taking pictures of Emma, and he and Talia rise and stride quickly to Derek as he trudges off the stage. As they get closer a group of kids from his class laugh at him in passing and—

“Oh my god, how did you get werewolf wrong?”

“Yeah Derek, did you get distracted being on stage with an older girl?”

“Shut up,” Derek mumbles.

Robert glares and walks faster so he can verbally beat the shit out of those kids, but his daughter beats him to it.

“Hey! Asshole Andy, shut the fuck up or I’ll rip off your tiny balls with a pair of hedge clippers and run them over with my dad’s 1986 Maserati!” Laura barks, taking a protective stance in front of her brother. “I bet you can’t even spell asshole let alone all the words Derek spelled up there. Get lost, twerps.”

Intimidated by Laura’s violent nature, the boys mutter under their breath and flee. In a second the three of them are standing before their tiny tween.

“What happened, champ?” Robert asks sadly. “You knew how to spell that word, you got it perfect yesterday at the table!”

“Sorry,” Derek looks at his shoes.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Robert says. “Hell, I’d be wetting my pants up there.”

“I wasn’t nervous, I just—“

“Did you feel like you were gonna puke?” Laura cuts in gleefully. “Or faint like that other kid? I bet you were gonna—“

“No!” Derek snaps, frowning at them all. “I just got it wrong, okay? Can we go home now?”

“It almost seemed like you… Did you get it wrong on purpose?” Robert questions.

“Derek _abeque_, why would you fail on purpose?”

His son sighs and squirms under the attention. “The other girl obviously wanted it more,” he shrugs. “I didn’t really care that much.”
There’s a moment of silence as they all stare at him. The commotion of the gym swarms around them as they stand in awed stillness.

“Fucking hell, Derek, why are such a good person?” As always, Laura is the first to speak, and she throws her head back and stomps off in exasperation.

“Damn, champ, but you had the win in the bag,” Robert points out.

“I’m sorry,” Derek’s cheeks redden in shame.

“What? No, don’t apologize! What you did was really…” Awesome, inspiring, incredible, humble, way too mature for an eleven-year—

“We’re very proud of you,” Talia fills in for him. She smiles one of her rare toothy smiles and Derek shyly reciprocates it, even when she pulls him in for a hug and kisses the top of his head. Robert meets her eyes and raises his eyebrows in a silent,

"He’s too good, T. We raised a son who’s too damn good."

The slight tilt of her own eyebrow says even she’s surprised too, but impressed nonetheless.

Across the gym Emma smiles wide with a small trophy for three cameras— the yearbook photographer, her mom, and her dad. She meets Derek’s eyes and waves, a gesture of thanks and good game. Derek nods slightly, balks as Laura stampedes into him and throws his backpack at him “Come on, let’s go, the competition went like fifteen minutes overtime!” and follows his own parents outside to the Maserati.

Tonight they are totally having pizza in celebration, Robert silently cheers— C-E-L-E-B-R-A-T-I-O-N.

.o0O0o. April 4th, 2005.

There are so many bills on the table that John can’t see the wood underneath.

His mom’s three-hundred-fifty thousand finally dried up a few weeks ago, leaving him to quickly drown in the ever-piling medical costs. Despite the cold dizziness he feels when he thinks about it, he thinks a lot about how if he hadn’t inherited that money they probably would have lost the house by now. It’s a small miracle in his otherwise miracle-less world.

He tries his best to hide the upcoming debts but his bank account loves to sneer otherwise at him. He wears his pencils down to nubs scribbling out numbers and trying to find a way to stretch their meager savings out as long as possible, but sometimes he wastes time staring out the window and imaging what it would be like to be a millionaire. To have so much money that you never need to worry about money, and you can spend as much as you want without batting an eyelash— toys and clothes for your kid, jewelry for your wife, shell out a mountain for a vacation and still have mountains leftover. But John’s never tasted that kind of life, so he figures it’s a moot point.

He’s pulled out of his head by the scuffle-scuffle of pink bunny slippers coming down the hall.

“Good morning, love,” Claudia greets sleepily. She doesn’t have soft, slumber-ruffled curls anymore, but he still likes to run his fingers over her smooth scull and tell her she has a beautiful-shaped head. She’s lost twelve pounds since her diagnosis, leaving her more angular in her fuzzy robe. Her breasts have been eaten away some after the surgery so she went bra shopping with Melissa to size down,
and her toes have acquired a pale blue color beneath the bright nail polish she paints on in the evenings. The apples of her cheeks are smaller and paler, lacking the rosy color that used to be there, but she’s beautiful just the same.

“Happy birthday, hun.” He kisses her on the cheek since mouth-kisses bother her cold sores. Today she is thirty-seven, and they both know it’s as old as she’s going to get.

“Thank you,” she hums. “Where’s my little—“

“Mommy!”

Stiles comes running down the hall from his room and tackles her legs. She’s only 5’3”, but he’s a tiny eight-year-old so the top of his head barely reaches her waist.

“Happy birthday, mommy! I wanted to bring you breakfast in bed but dad said you were sleeping!”

“My beautiful boy, thank you! Look at you, already dressed?”

“It’s one in the afternoon, Clauds,” John tells her gently.

“Oh,” she looks at the clock. “Whoopsies! Didn’t mean to sleep the day away,” she chuckles. “What have you boys been up to?”

“I watched cartoons and then I played with the soccer ball in the backyard and then I played with legos!” Stiles blurts rapid-fire. “And dad’s been inside doing homework!”

“Oh my, what an exciting day! Homework?”

“He means finances.” John quickly slips the biggest hospital bills underneath the adding machine.

“Grandma Stilinski’s money hasn’t run out, has it?” She shuffles over to her pill box.

“Still going strong,” John lies.

“Mom, can I make you breakfast in bed now?” Stiles tugs on her robe. She ruffles his hair.

“I’m not too hungry yet, kochanie. But maybe later!”

“M’kay.”

“Melissa wants to take you out to dinner later if you’re feeling up to it,” John says. “But she dropped this off for you this morning so you have something to open.” He drops a pink gift bag on the table. Claudia gasps and makes grabby hands at it.

“Oh my goodness! Isn’t she just the sweetest thing?” She gushes as she peeks into the tissue paper.

“I might use the word ‘sharpest,’ or maybe ‘spiciest,’” John concurs. “She’s a little scary sometimes. Like when I ate the leftover Chinese she was saving when I babysat the boys overnight?”

“Oh yes. You had a bruise on your wrist for days.”

“I like Ms. McCall!” Stiles blurs. He crawls up onto the table to try and see inside the gift bag. “And Scott, too! They play Radio Disney in their car!”

“Eeeeeeerreeeee!” Claudia squeals as she lifts out a fuzzy rainbow scarf from the bag. She buries her face into it and then wraps it around her neck with one hand while the other hand dives into the bag
again. It reemerges with a bag of Peeps and fingerless gloves that match the scarf.

“Dear Claudia,” she reads off the card after flipping it around right-side up a few times. “Here are some ack— Ack-ceck-ser… What is this word, John?”

He leans over and reads it. “Accessories.”

“Oh! Right. Here are some accessories to keep you warm while reading, and a sweet snack for my sweet friend. Aww!” Claudia rips the gloves apart and hurriedly slips them onto her fingers while gushing, “this must be because I mentioned how cold my fingers were the other day! Because I’m all toasty in bed, see, but my fingers get cold holding up my books because they’re not underneath the blankets! But now I have these!”

She wiggles her fingers in front of Stiles’s face, who giggles. The weather has grown warm the past few weeks, but her medication lowers her blood pressure which in turn keeps her chilly as an ice cube.

“She certainly knows you well,” John chuckles.

“Feel them John, they’re soft as a baby butt!” She cups his cheeks and rubs the soft fabric over his two-day stubble. He agrees they are very soft.

“Baby butt,” Stiles doubles over giggling. “Mom!”

“It’s true! Babies have very soft little butts. Yours was the softest.”

“Eeeeeeew, gross!” Then, “Daddy!” Stiles stands on his tiptoes to whisper-shout to him. “When can we show mommy our present?”

“We can do it now,” John grants.

“A present? For me?” Claudia perks up.

“Well it’s your birthday, isn’t it? Come with us.” He takes her by the hand and walks her over to the couch. Stiles zips in excited circles around their legs and presses up to Claudia’s side once they’re settled.

“What’s going on?” She asks excitedly. John smiles and retrieves the boxes hidden in the back of the fridge. He opens the first one and gingerly removes the crown of flowers.

“Well, we wanted to take you to Poland, but… That’s not exactly an option,” he says as he gently places it on her head. “So we brought Poland to you.”

“A corn poppy crown!” Claudia gasps— the traditional Polish flower. John opens the other box and places it on her lap; it’s filled with faworki, makowiec, and paczki from the European bakery in San Francsico. He drove there at five this morning to pick them up. “O mój boże, John! Farworki and makowiec? And Paczki! Oh, this is just a dream!”

“That’s not quite everything,” John hums. He turns on the TV, switches to VHS, and hits play on the VCR. He takes a seat next to Claudia and watches her face light up as the video starts and her cousin’s face fills the screen.

“Cześć Claudie! Dzień dobry from Olsztyn!” A blue-eyed girl grins into the camera. Claudia screams and points to the television.
“Maria! John look, it’s my cousin Maria!” She squeals, and her smile is the biggest he’s seen in months.

“Your husband John mailed us a video camera so we could send videos of Poland to you for your birthday!” Maria says. She flips the camera around, showing a beautiful expanse of green pasture and a twinkling blue river iced over on the edges.

“Oh! It’s the Łyna!” Claudia’s hand jumps to her mouth. “My tata used to take us there all the time, it was just by our house.”

“And I’m here with ciocia Czesia, ciocia Elżbieta, wujek Eustachy, babica, Mieszek, Róża, and… Where’s little Władysław? Ah! There he is! Say cześć to kuzynka Claudia, Władysław!”

“Oh!” Claudia claps both palms to her mouth. Her eyes grow glassy as she stares at her family on the screen. “Look at Władysław, so grown up,” she whispers.

“Mom, what are they saying?” Stiles wrinkles his brow as the people on the screen speak rapid-fire Polish into the camera. They’re beautiful people, some strikingly similar to Claudia with pointed noses, pale skin, and freckled cheeks. Others are blond and tall, or wrinkled with embroidered shawls wrapped over their hair.

“It’s babica’s birthday,” Claudia says softly. John hands her a kleenex so she can wipe her tears. “This must have been filmed in February, look, there’s still some snow on the ground! They’re all at the river to celebrate her turning eighty-six— o mój, eighty-six! And that’s Mieszek my older cousin, he used to play Serso with me when I was little. Oh! And uncle Eustachy has a mustache now! Doesn’t he look so handsome? And who…? Oh! Róża had a baby! Oh look how precious, aniołek!”

Claudia’s laughter is enough to make John forget about everything else for a moment. Her family did a wonderful job of using the camera to capture everything from February to March— the gingerbread architecture of the pointed buildings downtown, grassy rolling hills and lakes, colorful dresses of dancers at the Green Festival, her aunt rolling dough for pierogis and her cousin’s toddler taking a bite. Claudia gasps when Róża points the camera out the window to show the countryside covered in a layer of fresh white snow in the morning, and Stiles gasps too because he’s never seen snow.

The footage is an hour long. Claudia shares the desserts with them and bites happily into her paczki, dribbling rose jelly onto her chin. John watches and imagines her doing that as a child too, on Sunday mornings after church when her father would take her to the bakery around the corner, as he’s heard so many times over the years. Dozens of family members take turns with the camera, introducing new spouses and children and sharing messages with Claudia, some in broken English and most in Polish. Some of what he hears includes “hope you feel better” and “happy birthday.”

Stiles asks a million questions that Claudia whispers excited answers to. “That’s the town square! Look, it still has cobbled roads! When I was little I used to skip across them with cousin Marja.” And “They’re bringing dried flower towers to the church for niedziela palmowa, palm sunday. And oh! The Easter feast! See those volcano cakes, kochanie? They’re called babka and they’re positively decadent. Mmmm… Oh it looks just as wonderful as I remember.”


The woman has the same gap tooth and moles, and only speaks in Polish. John tries his best to understand but the woman’s accent is much thicker than Claudia’s and he isn’t the best at the
language. But he does catch the last line; a heartfelt declaration of “kocham Cię”—“I love you.”

The video cuts to black and white static and Claudia bursts into tears.

“Mommy, are you okay?” Stiles puts his head in her lap and flips over so he can see her face.

“Yes, kochanie, mommy is better than okay,” Claudia smiles through her damp eyes and pets his shaved head. “Thank you so much for this wonderful gift.”

“Happy birthday, honey.” John wraps an arm around her and tucks her close to his warm side. The corn poppy crown smells like He kisses her bald head as she cries into his chest, but it’s a different kind of cry than the one he’s been doing as of late, so he listens with a reverence as her garden sways in the breeze in the backyard. In April the flowers bloom the brightest with the rain of fresh Spring, almost like they’re celebrating her birthday too.

“Thank you,” Claudia whispers again.

“Nie ma za co, mommy.”

“Kochamy Cię,” John adds. “Very, very much.”

.o0O0o. September 15th, 2005.

Claudia takes a turn for the worse at the end of August.

She moves to the hospital full-time after she collapses one day in the shower. The doctors say her body is at the end of it’s rope. They say she’ll stop eating, then stop drinking, and for the final couple of days she won’t even be conscious. Just a peaceful sleep that will carry her up into the sky. They say it will be painless, but John doesn’t believe them because he’s in so much agony that every breath he takes nearly knocks him to his knees.

The second week of September they move Claudia into a private room that will be more “peaceful” for her. John leaves her side only to shower and brush his teeth so he doesn’t bother her with the smell, even though she says she can’t smell anything anymore. “It’s like my nose is on vacation!” She grins at him, but it only makes his heart fall further.

Melissa is her nurse. Melissa pulled strings and did favors so she could be Claudia’s nurse, and sneaks her things like extra pillows and candy corn from the vending machines. He spends hundreds he doesn’t have on flowers every week, and fills the room with fresh yellow tulips.

He knocks softly on the door one day with another delivery of flowers. Stiles is laying next to her in bed reading aloud the third Harry Potter book.

"Mr. Moony presents his compli— compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnor-mally… Abnormally large nose out of other people's business. Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony, and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git,” Stiles reads in his halted, enunciated third grade speech. “What’s a git?”

“I don’t know,” Claudia hums sleepily.

“A dumbass,” Melissa offers as she adjusts Claudia’s IV bag. Then she notices John standing in the doorway and helpfully takes Stiles by the hand. “Come on, sweetie, let’s go get you a snack.”
“Cheetos?” Stiles tries hopefully.

“Let’s try some fruit first, bud.”

They exit the room, leaving just the two of them. Claudia smiles but lifts a nonexistent eyebrow at the tulips. The hairs on her face fell out long ago. “John, how are you possibly affording these?”

John isn’t. John is drowning in hospital debt.

“The department is covering it,” he lies, because the truth would only worry her.

“How sweet of them. Tell Terry I say hi,” she smiles weakly, wanly, and his heart breaks because she’s telling him because she won’t be able to tell Terry in person. It’s only when her eyes soften and she murmurs, “Oh, John,” that he realizes her face is a blur because he has tears in his eyes. “John, John my darling, come here.”

He kneels and places a trembling hand on her cheek. It hurts because the roundness there is gone, eaten away along with the soft curves of her body. Grey taints her alabaster complexion, painting sunken purple circles beneath her beautiful brown eyes. The color in them is dimmer now, less sparkly than before. Even her lips, once always so watermelon and soft, are cracked and pale beneath the shine of vaseline. IVs decorate her thin wrists like fragile spiderwebs.

“John, I’m going soon,” she whispers.

It’s the most agonizing four words he’s ever heard. John knows what this is, this is her goodbye, and he’s not ready. “No, Claudia you’re not, you’re going to get better, we’re going to—“

“No, John. I’m not getting better. I’m going to—“

“No, Claudia, don’t say it, please—“

“I’m going to die, John,” Claudia whispers, eyes sparkly damp and lips smiling faintly. “And I love you so, so much.”

He sucks in a breath and squeezes his eyes shut to combat the pain. Hot wetness slips off his jaw in drips to the scratchy hospital sheets, head spinning as clutches her hand of brittle bones for dear life. “I’m— I can’t do this without you. I wish—“

“No darling, don’t say it,” Claudia interrupts him, putting a gentle finger to his lips to stop the ‘it was me instead’ from tumbling past his tongue. “Don’t say it because I am so, so happy that it’s me, John. You make me so happy, John. Ever since I saw you that first day at the protest, remember that day?”

He breathes shakily, wiping away his tears. “I think… I believe you threw a walnut at me.”

She chuckles, a breathless echo of a laugh in her lungs. It’s weaker than what it used to be, but still every bit as beautiful. “And you kissed me when I hadn’t showered or brushed my teeth in two weeks!”

“And it was incredible,” John whispers.

“And do you remember the restaurant we went to afterwards?”

“Tozatino’s,” he answers immediately. “And you were so excited to eat pizza you accidentally threw your first slice across the room when you flung your arms up.” She chuckles so he continues. “I
think it hit that waiter, remember? And you were so embarrassed you turned bright pink, just like Stiles does, but I thought it was the most adorable thing in the world.”

“And when we went to the county fair the week after that,” Claudia suggests, eyes dancing. “And you spent thirty dollars trying to win me that stuffed panda.”

John chuffs. “That game was rigged. But it was nothing compared to the Warriors tickets you won us at the department lottery.”

“I remember that! And Richard got his panties in such a twist because he had put in a dozen tickets.”

“It was almost as good as the time Stiles snuck worms in his desk drawer and made him spill coffee all over himself. I still wish you could’ve seen that.”

“I still can’t believe you punched the Praying Mantis to defend my honor,” she teases. “Even though it got you suspended.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” he promises. “For you and for Stiles.”

“Remember when he was little and used to run out of the bathtub naked and leave bubbles all over the kitchen floor? Oh! Or the halloween he dressed up as a ninja turtle and got stuck in his shell?”

“And we had to cut him out of it before he wet his pants? I sure do.”

“Such the little mąciwoda.”

“Mm. I recall having to go out and buy toilet paper at nine o’clock at night because he used it all to wrap himself up like a mummy.”

“That was the first night we all had an evening off,” Claudia’s eyes flutter sleepily. “You me and Melissa…. You were gone so long in that bathroom with him we wondered if you two fell asleep.”

“Kind of hard to fall asleep when our kid is around,” he chuckles. “But I’ll never forget last Christmas when the boys conked out on top of their pillow fort. They were like a couple of puppies.”

“Save those pictures for a decade and show them on their wedding days to embarrass them,” she whispers gleefully.

“I’ll blow them up poster-size and tack up a hundred prints all over town,” he promises.

She smiles softly. “Marrying you was the best thing I ever did. I think about that night all the time, you know. Getting married in city hall.”

“I think about it too. In particular that coffee filter you insisted on wearing for a veil.”

Claudia pulls him closer, whispers in his ear, “Or the first time we did it?” John chuckles and pecks a kiss on her nose.

“Best night of my life.”

“What about the night our darling boy was born?”

“That too. He looks just like you.”

“But he has your heart,” she presses three fingers to his chest. “He wants to be a Sheriff, you know. Just like his daddy,” she whispers proudly.
“I’m not a Sheriff yet, Clauds.”

“But you will be,” she squeezes his hand and looks at him without an ounce of doubt. “I can feel it, right from the first day I met you. Sheriff John Stilinski— and I’ll be with you when it happens.”

John swallows. “So you keep telling me.”

“Believe it, then.”

John smiles sadly at the hospital sheets and allows himself a small chuckle. Claudia grins through tired eyes and squeezes his hand.

“See?” She murmurs to him. “That’s what I want to see. That beautiful smile and that wonderful laugh. I’ll still be alive in those memories, John, and I want you to remember them for me, okay?”

He chokes. “Forever.”

“I am so glad it’s me,” she whispers. “Because you’re the stronger one. You’ve always been the stronger one. You’ll be able to move on after this, and you’ll be able to take care of our beautiful little boy for me.” Silent tears are rolling down her face now, and John wipes away each one with his thumb and brings them to his lips. “I don’t think I’d be able to live one second without you, John. But you will, I know you will.”

And with that she slowly reaches around her neck and unclasps the silver heart necklace he gave her for their first anniversary. She holds it out to him.

“Claudia, no,” he whispers, but she kisses it and pushes it gently into his palm, pressing his fingers down over it.

“I want you to have this,” Claudia smiles at him. “I’ve worn it every day since you gave it to me, and when you went to war? When I stayed with Wendy? I tucked it beneath my pillow every night. I want you to take it John, and whatever you decide to do with it, it will be a little reminder that I’m still with you. A little kiss from me to you.”

He bites his lip and averts his eyes to the ceiling. The clock on the wall ticks quietly as he slowly surrenders and grips the small pendant tightly in his fist. Claudia starts humming a soft, final rendition of Dancing Queen, and John’s entire world collapses as he folds over and sobs quietly atop her stomach.

“I love you,” he chokes out against the bedsheets. Claudia pets his hair as he shudders in her arms. “I love you so much, it— it hurts. You made me— you make me a better man.”


.oO0O0o.

Claudia dies on a Tuesday.

She falls asleep with Stiles a few hours after her and John’s walk down memory lane, and doesn’t wake up in the morning. A couple nights later her heart monitor slowed to a stop while he and his son were dozing off on her bedside.

The funeral is held the following Saturday.
Claudia had arranged everything beforehand with him many months ago. Her favorite flowers, her favorite dress, the psalms that she declared the least boring. She wanted everybody to come in their brightest colors instead of traditional black (“Black? Oh no, how boring John, honestly! I insist on the brightest colors everyone has in their closets! I want a party!”) and they play Abba during the procession. Her mother comes and is predictably horrified, but John knows Claudia would have been secretly delighted at this. Makowiec, paczki, pizza, finger food, and candy litter the reception tables in the next room, ready to be eaten.

The turnout is small—a few of Claudia’s cousins make the flight from Poland, Melissa and Scott, Terry and the other guys from the department minus Richard, her co-workers from Honey Flower. Carol, by some blessed stroke of luck, is being honored at a big realtor brunch in Ohio so she won’t be coming. Even Sheriff Sanders shows up, considerably more grey than John last saw him, still with his trademark handlebar mustache. He looks funnily at John’s ensemble; blue jeans, new balance sneakers, and a red sweater. Claudia had insisted he wear it.

“It’s gonna be a hard day for you, my love! I want you to be extra comfy. Besides, suits are so… Un-John!”

And Stiles. A few of his classmates show up with their parents; many John doesn’t know the names of, but he spots a pretty little girl with fire engine red hair in a pink coat that is undoubtedly Lydia Martin. They come up and say the same sappy, unoriginal lines to him like “I’m so sorry for your loss” and “I imagine she loved you very much” that he needs to stand and respond to over and over. The only one who says the right thing is Melissa, who hugs him fiercely and says, “Look at all the old geezers who showed up, huh? She’s probably delighted her mother is horrified at the song selection.”

Stiles runs away the second the funeral ends.

The closing song plays and there’s a flash of blue as Stiles bolts for the door, slipping past John’s arms and out the church double-doors with a loud bang. John looses him quickly as the crowd of guests rise and file slowly outside. Stiles is small but fast and flies down the street and around the corner before John can grab him.

“Stiles!”

He peeks into alleyways and stores down the next two blocks with no luck. His heart pounds as he jogs back to the church, suddenly grateful that his wife insisted he wear comfortable clothes and running shoes. Melissa and Terry are there at the door waiting for him.

“I take it you didn’t find him,” Terry concludes. John shakes his head quickly.

“No. You got a walkie talkie on you?”

“Nah man, I’m off duty. But lemme call Larson, he’s on patrol right now. I’ll tell him to keep an eye out.”

“Thank you,” John pants. He’s— he can’t really breathe well from the run and his hands are clammy. He just lost Claudia and he can’t lose his son too, he can’t handle— god, everything. He can’t handle any of this and he closes his eyes and wishes desperately for a rewind button so he can go back eight years to when they were holding newborn Stiles in the hospital when Claudia was— no, and now Melissa is pressing a hand to his shoulder.

“John, I need to you breathe,” she tells him firmly in her nurse voice. How the woman stays so levelheaded all the time, he doesn’t know. “In through your nose and out through your mouth,
straighten your diaphragm. Good. You should probably sit down.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “I can’t sit when he’s missing. Christ, we’re all the way at the edge of
town, all his usual spots are miles away. Unless—you don’t think he tried to go back to the house?”

“Does he know the way back?”

“I don’t know, but he’s an observant kid. He could probably find his way to Alaska if he wanted to,”
John pants grimly. “I’m going to go check.” He turns on his heel when—

“Mr. Stilinski?” Scott pokes his head out meekly from behind Melissa’s leg. They look down and
oddly, John regains some small shred of calmness just by looking at the boy’s big brown eyes and
mop of black hair.

“Yes, Scott?” Melissa answers for him.

“I think… I think Stiles is okay. He’s Batman,” Scott mumbles shyly, still blinking up at John with
his innocent but strikingly assured stare. John takes another couple of breaths, exchanges a glance
with Melissa, and crouches down to pat the boy’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Scott.”

“Do you need me to drive you back to your house?” Melissa offers.

“No, you stay here. Thank you but it’s just under a mile or so, I can make it on foot, I need to burn
my nerves anyway,” John dismisses, and takes off down the sidewalk.

He runs.

At least he would be running if he was back in his academy days, but he’s a month from turning
forty-two so his joints have slowed down some. He jogs, cutting across streets and calling out for
Stiles every other minute. By the time he’s four blocks from his house he’s sweating again, and ends
up cutting through a strange stretch of trees dotting his neighborhood that brings him to a sad-looking
abandoned pond. Sitting on the rock bed is a smudge of brown hair atop a blue suit.

“Stiles!” He yells as he runs over. Stiles flinches but makes no move to greet him.

“Stiles,” he breathes, as he grabs Stiles by the shoulders and yells, “Stiles, what were
you thinking, you had me worried sick! You can’t just run off like that, okay? Do you understand
me? I—”

He breaks off when Stiles starts to cry, animalistic, gut-wrenching sobs. His son has been stoically
quiet from the moment Claudia died, so it knocks John off guard.

“I know kiddo,” John sighs, and buckles beneath the weight on his shoulders as he holds Stiles to his
chest. His legs are jelly now anyway from the exercise and relief, and they quake as Stiles suddenly
pushes back against him, wailing loudly.

“I want her back!” Stiles yells into his chest. “I want her to come back!”

“Hey, sshh, listen kiddo, we’ve still got your mom’s clothes, right? And we still have her macaroni
recipe, we—“

“It’s not the SAME!” Stiles thrashes against him with sharp fingernails until John lets go.

“I know, Stiles, but it’s what we have now!” John barks with a sudden burst of anger. He’s
exhausted and just wants the day to be over. “We need to accept that now, this is how things are going to be now!”

“Well I don’t want it! I want mom to come—“

“Well she’s not coming back!” John yells viciously. “She’s in a casket back at the church by the reception we’re supposed to be at! So come with me, we need—“

“No! I’m not going back! I want to stay here forever and never see anyone again! Not Scott, not Terry, not Ms. McCall, and not YOU! I wish YOU had died instead of her!” Stiles bellows, tiny hands clenched in fists and angry snot running down his chin.

It snaps something in John, and with the sudden need to smash something he grabs large rock from the ground, trumps to the edge of the pond, rears his arm back, and chucks it over the pond with all his might.

“Ma’am makes me sound like my mother, and she’s a cranky old Polish woman with a grudge against the arts, so call me Claudia.”

"Get up, you Snorlax, it’s time to turn twenty-six!"

“Princess Claudia Gertruda Górski Great Governess Lady of Olsztyn. And I have miniature ponies.”

“It’s only for six months, Clauds.”

“No, I mean let’s get married right now! At City Hall! I don’t need a silly old rock on my finger, I have you!”

“And do you, John William Stilinski, take Claudia Gertruda Górski as your wife?”

“Goodnight, husband.”

“Goodnight, wife.”

“Będziemy się pieprzyć hard and fast and nasty right now if you don’t get out of our house! And we’re going to do it on top of the Polish flag we have kept under the television, right John?”

“Look, John, three little freckles right beneath his ear! That’s gotta be lucky.”

“Damn, you two sure made a cute kid. He got a name?”

“Goodbye, my love! See you when you get home. I’m making macaroni tonight!”

“Alright, kiddo, how ‘bout you hand me Mr. Ducky now so he can go back to the bathroom where he belongs.”

“Whadda ‘bout your daddy? Is he a puh’leese off’cer like you?”

“Goodnight, John! I love you.”

“Happy birthday, daddy! Mommy and I made you breakfast in bed!”

“Oh please, I’ve been trying to get Scott to be less of a wallflower since he learned how to walk. Besides, sounds like Stiles was just defending Scott’s honor.”
"How about I spruce this one up for you? Your very own, one-of-a-kind Stiles Batman costume!"

"Daaaaaaddy, stoooop! Put me downputmedown—!"

"John mój drogi, is my yellow sundress in the wash?"

"Love you too, daddy. Do we have rocky road ice cream left for dessert?"

"Mad rad!"

"Hey, is mom gonna be home soon? We’re supposed to do a paragraph on our special person in our lives and I wanna ask her interview questions."

"—so you found daddy’s razor?"

"Happy birthday, hun."

"But you will be. I can feel it, right from the first day I met you. Sheriff John Stilinski— and I’ll be with you when it happens."

"AAAAHHHHHHHHHGGGHH!" John screams as he throws the rock out one the lake, and pants with glum satisfaction at the big splash. He picks up another rock and chucks that one too, yelling as he does it. It unloads a small amount of the chaos in his head so he keeps screaming and throwing rocks—

"Come on. Pick up a rock,” he barks at Stiles. Stiles picks up a rock and throws it, screaming high-pitched and angry.

"AAAAaaaahhhHHHHHHH!"

"AAaaeeuuugghHHH!"

"EEEEEeeeeeeeeeaaahhhh!"

They must look crazy, a father and son wailing like wolves as they disturb the water with angry ripples. When all the birds have flown away from the trees nearby and their throats are sore, John retreats and sits heavily on the rocky shore, panting and newly empty. A moment later Stiles comes over and flops next to him. The silence of the pond washes over them.

"You remember that story I told you about when I was in the army, and how sometimes we need to do things we don’t want to do?"

"No.” Yes. John tells him that story once a month.

"Alright. Well I was a war sergeant in Somalia, as you know. I did it because Terry needed someone to do it for him, so I left for six months to go fight against the Kenyan terrorists. It was very loud, and hot, and sometimes my friends got hurt. My closest friend in my troop even died."

Stiles picks at his shoelaces.

"So I didn’t really want to be there,” John continues. “Because it was frustrating and I was scared out of my wits. But—"

“But you did it anyway because Terry was your friend and he needed you to stay and it would help you be Sheriff one day,” Stiles cuts in. “I know, I know."
“Right. So right now, even though we’re probably more comfortable here, at some point we do need to go back to the reception,” John admits. “Because sometimes we just need to do things that we don’t really want to do. Sometimes we need to think of other people that might need us, like Melissa, and Scott, and the other people waiting for us back at the church… Not to mention your mother, who we’re supposed to be honoring.”

“Yeah,” Stiles sniffles. His cheeks are still ruddy from his screaming, and a frustrated tear slips down over them. “But I still don’t wanna go back.”

“I know. Neither do I, but how do you think your mom would feel if we ditched her party to sit out by a cold lake by ourselves?”

“No… She’d be s-sad,” Stiles starts crying softly. John holds Stiles and rocks him back and forth like he used to do when his son was a newborn, even though Stiles is a bit big for it now. John waits until his wails quiet to tiny shuddering sobs, and then quieter sniffles.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘sad’… But she’d probably tell us to get off our butts and go eat cake with everyone else,” he sighs. Because she would.

“I don’t want to,” Stiles blurts. “There are all these people I don’t know and some of them stink, and they keep coming— coming up to me and telling me dumb things about mom!”

“Yeah, I agree with you there,” John grants. “But Scott is probably pretty bored without you. And if I’m not mistaken I think I saw Lydia Martin, too.”

“Lydia?”

“Mhm.”

“Mom never met her,” Stiles sniffs sadly.

John sighs, looking out over the lake. He fiddles with the silver heart necklace around his neck and raises his eyes to the sky, searching for a Claudia-shaped cloud. “I know. But like I said, we still have all her clothes, and her nail polishes, her macaroni recipe… And you’ll get to drive her jeep one day, in just a few more years. I know it’s not the same as having her here in person, but we’re gonna get through this together, okay? I’m sad too, so we need to help each other out. Stick together like a team.”

“Like Batman and Robin,” Stiles mumbles, because he’s Stiles.

“Right. And you can be Batman.”

“I’m always Batman.”

“Well in that case.” John pushes to his feet and extends a hand down to his son. “Are you ready to be there for citizens in need, Batman?”

Stiles blinks up at him. It’s one last piece of Claudia that John has left— the same amber eyes, dark hair, pointed nose and speckles of moles, and the same vivacious spirit inside. His son takes his hand —small smooth fingers inside a warm calloused palm— and lets him pull him to his feet. John gently ruffles his hair, tucks him in close, and takes a new breath as they start walking back to the church. Despite the blue shadow over the day and the days to come, he says the one thing that always slips easiest off his tongue.

“I love you, kiddo.”
“Love you too, daddy.”
Part 5

Chapter Summary

Fixing what is broken.


Laura shocks them all by falling in love with the preppiest goody-two-shoes in existence.

He and Talia placed bets as soon as she turned eight that she was immediately going to go for the most obscene Badboy she could find, for two reasons: to piss off Talia, and because she needs a boy who will be able to keep up with her, who won’t be intimidated by her crude jokes or swearing habits, and who won’t run for the door as soon as he finds out about her police record.

So there was quite an awkward silence after Laura came home from school one day gushing about how “the cutest fucking sweetheart in all of England and California” asked her out.

His name is Remington (not even kidding) and he’s an English (with the accent and everything apparently) transfer student who volunteers at the animal shelter on weekends, gets straight As, and wears polos, probably pastel ones. Last night he took her out for ice cream after school, won her a stuffed bear at the county winter carnival, and got her back home twenty minutes before curfew.

Laura named the bear ‘Mr. Remington’ which concerns Robert deeply, and not just because Laura usually hates stuffed animals with a passion.

“And he has these crystal blue eyes that sparkle like diamonds,” Laura sighs, practically melting into her lasagna as he blinks starry-eyed at the ceiling. “And his accent is like… Dreamy. So, so dreamy. It’s almost as dreamy as his hair, which is like, beyond amazing. It’s like spun gold. Spun sunshine!”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it. He’s pretty as a unicorn, now can we move on please?” Derek grumbles into his glass of milk. Laura simply giggles, which illustrates how serious her condition is. Robert is glad Cora is away on a week-long Girl Scout camping trip because she’d probably be terrified at her sister’s sappy condition.

“Don’t worry little brother, one day you’ll find someone as wonderful as Remy.” she croons and plants a kiss on her brother’s forehead, to which Derek immediately gags and flails.

“Gross! Moooom, make her stop!” Derek pleads to Talia. “She’s been like this for days. How long does it last?”

“Love lasts a long time, champ,” Robert informs his son. “Some say forever.”

“Remy and I are going to be together forever,” Laura declares, eyes sparkling. “Should I invite him to live here or should I go live with him in England once we’re married? Who am I kidding, England! So totally England. We can feed each other crumpets and say things like, ‘cheerio, dahl-ling, you look bloody fit!’”

Derek thunks his head on the table. “Make it stop. Or at least knock me out until they break up.”
“Silly Der-bear, you’re just jealous because you’ve never had a girlfriend,” Laura comments cheerily.

Derek stiffens. “So?” He shoots defensively.

“So, maybe you’d loosen up a bit if you just met the right girl! What about Linsday Waters?” Laura suggests eagerly. “She’s in your grade, right? And she’s cute!”

Derek’s ears pinken as he pokes intensely at his lasagna. He bites his lip. “I… Guess.”

“Or Penelope Carstein in my grade? She’s hot and available. But she likes grand gestures, so be sure to ask her out in a big way. Flowers, chocolate. Hell, just buy her a cake.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to buy her a cake,” Derek mumbles.

“Of course you do! Everyone does,” Laura dismisses with a laugh. “She’s like the Megan Fox of our school! If you don’t want in her pants you’re either gay or crazy.”

An unexpected silence washes over the table, accompanied by the sharp scent of embarrassment. Derek grows stone-still in his seat, eyes downcast and ears flaming red as he picks at his dinner. Robert exchanges a glance with Talia, who clears her throat and swoops in quickly.

“Laura, have you asked Remy to go to the winter formal?”

“Oh, I totally forgot to ask him!” Laura claps her hands. “I’ll call him now! Can I be excused please?”

Talia raises a concerned eyebrow at the usage of manners, but nods. “Yes, you—“ Laura squee and jumps from her chair, dark hair billowing behind her as she furiously beeps in numbers on her phone. “—may,” Talia finishes as she stares after her daughter. “You’d think this boy is the grandson of the Queen.”

“Well, supposedly he has crystal eyes that sparkle like diamonds, so there’s always a shot,” Robert muses as he shovels lasagna in his mouth. He groans at the taste. “Awesome lasagna, hun. Is that tarragon in there?”

“Oregano. Thank you, dear.”

For the rest of dinner Derek doesn’t contribute much to conversation, not even to complain about Laura’s crooning over Remington when she comes back to relay their baby-talk phone conversation. Robert watches him, curious as to what catalyst rendered his son so uneasy, and if it’s the catalyst he suspects. After dinner Laura and Derek move to clean the dishes but Talia stops them and says she’ll cover it tonight. The kids are surprised but don’t question it, and head upstairs after throwing “thank you’s” over their shoulders. Robert brings his plate to the sink and joins his wife.

“So what was that about?” He mentions quietly.

“Our daughter can be a bit oblivious to people other than herself,” Talia answers, and hands him the sponge.

Robert hums. “She really likes this ‘Remington’ guy, huh?”

“He’s her first real boyfriend,” Talia points out. “Those are always the most magical.”

"Hey, Hun?"
"Yes, dear."

"Has Derek ever... Talked about girls with you?"

She rinses her dish patiently. "No, he hasn't." She says lightly, after mulling it over. "Why do you ask?"

"Do you think there's a chance he’s… You know… Gay?"

Talia hums. "Mm, I don't think 'gay' is the right word for it, dear."

Robert looks to her imploringly. "What do you mean?"

"Do you ever notice how he looks at another corner of the room when a sexual scene comes on TV?"

“I… I didn’t notice,” He admits, frowning. Sometimes family movie night entails a film that includes a makeout scene or some nudity, but nothing raunchy. Just Kate Winslet’s tits in Titanic or a few make outs in whatever James Bond film they happen to be watching.

Talia, ever the patient one with him, elaborates. "When people kiss on screen he usually looks away, but his forehead creases like he can't figure out what he's feeling."

Robert knew exactly what he was "feeling" when he saw a steamy make out scene as a teenager. “Well…” He frowns. "Do you think he'd ever tell us?"

"I don't think so, not until he's ready."

"When is 'ready'?"

"Why are so eager to know, Robert?"

He sighs. He licks his lips and watches his thumb swipe back and forth over the counter. "Because I want to tell him that I'll love him no matter what."

A soft smile appears on Talia’s lips. “Of course you will."

“So if he’s not gay,” he ventures. “Then what is he?"

“I don’t know. And we won’t know until he decides to tell us, or until the day he brings home a girl or a boy, or nobody at all. And we will support him no matter which it is.”

Robert rocks in his chair, brushing the few crumbs off on his sweater, looks out the window and watches the rain roll down the pane.

“We’ve got a hell of a kid, T. I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

“I know."

.o0O0o.

The following few days are filled with squealing monologues about winter formal, winter formal, and winter formal.
Laura is her Freshman class representative so she’s on the committee for the dance, and she takes her planning as seriously as deactivating a bomb. She takes over the dining room table with stacks of poster materials and litters the antique rug with glitter, promises to mop the floor to bribe Talia into making three different kinds of cupcakes so she can sample which one is tastiest, and drags Robert to Bloomingdale’s for six hours so she can find the perfect dress, shoes, and makeup. Altogether it’s just under a couple thousand so he doesn’t mention the cost to Talia, but Laura jabbers excitedly all the way home while clutching the shopping bags tight to her chest.

Robert also donates a few grand to help the school get a chocolate fountain and a photo booth, per his daughter’s puppy-eyed request. In the evenings he and Talia invest in earplugs because Laura stays up until two in the morning giggling on the phone with Remington, Cora remains away from the chaos at her Girl Scout camping trip, and Mr. Remington (the bear) continues to freak them all out. Not even family movie night is immune to girlish lovesick discussions, where Laura babbles between all of them on the couch as they hit play for Mean Girls.

“I’m so excited for Saturday,” Laura chimes for the millionth time. She throws a piece of popcorn into the air and spears it on a claw. “Jenny and I finalized the decorating plans and approved the band’s outfits— because they need to match the theme, you know? Snowflakes are gonna be hanging fucking everywhere. The gym is going to be fucking sick.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing,” Talia frowns. She’s in her purple silk robe, which is Robert’s favorite.

‘Sick’ is the youngin’s slang for ‘awesome’ or ‘cool,’” he informs her.

“Yeah, and the winter formal is going to be so sick that I’ll go down in history as the best Junior council representative ever! Plus Remy and I are going to have so much fun. He’s gonna be so blown away by my dress, I can’t wait! I was gonna ask you guys about the pictures though; the biggest package is a 9”x12” but do you think we could special order two poster-sizes? One for us and one for Remy so we can hang them in our family rooms!”

He and Talia exchange a look. They wait for a laugh or a ‘just kidding’ but their daughter just hums happily into her popcorn. “Have you uh… Talked to Remington about this idea?” He ventures carefully.

“Nah. I know he’s gonna love it, we love everything about each other.”

“I hate dances,” Derek scowls into his popcorn with puffy cheeks. “They’re stupid and smelly. All it is is a bunch of sweaty people flirting and dancing to dumb music.”

“Talia, how blessed are we to have a such a optimistic child?” Robert muses. “Look at this one, always seeing the glass half-full.”

“Seriously, I can’t think of anything more awkward and annoying,” Derek wrinkles his nose. “You’ll find me in my room this Saturday night.”

“Which is why you’re mom’s ‘boy abeque, ’” Laura rolls her eyes. Abeque is Navajo for ‘stays at home,’ Talia’s pet name for Derek. Cora is adahy (stays in the woods) and Laura is ahote (reckless one).

“Kids, can we ever make it ten minutes into movie night without talking through the beginning of the film?” Talia frown at the screen. “Robert, rewind please.”

“Yes, dear.”
“Dad, you’re going too far, those are the previews!”

“Stop, dad!”

“Whoaaa, you kids are really sensitive about stopping the movie right at the perfect spot!” Robert dips his head into his bowl and laps at his popcorn.

“Robert, you look like a dog.”

“Psshh, wh’tever. M’ah hands’re full and I n’ed t’get m’ah p’pcorn s’mehow.”

“Dad, gross! You’re spraying kernels all over me!”

“Hey! Watch it, you bumped my bowl of popcorn!”

“Oh, boo hoo. Good thing you already ate half of it, little piggy.”

“Shut up! Who’s the one who ate an entire tray of mom’s brownies last year? Oh right, you did.”

“It was my birthday, ass! Everyone knows you’re allowed to eat as many brownies as you want on your birthday!”

“Mmm, wonder if Remington knows. Should I call him?”

“Ugh! You’re such a dick! If you tell him I’m gonna pin you to the ceiling fan by your big dumb ears!”

Talia sighs as the squabbling escalates into popcorn-throwing and wrestling on the couch. Robert pats her arm. “It’s okay hun, we can invest in muzzles for the next movie night. I think that’s the only way to get them to be quiet.”

“The sooner Cora comes home the sooner I’ll have my usual balance restored,” Talia sinks further into the couch.

“I miss that little squirt, too. It’s kinda boring around here without her.”

The next few days proceed as usual; the kids squabble and Laura continues crooning over Remington. Robert goes to work, Talia makes a fantastic dish of enchiladas, Laura screams at him when he trips over Mr. Remington in the living room, Talia helps Derek study for his biology exam, Laura assembles hundreds of glittery snowflakes on the kitchen table and makes them all sneeze sparkles out of every orifice, and they all poke their heads sadly into Cora’s empty room when nobody is looking.

The Thursday before the dance Derek comes home early because he has a free period, miraculously the same day Robert doesn’t need to go into the lab. He ambushes his son on the couch and clicks on the Warriors game, and Derek’s face lights up with the brightest smile he’s seen in years.

The cheering racket they make draws Talia from downstairs, but instead of telling him to turn the volume down she simply smiles and sits down to fold the clothes. He keeps stealing side glances at his son because they haven’t had this in a while; Derek is giving him attention. They’re having good ol’ father-son time and the Warriors are leading by twenty-one, and just when he thinks the day couldn’t get any better—
Laura walks in the door, chin wobbling and eyes glistening. They all freeze. She stands in front of the living room staring at her shoes, shoulders slumped in a way that’s extremely unusual for her. His daughter is bright and loud and confident, sometimes too much for her own good—she enters rooms with a fast stride and a hollered, “your favorite child is here!” punches things that annoy her and cuts in front of people at In N’ Out because she claims she’s the hungriest. But now she’s wilted, looks ready to fall over at the smallest breeze, and Robert wants to kill whatever did this to her.

“Laura ahôte, what happened?” Talia is up in a flash, Robert following at her heels.

“Lo hun, are you okay?” He asks. Derek stares from the couch, eyes wide and newly concerned. He mutes the TV.

“Remy…” Laura’s breath hitches. She trembles as she stares at her shoes. “R-Remy dumped me.”

And she collapses sobbing into her hands in a ball on the floor. Robert gapes at Talia and in a flash all of them are by Laura’s side, even Derek, who’s cautiously inching forward from the couch. Laura ignores them all as she wails into the million bracelets around her wrists, hair a dark shiny curtain hiding her face.

Laura never cries.

“Oh, Laura, ma’iitsoh ahote,” Talia whispers softly, stroking a warm hand over her back. Robert watches dumbly, struck by how it’s probably the most intimate moment his wife and daughter have shared since Laura was seven.

“Y-yesterday Danielle said she saw him making out with P-Penelope Carsten at a p-party,” Laura sobs. “And I didn’t b-believe her, ‘cuz like, who would r-right? B-but when I asked him about it, he said that h-he did! He ch-cheated on me and then said that I was too—too int-t-tense!”

Laura wails, and like everything else about her, it’s loud. It bounces off the spacious walls of the mansion and makes them cringe with ringing ears. He and Talia pet her back like Olympic champions, murmuring promises of “you can stay home from school tomorrow” and “oh, sweetheart,” and Robert’s added “you can eat all the ice cream you want with me” and “he’s a fucking dickhead.”

“I think—I t’think I just want to be alone right now,” Laura sniffs, and she brushes past them to jog up the stairs, dart into her room, and slam the door behind her. Derek sighs his classic “what a drama queen” eye roll and ascends the stairs to his own room.

Robert takes the opportunity to whirl to Talia with a snarl, eyes red and nostrils flaring. She cups his cheeks and tells him to calm down. “I’m gonna fucking pound that kid’s balls to dust, Talia,” he swears. “Tiny, minuscule little grains of dust. How could he— Laura,” he hisses brokenly.

“I know,” Talia sympathizes placidly. “But it’s not your fight, Robert. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later.”

“Pssh! You make it sound like I plan to murder the kid.”

His wife raises a knowing eyebrow.

“Which I would never do! In public, anyway.”

“Right now, let’s try to focus on helping Laura get through this,” she lays a hand on his arm. “She
probably still likes him very much. Not to mention class the winter formal will be especially hard for her come Saturday.”

His heart drops like a stone. “Oh, damn… The dance! God, she put so much work into and now she doesn’t— she’s not going with Remington. Well what if I take her somewhere Saturday instead? I can take her to Great America and we can ride roller coasters all day!”

“You can offer to take her, but don’t be disappointed if she’s not in the mood.”

He whines a little and looks upstairs in the direction of his daughter’s bedroom. “I want to make it better. How do I make this better?”

“Give her time. Could you take these upstairs to the blue bathroom?” His wife hands him a stack of folded towels.

They have eight bathrooms in the mansion— The ‘central’ bathroom (in the hallway by the kitchen), the pink bathroom (Cora designed it because it’s connected to her bedroom), the library bathroom (the bathroom with the best reading material), Derek’s bathroom (because teenage boys need their own, apparently), Laura’s bathroom (because teenage girls need their own, apparently), The Super Bathroom (with the most jacuzzi jets and the biggest sauna room because he and Talia brought three children into the world and deserve sexy fun times in there), the third floor bathroom (which no one uses because who has time to climb three flights of stairs when they need to take a dump?), and the blue bathroom (which is also on the third floor but they ran out of names so they call it the blue bathroom because it has blue tile).

“Yes, dear.” He pouts and balances the stack atop his arms as he begins the journey to Mordor.

But on the second floor he hears voices coming from Laura’s room. Against his better judgement he takes a detour and creeps forward— is she on the phone with Remington? That wouldn’t explain why her door is suddenly ajar.

“And I j-just… I don’t understand, I t-thought he liked me, y-you know?”

“He shouldn’t have led you on like that.”

“I’m s-so stupid.”

“No you’re not.”

“But you… Really?”

“A pain in the ass, yes. But you’re not stupid.”

Robert stops breathing as he quietly peeks around the doorframe.

Derek’s arms are wrapped around Laura, who’s cuddled in a ball against her brother’s side. Tear tracks glisten with black mascara on her cheeks and her pointed nose is red from crying. Derek doesn’t seem to mind that his olive green shirt is soaked, but he does, however, frown at a loose strand of waterfall-length hair and picks it off his shoulder with a wrinkled nose. Laura makes a little sniffle that sounds suspiciously like a laugh and buries her face deeper into his chest. Robert bites back a smile and slowly retreats back down the hall.

“Thanks, Derek.”

“Yeah, whatever. Why is your room so obnoxious?”
“It’s purple... I like purple.”

“Oh. Well... It’s nice I guess.”

When Robert makes it back down to the living room from the blue bathroom Talia squints at him. “And what are you smiling about?”

He points upstairs. “If you’ve got time you should check out what’s happening in Laura’s room.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll see.”

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The next day Laura stays home from school. Derek hovers in the doorway before leaving in the morning; Robert has a suspicion he wants to call in sick so he can stay home too, but werewolves can’t get the flu so he’s out of luck. Truth be told Robert totally wishes he could contract measles or something so he can stay home with Laura, but Talia ushers them both out the door with wise reminders of, “you’ll be late for school, boy abeque. And you’ll be late for work.” He and his son sigh broodily as they walk to the garage to pick out a car.

But it’s all worth it when Robert comes home that afternoon and walks in the house to find Laura painting Talia’s nails.

He drops his briefcase in surprise, which clatters loudly against the floor. The two most important women in his life look up unimpressed.

“You should be more careful, dad,” Laura voices from —a sheet, holy crap, Talia put a sheet down so they could paint their nails— on the living room floor. Her hair is pulled up in a messy bun, she’s in her sweats and Bulbasaur t-shirt, and her face (for the first time since 8th grade) doesn’t have a speck of makeup on it.

“She’s right, dear, you’ll scratch the hardwood,” Talia adds. And his wife —holy crap, his wife is in pajamas past noon— is sitting elegantly beside Laura with sparkly blue toenails. Talia hasn’t painted her nails once in the nineteen years Robert’s known her.

He snaps his jaw shut and scrambles to pick his briefcase up. “Ah— you’re right, sorry, I’ll— I’ll be more careful, I— what is it you girls are up to?” He squeaks.

“What does it look like,” Laura snorts. “We’re painting each other’s nails.”

Robert tip-toes to the stairs, carefully avoiding stepping on any of the approximate two-hundred nail polish jars strewn across the sheet. He feels like Bullseye in the cheeto scene from the second Toy Story film Cora loves so much. “Oh, well that’s— great. Really great, cool. I thought—“ He pauses and sniffs the air. “Do I smell cookies?”

“Yeah, we baked a few batches today. Chocolate chip, white chocolate macadamia, and peanut butter Nutella,” Laura says.

He stares at Talia. “You guys baked cookies… Together?”

“Duh, that’s what I just said.”
Laura doesn’t look up from Talia’s toes, which she’s painting a sparkly dark blue. Talia doesn’t look up from watching her, leaving Robert to gape unabashedly at them. They both seem to be in one piece—no clumps of hair missing or blood on the floor. In fact they actually look… Content? Which freaks him out a little because the two of them are always very far from content when they are in the same room, let alone glitter-izing each others toes and baking dessert. But hey, he’s not complaining.

“Okay… Well I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“M’kay, bye dad.”

“Don’t forget to hang up your towels, dear.”

Robert dashes up the stairs and tries not to double-take over his shoulder.

It gets weirder in the evening. Talia skips cooking dinner altogether in favor of sitting on the couch with Laura under a blanket and eating Ben&Jerry’s straight from the carton. Robert nearly trips on the rug and spills his tea because there are so many things wrong with that picture: dessert before dinner, ice cream without getting a bowl, food on the couch, feet on the coffee table—

“I thought we were out of Ben&Jerry’s?” He blurts.

“We went out and bought some this morning,” Talia voices as she dips a spoon into Chunky Monkey like she hasn’t scolded him for doing the same thing a thousand times.

Derek pads downstairs in his socks. “Moooom, have you seen my—“ but he freezes wide-eyed when he sees them on the couch. “What?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Robert murmurs to him.

“What?” Laura frowns at them.

“I thought we were out of Ben&Jerry’s?” Derek sputters meekly.

“They went and bought some this morning,” Robert informs him.

“Mom and Laura went shopping together? Without chaperones?”

“Look, are you two gonna stand there and gawk or are you gonna let us watch our show in peace?” Laura says around a mouthful of Triple Brownie Fudge.

Then Robert gapes at the TV screen. “Are you two watching… Keeping Up with the Kardashians?”

“Boys, out now please,” Talia orders.

Derek grabs Robert’s wrist and quickly drags him into the library. Once they shut the mahogany doors his son whirls on him, clutching onto his arm in fear. “What’s wrong with them? Are they Robots? Did a Lamia get to them and brainwash them into being completely crazy?”

“I don’t think so, champ—“

“Mom was eating ice cream on the couch!” Derek whisper-yells in horror. “Before dinner!”

“I know,” Robert breathes. That alone gives him goosebumps, but—“And she was willingly watching reality television.”
“Mom hates reality television! She says it’s an arid representation of the flaws in our society!”

Suddenly the Robot/Lamia theory doesn’t seem so crazy. Robert looks to the door. “I know, but Laura loves it. I think… I think maybe they’re finally… Bonding,” he breathes.

“No way,” Derek whispers. “I totally thought they were going to claw each other to death before that happened.”

“I had my money on it happening when Laura eventually gets pregnant,” Robert mutters.

“Ew, dad!”

Together he and Derek quietly open the door and peek around the corner. Laura and Talia are still on the couch licking their spoons.

“Mom, you should do something with your hair. Why don’t you ever curl it or something?”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

“Nothing, it’s really pretty actually. I dunno, I just think it’d be fun if you like, put in some barrettes maybe. Or some beachy waves.”

“I put it in a braid at night time.”

“Yeah, that’s cool I guess. But I meant styling.”

“Braids are plenty stylish. Come here.”

“What?”

“Do you know how to do a tl’iish braid?”

“A snake braid? No, what’s that?”

“Scoot closer.” Laura complies and Talia rolls up her sleeves, gathering Laura’s silky hair into sections. She begins plaiting at the top. “It’s a type of plait given it’s name because the weave resembles snake scales. My azhé’é used to do it for me before I went to school.”

“Wow, grandpa knew how to do girl’s hair? Sweet.”

“This is so weird,” Derek mutters.


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The next morning Robert makes pancakes for breakfast.

It’s the one thing he actually knows how to make, and only because all he has to do is add a cup of milk to two cups of pancake mix. The second the batter starts sizzling on the grill Derek stumbles down the stairs rubbing his sleepy eyes and takes a patient seat at the counter.

“Mornin’ son,” Robert greets as he flips a flapjack.

“Hey,” Derek says sleepily. The kid rarely rises before ten, except for when he’s lured downstairs by
the smell of food. “What’s the occasion?” Because Robert only makes pancakes for special events (birthdays, Christmas morning, when Laura’s field hockey team wins a championship, and that time Derek made honor roll) or when Talia doesn’t feel like making breakfast.

“The winter formal is tonight. It’s gonna be a hard day for Laura so I thought I’d start the morning on a good note.”

“Mom already made breakfast,” Derek yawns. “She left to pick up Cora like half an hour ago and made omelettes. But I’m down for pancakes.”

“I bet you are. Can’t start the day without second breakfast, and I make the best,” as he flips

“I smell pancakes—“ the door to Laura’s room bursts open upstairs, followed by the soft thunkthunkthunk of her socks descending the stairs. She hops on the barstool next to Derek wearing the same pajamas she was in yesterday, hair a tangled rat’s nest piled atop her head. For the second day in a row she’s without eyeliner or lipstick—she still looks nice, Robert thinks.

“You’ve got your mother’s nose,” he tells her. “When we first started dating she used to be able to smell the soup of the day at Tozatoni’s all the way from her house on 4th.”

“That’s crazy,” Derek mumbles as he rests his head on his arms, half-asleep still. “Really cool, but… Insane.”

“You just get up, little rebel?”

“Yeah,” Laura yawns. “Can I have chocolate chips in my pancakes?”

“How about chocolate chips and mini marshmallows? Because that’s what I added.”

“S’mancakes, awesome!”

“We should make actual s’mores someday,” Derek mutters. “Everyone ate them at Outdoor Ed and they won’t shut up about how awesome they are.”

“Maybe next time you should get better control of your shift so you don’t have to miss the trip,” Laura snarks.

“You guys want milk or OJ?”

“Milk.”

“Milk.”

“Good choice. I’m raising you right.”

Robert is secretly fascinated by the juxtaposition of how his kids eat pancakes. They start the same—with a mountain of seven pancakes and a lineup of toppings in front of them. But while Laura grabs three kinds of syrup and drowns her breakfast in the sweet stuff, dumping strawberries and a high pile of whipped cream, Derek squeezes a small pool of maple on the edge of his plate so none of his flapjacks get soggy. He then cuts them in tiny squares and dips them while his sister tears off huge chunks of three at a time and oozes syrup down her chin.

He’s piling a second round of steaming pancakes onto their plates when the front door opens, followed by tiny footsteps and a high-pitched squeal.

“Daddyyyyy!”
“Heyyyy, my little sunflower girl!”

Cora sprints across the room and leaps into his arms. He catches her and they’re a giggling mess as he spins her around and around in a circle. Then he attacks her with a dozen face kisses that leave her squealing for mercy. It’s adorable—even Derek can’t help but smile as he rolls his eyes.

“Second breakfast?” Talia comments as she plucks a piece of pancake from Robert’s plate.

“You bet. Also, we’re out of pancake mix now.”

“Daddy! I made you a present on our camping trip!” Cora thrusts tiny fingers into her backpack, placing Pig’s arm gently between her teeth. The animal is slightly dirtier now, but apparently no less loved. She’s still in her Brownie vest and she has four new badges pinned to it.

“Oh, boy. Hear that guys? I got a present!”

“We all got presents,” Talia points out, crushing his pride.

“Close your eyes,” Cora orders in her six-year-old lisp. Robert does, and she places something small and smooth in his palm.

“Okay, open!”

It’s a crude piece of clay shaped like a wolf. At least he thinks it’s a wolf—first graders aren’t known for their legible art skills.

“Wow, this is awesome!” Robert exclaims, and Cora beams.

“It’s you!” She exclaims. “When you’re a wolf!”

“And a handsome one at that,” he whistles as he swivels it in the light. “Thank you, Cora. I think I’ll put it on my desk at work.”

“Yay! Can I have pancakes?”

Robert plucks a flapjack off Derek’s plate and hands it to her, ignoring his son’s cry of protest. “Maybe if you ask mommy nicely she’ll let you eat it in your room while you tell me all about your camping trip.”

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Later that day Robert gets home from work tired and sore at 7:00pm. He walks in the door and makes a beeline up the stairs to Laura’s room.

“Oh, hey, my two favorite girls in one room,” he greets as he peeks around the doorframe. Talia and Laura are laying side by side on Laura’s giant purple bed, bare feet crossed and hands clasped over their stomachs.

Laura’s room is like a slap in the face from a glittery purple rock star zebra. It’s the only thing Robert can think of to describe the colorful jumble of absolute chaos that his daughter lives in—a fuzzy magenta animal-print carpet, violet orchid waterbed, posters of various punk bands including Led Zeppelin, Kiss, and The Killers, half-eaten candy bracelets, a vanity piled with pretty bottles of perfume and pink lipsticks, star lights and paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, a shelf with an impressive CD collection, and a shelf with an impressive trophy collection above that, her stereo and
computer surrounded by chip bags and Butterfinger wrappers, and mountains of rumpled clothes strewn on every surface.

“What about Cora,” Laura mumbles from her pillow. Her eyes are dewy and her lashes are sticky with tears. But Robert can fix that.

“Cora is my favorite girl under the age of fifteen.” He swaggers over and plops down heavily on the bed, which undulates beneath him. “Scoot your butt over, I want to lie down on your waterbed.”

“Daaaaad, there’s no room—”

“It’s a King! There’s totally room!” He shoves his daughter over and flops down down, stretching out his arms. “Aaahhh, nice and comfy. Really brings me back to the eighties, waterbeds were all the rage back then, you know. Wonder what would happen if I stuck a tack in this?”

“Dad! You’re horrible.”

“Not as horrible as that Justin Timberlake poster. His eyes really follow you everywhere, huh?”

“Shut up, he’s dreamy!”

“Steamy? He must own a sauna.”

“Dreamy.”

“Panini?”

“Dad, dreamy!”

“Creamy? So is yogurt, but I wouldn’t pin that up on my wall.”

Laura slaps his arm but he gets a small smile from her. He chuckles and steals Talia’s pillow, which she hands over with an eye-roll.

“So ladies, what’s this waterbed soiree I wasn’t invited to? A long day at work only to discover there’s a secret meeting in my daughter’s room? Tell me the 411.”

Laura huffs a sigh and rolls over, wiping her nose. “My dress is beautiful.”

“I know it is. In fact, look it’s right there on your weird little mannequin thing.”

Laura has a little fabric bust that she likes to dress in her most expensive outfits to show off to her friends when they come over. The dress is currently on it, a beacon of glittery sequins in the center of her room.

“I don’t know what to do,” Laura bites her lip as she stares wistfully at it. “I was supposed to wear it tomorrow, and I had my makeup all ready and my shoes, and I spent like an eternity organizing all the plans for the dance committee but now… I don’t have a date.”

“What about Alex and Kim and Monica? You could go with them in a little girl pack,” Robert suggests. “Like the Powerpuff Girls!”

“They already have dates.”

“You could go by yourself,” Talia suggests.
“Oh my god, no!” He and Laura bark at the same time. “Honey, she can’t go stag, that’s so lame!”

“It’s okay mom,” Laura snuffles sadly into Robert’s chest. “I just won’t go. Everyone already has dates, even Lucas Mucas from Spanish class— and he’s totally gross, he sneezes snot-rockets over everything. Plus Remington will be there with that whore Penelope Carstien and everybody will notice that the girl he dumped showed up without a date. It’ll be humiliating. So… I’ll just stay home.”

“Fine, then I’ll go with you.”

They gape at the doorway as Derek rounds the corner in his sweats and oversized Bill Nye t-shirt, eyebrows flat in their signature deadpan and toothbrush hanging out of his mouth.

“What?” Laura croaks meekly.

“I said I’ll go with you,” Derek frowns. “I mean you don’t… You don’t have to, but I’ll do it. I’ll go to the dance with you.”

He says every word like he’s constipated and by the time he finishes he’s scowling murderously, like he’s daring them all to laugh.

“But you hate dances,” Laura props herself up on an elbow, lips slowly parting in a smile. “You said they’re stupid and smelly and all it is is sweaty people dancing awkwardly.”

“That’s all true,” Derek grumbles. “So do you want me to come or not?”

“Yes, yes YES!” Laura squeals and teleports to Derek’s side in a flash of purple pajamas. Incredibly, he manages to scowl deeper as she throws her arms around him and jumps up and down, tangled tresses bouncing all over both of them.

“Gross! When was the last time you showered!!”

“Three days ago,” Laura grins proudly and sticks her armpit into his face for good measure. Derek makes gagging noises and flees the room, and Robert slyly holds out a hand to high-five with Talia.

The pictures are hilarious.

Laura is nearly a foot taller than Derek so she has to crouch when she pins on his boutonniere. Derek, who hates formal attire with a passion, is stuffed into a black Bill Blass suit with a purple tie and morning glory to match her dress. He makes a dashing thirteen-year-old despite how he looks like he wants to tear his outfit to shreds. The more Robert and Talia laugh the deeper his scowl gets, so every shot is Laura’s megawatt grin and pliant limbs wrapped around Derek’s stony murder-glare. Robert is going to blow them up poster-size and save them for future humiliation.

His daughter looks absolutely stunning. Her long tresses are curled into ringlets that flutter down to her waist, complimenting the silvery sparkle of her sapphire blue gown. Dark purple lipstick smiles to reveal dazzling white teeth, and her signature Doc Martens clomp across the hardwood to Talia’s disapproval. Robert takes her hands and twirls her around. “Damn, look at my little rebel, all grown up!”

“Don’t be so cliché, dad.”
“You’re right, you’re right. But damn, Lo, you look awesome! You have that pepper spray in your purse still, right?”

“Yep.”

“Good. And if a boy still tries to slobber all over you?”

“Show him my wolf face until he pisses himself and runs away screaming.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Are we going or not,” Derek grumbles as he tugs his collar. “The sooner I can get out of this thing the better.”

Laura skips over and presses a kiss to his cheek, leaving a smudge of purple lipstick there. “Cheer up. You need to look like I am the shimmering rainbow in your cloudy sky of life! Now start smiling at me so everyone at the dance sees what I catch I am. A way better catch than Penelope crap-stien.”

Derek pouts but Talia comes up behind him and tickles his side, making an involuntary giggle slip out as he squirms away.

“There ya go! Thanks, momma.”

“Bye kids, have fun!” Robert shouts as Laura drags Derek down the porch steps to the awaiting limo.

“Call us if you end up going to an after-party,” Talia adds. “The limo is rented until two am.”

“Okay thanks! You guys are b мммммбб! Come on Derek, hold the door open for me, I’m a lady tonight.”

“Eat ass.”

“I thought you were going to be nice to me?”

“Fine. Eat ass please.”

“That’s the spirit. Now onwards, ho, driver man! To the winter formal!”

Robert leans against the porch beam and watches until the car’s taillights are out of sight. It’s then when he notices that Talia has left him to go inside, so he checks the family room, kitchen, Cora’s bedroom (Cora is watching Babe in a mountain of stuffed animals), and three out of eight bathrooms before he finds her sitting quietly on their bed.

“Knock knock,” he greets as he enters their bedroom. “Now you say, ‘who’s there?’”

“Who’s there,” Talia grants him.

“Hale.”

“Hale who.”

“All Hale queen T, the love of my life, the very best wife!” He singsongs as he slips a hand around her waist, sitting beside her. But her eyes stay melancholy and her smile is nothing more than a twitch. He brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “Hey hun, you okay? You’re not really one to sit by yourself and stare at walls.”
“I’m fine, Robert.”

“Fine on the outside, sure. But you married me, and that means that I’m the guy who can see the Talia within,” he offers a small smile. Talia meets his eyes, unhumored at first, but then it melts away into something unusually defenseless. She preoccupies her hands with braiding her hair, and she sighs.

“I’m… Afraid it won’t be the same.”

Robert directs his gaze to the painting over the vanity to make it easier for her.

“The past couple days have been so… Nice.” Talia admits wistfully. “No yelling, no arguments… For once Laura actually came to me instead of you.”

“I noticed,” Robert nods. “You guys did all your—” he makes a vague hand gesture. “—girl stuff. Together.”

“She needed it.”

“You broke the rules for her,” Robert ventures. “You let her paint your nails, and you had ice cream instead of dinner… You even ate it on the couch. While watching the Kardashians.”

“Yes,” Talia sighs.

“You hate reality television.”

“It’s an arid representation of the flaws in our society,” Talia mutters.

“Yet you watched an six-episode marathon with her.”

“She wanted to watch it.”

“I know,” he grins and squeezes her shoulder. “I’m… That’s really awesome of you, T.”

But she turns to him, face startlingly vulnerable. Her dark eyes are flooded with guilt and a desperate sadness he hasn’t seen in the nineteen years he’s known her, not even for funerals and abused animal telethons.

“Is that terrible of me? To be grateful for her heartbreak because it made us closer?” She whispers, searching his face.

“Not at all,” Robert pecks her on the cheek.

“But now she’s going to the dance. And she looked so happy,” Talia quietly tells the carpet. “In a week she’ll forget all about Remington and be back to her normal self and… And what if…”

Robert takes her hands. “Hey. Laura loves you. She may not show it all the time but she does, T. Yeah, you guys will probably go back to bickering soon, but it’s what you guys do. Bickering is kind of her language, just look at her and Derek. But after this, I’d bet that she won’t be afraid to ask you for a pedicure anymore.”

Talia surprises him by wrapping her arms around him in a hug— but her arms are tucked under his, when usually he’s the one with his arms on the inside. He drags a hand up and down her back and does his best to be her big protective cocoon. He knows tomorrow morning she’ll be back to her feisty, no-nonsense, reserved self, but for now he holds her close and glows with how proud he is of her for admitting a small weakness.
“I love you, hun. So much.”

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“Hey,” Laura greets the next morning as she prances downstairs. Her makeup is pillow-smeared and her eyes are bright with residual energy from the dance, Derek is at the kitchen table shoveling Honey Nut Cheerios into his mouth, Cora is watching *Babe* again with Pig on the couch, Talia is out on a Kin of Kéyah beach cleanup, and Robert is polishing his shoes on the counter (which is protected with layers of towels).

“Sup,” he greets, because he’s cool like that. Derek scowls into his cereal.

“Remington realized he left his cardigan here and is stopping by this morning to pick it up.”

Robert whirls around, ripping his terrycloth clean in half. “What? No he doesn’t, you can keep that cardigan forever if you want, I suggest blowing it up along with—“

“Chill dad,” Laura raises a hand. “It’s cool. He talked to me last night because he wants it back. I don’t really care. He was super slobbery with Penelope so I’m totally over him. If he wants to cheat around with every pretty girl that comes his way, be my guest. My type is more of a James Dean guy, anyway. With a motorcycle or something, that would be cool. Or like a tattoo of a dead pony.”

“Son?” He turns to Derek, who nods from his cereal.

“She’s back.”

“By the way, is there anyway to get grandpa Nat’aanii’s old *bįįh* rifles out of the glass case in the library?” Laura asks.

“Uh, don’t think so. They’re kinda just there for decoration. If anyone attacks us in this house, we’ve got these babies,” he pops his claws and flashes his alpha eyes.

“Hm. M’kay. You got any dynamite?”

“Should I be concerned? As much as I’d like to kill that boy, I don’t think we can, Lo. We’d get arrested for like, twenty years.”

“Yeah, I know. I just want to destroy this thing in the coolest way possible.” She holds up Mr. Remington (the bear) by it’s tail.

“Oh! I’ve got just the thing for that,” Robert chirps. “Take a bottle of Polish Vodka from the liquor cabinet, stick in a rag soaked with some motor oil, I can help you get the ratio right, and bam! Bear goes kaboom. Your uncle Peter and I used to do that to our old textbooks in college.”

“Nice!” Laura salutes and runs off towards the liquor cabinet.

“Do it in the preserve or something!” Robert calls over his shoulder. “Let’s not set the house on fire or anything, okay?”

Laura is still out performing pyrotechnics when there’s a knock on the door. Cora is in the playroom and Derek is upstairs doing homework.

“I’ll get it,” Robert voices darkly. He rises from the couch and cracks his neck. He opens the door.
Incredibly, Laura wasn’t exaggerating. The kid looks like he walked fresh out of Buckingham Palace, practically glowing with charm beneath his creamy soft skin and full ruby lips, and crystal blue eyes that really do sparkle like diamonds. A perfectly-coiffed mop of thick, shiny, golden hair adorns his head, looking like waves of spun gold. A glance up and down reveals a baby blue cardigan over a crisp button-up and tie to match his irises, khaki slacks, and brown loafers Robert recognizes from the Burberry line.

“Uh… H-hullo, sir.”

“So you’re Remington,” Robert rolls the name off his tongue slowly, pronouncing every pompous consonant crisply. He takes a step forward. “Well aren’t you a cutie with your fancy name and adorable accent. Do you own miniature ponies, too?”

“I— N-no, sir.”

“Really?” Robert raises his eyebrows. “I find it hard to believe that someone who doesn’t own miniature ponies thinks he’s too good for my daughter.”

Remington pales and swallows, adam’s apple bobbing delicately on his delicate, English neck of Englishness. And there’s the crown birthmark. “I—I… It’s not… I didn’t—“

“You didn’t know you were dating my daughter?

“I’m— I’m sorry, sir,” Remington apologizes, irritatingly humble. “I just… She’s a little…”

“Beautiful? Intelligent? Fun? A fan-fucking-tastic person to be around?”

“Intense,” Remington winces. “She… Swears a lot and… Well you see, she just laughs really loudly and it was getting… Rather embarrassing.”

“So you cheated on her,” Robert enunciates, raising an eyebrow of doom.

“Well I— Yes, and I’m, well, I never intended to cheat on her,” Remington looks to the ground. Ooh, he’s a smooth one. “But Laura… She texted me fifty times a day. She was always crooning about my hair and she named the bear I got her Mr. Remington,” he winces. “Quite honestly I was scared to face her considering how strong her arm is, and then Penelope came along at that party, and I just…”

“Gave into your primal male urges and stuck your tongue down her throat,” Robert finishes crisply for him.

“Er… Yes, sir. They say she’s the Megan Fox of the school… It was quite hard to resist.”

“Well you’re a quaint one,” Robert smiles tightly. “I’ll take that cardigan now, since you definitely don’t deserve to be holding it. So let me tell you something, Phlem-ing-ton— in a few years you’re gonna be dying to find a girl who swears and snorts and laughs louder than an elephant’s trumpet, because those are the good ones. Yuck up all your easy peasy Penelope Carstein girlfriends now who fall for your diamond eyes and gold spun hair, but know that you threw away the best girl you will ever find in your life—and you can pour on all the English charm you want, but you’re still an asshole for how you did it.”

Remington gapes at him, heartbeat rabbiting. “Sorry, sir.”

“Shut up. And get off my porch before you scuff those gorgeous Burberry shoes on this Redwood.”
Remington doesn’t need to be told twice. He turns on his heel and Robert closes the door. But then Robert reopens the door when he hears a splattering crash and a yelp. He pokes his head outside and suddenly Remington is drenched in spaghetti and marinara sauce, red sauce dripping off his perfect golden hair and preppy clothes. The boy blinks up at the third floor balcony and curses, then turns around wide-eyed to face Robert. Robert shrugs as if to say, “Wasn’t me, I’m over here, see?” And shuts the door for good.

As he walks up the stairs he intercepts his son descending from the third floor. Derek is holding a large pot in his hands and using his fingers to lick up the last of the pasta inside. They make eye contact and Derek freezes like the guilty little smartass he is, but Robert chuckles and keeps walking, clapping a hand on his kid’s shoulder.

“Nice work, son.”

.o0O0o. March 18th, 2006.

A swirl of red polka-dotted dress, a slip-slap of dotted bare feet on thin air.

Claudia is dancing with him. He chases her amongst pink clouds that spin like rolling hills of cotton candy, watching her pale arms disappear and reappear through the haze. Her smile is blinding, laugh like the musical fluttering giggles he’s memorized over the years. Chestnut curls bounce atop her shoulders in languid waves as she floats and twirls with him, eyes sparkling and crinkly at the corners. “John,” she grins.

“Claudia,” he breathes, and smiles as she takes him by the hand, her pale fingers soft over his large callouses. She calls his name again. “John! I love you,” She giggles.

“I love you too.” He holds up her wrist and she twirls away, spinning back into his arms. She gazes up at him.

“Where’s Abba when you need it?” She laughs. “How can we dance without music?”

“Never stopped you before,” John murmurs, and wraps his hands around her waist to lift her up in a spin. She throws her head back and laughs, revealing the pale expanse of her neck and the silver heart necklace between her collarbones.

“John!” She squeals.

“What is it?” He chuckles.

She sticks her tongue out at him. “John.”

“Clauds,” he grins back. “Do you need anything? If you’re hungry we can grab a bite to—“

“John!” She laughs again and spins out of his embrace, raising her arms like a ballerina.

“Claudia…? Where are you going? Come bac—”

“John, John, John…!”

“JOHN!”

He awakens to Melissa McCall’s sharp voice and her painful grip shaking his shoulder. He’s facedown on his kitchen table, fingers loose around an empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s. The sun is
streaming brightly through the window, searing his eyelids into neon orange masts, and his cheek, his cheek is stuck to something— newspaper, a puddle of drool?

"Melissa?" He slurs. Then panics— what day is it? He peels his eyelids open, groaning as he rights his head vertical. "Stiles, wh’res—"

"He’s fine," Melissa purses her lips, staring down at him with hard eyes that look far too icy for her Nemo-print scrubs. "He called me this morning when he couldn't wake you up. I had my sister give the boys a ride to school."

John doesn't remember that. He remembers typing in ‘how to help someone through a panic attack’ on the computer last night and a big blank spot from then until now. But the newspapers don’t make sense, because why would he spread out a dozen of them on his dining table? It takes a second for his eyes to focus on the dark blurs, and then it comes into focus: it’s not a newspaper, it’s the photo album from his 26th birthday when Claudia took him to San Francisco.

Melissa shoves a glass of water into his hands and sits down.

"How’d you get in here?" He blinks around blearily, still half-asleep and feeling like death. He’s about to ask what crawled into his mouth and died, but then he remembers that’s just the whiskey. He hates whiskey. He loves it and he hates it. Just like his father used to love it and hate it.

"I had a copy of your house key made. Stiles gave me the original last week." Melissa provides tersely. She looks ready to slap him and hug him at the same time.

"Stiles…" John parrots tiredly, then blinks through a dizzy spell. “Shit, what time is it— The station, I had— I’ve’uh shift at seven—"

“It’s eight-forty-five, John,” Melissa cuts him off flatly, staring at him with dark brown eyes. She looks tired, he thinks, as he blows out a long breath and lets his head thunk back down to the table. He knows this is bad. The number of times this has happened have started blurring together. “I called the station and covered for you. You’re out sick today.”

John sighs. “Shoot, Melissa, ‘m sorry."

"John," Melissa says seriously. "This has to stop."

He swallows, staring at the peeling label on the bottle of Jack. “I know… I… I drank all that, didn’t I?"

Melissa purses her lips and plucks the bottle off the table, placing it on the kitchen floor and out of sight. “Yes you did. And I hope you enjoyed it, because that’s the last one you’ll ever squeeze a drop out of. You got that?"

She has on her strict nurse voice, and it’s terrifying. John’s only ever been on the receiving end of it once, when he cut his hand trying to smash open a jar of jam.

“John, look at me,” she orders sharply. He looks at her. “You. Cannot. Keep. Doing this. I know it hurts, but it’s been three months. We’ve all lost someone we love, and it sucks, but at some point we have to pull ourselves back up so we can be there for the ones we love who are still alive. That means Stiles. That means me. That means you, John. Do you understand?"

John nods. “I… I didn’t mean to…”

Melissa squeezes his hand. “I know. But this is the end, John. You’re done.”
Oh, how he wants to be done. He wants to smash a million bottles of Jack Daniels and then he wants to dump the contents on his father’s grave, but he’s married to the bottles now and he doesn’t know how to stop. He might say that out loud because—

“I’m one step ahead of you.” Melissa slaps a pamphlet on the table and slides it towards him.

He reads it. “Alcoholics Recovery Program?”

“Yes. It’s cheap and it’s at the hospital. I swiped it for you from the front desk last week.”

“You…”

“I also already signed you up. It’s a twelve-step program. You’ll meet with a group five days a week for three hours, and by the end of eight weeks you should be a lot steadier on your feet. If you need someone to drive you there I’d be happy to volunteer.”

John swallows, glancing to the high stack of unpaid bills on the counter. “You said you already signed me up? How—“

“I paid for it. You can pay me back once you’re back on your feet and you take care of your own bills. I also think you should take Stiles to see somebody.”

“Like a therapist?” He asks.

“You said he has a psychiatrist who diagnosed his ADHD?”

“Dr. Clarke,” John nods.

“I recommend taking Stiles in for a visit. I’m not saying anything’s wrong with him, but losing a parent can be especially tough on a kid his age. Especially if you say he’s having panic attacks, it would be a good idea for Stiles to have someone to talk to, since you’re not exactly in the best condition. Dr. Clarke can also prescribe him some medication if necessary to help keep his anxiety under control.”

“What, ah… Wha’do I do? How do I do that?”

“Call and make an appointment. I’m sure the number is in your address book.”

“I gotta’ check the calendar, his birthday’s coming up so I don’t wanna’—“

“His birthday was four days ago, John,” Melissa cuts in, eyes unreadable.

“…What?”

“His birthday was last Friday. He turned nine.”

John stares at her, feeling like someone took an axe to his ribcage. Last Friday—? Last Friday he woke up late with a hangover and worked at the station until five, then came home and…

And drank. Drank to the bottom of a bottle and woke up again the next day.

“God,” he chokes, eyes suddenly hot. He presses a hand to his mouth, feeling sick. God, he feels sick. He’s gonna be—

Melissa slides him a preemptively placed wastebasket. He lurches to the side and retches into it. It takes like whiskey.
“I’m glad to see you feel some remorse over it. You’re going to get better, John.”

He wipes his mouth, feeling like scum. He’s clammy, he smells like liquor and sweat and his eyes have that gummy film that happens when he sleeps too long. “I’m sorry,” he croaks.

“Don’t apologize to me,” Melissa shakes her head sadly. “Save it for your kid when you’re ready to say the words. Here,” she slides the glass of water to him again. “Hydrate. Drink lots of water, I’ll be back later today to drop Stiles off after school and check in.”

“Melissa.”

“Yes?”

“Stiles, did you…” He licks his lips, looking to her imploringly. “For his birthday, did he…?”

She nods slowly. He sees pity there. “I took him to dinner with Scott that night. He ordered fries and a milkshake.”

He closes his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispers. Melissa nods grimly, eyes sad, and walks out his front door.

“Get some rest, John.”

.o0O0o. June 18th, 2007.

Robert places three cupcakes on the table, one in front of each of his children.

Cora moves Pig’s nose forward to inspect it. Derek stares at it suspiciously. Laura hollers “Yessss, thanks dad!” and brings it up to her open mouth in a flash— before Robert slaps her hand away and puts it back on the plate.

“Don’t eat it yet!” He yells in panic, and now he has suspicious looks from all three of his children. The cupcakes sit pristinely in front of them, with pretty little swirly mountains of pink frosting Talia whipped up. There are even sprinkles.

“So…” Derek raises a furry eyebrow. “We’re just supposed to sit here and… Stare at them?”

“My dear children. Today we begin werewolf training lesson number seventy-five, perhaps the most important lesson you will learn,” Robert lectures. “Your mom was a little against it at first, but she agreed it’ll probably save your life in the future.”

“Why is Cora with us?” Laura frowns at her sister. “Her claws aren’t even in yet, she’s only six!”

“Yes, but this lesson will be useful to her too. Now I want you to look at these. Does anything look wrong to you?”

His children blink at their cupcakes. Cora shakes Pig’s head “no.” Derek raises another silent eyebrow. Laura blurts an impatient, “what, are they booger-flavored?”

“Not quite. Go ahead and eat them.”

The three of them wisely hesitate.

“What’s wrong with them?” Derek asks.
“Nothing. They’re strawberry cream.”

None of them move.

“Go on, guys, they taste great! Listen to my heartbeat. Your mother baked them this morning. They taste great.”

Cautiously they pick them up and take bites. Robert watches them chew, nodding as they realize that the cupcakes really do taste delicious and start taking bigger bites.

“Now, I don’t want you to panic at what you feel next,” he warns as he slides forward three more cupcakes with blue frosting, followed by plastic sand pails from Cora’s sandcastle set. “Don’t leave the table, I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Cora is the first. She sets down her cupcake and her smile falls. “My tummy feels funny.”

“Ugh… Mine too,” Derek’s fingers fly to his lips.

“What are you guys talking abo— Oh.” Laura grows pale and doubles over. “Shit.”

“You guys are doing great, just hold on for another minute or so,” Robert coaches. “Pay attention to exactly how you feel— your stomach, your skin, your hands and feet.”

“Ugh,” Derek groans. He swallows and a cold sweat breaks out on his brow.

“Daddy I feel funny!” Cora squeaks.

“Fuck,” Laura expresses eloquently. “I’m gonna be sick, what the hell was in those?”

“Alright, now all three of you take big bites of the blue cupcakes.”

“What? No fucking way!”

“I can’t eat anything ever again. Ever, especially not from you.”

“Trust me on this, it’ll make you feel better. Quick now, I know you don’t feel good but I need you to eat up for me. Good girl, Cora,” he encourages as his youngest bravely bites into the blue cupcake. Derek and Laura quickly follow and shove theirs into their mouths with scrunched eyes. Robert slides the sand pails forward and checks his watch.

“And in about three, two, one…”

All three of his kids retch violently into the buckets. Robert uncaps three cold water bottles as they catch their breath and slides them forward.

“What the fuck dad!” Laura rightfully yells.


“You poisoned us?!” Derek blurts.

“Only for a minute.”

“That’s child abuse!” Laura blurts angrily. “That’s gotta break like, twenty different laws! Poisoning your own—!”
“Shhh, Laura sweetheart, I know. I didn’t like doing it but it’s for your own good. See this?” He holds up her half-eaten pink cupcake. “None of you were able to suss out anything wrong even though each cupcake was baked with wolfsbane. It was a very mild species, but this is to prove that wolfsbane is nearly impossible to smell even with our heightened noses. And when you tasted them, they tasted fine, didn’t they?”

“They were delicious,” Derek mutters at the table.

“Exactly. This is why we need to be ultra careful—and why it’s important for you to recognize the symptoms of wolfsbane poisoning. How did you guys feel after eating it?”

“Like my stomach was burning,” Laura huffs. “And I cold-sweated all over my new sweater. Thanks, dad.”

“Yeah, my skin felt kinda tingly too,” Derek adds. “Like my hands and neck. It was weird.”

“I barfed.” Cora sums it up best.

“Right. So nausea, tingling extremities, and sweating. With more potent species you may feel your heart pounding fast, dizziness, and general weakness, sometimes so bad you black out. Humans actually experience these symptoms when they get hangovers.”

“What’s a hangover?” Derek asks.

“It’s when a human drinks too much alcohol and they feel sick the next day. We can only get them if we drink wolfsbane-infused alcohol since regular liquors don’t affect us.”

“Then why do humans like to drink so much?” Laura wrinkles her nose. “Gross.”

“Humans also get something called the flu, which feels similar, but the flu lasts about a week.”

“That’s horrible!” Laura blurts. “What the hell, no wonder they like to use hand sanitizer so much! Being human must suck balls.”

“I’ll admit I’m glad not to be one,” Robert admits. He holds up a half-eaten blue cupcake.

“Now, these babies—” he swivels it around. “Is the antidote to wolfsbane poising. Who can guess what’s in here?”

Cora raises her hand.

“Yes, Cora.”

“Um…” She waggles Pig’s ears. “The same woof’sbane and herbs,” with the ‘h’ pronounced for ‘herbs.’

“Very good!” He praises. “As you know, wolfsbane can be counteracted with the same type of species, and in special cases, certain herbs or ash to expel it. And if you’re injured with a wolfsbane infused weapon?”

“Rub the same kind of wolfsbane into the wound,” his kids recite automatically.

“Beautiful!” He claps his hands and the sound echoes across the kitchen. “Any questions?”

“What’s with the cupcakes?” Derek asks. “Why didn’t you just make us eat the flower petals?”

“I wanted to make this as pleasant as possible for you guys. Plus if I had told you to eat wolfsbane
petals you would’ve thought I was crazy. And this gave your mother an excellent excuse to bake some cupcakes—the non-lethal ones have green frosting.”

“Oh my god,” Laura breathes. “Our dad is George R.R Martin in disguise.”

“I prefer to be likened to George Clooney. Anyway, dinner on me tonight. You guys pick any restaurant you like.”

“You’re not gonna ask the cooks to poison our food, are you?” Derek mutters.

“Only when you least expect it. Now—” Robert grins. “Take a two hour break and then get your butts outside. Uncle Peter is coming over to help you with training.”

.o0O0o.

The woods are sunlit and buzzing with insects at two o’clock in the afternoon. It’s a great day for training, with plenty of fresh game out in the open to nab the fresh summer berries and nice strong bark on the trees. He walks with his head held high as he leads his children to the usual clearing, where Peter is waiting against a tree.

“Uncle Peteeeeeey!” Laura crows, and swaggers forward to perform their secret handshake.

“Good afternoon Laura, you’re looking well.”

“Hey uncle Peter,” Derek greets.

“Ah-ah, what’s missing here?”

“Oh, right.” Derek steps forward to shake Peter’s hand, like two business partners. Peter nods.

“A good man always shakes hands with another upon greeting. Yours could still be a little firmer, but better than last time.”

“Cora, honey, go say hello,” Robert prompts, but Cora sticks firmly to his side and watches Peter with wide eyes.

“Still shy, are we?” Peter smiles and crouches to her level. “Cora, sweetie. I thought we were past this? You’re too brave of a girl to be afraid of your uncle Peter. We’re all family here.”

“No.” Cora twists her face into Robert’s pant leg and holds Pig up in front of her face. It’s a little odd—Cora is shy with strangers but Peter is hardly a stranger, he’s been there for all six years of her life. But the past couple years she suddenly stopped running up to greet him excitedly, opting for cautious eyes and hiding behind Pig instead.

“Cora, don’t be—“

“It’s all right,” Peter says mildly, holding up a hand. “Children will be children. Let’s get on with the training, shall we?”

“Well, alright. Cora, here’s your butterfly net,” Robert fishes the item out of his backpack. “Don’t go past the creek, okay?”

“M’kay.” Cora takes her net and scampers off.
“And here are the frisbees.” He drops two dozen frisbees onto the earth, all of them painted like bullseyes.

“Okay Hales, let’s see your claws,” Peter instructs.

He stands before Laura and Derek as they work on popping their claws. Laura, a seventeen-year-old with six years of practice under her belt, extracts them confidently with a quick flick of her fingers. Derek, a fourteen-year-old who only hit puberty a couple years ago, struggles. After twenty seconds of concentration he only manages to fully grow them out a centimeter. Peter raises an eyebrow.

“My, fourteen years old and it takes you that long to extract them? Have you been practicing?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I think he’s just a bit nervous because you’re here, at home he can pop them out just fine.”

“Dad, I’m not—“

“No need to be nervous, nephew. I just want you to be able to defend yourself properly. You work on getting them out, I’ll turn this way to give Laura a pep talk.”

As Peter starts lecturing Laura, Derek looks strangely at Robert, so Robert leads him just out of ear shot and asks him what’s the matter.

“What’s the matter, champ? We do this all the time.”

“Yeah, but I don’t like when Peter comes,” Derek whispers. “He’s really strict and it freaks me out. I like it better when it’s just us.”

“Peter can be pretty intimidating, I’ll give you that. That’s what makes him so good at leading Hale Associates. But he’s family, Der. His critique is meant to help you, not hurt you.”

“Yeah, but—“

“C’mmon, just tune him out and you’ll be fine. Go get in line behind your sister.”

Robert picks up the frisbees and runs a good fifty feet away. When he turns around Derek and Laura are bouncing on their heels with claws raised and tensed. “Ready?” He calls over.

“Ready!”

He flicks a frisbee towards Laura at lightning speed. She snarls, eyes flashing gold, and swipes a hand through it. It cracks in half and ricochets off the ground. “Nice! Good, good! Excellent!” He praises as she splits the next one, and the next one, and nearly cuts the last two in half, even as he twists his throws and makes the frisbees curve. “These next ones are for you, champ!”

He chucks the next one in a straight line and Derek watches it with a focused mouth. He strikes it in passing and it rolls to the ground dented but in one piece. He hits the second one too, but only scratches it.

“Your aim is great as always, just put some strength behind it!” Robert calls.

Derek bares his fangs and slices the third frisbee clean in half. He grins and Robert throws the last three. Nearly cut in half, scratched, nearly cut in half.

“Nice work, kids!” Robert grabs the frisbee pieces as he jogs back.
“Can we practice with crossbows next time?” Laura asks eagerly. “I wanna see if I can slice an arrow in half!”

“I’ll see if I can bring one next time,” Peter smiles.

“No, we are not using crossbows or anything equally lethal. Talia will kill me if I bring any of her kids back in pieces. Now keep those claws out, let’s scratch up some trees. Laura, you take this big pine and Derek, you can have… Oh, that’s a good pine over there.”

His kids go to their assigned trees, tapping against the trunks in anticipation.

“Four clean lines, I want to see them deep,” Peter paces. “Go.”

Bark flies as Derek and Laura rear their arms back and swipe. He and Peter circle and nod approval.

“Good. Don’t pull your arm too far back or you’ll hurt your shoulder, try twisting your hips for more torque.”

“Excellent, Laura. Curve your fingers a bit more—good.”

The afternoon proceeds as usual. Another few rounds of frisbee targets, a lesson on landing, and practice tuning in to the smaller sounds of the woods, followed by the kids’ favorite part—full wolf transformation. It’s considered a tricky skill to master amongst werewolves, but the Hale children have exceptionally awesome alpha parents, which certainly helps. Both of them are now able to shift in just a few minutes—Laura a beautiful, sleek wolf with long legs and brown-black fur, and Derek a small, scruffy wolf with shaggy black fur just like his hair.

As they roll around in the dirt they snarl and practice play-fighting, but honestly they just look like a couple of adorable pups.

“Awesome! Excellent, such beautiful wolf-children I have,” he praises. Laura nips him playfully as if to say, *I’m sixteen, thank you very much.* Derek takes the opportunity to roll around gleefully in some moss, which Peter frowns at.

“We’re here to train, not to play,” Peter reminds them. “Try racing each other to the creek and back. Winner gets a ride in the company helicopter.”

The kids bolt off with happy howls, kicking up dirt behind their paws. Once they make it past the first twenty yards, Peter pulls him aside by the arm.

“Pete, what are you—“

Hi brother spins to face him, gaze steady and pale. “Derek’s a little behind, isn’t he?”

Robert blinks. “Derek? What do you mean?”

Peter rubs his jaw with a cool glint in his eye Robert doesn’t really like. “He’s not particularly strong, is he? It concerns me how little muscle mass he has. Even as a wolf he’s half Laura’s size.”

Robert laughs, but his eyebrows are knit. “Well yeah, but you were scrawny once, too. He’s just barely fourteen, Pete. Kids are supposed to be awkward at this age.”

“Yes, but look at Laura when she was his age. She exceeded him in strength and speed, but she’s not your *son*, Robert.”

He shrugs, still not understanding what his brother is getting at. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
Peter sighs through his nose. “Derek is the man of the house, after you. You and Talia had three
kids. The girls show promise, but Derek lacks in everything that makes a powerful werewolf. He’s
the one person who’s going to carry on the Hale name to future generations, and if I were you I’d
take a better interest in making sure he meets the proper criteria.”

“Hey, that’s my kid you’re talking about, Pete,” Robert warns. “The only ‘criteria’ I have for him is
that he try his best. He may not be as strong or intimidating as other werewolves, but he’s got a good
heart. Under my roof, those kinds of morals are much more important than how many rabbits you
can catch.”

Peter narrows his eyes. “A foolish decision, Robert.”

“Honestly? I don’t care what you think, Peter.”

“I’m just saying it would helpful to give him a little push. Maybe he can take up one of those boxing
classes they have over at the gym? I hear they’re very popular amongst school kids. Or what about
your personal gym? He could do some weight training in the morning. Along with extra meals and
protein shakes he’ll bulk up in no time.”

“Derek doesn’t have any interest in using my equipment, nor do I see why he should. He’s barely in
high school, kids should be spending time making friends and having fun at this age.”

“What, do academics have no place of importance under your roof?”

“Of course, but I don’t need to tell my kids that. Laura’s top of her class and Derek—“

Robert cuts off. Derek’s report cards have always been a wash of Cs and Bs, but he knows his kid is
smarter than that. He can see it in how fast Derek can connect car parts without instruction, his
performance during the 6th grade Spelling Bee, or his antics with Laura in how he’s always a step
ahead of her.

Peter lifts an eyebrow. “Have you heard the way he speaks? Clumsy, trips over his speech like a
nervous schoolgirl. His posture radiates insecurity and submission, like a breeze could push him
over. Do you really want to ruin your alpha reputation and our family’s title by showing off an idiot
like that in front of other werewol—”

Robert cuts Peter off by slamming his neck against a tree.

“Daddy?”

Cora suddenly appears behind a tree, holding her butterfly net. Her eyes are wide.

“Hi Cora sweetie, Peter and I are just practicing our combat skills,” Robert says lightly, then turns
back nose-to-nose with his brother and lowers his voice seriously. “If I ever hear you call my son an
idiot again, you’re kicked out of my house, you got that?”

Peter stares back at him cooly. He smiles stiffly. “Crystal clear.”

“Good.” Robert releases him and grins at Cora. “So how many butterflies did you catch today,
lovebug?”

.o0O0o. July 1st, 2007.
“Mr. Stilinski?”

John looks up from his newspaper in the pediatrician’s waiting room. “Yes?”

“I’m afraid we need you back here,” the nurse points a thumb backwards. “Your son just fainted.”

“What?” John is out of his chair in a second, pushing past her. “Is he alright? What happened?”

“We think he may be squeamish, sir. He went down as soon as the needle touched his skin.”

“Jesus Christ,” John sighs as he rounds the corner to room 102 and finds his ten-year-old son limp and white as a sheet on the examination table. Two nurses are there, one fanning him with a pamphlet on Measles and the other is still administering the rest of his vaccinations.

“Has he eaten today?” One of them asks him.

“He had two pop tarts before we came here. Honestly I was wondering if he was going to get squeamish at some point, my wife does the—did the same thing.”

“M’uh,” Stiles mumbles on the table.

“Hey, bud, how you feeling?” John rounds the corner of the exam table.

“Wha’mmapp’ned?”

“You pulled a Scarlett O’Hara,” John chuckles as he runs a hand over his son’s sweaty forehead.

“Wha’s that?”

“You fainted, kid.”

“Did not. Stilinski men do not faint.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you just became the first.”

“Ugh, noooooo. Dad?”

“Yep?”

“I don’t like needles.”

“I figured as much.”

“Needles are the devil’s spawn. They’re all sharp and pointy ’n… M’gonna stop talking about them now.”

“Whaddaya say we go get some ice cream once you’re ready to stand, okay? There’s a Baskin-Robins just around the block.”

“Aw, dude, really? Yes. Sí. All the yeses, I’m totally on board with that. I should pass out more often.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got a lifetime of vaccinations and blood tests ahead of you.”

“…Oh. Yay.”
“Mr. Hale?”

Robert looks up from his iPhone in the dentist’s waiting room. “Yes?”

“I’m afraid we need you back here,” the doctor points a thumb backwards. “Your son just got sick on my assistant.”

“What?” Robert is out of his chair in a second, pushing past her. “Is he alright? What happened?”

“We think he may just be really nervous, sir. He started panicking as soon as we turned on the drill.”

“Oh damn,” Robert gapes as he rounds the corner to room 102 and finds his fourteen-year-old son wide-eyed and green in the patient’s chair. Two assistants are there, one pinching her nose as she wipes the vomit from the floor and the other is swearing quietly as she changes out of her soiled shoes.

“You alright, champ?” He strides forward and places a soothing hand over his son’s sweaty forehead.

“M’fine,” Derek mutters. He flinches and avoids meeting Robert's eyes.

“Mm, really? Because that puddle of sick over there begs to differ. Do you need to be taken home?”

“No,” Derek stammers. “I can stay, I’m fine.”

“I dunno, you seem pretty shaken up. I know you get nervous at the dentist but I didn’t think it was this bad. Did something else happen at school I don’t know about?”

“No, I just don’t like people poking in my mouth,” Derek mumbles. His knuckles are white on the armrest; honestly it’s a miracle he managed not to pop a claw out. “They just loom over you and you’re not allowed to move, and they poke you with all these pointy things and it hurts. I just—I guess I just got a little freaked out. But I won’t do it again, I’m fine.”

Robert raises his eyebrows. “You sure like to end your sentences with ‘I’m fine’ even though you’re clearly not. It’s okay to be scared, you know.”

“But you’re never scared.”

Robert laughs. “Derek champ, we’re all scared of something.” Losing my kids, losing Talia, death, losing my kids— “Trust me, I’ve got plenty of fears.”

“What, spilling tomato sauce on your leather jacket?”

“Absolutely. That thing is my fourth child. But you wanna know a secret?” He kneels down next to his son’s head to meet his eyes. “I’m scared of something not even your mother knows about.”

Derek’s eyes widen. “But you tell her everything.”

“I know, which is how you know it’s kind of embarrassing. Way scarier than the dentist, at least. But it’s our secret, okay? And don’t let your sisters find out either, Laura would never let me hear the end of it.” Robert leans forward and whispers in Derek’s ear. “Bats.”

Derek blinks at him a few times. “What?”
“Don’t look at me like that! They’re creepy. And they have tiny little fangs and little claws, too.”

“Yeah, but so do you! Yours are bigger.”

“Nah, bats are terrifying. There’s no arguing out of it. Have you seen their faces? It’s fucked up.”

The dentist lady clears her throat behind them, raising an eyebrow.

“But my point is,” Robert continues. “It’s okay to admit you’re scared of something. And even if you think it’s stupid to be scared of something, your fear is valid. Now do you want to stay here and let the dentists poke around inside your mouth, or do you want to ditch and go get ice cream? There’s a Baskin-Robins just around the block.”

Derek bites his lip. He glances to the drills, the scowling dentist lady, the posters of root canals, and back to Robert. He scrambles out of the chair. “Ice cream, please.”


“Hurry up, slowpokes!” Robert calls back cheerily as he leads his kids through the preserve.

“It’s not our fault, Cora keeps stopping every thirty seconds because she finds a banana slug,” Laura rolls her eyes.

“Or a beetle,” Derek adds dryly.

“Pig and I like beetles!” Cora pipes up.

“Me too, sweetheart, but we’re never going to make it to the top by sunset if we don’t pick up the pace.”

Today is father-daughters-son bonding day (FDSBD), so he’s taking his three kids to the top of Crescent Hill forest for a picnic dinner, followed by some nice astrological trivia when it gets dark. Talia is back at the house having “Talia Time” which entails a bubble bath, Thai takeout, and binge watching crime shows on cable. She tries to do all of the above when her family is in the house too, but that usually turns into “interrupted bubble bath when Cora wants to play or Derek can’t find his gym shorts” and “can’t do thai takeout because Robert just eats it all” and “whoops the kids are already fighting over the remote.” So Robert’s father-daughters-son time is a win-win for everyone.

“Okay, so here’s an idea,” Laura chirps as she skips up to his side. “How about we abort the whole hiking thing before our legs turn to mush and go bowling instead!”

“Last time you went bowling you demolished lane twenty-three and now we’re not allowed back there,” Robert reminds her.

Laura groans. “It’s not my fault their bowling balls are so indestructible. How was I supposed to know that using super strength would send one shooting through the floor?”

“I like when we do hikes,” Derek voices. “This way Laura can’t ruin anything.”

“You’re just bitter because I beat your ass in laser tag last weekend,” Laura sniffs.

“What’s laser tag?” Cora inquires. Pig is sitting atop her shoulder, ears bouncing with every tiny step.

“You’re too young for it, sweetheart. It’s where people go in a dark room filled with fog and shoot
each other with lights.”

“Oh.” Cora wrinkles her nose.

“Don’t worry Cora, you can be on my team once you grow tall enough,” Laura assures. “We can take down Derek together.”

“No thank you,” his youngest replies primly. It’s amazing how polite she is considering the family she grew up in. “I wanna be on Derek’s team.”

The kids continue to squabble as they near the top of the trail. The trees and dirt smell normal, but there’s something sour on the wind that doesn’t match the earthy scent of the forest.

“—than you Derek, so you can go shove it up your furry—”

“Guys, shut up for a minute,” Robert voices sharply. His kids fall into abrupt silence, three sets of eyes swinging towards him.

Something is off—it’s too quiet, like all the mice and beetles have suddenly stopped moving in favor of freezing in fear. The birds in the canopies that were whistling happily a few minutes ago are now silent, and the sour smell grows stronger. And then a rustle of bushes where the wind doesn’t touch, a rhythm of breath that doesn’t belong to any Hale—or human.

“Dad?” Derek whispers.

“Kids, get—!”

But that’s all the warning he gets to say before a dark blur shoots from the trees with a wild roar, two satanic red eyes barreling towards him. His kids scream and he pushes them aside just before the beast barrels into his shoulder, knocking him backwards against the dirt with a pained grimace. It rakes a good chunk of skin with it’s teeth—the thing is huge with gnarled black fur, wolfish in shape but bearish in size. Drool drips off large fangs lodged in it’s muzzle, below glowing crimson eyes with no pupil. It’s clawed feet is packed with dirt, but it’s no werewolf.

It strikes for his throat again at lightning speed, giving him no more than a split second to roll out of the way. His shoulder splatters blood to the dirt as he shifts, roars, and swipes his claws at the creature, grazing the tip of it’s bloodied nose. It snarls and lashes back in rapid succession, so quickly that Robert can only dodge the first few. The fourth and fifth rake through his forearm and chest, shredding his cardigan to ribbons.

“I don’t appreciate that, Cujo!” He snarls and lunges for it’s back, but it shakes him off almost immediately as he sinks his fangs into it’s meaty shoulder. He gets thrown back hard against a tree and goes sprawling to the ground just as the thing charges him again—

“HEY! Get the fuck away from my DAD!”

The beast yelps and bucks as his daughter—his beautiful, foulmouthed daughter—jumps onto it’s back and sinks her claws into the roll of fur around it’s neck. “That a girl, Lo!” Robert larks and springs to his feet again, taking the opportunity to slash his claws across the dog’s eyes.

As predicted, it yowls and bucks back on it’s hind legs to rid of Laura. “Tuck your knees!” He shouts. She yelps as she looses her grip and goes flying, but Robert’s already in position to break her fall. He catches her with a grunt and she clings to him with terrified blue eyes.

“I got you, you’re okay, I got you,” he breathes. He’d like nothing more than to hug her until she
calms down, but the beast is still howling and thrashing in agony a couple yards away. He sets his daughter down before sprinting forward, leaping atop the beast’s back, and quickly grips it’s neck between his hands.

The crack echoes eerily across the preserve.

His panting is loud in his ears as the dog slumps soundlessly to the ground beneath him, and Robert quickly scrabbles off to make a beeline for Laura. She’s still standing shakily where he left her. Her eyes are stretched round in fear, chest heaving beneath streaks of blood. He panics before he realizes that it’s his blood that smeared off when he caught her—a glance down reveals his gruesome shoulder, and the dark red stains drenching his shirt. He should probably sit down. He runs forward anyway.

“Laura! Laura are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Laura’s voice wavers but she nods vigorously. “But dad, your shoulder—”

Robert whirls around, blood pounding. He’s missing two kids. “Derek? Cora?!?”

“D-dad?”

A pair of grey-green eyes cautiously poke out from behind a boulder. Robert follows two rabbity heartbeats over to the rock and falls to his knees where Derek is crouching, cradling a whimpering Cora in his arms. Her face is tucked tightly into her brother’s neck, knees balled up small with Pig squished in-between.

“Thank god,” he gasps, running his hands over them. “Are you hurt? Is everyone okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Dad, what was that?” Laura breathes.

“A Barghest,” he answers grimly.

“That wasn’t in our flashcards in middle school,” Laura squeaks, to which Derek adds a breathless, “no, definitely not.”

“We didn’t think you’d ever run into one,” Robert answers with a glance back to the motionless beast on the ground. The entire clearing is awash in blood. “But that doesn’t make any sense, they haven’t been around here for—“

“Fifty years.”

They turn their heads towards the familiar voice, where Peter starts slow-clapping from his stance leaning against a tree. “Bravo, brother, you’ve still got it.”

“Peter?” Robert breathes, utterly confused. “What do you… Were you just standing there watching?”

“Observing, yes,” Peter shrugs. “Excellent performance, Robert. Laura, you show great promise as a fighter, but remember to pay attention to your attacker’s strike range. I recommend injuring the flank or the belly since it can’t easily swipe you there. As for you,” Peter turns coolly to Derek, who swallows nervously. “I expected much more from the future man of the family.”

The forest grows eerily still, settling into Robert’s bones like lead.
“You sent it,” he whispers incredulously. “You sent that thing here. To attack us.”

“Of course,” Peter rolls his eyes. “How else are we going to get a clear picture of your children’s fighting skills if—"

But he’s cut off when Robert pummels him against a tree by the neck, breathing heavily. “What the hell is wrong with you? They could have gotten hurt,” he snarls. “They could have been killed!”

“But they weren’t,” Peter dismisses flatly. He can speak remarkably well for a man in a chokehold. “And now we know what needs to be worked on. For starters, how are you going to fix your son who hid behind a rock like a coward?”

Robert trembles with rage. “He was protecting my seven-year-old daughter,” he hisses. “The only thing that needs to be fixed here is your twisted idea of combat training!”

“I’m only trying to help mold them into proper werewolves,” Peter glares. Robert barks a laugh.

“No, fuck that. Fuck you. I’m sick of the way you’ve been treating my kids, like some kind of power lord who wants to mold them into perfect little killing machines.”

“We’re werewolves, it’s what we do,” Peter growls.

“We’re predators, not murderers!” He snarls back.

“Yeah?” Peter hisses. “Then what do you think will happen as soon as another pack comes after you? Or a Wendigo or some creature that’s stronger than a Barghest? When a pack from out of town decides to go after your alpha power? I won’t have my brother raising a family of weaklings!”

Robert slams him into the tree again, fisting his hands into the sharp collar of his shirt. “I’m raising a family with morals. What happened to yours, huh? Because growing up you used to laugh at Power Rangers on Saturday mornings and pine after Marsha Spears in third period, and then we started that goddamn company and it leeched away everything I used to love about you! What the hell happened, Pete? Because the guy I’m looking at is a power-hungry tyrant, not my brother.”

“Don’t you dare tell me that I’m the one who changed!” Peter seethes. “Let’s talk about my brother, shall we? My brother who was my best friend and business partner up until the day you found your damn hippie wife and decided she was better. Twenty-four years of camaraderie, dealing with mom together, shared secrets and good times, all thrown away for some dirty Sacagawea with—"

“Call her that again and I’ll rip your fucking throat out.”

“Time will never erase the fact that you looped me into your big dream and abandoned me,” Peter seethes. “You say you love your precious family so much? Well you were my only family! And then you left me to rot alone in that building full of idiots! Of course I value power, power is the only thing I have!”

“No,” Robert shakes his head. “You had us. I invited you into our home week after week for years before you finally took up my offer, and you’ve been joining us for holidays ever since as ‘Uncle Peter.’ I let you play with my kids and hold them when they were toddlers because I wanted you in our lives, but this is too far. Power? Brute strength? To set lose a dangerous beast on my children, Pete?” His voice cracks with sadness or anger, he isn’t sure. “You’ve let your obsession get to your head.”

He drops his brother with disgust and watches him hit the ground heavily, icy blue eyes burning up at him. “Consider yourself no longer part of this family. Leave, now. If I so much as smell you on
our property I’ll make sure to break both your legs with wolfsbane so you’ll never come near my family again.”

Peter’s eyes ground unexpectedly round. “I’m your brother. We grew up together, we were best friends, does that mean nothing? I’m your brother!”

“Peter Hale is my brother,” Robert voices calmly, even though inside the pain is agonizing. “I don’t know who you are now, but you’re definitely not him.”

He watches as Peter’s face morphs from shock to ugly lividity. He rises, brushes the dirt from his arms, and slinks away into the darkness of the preserve— but not before looking back and flashing his eyes red—

Red.


A tiny, triumphant smile appears on Peter’s lips. “I had my people track down our father.”

And he stalks back into the woods, hands in his pockets.

Robert stands and watches him go, hands alternating between tight fists and limp and trembling. Sometime between bouncing Cora on his knee and taking pictures at Laura’s thirteenth birthday party and camping with Derek— Peter killed somebody. Murdered the very man who brought him into the world to steal his alpha power, and it makes Robert sick.

“Dad…?” Laura ventures forward carefully, voice uncharacteristically soft.

When Peter was seven years old he fell off his bike and cried for their mom, but she had already been placed in the care home. Robert had helped him back into the house and cleaned his skinned knees that day, and sat with him on the couch while they watched The Munsters.

“I think it’s best we go bowling after all,” he announces, and starts walking down the slope back to the mansion. “I’m sure there’s another alley nearby that will let us in.”

The kids are shocked into silence as they trek back down the hill. Robert should probably say something, maybe crack a joke to loosen the tension and ease their fears, but his heart is beating too painfully to find the courage. He hears Cora tug on Laura’s sleeve to lean up and whisper in her ear— “Is uncle Peter ever coming back?”

“No, Cora,” he voices gently without turning around. “Your uncle Peter is just Peter now.”

A tiny scuffling of feet, and then a small hand wiggling around his palm. “Okay. He smelled like tuna.”

That would be the Armani aftershave. Robert hoists her up to carry her piggy-back style. She snuffles into his hair, Pigs’s ears fuzzing his jaw, and after a few beats—

“Dad?” Derek says weakly. “I’m—I’m sorry. I should’ve—”

Robert stops walking to crouch down and take Derek’s shoulders. He meets his eyes seriously. “You listen to me, Derek. You did exactly the best thing. You kept your sister safe and let the two best fighters do the fighting. I could not be more proud of you, do you understand?”

Derek swallows. He averts his eyes to the ground and nods. “Okay.”
“Good.”

Within five minutes they reach the edge of the mansion. As if sensing that something happened, Talia is already standing on the porch, one hand gripping the stair rail. “Robert?” She calls.

“Hi, honey,” he smiles tiredly at her. Her presence alone is enough to make his insides melt, and suddenly he feels the exhaustion in his bones.

“What happened? Are you still hurt?” She covers the distance in two steps and touches the bloodstained gashes in his sweater. Her eyes are serious and inquisitive.

“I’m healed now. Peter sent a Barghest our way as an idea for training.”

Her eyes widen. “The children—?”

“—Are okay. The Barghest is dead. I called Deaton on the way back and notified him so he can take care of the mess.”

She pulls the kids close, brushes protective hands over them all, and stares at him.

“And Peter…?”

“He won’t be coming back,” he says bluntly.

“Robert…?” She voices, and in the single word she both questions and confirms the past nineteen years of Peter Hale. To her, it’s only been a matter of time. She knew Peter was a bad seed from that first day back at the protest— why didn’t he believe her?

“Dad?” Laura tries.

Instead of answering he strides forward, grabs Laura and Derek, and wraps them both in a huge hug, pulling them close. They stiffen with surprise.

“Dad, your heart’s beating really fast,” Derek breathes against his shoulder.

Robert breathes them in, clutching them firmly. “Talia,” he voices, but she’s already wrapping her arms around his back from behind, holding him close like she knows exactly what he needs. Cora wiggles in underneath his arm and they stay there in the cooling afternoon air, listening to the buzz of a few late bees on the wind.

“Sooooooo this is fun, but Derek’s breath is starting to get unbearable.”

“It’s not as bad as Laura’s perfume.”

Talia’s silent laughter shakes against his back, infecting him. He smiles, and feels like maybe the world hasn’t ended quite yet.

“Alright,” he announces. "Somebody go pick go a car from the garage. We’re going out to Minton’s later, but first I need a shower."

“And then a bowling alley?”

“And then a bowling alley.”

The kids cheer, Laura and Derek clawing over each other to get to the garage and call dibs on their favorites (Laura likes the red ’67 Mustang, Derek drools when he gets within ten feet of the
Camaro). They're too busy trying to trip each other to notice that Cora is in the lead, which means they will probably be taking the baby blue 1950 Cadillac.

Talia is the last to let go of him, but still keeps a warm hand on his shoulder. Her eyes flick concernedly to his bloody shirt. “I hate seeing you get hurt.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

He nods, kisses her thumb as it trails across his cheek, and hugs her wholeheartedly. “It’s a bit of a mess, T.”

And Talia, in all her patience and quiet compassion, simply holds him close. They sway there, arms wrapped around each other as his blood stains her sweater, her hair ghosting over his face and protecting him from reality. With her, everything bad disappears.

“I love you,” she murmurs to him. He swallows, closing his eyes.

“I love you too.” And then, because Robert Hale always sees the glass half full, “I lost a brother today, but I still have my family. And as far as I’m concerned, it’s the best damn family in the world.”

February 21st, 2008.

“Laura did what?” He and Talia say in unison.

Spring sparrows chirp faintly outside the window of the Beacon Hills High school Principal’s office, where Principal Wiser has summoned Robert and his wife to discuss a “serious” matter involving his kids. It’s nothing new considering Laura has a hot temper and an intimate affinity for insulting people, but this is the first time he’s entered the office and found his son sitting there too. Derek looks out of place, green eyes wide with nervous energy and skinny limbs tucked tightly to his sides. He sinks deeper into his cheap plastic chair with a quiet groan as Laura sits up straighter, staring down Principal Wiser with a challenging stare, looking smug as usual.

“Your daughter punched two students in the face today,” Principal Wiser repeats, almost sounding bored.

The man has two bushy eyebrows constantly drawn in a pinched, flat line behind his 80s-style glasses, and deep frown lines around his lips broadcasting that he must have spent the majority of his life being this unamused. Or maybe it’s just the way he looks around Robert’s family, because this isn’t the first time he’s entered the office and found his son sitting there too. Derek looks out of place, green eyes wide with nervous energy and skinny limbs tucked tightly to his sides. He sinks deeper into his cheap plastic chair with a quiet groan as Laura sits up straighter, staring down Principal Wiser with a challenging stare, looking smug as usual.

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“The Callahan twins, Dustin and Matt, are nursing broken noses,” Wiser continues, glancing down at some handwritten notes. ”I wasn’t there to see it in person, but several teachers were. They say Laura opened by dumping two cartons of chocolate milk on them during lunch, then managed to give them both, and I quote, ‘extreme wedgies,’ and finished with two punches to the face, one for each twin.”

“Screamed like little girls,” Laura snorts, but Talia shoots her the sharpest, most evil glare Robert has
ever seen. Laura stops giggling immediately. Principal Wiser sighs, taking off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. Robert relates on a spiritual level.

“Laura,” Talia grits out her daughter’s name so fiercely that she actually startles Mr. Wiser. Laura flinches but immediately retaliates with an obstinate glare.

“Well they deserved it!” Laura raises her chin defiantly, eyebrows scrunched low. "They—“

“Laura!”

Surprisingly it’s Derek who pipes up. Robert and Talia blink, almost having forgotten entirely that their son was still there. Derek and Laura are engaged in a fierce silent-communication battle with their eyes, Laura’s blue ones pinched angrily and Derek’s softer greens almost pleading.

“Mr. Wiser, would you mind explaining to me what my son has to do with this?” Talia arches an eyebrow suspiciously, although her tone is calm as ever. She is brilliantly poised in her seat, ankles crossed in a perfect picture of grace and patience to hide her deadly inner wrath.

“Mom, it’s nothing,” Derek hisses, looking pale. “Just don’t— It’s not—”

“Mr. and Mrs. Hale,” Wiser cuts in. “Laura claims that the Callahan twins have been picking on Derek. According to her, Dustin and Matt cornered Derek in the locker room last week and gave him a black eye.”

A wave of silence washes over the office. Four heads turn to Derek, who looks like he’s trying his hardest to disappear into his crappy plastic chair. His ears are beet red, and the sharp smell of embarrassment is suddenly overwhelming as his son stares at the floor, lips thin and chin tucked against his chest.

Robert stares at him, livid that someone would do that to his son, confused as to why someone would want to hurt Derek, and overcome with the urge to make it better.

“Derek,” he says, but it comes out almost angry because he wants to rip the twins into quadruplets. Suddenly Laura is 100% justified.

But Derek flinches and looks up for a split second, and Robert’s heart jumps in confusion when he sees the utter shame in his son’s grey-green eyes.

“Laura?” Talia pins her daughter down coolly. Laura’s eyes are huge.

“Derek told me the day it happened!” Laura blurts, and Derek shoots her a fierce glare, attempting to swat at her.

“I told you it was no big deal!”

“It was and it is,” Laura glares at him before turning back to him and Talia. “I caught him coming out of the locker room with a black eye and made him admit it. They’ve been bullying him for weeks!”

“Well, the twins are denying it,” Principal Wiser returns his eyes to his papers lazily, clasping his hands in a power-move Robert knows all too well. Robert’s eyes narrow. “I also see no evidence of a black eye now, and no bruising was reported by any of Derek’s teachers the past week.”

Robert internally cringes. Supernatural healing isn’t exactly something he can explain.
“Those lying little *dicks!*” Laura cries, outraged, and Talia hushes her but with a lack of fire this time. Laura’s heartbeat is steady, but they don’t need that to know their daughter is telling the truth. Laura sneaks around them more than she thinks he and Talia know about, but she would never lie about something like this.

“Mr. Wiser,” Talia voices calmly, eyes narrowed on the man, and it’s terrifying. His name is spoken like a warning and Wiser actually hunches his shoulders a little. “If my daughter says these boys are hurting my son, I’d think some disciplinary action is needed, don’t you?”

Principal swallows uncomfortably but holds his ground. “I’m afraid your daughter’s track record is much more… Muddled than the Callahan boys.”

“That’s because they never get caught!” Laura counters angrily, and this time Robert shoots her a silencing glare, because he knows that in order to win they’re going to need to play this right. And playing it right requires his daughter to keep her mouth shut tight.

“As I was saying,” Wiser continues with a disciplinary glance at Laura. “The boys are star athletes on the basketball team. If what Laura says is true, they’ll have to be cut from the team. But with the championship game coming up next month the school can’t afford to lose our top players.”

More silence. The tension grows as the clock on the wall ticks quietly.

“Mr. Wiser,” Talia voices again, in that soft whisper of a last chance. “Are you saying that you’re going to let two boys get away with harassing my son because they’re star athletes for your freshman basketball team?”

Robert watches the man’s adam's apple bob delicately. “The county takes athletics very seriously, Mrs. Hale. Considering how close Derek and his classmates are to the end of the school year, the school board thinks it may be best to just let these accusations go. If there is any truth to Laura’s claims, Matt, Dustin, and Derek can start again fresh next year as sophomores.”

Deathly silence. Robert can’t bring himself to stop glaring at Wiser to glance to his family, but he can hear the outraged open-close of Laura’s mouth, senses that Talia is sitting poised and polite with a storm of rage on the inside, and he can smell enough of Derek’s embarrassment to know that his son is still hunched with his head down.

Talia clears her throat. That’s his signal to summon his powerful ex-co-CEO past, which he only reverts to in emergencies.

“Tim, is it?” Robert starts, resting his ankle over his knee to look more relaxed and in charge. “In case you’ve forgotten, I donated a very generous sum to this school when I enrolled my first daughter here, and continue to financially aid the academic programs each year. I wonder what the sports program would suddenly look like if the Hales were suddenly to cease contributing.”

Wiser swallows. “Well, uh…”

“I imagine the team would have to downgrade their uniforms,” Robert muses. “Or stop production on the new scoreboard, perhaps sacrifice the weekly waxing on the gym floor to keep it presentable. I also can’t help but wonder what would become of this school if I were to contact my friend Sal Rodgers of The Public School Administration to report the situation regarding my son’s harassment.”

Derek winces at the last word. Talia curls a protective hand over his shoulder.

“So let’s make a deal,” Robert continues. “You punish the Callahan twins accordingly and I’ll continue to let my children school here, along with my usual donations to ensure they’re getting the
best education available. As well as the best sports teams available. That sounds fair to me, what do you say?"

Wiser nods grimly, averting his eyes. “I— I suppose that’s fair, yes.”

“Good,” Robert smiles tightly. “Glad to hear we all have the same values here. I’ll be checking in soon as a follow-up to make sure both ends of our agreement are kept. Now if you’ll excuse me and my family, we have other matters to attend to today, other than sit in the office of Ed Rooney— Pardon, Tim Wiser.”

Robert stands, gesturing his head towards the door. “Talia. Kids.”

His family rises, a line of cool (Talia), smug (Laura), and utterly ashamed (Derek). Wiser remains silent behind him, and Robert doesn’t bother to see wether it’s out of embarrassment or contempt. “Come on, family. We’re going for ice cream,” He announces once they emerge into the parking lot.

“Sounds like an excellent idea,” Talia agrees.

“Dad, that was awesome!” Laura gushes as she tackles him from behind in a bear-hug. “And that Feris Bueller reference? Ha! Best dad ever.”

He chuckles, wraps an arm around her shoulders, and tucks her against his side as they walk. He looks to find Derek and grab him too but he’s glued close to Talia’s heels, staring at the ground as he walks, hands shoved deep into his pockets. The grin slides from Robert’s face.

“Any idea what you’d like to order, champ?” He tries.

“I’m not really hungry,” Derek mumbles without eye contact. “Thanks, though.”

Robert exchanges a look with Talia. Don’t make a big deal, we’ll talk to him later, she conveys to him. He nods.

“Well I’m getting the hot fudge triple-decker brownie sundae,” Laura snorts. “And I bet dishes duty for a week that I can finish it all before you can finish your banana whipped split!”

Robert barks a laugh. “You’re on, princess. Get ready to eat my dust.”

.o0O0o. June 27th, 2008.

Stiles favored Claudia.

John saw in how Stiles greeted his mom first when they both picked him up from school, and how Stiles hollered for Claudia when he has a nightmare, not John. Stiles ran to her for hugs first, and every time it was a little punch to John’s gut.

But now that she’s gone, a small, ugly, selfish part of John smiles as Stiles nuzzles playfully into his hand, because now John’s the favorite. He wonders if he would still have this if Claudia never died — would Stiles still run to him first for hugs? Would he tell John everything like he does now? Would they still be best friends?

“Of course, dad!”

John blinks— had he said all that aloud? “What?”
“Of course,” Stiles repeats, tearing into his burger. “Aren’t you listening to the radio? Greg and Fernando are deciding if Jennifer Aniston is pregnant or not. But of course she is, considering she didn’t have a champagne glass at the Oscars. But in the F.R.I.E.N.D.S. behind the scenes DVD, she said she snuck real wine on set instead of the grape juice for scenes.”

“Oh,” John says dumbly. “I don’t know, kiddo, she says she doesn’t want kids.”

“Dispatch to Stilinski we’ve got a 22-19, request for backup,” the squad car radio buzzes.

“A murder?!” Stiles shouts. Curly fries spill out of his mouth as his eyes widen with worrying enthusiasm. John shushes him as Mark continues.

“Victim found dead in an alley on Whipple Ave, blunt force trauma to the head, Lopez and Clarke on scene now.”

“Stilinski to dispatch, I’ll be there in ten,” John enunciates into the speaker, and flicks on the siren lights.

“Wow, my first real crime scene!” Stiles buckles up excitedly.

“Nope, you play enough violent video games as it is. I’m dropping you home first.”

“A, but dad! Come on, I’m ten now! I’m totally old enough to see a crime scene!”

“Ask me again when you’re thirty, kid.”

One week later, Jennifer Aniston announces she’s pregnant.

.00O00. December 25th, 2008.

"I don't think he likes me, T."

He and Talia sit side by side on the couch, bellies full and new pajamas fuzzy beneath their silk robes. The fireplace crackles and pops softly like a cozy choir by their chairs, casting dancing orange shadows atop the chocolate truffles they're picking at as the grandfather clock nears midnight. The box of See's candy Talia got for Christmas today is near empty, the kids have gone to bed, and Robert is trying to quickly get to all the caramels before his wife steals them all.

"Of course he likes you, Robert," Talia tells him calmly, and raises an eyebrow in warning as he plucks a sea salt chew a split second before she does.

"Did you see the way he looked at me this morning when he unwrapped my present?" he counters, rather unhappily. "His face fell, you’d think I gave him a rock. Or perhaps you missed the glare at the dinner table tonight? Or his glare yesterday, or the day before that? I swear, it's like he's been practicing his scowl in the mirror."

"Robert," Talia sighs, in that way that means she is smart and beautiful and is seeing something he's too stupid to see, but she's too nice to insult him. "You got him a Rolex."

"Exactly!" Robert exclaims, voice thick around his caramel. "I got my first Rolex when I was his age, I thought he’d be happy to get one for his birthday. What sixteen-year-old wouldn't love that?"

Talia puts down her book to regard him calmly. "That's because you were a pompous millionaire when you were sixteen. You’ve lived in wealth since you were born. Derek owns no more than five
shirts and one pair of shoes, and has he ever expressed a desire for anything more? Perhaps he was expecting something a little more personal."

"Personal," Robert parrots in question. "What does… Well, what do you think he’d like instead?"

“Dear,” Talia shakes her head softly. “You live with him. Try to put yourself into his shoes instead of the ones you wore when you were a businessman.”

Robert has difficulty picturing this. The girls are easy, Laura is happy with concert tickets or a generous deposit into her shopping credit card, and Cora loves anything from pretty spoons to stuffed animals, or new art supplies. Hell, she’d be happy with a single stick of gum. But Derek…

“He likes basketball,” Talia says when he takes too long to come up with an answer. Robert thinks she’s going to suggest buying him an autographed poster, but instead she says, “you could get him tickets to the Warriors game and go with him. Or even better, shoot some hoops with him out in the backyard.”

“Really?” Robert asks, entirely disbelieving. “You sure he wouldn’t want an autographed poster better? I could get him something signed by every player on the Warriors. A VIP pass to meet the coach for a day! I could buy out the whole court for him if he wanted.”

“Robert,” Talia says calmly. “For such an intelligent man, you can be absolutely clueless.”

The grandfather clock behind them agrees with her, chiming the first of what will be twelve reminders that another year is almost over. He stretches, frowning at the way his belly pooches against the cheesy Christmas sweater Hank sent him in the mail. "I'm getting old," he grumbles, patting the soft pouch over his belly button. Forty-five is ancient.

“Don’t you start,” Talia warns, and purses her lips at a coconut truffle after biting into it. “That would mean I’m getting even older.”

Robert grins softly at her, watching the hearth light cast golden shadows on her silky hair. “You’ve hardly aged a day since I met you. The morning you actually get a new wrinkle is the morning we’re all damned.”

Talia returns his gaze slyly, dark eyes crinkling at the corners. She reaches a soft hand out to smooth the hair back from his forehead, making him rumble happily and chase her palm with his lips. She pulls away and gets up. “Merry Christmas, dear. You owe me a new box of caramels.”

He scoffs. “I only had a few.”

“I ate one. There were eight in the box. You ate seven.”

“Preemptively counting all the good chocolates now, are we?”

“One must take precaution when they’re married to a giant sweet tooth,” Talia lifts an eyebrow. “Don’t wait too long before coming to bed.”

And with that his wife rises from her armchair, silk robe fluttering around her calves like purple ocean waves. Robert watches her float to the stairs, eyes trailing from her bare feet to her slim ankles, the sway of her cheeks and the soft taper of her waist, finishing on the quiet dance of her silky black hair between her shoulder blades. He tips his head back, closing his eyes as he listens to the fireplace crackle into silence. He thinks of his family; Laura’s ear-splitting cackle at the cheesy Christmas movie earlier that evening, Cora’s tiny-toothed grin while “feeding” Pig a candy cane, and the disappointed look on Derek’s face upon opening a Rolex.
“More personal,” he murmurs to himself, more question than answer.

..000o. **December 30th, 2008.**

Robert stands in the hallway staring down at the silver box in his hands.

He takes a deep breath, listening to the quiet *thump-thump* of the heartbeat on the other side of the door. But he trusts Talia more than he trusts himself, and he wants to make things right. So he raises aging knuckles to the wood and knocks softly over the scrawled ‘*Laura KEEP OUT*’ sign.

“Yeah?”

He turns the knob and peeks his head inside the room. Derek’s legs are tucked up criss-cross atop his navy comforter, back resting comfortably against the pale blue wall. He glances up from his laptop, grey-green eyes piercing and huge in the dim glow of his lamp. Robert takes a moment to observe in his son, letting his gaze trail over Derek’s dark caterpillar lashes to his darker caterpillar eyebrows, his shaggy black hair sticking out in the same cowlicks Robert has, and his large Dumbo ears that poke out from his face and turn bright red when he’s nervous.

He’s awkward, with hands and feet that are too big for his gangly limbs and rabbit front teeth, but his eyes are wondrous and his jawline is smooth, beautiful in his own way. Robert’s heart aches a little when he remembers last month in the principal’s office, and can’t imagine why anyone would want to hurt his son.

He clears his throat. “Hey, champ.”

Derek straightens up as Robert enters, heartbeat stuttering like a startled butterfly. His eyes flicker to the large box in Robert’s hands, long eyelashes twitching up and down. “Hi, dad.”

He ventures forward slowly and glances around the room. There are more posters up than last time, printed with basketball stars and music bands he doesn’t recognize. Derek’s room is the plainest of his three kids with nothing but a bed, a nightstand, a desk for homework, and a single shelf sparsely filled with a few sports magazines and books for school.

Laura’s room is like a punch in the face with bright periwinkle walls and a wild violet carpet, and millions of clothes strewn on every available surface except for their drawers. Whenever Robert steps into it his eyes water with the overwhelming gumbo mix of flowery perfumes, green apple shampoo, lavender body butter and half a dozen moisturizers and hair products in every girly fruity scent imaginable. Cora’s room smells like soft milk and sugar, and is distinguished by the many mountains of stuffed animals, small pillows, paint supplies and the tea set Robert bought her for Christmas last year.

But it strikes him how much of their family is present in Derek’s room; beside a small gumball dispenser lies the dreamcatcher Talia built him in middle school, the dozens of handcrafted knickknacks Cora made for him over the years, and the ticket stubs from every movie and concert Laura begrudgingly attended with him. With a pang Robert realizes that there’s nothing representative of anything they did together, aside from the untouched Rolex on the floor, as if Derek had tossed it aside like a wadded tissue.

When Derek was younger his room had been more colorful, disorganized and crammed with shiny toys and action figures and curtains printed with glow in the dark stars— but now it’s clean, spacious, and simple, and Robert tries not to break over the fact that his only son is growing up.
He cautiously sits on the edge of his son’s bed. Derek tucks his feet up to make more room. With a pang Robert realizes the last time he sat here, Derek’s legs only reached halfway down the mattress. “Whatcha’ working on?” He asks.

Derek hits ‘command s’ and closes the laptop. “An essay.”

“On?”

“Triangulation in Ordinary People,” Derek answers. “For English.”

Robert swallows. Clears his throat.

“How’s, uh… How’s that Rolex working out for you?”

“Oh. It’s… Shiny,” Derek manages, wholeheartedly avoiding looking over at the abandoned watch on the floor.

“That’s what I thought,” Robert nods. “So I, ah… Got you a new present, that I think you might like better. Happy birthday, champ.”

Robert hands out the silver box, and Derek regards it cautiously, expression falling a little when he sees the shiny Nordstrom’s logo, probably thinking there’s some suit inside. He takes it. “Uh, thanks… Um, do you want me to open it… Now?”

Robert nods, chest fluttering. “Go ahead.”

The other difference with Derek is how he opens presents. Cora and Laura rip into wrapping like starved animals to tender meat, gleefully shredding the paper at lightning speed to get to the treasure inside. But Derek spends an eternity unwrapping his gifts, carefully untying ribbons and peeking into the sides so patiently that Robert often has to turn the video camera off halfway to preserve battery. His son is cautious, tactile, as if to make sure he won’t damage whatever is inside.

Derek practices that method now as he opens the box; Robert watches his eyes grow round and his lips twitch and bloom into a grin once the tissue paper is lifted, and it’s the best feeling in the world. Slowly, gingerly, Derek lifts up the soft leather and lays it on his lap, gazing at it like it’s made of pure gold.

“This is your…”

“Yes it is,” Robert grins. Something painfully sweet taps inside him.

“This is…” Derek swallows, eyes round and lips twitching like wants to laugh but he wants to make sure it’s not a dream first. “You’re giving it to me?”

Robert nods. “I don’t expect you to fit into it anytime soon, but I want you to have it.”

A minute goes by, one of the best minutes of Robert’s life, where Derek stares wordlessly at the leather jacket, toes curling atop his blanket. Robert gazes at him and remembers the day his son was born, as a toddler, an awkward middle-schooler and the awkwardest high schooler, Talia’s best friend and Laura’s partner in crime, and Cora’s hero. The silence stretches on with the golden rays of the sun as they sink beneath the horizon, casting lazy gold shadows over the bed.

“Wow, I…” Derek looks at him, beautiful eyes shining with a warm mirth usually only reserved for Talia. “Thanks, dad.”
Robert nods, unable to say anything. His chest is too tight and there are too many words to chose from anyway, so he settles for lightly clapping a hand over his son’s knee.

“Hey, dad…?”

“Yeah champ?”

Derek licks his lips. His fingers brush absently over the leather on his lap. “Why do you call me that?”


“Yeah.”

“That’s what you are to me,” He shrugs. His heart pounds as he remembers Talia’s words from Christmas, how Robert blinked and suddenly his only son was all grown up. “I love you son, you know that right?”

Derek blinks, lips unsticking a crack. He swallows. Nods. Returns his eyes to his computer screen, where he types another ‘t’ into his essay. “I know.”

He knows.

Robert walks down the hall, feeling the dim warmth of the sun’s rays ghosting over him as he passes the four victorian windows. He gets to the balcony on the third floor, the one that overlooks the woods. One hand slips over the white railing and grips it gently so not to splinter the wood, and his other hand comes up to clamp over his lips. His eyes sting hot with the past sixteen years, and his heart dances weakly beneath his shuddering shoulders. His breaths are silent, quiet, softer than the sound of his tears hitting the grass three stories below.

He cries for the son who didn’t say it back, but for the son he loves just the same.

.00O0o. January 8th, 2009.

Robert walks in the door after a long day of fine-tuning test #382 with his engineers. The house smells delicious, and the house is loud. He drops his briefcase by the coat rack and goes over to slip his hands around Talia’s waist from behind, where she stands sprinkling shaved basil over a steaming jambalaya type thing. He kisses her cheek and peers down at the pan with interest, chin hooked over her shoulder.

“Lookin’ good, hun.”

“Me or the food?” She teases softly, and he rumbles with pleasure deep in his chest.

“Ew, gross!” Laura’s voice rings out from the couch. She grabs one of the ugly throw pillows Talia picked out and folds it over her ears, grimacing. “Guys, cool it down over there, there are children present! And sensitive teenage daughters!”

“I’m not children, I’m eight and a half!” Cora’s tiny voice pipes up indignantly, as she pokes at Laura’s leg. Robert exchanges a glance with Talia and they lock lips, smiling into the kiss as Laura shrieks in horror. He figures it will scar her for about two weeks, and then he and Talia will get to do it again.
“Oh my GOD!” Laura objects, flailing as she tries grabbing all the other couch pillows to throw them over her eyes, which Cora finds hilarious and joins in the game. Her current phase is to follow Laura around like a shadow and do absolutely everything her sister does, right down to the number of chews it takes to eat.

Then Derek walks in the door, bleary-eyed with backpack slung half-heartedly over his shoulder.

“Where have you been?” Laura pries loudly, and immediately leaps off the couch to start hounding her brother. It’s funny to watch because Cora follows Laura, so all three of his kids are waddling around the living room like a line of ducklings. Laura pokes at Derek’s elbow, grinning ear to ear. “You’re late. Did you know you’re late? What took you so long, huh? Making out with somebody special?”

Derek glares at her, although the usual fire is depleted. “No,” he states bluntly, and drops his backpack heavily to the floor as he slips off his sneakers. “Not as much as you make out with the sweatshirt your French tutor left here.”

“Shut up!” Laura reddens and punches him in the stomach, making Derek “oomph.” He curls over and stays that way for a few moments before Talia’s mansion-pride speaks up.

“Derek, if you have mud on your shoes they go on the front porch, and you better not leave that backpack there on the floor. Laura, you can make out with Jacob’s sweatshirt all you want until you give it back tomorrow, but there will be no kissing the actual Jacob. He’s too old for you.”

“Don’t worry mom, Derek’s just kidding,” Laura glares fiercely at Derek with her you-blow-my-cover-and-you’re-dead look.

"Kids! Come set the table.” Robert cuts in as he swipes a shrimp from the pot. Laura snorts at him. “How come you never have to set the table?”

“Because I married your mother so I win the right to boss my slave children around,” he replies swiftly, and Laura cackles.

“So. Where were you really, Der?”

“Practice ran late. It’s not a big deal.”

“Huh. You still at the gym? You sound winded. Maybe start laying off the leftover Easter candy,” Laura pokes at his belly, and Derek’s hands curl around his stomach protectively as he flinches away from her. The action is odd; Derek usually engages in full-on slap-fest with Laura and tosses in hair insults for good measure.

“You okay, champ?” Robert studies Derek as they set the table. His son immediately straightens up, tangling the air with a strange mix of fear and… Something bitter? Sweet? Robert can’t quite place it, but Derek looks paler than usual.

“Yeah, fine.”

Robert opens his mouth to question further but Talia’s voice rings from the kitchen. “Rob, could you help with this? I need two hands.”

“I’m gonna come down later,” Derek voices, moving to the staircase. “I’m not hungry.”

Talia whirls around, eyes wide. “My boy abeque not hungry? Either they served a six-course meal at practice or the apocalypse really is among us.”
“Big lunch,” Derek provides, but Laura springs on him immediately, pointing a victorious finger at her brother. “LIES! Where are the pants on fire, Derek? I see you at lunch everyday, and you always clear your entire tray like the growing hormonal wolf boy you are! You just don’t want to eat mom’s new dish.”

Derek glares at her. “You are such a stalker! What, do you spy on me from across the cafeteria where you eat with your dumb girly friends?”

“Well, you’re kind of hard to miss sitting all alone at your table like that,” Laura throws back, and Talia stops the conversation with a strict “ahem.”

“Settle down, guys,” Robert throws in. “Both of you, come to the table to eat. No excuses. You’d be crazy to think your mom’s food smells anything but amazing.”

Derek begrudgingly slumps into his chair, breathing deeply. Robert eyes him closely from underneath his brow. It’ll be easier to scope out what’s wrong this way.

“Cora helped me with this one today.” Talia voices as she sets the stew down on the table.

“Why wasn’t Cora at school?” Laura asks.

“Cora had a half day today.”

“What? Damn middle schoolers,” Laura pouts. “Where’s my half day? Us hardworking seniors deserve all the half-days!” She taps the table with her fork for emphasis.

“Derek, they’re not working you too hard at practice, are they?” Talia shoots a concerned glance to Derek as she sets the dish on the table. “You look pale.”

“No! I’m fine. I can handle practice just fine, mom,” Derek cuts in quickly. His eyes flicker worriedly to Robert again, which is strange. Robert studies him concernedly as he catches another whiff of the weird smell, but it’s hard to identify anything beyond the savory food, Laura’s perfume, laundry detergent, and the sugar on Cora’s breath. She must have found the secret Hershey’s Kisses container Laura keeps in her room.

He exchanges a glance at Talia as Cora sets Pig down on the table. “Talia, are we really gonna keep letting—”

“Yes, Robert,” Talia cuts him off in warning, and smiles warmly at Cora, who blinks happily at the pink rabbit by her side. “Will Pig be eating today, Cora?”

Sometimes Pig isn’t hungry. Sometimes Pig ‘eats’ what Cora is having. Sometimes Pig wants a single baby carrot. “Yeah. We practiced jumping today after school so he’s really hungry.”

“So dad, what’dja do at work today?” Laura prompts him, as she shoves a truly tremendous mountain of sticky rice in her mouth.

“Oh, the usual. Bossed lots of people around. It was fun.”

“Are you any closer to finishing?”

“Not quite, but—“

“Oh, I forgot the parmesan,” Talia murmurs.

“No, you sit, T. I’ll get it,” Robert stands.
“Could you bring back the Italian soda, too?” Laura pipes up.

“Sorry hun, your sister and I finished off the last of it today.”

Laura shoots a frown at Cora. “Cora! I liked that soda. And we can only buy it every two weeks when Pietro comes down for the farmer’s market! And to think— wait a minute…” She sniffs the air by Cora’s mouth and gasps. “Where did you get chocolate? Did you eat the Hershey’s Kisses from the jar in my room?”

Cora nods happily as she piles a small portion of rice on Pig’s plate. “Mhm.”

“Laura, you shouldn’t keep candy in your room anyway. I don’t want ants in this house,” Talia adds mildly.

“I don’t think there’s an ant brave enough to step leg into your house,” Robert laughs as he sets the parmesan on the table. His smile fades as he checks on Derek, who’s blinking heavily at the untouched portion of falafel on his plate. He looks even sweeter than when he came home from practice, but Robert still can’t pinpoint what—

“Come on, mom, if Derek can have a mini gumball machine in his room then I can have a secret jar of candy,” Laura snorts. “I need to keep my blood sugar up so I can maintain my straight A’s. That bitch Hannah Cambell wants Valedictorian and I’ll be damned if I let her gross manicure touch my podium. Everyone knows that I—"

“Laura hold on,” Robert voices. He and Talia are both staring at Derek now.

Laura’s voice tapers off, face growing serious as she catches up. “Derek? Are you okay? You smell kind of…”

Which is when several things happen at once. Robert realizes what the smell is, and he rises out of his chair with a sharp mention of his wife’s name in warning. It’s also the same moment Talia figures out what’s wrong, and she’s also halfway out of her seat when Derek’s eyes roll back in his head and he pitches sideways from his chair, slumping heavily against the hardwood floor.

“Derek!”

Laura swears loudly and jumps from her chair but he and Talia are already there crouched on the floor, hands moving rhythmically to check the pressure points on his son’s body. The acrid scent of everyone’s alarm floods the room and masks the abandoned dinner still steaming on the table.

“Cora, sweetie, stay back,” he orders sharply, and he hears Cora’s tiny feet shuffle back hastily towards Laura.

“Laura, call Dr. Deaton,” Talia adds quickly. “My cellphone is in my purse, he’s second on speed-dial.”

“They should really have his number in their own phones,” Robert mutters.

“Now is not the time, Robert.”

“Derek? Derek, champ?” But his son is unconscious beneath his fingers, sweat beading his slack face. “Talia—” he thinks quickly. They know all the werewolves in town. “The Gaffigans, the Suix-Yongs, Bill’s son, what’s-his-face—"

“I don’t remember,” Talia jumps in for him. “The Thompsons, I think that’s it for the high school.”
Their hands fly as a team to check for any injuries they might have missed— Robert checks his pulse, lifts his shirt for any sign of wound. Talia cradles his face, places a cool hand on his forehead to see how bad the fever is— "hot," she says. Derek lies limp beneath them, sweaty and quiet with the telltale tremors racing throughout his body. Robert’s never been more terrified.

“His pulse is too fast,” he breathes. “It’s gotta be internal, there’s nothing on him.”

“The scent isn’t strong enough, I can’t make out which type it is,” Talia adds grimly. “I barely noticed it at the table.”

“Deaton’s on his way,” Laura rushes back over with Cora and Pig in tow. She clutches her little sister’s hand, halting a yard from Derek as if frozen in place. Her eyes are glued to her brother’s body, wide and fearful as they jump from his face to his sprawled legs, to where Talia is rubbing circles into his chest, but she knows better than to get in the way. “D-Dad? What’s—?

Robert leaves Talia to monitor Derek since she’s the one with the degree in botany and medicinal herbs. He stoops eye-level with Laura and places urgent hands on her shoulders. “Laura, I need you to think very carefully,” he orders. “Is there anyone at school who might want to hurt Derek? A werewolf peer or a student who knows about werewolves?”

“Focus, Laura. This is important. You said he was fine at lunch, right? Did Derek eat anything strange today? Did anyone slip anything into his backpack, spill something on him?”

“Wolfsbane?” Laura breathes, blinking sharply. She gets it, because she’s just as smart as her mother. “You’re thinking— Oh, no. Dad, dad his—!"

Laura grows pale, whips around, and sprints to Derek’s abandoned backpack and sports bag on the couch. “The players all leave their water bottles on the bench during practice,” she hastily explains. “Steven Gaffigan, he’s a werewolf on Derek’s team. His teammates like to—" Laura breaks off, biting her lip as if keeping in a secret. “—Steven doesn’t like Derek. He’d have a perfect opportunity to—"

She pops the lid off Derek’s water bottle and peeks inside, gasping at what she sees. Robert grabs it from her and does the same; tiny purple flower petals cling to the bottom of the plastic, left behind from poisoning his son’s drink.

“Talia,” he voices sharply, and returns swiftly to his wife with the bottle. On the ground Derek moans weakly, forehead creased pain and pallor white. He hands the bottle to her. “Looks like Chinese Monkshood.”

“No, it’s too light,” Talia observes. “And the petal shape is slightly off, I haven’t seen this kind before. We need to wait for Alan.”

“What if he can’t wait, Talia!” Robert hisses.

“Mom,” Derek groans.

“On his side,” Talia says quickly, and they roll his son over just as Derek starts dry heaving. He needs to expel the wolfsbane, but not without the anti chemical. Robert resists the urge to hit something and wills Alan to get here now.

“Dad, is he gonna be okay? He’s gonna be fine, right?” Laura hovers stiffly nearby, watching wide-eyed. Her breathing is fast, scraping against her throat.
“Laura, ahote, I need you to be strong for us right now,” Talia orders. “If you can’t handle this, leave the room. Otherwise bring me a wet washcloth and a bowl of ice.” Laura nods silently, lips pressed white, and in a swirl of dark hair she hurries to the kitchen.

Talia’s head snaps up. “Oh— Cora, Robert. Could you…?”

“On it.”

He doesn’t want to leave but he rises and follows the tiny whimpers over to his youngest daughter, who’s hiding behind the couch. Her knees are tucked up tight and Pig is smooshed to her chest. She blinks at Robert with wide, glassy eyes and his heart breaks. She looks so much like her mother. He gets on his hands and knees and crawls over to her, slapping on a calm smile for her sake.

“Hey, love bug,” he greets gently.

In the tiniest voice, “Daddy?”

“Yeah, daddy’s right here. Whatch’a doing all the way over here, huh?”

“M’scared,” Cora whimpers.

“Aw, I know,” Robert sympathizes. “But you’re my brave little sunflower girl, you know that? Cora Nidfyflíí, the one who makes us all smile. Whadda’ya say you come with me outside for a while, okay? Pig too.”

“M’kay.” Cora sniffles and reaches her arms out. Robert hoists her up from the armpits and cradles her to his chest, keeping her head down with his hand so that she doesn’t try to see Derek dry heaving on the floor. “Mommy got some nice new Thanksgiving decorations for the front door, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, did I tell you that at work today we melted glass?”

“Really?”

“Mhm. A whole bunch of it. It turns gooey like dish soap.”

“But glass is hard.”

“Not when it’s really hot! Isn’t that neat?”

“Yeah.”

The porch is dark and cool compared to the brightly lit chaos inside the house. Crickets from the surrounding bushes chirp lazily as he maneuvers Cora on his lap and sits down on the wooden steps, bouncing her gently atop his knee. She’s eight (and a half), but she’s tiny and undoubtedly the cuddliest member of his family. Her heightened senses aren’t fully developed yet so she can’t hear anything inside, but Derek’s labored breaths are a loud countdown in Robert’s ears. He’s out here to keep his daughter calm, but honestly he needs her just as much.

“The woods look pretty tonight, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. The woods always look pretty.”

“Your mom said you went exploring down by the creek yesterday. Did you find anything fun?”
“Two banana slugs and a tsxilghááh,” Cora pronounces flawlessly. “And, um… Oh, a poop.”

“Wow, it’s been awhile since you found a salamander,” he praises. “And some poop, huh? Could you tell what animal it belonged to?”

“Mommy said fox. I thought it was a unicorn.”

“Mmm. Unicorn season is in the winter, but I haven’t seen one of them in a while. They tend to be pretty shy.”

“Daddy?” Cora blinks at him. “What’s wrong with Derek?”

Quietness settles over Robert. He thinks about choosing the best approach. “Well, sweetheart. You know how special it is to be a werewolf, right?”

“Mhm.”

“That’s good. We can do a lot of things regular humans can’t, like hear really well and run really fast, and shift into wolves. But sometimes we’re more vulnerable to certain things, like that purple flower I showed you, remember?”

“Uh-huh, wolfsbane. What’s vulmer-able?”

“Vulnerable means weak, or powerless. Derek has some wolfsbane inside him right now so he’s feeling sick. Your mom and I don’t know what kind it is, therefore we don’t know which herbs to give him to make him better. That’s why we’re waiting for our friend Dr. Deaton.”

“Why did Derek eat the purple flower?”

“Well… Someone tricked him into eating it,” Robert says seriously. “That’s why it’s very important to keep our wolf side a secret, because it can be used to hurt us.”

“Why would someone do that?” Cora implores. Her question is so innocent, eyes so big he can see the moon in them. He sighs.

“Well… It’s kind of like your movie Babe,” he decides on. They all have it memorized at this point. “There are good animals like Babe and Ferdinand the duck and the Farmer, but there are also bad animals like Duchess the cat. Remember how Duchess scratches Babe’s nose and says that he doesn’t belong with the other animals in the farmhouse?”

“Yeah. That was mean.”

“It was. And in the same way, sometimes bad people want to hurt us because we’re different. Especially if they know we’re werewolves. This time someone decided to hurt your brother, which is why we need to be extra careful so we can protect ourselves from bad guys.”

“Like Peter.”

Robert blinks. “What?”

“Like Peter,” Cora repeats as she plays with Pig’s ears. “He’s a bad guy. He doesn’t like butterflies.”

“What do you mean he doesn’t like butterflies?”

“He kills them. I saw him squish one a long time ago at the creek. It made him smile.”
For a minute the crickets in the bushes dull to white noise. Robert stares at the edge of the preserve, something uneasy settling in his stomach. He opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out, and then the two pinprick headlights of Deaton’s car appear in the darkness.

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Alan gets in the door what seems like an hour later, but is actually only two minutes according to Robert’s watch. Talia relays the information and Derek’s vitals as Robert sends Cora off with Laura upstairs, because his little one is too young to see what happens next. Deaton examines the flower petals at the bottom of Derek’s water bottle, hums darkly, and opens his briefcase, mixing together a few select herbs into a dark paste.

He and Talia prop up a semi-conscious Derek against the couch and coax the sludge down his throat, and a minute later he retches a glob of black stomach contents onto the living room floor.

They all breathe a sigh of relief, aside from Deaton who remains clinically impassive as ever.

“You were wise to wait for me, Talia,” Alan informs them once Derek is tucked in a blanket on the couch. “The petals at the bottom of Derek’s water bottle belong to a rare wolfsbane hybrid called Sythblossom, which can only be expelled with the combination of cedar wood ash with it’s petals. I’ve only dealt with a couple other cases before, but you’re lucky I kept a sample of the flower in case of emergency.”

“How on earth did a high school kid get his grimy hands on it, then?” Robert demands.

“Steven Gaffigan’s father travels frequently to more tropical areas for his job,” Deaton voices as he hands the leftover Sythblossom stem to Talia to examine. “On occasion he brings back herb samples for me that he buys from the local weres. It’s very possible that Steven could have found it amongst his father’s collection. This breed of plant tends to work quietly before worsening all at once. Derek probably felt queasy during practice and then experienced more violent effects at the dinner table.”

“Seemed like it, yeah,” Robert grunts. “The day nature quits making more breeds of wolfsbane is the day I declare myself a vegan.”

Deaton nods. “This wolfsbane isn’t very potent to adult werewolves, but because Derek is a teenager it affected his system much harsher. If Laura’s suspicions are correct in that Steven poisoned him on purpose, Steven probably didn’t realize it would be this dangerous. Only intended as a prank to make Derek tipsy during practice, perhaps.”

“What, so he could look like an idiot in front of his coach and teammates?” Robert snarls, eyes flickering crimson. Talia places a calm hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s not take out our frustrations on our friend Dr. Deaton, dear. Thank you Alan, for your help.” She voices calmly, cordially, like the centered woman she is. Robert doesn’t know how she does it.

“Anytime,” the vet answers humbly. He picks up his briefcase and heads for the door. “Derek should be completely fine in a day or so. Make sure he stays hydrated and gets lots of rest. If anything else goes awry, give me a call.”

“Sure thing, doc. Take care.”

The front door closes with a quiet snick. Robert turns slowly towards the couch where Derek is sleeping. He treads forward, faintly aware of Talia following at his heels. His son looks smaller than
usual laid up under the blanket, painted with a vulnerability that screams more human than werewolf. “Derek, champ?” He asks softly.

“Mom,” Derek mumbles.

And something ugly snaps inside him. Robert doesn’t even know why but he immediately clams up, body stiffening angrily, and he spins around sharply to storm down the hall. “He wants you,” he voices in passing his wife, harsher than he means to.

“Robert—”

“No no, stay with him, he asked for you.”

But she follows him down the hall and into the nearest bedroom anyway, which happens to be the old nursery. It’s painted like the forest with pale blues and calm greens, and a mountain of stuffed animals by the bassinet. It’s hard to believe his children were ever small enough to fit inside.

“Why would he do that!” Robert whirs around angrily to face his wife. “He must have felt bad as early as practice! You heard him, I asked him if he was fine and he said he was! Why would he hide that from us?” From me.

Talia takes a deep breath and holds his gaze. “Robert. It’s not that he didn’t want us to know. It’s that he didn’t want you to find out.”

“What, why? That’s ridicu—”

“He’s embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? Why on earth— Fuck, Talia, he could have died! He scared the absolute crap out of me, I hope I never have to see my son laid out sick on my floor again!”

“It scared all of us, Robert. But he’s safe now, he’ll be recovered in a couple days—“

“Oh, oh, so then you can continue packing his lunch and teaching him how to frost a cake while I’m at work, right?” He snarls unexpectedly. ”That’s what you were going to say, wasn’t it? That Derek tells you everything and a bag of chips while I’m left ignored on the sidelines? Because you swoop in and handle everything with him like you’re afraid to let me touch him!”

“We both know that’s not what the problem—“

“Problem? What the problem is? Well why don’t you tell me, since you’re the one who knows everything about everyone around here!”

“If you’d just calm down and—”

“Why won’t my son talk to me!”

“Because he’s scared of you, Robert!”

It’s like a slap in the face. He blinks, mouth falling open. “What?”

Talia’s expression softens as she regains her cool composure. “He’s scared of you,” she repeats, quieter this time. “And I know it hurts to hear, but you’re the only one who can’t see it.”

He sputters silently. He spins around, paces to the window, looks back to Talia in question. It doesn’t make any sense. He’s the fun dad, the one who takes them out for ice cream and showers them with
presents and laughs at their jokes and— “He’s scared of me?” he whispers. “But— why? I don’t— I’m not like…”

Peter. He isn’t like Peter.

He meet Talia’s eyes in silent question. She nods slowly. “I know you’re not like your brother. But Derek still remembers Peter’s criticism and believes that a part of you thinks the same of him. That he’s not an adequate werewolf to meet your expectations.”

Robert is quiet for a long time. It makes sense. He’s doesn’t talk to Derek as much as he interacts with the girls, because he never knows what to say anymore. An unspoken tension mounted between them around the time Derek hit high school, when his son started clamming up around him. It started changing when Derek hit puberty, thirteen, fourteen, maybe. When he grew five inches and his limbs were stretched thin and gangly and his voice started squeaking and cracking. Peter had made it obvious that he thought Derek was weak and underdeveloped.

“How do you kn—“ he licks his lips. “Does he… Talk to you about this?”

Talia regards him unblinkingly. “Yes, Robert. He talks to me.”

The hurt makes his expression fall. “So why doesn’t he like me? Has he told you why?”

Talia chuckles sadly. “Robert, that boy loves you, more than you can even imagine. You should see the way he looks at you when you’re too busy to notice.”

“Okay, then what’s the problem? Why doesn’t he ever—”

“He’s self-conscious, Robert. You know the kids at school tease him. That boy wouldn’t hurt a fly, he’s never dated a girl, and it costs him dearly amongst his peers. He looks up to you, Robert. He sees you the same as our girls do— the tall, strong, successful, celebrated alpha of Beacon Hills, while he’s a shy teenage boy still growing into his limbs. He compares himself to you, the man of the house, and thinks that he falls short of your expectations every time someone picks on him or he shows weakness.”

He gapes. “But I think he’s— he’s brilliant, Talia, you know that! Sure, he’s a little on the small side, but so I was I, so is every fifteen-year-old boy! Fuck, I don’t care about that, I care about, well, him! How sweet he is with Cora and how his teachers say how smart he is, do you have any idea how proud I am of him? God, Talia, he’s my son, I love him!”

“When was the last time you told him that?” Talia cuts in.

And Robert… Robert doesn’t have an answer for that. His stomach feels like lead. “I… I hadn’t… Of course I would tell him, I used to tell him all the time! I just… Now he’s…” Older. Distant. Scared. Scared of his own dad. "I don’t know how to approach him.”

“You have to find the courage to tell him everything you just told me. Or else how is he supposed to know it?”

And with that Talia leaves the room in a quiet swish of dark hair, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

He last maybe thirty seconds before he runs to catch up with her in the family room. She’s watching quietly from the hallway; their daughters (unsurprisingly) did not listen to their instructions to stay upstairs. Laura is sitting cross-legged on the floor at the head of the couch by Derek’s head, stroking slender fingers through Derek’s bangs. Cora is sitting by her side with Pig in her lap, staring at her
brother intensely. Derek looks asleep, but Robert can hear his heartbeat going just a tad too fast for him to be out.


Laura’s shoulders shake a little, but she’s too proud to let herself cry fully in front of her brother. He and Talia have been keeping count; Talia has heard Laura say “I love you” to Derek three times. Robert has heard it once, and twice including this time. The first was when Derek was still in Talia’s belly from a three-year old Laura. Derek cracks his eyes open a sliver to look at her. He swallows and smirks weakly. “Wow,” he whispers, voice raw. “You really do have a heart.”

Laura flicks him lightly on the forehead. “Shut up, fuzzbutt. I take it all back.”

Cora scoots forward, nose peeking over the couch cushions in front of her brother’s face. “Derek,” she whispers. Derek cracks his eyes open. They fall closed again but he manages a smile for her, probably sensing her fear. “Hi, Cora.”

She studies him, eyes big and brown, lips pursed in worry. “You’re not gonna die, right?” she whispers.

“Nah, I’m okay, I promise. I’m just gonna sleep now, ‘kay?”

Cora gently pushes Pig beneath his cheek. “Pig says he wants to sleep with you tonight. He’s good at making people feel better.”

Derek opens his eyes again briefly to smile at her, revealing a hint of his front teeth. To Robert’s surprise his son reaches a hand out and curls his fingers around the rabbit, tucking it in closer. His eyes flutter closed again. “Thanks, Cora.”

With one last flick on the forehead Laura hoists Cora into her arms and carries her up the stairs. After everyone is gone, Talia leaves to clean up the dining table, probably on purpose. So he takes his cue and slowly approaches the couch, making sure Derek is sound asleep. He stares and his heart breaks at how young and old his son’s face looks at the same time. It seems just a few blinks ago he was holding an infant with a shock of soft black hair in his arms, how time flies by and everything Talia said, and how Robert nearly missed it.

Tentatively, he reaches a hand out and gently lays it on his son’s dark hair.

“I’m so sorry, champ.”

.o00O0o. April 20th, 2009.

“I’m so proud of you, kiddo!”

Stiles runs into John’s arms with a victorious “whoop!” and John swings him around in a bear-hug that makes his back crack, not caring about how some of the other 6th grade parents observe them. His son just scored the winning goal.

“Did you see that?” Stiles squeals, a breathless, wriggling, sweaty body of pure joy in John’s arms.

“You mean how you side-stepped the other team, juggled the ball all the way across the field and kicked the winning goal? Heck yeah I did!”
“That was me, it was—I did it! Dad, I did it!”

“That’s right, I told you you would,” John smiles. It’s the first real accomplishment Stiles has made outside of household chores, and you can see the pride glowing on his eleven-year-old face.

“D’you think I can make it on the soccer team in high school?” Stiles pants. The kid has an inability to think ahead to a rational goal, often instead jumping lightyears into the future.

“I don’t think Beacon Hills High has a soccer team,” John says gently, “But I know a lot of people around here go to see the lacrosse games. If you’re interested in that.”

“What’s lacrosse?” Stiles wrinkles his nose.

“I think it’s the sport where they have those stick things. And there’s a ball involved.” He scratches his head. “We could look it up.”

“On the computer?” Stiles gasps hopefully.

The beige dinosaur he and Claudia bought in 1999 died a few months ago, so John bought a desktop Macintosh. Stiles loves the computer with a passion and will beg John for hours in order to play a game of Spaceball.

“Yes, on the internet,” John sighs.

“Come on, kids! Gather up Gators, let’s give the Tigers some high-fives!”

The coach blows the whistle and Stiles bounds off to join his team. The kids line up and slap hands as they pass each other, and John looks on with a proud smile.

“That’s our boy,” he murmurs to the sky.

.o0O0o. February 7th, 2009.

“Happy birthdayyyyy to youuu… Happy birthdaaayyy dear Lauraaa… Happy birthday to youuuuuuuuAAAAWWWOOOOOoo000000000000!”

Laura blows out the candles as the four of them howl towards the ceiling. Laura’s friends, all stunningly beautiful high school seniors, laugh and stare.

“Okay, so we know your family is kinda weird, but what’s with the howling?” Alex asks. Alex is Laura’s scariest friend, with short black hair and a piercing on her nose. She wears a lot of black.

“Just a tradition we like to do for birthdays,” Robert answers as he plucks another chocolate-covered strawberry from the table.

“Did you guys used to own a dog at one point?” Kim asks. Kim is Laura’s nicest friend, with long blonde hair and freckles on her nose. She wears a lot of lip gloss.

“Nah. But Derek looks pretty scruffy if you ask me,” Laura teases, and ruffles Derek’s hair.

“Shut up,” he swats her hand away and glares his signature glare.

“You’re just jealous that I’m an adult now,” Laura preens, making grabby hands at the slice of chocolate cake Talia hands her. “I can get into clubs, buy a lottery ticket, vote, gamble… What
can you do, Derek? Recite the periodic table? Mumble when people talk to you?"

“I don’t mumble,” Derek mumbles.

Laura’s friends (Talia let her invite four of them— Alex, Kim, Emily, and Rebecca) burst into giggles.

“Oh my god, you so do!” Laura cackles. “You’re sooooo shy, it actually pains me. You’re like a turtle! We should get you a shell so you can hide in it when we force you to be social.”

“At least I’m not an ego-maniac social butterfly like you,” Derek shoots back.

“Ha! You want to talk ego-maniac? I saw you flexing in front of the mirror the other day. Or trying, at least. Too bad you don’t have any muscles to actually flex.”

“Laura,” Talia frowns. Laura and her friends melt into laughter.

“Aaaww, Laura, don’t tease him!” Kim coos sympathetically. “You’re embarrassing him, look, he’s turning red!”

Sure enough, Derek’s ears are flaming as he stares down at his dessert. Scents of shame and unhappiness roll off him in waves, killing Robert’s appetite even for Talia’s famous German chocolate cake.

“Excuse me,” Derek mumbles, and stands up abruptly. He stalks off to the front door and slams it behind him.

“Don’t worry about him, such a drama queen,” Laura rolls her eyes. “He’s like your cat, Emily. So temperamental.”

The girls quickly transition into a rapid-fire conversation about other people Emily’s cat resembles, including a few “dickbags” at school. Robert’s tried to follow their conversations all evening, but they jump so fast between topics and gossip about names he doesn’t know, it’s near impossible.

He leaves his cake half unfinished and stealthily leaves the table.

The cold night air greets his nose as he pokes his head outside to the porch, but Derek isn’t there. Derek likes to retreat deeper into the woods when he mopes, and sure enough when Robert walks a few extra yards into the trees he finds his son sitting on a tree stump, knees tucked up and head in his hands.

"Hey, champ."

“Hey,” Derek says without turning around. “You can go back inside, I'm just getting some air."

"Your sister's being pretty loud, huh.” Robert takes a seat next to him on the stump.

"So loud.” Derek caves. “I hate her birthday, it's like she turns into Laura squared. This year it's worse because she's eighteen and thinks she's all high and mighty for being an adult. And her friends are just as bad, they're all annoying and Laura just likes to make fun of me more when they’re around.”

“Maybe she teases you because she’s jealous.”

Derek looks at him like he’s crazy. “Uh, no.”
“Yeah. I think so.”

“Laura is the most popular girl in school, she has tons of friends, she’s senior Valedictorian, and she holds the state record for the most number of field hockey goals scored in one season,” Derek blurts bitterly. “I don’t do anything. There’s nothing to be jealous of.”

“You have the one thing Laura doesn’t have,” Robert shares. He raises a finger and presses it to his son’s chest. “Compassion.”

Derek snorts.

“It’s nothing to laugh at, champ. Your sister may be all of those things, but she can’t comfort someone to save her life. You, on the other hand, wield empathy like it’s your skin and bones. Even when you were little you used share your lunch with kids in your first grade class and cry at sad movies.”

“Dad, that’s so lame,” Derek tucks his head deeper into his knees.

“Far from it,” Robert says seriously. “I want to tell you something Derek, and I probably should have said it a long time ago. Peter had a certain idea that werewolves should be unemotional, powerful beasts. But your mother and I do not share the same opinion. We raised you guys to have strength of heart, and you excel at that beyond anyone we know.”

Derek peeks up at him with those iridescent eyes—the ones that look like his father’s more and more each day. Robert sighs. He loves him so much it hurts.

“And I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like you didn’t meet my expectations. Because you exceeded them, champ. There hasn’t been a second in your life where I haven’t been proud of you.”

Derek, who always squirms under praise, hides his eyes by looking the other way. Robert can sense a cacophony of emotions radiating off him, all sweet, buttery scents that come with Christmas morning and good news.

“Thanks, dad.”

Robert smiles. He claps Derek’s shoulder and stands up. "Come on, up."

Derek blinks at him. "Are we going back inside?"

"Nah. You need to blow off some steam. You're gonna drive us to the main road."


“Because you need to have some fun right now. You really want to go back inside with those five crazy teenage girls?”

“No,” Derek agrees, and follows him to the garage.

“Now pick a car, any car,” Robert advertises as he lifts the door, revealing the colorful lineup of sports cars (parked in color order): The red Maserati, the yellow Lamborghini, the dark green vintage Thunderbird, the baby blue 1950’s Cadillac, the dark blue ’60 Mustang, Talia’s white BMW, Laura’s silver Porsche, and the black Cobra.

“Any car?” Derek lifts an eyebrow.

“Yep.”
“Maybe— Are you sure this is okay? I only just got my license, and I haven’t really—“

“Son, just pick a car.”

Derek bites his lip. He looks to Robert. “The Maserati?”

Robert’s favorite car. The Maserati is his baby, a gleaming crimson angel on four-wheel drive that has guided him through life since 1986. No one except him drives the Maserati.

“Good choice.” Robert throws him the keys. Derek stares at them like they’re made of gold.

On the road Robert is reminded how much of a grandma driver Derek is. Bordering on overly-cautious, breaking for all three seconds at the stop signs, and going far too slow for what the Maserati deserves. By the time they make it to the long, quiet stretch of road out the woods, Robert can’t take it anymore.

“You want to go a little faster?”

“Why?”

“It’s fun to take a risk once in a while. It’s what these cars are made for.”

Derek presses the gas a little harder.

“Wanna know a trick?” Robert suggests. “Let the car roll on it’s own for a bit and then tap the gas pedal.”

Derek obeys, and smiles when the engine revs like a tiger. The engine purrs and growls with every push, and the speedometer climbs from forty to sixty.

“That’s it!” Robert laughs.

“I can see why you like this car,” Derek grins as he smoothly zips around a curve. They’re traveling down the paved road that will take the out of the preserve. Trees zip by them beneath the dark night sky.

“Yeah!” Robert whoops.

“AAaarrrroooooo!” Derek tips his head back and howls, wind ruffling his already wild hair.

“AAARRRRRRROOOOOOoooo!” Robert matches, and the two of them match harmonies again and again beneath the moon until Derek melts into laughter.

“Make way, we’re— hang on, watch the—!”

Derek gasps and slams on the breaks as the car slips sideways on a pot hole.

“Easy, easy!”

“Dad!”

Robert’s head whips forward as the car crashes into a tree with a deafening crunch. He chokes as the seatbelt digs into his chest and a blink later the airbag deploys and smacks him in the face. He scrabbles at it, popping it with his claws as he frantically yells for his son.

“Derek? Shit, Derek?! Derek, champ, are you okay? Oh, shit—“
Derek groans as he clutches his forehead, a rivulet of blood oozing down between his fingers.
Robert’s hands are on him in a second, brushing over his hair and pushing the fingers out of the way so he can see. A large gash decorates the skin there from where his head hit the steering wheel.

“Shit, your head, are you alright—?”

“I’m fine,” Derek says quickly, but his hands are shaking. His eyes are wide as he stares at the shattered windshield. “I—I’m s-so sorry, dad—”

“Hey, look at me. Are you really okay? That’s a nasty bump you got there,” Robert says worriedly, reaching hand out to prod at the wound again.

“Dad, I’m sorry, it was an ac-ccident!” Derek gasps, growing pale. “I didn’t mean—“

“Whoa, whoa, champ! Slow down, it’s okay, you—“

“I crashed your car,” Derek whispers, eyes glassy and wide. “I crashed your—“

“Hey, Derek champ, calm down, it’s okay,” Robert says, startled. “It’s just a car, son. We’ve got plenty more.”

Derek takes a deep breath and stares at his lap. The gash on his forehead slowly seals up and disappears. “I’m sorry.”

Something in Robert breaks at the tone of his son’s voice. Failure, insecurity, guilt. While Laura is arrogant and Cora never does anything wrong, Derek is always the first to apologize for his actions, sometimes apologizing for things he didn’t even do.

“I don’t want to hear any more apologies,” Robert orders. “You did just fine. It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have encouraged you to do something so dangerous.”

Derek clicks out of his seat belt and stumbles outside. He stares in horror at the smoking engine. “Dad, your car…”

Robert steps out, slowly walking around to the front of the Maserati. The front is crumpled in like a crushed soda can, shiny red hood cracked up as grey smoke billows from the engine. The windshield is splintered nearly opaque, and one tire is askew on it’s axis. There’s no redeeming it, and it stings like acid.

“It’s okay, we can—I’ll, uh,” he scratches his head as he looks at his demolished baby. “I’ll call your mother and tell her I was driving.”

“But that’s—!”

“Ah-ah. She can’t ground me for a year, just yell at me considerably for an hour or so.”

Derek winces. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Don’t beat yourself up over it. Good thing cell phones have internet now, huh?” he says, taking out his iPhone. “Let’s see if I can find a tow—oh. unless there’s no service out here. So much for technology.”

Derek parks himself on a nearby rock and tucks his arms into his armpits. “Well what do we do now?”

Robert studies the car. He grabs the bumper and hoists it up, and starts dragging it back towards the
house. Derek gapes and scrambles out of the way.

“Holy crap, dad!”

“I’m the alpha of the county for a reason, son,” Robert huffs with pride. The Maserati squeaks in offense as he drags her back end through the dirt and leaves.

“Wow,” Derek breathes.

“Come on, keep up.”

His sixteen-year-old scurries forward and sticks his hands in his pocket as they walk side by side. It’s quiet for about a minute, and then—

“Thanks.”

“For what?” Robert asks.

“Taking me out here,” Derek shrugs. “It was… Nice.”

Robert laughs a little, because he said that same line to Talia twenty-one years ago when they sat side by side on an old elm marked for termination. Funny, since back then he had no idea they would end up buying that mansion in the woods he discovered as a wolf, and that he would attain that happy family he saw through the windows.

“Anytime, champ.”

“I love you, dad.”

Robert nearly drops the car. Instead he stares at his son, his gawky limbs as he trudges across the woods he knows so well, his shy eyes glued to the ground, and listens to that familiar heartbeat steady with the truth.

“I love you too, Derek.”

.o0O0o. March 12th, 2009 (11:47pm).

Robert climbs onto the bed and curls himself around Talia. She lifts the arm that’s holding her book to let him in— he’s in his boxers and an old sleep t-shirt despite the cold evening because his wife is like a furnace, and he rests his cheek over her chest. He can hear her heart beating the loudest that way, which he likes because it’s always a waltz twice as slow as his own heart.

“How is he?” He asks.

“He’s still up reading that book for his Literature test tomorrow.”

“Catcher in the Rye,” he huffs with a smile. “That was a good one.”

“Why don’t you pick him up from school tomorrow?” Talia pets her warm fingers through his hair. “The elementary and middle schools are having a holiday so I’ll be staying home with Cora, and Laura has field hockey until six if you wanted to take him somewhere.”

“I’d love to. You think he’d want to do that with me? Just me and him?”
“Of course. He still has your jacket hanging over his desk chair, you know. I wouldn’t be surprised if he tries it on every day.”

“Really?”

“Mhm.”

“Wow.” Robert smiles against her chest. “That’s… What if I take him to the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco? They just remodeled and it seems like it’s right up his alley.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Talia tells him. “I bet he’d love that.”

“It’s settled then. A surprise trip after school tomorrow, in celebration of him acing his reading test. Assuming he finishes the book tonight.”

She places her novel on the nightstand and clicks off the lamp, swathing them in darkness. Her body flips over so her freckled nose is just an inch from his and she plants a small kiss on his lips. They face each other in the calm dark of the room, eyes luminescent with the wolves within them.

“I wanted to tell you something else, too,” he says, tracing a thumb over her hand. “I was debating announcing it at the dinner table tonight, but I wanted to tell you first since you’re the one who inspired it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” he grins, stomach fluttering with the weight of what he’s about to say. “The team and I finalized our material today. We made something something strong as steel but twice as light. It only took twenty years… But we did it.”

“Oh, Robert,” Talia smiles at him. ”That’s wonderful!”

“Yeah,” he breathes, “A biodegradable super material that can replace wood in building construction. Once we get the okay from the Buildings and Grounds Administration then I can sign it off for purchase. If just ten contractors in the state switch over to it, we can save thirty-thousand trees a year.”

“And what do you call it?”

“Taliastone. Are you…? Oh my god, are you laughing? Hun! I named it after you! Because you’re so strong and… Yeah, nevermind. I take it back, I’ll just name it ‘Robertstone’ or ‘Dura-flex’ or something.”

“No, no I’m honored,” Talia whispers, but she’s still sniggering through her fingers. “I don’t know why I’m laughing.”

He giggles with her. It’s one of those rare moments when his wife lets her guard down and lets herself grow silly and pliant. He runs his hands over her arms and pulls the covers up higher when he feels the goosebumps there.

“You’re cold,” he points out.

“It’s a cold night.”

“Isn’t it? You’d think by mid-March we’d start seeing some sunshine, at least in California. But not Beacon Hills, I guess.”
“That’s alright. The heating will kick in if it drops below forty-five.”

“And I have you, A.K.A. the Furnace Woman,” Robert hums.

“Goodnight, dear.”

Talia turns her head into the pillow. He breathes her in, tunes his ears so he can hear the three heartbeats of his children—Laura’s restless *thump-thump* alongside a rock song because she listens to headphones when she sleeps, Cora’s tiny heartbeat probably cuddled up to Pig, and Derek’s slow metronome as he turns the pages of his book slower and slower. Robert hugs his wife, breathes deep, and smiles against her shoulder.

“‘Night, hun.”
Part 6

Chapter Summary

Life, love, and the world spins on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

.o0O0o. March 13th, 2009 (6:26am).

“And then Lydia raises her and and like, swishes her hair over her shoulder and says the answer is seventy-three, and Mr. Carlito was all like, say whaaaaaat! And then the whole class applauded for her, I was the loudest of course, but I don’t think she heard me because she’s right under the air conditioning, right? But oh man, I’m gonna marry her one day, dad. Do you think she’ll come today?”

“I dunno, kiddo,” John voices around his cereal. Lydia Martin has yet to acknowledge his son with a single phrase other than, “what the heck is a Stiles?” but the amount of false hope his kid has is astounding. He doesn’t want to ruin that anytime soon, especially not on his twelfth birthday.

Stiles sighs as he slumps dreamily over the dining table. “I bet she will. I slipped six invitations into her desk this past week to make sure she didn’t miss it, like for insurance in case one blew away in the wind or dropped to the floor or got lost in her backpack, you know? Plus I was talking to Scott near her in P.E., and I made sure to mention really loudly that there would be macaroons here today, and Lydia totally loves French things. So she’s totally coming.”

“Is that why you had me buy those things?”

It’s not quite six-thirty in the morning. Stiles does this every year— wakes up at five, paces around his room excitedly which inadvertently wakes John up with the noise, which John then tries to ignore until he eventually gives up and gets out of bed. Then Stiles barrels into him with very loud “Yes, you’re up! Sure took you long enough, let’s get the show on the road because it’s your favorite son’s BIRTHDAY!” and then sprints to start the coffee machine as John contemplates whether to talk to Dr. Shirley about increasing his Adderall dose again.

Granted Stiles’s birthday is actually tomorrow on the fourteenth, but they’re having the party today since it’s a school holiday.

Currently his son is scribbling out a list of activities for the day as he eats breakfast (eating breakfast: scooping out a handful of Lucky Charms from the box, shoving it dry into his mouth until his cheeks are puffed like a chipmunk, and then tipping his head back to guzzle milk straight from the damn gallon. Sometimes he chokes on it all, most times he just chews obscenely and dribbles mushy cereal down his chin).

“Son, can you please just get a bowl?” John sighs for the millionth time as he watches colorful marshmallows drop to the floor. It’s like his son has an allergy to table manners.
“Sorry pop, no time for that,” Stiles burps around his food. He flips his list around for John to see. “Okay, so we need to shower, make the sandwiches, fill the ice chest, and be out the door by nine to pick up Scott. I already have my outfit laid out so we should save some time there. Then we go to Stratford Park to set up the jumpy house, yes, and then Melissa comes at ten-ish with the cake, which is also yes, and then we make sure everything is perfect and ready for all my peeps at noon!”

“Sounds like a plan,” John finds the remote and flicks on the TV to find the news.

“Heck yeah it does! Dang, this is gonna be the best birthday ever. Especially since Lydia’s coming. Oh man, she doesn’t even need to bring a gift, her presence is the best gift in the world,” Stiles croons. “Oh, and Scott’s gonna bring his new Green Lantern comics so we can show everyone, I’m gonna make so many new friends.”

“And you, uh, made sure that Scott helped you hand out the invites, right?” John ventures.

This is Stiles’s first year at the Beacon Hills Junior High; he’s in a class with eighteen other students and the only ones he knows are Scott (his best and only friend), and Lydia Martin (who avoids him like the plague). According to Melissa Scott has actually done well making new friends even with the hindrance of his asthma during recess, but John wishes he could say the same for his son. While Scott is growing up handsome and humble Stiles grows more odd-looking everyday with his buzz cut and Bambi-like eyes, and his motormouth has a tendency to annoy everyone in hearing distance.

“Nah, I figured it would make more of an impact if I handed them all out myself. Like it is my birthday, right?”

“—biggest estate in Beacon Hills caught fire last night due to a gas leak, reporters say the Hale mansion—“

John’s head snaps to the television. He fumbles with the remote and turns up the volume, jostling his spoon enough to to fall to the floor with a clatter.

“Uh… Right, dad?"

John slowly rises from the table as he stares at the smoking ruins of a large house in the woods.

“—exploded after an indoor heater turned on automatically. Four out of five family members died in the flames, including husband and wife Robert and Talia Hale, ages forty-nine and fifty-one, and daughters Laura and Cora Hale, ages eighteen and eight.”

His breath catches in his throat.

“—the only survivor is son Derek Hale, age sixteen, who is currently being treated for severe burns and smoke inhalation at Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital. Officials say that as the sole heir to the Hale fortune, he will inherit over forty-seven million dollars as well as his family’s estate. The only other living relative, said to be Hale’s new legal guardian, is—"

“Whoa, what happened?” Stiles catches sight of the TV and takes another swig of milk.

“…A fire, I guess,” John murmurs. He watches as a family photo of the Hales pops up on the screen, above a scrolling text of “FOUR DEAD IN ESTATE FIRE—“

“Dang, everyone but the son died? That sucks.”

John stares at the screen.
“—ello, earth to dad? You didn’t know them, did you?”

John stares sadly at the flames on the screen. “No,” he says.

*I never took the chance to.*

“Okay then, so let’s send the funeral some flowers and continue on with the par-tay planning! We’ve got a lot to do today in the name of— dad? Hey, dad! Where are you going?”

But John is already halfway down the hall to the bathroom, where he sits heavily on the toilet and breathes great shuddering breaths into his hands after locking the door behind him.

His fingers are trembling and his chest feels strange and tight— which confuses the hell out of him because he didn’t really *know* them. Sure, he met Robert Hale in passing a couple times over the past decade, and sure Claudia used to be in an environmental group with Talia Hale, who might have been the same Talia who helped him that night of Loma Prieta, but it’s not like the Stilinski’s ever had them over for brunch. And their kids probably never overlapped in school— what did the television say? Ages sixteen, eighteen, and…

Eight.

The little one was only eight years old.

John remembers Stiles at that age, loud and tiny with a mop of messy brown hair. He closes his eyes and swallows down a lump of grief, particularly for the teenage boy left alone without his family. It conjures unwanted memories of losing Claudia, and worse fears about leaving Stiles all alone like that if he should die tomorrow. It’s unfair, he thinks, how life can pull the rug out from underneath you so fast.

*Nice meeting you, Robert.*

*Nice meeting you, John.*

He splashes some water on his face and goes back to the kitchen. John still has his kid, and he’s gonna make sure he gets the best damn birthday party there ever was. As his mom used to say, the world must keep spinning.

"Dad, why were you in there so long? Drink some more coffee if you’re constipated. We’ve got a party to throw!"

.o0O0o.

They arrive at the park at eleven-thirty sharp. Scott and Stiles run off to the jungle gym and race each other across the monkey bars and John pays the company man as the jumpy inflates. He’s unloading the snacks from the ice chest onto a table when Melissa arrives from her shift.

“Hey Mel,” he smiles.

“Hey Melissa!” “Hi mom,” his kids greet as they run over from the playground.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” Melissa pulls Stiles in for a quick hug as she hands him a pretty wrapped present. Stiles takes it and shakes it by his ear.

“Wow, thanks! What is it?”
“Guess you’ll have to open it and find out.”

“Okay kids, she’s all blown up!” The PartyPop guy calls from the jumpy. Scott and Stiles cheer and race each other over, tripping as they pull off their shoes. John chuckles but then Melissa pulls him aside and whispers,

“Did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Did Stiles tell you?”

“Tell me what?” John frowns. “You’re scaring me.”

Melissa sighs. “Scott said that another kid in their class is having a birthday party today—Danny Māhealani.”

John stares at her. “You’re kidding me. It’s sixth grade, there’s only nineteen kids in their class! Is this Danny cool?”

“According to Scott, he’s very cool,” Melissa purses her lips like she wants to beat the shit out of Danny for being popular. “Scott got the invitation yesterday, it got lost in the mail. Laser tag followed by dinner at Vandermil’s. They’re even getting Usher to come give a private performance.”

“Jesus Christ,” John buries his head in his hands. “Stiles didn’t get an invite, I wonder if he even knows.”

Melissa bites her lip and looks around the park, which suddenly looks like a very sad getup compared to what privileged kids can afford. “Did you get RSVPs for this?”

“Of course! I heard back from ten parents last week, they all said their kids would be here.”

“But if Danny sent out his invitations after Stiles did, I just worry that…” Melissa trails off, biting her lip. They stare at their boys. Scott and Stiles are roughhousing inside the jumpee, cackling and challenging each other to see who can jump the highest.

“All the kids are going to show up at Danny’s party,” John finishes for her.

“…Yeah.”

The party is supposed to start at noon. It hits noon, then twelve fifteen, and then twelve thirty. Stiles keeps poking his head out hopefully from the flap in the jumpee to scan for arriving guests. But the park is empty, and his smile continues to deflate until it’s a confused frown at one o’clock.

“Where is everyone?” Stiles asks as he finally climbs out of the jumpee. Scott follows from behind, exchanging a look with his mom. “I gave out all the invitations, people said they would be here!”

“Maybe… They got lost?” Scott offers weakly.

“I don’t get it, I told everyone there was going to be a bouncy house and— and food and cake and— where is everyone?” Stiles turns to John with wide, pleading eyes, voice cracking at the end. John purses his lips and lays a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” he says gently. “…But it looks like they’re not coming.”

He expects… Noise. An angry shout, a bitterly sarcastic comment, a panic attack even. But instead
Stiles nods at the ground, lips pressed tightly together, and wordlessly walks over to the playground to lower himself into a tube slide. He doesn’t come out, but a minute later his quiet sobs float across the park and hit their ears. Their shoulders sink with pity.

John is the first to move forward, but Scott catches him by the arm. “Wait, we should give him a minute. He hates when people see him cry.”

He sighs and places an affectionate hand on Scott’s long curls. “You’re a good friend, Scott.”

“So is Stiles,” Scott shrugs. “I just wish other people could see it, too.”

When the shuddering gasps turn into sniffles Scott goes in and joins Stiles in the tube slide. John and Melissa eat cake quietly like the eavesdroppers they are and catch little pieces of Scott’s monologue, things like “Danny sent out invitations” and “sucks, dude” and “Laser tag is overrated.” After a while they hear Stiles’s tiny, “thanks, Scotty” and he and Melissa exchange sidelong smiles. He takes her hand a squeezes it, a silent “thank you” for bringing his son a best friend, and for being a constant star in his life.

Soon the boys’ quiet mumblings turn into a heated discussion about which horror movie is the best, small snickers, and then loud cackling. Melissa hollers, “boys, come out and help eat this cake before I need to start looking for my fat jeans!” And their two kids come tumbling out of the slide in a dog pile of giggles wrestling in the sand.

This makes Scott start wheezing, but before he can get more than a single cough out Stiles is scrabbling for the inhaler on the table, fetching it and bringing it back to his friend with a “here, dude. Can’t have you asphyxiating at my party, that would suck.”

They dine on potato chips, grapes, and cake— Funfetti with chocolate icing, his son’s favorite. The boys then engage in a competition to see who can think of the worst smell ever, which Melissa promptly stops when they get to “three-year-old sweaty underwear marinating beneath the sun.”

Stiles opens presents: Scott and Melissa get him a Spock and Captain Kirk action figure set, and John has the collector’s edition pack of all six Star Wars films wrapped at home waiting for him to open tomorrow on his actual birthday. He shelled out extra this year to make up for Stiles’s sore luck making friends in his new class, but the smile on his son’s face while examining the details of the action figures with Scott is more than worth it.

“Excuse me? Is this… The party?”

They turn around and Stiles’s mouth drops open, making mushy cake fall off his tongue and onto the table with a wet plop. A beautiful girl in a chiffon yellow top and white sandals is standing there amid a waterfall of fiery orange hair. Her glossy lips are pursed and her green eyes sweep analytically from the table to the jumpy house, looking pained. She is undoubtedly—

“Lydia!” Stiles blurs, and stands up so fast that he trips over the bench and sprawls on the grass in a pile of flailing limbs. He scrabbles up and quickly hides the action figures on the table. “Lydia! You got my invitations!”

“All six of them… Yes.” She doesn’t try to hide the creped-out cringe on her face. “But my mom said it would be polite for me to come.”

“You’re an hour late,” Melissa frowns, but John kicks her beneath the table and she slaps on a smile. “Welcome. We’re glad to have you.”

“It’s always fashionable to be late,” Lydia expertly flips a waterfall of strawberry blonde hair over
her shoulder. It’s like something from a Pantene commercial, and the girl is only eleven. “I heard there would be macaroons.”

“Yes! Macaroons! We totally have those, not just because you like them but because they are great… Cookies, right? Fancy French cookies! You look really beautiful,” Stiles blurts, grabs the plate from the table and shoves the cookies in front of her nose. Lydia’s head rears back, eyes narrowing as she sniffs them.

“Are they from a French bakery?”

John bought them on sale at Lucky’s supermarket, but John can’t lie to a little girl so Melissa does it for him.

“Yes,” Melissa says sticky-sweetly. “The Frenchest bakery there is.”

“Le Petit Chaussure?” Lydia raises an eyebrow, pronouncing with a flawless French accent.

“That’s the one!”

The girl smiles and selects a pink macaroon with dainty fingers. Stiles watches her in awe, mouth hanging open like a panting dog. Scott claps him on the shoulder and waves hi. “Hi, Lydia.”

“Who are you?” Lydia squints at him.

“Scott. I sit next to you in class.”

“You know, because we all sit alphabetically,” Stiles supplies helpfully. “Like, A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M, ‘M’ standing for Martin, and also McCall, so Lydia Martin sits next to Scott McCall. Heh. Too bad I’m Stilinski, I get to sit next to Bobby Snider. He doesn’t cover his mouth when he sneezes and he has an allergy to air or something so he sneezes like, all the time. I sneezed on my spaghetti once, but it was more of an accidental thing, not an allergy.”

“Right…” Lydia frowns at him. “My mother will be here in an hour, so what is there to do here?”

“We have a giant jumpy house!” Stiles skips across the grass and gestures to the large inflated castle on the grass, followed by Scott’s enthusiastic nodding.

“Don’t you have to take your shoes off in those?” Lydia wrinkles her nose.

Good Lord, John’s son is in love with the biggest priss in the county.

“Well, yeah… Come on, it’ll be fun!” The boys wait by the entrance flap and Lydia lifts a pretty eyebrow. “We were playing Knights and Dragons, you— you can be the princess or something!”

Lydia sighs and daintily slips her shoes off. “I’ll be the dragon,” she declares, and steps into the jumpy house as Stiles holds the flap open for her.

He and Melissa watch amusedly as the kids bounce around in their socks and bare feet. They exchange satisfied glances and clink their root beer cans together.

“To another year of narrowly avoided catastrophes.”

“To another year,” John agrees.
The station door tinkles open on a quiet Sunday morning, followed by two pairs of heavy footsteps.

John is nursing a coffee with the pale tip of early sun warm on his back, the low drone of the radio fuzzy behind him. He glances up as he hears the clink of handcuffs snapping a wrist to captivity, as Winston attaches a scowling figure to the waiting bench in front of his desk. John sighs softly.

“Again, Hale?”

The teenager glowers at him, his usual silent response. He looks both too old and too young for a near seventeen-year-old, even more haggard than the last time he was brought in, which was two weeks ago. Dark shadows ring his eyes, the same shadows John had after Claudia died, and his face glints pale beneath a small stain of stubble on his chin.

For a kid who inherited eight figures, he’s in the same plain clothes he’s always in; a dark grey henley, black denims, scuffed sneakers, and a black leather jacket that’s about three sizes too big. His eyes are the only pinpricks of color, two piercing orbs of some unidentifiable hue between a pale ocean and grass in the springtime, mouth taut in a grim line that looks permanently sketched between his cheeks. John wonders if the kid ever smiles. Used to smile?

“This is your seventh time in the past two months, you know,” John tells him, not unkindly between sips of coffee. "Not that I don’t admire your effort, but Sheriff Sullivan is starting to lose his patience.”

Derek stares at his feet, still as stone. The first time he came in he was dripping wet— he had uprooted seven rose bushes in some woman’s front yard, then broke into her backyard and took a swim in her pool. The second time he was blacked out drunk, dragged in by Sullivan himself, and had later retched up some weird purple cocktail in the jail cell. John had been on duty both times, but didn’t yet realize that the “county crime-addict” (as the department had come to nickname him), was Derek Hale of Talia and Robert Hale; the woman his wife once illegally climbed trees with, and the man John had glimpsed in friendly passing twice in the past decade.

Derek’s latest crimes have only grown more obscure— popping open car hoods, somehow dismantling and lifting out the engine, and replacing the space with stolen garden gnomes from surrounding houses.

Breaking into residents’ apartments through three-story windows and eating from their fridge, napping on their couches, drawing crude illustrations on their walls with shaving cream and emptying shampoo bottles into their shoes.

It’s like the kid is determined to play out every summer camp prank on the county, and almost always does it between two and five in the morning. John’s shift, courtesy of Sullivan, is midnight to nine o’clock six days a week. John had asked Derek once what he was doing up so early. He got a sullen reply of, “couldn’t sleep.”

And that was the first and last of John’s conversations with the kid. Derek’s latest crime? Breaking into an animal shelter, somehow unlocking all the cage bolts, and setting all ninety-seven dogs free onto the streets, consequently piling up traffic on highway six when the canines stampeded across four lanes of traffic and into the next county. The kid’s level of stealth makes John wonder if Derek somehow has fingernails that double as keys.

The clock ticks quietly on the wall. Sullivan isn’t in yet so John finds his courage.
He rises wearily, huffing a small sound of annoyance as his back cracks in protest, and approaches the dark, huddled figure against the wall. He tows his chair behind him so that he doesn’t have to stand in front of the kid like some looming, superior authority figure, especially since he never really feels like a superior despite the uniform. In order to protect the people of the county, one has to be the people of the county.


Grey-green eyes flick up to regard him suspiciously. Silence.

John selects a chocolate donut from the pink box by the window anyway and places it on Derek’s bench atop a napkin. It’s a napkin printed with tiny snowflakes, leftover from the department holiday party last month. Derek’s eyes follow the pastry and jump to John’s face, features making no movement aside from an unreadable twitch of bushy eyebrows. John bites into his old-fashioned glaze and eases into his chair, keeping his eyes on the icing instead of the boy across from him.

“So what did you do this time?” John asks around his donut, careful to keep his voice calm and nonthreatening like Claudia’s. Derek is like a spooked horse. A very scary, angry spooked horse.

The clock ticks on the wall. The muted sound of the television chatters from the break room. John’s chair squeaks as he rests an ankle atop his knee.

“I stole a tray of muffins from the bakery downtown.”

John almost chokes on his donut, surprised that he actually gets an answer. The kid’s voice sounds rough, low and throaty in a way that indicates either lack of use or frequent yelling. John should be serious, stern even, as he’s an official officer of the law—but instead a chuckle escapes before he can stop it, and he doubles over in his seat to keep from laughing out his half-chewed breakfast onto the carpet. Derek blinks as if slapped, looking utterly taken aback and then twice as angry.

“Sorry, it’s just—“ John manages between giddy breaths. “Gotta admit, that’s a pretty funny thing to get arrested for, son. Did you poison them and start handing them out to people?”

“I dumped them in a lake.”

John raises his eyebrows. “Didn’t eat any?”

“No.”

John studies the hollow cheekbones in front of him, how the teenager’s body drowns in his leather jacket, and the pants that look old and much too big for Derek’s slim legs. John wonders if the kid is eating. “So how’d you get caught?”

“Went back to throw a brick through the window. Some bitch called the cops,” Derek mumbles, still glowering at the floor.

John nods. He can’t help but think of how cordial Derek's father had been, how Claudia used to praise Talia Hale’s big heart, and how the media broadcasted interviews that showed the respectability of both parents. Surely they couldn’t have raised a son so antagonistic? But beneath the dirt and grief, the kid looks just like his father.

“Why you doin’ this, Derek?” John asks gently, leaning in to try and catch the downcast eyes in front of him.

Derek shrugs.
John sighs, because he’s about to confide his deepest secret with a sketchy delinquent teenager. He reaches back to the vivid memory of that day he woke up slumped over the kitchen table, with fingers wrapped around the bottle and Melissa’s voice clear in his mind, and relays the words for the kid in front of him.

“Listen… Derek,” he starts. “I know it hurts. It’s the worst feeling in the world to lose someone you love, and you’ve lost four of them. But at some point we have to pull ourselves back up and keep living.”

Derek’s eyes flick up to meet him.

“Look, I—“ John rubs his forehead, as if the motion might erase all the heartache of the past few years. “I would hate to see my son tear himself apart if I were to die tomorrow,” he dares to say, and his heart clenches painfully at just the words. “And I’d bet that your parents wouldn’t want to see you destroy yourself either.”

Derek’s breath hitched. He steels his jaw, and for a second John thinks he’s going to start crying, but instead Derek’s eyes narrow hotly and he spits two words through his teeth.

“Fuck you.”

A moment of silence as John blinks, shocked by the teen’s ferocity. He nods and wheels his chair back to his desk.

In Claudia’s voice he says, “Sheriff Sullivan should be here in forty minutes. If you wanna use your phone call, you know where the phone is.”

He secretly watches Derek as he works. A few officers trail in as the minute hand climbs closer to eight o’clock, exacerbating the muffled sounds in the station. Sometimes John glances up and catches Derek staring at him, which is unnerving. Other times Derek looks longingly at the donut by his side on the bench; John can’t see the hands inside the leather jacket’s massive sleeves, but imagines the fingers are curling over his stomach.

It takes twenty minutes before Derek silently starts sneaking bits of donut when he thinks John isn’t looking, to which John keeps his head down. At seven forty-five he leaves to scan an imaginary file for a few minutes to make sure Derek has a chance to finish it. When he returns the donut is gone and Derek has a bit more color in his face.

Sullivan comes in bleary-eyed and annoyed at nine o’clock. Derek jerks from where he was dozing off against the wall, face immediately setting into a deadlock glare at the Sheriff, who pinches the bridge of his nose.

“You’ve got a thick scull, don’t you kid?”

Derek glowers. John tenses at his desk, glancing up from his papers.

“Because it seems, no matter how many times I warn you not to get your skinny ass thrown into my cells again, here you are!” Richard plows on, gesturing up and down Derek’s dark form. “For the eleventh time in the past three months? We should get a plaque for you in here, for the most impressive broken record. First you drop out of school, then you start running around breaking into every crack and corner in this town, and this morning I get a call informing me that you stole an entire basket of muffins from Miriam Hartwell’s bakery?”

Richard crouches down, glaring dangerously into Derek’s face. “You wanna tell me why you’re so dead-set on sending me to an early grave?”
Derek’s answer is to spit in Richard’s face.

The effect is immediate; Sullivan jerks backwards with a hiss, Clarke and Winston jump out of their chairs to defend their Fearless Leader, the corner of Derek’s lip quirks up with the tiniest hint of satisfaction, and John swallows down a lump of pride for the kid.

“Jesus fucking— get this brat into the cell, now!” Richard yells, as he grabs one of the snowflake napkins from John’s desk and harshly wipes his face.

“Maybe because you suck at your fucking job,” Derek snarls, as Winston and Clarke uncuff him and shove him into a cell.

“You had your chance,” Richard jabs his finger towards him. “I treated you with nothing but kindness after that fire, offered you program after program to get you back in school and into a foster home, but I have no tolerance for little punks who think they can disobey the law in this town. I worked hard to get my position, so I take any disrespect to this town personally.”

“Eat ass,” Derek mutters.

“Stilinski, has his guardian been contacted?”

“Ah… No, sir. He hasn’t used his phone call.”

“Well dial it for him. I’m surprised you don’t have the number memorized by now.”

“I got it, Sheriff, it’s in the system right here,” Markowsi hits a few keys on his computer and adjusts his headpiece as the line rings.

The day gets warmer. Derek visibly sweats in his cell but refuses to take his jacket off. John sits at his small desk and verifies paperwork while sneaking glances, but the teen doesn’t make eye contact; instead he stares at his shoes as if lost in his own thoughts, blinking lethargically like he’s trying not to fall asleep.

Officers come and go, the emergency line rings as usual, and Derek’s guardian doesn’t arrive until one o’clock that afternoon, right as John is logging out and grabbing his jacket to head home for the day.

John always stares longer than he should because the man looks nothing like he did two decades ago — he’s thin, almost skeletal with greying hair, extra lines etching his face and a hardened expression as if constantly tasting something bitter. Thin scruff covers his chin below his sourly downturned lips, sleepless bruises stain beneath cold eyes, and shadow of darkness hangs around him, his former confidence replaced a bitter slope of his shoulders.

“Peter Hale?” Markowski turns the sign-in clipboard around and offers a pen. Peter glares at the gesture and instead produces a ballpoint from his pocket, signing swiftly.

“Where is he?”

“He’s in cell two, sir.”

Peter follows the guard and drags Derek out by the arm as his nephew glares at him.

“Sure took you’re sweet time,” Derek mutters.

“You’re lucky I come to get you at all,” Peter snaps. “Just wait until you turn eighteen, when you’ll
land in big-boy jail and I won’t be legally obligated to bail you out anymore.”

“I can take care of myself,” Derek growls.

“Clearly you can’t. Look at you, thinner than a girl. You dropped out of school, you don’t have a job, you’ve given up on training, all you’ve done the past six months is live in hotels until that damn house of yours got patched up. You should have let it rot to the ground.”

“How can you say that, your family used to live there,” Derek seethes.

Peter swirls around, nostrils flaring. “You stopped being my family the second your father made it crystal clear that I was no longer welcome.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Derek snarls.

“I don’t have time to put up with this,” Peter hisses.

“Why? Because you’re too busy crying over how you sunk your own company and lost your fortune?”

“Shut your mouth!”

“I bet you hate that dad left me everything. He didn’t even save a single penny for you.”

“Yes, well. I wonder how proud would he be to find out that his son turned into an uneducated criminal.”

“At least I didn’t turn out like you.”

“Your whole damn family wished you did.”

“No they didn’t!” Derek barks.

“Oh? Here I was thinking that they might actually be proud of a pathetic orphan who can hardly lift a feather,” Peter dismisses.

“Yeah?” Derek snarls. “Well I’m gonna have a family and be way stronger than you!”

“You can’t have both, Robert!”

Derek blinks, taken aback, and Peter turns death white. Even some deputies turn to stare.

“Derek,” Peter corrects. His expression hardens back into a cruel glare. “You can’t have both, Derek.”

John startles as his cell phone rings. He fumbles with it in his pocket as the Hales walk out the door, and sees Stiles’s name flash across the screen. He usually doesn’t call in the morning so John picks up, even though John would pick up for his son no matter what time of day.

“Hey dad!” Stiles’s chipper voice greets. The rush of school drones in the background, as well as Scott’s chattering. “So I’m in the cafeteria with Scott, he says hi by the way, and we really really want to try these new chocolate waffle thingies the lunch ladies just put out, but I also really feel like yogurt, so I was just wondering if can I buy both with the emergency money you gave me but then pay you back when I get home? Because I left my wallet in my green hoodie pocket but today I’m wearing my blue hoodie, so… Yeah. So can I get a waffle and a yogurt?”
John nods for a long time before he realizes Stiles can’t see it.

“Yeah, kiddo. You can have both.”

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Derek is hauled into the station twenty-eight more times that year. John is on duty for five of those times, and does the same routine of offering a donut, getting “no” as an answer, and leaving a donut within reach anyway. Around February Derek starts coming in less, and by April of next year he stops getting arrested altogether. John hopes he found some peace.

...0000... October 15th, 2009.

“And then the ship was like 'BA-BOOM' and Captain Kirk’s face was just, oh man, such a great shot. Praise that cameraman’s panning capabilities. It’s the shit!”

“What have I said about language, Stiles? You’re only in seventh grade, you don’t need to be using those words. But yes, awesome shot. J.J. Abrams is known for his cinematography.”

“You liked it, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Not as good as the original Star Trek series, but good.”

“Pssh. Well duh, Nothing beats Nimoy and Shatner. But I still say we should have snuck in afterwards to see X-Men Origins.”

“Next time,” John chuckles. “The earlier in the evening we get out of this neighborhood the better.”

He and his twelve-year-old son are walking back to the car in a less-than-ideal downtown area at a less-than-ideal hour of night, but the movie theatre in this district has bargain prices. Thus, it was deemed as John’s venue of choice for his birthday celebration, even if it meant parking six blocks away in the nearest sketchy parking garage. The sidewalk and streets glitter wetly beneath the flickering streetlamp, reflecting the leftover rain from the afternoon. This October is unusually cold for California, but Beacon Hills tends to chill the air year round anyway.

“Chill dad, our car’s like, just past that flickering street light,” Stiles drawls helpfully. “Or was it by the trio of homeless people roasting rats over the garbage can?”

“Cut it out,” John voices with a glance over his shoulder. “I know we’re not exactly in Sterling Heights, but it’s not that bad.”

“Oh yeah?” Stiles veers to the side to point at the gutter, where a broken syringe lays abandoned. John mutters a “Jesus” under his breath and pulls his son away by the shoulders, tucking him close.

“Christ, Stiles, get away from that! Point taken.”

“Aw, c’mmon, pop. It’s not like it’s gonna jump up and bite me.”

“You’re too young to see that.”

“You do know I’ve seen crime photos of like, bloody corpses, right?”
John sighs. Snooping at the station has been one of his son's favorite pastimes. “Yes. But the longer I get to pretend that you’re still young and innocent the longer I get to rest at ease that you won’t be having nightmares anytime soon.”

“Nah. I think the worst nightmare I had once was showing up to school in my Batman briefs, you know the ones with the holes in them? In front of Lydia.”

“Oop, hold it right here, I need some cash to pay the parking garage,” John steps quickly over to an ATM on the side of a bank. Stiles follows and tries standing on his tippy toes to see the pin over John’s shoulder. John’s had to change it five times because his son keeps figuring it out and using it to buy ‘necessities’ like Twizzlers and slushies on the weekends with Scott.

“Common dad, let me see! At least take out an extra twenty so I can pay Scott back for the slurpee he bought me yesterday.”

“What, did you order one the size of Vermont? What do you need a twenty for?”

“$3.50 to cover the slurpee, $4.99 so I can buy the awesome new DragonAge Origins avatar and kick butt online, and then the rest I figure can be for future slurpees since that’s pretty inevitable. Then I won’t have to keep asking you for spare change all the time! See? Efficient. I’m totally capable of thinking ahead.”

“You take a water bottle to school. How about you drink from that?”

“Yeah, but water isn’t sugary bright red chemical deliciousness, dad. The whole point of—”

“Hold it right there!”

John’s heart drops to his stomach as he hears the click of a release behind him. Stiles freezes and John grips his shoulder as a warning not to do anything stupid. He’s not too concerned considering he’s drilled Stiles on everything from dealing with muggers to how to escape a kidnapping from the back of a trunk; more than anything he can’t help but be dismayed at his stupid move to stop at an ATM. The car lot is right there too, by the trio of homeless people huddled around the flaming garbage can.

“We don’t want any trouble,” John expresses quickly. “You can put the gun away.”

“Don’t turn around! Put your hands up! I want your pin number and then gimme' your wallet and empty your pockets!” Their mugger barks at them. He sounds young— a newbie to the trade? John may be able to talk him out of this.

“Kinda hard to empty our pockets if our hands are in the air, don’cha think?” Stiles (John’s idiot son) drawls snottily.

“Stiles,” he hisses.

“Shut up! Say your pin number now or I shoot the kid,” The mugger voices and Stiles makes a high-pitched sound as the barrel is pressed to the back of his head.

“1234! It’s 1234! Don’t hurt him!” John blurts, heart pounding.

“What the fuck do you think this is?” The mugger barks. ‘Gimme’ your real pin!”

“It is, it’s the real one, I swear,” John presses. He’d feel a lot better if he could turn around and see the guy right now. “My son kept guessing the numbers so I got tired and changed it to
something really simple. It’s 1234, cross my heart.”

“Wow, dad, that’s kind of genius,” Stiles praises. “It’s so in your face, I never would have—“

“I said shut up! Take out a hundred dollars so I know you’re not fucking with me.”

*Stop swearing in front of my kid*, John thinks, but mostly he just tries to think of a way to somehow get out of this safely and save his money. He winces as he punches in the numbers and watches as Benjamin Franklin’s face slides out to greet him.

“Good. Now turn around slowly and hand it over with your card! Remember I’ve got a gun!” The mugger growls. Definitely a newbie. They turn around, hands raised, and John gets a better look at him—tall and muscular, a black beanie with holes pulled down over his face, wide eyes, and trembling fingers over what is a very, very fake handgun.

“Oh my god, your gun’s not even real,” Stiles rolls his eyes. The mugger blinks, taken aback. John doesn’t blame him, it looks very real to anyone who isn’t a cop. Or the son of a cop.

“Wh— Yes it is!”

“The magazine release is in the wrong place,” Stiles argues, crossing his gangly arms. “A handgun can’t shoot if it’s blocking the hammer, you need it parallel. Firearm 101, dude.”

*That’s my boy*, John thinks proudly. “Look, son. No one has to get hurt here,” he voices gently to their attacker, lowering his arms and gripping his credit card safely. “If you need money, there are better ways to go about it. You’ve picked the two people with empty pockets anyway.”

“Shut up! I said hand over your credit card!”

“Hey, let’s calm down, alright? I’m a police officer for this county and we’ve got a program for youths on the streets. We can help find you a job.”

“I said hand me your fucking card!”

John halts. The gun is fake but it looks weighted; it could be a dangerous weapon if used as a blunt force. The guy, albeit not an experienced mugger, looks to be in shape and seems determined enough to chase after him and Stiles if they try to leave. John looks down at his empty wallet and credit card, regarding the engraved plastic carefully. His bank allows a max of $500 to be extracted from his checking account every twenty-four hours; the problem is that the ATM is right behind him and the guy could easily withdraw the remaining $400 (plus the Benjamin in John's hand) before John has any chance of calling the bank to cancel his account. But he budgets every penny and knows exactly how much he gets to spend for the week, so he can’t afford to lose that much income.

“Stiles, go to the car,” John says calmly.

“What? Dad, no—“

“The kid stays here! Now both of you empty your damn pockets! Last warning.”

John steps forward slowly, calculating the best position to get the fake gun out of the guy’s hand. He carefully hands over his money and credit card, but before he can knock the weapon away Stiles chucks a gnawed-on jawbreaker from his pocket into the mugger’s face.

“Fuck! You fucking—!”
In his anger Mugger charges Stiles with the pistol raised, and that’s all John needs to quickly step to the side and deliver a quick palm to the guy’s sternum. Mugger chokes with the impact so John quickly locks the man’s right arm and hits his flexor digitorum muscle to make him drop the gun. The pistol clatters heavily to the pavement and John kicks it away.

“Dad—!”

“Oomph!”

But John doubles over as the guy kicks him hard in the shin, followed immediately by a knee to the gut. It knocks the breath out of him and he wheezes, involuntarily dropping to a crouch on the pavement. From the corner of his eye Mugger brings up his elbow to strike it down on John’s head and—

“HEY! Get the hell away from my DAD!”

“Aagck! Fuck, you little shit—!”

John hears when Stiles bites down and chomps the guy’s fingers with a crunch. He looks up just in time to see Stiles riding piggyback on their attacker, skinny arms in a chokehold around the guy’s neck. Mugger scrabbles at the grip but his son holds firm like a little monkey— until Mugger slips out a thin metal rod from his sleeve and promptly swings it backwards.

It connects to Stiles’s temple with a sharp thwack and his son slips off his back, dropping to the sidewalk like a sack of potatoes. John sees red.

“Hey!” He yells, and kicks the guy in the back of the knee. He moves to twist the arm socket but Mugger uses his rod to whack John in the stomach again, knocking him to his knees with crippling pain. He can only gasp for breath and watch helplessly as the robber grabs his fallen wallet, credit card, and the extracted $100 dollar bill, and runs off with it all, shoes slapping away on the damp pavement. But it’s a problem not at the forefront of John’s mind.

He quickly shuffles beside Stiles, who’s still sprawled out on the sidewalk. “Stiles,” he demands, patting the kid’s cheek. A large goose egg decorates his son’s forehead. Dazed brown eyes blink up at him. “Stiles, say something. Can you hear me?”

“M’rumph,” his son answers, and curls to his side to clutch his head. “Ow.”

He sends a silent thank you to the sky. “That was very stupid and very brave,” John tells him. “As soon you as you’re ready to stand we’re taking you to the hospital.”

“Nooo,” Stiles immediately slurs. “M’fine, just… Ow, Jesus. You hurt?”

“I’m fine, son.”

“He kicked you in the stomach!”

“He nicked me a little on accident. I’m okay.”


“I’m old,” John frowns. “You didn’t even make a sound when he hit you, which concerns me more. Gimme’ your hand, I’m taking you to get checked out.”

“Dad, no!” Stiles insists.
“Son, yes.”

“Wait, did he get your money? Where’s your credit card?” Stiles demands, trying to crane his neck around.

“Yes he got it, don’t worry about it—“

“Aw, man! But that’s bad! How do we—“

“I said don’t worry about it, it’ll be okay. Now come on, hospital.”

“I hate the hospital,” Stiles blinks up at him with his big brown eyes. “Please don’t make me go there. I’m fine, really!”

John falters. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three plus your thumb.”

“What did you eat for breakfast this morning?”

“Leftover birthday cake.”

“Say the alphabet backwards.”

“I can’t do that sober let alone concussed, dad. Which I’m not. Concussed. Not concussed. A very un-concussed sixth grader here.”

“Alright,” John sighs as he fishes out his cell phone. “But I’m still taking you to Melissa.”

.oO0O0o.

Melissa takes one look at the bleeding gash on Stiles’s forehead, crosses her arms, and says, “Really, Stiles? On your father’s birthday?”

“It wasn’t my fauuuuult,” Stiles whines as she prods at it with Neosporin in her kitchen. “So like, I know I’m usually dad’s number one source of entertainment gone awry, but I was doing really great at not getting into trouble today. I mean if we’re technical here, dad is the one who provoked the guy with his good samaritan ‘bler blah, let’s get you a job, fellow criminal!’”

“John,” Melissa scolds with an exasperated glance to him. “You always gotta be the good guy, huh.”

“Exactly!” Stiles agrees, spewing spittle onto Melissa’s sweater. She frowns and he offers a “whoops, sorry.”

“Well what good is it to be in law enforcement if we don’t actively convert the troublemakers into well-behaved citizens?” John counters from the McCall’s dining table, where he’s eating more leftover birthday cake with Scott amid tall glasses of milk. “I didn’t become a cop to just throw people in cells.”

“Well the important thing is that both of you are safe now,” Melissa clasps a butterfly bandage over a wincing Stiles.

John wants to believe it, but not when he knows the current balance in his bank account. His cake suddenly tastes dull as he thinks about how his wallet is currently in the hands of a young felon,
including his credit card and the polaroid of Claudia holding their infant son in the hospital bed—by
the time he called the bank the creep had extracted another the max $400 from his account; he works
so hard to scrimp and save every penny and it’s incredibly unfair how it can be taken away so
abruptly.

“Alright sweetie, you’re all patched up,” Melissa declares as she wipes her hands. “No concussion as
far as I can tell, but John be sure to keep an eye on him. If your head hurts or you feel nauseous, go
the hospital.”

“What about dad,” his tattletale son pipes up.

“What about your dad?” Melissa whirls on John, ready to attack with nurse skills.

He waves her off and polishes off the last of his cake. “It’s nothing, Melissa, I’m fine.”

“The mugger kicked him in the stomach twice!” Stiles blurs, the traitor.

“John, let me see.”

“Nope, no need Mel, it’s just sore.”

“John Stilinski you will march over here and let me examine you or I’ll tell the boys about what you
and your wife did in summer of ’95.”

Scott and Stiles perk up at this, whipping heads wide-eyed to John. “Wait, what? Dad, what does
she mean?”

“Yeah Mr. Stilinski, what happened?”

“Oh my god, what did you do? Did you kill someone? Wait, no, did you hijack someone’s hippie
van?”

“No, and no. Thanks, Melissa,” John gives her the stink-eye. “Now they’ll never let me rest until
they find out.”

“Damn right! So you—“

“Language, Stiles.”

“Dang right! So you better tell us now!” Stiles hops up and does his excited hand-flailing thing he
does when he’s excited, nearly toppling over with the head rush. Luckily Scott darts over in time to
steady him, clapping him on the shoulder and muttering, “don’t worry, man, I’ll get my mom to tell
us later.”

“Like hell I will, Scott. You boys finish up that cake on the table before I give into temptation and eat
it.”

“If you insist, mama McCall! But you know you look great.”

“Shut up dude, that’s my mom.”

“Calm down Scott, Stiles is the only one who compliments me around here. And thank you Stiles,
yes I do look great.”

The boys take the platter and chat thickly around mouthfuls of cake into the hallway, Stiles
describing in great detail how awesome it was when John attacked the mugger and how the guy's
finger tasted like wet sock.

“Alright, lets see the damage.”

Reluctantly John lifts up his shirt, wishing he still had his figure from his academy days. Now there’s about eight extra pounds of pudge around his midsection and his ears flare with embarrassment as Melissa prods at it. He clears his throat awkwardly and Scott and Stiles pause around the corner to stop talking and stare. They whisper something, start sniggering, and race off into Scott’s bedroom peeking over their shoulders, Stiles winking profusely. John rolls his eyes.

“Ouch,” Melissa winces at the wound; the bruise is purple and mottled beneath his ribcage. “Yeah, that’s a good one. But I don’t see any signs of internal bleeding. Can you breathe okay?”

“Same as always,” John shrugs.

“Your mouth doesn’t taste metallic, does it?”

“No. Just tastes like chocolate cake.”

“I’m glad you liked it. That was my mother’s recipe,” Melissa starts digging into her first aid kit. “I’ve got some ointment in here that will help with the swelling, it should heal up in a week or so. Geez, I still can’t believe you got jumped. What an idiot, picking an officer to mess with.”

“I feel more the idiot for letting him take a swing at me and kid,” John mutters.

“Hey, none of that,” she warns. “The important thing is that that gun was fake. Besides, the way Stiles described it you were a real hero.”

“I’m not a hero,” he sighs. “My kid was. That guy would’ve clocked me good if Stiles hadn’t tackled him. And that kid’s the skinniest seventh grader I know,” John shakes his head with a quiet laugh. “He’s Batman.”

Melissa stops dabbing to look up at him, eyes crinkling mirthfully at the corners. “So I’ve heard, since that first day back in Kindergarten. But you do know he looks up to you more than Bruce Wayne, right?”

“Debatable.”

“Really, John. You should see the way he looks at you when you’re not paying attention. If I could hand pick Scott’s father, I’d pick a father like you.”

John’s smile slips away as he stares at her, her brown eyes so earnest as they flick between his. “Thank you, Mel. That means a lot.”

They hold gazes for a few more moments before Melissa stands and scoops her hair behind her shoulders. She hands out the tube of cream. “Take this. Apply it twice a day and avoid any yoga. I’d invite you to stay for a cup of tea but I’ve got a five am shift tomorrow,” Melissa frowns at her watch as if it’s personally offending her.

John rises. “Aw shoot, I’m sorry for keeping you. Thank you for patching us up, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Melissa dismisses. “Boys, come say goodbye!”

“Can’t he sleep over, mom?” Scott hollers from his room, followed by “Yeah dad! Can I sleep over?”
“You slept over last night,” John calls back. “I swear you kids are joined at the hip. C’mon, kiddo, Melissa’s got an early shift tomorrow.”

“And it’s a school night,” Melissa adds loudly.

The boys come tumbling out, whining loudly about “whatever, it’s not like sleepovers on school nights are illegal” and “s’okay, dude, I’ll see you tomorrow” and “gross, we have that substitute again, Mrs. Wench. Lets put a worm in her coffee again” and then “sshh, dude, my mom’s right there! Besides, you did that. I just watched.”

“Bye Melissa, thanks again,” John hugs her goodbye and ruffles Scott’s hair. “Sleep tight, Scott.”

“Bye Mr. Stilinski, happy birthday!”

“Peace out, McCall McMuffins! Excellent cake, Melissa. You’ve got some serious baking skizzles—that means skills.”

“Thank you, Stiles. And don’t forget to ask your dad what happened in summer of ’95.”

“Oh my god, that’s right! Dad! Dad, you gotta—"

John gives Melissa the finger on the walk back to the car, making her cackles echo into the street as she shuts the door.

.o0O0o.

On the way home the Volkswagen creaks and shudders with age; John’s half afraid it will explode one day, or that the duct tape holding together the window will wear out and send his windshield crashing to the ground. He ignores it and turns on the oldies but Stiles reaches forward and immediately switches to a pop station. John gives him a flat look that says, whose birthday is it? and Stiles wilts and switches back to Stayin’ Alive with a muttered, “sorry.”

"Dad, dad! You HAVE to tell me, I’m your son!”

He chuckles. “That’s not how it works.”

“Yes it is! Tell meeee.”

“No.”

“Tell me tell me tellmetellmetellmetellmetellme—“

“Stiles.”

“—tellmetellmetellmetellmetellmetellmetellme! I can do this all day, you know. Tellmetellmetellme—“

“For Christ’s sake, we just ate a few pot brownies.”

Stiles gapes, for once rendered totally speechless. Then he screams and starts scrabbling at John’s sleeve, nearly making them swerve off the road.

“Jesus, Stiles! Don’t do that, I’m driving—“
“YOU GOT HIGH!?”

John sighs, internally cursing Melissa. “Yes. It’s not a huge deal, alright? Your mother wanted to do something new and ‘scary’ for her twenty-seventh birthday and Terry had given me some as a joke for my birthday. So we baked some pot brownies and… Well, we ate them on the couch while watching the Academy Awards.”

“Holy flippin’ mother of shit!”

“Language, Stiles.”

“Whoa, no, okay, language is totally acceptable here to express the extent of my shock in this moment in time— this is real, right? Like you know what you just said, right? I’m not having like a weird fever dream, am I? Wait a minute, weren’t you a cop in 1995?!”

“Yes, I was a cop,” John sighs at himself in the rearview mirror. This is going to be a long night.

Stiles crows, whistling in John’s ear some more. “Holy shit, this is outrageous! Oh my god, you and mom totally got high! Illegally! While you were a police officer! And you got your pot from a police officer! Oh man, this is like something out of a really controversial Seinfeld episode. My mind is literally exploding right now.”

“You done?”

“Ha! No, no we are so not done here. You, John Stilinski, A.K.A dad, A.K.A the most cautious, painfully law-abiding ‘you’re grounded for nicking my car with your bicycle son’ goody two shoes EVER— did drugs. Drugs! With mom! God, that’s so cool.”

“This doesn’t mean you get to—“

“Chill, pop, I’m not gonna go out and buy a bunch of marijuana. I don’t get that kind of allowance money.”

"Stiles."

“Nah, for real dad, I promise I won’t do drugs. With twig-limbs like mine, my brain is my most powerful weapon! Quick wit and sarcasm is my only defense, you know? I can’t jeopardize that with some mind-altering leaves. Besides, Scott is super against drugs like the total weenie that he is, so if I become a pothead he would totally abandon me to run for the hills screaming. And he’s kinda my only friend, so. Can’t afford that.”

“Good. And you’re not allowed— well, I guess you have to tell Scott now, huh.”

“Yes. Best friends automatically get a right to know everything I know.”

John sighs. “Fine. Just— I don’t want him to think less of me. Your mom and I were adults and it was a one-time thing.”

“Dad, you know Scott thinks you’re like, the coolest dad ever, right? You’re basically his dad. You’d have to like, I dunno— kick puppies or something to make him think less of you. Ooh, or take all his comic books and set them on fire, you know? Hey, do you think the flames would be normal orange flames or would the ink turn it different colors? Like red, green, or rainbow flames? I saw a YouTube video the other day, like three days ago I think? Where a bunch of guys lit a log soaked with potassium salts on fire and the flames turned purple! Isn’t that awesome? I think house fires would be a lot less scary if the flames were all purple instead of orange, because then instead of
suffocating to death you’d be suffocating to death while being all ‘wow, look how pretty!’ and then you’d die a happy death.”

“That’s… If you say so, kid.”

.o0O0o. May 14th, 2010.

John’s world tips upside down on a quiet Thursday night.

The wall clock ticks closer to midnight as he pages through old police reports at the dining table. His fingertips are stained black from the ink at this point, smudging on his eyelids when he tries to rub the sleep from his vision. He’s thinking about downing a glass of warm milk and calling it a night when he hears his eighth grader stumble down the hall.

“You still up, kiddo?” He asks, glancing over the frames of his reading glasses. Stiles says it makes him look like Dumbledore from Harry Potter.

Stiles nods. “Studying,” he mumbles, and proceeds to get a glass down from the cupboard. He seems pale beneath the sink light, almost a little shiny with sweat. It’s a warm night, but perhaps he’s coming down with something? John watches him, eyes narrowing in concern.

“You’ve been studying since you got home… Are you feeling okay?” He asks.

“Yeah,” Stiles swallows. “Just thirsty.”

But as he fills up water from the sink John notices his hands are trembling, sloshing water against the glass. He rises, chair scraping back against the carpet. “Stiles, are—?”

The glass shatters with a loud clang as Stiles suddenly drops it against the sink. He gasps and doubles over against the counter, wheezing like an asthmatic. John teleports to his side in an instant, heartbeat pounding loud in his ears.

“Hey, hey, Stiles! What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“No,” Stiles breathes, high-pitched and scared. His chest is heaving, hands trembling violently. “I can’t— I can’t breathe—”

“Hey, look at me, is this a panic attack?”


John is already grabbing his cell to call an ambulance. “Okay, Stiles, just sit down— that’s it, against the sink. You’re okay, I’m going to call an ambulance now.”

“No!” Stiles grabs his arm, taking John by surprise. “Doesn’t that c-cost m-money?”

John stares at his kid. Stiles is thirteen. Stiles has never mentioned money, nor has John ever mentioned money around him. He doesn’t know how Stiles would know about their rocky financial situation, or guessed it, but Stiles is as deductive as he is smart, and probably put it together from John’s aversion to name brands at the store, the cheaper cuts of meat in their fridge, the dwindling number of presents every Christmas.

“Stiles, you— you shouldn’t worry about that, kid,” John says tightly, stomach flopping painfully as he dials 9-1-1.
“Dad—"

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“My son can’t breathe, he needs help,” John blurts into the speaker. He brushes Stiles’s hair back from his forehead. It’s an automatic gesture even though there hasn’t been enough hair to get in the way since he was eight. Stiles is gripping John’s hand so tightly it hurts, a ghost of Claudia’s hand when she was in labor.

“How old is he?”

“Thirteen, he has a fever, too.”

“Other symptoms?”

“Dad, ‘m g-gonna—"

“He’s sweating, shaking, Stiles, are you—?”

John’s heart drops to his stomach as Stiles suddenly lurches to the side, vomiting violently onto the kitchen floor. It splatters to the tile with a wet smack, and John feels the blood drain from his face.

“Stiles, shit, hang on, kiddo— he just threw up. He—“

“Dad,” Stiles moans pitifully.

“—Shh, I know bud."

“Is he conscious?”

“Yes!” John barks into the phone. “Yes, for fuck’s sake, I need an ambulance, now!”

Stiles flinches, eyes stretched round in fear. John never swears. His mother drilled that habit into him as soon as he could stand on two legs, and he hates himself now for giving away his panic to his already panicking son. John is the father, John is supposed to be calm—

“An ambulance is on the way, sir."

“Okay, Stiles bud, I’m sorry. You’re gonna be fine, okay? Help is almost here,” he assures and scoots closer across the kitchen tile. Stiles whimpers through chattering teeth, fingers quaking around John’s wrist. “Just try to breathe with me kiddo, our regular routine. One, two, three, four. One, two, three…”

.o0O0o.


John blinks muzzily, listening to the plastic clock on the wall to his left, the same clock that’s been there since 2005. He shifts uncomfortably in his hospital chair. Saline drips quietly next to him, mingling with the quiet breaths from the bed next to him. Stiles lies asleep, but it’s a sedated sleep so he isn’t mumbling flowery professions about Lydia Martin or licking his lips or twitching or any of the other usual sleep movements he does. It’s such a quiet room for all the loud thoughts in John’s head.
The clock reads 5:31am. Each secondhand stroke cuts into the sterile silence with a reminder that they had arrived just a couple hours ago in the ambulance. The doctor’s words are still ringing on repeat in his ears, looping around and around.

Adderall overdose.

“Has your son been taking more than his prescribed dose? Amphetamines can be addictive, you might want to look into—”

“—symptoms include rapid heartbeat, shaking, fever, nausea, Stiles is lucky he didn’t have a seizure.”

“We’d like to keep him overnight for observation to make sure nothing else goes—”

“He’ll be okay,” Melissa says for the tenth time as she pokes her head into the room. Her eyes are dark and her scrubs are wrinkled from her red-eye shift. “I’ll be right back to check his blood again, let me know if you need anything.” She disappears with a swish of ebony ringlets.

John stares at the IV in his son’s pale wrist. His pale face is slack and peaceful, a mirror image of Claudia in her hospital bed. Although she had eighteen dark freckles on her face and their son only has twelve. There isn’t a single physical feature he got from John, aside the thick lobes of his ears. He used to tease her about her secret affair with the mailman, but Claudia always gasped and tackled him with a string of “nononono’s” like it truly baffled her that she might be with any man other than John. She was his whole world, which is why it’s so painful to see his son in the same position.

A glance down and he realizes his son is staring at him, a crack of amber between dark lashes. “Dad?” Stiles croaks.

John breathes a sigh of relief, letting his head hang down. “You sure like to sleep, kiddo.”


“Good,” John says sharper than intended. “Then you’ll never do anything that stupid again, got it?”

Stiles swallows, suddenly fascinated with staring at the sheets. John plows ahead, trying and failing to control his calm. “The doctors found sixty milligrams of Adderall in your system, Stiles. That’s three times your daily dose, what were you thinking? You know I have nurses breathing down my neck to get you into rehab because they think you’re an addict?”

“M’sorry, I—“

"And here I am telling them no, my son is smarter than that, defending the dummy who landed himself in the hospital over taking too many pills! Do you have any idea how terrified I was?”

He’s standing and breathing harshly now. Stiles shrinks against the sheets, heart monitor kicking up. Melissa rounds the corner into the room like she teleported.

“John, what's going on here? Stiles, honey, you’re okay, John honestly, who yells at their kid the second they wake—“

“No, it’s okay,” Stiles interrupts Melissa, squirming in his bed. “Dad’s right, I was stupid. I should have been paying more attention, I just forgot how many I had taken!”

“Stiles,” John chastises. “You’ve been on Adderall for years, you know how dangerous—"
“I know, okay?” Stiles keens. “I didn’t mean to, I lost count! I— I thought if I took more then I could study better for—” His eyes grow wide, snapping to the clock. “The entrance exam! Oh my god dad, the exam, it’s in two hours!” As he actually moves to get out of bed, attempting to yank the sheets off. “We gotta go home, I—”

“Whoa, what the hell are you doing? Lay back down, you’re in a hospital bed in case you haven’t noticed,” John eases his son back down.

“Your dad’s right, sweetie, you’re not going anywhere just yet,” Melissa adds. She gently straps a blood pressure cuff around his arm.

“Besides, you can take the exam in three weeks. There are two dates to do it, kiddo.”

“What?”

“Yeah, May fourteenth and June sixth. Just calm down, work on going back to sleep.”

“I know it can be scary, honey, but it’s important that we keep you here to make sure you don’t run into any other problems,” Melissa adds gently. “I can get you an extra pillow if you like?”

“But I can’t be here,” whispers Stiles, grabbing John’s sleeve. His eyes glaze with anxious moisture. “Dad, how much is this costing you? You haven’t even payed off mom’s bills yet! I feel fine enough to go now, really!”

John stares at his kid. Melissa exchanges a look with him and he purses his lips at the floor. “Melissa, think you could give us a minute?” He asks quietly. She nods and exits, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

He sighs, sits back down in his crappy hospital chair, and rubs a hand over his forehead. Stiles purses his lips nervously, watching him closely. “Okay, kid. First off, how do you know about my bills?”

Stiles licks his lips, eyes flicking to the IV in his hand. He picks with slim fingers at the scratchy hospital sheet. “I check the mail stack for my Justice League subscription and sometimes I find things with ‘second notice’ on them. I guessed your email password and figured it might be the same as your online bank account password, so I log in once in a while and see the debt.”

“How did you get my email password?” John has never shared his password with anyone.

Stiles lifts an eyebrow as if to say, duh. “It’s my real name, dad. What else would it be?”

John raised an annoyingly clever kid. Keyboard smash offers the best protection. Now he’s going to have to think of something else.

“Jesus, kid.” He sighs and takes a minute to study his son. “Alright, now you listen to me,” he says gently. “I’m the dad, and you’re the son. That means that I get to handle all the stressful adult stuff like finances and taxes, and you get to handle all the fun kid stuff like going to school and hanging out with friends.”

“But—“

“No buts. You’re thirteen. You shouldn’t be worrying about anything except showing up to class on time.”

“But I worry about you,” Stiles blurs meekly.
The words tickle John’s insides. “You don’t have to. I’ve been an officer for twenty-one years, and you’re the one in the hospital bed in case you haven’t noticed. Which brings me to my next question: what’s got you so stressed out over this exam, bud? You know you only need a 1400 to pass into highschool. That’s a piece of cake even for Scott.”

“But he’s not the one with ADHD,” Stiles stares at the sheets again. “I wanted to prove that I can do better than bare minimum. Really impress you with a high score, the top score even.”

“Son, you impress me every day,” John says honestly. “You don’t need to prove yourself with a crummy standardized test.”

“Yeah, well crummy standardized tests measure your intelligence in America.”

“Well I’ve known you for thirteen years, so I’m a pretty good judge to say that you’re the most intelligent kid I know.”

“You only know me and Scott.”

"TV and film characters included."

“Doogie Howser?”

“He’s got nothing on your MacGuyver skills. You once fixed the microwave with duct tape, a lemon, and a couple alligator clamps, remember?”

He wins a small shrug, so he keeps going until he gets a smile.

“We both know you’re smart, Stiles. You’re too clever for your own good most of the time. I don’t care what grades you get so long as you try your best. You’re more important than any scantron.”

Stiles licks his lips, eyes round and far too much like his wife’s. “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

“Sorry for tripling your dose, yeah. But you have nothing else to apologize for. I mean it when I say you’re my favorite son.”

“I’m your only son.”

“Still my favorite,” John declares as he stands up. “Alright, I’m gonna grab Melissa again so she can check your vitals. You’re lucky she happened to be on a red-eye shift because she’s definitely one of the nicer nurses around here. Can I get you anything? Another blanket?”

“Um. Water maybe?”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, I mean… Thank you for being… Dad.”

John ruffles his son’s hair. “Thanks for being my kid, kiddo.”

.o0O0o. May 15th, 2010.
The TV drones with a talkshow as John sits at the dining table looking over police reports. He calls it an early night and goes to his bedroom to find the crime book he got from the library yesterday, changing into his pajamas. His shirt is barely on when his cell phone rings on his bed— it’s a number he doesn’t recognize.

“Hello?”

“Is this John Stilinski?”

“Yes it is,” he says, heart suddenly pounding. Is Stiles okay? Is Stiles hurt? What did Stiles—?

“I’m Raymond Mellarke with the Federal Police Bureau of the Bay Area. We’ve just been informed that your county’s current Sheriff, Richard Sullivan, reportedly assaulted a minor without provocation, breaching law of conduct.”

“Jesus,” John breathes. He grips his bedsheets— he knows Sullivan can be blunt but this is absurd, even for him. “That’s terrible, is the kid okay?”

“We can’t release any details until the investigation is completed, but it happened around five-thirty this evening. Our building currently has both personnel in custody for questioning, but it looks like Sullivan acted without fair cause and will be stripped of his title. The reason I’m calling is to see if you would be willing to take over as Beacon Hills County Sheriff.”

The room stills to a stop aside from the slight flutter of his curtains. It takes a moment for it to really comprehend, even though he’s been waiting for the words for nearly two decades.

“Me?” John whispers.

“Our office oversees all officer records. According to your file and previous recommendations from Earl Sanders and deputies, there’s hardly any decision to be made. You’re our top pick.”

“I— Jesus, thank you,” he grips the receiver so tight he’s amazed it doesn’t break. “I— I would be honored. Yes, I’ll do it. Thank you.”

“I’ll be in contact with you the next couple days to go over details and the standard policies. But other than that, there’s not much to it. You’ll be instated this Friday on May first.”

“Thank you,” John says again. His voice and fingers tremble.

“Thank you, John. Have a great evening.”

“You, too.”

John hangs up and stares at his phone. He laughs hysterically and leaps up, does a little jive around his room and wipes the hot tears from his face. Panting, he goes over to his bookshelf and picks up the photo of Claudia he took on her twenty-ninth birthday— she’s in her red dress and the Audrey Hepburn hat he bought her at Haight Street, and she’s laughing at something across the street.

“I did it,” he whispers, and gently presses his lips against the glass of the frame.

June 1st, 2010.

John is elected Sheriff of Beacon Hills County on June 1st, 2010.
He moves in to the office as soon as the minute hand hits 8:00 that morning.

“Wow dad, this is so cool! Your own office and everything! After what, like, twenty years? Ha! Wow. You’ve been stuck in this building for two decades and you never got bored? I’d get so bored sitting at the same desk everyday, but it’s cool that you get your own big new desk now. Hey! Did you bring your army flag? It’d be so cool to have your army flag in your office. Or like a gold eagle statue— no wait! An actual eagle! That would be so—”

Stiles is helping him carry in the cardboard box of stuff to decorate. He graduated eighth grade a couple days ago, so this is only the beginning of what will be three months of the usual summer vacation whining.

Daaaaad, I’m bored!” “Daaaaaad, it’s so hoooot! I’m melting, why don’t we have air conditioning?” “Daaaaaad, can’t we go out for ice cream? Pleeeeeease? I’m gonna lick the fridge handle until you say yes.” “Daaaaad, can we get a new fridge? The door handle on this one tastes gross.”

Summer is fun for about three days before Stiles realizes there’s nothing to do in a small town, which means his top two forms of entertainment are bugging John all day long and getting into extra big trouble. Last summer he set off fireworks in Mrs. Flannigan’s backyard because he “had nothing else to do.” It’s a dangerous, dangerous season.

“Okay, here it is,” John says as he sticks his new key into the lock of his new Sheriff space— he’s keeping it together on the outside, but inside he’s giddy as a kid in a candy shop.

“Open it, open it!”

John opens the door. It swings open to reveal a small, bare office space with a mahogany desk, two empty shelves, a lamp, a saggy victim couch, and a swivel-chair. There’s dust on the floor and a crack in the window, and it’s the most beautiful room he’s ever seen.

“What a dump,” Stiles wrinkles his nose as he flops on the victim couch, coughing as a cloud of dust shakes free.

“Shush, I’ve waited half my life for this moment,” John scolds as he sets his box down on the desk. His beautiful, beautiful desk. His breath catches when he sees the bronze police Chief name plaque atop the wood, and the badge— shiny gold and brand new, with “Sheriff John Stilinski” engraved into it.

"Dang, pop, look at that shine!” Stiles crows as he points to the plaque. He spits on his sweatshirt sleeve and rubs it against the bronze. "Sheriff John Stilinski" he pronounces slowly. "So official."

"It’s just a title, Stiles,” John brushes off modestly, even though he’s been doodling ‘Sheriff john Stilinski’ in his notebook margins since he was a student at the academy.

“And your badge!” Stiles grabs the star off the desk and gasps.

"Hey, don’t breathe on it," John chastises and yanks it back, cradling the badge to his chest. "You’ll get your cheeto breath all over it."

"Ohh, right, because you care so much about germs, Mister eat-the-lasagna-out-of-the-trash-because-no-self-control."

"Hey, I'm the Sheriff now. I can have you arrested for talking back to an officer."
Stiles flops back on the small couch, arms behind head and chews on a toothpick he seemingly pulled from nowhere. "You should have arrested me years ago. Provoking officers is hardly the worst thing I've done."

John sighs because it’s true.

“Well? Aren’tcha gonna try it on?” Stiles blinks up at him from the couch. John stares at the badge in his hand, eyes raking over the glossy metal. It feels heavier than he imagined in the palm of his hand, but it fits twice as perfect. The only thing missing is—

“You wanted mom to pin it on you, huh,” Stiles guesses quietly. John meets his eyes, marveling in how much his son’s big browns look like Claudia’s, and the intelligence behind them.

“Once upon a time, yeah,” he admits.

“And when you do, our son will be right there to pin it on you."

“But I’d love if you could do it for her.”

He holds out the badge and after a moment of startled blinking, Stiles grins and takes it. His skinny fingers flitter over the gold and find the clasp in the back, and he hops up close on his tip toes to pin it on.

“How about right here?”

“Looks good. Just try not to stab me, alright?”

“Chill, I’m not gonna stab you.”

“Ow!”

“Heh. Okay, that was an accident. I’m not gonna stab you mortally.”

John looks at himself in the glass reflection of book case. He smiles.

Stiles starts poking in drawers and finds Sullivan’s apparent snack drawer. “Score!” He pulls out a bag of Doritos and tears open the bag. He’s an honest kid that is turning into the biggest klepto John has ever met, and John’s worked in law enforcement for twenty-two years.

"Kid, could you not eat that on my new couch?” He frowns at the neon crumbs Stiles is spilling between the cracks.

Stiles flops backwards, opening his mouth to chew obscenely, showing John the orange mush in his mouth. “Good one, dad. Like you think I’m not gonna be in here eating all the time.”

“You’re going to be in school, kid. Now I brought you to help me unpack this stuff. Get off your butt and come help.”

Stiles sighs dramatically, stuffs a handful of as many Doritos as he can into his mouth, and swings his legs off the couch. John unloads the box, which includes a mug of pencils, his folded army flag, and a folder of police records he’s supposed to file away in his drawers.

“Wow, who’s this guy?” Stiles flips open a folder and squints at the mugshot there.

“Dude!” Stiles says. “No way! That’s what he got fired for? I thought he punched, you know, a man... But this guy looks like he's just a teenager.”

"He is," John grunts. "No faster way to get yourself demoted to mail room."

"Derek Hale," Stiles pronounces. "He's..." he trails off, squinting at the picture.

"Dangerous," slips out of John’s mouth before he can think. He feels a pang of guilt for a memory of young Derek, skinny and grief-ridden at the station, but he also wants to protect Stiles from the kid who has a criminal record.

"Dangerous?" Stiles snaps his head up, wide eyes on John. He looks to Derek again. "I was going to suggest ‘ruggedly handsome,’ but what's so dangerous about him? Did he kill someone?"

"Remember that fire that happened the night before your twelfth birthday party?"

"Yeah?"

"That was the Hale fire."

Stiles eyes bug on the picture. “Holy— Derek Hale? As in the sole survivor and teenage millionaire?"

"That's him."

"Wow," Stiles gazes at picture. "He lost his whole family?" He says meekly, frowning. It’s the first sign of sympathy he’s shown for someone other than Scott. "That sucks. But why would Richard punch him? Talk about kicking a dog when he’s down."

"Derek Hale spent the majority of last year terrorizing the town," John explains. "He used to get arrested all the time for one thing or another. He refused all the department rehabilitation programs and dropped out of school— kid had a mouth on him too, drove Sullivan crazy. Guess Richard finally snapped and lost his temper."

“Dang. Does he still live... You know... In the house his family died in?"

"Rumor has it he just finished remodeling it. City wanted to condemn the place, but he refused."

“Wow,” Stiles murmurs. “That’s really sad. Maybe we could go... I dunno. Bake him cookies or something."

"No," John shuts him down, then immediately feels guilty. "I don't want you having anything to do with that kid, Stiles. He has a criminal record longer than my arm."

"Well so do I! Or at least I would if I got arrested for half the things I do."

"Doesn't matter," John says. "He's a high school dropout and doesn't go to college. He lives out in the woods by himself. That qualifies as sketchy in my book."

"Aw, look at you dad, looking out for me," Stiles teases, popping another Dorito in his mouth. "Let's order pizza for dinner."

.o0O0o. June 6th, 2010
Stiles takes the high school entrance exam a few days later. It’s held at Beacon Hills High, where half the county eighth graders file in nervously from the sidewalk, number two pencils clutched in sweaty hands. John drives him in the police cruiser, secretly giddy that there’s a big ‘ol “COUNTY SHERIFF” plastered on the side in big white block letters. He gets to park it in the driveway now, and it tastes sweeter than candy.

“Bye kiddo, you’ll do great!” He calls out the window as Stiles salutes him.

“Thanks, pop!”

He watches proudly for a moment as his gangly kid walks up to the double doors. Then he shifts gears, looks over his shoulder, and pulls out onto the—

“Hey Stiles, where you going?”

“Room 400, it’s on the other side of the school.”

“Room 400? Isn’t that the retard room?”

John hits the breaks so fast the tires squeal against the pavement.

“I— what? No, it’s just… It’s for students who need extra time.” Stiles is facing a freckled kid with matted orange curls.

“Yeah, because you’re a retard,” the kid cackles. A few other students join in the laughter as John flashes his break lights and steps out of the car.

“Hey you,” he strides up the front steps. Stiles whirls around with wide eyes and the kids abruptly stop laughing at the sight of his uniform.

“Y-yes sir—“

John sizes him up. “Did I hear you call my son a retard?”

“I—“

“Are you aware what that word means, son?”

“Yeah,” the kid sticks his chin up valiantly, squinting his already squinty eyes. “What’s it to you?”

“To me it’s a pretty nasty word to use on someone who isn’t clinically mentally retarded,” John states dangerously. “That’s my son there you’re talking to, and he’s a brilliant kid with ADHD wether he’s granted extra time or not. You’d best shut your mouth with childish remarks like that unless you want me to call up your mother and get you grounded for the whole summer.”

“You can’t do that! You don’t even know who I am!” The kid sputters.

“Ricky Santiago. You’re trying to get into Saint Francis high school, you play club soccer for The Colts, you had cheerios for breakfast, and you’re about to cheat on the exam.” John doesn’t miss a beat.

As expected, the kid’s eyes widen in shock. “W-what—?”

“Your name is written in sharpie on your backpack, probably by your mother. Your older brother David —at least I’m assuming since there isn’t another Santiago in this town— was arrested for underage drinking last week and he was wearing a Saint Francis sweatshirt, so odds are you want to
go to the same school. Your shorts are The Colts uniform, which I recognize because Stiles played club soccer last year and The Gators beat you ten to none, and your breath smells like cheerios.”

John pauses to lift his eyebrow. “And there’s a black smudge on your forehead which I’m guessing isn’t soot. It looks like you wiped the nervous sweat from your forehead at some point this morning, and since it’s on the left side, that’s why I deduct—“

John grabs Ricky’s hand and shoves up his jacket sleeve, revealing a mile of scribbled sharpie notes.

“You’re about to cheat on the exam.”

The small crowd of students gasps and Ricky turns bright red, trying to squirm out of his grip.

“H-how—?” Ricky squeaks.

“He’s the Sheriff,” Stiles grins in awe, and John swells with pride but keeps his grim expression. Because he’s the Sheriff now, which means he needs to look the part.

“Now, I’m gonna call the dean’s office while I wait here with you,” he says as he starts scrolling through his phone (Stiles decided to ride his bike on the high school roof last month so he actually has the office number in his contacts). “I’d walk you down there myself but I can’t leave the squad car running and unsupervised.”

“Wait, please—! I’m sorry, I just really wanted to do good on this test!” Ricky blubbers.

“I know this test can be nerve-wracking, but I don’t have much sympathy for cheaters, son.”

“Uh, dad? This is really cool and all and I would totally love to stay and watch this guy get his just desserts, but I gotta go,” Stiles interrupts with a glance to his watch. “But that was totally sick, you were like Sherlock Holmes! Wait, are we supposed to be in the classroom at eight or five to eight?”

“Five to eight.”

“Aaeep! Okay I’m going bye I gotta go like right now—“ Stiles flails and drops his pencils then grabs them and takes off running. “Wish me luck!”

“Bye, son! You don’t need it.” John smiles. Stiles gives two thumbs up over his shoulder.

“Bye pop! Love you!"

.o0O0o. August 10th, 2011.

John’s been working on the same murder case for a week.

All three deaths are connected to Beacon Hills county's most popular gay club, The Jungle. The details are as follows:

• 23-year-old Greg Suarez, the first victim, went out drinking at The Jungle with his boyfriend on Friday night. Upon returning home to their apartment, Greg suddenly convulsed and dropped dead.

• The next day on Saturday night, 21-year-old Ryan Alvaratto collapsed dead while dancing at the club.
On Sunday evening, 39-year-old Wilbur Walters convulsed and died in the back of a taxi on his way home from The Jungle.

First time is an incident, two times is a coincidence, three times is a pattern.

The autopsies showed arsenic poisoning as the cause of death, but every open bottle of liquor from the club tested clean. The Jungle has since been closed as a crime scene and the staff members have been interrogated, with prime suspect Ashley Nguyen, who was on shift bartending for all three nights the victims died.

Today is Wednesday. John’s favorite days are Wednesdays, because those are his days off. Which means that instead of spreading out police reports on his tiny desk at the station, he gets to spread out police reports on his tiny dining table in his kitchen. Except now John is driving the squad car out for a well-deserved Burger King break, until he spots a beat-up red bicycle with a bat logo sticker sloppily parked outside The Jungle, which has long ropes of yellow police tape wrapped around the perimeter.

"Stiles," he growls as he flips his blinker on, pulling left instead of continuing down the lane that will take him to sweet, calorie-filled mercy.

And that’s the other thing. Ever since John’s job started including investigating cold cases and murders, Stiles has taken a large interest in “helping.” John should have expected it considering how the kid has seen all eight seasons of Monk, all eleven seasons of CSI, and knows the dialogue to some Criminal Minds episodes better than he knows the Pledge of Allegiance. But by the time John parks the Crown Vic outside the club’s double doors, his son has already slipped inside.

John crosses his arms as he passes the threshold and spots Stiles by the bar stools. He takes a minute to just watch him, looking forward to the well-deserved terror his son will experience as soon as he turns around. The teen paces the bar slowly but with purpose, eyes trailing analytically over the stacked glasses, bundles of mint, and the sealed bottles of liquor. He chews on his hoodie string, muttering lightly to himself as he peeks underneath the counter, peering closely at suspicious stains and peanut shells. He looks out of place in his dirty converse, ripped jeans and striped sweatshirt. Then he turns around and screams.

"Oh my God! Give me a freaking heart attack why don't you!"

"Son," John greets darkly.

Stiles has grown a mile in the past year, stretching him beanpole-skinny just in time for Freshman year. For such gangly limbs he eats like a horse (and drinks milk straight from the damn gallon) but looks like a deer with his huge, brown eyes and feathery lashes blinking amid pale, freckled skin. He has big feet and big hands but little ears that stick out from the buzz cut he’s still nursing. With his moles and girlish pink lips he looks odd, but John loves him just the same.

"Dad!" Stiles yelps, eyes darting back and forth as if to calculate the best way out. "Right, hi! Heeey, daddy-o... Heh, what's, uh... What's the happ’s?"

"Oh, the happ’s?" John plays along amicably. "Nothing much, just taking time out of my day to catch my son committing suspicious, probably illegal activities because he thinks his father isn't watching."

"Oh," Stiles gulps. "Hey, did I mention that I got an A on my science report Friday?"
"Very nice. Now what are you doing here?"

"Mm. Define ‘here’? Like here in the county, here in California, here in—“ but Stiles flings his arm back in his squandering and knocks over a bowl of limes sitting on the bar counter. “Oh, shoot — sorry, sorry! That was an accident! Who the hell decided that was a good place to put that?"

“For Christ’s sake, Stiles, this is a crime scene,” John hisses, bending down to help pick up all the fruits as they bounce across the floor.

“Oh, wow, really?” Stiles chuckles nervously, scrabbling to throw the limes back in the bowl. “What a coinkidink, I didn’t know, I was just, uh—“

“How did you even get in here?” John sighs, because The Jungle's doors are all locked with the set of keys in John’s—

“I stole the keys from your uniform pocket when you were in the shower.”

Well, at least he raised an honest kid.

“Son, you do realize I should be arresting you for that, right?” John grabs a lime, then picks up a smaller lime and holds it adjacent, lifting each one accordingly. “See? Like these limes. I’m the dad —“ he shakes the bigger fruit. “And you’re the son—“ she shakes the small lime. “That means I’m in charge and you listen to me, not the other way around.”

“Nice metaphor, dad,” Stiles nods approvingly as they set the bowl back in place on the counter. “Although I feel like that's unfair for the small defenseless lime son, don’t you? Like this is 2011, ammi’right? Sudan just got independence, so shouldn’t well-behaved teen— no, scratch that. Shouldn’t teenagers get some independence too?”

“Sure, independence with doing your own laundry and buying your own groceries. Not freedom to be here, Stiles, inside a building that has yellow ‘crime scene: do not enter’ tape around it.”

“Oh,” Stiles licks his lips, blinking around the space as if seeing it for the first time. “I was, you know, uh, just clubbin’… At the club,” he fist-bumps awkwardly, smile crooked and unconvincing.

“Stiles, this club was shut down two days ago,” John deadpans.

“Yeah! Right. Right, I was just here looking for…” His son whirls around, spotting a button on the floor. “A button! I mean, my button. My lucky button, which I lost, but now I found! Phew, what luck, eh? Anyhoo, I’m gonna go home and sew it back on to my shirt, so—“

John grabs the back of Stiles’s hood before he can escape, making his son’s sneakers scrabble for purchase on the slick floor. “Stiles,” he growls.

Stiles twists away and runs his large hands up and down his hoodie, a habit when he’s trying to think fast. “Fine, fine! Okay. I, uh— Dad, there’s something I need to tell you.” His son pauses for dramatic effect, splaying his long fingers out wide in front of John. His eyes are large and rabbit-like, like he might try to bolt any second.

John crosses his arms. “I’m waiting.”

“Okay, here goes,” Stiles takes a deep breath and throws his arms out. “I’m bisexual!”

“And the sky is blue. Now what are you doing here?”
His son blinks wildly, mouth dropping open with a wet pop. ”Wait, what? Wow, that was… Not the reaction I was expecting. Wait, you knew?”

”Your mother and I knew when you were five. Nice diversion tactic, but it needs work. Now for the last time, answer my question.”

”Damn, I was saving that one for a real pickle. Shame,” Stiles tsks, softly shaking his head. ”Okay, so don’t get mad—”

”We’re past that stage, kid.”

”—But I’m really reallyreally close to figuring out this case and I needed to check something here.”

John’s hand flies up to pinch the bridge of his nose. ”Stiles, no! Goddammit, what did I tell you? No more meddling with police work! I don’t care how good your attention to detail is, you simply can’t go snooping around illegally just because I’m the Sheriff— especially because I’m the Sheriff. I already got in trouble once, and I’d really like to keep my job, kiddo.”

Stiles squeaks and trips over his feet at John’s anger. ”Aheh, great points pops, and I know and I’m superdupersorry, but look!”

”Stiles—”

”Just look!” Stiles insists, and curls his bony knuckles around John’s elbow to drag him over to the employee clock-in sheet by the wall. His son points eagerly at a line on the paper. ”Here, see? Eduardo Vasquez, bartender. Clocks in every Friday from 8:00pm to 2:00am— the same time the first murder took place!”

John sighs heavily. ”Yes, the department knows that. That’s the first thing we looked into. He’s clear.”

”What?” Stiles squawks.

”We brought him in for questioning a few days ago, along with all the other staff members who were on shift. He didn’t even make the victim’s drink, his co-worker Ashley did. Sweet guy, actually. He gardens for his grandmother on the weekends.”

”What! No, that can’t be right. Then what was he doing when the drink was being made?” Stiles asks suspiciously.

”He was mixing another cocktail, confirmed by two witnesses. I shouldn’t even be telling you this, but if it will help put your mind at ease—”

”No, there is no mind to be eased, dad, there’s a murderer on the loose!” Stiles throws his arms up, gesturing wildly around the bar. ”And I’m not buying any of that BS, like come on, gardening for grandma? This guy is—!”

”Innocent,” John cuts in firmly. ”He’s already been asked a million questions by the board, Stiles. Let the professionals do their job.”

”Well the professionals are wrong,” Stiles huffs, tapping his foot as he frowns at the sign-in sheet. ”I saw Eduardo’s headshot on the dining table last night. He’s totally guilty.”

”And what makes you so sure Eduardo murdered three people based off his headshot?” John presses.
“He’s six foot one, he has a terrible haircut, and he has evil, shifty eyes of evilness!” Stiles whispers- shouts urgently, then throws his arms up when John rolls his eyes. “He’s your guy, dad, I can feel it! I’d say my Spidey Sense is tingling, but we both know I’ve always been Batman.”

“Stiles, you’re going to go home and do your homework,” John growls, hauling his son out the door of the club. “You know, like a normal fourteen-year-old. And when you’re done with that you’re going to do the dishes, and if I deem you’ve done a good job then maybe you’ll have your punishment dropped to two weeks grounded instead of three.”

“What! Dad—“

“Stiles, I’ve had it up to here,” John raises his hand up to eye-level. “This is the only way you’re gonna get it through that head of yours. No. More. Meddling. You can solve murders when you’re in uniform.”

Stiles glares at him as he swings a leg over his bike. "You were on your way to Burger King, weren’t you?"

"I was not!" John lies over his shoulder.

"Was too! I swear I’m the only one who cares about your cholesterol!"

“Next time I see you on that bike I want to see you wearing a helmet, Stiles!”

“Ugh, you’re so lame, dad! Only lame people like Scott wear helmets!”

“Scott’s your best friend—”

“Exactly, which is why I’m the only one who’s allowed to call him lame!”

“Grounded, Stiles!”

John drops into the passenger seat of the cruiser and slams the door, sighing heavily against the steering wheel. He glances up just in time to see Stiles riding out onto the street, sticking his tongue out at John over his shoulder. He should really have “please return to Smartass Stilinski” stitched into the back of all his kid’s clothes. John meets his grey eyes in the rear view mirror, raising an eyebrow at himself.

“It’s your own damn fault,” he mutters.

.o0O0o.

Later that night black stains dust his fingertips, result of paging through police reports and newspaper articles all day. His glass of iced tea leaves a ring of white on the dining table, an addition to the million other rings of white left faded from drinks without coasters over the years. It’s been a quiet yet counterproductive Wednesday; he’s still going in countless circles with this case and Stiles has been in his room all day. They’ve hardly said a word to each other since this morning, but that’s the usual after arguments.

At seven Stiles slides slowly into a chair beside him, scooting forward an open can of Pepsi.

“Heeeey, pops,” his son greets, popping the ‘P’. A fleck of spit flies out and lands on the autopsy report. John shoots his son an unimpressed frown and wipes it away with his thumb.
“This is classified murder information, son.”

“Exactly! Why do you think I’m here?” Stiles rolls his eyes, cheeks hollowing as he sucks up sugary Mountain Dew through his straw. “Any new details worth mentioning?”

“Nope.”

“Not even for a sip of this delicious soda?”

“Considering my son is the King of Backwash, definitely no.”

Stiles whines in frustration and tries craning his neck to see around John’s hand. John moves his palm accordingly. “Come on, dad, I finished all my homework! And look, you’ve been at this case for days, just let me help! You know what they say— two heads are better than one, especially if the bigger of those heads has a receding hairline.”

John sighs and flips the binder shut. “Stiles, do you not remember this morning, when I grounded you for sticking your nose into my work?”

“Yeah, but that was for meddling! Physically going out, breaking into a crime scene and meddling with my hands!” Stiles says, wiggling his fingers two inches from John’s face. “All I’m asking is that you share a little info with me to ease my curiosity. I’m not gonna go out and meddle with anything, I just wanna know the new details. You know, for funsies. So I can have something to entertain me since you took away my internet and my phone. Pleeease?”

He finishes with giant brown puppy eyes and a pouted lip, and John stares him down with his best fatherly-unimpressed look. Stiles sighs, and in a blink the playful jest vanishes from his irises.

“Look, I’m sorry about going out behind your back today and snooping through The Jungle. And stealing your keys,” Stiles tells him earnestly, voice falling and cracking quiet in that way it does during those rare moments of seriousness. "I just got really excited about solving this case and acted on instinct. It was stupid of me. I just…” he licks his lips. “I think it’s kinda cool, the idea of getting to help you with cases and stuff. Like it’s something we could do together, you know?”

Since the first year after mom died you were too busy drinking to be there for me.

The last line Stiles leaves unspoken, but John hears it loud and clear. He releases a quiet breath, observing his son’s warm, hopeful-nervous eyes, which are somehow more powerful than his puppy eyes. He sighs. He is weak.

“If I catch you interacting with anyone or anything related to this case, you’re never leaving this house again,” he warns darkly as he reopens the binder. Stiles whoops and pumps his fist in the air, jumping over to plant a sloppy kiss on John’s forehead.


“A third victim keeled over dead in a taxi on the way home from The Jungle last night,” John points to the newest headshot. “Wilbur Waters. Autopsy just came in, cause of death arsenic poisoning.”

“Aw man, again?” Stiles frowns at the picture. “Well guess we’ve definitely got a serial killer on our hands, since he’s victim number three.”
“First time’s an incident, second time’s a coincidence, third time’s a pattern,” John nods.

Stiles studies the file. “Whoa, hold on, this guy was thirty-nine? But that’s ancient!”

“Hardly, kid.”

“Okay we get it, you’re sensitive about your age. But what I meant was that the other two victims were in their early twenties, right? So why would the killer want to off this geezer Wilbur, too?”

“That’s not the strangest part,” John sighs. “According to the cab driver, Wilbur mentioned he only ordered a coke at the bar.”

“A coke with rum?”

“Just a coke.”

Stiles chews his thumb. “Well that’s… Annoying.”

John nods. “Puzzling, sure, considering it’s hard to tamper with a sealed soda can. Meanwhile the lab sent back the toxicology reports from the open liquor at the bar— all came back clean.”

Stiles chews his thumb. “What were the three drinks again?”

“On Friday Gary ordered a mojito. On Saturday Ryan reportedly downed several margueritas. Wilbur had the coke.”

“Okay, so those all sound gross. What if the arsenic is in the ice cubes?”

“That’s what I thought too, but the ice is dispensed from a large machine. There’s no way to poison a few cubes without poisoning all of them, and we only have three dead bodies. ‘Only’ as a relative term here.”

“Okay, so we know that someone’s slipping the arsenic into the drinks when no one is looking,” Stiles concludes. “Like Eduardo.”

John sighs. “Stiles, I told you, we already checked him out.”

His son makes a vague sound and flutters his fingers dismissively in the air. “Right, right, sure.” He starts scribbling the details out in a chart, the same chart John drew only messier. “So there are three dead people. One died on Friday, the second died Saturday, and the third died on Sunday. And there was only one staff worker who was there working all three shifts?”

“Ashley Nguyen, a bartender. Pours all the drinks and has a degree in chemistry, too. She’s our prime suspect.”

Stiles grunts and taps his pencil rapidly against his temple, pat pat pat pat patpatpat— “Okay, so if we buy that she is the killer, which she’s not but okay, how does she get the arsenic into the glasses without anyone noticing?”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” John says. “When you get stuck on a case you always go back to square one. The start of the crime, also known as the big picture.”

“Alright, so that’s the killer’s motive, right? Why would someone want to kill three people, all presumably gay, since you know, a gay club, ages twenty-two, twenty-three, and thirty-nine?”

John sighs. “I don’t know, kid. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”
The *beep-beep* of the microwave interrupts them, signaling the end of Stiles’s dinner. His son leaps up and returns with a steaming hot pocket flopping out of his mouth, and a plain spinach salad for his dad. John winces and returns from the fridge with low-fat ranch dressing, bacon bits, a lime, and croutons.

“Is that the low-fat dressing?” Stiles narrows his eyes.

“You only buy low-fat dressing nowadays. Although I hope you realize that the full-fat kind won’t kill me, right?”

“Not immediately,” Stiles chirps around his hot pocket. Sauce oozes out and drips on his shirt. He frowns at it and dips his head down to lick it off. “Why do you always gotta add all that extra stuff to my delicious healthy Dad Dinners?”

“Just trying to cover up the taste of leaves, kid,” John dotes as he squeezes fresh lime over his mountain of bacony-ranchy-croutons, and the rabbit food beneath that.

.o0O0o. **August 11th, 2011.**

“Did your boss give you any supplies for your shifts at The Jungle, Ashley?”

“We all have aprons to hold our tips, and a visor. But nobody really wears the visors.”

“Uh-huh. Did you make good tips that night?”

“Me? No, just average. But Eduardo made good money, he had a big wad of bills in his pocket.”

"And you’re majoring in chemistry, correct?"

“I… Yes.”

“Do you know how to make arsenic, Ashley?”

“Well… Yes, technically, but—“

John watches the interrogation tape closely in his shiny new Sheriff’s office beside the tall form of Detective Larson, San Francisco PD’s most celebrated investigator. San Francisco’s Chief of Police Andrew Watts and criminology team are here as well. John tugs at his collar—he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous as hell about making a good impression.

“Excellent work, Sheriff,” Larson straightens and clicks his pen. “It’s not a confession but everything does seem to fall into place around her. May I get a copy of this tape?”

“Absolutely. I’ll have them ready for you in a couple hours, detective.”

“She seems nervous from the get-go,” Chief Watts adds. “I’ll have my team investigate The Jungle for anything your department might have missed. Hopefully with any newfound evidence we’ll have enough for a warrant. You said you already had some scene evidence held here?”

“Yes, the staff’s aprons and some bottles of liquor,” John replies.

“Excellent. I have no doubt we’ll be able to wrap this up quickly between both our cities,” Larson nods. John internally preens—he’s working with the *big guns*—and the big guns like him! He’s almost grateful enough to say a Hail Mary when he gets home, until—
They all turn to the window, where his son’s grinning face and skinny knuckles tap furiously on the glass. John’s heart nosedives into his stomach.

“What the—?” Detective Larson starts.

“I— Sorry, that’s my son,” he sighs, and quickly shuffles forward as Stiles points furiously to unlock the window. It comes undone with a *snick* and the kid tumbles through the opening, falling gracelessly to the floor. “Stiles, what in the—?” John starts.

“Dad! Dad, you— Oh, there’s people in here. Hi people, I’m Stiles,” Stiles salutes. He’s wearing a bright blue “stud muffin” t-shirt with a ketchup stain and his bike helmet, buckles swinging wildly around his face. "But dad! I’ve got some important info you’re totally gonna wanna hear about the arsenic case!"

“Sheriff, need I remind you that police business is strictly with the department?” Larson warns. The entire SFPD is staring disapprovingly between him and his lanky teenager.

“Yes, I understand,” John assures him hastily. “My son here tends to stick his nose into business he’s not supposed to,” while shooting a deadly look to Stiles, who sputters.

“But you—!”

“You were just leaving, weren’t you, Stiles?” John presses.

“What? No I wasn’t!” Stiles blurts angrily. “You can’t just kick me out when it’s inconvenient, I come here all the time! I’m practically here as much as you are! And you said yesterday that—"

“That’s alright Sheriff, I’ll come back later.” Larson’s tone is clipped. “Clearly you and your son have a discussion to sort out.”

“Detective, wait.”

“Call me when you’re ready to talk business.”

Larson walks out of the office, followed by Chief Watts and the rest of the chuckling SF team, glass door swinging shut behind him. John gapes and turns to his kid, just short of furious.

“Wow, that guy is a turd,” Stiles frowns.

“Stiles, you better say that you came to tell me you just won the lottery, because anything short of that and you’ll end up as victim number four in this case.”

“Uh, nope, no lottery news here. C’mon mom dad, the odds of actually winning are like, lower than getting struck by lightning while being eaten by a shark, you know that right? I came to tell you that I was talking to Danny’s friend Carlos today —Carlos is a senior at our school but he has a fake ID and he’s very, very gay, like Richard Simmons gay— and he goes to The Jungle all the time! So I asked him some questions since he’s a regular and he said that—”

“Jesus Christ, Stiles,” John buries his head in his hands.

“—Eduardo works slowly and slacks off while working! But if that’s true, then why did Amy say that—”

“*Stiles!*"
His son stammers to a stop at John’s tone, because he’s only truly yelled like this a handful of times.

“D-dad, I’m going somewhere with this, it’s important if you’ll just—“

“You’re not going anywhere with this, Stiles!” John slams his fist down on his desk, upsetting the papers there. “I just had some very important people from the San Francisco department here, and they’re the ones who are going to help figure this out— At least they were going to until you fell through the window and made me look like an idiot who’s out of his league!”

Stiles falters, hands hovering like he wants to fix it but doesn’t know how. “Shoot, dad, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know they’d be here! But I can figure out this case if you—”

“No you can’t,” John blurts angrily. “You’re fourteen, Stiles, you can hardly focus on a single math problem let alone a triple homicide murder case! Why can’t you just stay home and watch TV like a normal kid!”

It slips out before he can stop it. Stiles visibly flinches, and John nearly drops to his knees because he knows how insecure his kid is about that word— he doesn’t mean it, what he means is that Stiles is wonderfully unique and has the courage to tackle a triple homicide case, but that courage gets him into trouble and risks John’s job. But by the look on his son’s face, the flash of hurt in his brown eyes, Stiles interpreted the phrase literally.

Stiles purses his lips and stares at the carpet. “Mom would have believed in me.”

The words are a knife to John’s gut. Claudia was always the better parent. She would have believed Stiles, and she would never say what John just said to Stiles. Without another word his son turns on his heel, and John can’t bring himself to call him back as he exits through the window.

.o0O0o.

The guilt eats him all day, planting rewrites of Stiles flinching so that he can’t focus on sipping his coffee let alone the arsenic case. He doesn’t get off until after dark that night, and he makes a beeline for his son’s bedroom as soon as he walks in the house.

“Stiles?” He knocks softly on the door.

He peeks through as he opens it a crack. Stiles is facedown on his bed, limbs tangled in schoolbooks and binders and blankets. A bag of Cheetos lays atop a pillow throne, spilling orange puffs down onto the chaos. The kid doesn’t bother looking up. “Mm?”

The bed dips and creaks as John sits on the edge. “Listen, kiddo. I’m—“

“I’m sorry,” Stiles cuts in, muffled behind his pillow.

“Hey, now don’t go stealing my line,” John admonishes. “I’m the sorry one here. I didn’t mean what I said in the office. About you being…”

“Normal,” Stiles provides for him, turning tired eyes up to blink at him. “Yes you did. I’m sorry for being so crazy all the time, I know I talk to much and I can’t focus on anything longer than… I shouldn’t— I won’t bother with your cases anymore.”

“You’re not crazy,” John chides, rubbing a hand in little circles over Stiles’s back. “You have ADHD. You’re extremely smart. You have ambition and you’re very stubborn, all of which make
you an excellent problem solver. Just a very animated problem solver.”

“I know it’s annoying.” Stiles mumbles.

“Stop with the self-depricating BS,” John scolds gently. "I mean it when I say I wouldn’t trade you for any of the ‘normal’ kids in this town. Not even the ones with the normal names.”

Stiles snorts and kicks John gently in the knee.

“As for you sticking your nose into my cases,” he continues, blowing out a long breath. “I’d be lying if I said I wanted you to pull your nose out of them.”

Stiles blinks up wide-eyed, perks head up. “You what?”

John studies him. “You really think you can piece something together to solve this case?”

“Yes! I mean, I think so, yeah,” Stiles nods eagerly, scrambling into a sitting position. Several Cheetos are crushed to death in the process. “What I was going to tell you earlier was— can I tell you?”

“Absolutely. I’m all ears.”

Stiles bounces closer to him on the mattress. “Okay, so I talked to Carlos, who’s a regular at The Jungle. He said that Eduardo usually slacks off on the job and doesn’t work very fast, maybe he doesn’t work well under pressure, maybe he just has a bad day everyday, but beside the point. He’s slow. But in Ashley’s interrogation tapes she said that the night of the first murder while he was on shift, he made really good tips! But if he’s not a good worker, why would people pay him so well?”

John considers this. “You’re right, that is odd. But we would have to get statements from more regulars to confirm that Eduardo really is a slack on the job to back up your suspicion.”

“Yeah, but I think… Could you do something else too, maybe?” Stiles looks at him imploringly, biting his lip.

“That depends. What do you need?” John says carefully.

“Bring Eduardo back in for an interrogation,” Stiles blurts urgently. “And let me be there to listen behind the mirror. I swear, if I could just get some more details from him I can connect the right dots.”

“I’ve only been Sheriff for five months, Stiles. Do you know how unprofessional it would look for me to bring back in a cleared suspect so my teenage son can listen in on his interrogation?” John voices seriously, but not unkindly. Not when Stiles is staring at him so determinedly. The kid nods slowly, licking his lips.

“Yeah. To the SFPD maybe, but not to me.”

John can’t help the small smile that grows from that. Because in the big picture, his son’s opinion is the one that matters most.

“Allright. Then I’ll call in Eduardo for another session tomorrow. But this needs to be under detective Larson’s nose, so you’ll come with me to the office early morning before the SFPD arrives. That means seven am sharp you’re dressed and out the door.”

Stiles nods eagerly and hops out of bed. “Yes! I can do that! I’ll lay out my clothes now! Is my Star
Trek shirt still in the wash? The blue one, not the yellow one. Gotta channel my inner Vulcan if I want the logical side of my brain to be in tip-top condition!”

John tries to sigh but it comes out a chuckle instead. “I think I saw it in the dryer.”

“Yiiss! I’ll go get it,” Stiles spins around and skids into the hallway in his socks, but then skates back and plows into his father. John smiles as Stiles wraps his arms around him and squeezes him tightly in a hug. “Thanks, dad. You’re the best!”

John pats his son’s back. “Alright, kiddo.”

.oO0Oo. August 12, 2011.

Eduardo is tall, dark, and handsome with tanned skin, a whisper of a goatee, and a thick Colombian accent that’s silky smooth.

“How long have you been working at The Jungle?”

“Just a couple months. Since the second of April I think.”

“And you were working there the night of the first murder, of victim Gary Suarez?”

“Yes. We used to date, but we broke it off on good terms.”

“Did anything of note happen during your shift that night?”

“Not that I can remember. It was a pretty regular night, same music, same drink orders, made good tips.”

“And you mentioned you stay at your grandmother’s house during the weekends?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of things do you do there?”

“Chores, mostly. Gardening work, helping her with the groceries, things like that… I’m sorry, but ah — did I not answer these same questions last week?”

“What kind of garden is it?” Stiles prompts John. His son is leaning so far over his nose is practically smashed to the two-way mirror, chewing on his thumbs. Brandermill is grilling Eduardo on the other side in the interrogation room. "Like mom’s flower garden or like a vegetable garden? An arsenic garden?”

John rolls his eyes but relays the question to Brandermill through the earpiece, who then asks Eduardo on the other side of the glass.

“What kind of garden is it?”

“Fruits and vegetables mainly,” Eduardo shrugs. “Lemons, limes, strawberries, carrots, the usual. She can’t bend down to pull weeds like she used to, you know?”

“Do you do work around the house for her, too?”

“Yes. She has me wash the windows, eh, laundry, dishes, dusting, that kind of thing. She can’t reach
“Tell him to ask more questions about his grandmother,” Stiles prompts.

“Why?” John asks.

“Because no twenty-year-old dude just spends his weekends doing chores at his grandma’s for free!”

“Maybe you wouldn’t,” John concurs dryly. “But other, nicer grandchildren might.”

“Please, dad? Ask! Ask quickly, gogogo!”

“Alright! Brandermill, we’d like more info on the grandmother, please.”

“Would you say you and your grandmother get along, Eduardo?”

Eduardo’s expressions softens. He places a hand over his heart. “Of course, I love my abuelita. Ever since I was little, she was always there for me. Now that she and I am older, it is my turn to be there for her since she cannot do things like she used to.”

John shoots a side-glance to Stiles, wondering if his son will stick around to help John when he’s old and creaky. He imagines Stiles spoon-feeding him mashed broccoli and shudders.

“You okay, pops?”

“Yes. Just promise to shoot me before I get decrepit.”

“She likes to bake, loves to spoil me with her food,” Eduardo continues. “She always says, ‘Eddie, sit down, eat chico!’ Her desserts are perfection. Strawberry shortcake, jam tarts, manticados, and her key lime pie is award-winning! I always do double my workout at the gym to make up for it all.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a saint, make it cuter. You ain’t fooling nobody,” Stiles hisses.

“Honest to God, Stiles, what are you looking for?” John sighs.

“I don’t know yet, but something.”

He checks his watch. “Look, kid. We’ve kept him here for an hour, it’s time to let him go.”

Stiles chews his lip. He stares down at his hands as he flexes them. “But I… I don’t know how he did it yet.”

John rests his hands on the boy’s shoulders to make him look up. “Hey, kiddo. I know you say you’ve got a hunch, but a hunch doesn’t always mean guilty. I’m proud of your efforts, but you should go home before the SFPD gets here. Call it a day, maybe?”

Stiles deflates, but John can see in his eyes that he knows it’s time to turn in. “Yeah… ‘Kay. Thanks for letting me come.”

John claps him on the shoulder. “We’ll order pizza later, okay?”

“’Kay.”

Stiles grabs his hoodie and bike helmet off the back of his chair and leaves the room. John relays the stop word to Brandermill and Eduardo is supervised out of the interrogation room by Clary and Winston. He meets them in the hallways and escorts them past the desks and call stations, thanking
them all again for coming in on such short notice.

“No problem,” Eduardo replies amicably. “I understand you officers must do your job. I am happy to oblige.”

“Sheriff Stilinski!”

John stops at the sound of Detective Larson’s voice as the man enters with the rest of the SF department. The station is packed at this point, noisy and bustling with early morning officers sipping coffee, mulling over papers, and handling phone calls. “Good morning, Detective Larson. Chief, nice to see and your gang as well.”

“What’s he doing here?” Larson gestures to Eduardo, still standing between Clary and Winston. “I thought you said you cleared him?”

“Just brought him back for some extra questions,” John brushes off. “Alright Eduardo, you’re free to —“

“WAIT! DAD, WAIT!”

The double doors of the station burst open loudly as Stiles sprints into the office, yelling and knocking over several stacks of papers from nearby desks because for some odd reason, he flails like Claudia when he runs. Everyone in the station turns towards the commotion, some rolling eyes, some sniggering into their palms, others looking in interest to see how the Sheriff handles it.

“Stiles?” John questions. “What—?”

“Him again?” Larson turns condescendingly to John. “What is the meaning of this, Sheriff? Do you always let your son roam the station like he lives here?”

“Don’t let him go! Don’t let him leave, he’s GUILTY!” Stiles hollers as he fights his way around officers and fax machines to get to John. Eduardo stares at him like he’s crazy and whispers of speculation flutter around the room, as Larson makes another snide comment about John’s irresponsibility.

“Someone get him outta here,” one of the SF criminology experts mutters.

“Stiles, Stiles, kiddo, I thought we just agreed on this? We’re about to let the man go, you said so yours—”

“Dad, he killed them!” Stiles blurts urgently. “I figured it out just now when I got on my bike, dad, you have to believe me, he’s lying his ass off!”

Chief Watts snaps his fingers. “Sheriff, if you won’t remove him, I will. Guys, get him out of here.” The SF officers behind him step forward and grab Stiles roughly by the elbows, dragging him towards the exit as he fails and scrabbles against the linoleum.

“Wha— friggin’ ow! Hey, hey! Let go of me! Stop, STOP!”

“Hey, get your hands off my kid! You don’t need to be so rough with—"

The station grows loud with commentary and Stiles cranes his neck above the commotion, eyes pleading as he fights against the officers. “Dad! Dad, trust me— Check the limes!”

“What?” John breathes.
“Out you go, kid, this is an adult matter. You can come back when you’re in uniform—"

“The LIMES!” Stiles screams. “The limes at The Jungle, just do it!”

“ALRIGHT, EVERYBODY STOP!”

John bellows as he finds the air horn and blasts it. Everyone ducks and covers their ears, falling silent immediately.

“That’s better,” he glares at Chief Watts, and then at the SF officers frozen halfway through dragging Stiles out the door. “Now let go of my son. Hands off him, good. You lot may be the top investigators in SF, but I’m the Sheriff of this station and you’re in Beacon Hills now, which is my town. That means I’m the only one who gets to boss people around in this situation, are we clear?”

Larson and Chief Watts exchange a look. “Very well.”

“Good. Thank you, gentleman.” John approaches Stiles and frowns at the red splotch on his elbow where he was manhandled. He lowers his voice. “Stiles. How sure are you that Eduardo is guilty?”

Stiles pants as he meets John’s eyes. “Very sure. Like sixty percent sure.”

“That’s not very high, kid.”

Deathly silence in the station as everyone waits on the Sheriff’s decision. Eduardo stands frozen in the arms of his officers, and tension mounts as everyone holds their breath. The only sound is Stiles panting, eyes wide/pleading with his dad. John sighs.

“Winston, go to The Jungle and bring back the damn limes.”

“Sir—?”

“Now, Winston.”

“This is absurd,” Larson comments, but John doesn’t spare him a second chance.

“Stiles, start explaining.”

Stiles whirls around and bounces to the white board by the investigation cork. John orders his officers to stay seated but none of them oblige, too curious to continue working. They crowd around as Stiles grabs a pen and swipes a sleeve over the board, erasing the elaborate plans already drawn there. Everybody groans.

“So at the— Oh. Oops, heh. Sorry! Guess there was some uh, fancy police stuff drawn there, huh?”

“Keep going, Stiles.” John closes his eyes. Please.

“Okay, so. According to Ashley's interrogation tape, she said that she was working the bar with Eduardo the night of the first murder.”

“How did you get that tape, it was under lockdown,” John states.

“I stole your keys when I hugged you goodbye yesterday morning. And then I slipped into your office during your lunch break and stole the file from your desk.”

John feels his key ring; the desk drawer key is gone. He closes his eyes and sighs.
“—But anyway, there are more pressing matters at hand, like dead bodies,” Stiles continues quickly, scribbling on the board. “So Eddie was indeed there at The Jungle for his shift the night of the first murder, right? And he even admitted to formerly dating the victim, Gary Suarez!”

“Which we broke off on good terms,” Eduardo cuts in. “I already told the police, I didn’t even realize he was there. I just told Ashley to make a mojito for a ‘Gary’ since I had my hands tied with another drink.”

“Exactly!” Stiles points a finger. “But you gave her something first, didn’t you. From your apron?”

“What kind of guessing game is this?” Larson laughs. John resists the urge to step on his foot.

“This is kind of a guess as far as the murdering goes, but why do you think I wear hoodies so much, dad? Because the pockets are great for hiding secrets!” And Stiles starts pulling stuff out from his front pocket then and there—John’s keys, a few dollar bills, John’s credit card, some gum and a bouncy ball.

“So like I said, in Ashley’s tape she said that The Jungle provides staff with aprons to hold their tips. She also mentioned that Eduardo made a lot of tips the night of the first murder because she saw the bulge of money in his apron pocket, but Eduardo said that he didn’t make good tips that night! Ashley only thought he did because she assumed the bulge in your apron pocket was bills, but it wasn’t money, it was limes.”

“Limes,” John repeats.

“Limes!” Stiles grins. “Poisoned limes, to be specific.”

A few chuckles from the back of the room, and full-belly laughter from the SFPD. John breaks out in a nervous sweat.

Stiles paces, arms gesturing wildly. “I didn’t put it together until I thought about what you said last night, dad. You squeezed all that lime juice on your salad because you said ‘kid, I’m just trying to cover up the taste’—Eddie used the limes to cover up his murder! He only wanted to kill his ex Gary, but by leaving behind a few extra citruses of death at the bar, he could create extra murders to throw off the police!”

“That’s why there was no connection between the victims,” John says slowly. “A twenty-three-year old, a twenty-one year old, and a thirty-nine year old, all on different days.”

“Right, it was just random coincidences who died next!” Stiles grins at him. “Eddie only works at The Jungle on Fridays. He knew that by leaving some extra limes behind, another bartender would make a poison drink and kill someone on Saturday or Sunday while he wasn’t even at the scene! It would make it look like serial killings, but really it’s just happenstance! Genius tactic by the way. I’d say I wish I’d thought of that myself, but I don’t typically go around killing people.”

“A mojito, margueritas… But what about the coke?” John asks, frowning. “The first two drinks have limes, but not the soda.”

“Sir—“ Rhonda voices behind him. She pulls The Jungle beverage menu from the papers on her desk. “It says here that all sodas are served in a glass with a wedge of citrus.”

“This is ridiculous,” Eduardo cuts in, crossing his arms. “You have absolutely no proof of this. Some boy throwing out crazy accusations, who even are you to have the right to be here?”

Stiles turns to Eduardo, eyes glittering. “I’m the Sheriff’s son,” he announces. “And you actually
convicted yourself. You said your grandmother has a fruit and vegetable garden with the ‘usual’ stuff like lemons and lime trees. Then you said that your grandma bakes a lot, and how her key lime pie is award-winning, remember? What woman has a garden full of fruit and doesn’t use them for her own freshly baked goods?”


“What I’m saying is, your grandma must be growing key limes in her garden since she makes enough key lime pie to perfect an award-winning recipe! But dad—“ Stiles whirls around, eyes shining on John. “When you caught me at The Jungle and scared me so that I accidentally knocked over the bowl of limes? When we were putting them back most of them were huge, but aren’t key limes supposed to be the smaller ones? Remember how you picked up a smaller lime and said, ‘like these limes, Stiles! I’m the dad, you’re the son!’”

“Son, do you realize I should be arresting you for that, right?” John grabs a lime, then picks up a smaller lime and holds it adjacent, lifting each one accordingly. “See? Like these limes. I’m the dad —“ he shakes the bigger fruit. “And you’re the son—“ she shakes the small lime. “That means I’m in charge and you listen to me, not the other way around.”

John is speechless. “There were a few smaller limes mixed in with the bigger ones,” he breathes. Eduardo pales.

“Exactly!” Stiles cries, turning to Eduardo. “And you said yourself that Gary’s signature drink was a mojito. You knew that eventually he would come in and order one! Check the limes at The Jungle, and I’ll bet you that the smaller ones— the key limes from Eddie’s grandma’s house— will be the ones laced with arsenic!”

There’s a moment of silence where no body moves, for the whole room —Larson, Chief Watts, the SF officers, and all twelve Beacon Hills deputies— are staring stunned at the Sheriff and his kid. John points to the door. “You heard my son. Mulaney, have the labs run a sample of those limes!”

“And you guys have the staff aprons here too, right? Check Eddie’s pocket for lime residue!”

“Wait! That’s one big jump, don’t you think?” Eduardo cuts in. “I’ve already been cleared, twice!”

“Nobody does gardening for grandma for free,” Stiles snorts. “If the residue checks out, I’m guessing that’s enough for a warrant of grandma’s house. Check the backyard for a lime tree, and the arsenic probably isn’t too far.”

“Wait, but what about a motive?” Larson sputters.

Suddenly Eduardo kicks Winston in the shin and bolts for the door. Clary and the SFPD are on him in a second and tackle him to the floor, where he wriggles and snarls at Stiles, “He cheated on me, did you know that! Gary was two-timing me for months! That fucking bastard left me for another man after I gave him my heart, he deserved what came to him!”

“There’s your motive,” John breathes incredulously.

“How did you even figure it all out, you’re just a stupid kid! Jódete! Y tu padre y sus—!”

“Arrest him.” Another officer comes up behind Eduardo and clicks a pair of handcuffs around his back. “Eduardo Vasquez, you are under arrest under syndication of law, you right to remain silent and refuse to answer questions. Anything you say may be used against against you in a court of law —“
“O’Leary, Christiansen? Contact the media and let them know we’ve caught our arsenic killer,” Chief Watts breathes into his walkie talkie. Larson swallows heavily and picks his jaw up off the floor.

And John turns to Stiles —his skinny, sarcastic, crazy smart kid with the attention span of a gnat—who’s grinning and flushed with sparkling eyes of laughter. John is laughing too as he grabs him in a bear hug and spins him around, clapping him on the back. When he sets him down they’re both red in the face and beaming, because the entire station is whooping and cheering in a standing ovation.

“Dad, are they cheering for us?”

“They’re cheering for you, Stiles.”

“Really?” Stiles gapes at the scene, eyes wide with staggering disbelief. John vows to convince him that it certainly won’t be the last standing ovation, because the kid deserves all the recognition in the world.

“Son, that was incredible.”

“Does this mean I’m un-grounded?” Stiles beams hopefully.

“You’re un-grounded for life, kiddo.”

“Alright! Does this mean if I solve the next murder you’ll let me save up for a motorcycle?”

“Absolutely not. But I will be making a copy of my desk key for you. The government probably wouldn’t approve of you breaking into my office every day.”

March 7th, 2012.

If John is honest, Claudia is her jeep.

He and Stiles both refer to the car as “she” instead of “it,” a unvoiced agreement that started the day after the funeral. The car sits in solitude for years as John keeps it dry and oiled for the day Stiles has a license in his oversized hands. For the most part it’s unacknowledged, a quiet guardian in the garage. Although sometimes when John’s cleaning out his tools he opens the garage door for some light, heads back inside for lunch, and returns to find his son sitting by the front tire running his fingers among the ridges.

As Stiles gets older he starts dropping hints about driving, then escalates to full blown ass-kissing the month before he turns fifteen.

“Good morning father,” his son chirps cheerily one early Saturday morning. He waltzes into John's room carrying a tray of breakfast as John rolls over in bed and groans as the sunlight hits his eyes.

“S’Saturday mornin,’” He mumbles with a bleary glance to the clock—nine am sharp. “Wha’appened, who died? What did you do?” He demands suddenly, because it must be the apocalypse if his son is up this early on a weekend. Actually, his son would probably sleep through the apocalypse.

Stiles makes a raspberry noise as he fluffs John’s pillow so he can sit up. “C’mmon, pops, can’t a guy just do something nice for his old man once in a while? Although between you and me, you
look more the young man every day! Like a good cheese, John Stilinski gets better with age.”

John squints suspiciously at the tray Stiles sets down on his lap. Unbuttered whole wheat toast, a lopsided veggie omelette with no cheese, and a single, half strip of bacon. “What did you poison this with? Is this your plan, to drug me unconscious so you can run off and drive that jeep without me knowing?”

Stiles gapes. “What? No! Nooooo, I would never… Although hypothetically, which sleeping pills would be the best for quick effects?”

“Stiles.”

“DaAAAAAaad,” Stiles whines, and climbs into John’s bed to poke and prod at his father’s pajamas. “Come onnnnn, please? I’m fifteen next week! That’s so close to legal that is basically is legal! How did you even know this was about the jeep? Do you have some kind of fatherly jedi mind-reading powers? That baby has been sitting in the garage gathering dust for ages! She needs me to drive her, and you’re the only one who can teach me! I know you know how to drive sink since those were like, the only cars around back in your day.”

John nibbles on his bacon. “First of all, I’m forty, not ninety. Secondly, I grew up in New York. I didn’t even learn how to drive until I was eighteen.”

“Yes, yes, very nice. But this is California, where teenagers rule the road the second they hit that golden pubescent age of fifteen, which I’m turning next Thursday!” Stiles flails with passion. “Jackson is already driving Lydia to school in a Porsche, dad. How am I supposed to compete for her hand in marriage?”

“You think that girl is going to be impressed with the baby blue hunk a’ junk in our garage?” John scoffs around his toast. His dry, dry, toast.

“It’s not what you drive, dad. It’s how you drive it,” Stiles tells him seriously. “Stop scowling at your toast, I made it with love.”

“You should have made it with butter.”

“Butter clogs arteries. Love lowers blood pressure and reminds fathers how incredibly smart and well-deserving their sons are,” Stiles flips over and bats his eyelashes up at him, bouncing on John’s mattress. “Wow, your bed is comfy. Is this memory foam?”

“It’s the same mattress we’ve had for fifteen years. A box-spring.”

“Huh. It’s really squishy and like, sink-y,” Stiles observes, kneading his elbows into the fabric. “Hey, do you think it’s too soft? Is this why your back hurts all the time?”

Yes.

“No.”

Posturepedic beds are expensive.

“Weeeell, maybe some good ol’ driving can alleviate that problem!” Stiles blinks hopefully at him.

“I’m not taking you driving until you turn fifteen, Stiles,” John says calmly.

“But you’re eating my breakfast!”
“That I am. But I never said I agreed to your proposal.”

Stiles twists so that his face is mashed into the sheets and groans in frustration. “You’re the worst dad ever” he pouts, although it sounds more like “‘eer duh wurf ‘ad effer.” John chuckles and pats his son on the back.

“I know. Now get your butt up and so we can finish washing the squad car before the lacrosse game.”

..0000o.

For the first lacrosse game of the year it’s a chilly January morning. Since it’s Stiles and Scott’s first _ever_ lacrosse game, John made sure to schedule his deputies accordingly so he could attend the game despite Stiles’s odd protests. “No dad, you totally don’t want to come. It’s not a big deal, you can catch sports on TV like, all the time! Plus it will be cold and… Boring. Very boring. You’d have much more fun at the station!”

“Hey, brought’cha coffee,” John offers the cup. She’s bundled up in a purple coat and mittens, dark curls tied back beneath a beanie.

“Oh my god, thank you,” Melissa makes grabby-hands at the dark roast and cradles it close like she might try to bite anyone who comes close. She inhales deeply and takes a long sip. “Mmmm, yes. Have I ever told you that you’re the best? Because you’re definitely my favorite now. Hey, is there caramel in this?”

“I asked them to add a pump for you,” he says as he sits down next to her on the cold bleachers. He shivers, white plumes of breath billowing out in front of them. “Jesus, and to think the boys are out on the turf in their shorts.”

“Right? They should warm up quick though, the game should start any minute. Stiles is number twenty-four, right?”

“Yes. And I’m guessing Scott is eleven?”

“Yeah, did he tell you?”

“No, I made a deduction because number eleven is the only kid standing next to my son.”

John points to to the two gangly figures hovering at the edge of the field. What Scott lacks in height Stiles makes up for in skininess, and apparently the rest of the team notices this too because there is clear separation between the players; like a force field separating their kids from the rest of the heightened, muscle, tan athletes sporting Cyclones uniform. He doesn’t take it as a good sign.

“Did, uh… Have you seen Scott play?” John asks hesitantly.

“No, supposedly he practices in the backyard but I’m usually at work,” Melissa frowns, apparently nearing the same conclusion. “Have you seen Stiles play?”

“Er… No,” he admits. “He actually didn’t really want me to come today, although he wouldn’t say why.”

“Huh. I guess we’ll find out,” she sips her coffee. "He still bugging you about that jeep?"
“Brought me another bribery breakfast in bed this morning,” he chuckles. “Last week he polished all my shoes and the week before that he scrubbed the kitchen floor. Gotta admit, I’ll be sad to lose all the pampering come next Thursday.”

“Ha! Not my son,” Melissa scoffs. “He just ran out and got a job at that veterinarian clinic and used his paychecks to buy a bike. Now he flies all over town on it. Said he didn’t want to drive my ‘mom’ car.”

“That’s understandable,” John hums. “Have you seen your van? It’s a total mom car.”

“Excuse me for not having a fancy police cruiser to roll around in, Sheriff.”

He smiles into his café mocha. “Truth be told I wish Stiles was happy just riding a bike like Scott. I’d love to see him in Claudia’s jeep, but I… Worry.” He’s nervous to let Stiles drive because his kid is reckless and scatterbrained, and John has nightmares of his gangly limbs splattered on the pavement that leave him gasping awake in a cold sweat.

“Welcome to being a parent,” Melissa raises her eyebrows. “Kids love to scare the crap out of us. Honestly I’m worried about Scott being out here today, the conditions are terrible for his asthma. Cold air, grass, exercise… Sometimes I want to just permanently wrap him in bubble wrap.” she bites her lip, little worried crinkles scrunching on her forehead. John pats her knee assuredly.

“Hey, Scott’s a tough kid. He’s made it through all the practices just fine, what’s a little extra game?”

She blows out a sigh and rests her chin on her cup. “How do you stay so calm and practical all the time? Is there something extra in your coffee, too? Because I want what you’re having.”

“Not since you helped me stop drinking in 2006, no. But I’ve found that occasionally switching to tea helps with nerves.”

Melissa’s mouth falls open in embarrassment. “Oh, shoot. I’m sorry John, I didn’t mean— I should really think before I make jokes.”

“It’s perfectly fine,” he assures her as he takes a sip. “The last thing I want is for it to be a taboo subject. It’s, ah… It’s not something I’m proud of, but I think it’s important for Stiles to see that I’m open to talking about it, if he ever needs… I dunno. If he has questions, I guess.”

“Well I’m proud of you,” Melissa states firmly. “I know you beat yourself up over it, but you managed to pull yourself out. Not everyone can say that.”

“Alright you little sticky-fingered weasels, line up! Greenburg! Spit out the gum, you disgust me. Bilinski, McCall, quit acting out Romeo and Juliet and get your scrawny butts over here!”

The crowd rumbles excitedly as Coach Finstock blows his whistle like it’s his sole mission in life, congregating the boys in position on the field. The opposing team is the Carlridge High Bulldogs, a band of bulky kids dressed in impressive blue uniforms that outshine the dull maroon of the Cyclones. John bites his lip as he watches his son nervously adjust his helmet and clap Scott on the shoulder. The teams gather in circles, review game plans, and throw their hands up with a “Goooo, Cyclones!” and a “Bulldogs, ruff ’em up!”

“Should we be concerned?” Melissa mutters.

“I’d say yes, but it looks like our boys are sitting on the bench,” John frowns as Coach Finstock herds their kids over to the side as the rest of the team lines up on the field.
The Bulldogs are ruthless.

As the whistle blows it’s like the opposing team transforms into a train and barrels into the Cyclones all at once. The sound of the impact —ten blue helmets hitting ten maroon helmets— is like a crack of thunder that echoes across the field. The ball is snatched in a net and the Bulldogs start running towards the goal. Time stretches on and the score climbs against the Cyclones; Finstock shouts at his fallen players to shake it off, but eventually the battering and bruising leaves the whole team moaning like worms on the field.

“Are those kids even in high school?” John squints at a Carridge player as he slams a Cyclone into the ground.

Melissa winces. “Either they were held back a few years or they take a shot of gym juice with every meal.”

“Quit lyin’ around, Greenberg! It’s just a scratch, walk it off!”

“I think he’s unconscious, coach!”

“Well somebody get him some smelling salts! Or— you! Whittemore! Wave one of your shoes under his nose! That’s it!”

“You’ve got two kids on the bench, put them in the game already!” John shouts.

“I swear if you injure my son further you’ve got a lawsuit comin’ your way!” Another man chimes in. It’s Danny Māhealani’s father, a very rich lawyer. This gets Finstock’s attention; the coach sighs and scrubs his hands over his hair, then jabs a thumb to the field.

“Alright! Māhealani and Whittemore, get to the sidelines! Bilinski and McCall… You’re in.”

The man says it like it’s his deepest regret in life. Stiles and Scott jerk in surprise and scramble off the bench, Stiles tripping over his lacrosse stick in the process and face planting the grass. Finstock buries his face in his clipboard and stalks over to stand beside his two benched star players. The whistle is blown again.

“My son is on the field!” John crows happily.

“Common’ Scott! You can do it, honey!” Melissa hollers. It’s hard to tell from the bleachers, but it almost looks like their kids duck their heads in embarrassment.

The ball is tipped and the Cyclones grab it. Heads turn from side to side as lacrosse sticks fling it back and forth across the field, two dozen teenage legs sprinting in pursuit. Number thirteen chucks it to six, who passes it to sixteen, who dodges a Bulldog and hollers at twenty to get free.

“Pass it to twenty-four, he’s wide open!” John hollers.

“Same with eleven!” Melissa chimes in.

But the Cyclones seem highly invested on keeping the ball far away from their kids. Stiles and Scott wave their arms and run doggedly up and down the field to chase the game, but they go unnoticed—except by the Bulldogs, who elbow and tackle them as needed. John winces as one barrels into Stiles and sends him sprawling to the grass with an undignified squawk. It soon becomes clear why his son didn’t want John to show up. The kid is arguably the worst player on the team, even worse than Scott, who keeps stopping to take puffs from his inhaler.
The next quarter Stiles is wide open right next to the opposing goal. He waves his arms like a crazy man until number three, in a desperate move, chucks the ball to him. Stiles screams, raises his stick like a shield, and scrunches his eyes shut as the ball bounces to the ground and rolls to a stop at his feet. Everyone stares with baited breath as Stiles laughs, swoops his stick to pick it up, and tears up a clump of turf when he misses by five inches.

John’s side of the bleachers and the Cyclones groan— one player actually throws down his stick and walks off the field. Stiles flees to the safety of the Ref as the Bulldogs charge where he was standing and steal the ball back.

“Well, he’s certainly… Good at running,” Melissa suggests weakly. A second later Stiles trips over his own feet and belly flops on the grass.

“It’s okay, Mel. But I appreciate your effort.”

The Bulldogs continue to pummel their team the remaining twenty minutes of the game. Towards the end Stiles and Scott give up entirely on trying to score goals and focus instead on running away from the ball, a decision that has Finstock abusing his bullhorn with colorful swearing. Scott in particular wears out faster than the other players and starts panting with hands on his knees. Melissa grips John’s hand tightly as he fumbles with his inhaler again, and once he’s running again she meets John’s eyes and quickly pulls her fingers away.

The Bulldogs win 52-11. Afterwards the boys trail out from the locker room bruised and disappointed. Melissa pecks each of them on the cheek and says she’s proud of them before hurrying off to her shift at the hospital, leaving John to bring them back to his house for the day. The car ride home in the police cruiser is awkward.

He clears his throat. "Well boys, you certainly... Showed the grass who was boss," he manages. They had missed the ball so many times that their sticks kicked up clumps of earth from the turf.

“We suck, dad.”

“Yeah… But thanks for trying, Sheriff.”

John glances in the rear view mirror. The boys are slumped in their seats chewing sadly on their nails (Stiles) and blinking forlornly out the window like an abused puppy in those Sarah McLachlan commercials (Scott). He sighs.

“You boys wanna stop for ice cream?”

“Eh. Thanks but I think I’d rather have like a hot meal, you know? Or a heating pad. IB-profen. All the IB-profen, please. Unless you want ice cream, bro?”

“No thanks. Hot food sounds good.”

“Alright, home we go then.”

“—Markowski to Bellview, we’ve got a reported 13-21 at 611 Port Avenue, dispatch.”

“Breaking and entering,” Stiles whispers to Scott in the backseat. John grabs the receiver and clicks it on.

“Sheriff Stilinski speaking, Markowski don’t take highway five, I was just on it and traffic is terrible. You’re better off taking Berwald.”
The radio fuzzes back, “Sheriff? Martowski here, will do. I thought you weren’t coming in until three today?”

“I’m in the car taking my kids home,” John says. “They just had their first lacrosse game.”

“Nice! Hey, Stiles.”

“Hey Mark!” Stiles chirps.

"I thought you only had one son, Sheriff?"

“Scott’s the second son I never had,” he winks at Scott in the rear-view mirror, coaxing a shy smile out of him. “But enough chitty chat. I could get in trouble from the state if I keep this line open for gossip. Good luck, Martowski.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. Dispatch, over.”

When they get to John's house the boys groan as they unfold themselves from the seats. Stiles asks “ugh, is this what it feels like to be old?” and John tells him “I wouldn’t know, I’m not old yet” which Scott chuckles at. The sophomores peel off to the garage as Stiles drags Scott over to look at the jeep for the millionth time, making sure to loudly talk about how he’s probably a great driver since he’s got such fast reflexes and how a cool dad would totally let him drive it today, to which Scott politely listens. John rolls his eyes and gets the bread out from the fridge.

He makes them grilled cheese sandwiches and lemonade. It's the same lunch he's been making for them for a decade and they still gobble it up like the little tapeworms they are.

“So anyway,” Stiles smacks loudly once they're eating at the counter. “Those are all the reasons why I’d be an excellent driver.”

John rests his elbow on the table as he chews his grilled cheese, raising an eyebrow at Scott. “You know, if you ever need to get a word in edgewise you can always put a rubix cube in his hands. Shuts him right up.”

“Dad! Rude.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. When we go to the movies I just offer him Red Vines so he’s busy chewing.”

“What! You said sharing is caring!”

John hides his smile as Scott grins around a string of gooey cheese clinging to his sandwich. It snaps and he coughs into his sleeve.

“You need your inhaler, Scott?” He asks.

“Nah, I’m okay. My throat’s just dry throat from all the running.”

“Stay hydrated, buddy. Let’s see who can chug our lemonade fastest! Winner gets ten bucks,” Stiles chimes in.

“Do you even have ten bucks?” Scott lifts an eyebrow.

“Nah. I might be able to scrounge around in the washing machine and see if I could find some change, though. Under the couch cushions usually works well, too.”

“Already beat you to it,” John supplies as he pulls off his crust. “Found a dollar fifty-two.”
“In monopoly money?”

“In money money.”

“Drat. Hey! We should play Clue! Dad, will you be the third player?”

“No way,” Scott protests around his sandwich. “I'm not playing Clue against you and the county Sheriff. Once was enough—“ he breaks off with a cough. Stiles slaps him on the back.

“Small bites, Scotty. I don’t know how to do the Heimlich so if you choke you die.”

“I wasn't choking,” Scott frowns, and guzzles half his lemonade.

“Hey! We could go the comic book store and see if we can bribe Gus into selling us the new Deadpool Dead 7 first when it comes out!” Stiles chirps, then zeroes in on John. "At least we could if a certain somebody would let me drive us.”

"Letting you drive before you're fifteen is illegal. Letting you drive two passengers on the freeway before you're fifteen is very illegal," John points out.

“Daaaaaaad--”

"No ifs, no buts, no coconuts.”

"That doesn't even make sense.”

"I thought it was witty, Sheriff.”

"Thank you, Scott.”

"I am surrounded by lame people,” Stiles whines as he hangs his head over the back of his chair. “Too bad we’re still waiting on the next Netflix disk, we could’ve watched Casino Royale.”

“We should probably just get our homework out of the way,” Scott clears his throat.

“Aw, c’mmon. Why you gotta be such a goodie two shoes?”

“Because mom will kill me if I fail another history exam. Or worse, she’ll take away my bike.”

“How is losing your bike worse than dying?”

“By bike is my freedom, dude. Give me liberty or give me death.”

“Touché. Very scholarly, Scotty. D’you know who said that?”

“Uh… Teddy… Rosevelt?”

“Er, you’re a couple centuries too late. Try again, buddy. Think ‘Stamp Act of 1765.’”

John’s been doing it for years, but he still secretly loves overhearing conversations between his boys. Stiles is a monologuer and Scott speaks in questions; it’s part of why the boys work so well together. Stiles initiates conversations with an loud tangent and when he rolls to a pause Scott jumps in with a quiet question, prompting him to talk more.

“—and that is why they should make venting machines horizontally, because then you'd lower the risk of your candy getting stuck on the drop down. And you’d completely eliminate the risk of
machines toppling over and killing people— Did you know that thirty-seven people were killed like that last year? Death by candy, not the worst way to go. But a simple change in direction could save lives, man.”

“But wouldn’t longer candy bars get stuck? Like King-size Butterfingers.”

“Oh, excellent point! Clearly there would be some sort of sensor mechanism where the machine would scan the candies when you punch in your order, and then the longer ones would go through a separate shoot with an extended slide. Badda bing badda boom, you’ve gotch’your King-size candy bar. Remind me never to use ‘badda bing badda boom’ in a conversation again. And if I do, shoot me until I die.”

“Do I get your comic books?”

Common topics initiated by his chatterbox son include Lydia Martin’s pristine hair, conspiracy theories about aliens, in-depth discussions to wether or not the Harry Potter books or movies are better, his elaborate plan to invent a time machine, and how if he were president he would make s’mores mandatory at every school cafeteria. Scott’s favorite questions include “Did you hear what Mr. Harris said to Danny last class?” “Do you think my bike helmet is lame?” and “I dunno, man. How do we get girls to like us?”

Right now they debate what kind of dog is the best breed as John settles into his armchair in the living room— Stiles says German Shepherd, Scott vouches for Beagle. After ten minutes of intense debate they decide the solution is to breed a German Shepherd Beagle hybrid called the ‘German Beag-lard,’ of which they will own eight when they move into a dorm together (but a dorm that’s really big so the dogs can run around while they’re in classes). John chuckles as he peels through police reports. It isn’t long before his head back and he starts to doze, grilled cheese heavy in his belly.

“Dad!”

He jolts awake to Stiles’s panicked yell from the kitchen. He’s out of his chair in a flash racing down the hall. “Stiles? Stiles, are you—!”

But he skids around the corner to find a different nightmare. Scott is wheezing harshly in his chair, slumped sideways into Stiles’s supporting arms. His skin is pale and his gaze is flicking around in panic, hand scrabbling at his chest.

“Asthma attack,” Stiles breathes in a rush, then bolts to their lacrosse bags on the couch once John replaces him by Scott’s side. “Hang on Scotty, I’ve got your inhaler right here, just hang on.”

John has watched Scott bring an inhaler to his lips since the kid was six years old, but he’s only ever witnessed two asthma attacks— while playing in the park with Stiles in 3rd grade, and on a particularly hot day summer before 7th grade. Both times Melissa had been there and both times Scott had been back to normal in half an hour. But there’s something extra scary about seeing it happen in his kitchen when just half an hour ago the boys had been joking about Mr. Harris’s pornstache.

“You’re doing great, Scott, just relax,” John coaxes as he holds a steady hand on Scott’s shoulder. The teen leans into him as Stiles rips open the duffel zipper and paws through clothes until he pulls out the inhaler, shoving it into his friend’s hand. Scott fumbles to bring it to his lips, sucking in and then again when the device clicks with emptiness.

“It’s e-empty,” Scott wheezes, gasping in panic. “I u-used it too—“ gasp “—too much d-during—“
“During the game, I got it. Save your breath dude,” Stiles orders, then spins on his heel and sprints down the hall. “Hang on, I’ve got a backup in my backpack—!”

John blinks. He didn’t know this.


“Hey, none of that,” John admonishes. “Just focus on breathing best you can, this isn’t your fault. If anything it’s mine, I should have had more sense when you kept coughing once we got home.”

Stiles thunders back down the hall with a second inhaler, singing Batman’s “Nanananananana” theme song under his breath. Scott grabs for it and sucks in a shallow breath as the medicine enters his lungs, and then another breath for good measure.

“Yes! Success!” Stiles whoops and fist-bumps the air, but his smile quickly falls as Scott continues wheezing. “Scotty? That worked, didn’t it? It—you can’t take a third puff, can you?”

Scott shakes his head. “S’not—”

“Shit, Scott?” Stiles breathes, hands fluttering worriedly over his friend. John is too on edge to scold him for the language. They wait another minute for the Budsonide to kick in as Scott clutches the counter with white knuckles. But then—

“C-can’t—”

“—breathe.” Scott sucks in a desperate wheeze and tips over, but John and Stiles catch him and gently lower him to the floor.

“Dad, we gotta get him to the hospital,” Stiles urges, eyes two brown saucers. “I’ve never seen one this bad before, he needs—”

“N-no—” Scott wheezes. “M-mom—”

“Your mom worries about you anyway, kid,” John cuts in as he shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over the teen on his floor. “I’m gonna pick you up now and take you to the car, alright?”

“K-kay.”

“Stiles, get the keys and open the backseat door of the cruiser—“

“On it!”

John tucks his arms under Scott’s knees and back and lifts. His back twinges in protest as a reminder that he isn’t as young as he was back when he was in the academy, an observation that irks him. Still, the fifteen-year-old is a feather in his arms with his short stature and knobby knees. He murmurs a distraction the best way he knows how as Scott wheezes in his arms and trembles against his chest, fingers clutching weakly at John’s jacket.

“Did I ever tell you about the time my troop and I had a fishing contest when I was in Somalia?”

John voices as he makes his way to the car. “We took a break at the side of a river and used our war hats as buckets to see who could catch the most. They were just small guppies, maybe a few freshwater tetras, but I’ll be damned if it wasn’t the most fun we’d had all day. It was Claudia’s idea to cheer us all up.”

He places Scott lying down in the backseat with his head cushioned on Stiles’s lap. Stiles squeezes his hand and teases him about being carried like a princess, to which Scott slaps his arm weakly.
More jokes, Stiles’s specialty, are tried until Scott’s lips twitch up despite the fear in his eyes. John flicks on the siren and hits the gas.

“Sheriff Stilinski to dispatch, I’ve got a teenager suffering from a severe asthma attack on the way to Beacon Hills Memorial hospital,” he enunciates into the car walkie talkie. “I need medical personnel ready with equipment at the front entrance ASAP for immediate medical attention. Clear the entrance gate of any vehicles that might be in the way, ETA minus three minutes.”

“Copy that, Sheriff—“ someone, sounds like Tanner, crackles back over the line.

“Listen, I need Melissa McCall to be notified as well, it’s her son. She works at the hospital.”

“Gimme a minute… Got it. Extension 308?”

“That’s the one.”

“Copy that. We’ve got a medical team on their way to front entrance right now.”

“Thank you.”

He can’t help his eyes from flicking to the rear-view mirror as Stiles babbles quiet reassurances to his best friend.

“—okay, Scott? You’re gonna be fine, you’re The Flash, remember? You made it through the beep test in sixth grade P.E. and almost lasted as far as Danny, this is a piece of cake for you. Speaking of which, I bet your mom is going to let you eat as much cake as you want after this. She’ll probably go out and buy you a bunch of pity presents like ice cream and five comic books of your choice, that’s a pretty sweet deal, no pun intended. Hey, did I tell you that Mr. Lanan sat on a thumbtack yesterday? He was wearing khakis so the bloodstain totally showed up on his butt! I know what you’re thinking based on my track record, but I unfortunately was not the mastermind behind it. Although next time — Scott? Scotty? Hey, oh no— dad, go faster.”

John risks a glance over his shoulder as he makes a left turn. The whites of Scott’s eyes are fluttering slivers as he lays prone in Stiles’s lap, seemingly passed out. His lips have a bluish tint and his breaths are quiet, known as silent chest—a dangerous sign. John presses harder on the gas and cuts in front of a Subaru.

“How’s his pulse, Stiles?”

Stiles presses two shaking fingers to Scott’s neck. “It’s— it’s s-slow, dad.”

“Okay, he’s gonna be okay,” John says in his calm policeman voice he uses for hysterical car crash victims. “Just hang on, we’re almost there.”

As promised there’s a team of blue-scrubbed nurses waiting with a stretcher when John grinds to a halt outside the double doors. They hoist the now unconscious Scott out of the car and onto the gurney, replacing John’s jacket with a pair of scissors they use to cut open his shirt. They bark medical jargon and strap an oxygen mask over Scott’s face as he and Stiles follow in tow, answering questions with “asthmatic of nine years,” “inhaler didn’t work,” and “unconscious for about a minute.” Melissa runs around the corner just as they wheel Scott into an ICU room, and her hands fly to her mouth.

“Scott! Oh my god, Scott, Scott—?”

“Melissa, you can’t follow us,” one of the nurses tell her. “I’m sorry, but family—“
“Can’t treat family, I know,” Melissa runs her hands through her hair. “Take care of him.”

She follows her son as far as she can before she turns to John, gripping him tightly in a hug.

“Hey, hey, it’ll be alright. He’s in good hands,” he tries to reassure her.

“I know, God I know I just—“ she takes shuddering breath. “I’m always so worried about this. He hasn’t had one this bad in years, he could’ve—“

“But he didn’t,” John cuts in firmly. “His heart is beating, he’s getting help, he’s gonna be just fine.”

“This is my fault,” Melissa says immediately, “God, I never should have let him play lacrosse, I let him play when I knew he was going to be running a long time on the grass—“

“Hey— You let him be a kid, Mel. What are you going to do, lock him up in his room his whole life? You’re not that kind of mother, which makes you the best one I know. This isn’t your fault.”

Melissa sniffs, embarrassed. “You’re right, I know. I— God, look at me. I’m the nurse here, I’m supposed to be the calm one.”

“It’s perfectly justified.”

“What happened?” Her eyes dart between him and Stiles.

“After we got home he had a few signs like clearing his throat and coughing a bit, but he said he was fine. I should have paid more attention. Then maybe an hour later—“

“It was forty-five minutes,” Stiles cuts in. “He started wheezing and his inhaler was all used up from the game, but he took a couple puffs from his backup and that didn’t work either.”

“At that point he was only getting worse, so we drove him here.”

Melissa sighs at the ceiling. “Thank you. You were right to bring him in.”

She’s called back to work within the next blink, so he and Stiles they take a seat in the waiting room. The Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital waiting room is like his second home. Sitting with Claudia before pregnancy checkups, gripping hands with Claudia as doctors set Stiles’s broken arm in a cast (fell out of a tree), the many later injuries his accident-prone kid has gotten into, and the countless visits to the Oncology wing.

The clock ticks closer to two, and then two-thirty. Stiles reeks of nervous energy— he chews on his thumbnail until he whittles it down to a sore nib, scratches his nose, thumps his head against the wall, all while his leg bounces like it’s being electrocuted. Every couple minutes his hand comes up and rakes through his hair.

“Do you need an Ativan?” John asks. Dr. Clarke prescribed the anti-anxiety pills to be used as needed since Stiles started getting panic attacks.

“Nah, I’m good, just…” Stiles gnaws on his nail and blows out a breath. “A little freaked out.”

John gives a warm squeeze to his shoulder. “I didn’t know you kept a backup inhaler in your backpack.”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. Just in case, you know— can never be too careful.”

“Did Scott give it to you?”
“Nah, I asked Melissa for one last summer. I’ve never needed to use it though, until today.”

“Inhalers are expensive. I didn’t think she’d order more than a couple.”

“No, I used my birthday money. Hey, uh… Can I have a dollar to get something from the vending machine? Actually, maybe a few dollars since Scott might want something when he’s awake. Better. Better and awake. And allowed to eat Redvines.”

John slips out his wallet and hands over a ten.

“Whoa, awesome! You want anything?”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay, bye—“ Stiles trips down the hall. “They should totally make vending machines horizontal, remind me to tell you my theory when I get back.”

Stiles tells him all about his theory when he gets back, while chewing noisily on sour gummy worms.

“You should be an engineer, kid.”

“Nah,” Stiles ruthlessly snaps a gummy worm in half with his teeth. “I wanna be a cop.”

John smiles wanly at him from the corner of his eye. Silence and twiddling thumbs precedes for another few minutes or so, and then his son brings up the topic John tries so hard to keep secret.

“So… Melissa, huh.”

He casually adjusts his position in his chair. “Yes, what about her?”

“You two, uh… Sure get along well.”

*He’s on to me,* John thinks. “Well, I have known her since you and Scott were four.”

“Yeah, but don’t you want to know her more?” Stiles prompts.

Yes.

“What are you getting at, Stiles?”

“I’m just saying, she’s an attractive woman, you know, from a third person outlook, definitely not a Scott’s-tween-best-friend outlook, and you’re pretty decent-looking, you know, if you can get around the extra five pounds on your belly and the intense frowny thing you’ve got goin’ on right now— not a good look, pops.”

“Quit while you’re ahead, kid.”

“But you two are *friends,* and you know what they say about *friends*…”

John gives him a blank look seasoned with impatience.

“Okay, I was totally hoping you’d just fill in my sentence because I just made it up, but come on, dad! You like her, I can *feel* it, so why don’t you ask her out?”

“Because I married your mother, kid.”

“…Oh.”
Stiles deflates in his seat and bites his lip, looking guilty. The atmosphere suddenly switches to that sad heaviness that happens whenever they talk about Claudia. If John is honest with himself, he likes Melissa. Melissa is beautiful in a completely different way from Claudia, sharp-witted and strong and the spice to Claudia’s sugar, but there’s still too little time in the way.

John sighs and wraps an arm around his kid. “Hey, it’s alright. I just loved your mother very much, that’s all.”

*And I’m not ready to move on.*

*Am I?*

.o000o.

Melissa emerges from the ICU wing an hour later, haggard but relaxed.

“He’s alright,” she says as he and Stiles jump from their waiting room chairs. “He’s resting and on Albuterol now. His lungs are okay and he doesn’t have any brain damage from the oxygen loss, he’s just a little shaken up. We’ve determined the extensive exercise on the grass irritated his lungs. Thank you for bringing him when you did.”

“When can I see him?” Stiles pokes his head out from around John’s arm.

“I came to tell you he’s awake now, too. You can see him, just—“

“Don’t be loud, don’t break anything, and don’t use his IVs as squirt guns,” Stiles fills in quickly.

“Good boy. He’s in room 108.”

Stiles takes off at the fastest pace he can without running. Melissa turns to John with a sigh of a smile and they take a minute to let the relief weigh in. Their eyes flicker back and forth between each other — John’s greys and her dark browns, and he’s suddenly filled with a desire to hold her tight until the weary weight on her shoulders melts away.

“Thank you again,” she says instead, and pecks his cheek lightly with a small kiss of gratitude. It catches him by surprise and he blinks speechlessly for a moment too long before he can figure out how to talk again.

“It’s— it was nothing, really.”

“Would you like to see him?”

“I— yes, of course.”

He stares at the back of her curls as she leads him to room 108. His gaze may flicker down for a moment too, but he tells himself it’s nothing like that.

They watch the boys through the window for a minute. Scott is a small lump in his white hospital sheets, a puffing ventilator mask over his face. His gaze are tired and his skin is paler than normal, but his eyes crinkle with amusement at the corners as Stiles tells some tale with wild arm gestures and excited spittle.

“Hey, honey,” Melissa greets as they enter. “Your color is looking better.”
“Hi Mr. St’linski,” Scott lifts an IV’d hand in hello.

“Hey Scott, how you feeling?” John asks.

"A lot better… Thanks for driving me here.”

“I always love an excuse to use the siren.”

“How long—?” Scott turns to his mother.

“Sorry sweetie, the doctors want to keep you overnight for observation,” Melissa answers sympathetically. Scott and Stiles groan. “But don’t worry, I’ll be here on shift until eight and then I can come stay with you. But I’ve got to get back to work as long as I’m on the clock,” she frowns sadly at her watch.

Scott looks at her with huge, worried brown eyes. “Casey?” He rasps.

“Don’t try to talk so much, honey. I already checked, Casey’s tied up so she can’t cover my shift. I’m sorry. I’ll try to sneak in when I can.”

“Let me call the station,” John pulls out his cell phone. “I’ll tell them I’ll be in later so Stiles and I can stay with you until your mom gets off, if you want?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do…”

But Scott is nodding best he can at her as Stiles crouches nearby with a stream of "pleasepleaseplease otherwisehe’llbeallalone andI’mhisbestfriend!” And for good measure he throws in “the station will be fine without me for a few more hours, I really don’t mind.” Even though he’s technically already been cited for skirting time at the station, but family always comes first. Melissa sighs, giving in with a small smile that turns into a stern gaze at Stiles.

“Alright, but Scott needs his rest. No roughhousing, no two-sided conversations, and don’t jabber his ear off if he’s trying to sleep.”

“Aye aye, mama McCall.”

“How about I run to the house and bring back a few comic books? Stiles’s iPod?”

“That would be wonderful if you don’t mind,” she gushes hopefully.

“Gorgon,” Scott crackles behind his mask.

“What’s that?”

“The Gorgon something-something is the new comic book he just bought,” Melissa rolls her eyes. “I don’t think he’s read it yet.”

“Oh, that’s actually at my house,” Stiles raises a finger, flinching when Scott mewls in outrage. “Sorry, bro! I saw it yesterday in your backpack and I figured I just read it and slip it back before you noticed! But I know where it is, I’ll bring it back and we can share it.”

“Ahem,” John, Melissa, and Scott say at the same time.

“Or you can just have it all to yourself? Scott exclusively, the exclusive Scott comic book. Yeesh, you guys are creepy when you gang up like that.”
“Alright, so you’ll come with me so you can locate all these items in our pigsty of a house,” John dotes as he fishes his keys out of his pocket. We should be back in a jiff, okay Scott?”

“Thank you so much,” Melissa says again.

“Bye bro, B-R-B.”

But John spares another look at the boy he’s known for a near decade, small and littered in wires just as his wife had been, and moves forward on pure instinct—he places a small kiss atop the long mop of shaggy black hair before exiting the room.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, son."

Melissa watches him go with an unreadable expression, but her eyes are the softest he's ever seen them.

When they make it back to the cruiser Stiles drops into the passenger seat and blows out a long sigh, letting his head loll to the window. “Man,” he mumbles tiredly. “That was… That was a long day.”

John looks at him quietly, a small smile slowly pushing his lips. He pulls the keys out of the ignition, fiddles with them until he finds the right one, and holds it out. Stiles rolls his head over, blinks at the key, and immediately bolts upright when he sees which one it is, mouth dropping to the seat.

“Dad?”

“You impressed me today, son,” John tells him. “You fought hard on the field and then you kept your head on straight when Scott needed you. You even used your own money to keep an extra inhaler for him. You showed a lot of responsibility.”

Stiles grabs the key with shaking fingers and cradles it in his palm. “So I can—?”

“Yes.”

“Even though I’m not fifteen until next week?”

“The key is yours. I’ll let you take the jeep out as soon as we get home if you like.”

Stiles lets out a cheer so loud that John winces at the decibel. His son launches himself over the seat and hugs him fiercely, laughing and screaming about how John is—

“—amazing, the best dad in the history of ever! Even better than pizza, even better than Star Wars — okay, maybe not Star Wars, but almost! And just— just let me say one swear word, because I need it for emphasis, okay? You are the coolest, awesomest, most amazingly generous dad in the fucking universe. Thanks, pop.”

John accepts his fate as he pulls out of the hospital parking lot. “Thank you. You use that word again and the jeep is off limits for another year.”

.o0O0o. September 17, 2012.

On September 17th, 2012, John leaves the station early to buy a bottle of whiskey.

He feels sick as he hands over the money to the liquor dealer at a shady 7/11 downtown where no one will see him. He keeps throwing looks over his shoulder as if one of his deputies will be there to
witness, but it's pushing nine o'clock at night and the store is empty aside from a couple shady men preoccupied eyeing the *Playboy* magazines. Stiles comes here occasionally on late night snack runs, but Stiles is spending the night at Scott’s tonight so John isn’t worried.

The bottle feels heavy in his hand as he carries it out to the squad car in a paper bag. It feels right in his hand, like an old friend. His fingers wrap perfectly around the neck. He can hear it sloshing in the backseat as he sweats during the drive home, making him startle at every pot hole and bump in the road until he pulls crookedly into his driveway. But something makes him change his mind as he stares at the windows of his small home; perhaps the thought of the shiny Sheriff’s badge pinned to his chest, Melissa’s stern gaze, Stiles’s disappointment, or how Claudia wouldn't want him to.

It's Thursday so the trash cans on the curb are empty. He closes his eyes and sways before the bin, bottle heavy and unopened in his hands. If he concentrates hard enough he can still feel the soft brush of her lips smiling against the back of his neck, a whisper of "*stay strong, John*" in his ear. He drops the bottle to the trash with a resounding "thunk." The glass shatters and he releases a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

He enters to a quiet house.

The carpet creaks beneath his shoes as he drops his keys into the bowl with a clink, switches on the light and pops a mug of leftover chamomile to re-heat in the microwave. He sinks with a quiet groan into a chair and reaches for the remote, ready for a long, difficult evening.

Until he hears a muffled noise from down the hall.

His Sheriff brain snaps into deductions— Stiles is with Scott studying for midterms. No one else has the key to his house except Melissa and she’s working a double-shift. Therefore, intruder. Thinking *burglar* he grabs a nearby weapon (the baseball bat Stiles so often likes to carry around for whatever reason) since the firearm is in his sock drawer, and creeps quietly down the hallway. He rounds the corner to Stiles’s room, flicks on the light, and the baseball bat slips from his fingers with a dull thud against the carpet.

His fifteen-year-old son is sprawled out on his back on the floor, shirt riding up and only one sock on, blinking at John lethargically. A half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey lies slack between his lose fingers, dripping auburn stains onto the carpet. The room reeks of alcohol.

“Thought y’were workin’ th'overnight shift,” Stiles slurs quietly, lolling his head away from his father.

It's like the whole world crumples around him. He nearly falls to his knees with the impact of the scene before him— it's like a punch to the gut, a nightmare come to life. Stupid, he was so *stupid* to think Stiles would be okay without him on her seventh anniversary— he should have called Melissa to make sure he was really with Scott, he never should have worked tonight in the first place— what if he hadn't come home when he did? How did stiles get the liquor? How many times did Stiles see *him* like this eight and seven years ago, and who else could he have gotten the idea from?

John shoves it all down.

“I came home early," he whispers, words staggered and flighty in his mouth.

Stiles opens his mouth to say something but instead retches onto the carpet, triggering John’s paternal instincts. “Jesus kid," he whispers, and keeps muttering that over and over as he slips his hands beneath his son’s armpits and hoists him to the toilet. Stiles barely gets there in time, sloshing sick into the bowl with a moan. With a pang of horror John vaguely wonders how many times Stiles had
to do this for him before he gave up the bottle, and how close John had come to drinking again tonight.

He fills a dixie cup with water from the tap, eyes flickering to his son's light saber toothbrush. He’s such a kid—even at fifteen years old the kid is so young.

“S’where we goin’… Eeyyyy, it’s s’bathroom. ‘Eeyyy bathroom, how ‘ya doin’… Dad, what’re you… Oh.”

And his kid never shuts up, even drunk. “Come on, drink it.” John pushes the dixie cup.

Stiles’s head lolls the other way and purses his lips, unhappy crinkles spilling out over his forehead. "M'no, noooo, don't wan’tin… No’more."

"Just a few sips, it’s water," John prompts, putting the cup up to his son’s stubborn lips. “That’s it, slow sips, Stiles."

“Y’er not mad?"

"We’ll get to that later, kid."

"M’head huuurts,” Stiles whines and starts slipping down the toilet. He lists to the side. “S’all… Spinny. M’head hurts."

"I know it does. Bet you’ve got a great aftertaste going on too. Remember what this feels like, okay?"

“M’kay…”

Stiles babbles incoherently as John uses a washcloth to wipe away the vomit smeared on his chin. His son smells like John used to, and his son smells like John's father. It makes him wrinkle his nose and try not to be sick himself.

"We should ge'tta better bath... Thing. In here. Y'know, the bath thing... T'bath mat! Yeah... We need a new one, ours is all old 'n... Yucky."

“Come on, time for bed."

"N'yyyyahhh, m'not tired..."

"I know. Time for bed."

John leads them to his own bedroom so he can clean the sick from Stiles's carpet and air out the room. He sits him down on the bed and strips him out of his soiled, sweat-stained clothes until the kid is swaying on the mattress in his Marvel boxers. Stiles giggles and snorts, slurring, "whoaaaa, dad, pers'nal bubble! You haven't done this'since I was like... Four," and John's heart breaks a little more. He goes to the drawers, fishes out an undershirt and pulls it over his teenager's head.

"Wait, wha? This'is your shirt... Wh'res my shirt? Din'nt I have... I thought I was wearing a shirt, wh'appenn'd to it?"

"I'll call in sick for you tomorrow. Sleep it off," John instructs as he pulls the covers up over his semi-conscious son.

"S’mm..."
But just as he flicks out the lamp and makes it to the doorway—

"Thanks, daddy."

John swallows a lump and softly shuts the door behind him.

.o0O0o.

In the morning Stiles pads out to the living room just after eleven, clutching John's blanket around him like a somber cape. John has been sitting quietly at the table waiting for him since nine o'clock. Stiles sways to a halt when he sees him. His hair is sticking up like he was electrocuted, complexion pale with two high dots of watermelon on his cheekbones beneath two glazed eyes, lips chapped and ajar. His son looks wrecked, sad, guilty, scared, a spitting image of John himself months after the funeral. John opens his mouth and says his son’s real name, pronouncing each syllable slowly, firmly, and with somber purpose.

“Stielwlicmierzlaw Stilinski.”

Stiles’s mouth opens and closes silently. He bites his lip and averts his gaze to their crappy carpet. For once John has rendered him speechless. When Stiles looks up again, desperate tears glimmer in his amber eyes.

“I—“ his voice cracks, breaking off to a raspy whisper. "Dad, I'm— I'm s-so sorry.”

As John stands from the table his son sinks in on himself as if afraid to be struck, but it only make John wrap his arms tighter as he pulls him in for a hug. Stiles shudders with wretched sobs as he folds in on himself, spilling hot wet drool onto his father’s shoulder that smells like sick and whiskey. When John closes his eyes he feels a dampness on his lashes too. He pulls Stiles back, looks into those big brown eyes, Claudia’s eyes, and says seriously—

“You are never going to touch a bottle of Jack again.”

Stiles nods, chin trembling. “Yeah.”

And John believes him with every bone in his body.

Somehow they end up on the floor sitting against the dishwasher. John’s blanket pools around his teenager and gathers dusty crumbs from the floor, but Stiles’s hands are trembling and he’s clutching the fabric tightly like it’s the only thing anchoring him. John sits in his jeans and flannel and watches a small spider crawl beneath the fridge.

"I miss her,” Stiles voices meekly, voice raspy with his hangover.

“I miss her too, kid.”

“I wish she was here.”

Once upon a time in room 108 of Beacon Hill Memorial Hospital, a beautiful woman replayed memories with John until he laughed and forgot his heartache a little.

“She is,” he sighs. “In our memories.” And when Stiles snorts unhappily, “I know it’s not the same as having her here physically, but it’s what we got, right? Remember when we the three of us went down to the park and we taught you how to ride a bike? And then she chased down the ice cream
truck for four blocks in her roller-skates until it stopped?”

“...Yeah.”

“And we have some pretty good new memories, too. Like when you singlehandedly solved a triple homicide when you were fourteen.”

This wins a small smile from Stiles, who murmurs, “Poisoned limes.”

“Right. Or for my birthday a few years ago when we went to go see the Star Trek movie?”

“We got mugged that night.”

“Yeah, but Melissa let us polish off the last of the birthday cake at her house afterwards,” John points out.

“And then you told me how you and mom got high—“

“Yes, yes, your mom and I were in our twenties and we were human, sue us.”

Stiles giggles into his fist. “No no wait, remember when I was like, seven I think? And you let me put worms into Richard’s desk and then he flipped out at the station.”

“Classic,” John chuckles. “But I think my favorite prank of yours was hacking into Mr. Harris’s chemistry presentation and filling the slides with pictures of Shrek.”

“You grounded me for a week!”

“I had to, I’m your father. But that doesn’t mean I’m not amused at the stunts you pull. Just don’t take that as encouragement to do anything illegal.”

“Ha! Wanna talk illegal? How ‘bout the time you punched a colleague in the face to defend mom’s honor— in the middle of the station!”

“It was in the copy room and you were three months old, kid.”

“Yeah, but I love that story!” Stiles’s eyes shine up at him. “You were willing to jeopardize your job to put a douchebag in his place! That’s so freaking cool. I think also... Um, right before the high school entrance exam, when Ricky Santiago called me a retard for having ADHD, and you got out of the squad car and told him off.” Stiles stares shyly at his knuckles. “That was... Really cool. Thanks, for that.”

“Anytime. Thanks for dumping a bowl of chowder over Ricky Santiago’s head when he called me a drunk a year later.

“Yeah... Well. It wasn’t very good chowder anyway.”

“I just need to know, kid,” John sighs quietly. "I know you drink at parties, beer, vodka, whatever it is you kids—“

“I don’t drink at parties.”

John blinks, genuinely surprised. “You what?”

“I don’t drink at parties,” Stiles repeats. He looks seriously into John's eyes. “I don’t drink alcohol.”
“Oh,” John says dumbly. “I just assumed…”

“Why would I?” Stiles voices quietly. “After what you went through after mom died.”

Because Stiles is just like John. When your father is an alcoholic, you vow never to drink.

“Well I guess that answers my question. I wanted to know if last night was your—“

“The first time I got drunk on whiskey?” Stiles finishes for him. “Yeah. It was. And don’t worry, it was my last, too.”

John sighs. “Why’d you do it, kiddo?” He doesn’t need to know how Stiles got the bottle. He probably has contacts with seniors or peers with older brothers, maybe even has a fake ID himself, but that’s not the important part.

Stiles shrugs. “It was dumb. I missed mom. I thought that… Maybe there was a reason you used to drink? Like it must have helped with losing her, since it was so hard for you to get out of it. I just wanted to try it for myself. See what was so special about it, I guess.”

John swallows. “And what did you find out?”

Stiles wrinkles his nose. “It’s nasty as hell. No, I take it back. I bet you’ll find whiskey at the seventh circle of hell. How did you not need to wash it down with muffins or something? Multiple muffins, with extra chocolate chips. Warheads. Motor oil, even. Genuinely anything else would taste better.”

John chuckles. “I think it permanently burned my tastebuds off somewhere after the second bottle.”

Stiles snorts next to him. “Yeah? So why do you always complain about my five-star vegan entrees?”

“Kid, anyone would be able to taste soy sauce and pickle relish in the same dish.”

“I was experimenting! You’re my culinary guinea pig.”

“Word of advice? You’ve got many career options, but cooking is not one of them.”

“—dispatch Tarson, Mulaney and Suarez with a 12-87 on Fairmont Avenue broad—”

Stiles’s expression falls as he looks to the walkie talkie vibrating on the table. “Oh. Are you working today?”

“I’m supposed to go in at two.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m going to call and tell the station I’m taking the day off.”

“Wait, really?”

“Consider today a father-son day.”

Stiles cracks a small smile, eyes twinkling like they did when he was six. “Wow, um… Cool. Well do you maybe… Wanna have a Star Wars marathon later? Or something else, whatever you want.”

“Sounds great. If you’re feeling up to it tonight I’ll make some pancakes, too.”
“Pancakes for dinner?” Stiles says hopefully.

John smiles. “Pancakes for dinner, kid.”

.o0O0o. September 30th, 2013.

“Aaah-CHOO!”

“Jesus, son, could you try not to sneeze all over my paperwork?”

“Blugh. Sorry.”

The start of sophomore year brings new hoodies, new school books, and the common cold. John hasn’t seen his kid this sick since he rubbed poison ivy all over himself in 4th grade (he thought it was aloe, and he was trying to impress Lydia Martin with supple skin). But John will take oatmeal baths to phlegmy coughs any day.

“Wh’re’s the milk?” Stiles asks thickly as he sways before the fridge.

“Middle shelf behind the ham. Get a glass. I don’t want you putting your germy mouth all over— Stiles!”

John turns around to find his son already guzzling straight from the gallon. He sighs.

“Sorry,” Stiles sniffs again. “This can be my gallon. Here, I’ll write a ‘JS’ on it.”

“Those are my initials.”

“No, it stands for Just Stiles, like this milk is just for… Oh. Wait. John… Stilinski. Huh. Okay. Well I’ll just draw the Starfleet Delta and we’ll know it’s mine.”

“You should be in bed, kid,” John peers at him over his reading glasses, this time with some concern. “You look awful.”

“Thanks. ‘Preciate it, pops.”

“You want me to run down and get some gatorade for you? More cough drops?”

“Nah, I’ll just pick ‘em up myself. I’m heading out to Scott’s house now anyway.”

“What? Stiles, you’re sick, don’t infect him. Whatever video game he bought can wait.”

“We’re not going to play video games,” Stiles sighs as he lugs his backpack over his shoulder. “I need to help him with his shift.”

“His shift at the veterinarian’s clinic?”

Stiles freezes halfway through zipping up his hoodie. He snaps his jaw closed, nods, and scratches his ear. “Yeah, yes, the— the veterinarian’s clinic. Where he works. And goes on shift. Like for his job, right!”

“And… Why exactly do you need to help him?” John squints.

“He, uh… Deaton got a bunch of new puppies and needs someone to help babysit them until the
owners can pick them up, you know, since puppies are a big handful—peeing, yipping, chubby little waddling puppies getting into cat food and escaping, probably... Can’t be too careful, I can see why he needs all hands on deck."

John studies him. Stiles is doing that nervous fidgety thing he does when he’s lying, but it might just be because his nose is stuffed up.

“I still think you should call and cancel. Scott has asthma, it can be dangerous for him to get colds Stiles, you know that.”

“But Scott doesn’t have—! Textbooks. His textbooks! He doesn’t have his textbooks anymore. Because he left them at school! But I got them for him, since I’m an awesome friend, and I was gonna drop them off at his house and give him a ride to the vet clinic and then help him keep the puppies under control... Yeah,” Stiles blinks and sways as he adjusts his backpack. “Wow, is it spinny in here? Something is spinning, is that me? Whoa..."

John steadies him by the arm as he starts to topple over. “Lay down before you fall down, okay kid?”

“But Scott...” Stiles mumbles.

“Look, I know you’d fling yourself off a cliff for that boy, but I need you to stay home and get some rest, okay bud? I’m sure Scott can handle the puppies without you.” John feels his forehead. “And you have a fever. That settles it.”

“Mrrregh.” Stiles flops down on the couch in a pile of crumpled tissues. John pats his back and throws a blanket over him.

“Sleep. I’ll be back in a bit, okay?”

“Mmfgh.”

“Love you, too.”

.o0O0o.

Twenty minutes later he’s standing on the McCall doorstep with Scott’s books in his arms. He got them from Stiles’s backpack— he was expecting chemistry or math but instead they’re all strange titles like “Mythology Through The Ages,” “Fairy Folklore” and “Botany 101.” In the car are bags of decongestant and gatorade he picked up at Walgreen’s.

Suddenly the door swings open. Melissa blinks at him in surprise. She’s halfway through poking a silver hoop through her ear and her wild curls fall in long ringlets around her face, let down from the usual ponytail. She’s in a dress too, something low cut and simple, a deep blue that brings out the gold in her caramel skin tone. Her lips shine with berry colored gloss.

“Melissa,” John blurts. “You— I haven’t seen you out of scrubs in a while.”

“I’ve got a date in about thirty minutes,” she says, checking her watch. “How do I look?”

She holds out the edges of her dress and smoothes down the fabric. It flutters around her knees, drawing attention to her slim calves.
“You look beautiful,” he tells her.

“Thanks.” She blinks at him. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but why are you standing on my doorstep with a stack of musty books?”

“Oh. Uh—” He holds the books out. “Stiles said that Scott left some books behind at school, so I’m here to drop them off for him. Stiles has a nasty cold and I didn’t want him to give it to Scott, considering how bad it is for his asthma.”

“His asthma?” Melissa parrots, cocking her head, then her eyes snap wide. “Oh! Right, his asthma… Which he still has, right. Well thank you, I’ll take them inside for him.”

“I’m also here to relay that Stiles won’t be able to help him with the puppies tonight at the Vet clinic.”

“Scott isn’t working tonight,” Melissa furrows her brow in confusion. “Did Stiles say he was?”

“Oh, yeah,” John mimics her befuddled expression. “He said he needed to help Scott with his shift.”

“His… Oh.” Again, Melissa’s eyes grow wide. Her eyes flick to the sky as she murmurs, “Right, it’s that time of the month…”

“Sorry?” John chokes a little.

“What? Oh! Oh, no, I meant— not like— god,” Melissa blushes fiercely beneath her makeup, something Melissa McCall rarely does. “I meant that… Yes, Scott does have a shift tonight. And Stiles said the Vet clinic. Right. Thank you for… Reminding me.”

“Is… Is everything okay?” He asks quizzically.

Melissa seems to right herself. She chews her lip and hides it with a chuckle. “Yes. I’m fine. Just first date nerves, that’s all. Anyhow I should really— get back to that. Getting ready. You know, for my date.”

“Right… Well, okay, have fun tonight.”

“Thank you.”

And she quickly shuts the door in his face.

He stands there confused for a moment before he shakes his heads and retreats back to his car. He slips his phone from his pocket and sends her a quick text message.

Don’t worry about the date. You really do look beautiful.

.o0O0o.

Stiles starts growing distant in October.

He comes home from school and goes straight to his bedroom with a quick, “hey dad” before shutting the door behind him. Most of the time he only emerges for dinner, grabbing a protein bar or cold leftovers from the fridge and scurries back to his cave. Sometimes John peeks in on him around eleven and finds him slumped over asleep on his keyboard, with some strange article about plants or mythical creatures on the screen. John asks him about it one day and Stiles freezes before blurting a
dismissive, “just stuff for school, Mrs. Grady wants us to do a big report thing on folklore.”

But then Stiles starts leaving the house for long periods of time and returns pale and exhausted. He says he’s “just studying with Scott” or “meeting with my chemistry group at the library,” but the way his eyes flick to the side and his tongue darts out nervously tells John he’s lying. John doesn’t want to believe it, but one day he cracks and checks the library hours online. It closes at seven, and Stiles doesn’t come home until ten.

“How was school, son?” He tries asking on the days he’s home when Stiles walks in the door. He gets a quick “good” before his son is already down the hall. Last year John used to get a fifteen minute rant on everything from annoying teachers to Scott’s lunch, and it hurts more than he wants to admit.

He grows even more worried when he starts finding small spots of blood on Stiles’s clothes when he does the laundry.

Again he confronts Stiles about it, but he licks his lips and insists he tripped in school and scraped his elbow when he hit the floor. The next time he says Lydia brought her dog Prada to school and she bit his ankle. Then it’s he accidentally shut the jeep door on his fingers and sprained his knuckles.

“You know me, clumsy as a baby deer. It’s nothing, dad. I’ll start wearing a helmet everywhere I go, ‘kay?”

John isn’t convinced. Strangely Melissa starts avoiding him too, with shorter phone conversations and claiming she’s working more hours and doesn’t have time for lunch. That also hurts more than he expects— does his breath smell? Is there a rumor going around that he tortures puppies in his free time? He starts brushing his teeth more often and drops off a small donation at the animal shelter.

The worst is the day Stiles stumbles in the door with an ugly bruise on his cheekbone. John is out of his seat and across the room in a heartbeat.

“Stiles! Jesus, Stiles, who did this to you?” He demands as he cradles his son’s face to get a better look. Stiles squirms away and hides it beneath his palm.

“Dad, cut it out, it’s nothing!”

“That does not look like nothing!”

“Look, I just— I was fooling around with Scott after school and I accidentally brained myself on the jeep door. No big deal.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” John fumes. “I’m the town Sheriff, I know the difference between an accident and a right-hook punch. Who hurt you, Stiles? What’s going on with you? Are you in a gang?”

“What? God, no! I’m not in a gang!” Stiles brushes past him to the hallway. “Just— don’t worry, okay? I’m fine.”

“Stiles, you’ve been acting strange for two months and I can’t just let an injury like that drop. You really think the bloodstains on your clothes don’t concern me? You’re an accident-prone kid but this is getting out of control. I just—” He shakes his head, silently pleading with the sixteen-year-old in front of him. “I just want you to talk to me, son. You know you can tell me anything, right?”

For a moment Stiles looks like he might blurt the truth. He bites his lip, eyelashes twitching guiltily, and averts his gaze to the floor. “I— I can’t tell you. Not yet. I’m sorry. But I’m not selling drugs on
the street or anything like that, I promise. Can you trust me?”

John sighs. He gives up and goes back to his armchair, turning his back on his kid. “When you see Scott tomorrow could you give him the package on the table? It’s for Melissa.”

“Why don’t you give it to her yourself?”

“She says she’s busy. Just between us, I think she’s avoiding me, too.”

Stiles stays a moment longer just standing in the kitchen. John doesn’t look up, but he can sense his son staring at the back of his head. Then with a quiet, “I’m sorry, dad,” he retreats to his room.

Halloween approaches swiftly and the tension in the house grows.

Stiles starts giving him guilty looks at the dinner table and apologizing for things more often, even though he usually unleashes every defense in the book before apologizing. He forgets to clear his plate at the table— “Sorry, dad.” He accidentally bumps into John in the hallway— “Sorry, dad,” when he usually says something like, “yo, watch where you’re going, you old geezer!” Even when he realizes he’s hogging the remote— “Sorry, dad.”

Everything but the one thing John actually wants him to apologize for, and John doesn’t even know what it is. He just wishes his kid would stay safe.

On October 29th John waits in the dark in the living room for Stiles to come home. He’s been calling his cell phone for hours and it goes straight to voicemail. Scott isn’t picking up either and the library is closed. The clock creeps closer to midnight and then his kid finally comes in the door, looking exhausted and weary. He’s carrying a baseball bat.

"Son." John greets darkly.

Stiles screams and jumps three feet in the air, flailing wildly. He swings his bat and knocks over a lamp, which crashes to the ground in a scatter of glass.

"Holy god, Dad!" Stiles goes pale. His lip is split and there’s a dribble of red on his shirt.

"Do you want to tell me where you were at midnight on a school night with your phone off?” John rises from his arm chair and slowly stalks forward.

"Not really, no. Preferably no, please."

"Stiles."

"I was… Out hitting around some baseballs!” Stiles offers, swinging his bat for emphasis. It cracks into the wall and leaves an indent. Stiles swears.

"Don't lie to me, kid."

"Dad," Stiles looks pained as he says it. He runs a hand through his hair and John sees a bruise there beneath the messy waves. "I... I can't tell you."

"Is it a girl?” John prompts.

"What! No, dad! God—"

"Is it... A guy?” John ventures.
"No!" Stiles hollers. "Oh my god, no!"

"Then what is it?" John demands. His blood pressure is up now, angry and desperate and terrified of losing the kid in front of him. "What is it that has my son so distant from me, huh? What has him telling lies and sneaking out and coming home with bruises I can't protect him from? Goddammit Stiles, I am your father and I want answers!"

"Well I can't give you them!" Stiles yells, growing more distressed. "I want to, okay? But you won't believe me."

“What makes you think I wouldn’t believe you after you singlehandedly solved a triple homicide using limes?” John challenges. “You’re my son, I want you to trust me! You can trust me, Stiles, I just want to know what—"

He breaks off as he spots the bulge in Stiles’s pocket, illuminated by the soft light of the streetlamp outside. Stiles pales and takes a step backwards, twisting his hips to hide it.

"Stiles," John takes a step forward. "What is that, what's in your pocket?"

"Shit, it's nothing, okay? Just some candy Danny gave me after school."

"Let me see."

"Dad—"

"Let me see."

Slowly, painfully, Stiles takes out the contents of his pocket and lays them in John’s palm with trembling fingers. Two small bottles of grey dust and a small packet of purple granules.

"You're doing drugs?" John whispers incredulously.

"No, Jesus Christ, dad! Do I look like I'm on drugs?!"

"Honestly it's hard to tell sometimes. What is this stuff?" John demands.

Stiles sighs, dragging a hand down his face. "Mountain ash and wolfsbane powder."

"What is that, slang for amphetamines?"

"I am not on drugs!" Stiles hollers. "You, I can’t— I can't do this anymore—“ His breaths start whining fast and shallow in an impending panic attack, but John is too angry to calm down.

"Stiles, what the hell is this for then? I want the truth, the whole truth, what is going on with you?"

"You really wanna know?" Stiles whirls around and looks up, surprised tears in his eyes. "Werewolves!" he blurts. "Scott is a werewolf. He was bitten by a werewolf and now his eyes turn red because he’s a true alpha and he can grow claws and fangs and has super hearing, and he doesn’t have asthma anymore because of it! And it turns out Allison's family hunts supernatural creatures with arrows and guns but they like Scott because he's so morally righteous and everything, and Derek Hale is a werewolf too and he's been helping him get a handle on his powers despite being eternally grumpy! Oh, and Scott’s boss Dr. Deaton is a vet but he's also a Druid which means he gives us really cryptic information and heals weird injuries! I'm a human so I can use mountain ash and wolfsbane powder against supernatural creatures that try to kill us, because apparently this town is a beacon for all kinds of crazy murderous beasts that none of us thought existed!"
John stares at his son. “…Is that all?”

“No. Lydia’s a banshee.”

John feels like crying. He closes his eyes and curls his fingers tightly over the mystery contents in his palm.

“Dad?” Stiles’s voice trembles. He steps forward cautiously. “D-dad, are you—?”

“You’re grounded. No TV, no computer games, no comic books. You’ll give me the keys to your jeep right now and you’ll get them back when you stop telling lies. I’ll take your cell phone, too. Every day I will drive you to school and pick you up immediately after lacrosse practice.”

“Dad!” Stiles rasps, and this time the tears break free from his eyes and spill down his cheek.

“Give me your phone, Stiles.”

“Dad, wait— j-just let me call Scott, I need to call S-Scott and then he can show you—“

“Now, Stiles.”

But Stiles jerks backwards and continues punching in Scott’s number with shaking fingers. “Please, it’s important, just let m-me—”

“Give me your phone, Stiles!”

“JUST TRUST ME FOR TWO MORE SECONDS!” Stiles screams, startling John with his desperation. His face is wrinkled with anger and sadness and a million other things John can’t place, but it’s enough to quell his frustration for another second.

“As soon as you call him you’re handing me your phone,” John decides shortly. Stiles sucks in a breath of relief and quickly puts his cell phone to his ear, whispering a steady stream of “come on come on come on, pick up the phone, pick up the—”

He hears Scott’s tinny “hello?”

Stiles chokes in relief and says, "it's time. I can't do it anymore, we gotta show him.”

“Show me what?” John crosses his arms.

Stiles licks his lips and hangs up the phone. He meets John’s eyes with a terrified yet steady gaze. “We need to go to Scott’s house. You can ground me for a decade but first I really need you to come with me to see him.”

“Stiles—“

“Please, dad,” Stiles whispers.

John studies his son, taking in Claudia’s eyes, the insecure crease of his brow, and the bloody cut on his lip. He sighs. He nods.

“Okay.”

The drive down the block is quick. The McCall house windows glow with yellow lights from inside, one of the only houses left in the neighborhood that’s still awake at midnight. Stiles barely raps his knuckles against the door before Scott answers, big brown eyes flicking cautiously between him and
John. He steps aside to let them in, where Melissa is sitting calmly at the dining table with a mug of tea.

"Hi John," she greets casually.

"Melissa," he returns stiffly. Scott and Stiles join her at the table, whispering to each other with serious faces.

"You might want to sit down for this," she recommends. Cautiously he takes a seat across from her.

"So do you mind telling me why I’m here?" He asks grimly. "My son here was just feeding me a story about werewolves."

"Yeah, those exist." Melissa sips her tea.

"...What?"

"Werewolves are a thing, apparently," she shrugs. "My son is one now. Scott, do the face thing for him."

.o0O0o. **December 14th, 2013.**

So… Werewolves.

Werewolves are apparently a thing, and have been since Scott was out in the woods catching fireflies with Stiles a few months ago, and was bitten by a werewolf… And then became a werewolf. Stiles tells him everything and introduces him to Chris Argent, who is Allison Argent’s father, and that girl is Scott’s girlfriend. The Argent family is actually a secret and revered family of hunters that hunt supernatural creatures that threaten the town. He learns about Banshees and Wendigos and pixies and of course, werewolves.

Jesus Christ.

It only takes him a few weeks to get used to the idea, because frankly it makes a whole lot of sense considering the strange happenings that go on in Beacon Hills.

A few months later a drag queen knocks on John’s door.

"Hi, you must be Sheriff Stilinski," he —(She? She.)— smiles warmly and reaches out huge red fingernails to shake his hand. "I'm Josephine, and you are just about the sweetest man in the county so I've heard."

"Uh..." John trails off, staring at her glittery top and ___ and trying not to stare at her ample cleavage.

"I'm just here to return my little Bambi's jacket—" Josephine holds up Stiles’s worn red hoodie. "Are you making sure he’s eating enough? This thing is small enough to fit my arm and it's baggy on him. Strange considering how much junk food that boy can pack away."

“I— I’m sorry, how do you know my son?” John cocks his head. Should he be concerned?

“Oh right, you’re probably thinkin’ it strange that a teensy teenager like your son is friends with a big bombshell drag queen like myself,” she flips a mane of glossy brown curls over her shoulder.

“Well, I— not to— I didn’t—"
“It’s alright, Sheriff. Ever since the girls and I found out how he singlehandedly saved our favorite hangout place, we gave him free tickets to our show. That little string bean is a crackup. He hangs out with us backstage when he has nothin’ better to do.”

“He… Sorry, your favorite hangout place?”

“The Jungle,” Josephine winks. “Best gay club in the county. Well, the only gay club in the county.”

“The lime crime?” John whispers.

“Yeah! That’s what we heard, that some jackass was poisoning people with arsenic limes. Turned my taste buds off to mojitos ever since.”

“But he was fourteen when he solved that,” John murmurs. “That was two years ago, you mean to tell me that Stiles has been hanging out with drag queens and never told me?”

“Whoops, looks like Josie’s let the cat out of the bag,” Josephine hides a sly smile behind her fingers. “You talk to your son, Sheriff. If you decide not to ground him for life, you’re always welcome to come to one of our shows.”

And with a final hair flip, she walks back down the porch and to the sidewalk, hips sashaying the whole way.

.o0O0o.

“So I met your new friend today,” John voices when Stiles comes home from lacrosse. Sweaty, stinky, red cheeked and invigorated.

"Ha! Nice one, dad," Stiles swigs the milk from the fridge.

"Her name is Jospehine."

Stiles freezes and actually spits out some milk. It dribbles down his chin. He turns around. "You met Josephine?"

"She came to return your jacket. Said you left it at the Jungle in her dressing room," John lifts an eyebrow. "Is there something you want to tell me, son?"

“What, like tell you I’m gay?” Stiles snorts. "You said yourself you and mom figured out I was bi when I was five, you creepers. So yeah, I may have been given an honorary pass to The Jungle since I helped solve their lime crime problem. As for the drag queens, it’s not like I went out of my way to make friends with them— they pounced on me like a pack of tall, sparkly, sassy lions!" Stiles flails.

“Mhm,” John hums.

"And I dunno, they were pretty cool and it turns out Josephine can stitch up a panty hose rip in under thirty seconds, and then they kinda just started inviting me over for shows and… The place is pretty cool. It’s not a big deal, I just hang out with them sometimes when Scott’s busy with Allison.”

“And you…” John squints. “You don’t want to… You like being a boy, don’t you?”

“What! Oh my god, dad, stop.” Stiles presses his fingers against the bridge of his nose, a gesture John does a lot. “Yes, I like being a dude! Being a dude is great, it’s awesome, minus the random awkward boners in public, but yes!”
John closes his eyes and prays for guidance.

“I mean, they kind of decided to do my makeup one day because they said I was all baby faced and they were begging for a model, but no! Dad, don’t be so weird.”

“Forgive me for being a little surprised,” John says.

“Look,” Stiles rubs the back of his neck. “How about you come with me to their Christmas show? It’s next Saturday, and they’re actually pretty fun. I could introduce you to everyone! They’d love to meet you in person.”

“Stiles, I’m the county Sheriff, I’m not sure if—“

“What, that the townspeople would approve of you going to see a drag queen performance at a gay club?” Stiles rolls his eyes. “Dad, you’re better than that. This is 2013, don’t let your head get stuck in 1970.”

John regards his son. He’s finally starting to let his hair grow out.

“Okay. But you’re driving.”

.o0O0o. October 4th, 2014.

The last time John sees Derek Hale is in October of 2014.

He’s on break from patrol and parks the cruiser outside Hal’s Café, his favorite spot to spend his lunch break. He buys a ham and cheese croissant, thanks Greg for the complimentary coffee, and savors his meal at table by the store window.

Derek walks in not five minutes later clad in scuffed boots, grey jeans, a white shirt, and the same black leather jacket he was wearing back in 2009. It fits him much better now; the kid has grown five inches in height an width, acquired a handsome beard of groomed stubble, and has a new softness around his vivid eyes. He looks just like his father.

Yet John freezes in his seat and watches like a spooked deer, cheeks stuffed with croissant. The rest of the café quiets as well and several heads turn to stare. Hands come up to mouths and eyes stretch wide as whispers are exchanged, and John catches things like “family died in a fire” and “used to wreak havoc on the town” and “hardened criminal.” Guilt swoops in his stomach as he remembers the hollow boy who was too angry to ask for a donut.

With supernatural hearing Derek can hear the whispers, but he ignores them and politely orders a poppyseed muffin at the counter. He uses “please” and “thank you” and leaves a generous tip as he waits. John scribbles the math on his napkin and figures that Derek should be twenty-one now. Once the muffin is in his hand Derek takes a bite and brushes the crumbs from his shirt, making sure to hold them and drop them in the trash instead of letting them fall to the floor. He doesn’t see John as he walks out.

But then Derek sits on the small bench outside Hal’s Café, right on the other side of the window John is at. He watches Derek like “a total creeper” as Stiles would say, as the kid alternates between eating his snack and tossing muffin crumbs to the pavement to feed the tiny birds that congregate there. People walk down the sidewalk but slow down when they see Derek, whisper and turn the other direction.
After ten minutes of this the store manager comes out and politely tells Derek to leave because he can’t afford to lose the business. Derek’s expression is flat like he gets this all the time. But a moment later he nods and politely stands to leave, which is when he catches John’s eyes in the window. John stiffens as goosebumps pimple his arms.

Derek nods as if to say “thank you,” then turns and leaves. The birds fly away.

John doesn’t even realize he’s called his son until Stiles’s worried voice answers.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

John blinks and checks his watch. It’s a quarter to twelve, which means he caught Stiles in the middle of passing period. “Uh, yeah. Sorry, kiddo. I just…” John stares at the leftover muffin crumbs on the sidewalk.

“Just wanted to call and say I love you.”

.o0O0o. December 12th, 2014.

The windshield wipers on the squad car swipe in sync to “Baby It’s Cold Outside” as John finishes his rounds on the highway. With the approach of Christmas the sky darkens earlier and earlier, so that he finds himself growing tired at six o’clock simply because the sun disappears. Right now his feet ache and he’s looking forward to a hot mug of cocoa piled high with mini marshmallows from the secret bag he hides in the drawer beneath the kitchen landline. Maybe he’ll even put the heat on tonight, watch a little CSI with Stiles during dinner, finish up the day with a magazine in bed.

But his plans will have to wait when a single red tail light grows closer and closer— a car stalled on the side of the empty road.

He pulls the squad car over and flicks on the flashing lights, tires grinding to a halt behind the Volkswagen with a wet crunch. He’s grown extra weary of things like this since he found out about the supernatural, so he pats his pocket to make sure the wolfsbane spray Stiles got him is still there. It is.

He steps out into the rain and approaches the driver’s door cautiously, noting how the car’s taillight is out. The engine is running, spewing white fog into the chilly nighttime air that turns pink and then blue with the switching squad lights. With one hand on his holster he knocks on the window and peers through the glass, and blinks in surprise when he sees who’s inside.

“Melissa?”

She startles, jumping in her seat and swinging wide eyes towards him. Her dark ringlets are pulled back in a cleaner-than-usual high ponytail, gaping lips painted a rich berry with matching rose dusted on her cheekbones. A quick glance reveals she’s not in her scrubs, but rather a soft pink sweater beneath a black blazer and a simple pearl necklace; formal attire, but her gaze is wide and glassy with tracks of mascara smudged beneath her eyelashes. She’s crying— in all twelve years he’s known Melissa, he’s never seen her cry aside from Claudia’s funeral.

She fumbles to roll the window down as she hastily wipes a palm across her cheeks. “John! You scared me, I’m so sorry, I… I’m fine.”
"I was just going to let you know that you're taillight's out," John says.

"Oh, right. That," Melissa chuckles weakly, still swiping at her face. "Sorry, I've been waiting on tomorrow's paycheck to get that fixed."

"Don't worry about it," John leans down gently, eyeing her beneath the frame of the car. "But you match the weather… Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm—" Melissa barks a laugh, but it comes out bitter. "Just a stupid date, that's all."

"Again? What happened?"

She throws her head back against the seat rest with a heavy sigh. The rain's shadows on the windshield mingles with her blackened tear stains in the dim light of the street lamp. "I was supposed to meet this guy at Harman's Bistro for dinner. I waited for two hours. He stood me up."

John frowns. This isn't the first time. Honestly he will never understand how men could throw away such a strong, funny, beautiful woman like she's no different from a kleenex.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Melissa frowns at him, waving a hand in the general vicinity of his face. "I don't like pity. I'm a painfully single woman with crap luck when it comes to dating, but I already see that face enough when I look in the mirror. It's stupid, it's stupid okay? I get it. I've got a great kid and a roof over my head, a job in a field I've wanted since I was ten, knock on wood we're both in good health, and I'm thankful for that, alright? I've worked my ass off my whole life so I can have that, but sometimes—!"

She squeezes her eyes shut and bangs her head back against the seat. A defiant tear rolls down her trembling chin, but it looks like she's making a wish, not having a breakdown. John has never known another woman half as strong.

"—Sometimes I just wish I could be dealt a good card once and a while."

She finishes with a quiet breath, eyelashes blinking vacantly at the windshield. Then she seems to snap out of it and realize that John is still standing in the freezing rain, but before she can apologize or drive off, he cuts in.

"Harman's, you said?"

Melissa's blinks. "Yeah."

"That's just off the last exit, isn't it?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I haven't eaten yet. Let's go."

Melissa's mouth drops open and moves soundlessly. For once, John's caught her off guard.

"I— John, I look like a mess."

"You look great."

"You're— no, I should get home to make Scott dinner. He's—"

"A fully functioning werewolf teenager who can make his own dinner. Or catch a rabbit."
Melissa gapes at him, eyebrows arching high. "I swear you're just like your son, John. Your son, Stiles, who is waiting for you to get home so he can make you—"

"Boiled sweet potato and salad with low-fat dressing?" John finishes wryly, arching his own eyebrow. "Come on Mel, you'd be doing me a favor by getting me out of that."

She bites her lip, half to keep from smiling and half to think it over. When she blows an angry curl off her nose John knows he almost has her, and when she nods— "Alright, you got me. But only because I'm starving and I hear Harman's has a five-star hamburger."

John grins. "That's the spirit. You lead the way, I'll be right behind you."

Melissa rolls her eyes. "Just so long as you don't write me a ticket for my tail light."

"Only if you get it fixed by Monday. Stay off highway ninety tomorrow night though, Richard's on patrol and he'll definitely nail you for it."

"Deal."

.o0O0o.

The restaurant hits them with a gust of warm air as they step inside. Twinkling Christmas decorations and savory fried food glitter at every turn while the rain quickly dries from John’s shoulders, thawing out his toes. He leaves his belt and badge in the squad car since he’s off duty now, and Melissa hangs her jacket on the back of the booth they sit at. They chat while waiting for their orders and Melissa's sadness slowly seeps away, replaced with her usual witticism and sharp chuckles. John’s cheeks grow warm with the content of it all as he texts Stiles letting him know that he’ll be home a little later, and she texts Scott letting him know there’s a box of mac&cheese on the third shelf of the cupboard. And to be sure to add the powdered cheese after straining the pasta.

"Mm’ohmygod, I want to marry whoever made this cheeseburger," Melissa groans as he chews over a giant mouthful of crispy bun and medium-rare heifer. "No, I take it back. I’ll just marry the burger."

John hums his agreement as he uses another fry to mop up the tatar sauce oozing off his steak. "I stopped praying decades ago, but I’d like to take a moment now to bless the cow that died so I could eat this steak."

"I oughta take a picture of you and send it to your son," Melissa teases, pointing a pickle slice to John’s meal.

"You wouldn’t dare," he warns as he curls a protective hand over his plate. "I earned these calories, I worked hard today."

"You sure this is okay?" Melissa asks again. "I’m serious about leaving if you need to. I know finals are coming up for the boys but with both of us out of the house who knows what supernatural shenanigans they’ll get into."

"Well let’s hope they don’t run into anything too bloodthirsty," John comments. "I’m running out of mountain lion excuses to tell my deputies."

"Ugh, remember those pixies? They were probably my least favorite creature they’ve run into," Melissa rolls her eyes. "I’ll take bloodthirsty werewolves any day over a backyard covered in smelly, glittery slime."
“I still have a grudge against that English teacher—the darach? Getting kidnapped and held hostage underneath a magic sacrificial tree is not how I like to spend my weekends.”

Melissa chuckles grimly and takes another bite. “I still worry about them being safe. Frankly I’m amazed how you’re able to let Stiles go out and fight when he has nothing…”

“But sarcasm and a baseball bat for defense?” John fills in for her. “Yeah, when I first found out about the whole… You know.” He twirls his fork in the air. “I hardly let him leave the house. But then he just ended up sneaking out anyway. When he gets it in his head that he’s going to do something, nothing stops him. And he’s pretty dead set on protecting his friends.”

“Sounds like my son,” Melissa comments. “Good thing they’re best friends. Why can’t they just stay young and innocent forever?”

“Because then we’d never get a night to ourselves,” John points out, and Melissa nods vigorously and raises her root beer so they can cheer to it. Their glasses clink and they take a sip.

“So who’s this asshole that stood you up? Do I need to arrest him?”

Melissa rolls her eyes. “Don’t bother. He was some guy who came in last week with a sprained wrist,” she sighs. “And he was cute, too.”

“Listen Mel. Any man who’s dumb enough to stand you up doesn’t deserve you,” John tells her, pointing his french fry for emphasis. Melissa mistakes it as him offering it to her and she takes it, popping it in her mouth.

“Looks like someone finally started watching Gilmore Girls,” she snorts.

“I mean it. You’re fantastic. You just haven’t found the right guy yet.”

“Yeah,” Melissa murmurs and looks away. “Or maybe I’m just not meant to find the right guy. I mean look what happened with the asshole I married. Hah.”

“That doesn’t mean you won’t meet someone better,” he points out seriously. “Someone who really knows and appreciates you.”

“I’d love to believe that.”

“Cheer up, Mel. For example I know you, and personally I think this place is a little cliche for your taste. I’d take you out for pulled pork sammies at Phil’s Club on trivia night. You’d win us free t-shirts with your extensive knowledge on medical practices and mythology, and then we’d go people-watching at the pier so we could laugh at all the tweens flirting on the doc.”

Melissa chuckles and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, well not every man is like you. Besides, between my work schedule and our supernatural kids, where am I gonna find the time to meet someone for all that?”

“How does this Saturday sound?”

She blinks and looks up at him. He continues eating his french fries. For all the time he’s spent imagining this moment, he’s surprisingly calm.

“John?” Melissa gazes intently at him. “Are you… You mean… Us?”

He nods. “Us.”
“Us,” she breathes. “On a… Date?”

“If that’s what they’re still called, yeah.”

Melissa bites her lip, looking tentatively hopeful. “I— I mean, are you… You know, after…?

“I’ve been ready for a while, Mel. I just haven’t had the guts to ask you.”

And her expression blooms into one of the most beautiful smiles John’s seen on her. It makes him smile too, and then they burst out laughing because they’re officially a cheesy couple in a romcom and it’s finally happening.

“Well then yeah, yes. Let’s do this,” she grins once they settle down. “But… Oh. This Saturday I’m working. Let me see…” She takes out her phone to check her calendar and John grabs the little notepad and his reading glasses from his jacket pocket.

“I’m working double-shift every other weekend until December 31st,” she frowns.

“And I’m at the station every night on weekdays,” he mutters, skimming his notepad. “Oh! Except next Tuesday, the nineteenth.”

"I promised I'd help Scott study for his math midterm,” Melissa shakes her head. He's one wrong answer away from failing.

"He's a hardworking kid, he'll pass. Next Saturday night?"

"Nurses' seminar and awards dinner. I'd get out of it, but I promised I’d fill in for a friend. How about Wednesday the 26th?"

“Stiles and I always spend the day after Christmas watching a Lord of the Rings marathon.”

"I'd suggest the 27th, but Scott and I have tickets to see Eddie Money."

“What about afternoons? We could do lunch tomorrow?”

John shakes his head. “Stiles is seeing his psychiatrist to get his meds adjusted. I'd reschedule but that woman is impossible to book less than a month in advance.”

“Okay, how about Friday January second, then? To kick off the new year?” Melissa suggests.

He grins. “Sounds like a great start to 2015. I’m looking forward to it.”

She sips her coffee, eyes crinkling mischievously at him over the rim. “Our kids called this years ago, you know.”

He chuckles. “I’d say they’ll be thrilled at the news, but I don’t think they’ll be surprised.

“So when do we tell them?”

“Assuming they don’t figure it out first? Let’s wait just a little longer. It’ll be fun to tease them.”

Melissa smiles. “January second, then. Pick me up at five and we’ll head over to trivia night.”

They talk until both their plates are wiped clean, and then they talk more. She tells him about a kid who came into the ER with his mother’s wedding ring stuck in his nose, and John tells her about a woman who was arrested last week for stealing seven cats from the animal shelter. The dinner tab is
pricey. John can't really afford to pay it all, but he does.

When they walk out to the parking lot Melissa turns to face him beneath the pink light of the Harman's sign. She smiles softly and slips her fingers over John’s, coaxing a grin from him in the sprinkling weather. Her hand is small like Claudia’s but without any freckles, darker and cooler. It’s a charming juxtaposition to John’s calloused warm hand underneath, as Stiles so eloquently describes as 'sausage fingers.'

“Thank you, John.”

“Thank you, Melissa.”

They glance at each other, eyes twinkling, lips pulled into tiny, knowing smiles. It feels right, and it feels warm, and it feels like living.

.o0O0o. December 25th, 2014.

“I’mmmm dreaming… Of a white Christmasss…”

The Yule log pops and dances on their rabbit-ear TV as John sits in his armchair by the tree, trying to figure out how to use the Kindle Terry got him yesterday. So far he’s deducted that either his fingers are too big or the device was designed by morons, even though Stiles insists John is just “technologically challenged.”

He’s wearing the same slippers and flannels he's worn every Christmas for the past decade; he probably looks like an old man and he feels like one too, but he minds less and less every year. Stiles and Scott say they can't picture him a day under forty, which Melissa agrees with even though he was thirty-two when they met.

In elementary school Stiles used to speed into his parent’s room at five in the morning and jump on the bed hollering to wake up for presents. Nowadays John gets to sleep in.

"Merry Christmas, daddy-o!"

Stiles finally pads out into the living room in worn flannel pajama bottoms and a Yoda t-shirt that says, ‘the sleep is strong with this one’ that he loves despite the moth holes. A lopsided grin decorates his face as he idly scratches at his belly button, revealing an absurd amount of dark curls trailing to his waistband. His hair looks like it was electrocuted, ruffled from sleep and sticking out in a million different directions around the pillow marks on his left cheek, which connect his moles with tiny pink lines.

“Morning son,” John greets, checking the clock on the wall. Half past eleven, a new record. “You start sleeping in any later and we’ll have to start greeting, ‘merry December twenty-six.’”

Stiles snorts as he plops down by the tree. “What can I say? Gotta get my beauty rest, dad. I only have a few prime years left before I loose my youthful glow.”

“You’re seventeen, kid. You’ve got at least a decade.”

“Yeah, but you’ve had wrinkles since you were like, twenty. I gotta start preserving my skin early. Thanks for the genes, pops!”

“Hey,” John warns lightly, as he tosses a mini candy cane at his kid’s inflated head. “That’s not
true,” he lies. “Besides, Melissa says I don’t look a day over forty-nine.”

“You are forty-nine, dad.”

“Yes, but life expectancy is eighty! I’ve still a good handful of decades left—“

“To get even wrinklier. I bet if we ironed you out you’d be ten feet long.”

“Make one more jab at my handsome features and you’ll be doing all the ironing in this house for the next month,” John warns as Stiles snickers into his fist.

His son sits cross-legged on the floor by the tree, the same spot he’s sat since he could walk, all long limbs and pale feet and big hands that flip the presents in the air before handing them over. John takes his usual spot in the armchair, or as Stiles calls it, “dad’s Manly-Man Sheriff Chair” because John doesn’t let anyone else sit in it. He’s has worn a perfect Sheriff-shaped butt imprint into the leather by now, so he has claimed it. There are only three presents under their tiny tree this year; his gift for Stiles, a large box that must be Stiles’s gift for John, and a small gift bag with a Spa&Massage gift card for Melissa. Stiles gave Lydia and Scott their presents last week.

“Think fast, Sheriff.”

Stiles tosses him a large box wrapped in last-minute paper that feels mysteriously light.

“This isn’t another vegetarian recipe book, is it?” John asks suspiciously, raising a dubious eyebrow.

Stiles makes a raspberry noise and rocks back on his heels. “Nice try, pops. You don’t get another one of those until you work through all the meals in the first book I got you.”

“Oh, goodie,” John deadpans. Stiles gave him the last recipe book for his birthday, and since then the dinner table became the ‘vegetarian health mush table,’ courtesy of his son’s cooking on days he doesn’t have lacrosse. Last week they had sweet potato mash with some kind of vegetable he can’t pronounce. "Sure you don't wanna go first, kiddo?"

Stiles grins and shakes his head. His hair flops over his eyes. It's getting long. His bony knees bounce excitedly over the carpet, in time with the “thumpity thump thump thumpity thump thump Santa's on his way” in the background. "Nah, you first. I can't wait to see your face."

John obliges but can't help but be a little worried as he unwraps it. There are millions of layers of tissue. Stiles is gleefully watching him struggle, rocking back on his hips and biting on his knuckles to keep from cackling.

"Christ, kid."

"Gotta make you work for it, pops."

When John finally gets to the last layer the box is no bigger than his palm. He purses his lips, opens the cardboard, and gapes at the two shiny Mets tickets staring up at him. He stares at his kid, who’s grinning gleefully watching him struggle, rocking back on his hips and biting on his knuckles to keep from cackling.

"Christ, kid."

"Gotta make you work for it, pops."

“Mets are playing at AT&T Park next May!” Stiles whoops excitedly. "And it’s May second, which means it won’t run into finals!"

“What day of the week is May second?” John asks, because John knows better. Stiles squirms, “Wellllll, it’s a Wednesday, soimighthavetomissschoolthatday, but it’s gonna be so rad!”
John chuckles. “Mad rad?”

“Yeah, sure, mad rad! Look at you, pops, learning pop slang. Such swag. Swagger. Dope. Bangin’!”

“I don’t know what to do with you, kid.”

“You could start by giving your favorite son a big ol’ thank you hug for his beautiful act of love?”

Stiles bats his eyelashes, holding his hands out and flexing his fingers hopefully.

John studies the tickets. “Where did you even find the money for these?”

“I know a guy,” Stiles shrugs casually, and John wonders how many peer math papers Stiles had to do in order to get the tickets.

He sighs but can’t help a smile from forming. “Thanks, Stiles.”

“Yep, 2015 is gonna be awesome,” Stiles laces his arms behind his head. “It’s the year the Mets are gonna win the series, I can feel it. Let’s start saving now so we can fly out to New York to see it, okay?”

John smiles, even though he knows they won’t have the money to afford that, even by the time next October comes around. But “sure,” he says, just to watch the grin stretch bigger on his son’s face.

“So... what’dja get me?” Stiles teases, as he hauls John’s gift onto his lap. His long fingers skitter over the paper excitedly, eyebrows flattening as he tries to figure out what’s inside. With Stiles it’s always another crime case; he shakes the box and puts it next to his ear to listen, feels the weight and tries to get a judge for the shape. Stiles is too good at solving puzzles, because he always guesses and ruins the surprise.

“You evil gremlin, you filled the box with packing peanuts!” Stiles cries in outrage. John smiles victoriously; he did.

“Can’t have you guessing and ruining the fun,” John shrugs. “This year you get to open your gift and be surprised like a regular teenager.”

“Bullsh— balderdash. Evil, evil father. Darth Vader levels of evil father, is what you are,” Stiles huffs as he unsuccessfully shakes the box, hearing and feeling nothing aside from the slight shift of styrofoam peanuts. “It’s a one-fiftieth scale model of the Millennium Falcon. A transcript for the unreleased Avengers movie? That rocket ship I wanted in third grade? The full eight-disk blu-ray collection of the good John Hughes films! Do they make that? Is that a product for purchase? It should be.”

“Just open the box, kid.”

Stiles slips out the shoebox and lifts the cardboard. His mouth drops to the floor. “Dad?”

John smiles as Stiles lifts up the sneakers by the laces, scattering packing peanuts onto the carpet. The red high-tops spin like two cherry ornaments from his fingers, shiny and fresh from the mall. In truth they were triple John’s Christmas budget, but Stiles had eyed them in the store like they were made for him and didn’t ask because he knew John couldn’t afford them.

“Oh my god, DAD! You got me—from the mall, you remembered!” Pure joy, immediately dampened with a frown and worried eyebrows. “These are expensive, though, are you sure you can afford—-”
"Hey, that's for me to decide and you to enjoy," John cuts in firmly.

“I— okay, wow, whoaow,” Stiles’s fingers dance over the sneakers. They’ll replace the rattier ones he’s been using duct tape to hold the soles in. “Holy crap these are beautiful, these are awesome. Oh man, thanks dad!”

His son starts trying them on in his batman pajama bottoms, wiggling his long bare feet beneath the tongues. It’s worth it. John can’t afford the sneakers, but Stiles doesn’t need to know that. Stiles shouldn’t need to worry about finances when he’s already worrying about battling monsters and being a teenager. In truth John sacrificed his life insurance in order to pay off the last of Claudia’s hospital bills, but he’s going to pay it all back before Stiles ever finds out.

“So how did Scott like his present?”

“Gave it to him last weekend. I got him a double-jumbo pack of Redvines, glow-in-the-dark shoelaces because obviously, and a dog brush so he can comb his muttonchops properly when he gets all furry. Also because his face does this little scrunchy-squinty thing when I tell dog jokes, kinda like how baby animals try to look angry but they’re just cute to take seriously, you know? It was an opportunity that couldn’t be missed, and I got a picture of it on my phone to have for the rest of eternity. At least I did, until he sat on me and stole my phone and deleted it.”

“Don’t you have a passcode?”

Stiles pauses to raise a single ‘seriously?’ eyebrow that says, “Scott knows it, dad.”

“Ah.”

“Yep.”

At the breakfast (lunch) table Stiles immediately dives for the Bisquick box for pancakes. Neither he nor Stiles have time to spare for anything other than toast or a pop tart in the morning, but pancakes are for special occasions and crappy days. “Come on, it’s Christmas,” John bargains when Stiles starts cutting the recipe in half.

Stiles waves the spatula at him. “Alright, I’ll make you a deal. You get three pancakes if I get to say three swearwords today, minimum potency b-word and no more potent than an f-bomb.”

“I get four pancakes and no more potent than the s-word.”

“Ah, fine. Okay deal.”

The pancakes pile atop the stove and John flips through the TV channels until he finds a cheesy Hallmark movie. His childhood never had Christmases like this; his Christmases were filled with screaming and disappointed frowns and sometimes if he was lucky, his father would already be draped over the kitchen table passed out with the whiskey bottle in his hand.

But the reason he likes cheesy Hallmark holiday movies is because he used to watch them as a child, and used to pray that one day he would get a Christmas like the happy people he saw on television. But the December twenty-fifths of years past have been just like the ones he hoped for, filled with laughter and warmth and family. Even with Claudia gone, his empty wallet, and the new wrinkles around his eyes, his son is enough to light up the room and put a smile on his face so he hardly remembers what it’s like to be sad in the first place.

"So watcha' wanna do today?" Stiles asks around a truly massive bite of flapjack. It’s a question that’s asked every year since they’re the only two Stilinski’s and the McCall’s spend all day
“Do you want to see the new Hobbit movie again?” John says. “The theatre has tickets half off today. My treat.”

“Eh. It was good but twice was enough for me. Kinda pales in comparison to the original Lord of the Rings movies, you know?”

“I wouldn’t know since I haven’t seen it, but I’ll take your word for it. How about driving down to the bridge and feeding the ducks?”

“Eh. Let’s just stay home, maybe?” Stiles shrugs. He grabs the syrup and squirts a long stream of sugar onto his plate. “We haven’t just stayed home in a few years. I feel like sometimes that’s the most fun. Plus it’s raining outside and I don’t want to subject the jeep to that, she deserves to stay nice and toasty in the garage on Christmas, don’t you think?”

John tucks his last piece of pancake into his smile. “That sounds just fine. I like staying home, too.”

“Great. You finished there, pops? Lemme’ take your plate.” Stiles licks his fingers and sticks John’s plate in the sink. “Cheesy Hallmark movie? I call dibs on the right side of the couch.” Because the left side has a spring poking loose.

“Only if you stick those dishes in the dishwasher,” John bargains, and gets up to grab dubs on the good pillow.

Stiles plops on the couch next to him with Melissa’s chex mix, the tin of chocolate popcorn, and a candy cane sticking out of his mouth.

“Christ, kid, you just had six pancakes,” John snorts. “Where do you put it all?”

“I’m a growing teenage boy,” Stiles stuffs a giant handful of popcorn into his mouth. “I run on sugar and sarcasm. And compliments, compliments are definitely good. Feel free to stroke my ego anytime.”

“Well. You’re better at offending people than anyone I know.”

“Aw, thanks. I try my best.”

On the television a litter of lab puppies yip and wag their tails inside a box for adoption. A young man and woman startle and gape at each other as they brush hands reaching to pet the same dog, and John smiles as he thinks about his date with Melissa on January second.

"Hey, thanks dad."

"For what?"

Stiles shrugs. “I dunno, just being dad.”

The rain taps softly against the window outside. A warmth more vibrant than he can describe spreads through his entire being, and he wraps an arm around his son with a protective determination to let him know he has everything to be proud of. He has the job of his dreams, a fantastic kid, a friend and something more in the nurse he’s laughed with for a decade, and Claudia’s necklace a constant presence beneath his shirt. He smiles as Stiles laughs at the television, watches the happy family on the screen, and decides he he’s the luckiest man in the world.
“I love you, kiddo.”

"Love you too, pops.”

Incredible Raising Home fanart by spider999now and benaya-trash.

Chapter End Notes

After seven months of writing, this story is finally posted!!!

It was only meant to be about 10k illustrating the protest in part one… But then it grew and grew into something that is very special to me, and once I finish Home I will adapt both stories into one big, original novel… And hopefully one day a movie!

God, so much reseach went into this. Sometimes one sentence would cause me to surf google for fifteen minutes— who was the US president in 1988? How many American Girl Dolls were there in 2003? Loma Prieta magnitude? Mets Roster 1990? As a girl who’s only been around since 1996, I consulted my mom for some answers from her memory. She was really good at describing what the style was like in the early nineties — I was really good at remembering what all the hot new toys were in 2002 (light-up shoes, Barbie dolls, Bop-Its, Calico Critters, and snap bracelets).

For character discussions, parallels and fun facts, and extra art, check out my tumblr at stiles-and-the-sourwolf. If not, an unbelievable amount of effort went into this fic, so I really appreciate any and all reviews, comments, kudos, and shares. Seven months without feedback has been a certain kind of torture, but it sure feels good to finally hit “post.”

Thank you for reading, thank you for the support, and I’ll see you soon for chapter 16 of Home around early July! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!