Together We Build

by KouriArashi

Summary

Everything has settled down after the last Searching Ceremony. Stiles decides to tackle a cold case that his father gives him - a 10 year old murder caused by a rejected werewolf bite. Meanwhile, Derek is trying to solve an even bigger mystery - what’s going on between Uncle Peter and Sheriff Stilinski, and how much does he have to worry about it?

Notes

I love you all so much for encouraging me to continue with this series. This fic starts about a year and a half after the end of United We Mend and absolutely nothing exciting has happened in the meantime. Everyone is very happy about this. So far this fic has been a little lighter than the first two, with a generally happier tone, but don’t worry I’m sure I’ll find opportunities to make Stiles and Derek regret that I love them so much. There’s going to be at least one pairing that I don’t want to list because it would be kind of spoilery, alas.

Special thanks to emptyknight for the title idea!

The first chapter is somewhat NSFW, heh. Stiles and Derek sure don’t waste any time!

Oh, one more thing – it was stated in Divided We Stand that Derek has gold eyes, so when you get to the end of this chapter, don’t freak out about what you’re afraid Stiles might find out about him. *blows kisses*
The graduation party that the Hale pack throws is one of the more impressive parties that Stiles has been to in his life. Of course, he muses, it would be. Talia doesn’t do anything halfway, and the fact that all of them had survived long enough to graduate high school is kind of a big deal. Cora was in charge of decorating and has brought her whimsical charm to everything. There’s a DJ with a bunch of old vinyl records. Talia even hired a caterer, saying that if Stiles had to do the cooking, he wouldn’t be able to do anything else for a week ahead of time, including study for his finals.

Stiles has to agree. There are almost a hundred people at the party. From the Hale Pack, Stiles, Scott, Cora, and Isaac had all graduated. They had invited the Reyes pack and the Boyd pack, since Erica and Boyd were both friends of Stiles and Cora. Beacon Hills’ public high school’s graduation was the same weekend, so Stiles invited Danny. From the other mundane high school in town came Allison and Stiles’ friend Heather. Once all their families were included, it was a huge number of people. Even he only has so much time on his hands.

So he’s happy not to do the cooking for once, and to stuff his face and laugh and dance even though he’s a terrible dancer. It’s okay because he knows that Derek thinks his horrible dancing is both adorable and sexy, though he’s not sure how. He’s seen videos of himself, and he’s fairly sure that he looks like a freak.

It’s going to be nice to have the summer together without a lot on his plate, since they’re going to be splitting up, if only temporarily, in the fall. It’s not that anyone’s going far away, and at least they now live in an era of cell phones and skype. But Scott is going to the University of California in Davis, which is the first time he and Stiles will ever be more than twenty minutes apart. Allison got into Berkeley, and her father is so proud of her that he’s actually smiling, even though there are werewolves nearby.

Cora’s going to the California Institute of the Arts because they’ve got a great theater program and she wants to go into costume design. Isaac didn’t want to separate from her, of course, so he’s going to the LA campus of the University of California. For a while he had tried to say he wouldn’t go to college at all. His grades came up a lot after the pack took him in, but his GPA isn’t exactly impressive, and he hated the idea of the pack spending money on him. Cora finally talked him into going because “someone’s going to need to run the theater company I’m going to open in Beacon Hills, right?”

As for Stiles, he’s decided to enroll at the UC Beacon Hills campus. Everyone encouraged him to go “wherever he wanted”, but he still has trouble with language and memory if he gets too stressed, and he’d prefer to take it easy. And he doesn’t want to leave Beacon Hills, not just because of Derek and the pack, but because of his father. He’s happier there.

Besides, he’s pretty sure that his choice of college doesn’t actually matter one whit in the long run. The previous year, he had been at the unveiling of the memorial for the babies that had been killed by the WLO. How much credit he actually deserves for solving that is a matter he still privately debates, but certainly nobody else seems to care. Three separate people had come up to him at that ceremony and offered him a job.

“I’m in high school,” he said. “I’m not even doing well in high school.”

The woman he said that to just gave him a smile and replied, “If we’re going to be honest, Stiles,
the type of talent you have – the ability to look at puzzle pieces and fit them together – I don’t know if that’s something that can be taught.”

He told all of them that he wanted to go to college, that he wanted to take courses in criminology and psychology and really learn everything he might need to know. He didn’t know how long it might take him to get through college, but he really wanted to do it. And the one job he had really been interested in – the California legal system opening a cold case division – wasn’t going anywhere.

“It’ll take two years just to get it approved and funded anyway,” the man at the ceremony had told him. “Whenever you’re ready. That job will be waiting for you.”

So Stiles is going to college because he wants to, not because he really needs to, and he’s staying in Beacon Hills so he can take classes and sometimes get frustrated and then return to his safe place and make cookies and snuggle with his mate. His life is pretty good, and he has no complaints, and six months of therapy has taught him not to always be waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The party tapers off after sunset, and a lot of people leave because they want to go set off some fireworks and that’s something that the Hale pack is, understandably, not interested in. After about an hour, it’s just them, all sprawled out on picnic blankets under the stars. Stiles looks around at his pack, his family, with a warm feeling in his stomach. Cora is sprawled out in Isaac’s lap while he braids her hair. Allison and Scott are quietly canoodling while Melissa shakes her head and says that Scott’s grown another inch and shouldn’t he be done by now? Talia is sitting with her back against Aaron’s chest, his arm around her waist. Laura and Jonathan are fussing over their new baby while Tyler shows Sylvia how to blow the seeds off a dandelion. Peter is sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Stiles’ father, occasionally leaning into him and bumping his cheek against Tom’s temple or chin. Stiles watches them for a minute, trying, as always, to figure out exactly what’s going on there.

Then there’s Derek, of course, a warm, solid presence at Stiles’ back. Derek had been the most vocal advocate of Stiles going wherever he wants to school – and the first to accept Stiles’ decision that he really just wanted to stay in Beacon Hills. Derek had supported his decision to take classes over the summer between junior and senior year so he could graduate with the others, even if it meant he didn’t get a break. And Stiles supported Derek when he had decided to open up his own landscaping business so he could do more of the things he liked – design and artistry – rather than constantly being the one who got nominated to haul around bags of dirt.

“So,” Talia says, “since everybody’s here and still awake – I think – I’ve got an announcement to make.”

Stiles tenses up; he can’t help it. Derek’s hand rubs up and down his spine, and he lets out a breath.

“Aaron and I have been talking about starting design and construction of a new house,” Talia says.

That’s nowhere near as scary as it could be, and Stiles relaxes while the others start asking questions. They had actually just finished building a house about three months prior, a new place for Laura and Jonathan and their children. When Laura had become pregnant a third time, they had made the decision that they would need the space.

“Well,” Talia says, “we thought that you kids might enjoy having a place of your own during your breaks from college.”
“Whoa, for us?” Scott says, all sunshiney excitement.

“Primarily,” Aaron says, “for Derek and Stiles. Since they’ll be staying in Beacon Hills. But with room for the rest of you, too.”

Cora is beaming and Isaac is making that face like he’s afraid to say thank you, but Stiles frowns a little. “I can’t really . . . I mean, I appreciate it, but I’d just end up spending most of my time at the big house anyway, to do the cooking.”

“You wouldn’t have to,” Talia says. “In packs with multiple houses, meals are traditionally held at the denmaker’s house, not the alpha’s. It just makes more sense that way, wouldn’t you say? Anything that you put together for everyone else, you would bring over to the other houses, or we would come get it from you.” She smiles warmly at Stiles and says, “I thought you might enjoy the chance to design your own kitchen.”

“Well, yeah, I – wait, what?” Stiles sits up in excitement. “I can design it myself? Oh my God! Can – can I have a walk in pantry? Can I have one of those, those flat stoves that are super easy to clean? What about those baskets that hang on –”

“Softly, softly,” Aaron says, laughing. “You can have anything you want. We’ve been talking to some of the contractors who built Laura and Jonathan’s place. You can sit down and talk to the people who did the kitchen.”

“What about the rest of the house?” Stiles is revved up now. “Can Derek have a greenhouse? He’s always wanted a greenhouse. What about a Jacuzzi? Or at least a bathtub big enough for two people? I need that because of, um, reasons,” he hastily finishes, glancing at his father, who just sighs.

“Let’s talk about that later,” Talia says, amused.

Cora leaves Isaac’s lap to snuggle against her mother’s shoulder. “Won’t you and Dad be lonely in the big house by yourselves?”

“Of course not,” Peter says. “They’ll have me.”

Talia snorts despite herself. Aaron just laughs quietly and says, “It’ll be nice to have some peace and quiet.”

“Boy, are you fresh out of luck,” Tom says, rolling his eyes. “There’s never much of that around here.”

“Truth,” Talia says, with a rueful smile. “Come on, let’s get inside before we all get eaten alive by mosquitoes. Who’s up for a movie?”

Laura and Jonathan decide to go back to their house to put the kids to bed, but everyone else troops back to the main house. There’s still plenty of food, and Stiles gets a pitcher of lemonade and one of iced tea so everyone has something to drink, while the others select the movie. Everyone’s taste is dramatically different, so everyone gets a turn picking something. Over time, they’d gotten themselves sorted out into groups to make things a little easier. Scott, Stiles, Isaac, and Cora all like action, superheroes, science-fiction. Talia and Derek are more Masterpiece Theater types: drama, period pieces, foreign language films. Allison and Laura like romances. Tom and Aaron both like classics. Peter does as well, but only to a certain extent. Peter is the wild card pick; his taste is very eclectic and he often chooses based on his mood, which is still capricious even on his best days.

This day is Peter’s turn to pick, and after several minutes perusing Netflix On Demand, he selects
Fight Club. Stiles and Scott have it all set up to broadcast to the television, so they can make themselves comfortable on the sofas and cushions and bean bag chairs.

Stiles watches as the movie starts and Peter settles down next to Tom, leaning over and rubbing his cheek against Tom’s collarbone. Tom reaches up absently and rubs a hand down his spine, the exact same way that Derek does to Stiles. Stiles makes several mental notes to discuss this with Derek later. For now, it’s not anything he needs to worry about. Whatever’s going on, it’ll be a good thing. He’ll make sure of that.

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Stiles wakes up the next morning on his side with the heavy weight of Derek’s arm over his waist. They’re not snuggled too close together, or else Derek would lose circulation to his arm, but Derek is always touching him when they sleep, in some manner or other. Stiles yawns and rolls over, nestling a little closer. Derek’s mouth curls up a little, so if he isn’t awake, he’s close.

Stiles’ mind wanders, as it always does, and he thinks about what he’s going to do. He can cook, of course; there’s always denmaking to do. And he can read, or surf the internet. That will keep him occupied . . . for an hour. But the entire summer is stretching out before him. The entire enormous, empty summer.

“What’re you getting all freaked out about by?” Derek murmurs, hand reaching out so his fingers can delicately trace over Stiles’ breastbone.

“I’m going to be so bored,” Stiles says. “I mean, okay, I have denmaking to do and I can help design a new house and maybe I can talk my dad into giving me some cases and obviously I have to spend a lot of time having crazy sex with you but what am I going to do all summer?”

Derek gives a small snort of laughter at hearing Stiles describe his schedule thus. “You really aren’t happy if your head isn’t going in ten different directions at once,” he says.

“Hell, no. I need a case.” Stiles rolls over so he’s on top of Derek. He takes on a Humphrey Bogart accent and says, “It’s a tough job, but I’m a tough guy.”

“That’s the worst fake accent I’ve ever heard,” Derek says.

“Then you’ve never played Cranium with Scott,” Stiles says. His eyes light up. “I know! Let’s figure out what’s going on with my dad and Peter.”

“Let’s figure out – what?” Derek asks, his eyebrows going up to fully deploy Judgment.

“Come on. Don’t tell me that you haven’t noticed that something is up between them. I’m going to find out what.”

Derek still looks skeptical. “I was under the impression that they were friends.”

“They don’t act like friends.” Stiles gets distracted nibbling on Derek’s ear. Derek’s arms come up around him, fingers tracing the curve of his shoulder blades and down his spine. “They cuddle too much. And don’t tell me it’s a werewolf thing. Peter’s not like that with anyone else.” When Derek just makes a small rumbly noise, he says, “Come on, you know I’m right. Uncle P is the most dangerous person I’ve ever met, but put him in a room with my father and he turns into an overgrown feline, purring and rubbing himself against my dad’s legs.”
“Okay, so maybe he’s a little – wait. Literally?”

“Yes, literally,” Stiles says. “I have literally seen him lying on our sofa, rubbing his head against my father’s legs. Only while in his wolf form, but even so. That’s pretty fucking weird, even for Uncle P.”

“Well, Peter’s always been weird,” Derek says.

“Hell of an understatement.” Stiles lifts himself off Derek slightly, and Derek grumbles. “Okay. Let’s play a game. I’ll tell you something that they do, and you can tell me it’s weird by werewolf standards or not.”

“Yes?” Derek reaches up and then rolls them over, going in for a deep, thorough kiss. “What do I get if I win?”

“That’s not going to be an issue,” Stiles says, and Derek growls in protest before kissing him again. “Okay, okay,” Stiles says, trying to catch his breath. “Peter scent marks my dad a lot. Weird or not weird?”

“Not weird,” Derek says. “Especially since your dad isn’t here as much. When Peter sees him, he’s going to want to add pack scent to him.”

“He also likes to lie with his head in my dad’s lap.”

“ Weird,” Derek admits, “but that may just be Uncle Peter weirdness. I mean, werewolves crave physical contact, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, panting a little as Derek leans down to suck a mark into the side of his neck. “It’s oxytocin dependency.”

Derek pulls away. “What?”

Stiles blinks up at him. “What, what? Werewolves require higher oxytocin levels than humans do. It’s a neuromodulator. It has a lot to do with . . . crap, uh . . . togetherness? Like . . . physically?”

“Intimacy?” Derek suggests. “Attachment?”

“Yeah, either of those will do,” Stiles says. “Well, go find a chemistry textbook if you really care. The point is, werewolves require more oxytocin than humans, and are most likely to produce it after physical connection or intimacy with another person that they’re close to. That’s part of why omega werewolves are often unstable, and why separation from your pack affects you mentally and emotionally. My point is just . . . Peter needs oxytocin as much as the next werewolf, but he’s always been kind of aloof, because, you know, the crazies. So, he might be making up for lost time where my father’s concerned.”

“Almost like he’s got a physical addiction now,” Derek muses. “Interesting. Okay. What else?” He leans in and sucks Stiles’ earlobe into his mouth, one hand tracing over his ribs and stomach.

Stiles wiggles contently. “He steals my dad’s . . . things that he wears. Clothes, that’s the word.”

At that, Derek sits up. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a mating thing.”
Stiles rolls his eyes. “Dude, I know.”

Derek considers this for a minute. “I mean, wanting your dad to carry his scent, that makes sense, that’s a pack thing. But wanting to have your dad’s scent available to him? That’s a little odd. I guess maybe, if your father is the one providing all this oxytocin, maybe having his scent helps keep Peter calm?”

“You make my dad sound like a back alley drug dealer.”

“Hey, it was your metaphor.”

“It wasn’t a metaphor; it was a statement of neurochemical fact,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes. “Now put your hand back where it was.”

Derek snorts and does as he’s told. “Okay. Keep going.”

“He’s really sensitive to my dad’s moods. Like, he always knows how he’s feeling.”

“Not weird,” Derek says. “That’s just scent. We get that ability for pretty much anyone we spend a lot of time with. I’m pretty good at reading your father’s mood, too. Anything else?”

“He brings my dad food,” Stiles says.

Derek shrugs. “Not that weird.”

“And watches him eat it.”

At this, Derek pauses again.

“Intensely.”

Derek hangs his head, pressing his forehead against Stiles’ collarbone. “Okay, you win, that’s weird,” he says. “That’s another mating behavior. You know that. I know you know that because I do it to you even though you’re the denmaker. Hell, everyone does it. Dad bringing those treats back whenever he travels, Isaac making Cora her favorite cookies . . .”

“Yep, it’s weird,” Stiles says. “Something is going on.” He leans up and mouths at Derek’s neck where it meets his shoulder. “I’m gonna find out what.”

“Look, you know it’s impossible for a werewolf to have a second mate,” Derek says. “It just doesn’t happen.”

“I know.” Stiles runs his hands through Derek’s hair and down his back. “Actually, I was thinking about that the other day. You know, everyone says that werewolves never recover from the loss of a mate. And God, I know that when I’ve been afraid I might lose you, it’s the scariest thing on earth. Dad told me that most werewolves who lose a mate just kill themselves.”

“Right,” Derek says, choosing not to get emotional about this because such a thing will never happen.

“Well, Peter didn’t,” Stiles says. “He might honestly be the longest-lived werewolf of his kind. A lot of them stick around long enough to get revenge, but Peter got . . . sidetracked. In a way, the way your mother convinced him that he was crazy might have done him a favor. Because of that, it took him six years to get his revenge, and by then . . . maybe only in a small way, but he was recovering. And he’s been getting even better since then. So maybe werewolves can recover from losing their mate, maybe not entirely, but at least a little. And we’ve just never known, because
none of them have ever lived long enough.”

Derek thinks all this over. “I guess it’s not a terrible theory,” he allows.

Stiles pokes him in the ribs. “It’s an awesome theory, because all my theories are awesome,” he says. Then he huffs out a sigh. “Look, I know that my dad isn’t Peter’s mate, I know that he’s not going to be some magical panacea for all of Peter’s emotional problems. But just because he’ll never have another mate, does that mean he can never fall in love again?”

“I don’t know,” Derek admits.

“Me neither. Nobody does. So let’s find out.”

“What exactly do you suggest?” Derek asks, and then his head drops back down when Stiles’ hands travel lower. “That – that is distracting.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles says, keeping his hands moving over Derek’s ass and the backs of his thighs. “I was thinking that we should just, you know, observe. For now. Without them knowing. They’d get all weird if they knew we were watching.”


“It’ll be good practice!” Stiles says. “Peter’s always telling me that I should work on that sort of thing. I’ll tell him I’m honing my Left Hand skills and he should tell me when he catches me but not interrupt me. He eats that sort of stuff out of my hand.”

“If anyone in the world can outsmart Uncle Peter, it’s you, but I really don’t think he’s going to fall for that. Can we have sex now?”

“In a minute,” Stiles says. “It’s worth a try at least. C’mon, I know you want to do this with me. We’re going to be partners. You can be the stuffy, by-the-book cop and I’ll be the dangerous loose cannon cop.”

“Uh huh. Would the by-the-book cop do this?” Derek asks, reaching down Stiles’ boxers to give him a firm squeeze.

“Oh, geez, I h-hope so,” Stiles says, closing his eyes. “A lot, preferably. All the time.”

“We could do something revolutionary like just ask them.” Derek closes his eyes and grinds his hips against Stiles’, thrusting restlessly against him.

“Are you kidding? My dad, I guarantee you, doesn’t have any clue at all. Even if he suspects that Peter’s got feelings for him, he’d never say anything in a hundred years, because he knows that Peter lost Olivia and there’s a one hundred percent chance that he would completely lose his shit if he realized he was falling in love with someone else. And if Peter had realized that, he would, so he obviously doesn’t know what’s going on either.”

“You know,” Derek says, “it sounds less like you want to figure out what’s going on and more like you want to tell them what’s going on.”


“That . . . will certainly be a challenge.”
“Uh huh,” Stiles says. “So are we going to have sex or what?”

“Jesus, I thought you’d never ask.”

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Surprisingly, Stiles makes it an entire week into his summer vacation before he finally goes looking for something to do. He spends the time doing a lot of baking and cooking, playing video games with Scott and Isaac, going to the movies, and generally relaxing. It’s rather novel for him. Stress has been a constant in his life since long before the day Derek Hale chose him as a mate.

Still, Tom Stilinski isn’t surprised to see his son wander into the police station during the second week of his break. “Don’t you have important goofing off to do?” he asks, giving his son a nudge in the ribs.

“Not at the moment,” Stiles says, rocking back and forth on his heels. “So, what’s shaking? Have I missed anything exciting? Any good cases? Are there – ”

Tom lets him talk until he’s run out of steam, spending the time doing the paperwork for the latest case that was just closed, a standard DUI. When Stiles finally stops talking and gives him an appealing look, he folds his hands on his desk and says, “I wanted to talk to you about orientation.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, blinking, clearly caught off guard by the abrupt subject change. “Okay, sure. What about it?”

“You’ll be picking your classes there, won’t you?” Tom asks.

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “I mean, I can’t take all the ones I want, a lot of them are closed to first-semester freshman, and of course all the stuff I really want to take has prerequisites that it might take me a year or so to get through, but – ”

“About that,” Tom says, “I think you should only sign up for three.”

“Three classes?” Stiles frowns. “Dad, that’s only nine credits, I can’t only take nine credits.”

“Yes, you can,” Tom says. He sees that Stiles is about to protest and says, “I’m not saying you have to take nine-credit semesters until you graduate. I’m saying that this is your first semester. It’s going to be an adjustment. You’re going to have to get used to the new work load, and I think it would be better if you eased into it. Especially because I don’t want you to pile work on yourself and then get upset if you can’t handle it.”

Stiles is still frowning. “I did full classes my entire senior year of high school and I was fine.”

“Yes,” Tom says, “but this isn’t high school, Stiles. It might be harder. It might be easier. I don’t know. I’m just saying that, until we know, I think you should make sure you take it easy on yourself. But,” he continues, “since I knew you’d hate the idea, I’m prepared to offer you a deal.”

“What sort of deal?” Stiles asks warily.

“If you agree to only sign up for three classes, then I will let you pick out a couple of cold cases to work on.”

“Against my better judgment,” Tom says dryly, “yes, with legal police support.” That’s what will make this different from the cases Stiles had worked on in the past. When we had been researching cases that they WLO had been involved in, they hadn’t been open cases. Sometimes they hadn’t been declared crimes at all. So he had had to be sneaky about getting information. Tom thinks it would be good experience for him to actually work with a police department.

“Does Beacon Hills even have a lot of cold cases?” Stiles asks.

“Well, that depends on what type of case you’re in the mood for,” Tom says. “Yes, there are plenty of cold cases, if you’re looking into petty theft, vandalism, et cetera. No, there aren’t a lot of major crimes that are left as cold cases, but there are a few. Some of them are even from this decade.”

“We-e-e-e-ell,” Stiles says. “I guess it wouldn’t be a terrible idea to do an easy first semester. You know, just to get a feel for it.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Tom says. “I will give you a summary of the cold cases and you can choose one.”

“Only one?” Stiles asks. “Dad, come on! You know I can’t work if I only have one thing to work on. Give me a handful!”

Tom sighs. He would argue, but Stiles has a valid point there. He does do better work when he can flip back and forth between cases, changing things up if he gets stuck or starts to get frustrated. “Fine. But no more than three. Actually,” he adds, “I think I might know one that would interest you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Stiles asks. “Let’s hear it.”


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One nice thing about having a business of his own is that Derek was able to design his office, and he works in a screened-in porch three seasons a year. Sometimes it’s even nice enough to work there during the winter, depending on the weather. On this particular day, it’s sunny and in the upper eighties, and he’s working shirtless, drinking iced tea in the shade, while he sketches out plans for a fountain.

It wasn’t that he minded the fact that he always got called on to lug around trees and rocks at his previous job. It just wasn’t exactly what he had dreamed of doing. He loves tending to plants, but he also loves the broader aspects of landscape, designing things on a large scale. He had waffled on the subject for a while, because he didn’t want to ditch his boss at the nursery where he worked. Scott had had the idea to have Isaac apply for a job there to take over Derek’s position. Isaac had some experience due to his work at the graveyard, and he was a hard worker (probably harder than Derek, who tended to get distracted by finding the perfect angle for an azalea bush, and who hated to deal with actual customers).

Isaac would be going off to college in the autumn, but by then the owner of the nursery could probably find someone else to replace him. And it was a good summer job for Isaac, with flexible hours and the sort of outdoor work that would keep him happy and healthy.

Derek was glad that Cora had talked Isaac into going to college. As werewolves, they didn’t really understand the mindset that some human pack members had about letting the pack pay for things. Isaac, coming from such hardships, had an even harder time with it than usual. But Derek had been prepped for this, thanks to the trouble he had had with Stiles trying to buy all the groceries and earn a place in the pack. He had suspect that Isaac would probably be the same way.

Over the long winter nights, he and Cora had plotted strategy to help Isaac feel like it wasn’t pity or obligation. It was something the pack enjoyed doing. They pooled resources so everyone could be happy, because even one unhappy pack member made for an unhappy pack. It was as natural to werewolves as breathing.

Of course, Cora had had her own issues about college. She had always enjoyed watching movies with elaborate costumes; she loved doing makeovers with Allison and Erica, playing with hairstyles and makeup. She had been in charge of costumes for the senior class play and had loved it. Beacon Hills didn’t have a theater group, but it was large enough to support one. Some people she had talked to, like the drama teacher and the curator at the local art museum, had thought it could definitely work.

“I don’t know, though,” Cora said, lying on her back and staring at the ceiling in Derek’s room during a rainy winter evening. “Just . . . I don’t want to disappoint Mom. I mean, she and Dad are both so amazing at what they do. They do real stuff, important stuff.”
Derek shook his head and let her share his cocoa. “Mom and I got in a lot of arguments,” he said, “and there was a lot of stuff we didn’t see eye-to-eye on. But she never pressured me about college, about a career. I told her when I was seventeen, after I had worked the summer at the nursery, that that’s what I wanted to do. And she was totally okay with that. She was happy that I had found something I really enjoyed doing.”

“You think it’s okay?” Cora asked.

“I think that if it’s what you want to do, you should go for it,” Derek said. “Everyone in the pack would tell you the same thing.”

When Cora had gotten her acceptance to the California Institute of the Arts, she had then announced her plan to get into set design and costume and eventually open a theater group in Beacon Hills. Then she had announced that Isaac would have to go to college so he could help her with it. Isaac had shyly agreed to this, and Derek breathed a sigh of relief.

Besides, the next generation of the Hale pack would have plenty of career-bound people in it, regardless of whether or not they were Hales by birth. Scott was right on track to become a veterinarian. Allison had taken a summer internship at Talia Hale’s law firm (her father was outraged, but over time, his outrage was becoming more and more resigned, and Allison seemed to think he was really phoning it in this time). And Stiles, of course, was going to be the best detective/private investigator this side of the Mississippi.

As if thinking of him has summoned him, Derek hears a low whistle as Stiles comes jogging up the small set of steps and into Derek’s office. “Damn, is the view this nice every day?” he asks, wiggling his eyebrows at Derek suggestively. “Because if so, I’m going to come visit you at work more often.”

“It’s too hot to work fully dressed,” Derek says, as Stiles leans down to give him a kiss.

“Yeah, that’s why most people work inside, in the air conditioning, during the summer,” Stiles says.

“No point to that,” Derek says, “since I spend at least half my day in the nursery or the greenhouse, and I’d wind up dirty and sweaty anyway. Anyway, don’t get any ideas,” he adds. “As much as I’d love to take a break, I do have an actual job to do.”

“What’cha workin’ on?” Stiles asks, leaning over his shoulder to take a look at Derek’s laptop. He likes to sketch on paper, but design software is amazing these days and can render his designs in three dimensions. “That’s gorgeous,” Stiles says. “What’s it for?”

“There’s a museum in Ukiah that’s redoing their courtyard,” Derek says, and glances up at him. “Where’ve you been all day? You smell excited.”

“Oh, yeah, I went to see my dad at the station,” Stiles says.

“How did your spying go?” Derek asks, as Stiles hauls himself up to sit on the table and watch him work.

“What? Oh! I forgot all about it,” Stiles admits. “My dad threw me a curveball and distracted me.”

“Yeah?” Derek asks, glancing over but mainly just paying attention to the laptop screen. Stiles explains that he agreed to take three classes for the first semester, and in return his father gave him some cold cases to work on. “Anything good?”

“Murder most foul,” Stiles says. Derek arches his eyebrows, and he becomes a little more
subdued. “No, uh, seriously. The murder of a teenaged girl in 2003. She died from bite rejection after a rogue alpha attack, so he thought I might be interested.”

Now Derek looks up. “Is that Paige Krasikeva?” he asks.

“Yeah, you know about it?”

“Every werewolf in California heard about that,” Derek says. “I knew her, a little. But, you know, attacks from rogue werewolves are pretty rare. So yeah, it was kind of a big deal. I would have been fifteen then.”

“Oh my God! You knew her? Can I interview you?” Stiles bounces up off the table. “As practice, you know.”

“Sure, as long as you don’t expect me to stop what I’m doing. I have to have these plans done by the end of the day so I can order the tile.”

“Okay.” Stiles hauls his laptop out of the bag he perpetually carries it around in and say, “I mean, Dad gave me the case file and I barely looked at it so far. It was huge; I guess they did a ton of interviews. He said he thought I might have better luck with it than the police since I know so much about werewolves and bite rejection and that kind of thing.” He’s setting the laptop up as he speaks. “Okay. How did you know Paige?”

“That was the first semester of my sophomore year of high school,” Derek says. “Back then, they were doing a program for human/supernatural relationships that involved exchange students. A few of the human students would spend a semester at our high school, and a few of us would spend a semester at theirs. I went to Beacon Hills High for that semester and that’s where I met Paige.”


“Not sure,” Derek says. “It was stopped after the fire, I know that much, because Tyler did it too, a couple years after I did.” His voice hitches slightly, but overall remains steady when talking about his younger brother, the middle child, who had died in the fire at age fifteen.

Stiles makes a note of that. “What was she like? Paige.”

Derek glances over again. “I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, but uh, we kinda hated each other. Which is probably more my fault than hers, if we’re going to be honest. I mean, I was a werewolf among humans, so I was super athletic and, uh . . .”

“Super gorgeous?” Stiles supplies. “The girls were probably all over you, huh.”

“I got a little cocky,” Derek agrees. “Pun not intended,” he adds with a growl, seeing that Stiles is about to say something. “Anyway, from what I could tell, Paige was really smart and had absolutely zero tolerance for teenaged male bullshit. She played the cello, I remember that. She used to yell at us if we were too loud while she was trying to practice. I thought she was stuck-up, you know, a bit of a wet blanket. But she was probably a perfectly nice person.”

“Was there anyone who didn’t like her?”

Derek gives a little shrug. “Nothing that went outside typical high school drama,” he says. “I heard a rumor once that some girls were giving her a hard time because of her supposed crush on me, but it was probably just, you know. High school gossip.”

“Yeah, well, we both know how far out-of-hand bullying can get in this town.” Stiles says,
making a few more notes. “She was found at the school at around six o’clock. Do you know what she might have been doing there?”

“She stayed late to practice a lot of the time,” Derek says. “That’s why she was always yelling at us. I don’t know why she didn’t do it at home.”

“Probably too noisy there, too,” Stiles says. “Not that any of this explains how or why an alpha werewolf would have bitten her,” he adds. “I mean, to come to the high school, it’s like he was specifically looking for her.”

“How do you know it’s a he?” Derek asks.

“Size of the bite suggested a male jaw,” Stiles says. “I did look over the prelims while I was at my dad’s office. A woman is still possible but far less likely.”

Derek types for a minute in silence and watches the computer render the proposed layout with satisfaction. “From what I know, the fact that it was bite rejection was kept very quiet,” he says. “Nobody wanted a panic. I know the kids at the high school were told she’d had a severe allergic reaction. They didn’t say to what. Everyone assumed it was peanuts or shellfish or something. I only knew because mom mentioned it.” He tweaks a few of the settings on his design and says, “She probably knows a lot more about it than I do. There was some legal stuff afterwards.”

“Yeah?” Stiles asks, making another note. “What kind?”

“Some legislation about paramedics carrying the first round of immunosuppressants and having authorization to administer them in the field,” Derek says. “They said that she might not have died if treatment had been started sooner. You’d know more about that than I do.”

“Yeah, I need to sit down and give her file a thorough read.” Stiles stands up and slaps his laptop shut. “But this was a good start.” He leans over and gives Derek a more generous kiss. “For now I’ve got to get home and get dinner started, and then Scott and I have a very serious Call of Duty tournament to attend to, and then I’ve got a mate who’s going to need to be rewarded for being so awesome. So I probably won’t get to it until tomorrow.”

Derek gives him a smile, glad that Stiles isn’t immediately going to start obsessing over this case like he has with so many others. “Okay. I’ll see you back at the house around five thirty?”

“I’ll be there!” Stiles says, waving as he jogs out the office.

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It’s easy to see how the murder of Paige Krasikeva had become a cold case. Virtually every question asked had led into a dead end. Looking at it eleven years later, Stiles can’t even decide where to begin.

The crime itself was simple enough. As it turned out, Derek had been correct about why she was at school late. She often stayed late to practice, the music teacher said, because she had three younger siblings and couldn’t get enough quiet at home. That particular day was no different. Orchestra rehearsal went until four. On some days, Paige hitched a ride home with a friend since both her parents worked. On this particular day, she told her friend she was going to stay late and practice. She had a competition coming up. This was nothing unusual, and didn’t raise any red flags. The teacher left around four thirty, and said Paige was still there and still practicing in the
music room. The school didn’t close until six on most evenings.

Somewhere between four thirty and six – probably closer to six – Paige had been bitten by an alpha werewolf. Her body had rejected the bite and gone into shock. The medical care was an unfortunate cascade of errors. Bite rejection was rare, and the paramedics weren’t familiar with it. In the dim light of the school after hours, the black secretions that were the classic sign of bite rejection had looked like blood, and the paramedic had wiped it away from her mouth when checking her airway. The bite itself was on the torso, underneath her clothes, and hadn’t been noticed right away at the hospital. By the time they realized what was happening and started appropriate treatment, it had been too late. Paige had gone into a coma and died two days later.

None of that was malicious, and given the rarity of bite rejection, wasn’t even that surprising. The hospital had instituted a refresher course in recognizing it for all emergency room staff and paramedics. The lawsuit was settled out of court. But nobody ever figured out who had bitten her, or why they had left her to die.

Rogue alpha attacks are incredibly rare in the United States as it is, and when they do occur, they’re almost always in the wilderness. Stiles isn’t sure what drives an alpha to turn someone at random. He can’t imagine why they would want to add a complete stranger to their pack, not with everything he knows about packs. Since most of the attacks occur out in the wild, he assumes that there’s some feral quality to the werewolves in question.

So what would prompt an alpha werewolf to enter a public high school at six PM and bite a random teenaged girl? The Krasikeva family had no connection with any werewolves. Of the three packs who lived in Beacon Hills, all their alphas were accounted for at the time of the attack, and none of them knew anything about another alpha being in town.

The only thing that seemed like the smallest clue was the 911 call that had been made. It had come from Paige’s cell phone, at 6:01 PM. The operator had heard heavy, rasping breathing, but nothing else. She had assumed, correctly, that it was a medical emergency, and dispatched the paramedics along with police. They arrived three minutes later. None if this would seem odd except that the cell phone had been wiped of prints. There was no conceivable reason for Paige to do that, if she had even been capable, so it must have been done by either her killer, or a witness.

Why? Stiles shuffles through the papers, looking for an answer. If the alpha had realized she had rejected the bite, why not stay on the line and tell the operator that, to make sure appropriate treatment was started? Why dial her phone, set it down, and leave? And if it was a witness, why hadn’t they stayed with her? Were they afraid of the alpha, was he still nearby? Were they afraid of being somehow blamed if they were caught with the dying girl? Would a witness have recognized bite rejection?

None of it makes sense, and, as Tom had predicted, Stiles is in love with the case within ten minutes of sticking his nose into the file.

In addition to reams of paper evidence, all the interviews are on tape, and there were a lot of them. Everyone even remotely connected to the Krasikeva family had been interviewed. So had all the school personnel. The music teacher was sobbing continuously throughout her interview, talking about how such a great talent had been lost. Every alpha within a hundred miles had been interviewed.

The natural conclusion that Stiles comes to is that, regardless of what had actually happened, murdering Paige had not been the killer’s goal. Bite rejection is incredibly rare, and there are much easier ways to kill somebody. So the most likely explanation is that the alpha had intended to turn her, and then panicked when her body showed signs of rejection. He had called 911, wiped down her phone, and run.
But why anyone would want to turn Paige Krasikeva – a human girl with no known connection to any werewolf pack – was beyond him. The only werewolves who had ever even met her were Derek, and a girl named Karla Reyes, one of Erica Reyes’ older sisters. Neither of them had any real connection to her.

With all this to puzzle over, Stiles goes looking for his favorite person to bounce facts off. He finds Peter, surprisingly, in the kitchen. “Hey, Uncle P,” he says, looking at where the werewolf is staring into the pantry like it holds the secrets to the universe. “What are you up to? Are you hungry? I could make you something.” Peter often misses meals, because he’s busy doing other things or loses track of time or simply forgets they exist.

“Do we have any of those bacon-flavored crackers?” Peter asks.

“I don’t think so. You want me to put them on the list?”

Peter is still frowning into the pantry. “Does your father like them?”

“Nope. They’re too peppery.” Stiles gives him another sideways glances before he takes a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator, because if he’s going to be in the kitchen, he might as well get something done. “You know what my dad does like, though? Some of those weird Triscuit flavors, like the tomato ones and the ones with, with, that green stuff that looks like seaweed. Want me to get a couple of boxes of those?”

“It seems odd. Your father disliking something bacon flavored,” Peter says thoughtfully.

“Well, those crackers don’t actually taste anything like bacon,” Stiles says. Peter continues to stare into the pantry. After a moment, Stiles prompts, “Do you want me to pick up some Triscuits?”

“Next time you’re at the store, perhaps,” Peter says. He looks at what Stiles is doing, pulling celery and onion out of the refrigerator. “Are you making egg salad?”

“Yes. You hungry?”

“Mm,” Peter says. He hoists himself up to sit on the counter, watching Stiles while he puts a pot of water on to boil. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“I’m working on a case for my dad,” Stiles says. “Do you know much about rogue alpha attacks?”

“As much as I know about anything, I suppose,” Peter says, which means he knows about five times what the average person does.

“Well, why do they happen?” Stiles asks.

He expects Peter to hem and haw, and is surprised when he gets an immediate, decisive answer. “Insanity,” he says.

“Is that . . . a common thing?” Stiles ventures.

Now Peter is quiet for a long minute, watching Stiles rinse the celery and start chopping it. “No,” he finally says. “It usually happens due to the loss of pack, or the loss of a mate. You saw yourself how driven alphas can be to add to their pack.”

Stiles nods, thinking back to Talia’s behavior in the months after he and Derek had met. The drive to increase the size of her pack had been driving Talia slowly insane, no doubt helped along by
the trauma of how many pack members were killed in the fire. She had nearly splintered what was left of the pack with her attempts. And that was Talia – a strong, intelligent woman who had been a werewolf her entire life. “So if a pack loses too many members . . .”

“Due to trauma,” Peter says, “it almost always involves trauma of some kind. Packs grow and shrink, they . . .” He gestures with one hand. “Breathe. In and out. It’s a natural rhythm. Pack members can move. Aaron left his pack to join ours, when he married Talia. If one of their children had married a born wolf, they might have left our pack to join theirs. Usually the two alphas sit down with the mated pair and they hash it out. It creates strong alliances and is considered a good thing. But when pack members are ripped away, it creates this sort of . . . mental, emotional wound. Losing pack isn’t like losing family. It’s like losing a limb.”

“But that isn’t the sort of thing that happens often,” Stiles says.

“Oh, no, at least not here,” Peter says. “There are still areas of the world where werewolves are regularly hunted. And there are areas of the word where werewolves are worshipped. But here, no. I’d be quite surprised if there was more than two or three rogue alpha attacks in a year. We’d all be locked up if it happened more often than that.”

Stiles nods, knowing that’s true from all the research he’s done on organizations like the WLO. If there had been any evidence that werewolves were more likely to go on homicidal rampages than the average human, the WLO would have been able to win a lot of their legal battles. “That must be one of the reasons nobody’s sure whether or not bite rejection is more likely when it’s from an outside alpha,” he says, thinking back to his own experiences with Deucalion. “There just isn’t enough data to tell.”

“Mm,” Peter says. Then he frowns. “Bite rejection? What does that have to do with this?”

“Oh, I’m investigating a murder for my dad,” Stiles says. “You probably heard about it, actually. It happened a couple years before the fire. There was a girl named Paige who was bitten and then died of bite rejection, and they never figured out who bit her or why.”

“I remember hearing about that,” Peter says. He watches as Stiles turns off the stove so the eggs can cool. “I wasn’t much involved. I had just married Olivia the previous spring. We were on our honeymoon for an entire month that summer.”

Stiles glances over and smiles a little. It’s nice to hear Peter talk about Olivia – it’s nice that Peter can talk about Olivia now, not just when he’s in one of his strangely detached states but when he’s aware. Regardless of what exactly is going on between Stiles’ father and Peter, it’s definitely been good for the werewolf. “Well, Dad thought I might enjoy taking a crack at it.”

“What’s your first move?” Peter asks.

“So far it’s been ‘read everything over and over and hope that something leaps out at me’, Stiles says. “Then it was ‘talk to Uncle Peter and see what he thinks’. Now it’s going to be ‘research any alphas that lost pack members in the preceding six months’.”

“Good boy,” Peter says, hopping off the counter. “That food processor you use hurts my ears. I’m going out. Text me when the egg salad is done.”

“Won’t be fifteen minutes,” Stiles tells him.

“Then I’ll be back in twenty,” Peter says, and leaves the kitchen without another word. Despite repeated texts, he doesn’t see Peter until six hours later.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Derek and Papa Stilinski! Stiles and Talia! I'm so happy! <3

While Stiles has his head buried in an eleven year old murder, Derek takes up the ‘spy on Peter and Tom’ duties. But he takes them a little more seriously than Stiles seems to have anticipated. He just watches, for the first week or two. Watches their behavior around each other in a way that he hadn’t before.

Stiles was definitely right about how touchy-feely Peter is with Sheriff Stilinski, Derek notes. But he supposes that’s not entirely surprising. In fact, nobody in the family had been surprised at their developing friendship. They had very different personalities, but they also had a lot in common. They had bonded over their mutual losses, and their paternal love for Stiles.

It’s funny, Derek thinks, because even though they’re so different, it’s the little things that make them fit together. They both like the same kind of movies, they both play chess, they’re both problem-solvers although in different ways. They have a mutual lack of tolerance for stupidity. They’re both fiercely protective of their families.

Derek doesn’t think that Peter has any idea what sort of behavior he’s displaying, or he probably would have, as Stiles had charmingly put it, ‘lost his shit’. But he can’t help but wonder what Tom thinks of all this. He thinks back to what Stiles had said about that, that he wouldn’t have any idea. But Derek doesn’t think that Tom is as clueless as he’s pretending to be.

Stiles clearly thinks this is all very amusing, and he’s turning it into a game, a mental exercise of sorts. Derek doesn’t want to suck the joy out of his mate’s life, but he’s worried. Peter’s already been hurt so much. The fact that he’s still alive is a miracle. He doesn’t want to see his uncle hurt again, doesn’t want to see him break down completely.

Part of the problem is that although Stiles has certainly seen Peter in his less-than-sane moments, he didn’t witness the brunt of it. He wasn’t there for the year after the fire, the time that Peter spent entirely feral. He would lash out at everyone, even Talia, would wake them all with his screaming nightmares. He would go weeks without eating, days without sleeping. The smallest things sent him into rages where he would break everything in the house. Sometimes he spent days just sitting in a corner, knees pulled up to his chest, caught in black despair that Derek can’t even imagine. He would wander off into the forest and they wouldn’t see him for days, and would sit huddled together, waiting for that horrible, gut-wrenching feeling of the death of a pack member.

The worst of it had passed gradually. Peter came alive again by degrees, letting them bring him food, letting them touch him again. He still had bad days – he was still having them when Stiles came along – but by then he was mostly vague and distant when he had one of his spells.

Stiles hadn’t witnessed Peter at his worst. Not even close. And Derek is terrified that what’s happening with Tom is going to send Peter spiraling back into that.

So he watches Tom. He seems genuinely affectionate with Peter. He doesn’t give off the air of
just putting up with Peter’s behavior. His scent is largely that of contentment, although at times he
has an air of confusion or concern. He actively seeks out Peter’s company, saying things like, ‘you
want to go catch a movie after this’ or ‘I’m going to see you at the game this weekend, right?’ So
it isn’t simply that Peter has attached himself to Tom and the other man doesn’t want to discourage
him and risk a bad reaction.

Derek decides that no matter what Stiles thinks, he has to talk to Tom. If the other man is aware of
what’s happening and even interested in Peter, then they can decide how to talk to Peter about it.
But he can’t watch Peter be hurt again, even if he has to argue with his mate about it.

But in the end, there’s very little argument. Derek explains to Stiles why he’s worried during one
of their late-night drives, and Stiles pouts a little but agrees that Derek is probably right. As smart
as Stiles is, there are things that Derek is better at than he is, and he knows it. Stiles is a denmaker
and a Left Hand, but Derek is a peacekeeper, like his father. He’s good at reading emotional
undertones, at understanding why people are acting the way they act.

“You want me to come with?” Stiles asks.

“No,” Derek says. “Pretty sure that your dad doesn’t want to discuss his love life with you.”

“So true,” Stiles agrees.

What Derek doesn’t tell Stiles is that he has every intention of taking the sheriff out to get a bacon
cheeseburger to preface this conversation. He wants Tom in a good mood, and he wants to make
it’s not somewhere that the pack will overhear. So he drops by at the lunch hour the next day and
asks Tom if he wants to grab a bite to eat.

There was a time that Derek felt fairly awkward around Tom – he never could have gotten Stiles
to accept him without Tom’s help, but the fact that he was having sex with the sheriff’s underage
son was never comfortable for either of them. Time had taken the edge off. Stiles’ eighteenth
birthday had helped, too. Now it seems natural to head down to the local diner and get a corner
booth and greasy burgers together.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Tom asks.

Derek isn’t surprised that he’s figured that out. Tom’s smart, and Derek just doesn’t seek out the
company of other people one-on-one very often. “Peter,” he says.

Tom groans. “What’s he done now?”

with Peter.”

He’s not sure exactly what sort of response he’s going to get. Amusement, confusion, anger – just
about anything wouldn’t surprise him. Tom puts down his cheeseburger and looks flatly
unimpressed. “You do realize that your mother had this discussion with me six months ago,
right?”

Derek grimaces a little. “She pays more attention to Peter than I do,” he admits.

“Let me guess,” Tom says, picking up an onion ring and gesturing with it. “Stiles is on break and
he has too much free time and he’s decided that he’s going to reenact The Parent Trap with Peter
and I in the unwitting lead roles.”

After a moment to think it over, Derek says, “That . . . is pretty accurate.”
Tom shakes his head, looking fondly amused. “You should have seen the show when he and Scott were twelve and decided that Scott’s mom and I should date. It wasn’t pretty. In fact, I’m pretty sure that it’s why Melissa and I never did date. She’d just gotten out of a toxic relationship and she wasn’t in any mood to have a man in her life. A few years later, it might have worked out, but after that it was just weird. We decided we made better friends after that night in the closet together.”

Derek nearly chokes on his French fries. “I don’t want the details,” he says, “and I promise I’ll do everything in my power to keep Stiles from locking you and Peter in a closet together.”

“Good,” Tom says. He shakes his head a little. “What do you want to know, Derek?”

“Do you . . .” Derek stops. He’s about to ask ‘do you like Peter’, but Tom obviously likes Peter, and they aren’t teenagers. But he’s not sure what questions are appropriate. And he probably should have thought about it before this little outing, but Tom had taken him off guard by being so matter-of-fact about it. He’s used to having to deal with an emotional response for everything, given Stiles’ flailing and Cora’s dramatics and the general day-to-day heightened emotions of a werewolf pack.

Tom sees him struggling and takes pity on him. “I like Peter,” he says, picking up another onion ring. “Am I in love with him? I don’t know. I like spending time with him. It would be horrible if something happened to him. I look forward to seeing him, don’t like going too long without seeing him. So sure, I guess, maybe. He’s not Claudia. And I’m not Olivia. I know that. I know that any sort of relationship I had with him would be . . . colored by that. Do I mind the way he acts around me? No. It’s kinda cute, in a weird sort of way. Do I have even the slightest clue what to do about any of this? Nope.” He bites down on his burger decisively.

Derek has to laugh at the bit at the end. “Yeah, I think we’re all stuck there,” he says.

“I’m not worried about it, to be honest,” Tom says. “I’m happy with things the way they are. Peter’s got his issues. Maybe he’ll never realize he’s using me as a sort of . . . surrogate. For something he can’t have anymore. But I don’t mind. It’s not like I was going on OK Cupid and looking for dates.” He gives a shrug and says, “I don’t think we need to overcomplicate it. We’re friends. Maybe we’ll be more someday. Maybe we won’t be.”

“If Peter figures out what he’s doing, it could . . . be messy,” Derek says.

“I know. Which is why I’ve never said anything to him. I know what the sort of behavior he’s exhibiting looks like. But I know I’m not his mate. I’ll never be what Olivia was to him. Just like he’ll never be what Claudia was to me. So I just let it ride. Maybe if I let it ride long enough, but the time he figures it out, he’ll be stable enough to handle it.”

“How likely is that?” Derek asks, feeling skeptical.

“Pretty damned likely if you and my son, infuriating little genius that he is, can keep your mouths shut. Why the hell do you think Talia hasn’t said anything, either?” Tom gestures with an onion ring. “Peter’s the smartest damned guy I know. He’s blind to what he’s doing because he needs to be. It’s a self-defense mechanism that his own brain is pulling on him. If nobody says anything to him, he won’t realize it until he’s ready to deal with it.”

“I hope you’re right,” Derek says.

“Yeah, me too,” Tom says. He studies Derek for another moment and says, “I care about him too, you know.”
“I know that, but you – you didn’t see, you don’t understand – ” Derek says, and then realizes what a stupid thing to say that was. Nobody in this diner understands Peter’s loss as well as Tom Stilinski. “Sorry,” he mutters, training his attention on the ketchup bottle.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tom says. “I know that it must have been scary, seeing Peter after he lost Olivia. Hell, it was probably scary seeing me, after Claudia died. I spent a good six months at the bottom of a whiskey bottle while my son soldiered on, and trust me, Derek, I’m not proud of that. I know you don’t want your uncle to be hurt again. I know you’re worried that one more straw might break the werewolf’s back. I’ll do my best to keep that from happening. That’s all I can promise you.”

“That’s enough,” Derek says, breathing easier. “Thanks.”

Tom waves this off. “Nothing to thank me for. Not this time, at least.”

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There are always people in and out of the Hale house, but the quietest time is undoubtedly mid-morning, and that’s when Stiles gets a lot of his denmaking done. He’s loving his summer schedule, how he doesn’t have to spend the entire weekend in the kitchen so he can go to school during the week. He sleeps in, spends an hour or so on his computer, and then heads downstairs to chop vegetables or fruit, or make some muffins.

Now that Laura and Jonathan have their own place, the house gets quiet during the day. The adults are all off at work, and these days the other teenagers are too. The only person who doesn’t have a summer job is Cora, but she’s helping a theater group in Redding with a production of Oliver Twist, so she’s gone a lot of the time, too.

With more time to devote to cooking, he’s been trying some new recipes, and he’s in the middle of experimenting with zucchini bread when he hears the front door open and close. A few minutes later, Talia walks into the kitchen. “Oh, hey,” Stiles says, glancing over at her. “What are you doing home this time of day?”

“Meeting got cancelled.” Talia rubs a hand over her face, looking more tired than usual. “I was supposed to be in court all day, but my lovely client got cold feet at the last minute and decided to settle.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, a little surprised. Talia normally just goes back to the office if that sort of thing happens. She’s always in the middle of multiple cases.

“I argued with her for an hour and by then I was so frustrated that I decided I would come home and work on some of the design plans for the new house,” Talia says. “Maybe lie down for a while. My back is killing me.”

“Really?” Stiles asks.

Talia glances over at him with wry amusement. “I may be an alpha werewolf, but I’m just as susceptible to back pain after a day on my feet in high heels as any woman. Or headaches after arguing with someone who’s being willfully ignorant. What’s that you’ve got on the stove? It smells good.”

“Oh, I just made a pot of tea,” Stiles says. “It has . . . red berries in it. The Thanksgiving sauce
berries. Got the recipe off the internet. Want to be my guinea pig?”

“Cranberries, and sure,” Talia says, accepting the mug. They’re all used to supplying words that Stiles has forgotten by now, and nobody makes a big deal out of it. He prefers it if they tell him, or he’ll spend the next twenty minutes trying to remember what he wanted to say. She takes one foot out of her shoe and rubs it up and down her calf. “Actually, this works out. We can talk about the kitchen. I assume you’ve had approximately nine hundred ideas?”

“Each more fantastic than the last!” Stiles proclaims, and Talia laughs quietly. They talk about that for a little while, and she takes some notes, while he bakes. He gives her a muffin and some fruit because he doesn’t like how tired she looks, and she eats it without complaint. He’s starting to learn that the hierarchies of werewolf packs are much more intricate than they look. The alpha is in charge, certainly, but the Left Hand and the Denmaker are arguably just as important, and any alpha worth their salt leans on them heavily.

“You know, Derek told me that you were once involved in a campaign for better treatment of bite rejection,” he says, as he puts the zucchini bread in the oven.

“That was a long time ago,” Talia says, nibbling at her fruit. “Ten years at least.”


“Nothing,” Talia says, with a slight shrug. “ Like so many laws and propositions. There just wasn’t enough support to get it funded. Bite rejection is so rare – it’s one of those things that nobody believes will happen to them. And truthfully, it doesn’t. There can’t be more than a small handful of cases per year. Every pack member who’s turned voluntarily, they’re aware of the risks, and we’re prepared to have to deal with the reaction. ”

“That’s why pack members are always turned the day before the full moon, isn’t it,” Stiles says.

Talia nods. “ It’s grounded in ritual, ” she says. “ But I suspect that’s the reason for it, yes. The closer to the full moon, the less dangerous bite rejection is. ”

“Right,” Stiles says. He’s very familiar with the mechanics of bite rejection and treatment. “ So the only people who would be caught off guard by bite rejection are people who are bitten by rogue alphas, and that hardly ever happens. ”

“And accidents,” Talia says. “ That’s rare, but it can happen as well. ”

“Huh,” Stiles says, making a mental note of that. “ Well, we should campaign for it again. But maybe I’ll look up some statistics or something. I mean, I don’t know exactly how many cases there are per year and it would probably be helpful to know that. ”

“Mm hm,” Talia says. She sounds a little distracted, studying her phone. “ Oh, that damned contractor – he was supposed to let me know what the final square footage we would be using, and now I’m getting this e-mail about how he’s out of the office and won’t be back until next week. How am I supposed to design a house if I don’t know how big it’s going to be? ”

“Um,” Stiles says, blinking at her.

“Ugh, I’m sorry,” Talia says. “ I don’t mean to yell, I’m just – frustrated. I don’t know what’s wrong with me lately. I’m all over the place. ”

Stiles studies her for a long minute as a thought occurs to him. It’s a strange thought, frightening but exciting, both good and bad. He’s not sure how to tackle it. He taps his mug of tea against the table several times before saying, “ Um. Talia? Can I ask you a question that might upset you? ”

“Is there . . . is there any chance at all that you could be . . .” Stiles swallows hard before forcing the word out. “Pregnant?”

Talia stares at him.

Somewhat hastily, Stiles says, “It’s just, I actually did a report on this last year for my senior biology class, on the differences between human pregnancy and werewolf pregnancy, you know, like the gestation period being shorter, and uh, werewolf women are fertile a lot longer than human women, usually into their sixties and sometimes even seventies, and they don’t get the traditional symptoms of pregnancy like morning sickness or anything but they do get back aches and fatigue and mood swings because of the hormonal changes.” He says all of this very fast. “So uh, it was just a thought, I’m probably wrong anyway, don’t worry about it.”

Talia presses her hand against her mouth and clearly forces her emotions back into check. “It . . . it is possible,” she finally says. “I’m on birth control, but . . . things can happen. And we don’t use any other . . . I mean, we just didn’t figure it would be . . .” She stops and takes a deep breath. “Now that you’ve mentioned it, it is . . . similar. To the symptoms I’ve had with . . . previous pregnancies.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, unsure of what to say.

“I’m on one of those birth control forms that means you only get a period every six months, so . . . I wouldn’t necessarily know right away. I mean.” Talia looks up, her eyes shining with sudden tears. “Stiles, I – I could be pregnant.”

“Are you okay?” Stiles asks anxiously. He knows so, so well about how much Derek had avoided the idea of having children. How Derek hadn’t wanted to feel like he was replacing the people who had died in the fire. He imagines it must have been even worse for Talia and Aaron – knowing that they were still of an age to have children, but feeling like doing so would have been betraying the two that had died. In all the discussions Derek and Stiles had had about their possible future offspring, about rebuilding the pack, Stiles had never even asked why Talia and Aaron hadn’t had more children. The answer seemed so obvious to him.

“I – I think so,” Talia says. “I couldn’t have – wouldn’t have tried to do it. Wouldn’t have wanted to – you know.” She wipes tears out of the corners of her eyes. “But like this, an accident – I think I could be okay with that.”

“Well, we should find out, right?” Stiles says.

“Oh, Lord, I can’t walk into a Walgreens and buy a pregnancy test, are you kidding me?” Talia asks. “Everyone knows who I am. They’d spread all kinds of rumors and half the pack would know before lunch.”

“No, but I bet there are still a couple upstairs,” Stiles says. “Laura was practically buying the damned things in bulk when she and Jonathan were trying for their third – but there wouldn’t have been any reason for her to take them when they moved to the new house.”

“Okay.” Talia lets out a breath. “Let’s go see.”

She’s a little shaky as she gets to her feet, leaving her high heels behind. The two of them go up the stairs, to the bathroom that Laura had shared with her younger sister before moving out. Stiles roots around in the cupboards before he finds two small boxes at the back. “Okay, here we go,” he says, checking the expiration date before handing it over to her. She nearly crushes the box.
“Do you want me to call somebody?” Stiles asks. “I could call Aaron, or, or Derek or Laura.”

“No.” Talia squeezes his shoulder. “It’s fine that it’s you.” She looks at the box and says, “Honest to God, I’m not sure what I want the answer to be.” She lets out a slow breath. “Okay. Just a minute.” She goes into the bathroom and closes the door.

Stiles paces up and down the hallway for a few seconds, wondering how long the test takes to register. Not long, apparently, because Talia opens the door a minute later. There are tears trickling down her cheeks, and he doesn’t know if that’s a good sign or a bad one. She holds the test out, and he looks at it. “Um. I don’t know what that means,” he confesses.

“Oh.” Talia chokes out a laugh. “Positive. It means positive.” She sets it down on the counter and presses a hand over her mouth again. “I’m going to have a baby, Stiles,” she says, and bursts into tears. “I’m going to have a baby.”

She hugs him so hard that he hears his bones creak. After a moment, he coughs out, “T-Talia. Need to breathe.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Stiles.” She loosens her grip so she isn’t choking him anymore, and then after another moment, lets go entirely. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Are you?”

“I think so.”

“Are you craving anything? Oh my God! I’m going to cook you all the things. Anything you want, you just ask me, it’s okay if it’s ice cream and those, those sour things that used to be cucumbers.” He sees that she’s smiling and keeps talking. “And we obviously have to have a big family dinner tonight. What do you want? How about I make that Mongolian beef dish that you really like?”

“That would be nice, Stiles,” Talia says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I had better go see my husband.”

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The house is full of noise and bodies by the time Derek gets home, with only a few minutes to spare. Stiles had texted him earlier to say that dinner would be at six, and he had wanted to finish up his inventory before he left. When he reaches the kitchen, he’s surprised at what he smells. Stiles is excited, happy, a ball of nervous energy.

“What’s going on?” he asks, leaning in to nuzzle at Stiles’ shoulder.

“I’m not allowed to tell,” Stiles says, squirming back into his embrace for a few moments. “Your mother has an announcement to make.”

Sometimes Derek thinks about how awful life must be for humans, with their poor sense of smell. That statement could have seemed ominous, but with happiness drifting off Stiles and gathering in every corner of the house, he’s not nervous at all. He just says, “Okay,” and leans in for another kiss. Whatever it is, it must be big. Stiles hardly ever makes Chinese food at home; it involves a lot of chopping and takes up a lot of time. They usually just order it. But there are a few dishes he’s mastered, and Derek knows that his mother loves homemade Chinese food.
Derek wanders over to say hi to his sisters and help them set the table. The entire pack is there, even Melissa, again leading him to believe that it’s a big announcement. He carries in a pitcher of green tea and one of water, and Stiles calls, “Okay, everything’s ready!”

Derek looks expectantly at his mother, who’s clinking a glass to get everyone’s attention. Stiles comes out of the kitchen and stands with his arm around Derek’s waist, grinning like an adorable idiot. Aaron has a similar expression on his face, standing behind Talia so his chin is just barely resting on the top of her head.

“Okay, everyone,” Talia says. “I have an announcement to make.” She takes a deep breath and then her face splits into a wide smile. “I’m pregnant.”

There are several literal gasps, and then Cora squeals and throws herself at her mother. Everyone starts talking at once, asking all sorts of questions and offering congratulations. Derek leans in to Stiles and asks in an undertone, “Why did you know this before I did?”

“Because I’m the one who knew Laura left pregnancy tests under the sink,” Stiles replies.

Talia is hugging Cora with one arm and holding the other hand up to stay the questions. “Yes, I’m sure. I took a second pregnancy test to double check, and once it was pointed out to me, I recognized the symptoms. No, we didn’t do this on purpose, but I’m still very happy about it.” Somewhat anxiously, she says, “I hope you are, too.”

“Mom, of course we are!” Laura says. “This is fantastic!” She lifts Tyler up so he can give his grandmother a kiss. “You’re going to have an aunt or uncle younger than you, won’t that be something?” she asks, laughing.

“How far along are you?” Melissa asks.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Talia says.

“Probably six to eight weeks,” Stiles says, and everyone looks at him. “Most werewolves start seeing symptoms at about six weeks, and after eight weeks the mother can hear the baby’s heartbeat.” He sees the expressions on their faces and adds, “What? I did a project on it!”

Talia is laughing. “Stiles is our resident expert, it seems. I’ll defer all questions.”

“Werewolf pregnancies are shorter, aren’t they?” Tom asks.

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Usually about six months.”

“I think I read somewhere that they can be even harder than human pregnancies,” Allison says.

“That’s a myth,” Talia says. “More of an urban legend, actually. Someone started a rumor that humans pregnant with werewolf babies have immense complications. It’s actually not true. In fact, they tend to have easier pregnancies, because the werewolf fetus enhances their immune system and boosts their healing. What’s harder is werewolf births,” she adds.

“Why?” Isaac asks.

“Because modern medicine has yet to find a painkiller that actually does anything to a werewolf,” Laura says, grimacing. “We metabolize them too quickly. If they give us doses large enough to actually diminish the pain, it’s dangerous to the baby. So it’s natural childbirth all the way, lucky us!”

“We can handle it,” Talia says, laughing.
“Why don’t you just do the pain drain?” Scott asks.

“Well, we could, and sometimes do,” Talia says, “but labor can last hours, and the pain drain only works for about ten or fifteen minutes at a time. So without constantly cycling people in and out of the birthing room, that doesn’t really work.” She shakes her head a little. “Any other questions?” she asks, and then glances around to see who hasn’t spoken yet. Peter is standing in the corner, just watching. “Peter? You okay?”

Derek glances over at his uncle. He walks over to Talia and takes her hands in his, and says, somewhat stiltedly, “I’m very happy for you, sister.”

Talia embraces him, and holds him for a long minute. Then she lets go and says, “Okay, let’s eat.”

Derek keeps an eye on Peter as he walks away from Talia. He watches Tom lean in and quietly make a comment. Peter shakes his head and then sits down in his usual seat, which leads Derek to assume that Tom was asking if he’d rather leave. Since Peter sits down, so does Tom, but he takes the seat next to Peter instead of sitting further down the table, near Stiles. A few moments later, the food is on the table and people are passing dishes around. Peter insists on making a plate for Tom, as if he wants to make sure that Tom only gets the best of everything. Tom allows this with good grace.

Stiles proposes a toast and says, “To the Hale pack,” and everyone clinks glasses of tea and water, and Derek finds himself smiling at his mother, at his mate, at everyone.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Look at me makin' stuff up~

It’s not entirely unusual for Stiles to find himself sidetracked when he’s working on a case. He has a ‘throw everything at the wall and see what sticks’ method of operations which can easily lead to tangents. It’s especially likely to happen when he’s working a case like Paige Krasikeva, which has no obvious leads.

His conversation with Talia has him thinking about the bite rejection awareness campaign. It’s a subject that he is, of course, intimately familiar with. He knows that he had been lucky; he had heard people say more than once ‘it’s a good thing that the hospital knew what to do’. Out of curiosity, he pulls together some statistics on bite rejection. It’s harder than he would have anticipated. This isn’t something contagious like influenza where the CDC keeps detailed records. He winds up having to send out over a dozen e-mails before he finds the right place.

In the end, he doesn’t learn anything particularly interesting. The bite rejection rate has remained stable over the past two decades. Twenty cases in 2013. Twenty-three in 2012. Twenty-one in 2011. It goes back like that until the eighties, and before that, detailed records are impossible to come by. Stiles tries to work out the rejection rate but the math is beyond him. He recruits Allison and Scott to help with the numbers. They work out that the rejection rate is two percent, just like it should be.

“What are you trying to find out?” Scott asks.

Stiles shrugs and says, “I don’t know, anything.” He makes a mental note to talk to Talia about whether or not she’d ever be interested in trying that campaign for paramedics to be able to treat bite rejection in the field. Of course, she has a lot on her plate right now. It might have to wait.

The Hale house has become an interesting place in the wake of Talia’s announcement. Everyone is excited. Talia has to put up with people touching her stomach to see if they can feel the baby’s heartbeat about six times a daily. She doesn’t seem to mind a bit.

In a way, Stiles thinks that an unplanned pregnancy might be the best thing that’s happened to Talia. She’s got a warm glow about her now, and overall she seems much more mellow. Stiles knows that everyone is happy for her, and Derek mentions at one point that he’s sure his two brothers would be happy, too. Peter is the only one who seems to be having trouble with his sister’s pregnancy, and nobody’s surprised by that. It has to remind him of Olivia, of what he lost in the fire, so they don’t say anything about his short temper or abrupt departures from conversations about it.

Since Talia’s busy, Stiles puts all those statistics aside and goes back to what Peter told him. Focus on alphas who lost pack members. Those statistics aren’t exactly lying around, either, but he sends more e-mails and scours newspaper articles and comes up with several candidates. Werewolves aren’t exactly given to die sudden, traumatic deaths. Their healing ability keeps them alive in all but the worst circumstances.
Due to that, most of the deaths he finds are gruesome, and several of them do relate back to the WLO. That doesn’t exactly surprise him. The WLO is probably the leading cause of sudden, traumatic werewolf death. There’s a couple whose car went over a bridge. A girl who was electrocuted. Half of a pack that succumbed to wolfsbane poisoning.

Most of those alphas have gone on to recover and rebuild their packs. There was no evidence that any of them might have gone on a maniacal biting spree.

One case does catch his eye, though. An alpha named Satomi Ito, who lost her grandson about three months before Paige’s murder. It was, in a roundabout way, due to bite rejection. His mate, a nineteen year old woman, had accepted the bite after they had been together for a year. She had rejected it and been rushed to the hospital, but then had a bad reaction to one of the immunosuppressants that was used. She died a few hours later. The grandson had promptly gone up to the hospital roof and thrown himself off.

Stiles ponders this for a long time while studying his wall of facts. If Satomi had then bitten Paige, he could imagine her getting upset and running away when Paige showed evidence of bite rejection.

But then, he mentally counters, calling 911 and carefully wiping down the phone didn’t indicate a distressed frame of mind. That had been deliberate.

Then again, he doesn’t know whether or not the 911 caller and the alpha had been the same person.

“I’m arguing with myself,” Stiles says to his ceiling. “I need to stop.”

Like the others, there’s no evidence that Satomi had actually become unhinged by her grandson’s death. She seemed to carry on regardless. But she was nearby, and he wonders if she would be willing to talk to him. It’s not like he has any experience interrogating suspects. He wonders if he can find some way to link her to Beacon Hills, instead, and then let his father talk to her.

“It’s not like I can just walk up to random alphas and say, ‘hey, by any chance did you go insane and bite random teenagers back in 2003’,” Stiles remarks glumly to his father over lunch.

“I know,” Tom remarks, looking at the bag full of raw cauliflower with despair. “That’s why I said I was giving you access to police resources. Convince a judge that Satomi Ito is a real suspect, and you can get a warrant to take a closer look at her. But you’re going to need more than ‘she lost a pack member back in the day’.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stiles says.

“If I were you,” Tom says, “I’d be focusing more on what happened to the pack after Paige’s death than before. Like you were saying, these people all seem to have rebuilt their lives. What happened was traumatic, but we know for a fact that not every alpha that goes through a traumatic loss goes off the deep end. But if the alpha did go off the deep end, what happens afterwards?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says. “It doesn’t seem like the sort of thing they recover from.”

“Exactly,” Tom says.

That starts Stiles down an entirely new line of inquiry. Pack records aren’t public, but the WLO had actually kept very detailed records on all the packs they could get information on, and thanks to Kate Argent and some general skullduggery, he has copies of all of that. He sits down to look at every pack in a hundred mile radius of Beacon Hills.
As Peter had said, packs grow and shrink in a natural rhythm, like families do, as people marry or move. Werewolves are still people. A werewolf might get a great job offer in Chicago and want to move across the country. In that case, their alpha was responsible for finding a new pack for them. A lot of packs had intermingled over the years.

He finds references here and there to something big that had happened in 2003, referred to in Kate’s notes as the ‘Black Steel Implosion’, which he thinks must be the most melodramatic thing he’s ever seen committed to paper. He hunts down Peter, who’s curled up in the papasan chair on the back porch, enjoying the sunshine, to ask about it.

“It’s not as melodramatic as it sounds,” Peter says, yawning widely and showing teeth. “It’s a name. Two names. Ennis Black and Kali Steel.”

“Ohhh,” Stiles says, getting it now. “Why was it an implosion?”

“Because their pack self-destructed. Why are you interested?”

“I’m just looking into alphas that might have been insane around the time of Paige’s murder.”

“Ah.” Peter yawns again and settles more comfortably into his chair. “Well, you’re barking up the wrong tree with them. They weren’t insane; just power hungry idiots who got what was coming to them.” He saw the way Stiles was looking at him and sighs, sitting up. “Very well. The story, then. You’ve noticed, I’m sure, that it’s very rare for an alpha to choose another alpha as a mate.”

Stiles nods. “Yeah, now that I think about it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it happen.”

“The generally prevalent theory is that two alphas would hardly ever be compatible,” Peter says. “Alphas have such a force of personality, and they have a tendency to be direct and headstrong. Two alphas hardly ever even get along in the same household. It’s part of why you and Talia didn’t get along for so long. You both have a lot of that alpha personality.” He yawns again. “Your father is quite the alpha, too, or would be if he were a werewolf. Do you have werewolf in your ancestry, by the way?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Maybe?” Stiles ventures. “If I did, it’s got to be at least three generations back.”

“Mm. I was just thinking about something your father had said once, about your mother . . . how he felt when he first met her. It sounded much akin to a mating instinct.” Peter brushes this aside. “I’ve gotten sidetracked. Kali Steel was – is, I should say, I believe she’s still alive – an alpha from somewhere in the southwest. Ennis Black was an alpha from northern Nevada. After the Searching Ceremonies in 2002, they declared that they were mates.”

“Were they?” Stiles asks.

“I doubt it. Everyone doubts it. But of course there was no way to actually say anything against it. The mating ceremonies are, as you’ve seen, held sacred,” Peter adds dryly.

“Okay. So Kali and Ennis got hitched and merged their two packs?” Stiles asks.

“Yes.”

“That can’t have made them, um, the word for when people like you.”

“Popular. No, it didn’t. Pretty much every alpha in the entire region was unhappy about it. As you know, the larger the pack, the greater the power. It seemed obvious to everyone that they were
going to make moves to seize the territory around them. And so they did. A number of packs in their
general area suddenly found reasons to move elsewhere. Nobody ever admitted to foul play.”

“Okay. So what happened?”

“I doubt anyone is one hundred percent sure. Ennis disappeared. He’d made a lot of enemies, and
odds are good that he’s dead. Kali tried to keep the pack together, but a lot of Ennis’ pack blamed
her for his death – saying the whole thing had been her idea – and in the end it broke up and she
slunk back south with her tail between her legs. Most of the packs that had been driven away
came back and reclaimed their territory, and that was the end of that.”

Stiles sighs. “Well, that’s interesting and all, but it isn’t exactly helpful.”

“No, I imagine not,” Peter says. “I heard you wanted to talk to Satomi Ito.”

“I don’t know what I would talk to her about,” Stiles admits. “I can’t exactly just ask her if she
accidentally killed a fifteen year old girl. Besides, if she had gone nuts, wouldn’t she still be nuts?
What happens to rogue alphas, you know, after they attack?”

“An interesting question. I don’t know the answer to that, to be honest. Usually they’re
apprehended, and the punishment, of course, is execution. Which has always seemed a little harsh
to me, to be honest, but I don’t make the rules. Could one recover over time? Perhaps. It’s possible
that the knowledge she had accidentally killed a girl could be the wake-up call that was needed.”

Stiles throws his hands in the air. “I need data from a country where these problems happen often
enough for there to be data. What’s the worst country in the world to be a werewolf in?”

“Mmm, tough call,” Peter says. “There are pockets of Africa that are very bad – Uganda,
Rwanda, that area – although much of Africa actually venerates werewolves. Russia has very,
very strict laws regarding werewolves, to the point where I don’t believe there are any there. Other
Slavic countries might not be a bad bet. I would start with those two.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Stiles says, bouncing up to his feet. “That ought to keep me busy for a few
weeks.”

“Indeed,” Peter says, and he looks amused. “Have fun.”

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Tom is starting to look forward to Derek dropping in for lunch, particularly since he usually brings
something unhealthy that Stiles would have a fit if he knew his father was eating. They both have
a healthy ‘what Stiles doesn’t know won’t hurt him’ attitude about this. Derek, of course, would
never actually lie to Stiles, but they both know that Tom’s cholesterol is nowhere near as bad as
Stiles has somehow convinced himself it is. They also know that half the reason Stiles does it is
just to give his father a hard time.

“You’re my savior,” Tom says, opening the Styrofoam container to see the BLT inside. “What’s
up?”

“I just . . . was wondering how Peter’s doing,” Derek says. “This whole thing with my mom being
pregnant has to be hard on him.”
“It is,” Tom agrees, chowing down. “He’s upset because he can smell the change in her hormone levels and it reminds him of Olivia. He probably won’t want to go near her until after the baby’s born. That’s why he’s slept on my sofa for the past three days.” He takes another bite and says, “I tried to say he could sleep in Stiles’ room, but he got weird about it.”

“That’s a big surprise,” Derek says with a sigh. “I don’t want him to feel like he’s exiled, but . . .”

“But you’re all excited. He knows that. He doesn’t blame you, you know.” Tom sees the look on Derek’s face and says, “Son, there are some things you can’t fix. You just have to ride them out. Peter’s upset. He’s going to be upset for a while. You just have to let him be upset. Let him deal with it in his own way.”

“Peter’s way of dealing isn’t always the kind of thing you want to let him do,” Derek says dryly.

Tom gives a snort of laughter. “True.” He takes another bite. “What’s really on your mind?”

Derek looks away. “Uh, babies,” he says. “Stiles kind of has baby fever. It’s an interesting combination with the murder research. Half the time he’s talking about rogue alphas and people dying in a variety of horrible ways, and the other half the time he’s getting all moogly-eyed with Cora and Allison.”

“My son having moogly-eyes. Well, that’s something I never thought I’d see.” Tom picks up his can of soda and thinks for a minute. “Having second thoughts about kids? Or are you worried that Stiles is having second thoughts?”

“I guess maybe a little of both.” Derek chews on his straw, unaware of how much it gives away about his mood. “I don’t want to make Stiles unhappy. This whole thing with my mom has made me think about it, I guess. She never could have gotten pregnant on purpose, for the same reason that I didn’t want kids. It just seems . . . disrespectful. Like we’re replacing the people who died.”

“You know,” Tom says, “after Claudia died, I was one hundred percent not interested in dating. But a lot of people told me I should get back out there for Stiles’ sake. That he needed a mother in his life, that if he didn’t have one, he’d come out wrong. That’s not what they said,” he adds, seeing Derek’s eyes narrow, “but it’s what they meant. What they didn’t understand is that trying to replace Claudia would have only made Stiles upset and angry. Because you can’t just replace someone’s mother. After Stiles decided that Scott’s mom and I should date, I asked him about it, and do you know what he told me? That I should do whatever made me happy.”

“Sounds like Stiles,” Derek says, smiling fondly.

“Yeah,” Tom says. “And in the end I took an ‘if it happens, it happens’ attitude about it. I figured if it were meant to happen, I would meet the right person. Obviously, that’s not really an attitude you and Stiles can have about children.”

“That’s . . . very true,” Derek says. “And maybe that’s part of what bothers me about it. That we can’t just let it happen. We’d have to actively go out and put a lot of effort in. But, you know, it’s not just me. Don’t you want Stiles to have kids? He’s your only son.”

Tom waves this off. “I think the whole ‘passing on your genes’ thing is probably the least important factor about having kids. I’m hardly the last Stilinski. I’ve got two brothers, you know; they’re in the Midwest and we don’t see them very often but they’ve both got a passel of kids. And Claudia’s genes are pretty well taken care of, too. Would I be happy if Stiles has kids? Sure. That sounds like fun. Does it matter to me if they’re adopted or surrogates or whatever? Nope. Would I be happy if he never had kids? Yeah, that’s fine. What’s most important to me is that he’s happy. And you, too.”
“What if he decides he wants kids and I still don’t?” Derek asks.

“Then you talk about it. You compromise. You figure out why he wants kids and why you don’t and you figure out some solution that everyone can be happy with.” Tom takes another drink of his soda and holds up a hand. “Two things to remember. No, three. First of all, don’t get so tense about this. Stiles is only nineteen. You’re twenty-six. Your biological clock is hardly running out. You have years, decades, to make this decision. Your ideas about it might evolve. So might his. Or they might not. But don’t force them to evolve. That’s not how feelings work.”

Derek takes a deep breath. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Secondly,” Tom continues, “I think Stiles is less excited about the idea of babies in general and more excited about the idea of Talia’s baby. He didn’t get like this when Laura was pregnant. He was happy for her, but the baby itself didn’t interest him that much. Mostly I think Stiles is happy for Talia, and he’s sort of getting swept up in that.”

“You might be right about that,” Derek says. After their incredibly rocky start, Talia and Stiles have gotten a lot closer over the past year. To see this sort of recovery in his mother, to see how happy she was, it made all of them happy. Stiles included.

“Third and lastly, and you can feel free to tell me I’m full of shit about this,” Tom says, “but I suspect a lot of your reluctance to have children comes from the fact that your mother pressured you about it so much. You felt like you were trying to replace your siblings because your mother obviously wanted to increase the pack’s numbers. That was a natural way for you to feel, and the resentment you’re probably still harboring isn’t something that will go away overnight.”

Derek squirms a little, because he knows Tom is right. He had gotten extremely contrarian about the entire idea of a mate and children, and if Stiles hadn’t stumbled into the room where he had been standing, he’d probably still be single. He wouldn’t give up his life with Stiles for anything, but he has to admit that there’s a stubborn part of him that’s still rebelling against the pressure his mother had put on him.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, or that you should magically want to have children now that I’ve pointed that out,” Tom says. “All I’m really saying is, there’s some stuff you just have to take as it comes. Enjoy your mother being pregnant, enjoy your new sibling, enjoy Stiles enjoying it. Don’t push yourself so hard to change your own feelings.”

“I don’t know how you can be so easygoing about so much,” Derek says. “First this whole thing with Peter, and now this.”

Tom smiles a little and says, “Experience, bucko. I’ve lived longer than you and I know that there are some things you just can’t control. Like, for example, my son. I slammed my head against that brick wall for a long time before I learned that sometimes things work out better if you go with the current than against it.”

“Go with the flow, huh?” Derek says. “It’s not really what I would have pictured as your life motto.”

“Well, it isn’t,” Tom says. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be a sheriff. Like I said. There are some things you can’t control, that you take as it comes. And there are some things you can. You know the serenity prayer?”

Derek nods. “The serenity to accept the things I can’t change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
“I’m not normally one for platitudes, but that’s a good one,” Tom says. He checks his watch. “I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you at the house tonight?”

“Yes, you will,” Derek says. “Thanks.”

~ ~ ~

“Derrreereeeekkk,” Stiles whines, flopping onto their bed, where Derek is looking over some of the plans for the house that his mother had given him. He’s going to get to do all their landscaping, and he’s excited about it. He reaches out and absently brushes his hand over Stiles’ face, fingers trailing over his lips. Stiles bites at them. “My head aches and I’m frustrated.”

“About?” Derek asks.


“Ahh,” Derek says. He knows that Stiles still has a lot of trouble with numbers. He puts his papers aside and lies down, inviting Stiles to sprawl over him. The teenager promptly does. “What math?”

“So I got all this data from, like, twenty different countries,” Stiles says, “and I was working out rejection percentage rates and rogue werewolf attacks, and these formulas are simple! You count up the attacks and the rejections and then divide, and ta da, a percentage! But I’m fucking up somewhere, because I keep getting this weird answer.”

Derek brushes his thumb over the back of Stiles’ neck. “You want me to check your numbers for you?”

“Would you? I know you’re busy doing stuff that’s actually time sensitive but I’ve been banging my head against this for the past twenty minutes and I’m not going to be able to sleep until it’s done.”

“The house isn’t that time sensitive,” Derek says. “Most of what I’m doing will be done after it’s built, anyway.” He sits up, spilling Stiles off his lap. That doesn’t slow the teenager down. He bounces to his feet and leads Derek downstairs, to where he has his papers spread out over the kitchen table. He often works in the kitchen so he can do food prep while he’s thinking, if he gets stuck or frustrated. Derek sees several bowls of chopped fruit on the counters, so he was clearly working.

“Okay, what have we got?” he asks, eyeing the piles of papers.

“So I got a report from twenty-three different countries,” Stiles says, “with how many werewolves that were made in a year, how many of those were from rogue alpha attacks, and how many cases of bite rejection there were. See, this sort of started out as murder research but lately it’s just been more generic bite rejection research, to prove that it’s important for paramedics to be properly trained, et cetera, et cetera.” Stiles waves this aside. “But also it’s because I’m trying to figure out what sort of werewolf participates in rogue attacks.”

“Okay,” Derek says.

“And some of these weird numbers I have make sense,” Stiles continues. “Like, there are countries where the bite-without-consent rate is much higher, just because of cultural differences,
and those get counted as rogue attacks. But what I’m looking at is the rejection rate for rogue attacks. It should be roughly the same as the overall rejection rate.”

“People aren’t more likely to reject it if it isn’t from their own alpha?” Derek asks, glancing up.

“Not that anyone has ever proven,” Stiles says. “That’s a going theory but there’s never been enough evidence to support it. And sometimes the rejection rate is a little bit higher – we’re talking like four percent versus two percent, which may or may not be statistically significant.”

“Okay. So if that’s what you’re supposed to be finding, what are you finding instead?”

Stiles chews on his lower lips. “I don’t want to influence you,” he says. “Will you just run the numbers? I’ll make gingerbread muffins for you.”

“You don’t have to bribe me,” Derek says, “but okay. Just the rate of rejection overall per country, and the rate of rejection for rogue alpha attacks per country?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Stiles heads into the kitchen and gets to work on the muffins while Derek starts typing into the calculator and making notes. Like Stiles had said, it wasn’t difficult work. Dividing the number of rejections by the number of bites and noting down the result. It goes quickly. Two point four percent in England. Two point seven in Thailand. One point nine in Brazil. Then he does the same for all the rogue attacks. Three point three. Two point eight. Two point zero. Seventeen point –

“What the hell?” he mutters to himself.

He can feel and smell the tension go out of Stiles. “You got it too?” he demands, immediately coming over to look over Derek’s shoulder.

“A rejection rate of seventeen percent for rogue alpha attacks in the United States,” Derek says. “Is that what you were getting?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “I mean, I had noticed that our overall rejection rate was slightly higher, but until I separated out the data, I had no idea that the rejection for rogue attacks was the reason why.”

Derek is nodding and going over the numbers again to double check. In the past two decades, the United States has seen over twenty-three thousand werewolves get turned. There had been just over four hundred and fifty cases of bite rejection. Ten of those were from rogue attacks. All the numbers seemed reasonable until you considered that there had only been fifty-six rogue attacks in the same time span.

“There were so few rogue attacks that it didn’t really change the overall rejection rate,” Derek says. “So nobody noticed.”

Stiles nods, tapping nervously at the table. “And rogue alpha attacks are so rare that any time someone wants to study them, they basically have to get data from all over the world. So nobody noticed that our rejection rate for rogue attacks was so much higher than the average.”

“Maybe it’s just an outlier,” Derek says. “I mean, when you’re working with numbers this small . . .”

“I’d say that if it hadn’t been so consistent over every other country,” Stiles says. “No, it’s definitely weird. I mean, five percent might be a statistical outlier. Seventeen is something else. But you can force a rejection, like we saw with Gerard Argent, or you can probably predict who might reject the bite, like me.”
“You’re suggesting that these rogue alpha attacks were specifically aimed at people who would reject the bite,” Derek says, and Stiles nods. “Okay, but why? What would the point be?”

“I have no idea,” Stiles says, “but I want to get the story of these ten people and find out.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Getting the story of the ten people who rejected the bite after being bitten by a rogue alpha starts out as more difficult than Stiles would have predicted. The problem is that most of them don’t want to talk to him. Out of the ten, two of them died, six went on to have major complications from the rejection, and five of them wound up in therapy for the trauma of the attack.

Stiles is a public figure to a certain degree, and among people who are anti-werewolf, he’s not very popular. Only one of the victims agrees to talk with him, and they have a brief conversation about the incident which tells him very little. It might tell him more if he could look for patterns, but one incident isn’t going to give him that.

Out of the remaining seven, two are unlisted, and the other five either won’t return his calls or call him a variety of terrible names.

“How am I going to figure this out if none of them will talk to me?” Stiles complains, mashing potatoes with force. Derek rubs his back and tells him that he’s sure he’ll figure it out. Stiles is still muttering about it during dinner – he got off the phone with one of the nastiest people about an hour previous – and his father looks over at him.

“So they won’t talk to you,” he says. “So what?”

“So what?” Stiles asks. “Dad, how am I supposed to get information if the victims won’t talk to me?”

Tom arches his eyebrows at Stiles, then shakes his head a little, clearly amused. “Rogue alpha attacks are a crime,” he says. “These people were questioned at the time. In some cases the perpetrator was caught. Why don’t you just request the case files?”

“Oh!” Stiles blinks at him. “I forgot I’m sort of legit now!”

It’s not that he hasn’t requested case files in the past, but those have always been for open cases. It’s one thing to call someone, pretend that he’s his father, and come up with some reason why he might need to take a look at an open case. Closed cases are something else. He has no legitimate reason to be interested in them, so asking for them would raise eyebrows.

Sheriff Stilinski is shaking his head at his son. “Tell me the ones you need, son, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Yes!” Stiles does a fist pump. “I’ll e-mail you a list.”

Dinner is interrupted when the front door opens and Talia and Aaron come in. Talia had texted Stiles about an hour previous, saying they were running late and to feel free to start dinner without them. It’s a Tuesday night, and quiet. Laura and Jonathan are eating at their own house because
Tyler misbehaved and his punishment is that he doesn’t get to see his aunts and uncles. Scott and Allison are eating at Melissa’s house. Peter’s there, but he’s sitting at the far end of the table instead of his normal seat at Talia’s left. That seat has been empty, but she’s smiling now as they come in. “That smells good, Stiles,” she says. Aaron pulls out a chair for her. “I’m sorry that we’re late. Traffic was terrible.”

“You were getting your first sonogram, right?” Cora is practically bursting with excitement.

“Yes, I was,” Talia says, smiling fondly at her daughter.

“And?” Cora demands, bouncing in her chair.

“And the babies look very healthy,” Talia says, accepting a serving dish from Derek with a smile.

“Babies?” Cora demands, and Derek and Stiles both echo her. “Babies?”

“Plural babies?” Stiles asks, just as excited.

Talia nods, and it looks like she’s honestly smiling so widely that she can’t talk. Aaron puts his arm around her and says, “Two babies, to be specific. Twins.”

“Oh my God this is the best day ever!” Cora squeals. Then she looks at Isaac and says, “Except the day I met you. No, wait. That was actually a terrible day. And then there isn’t really a single day that I can say we ‘got together’ on because that was kind of a process, and I can’t say ‘the day we brought you into the pack’ because that was a pretty horrible day, too. So, yeah, sorry. Best day ever!”

Everyone is laughing, even Isaac. He leans over to kiss Cora on the top of her head, and rub his cheek against her temple.

“Twins, wow,” Derek says. “Boys or girls?”

Talia gives her son an amused look and says, “It’s a bit too early to tell that, Derek. Right now on the ultrasound they look like grapes.”

“Are you hoping either way?” Isaac asks, a little hesitant around Talia still, but warming up to her.

“Not really,” Aaron says, squeezing Talia’s hand. “Either would be okay with us.”

Everyone knows what they’re thinking, that it would be nice to have a couple boys so Derek could have brothers, but nobody wants to actively wish for that since it was his brothers who died in the fire. Derek thinks back to what Tom had told him about taking things as they come, about things that you can and can’t control. He can’t control what sex his new siblings are going to be, but he can control his attitude about it. “I think it would be nice if you had one of each,” he says, surprising his parents. “You know, to keep it even.”

Talia smiles at him and says, “That would be nice, wouldn’t it.”

There’s a loud screeching noise that makes all the werewolves wince, as Peter abruptly pushes his chair back from the table. “I have to go,” he mumbles, and then is out the back door without another word.

A moment of silence passes. Everyone turns and looks at Tom. He takes a drink of his water, and then says, “You guys can stop staring at me now.”

“Shouldn’t you, you know . . . go after him?” Cora asks.
Tom sighs. “Cora, honey, if I went running off after Peter every time something upset him, that would be all I ever did. Give him a few minutes to collect himself. If he’s not back in ten or so, I’ll text him to see if he wants company.” He sees that several of them are still staring at him. “Guys, we talked about this. Peter’s mood is volatile right now because of Talia’s pregnancy. He promised he’d let me know if he needed me.”

“It’s just . . . not how we’re used to dealing with him,” Aaron admits.

“I know,” Tom says. “Look, I know I wasn’t here for the worst of this. I know that five years ago, if you didn’t go after Peter after an exit like that, you were afraid you’d find his body in a ditch later. But Peter’s better now. He’s not okay by any means, but he’s better. So let him be better. Okay?”

“Okay,” Talia says firmly, and starts eating again. “So, Stiles was right. I’m just shy of eight weeks pregnant. That gives me a due date in mid-October.”

“Oh my God that’s only four months away!” Cora says. “We don’t have any baby stuff! Where’s the baby going to sleep? Babies! I forgot it was plural for a second. Where are the babies going to sleep! There’s so much to do!”

“Cora,” Talia says, amused, “you do know that your father and I have done this before, don’t you? The babies will have Tyler and Sylvia’s old room. And yes, obviously, we’ll need to buy some things.”

“Can I help you decorate? And pick out the clothes and stuff? Are we going to have a baby shower?”

“I’d . . . prefer not to,” Talia says. “I don’t want to make this into a huge deal. Okay, honey? But I’d be happy to take you shopping with me and pick out some things for the room.”

“What are you guys doing about the new house?” Tom asks. “Are you going to put that on hold for the time being?”

“On the contrary, we’re trying to step things up so we can finish it before the due date,” Aaron says. “Trust me, Derek and Stiles will be much happier if they don’t live in a house with two werewolf infants.”

“One is bad enough,” Derek agrees, wincing as he remembers the days after his nephew Tyler was born. He had been seven when his youngest brother was born, and remembers being extremely grumpy about how demanding David could be, but the recent memories are more clear. He loves his nephew dearly, but werewolf babies are loud.

“Can it get done that quickly?” Isaac asks, looking interested. He’s got some interest in architecture and construction, which Derek has encouraged him to explore at college if it strikes his fancy.

“Hopefully,” Aaron says. “We’ve gotten all the permits and the plans will be finalized as of the end of this week. The ground is already cleared; we had them do the whole area when they were building Laura and Jonathan’s house. So, if we pay a bit extra to have two crews working longer days, and the weather holds up, we should have it finished by the beginning of October. It’ll be dicey, but we’re going to try.”

“The Amish can build a barn in a day,” Cora says.

“I don’t want to live in a barn,” Stiles says, and Cora snickers.
“Even if the guts aren’t all put together yet, we can still sleep on the floor, and not be woken at
three AM by howling babies,” Derek says, and Stiles snickers.

The back door opens and Peter comes back inside. He looks calm and collected, and he sits back
down next to Tom, leaning over briefly to brush his cheek against the top of Tom’s head. “Better
include a room for me, in that case,” he says.

“Do you want one?” Stiles asks, a little uncertain. Peter is in an odd age gap – he’s younger than
Talia by quite a bit, but not young enough to be considered one of the next generation. Tom is
about halfway between Talia and Peter in age.

“Joking, joking,” Peter says easily. “You wouldn’t want any old fogeys in your house of
excitement and fun. Besides, once we’ve emptied this one out a bit, Tom is going to move in
here.”

“He is?” Stiles asks, startled.

“I am?” Tom asks, clearly just as taken aback.

“Of course you are,” Peter says, without any loss of aplomb. “You complain constantly about
having to drive all the way from town for dinner every night. Once the new house is built, there
will be plenty of room for you here. Melissa, too, if she’d like.”

Tom pushes a hand through his hair. “Remember that talk we had about boundaries, Peter?”

Peter doesn’t look perturbed. “I fail to see how it applies in this case. I know that you’d be happier
living here.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to leave my family home,” Tom says, gently stressing the word
‘family’, obviously not wanting to mention that it was the house he lived in with his wife.

Peter stiffens. “Ah. I see.” He sets down his fork without having taken a bite.

“I’m not saying no,” Tom says. “I’m just saying, it’s a decision you can’t make for me. You can
offer. And we can talk about it. But you can’t just announce it and then expect everything to fall
into place.” He shakes his head. “We’ll talk about this later, okay? You want to go down to
McNally’s and play a few games of pool?”

Everyone expects Peter to get angry or upset, but after a moment he nods and says, “Yes. That’s a
good idea.”

“The new house should have a pool table,” Stiles says, jumping in before things can get more
awkward.

Talia laughs. “I’ll see what I can do.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“Wow,” Derek says, walking into Stiles’ bedroom at the Stilinski house to see literally every flat
surface covered with posters. “Is this the stuff from the rogue attacks?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, a little muffled since his mouth is full of highlighter.
“This looks like a lot more than ten incidents,” Derek says, frowning slightly.

“Oh f, yef, I defided – ” Stiles spits the highlighter out in the general direction of his desk, whereupon his cat Cleopatra immediately pounces on it and starts batting it around. “I decided to get all fifty-six cases so I could look for similarities between all of them. I mean, if someone was purposefully trying to cause rejections, they probably couldn’t have gotten a rejection all the time. So some of these might come back to the same source.”

Derek nods, looking around. He knows that Stiles prefers to work on this stuff at his own place because he doesn’t like having it all over their room at the den. That’s not just because he doesn’t want to bother Derek. It’s because he’s altogether too likely to stay up late or get out of bed in the middle of the night to work on things if they’re right there.

Someday, Derek thinks, Stiles is going to have an actual office where he can keep all this stuff. But in the meantime, this bedroom is good enough. “Find out anything interesting?”

“Well, I’ve taken it down from the original fifty-six to twenty-four,” Stiles says, “by ruling out incidents that were already solved, and the alpha in question apprehended. From the looks of it, most of those fit Peter’s description of a werewolf that went insane due to trauma. So now I’ve got these twenty-four left, including the original ten rejections, which includes Paige. There are a few more that I think I’m going to filter out. But I’ve got seventeen that all have distinct similarities.”

“Okay,” Derek says, hauling himself up to sit on Stiles’ desk after carefully moving some papers aside.

“In these seventeen cases, the victim was always alone,” Stiles says. “Which is actually important. Crazy alphas don’t show a lot of restraint. Some of these took place in schools, malls, a freakin’ football stadium. When they lose it, they lose it big. But in these seventeen, the victim was alone but also in a public place. Not in their home. A bunch of people who worked late and closed up a place by themselves. A handful who were out for early morning jogs or late night walks. That sort of thing.”

“Mm hm,” Derek says, just to show that he’s listening, watching Cleopatra attack his shoelaces.

“None of them got a good look at their attacker,” Stiles continues. “It was always pretty quick. The alpha knocked them down, took a pound of flesh, and then took off. Which is pretty odd for a rogue alpha attack. A crazy alpha has a tendency to try to drag their unwilling recruit back to their den.”

“Yeah, that is weird,” Derek says.

“And I don’t have a clue what it means!” Stiles says brightly. “Preliminary research on the ten people who rejected shows absolutely no commonalities. Ages range from fifteen to eighty-two. Six women and four men. No racial bias. It’s just a total grab-bag. I have no idea why someone might look at these ten people and think ‘this is the sort of person who would reject the bite’.”

Derek is studying the posters and thinking things over, but the doorbell rings before he can say anything. He glances over at Stiles. “Expecting anyone?”

“Nope,” Stiles says, and glances at his watch. It’s too late for any deliveries. “I guess we might as well go see who it is,” he says. It’s not entirely unheard of for a neighbor to stop by for the proverbial cup of sugar. He jogs down the stairs with Derek on his heels and glances through the peephole. There’s a woman standing there, a few years older than Derek, with brown hair and a pretty smile. She appears to be alone, so he pulls the door open a few inches. “Can I help you?” he asks, comforted to have Derek’s solid presence behind him. It’s not that he’s nervous, except,
well, he is. Too many bad things have happened when people have come to his door for him to not be nervous.

“Well, I hope so,” she says, still smiling. “My name is Jennifer Blake, with Search for a Cure. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you.”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles says. “I distinctly remember ignoring your e-mails,” he adds, and Derek gives an amused snort.

“That’s why I decided to come in person,” Jennifer says. “I know that to you, someone from a society like mine must make you get your back up. I don’t blame you for that! But we’re not the WLO, Stiles. Our goal is to help people, and we want to include you in that.”

“Yeah, okay, but I’m happy in a pack,” Stiles says. “Really happy. Bordering on ecstatic at times, depending on how much clothing I’m wearing.”

“Of course you are,” Jennifer says. “You joined this pack of your own volition. Not everybody in a werewolf pack has. We’re trying to help people who don’t want to be werewolves. People who were turned involuntarily. It’s not such a problem here in the United States, but we do a lot of work in Africa and South America.”

Stiles hesitates for a minute, thinking about it. “A lot of people in those areas venerate werewolves,” he says.

“Yes, a lot of them do,” Jennifer says, “which leads to an imbalanced society where some werewolves take advantage of humans. It happens, Stiles. I’m not saying that all werewolves are like that. I’m not even saying that most werewolves are like that. But there’s a huge potential for abuse in any society that treats some of its members as better than others.”

“Well, then, go fix it,” Stiles says. “It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“It might,” Jennifer says. “We think that bite rejection might hold the key to a cure for lycanthropy.”

“Uh, I doubt it,” Stiles says. “I mean, I see where you might get the idea. Like, look at the antibodies made by someone who went into bite rejection, okay. But if you try giving those antibodies to someone who’s already a werewolf, you’re just going to kill them. I mean, you talk about it like that option hasn’t been explored.”

“Right now we’re focusing on a very specific subset of victims of bite rejection,” she says. “People who had previous exposure to wolfsbane or mistletoe. We think that the antibodies you create might be slightly different from the antibodies someone who rejects the bite naturally might have. If so, you and a handful of other people in the states might be able to help.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “I don’t know,” he says. “I mean, yes, I’m aware that there are probably people out there who don’t want to be werewolves. But I’m not sure that curing them is the right choice. There are people out there who would take a cure for homosexuality if one existed, and that wouldn’t be right, either.” He frowns suddenly and says, “By the way, if you have a problem with homosexuality, you can get off my doorstep.”

“I’m a lesbian,” Jennifer says.

“Oh. Carry on, then.”

Somewhat amused, Jennifer says, “There are people out there who would take that cure, that’s true. But even though homosexuality is natural, do we have the right to tell them that they have to
be homosexual? Graying hair is natural, but we don’t tell people not to dye their hair. Leg hair is natural, but we don’t tell people that they can’t shave their legs. Lycanthropy is not always natural. There are incidents where people are turned against their will. It’s terrible, but it does happen.”

“Yes, okay, but their problem isn’t actually with being a lycanthrope, it’s with the interlinked trauma, we can’t un-attack them by curing them – ”

“That’s true, to a certain extent,” Jennifer says. “But that doesn’t mean a cure might not help. If someone is raped, and becomes pregnant, we don’t tell her she can’t have an abortion because the pregnancy is natural and getting rid of the baby won’t un-rape her.”

Stiles squirms. “Okay, look, I’ll think about it,” he says. “I mean, what would you need from me?”

“Just a blood sample,” Jennifer says. “That’s it. That’s all you’d have to do.”

“I have a question,” Derek says, startling Stiles as he comes out of his silence. “Let’s say you take Stiles’ antibodies and develop them into a serum that you think will cure lycanthropy. Who will you test it on?”

“Volunteers,” Jennifer says. “The aforementioned people who wish to no longer be werewolves.”

“Uh huh,” Derek says. “I think that before we agree to anything, we need to have our legal team review your company.”

“Of course,” Jennifer says. She takes out a business card and hands it over. “They can call or e-mail me any time.” She offers them that pretty smile. “Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today, Stiles. I’ll look forward to hearing from you.”

She waves and then heads back to her car. Stiles watches to make sure she drives away, then shuts the door.

“She’s worked with werewolves before,” Derek says, and Stiles gives him a questioning look. “She didn’t try to shake hands. She knew that I wouldn’t want her scent on you.”


“Yeah, she is interesting, isn’t she,” Derek says. “She’s very persuasive. She made even me think about it for a minute.”

“You hate it, huh?” Stiles asks.

Derek gives a one-shouldered shrug. “Everything I am tells me that people can and should be happy as werewolves. If someone gets the bite against their will, by all means punish the alpha who was out of line, but don’t take the bite back. Find a pack they can be happy with.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “It just seems like there’s a lot of potential for abuse, if they did actually find a cure.”

“Mm,” Derek says.

“Funny her showing up now, though,” Stiles says. “Just as I’m researching a bunch of bite rejection victims.”

“Funny,” Derek agrees.
Stiles huffs out a sigh. “Ugh, my head is swimming. That’s enough for one day, I think. In the morning I’ll do a bunch of research on Search for a Cure and see if I can figure out whether or not they’re legit. You want to go work out back? I haven’t pruned in ages. Those roses are going to have us begging for mercy soon.”


~ ~ ~ ~

On the surface, Search for a Cure is a gold star organization. It’s a non-profit, aimed towards helping people who were bitten without consent. As Jennifer stated, most of their work is outside the United States. A lot of what they do centers around moving people to America, smuggling them away from the packs that had abducted them and finding them new homes.

They also, obviously, sponsor different scientific experiments geared towards finding a cure for lycanthropy. That doesn’t particularly surprise Stiles. There have always been studies like that, with a variety of legitimacy. Lycanthropy is a fascinating subject – half-science, half-mysticism – and a lot of real scientists have performed studies on it. Other scientists have cobbled together those legitimate studies to try to find a way to reverse the transformation.

Stiles knows well from research he’s done that most of those studies have resulted in a lot of dead werewolves, most of whom had never done anything to deserve it. So he’s skeptical that Search for a Cure is any different.

Still, everything he finds on the organization tells him that it’s legitimate, that it’s really geared towards helping people, that they’re trustworthy. The more squeaky clean they look, the more he suspects that they’re just a front for something else.

“What should I do?” he asks Peter. “I can’t exactly go undercover with them the way I did in the WLO.”

“No,” Peter agrees, “so find someone who knows the answer and is willing to tell you.”

Stiles frowns. “Like who?” he asks, and then realizes that the answer is obvious. It’s literally sitting at the dining room table with him. “Hey, Allison,” he calls down to her. “Any chance you can get your dad to talk to me?”

“Any chance you can get your dad to talk to me?”

She gives him an amused look, then says, “Roger that.”

That’s how he winds up meeting with Chris Argent at the police station the next day. Nobody wants him at the den – including Chris himself – and he doesn’t really want to go to Chris’ house.
That seems rude, and also dangerous. There are some unanswered questions about the Argent family that Stiles doesn’t expect he’ll ever get the truth on. He wonders sometimes if Chris really could have been that blind to his sister’s homicidal streak, or if he just chose not to see it.

For his day job, Chris sells guns and security systems, and he capitalizes on some people’s xenophobic fear of werewolves. It benefits him to spread rumors and propaganda about how werewolves can only live peacefully for a short time, before they inevitably become violent and come to your house to steal your children. He’s lobbied hard to get more legal restrictions on werewolves put into place, to keep them from living near schools or playgrounds, to put an end to the Searching Ceremonies.

In some people, this behavior would piss Stiles off, but the problem with Chris is that he wholeheartedly believes what he’s saying is true. He was indoctrinated from birth by his crazy father, and it’s taking a lot of hard work and time to get through that. In the end, Stiles just feels sorry for him.

“So, do you know anything about Search for a Cure?” he asks Chris. They’re having this conversation in his father’s office, because he doesn’t want to put Chris in one of the interrogation rooms and send the wrong message. But he doesn’t want anyone to overhear, either.

Chris shrugs and says warily, “About as much as I know about any anti-werewolf organization.”

“Are they actually anti-werewolf?” Stiles asks. “Or are they just pro-human?”

Chris gives him a look and says, “Isn’t that like asking whether someone is pro-life or anti-abortion?”

“Yes,” Stiles says. “Yes, it is. Those two things are very different. Someone who is pro-life would be against the death penalty, and would want free healthcare for children. Lots of pro-lifers aren’t actually pro-life. So. Is Search for a Cure anti-werewolf, or pro-human?”

“I’d say they’re anti-werewolf,” Chris says. “They’re looking for a cure for lycanthropy. That’s pretty much always anti-werewolf.”

“Well, they say they’re only doing that to help people who were turned against their will,” Stiles says.

“Of course they say that,” Chris says, with a snort. “The government would shut them down if they said they wanted to eliminate lycanthropy altogether. And since they run on donations, playing it the way they do allows them to get money from two groups of people – people who genuinely want to help others, and people who just really hate lycanthropes.”

Stiles nods, thinking this over. Jennifer is smart, it seems, and more than that, she’s crafty. Devious. He wonders what her position in the organization truly is. It’s been hard to get actual records on their power structure. “Do you think they actually help people?”

Chris glances around as if he wants to make sure nobody else can overhear them. “I think,” he says slowly, “that they genuinely do help people get out of werewolf packs they joined involuntarily. But I also wonder what happens to those people afterwards.” He spreads his hands and says, “The wolf needs a pack. Being omega is dangerous and unhealthy. A lot of the people they rescue stay in ‘communes’, which is a word you really only hear in one place.”

“Cults,” Stiles says.

“Exactly.” Chris says. “They form these quasi-packs of werewolves who hate being werewolves. Who reject the things they need to make them happy. If I ever got turned against my will, I’d hate
it. I’d be angry and upset. But I would find a pack to join because I know that there are things I would need. Touch, hierarchy, den – these are things that werewolves are miserable without.”

“Search for a Cure rescues werewolves but then doesn’t integrate them with werewolf society,” Stiles says, and rubs a hand over his face. “So when Jennifer says they have ‘willing volunteers’ to participate in their experiments, she’s technically being accurate, but those volunteers have been purposefully left miserable as werewolves so they’d be willing to go along with it.”

“That’s just my theory,” Chris says.

“Makes sense, though,” Stiles says. “And this stuff about the communes should be easy enough to verify.” He pauses, taps his pencil against his father’s desk, thinking about all the data, and then nods. “Okay,” he says. “I have an idea.”

~ ~ ~ ~
“So!” Stiles says, setting a tray of cookies down on the table. “I assume you’re all wondering why I’ve gathered you here together.”

“Not really,” Scott says, picking up a cookie. “We all pretty much assumed that you want something from us, and you’re going to bribe us with cookies.”

“Truth,” Cora agrees, picking up two and feeding one to Isaac, who smiles at her.

Stiles rolls his eyes and views the gathered teenagers. He’s not sure about exactly who would be best for this little mission he’s got in mind. There are pros and cons to every choice. He’s discussed it thoroughly with Peter, and cleared it with Talia. She was a little bit reluctant, but Stiles reassured her multiple times that he doesn’t believe it will be dangerous. “So I’m doing research into this group Search for a Cure,” he says, and gives everyone a brief summary of what he had found out so far. “So it seems pretty suspicious to me that they show up just as I’m looking into these rogue alpha attacks that might have had something to do with forced rejection.”

“Hella sketchy,” Cora agrees.

Allison is a little slower to agree. “You said she’d been trying to contact you for months, though.”

“That’s true,” Stiles says. “In fact, I got the first e-mail from them less than a month after I was released from the hospital. And they’ve been trying off and on since. But now, all of a sudden, they care enough to send one of their top members to my door. It’s a little weird.”

“Oh, that I agree with,” Allison says.

“What I really need,” Stiles says, “is inside information. And that’s what I think you guys can help me with.”

“So you want us to do what, exactly?” Allison asks, arching her eyebrows at Stiles.

“I want you to go undercover in Search for a Cure,” Stiles says. “You especially. You’re an Argent, right? And I know for a fact that Chris has kept it really fucking quiet that his daughter went and joined a werewolf pack. It would destroy his reputation with all those fuck-heads he works with. So you could volunteer there. And if we sent you with a werewolf who had just escaped a terrible pack, you could get into one of the communes. There’s one up in Oregon.”

“Where am I going to get a werewolf?” Allison asks. “I mean, other than the ones I live with.” She looks around and says, “Or is that the plan?”

“Well, that’s the general idea,” Stiles says. He looks over their assembled company. “Any of the
three of you would work. I don’t know how they would react if they found out you were pretending.”

“If it’s dangerous, and Allison’s going, I’m going,” Scott says firmly.

“What about your job at Deaton’s office?” Allison asks. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“I know, but . . .” Scott gives her sad eyes. “I can’t let you go into danger alone. Dr. Deaton will understand.”

“I really don’t think it’s going to be that dangerous,” Stiles says. “I mean, these people aren’t the WLO. They aren’t a violent group; they’re not associated with any terrorist acts or hate crimes. The most that’ll happen is that they’d throw you out.”

“I can take care of myself,” Allison reminds Scott, reaching over to squeeze his forearm.

“I know that, but – ”

“I’ll go,” Cora says. “It should be me, anyway, I’m the only one who doesn’t have a summer job.”

“No, your mom needs you,” Isaac says. “I’ll do it.”

“Wow, this is really inspiring,” Stiles says, grinning at them. “Since you’re all willing, I think Isaac would be the best choice. He’s got the best puppy face. I think he’d be most believable as a runaway omega. It’s not like you have to go in deep cover for months. Just a quick in and out, sniff around for a few hours, and then get out.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Isaac says.

“I’ll make each of you a batch of cookies of your choice,” Stiles says.

“You don’t have to pay us off,” Allison says, laughing.

Stiles laughs, too. “I know, but it can’t hurt.”

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Derek’s office isn’t exactly open to the public, but sometimes clients do come over to talk about plans or look at different kinds of plants or tile. The address for his business is listed on the internet, so sometimes people wander by to look at the nursery and buy some flowers or bushes. Laura had created a gallery of some of the work he’s done, and so there’s a wall of photographs.

He’s working in the screened-in porch like usual when he sees a car pull up, a small, generic-looking family vehicle. The woman behind the wheel gets out and checks her phone as if to make sure she’s in the right place, before walking towards the door. Derek gets up and heads towards the door, coming down the front steps. “Can I help you?”

The woman stops in her tracks and looks at him warily. He supposes he makes an imposing figure. He’s dressed in only an old tank top and jeans, both of which are smeared with dirt and grass stains, as are his knuckles. He hastily puts the trowel down.

“Oh, hi,” the woman says. “Are you . . . Derek Hale?”
“Yeah,” Derek says.

“I’m, uh, Cheryl Krasikeva. I think I met you once, a long time ago. At Paige’s funeral?”

“Oh,” Derek says. He has no recollection of this dark-haired woman, but that was over ten years ago, and a lot’s happened since then. “Oh, uh, sorry,” he says, wiping his hands on his pants and then extending one to shake.

Cheryl looks at them somewhat dubiously and then surprises him by reaching out and shaking it, without even trying to wipe her hands off afterwards. “I, uh, I hope it’s okay that I just came by. I called earlier but only got a voice mail and I didn’t really want to leave a message. Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Sure,” Derek says, and gestures for her to follow him up the stairs and onto the screened porch. “You want anything to drink? Lemonade, iced tea?”

“I’d love some iced tea,” she says, so Derek gets her a glass. Stiles had put a miniature refrigerator on the porch since he knows that’s where Derek works most of the time and ‘hydration is important!’ He also won’t allow Derek to buy ‘store bought crap’ when it comes to iced tea. To be fair, Derek appreciates that. Most store bought iced tea is basically sugar water. He much prefers the kind that Stiles makes.

“What can I do for you, Miss Krasikeva?” Derek asks.

“Please call me Cheryl,” she says. “I just, uh . . . I heard that your . . . your mate is investigating my sister’s murder. He called last week to talk to my parents.”

Derek nods. “Did you want to talk to Stiles?” he asks. He can understand that she might not know exactly how to get in touch with him. It’s generally considered bad form to go to a werewolf den without invitation, so visiting a place of business is a better way to go about things. But Stiles doesn’t have a place of business.

“No,” Cheryl says. “I mean, it’s not like I have information or anything. I just, I wanted to talk to you because I know that you and my sister were friends, so I . . .”

“I wouldn’t really say that,” Derek says. “We were more enemies than anything else, in that fifteen-year-old sort of way.”

Cheryl squirms a little. “Well, everyone knew Paige had a crush on you.”

“Not that I ever heard about,” Derek says, but with a note of wry humor in his voice.

“Really?” Cheryl sounds surprised. “I mean, I was two grades above her, but . . . she always denied it, but I figured she was just embarrassed because, well, half the girls in school had a crush on you. And I mean, you know how it is with teenagers. One minute it’s ‘I hate you, don’t talk to me’, the next it’s frantic groping in any dark corner you can manage to find . . .”

Derek clears his throat and says, “Trust me, on no occasion was there any frantic groping between me and your sister.”

“No, no, I know that,” Cheryl says. “I just always thought she hated you so vehemently because she secretly liked you.”

“Well, I guess that’s possible,” Derek says. “But if it was, she never actually mentioned it to me.” He wonders why Cheryl is here, bringing this up. There has to be some sort of purpose to it, but so far she hasn’t told him anything that she hadn’t already figured he knew.
“It was just one of those rumors, you know,” Cheryl says. “She got bullied some because of it. I mean, after everything that happened with Stiles, I’m sure you know how it must have gone . . . ugly duckling with a crush on the amazing Derek Hale, stepping out of place . . .”

Derek grimaces and gives a little nod.

“I think Paige was targeted because of her interest in you,” Cheryl blurts out.

“I . . . what?” Derek asks.

“Listen, just, hear me out,” Cheryl says. “I know it sounds crazy but, given what happened with Stiles, I thought you might believe me. Nobody did back then. But you were fifteen. Fifteen is the first year that the Searching Ceremonies start. There were rumors that you might choose her, even as young as you both were. And a lot of people seemed really angry about that. I mean, our family is poor, we’re immigrants, Paige was kind of a stuck-up nerd and didn’t have many friends. Everyone talked about how you were too good for her.”

“Oh, yes!” Cheryl says, eyes wide. “Because once it was official, if she was killed, then you would never pick anyone else, right?”

Derek thinks about explaining to her that a mate was a mate, regardless of what happened at the Ceremonies. That even if Stiles had rejected him, he always would have been Derek’s mate, that Olivia had been Peter’s mate from the moment they met even though the Ceremonies were never even involved. But then he realizes that that’s beside the point. That Cheryl believes it, that a lot of humans probably believe it. And that she could be right.

He knows that, as excited as Stiles is to have stumbled upon this strange pattern of bite rejection and rogue alpha attacks, that Paige’s murder might not be related. There were some factors in her death that didn’t fit, particularly the 911 call that had been made by some unknown party. Stiles would undoubtedly say that they should follow any lead.

So what Derek says is, “That’s not exactly how it works, but I can see why some people might think so. Cheryl, did anyone ever threaten your sister? Did you get anonymous phone calls or letters or anything?”

“No,” Cheryl says. “But the thing is, I can’t figure out why else she might have been at school so late.”

“Someone like . . . a crush who had slipped a note into her locker? A secret admirer?”

Cheryl nods. “Not that I think you did!” she assures him. “I always assumed it was just a nasty prank and that Paige was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Even if it was, whoever did that would be guilty of something,” Derek says, though he doesn’t
know what it would be. What was the charge for luring someone to their death, even accidentally? Negligent manslaughter? “Did Paige say anything to you that day? About having gotten a note?”

“No,” Cheryl says. “All I have to go on is that I can’t think of any other reason why she still would’ve been at school that late.”

“Did you mention that to the police?” Derek asks.

“Yes,” Cheryl says. “They said they checked all her things, her locker and everything, but didn’t find a note like that. And I have to admit that it would have been on her, if she’d had it.”

Derek shakes his head. “Not if her killer knew it was the only thing that would link him or her back to the murder,” he says. “He could have easily taken it from her. Plus we still have whoever made that 911 call.” He grimaces a little and says, “Mysteries aren’t exactly my forte. Listen, I think you should talk to Stiles.”

“I was afraid he wouldn’t take me seriously,” Cheryl admits. “I mean, he didn’t know my sister. I thought he might brush me off. But you knew her. I just thought, after Stiles had solved stuff like that mass killing in Chicago and exposed the WLO, he wouldn’t . . .”

“Trust me, if there’s one thing that Stiles takes seriously, it’s bullying people who don’t fit the ‘werewolf mate’ mold,” Derek says. “He’s going to grill you until you’re burnt.”

Cheryl smiles at that. “Thanks,” she says. “I just . . . everyone talked about it like it was just the act of some random maniac, but I always, always felt like it had to be different. That . . . that she couldn’t have died for no reason. That’s probably silly.”

“No, absolutely not,” Derek says. “I know exactly how that feels.”

“Oh, I guess you do,” Cheryl says, and looks away. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Derek says. “I’m going to give Stiles a call, okay? One way or another, he’s going to get this solved. He’s worse than a dog with a bone when it comes to mysteries. We’re going to figure out what happened to your sister. I promise.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“I’m not going to be around for a few days,” Peter says, halfway through an episode of Broadchurch. They’ve both been quietly watching the episode, so this commentary takes Tom off guard. He fumbles for the remote and manages to pause the episode. Then he regards Peter curiously. The werewolf has always wandered in and out of town as he pleases. It’s not unusual for him to be gone for several days at a time. But he’s never bothered to tell Tom about it ahead of time before.

“Okay,” Tom finally says. He looks over at Peter, who’s sprawled out on the far end of the sofa with his feet in Tom’s lap. “Where are you going?”

“Oregon,” Peter says.

“Looking out for Allison and Isaac?” Tom presumes.

Peter nods. “Stiles told me what he intended and I do agree with him that the danger is minimal,
but it isn’t absent. I’d prefer to be close by in case I’m needed.”

“Okay,” Tom says. He’s still not sure why Peter’s actually bothering to tell him this. “Did you want me to come?”


“Well, I’m glad you told me,” Tom says. “It’s just a little unusual. You don’t normally bother to notify anyone of your comings and goings, including me. Even when you plan them in advance,” he adds, because he knows that sometimes Peter just wanders off without thinking about it, and comes back without realizing how long he’s been gone.

“Olivia was always very firm with me about telling her when I would be gone,” Peter says.

That nearly makes Tom’s heart stop, because Peter bringing up Olivia is rare enough. Peter bringing up Olivia in a direct comparison to Tom has never happened before. “Oh,” he says.

Peter’s silent for a minute. “The pack – they’re used to me. They know the way I am, the way I wander. It doesn’t bother them. At least, not anymore. Not now that they can trust that I’ll come home. But Olivia wasn’t a wolf by birth. It bothered her when I would leave for a few days without mentioning it. Even back when we were just dating. I thought it might bother you, too.”

Now Tom is torn, because he thinks that Peter setting up this parallel might help him come to terms with their relationship in the long run, but he also doesn’t want to give Peter the wrong idea about his own personality. “I don’t mind, because you’ve been that way as long as I’ve known you. It’s just something that’s a part of you. Now, do I appreciate it when you tell me? Yes. But I’m not exactly holding your leash, so to speak.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Peter says. “I’m not sure I like the sound of this place up in Oregon.”

Tom forces his brain to follow Peter’s train of thought. “Why not?”

“It sounds very cultish to me,” Peter says. “I know that Allison and Isaac can take care of themselves. But they’re not as world-wise as they could be, and that sort of place . . . entices. I don’t want them to get the wrong impression of the place.”

“And you think lurking in the bushes is going to help?” Tom asks skeptically.

Peter shrugs. “You never know.”

“Well, I don’t think you need to worry,” Tom says. “From the way that Stiles has described it, the point of these ‘communes’ is to keep the werewolves miserable, not happy. Maybe brainwashed to a certain extent, yeah, but I don’t think it’s the sort of hippy-friendly vibe you’re thinking of. I mean, I see where you would get the idea, but I don’t think you need to worry.”

“It’s mostly Isaac that I’m worried about,” Peter says. “Not that he would ever leave Cora, of course, but he’s psychologically fragile in a way that Allison isn’t. He’s had a very hard life, and that makes the pack more protective of him. And of Cora, of course. After what she went through, I’m surprised she didn’t insist on going with them.”

“Cora’s pretty resilient,” Tom says, though he knows that Peter is right to a certain extent. Cora had recovered from what she had endured with Seth remarkably well. She’s back to being her friendly, cheerful self. There are only a few moments here and there where you can see the marks it left on her. Those moments tend to center around how clingy she is with Isaac. Fortunately, Isaac doesn’t mind a bit.
So it is a little surprising that Cora didn’t insist on going, but Tom chalks it up to a mark of Cora’s continuing recovery. He’s glad that she’s doing well. It was hard for everyone to see how fragile she was after Seth, when she was normally the one that could always be trusted to find a smile.

“I suppose you’re right,” Peter says.

He falls silent then. Tom is accustomed to Peter’s silences, to the way his thought process works in jagged leaps and bounds. He doesn’t try to rush Peter, but lets him have his moments. When it goes on for more than a minute, he usually changes the subject, or in this case, reaches for the remote to turn the television show back on.

“I wish you hadn’t given Stiles this case,” Peter says abruptly, just before Tom can hit ‘play’.

Now Tom is really confused. “Wait. What?”

Somewhat testily, Peter repeats himself. “I wish you hadn’t given Stiles this case.”

“Yeah, I heard you. It didn’t make sense the second time either. You’re always encouraging Stiles to stick his nose where it doesn’t belong. I figured giving him a local case would keep him out of trouble. I had no idea how far down the rabbit hole he would end up going.”

“It’s not that.” Peter seems frustrated. “I don’t know quite what to make of this, this string of rogue alpha attacks and forced rejections. I doubt it’s what either of us would have expected to come of this case. But the murder of Paige Krasikeva – there’s something about it I don’t like. Something I can’t quite – ” He breaks off and looks away. “The timing is bad, that’s all. Talia. I’m on edge because of Talia.”

“Look,” Tom says, and he reaches out to Peter, thinking that he needs some physical reassurance. He cups his hand around the back of Peter’s neck, smoothes down his hair. “I know that Talia being pregnant is hard on you for a lot of different reasons. And I’ll be the first to admit that this murder case is a real tangle. But Stiles is smart and resourceful. He’ll get to the bottom of it, just you wait.”

Peter pulls away, looks away, and says, “Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of.”
From first glance, Isaac understands how the Search for a Cure commune could be considered a paradise. It’s located deep in the Oregon wilderness, near Crater Lake, probably at least an hour’s drive to the nearest grocery store. The air smells amazing, like dirt and pine and the faintest hint of chimney smoke. He inhales deeply through his nose.

He doesn’t know exactly where they are. The exact location of the commune is a closely held secret. They traveled there by helicopter, so all he was able to see after they left Portland was a vast forest and a road here and there. There’s a helipad just outside the cluster of buildings that make up the commune.

Their meeting with Jennifer Blake had been interesting. She had been wary of them, but for the opposite reason that anyone had anticipated. She didn’t have the slightest clue that Allison was actually friendly to werewolves, or part of a pack. Instead, she had been blunt and up front with them that she didn’t want her organization associated with the WLO.

“All due respect to your sister and your grandfather,” she said to Allison, with the unspoken ‘which is none’ ringing in the air, “the WLO is a hate group. A terrorist group. My organization is here to help people. We have a few principles in common, but very few. If you’re at all here because you need a home now that the WLO has been dismantled, then the door is to your left.”

“It isn’t like that,” Allison assured her. “Like you, I have only a few opinions in common with the former WLO. Both my father and mother were very thoroughly investigated after that and we had no connection to any of the crimes committed by the WLO. Yes, my father works as an anti-werewolf lobbyist, but his goals are to protect people. Not to hurt them.”

Jennifer studied her for a long moment, then nodded. “Your family’s backing would be helpful,” she said. “We run entirely on donations and I’m sure that you could get some big names and companies on board. But I needed to be clear about this organization’s purposes.”

“You work mainly in third world countries, right?” Allison asked.

Jennifer nodded. “Though some are closer than you think. We’ve worked extensively in South America, as well as Africa and Asia. We do have a few people from North America in our communes, but they’re by far the minority.”

Most of what she said confirmed what she had told Stiles. Nothing seems out of place. Allison had introduced Isaac as a werewolf from England who had been turned against his will. Isaac does a very good English accent, mostly thanks to how much BBC television Cora and Stiles had been forcing him to watch. “It’s more of a London accent than a wilds-of-England accent,” he had said to Stiles dubiously. Stiles was pretty sure Jennifer wouldn’t notice. Also, Isaac wouldn’t have to talk much.

To keep things simple, they were using a basically accurate story for Isaac. He had been injured, close to death, and a local alpha had turned him to save his life. “I was grateful, I really was,” Isaac told Jennifer, “but being in the pack was just . . . suffocating. I couldn’t handle it.” He told her that he had run away and managed to get to America, because he had heard that things were different there, and Allison had met him at an event her father had sponsored.

After about an hour of discussion, Jennifer had agreed to take Isaac to the commune in Oregon,
and now Isaac is looking around, just breathing. “It’s amazing,” he says, and Jennifer smiles and thanks him.

“We have almost everything delivered,” she says, gesturing for them to follow her, “but we’re as self-sufficient as possible. We can’t exactly grow crops, but we do grow our own fruits and vegetables. And almost everyone here is trained in some sort of trade. We have our own plumber, electrician, et cetera. I’m afraid we don’t get wi-fi,” she adds, seeing Allison check her phone. “We’ve talked about putting a tower in, but so far it’s been beyond our expenses.”

“Oh, no problem,” Allison says, tucking her phone away. “Maybe my dad and I can help out with that.”

There are no cars at the commune, thus negating the need for a gas station. The commune consists of a cluster of about two dozen buildings. The communal gardens are in the center. One of the buildings is a gathering hall, and a second is the ‘general store’, Jennifer says, although it’s really just the place where their stores are kept. There’s no buying, no currency. People request what they want, and within reason, the supply plane brings it in once a week. One of the buildings houses a generator that provides power to the commune. The rest of the buildings are houses.

“Whenever we get a new resident, we start building a new house for the next one,” Jennifer says, “so there’s always one empty house in case someone needs it. Isaac, this will be yours.”

The house is one-story and Spartanly decorated, although he can’t blame them for that. There’s electricity, so he has a refrigerator, and the stove is electric. “No air conditioning, sorry,” Jennifer says, “but it doesn’t usually get that hot out here. Cold, yes, so we do have central heating.”

She had called ahead, so somebody went to the supply building and laid in some basics. The bathroom has soap, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste. The kitchen has some loaves of bread, fruit, cheese, fresh vegetables. There’s flour and sugar in the pantry along with some canned goods, and some assorted cookware.

“You guys don’t eat together?” Isaac asks, surprised.

Jennifer shakes her head. “Self-sufficiency is very important here. You’ll cook your own meals. Of course, you’re welcome to have someone over,” she adds.

Isaac realizes he might have just made her suspicious, and says hastily, “It’s just . . . quite different from the way things were with the pack.”

“Well, that’s the point,” Jennifer says, smiling at him. “I know it’s a little bare. The main hall has a small library of books and movies, and there’s some games there, too. Oh, and that’s where the washer and dryer are. There’s a sign-up sheet so you can just take whichever slot works best for you. The clothes they’ve provided might not fit you very well, but we’ll get you some better ones as soon as we can.”

“It’s fine,” Isaac says. “It’s wonderful. Thank you very much.”

“Let me introduce you to Utari,” she adds, and gestures for them to follow him out of the house. They go three doors down and she knocks on a door. The woman who opens it is probably in her mid thirties, with darkly tanned skin and a round, pregnant stomach. She doesn’t smile when she sees them, or make any move to greet them. “Utari, this is a new resident, Isaac,” Jennifer says. “Isaac, Utari is in charge of running things around here, so if you need anything, just come see her.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Isaac says, and moves toward her instinctively.
Utari takes a step back, denying Isaac any physical contact. But she does offer Isaac a thin smile. “Welcome,” she says. “I hope the accommodations are satisfactory.”

“Yeah, uh, they’re great,” Isaac says. “Is there – do I meet the others? I mean, we do all live together, so I thought . . .”

“I understand this must be very different for you,” Utari says. “You will adapt. As for meeting the others, it is difficult – we speak many languages here. Only two of the others speak fluent English.”

“Oh – really?” Isaac asks, startled.

“Because of how we rescue people from all over the world,” Jennifer says. “When we first get them settled in, we have a translator available so we can make sure they get everything they need. But it’s not something we can afford full time. We have people here who speak Hindi, Swahili, Urdu – all different languages!”

“Well, perhaps I’ll learn some of those, then,” Isaac says, trying to smile.

By this point, it’s nearly dusk. They didn’t meet with Jennifer until mid-afternoon, and the plane ride wasn’t exactly a short one. He goes into the house and makes himself a cheese sandwich, eats it along with some of the vegetables.

It feels incredibly strange to be so alone. He spent most of his life alone, after Camden left, but he’s grown used to the company of pack in the last year. Even if he hadn’t, this is the most isolated place he’s ever been. He looks out the window, waiting to see if any of the others emerge from their houses to socialize. They don’t. One woman comes out and picks a few things out of the garden. He can see lights in the other houses. People do live here. But they live completely apart. They can’t even communicate with each other.

He can easily see how living in a place like this would drive a werewolf insane, let alone make them miserable. He’s already itching for the touch of pack. The house is clean and sterile. It doesn’t smell like anything. And it’s so quiet. He thinks it might even be soundproofed. He can’t hear any nature noises. He can’t hear the comforting thrum of heartbeats down the hall from his, which he’s gotten so used to.

What he finds interesting is less how this place is so contradictory of everything a werewolf needs, and more how the *rightness* of that was reinforced at every step. How he would get used to it. How he would adapt.

He won’t adapt, and he knows it. This is more than something he wants; it’s not just mystical. It’s chemical. But he can see how a werewolf with a history of trauma, who already has reason to hate these needs, who’s constantly being told that the needs are *wrong*, would eventually lose their mind. And it must have happened. Jennifer Blake and her organization must have seen it. But they kept pushing it on the wolves who arrived. Which meant that either they were incredibly blind, or doing it purposefully.

Isaac lays in bed that night staring at the ceiling, every inch of his skin crawling with loneliness. As soon as the sun is up, he’s out of the house and heading down the small road. He has no idea how he’s going to get out of here, but he can’t stay here another night. He needs to get back to
Beacon Hills. To the pack. To Cora.

Utari looks annoyed when she cracks open her door, wearing a bathrobe. “Yes?” she asks, not at all friendly.

“This – this place is going to drive me mad,” Isaac says, remembering his ‘accent’ only at the last moment. “I can’t stay here.”

At this, Utari rests a hand on his shoulder, and Isaac can feel everything in his body react to that touch. “You will get used to it,” she says, and gives him a squeeze.

It’s reassuring, and horrifying. Isaac can see it spooling out in front of him, how Utari will become the only person he can get physical comfort from, how he’ll grow dependent on that. Small favors that will mask the larger deprivation. Like a strange version of Stockholm Syndrome. “I’m sorry, I really won’t,” he says. “I have to get out of here. I have to – I was so wrong to leave my pack. I need to get back to them. Is there a telephone? I’m sure they’ll come get me if I could just – ”

“We have a phone, but it will not call England,” Utari says. “I can call Ms. Blake.”

“Please,” Isaac says. “Please do.”

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Stiles listens to everything that Cheryl Krasikeva has to say, and then asks her a lot of questions, just like Derek had promised he would. He takes detailed notes and only loses a few words here and there. Then he thanks her and Derek shows her out. He comes back into the screened porch where they’d had the interview and asks, “What do you think?”

“I think that the students of Beacon Hills High are absolutely capable of slipping a note into Paige’s locker, meaning to embarrass her,” Stiles says. “I don’t think that has anything to do with what happened to her.”

“You don’t think so?” Derek asks, a little surprised.

“Look, I’m hardly the last person to start coming up with crazy conspiracy theories,” Stiles says, “but this one stretches the bounds of even my credibility. Someone was mad that a werewolf might choose a poor immigrant girl, so they killed her off before he could. Okay. That’s not too crazy. But let’s not forget the fact that the motive can’t have been to kill her. Bite rejection is too rare. Whoever bit her almost certainly meant to turn her, not kill her.”

“Well, what if she had been, been poisoned first?” Derek asks. “Like Gerard Argent?”

“How likely is that?” Stiles says. “It’s possible, I suppose, but so convoluted. What would the point be? Deucalion did that to Gerard because he wanted to frame Peter – and probably because he heard that Gerard was trying to get the bite, and it fucking – ” Stiles goes blank. “Made him angry. In a, a special sort of way.”

“Insulted him?” Derek tries.

“Close . . .”

“Offended him,” Derek says.
“Yes! That’s it. Deucalion was offended that Gerard would do that, so he used that to kill him. But some random person kills off a high school girl that way? Why? There were a million easier ways to kill her.”

Derek has to admit that Stiles has a point. “What about the way she stayed at the school really late?”

“Oh, yeah, like I said, I totally believe that someone might have used her crush on you to bait her. But they probably didn’t mean for that to happen. They probably just figured she would sit there all hopeful and then you wouldn’t show and she’d be upset. Maybe they were waiting in a closet to laugh at – ” Stiles stops. “Oh my God. The witness. The 911 call.”

Derek’s eyes go wide. “They didn’t want anyone to know who they were because they thought they’d get in trouble for pranking her, for luring her there.”

“So they dialed 911 and then wiped down her phone,” Stiles says. “Oh my God! Derek! This is an actual lead! They might have seen the alpha that did it!” He’s on his feet. “We need the complete roster for Paige’s school the year she was there. I have so much work to do!”

“Slow down,” Derek says, laughing a little as he catches up to Stiles, who’s bolting out to the driveway. “Do you still think Paige is part of the whole bite rejection scheme?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. There’s still so much about that I don’t know, so many pieces I’m missing – hopefully when Isaac and Allison get back today I can find out more about it. But I want to get that roster and then sit down with – who would know? Not Finstock, he doesn’t pay attention to that sort of shit – I wonder if Miss Schiffer taught there in 2003? No, she’d be too young. Well, I’ll find somebody. I need to know who was in which clique.”

“Okay,” Derek says. “Let’s get to work.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Isaac spends most of the morning pacing nervously around the small house he had been given. He reminds himself constantly that even if the people from Search for a Cure have no intention of letting him leave, the pack will never let him be held hostage. His fingers itch to call Cora. He sends her dozens of texts, watching the ‘message failed’ come through glumly.

Just before noon, Utari knocks on his door and tells him that she’s talked to Jennifer. “They’re going to send someone to pick you up with the next supply plane,” she says.

“How long will that be?” Isaac blurts out.

“Three, four days, probably,” Utari says.

Isaac swallows his panic. “All right. I – all right,” he finishes lamely, not knowing what else to say. He has this feeling in his gut that there’s going to be some ‘problem’ in three days that prevents his leaving. That they’ll keep him there as long as possible, to see if he ‘gets used to it’ and changes his mind about leaving.

He’s wondering what to do about this, and trying to convince himself to eat something, when there’s a quiet tap at the window on the back of the kitchen. He looks up and sees Peter’s face, and his jaw drops. He jogs over and pushes the window up. “What are you doing here?”
“I came to pick you up,” Peter says, completely unperturbed. “From that conversation I just overheard, it seems they mean to keep you.”

“Uh, yeah, but – but how did you get here?” Isaac stammers. “They said the location is top secret. I know you weren’t on the plane with us yesterday.”

Peter gives him one of those ‘infant, please’ looks. “No, I was not, but the plane’s transponder was, so I bribed someone who works at the hangar to tell me where it went. Then I got on a red-eye to Portland, rented a car, and drove here. Do you want to leave or not?”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely,” Isaac says. He’s still wearing the same clothes he had arrived in the day before, so there’s nothing he needs to grab. The house has a back door next to the kitchen, so he heads for it without further delay. Peter is already sauntering back into the forest with both hands in his pockets. Isaac has to jog to catch up. “Won’t they wonder where I went?”

“Probably,” Peter says.

Isaac thinks about this. “They’ll know you were here. I mean, they’ll be able to scent you.”

Peter shrugs. “They won’t know who I am, or how I found them. I’m sure they’ll have bees in their bonnets about it, but I couldn’t care less.”

“Oh. Okay.” Isaac hesitates. “Did you ask Stiles?”

Now Peter looks amused. “I don’t ask Stiles for permission to do my work,” he says.

“Well, he’s the one who sent me here, so . . .” Isaac trails off. He feels uneasy challenging Peter, and unconsciously tilts his head to one side, baring his throat, when Peter turns to look at him.

“This place isn’t good for you,” Peter says. “And you’re not staying here. If Stiles has a problem with that, he’ll take it up with me. But he won’t. He wouldn’t want you to stay in a place that was making you so unhappy.”

“Oh . . . okay,” Isaac says, uncertain but not wanting to continue to argue. If this could really be called an argument.

“It’s a bit of a hike,” Peter tells him. “The road doesn’t really go close by.” He stops and looks at Isaac, then thoroughly surprises him by pulling him into an embrace. The surprise is only momentary, though, because he can’t help but nestle into it, relishing the physical contact. Peter smooths down his hair and gives him a quick pat on the back. Then he releases him and starts walking again as if nothing had happened. “We can just drive back to Beacon Hills. That will be faster than driving back to Portland and taking a plane.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, since his knowledge of geography is hazy at best and he still doesn’t actually know where they are, beyond ‘Oregon’.

He realizes as he follows that this is the first time he’s ever actually been alone with Peter. The den is always so full of people, and Peter isn’t even there half the time. He should be frightened – and he’s willing to admit that he’s definitely a little intimidated – but he isn’t, not really. Peter clearly cares about him, even if it’s only peripheral because he’s a pack member. And he definitely can’t argue with not staying at the commune for another minute.

After about forty-five minutes, they come up to a small dirt road that’s ended at a gate with the words ‘private property’ and a chain link fence. Peter scales it easily, and gestures for Isaac to follow, so he does. A few minutes later, they’re in the car and they’ve found real pavement.
“Do you like music?” Peter asks, startling him.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sure,” Isaac says.

“I don’t like the quiet.” Peter says, and plays with his phone for a minute until there’s music filling the cabin of the car. Like his taste in movies, it’s very eclectic. One minute classic rock, the next Spanish guitar, and the next heavy metal. Despite the volume, Isaac drifts into a doze.

“Are you hungry?” Peter asks, waking him, and he startles a little and blinks. They’re on a main road now. He nods sleepily. Peter goes through a drive through. Isaac eats two cheeseburgers and then falls back to sleep.

It’s evening by the time they reach Beacon Hills. Someone there must have known what Peter was up to, or maybe he had texted them when they had stopped for gas, because most of the pack is there, waiting for his return. Cora squeals and jumps into his arms, showering his face with kisses. He kisses her back and hugs her tight while the rest of the pack piles on, and feels like things have returned to normal.

“So that place is bad news, huh?” Stiles says.

“The worst,” Isaac says, sitting on the sofa and pulling Cora into his lap, before he begins to describe it. It’s strangely gratifying. The other pack members respond as if he were telling a ghost story, with gasps and shocked looks. When he gets to how quiet it had been, Peter stands up and excuses himself. Isaac can imagine what it must be like for him, trying to sleep without his mate beside him. He wonders if that’s why he’s started sleeping at Tom’s house so much.

Stiles takes notes, and when he’s done, says, “Well, at least I know not to donate my blood to them. I’m still not sure how they might be connected, but I’m following up on some other leads right now, so I guess we’ll see what happens. In the meantime,” he adds, “after Peter texted me, I made some blueberry muffins, so – ”

“Awesome,” Isaac says. He doesn’t want to let go of Cora, so he just gets an arm around her waist and stands up, carrying her princess style. She laughs, hooking an arm around his shoulders.

“Let’s eat.”

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“So what are you thinking?” Derek asks, taking Stiles by the wrist and pulling him down onto the bed so he would stop pacing.

“We-e-e-e-ell,” Stiles says, sinking down onto the mattress beside him, “Search for a Cure is obviously no good. And we’re going to have to figure out something to do about them. The problem being that they’re just legit enough that it might be difficult. I’ve got enough leads to follow here, I mean, if I can figure out who the witness to Paige’s murder was, they might have seen the alpha. But therein lies the problem.”

“The alpha,” Derek says. “It’s like the whole thing that happened with Deucalion. Why would an alpha help someone like that?”

“It might make a little more sense with Search for a Cure, because they have actual werewolves that they help,” Stiles says. “It’s possible that they might have an alpha or two. You know, some
poor beta who got turned and lucked into killing the alpha that attacked him.”

“Okay,” Derek says. “So how would we find out?”

“Well, I don’t know if they keep any sort of records of that thing,” Stiles says. “I wonder if I can get into their computers. I’ll have to give Danny a call.”

He’s been dealing with the list of students, starting with those who were actually in Paige’s year, trying to sort out who had been in the sort of clique that might bully others. He’s talked to a few of the teachers at the school, and tracked down some of the students. He doesn’t know if any of them will want to talk to him, but he’ll see what he can sniff out.

“Somewhere in here, there’s a clue,” Stiles murmurs, staring out through the window.

“Mm hm,” Derek says, leaning and nuzzling his neck. “In other news, have Peter and your dad worked out that whole thing where Peter tried to bushwhack him into moving into the den?”

“Oh, geez,” Stiles says, and pulls away. “I don’t think I can talk about something serious while you’re making out with me. So keep those attractive lips to yourself for a minute,” he adds, and Derek arches an eyebrow. “See, the thing is, Peter’s sort of right. My dad would be happier if he moved out here. I mean, okay, the commute to work would be a pain, but since he’s already driving out here to dinner five or six times a week, it’s not like it would really change much. And I know he gets lonely.”

“Okay,” Derek says. “But obviously it isn’t that simple.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “I mean, obviously, that’s the house where Mom and Dad lived, it’s the house where I was a baby, et cetera. Plus we did all that work on the flower beds. But the thing is, I don’t think that’s actually what bothers my dad. I mean, he misses my mom. Of course he does. I don’t want to just be like ‘oh, he’s over that’ because it’s not the sort of thing you just get over. But at the same time, he has moved on to a certain degree, you know? He started dating again when I was, like, fourteen, even though he never found anyone serious.”

“So what is it, then?” Derek asks.

“I think that he’s worried that Peter hasn’t thought it through,” Stiles says. “I mean, for starters he was just annoyed that Peter sprung it on him like that, but here’s a question: let’s say my dad moves in here. Where is he going to sleep?”

“Well, he could have our room, or he could – ” Derek sees what Stiles means. “Stay with Peter.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “I think what really worries my dad is that Peter’s subconsciously inviting him into, you know, being serious together. And that if he just says okay, he’ll end up opening nineteen cans of worms.”

Derek grimaces. “But if he puts Peter off for too long, he could give the wrong impression.”

“Yes. Basically, it’s an enormous clusterfuck and your uncle really should see a therapist.”

“True,” Derek says. He thinks about what Tom had said to him. “I think your dad is really hoping that Peter will . . . get himself sorted out, and come to terms with it.”

“I hope so,” Stiles says. “I mean, hey, he is getting better. He’s improved a lot in just the time I’ve known him, so maybe he’ll continue to get better.” He chews on his lower lip and adds, “Man, I really want my dad to be happy. I know he’s been kinda bummed since I moved out here. I wish I could just, you know, make things okay for them.”
Derek gets an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in for a hug. “I think your dad knows what he’s doing,” he says, “so for now, we should let him handle it.”

“I suck at letting other people handle things,” Stiles says.

“I know,” Derek says, and laughs. “Why don’t we find some other things for you to suck and handle?”

“Derek Hale,” Stiles says, feigning a scandalized tone. “That was uncouth. I’m so proud of you! I’m going to find all the things to suck and handle, just wait and see.”
“You want me to what?” Danny asks, giving Stiles a narrow-eyed look.

“Hack into a charity organization and get me their records,” Stiles says. “Serious, they’re bad news. Besides, it’s not like you have a job.”

Danny rubs his hands over his face. “Leaving aside the fact that it’s illegal, because I know that won’t stop you, they don’t sound as bad as all that. I mean, I’d go nuts without wi-fi, but I know a lot of people on the internet who would love to live in a cabin in Wyoming where no one could bother them.”

“Yeah, you know, we say that, but that’s different from actually doing it,” Stiles says. “I could go off on a long tangent about cults and brainwashing techniques, but you probably don’t actually care that much. Anyway, regardless of whether or not it would bother a few people, it’s practically designed to drive a werewolf insane. That house was basically a sensory deprivation chamber for a werewolf. And what’s up with not having anyone there who speaks English?”

“Well, if they rescue from all over the world – ”

“Then they should be able to have at least three or four people they’ve rescued who speak the same language, so why not keep them together?” Stiles shakes his head. “And all of that bothers me less than their attitude about it. The way they kept pushing it on Isaac. Telling him that he’d get used to it was a way of invalidating his feelings. It’s gaslighting, basically.”

Danny grimaces a little. “Okay, okay. They’re bad news. But you do realize that hacking isn’t quite as easy as just typing really fast while my computer displays a Matrix screen, right? I mean, I doubt you know their IP address.”

“Actually, I believe I do,” Stiles says, and smirks when Danny gives him an incredulous look. “When Allison visited them, she asked if she could use their wi-fi, and then she sent me an e-mail. Shouldn’t you be able to trace it from that?”

“Yes,” Danny says, grudgingly. “Okay, fine! I’m going to go to jail for you someday, you know that, right?”

“It’ll never happen,” Stiles says. “We’re too rich and pretty.”

“We?” Danny asks, amused. “What do you want me to look for?”
“Anything you can get. Financials and correspondence especially.”

“Okay. I’ll get on it. But next time you get on Ellen, I’m coming with you.”

“Deal,” Stiles says, giving him a fist bump before going on his way. He has a lot of denmaking to do, since he’s been working so much on the case lately, so he heads back to the house. He stops to watch the construction for a little while, admiring how quickly the house is getting put together.

When he gets back to the house, he gets an enormous pile of fruit and vegetables to chop for the coming week, and chats with Allison about what she had found out while he works. It’s not as much as he would like. They have five communes, but she doesn’t know where the others are. They did talk about the experiments that Search for a Cure is sponsoring.

“Apparently,” Allison says, stealing a strawberry, “she thinks that a combination of bite rejection and werewolf ancestry might be the key to a cure.”

“Huh,” Stiles says. He knows that Peter has theorized that Stiles might have werewolf in his background. Maybe that’s why Jennifer is being so persistent with him. Unfortunately, Jennifer didn’t give her any more information on the studies, and she didn’t want to push. They have to be careful with this. go slowly, or Jennifer will figure out what they’re up to.

He’s halfway through slicing the zucchini that are going to go with dinner when his phone rings, and he grabs it, putting it on speaker so he can keep working. It’s Danny calling, which surprises him a little; he hadn’t expected to hear from him for a few days. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to let you know, I think this is going to take a while,” Danny says. “They’ve got hardcore data encryption.”

Stiles pauses in the zucchini he’s working on. “That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?”

“Dude, I’ve only seen security this good once before, and that was when I was trying to hack into a European bank. Uh, for a friend. It’s better if you don’t ask too many questions. Anyway, yeah, it’s weird. I mean, the firewalls themselves aren’t that bad, but even if I manage to get information, it’s completely useless.”

“Can you decrypt it?”

“Maybe. If you give me a few weeks. Or months.”

“Okay, well, do what you can,” Stiles says, “but I won’t hold my breath.” He says goodbye to Danny and hangs up, mulling this over. If they could get a warrant, they could get everything he needs legally. But he doesn’t have any evidence of actual wrongdoing. There’s no law against anything they’re doing at the communes. Stiles isn’t even sure that people unfamiliar with werewolves would even understand what was wrong with them. And although it might be highly suspicious that they were interested in bite rejection secondary to wolfsbane or silver exposure, and there was a high rate of rejection among rogue attacks, that’s miles and miles away from any sort of proof.

They’ll need more than that, he decides. So he’ll keep looking. But at least now he knows for sure that they have something to hide.

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The pack is in the middle of an epic, no-holds-barred game of Risk on a lazy Saturday afternoon when it’s far too hot to leave the house, when the doorbell rings. It’s unusual to get visitors at the den. Everyone knows where it is, but it’s a good twenty minute drive from town. Anyone who wants to talk to Talia or Aaron can do it at one of their more convenient offices, and the rest of them rarely get unexpected guests.

“If that’s for me, I don’t live here,” Stiles says. He’s busy executing an invasion of Australia. Derek snorts with laughter and rubs a hand up and down his back. He enjoys Risk, but one of the things he enjoys most is watching Stiles play. Not because Stiles is better – he frequently gets his ass kicked by various parties – but because he gets so involved. He plays with dramatic abandon.

Aaron glances around, sees that nobody else is going to go answer the door, and gets to his feet. “Cora, keep an eye on Brazil for me,” he says, heading for the front of the house. Everybody keeps half an ear out. Any family that’s survived two assassination attempts has more than their fair share of paranoia. But there’s no unexpected noise, just a low rumble of two men talking. Aaron comes back into the living room a minute later, his brow furrowed in a frown that’s more puzzled than worried. “There is an FBI agent here looking for Przemysław Stilinski.”

Everyone goes a little stiff at that. It’s not exactly a code, but it’s a way of communicating that this person is unknown to them, since he didn’t ask for Stiles. But it’s Talia who looks up, whose voice takes on a note of steel, of alpha. “What is an FBI agent doing here, instead of contacting us through the sheriff or my office?”

“I’m not sure,” Aaron says. “Would you like to ask him, my love?”

“I think I will,” Talia says, getting up.

“This I gotta see,” Stiles says, bolting out of his chair. Derek gives a quiet snort of laughter and follows. But he settles for hearing instead of seeing. There isn’t really enough room in the house’s foyer to fit three people, so he hovers just inside the living room.

Talia walks through the room and to the front door, and the way she walks gives the impression of her sweeping up all the power in the room and cloaking herself into it. She looks like a queen by the time she reaches the front door and says, “I’m Talia Hale. Can I help you?” From the tone of her voice, she doubts very much that she can.

“Mrs. Hale,” a polite baritone says. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m looking for the famous Przemysław Stilinski.”

The way he says it makes Derek bristle. Stiles, more accustomed to the attention, just wrinkles his nose. Then he rounds the corner and sees who’s at the front door, and his demeanor instantly changes from annoyed and curious to surprised and pissed off. “What are you doing here?” he demands.

Talia and Derek both give him a startled look. Not at the way he instantly snaps into a snarling, commanding alpha personality – they’ve seen him do that before – but at the obvious recognition.

“Hey, Stiles,” the man says. “Long time, no see. Got a minute to chat?”

“Why on earth would I want to chat with you?” Stiles says.

“Stiles,” Talia says, her voice steel covered in velvet, reminding Stiles that she’s the alpha, and they’re on her turf. “You know this gentleman?”

The man gives them a tight smile and says, “Agent Rafael McCall. Can I come in?”
“McCall?” several people, most of them Hales, echo. The pack in the living room is clearly listening, and Stiles winces at that. Before anyone else can say anything, Scott abandons the game of Risk and jogs into the foyer, which is getting somewhat crowded.

Stiles’ gaze flicks over his shoulder at Scott’s approach, but he doesn’t move until Scott elbows past him. “Dad?”

“Scott?” McCall is clearly just as surprised as everyone else. “What are you doing here?”

“Playing Risk,” Scott replies. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I was here to talk to Stiles about –” McCall remembers that everyone is listening. “Would you like to introduce me to your friends, Scott?”

“I can introduce you to my pack,” Scott says.

McCall frowns. “You’re – in a werewolf pack?”

Scott’s eyes deliberately flash gold. “Is that a problem?” he asks, both his tone and his stance taking on an air of belligerence.

“No,” McCall says. “I’m just surprised. Your mother didn’t tell me.”

“Well, I think the sole custody agreement rendered your opinion on it pretty moot,” Scott says.

“What is happening here?” Peter asks, and everybody jumps because nobody, not even Talia, had noticed him coming down the stairs. Peter getting involved in an emotionally tense situation is the last thing anyone wants, so Talia hurriedly intervenes.

“Agent McCall,” she says, with a thin smile, “I’m sure you understand that we have a hard time letting strangers into our den. Mind if we step outside with you, rather than the reverse?”

“I need to talk to Stiles in private,” McCall says.

“Then get a subpoena,” Talia says, without missing a beat.

McCall doesn’t look happy about it, but it’s an argument he’s clearly not going to win, so he takes a few steps back, to allow them onto the front porch with them. Derek heads over to the window to listen in, because he doesn’t like this man, doesn’t like his voice or his smile or his scent. Talia shuts the door before any curious pack members can come with them, including Peter.

“What is this about, Agent McCall?” Talia asks.

“I really need to talk to Stiles,” McCall says, and he looks directly at Stiles when he says this, as if doing so will get Stiles to talk to him.

“I’m his alpha and his attorney,” Talia says. “Until we know what you want, Stiles is under no obligation to say a word to you. Nor is your son, before you attempt to use that tactic. So I will ask this one last time before I cordially invite you to get off my property. What is this about?”

“It’s about a case that he’s working on,” McCall says.

“What about it?”

“Well, I’m working on it, too,” McCall says. “I thought we could share notes.”
“That’s why you’re here?” Scott asks. “Wow, Dad. Wow. I’m out.” He turns and heads back into the house without another word. Stiles casts a worried glance after him, but doesn’t follow. Allison’s there, and he knows that she’ll take care of him.

“What case is this?” Talia asks. “And why do you think Stiles is working on it?”

“There’s been an unusual pattern of alpha attacks over the last decade,” McCall says. “Sheriff Stilinski requested the files pulled from various departments, which got flagged by my office. Since the sheriff himself is, I’m sure, far too busy to be working on cases from other states, I assume it was Stiles who requested them.”

“And instead of asking to see him through the sheriff’s office, you decided to come here,” Talia says. “Why?”

“I didn’t want to give the wrong idea,” McCall says. “It’s just a friendly, informal chat. Between colleagues, as it were,” he adds, giving Stiles that insincere smile that makes Derek’s hackles rise.

“I think it’s because you didn’t want to give the right idea,” Talia says, “which is that you don’t want a teenager stealing your glory so you came here to demand that he stop working on the case.”

“If we’re going to be technical,” McCall says, “Stiles has no right to the case. It’s a federal matter. So unless there was something that happened here, to give Sheriff Stilinski local jurisdiction –”

“Which there is,” Talia interrupts.

“I beg your pardon?” McCall says.


McCall gives him a somewhat surprised look. “Paige Krasikeva doesn’t fit the pattern,” he says.

“Well, she fits it well enough to give me the right to request the files,” Stiles says, smiling right back at him. But Derek is frowning slightly. Why does McCall think Paige doesn’t fit? How much does he know about everything that might have happened in Beacon Hills? To all outward appearances, Paige would be on the list.

“I’m surprised that case is still open,” McCall says. “There can’t be many cold case homicides in Beacon Hills. 2003 . . . wasn’t that the year your mother died? I suppose we can be understanding if the sheriff wasn’t at peak performance.”

Derek gives a low growl at this, and Stiles’ voice stiffens. “Why don’t you take your opinion of my father’s performance and stick it where the sun –”

“Stiles,” Talia says, squeezing his shoulder. Her voice is calm, but crimson is starting to seep into her eyes. “Agent McCall, I understand that you probably do have the legal authority to demand the information that Stiles has uncovered. Why don’t you go down to the sheriff’s office and set up a meeting for Monday? You and Stiles can go over the case together then.”

“Sounds good,” McCall says, and gives them another insincere smile before heading back to his car.

Stiles watches it go, then turns to Talia and whines, “Do I have to?”

“Is he actually an FBI agent?” Talia asks, and Stiles nods. “Then yes. I understand why you don’t
want to, but you can’t interfere in a federal investigation. Now, he can’t stop you, either – you’re investigating a local murder, and you’re entitled to go wherever that investigation leads you. And by ‘you’ I mean ‘people who are actually employed as detectives by the Beacon Hills police’. So really, ‘your father’.

Stiles sighs. “Then why’d you pack him off? I would’ve rather gotten it over with.”

“Because if that man is going to speak any sort of disparaging words about your father,” Talia says, “I would prefer to keep him as far away from Peter as is possible.”

“Oh. Right.” Stiles thinks this over, considering what Peter would probably do to Rafael McCall. “Ouch.”

“I take it there’s some sort of history there, which I’m probably not aware of,” Talia says.

“Surprisingly little,” Stiles says. “Scott’s dad is a jerk, and he and my dad have always hated each other.” Stiles gives a shrug and continues, “After Melissa gave him the boot, he left town. This is the first time I’ve seen him since then.”

“And the first time Scott has, too, if I read his reaction correctly.” Talia presses her lips together. “Was his father abusive?”

“Physically, no. Verbally and emotionally, yes. Scott can handle him.”

“Okay,” Talia says. She shakes her head a little, as if attempting to comprehend people who abused their wives and children was simply beyond her. “Let’s go back in.”

She turns and heads back into the house, and upon entering the living room, sees the way everyone is staring at her. “You heard all of that, I’m assuming?” she asks, and gets a round of nods. “Scott, you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” Scott says. “I texted my mom to let her know he’s in town. She texted back words I can’t say around children.”

Everyone gives a snort of laughter except Peter, who’s still frowning at the door. “Perhaps I’ll go visit Tom at work,” he says.

“Trust me, Uncle P, my dad does not need help to deal with that jerk,” Stiles says.

“I suppose that’s probably true,” Peter says, and returns to his seat at the table.

“I, on the other hand, need to chop something,” Stiles says, and heads into the kitchen. After a few moments, Derek gets up and follows him. He finds Stiles attacking a helpless head of lettuce.

Since the question ‘you okay’ has an obvious answer, Derek skips it entirely. “Why does he think Paige Krasikeva doesn’t fit, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says. “Even with the possibility that she was lured there by someone, she still fits the pattern of rogue attacks. I’m not sure if there’s something I’m missing, or if there’s something he’s missing. And I don’t know how to find out, since I’m sure his version of ‘working together’ involves me telling him everything I’ve figured out and then not telling me anything in return.”

Derek grimaces. “He does seem like that sort of asshole.”

“Yeah. He’ll just tell me that, for the purpose of my investigation, all I need to know is that Paige
wasn’t a victim of the rogue alpha he’s looking for. And everything else is confidential, blah, blah, blah.” His knife hits the cutting board with a thunk. “I bet it’s the phone call,” he says after a moment. “None of the other victims had someone call 911 for them.”

“Maybe,” Derek says. “But we’ll figure it out. With or without his help.”

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Tom can’t help but feel some amusement when he sees his son come slumping in to the sheriff’s station on Monday, lugging a backpack and scowling prodigiously. He can’t blame him, either. He can’t recall a single instance in which he’s met with Rafael McCall and not ended with a scowl on his face. From their very first meeting when Stiles was six, up to the very last meeting two days before, he loathes Rafael McCall with every fiber of his being.

It’s easy enough to fend off McCall’s jabs about alcoholism and incompetence. McCall is decent at his job, but he’s not a show-stopper, and he channels his insecurity into insulting other people. He’s held a grudge against Tom specifically for Tom’s perceived role in Melissa finally kicking him to the curb. Tom really doesn’t give a single fuck about McCall’s opinion of him, so he just rolls his eyes when McCall goes off on one of his tangents.

The problem is that he’s the only one who seems able to do that. Stiles starts hissing and spitting every time McCall even looks at his father sideways. Which is easy enough to deal with, sure. What Tom doesn’t need to deal with is Peter abandoning subtlety and asking, “Would you like me to arrange an accident for him?” over Sunday brunch.

So the upshot is, everybody hates McCall, and Tom hopes that this meeting is quick and that then he’ll get out of town. Seeing the scowl on Stiles’ face, he sighs, because that clearly isn’t going to happen. Stiles isn’t going to give McCall anything. He’s going to make him work for every scrap of information that Stiles imparts, and this is going to take forever. The annoyance over McCall being in town longer is balanced with pride in his son and amusement at his antics.

“So,” Agent McCall says, as Stiles and Tom join him in the conference room, “you began by investigating the murder of Paige Krasikeva.”

“Yes,” Stiles says, glowering.

“Why?” McCall asks.

Stiles shrugs. “Boredom.”

McCall gives him that smile that Tom thinks is supposed to look chagrined, but mainly just makes him look like a pufferfish. “What did you find out?”

Stiles stares at him for several long moments, but then heaves a sigh. Dragging out the words like each one is terrible effort, he says, “That she’d been bitten by a rogue alpha and died of bite rejection.”

Silence falls for a long minute. McCall looks less amused. “I think this would be easier if you cooperated, Stiles.”

“I am cooperating. I answered your question.”
McCall narrows his eyes and says, “Okay. So what did you do next in your ‘investigation’.” He makes air quotes with his hands, which Tom thinks must be for the purpose of pissing Stiles off and getting him to talk, because even McCall isn’t stupid enough to think that Stiles is incompetent.

“I did research into bite rejection,” Stiles says, “and found a pattern of rogue alpha attacks. Then I requested the files of all rogue alpha attacks in the last fifteen years. And then you showed up on my doorstep.”

“Okay,” McCall says, “why don’t I take a look at your notes, since you seem to think Paige fits the pattern, and I don’t think she does.”

“I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours,” Stiles says.

Surprisingly, McCall says, “Okay,” and opens up his briefcase. Stiles seems a little take aback by this, but a few minutes later, they have files spread out all over the table, and they’re both looking them over. “You included Stephanie Nichols.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, looking over. “You didn’t?”

“Well, she was attacked at home. The rest of these people were attacked in public places.”

“At home but not in her house,” Stiles says. “She was in her driveway, washing her car. She fits all the other criteria, so I included her. You’ve got Quentin Parker on here. Does he count? I thought he recanted later and said he was paid off by the WLO to try to get the alpha in trouble.”

“Hm,” McCall says. “I’ll have to verify that. You might know more about the WLO than I do.” He taps a picture. Mariana Cruz. We know she’s not involved because the perpetrator was caught.”

Stiles shuffles through some papers. “It wasn’t in the files.”

“No. It’s classified. I can’t give you more information than that.”

“Hunh.” Stiles scratches her off the list. “Okay. So the big question. Why do you think Paige Krasikeva doesn’t fit the pattern?”

“Because she wasn’t alone when she was attacked,” McCall says. “Someone made a 911 call for her.”

“We don’t know that whoever did that was with her when she was attacked,” Stiles says. “They might have happened on her later.”

“Then why wipe down the phone?” McCall asks. “One way or another, there’s a third party involved in Paige’s murder, and that means she doesn’t fit the pattern.”

Stiles looks disgruntled, presumably because McCall has a point. “Well, I still think she fits it well enough that I’m going to continue to investigate.”

McCall studies him for a minute. “Maybe you’re right,” he says, surprising both of the Stilinksi. “After all, the first attack is often different in patterns. You see that in serial killers. That they’ll start with someone they know, and then branch out after realizing that they like killing. And chronologically, Paige predates the first of the other attacks by about six months. If we look at Paige as the first in a series, then it might make sense that there are some discrepancies.”

Stiles eyes him, clearly wary. “So?” he asks.
“So, if you’re right, Paige Krasikeva might be the key to all of this.” McCall begins to gather up his papers and put them back into his briefcase. “In short, it looks like I’m going to be here for a while.”

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Derek looks up as Stiles walks into their bedroom and flops dramatically down on their bed. He reaches out to rub a hand down Stiles’ spine, hoping that he isn’t actually trying to suffocate himself, and says, “I take it that things didn’t go the way you wanted?”

“Oh my God!” Stiles lurches back upright. “He’s the worst!”

“Yes, he is,” Derek says, although frankly he doubts it. Not after dealing with Seth Freudenberg. “What happened?”

“He decided to ‘believe me’ about Paige being involved and now he’s setting up camp!” Stiles says. “He’s talking about staying long-term! About how Paige might be the key to all of it, how she might have been the first murder, and by the end of it he was talking about making my dad loan him a deputy to help him navigate things locally. I don’t know who’s more pissed, me or my dad.”

Derek grimaces. He’s seen Sheriff Stilinski pissed off, and it’s never pretty. At least, not for the people he’s pissed off at. For other people, it can be genuinely beautiful. “So what now?”

“I don’t know. He’s already demanded that I give him all my notes and not interfere and, and it’s going to be terrible!”

Derek reaches out and rubs his fingers over the back of Stiles’ neck. “Something else is wrong,” he says. “I know you don’t want to work with him, but . . .”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “I know I’ve been better lately. But you know if I start forgetting words and stuff . . .”

“He’ll be a jerk about it,” Derek agrees, nodding in sympathy.

“I know what I’m good at,” Stiles says, “and I don’t usually let people like that get to me. But just, that guy. Even if I do manage to solve it, he’s going to take all the credit. And that shouldn’t bother me. You know, sometimes I feel like I’ve gotten too much credit in the past, so, maybe that’s some karmic balance or whatever. But why does it have to be him?”

“Was he mean to you when you were a kid?” Derek asks.

“Sometimes. Mostly he was mean to Scott. Which bothered me. I remember asking my dad about it, and he just said that people showed their love for their children in different ways. Which, now that I’m older, I know is code for ‘there’s no way I can explain that douchebag to a seven-year-old’. But he was also a real jerk to my dad, and I know my dad can handle himself, but . . .”

“But you’re protective of your dad, I know,” Derek says.

“And now I’m worried about Uncle P losing his shit on top of it,” Stiles says. “I mean, I know it’s not likely that he would actually kill Scott’s dad, but . . . well, one worries about that sort of thing once they’ve gotten acquainted with Peter.”
“I can see that,” Derek says, shaking his head and thinking of Peter offering to have McCall killed a breakfast the previous day. “But I think Peter won’t do it unless he your father actually wants him to.” He thinks about that and then adds, “Well, or if he thinks McCall is actually a danger to the pack.”

“Hopefully that won’t be an issue, but . . .” Stiles rubs a hand over his face. “I wish there was some way to keep an eye on him.”

Derek glances over and says, “Maybe there is. I mean, you said he had asked your dad for a deputy.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think my dad wants to give up any of this,” Stiles says. “I mean, crime’s always highest in the summer. The heat, plus all the kids being out of school and stuff. Plus he’s up for re-election this November, and just because he’s got like an eighteen point lead in the polls doesn’t mean that he wants to waste his time with McCall’s douchebaggery.”

“I can see that.” Derek leans over and nuzzles into Stiles’ neck. “I could do it.”

“You’re not a police officer,” Stiles says.

“McCall doesn’t know that,” Derek points out. “He’s never met me. Get me a fake identity and have your dad vouch for me, and hey presto. You’ve got an inside man.”

“That is the sexiest thing you’ve ever said to me,” Stiles says. “Oh my God. You in a uniform? This is the best idea ever!”

Derek gives a snort of laughter. “Just remember that if you want me to actually help you, you’ll have to let me out of your clutches occasionally.”

“Occasionally,” Stiles agrees. “Let’s go find a uniform that fits you so I can take it off you.”

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

There's some discussion of child abuse and alcoholism in this chapter, so be warned!

Tom is still blissfully unaware of his son’s plans to have Derek impersonate an officer of the law as he heads into his house and shrugs his holster off. It was a long day, and he’s feeling grouchy. He doesn’t want to drive all the way out to the preserve to have dinner with the pack. Normally, he enjoys it, but sometimes the crowd and the noise is too much for him. He’s still human, and he needs time by himself occasionally.

Which isn’t something he’s going to get today. He pulls a beer out of the refrigerator and has just popped the top off when Peter says, “Long day?”

For the first few months, Tom had jumped every time Peter had appeared in his house seemingly by magic. Sometimes he had asked how Peter had gotten in (which usually led to one of those disappointed looks). Once he offered to give him a key, and Peter told him not to bother. In short, Peter gave him the heebie-jeebies for a while. But by now he’s used to it – even, to a point, likes it. He likes having someone there when he gets home at the end of a long day. Stiles has been living more-or-less permanently at the den for almost a year now, and even though Tom goes over there four or five times a week, he still comes home to an empty house at the end of the day.

“Something like that,” he agrees, taking a swig of the beer as he turns around. “You hungry?”

“I could eat,” Peter agrees.

“Mmkay,” Tom says, turning around to go for his drawer of take-out menus. He’s never been much of a cook. Claudia was amazing at it, and of course she passed that gene down to Stiles. He’s hardly had to cook for himself since the year after college. After Claudia had died, he had given it a try for a while, but after about six months of meatloaf two times a week and tough, overdone steaks, Stiles had gently “suggested” that he help out.

He has to admit that he likes to get away from the den a couple times a week just so he can order something unhealthy. His guilt usually gets the better of him before he can eat all of it, but he does it anyway. “Mexican?” he proposes.

Peter walks over and peers over his shoulder. In doing so, he presses his chest against Tom’s back, chin hooking over his shoulder, arms snaking around his waist. It is not at all the sort of embrace one gets from a platonic friend, even a platonic werewolf friend, and Tom lifts his gaze Heavenward and prays for patience.

It’s not like he minds how touchy-feely Peter has become. He hadn’t lied to Derek about that. He does like it. Sometimes he’s afraid that he likes it too much. He hasn’t had sex in years, and Peter, well. Peter’s a damned attractive man. Having all of that attractiveness pressed up against him, draped all over him, cuddled up next to him – it leads to certain feelings. Feelings that he would rather Peter not be privy to, lest the werewolf completely freak out.
That’s part of why Tom is convinced that Peter is willfully ignorant of the overtones of their relationship. He knows that, as much as he can control what he says and how he acts and even his body language to a certain extent, he can’t control his hormones and his scent. And right now, after a long, frustrating day, with Peter snug against his back, he must be radiating pheromones. But Peter never seems to notice. He *should* – Tom’s well aware of how good a werewolf’s sense of smell is – but he doesn’t.

There are times when it requires all of Tom’s formidable self-control not to just grab Peter and start kissing him, but every time he’s tempted, he thinks of the inevitable fallout. He has to take it slow, has to let Peter ease into this – whatever it is – at his own pace. He doesn’t want to lose Peter, as a friend or as anything else, and for now, that means he can’t make a move.

So he sorts through the menus as Peter says, “Mexican sounds good,” and then he takes out his phone while they talk about what to order.

“So,” Peter says, once that’s done. He settles back into one of the kitchen chairs. “You’re angry about something.”

“Less angry, more . . .” Tom searches for a word for what he means. He decides there isn’t one. “I’m frustrated, and I feel insulted, and I’m tired. But mostly I’m just resigned.”

“Mm. Agent McCall is giving you trouble?”

“Apparently he’s going to stay in town for a while,” Tom says, taking another swallow of his beer. “Because of course he is.”

“Why?” Peter asks, his tone mild.

“Ostensibly, because he’s decided that the murder of Paige Krasikeva really could be connected to his case. But in actuality, to annoy me, cast aspersions about my character, and most likely harass his ex-wife.”

“Are we going to allow this?” Peter asks.

Tom shrugs. “Can’t really stop him. He’s a field agent; he can set up camp here if he wants to.” He deliberately ignores anything else Peter might be implying with his question.

“You two have history together,” Peter finally says, watching Tom closely.

“Uh huh,” Tom says.

Peter’s quiet another minute. “You want to talk about it?”

Tom shrugs a little, but he’s glad that Peter asked. He really is getting better. “You know, some people, from the first time you meet them, you’re just destined to get underneath each other’s skin. Rafael and I were like that. Practically got in a fist fight first time we met. That was, geez, over ten years ago.” He takes another swig of his beer. “See, Scott and Stiles met in kindergarten and were pretty much instant best friends. Claudia took him over a few times, and Melissa brought Scott over to our place, but I wasn’t much involved. I mean, I was working full time. I love my kid, but taking care of him was her job back then.

“So I came home one day after school and Claudia was just *fuming* about something, which was really unlike her. She was generally pretty mellow. So I asked what was up and she said that Stiles had been over at Scott’s and come home upset. Apparently he’d made some silly comment about Raf’s – Jesus, this was a long time ago – I want to say it was about his haircut? I don’t remember. Something stupid. And Rafael told him ‘nobody likes a smartass’, and Stiles got upset.”
“Everybody likes a smartass, actually,” Peter comments, going into the refrigerator to get himself a soda, and supplying Tom with another beer.

Tom waves this off. “Claudia wanted to read him the riot act, but I told her I would talk to him. I went over, made sure I was wearing civvie clothes, and I said Stiles had been upset and I just wanted to know, from his perspective, what had happened. There’s two sides to every story, right? And I’d have to be an idiot to believe every word that comes out of Stiles’ mouth, even back then.”

Peter gives a snort. “True,” he murmurs.

“And Rafael said to me ‘so you’re the one responsible for that little brat?’” Tom gives a snort. “That I remember. I kept my cool, though, and asked what Stiles had done. Wish I remembered what it was, but I think it was pretty innocuous. So I told him he didn’t have to like my kid, that was just fine, but if he sent him home crying again, we were going to have words about it.” Tom shrugs. “From then on, we just tried to avoid him. It wasn’t that hard. He traveled a lot for work. If Stiles went over during the week, Claudia just made sure to pick him up by five. On the weekends, Scott could come over to our place, but Stiles couldn’t go to his unless Rafael was out of town. It was stupid, but it worked.”

“Mm hm,” Peter says, fiddling with his can of soda. “And so? What happened?”

Tom sighs heavily. “Claudia got sick,” he says, and sees Peter stiffen a little. It’s not like they haven’t talked about Claudia’s death – he’s talked more about that with Peter than with anyone else on the planet – but it’s never a fun subject. “Suddenly I was trying to work full-time, get my son to school on time, and be a caretaker for a wife who had gone from perfectly healthy to a, a shell of what she had been. It wasn’t fun for anyone. Stiles wound up at Scott’s a lot just because . . . he liked it there. It was hard for him, seeing his mom like that. She just went downhill so fast . . .” Tom opens the second beer, feeling like he’s going to need it, but then stops and looks at it. “After Claudia died, I drank a lot. I didn’t do a great job of taking care of Stiles. I thought I was, because he seemed okay, but he wasn’t okay. Of course he wasn’t.”

“Anyway, a few months after Claudia died, Stiles came home crying but wouldn’t tell me why at first. I tried to coax it out of him, but he wouldn’t budge. You know how stubborn he gets,” Tom adds, and Peter nods. “But he woke up from a nightmare and crawled into my bed and told me to please stop drinking because Scott’s dad told him that I was going to drink myself into an early grave and he didn’t want to lose me, too.”

“Oh, boy,” Peter says under his breath.

“Yeah. I was livid. The funny thing was, I had actually just realized a couple days before that I was letting it get out of control. I’d screwed up something at work – something simple – and had decided I needed to cut way back. Anyway, I finally got my son calmed down and promised him that I wasn’t going to die – which had absolutely no impact on him, so I promised to stop drinking, which got him to go back to sleep. I had to pour out all the liquor, but he went back to sleep. Then I called the McCall house and got in a rip-roaring argument with Rafael. I told him if he ever talked to my son like that again, I’d kick the shit out of him.”

“Probably not the brightest move for an officer of the law,” Peter mentions.

Tom shrugs. “He started it.”

Peter laughs, delighted. “How childish of you! Go on.”

“Not much more to tell after that,” Tom says. “Rafael kept being a jerk. Somewhere in there,
Stiles matured enough to figure out what a jerk he was, and decided to start hating him instead of believing what he said. He cracked wise at Rafael all the time and was basically a little shit whenever Rafael was around, in that way that only Stiles can be. Rafael kept verbally and emotionally abusing his wife and his kid. One night he got drunk – what a fucking hypocrite – and hauled off and smacked Melissa, and she threw him out."

“Good for her,” Peter says.

“Yeah. She’d just about reached the end of her rope with him. I think the only reason she let him stay as long as she did is because she was convinced that it was better for Scott to have a lousy father than no father. But I think that night it clicked that he was only going to get worse, and if he was willing to hit her – ”

“Eventually he would start physically abusing Scott as well,” Peter says with a nod.

“Yep. So she tossed his ass to the curb. He showed up at our house, still drunk, shouting about how this was all my fault and I was probably fucking his wife. I arrested him and tossed him in the drunk tank. Best night of Stiles’ prepubescent life,” Tom adds, and Peter gives a snort of laughter. “Once he had sobered up, I told him that I wouldn’t press charges if he agreed to request a transfer to get out of Beacon Hills. Which he did. And that was the last time I saw him until this week.”

“Quite a story,” Peter says, but then shakes his head. “It isn’t really, though, is it. Just a typical jerk causing typical problems.”

“Well, something in our life has to be typical,” Tom says.

“Is he going to be a problem?” Peter asks. “He seemed to imply that he believed you’re incompetent. Could he make trouble for you?”

“No,” Tom says, rolling his eyes. “What’s he going to do? Nail me on being unable to solve Paige’s murder? He can’t do that, because he can’t solve it, either. Beacon Hills has good crime stats and I’m pretty popular with the voters. Frankly, I don’t give a shit what he thinks or what kind of trouble he tries to make.” He looks at Peter with narrowed eyes. “I mean that.”

Peter waves this off. “You told me not to kill him, so I won’t. I do try to respect your wishes.”

“Yeah.” Tom wonders about that. Wonders if he’s the only person on earth that Peter would agree not to kill for. The doorbell rings, and he gets up to get the food. A few minutes later, they’re settled back around the kitchen table, digging in. “I’m less worried that McCall is going to cause trouble for me, and more worried that he’s going to cause trouble for Stiles.”

“Well,” Peter says, with a glint in his eye, “we’ll just have to make sure he doesn’t.”

And that homicidal impulse is one that Tom can totally get behind.

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There are times that Stiles’ father gets this expression on his face that Derek finds difficult to put into words, this ‘so very done with your bullshit’ look that only ever appears around Stiles. He’s wearing it now, but Stiles forges on, undeterred, as he often does when his father is wearing that expression. Derek, on the other hand, is edging towards the door.
“Let me get this straight,” Tom finally says, in that tone that really means ‘let me make it clear how much I don’t approve’. “You want me to introduce Derek to Agent McCall. Who works for the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Presume that he won’t recognize Derek and nobody will tell him who Derek is. Tell him that Derek is one of my deputies, which is untrue, and then have Derek go work for him, as if impersonating an officer of the law isn’t an actual crime.”

“Right,” Stiles says, with a decisive nod. “Oh, but I got him a fake identity. Or, Peter did actually. A while ago. It had nothing to do with this.” He holds up the license, which labels Derek as ‘Eric Hardy’.

“Stiles,” Tom says. “Did you not hear me about it being a crime?”

“C’mon, Dad,” Stiles wheedles. “I know you want me to show McCall up. I know it. But I need to be able to keep track of his investigation so I can make sure that I stay ahead of him.”

Tom stares at him for so long that Derek starts to sweat nervously. Finally, he turns to Derek and says, “I’m going to have you fill out some paperwork. If I’m going to tell McCall you’re employed here, it’s going to be the truth, and firm enough that he’ll be able to verify it. We’ll just have to fudge the dates a little.”

“Awesome,” Stiles breathes out.

“But,” Tom says firmly, “you’re being hired as an administrative assistant, not a police officer. I already told McCall I couldn’t spare an actual deputy, and he agreed that an administrator would be fine. So I hope you can sort through paperwork and make coffee.”

“I’ll manage,” Derek says.

“No uniform?” Stiles asks, and pouts.

Tom opens his mouth like he’s going to say something else, but then just shakes his head, as if he’s questioning his judgment in not throwing them both out of his office. “Derek, with me,” he says. “Stiles, you stay here.” He leaves the office, and Derek follows along, a little curious. Tom stops to get some paperwork and then sits down with him in the break room.

“Let’s get something clear,” Tom says. “McCall is a federal agent. We do not have the right to interfere with his investigation, and if I think you’re doing that, I will pull you out so fast that your pants catch fire. This is observation only. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Derek says.

“Even if Stiles tells you to do something else, like ‘accidentally’ shred a bunch of his files?”

“I understand what an obstruction of justice charge is,” Derek says, with a nod.

“Good. Because I don’t want to lose my career to that asshole after having kept it through everything else. If he catches on, he’ll probably make an enormous fuss about everything. So don’t let him catch on. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d better give you a crash course in our computer system, in case he needs anything,” Tom says.

They’re there for about an hour, while Tom gets everything straightened out and mutters to himself about how he’s going to regret this every five minutes. Derek can’t help but agree, but he’s kind of excited about it nonetheless.
By the time they leave, Stiles is making friends with the new police dog. He bounces out of his seat when he sees Derek coming back. “This is gonna be so awesome, you’re going to have to wear a suit and a tie and I’m so hot and bothered, you don’t even know.”

Derek laughs. “You’ve seen me in a suit before.”

“Yeah, but not in a professional sort of way,” Stiles says, and Derek decides he doesn’t even want to ask what that means.

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“Hey, you want some help with that?” Isaac asks, walking into the kitchen to see Scott scrubbing out the roasting pan that Stiles had used to make dinner. They have a dishwasher, but some of the bigger things don’t fit inside. One of the things on Stiles’ wishlist for the new kitchen to have a dishwasher with adjustable racks. This is mainly for the benefit of the pack, since Stiles hardly ever does the dishes himself. The pack takes ‘whoever cooks doesn’t have to clean’ rule pretty seriously.

“No, I’m fine, I just – ” Scott gives a low growl in his throat and scrubs at the metal even more vigorously.

Isaac hesitates. He’s still learning about this whole werewolf thing. His sense of smell is just as good as any of the others, but it takes time to learn what the difference scents that emotion produces mean. Scott is angry, but it’s not just anger. There’s an undertone of guilt, of something – it’s not fear, it’s not sadness – it’s bitterness and loathing and a strange, smothered longing.

It’s not just learning what the different scents mean that’s important. It’s learning when it’s okay to talk about them. All the other wolves seem to have this odd, semi-silent way of communicating that he hasn’t caught onto yet.

Still, he’s learning some things that have nothing to do with werewolves and packs and everything to do with a family that loves him. One of those things is confidence. So he gets two sodas out of the refrigerator, and sets them both on the table. “Hey, give that a rest,” he says. “Come have something to drink.”

Scott looks over at him, then give a gusty sigh. “Yeah, okay,” he says, and gives the pan a quick rinse. ‘Probably clean enough anyway. I’ve been scrubbing it for ten minutes. Wish Stiles had made something more complicated for dinner.”

Isaac nods and fiddles with the tab of the soda can. “You want to talk about it?” he offers.

“I don’t know, man.” Scott rakes both hands through his hair, leaving a streak of soap on his forehead. “My dad’s been back in town for a week and he hasn’t even called. And I should be happy about that, right? Because I don’t want to talk to him. But at the same time I want him to want to talk to me. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes sense to me,” Isaac says quietly. He can vividly remember his father’s trial for attempted murder. How he had had to stand up in front of twenty-five different people and tell everyone what his father had done to him. He remembers the man glaring at him, trying to stare him down. He didn’t think he’d be able to do it. His knees had been shaking, and every time his father looked in his direction, he thought he had to be visibly shrinking.
But he had done it. He had gotten through it, because every time he wanted to run away, he looked at where Talia and Cora were sitting. He looked at Cora’s encouraging face and Talia’s red eyes, and the fact that they were there to support him made all the difference. He had a feeling that it was taking Talia a lot of effort not to leap over the bar and start throttling Isaac’s father.

Scott looks up and nods a little. “Yeah, I guess it would.”

Isaac hasn’t spoken a word to his father since the day Talia had turned him. They had only been in a room together when lawyers and police had been present. After he had been sentenced to twenty years in prison, he had lost his temper in the courtyard and started shouting at Isaac about how he wasn’t his son anymore. There didn’t seem to be much point in visiting him in prison after all that.

They sit in silence for a long minute, drinking their sodas.

“It’s like . . . he wasn’t always awful. You know?” Scott says. “And so when you think back, you, you remember the good things. Like the fact that he used to take me out to get ice cream after baseball games. And he never made fun of me for being bad at baseball, because of my asthma. But then I think about the times he would mock the other kids when they would strike out. Or the way he made fun of Stiles’ name or how clumsy he could be. And sometimes he would say these awful things to my mom. Like, she would be all happy about this new dress and he’d ask ‘why’d you buy something that makes you look so fat’, or she’d ask him to empty the dishwasher and he’d say ‘I can’t believe I married such a nag’. And whenever she got upset, he’d just say ‘come on, honey, take a joke’. Oh, and when it came to money, Jesus – he never liked the fact that she went back to work. So he insisted on having a joint checking account and then he would bitch constantly any time she spent anything on herself.”

“Jesus,” Isaac says. He’d only ever had to deal with his father being awful to him. His father had loved Camden, had always put him up on a pedestal. All his behavior had gotten so much worse after Camden had gotten killed in Iraq, not that he had ever been a peach to live with.

“The thing is, when it starts out small like that, you just, you get used to it, and you don’t realize they’re getting worse. And when you look back on it, you can see it. But it’s not the first thing you think about when you just think back to your dad, right?” Scott looks up at him and then sighs. “Or maybe it was for you. Maybe this is just super whiny of me. I mean, compared to your dad, mine was . . .”

“Hey,” Isaac says, “don’t think like that. I mean, okay, your father never impaled you on a metal pipe, but there are levels of bad, you know? Just because it was bad for me doesn’t mean it wasn’t bad for you. Better than ‘the worst’ doesn’t mean ‘good’.”

Scott brightens at this. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.” Then he frowns. “Why am I happy about this?”

“I dunno, maybe because acknowledging that your dad is a shitty person makes it easier to accept that he hasn’t called you,” Isaac says. “But I get it. I do. I would want him to call if I were in your shoes.” When Scott just gives a little nod, he says, “Maybe you should call him.”

“I don’t want to call him,” Scott says. “I don’t want to talk to him. I just want him to want to talk to me. That’s it. That’s all I want.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, feeling awkward, like he shouldn’t have suggested it. He’s not good at this sort of thing. “Then don’t call him.”


“Yeah?” Isaac smiles. “I don’t know that I was really helpful.”
“I wasn’t expecting you to solve all my problems or make my dad any less of a dick.” Scott shrugs. “It just helped to, you know. Be told that I’ve got every right to be pissed at him. And it helps to remember that I’m not alone.”

Isaac nods. “I know that feeling,” he says, remembering the witness stand again. He glances at his watch and sees that it’s just past seven o’clock. “Come on, it’s too early to sit around here moping. Let’s go collect our mates and go out somewhere. You know, catch a movie or something.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Scott says. “Okay, let’s do that.”
Derek doesn’t get much of a hello from Rafael McCall. He’s barely gotten his fake name out when McCall thrusts a sheet of paper at him and says, “I need current address and phone numbers for all these people.”

“Can do,” Derek says, glad that Tom had thought to show him the ins and outs of the computer system. It takes just a minute to remember it, and figure out how to get the information that he needs. “Do you want me to print this or compile it to send to your phone?” he asks, hoping his hunt-and-peck method of typing doesn’t give him away. He’s a gardener, as he’s reminded Stiles, several times over the previous few days, but he does spend a fair amount of time on his computer, like basically any guy in his twenties.

The list of people is interesting. They’re the primary people of interest in Paige Krasikeva’s murder. It looks like McCall is starting the investigation from scratch, repeating everything that had been done by Sheriff Stilinski in 2003. He can see why McCall might want to do that, particularly if he didn’t think Tom was competent, but it seemed like an awful waste of time.

“Whichever,” McCall says, waving impatiently. “You’re coming with me. I don’t know the town as well as I used to. You’ll drive.”

“Sure,” Derek says, sending the list to his own phone, instead. He stands up and gets his keys out, and said, “Where do you want to start?”

“With the Krasikeva parents,” McCall says.

It also seems like a great way to stir up bad memories for the people who had lost Paige, but Derek is fairly sure that McCall doesn’t give a shit about that. He drives over to the Krasikeva house and parks outside. “Wait here for me,” he says, and Derek is happy to obey. As much as it might help Stiles for him to overhear the conversation between McCall and the Krasikevas, he doesn’t want to be privy to their pain. It’s bad enough that McCall is digging into it.

That gives him a thought, though. Stiles is still adamant that he wants to crack the mystery himself, but he’s definitely willing to use McCall for all he’s worth. He’s dumped all of the stuff about Search for a Cure on Agent McCall, hoping that he’ll be able to use his contacts with the FBI to get more information. But he hasn’t said anything about their one real lead – the idea of the bully-turned-witness that Cheryl Krasikeva had told them about.

Derek looks down at the list of contacts that McCall had made him look up. Cheryl Krasikeva isn’t on the list. That’s good. McCall seems oblivious to the fact that she could know anything. That means Derek doesn’t have to try to hide it – he just has to not mention it to the FBI agent.
It turns into a very long, very boring day. He drives around town and sits in the car a lot. He’s brought his sketchbook with him, so he’s able to get some work done. He wishes he had brought his laptop, so he had his design software with him. Mostly he wishes he was somewhere else entirely, but thinking of all the ways Stiles is going to reward him for this is more-than-adequate incentive.

It’s nearly five when McCall proclaims that he’s interrogated enough innocent people for the day, but then says he wants to make one last stop and gives Derek an address. It’s vaguely familiar to him, but he doesn’t recognize it until he actually pulls up across the street. It’s a generously sized house with a neat lawn. He hasn’t been there in a while, although he had gone several times while Scott was being brought into the pack. The McCall house.

Rafael doesn’t make any move to get out of the car, though. He sits in the passenger seat and stares up at the house moodily for several long minutes. Derek politely clears his throat, wondering if there’s a tactful way to ask how long McCall plans on creeping around his ex-wife’s house.

“I suppose you’ve probably gotten the whole story, one-sided as it might have been,” McCall finally says, still brooding.

“Sir?” Derek asks, feigning cluelessness.

“I’m sure that any time Tom or Melissa tell the story, they make me look like the bad guy,” McCall continues. “And I guess I can’t say that my behavior was great. They act like being a father is so easy. Like I was always supposed to know the right thing to do, like every little mistake was some sort of attack on my family.”

“Doesn’t the sheriff have a son of his own?” Derek asks, hoping that he sounds merely inquiring, rather than accusatory.

“Yeah.” Rafael gives a snort. “Like he did such a great job raising that kid.”

Derek decides that silence is the best response to that, since tearing McCall’s throat out probably wouldn’t win him any points with anyone.

“Hell, after Claudia died, Stiles practically lived at our place for six months anyway,” McCall continues. “I tried to knock some respect into him, but apparently I didn’t get very far.”

“Uh huh,” Derek says, trying to suppress the seething rage. He thinks back to Stiles when he first met him, so convinced that he was unlovable, and wonders exactly how much that six months with Rafael McCall had had to do with it. McCall was long gone by then, but clearly nobody had forgotten about some of the things he had said.

“And now they’ve gone and poisoned Scott against me,” McCall says. “I don’t even know what to do about it. He’s in this werewolf pack, and that bitch alpha of theirs – ”

Derek abruptly puts the car in drive and pulls back onto the street, because he’s very sure that if he has to listen to McCall for two more seconds, he really is going to punch him in the face. “Sir, I don’t even know what to do about your family problems and I don’t want to know,” he says. “I’m working for you on a temporary basis and then I’ll be working for Sheriff Stilinski again, so I don’t really think this is appropriate. If you want to come here again, drive yourself.”

McCall says nothing. But when they get back to the station, he says, “You’re right. I shouldn’t have involved you in my personal problems, and I’m sorry. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Derek says. “I mean, yes sir. See you tomorrow.”
McCall gets out of the car and heads over to his own. Derek lets his head thunk back against his seat and wonders how he’s going to survive.

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Stiles looks up as he sees Derek trudge into the house, looking less than pleased with the world. That’s a problem, of course, but he’s also somewhat distracted by how good Derek looks in a suit. He’s been distracted with that somewhat perpetually over the last few days. “Hi, honey, you’re home!” he says, and Derek gives a snort of laughter, coming over to wrap his arms around Stiles’ waist from behind and nuzzle his face into the crook of Stiles’ neck.

“Smells good,” he says, leaning over him to sniff at the food. “When’s dinner going to be?”

“Another ten minutes or so,” Stiles says, then glances back and says, “but don’t go change, okay? Leave that suit on for me.”

“I don’t understand your fascination with the suit,” Derek says.

“Do you want to see me in one?” Stiles teases, and Derek appears to consider that. “Never mind, you’ll bruise my ego,” Stiles adds.

“I would never,” Derek says. “But I’ll leave the suit on. Just for you. The tie goes, though.”

“But the tie is the best part!” Stiles turns around and grabs hold of the tie in question, using it to reel Derek in for a kiss.

When Derek pulls away a minute later, he says, “Point taken. But I still hate it.” He heads for the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of lemonade. “I’m surprised you aren’t grilling me on how my day went.”

“Can’t,” Stiles says. “My dad’s here already, and he has made it very clear that he does not want to know anything about how your undercover mission goes. Plausible deniability, you know. And Peter’s lurking, and the less he knows about Rafael McCall, the better.”

“Reasonable enough,” Derek says. “Do you need help with anything?”

“Nope. You can just sit there and look pretty.”

“I can’t just sit here?”

“You’ll look pretty whether you want to or not,” Stiles says, and Derek grumbles at him. “Sorry. Would you prefer ‘devastatingly handsome’?”

“Shut up,” Derek told him, turning pink all the way up to the tips of his ears. Stiles just grins at him, but then Cora and Allison come in, and he stops his quest to embarrass Derek. He tries not to do it when other people are around. It’s a compulsion, though; Derek’s blushing is too cute. He concentrates on finishing dinner, while the girls rope Derek into setting the table.

It’s a night when everyone is there, so dinner is a noisy, excitable affair. Talia is mourning the fact that she can’t have a glass of wine, saying they have just the right one for the dish Stiles has made. Stiles promises to make it again after the babies are born. They’re talking about the house and their
It’s not until two hours later that Stiles finally manages to drag Derek upstairs and views his mate head-to-toe, trying to decide where to start. “Okay,” he says, “on a scale of one to ten, how awful was it?”

Derek thinks it over. “Three.”

“Three?” Stiles sounds appalled. “That’s it? You spent an entire day with Rafael McCall and you only give it a three?”

“Stiles,” Derek says patiently, “consider some of the things I’ve got to compare it to. The bar for ‘awful’ is set pretty damn high.”

“Okay, point,” Stiles says. “Let me rephrase. On a scale of one to ten of day-to-day life rather than ‘complete catastrophe’, what was it.”

“Seven.”

“See, that’s much better.” Stiles grabs the tie and pulls Derek in. “So that means that we have to have at least seven-star sex to make it up to you.”

Derek leans in and bites at Stiles’ lower lip. “Sex with you is always at least seven stars.”

“Aw, you’re going to make me blush,” Stiles says, but laughs. “No, for reals,” he adds, returning the kiss with interest. “What do you want to do, I want to do whatever you want to do.”

They kiss for several long moments before Derek pulls away enough to say, “I want your hands.”

“You always want my hands,” Stiles says, smirking. But he takes his time undoing the tie, going down the line of buttons on Derek’s shirt. He’s aware of Derek watching him, and it’s the sexiest thing on the planet. He gets Derek undressed, slowly, before pushing him down onto the bed and running his hands up and down Derek’s body. He lets his fingers play along Derek’s chest and stomach, seeking out the sensitive places he knows so well.

He’s aware of Derek watching; he loves the way Derek watches him. His fingers dance over Derek’s collarbone and down his arms, brush along the lines made by his ribs. He takes what feels like an hour undoing Derek’s belt, rubbing his hands over the front of Derek’s pants until the werewolf is muttering curses underneath his breath. Derek’s head is tilted back, eyes closed, and Stiles takes a moment to trace over his cheek and jaw, letting his fingers trail down Derek’s throat, lingering on the point of his pulse.

“Love you,” Derek murmurs, and Stiles leans down to give him a gentle kiss. Then he reaches down to get Derek’s pants and underwear off, freeing him from the fabric. Derek groans as Stiles wraps his fingers around him. Stiles has never been quite sure of exactly why Derek loves his hands so much, but he definitely does. And it’s the easiest, most amazing thing in the world to just make Derek writhe and shudder in his grip.

“This good?” he asks, leaning down to ask it right in Derek’s ear.

“Nng,” Derek replies eloquently. Then he’s fumbling for the lube on their bedside table. He tosses it in Stiles’ general direction. “Can – can you – ”

“Hell yes,” Stiles says, letting go of Derek so he can grab the little bottle. He settles between Derek’s legs, helping him tilt his hips upwards, applying a generous amount of lube before easing his fingers inside. Derek groans, head tilting back again, and Stiles can’t resist leaning in to mouth
messily at his throat. He’s done this countless times but it’s always amazing, the way he can take this gorgeous, breath-taking man who loves him and make him feel so good. He doesn’t rush, but it doesn’t take long before Derek is shuddering against him and coming in his hands.

Stiles is so turned on by that point that he finds himself rubbing himself up against Derek while he comes down from it, grinding his still-clothed hips against Derek’s thigh. Then Derek is fumbling at his pants. “C’mere, gimme,” he says, and Stiles laughs a little but doesn’t protest, choking back a moan as Derek gets his hands on him. He’s gotten the bottle of lube from somewhere and Stiles can’t resist just fucking into Derek’s hand. Derek holds him steady, letting Stiles do the work, set the pace just how he wants it. Stiles leans down to bite at Derek’s collarbone as he comes.

A few minutes later, they’re lying on the bed and Derek is making some vague noises about cleaning up. “Seven stars?” Stiles says drowsily into the silence.

“Mm, eight at least,” Derek replies.

“Good, good.” Stiles bites off a huge yawn. “So. How’d it go with Agent McCall?”

“That guy is a total jerk.” Derek rolls onto his side, cupping Stiles’ cheek with one hand, rubbing his thumb over Stiles’ lips. “Apparently he’s decided he’s going to start the whole investigation over. He spent the day interviewing the key witnesses from Paige’s original file.”

Stiles groans. “Are you kidding me? I gave him all that stuff on Search for a Cure and he decides to do that? That’s not only obnoxious, it’s also stupid. He has to know that Blake is the best lead.”

“Yeah,” Derek says. For the first time, he stops and really thinks about why McCall is doing what he’s doing. “But right now he doesn’t want to solve the greater mystery. That’s not what’s important to him. He wants to solve Paige’s murder. Then, once he’s proven that it’s not related, he has grounds to tell you to step off his case.”

“And then he’ll use the information I gave him to solve it and shut me out.” Stiles gives an explosive sigh. “What a fucking jerk.”

“Mm hm,” Derek says. “But he doesn’t know anything about the bullying. Cheryl Krasikeva wasn’t on his contact list and I didn’t say anything about it. So your lead is still all yours.”

“Well, that’s good,” Stiles says, brightening. He leans into Derek’s palm, nuzzling into it. “I’m sorry that you’re stuck with him.”

“I can handle it,” Derek says. “There’s something else I’m not as sure about. He had me take him by Melissa’s house at the end. Just to brood over it, I think. I want to mention it to her or your dad, but . . .”

“But if you do, they’ll rightfully go ballistic,” Stiles says, picking up his train of thoughts. “Melissa will file a restraining order, and your cover will be blown.”

“Yeah.”

Stiles thinks that over for a long minute. Then he says, “We’ll tell Uncle P. He’s better at thinking around corners than my dad. He’ll know how to keep Melissa safe without tipping our hand. Maybe we can set up a security system so if he shows up again, Melissa can just say that she picked it up herself.”

Derek nods. He’s clearly relieved that Stiles isn’t intent on keeping this to themselves. “Hey, can I ask you something?”
“You know you can,” Stiles says.

“When we first met, you had some self-esteem issues,” Derek says slowly.

“Oh my God, really?” Stiles asks. Derek gives him a pointed look, and he says, “Sorry. Go on.”

“Well, McCall said a few things about you that made me wonder exactly how much contributed to that.”

Stiles rolls onto his back and folds his arms underneath his head. He studies the ceiling for a long minute, thinking about it. “It’s funny,” he says, “because at the time I never really thought about it. I mean, I was just a kid. But looking back on it, seeing it now, you’ve kind of got a point. He was pretty harsh with me at a time that I was already pretty fucked up. I mean, I started spending a lot of time at Scott’s when my mom got sick. She just . . . she went downhill so fast. My dad was suddenly working full time and trying to get her to all her appointments, do all the housework, and he just . . . he didn’t like me seeing my mom like that, either. So yeah, I spent a lot of time at the McCall house.

“But they shooed me off there so often that I got sort of a complex about it, convinced myself that my mom didn’t want me around. Now, my mom was way better with moody eight-year-old me than my dad was, and she coaxed that out of me pretty much immediately, and from then on I barely ever left her side. She let me sit with her all afternoon and sleep in their bed, even after she was hospitalized. That was, uh, that was just about three weeks before she died.”

Derek leans over and rubs away a tear with his thumb. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Stiles nods in response. “After that, I practically lived with Scott for a few months. I mean, my dad was suuuuuuper fucked up. I mean, not post-fire-Peter levels of fucked up, but pretty bad. He worked all the time, because home just made him think of mom. So I went home with Scott after school and stayed there until my dad put himself back together enough to come pick me up. Sometimes that was five, sometimes it was nine. If he didn’t show up by six, I ate with them. If he showed up after seven, Melissa gave him some dinner in a brown paper bag, and for lunch he just ate fast food. Plus he drank a lot, like, a lot a lot.”

“Geez, I’m surprised he didn’t give himself a heart atta . . .” Derek’s voice breaks off abruptly.

Stiles looks over and gives him a wry smile. “Yes, the thought occurred to me, too.”

“Sorry,” Derek says, wincing.

“No big,” Stiles says. “So that was quite a few hours per week that I was spending with the McCall family. And Scott’s dad . . . he said a lot of shit that probably really fucked me up. Never to my face, but always where I could hear. Stuff like, ‘why do we have to put up with him all the time’ and ‘I’d drink too if I had that brat to look after’.”

“Jesus,” Derek says.

“Oh, never tell my dad about this, okay?” Stiles adds. “Because I’m pretty sure if he knew about some of this, he might actually go kill Rafael. And Peter definitely would, so . . .”

“I’ll keep it to myself,” Derek says. “Unless I can’t.”

Stiles makes a face at him. “After the first month, McCall started pretending to be my dad and giving me a hard time a lot. He would insist on going over my homework and make sarcastic comments if I got stuff wrong. He complained about my stuff being there and made me do chores – seriously, he made me do more chores than Scott did. Scott always tried to help, but his asthma
made some stuff impossible for him back then.

“Anyway, the last straw came about four, maybe five months after my mom died,” Stiles continues. “My dad called to say he couldn’t come get me, could Melissa drive me home, because he was too drunk to drive. That happened a lot. I mean, my dad was drinking way too much but he never drove while he was drunk, not ever. So he would just call Melissa and she would take me home. Anyway, Melissa had had to take a shift at the hospital to cover for a coworker, so McCall drove me home, and he said something like ‘your dad is going to drink himself to death just to get out of looking after you’.”

Derek sits up abruptly. “He did not.”

“Yeah. Down, Fido.” Stiles gets a hand around Derek’s arm and pulls him back down. Derek goes reluctantly. “I went into the house all upset and crying, and I didn’t want to tell my dad why, but then I had bad dreams, and anyway, he got it out of me. I wouldn’t go back to sleep until he poured all his liquor down the drain. Many a dollar was wasted to appease my nine-year-old self.”

“I’m sure your dad would say it was worth it,” Derek says.

“Yeah. He never said anything about it afterwards. He just stopped, cold turkey, didn’t touch liquor again until at least three years later, when I guess he decided he was okay for social drinking again. Even now, he doesn’t drink much.”

Derek nods. He’s seen Tom have a beer or two on occasion, but he never drinks to get drunk, never has more than two in one sitting. “So what happened to McCall?”

“Dunno,” Stiles says. “After that, my dad started picking me up from school and taking me to the station. I hardly ever even saw Mr. McCall after that. Dad didn’t like me going over there, but he never had any problem with Scott being at our place, so usually Scott just came over. I saw him sometimes, but by then I had figured out how much my dad hated him, and realized that I wasn’t the problem, so it was a lot easier to ignore him and/or give him shit.”

“You? Give somebody shit? I can’t believe it.”

Stiles reaches over and flicks Derek’s nose. “And then Melissa threw him out and he moved away, the end.”

Derek nods. But then he shakes his head. “I can’t believe he said that stuff to you. I should tell Peter. He might not kill him. He might decide that leaving him alive is a greater punishment.”

“Look, as much as I’d like to see Uncle P go all Pit of Despair on Rafael McCall – which I would love, real talk – it doesn’t bother me that much anymore. I’m older and at least marginally wiser, and I can look at McCall and see that at heart, he is an insecure little primate with an overly aggressive man-child brain and, most likely, a tiny dick.” Stiles shrugs. “I don’t care what he thinks about me.”

“Very mature,” Derek says. “But the problem is, even though I don’t care what he thinks about you, I care what he says about you.”

“Just remember that you’re helping me kick his ass,” Stiles says, then groans. “Presuming I can get more information on Search for a Cure somehow, since he obviously isn’t planning on doing it. Christ, I have to do everything myself.”

Derek laughs quietly and nuzzles at Stiles’ neck. “Maybe you can get Peter to help. Keep him distracted from McCall.”
“Excellent idea,” Stiles says. “I knew I kept you around for something. You know, besides your stunning body, amazing horticultural skills, taste-testing ability, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Shut up,” Derek growls, and then seals his mouth to Stiles’ to enforce his command.

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Peter listens quietly while Derek tells him about McCall’s trip to Melissa’s house the previous day. He can see that both Derek and Stiles are anxious about this, but like Stiles, he would rather they be able to keep Derek in position to keep tabs on McCall. That just seems like a wise idea for a variety of reasons. So he simply says, “I’ll take care of it,” and sees the tension go out of Derek’s shoulders.

It isn’t exactly difficult. Melissa already has a decent security system, and he doubts that Rafael has the code. But if they want to keep him from lurking, they’ll need to catch him in the act. So he sets up a camera in Melissa’s living room window (Rafael might not have the code, but Peter does) sets it to motion-activation, and leaves. His next stop is the hotel where Rafael is staying, which was easy enough to find by following him home after his second day at work. Then he knows what car he’s driving, too. He slides a GPS tracker into one of the wheel wells and heads back to the den, whistling.

His good mood vanishes mere hours later when he goes to look at the data from the GPS tracker and sees that not only had McCall stopped by Melissa’s house, presumably to brood, but he had also lingered outside Sheriff Stilinski’s house for about twenty minutes. Peter studies the data with narrowed eyes for a long minute before he heads over to the Stilinski house, completely forgetting about the fact that it was nearly dinner time.

Tom isn’t there, so Peter merely sets up another security camera in the light fixture by the garage before heading back to the house. Dinner is ongoing when he gets there. He wanders through the kitchen, picks up a plate, and goes to eat outside. He’s feeling smothered, threatened, and he doesn’t want to be in close quarters.

He goes out for a long run after dinner. That always calms him down. By the time he gets back, the family is settled in the living room, gathered around some game or other. Talia looks up when he comes in and says, “Come sit down.” He moves towards her, but as soon as he gets close, her scent overwhelms him. He grits his teeth, hanging gamely onto reality, and backs away.

“I’d rather not,” he says, rather than outright disobeying. As always when this sort of thing happens, it seems like he can hear his voice coming from miles away, like there’s some part of him that takes over when his emotional side is reeling. He sees the look on Talia’s face, smells her sorrow, and flees the house. There are things he can never have. He never forgets that. He can’t.

Instead he heads back to the Stilinski house. Tom is home by then, and he lets Peter in, but he’s gotten better at assessing Peter’s mood over the years. He can tell when Peter is edging towards feral, shying away from his touch. He lets Peter pace around, shred a pillow with his claws, and talks calmly to him until he’s come back from that edge.

As always, it leaves him exhausted and strangely sore, like every muscle in his body has been held tense for the past several hours and is only now relaxing. He falls asleep on the sofa with his head in Tom’s lap, Tom’s hand rubbing down his spine and over his hair.
The next morning is better. He wakes up early and makes breakfast. He’s never been much of a cook – that, of course, was always Olivia’s domain – but he can throw together scrambled eggs and toast. He knows that Tom likes the apricot jam. He likes to cook for Tom, likes to make sure that he’s taken care of. Watching him accept the offerings and eat his fill is always strangely soothing. Tom eats breakfast and reaches out to give him a quick embrace before leaving. Peter rubs his cheek against Tom’s temple, layering the scent of pack on top of his soap and aftershave without thinking about it. It’s a move that comes as naturally to him as breathing.

He waits about an hour so Tom will be busy with something by the time he gets there, and then heads to the station. The woman at the front, who knows him well by this point, gives him the side-eye when he asks about Rafael McCall, but directs him to a small conference room. He finds the man there, studying a list of names written on a whiteboard. Derek is there, too, sorting through some papers, and his eyebrows go up when Peter enters. Peter ignores him, since he’s not there to blow Derek’s cover.

“Agent McCall,” he says. “Do you have a minute?”

McCall turns and gives him arched eyebrows, the kind of expression that Peter knows full well means, ‘are you going to make it worth my time’. Peter forestalls him by holding a hand out and saying, “Peter Hale. I’ve heard a bit about you.”

“I’m sure,” McCall says sourly, and shakes the offered hand. “What do you need?”

That amuses Peter: McCall doesn’t want to say ‘how can I help you’ or ‘what can I do for you’ the way most people would. He decides to point it out. “Well, it’s not about what I need, Agent McCall,” he says. “I came here to help you.”

“Really.” McCall looks unconvinced at best. Derek, in the background, maintains an admirably straight face.

“Mm hm,” Peter says. “I’m sure you know who I am. Anybody who reads a newspaper in this country knows who I am. I thought I would stop by and offer you a few pointers.”

“I don’t need pointers from a murderer,” McCall says.

Peter regards him quietly for a moment, then says, “Scott would like very much if you would call him.”

That’s clearly not what McCall was expecting. His frown deepens, and he says, “I didn’t think he would give me the time of day after you lot have gotten to him.”

“Oh, he might not,” Peter says, carefully keeping his voice pleasant. “But he’s hurt that you haven’t even attempted to contact him. You are, after all, his father. The fact that you have now been in town for a week and have yet to pick up the phone and call him is making him feel very unloved and unhappy. And I do not like that.”

“Really,” McCall says.

“Similarly,” Peter continues, without dignifying McCall’s sceptical tone, “I would like to ask you not to contact Melissa. She thinks she might have seen you outside her house yesterday, and she’s quite upset about it.”

Derek gives his uncle a somewhat incredulous look, as if to say ‘this is it? We ask you to think around corners and you come accuse him right to his face?’ Peter ignores him, instead studying McCall, who has a gratifying little tic in his cheek. “I wasn’t – ” the agent begins.
“Please, Agent, I know a liar when I smell one,” Peter says dismissively. “Your reasons for being here are your own. Melissa is a grown woman and can certainly take care of herself, but when she’s upset, Scott is upset, and when Scott is upset, Stiles is upset, and, well.” He grins toothily. “I don’t think I need to tell you what it’s like when Stiles gets upset.”

“You certainly don’t,” McCall says, rolling his eyes.

Peter sees that he took that entirely the wrong way, but decides against correcting him. Let McCall continue to think that Stiles is an unruly brat. Being underestimated is only a good thing in their profession. “Leave Melissa alone, Agent McCall. I’m asking you politely. And I only do that once.” He continues to smile, and then adds, “Good luck on your case, Agent,” and turns and walks away.

~ ~ ~
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

so much plot-

Also, mild trigger warning for the mocking of mental disabilities, since I know that sort of thing bothers some people.

After the first few days, McCall takes on an interesting tactic that had honestly never occurred to Derek. He’s not sure whether or not it’s something that Stiles had thought of. He starts looking into the two paramedics who had found Paige at the school. His theory is that they intentionally wiped away the dark secretions to hide the fact that she had gone into rejection.

When Derek mentions it to Stiles, he says he thinks it’s unlikely. “I still don’t think killing Paige was the intention,” he says, “but I guess if it was, the paramedics could have been in on it.”

Derek tends to agree, and Stiles knows a lot more about bite rejection than he does. If he thinks that murder wasn’t the goal, he’s probably right. When he mentions that to McCall, the agent just blows him off, so he doesn’t bother to worry about it. Instead he just helps McCall go through a bunch of phone records and bank records that are now ten years out of date.

When nothing turns up, McCall decides to widen his search to the doctors involved in her care. It’s possible, he says, that someone had deliberately delayed her treatment to ensure her death.

Going through that list, Derek finally figures out what McCall is actually up to. The list of hospital personnel includes two doctors, a lab technician, and a triage nurse. The nurse, of course, is Melissa McCall.

“So she worked at the hospital even back then?” Derek inquires innocently, as McCall is smugly ordering him to enter a request for her phone and financial records. “Shouldn’t you know she wasn’t involved? You were married to her at the time.”

“Maybe I didn’t know her as well as I thought,” McCall says, and Derek rolls his eyes despite himself.

When the records come in, Derek says, “I’ll handle these,” and snatches up Melissa’s records, shoving the doctors’ records at McCall. The agent gives him a dirty look but apparently decides it’s beneath him to argue over something so petty. Derek gives a quick skim of the financials – the account she had shared with Rafael, for crying out loud – and the phone records.

“Anything interesting?” McCall asks, pretending not to care.

Derek sighs. “Just one number that she called a lot.”

“Mm hm . . .” McCall takes the paper and glowers at it. Derek knows whose number it is, because the Stilinski family still has their land line, and although he hasn’t called it enough to have it memorized, he recognizes it when he sees it in context.
Derek thinks about asking whether or not McCall took this entire line of investigation as an excuse to find out how often Melissa had been calling the sheriff. He thinks about pointing out that she was probably just trying to comfort a friend whose wife had just died, or coordinate the care of his son. He thinks about saying a lot of things, but in the end says nothing. It would all fall on deaf ears, and he’ll only get himself in trouble. His job is to monitor McCall, not to try to influence his behavior.

“So now what, sir?” he asks, when McCall has been silent for too long.

“This doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere,” McCall says, and Derek resists the urge to say ‘ya think?’ He broods for another minute before saying, “I need to do some thinking about how to handle this. You can go for today. But be here at eight tomorrow – by then I’ll have a lot for you to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Derek says, glancing at his watch. It’s just past three PM. He quickly texts Peter to let him know what happened, in case McCall’s strategy session entails sitting outside Melissa’s house, or worse yet harassing her about why she was calling the Stilinski house ten years ago. Then he heads back to his own office. He has a lot of his own work to do, since he’s been wasting so much time with McCall. And a few hours in the greenhouse is just what his temper needs right now.

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While McCall is beating his head against a wall re-interviewing everyone who was even remotely acquainted with Paige Krasikeva, Stiles feels like he’s five miles ahead of him. He’s talked to a bunch of the different teachers and some of the former students and found that the students involved in bullying Paige was a clique of about a dozen kids.

Some of them don’t live in Beacon Hills anymore, which makes sense, given that it was eleven years ago. And he can hardly come at them head on. They’ll just say that they won’t remember where they were the night Paige was killed, and how can he argue with that? None of them would ever admit to anything beyond some teasing. No, if he wants to nail them, he needs to come at them sideways.

After mulling over the options while he chops enormous heaps of fruits and vegetables (Talia is suddenly obsessed with radishes and cantaloupe), he sends a quick text to Danny. ‘Need to send an anonymous text. Advice?”

Danny wisely does not offer an opinion on Stiles’ illicit activities. ‘Just get a burner,’ he replies. Stiles makes a face at the phone because he was hoping there would be an option that didn’t involve buying a new phone. A few moments later, Danny adds, ‘and remember to disable the gps’.

‘Thanks for the tip,’ Stiles replies. He finishes his work in the kitchen and then drives over to the nearest convenience store where he can buy a prepaid cell phone. Then he heads out of town and parks at the side of the road, somewhere that no camera could possibly film him sending these messages.

Out of the eleven students he thought might have been involved, one died in a car accident and three have left town, leaving him with seven. He puts all seven of them in the phone as contacts and then sends each one an individual text that reads ‘I know what you did to PK.’ Then he sits
back to wait. That text ought to ruffle some feathers, and he’s curious to see what will happen.

Two responses come almost immediately. One reply of ‘who is this?’ and another of ‘wtf man!’ A few minutes later, he gets a third reply. ‘Wrong number, creep.’ He whistles and checks his watch. One more reply comes in after about ten minutes, another of ‘who is this?’ The other three don’t say anything in return, although one anxious young man tries to call him back. He ignores the calls.

Once half an hour has gone by, he sends another text. This one just reads, ‘Rigby Park, 10 PM tonight’. He sends it to everyone, even the person who claimed he had a wrong number. Then he turns the phone off, drives back into town, and tosses it down a sewer grate. Worth every penny.

He heads to Rigby Park, which is a small park that boasts a playground and a couple tennis courts. The gates to the courts will be locked at night, so whoever shows up to the rendezvous will either head to the playground or just stand in the parking lot. He takes a couple of the listening devices he’s bought online and sticks one to the underside of the slide, and another on the back of the sign listing the rules in the parking lot. Then he drives back to the den. It’s getting close to dinner time.

He’d love to be physically present for this conversation so he can see who shows up with his own eyes, but it’s way too risky. Once he has the conversation recorded, he can bring it to his father and get warrants for the people in question and use their phone’s GPS to prove who was and wasn’t there. So after dinner, he holes up in his bedroom and tells Derek what’s going on. Derek agrees to stay quiet while they listen in. He’s clearly relieved that Stiles is exercising caution, so he doesn’t argue.

At nine fifty-five, Stiles is pacing around the room, brimming with nervous energy. He practically can’t hold still as the minutes trickle by. Then at nine fifty-eight, there’s a crunch of tires on gravel and then the sound of a car door slamming shut. Another minute passes in silence, and then a second car pulls up. Stiles does a silent fist pump.

The conversation starts off with a bang. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” a male voice says. “You think you can just haul me out here with some bullshit cryptic text and I’ll – ”

“Whoa, dude, calm down,” another male voice says. “I got a text, too. I didn’t fucking send you one.”

“Show me,” the first man demands, and there’s a moment of silence. Then he says grudgingly, “Yeah, okay. Sorry, Tucker. I’m just on edge.”

“Look, we didn’t do nothing wrong,” Tucker says. “Whoever sent this is just trying to scare us.”

Before the first voice can say anything, another car pulls up. One of the guys says, “Hey, Carrie. You get a text, too?”

“Yes.” The voice is high-pitched, thin and nervous. “What’s going on? Did you guys make sure no one else is here?”

“Yeah, I walked around after I got here,” Tucker says. “Ain’t a soul in sight. And there’s nowhere around here that he could watch us from either.”

“Then what the fuck is going on?” the first man demands. “Why are they reopening Paige’s murder case? Joe said that some FBI agent was sniffing around, asking a bunch of questions.”

“I talked to Lisa and she said that they thought it might have been connected to some serial killer,” Carrie says.
“Come on, come on,” Stiles mutters. “Say something useful.”

“What the fuck, seriously? What kind of asshole thinks – ”

“Jesus, Don, calm down,” Tucker says. “Look, it doesn’t matter, okay? None of it matters because none of us did anything wrong. If Paige decided to go find herself an alpha to get bitten by, that was her decision, not ours.”

“You think that’ll fly?” Don asks incredulously. “I mean, we only told her ten times a day that the only way she’d ever get anywhere with Hale is if she was a werewolf.”

“Hey, kids say stupid shit,” Carrie says. “We didn’t mean it. And even if we did, how could we have anticipated that it would kill her?”

Stiles frowns, glancing at Derek. He gives a somewhat clueless shrug in return.

“All I’m saying,” the man says, “is that the promise we made ten years ago protects us just as much now as it did then. Nobody says anything to anyone. Problem solved.”

“Yeah, until someone starts sending us ‘I Know What You Did Last Summer’ text messages,” Carrie says. “What time is it?”

“Nearly ten after,” Don says. “Fuck this. I’m leaving. It was probably Dave or Nick, they probably heard about the FBI guy and decided to fuck with us. I’ll kick their asses all the way to fucking Timbuktu for this God damned stunt.”

“I’ll help you,” Carrie says. “Let’s go out of here, this place is creepy.”

There’s a general chorus of agreement, and then the sound of car doors and engines, and then silence. Stiles frowns at his recorder and says, “Well, that was . . . not what I was expecting.”

“I noticed a distinct lack of people talking about having lured Paige to the school after hours,” Derek agrees. He hauls himself up to sit on the desk, looking troubled. “Do you really think Paige would have . . . wanted to become a werewolf? For me?”

“I don’t know, Der,” Stiles says. “It sounds weird to me, but if she really liked you and thought it was the only way you would ever like her back . . . but where the hell would a fifteen year old girl have found an alpha willing to give her the bite? They didn’t have any connection to any werewolf families.”

“Maybe online?” Derek says. “Social media wasn’t as big in 2003 as it is now, but most teenagers did have internet access.”

“They checked her browser history,” Stiles says. “It’s all in the files.”

“Maybe she deleted it out of her history.”

“Come on, she’s a teenaged girl, not James Bond,” Stiles says. “Besides, why would she have bothered?”

Derek gives a slight shrug. “Maybe she didn’t want her parents to know?”

“It would be one thing if her entire history was deleted, but to only clear out specific websites? I didn’t even know you could do that until I started hanging out with Danny.” Stiles shakes his head. “I don’t get it. It’s weird. It’s like, everything I find about this case only makes me more confused. One of the teenagers bullying her being the witness who called 911 fit in so perfectly.
But if they didn’t do it, who did?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Derek says. “I have faith in you.”

“Yeah, I hope so.” Stiles sighs. “Allison’s going back to talk to Jennifer Blake next week. She talked her father into making a big donation to Search for a Cure and get them a meeting. So hopefully that will give me some new leads to follow. You know, since Agent Jerkface apparently doesn’t plan on doing any research into them at all,” he adds, making a face.

“I’ll let you know if he does,” Derek says. “Come on, you’re stressed. You want to go take a bath?”

“Only if you’ll take it with me,” Stiles says, regaining some spirit.

Derek smirks at him. “I think that can be arranged.”

~ ~ ~ ~

It’s nearly nine o’clock at night when the doorbell rings, startling Stiles from the book he’s curled up with. Derek had convinced him to put aside his investigation and cuddle with him on the sofa. It’s a quiet evening. Laura and Jonathan have taken the kids back to their house; Cora and Isaac are up in her room. Tom and Melissa are both working, and Scott is over at Allison’s for their weekly dinner under Chris and Victoria’s terrifying supervision.

The doorbell is followed up with a loud knocking, and Stiles is trying to get to his feet when Talia sweeps past him, looking annoyed. She had been in her study. Aaron is out of town, chasing down some story. She gets to the door just as Stiles and Derek manage to untangle themselves and get up, and faces a furious looking Rafael McCall.

“Where is he?” the agent demands. Derek scrambles for Talia’s study so McCall won’t see him there.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific,” Talia says, although her demeanor goes instantly icy at his tone.

“Your brother,” McCall snarls.

“Why do you want to know?” Talia asks. Peter is home, surprisingly; he had been unhappy that Aaron was out of town during Talia’s pregnancy and so he hasn’t left the house much in the past few days. He’s been hiding in his room most of the time, however.

“Because I’m going to arrest him,” McCall says.

“Oh, really,” Talia says. “Do you have a warrant for his arrest? What are the charges?”

“I’ll have my warrant within three minutes of getting to the station, but I didn’t stop by after finding the present he left on my doorstep,” McCall snaps. “The charges are stalking, harassment, and making impotent threats.”

“My threats are never impotent,” Peter says, leaning over the railing of the upstairs balcony, and Talia gives a slight sigh. “But I don’t recall wasting any of them on you.” He comes down the stairs, looking as though he doesn’t have a care in the world.
“Don’t play games with me, Hale!” McCall takes out an envelope and rattles it angrily in Peter’s direction. “You left these pictures on my door.”

“Yes, I did,” Peter says. “What about it?”

“That’s where the stalking and harassment charges come in,” McCall says.

Peter looks at McCall as if he’s a particularly disgusting bug. “Those pictures,” he says, “are you outside your ex-wife’s house, where you had specifically been asked not to go but I personally had every right to be. I took them in case Melissa decided that she would like to file a restraining order against you. I left them on your door so you would know, should she choose to do so, that we had this evidence. I thought it might encourage you not to fight her on it.”

“These are a threat and you know it,” McCall says.

“Well, I’m very sorry if you interpreted it that way,” Peter says, with a charming smile. “It wasn’t at all my intention. It isn’t as if I wrote any sort of threatening message on them, or like I had followed you around town.”

“You came to my hotel room!” McCall shouts. “How did you even know where I was staying?”

“Agent McCall, there are three hotels in town. I wanted to make sure you got my message, so I went to each one to look for your car. I know what your car looks like because it was also seen outside Melissa’s house – again, a place you had been asked politely not to go.”

McCall’s face is slowly turning an ugly red. “You could have come to the station to give them to me.”

“Oh, I suppose that’s true,” Peter says, as if the idea had just occurred to him. “I’m sure Sheriff Stilinski would be very interested to hear about how you’re sitting outside his house for a half hour at a time, while he’s not home. Might I ask what the purpose of that is, exactly?”

“Wait, he’s going to my dad’s house?” That’s too much for Stiles. He pushes forward, practically elbowing past Talia. “What the fuck for?”

“This is none of your business, young man –”

“You’re sitting outside my dad’s house when he’s not there and you’re trying to tell me that’s not my business?” Stiles asks furiously. “I’m a legal fucking adult, I’m a god damned national hero, you don’t get to ‘young man’ me anymore, you spiteful son of a bitch. I know the only reason you give a shit about Paige’s murder is because you want to find a way to embarrass my dad somehow, but spying on him? You can take that shit right the fuck outside!”

“National hero?” McCall laughs at him, loudly. “Yes, you appeared on ‘Ellen’, how could I forget what a genius you are? I’ll grant that you had your fifteen minutes of fame, but I’ve had twenty years in the field. I had solved more cases than you before you were even born, bucko.”

“Don’t fucking change the subject,” Stiles spits out. “This isn’t about me –”

“Oh, isn’t everything?” McCall retorts.

“This is about you and the fact that you can’t stand my father because Melissa likes him better, maybe because he’s not an asshole, and so you’re going to hold some, some stupid . . . petty . . .” Stiles twists a hand in his hair, but the word is gone. “You know, that thing, where you don’t . . .” He looks over for Derek to supply the word, remembers he’s not there, and looks at Peter instead.
“Grudge,” Peter says.

“Right, okay, you’re going to hold a grudge against my dad because of that time he arrested you when you showed up . . . alcohol . . . alcohol’ed, damn it, that’s not the word – and he ran you out of town, well, you fucking deserved it because you’re an abusive, mis – misanthropist? No! God damn it, the word where you hate women – ”

“Take it easy, Stiles,” McCall says, with a smirk. “We wouldn’t want you to tax your genius brain, am I right? It’s clearly a finely tuned machine – ”

Peter steps forward before Stiles can actually start screaming, and says in a quiet voice, “Sir, you want to leave now.”

“Oh, do I?” McCall is still looking smug.

“Do you know what the Left Hand of a pack does?” Peter asks. “He takes care of things before the alpha has to step in. Do you want the alpha to step in?” He gestures to Talia, and Stiles turns to look at her, sees the way she’s standing with her shoulders back and jaw clenched, eyes bright crimson. “Because Stiles sustained those difficulties you so cavalierly mock by saving her family’s life. And I really don’t think you want her to be the one who deals with you.”

At this, McCall hesitates, looking between Stiles and Talia uncertainly. Somewhere in his reptilian brain, he apparently decides to push his luck. “If you touch me, that’s assault.”

Talia’s lip peels back into a snarl, but the tenor of Peter’s voice doesn’t change. “You’ve been asked to leave, which means you’re currently trespassing, and the alpha of a werewolf pack has a great deal of leniency when it comes to removing trespassers from her den. As long as your throat was still intact, the courts would be very forgiving.”

McCall presses his lips together and says, “We’re not done with this,” but he turns and heads out the front door.

“Yeah, you better run, you, you, slimy butt goblin!” Stiles shouts after him, and Talia’s snarl breaks into a laugh.

“Oh, Stiles,” she says, leaning against the wall. “Butt goblin, really?”

“I was under stress! It was the best I could come up with!” Stiles protests.

Peter closes the door and turns the lock. “False,” he says. “You’ve been waiting ages to have the excuse to call someone a butt goblin, and this was the perfect opportunity.”

Derek jogs out of the room he’s been hiding in, and he’s clearly heard every word, because he’s got an enormous scowl on his face, Stiles’ antics aside. “Are you okay?” he asks, getting an arm around Stiles’ waist and rubbing his cheek over Stiles’ hair.

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Thanks to Peter and Talia.”

Talia draws him into a hug. “You know how I feel about people who mock your difficulties,” she says. She glowers at the door and mutters something that sounds very much like, ‘he should be put to sleep’.

Stiles shakes his head a little. “Come on, I’ll make you some of that chamomile tea. It’ll calm you right down.” He shoos everyone into the kitchen and puts water over to boil, then takes out four mugs and starts busying himself with teaspoons. Chamomile for Talia, ginger for Derek, lapsang souchong for Peter, dragonwell for himself. It’s too late for a lot of caffeine.
Still brooding, Derek turns to Peter and says, “Why did you leave those photos at his hotel?”

“Oh, to threaten him, of course,” Peter says complacently, and Stiles gives a snort. “To let him know that he was being watched and I have no intention of letting him get away with whatever he wants while he’s in town.”

“Why’s he watching my dad?” Stiles asks.

“It’s obvious that he blames your father for the failure of his marriage and his subsequent transfer,” Peter says. “My guess is that he suffered some loss of status and pay when he had to request to be moved. And clearly he’s not planning to take responsibility for it himself. Now, what exactly he intends, I’m not sure, but it seems he’s trying to find something he can use against your father.”

“I’ll run him right the hell out of town again,” Stiles says grumpily.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Peter says, smiling. “I’m going to take very good care of Agent McCall. You don’t need to worry about that.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

so much mystery~

Allison gives her father a sideways glance as he shifts in his chair, clearly uncomfortable. She’s still surprised that he had agreed to this, and thinks that in some ways, he’s trying to make up for what happened to the Hales. She knows that her father was ignorant to Kate’s true nature, just as she had been ignorant herself. Kate was a psychopath, she was charming and manipulative and very few people had ever seen beneath that false face.

So when she needed her father to support her in the ongoing investigation into Search for a Cure, he had grumpily, reluctantly, agreed. There were no downsides for him, not really. If Search for a Cure was legitimate, then a generous donation would make a lot of people happy. And if it turned out that they really were as anti-werewolf as Allison suspected, it didn’t really matter. Everyone who didn’t want to look like they supported anti-lycanthropy sentiment had already jumped ship after the WLO scandal. All of Chris’ remaining clients and contacts thought that the WLO had done good, necessary things. They wouldn’t flinch at something like Search for a Cure.

Jennifer comes into the conference room a few minutes later, smoothing down invisible wrinkles in her business suit. “Thank you for joining me,” she says, and shakes Chris’ hand. “And of course, thank you for the generous donation.”

Chris nods a little. “My daughter has spoken very highly of you.”

“Well, she seems to be a remarkable woman,” Jennifer says, smiling at Allison. “I don’t think I was so into politics when I was her age. I was mostly into girls back then.”

Chris glances at Allison and says, with a genuine smile, “She’s been like that ever since she hit double digits.” Allison smiles back, because she’s glad her father seems able to smile about this now. Ten years old was when she had gotten old enough to start questioning her family’s anti-werewolf rhetoric, thanks to a teacher at her school. By the time she had been thirteen, they had been having full-fledged shouting matches about it. It wasn’t until after Kate had died that her father had finally admitted that maybe he had been wrong about a few things.

“Well, the world has changed a lot in the past few years,” Jennifer says. She takes a sip from her bottle of water and says, “But as I’m sure your daughter told you, we don’t actually do a lot of work in America.”

“You don’t rescue werewolves from America, but you do house them here,” Chris says. “How many communes do you have here now?”

“Five,” Jennifer says, smiling. “We have nearly two hundred werewolves that we’ve rescued.”

“That’s a lot,” Chris says. “Allison said the one she saw in Oregon only looked like it housed a few dozen people.”
“That’s one of our smaller ones, though it is the closest to our headquarters,” Jennifer says with a nod. “The largest is in Minnesota and has about sixty werewolves there. Then we have one in upstate New York, as well as one in Kansas and one in Georgia.”

“Does each one have an alpha?” Chris asks.

“Oh, no,” Jennifer says. “All of our rescued werewolves are omega. We don’t have any alphas. It’s not that we haven’t run across one or two, but they can’t live in the communes. Their instincts are just too strong. They have to build their own packs or they can’t cope, mentally or emotionally.”

Chris nods a little, and Allison notes down that they’ve met a few alphas, which is important. She had hoped that they had rescued a few and she could try to find records on them, but if not, then they’re at a temporary dead end.

“So how many studies are currently going on to find a cure for lycanthropy?” Chris asks.

“Legitimate studies? Only a few,” Jennifer says. “It’s one of those things that can be so difficult to study, since it doesn’t present in any other species. As I’m sure you’re aware, the vast majority of drug testing is done in mice or rats, and then graduates to monkeys before it ever sees human trials. But since lycanthropy only affects humans, it can be impossible to do studies on it. Most of the ones I’ve seen are retroactive – looking at things that have already happened.”

“Are you sponsoring any studies right now?”

“Only one.” Jennifer takes another drink of her water. “There has been some very promising research into the idea that people who have previously rejected the bite might be the key to a cure.”

Chris frowns. “I thought that had been tried before and all the participants died.”

“Well, we’re focusing on people who rejected the bite because of prior exposure to wolfsbane or silver,” Jennifer says.

“That sounds like it would only make it more lethal, not less,” Chris says.

“Yes and no,” Jennifer says. “The theory is that the antibodies produced by those people are different from those produced by people who have a natural rejection. And that they might have a different effect on lycanthropy – destroy the virus without destroying the body.”

That doesn’t make a lot of sense to Allison. As far as she knew, the virus itself only survived until the next full moon. Otherwise, bite rejection sufferers would have to remain on immunosuppressants the rest of their lives. But she doesn’t know a lot about medicine or science and she doesn’t want to argue with Jennifer. Her father looks somewhat skeptical, too, but he just nods and says that they’re all in favor of any possible cure.

“An interesting point we’ve found.” Jennifer continues, “is the idea that werewolf ancestry might have some effect, might make the antibodies less lethal.”

“That’s interesting!” Allison says. “How far back can the ancestry be?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Jennifer says. “You understand, bite rejection is such a rare thing to begin with, finding people who fit a specific profile can be difficult. We have managed to ascertain that children with werewolf parents never reject the bite. But werewolf grandparents, great-grandparents – there does seem to be an effect, although the statistical significance is currently up for debate.”
“I’d be really interested to see the studies you’ve done,” Allison says, thinking that Stiles had mentioned once that Peter thought he might have werewolf ancestry. Maybe that has something to do with why Jennifer is so interested in him.

There is, of course, the larger issue that if Search for a Cure hadn’t found enough people who fit their criteria, that they had gone out and created some. But how they could have predicted a group of people who would reject the bite, Stiles still hasn’t figured out. If there’s any connection that links the ten people together, he hasn’t found it.

As they’re wrapping up, Allison says, “Oh, how is Isaac doing? Is he integrating into the commune well?”

Jennifer smiles and says, “Yes, he seems to be doing very well there. I’ll tell him that you said hello.”

“Thanks,” Allison says. It’s interesting that Jennifer doesn’t want them to know that Isaac lasted fewer than twenty-four hours, but she supposes it’s a good thing that Jennifer doesn’t seem to think that Allison might have planted him there as a spy. She’ll take what she can get. She stands up to leave, and ‘accidentally’ knocks over the Styrofoam cup of coffee that her father had been drinking. During the predictable chaos, she switches her own water bottle with Jennifer’s, careful to only hold it by the cap. “Sorry, I can be such a klutz sometimes,” she says.

Jennifer tells her it’s fine, thanks them for their donation again, and then they head downstairs. Chris is giving Allison the side-eye as they go out to the car. “What was all that about at the end?” he asks.

“Just getting her fingerprints,” Allison says, gesturing with the bottle. “You never know what might come in handy.”

Chris glowers at her, which she takes to mean that he’s very proud of her and doesn’t dare show it, lest he encourage her behavior. She smiles back. Progress is progress.

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Derek knows that there’s trouble from the instant he sees the smirk on Rafael McCall’s face. He quietly makes coffee and yearns for his gardens while the man types on his laptop. Then he shuts it and says, “Well, Mr. Hardy. It’s going to be an interesting day.”

“How so?” Derek asks, maintaining a neutral expression and wondering if the Academy Awards have expanded to people doing undercover work. He’ll have to find someone to submit that petition to.

“Well, I received an anonymous tip this morning that Paige Krasikeva and Derek Hale were much closer than the Hales ever let on,” McCall says, and Derek blinks at him. “Apparently they were quite the hot item, and the tipster says that Paige might have been murdered due to her connection with the Hale family.”

“Oh, uh, wow,” Derek says. He wonders if it’s one of the three teenagers that Stiles had anonymously threatened. If they had realized that the message hadn’t been a prank from one of their other friends, they might have wanted to throw the Hale family under the bus, to make sure nobody suspected them.
“So,” McCall says, “we’re going to be interviewing Derek Hale today.”

“That ought to be, uh, interesting,” Derek says, mind racing.

“I need to avoid his mother if at all possible,” McCall says. “She’ll undoubtedly insist that I get a subpoena. When I Googled him, I got an address for his business. Let’s get moving.”

“Okay!” Derek says. He follows McCall out to the parking lot and gets behind the wheel of his rented car, and has McCall text him the address that he goes to almost every day. Then he follows the GPS instructions, despite knowing at least one shortcut.

While McCall goes to knock on the door and shout to nobody, Derek texts Stiles. ‘Someone tipped McCall that Paige and I were ‘involved’,’ he sends. ‘He wants to interview me.’

‘oh boy,’ is what Stiles sends back.

‘what should I do?’ Derek asks.

‘nothing for now, when he can’t find you he’ll have to come to the den,’ Stiles sends, and then a few moments later, ‘I’ll handle it’.

That sounds a little dire to Derek, but he agrees and then turns the ringer on his phone to silent. If McCall gets his number off the internet and decides to call him, he doesn’t need his own phone ringing while they’re sitting in the car together.

It’s a good thing he thinks of it, because that’s the next thing that McCall does. He growls when nobody answers, and leaves a message. Derek drives him back to the station and then texts Stiles to let him know what McCall did and where he is. McCall immediately starts the paperwork to get a subpoena to interview Derek, since, “that bitch mother of his won’t get in my way this time”.

It’s been about half an hour when Agent McCall’s phone rings. Derek can hear the voice on the other end perfectly well, although he takes care to look clueless and not pay too much attention. That’s difficult, since it’s his mother. She opens the conversation with, “Agent McCall. My son called me to let me know you wanted to interview him in connection with Paige’s murder.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” McCall says. “I’m in the process of getting the subpoena now.”

“No need,” Talia says. “My son would be happy to sit down and chat with you. He has nothing to hide. Would eleven thirty be convenient? He’s working in the field right now.”

“ Eleven thirty would be fine,” McCall says. He says goodbye and hangs up, and then gives the phone a suspicious glance.

Derek is just as bewildered, but when he checks his phone, he sees Stiles has texted him to say, ‘Jonathan’s gonna be you. No worries. Your mom and I are prepping him.’

That has to break so many laws that Derek’s brain hurts just thinking about it, but he has to admit that it’s a sound strategy. Jonathan is only two years older than he is, and could easily pass as a Hale. Stiles can tell him what to say, because there’s virtually no information that Derek could offer McCall anyway. He wonders if that’s why his mother is getting this done before McCall can get the official subpoena. It’s probably still illegal, but less illegal.

When his mother arrives with Jonathan in tow, McCall insists on seeing them in the official interrogation room, which seems to irritate Talia. But she doesn’t argue, probably considering it beneath her dignity. Derek goes into the room on the other side of the mirror so he can watch, but
“What was your relationship with Paige Krasikeva?” McCall asks.

“I knew her from school,” Jonathan says. “We didn’t talk very much, though. We were in different circles.”

“Mm hm,” McCall says. “She seems to have been from the wrong side of the tracks, metaphorically speaking. But a lot of sources agree that you two were closer than that.”

Jonathan blinks and says, “I’m not sure why. I don’t think she even liked me very much.”

“Well, you know how teenagers are,” McCall says. “If a guy pulls a girl’s pigtails, that means he likes her, right?”

“I’ve never actually held a lot of stock in the idea that boys should be mean to girls because they like them,” Jonathan says, “or that girls should put up with that.”

“So you and Paige weren’t in any sort of relationship?” McCall asks.

“No,” Jonathan says. “I barely knew her.”

“She didn’t have a crush on you?”

“If she did, I didn’t know about it.”

“So she would have no reason to want to be a werewolf,” McCall says, and Jonathan just looks at him blankly. “Well, the Searching Ceremonies were coming up. Wouldn’t that have helped her?”

“Oh, I’m not sure if you aren’t paying attention or what,” Jonathan says, “but humans get picked in the Searching Ceremonies all the time. I did choose a human. Paige being a werewolf wouldn’t have made any difference at all.”

“Maybe she thought it would.”

“I can’t see why.”

Derek starts to get bored, watching the conversation go around in circles. McCall refuses to take no for an answer, and continues to press at the subject, while Jonathan stays calm and repeats his lack of involvement ad nauseum. About ten minutes later, Talia puts an end to it. “Agent McCall, we have been more than patient enough with you,” she says. “We’ve answered all your questions. This interview is over. If you need to speak to any other members of my pack, just let me know.” She stands up and leaves, with Jonathan in tow.

McCall comes out of the interrogation room, scowling. “Well, it’s obvious that they’re hiding something,” he says, and Derek considers banging his head into a wall. “But I’m sure Stilinski didn’t press the issue back when it happened.”

“Sir?” Derek asks politely, clueless.

“I’m sure if he had really looked into it, he could have found connections between the Hales and Paige Krasikeva,” McCall says. “Now it’s eleven years later, and it’s going to be much more difficult.”

“Uh, I’m not trying to argue, but why would Sheriff Stilinski have done that?” Derek asks. “I mean, I can see how you might think he would do it now, since his son is part of the Hale pack,
but this was long before Stiles got chosen by Derek Hale.”

“It was, but who knows how long ago they set all that up?” McCall asks. “Now that I think about it, that could have been a brilliant move on Stilinski’s part, getting rid of his kid by foisting him off onto a werewolf pack.”

That statement is offensive for so many reasons that Derek feels his claws come out in response, and he scowls and shoves his hands underneath the table while he reminds himself that he needs to keep his cool. Fortunately, McCall doesn’t notice. He’s still talking about how Stilinski and the Hales were obviously in on this from the beginning. “Maybe that was Stilinski’s price,” he says. “You know, he keeps quiet about their involvement in Paige’s death, if they’ll come take his kid off his hands once he’s old enough. He’s obviously in deep with that family, look at the way their Left Hand is so protective of him . . .”

“Okay, but,” Derek says, taking a deep breath, “that still doesn’t answer how Paige got turned. I remember from the file that Talia Hale had a rock solid alibi. She was in court that day.”

“She must have dozens of alpha friends,” McCall says, waving this off. “She probably called one in from out of town, had them do the deed, and then they called 911 when it went south. How to figure out who, though . . . we need to get a list of every alpha that Talia Hale has ever had dealings with,” he announces, and marches out of the room.

Derek lifts his gaze to the ceiling and prays for patience. At least, he thinks, while McCall is wasting his time with this, it will give Stiles more time to find the real culprit. It’s a meager comfort.

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Derek is used to the fact that Stiles is never quiet while he’s doing his investigations, that he talks to himself and flails expansively and occasionally has entire conversations with Derek without Derek ever saying a word. Still, it’s unusual even for him when he comes pounding down the stairs, brandishes a photograph, and shouts, “Argyria!” so loudly that Cleopatra bolts off her chair and runs away.

“Algeria?” Derek asks, looking up from the garden sketch he’s working on.

“No, not Algeria, argyria,” Stiles says. He slaps the photo down on top of Derek’s sketch. “See the way the nails and skin around them are tinted kind of blue?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, picking up the photo to study it. “Am I looking at a dead person’s hand?”

“Uh, yeah. Autopsy photos. Sorry,” Stiles says, and then waves this aside. “At first I thought it wasn’t that important. I mean, lack of oxygen, your lips and fingers will turn bluish. I wasn’t really thinking about it until I saw the word. Different from hypoxia. Argyria.”

“Okay,” Derek says.

“Argyria!” Stiles says, picking up the photo and waving it around. “From the Greek! Argyros! Silver!”

Derek looks back down at the picture. “So, they had prior exposure to silver, and that’s why they rejected the bite?”
“Yes.” Stiles sets down another set of photos. “There are at least two more people who had similar
discoloration, once I stopped and looked at some of the photographs. It just wasn’t noted on their
exam at any point. I guess they had too much other stuff to worry about.”

Derek thinks this over. “We knew all their professions. It’s not like they were professional
jewelers or metalworkers or anything like that. So why would they have silver in their system?”

“Don’t know!” Stiles says. “You wanna find out?” he adds, and takes out his phone, tapping the
screen for a few moments. The phone rings several times before a woman picks up on the other
end. He doesn’t have it on speaker, but Derek’s hearing is good enough to pick up both ends of
the conversation. “Mrs. Barclay? It’s Stiles Stilinski, I talked to you a few weeks ago about what
happened back in 2009, remember?”

“Oh, yes, honey,” the old woman says. Derek knows a lot about Mrs. Vera Barclay from having
seen Stiles working on the case a hundred times. She had been bitten while walking to her car
after an appointment at a hair salon, in the evening. She had gone into rejection, but it had been
mild, and she had been out of the hospital a few days later. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, how are you?” Stiles asks, and after her response, says, “Listen, I’m still working on the
case, and I wanted to know if you had been exposed to silver at all in the weeks before the bite?”

“Silver?” Vera says. “Oh, yes, of course! I take it for my immune system.”

“You take it for – what?” Stiles asks.

“It’s called colloidal silver, honey,” Vera says. “It’s an amazing natural remedy! They used to use
silver as an antibiotic, you know. Colloidal silver is a solution of very small silver particles
suspended in water.”

“Did you use it a lot?” Stiles asks.

“Oh, of course, I’ve used it for years,” Vera says. “I told the doctors at the hospital, you know,
when I listed my medications. But a lot of doctors don’t believe it really works, so I suppose they
didn’t mark it down.”

“That’s probably not the kind of thing you can buy at the average grocery store, right?” Stiles
asks. “Do you mind if I ask where you get it?”

“Oh, I only buy mine from Pure Silver, honey. They make the absolute best product. You really
should try it!”

“I will definitely look into that,” Stiles says. He thanks her, says goodbye, and hangs up. Then he
grins at Derek. “Think I can get the records from Pure Silver without Agent Douchebag figuring
out what I’m up to?”

“If anyone can do that, it’s you,” Derek says, then adds, “but seriously, anyone could do that.
He’s as thick as mud.”

Stiles’ grin turns into a smirk, and he throws himself into Derek’s lap without further commentary.
But before they can make it past first base, his phone rings. He grabs it and glances at the screen,
then frowns and says, “It’s Mrs. Barclay calling me back.” He taps the screen and says, “Hello?”

“Stiles, honey, it’s Vera again. It just occurred to me after I hung up to call and ask you – does this
have anything to do with that nice lady who came and talked to me about the silver? She said that
I might be able to help them find a way to reverse lycanthropy.”
“Uh, was this lady from an organization called Search for a Cure?” Stiles asks.

“I think so. It was a few years ago now. She was very nice, though. Her name was Jessica or Jennifer or something plain like that. I told her she could take my blood any time if it helped those poor unfortunate souls, but she only came the one time. Is that important?”

“Well, it definitely might be,” Stiles says. “Thanks for letting me know.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Peter is scrolling through the footage from the camera he had placed at the Stilinski house, more than a little bit amused. He can’t quite decide if Rafael McCall is an enormous idiot, or if he just wants them to think he is. He’s learned not to underestimate people over the years, but he’s also learned that people can be vastly stupid.

Derek’s told him all about how Agent McCall has decided that Sheriff Stilinski covered up their involvement in Paige’s murder in exchange for selling off Stiles. It’s so ridiculous that he can’t even find it offensive (although Derek certainly does). Nobody has told Stiles or the sheriff about this theory, and Peter thinks it’s fine to keep it that way.

If Agent McCall continues to poke his nose into things, it’s possible he could eventually be a problem. But Peter’s content to take that as it comes. At the moment, the places he’s poking his nose are totally devoid of information, so Peter doesn’t care. Let him bang his head against as many walls as he likes, if it keeps him out of their hair.

At least he hasn’t been back at the Stilinski house, which Peter is frankly surprised by. He had thought that he would continue to lurk around there and be problematic. But this is the second day of footage that hasn’t had any trace of him.

Unless he had changed cars, Peter muses. There’s a dark red sedan that he’s seen on both tapes now. Coincidence, or a new neighbor, perhaps. But he keeps an eye out for it as he moves on to the third day of footage. It appears again, parked down the street. He takes the still shot and zooms in to see that it’s not Rafael McCall. It’s Jennifer Blake.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Peter murmurs. He checks the time stamp and sees that she was there around the same time every day, around mid-afternoon. That’s about an hour away. He puts his computer aside and heads out of the house.

He hadn’t been able to drive for a long time after the fire. His grip on reality was just too tenuous. He would get confused, or lost, and find himself somewhere he hadn’t intended to go or lose control of the vehicle. Talia had taken his keys away and made him promise not to hot wire a car unless it was an emergency. During the year after Kate Argent had been killed, he had slowly learned how again, and by the time Seth had thrown their life into disarray, he had been moderately proficient.

The Stilinski house was quiet when he got there, and presumably empty. He parked a few doors down and waited. The red sedan showed up approximately when he expected it to, stayed for about half an hour, and then drove away. Nobody got out; Jennifer Blake didn’t go try the door. When it passes him, he sees that there’s another woman in the car with her, one he doesn’t recognize. He pulls out and follows them.
Jennifer drives to the edge of town and parks in a little lot that’s designed for people who want to hike through the preserve. Once they had gotten off the main roads, Peter had had to hang back quite a bit, so they’re long gone by the time he gets there, but he can still follow them by scent. He starts walking through the preserve, letting his mind wander. It’s a beautiful late summer day, sunny and breezy. He could walk for hours on a day like this.

But he doesn’t have to walk for hours. After about fifteen minutes, the scent vanishes. Interesting. He starts to walk in a spiral pattern, branching out from the last place he can tell that Jennifer Blake was, prowling quietly through the forest.

Clouds have come out and covered the sun by the time he hears another heartbeat, and goes still. A woman comes out of the trees, not Jennifer but her companion, with darker skin and hair and crimson alpha eyes. Her lip is peeled back in a silent snarl.

Peter smiles at her as she stalks towards him, her teeth lengthening and claws coming out. “No need for that,” he says, holding up his hands in surrender. “But if you don’t mind,” he adds, “I think I’d better call my family and tell them I’ll be late for dinner.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

These are probably my favorite Tom/Peter scenes yet! =D

When Peter wakes up, he has no idea where he is or how he got there. His entire body is shaking, and he can hear Olivia’s screams ringing in his ears. He tries to get up, but his knees are weak and watery, and after a few moments he falls, pressing his face into the ground. It smells familiar. Dirt and pine leaves. There’s no scent of smoke, no horrible smell of loved ones burning alive.

It doesn’t matter. Even knowing it’s not happening, he can’t stop seeing it. His body shudders, wracked with sobs. He needs help. Needs someone to come get him, figure out what happened to him. His mind sluggishly whirs into gear, trying to push away memories of the fire and make sense out of his surroundings.

Somehow, he gets his phone out. He pulls up his contact list and hits T for Talia. Then he pauses. He can’t call Talia. She’s pregnant. Vulnerable. He can’t put her in danger. He taps Tom’s name with shaking fingers instead.

“Sheriff Stilinski,” the familiar voice picks up.

“Tom,” Peter chokes out. “Need help.”

“Where are you?” Tom demands, and his voice has that edge to it, the edge that means if Peter’s hurt, people are going to pay.

“Not sure. Lost.”

“Are you hurt?”

Peter can hear him typing on the other end and wonders what he’s doing. “No. Don’t – don’t think so. Just lost. Confused. Can’t remember.”

“Okay, I have your phone’s GPS pulled up,” Tom says. “Stay right where you are, okay? I’m coming to get you. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Don’t hang up,” Peter says. “Don’t leave me alone.”

Tom mutters a curse as Peter wonders exactly what possessed him to say that, and then he says, “Hang on, this damned Bluetooth Stiles got me – ” There are a few more noises as he shuffles around, and then Peter hears a car door, an engine starting. “Okay, I’m here. It looks like you’re on the preserve somewhere. Can you look around, tell me what you see?”

It doesn’t matter, if Tom has his GPS, but then he realizes that Tom is trying to assess his mental state. He scrapes together some coherence and looks around. “Trees . . . sky . . .” And flames, flames everywhere. The trees are consumed by the raging fire, and Peter chokes out another cry and curls up around his phone.
He can hear Tom talking on the other end, and he can’t quite make out the words, but the sound of his voice is comforting. He lets it soak in and concentrates on his breathing. He knows that the fire isn’t really there, that the fire is over. But remembering that doesn’t help, because the fire being over means that Olivia is gone.

“Jesus, Peter,” Tom’s voice says, close now, and Peter opens his eyes to stare at the man’s boot. Tom kneels down next to him, drawing Peter into an embrace. Peter closes his eyes and lets the world fade away.

~ ~ ~ ~

It takes Tom two minutes to ascertain that Peter hasn’t been physically harmed, and that it seems more like he’s had some sort of nervous breakdown. He tries to ask if he wants to go home or not, but Peter just clings to his shirt and mumbles about the fire. After some consideration, Tom decides to take him back to the Stilinski house instead. Whenever he’s been upset about the fire, or wanted to get dead drunk to forget the loss, he’s always gone to Tom’s. He doesn’t seem to like the others seeing him like this.

Peter’s no light weight, and Tom grunts a little as he hefts him up. “Peter, can you walk?” he asks, and the werewolf manages to stumble alongside him. Tom thinks he probably could carry him if he needed to, but his back would regret it the next day. He gets Peter back to his car and buckles him in, using the radio to report in to the station to say he wouldn’t be back, call him if he’s needed.

When he ushers Peter into the house, he seems to snap back to reality. It’s the scent, Tom thinks; the familiarity of his surroundings jarring him back into place. He looks up and around, with lucidity in his gaze that hadn’t been there before. But he’s still pale and trembling, so Tom makes him sit down on the sofa and then sits down next to him. He puts an arm around Peter’s shoulders and pulls him into a half-embrace, knowing that touch will help calm him. Peter nestsles right into the embrace, as he always does, rubbing his cheek against Tom’s shoulder.

“’m all right,” Peter murmurs, and Tom’s heart constricts with painful relief. He closes his eyes for a few minutes, trying to wrestle his emotions back into control. Peter’s all right. But that doesn’t change how panicked he had been when he had thought he might not be.

Tom sighs and shelves all that for a time when he’ll be able to deal with it. “Peter, what happened?”


“What do you remember?” Tom asks, keeping his voice calm and even. He’s dealt with trauma victims, with frightened witnesses. He knows how important it is for him to stay composed, even relaxed. He rubs his hand up and down Peter’s back, trying to soothe him.

Peter goes quiet for a minute, and Tom suspects that he’s trying to sort his thoughts out, so he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t disturb him. “I came here,” Peter finally says. “I had been watching the surveillance tapes.”

“Surve – what surveillance tapes?” Tom asks.

Peter blinks up at him. “Oh. I put a camera on your garage. Because of Agent McCall.”
“You put a camera on – okay, you know what, I’m just going to let that go for today. We can have another discussion about boundaries later.”

“It was because of McCall,” Peter repeats. He looks like he’s edging towards a pout.

“You could have told me it was there,” Tom says, “but never mind. Go on. You were watching the surveillance tapes.”

“Yes. I saw Jennifer Blake on them. She had been coming by the house in the afternoon. So I came here to see if I could figure out why. I followed them to the preserve.”

“They?” Tom says. “She was with someone?”

Peter is silent for a moment. “I don’t remember,” he says.

“Okay.” Tom rubs his back again. “Okay, go on.”

“I parked outside the preserve and followed them, and I . . .” Peter gives a shiver. “I don’t know what happened. The next thing I remember after that is . . . is the fire. It felt like I was there again. I could smell it. Could hear my . . . my family crying. It went away gradually. Not like waking up from a bad dream, where it happens all at once.”

“Something must have upset you pretty badly,” Tom says, cautiously trying to prod at the memories.

“I . . . I’m not sure. I wonder if I . . .” Peter takes his phone out and then says, “I did. Excellent.”

“What?” Tom asks, somewhat suspicious. It’s a relief to see Peter returning to normal, but also maddening in a way. He wants to grab the werewolf by his shoulders and shake him.

“I was recording,” Peter says. “I often do, if I feel that I’m going into a dangerous situation. Audio only, of course, since my phone was in my pocket. In any case, sometimes being ‘captured’ by your enemies is a very good way to get information. People do love to talk, I’ve noticed. Particularly when they have a captive audience.”

“Gee, I wonder how that feels,” Tom says.

Peter doesn’t notice his tone. He’s tapping his phone’s screen. A few moments later, it starts to play. There’s silence for a long time, footsteps. The sound of a car door opening and closing, an engine, the hum of a car. That lasts about ten minutes. Tom sits there with Peter, still idly rubbing at his back, but now going unnoticed. Peter is wholly focused. The noise of the car stops, and there’s a screech of a door opening on metal hinges, more footsteps, and then, finally, voices. A woman’s voice. Tom doesn’t recognize it, but he’s never spoken to Jennifer Blake, so he wouldn’t. He’ll have to play it for Stiles later and see if he recognizes it, although he only talked to her the one time. “Peter Hale,” the woman says. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Yes, what are the two of you lovely ladies doing in a place like this?” Peter asks on the recording.

At the Stilinski house, Peter taps the phone to pause it. “I must have known I was recording,” he says. “I tend to say things out loud that I might not, so I’ll have a record of them later. Jennifer was with someone, another woman.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Tom says, feeling grumpy. He gestures for Peter to start the recording again.

“Why were you following us?” Jennifer asked, not dignifying Peter’s remark with a reply.
“Why were you at the Stilinski house?” Peter asked.

Jennifer gave a sigh. “I’ve been trying to talk to Stiles. He’s ignoring my e-mails and not picking up my calls. Going to his house seemed the next most logical step.”

“You didn’t even get out of your car,” Peter pointed out.

“He wasn’t home,” Jennifer said, sounding somewhat impatient.

There was a long pause. “You’re convinced Stiles is the key, aren’t you,” Peter said. “That something about him makes him different from the others who have suffered bite rejection. Perhaps you’re even right. But he isn’t going to agree to help you. And if I see you continuing to skulk around the Stilinski house, I’m going to end up thinking you’re a threat to my pack.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Jennifer replied.

“I wasn’t trying to frighten you. I was just stating a fact.”

“Mm hm.” Jennifer still sounded unimpressed. “Well, unfortunately for you, Mr. Hale, I don’t take no for an answer. And my work here is far from done.”

Tom isn’t sure what happens next. There was a shuffling noise, a gasping sound, and then Peter started to scream. He screamed bloody murder, screamed until it sounded like his throat must have been raw and bleeding. Tom steals a glance at the werewolf sitting next to him on the sofa, but he’s listening in silence, seeming unperturbed.

“Interesting,” he finally says, when the screams on the recording start to trail off into whimpers.

“That’s one way to put it,” Tom says, struck again by that urge to grab Peter and shake him.

“She must be a witch,” Peter says. “It’s clear that she worked some sort of magic on me, invoking my memory of the fire to incapacitate me. That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“Maybe her nameless friend was a witch,” Tom says.

“No, her friend was a werewolf,” Peter says. “The only way they could have known that Stiles wasn’t home, without leaving the car, would be if there was a werewolf who could hear that nobody was inside. So Jennifer Blake is a witch. That’s somewhat discomfiting.”

“How can you be so calm about this?” Tom demands, his temper giving way. “They could have killed you!”

“Oh, I suppose so,” Peter says. “But it seemed unlikely. A disappearance would have raised a lot of questions, and they clearly don’t want anyone looking at them too closely. Without the recording, it would seem as though I was just walking through the preserve when I had one of my episodes.”

“Jesus, Peter,” Tom says. “You can’t just – just walk into harm’s way and expect everyone to be okay with that.”

“My job is to protect the pack,” Peter says.

“And you can’t do that if you’re dead,” Tom says, between gritted teeth.

Peter sighs. “I took a calculated risk. Could you please –”
“No, you know what, you don’t get to sigh and look put upon and treat me like I’m the unreasonable one,” Tom says, getting off the sofa so he can pace around the room. It always seems to make Stiles feel better. “You can’t just throw yourself into danger and expect me to be okay with that. You can’t rationalize this away with ‘sometimes getting captured gets you information’. What the hell kind of stupid plan is that!”

“Well,” Peter says, “it worked.”

“You know what else might have worked? Running her license plates, or getting a warrant for her financial records, which I would have been able to do if you had come to me with the information that she was stalking my house instead of just running off half-cocked!”

“That’s not how I work,” Peter says.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. I know damned well that you take advantage of whatever resource you can get. Did you pull these kinds of stunts when Olivia was alive?”

Peter flinches. “That’s none of your business.”

“I really think it is. You told me, you told my son, that you were going to stick around. Which I think means showing a little basic self-preservation!” Tom sees Peter’s jaw firm up again in that stubborn expression and bulldozes onwards. “You chose to stay. You’re part of a pack, part of a family, so fucking act like it.”

At this, Peter winces again. “All right,” he says quietly, lifting his hands. “You’re right. I . . . it’s not that I don’t think things through, precisely. It’s just that I . . .”

“Don’t consider your safety a priority,” Tom says. “I know. But if you think that the people who care about you wouldn’t be upset if something happened to you . . . then you’re the dumbest genius I know.”

Peter gives a quiet chuckle at that. Tom sits down next to him again, and pulls Peter against his shoulder. Peter makes a content little noise, and Tom’s heart gives a painful twist in response. He looks at the ceiling, holds Peter, and thinks about how much trouble he’s in.

~ ~ ~ ~

The people in charge of Pure Silver are less than thrilled when they receive a request for the last ten years of their records. They kick up an enormous fuss about patient privacy, but what they’re obviously concerned about is regulation of their product. Some research shows that the non-regulation of supplements like colloidal silver is a huge deal.

Stiles’ father files to get a court order to compel them to release them, but apparently a judge is concerned about the massive numbers of people who buy their product who weren’t targeted. The wheels of justice move slowly, and Stiles is never in the mood to move slowly.

It takes three days of persistent phone calls, messages, and general appeals on the forums he moderates before he manages to get the company’s CEO on the phone. He reassures her that this has nothing to do with the safety or the efficacy of their product and tells her all about the case that they’re working on. The idea that someone might be targeting users of their supplement scares the hell out of her, and they talk at great length about liability and privacy issues. Finally, they settle on a compromise. She agrees to give him a list of their buyers, but refuses to release any records
on their employees unless more of the victims than just Vera Barclay bought their product.

An hour later, Stiles is wrestling with an enormous spreadsheet. It’s so large that it choked his e-mail and froze his computer. He deletes some of the irrelevant information, like how much was paid, and manages to get it to a more wieldy size. Then it’s a simple matter of hitting ctrl+f to find the names of the victims.

Nine out of ten come up.

Some brief research makes it obvious that the people targeted were repeat buyers, people who obviously used it on a regular basis. There were plenty of people who bought it once and then never again, or sporadically. But people like Vera Barclay obviously took it regularly.

Even some of the people who didn’t reject but were attacked by alphas come up, which Stiles finds interesting. He assumes it has something to do with how they use it – it can be used topically as well as orally – or the possibility that they were buying it for someone else.

Only one name isn’t on the list of buyers, and that’s Paige Krasikeva.

“It’s so fucking frustrating!” he exclaims, pacing around Derek’s greenhouse. He has an afternoon off from pandering to McCall, who’s busy doing who-knows-what. He’s taking the opportunity to administer some TLC to his neglected plants. “None of it makes any sense! Every piece of information I get just makes things more confusing!”

Derek looks up from where he’s spritzing a fern and says, “It makes sense to me. Search for a Cure needs bite rejection victims that they can take their samples from. They wanted people who had specifically rejected due to silver exposure, so, they stole a list of customers from Pure Silver and then targeted them.”

“Not that,” Stiles says, waving this aside. “Paige! Paige doesn’t make any sense. I might not be able to prove Search for a Cure’s involvement with these other people and I don’t know where they got an alpha, but all that’s coming together. It’s Paige. No matter what I do, she doesn’t fit. My theory about the bully was wrong. My theory about the silver exposure was wrong. All of my theories are wrong!”

“You’ll come up with the right one,” Derek says.

Stiles grumbles at him and says, “I’m beginning to think this one is really unsolvable. I read this quote a long time ago that said the elaborate cases are easy. The hard ones are where one drunk throws a brick at another drunk and leaves his body lying in a road. What if it really was just the random act of a maniac?”

“Maybe the attack was,” Derek says, “but the 911 call wasn’t. And if you can find out who that was, they might be able to ID the killer.”

Stiles makes a face and says, “Damn you and your logic.”

Paige’s murder aside, this confirmation will give him a lot more to work with on the case against Search for a Cure. He calls and talks to the Pure Silver CEO again, and coaxes her into giving him their employment records. He’s sure that whoever got this information was employed there at one point. That’s the easiest explanation for how they got their records. It’s a small company, with fewer than a dozen people, so it doesn’t take long to single out the most likely suspect: their part-time IT guy. He had access to their computers, of course, but wouldn’t suffer the same way if they went out of business.

A quick skim of his financial records proves it almost beyond a doubt. Each time there was an
attack, he had a sizable amount deposited in his bank account via wire transfer. They came from a shell corporation which would be difficult to track, but Stiles doesn’t care.

“Think I can bring this guy in without McCall asking why I want to talk to him?” he asks Derek after getting all this information.

“Honestly, he’s so busy interviewing everyone my mother has ever spoken to, all of whom think he’s an idiot, that he probably wouldn’t notice,” Derek replies. He’s been very grumpy about this lately, but cheered up by the people who have come in to see McCall. They all recognize Derek, of course, and they all seem to think it’s funny that McCall has no idea who he is.

“Sweet,” Stiles says, texting with his father. “Let’s get a warrant.” He rocks back and forth on his heels excitedly. “I get to request a warrant!”

Derek looks up and smiles, then leans over to kiss him on the temple. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

Stiles paces another minute. “Huh. Dad’s not texting me back.” He taps his screen a few times. A few years prior, he wouldn’t have bothered his father over something so simple, but he’s more anxious than he used to be, after everything that happened with Kate and then Deucalion. “Hey, Dad, is everything okay? You didn’t answer my text.”

“Everything’s fine, Stiles,” Tom says. “Peter’s here and it took me a minute to get to my phone.”

“Oh, sorry if I interrupted anything important,” Stiles says.

“No, just the usual,” Tom replies. “What did you need?”

“A warrant for the guy who works for Pure Silver.”

“Okay. Text me the info, I’ll see what I can do.”

~ ~ ~

It’s late, and the house is quiet, and Talia is getting ready for bed. She’s just gotten out of the shower and is studying herself in the mirror. She turns to one side so she can see the curve to her belly, and smiles. She can feel the heartbeat and the small movements of the new life inside her, and it makes her smile every time.

She’s a little surprised at how happy she is about this, or at least about how simple her happiness is. Although there are moments when she has a pang of sorrow or guilt, for the most part, she’s just happy. She misses her sons that died, clever Tyler who loved to prank his siblings and shy David who was always hugging her leg. But she loves these new children in her belly, unreservedly, with all her heart.

“What are you thinking?” Aaron asks, hugging her from behind and nuzzling his face into her shoulder. His stubble tickles her neck, and she laughs.

“I was just thinking about maybe not finding out the gender until they’re born,” she says.

“That’s fine, if that’s what you want,” he replies.
Talia glances over her shoulder at her husband, who’s gone out of his way to let her have anything she wants for the last two months. “You are allowed to have opinions, you know.” She holds a hand over her stomach and says, “You lost two sons, too.”

“I know,” Aaron says, and gives a little shrug. “But it doesn’t really matter to me. I just want to know that they’re healthy. On the other hand,” he continues, “if we don’t know the gender ahead of time, they might go nameless for weeks, after what happened with David.”

“Oh, Lord,” Talia says, laughing. They hadn’t been able to agree on a name until the night before David had been born. “You do have a point. But, you know . . .” She falls silent and pensive for a moment. “I was thinking, if one of them was a girl, we could . . . name her Olivia. And then if it was a boy, we could go with Oliver. But I don’t know how Peter would react to that.”

Aaron gives a little grimace. “He’s so much better now, he truly is, but . . . I don’t know if he would go for that. To be fair, I’ve never quite understood the convention of naming a baby after a deceased relative. We would never name them David or Tyler.”

Talia shudders. “You do have a point,” she says. “Well, we can keep thinking about it.” She looks up as she hears the front door open. “Who’s coming in at this hour?” she asks.

“Want me to go check?” Aaron asks.

“No, it’s probably Peter. You go to bed, I’ll join you in a bit.” She pulls on her bathrobe and heads down the stairs. She’s surprised to see Tom there, supporting a bleary-eyed Peter. “I feel like maybe I shouldn’t ask . . .”

“Sister,” Peter slurs out, and launches himself out of Tom’s arms and drapes himself onto Talia. “My lovely sister. With babies inside. Your babies are going to be amazing . . .”

“Yes, they are,” Talia says, and sighs. “Peter, you’re drunk.”

“’m not,” Peter protests.

Tom gets his arm around Peter’s waist again. “C’mon, Peter. Let’s get you to bed.” He starts hauling him up the stairs. After a few moments to think, Talia decides to wait for him to come back down, so she can talk with him about what just happened. When he does, he says, “I didn’t think you knew about Peter’s bad habits, but you weren’t surprised.”

“I try not to pass judgment on his coping methods,” Talia says. “What happened?”

“He ran into Jennifer Blake, who’s apparently a witch, and she cast some sort of spell on him to invoke his memory of the fire,” Tom says, and Talia winces. “It went about as well as you might expect. He called me, having a complete meltdown, and I went to pick him up.”

“He called you?” Talia says. “I’m surprised, although I feel like I shouldn’t be. He’s really come to rely on you. I’m surprised you bothered to bring him back here, though, given how many nights he’s been staying at your place.”

“I feel like maybe I shouldn’t ask . . .”

“Yeah, well, once he got good and toasted, he insisted I bring him home so he could check on you,” Tom says. “He sits down heavily. “I thought I might lose him today. It hit me hard, harder than I would have expected. God, I’m screwed. I’m in love with your brother. I’m so screwed.”

Talia makes a sympathetic noise. “If it helps at all, I’m pretty sure he loves you, too.”

“You know what? No. That doesn’t help.” Tom pushes both hands through his hair. “I could deal with unrequited love. It would suck but I could handle it. What I can’t deal with is the knowledge
that the fact that we’re in love could destroy his life.”

Talia gives a little sigh, then shrugs. “I don’t think you’re going to let that happen, though.”

“You know, back when we first talked about this, I thought no, Peter’s a friend, even a good friend, but I’m not stupid enough to fall for him,” Tom says. “But apparently I am. I am absolutely that stupid.”

“I’m not sure we get to choose who we love,” Talia says.

“Well, at least you guys have mating instincts to blame for it,” Tom replies. “What’s my excuse?”

“Maybe my brother is just a lovable person,” Talia says, and then they both burst into laughter. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Talia says, waving her hand. “That was a little mean. He’s my brother and I do adore him, but he can be so annoying. I mean, pressing people’s buttons is one of his primary skills.”

“That’s so true,” Tom says, with a sigh. “Oh, well. I guess I’ll keep doing what I’m doing and wait for him to realize what’s happening.”

“He’s getting there,” Talia says. “I mean, he invited you to come live with us.”

“Is that what you call an invitation?” Tom asks, with a snort of laughter.

“From Peter? It was about as close to one as you would get.” Talia shakes her head a little and says, “You know, I’m really glad he has you. I was . . . really awful to him after the fire, and I worried for a long time that he would never recover. And the fact that he is recovering . . . I think is due a lot more to you than it is to me. So thank you. For being patient with him. And for loving him. Even if it is a disaster.”

Tom smiles and says, “Well, I guess we’ll work it out somehow.”

“That’s the spirit,” Talia says. “Now, I think I’m going to bed. You should stay the night – sleep in Laura and Jonathan’s old room. It’s too late for you to drive home.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Tom says. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

~ ~ ~ ~
If you're not familiar with the story of Henrietta Lacks, it's a really amazing story, and you should look it up! The story of James Harrison and the cure for Rhesus disease is equally interesting.

Stiles is making breakfast the next morning when his father walks into the kitchen, wearing a pair of flannel pants and a T-shirt that obviously isn’t his, if the LA Lakers logo is anything to go by. He nearly flips a pancake into the ceiling. “Dad! Did you stay the night?”

Tom gives him a look and says, “As a matter of fact, I did.”

The look he’s giving Stiles practically dares Stiles to make a comment. Stiles finishes flipping the batch of pancakes he has on the stove and says, “You know I just want you to be happy, right, Dad?”

“I know,” Tom says. He reaches over and gives Stiles’ shoulder a squeeze. “Peter was upset last night; I drove him home. It was late, so I crashed in Laura and Jon’s old room. Now, do those have blueberries in them? Because I’m starving.”

“They have chocolate chips, because I didn’t know you were here!” Stiles says.

“Even better,” his father replies, and Stiles slumps, defeated. He goes back to cooking while his father pours himself a mug of coffee. “Actually, I’m glad you’re up, because I wanted to talk to you before I have to go to work. No, I don’t have your warrant yet, calm down. But Jennifer Blake has apparently been watching our house.”

“Watching – oh, hell, no!” Stiles turns around and gestures indignantly with a spatula. “What’s with everyone spying on us? First McCall, now this?”

“Peter had a word with her, so I don’t think she’ll try it again,” Tom says, “but apparently, she’s a witch.” He gives Stiles a brief summary of what had happened the day before, downplaying Peter’s meltdown to avoid embarrassment for the other man. “So, my comfort level with you working this case just went way down into the toilet.”

“But Dad!” Stiles protests. “I’m really close to solving it! Once I interview that guy –”

Tom holds his hand up to stay Stiles’ tirade. “You’ve done amazing work on this case and I’m not going to take it away from you,” he says. “I just want you to promise me not to go running off to follow new leads by yourself, without checking with me first. Okay?”

Stiles sighs. “Yeah, okay,” he says.

By the time the pancakes are made, other teenagers are starting to wander into the kitchen. It’s not Sunday brunch, so it’s not exactly an elaborate meal, but they sit around the kitchen table and eat and talk about who’s working that day. “Derek gone already?” Tom asks, sitting down with a
plate of pancakes and a side of fruit that his son presses on him.

“Yeah, I guess McCall wanted him there early today,” Stiles says.

Scott scowls enormously, and Stiles feels a new urge to push Agent McCall’s face into a toilet. “Isn’t he busy spying on my mother?” he asks.

“I guess he’s gotten distracted by trying to prove that Derek was involved with Paige’s murder,” Cora says, rolling her eyes. “Ugh, that guy is the worst.”

Tom looks between Scott and Stiles and seems to understand the reason for some of the tension. College will be starting in less than two weeks, so if McCall is going to see his son before Scott leaves for San Francisco, he’s running out of time. “Scott, if you want me to deliver a message to your father, I’d be happy to talk to him.”

“You’ve never been happy to talk to my dad in your life,” Scott says, but then smiles slightly. “No, that’s okay. Thanks for offering, but . . . I want him to call me when he wants to, not because someone else is pushing him to do it.”

“Okay,” Tom says.

Stiles thinks that’s going to be a long wait for a train that won’t come, but he doesn’t get involved, because in his opinion, the more Scott hates his father, the better. He changes the subject, at least obliquely, talking about how stupid McCall is going to feel when he gets this solved and proves who’s behind the murders.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Isaac says suddenly.

Stiles blinks at him. “Sure. What’s up?”

“If Search for a Cure gets shut down, what’s going to happen to all those people that they have in their communes?” Isaac asks. “It’s not their fault, and . . . they must be so unhappy. I nearly went nuts being there twelve hours, I can’t imagine what it’s been like for them.”

“That . . . actually, that’s a really good question,” Stiles says, with a slight grimace. He had been so caught up in the case that he hadn’t stopped to think about the aftermath. Search for a Cure had genuinely taken a lot of people from bad situations, and they couldn’t just be sent home. Since there was no cure for lycanthropy, those people would need to be matched up with packs who were willing to take them in. It would be an enormous operation, and it wouldn’t be easy. Search for a Cure’s funders would vanish once their crimes were exposed.

“Well, we can’t leave them in the communes,” Cora says. “We’d have to find packs that would take them in.”

“Yeah.” Stiles is quiet for a minute. “Do you think they could ever truly be happy as werewolves?”

His father glances at him and reaches for the coffee. “Thinking about what Jennifer said?”

“I guess,” Stiles says. “I mean, I know that a lot of things about being a werewolf are really awesome. But when it’s interlinked to trauma like that – and then they’ve reinforced the hell out of how terrible it is – do you think they’d ever be happy?”

“I don’t know, kiddo,” Tom says. “But it’s kind of a moot point, isn’t it? There isn’t a cure for lycanthropy.”
“Even the stuff that Jennifer told us about seemed pretty sketchy,” Allison says. “I’m no immunologist, but it sure sounded to me like she was grasping at straws.”

“But what if I really am the key to a cure, like Jennifer thinks?” Stiles asks. “What if I’m some perfect combination of factors, and my blood really does hold the possibility of a cure? Stranger things have happened, like Henrietta Lacks’ immortal cells and that one guy whose blood had a cure for Rhesus disease – ”

“Stiles, breathe,” Tom says.

“But then I think, what if they do find a cure and they weaponize it somehow, like in the X-Men movie, and suddenly there are no more werewolves and it’s all my fault? I don’t think I could – ”

Scott reaches over and shoves a piece of pancake in his mouth. “Dude, get a grip,” he says.

“Mmmphfr,” Stiles responds.

“I will grant that there’s a remote possibility that you do somehow hold a cure for lycanthropy,” Tom says, “but I think it would be more productive to try to help these victims adjust, than try to reverse it. Given that the bite itself carries a risk, trying to reverse it probably would, too. Now, it would be their choice to make. But I think it would be a good idea to try to make them happy as werewolves before any risks like that were taken.”

“It is a pretty complicated moral issue, though,” Allison says thoughtfully. “Maybe I can write a paper on it for the ethics class I’ll be taking.”

“The important thing is that we make sure the people taken in by Search for a Cure are taken care of,” Cora says, leaning over to rub her cheek against Isaac’s shoulder, “so we’ll do that. If we need money, Mom can hold a fundraiser or something. I’m sure that once we expose the conditions they’ve been forced to live in, lots of people will want to help.”

“I worry less about money and more about finding packs for them,” Isaac says. “I mean, what if packs don’t want to take them in because they’re so, so damaged?”

Everyone can see the anxious, abused child underneath the surface of Isaac’s question. Tom reaches over to squeeze his shoulder and say, “We’ll find places for them. It won’t be easy, but we’ll get it worked out.”

Isaac lets out a breath. “Okay,” he says. “I’m sorry I’m being silly.”

“Dude, no,” Scott says. “You’re worried about people in trouble, that’s not silly at all.”

“Well, yeah, but I . . .”

“None of that,” Cora says. “You’re amazing and I love you, now eat your pancakes,” she adds, and Isaac turns pink but obeys.

~ ~ ~ ~

Derek is starting to wonder if Rafael McCall is seriously losing it. He’s never seemed like a particularly stable individual, but watching him cross names off a list and mutter feverishly to himself is somewhat unnerving. He throws the list against the wall and says, “This is useless!”
Since Derek could have told him at least a week prior that trying to prove that one of Talia’s alpha friends had bitten Paige was going to go nowhere, he was unsurprised at the lack of results. He also wasn’t about to get involved with a man in his forties having a temper tantrum. Particularly not one who’s licensed to carry a firearm.

He’s also a little distracted, because he’s waiting for a text from Stiles. The IT guy who works for Pure Silver, Jason Stillwell, is supposed to be showing up to be interviewed soon, and Derek is curious to know how it goes. If he confesses, a warrant could be issued for Jennifer Blake’s arrest within an hour. Temper tantrum or no, Derek’s very excited to see how McCall will react to Stiles solving the case out from under him.

The problem, of course, is that proving that Search for a Cure is behind the strange pattern of rogue alpha attacks isn’t going to get them any closer to solving Paige Krasikeva’s murder. But since Paige’s death won’t be McCall’s jurisdiction after the major case is closed, at least that will get him out of their hair.

“Who are you texting?” McCall growls at him.

“Uh, my girlfriend,” Derek says, since he doesn’t put it past McCall to grab his phone and look at it. The last few texts on the screen are Stiles complaining about how much he misses seeing Derek’s glistening biceps while he works in the garden. He’s waxing quite poetically about them, actually. Stiles’ contact info in his phone is entered just under ‘<3’, mostly because Cora has a tendency to grab his phone and relabel his contacts for her own amusement.

“Women aren’t worth it,” McCall says. “It’s a race to break your heart or your wallet.”

“I’ll risk it,” Derek says, since telling McCall ‘I’m not going to take romantic advice from an abusive dickhead’ probably won’t win him any points.

McCall is already ignoring him. He’s frowning at the folder he’s been looking through. “This theory doesn’t make sense,” he says to himself. “If Paige wanted the bite because she thought it would help her win Derek Hale’s heart, and Talia Hale arranged it all, why would they do it at the school? Why not just bring her to the den?”

“Maybe her parents didn’t approve,” Derek says, because even if McCall is way off base, he can be a sounding board like a pro.

“Her parents clearly didn’t know,” McCall says. “If she had asked about getting the bite and they’d said no, they would have mentioned that right away. And it isn’t as if they were involved in any anti-werewolf business. She wouldn’t have had a reason to go behind their back. Maybe the Hales arranged it without her knowledge.”

“And they would do that . . . why?” Derek asks, interested to see what crackpot theory McCall is going to spout next.

“Maybe Paige didn’t have a crush on Derek,” McCall says. “Maybe it was the other way around. Maybe she had turned him down and he was trying to win her back.”

“By hiring an alpha to attack her at school and turn her into a werewolf against her will?” Derek says. “And they say romance is dead.”

“Fair point,” McCall says. “Maybe Derek asked Talia to arrange it and she refused. Maybe she didn’t think Paige was good enough for her pack. Derek could have arranged it behind her back.”

“Really?” Derek says. “You think he would’ve done that?”
“Granted, he isn’t known to be the sharpest tool in the shed,” McCall says. “More brawn than brains, or so I’ve heard.”

“Uh huh,” Derek says, because after a few weeks, he’s growing inured to McCall’s constant insults of himself, his pack, and everything he holds dear. “Okay, who, then?”

“Could’ve been Peter Hale,” McCall says. “Derek brings home a girl that Talia doesn’t approve of. Peter’s a lot younger, and he had just married – maybe he felt sorry for his nephew. He knew that if Paige got turned – by a ‘rogue attack’ – then Talia basically wouldn’t have any choice but to take her in. So Peter calls up someone he knows, arranges the whole thing.”

That all sounds strangely plausible to Derek, despite knowing it hadn’t happened. “I don’t think Peter Hale has ever felt sorry for anyone.”

“Also a fair point,” McCall says. “Can’t imagine how he found anyone willing to marry him, ugh. Probably just some whorewolf who wanted him for his pack or his money.”

Derek takes deep breaths and studies the ceiling. He’s saved from having to reply when his phone chimes, and he glances down at the screen to see a message from Stiles. ‘Stillwell didn’t show’, it says, with the angriest looking emoji that Derek has ever seen.

“I wonder if I could get Peter Hale in here to talk to me,” McCall says.

The idea of Peter running verbal rings around McCall is highly amusing, so Derek says, “Well, Mrs. Hale did say to call her if you needed to talk to any of her other pack members, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but it’d be easier if she didn’t know about it,” McCall says. “Peter is so arrogant that he’d never think to request a lawyer if she didn’t come in with him. But he’d be hard to corner. Doesn’t have a day job. He does seem pretty tight with Stilinski, though. Maybe I can get him to the station somehow . . .”

“Uh huh,” Derek says. His phone chimes again. Stiles has sent him a message that says, ‘are you here somewhere? I’m annoyed now. Come make out in the supply closet with me.’ He clears his throat and says, “Do you need me for anything else? My girlfriend got sick at work and wanted to know if I could come pick her up.”

“Go on,” McCall says, making a shooing gesture with one hand. “You know, you’re a good sounding board, Hardy. You’ll make a decent cop someday if you can get away from what a joke this department is.”

“Uh, thank you, sir,” Derek says.

“Be here at eight tomorrow. We’re going to get Peter Hale in here, one way or another.”

“Yes, sir,” Derek says, and leaves the conference room that McCall has been working out of. He finds Stiles in the supply closet as promised, and locks the door. “What’s happening with Stillwell?” he asks.

“They’re going to issue a warrant for his arrest,” Stiles says, then adds impatiently, “now take off your pants, I want to suck your dick.”

And really, there’s no argument Derek can make to that.

~ ~ ~
Sheriff Stilinski is in the middle of an extremely mundane car theft case when there’s a quick knock on his door and Stiles pokes his head in. “Hey, you,” he says, smiling. Then he sees the brown paper bag that Stiles is carrying and the smile vanishes. “That had better not be more chard. If you try to feed me chard again, I’m moving to Hawaii.”

“Ugh, no, that stuff was gross,” Stiles says, laughing. “I made you a special treat today. Trying some new stuff while I have time, you know, before classes start next week.”

“Lay it on me,” Tom says, and Stiles opens the bag and starts taking out some Tupperware. “Are those chips?”

“Sort of,” Stiles says. “Try them!”

“Tell me what’s in them,” Tom says, and Stiles whines. “Okay, fine,” Tom says, with a laugh, and picks one up and pops it in his mouth. They’re apple chips, both sweet and tart, dusted with cinnamon and a bit of nutmeg. “Hey, these are good!”

“Yes!” Stiles does a fist pump. “They’re just really thinly sliced apples that you put in the oven on low for a couple hours. Super easy, super healthy, super tasty. My favorite kind of recipe. Okay, now try these.” He sets out another Tupperware.

“Are those peas?”

“Roasted chickpeas. Come on, just try them.”

Tom does so. “Not bad,” he says. “I feel like I could eat the entire bowl of them and still be hungry.”

“Well, on the upside, you can eat the entire bowl of them, without me glaring a bit!” Stiles says. “And turmeric is super good for your heart.”

“Actually?” Tom asks.

“Yeah, actually,” Stiles says. “You should see all the reading I’ve been doing on natural remedies lately. I mean, it’s pretty interesting. There’s a lot of stuff that’s just so much garbage, like essential oils and detoxifying your liver, like, you know, the entire point of your liver isn’t to remove toxins from your system, I mean, I think most of these people got their degrees from Google University — ”

“Stiles, focus,” Tom says, amused.

“Right, that’s how I found some of these recipes,” Stiles says, “because I was looking up that colloidal silver stuff. Which, uh, the jury is very much out on. And there are some things like turmeric and ginger and honey that really are really amazing natural remedies. Here, try these. Kale wraps.”

Tom takes a bite of one and grimaces. “No, son. Just no.”

“They’ve got avocado in them; you like avocado.”

“I can’t taste it past the kale,” Tom says. He sets down the plate and says, “Stiles, why are you bribing me?”

“What! I’m hurt! Offended! I – yeah, you’re not buying it, okay. I wanted to check in about
Stillwell. Any luck?"

Tom shakes his head. “Apartment’s empty, hasn’t been to work. Bank account hasn’t been touched, so he must have more than one, or he laid in some cash in case he needed to make a quick getaway. It’s possible that this wasn’t the only criminal activity he was involved in – some of those bribes don’t match up to rogue attacks, so he might have been a hacker for hire.”

Stiles growls. “Okay. What about those fingerprints we got off Jennifer Blake? Any results yet on those?”

“Should be any day now,” Tom says. “I’ll check with Sue. Hang on.” He dials his phone and talks with the secretary for a minute. “She’s going to call the lab and see where they’re at,” he says.

“Okay. Hey, did you know that we have werewolf in our ancestry?”

Tom frowns. “We do? How far back?”

“Your . . .” Stiles pulls out his phone and starts tapping the screen. “Great-great-great-grandfather was a born werewolf. Married a human woman, had two werewolf kids and three human kids. One of the three human kids was your great-great-grandmother. And since then everyone has been human, so it’s super diluted, but still back there.”

“Huh,” Tom says, and wonders when Stiles has had the chance to research their family history in and among everything else he’s been doing. Does the kid ever sleep? “No, I didn’t know that. My knowledge of our genealogy stopped about one generation after that. I met my great-grandmother once, but she died when I was only seven. Why were you looking that up?”

“Well, apparently Jennifer said that she thinks people who rejected the bite but also have werewolf ancestry might be the key to a cure.” Stiles puts his phone away. “You ever notice how there’s always something that’s ‘the key’? If this didn’t work, they’d just find something else. It’s like geez, guys, get over it. You haven’t found a cure, there probably isn’t one, stop grasping at straws.”

“You can’t really say that,” Tom says. “Just because we haven’t found a cure for every cancer doesn’t mean there isn’t one. There are plenty of diseases that humanity has found a cure for after decades of looking.”

“Lycanthropy isn’t a disease,” Stiles grumps. “Okay, fine, it’s just a metaphor. And I’m still a little torn on the ethics about it, and maybe a cure would be a good thing, at least for attack victims, but I don’t want it anywhere near Jennifer Blake. She can take my antibodies and shove them up her – ”

“Sheriff?” Sue pokes her head into the office and says, “They just faxed over that report. Here you go.”

“Thanks, Sue,” Tom says, taking the papers. He views them and says, “Huh.”

“What? What!” Stiles practically spills out of his chair as he rounds the table. Then he frowns. “Huh.”

The fingerprints have a match, but it isn’t anyone named Jennifer Blake. It’s a woman named Julia Baccari, who hails from a small town in Arizona called Sierra Vista. The only reason her fingerprints are on file at all is because she had been arrested once at an anti-werewolf demonstration in Phoenix. No charges had been brought.
“So she changed her name,” Tom says. “Maybe to get away from the anti-werewolf connection?”

“Maybe. I’ll see what the local alpha down there knows about her.” Stiles takes his phone back up and pulls out his listing of all the alphas in California and the surrounding states. He had put it together when investigating Gerard Argent’s murder, and kept it updated since then. “Okay, Sierra Vista, the local alpha is . . .” He stops. “That can’t be a coincidence.”

“What?” Tom asks.

“The alpha in Sierra Vista is Kali Steele,” Stiles says. He sees his father’s blank look and says, “Kali was married to an alpha named Ennis Black, and they were trying to steal up surrounding territory. In 2003, the same year Paige was killed, Ennis disappeared and Kali went back to Arizona.”

“Now that is interesting,” Tom says. “Think she’s our alpha?”

“That seems like a pretty good bet,” Stiles says. “Let’s see if I can find out what she’s been up to.” He sticks his phone in his pocket. “Thanks, Dad! Enjoy your chickpeas!” he adds, and bounces out of the office.

“Enjoy your chickpeas, he says,” Tom mutters, rolling his eyes. Then he eats another handful. They’re pretty darned good.

~ ~ ~ ~

Peter manages to duck McCall for two days, more because it amuses him than because he actually doesn’t want to talk to him. Derek was surprised when he first told Peter that McCall wanted to interview him, and his uncle frowned and asked, “Me? Why?”

“I dunno, because he’s an idiot,” Derek said, and summed up McCall’s theory about Peter’s ‘involvement’ and how he wants to get him into an interview without Talia present. Peter rolled his eyes at that and then wandered away without further commentary.

Peter’s phone number is unlisted, so since McCall doesn’t want to go through Talia, he calls Stiles and demands it as part of their ‘cooperation’. Stiles tells him that it’s 867-5309 and then laughs hysterically when McCall actually falls for that. When he calls back growling, Stiles gives him the real number. Peter then promptly ignores all of McCall’s attempts to reach him.

Since Peter’s voicemail is the generic ‘you have reached such-and-such number’ supplied by the phone company, McCall suspects that Stiles has given him another bogus number and calls to shout at him. Peter then changes his voice mail to, ‘This is Peter Hale. If I don’t return your call, it’s most likely because I’m ignoring you.’

Annoyed, McCall goes to the station and asks Sheriff Stilinski to call him. Tom gives McCall an incredulous ‘are you kidding me’ sort of look, to which McCall reminds him that it’s their duty to help with his investigation. Tom shrugs and calls Peter, who picks up on the second ring.

“Agent McCall wants to talk to you, in case you hadn’t figured that out from the seventeen voice mails he’s left you.”

“Ah, well,” Peter says, “as it happens, I just left town. I’ll be back in a few days.”
Tom looks up at McCall and says, “He’s not in town.”

McCall snatches Tom’s phone, which almost results in Tom pulling a gun on him out of sheer reflex, and snaps, “Where are you?”

“Arizona, as it happens,” Peter says. “I’m doing some work of my own.”

“What work is that?” McCall asks, his voice dripping contempt. “It’s not like you have a job.”

“It’s confidential,” Peter says, “and none of your business. Would you put the sheriff back on the phone for me?”

“If you are not back in town in forty-eight hours, I’m going to issue a warrant for your arrest,” McCall says. “Obstruction of justice, if nothing else.”

“It wouldn’t fly. You don’t have a subpoena to talk to me, since you have absolutely zero evidence that I’m connected to the crimes you’re investigating, so my appearance would be nothing more than a courtesy. However, since I admire tenacity, I will come see you as soon as I get back. Likely Tuesday some time. Will that suit?”

“If you show up,” McCall says, and slaps the phone back into Tom’s hand.

Tom sighs. “Peter, why are you in Arizona?”

“I’m heading to Sierra Vista to ask some questions for Stiles,” Peter says. “He wanted to go himself, but I reminded him that his classes start on Monday. I’ll see you Tuesday night?”

“Yeah, okay,” Tom says. He says goodbye and hangs up.

McCall looks at him with narrowed eyes. “Why is Peter in Arizona?”

“It has nothing to do with Paige Krasikeva, I can definitely assure you of that,” Tom says.

McCall gets right up in his face. “If I find out that you’re lying to me, I’ll have you removed from office. You think you’re invincible because your son is some big hero, well, think again. There are plenty of people in this country, in this county, who aren’t fans of Stiles or of werewolves. You think I can’t make it happen?”

“I think,” Tom says, pressing two fingers into McCall’s collarbone and forcing him back a step, “that you’re a bully. And I don’t much like bullies. Now get out of my office.”

After a moment, McCall sneers and stomps away. Tom slams the office door behind him.

~ ~ ~ ~
Saturday night before the school year starts is a more somber occasion than Stiles had expected. He had been geared up for another party, but hadn’t thought about the stress that separation had on packs. Everyone is somewhat anxious, especially Talia. “It’s not normally this bad,” Derek says, when Stiles mentions it. “But usually only one person is leaving at a time, you know? Having four people suddenly going off to college is a big deal.”

“Oh, I see,” Stiles says. Of course, adding to the emotional stress of separation is the chaos of four people getting ready to depart. Scott and Allison still technically live at home, so they’ve done all their packing there, but Cora and Isaac live at the den. Isaac has far fewer belongings than Cora, who’s been running around all day looking for her curling iron and her navy blue sandals and a million other things she wants to bring.

There’s also the logistical stress of the departure itself, because Allison’s parents were insisting she stay the night at their house and leave from there in the morning. It was bad enough, in their opinion, that she ever spent a night at the den. She wouldn’t be spending her last night before leaving for school there.

Talia is clearly exasperated, because she’s offered multiple times to let the Argents stay at the den so they can see Allison off in the morning, but of course they’re refusing. Stiles managed to finagle a solution in his usual underhanded way. Fortunately, Scott and Allison were only going to San Francisco, which was about a three hour drive. Since the Argents had already agreed, grudgingly, that Scott could pick her up and they could drive together, Allison would spend the night at her parents’ house, and then leave first thing in the morning. While her parents were told they were going straight to San Francisco, she could come by the den for breakfast first.

Cora and Isaac had a much longer drive, eight hours, and because they were going to be in an apartment instead of a dorm, they had a lot more in the way of stuff. Derek has decided to go with them, stay the night, and drive back the next day, so he can help them get unpacked and set up. Stiles would like to go, too, but his own classes start on Monday, so he can’t.

Since everyone is running around like an idiot or stressing out about the impending separation, and Scott and Allison aren’t even there, Stiles decides against doing anything special for dinner and focuses on the next morning’s breakfast instead. He chops a bunch of fruit and cheese and goes to the bakery to buy a ton of pastries. Talia wants sausage, and not just any sausage but a specific brand that’s apparently only sold at two grocery stores in the world, if his search for it is any indication. But he triumphs, and makes breakfast for everyone.

The only person not present at breakfast is Peter, because he’s in Sierra Vista. He had texted Stiles the previous night to let him know that he had arrived in one piece, that he intended to snoop around and be back soon.

That has Stiles on edge, and he wishes that Derek wasn’t leaving, although he certainly can’t blame him. He’s glad that Cora and Isaac will have Derek there with them, to get settled in. But the idea of facing his first day of classes by himself, without Derek to kiss him good luck in the morning, isn’t one he relishes. He fidgets and says that he’s fine when Derek asks, because he can’t tell Derek not to go.

So he hugs Scott goodbye and they pound on each others’ backs for about five minutes, and then he kisses Allison on the cheek, and they load up into Scott’s old Ford and take off, and then Cora
is loading her last backpack into the bed of Aaron’s truck, and –

“Wait, is your dad going, too?” Stiles asks, blinking at Derek.

Derek slides an arm around his waist and says, “He said he’d take them so I could stay here with you. Just made more sense, given that behemoth he drives and how light Cora is not capable of packing.”

“Oh . . . is that okay?” Stiles asks. “You can go if you want, I don’t want to make you stay if you –”

“It’s fine,” Derek says, leaning down to rub his cheek over Stiles’ hair. “I don’t like leaving you either, you know.”

“I know you and Cora are close . . .”

“We can go down and see them in a couple weeks,” Derek says. “I love my sister. A lot. Without her, I wouldn’t have you. And she’s the one who slapped me upside the head this morning and said ‘don’t you dare drive down to LA with me, Stiles looks like he’s about to have apoplexy’.”

Stiles groans. “I was that obvious?”

“Not to me,” Derek says, “but Cora knows you pretty well.”

“True,” Stiles says. He lets go of Derek and goes over to where Cora and Isaac are hugging Laura and Jonathan’s kids goodbye. He draws Cora into an embrace and says, “Thanks for helping out with your oblivious brother.”

“Oh my God, so oblivious,” Cora says. “You’d better watch out for him while I’m gone.”

“Will do,” Stiles says, and then gives Isaac a hug while Derek says goodbye to both of them. A few minutes later, they’re gone.

“Well, I’m going to take the kids down to the park,” Laura says, before anyone can get maudlin. “You guys want to come?”

“You bet,” Derek says.

~ ~ ~ ~

Tom is enjoying a late night cheeseburger that he had picked up on the way home from work when the door opens and Stiles come inside. He’s struck by the urge to hide the cheeseburger, or at least the curly fries, but then he remembers that he’s not four years old. So instead he just says, “Hey, you. What are you doing here this time of day?”

“Peter texted me about an hour ago, saying he was going to be back and he’d meet me here.” Stiles’ gaze, of course, lasers in on the fast food. “Dad! What are you eating? I made you all those healthy snacks!”

“You can’t make a meal out of chickpeas and apple chips,” Tom says, clutching his burger defensively.

“But we ate at the den! There was turkey! You like turkey!”
“Yes, but I was working then, and I’m not going to drive all the way out to the den at nine thirty at night just to get some turkey when there’s a perfectly good Red Robin right down the street from my office—”

“Did you have curly fries? You did, didn’t you—”

“Stiles, I am a grown man, I can eat curly fries when I want to eat curly fries.”

Stiles folds his arms over his chest and pouts. “That’s another excellent reason why you should move out to the den,” he says. “You know, then you could have my leftovers available whenever and you wouldn’t have to resort to grease-bombs.”

“Stiles, if you honestly think that living at the den will make me eat cheeseburgers any less often, then you’re a lot dumber than you pretend,” Tom says. Stiles makes a face at him. “Look, kiddo, there are some reasons why moving out to the den is a great idea. And there are some reasons that it’s a bad idea. There’s no reason to rush into a decision. Now sit down and tell me about your first couple days of classes while we wait for Peter to grace us with his presence.”

Stiles moans and agrees. His classes aren’t particularly riveting, in his own opinion. Psychology 101, Introduction to Criminology, and a Biology/Anatomy class. “I’m gonna be so bored,” he whines, and his father gives him an incredulous look.

“I can probably help with that,” Peter says from the front hall, and Stiles jumps.

“Jesus, Peter, did you forget the collar with the bell I gave you?” Stiles demands. Peter just arches his eyebrows and looks unimpressed. “Yeah, yeah, okay. Sierra Vista. Spill.”

“Hello to you too,” Peter says. He walks over and gives Stiles a brief embrace, then sits down on the sofa with Tom, rubbing his cheek against Tom’s shoulder and then crawling into his lap. Tom continues to eat his cheeseburger, completely unperturbed. “Unfortunately, there’s not much to tell. There wasn’t anybody there for me to talk to.”

“Kali wasn’t there?”

“No sign of her anywhere,” Peter says. “None of her pack was there, either. The house where they used to live is boarded up and empty. It doesn’t look like anyone has lived there in years. Get me a soda, would you?”

“There should be some Dr. Pepper in the door of the fridge,” Tom says, as Stiles heads into the kitchen, because of course he keeps some of Peter’s favorite soda there.

Stiles comes back a few moments later. “What do you think happened to them?”

“Oh, I know what happened to them,” Peter says. “After I realized they were gone, I did a little research, got some names. Two of them are living in Virginia. One in Wisconsin. Another pair in Alabama. The pack simply dissolved and they all moved into other packs.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “So Kali went to work with Jennifer, and her pack split up.”

“That would be my assumption, yes,” Peter says. “But it doesn’t answer the big question, which is why Kali would have gotten involved with an anti-werewolf activist.”

“Jennifer’s a witch, so, maybe she’s under some sort of spell,” Tom suggests.

“That’s definitely something to consider,” Peter says. “Kali certainly isn’t Mother Theresa, but it is
very possible that she’s a victim in all this, too.”

“It has to go back to 2003,” Stiles murmurs.

“What was that?” his father asks.

“2003,” Stiles says. “That’s the year that Ennis and Kali’s pack broke up, the year Ennis disappeared and was probably killed. It’s the year Paige died and these attacks started. Everyone assumes that Kali slunk back to Arizona, but maybe she didn’t. Maybe she hooked up with Jennifer and started these rogue attacks. It all has to be connected somehow.”

“That doesn’t get us any closer to figuring out why Kali would work with Jennifer,” Tom points out, “presuming that she is. Or how Jennifer got hooks into her, presuming that she isn’t.”

“Nope,” Stiles says. “I should talk to Ennis’ pack. They drove her out. They might know something about where she went, or why she might have freaked out.”

“No a bad idea,” Peter says.

“You have classes,” Tom reminds him. “They’re a priority, remember?” He looks away from his pouting son and to the werewolf in his lap. “Could you go?”

Peter clears his throat. “The man who assumed control of Ennis’ pack is not, shall we say, an enormous fan of mine. He probably wouldn’t give me the time of day. But I do think he would talk to Stiles.”

“This weekend,” Tom says firmly.

Stiles groans. “Fine, this weekend,” he agrees.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

By the time Peter gets to sit down with McCall in the interrogation room, the agent has called him no fewer than four times to remind him that he agreed to come in. Peter is growing decidedly less amused with the process, but keeps his word and wanders into the station on Wednesday afternoon. It doesn’t help that McCall decides to let him cool his heels for half an hour, obviously intending to make him nervous. It has the opposite effect. When he sits down across from Peter, the werewolf gives him the type of stare that a scientist gives a bug underneath a microscope.

“So, Mr. Hale,” McCall says, with a smug grin. “What is your relationship with Tom Stilinski?”

“Aside from being none of your business?” Peter replies. “We’re friends. I understand it’s probably a foreign concept to you.”

“Could you tell me how you two met?”

“Depends. Could you tell me how that’s relevant?”

McCall’s jaw tightens. “I’m the one asking the questions here, Mr. Hale. If you don’t intend to cooperate, just let me know now, so I can get a subpoena to compel your honest testimony.”

Peter waves this aside. “I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t you tell me whatever cockamamie theory you’ve cooked up in that lizard brain of yours, I’ll poke a dozen holes in it, and then we
“You think you’re very clever, don’t you,” McCall says.

“Oh, I know I’m very clever,” Peter replies.

“Were you aware that your nephew was having an affair with Paige Krasikeva?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “First things first. Nice try, phrasing it so no matter how I answered, it confirmed that he was doing so. He was not. To the best of my knowledge, Derek’s knowledge, and reality’s knowledge. Secondly, even if they had been it wouldn’t have been an ‘affair’. They were fifteen. I am very sure that my nephew was not having an ‘affair’ with anyone when he was fifteen. Or when he was eighteen, or twenty-one, for that matter. He’s a complete incompetent when it comes to romance.”

“Everyone agrees that they were in a relationship,” McCall says.

“If by ‘everyone’, you mean ‘nine out of the ten voices in your head’, I can refer you to an excellent therapist,” Peter says. “If you mean ‘real people in the real world’, I have to assume that you’re just making things up.”

McCall doesn’t respond to his retort. “Why would Paige need to be a werewolf before she could be Derek’s mate?”

Peter lifted his gaze Heavenward as if praying for patience. “My God. How do you dress yourself in the morning when you’re this stupid? Nobody needs to be a werewolf before they would be Derek’s mate, a fact that is easily proven by the fact that his mate is not a werewolf.”

“Well, I understand procreation is something of an issue for your family,” McCall says.

Peter looks disappointed. “Paige died before the fire, so that really can’t have been involved in anyone’s motivation. In any case, Paige wouldn’t have needed to be a werewolf to have Derek’s children. Just female.”

“A born wolf and a turned wolf have a higher chance of having a werewolf baby than a born wolf and a human, don’t they?” McCall says.

“Yes. So what?”

“So maybe Talia wanted to keep the Hale family pure.”

“You really haven’t done your research, have you,” Peter says. “I married a human woman. Nobody insisted she become a werewolf before we had a child.”

“Mm hm,” McCall says. “Tell me, how did that work out for you?”

Peter’s nails dig into the table, and he clings to his self-control as hard as he can. It takes a long moment of quiet breathing before he opens his eyes and says, “Ah. You’re trying to provoke me. Hoping that if you upset me, I’ll say something relevant?” He stands up. “Well, unfortunately for you, Agent McCall, I don’t actually know anything about your case. If you were willing to tell me what your theory was, I might be able to help you, but instead you just want to antagonize me, so I’m leaving. Please don’t call me again. I’d hate to have to report you for harassment.”

He feels shaky as he leaves the office. He is shaking, he realizes, with a combination of grief and rage. He doesn’t trust himself near anyone like this. He needs to find a place where he can take it out on something inanimate, so he heads into the preserve.
He drifts.

When he regains full coherence, there’s blood on his hands, although they’ve already healed. He’s lying in the midst of a dozen broken trees, watching the sky overhead. It’s long past dark. It’s time to go home.

When he gets back to the den, Tom sees him and says, “Thank God, you’re okay,” and draws Peter into an embrace.

Peter blinks at him. “How . . . how long was I gone?” he asks, trying to take stock. He’s sore and tired and thirsty. He never notices hunger very much anymore.

“Relax, it wasn’t that long,” Stiles says, jogging up behind his father. “Six, eight hours maybe? But we couldn’t get in touch with you. You left your phone at the station. Sue said you seemed upset when you left, and of course we had no idea what sort of bullshit McCall had said to you.”

“I left my phone?” Peter asks, blinking. He feels slow and stupid. He never leaves his phone, for this exact reason, among many others.

Tom sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “McCall took it out of your pocket at some point. I found this out because, of course, it’s password protected, and he wanted IT to break into it for him. IT asked him if he had, you know, a warrant to look at the contents of your phone, and – never mind. Here.” He hands the device back.

Peter thinks back to the moment that he had been so upset and wonders long he sat there, struggling with his temper. It doesn’t really matter. “Thanks,” he says, sliding the device away. “I just went out for a run. I’m fine.”

“Let’s clean up your hands,” Derek says, gently taking his uncle’s arm. Peter follows him into the bathroom, lets Derek help him. Now that he’s a little more coherent, he can smell the distress and unease that’s permeating the den. When he goes back out into the main room, he makes an effort to appear nonchalant. This isn’t what Talia needs right now. She needs to feel secure.

“How about some dinner?” Peter asks Stiles, and lets the others fuss over him, sit around the table with him even though they probably ate hours ago. Stiles made spaghetti and meatballs, and Peter tucks in. He’s not particularly interested, but he knows that they’re worried. He can do this, he can pretend he’s okay.

Talia, at least, isn’t fooled. She’s staring at him with that hint of red in her eyes. “What did he say to you?” she asks.

“Nothing worth your time,” Peter says.

“He upset you,” Talia says.

“You know, there was a time when I would wander off into the forest for eight hours with no provocation whatsoever,” Peter says.

“Yes,” Talia says, “but he provoked you, and you will tell me what he said.”

Even Peter can only disobey his alpha so much. He takes a drink of water and says, “A lot of bullshit about Paige and Derek being involved, and how we set Paige up to get bitten so she would be worthy of being a Hale. He played stupid and made a lot of incorrect assumptions, hoping that I would correct him. He’s not actually as dim as he seems, I don’t think – just extremely focused on the wrong answer.”
“And?” Talia asks.

“And then he said something idiotic about Paige needing to be a werewolf to increase the likelihood of werewolf children. I mentioned the fact that I had married a human woman who had then gotten pregnant, and he asked – ” He’s fine, he can do this, he can say this. His voice doesn’t even tremble. “ – how that had worked out for me.”

Talia’s eyes flared crimson, and Aaron has to take her hand and pull her back into her seat. “I should kill him,” she snarls.

“You can’t kill him for saying something snide about our family,” Aaron tells her gently.

“I still should,” Talia says.

“I’m fine, sister,” Peter says. Talia looks dubious, but nobody’s stupid enough to challenge his assertion in front of her. Peter feels dubious himself. He’s starting to feel smothered and claustrophobic. He wants out, wants fresh air, wants to scream and cry and rip something apart with his bare hands. But he can’t. He has to sit here and play nice because if he doesn’t, Talia will do something stupid.

“Well, it’s late,” Tom says, startling everyone. “I’m going to head home. Peter, if you come with me, we can stop by the station and you can pick up your car.”

Peter stands up more quickly than could be considered dignified. “Good idea, thanks.” He hugs Talia, lets her scent-mark him, then exchanges a quick embrace with the others before leaving the den on Tom’s heels.

“I’m not actually going to take you to the station, because you shouldn’t be driving right now,” Tom says, as soon as they’re in the car and driving down the small road that leads to the den. “But you can hitch a ride with me to the station tomorrow morning and the others will never know the difference, okay?”

“Okay,” Peter says. He focuses on his breathing instead of the grief and rage that are warring inside him.

Tom’s quiet as he drives. Peter has always liked that about him. So many people always need to fill the air with words, especially when they suspect that Peter isn’t okay. They always want to talk about it, and that drives Peter insane. It’s one of the reason he likes Derek so much; his nephew also has the gift of knowing when to just shut up. Tom knows that if Peter wants to talk, he’ll talk, and if Peter doesn’t, he’s content to let the silence rest.

They get back to the house, and Tom parks in the garage and lets them both in. He toes off his shoes and then turns to face Peter and asks him what he always asks him at times like this. “What do you need, Peter?”

“I need – ” Peter chokes on the words. Is there really an answer? What he needs, he can never have. They’ve found stop gap solutions like liquor, breaking dishes, funny movies, but none of those will ever really fill the hole inside him. And it’s times like this that the hole seems like it’s consuming him from the inside out.

But he searches for an answer because he knows that whatever it is he thinks might fill it, Tom will give him, without reservation. What finally comes out of his mouth is, “Please just hold me for a little while.”

“Sure,” Tom says. “Sure.” He sits down on the sofa and Peter crawls into his arms, resting his face against Tom’s shoulder, letting Tom’s arms come up around him. He listens to his heartbeat
and breathes in his scent, and after a while, the crushing emptiness starts to abate.

He falls asleep without ever thinking about the fact that, when it comes to Agent McCall, Tom is a lot more likely to lose his temper than Talia is.

~ ~ ~ ~
Stiles isn’t sure what it is about hotels that, apparently, make him really horny. There’s something about the anonymity to it, that he and Derek are at a hotel three hundred miles from home, where no one else can get to them. There are no werewolves around that will be able to tell immediately that they’ve been going at it, no werewolves to hear every thump or moan.

“This is awesome,” he says, after their third go round, and Derek wheezes slightly in reply. Stiles can be, well. Enthusiastic. So can Derek, of course, but Stiles is just naturally more aggressive and excitable than his mate, and he can be a little overwhelming sometimes. “Let’s have sex until dawn.”

Derek leans over and kisses him on the crown of his head. “You do know we have another three hundred miles to drive tomorrow, and we’re supposed to be meeting Rashid, right?”

Stiles grumps. “Well, one more time then,” he says, and bites down on Derek’s ear.

“We’ll have another stop on the way back,” Derek reminds him. They had left after Stiles’ classes on Friday, driven about halfway, and would be driving the rest of the way and meeting Ennis’ former Left Hand the next day. Then they would drive partway back, and finish the return drive on Sunday.

“Right,” Stiles says, crawling on top of him.

Somehow, Derek manages to get a little bit of sleep. They leave early the next morning, driving across the extremely empty interior of northern Nevada for hours. Stiles spends a large part of the drive sleeping.

It’s rare for a Left Hand to take control of a pack, and Peter had mentioned that it happens most often in cases when the alpha doesn’t designate a successor before death. That’s more common in built packs, rather than families, which Ennis’ pack was. Stiles is sure that Ennis was arrogant enough that it never occurred to him to think about what would happen if he was killed.

There aren’t many beta packs, simply because most werewolves crave an alpha’s rule. Only the most willful and iron-fisted of betas can hold together a pack, so Stiles is quite nervous about whether or not Rashid is going to be willing to talk to him. Peter had refused to talk about why Rashid didn’t like him, so Stiles wasn’t sure if it was a grudge against the Hale pack in general or Peter specifically.

But when he had called up and explained who he was and what he was investigating, Rashid had returned his call later the same day and said he was welcome to come by, even though he didn’t know how helpful he could be. So now Stiles is on the road, pulling up to a gate in the northern Nevada desert and hoping it goes well.
The complex is three small houses placed close to each other. The pack only had nine members, so it was small for a werewolf pack but large for a beta pack. Rashid is clearly waiting for them, because the car isn’t even in park when a man at least head and shoulders taller than either of them steps out of one of the houses. It’s hot, even for the first week of September, and he invites them into the house.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Stiles,” he says, getting them each a bottle of beer. Stiles is thrilled with this, and shoots Derek a ‘don’t ruin this for me’ look. Then he takes one mouthful of the beer and has to try not to gag. Fortunately, Rashid is still talking and doesn’t notice. “The stuff on the news, of course, but I have a friend whose cousin was killed by the WLO, so. She’s a great admirer of yours.”

“Oh, thanks,” Stiles says. He doesn’t like to throw his success around, but he’s definitely willing to use it when he has to.

“But now you’re getting mixed up in our business, and I’m not so sure I’m thrilled about that,” he says, sitting down across from them. “I had to work hard to get other packs in this area to respect our claim to this territory, and to convince them that we weren’t going to continue Ennis’ work.”

“The thing is, I don’t actually know that this has anything to do with Ennis himself,” Stiles says. “It’s more about Kali.”


“Not a fan?” Stiles prompts. He remembers what Peter had said, that Ennis’ pack had blamed everything on Kali, but wasn’t sure how accurate that was.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Rashid says. “Ennis was no boy scout. I can’t sit here and say that Kali turned him to the dark side. He was all about taking over territory and he did a lot of bad things, and I told him over and over again that he was going to get himself killed. But Kali was the brains behind it. She was the one who figured out that two alphas could join forces by claiming to be mates, and she’s the one who came up with whatever voodoo that he was using to ‘persuade’ other packs to give us their territory.”

“Which was what?” Stiles asks.

“Don’t know,” Rashid says, taking a pull at his beer. “Whenever I asked too many questions, Ennis told me that I would shut up if I knew what was good for me. Which is precisely why he got himself killed. He didn’t think around corners the way a Left Hand would. He came up with some scheme, but it backfired on him, whatever it was.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?” Derek asks. “Everyone says he disappeared.”

“If your alpha died, wouldn’t you know?” Rashid asks with a snort. “Yeah, he’s dead. Never found a body and I doubt we ever will, but he’s dead.”

“And then you guys forced Kali out,” Stiles says.

“Had to,” Rashid says. “It was the only way anyone around here would have believed we weren’t going to keep up what they were doing. Not like it was a great loss.”

“Okay, but here’s the thing,” Stiles says. “Everyone assumes she went back to Arizona, but she didn’t. She hasn’t been there in years.”

Rashid shrugs. “So she decided to make a new start somewhere.”
“You don’t have any idea where she might have gone?” Stiles asks.

“I didn’t talk to her much,” Rashid says. “We weren’t friends.”

Stiles considers this, then says, “Did she ever say anything about a woman named Julia Baccari?”

“Kali’s psycho ex? Yeah, she came by a few times, actually,” Rashid says.

“Wait, what?” Stiles blinks. “Kali and Julia were an item?”

“Well, not by the time we met them,” Rashid says. “Far as I can tell, Julia and Kali were a couple down in Arizona like . . . a year or two before Kali and Ennis got hitched. I’m not sure if Kali dumped her for Ennis, for her plan, or because Julia was batshit crazy. Julia would show up here and shout at Kali about how they were meant to be together, about how Kali was throwing away everything they had.” Rashid lets out a low whistle. “Kali got rid of her both times.”


“Maybe you’ve got the order wrong,” Derek says. “How does an alpha’s girlfriend become an anti-werewolf activist? Maybe by getting horribly dumped by the alpha.”

“Well, don’t ask me how that might have happened,” Rashid says. “I couldn’t begin to tell you. Kali seemed to be pretty sick of her stalker bullshit when she was up here.”

“Hm,” Stiles says, thinking about Jennifer, the witch. Would it be difficult for her to constantly maintain magical control over Kali? Yes. Would it be impossible? No. But he also knows that werewolves who lose their mates can go crazy in some very interesting ways. “Hey, Rashid, do you think that Ennis and Kali were really mates?”

“No,” Rashid says, with a snort. “Nobody thinks that.”

It’s what Peter had said, too, but Stiles can’t help but wonder. What if Kali had lost her mind after Ennis’ death, what if it had rendered her susceptible to Jennifer’s influence?

Either way, they’re not going to figure anything out if they can’t find her. But it’s coming together, one piece at a time. They chat for a few more minutes before they get up to leave. “You know,” Stiles says, “this was really helpful. Maybe I can figure out what happened to Ennis, you know, to pay you back?”

Rashid gives him a somewhat incredulous look. “Seriously?”


“I know what happened to Ennis,” Rashid says. “I’m surprised that you don’t. It’s your pack’s Left Hand that killed him.”

Stiles’ jaw sags a little as he thinks back to Peter saying that Ennis’ pack wasn’t fond of him. “Uh. He failed to mention that. Are you, you know. Sure?”

“Am I positive? No,” Rashid says. “But Ennis was heading west, he’d hit the Sierra Nevadas. He
was going to get to the Hale territory, sooner rather than later. Everyone else was rolling over for
him, for whatever reason. I’ve looked at all the packs who were at risk from Ennis – from us – and
there was no one more dangerous and more ruthless in our path than Peter Hale. Take it from one
Left Hand to another – Peter might not admit it, but he killed Ennis.”

“Peter’s not an alpha,” Derek says uneasily.

“Doesn’t matter,” Rashid says. “Left Hands who kill alphas give the power to their pack, stay
betas. Keeps everyone strong, keeps their place at their alpha’s side.” He sees the look on their
faces and says, “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. Left Hands keep the secrets. They bury
the bodies.”

“Well, it’s kind of important to my case if Peter killed Ennis,” Stiles says, through clenched teeth.

“No it isn’t,” Rashid says. “Whatever Julia Baccari is up to, however she’s hoodwinked Kali into
helping her – Ennis has been dead for eleven years, and he ain’t getting any deader. What’s it
matter who put him in the ground?”

“But he said nobody knew who killed him!” Stiles says.

“And Peter Hale never tells a lie?” Rashid gives an amused snort. “Please, kid. Grow up. Peter
didn’t tell you because it’s none of your business. Let him have it. But don’t worry on my
account. Frankly I couldn’t care less what happened to Ennis. He brought it on himself, and I’ve
managed to do pretty well in his absence.”

He says goodbye and shows them back to their car.

Stiles drives almost twenty miles in silence before he bursts out with, “Oh my God!”

“Do you think he’s right?” Derek asks.

“Well, God knows I wouldn’t put it past Peter to hide something from me, particularly if he didn’t
think it was something I needed to know,” Stiles says. “And granted, when we started this whole
thing, we had no idea that Kali was involved, and even if she is involved, the connection to Ennis
is pretty irrelevant. But still! He just straight up murdered a guy and didn’t think that was worth
mentioning?”

“Well, this is Peter, so . . . no,” Derek says. “Probably not.”

Stiles groans. “Oh my God. I give up. Let’s go get some dinner and then find another hotel room
to screw each other silly in.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“So are you going to ask him?” Derek asks, as he pulls the car onto the little road that goes to the
den.

Stiles doesn’t need to ask who or about what. After a few moments of thought, he says, “No. Not
unless I have to. If Peter didn’t tell me . . . there’s probably a reason he doesn’t want me to know.
And I trust Peter. Which probably makes me an idiot. But I do. So I’ll see what I can find out. If I
think it’s going to be relevant, I’ll ask, but . . . hopefully it won’t be.”
Derek nods and says, “Okay.” He’s glad to be home. Separation from the pack, even only for a few days, always feels awkward and dangerous to him. He’s relieved when they pull up and he can get out of the car and embrace his parents and his sister, kiss his nieces and his nephew. Stiles is doing the same. His father is there, too, although Peter is nowhere to be seen. Stiles heads into the kitchen; it’s only three o’clock, so plenty early enough to do some cooking.

“So what did you find out?” Tom asks.

“Apparently,” Stiles says, as he settles in the kitchen to start dinner preparations, “Kali and Julia were an item. Kali broke up with her around the same time as she got hitched with Ennis. Reasons why are fuzzy.”

“Huh,” Tom says, thinking this over. “So Julia got upset and became an anti-werewolf activist.”

“So it would seem,” Stiles says. “Search for a Cure was actually founded in 2003, the same year. I still don’t know how Paige is connected, if she even was, but the rest of it seems to track pretty well. Jennifer-slash-Julia hit on the idea that bite rejection victims were the key to a cure. She got into Pure Silver’s records and somehow got Kali to bite people for her, then showed up as the benevolent do-gooder to get her samples. Meanwhile, she collected unhappy werewolves and made them even less happy, so she would have test subjects.”

“And without her contact from Pure Silver, we have absolutely no way of proving any of this,” Tom says, grimacing. “We don’t even know where Kali is.”

“She probably stays in one of the communes, right?” Aaron chips in.

“I don’t think so,” Stiles says. “She told Chris and Allison that alphas can’t handle the communes and I don’t see that she would have had any reason to lie about that. Not to them, at least. No, my guess is that Jennifer keeps Kali pretty close to her. But we can’t exactly search her place. We have exactly zero grounds to request a warrant.”

“Hm,” Talia says. “It’s possible that you might have to think around corners.”

That seems to be tacit permission to break into Jennifer’s house, and it looks like Tom is about to object, but Stiles is already shaking his head. “She’s a witch, and Kali’s an alpha. No way am I trying to get into her house without permission.”

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Laura says. “So Jennifer thinks that Stiles is the key to her weird lycanthropy cure. And she’s a witch. So, why doesn’t she just, you know . . . take what she needs from him without asking permission?”

“Oh, geez,” Stiles says. “Shut up before my father decides to keep me in a bunker.”

“She does have a point, though,” Tom says, a faint frown on his face. “It’s like there’s something that she’s waiting for.”

“Boy, that isn’t ominous at all,” Derek says, scowling and scooting closer to Stiles.

“So what do we do now?” Stiles asks, changing the subject. “If I could get some of the records from Search for a Cure, I could maybe find some of the past participants – you know, werewolves who have been in her communes that have ‘volunteered’ for the experiments. Maybe some of them would be willing to talk.”

“Even if they are, I’m sure that Jennifer had them sign waivers and followed all the right procedures to keep it legal,” Tom says. “The rogue alpha attacks are the only thing you can nail her on. And you can’t nail her on those until you find Kali. But,” he adds, “I think you have a
strong enough case that we can get a warrant for her phones and financials. And I’ve got a couple guys working on those payments that were made to the guy at Pure Silver – maybe we can trace them back to her somehow.”

Stiles groans. “I practically fell asleep halfway through that.”

“That’s police work, son,” Tom says, amused despite himself. “It isn’t always excitement and breakthroughs. A lot of the time it’s drudgework, going through the haystacks to find the needles.”

“Fine,” Stiles says, making a face. “We’ll do it your way.”

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It’s nearly nine o’clock on a Tuesday when Peter looks up from the game of chess he’s playing with Tom at the den’s kitchen table and says, “What did you do?”

Tom blinks in response and says, elegantly, “Huh?”

The house is quiet. Laura and Jonathan have gone back to their own house to put their kids to bed. Stiles and Derek are up in their bedroom, watching television. Tom has been sitting with Peter in the kitchen while Aaron does the last of the dishes. Talia is sitting with them, doing a crossword puzzle and drinking some tea that Stiles had made for her.

Before Peter can reply, Talia looks up as well. “Is that – ” she says.

“What?” Tom asks again, and then he hears a car door slam outside. “Who is it?”

“I’ll get it,” Aaron says. “I’m already up.” He dries his hands on a dishtowel and heads for the front of the house.

Peter looks at Tom and says, again, “What did you do?”

“What did I do? Well, not talk in cryptic half-sentences after being asked what the hell is going on,” Tom says, somewhat peevishly, and then Aaron is apparently at the front door because he hears footsteps and Rafael McCall marches into the kitchen. He looks livid. “Oh,” Tom says. “That.”

Talia is immediately on her feet, eyes crimson. “You are trespassing, Agent McCall, and you will remove yourself from the premises immediately.”

“Not until I have an explanation!” McCall shouts, and to be honest he looks a little unhinged, with his hair in his face and his tie askew. He reaches out as if to grab Peter, demanding, “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Peter looks completely unimpressed and unconcerned, but Tom is already on his feet, and grabs McCall’s wrist before he can lay a hand on Peter. “Agent McCall,” he says, “you are out of line. Why don’t we take this outside?”

“He doesn’t leave my sight until I have answers!” McCall snaps.

“Peter isn’t the one responsible for your demotion,” Tom says. “I am.”

McCall’s jaw sags slightly, and it’s clear that some of the wind has gone out of his sails.
“Or actually,” Tom says, keeping his tone calm and reasonable, “you are. Your own behavior is what resulted in this, so I recommend you keep your hands to yourself and take this outside like I suggested.”

McCall’s jaw clenches angrily, but he turns and heads towards the front door. All four adults follow him, primarily because they aren’t about to leave Tom alone with a maniac, even if Tom can certainly take care of himself. As soon as they’re outside, McCall whirls around and says through gritted teeth, “Explain yourself.”

“For starters, I don’t have to explain anything to you,” Tom says. “You could have asked your superiors why you were pulled off the case. But you were too eager to blame everything on Peter Hale to actually do that, and now you’re in this bind. However, since I want you gone sooner rather than later, I will explain. Yes, I called your superiors. I told them about your gross misconduct during your interview with Peter, and they agreed with me that mocking a man’s dead wife and child wasn’t appropriate. Particularly not when it was someone who was barely even a person of interest, let alone a suspect, who had granted you an interview out of courtesy because you were unable to get a subpoena – and I know you tried and failed, Rafael. I told them about how you tried to convince my IT staff to break into Peter’s phone even though you didn’t have a warrant. I explained to them that you were clearly still upset about how you had left things in Beacon Hills, and that you were taking this as an opportunity to harass the Hale family and try to drag me through the mud instead of actually solving the case you came here to solve. They asked me if I knew on what grounds you thought Peter Hale might have been involved. I explained your theory to them and then told them about how there was absolutely no shred of evidence to support it. They told me that they were going to look through your files and then make a decision. Apparently, they decided that I was right and that you’re a useless waste of oxygen.”

“You – you son of a bitch!” McCall shouts. “I know you were involved in this, all of you – it’s all a conspiracy against me!”

“You’ve always loved acting like the victim,” Tom says, his voice tight with anger. “Nothing is ever your fault, is it. But leaving aside obvious questions like ‘if I was involved, why would I have had Stiles reopen the case’, the fact is that you’re being reassigned and I don’t have to say anything to you. Now if you know what’s good for you, you’ll go calm down and then report to your superiors for your new case.”

“You’re the one who’s going to lose when I’m through with you!” McCall says. “You might have my boss listening to you now, but I bet you neglected to mention the fact that you’re shackled up with the Hale pack’s Left Hand!”

Talia winces and her gaze darts to Peter, but her brother’s face is blank. Tom’s mouth twists into a grimace and he bites out, “It isn’t like your boss doesn’t know that I’m part of this pack, for one thing, and secondly you are way out of line, and I don’t have to stand here and – ”

“What does he mean?” Peter interjects, and Talia winces again. So does Aaron. Peter is looking between Tom and McCall, still with that blank expression. “You think that we’re – ” he makes a circular gesture with his fingers. “Together?”

“Don’t give me that,” McCall says. “Playing innocent won’t win you any points with me. I know that you two are – ”

“Listen to me,” Tom interrupts. “I don’t care that you’re with the God damned FBI, shut your mouth right now or I will shut it for you.”

“Oh, you’re threatening me?” McCall looks satisfied, his temper easing back now that he thinks
he has the upper hand. “Do you think – ”

“Are we?” Peter asks, not paying any attention to McCall. “Do people think that about us?”

Tom’s shoulders tighten, but he keeps his voice even. “Peter, we can talk about this later.”

“No, I want to talk about it now,” Peter says. “You’re upset. I don’t like it when people upset you.”

“Then let me deal with this and then we can – ”

“You can’t be my mate,” Peter says, and Talia sees Tom’s jaw tremble slightly. “Olivia was my mate. And Claudia was yours.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, but – ”

“But what?” Peter is looking at Tom with an intense, focused expression. It’s not at all the way he looks during one of his spells, where he gets vague and distant. It’s practically the exact opposite. “What is it, then?”

“Peter,” Tom says, practically through clenched teeth. “We will talk about this later.”

“No, I’m not letting this go until I get an answer,” Peter says. “What do you want? From this, from us.”

Tom stares at him for a long moment, caught between anger and disbelief and with the scent of a hundred emotions rolling off him, before he bites out, “I want to be able to love you without being afraid that it means I’ll lose you.”

Peter’s eyes widen slightly. He looks at Talia, as if asking her what to do. Even McCall has gone silent. Then, abruptly, Peter lunges forward and kisses Tom on the mouth. Tom barely manages to keep Peter’s force from knocking him to the ground, and might not have if Aaron hadn’t quickly moved behind them to stop his fall. Once he regains his balance, he manages to smooth the kiss into something less desperate, putting a hand on the side of Peter’s face, rubbing Peter’s cheekbone with his thumb.

A long minute goes by. McCall opens his mouth to say something, but it turns into a grunt of pain when Talia steps sharply on his foot. Then Peter pulls away. He draws in a shaky breath, then says, quietly, “I . . . I have to go. Excuse me.” He turns on his heel and walks away, breaking into a jog as he rounds the house.

“Fuck,” Talia snarls. She stabs a finger at McCall and says, “Tom, deal with him. Get him off my property. I’ll handle Peter.” She heads after Peter with quick strides.

McCall smirks as Tom turns to face him, but the smirk fades as he sees that Tom isn’t just annoyed, Tom is *livid*. “I’ve spent the last year trying to figure out how to tell him how much I care about him without him having some kind of, of nervous breakdown,” Tom says. “Now you come in here and in thirty seconds manage to destroy all of that.” He has to stop and take a breath. “You heard the lady. Get off her property. Don’t come here again.”

“I still have questions I want answered – ”

“I don’t care,” Tom says.

“I’m a federal agent and I – ”
“Listen to me, you piece of shit, I don’t think you understand the situation you’ve put yourself in here,” Tom says. “You do know that Talia is friends with the California Attorney General, right? That she’s written legislation with Senator McNally and Congressman Ruiz? Do you realize that alphas of old, established packs practically give new definition to the phrase ‘friends in high places’? Give me a reason to have you fired, Rafael. I won’t lose a God damned bit of sleep over it. I’ve been talking her out of doing it for weeks. I kept telling her that despite everything, you’re a good cop, that you weren’t going to make this about us. But you just had to go and prove me wrong. You’ve already lost this case, Rafael, but if you want to keep your career you will shut the hell up for once in your God damned life, get in your car, and leave.” When Rafael hesitates, Tom barks out, “Now!”

“This isn’t over,” Rafael says, but he goes, getting in the car and slamming the door.

Tom has to take several deep breaths. After a long minute, Aaron turns to him and asks, “You gonna be okay?”

“I don’t know,” Tom says wearily. “I really just don’t.” He rubs both hands over his face. It looks like he’s about to say something else when Talia comes back around the house.

“He outdistanced me,” she says. “I could have caught up with him, but . . . he clearly didn’t want to talk to me. I think it might be better to leave him alone to sort it out. I texted him, letting him know to call me if he needs me.”

“Okay.” Tom sighs. “Yeah, okay.”

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When several hours have passed and there still hasn’t been any sign of Peter, Talia goes looking for him. It isn’t difficult. She knows exactly where he’ll be, under the memorial tree. He’s sitting with his legs pulled to his chest, staring off into space. But he seems lucid enough. He looks up when she approaches, and then away. He doesn’t look distant or vague. He just looks miserable.

“Penny for your thoughts, brother?” she asks, sitting down on the ground next to him.

He’s silent for a long time, then says, “You probably think I’m an idiot.”

Talia snorts despite herself. “Peter, there are a lot of words I could use for you, but ‘idiot’ is pretty much never going to be one of them.”

“I don’t know how I could have missed it,” Peter says. “Looking back on things. The way I treated him, the way I marked him, the way he allowed me to . . . I suppose he was probably just humoring me.”

Talia gives this a moment’s thought and then says, “Okay. I was wrong. You’re an idiot.”

Peter growls at her.

“All right, little brother,” Talia says. “Cards on the table, and I’m just going to have to make sure you handle it. Yes, the way you were treating Tom was pretty obvious. I figured it out at least a year ago, and spoke to him about it not long after that. Derek and Stiles have both figured it out. I can’t speak for the others. But nobody thought you were stupid for not noticing yourself. You were blind to it because you needed to be, because you weren’t ready to handle it yet. And nobody blamed you for that. Least of all Tom. He understands your pain better than any of us.”

“I was promising him things I can’t give him,” Peter says.

“You were giving him things that you could give him,” Talia says gently. “You must think he’s an idiot if you think he didn’t know that this was going to be difficult for you. But it isn’t impossible, Peter.”

“He isn’t my mate,” Peter says.

“So what?” Talia asks. Peter gives her a blank look. “Humans fall in love every day without the help of mating instincts. Why does it matter if he’s not your mate? Does that mean that you can’t love him? I really don’t think it does. I think you’ve already proven the contrary.”

Peter lets out a shaky breath. “I don’t know if I can.”

Talia reaches out and grips his hand between hers. “You’re frightened,” she says. “I understand, Peter, I truly do.” Her free hand hovers over her stomach and she says, “I’m frightened, too. And I
could tell you all the platitudes about how Olivia would want you to be happy, that you’re not dishonoring her memory by falling in love again. But you know all that. It isn’t your problem. I know how you love, brother. I know that you pour your entire heart and soul into it, and I know that the concept of loss is terrifying.”

“It won’t work,” Peter says. “It can’t work. I’m . . . I’m broken, Talia. I can’t be what he needs me to be.”

“You’re already what he needs you to be,” Talia says. “He’s not asking you to be anything other than who you are. He’s already in love with you, Peter, warts and all.” She sits back. “I know that it’s part of your job, part of your personality, to plan ahead. To try to see all the possible outcomes. And this is one time that that’s biting you in the ass. There are some things you just can’t plan ahead for, Peter. You have to take them as they come. Listen to your heart, instead of your head.”

“I thought you weren’t going to spout platitudes,” Peter says.

Talia shrugs a little. “If the shoe fits,” she says. “But I’m serious. Can I promise that everything will go splendidly and you two will live happily ever after? Of course not. Nobody can promise that. But that has nothing to do with whether or not you should take the plunge. Just tell me – right now, in this moment, if this moment was the only one that existed, if the earth was going to smash into the sun tomorrow – what would make you happy?”

Peter’s silent for a long time, turning his wedding ring around between his fingers. “I want to go to him,” he says quietly. “I want to be everything he wants me to be.”

“Then do that,” Talia says. “No, nothing in life is certain. We know that better than most. But he loves you. And you love him. If you hold back out of fear, then it wouldn’t hurt less if you lost him. It would only hurt more.”

Peter lets out another breath. “If I lost him, that would be it for me,” he says. “I couldn’t handle that twice.”


“Thank you, Talia.” Peter gets to his feet, then extends a hand and helps her up as well. She gives a little grunt. “You’ll be all right getting home?”

“I’ll be fine, little brother,” Talia says. Then she smiles and adds, “I won’t wait up.”

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Tom would have liked to say that he was mature enough that he wasn’t drowning his sorrows in a carton of chocolate ice cream when his doorbell rang that evening. It would not have been true. He was smart enough to stay away from liquor when he was upset, but after possibly losing the man he was in love with due to McCall’s snide interference, he figured he deserved chocolate.

So when the doorbell rings, he quickly sticks it back in the freezer and wipes his mouth off on a napkin before heading for the door. Out of all the people he’s expecting to see, Peter isn’t one of them. Peter hasn’t rung his doorbell in – possibly ever. But he did this time, and Tom is pretty sure that that bodes ill. “Hey, you okay?” he asks, standing back to let Peter in.

“I think I am,” Peter says. He closes the door after himself and flips the deadbolt. Then he turns
back to face Tom, leans up, and kisses him. It’s not a desperate kiss like earlier, but it’s hardly
chaste, either. He gets an arm around Tom’s shoulders and leans into it, and Tom says to hell with
everything and goes for broke.

Peter pulls away a minute later, not even out of breath, which Tom thinks is a little unfair. “I’m
surprised you’re not asking me a million questions,” he says. “Like, how are we going to handle
this, or, am I really going to be okay with it.”

“No,” Tom says. “I know you don’t have the answers. I don’t have them either.” He shrugs and
says, “I think that’s okay. You seem to really want to kiss me, and I know I really want to kiss
you. That’s probably enough to be moving forward with, don’t you think?”

Peter leans in and kisses him again, one hand twining through Tom’s hair. “If we’re going to be
quite honest,” he says against Tom’s mouth, “I want to do a lot more than kiss you.”

Tom hesitates. “I don’t want to go too fast for you,” he says. “We don’t have to do anything that
you’re not ready for.”

Peter pulls away so he can look at Tom. “I love you,” he says, “and I’m ready.”

There’s not much Tom can say to that, so he kisses Peter again, and then again, and then several
more times for good measure.

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Tom’s not used to someone else being in his room, let alone his bed, so he’s a little confused when
he wakes up the next morning with Peter curled up at his side. He recovers quickly, though,
reaching out with one hand to rub his thumb over Peter’s cheekbone. Peter stirs but doesn’t wake.
Tom rolls over to check the clock and sees that it’s about half past eight. He normally gets up
earlier, but, well. They were up pretty late.

His impulse is to get up and make Peter some breakfast, but he realizes halfway into his pajama
pants that it’s probably a bad idea. It’s undoubtedly something Olivia did for him, not just once but
repeatedly. He decides to go get some donuts instead. But he doesn’t just want to leave a note.
Peter might get upset if he wakes up in the bed alone; he might not notice a note.

So Tom leans over and kisses Peter on the crown of his head, on his temple. As he expected, Peter
rouses almost immediately. “Morning,” the werewolf mumbles.

“Hey,” Tom says. “I’m going to go pick up some coffee and donuts. I’ll be right back.”

“Mmkay,” Peter says, rolls over, and goes back to sleep. Tom throws on a pair of jeans and a T-
shirt and makes a quick stop in the bathroom. He doesn’t bother shaving – it’s a Sunday, who
cares – but sees himself in the mirror and realizes that he’s grinning like an idiot. This does
nothing at all to dampen his mood.

Being a Sunday morning, there’s a line at the donut place, but it’s still early so it isn’t too bad. He
gets a dozen, ignoring the fact that Stiles would undoubtedly have apoplexy, and a gallon of
coffee because he knows that Peter likes hazelnut coffee and that’s the special of the day. He puts
it all on the kitchen counter and then goes upstairs to see if Peter is awake yet.

As it happens, Peter is curled up on his side, face pressed into the pillow Tom had been using.
Tom takes the opportunity to snap a quick photo with his phone, because that’s an adorable picture he wants to be able to review every day. Then he leans over to caress Peter’s cheek. “You awake?”

“Sort of,” Peter says, and then suddenly he’s got an arm around Tom’s waist and Tom is on his back on the bed and he doesn’t even know how it happened.

Needless to say, it’s quite a while later before they manage to get downstairs for the donuts. Tom has managed to get his pajama pants back on, and Peter has claimed his bathrobe. Tom hasn’t bothered to tell him that it’s inside out. They have to eat their donuts on the sofa, which Tom typically has rules about, because Peter refuses to leave his lap, and sitting that way in the kitchen chairs is awkward and difficult.

He’s on his second donut (and Peter is demolishing his fourth) when the front door opens and Stiles bounces inside. “Hey, Dad, you home?” he calls out, before jogging into the living room. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees them, taking in not just the cuddling, but the donuts and Peter in Tom’s inside-out robe. “Oh. Oh my God! You two totally did it!”

Tom literally face-palms. “Stiles . . .”

“No, I’m sorry, I’m really happy for you!” Stiles says. “I just needed to get some papers from my room. Well, sort of. I mean, that was my excuse for coming by to check on you after what happened last night. Because you didn’t answer when I called you. I guess you were busy, am I right?” he asks, with a mile wide grin.

“Stiles . . .” Tom says again.

“Right, sorry,” Stiles says. “Super happy for you. Just gonna grab my stuff and then I’ll get out of your hair. Your ridiculous looking sex hair. See you later!” He darts up the stairs. Peter complacently starts on his fifth donut while Tom studies the ceiling and wonders why this is his life now. A few moments later, Stiles jogs back down, waves on his way through, and then is out the front door and gone.

Peter leans in and sniffs at Tom’s throat. “Are you upset?” he asks.

“No, I’m just looking back at my life and my choices and wondering how this happened,” Tom says, reaching for another donut. “Not the whole thing with you. But how I managed to raise a child with absolutely no filter.”

Peter gives an amused snort. “Admittedly, werewolf culture has worn off on Stiles a lot more than it’s worn off on you,” he says. “Although that would make sense. Exposure, et cetera. I think most humans always have a certain amount of awkwardness around those subjects. Stiles doesn’t mind discussing other people’s sex lives, but he still doesn’t like anyone else discussing his. Olivia was much the same way.”

Tom rubs his thumb over the back of Peter’s neck. “I think I’m going to stick with ‘uncomfortable in general’. Thanks.”

Amused, Peter glances up at him and says, “Yes, that’s what she thought would happen, but it didn’t. Exposure.” He’s quiet for a moment. “I’m glad you’re not much like her, you know.” He sees Tom’s frown and adds, “Physically, I mean. There’s no way I could get . . . confused. I don’t know that I could have ever fallen in love with another woman. But you’re about as unlike Olivia physically as you could get. Her dark skin versus your light, her long dark hair versus yours being short and blonde. I used to . . .” His breath catches a little, but then a small smile touches his face. “I had so much trouble convincing her that I loved her natural hair. She was always straightening
it or adding ridiculous amounts of product to tame it. But I loved it when it was enormous and curly."

“Well, you won’t get any enormous curly hair out of me,” Tom says.

“True. And then there are the obvious differences, of course,” Peter continues, rubbing a hand up and down Tom’s chest. “Like your muscles,” he adds, squeezing Tom’s bicep. “I do like those.”

“Glad to be appreciated,” Tom says, amused.

Another quiet moment, and then Peter says, “Thank you for waiting for me.”

Tom leans over and presses a kiss into his temple. “If we’re going to be honest, I thought it would take a lot longer than it did. But I would have waited anyway.”

“You’re amazing,” Peter says. “I hope you know that.”

“I have my moments,” Tom says.

“I’m not sure I deserve you.”


Peter laughs quietly and presses his face against Tom’s shoulder for a moment. Then he pulls away and says, “How about a movie?”

“A movie sounds good,” Tom says.

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Stiles is just finishing up regaling Derek with the details of exactly how rumpled his father and Peter were that morning, to Derek’s great amusement, when his phone rings. He puts aside the carrots he’s peeling and grabs it to see that it’s Danny calling. That surprises him somewhat; they’re in the second week of school now, and Danny is off in Massachusetts.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asks, tucking it under his ear.

“How much, man, you?” Danny asks, and when the pleasantries are over, he says, “I’m gonna send you an e-mail but it’s gonna come from an unfamiliar address, so it might get kicked into your spam folder.”

“Oh, why?”

“I met this guy here, Han, who has this kickass decryption program,” Danny says. “We’ve been working on that stuff from Search From a Cure that I got ages ago.”

“Really?” Stiles is even more surprised. “Is that your idea of fun at MIT?”

“Uh, yeah,” Danny says. “Seriously. Actual money has been put on whether or not he could do it, after some of the others got a look at the encryption they were using – anyway, I’ve been careful with the info, no worries, but we finally got some of it done and I think you’re going to want to see it. It’s about the experiments.”
“Awesome,” Stiles says. “You said some of it. Is there more?”

“Tons more,” Danny says. “They use some bullshit rotating encryption. It’s going to take years to
do it all. But I think you might have enough to get a warrant now. I mean, I’m not sure, I’m not a
cop here – oh, wait, neither are you.”

“Hardy har har,” Stiles says. “Seriously, though, this is awesome. I’ll send you a care package.”

“If you send me some of those double chocolate cookies you make with espresso in them, I will be
the most popular kid in my dorm,” Danny tells him.

“Consider it done,” Stiles says. They say their goodbyes and he hangs up. Peeling carrots to put in
macaroni salad takes a far second place to looking over what Danny sent, so Stiles washes his
hands and then heads over to the kitchen table with his laptop. He doesn’t have to relay the
conversation to Derek, since Derek had heard every word, and the werewolf is leaning over his
shoulder as he pulls up the files.

Stiles is passingly familiar with how to read scientific reports, but these are dense even by his
standards. He skims through them, trying to decipher the method through which they had
developed a person’s blood into an ‘antidote’ for lycanthropy, but unable to. He can see that, as
per usual, the experiments have killed a lot of werewolves.

“That’s not illegal, though, is it?” Derek asks. “If they’ve signed a waiver and everything?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “I mean, could we prove that the waiver was signed under duress? That
they’re torturing werewolves to get them to a vulnerable state of mind? Maybe. But it wouldn’t be
easy.”

Derek considers this while eating one of the carrots Stiles had peeled. “There must be a way to tie
the experiments back to the rogue attacks.”

“Hm . . .” Stiles continues to read. “Well, it won’t be through timing. These experiments have
been ongoing for years. They probably start a new one after each attack, but keep trying to tweak
it until the next one. Let me run a quick search . . .” He continues to type while Derek goes over to
the counter and starts peeling more carrots for him. “God damned Greek roots,” he mutters. “Huh.
That’s interesting.”

“What is?” Derek asks.

“So they have to say what they’re testing, right? And it does. They’re very specific about how
they’re using antibodies from bite rejection victims with a history of silver exposure. Now, that
alone doesn’t prove anything. They could have heard about the attack on the news, gone to
interview victims. But they’re very specific about the exposure – how much silver was taken and
in what sort of time frame.” He’s tapping his phone as he speaks, and then puts it to his ear. “Mrs.
Barclay? Hey, it’s Stiles again! Listen, I know it was a long time ago now, but when that woman
came to take your blood, did she ask any questions about how much silver you were taking, or in
what way? Are you sure? . . . Okay, thanks. That’s really helpful.”

Derek is frowning as he hangs up. “If they didn’t ask the victims about the amount they took . . .”

“Then the only way they would know would be if they looked at the records of how much they
bought and when they bought it,” Stiles says, satisfied. “Add to that all the victims getting their
silver through the same company, and the IT guy suddenly disappearing, and I think we have
probable cause for a warrant now. Let’s see what the rest of their records say.”

He’s about to dial his phone when it rings, and he nearly drops it, startled. It’s his father’s
ringtone, so he picks up. “Hey, Dad, what’s up? I was just about to call you.”

“Well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” Tom says. “The good news is, they found Jason Stillwell.”

“Damn, two breakthroughs in one day!” Stiles says. “Where was he?”

“In a dumpster,” Tom says. “That’s the bad news.”

Stiles grimaces. “Dead? How?”

“Well,” Tom says slowly, “from the looks of it, he was poisoned with wolfsbane and then bitten by an alpha werewolf. It’d be difficult to say which one of those things killed him. Aconite is toxic to humans, and he definitely went into bite rejection, but he also might have simply exsanguinated. It’s impossible to say, at least until the ME turns in the final report.”

“How in the hell would Blake have known that we were on to him?” Stiles asks, bewildered.

“My guess?” Tom says. “He told her. He was tipped off by somebody at Pure Silver, because they absolutely didn’t want their customers to know that their IT guy had released a bunch of their information. He went to Blake for money or protection, and she decided to tie up loose ends and get a new bite rejection victim while she was at it.”

“Well, I’ve got news for her,” Stiles says, and sums up what was in the information Danny had sent him. “Think we’ve got enough for a warrant?”

“Added to Stillwell’s death, then yeah, I think we’ve got enough,” Tom says. “I’ll get on it. Look, you stay at the den. I’m not saying I’m paranoid, but . . .”

“But it’s not paranoia when they’re really out to get you,” Stiles says, and sighs. “Yeah, I’ll stay here. I’ll even have Derek drive me to class tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll call you as soon as I know something.”

~ ~ ~

Stiles is just leaving his psychology 101 class on Friday when his phone chimes with an incoming text. He sees that it’s with Peter and opens it with some trepidation. But the message is relatively benign. ‘Need to speak with you. At your father’s house.’ Stiles texts back to let Peter know that he’s on his way. He wonders what he’ll find there, which makes him grin a little. He’s glad that his father and Peter finally got things worked out, glad that his father seems happy.

When he gets there, he comes inside to find the two of them in the kitchen. Peter is doing the crossword puzzle while Tom is fiddling with the coffee maker. “Ah, here you are,” Peter says, and Tom frowns, which Stiles takes to mean that his father hadn’t been informed of the agenda. “Good. I wanted to speak with you, both of you, at the same time.”

“That’s not ominous at all,” Stiles says, accepting a mug of coffee from his father before he sits down.

Peter is quiet for a few minutes, which doesn’t make either Stilinski feel better, before he says, “I’ve done some things in my life that I doubt either of you would approve of. Which is fine. I
don’t sit around pondering moral judgments. I do what I have to do to protect my pack, and I don’t regret it. Which is why I found myself somewhat discomfited to realize that I had done something... I wasn’t proud of. Something I did regret.” He looks at Tom and continues, “I have no doubt that there are things in my past that would make you profoundly uncomfortable with me. And I don’t wish to discuss them, and I doubt you do either. But this is different, because I lied to you. Both of you. And you deserve better.”

“About... what?” Stiles asks warily, thinking of what Rashid had said.

Peter lets out a breath. “I know who killed Paige Krasikeva,” he says, and Stiles’ jaw sags. “I’ve known this entire time.”

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Chapter 18

Peter continues to speak into the stunned silence. “In fact, from the moment you first mentioned it to me, I went out of my way to steer you onto theories that I knew were incorrect, because I didn’t want you to know about my involvement in her death.”

“You – I – what?” Stiles stammers. “Wait, what? Who killed her, then? It can’t have been you, you’re not an alpha.”

“Let me start at the beginning –”

“No way, I feel like I’m in some bad movie and you’re going to be sniped before you can get to the point,” Stiles says. “The name. Now.”

Peter looks faintly amused at that and says, “Ennis Black.”

Stiles considers that for a moment, chewing on his lower lip and darting a glance at his father, who’s frowning. “Okay. Now, start at the beginning.”

Peter nods acquiescence. “As I told you, in 2002, Ennis Black and Kali Steele merged their packs and started forcing other packs off their territory. They were expanding enough that they were likely to become a threat to everyone in time, although they were months if not years away from getting this far west. However, I prefer to take care of threats before they grow sharp teeth, and the larger their pack became, the more powerful Ennis and Kali became. It seemed prudent to knock them off their self-styled pedestal before they could build it any higher than they already had. I was considering all of this when Talia got involved anyway. One of the alphas who had been displaced was a friend of hers, and she was talking to other alphas, trying to drum up support to take action against them.”

“What sort of ‘action’ would that have been?” Tom asks, speaking for the first time since Peter’s revelation.

“There is a way to strip alphas of their rank,” Peter says. “Drain their power. That would have been the most likely conclusion. Ennis, of course, was having none of this. I began to hear rumors – reliable ones – that he intended to come ‘take care of’ Talia. Which of course necessitated quick action on my part.

“Stiles, you’ve been working under the assumption that a rogue alpha bite was always due to either insanity or accident,” Peter continues, “but there is a third reason. Control. An alpha has control over a newly turned wolf, particularly if they haven’t had much contact with werewolves and don’t understand how to anchor themselves.”

“So Ennis bit Paige to . . . control her? I still don’t get it,” Stiles confessed.

“Basically, yes,” Peter says. “I did some research and found that that was how he had been coercing packs to move. He would target a human that was important to someone in the pack – a friend, a colleague, et cetera – and give them the bite. Then he would hold them hostage, exert control over them, until the alpha of the other pack gave in to his demands.”

“Jesus,” Tom says. “But why Paige? She wasn’t actually connected to you guys.”

“No,” Peter says, “she was not. But I needed somebody for Ennis to target. I needed to know
where he was going to be, so I could intercept him. And that meant making somebody look like an attractive candidate. I chose Paige Krasikeva.”

Stiles feels sick. “You started the rumors.”

Peter nods. “Easily enough. I made a comment or two within earshot of various high schoolers that Paige had a crush on Derek and was hoping to win his heart at the Searching Ceremonies. The teenaged rumor mill did the rest of the work for me. I knew Paige often stayed late after school and that Ennis would very easily be able to find her there. He had had a tendency to go after younger people as they were more vulnerable, so that made her a better candidate than one of Aaron’s colleagues or Laura’s friends. And from there it was just a matter of time.”

“Why didn’t you stop him from actually biting her?” Tom asks, his voice a little tight.

Peter gives a little grimace. “If I intercepted him before he bit her, and then failed to finish the job, I wouldn’t have had a way to find him again. Whereas if he had bitten Paige, I would. But when she rejected the bite, he panicked. He left her there and ran. I used her phone to call 911, wiped it, and followed him.”

Stiles pushes his hands through his hair. “Christ,” he mutters.

“You have to understand, I never intended for her to be killed,” Peter says. “Bite rejection is so rare that honestly it never occurred to me. And after she did go into rejection, I chose to call 911 and then leave her, because if I stayed with her, Ennis would have gotten away. It was a calculated risk I took, and she paid for it with her life.”

“What happened to Ennis?” Stiles asks, although at this point he’s pretty sure that he knows.

“I killed him, of course.”

“You’re not an alpha,” Tom says.

“Oh, no. I gave his power to Talia. I’ve done that more than once. It’s what I would have done if I had managed to kill Deucalion. I have no desire to be an alpha myself – far too much work, and I’m really not well-suited for it – and the power makes Talia stronger, makes the pack stronger.”

“So she knew?” Stiles asks. “She must have made the connection.”

“No. I was careful to keep the power and hide it from Talia for some time. She knew it was Ennis’ power, but she never connected that with Paige’s death.”

Stiles sits back in his chair, mind whirling. He doesn’t know what to do about any of this.

“I was sorry for what had happened to her,” Peter says. “I made amends as best I could – made sure her family was properly supported, which was easy enough as they sued the hospital. I did it to stop a madman and to protect my pack, and to be perfectly honest with you, I didn’t think about it much after everything had been settled. But when you asked me about it, Stiles, I lied to you almost on instinct. I didn’t want either of you to know that I had gotten an innocent child killed. So for that, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have misled you.”

“Yeah, well . . . if you hadn’t, I never would have stumbled onto this much bigger problem, so . . . I guess I can get over that. Jerk.” Stiles kicks Peter’s ankle under the table, not sure how else to react.

Peter lets out a breath. “Tom?”
Tom is quiet for a moment. “You didn’t mean for her to get hurt,” he finally says. “And that doesn’t make what you did okay. But I think it is important to remember that.” He shakes his head a little. “You and I have never existed on the same moral wavelength. And you’re right in that I’ve never wanted to explore that too deeply. You did the wrong thing for the right reasons, and maybe there wasn’t a better way of bringing Ennis down. So we can . . . at least put it behind us. Under one condition, which is that we need to give Paige’s family closure. Regardless of whether or not you want your role in her death discussed. They deserve to know what happened to their daughter.”

“Which I absolutely would have agreed to,” Peter says, “if it weren’t for the fact that Agent McCall is now waiting in the wings to discredit you. Which my involvement surely would.”

Tom gives a little grimace, but it’s Stiles who speaks up. “Why don’t we use my original theory?” he asks. “That one of the bullies had tricked her into staying after school, and witnessed the attack, but then was afraid to come forward? We can probably find someone who would be willing to testify to that, you know, pay them off or whatever.”

“Not a bad idea, Stiles,” Peter says. Tom gives another sigh. “I assume you have someone in mind?”

“I tracked down a few of the kids that were bullying her, yeah,” Stiles says. “A couple were more nervous than others.”

“We don’t want the nervous ones,” Peter says. “Nervous people break down under pressure. We want one who will accept a large paycheck and then keep his mouth shut.”

“Okay, then we want Tucker Reilly,” Stiles says. “He’s the one who coordinated the conspiracy of silence to begin with. Which is actually kind of amusing, since in the long run it was totally unnecessary. The fact that they were bullying her really had nothing to do with her death.”

Peter nods. “Give me his contact information. I’ll take care of this.”

“You don’t want me to – ”

“No,” Peter says. “This is my mess. I’ll clean it up.”

“Okay,” Stiles says quietly. He shifts and says, “Well, uh. I’ve got some reading to do for my classes tomorrow, so . . .”

Tom nods, reaches over to tousle his hair. “You get going, kiddo.”

Stiles agrees, but he feels awkward leaving, feels like he’s telling Peter that he’s angry or disappointed or that he doesn’t care about him. To be fair, his feelings on the matter are more than a little complicated, but he doesn’t want to leave Peter upset. “I was thinking about making chicken cacciatore for dinner,” he says, knowing that it’s one of Peter’s favorites. “You’ll be home by then, right?”

Peter’s gaze softens a little, and he says, “Yes, Stiles. I’ll be home for dinner.”

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The sheer of amount of nothing that follows the bombshell that Danny had dropped is about to
drive Stiles around the bend. A warrant was issued to examine all of Search for a Cure’s records. A couple detectives had gone to their headquarters in Portland to collect them, and nobody was there. It wasn’t one of those creepy ‘it was as if they had never existed’ scenarios. The signs were still there, desks and cups full of pens and everything. But the staff was gone, the papers were gone, and the computers were gone.

Danny thinks that typical office computers wouldn’t have been enough to have hosted the encrypted files he had found. “They have a server farm somewhere,” he told Stiles, who wondered what the hell a server farm was. But if they do, nobody has managed to find it. Similarly, nobody has managed to find Jennifer Blake, although there’s an intense hunt for her.

Thanks to the information Allison had gotten, they had the locations of all the compounds and the number of werewolves that were supposed to be there. All of them were raided by the government – Stiles hates the word since it was non-violent but can’t think of one better – and the werewolves were emptied into one large refugee camp that several alphas that Talia got in touch with helped set up. They were sorted into groups of people who at least spoke the same language, and thoroughly educated on what werewolves need and how the communes were denying them that.

About fifty percent of the werewolves were extremely relieved and took to it like a duck to water; the less time they had been in the commune, the more likely that was. The other half reacted with violent negativity to these suggestions. The refugee camp was sorted again into smaller groups. A few of the better off werewolves started being adopted by packs. The others were getting intensive psychological treatment.

So it wasn’t correct to say that nothing was happening, but Jennifer Blake and Kali were nowhere to be seen. All their accounts had been frozen, but Stiles is sure that they have more that the authorities aren’t aware of. They had vanished without a trace.

While all that is going on, the long-unsolved mystery of Paige Krasikeva’s murder has finally been closed. The day after Peter’s talk with Tom and Stiles, Paige’s classmate Tucker Reilly shows up at the police station to talk to the sheriff. He says that he had pranked Paige by planting a note in her locker to make her stay late after school, and then hidden in a bathroom to watch the fallout. He describes Ennis Black perfectly and gives a relatively coherent accounting of the events he had not actually witnessed. For the record, Tom asks why he chose to come forward now, and Tucker says, as planned, that Stiles had figured out what he had done and convinced him that Paige’s parents deserved closure.

Tom then ‘compared Ennis’ description’ to alphas who had been active at the time and narrowed it down to Ennis Black. Then he went to the Krasikeva household and explained what had happened. As he had predicted, they were grateful to at least know who had been responsible for their daughter’s death. Tom keeps Tucker’s identity a secret. He tells the Krasikeva family that the student doesn’t wish to be identified and that he’s chosen to honor that wish. He’s remorseful, and Tom doesn’t think he deserves to have his life ruined because of a stupid thing he had done when he was fifteen.

They’re also grateful to hear that Ennis is no longer among the living. Tom tells them mostly the truth about that – he tells them the truth about what Ennis had been doing and says that another werewolf pack had hunted him down and killed him. He’s not long on the details, but they don’t ask many questions. They just want to know that he’s sure, and he says he is.

It’s all over the news, of course, and Stiles is pleased that even if he hadn’t really solved it, at least he had brought closure to it. “Looking back on it, it makes sense now that I couldn’t figure it out,” he says to Derek, rolling out dough for cinnamon rolls. “I mean. It was Peter. If there’s going to be someone who manages a murder I can’t solve, it would be him.”
“Fair,” Derek says, slightly amused despite himself. He’s not sure what to think of Peter’s involvement in Paige’s death. He’s angry, because Peter used him, in addition to getting Paige killed. But at the same time, he knows that everything Peter does, he does for the pack. It’s hard to be angry about that. And regardless, it’s eleven years in the past. Peter’s changed; they’ve all changed.

So his method of dealing with it was to give his uncle one hard punch to the face and then declare that they were done with it. “That seems fair,” Peter replied, holding onto his bleeding nose.

With all this going on, Derek is a little concerned when he gets a call on ‘Eric Hardy’s’ phone. Since Rafael McCall had insisted on being able to contact his assistant any time day or night, but Derek hadn’t wanted to give the man his own number, they had gotten him a second cell phone. It had been silent since McCall’s removal from the case, and he had sort of forgotten about it in the intervening two weeks. But then it rings while he’s lying on the bed with Stiles, watching TV, and he gropes for it, only noticing at the last minute which phone it is. “Hello?” he says, cautiously.

“Hardy,” McCall snaps, “I need to talk to you. Where are you?”

“Uh, at home,” Derek says.

“What’s your address?”

Derek blinks and then says, “Uh, I don’t know that I’m really comfortable with . . .”

“Fine,” McCall says impatiently. “Do you know that coffee shop right down the street from the library? Meet me there.” He hangs up before Derek has a chance to protest.

Derek glowers at the phone. “What the fuck, man,” he says.

“Yeah,” Derek says, and sighs. “I’m sure he’s full of grievances. And here I thought I was done putting up with his bullshit.” He hauls himself off the bed. There’s no need to get dressed up, since it’s eight o’clock at night. “You wanna come?” he asks.

“Better not risk it,” Stiles says. “It’d be a disaster if he saw me. Not sure I like you going alone, though.”

“Pretty sure I can handle Rafael McCall,” Derek says, rolling his eyes. He leans over and kisses Stiles on the mouth, then on the forehead. “But why don’t I stay on the phone with you while I’m there? Can I make a call and record at the same time?”

“Yeah, let me show you,” Stiles says, leaning over to take his phone. Derek is on his way a few minutes later.

When he gets to the coffee shop, it’s fairly empty, which makes sense given that it’s approaching nine on a week night. He makes the call to Stiles before he goes into the shop, so McCall doesn’t see him doing it. Then he gets himself some tea and scans the shop. McCall is sitting at the back, wearing a baseball cap that’s pulled low over his face. Derek resists the urge to roll his eyes as he sits down across from him. “Uh, what’s with the get up, sir?”

“I don’t want anyone to see us meeting,” McCall says. “I need your help. They’re trying to crucify me, and you’re the only person who can prove that I was doing my job.”

“Uh, who is they?” Derek asks.
“Everyone,” McCall says, waving this aside angrily. “Stilinski and Peter Hale and – they’ve convinced my boss that I was persecuting the Hale family.”

“Well, uh . . .” Derek isn’t sure what to say. “Given that it’s now been proven that they had nothing to do with Paige’s death, it does kind of look that way.”

McCall scowls. “Even if I believed that bullshit – which I don’t – it doesn’t change the fact that I was just following the evidence! You saw them – the way they kept trying to dodge me and lying to my face – it spoke volumes about their involvement!”

“Sir, I’m still not sure what you want me to do,” Derek says.

“I need you to come with me tomorrow and talk to my boss. Just tell them what was happening, tell them that I was only doing my job.”

Derek’s quiet for a few moments as he tries to figure out what he should say to this. But in the end, there’s really only one answer. “Agent McCall, you don’t want me to talk to your boss,” he says. “Because I’ll tell him the truth. I’ll tell him that you were stalking your ex-wife. That you called Olivia Hale a whorewolf. That you accused Sheriff Stilinski of selling his child to a pack even though every fact surrounding Derek’s choosing of Stiles gives the lie to that. I’ll tell him that Stiles gave you all the information on Search for a Cure at the very beginning, and you ignored it to take on your half-assed witch hunt. So if you’d like me to come talk to your boss tomorrow, I’d be happy to do that, but I don’t think it’s gonna work out the way you want.”

McCall is slowly turning a dull shade of red. “Here I thought you were actually someone who was worth half a damn,” he says. “You don’t understand what you’re throwing away. If you want to get out of this one-horse town and somewhere that they’ll respect your talent, you’re committing career suicide by crossing me.”

“I really doubt it,” Derek says, “since by the time this is over, you’re going to be scrubbing toilets at the FBI. If you’re lucky. So with all due respect – which is none – you can lose my number and stay the hell away from me.”

With that, he picks up his tea and leaves the coffee shop with McCall fuming behind him. Once he’s out of sight, he puts his phone to his ear. “Did you get all that?”

“Uh – huh?” Stiles pants on the other end.

“Stiles?” Derek frowns. “Did you get it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles says, his voice a little higher-pitched than normal. “Awesome. You did awesome.”

“Are you – Stiles, are you jerking off?”

“Oh my God, yes,” Stiles says. “That was hot like burning, come home and screw me.”

Derek smirks despite himself. “I’m on my way.”

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With Paige Krasikeva’s case solved and Jennifer Blake in the wind, Stiles has nothing to do but
study for his classes and make food for his pack. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, as the latter is taking more and more time. Talia is only two weeks from her due date, and she’s eating everything in sight. Stiles can barely keep up with her, and he’s loving every minute of it.

He’s thinking about asking his father for another case – he had, after all, said Stiles could have ‘a couple’ of cold cases, and his three-class semester still has two and a half months left to it – but he feels weird doing that, since the case he’s been working on isn’t technically over.

“It just feels like a letdown,” he says to his father over dinner, while they’re eating chop suey and Talia is putting away her third plate. Rain is drumming down outside, creating a quiet hum behind the conversation. “I mean, I solved it! And yes, it’s great that the people in the communes are being taken care of. And it’s great that the people who were attacked know who did it and why, and maybe they’ll hate werewolves a little less no. But it feels so anti-climactic.”

“Sometimes cases end that way, kiddo,” Tom says. “Sometimes we know who did it but don’t have enough evidence. Sometimes we catch them but they don’t end up in jail. And sometimes we know who did it but don’t catch them. It’s sad but true. It’s not a perfect system.”

“I hate the idea of her still being out there,” Stiles says.

Derek gives a low growl and says, “Trust me, on that score you’re not alone.”

Stiles makes a face at him and is about to make a comment about his father assigning a protective detail to him when the doorbell rings. It’s followed up by a loud banging.

“If that’s Agent McCall again, I swear to God – “ Talia says, half-rising to her feet.

“’I’ll get it,’ Tom says, standing up. Stiles decides he’s going, too, because if Agent McCall is going to start shouting again, he’s got some choice things to say that he actually can say, now that he’s no longer working with him on an investigation.

But it isn’t Rafael McCall standing on their doorstep. It’s probably the least person they would have expected. It’s Chris Argent, and he’s supporting his wife, Victoria. Both of them are drenched by the rain, and Victoria is clutching at her shoulder, where her blouse is stained red.

“The hell?” Tom manages.

Chris looks at them with a haunted, hunted look on his face. “I didn’t know where else to take her,” he says.

“Jesus, come inside,” Tom says, standing back. The others are coming out of the kitchen now, drawn to the noise and the smell of blood. Talia makes a surprised noise and Aaron says he’ll go get some towels. Tom gets the two of them seated on the sofa and sits down across from them.

“What happened?” he asks, as Aaron comes in with the towels.

“Let me see,” Aaron says, but Victoria jerks away.

“Don’t touch me!” she snaps.

Aaron glances at Talia, who presses her lips together in a thin line. But Chris takes the towel with a nod of thanks and eases his wife’s blouse off her shoulder. Everyone can see the nasty mark there, the set of punctures that have to be tooth marks. Chris gently pats the wound with the towel a few times before applying pressure, and Victoria makes a hissing noise.

“I’ll get you something to drink,” Derek says, going back into the kitchen.
Once that’s taken care of, Tom repeats, “Okay, what happened?”

“What does it look like happened?” Victoria chokes out.

Chris takes her hand and squeezes it. Before Tom can say anything, he starts to talk in a dry, measured voice. “We had just gotten home from a movie. The rain hadn’t started yet. Victoria walked down to get the mail, and she . . .” His voice cracks. “She got bit.”

“Did you see anything?” Tom asks. It’s his reassuring voice, his cop voice. “Is there anything you can tell me about who did it?”

Victoria is glaring at him, her mouth tight and angry. But she says, “It was a woman. Long dark hair, and red eyes. It happened . . . very fast. I didn’t get a good look. She tried to drag me away afterwards. I used my can of mace on her and shouted for Chris.”

“By the time I got to the end of the driveway, she was gone,” Chris adds.

“Why did you come here?” Stiles asks, baffled. “Why didn’t you bring her to the hospital, or, or call 911?”

“What would the hospital do?” Chris asks, gritting his teeth. “She doesn’t need stitches. It’s not that deep. They’d swab it out with antiseptic, put a bandage on it, and tell her to go home. She’s not in rejection. The hospital wouldn’t . . .” His voice falters again. “I can’t call the police. I have to keep this quiet until I’ve figured out how to handle it. But she – she needs an alpha. And if she doesn’t find one, then the wolf that bit her is – I can’t let that happen.”

Talia presses her lips together again, but then lets out a quiet breath. “I understand that this is upsetting for you,” she says. “And yes, you are correct that Victoria will need an alpha, and that the sooner she finds a pack to bond with, the less control the person who bit her will have. But I’m not certain that I’m the best choice. Your family and mine . . . have a history, obviously.”

“I know,” Chris says. “I know that, damn it. But Allison – this is Allison’s pack. She trusts you. You – you made her happy. I’ve tried to, to come to terms with that. There’s nobody else we can go to. No other alpha would accept her. Not after everything my family did. Please help her. Please.”

Talia’s jaw tightens a little, and Stiles knows that she’s thinking of the fire, of her children, of her family. But then she nods. “Okay,” she says. “I’ll help you.”

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Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Just a warning that there is some discussion of suicide in this chapter, although there will be no suicides taking place, in this chapter or any following chapter, because seriously, fuck that particular bit of canon.

For several long minutes, the only sound in the den’s living room is the rain drumming on the roof. Tom is tapping away at his phone, instructing his deputies to go have a look at the Argent house, although he doubts it’ll come to anything. Derek gives Victoria a glass of water, which she holds with white-knuckled hands. Chris is still patting at the wound, checking it periodically to see if it’s still bleeding. Most of the pack has withdrawn back to the kitchen, not wanting to get in the way. Talia is still sitting across from the Argents, while Peter leans against the wall.

Finally, Victoria speaks. Her face is fixed in a tight scowl as she says, “May I speak to my husband alone for a few minutes?”

Peter and Talia exchange a look, and then Talia says, “Sure,” and shoos them all back into the kitchen. It obviously hasn’t occurred to Victoria that unless she makes them go out into the rain, they’ll still be able to hear every word she says.

The words she says are, in fact, “I won’t do this. And you have no right to make me.”

“Vicky –” Chris chokes on the word. “Vicky, please. I know that I, I made promises to you, we made them to each other. But nobody ever expected it to happen. I can’t lose you.”

“I will not do this,” Victoria says, as the werewolves in the kitchen shift from foot to foot uneasily. “You know me better than that. Or at least you should by now.”

“God damn it, Victoria,” Chris says, regaining some life. “What do you expect me to do? I don’t care about the promises we made when we were twenty. We’re both older and I should hope a hell of a lot wiser by now! Being a werewolf won’t be the end of the world. I won’t just stand by while you kill yourself! What would I tell Allison? What do you want me to do? Call our daughter and say, ‘honey, I hope you’re having a great time at college, but I need you to come home this weekend, so you can say goodbye to your mother, who would rather be dead than furry’?!”

“You’re oversimplifying it,” Victoria grits out. “You can’t sum up lycanthropy as ‘furry’.”

“Well, you can’t summarize it as ‘less preferable than suicide’, Chris snaps back. But then his voice softens. “Please, Vicky. Please just – just try. If it’s really as horrible as you think, then we can – we can consider other options, but – give it a few weeks. Don’t make me call Allison and tell her she needs to come home for this.”

Victoria is silent for a long minute. “All right,” she finally says. “For Allison.”

When nothing else is said, Talia heads back into the other room. She doesn’t say anything either, but peels back the towel to make sure the bleeding has stopped. Then she sits down on the coffee
“I’m going to be blunt,” she says. “The first two weeks are the worst. So it would be unwise to make a decision based on them. The increased senses can be painful and difficult to deal with. And emotionally – I’ve never experienced it myself, obviously, but virtually every turned wolf in my pack has described it as a roller coaster. It evens out after a week or two, but it’s not the most pleasant experience in the world.”

“Okay,” Chris says, rubbing his wife’s uninjured shoulder.

“It takes a certain type of person to become a werewolf,” Talia continues. “It’s not for the faint of heart. So if you don’t think you can handle it – ”

“I can handle it,” Victoria says, her tone going icy. It’s in that moment that Stiles realizes Talia was manipulating her, goading her, to convince her not to kill herself even if the transition is difficult.

Talia studies her for a long minute, and then says, “Okay. Then I’m all right with the idea of you staying.”

“I’m not,” Peter says, leaving the kitchen to walk into the living room. Aaron tries to grab him, but Peter shakes him off. Peter continues into the other room and levels both Argents with a cold stare. “Not now, at least. Talia, you are pregnant, and that makes you vulnerable. I do not trust either of these people. Chris’ sister killed half of our family, and we have only his word that he wasn’t aware of what she was doing. I don’t want them in our den, and as your Left Hand, I strongly advise you to show them the door.”

Talia hesitates, but Chris holds up his hand and says quietly, “It’s fine. We’ll go.” He swallows hard and says, “He’s right. You have no reason to want us here.”

“You can take her to the refugee camp they built for the victims of rogue attacks,” Peter says. “That’s what it’s there for.”

“Peter . . .” Talia says in an undertone, but Peter doesn’t budge.

“That – that’s fine,” Chris says. “I know – I’m sorry for what my sister did. I truly am. I know that doesn’t really make a difference. But I’m sorry.” He stands up and extends a hand to his wife, saying quietly, “Come on, Victoria, let’s go.”

Peter watches this in silence. Then he says, abruptly, “Okay. They can stay.” He turns on one heel and leaves the room, then leaves the house entirely, going out the back door. Tom sighs, and it looks like he might follow him until he remember that it’s pouring rain.

“What the hell was that?” Victoria asks.

“That was Peter,” Talia says warily, “wanting to be sure of your intentions. If you were up to anything nefarious, you would’ve tried to talk us into letting you stay. He wanted to know what you would do if he forced you out – not just what you would say, but your heartbeat and your scent. My brother protects this family at all costs.” She lets out a breath. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet, no,” Chris says.

“Then come sit down and have some dinner,” Talia says. She glances over at the door to the kitchen and adds, “Is there enough, Stiles?”

“Oh, yeah, I made a solid ton,” Stiles says.

“Okay.” Talia stands up and offers her hand to Victoria. After a few moments, Victoria takes it.
“It doesn’t! Make! Any! Sense!” Stiles slaps a cutting board down on the counter hard enough to make several werewolves wince. The kitchen is mostly empty. Aaron took Victoria and Chris upstairs about half an hour previous to get them settled into Laura and Jonathan’s old room. The excitement had given Talia a headache, and she had gone up to her room to lie down.

That left Stiles in the kitchen with his father, Derek, and Peter, who had returned from his jaunt sopping wet and is now sitting in the kitchen in his underwear with a towel draped over his shoulders. Being mostly naked doesn’t seem to bother him, although he had made a few remarks about Tom helping him warm up that had made Stiles giggle. Now the teenager had made them all some tea and he’s going to chop some fruit into oblivion to relieve some frustration.

“Why would Kali bite Victoria? There’s no logic to it!” Stiles rants, attacking a hapless cantaloupe. “It doesn’t match any of the other attacks. She has no prior exposure to silver or wolfsbane. Am I supposed to believe it’s a coincidence? That they just randomly attacked an Argent? Fuck no! What is happening?!?”

“Stiles,” Tom says, after he appears to have gotten it out of his system, “we’ll figure it out.”

Peter takes a sip of his tea. “Three reasons for a rogue alpha attack. Insanity. Accident. Control. We can safely rule out accident, so that leaves one and three.”

“You know, we hadn’t really thought about this,” Derek says pensively, “but Kali did lose her entire pack, didn’t she? Regardless of whether or not she lost her mate, her pack abandoned her and split up after what happened with Ennis. I know that’s not as traumatic as death, but it is traumatic.”

Peter nods. “Jennifer may or may not be using magic to influence Kali’s actions. But Kali may also have a residual need to try to create betas for herself. It would certainly make things easier for Jennifer if she did. Simply channel Kali’s insanity into the right direction.”

“Look, the main difference about this is that Kali tried to drag her away afterwards,” Tom says. “That supports insanity. Typically they try to drag their new recruit back to their den. So maybe Kali slipped Jennifer’s leash.”

“Or,” Peter says, “Jennifer knows that the Argents used her, and she’s angry about it.”

Stiles grimaces. “It’d be easy enough for her to figure that out. We raided all her camps and there are only a few ways we could have gotten that information.”

“If she figured out the Argents have a connection to us, maybe she thought abducting and turning Victoria would give her leverage over us,” Derek suggests. “Like what was going on with Ennis.”

“Possible,” Peter says. “Very possible. And it might have been a combination of all these things. Stiles, I’m curious about the timing of these rogue attacks. How many were definitively Kali, by the end? And how spaced out were they?”

“Uh . . .” Stiles puts down the knife and fumbles for his phone. He has to scroll and swipe for a long time. “Okay. There were sixteen that I definitely or at least almost definitely pinned to her. Over the course of eleven – no, ten years, since Paige isn’t involved they didn’t start until 2004.
About six months after Paige’s death.”

“Sixteen attacks in ten years,” Peter says. “That’s an attack every seven or eight months, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, although it wasn’t anything you could set a watch by,” Stiles says.

“And when was the most recent?”

Stiles taps his phone for another minute. “Barring one I didn’t find . . . December twelfth of last year.”

“Over ten months ago,” Peter says.

Tom is watching him. “You think Kali was getting antsy?”

“It’s a strong possibility,” Peter says. “If any part of this is involved with Kali’s drive to create a pack, then Jennifer might only be able to stop her for so long. And if Jennifer doesn’t want Kali to fight against whatever magic she’s using, she wouldn’t want to push her too far. So yes, it’s very possible that Jennifer let Kali bite Victoria because she needed to bite somebody. And then you get into the matter of geographical convenience.”

Derek grimaces. “They’re here. In Beacon Hills.”

“Yes,” Peter says. “We’ve known that for some time. They were watching the Stilinski house; they took me somewhere, even if I have no memory of where. They have a home base here. They still think Stiles is the key, so they won’t go anywhere as long as he’s here.”

Now it’s Tom who gives a grimace. “Time for a vacation to Timbuktu,” he says.

“Talia can’t travel right now,” Peter says absently, missing the point. “There’s another reason that they might have chosen Victoria. It might not have anything to do with Chris and Allison helping us uncover Search for a Cure’s secrets. It could be much the opposite. Victoria described her attacker as a woman with long dark hair and red eyes. That description fits Kali. But it also fits Talia.”

Derek’s eyes go wide. “You think they were trying to frame Mom?”

“Well, the feud between the Argents and the Hales is longstanding,” Peter says. “If she didn’t realize that Allison was part of this pack, then she could have done it for that reason.” He sips his tea and says, “It might take some time before we know. They were smart to do it on a rainy night. Erase the scent. We won’t be able to track them down.”

“So what do we do?” Stiles asks.

“I wish I could remember – ” Peter frowns. “That place that they took me. I feel like I should be able to remember, but whenever I try, I just – ”

He gives a little shudder. Tom reaches out to give his shoulder a squeeze. “Don’t push it,” he says. “We’ll figure something out.”

Peter nods and lets out a slow breath. “Perhaps I’ll take a walk in that area of the preserve tomorrow, see if anything jogs my memory,” he says. Then he looks over at Tom and says, “If you’ll join me, of course.”

“Of course,” Tom says, leaning over to press a kiss into the crown of Peter’s head.
“They’re so cute!” Stiles says, not at all under his breath. Three sets of eyes roll at him, and he snickers behind his hand.

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The rain slackens overnight, and it’s clear the next morning, although the air is quite chilly. Stiles wakes up early and decides to go downstairs to make breakfast, even though it’s not a Sunday. He thinks it might help lighten the mood.

Much to his surprise, Victoria is already sitting in the kitchen. She has a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and an unhappy expression on her face. “Hey!” Stiles greets her. “Good morning. Are you cold? Werewolves are more sensitive to temperature shifts. Do you want some tea?”

Victoria gives him a cold stare for a long moment before her shoulders move in an almost imperceptible sigh. “Tea would be nice. Thank you.”

“What kind?” Stiles asks. “We’ve got like twenty varieties.”

“Earl Grey?”

“Sure.” Stiles busies himself with the kettle and decides to make an entire pot. Almost everyone in the pack loves Earl Grey. “So have you, uh, have you talked to Allison? Scott just got the Bite a couple years ago, he’d really be the resident expert on coping and stuff.”

Victoria’s mouth tightens into a grimace. “My husband e-mailed Allison last night, but he didn’t tell her what had happened. Just that I had been injured in an accident. She said she would come home this weekend, so I’ll see her then, and I assume Scott will come with her.”

“Yup, joined at the hip, those two,” Stiles says. He hesitates, then adds, “Allison’s really happy. You know that, right? Scott really makes her happy. And she makes him happy, too.”

“I’m aware,” Victoria says.

“You just don’t like it,” Stiles presumes, and Victoria just glares at him. Stiles lets out a breath and then asks, “Why not? I’m honestly curious. I mean, what’s so bad about being a werewolf?”

“Do you know what, Stiles?” Victoria says. “It doesn’t matter. I have my reasons for not wanting to be a werewolf. The fact that you might or might not agree with them is a moot point because it should be my decision.” Her hands curl around the table, new claws digging into the wood. “But that decision was taken away from me. You have no right to question me.”

“I wasn’t trying to – ” Stiles begins, and Victoria snarls at him, her eyes flaring gold.

“Victoria.” Talia’s voice comes from the door to the kitchen, and it’s calm, but has that hint of command to it. “Please calm down.”

Victoria lets out a shuddering breath and then shoots a hateful look at Talia. She knows she needs an alpha, but it’s clear that she deeply resents Talia’s control over her. Stiles is beginning to think that maybe Peter was right.

The kettle starts to whistle, and he jumps, then busies himself with the tea for a few long minutes. He clears his throat and asks, “Victoria, are you hungry? Would you like me to make you
“No thank you,” Victoria says stiffly.

“Well, I’m starving,” Talia says, sliding into her chair at the end of the table. “And I would love some of those corn pancakes that you make.”

“Coming right up,” Stiles says, leaving the tea to steep and rummaging around in the pantry. He’s glad to have something to do so he isn’t just sitting there staring at them. Derek comes down a few minutes later, yawning and with his hair sticking in every direction, so Stiles has to sneak in a quick kiss, obviously. By the time the first batch of pancakes is done, Chris has appeared as well, looking like he hadn’t slept all night. Stiles starts making scrambled eggs to go with the pancakes, since apparently he’s feeding more than just Talia.

“You working today, Der?” he asks, putting some dishes on the table.

“Mm,” Derek says sleepily, around his mug of tea. “Got a lot of plants that need attention.”

“I’ve only got one class today, so maybe I’ll come help out for a while,” Stiles says. “If you could drop me off at, uh, at the place where my class is.”

“Sure,” Derek says.

“Unless you need me here?” Stiles adds to Talia.

“No, we’ll be fine here,” Talia says.

About half an hour later, they’re on their way to the studio. Stiles is enjoying the crisp autumn air as they drive with the windows down. “It’s been too long since we’ve had sex in this car,” he remarks.

“Maybe after work,” Derek says, amused.

“God knows I don’t want to go back to the den,” Stiles says. “That woman scares me. I mean, she’s like . . . she’s got a laser stare and she so clearly hates us all and doesn’t want to be there and I’m moderately freaked out by it.”

Derek grimaces. “Yeah, I’m not a huge fan of her either. But Chris was right. No other pack would ever take her. And you were talking about how bad it is for werewolves to be omega, like, it being physically bad for them. This isn’t her fault, so . . .”

“I know. She’s upset and I get that,” Stiles says. “But we’re trying to help her. I guess I feel like she should just . . . we’re not the enemy, you know? But she’s still treating us that way.”

“Well, they’ve always treated us that way,” Derek says dryly. “Why change now?”

“Fair enough.” Stiles sighs. “I was thinking about the cure again. You know, about what I would do if I really was the key to the whole thing. And I was thinking about, you know, the . . . science stuff? And thinking that if anything, you actually might be able to reverse the bite if you got to an attack victim quickly enough. Like, I don’t know if it would work on someone who had been a werewolf for a long time, and certainly not a born werewolf. But it’s like, if lycanthropy starts as a virus, and that stays around until the full moon, maybe you would have that long to give them an, an antidote.”

“Maybe,” Derek says. “I guess that does make sense.”
“And I mean, I know that you think that people should be able to be happy as werewolves. And I think so too. But Victoria made a point that it’s not really our business. It’s not our decision to make. All the educational materials are out there, you know? If they don’t want to be a werewolf for, for whatever reason, that should be their choice.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Derek says, “although remember, you’re talking about a pretty small number of people. Rogue attacks are really rare.”

“Well, yeah, but so’s progeria,” Stiles says. “We haven’t stopped trying to fix that.”

“Fair point,” Derek says.

“I guess what I was really thinking is that if, if there were a legit organization and not, you know, crazy Jennifer Blake, trying to fix it . . . maybe I should help.”

“But you’re still going to run into the problem that running tests is almost impossible,” Derek points out. “Especially if you’re talking about specifically trying to have an antidote that’s used right after the bite is administered.”


“Well, keep thinking about it,” Derek says. “Somewhere in that brain of yours, you’ll find a solution.”

“I bet sex in the car would really help jar something loose,” Stiles says, with a serious nod.

“I bet,” Derek says, reaching over to rub at Stiles’ knee. “I’ll see what I can do about that.”

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Tom had expected that Peter would want to go out right away, so he’s somewhat surprised when he decides to stick around the house during the day. He sticks around the house very obtrusively, for that matter, never venturing far from wherever Talia is. Despite having agreed to let Chris and Victoria stay, he’s obviously not thrilled about it. Of course, Victoria clearly isn’t either. Chris, for his part, seems to have completely thrown in the towel. The Hales agreeing to help them after everything had clearly been the last straw for his anti-lycanthropy sentiment.

Once Aaron is home for the day, and Laura has come over with Jonathan and the kids, Peter decides it’s safe to leave Talia. The two of them hike out onto the preserve, heading for the place that Tom had found Peter. Tom reaches out and takes Peter’s hand in his. Peter looks somewhat startled at first, but then curls his fingers around Tom’s, and they walk in silence.

“Okay, this is about where you were when I found you,” Tom says, glancing around. It’s about an hour before sunset, so there’s still plenty of light. “Anything familiar?”

Peter glances around, pulling his hand out of Tom’s and walking in a slow circle. “No.”

“Well, they brought you here in a car,” Tom says, “which means there must be a road somewhere nearby.” He takes out his phone and taps at the screen. “Nothing on the map. Probably just a local access road.”

Peter nods. His head is up, nose working quickly, eyes bright and alert. “There isn’t a strong scent
of gasoline anywhere, but I think . . .” He starts walking again, and Tom follows. About ten minutes later, they come up to an old dirt road.

They’re still well into the woods, and there won’t be a security camera for miles. Tom looks around but doesn’t see anything that could be considered useful. “Can you smell anything?”

“Not here.” Peter walks down the road a little bit.

Tom trails behind him, looking for footprints or tire tracks, anything that might indicate where the car had stopped. He sees a break in the underbrush and calls out, “Hang on a sec.” Leaving Peter where he is, he carefully lifts up a branch and sees footprints in the soft dirt beyond it. “Over here,” he says, waving Peter over. The prints are sneakers, probably a man’s. Peter walks over, looks at what Tom has discovered, and then gently puts his foot down in one of them. It fits exactly.

“So they dumped you out of the car here,” Tom surmises. “You must’ve run for a bit before settling down to call me.”

“Mm.” Peter looks over at the road where the car must have stopped, then kneels down, rubbing some of the dirt through his fingers. He gives a slight shudder.

“What is it, are you okay?”

“I just – it does smell – familiar,” Peter says, the words coming out sharp and broken. “Like – I don’t know. I try to think back and, and all I can think about is the fire, about Olivia – ”

“Hey,” Tom says, kneeling in front of him and taking Peter’s shoulders in his hands. “You’re okay, Peter. It’s over.”

“I know.” Peter lets out a shuddering breath. “I know . . .”

“Let’s not push, okay?” Tom says. “We still have options. We’re monitoring all of Blake’s finances. Every cop in town and all the werewolves are on the lookout for her, too. We’ll find her; we just need time.” He pulls Peter into an embrace, both of them still kneeling on the ground. “Come on, I’ll take you home, okay?”

Peter nods. “All right,” he says, a little shaky as he gets to his feet. “You’d think I would be used to it by now.”

“To what?” Tom asks.

Peter’s silent for a few moments. “Being broken,” he finally says.

Tom shakes his head. “You’re not broken, Peter. Oh, you’re a little rough around the edges. You’ve got some wear and tear. But I wouldn’t call you broken. You’re still standing, and that makes you tougher than anyone else I’ve ever met, I think.”

Peter huffs out a breath. “That’s a little sentimental, isn’t it?”

“So call me sentimental,” Tom says. “I’ve been called worse things.” He leans in and presses a kiss against Peter’s temple. “Now are we going home for dinner or what? That kid of mine is cooking up some kielbasa tonight.”

“Sounds good to me,” Peter says, but he looks over his shoulder several times as Tom leads him away.
Chapter 20

This chapter is a little on the short side. Sorry, I couldn't help it. =D

It’s about eight o’clock on Friday night when Allison bursts into the den, startling several werewolves out of their chairs. “Okay, I’m here,” she says breathlessly, as Scott comes in behind her, carrying a backpack. “I got a message from my dad, why was I supposed to meet them here? Did I misunderstand? I would’ve tried at home but the e-mail said – ”

“Allison, slow down,” Talia says, gripping her by the upper arms. “Yes, your parents are here. They’re in my study, come on.” She maneuvers Allison into following her, and Scott trails behind her. As soon as they get into the study, Scott’s eyes go wide; he can smell the change in Victoria even though Allison can’t.

“Mom, you’re okay!” Allison says, throwing her arms around her mother’s neck. “What happened? God, Dad, could you have been any less specific in that e-mail you sent me?”

“Your mother is fine,” Chris says. “But there was . . . it wasn’t an accident. She was attacked. By . . . by a werewolf.”

“Oh my God!” Allison’s eyes go wide. Then she blinks. “And you – came here?”

Victoria’s mouth purses; she’s clearly irritated that her husband is beating around the bush. “I got bitten,” she says impatiently. “I got turned. Chris brought me here.”

Allison’s jaw just kind of sags. Scott says, “So, you’re a werewolf now?” There’s a hint of excitement in his voice, but then he reads the situation and changes his tone. “I’m really sorry, Mrs. Argent, that’s awful.”

Looking sour, Victoria says, “I would have rather chosen . . . alternate measures, but your father didn’t agree. In order to keep the alpha that bit me from having control over me, I agreed to join this pack.”

“Well, it might not be what you wanted, but Talia is a really good alpha, and this is a really great pack,” Allison says. Victoria just looks angrier. “I mean, there are a lot of benefits to being a werewolf, it’s not just – ”

“I know what the benefits are!” Victoria snarls, and Allison flinches away.

Talia steps in. “Victoria,” she says quietly, “why don’t you come with me? We’ll go for a run.”

Victoria snarls at her, too, but then looks away. “I hate the fact that I don’t want to say no,” she snaps.

“I know,” Talia says.

“You don’t own me!”
“I know,” Talia repeats. “But I’m trying to help you, Victoria. And you need to burn some energy off right now, so why don’t we go for a run.”

“Fine.” Victoria’s voice is still clipped and angry, and she almost knocks the chair over as she gets up and follows Talia out of the room.

Allison turns like she’s going to follow, but Chris takes her by the wrist and shakes her head. “She needs a little time by herself,” he says wearily. “She’s . . . angry, and her temper is volatile right now, so going after her won’t help. Trust me.”

Since Allison still looks upset, Scott sits down and pulls her into his lap. “It was like that for me, too, remember?” he says. “I was nuts the first week after the Bite. I broke, like, half the furniture in my room and only some of it by accident. It’ll pass.”

“I hope,” Chris says, and rubs both hands over his face. “She’s furious with me and I don’t know that she’s going to get over that any time soon.”

“Because you brought her here?” Scott asks.

Before Chris can reply, there’s a knock and the study door open. Stiles comes in with a tray. “Hey, I heard you guys come in but I didn’t want to interrupt, and then I saw Talia and Victoria leave, so I thought I might bring you in some . . . hot leaf juice.”

“Tea,” Scott supplies automatically. Since Allison is on his lap, he can’t give Stiles a hug of greeting, so he reaches out for a fist bump instead.

“Right, how could I forget tea? I make it all the time.” Stiles keeps talking, setting down the cups. “Earl Grey for Mr. Argent, English Breakfast for Allison, and vanilla . . . nut thing . . . for you, Scott.”

“Almond. Bad day?” Scott asks.

“Just, you know. They’re sometimes like that,” Stiles says. “Nothing’s going wrong, I mean, I’m not upset about anything, I’ve just got Swiss cheese brain today. You guys want anything to eat?”

“I’m starved,” Allison admits. “We came straight after classes and I was so worried that I didn’t even want to stop for dinner. Have you guys already eaten?”

“Yeah, but there’s plenty of food, how about I make you some sandwiches?”

“That’d be awesome, man, you’re the best,” Scott says.

Stiles beams at them and leaves the room, and Allison looks at her father uncertainly. “He just, uh, sometimes has problems with his memory,” she says.

“I know.” Chris looks gloomy again. “I remember the fact that someone acting on my sister’s orders shot an innocent seventeen-year-old boy. Trust me, that’s not something I’m going to forget any time soon.”

Allison grimaces a little and says, “So why is Mom mad at you? She didn’t want Talia to be her alpha?”

“She doesn’t want an alpha,” Chris says. “She doesn’t want to be a werewolf at all, obviously. She . . . look, Allison, you aren’t going to like this. But when your mom and I were younger, we promised each other than if she ever got bitten, I would, you know . . . put her out of her misery.
And vice versa."

Allison’s jaw is practically on the floor, and Scott can’t hold back from blurting you, “You’d rather *kill yourself* than be a werewolf?”

“It made sense at the time,” Chris says between clenched teeth, but then sighs. “No. Obviously it’s stupid. We were young, we were . . .”

“Indoctrinated,” Allison says, recovering.

“Yeah.” Chris waves this aside. “Anyway. Victoria’s angry because I didn’t keep my word. But things are different now. Not just because of you, but because . . . because of all of this. I don’t know.” He broods for a minute. “Sometimes I think I’m the biggest asshole in the world.”

“That’s only because you haven’t met *my* dad,” Scott says, rolling his eyes slightly. Chris arches his eyebrows, and Scott gives a little shrug. “Look, you were raised to believe werewolves were like a scourge on humanity. That isn’t your fault.”

“No, it isn’t,” Chris says. “But the more I learn, the more I think that I don’t get a pass for that. You know who else was raised to believe that? Allison.” He points at his daughter, who gives a little grimace. “But she was smart enough, and kind enough, to realize that it was a mistake. She went out and got all the information on her own, without any help from me. If she could do it, I could have done it, too. But I didn’t. And I don’t know if that’s because I’m stupid or if it’s just because I’m a coward.”

“Whoa, Dad, take it easy on yourself,” Allison says. “Yes, I did that, but I had a lot more opportunities than you. I mean, you and Kate were never allowed to interact with any werewolves. You told me once that you changed schools because your dad didn’t like that there was a werewolf in a class two grades above you. And you didn’t like what I did, but you never stopped me. I’m pretty sure I can imagine what your dad would have done to you, if he’d caught you palling around with werewolves.”

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“I don’t think so,” Scott says. “I mean, I think it’s a worse crime to cling to an idea you know is wrong than to admit you made a mistake. And it’s even worse to just . . . do nothing, to let injustice happen, when there might be something you could do to stop it.”

“I don’t think so,” Scott says. “I mean, I think it’s a worse crime to cling to an idea you know is wrong than to admit you made a mistake. And it’s even worse to just . . . do nothing, to let injustice happen, when there might be something you could do to stop it.”

“Yeah,” Chris says. “You’re right.” He hooks an arm around Allison’s shoulders and says, “But you’d better be ready to support your old man when he’s broke and divorced.”

“Mom would never,” Allison says.

“I don’t know, kiddo,” Chris says. “She’s pretty angry at me. And she’s got a right to be. I did what I thought was best for her, but I did it against her wishes, and that’s not an easy thing to forgive.”

“Well, if you’d just let her . . .” Allison gives a little shudder. “I don’t know that I could have ever forgiven you for that.”

Chris nods and says quietly, “I know I never could have forgiven myself.”

Scott reaches out and squeezes Allison’s hand. “I think your mom is going to be okay, Allison. I mean, it won’t be easy, but . . . we’re getting pretty good at things that are hard.”
Chris arches his eyebrows at Scott.

“No!” Scott yelps, flushing pink. “That’s not what I meant! Oh my God. I, uh, I have to go.”

Chris shakes his head, clearly amused despite himself. “You know, Scott, I’m glad Allison found you. You’re a good kid.”

“Nooooo,” Scott moans, mortified, as Allison just continues to giggle. “I mean, yes, yay, I’m happy, but . . . can I please run away now?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Allison says. “Go find our sandwiches.”

“Right,” Scott says, and hustles out of the room.

~ ~ ~ ~

Stiles wasn’t being one hundred percent truthful when he told Scott that it was just ‘normal stress’ making his aphasia worse than usual. Although he does sometimes just have days like that, everyone is uncomfortable with the Argents in the house. He just doesn’t want to mention it in front of Chris. It’s not Victoria’s fault, or Chris’, but Victoria is making everyone nervous. She’s constantly angry and snapping at everyone, sometimes with fangs.

In the interest of trying to cheer Victoria up, Stiles asks Chris what her favorite food is. She loves Italian food, he says, so Stiles decides to make fettucini alfredo. He spends most of the day in the kitchen, which is always his safe place. With Victoria’s entrance into the pack, he’s looking forward to the new house more than ever.

Victoria has made it eminently clear that she has no intention of living at the den with the others. At the moment, nobody is interested in arguing with her. It might change with time, or it might not. Talia says that by the time Monday rolls around, Victoria will be bonded into the pack well enough that she won’t be in danger from the alpha who turned her. She’ll be able to go back to her own home as long as she visits the den for dinner every day.

So they sit down to dinner on Saturday night and Victoria actually smiles a little when she saw the fettucini. “This is very good, Stiles,” she says, and then closes her eyes for a moment, trying to fight back the storm of emotions. Chris reaches out to squeeze her forearm, and she glares at him. He removes his hand.

“So what are we doing about the alpha that bit my wife?” Chris asks.

Tom grimaces a little. “We’ve been looking for her and Jennifer for weeks. Unfortunately, they didn’t leave any evidence at your house. So we’re doing the same thing we’ve been doing for weeks, showing their pictures everywhere, monitoring their bank accounts, and doing our best to track them down.”

“Why do you think she went after Mom?” Allison asks, frowning. “Does it – does it have anything to do with the fact that I was undercover with Search for a Cure? Did she find out?”

“It’s possible,” Stiles says. “Peter said that he thought they might be trying to frame Talia.”

“Oh, geez,” Scott says, looking at Peter’s empty chair. He’s in the house somewhere, but not joining them for dinner. He doesn’t like being in the room with Kate’s brother any more than
Chris likes being in the room with Kate’s killer. He’s made himself scarce, spending more time with Tom but less time with everyone else.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Talia says, seeing the tension building up in Victoria’s spine and shoulders.

“Right,” Stiles says hastily, and starts talking about what they might want for dessert. He’s been into gelato lately, and picked up several pints at the grocery store.

The subject of lycanthropy doesn’t come up again until they’ve all eaten. Allison asks her father, “So, have you thought about what you want to do now?”

Chris sighs. “I don’t know, honey. I don’t think it’s as easy as just closing down my security company and announcing that I think werewolves are okay now.”

“Well, no, I don’t it’s going to be easy,” Allison says, “but I think it is that simple.”

“Look,” Chris says. “We all know those people who only take a stand on things after it matters to them personally. We hate people like that.”

“Well, yes and no,” Stiles says. “Don’t get me wrong. The viciously anti-gay guy who suddenly changes his mind after his son comes out of the closet is a dick, yeah. But I’d way rather have him in my corner than the guy who doesn’t change his mind and throws his gay son out of the house. People learn, people change. And I think it means more when it’s coming from someone was outspoken against it before.”

“Maybe,” Chris says. “I don’t even know what I would do.”

“Actually, if you’re serious about coming over to our side,” Talia says, “I had a thought about that. We need somebody to take over what remains of Search for a Cure and run the refugee camp. A lot of what Blake did was terrible, but the people she rescued from countries where rogue werewolves run wild did need help. She just didn’t actually help them. Maybe we can.”

“You want me to run that?” Chris asks, skeptical.

“Why not?” Talia says. “You’re clearly a good businessman. Your security company has been very successful. I think this is something you could do very well at. If Allison continues in her current career path, she can be your legal counsel someday. And Isaac has said something about wanting to help as well.”

Chris nods slowly. “I’ll think about it,” he says. “Right now, I just have to figure out how to word the press release and the letter to my shareholders.”

“Stiles can help you, he’s good with that sort of thing,” Scott says, grinning.

“God forbid,” Chris says.

Victoria sets down her spoon. “Well,” she says. “I’m tired. I think I’m going to head upstairs and lie down for a while.”

“All right, let me know if you need anything,” Talia says.

Victoria stands up. Then she glares at her husband. “Are you coming or what?”

“Oh, yeah,” Chris says, hastily getting to his feet. “Of course.”
Things settle down. Victoria and Chris go home on Sunday evening, after Scott and Allison have left to head back to San Francisco. Allison isn’t thrilled with leaving, but she knows that her mother is in good hands. Chris decides to sell his company, not wanting to close it down completely since there are people with subscriptions to his security systems. That’s underway by the end of the next week, and he’s slowly getting involved in the refugee camp that’s been set up in Arizona.

Stiles is going about his business as best he can, although he always has a lycanthrope shadow. A lesser man, he thinks, would probably be annoyed at the fact that he’s basically under house arrest. But given everything he’s been through – everything they’ve all been through – he can’t really blame his father for it. And it isn’t irritating him as much as he would have expected. Derek drops him off on campus before he goes to work. Aaron or Laura pick him up after class, and they’re never as much as thirty seconds late. Since he only has three classes, it’s not really a big deal. He rarely eats on campus. When he needs to use the library, they go with him.

At home, there are always people around, so he does his homework and then his denmaking. They’re just putting the finishing touches on the house now – the electricity is on and the water is running, so it’s just paint and carpeting now. Once that’s done, they’ll get everything moved. ‘They’ does not include Stiles. It’s not that he’s a weakling, but Derek can lift their furniture single-handedly, so why strain himself?

Even in the early afternoon, when it’s really quiet at the den, Talia is there. And nobody will be getting to him while Talia is around. So despite the fact that a psychotic witch and her pet alpha think he’s the key to either a miraculous cure or a horrendous genocide, he feels safe.

He spends a lot of time thinking about Jennifer and Kali while he paces around the house. He still can’t quite fathom their motives. Are they the same, or separate? Is Kali acting under duress, or helping Jennifer voluntarily? The specter of never knowing hangs over his head. His father keeps telling him that he won’t be able to solve every case. And he knows from Deucalion that sometimes he just won’t see the motive coming. Sometimes it’ll be too far out of left field.

He never would have predicted Deucalion’s motive of wanting to destroy the Searching Ceremonies out of grief over his lost mate. Jennifer wants to destroy lycanthropy, but why? Even if she had been hurt by Kali breaking up with her to marry Ennis, why generalize that to wanting to end werewolves altogether? Stiles has done serious research into Julia Baccari’s early life. There’s no evidence of anti-lycanthropy sentiment before then.

If Ennis had really been Kali’s mate, then Stiles can understand why Jennifer would have been upset when Kali broke up with her. He had heard of it happening before – werewolves who didn’t have a mate would enter into a serious relationship, then meet The One. These often resolved into stable threeway relationships, but not always.

It was possible that Jennifer and Kali were mates, but Stiles doesn’t think so. If Kali had wanted to hook up with Ennis for power, why not bring Jennifer along? They could have kept seeing each other on the sly. Or if she had been worried about people questioning her relationship with Ennis, they could have temporarily split up, while Kali and Ennis amassed the power they needed to keep anyone from throwing barriers up in their way.

All in all, it’s a mess, and he thinks about it more than he should. He’s in the middle of chopping
apples for a pie and trying to distract himself by thinking about what the first meal he’ll make in
his amazing new kitchen should be, when Talia waddles in. She does everything at a waddle these
days, and Stiles has to smile whenever he sees her. “So,” she says, “is that something that can
wait?”

“Well, I’ve already got the pie crust made, so I could – wait, why?” he asks, blinking up at her.

“Because,” she says, “my water just broke.”

“Oh my God!” Stiles practically flings the bowl of apples onto the ceiling. “Oh my God, you’re
going into labor. Okay. Let’s go. We prepared for this. We’re prepared, right?”

“Stiles,” Talia says patiently, “I just need you to drive me to the hospital. I already called Aaron
and he’s going to meet us there. You can call Derek and everyone else once you get me there.
Okay?”

“Yes, right, okay,” he says. “Oh, I should turn off the oven!” He’s running in a hundred different
directions as Talia slowly waddles towards the front door. He grabs the bag that’s been sitting by
said door for a week in preparation for this exact event, and jogs ahead of her to open the door to
the Jeep for her. “Are you sure you want to take my car? We could take your car. The seats are
probably more comfortable – ”

“Yours is fine, you’ll need to drive it home later anyway,” Talia says, getting into the passenger
seat. She’s smiling a little. “Calm down, Stiles. Babies don’t just fall out. It’s going to be a little
while. You have time to get me to the hospital. Just take it easy on the bumps, okay?”

“Right,” Stiles says.

As he’s rolling over the first bump at four miles per hour, Talia says, “Not that easy,” and he
speeds up, fingers tapping incessantly at the steering wheel as he babbles about how he read that
some werewolves prefer to do home births, and it’s generally pretty safe for them, but in Talia’s
case, with an older mother and especially with twins, the hospital is recommended.

He’s still talking as they reach the main road and turn onto it, and he’s so absorbed with checking
on Talia every ten seconds that he doesn’t even see the car that suddenly comes barreling onto the
main road from a side street. It slams into them broadside, sending the Jeep crashing off the road,
where it rolls several times before fetching up against a tree and coming to a shuddering stop.

It was so sudden that Stiles has only a limited understanding of what happened. He’s mostly just
aware that there was a really loud noise and now he’s on his side and he can taste blood in his
mouth.

“Stiles!” It’s Talia’s voice, coming from what seems like a hundred miles away. “Stiles, are you
okay?”

Stiles gives his head a little shake, trying to clear it. He manages to open his eyes just as there’s a
horrific screech of metal coming apart. He sees someone take Talia by the arm and pull her out of
the vehicle. She’s just turning to see who it is when Stiles sees a flash of red and he lurches
upwards, trying to get to her. His seatbelt yanks him back into place and his head smacks painfully
against the window where it’s pressed into the earth. He’s dizzy and seeing stars as someone grabs
him, and he passes out before he can make another move.

~ ~ ~ ~
I couldn't leave you on that cliffhanger for too long, right? Plus, I really like this chapter. ^_^

Stiles comes to with a jolt, flailing and nearly falling off whatever surface he’s on before someone grabs him. He’s in a car, so he thinks he was only unconscious for a few minutes. That’s good – despite what Hollywood might want people to believe, prolonged unconsciousness after head injuries is a very bad thing. He struggles upwards only to find himself pressed back down. He can’t see by who, because his face is pressed into the seat, but whoever it is, they’re much stronger than the average human.

The car jolts over some dirt roads, and then grinds to a halt. Stiles is still scrambling to regain his wits when the door opens and a woman with tan skin and long dark hair yanks him upright. She drapes him over her shoulder with only an ounce of effort, then reaches into the front of the car and pulls out Talia. Stiles is relieved to see her, and she looks conscious, but for some reason isn’t fighting back. There’s a murderous glare in her crimson eyes, but she isn’t moving.

Ahead of them is a building that looks like it’s made mostly of concrete and corrugated steel. The door is already open, and the woman heads inside, casually carrying both of them.

“Lay her down there,” Jennifer says, her voice tense with excitement. “That paralytic won’t last more than a few more minutes.”

The woman carrying them does as she’s told without a verbal response. Stiles’ muddled brain starts to put things together – this has to be Kali, she’s strong enough to be an alpha, and matches the description. Talia has been given some sort of drug. Of course, that explains absolutely nothing about what the hell they’re doing here. He takes a quick moment to look around as he’s dumped unceremoniously into a chair. There’s a table to his left with what looks like some scientific equipment on it, and that’s where Jennifer’s standing. To his right is another table with a stack of towels, a basin of water, and some medical tools. All in all, he’s getting a creepy vibe, and he still has no idea what’s going on.

But that’s answered a few moments later when Jennifer crouches down in front of him with a smile. “How are you feeling, Stiles?” she asks, true concern in her voice. “I hope we didn’t damage you too badly. I’m glad you decided to take the Jeep. Older cars are much more durable, did you know that? That Honda that Talia drives probably would’ve been smashed to oblivion.”

“That’s . . . great,” Stiles says. “No, I feel terrible. I hurt everywhere. You should probably take me to a hospital. And you should definitely take Talia to the hospital. She’s going into labor, for God’s sake.”

“Oh, I know,” Jennifer says. “Kali’s been listening in from a safe distance for weeks. I wasn’t sure it would work out, but you were alone with Talia when she went into labor, which made things much easier for me. Luck is truly on my side.” She looks over at the werewolf and says, “Come help me with this, love.”
Kali walks over, still silent, her face creased into what looks like a permanent scowl.

“Wait, you wanted Talia in labor?” Stiles is confused, still trying to put the pieces together. Then it clicks. “You . . . you want the babies. That’s what you were waiting for.”

“I think the WLO was really onto something when they tried their cure with babies,” Jennifer says, as Kali grabs Stiles’ wrist and yanks it so his arm is outstretched despite what he might want. Jennifer wraps a piece of rubber around Stiles’ upper arm. “They’re just more resilient overall. And born wolf babies are rather difficult to come by if you don’t want to start raiding hospitals. Especially since you have no way of knowing whether or not the baby is a werewolf. You can play the odds, of course, but since all the werewolves in our communes are turned wolves, even if one of them got another pregnant, there’s still only a thirty-three percent chance of a werewolf baby. You can only be sure of that if the parents are both born wolves . . . like Aaron and Talia Hale.”

“Jesus,” Stiles mutters. He thinks about fighting back as Jennifer inserts the needle into his arm and starts to draw blood, but decides against it. If he flails, she could cause nerve damage, and with Kali holding him, he won’t get away. Then it’s over, and she releases him.

“Prep the next dose of the paralytic, Kali,” Jennifer says, turning towards the corner of the room where the scientific equipment is set up. She inserts the vial into a machine and starts pressing buttons. To Stiles, she continues, “It’s not quite as simple as sticking a needle full of your blood into them, unfortunately. But I’ve been preparing this for weeks, so by the time the babies turn up, we should be ready. I can’t believe how lucky we are that she’s having twins!” she adds, sounding genuinely excited. “It gives me a chance to test my second theory.”

“What theory is that?” Stiles says, keeping a close eye on Talia, who’s practically vibrating with her efforts to move, and Kali, who’s drawn up a syringe of a pale liquid and set it down on the table next to Talia.

“What if we need someone who’s actively in rejection?” Jennifer says, and Stiles’ stomach drops into his feet. “I mean, you still have the antibodies in your system, sure, but they must be so much more potent and plentiful if you’re actually in rejection when the sample is taken.”

Stiles has to swallow hard before he can speak. “You’re going to have Kali bite me?”

“That’s the plan,” Jennifer says.

Stiles’ gaze darts towards the door. It’s a good twenty feet away, and he would never make it before Kali caught him. But as the werewolf heads over to stand next to Jennifer, Stiles lunges forward, out of his chair, and snatches the syringe on the table next to Talia. Both Jennifer and Kali whip around, but it’s too late; Stiles has a firm grip on it and has the needle pressed into his throat.

“Stiles,” Jennifer says, “what are you doing?”

“She does not get her teeth in me,” Stiles says. “If this syringe has a paralytic in it that’s strong enough to hold down an alpha, it would definitely kill one scrawny human. If she comes anywhere near me, I’ll use it, I swear I will.”

“You’d kill yourself?” Jennifer sounds skeptical.

“Let me think about that – yes!” Stiles retorts. “Bite rejection is more dangerous the second time. Odds are eighty percent that I would die even with immediate medical attention, which you clearly don’t plan on letting me have. So if my choices come down to die before the crazy lady uses my
blood to find the key to genocide, or die after the crazy lady does that, I’m going to pick before. Thanks.”

Jennifer’s mouth thins as she presses her lips together in annoyance. “Have it your way,” she says. “I suppose, since we’re going to have two chances, we can see if the first one works before we go the second route.”

Stiles thinks about that, then nods in agreement. It’ll be at least an hour before they come to that, and by then, someone will have found him. Talia had called Aaron. When they don’t show up at the hospital, everyone in the entire town is going to be looking for him. His father, Peter, Derek – all of them are going to be looking. They’ll find him – he just has to live that long. So he says okay and hands the syringe over.

“Don’t give that to me,” Talia says, somewhat breathless, as Jennifer starts towards her. “I couldn’t – nngg! – couldn’t feel anything down there. Let me – let me deliver first. It might – might hurt the babies.”

Jennifer takes a moment, and then nods. “Okay. But Kali will be right beside you, in case you get any ideas.”

“I really don’t think she’s going to try to run when she’s got a baby coming out her hoo-hah!” Stiles retorts. He goes over to Talia and kneels beside her, letting her squeeze his hand so hard that it hurts. “Okay, just breathe, Talia. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Talia’s gaze meets his, and she nods. “Still a little bit to go,” she says, gritting her teeth. “Not full contractions yet.”

“You know what, Stiles, if you’re going to insist on being a pain in my neck, you can help,” Jennifer says. “Put these towels down.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Stiles says, spreading them out. Kali and Jennifer move Talia a few feet so she’s lying down on them. “Actually, I read that lying down isn’t a great position for childbirth, squatting or kneeling can be – ”

“If you know so much about it, check to see how far dilated she is,” Jennifer interrupts him.

“Come on, really?” Stiles whines, but there’s no getting around it. He’s going to be much more familiar with his mother-in-law’s vagina than he ever wanted to be by the time this is over. Talia, for her part, is beyond embarrassment, if she would have felt any in the first place. She drags her skirt up over her bent knees. She’s not wearing any underwear, having taken it off after her water broke. “I have no idea what I’m looking at,” Stiles says, “but I’m pretty sure that I’m going to end up in therapy.”

“Stiles, really,” Talia huffs out, and Stiles giggles, feeling hysterical. But then she shudders, tossing her head back and strangling out a cry. Stiles grips her hand as she pants for breath. “That . . . that was a real one,” she says. “Won’t . . . won’t be long now.”

“Okay, great, glad to hear it, you’re doing great,” Stiles says, pretending that he isn’t freaking out. “Maybe we should get you something to hang onto that isn’t my breakable bones – ” He grabs a towel off the table and folds it underneath Talia’s hands so she can grip. She tilts her head back and chokes out another shout, her fangs slicing into her lower lip. “And maybe one for your mouth – ” he adds, giving her one to bite down on. “Okay, uh, okay, you ready? Are we ready, are we good? Let’s do this.”
“How would you feel,” Peter says, leaning over Tom’s shoulder to nuzzle at his ear, “about going out on a date?”

“How would you feel,” Peter says, leaning over Tom’s shoulder to nuzzle at his ear, “about going out on a date?”

“Like a date?” Tom asks. “At a fancy restaurant, where I’d have to wear a tie and remember which fork is which?”

“Yes, that sort of date,” Peter says.

“Awkward,” Tom replies. “I’ve never been good at that sort of thing. It’s amazing I ever managed to get anywhere with Claudia, but I think she found my romantic incompetence endearing.”

“As do I,” Peter says, smirking. “We could order a nice wine . . . expensive steak . . .”

“Well, I do find it hard to say no to a good ribeye,” Tom admits. “I suppose I could probably find a suit somewhere in my closet. Maybe it would even still fit.”

“Hold that thought,” Peter says, as his phone rings. He takes it out of his back pocket, glances at the screen, and then picks up. “Is it that time?” he asks, but then goes quiet and his face becomes as still as stone. “I see,” he says, a minute later. “Give me five minutes. I’ll call you back.”

Tom has looked up from his book to see the blank expression on Peter’s face. “What is it?” he asks.

“Talia called Aaron about thirty minutes ago, saying that she had gone into labor and Stiles was taking her to the hospital. Only they didn’t get there. Talia isn’t answering her phone and neither is Stiles.”

“Jesus,” Tom says, grabbing his laptop. He waits impatiently for it to come out of sleep mode and punches the buttons to bring up the GPS tracking website that they use. “Okay, Stiles’ phone is . . . not turned on. Fuck, his phone is always turned on. He panics if the battery goes lower than twenty percent.” He’s still typing as he talks. “I should be able to remotely turn it on from here . . . and . . . there we go. Okay.”

“You drive,” Peter says, tossing Tom his keys. They’re on the road a moment later. Peter calls Aaron to let him know they’re tracking Stiles’ phone and will call him with updates. Aaron is anxious but agrees, saying he’ll wait at the hospital and call them if Talia should happen to turn up. Peter holds the laptop so he can give Tom more specific directions once they get close. “Okay, pull over. It’s here somewhere.”

Tom pulls to the side of the road. He doesn’t see Stiles or Talia anywhere. “The hell?” He jumps out of the car and feels glass crunch underneath his feet. Looks down, sees the way it’s strewn everywhere. Follows the line of sight to a tree about ten feet off the road, which looks like it’s seen better days. “Jesus,” he says. “Where’s the car?”

“An alpha could move a car,” Peter says. “But not far.” He lifts his nose to the air, takes a few quick breaths, and then sets out into the forest.

About fifty yards into the woods, they find the Jeep, which has an enormous dent in both sides and entirely broken windows, but is surprisingly intact.

“Talia could survive this, certainly,” Peter says. “Stiles, probably. It would depend on the angle they were hit. But they didn’t want to kill him, so they were probably careful.” He kneels down
and picks up Stiles’ phone from the wreckage. “They took them somewhere.”

“Shit,” Tom says, looking around as if there might be a sign. Then he looks back at Peter. “They have a home base, right? They’ve been staying somewhere. Jennifer can’t keep Kali in town, not with Kali being so close to feral. And you’ve been there.”

Peter shakes his head. “I don’t – I don’t remember.”

“Okay, I know you don’t, but you can, if you try,” Tom says. “Here, come over here, sit down,” he adds, leading Peter over to a fallen tree and making him sit. “Just try. Think back.”

Peter takes a few deep breaths and closes his eyes. “All right,” he says. “I was in the forest. I remember that much. And then I . . .” He gives a shudder. “I can’t, I’m sorry. Every time I think back, I, I think of the fire, of Olivia – ”

“I know,” Tom says, keeping his voice low and soothing. “I know, Peter. But it’s over. I need you to try to remember, okay? I’m right here with you. Here, take my hands.” He reaches out and lets Peter squeeze down on his hands. “Just take it easy. Think back. Anything you can remember – anything at all, no matter how small – might help.”

Peter just breathes for a few minutes that seem very long to Tom, keeping his eyes tightly shut.

“It’s not . . . a house,” he finally says. “It was hot. Very hot inside. I think I remember . . . corrugated metal. Steel, maybe.”


“I can’t . . .” Peter shudders. “Smoke, I keep smelling smoke, I know it’s not real but I . . .”


Peter nods and takes another shaky breath. He’s silent for another long minute. “It smells . . . dusty,” he says. “And there’s something else. Something . . . underneath that scent. Something damp. Does that make sense?”

“That’s great, Peter,” Tom says. “Damp how? Like the smell of rain?”


Tom’s eyes widen. “That old distillery on the edge of town.”

Peter jolts to his feet. His entire body is trembling, and Tom has to catch him and steady him. Peter clutches at him for a moment, not even realizing what he’s doing. Then he manages to release him and say, almost evenly, “Let’s go.”

~ ~ ~

Derek is oblivious to all the chaos as he works in his office, designing a courtyard for a new hotel that’s being built in nearby Eureka. They’re a city on the ocean, and he’s considering making a trip there over the weekend to get a better sense of the local flora. A courtyard should complement the landscape, not stand apart from it. But at the moment, he’s just flipping through pictures on
Even when he tries to call Stiles to ask about the possible weekend trip and it goes to voice mail, he doesn’t suspect that anything is amiss. Stiles often doesn’t answer his phone when he’s doing his denmaking, because his hands are messy or he’s doing something time sensitive. So he just sends Stiles a text instead, and goes back to his work.

He’s just finishing up with the project and thinking that he might head home when there’s a knock on the door. It sounds more like an angry knock than a polite one, and he sighs, wondering if it’s some irate customer who had improperly watered their plants and now wants to complain about the state they’re in. He finishes off his mug of tea and opens the door.

Standing there is Rafael McCall, hand raised to violently knock again. He does a double take when he sees Derek, who stands there blinking like a deer in headlights. “Hardy?” he says. “What are you doing here?”

“I, uh,” Derek says, unable to come up with a convenient lie on the spot. “I work here.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and Derek grimaces as he sees the pieces fall into place for McCall. As Peter had said, he isn’t actually an idiot. It only takes him a moment to put two and two together and figure out exactly who Derek is. “Son of a bitch,” he says. “I’m going to have Stilinski fucking crucified for this –”

“Sheriff Stilinski did nothing wrong,” Derek says. “You asked for an administrative assistant. He gave you one.”

“Without mentioning that it was the object of my investigation,” McCall says between gritted teeth.

“I introduced myself,” Derek says.

“With a fake name!”

Derek shrugs and says, “You must have misheard me. Is there something I can do for you, Agent McCall?”

“Wait, then, if you’re Derek, who did I –” Rafael swears again. “You’re finished, do you hear me? You’re all finished, and you’re under arrest, you’re coming with me.”

Derek takes a step back. “Don’t touch me.”

“I can damn well touch you if I want to,” McCall says. “That goes along with being arrested. If you want to resist, I’d be happy to incapacitate you.”

“How?” Derek asks dryly. “What are you going to do, shoot me? Unless you’re carrying wolfsbane bullets, it wouldn’t slow me down very much.”

“Listen to me, you smug son of a bitch –” Rafael breaks off as his phone rings. “Jesus, what now,” he snaps, as if Derek will know, and grabs it. “What is it?” he demands.

“Where are you?” a female voice says at the other end of the line, sounding impatient and annoyed. “You were supposed to be here half an hour ago.”

“I had to run an errand,” McCall snaps back.

“Well, make it quick,” the voice replies. “I’m going to need your help soon. This little son of a
bitch isn’t being very cooperative and if Kali has to handle him, she’ll break him in half.”

“That’s a shock,” McCall says, rolling his eyes. “He’s always been a brat. Okay, I’ll be right there.” He hangs up the phone and then snarls at Derek, “I’ll deal with you later,” before heading towards the door.

Derek slams his hand against the doorframe, blocking McCall’s exit. “Who were you just talking to?” he asks.

“None of your business,” McCall sneers.

“You were talking about Stiles,” Derek says. “Weren’t you.”

McCall blinks. “How could you –”

“You’re still thinking of me as Eric Hardy, Agent McCall,” Derek says. “But I’m not, remember? I’m Derek Hale. I’m Stiles’ mate. I know exactly how you’ve always talked about him. I could hear every word that the woman you were talking to said. That was Jennifer Blake, and you were talking about Stiles. He didn’t answer my texts earlier. I didn’t think much of it at the time.”

“Let me through,” McCall says, pushing at Derek’s arm.

It doesn’t yield a centimeter. “Where is Stiles?”

“I don’t know,” McCall growls.

“Yes, you do,” Derek says. Pieces are falling into place now, and he wonders if this is how Stiles feels when he solves a mystery. “Jesus, you’ve known all along. You could have solved this case ages ago. I bet you did solve it ages ago. You’re not as stupid as you pretend to be. But instead of arresting them, you made a deal with them, didn’t you. They’ve been paying you off to keep quiet. That’s why you were so pissed when you lost the case. Because you were going to lose your payoff. And that’s why you didn’t do anything at all with all the information on Search for a Cure that Stiles gave you. Because you already knew all of it.”

“It was only what I deserved!” McCall snaps. “Do you have any idea how big a pay cut I had to take when I asked my superiors to transfer me? It wasn’t an insult enough that they made me go live in Indiana, no, they had to cut my pay twenty percent. What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, man up to your mistakes?” Derek asks, and then takes a deep breath. He doesn’t need to get into a protracted discussion with McCall about his life choices right now. His claws dig into the doorframe. “McCall. Where is Stiles?”

“I don’t know!” McCall shouts.

“Yes, you do,” Derek repeats. “And you’re going to take me to him. Right now.”

McCall sneers. “Or else what?”

Derek grabs him by the throat and slams him up against the wall hard enough to knock the wind out of him. “Or else,” he says under his breath, “I will make you.” He holds McCall suspended, feet kicking for purchase, and squeezes. “Do you think that there is anything I would not do for my mate?” he asks, and McCall tries to choke out a response. “There isn’t. But I don’t need you, McCall. Now that I know you’ve been involved this whole time, now that I know you went to cry foul to Jennifer after you got taken off the case and that you’ve been working with them – I can find them with or without you. Peter put a GPS chip in your car. Your phone will have records. It’ll take me a little time, but I could do it. But the fastest thing for me to do is make you show me.
If you’re not going to cooperate, I don’t have time for you. So I’ll happily break your neck, leave your body here, and then go rescue Stiles anyway. So make a choice, McCall, but make it fast.”

“Show you,” McCall wheezes.

“Good.” Derek sets him on his feet. “Let’s go.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 22

Stiles is beginning to think that the word ‘push’ has lost all meaning. Why do people shout that during deliveries, anyway? Do they think the mother doesn’t know what she needs to do? He’s pretty sure that she does. The contractions don’t exactly seem to be voluntary. So is it just meant to be encouragement? Because he’s pretty sure that if he was trying to squeeze a human being out of his genitals, he’d be pretty fucking annoyed with everyone shouting in his ear about it.

He settles for quieter, less demanding encouragement. “Okay, you’re doing great,” he says, over and over again, as Talia shreds towels with her claws and grinds down on the washcloth in her mouth. “That’s really good, Talia, you’re gonna be done in no time.”

The monotonous drone of encouragement is coming out automatically when he checks things down below and lets out a yelp. “Oh my God! That’s a head!”

Jennifer leans over to check. “She’s crowning,” she says.


Talia wheezes out a laugh. She snatches the fabric out of her mouth. “No,” she grunts. “Almost – almost –” Her entire body shudders and the head emerges the rest of the way, and then a few moments later, the shoulders. Stiles is so enthralled that he forgets to be grossed out for a few moments, as he grabs the baby and draws it the rest of the way out.

Then he promptly goes back to being grossed out, because, well, the baby is kind of slimy. He pushes that aside. “Girl!” he proclaims, as the baby pulls in air and starts to wail. “Talia, it’s a girl!”

“Give it here,” Jennifer says.

Stiles pulls the baby to his chest protectively. “Over my dead body!”

“Stiles,” Jennifer says impatiently, “you can’t hold the first baby and deliver the second.”

“Fucking watch me!” Stiles says, holding the baby girl in the crook of one arm while he checks on Talia to see, to his relief, that the second baby isn’t already elbowing his or her way out into the world. The relief is short lived. Is that supposed to happen? Are there usually gaps between twins? Or is the second one stuck somehow? How can he find out? He knows twins are born on separate days sometimes. That means he’s probably got a little time before he has to freak out. He grabs one of the spare towels, dips it in the water, and starts to clean her face off. She doesn’t appreciate this treatment at all, and wails louder. “Oh, shit, the cord,” he says.
“Here, we have clamps,” Jennifer says, handing him one.

Stiles gingerly puts the tool on the umbilical cord, wincing as he clamps it down. He’s anticipating more wailing, but it doesn’t happen. “Okay, do you have like, a knife or a . . . a cutting thing with handles,” he says lamely, because the cord looks thick and rubbery.

“Scissors,” Jennifer says, and before Stiles can protest, she kneels down beside him and snips the cord. Then she reaches for the baby. Stiles yanks her back. “Stiles, for God’s sake –”

Talia lets out a loud wail of her own, body bowing, and Stiles nearly drops the infant girl as he checks on her. “I’m good, I’ve got this,” he says, shoving Jennifer away with his free elbow. “Okay, you’re crowning again,” he says, seeing the second baby start to emerge. “You’re almost done, Talia, you’re doing great, just one more push and I think –”

His attempt to juggle the first baby while grabbing the second goes about as well as could be expected, but he manages not to drop her on her head, which is about all he was going for, and the second baby pretty much lands in his lap. He’s going to need new pants. Somehow in all his research on childbirth and pregnancy, he had never realized how messy it was. “Boy!” he shouts, wiping off the baby’s face and scooting back a few inches so he can sit Indian-style and keep both babies on his lap.

“Hnnnnng,” Talia replies.

“Oh my God! Is there a third one?!” Stiles chokes.

“No, just –” Talia grunts again, fists clenching down in the towels.

“Afterbirth,” Jennifer says, leaning down and again trying to take one of the babies from Stiles. “Get away from me, you psycho,” Stiles says. “This is a special moment! Hand me the clamp.”

Jennifer scowls and practically throws it at him. His hands are still shaking from the adrenaline as they get the second cord cut. Talia collapses backwards, panting, as the contractions ease. “Let me see them,” she says, in a voice that cracks.

“Here you go,” Stiles says, shuffling over so he can hand her the babies.

Jennifer snatches the boy just as Stiles is trying to pass him over. He lets out a yelp and Talia snarls, but she’s weak from the labor, and can’t manage more than that. “You can keep the other one for now,” Jennifer says, as Stiles scrambles to his feet, although to do what, he has no idea. He’s still holding onto the baby girl, and even if he wasn’t, attacking Jennifer won’t get him anywhere. He doesn’t have any weapons. He stands there, paralyzed in indecision, while Jennifer sets the boy down in a waiting bassinet and begins to sort through her equipment.

With nothing else to do, Stiles goes for stalling. “Why are you doing this? Why do you hate werewolves so much?”

“It has nothing to do with hatred,” Jennifer says, not looking up from what she’s doing, drawing the test tube that Stiles’ blood had been in out of the machine and checking a readout. “It’s just about what’s best for everyone. And eliminating lycanthropy is it.”

Stiles looks over at Kali, crouched silently in the corner, face set in a permanent scowl. She looks more animal than human. “You’re in love with a werewolf,” he says.

“That’s just it, isn’t it?” Jennifer says. “Being mated to a werewolf is the worst thing that can happen.”
“I, uh, I have to disagree with you on that one,” Stiles says. “I think it’s pretty awesome.”

“Because you two are still together,” Jennifer says. She puts a needle in the test tube and starts drawing the liquid into a syringe. “But you’ve seen what happens to werewolves who lose their mates, who lose their packs. The pain, the suffering, the insanity. Peter Hale. Deucalion. All those alphas that we see who have lost control.”

“Yes, okay, bad things happen sometimes,” Stiles says. “Trust me, nobody knows that better than the Hales. But that doesn’t mean they want to give it all up. I mean, look at Peter Hale for your example. Yes, he lost his mate and his child, and yes, he’s more than a little bit crazy. But he can still smile. He was happy for Derek when Derek found me, even though he lost his mate, and he’s happy for Talia for having children even though he lost his child. He even found someone to love again. It’s not always suffering, Jennifer. It isn’t.”

“What would you know about it?” Jennifer snaps at him. “You’re just a child. You don’t know what it’s like to love someone more than life itself and have them leave you. And for what?” She gestures to Kali. “For power. She threw away what we had together like it meant nothing to her.”

“So because you had a bad breakup, all werewolf bonds are bad?” Stiles asks. “What kind of ignorant bullshit is that?”

“I’m curing a disease, Stiles. I’m preventing people from going through pain. And I don’t give a damn what you think of me.”

“What about what she thinks of you?” Stiles asks, jabbing a finger in Kali’s direction. “What have you even done to her? She hasn’t said two words since I got here. How much magic do you have to use on her every day to keep her with you? To force her to do what you want?”

Jennifer’s jaw tightens. “She brought it on herself,” she says.

“She left you, okay, that sucks,” Stiles says. “I can definitely say that she isn’t a very good person. But does she deserve this? To live half-feral, barely able to control her own instincts, because you won’t let her have a pack?”

“She betrayed me! I was her mate and she left me! She doesn’t deserve a pack!”

Stiles stares at Jennifer a minute before he says quietly, “But she isn’t your mate, Jennifer.”

“How dare you – ”

“She isn’t,” Stiles says. “I know that because of what you’ve done to her. The ways you’ve hurt her. I know she’s in pain. But you don’t see it. If she was really your mate, you never could have hurt her.”

“After what she did to me – ”

“It doesn’t matter,” Stiles insists. “Derek is my mate, okay? I love him with my entire heart and soul. And the thought of him leaving me, it’s like a knife to my gut. There was a time when I didn’t believe he loved me. When I thought it was just a joke. But even when I thought that, I loved him. And if I had been right – if it had been a joke, if he had left me or mocked me – I would have been angry, and, and devastated, I would have hated him with every fiber of my being, but even then, I never could have hurt him.”

“You don’t – ” Jennifer’s face is white with rage, her hands trembling as she clutches at the syringe she’s drawn of the ‘medicine’ that she’s made out of Stiles’ blood. “You don’t know what
you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do,” Stiles says, and points at Kali again, where she hasn’t moved an inch, her eyes wide and red and full of hatred and despair. “Look at her,” he says, and when Jennifer opens her mouth to retort, Stiles shouts, “LOOK AT HER!”

Everyone is jolted out of the tense moment and there’s a knock on the door. It’s a rapid noise that sounds more like a clang, and then someone says from outside, “It’s me.”

It’s Rafael McCall’s voice, and Stiles is so stunned that all he can do is gape at the door, unable to even think of something nasty to say.

“About fucking time,” Jennifer snarls, as Stiles stands there with his jaw ajar. “Kali, get the door,” she adds, and the alpha gets up from where she’s been crouched silently in the corner to walk over to the door. It’s got a huge metal bar over it, which it seems that only Kali can lift. She does so easily, pushing it with one hand until it swings the other way and the door is no longer barred.

All of them squint in the sudden bright light when the door opens all the way, and then suddenly Rafael McCall comes flying through the air and crashes into Kali. Both of them go sprawling. And Stiles sees Derek before anyone else, maybe even before he really sees him at all. He just knows. He dives forward, practically throwing himself towards the bassinet, as Derek charges inside.

Jennifer makes an abrupt gesture with one hand, and a huge wind gusts through the room. Stiles is thrown backwards. He twists in the air so he comes down on his back, still holding the baby girl against his chest. He lands so hard that it knocks the wind out of him, and sends jolts of pain through his already battered body. “Derek, the baby,” he gasps out.

Derek hits the wall but bounces back, heading towards Jennifer. She snarls at him, and the air suddenly goes thick like molasses, and he struggles against it, clawing his way forward an inch at a time.

Stiles nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels someone tugging at the cuff of his pants. He looks over to see Talia. She makes a beckoning gesture with both hands. “Give her to me,” she says, and Stiles hands over the baby girl so Talia can protect her. Then he does the only thing he can think of. He grabs the pair of scissors off the small table and throws them at Jennifer as hard as he can.

They don’t come anywhere near her. Her head snaps around as she senses them, and her other hand comes up to deflect them. But as a distraction, it serves. The wall of thick air around Derek weakens, and the sudden lack of pressure has his own momentum hurtling him forward. He lands on Jennifer hard, and they both tumble to the ground.

Jennifer gives a bloodcurdling shriek of rage, and Kali jerks upright as if she had been slapped. But she doesn’t go to her, doesn’t do anything else. Stiles can see her body trembling, as if she’s fighting against herself.

That’s a problem that’s going to have to wait. He darts forward to grab the baby boy off the table. A hand claps down on his forearm and he’s nearly yanked off his feet. “Oh, no, you don’t,” McCall growls, trying to get him into a headlock. But Stiles didn’t train with Laura for years for nothing. He slams his head backwards, so the hard back of his head impacts with McCall’s comparatively softer mouth and nose. Then he pistons his leg backwards, slamming his foot into McCall’s knee. The FBI agent lets out a muffled yelp and goes staggering, and Stiles manages to squirm free.
He’s just managed to reach the bassinet and throw himself on top of it, trying to shield the baby without squashing him, when he hears a snarl from the floor. Derek and Jennifer are still grappling. In terms of strength, she has nothing on him, but she must be using some kind of magic, because he just can’t seem to get a grip on her. She manages to get free and scramble to her feet, looking around wildly. Stiles thinks she’s looking for the baby, and he’s trying to think of a way to defend himself when she instead dives for the syringe that she has her theoretical cure in.

“Derek, look out!” Stiles yelps, as Derek lunges for her again, but it’s too late. She slams the syringe into his chest and pushes the plunger down before he can pull away. He staggers backwards, eyes wide with surprise. Stiles feels his heart leap into his mouth. He’s seen all the reports about these experiments. He knows that the cure is a death sentence unless it works. And he just can’t bring himself to believe that his blood is actually special. “Derek!”

McCall grabs him again, this time getting an arm around his throat so it’s harder for him to fight back. And he’s holding the baby boy, now, which makes things more complicated. He flails and tries to squirm out of McCall’s grip, but feels something sharp stab into his neck. “Don’t move,” McCall pants. He’s picked up the scissors from the floor where they had gotten thrown. “Or I’ll cut your throat, I swear to God.”

Stiles goes still. He doesn’t even care. He’s looking desperately at Derek, who’s braced against the table, one hand pressed against his chest. “Derek?” he whispers, thinking back desperately to the reports, trying to remember how long it takes for adverse symptoms to show up.

“Give me the baby, Stiles,” Jennifer says, and she looks feral herself, her typically neat brown hair strewn down around her face.

“Fuck you,” Stiles retorts, his gaze still glued to Derek, whose wolf features are gradually melting back into his human face.

“Do what she says,” McCall says, pressing the scissors harder into Stiles’ throat.

“Be careful!” Jennifer snaps. “He’s the God damned golden ticket, if you cut his throat I’ll end you!”

“Give me a break, you can’t think – ”

“Look at him!” Jennifer says, pointing to Derek. “It worked!”

Everyone is now staring at Derek. He looks down at his hands, then up to Stiles. He still looks more surprised than anything else. But he’s not showing any of the symptoms that the other failed experiments have. No seizures, no trouble breathing, no agonizing pain. And as the seconds continue to tick by in tense silence, it’s becoming clear that he isn’t going to.

“Try to shift,” Jennifer says, and Derek shakes his head, again looking at his hands like he can’t figure out what happened to them and where his claws went. A wide, excited smile touches Jennifer’s face. “It works! Stiles, you – you’re a miracle! It works!”

“I thought I was going to get to kill him,” McCall says sourly.

“I told you, you would only get to kill him if it didn’t work,” Jennifer snaps.

McCall’s gaze lights on Derek. “What about him?” he asks. “Can I kill him?”

“Sure,” Jennifer says breezily. “He’s human now. And we have the cure. We don’t need him.”

At this, McCall’s face twists in an ugly smile. Stiles tries harder to get free, and the scissors start to
dig painfully into his neck. Then McCall lets him go, shoving him over at Jennifer. He whips around as Jennifer's hand clamps down on his shoulder, keeping him from throwing himself at McCall.

But the FBI agent has barely taken one step forward when there’s a sudden loud noise, and he reels backwards. A gunshot, Stiles’ frozen brain begins to process. An excellent shot; it hit McCall squarely in the shoulder and it must have come through the door, which is only open about six inches. It’s an opening that a werewolf has now hurtled through, all lean muscle and glowing blue eyes, and Peter has his hands around McCall’s throat before anyone can move.

“Peter, don’t!” Sheriff Stilinski’s voice rings through the room. “We need him alive!”

Peter turns with a snarl, and there’s nothing human in his face. But his hands slowly relax. Stiles can see blood on McCall’s throat, so Peter’s claws must have penetrated, but overall it still looks intact. McCall is clutching at his wounded shoulder with a look of terror on his face, and Peter stays crouched on top of him, not letting him move a muscle.

“All right, nobody move,” Tom says, stepping through the door with his gun still up. “Stiles, you okay? Derek?”

“I’m okay,” Stiles wheezes, although Jennifer’s hand is still digging tightly in his shoulder. “Derek is – I’m not sure, but – ”

“I’m all right,” Derek says, holding Stiles’ gaze. “Stiles, I’m all right.”

Tom gestures at Jennifer with the gun. “Let my son go. Now.”

Jennifer gives a scream of frustration. “KALI!”

From the corner, Kali lurches to her feet. She steps forward, unsteady, lips peeled back in a snarl. Tom turns so he has the gun trained on her, but everyone knows that he could empty the clip into her without doing more than slowing her down.

“We’re leaving,” Jennifer says. “Stiles, come with me. Bring the baby. Kali, cover our exit. You can keep Rafael – he’s useless anyway.”

“Kali, stop,” Stiles says desperately. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to listen to her. She’s not your mate, she’s just – she’s crazy and she’s just using you.”

There’s a flicker of frustration, of something human, in Kali’s eyes for the first time. But she doesn’t stop. She continues that slow stalk forward as Jennifer starts to take steps backwards, heading for the distillery’s back exit. Tom’s gaze flickers between Jennifer and Kali, and his finger starts to tighten on the trigger.

Then, abruptly, Kali goes flying. It happens so quickly that for a minute, Stiles isn’t sure what happened. One minute Kali was on her feet, advancing on his father, and the next she was crashing into the far wall and Talia – Talia is standing where Kali was a few seconds ago, eyes crimson, clothing bloody and ragged, still holding her new daughter in her arms.

Kali scrambles to her feet and charges forward again, and Talia spins in place and slams one bare foot into Kali’s stomach. The force of the kick practically folds the feral alpha in half, and she goes flying again. This time Talia pursues, and when Kali tries to get back up, she kicks her again. Kali keeps trying to get up, and Talia keeps slamming her back down. It’s a beatdown of epic proportions, not least of all because Talia does it all without ever letting go of the baby.

Finally, Kali stops trying to get back up, and crawls over to where Jennifer is standing. “Julia,”
she chokes out, the word mangled from her broken jaw and teeth. Talia turns and those red eyes focus on Jennifer and Stiles and her other baby. Jennifer trembles, but she’s not giving up yet. The entire room starts to rattle and objects go flying through the air at Talia. She bats each of them aside as if they were nothing.

“Give me my sons,” Talia says, in a low snarl. “Both of them.”

“I need Stiles’ blood,” Jennifer says.

“Give it a rest!” Stiles retorts, trying to squirm free.

“Julia,” Kali moans again, trying to claw herself back to her feet. Jennifer looks down at her with an expression that’s a mess of conflicting emotions. “I – I need –”

“What is it, my love?” Jennifer says. “What do you need?”

“I need – need –” Kali continues to choke out the word, and then finally gasps out, “pack.”

Jennifer’s face turns into a sad smile. “I know, Kali. We’ll get you a pack, I promise. I don’t –” she starts, but then the words break off with a startled cry as Kali lunges upwards and sinks her teeth into Jennifer’s thigh. She stumbles backwards and loses her grip on Stiles, who wastes no time getting as far away from her as he can, ducking behind Talia and his father.

“Mine,” Kali says, struggling to her feet and drawing a stunned Jennifer into her embrace. “Mine now. I was yours and now you’re mine.”

“What – what have you done?” Jennifer asks, her voice wavering.

Kali just continues to stroke Jennifer’s hair and croon. They sink slowly to the floor together, Kali ending up on her knees while Jennifer is sitting, the werewolf wrapped around her like a protective shield. “Mine, mine, mine.”

After a moment, Tom seems to come to the conclusion that Kali and Jennifer can be insane together in their own corner. He holsters his gun and takes Stiles by the shoulder. “You – Jesus, are you okay? That – that’s a lot blood –”

“It’s not mine,” Stiles says. “I kind of became an honorary midwife.”

“You did amazingly,” Talia says. “And I’m sorry it took me so long to get up and help. I figured if I took a minute or two to regain my strength, I could settle things quickly, rather than struggling to participate while I was still weak.” She kneels down next to Peter, who still has Rafael casually pinned to the floor, although at some point he had grabbed one of the towels and pressed it against Rafael’s wounded shoulder. “You all right, little brother?”

“Derek -?” Talia begins, turning to look at her son. But she stops, her eyes going wide. Black liquid is starting to soak through the fabric of Jennifer’s pants. It makes sense, Stiles thinks. She’s worked with silver and wolfsbane exposure for years. Odds are that she’s had a fair bit of exposure herself. But that doesn’t change the fact that there’s now a clock ticking on Jennifer’s life, and the distillery is on the far edge of town, at least twenty minutes away from the hospital even at top speed.

“Jennifer, your leg,” he says, and she looks down at the black liquid. “We need to get you to a hospital.”
Tom and Talia both take a step forward, but Kali snarls at them, curling tighter around Jennifer’s body. Tom holds his hands up in surrender and tries to take another step, but Kali’s snarling only intensifies.

“Jennifer, get her to stand down,” Talia says. “You need medical treatment.”

“No,” Jennifer says, her voice shaking. “Kali, let me go.”

“Kali,” Kali snarls. “You’re mine now. All these years you told me I would have a pack again someday. But you never let me keep anyone. Now I have you, and I’m not letting you go. Not ever. Not ever letting you go.”

“Kali, she’ll die if she doesn’t get treated for the bite rejection,” Stiles says, but he knows that reason isn’t going to work. And maybe, possibly, they could get Jennifer away from Kali, but he doesn’t think they could do it without getting hurt. He certainly isn’t going anywhere near her, with her alpha fangs and her lust for pack, not when a single bite will kill him just as surely as it’s trying to kill Jennifer. To save an innocent, he would risk it. But not to save Jennifer Blake. And from the way everyone else is just standing there, uncertain, he doesn’t think anyone else is eager to risk Kali’s wrath, either.

That’s what he’s thinking, when Derek suddenly stands up, grabs the chair Stiles had been sitting in earlier, and breaks it over Kali’s head.

“Holy shit!” Stiles yelps, as Kali reels, dazed. Talia moves in immediately to subdue her, and Tom grabs Jennifer and hauls her back to her feet.

“Take her, go,” Talia says, and Tom nods, half-carrying Jennifer out of the distillery. Peter gets to his feet, leaving Rafael bleeding on the floor, and follows them at a pace that somehow seems nonchalant. He obviously doesn’t intend to let Tom out of his sight, particularly not while accompanying a witch somewhere.

Stiles stares at her. “Lady, you are some kind of crazy,” he says, and then Tom and Peter have hustled her out of the building. He walks over to Derek, hesitantly laying his hand on Derek’s chest, where the syringe went in. “You – are you still – ”

“Yeah,” Derek says, half-shifted. Stiles reaches out and rubs a hand over his ridged brow.

“It didn’t work,” Stiles says. “It didn’t work after all.” He stifles a half sob. “I thought you were going to die but it didn’t work. I’m not special. Oh my God, I’ve never been so happy to not be special.”

Derek rubs his back and his hair and murmurs into his ear. Then he says, “We need to get Mom and the babies to a hospital. McCall too, I guess,” he adds uncharitably.

“Through and through gunshot wounds have a very good prognosis,” Stiles mumbles into Derek’s chest.

Talia, who seems to be suffering no ill effects of having delivered twins on a dirt floor, hauls McCall up over one shoulder. He lets out a muffled noise of protest. Derek carefully takes both babies, cradling them in his arms. “Hello, little brother,” he says, kissing the boy on the forehead. “Hello, little sister.”
“Oh my God, you are so cute,” Stiles says, and closes his eyes as he stumbles after his mate.

~ ~ ~ ~
The scene at the hospital is chaotic, and Derek would love to find a quiet corner to pass out in, but that’s not going to happen. Aaron is in with Talia and the babies. The doctors have checked them over and proclaimed them in perfect health. Jennifer Blake was rushed into treatment, but because of the delay, things look dicey. Kali has been arrested and Tom had a few deputies come with their mountain ash handcuffs and tasers to take her down to the station. She seems more confused than anything else, and Derek knows that it’s going to take some time to sort out which of her actions she can really take responsibility for.

Rafael McCall was taken into surgery, and was eventually proclaimed in stable but serious condition. Tom had shot him in the upper shoulder, which had broken his collarbone and severed some important nerves, and once Peter had let go of him, he had nearly bled out from where the bullet had clipped his subclavian artery. But he’s been stabilized, and Tom has posted a guard on his room in case he gets any ideas.

Everything going in was so exciting and stressful that it was nearly an hour later before Derek found Stiles sitting in a corner, still in the same bloodstained clothes, pale and shaking. “I don’t feel so good,” he said, when Derek asked, and right about then everyone remembered that Stiles had been in a major car accident and then gotten tossed around by a witch. Fortunately, none of his injuries were serious, but he was dangerously close to going into shock. They put him on IV fluids and got him a heated blanket. Derek curled up with him on a stretcher, wrapping his warmer body around his mate.

He’s still lying there, almost dozing off, exhausted after everything that had happened. He still doesn’t even know the full story, but at the moment, he doesn’t care. It occurs to him to ask if anyone had called his sisters. Not wanting to get up, he texts his father. Aaron reports that no, he hadn’t called them yet, since everything was so confusing, and Derek can if he wants to do the honors.

Laura squeals and says she’s going to throw the kids in the car and be right down (which, since there are three children under the age of six, means it’ll be about an hour). Cora, for her part, screams out of happiness, and Derek can hear Isaac in the background, telling her to get off the chandelier. Derek makes her promise that she won’t drop everything to come back, and after some persuasion she agrees to attend her classes the next morning and then get on a flight back.

By then, Tom has finished the police work he has to do, and comes over to report in. “Well, they’ve got Blake in a medically-induced coma,” he reports. “They’re not sure how she’s going to do. Her fever spiked pretty high. She went into respiratory failure and they had to put her on a ventilator. And the full moon is still two weeks away, so, they’ll need to keep her immunosuppressed for a while.”

“Lucky her,” Stiles mumbles. “I’m not sorry for her at all.”
Tom gives a quiet snort, and then looks up as Peter walks down the hallway. He continues, “McCall is unconscious, for now, so if either of you know anything about what the hell he was doing there, now’s the time to speak up.”

Derek looks up at this. “He came to my office looking for me,” he says. “Figured out who I was and started to pitch a fit. But then he got a phone call from Jennifer. I could hear who it was, and I figured it out. He solved the case ages ago, but they paid him off to keep him quiet. That’s why he wouldn’t let the whole thing with Paige go. He knew for a fact that she wasn’t part of the pattern.”


“I made him take me there.” Derek huffs out a sigh. “Apparently that wasn’t the brightest of moves. I guess I should have knocked him out and left him in the car.”

“We can’t all be perfect,” Peter says complacently. But he reaches down and gently squeezes Derek’s shoulder. “You got there before I did, which is quite impressive.”

“Yeah, you were badass,” Stiles says, cuddling closer. “I mean, you kept her from injecting baby brother with that stuff.”

“Apparently it wouldn’t have mattered,” Derek says.

“You didn’t know that,” Tom points out. Then he glances at Peter and says, “Why do you think it didn’t work? I mean, okay, I get that maybe Stiles isn’t actually the werewolf messiah. But all the previous versions actually killed the subjects, right? But Derek is fine.”

“I imagine that actually has less to do with the formula and more to do with the test subject,” Peter says. “Up until today, Jennifer has exclusively tested on turned wolves. Perhaps born werewolves don’t have the same reaction to the serum. The immune response it triggers that causes death must be something that they’re simply born without.”

“Wow, that’s super fascinating,” Stiles says. “I’m gonna care about that later, I swear.”

Derek smooths down his hair. “I’m sorry that I brought McCall along and then he hurt you,” he says, scowling.

Peter growls a little and then turns to Tom. “I wish you had let me kill him. Need him alive for what, precisely?”

With a sigh, Tom says, “You want an honest answer, Peter? I just wasn’t sure I’d look at you the same way if I saw you tear a man’s throat out with your bare hands, and I didn’t want to risk it.”

“Ah,” Peter says. “That makes more sense. I’ll allow it.”

Derek shakes his head a little at this and nuzzles at Stiles’ neck. Before he can say anything else, the doctor comes over to check on him. After a few minutes of poking and prodding, he says, “Well, so far everything looks okay, but we’re going to keep you overnight, just to be on the safe side. A nurse is going to come by to get you settled into a room in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He looks at his father and says, “Can I see the babies first?”

“We’ll see,” Tom says. “I’ll go check on them.”

He’s still gone when the nurse comes by, and they get Stiles settled upstairs. He has a roommate, a young man who’s sleeping, so they try to stay quiet. Stiles is exhausted anyway, despite everything, and happy to cuddle with Derek and not talk much. Peter has brought Stiles’ phone
from the wreckage of the Jeep, so he texts Scott and Allison to let them know that Talia has had a boy and a girl.

He’s grumpy about the fact that nobody will let him out of bed to go see the babies he just helped deliver, but now that he’s had some time to lie down, every inch of him is sore. When Derek realizes that, he calls Stiles an idiot and asks the nurse if he can have some painkillers. Stiles takes them somewhat grudgingly.

A few minutes later, Talia walks in with Aaron behind her, each of them carrying a baby. Stiles sits up and then immediately lies back down as his head spins. “You brought them!”

“Well, you couldn’t see us, so we decided to come see you,” Talia says. She sits down next to the bed.

“They’re so pretttyyyy,” Stiles slurs.

Derek bites back a smile. “Painkillers,” he says to his mother, “and a shot of pain drain. He’s a little loopy.”

“I can see that,” Talia says. She reaches out and takes Stiles’ hand, laying it gently on the sleeping baby’s head. Stiles coos happily. “Well, he deserves it. I’m sorry I couldn’t do a better job protecting him.”

“You did kind of have other things to worry about,” Tom says. “So what are their names?” he adds.

Talia clears her throat and shoots her husband an amused look. “We, uh. Haven’t managed to agree on that yet.”

Derek lets out a snort of laughter. “This is going to be like David all over again, isn’t it.”

“Well, if my husband could just let me boss him around like usual, we wouldn’t have this problem,” Talia says, “but for some reason he thinks he should get a say, too.”

“I’m old-fashioned like that,” Aaron says, grinning, as he rubs his hand up and down Talia’s back.

Tom shakes his head, chuckling. “You guys heading home?”

“We’ve been discharged,” Aaron says with a nod. “We’d stay, but . . .”

“No, no,” Tom says. “Take your babies home. We’ll stay the night with Stiles. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Gonna make you all brunch,” Stiles says, smiling blearily up at Talia. “Like with . . . those pancakes with squares in them.”

“Okay, Stiles,” Talia says, muffling a laugh. “Tom, I assume we can leave the legalities until tomorrow?”

Tom nods. “Kali’s in holding, and neither McCall or Blake are going anywhere. I’ll get it all sorted out after Stiles is out of the hospital.”

“Okay.” Talia leans over and kisses Stiles on the forehead. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

~ ~ ~ ~
It’s about one o’clock in the morning, and Stiles’ hospital room is quiet, when Peter stands up and heads towards the door. Derek is sound asleep at Stiles’ feet, but Tom looks up, yawning. “Where y’going?” he asks.

“Just need to stretch my legs,” Peter says, leaving the room. He doesn’t wait to see whether or not Tom believes him. It doesn’t matter.

It’s easy enough to find Rafael McCall’s room. There’s a police guard on it, after all, and he paces the hallways for nearly half an hour, walking past it several times, just to give the impression that he’s just wandering to pass the time. But he keeps a careful eye on it, waits until he sees the officer start to yawn. Then it’s just a quick trip down to the cafeteria to get a bunch of cups of coffee, which he brings up and distributes to the nurses and staff, gaining himself many fans in the process. He gives one to the officer as well, of course, but his has a little something special added.

Once he’s nodded off, Peter slips into the room. He hums underneath his breath while he makes a few preparations. McCall’s roommate just had an operation, so Peter dials up his morphine for a minute to make sure he’ll stay sleeping for a little while. The man could probably use it, anyway. McCall is easy enough to deal with, and then Peter sits down by the head of the bed, leaning into McCall’s personal space, presses one hand over his mouth, and gives him a sharp nudge to the bullet wound.

McCall wakes up with a pained grunt. He blinks somewhat blearily around the room before he focuses on Peter and makes a muffled noise.

“Shh,” Peter says, right into his ear. “We’re just going to have a little chat. I’m going to take my hand off your mouth now, but if you shout for help, I will break your windpipe. They might get the tracheotomy done before you suffocate . . . or they might not. Is that understood?”

McCall gives a little nod, and Peter lifts his hand away. There’s a moment of intense straining on McCall’s part, before he rasps out, “Can’t move.”

“Yes, I know,” Peter says. “I gave you a little paralytic. Jennifer Blake had some left over. Don’t worry, I didn’t give you enough to cause any damage. I just didn’t want you getting any ideas during this conversation.”

“What do you want?” McCall says, trying to inject some measure of bravado into his voice.

“What do I want . . .” Peter lets his voice trail off, fingers tapping absently at McCall’s wounded shoulder. “Where shall I even begin? Tomorrow, some fine officers of the law are going to have some questions for you, Rafael. And you’re going to confess. You’re going to confess to everything. You’re going to tell them how you solved this case years ago but continued to let your superiors pay you to work on it, while Blake paid you to keep quiet about it. You’re going to admit you came here to try to keep Stiles from solving the case so you wouldn’t lose your payday, and how you figured that if you ignored what he gave you on Search for a Cure, he’d hit a dead end. And you’re not going to say a word about the Hales, particularly Derek’s little side job, or Sheriff Stilinski. How’s that for starters?”

McCall’s throat works. “You have no proof of any of that,” he says, trying to muster up a sneer.

“Of course I don’t. That’s why I need you to confess. Pay attention,” Peter says, with another gentle prod at the bullet wound. “We could work it out, most likely – eventually we’ll get through all of Blake’s financials, and her payments to you will be in there somewhere, but that’s besides
the point. You’re going to admit to everything. You’re going to accept whatever plea deal they
give you. And then you’re going to leave this town and never come here again. That, Agent
McCall, is what I want.”

McCall opens his mouth, most likely to say something stupid, and Peter gently lays a hand on his
throat. There are three small wounds there from where Peter’s claws had sunk in. “Do you know
why you’re alive, Rafael?” he asks, and McCall makes a small noise in the back of his throat.
“Because Tom did not want me to rip your throat out in front of him. That’s it. That is the only
reason. But you know what’s funny? I don’t think he’d really have much of an objection to you
mysteriously vanishing.”

“You . . .” McCall can’t finish his sentence.

“Oh, I would, Rafael. So from now on, every time you think about how you don’t have to do
what I’ve asked, I want you to look at the mirror. Look at these.” His claws dig in lightly. “Look
at these and remember that the only reason you’re still alive is because of my self-control. And
Rafael?” Peter smiles at him. “My self-control is not very good.”

With that, he stands up and heads back to Stiles’ room. The paralytic will wear off in about an
hour, and he’s guessing McCall won’t call for help. If he does, well, Peter will deal with that as it
comes.

Tom is still awake when Peter gets there, and asks, “Enjoy your walk?”

“Brought you some coffee,” Peter says, and he knows that Tom knows exactly where he went
and why he went there. It’s nothing that they need to talk about.

“Thanks,” Tom says. He pulls Peter down onto his lap. Peter tucks his head into the crook of
Tom’s shoulder, where it always seems to fit so naturally, and smiles.

~ ~ ~ ~

By six o’clock the next morning, Stiles is awake and thoroughly sick of being in the hospital. He’s
done enough time in them, he says, and starts pestering every nurse who comes in to get him
discharged. They tell him they’ll see and give Tom sympathetic looks. Tom, who’s more used to
his progeny, settles for distracting him.

Jennifer Blake and Search for a Cure have been on the news for weeks, of course, ever since they
first got their warrant and the scheme started to fall apart. The media has taken interest in the story
of the refugees being rehabilitated, so it’s hardly a dramatic splash at this point. Still, Tom goes
through the various news websites to read to Stiles about how Jennifer Blake had been
apprehended when the alpha she had been using to give people the bite had turned on her, forcing
her to seek medical care when she went into rejection.

“I don’t care about that, read me the stuff in the comments section,” Stiles says, and Tom, against
his better judgment, wades into all the commentary about karma.

None of the articles have anything about Talia or Stiles, but by the time Stiles is getting his
discharge paperwork done, they do have a few mentions of Rafael McCall, the FBI agent who
was supposed to be solving the case but had confessed to having helped Blake stay under the
radar of several federal agencies.
“So it looks like he confessed to everything, huh,” Derek says. He gives Peter a sideways look. Peter just smiles back, looking content.

“I’m just glad he didn’t try to get my dad in trouble for letting you spy on him,” Stiles says.

“Mm,” Peter says. “We wouldn’t want that.”

Tom shakes his head. “Come on, you two. You’re going to give me heartburn.”

“You don’t like it when I’m naughty?” Peter says, giving Tom a look from underneath his eyelashes. “Do you want to take me in, officer? I promise I’ll resist . . .”

“Oh my God!” Stiles says. “Come on, Uncle P, that’s my dad! Even I have to draw the line somewhere!”

“Well, thank God for that,” Tom says, rolling his eyes and trying to hide the blush that’s springing to his cheeks. He manages to usher the group out of the room and down to the car.

“Hey, what happened to my Jeep?” Stiles asks, eyes going wide as he realizes he had never been told what had become of his beloved vehicle.

“It’s pretty messed up,” Tom says. “I don’t even know how we would get it back to the road to get towed away, although I guess with werewolves around anything is possible. Still, we can look into getting you a new car this weekend.”


“We’ll find you some old clunker you’ll love just as much,” Tom says, tousling Stiles’ hair, and Stiles just whines more. Derek eventually shuts him up with a kiss.

Everything is surprisingly peaceful at the den. Talia is asleep on the sofa with her head in Aaron’s lap. He’s holding one of the babies in his arms, and Laura is sitting in the armchair with the other. Derek immediately goes over to give each of them a kiss on the forehead.

Laura leans upwards to rub her cheek against Derek’s. “Cora called earlier, she’s on a flight back this afternoon,” she says. “They’re probably already at the airport, for that matter.”

“Okay,” Derek says, looking forward to seeing his younger sister.

Peter yawns and stretches. “Well, if nobody minds, I was up all night, and I’m going to go get some sleep. Tom, would you care to join me?”

“I’d love to, but I have a feral alpha in holding and eight hundred phone calls to make,” Tom says. “I’ll see you guys later.” He leans in to give Peter a quick kiss, tousles Stiles’ hair, and heads for the door. Peter yawns again and heads up the stairs without another word.

“Well, obviously we’re going to have a big family dinner, so if I’m not needed here, I’ll be in the kitchen,” Stiles says. “At some point yesterday, I was in the middle of making an apple pie.”

“Sounds good to me,” Derek says, getting an arm around his waist and following him. He gets himself a mug of tea and watches contently as Stiles starts pulling things out of cupboards and turns the oven on to preheat. “So what do you think Peter did to Agent McCall?”

“Oh, geez, I’m not even sure I want to know,” Stiles says. “Did you see the way my dad was looking at him? He was like ‘well, mark me down as scared and horny’.”
Derek gives a snort of laughter. “Funny because it’s true,” he says. “Your poor dad. He wants so badly to be disappointed in Peter when he does stuff like that because it’s so illegal, but he just isn’t.”

“Nope. He thinks it’s super hot. Just like I bet you were when you threatened McCall into leading you to me. God, I’m sorry I missed that. It must have been hot like burning.”

At this, Derek scowls. “Yeah, if only I had thought to rip his throat out before he tried to kill you with a pair of scissors.”

“It’s not your fault that Agent McCall is a fuckmonkey,” Stiles says. “Anyway, I’m fine, the babies are fine, we’re all fine. And McCall being alive is probably a good thing because he’s confessed to everything, which could have gotten complicated with Kali being feral and Jennifer being in a coma. So it all works out. How about ginger chicken for dinner tonight?”

Derek perks up despite himself. “Yes. That would be good.”

Stiles grins over at him. “You have to help me grate the ginger, though. My arm is still super sore from the crash.”

“You shouldn’t be cooking if you don’t feel like you’re up to it,” Derek says.

“Nah, I’m fine,” Stiles says. “Apple slice?”

“Sure,” Derek says, and Stiles tosses him one. He catches it in his mouth and crunches down on it happily. From the living room, he hears one of the babies start to fuss, and his father soothing it. “So . . . you’ve been really into this baby stuff,” he says.

“Oh, have I?” Stiles asks. “I guess a little. I was really happy for your mom, though, you know that.”

“Yeah, I do.” Derek considers this for a long minute. “I thought maybe seeing the babies might make you, you know, want kids.”

Stiles surprises him by giving a theatrical shudder. “Are you kidding? I’ve now witnessed the miracle of birth and it is fucking horrifying. I’m going to have nightmares, dude. It was super gross and babies are sticky and, okay, if you could magic me one out of a test tube I might be interested but at the moment, I don’t want to think about pregnancy ever again.”

Derek is laughing quietly. “That bad, huh?”

“Seriously, there’s nothing you want me to tell you about it if you ever want to look at your mother the same way again. You do not know disgusting until a placenta has landed in your lap.”

At that, Derek has to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud. “I’m sorry,” he says, walking over so he can nuzzle his mate behind the ear.

“I mean, yay, babies, the babies are adorable,” Stiles says. “But trust me, the hour I spent with my hands in your mother’s groin did not make me eager to go out and knock somebody up.”

“Oh, thank you for that visual,” Derek says.

“Hey, you asked,” Stiles says. He looks over and asks, “What’s up? Are you changing your mind about kids?”

“I don’t know,” Derek says. “I just hate the idea of being a disappointment to you.”
“You know, that’s exactly what I said when you told me that you didn’t want kids,” Stiles says. “Which I happen to know off the top of my head because I might possibly have re-read that text conversation eight hundred times.” He half-turns so he can press a kiss into the corner of Derek’s mouth. “I love you. If you decide you want babies, hey, maybe we can make some babies. If you decide you don’t, we won’t. It’s not like we have to decide right now. I’m only nineteen, for crying out loud.”

“That’s what your dad said,” Derek says.

“You talked to my dad about this?”

“I talk to your dad about a lot of stuff,” Derek says, somewhat defensively.

“I’m not upset, just surprised,” Stiles says. “I guess I shouldn’t be, though. You and my dad are a lot alike in some ways. I’d say that thing about people falling in love with their fathers, but I’m pretty much as unlike your dad as possible.”

“True,” Derek says, “but you are a lot like my mom.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“Wow, this conversation suddenly got very uncomfortable,” Stiles says.

Derek shakes his head a little, but he’s smiling. “I just think that you would make some amazing kids someday. That’s all.”

“Well, so would you.” Stiles pokes him in the ribs, but then he gets serious. “And you wouldn’t have them for your mother, or for the pack. You would have them for you. For us. So it’s just something to think about, okay? Let me get through college first, geez.”

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Everyone was so excited about the names, I hope these don’t disappoint, LOL

Thanks for reading, everyone! I hoped you’ve enjoyed it. To the people who have asked me about the possibility of a fourth installment: I have no idea. I’m not planning one, but then again I wasn’t planning a third one, either. =D

It’s a chaotic scene at the den that evening, with the entire pack all crammed into the living room, everyone wanting to be close to the babies. Laura is cooing and Cora is squealing and Talia just sits there with a warm, happy glow. Everyone wants a chance to hold the babies and scent mark them, but they never go more than a few minutes without returning to their mother’s embrace.

“So did you decide on names?” Isaac asks, looking the babies, entrallled.

Talia nods a little. “This is Brian,” she says, smoothing her hand over the sleeping boy’s hair. “It’s from the Gaelic root for strength. My strong, brave little boy.” She leans down to give him a kiss on the forehead, and he stirs sleepily but then settles. “And this is Hope.”

“Gee, Mom, what’s that one mean?” Cora teases.

Talia reaches out and tweaks Cora’s nose. “It means, I hope my two older sisters won’t boss me around too much.”

“I hope she doesn’t hold her breath for that,” Derek says, quietly amused.

There’s a spate of snickers throughout the room. Hope fusses a little and what seems like fifty people descend to try to soothe her. Tom watches all of them with amusement, not least of all his son. Stiles has had an expression of awe and wonder on his face ever since he had seen the babies – well, cleaned up. Tom’s interested to see what’s going to come of that.

But at the moment, there’s someone else he’s interested in more. He had seen Peter there at the beginning, but at some point the werewolf has slipped away. Tom squeezes Stiles’ shoulder before heading out back.

He’s surprised to see that he doesn’t have to leave the property, that Peter isn’t curled up underneath the tree that memorializes his dead wife and child. Instead, he’s sprawled out in the papasan chair on the back porch. He glances up as Tom comes outside. It’s a gorgeous evening, a little cool for his taste, but crisp and clear.

“Hey,” Tom says. “Room for two?”

“I suppose that can be arranged.” Peter shifts slightly, and the chair rocks in its bowl. Tom sits down next to him. Room for two is pretty easy, since Peter curls up in his lap immediately, resting his head on Tom’s shoulder.

They sit in silence for a long time, while Tom rubs his hand up and down Peter’s spine, listens to him breathe. He wishes, not for the first time, that he had the senses of a werewolf. Life with Peter
would be easier if he could use his nose to figure out whether or not Peter is upset.

Then again, most of the time he doesn’t need it, because no matter how much he might lie to protect his pack, Peter is always honest with him when it comes to one question. “What do you need, Peter?”

Peter’s quiet for another moment, before he says, “Nothing. This is good.”

“Okay.” Tom leans down and kisses the top of his head. “Good.”

“Will you come live here with me?” Peter asks, “At the den?”

“Was that an actual invitation I heard?” Tom teases, and Peter makes a little grumbling noise. “Yes, I will. I’d like that very much.”

“Would you like it if we had our own house?”

Tom gives a little shrug. “If you’re more comfortable living with Talia in the main house, that’s okay with me. I’m not going to sell the old house – it’s paid off, and it’s not like I need the money. Stiles might want to use it as an office or something someday. So we’ll have it if we feel the need for some privacy.”

Peter nods. Then he lets out a breath. “How would you feel about . . . maybe adopting a child together? Or children?”

Tom half-sits up, nearly spilling Peter off the chair. “Really?”

“Maybe,” Peter says. “I don’t know. But I was thinking about what Stiles had said. Even during the pain, I never wished I hadn’t met Olivia. And she’ll always have that place in my heart. So will our baby. But I love you, even though I still love Olivia. And I think I would love a child. And even if . . .” He has to stop and take another deep breath. “Even if I wasn’t okay all the time, if you were there to help me, then . . . that baby would have the best damned father in the world.”

Tom gets his thumb underneath Peter’s chin so he can tilt it up and meet Peter’s gaze. “I think,” he says, “that it’s a big decision. I think we should talk about it. And make sure that we make the decision together.”

Peter nods. “I know you and Claudia wanted more children,” he says. “And I know that some of the people brought in by Search for a Cure were young. There are children out there who need good homes, good families. Maybe we could give them that.”

“I’m not against it,” Tom says. “It could be a lot of fun. There are a lot of good reasons to do it. So we can do some research, maybe, find out a bit more about what our options would be.” He kisses Peter on the forehead, then on the mouth. “Now, how do you feel about going inside and spending some time with your new niece and nephew?”

“Okay,” Peter says. “I’d like that.”

Jennifer Blake comes out of her coma two days later, and the first thing she asks about is Stiles. He has absolutely no interest in seeing her, but he asks Melissa to pass along a message to her,
telling her that the ‘cure’ didn’t work. Derek is still a werewolf, and Stiles isn’t a miracle. Jennifer doesn’t send any reply.

Kali is still confused about what had happened. She has only patchy memories of the last ten years. She knows that she was with Jennifer, although she always calls her Julia, but it’s fairly clear that she had no real agency of her own and didn’t attack people of her own volition. After some discussion with the police and the district attorney, Talia and the other alphas in the area decide to strip her of her alpha powers and send her to the refugee camp.

It’s true that Kali probably did commit a number of crimes back when she had been partnered with Ennis, but everyone agrees that she’s suffered enough for them. At the camp, she’ll be an omega like everyone else. They’ll watch her closely to make sure that she doesn’t cause any trouble, and she’ll get the same therapy and treatment as all the other omegas.

Chris has taken over the management of the camp, and is talking about moving there. He has no real attachment to Beacon Hills – they’ve only lived there a few years – and things between the Argents and the Hales are still awkward. They probably always will be. Now that Kali is no longer an alpha, there would be no danger of her having control over Victoria. She could live with the rest of the werewolves as a beta pack.

The number of wolves is down to about a hundred now, as a lot of them have been adopted into packs. The ones left are the ones that are worse off, and it’s going to take time to rehabilitate them. But Chris genuinely wants to help them, and Talia and some of the other alphas have raised plenty of money to provide education and counselors.

Talia and Aaron are both home all the time, having both taken time off from work while the babies are, well, babies. Laura has taken advantage of that by letting her parents watch her own kids for a while so she can get out of the house more often, so the main house at the den is typically a noisy and crazy place.

“Why am I moving in here again?” Tom asks, as Tyler runs in front of him and nearly trips him, then shouts ‘sorry sorry sorry!’ over his shoulder without slowing down even the slightest bit.

“Because I make a mean roasted chickpea,” Stiles tells him, lugging in a box of books, “and because Uncle P doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“God, that’s so true,” Tom says with a sigh. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing that a roasted chickpea can’t fix!” Stiles says, and Tom elbows him in the ribs. “No, seriously, though. I mean, I don’t have really strong opinions on the afterlife or anything, but . . . I bet Mom and Olivia are, like, best friends in Heaven. They were totally rooting for you two crazy kids to get together.”

“Give me a break,” Tom says. “Claudia was undoubtedly throwing metaphysical popcorn at the screen and shouting for Peter to get a clue already.”

“That’s so true!” Stiles says, laughing.

“You got that habit from your mom, huh?” Derek asks, remembering how Stiles threw popcorn at the TV on their first date.

“Oh, yeah. Big time.”

Derek, for his part, has been happy to return to his plants. He’s not made for police work, he doesn’t think. He has no regrets, and Stiles has told him a hundred times how amazing he was, but he’s definitely much happier in his quiet office, drinking cider and designing gardens.
Of course, one good thing came of it – he came into his bedroom to find a large box that had a crisp, brand-new policeman’s uniform inside. There’s no note, so he doesn’t know where it came from, but he knows a thank you gift from Uncle Peter when he sees one. It’s not like he did anything particularly special, but he supposes that he is the one who figured out McCall’s scheme. Either way, Stiles definitely likes the uniform.

As for McCall, whatever Peter said to him, it was enough to get him to plea bargain. He apparently has no interest in facing Talia Hale in a courtroom. That seems like a logical decision to Derek. He’s seen his mother in court. McCall has his own lawyer, of course, so he manages to get some of the more serious charges dismissed. He pleads guilty to assault on Stiles in order to avoid a conviction for attempted murder. The rest of the charges are more mundane: accepting bribes, obstruction of justice, and so forth. He’s discharged from the hospital straight into custody.

“So he never did call you, huh?” Isaac asks Scott, on their next weekend home.

“I guess he figured that I really wouldn’t want to talk to him after I found out he was a fraud and he tried to kill my best friend,” Scott replies. “I think I’ll go visit him in prison. He’ll hate that.”

“I’ll go with you,” Isaac says, and Scott agrees.

Stiles, meanwhile, is back to his usual habits – auditing a fourth class without telling his father, working on two more cold cases, and learning how to make Thai food.

And, of course, getting woken up at two AM when the babies start howling.

“You know,” Derek says, as Stiles groans and tries to crawl underneath a pillow, “the new house might not be completely ready yet, but, you know, the roof is on. We should take some blankets over there and have a slumber party, just the two of us.” He gives Stiles’ neck a little nuzzle. “It’ll be kind of like the hotel rooms.”

Stiles’ eyes go wide. “Oh my God, yes!” he says. “Actual privacy! We should have sex in every room.”

“That might take a while,” Derek says, amused.

“Then we’d better get started, are you kidding?” Stiles tosses the blankets back. “This is gonna be so awesome, I’m gonna ride it like I stole it!”

Derek huffs out a laugh. “You’re ridiculous,” he says.

“Yeah, I am,” Stiles agrees cheerfully. “But you wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“No,” Derek agrees, and pulls him in for a kiss. “I wouldn’t.”

~fin~

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