“Those contracts that you signed was you agreeing to follow producer instructions. Your instructions were to give us drama. Whether or not you like each other, you are, for all intents and purposes, hired actors for these seven weeks,” Finstock snaps. “Pretend to actually like each other or I will dock your pay.”

Married at First Glance gives its participants seven weeks. Seven weeks, starting when they meet and marry their “perfect match”, to decide if they want to stay married or divorce.

For Stiles and Derek though, the challenge lies within trying to pretend that they don’t absolutely hate each other’s guts. When you’re married to a werewolf who dislikes humans, however, this can get a little tricky.

But the sweet, sweet cash reward at the end will be worth it. Right?

(A Married at First Sight AU)
The Cold Open

Chapter Notes

I’m back from my hiatus and I’d like to start of by thanking Domik for beta'ing :) Without further ado, here is the fic based on the premise of the reality show "Married at First Sight".

It’s dark inside the ambulance, the engine silent and work-lights turned off as they sit in the hospital parking lot. Nearby street lamps bask the surrounding bushes and cars in a soft, orange glow. Stiles would almost consider it to be peaceful, enjoying the almost eerie silence of the midnight hours in his rig if he weren’t frantically stuffing his face with curly fries like it’s the first time he’s had to eat in almost twelve hours. Hell, maybe it is. He can’t remember.

Even his partner, Scott, the tan and impossibly joyful human being that he is, looks worse for wear as they near the end of their shift. His usually vibrant brown eyes are dull with exhaustion, the edges of his mouth pulled down as he stares sadly at the pile of crumbs where his own sandwich used to be.

Stiles swallows thickly around his food as he watches his partner with concern. It may not just be the hard hours bringing him down though. It’s been a rough couple of months for him, since Kira, his girlfriend of two years, abruptly left with her family to move to Japan, leaving behind a distraught and devastated Scott. And, instead of work being a helpful distraction from his loss, their hectic and stressful work hours only seem to be making things worse.

It’s understandable, of course. Scott’s a lover by nature; the kind of person who isn’t happy unless they’re in love or actively pursuing it. It’s probably not healthy, but, seeing him this sad and alone, it’s clearly better than him being single.

The radio crackles ominously.

“Y’alright, man?” Stiles asks, pieces of chewed fries tumbling from his stuffed mouth.

“Yeah, just—”

The radio interrupts, crackling and coming to life, dispatch’s voice ringing loudly through the quiet. “Ambulance 2411, do you copy?”

They both grimace at the radio and Stiles quickly gestures for Scott to answer it. Scott sighs heavily and picks up the radio.

“This is 2411.”

“Male in his 40’s, suspected broken arm. We’re sending you the address now.”

“Copy that. 2411 responding,” Scott replies, albeit a little dejectedly. Stiles groans and starts the engine, lightly bumping his head against the steering wheel in frustration before pressing on the gas and heading towards the address Scott relays. “We were so close to the end of our shift, man.”
“Twenty minutes,” Scott mumbles morosely in agreement.

The address thankfully isn’t too far away and leads them to a quiet, suburban area where all the houses look the same. They’re dainty and old, the shutters starting to hang off their hinges and resting against the peeling paint job on the walls. A middle-aged couple stands on the front lawn, bickering loudly as the ambulance pulls up.

The man on the lawn— bald, bulky, and angry— lifts his head to glare at Scott and Stiles when they exit the vehicle and start to approach. His arm is dangling uselessly at his side, clearly dislocated at the shoulder where there is a visible disconnect at the joint. His other hand clutches the arm protectively against his side as if to hide his vulnerability from strangers.

His eyes flash a bright red as he focuses on Scott, his growls growing louder as he bares his fangs threateningly. Aw, shit, Stiles thinks, knowing from past experiences that nothing good starts with glowing eyes. Scott’s eyes flash a luminous yellow in response and he immediately stops in his tracks, putting his hands in the air to placate the Alpha and show that he’s not a threat.

It’s ridiculous, this werewolf posturing that gets in the way of them trying to do their jobs. More often than not, it leads to Stiles doing more work, since wolves view humans as the weaker and less-threatening species, a stereotype he really, really, does not appreciate. His job is hard enough without adding extra work to it, thank you very much.

Stiles swears under his breath as he continues to approach the couple. Of course this had to be his luck— having to deal with an injured and angry werewolf at the end of this already awful day. The only thing worse than dealing with a vulnerable werewolf is a vulnerable Alpha werewolf since all they seem to focus on is the fact that Scott is nearby. As if Scott could even hurt a fly, let alone murder someone in cold blood for their Alpha powers. Absolutely ridiculous. Fucking werewolves.

“He won’t hurt you,” the woman says, smacking the injured man upside the head to put an end to the growling. “He’s just had too much to drink. My name is Ellis and this moron is my husband, Robert.”

“’m not a moron,” Robert grumbles, still glaring at Scott.

Ellis rolls her eyes and folds her arms over the front of her bright pink robe. Her hair is up in curlers and fluffy slippers adorn her feet, yet she’s about a hundred times more intimidating than her husband. “You climbed onto the roof to fix the TV antennae, while incredibly drunk, I might add. That makes you a moron.”

Robert shoots her a look of pure frustration, finally having his attention dragged away from the other Were. “Yer the one who… who kept complain’n ‘bout the signal. Wha’ was I s’posed to do?”

Ellis opens her mouth to reply, but Stiles has had enough, his head throbbing from being awake for so long.

“So you fell off the roof, Robert? Is that how you injured your arm?” He asks in his I’m-a-professional voice, pulling out his notepad to jot down the information for his report.

“Yes,” Robert says through gritted teeth, as if talking to a paramedic was more painful than the dislocated shoulder. Ah, yes. It’s the respect from the citizens that keeps him coming back to do this job every day.

“He jumped off the roof, trying to impress god knows who, like a damn fool. Too much damn Alpha testosterone if you ask me. And it was the most graceless landing I’ve seen in my life, too.
He landed right on his shoulder. Probably smashed it to bits,” Ellis rants. Stiles immediately decides he likes her.

“Did you hurt anything else when you landed?” Scott asks politely, still standing off to the side.

“He might have hit his head, too,” Ellis responds, talking for her husband who simply glowers at her as if she had committed some atrocious betrayal by giving them information.

“Alright, sir. I’m going to ask you a few questions now and test your responses, alright?” Stiles says, stepping into the werewolf’s space and gently placing one hand under his jaw to hold him steady. He brings out a tiny flashlight pen, frowning when Robert’s pupils don’t react to the light. He asks him to follow his fingers, making note of the results on his notepad and continues. “Are you having any head pain? Any dizziness or nausea?”

“No, no, and no,” Robert snaps.

“Lie, lie, and lie,” Scott says. Stiles smirks and makes another note, checking off the box for irritability as well. If only they had boxes for denial and ignorance.

Alright, he can admit it. Sometimes having a werewolf as a partner has its benefits too.

“Well, Robert, I hate to tell you this, but it looks like you have a dislocated shoulder and a concussion,” Stiles says.

Robert’s frown deepens. “I don’t remember hitting my head, how the hell could I have a concussion?”

Stiles puts on his best customer-service smile, which probably comes off more as a tired grimace at this point. “You see, Robert, my man, not remembering that you’ve hit your head is actually one of the symptoms of a concussion. Now, I’m gonna have to ask that you come with us to the hospital to get checked out.”

“No,” Ellis and Robert say in unison. The first thing they’ve probably agreed on all night.

“I don’t need it,” Robert argues. “I’m a werewolf. I’ll be fine in a few hours!”

“We can’t afford a ride to the hospital,” Ellis explains calmly.

“You have to have your shoulder set so that it can heal properly, otherwise you’re risking it healing in place the way it is now,” Stiles insists. “Which, if you can’t tell, won’t be fun for you, alpha werewolf or not.”

“Can’t you do that?” Ellis asks, hopeful.

Stiles sighs. “We’re not supposed to fix dislocated shoulders, ma’am. They do that in the ER.”

“But he’s a werewolf, so he doesn’t need the ER, right? Technically he can sleep off the concussion and, if you just put his shoulder back into place, then he can heal fine,” Ellis says, eyes hopeful as she looks at him.

Stiles glances over to his partner, but Scott just shrugs. Of course. Stiles sighs and looks up at the sky for a moment, asking invisible beings what he did to deserve this awful night.

He’s never been very good at saying “no” to patients.

“Alright, fine. It’s gonna hurt, but I’ll do it quickly. Just don’t try to rip my throat out, okay?”
Stiles gently grabs ahold of the man’s shoulder and wrist, twisting slowly and gently until it’s at just the right angle, and… POP!

Robert howls in pain, his eyes glowing an angry red before they dwindle out and he gains control of himself, his nostrils flaring wide with the force of his breaths. Ellis stands off to the side, looking utterly gleeful.

“There we go. How’s that? Does it feel better or what?” Stiles asks with a small smile.

Stiles doesn’t get a verbal response, just a sudden and large amount of vomit all over his uniform.

o0o0o0o

Stiles sits in the passenger seat of the Jeep, wearing a pair of bright pink scrubs they had stolen from the hospital a while back for times like this. He stares down at his bundle of vomit-soaked clothes on the car floor, wondering if they’re worth washing or if he should just burn them.

“At least it wasn’t blood this time,” Scott offers as he hops into the driver’s seat, his voice strangely thick. Stiles glances up and notices the close pin pinching Scott’s nostrils shut to block out the awful stench of puke. Normally the sight would cause Stiles to crack a smile and some jokes, but not now. Not after today.

“This time.” Stiles sighs. “What did we do to deserve being the bitch truck today?”

“You say that like we’re not the bitch truck every day,” Scott says, unhelpfully.

“It’s because Harris hates us, I swear. He probably bribes dispatch to royally screw us over. Notice how they never ask for whoever is closest to get to the scene, they just send these calls our way,” Stiles rants. “Whose great idea was it to put him in charge anyway? Such a giant asshat.” Stiles picks at the scrubs unhappily as they drive home to their apartment.

They park the Jeep on the street and trudge into their apartment building and home of two years. It’s a tall brick building with years worth of vines and moss clinging to the neglected outside. The bricks are so old their bright red coloring has faded to a clay-like brown and the paint has started to peel off, revealing an off-white undercoat.

Some say it’s got that authentic old building charm, others say it’s a dump in the middle of the cesspit that is downtown Beacon City. If you ask Scott or Stiles though, it’s the best building they’ve ever seen because it’s affordable.

The moment the apartment door opens, Stiles beelines for the couch and face plants into the uncomfortably straw-like material. The barely there smell that accompanies the couch immediately becomes pungent and can’t be ignored with his nose pressed so closely to the fabric, but he’s too tired to care, just mentally makes a note to spray it with a heavy dose of Febreze again later.

He’s already half-asleep when Scott comes barreling into the room, loudly proclaiming that Stiles has to wake up.

“Dude, we got in!” Scott shouts.

Stiles groans from the couch as he attempts to bury his face further into the fabric, as if trying to escape Scott’s loudness by smothering himself. “I know we got in, Scott. I’m on the couch.”
“No, come on, buddy. Look at me,” Scott says, moving forward to stand in front of his partner. Stiles rolls and blinks his eyes open, still squinting in a mixture of annoyance and sleepiness. Scott ignores the hateful look, waving two large envelopes in front of his face. “We. Got. In. We’re going to be on the show Married at First Glance!”

“We— what?” Stiles is instantly awake now, shooting upright in shock as Scott paces around excitedly before him.

“I’m going to be married, man. They found my perfect match! I have a perfect match out there,” Scott gushes.

“We’re going to be famous,” Stiles says, eyes wide with shock. “Wait, let me see—” He tears the envelope out of his friend’s hands, his eyes skimming frantically over the page for— Aha! There it is. “Holy shit! Five-thousand dollars? They’re going to pay us five-thousand dollars to be on TV!”

“I’m going to have a wife!” Scott exclaims, clearly not listening.

“I can buy a real bed!” Stiles cries, because priorities. He continues to read through the letter, his eyes slowing as he sees the part where it states world renown love experts have found his perfect match and they want to start filming in a month.

He’s going to be married to someone, his supposed perfect match, in a month.

Holy. Shit.

“I’m going to be married,” Stiles mumbles, the realization of what this means finally setting in. A nervous feeling creeps into his stomach. He doesn’t know how to feel about this— doesn’t even know if he’ll be marrying a man or a woman, had told the experts that he was open to either. What if they don’t like him? What if he doesn’t like them? What if they turn out to be like Heather? Or Danny? Or what if—

“Hey,” Scott says softly, tearing Stiles out of his panicked thoughts. “It’s gonna be great. They’re like our soulmates; picked out specifically for us because experts believe that we would make the best match possible. You just gotta have faith.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees tonelessly. “Well, if it all goes to shit, at least we’ll make five-thousand dollars, right?”

Scott shoots him a bemused smile. “Yeah, man. But I’d much rather being married to my soulmate, to be honest.”

“That’s because you don’t have to sleep on a smelly couch we bought off craigslist for a hundred and fifty dollars,” Stiles shoots back.

Scott simply laughs.

Stiles stares down at the paper again, the sinking feeling in his stomach giving way to a more fluttery, excited feel. He wants the money, of course, but can’t help but feel a little bit awed.

He has a perfect match out there somewhere, waiting to meet him in a month.

Damnit, Scott’s enthusiasm was just too contagious.
The tuxedo is perfect, even Stiles can admit that. It’s form-fitting and a crisp, traditional black that, when buttoned, accentuates the slimness of his figure. Will his future spouse like that or would they prefer someone with more muscles? He’s not skinny, but rather has more of a lean-muscle type of figure. What if his match wanted a bodybuilder type of guy?

Stiles stares at his reflection in the full-length mirror, entranced by the image of himself looking so clean, not a hint of blood, brains, guts, or vomit anywhere on him. Not to mention, he’s never worn anything more expensive than a twenty-five dollar shirt, not since his mom died and his dad had to single-handedly keep them afloat on one parent’s salary.

“How much did this thing cost, Lyds?” Stiles asks incredulously. He shifts around to ogle how the pants fit snug and tight around his ass, making it look more tantalizing than he ever thought possible. Is he even allowed to appreciate how hot these pants make his butt look? Because goddamn, he is pretty sure his butt has never looked this good.

“Price doesn’t matter when you’re with me, remember?” Lydia hums, circling him and inspecting the outfit for any imperfections. But Stiles has stared in the mirror long enough to know there aren’t any. “You look good. Whoever they are, they’re going to either love you or want to ravish you. Possibly both.”

Stiles eyes himself in the mirror once again, wondering, if his perfect match will be pleased or disappointed when they see him. “You didn’t,” he points out.

Lydia frowns at him, but her eyes get a soft edge to them, something akin to fondness or maybe exasperation. “I do now. It took some time to get to know you first. And, if they don’t like you right away, just give them the chance to know you too and I guarantee they will adore you. It won’t take them long to realize that they’re lucky to have you, I promise.” Stiles smiles at her gratefully, but not quite believing. “After all, I wouldn’t buy a two thousand dollar suit for just anyone.”

The color drains from Stiles’ face at he stares at her in horror. “Two— two thousand dollars?! Are you serious? You can’t— I can’t wear this, are you kidding me? It’ll be ruined by the end of the night, I guarantee it.”

Lydia smirks. “I used Aiden’s credit card.”

“Well, in that case, I’m keeping it,” Stiles replies. He hates Aiden, hates that Lydia settled for him and moved to England to be closer to that douchebag, but Lydia is nothing but stubborn and she won't hear anything negative Stiles has to say about it.

He is immensely grateful that she flew out to be here with him though, he's not sure he wouldn't have run away by now if she weren't here.

Lydia’s smile grows wider and sharper. The kind of intimidating smile that reminds Stiles of the Cheshire cat. “I wouldn’t expect you to do anything else.”
There’s a loud knock on the hotel room door before the producer, Finstock, comes barreling through. His black hair is in it’s typical disarray, his eyes wide and filled with either pure excitement or anxiety, it’s hard to tell.

“It’s show time,” he barks. “Hurry up and get married. The cameras are waiting.”

Stiles’ breath hitches and he looks at Lydia, sure his panic must be showing on his face as clear as day. She simply smiles at him encouragingly and kisses his cheek, his skin tingling from the touch of her lips even as she backs away.

“Good luck. I’ll be in the audience,” Lydia says.

“Don’t tell my dad I’m freaking out,” Stiles replies quickly. Lydia snorts derisively. “Yeah, you’re right, he won’t believe that.”

“You’ll be fine, Stiles,” Lydia says softly, her heels clacking against the tiles as she leaves. Finstock raises his eyebrows impatiently and hustles Stiles out of the room.

The flurry of cameramen around him is difficult to get used to, knowing that he’s being watched at every moment from multiple angles. He tries his best to tune it out as he stares forward at the two large and heavily decorated doors, the only things blocking him from meeting his soon-to-be spouse.

Wiping his sweaty palms on his pants, he suddenly feels the outline of his cellphone in his pocket. He swiftly pulls the device out, a pang of disappointment shooting through him as he sees he has no messages from Scott. It’s to be expected though; Scott’s in another hotel right now, getting married at this same exact time. Of course he wouldn’t think to send a text. Stiles, on the other hand…

_This better be worth it_, he sends, trying to ignore how badly his hands are trembling as he returns the phone to his pocket. He takes a few calming breaths through his nose, his heart rate slowly just a little, until the doors pull open.

His eyes go straight to his father first, seeing him sitting in one of the solid white chairs —one of many, elegantly lined up in rows— on the right side of the room next to Lydia. The Sheriff’s eyes are watery, but proud as he smiles at his son.

There have to be at least twenty or thirty chairs on his side of the room, but only two are occupied. Hopefully his spouse won’t think less of him for having so few people come to his wedding, but the thought quickly vanishes as he looks to the left side of the room. There sits only a handful of people, although all of them are intimidatingly beautiful like Lydia. The youngest, though she looks to be in her mid-twenties like Stiles, is a woman with straight dark brown hair and an unimpressed look on her face. Beside her are two very similar looking people, perhaps close relatives or siblings. One is another woman with black hair, but kind eyes, and an older man in his late 30’s, an amused grin on his face. In the row behind them is a group of three, all of them also appearing to be in their mid-twenties. The blonde woman of the group is grinning widely, her lips colored a bold red, as she whispers something to the other two, a handsome and well-muscled black man, and a slim man with wide eyes and curls.

Stiles can’t help but watch them curiously, wondering what relationship these people have to his future spouse.

Suddenly someone coughs loudly from the stage, drawing Stiles’ attention and— Oh. His brain stops functioning. _Holy. Shit._
A man stands on the stage, dressed perfectly in a black and white figure-hugging tuxedo that shows off his obviously fit body. His hair is black, much like the layer of stubble on his face that ends just below his cheekbones, emphasizing the sharp angles of his face. His bushy eyebrows are pulled down in annoyance, probably wondering why Stiles hasn’t moved yet.

He might possibly be the hottest, and also grumpiest looking, person that Stiles has ever met.

His legs finally kick into action and he hurries forward, tripping momentarily on the edge of a chair and drawing a few chuckles from the small crowd.

“Stiles,” he says as he reaches the altar, mentally cringing at the lack of smoothness.

“What?” The other man asks, confused. His voice is softer than Stiles’ expects. His eyebrows pull down even further, making Stiles’ mind wander momentarily as he wonders how far down they can go. They’re really quite expressive for eyebrows.

“My name. It’s Stiles,” Stiles repeats, licking his lips nervously.

The man’s eyes—the beautiful, multi-colored blue-green-yellow mix—dart across his face in confusion as if searching for a lie. Which is weird because why would he lie about his name?

“Derek,” he offers.

“Nice to meet you, Derek.” Stiles grins. “You ready to get married?”

Derek’s face goes pinched as if just noticing something, his nostrils flaring wide to catch a scent in a way that’s eerily familiar like— like Robert. And Scott. Shit.

“Shit,” Stiles blurts, his eyes widening in realization. “You’re a Were.” He backtracks quickly when Derek’s frown instantly turns into a scowl. “I mean, not that that’s an issue. I have no problem with shifters. My best friend, Scott, who’s not here right now because he’s also getting married, is a werewolf. Bitten, not born though.”

“You’re human?” Derek asks, obviously knowing the answer and clearly not happy about it.

“Is that a problem?” Stiles shoots back, though he also knows the answer. It’s clear as day as Derek stands rigid, his muscles tense as if keeping himself from bolting out of the room. Derek’s face contorts into a furious, though still gloriously attractive, scowl at being called out, but he smartly holds his tongue.

It’s faint, but Stiles can hear one the cameramen —Greenberg, if he remembers correctly— whispering something excitedly to the producer. Derek shifts his glare towards them at whatever they’re saying, his ears starting to turn red in either embarrassment or anger. Maybe both. Stiles is just glad to have that expression being directed at someone else. He stuffs his hands in his pockets, hoping to hide how much he’s shaking with anger and— something else. Nerves, maybe. Embarrassment. Resentment.

“Can we just get this over with?” Derek mumbles to the officiant. He looks completely annoyed to even be there and all hints of nicety drops off of Stiles’ face as his eyes narrow.

“Sure, why not. It’s only a wedding, right? Nothing important,” Stiles snipes, his own annoyance at being so easily dismissed getting the best of him.

Derek rolls his eyes upward as if asking for patience from someone above. “I didn’t mean it like that, just…”
“Just what? I’m annoying you already after two minutes of being together?” Stiles challenges, his eyebrows raised. “You sure you want to rush this along? You can back out now with your tail between your legs if being with a human bothers you that much.”

Derek’s expression grows darker. “Did you just…”

“Make a dog joke? Yeah, Fido. There’s plenty more where that came from and we’ve got seven weeks worth of time for me to come up with even more,” Stiles snaps.

There’s a loud burst of feminine laughter from the audience, causing both Stiles and Derek to jump in surprise, looking for the source of the sound. Stiles’ heart pounds in his chest and heat floods his cheeks. He hadn’t realized how worked up he was getting, his focus wrapped up completely in Derek.

The blonde woman on Derek’s side of the room is covering her mouth guiltily, obviously trying and failing to stifle her laughter. The older man in the row before her, Derek’s father or uncle perhaps, turns around and murmurs something that causes her to snort with laughter again.

“I’m so sorry,” she manages through her giggles, fanning her face with her hand as if to dry her amused tears, “I’m fine. Please, by all means, keep going.” The rest of Derek’s group look fairly entertained by the display, while Lydia and Sheriff look downright murderous.

The officiant clears his throat and begins to drone on about how this is an important and fateful day in their lives, how they are committing to an eternity together, yada yada. Stiles tunes it all out, standing and growing more sour with every moment, glaring at Derek while he continues to avoid even glancing at him.

He has to admit that in all the scenarios he imagined this past month, he hadn’t thought it could possibly start off this badly. But it has and, as he stares at the man in front of him, he can’t help but wonder if it will get even worse from here.

“Derek?” Derek’s head snaps up to face the officiant, a look of mild surprise on his face. He must’ve been tuning out the man as well. “Do you take M…Mi—”

“Stiles!” Stiles interrupts. “Just Stiles. My birth name like someone smashed a keyboard, so please don’t even try.”

“Do you take Stiles Stilinski,” the officiant continues warily, “as your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish until death do you part?”

Derek seems to flounder for a moment, as if seriously considering the words and the promise he’ll be making. Stiles’ patience wears more and more with every passing moment that he needs to think this through.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Derek. We’re not Catholic, you can divorce at the end,” the young woman with brown hair yells out.

Stiles tries not to show his embarrassment, though he can feel his face and neck growing warm. He tries to keep his face stoic, but somehow he must give away how he’s feeling, given the furious glare Lydia shoots at the brunette.

“I do,” Derek reluctantly grumbles. Oh, fuck you, Stiles thinks through a glower. This isn’t some prison sentence.
The officiant sighs, turning to Stiles. “And do you, Stiles Stilinski, take Derek Hale as your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish until death do you part?”

“I do,” Stiles says sourly.

“You may now kiss if you so choose.”

Derek looks distinctly uncomfortable at the idea. Stiles rolls his eyes and offers his hand, which Derek instantly shakes with a semi-grateful expression. Maybe things could get better though, maybe Derek is just uncomfortable because he doesn’t know Stiles at all. Maybe they can make this work or—

“Alright, now let’s get some drinks!” The brunette exclaims, barging out into the hallway towards the reception area. Stiles watches with wide eyes as the blonde howls with laughter and Lydia stomps through the doors, clearly pissed off.

—maybe not.

The reception venue is… it’s absolutely stunning.

It’s located in the large hotel auditorium, but completely transformed with lights and decorations. Small rectangle tables for groups of five or six are spread throughout the room, each one beautifully decorated in white patterned cloths even though only two tables will be used. Delicate plates and white roses in a vase decorate the tables, little lit lanterns circling the bottom of the vase, giving the tables an element of warmth. Thousands of tiny blue-white fairy lights line the ceiling and it feels like snow. Like the quiet beauty of winter captured in what once was an ordinary room. Even the dance floor in the middle is made of blue and white tiles.

It’s breathtaking and most of all, it’s silent, with none of the guests having been allowed in yet. Finstock said that he and Derek would have ten minutes to themselves to relax and talk before their families would arrive. Stiles stands stunned in the doorway for a moment, captivated by the peacefulness of it all, before he’s literally dragged back into reality. A tight grip on his shoulders pulls him over to one of the tables, forcing him to sit in one of the chairs as the black haired woman takes the seat next to him, a friendly smile on her face. Stiles’ blinks at her in confusion. That’s not Derek.

“I’m Laura,” she says. Stiles stares at her silently. “This is usually the part where you introduce yourself,” she smirks.

“You already know who I am, you were at the wedding,” Stiles points out. Laura lifts a thin and perfect eyebrow before letting her gaze run across Stiles’ body.

“You’re the cutie who just married my brother,” Laura says and Stiles’ shoulders lose some of their tension when he realizes there’s nothing but kindness and interest in her voice. “I was in your spot last year, you know. I was in season one.”

Stiles’ eyes widen as he realizes that he has seen her before. He never really watched the show, but Scott would sit in front of the TV every week religiously, loudly giving a running commentary
about what was happening that Stiles *sometimes* paid attention to. He thinks he can remember some of what he said about Laura, something about a beautiful wife… she was tough and they got into a fight at one point during the season, which ended with Laura in handcuffs, not because she was arrested, but because…

“You married the bounty hunter,” Stiles recalls. Laura grins at him.

“Braeden. Yeah. We’re still married too,” Laura says, vaguely adding, “even after the whole handcuff incident.” He hopes he can introduce her and Scott sometime, knowing his friend would probably die to have all the details about that incident. He was ranting about how crazy the scene was for weeks after, giving Stiles an earful about how worried he had been that the two women were going to divorce in the end.

“That’s great, but, no offense, where is Derek?” Stiles asks. Laura’s smile falters for a moment, an expression of something close to pity on her face. Stiles’ stomach sinks further.

“He’s not coming.”

“Right,” Stiles says numbly, disappointment settling within him. It’s not that he really wanted to spend more time with Derek, he was kind of an asshole, after all. But he was hoping they could at least talk alone, maybe try to start again on a better foot. “Why would he show up to his own reception, right?” He tries, but his joke falls flat to his own ears.

Laura’s foot taps gently against his. “You just have to give him a little time. He’s a little disappointed right now and—”

Stiles snorts. “Gee thanks. Not like I’ve struck gold here either.”

Laura’s lips purse in annoyance at the insult against her brother for a moment before she defensively adds, “He just wasn’t expecting a human. He’s got some issues to work out, don’t take it too personally.”

“And if Braeden refused to accept you because you were a werewolf, that wouldn’t seem speciesist to you? You wouldn’t take that personally?” At Laura’s condemning silence he adds, “That’s what I thought.” He rose from the chair, hand scraping through his hair as he glanced around the empty room. “I’d like to say it was nice talking to you Laura, but to be honest, this whole situation is kind of shitty. So I’m gonna go take a break for a bit.”

Laura’s head dips in defeat as he leaves the room.

The last thing he’s expecting when he enters the men’s bathroom is Greenberg standing with his expensive thousand-dollar-camera perched on his shoulder, red light on and pointing at Stiles.

“Seriously?” Stiles exclaims.

Greenberg shrugs. “Finstock wants you to tell the audience how you feel about your talk with Laura.”

“I feel fucking peachy,” Stiles snaps, slamming the door shut as he runs away. Again.

He runs into a few more crew members and successfully manages to avoid them after, eventually
finally finding an empty room. It’s a small conference room, a round table with chairs in the middle of the room and taking up most of the space. He hops into one of the chairs, lazily spinning in circles as he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

Still no text from Scott. He types a new message and quickly sends, **Husband is a douche. Hope your day is going better.** It feels weird typing it, suddenly realizing that it’s true. He’s married now and has a husband. A husband who’s a douche.

It’s a good sign that Scott hasn’t texted. He’s probably at his own reception party, spending time with his match, getting to know her and her family. Like Stiles was supposed to.

He doesn’t know how long he sits in the room, spinning in silence and contemplating the many ways everything has gone wrong. He still has the money to look forward to, thankfully, but he can’t help but feel disappointed that the experts weren’t able to find him a true match. In the silence of the conference room he can finally admit to himself that he’s been lonely for far too long. He had hoped, deep down, that this would be his chance at something, a real relationship, a possibility for a future with someone he loves. A future of lazy weekends, cuddles in bed, movies and salty kisses.

So much for all that.

He’s taken out of his pity party when the door slides open, revealing a pretty brunette with a distinctive beauty mark below her eye. She startles when she sees him and he freezes.

“I’m sorry, I’m looking for Derek Hale. Do you happen to know where he is?” She asks, her voice soft and gentle as she smiles at him. Stiles frowns, wondering why this woman was looking for his husband. He doesn’t remember seeing her at the wedding.

“Nope,” Stiles says instead of asking why she wants to know. “Last I heard was that he’s hiding.”

The woman’s smile grows amused at the news and she nods. “That sounds like him. He can be a little reserved, especially with all of the cameras and new people around. It can be a bit much for us werewolves, you know.”

“Huh.” Stiles’ eyebrows lift. So she’s a werewolf then. Must be one of Derek’s friends or family. “I wouldn’t know. I’m one-hundred percent human.” He taps his nose.

Her head tilts and her nostrils flare as if to confirm it, before she smiles again. “So you are. Are you part of the groom’s family?”

Stiles considers lying for a moment before he realizes it doesn’t really matter in the end whether or not she knows. She’d find out soon enough anyway. “The groom, actually. Name’s Stiles.”

“Cool. I’m Paige.” She nods towards the chair beside him. “Mind if I sit? I have a headache and it’s pretty quiet in here.” Stiles gestures for her to go ahead and sit. She does.

“I didn’t know werewolves could get headaches,” Stiles mentions.

Paige smiles softly, admitting, “I wasn’t born a Were. I got turned a few years ago. I have control, for the most part, but tuning out a lot of sounds can still be difficult for me.” Stiles nods with understanding, and Paige’s expression goes curious.

“So…you’re not attending the reception,” she observes, her tone inquisitive.

“Neither is Derek,” Stiles says pointedly.
“Touché.” Paige grins. “But you might like the others out there. Derek’s friends are pretty cool.”

Stiles looks at her, his own curiosity getting the better of him. “Is that what you are? One of Derek’s friends?”

“Derek’s best friend,” Paige says. “We’ve known each other since high school and have been close ever since. I missed the wedding, but… Well, I’m here now.” She quickly averts her gaze with what appears to be guilt, looking down at her nails with sudden interest.

“That’s good then. That you’re here now,” Stiles says. “If you can find him, maybe you could ask him to be a little less of a douchebag. That would be pretty cool.”

Paige actually laughs at that and instantly, her gaze is back on him. She’s obviously not offended like Laura had been when he’d insulted her brother. “Yeah, he can be a bit of a dick sometimes. But he’s a real softie underneath. You just have to give him time.”

*If they don’t like you right away, just give them the chance to know you too and I guarantee they will adore you.*

Lydia’s words float through his mind, reminding himself that he’s not always easily likable at the start either. The thought settles like a weight in his mind and he stands up, nodding towards the door.

“I think I’ll head back out there,” he says. “Good luck with your search for Derek.” Paige’s smile grows brighter.

“Thanks. It was nice to meet you, Stiles,” she says, sincerity in her voice. Stiles gives her a small smile and lets the door close behind him. Hopefully the rest of Derek’s friends are that friendly. He has a feeling though, after the scene at the wedding, that they won’t nearly be as calm.

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He was right to be worried.

The moment he enters the reception area, he’s pulled to the dance floor by the blonde from the wedding. Her lipstick still a fierce red as she grins toothily at him, her eyes bright with mischievousness. She has to be a werewolf with that level of strength and hotness.

“I’m Erica and you’re dancing with me,” the blonde demands, tugging him to the middle of the floor and placing his hands on her waist just as a slow song starts. Jesus. What is with these wolves and their manhandling?

He glances around the room for someone to help him, spotting his Dad talking to Lydia in a far corner, both of them distracted by their conversation. The only others left are from Derek’s group and they’re all sitting together at a nearby table, some of them talking to each other and the others watching Erica with amusement. The only one watching Stiles is the young brunette, her eyes glaring daggers at Stiles. What the hell is her problem?

“Cora’s a little protective of her brother,” Erica says casually, as if reading his mind. Stiles looks at Erica in surprise and she chuckles. “We all are pretty protective, to be honest. But she’s the most.”
“I would’ve suspected Laura,” Stiles replies and Erica smiles at him— her first genuine, non-threatening smile. Her hands tighten on his waist as they sway to the music.

“Nah, Laura’s pretty chill. It’s Cora and me you have to worry about.” Her intimidating smirk is back as she glances up at him. “So I’m going to lay down the rules real quick. If you do anything to hurt Derek, emotionally or physically, I will hunt you down by your funky little human stench and tear your balls off with my claws. Got it?” She bats her eyelashes at him and Stiles gulps, feeling the color drain from his face. He manages to pull himself out of her grasp, though he suspects that it’s only because she allows him to, and steps back.

“I don’t think you have to worry about me hurting him. He’s the big bad werewolf and I’m the tiny human, remember?” Stiles says, his voice going rough with sudden anger.

Erica rolls her eyes at him. “Humans can do just as much damage as a shifter.”

Stiles glowers. Honestly, fuck this family and the high horse they rode in on. “Yeah, whatever. You don’t have to worry about me hurting him, okay? You’ve got my word. Now leave me alone.” He moves to get away, making a noise of utter frustration when Erica grabs his wrist to stop him.

“What? Not done threatening me yet? Or let me guess, you have some more insults because telling me I have a ‘funky human stench’ wasn’t enough? Honestly, what the fuck is wrong with you all? I haven’t even done anything to you people!” He sounds slightly hysterical by the end, the stress of the day finally getting to him, and sees his dad looking over with concern.

Erica has the decency to look guilty and she instantly drops his wrist. “No, I’m done,” she says, quieter. “I’m sorry. We just… we’re worried and we don’t know how to handle this… situation. It’s new to us. And we’re a little extra protective of Derek. He’s our alpha.”

Stiles continues to glare at her, though he doesn’t move away. “And you think it isn’t new to me? This is my first blind date, first marriage…” he hesitates, deciding not to mention how it’s his first relationship in a long time. He doesn’t need them knowing he’s that pathetic. “I’m just as new to this as you guys, except I’m doing it all alone right now, because my best friend’s off getting blind married too and won’t answer his texts. Hell, my husband ran away before our reception, leaving me alone with his crazy pack, and these damn cameramen are following me everywhere and documenting for the world to see the fact that I’m apparently incredibly undesirable.” He’s ranting by the end, his hands flailing wildly as he talks, but Erica looks completely thrown, her eyes wide as she watches him.

“Do you want me to threaten him for you?” Erica asks, and…wait, what?

Stiles freezes, a look of pure confusion on his face. “What?”

Erica shrugs. “You sound like you could use the backup. Cora can protect Derek enough for the both of us, but you? Sounds like you need someone who will have your back more. I’ll tell Derek he better treat you better or else.”

“Or else his balls will meet your claws?” Stiles asks, his mouth pulling into a lopsided grin as he looks at this baffling woman. “Why do that for me though?”

“There’s something about you, Stilinski. I don’t know why, but I think you could be good for Derek. And you don’t take my shit, what can I say? I like that in a guy,” Erica says. She grabs his hand and begins to tug him towards the table— Derek’s table. Filled with his family and pack. Stiles’ heart thuds in his chest. He considers running away again, but Erica’s grip is like a vice, derailing any chance of escape.
The first thing Stiles notices is that Paige’s is pressed up against a guy— her boyfriend, maybe?— who he doesn’t remember seeing at the wedding. The rest of the group, Laura included, are all familiar faces he remembers from the crowd.

“Stiles, you’ve met Laura already. This is Paige, Derek’s best friend, and her husband, Adam,” Erica introduces. Adam is a plain type of handsome, but Paige looks at him with a kind of fondness that makes Stiles’ heart pang with longing. It’s that type of relationship he had hoped to have one day. Erica continues on, pointing to the older man and introducing him as Derek’s uncle, Peter. Cora is seated next to him and still glaring at Stiles, which is starting to become worryingly normal. The last two are also members of Derek’s pack, a blond curly-haired male named Isaac and a handsome and built black man named Boyd.

It’s a little overwhelming to be stared at so judgingly by a group of such beautiful people, but he tries not to let it intimidate him.

He fails.

“So, Stiles,” Cora begins with a smirk, leaning forward as if preparing to interrogate a criminal. “What do you do for work?”

Stiles blinks. That… wasn’t really the question he was expecting. He quietly sits down in an empty seat that Boyd pushes towards him and clears his throat. “Uh… I’m a paramedic.” To say he isn’t expecting the startled laughter from the others is an understatement.

“No fricken way,” Isaac says through a grin. “We’re firefighters. Derek is too.”

“Fuck. My husband’s a hose monkey?” Stiles blurts, the thought having pushed past his lips without consulting his brain first. Foot meet mouth. As per usual. “I mean, uh…”

“Jealous of the real men?” Peter says, though his tone is more playful than offended. “I know the Band-Aid Brigade doesn’t get to see a lot of action out there. But if you try hard enough, maybe you could be on a real scene one day.”

Stiles can’t help the laugh that is startled out of him. Hey, Derek’s family has a sense of humor, maybe this won’t be so bad after all. “Fuck you,” he says through the laugh, “I’ve seen some shit.”

“Yeah?” Laura challenges, her eyebrow raised in amusement.

“Got a story for us?” Paige encourages, her smile light and not at all challenging. Adam stays silent next to her, casually scrolling through something on his cellphone as if used to tuning out the rest of the family’s nonsense.

“Once I got a call for a snake bite. Real serious. The patient was experiencing cardiac arrest symptoms and we rushed there, not even sure we were going to make it in time or if they even knew what bit them,” Stiles recalls. It sounds way worse than it was, to be honest. But that’s how most of his calls end up.

“What type of snake causes cardiac arrest?” Isaac questions, his brows furrowed.


“Brown snakes are located in Australia,” he says.

“Why do you even know that?” Isaac asks.
“I did my research before we went there,” Boyd says calmly.

“When did you go to Australia?” Isaac questions, his voice going higher to match his intensifying look of confusion.

“Erica and I went on our honeymoon,” Boyd explains slowly, looking at Isaac like he’s an idiot for not knowing that.

“I thought you guys went to Hawaii for your honeymoon,” Isaac states.

“That was our second honeymoon,” Erica replies.

Stiles watches silently as the conversation completely derails, his lips twitching involuntarily with amusement. He can feel tension bleeding out of his shoulders, starting to relax for the first time that day. It’s starting to finally sink in that these people aren’t hoping for him to crash and burn, they’re just a concerned pack. A family. His family— for the next seven weeks, at least.

That revelation is more welcome than he’d anticipated.

“Who has a second honeymoon?” Isaac questions. “Wait. Why have a second honeymoon?”

“For the sex,” Erica states, the same time Boyd answers, “For peace and quiet.”

“Get back to the story,” Cora loudly demands.

“But seriously, who has two honeymoons?” Isaac hisses, quickly being shushed by Laura.

“Did they die?” Paige asks Stiles.

“Well, no. It turns out it was a typical garden snake. The ‘cardiac arrest’ they were having was just psychosomatic. That was an awkward conversation, let me tell you. The man demanded that we take him to the hospital anyway, even after we explained the cost and how it wasn’t necessary. So we drive him to the hospital and my partner, Scott, opens the rig doors. The guy fucking bolts. No explanation, nothing. Just bolts. Never did pay his bill, either,” Stiles scoffs.

“We were on a scene once,” Peter starts, leaning back in his chair slightly and crossing his arms over his chest as he tells his story. “and this guy’s shitty house is on fire. The whole place is small as hell and packed with garbage. Used needles, stuff thrown everywhere, I mean the place should have been condemned before any of this, it’s pretty clear it’s an amateur meth lab. We get inside and are tripping over all kinds of shit. Thank god for those heavy duty boots because I don’t know half of what we stepped in. Anyway, we finally manage to find the guy passed out on his bed. Derek lugs him over his shoulder and takes him outside. After some oxygen and gentle coaxing—”

“Face slapping,” Cora corrects.

“Gentle coaxing,” Peter insists, “the guy wakes up and fucking punches Derek in the face.”

Stiles’ eyebrows shoot into his hairline, unable to imagine how anyone would have the guts to punch someone that intimidating. Intimidatingly hot, but still. The point stands, the man’s got an intense resting face.

“It was glorious,” Cora sighs.

“Almost as good as the time when he had to rescue that cat and it peed on him,” Laura snorts.

“I never get to be on any of the good calls,” Isaac says forlornly.
“So how old are you?” Cora asks suddenly, completely bypassing Isaac’s comment and changing the subject.

“Twenty-four,” Stiles answers.

“Derek is twenty-nine,” Cora states. “That’s a big age gap.”

“It’s just five years,” Stiles says, unsure as to what Cora was getting at.

“Five years is a lot,” Cora insists. “Derek will be in his thirties soon and you’ll still be in your twenties. There’s a big difference between your twenties and thirties.”

“Not if you know how to count properly,” Stiles says, deadpan.

“Five years isn’t that much. My parents have a ten year gap between them and they’re still crazy over each other,” Erica says defensively.

“I’m just saying, not many people are ready to settle down when in their twenties,” Cora continues.

“You’re twenty-two,” Isaac points out.

“And I’m a shining example of what I’m talking about,” Cora snaps through bared teeth. Isaac bares his back, only to be pushed back in his seat by Erica. Stiles completely takes back his earlier contentedness. He would like to return these people and not have them as his new family for seven weeks, please.

“I wouldn’t have signed up for this experiment if I weren’t ready for the possibility of falling in love and settling down,” Stiles argues, crossing his arms defensively against his chest, as if that would put a stop to her tirade.

“So you admit this is just an experiment to you,” Cora snipes.

“Oh my god.” Stiles rolls his eyes. “The show is literally advertised as an experiment.”

“Cora, maybe you should take a walk,” Laura suggests, though it sounds more like a command. Cora glowers at her, her eyes flashing an annoyed yellow. Laura growls and flashes her eyes right back— alpha red. Cora’s lips curl in a snarl and her chair scrapes back loudly against the floor as she storms off.

“Sorry about her.” Laura smiles softly. “She’s…”

“Protective,” Stiles supplies, monotone. “So I’ve heard.”

“So where do you live?” Paige asks, clearly trying to offer an olive branch. “We’re all in Beacon Hills.”

“Downtown Beacon City,” Stiles answers, his mouth pulling down at the horrified expressions he’s receiving. “What? It’s not that bad.”

“Isn’t that place like…on the verge of being condemned?” Erica asks.

“They can’t condemn all of downtown,” Stiles snorts.

“I’ve been there,” Boyd speaks up, “and they probably should.”

“Okay, so it isn’t the safest, cleanest, nicest, place around, but it’s my home,” Stiles says
defensively. “And most importantly, it is affordable.”

Laura frowns in disapproval. “You shouldn’t have to risk your safety just to be able to afford an apartment.”

“Sure, I shouldn’t have to make those choices, but that’s what happens when you’re poor as dirt,” Stiles says callously, shrugging at their shocked faces.

“You don’t get paid much?” Peter inquires. Stiles shrugs again.

“Typical EMS salary. Add in some debts and you’ve got me— royally screwed and living in a dump.” Stiles can’t help but shrink back when Laura looks at him consideringly.

“Gambling?” She asks.

“Hospital,” is all Stiles gives.

“You should move in with Derek,” Laura says. As if it’s that simple. Yeah, sure, just move into my brother’s place after you’ve literally said two sentences to each other! Great idea. “You guys will have to get a place together anyway for the show. He lives in a nice area, it’s close enough to the EMS station. You’d like it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Stiles hedges.

“Speaking of the dork, I should really try to find him,” Laura sighs as she stands.

“I’m starting to think he hopped on a plane and left,” Stiles jokes, though it sounds slightly flat with disappointment even to his own ears.

Laura grins at him, her eyes flashing red for just a moment. “He’s still here and I’ll find him, don’t worry.” She exits quickly and Stiles takes that as his cue to rise as well.

He spots his dad in the corner of the room, watching Stiles warily. Lydia’s missing, and Stiles can’t help but wonder where she’s gone and what trouble she may be getting into. Stiles heads over to his father, smiling sheepishly. He knows his father must’ve been watching the shit show with horror, likely struggling to resist the urge to defend his son against every loud insult that was thrown his way.

“Son, what have you gotten yourself into,” his dad begins with a sigh, taking a step forward. Stiles reaches out to steady his father before he even has a chance to wobble, a move that’s quickly become second nature in the past few months. “It’s fine, Dad. It’s not that bad. Did you bring your cane?” The question rolls out before he can stop it and the Sheriff simply shoots him a sour look.

“Yes, I brought it. But I’m fine,” his dad insists. Stiles reaches out to steady his father before he even has a chance to wobble, a move that’s quickly become second nature in the past few months. “It’s fine, Dad. It’s not that bad. Did you bring your cane?” The question rolls out before he can stop it and the Sheriff simply shoots him a sour look.

“Yes, I brought it. But I’m fine,” his dad insists. Stiles raises his hands placatingly.

“Alright. Just remember, the doctor said…”

“I know what the doctor said, Stiles. But I’m fine. Today’s a good day, alright?” his dad says, his lips thin with annoyance— not at Stiles, but at his situation. Having been an officer for so many years, he must’ve gotten used to feeling almost invincible. Gotten used to ringing gunshots nearby, putting away criminals, running and chasing and heaving with exertion; gotten used to the rush of victories and the pride of so many accomplishments. Or, at least, that’s what Stiles used to think as a child, when his father was like a superhero. But the truth is, being a cop, he’s had more bad days than good— being unable to solve cases due to a lack of witnesses or evidence. Heaven knows, he
hasn’t always caught the bad guy when they’ve run, and he’s witnessed a fair amount of criminals he’s caught slip through the justice system— getting released to the streets only weeks or even just days later. He’s watched kids dealing with situations they shouldn’t have to know about, and has seen families struggling to stay together. Even through those tough times, those moments of anger and frustration and disappointment, it’s clear that he’s still not used to feeling this helpless. The weight of the situation seems to sit heavily on his once broad and strong shoulders, his shoulders that now sink lower than Stiles can ever remember.

It’s not easy for Stiles to see his father this beaten down-- left to rely heavily on doctors and a cane in a way that is almost surreal. His father, the superhero, being stuck on the sidelines for his own safety.

“Okay, Dad,” Stiles says, clearing his unexpectedly dry throat.

The Sheriff nods sharply, his eyes roaming over his son. “They treating you alright?”

“No, they’re fine. They’re firefighters, actually,” Stiles mentions. “I may have accidentally called them hose monkeys when they told me. It just slipped out.” Sheriff huffs a laugh.

“You know I taught you never to buy into those rivalries, kiddo,” his dad admonishes playfully, his lips curled up in amusement. “We’re all in this hellish career field together.”

“I know, I know,” Stiles grins, adding teasingly, “But you have to admit, these guys are kind of the epitome of the firefighter stereotype. All brawn, not so much anything else.” The Sheriff glances over at the group with a smirk and gives a short nod of assent.

“You’ve got a point there,” he admits. Stiles laughs as Erica shouts her disapproval from across the room, yelling something that suspiciously sounds like a challenge to a duel.

Stiles can’t help but think that maybe this could work out, after all.

Or, in the least, he could maybe see if Erica and Boyd would be interested in a polygamous relationship. He likes Boyd, Boyd is quiet. And funny. Maybe he could convince Finstock to trade Derek for Erica and Boyd.

They could honeymoon in New Zealand. There aren’t any killer snakes in New Zealand. It’d be great.

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He doesn’t mean to eavesdrop; really, he doesn’t. He just wanted to get some air, to walk around and maybe call Scott and see how his wedding day is going. He’s already got the text typed out, asking him if he’s busy— and that’s when he hears it.

He doesn’t recognize Derek’s voice at first, but he instantly recognizes Laura’s and that’s enough to have him stopping in his tracks and flattening himself against the nearest wall. He’s pretty sure that if he can hear them clearly, then they could hear his rabbit-fast heartbeat, if they tried. But they’re wrapped up in their argument, their voices harsh as they snap at each other in frustration.

He peers past the corner of the wall and sees Derek standing, handsome as ever and still dressed in his suit, though his jacket is missing. Laura is standing next to him, her hands on her hips, looking
one-hundred-percent like the fed-up older sister.

“Just give him a chance, come on, Derek,” Laura pleads. “It’s your wedding day and you’re out here moping instead of getting to know your husband. That’s not fair to you or him.”

“You don’t get it, Laur. He’s not…” Derek snaps his mouth shut, exhaling a heavy, impatient breath out of his nose.

“He’s not what? He’s not Paige?” Derek flinches like he’s been slapped and he lets out a low growl, even as Laura continues, “That’s the whole point of doing this! He’s not Paige and you need to move on. Stop pining over her, you’re wasting your time! You’ve lost your chance. Let it go. She’s married now and you can’t let her stop you from living your life.”

Derek’s face is still scrunched up in anger and shame, even as he glances away. “I know he isn’t Paige, but it’s more than that. He’s not what I want. He’s human, he’s too immature, he’s uncontrolled, smells like medication, and is completely graceless—”

“He’s kind and hardworking. He’s a paramedic and twenty-four; he’s likely seen enough not to be to be talked about like he’s a sixteen-year-old child,” Laura challenges. “You’d know that if you’d actually talk to him. Sure he’s not the most graceful creature out there and he might have ADHD, but he’s at least trying. That’s more than I can say about you!”

Stiles’ heart skips a beat and he can’t help but feel a surge of gratefulness for Laura. For her defending him, even though they’ve barely met. But her kindness isn’t enough to cover up the fact that Derek’s perception of him— accurate and brutal as it was— stung more than he’d like to admit.

“He makes dog jokes about us,” Derek seethes.

“You tried to rush through the wedding by saying ‘can we just get this over with’ in front of his family,” Laura snarls back.

Derek steps back and rubs a hand across his face, letting out a heavy sigh as his shoulders slump in defeat. He suddenly looks incredibly tired and resigned.

“He’s just… I told the matchmakers that I didn’t want a human,” Derek mumbles so lowly, Stiles almost misses it. “I… I wanted something that could be real. Something like what Paige has with Adam.”

He tunes out Laura’s reply, tearing his gaze away and shuffling down the hallway. For what feels like the hundredth time that day, he shoves his way through the reception doors.

Unlike before, the place is completely crowded— filled with strangers dancing, eating, celebrating. Finstock is off to the side, loudly instructing some extras to look more casual as they danced and to —

“For the sake of my sanity, stop looking at the camera!” Finstock bellows, his hands clutching desperately at his hair.

It’s completely ridiculous— all of these people and commotion— and Derek is much more likely not to step foot in this room now that all these strange scents and noises are here, but… a part of Stiles can’t help but feel awed. Everyone’s dressed to the nines and there are people dancing slowly to the music, people smiling and an air of genuine fun and celebration in the atmosphere. It almost feels like a real wedding.
Almost.

Stiles’ attention is instantly captured by Paige spinning on the dance floor, her pale yellow dress flowing smoothly around her as she follows the smooth movements of her husband. Her head is thrown back on a laugh, her arms winding around Adam’s shoulders as he smiles, his hands resting comfortably on the small of her back as they sway to the melody.

He can admit it. Paige is stunning like this—in a cute summer dress and a smile that lights up her face. He can see why Derek is in love with her. She’s been the kindest of Derek’s pack, the most soft and caring in a way that made you just want to protect her and keep her safe.

Stiles shifts on his feet as he watches them dance. They’re truly a picture perfect couple. Like Derek, he had hoped for something real—a relationship that would last, even after the money from the show was gone. But, he won’t get that—the most he will get is five-thousand dollars and seven weeks with a husband who resents him for being human. At least he gets the money, no matter how his relationship ends.

“I didn’t think you were going to come back,” Lydia says, pulling him out of his trance. “Want to dance?” Her eyelashes flutter as she offers her hand, the sterling silver bracelets hanging on her dainty wrist jingle with the movement.

“Can I get a raincheck? I’ll save a dance for you at my next wedding,” Stiles jokes, though he takes her hand anyway, because you don’t reject Lydia Martin. You just don’t.

They get to the dance floor just as the music changes to something more upbeat, but Lydia just steps closer, resting her head on his chest. The smell of her flowery shampoo tickles his nose and he leans even closer, letting his eyes fall shut as a sense of peace washes over him.

Once upon a time, he would have dreamt of a moment like this—though in this dream, he would have been marrying Lydia instead of a stranger. But now, after years of getting to know Lydia, actually knowing her as a person and not some perfect person he’d imagined, his love has solidified into something deeper. Something more real. He would do anything for her, they were family now.

“Do you think it will work out?” Lydia asks quietly, her cheek still pressed against his chest.

“I don’t know,” Stiles replies honestly.

“Do you want it to?” She asks.

“I don’t think he wants it to,” Stiles says. “I’m not what he wants.”

Lydia snorts and takes a step back as the song ends, her eyes looking unwaveringly into his.

“Maybe you’re not what he wants, but the specialists picked you for a reason. Maybe you’re what he needs,” Lydia states. Her gaze shifts to somewhere just behind him and Stiles turns to see what she’s looking at. Derek stands in front of the doors, a frown on his face as he takes in the chaos of the reception hall.

“Sounds like wishful thinking to me,” Stiles mumbles. "I'm going to miss you, you know."

Lydia just smirks at him, her lips pursing as she decides whether to respond truthfully or not. Stiles knows her well enough now, to be able to read her expressions. Lydia exhales through her nose and rolls her eyes and Stiles grins, knowing that she's gone with the honest option.
“Yeah, yeah. I'll miss you too, Stilinski. Just don't forget about me, alright?” Lydia says.

The music around them comes to an end and the DJ announces that everyone should take their seats. One of the Assistant Producers comes over, ushering Stiles to a small table at the far side of the reception room, seemingly to give them a modicum of privacy. Derek’s not far behind, baring his teeth threateningly at an AP that gets too close. He grabs the empty seat next to Stiles, but his eyes are shifting through the crowds, likely trying to spot his pack among the mass of people.

“You showed up,” Stiles says, though he can’t hide the bitter tone. Derek’s lips thin.

“Yeah,” he mumbles.

Stiles clears his throat, his heartbeat picking up pace as he already regrets what he’s about to do—but fuck it. Anything’s better than this thick tension between them.

“I may not be a firefighter, but I sure know how to handle a hose,” Stiles says, his voice raspy with nerves. Derek’s eyebrows—those giant, bushy eyebrows—inch upwards as he turns his head towards Stiles, a disbelieving expression on his face. Well, it’s not disgust at least.

“What,” Derek intones.

“I’m glad there are firefighters nearby, because you are smoking hot,” Stiles tries again, though he can’t help but cringe at his own pickup line. Derek simply stares at him, expression completely blank and, Jesus, why did he think that was a good idea? “Okay, admittedly those aren’t my best work, but I’ve only had a few hours to come up with them, so—”

“You’re a paramedic,” Derek states and Stiles’ eyebrows scrunch together, confused by the sudden observation.


Derek shrugs nonchalantly, his lips quirking up at the ends. “Nothing, that’s it. That’s the joke.”

Oh. Oh, that’s just rude. But Stiles can’t help but huff a laugh, leaning back in his chair and looking at Derek with a new sense of approval. His husband does have a sense of humor, after all; he can work with that.

“So how do you like being a water fairy?” Stiles asks, moving his arms off the table as the catering team places their meals in front of them. It doesn’t look too bad for wedding food, though it’s just a simply dish of chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans.

Derek scoffs, his eyes sparkling with something as he looks at Stiles. “It’s alright. How’s getting paid for sleeping?”

“The seats could be more comfortable, to be honest,” Stiles says through a mouthful of mashed potatoes. Derek’s expression shifts from mildly entertained to mildly disturbed as he watches, though there’s a hint of amusement pulling at the corner of his eyes.

The rest of the meal drags on slowly, the sounds of the crowd washing over them as they eat in companionable silence. They might be able to make this work, Stiles thinks, at least enough that they can survive the next seven weeks together. Maybe they’ll even be friends by the end.

The cameras linger around them, though they become easier to tune out as time goes on. By the time they finish their meal, they already know what’s coming. The DJ announces the first dance between the grooms— the sarcastic “now that they're both in the room together” hangs, unspoken.
Stiles tries to surreptitiously wipe his sweaty palms on his pants as they stand, but knows they probably still feel clammy when Derek’s large, rough hands grasp them.

The moment “Can You Feel The Love Tonight” starts blaring over the speakers, Stiles loses it. This is not happening, no. He is not dancing to a goddamn Disney song on his wedding day. He instantly knows who to blame though, when he glances over at Finstock standing off to the side looking downright gleeful.

“Oh my god, they can’t be serious,” he whines, his head slumps onto Derek’s shoulder. They couldn’t even be bothered to play the version without Timon and Pumbaa’s narration about the romantic atmosphere. Is this what Hell is like? He’s almost positive that this must be what Hell is like, because he’s also certain that he’s never felt this humiliated in his life. Which, to be honest, is really saying something, because embarrassing shit seems to happen to him a lot.

Finstock frantically starts motioning for them to play it up more and— really? They’re dancing, what more could they do to play it up? Finstock throws his hands up in frustration before grabbing Greenberg and miming a dramatic, sweeping kiss, which Stiles really could have gone a lifetime without seeing.

Stiles’ eyes dart across Derek’s sour face, lingering on his lips for just a moment too long. Nope. No. Hell no. Not going there. Pleasing Finstock is not worth getting his throat torn out over.

Derek remains silent, his body tense and rigid with discomfort, even as they go through the motions of the dance. It’s not even a nice dance routine, they’re literally just swaying on the dance floor and Stiles’ face has to be an unflattering shade of red by now. This feels just like the awkwardness of prom all over again.

He hated prom.

Still, as uncomfortable as he is with this, it’s nothing compared to Derek. It’s almost like this is an actual form of torture for him and Stiles can’t help but feel a little bit of pity for the guy. He was in his position once; lovestruck and completely gone over Lydia when she’d barely noticed him as human being, let alone a romantic option.

Stiles takes a calming breath, proud that his voice is soft, but strong as he says, “Just pretend I’m someone else.” Derek’s eyes instantly snap to his, guilty and surprised all in one. “I know I’m not…” he cuts himself off, trying again, “just relax and pretend I’m someone else. You’re making my muscles hurt just by looking at how tense you are.”

Derek nods shortly, his eyes slowly slipping closed. His hands dip lower, finally settling on Stiles’ waist. The change is almost immediate, the tension seeping out of him and Derek looks almost relaxed. Stiles shifts his arms to fit around Derek’s neck and lowers his head to rest lightly on his arms. He hopes it blocks his expression from the cameras, knowing that his expression must look disappointed.

His first wedding, the very first dance with his husband, and his spouse is unable to handle it without imagining that he’s dancing with someone else. Someone he actually cares for. Stiles’ stomach has settled somewhere by his feet, and he knows that this is all he’ll think about when he sees the videos and photos taken today. None of those mementos will mean anything, in the end.

Just like this marriage.
CHAPTER THREE (Episode Two: The Honeymoon)

Stiles grins at the flight attendant as he boards the plane, tugging his heavy carry-on behind him. He’s never actually flown before, never having been able to afford it. The plane is fairly large, but only one thin aisle down the middle— which he thankfully doesn’t have to walk down, since they are sitting in First Class.

He quickly stows his bag in the overhead and plops into the aisle seat, automatically hitting the button to recline. Derek follows behind, taking the aisle seat across from him. It takes a surprisingly long amount of time for everyone to board, but once they do, one of the flight attendants rushes over to First Class.

“Can I get you anything before we take off?” The flight attendant asks, her ruby red lips pulled open in a smile.

“No thanks,” Derek grunts, tugging a book out of his backpack under the seat.

Stiles grins cheekily at the woman, gesturing between him and Derek. “We just got married, we’re going to our honeymoon,” he says, because if he’s got to deal with Derek’s company, then he’s going to milk it for all it’s worth.

“Oh my gosh! Congratulations!” The flight attendant gasps. “We’ll have to make sure this flight is extra special for you two.” She heads back towards the front with a conspiratory wink. Stiles snorts the scowl Derek’s aimed at him.

“Did you really have to do that?” Derek mumbles.

“Are you really surprised I did?” Stiles challenges, eyebrows raised. Derek lets out a long suffering sigh, sifting through the book to find where he had left off.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We’d like to thank you for flying Alpha Airlines today on your way to Jackson Hole, Wyoming…” The flight attendant’s voice comes through over the speakers. “We’d like to extend a special welcome to our absolutely adorable newly wed couple on their honeymoon in seats 4B and C! Give them a round of applause, please!”

There’s a smattering of applause, but it’s enough to set Derek’s face aflame. Stiles cackles and claps loudly as Derek sinks in his seat, ducking his head towards his book to hide his embarrassment, though his bright red ears are enough of a giveaway.

“Thank you for your cooperation, everyone. Now if you’ll kindly allow us to perform for you our safety demo, we will be on our way!” The flight attendant ends the announcement, grabbing some of her demo equipment from the front. She starts to strut down the aisle, stopping for a brief moment in front of their seats.

“If you guys need anything— anything at all— please let me know,” she insists.

“Thank you so much… Cindy,” Stiles reads from her wings, shooting her an award-winning smile, “we really appreciate that. But I think we’re fine as it is. We’re content enough, just being close to
“Would you stop that,” Derek hisses when Cindy leaves. Stiles blinks at him innocently.

“Stop what?” Stiles asks.

“Bringing attention to us!” Derek snaps through a whisper. “We don’t even like each other, stop hamming this up.”

Stiles purses his lips, leaning back against the seat as he narrows his eyes towards Derek. “Why does it matter to you if I’m having fun with this? I’m just trying to make the best of this shitty situation, so why do you have a problem with that?”

“Because it’s embarrassing!” Derek huffs.

“It’s embarrassing because of the attention or the fact that you’re married to me?” Stiles asks lowly. Derek’s eyebrows furrow at the question.

“I didn’t say that,” Derek says, though noticeably avoiding the question.

Stiles lets the conversation drop as the flight attendants take their seats. The plane roars with power, the grass and planes outside the window starting to blur as they gain speed. The plane lifts, and Stiles can’t help but smile at the swooping sensation in his stomach. His eyes are glued to the window across from him, watching in awe as the ground below grows smaller and smaller, until they’re surrounded by large, white clouds.

It’s amazing.

The flight attendants working in the front— Cindy and Netta— quickly heat meals and pour drinks, constantly checking on their First Class passengers to make sure that they’re happy. Stiles sits contentedly in his seat, enjoying the attention and free food.

They’re only halfway through the two and a half hour flight from California and Stiles has been using every chance he gets to piss off Derek more and more, constantly referring to him loudly as “his adoring husband” or “the love of my life” and watching him squirm as the flight attendants coo at their cuteness. He makes up an outlandish story about how they met— Stiles having accidentally trespassed on his property and Derek having been the grumpy, but handsome man who couldn’t resist Stiles’ charms. The flight attendants are leaning against the seats, entranced by the story and giggling as Stiles’ gets more and more inventive— going so far as to verbally reenact their fake interaction.

“This is private property,” Stiles imitates, his voice low and eyebrows pulled together. The flight attendants are sent into a fit of giggles over the imitation, glancing over at Derek and nodding as if they could totally picture that happening.

That’s apparently the final straw. Derek tugs off his seat belt, snarling at Stiles to knock it off. He announces loudly to the flight attendants— and anyone listening within a twelve foot radius— that it’s a goddamn arranged marriage and then storming off towards the back galley.

Stiles lets out a fake laugh, unable to handle the looks of confusion and pity being sent his way. “It’s fine, we’re in a flying tube, it’s not like he can go very far, right?” But he turns, more subdued than he’s been the past hour, and decides to stare out the window. He leans on the armrest, his chin resting on his hand as he picks out shapes in the clouds that pass by. He’s really glad that the seat next to him is unoccupied, so he can slide over into the window seat and doesn’t have to deal with anyone’s questioning or concerned glances over his husband’s outburst.
He knows he shouldn’t have pushed so much, knows he shouldn’t have made such a scene when it was clearly making Derek uncomfortable, knows that doing it anyone kind of makes him a dick, but he just got wrapped up in the whole ‘honeymoon’ charade.

He’s lost in his thoughts for a few minutes, before he’s startled when someone’s shadow hovers beside him. He sits back, glancing up in surprise as Cindy offers him a small smile, placing a couple of snack bags on his tray table before walking away. It’s a small act of kindness, but it’s enough. Stiles runs his fingers over the bags, imagining what this trip would have been like if his stories had been true. If he had been traveling to somewhere he had never been before with the man (or woman) he loved by his side. If the flight attendants had given him snacks out of excitement and not pity.

He imagines that it would have been nice.

Great, even.

Maybe he’ll try again on his next honeymoon.

Why would anyone have a honeymoon in Jackson whatever, Wyoming? Why would anyone ever choose to even visit such a random place? Before Finstock had told them it was where they would be taking their honeymoon, Stiles hadn’t even heard of the place. Never knew it existed.

And now, as the taxi drives them through the small town, Stiles wishes he had. It’s… ‘stupidly entertaining’ and ‘cute’ are the only words that immediately come to mind. There are people grinning and lifting their hands in peace signs as they take selfies in front of arches made of antlers, there are cowboy-themed bars with giant electronic cowboys signs and actual saddles for bar stools (or so their taxi driver tells them), and cabin-like buildings everywhere he looks. Just past the large surrounding hills, grand Tetons are visible and the view is breathtaking. So maybe now he understands why someone would want to visit this place—or stay. Forever.

Definitely stay forever.

When they check into the fancy cottage-style hotel, the concierge informs them of a nearby fair going on and Stiles can’t help but feel a burst of excitement. He’s always loved fairs—the smell of funnel cake and burgers, the bright lights, the laughter and screams from the people who dare to go on the rides.

Stiles swiftly takes the key card from the concierge. “Hey, Derek, wanna go—” He turns, annoyance quickly shooting through him when he just barely catches sight of him turning a corner, already heading towards the elevators. “Are you serious?” Stiles grumbles, snatchi###ing his bags and hustling towards the elevators, impatiently waiting for the next one to arrive since his precious husband was in such a rush to get to the room.

The door to their suite slams open, revealing Derek casually lying on the bed, his back pressed against the headboard as he flips a page of the book in his hands. Him and that goddamn book.

Besides the eyesore that is Derek Hale’s presence, the hotel room is really nice. It’s decorated with a clear theme of natural colors—greens, blues, and browns—and it connects to another room with a high definition television and a soft, brown couch that feels like velvet when he sweeps his hands
over the fabric. He assumes that's going to be where he sleeps since Derek seems to have claimed the bed already.

“No, it’s okay, Sweetums, I don’t need any help with my bags. Thanks for offering,” Stiles snarks, tossing the bags haphazardly on the floor by the couch. Derek’s lips twitch, but he returns his gaze to the book.

“You pack it, you stack it. You bring it, you sling it,” Derek simply says. Stiles grinds his teeth.

“Did you hear about the fair?” Stiles tries, decidedly ignoring Derek’s snark.

“I did,” Derek replies shortly. Another page flip. Alright, clearly he’s still pissed about the drama on the plane. Stiles rolls his eyes and tries again anyway, because no way in hell is he going to let Derek’s pissy attitude ruin their vacation.

“Do you want to go with me or are you just going to sit and read? Finstock says we’re supposed to be ‘bonding’,” Stiles says, making air-quotes with his fingers.

Derek purses his lips, sending an impatient look Stiles’ way as if his talking was annoying. As if they’re not newlyweds who are supposed to be on vacation right now for the sole purpose of getting to know each other.

“Why do we have to do what you want to do for it to be considered ‘bonding’? Why not sit and read with me?” Derek offers. But they’re in a whole new town in a state Stiles has never been. Just the scenery outside is stunning on its own, but now he has a chance to enjoy it while going to a nearby fair. No way is he passing that up to sit indoors and read.

What were the specialists thinking when they decided they would be a good match? Stiles is genuinely puzzled over it; they couldn’t be more different. And Stiles is also pretty sure they couldn’t dislike each other more than they do right now—the both of them staring each other down in the room.

“Fine. I’ll go by myself.” Stiles grabs his key card and some money, stuffing it quickly in his pockets and letting the door fall shut behind him.

The fair is just as amazing as he thought it would be. He gets a hot dog and some cotton candy, scarfing down the food as he walks around the fairgrounds, letting the lights and sounds wash over him. He visits the petting zoo, watching children chase chickens as the goats climb their fences and bleat for attention. He walks past the goat enclosures quickly, disliking the way they stare at him with beady, emotionless eyes.

The cows are much cuter and calmer, letting him pet their heads and rub their necks with the kind of patience that makes him think of giant, hoofed golden retrievers. The baby cows are the cutest though, prancing around the enclosure and stopping every now and then to glance curiously at the humans passing by before they start prancing around again. It’s almost enough to convince him that he should buy a cow. Almost.

He watches dirt car racing next. The stands are filled with people, shouting and cheering as the cars race through the small, muddy track surrounded by fences. Multiple cars spin out, often times hitting and taking out another car as well, before speeding back down the track as if it never happened, flinging mud and dirt in every direction. Stiles goes to stand next to the EMS truck
parked off to the side of the stands. Of course he gravitates toward what’s familiar, even when he’s hundreds of miles from home.

He sees one of the EMS squad—a pretty young woman, likely in her twenties, with light brown hair—sitting at the edge of the bleachers, a small box of popcorn in hand.

“Mind if I sit here?” He asks, slightly nervous and hoping he doesn’t come across as awkward and creepy.

The woman barely spares him a glance, just grunts. Stiles assumes that’s a yes and he plops down onto the cold metal.

“Do you guys see any good action at these events?” He asks, genuinely curious and he can admit to himself that he’s a little lonely and looking for some kind of conversation. It’s hard to enjoy events—let alone a vacation—when you’re by yourself.

The woman snorts and continues to ignore him. He raises his hands placatingly. “Not hitting on you,” he gestures to his left hand, “just married actually. If you want me to leave you alone though, I will. I just work EMS, in California though, and was curious. I’ve never worked a car race before.”

The woman actually looks at him this time, her eyes taking him in with consideration. There’s a moment of silence before she seems to deem him worthy enough to talk to. “Sometimes we see some action. Usually they’re pretty good at avoiding the bad crashes, although last year we had a car catch fire. That was pretty cool. The driver got some pretty severe burns and his foot was pretty badly mangled when we pulled him from the car.”

“That’s awesome,” Stiles breathes, eyes wide. The woman grins back in approval, extending a hand for him to shake. He does.

“Malia.”

“Stiles.”

"Popcorn?” She tilts the box towards him and he grins, taking a handful that he immediately shoves in his mouth. He's never been able to resist free food; it's one of his weaknesses.

"Thanks."

“So, Stiles. What brings you all the way here from California?”

“My honeymoon,” Stiles states, accidentally spitting some crumbs as he speaks.

Malia’s eyes narrow and she tilts her head slightly in confusion. “You don’t smell married. Was that just a really good lie to get me to talk to you or what?” She smirks, tapping her nose. So she’s a shifter too, then.

Stiles laughs, shaking his head. “Nah, we’re newly weds. It’s a uh… an arranged marriage. We just met yesterday actually.” He scratches his cheek, suddenly nervous at saying it aloud.

Malia lets out an interested sound. “I didn’t know people still did that kind of stuff. Kind of weird, isn’t it?” Stiles simply shrugs.

Malia’s eyes flicker down and linger on his mouth, her intense gaze causing Stiles to fidget with discomfort.
"Um..."

"You have popcorn crumbs all over your face," Malia says with an amused huff. "How did you even manage that?"

The tension instantly drains out of Stiles' body and he swipes at his cheek with the back of his hand.

"You missed all of it." Malia rolls her eyes and reaches out, wiping her hand over his mouth. "There."

"Thanks," Stiles says.

“So where’s your spouse?” she asks, lowering the popcorn box to the ground. She grabs a piece of gum from her pocket and pops it in her mouth.

“He’s a grumpy werewolf in the hotel room.” Stiles sighs. Malia nods knowingly.

“He’s a Were? That makes sense then,” she says.

“What makes sense?” Stiles asks, feeling like he’s missing something.

“It just makes sense that he isn’t here with you,” Malia states.

“I’m not following.”

Malia gestures around them. “Places like this aren’t the best for Weres. Lots of people, noises, smells—all in a small area. It can be overwhelming. It took me a while to get used to. A couple weeks or so.”

“So it doesn’t bother you anymore?” Stiles asks, wondering. Malia shrugs.

“It’s worth the occasional headache. But I like the lights and the people and the chaos. You can learn to love things you don’t like at first. It just takes time,” Malia says with a grin.

“Right,” Stiles says dumbly, his fingers picking at the threads on his shorts, absentmindedly wondering if that’s just what he and Derek need—time. Maybe he will grow to love Derek or Derek will grow to love him. He shakes his head minutely, willing the thought away. There’s no way that’s happening. Derek has made it clear how much he hates Stiles, just for being human. No use holding onto a ridiculous idea like love.

“So where are you from?” Malia questions.

They end up talking through most of the race, sharing their awful work stories, and it’s—it’s great, actually. Something warm settles in his stomach as they sit shoulder to shoulder, watching fireworks go off in the distance while the race continues on the ground. The loud booming echoes in his ears as Malia grins widely beside him, the lights reflecting in her awed eyes.

Maybe it’s not how he imagined his honeymoon night, but... at least he’s not spending it alone.

o0o0o0o
“You smell,” is the first thing Derek says when Stiles arrives three hours later.

“Nice to see you, too, Derek,” Stiles huffs, kicking off his shoes in the corner by the door. Derek watches him with a blank face.

“Take a shower,” Derek grunts, frowning in displeasure as Stiles starts to dig through his bag by the bed.

Stiles bends his neck, sniffing his armpit for any sign of an offensive odor. Nothing. He glares up at Derek’s constipated expression. “It’s just dirt, get over it.”

Derek’s jaw ticks. “If you’re going to seek out other Weres then you should at least have the decency to shower before coming back.”

Stiles stands ramrod straight, sputtering in offense. He did not just insinuate— “You think I cheated on you.” Because, of course that’s the first thing Derek’s mind jumps to. Obviously it’s crazy to think that maybe, unlike Derek, he’d rather be out and making friends than enjoying his fucking honeymoon alone.

Derek looks at him, and it truly hits Stiles then that he’s married to a stranger. Married to someone who doesn’t know a thing about him, doesn’t care for him, doesn’t know that Stiles wouldn’t cheat on anyone. Ever.

His husband truly is a complete and total stranger.

“You’re not denying it,” Derek says, his eyebrows pulling together.

Stiles grabs a new bundle of clothes from his bag and holds it defensively against his chest. Maybe he’s about to fuck things up worse, but he can’t stop being angry. Angry that Derek won’t give him a chance, that Derek made a scene on the plane, that Derek would even insinuate Stiles would stoop as low as cheating on someone on their honeymoon.

Hell, maybe he’s just angry. So, against his better judgement, he coldly says, “Can you blame me? It’s not like you wanted to spend time with me.”

Derek’s book slams shut in his hands, but he shows no reaction other than that. The vindictive part of Stiles wishes, just for a moment, that he had supernatural smell like werewolves do. Wishes that he could smell if Derek was hurt by Stiles’ comment, or if he really doesn’t care at all.

He’s about to slam the bathroom door closed when—

**KNOCK KNOCK**

“Room service!” A muffled, albeit vaguely stern sounding voice calls out from the other side of the door.

“What, did you order yourself a fancy steak or something?” Stiles snorts.

Derek ignores him, walking barefoot over to the door and opening it—

—immediately slamming it shut and dead bolting the door.

The knocking turns into loud banging, Finstock’s pissed off voice coming in clearer through the wood.

“Open the door right now, Hale!” Finstock shouts, banging against the door relentlessly.
“What did you do?” Stiles laughs, admittedly gleeful over Derek’s misfortune. Derek shoots him a withering glare. He sighs and removes the locks, reluctantly opening the door.

“What,” Derek barks, opening the door just enough to reveal Finstock’s pissed off face. The producer shoves his way through the door, only really getting through because Derek allows him to, albeit with an annoyed expression.

“You both signed contracts,” Finstock begins, pacing at the far corner. “You signed contracts. Do you happen to, I don’t know, remember those at all?”

“Vaguely,” Derek deadpans, crossing his arms across his chest, waiting for him to get to the point.

Finstock shoots him a scathing look. “Those contracts that you signed were you both agreeing to follow producer instructions. Do you remember the instructions I gave you before all this started?”

“Not to call you Cupcake,” Stiles recalls.

Finstock pinches his nose in frustration. “Your instructions were to give us drama, to give us a content that would captivate the audience. Whether or not you like each other, you are, for all intents and purposes, actors for these seven weeks,” Finstock snaps. “Do you know what you’ve given me so far? Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Contrary to what you may believe, moping and avoiding each other isn’t interesting to viewers.”

“So what do you want from us?” Derek practically growls, having grown impatient the more Finstock talked.

“Go on a date. A real one. Actually act interested in each other, because what you are doing now won’t make people excited about you as a couple. It won’t keep them entertained or guessing if you’re going to divorce or stay together, which may I remind you, is the whole point of this show.”

“Got it,” Stiles bites.

“We’ll do it. Can you go now?” Derek snipes.

“No. The date starts in twenty minutes. Get dressed— look nice. We’ll meet you in the lobby and take you to a restaurant to film the scene,” Finstock instructs.

“It’s nine o’clock! It’s too late for dinner,” Stiles groans, dropping his head back against the wall outside the bathroom.

“My grandma used to stay up til midnight every day knitting little outfits for orphans. Are you telling me you can’t stay up as late as my grandma just to have a free meal? Jesus, what kind of twenty-something are you to complain about it being nine?”

“I have a job,” Stiles hisses, defensive. “Excuse me for going to bed on a schedule so I can get decent sleep.”

“Yeah? Well, this is your second job for the next few weeks, Kid. And your boss is telling you to get the fuck to work. Get dressed and fake eat for all I care, just give me something to work with!”

Finstock stomps through the doorway, shouting through the door after it closes to add, “And it better be believable or I swear to my dead grandmother I’ll start docking your end pay!”

Derek and Stiles eye each other warily, both of them hesitant to break the heavy silence left behind in Finstock’s wake. Derek moves first, digging dressy clothes out of his suitcase. At least they both
had had the hindsight to pack nice clothes.

“Hurry up and shower, I’m not going on a date with you smelling like another shifter,” Derek huffs.

Stiles’ anger flares. “Oh, don’t pretend you actually give a shit.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” Derek says pointedly, throwing a shirt onto the bed with more force than is necessary.

Stiles snorts. “Obviously you do,” he mocks under his breath, slamming the bathroom door shut behind him. He starts the shower, steps in and closes his eyes, imagining he were anywhere else. A fancy resort thousands of miles away, alone and at peace.

It helps. But only until the shower’s turned off.

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To say the date is awkward is a bit of an understatement. They both stare at the expensive Italian menu, tension thick between them as they refuse to look at each other. In their first act of camaraderie, they both order the most expensive dish and glasses of wine, because it’s on Finstock’s dollar, so why the hell not? He’s not hungry this late, but the dish can easily be reheated for tomorrow at least.

Stiles is almost positive his fury is radiating off him in waves, seeing as he’s still pissed over the implication that he had cheated within the first twenty-four hours of them being married. It only takes a handful of snide comments from Derek before Stiles is snapping that if he had actually listened to his heartbeat, then he could have easily realized that Stiles hadn’t actually cheated. He just hadn’t wanted to be alone, but he keeps that to himself. Even so, Derek just huffs and continues to be silent, only speaking to reiterate that he doesn’t care, obviously not believing Stiles or not wanting to admit he’s wrong.

It’s infuriating. It especially doesn’t help that the cameras are pointed at them the whole time, silent and judging and eating up the drama.

“You’re on a goddamn date,” Finstock seethes from beside one of the cameras, “remember what I said about your pay.”

Derek rolls his neck on an exhale, as if preparing himself for a big move. Instead, he settles his gaze on Stiles and clenches his teeth. “You look nice,” he offers, pained.

Stiles can’t help it. Derek’s pained expression and the amount of effort it took just to say that compliment just… it’s… it’s funny. Stiles chokes on his water as he laughs, sputtering and spitting some of his drink through his laughter. Derek looks bewildered, but without a single trace of anger on his face for the first time that day.

Greenberg kicks Stiles’ chair, reminding him of the cameras. Stiles wipes his mouth and puts down his glass, his lips slanted on a smile as he says, “Thanks. Uh, you too. I guess.”

Another silence settles between them, quiet enough that Stiles can practically hear Finstock ripping out his hair in frustration.
He blames the pressure of the cameras as the reason why his brain decides a good conversation starter would be to ask, “So why do you hate humans?”

Ah, there we go, the anger is back on Derek’s face. “I don’t hate humans,” he says stiltedly.

“Uh huh, so it’s just me being human you hate then?” Stiles scoffs.

Derek glowers. “I don’t hate humans, I just don’t date them.”

Stiles leans back in his chair, fingers tapping against the pristine tablecloth. “You know that sounds pretty speciesist, right? Have you dated humans before?”

“Yes,” Derek forces out through clenched teeth. This conversation is going so well, truly. It’s astounding. “Both ended badly.”

“Oh come on, how badly could it have gone that you’ve sworn off all humans?” Stiles asks. “What, they refused to rub your belly when you shifted? Didn’t cook your steak right?”

Derek bares his teeth at the dog jokes, leaning forward over the table with a look of fury. Stiles stays where he’s seated upright, refusing to move back or let Derek intimidate him. “One burned down my house with my family inside it and the other almost died before she was given the bite.”

Stiles leans back, absorbing the new information. He clears his throat, recognizing the possibility for something here. A chance to acknowledge Derek’s honesty, a chance for Stiles to try to be serious and sympathetic. He finally settles on saying, “I can promise I won’t burn your house down, if that helps at all.” That was probably not as reassuring as he was hoping for.

“You can’t promise not to get sick,” Derek says lowly. “Humans are weak. Vulnerable. You can’t do anything about that.” He pushes his silverware away and stands abruptly, clearly having finally decided to leave. “I don’t know why I’m doing this. I don’t need the money.”

Stiles bursts forward out of his chair, grabbing onto Derek’s arm before he can escape. His heart pounds in his chest, panicked at the idea of Derek quitting. Derek may not need the money, but Stiles does. Desperately. “Please. You can’t quit.” He’s not above resorting to begging if it comes down to it.

“Why not?” Derek asks, his brows furrowed in genuine confusion. “You hate me. I hate you. What’s the point of faking this for seven weeks when we can’t even stand a single dinner with each other?”

Stiles swallows thickly, his mind racing with ways to keep Derek from leaving. He needs the money, he needs it. This can’t all be for nothing.

“I know you love Paige,” Stiles confesses. Derek stares at him, an expression of shock on his face. “I heard you talking and I know you love her and that you aren’t going to fall for me, and that’s okay. But maybe…Maybe you can make her jealous.”

Derek snorts at that, obviously not impressed with Stiles’ idea. He moves to walk away again, but Stiles only tightens his grip.

“Hear me out, man. It might not work and she could be completely happy in her marriage, but maybe, just maybe, she will get jealous when she sees her best friend happily married to someone else. It might make her realize her feelings for you. You dated her once, right?”

“How do you know that?” Derek asks, softly, turning to face Stiles instead of leaving, which Stiles
definitely counts as a win.

“I’m assuming she’s the human you once dated—the one who almost died before the bite. When I first met Paige, she told me she was born human and was only turned a few years ago,” Stiles says, remembering meeting Paige in a quiet room because the noise of the wedding crowd had been too much for her.

Derek nods slowly. “We took a break after, so she could focus on adjusting to everything, but then she…found Adam,” he admits, a sad frown pulling at his lips. He looks away and Stiles lets out a nervous breath. Derek is listening, he’s not leaving. He could still have a chance at the money.

“She might still have some residual feelings then,” Stiles says, “Feelings that she doesn’t know about herself. Have you dated anyone seriously since her?” When Derek shakes his head, Stiles continues, “Then she hasn’t been confronted with the possibility of losing you. If she sees you in a happy relationship, it could bring old feelings back for her.”

Derek snorts. “I highly doubt that. She loves Adam.”

“But there’s still a chance! It’s worth a try, right? And if it doesn’t work, then it will be easier for you to move on, because at least you tried everything,” Stiles says in a rush.

Derek looks at him, as if he’s actually considering it. “What’s in it for you?”

Stiles laughs, though it sounds unhappy even to his own ears. “Unlike you, I could actually use this money. And I can’t face everyone in my town if they watch this and find out I’m so undesirable that I can’t even stay married for more than two days.” He awkwardly releases Derek, suddenly realizing that he’s been gripping Derek’s arm this whole time. “Sorry. Are you staying then?”

After an unsure moment, Derek nods, taking his seat. Stiles offers a small smile and sits as well.

“So,” Stiles clears his throat. “What’s your favorite movie?”

Derek huffs a laugh. “Seriously?”

“We’re supposed to be giving them a real date, right?” Stiles gestures to the nearby cameras. “Spill, dude. Favorite movie.”

Derek leans back in his chair, taking a few moments to think before he settles on, “Clue.”

“You like Clue?” Stiles asks skeptically. “That wouldn’t make sense since you are basically required to have a sense of humor to like that movie.”

Derek quirks an eyebrow. “You think I don’t have a sense of humor?”

“You seem like you have something shoved up your ass, quite frankly. And not in a good way,” Stiles says. Finstock pointedly clears his throat and Stiles grimaces, trying for flirtatious when he bats his eyelashes and adds, “I mean, I could make it in a good way…?”

“You’re really wooing me here,” Derek deadpans. “Truly, I’m sure the audience will absolutely believe that.”

“I don’t see you trying,” Stiles grumbles, jolting with surprise when Derek reaches out, placing his large hand on Stiles’.

“I think we might have started off on the wrong foot,” Derek says softly. Almost…gently. Wait,
“The experts must have seen something in you, to make them think that you were perfect for me. I’d like to give this a try, Stiles, if you’ll let me.” Derek smiles, his bunny teeth showing and making him appear even more genuine and harmless. It does confusing things to Stiles, the smile and the way he says Stiles’ name, making his heart flutter as his ears burn. He knows that Derek is spewing bullshit for the cameras, but he can’t help but feel affected. Objectively, Derek is beautiful. To have someone as handsome as Derek with his attention focused solely on Stiles—it’s… nice.

“Yeah,” Stiles croaks through a suddenly dry throat. “We could do that.”

Derek’s eyes seem to sparkle with happiness and Jesus—this man should be given some kind of award for acting. It’s ridiculous, but it kind of reminds him of Tyra Banks and how she always tells her models that they have to master the art of Smeyesing. Derek could definitely run for America’s Next Top Model and win with the way he is able to smile with his eyes at the drop of a hat.

The mental image of Derek on the show forces a strangled noise from Stiles.

“Let’s start over then,” Derek offers. “My name is Derek Hale and I’m a firefighter.”

“Nice to meet you, Derek. I’m Stiles Stilinski, paramedic and professional asshole.”

They both grin at each other and it’s the fakest Stiles has felt in a long time. But Finstock deems it good enough and orders the cameras to be put away for the night, so he can’t really force himself to care too much.

Stiles stands on a small hill outside the hotel, his cellphone ringing against his ear as he waits for an answer. It takes four rings, but then…

“Stiles!” Scott’s voice sends a rush of warmth through Stiles and he can’t help but grin widely at the sound. “Dude, oh my gosh, I have so much to tell you.”

“Yeah? How was the wedding? Good, I guess?” Stiles questions, the smile still pulling at his lips.

Scott’s voice takes on a dreamy quality. “Her name is Allison and she’s amazing. You have to meet her some time. She’s beautiful and kind and— Stiles, her dimples. She has dimples!”

Stiles laughs, lowering himself down until he’s lying down, the cold grass itching at the nape of his neck. The sky is dark, but illuminated by thousands upon thousands of stars in a way that isn’t easy to find on the west coast. It’s absolutely stunning and Stiles lies with his back on the ground, eyes captivated by the stars as he listens to Scott gush in his ear about how great the wedding was, how they were flown to Cancun, and are having a blast. It’s one of those moments that, as it happens, you get this feeling in your gut that this is a moment. One of those times that becomes a memory you look back on for the rest of your life, remembering the exact emotions you felt at that time because it feels like true happiness.

It’s one of those moments, and it doesn’t matter that not everything in the world is perfect.

Because right now, in this moment, it feels like it is.
EDIT 9/18: added a few sentences to Stiles & Malia scene
CHAPTER FOUR (Episode Three: The Return to Normal)

Usually, Derek loves working the morning shift at the firehouse. He enjoys the peace and quiet at the start of the day, habitually checking all of the equipment in relative silence as the birds chirp and the sun beams down outside.

It isn’t quiet or peaceful this morning.

“Are you being nice to him?” Erica prods. She’s across the room, checking their protective equipment while Derek inspects their trucks. It’s about the hundredth question she’s asked Derek about his relationship with Stiles.

As Derek if isn’t already churning with annoyance; annoyance with himself that he had listened to Laura when she convinced him that giving the show would be a good idea for him—a way for him to put himself out there and make a “worthwhile connection” like she had. But, of course it wouldn’t work out that way for him. No, he’s never been that lucky. He doesn’t know why he’s surprised the matchmakers ignored his one and only request and paired him with a human, but he is. More so, he’s pissed that the next six weeks of his life will revolve around that asshole who doesn’t care much about anything but himself and his own amusement. What a waste of time.

But…he’s agreed to do it. To suffer through the next six weeks for the possibility that maybe Paige still has feelings for him.

Even though he knows his chances are pathetically slim, he just can’t give up the idea. If there’s any chance that this ridiculous plan will work, then Paige is worth the annoyance.

Derek simply grunts, dipping lower to check the equipment towards the bottom of the truck. He pointedly ignores the wolf-whistle from behind and moves to the other side to continue checking equipment.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no, Erica, I’m not being nice to him’. Do you want to change your answer or do I need to claw your balls off?” Erica asks loudly from the other side of the room, as if they weren’t werewolves with super hearing.

“What is with you and threatening to claw people’s balls off?” Derek asks, genuinely disturbed. “It’s not like he’s been a ray of sunshine either.”

“Okay, fine. I won’t claw either of you. But have you at least kissed him yet?” Erica asks, sauntering over and leaning up against the truck, watching Derek finish the last of his checks. Derek grabs a rag and does a cursory wipe of his hands, walking through the door that leads from the garage to the kitchen where Boyd is taking inventory of food.

Boyd doesn’t react to their presence, just continues scribbling notes on a small notepad as he searches through the fridge. Derek moves to the sink, scrubbing his hands with soap as Erica corners him.

“Well?” Erica hums.

“No, I haven’t kissed him,” Derek grumbles, annoyed he even has to answer all of Erica’s ridiculous questions. It’s eight in the morning, for god’s sake.
Her bottom lip juts out in a pout. “Why not? He has really kissable lips. I saw them. They’re all plump and pink and inviting…and the way he bites them…” she sighs wistfully.

Derek snorts, glancing over at Boyd with an inquiring brow. “You alright with her saying that?”

Boyd shrugs, a small, amused smile on his face. “She’s right.”

“See?” Erica grins.

Derek rolls his eyes as he dries his hands, once again wondering what possessed him to choose such strange betas.

“We’re not really…We haven’t spent much time together since the honeymoon. He’s been at his apartment packing for the move,” Derek says, leaning back against the sink. It’s been blessedly peaceful not having to spend all day in close quarters with Stiles. The idea that that peace just might be coming to an end soon sends a feeling of dread down his spine.

“Moving where? Are you two buying a place together?” Erica asks, her eyes glinting with curiosity.

“He’s temporarily moving into my place. Just until the show is over,” Derek says, adding the latter part with a more stern tone of voice when Erica starts to look too excited. “Finstock says it will help ‘facilitate our marriage’.”

“Don’t forget to tell him to pack his sex toys,” Erica says. “That’s the best way to ‘facilitate your marriage’ if you ask me.”

“I didn’t,” Derek grumbles.

Boyd snorts, pushing his notepad into Derek’s chest. “Your turn to get the groceries, boss.”

Derek frowns as he grabs the notepad, eyeing the long list. He usually hates doing grocery runs since it means going out in public and dealing with people’s interest and questions about his job. But today, he relishes the idea of getting away from the fire house —and Erica’s inane questions—for a little while.

The grocery store isn’t very busy at this time of day, thankfully. It only takes him an hour to find all of the items on the list and check out. He hauls the last of the paper bags into the truck, only to stop short when he hears a grunt of pain nearby. He glances to the side and sees an older man with sand-colored hair, struggling to carry two full bags of groceries. It’s clear, as he walks, that there is something wrong with his right leg—as if he can’t bear to put too much weight on it. Derek steps closer and the man looks vaguely familiar, but Derek can’t put his finger on where he knows him from. Perhaps he’s someone he met at a charity event of some sort; the station tends to host a lot of those events.

“Would you like some help?” Derek asks, voice gruff with awkwardness. He never knows how to approach people struggling who don’t actively ask for help—he has, on multiple occasions, been told to fuck off and mind his own business. Usually by old ladies. He never knows what to expect when offering unsolicited assistance.

But the man looks at him gratefully, a relieved smile pulling on his lips. “Yeah, I could…I could use some help. It’s not a very good day for my leg, unfortunately.” The man rubs at his hamstring as Derek effortlessly takes the bags into his arms. The man leads him towards a police cruiser,
gesturing to the open trunk.

“Sports injury?” Derek asks, his lips quirking as he drops the bags into the car. The man huffs a laugh, obviously not the type to be playing sports on the weekends.

“Work injury,” is all the man says. Derek winces in sympathy.

“Sorry,” he offers.

The man shrugs and holds out his hand to shake. “John. I don’t think we’ve formally met.” Derek grabs his hand and offers his own name, confusion setting in when John knowingly asks, “Everything going well with the move?” Off Derek’s puzzled look, John laughs and adds, “You married my son. Stiles.”

Derek reels back with surprise, feeling a flush begin to form on his cheeks that he hadn’t even recognized his husband’s father. Jesus Christ, he’s a mess. “Uh. Yeah. He’s packing his stuff to move in today. It’s going fine.” He grimaces at his own awkwardness. “Sorry for…” He gestures towards John as if to finish with ‘not recognizing you’.

John merely looks at him with mild amusement. “You boys getting along? I know the last I saw, things were pretty rocky between you two.”

Derek flounders, unsure about what to say. He’s pretty sure being honest and saying, “I can’t stand your son,” is out of the question. He ends up just staying silent, but something in his expression must give him away because John’s face dims a bit and he nods solemnly.

“I know he can be a bit much to handle, what with his ADHD and a mouth with a penchant for trouble,” John admits with a tight smile. “But he’s a good man. He’s loyal to a fault and selfless when it comes to people he cares about. I hope you’ll be willing to give him a chance.”

Derek nods stiffly, not sure what to say to that. He’s pretty sure he’ll never be someone Stiles cares about; they’re too different. John claps a hand on his shoulder and thanks him again for his help.

“For the record, I think you’re alright yourself, Hale. I hope he gives you a chance too,” John says, before he gets in the cruiser. The short meeting leaves him feeling a little off-center as he drives to the fire house.

That feeling only gets worse when he pulls the fire truck into the station. There are two cameramen standing in the garage, a beaming Erica shifting excitedly on her feet next to them.

“The groceries,” Derek grunts when Erica grabs his arm and tugs him out of the truck.

“Boyd will get them,” Erica states. “You have to see this.” Her grip doesn’t let up until they’re entering the lobby where some of his pack— Peter, Jackson, Cora, and Laura— are suspiciously hanging around a table.

Derek’s nostrils flare at a familiar scent and he angles his head slightly, suddenly spotting Stiles looking sheepish behind Laura.

“What’s going on?” Derek asks, suspicious.

“Stiles was kind enough to bring us some food,” Laura says with a grin.

“Homemade food,” Erica adds.
Derek’s eyes wander back to Stiles, whose ears are starting to turn pink. “It’s not a big deal, I just
got tired of packing. Plus, we’re married now, and my mom used to bring meals by to the station
when my dad worked, so…” He cuts himself off with a shrug. His heart stutters a bit on a lie, or
half truth, but none of them call him out on it. Derek can’t help but wonder if this was Greenberg’s
idea, to help them better pretend to be trying to make this marriage work, or perhaps it’s Stiles’
way of apologizing for cheating on their wedding night. As if food is something that could make
up for that. Not that Derek cares anyway. He doesn’t.

He’s starting to realize that he’ll probably never know anything for certain when it comes to Stiles;
will never know how genuine the man is being, or if he’s just looking out for his best interest.
Nothing is clear with him.

Jackson leans towards the table, lifting up the lid on the dish. A delicious scent wafts out— strong
scents of pork, tomato sauce, onions, cabbage, and more. Derek greedily inhales the smell. It sends
a tingling warmth down his spine and his fangs itch and prick at his tightly closed lips. Erica
glances over at him with a smirk, knowing the complicated feeling Derek is experiencing. He
dislikes Stiles— his overly energetic, obnoxious, and hard-headed husband. But whether he knows
it or not, he is providing for Derek— providing for his pack and that sends Derek’s instincts
reeling. His hands itch to reach out and touch, to wipe his scent along Stiles’ neck in response— a
way of accepting his gesture. Instead, he clutches his hands into fists at his sides, knowing that
neither of them would be comfortable with such an intimate gesture. They can barely stand each
other, after all.

“What the hell is it?” Jackson asks, voice tinged with a hint of disgust.

Stiles’ lips purse at the rude question, but answers, “It’s gołąbki. A Polish dish. It’s—”

“You couldn’t make something normal?” Jackson asks, his nose scrunching in disapproval. “Why
not cheeseburgers or something?”

Stiles’ eyes narrow at Jackson and his scent sours with anger at the comment, the smell of his
emotions momentarily stronger than the food itself. The off-putting scent sends Derek’s fangs
receding quickly back into his gums.

“Why couldn’t you just say ‘thank you’ like a decent human being?” Stiles snaps back.

Jackson swears loudly when Erica elbows him sharply in the ribs. She shoots Derek a questioning
glance, as if to ask why he hasn’t said anything yet. But what is he supposed to say, when he
doesn’t even know the meaning behind the gesture? Does Stiles know what he’s doing by
providing for Derek’s pack? Does he know that, with this dish, he’s declaring his intentions to
court Derek? Or is this something he was instructed to do by Finstock or Greenberg to look good
for the cameras?

Peter simply looks gleeful, eyes bouncing between Derek, Jackson, and Stiles.

Laura, looking anxious to save the moment, says, “It smells great, seriously. It was really nice of
you to bring that for us. Right, Der?” Her eyes turn to Derek, nonverbally begging him to chime in.
Derek’s eyes catch movement in his peripheral, suddenly reminding him that there are cameras
watching their every move. He can only imagine how awkward and stilted this exchange must look
from the outside. He grimaces, knowing they are utterly failing at looking like a real couple.

“Yeah,” Derek grunts, “thanks. It was… nice. Of you.”

Stiles stares at him, clearly unimpressed. “Right,” he says, voice flat as he pushes his hands into
his pants pockets. “Well, I guess I’ll see you at the apartment.” He starts walking towards the door to the garage, and Derek opens his mouth to say something—anything to help the situation. But nothing comes out and the door shuts firmly between them.

Once Stiles is gone, Jackson grabs a fork from the table and lifts the lid, ready to eat. Cora’s eyes flash an angry gold and she slaps his hand, obviously done with watching from the sidelines. The fork clatters onto the floor, while Jackson swivels to yell at her, but he’s no match for Cora’s fury.

“Get lost you utter douchenozzle. What the fuck is wrong with you? You don’t get to eat if you can’t be nice to the cook,” Cora snarls.

Jackson’s eyebrows pull together and he barks out, “Why do you care? You don’t like him either.”

“I still have manners!” Cora seethes.

Jackson bares his teeth, but leaves, grumbling about take-out being better anyway. Laura crosses her arms, aiming a disappointed look Derek’s way.

“Are you even trying to make this work?” She asks, disapproval clear in her tone. “You have to put in at least a little effort, Baby Bro. You know that.”

“I am trying,” Derek defends, although it doesn’t sound very convincing even to himself.

“Bullshit,” Cora says through a cough. Derek shoots her a look.

“He probably spent hours gathering ingredients and making this for you—for us. Your pack. And you could barely utter a thank you. What would mom say?” Laura chides.

“Don’t bring Mom into this,” Derek groans, a pang of loss running through him at the mention of her. “He’s just doing it for the cameras. It’s a reality show, remember? He was probably instructed to do it to keep up appearances. Even you admitted that most of your drama on the show was faked,” he says to Laura.

“That didn’t look fake to me,” Peter adds, looking inappropriately amused at the drama unfolding before him.

“Just try harder, okay? He’s at least trying to make this situation better,” Laura says.

“Ah, yes. Buy him flowers or something. Humans love that kind of stuff,” Peter says, digging into the food dish and taking a large bite. He groans happily and gestures to the food with his fork. “If you want to quit the show, let me know. I’ll gladly fill in for you.”

Derek rolls his eyes. Stiles is an adult. He will be fine; he doesn’t need flowers or Derek’s reassurances every time someone acts like a dick.

The day had been a relatively uneventful one. Thankfully, they only got called out twice and both of the calls were for minor accidents and nothing extreme. But, of course, the people involved were upset and needed a mixture of calming down and consoling—neither of which Derek was very adept at.

He steps up to his apartment door, Greenberg and company trailing behind him as usual. He wants nothing more but to climb into bed and sleep, but his muscles instantly tense as he reaches for the doorknob. There are heavy footsteps on the other side of the door, Stiles’ scent coming through the
cracks, and Derek wants to slam his head against the wall. Of course the kid felt the need to let himself in while Derek was away. Derek mentally heaves a sigh, knowing he probably won’t even get a good night’s sleep now that Stiles has officially moved in.

“Who gave him a key?” Derek grumbles, though he narrows his eyes knowingly at Greenberg, who smells like nervousness.

“You knew it was going to happen anyway. Which reminds me,” Greenberg starts. He pulls off his backpack and pulls out a bouquet of roses, shoving them into Derek’s hands, red petals falling from the rough movement. “Here.”

Derek blinks down at the flowers. “What?”

“Peter mentioned bringing flowers.” Greenberg shrugs. “Finstock thought it was a good idea. You were a bit of an asshole about the food thing, so we figured it would be good for the audience to see that you’re trying.”

“I’m the asshole?” Derek asks incredulously, thinking back to their honeymoon and all that Stiles’ had done— making up embarrassing stories to loudly tell anyone in hearing distance, leaving Derek behind just because he didn’t want to go to the fair, and cheating on Derek when they had only just gotten married.

“He made your pack a meal,” Greenberg states pointedly.

“You wanted us to pretend. He’s pretending,” Derek replies. Greenberg rolls his eyes.

“I don’t get paid enough for this shit. The audience doesn’t know that you’re pretending, dumbass. Just act remorseful unless you want millions of people, to watch this and hate you. If you want that, then fine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Greenberg rants.

The apartment door swings open.

“Why are you just standing out here talking?” Stiles asks. His eyes suddenly drop to the roses, eyebrows rising. “With…um…flowers?”

Greenberg’s eyes widen at Derek, urging him forward. Derek lifts the flowers stiffly, offering them to Stiles in a way that hopefully appears more natural and less awkward. Stiles’ lips thin, turning white as he presses them closed, and he grabs the flowers with a nod.

“Thanks for the meal. Sorry about Jackson. He’s an ass,” Derek offers lowly. He’s not sorry for anything else, but that much is the truth. It’s not uncommon that he has to apologize for something Jackson’s said or done. He often regrets ever having bit the kid.

Derek steps forward to enter the apartment, aborting the move when he thinks of something better. Greenberg wants him to seem remorseful, to seem more genuine. Fine. He can do that.

He slowly leans towards a wide-eyed Stiles, his lips brushing against the man’s smooth cheek by a small cluster of moles. It’s a simple gesture on TV, but for Stiles and him, it’s pushing the boundaries, possibly crossing the line since they hadn’t discussed any form of PDA. He realizes it may have been too much, when he notices that Stiles is shaking. He pulls back quickly, starting to wonder how much he can fuck up in one day. “Are you—”

Stiles sounds like a deflating balloon, air rushing out of him on a wheeze as he finally starts to laugh. His whiskey brown eyes crinkle at the corners, a large grin on his face as he clutches the roses to his chest.
“I can’t… Oh my god, dude. You look so pained,” Stiles hunches over, dropping the flowers to clutch at his stomach as he laughs harder. “Who made you do that? How much did they offer to pay you? Jesus christ, the expression on your face.” Stiles wipes at his eyes, still letting out breathless chuckles, when he notices Greenberg standing in the background. “Please tell me you’re going to air that.”

“I was hoping to, but your hysterical laughter might have ruined the moment,” Greenberg deadpans.

“Nah, it’ll be fine,” Stiles says, voice still light with amusement. He reaches down to grab the flowers and move out of the doorway, walking into the kitchen to find a vase and water. Derek stands by the door, feeling strangely off kilter as he watches Stiles.

In that one moment, Stiles had smelled like genuine happiness— like warm sugary treats and cinnamon. Derek’s nostrils flare, trying to catch what is left of the delicious scent and it leaves him feeling confused. With Stiles’ face lit up with laughter, his eyes shining as they looked at Derek without a trace of dislike, Derek’s heart had skipped a beat. He can’t deny that he had liked it, liked being looked at like he was something to be treasured. A primal part of him preens at the idea that he had done that, had made Stiles look and smell so happy, so content with life, even if just for a moment.

He feels conflicted. He doesn’t even like Stiles, can barely stand him for longer than twenty minutes. But the smell of his happiness, his soft and open expression when he had looked at Derek…It made something in his stomach flutter— the way it does when Paige smiles at him, her chocolate brown eyes soft and sweet.

He doesn’t know what to do with that.
The Bad Day

CHAPTER FIVE (Episode Four: The Bad Day)

Stiles knows it isn’t going to be a good day the moment he shows up to work and Scott isn’t there.

He knows it’s going to be a bad day when Scott texts him that he is taking some time off to get to know Allison and to work on finding an apartment together with her. Which is news to Stiles. Up until this point, he had thought that their plan was for Stiles to continue to pay rent for his and Scott’s apartment while staying at Derek’s—for free—for the remainder of the show. Meanwhile, Allison was supposed to move in with Scott. That way, Stiles would still have a place to live after the seven weeks. After all, it was a fairly decent sized apartment and they could still have room for Stiles. On the couch, or something.

I’m so sorry, bro. She doesn’t feel safe living there. We’re looking for a place closer to the suburbs, Scott’s text reads.

Apparently Stiles had been a fool.

It’s fine, Stiles replies, even though it’s not. I totally understand. Even though he doesn’t, because Scott obviously sees a decent future with his match, if he’s willing to purchase a lease of six months or more with her, but Stiles only sees a five week deadline with Derek.

His day only gets worse when he realizes Danny’s been assigned as his temporary partner.

“Aw, hell,” Stiles groans when he hops into the ambulance and sees Danny in the driver’s seat. As if it wasn’t already bad enough that his first call of the day was a lift assist.

“Good to see you too, Stiles.” Danny grins. Ah, there they are. The dimples Stiles had once been obsessed with when they were together. He hates them now. “How’s it going?”

Stiles merely grunts, shutting the passenger door beside him and strapping himself in. “Just drive, Danny.”

Danny’s grin drops to a frown as he pulls out of the hospital parking lot. “I guess you’re still mad…?” He asks softly, hesitantly.

“…That we dated for six months and then you ditched me for your ex boyfriend? Nope. Not mad. Not even a little,” Stiles says, pausing before adding, “I just know now that you’re actually a giant ass.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Danny says, and it sounds sincere. But Stiles doesn’t care, just turns his head and rests it against the window, watching the blur of cars as they speed by. Their siren blares in the background, though he’s so used to it by now that he barely notices it these days. “I just…I had never truly gotten over him. And—”

“—and so, when he was suddenly single and calling you, you decided to drop me like I had just been a consolation prize or worse, just something to keep you entertained while you waited for
him. So, whether or not you intended to hurt me, that is what happened,” Stiles says, his body thrumming with residual anger that had never truly left.

“I know,” Danny admits. “I just thought…It’s been a few months. I thought you might not be upset anymore.”

Stiles exhales heavily through his nose. “It’s fine. I don’t forgive you, but that doesn’t mean this has to be awkward, alright? We can just agree to not talk about it and today will go smoothly.”

“What if I want to talk about it?” Danny asks, glancing between Stiles and the traffic ahead. “What if I wanted to say that I’m sorry?”

“You’re sorry,” Stiles repeats flatly, disbelieving.

Danny nods. “I thought Ethan was the one when I left you. I was so wrapped up in this idea that we were meant to be that I didn’t think about what I already had. What we had was good, Stiles. I shouldn’t have let you go like that.”

Suddenly realizing what was happening, Stiles let out a bemused laugh. “Oh my god, he dumped you, didn’t he?”

Danny’s hands grip the wheel tighter, knuckles going white. “It was amicable and mutual. I regretted breaking up with you the moment I did it.”

“But that regret didn’t stop you from having a four month relationship with him,” Stiles says, cocking a brow. Danny smartly remains silent. “Yeah, didn’t think so. I’m married now anyway, didn’t you hear?” He flashes his wedding ring, resisting the urge to childishly flip him off with the gesture.

“I heard it’s not going well,” Danny says.

“Yeah, well, it seems to be my luck, dating guys who still love their exes,” Stiles says, with just a hint of bitterness. Only a little.

“If it doesn’t work out…” Danny hedges, fingers tapping on the steering wheel as they park in front of a familiar building.

“You’d be my very last choice,” Stiles finishes, hopping out of the ambulance and grabbing some of the emergency equipment from the back. Usually, they won’t need it on a simple lift assist, but it is always better to be prepared for the worst.

“Ouch, that was uncalled for,” Danny says, though his tone belies his amusement.

They enter the nursing home, strutting through the hallways until they reach the recreation room. They receive so many calls from this place, they could probably walk through hallways and rooms while blindfolded.

“Hey, Martha,” Danny greets the nurse sitting behind the reception desk. Stiles grabs a handful of hard candies from the candy bowl on the counter, stuffing them in his pants pocket.

Martha, tall with short, curly red hair, stands and nods for them to follow her. An elderly lady is lying on the floor at a far corner of the room, her body hidden at first by the large chairs in front of her. Stiles grins, instantly recognizing the woman— she is one of their frequent fliers, well-known at the station for needing assistance at least every other week.
“Mrs. Erickson!” Stiles calls out, the little old woman shakily lifts her head, a large smiling forming on her wrinkled face as she looks up at him.

“Stuart!” Stiles huffs a laugh, knowing very well that she knows his name. She just prefers to call him by what she thinks is a “normal name”.

“You kids these days and your weird names,” Mrs. Erickson would rant, going on about foreigners and their strange names and inability to assimilate to America by taking on a “respectable name”. Not to mention the time that Stiles had brought up his real name; it was a mixture of horrifying and amusing, hearing the woman rant about how the Polish “could be considered respectable workers” if they just named their children ‘Joe Smith’ or ‘Jane’ like “normal Americans”.

Mrs. Erickson is the epitome of a kind-hearted old lady unfortunately stuck in an era of racism and prejudice. Stiles adores her company anyway.

“What’s going on today, Mrs. Erickson?” Stiles asks, stopping and standing by her side. “I hear you might need a hand.”

“Oh, I just had a little spill. Richard left his darn shoes on the floor again and I tripped,” Mrs. Erickson explains. “It’s nothing.”

“She can barely move and has been complaining that her hip hurts,” Martha adds, shooting Mrs. Erickson a quelling look when she tries to interrupt.

“Just a tiny bit of pain,” Mrs. Erickson corrects, though her face goes oddly pale when she shifts slightly.

“Is that tiny amount of pain in your hip area?” Danny questions. Mrs. Erickson nods sadly, as if knowing the diagnosis already.

“You know we have to bring you to the hospital for X-Rays now, right?” Stiles says as they pull out a flat mat and help her sit on top of it.

“I know,” Mrs. Erickson groans unhappily, though her eyes light up as she watches Stiles work. They press a button on their control, watching as the mat begins to inflate, lifting her up into the air as they stand at each side of her, a hand on her shoulders to steady her. “Is that a wedding ring I see?”

Danny bites his lip to hide his laughter as he grabs a nearby wheelchair. They help her stand, keeping her from moving too much as they bring in the chair and gently lower her into it.

“It is,” Stiles admits. Mrs. Erickson looks positively gleeful.

“So you finally found a nice girl to settle down with and you didn’t tell me?” Mrs. Erickson asks in mock offense. Stiles grabs the handles on the back of her chair, wheeling her towards the exit.

“What’s she like? Tell me about her!”

“It’s a pretty recent development, actually. And it’s a ‘he’,,” Stiles says, smirking to himself as he waits for Mrs. Erickson’s reaction.

“Oh,” Mrs. Erickson says, “I’ve heard about the homosexual lifestyle choice. It’s fine with me as long as you keep it to yourselves. You’re a good boy and deserve to be happy. Is he nice?”

“He can be,” Stiles says. It’s true, he knows Derek can be nice. He remembers Derek giving him flowers to apologize just last week. Sure, it probably wasn’t his idea, but he at least did it. That’s
something.

‘Homosexual lifestyle choice?’ Danny mouths as they load her into the rig, her back turned to them. Stiles shrugs, quietly laughing and shaking his head.

“It’s hard to dislike them when they’re nice and have candy,” Stiles murmurs out of the side of his mouth. Danny snorts, holding his hand out. Stiles grabs a piece of candy from his pocket, obligingly dropping it into his open palm.

The moment they drop off Mrs. Erickson at the hospital, dispatch informs them of another call. Another lift assist.

“Is this what it’s like being paired with you? Getting all the shit calls?” Danny asks, pulling out of the parking lot for the second time.

Stiles slams his hand on the door. “I knew it! I knew Scott and I got the worst calls!”

Despite it being for the same thing technically, their second call is much different from the first. They pull into a relatively well-to-do suburban neighborhood with large homes. Each of them have something unique about them, whether it be their shape, color, or style.

They pull to a stop in front of a beautiful, light-blue painted home. A tan woman stands at the door, wearing sweats with her thick black hair pulled up into a bun. She nods at them wordlessly and lets them in, gesturing to the living room on the right.

Danny’s the first to enter the room, but he stops abruptly and Stiles crashes into his back, the stretcher he was pulling smacks into the wall at the sudden stop.

“What?” Stiles whispers, shifting to look over Danny’s shoulder to see what was the hold up.

“We’re going to need reinforcements,” Danny mumbles back, voice low as he stares ahead.

A tan man with wavy, shoulder-length black hair sits on a mattress, his back against the wall as he watches TV. He isn’t just large in size, but is excessively huge. His legs are as wide as, if not wider than, logs and the fat around his stomach forms large waves. He has to be five hundred pounds at least.

Jesus christ. He could feel phantom pains in his back just at the thought of lifting this guy.

A young boy, about four or five, sits a few feet away, playing with little toy cars and occasionally glancing up at the television screen.

“Manuel, the paramedics are here,” the woman—Manuel’s wife?— says from behind them, startling them forward and into the living room.

Manuel looks up at them with the friendliest smile, kind brown eyes finally shifting away from the TV.

“They only sent two of you? Hoo boy, you’re going to need a lot more than that to lift me,” Manuel laughs.

“I’ll call for help,” Stiles says, pulling out his portable radio with a mischievous grin. “Dispatch, this is ambulance 2411 requesting fire backup on a lift assist.” Danny cocks an eyebrow at him.

“Copy that, 2411. Backup is on its way,” the radio crackles.
“You really want to see your boy-toy that bad?” Danny asks.

Stiles smirks. “I really just want to see Jackson have to lift this guy.” Danny chuckles, nodding in agreement. Why should they, the humans, have to do all the work when the fire brigade seems to have all the supernatural strength?

“Backup is on its way, Manuel. Should only be about ten minutes,” Danny says. “Are we just here to give you a lift or are you needing emergency assistance?”

“Nah, I feel fine,” Manuel says, “Just need a ride to the hospital for a checkup and weigh-in.”

“Alright, sounds good. Hopefully it won’t be a long wait,” Danny says.

“No worries. You guys wanna sit and watch? Disney Channel marathon is on,” Manuel replies. Stiles whoops and drops in front of the TV, using his emergency kit as a pillow to lean his head against. This might be their only real break for the day, and there is no way he’s going to pass it up. Danny follows close behind, grabbing a toy truck and offering to play with the boy.

“Popcorn? Sofía, my wife, just made it,” Manuel offers, passing a bowl over. Stiles and Danny instantly grab a handful, eyes glued to the screen as Zenon gets to watch Protozoa perform. Manuel shimmies his shoulders to the undeniably catchy song, and it might be the funniest sight Stiles has seen all week.

“Zoom zoom zoom,” Danny sings, making an explosion sound as the boy’s toy truck crashes into his own.

If there’s one thing that they’ve learned in the years of working this job, it’s that you take the peaceful moments while you can. Enjoy the simple moments, the times you get to breathe and relax, because they don’t come often in this field.

Of course, these moments don’t always look good to outsiders.

“Seriously?”

Danny and Stiles’ heads snap up at the voice. Jackson, Boyd, and Derek stand in the doorway, eyebrows raised as they take in the scene. A camera clicks and Boyd smirks down at his phone, fingers flying across the screen as he likely forwards the photo to the rest of the fire department.

“We’re committed to patient care,” Stiles says defensively around a mouthful of popcorn. “Guys, this is Manuel. Manuel, these are our very own bucketheads.”

“You wear buckets?” The little boy asks, eyes wide with interest.

Jackson rolls his eyes and tugs the stretcher behind him.

“Can you stand?” Jackson asks grumpily, completely ignoring the kid.

Stiles stands up as Derek closes in, an unimpressed look on his face. He leans forward until his scruff scratches against Stiles’ cheek and Stiles’ heart starts to pick up at Derek’s closeness, his eyes fluttering shut as he inhales. Fuck, the man smells good. It isn’t fair that he can be such an asshole, and yet still be so attractive.

“Really? You specifically request us for a lift assist?” Derek whispers, voice low and rough. His warm breath at Stiles’ ear causing him to shiver. “Expect payback.”
“Yeah, yep. Gotcha. Revenge is in the future, message received,” Stiles says, slightly breathless. They have been getting more used to each other’s presence the past week. They still bicker and argue non-stop, but there is less anger there now, as if they’ve both finally accepted that this is their fate for the next few weeks. But this—this slightly sexual, but still antagonizing interaction—this is a new development. Completely new and so surprising, Stiles has no idea how to handle it, his brain short circuiting with the tension.

Derek pulls back with a smirk, his nostrils flaring, and he *has* to catch Stiles’ arousal. There’s no way he could possibly miss it; Stiles is sure his eyes must be blown wide as he stares at Derek, it’s so obvious he might as well be wearing a neon sign stating he thinks Derek is hot. Derek’s green-blue eyes flicker down towards Stiles’ lips for a fraction of a moment before he’s forced to move away, Jackson’s loud complaining for help in the background.

“*O mój Boże,*” Stiles mumbles to himself, blinking as his brain clicks back into gear. He and Danny move off to the side, watching in amusement as the three werewolves help Manuel stand and lie down on the stretcher before wheeling him off as if he doesn’t weigh much more than a normal patient to them.

Fucking werewolves.

“Bye, Daddy!” The little boy calls out, holding his toy truck to his chest. Sofía waves at Manuel from the kitchen, a soft smile on her face.

“See you soon, Gabriel!” Manuel yells back.

“We’ll be right behind you guys, thank you for taking him for us. We wouldn’t have been able to get him into the car by ourselves,” Sofía says to Danny and Stiles.

“It’s no problem,” Danny says. “It was our pleasure, actually.” And it’s true. This has been the best call Stiles has been on in a while.

“I’m getting weight loss surgery,” Manuel confesses in the back of the rig. Stiles sits next to him on the bench, perking up with interest.

“Oh?” He encourages.

“They told me I have to get under six hundred pounds in order to have the surgery; that’s why I’m going to the hospital. I’m being weighed again,” Manuel says.

“Do you think you’re under six hundred?” Stiles asks.

Manuel looks up at him and the look of pride on his face has Stiles smiling. “I’ve been really trying and yeah, I think…I think I finally am ready.”

“That’s really great,” Stiles offers. Manuel’s eyes water as he nods.

“I really want to be a better father to Gabriel. I haven’t been able to do much, like this. But I want to be there for him, I want to be able to take him the places he wants to go, to be able to watch him play sports or whatever events he may end up doing when he’s older. I want to be there to see him graduate high school. I don’t want to feel stuck anymore,” Manuel says, wiping at his eyes. Stiles reaches for his hand to offer some support, surprised when he feels how clammy the man’s palm is.
“You feeling alright, Manuel?” Stiles questions, his eyes immediately searching for any signs of distress. But Manuel shakes his head with a watery smile.

“I feel better than I have in a long time,” Manuel says. “I’m…” Stiles begins to grow worried as Manuel goes pale, all of the color draining from his face. He leans forward, murmuring for Manuel to calm down and asking if he is feeling anything strange. But, within seconds, Manuel has passed out.

Stiles calls out his name a few times, tearing open Manuel’s shirt and watching for signs of breathing. He checks the man’s pulse and, upon finding nothing, he frantically grabs the defibrillator.

This isn’t right. This isn’t right. Manuel has to get to surgery. He has a wife and a kid at home; he has dreams and goals…

Stiles tunes out the noises of the machine, knowing by heart what to do. He sticks the pads to Manuel’s chest, pressing rhythmically onto the middle of his chest with the heel of his hand, using the force of his body and locked elbows. He follows the movement with two breaths into Manuel’s mouth using a CPR mask, moving back from the body when a shock is advised.

When the defibrillator advises him, he repeats. He can’t let him go. Manuel has to make it. He can’t let him, he can’t…

Press down, again, again, again, again.

Breaths.

Step back.

Shock.

Repeat.

Repeat again.

And again.

Again.

He’s not sure how long he’s giving CPR for— it feels like eternity. He’s breathing hard, his arms weak when Danny opens the back doors, his expression defeated. There are nurses standing behind him, shaking their heads and already calling it a Dead on Arrival and asking for someone to take the body to the morgue. But Stiles argues, stumbling forward into Danny’s arms, begging him to keep trying.

Danny shakes his head, clutching Stiles closer and whispering in his ear that there’s nothing more they can do, that Stiles had done good, had given his all. It just wasn’t enough.

It wasn’t enough. He couldn’t bring him back.

Stiles breaks down, sobbing into Danny’s shoulder, though he tries to reign in his ragged breaths when he sees Sofía stumbling out of her van, clutching Gabriel to her chest with a lost expression.

“I’ve got this,” Danny murmurs soothingly, his hand rubbing circles against Stiles’ back. “Go home. I’ll talk to them. I’ll fill out the paperwork.” Stiles nods numbly, mustering all of the
courage he has to face Sofía.

“I’m sorry,” his calls out, his voice breaking. “I did everything I could. I’m so sorry.”

Sofía’s arms tighten around Gabriel, but she nods, her lips trembling.

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Stiles slinks into the apartment, not bothering to remove his shoes or clothes as he collapses into bed. He stares at his phone where Danny’s texted, informing him that it was determined a Sudden Cardiac Death. Nothing more could have been done.

Stiles pushes himself against the headboard, his head in his hands. They said he did all he could, but did he really? If he had noticed sooner, or had gotten the Defibrillator quicker… maybe Manuel would still be alive. Or if they had just tried to lift him into the stretcher themselves, instead of waiting precious time watching a movie. Maybe they would have gotten to the hospital in time.

Maybe he could have been saved.

Stiles jumps when rough hands pull his hands away from his face. He looks up at Derek in surprise, blinking tears out of his eyes. He hadn’t heard even Derek come home.

Derek’s silent as his hands start to tug at Stiles’ work boots.

“Don’t,” Stiles grumbles, trying to pull away. Derek steadies him, his hand pushing down on Stiles’ leg firmly as he removes the shoes.

“You need to get out of those clothes,” Derek says.

“Why? I smell too much like Danny? You think I cheated again?” Stiles snarls, tears still tracking their way down his cheeks. It’s been over a week since the fair and the issue remains a sore spot for him, since he knows Derek still believes it to be true, still thinks that badly of his husband. And now, his emotions are high, his body thrumming with his need to get the emotions out. To break, to hurt, to yell.

Derek looks at him, his lips tugging down as he tosses clean pajamas at him. “No. You smell like death.” It sends the air rushing out of Stiles’ lungs like he’s been punched. He nods, suddenly feeling more defeated than angry. He takes the clothes and shuffles into the bathroom, changing quickly.

“Manuel coded in the rig,” Stiles whispers when he exits the bathroom, knowing Derek will hear him clearly. Derek’s sitting on the edge of the bed, watching Stiles with tired, understanding eyes. “They said it was sudden cardiac death. We couldn’t…I couldn’t…He has a wife and a kid. He was going to make his life better. He wanted to be a better father, and I…I couldn’t save him.” Stiles hiccoughs.

Derek moves closer, his hand pressing against Stiles’ neck, rubbing lightly. Stiles closes his eyes, subconsciously leaning closer. This is the most Derek has touched him since they met, and Stiles can’t help but shuffle closer into the warmth of Derek’s body, seeking comfort. Derek’s arms wrap around him as he gently shushes him, trying to quiet Stiles’ soft sobs.

“You did as much as you could have,” Derek murmurs. “Sudden cardiac death is exactly what it describes. You couldn’t have known it was going to happen. Did you start CPR the moment you noticed he was going into cardiac arrest?”
"Of course I did," Stiles snaps against his chest, his voice muffled from Derek’s shirt. His wonderfully soft, warm shirt. “I checked for breathing, then I got the AED. I shocked him and did CPR, I tried so hard, I—I did everything, but nothing brought him back.” He sniffs and Derek gently rubs the scruff of his barely-there beard against Stiles’ temple.

“You did everything right,” Derek whispers, sounding so sincere, and a part of Stiles’ heart breaks open at that. This isn’t his first experience with losing a patient, and it won’t be the last. But the feeling of loss, of remorse, of guilt— it never goes away. He carries the memories of each one with him like a weight so that he never forgets.

Enrique. 42 years old. Car accident.

Helga. 22 years old. Suicide.

Penelope. 6 years old. Domestic violence.

Andy. 17 years old. Skateboard accident.

Sam. 56 years old. Gunshot wound.

Manuel. 38 years old. Sudden cardiac arrest.

None of them deserved to die, but they couldn’t be saved either. If there’s one thing that Stiles has learned over the years, it’s that the “heroes” don’t always win, don’t always get there in time to save the day. He remembers, when he was a child, looking at his dad like he was a superhero, but now he knows better. He knows the horrors his father has faced; he’s faced plenty of it himself. And as an adult, he knows now, more than ever before, that most of the time you don’t feel like a hero. Not even a little.

“You don’t have to do all this,” Stiles finally says, pulling out of Derek’s arms as he wipes at his eyes. “I know we’re pretending to be all couple-y, but Finstock isn’t here right now. You don’t have to act like this. I’ll be fine.”

Derek looks at him, real concern on his face. “I’m doing this because I know what it’s like. I’ve lost people too. People I liked. I know how it feels, Stiles.”

Stiles nods, letting Derek lead him down onto the bed. Derek lies down next to him, reaching into the nightstand and pulling out a book.

“Do you want me to read to you?” Stiles blinks at him, at first not comprehending. His eyes scan the book, widening as he realizes Derek had stashed a Harry Potter book in their nightstand without him knowing.

“Seriously?” Stiles asks, voice rough. The tears have slowed, though his vision still swims with unshed tears. Derek stares at him, waiting patiently for an answer. “Yeah, that’d be…That’d be nice.” He closes his eyes, thinking of Mrs. Erickson’s question earlier that day.

Yeah. Derek could be nice.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.” Derek’s voice washes over him as he reads, his left hand softly trailing down Stiles’ arm. Stiles burrows closer, his nose pressed against Derek’s shoulder.

He tries not to think about how much he likes the warmth of Derek’s body next to him, or how soothing Derek’s voice is as he reads aloud. He tries not to think about how Manuel’s death is
allowing him to get closer to Derek, because the guilt of thinking such a way threatens to suffocate him. He tries not to think about Sofía’s trembling lips as she looked at him in devastation.

But most of all, he tries not to think about how Manuel will never be able to read Harry Potter to Gabriel.

He thinks about it.

“Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death.” - Coco Chanel

Dedicated to the ones we lose too soon, the ones filled with kindness and hope.

And the ones they leave behind.

Chapter End Notes

This was kind of cathartic for me to write. I don't really know what else to say about it. First responder stress, depression, PTSD, etc. is a real issue. Please seek help if you (or someone you know) needs it.
Greenberg is holding a small speaker playing a Christmas music playlist and Stiles wishes someone would just end his misery already. He must have done something awful in his past life to deserve this treatment.

Derek sits next to Stiles at the dining room table, his claws subconsciously scratching against the wood as Jingle Bells echoes through the room. Stiles wonders if he is imagining that he’s clawing Finstock. He wouldn’t blame him, if he were. Stiles isn’t even a werewolf and he’s having trouble controlling that urge to attack and make the torture stop.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Stiles finally responds tonelessly, his gaze returning to where Finstock stands, decked out in a clearly homemade Santa suit, next to a miserable looking Greenberg.

“Nope,” Finstock says cheerily.

“It’s September,” Stiles says, hoping it will urge some common sense into the producer. It doesn’t.

“It will be Christmas when this airs, so I want to see you all celebrating, decorating trees, and singing carols like you’re one big happy family, got it?” Finstock instructs.

“I’m Jewish,” Stiles deadpans. Derek lets out a cough that suspiciously sounds like a laugh. Stiles glances over at him, quietly pleased that he had managed to make Derek crack. Derek doesn’t laugh often, but Stiles can’t help but feel a burst of pride every time he is able to elicit the sound. He’ll never admit that though.

Finstock shoots him a quelling look. “Happy Hanukkah. Now decorate the flippin’ tree, Kid.”

“There’s even a snow machine,” Stiles points out. It’s strange, looking through the windows and seeing a heavy amount of snowflakes cascading down as if there were a blizzard outside. It looks surprisingly real, although it is much more disappointing to roll in than real snow. He knows from experience.

“Do you think he realizes we’re in Southern California?” Stiles grumbles, sifting through the large box of decorations until he finds a large orb with howling wolves on it. He coos as he sticks it in Derek’s face, laughing when he scowls and pushes Stiles’ hand away.
“That’s hideous,” Derek says, turning back to the tree to focus on wrapping the lights around it.

“It’s even red like your eyes,” Stiles says gleefully, reaching out to put it on the tree.

“You’re not putting that on the tree,” Derek says lowly, his hands pushing Stiles’ away with more playfulness than anger.

It’s the beginning of their third week of living together and it’s getting easier for them every day. Stiles is starting to understand that Derek is extra shy and growly when the cameras are around, as if he’s just not comfortable with the idea of them being watched nearly 24/7. One would think he wouldn’t value privacy so much since he’s a werewolf with super senses and an incredibly nosy pack, but obviously that isn’t true.

Even so, things have gotten easier between them since Stiles came home, broken and crying from Manuel’s death. He had taken a few days off after that, which was Derek’s idea, and spent a lot of time unpacking his things and settling into the apartment. It almost feels like home now. Almost. They still sleep separate, Stiles taking the couch while Derek keeps his bed, and they never talked about the cuddling they had done that one night. But things are less tense, less volatile and spiteful between them, almost as if they had silently entered into a truce.

It’s surprisingly nice.

“Stiles,” Derek growls, voice low and dangerous. Stiles’ stomach flutters at the sound and he laughs, dodging Derek’s arms and sneaking past to hang it towards the top of the tree. He grins triumphantly, laughing loudly when Derek grabs him by the hips and forces him away from the tree. He doesn’t touch the ornament though. Stiles has come to realize that Derek is all bark and no bite, a grumpy face but a marshmallow on the inside.

It’s getting harder each day for Stiles to admit that he doesn’t feel anything for the man. Realistically, he knows that he’s developed a bit of a crush on him after he held him when he was crying, reassured him in one of his worst moments, and read Harry Potter until he fell asleep.

Plus, they’re spending so much time together in the apartment— and the more time he spends with Derek, the more he gets to know about him. The more he gets to know, the more he likes and the deeper his crush begins to grow…

He sometimes catches himself forgetting, too. Forgetting that it isn’t really real, that they are just pretending to be a couple. They still have four weeks left, and he can’t help but wonder if it’s going to hurt having to let Derek go.

The thought alone sends a pang of anxiety and fear through him, and he knows it’s going to hurt. There’s no way it won’t.

That doesn’t stop him from continuing to enjoy his time with Derek though, even though they still spend half of their time together bickering.

“You know, if this really were the holidays, we’d both be working, let’s be realistic here,” Stiles says slightly breathlessly, his cheeks flushed from laughter. He grabs some plain colored ornaments and starts to hang them.

“It’s reality TV, Stiles. Nothing is realistic,” Derek huffs.

“It’s kind of ironic when you think about it,” Stiles points out. He steps back to admire their handiwork. The tree looks pretty good, actually. The lights Derek wrapped around the tree are soft and colorful, adding a little extra shine to the ornaments. And, with the red wolf ornament at the
top, it sends an extra surge of warmth through Stiles.

He’s always been a sucker for the holidays.

“Hey,” Stiles starts, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “Does this mean I have to buy you a gift?”

o0o0o0o

“Scott!” Stiles shouts. His best friend’s face splits wide in a grin and he jogs over to the front of the mall, enveloping Stiles in a tight hug. They had agreed to meet up to go shopping, both of them needing to pick out fake gifts for what they have decided to call ‘The Great Fake Christmas’.

He can’t believe that they haven’t seen each other in three weeks— what with the wedding, then Scott taking time off from work, and then Stiles taking time off. They’ve been keeping in touch through texts whenever they could, but it isn’t the same as actually being together in the same area.

A man wheezes as he rushes to follow Scott, carrying a large and expensive camera on his shoulder. Stiles thinks it’s a testament to how weird their life has suddenly become that he doesn’t think that sight is strange.

“Stiles, this is Jared, my camera guy,” Scott introduces, pulling out of the hug and gesturing to the slightly jittery looking cameraman. Scott turns back to Stiles with a grin. “It’s been too long, man. Are you coming back to work? Please tell me you are. Danny is great to work with, but he isn’t you, you know?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Stiles says as they start to walk through the mall, eyeing stores for ideas as they pass by. “How’s it going with Allison?”

“She’s great,” Scott gushes. “I just…I had hoped that it would be good, you know? But I didn’t think it could be this good. She’s literally perfect and we get along so well, despite her family.”

“What’s wrong with her family?” Stiles questions.

“Well,” Scott’s expression goes sheepish, “they’re kind of…anti-werewolf activists…”

“What?” Stiles exclaims, eyes wide and swiveling to stare at Scott. “Are you kidding me?”

“Her grandfather founded one of the largest Werewolf hate groups in the US,” Scott says, his tone softer and slightly dejected. Holy shit.

“But Allison is fine with marrying you?” Stiles asks.

Scott nods. “Yeah, she and her dad basically cut all ties with her grandfather. She is fine with us, though her dad is still a little wary. I don’t think he approves of us really.”

“What are you doing for Fake Christmas then?” Stiles questions.

Scott shrugs. “I guess I was just going to celebrate with my mom and Allison.”

“You guys could join us. There’s more than enough room at our apartment,” Stiles offers, his ears burning when he’s realized what he’s said. What is wrong with him? The move is only temporary, he knows that. So when had he started thinking of it as their apartment?

Scott beams at him, not noticing Stiles’ internal panic.
“Yeah? Cool, man. I’ll ask them,” Scott says happily. He suddenly perks with interest when he sees a sports store, grabbing Stiles’ arm and dragging him into it.

There are guns, kayaks, tents, surfboards, and other sports related knick-knacks decorating the store’s walls. Scott makes a beeline towards the back where there’s a vast display of crossbows and bows and arrows.

“Seriously? Is it really a good idea to give your new wife weapons as a gift?” Stiles asks, lifting one of the crossbows and pretending to aim at the wall behind Scott. His finger taps the trigger and he jumps with a surprised squawk when an arrow soars, impaling itself inside a surfboard box. Scott swivels his head from the arrow to Stiles’ his expression completely unimpressed.

Stiles slowly lowers the crossbow to where he found it and steps away, lifting his hands up placatingly at Scott’s look. Scott snorts and returns to looking through the display cases. Stiles sidles up next to him, leaning against the case.

“How are you and Derek getting along? Still not good?” Scott asks absently, still eyeing the weapons.

Stiles shrugs before realizing Scott isn’t watching him. “It’s going alright. We haven’t killed each other yet.”

Scott huffs a laugh, briefly glancing at him. “That’s not saying much.”

“It is for us. I guess, since Manuel…things have been better. I kind of have a hard time staying mad at him, I just keep imagining him reading Harry Potter and actually doing the voices, and then all my anger kind of…melts away. I guess.”

Scott blinks up at him, realization slowly dawning on him. “Dude, do you like him?”

“What? No!” Stiles denies with a scoff, averting his eyes.

Scott gasps, waving an accusing finger. “You do. You like him!”

Stiles slaps Scott’s hand away, flushing. He swivels and glares at Jared who is standing nearby. “You do not air this,” he hisses, before turning back to face Scott and gritting his teeth. “He’s just…It’s not a big deal, okay? I just think he’s…tolerable. Mildly tolerable. Just barely.”

Scott looks gleeful. “Is this because he comforted you?”

Stiles shrugs, almost positive his face must be turning an ugly shade of pink by now. “Yeah, I think that’s when it really started, but he’s also…he’s got this dry humor that kills me. And he’s actually kinda sweet, despite the fact that he comes off as really grumpy. He’s not as bad as I thought.”

“This is great, Stiles! I know you really only agreed to do this because of the money, but I’m glad it might work out between you and Derek. You deserve a good relationship,” Scott says. Stiles’ expression sours though, because he knows it isn’t as good as Scott thinks it is. “What’s that look for?”

“It’s not what you think, Scott. I’ve got…some feelings—a tiny amount—they’re minuscule, really—but…Derek doesn’t,” Stiles states. Scott’s eyebrows scrunch in confusion.

“How do you know that though? Have you asked him?” Scott asks. He startles when a worker moves to the other side of the display, a welcoming smile on her face. “Ah. I’d like to buy this.”

He looks dreamily down at one of the crossbows. “Allison is gonna love it.”
“I’m sure she will, but if she gets tired of you one day and aims it at you, run fast,” Stiles jokes. Scott rolls his eyes.

“Derek doesn’t like humans,” Stiles admits after a pause, drawing the dreamy look off Scott’s face.

“What?”

“He doesn’t like humans. We hated each other the first two weeks because he was upset that the specialists ignored his request for shifters only,” Stiles says with a self-deprecating smile. Because only he would develop feelings for someone who absolutely refused to date humans.

Scott frowns at Stiles, absently taking the bag from the cashier. “But…I thought you said things were going well between you two.”

“We agreed to pretend for the cameras and that is going well enough. Finstock threatened to take away our pay if we didn’t,” Stiles admits. “The thing is, it’s getting harder for me to remember it’s fake.”

“Maybe he’s having the same problem. You’re a great catch, man. He has to see that, human or not. Maybe he’ll change his mind,” Scott encourages.

Stiles doesn’t respond. He freezes, eyes going wide as he spots **it**. The perfect gift for Derek.

There are more people than is comfortable in the apartment, but that just adds to the cozy holiday feel. It’s pretty chaotic though, with Derek’s pack, fortunately not including Jackson, all present and loudly puttering about, adding extra snowflake decorations here and there. John and Melissa are drinking eggnog and hot chocolate at the dining room table, their faces flushed with warmth from the beverages— and maybe something else, Stiles suspects.

Thankfully, the cameramen have left for the day after they set up their cameras around the house to capture footage while they were away. Stiles can’t help but feel grateful for the extra breathing room.

Stiles stands in the kitchen, watching the oven impatiently as the timer for the turkey counts down. He already has most of the dishes out on the table— bowls of bigos (hunter’s stew) and mizeria (cucumbers in sour cream) along with mashed potatoes. The dessert, a plate of faworki (deep fried dough sprinkled with powdered sugar) and a plate of makowiec (poppy seed cake roll), sit on the counter for later.

If there’s one thing Stiles loves about the holidays, it’s the fact that he gets to cook an elaborate meal using his mom’s favorite book of Polish recipes. In the act of cooking— of sifting through ingredients, mixing and decorating— he finds peace. Sometimes, if it’s quiet and he’s home alone while he cooks, he can almost hear her voice softly murmuring the directions to him.

“Just a pinch more salt, Kochanie. Not too much,” she would say, her voice gentle and kind as she would watch him, a proud smile upon her face.

“Smells good.” Stiles jumps, blinking at a smirking Derek standing just a foot away.

“Thanks,” Stiles says, letting out a pleased hum when Derek offers a cup of eggnog. He leans against the oven, taking a sip and covertly trying to hide the fact that he’s staring. Derek’s watching his sisters with a pleased smile as they loudly play fight in the other room. With his profile showing, Stiles can’t help but admire his strong jawline, the attractive stubble on his face,
and the way Derek’s face looks softer, filled with love and pride, when he watches his family. It makes him look incredibly open and gentle in a way that Stiles doesn’t get to see often.

“Do you keep kosher?” Derek suddenly asks, eyeing the lit menorah by the window. Stiles and his father had lit it earlier as the sun set, murmuring the prayers as they held the shammash and then lit the candles. Normally, they would light a candle a day as the eight days of Hanukkah passed, but since this is fake they went ahead and lit all of the candles as if it were the final day.

Stiles shrugs, taking another sip of his eggnog. “We’re not really observant. Don’t go to temple much or anything like that. It’s mostly a cultural thing for us,” he answers.

Derek nods. “We’re similar with Christmas. It’s the only religious holiday we celebrate.”

“Except for Halloween!” Cora calls out from the living room, obviously having been eavesdropping. “All hail the Great Pumpkin!”

Stiles snorts into his cup, chuckling at Cora’s antics. Derek simply mutters about nosy sisters, though he smiles softly when Stiles bumps his shoulder playfully against Derek’s. Stiles’ breath hitches at Derek’s soft expression—an expression aimed at him. His eyes flutter downwards, taking a brief glance at Derek’s lips, wondering if Derek would still have that expression on his face if Stiles leant forward and— he jolts at the sound of knocking at their door.

“I got it!” Laura yells out, tumbling towards the door and cackling when Erica tackles her to the ground before she can reach it.

“Go, Boyd, go!” Erica laughs drunkenly and Boyd watches with raised brows, but obligingly opens the door.

“Holy crap,” Scott’s voice trails over the noise and Stiles rushes to the door, pulling his friend into a quick hug. “I thought you said there was ‘more than enough room’ here!” Scott laughs, looking around at the admittedly large crowd.

“Yeah, things got a little out of hand,” Stiles chuckles. He pauses, leaning to look over Scott’s shoulder where a beautiful brunette stands.

“Oh yeah. Guys, this is Allison. My wife,” Scott says, his eyes going dreamy as he looks at her. Stiles has a feeling that Scott refers to her as his wife whenever humanly possible.

Allison smiles and wow Scott wasn’t kidding about those dimples. She’s absolutely gorgeous, her smile wide and shy, but genuine.

“Nice to meet you, Allison. I’m Stiles, though I’m sure you already knew that. These weirdos are Der— er… my husband’s pack. Derek’s standing there by the oven. Scott’s mom and my Dad are sitting at the table though, if you want to join. We’re about to serve dinner,” Stiles says. Derek’s already pulling the turkey out of the oven, lifting the weight easily as he moves it to the table. Having a husband with super strength definitely comes in handy.

“Oh my god, it smells so good!” Scott gushes, eyes lighting up when he smells the dessert plates. “Dude, did you make faworki? Oh, and—” he inhales deeply, becoming even more excited, “and bigos? Aw yeah!”

“That’s my favorite, you’ll have to try some,” Scott adds to Allison, grabbing her by the hand and leading her towards the table.

Dinner goes quickly after that. There are no awkward silences with so many people, all of them
having something to say—ranging from compliments on the dinner to telling stories from work. Unexpectedly, Allison is the one with the interesting story, regaling everyone with a tale about how she had to drive to the airport to arrest a man who had been trying to open the airplane’s exits upon landing. Apparently, he had gotten confused and thought he was somewhere else, demanding that the flight attendants “let him off this bus.” Allison’s impression of the man’s dazed comments as she handcuffed him has the table erupting in laughter. Stiles glances over, his grin widening at Scott’s completely besotted look. It’s endearing.

The cuteness of Allison and Scott as a couple doesn’t last long. It takes an hour and a half before Stiles is completely sick of watching them, his eyes darting self-consciously to the still cameras set up around the apartment. Allison and Scott were just so clearly in love—they were almost constantly touching each other, smiling at each other, or whispering little things to each other. It makes Stiles uncomfortable as he glances at Derek standing feet away. He can almost hear Finstock’s voice in his head, scolding them for not pretending well enough.

Nobody would believe their charade when compared to a real thing like Allison and Scott.

Derek finally seems to notice Stiles’ murderous look.

‘What?’ Derek mouths.

‘Get over here,’ Stiles mouths back, gesturing to the empty space next to him. Thankfully most of the others are busy, going through the stack of gifts and handing them out so that they can start unwrapping.

Derek furrows his eyebrows and doesn’t move. ‘Why?’

Stiles simply glares at him until he’s holding in a laugh. “Finstock will be pissed if we don’t try harder,” Stiles whispers.

Derek frowns, watching as Allison giggles and tosses her legs over Scott’s, effectively sitting in his lap. Derek’s eyebrows raise and he looks at Stiles. “You want me to sit on your lap?”

“No, I’m just saying, we don’t look very convincing compared to them,” Stiles hisses.

A line forms by Derek’s mouth as if he’s holding in a laugh. “I think most couples wouldn’t look convincing compared to them.”

“What?” Stiles asks. Derek nods towards Erica and Boyd, sitting on the floor and whispering lowly to each other with soft expressions. He nods again towards where Braeden hands Laura a gift, casually dropping down into the seat next to her on the couch. Okay, he has a point. Maybe nobody can live up to the Scallison levels of coupliness.

“If it makes you feel better though…” Derek pauses, deciding to finish the thought by grabbing Stiles and pulling him close, tucking him against his side as his arm wraps around Stiles’ shoulders. Stiles’ face flushes as Erica glances up, having heard his embarrassed squawk. She grins toothily, her eyes dancing with laughter as she looks between them.

“Hey, Derek, have you opened Stiles’ gift yet?” Erica asks, tossing a box towards them. Derek catches it easily, placing it gently on the ground before he hands his own gift to Stiles—a small, poorly wrapped bundle.

“How did you know that one was from me?” Stiles asks, frowning as Derek huffs a laugh.
“It smells like you, dummy.” Erica rolls her eyes as if it were obvious. It actually kind of is. Stiles feels like an idiot. He blames the eggnog, he’s already had two glasses, after all.

His fingers wrap around his new glass of eggnog and he downs a portion of its contents for a little more courage. He isn’t sure if Derek will like his gift or not, though Stiles knew he had to get it when he saw it.

Derek is silent as he lifts up the stuffed animals. They’re two bears from Build A Bear, fully assembled and filled with fluff. The brown bear in Derek’s left hand is outfitted in fire gear, while the black bear patterned with batman symbols wears a Mets uniform.

“This one’s you,” Stiles says softly, pointing to the brown bear, then to the batman bear, “and that one’s me.”

Derek snorts, placing them gently on the ground. “They’re cute. Thank you,” he says softly. He moves his hand, palming the back of Stiles’ neck and rubbing warm circles. Stiles’ eyes close involuntarily at the warm feeling that spreads through him as Derek scent marks him, his mind drifting and wondering if Derek’s hands would feel that warm trailing down his sides, his legs, his —

“Here,” Derek pushes his gift towards Stiles with his other hand, leaving one arm wrapped around Stiles’ shoulders. For the cameras, obviously.

Stiles tears through the wrapping easily, laughing loudly as he eyes the gift. Derek bought him wolf pajamas— wolf footie pajamas.

“This is so… I can’t,” Stiles coughs, choking on his own laughter. He feels pleasantly warm and tingly, and he can’t help but wonder if the eggnog is finally catching up with him.

Derek’s lips quirk at Stiles’ amusement. “Now you can be part of the pack.”

Stiles’ laughter slows down and he says through hiccoughs, “I’m going to get you back for this next year. I’ll buy you something ridiculous, just you wait and see.”

He doesn’t notice his slip until Derek abruptly averts his gaze and avoids his eyes. His face is carefully blank and Stiles mentally replays what he’d said.

Next year. He had insinuated there would be another year for them. Another year in which they would be a couple. Stiles grabs for his eggnog, his blessedly alcoholic eggnog and downs the rest. He frowns down at the gift. It was cute, thoughtful in a joking way, but it doesn’t mean anything. Just like the scent marking and touching doesn’t mean anything. It’s all pretend and anything more than that is more than Derek wants, clearly. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, of course. But it does. Maybe Scott’s optimistic talk earlier had somehow sunk into his mind, forcing him to think of possibilities that weren’t there.

“I think that’s enough alcohol for you,” a voice says. Stiles blinks up at Cora’s unamused expression. She grabs Stiles by the arms, tugging him up with her werewolf strength. “Go dance,” she orders, pushing Stiles into Laura’s arms.

Laura snickers, wrapping an arm around his waist and leading him in a simple dance as Frank Sinatra plays on Boyd’s phone, his voice crooning about having a merry little Christmas. Stiles can’t help but laugh as Laura sings along, making her voice low in a bad attempt at Sinatra’s voice.

It’s like Stiles’ troubles disappear with the mixture of Laura and alcohol, and he feels light as they twirl around the living room.
The next song starts to play and he’s feeling mildly dizzy, but he doesn’t mind. Laura calls out Derek’s name and she shoves Stiles suddenly. He tumbles backwards into a sturdy chest and it takes longer than normal for Stiles to get his bearings, the room swimming slightly in his vision. When he finally rights himself, it’s with Derek’s help, his hands guiding Stiles before they come to rest on his waist.

A man sings about chestnuts roasting on an open fire and Derek starts to lead. It’s just a gentle swaying, unlike Laura’s energetic spinning around the room. This dance is calmer, softer, much like the one at their wedding. The memory comes with a sting, but Stiles pushes it away, resting his head against Derek’s shoulder. His eyes are closed and he simply enjoys the piano notes as they play and the earthy scent of Derek himself.

“Dobrze się bawisz?” Are you having fun?

Stiles closes the fridge, water bottle in his hand. His father smiles at him, his arms folded over his chest.

“Tak,” Yeah, Stiles says, partially surprised to realize it’s the truth. He hadn’t expected to have this much fun, really. But he looks into the living room, a smile tugging at his lips as he watches the pack shouting over a game of Mario Kart. Even Allison and Scott are getting into it, yelling about when to dodge and cheering when Boyd brutally defeats Isaac.

Stiles’ eyes momentarily linger on where Derek’s sitting on the couch, his body relaxed as he watches the group with a fond smile. When Stiles’ gaze returns to his father, it’s to see him looking back with a knowing expression.

“Martwilem się na początku,” his father starts, “ale widzę, że teraz dogadujecie się lepiej.” I was worried at first, but I now see that you both are getting along better.

“Jakoś,” Stiles says. Somehow. His hands twist around the bottle as he contemplates whether or not he should say what’s on his mind. His mouth opens and closes a few times before he manages to say, “Chaiałbym, żeby mama tu z nami była.” I wish mom were here with us.

His father’s expression falters with surprise, but then goes soft, a wistful expression on his face when he says, “Me too, kid.” He leans forward, pressing his lips against Stiles’ forehead like he used to when Stiles was a child. “Byłaby z ciebie taka dumna.” She would be so proud. His father wishes him goodnight, taking his absence only a little while after Melissa’s.

Stiles heads back into the living room to say goodnight to the others, deciding that it’s late enough and he has to work the next morning. Everyone wishes him well, enthusiastically promising to be quiet so he can sleep. Stiles snorts disbelievingly, noticing Derek’s absence at the last moment. Had he already gone to bed as well?

Stiles heads towards the bedroom, stopping in the dark hallway when he hears Derek’s quiet murmuring. It’s coming from the bathroom, the door cracked open slightly. Stiles bites his lip, contemplating what he should do. Derek deserves his privacy, of course. And the last time he eavesdropped, he found out some hurtful things...But they were also things he needed to know.

Before he’s consciously made a decision, he steps up next to the door, placing his ear between the end of the door and the wall.
“Paige— no. I…” Derek lets out a frustrated sigh. “Yes. I know it’s late. You’re the one who texted…I’m sorry. I just…Yes, I miss you too.” There are pauses as Paige responds, her voice silent to Stiles’ human ears. “I know. I shouldn’t have called…”

Stiles pushes away from the door, feeling sick from more than just the alcohol. Of course he knew Derek wasn’t going to just magically fall out of love with Paige. He knew that. The problem was that he just. Keeps. Forgetting. Forgetting that they are pretending, that Derek has feelings for Paige, that this charade will all come to an end in four weeks. But just because he forgets about those things doesn’t mean that they cease to exist.

Stiles is developing feelings for a man that will never love him, but there’s nothing that Stiles can do to protect himself. He can’t seem to close his mind to the marshmallow-soft werewolf with a grumpy exterior who adores his pack and lets his sisters boss him around. The man who lost most of his family to fire when he was a child, but grew up to become a firefighter so that he could protect others. The man who hates humans, but is still helplessly in love with a woman who once was one.

Stiles trudges to the bedroom, dropping down onto Derek’s bed. He’s only slept on it once, after Manuel died, but Derek’s pack is occupying the couch and he figures that’s good enough reason to hijack Derek’s bed. If he has any problem with Stiles’ human stink on the sheets, then he can wash them himself tomorrow.

Stiles burrows his face into the pillows, breathing in the scent of Derek’s shampoo—a delicious, but faint minty scent. God, he’s pathetic.

He’s half-asleep when Derek steps into the room, the light from the hallway making him a silhouette in the doorway.

“You’re in my bed,” Derek says.

“You’re in my bed,” Derek says.

“Your pack is hogging the couch,” Stiles mumbles, trying to hide his face from the light by burrowing it further into a pillow. Derek takes the hint and shuts the door, not needing to turn on any lights with his supernatural vision. He doesn’t move closer though.

“Is it really that big of a deal? What, are you gonna kick me out?” Stiles laughs drunkenly at the thought. “You wouldn’t be the first. People love to kick me out once they’re done with me.”

“I’m not ‘done with you’, Stiles. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” Derek starts to move.

“I’m bad with relationships,” Stiles admits out of nowhere. The bed dips next to him, but he continues, turning to lie on his back. He stares up at the dark ceiling. “I used…Used t’ sleep ‘round a lot. After Danny. And Heather. Couldn’t bring them home, ‘cause I didn’t want that ‘round my dad.”

He can hear the sound of Derek removing his clothes, changing into something lighter. He wouldn’t be able to keep the room as cold as he would like with Stiles here. His presence probably hinders Derek a lot, he thinks.

“They’d kick me out when we were done. Heather kicked me out too, but that was ‘cause I caught her cheating,” Stiles closes his eyes, not knowing why he’s sharing all this. But he needs to. Needs to share it, so Derek can know. “Danny didn’t cheat, but he…left me. For his ex. I wasn’t good enough.”
Stiles tilts his head to the side, watching Derek as he lifts the sheets and slides under, leaving a fair amount of space between him and Stiles. “R’m’rber when I smelled like another Were on our h’neymoon?” Stiles’ voice grows softer as the lull of sleep tempts him, tugs at him, prepares to pull him under. He could barely hear Derek’s light grunt of affirmation.

“I just said that ‘cause I hated you. W’nted to hurt you. ‘M sorry. Didn’t cheat on you. Would never cheat. You were right…I’m too immature,” Stiles rolls onto his side, facing Derek, but he keeps his eyes closed. He doesn’t want to see Derek’s expression.

Derek remains condemningly silent in the darkness. The silence helps pull Stiles into sleep, where he imagines a light touch on his face. The touch starts at his temple, sweeping hair back, before trailing down to draw mindless circles against his cheek. It’s feather-light and gentle, sending pleasant tingles down his spine. He can almost believe it were real, but he knows better.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for any cultural/religious errors in this chapter; I am not Jewish. I hope I represented it respectfully, but do let me know if I misrepresented anything. Also, special thanks to Domik for translating in this chapter.
Derek knew what he was getting into when he applied for the reality show. He had seen firsthand the situations that the producers created for Laura and Braeden. He had been the one that Laura opened up to when she was frustrated with all of the fake bullshit and fights they were forced to fake, just for the sake of “good television”. He knew that the producers had a lot of power, a lot of control over what would happen on screen.

Despite knowing this, he still manages to feel surprised when he steps onto the large, grassy field and sees hundreds of people milling about, setting up a carnival. Wooden booths are being built, large stuffed animals hung onto the prize walls. Truck after truck pull in, the pieces of rides and carousels attached to them. It’s a flurry of controlled chaos.

Finstock had suddenly approached Stiles and him last night saying that he wanted to set up a carnival—a charity day event to benefit Beacon County’s emergency services. Less than twenty-four hours later, Finstock’s idea is being put to life. It’s a nice idea, though Derek doesn’t think for a second that Finstock’s doing it out of the kindness of his heart. He just wants more drama, more entertainment, and probably also wants to torture Derek at least a little bit. Derek knows he hasn’t been playing his role as well as Stiles has—Finstock had flipped when he reviewed the footage from their Fake Christmas a week ago, yelling at Derek for disappearing to call Paige.

“I don’t care what you feel for this…this temptress! Until the very last second of this experiment, you are in love with Stiles, understood? I need to you suck it up and act, for Pete’s sake, even Laura was better at acting than you and she was horrendous,” Finstock snapped. Derek nodded, his expression sour.

It isn’t that Stiles is awful to be around. He can be funny and sometimes the way he looks, glancing up at Derek with mirth-filled eyes and his mouth pulled up into a smirk, makes something in Derek’s stomach flutter with the desire to pull him closer. Makes him inhale deeper, trying to take in as much of that sugary sweet scent as he can. But Stiles is infuriating to be around. They still bicker, arguing over what to eat, what to watch on TV, who gets to shower first—whatever they can argue about, they do. On occasion it’s gotten heated, the Stiles’ scent of arousal thick in the air, and Derek’s had to clench his fists, nails cutting into his palms to stop him from pushing the kid into walls, trapping him there, his hands pinning human hands to the walls, and— and what?

He never lets himself think that far. He can’t. The kid is so break-ably human, yet enviably strong, laughing and fearless whenever he challenges Derek. He might not always like Stiles, but he can’t deny that the human fits in so well with his pack, as if he’d been a part of it from the start. He still cooks them meals sometimes, stopping by the firehouse with homemade Polish treats. The pack effortlessly accepts him, their hands rubbing their scent into his clothes and Stiles accepts their affection just as easily.

Reluctantly, Derek can admit now that he sees why Stiles was chosen for him. Stiles is human, yes, but he’s more than that. He’s strong, overcoming obstacle after obstacle and pushing forward anyway. He’s knowledgeable about werewolf culture too, never showing any sign of discomfort around werewolves and their tactile nature. Derek has never met a human like him, even Paige had needed time to adjust to pack life after she was turned. But Stiles just jumps into it, accepting everything they do without ever batting an eye. If anything, he almost seems pleased by it all. As if
being surrounded by a group of overly affectionate people was something he wanted, not just tolerated. It makes a part of Derek want to rub his scent all over him, to bite and claim for his pack; to accept him officially.

But what they have isn’t real; the way Stiles is acting isn’t real, none of this is real and it’s sending Derek’s instincts into a frenzy.

Only three weeks left, he reminds himself. Only three weeks left and then it’s over and they can both move on with their lives.

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Derek stands behind the counter of one of the game booths, wearing his BHFD shirt and scowling when women (and some men) slow down as they pass by, their eyes trailing across his body. He moves to take shelter behind the large stuffed animals that decorate the wall next to him. Some of them are bigger than the people themselves who stop to play the games, which allows him some semblance of privacy from hungry gazes. It wasn’t his fault that Erica made him wear a shirt that is clearly at least a size too small. The cotton material clings to his body, especially tight around his biceps which make them look larger than normal. He feels absolutely ridiculous, but even he can admit that the people who ogle him tend to spend more money at their booths, shelling out dollar after dollar at his and Boyd’s booth.

Boyd is similarly dressed, his t-shirt tight against his own thick muscles. But, unlike Derek, he seems to be enjoying the attention. Not that the enjoyment is visible on his face, he still is as stoic as usual. However, it becomes obvious in the way he flexes his muscles and looks subtly proud whenever Erica saunters by, winking and catcalling at her husband.

Derek leans his head back against the wooden wall of the booth. He hates carnivals and fairs so much. The loudness of the people, the intense smells of sugar-filled and fried foods, the chaotic energy of so many things happening at once. It was nearly insufferable for the first half hour of his shift as prize master, until he found something to focus on.

Or someone, rather.

He can’t help but pay attention to Stiles, watching him from where he’s working his own event yards away. He would never admit it, but Stiles is...ridiculous distracting. He’s wearing a Beacon County EMS shirt and work pants, both of which are completely soaked through and clinging to his frame. Derek would have described Stiles as skinny up until this point, but he realizes now just how wrong he was. The tightness of the wet shirt reveals the outline of a lithe body—a body made up of lean, but defined muscles.

Of course Stiles would be placed in charge of working the dunk tank with Scott. They’re actually surprisingly good at it. Derek can’t help but tune into Stiles’ goading of customers, the way he playfully shit-talks them until he loudly squawks and lands in the presumably cold water with a loud splash. It’s oddly satisfying to watch, seeing Stiles’ shocked face right before he drops into the transparent pool. Derek’s lips twitch against his will and he adjusts his gaze to a nearby patch of grass so he can focus on controlling his expression.

He can silently admit to himself that he’s not just focusing on Stiles for the pleasure of seeing him getting dunked time after time—although that is definitely entertaining enough on its own.
Somehow, listening to Stiles’ voice seems to have some sort of a calming effect on him— even if he’s just barely paying attention to it in the background while he interacts with customers. It’s almost as if Stiles’ presence takes over the noise of the rest of the carnival, giving Derek one thing to listen to instead of many. It’s probably because he’s so loud; it’s nearly impossible to hear anything else.

“Boss?”

Derek glances over at Boyd, blinking as he tears his eyes from the grass.

“You okay?” Boyd asks.

“Yes, why?” Derek says, perhaps a little sharply. Boyd’s lips twitch and he nods towards Derek’s hands.

“You’ve been staring blankly at your phone for the past few minutes.”

Derek peers at his phone for a moment, remembering that he had been in the process of responding to a text from Paige when he had gotten distracted. Stiles had suddenly started laughing loudly, a sound filled with pure unadulterated amusement, when he had finally spotted Jackson working the kissing booth. The sound had instantly captured Derek’s attention, naturally, because how could it not? It was obnoxiously loud and half of the fairgoers probably heard it and were just as distracted.

“It’s nothing,” Derek says easily, tucking the phone back into his pocket. He’ll respond to Paige later.

Boyd snorts disbelievingly, but lets it go. A woman steps up to their booth, money in hand and Boyd mindlessly relays their rules and instructions while Derek’s eyes wander back to the dunk tank. Scott’s climbing up the side of the tank to take his turn and Stiles stands off to the side, wringing out the bottom of his shirt. As if sensing eyes on him, Stiles glances up and spots Derek, his brown eyes wide and bright, still visible from so far away.

Stiles lifts his hand in a small wave, an almost shy smile on his face. Derek nods pointedly at the booth and Stiles raises his eyebrows in question, pointing between himself and Derek’s booth. Derek nods again. Stiles shrugs, but pushes his hands into his pockets and obligingly walks over.

“I think I have enough skill to win this,” Stiles jokes, though his eyes linger on a large plush wolf hanging on the wall.

“You want to try?” Derek grins wolfishly, leaning forward on the counter. Stiles’ eyes drop to him, something warm in his gaze as he looks at Derek. He tries not to look into the meaning behind the expression too much— and completely avoids thinking about how it makes something in his stomach swoop.

Stiles takes his hands out of his pockets, tugging the empty fabric out with him. “I don’t have any money.”

Derek pulls out his wallet, sliding a dollar bill over to Boyd, who is smirking at him. “I’ve got it.”

Boyd beams at him and Derek can feel his ears heating up at the absolute joy on his face.

“Alright, let’s do this. I just aim to knock over the cups?” Stiles asks, picking up the toy gun loaded with a neon colored plastic ball.

“All three,” Boyd says with a smirk.
“Shouldn’t be too hard, right?” Stiles aims the gun as Boyd and Derek grin at each other knowingly. Stiles misses completely on the first shot, saying the first shot was always the test shot anyway. When he only hits the top cup the second time, he starts to look a little embarrassed. When he only knocks off two cups the third time, he glares accusingly at Derek.

“It’s rigged, isn’t it?” Stiles’ eyes remain narrowed. Derek chuckles and hops over the counter, picking up the toy gun. He grabs a ball from Boyd’s extended hand, handing over another dollar bill.

He knocks out all three on the first shot.

Stiles’ eyes go wide. “What the *fuck*. Did you cheat? How did you do that?”

“You have to aim for the bottom of the bottom two,” Derek says cockily. “Shouldn’t you know how to aim better? Isn’t your dad the sheriff?”

Stiles shoves his shoulder playfully and Derek can’t help but take a step closer when he adjusts his footing. “He didn’t take me out shooting regularly, so no, asshole.”

“You going to choose a prize or what?” Derek asks, his lips lifting a little at Stiles’ surprised expression.

“What?”

“I paid and I won. Pick a prize,” Derek says simply. Stiles’ eyes automatically drift to the plush wolf and Boyd obligingly hands it over.

“Thanks.”

A light blush forms on Stiles’ cheeks as he clutches the ridiculously sized stuffed animal. It doesn’t send a rush of warmth through Derek at all. It doesn’t. He just remembers a night, days ago, with a half-asleep Stiles dejectedly mumbling about his past mistreatment by his exes. Just the memory alone makes Derek’s claws itch to come out, the urge to protect this human surging through him. Stiles is an annoying shit, but Derek doesn’t mind it— maybe even likes it. A little. He doesn’t want to see Stiles that miserable again, not if he can help it.

Derek suddenly steps back, going tense when he spots Greenberg walking over, camera on his shoulder. Stiles follows Derek’s gaze, a frown taking over his expression.

“Now don’t look so happy to see me,” Greenberg says. “Really, you’re going to give me a complex. I’m not that awful am I?”

“It’s the camera,” Stiles says.

“And the stalking,” Derek adds.

“Both of which were stated clearly in the contract you guys signed and agreed to,” Greenberg says cheerily.

Stiles rolls his eyes, moving his head with it as if it were one giant motion of sass. “What do you want, Greenberg?”

“I want a lot of things. Money, a nice vacation in the Bahamas far away from you guys, an actual date or two would be nice as well,” Greenberg lists. “Though this isn’t about what I want. Finstock wants more romance.”
“More romance,” Derek repeats flatly.

“You got it. More romance for this guy here.” Greenberg affectionately pets the camera.

“I’m on break right now. We could go on the ferris wheel, I’ve been wanting to go all day,” Stiles offers. Derek opens his mouth to say hell, no— but Greenberg speaks first.

“Sounds like a great idea.”

“I’d rather not,” Derek says lowly.

“I don’t think I really asked if you wanted to, now did I?” Greenberg says, tone turning snappish. “Look, I’ve been here all day waiting for something, anything from you guys and I’ll admit that the plushie thing was cute, but I need more. And you will give me some romance so I can fucking go home and pretend I have a life, okay?”

Derek doesn’t want to, but he agrees. Maybe it won’t be as bad as he thinks; maybe it will be over quickly. Stiles quickly changes into dry clothes, forces Greenberg to hold the oversized stuffed animal, and then they head over to the giant wheel.

He instantly regrets his decision when the ferris wheel car door shuts and he’s trapped, Stiles sitting by his side and Greenberg silently holding his camera at them from the other side. What has he done?

His hands clutch the railing by his side, his knuckles turning white as the metal creases and creaks beneath his palm. Fuck, he forgot exactly how much he hates heights.

“Man, this view is great. I think I can see Scott from way up here, although he looks really small so it’s hard to tell,” Stiles rambles. Derek’s breathing hitches and then quickens and he tries to focus on the sturdy floor beneath their feet. It was metal, strong metal, so it wouldn’t give way. it wouldn’t. Would it?

“You okay?” Stiles’ concerned voice forces him to glance up. Stiles is frowning at Derek, one hand extended as if he were thinking about reaching forward, but wasn’t sure if it would be welcome.

“Fine,” Derek says through gritted teeth.

“Romance,” Greenberg hisses.

“Shut up,” Stiles snaps at him, turning back to Derek. “You don’t look too good, man.”

“I said I’m fine,” Derek nearly growls, though his voice breaks on the last word when the car comes to a sudden stop, rocking uncomfortably back and forth. Is it supposed to do that? To rock so much? What if something is loose and that’s why it’s moving so much?

“Hey, hey, hey, stop that.” Stiles grabs Derek’s face with his hands, turning it until their eyes meet. “You’re okay. We’re okay.”

Derek shakes his head, causing Stiles’ hands to drop away. “We’re moving too much, there must be a screw or two loose.”

Stiles starts to look amused, a small smile starting to form on his face. “I had a call like this once, one of the ferris wheel carts got loose and people fell out. They all died, Stiles,” Derek hisses, not happy at how amused Stiles is. Doesn’t he understand how dangerous it is? Derek can heal from a
lot of things, but not a fall from this kind of height. Not if he lands wrong or hits his head just right —

“You need a distraction, alright? So I’m going to distract you.” Derek’s eyebrows furrow at Stiles’ amused voice, at the way he bites his lip suddenly looking shy and nervous, but excited as well.

“Do you realize how high up we are? How are you going to distract me?"

“One focus on me, okay?” Stiles instructs, taking one of Derek’s hands in his and rubbing his thumb soothingly against the back of Derek’s hand. “My mom and I used to go on these all the time. It was always her favorite ride. She said it made her feel powerful, being this high up and getting to look at so many things at once, like she was free of all of her problems for a few minutes because they became minuscule…”

Derek’s heart rate is still up, but he can feel himself starting to relax as Stiles talks about his mom. Stiles is looking out at the view around them, but Derek— Derek is solely focused on Stiles. Focused on his thick lashes and how they briefly brush against the soft skin of Stiles’ cheeks as he blinks. Focused on the moles decorating Stiles’ face like stars, the relaxing cadence of his voice as he talks about a precious memory to him, the way his eyes seem to shine with a mixture of sadness and happiness as he talks about his mom. So much about Stiles is hypnotizing.

“I like ferris wheels because it makes me feel closer to her, you know?” Stiles says softly, his thumb still running across Derek’s skin. “It makes me feel a little powerful too, like her.” As if, by feeling the way she had, it’s almost like she’s here again. Derek understands that. He does.

The car lurches for a moment, before starting to descend slowly. Derek lifts his other hand, bringing it up to rest against Stiles’ face before he moves forward. He doesn’t even think, just acts in the moment.

He presses his lips against Stiles’, aware that his are slightly dry from fear. But Stiles’ lips are soft and wet. Stiles’ breath hitches for a moment in surprise—a similar noise coming from Greenberg just before the sound of the camera’s zoom being activated—but then he pushes forward, his nose brushing against Derek’s as he tilts his head slightly for a better angle.

Despite all of their bickering they’ve done over the past four weeks, the kiss is gentle. Stiles’ tongue traces against Derek’s lips a moment before pushing forward slightly, quickly pulling back as to not deepen it too much. Derek groans and his other hand starts to trail upwards, his fingers grazing against Stiles’ warm side as the shirt begins to ruck upwards. He delves his tongue into Stiles’ open mouth, groaning again when Stiles’ tongue brushes against his own. The kiss quickly goes from sweet to filthy, both of them pushing forward to get closer and closer until Stiles is on his lap, Derek’s head resting back against the metal wall of the car.

Derek is warm, warmer than he’s been in a long time, and his hands grip Stiles’ hips, holding him close as they kiss. They fit so well together, he can’t deny it. Can’t deny how right it feels to be this close to Stiles, to have his scent surrounding him, their lips together as they pant into each other’s mouths and keep pushing to get closer as if it were possible. It feels amazing and Derek’s brain must be short-circuiting because how can it possibly be this good with Stiles? It doesn’t even make sense! He doesn’t even like him, but this…this is perfection and he doesn’t want it to end.

He wants to keep kissing Stiles, wants to be wrapped up in his scent, wants him in his pack, under him, in his bed— he wants Stiles.

The door to the car opens loudly and Stiles jumps away, looking as shocked as Derek feels to see that the ride is over.
“I’ve…uh…got the footage. Thanks,” Greenberg says quickly, running off in discomfort. Stiles’ ears are bright red as he steps out of the car into the grass and Derek follows in a daze.

“So, um… I’m not sure I want that aired on national TV. Oh man, my dad’s gonna see that,” Stiles says with a wince, but Derek is still stuck. When had he started wanting Stiles? When had he even started liking him? Because it’s undeniable now, he knows he likes Stiles. He likes the way they argue, the warm looks Stiles gives him when Derek says something funny, he likes how Stiles fits in his life so well, as if they were meant to be together. As if he’s been a piece that Derek’s life has been missing for so long.

“Well, Greenberg said we needed to up the romance, right? Hopefully that’ll tide him over for a while,” Stiles says lightly, though his voice wavers a little as he glances at Derek. He looks tired.

“Yeah,” Derek says numbly. For a moment he feels nothing, but then disappointment starts to set in and he looks away. Stiles hadn’t really wanted to kiss him then, he just felt like he had to— for the show. He’s surprised by how much that hurts, the realization that he wants Stiles to want him. He knows that Stiles is attracted to him, that much has been obvious for awhile now, but Stiles doesn’t really want Derek. Doesn’t like him or want to be with him, certainly wouldn’t want to remain married.

Wait… Did he want to remain married to Stiles? Derek’s heart starts to beat faster in his chest and he’s glad that Stiles is human and can’t hear it. He turns to face Stiles and is suddenly struck by how handsome Stiles looks, surrounded by the bright lights of the carnival rides. The sun is setting in the background, and Derek’s breath hitches when Stiles turns to look at him, a soft smile on his kiss-reddened lips.

He notices something in the background and Derek looks over, spotting the empty unmanned dunk tank. An idea pops into his head and he grins sharply.

“What?” Stiles asks warily, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

Derek grabs him by the waist and lifts him into a fireman’s carry, stalking towards the tank.

“What the hell, Derek?!” Stiles squawks, shrieking when Derek drops him into the cold water. Stiles sputters to the top, glaring at Derek once he breaches the surface. “I only just changed into dry clothes, you asshole!”

Derek grins widely, stepping forward until there’s only a foot of space between them. Stiles’ eyes are sharp as they stare up at him, waiting for an explanation. “That was revenge for calling my team out for a lift assist.”

An equally amused smile breaks out on Stiles face. “That’s part of your job, you know. I just—I—Geez, help a guy out!” He struggles to hop over the side of the tank, snorting with laughter when Derek lifts him effortlessly like he were a wet chihuahua stuck in a bathtub and not a grown man.

“You could have called someone from your station,” Derek chuckles. He’s not really upset about it at all, but he had promised revenge and he can’t just let that go. Not when it comes to Stiles.

“That wouldn’t have been as much fun,” Stiles admits, stepping closer until their noses are almost touching. They’re so close and Derek’s gaze drops to Stiles’ mouth. It had been a great kiss on the ferris wheel, he knows that Stiles is at least attracted to him— it would be impossible to have that heated, that great, of a kiss if he weren’t. The thought crosses his mind that maybe Stiles wants to do it again too, that maybe they can at least have this. He moves to lean forward again, when he
suddenly hears his name being called.

He pulls back and feels like he’s the one that’s been drenched in cold water because Paige is standing just feet away, her eyes wide as she looks between him and Stiles.

“I uh…I texted you,” Paige stutters, her face slowly losing the evidence of surprise. “You never responded.”

Derek winces, remembering the text she had sent, asking if he was at the carnival and where.

“Sorry, I forgot to reply,” Derek admits. It’s the truth, although surprising to them both. Derek’s never forgotten to respond before. Not once. Paige’s lips thin, but she nods in understanding.

“You guys look like you’re getting along well,” she says with a smile, though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. She looks sad and Derek has the feeling that she wasn’t just asking where he was so that they could hang out. She’s upset over something.

“Stiles, do you mind if Paige and I talk for a bit?” Derek says.

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll see you later.” Stiles quickly turns to face the dunk tank, starting to take the sign off now that it was getting to be too cold for the event.

They walk for a few minutes in silence, Paige letting out little upset sniffles every now and then. Derek waits patiently for her, knowing that she doesn’t like to talk about what’s upsetting her until she’s ready.

“Adam and I have been fighting,” Paige admits lowly, her breathing hitching with the effort to keep her tears at bay. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek says.

Paige just shakes her head, her bottom lip trembling. “Sometimes I can’t tell if he’s still in love with me. He’s been getting mad a lot lately, over stupid things. It’s like he’s constantly losing his patience with me.” Paige wipes at her eyes, letting out a frustrated groan. “I hate that I’m even crying over this, it’s so stupid, every couple hits their rough patch, right?”

“That’s what I’ve heard,” Derek says. “But if it’s upsetting you this much, maybe you could try talking to him or go see a counselor.”

“A counselor?” Paige repeats.

“A couple’s counselor. They might be able to help you guys find out what’s causing him to be so upset,” Derek says.

“But what if this is all because he’s seeing someone else? What if he doesn’t love me anymore and wants to leave? What if he doesn’t even want to try counseling?” Paige asks, tears starting to trail silently down her cheeks.

“Wouldn’t you rather know?” Derek asks softly. “Besides, I’ve seen you both together. I don’t think he’s fallen out of love with you.” Derek scoffs at the idea. He can’t imagine that at all.

“You don’t?” Paige asks.

“I don’t. I think you should ask him to tell you what’s wrong and if he doesn’t want to, you can try
counseling. But I think he will be willing to talk it out with you. He adores you,” Derek says, pulling Paige in for a hug when she starts to quietly sob.

“I really hope you’re right,” Paige says, her voice muffled against his chest.

“I’ve envied your relationship with Adam for a long time. There’s no way he is going to stop loving you and give up this marriage without trying to fix things first. He’s a good man, even if he’s being moody lately.” Paige’s arms wrap tighter around his back in response to the kind words, her sniffing buried in his shirt.

It’s true, he has envied their relationship for a long time. He’s wanted something as wonderful as that for what feels like ages. And, though he might care deeply for Paige, he would never wish for her marriage to end; would never wish for Paige to go through that kind of pain. He just wants her to be happy, even though that outcome will never truly include him.

In all the times he’s said that to himself over the past few years, he thinks that it finally might be true this time.
CHAPTER EIGHT (Episode Seven: The Trip from Hell)

The fire has been put out and the danger is over, but the noise of three angry college roommates has yet to dissipate. They’re standing out in the lawn in front of the building, angrily watching as fireless smoke pours out of their dorm room.

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t me!” Alexander yells.

“No, of course not, it’s just a coincidence that the dorm blew up when you decided to bake another goddamn pie,” Michael snaps.

“Actually…” Erica starts, but is quickly interrupted by the feuding students. Boyd and Isaac step out of the stairwell of the apartment and pull down their masks, matching looks of interest forming on their faces when they see the commotion.

Alexander starts to pace in his aggravation. “My pie had nothing to do with this. I’ve been baking for years and never even burnt a single thing, let alone set a building on fire!”

“Are they still arguing over whose fault it was?” Boyd mumbles, stopping between Erica and Derek. Derek smirks and nods, watching the scene unfold with mild amusement. They get called over to the college dorms all the time, usually for students sleepily burning popcorn or trying to cook their first meals. This is their first actual fire at the college though.

“Why do you even have to bake so much anyway? Don’t you have a life?” Steven finally chimes in, taking Michael’s side.

“I told you! I’m baking them for the hockey team’s fundraiser,” Alexander says defensively.

“Do you want to tell them or should I?” Erica asks her coworkers. She looks excited, so Derek waves for her to go ahead. “Hey, knuckleheads, whose bright idea was it to use one outlet to power almost all of your stuff?”

“What,” all three say in unison, turning to look at Erica with matching expressions of confusion.

“There were two power strips plugged into a single wall outlet. Want to guess what was attached to those? Let’s see…I saw a PS4, a TV, a toaster oven, three phone chargers, a laptop charger, and at least two or three other things. Do you know what happens when you plug in too many things inside an outlet?”

“It uh…catches fire?” Michael guesses.
“Bingo.” Erica grins.

“I told you it wasn’t me!” Alexander shouts.

“Just be more careful, alright?” Isaac says, speaking loudly to be heard over the three boys starting to bicker again. “Spread out your appliances and don’t attach them all to one outlet.”

“Also, you might want to let your apartment air out for a while. We turned on your fans and opened the windows, but it might take a couple of hours for the smoke and smell to clear out,” Erica instructs.

They can hear the roommates still yelling at each other when they get back onto the truck.

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Derek wipes his hands over his face, groaning when they’re sent on another call. The day just keeps getting longer and, for some reason, they keep getting called out. It must be because it’s a full moon. He snorts at his own internal joke. It’s ironic, really, that the werewolves are out and acting normal, driving around to help while humans seem to be the ones acting strange and abnormally.

He tries to stifle a yawn, but just ends up covering it with his hands, though he knows his betas heard it. Boyd looks at him with a raised brow— he knows that Derek had yesterday off. There’s no reason he should be tired— especially with the pull of the moon thrumming in his veins. But Stiles had worked a night shift last night and didn’t come back until six in the morning, which never used to be a problem. But, after so many weeks together, Derek can’t seem to fall asleep anymore without hearing the steady sound of Stiles’ heartbeat coming from the living room. He had been up the whole night waiting impatiently for the sound of the apartment door opening, only to have to go into work just two hours later himself.

He tenses as his phone vibrates in his pocket, but he knows it’s Paige. It’s been Paige every time his phone went off these past two weeks— she’s upset over Adam and looking for support, for advice, for help from the people she cares about during these tough times as she struggles to maintain her marriage. He knows he shouldn’t feel so disappointed by the fact that it’s her texting him, but he does. He can admit to himself that a small part of him lights up with hope at the thought that it might be Stiles texting him, just to say hello or to share some random fact that popped into his head. It’s been five weeks, and Stiles has grown on him impossibly fast.

But Stiles never does text.

He doesn’t check his phone.

“You look tired,” Boyd comments.

“Couldn’t sleep,” is all Derek says.

“That’s a new development. Stiles keep you up? Did you finally gather up your nerve to ask him out?” Erica asks from behind the wheel, her eyes steady on the road.

“I don’t have to ask him out, he’s already my husband,” Derek says gruffly.
“Pretend husband,” Isaac corrects.

“Pretend lover, but real husband,” Boyd clarifies. “They are legally married.”

“He thinks it’s all pretend, so you should actually ask him out. That way he knows your feelings are real,” Erica says.

“I don’t have feelings,” Derek grumbles, though even he can hear his heart skip on the lie. His ears burn at Erica’s mocking laughter. Why did he have to recruit such nosy, defiant betas?

He regrets it; truly, he does.

Sometimes.

“You do. Ever since he kissed you, you have had feelings. Real, adult feelings. For a human,” Erica sing-songs.

“I still don’t know how you found out about that,” Derek growls, baring his pointed teeth when Erica looks away for a moment to stick her tongue out at him.

“I have my sources.” Erica grins.

“She bribes Greenberg for details,” Boyd states.

Erica gasps and reaches past the driver’s seat to smack his shoulder playfully. “Babe, you can’t give away my secrets like that.”

“I should have known,” Derek sighs.

“I think I watched the video like five times. The sounds you guys make while making out…God. It was seriously the hottest thing I have ever seen. It was like porn,” Erica says.

“You watched it?” Derek exclaims. Though, really, it’s Erica. He shouldn’t be surprised.

“What does it matter? It’ll be aired all over national TV in a few months anyway. I just got an early preview,” Erica says. Derek groans into his hands. “You’re so dramatic. Only you would be this dramatic over having feelings for your husband.”

“It’s not that simple,” Derek says.

“It could be,” Erica says.

“He smells like it would be simple,” Isaac says with a snort.

“Are you calling my husband ‘easy’?” Derek asks with a grin that just happens to show off the sharpness of his fangs.

“I, uh, no. Sorry,” Isaac backtracks. “I just meant that uh… he always smells like…y’know.”

“Arousal,” Boyd says flatly.

“That,” Isaac agrees.

“Being attracted to me is not the same as wanting to stay married to me,” Derek says. “It doesn’t work like that.”
“I don’t know. I think it works like that for Stiles,” Isaac states. “He’s kind of simple.”

“And now you’re implying that he’s dumb?” Derek’s eyebrows raise.

“You know, I think I’m just going to stop talking,” Isaac says.

“I think it’s cute that you’re getting so defensive over him,” Erica coos.

Derek sits back against the seat, letting his head fall back against cold metal. Maybe it would be that simple, to just admit his feelings for Stiles—but this whole charade was his idea. And, after their rocky start, it’s hard to imagine that Stiles would actually feel anything at all for Derek. He doesn’t want to let himself hope, doesn’t want to have these feelings for another just for it to end with him being left behind.

Again.

“We’re here,” Erica suddenly announces.

They’re pulled up to the front of the local community center where they had received a call of patrons feeling unwell. Naturally, they’re expecting a bit of a mess already. Maybe some people throwing up from food poisoning or uncooked food.

They step through the glass doors and are met with utter chaos.

It’s Bingo night for the senior ladies of Beacon County, and the firefighters have become well acquainted with many of the attendees over the years—usually due to minor accidents and falls. The affair has always been a peaceful and quiet one. However, today it is anything but.

There are old ladies hunched over and vomiting black goo, while others jump on tables and claw at the walls, their eyes glowing various colors.

“I think we’re going to need backup,” Isaac says.

Boyd immediately radios in for help—in any department, who may be available. He adds a warning that there are feral shifters, so that human backup will be prepared upon their arrival. Derek spots at least one elderly woman with glowing red eyes and he knows instantly—this could be some real trouble.

“Help…us,” one woman manages through gritted teeth. Her white hair is short and curly, her eyes flickering between alpha red and human brown. She appears to be in her seventies, maybe a little earlier, and Derek recognizes her as Georgia—a woman whose husband had died last year from a heart attack. He had been the alpha until his death, passing the power to Georgia, her eyes glowing red as she had cried at the scene.

He knows there aren’t many ways to affect so many shifters at once. Either they all ate or drank something bad or they inhaled something. But since he and his team aren’t affected—it must’ve been something they consumed.

“Ma’am—Georgia—what did you eat? Did you all eat the same thing?” Derek asks, pushing forwards and resting a hand on her shoulder. His veins shift to black as he tries to take her pain, but he’s surprised to feel his stomach burning. He looks down at her stomach where she’s pressing her hands, as if protecting the area. That’s when he realizes that she’s not trying to soothe the pain or protect the area; she’s causing the pain.

Her claws are embedded into her stomach.
She’s doing it to herself.

“Don’t,” Georgia snarls and slaps his hand away with a bloodied hand. “The pain keeps me human.” She pants heavily, her eyes a steady red as she glares at Derek. Her arms wrap around her abdomen and Derek can smell the fear and distress coming off her in waves.

“Do you think it’s hunters?” Boyd asks lowly, though it’s pointless in a room filled with werewolves.

“Stay with her, get the humans out,” Derek orders to his betas as he steps towards the kitchen.

Something affecting all of these women has to be something they’ve eaten. They all have years of experience and control, there’s no way they were struggling on the full moon without some outside factor causing it.

Georgia grabs onto his arm, her claws piercing the skin of his arm. “Find. Jeannette.”

“Jeannette?” Erica asks as she steps forward, hands outstretched as if ready to pull her off of Derek.

“My granddaughter,” Georgia says, sweat breaking out on her forehead. Her grip loosens on his arm. “The cook.” Her gaze suddenly goes distant, as if seeing something far away. The scent of fear spikes around her again. “The snake is coming.”

Derek pulls out of her grip, quickly jogging to the kitchen in the back of the building. It’s a surprisingly large room, everything shiny and silver. Large pots rest on the island in the middle of the room, the sink filled with dirty dishes. Most notable, however, is the young woman in the corner of the room.

She has to be around eighteen or nineteen. Her hair falls down to her shoulders in a mop of curls and her skin is tan, but spotted with freckles. She’s frantically tearing through the cupboards, a cookbook resting on the counter in front of her.

“Oh my god!” She startles when she sees him, her heart pounding inside her chest. She looks completely panicked, her eyes red and puffy from tears. “Oh my god, I think I did this. What did I do? What did I do? Oh my god.” She hiccoughs through sobs, looking pleadingly at Derek for help.

“What were you trying to make? What ingredients did you use?” Derek asks calmly. The young woman— Jeannette— is shaking when she hands him the book. It’s a simple stew, although it requires quite a bit of herbs and seasonings. It shouldn’t have been difficult to make though and definitely shouldn’t have caused a reaction like this with the shifters.

“These are all the ingredients. I didn’t move them or anything,” Jeannette says, pointing to the mess on the counter. Derek takes a step forward and immediately smells it— wolfsbane. He picks up a small bottle filled with tiny green bits. There’s a shine to it when he shakes it— a hint of a purple shine to the ingredients. It smells thickly of wolfsbane and something else.

“What’s wrong? Is it expired? Look, I’m not a good cook, okay? I don’t usually do this, but Grandma asked me to fill in for the woman who usually cooks for them and I thought ‘hey, I can make a stew, how hard can that be?’ I didn’t mean to use bad ingredients— I just didn’t think to check them,” Jeannette explains in a rush.

“This is wolfsbane,” Derek says flatly.
Jeannette’s face goes pale. “I—What? how do you know? Can you smell it? I’m human, I didn’t—my older brother, he’s a Were and he uses it all the time on his food and is fine. He says it adds flavor. How can that be wolfsbane?”

Derek holds up a finger and dials a number on his phone. If there’s anyone who can tell him what is going on, it’s Deaton, the local emissary. He quickly relays what information they know— all of the shifters are affected, there’s a bottle that smells like wolfsbane and something else, it has the appearance of very tiny chopped up pieces of leaves, and there is a purple shine to it.

Deaton hums for a moment, the sound of flipping pages coming through the speakerphone.

“Aha,” Deaton says and Derek’s back straightens as he waits for the answer. “It sounds like the acid version of wolfsbane.”

“Acid? Like, acidic? It’s burning them?” Jeannette asks shakily, her eyes wide and horrified.

“No, I highly suspect your patients are experiencing a very uncomfortable acid trip,” Deaton explains, tone professional and stoic as always. “It’s likely that the full moon is making the effects even worse than normal.”

Jeannette’s expression is a mixture of shock, guilt, and horror. Her hands fly to her hair, tugging on it in surprise. “Oh my god, I drugged my grandma’s bingo group?”

Derek bites down on his lip because this isn’t funny, it really isn’t. But he can’t help but think about how hard Stiles is going to laugh when he finds out that a group of elderly ladies accidentally got to experience their first acid trip.

“Is there an antidote?” Derek asks.

“I’m afraid all they can do is rest and wait for it to flush out of their system. You should take them to the hospital, though. Giving them fluids will help and they’ll need to be watched. I imagine they are having trouble maintaining control of their shifts right now, especially since, if it was served inside a meal, then they ingested more than is recommended for a…ahem…good time.”

“I’m going to kill my brother,” Jeannette snarls, then pausing as realization dawns. “Oh my god, my mom’s going to kill me.”

“Nobody’s going to kill anyone,” Derek says, thanking Deaton and then hanging up. He motions for Jeannette to follow him as he walks back into the gymnasium.

It’s even more chaotic than it was before.

Derek immediately spots Scott and Danny restraining one of the werewolves, yelling for someone to get a stretcher with restraints. Derek’s mind halts immediately, because if Scott and Danny are here, then— he whips his head around, immediately searching for the familiar scent.

He finds Stiles across the room, consoling a sobbing woman covered in black vomit.

“It’s gonna be okay, Mrs. Oak, I promise I’ll be right back. I just have to check on Susanne,” he hears Stiles say consolingly.

Derek steps forward to go to him; he’s human. He shouldn’t be left alone in a room full of out of control shifters.

He’s interrupted before he can take a single step.
“Derek!”

Jackson shouts frantically as one of the old ladies—an alpha—shifts and *roars*. The tables shake with the sound and Derek’s eyes glow red in response. The woman swipes at Jackson and he’s barely able to dodge out of the way in time.

“A little help please!” Jackson yells, his voice breaking as he dodges another swing.

Derek snarls and slams into the woman, pushing her against the wall and pinning her arms to stop her from clawing at him. He tries not to feel bad about attacking an old lady, out of control or not, but the guilt seeps through anyway. He just hopes that she’ll understand in the morning.

The old lady bends her neck, futilely snapping at his wrists with sharpened teeth, trying to bite away his hands but not quite able to reach. As if realizing the futility, she resorts to growling threateningly as she continues to struggle against his hold, her eyes glazed over and not really seeing.

Suddenly there’s a hand stabbing the woman’s neck with a syringe and she slumps forward, unconscious in his arms. Derek gently lowers her to the ground as he pants from the effort it took to keep her restrained. She might have been old, but she was feral and an alpha—the combination giving her a lot of strength.

Derek glances over to where Danny is grinning at him as he seals away the syringe in a waste bag.

“Thanks,” Derek says.

“Don’t mention it.” Danny shrugs. “Any idea what’s going on?”

“Deaton says it’s acid wolfsbane,” Derek says.

“What, like—they’re all tripping balls right now?” Danny asks. Derek nods. “Geez, that’s…wow. Alright. I’ll let the others know.”

Derek turns to see that multiple patients, all unconscious, are being carried out on stretchers headed for the hospital. The chaos is slowly starting to calm down and for a moment he stops and takes a breath. This might not be as bad as they thought. If they can just get everyone to the hospital to recover quietly… Of course, that’s when it happens.

The sound of Stiles shouting in surprise and *pain* pierces through him like a bullet, sending a wave of coldness sweeping over him. The strong smell of blood quickly follows and, without a moment of conscious thought, Derek is darting towards the source.

Georgia has lost all control. She’s fully shifted, sprouting fur and fangs as she tackles Stiles to the ground with her heavy form. Her bear-like claws swipe at Stiles’ arms from where they are protectively shielding his chest. Derek’s about to lunge to attack when Scott jumps in with a syringe, instantly sedating Georgia.

“Danny! My kit!” Scott shouts. Danny rushes over with his bag, but Derek grabs it from him and quickly drops it beside Stiles.

“Let me—” Derek starts, but Scott barely spares him a glance.

“You’re still shifted, man,” Scott says as he pulls out bandages and alcohol. Stiles groans in pain as the wounds are disinfected and wrapped in bandages. Thankfully, they don’t appear to be that deep, but they’re bloody and painful if Stiles’ expression is anything to go by.
“Can I just—” He doesn’t know how to say it. He just *needs* to touch Stiles, needs to reaffirm that he’s okay. Scott should understand that, but he’s still there— blocking him from getting to Stiles.

“Claws,” Scott says pointedly. Derek glances down and realization finally hits him. Scott’s right, he’s completely shifted and he doesn’t remember it happening. Doesn’t remember losing control like that, but he must have. For the first time since he was a teenager, he’s lost control of his shift. Derek’s eyes must be wide, he’s sure, as he stares down at his hands in a mix of wonder and fear. He steps back, but stops when he feels something tugging at his leg.

Stiles’ hand is wrapped around his ankle, keeping him from moving away. Derek’s confused eyes meet curious brown ones.

“Hey, Big Guy, what’s got you so worked up?” Stiles asks, as if that even needs to be asked.

“You just got attacked,” Derek growls.

“Yeah, by an old lady. I’d’ve thought you’d find it funny,” Stiles says with a lopsided grin. “She was growling about magic mushrooms and swirling stars just a minute ago. I think she might be high, dude. How crazy is that?” His grip loosens around Derek’s ankle, as if realizing that he’s not leaving.

Derek frowns. “It’s not funny, I don’t like it when you’re injured.”

Stiles looks surprised by that confession and that makes a part of Derek shrivel in shame. Has he really been that awful to make Stiles think that he’d find it funny if he were injured? Scott clears his throat and backs away to allow Derek closer. Derek kneels beside Stiles and he reaches out with human hands, resting his palm against Stiles’ neck. His arms burn as his veins turn black and he takes Stiles’ pain. It’s the least he can do, to make up for failing as a husband— for making Stiles think that he didn’t matter.

Stiles moans, his eyes fluttering shut as he leans into Derek’s hand. Derek’s heart flutters at the sound, his cheeks heating as he tries not to think about the sound or if Stiles would make similar sounds in other contexts.

“I uh…Oh you guys hear that? I think Allison needs my help with a…thing…” Scott says awkwardly, gesturing over his shoulder and leaving them alone.

“He’s socially aware sometimes,” Stiles sighs, his lips twitching up in amusement.

“I’m sorry,” Derek says roughly.

“What for?” Stiles asks, his eyes fluttering back open and they stare into Derek’s. They’re truly a beautiful color— a mix of brown with a hint of a golden yellow hue. It reminds him of honey whiskey.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to you faster,” Derek says lowly, because it’s easier to say than ‘I’m sorry I’m a bad husband’. Stiles rolls his eyes and pulls Derek’s hand off of his neck. Derek opens his mouth to protest, but is quickly quieted by Stiles’ fingers playing with his own.

“You didn’t let me get injured, dummy. It just happened and I’m fine. Yes, they hurt, but they’ll heal in no time,” Stiles says. He releases Derek’s hand and pushes himself off the ground with a wince, though he huffs a laugh when Derek’s hands instantly reach out to steady him and leech his pain once again.

Stiles’ eyes bounce curiously between Derek’s as if searching for something.
“You care,” Stiles says, voice filled with awe. “Like, you actually care about me.” He looks stunned, as if the possibility had never occurred to him before.

Derek’s hands instantly withdraw.

“No, I don’t,” Derek says, because Stiles can’t know. He can’t know about Derek’s feelings; it’s too soon. He won’t feel the same, he couldn’t possibly. Not with the way Derek’s been acting as a husband. There’s no way that Stiles could feel the same. He can’t know. Not yet.

Stiles takes a step and sucks in a sharp breath of pain. Derek darts forward again, his hands grabbing at the bare skin showing at Stiles’ waist to take his pain.

Stiles’ eyes shine with victory and he smirks.

He won.

He knows.

Derek swallows thickly, pulling away his hands again, though slower this time. Defeated.

“You do. You care. You worry about me. You like me.” Stiles’ grin grows bigger as he teases. Derek flushes, noticing his betas stopping to stare at the commotion.

“Can we not…do this here,” Derek grits out. Stiles continues to smirk, but nods.

“Yeah, I’ve got to go back to the station to fill out paperwork anyway. But we are so talking about this at home,” Stiles says with a wink. “I’ll race ya there.”

He strides easily after the last of the paramedics, clearly having faked the pain just moments before. Derek can’t help but be amused and impressed, his heart beating quickly in his chest from their conversation.

Stiles hadn’t seemed bothered by Derek’s feelings, and he had called their apartment ‘home’.

Home.

o0o0o0o

Derek opens the door to the apartment hours later, having had to fill out paperwork and explain to the hospital’s nurses exactly what Deaton had told him about the elderly patients’ condition.

He anxiously steps into the apartment, not knowing what to expect when he enters— Stiles had been acting strange when they parted and now they both know he knows about Derek’s feelings.

Whatever he might have been expecting, though, it wasn’t this.

Stiles grins from the couch, pushing himself up and forward until he’s standing just a few feet away. “Hey, honey, welcome home,” he says with a smirk, his eyes sparkling with humor Derek doesn’t quite understand. He only becomes more lost when Stiles strides the rest of the way forward, wrapping a hand around Derek’s neck and pulling him into a kiss.

It isn’t a gentle kiss— it’s heated with intent as Stiles’ lips and drag against his own, his tongue following the same path just a beat after. To say Derek’s confused is an understatement, but he responds anyway.
The scent of Stiles is thick in his nostrils, acting like a drug and making him feel alight. He pushes closer, dragging a hand up Stiles’ back until his hand rests against the nape of his neck.

“You…” Stiles pulls back and tries to speak, but Derek pulls him in again, effectively shutting him up for once. Stiles doesn’t seem to mind too much. He hums with pleasure as Derek gently bites at his lip and pulls back, lifting up on Stiles’ shirt until he gets the hint and tugs it off himself.

Derek’s hands instantly start to explore the bare skin and he pulls back to see for himself how Stiles’ skin is truly dotted with moles everywhere. His fingers drag against the beauty marks and Stiles shivers, his eyes blown wide as he watches Derek.

“You’re beautiful,” Derek murmurs lowly, leaning forward to put his mouth against Stiles’ neck. Stiles tilts his head, wordlessly giving Derek more access. He lets out an approving hum, his teeth scraping teasingly against the skin. Stiles’ hands start to tug forcibly on Derek’s shirt and Derek pulls back just long enough to remove his shirt before going back to putting his mouth on every inch of Stiles’ skin.

“What’re we doing, Derek?” Stiles asks. Derek moves again, trailing little nips and kisses to Stiles’ neck and jaw until reaching his mouth and diving in again. Stiles’ hands cling to him as Derek takes a step and they stumble backwards into the edge of the couch. Stiles’ knees buckle against the couch’s arm and he tumbles back onto the cushions. Derek is tugged down with him and Stiles hisses at the sudden weight and pressure against his bandaged arms.

“Sorry,” Derek murmurs, adjusting his weight to his knees on either side of Stiles’ waist, caging him in. Not that Stiles seems to mind. He stares up at Derek, his face blank despite his reddened cheeks.

“What are we doing?” Stiles repeats. He’s panting lightly from kissing and his neck is bitten red in multiple places. It takes all of Derek’s restraint not to push forward and continue, to claim Stiles for his own.

“Shouldn’t you know? You started it,” Derek says gruffly, his voice deeper than normal with arousal and frustration.

“Yeah, but I know what I want out of this. Do you?” Stiles asks. Derek’s brows furrow, not understanding why Stiles wants to talk when they could go back to kissing. Everything is better when they’re kissing.

Derek remains silent, not knowing what Stiles wants him to say. Does he want him to admit his feelings? That he wants more than just sex from Stiles?

“You care about me,” Stiles states. Derek rears back, pushing himself to his feet. So he wanted to talk about his feelings then. Stiles watches him with knowing eyes as he sits up on his elbows. Derek flushes and opens his mouth to deny it, when Stiles continues, “I care about you too.”

Derek freezes.

He glances around suspiciously as the reality of what was happening finally catches up with him. But he can’t see any cameras anywhere.

Not that that means anything.

He knows the cameras are small and that Finstock likes to stash them around when they’re out. They kept finding them over the weeks in increasingly impressive places— ranging from the obvious places (behind the TV and in their bookshelf) to the better hiding places (inside the
toaster). Although they’ve returned them repeatedly to Finstock, there are bound to be ones that they’ve missed.

So, naturally his first instinct is to think that they must be being filmed again and that Stiles is acting, but... but his heartbeat is steady— fast with excitement, but steady. Not a single hint of a lie. And he’s watching Derek with a serious expression, chewing at his lip like he does when he’s feeling anxious about something.

“I like seeing you smile because you’re happy. I like it when you laugh. But I really like when I’m the reason you’re doing both,” Stiles admits and Derek feels like his mind is reeling. This can’t be happening, it doesn’t make sense. It just doesn’t. Only weeks ago, Stiles had hated his guts. He would have noticed Stiles’ change in feelings, wouldn’t he?

“You were worried about me today— you didn’t see yourself, Derek. You looked...You looked scared. Because I got hurt. You were scared and you lost control of your shift. Don’t deny it, I saw it.” Stiles starts to look annoyed as Derek shakes his head and backs away.

He wants to deny it, doesn’t want Stiles to know, to have that advantage over him.

“I don’t want you to get hurt either,” Stiles says gently, like he knows Derek’s feeling caged and vulnerable, and it’s clear his words have weight behind them. Enough weight to make Derek pause. He doesn’t want Stiles to leave him vulnerable, to reject him the way that Paige did— but he’s not. He’s not.

“What are you saying?” Derek asks quietly, needing to know for sure.

Stiles pushes off of the couch and stalks closer. “Let me show you?” He bites his lips again, unsure, but Derek nods. Stiles lets out a shaky breath and he steps forward, reaching out with both hands to cradle Derek’s cheeks.

Stiles moves forward, pressing a feather-light kiss to Derek’s lips. When Derek’s eyes close, Stiles pushes in again, nipping at Derek’s lips and jaw until his mouth is against Derek’s ear. “Do you want me?”

Derek’s eyes shoot open, burning a bright Alpha red. He stares at Stiles, shocked into silence. How could Stiles not know? Was it not clear enough earlier, with how worried he was? Of course he wants Stiles. He wants Stiles by his side, in his pack, healthy and safe— he wants Stiles in his bed, writhing against the sheets— he wants Stiles. Just wants him.

“Yes,” is all Derek says. All he’s capable of admitting.

Stiles nods with a pleased smile and his eyes shine as he asks, “You want to fuck me?”

He does. God, he does. But right now he needs to know Stiles is safe. Needs to know that Stiles is okay, that he's strong and healthy. Derek wants to fuck him, but he needs something else.

“I’d rather you fuck me.” Derek smirks, his lips pulling into an amused grin at Stiles’ stunned expression.

“Fuck yes.” Stiles grins. He eagerly tears off his jeans, laughing as he stumbles towards the bedroom. Derek can’t do anything but follow, chuckling when he sees Stiles rummaging through the night stand for lube.

“You’re eager,” Derek notes.
“Stop laughing, I’ve been wanting to do this for like… ever,” Stiles says.

“We’ve only known each other for five weeks,” Derek points out.

“A very long five weeks that has felt like forever,” Stiles replies, waving the small tube of lube he’s found.

Derek’s eyes linger on the sight of Stiles naked. He’s truly beautiful— made up of lean muscle and speckled with moles like stars. His cock is already hard, standing tall and thick and ready in a way that makes Derek’s mouth water. He’s tempted to get on his knees and put his mouth around it, but Stiles seems to have other plans. “Get on the bed and remove your pants.”

“So romantic,” Derek says, though he obeys easily.

He’s right though, it has been a long five weeks. Long enough to make his heart pound with excitement at the thought of finally getting to have Stiles. He may have disliked Stiles for most of their time together, but he gets the feeling that it wasn’t just dislike that made him so hostile towards Stiles. The human is handsome and quick-witted, willing to challenge Derek in any way possible. It drives Derek insane with the desire to shut him up— most of his fantasies revolve around that. Shutting Stiles up. Usually using his mouth or cock.

Stiles watches him with hungry eyes as if he can read Derek’s mind and see the fantasies he’s thinking about. He coats his fingers with lube, letting it warm before moving forward.

“I try,” Stiles quips. “On your front or back?”

Derek answers wordlessly, turning onto his stomach. Heat and anticipation curls in his gut as he feels the bed dip with Stiles’ weight. His heart stutters as fingers knead his cheeks and Derek hums approvingly; he hasn’t had anyone play with his ass in far too long. He’s almost forgotten how good it feels.

Stiles’ fingers pull his cheeks apart and Derek waits for the feeling of lubed fingers pushing into him, but he jolts with surprise when there’s a hot breath against his hole instead.

“What are you—” He’s cut off by a choked moan in his throat when Stiles’ hot, wet tongue swipes against him— against his hole that clenches in surprise at the feeling. Holy fuck. Stiles dives back in, his tongue flicking teasingly and pressing down in long swipes. Stiles groans with pleasure, as if he were the one being rimmed and not the other way around, while Derek gasps at the incredibly intimate feeling.

He’s never been rimmed before and never would have imagined anyone doing it so enthusiastically. It feels incredible— hot and wet, sending shocks of pleasure through his body. Stiles’ lube-slicked fingers clench and pull at Derek’s cheeks, keeping them open as Stiles tries to devour him.

“Please,” Derek chokes out when he can’t take it anymore. He needs to be fucked, needs to feel Stiles inside him. His eyes widen when Stiles pulls away, but before he can complain, there’s a finger pushing into him. He can feel his rim give easily at the action and he moans as he’s breached.

“Oh?” Stiles asks, voice rough.

Derek pushes back against the finger, nodding enthusiastically. “More, Stiles. More.”

Stiles sucks in a breath at his name, as if surprised. Something in Derek’s mind clicks into place,
reminding him that Stiles has had bad relationships, that he’s been cheated on time and time again. It suddenly seems important that Stiles knows that Derek’s not thinking of anyone else, would never imagine anyone else when having sex with him. He picks up Stiles’ name like a mantra, whispering it over and over as Stiles works him up to three fingers.

Derek continues to fuck back onto the fingers, impatiently waiting for his cock. He’s burning up with desire—desire to be sucked, to be stuffed full and filled. Fuck, he wants it. He needs it. He turns his head to see that Stiles’ cock is painfully red, slick at the tip with precum.

As if noticing Derek’s impatient gaze, Stiles’ pulls his fingers out and lines up the blunt head of his cock against Derek’s rim, pressing slowly forward. Derek pushes back onto it, enjoying the burn and the stretch as it enters him.

Derek grunts, his body relaxing as Stiles slowly pushes in and out, setting a teasing pace that has Derek gripping at the sheets and pushing back for more. He’s stopped by Stiles hand pushing down against his shoulder blades, pushing him into the mattress and forcing him to take what Stiles is giving him—slow pace and all.

“Stiles,” Derek growls. Stiles lets out a huff of amused laughter and he moves forward, biting gently at Derek’s ear.

“Yes, husband o’ mine?” Stiles says, grin evident in his voice. Derek can’t stop the pleased feeling that rushes through him at Stiles calling him his husband. God, he hated that term weeks ago. But now… Now he wants to hear it every day.

“Come on,” Derek says.

“What do you want?” Stiles asks cheekily.

“Fuck me,” Derek growls.

“I am,” Stiles says teasingly. Derek’s fingers clench in the sheets. He takes it all back, Stiles is awful.

“It’s not enough,” Derek says. “I need more.”

“More?” Stiles hums. “Do you mean faster?” His hips pick up their pace and push in and out, faster, faster. It’s still not right. “Or harder?” Derek groans as Stiles pulls out further on each thrust, pushing in with more force each time. But it isn’t enough. It isn’t what he needs. The feeling inside of him that it wasn’t quite right.

Derek reaches back and grabs at Stiles’ arm, tugging with force until Stiles falters and falls on top of him. Derek sighs at the feeling—the length of Stiles’ body pressed against his, warm and comforting. Stiles let’s out a surprised “oh”, but he accepts the change easily.

He rests all of his body weight down onto Derek, pushing him deeper into the mattress as he continues to drive his perfect cock into Derek’s tight heat. God, he feels so good inside of him, on top of him—surrounding him.

Derek groans into the pillow, his claws—when had he lost control again?—clutching at the sheets to ground himself. Stiles pushes in with a strong thrust and stars light up behind Derek’s eyes—fuck, fuck, fuck. The drag of Stiles’ thick cock, the warm and velvety soft skin pulling out and pushing into his opening—he never knew it could feel this good.

Stiles moves to wrap his arm, the bandages scratchy against his skin, around Derek’s chest and
Derek’s hand releases the sheets to clutch at Stiles’ arm, pushing it closer against him and upwards—a solid weight against his neck, making him feel even more controlled.

Stiles presses filthy kisses against the nape of his neck, his shoulder blades, the tattoo of his family crest between his shoulder. Derek is lost in the feeling of being completely surrounded by Stiles. His mind is blank; he can’t process anything but the feeling of being fucked full with his cock.

It feels amazing.

Stiles’ hips snap faster and faster and Derek pushes back into the movement, relishing the sound of Stiles’ heavy breaths and pleasured groans.

“You’re so good, Der. So good for me,” Stiles praises. Derek presses a brief kiss to the arm around his chest.

“Stiles, Stiles, yes,” Derek grunts as Stiles’ hips start to push in with sharp, powerful thrusts. Each one hits against the spot inside him, lighting him up from the inside. Holy hell.

He can hear the sheets tearing beneath him from where his claws have started dragging. He can feel his orgasm building fast as Stiles resets his pace and starts to pound into him slowly. Tantalizingly slowly.

“Can’t,” Derek grits out. He can’t stop it anymore, but he doesn’t want to come yet. Doesn’t want this to end.

“It’s okay, Der, come for me,” Stiles whispers against his ear, his thrusts speeding up just enough to send Derek over the edge.

“Fuck, fuck,” Derek chants as he comes, the feeling of a wave of pleasure cresting over him. His body shudders and releases and he relaxes completely against the sheets, body still shuddering and tingling from the orgasm. He can’t muster enough energy to care about the wet spot beneath him, just lies still and hums contentedly as Stiles’ thrusts falter and become erratic.

“Come in me,” Derek mumbles, his lips tugging up when it causes Stiles to stutter a string of curses. The idea of Stiles’ scent rubbed onto him—into him—and knowing other shifters will be able to smell it has his fangs itching to drop. Stiles’ hands clutch at Derek’s body with enough strength to bruise if he were human and he pushes in with one more strong thrust before holding his body still over Derek’s.

“Fuck, Der,” Stiles groans, his body trembling before he collapses on top of him. His cock pulls free of Derek’s hole and Derek can feel the cum starting to trickle out, trailing down onto his balls and thighs. The loss of feeling so full has Derek letting out a disappointed exhale, but the feeling is quickly remedied when thin fingers press against his rim, pushing the come back inside.

“Feels good,” Derek says tiredly. He hasn’t felt this loose-limbed and relaxed—from sex in a long time.

Stiles glances at him with a small, pleased smile. “Maybe we should buy you a plug. Keep it in after.”

Derek’s cock twitches in interest at the idea and he groans. It’s too soon for another round. He might be a werewolf, but he doesn’t have enough energy to go again. Still, two fingers press inside of him and he spreads his legs to allow for more access. Stiles lets out a low swear at the sight.

“God, you’re perfect,” Stiles breathes.
“So are you,” Derek mumbles, turning to rest his head on the back of his hands so that he can watch him better. Stiles flushes even more at the praise and he grins dopily in a way that reminds him of Scott’s face when looking at Allison.

“I’m perfect? You don’t care that I’m human?” Stiles challenges, eyebrows raised.

Derek pretends to think about it and grins when Stiles’ eyes start to narrow at the silence. His fingers pull out as Derek shifts onto his knees, pulling Stiles in for a kiss.

“Don’t care,” Derek says against his lips. And it’s true. He knows why the matchmakers chose Stiles despite his request for non-humans— they couldn’t find anyone else who would challenge him, who would tease and banter with him, who would fit in so well with his pack.

No one else could be a better match for him, Derek firmly believes that now.

Stiles exhales deeply out of his nose and his eyes flutter shut. “Good, because I kind of like you a lot.”

“Good. I kind of like you too,” Derek says.

“Good,” Stiles agrees. And he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

06/26/17-- added a couple of lines.

Top Stiles Stilinski/Bottom Derek Hale with implied versatility in the future

EDIT: I mean this in the nicest way possible: do not tell me about your dislike for 'bottom Derek', that isn't my problem and I don't care. If you don't like it, that's fine. You can quietly skip the sex scene.

It is approximately 2,000 words in a 60,000+ word story. You won't miss much by skipping it, k?
Week six is nearly coming to a close and Derek can’t help but feel surprised at how quickly time has passed. It’s been a little over a week since he and Stiles slept together for the first time and things are better between them. Better than he ever thought possible.

They’re spending a lot more time together and talking a lot more through texts when they’re busy at work. At home, they spend a lot of time cuddling on the couch and watching movies like Clue and Batman while Stiles interrupts important scenes with stupid commentary that Derek can’t help but find endearing.

At Finstock’s encouragement, they’ve gone on a few dates—real ones—and it’s been…fun. Amazing, really. Derek feels more at home than he’s felt in a long time and Stiles’ presence in the apartment has quickly gone from barely being tolerated to being needed.

Unfortunately for them both, Greenberg has also started to relax more around them. Now, he’s nearly constantly making comments about their coupliness or cooing loudly whenever they do something cute. It’s infuriating.

Like now, for instance.

“I swear I’ll break your camera if you don’t get out of my face,” Derek growls, pushing the large camera away.

Greenberg just laughs at Derek’s embarrassed expression and he clutches his camera, desperately trying to keep it safe during his fit of laughter. Stiles is standing next to him looking amused as he holds a plastic container in his hands.

“Your face, oh my god. You…I just…Who brings their date pancakes?” Greenberg tilts backwards and falls onto his butt, still wracked with laughter.

Derek’s ears burn with shame and embarrassment. He hadn’t known it would be such a big deal, bringing Stiles pancakes before their date. He just thought that flowers were bland and that Stiles prefers food as a way of showing his affection.

“Stop laughing,” Derek orders gruffly.

“I’m airing this. The world needs to see this,” Greenberg says through cackles.

“You are not airing this,” Derek replies lowly.

“You signed a contract.” Greenberg grins.

“I didn’t sign anything saying I wouldn’t break each of your fingers until you couldn’t hold a camera anymore,” Derek hisses.

Greenberg goes pale, his hands gripping onto the camera tightly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” Derek says, his teeth growing pointed as he grins.
“Alright, enough posturing,” Stiles says, stepping forward to press a fleeting kiss against Derek’s cheek. “I like the pancakes. It’s a sweet gift; much better than flowers.”

The tension in Derek’s body suddenly dissipates and he smiles softly at his husband. He had made the right decision in forgoing flowers after all.

“Shall we go? We can eat the pancakes at the park before we go to the movies. It’ll be like a mini-picnic,” Stiles says, outstretching his hand in offering. Derek takes it instantly, threading their fingers together as Stiles starts to pull him towards the elevators.

“Hey, wait,” Greenberg stumbles to his feet, hefting the camera onto his shoulder easily. “Did Finstock tell you guys about the reward?”

“Reward?” Stiles asks, stopping instantly and turning to listen to Greenberg with interest. “What reward?”

“He’s planning on giving a reward to the people who create the best ‘audience-shock-inducing drama’ this week—his words, not mine,” Greenberg states.

“What kind of reward?” Derek asks. “Twenty-four hours without creepy cameras or cameramen stalking us?”

“That would be nice,” Stiles agrees.

Greenberg glares.

“It’s a monetary reward, actually. A thousand dollars,” Greenberg says.

Derek frowns. Things have been going well for them lately, he doesn’t want to stir up unnecessary drama—pretend or not—just for a little extra money. Stiles, however, seems to be considering it.

Stiles’ eyes become as wide as saucers. “A thousand dollars? Extra?”

Greenberg nods with a smirk. “Better stir up some drama.”

“I’m just saying, a thousand dollars is a lot,” Stiles whispers, his breath hitching as Derek bites down on the soft part of his ear.

Derek keeps his eyes firmly shut as he nuzzles against Stiles, inhaling as much of the intoxicating scent as possible. He knows that his eyes would be glowing bright red if they were open, which would definitely not be good inside of a darkened movie theater.

“No,” Derek murmurs, continuing to pepper kisses along Stiles’ throat. A thousand dollars is a decent amount of money, but not enough for what Stiles is suggesting. They’ve finally reached a point where they’re happy, content just to be in each other’s presence while they get to know each other more.

It’s been good. Calm, even.

He doesn’t want to risk that.

“You don’t want to fake some good drama? I’m sure we could come up with something,” Stiles
continues, though his breathing starts to grow rough as Derek’s hand reaches down, rubbing at the rough bulge at the front of his jeans. “Maybe ask Peter to come up with some ideas.”

Stiles whines breathily as Derek pulls his hand away with a frown. His eyes quickly lose their burning red color, the mention of his uncle as much of a turn off as a bucket of cold water. “Don’t talk about Peter while I’m rubbing your dick.”

Stiles quirks an eyebrow. “Don’t rub my dick while we’re discussing plans.”

Derek sighs and pulls back, sinking into the uncomfortable seat. There’s a woman crying on screen, walking away from a man in the rain as he watches her go, a longing expression on his face.

Derek wonders if they broke up because the man was hoping to get more money by creating unnecessary drama for a dumbass reality show.

Stiles exhales heavily through his nose, his lips pursing into a sour expression. “Look, I’m sorry. I just…the money is important to me, okay?”

“I can see that,” Derek says, tone clearly bitter at the fact that his husband is too concerned over possible money to enjoy their date together.

Stiles’ frown deepens. “I get that you’re annoyed with me, okay? But if you could just try to understand…”

“I understand just fine,” Derek interrupts. “You care about money. A lot. Enough to want to come up with some scheme so that you can win more money instead of spending the time together as a couple.”

Someone nearby clears their throat pointedly.

“I’m not ‘scheming’ and we can earn money while still spending time as a couple. I’m just trying to play this stupid game,” Stiles responds, voice low as to not disturb those around them.

“Our relationship isn’t a game,” Derek hisses.

Stiles’ eyes narrow. “I didn’t say it was. This reality show is the game and Finstock’s making the rules. Why not try to win some extra prizes along the way?”

“I don’t need extra prizes, I just need…” you. Derek clenches his mouth shut, unwilling to finish that thought. “I need some air.” Derek grabs his jacket and strides down the theater steps, ignoring the frantic footsteps following him.

“You’re overreacting,” Stiles says.

“You’re planning to create drama for us to act out on national TV for some extra cash. What ideas are you thinking about exactly? Me cheating? You cheating?” Derek snaps. Stiles’ eyes widen.

“I’m not interested in that. Maybe you want to play this game for money, but I don’t. I just wanted a relationship.” Derek shrugs, feeling defeated and tired.

“Look, I can explain, just…”

“I need some space,” Derek says. Stiles’ expression falls. “Lucky for you, the cameras are always around. You got the drama you wanted after all.” Derek gestures to the very obvious cameraman hiding behind one of the building’s pillars.
Even if the camera-people didn’t follow them everywhere, they were still wired with mics nearly all the time.

The lack of privacy is starting to get on the last of his nerves.

“Here’s money for my movie ticket. I’m sure you’re worried about that, since money is so important to you,” Derek says, tugging a twenty dollar bill out of his pocket and tossing it towards Stiles’ feet. Stiles’ expression shutters closed, but he ignores the jab.

“I drove you,” Stiles points out when Derek heads towards the exit. “It’s raining. Let me at least drive you home. Then you can have your space.”

Derek pushes through the glass doors and into the rain, ignoring Stiles’ request completely. He’s dialing a number on his phone before he’s even consciously thought about it.

He starts to walk towards home, becoming more and more drenched with every step. He really does feel like the woman from the movie now, only minus the tears. He’s determined not to cry over this, it’s not worth it. Thankfully, it only takes about ten minutes before a familiar, sleek black car pulls up to the sidewalk.

“Get in, idiot,” Paige calls out through the open passenger window. Derek slips into the car, water pooling onto the seat around him. “You’re lucky Adam and I don’t care much about our cars.” She grins jokingly, though the expression falters at Derek’s look.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Paige asks.

“Not really,” Derek says, wondering when things became so difficult that he had trouble talking to his best friend. They’ve barely talked the past two weeks, only communicating with a single text here and there. Paige’s hands tighten on the wheel as if wondering the same thing, but she nods and pulls back onto the road.

“I thought…” Paige hedges, hesitant and choosing her words carefully, “I thought you both were pretending.”

“We are,” Derek says with a mirthless laugh. That was the problem. Stiles didn’t seem to want to stop pretending, not if it meant extra cash.

Paige wisely lets that topic drop.

“Do you want me to drop you off somewhere? The station? Erica’s? Your apartment?” Paige asks.

“Can I stay at yours?” Derek asks, his mind reeling with thoughts of the fight. Had he overreacted after all? Or should he have said more? Been angrier? He doesn’t want to talk about it, not with his nosey pack, not when he hasn’t even finished processing it all himself first.

Paige looks surprised at the request, but nods. “Of course. It’s just me tonight. Adam is….” She trails off, a soft frown on her face as she pulls into her apartment complex. “He’s been staying at a hotel for the past few nights.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek says.
Paige offers him a tight smile. “We’ll work through it. It’s just a misunderstanding.” She pulls into the parking space, eyeing her phone warily as it buzzes. Adam’s name flashes across the screen. “We were supposed to go to dinner tonight to…talk. About things.”

Derek suddenly feels a rush of disappointment in himself. Paige was supposed to be working things out with her husband, but she came to his aide instead. Geez, he really is terrible, isn’t he? He’s a shitty husband and a shitty friend too.

“I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have called you. I’ll call Boyd and…”

Paige shakes her head with a rueful smile. “To be honest, I didn’t feel like seeing him tonight. We’ll just end up fighting— just like every day this week. Don’t worry about it. You know what we’ve always said— pack comes first. Come on.”

She gestures for him to follow her into the apartment.

He does.

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“You smell like Paige,” is the first thing Erica says when he enters the fire station lounge the next morning. Her voice is filled with disapproval, her nose scrunched up as if the idea of the smell of her being on Derek was offensive to her.

Boyd looks up from where he stands at the coffeemaker, his nostrils flaring and a frown forming on his face.

Derek staggers to the couch, falling heavily onto the cushions. The temptation to close his eyes and sleep is almost too much. He and Paige had stayed up late talking about anything and everything as long as it had nothing to do with Adam or Stiles. He feels a little better, actually. As if not talking about Stiles for a few hours and focusing on his friendship with Paige had given him a chance to breathe, to forget his problems and just be.

But when it had gotten a bit too late for them both, they went to their separate rooms and Derek hadn’t been able to sleep. There was too much missing in the guest room— most notably, Stiles’ scent and presence.

But he had needed the space to think about things— about their marriage.

“Stiles and I fought,” Derek says.

Erica makes an inquisitive noise, squeezing herself into the small space between him and the end of the couch.

“I spent the night in Paige’s guest room,” Derek says, his eyes slipping closed as Erica pulls his head into her lap, her fingers carding through his hair. It feels like heaven.

“What did you fight about?” Erica asks softly, her face framed with silky blonde curls as she looks down at him. “You guys were doing so well.”

“I thought so too, but then Greenberg mentioned that we would get a thousand dollars extra if we created enough drama this week,” Derek explains. Erica hums consideringly.

“So you guys would have to pretend to fight or something?” Boyd asks, sitting in a chair opposite them. Derek nods.
“What did Stiles think about that?” Erica asks.

“He wanted to do it. I didn’t,” Derek answers.

“Why not?” Erica prods.

“I don’t know,” Derek says, “I just want to enjoy my time with him. I’m tired of pretending for Finstock.”

“That makes sense,” Boyd says.

“I don’t see why the extra money matters to him when he’s already got you as a husband,” a voice says. Derek’s eyes snap open and he pushes up out of Erica’s grip and into a sitting position, looking at Jackson with a frown. He had been so engrossed in the situation, he hadn’t heard anyone else come in.

Jackson’s words ring loudly in his head alongside the feeling of confusion.

“What do you mean?” He questions.

Jackson smirks, obviously pleased to not be ignored for once. “I mean he probably asked the producers for a rich partner—which he got.” Off Derek’s bewildered expression, Jackson continues, “Everyone knows that Stiles is dirt poor. Like…seriously. Dirt poor. And he’s human. If you think about it, it doesn’t make sense that he was paired with you. Unless…he begged them to give him a rich husband.”

Derek opens his mouth to deny it, to argue that it isn’t possible. But…what if it is? He knows Stiles needs some money, but Stiles had never said he was that broke, that desperate for money.

He hadn’t seen this side of Stiles before, so willing to plot and plan in order to gain extra money, even at the expense of their relationship. What if everything had been a scheme from the start and the matchmakers were in on it? It would result in drama, that’s for sure, once the story got out at the end of the season that they chose to divorce and Stiles had wrung Derek’s vaults dry.

A sense of dread pools in his stomach, the memories of a scheming woman flooding back to him and threatening to drown him. He hasn’t thought of her in a long time, but she is a large reason as to why he is wary of humans. How could he have been so stupid as to fall for it twice? How could he still be so foolish? It all makes sense.

He’s fallen for another Kate.

“Shut the hell up, Jackson,” Erica snarls. To Derek she adds, softer, “You can’t believe that, okay? It’s not true. Things are going well with you guys, don’t start doubting it now.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Derek says honestly, feeling lost. He feels sick, doesn’t want to believe that Stiles would do such a thing to him. But it would explain so much…it explains why the matchmakers ignored his wishes without any explanation and why Stiles was so determined to win the extra money.

“I’m gonna…get some air,” Derek says, wanting to laugh at how often he seems to be using that excuse lately.

“Don’t do anything foolish, Der!” Erica calls after him.

But he’s already sending a text to Stiles.
We need to talk.

He sends a message to Laura saying that he’s taking his break early, a flimsy excuse that Laura immediately sees through.

You literally didn’t even start working today, bro. Laura replies.

Something’s come up. He sends back.

Is it Stiles? Laura asks.

Yes. Is all he says.

Call me later. Laura responds, the text sounding demanding even without help of her voice.

Derek puts his phone away, hopping into his car and making the half hour drive to the EMS station. The trip feels like a blur, as if he’d driven there on auto-pilot, his mind too occupied with possibilities.

The person at the front desk recognizes him immediately and pages for Stiles, to Derek’s surprise. He hadn’t ever visited Stiles’ work before, so how did they know? He doesn’t get to dwell on the thought too much before Stiles is stumbling in, a look of pleasant surprise on his face.

Derek clenches his hands into fists at his side to keep him from reaching forward.

“Oh. Hey, Der. I’m glad you came by. Do you want to get lunch or something?” Stiles asks, rubbing at his neck nervously, clearly unsure as to why Derek is here or if he’s still mad.

“Did you get my text?” Derek asks, tone carefully blank.

Stiles blinks at him. “Oh, uh. No?” He pats at his pants pockets and reaches in with a hand, pulling out the device. Derek doesn’t care to wait for him to read it, it isn’t important anyway.

“How poor are you?” Derek blurts, mentally wincing at his lack of tact. He was supposed to ease into the conversation, to simply ask for an explanation, to hear Stiles’ side of the story. So much for that.

Stiles’ head whips up, his brows furrowing unpleasantly at the question. “Excuse me?” He intones.

“I knew you were having trouble financially. But I was just told that it’s more than that. You’re…”

“Broke. Lost in a rabbit hole of debt,” Stiles finishes blandly. Derek nods stiltedly. Stiles’ fingers are white, clenching tightly onto the phone in his hand.

Derek licks his dry lips, forcing out the question he needed the answer to most. “Did you specifically ask to be put in a relationship with someone who was rich?”

Stiles’ heart hammers loudly in his chest and he looks undeniably hurt by the accusation, but Derek can’t take it back.

His claws pierce the skin of his palms and blood trickles down past his knuckles. He can’t console
Stiles, can’t take his pain away this time.

He needs to know.

“You think I…what? Asked the producers to match me with you because you’re rich or something?” Stiles asks, letting out a hollow laugh at the idea. His bemused smile falls from his face as he takes in Derek’s serious expression.

For a second, Stiles’ eyes grow hopeful and he glances around before leaning in conspiratorially, whispering, “Is this for the reward?”

That’s the last straw for Derek, his patience snapping.

“Not everything is about the fucking money, Stiles!” Derek snaps loudly. He continues lower, “It just doesn’t make sense to me, except for the fact that my family has money. Everyone in Beacon County knows that.” Stiles flinches at the accusations, his eyes wide as if he hadn’t known that at all. But his father is the Sheriff, there’s no way he didn’t know about Derek’s family. No way he hasn’t heard about the fire.

He’s just that good of an actor, Derek can see it now.

He can see it all.

“You never told me you were broke or in debt, don’t you think that is something important to share with your spouse?” Derek hisses. “Unless you were trying to hide it. And the matchmakers…why would they agree to pair anyone with someone so irresponsible with money? It doesn’t make any sense at all.” He takes in Stiles’ clenched jaw, his furious gaze. “You’re not even going to deny it are you?”

“Would it matter what I said? You seem to have made up your mind already,” Stiles says, his eyes like fire as he glares at Derek like he had so many weeks ago.

Coldness sweeps through Derek and he suddenly knows that he’ll never get to have the relationship he wanted so badly. He had let Laura convince him that it was all worth it and he had signed up, wishing for the best. Dreaming of meeting the love of his life.

Now he’ll never get to wake up to see Stiles’ sleep-rumpled hair and dopey grin from the pillow next to him, he’ll never get to raise a family with Stiles, to see him as a father. He feels the sudden weight of the loss of these things he didn’t know he even wanted until now.

Everything is slipping away so fast.

“I came here because I wanted an explanation, to talk about it. But I should have known you wouldn’t deny it. So it’s true then? You asked for this?” Derek’s heart sinks deeper with every breath.

He had thought—had hoped—that they were paired together because they were the best match for each other. He sees now how naive that hope had been.

Stiles looks as if he’d been hit. “Yeah, that’s what you’ve been thinking this past week, right? As we were cuddling, watching shows together, fucking—I’m sure you were wondering ‘Why did they pair us together?’” Stiles scoffs. “You’re such a fucking asshole, Derek! Why is it so hard to admit that you like me? That the matchmakers were right with us?”

“I thought they were!” Derek nearly roars, his voice desperate, and Stiles looks stunned.
“But it doesn’t matter anymore, does it? Since you won’t even deny that you’re with me for the money,” Derek seethes.

“Well, lucky for you, this sham of a marriage is almost over!” Stiles shouts, his eyes becoming suspiciously red as if holding back tears. They stare at each other for a moment in silence, neither of them sure what to do next.

Derek swallowed thickly, his throat feeling thick with panic at the thought of walking away from their marriage, from Stiles. It’s only days before their decision to stay married or divorce and they can’t be fighting before that. They can’t.

An alarm suddenly blares and Derek cringes at the overly intense sound. Scott rushes into the lobby, heading for the doors when he spots them both. He glances curiously between Stiles and Derek, his nostrils flaring—likely picking up the smell of anger and sadness wafting from them both.

“Hey, uh…I got a call to run. You wanna come with?” Scott calls out to Stiles.

“Yeah,” Stiles says softly, defeatedly. He lifts his head to look at Derek, his gaze missing that spark of amusement that was usually there. “The reason I’m not denying it is because I shouldn’t have to. I thought you knew me better than that. I…Yeah.” He cuts himself off and exits through the doors with Scott by his side, his friend glancing curiously back at Derek.

Derek tries not to let it get to him that Stiles didn’t say he’d see him later. So this is it? This is the end of them? They worked so hard to get here, to get to this point. Not that it matters anyway. He shouldn’t want to see Stiles again. Not if he’s really like Kate…

It isn’t until he’s driving home that he can admit to himself that he’s disappointed. He had wanted so badly, no—he had needed to hear Stiles deny it.

But he didn’t.

He texts Laura the moment he’s home to let her know that he’s taking a sick day. It takes an impressive total of four minutes before his phone is ringing.

“What the fuck did you do?” Cora snarls when his picks up the phone.

“What the hell? Cora?” Derek asks, confused. He glances at the caller ID just to be sure, but it still says ‘Laura’.

“You’re on speaker phone,” Laura’s voice chimes in. “Did you go see Stiles?” Her tone is calm, but tinged with a hint of worry.

Derek grunts an affirmation, not wanting to talk about it so soon.

“Oh, Der,” Laura sighs, clearly disappointed. He’s suddenly glad that it’s a regular phone call and not a video call. He’s not sure he could handle her disappointed eyes right now.

“You can’t possibly think that this was a setup for him to get your money,” Erica pipes up.

Derek growls in frustration. “It would make sense! Why else would they have set me up with a human and—”

Erica interrupts with a loud, “Because he makes you happy!”
“—and he never told me he was dead broke!” Derek continues on as if she hadn’t spoken.

Cora’s voice comes through the speaker. “Stiles has been honest about his money issues. He told us the first time we met him. You would have known about it too if you bothered to show up at your own reception, you utter buffoon!”

What? Derek sinks into his couch, stunned by Cora’s admission. Had Stiles really not been hiding it this whole time? But he had never told Derek about it, not once.

Peter’s voice enters the conversation—for fuck’s sake, is the whole world in on this call?—and Derek’s stomach plummets further at what he has to say.

“It’s only to be expected that the kid’s in debt. Of course he’s going to be flat broke when all of his money is going to rent and his father’s rehab payments.”

“How do you know that?” Derek asks, his voice whisper soft though the other’s hear it clearly with their werewolf hearing.

“I have contacts,” Peter says cryptically. Derek rolls his eyes, but lets it go. There are bigger things to discuss. “His father was shot nearly four months ago. He was off duty, trying to stop a robbery in the city. Since he wasn’t on duty, the insurance company refused to cover it. The Stilinskis have to pay all of the medical and physical therapy bills themselves. But the sheriff is no longer working, so…it’s all on Stiles.”

Derek is miserable, the heavy feeling of guilt like a weight in his stomach making him feel sick. He had had no idea. He knew the sheriff was injured, but he didn’t realize…No, that’s just it—he hadn’t realized. He was too busy burying himself in self-pity, worried that he had found another Kate that he hadn’t stopped to really think about it all.

“He’s not some gambling addict or gold digger,” Laura says softly. “He’s just a guy stuck in a shitty system.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” Derek asks, not really expecting an answer. “Why didn’t I know?”

“I thought you knew about him being poor. He was pretty open about it with us,” Laura says sadly, not able to answer why Stiles hadn’t been truthful with him as well.

“You fix this, Derek. You fix it now!” Cora snarls. Derek pulls the phone away from his ear to glare at it, as if Cora could feel the weight of his stare.

“Since when do you even like him?” Derek snipes.

“Have you seen yourself this past week? Because I have. You’ve practically been glowing. It’s the happiest I’ve seen you in a while; it’s disgusting,” Cora mumbles. “How can I not like him when he makes you like that?”

God, even Cora thinks he’s an idiot.

Derek wishes he could sink into the ground until he disappears. He’s really messed up this time.

He quickly ends the call, frowning when he dials Stiles’ phone only to be sent to his voicemail.

He types out a text asking if Stiles will be coming back to the apartment today. He isn’t surprised when he doesn’t get a response, but fear starts to settle in his bones anyway. What if Stiles doesn’t come home at all? He exhales shakily at the thought and he can’t help but wonder when had he
started to care so much? When had Stiles become so important to him?

He knows what this feeling is now, and it is too late. He can admit to himself that he’s falling for Stiles. He’s falling for Stiles and, of course, he had to go and fuck it up like he always does. He is such a moron, such a goddamn fool. He doesn’t want to divorce, doesn’t want to let this man go, not ever.

After a few silent hours, he accepts that he’s not going to get a reply. He sends another text anyway.

I’m sorry. It reads.

The clock hits midnight.

Stiles doesn’t come home.
Stiles doesn’t go to their apartment after taking multiple calls with Scott. He doesn’t go to Scott and Allison’s place even though his best friend offers. Instead, he goes to where he hasn’t spent a night since before college.

He goes home.

“Hi, Dad,” Stiles says with a lopsided grin and red, puffy eyes. His dad looks half-asleep and unamused at the sight of his son showing up on his doorstep at half past one in the morning.

“Aw hell, Kid, you look awful,” his dad says with a sigh, opening the door and his arms. Stiles crumbles in his embrace, letting out a wet exhale as he finally lets tears spill. His father leads him inside, ushering Stiles into a kitchen chair while he makes hot chocolate with milk and marshmallows like Claudia used to when someone was upset.

Stiles angrily relays the story to his father, gesturing wildly as he imitates Derek’s infuriating voice as he basically accused Stiles of being a gold digging whore. His father listens intently as he pours them both hot chocolate in messily painted superhero mugs that Stiles had made in an elementary school art class.

“Have you mentioned your money issues around him before?” His father asks patiently, taking a sip. His face is open and considering, not an ounce of judgement for either side.

Stiles frowns, his fingers strumming against the tabletop in irritation. It’s times like this that he really dislikes his father being a sheriff, he’s too unbiased when Stiles wants him to be on his side.

“Well, no. But it just never really came up. I told him once that I needed the money, I assumed his sisters had told him…” Stiles trails off, his annoyance spiking. This wasn’t his fault, this was Derek’s fault and he wouldn’t be convinced otherwise.

“It’s a serious conversation you have to have with your spouse, Son,” his father says.

“Okay, fine. I should have told him earlier,” Stiles snaps, his expression sour. He takes a large sip of his hot chocolate, the liquid burning his tongue and throat unpleasantly.

“Did you at least explain yourself when he came to you?” His father asks with a pointed look. Why had Stiles thought it would be a good idea to come here again? Clearly that was a bad decision on his part. He regrets it immensely.

“Uh. No, but…” Stiles stops as his father sighs in frustration, wiping a palm across his face as if questioning how he raised his son.

“I need to show you something,” his father says, his expression serious. He disappears for a few moments inside his office, before coming back out with a case file in hand. “This is Derek’s file.”

“You pulled his file? Really?” Stiles asks, surprised and a little amused. “Why do you have that? Were you planning on blackmailing him or something?” Stiles grins, amused, but it falls as he takes in his father’s expression.
He doesn’t look even a little bit entertained at the situation. “My son married a complete stranger and you think I wouldn’t check out the guy’s record?”

“Oh,” Stiles says softly, his fingers trembling slightly as he opens the file that’s dropped in front of him. “Did you find anything good?”

His father sits down slowly and he looks…sad.

That isn’t a good sign.

Stiles swallows down his nerves and reads. He freezes when he reads the headline, his body growing colder with every line below it.

**Four survivors in Hale fire, eleven killed.**

Derek had lost his entire family in a fire—his parents, cousins, aunts and uncles. All except for Cora, Laura, and Peter.

Derek’s voice rings through his ears, “…my family has money. Everyone in Beacon County knows that.”

“He’s rich because…?” Stiles swallows thickly, unable to finish.

“Insurance money,” his father finishes for him. “I had thought he looked familiar, but I never worked this case. I’d heard about it though.”

Stiles’ eyes speed through the paragraphs, looking for answers, for as much information as possible.

“It was arson?” Stiles asks, stunned when his eyes land on the named suspect: Kate Argent. Of the notorious Argent family of anti-werewolf activists. Stiles’ heart drops in his chest. “Argent? Does Scott know? Is Allison…”

“I’ve spoken to them both personally after I read the file,” his dad says, “Allison and her father are no longer associated with her grandfather’s organization. She’s very pro-werewolf, though her father is still…reserved. She seemed truthful. I believe her.”

Stiles nods, feeling some relief at the thought. If his father believes her, then Stiles does too.

“Derek admitted that he was dating her at the time. He was sixteen and she was twenty-three.” Stiles looks horrified, but John continues, “She used wolfsbane to lock them inside while Derek and his sisters had snuck out. They were being punished, but Cora didn’t want to miss her soccer game, so they snuck out to help her get there. They survived the fire because they weren’t there for it. Peter was in the fire, but managed to survive. He was in a coma for a few years after, but has since healed, obviously,” his father explains.

Stiles wonders how many times he had stayed up, drinking whiskey and reading the file, to be able to know it so well.

“Why did she do it?” Stiles asks, unable to continue reading through blurred vision.

“Stiles…” his father looks pained at what he’s about to say and Stiles wants to ask him to stop, not to continue. “Their family vault was ransacked. She stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from them to help fund her father’s campaign.”
Stiles sits ramrod straight, shocked and biting at his lip to keep the tears at bay. She was human and a monster, having stolen so much from Derek—both his family and their fortune.

It suddenly makes sense, why Derek hadn’t wanted to date a human. Why he had been so upset at the idea of Stiles being with him for the money. He must have felt so blind-sided at the time, so scared that Stiles was going to rip everything away from him again. It doesn’t matter how long they’ve known each other—days or weeks—they were still getting to know each other and fear from a trauma like that doesn’t just disappear overnight. But Derek had gone to Stiles to ask him for the truth, albeit a little tactlessly. He had been willing to talk about it, to hear Stiles’ side, but Stiles had ruined that completely.

Stiles’ hand curls into a fist and he inhales shakily, wondering if he’s truly messed everything up. How could Derek trust him again after this?

“Was she ever caught?” Stiles asks, needing to know. But the grim look on his father’s face makes him not so sure he wants to.

“Last rumored sighting was of her in Barcelona. Where she went after that is a mystery,” John says, voice hollow.

Stiles sinks in his seat, knowing that the fact that she’s still out there probably still weighs on Derek’s mind, only adding to his wariness. Of course he would be extra paranoid, since he knows evil can remain free.

“I was hoping he would have shared this with you himself, but it seems you boys don’t know how to have the big conversations yet,” his dad says, disappointment clear in his expression.

Stiles only feels worse when his father continues, “Have you thought about if you’re going to stay married? You have to decide in a couple of days, don’t you?”

Stiles’ mouth drops open in realization. For so long, he had assumed that they were going to end in divorce; of course they would, they could barely stand each other. And when he finally realized he had feelings for Derek, he had assumed Derek hadn’t felt the same. Then they finally got together and Stiles hadn’t thought much about it at all, to be honest. He had never really entertained thoughts about continuing their marriage, but despite their fight, they had been doing so well the past week.

What they have is good.

Sure, they’re struggling to have the important conversations, but they’re learning. They’re growing and becoming better every day, together. They weren’t truly ready for marriage when they had started this, they were both selfish and focused on their own needs, but that’s changing. It has been changing for a while now, if he’s being honest.

Maybe the only way to be truly prepared for marriage is to take the leap and get married, not being afraid to learn as they go.

He’s learned a lot over the past few weeks, about what he wants and needs from a relationship. The things he used to hate about Derek are now some of his favorites. It’s undeniable now that he loves Derek’s company—loves spending time with him even if they’re just snuggled together after a long day or laughing as they eat, telling stories about their days.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.
He wants to stay married to Derek—for...as long as possible. Maybe forever. Oh god, how does he realize this after they've had a huge fight? How is that fair?

“Dad, I think I’ve ruining everything,” Stiles groans, hands tugging at his hair in frustration. What does he do now?

“I highly doubt that. Your mother and I had our fair share of fights, you just have to be willing to go back and talk about it,” his father says.

“Yeah, okay,” Stiles says enthusiastically, jumping out of his seat. He knocks into the table and his mug shakes ominously, but he reaches out to steady it with an embarrassed grin. His father looks unimpressed. “Sorry.”

“It’s three a.m.,” his father points out, raising his eyebrows as Stiles rushes to tug his jacket on as he heads towards the front door.

“But I have to make up with Derek and there’s no time like the present, Dad,” Stiles says. His father smiles, amused, and offers a wave before Stiles darts out the door.

“I want you both over for a Sunday dinner soon!” His father calls out after him. Stiles huffs a laugh and hops into the jeep, hoping to whatever beings exist that Derek will take him back so they can do that.

Stiles opens the apartment door slowly, shocked to a halt when he sees Derek asleep on the couch, his nose buried in Stiles’ pillow. Stiles’ heart flutters at the sight and he can’t help but feel a rush of warmth and hope spread through him.

As if hearing his heartbeat skip, Derek blinks awake, glancing up and almost falling off the couch in surprise when he spots Stiles.

Stiles leans back against the door, nibbling on his lip as he and Derek stare at each other in silence, as if both of them were reassuring themselves that what they’re seeing is real.

“I’m sorry I—” Derek starts, the same time Stiles’ rasps, “I should have—”

They both instantly stop talking and Stiles chuckles lowly. They are ridiculous. “I should have told you. I thought you knew about my finances, because I told your sisters,” Stiles says. “But that’s no excuse, I should have been the one to tell you.” He takes a breath before confessing, “I have literally nothing more than five dollars in savings right now. I’m not careless with money, but with my dad—”

“I get it,” Derek cuts in and the tension seeps out of Stiles’ shoulders. “The others told me. Peter knew about your situation with your dad’s medical bills. He explained it to me. I should have realized though.”

“Peter knew?” Stiles questions.

“Yeah, says he’s got... contacts,” Derek admits with a displeased expression.

“That’s a little creepy.” Stiles says. Derek huffs a laugh and agrees. “Really though, I’m sorry I got mad when you asked. I should have made sure you knew. I’m not in this for your money and I didn’t ask for us to be paired, but I can’t say that I’m not happy we were.”
Derek’s lips twitch, not in amusement, but in a soft smile. He’s clearly pleased by the admission. It loosens something within Stiles and he starts to think they might make it out of this okay.

“I shouldn’t have accused you of being in this for the money,” Derek says. “I know it isn’t true, I guess I just panicked. I should have trusted you and I’m sorry I forgot that for a moment. But I do. Trust you.”

Stiles feels shame well up within him. Before he can think better of it, he’s admitting, “I did though. I signed up for the five thousand dollars.”

Derek stares at him blankly, his gaze unwavering in his faith as he confidently says, “But you wanted a relationship too. Not just the money.”

“Not just the money,” Stiles agrees on a heavy exhale, glad that Derek isn’t freaking out.

“I panicked and I shouldn’t have, so for that, I’m sorry. Next time we have a problem, I will come to you first and we will talk about the issue properly,” Derek says.

Stiles’ eyes widen just a little and he can’t repress the smile that forms on his face, doesn’t even want to hide it, because Derek said “next time” as if he also believes they have a future together. But there’s still more to talk about.

Stiles shifts on his feet, gathering his courage to bring it up. “I didn’t know about you being rich… or why you are.”

Derek nods, as if believing Stiles is just that easy, though his lips tighten into a thin line. “You know now?”

Stiles nods. “I went to my dad’s. He showed me your case file. He told me…about Kate.”

Derek nods. “I went to my dad’s. He showed me your case file. He told me…about Kate.”

Derek’s eyes—for just a moment—flicker shut in pain at the mention of her name. But he opens his eyes, his beautiful multi-colored eyes, and looks determined. “Before Paige, I dated a woman named Kate. I was young and in love with her, and she was older and so much wiser than me. She burned down my house with most of my family inside it. When we had checked our family vault, it became clear that she had stolen…a lot of money from us as well.”

Stiles sucks in a sharp breath at the pain in Derek’s voice, it is so much worse hearing it from him than reading it had been.

But it isn’t over.

“A few years later, I met Paige at college and we dated. I fell for her, as you know. But she…got sick. Really sick, with stage four cancer and, by the time the doctors found it, they said she only had a few more months left.”

Stiles moves to the couch, sitting next to Derek and reaching out to cover Derek’s hand with his own. Derek continues, staring at the ground as he recounts his story. “Laura eventually convinced her to take the bite, but she was so fragile by then. It almost killed her. For a moment, I truly thought it had, and it was awful. I couldn’t…I didn’t want to go through that again, that fear.” Derek’s voice is rough with emotion by the end. Stiles watches him with saddened eyes.

“I didn’t want to go through that kind of pain again, so I became wary of humans. I shouldn’t have held that against you when we met, but I was stuck in the past and I really am sorry for that. I’m sorry I didn’t give you more of a chance sooner, but I hope it isn’t too late now.” Derek looks at
him with hopeful eyes and Stiles darts forward, wrapping his arms around Derek’s shoulders. Derek’s hands grasp at his back in response, pulling Stiles in as tightly as possible without being painful.

“It’s not too late,” Stiles whispers, burying his face in the warmth of Derek’s neck. Derek lets out a relieved breath, his hands rubbing soothingly against Stiles’ back as he starts to sniffle, overwhelmed with emotion.

“Thank you,” Derek whispers against his cheek. Stiles clutches him tighter and closes his eyes, lost in the warmth of possibilities. They have just a few days left to decide their fate as a couple and, for the first time in a long time, he feels excited for what the future holds.
Stiles is fussing with his tie in the mirror, about ready to give up when Derek enters the frame and tugs it loose. Stiles goes cross-eyed as he watches Derek’s hands swiftly tie a neat knot and he can’t help but feel impressed. And turned on. Definitely turned on.

They’re preparing for their annual Police and Firefighter’s ball, an event that surprisingly wasn’t created by Finstock, but rather, has been a Beacon County tradition for nearly forty years.

“I’ve never had this many events in one month before. People are going to think our lives are vastly different than they actually are,” Stiles says.

“It’s reality TV,” Derek points out with a small smile. “I don’t think anyone expects it to be real.”

“You look good in that suit,” Stiles purrs. It’s the same form-fitting suit that he wore to the wedding and he looks just as handsome as he did then. “You’d look better out of it though.”

Derek snorts. “Your pickup lines are still awful.”

“I’d ride your firefighter’s pole any day,” Stiles says with a wink. He slaps Derek’s ass and cackles as Derek flushes.

“There are cameras, Stiles. Your father watches this show!” Derek hisses, scandalized.

Stiles simply grins and tugs Derek by the hand towards the lobby. Derek follows easily, despite being able to pick Stiles up and throw him 50 feet or more if he wanted to.

It’s taken seven full weeks, but he can finally say that he’s happy.

They’re happy.

Their decision is supposed to be made that evening and Stiles knows what he’s going to say. He wants to stay married and, although they’re not supposed to discuss it beforehand because their reactions wouldn’t be as genuine, he is positive that Derek feels the same way.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” Stiles says when they reach the lobby doors. He leans in to give Derek a peck on the lips, relishing Derek’s soft lips under his own. Derek’s eyes flutter shut for a brief moment, before landing on a nearby closet.

“You sure we don’t have a few minutes to spare?” Derek asks, giving the closet a pointed glance.

Stiles snorts a laugh, though the temptation certainly is there. “We’ve got all night for that.”

Derek hums in thought, though his lips quirk into a soft smile. “Are you that sure that we’ll be spending tonight together?”

“Pretty positive,” Stiles whispers, his lips just an inch away from Derek’s. Derek pushes forward, closing the space between them, his lips parting Stiles’ own. Stiles’ eyes fall closed as Derek’s hand comes to rest against his jaw, tilting Stiles’ head to get a better angle for them both.
Kissing Derek has become addictive, something that Stiles craves whenever it’s been longer than ten minutes without Derek’s mouth on his own.

Stiles smiles as Derek pulls away, his thumb pressing against Stiles’ bottom lip and his pupils blown wide.

“I’ll see you later,” Derek says. He presses another soft kiss to Stiles’ lips before walking into the lobby with a smile.

Stiles’ hand reaches up to mindlessly touch his tingling lips. He’s surprised to find himself grinning widely, but Derek seems to have that effect on him.

There’s about an hour before the show actually starts and the volunteer coordinator had put Stiles in charge of manning the Welcome Booth. It has been a long-standing tradition for Stiles to volunteer at the ball so that he could help out the cause and be able to attend with his dad as well. Now, he’s just doing it because he wants to.

He plops into the uncomfortable metal chair and rests his hands on the table, entry tickets on his right and a large half-full donation jug on his left.

The job is pretty mindless and easy. He just has to hand people a ticket to enter the venue after they offer a donation—any amount that they desire to give. Each year, he expects a lot of ones and fives, but he’s always pleasantly surprised at how many people give twenties, fifties and even hundred dollar bills.

“Son,” Stiles’ head whips up at the sound. He hadn’t even seen his dad enter.

“Hey, Dad.” Stiles grins and gives his dad a hug, the table sitting awkwardly between them.

“You look better,” his father notes. Stiles’ flushes at the reminder that the last time he’d seen his dad it was during an angry tirade he’d had at one in the morning.

“Yeah,” Stiles says awkwardly, rubbing at the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Derek and I talked. We’re doing a lot better.”

His father smiles at that and nods. “I’m glad to hear that. I’ll see you inside.”

“Yeah, see you,” Stiles calls after him.

There’s a steady line of people entering and Stiles finds himself pretty busy for the first half hour, before people start to slow down and trickle in every couple of minutes. Most surprising, though, is when Scott comes through the doors, Allison by his side.

“Hi, Stiles,” Allison says with a grin, her adorable dimples showing.

“Allison,” Stiles greets with a smile. “I wasn’t sure you guys were coming, I didn’t see you on the volunteer sheet.”

“Well, Allison’s a cop, so I’m actually attending this year,” Scott says, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink as Allison grins at him.

“He’s my plus one,” Allison adds.

“That’s awesome,” Stiles says truthfully. He’s so glad that things finally seem to be working out for them both.
“Hey, Ally, do you mind if I speak to Stiles alone for a moment?” Scott suddenly asks. Allison agrees easily, telling him to find her by the food tables when he’s ready. Scott grins after her dopily, watching her until the doors shut.

“What’s up?” Stiles asks when Scott’s attention returns to him.

“This,” Scott tugs his backpack off his shoulder and pulls out a large roll of cash. Stiles’ eyes widen at the sight. Holy shit. Scott won the reward?!

“What the hell? How did you win it?” Stiles asks through a laugh. He’s so surprised, but he can’t even be mad because Scott’s expression is so embarrassed. Oh good, the story must be a good one then. His ears are so red Stiles fears they might catch fire.

“Chris Argent shot me. With a gun. Twice,” Scott says lowly.

“What the fuck,” Stiles breathes, eyes wide.

“He might have found Allison and I in a…compromising position…Er…while I was shifted…” Scott trails off, looking pained as he retells the story, unable to even make eye contact. This is the best thing Stiles has ever heard. Nothing will ever top this.

“Oh my god,” Stiles wheezes. “Oh my god.”

“Allison was screaming, and um…” Scott’s face is a fantastic shade of red. “He thought she was being attacked…That I had lost control.” Scott looks so embarrassed by the situation, but Stiles can’t stop from grinning. He’s sure he must look insane with how wide his eyes and grin are.

“It took an hour for Allison to calm him down and explain, but he’d shot me twice by the time that happened.” Scott grimaces at the memory, his hand rubbing subconsciously at his arm—presumably where he had been shot. At least her dad hadn’t aimed to kill.

“Holy fucking shit, Scotty,” Stiles cackles. “Why the hell would you have shifted sex in your wife’s parent’s house? The house of her parents who are former anti-werewolf activists?!” Stiles hiccoughs with laughter.

Scott shifts on his feet, grumbling, “Allison thought it would be hot…”

Stiles laughs even harder at his friend’s discomfort, the whole situation just so ridiculous he wouldn’t believe it if it weren’t Scott. Only something this crazy would happen to Scott.

Stiles’ laughter finally calms down enough for him to say, “You totally deserve that bonus, man. Holy shit. I’m going to record that episode when it airs and I’m going to play it anytime I want to feel better about my life.”

“About the reward…” Scott says, suddenly looking less embarrassed and more shifty. He pushes the roll of money towards Stiles.

Stiles is confused to say the least. “What, you want me to count it? I believe you that it’s a thousand dollars, buddy.”

Scott rolls his eyes as if Stiles is the dumb one. But they both know he isn’t. Stiles wouldn’t have shifted sex in an ex-werewolf-hater’s house.

Stiles immediately shoves it back, adamantly refusing to take it.

Scott starts to pout, resorting to using his sad puppy-like eyes. That isn’t fair and he knows it. “Come on, man. You know I never signed up for the money,” Scott insists.

Stiles resolutely shakes his head. “You won it fair and square.”

Scott smiles sadly. “Let me. He’s like my dad too, you know? Please. I want to help. You would do the same for Melissa or me, wouldn’t you?” Damnit. He knows his dad is Stiles’ weak spot. Stiles finally nods and accepts it, wrapping Scott in the biggest hug possible.

They’ve both been wrapped up in their own drama lately and haven’t been able to see each other as much as they used to, but that’s okay. That’s okay. Sometimes that’s what friendship is— not always being able to be there physically, but simply knowing that you can call them at any time and they will answer. Knowing that they will always be there when it matters.

Scott is the best possible friend he could have asked for.

“Thank you,” Stiles says roughly, wiping at his eyes quickly before stuffing the money in the waistband of his trousers. Scott just grins at him, like giving away a thousand dollars is the easiest decision he’s ever made.

Maybe, for someone like Scott, who cares so much about people, it really is just that easy.

“I’ll see you inside, yeah?” Scott asks. At Stiles’ answering nod, he disappears into the venue.

By the time the clock reaches seven p.m., Stiles starts putting everything away. The table’s stashed away in the props room and the extra tickets thrown away. He’s lifting the heavy jug of donations to bring to the coordinators when the doors suddenly open again.

Paige.

She’s dressed up in a glittering blue evening gown, her hair put into a stylish bun and she absolutely lights up when she spots Stiles.

“Stiles!” She calls out, sounding relieved to see him. But why would she…?

“Paige, he-eeey, what are you doing here?” Stiles asks awkwardly, trying to adjust the jug so that its weight rests more on his hip.

Paige actually looks nervous, which isn’t good. Stiles’ stomach flutters with anxious butterflies, a sense of foreboding setting in.

“I was hoping to talk to Derek, but I…well, I mean, I wanted to talk to you first, of course. You are his husband and all, um…” Paige seems to flounder, trying to come up with the words. “Let me start from the beginning. Uh. Derek came by a few nights ago; I picked him up outside the movies.”

Stiles nods, his palms starting to lose their grip on the jug due to sweat. He knew this already, but where was she planning on going with this? Had she and Derek kissed or something? His heart suddenly sinks with the thought. Oh god, what if they had kissed?

“Nothing happened!” Paige hurries to correct, as if she could read Stiles’ expression. “Except um…I think my husband was right. These past few weeks, he’s been growing more distant. You see, he thinks I’m in love with Derek. And I think…I think he’s right.”
She exhales shakily at the admission, a small smile starting to form on her face as if she had accomplished something big by finally admitting it. It would be adorable in any other situation, if she had feelings for any other person, but…

Stiles’ insides turn to ice at the confession. The jar slips out of his hands and lands on his foot. He jumps back, grabbing at his injured foot as he swears.

He quickly drops his foot back to the floor though, resolute to ignore the pain in favor of staring wide-eyed at Paige like she’s the truck and he’s the deer stuck in the middle of the road, about to get run over.

“W-what,” is all Stiles can say.

Paige resolutely continues, “I’ve been in denial about it for a while, I guess. But I see it now. Seeing you two together as a couple, even though he told me you guys were just pretending, it still made me jealous. I…I like him. A lot. And the thought of him being married to someone else…” She shakes her head as if the thought is too upsetting for her to voice.

Stiles’ heart is thundering in his ears. This cannot be happening, there was no way…

“I know it’s bad timing, but you guys are going to divorce soon, so…” Stiles’ heart breaks a little at the surety in her voice, absolutely certain that they were going to divorce. Paige continues on, oblivious to Stiles’ pain. “…and I came here to confess to him. Even if it’s all fake, you’re still his actual husband, Stiles. So that’s why I want to make sure it’s okay with you first.”

Logically, Stiles knows that Paige isn’t aware that he has feelings for Derek or that Derek likes him back. She literally has no idea, it’s clear in her innocent expression.

And while Stiles is still sure that Derek would choose to stay married to him tonight when he’s asked…he also knows that Derek entered this show in order to get over Paige.

Because he’s in love with her.

He’s been in love with her from the start.

Derek likes Stiles, has feelings for him, that is undeniable after the past few weeks. But what is married life with one’s crush compared to the possibility of a life with one’s true love?

They can’t compare at all.

Stiles is crushed and he can feel his breathing starting to pick up. It’s the beginning of a panic attack—he knows the feeling well by now and knows he has to stop it before it gets worse. He focuses on steadying his breathing, chanting a mantra in his head, reminding himself that he has to focus on now.

Get through this now, panic later.

Get through this now.

Panic later.

Panic later.

He breathes.

He manages to stave off the panic attack and gathers the courage to nod. He can feel his throat
tightening on the words he’s about to say, but he has to tell her.

She’s not the villain in this story. She’s Derek’s best friend, Derek’s love, and she’s finally realized her feelings.

She’s not the villain of this story, she’s the heroine and Derek’s the hero.

Stiles was just the temporary love interest, the plot device to help the real protagonists end up together.

“He didn’t initially want to fake the relationship with me, but I convinced him to do it because it might make you jealous. You’re all he’s ever wanted, Paige,” Stiles admits.

Paige smiles blindingly at him, as if his approval means everything to her.

Stiles can’t get his mind over the fact that his plan had worked. Somehow, someway, it had actually worked. He has never hated a plan more in his life.

But there is no way that he is going to stand in the way of Derek’s happiness. He’s loved Paige for so long; much longer than he’s liked Stiles.

“Can you just wait, like, ten minutes to tell him? I just have to do something first,” Stiles says.

Paige looks a little confused, but agrees easily. She trusts him so blindly, she doesn’t even register him as a threat at all.

Stiles grabs the jug, ready to bring it to the coordinators before thinking better of it. He pushes it towards Paige. “Actually, could you just…bring this to Finstock for me?”

“Yeah, sure,” Paige says, blinking at him.

“Thanks. I’ll be quick, I promise,” Stiles says, and he pushes through the lobby doors, completely unprepared at all for what he’s about to do.

He keeps his mind blank as he pushes his way through the crowd, keeps his mind blank as he goes onto the stage, keeps his mind blank as he grabs the microphone and thanks everyone for coming to support people like his dad, Allison, and Derek.

He swallows past the lump in his throat as he sees the cameras pointed on him.

Focus, Stiles. He reminds himself.

Get through this first. Panic later.

“I, uh, have a confession to make,” Stiles says, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he can dwell on them too much. He stares at one of the cameras in the back—it’s easier to focus on than the hundreds of eyes on him.

“As many of you know, Derek and I were married because of a TV show called Married at First Glance…But what you don’t know is that we made an agreement during the first week to fake our relationship.” Stiles takes a steady breath to calm himself, to keep his voice steady as he continues, “I know I’m a couple hours early with this decision, but I wanted to announce that I would like a divorce.”

There’s a shocked gasp through the crowd and murmuring, likely from attendees that have no idea
what he’s even talking about.

Stiles’ eyes instinctively seek out Derek in the crowd, though he instantly wishes that they hadn’t. Derek looks stricken, completely blindsided by the admission.

And Stiles has proved, once again, that he can’t trust a human.

“That’s all I wanted to say,” Stiles says and then rushes off stage, shoving his way through the mass of bodies.

“Now that’s the kind of drama I’m talking about!” He hears Finstock’s shout echo through the venue.

Stiles ignores everything as he pushes his way through the lobby doors. He can hear people calling out his name—Scott, his father, Derek, maybe even Greenberg. Shit, his dad—how is he going to explain this to him? He decides to worry about it later, he can’t stop right now, he has to get out of here.

He’s focused enough the past few minutes. Now he just wants to lose himself in this panic attack, to not feel anything other than the feeling of not being able to breathe. Because even that awful feeling is better than thinking about a future without Derek.

Someone grabs him before he can get halfway through the parking lot. For a second, he thinks it might be Derek, that he might have run after him, but it isn’t.

It’s Cora.

She’s furious, her fangs and claws extended as she stares at Stiles like he’s more disgusting than a piece of shit at the bottom of her shoe. She growls and shoves him harshly, causing him to fall back onto the asphalt, scraping his palms along the rough surface.

“What the fuck was that about? I stood up for you and you do this? How dare you do this to him!” Cora snarls.

Stiles laughs hollowly, not even bothering to push himself off of the ground. “Derek will be fine. Our plan worked, he’ll be ecstatic.”

Cora pauses, tilting her head in confusion as she presumably listens to his heartbeat. The area where her eyebrows should be—where did they go?—scrunches in befuddlement.

“What the hell are you going on about?” She asks, clearly frustrated and confused.

“Our deal was to fake this relationship from the start. I needed the money and Derek wanted to make Paige jealous. It was mutually beneficial,” Stiles explains.

Cora snorts, obviously disbelieving.

Stiles nearly growls in frustration as he pushes to his feet. “I’m serious. And the plan worked. Can’t you sniff her out? Hear her heartbeat or whatever? Paige is here to confess her love to Derek. Plan worked; go us. Now can I leave or what?” Stiles snaps.

Cora glares at him, but with less heat than before. Stiles counts it as a win. “Say it again,” she demands.

“Say what again?”
“Say it was fake.”

“It was fake, what the fuck, you want me to write it too?” Stiles says, his patience gone. He just wants to go home.

Cora points at him viciously with a clawed finger. “Your heartbeat skipped. You’re lying. You knew he had feelings for you—”

Stiles cuts in, “Cora, for fuck’s sake—stop. Listen to my heartbeat, alright? Derek agreed to be with me to make Paige jealous. He still loves Paige, he just went over to her place a few nights ago when we fought. I’m not hurting Derek.”

Cora huffs in anger. “You may think that, but I know him and I know—”

Stiles shakes his head, knowing what she’s trying to say. But it isn’t true. It just isn’t. “Can you say, without a single doubt, that he doesn’t still love Paige? Or that he would choose to be with me over her if he’s given the option?”

“I—He—Well—that…” Cora flounders, her eyes wide with uncertainty. Stiles fully deflates at that, the last tiny shred of hope leaving him in a rush.

“Yes,” Stiles mumbles with a dejected nod. “I didn’t think so. He might like me and have real feelings for me, you’re right, but he loves her.” Stiles sighs, turning to go to his jeep. He stops though, when Cora calls out to him again.

“Your heart did skip when you said it was fake though. But…that’s not because of Derek’s feelings for you…it’s because…it wasn’t fake for you?” Cora asks softly, more gently than he had ever thought she was capable of. “Do you love him?”

Stiles pauses, his eyes getting watery and he’s glad he’s still facing away so that she can’t see it. But the way his head hangs low in defeat can’t be missed.

“Does it really matter?” He asks.

“I guess not,” Cora says quietly.

“See you ‘round, Cora,” Stiles says. It feels like goodbye.

“See you, Stilinski,” Cora says sadly.

Yeah, it feels like goodbye.

He gets in the jeep, his breathing going ragged, and he jumps, hitting the ceiling with a loud shriek when Greenberg makes his presence known in the backseat. He’s holding a hand-held camera, staring at Stiles with a disapproving frown.

What does a guy have to do to be left alone so he can panic in peace?

“How the fuck did you get in here?” Stiles breathes.

“You shouldn’t leave your jeep unlocked,” Greenberg says, leaning forward. “So is it a bad time to give you these then?” He drops a leather bound album in his lap.

Stiles hesitantly opens it and regrets it instantly.
Their wedding photos.

Stiles’ hands shake as he looks at the photos, a beautiful mix of black and white photos and photos with soft color. He turns the pages and his eyes linger on the one of them dancing.

The memory comes flooding back, as clear as if it were yesterday. He remembers how it all began, how he had whispered to Derek.

“Just pretend I’m someone else.”

He won’t have to pretend anymore.

Neither of them will.

Greenberg’s voice pulls him out of the memory. “Look, I’m not supposed to interfere, but—”

“Then don’t,” Stiles says, shutting the album and placing it on the passenger’s seat. Looking at that album won’t do him any good now.

“Are you sure you want to do this, man?” Greenberg presses.

Stiles turns to glare at him, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly though they haven’t moved an inch.

“I already told everyone it was fake and said I want a divorce; it’s over. Now nobody will blame him when he starts dating Paige. They’ll be happy for him,” Stiles says. “Besides, isn’t this what you people wanted? The drama?” He practically spits out the last word. He hates that word so much, never wants to hear it again.

Greenberg clutches the camera to his chest in offense, a saddened expression on his face. “Believe what you want, but we aren’t heartless. Sure, we want good TV, but not at the price of ruining lives.”

Stiles’ hands shake on the wheel.

“Let me drive you home,” Greenberg offers.

Stiles opens the car door.

Greenberg’s quiet as he drives, letting Stiles sulk in silence, both of them ignoring the constant blaring of Stiles’ ringtone. Stiles’ breathing is shallow and he wipes at his eyes every now and then, hoping Greenberg doesn’t notice.

He doesn’t say anything, if he does.

He’s not really sure where they’re going, but he can’t find the energy in him to care.

With the peaceful quiet of the night around them, their car suddenly swerving is the last thing he expects.

“Holy shit!” Greenberg yells, pulling roughly on the steering wheel to avoid the black SUV that plows through the red light, smashing into a small silver car in front of them.
Stiles’ breathing instantly steadies and he picks up his phone, dialing the station faster than he can even think about doing it.

“Pull over onto the grass!” He orders. Greenberg obeys and Stiles shoves his way out of the car. “This is Stiles Stilinski, there’s been a car accident at the intersection of Baker’s Street and Robin’s Avenue. I’m on scene now and responding, requesting an ambulance. We’re going to need it.”

He loses himself in his work, jogging over to the crash to check on the victims. Thankfully it’s no one he knows, just strangers that need his help.

He can’t handle the thoughts of Derek and Paige tonight, or the realization that he’s going to be a divorcé soon.

No, he can’t handle any of that.

But this car accident…this, he can handle.
Derek is devastated and confused; so, so confused. He sees Stiles run off the stage, he knows what he heard, but he doesn’t understand. Can’t comprehend, because it doesn’t make sense.

They were fine moments ago; Stiles had kissed him, had told him that they would be spending the night together.

But then he does this…

“…I would like a divorce.” The words send Derek’s mind reeling and he feels like he’s spinning, like the rug’s been pulled out beneath him, sending him tumbling down.

A hand latches onto his arm and he blinks back to reality, turning to face a concerned looking Laura.

‘What’s going on?’ Her mouth forms. He reads her lips to understand, because he can’t hear anything past the ringing in his ears.

Stiles wants a divorce.

Stiles wants to leave him.

What had he done? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know.

Derek just shakes his head and tugs out of her grip, making his way through the crowd to follow his husband. He doesn’t know what’s going on in Stiles’ head and that worries him, because if he doesn’t know, then how can he fix it?

They had only just talked about communication between them, just promised not to keep each other in the dark. Had their discussion really meant nothing at all to Stiles?

Derek heads for the doors leading to the parking lot. He’s not even sure if he’s heading in the right direction, there’s too much noise, too many smells, from the people inside and he can’t focus on Stiles’ scent or heartbeat.

The sound of a familiar voice calling his name stops him in his tracks. He turns in surprise to find Paige standing in the middle of the hallway, a nervous expression on her face. Had she heard Stiles’ announcement?

“Have you seen Stiles come through here?” Derek asks frantically.

 Paige just shakes her head, looking confused by Derek’s urgency. She starts to move forward as Derek moves towards the exit again.

“I left my husband,” Paige blurts.

Derek freezes, his eyes wide as he takes in her appearance for the first time. She doesn’t look upset by the statement, if anything, she looks…unburdened by the admission. Freer, even. He suddenly wonders just how much he’s missed in his best friend’s life lately.

Probably the same amount that she’s missed in his.
“What?” Is all Derek can manage.

“I left Adam,” Paige says slowly, her eyes steady on Derek. “I left him because I…I love you, Derek Hale.”

Derek is stunned, feeling like everything he’s known has suddenly been turned upside down in a matter of minutes. Stiles is gone and Paige…

“You love me,” Derek repeats dully, unable to comprehend.

“It took me a long time to realize it, but it’s true. I do. I saw you with Stiles and it made me jealous, because I kept wondering…what if next time you find someone, you really fall in love with them? What if you really get married to someone you love next time? I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Derek opens his mouth to refute her ideas—he is in love. He is really married. He is.

But he’s stopped from making the words when Paige determinedly strides forward, pushing up from her tippy-toes to kiss him. Her soft, lipgloss-slick lips press against his and Derek blinks, eyes wide with shock.

Paige is kissing him.

Paige, his best friend, the woman he has loved for years, is kissing him.

And it feels so very, very wrong.

The woman he mooned over for years is finally returning his feelings and all he can think about is how Stiles wants to divorce him, wants to leave him, and Derek hasn’t found him yet.

Derek abruptly steps back and Paige looks hurt and bewildered, as if he’s done the last possible thing she expected. Derek feels very much the same.

“I don’t understand,” Paige says softly.

“I’m in love with Stiles,” Derek confesses, the admission taking a weight off his shoulders he didn’t know he had. He loves Stiles.

Paige’s shoulders grow tense and she looks completely blindsided by the news. Her eyebrows furrow in her confusion and she stumbles out, “I thought…I thought it was fake.”

“It wasn’t for me,” Derek says. “Not after the first few weeks. I think I’ve been falling for him since the day we met.”

Paige inhales sharply, her eyes becoming watery. He wants to reach out, to console her, but he can’t.

“I-I didn’t know that,” Paige whispers, letting out a hollow self-deprecating laugh. “God, what kind of best friend am I if I didn’t see that you were in love with him?”

“Probably as bad of a best friend as I am, since I didn’t know you were leaving Adam,” Derek says, just as softly, not wanting her to lay all of the blame on herself.

Paige laughs again and, despite the watery tracks on her cheeks, her lips actually twitch up in a tiny smile. “Guess we’re both shitty friends, huh.”

“I…Paige,” Derek starts, voice wavering as he tries to figure out how to put his thoughts into
words. “I want us to be friends, I want to stay friends, but I need you to know that that’s all there is. That’s all it can be.”

Paige nods, biting her lip as her jaw trembles. “I, uh…I don’t know what to do now,” Paige admits, her voice quaking with uncertainty. “I left my husband for you and now…I’m alone.”

Derek shakes his head, giving in and reaching out to pull her close as she wipes at her eyes, new tears starting to fall down her soft, pale cheeks. He’s never wanted to be the reason for Paige’s tears, never wanted to cause her any pain. She’s his best friend and he loves her, just not the way she wants.

He presses his lips to her forehead, offering one last gesture of comfort.

“You left your husband for you,” Derek says confidently as he gives her one more squeeze and then pulls away. Paige looks devastated by his words, her eyes wide and dazed. “It’s okay to start again. I know it’s scary, but you can do it. You will find the right person, just give it time. And have an open mind.”

He knows his words are hurting her, but she needs to hear them now instead of later. Maybe, if someone had said those words to Derek earlier on, he wouldn’t have lost Stiles.

Stiles.

As if reading his stricken expression, Paige wipes at her cheeks and rolls her eyes. Her lips tilt in a lopsided grin as she snarkily says, “Oh for Pete’s sake, go find him already! Go and be happy. You deserve it. I’ll be okay. Go.”

Derek nods, though fresh tears fall from Paige’s cheek as she watches him go. Her smile wavers, but she stays in place in the empty hallway, trying her best to stay strong for him.

Derek pushes through the parking lot doors, dialing Stiles’ number when he realizes he must be too late. The jeep is gone.

The phone rings and rings and rings, then goes to voicemail.

He dials again.


Derek falls to a seat on the sidewalk, dialing again and again and again.

He doesn’t know where Stiles is going. It could be anywhere.

He clutches his cellphone in his hand, wondering how everything got to be so messed up in such a short amount of time.

He never even got a say in their divorce. He never got a chance to tell Stiles that he loved him, that he wanted to stay married. As the ringing cuts off and the voicemail intro begins to play, it starts to sink in that maybe he’ll never get that chance.

The phone rings in his palm as he hangs up and dials again. Ringing. Ringing.

“You’ve reached the voicemail box of Stiles Stilinski. Please leave your message—”
Four Weeks Later

Derek might be going a little overboard with cleaning, but he wants his apartment to look presentable and not like the giant mess it has been the past few weeks. Nobody has to know that he’s been wallowing in self pity these past few weeks, his apartment becoming a cluttered mess in the meantime.

It looks nearly immaculate now though, that’s all that matters.

He breathes in a steadying breath, trying not to notice how Stiles’ scent is finally starting to fade. It’s both a blessing and a curse at this point.

There’s a soft rapping against the door and Derek darts towards it, anxious to get this over with. He does a quick check in the mirror next to the door before he opens it, revealing a familiar, smirking face.

“Greenberg,” Derek greets. Greenberg’s smirk lifts even more, this time into a more friendly grin.

“Derek,” Greenberg says as he enters, his eyes darting around the place to inspect it, as if he hadn’t spent weeks filming inside it. His calculating gaze lingers on where two stuffed bears sit upon the fireplace mantle. A framed wedding photo sits between the bears—a picture where Stiles is grinning as he talked to Derek at their wedding reception dinner—a memory Derek now remembers fondly. At the time, he had implied Stiles’ profession was a joke and Stiles had laughed, calling him a water fairy in response. It wasn’t one of their nicest moments, but it had been the start of everything between them, a spark of hope as they’d laughed at each other’s quips.

Greenberg graciously doesn’t mention it, and instead chooses to sit on the couch and start setting up his tripod.

“I’ll have you sit on the chair opposite me and we’ll conduct the follow-up interview that way. It will be really casual, just some questions and you can answer with as much or as little detail as you want to give,” Greenberg instructs, his voice kinder and more professional than Derek remembers ever having witnessed.

“It’s your chance to tell your story, to tell everyone how you’ve been doing since decision day,” Greenberg says. The “decision day” he never really got to experience, since Stiles had made the early decision for them both.

Derek nods and sits down in the chair facing the camera. It’s intimidating, looking into an emotionless lens as the light blinks red.

“First question is…” Greenberg pauses a moment, eyes flickering between Derek and the sheet of paper in his hands, before he continues, “…have you seen Stiles since filming ended four weeks ago?”

“No,” Derek replies. Sadly, the truth.

Greenberg doesn’t look surprised. “Have you tried?”
Derek opens his mouth, but thinks better of it. How much detail does he want to give? Does the audience need to know that Stiles had virtually vanished, his stuff disappearing one day when Derek had been at work, only Scott’s scent hanging in the stale air of his apartment?

Does he want to admit that he’d called Stiles daily until his calls stopped going through at all, as if Stiles had blocked his number?

Does he want to admit that he’s even tried visiting Scott’s apartment, only to have Scott sadly inform him that Stiles isn’t there anymore?

Or that he went to see Stiles’ dad, who had looked at him with pity and told him that Stiles doesn’t want to see him and to stop trying before he has to file for a restraining order?

No. He doesn’t want to admit that.

He’s sure he looks pathetic enough already.

“Next question,” Derek says gruffly. Greenberg shrugs and moves on easily.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Greenberg asks, his eyes sparking with his own interest at the question’s answer.

“No,” Derek says.

“Not Paige?” Greenberg presses.

Derek’s hands tighten on the chair’s armrest, fingers turning white. “I’m not dating anyone. I’m not…interested. In anyone.”

“Not interested in anyone other than Stiles, you mean?” Greenberg asks knowingly. “Do you still have feelings for him or are you trying to move on?”

“I…” Derek pauses, wondering, once again, just how honest he wants to be. Stiles left him, chose to divorce him publicly in front a crowd of people without a single explanation before or after. How can Derek be expected to move on from that when he never got the closure he needed? He never got answers, never got to understand what happened that night. He’s tried so hard to get ahold of Stiles, but it’s like he’s become a ghost.

Greenberg’s eyes soften with understanding and he says, “You still love him.”

Derek’s hands clench into fists on top of the armrest, but he nods. He does.

“Have you signed the divorce papers yet?” Derek flinches at the mention of the papers and he shakes his head, no. They’re sitting on the kitchen table, have been for the past three weeks, ever since he found them on his doorstep. Stiles’ signature is on them, large and enthusiastic, but Derek hasn’t been able to force himself to sign them yet.

He will, though.

Eventually.

Because he knows it’s what Stiles wants.

“Those were the most important questions, other than the addition of ‘how are you doing?’” Greenberg says with a lopsided smile.
“I’m…fine,” Derek lies. Greenberg grins at the obviousness of his lie, but accepts his answer anyway.

“Do you want to add anything? Or do you want to continue answering more questions?” Greenberg asks, waving a paper with lines of potential questions on them, only the top few highlighted in yellow.

“Not really,” Derek says. Greenberg nods and turns off the camera. As if it were that easy.

“What, that’s it?” He can’t help but feel surprised. He had expected a long, drawn out interview with pressing questions and being forced to answer in excruciating detail he didn’t feel inclined to give.

“That’s it,” Greenberg says with a shrug. “But I do have something for you…You got a laptop?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, blinking in surprise. Greenberg digs into his pocket, pulling out a small USB drive shaped like Darth Vader.

“You’ll want to watch that. It’s Stiles’ update.” Greenberg looks at him with a mischievous grin, as if proud of what he’s done.

“Take it back.” Derek shoves it back towards him, but Greenberg dances out of reach with a laugh.

“Nuh-uh,” Greenberg sings. Geez, for a moment he had almost forgotten how annoying the man could be.

“I can’t watch this, it’s personal,” Derek argues.

“No such thing as ‘personal’ in reality TV,” Greenberg dismisses easily. “Besides, that’s going to air on national TV in a few months and you’ll see it then. But why wait when you can have an early viewing?”

“Am I supposed to have this?” Derek asks. Is he even allowed to have it?

“Technically, no. But I made a copy anyway, because you need to see it,” Greenberg says, his tone finally taking on a serious quality.

“What happened to being impartial?” Derek questions. He thought cameramen weren’t allowed to get involved, to interfere with their subjects.

“I told Stiles a month ago that we don’t want to ruin lives just to make good TV. I meant it. Please watch the video,” Greenberg says. “Good luck, Derek. I really do hope things work out for you both.”

“Thanks,” Derek says softly, watching as Greenberg grabs his bags, stuffing the camera inside with less care than one would expect of a professional, and leaves.

Derek stares at the USB in his hands, turning it over a few times between his fingers before finally making a decision.

He carries his laptop from his bedroom into the living room, resting it on his lap as he sits on the couch. He plugs in the USB and starts the video file with sweaty palms.

The sight of Stiles on screen hits him like a punch to the gut. He’s as handsome as ever, dressed in a soft turtleneck for the interview and he smiles, laughing at something Greenberg had mumbled
“Time to get down to business,” Greenberg’s bodiless voice says.

“To defeat the huns,” Stiles sings, smirking at Greenberg’s loud sigh.

“Have you seen Derek since the end of filming?” Greenberg asks. Stiles’ smirk immediately falls to a frown.

“No, I haven’t seen him,” Stiles says, looking distinctly uncomfortable in his chair.

“Has he tried to contact you? Or you him?” Greenberg questions.

Stiles’ expression goes pinched. “We haven’t spoken. That’s all I’d like to say.”

Greenberg clears his throat off-screen, preparing for the next part.

“Are you single or seeing anyone?” Greenberg asks.

“I’m single,” Stiles says, his lips quirking into a mocking smirk. “I’m just getting out of a rocky marriage, after all.”

“The audience will want to know…why did you decide to divorce? From what we could see, things were going well between you and Derek. What changed?” Greenberg asks.

Derek subconsciously leans forward towards the screen, wanting to hear the answer more than anything.

But Stiles just laughs—a fake one at that. Derek knows the sound of his real laugh by now. “I think that’s best for just me to know, don’t you think?”

Greenberg’s shadow appears in frame, and Stiles’ eyes wander up presumably to meet his gaze.

“This is your chance to let everyone watching know your side of the story. Our cameras were in the venue’s auditorium for hours, we have no explanation for what changed your mind when you and Derek had clearly been happy before the event,” Greenberg says.

Stiles watches him solemnly, his expression stubbornly blank. Derek’s heart is pounding in his chest, hoping Stiles will give in and give an answer. An answer, an explanation, something.

“It was going well, as you know. And I was going to ask him to stay married to me, but…But
Paige showed up and…” Stiles chuckles, wiping at his eyes and Derek’s heart lurches in his chest at the sadness in his expression. “It broke my heart, but I had to give Derek up, because, you see—she was the reason he signed up for this show in the first place. He’s loved her for years. Me? He’s liked me a couple of weeks. Barely tolerated me before that. That—that can’t compare to his love for her. I can’t compare.”

“What’s that stupid saying? ‘If you love it, let it go’. I knew he’d be happier with Paige than being stuck in a marriage. I mean, have you seen us together? We bicker all the time,” Stiles says with a shrug, as if it doesn’t matter. But it so obviously does. His shoulders are slumped with defeat, his eyes dull as he speaks. “I just want him to be happy, even if it’s without me.”

“You loved him though?” Greenberg finally pipes up.

A small smile forms on Stiles’ face. “Specialists say that you can’t truly love someone until you’ve seen them at their worst. Derek and I…we really didn’t get along at first. And we still bickered up until decision day, though it was more fond at that time. I’d say we’ve seen each other at our worst many times over. So,” he takes a shuddering breath, “Yeah. I love him. I still do.”

Derek is floored by the confession, his chest pounding with the news. There’s a new hope filling him, hope for their future together, alight inside of him. But he shuts his laptop, mind reeling at what he’s supposed to do now. He knows Stiles loves him, but how does that help when he can’t speak to him?

He glances around for answers, anything that might spark an idea inside of him. His eyes land on the kitchen table, a stack of papers resting on the surface, untouched. For so long he’d avoided those papers, not wanting to take a step near them. But now…what had seemed like the symbol of the end of their marriage is now the one chance he has to fix everything.

He signs his name.

The secretary at the front desk of the EMS station argues with him, not wanting to let him past the lobby to talk to Stiles. It’s about the fifth time that he’s visited in the past month, but this time he actually has a real reason.

Of course, she still doesn’t care.

Derek tries anyway.

“I’m just here to give him these,” Derek snaps, waving the divorce papers in her face.

“And, like I told you already, you can drop them off and I’ll make sure he gets them,” the secretary smiles faux-sweetly.

Derek bites his tongue on all the nasty names he wants to call her. “You want me to just drop off divorce papers? You don’t think that lacks a little tact?”

The secretary’s eyebrow quirks. “Is that not what he did to you?”

Derek very nearly starts growling when someone enters the lobby. Scott instantly stops when he spots Derek, eyes going wide. He comically backtracks, heading back outside to avoid him. Derek darts after him, not willing to let this opportunity pass him by.

“Stop following me! I’m not allowed to talk to you!” Scott yells out when he realizes Derek’s
following him into the parking lot.

“But I need to—”

“Nope!” Scott yells.

“Would you just—”

“Sorry, I caa—aaaah!” Scott shrieks when Derek suddenly tackles him to the asphalt, his body weight pinning Scott onto the ground. “Get off me! What are you doing?! Come on, I swore a best friend oath! I can’t break that, man,” Scott groans, spitting multiple times from pebbles that entered his mouth during his yelling.

Derek grimaces at what he’s about to do, but he thinks it might be the only way to get through to this moron.

“Stiles is my Allison,” Derek grits out, ashamed the words ever had to come out of his mouth.

But it works.

All the fight leaves Scott and he just turns his head to the side, one cheek scraping against the ground as he dumbly says, “Whaaaa?”

“You love Allison a lot, right?” Derek asks, pushing a little more weight than necessary onto his knee that’s currently pinning Scott’s back to the ground.

“Yes,” Scott wheezes.

“Well, I love Stiles that much, alright? I saw his interview video and I know he loves me too. So I need to talk to him. Can you help me?” Derek asks, finally shifting his weight off the other Were.

Scott groans as he sits up, brushing pebbles off his clothes with an accusing glare. “What about Paige?”

“I told her I was in love with Stiles,” Derek answers. “I told her that when she confessed to me. Does Stiles think…” He trails off, eyebrows scrunching downwards. How could Stiles not have realized that Derek was head over heels in love with him?

“Does he think you’re currently getting ‘re-acquainted’ with her? Yeah,” Scott says, voice dripping with disapproval.

“I’ve tried to contact him,” Derek says defensively.

Scott frowns, but nods. “I know, it’s just…he won’t listen to me or his dad. We’ve been trying to get him to talk to you, but he’s a fan of avoiding situations until they go away, so…” Scott shrugs, but glances over at Derek, a contemplative look on his face. “You really want to get back together with him?”

Derek nods towards the bundle of papers spread out over the pavement. “I had an idea, actually. But I need to be able to actually see him for it to work.”

Scott bites his lip, as if considering what he’s about to do. “Alright. I’ll help. He’s on a call right now, but he texted me a bit ago to ask if I wanted pizza. So he should be coming back soon.” He looks at Derek, to see if he’s in agreement with the plan.

Derek’s brows furrow again in confusion, not able to follow Scott’s thought process.
“I…Okay? Pizza? How does that help me?” Derek asks.

Scott rolls his eyes dramatically, his whole head and neck getting involved with the movement. Stiles’ friend really is an idiot.

“Pizza, dude. Stiles and I always have pizza together in the lounge. Come on, I’ll let you in,” Scott says impatiently, pushing to his feet. Derek quickly follows, grabbing at the papers on the ground.

“How the hell was I supposed to know that?” Derek grumbles to himself, though he knows Scott can hear him anyway.

The plan is simple, really. Derek and Scott sit in the lounge, a box of cold pizza resting on the coffee table as they wait for Stiles to show up.

It takes over an hour and the conversation between the two of them quickly ran dry after a few minutes. Derek supposes, if he and Stiles are to have a future together, he’ll have to try to get to know Scott better.

Today is not that day.

The sound of the lounge door opening has Derek darting to his feet, eyes wide as he waits for the door to open.

“I was never here,” Scott hisses, running out through the backdoor and that’s all the confirmation Derek needs that Stiles is finally here. His heart is beating so hard in his chest he can’t seem to think straight.

Even though he’s been expecting it and waiting for it for a while now, the sight of Stiles leaves him momentarily breathless. Stiles stares back at him in surprise, pale from tiredness and with a smear of what hopefully is dirt on his cheek.

“Derek. You’re in our lounge,” Stiles says dumbly, obviously shocked to see him here. His eyes drift to the table. “With pizza.” He looks beyond confused, gaze darting repeatedly between Derek and the pizza box, slow to make the connection as to why both of them are there at the same time.

“Scott did this,” Stiles says slowly, realization dawning.

“Uh, no. He didn’t,” Derek replies. Definitely not his most convincing lie.

Stiles’ eyes narrow. “You have a pizza box and are waiting in our lounge. That’s Scott and I’s thing. I literally texted him about it about an hour and a half ago. Plus, you’d need someone to let you in. Ergo, it was Scott.”

“It wasn’t,” Derek tries again. Stiles rolls his eyes and leans against the doorway, his arms crossing against his chest as he smirks.

“I’m not an idiot, Derek,” Stiles says. “I don’t need your wolfie senses to know that you’re lying.”

Derek nods and moves towards the pizza box, pulling the stack of papers out from underneath. He brings them over to Stiles, walking slowly enough so that he can leave if he wants to.
He doesn’t.

Stiles watches him steadily, waiting for him to stop nearly a foot away, before his gaze drops to the papers. A tight frown forms on his face when recognition sets in.

“I finally signed the papers,” Derek says, watching as Stiles’ hands tremble as he takes them from him. “We can officially divorce now.”

“Great,” Stiles says, his heart skipping a beat as he looks away. His disappointment is painfully obvious. “You could have just mailed them or something.”

“Greenberg stopped by,” Derek suddenly says, trying to change the subject, to keep talking to Stiles for as long as possible while he builds up his courage.

“Yeah, he interviewed me too,” Stiles says.

“I know, I saw it.” Derek smiles softly as Stiles freezes, looking like a deer in headlights.

“That doesn’t air until like…six months from now. How the hell did you see it already?” Stiles hisses, clearly affronted by the breach of trust he’d had in the television process.

“Greenberg copied it to a USB drive,” Derek says with a grin.

“That fucker! I’m gonna kill him,” Stiles seethes, his ears turning red with embarrassment.

“Was what you said true?” Derek asks, though he knows the answer. He just wants to hear it, a reminder of why he’s here right now, using all of his courage to try to convince Stiles to come back.

Stiles glares at him, though his eyes are filled with more pain than anger. “Yes,” he hesitantly admits. “What does it matter anyway?”

“It matters because I love you too,” Derek says, taking a step forward. “I have for a while now, but you didn’t give me a chance to say that. You didn’t talk to me about anything, you just ran away and made the decision for us both.”

“I did what I thought was right,” Stiles snaps back, as if he’d completely missed Derek’s confession. “I didn’t want to talk to you about it, because I knew what your answer would be and I didn’t feel like being rejected again, so I—”

“I’m not rejecting you!” Derek shouts. Stiles’ mouth slams shut. “Didn’t you hear me? I said ‘I love you too’.”

The papers fall from quaking hands. “What the fuck,” Stiles breathes, eyes wide and disbelieving.

“I love you, Stiles. And I don’t really want to divorce. I didn’t want to four weeks ago, and I don’t today. I love y—”

“Stop saying that!” Stiles cries, looking panicked and upset and not at all like Derek had expected. “You can’t love me!”

“Why the hell not?” Derek says, affronted.

“Because I’m not her! I’m not kind, I’m an asshole. I’m not graceful and beautiful; I’m not gentle or a werewolf. I’m nothing like her,” Stiles rants.
“I know,” Derek says softly, trying to soothe Stiles’ panic. “And that’s good, because I turned her down for a reason. I don’t want her. I want you. I like that you’re an asshole, because I’m an asshole too. I like that you’re bursting with energy, and that you could talk for hours, because I want to listen to everything you say. You captivate me. And, for the record, I think you’re beautiful!” Derek doesn’t know why he’s yelling by the end of his speech, but he is and Stiles looks like his brain has short-circuited.

Derek doesn’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing yet.

“I wish you had given me a choice, Stiles. I would have chosen you in a heartbeat. I will always choose you,” Derek says.

“You love me,” Stiles states, doubtfully, as if testing to make sure he’s come to the correct conclusion. As if Derek’s confession hadn’t been clear enough.

“I love you,” Derek repeats, willing to repeat it every day, every hour, if Stiles needed him to.

“You didn’t run off into the sunset with Paige,” Stiles says.

“I ran off into the parking lot, by myself, dialing your phone every few minutes, wondering why you ran off into the sunset without me,” Derek says with a lopsided grin.

Stiles’ lips twitch at that. “You want to stay married,” Stiles says.

“Yes,” Derek says.

Stiles snorts, a smile finally starting to break out on his face. “You’re supposed to say ‘I do’. It’s all symbolic and what-not.”

“Oh. Well, I do,” Derek says.

Stiles’ answering grin is beautiful. The most beautiful thing Derek’s ever seen and he can’t believe he’s gone a month without seeing it.

“I do, too.”

And, after four painful weeks for them both, it was just that simple.
The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN (The Epilogue)

-One year later-

Stiles’ head rests against Derek’s chest, both of them swaying to the music in the background. The slow song abruptly cuts off and “Can You Feel The Love Tonight” starts playing over the speakers. Stiles groans, hiding his smile against Derek’s neck.

Derek exhales contentedly at the feeling of having Stiles so close to him, so relaxed and comfortable in his arms.

“I’m going to kill Greenberg,” Stiles says, his voice slightly muffled. “I regret inviting him already.” Derek doesn’t mention how his heartbeat skips. He doesn’t have to, because they both know they’re happy to have the idiot there. Even if he sneakily tells the DJ to play the stupidest songs.

Derek simply hums, his hand at Stiles’ waist gripping him just a little tighter, wanting to preserve their moment of peace for as long as possible. “I don’t know, the song’s kind of growing on me.”

Stiles snorts, his hand mindlessly playing with the hairs at the nape of Derek’s neck. It feels insanely good and Derek leans into the contact, trying not to imagine that he’s acting like a dog enjoying being pet.

“I love you,” Stiles says softly. His eyes flutter shut as Derek presses a gentle kiss against his hair. He’ll never get tired of hearing that.

“Love you too,” Derek whispers back. He’ll never grow tired of saying it either.

Their relationship hasn’t been perfect over the past year, but that’s only to be expected. They bicker a lot, sometimes ending with one of them storming out of their apartment to calm down before saying something they don’t mean and can’t take back.

But they whisper loving things in the dark just as much, caressing each other’s bodies like being able to do so is a privilege, a gift.

The song comes to an end and Stiles laughs loudly as Derek dips him on the dance floor, both of them dressed up in expensive black suits for the formal occasion. Derek pulls him up and into a kiss, though neither of them are able to do anything but smile against each other’s mouth.

It’s the one year anniversary of their wedding and they’re undeniably happy. It was Derek’s idea to renew their vows, inviting all of their family and friends to the ceremony.

Their initial wedding is something they look back on with fondness, remembering how they had been so different at the time and it had felt like everything was going wrong that day. But this feels even better. This is their chance to actually choose each other. After everything they’ve been
through, all the fights and arguments, all the loving touches and dates, the secrets and kisses they’ve shared—they are finally choosing to be together. To marry each other.

For better or worse.

For richer or poorer.

In sickness and in health.

‘Til death do them part.

The song switches to something more upbeat and Stiles bursts out laughing as Erica drags a willing Boyd onto the dance floor, turning so that her back is against his front before she drops it low and starts dancing raunchily against him. Even with the more upbeat rhythm, their dance is still completely inappropriate for the song choice.

Derek seems to notice Stiles’ entertained expression as he glances between Erica and Stiles, eyebrows raised. “I’m not doing that,” he says drily.

There are hundreds of thousands of things he would do for Stiles.

Dancing raunchily in front of friends and family is not one of them.

Stiles pretends to pout, but Derek simply gestures for him to go over there, to have fun.

Stiles’ eyebrows raise, a grin forming on his face at the unspoken permission. He plants a loud kiss against Derek’s cheek before he runs off to join in the fun. Erica cheers loudly at his arrival, pulling him in-between her and Boyd as they grind. Stiles whoops loudly, smacking Boyd’s ass as Erica cheers him on.

Derek huffs a laugh and rolls his eyes at the ridiculous scene, but he’s unable to hide his smile. Not today.

He takes the moment by himself to grab some water from the refreshments table, leaning against the wall to watch and enjoy the scene around him.

Cora and Laura are dancing together ridiculously with wide grins on their faces that split with laughter when Peter smoothly grabs both their hands and spins them at his sides. Scott and Allison are in their own world, slow dancing to a tempo only they can hear as they whisper things to each other, love in their eyes. Danny and Isaac are sitting at a nearby table, engrossed in their conversation.

John is dancing with Melissa, their movements slow because of John’s leg. He’s still lacking in some movement and is unable to do much more than walking on it—but he’s improved a lot over the year—it’s been months since he’s needed to use a cane.

Derek made sure early on last year that he was switched to the most best team of specialists, physical therapists, and programs in order to help him heal. Derek and Stiles had gotten into a large fight over it, because having the best team for John also meant that he was getting the most expensive treatments possible. Stiles had balked at the numbers, face growing pale as he yelled at Derek for spending so much money on him—he had been upset at the time, saying that he didn’t want Derek to take on Stiles’ obligations. Derek knows that some of Stiles’ stubbornness had come from not wanting to be the gold-digger that Derek once thought he was. Derek was adamant, however, that he was going to spend his money how he wanted to. And that meant paying for Stiles’ father to get better. Stiles was furious, but, after seeing John’s prognosis improving, after
hearing the doctors say that there is hope that he will have a wide range of motion back, he had finally come around and agreed to let Derek help in any way he could.

Although John had been told that he will never be physically fit enough to be taken off of desk duty, he doesn’t seem to mind much. Surprisingly enough, he’s been talking about settling down to enjoy his retirement. He and Melissa have been looking at houses recently as well, searching for a quiet neighborhood to move into. Together.

Paige isn’t here, nor is Adam. She and Derek have very limited contact, only really messaging each other over Facebook—Stiles made him create one—on birthdays and holidays. They both decided it was better that way, giving Paige the time and space needed to focus on herself. Derek still hopes that they’ll be able to be good friends again one day, though he knows it might not be possible.

Derek looks to the left, taking in the beautiful sight of the sun starting to set just beyond the grand Tetons.

When Stiles had agreed to renew their vows, he had had only one stipulation: he wanted to see Jackson Hole again.

Naturally, they had decided to just host the event there, outside in the beautiful, vast outdoors of Wyoming. It had cost a lot of money flying everyone out here, but Derek can’t find it in him to regret it. Not on a day as perfect as today, with all of their loved ones enjoying themselves.

Even Stiles’ friend Lydia is here. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend—Adrian? Aiden?—while in England and Stiles demanded that she fly out to enjoy some time with friends. Lydia had reluctantly agreed, although she seems to be having fun with the way she’s smirking as Jackson follows her around like a lovesick puppy.

He might not like Jackson much, but he’s been getting better over the past here. He even apologized to Stiles for treating him so badly. He’s still barely a part of their pack, but he might be fully accepted soon, if he keeps up the good behavior.

Derek grins at the sight, covering his smile with the glass in his hand. Movement off to the side catches his eye, and he turns to see Greenberg kneeling in the dirt, his hand playing with the zoom lens on his camera as he focuses on the dance floor.

Perhaps most surprisingly since the end of filming, Stiles and Derek had kept in contact with Greenberg, texting him every now and then to invite him out to lunch or helping him find extra photography jobs when he isn’t filming for TV shows.

He’s still an annoying shit, but so are Stiles and Derek, so it all works out.

They’d also invited Finstock, but he said he had better things to do—mostly working on some new reality show idea.

Derek pulls his phone out of his pocket, feeling a sudden urge to go through his twitter. Finstock had made it for him eight months ago, claiming that he and the other reality show stars would need social media accounts to interact with the followers of the show. He had never responded to anything, or tweeted anything, though he somehow still has over twenty-thousand followers. Stiles has a lot more—over a hundred thousand—since he likes to tweet updates on how they’re doing as a couple.

Derek scrolls through the tweets, going back to some of the tweets he had received when the first episode had aired.
‘#Sterek isn’t going to make it! LOL’ A tweet reads.

‘Theyre so CUTE! can’t w8 2 C if they stay married! #sterek’ Another said.

‘Not gonna last! Calling it now! #sterek’

Derek smirks at the tweets, knowing that they couldn’t have guessed how good of a future they were going to have. His eyes instantly snap to where Stiles is dancing with some local girl he had invited. She works in EMS too and is nice, Stiles had said when explaining why he wanted to invite her. Derek had shrugged and handed him a blank invitation, watching as Stiles’ grin grew blinding in response.

Derek smiles as Stiles nearly hits her as his arms go wild and he shouts, starting to do a move called ‘the Sprinkler’. The girl just shakes her head, showing him up with an even more ridiculous move. Neither of them seem to have a single care about how crazy they look. It’s kind of refreshing to watch, actually. She looks strong and Derek can smell that she’s a shifter, and he remembers Stiles casually mentioning that she is looking to move to a bigger city. Most importantly though, she seems to fit in well with them, and with Stiles most of all. He thinks that he might invite her to join their fire station in Beacon County. If she wouldn’t mind the move, that is.

The girl laughs loudly, clapping as Stiles slips on the floor and crashes onto his back. Her laughter gets even louder when he reaches for her outstretched hand, only to crash onto the floor again.

Derek smiles, stuffing his phone in his pocket as he watches Stiles stumble to his feet and then glance over at Derek, grinning sheepishly. He’s still smiling as he jogs clumsily over to Derek, jumping and wrapping his arms around Derek’s neck, his legs around Derek’s waist like an octopus. Derek sighs, bringing his arms to settle around Stiles’ waist.

Stiles smells like alcohol and happiness. Derek pushes his nose into Stiles’ neck, wanting to smell that scent forever. Wanting Stiles to be happy forever.

“Kocham cię,” Derek whispers. Stiles tenses in his arms, pulling his head back to look at Derek in what appears to be amazement.

“Did you just…when did you learn that?!” Stiles yells, his face split wide with a grin.

Derek just shrugs with a smile, not wanting to admit how much time he had spent trying to perfect his pronunciation on that one little phrase. But the way Stiles is beaming at him makes it all worth it.

“I love you too,” Stiles says. He pulls close again, his eyes falling shut as he tightens his arms around Derek’s shoulders. “This is the best wedding ever.”

Derek can’t help but agree.

Chapter End Notes

COMPLETED: 11-19-2016
We’ve finally reached the end! Thanks for joining me on this journey--this is my longest fic to date and I’m so happy to see it completed. Thanks for all the encouraging comments, they really helped the weeks pass by quickly.
Let me know what you think of the end! Hope it was worth it ;)}
I commissioned Geeky-Sova to draw the carnival scene in chapter seven. Honestly, I am amazed at how beautiful and soft it looks! It fits the scene perfectly.

Reblog and let them know how much you love their art!

Geeky-Sova’s commission info can be found here. I can’t recommend them enough! :)
Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!