

## Hook, Yarn, Sinker

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# Hook, Yarn, Sinker

by [pprfaith](#)

## Summary

Stiles is happy with his store, his hobbies, his friends. Peter's just trying to figure out how to raise his nieces and nephew without fucking them up too badly.

Paths cross.

## Notes

Look at me. Now back at the title. Now back at me.

Obviously, this is ridiculous and I have no idea what I'm doing.

This story is an all new thing for me. Not only am I writing something that will be happy, goddamn it, I'm also writing as I go along. No prewritten chapters, no concrete, detailed plots. I have a few basic plot lines and I have the stubborn will to finish this story. Beyond that, you're welcome to comment, criticize and give me all kinds of ideas.

Actually, please do. I want this, more than anything, to be fun for me and you.

Even if it is ridiculous.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

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The eyes, Stiles decides.

If he's really going to attempt homicide with the knitting needles in his hands, he's probably best served going for the eyes. The jugular would just be a mess and he doesn't know enough about anatomy to get any major organs. So. The eyes.

Except... damn it.

He promised his dad he wouldn't kill anyone way back in high school, didn't he? They put it in writing and everything. I will not murder anyone, even if they have pissed me off, hurt Scott, or otherwise deserve it, blah, blah, if I do, my father, the Sheriff, will not help me hide it but prosecute me to the full extent of the law.

What? Stiles was an angry kid.

"Ma'am," he tries for the approximately sixty-seventh time to interrupt her monologue.

"... and do you have any idea what kind of allergies these fibers can cause? The chemicals in the dyes alone do more harm than a year of..."

What if he aims for a non-vital area? It'd shut her up, but not kill her. Leave witnesses, though. Plenty, since the store is pretty crowded at the moment. With other customers. Who have questions.

Which he can't answer because Yuppy Super Mom is still. Fucking. Talking.

He gets it. Most people don't like artificial fibers for their kids. They prefer natural ones. That's okay. It's fine. There's a whole damn wall dedicated to cotton yarns and an extra shelf with yarn specifically marketed toward making stuff for babies.

Because artificial fibers might be bad for your kid. Personally, Stiles spent his early days swaddled in blankets made from acrylic yarn because there wasn't money for fancy ass shit, and he grew up just fine. But whatever.

This lady wants to swath her kids in silk and satin? More power to her. But it'd really help if she *stopped yapping!*

"Ma'am," he starts again and this time when she just keeps rambling on about toxic dyes and her fragile baby's skin, he gets louder. "I'm not forcing you to buy anything you don't want to. We have all kinds of natural fibers. I'm sure you'll find something there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other customers."

He leaves her there, gaping, fully aware that he's probably just lost a customer for good, but he's got no fucks left to give. This day has already been way too long.

Unfortunately, his grand exit is ruined after barely three steps by something small and fast barreling into his legs and almost taking him down at the knees.

He's all set to rail at whoever brought a fucking dog in here when he looks down and is met by the most adorable, two-toothed smile he has ever seen.

"Huh," he manages. The toddler giggles, wraps her arms around his legs and vibrates in place. Once again, almost taking him down. Which would be a little bit embarrassing.

So he tucks the needles into a pocket, bends down, undoes her death grip on him and asks, "Who do you belong to, button?"

She looks young. Really young. So young he's surprised she's walking. Bouncy brown curls, matching eyes and freckles all over. "Christ, you're cute," he tells her before hauling her up onto his hip and standing. "Now, who do you belong to?"

A split second later, a harried looking man in his early thirties comes shooting around the needle display, two older kids on his heels. He does a visible double take when he sees Stiles, then reigns himself in surprisingly quickly and hurries to pull the girl into his own arms. "Cora, damn it," he chides, still sounding a bit panicked.

She giggles and bats her hands against his cheeks, making squeaky noises.

Stiles watches the whole spectacle with an inner *ohmigawd*, because Stressed Dad has very blue eyes, is wearing two parts of a three piece suit, collar undone, cuffs rolled up to his elbows and that neck is a crime against decency, okay? Holy shit.

Also, baby on hip?

If Stiles had ovaries, they'd be exploding.

"Sorry about her," Dad apologizes with a charming smile and fuck. Him. This isn't fair. Stiles smiles back with a baby's reflex. "She hasn't figured out steering or braking yet." He jostles his kid higher on his hip. "Or walking for that matter. One speed only."

That voice. Oh god.

Stiles shrugs and tried to come up with something better than 'pretty, me like'.

"She's too cute to be a bother," he finally manages and then sternly orders himself to stop staring. At Dad. At the baby. At the whole damn picture.

"Can I help you?" he asks instead and it comes out all professional and shit. He's proud of himself. And while he's on the Distraction Train, he checks to see if Yuppy Super Mom is still hanging out. She isn't. Instead she's taken her fashionable self over to the baby section. Huh. He turns back to the customers that are actually cute.

Dad's eyes flicker down to his nametag and then back up to his face. "Actually, yes."

He twists to one side, manages to get his free hand behind him and pretty much pulls a little boy out from behind his leg by the hair. For a shrimp, the kid's got an impressive glower. He crosses his arms, buries his face back in his father's slacks and makes a mewling little noise of discontent.

His sister promptly kicks him in the head.

The third kid, another girl, around nine or ten, rolls her eyes and elbows the boy. "Derek wants to learn to crochet," she tells Stiles, the exact opposite of shy. "But he's being a butt about it because he thinks only girls do craft stuff and he's been whining about it for days, so Uncle Peter made us come here."

To make her displeasure with the whole situation known, she frowns up at her uncle – not dad, whoops – and elbows her little brother again. At least Stiles assumes Derek is her brother. The boy's got a different coloring from the girls – darker hair, lighter eyes – but they have the same nose, freckles and chins.

Stiles looks at Uncle Peter, who shrugs while leaning back to avoid the tot – Cora – who is trying to dig around his nostrils. Derek takes the chance to bury his face deeper into his hip and kicks out at the yet unnamed girl, who shoves him and the entire family pile almost goes ass over teakettle.

Uncle Peter barely catches them, shoots the girl a glare and then bites off a curse that sounds way too vile to be heard by anyone under twenty-one. Unfairly gorgeous or not, the guy looks frazzled. And the button on his hips picks up on it. Her lower lip starts wobbling threateningly.

Stiles holds up a finger, closes the short distance to the register and leans over the counter to get at the basket of random projects he keeps below. He's been making crochet balls all afternoon, between customers, and he plucks a bright yellow one out of the pile now, squishing it once and giving it a shake. Yup, that's one of the ones with peas inside.

It rattles nicely and he waves it in front of Cora's face, immediately catching her attention. She squeals, reaches for it and as soon as he lets her have it, she shakes it like mad, making *bup bup bup* noises.

Peter stares at her for a moment, then at Stiles, then at his niece again. After a few seconds he decides to trust the peace and sets her on the floor, where she stays sitting, banging her new toy against her knees.

"Laura," he orders the oldest, "keep her leashed."

Somehow, Stiles get the impression that man isn't really very practiced in dealing with his nieces and nephew, but the kids seem to take his lack of skill with grace. Laura crouches next to her sister and starts talking to her.

Uncle Peter turns back around with his other barnacle still attached to him. "Why did you do that?"

Stiles hunches his shoulders a little. The guy sounds suddenly hostile. "Customer service?" he suggests. He should have maybe asked before giving the kid a toy to play with. Some people are particular about what their kids touch. Or maybe not-Dad thinks Stiles is questioning his parenting skills. Which he might, if it were his fucking place. God knows his own dad wasn't ever a conventional parent after his mom died. But Stiles grew up fine. There's probably a reason this guy is lugging around a bunch of kids that aren't his with bags the size of Stiles' yarn tote under his eyes and Stiles remembers that look from his own dad's face and he knows better than to ask. He does. To distract himself from the family dynamic that isn't his beeswax, he leans down to Derek's level. He is so totally citing this momentous occasion the next time Scott calls him tactless.

"Hey there, little man. You wanna come out?"

Headshake.

"He's shy," Laura offers, taking Cora's ball and throwing it from one hand to the other to distract the baby. "He doesn't even talk in class, only to me and Uncle Peter and the kids at school all think he's an idiot or something." She beams at Stiles and tickles her sister.

That one is going to grow up terrifying, Stiles can tell. Still, bad word choice, kid.

Derek comes out just long enough to glower. Again, impressive, for a kid.

Stiles derails the sibling-bitchfest train. "You really think crafting is for girls?"

Pause. A nod.

"You wanna look at me for a sec?"

A peek. Peter just stands there, watching intently, but letting Stiles proceed to school his not-kid.

Derek's eyes are grey-ish blue, closer to his uncle's than his siblings'. Pretty. Stiles smiles at him. "Do I look girly to you?" he asks.

The answer to which is no. He's gangly as hell, but he also hasn't shaved in two days and he's rocking a lip ring and at least two visible tattoos right now along with skinny jeans and flannel. Isaac calls it his hipster uniform, but Isaac wears fucking scarves, so he can just shut up. It's comfortable and what he's worn since he was, like, twelve. He looks badass, if he does so say himself. And very far from what a first-grader might define as 'girly'.

Derek shakes his head.

Stiles raises a finger in the air and twirls it. "You know who this place belongs to? Me. Because I love to crochet and knit and do all kinds of 'girly' stuff. Because it's fun and it's awesome and you, my friend, are gender stereotyping. Which is a big word, but it mostly means you think that there's boy things and girl things, when really there's just fun things and not fun things. You do whatever you want and f... forget anyone who doesn't like it, okay?"

Peter's eyebrows are up near his hairline, but his smirk says he's more amused than pissed at the complete stranger schooling his kid in gender relations. And Stiles figures, hey, he took the kid here to get craft supplies, so he's probably okay with the spirit of that speech.

Laura is staring at him, too, but with blatant adoration. Considering the fact that she's wearing neon orange Chucks, grass-stained jeans and a Captain America shirt, Stiles figures she feels him.

Derek still looks unconvinced. Well, the portion of his face Stiles can see. Okay. Time for the big guns. Literally. He straightens, spins on his heel and hollers, "Boyd! Front and center!"

A few moments later, six foot four of pure, mean muscle come to a halt next to Stiles, a willow basket filled with all kinds of pastel yarns inside. Stiles cocks his head. "Baby blanket?"

Boyd nods, then asks, "You rang?"

"I need a sexism fight buddy," Stiles announces and points a finger at his friend's face. "Does he look girly?"

Headshake. Way faster than before. He doesn't take it personally. In high school, the other lacrosse teams flinched when Boyd stepped on the field. Erica calls him her Chocolate Hulk, which is almost as cute as it is offensive.

"Boyd, my man, what's that yarn for?"

Boyd catches on and answers evenly, "I'm making a blanket. My girlfriend is having a baby."

Look at that, the kid has more than half a face. "Really?" he asks, skeptically. "Babies are stupid."

And he speaks!

"You were a baby," Laura shoots back before the adults can.

"Was not!"

"Children!"

They fall silent. Boyd takes in the scene, considers his work done and disappears back into the pastel aisle. He'll probably be here another thirty minutes and leave with his weight in yarn. At this point, Stiles is sure half the place actually belongs to Boyd, because he leaves so much money here.

He turns back to Derek. "So, you wanna try?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I teach a kids class on Tuesday afternoon, if you want?" he looks at Uncle Peter as he says it, but Derek immediately interrupts. "No!"

“No class,” Stiles guesses.

“I can do it!”

For a kid who doesn’t talk, Derek is suddenly quite, well, talkative. Stiles bites his lips. “Is Derek allowed to use the internet?” he asks.

Peter frowns. “Why?”

“Because I have a bunch of tutorials on the store’s website. You could buy a hook and a skein and have him try at home. If he likes it, come back for more, if not, you haven’t wasted thirty bucks on a starter kit with a book that’s going to land in a corner somewhere and never be used.”

Peter considers, then looks down at his nephew. “Derek?”

He gets a nod.

“Awesome, follow me.”

Stiles leads the way with Derek on his heels, followed by Peter and then Laura, who is hauling Cora. They stop in front of a rainbow of colors. “Pick one.”

Derek chooses pale blue after almost two minutes of careful consideration and Stiles magics up the right size hook to go with it – big enough to not be fiddly, small enough for a kid’s hands - before leading them to the register, where he passes the boy’s uncle a business card with the web address on it. “There’s a link marked ‘tutorials’ in the sidebar. Click on ‘beginners’ and then ‘basic single crochet’ and you should be golden. If you have any problems or questions, just drop in, I’m happy to help.”

He addresses the last to Derek, who smiles shyly, clutching his yarn and needle happily. Stiles rings them up and waves as Laura and Derek trot off toward the door. Peter hauls Cora back up and takes the ball from her to hand it back, slightly chewed on and damp.

Immediately, the baby starts wailing like a siren. Stiles shakes his head. “Keep it,” he tells the older man. “I make them out of boredom, it’s fine.”

He also usually sells them for two bucks a piece, but Peter doesn’t need to know that Stiles is considering his pretty self payment enough. Besides, the kid’s cute and he’s a sucker for cute.

For a moment, it looks like the man’s going to argue. But his niece is still screeching in his ear, so he helplessly hands the ball back to her and nods a quick goodbye to Stiles before turning to leave, hollering, “Stay *inside*, I’m not scraping you off the road, damn it!”

Stiles watches him go.

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A day off.



That's what got Peter into this goddamn mess. A day off, as a birthday present to Talia, because he flat out forgot her birthday until the last second. So he bought a bottle of wine on the way to Beacon Hills and scribbled a voucher into a cheap gas station birthday card.

*A day off from the pests.*

Seemed easy enough. Pick them up, take them to the zoo, feed them lots of sugar, drop them back with their parents.

Steps one through three worked out fine. It was after that they hit the snag. 'Snag' being code for 'when we got there, the house was a smoking ruin and their parents were dead'.

Or as good as.

That was six months ago and damn it, Peter still hasn't gotten used to them underfoot. To feeding them and drying their tears and helping them with homework and making Derek talk and getting Laura to stop talking and catching Cora before she runs into traffic *again*.

He sucks at this.

And his sabbatical was up a week ago, so now he's juggling work at the firm on top of it and he hasn't slept since Tuesday, isn't even sure if it's Thursday or Friday and he is done.

So fucking done.

If he wanted kids, he'd fucking have some of his own.

He cringes at his own inner monologue, because, fuck it, he loves them. All three of them. But Peter had a life. Swanky job, swanky penthouse, the occasional lazy affair and a lot of booze and good music. Peace.

Now he has a house in the suburbs stacked high with all the things he still hasn't unpacked because the kids would ruin them anyway, a job he barely has time for, much less enjoys anymore, and three other, full time occupations depending on him to keep them alive.

*Dear Talia, I fucking hate you, but I'm sorry for every time I made fun of you for being tired.*

Amen.

"Uncle Peter?"

Peter raises his head from where he banged it against the steering wheel after buckling in. Derek is leaning over Cora's car seat to look at him, brows scrunched up in worry.

"I'm fine," he tells the munchkin. "Put your seatbelt back on, Nephew."

Derek hesitates for another moment, then nods. "Okay."

Combined with the conversation he just had with the clerk at the craft store, that's the most Peter has heard him say in weeks. He watches Derek buckle back in in the mirror, studies

Cora, happily sucking on the little yellow rattle the man gave her. Laura is sitting next to her, one hand curled around her sister's ankle, but her mouth, her eyes, are closed for once. She looks exhausted, too.

He knows he's been depending on her too much.

"Can we go?" Derek asks, obediently staying in his own booster seat this time. "I want to see the video Stiles said."

Stiles. The name of the clerk. The one who got Derek to talk and made Cora content. The one who didn't frown at Peter for talking to the children all wrong. Who looked at him with frank appreciation, despite his three sentient growths.

The one who had really very unfairly pretty eyes and lips.

Whatever. It's not like Peter has the time for a twink to fuck. Much less the energy.

"We're going," he answers, far too late, forcing himself back to alertness and then pulling out into traffic. Dinner. Bathtime. Derek in front of the computer, Laura in front of the TV, Cora in bed. Three hours, four tops. Then he can finally pass the fuck out.

Right after he's gone through the briefs for tomorrow's meeting one more time.

Fuck his life.

*And fuck you, too, Talia.*

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## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

If you look up 'overwhelmed' in the dictionary, there's a mugshot of me staring stupidly. You people seriously blew me away with your reaction to, and support of, the first chapter. Thank you.

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This is what Stiles comes home to after locking up:

No less than five cartons of Chinese spread all over the dining table, a half empty bottle of wine, Taylor Swift on the stereo and Allison sprawled in the middle of it all in sweats and one of his graphic tees, staring morosely at her laptop.

He drops his nametag, keys and wallet by the door, kicks off his shoes and drops into the chair next to hers, grabbing the first carton that comes equipped with chop sticks poking out of it.

“Who am I murdering?” he asks, nudging her thigh with his sweaty toes.

She smacks at his ankle, sticks her tongue out and then draws the poked leg up to rest her chin on her knee and pout. “What are we doing wrong, Stiles?”

He stops, a piece of yummy chicken halfway to his mouth, and frowns. “Am I going to need vodka for this conversation?”

She pauses. “Yes.”

With a nod, he gets up, makes his way to their kitchen, grabs the bottle and a shot glass. Sits back down, hammers back two shots in quick succession and then refills the glass a third time, nudging it over to his roommate before going back to his pilfered dinner.

Allison downs the vodka and starts over. “I was looking at wedding gifts for Scott and Kira.”

And Stiles winces because no matter how amicable the break up was – all four times – buying a wedding gift for your first love kind of sucks.

“And it was terrible because do I get them a juicer? Is that too impersonal? Or, like, a quilt? They have amazing quilts on that one website, but it feels like I’m commenting on their sex life, or something, and that’s too personal, and then there was baby stuff and I thought of Erica.” She frowns and takes the offered shot, going halvesies with him. “Everyone is getting married and having babies, Stiles. Why are we single?”

“Because we enjoy life and don’t need an SO to make us feel validated?”

This time, Alli is the one kicking him. “Stop quoting Lydia at me, Stiles.”

“She’s single, too.”

“She’s planning world domination. Of course she’s single, she’d never share the throne.”

Careful avoidance of any mention, whatsoever, of those two weeks in freshman years when Stiles and Lydia were actually, finally, a couple. It was a disaster.

Stiles toasts that with the half shot Alli left him. Refills.

Stiles and Allison ended up rooming together by accident. Originally, Stiles moved into this apartment with Scott and Isaac when they started college. Allison hung out a lot because she was with Scott (again) at the time. When they broke up, she drifted toward Isaac (again) and when Scott moved out to be with Kira a year later, she took the spare room.

Then she and Isaac broke up (again), and he moved out, too, to travel the world. By then *Yarnsome* was taking off and Allison was working, too, so they could manage rent between just the two of them. They turned the third bedroom into an office for her and a craft room for him, complete with matching desks, and left it at that.

And now here they are, three years later, like an old married couple. Alli works from home, Stiles is at the store all day, they spend their evenings vegging out together, and the routine is comfy and well-worn and he guesses that’s the problem.

“You’re not unhappy,” he finally tells Allison, head on. It’s not even a question. She’s happy. He knows because when Allison Argent isn’t happy, she does things like go to the shooting range and terrify the employees there, or sex up Isaac loudly all night, or call her father and sob quietly into the phone.

None of these things have happened lately.

She spits out the knee of her sweats that she was chewing on and gives him a baleful, half-drunk look. He passes her a spring roll. “No.” Chomping down.

“So what’s the problem?”

“I feel like I should be? Because I’m closer to thirty than twenty and I have reached zero life goals?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. We survived high school. That’s quite an achievement.”

Because high school fucking sucked for both of them. Stiles’ Dad kept falling deeper into the bottle, Scott and him kept drifting further apart, he got into more and more shenanigans out of spite and rage and helpless loneliness, and then his Dad got shot and things got worse before they got better and the Stilinski men pulled themselves up by their own hair.

Allison lost her favorite aunt, her mother and her creepy grandpa in one fell swoop and went completely off the rails.

Looking back, Stiles thinks they're perfectly okay where they are, because while all their friends were making plans and getting ready to face the grown-up world, Stiles and Alli were fighting just to stay alive and hold the fuck on. So they're a bit behind schedule. So what?

But Allison knows him as well as Scott once did, by now, and she narrows her eyes at him. "You don't really believe that."

"Sure I do. All with the believing, me. Totally. Look at me, I'm a believer."

"More like a Belieber."

"That was one fucking time, Argent. Can it."

She grins. "Never."

"You don't get to talk. We're currently listening to Taylor Swift's early works, you do not get to talk at all, ever."

"Taylor's cool."

"Yes. Now. That," he points at the sound system, "is her dresses and curls stage. No."

"For a hater, you sure know a long about TS?"

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't. Come on, you lush, off to bed."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't. I'm not sleepy."

"You're weepy, that's basically the same thing."

"I still haven't picked a gift."

"Oh, please. I've been collecting Scott's old clothes for, like, ever. I'll make a quilt out of them and you will help me. It'll be an awesome gift."

He hauls her up and steers her toward her room.

"That's a grandma gift. Grandmas give that kind of gift."

"It's thoughtful."

“It’s ridiculous.”

He stops her by her bed, pulls her sweats down her legs and lets her step out of them. Then he digs through her drawers long enough to find a tank and passes it to her, gets his own shirt flung at him in thanks. Shuffles her under the sheets because she’s a fucking lightweight.

Kisses her on the forehead, tells her not to worry and then goes to finish off the Chinese and the wine.

And maybe make himself maudlin with looking at baby clothes for a while.

Goddamn. Now she’s pulled him into her quarter life crisis with him.

“I hate you,” he tells her as he closes the doors behind himself.

The mumbled response might be yet another, “no, you don’t.”

Whatever.

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Morning comes too soon.

Although, for once, it doesn’t come in the form of a squalling infant or a babbling ten-year-old.

Today, it comes in the form of Derek, poking him with his crochet needle thing until he wakes.

For something rounded, the thing is surprisingly pointy. Peter grabs the boy around the waist and rolls them both to the far side of the bed, where the alarm clock is cheerfully announcing the time: 5:57.

He slumps. Four hours of sleep aren’t nearly enough to combat the exhaustion of the last six months. Derek wriggles a little in his hold, working his face free to scowl. Peter decides he’s not awake enough for this and shoves his nephew back down, holding on until Derek settles into his side. As soon as he’s still, Peter kicks up the afghan from the end of the bed and covers the boy with it.

This is what his life has come to: instead of silk sheets, he now keeps extra blankets in his bed for invading children.

They doze for another half hour before Derek wriggles again. He brings up the crochet hook fisted in one hand and then a lopsided quarter of a scarf in pale blue with the other.

There are two ends trailing from the piece of fabric.

Sitting up, Peter takes the practice piece from Derek and inspects it. He hasn’t got the first clue about crafts, but even he knows the sides should be parallel, and not closing in. The strip starts out at about four inches in width and dwindles to less than three over the course of a bit

less than a foot. Also, some rows are holey enough to stick a finger through, while others are tight enough to look like they're about to rip.

Clearly, Derek sucks at this.

But it's also the first thing he has shown interest in since his parents went up in flame thanks to faulty wiring in that old, fucking house, so Peter doesn't really care that it looks like someone made it with their feet. Possibly while drunk.

"Good job. When did you finish this, Derek?" he asks, rubbing over the kid's scruffy hair, because he knows Derek's going to think he's angry, otherwise.

A shrug. "Last night?"

Another shrug.

"This morning?"

Slight blush.

"He woke up in the middle of the night again," Laura offers from the doorway, already dressed, her hair in lopsided pigtails, hauling a freshly diapered Cora on her bony hip.

Peter looks between the siblings. "You should have woken me," he tells them.

"You were so tired, though," Laura translates her brother's helpless look. "And the crochet stuff worked. He finished it and went back to sleep, right, Der?"

Cora claps her hands and bubbles a happy, "Drdrdrdrdrdr."

Peter motions the girls over, hauls Cora in his lap and pulls Laura up after her. The older girl snuggles into his side and falls back to sleep almost instantly.

Peter checks his alarm clock again. Half an hour until it'll start ringing. He hands Derek back his master piece. "We'll go back for more yarn after school, okay?"

Then he shuffles Cora up his chest and lies back down, holding onto her until she settles for the moment. Twenty-eight minutes more sleep. Please god, please.

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He gets fifteen before little stomachs drive him from his bed. He heats Cora's food and leaves Laura to feed her while he quickly showers and helps Derek pack for school. Their lunches are already done, so he distributes them and drops Thing #1 and #2 off on the way to Cora's daycare.

Halfway there, she starts the same tantrum she's been having for the past three weeks. She hates the daycare, loathes the women that work there and screams for him to come back for hours.

Peter hates himself when he deposits her, still sobbing, into the arms of Marlene, the harried looking owner of the place.

She wishes him a good day over the wails of his abandoned niece.

Fuck his life.

He makes his meeting with five minutes to spare, gets through it without botching it too badly and then marches straight into Kali's office.

"This isn't working," he tells her and the expression on his partner's face says it's a good thing he brought it up, because she was about to.

"Nanny?" Kali suggests.

Peter shakes his head. "They just lost their parents. I can't foist them off on someone else."

She nods like she didn't expect another answer and taps her, frankly terrifying, nails against her desk. "You'll need to scale back your hours," she finally informs him. "I've talked to Ennis."

"I love this job, Kal," he tells her. "I love this firm. You know that."

He helped Kali and her husband build it from the ground up after college and they're only just starting to get the kind of clients he has dreamed about since freshman year.

"Of course I do, Peter, but you're fuck all use like this."

Blunt. Also true. He grits his teeth and fights back a yawn.

"We'll shuffle cases. You get the smaller ones for a while, do your paper work from home. Come in three days a week instead of five. Get your life sorted. Get those kids sorted. Find something that works before you fuck everything up, here and at home."

He frowns at her, opens his mouth to say something he'll definitely regret later.

But she's is faster, stands and rounds her desk to lay a hand on his shoulder and squeeze. Too hard. Bitch. "You have this job, Peter, you have this firm. Callum, Callum and Hale. That's not going to change. So take a break."

"I already took six months off."

"And we didn't go bankrupt without you. Imagine that," she snaps. She's never been a patient woman. Kali is, above all else, a predator. Peter used to be one, too, until three little balls of prey invaded his life for the next eighteen to twenty years.

"You can still pull your weight like this," she goes on. "Just with less flash and less court appearances."

He hates it.



But it's also exactly why he came in here, so he nods, sighs, scrubs his eyes.

She pats him on the head. "Good boy." Then, with a smile that could almost be termed kind, she adds, "Ennis is bringing back lunch. We'll eat and sort out your caseload."

"Yeah," Peter answers, half resigned, half relieved. "Why not."

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He picks up Cora first, finds her exhausted from crying in the arms of an equally exhausted teacher, sucking on a certain little yellow ball he doesn't remember giving her this morning.

As soon as she sees him, she reaches out little arms and he hauls her onto his hip and kisses her hair.

Baby smell. It's fucking addictive.

God, how the mighty have fallen.

The teacher gives him a fake smile, more or less chucks Cora's bag at him and flees back inside.

He looks down at her. She looks up, gumming her little rattle. "Let's go pick up the other pests, shall we, my dear?"

"Ba da sssssssssss."

"Exactly."

They're waiting by the gates, Laura holding on to her squirming brother with steely determination. She's so much like Talia, he has to fight to look at her, some days.

As soon as he pulls up, they both scramble to get in, buckling themselves into place and immediately latching onto their sister. Making sure she's okay. After that, Derek trails a hand over Peter's shoulder and Laura stares at him intently as he pulls the car back onto the road.

Reassuring themselves that everyone is fine.

It breaks his heart.

Which is funny, because half a year ago, Peter would have sworn on a stack of bibles that he didn't have one.

"Food, home, or craft store?"

There's a silence. Then Derek quietly requests, "Craft store."

"Alright."

With that cleared up, and the tacit promise that he won't drag them to the office again today, Laura launches into a detailed rendition of every single thing that happened to her since nine

o'clock this morning.

Peter listens to her extol the virtues of the new board game she discovered during lunch breaks, feels his shoulder untense a little and hates Kali for being right, as always.

Or he would, if she weren't such a good friend.

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# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

First this chapter was short. Then I added a scene and now it's long. Huh.

Also, the last bit derailed. Sorry.

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Working with a hangover is bad.

Working with a hangover and a borrowed existential crisis is worse. Stiles spends the morning alternately feeling queasy, restocking, repressing, and trying to reach Kira's parents to ask if they have any old stuff of hers saved somewhere. Clothes. Blankies. Anything they're willing to part with so Stiles can make the Grandma Quilt a Couples Grandma Quilt. It seems appropriate for a wedding and everything.

So far, they're unreachable. But then, they do both have jobs. He still has months and months, too, but quilting has never been his strong suit – he learned so he can help out customers – and he can just tell he'll take forever to finish it.

Scott drops by for approximately five point four seconds to say hi and pilfer Stiles' coffee between house calls.

The usual Friday noon rush hits just as he leaves and Stiles grins to himself because this is still hilarious. It happens every time the weather is bad on Friday. People get off work, realize the weather is shit and decide to buy craft supplies for a weekend in.

His friends didn't believe him when he first told them, but Allison camped out at the register for three consecutive Fridays in November and couldn't stop giggling until closing.

That particular phenomenon is just dying down and Stiles is running out of things to distract himself with, when the bell above the door chimes and in come Uncle Peter and company.

"Wow," Stiles greets Derek, who's in front him like a shot, "I didn't expect you back so soon."

Derek grins, showing off a missing eyetooth, and holds out what could be charitably be termed a rag, proud expression on his face. Stiles takes it with the appropriate noises of awe and amazement, glad that his four cups of coffee have managed to beat down his hangover. He's a grumpy asshole when he's got a headache and he doesn't want to scare the pipsqueak away.

Behind Derek's back, Peter bites back a snort and Laura rolls her eyes. Little Cora is trying to kick off her uncle into a backward flip so she can reach her sister's shiny, shiny hair. She's producing her own soundtrack, too, making popping noises with her mouth.

"Dude, did you make this all since yesterday?"

Derek nods. "Uh-hu."

"That's amazing, buddy."

His little nose scrunches up critically. "It looks different in your video."

"Ah," Stiles announces as he crouches down to eye-level, "but I've made hats and scarves and bags and toys and even blankets. So I have a ton of practice and you started out less than twenty-four hours ago. And you didn't give up. You worked through the entire ball of yarn. And if you do it again and again, you'll get perfect at it."

The adorable nose is joined by a squinty frown. "Promise?"

Stiles deals with kids enough to know they take promises seriously, but there's an extra layer to the way Derek asks. He looks up to Peter – who he still hasn't been introduced to – and finds an expression between heartbreak and rage on the man's face.

So he sticks out his hand, solemn as he can be while trying to bite back a chuckle, and swears, "Promise."

They shake on it.

"Now, are you here for more yarn? Or for some constructive criticism?"

Derek mouths the words.

"It means tips to do better next time."

It's the uncle who takes over here, taking a step forward and getting a chubby fist in the face for moving Cora away from her goal. "Both, actually."

Stiles turns back to Derek, nodding. "Okay. Then how about you find some new colors and then we'll have a go at it together."

Derek nods hard enough to give himself a concussion and shoots off to where they got the yarn from yesterday. Laura ducks past Stiles and follows, leaving only Uncle Peter and Cora.

Stiles sticks his hand out. "I'm Stiles by the way. Stilinski. Owner of *Yarnsome* and all around craft fiend."

Peter juggles Cora sideways, gets another flailing slap to his other cheek and offers his free hand to shake. "Peter Hale. Lawyer and uncle."

Lawyer. Fancy.

“Did you help Derek with this?” Stiles waves the scrap like a flag.

“No. He did it all himself.”

Impressive. “Not bad. But you should sit down with him at some point. Let him explain it to you.”

The reaction is immediate. Peter stiffens, expression darkening enough for even Cora to notice. But then kids are sensitive to shit like this, aren’t they? She immediately starts whimpering as Peter demands, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Whoa.” Stiles raises both hands, look ma, no bombs! “Way to get defensive, dude. I meant explaining it might help him figure it out faster, that’s all.”

As fast as he blew up, Peter deflates, setting a mewling Cora down on her feet and directing her toward her siblings. She goes scampering off in the other direction instead. But since the door’s closed and the displays are too high for her to reach, Stiles doesn’t mind.

“I’m sorry,” the older man offers, grudgingly, after a moment of silence. “I’m tired.”

Stiles shrugs it off. “No problem. I can tell you’re not used to...,” he thinks of a way to phrase it without coming off like the asshole he is, “them.”

Peter actually flinches. He doesn’t seem the type for self-doubt, what with the fancy suits, the rocking body, killer smile and classic car outside, but Stiles knows a man at the end of his rope when he sees one. “Am I doing that badly?”

So he decides to throw the guy a bone. “What? No! It’s just that you don’t have some of the things parents do automatically down yet. But those kids adore you and it’s kind of obvious you’re running yourself ragged for their sake.” He smiles, then tags on, “Besides, totally not my business, dude.”

“Don’t call me dude.”

Stiles snorts and Peter manages a weak grin. He doesn’t offer an explanation and Stiles doesn’t ask for one. It’s really not his business. Even if the curiosity is *burning*.

Instead they both turn to watch Cora collide with a stand of embroidery floss and land on her diapered bum. She gives the obstacle a judgmental look before rolling onto her hands and knees. From there, she shuffles her feet under herself, swings upright and, with her torso leaning forward, goes off running again, straight into the baby yarn, which dastardly drops her on her ass again. She glowers, rolls onto her hands and knees and starts over.

Rinse, repeat.

“I kind of want to film this,” Stiles admits, fiddling with the ends of Derek’s first project, before holding it up. “By the way, you should do something with this. It’s terrible, but it’s his first.”

(So much for it not being his business. Whoops.)

This time, Peter doesn't take offense, just leans against a wall shelf full of raw silk yarn and asks, "Like what?"

"My mom had mine framed and put it into her craft room."

Where it still hangs today, dusty and enshrined with the rest of her things.

"Is she the one that taught you?"

"Yep." Stiles nods and does a cursory check of the other customers. A pair of old women who get cranky when he interferes, a younger chick who has been buying more and more yarn for a blanket over the course of the past month. At first Stiles thought she didn't know how to calculate the necessary yardage, but at this point, he's convinced she just likes the act of buying new yarn.

No-one needs him. He stays next to Peter, watching the man's niece batter at her surroundings with relentless energy and utter fearlessness. That one's going to grow up tough as nails.

"Derek doesn't talk," Peter suddenly says after a minute of silent observation. The old ladies have been hit by Hurricane Cora and are now crooning over her. There might be linty bottom-of-the-purse candies involved. Peter makes no move to interfere and Stiles manages to reign himself the fuck in. Focuses back on their renewed conversation.

Which...okay. Abrupt subject change is abrupt.

"He spoke earlier."

"To you. He's said more inside this store than he has for the past week. Usually he only talks when it's absolutely necessary and only to me or his sisters. It's been that way since..." he hesitates and then barrels on because he doesn't seem the kind of man to sugarcoat anything. "Since their parents died."

And now here comes Stiles, the perfect stranger who doesn't even have to try to get the kid to talk. Shit. Fortunately, if Stiles understands one thing, it's how to deal with grief before hitting puberty.

"It's because he wants something."

Peter tears his gaze away from his niece to stare at Stiles, who clears his throat. "I bet he hasn't asked for much since it happened, right? But now he's got this thing and he's hung up on it and I'm the gatekeeper to that thing. So he talks."

"Crochet," Peter drawls, more than skeptical. "He's talking again because of crochet."

"It's art therapy," Stiles offers. "Repetitive, relaxing, tactile. And it gives a sense of control. If he's grieving, he needs that."

"Control?"

There's an echo in here.

Stiles smiles wanly. "Even when the rest of the world has gone mad and nothing goes the way you want it to, you can still make that damn piece of string do what you tell it to do."

There's a beat of silence. Behind the quilting supplies, Laura and Derek are arguing if that color is purple or red. Stiles knows exactly which color they're talking about. It's called 'plum fairy' and it's totally red anyway.

"Speaking from experience?"

It's probably meant to come out scathing, but Stiles just grins. "Yup." He takes a few steps. "Now excuse me, I have a little customer to see to."

He heads toward the kids. One look back shows their uncle, standing with a scrap of blue in his hands, frowning at it, deep in thought.

Stiles might be wrong, but he thinks he probably just secured a new frequent flier to *Yarnsome*.

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Watching the video as Stiles recommended was a mistake, Peter decides hours later, Derek on his lap, the girls playing close by.

Because, goddamn it, those hands. And that voice. The somewhat flailing and upbeat nature of the younger man distracts from it in real life, but he really has a very nice voice. And hands.

Fucking hands.

"Uncle Peter?"

"Mhm?"

"Are you paying attention?"

Once again, Derek speaks. But only in relation to crafting. On top of everything else, Stiles seems to have a degree in child psychology, too. Six months ago, clever and pretty would have been enough to make Peter invite him out for a coffee.

Maybe even invite him *in* for coffee, if he managed to stay interesting enough through a date or two. Most people don't.

Now, though.... He shuffles Derek from one thigh to another, checks that Cora is still contained and Laura still content to play with her and thinks, mournfully, of a time where he had time to take people out for coffee.

"Of course I am," he answers, belatedly. Then adds, "Start it over, will you?"

One day, Derek's scowl is going to terrify the masses. But not yet. The video starts over, just those hands and that voice and a hook and some electric green yarn.

"...need to hold the yarn in a special way. First hold your hand like this, palm up. The yarn comes up between pinkie and ring finger, then goes down again between middle and forefinger, wrap it around once, like this, and hold the end between thumb and middle finger. Keep your forefinger raised. See?"

He demonstrates three times and Derek eagerly follows the instructions each and every time, even though it looks like he's breaking his fingers to do so. The one time Peter tries to help to distract himself from listening to that voice and softly slumbering away, the boy snarls at him.

"Now we're going to cheat a little with the beginning, okay? But don't tell anyone, or I'll lose my street cred in arts and crafts."

The video is obviously marketed toward children, not just beginners, but it's well made and not too idiotic for an adult to tolerate. He watches as Stiles ties a little loop into the beginning of the yarn and Derek copies him, tongue sticking out between his teeth. Once the loop is done, they pick up the yarn again –

"...And now, you pick up the hook and stick it through your loop. Hook a piece of yarn from between your thumb and forefinger and pull it back through the loop like this. See? Easy. This is called a chain. We're going to crochet into the chain later, so go on and make a bunch. It should be at least fifteen, so you have something to hold on to later."

Derek chains at a quarter of the speed of the hands in the video, but he makes sure the loops are more evenly sized, as Stiles recommended earlier. He also explained how to avoid the shrinking sides. There's counting involved and he winked at Peter as he mentioned that.

"Good practice for school," he offered, like Peter needs any encouragement to let Derek do the one thing he seems to enjoy anymore.

"Okay. You got fifteen? Then count backwards. Because we're going to work with stitch number thirteen now. The others are for turning around. Got it? Push your hook through two of the three strands. Technically, it should be the bottom and topmost one, but that's the kind of thing no-one really cares about. So just find two, hook through. Grab the yarn again and pull through. You should now have two loops on your hook. Got it?"

Derek nods hard enough that Peter has to jerk his head back to save his chin. To one side, Laura mutters something that sounds like, "Nerd."

"Great. Not grab some more yarn and pull it through both loops. Turn the nose of the hook down as you go, so it slips through easier. Like this, not like this. Done? Congratulations, you just made your first single crochet! Well done. Let's practice together for the rest of the row and then I'll show you a turn. After that, you're practically an expert already. So, again, hook through two strands..."



‘Single crochet’ seems indicative of there being more than one way to crochet. Oh, dear. Therapeutic, he reminds himself. If it gets Derek talking again, he’ll spring for classes, hooks, and a metric ton of yarn. He’ll sit here, let the circulation in his legs be cut off by a bony ass and watch endless videos of too graceful hands. Anything, if it gets Derek back to the happy, bubbly boy he once was.

“Hey, Laura,” he asks, abruptly. “Do you want to try?”

Derek instantly clutches his project to his chest, jealously protective of it, but his sister only shakes her head. “Nope. I want to learn to sword fight!”

Peter sighs but isn’t worried. Where Derek stopped wanting anything after Talia and Paul, Laura wants everything. Last week she wanted to build a rocket ship in the backyard. Before that she wanted to run a marathon and before that, she dragged them all out to the public pool four times a week to she could train to be a mermaid.

Sometimes, Peter wonders how Laura and Derek could possibly have come from the same womb. But then he looks at Cora, who is both manic and taciturn, a perfect mixture of her older siblings, and feels like he’s discovered a missing link in the evolutionary chain. Yeah. They’re related, alright.

Derek skips the video back to the first single crochet and watches all over.

Peter leans back and follows his legs into the oblivion of sleep.

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It’s pizza night.

It’s pizza night and it’s Stiles and Allison’s turn to host, which means at eight o’clock sharp (ish (ly)), the rest of the gang shows up and takes the place over. Isaac finds one of Stiles’ yarn baskets and immediately starts fucking with the yarn cakes because he’s a dick, Boyd and Lydia take over the kitchen to make salad, Erica stands in the open fridge door for five minutes and complains over not getting to drink beer. Scott tells a story involving kittens and a raccoon to anyone who will listen and Allison and Kira are making terrible, terrible movie choices.

Stiles’ friends are all children.

He rolls his eyes at Erica and passes her one of the alcohol free beers he bought specially for her pregnant ass, kicks Isaac in the shin on his way past and then orders enough chow to feed even the hungry, knocked-up she-zilla and her little parasite.

That’s not him being rude. She’s actually calling the baby that.

“Fuck you, Stiles! This stuff tastes like shit!”

“Close the fucking door! We’ve got penguins dancing on the furniture already! And you can’t tell the difference!”

“But I want booze!”

Isaac cackles because he’s an instigating, exacerbating shit. “I brought tequila! And Erica can’t have any!”

“Scott,” Lydia orders over the shrieks of agony coming from Isaac as Erica pounces on him and starts tickling, fully aware that he’s too scared of hurting her to retaliate the way he normally would, “you work with animals for a living. Do something!”

Scott pauses his tale of woe and cuteness long enough to answer, “They’re rabid. There’s no hope for them.”

Which, naturally, results in Erica and Isaac ganging up on him. And Scott is just as helpless against Erica as Isaac, so it’s a massacre. Stiles saves his mom’s favorite vase from the danger zone and retreats to the kitchen, where Lydia offers her cheek for a kiss and a cherry tomato just because.

He sucks it between his teeth and grins at her, eyebrows waggling. She hacks a cucumber in two.

Boyd snorts.

By the time the pizza arrives thirty minutes later, they’re done being infants and everyone’s talking babies instead. Actual babies. Not mental ones. Alli keeps shrinking back into the sofa beside him and Kira has stars in her eyes and Stiles has been distracting himself all day but now here he is, surrounded by people talking diapers and wedding dresses and he feels lost.

So he sucks grease off his fingers and announces, “I have a new customer.”

Pause.

“Way to change the subject,” Isaac, the dick, mutters, but as one of the single contingent, he looks grateful, too. His last flavor of the month only just broke up with him. He’s been mooney all week.

“Wasn’t actually,” Stiles defends. “He’s six and he has an adorable baby sister. Totally logical jump for me to make. Anyway, they’ve got a big sister too, and all three of them are great. Their uncle brought them yesterday because the boy wants to crochet.”

“A six-year-old with pointy needles?” Lydia, who has steadfastly refused to learn anything at all about crafting for the past decade, asks, “That can’t go wrong at all.”

“What six-year-old boy would even want to?” Alli tags on.

Scott and Stiles exchange a look with twenty-plus years of history between them.

“It’s therapy,” Stiles settles on, only because Alli knows every gender rant he has and is saved by the fact that she sounded simply curious, not judgmental. “Their parents died a while ago and they’re still dealing with it.”

“Uh-oh,” Erica mutters ominously while stealing a bit of sausage from Boyd’s pizza. He waits until she’s enjoying her spoils before nudging more toward her side of his plate and pretending not to see her steal those, too.

“What?” Stiles asks, because, what?

“Stiles has found new strays to adopt.”

Everyone nods.

“Hey! I don’t adopt strays!” He doesn’t!

“You totally do,” Scott argues.

“Yeah? Name one.”

Snorts all around. “Me,” Scott says between bites.

“No way.”

“Uh-uh. You saved me from Jackson and then fed me your lunch and took me home. Totally a stray.”

“Me, too,” Isaac adds, but doesn’t explain, because, yeah, okay. Stiles was the one who kept shouting bloody murder until someone finally looked into the Laheys’ home situation and he was the one who insisted Isaac stay with them until he found a decent foster family. And the one who sat up with Isaac when the nightmares kept him awake.

“Okay. I’ll give you Scott and Isaac. But that’s it.” He likes taking care of people. After his mom, looking after his dad kept him sane, for a while. And it’s a hard habit to break, mothering the ones he loves.

Erica raises her hand. “You sat at my table, announced that we were friends, fed me and took me home to play Halo.”

“And hooked us up,” Boyd adds. Then cocks his head to one side. “Taught me to knit and crochet.”

Boyd was going through a tough time. Stiles was only distracting him. And Erica needed someone to tell her life isn’t over simply because she’s sick. Besides, she totally grew out of the epilepsy in the end, so there.

“Picked me up after,” Alli offers without specifying after what. They both took hits in high school. Hard ones. “And you convinced Lydia that she doesn’t have to fit in to be amazing.” She looks around, ticks names off on her fingers. “Basically, you adopted everyone in this room at one point.”

Lydia sniffs derisively but doesn’t protest the statement and Stiles suddenly has....allergies. He has allergies. All that yarn makes for a lot of dust and... stuff. Shit.

Kira, bless her, notices and announces, “Well, you didn’t adopt me.”

Only to be met by a chorus of, “Not yet!” that sets everyone off laughing.

“Point is,” Allison summarizes, “you have a tendency to find charity cases and drag them home. You feed us, swathe us in wool and don’t let us go until Stockholm syndrome sets in.”

He takes her plate from her, grabs the pillow behind her back and whacks her with it. “So I’m a carer. Nothing wrong with that. And you people do not have Stockholm syndrome!”

More laughter. Scott leans around his ex-girlfriend to pat him on the shoulder. “Nope. But maybe, this time, ask before you adopt, okay?”

“We don’t need you accused of kidnapping,” Isaac pleads. “Again.”

Stiles plucks a piece of pineapple off his pizza and throws it at the asshole. “Fuck you.” One time. Kidnap a guy a little bit one time and they never let you live it down.

Isaac picks it off his lap, blows on it and eats it with a wide grin.

It’s official; Stiles needs new friends.

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# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

This one almost gave me an ulcer. You might hate it.

It's also a bit of a tear-jerker, by which I mean some people might tear up and I'm a jerk. But it should be the last sad bit. From now on, it gets happier.

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Saturday is Park Day.

That is something that has happened since Laura was born and Peter has spent many a wasted day dragged outside to sit around and roll a ball at toddlers too small to catch or return it. He took it with a lot of dramatic sighing and low-key bitching before the fire, and after, he considered never doing it again.

Considered how it would feel for Derek and Laura – Cora was only four months old when she lost her parents – to go out and do what they did every Saturday, without Paul and Talia there with them.

But then, everything in a child's limited life tends to include parents in some way, and the gaping hole left behind is already obvious enough, so Peter decided to hell with it. He's never been particularly careful, of himself, his possessions, of people. As much as he'd like to place the children under a bell jar and never let them out again, it's not going to help. Being careful with them isn't the way to go.

Ignoring that fact that their father is dead and their mother as good as is useless, in the end.

So on their third Saturday with him, they all went out and bought the most hideously patterned picnic blankets they could find, along with a basket so quaint, he expected it to come with a hobbit attached to it. And an entire net full of balls. Then they filled the basket, spread out the blankets at the park close to his – then still – apartment and tried out the balls.

And for the first time in almost a month, Laura laughed and Derek met someone's gaze.

(And Peter hated them, for a few bright, breathless minutes, that day, for getting over their loss so quickly, for forgetting that his sister lies in a coma and will probably never wake.)

They've gotten better since then.

But they still play Norman fucking Rockwell once a week.

+

“Cora, don’t!” Derek chides, but it’s too late. The little menace has already grabbed the loose pile of yarn Derek is working with today and stuffed half of it into her mouth before throwing herself sideways and rolling across the blanket, effectively hogtying herself with bright yellow string.

Peter puts down his sandwich with a sigh and shuffles over on his knees to try and keep the girl from strangling herself without fucking up Derek’s yarn even more. It’s been a week since their second visit to *Yarnsome* and Stiles’ advice seems to have been solid because Derek’s current project at least has neat sides.

It’s also looking suspiciously like a scarf and Peter hopes, fervently, that it’s not meant for him, because his nephew has chosen blue, green, yellow and purple to work with. He’d wear it. Of course he would. But he would hate every single second of it.

“You need to learn to make balls,” he tells the kid as he unwraps his sister and places her in his lap, distracting her with a grape. She licks it, sucks it into her mouth and then spits it at an unsuspecting dog passing by.

When the labradoodle’s owner shoots them angry looks, Peter just smirks before turning back to his conversation. “Then she’d have a harder time and you wouldn’t spend half your time untangling this unholy mess.” He wiggles his fingers into the sloppy skein for emphasis.

Cora, pleased, reaches out to do the same, so he turns her upside down and shakes her a little. She shrieks with glee.

Derek gives her a look that states, very clearly, how much he is over her being tiny and useless and could she please grow up? Now?

Peter helpfully turns her face out and holds her at eye-level with Derek. “This is your brother’s grumpy face,” he informs her. Derek scowls and once again, Peter has to wonder where in god’s name the boy got those eyebrows from.

“How about you put that out of her reach for now and play a little with her?”

So Peter can please finish his sandwich in peace. Since he’s reduced his work hours again, he at least gets enough sleep, but quiet time is still a thing of the past and he’ll lie, murder and steal for five minutes of peace by now.

Derek grumbles, rumbles, puts his crochet into the designated-for-the-purpose Batman backpack and fetches a ball. Cora, knowing what’s coming, primes by getting into her starting position, hands and feet.

Peter can almost taste the quiet about to descend.

Then Derek looks around and asks, “Where’s Laura?”

+

“I think we might be getting too old for pizza Fridays,” Stiles announces, forehead pressed to the cool glass table, left hand wrapped desperately around his expensive-as-fuck coffee. He has never been this glad that he hired Maggie last year. She stays with her kids during the week and works weekends at *Yarnsome* for some kid-free time and spending money while the husband gets to change diapers. She adores it and Stiles has free weekends. Totally worth the expense.

Allison pats his head fondly and pretends she isn’t turtling into her stolen hoodie and wearing sunglasses, just as hungover as he is. “I think,” she offers, after a brief silence, “We just need to stop letting Erica egg us into drinking all the booze she can’t.”

“She’s a second hand alcoholic, or something,” Stiles agrees.

“She just likes to see us suffer.”

“Fridays didn’t use to be about the booze.”

“Mhm.”

They sink back into silence again, contemplating Erica’s sudden and aggressive desire to make other people drunk because she has to be sober. Which is even weirder than it sounds, because Erica isn’t much of a drinker, usually. Neither are the rest of them. Stiles, Scott, Lydia and Isaac all have parental units with alcohol troubles and so boozing it up just never really caught on in their friend group. A bottle of tequila between the eight of them is usually the extent of it.

And yet, somehow, for the third time in two weeks, Stiles and Allison are hungover and two of those times were Erica’s fault.

“We should have an intervention.”

“Or stop letting her goad us,” Alli points out.

Blindly, Stiles holds up his free hand, pinkie extended. “No more booze.”

Alli hooks hers into it and adds, “Unless it goes with dinner.”

They shake on it.

“Do you think I can drink my coffee while lying here?”

She makes an unladylike sound and tugs him up by his hair, depositing him into his chair properly. He lets her, too busy squeezing his eyes shut against the happy Saturday morning to complain.

He drinks his coffee without opening them, waits for the caffeine to hit and then slowly blinks back to reality, where his BFF is watching him with an amused curl to her lips.

The family of four on the table one over doesn’t look nearly as entertained by his de-boozing self. Well, the adults and the prim, pimply twelve-year-old don’t. The teen daughter with the

emo hair is another matter entirely.

Stiles pretends to at least look contrite and then, just as the mom starts to relax, he turns so she can see his entire face and nudges his lip ring with his tongue to make it catch the light. She grimaces and quickly looks away.

So he's an asshole. Everyone he loves is fully okay with that.

Alli quietly grins into her coffee and doesn't seem to mind the quiet, so he reaches over and digs into her purse until, "Aha!"

He pulls out a small ball of orange yarn with one of those little crochet hooks, the kind where you can stick the needle in the handle, stuck in it. It's cheap plastic and the print has long since worn away and he isn't sure they even still make those travel needles, or whatever they're called. This one used to belong to his mom.

Allison eyes her bag and then Stiles, but doesn't comment. She's long since grown inured to his shit showing up all over the place. They've been engaged in a furious war over his favorite yarn bowl for six months now because she keeps abducting it to eat her breakfast cereal out of it, the witch!

He starts randomly chaining and once that's done, he lets his fingers do as they will, starting with little scales that grow bigger as he works his way back the chain and sips his lukewarm coffee. Alli is people watching and occasionally texting with Lydia and it's pretty much perfect.

"Are you up for dinner with Lyds and Isaac later?"

Stiles quadruple crochets into the last chain, chains four and ties everything off, biting the thread with his teeth. "Sushi?"

A shrug. He starts curling the row of scales inwards, using the ends and hook to sew it up into a spiral and put it aside.

"Probably. You in?"

"You know," he tells her idly as he whips up a single popcorn stitch and quickly knots it into the center of his project. "For someone who complains how domestic we are, you sure act like my little wifey, setting up dinner dates and everything."

She's about to tell him to go fuck himself, he can tell. But Allison was raised with manners, so, with a quick glance at the kids next to them, she bites her tongue and shoots him a middle finger under the table instead. "If anything, you're the wife."

That is true.

He grins, leans over to steal the bobby pin holding her hair behind her ear, and threads the finished flower blossom onto it. He adjusts it and then puts it back in her hair, ignoring her wince as he digs a small hole into her skull. Relaxes back into his seat to let her pull out her phone and fiddle with her reflection.



Once she's done, she gives him one of her radiant, dimpled smiles.

"I'd do you," he tells her, quietly, the way he's been for years. Scott never cared but Isaac used to get pissed when he did. Didn't understand that it's a ritual, a declaration. A thing between them, from back when she was one of the first people he got close to without having known them all his life. Until her, he never had to explain his sexuality, because everyone else just kind of knew.

But for her, he had to find words because she kept trying to find girls for him, and then boys, and he still didn't like anyone. Somehow, it's become this.

And Allison answers, as she always has, "I'd not do you."

For her, he'd try sex. For him, she'd give it up.

If, if, if, they felt that way about each other at all.

"We should make a pact," she suddenly announces. "If we haven't found anyone by thirty-five, we get hitched and have babies together."

He cringes. "When did this turn into a rom com, Alli-cat?"

She shrugs. "What? It's not like you've got anyone. And I sure as hell don't."

He brandishes his hook at her. "You're doing that thing again where you're shoving your quarter life crisis at me."

"Oh, please. I've seen the way you look at Erica. Don't tell me you're not."

He's about to argue about whose biological clock is ticking louder (totally hers, thank you very much), when he spots someone he didn't expect to see, especially not alone.

Laura is standing close by, just at the tree line beyond the outdoor café they're sitting in, looking around morosely, digging her orange sneakers into the dirt, hands shoved into the pockets of her camo skirt. She looks lost. And not just physically.

Shoving his hook and yarn into his pocket, Stiles stands and makes his way over to her. Vaguely, he hears his friend following.

"Hey there, sailor," he greets when he's close enough.

She looks up, alarmed, then visibly relaxes when she recognizes him. "You're the yarn guy."

Allison chuckles. Leave it to a kid to summarize his entire personality in four words.

"That I am. You here alone?"

She shrugs sulkily. He waits. If it works on Scott, it generally works on kids, too.

In the end she mutters, "Uncle Peter and the others are having a picnic. I went for a walk."

“Does your uncle know you’re going for a walk?”

For a kid, Laura does mulish really well.

“O-kay. I’m assuming that’s a no. Wanna tell me what’s up?”

Really, really well.

Time to change tracks. “Want cake instead?”

She frowns almost as well as he brother, too. “I barely know you.”

“Ah, but you know my name, where I work, and my face. Plus, my friend Allison here is an excellent chaperone. And we’re in public. Also, I don’t feel comfortable letting you run off alone. I know you’re a tough kid, but your uncle looks like the kind of man who can get pretty intense.”

She manages a weak giggle before abruptly going serious again. “We stay in public. And I bite.”

“Smart girl,” Allison praises before leaning down to introduce herself, handshake and all. It immediately endears her to Laura, who follows them back to their table and orders the biggest muffin they have. Double chocolate, naturally.

Since they’re stuck, the adults order more coffee and he lets Allison work her dimple-magic to completely enchant Laura. The family one over is giving them looks again, but Stiles blocks Laura from their view and lets them be. It’s not like they’re doing anything wrong.

“...pretty,” Laura finishes and he tunes back in.

“What is?”

“The flower.” She points at Alli’s hair. “It matches my shoes.”

It does. It also clashes horrible with her red and green striped tights and the blue t-shirt with a cupcake on it, but Stiles digs her style anyway. So he whips out the yarn again and makes another flower, hypnotizing Laura with his mad needle skills.

Allison digs out another bobby pin, because somehow Allison is *made of bobby pins* (seriously, they went skinny dipping in college once and when Lydia’s bun came loose, Alli pulled a pin from nowhere to save the day). Stiles affixes it and lets the ladies do the hair styling.

Laura admires herself in his phone screen, then beams at him.

“Soooo,” Stiles tries again. “What’s up?”

She’s in too good a mood now to shut down again. Victory! But her smile still falls. She plucks at her shirt. “I was wearing this. When mom and dad.... I didn’t notice this morning.

But then I remembered and Derek's all happy with his stupid crochet and Cora's too little and we went on a picnic like everything's normal and I...."

She looks close to tears, so Stiles grabs her hand and squeezes. He'd like to hug her, but she might kick him. He hasn't been professional with the Hales ever, but that's be crossing a line. Allison takes her other one and they let her breathe, exchanging weighty looks.

"Have you been inducted into the Dead Parents Club, yet?" he asks after a few moments.

*Someone* kicks him in the shin. Hard. He kicks back, misses, and focuses on Laura, who looks torn between shock and intrigue.

"WHAT?"

"Dead Parents Club. Alli and I are founding members. Our friend Isaac is in it, too. My mom died when I was around Derek's age."

"Mine died when I was seventeen," Allison, bless her, adds once she's sure Laura isn't going to start crying and his bull in a chinashop routine actually works for her.

"It sucks," Stiles continues. "Super bad. But in the Club, you can cry as much as you want, you get free hugs and hot chocolates for life and eventually, it gets better. A little bit."

"Really?" Her eyes are watery, her lips are quivering and she's, what, ten? At the most? Shit.

"Promise," Alli offers when he doesn't, not fast enough.

Stiles takes a deep breath. "You mom and dad, they left a hole inside of you when they left, didn't they?"

A nod.

"And it feels like it's never going to close."

Another one.

"And people tell you to give it time, because it will."

And another one.

"Well," Stiles confesses, "that's horse crap. It doesn't go away. Not ever. It's like a crater made by a bomb, or, like a meteorite, or something. You know what that looks like? All charred earth and nothing inside?"

She nods again and squeezes his hand. Hard. "Yeah?"

"Well, if you leave a crater alone long enough, flowers start to grow in it. And animals move in. Sometimes, a crater becomes a lake. It's still a crater, but it's beautiful and you can't really see it at first glance. The hole inside you is the same. Beautiful things are going to grow there. The memories you have of them and the things you did with them. New memories you

make in their honor and just the happy things that are going to happen in your life. And one day, you'll look at the hole, at it'll still be there, but it'll be okay."

For a moment, he thinks she's going to tear herself loose and run away. She's crying freely now and then she rips her hands out of theirs, but instead of running, she launches herself at him and suddenly, he has a lap full of crying child.

It turns into a lap full of crying child and teary-eyed adult when Allison rounds the table and joins the huddle.

There might be something to that damn stray theory after all.

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Peter is freaking the fuck out.

He expected to lose a kid at some point and has been trying to psyche himself up for the occasion for the past few months. The problem is, he always expected Cora to go on the lam.

Not Laura.

Not dependable, responsible, oldest-of-the-litter *Laura*.

He hikes Cora onto his hip, grabs Derek, abandons their picnic and starts more or less systematically searching the surrounding area, shouting for his niece like a madman. He doesn't even remember when she disappeared.

He keeps accosting people with her description and getting helpless shrugs while Cora gets crankier and Derek gets quieter and goddamn fucking hell, Talia is going to wake from her coma just to murder him if anything happened to her primary spawn.

So he rushes to and fro, checking the blanket occasionally to see if she's come back. He's thirty seconds away from calling the police when someone calls his name.

He whirls around, ready to yell at whoever it is, when he sees Stiles, from the craft store, with a strange woman and Laura. Laura, Laura –

"Laura Emily Hale, where the hell did you go?!"

Laura, standing between the two adults, holding both their hands, hangs her head in shame.

The woman speaks up, "We're sorry, but it's partly our fault. We didn't bring her back straight away after we found her wandering."

"Why did you run off in the first place?" he demands, foisting Cora onto her brother and grabbing Laura, lifting her up and hugging her, despite the fact that she's really too big for it. She hangs there limply for a moment before wrapping her arms around him and squeezing back tightly.

When she just shakes her head as he repeats the question, Stiles offers, “It’s the t-shirt. Apparently, it brought up memories?”

The cupcake shirt. Of course. Fuck. Why didn’t he throw that thing out months ago? Right, because aside from a few charred toys, what they had with them that day is all the kids have left of their old lives.

“She had a good cry about it, though. I think she’s a bit better now.” Stiles smiles sadly.

Laura? Cry? She hasn’t since the funeral.

“Want to throw it out, sweetheart?”

Laura snuffles into his neck one last time, then raises her head, shakes it. Her eyes are red-rimmed and swollen. “Mom bought it for me. It’s a good memory.” She turns to look at Stiles and the woman.

The two have gravitated to each other without a child between them, and are standing arm in arm, watching. Girlfriend, then.

“Flowers, right?” Laura touches a new hairclip above one ear and smiles.

Stiles and his girlfriend nod, smiling back as she buries her head back in Peter’s shirt. Derek latches himself onto Peter’s hip, fingers digging into his belt loops, Cora squished between them, staying still for once.

Peter closes his eyes and lets the panic ebb. It’s something he’s had practice in, recently.

When he opens his eyes and untangles the cuddle knot, Stiles and his lady are gone.

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# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Short, but hopefully not bad.

Also, fair warning: There is no freaking way I can keep up this update rate over the weekend.

That said; *holy fuck, people*. You all keep leaving extra kudos and commenting and writing such nice and thoughtful things and I know this is weak, but, wow. Seriously. Wow. The crater thing in the last chapter was a spur of the moment bit of inspiration and I had no idea it would make this kind of impact (ha, crater, impact, get it?). I'm in awe of you all and you're spoiling me rotten. Thank you.

+

Laura sleeps like a rock that night, still in her cupcake shirt, the little orange flower on her nightstand. She was quiet all evening, more so than she's been in months. Less desperate, perhaps, about filling the silence Derek and her parents left behind.

It's not going to last. Of course it isn't. But for the moment, she seems more at ease than she has in a long time.

Somehow, Stiles seems to be healing Peter's nieces and nephews one at a time. Peter would be angry, or feel threatened. Something. If he weren't so glad that someone seems to have a clue what they're doing.

He's not good with kids. He's aware. Stiles is. And he seems willing to be kind. Peter doesn't give a fuck about anything else, not even the fact that the man is pierced, tattooed and practically a complete stranger.

Also: he gets to sleep for eight glorious hours that night. Uninterrupted. Cora exhausted herself, Derek crafts when he wakes up, and Laura is dead to the world.

The rest of the weekend passes similarly quiet and for the first time in a while, Monday morning doesn't seem an insurmountable obstacle. Derek smiles for a full three seconds over breakfast and Laura insists on extra carrots in her lunch because she wants to see in the dark, like a werewolf.

Cora only cries when he drops her off, instead of throwing a screaming tantrum.

If Peter believed in that crap, he might almost think that the universe is giving him a break.

+

No-one mentions Stiles until Thursday, when Derek announces, “I need to learn swishies.”

“Pardon?” Peter asks.

“Like on a scarf. At the end. The fuzzy bits. They swish.”

Whatever that means. “Tassels?”

“Swishies,” Derek agrees and goes back to his dinner.

Laura kicks at him under the table. “Baby,” she tells him. “They’re called tassels.”

Which she’s probably known for a full five seconds, but she sure won’t tell her little brother that.

Derek kicks back. “Uncle Peter knew.”

“No, he didn’t, nerd.”

“You’re the nerd!”

Peter raises his hand to stop them both before they descend into full out hair-pulling and slapping at the dinner table. “One of you crochets, the other wears comic hero merchandise. You’re both nerds. It’s not an insult.”

They subside, pouting.

“Is, too,” Laura mutters, mutinously, before Peter’s glare shuts her up. Derek, meanwhile, is unloading his bell peppers onto her plate in revenge while she’s distracted.

“I take it that means you want to visit the store, Derek?”

Nod. The boy’s smart enough to actually stir the bell peppers into the rest of his sister’s vegetables. Peter’s almost impressed.

“Stiles?” Laura asks, brightening suddenly. His flower is hanging lopsidedly from her ponytail.

“Stiles,” Peter agrees. He’s been meaning to talk to the younger man anyway to thank him again and invite him and his girlfriend for dinner. It seems like the thing to do for strangers who return a lost kid in a better state than she left in. “After school tomorrow.”

He’s met with two gap-toothed grins in response. It’s possible Stiles is going to regret attracting the Hale brood.

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“Hello there, welcome to... oh, hi!” Stiles looks up from where he’s sorting through a bargain bin mid-greeting, realizes who they are and beams.

Laura shoves past Derek, who is already unspooling his mostly finished scarf (it *is* a scarf; Peter is terrified), and launches herself at the young man, who catches her with a wheezing noise.

“That’s new,” Peter observes. Mostly to keep Derek from working up a good lather. The boy looks jealous.

“Free hugs for life,” Laura explains, without explaining anything, and then lets go like she always tackles random shopkeepers into bear hugs. Stiles laughs and pats her on the head before righting his atrocious flannel shirt. Under it, he’s wearing a t-shirt that reads *I crochet and I have the balls to prove it*, next to a picture of two balls of yarn.

Peter cringes at it. “That is a terrible pun.”

Stiles, strange creature that he is, actually puffs out his chest. “Christmas present from a friend.”

“What did you give him? Coal, I hope.”

“Hers says ‘Everyone else got hand knit sweater for Christmas and all I got was this shirt’.”

That’s even worse.

“Where did you find that?”

Stiles’ grin is unholy. “Nowhere. I had it printed. Erica is nothing if not predictable in her meanness. Preemptive revenge is the best kind. Now, how can I help you ladies and gents today?”

“Swishies,” Laura snarks, not entirely kindly.

“Tassels,” Derek clarifies, over enunciating to the point of making the word almost unrecognizable. Cora grabs his shoelaces and start pulling. He tries to pull away and almost lands on top of her. Poor boy. Dignity isn’t something that comes easy for him.

Stiles takes pity. “What for?”

“I made a scarf.” He holds it up as proof. It only narrows marginally and the stitches are a bit more even than his first try, getting progressively better. There is still room for improvement. A lot.

But Stiles kneels down and starts gushing straight away like he’s sing the sun and stars for the first time. Once he’s done aw-ing and oh-ing, he asks, “Did you bring the rest of the yarn?”

Arbitrarily, Derek has bits of yellow and green left, but not blue or purple. He stuffed the leftovers into his designated craft backpack before they left for school this morning and brings it around shyly now.



“That,” Stiles decides, taking the Batman bag and opening it, “is the coolest yarn tote I have ever seen.” He offers his hand for a fist bump and receives it. Then he pulls out Derek’s tangles of yarn and adds, “Winding yarn. Also on today’s To Teach list. Follow me, buddy.”

+

While Stiles and Derek sit on one of the two small sofas in the far corner and stick their heads together over green and yellow tangles, Laura goes to examine the store in detail. She hasn’t shown interest before, but then, Stiles seems to be her new obsession.

Cora, for once in a biddable mood, follows her around and Peter, for lack of anything to do, trails after.

The store doesn’t just sell yarn.

There’s a shelf dedicated to quilting and one to needlepoint and embroidery, which Peter remembers his own grandmother doing by candle light, because that’s how she liked it, apparently, and she was practically blind anyway, working by feel. There’s a small section for paper crafts, a pyramid table that looks like its contents change regularly and, randomly, a single display of novelty postcards.

Placed all over, in between materials, are little yarn projects. Balls. Cubes. Rattles. Flower clips like Laura’s. And animals. Peter counts two turtles, four cats, a few bunnies, a bear, a frog and two penguins, all made with precise, tiny stitches, all looking like they took forever to make.

None of them have price tags on them.

When he points them out to his youngest niece, she takes a shine to a powder blue bunny with one purple ear. It’s adorable in a quirky, weird way, which Peter is rapidly coming to associate with this little shop and its owner. He grabs the bunny from its perch on a stack of knitting books and holds it out of her reach as he makes his way across the store where he saw Stiles last.

He’s gone, but Derek is still sitting on the sofa, tongue sticking out a little as he focuses hard on cutting the leftover yarn into equal sections of about six inches.

Stiles is behind the counter, digging through a humongous basket of half-used yarn balls, looking for something. Peter makes out another, half-finished penguin, several balls and a piece of cake (Made of crochet? What?) somewhere in the mess. Suddenly, the young man crows in victory, pulls out two small wads of blue yarn that match Derek’s scarf and calls, “Catch!”

Derek looks up in time to get smacked in the face, looks at what lands in his lap and beams. Stiles tucks the basket back out of sight, turns to Peter and informs him, “What he had left wasn’t enough for both ends. You two pretties need anything?”

Peter’s eyebrow hikes up into his hairline. Stiles blushes, but doesn’t break his gaze until Peter shakes the colorblind bunny in his free hand. “How much for this?”

Stiles grabs it and holds it up for Cora to see. She coos and makes greedy hands, smacking her lips. He chuckles and wiggles it in her face, teasing her. “Is this for you? Do you like the little bunny with the confused ear?”

“Abababbbbppppffffffffff!”

“I thought so,” he hands it over and beams up at Peter. “Ten bucks,” he says, casually, and Peter is pretty sure he’s getting a discount there, makes a mental note to cook something extra nice for dinner. Which –

“About Saturday,” he starts, only to be immediately cut off.

“Dude, I am so sorry we kept Laura for as long as we did. That was pretty sh---- not good of us. We should have brought her back right away.”

He shoots a side-eye at Cora, as if to see if the toddler’s going to call him out on almost wearing. Like her first word isn’t going to be ‘fuck’ anyway, thanks to Peter. She just tries to whack him with the stuffed animal.

Peter holds up a hand to forestall any more apologies. “Don’t. I admit to,” *freaking the fuck out*, “having been frantic, but while I still have no idea what you said to my niece, she was happier last weekend than I have seen her in a long time. You certainly made an impact and I can’t tell you how grateful I am for that.”

Stiles blushes even brighter. Peter wants to eat him up, but refrains through sheer self-control. Even if the other man didn’t have a girlfriend, falling asleep on the first date is probably in bad taste and Peter can barely stay awake for the eight o’clock news these days.

His libido packed a bag and moved to Ibiza months ago. It sends the occasional postcard, but no more than that.

“It’s a Club thing,” Stiles finally mutters.

“Club?”

He shoots another look at Cora, then checks to see if Derek or Laura are around. Then he cringes a little in advance. “Dead Parents Club. Alli – my friend who was with me – and I are both card carrying members and we inducted Laura, too.”

Peter frowns. Really? Dead Parents Club? With a ten-year-old? “What, exactly, does this club entail?”

“You can cry as much as you want and you get free hugs and hot chocolate for life,” Laura pipes up from behind him suddenly, making him jump. She grins wickedly before turning her attention to Stiles. “But not the instant kind, right?”

The man shakes his head hard enough to look painful. “Nuh-uh. No way. Only the real kind. Allison makes it best. Hers has a secret ingredient in it and she won’t tell me what it is.”

Which brings them nicely around to, “Speaking of unnecessary calories. If you don’t mind the brood, I would like to invite you and your girlfriend for dinner sometime. As a thank you, for Saturday.”

And maybe some adult conversation. Human contact. Something approaching a life beyond diapers, homework and the office. Stiles.

“Oh, can you come? Please, please, please?” Laura demands, vibrating in place and throwing Stiles her best pleading look. Stiles glares at Peter, who shrugs. He’s not above using the girl against others on occasion. God knows he deals with her enough to sic her on others every now and then.

“First of all,” the younger man tells them both, ticking off fingers, “Allison is not my girlfriend. She used to be my best friend’s girlfriend, at one point, but they broke up and he moved out and I sort of inherited her. That sounds terrible. It was a mutual break-up and I’m pretty sure his fiancé is going to make her a bridesmaid in the wedding, because we are all that crazy close, it’s ridiculous. But, Alli. Not my girlfriend. I think I might have agreed to a marriage and baby at thirty-five pact on Saturday, but Laura here saved me from committing. So, hum...,” he blinks. “Allison is my roommate. And I’d love to have dinner with you, but she’s probably a lost cause for the next eight to twelve days. What was the second thing I wanted to say?”

“Why’s she lost?” Laura asks before Peter can.

“Because she’s working. She’s a translator for French and Greek and sometimes, she translates novels,” he explains patiently. “She works from home, so she stays in her office all day and drinks energy drinks. I try to feed her twice a day and make sure she hasn’t OD’ed on *Monster*, but trying to drag her out of her linguistic cave is pointless. I can tell her you asked, though?”

Peter is still trying to parse anything beyond a) not my girlfriend and b) yes, by the time Stiles finishes his rant and the first reaction that pops into his head is a sardonic, “You don’t waste time breathing, do you?”

The wink that earns him is positively filthy.

Peter is not flustered. Peter is a grown man with amazingly good looks, a full bank account, a successful career and a brilliant brain. He has no reason to get flustered by a mid-twenties boy with a lip ring winking at him. Even if that boy is still blushing and looking at him with bright, bright eyes.

Even *if* said boy just denied dating that girl almost off-handedly and didn’t mention anyone else.

...

Change of subject. Now.

“When would be a good day for you? I assume weekdays are out?” The store’s open until eight every day, but being in the park on Saturday seems to indicate free weekends.

“Weekends,” Stiles delivers, promptly.

Peter hums in thought, then offers, “We should exchange numbers. You can ask your friend if she wants to join you and then call me.”

Stiles snorts. “It’ll also make returning lost luggage a lot easier, you know, in case of future incidents.” He shrugs easily, like he wouldn’t mind finding and emotionally patching up one of the kids again. Like that’s the kind of thing people just *do*.

Laura, who has been intently sorting through needlepoint kits close by, looks up, eyebrows scrunched up in a way he usually expects from her brother. “Did you just call me luggage?”

Stiles doesn’t miss a beat as he taps a new contact into his phone and then holds it out to Peter to add his number. “You’re the prettiest bag at the baggage claim, Miss Hale.”

She sniffs derisively, but then whips up one of the boxes, stares at it, and then holds it out. “Can I have this?”

Peter finishes inputting his number and passes the phone back after saving, before looking down. The picture on the box shows a waterlily and dragonfly, painted in a way you might find in an old painting.

Stiles taps the phone a few more times and Peter’s own chimes in his pocket. “Oh, good choice,” he praises. “This one’s really pretty.”

“How hard is it?” Peter asks because he knows Laura’s attention span and he knows how frustrated she gets. Derek got all the bullheaded determination in the family. He’ll work on something until he either succeeds or gets killed by it. Laura... doesn’t. Her room back in Beacon Hills was filled with abandoned hobbies and projects.

A shrug. “It’s needlepoint. Basic stitch. Once you’ve got it, it’s easy. Dimensions has good materials and the instructions are doable. If they written ones aren’t enough, there’s always youtube. Or, you know, your handsome, suave craft store owner.” Another wink.

Laura giggles. Peter gives her a searching look. “Are you going to finish it, if we buy it?”

To her credit, she seems to actually consider the question until Stiles pipes up, “If you do, I’ll give you another flower clip, how’s that?”

Peter frowns. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Nope. I don’t. But I want to. So, do we have a deal?”

“Yes!”

They even shake on it.

That's when Derek suddenly shouts from the seating area, "I'm done! Come look!"

Peter can see his future looming now. It's filled with tangles, pointy things and daily trips to the store to keep these tiny, tiny junkies in materials. He's surprisingly alright with that idea.

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# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

Once more, thank you.

There's a chance this is riddled with typos, but I'm a bit headache stupid, right now. Sorry.

Paige's last name is what google told me to use. If it's wrong, please correct me.

+

Of course the peace is too good to last.

Peter hoped he'd get Saturday dinner with Stiles and maybe the rest of the weekend before the shit bubbles over again, but, alas, he failed to inform munchkin #1 and #2 of that. So it's his fault, really.

He's at work, just for a few hours, a client meeting for an upcoming court date. He could have given the case to Ennis, but it's tricky enough to tickle his pride and complicated enough that a change in attorney this late might have fucked the whole thing up.

So. Client meeting. His plan is to be out of here by twelve, get some shopping done for the weeds in his custody – Cora grows faster than the grass in the backyard – and then pick munchkin #3 up early from daycare and maybe tire her out with a walk.

Having it all planned out and doing an amazing job with the client has him feeling competent for the first time in a while. He used to feel this way all the time, on top of things, organized, in charge. These days, it's more common for him to feel like the fat kid running after the ice truck, panting, struggling and eventually landing on his ass.

The only thing he's been on top of in months is the floor. Hell, less than a week ago, he managed to lose a ten-year-old in a crowded park.

But this week was better.

This week was almost, dare he say it, good.

So when the phone rings at 11.05 and *school* flashes across the screen, Peter knows he jinxed himself.

Nodding for Amy, the paralegal on this case, to continue his briefing, he bites back a few choice words and excuses himself with a quick, "Child emergency, sorry, have to take this."

Five minutes after that, he's more or less running out of the office like his suit is on fire.

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Laura and Derek are sitting next to each other on chairs in front of the principal's office, looking angry and dejected, respectively. Derek is clutching his Batman backpack fiercely and Peter thinks he might have an inkling as to why Laura's tights are torn at the knee and she's icing her left hand.

Across from them, a little girl in dark pigtails sits, swinging her legs to and fro. She looks unharmed and keeps trying to catch Derek's gaze. Peter could tell her not to bother, the boy is a fortress of solitude when he wants to be, but he thinks the reference might go over her head. She doesn't look any older than the boy in question.

Two chairs down from her, two slightly older boys are glowering, arms crossed. One of them has a split lip. The other looks like he rolled around in the dirt outside.

A hall monitor is watching over them all, greeting Peter with a nod and a smile. He barely manages to nod back before a brunette woman pushes past him toward Pigtails. "Paige? Are you alright, honey?"

"Fine, Mommy," she answers, smiling. Gap-toothed. Cute.

Peter doesn't spare her another look, kneeling down in front of his niece and nephew who are both looking at him like he's about to slaughter a puppy in front of them. Derek is making fantastic progress at trying to become one with his hoodie. He's mostly just fabric with a mop of hair at this point. Laura is picking at the torn fabric at her knee like it contains the secrets to curing cancer and stopping war.

"This is not how I planned to spend my morning," he scolds, sees the hall monitor open her mouth out of the corner of one eye. Ignores her and opens his arms because damn them and their pathetic selves. Dignity. He had it once.

Derek and Laura both topple into him, sad, hurt, ashamed, maybe a mixture of all three. Derek burrows his face in between Peter's shirt and suit jacket and Laura clings like a monkey.

He wraps an arm around each and stands, taking Laura's abandoned chair and sorting out limbs until they're both tucked into his lap. He's become an expert at untangling children in the last few months.

"What happened?" he asks. Derek mews a little. Laura pulls back far enough to give him a vicious look, accompanied by a sharp, "Ask the bullies over there."

That's helpful. No, really.

He looks to Paige and her mother for answers, but finds them both watching the Hale sideshow with curious looks. Fuck. Talia would know what to do, beyond sitting here like an idiot, two obviously distraught children on his lap.

Two more mothers rush into the hallway then, heading for the two other boys, fussing over them. The hall monitor knocks on the principal's door and a moment later, the woman comes out, smiling thinly. "Everyone here? Good, then please follow me. We'll take this somewhere with more space than my office."

They end up in what looks like a conference room, stacking a parent and a child per seat. Laura sits on her own but keeps a death grip on Peter's hand, chair inched as close as the armrests will allow.

"Alright," Principal Collins, starts, "Here's what we know. Today, during recess, Devon and Jimmy got into a fight with Laura and Derek. Paige saw it and ran to fetch one of my colleagues, who broke the fight up, but not before Laura landed one on Devon, giving him a split lip. Jimmy reports having been pushed. Derek is, unfortunately, not talking and Laura won't say more than that they deserved it."

Fantastic. Peter squeezes her hand. He trusts her judgement, even if her execution leaves something to be desired. She needs to work on not being caught. Also, the proper way to throw a punch. She moves her hand like her thumb is stinging.

"Paige, dear, would you tell us what happened?"

The little girl nods and shoves herself forward on her mother's knees to lean on the table. "Derek was doing crochet at recess. I went over to talk to him, because it looked pretty and I'm learning, too. I wanted to know what he was making. He didn't tell me, but he let me sit with him and look and it was nice. Then Jimmy and Dev came over and they made fun of him, cause crochet is a girly thing and they said he's a girl if he's doing it and they tried to take his yarn away and his backpack because girls don't get Batman stuff and they were really mean and I told them to go away."

Her mother jostles her pointedly and she stops long enough to take a deep breath. Peter feels a headache coming on because, goddamn it, he was right. He considered not letting Derek take his craft things to school, but his nephew shouldn't have to hide just because people are idiots. Derek likes to do weird stuff with yarn. Derek gets to do weird stuff with yarn.

Paige rambles on. "Laura saw and came over and told them to go away, too, but Jimmy pushed her. So she pushed back. And then I ran to get Ms. Meyers. When we came back, Dev was bleeding and Derek was crying and Jimmy was calling them both names."

She finishes with a decisive nod. Peter half expects a little salute to follow, but her mother hugs her from behind, praising her for fetching someone instead of getting involved.

The other two mother don't look quite so pleased with their offspring. One is silently glaring her ill-mannered spawn into contriteness while the other is hissing at him in an undertone. Peter catches the word 'this weekend' 'football' and 'forget it'.

Good. He's not above feeling vindictively pleased at the expense of a third-grader.

Principal Collins looks around the table once the impromptu scolding is over and done with. "Anything you would like to add, children?"



Dev looks like he would very much like to add a few things, but his mother clamps a firm hand on his shoulder, lips pressed into a thin line. He slumps into her and stays silent.

“Can Derek come to my house and play with me sometime?” Paige asks into the ensuing silence.

The adults chuckle as the principal corrects, “I meant something that has to do with what happened, dear. But I’m sure you can ask Derek.”

Derek blushed and reburies his head in Peter’s thousand dollar suit. He’ll never get the wrinkles out. Laura proves that she’s getting back on even footing by snorting and digging her knuckles into her brother’s thigh. He kicks weakly at her and she grins.

Peter hopes, fervently, that they’ll never, ever stop being thick as thieves because god knows what he’ll do if they start battling each other instead of asshole-ish schoolmates.

Collins hums to herself. “Now. As for punishment. Do you three have any suggestions how you should be punished?” She looks at Laura and the two bullies.

Mulish silence until Laura offers, “I’ll apologize. But only after they apologize to my brother.” Her glower is every bit as fierce as her mother’s was. “He’s not talking again because of you poopheads!”

Paige nods along with her and Peter has to bite back a smirk, despite everything, because it looks like Derek has a new friend, whether he wants one or not.

“Laura, language! Boys?”

Both their mothers have to prod them, but they apologize. Laura echoes them without Peter so much as nudging her.

He’s proud. Sue him.

Principal Collins gives a satisfied nod. “And, I think, essays from all three of you about why violence is never a good solution to your problems. Due Monday.”

“Pardon me,” Peter interrupts when it sounds like she’s winding down. He looks toward the boys, hitching Derek higher to avoid numb-leg. “But I, for my part, would like to know if Devon and James are aware of why teasing my nephew was wrong.”

Silence.

After a long moment, Paige raises her hand. Peter is really starting to like this girl. “I know!” she blurts, when no-one calls on her fast enough for her liking.

The adults smile. Again. The kid is cavity inducing.

“Can you tell us?” Devon’s mother asks. Devon doesn’t look too happy about it but the way she’s holding onto him makes it clear that he’s getting a lesson in manners from that little girl, and he’d damn well better listen. And like it.

Paige beams at the woman and leans back against her own mother to explain, “Cause there’s no boy things and girl things. There’s only fun things and not fun things and everyone who says different is stupid!”

Peter has heard the speech before. Somewhere.

Derek has, too, and he wrestles himself around on his uncles lap fast enough to almost give Peter a wedgie. Staring at Paige he asks, “You know Stiles?”

Peter is still trying to compute the fact that Derek just spoke in a room full of strangers, but then, this is about Stiles. Stiles is serious business. Almost as serious as yarn.

Paige nods hard enough to send her pigtails into her mother’s face. “I go to his class on Wednesday! He’s super!”

Peter and Paige’s mom exchange looks. Stiles Stilinski, all around craft fiend and kid-nip.

“Do you go to class, too?” Paige asks and Derek blushes and turtles into his hoodie, scootching up Peter’s lap again. He nods, though. Or at least twitches something like a nod. Laura peers around Peter to add, “Stiles is awesome. He made me this.”

She almost rips her flower out of her hair to show it off and then both girls are gushing over the thing.

“What, exactly,” Jimmy’s mother interrupts after a minute, looking way too entertained, “is a Stiles?”

Addictive.

Very, very addictive.

Apparently not just to Hales.

“He owns a craft store!” Paige enthuses.

“And he makes stuff!” Laura adds.

Derek nods.

“And he teaches classes. I’m learning crochet and Mom says if I’m good, I can do knitting next year!”

Laura bites her lip, flickers a brief look at Peter, then Derek, then the table in front of her. “He’s in the Dead Parents Club.”

“What’s that?” Devon asks, interested instead of sullen for the first time. Figures that death would draw the little cretin out. Derek shrinks even further into himself.

But Laura shrugs. “You can only be in it if your parents are dead. Stiles is in it and his friend Alli, too, and they said I can be in it, too. Because of my dad. And mom.”

She looks up at Peter suddenly. “Does mom count, Uncle Peter?”

How the fuck is he supposed to answer that? How the fuck do you explain the Glasgow scale and fourth degree burns to a ten-year-old? How the fuck do you – even Peter still expects her to just show up one day and claim her kids back. Expects her to call and chide him for his shitty parenting technique.

Expects her to just *be there*.

Instead of answering, he pulls her close and presses a helpless kiss into her hair. Every adult in the room is judging him, he can tell. He stares them all down.

+

He pulls them out of school for the rest of the day. Principal Collins doesn’t even pretend to put up a fight.

Paige skips back to class after saying goodbye to Laura and Derek and weaseling a phone number and a promise for a play date – craft date? - out of Derek, with Laura as his interpreter. He scowls and she talks, mostly. Paige doesn’t seem to care, just beams and accepts the number before waving goodbye.

Her mother follows them outside and while the kids sort themselves out in the backseat, she ambles closer. “I’m sorry about Paige,” she offers. “She’s a bit enthusiastic. Especially when it comes to the things she likes.”

“Craft?” Peter asks, even as he gives her a considering look. She seems friendly enough, but she just apologized for her kid and that just rubs him the wrong way.

“That. And unicorns and music and her cello.” She shrugs, what-can-you-do, but her expression is soft. Loving.

He gives her the benefit of the doubt and nods toward the car. “Laura is just as much of a talker. And Derek could use a friend. He’s been having a hard time... adjusting.”

She nods. “I can’t even imagine. It’s an amazing thing you’re doing, taking them in.”

What else was he supposed to do? Abandon them? Talia would have haunted him into a grave right next to Paul’s.

“Thank you,” he answers instead of the things he’d rather say.

If she picks up on how tense he suddenly is, she doesn’t say it. Instead she sticks out her hand. “I’m Helen, by the way. Helen Krasikeva.”

“Peter. Hale.”

She smiles at him. “I guess we’ll be seeing more of each other now, Peter. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he offers.

Helen leaves him alone with a wave and he climbs behind the wheel, checking the time. It’s too late to make it back to the office now and he has no desire to work anyway. Instead he turns to look at his two passengers, safely belted into their booster seats, watching him. Derek’s still holding onto Batman, but less tightly.

“I was going to get some new clothes for you and Cora. Would you like to help?”

Laura shrugs. She’s always down for clothes shopping, as long as no-one comments on her color palette. It’s Derek who wants to know, “Do I need to try stuff?”

It’s kind of ridiculous, how relieved Peter feels to hear the boy speak to him, even if it’s only six words.

“Maybe. If we find some cool stuff for you, we need to make sure it fits.”

Derek concedes the point with a wrinkled nose.

“Can we have ice-cream after?”

Peter makes a show of considering it. “We need to go grocery shopping for tomorrow, too. Stiles is coming for dinner and we want to do our best, don’t we?”

Twin nods. Eager grins. Kid-nip. “So clothes, groceries, then ice-cream if you’re good.”

The double fist pump thing they both do would be cuter if they didn’t almost take out each other’s eyes with it.

“And as soon as we get home, you’re writing that essay, Miss Hale.”

“They started it!”

“And you got caught ending it, which was sloppy.” He pauses. “And bad.”

There. That qualifies as parenting, right?

She pouts all the way to the mall. Peter just enjoys the silence.

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# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

After two Peter chapters, you get a Stiles chapter that doesn't move the plot forward. At all.

As always, finders keepers when it comes to typos and I love you to the moon and back. Post-update mornings are becoming my favorite, because I wake to a ton of lovely comments from a ton of lovely people. It's lovely.

+

How did it turn Friday again so fast?

Stiles is perched on the kitchen table in Scott and Kira's apartment, watching the rest of the gang in the living room. Lydia and Kira are discussing flower arrangements for the wedding, with Isaac trolling them on the regular and Erica playing devil's advocate when it suits her. Boyd is right in the middle of it, taciturn as always, massaging his girlfriend's feet like his life depends on it.

Knowing Erica, it actually might.

Alli is curled up beside him, watching everything with the slightly glassy expression she gets when Stiles pulls her out of her work at a bad moment. She's been mucking up languages all through dinner, which is always hilarious but tends to make her grumpy.

Not Stiles' fault, though. She's the one who grew up bilingual with French and English and decided to add Greek for the hell of it in college. If she can't keep it all straight in her head, well. He's a good wifey, but even he needs to get his kicks somewhere. Whatever.

Stiles nudges Scott, who is leaning next to him, beer in hand. They banned hard liquor today. Apparently, Stiles and Allison aren't the only ones who miss Saturdays without hangovers. "Shouldn't you be over there?"

Scott scrunches up his nose. "I don't know anything about flowers and color schemes and," he waves a hand in the air.

"It's your wedding, though," Stiles counters and Scott shrugs and drinks his beer with way more concentration than necessary.

"You okay, buddy?"

Kira chooses that moment to look up from Lydia's color coded timeline and ask, "Have you made an appointment for your tux fitting, yet? You need to take the color swatches with you, and we need to give them back to the florist next week."

Scott whimpers. "Yes?"

"Well, have you, or haven't you, McCall?" Lydia demands, not looking at him, pen poised to take notes.

"I'll do it tomorrow?"

Every female in the room glares at him. Even Allison, who, Stiles is sure, has no real idea why they're mad at Scott.

"See that you do," Lydia informs him, primly, and then they move on to other things. Scott whimpers again.

Stiles pats him on the shoulder sympathetically. And because it helps to hide his grin. "Want to get out of here?" he offers after a minute of enjoying Scott's kicked-puppy look.

"Oh god, yes!" Never say he doesn't do anything for his best friend. Other best friend. Can you have two best friends and is it weird if they used to date?

They grab an extra beer each and leave the apartment to climb up onto the roof. They found out that the door lock up there is broken the day they all helped Scott and Kira move in. According to the neighbors, it's been that way for years. No-one reports it though, because it's convenient. Someone even donated a few old kitchen chairs to the cause and Stiles drags two of them to the low wall framing the roof, plops down on one of them and plants his feet up on the wall. He takes a long sip of his beer, sighs dramatically and then just goes lax. It's been a long week.

A really long week. A shipment got all fucked up and he spent hours on the phone, trying to unfuck it. Then some craft blogger with too much ego came into the store and got on his last nerve and natural-fucking-fibers came back for round two. At one point, Stiles considered strangling her. With acrylic yarn, just for the sheer irony of it. Or would it be more ironic to do with cotton? Eugh.

In any case, until closing today, the only good thing that happened all week was the Hales descending with that dinner invitation.

After a moment, Scott joins him by the edge, sitting on his chair backwards, leaning on it, chin on his arms.

It's testament to how long they've known each other that they sit there, perfectly comfortable, for almost ten minutes without saying a word. Just letting Friday evening wash over them. Then Scott quietly asks, "Stiles?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I'm getting *married*."

Stiles snorts. “That only registers now? You’ve been engaged almost a year. I should know. The engagement party was so cute and fluffy I got diabetes from it.” He mimes dying and falling out of his chair. Scott flips him off but actually answers the question anyway, as soon as Stiles stops flopping around like a dead fish.

“It kinda hit yesterday? I called about the tux and they asked all kinds of things and I realized the date’s only four months away and then I’ll be married. For the rest of my life. And I freaked and called mom and then I remembered her and dad and what if I fuck it up and we get divorced within a few years?”

Rafael McCall packed his bags for San Diego the same year Claudia Stilinski packed hers for heaven. In hindsight, Stiles and Scott ending up Siamese twins was a bit inevitable. Scott was lost and Stiles was angry and together they were a giant fucking mess.

“So what if you do? It might happen. People get divorced all the time and the world keeps spinning madly on.” Stiles shrugs. He’s always been prosaic about the longevity of anything. Things end. It’s as simple as that. Doesn’t mean they aren’t awesome while they last.

Scott makes that sad, lost sound again because somehow, despite being friends with Stiles for so long, he’s still an optimist at heart.

“Do you think you’ll get divorced?” Stiles turns the question around before he gets a Disney worthy speech about the power of hope and faith.

A shy shrug. “I love her. With everything I have. But what if she decides she doesn’t love me? I mean, I work too much, Stiles. And I fart at night and I’m a horrible cook and I hate half of her movies and I never get what she’s talking about when she gets all technical with her work stuff and I don’t always get her jokes and I drop my clothes everywhere and she hates my taste in music and I don’t know if the sex is really good and-“

“Whoa, hey, buddy! Breathe! And stop talking bullshit. Kira is as gone on you as you are on here and everyone knows it. Stop fishing for reassurance.”

“I’m not. I just... I’m getting *married*, Stiles.” He sounds well and truly steamrolled by the fact. Like it isn’t his fault in the first place. He spent three damn months ring shopping.

“You said that already.”

Scott grunts, frustrated with Stiles not understanding his woes. “It’s just... did you ever expect us to end up here? I mean, getting married? Having a job, working nine to five and paying taxes and owning a car made in this decade. We’re talking about maybe buying a house. A house! That’s stuff adults do, Stiles! I’m not an adult!”

Stiles claps his friend on the back. “Dude, hate to break it to you, but you’re 27. You have a job, a fiancé, and a potted plant. You’re totally an adult.”

Scott blinks those ridiculous eyes at him. “But I don’t know how it works!” he wails and this is fifth grade all over where Scott convinced himself he didn’t know how to swim just because he was scared of doing it in front of the whole class.

Stiles tips his chair onto two legs and watches a satellite blink its way across the sky. “Dude, you’re asking me? I still live in my college apartment with a chick who calls me her wife and tells me all about the guys she fucks. I’ve never had a long term relationship. Hell, since Lyds, I haven’t had a relationship. I find sex weird and unsanitary and the chances of me ever finding anyone compatible with all my neuroses is only slightly higher than that of the dinosaurs returning. If you’re asking advice on how to adult, go find Lydia or Boyd. Hell, ask your fiancé. She’s doing pretty well.”

He waves a hand in Scott’s face, please and thank you. If they’re counting distance traveled since they all moved out here for college, away from home, Scott has him beat by miles and miles. Stiles just sort of stopped after college. He’s happy with his store, his friends, his hobbies, loves living with Allison and decking everyone he knows out in wool.

It’s comfortable, sure, but his friends are all doing so much better. Lydia, Scott and Kira are working on actual careers, Boyd and Erica are having a baby in less than three months, Scott and Kira are getting married. Besides Alli, everyone’s getting places and she and Stiles are just bobbing in the water like the crooked rubber ducks with the dented heads that don’t float quite right anymore.

... Wow, that metaphor is morbid.

Scott’s giving him side-eye. “Man, you do realize that having your own business before you’re thirty is a pretty adult thing, right? And you’re like... I don’t know. You were always all flaily and a spaz and ADHS cranked up to max –“

“Wow, thanks there, Scotty.”

“- but even when we were kids, you always knew who you were. You’ve always been this totally steady, settled person and I envied you like hell for it. Still do. The only thing that ever made you insecure in your entire life was Lydia demanding sex.”

Worst night of his life, that was. Also, “Your lack of observational skills once more astound me. How the hell did you survive until now? Hell, how did you survive beyond kindergarten? I am the most insecure person I know! I am the king of insecure. The insecurest of the insecure that has ever insecured in all of forever. The other day I spent seven minutes, read my lips, seven minutes in the supermarket trying to decide which ice-cream flavor to buy because I adore Chubby Hubby but Cherry Garcia is a gift from the gods of decadence and Alli doesn’t like cherries, for some really weird, fucked-up reason, so she doesn’t steal it the way she does Chubby Hubby and it cost me seven minutes. Seven. Minutes. To decide. I went back and changed it twice! Even the little kid in aisle five was giving me judgy looks by then! And I didn’t even -”

“About the little stuff, yeah,” Scott cuts him off, thank god, “but not about who you are.”

Oh.

Okay.



Stiles shifts in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable. He doesn't deal well with compliments. Never has. They make him all squirmy inside. "How did this conversation get to be about me? We were whining about your unfounded terror of scaring away your bride to be with all the nasty character deficits she's known about for years. Please, proceed to tell me all your woes."

Scott punches him in the arm. Hard. "Fuck you."

"Let's not and say we did."

They look at each other and start giggling. Not chuckling. Giggling. Stiles is manly enough to admit that's what they're doing. Giggling. He raises his bottle and Scott clinks his against it.

Silence descends again. Through the open living room window below, they can hear Erica laughing brightly.

"We're heading down to Beacon Hills tomorrow to visit my mom. You want to hitch a ride, see your dad?"

"Would," Stiles allows. He hasn't seen his old man in a while and Skype only goes so far. "But I have plans tomorrow."

"Yeah?"

"Uhu. Remember the kid I told you about, the one who doesn't talk? And the girl from the park last week?"

Scott frowns at him, mock thoughtful. "You mean... the family you haven't shut about in weeks? Laura and Derek and baby Cora and their Uncle Peter who is hot and has an unfairly sexy neck? The ones you've been giving discounts to without them knowing and then gushing about them to Allison every time they come to the store? Those ones?"

"Fuck you," Stiles laughs.

"Let's not and say we didn't," Scott counters, grinning. "Yeah, I remember. What about them?"

"Hold on, has Alli been bitching about me?"

Eye roll. "No more than usual. I think she finds your man crush entertaining."

That's it. For her birthday, Allison is getting a pillow. And on that pillow, *Bad Friend* will be stitched. And he will smother her with it. Slowly.

"So?"

"Peter invited me to dinner tomorrow. As a thank you for saving Laura from child snatchers at the park."

Scott wolf whistles. "Sti-les has a da-te!"

It's Stiles' turn to punch him. "He invited Alli, too, but she's in a translation haze and doesn't want to come. Also, his three children will be present. I'm expecting Mac and Cheese and craft time with the munchkins."

"So, basically, your idea of a perfect date."

"You are a horrible human being! A curse on your house and your manhood."

"I'm telling Kira you said that."

"She'll understand."

"It might make the wedding night awkward. She already made me promise to do that thing with my - "

Eugh. "Dude! No sextails! I can't unhear that shit!" He slaps his hands over his ears and starts to sing, loudly and off-key, until Scott raises both hands in surrender.

"Seriously, though," he says as soon as Stiles drops the act, "you like the guy, right? And the little ones."

"I like the kids. I don't really know Peter."

"That's what dinner's for, right?"

"I," he fumbles. "It's just dinner. I think maybe the guy might need a friend? He seems way stressed with the kids and I'm good with those. I mother hen."

"What, really? No!"

"And they kind of need someone to fuss a little. Plus, I know how they feel. Dead Parents Club and all. I'm pretty sure the newly minted father of three doesn't need my mess on top of everything."

Scott makes a t-sking noise he totally gets from Melissa, even if he denies it, and shakes his head. "You're not a mess. You're my best friend and you're awesome."

"Not the point," Stiles sing-songs because it isn't. He just wants to get to know the Hales better. Maybe find a way to put smiles on their faces because he genuinely gets a kick out of making people happy and always has.

Scott makes a face, like Stiles is being dumb, or maybe like he's giving up, then shakes his head and finishes off his beer. "Whatever. Head downstairs again?"

"I don't know, are you going to get the vapors again if we do?"

In lieu of an answer, Scott tries to wrestle Stiles into a headlock. He ends up with an elbow planted in his junk and Stiles jeering all the way back to the apartment, where the wedding plans have disappeared and Isaac and Kira are arguing about which *Transformer* movie to

watch. Stiles wiggles his ass in between Lydia and Erica on the couch and gets a lap full of red hair as his one and only ex-girlfriend snuggles up to him.

“I wanted to watch *The Notebook*,” she grumbles, even if she’d never admit that’s what this is.

“We’re already planning a wedding. Maybe tone down the romance a bit?”

“*The Notebook* is a classic.”

“It really isn’t.”

Predictably, that sets off Lydia’s four-and-a-half-minute rant about that damn movie. Stiles bumps shoulders with Erica and settles in, pretending to listen.

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# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

I wanted to have this out two days ago, but reading bad!fic and sleeping won out. I have weird hobbies. Don't judge.

Also, drum roll please, this is HYS' first cliff hanger! Yay!

Thank you all very much for being so awesome and enjoy!

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Peter is an awesome cook.

And by that he means he's made a hobby out of recreating meals from three star restaurants, right down to the goddamn parsley garnish. And he's good at it. Brilliant, in fact.

The problem? Apparently, pre-pubescent children don't really know how to appreciate slow cooked duck breast on asparagus risotto.

Who knew.

So Peter has taken a crash course in low cuisine over the past six months, throwing together a few comfort food he remembers his mother making, trawling food blogs and generally being as uncreative as he possibly can be in his endeavor to get Laura and Derek to eat semi-healthy food.

There was a lot of McDonald's the first few weeks, owing, among other things, to the fact that Peter abruptly realized he barely had any recipes that didn't include alcohol in some fashion.

He's gotten a lot better since then, but his success rate is still only about seventy percent. Once a week, at least, the munchkins still go on strike and there'll be sandwiches for dinner while Peter eats alone.

To avoid that particular dilemma, Peter let them create the menu for Stiles' visit.

That may have been a mistake.

Derek wants noodles with ketchup, Laura wants fishfingers, they both agree that salad needs to have only cucumber and nothing else and dessert should be before the main course and chocolate. They literally wrote it down that way. *And chocolate.*

Peter amended, negotiated and finally gave up on the chocolate issue because he is learning to pick his battles. So they will have pasta bologna with a cucumber salad on the side and chocolate cake for dessert. On the condition that there be no food fights at the table and they help clean up afterwards.

Both of them swore solemn oaths. Cora smashed a piece of banana onto Derek's head and screeched.

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Stiles checks the address no less than three times before realizing, nope, he's in the right place. That giant ass mansion really is the Hales' home.

Okay, maybe mansion is a bit much, but Stiles grew up in a two-bedroom and this place has to have at least, what, seven bedrooms? The yard alone is big enough to fit his father's entire house in it.

It seems a bit much for four people, one of whom needs a padded play pen more than a room.

The bottle of wine and small bag of goodies he brought for the kids suddenly don't seem enough anymore.

Whatever. Suck it up, Stilinski. He rings the bell and half expects a butler to open the door.

Instead he gets something worse: Peter Hale, dressed down.

No man should look that gorgeous in a simple Henley and jeans. There's a dish towel tucked into one of his pockets and Stiles still wants to stop and stare for at least half an hour.

"Hi?" he offers, tentatively. "Am I early?"

Peter smirks. "For the food? A little. For the children? No. They're been climbing the walls since noon." He holds out a hand for Stiles to shake, which feels awkward, because they've talked about dead parents and traumatized kids and Stiles wants to climb the man like a monkey and just hold on, but. Whatever. Peter steps aside to let him in.

Of course, the foyer is just as show stopping as the outside and Stiles gawks. "Wow," he comments after a moment. "This place is... wow."

Peter snorts as he closes the door. "My old apartment wasn't really fit for three children. I needed a house big enough for four, and fast. This place was cheap and available almost instantly. The fact that it's too big didn't really factor in at the time."

Stiles winces a bit because, hey, great going there, bringing up bad memories before he's even taken his shoes off, but doesn't answer. Just nods and actually does take off said shoes, following Peter in his socks, which are hand knitted and violently purple.

The image of the grand house takes a hit as soon as they step into the living room and from there into the kitchen. Mostly, the house is bare. The living room contains two couches and an entertainment center. The built in shelves are half-filled with books. No rugs, no pictures,

no coffee table, end table, no drawers. Nothing. A few moving boxes in one corner, a play carpet and toys in another.

A peek into the hallway beyond the kitchen shows the theme continues. Boxes and bare walls, too little furniture. Peter notices him looking around and twists his lips into something between a wry smile and a snarl.

“I have always preferred a minimalist style and the fire spared nothing. The children came to me with that they had on their backs.” He sounds like Stiles is dragging a murder confession out of him, and frowns fiercely, as if challenging Stiles to say something when really, his heart is just breaking all over again for those kids and Peter, too. Losing his mom almost killed Stiles, but he still had her things. Pictures. The blanket they made together, her perfume, her favorite painting, her rosewood needles. Her craft room in Beacon Hills is still there for him to visit, to one day sort through her things.

He tries to imagine losing both her and every reminder of her at the same time, along with his own comforts, his clothes, his memories, his toys, his books, his *entire life*.

Okay, no. He needs to either stop thinking about this or start sobbing uncontrollably. Instead he says, “If you need help unpacking or a babysitter so you can do it, I’m game.”

It’s weird, he knows. Offering to watch a man’s kids without knowing him from Adam, but Stiles has always made snap decisions about people. And he’s yet to be wrong.

Peter gives him a long, searching look and then leans out the door and hollers, “Stiles is here!”

Instant stampede. Derek comes racing down the stairs like an elephant, screeching to a halt in front of Stiles and grinning his gap-toothed, shy smile. He doesn’t talk, but Stiles bends down and offers him a fist anyway. Derek blinks, then bumps his own against it.

“Hey, buddy. How’s the tassels coming?”

“Good. Almost done.”

“Cool.”

By then, Laura has arrived, having made the journey from upstairs more carefully on account of her cargo. She dumps Cora unceremoniously on her diapered butt the moment she gets off the stairs, though, and wedges herself in front of her brother.

“Hug,” she demands and Stiles, as per contractual obligation, hugs.

“Hi,” he says when they let go.

“Hi,” she echoes.

Cora, feeling ignored, chooses that moment to tackle Stiles in the back of his knees, headfirst.

“Christ!” he yells as he tries not to fall on neither girl, keep his balance, and not drop the bag he’s still holding. Then Peter is there to steady him and pluck the bag out of his hands while Laura grabs her little sister by the waistband and pulls her to a wriggling halt.

Stiles studies the kid. “You,” he tells her after a moment, “are a scud missile in human form. I salute you.”

Then he makes grabby hands for his bag, accepts it back and starts digging.

The bottle of wine comes out first and he passes it to Peter with a shy grin because, yeah, it’s a total cliché. But the designer threads make Stiles think a pair of chunky mittens wouldn’t be really appreciated. Next is the string of crochet balls for Cora. There’s five balls and each has a different color, going from walnut-sized to fist-sized. He shakes it in front of the little girl’s face and she squeals in delight before snagging it from him and immediately testing how much will fit in her mouth.

Toddlers. Gross and adorable.

Laura lets go of her little sister and gives Stiles a look halfway between demanding and hopeful. Derek is bouncing on his toes but not coming closer. Stiles makes a show of sticking his hand in up to the elbow and rooting around, making faces.

After about twenty seconds, Laura bursts out with a, “Please, now!”

He takes pity. Next out is a strip of paper with five more hair clips pinned to it. Two more flowers, a butterfly, a ladybug and a bat. Laura squeals and jumps up and down before shooting off toward the nearest mirror. Presumably. Stiles doesn’t catch any of her babble; the pitch is outside his range of hearing.

That leaves Derek’s quietly yearning little face. Stiles puts down his bag and uses both hands to shove a navy blue beanie over the boy’s head and down to cover his ridiculous puppy dog eyes. His grin is still visible as he scampers off after his sister, though.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Peter offers, quietly. He’s still standing in the kitchen doorway, holding the bottle. Cora is sitting at his feet, sucking on her new toy, burbling at it in random intervals.

Stiles shrugs as he straightens. “You didn’t have to invite me. So, what’s for dinner?”

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Peter spends most of dinner watching silently. Laura is jabbering away at Stiles, telling him about school and the stupid bullies who thought they could be mean to her brother and about Paige, and does he know Paige? She’s a bit annoying but okay and at least she’s not a scaredy-cat, scaredy people are stupid, right, and her needlepoint is coming okay, but she keeps pricking her finger and her knuckles still kind of hurt from punching that poophead and is it bad if her stitches don’t all look like in the pictures?

Derek pipes up occasionally. Yes, Paige is cool. No, he still doesn't want to go to a class. Yes, he might have a playdate with her. Yes, his scarf is almost finished. (Peter still dreads that day.) Stop it, Cora, it's food, not a toy, how did Stiles make the beanie? It doesn't look like the scarf.

"it's a basket stitch," Stiles confirms and Derek's eyes go wide with the possibility of there being *multiple stitches*.

"Can you show me?"

Stiles hums, shoveling a bit more pasta into his mouth. His manners are marginally better than those of the actual children at the table, but he's obviously enjoying the food, and he's terribly patient with the tiny Inquisition, so Peter decides not to quietly judge him. "It's a double crochet stitched into the running row, instead of the top of it. You'd need to learn double crochets first, and how to count stitches. But before that, you should practice single crochet a bit more, mokay? You don't want to unlearn everything, do you?"

Derek shakes his head hard enough to almost dislodge the hat he refused to take off earlier. "How long?"

Another hum. "Give it, say, two more projects with the single?"

"Okay."

"Tell me, Stiles," Peter tries, "what do you do when you're not crocheting?"

A shrug. "Hang with friends. Read. Do other crafts. Skype my dad. Run the store. The usual."

"What other crafts?" Derek wants to know the same time Laura demands, "What friends?"

Peter resigns himself to not getting a word in edgewise until they're in bed. The children. Not Peter and Stiles. On his lap, Cora mashes a fist into her watered-down pasta-puree and chants, "Gah gah gah gah."

"Grow some more teeth," Peter informs her. "Then you get solids. Until then, be happy I'm not feeding you apple sauce again."

Cora hates apple sauce enough to actually react to the word. She throws up her sauce stained hands and whines. Loudly. Peter uses the chance to jam a spoonful of food into her mouth, fully resigned to changing after dinner. As he does almost every day.

"Dude," Stiles pipes up. "That is one hot mess."

Laura rolls her eyes. "She doesn't eat in her chair."

"The only person she can cover in food in her chair is herself. I suspect that's no fun at all," Peter adds and gets in another spoonful under the radar. Cora swallows in surprise, then launches herself forward without warning toward Peter's wine glass.



Only Stiles' timely intervention saves the glass. He catches both her wrists gently in one hand, picks up the bib she tore off about five minutes into dinner and uses it to wipe her hands at least semi-clean. Then he gives her face a swipe, too, and tickles her tummy until she's not mad anymore.

"Do you have kids?" Derek wants to know.

"Nah. I just really like them. It's why I teach the classes. Kids are more fun than adults." He says the last like it's a secret and the boy beams at him.

"But babies," Laura persists. "You're good with babies. Uncle Peter was awful at first. Do you know other babies?"

Peter doesn't flinch at her honest assessment, but it's a close thing. The first week, Laura was the one teaching him to do all the things he had never done before. Or at least those she knew how to do. The rest came from research and a lot of learning on the job. In hindsight, it's a wonder all three of them are as healthy as they are.

Stiles cuts a grimace at Peter, like he's sorry for the question, but answers anyway. "No, no other babies. At least not yet. One of my friends is going to have a baby soon, though. I just like taking care of people and babies are people, right?"

Laura concedes the point with a one-shouldered shrug. Derek, who still insists on having been born *at least* four years old, doesn't look convinced.

"Eat your food and stop the interrogation," Peter tells them.

Stiles, at least, obeys. The actual children follow suit.

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Two hours later dinner is cleared away, Peter has changed twice, thanks to his littlest pest, and all three under-eighteens have finally been threatened, coaxed and then flat-out bribed into bed.

Stiles watched it all, biting back a permanent grin and trying not to rile the kids up any more than they already were. Apparently, the little Hales dig him as much as he digs them.

It's flattering, but he suspects it totally messed up their bedtime ritual to have him there. But Peter didn't send him away, so.

Now, though, without their tiny buffers, they're just standing in the kitchen, stop-starting conversation like idiots. It's awkward and Stiles realizes that they've never talked about anything other than the kids before. It's weird.

"I should," he hooks a thumb over his shoulder toward the front door, not really managing to make it sound like a statement.

Peter glowers briefly, then chuckles abruptly.

“What?”

He shakes his head. The last Henley he changed into is white. Un. Fair. “I seem to have unlearned how to communicate with people over the legal drinking age.”

Stiles snorts and chews on his lip. “Yeah, well. Me, too.”

Not that he’s ever been all that smooth, but he’s also rarely run out of things to babble about.

“I used to be good at this. Downright charming, in fact.”

“With an ego like that, who could resist you?”

“Exactly.”

“You do realize that was sarcasm, right?”

“Really?” Peter demands, facetiously, pointing at Stiles’ chest.

Today’s t-shirt reads *If you’re not sure, it’s probably sarcasm*. “Ah,” Stiles admits. “I forgot about that.”

“Do all your shirts take part in the conversation?”

“Some of them just have pictures.” He actually might own the same Captain America shirt Laura wore the first day at the store.

“Refined taste,” Peter comments. Stiles sticks his tongue out before thinking and then almost bites it off pulling it back in. He winces.

“What are my chances of you having missed that and me still coming across as suave and clever?”

Peter laughs outright, eyes sparkling, crowfeet crinkling. Goddamn it, why does the man have to be a work of art? He shakes his head. “Sadly, not very good. Drink?”

And just like that, it’s not awkward anymore and Stiles is not leaving. Strike. “A coke, if you have it.”

A moment later, he’s handed a bottle and a glass. Peter pours himself some more wine and then waves for Stiles to follow him into the living room.

Stiles does a little hip shimmy of victory and moves.

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## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

How badly are you going to hurt me if I tell you I had this written on Friday and didn't get around to editing and posting until today?

And, dude, this got way deeper than intended.

To everyone who's been asking about the Talia situation, I think I clear that one up in this chapter. Stiles' background is still mostly a mystery, damn it. As always, I can't thank you enough.

If you haven't checked out the tumblr link below, the *Hook, Yarn, Sinker* tag over there now contains reference pictures of all kinds of yarny weirdness.

Peter has no less than seven different editions of *Frankenstein* on his living room shelves. The oldest dates back to 1848 and is a Bentley's Standard Novel. Stiles stares.

Tilts his head. Nope, still there.

"I want to marry that book," he announces. Because he does. He will vow to honor and love it for all time.

Peter comes to a halt next to him, glass in hand. "Which one?"

Stiles points but doesn't touch. "That one. Duh. I'm guessing you really like *Frankenstein*?"

"I find its message poignant. A few years ago, I almost managed to get my hands on a copy of the three volume first edition."

Stiles groans, somewhat graphically. "Dude, that has to cost a fortune."

"Quite. It's why I content myself with the Bentley's. You like to read?"

"Are you kidding? Between me and Alli, our living room doesn't have walls anymore. It's all books in, like, five different languages."

Peter's eyebrows hike up. "That is impressive," he says and Stiles gets that little thrill he always gets when people look at Yarn Guy and realize there's an actual brain there and an IQ numbering well into the triple digits. It's not really a mean thrill, just a little, *yeah, so what?*

"Well, mostly it's Alli. She speaks French and Greek on top of English. My Polish is passable and we both did Spanish in high school. It stacks up. What about you, lawyer man?"

“Spanish, some Russian. Languages have never been my passion.” He hesitates a moment, then motions for Stiles to follow him to a stack of unpacked boxes. He shifts them around to get at a specific one and opens it. “If you like the classics, this might interest you.”

The entire box is filled with books older than both of them put together and Stiles puts down his drink to start digging. Carefully. Very, very, carefully. Some of the book have browned sleeves, others are water-damaged. If he had to guess, all of them have been carefully adopted out of second hand bookstores, piece by piece. There are multiple copies of a lot of books and there doesn’t seem to be a system to the editions Peter owns. “Do you just buy any copy you find of a book you like?”

A chuckle. Peter is sitting on the sofa, watching Stiles geek out over his books, with a sly expression on his face. He looks pleased. “Somewhat. It’s something I started doing during college when I wanted to own first editions but could not afford them. These days it’s a habit.”

Stiles, who is currently holding a trashy paperback edition of *Dracula* with a horrible eighties drawing on it in one hand and a 1912 edition in the other, finds it incredibly charming.

“Did you know that the word ‘vampire’ isn’t used until over three fourths into the book?” he asks randomly, placing both books back down with equal caution.

“I did, yes. What is your favorite book, Stiles?”

Loaded question. Maybe not to most people, but definitely to Stiles and, he thinks, Peter, too. Books say a lot about a person, after all. “Yours is *Frankenstein*, right?”

“What makes you say that?” Devil’s Advocate, rather than doubt.

“It’s on the shelf. Most of your old books aren’t, which I guess is down to the kids? But you unpacked those. And bput them right by the TV, where you’d see them all the time.”

Peter nods. “You’re right. Now, your favorite?”

Ripping himself away from the box, Stiles goes to sit on the far end of the sofa, one leg curled under, chewing at his lip ring. “I’m one of those super annoying people who have a new favorite book every five minutes. But generally I like the newer stuff. Post modernists, Science Fantasy. The weird stuff, basically.”

“Such as?”

“Vonnegut. Nabokov. Old, dead, white dudes, I know. Anne Carson. Hal Duncan. And, no judging, I dig Suzanne Collins. *The Hunger Games* were brilliant until Katniss became nothing but a figurehead and everything she did in the first two books was completely devalued.”

Peter chuckles, but lets the assessment stand. He lets his head roll back, slouches a little, stares at the ceiling. “You would have loved my sister’s study. She read everything, from

campy High Fantasy to law texts. I teased her mercilessly about having no taste at all in books.”

Somehow, Peter keeps doing this. Every time Stiles has almost managed to distance himself, to act like they’re distant acquaintances, he bursts out with something like this, close and personal and *heavy* and Stiles is drawn right back in.

“Your sister – the kids’ mother, right?”

“Yes.”

“What was she like? If you want to tell me. You don’t have to.” He wishes he’d brought a project to work on, keep his hands busy. Makes avoiding eye-contact that much easier.

Peter snorts, rolling his head sideways to stare Stiles dead in the eye. His gaze is unsettling. “Is. Technically. What is she like. Talia isn’t dead.”

“What? But the kids?”

“She’s in a coma,” Peter explains, voice detached. Clinical. “The doctor’s don’t expect her to ever wake up.”

Oh.

Oh, fuck. “How... how are the kids dealing with that?”

The older man sighs. “They aren’t. Not really. At first, they spent every second in the hospital, refusing to leave. In the end, that’s why I moved them out here. I planned to move to Beacon Hills with them, but I thought they needed the distance, so I brought them with me. Now... we don’t talk about Talia. And I have no idea what to do. They don’t understand the concept of pulling the plug. If I do it, all they’ll know is that I killed their mother.”

He sounds so helpless and tired and plain beaten, that Stiles swallows a hundred empty promises and goes for distraction instead. Goes for the easy option because somehow his friends have convinced themselves that he always knows what to say, but that’s bullshit. He just rambles on, with them, until he hits the nail on the head, because he’s known them so long and so close that he doesn’t have to be afraid of fucking them up any more. But this guy, this guy is fragile and strange and he literally has lives depending on him and Stiles may know from grief, but even he has never had to grieve a living person.

So all he has is, “Dude, you’re from Beacon Hills?”

A beat. He can see Peter switch gears, gratefully. “Yes. You know it?”

“I grew up there. Scott and Alli and pretty much everyone except Kira, too. Lydia, Alli and I got accepted to college out here and the others sort of tagged along. My dad’s still down there, though. He’s was the Sheriff until last year.”

“Sheriff Stilinski. Of course. I remember him.”

“Oh yeah? That sounds like there’s a story there.” Stiles grins, curls his tongue behind his piercing and waggles his eyebrows, happy that the change in subject worked. He’s pretty sure the guy spends enough time brooding about his situation already. Stiles isn’t going to drag him down. But then the fact that they’re from the same little sleepy town is a really good distraction. And super weird. What are the odds, in a college town like this, where people are from all over and usually don’t stay all that long?

Maybe there’s something in the water in good old BH that makes it so the natives always recognize each other, no matter where they are. It’d explain why Stiles is so damn gone on the Hales.

Peter sits up to reach for his glass and take a sip. “Perhaps. I was a wild teenager.”

That’s informative. “You know I’ll call my dad and ask him if you don’t tell me, right?”

“Is he allowed to tell you these things?”

“Please. I know a lot of embarrassing stories about him. He knows better than to deny me what I want.”

“Isn’t it usually the other way around with parents? Shouldn’t he have the stories?”

Stiles snickers. “Oh, he does. I was just born without an ounce of shame in me. So the application of said stories is pretty useless.”

Peter laughs. “That seems problematic.”

“A little.”

“I got drunk and tried to break into the school’s swimming pool.”

Ah, man. “That’s it? I did that when I was, like, fourteen. Boring.”

“Perhaps. Tell me about your friends.”

“Smooth change of subject there, Mr. Hale.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Almost as smooth as yours earlier.”

Touché.

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As he listens to Stiles extoll the virtues of his circle of friends, Peter stares balefully at his wine and wonders if his alcohol tolerance is shot these days, or if Stiles is a drug of his own, because he certainly didn’t mean to confess one of his darkest, grittiest secrets.

Talia is an open wound on everyone in this house, alive but as good as dead, something that can’t scab over, can’t heal. For the children, their mother would be more use dead than she is now. At least then they could grieve. At least then they could let go.

But Peter has already stood at Paul's grave with Laura and Derek clinging to him like a lifeline. The idea of having the doctors stop Talia's life support, of being the cause for another funeral, makes his stomach turn.

And of course, there is also always the desperate hope that Talia might beat the odds and wake.

It wouldn't fix anything. Her injuries are too grave for things to ever be as they were and no-one can say how bad the brain damage from lack of oxygen is, but she'd be *there*. Here. Something more than a limp body for her children to cling to.

The dilemma has kept Peter awake for six months now and he has never, not once, voiced it. Not to Kali or Ennis, not to the few friends that stuck around in the beginning.

But Stiles is happily chatting along about books and authors and Peter just open his mouth and out comes the truth.

That is not normal. That is not how Peter fucking Hale operates. He takes another sip of his wine and checks himself for dizziness, for loose limbs and warm cheeks.

Nothing.

It's Stiles then. Stiles with his dirty-happy smiles, open and giving, rambling on about anything and everything, irreverent and understanding. Accepting. He deals with Derek's mutism the same way he deals with Laura's need for attention and Peter's wicked tongue.

He doesn't judge.

Peter doesn't think Stiles even knows how to.

He's still talking, about one of his friends working toward a Field's Medal and another who is a tattoo artist and having a baby soon. There is another one who works for CPS, a vet, a translator, a graphic designer, a carpenter. Couples, singles, a gay friend, a lot of straight ones, women, men, blue collar, white collar and everything in between.

Stiles, it seems, is incapable of judging anyone.

And Peter, god help him, adores the boy for it.

He tunes back into Stiles' rant just as he gets to the punch line of an adventure he had with his friend Scott during their high school days.

"Was Scott the one dating Allison?" he asks, trying to seem like he was paying any attention for the last five minutes and not lost in his head. He blinks, realizes he has been staring at one of Stiles' tattoos, the green string tied around his right wrist. It's so perfectly done, so well shaded, that he thought it was real yarn the first time he saw it. Did his artist friend draw it? In stark contrast, a stylized and basic greyscale bow with a notched arrow sits in the crook of his elbow, where the sleeve of his atrocious shirt is bunched up.

"Huh?"

“You said you inherited your friend Allison from your best friend. While correcting my assumption about you two dating.”

That earns him a startled blink. “Oh, right. Don’t sweat it, everyone makes that mistake. I need to get her to stop calling me her wifey in public. And yeah, Scott dated Alli in high school. And then she dated Isaac for a while and then Scott again and it was weird because they were both living with me at the time. I used to set my alarm earlier just so I could be up first and see whose room she came out of. No other way to keep that mess straight. At one point, I think there might have been a threesome, but I have yet to get any of them drunk enough to confess. I might never know. Then Scott got with Kira and moved out and Alli took his room and Isaac left soon after and suddenly, Alli, sans boys. We’re turning into spinsters together.”

Peter can’t understand why. People should be jostling each other for Stiles’ attention. Despite his lapses in judgement, Peter is fully aware Stiles is not as perfect as he seemed at first, full of quirks and strange habits, but where that would have made him dislike most people, it makes the man across from him seem more, not less, fascinating.

“And they’re still friends?”

“Isaac, Scott and Alli? Yeah. I mean, if ex-something meant you couldn’t be friends anymore, we’d be screwed. Erica dated Isaac for a hot second. I dated Lyds once and I think Alli dated Jackson, Lydia’s ex, for a while, way back when. Scott and Lydia definitely hooked up once when we were sixteen. It helps that everyone’s smart enough to break things off before the hating starts. And we’re all... we don’t have a lot of family.”

He licks his lips, making that damn ring catch the light again. “We’re mostly all from single parent homes with a lot of work and a lot of alcohol going on. Some of us have parents who didn’t care a lot, or were just plain dickheads. So we stick together, you know?”

It seems like it, considering that this group of friends moved halfway across the state to stay together, even the ones who didn’t go to college.

“It sounds to me like you all have a wonderful family,” Peter offers, even though it sounds terribly cliché and cheesy.

The way Stiles’ face lights up makes it worth it, though. “You know, I never really thought about it like that. But family don’t end with blood, right?”

Somehow, Peter must give himself away, because the bright smile turns into a shit-eating grin. “You totally got that reference, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Uh-hu.” Total disbelief. “So, Team Dean or Team Sam?”

It’s Peter’s turn to grin. He makes sure all his teeth are on display. “Silly boy,” he chides. “Team Crowley. Obviously.”



Stiles giggle-snorts into his coke. “Obviously,” he echoes as soon as he can breathe again. “Right.”

Silence falls between them, easy and comfortable and yeah, Stiles is a drug. Apparently not just one for children. It’s not even that Peter wants to fuck him. He just wants to keep talking to him, watch him interact with the kids, give them little, lovingly made gifts. Be good to them.

Six months ago, Peter had friends. People he went out with, cooked with, occasionally went to an event with. All of them were like him, in their thirties, married to their work, clever and deadly and sharp-tongued.

And all of them started drifting away when he returned home from a weekend at home a month late with three children. They didn’t mean to, he doesn’t think. Diapers, bibs and homework are just as far outside of their comfort zone as they are his. But unlike him, they had the option to get out. He can’t fault them for taking it.

Only Kali and Ennis really stuck around. Julia still calls occasionally. But even they have no idea how to interact with the children. And Stiles just looked at Peter, then looked at the kids, and didn’t even hesitate.

So Peter really, really doesn’t want this evening to end. Doesn’t want this thank-you dinner to be over and the whole thing done with.

“Would you like to borrow one of the books, Stiles?”

Stiles gives him a startled look. “You’d let me? Those aren’t exactly Penguin paperbacks.”

“I’m sure you know how to treat a book.” He makes it sound dirty just to see that wry grin again.

“That I do.” He looks over the open book and the shelves. “If you’re serious, I’d love to borrow *Dracula*. My copy’s still at home with my dad and reading it on my Kindle isn’t the same.”

“You’re welcome to it,” Peter assures him. Because once he’s finished with the book, he’ll have to return it. It’s a pathetic ploy, but his days of elaborate seduction are probably over. And Stiles seems like the kind of person to appreciate a simple gesture more than a three-hundred-dollar gift.

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On Sunday, Peter wakes up to a barrage of texts on his phone. The first of them reads, *New Woman reading of Dracula. Lucy vs Minna. Discuss.*

He grins all the way down to the kitchen, where Laura and Derek are having a flour fight because he didn’t wake in time for pancakes and doesn’t even stop smiling when his darling nephew nails him right in the forehead.

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# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you. I know I haven't responded to your comments since the last chapter and I'm sorry about that, but it's been a whirlwind few days.

A few of you asked why Stiles keeps downplaying his own success, this chapter provides a bit of an answer. Also: the grandma quilt!

Monday is a good day.

Monday begins with two messages on his phone, both from Peter, both continuing their Dracula conversation from the day before, veering into all sorts of other territory on the way.

When there are no small ears to listen in, Peter is an actual fucking riot of sardonic humor and wickedness and Stiles adores it.

As he fixes himself a healthy bowl of cereal with extra cocoa on top, Stiles texts, *The concept of vampires counting is ridiculous. But imagining Edward Cullen counting peas is hilarious.*

He's watching Allison shamle through the kitchen in a zombie-like search for the much coveted yarn bowl (which is hidden under a stack of patterns in the craft room) when his phone pings again. *Tell me you haven't read those abominations.*

*Isaac once complained that there isn't enough romance in his life. I gave him the books for Christmas.*

Alli huffs, glowers at Stiles and settles for a regular old bowl. She takes the box and milk carton over to the table because she always has seconds when she can't use the yarn bowl. Their regular ones are too small for her cereal needs, she claims. Stiles is pretty sure the whole thing is just petty revenge for calling her Alli Cat a lot. The bowl has a cat on it, after all, and Alli isn't really Machiavellian in these things. A straight line from A to B is usually right, with her.

*A friend gave them to me as a joke* Peter answers, *I recorded myself reading them aloud and play it every time she rides in the car with me.*

He almost snorts milk at that because that is genius. *Brilliant.*

Allison bites her spoon because he hates it. He shows her the texts to pacify her.

*That's nothing. One year, she adopted a penguin baby in my name and asked them to update me weekly. I was spammed with baby penguin pics for a month. At the office.*

Stiles can imagine how that'd go down in an office filled with cut-throat lawyers.

*I'm sensing a long and varied history of hate gifts here.*

*Quite.*

*Revenge?*

His favorite roomie is looking at him weirdly. He should probably stop giggling.

*Pens*, comes the answer twenty minutes later. *I made all her pens mysteriously disappear for weeks. She put it down, it was gone. Everyone at the office got in on it. Even her husband.*

Oh, that's brilliant. Subtle, not over the top, but over time, it'd drive anyone mad. Also, vindictive as hell. Everyone's capable of small bursts of revenge, but this kind of long-term scheme takes a special kind of asshole to pull it off. He knows what he's doing to Scott the next time the guy is an idiot. His assistant likes Stiles. He can totally get her in on it.

*On a scale from one to devil, how evil are you?* The question is mostly rhetorical.

"You're totally gone, aren't you?" Allison comments as she watches him grin at his phone like an idiot.

He gives her the finger.

Peter's answer comes just as he's done rinsing his bowl and putting it in the dishwasher.

*Black poodle.*

He cackles all the way into work.

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The happy theme continues when he gets in to find a humungous box waiting for him in the office once he's done with the morning's tasks. It's filled with Scott's old clothes. The note on top reads *Have fun and throw the rest out* in Melissa's best nurse scribble.

Twenty minutes later, another box arrives, this one from Mr. Yukimura and contains a number of adorable baby!Kira outfits, along with some random stuff and her prom dress. It's red and black plaid with frayed edges, like she took a pair of scissors to it. Stiles knew there was a reason he approved of her.

He takes both boxes to the seating area, shoves the couch and chairs out of the way and starts laying it all out, a stack of printing paper and a bunch of pens next to him to work on patterns between customers, some of which have helpful suggestions, or just ask what he's doing.

He swears them all to secrecy and then tells them, resulting in a few women eying the quilting section speculatively. Most of Stiles' friends think the crafting-at-the-store thing is just him being quirky and bored, but it's also an awesome hook for customers.

Around noon, the Monday Stitch'n'Bitch starts trickling one, one old lady at a time. They started out just coming around to test Stiles in the early days, settling in and squeezing the new guy for information, testing if he was worth the title of 'yarn guy' but it's long since turned into a mutually beneficial arrangement for all of them. The ladies get away from sickly husbands, nagging children and loud grandchildren for a while and Stiles gets money in the register because these women don't just live and breathe yarn, they also eat it, drink it and possibly snort it.

Plus, they bring baked goods and as long as he provides tea and coffee, he gets some.

He greets Maeve with a grin and a wink and jogs back toward the office to make the required pots of coffee and tea. Pomegranate today, because it's awesome and it goes with the deep red yarn he saw Maeve pull out of her bag.

By the time he returns with the thermoses and a tray with mugs, sugar and milk, the rest of the group have arrived and taken over all available seats around his stack o'doom.

Nell waves, Audrey presents her cheek for a kiss, Cami smiles and Roxy stabs viciously at a bunch of tangled lace yarn before demanding, "Coffee, boy, before I murder someone with my needles."

"Yes, ma'am," he shoots back and presents her with Alli's Merida mug, filled to the brim with hot, black coffee, just the way she likes it.

She squints at him, purses her lips and then accepts the mug, pressing a dry kiss to his cheek and pointing at the floor, "Explain this mess."

Holding up a finger, Stiles excuses himself to help out a couple of browsers and get into a minor argument with a woman trying to return a cake of partly used yarn. Fifteen minutes later, victorious and vindictively pleased, he returns, drops onto his ass in the middle of the mess of clothes and tells Roxy, "My best friend is getting married. I want to make them a quilt."

Even if Allison keeps insisting it's a grandma gift and, "Giving someone a quilt for a wedding is like saying do your nasty under there, in the dark, have many children and raise them the proper, Christian way. It's old-fashioned, Stiles, and repressed. Repressed!" There was fist-waving involved.

To which Stiles always rolls his eyes because Allison knows, better than him, that Scott hasn't slept under a quilt even once in his life. He always kicks bedspreads of any kind to the floor before going to bed. Thus the quilt is purely decorative with no sublime messages attached to it. *At all*. Except maybe, "I put a shitload of work into this because I love you losers, be happy."

Maeve puts down her needles and makes grabby hands at his sketches. He passes them over and awaits judgement. Nell and Audrey peek from either side.

"Oh, this isn't working," Nell points out, tapping the triangle and the circle patterns. "The fabrics have too many patterns already. It'd be a mess."

“Not basic squares either,” Roxy adds.

“You’ll have trouble with any big patterns. Have you considered separating the fabrics? His side, her side?”

Stiles stares at the piles surrounding him, grabs the few jeans in them and throws them out before he starts crawling around, arranging clothes by who they belonged to, occasionally folding them into rough shapes.

The ladies watch, comment and occasionally swat at his ass when he gets within range, giving him raunchy looks. Stiles wiggles his ass extra for them until Maeve confesses, “I feel like we should start bringing small bills,” making everyone laugh.

“Please,” he tells her, trying to find a good way to include Kira’s Foo Fighters tour shirt into the mess. “I’m not that cheap. You want some of this, you gotta at least take me to dinner.”

“If only I were forty years younger,” Audrey bemoans jokingly.

He winks at her. “Then you’d still be way out of my league. Don’t give me false hope now, Aud, I’ve just resigned myself to a sad life of solitude.”

His contemporaries may not appreciate his over-the-top cheesy flirting, but the ladies always do. Audrey swats at him again – his head this time – declaring, “You silly boy, anyone would be lucky to have you!”

Something must show in his smile, a little forced or a little bitter, because, yeah. Everyone. Right. Cami, the only one who’s been quiet so far, sees it and softens, pats his shoulder. “You could separate the sides diagonally,” she offers, changing the subject successfully as the others go back to critiquing his ideas.

Maeve eventually goes back to her knitting, while the others keep throwing around ideas. Roxy, the youngest of them at only sixty-five, joins him on the ground to shuffle clothes around.

By the time Maeve finishes the sleeve she was working on, they’re all resigned. “There’s too many colors and patterns. Whatever you make, it’s going to look a fright.”

Stiles hums, thoughtfully. They’re right. Time to pull out the big guns.

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“This better be worth it, Stiles, Junior is crushing my bladder today and I had to go pee four times while I waited for this food. Four times! You know I hate the bathroom at that place, it’s disgusting!”

Erica steps into *Yarnsome* with one hand on her aching back, clutching bags of Chinese take-out with the other. Surprisingly, Allison is right behind her, giving their friend a nudge over the threshold, like the blonde needs it.

Stiles hugs her, presses a kiss to Alli's forehead over Erica's shoulder and then swoops away with the food. It's after two and the lunch rush has passed, so he has no qualms setting them up on the sofa. He spends twelve hours a day in this shop. He gets to relax sometimes.

"Where did you come from?" he asks his roommate as he fishes sodas out of one bag and food cartons out of another.

She shrugs and grabs a coke, eying the stack of mugs he hasn't had time to clear away yet. She hates it when he lends out her mug. "I craved Chinese and I finally finished that translation, so I decided to treat myself."

"I annexed her lazy ass," Erica supplies as she sinks into an overstuffed armchair like she plans to stay there until she has to give birth. "So, what's the emergency?"

Stiles points.

Erica squints. "Did Salvation Army explode in here?"

"It's the grandma gift," Alli sing-songs, snatching chopsticks and breaking them apart with ruthless efficiency.

"Fuck you."

"Please don't."

"I'm making a quilt for Kira and Scott. From their old clothes. And I can't find any pattern that works so I thought to beg at the altar of your creative genius, oh great and artistic one!"

Erica has designed and tattooed most of the art adorning his body. If he trusts anyone's taste in aesthetics, it's hers. He flips a hand at Allison. "You can help, I suppose. If you can keep the hate on the low."

She considers, then manages, "If you can turn this into something pretty, I'll shut up. Until then, grandma gift."

Erica chows down on her Lo Mein and starts studying the even layer of clothes covering the floor with an intensity she usually reserves to tattooing and lewd commentary.

"Triangles?"

"Nope."

"Circles?"

"Nope. Also: squares, hexagons, ovals and just about any other geometric option. There's too many colors and patterns."

Even without the jeans, there are a ton of pastel colored baby things ranging from yellow to blue to pink to green to purple. Scott's t-shirts are mostly blues, red and greens, Kira's stuff tends toward blacks, purples and greens. The shirt Scott wore to prom is white, Kira's dress is

tartan. Further patterns include polka dots, stripes and tie die. Scott's pile offers dinosaur prints, skulls and, memorably, a pinup in a leotard, swinging a lightsaber. Three guesses who gave him that.

"Really thin stripes?" Allison suggests, stirring chicken sweet sour into a box of rice. "It'd hide the patterns?"

Stiles considers. Then he puts down his food and hurries to the register, refills two empty shelves, helps three customers find what they are looking for and spends another five minutes righting the postcard display a rambunctious kid messed up.

By the time he makes it back to his (cold) lunch, the girls are finished with theirs. Erica gives him a narrow stare. "You should hire someone," she announces.

"I have someone." Maggie turned his seven-day week into a five-day week, bless her.

"Someone during the week, to either cover shifts or give you a second pair of hands. You're running yourself ragged." She says it in her no-nonsense, off-with-his-head tone, glaring for all she's worth. She'll make a terrifying mother.

He shrugs. "Too expensive."

This time, Alli's the one giving him a Look. "Bullshit. This is a college town. Help comes cheap, and you can totally afford it."

"Yeah, but I don't need it." He doesn't. He can manage on his own just fine and it isn't like the store's all that big. It helps that he loves his work and doesn't mind doing it most of every day.

Alli looks like she wants to argue, but Erica shushes her, still in Queen mode. "Explain to me why."

He blinks, takes a bite. Answers, because he knows better than to incur her wrath, even when she's not pregnant. "Because it's a small store. I don't mind being here."

"Stiles?"

"Yes?"

"Are you aware that *Crafts and Things* went out of business three months ago and *Yarnsome* has been the only decent craft store in town since then?"

Huh. "Well, that explains the uptick in customers."

"Uptick." Allison repeats, flatly. He lives with her, she knows what he makes every month. He rolls his eyes at her.

"Stiles," Erica repeats. This is getting stupid. Hormones or not, she's way too into this right now, especially considering it's not her business.



“What?” he asks, not entirely politely. She snaps her fingers at him in warning and then stands, waddles over to him and smacks him upside the head.

“What the fuck, Eri?!”

“You’re a dumbass. Look, I know you started this place to honor your mom, and that’s really sweet, but it’s been years. You have a loyal customer base, a ton of regulars and even more walk-ins.”

He opens his mouth. She smacks him again. “This place may have been a small deal, once upon a time, but it isn’t anymore. And your mom has nothing to do with it. You did this. You built this. And you have to stop putting it down because it’s a fucking amazing thing you’ve done here and you deserve the credit. You did it for your mom, but it was still you who did it!”

He opens his mouth. This time, Alli is the one to hit him. What the fuck, they’re ganging up on him now? Over the store?!

“Grow a fucking pair. This is a successful business and you need to expand. Hire someone for a few hours a week, for fuck’s sake. Stop being more of an idiot than usual, Stilinski!”

He opens his mouth. And blocks the hand coming for his head. “First of all, rude. Secondly, ouch, thirdly, rude. D) I fucking hate both of you. E) what the hell? And six, you’re exaggerating.”

Erica growls. Honest to god growls. Then she spins around, snaps her fingers at a hapless hipster standing by the needle display and asks, “You, with the cheap ink. What’s the best place in town for yarn and craft and shit?”

The guy first looks like he wants to argue then takes Erica in, really takes her in, and stutters, “Uhm, here?”

“Good boy, move on.”

Stiles sends him an apologetic look and argues, “That doesn’t prove anything. That’s dirty pool.”

“It’s the truth.”

It’s... Stiles knows it. Okay? He’s not dumb and he sees the zeroes at the end of each month. He knows that his little hole in the wall homage to his mom has grown far beyond that. But it still feels... it feels like it’s more hers than his. He did it for her. Hell, he used the money he inherited from her to start this place up. He painted the walls her favorite color and stocked her favorite yarns and keeps her favorite rose wood needles by the register for good luck.

This place, is the dream he had for her since the dementia turned her into someone else. The dream he fled to, where his mom was hale and whole and had a place just like this, with endless yarn and a thousand different crafts. It’s a lonely little boy’s dream and he knew that, even as he worked to make it real.

Accepting praise for what he's done here feels like cheating because it wasn't him, you see? It was her. Or at least, it was for her.

He looks at Erica, who hides her worry under anger pretty well, but he's known her too long to still fall for the rampaging female act. Looks at Alli, who looks tired and concerned and like she should be worrying about herself more than him. He looks away.

His phone chimes, undoubtedly another verbal volley from Peter.

After a long minute, Erica huffs an annoyed, "Idiot," like she doesn't know full well that Stiles not fighting back is as good as him agreeing with her, even if he has no idea where that tirade came from.

Allison presses a kiss to his temple and sinks into the sofa.

"You should sort it by color," Erica decides, back to inspecting the clothes. "Ombre, or maybe rainbow. Thin strips. What do you think, Alli?"

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That night, before going to bed, Stiles texts Peter, *If you build something in someone else's honor, then who does it belong to?*

*Not a gift?* Peter texts back and of course he'd ask that. He's a lawyer. Followed by, *hold on, Cora just escaped from prison.*

Fifteen minutes later: *the day she learns to work doorknobs I'm doomed.*

*Probably. Not a gift.*

*Then the person who made said thing. Why?*

Stiles's finger hovers over the screen for a while. *Nothing. Existential crisis. Night.*

If Peter texts back, Stiles doesn't hear it anymore. In his dreams, his mother calls him her sweet boy and then tell him he's an idiot in Erica's voice.

Sometimes, Stiles hates his friends.

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# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

This chapter is a) kind of short and b) mostly dialogue, which is a total cop-out, but that's how it worked out. And the next one is already half written.

Also, fair warning, check out the new tags, please. Some angst snuck in again and the subject might not be for everyone.

As ever, thank you all so much for your support and cheerleading and craft-talk!

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After Erica ruined his magically happy Monday with common sense and her pregnancy hormones, Stiles spends Tuesday sulking. And Wednesday, too, because he's a grown ass man and he does what he wants.

In fact, he repeats that so often that he gives himself a hankering for MCU Loki and ends up crashing Scott and Kira's evening with a stack of DVDs and a lot of junk food. They snuggle him on the couch and aren't judgmental even though he's aware that they know full well what has him in a snit. A curse on whoever invented group texts.

And, okay, mostly it's just Kira who isn't judgmental, but she keeps shutting Scott down with some fairly impressive looks, considering she's a fucking Disney Princess most of the time. Whatever.

He watches Loki get his ass kicked and still be sassy as fuck and by the end of *The Avengers* he's decided that he needs to decide something and stop sticking his head in the sand. If only because Allison threatened to kick his ass if he doesn't stop being a whiney douchewad.

So he goes home. Drops his shit by the door, ruffles Alli's hair on his past the couch and then ducks away from her retaliatory pillow and slips into his room, where he sits on the bed, stares at his walls for a while and then pulls out his phone.

Scrolls through his contacts.

Considers who to use as a sounding board.

Comes up blank because everyone he knows is an opinionated asshole. Which is why he loves them so much, most days, but right now, he needs impartial.

In the end, that leaves him only one option.

*Are you still awake?* It's only ten, but little kids and everything.

Ten minutes pass before, *Yes*.

Succinct bastard.

*Can I call you?*

It feels weird, the prospect of talking to Peter on the phone, because they've never done it before. They've talked face to face, and by text for half a week, but on the phone is a whole other kettle of fish. Generally speaking, Stiles hates talking on the phone because he can neither filter his words like he does in writing, nor gauge the other's reactions and do damage control if necessary.

But. Needs must and Alli's threats are not to be taken lightly.

Instead of an answer, the phone rings in his hands.

"Hi," Stiles answers, because he's an idiot.

"Hello, Stiles." Damn Peter. Damn his voice. Damn whatever god thought it would be hilarious to put the man into Stiles' path. There's a pause.

"You wanted to talk?"

Right, yes. The purpose of this call. Oh god, shoot him now.

"I... I kind of need to vent and all of my friends are judgmental, opinionated and involved in this. Or at least think they're involved in this and it's a sad fact of my life that I don't know anyone who doesn't stick his nose in my business, except you? Kind of? You can tell me to stuff it, if you want to. I won't take it personally, you have enough on your docket without me whining at you."

There's a careful silence that lasts long enough that Stiles seriously considers hanging up and pretending this never happened. Then Peter drawls, "Considering everything you've done for me and the children, virtual strangers to you, I can offer an open ear for a while."

"I didn't do anything," Stiles argues, then moves on before Peter can get into it. "Are you sure?"

"Quite."

Alright then.

"So... it's about the store. Or, really, it's about my mom and how I'm a little screwy and my friends are pushy bastards and I think I probably need to give you some context."

There's a rustle of cloth over the line, like Peter is getting comfortable and Stiles wonders if he's in bed already, if he's looking sleepy-eyes like he did on Saturday evening, what his bedroom looks like, what the kids did today.

“That would be appreciated, yes.”

Breathe, Stiles.

“You might have noticed that I have some experience in the loss-of-parent department.”

“Dead Parents Club, I made a leap or two, yes.” If Stiles figured out how to bottle Peter’s sarcasm they could sell it to, like, dry out swamps, or something.

“Right. My mom got sick when I was little. Frontotemporal dementia. Which is... it’s shit. And it kind of pulls you out of your own skull and replaces you with someone else. My mom got violent and paranoid and-

And threatened to kill herself if they let her hell spawn son anywhere near her because she was convinced he was a changeling sent to murder her in her sleep.

“- she was in a bad place for a long time before she – “

- finally did manage to kill herself, and no-one will ever know if she was having a turn again and did it to escape Stiles, or if she was lucid and made a rational decision to end it.

“- died. I got my craft obsession from her. When I was diagnosed with ADHD, she taught me to crochet to keep my hands busy and it never really helped me concentrate, but it was something we did together. She’d knit, because that was her drug of choice, and I’d fuck around with a hook and some yarn and she was happy. Even after she got sick, crafting was one of the few things she still enjoyed. So I kind of made up a dream for her. For the both of us. A dream where there was an unlimited supply of yarn and any craft you wanted and there were fuzzy armchairs and blankets and tea and cocoa and you could knit a scarf long enough to mummify yourself with it.”

He takes a breath because oxygen is awesome, and also because Stiles isn’t a crier, never has been, but. He doesn’t talk about her. Not really. Not to anyone but his pillows in the dead of night because his mother either killed herself to get away from him or she killed herself to protect him from what she was becoming and either way, he can’t.

“*Yarnsome*,” Peter says into the gap and Stiles adores that clever, clever man.

“Yeah. She had a college fund she never touched because she didn’t feel like going to college, and I inherited it. I used my own to get a degree in business and then hers to start the store.”

“You opened it in her honor,” comes the conclusion and right, Stiles texted Peter about that, didn’t he? Eugh. Emotions. Help him!

“Yep. Apparently, it’s gotten kind of big since then?”

Peter hums. “I googled yarn stores when Derek first showed an interest. In a fifty mile radius, yours came up with the most positive reviews.”

“Really? Cool. So, anyway. It’s gotten way busier than it used to be. Instead of a little hole-in-the-wall memorial place, it’s apparently the place to be when you’re a yarnivore. And my friends think I should hire help. But I kind of don’t want to.”

“You have someone for the weekends, don’t you?”

Well. “Maggie, yeah. But she’s... we met in this knitting circle I joined for about five seconds, okay? It was full of snobbish stay-at-home moms who liked to bitch about their husbands and Maggie hated it as much as I did, so we kind of did our own thing for a while. Plus, her mom died of cancer a few years ago. So she gets it. Hiring her was okay. Plus plus, I was running myself ragged, working seven days a week.”

“But hiring more help isn’t okay?”

“Nooo?” It sounds stupid when he says it like that.

Peter makes a thoughtful noise, then abruptly says, “Hold on.”

He puts down the phone and Stiles hears distant voices. Derek, he thinks, or Laura, needing something. Peter’s back five minutes later, offering, “Derek got thirsty, my apologies.”

“No problem.”

“Tell me why.”

“Why what?”

“Why you don’t want to hire anyone. Rationalize it.”

Right. By day, when he’s not being an awesome uncle, Peter is a lawyer.

“Why?” he asks, suspiciously.

“So I can either counter your arguments or concede them and you can find a conclusion.”

“Eugh. You’re using logic.” He makes a retching noise. Peter chuckles.

“Go on.”

“What if I hire someone and they don’t take it seriously, or do it just for the money and not for the craft stuff?”

“Then you fire them and hire someone who fits you better.”

“What if they want to change things?”

“You tell them no. You’re the boss.”

“What if-“ Wow. Finding rational reasons for not hiring anyone is really kind of hard. Peter hears it, too, it seems, because he interrupts, “Do you want to know what I think?”

“Kind of why I called, dude.”

“Don’t call me dude. I think that *Yarnsome* is your way of holding on to your mother, and to your memories of her.”

Well, duh.

“And you’re afraid that letting someone else in on those memories is going to diminish them, somehow, make them less. Make you forget and move on.”

Stiles says nothing.

“However, as someone told my niece recently, grief is like a crater in your chest.”

He winces. “She told you about that, huh?”

“Obviously,” Peter deadpans, then adds, “I spent three months ferrying her and Derek from therapist to counsellor to therapist until they flat out refused to go anymore and none of these trained professionals managed to put grief into words they could understand. You did. Eloquently enough that Laura could explain it to Derek in turn and have him understand.”

Stiles... has really no idea how to react to that, except blushing scarlet and being glad he’s on the phone. In the dark. Although it’s entirely possible Allison can see him glowing from underneath the closed door.

“Grief is like a crater,” Peter gets back to his point, the bastard. “And letting someone else work at the store is letting things grow there, letting it become something new and you don’t want that. You want it to stay barren and empty for reasons I cannot possibly fathom, don’t you, Stiles?”

He sounds patronizing enough to make Stiles want to punch him in the face, but at the same time, *Because I deserve it* is on the tip of his tongue, almost, almost slipping out.

He deserves to have that crater in his chest, because his mom killed herself. For him. Because of him. She’s dead and it’s his fault and has been for twenty damn years.

“Frontotemporal dementia doesn’t kill,” he blurts instead, which is almost as bad, but not... not quite.

“It doesn’t?”

No.

“She killed herself.”

“And like a classic only child, you think it has to do with you, don’t you?”

“Fuck you,” he snaps, angry and defensive, feeling like a dumb teenager again, and a second later he winces because Peter is going to hang up any second now and never speak to him again.

Fuck.

“I overstepped,” he says instead, sounding regretful. “I’m sorry, Stiles.” A beat. “Have you, in your worries, considered what your mother would want for you? For the store? Would she begrudge you more free time, or your success?”

He... the man changes tracks almost as fast as Stiles does. The only other person Stiles knows who does that is Lydia.

“No,” he admits, because he knows she wouldn’t and he knows he’s ridiculous and he knows Erica is right and fuck them all. Fuck them so hard.

“You can always take your time. Find the right person. Try them on for size. Get used to the idea.”

“Stop. Stop logicing me.”

“Not a word.”

“Is, too. Logicing. I can say it. Hence, a word.”

“Derek finished the scarf,” Peter counters, because he’s obviously admitting defeat.

“He did? Awesome.”

“Yes. To my infinite relief, he has gifted it to Laura, not me.”

That startles a laugh out of Stiles. “You had horror visions of trying to combine your designer threads with a yellow-green-blue-purple scarf, didn’t you?” he asks, because he has no doubt that Peter would have worn the monstrosity. Hated it. But worn it. Probably until it fell apart.

The man makes a grudging noise. “Perhaps the color scheme should have been my first clue.”

“Oh?”

“They’re Laura’s favorite colors. And she wanted me to tell you she’d like a bumblebee for her hairclip because the needlepoint picture is almost done.”

“Really? That’s awesome!”

“It doesn’t look like the picture.”

“Doesn’t matter. She finished it!”

Peter makes a long-suffering sigh. “And please, don’t feel obligated to give in to her. She’s being rude.”

“She’s being adorable.”



Peter's next sigh says that yes, he's fully aware, he's just trying to deny it because if he gives in, he might as well strike the word 'no' from his dictionary forever, quit his job and live at the whims of his kids.

"Fess up," Stiles demands. "Your kids are awesome."

There's a pause, suddenly awkward. "They're not mine."

Oh.

*Oh.*

"Too early?" Stiles asks, trying to make light of something very, very dark.

Peter takes a moment, then confesses, "I'm afraid so."

Great going there, Stilinski.

"I'm sorry. I... thank you. For listening to me ramble. I know I cost you precious sleep."

A chuckle. "Not quite. Cora's due another jail break attempt in about thirty minutes. I usually wait the first one out before going to bed."

"What does she do?"

"Climb out of her crib and randomly run into walls. I'm waiting with baited breath for her to finally learn how to brake."

"You'd miss her suicide runs at... everything." Because they are adorable and Stiles wants to film them.

"Quite. But they're keeping me up at all hours, so for the moment, I just want her to learn to sleep through the night."

"Fair."

"Good night, Stiles."

"Good night, Peter. And thanks again."

"You're welcome."

Ring tone.

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# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

I legit have no idea what happened here. And Peter is possibly terrible OOC.

I still adore all of you and want to snuggle you and feed you cookies for being so awesome to me.

The brilliant, wonderful and amazing DH drew art of Cora in the Basket! You can find it [here](#). Isn't it perfect?!?! Thank you!

Allison comes breezing into the store with two giant paper cups of coffee and a frown on her face. Stiles accepts the coffee and accompanying hug before digging his thumbs into her forehead and shmooshing out the wrinkles there.

“Tell Auntie Stiles what’s wrong?” he cajoles in his best simpering tone, just to see her roll her eyes.

A few feet away, a beefy dude bro, who got dragged in here by his girlfriend and has been making snide comments the whole time, gives Stiles a revolted look.

Stiles flutters his lashes at the guy and licks his lips suggestively.

Dude Bro flees to stare intently at the baby yarn. Girlfriend shoots Stiles an apologetic look and makes a *what can you do* gesture with one hand. He mouths *dump him* at her and she gives him a thumbs up.

Good girl.

Allison waves a hand in front of his face, squeezes past him behind the counter and sits on the barstool he keeps there for slow days. Not that he’s been having many of those lately and damn Erica for making him notice. These days, he considers it a ‘lull’ when there’s less than ten customers in the store at the same time.

“That book I translated,” she starts, takes a sip of her coffee, watches Girlfriend freak out Dude Bro by cooing over the baby stuff, concludes, “was shit.”

“Okay?”

“All the stuff I’ve been translating lately is shit.”

“A sad testament to the ruination of our written culture.”

He takes a sip of his own cup and tries to look like he's mourning. She swats at him and her gaze falls onto the notepad on the counter. She picks it up, reads off, "'On a scale from one to crazy yarn person, how much do you like crafts?' Stiles, what is this?"

He grimaces. "We were talking about shitty books."

She waves a hand. "It's frustrating. Is that... an application? Are you trying to design an application?"

"Why is it frustrating?" he tries not to sound desperate.

"Because I feel like I could do better, yet I'm the one doing the cheap translations while they're making big bucks with their awful literature. It is, isn't it?"

She scans the paper, flips back a few failed tries. "Stiles! You can't ask that on an application! That's totally not PC! And possibly illegal!"

"But I need to know who I'm letting in here!"

"This shit could get you sued!"

"That's why I struck it out!" He lunges for the notepad, grabs one corner and pulls it away from her. "So do better."

"What?"

"If you can write a better book, then do it. Maybe that'll get you out of your funk. You know, don't have a husband, don't have a kid, but you could have a decent book. I see you rocking young adult fantasy. There could be werewolves. And a plucky heroine with a bow and arrow."

"Does she have an annoyingly honest asshole of a best friend?"

"He's awesome," Stiles defends.

"He's a pain in the ass," she counters, then holds out her hand to demand the pad back.

"Can I pay?" Girlfriend asks. Dude Bro hulks behind her with a disgusted expression.

"Sure!" Stiles chirps and hands her basket to Alli.

"I don't work here, Stiles."

"No, but your malcontent ass is between me and the register. Mush!"

She glowers at him and starts ringing up a ton of yarn because she's helped out often enough to know how. Stiles, meanwhile, takes care of the customer service, bagging her purchases and asking, "What are you making? Blanket?"

By the pastels, he guesses baby blanket.

“My cousin’s having her second baby. I’m making her a blanket,” Girlfriend tells him. Ten points to him.

“Great choice then. This yarn holds up well and you can wash it a little hotter than the tag says.”

She nods, beams. “I know. I used this kind for the last one, too. Little Domi threw up non-stop until she was six months old. That blanket got washed a lot.” She snorts. “Everything got washed a lot.”

“Sounds like you’re close,” Stiles observes. He knows distant relatives who come in here hoping to buy something ready-made so their siblings’ or cousins’ babies won’t cost them time. This girl? Nope. Totally into her niece. Dude Bro glowers.

“I love babies. And Domi’s an awesome kid. You two got kids?”

Alli doesn’t even blink as she takes the offered bills (Dude Bro is gaping wide-eyed at the total) and says, “Not until we’re thirty-five. Enjoy your day!”

They leave.

“So, you’re hiring someone?”

“Maybe. I’ll look at a few people, at least, okay? But you don’t get to emotionally press gang me into anything.” He eyes her sideways because she totally will do exactly that if given half a chance.

She sniffs. “I would never. What made you change your mind?”

“I was serious about the book, by the way. You could do it.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Since we’ve been having two conversations pretty much since you came in here, I’m not.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’d be awesome at it. You have a flair for story-telling.”

“You’re confusing us again. You’re the great talker.”

“And you’re the great writer.”

“Why did you start writing applications?”

“Because Peter threw logic at me until I folded.” He crosses his arms over his chest and frowns. She considers him a moment, then pokes him in the forearm. Right where the bow

and arrow tattoo sits.

He pokes her in the hip, where she's hiding a tattoo of two photorealistic knitting needles under her clothes.

"I think I need to meet your Peter."

"Not my Peter. And you have."

"Five minutes at the park while he was out of his mind with worry don't count. You should invite him over."

"I- huh," Stiles finishes, because speak of the devil and he waltzes in in a fancy suit with a toddler on his hip and a borderline panicked expression on his handsomely devilish face. Which makes sense. Because the devil would have a devilish face.

"Stiles!" he says and it sounds more like an exclamation than a greeting.

"Peter!" Stiles returns in the same tone. "Cora!"

Peter sends him a narrow-eyed look for poking fun at him. Cora blows a spit bubble directly into her uncle's ear.

"What's up? Where's the rest of your army of flying monkeys?"

Beside him, Allison mutters something about getting that reference and waves at Cora, who waves back clumsily.

Peter's whole expression sinks back into panic. "I need to ask you a favor. You can tell me to go to hell, in fact, you actually should, but as cheesy as that may sound, you are literally my only hope right now." He cringes a little. "But as I said, you can tell me no."

Stiles chuckles because so far, he's only seen Peter either unfairly smooth, or stoic with grief. Flustered is an entirely new look and Stiles is worried about how adorable he finds it. Badass lawyers in their thirties are not 'adorable'. But then, there are mitigating circumstances in this case. One of them is currently trying to gnaw on his ear. Peter tips her sideways and swipes, ineffectively, at his soggy appendage. It's possible he has drool in his ear.

"Maybe tell me what's going on first?" Stiles suggests.

"What's going on is that my secretary just fired herself by not telling me last week that the hearing for my biggest current case got switched to an earlier date so now here I am, with forty-five minutes left to get to the courthouse and a toddler with nowhere to put because her daycare is closed due to lice this week. Lice! How imbecilic do you have to be, to let a toddler catch *lice* of all things?!"

Oh, boy.

"Sounds like someone's getting fired. And also like someone else," he wiggles his fingers at Cora. She abandons Peter's ear in favor of grabbing for them. "is staying with me for a few

hours. What do you say, kid, drugs, violence and hard liquor sound like fun?"

Alli makes a dying walrus sound next to him. Peter visibly relaxes and dryly offers, "Reassuring."

"Hey, I'm your last minute emergency baby sitter. I figure I need to live up to a stereotype."

"Unfortunately, I have seen you interact with children. No-one's going to buy the act."

"Damnation!"

Peter shakes his head, amused. "Are you sure? I... might not have been thinking quite clearly when I rushed here."

Is it weird that Stiles is sort of touched that Peter panicked and thought of him? Usually, he's the person causing others panic, not the cure.

"Like you said, you've seen me with kids. I adore your flying monkeys and you know it."

"There is a difference between playing with them for a bit and taking care of this one for hours."

True. But it's equally true that Stiles adores Peter as much as – possibly more than - his kids and that he would do a whole lot more than spend an afternoon with Cora, if it meant keeping Peter around. And it's not like Cora is a hardship. She's a perfectly shaped missile of diapered destruction and glee. He wants to be like her when he grows up.

Also, is Peter actually trying to talk Stiles out of doing him a favor?

"Do you have a Plan B?"

"No."

"Then pass her over, dude, and trust me. I babysat my neighbors' kids all through school to afford my jeep. I'm a pro at kids and this one's no trouble."

"Stiles is the kid-whisperer," his lovely roommate supplies helpfully, from where she's perched, chin-hands, watching the show like she paid for it.

Peter's jaw ticks, he holds Cora a little tighter, gaze flickering to the clock behind the counter. "I do trust you," he finally says. "Otherwise we wouldn't be here."

And that's... uhm. Wow.

Stiles beams.

Five seconds pass, then the older man sighs. He hands over his kid with obvious reluctance and lets Allison make a grab for the diaper bag slung over his free shoulder. It has little cartoon wolves on it.

“I owe you.”

Stiles settles her on his own hip and shakes his head. Peter sticks his hands in his pockets, possibly to stop himself from nabbing his niece back. “Nah. Friends help friends. No IOUs necessary.” Cora agrees with him by letting out an ear-splitting shriek and starting to paw at his beanie.

Peter looks startled for a moment, then something pleased settles onto his face. “We’re friends?”

The guy has invited Stiles over for dinner, let him borrow books and listened to him whine for half an hour in the middle of the night. Without judging. And that’s on top of the text conversation they’ve been having for the past two weeks. What the hell does he think they are?

“We’re friends. Duh.”

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Peter is...

Peter is a mess of emotions, currently. Not all of them vengeful, surprisingly. Oh, he’s still going to humiliate Sabrina, his secretary, in the most creative way he can think of before firing her incompetent ass for almost ruining a six-figure case with her idiotic habit of writing important information of fucking post-it notes and then losing them, but.

That’s not all.

There was panic mixed in with the rage earlier, and determination and dread. He grabbed Cora and hooved it and almost didn’t realize where he was headed until he was already parking.

Stiles.

Somehow, for some reason, he went to Stiles. He almost turned around on the spot because why in god’s name would Stiles do him a favor like this? Playing with a baby for a few minutes is one thing but taking responsibility for one for hours on end, while also running a store? Why should the younger man go to so much trouble for Peter, of all people?

Don’t get him wrong. His ego is in full working order. He’s hot, smart and wickedly devious. There was a time when a hitched eyebrow and a smile was enough to get anyone into his bed. But he knows he’s overly invested in the man the children like to talk crafts with and has been from the beginning. For fuck’s sake, he keeps telling the kid his deepest, darkest secrets and he doesn’t even know his real name. (Because he hopes, fervently, that it’s not actually Stiles.)

Still, there wasn’t time to reconsider, so he did what he did best and barged right on. And Stiles didn’t even hesitate. Didn’t try to fib him off with excuses or flat-out refuse. He seemed eager.

And then he had to go and emotionally wreck Peter for good by calling them friends. Glee, hope, surprise, pleasure.

All of it. Because some random twenty-something said they're friends.

It's ridiculous.

Peter has never been fond of people. He's always gone for quality over quantity when it came to friends and of all the people he used to call that, only Kali and Ennis truly are. The others were only ever closer acquaintances than the rest, as evidenced by how fast they jumped ship when he inherited the children.

So for the past months, Peter has been, if not lonely, then isolated. Even Kali and Ennis have become more distant. He doesn't see them every day anymore and they both made a conscious decision to never have children, while Peter now has three, which is another wedge between them.

Enter Stiles, who met Cora, Laura and Derek almost before he met Peter, who knows more of the baggage that comes with the Hales than most, and still, still uses the word 'friends'.

Of course Peter's a little fucked up. (Not that he's ever voicing that thought. To anyone.)

But not now. Now, there's a case to win and a minion to fire. He'll save everything else for later.

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Stiles looks at Cora, at her diaper bag on the counter, at the lunch rush just starting to trickle in and then at Allison.

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, I'm staying." Then she grabs the coffee she bought him and adds, "But I'm keeping this."

"You, my lady, are made of sunshine and stardust and if I were twenty years younger, I'd call you Mommy and cling to you like a limpet."

She aims a smack at his head and then stops herself because, yeah, precious cargo, anyone? Cora, though, is either telepathic, or already damn good at reading people, because she whacks him one less than a second later.

"Ouch."

"You are so freaking weird, I don't know why I even let you out of the house."

"Because you love me, dear?"

"Go deal with the kid."

Good idea. Only Stiles doesn't really know where, because he has seen Cora in action and he knows better than to think she's going to stay wherever he puts her.



“You’re already plotting escape, aren’t you?” he demands, jiggling her on his hip as he grabs her things and goes to set her up on the rug by the couch.

“Ba b aba da grrrrrr!”

“Oh no, a monster!”

“Gah!”

“Oh, hey, did you grow another tooth? You’re getting dangerous there, little lady.”

“Ba ba maaaaa!”

“Excellent.”

He puts her down on her diapered butt and aims a stern finger at her. “Okay. Rules. No leaving this store. No eating anything. No pulling down displays. No booze and no cigarettes. Clear?”

In lieu of an answer, she rolls to her feet and takes a run at the nearest armchair.

Stiles resigns himself to a day spent toddling after a baby and doesn’t even try to keep the grin off his face. Laura and Derek are cute and all, but Cora is the best. Still.

“Stay for a moment, okay?”

He scampers back to the register and grabs a sheet of paper and a sharpie to write with. Then he tapes his improvised sign outside the door, grabs the crochet ball basket and plonks his ass down next to his new ward.

“Have you ever been in a ball bath, Rocket?”

She trundles past him at an angle and he snags the back of her pants and lifts her up.

“Because the craft version of it so so much squishier.” And then he dumps her in the basket.

Her squeals of delight actually end up drawing more customers than they scare off.

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# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Boundless fluff, with a dash of semi-angst at the end, to off-set it.

You people are still wonderfully amazing and brilliant and your suggestions as to what the sign says were hilarious. And a few weren't far off the mark!

Enjoy!

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“Uncle Peter?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s Cora?”

“I had a bit of a work emergency, so she’s with Stiles at the moment,” Peter announces, pulling out of the school’s parking lot in time for twin screeches of “Stiles” to deafen him forever.

On the one hand, Derek actually being loud is still novel enough to be wonderful. On the other hand, Peter has had thirty-some years to get rather attached to his eardrums, so he sends the children a scolding look in the rearview mirror.

“Settle down.”

They glare right back and don’t wilt in the slightest. “Are we going to see Stiles now?” Laura demands.

“We could just leave your sister with him forever. I’m sure they’ll have a nice life together.”

Derek snorts. Laura rolls her eyes. Peter heard once that children are incapable of understanding irony and sarcasm until well into puberty. Whoever came up with that theory has obviously never met the Hale brood.

“So we’re going to see Stiles.” Laura concludes, because she is a tiny little despot. “Has he made my bumblebee, yet?”

“Don’t be greedy, sweetheart. If Stiles decides to give you a gift, it will be on his terms and you will be grateful.”

A beat. “Why are you grumpy?” Tiny little perceptive despot.

“I’m not grumpy, I’m stressed. I had a work emergency earlier and I only just managed to salvage it.”

Derek’s little face appears between the front seats at the next stoplight. “Did you win?”

Shark-like expression on his own face, Peter grins down at his nephew. “Yes.”

“Cool.”

“Indeed.”

There’s silence from the peanut gallery for the rest of the drive, giving Peter a chance to sort himself out. He still has way too many emotions regarding a certain, self-proclaimed Yarn Guy and he doesn’t like it. Sentimental floundering is for other people.

And yet.

And yet.

Stiles is loud and bright and inappropriate and utterly unstoppable and Peter dares anyone to remain stoic in the face of him. Maybe he would have managed a year ago, before the children came and started tearing down his walls, but these days? He might as well admit that he’s a mostly mushy marshmallow. If the people at the firm ever find out, he’s doomed.

They pull into the parking lot closest to *Yarnsome* fifteen minutes later and while the children both wait patiently for Peter to take their hands and help them across the street, they’re obviously chomping at the bit.

He takes the time to get rid of his jacket and tie and neatly store them in the passenger seat, just to annoy them.

(Maybe he’s not *all* marshmallow just yet.)

As soon as they get close to the door, he starts laughing. There is a piece of paper taped to the glass, and Derek obligingly reads it aloud, nose scrunched up in concentration. “Free-running tod-toddler inside. Please keep door closed at – at all times. Thank you.”

Peter pulls down the sign and holds the door for the kids before quickly shoving it shut again, fully aware of the way Cora homes in on escape routes with frightening accuracy.

Stiles’ friend, Allison, is still manning the register and Stiles is nowhere to be seen until she waves at them and points toward the seating area. Rounding a few shelves, the Hales discover Stiles stretched out on the couch, back against one armrest, legs long. He’s putting the finishing touches on another crochet project. Cora is lying, swaddled in her favorite blanket, on his lap, curled up like a kitten, snuffling away in blissful sleep.

“I tucked her out,” Stiles informs them, unconcerned, like he’s completely unaware of what a feat that is. Peter has, at one point, when sleep deprivation set in and dawn was creeping

over the horizon and Cora *still wouldn't sleep*, considered making her run after the car like a dog, just to tire her out.

"I didn't know that was possible," he manages after a moment spent desperately trying to swallow down the, *Move in with me and never leave*, that's trying to fight its way out of his mouth.

The younger man points toward a basket filled with crochet balls, much like Cora's still-favorite toy, the yellow ball he gave her the first time they were here. "Don't get mad, but, uhm, apparently, she, uhm, fetches?"

"Fetches?" Laura asks, blankly.

"Like a dog," Allison supplies, coming up behind them. "Throw something she likes and she fetches it. I told Stiles it's not okay to do that because she's not an actual dog, but he never listens to me. Sorry." Her smile is half embarrassed, half apologetic. Her eyes are huge, dark and shiny. She has dimples. Forest creatures probably flock to her and offer to do her housekeeping.

She also seems to think Peter cares about the fact that pretending his niece is a canine is a little bit undignified. "You realize," he says to Stiles instead, "that you have just turned yourself into prime babysitter material, don't you?"

A beaming grin is his only answer as Stiles pulls a pair of nail clippers out of nowhere and uses them to cut the yarn. He makes hook and clippers disappear on his person, puts the leftover yarn ball aside and spins the green-and-red-and white hat on his finger once before snugging it over Cora's fine baby hair.

It's a strawberry. Or at least, it's made to look like a strawberry and in combination with the serenely sleeping baby face below it, Peter can feel himself getting cavities just from looking at it.

Allison audibly coos. Derek looks like he's just seen god, although that's probably more due to the skillful crafting, than the cuteness that is his baby sister.

Stiles smiles down at Cora for a moment, then wiggles his phone out of his back pocket and takes a picture of her. Shortly after that, Peter's and Allison's phones chime in sync.

"Is that the scarf Derek made?" Stiles asks once that's done, turning to Laura.

She nods, proud as a peacock and steps forward to show the monstrosity off. Derek follows, glowing at his sister's obvious pleasure.

"It's all my favorite colors!"

Not that most people would be able to tell what those are. Today's ensemble consists of canary yellow skinny jeans, the ever present orange Converse, a purple and green Hulk shirt and a blue cardigan. Every single shade clashes with the scarf. At this point, Peter just takes a

lot of pictures for future blackmail purposes and lets her be. She's happy and he doesn't have the energy to care. Besides, it does make her easier to pick out in a crowd.

Derek, by comparison, looks almost sophisticated in simple blue jeans, red sneakers and a Batman hoodie with one of Laura's flower hairclips attached to the front pocket. Peter has no clue how he got his hands on that, but he suspects Laura might have given it to him in return for the scarf.

Which the three of them are still gushing over while Stiles periodically smooths a hand down Cora's little back. It seems to be working, because she's still sleeping. Beside Peter, a little click announces that Allison has decided to take a few pictures of her own. When she catches his gaze, she asks, a little sheepish, "You don't mind, do you? I can send them to you, if you let me have your number."

"Please," he requests. She passes over her phone. Once he hands it back, his own phone chimes within seconds.

He pulls it out to save her to his contacts, but instead of the empty text he expected, he reads, *Is that sappy look for your kids, or for my best friend?*

He looks up, startled, and finds her doe eyes suddenly cool, dimples absent. It's possible aforementioned woodland creatures might be more along the lines of feral wolves than squirrels.

*I don't do sappy.*

*Yes you do. Look in a mirror. Now, who?*

*I believe that's none of your business.*

They must look like idiots, texting while standing directly next to each other, but by silent agreement, neither wants Stiles to catch wind of this conversation.

*He's my best friend. If you're going to hurt him, I will shoot you. With an arrow.*

Suddenly, the tattoo in the crook of Stiles' elbow makes more sense. And if the man has a tattoo in the name of this girl, Peter better not piss her off.

*Stiles does have an unfortunate charisma to him,* he allows, and no more than that.

*So you like him.*

I am a single man in his thirties with three traumatized children tied to his apron strings, he doesn't say. What the fuck does it matter if I like him, he doesn't say. Of course I want him bad enough to feel it in my teeth, he doesn't say.

Maybe some of that shows on his face, because the next text consists of nothing but an insufferably smug looking smiley face. Then Allison tucks her phone away and announces, "If your guest is leaving, I'm taking off. I'm meeting Isaac for dinner. Don't wait up, honey."

She waves, pats Peter on the shoulder and disappears out the door.

Stiles takes that as his cue to wrangle Cora into his arms and slowly stand up, groaning as he goes. Laura holds out her hands automatically, but he simply shakes his head and hitches the sleeping child higher on his hip. “Nah, I’m good, kiddo.” He turns to Peter, “She was adorable. Thanks for letting me have her.”

“Thanks for having her.”

“No trouble. Anytime, really. And I mean that. I think I’m in love.” He beams, first at the awake Hales, then at the sleeping one, looking totally dopey and love-struck and yeah, Peter knows the feeling. All three of Talia’s brood had that effect on him when he held them for the first time. One look at them and he felt his IQ drop twenty points. Another reason he always tried to stay away from children. Even with an IQ as remarkable as his, there’s only so many points one can afford to lose before the drooling and rocking sets in.

“You should come to the park with us on Saturday,” he offers instead of something reasonable, like *thank you* or, *that is a very generous offer* or even *marry me*.

“Nuh-uh!” Laura pipes up instantly. “We’re going to the pool! You promised!”

Derek rolls his eyes and stage whispers to Stiles, “Mermaid training. It’s super stupid.”

“Mermaid training? Now that sounds like something I can’t possibly miss!” The enthusiasm doesn’t even sound faked, bless him.

But Laura’s already shaking her head again. “Weremaid! I want to be a weremaid!”

That’s a new one. “And what, dear niece, might a weremaid be?”

He has a pretty good idea and from the way he’s hiding a grin in Cora’s new hat, so is Stiles.

“S a mermaid who turns into a wolf. With claws!” She mimes slashing at something and bares her teeth. It looks more like a kitten than a wolf, but alright.

“Wolves can’t swim, dummy!” Derek cuts into her glee.

“Can too!”

“Not at the bottom of the sea!”

And they’re off, bickering like only siblings can. They’ll probably keep at it until Saturday at this rate. Peter sighs and steps between them to gently take Cora from Stiles, who makes a face like he’s being robbed of joy and clings to her for longer than strictly necessary.

“Are you sure you want to subject yourself to that?” Peter uses his free hand to point at where Laura looks homicidal and Derek darkly pleased.

Stiles snorts. “Are you kidding? I’m not missing weremaid training for the life of me.”

Peter smiles, softer than he means to. “Good.”

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Stiles is watching Daryl Dixon being badass at everything when Allison gets home after ten, looking windswept and a bit tipsy. Happier, too. She takes a long look at the screen, then toes off her shoes and flops down next to him on the couch, her head in his lap.

He shrugs, shifts her around a little and then starts playing with her hair because it’s just *right there* and he’s not strong enough to resist those luscious curls.

Allison purrs. She keeps telling him he’s full of shit, but she also keeps purring when he plays with her hair and Stiles is pretty sure if either Isaac or Scott had figured out that particular trick, the Triangle of Doom would have ended a lot sooner than it has because Allison would have put a ring on someone.

They watch the badassery in silence for the next half hour. Then, as one episode switches over to the next one, Alli hums his name quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Is it,” she stop-starts without looking away from the screen, “is it Peter you want? Or is it his family?”

Stiles’ hand stills. She shoves her head back into it and he resumes his ministrations. “What do you mean?”

“You’re... you’ve always wanted a family. For as long as I’ve known you. But you also never expected to have one because you have self-esteem issues,”

-Someone has been talking to Lydia again –

“and you think you’re going to be alone forever. Watching you with Cora today,”

-“Thanks for that, by the way.”-

“Sure, no problem. But seeing you with her made me wonder if you’re into Peter, or if you just...,” she rolls backwards until she can look up at him without breaking her own neck.

“Are you just lonely, Stiles?”

If this were Erica or Boyd or Isaac or even Kira, Stiles would have made a joke of it. If this were Lydia, he could have refused to answer and she would have accepted it. If it were Scott... okay, if it were Scott, they wouldn’t be here, because Scott is many things, but not the most observant.

Fuck Alli for being herself and not Scott. For not being blinded by his usual bullshit. For knowing to ask that question in the first damn place.

“Isn’t that why anyone wants a relationship? So they’re not lonely?” he asks, lightly, gaze fixed on the empty hallways of the credits on the screen.

She hums, thoughtful. “Maybe. But you know how you get. You’re all intense and determined and you end up hurting yourself just because you’re holding on too hard. If you’re in it for the kids, you’re going to...” Apparently, even Alli doesn’t know how that sentence ends, because she trails off. He gets it, though. In the most basic terms, he thinks, she’s afraid that he’s going to bend himself to be with Peter just because he wants adores his kids.

Seriously, though. If teenage Stiles didn’t have sex with Lydia, the girl he loved madly for a decade, the adult version’s not going to bend for anyone else, either. He tries not to lie to himself and that would be the biggest lie of them all. Giving in. Trying to be another person’s idea of him. He did that, for years, with his dad, and it almost killed them both.

“It’s a moot point anyway,” he declares, instead of saying any of that out loud. “Peter and the kids are a package deal. One comes with the other. So whatever we do, or *don’t* do is going to involve five people, not two. Everything else is sort of chicken-egg, isn’t it? Besides, being friends with the guy doesn’t mean I’m going to become his wife and have his babies, Alli Cat.”

“Right,” she agrees, and then lets him off the hook by filling him in on Isaac in between zombie battles on TV. In exchange, he keeps her purring until she eventually falls asleep.

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# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Moving into slightly bitter-sweet territory. Fair warning, I don't really think highly of the Sheriff and it shows in this chapter. Sorry if that offends anyone.

In other news: I'm completely fucking stuck on the next chapter. Yay!

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Peter may have miscalculated when he agreed to take the kids to the pool with Stiles.

Or, well, maybe not 'miscalculated' as much as 'not thought it through'. Because the thing about pools in early summer?

People tend to take off their clothes.

A lot.

And Stiles.

Stiles has tattoos.

More than the two on his arms. More small ones, scattered all over. And a full back piece that made Peter's mouth go dry when the younger man pulled off his t-shirt in a single smooth motion.

And that's just the tattoos. In between, there's miles and miles of pale, mole-dotted skin on display with lean muscles underneath and low slung board shorts that should really be outlawed.

Except if they were, Stiles would be wearing nothing at all and then Peter would be financially ruined because he'd need to send all three of his charges to therapy for the rest of their lives.

Also, for some reason, Stiles just keeps *bending over*.

Peter is transfixed, hypnotized, wishing-for-popcorn spellbound. Stiles moving, Stiles talking, Stiles scratching his belly, Stiles playing ball with Derek, Stiles drinking water, Stiles hitching Cora onto his hip and letting her paw at the bird of paradise high on his left pectoral.

It's not even that Peter is sporting wood, the way regular people do when a person they... are attracted to is running around half naked. No, it's that he can't tear his eyes away from *Stiles*.

He's beautiful, the tattoos are a mystery, he's laughing, he's playing with the kids and Peter is pretty sure Laura could discover the cure to cancer on the deckchair next to his and he wouldn't notice because he can't look away.

It's patently ridiculous.

"Hey," the devil in person asks, flicking water at Peter's face, two kids in tow. "What's your stance on toddlers in deep waters?"

"Not until she can a) control her bodily functions, b) swim and c) punch a shark in the face," Peter supplies because he googled the hell out of babies at pools when Laura started her first mermaid phase and swim diapers just seem more trouble than they're worth. Cora can splash at home. Still, though, "If anyone's going in, she gets swimmies, though, in case she gets adventurous."

Peter is wise enough to his youngest niece's ways by now to fully appreciate that she might throw herself into a pool just to give him a heart attack.

Stiles nods and before he can open his mouth again, Laura is already holding out Cora's swimmies. Peter grabs both them and the baby and starts putting them onto her. She doesn't like them much, but once they're on and she can smack him again, arms unimpeded, she's content enough.

Stiles, meanwhile, turns to Derek, sunglasses shoved down to give the boy a serious look and ask, "Freestyle or super rad flotation devices?"

Derek sniffs derisively. "Only babies can't swim."

Stiles, having learned the lay of the land rather quickly, turns to Laura, who confirms with a nod and then adds, just to stir up some shit, "He only learned last year."

Paul taught her and Derek in the same pond Peter and Talia once learned how to swim in. He wonders if anyone uses it, now that the house isn't there anymore and the property abandoned.

Once Cora is prepped for her hopefully dry adventure by the pool, they clear up their spot a little and then trek to the kids' pool, where Laura and Derek jump in immediately, screeching, splashing and generally blending in with the populace.

They holler for Stiles to join them, but he resists for the moment, catching Cora when she shoots past him, turning her around and sending her back to Peter, who mirrors him and sends her back in turn. He does it all completely casually, like they've been handling tiny cannon balls together for years and Peter... Peter is getting all caught up again, isn't he?

"You should go," he says, suspending Cora in mid-air for a moment, her legs still pumping, "before they start a tiny riot."

Laura is already practicing her weremaidding in between bouts of screaming for Stiles and it looks frankly terrifying. She keeps diving, flopping her feet above water in an imitation of a

fin, only to suddenly explode out of the water, growling, snarling and making claws at anyone within range. Derek, paddling nearby with a long-suffering expression under his eyebrows, is her favorite victim.

“On second thought,” Peter corrects, “please go and keep them from committing homicide. Derek would never survive in prison.” Laura, on the other hand, would probably take it over within the month. It’s possibly a bit undignified to be terrified of your ten-year-old niece, but dignity has nothing to do with it, really. It’s pure survival.

Just then, a teenage boy approaches Laura from the left, intending to get her to stop making a racket, by the looks of him. She dives under and around him, lunges out of the water and proceeds to almost strangle him.

“True,” Stiles agrees and then hastily dives in, already shouting, “Laura Hale, stop killing innocent bystanders! No bumblebees for murderers!”

“Your sister,” Peter informs Cora once he’s sure the cops won’t be called, “is a maniac.”

She grins. Then she promptly applies all five of her teeth to his bicep. Apparently, ‘maniac’ runs in the family.

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An hour later, everyone under six feet is exhausted enough to agree to some land time. Which is just as well because the lifeguard looks like he’s considering calling animal control on the weremaids. Plural. At some point, Derek decided he was fed up with being the victim and instead joined the dark side. After that, it cascaded, until half the prepubescent population of the pool was snarling and spitting.

Peter bundles all three kids into towels— because of course Cora managed to get wet, even on dry land – while Stiles sets up drinks and sandwiches, which are devoured ravenously because, “Weremaids are always hungry, grrrrr.”

Ten minutes later, Derek pops up from his towel nest and asks, “Can we have ice-cream?”

“Do you promise not to attack any more strangers today?”

“Yes?” He’s not even trying.

“Try again, nephew.”

“Yes.” Angry set to his jaw. Lying, but at least doing it determinedly and that’s a life skill, so Peter lets it pass.

“Better.” He digs up a twenty and is about to dislodge a drowsy Cora and climb to his feet, when Stiles snags the bill from his hand and announces, “I’ll go with them, you two chill.”

He sticks the money into the pocket of his board shorts, grabs a Hale on each hand and jauntily marches them away, nattering on about flavors and how to keep ice-cream from dripping, every bit as energetic as the children bouncing around him.

Peter feels incredibly, ridiculously, stupidly fond. Right until they come back ten minutes later, popsicles in hand. Stiles passes Peter an orange flavored one and sits down again, unconcerned. The children are scowling furiously. Derek's free hand is bunched into his trunks in a way that usually heralds an impending tantrum.

"What happened?"

"People are idiots," Stiles supplies serenely, licking melted raspberry from his fingers. Peter gets sidetracked for a moment before turning to his niece and nephew for more information.

"There was a dumb lady at the pool earlier," Laura supplies when Derek seems to have gone temporarily mute again. "She was glaring. And she just said, she said," she has to pause to make a grimace and lick her popsicle.

Derek nods and opens his mouth, closes it. Gives an angry lick, too. It'd be comical if they weren't both so obviously upset. Stiles shakes his head. "Sit down, you two, and chill. Dumb people are everywhere and they can only hurt you if you let them."

"What in god's name did she *say*?" Peter demands, because that sounds like he needs to take out a hit on someone.

"Paraphrased?" Stiles asks rhetorically, then answers, "That it's no wonder they have no manners, if they're being raised by the 'likes of me'."

"Which is?"

"Tattooed. Apparently, my skin offends her." He waves a hand and turns back to the kids. "I told you, forget about her. I love my tattoos but some people don't. It doesn't mean anything. They're for me, not for her."

Being a craft-obsessed male with a bunch of tattoos and a pretty big mouth probably means Stiles has practice ignoring people. He doesn't fit into any stereotype Peter has ever heard of and Beacon Hills might not be the worst small town there is, but it's not exactly kind to those who are too different.

The children take a few minutes to absorb his statement, then visibly relax, although Laura adds, "I'll splash her if I see her again."

Before Peter can say anything, Stiles shakes his head. "No, you won't. Because then you're as bad as her."

She glares furiously, but doesn't argue.

"What are they for?" Derek asks a moment later, his voice quiet in a way it hasn't been in months. And, oh, it's been almost two months since Peter dragged him into *Yarnsome* just to put an end to his sulking, hasn't it? It'll be Cora's first birthday in only a few weeks.

Around that revelation, the conversation continues. "What? My ink?"

"Mhm."

“Which one do you want to know about?”

“This,” Derek answers promptly, pointing to the image of a piece of string tied around one wrist.

Stiles smiles and holds that hand out for inspection. “It’s for my mom. Green was her favorite color and knitting was her favorite thing in the world, so I got some green yarn to remind me of her.”

“And this?”

The bird of paradise is for Lydia, the ex-girlfriend come friend. The dog paw prints along his left hipbones are for Scott. The greyscale of the ocean sliding around his biceps is just pretty. The flowers on his calf are from when he ‘gave Erica permission to tattoo anything she wants’. The stars on his other shoulder are for people whose names Peter has heard mentioned before. The bow and arrow is for Allison.

“And the wings?” Laura demands, standing behind him, her small hands sprawled over the leathery folds of them. Derek leans over, runs a finger over the claw-like protrusions at the topmost points. They are curved up and around almost to the collarbones.

They look like something you might find on a bat, just a lot bigger and a lot more vicious. Looking at them, Peter can’t help but think of old wood cuttings of devils and demons.

Stiles flexes his shoulder blades in a way that makes the wings dance and shudder, like they’re about to open. They’re perfectly crafted to align with certain muscle groups. The result is chilling. Laura actually flinches back a bit, equal parts horrified and fascinated.

“Those are special,” Stiles tells the kids, “and the reason I got them isn’t something I like to talk about. Maybe ask me in a few years?”

Before they can settle in to pout, he skillfully navigates them into wanting to go for another swim, leaving the adults alone with a napping toddler. Stiles watches them go, flexing his shoulders again, absently.

“Is the reason not child friendly, or is it private?” Peter says before he can stop himself, because fascination makes him stupid.

Stiles flashes him a grin and pats at the wings over one shoulder. “Both, really. You mind?”

Yes.

“No. Tell me about the bow and arrow instead. It looks different from the others.”

The younger man taps it, laughing. “It’s cause it wasn’t done by Erica. She did all my others, but I got this one when I was seventeen, back in BH. Alli has a matching one on her hip. Knitting needles.”

“I’m sensing a story.”

Rolling backward to lie flat on his deck chair, Stiles hitches his sunglasses higher and shrugs. “Alli lost her mother, her favorite aunt and her super creepy grandpa in a car crash when she was seventeen. She lost the plot for a little bit and Scott – she was still with Scott at the time – got desperate and threw me at her, because of my mom, I guess. That’s where the Dead Parents Club comes from, in case you were wondering.”

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It’s weird, telling this story. Everyone Stiles knows, everyone who has ever seen his tattoos, knows this already. Putting this shit into words for Peter is awkward because there is so much more to this.

Allison didn’t just ‘lost the plot’. She went full on psycho. And when a chick with martial arts training, a proficiency in long range weaponry and an arms dealer for a father goes psycho, well. She was dangerous and didn’t give a fuck about who got hurt in her quest for something like justice. Only how do you get justice when your grandfather has a heart attack at the wheel and kills three quarters of your family in one fell swoop? There was no-one to blame, so Alli blamed everyone.

“That’s how we became friends in the first place.” Before that, she was always Scott’s girlfriend and he was Scott’s friend and there was no real connection. Degrees of separation. It took her breaking down to Stiles’ level, took her becoming as angry and helpless and full of rage as him, for them to get close. To become real friends. Stiles regrets it, a little, that it took so much shit for them to become what they are, but these days, he can barely remember what it was like to not have Allison Argent living in his pocket.

“That year was the Bad Year,” he tells Peter. “A few months after the accident, my dad got shot in the line of duty. I...,” he’s going to have to explain, isn’t he? This, too. So weird. “After mom, dad kind of checked out for a few years.”

Drank too much, slept at the station, only came from every few days and couldn’t seem to look at the boy who had her eyes, the boy who had her knitting needles and her smile, who waited in an empty house for either of his parents to come home. The boy he forgot, for a long while.

(His mother died with a razor blade in her hand and his father turned into ghost and Stiles was orphaned in less than a day.)

By the time John Stilinski crawled back out of his grief, years had passed and Stiles had learned to raise himself, to cook and clean and wash, to iron uniforms and vacuum carpets, to do his homework with google as his only help and buy himself new clothes, fib off inquisitive teachers. He learned what happened when you poured bleach into the dark laundry, how to dismantle the fire alarm in the kitchen, where the stepladder was kept and how to chop onions without crying. He learned to forge signatures and the bus routes to the station, so he could make sure his dad ate and was okay. He learned how to tell a ripe tomato from a rotting one and how to clean out the vacuum and where the tools were kept in the basement for when his bike broke down again. He learned to smile and take his meds by himself, how to make it to school on time and how to convince everyone that he was okay with this. He was. Look at him, he’s smiling, of course he’s fine.

He never asked what made his father look up from the bottom of his glass a few years later, made him take a look around the dial back the alcohol. He was ten and pretty much an adult in all the ways that counted and while he still missed his father, he didn't really need him anymore. He was too old for bedtime stories and trips to the park and everything else he could do just fine by himself.

“By the time he got better, we were more like –“ roommates who occasionally met at the fridge – “partners. And then he got shot and I fucking lost it. He'd already checked out for years and years and now he was going to die on me? No fucking way.”

He cranes his head sideways to take in Peter, sitting on his chair, legs sprawled open, Cora snuffling between them, still asleep. Those blue eyes are burning a hole into his skull. He smiles. Peter smiles back, wryly, like he gets it, even though no-one ever really does. All of Stiles' friends think Stiles should be a lot angrier with his father than he is, these days. But the Bad Year was almost ten years ago and railing against his childhood isn't going to change anything, is it?

“I did some really dumb shit. And... look. Most kids at seventeen, they say they did dumb shit, it's just, you know, dumb shit. Like breaking into the school pool.”

That gets him a regretful chuckle. “But I've got an IQ of 145, grew up around law-enforcement and, according to my friends, have no sense of self preservation.”

*I've always been an angry child*, he told Lydia once, somewhere in the middle of it, voice dripping with sarcasm.

*You're a forest fire, Stiles*, she answered, dryly and sadly and absolutely honestly.

“When I say I did dumb shit I mean I almost fucked up badly enough to land myself in jail. And Alli pulled me back.”

“Returning the favor?”

He shrugs. “I guess. The tattoos were her idea. To remind us that we're not alone, she said. She was already eighteen, then, and I got my dad to sign off on it.”

The Sheriff had tried to argue, but Stiles just candidly informed him that he'd fake the signature if he couldn't get the real one. At that point, the man's shoulder had still been tender and Stiles had still been a wreck, a thing full of jagged edges.

God, he'd been so angry.

“And that's pretty much all there is to that one.” He already said far too much, anyway.

Peter hums, thoughtful and quiet, before theorizing, “The wings have something to do with that, don't they?”

Clever, clever man.

Behind his shades, Stiles closes his eyes, inhaling the smell of popsicles, chlorine, sunshine and baby. “Sometimes,” he responds, almost too quiet to be heard over the din of the pool, “the easiest way to get rid of your demons is to let them out the front door.”

“Or to turn them inside out on your skin?”

He lets his lips quirk into a smile. “Smart man.”

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# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Sorry, I know I promised to post this yesterday, but life got nasty and my mind was elsewhere.

Thank you for all your support and continued brilliance!

This chapter we have some fluff, more fluff, total cuteness and then a dive toward mildly angsty fluff.

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Cora's birthday.

It's a problem. For one, because Peter loathes children's birthday parties and has never understood the sense in having them for children too young to remember them. He spent Laura's first birthday getting drunk with some other poor distant relation who'd gotten dragged into the mess and didn't bother showing up to Derek's.

And now Cora.

A second reason to dread the date is because it's the first major event since the fire. Laura and Derek were born in winter, so they had their birthdays before it happened and Christmas is, thank god, still a ways off.

But Cora is going to have her first birthday in less than two weeks and her parents won't be there.

If he could, Peter would just ignore the entire thing. But that's the thing, isn't it? Talia and Paul aren't here, so if Peter doesn't do something for her birthday, then no-one will.

"Family meeting!" he hollers into the hallway and since he gets no reaction, he adds, "Now! There'll be soda!"

Thirty seconds later, he has two attentive children sitting around the kitchen table, each with a can of Sprite in front of them.

Peter sits, folds his hands on the tabletop and announces, "Cora's birthday."

Laura perks up. "Are we having a party?"

Oh, yes. Reason number three: The only interaction Peter has had with the parents of Cora's 'classmates' at the daycare is when they came up to him to complain about his scud missile in human form. Cora has no friends there and there's nothing sadder than a party no-one comes to. (And nothing more disastrous than a party where Peter has to make small talk with people he can't stand.)

Derek's nose scrunches up. "Do we have to?" he asks and Peter makes a mental note to buy him extra yarn on their next trip to see Stiles.

"What else do you suggest?" he coaxes.

"We need cake," Laura supplies. "And presents. Birthdays without presents are stupid."

"True." Shopping for the children is still easy. They have replaced a lot since the fire, but there is still more to buy. "What would we do?"

"Park?"

"We always go to the park. Pool!"

"Not again. Zoo?"

That seems to suit them both, so Peter thinks it over. "Trip to the zoo, picnic with cake, presents at home?"

They both nod. It is an excellent plan, especially since it involves feeding Cora her birthday cake outdoors, where they won't have to put down tarp and cover the walls.

"Just the four of us?"

Derek perks up, "Can we take Stiles?"

"And Allison?" Laura adds and, okay, this is new. Peter is aware that his niece has some major hero worship going on with Stiles' roommate, but so far, it's been a long distance phenomenon that mostly expressed itself in random comments like, "I want hair like Allison's," and "Stiles says Allison knows karate. Can I learn karate?"

(The answer to which is no, absolutely no, you'd take over the world before you turned twelve, leave me my delusions of control a little longer.)

"We can ask them," Peter decides, magnanimously. He's almost certain Stiles will actually jump on the chance to run around a zoo after hyperactive children in his spare time, but Allison might not be as deranged as her best friend.

"Anyone else?"

Laura shakes her head, content, but her brother shifts on his chair, uncertain.

"Nephew?"

“Can... ‘s Cora’s birthday, but... can Paige come?”

Oh. *Oh*. “How about you ask her? And get me her mother’s phone number, so I can call her?” Helen seemed like the kind of person Peter wouldn’t have to lobotomize himself to stand for more than five minutes. It’s worth a try.

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“Erica,” Stiles tries for the fifth time. “Erica, stop.”

She keeps pointing and gloating and generally being an asshole between huge, gasping guffaws.

“You’re going to go into labor if you don’t stop howling like a fucking hyena, damn it!”

“I knew it, I knew it, I was totally right and Stiles just saw the light!” She delivers the whole line in a sing-song and goddamnit, now she’s rhyming.

“Boyd, do something!” Stiles orders, but as ever, the taciturn giant is useless against the mother of his child. He just shrugs and rescues the mugs from the coffee table when it looks like Erica is about to topple over from laughter.

“I told you so!!!!”

“I hate you!”

She stops cackling long enough to pout at him. “Aww, you pwoor wawy.”

Seriously? “Fuck you, Eri. Fuck you.”

She wipes her eyes and straightens a little. “Hey, come on. It’s not often I get to say I got you do to something you didn’t want to. In fact, I think this might be the first time.”

“Drag,” Boyd supplies, back to thumbing through a magazine, pretending he doesn’t get a kick out of reminding Stiles that, at one point, he let Erica crossdress him and parade him all though Beacon Hills. There are pictures and yeah, Stiles has the legs for it, but damnit, no.

“Second,” she amends.

Time for a little revenge. “Actually,” he starts, draws it out just to be mean. “It wasn’t you that convinced me to find some help.” Drumroll. “It was Peter. I talked it through with him and he was logical and *didn’t hit me all the time*, and I decided to give it a try.”

He sniffs at the end of it, snooty as fuck. Because he can and Erica just spent five minutes howling, cackling and generally being a bitch in his direction and he couldn’t even hit her because she’s pregnant and about to pop.

Erica straightens, which is impressive, seeing as how Stiles isn’t sure how the hell she managed to bend over in the first place, what with that planet growing in her midsection.

Boyd puts down his magazine.

“Peter convinced you to hire someone for the store.”

Not a question, but, “Yes.”

“Peter. The guy you’ve known for a few weeks. Convinced you to do something we’ve been trying to get you to do for a year.”

Well. If she puts it like that...

“He didn’t hit me?”

“Weak, Stilinski, weak,” Boyd critiques at the same time as Erica asks, “When’s the wedding?”

“What?”

“When’s the wedding?”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding, geez, can you get any more middle school?”

But Erica is wearing Serious Face. “Stiles, Batman, you *listened to him*. You don’t listen to *anyone*.”

“I listen to you guys all the time.”

Boyd snorts. “Yeah. When we tell you what you want to hear.”

He may have a point there. A fairly good one.

“Damn you,” Stiles mutters, shooting the other man a look. Boyd blinks serenely back at him.

Erica smacks his thigh to get his attention. “So, are you two?”

Stiles rolls his eyes because, seriously, haven’t they done this often enough? “Are we what? Not having sex? Hate to break it to you, but I’m not having sex with about seven billion people at any given time.”

She rolls her eyes right back. “Relationship. Sex. Not the same thing.”

Coming from the girl who dragged Boyd into a supply closet within two weeks of meeting him. Once she got over her crippling shyness brought on by her epilepsy, Erica got kind of wild. And then she mostly outgrew her epilepsy and since then, it’s been a downward spiral of TMI and brain bleach for everyone.

“He has three kids to worry about. We’re friends. We talk. He had good arguments. Don’t make this more than it is, please?”

Because the last thing he needs is his friends getting pushy about something that just won't happen. Stiles is happy with his life and the people in it. No reason to stir up shit.

She hugs him. Then she swats him upside the head and tells him, "You're an idiot. Now show me those applications."

Which are the reason he braved her insanity in the first place. He pulls out a stack of them – beta read by Allison, who has an unreasonable fear of lawsuits – and the poster that goes with it.

"Think you could put that up in the parlor?"

Erica stopped working weeks ago, because apparently there are health concerns about a pregnant woman working in a tattoo parlor and her boss shoved her out the door and told her to enjoy the time off because he was playing it safe and she better send him pictures as soon as the kid pops out.

"If the chief lets me set foot inside, sure." She cocks her head, considers briefly. "Social experiment, how many people hanging out in tattoo parlors are also interested in craft?"

Both men raise their hands. Erica pats Boyd's hand. "The only reason you're tattooed is because I held you down and inked you, honey."

Stiles snorts because that excuse may have worked for the first few, but after tattoo number six or seven, no-one bought sexual blackmail anymore. Boyd is as much of a needle junkie as Stiles and Erica and the three of them have been slowly but surely converting Kira to their ways. The fox on her thigh is one of Erica's best pieces, to date.

"It might save me from having to sort out too many prejudiced assholes. Isaac put up something at the youth center, too."

"Get 'em young. I like the way you think."

"Way to make that sound dirty."

She gives him the finger and then winces, hands flying to her belly.

"Babe?" Boyd asks.

But she just grabs both their hands and pushes them against the side of her stomach, waiting. A moment later, Stiles feels it.

"Whoa! What's Peanut doing in there?"

"Somersaults, by the feel of it. Been going on all day." She makes a face. "At least this time it wasn't my kidneys."

They sit like that for a moment longer before Stiles reluctantly takes his hand away. He knows he's grinning stupidly, but that's amazing. There's a tiny terror growing inside his friend. How awesome is that?

“Found a name, yet?”

The two of them exchange weighted looks and Stiles raises both hands, palms out. “You don’t have to tell me.”

So far, they haven’t even told anyone the gender, yet. The kid’s Project Peanut and has been for months. At the rate they’re going, their circle of friends is still going to call them Peanut by the time they graduate high school.

“Tom, if it’s a boy,” Boyd supplies, like it’s not a big deal. And Erica adds, “Alicia for a girl.”

That... Stiles can’t really argue with that, can he? He never met Boyd’s little sister, the girl who disappeared one day and was never found, but he knows she’s still sorely missed, over a decade later.

“That’s perfect,” he says, instead of making a joke out of having a miniature Alli running around. He has years to make that joke.

Erica nods. Boyd smiles. “Yeah,” he echoes. “It is.”

The way he’s looking at his girlfriend tells Stiles that she’s the one who suggested the name. He takes it as his cue to leave.

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“Ducks or rockets?” is what greets him when he opens the front door at home.

“What?”

Allison shoots him a look before going back to staring fixedly at her laptop screen. “Ducks or rockets, what would Cora like better?”

“Rockets. Why are you buying stuff for Cora?”

“Check your messages.”

He does.

*We’re celebrating Cora’s first birthday Sunday after next, at the zoo. Would you like to accompany us? Your presence was requested.*

Only Peter could make a text invitation to a children’s birthday party sound formal.

Followed by *pleas come, pleas, pleas. Hugz, D&L.*

“You got invited, too?”

She grins at him. “Oh, yeah. No more hogging those kids. I’ve always wanted minions.”

Then she spins the screen around to face him, revealing that she’s looking at tiny little sweaters.

“Clothes?” he teases. “Really? Can’t think of anything better?”

She sticks her tongue out at him and he takes a sip of her wine in revenge. “Like you aren’t going to be totally predictable and crochet her something.”

A blanket was his first thought. A nice, snuggly one that she can drag around for a long time. And some more balls. Because he has never seen anything more adorable than Cora Hale in a basket of crochet balls.

He clicks through Allison’s selections with one hand while typing out a quick answer with the other. *Of course, when and where?*

“Rockets are definitely the coolest.” Especially considering Cora’s average travel speed.

“I thought so, gimme.” She grabs her laptop back and clicks the right button to order the sweater, along with three other items in her cart. When Stiles raises an eyebrow at that, she doesn’t even have the grace to blush. “How many things have you made for them by now?”

A few balls for Cora, a hat, the clips for Laura, the beanie for Derek, a penguin, a bunny, and a pair of superhero turtles. They have capes. Stiles almost couldn’t bear to part with them.

“Not that many,” he defends.

Her expression says she doesn’t buy it for a second. Damn her!

“Rocket sweater,” Alli reiterates. “And toys. Because I want to. Now shut up and start making baby gifts.”

She knows him so well.

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Laura falls asleep while aggressively using up every second to her bedtime. Derek gave up half an hour ago and, sleep-addled but awake, made his own way to bed.

Laura conks out on the sofa, watching TV while Peter tries to work next to her. He doesn’t notice she’s asleep until she snores and rolls over, almost falling onto the stack of files in his lap.

He puts down his work and hefts his niece instead, carrying her up the stairs and into her room. Briefly, he contemplates waking her so she can brush her teeth, but she looks exhausted, so he doesn’t.

Just undresses her to her t-shirt and panties and maneuvers her under the blankets. She twitches and grumbles but doesn’t really wake until he’s already halfway out the door after a kiss to her forehead and an unheard ‘sleep well’.

“Uncle Peter?” she mumbles.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“D’you think Allison c’n French braid?”

He honestly has no clue. “We can ask,” he tells her, taking a few steps back toward her bed.

“G’d. You suck at it.”

He does. His one and only attempt almost ended in tears. On both their parts.

Thinking she’s done sleep-talking, he turns to leave again, only to be called back yet again. “Uncle Peter?”

This time when he turns around, she’s sitting up in bed, eyes actually open, even if only a little. She squints at him like a cave dweller in daylight. He sits down next to her, careful not to squish Wedgie, the crooked-eared bunny. Or Tortilla, the Caped Turtle Terror. “Yes, sweetheart?”

She worries at a loose thread on her blanket. “Do you think Mom’s mad at me?”

His heart stops. It just stops and doesn’t feel like it will ever start again. “Of course not. Why do you think she might be?”

She drops her gaze, fiddles with the thread for a moment until it rips loose, then looks back up at him. “I didn’t like it when we moved here.”

There’s more to come, he can tell, so he says nothing, even though his heart still hasn’t resumed beating. He knows, though, he knows, because all three of them cried themselves to sleep for weeks in this house, back when the walls were still bare and their noses still clogged with the smell of ashes.

“But now... now it’s okay. I have friends at school and Derek and Cora and you and Stiles and weremaid training is fun and I can play soccer and my room is really pretty and you play with us a lot and...,” she heaves something that might be a sob if she were more awake, but here, half asleep, it’s just a shuddering breath, full of things ten-year-olds shouldn’t know. “Uncle Peter, I like it here.”

She sounds so guilty.

“Your mother,” he manages, somehow, after a long moment, without a beating heart or oxygen in his lungs, “could never be mad at you for being happy, no matter where you are. And your father would feel the same way. I’m glad you like it here with me and they would, too. And want to know a secret?”

She looks at him, wide-eyed and serious and he leans in to wrap his arms around her and whispers, “I like it here with you, too.”

She hugs him back with a little, wobbly giggle of relief and suddenly, he can breathe again and his heart is trying to beat out of his chest.

Five minutes later, she’s fast asleep again. So much so that he isn’t sure she’ll even remember this in the morning.



Peter's head is pounding with something a lesser man might call relief because, somehow, despite all the fucking up he's been doing, Laura, at least, seems to be okay. Seems to be alright with living here, with him. Being raised by him. He knows he's not her first choice in parent and that's the way it should be. Talia and Paul should always, always be her first choice, but knowing that this is okay, that *he* is okay as a third choice... Christ, what are those children doing to him?

*Your kids*, he directs toward Talia as he makes his way into the kitchen on weak knees to pour himself the largest scotch he can manage, silent and stupidly fond. *Your fucking kids*.

Then he snatches up his laptop, googles children's birthday cake recipes and gets really, really drunk.

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# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

I love you, you are wonderful, please keep keeping on.

Fair warning, expect no productivity from me until the end of the week.

Today's chapter is fluffies, fluffies and a side dish of fluffies and nothing else. For once.

“Mr. Hale?” Mary, his new secretary, asks timidly, head stuck through the cracked open door.

“Yes, Marcia?” She hides a frown at the wrong name but doesn’t say anything. It’s the third time he’s called her by the wrong M-name this morning alone and she still hasn’t done a thing about it. If that girl doesn’t grow a spine fast, she’s going to go the way of the dodo and Peter will need yet another new secretary.

He doesn’t want that. The last one already came with a ten minute lecture from Ennis attached to her. If this one flunks out, too, Ennis will never, ever stop lecturing.

“Your 2 o’clock is here, sir, er, Mr. Hale.”

Well. At least she’s getting the hang of the ‘sir’ thing. Now if only she would dare use his first name, that’d be splendid. Really, Kali said this one had spunk. And sure, Peter appreciates a little healthy terror in his subordinates, but they still need to function independently. Initiative is a good thing. And snarking back is always welcome.

“I don’t have a 2 o’clock.” Because he definitely checked his calendar earlier.

“You do now,” a new voice announces, followed shortly by an immaculately dressed redhead in terrifying heels, shouldering past Mary and dropping her purse on one of the visitor’s chairs before draping herself into the other one.

Ballsy. “It would appear so,” Peter admits, folding his hands on his desk, too intrigued by far.

Mary takes half a step forward, a full one back, stops right in the doorway. “Should I... call security?”

“Rather late for that, isn’t it?” Peter muses.

The redhead’s lips quirk to one side and he has a sudden, startling insight as to who has invaded him. Clever and beautiful, terrifying and wry.

“I... uhm,... I...coffee, then?”

“Quite, Maria. My usual, please. Miss Martin, what will it be?”

Lydia Martin inclines her head in something that might be acknowledgement and then turns to Mary. “A cappuccino, if you don’t mind. And, honey?”

“Yes?”

“I just walked all over you. Do you know why?”

Mary swallows and Peter can already see why Stiles adores this woman. “No?”

“Because you act like a doormat. Don’t act like a doormat. Now, coffee?”

For a moment, Mary stands there, completely paralyzed. Then she opens her mouth, probably to apologize. It snaps shut a second later.

“Coffee,” she says, voice surer than it has been all morning. “Coming in a minute.”

She closes the door behind her and Peter waits until she’s out of earshot before sighing, “Finally.”

Lydia turns to give him a sardonic eyebrow. “Interesting,” is her only comment.

“I try. How may I be of service, Miss Martin?”

Sharks smile the way Lydia does, but they don’t look half as pretty doing it. “Lydia, please. May I call you Peter?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then, Peter. Do you enjoy using Stiles as a babysitter?”

+

“So, Liam, I can call you Liam, right?”

The kid on the couch nods eagerly. He’s wearing jeans and a button-up shirt combined with ratty sneakers and Stiles can see where he made an attempt at brushing his hair and failed miserably. The boy reminds him of a younger Scott, before he started dating Allison and learned to work with what he has.

Liam is still in the awkward puppy stage of existence. Stiles wants to feed him and then give him a belly rub.

“Sure, Mr. uhm... Stil-“

Stiles spares him that agony. “Call me Stiles, dude. Everyone does. Tell me something about yourself?”

Yes, he’s being a bit of an asshole right now. But he still remembers half a dozen college job interviews and he needs to pay it forward, at least a little. He *hated* those interviews, mostly

because he always had to hide his tattoos and try not to let his mouth run off and it was awful because the interviewers were always, always judging him.

“I’m nineteen?” Liam starts and it’s way too much of a question.

“Unsure about how old you are?”

“No, I mean, I’m nineteen. I’m a freshman at college and I need a part time job.”

“Why here?”

He bites his lips before answering, “My dad’s a doctor and he knits. Says it keeps his fingers dexterous, or something. He taught me a few years ago. It’s... calming.”

Can’t lie worth shit. Make note of that.

“And why did you need calming down?”

The kid flushes scarlet. “Do I have to tell you that?”

Nice try. “Do you want the job?”

+

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you enjoy using my friend as a babysitter?” Lydia reiterates, exaggerating every syllable.

“I wasn’t aware that I was using Stiles.” Except as kidnap and the occasional treat to dangle over the children’s heads, but no-one needs to know that.

“Oh, so you don’t dump your kids on him because he’s cheaper than actually paying someone for it?” She’s leaning forward, her cleavage an invitation and her expression a declaration of war, intentionally provocative in all possible ways.

Peter, though, Peter has been playing this game since she was in diapers. (God, he’s old.) “I asked a friend for help. Once. I don’t believe that’s any of your business.”

Lydia harrumphs in a way that makes it very clear what she thinks about that. Her rejoinder is stopped by Mary entering with a small tray, placing two mugs on the desk between them.

“Is that all, Mr. Hale?”

“That’s all, thank you, Mary.” Peter does like to reward good behavior in his minions.

Mary beams and leaves.

“So you didn’t make Stiles hire someone for the store so you could dump your children on him?”

The accusation is so ridiculous, Peter actually needs to bite back a laugh. “My dear, are you trying to play games with a lawyer?”

“Are you trying to dodge my questions?” she parries, without hesitation.

+

“I... used to get angry. Like, super angry.” The kid glares at Stiles mulishly for a moment before adding, “It’s a disorder.”

Stiles nods. “Is it still a problem?” Because he can’t have employees accosting customers, even if he sometimes daydreams about it.

Vigorous headshake. “Like I said, my dad taught me to knit and it calms me down. I haven’t gotten really angry in a year.”

“Good. Any experiences working in a store?”

“I did some waiting at a diner during high school.”

“So you know the dos and don’t of dealing with customers. Good. Your application says the only craft you’ve got experience in is knitting. How good are you at that?”

Liam’s relaxes at the question, either because they’re leaving a minefield, or because knitting really is a lifeline, like he claims. But his shoulders sag and his jaw unclenches and then he’s diving into the bag at his feet and pulling out all kinds of fuzzy things and Stiles likes the kid, he does.

He brought samples!

You can’t hate on people who bring you knit goods!

+

“So far,” Peter counters, “I have not heard a serious one.”

Lydia purses her lips, takes a sip of her coffee, which has to be scalding. She doesn’t even blink. “Did you make Stiles hire someone for the store?”

He snorts. “While I find it flattering that you think I have that much power, I’m pretty sure no-one makes Stiles do anything. So no, I did not. I merely provided a sounding board. He came to the conclusion himself.”

For a beat or two, he considers the option of throwing Lydia out. She has no right to stick her nose where it doesn’t belong. On the other hand, he feels strangely buoyed by the fact that Stiles’ friends obviously consider him important enough to give him a shovel speech. Delivered in such a deadly package, too.

(He’s not afraid that they’ll take Stiles away from him. That would be childish.)

For the first time, Lydia looks something other than chillingly composed and mildly disapproving. “Good. At least you’re not a complete idiot. Now back to the other part of that question. Are you using Stiles for his Pied Piper skills?”

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“Oh, look at those cables. I never quite got the hang of them. Mine always end up holey.”

Liam beams. “Mine did, too, but I figured out that there’s a trick to it. I can show you if you want?”

Absently nodding, Stiles digs through the rest of the pile. There’s some decent patterns and color work, solid stitches. “Are you willing to learn other crafts? It’s hard to help out a customer when you have no idea what you’re doing.”

Another one of those bright puppy grins. “Totally! I mean, my ex-girlfriend was super into scrapbooking, so I can probably fake it when it comes to paper craft, but, like, crochet or sewing or something, I’d love to learn.”

Stiles considers the boy. And yeah, it’s weird calling someone less than a decade younger than him ‘boy’, but Liam reminds him way too much of Scotty for him to think of the guy as a grown man. He’s all puppy.

“Let’s talk hours,” he finally says, handing the sweater back, already contemplating what samples he can have Liam make. His cables really are a thing of beauty.

+

“Even if I were, do you really think it’s any of your business?” Peter demands, just out of idle curiosity as to how she’ll react to the blatant dismissal.

“If it’s going to hurt Stiles, yes.” She doesn’t even hesitate.

“So you think he needs protecting.” It’s possible he’s enjoying this verbal spar more than he should.

“No. But I think he deserves it.” Excellent counter argument and really, there is something beautiful about the fierce devotion these people show each other. They’re like a pack of feral animals from what Peter has observed so far. He understands, he thinks, why Stiles has all of them inked onto his skin. They’re worth keeping.

For that and that alone, he decides to be truthful. “The children adore Stiles and he adores them. When he chooses to spend time with them, it’s of his own free will. That said, I appreciate your position, but I don’t see how me being friends with him warrants an intervention. And while on the subject of Stiles, is he aware that you still love him?”

Lydia’s head tilts slightly. She smiles. “Mhm. Of course he is. I would kill for him and he would hide bodies for me. Now, I can’t decide if you’re being willfully obtuse or just stupid.”

Her easy admission of devotion is... startling. Unusual. Peter, well, Peter thinks he admires her, for her bravery.

Still, "What's that supposed to mean?"

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"The goal," Stiles explains, pointing at his shiny spreadsheet, "is for you to work 20 hours a week, either with me during the crunch hours, or alone in the mornings or evenings. Extra shifts optional. If it goes well, we might up your hours permanently."

"Could we work this around my classes?"

"Sure. If you get the job, you give me your schedule and we find something that works."

If. Ha. Mentally, Stiles has already hired the puppy. All that's left to do is stress test the kid and then see if he holds up in the long run. But he likes Liam. And he likes that the kid has a parental connection to crafting. Likes that he's eager.

"Are you busy the rest of the afternoon?"

A headshake. "Nope. Why?"

"Work trial. Impress me and I can cancel the other interviews."

Not that there are any scheduled, yet. He got ten applications in the first week, filed eight in the trash and only kept number nine in case Liam turned out to be a total turd. He isn't, so he can probably lose Matt Daehler, arts major. Who puts *capturing beauty* as a hobby?

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Lydia shakes her head, carelessly dismissive. It's grating. "Nothing at all. Are you busy Friday night?"

Peter hikes an eyebrow up to his hairline. "No."

"You are now. It's Pizza Night for the entire gang, and you're coming. Allison and Stiles are hosting, get their address and be there by eight."

It's already Wednesday. "I don't know if I'll be able to find a sitter on such short notice."

She gives him an incredulous look. "You're bringing the children," Lydia informs him, as if it's understood that the invitation includes the kids and he's a moron for thinking otherwise.

Peter... Peter really has nothing to say to that.

"We'll be there," is what he finally settles on. Because he's not sure Lydia Martin is entirely real. Or going to accept any answer but the one she wants

She stands, retrieves her purse from the spare chair and nods regally. "I know."

With that, she blows back out of his office, only to stop in the doorway and look back. “By the way, Stiles has his first interview today. If you want to help stress test the applicant, showing up at the store in the next hour or so would be a good idea.”

And she’s gone.

Well, Peter decides as he finishes his coffee and starts sorting out which files to take home, he needs to get Stiles’ home address off him anyway.

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Liam is friendly, open and even though he gets flustered when he doesn’t know something, he does it in a way that leaves the customers absolutely incapable of being mad at him.

It’s like setting a puppy loose in a park and watching everyone melt. He gets the hang of the register relatively quickly and he’s eager.

Let’s face it, he’s practically hired, Stiles thinks as he watches his new employee refill the yarn cubicles.

It’s all going fine until the doorbell chimes and three bullets come shooting through. The first beelines for the basket of yarn projects by the couch, immediately ripping into it curious as ever. The second almost bounces off of Liam and starts interrogating before he’s finishes windmilling. And the third hits Stiles’ legs with the usual force and happily babbles, “Sta, sta, sta,” up at him.

He picks Cora up, presses a wet smooch to her cheek and asks, “Did you just say my name, tiny torpedo?”

“Sta, sta, sta!”

“Stiles. Say it, Stiles.”

“Sta, pfffffffffffffffffffffffffghah!”

“Close enough. Hi, Peter.” Peter, in his usual after-work getup, smirks. “You should feel honored. So far, her only other words have been ‘no’ and ‘deedee’.”

“Derek?”

“It seems likely,” the older man agrees and tries to take Cora back. Stiles hisses at him and turns toward where Laura is chattering Liam’s ear off. Where does he come from, does he work here, how old is he, does he do craft, does he like werewolves, what does he think about mermaids, this is her favorite shirt, does he like the Peanuts, the Peanuts are awesome, isn’t Stiles cool, she’s getting a bumblebee for her hair soon.

“Yo, kiddo,” Stiles hollers. “Breathe.”

She stops. Takes an exaggerated gasp. Keeps talking. Liam, eyes as wide as saucers, looks to Stiles for help. Stiles smirks and goes to stop Derek from pulling apart a half-assembled



amigurumi just to see what's inside. Peter follows and before the boy can get sad faced over not getting to dig into the basket, he redirects him. "See that man over there?"

Derek nods.

"Annoy him."

For a moment, Derek looks skeptic. Then he checks with Stiles, who just shrugs and puts Cora down so she can follow after. Which leaves the two adults alone.

"Who put you up to this?" he asks, suspiciously. Because he didn't tell Peter he was interviewing today. And Laura's been acting suspicious since she barreled in. Usually, she greets Stiles before she sets off exploring and she's never *that* open with complete strangers.

Well, fuck. Stiles knows these children's habits. When did that happen?

Before he can spiral into total panic, Peter sends him on a tailspin in an entirely different direction. "Miss Martin paid me a visit today."

"Oh my god." His voice squeaks. He's not proud of it, but Lydia. Lydia visiting Peter. Lydia and Peter in the same room. Oh sweet merciful baby Jesus.

Peter cackles and pats Stiles' shoulder as patronizingly as he possibly can. Dick. "It was actually rather entertaining. I can see why you adore her so. She's fiendishly clever."

Stiles breathes for a while. Then he hikes up one eyebrow and asks, "Did you know your vocabulary gets really snooty when you're uncomfortable?"

Peter sniffs derisively. "I have also been invited to Pizza Night. I was told you would provide me with an address."

Uh-oh. "Seriously? She did that?"

Peter frowns. "You don't want me there?"

Idiot. "No! I mean, yes. That's not it. You four are super welcome. But all my friends are going to be there."

When Peter doesn't look like he gets it, Stiles adds. "You know, the friends you once referred to as my family? The ones who all also happen to be assholes?"

"Oh."

Yeah, oh. Lydia basically just invited Peter to meet the family and Stiles hates her a little because if they're only friends then that's completely okay and if Stiles is not okay that being okay (what?) that means he has to admit that he's crushing on Peter and he hates, hates, hates that Lydia can outsmart him. Every damn time.

That glorious, cruel goddess.

“If you think it’s a bad idea...”

Across the store, Cora is airplane-ing around Liam’s legs while he answers Laura’s questions and coaches Derek on how to fill the little cubbies at the same time. He’s sweating and stuttering, but he’s not running away screaming.

Stiles decides to take pity. “Cora, Rocketgirl, want to see something cool?”

He grabs a crochet ball from a nearby shelf and wiggles it for her to see. She comes racing over like a shot and Stiles flings it a few feet, watches her take a sharp turn by the quilting fabrics and go after it.

“Oh god,” Peter mutters in an undertone. “She actually does fetch.”

A moment later, his niece pops back up with the ball. Stiles smirks with glee. “Oh, yes.”

Then he heads behind the register to find a piece of paper and scribble his address on it, passing it on to Peter. “Eight sharp. Lydia times that kind of shit.”

Peter smiles, nods and tucks the note away.

They both turn to watch Liam reorder everything Derek shelves wrong. Laura is working tirelessly to re-fuck everything he un-fucks and Derek is obviously ‘helping’, his tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration.

Peter takes a picture, then ponders, “Are you keeping him, then?”

Stiles contemplates briefly, then nods. “Yeah, I think I am.”

He’ll even call off the terrors. In a minute. Or two.

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# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this took so long, but it's a bit of a whammy and I needed to sleep on it. Several times. I hope it's not as all over the place as I think it is?

Please tell me if it doesn't work for you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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Peter's first impression of Stiles' and Allison's apartment is that it is small. Laura and Derek have already barreled past him and are accosting Stiles in the kitchen. He laughs, makes them go to take their shoes off and grins at Peter in passing.

Peter grins back, helplessly, and gets out of the way so the curly-haired man next to him can close the door.

"Hi," the cherub says once the door is closed and Cora unleashed upon the populace. "I'm Isaac."

"Peter. Nice to meet you." They shake hands and Peter goes back to studying the apartment. It's pretty open plan, living room, dining room and kitchen in one, with a small hallways leading off to one side. Not small at all. That impression comes for the eight adults already crammed into it and Peter is surprised to realize he has either met, or can identify, all of them.

Stiles and his family seem to be a creeping kind of disease.

The big, quiet man from their first visit to *Yarnsome* is sitting on the couch, serenely knitting what looks like a baby blanket, calm at the center of the storm that is the rest of the room. Was his name Boyd?

Lydia is perched next to him, avidly chatting with a dark-haired couple who can't leave their hands off each other. Scott and Kira. Scott gestures grandly and Kira ducks, almost falling out of his lap, an impossibly soft expression on her face. They remind Peter of bunnies, sweet and fluffy and utterly helpless.

Behind them, a very, very pregnant woman (or a well-disguised whale) is slowly shuffling up and down the length of the room, hands at the small of her back. Erica. Boyd's girlfriend.

Isaac has abandoned Peter to fiddle with the stereo system set up a few feet away. Smooth jazz rolls out of the speakers for a mere instant before Erica marches over to him and smacks him into changing the CD.

Allison is in the kitchen, occupied with the children, who are both babbling at once, while Stiles has caught Cora and is making his way over to grab Peter by the wrist and drag him forward. Everyone else is still summarily ignoring the newcomers, only throwing covert looks. It's possible they're trying to be... patient? Kind?

"Listen up, losers," Stiles hollers and for the first time, most of the room looks at the Hales straight on, conversation stopping dead. Peter has a sudden vision of Stiles schooling these people into how not to mob the newcomers, slideshow included.

Kira breathes something high-pitched that sounds a lot like, "Babies!"

"This is Peter and his spawn, smallest to coolest, Humpty, Dumpty and Dori."

The children screech in outrage. Laura elbows Derek into silence and announces, "I'm Laura. That's Der-bear and Cora."

"Don't call me that!"

"Der-bear, Der-bear, Der-bear."

"Babies," Kira repeats, utterly helpless. Her eyes are comically wide. Scott makes a crooning sound.

"Peter and Band, you know Boyd and Alli, and Lyds, because she's a nosy-nosy. The pregnant chick is Erica, her current victim is Isaac, these are Scott and Kira." Stiles rolls his eyes at all of them and adds, "You may talk among yourselves, but no inquisition until after dinner. Orders?"

The entire room erupts into a chorus of, "Usual!"

Stiles nods, like he expected nothing else and turns to Peter, questioning expression on his face. "Pepperoni," he answers.

Passing over Cora, Stiles heads for the phone. Kira, meanwhile, is beckoning the children closer with questions about their ages and Laura's 'funky' shoes.

Peter chances a quick look and yes, there's a pair of eye-searingly purple Converse by the door. Next to his fiancé, Scott is asking if Derek wants to see some puppy pictures.

"We have a litter at work right now. They're adorable."

Derek looks skeptic. "Where do you work?" he whisper-asks. The boy is utterly convinced that 'work' is adult code for 'super boring', unlike normal children, who are fascinated by the unknown world of grown-ups. Puppies and boring cannot possibly coincide, therefore Scott must be hinky.

Paranoid little bastard. Peter approves.

"Hasn't Stiles told you? I'm a vet!"

Cue saucer-wide eyes and a dropped jaw. It's possible that Scott just threw the child's entire worldview into upheaval. "Really?" Derek breathes reverently, "Cool."

"So, pics?"

A vigorous nod.

Lydia materializes next to Peter. "They are pretty cute," she informs him without a greeting, like she's conceding a point.

Peter raises an eyebrow at her.

"At least you're punctual," she sniffs.

"I try." He told the children to be ready an hour before the agreed on time and they still barely made it. He puts Cora down and subtly aims her at the redhead, just to see what she'll do. His niece collides with her bare shins and then stops, gripping pale thighs, staring upwards. Straight under that criminally short skirt. At his office, Lydia was dressed for modern warfare. In her spare time, she appears to prefer the wardrobe of a highschool prom queen, all flowery and provocative.

Peter stares at her. She stares back. Cora is babbling at Lydia's kneecaps.

Stiles is the one to interrupt the Mexican stand-off by grabbing the toddler and hauling her back onto his hip, announcing, "We've got an hour until there's grub. Uno?"

In order to avoid small talk, Peter agrees.

+

It takes a while to drag Derek away from Scott and then they have to wait for Allison to finish doing Laura's hair (She asked. She was answered.) before they can all sit around the coffee table. The only ones sitting on furniture are Erica and Lydia. They are discussing bridesmaid dresses from a magazine perched on Erica's unborn child. The rest sprawl artlessly on the floor, cards in hand and hopelessly tangled into each other.

Isaac hauls Derek into his lap after a brief, intense exchange of eyebrow signals between the two and Laura sits between Kira and Allison (who isn't playing but has a running commentary going), alternately leaning into either. Cora has decided that orbiting Stiles is her new hobby for the evening, keeps going circles around him, babbling, "Sta, sta, sta," with the occasional, "No" and "Deedee LaLa," thrown in. Peter has Tele Tubbies flashbacks.

He is also very determinedly not jealous of his eleven-month-old niece.

Or wondering where his timid nephew and stand-offish nieces have disappeared to. Either the orange juice they're both guzzling is drugged, or Stiles' special brand of... something has rubbed off onto his friends through prolonged exposure.

(Or maybe the children just react in kind to these people, who are treating them absolutely openly and without a hint of shyness or awkwardness. Not even their teachers manage that,

too taken with the poor orphan babies to treat them as anything less than fragile.)

Stiles nudges him with an elbow and he startles, puts down a 2+ card and sticks his tongue out at Laura, who snarls back and smacks another one on top, much to Kira's dismay. The girl almost climbs into the woman's lap with sudden, sincere apologies.

"This is surreal," Peter whispers, momentarily managing to trap Cora and wedge her against his side, keeping her still with his free hand. She starts gnawing at his kneecap in retaliation.

"What is?" Stiles asks, absentmindedly sneaking a look at Boyd's cards. The tall man isn't even trying to hide them. When he notices Peter's expression, he shrugs.

"Stiles cheats anyway."

"Hey! I don't cheat! I play creatively!"

"In other words," Lydia clarifies, smacking him upside the head with the magazine, "You cheat." She turns her pointed expression on Peter. "Do you cheat?"

Peter grins, flips his wrist over and down, pulls a ninth card out of his sleeve and tucks it into his hand, all without taking his eyes off her.

Erica cocks her head. "Okay," she decides after a beat. "That was hot." She turns to her boyfriend. "Babe, learn to cheat."

Stiles cackles as Scott complains, "Come on, guys! It's bad enough Stiles and Alli cheat like pirates. Can't the rest of you play like adults?"

"Pirates," Derek whispers.

"Grrr-Argh," Isaac agrees.

"I'm imagining Peter in a pirate costume right now," Allison announces, studying him like he's meat at the butcher's. He has no idea why he ever thought she was a Disney princess.

She's more Ursula than Ariel, that one.

(Peter's inner monologue is speaking pre-pubescent now. Great.)

Kira hums thoughtfully.

Peter clamps his ears over Cora's ears and announces, "I feel objectified."

"So sue us," Lydia challenges.

"You're a lawyer?" Boyd.

"Yes."

"Are you any good?"

“Yes.”

“Modest, too.”

“It’s the truth. Saying something different would be lying. Lying is bad.”

Boyd raises one eyebrow, raises the other, then turns to look at Lydia, seated above and to one side of him. “You’re right,” he tells her, not bothering to keep his voice down. “There are two of them now.”

“Two what?” Laura demands. Derek nods agreement as he leans over and plucks a black card from her hand. Kira, who he is reaching around, bites her lips to keep in a laugh.

Lydia turns to look at the girl, then at Peter, at Stiles, at Boyd. Then she apparently decides to just go for it, because the next thing out of her mouth is, “Morally confused crap talkers with too big egos.”

Stiles groans.

Cora claps her hands and chants, “Cwap, cwap, cwap!”

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Peter wins two hands of Uno due to gratuitous cheating. Stiles wins another two and then Erica gets Boyd to lower her carefully to the ground and proceeds to wipe the floor with all of them.

By the time the pizza finally arrives, everyone is glad the bloodbath is over.

Peter expects there to be some kind of organization for dinner, but all that happens is that Allison and Isaac bring out glasses, various drink, napkins and a huge bowl of salad to place on the coffee table. Stiles stacks the pizza boxes next to it and everyone takes what they want and eat where they want.

Somehow, these people have not yet figured out how to adult. Peter hasn’t had dinner on the floor since college. The kids, predictably, love it, and schmooze the entire time, wrapping everyone around their little fingers.

He watches, eats, and expects the inquisition to start – despite Stiles’ orders to save it for later – but it never does. Oh, he gets watched, and there are a lot of curious questions, but no-one digs, no-one gets mean.

When he mentions it to Boyd, the man just chuckles. “You’re here. That means you’re okay.” He points toward where Derek is speculatively eyeing Erica’s belly. “And the kids are a good distraction.”

True. “Stiles implied shovel speeches.”

Boyd studies him for a long moment. “You need one? Stiles says you’re just friends.”

... Somehow, Peter thought Boyd would be the harmless one. Rookie mistake.

He opens his mouth, tries to formulate the usual denials and just comes up empty because, well. Fuck it.

The younger man nods, wisely. “Don’t fuck up,” he says, still in that deep, even tone of voice. No threat. Just a warning.

Peter studies the tableau in front of him, the liveliness of his children, the smiles on the adults’ faces, the way Stiles chases a cheese string with his tongue and fingers.

“I know better,” he admits. And means it. It’s not even a revelation at this point. Just. Yes. To all of it.

Yes.

+

By ten, the kids conk out in Stiles’ bed. At midnight, Boyd carries Laura to the car, followed by Kira leading a sleep-addled Derek and Stiles lugging a drooling Cora.

Boyd buckles the children in silently, Kira kisses them all on the forehead and then the two head back inside, leaving Stiles and Peter alone.

“So,” Stiles says, suddenly awkward, a smile on his face. “That wasn’t so bad, right?”

“Your friends are menaces to society,” Peter summarizes the whirlwind evening.

A snort. “Yeah. So. Kira is totally going to call you tomorrow to ask if Laura and Derek can be flower girl and ring bearer in the wedding. Both her side of the family and Scott’s are a little short on kids, and she’s head over heels in love with yours.” He bends down a little, look in the car window. “Not that that’s hard. Your kids are magic, Peter. You should be proud.”

“Or use them as distractions for bank heists,” Peter counters, because too many emotions are bad for his digestion.

Stiles’ grin gets wider. “You didn’t correct me,” he says.

When Peter just frowns, he adds, “When I called them yours. Congrats, it’s triplets.” And because he knows Peter well enough by now, he immediately waltzes over that realization and adds, “And Lyds and Alli want to kidnap Laura for a girl’s day. Something about feminine influences? I’m sure Laura is going to have a blast setting them straight about super heroes, torn jeans and the importance of climbing trees.”

Grateful for the distraction (his, his, they are his), Peter nods and waggles his phone. “This has acquired quite a few numbers tonight. I should have expected your friends to be as open as you.”



As welcoming. As kind. As genuinely interested in other people. Just being in that room with those people made Peter feel like a bad person because he does not give a fraction of the fucks every single one of those men and women give to seemingly everyone they meet.

But Stiles shakes his head. “Nah, man. We’re not really all that nice. It’s just that once someone’s adopted, they never get away. Kira got the same treatment when she started dating Scott. At some point, her mother likened us to a cult. Erica had t-shirts made for everyone.”

Well, that explains the cheap white t-shirt reading ‘Cult of Awesome, We Have Cookies’ he wore last week. There was a rainbow farting unicorn on the back.

There is a beat of silence between them, laughter from an open window above.

“Why did you and Lydia break up?” Peter blurts abruptly, and curses himself immediately after. But he has been wondering since she showed up at his office, perfectly dressed for war and professing her love for a man she broke up with years ago, without regret or shame. And Stiles declares her a queen among women at least once a week within Peter’s earshot. So why?

Stiles ducks down again, takes another gander at the children. Derek has checked out again, drooling into his sister’s shoulder. Cora is sucking her thumb. He sticks his hands in his pockets, wiggles them, winces up at Peter from below long lashes.

“I’m sorry,” Peter backtracks, “I shouldn’t have-“

At the same time, Stiles answers, “Because of the sex.”

They both stop. Peter frowns. “The sex?”

“Yep. The sex. All the sex. The sex that Lydia loves and adores and likes to have a lot – sorry, overshare, but you asked – and the sex that I don’t love, don’t adore and do not have. Ever. She tried, I tried, we experimented all scientifically and shit, because she started the ‘how do you know if you’ve never tried line’ and I have always been a sucker for her schemes, but that was possibly the worst night of my life, except not really, but, you know, and I hated it and her and myself for a while after it, so yeah. I love her and she loves me, but Lydia needs sex in a relationship and I don’t. And while we’re at it, the answer to ‘how do you know you don’t like it’ is ‘well, have you ever fucked a sheep’ to which you say ‘no’ and I say ‘then how do you know it’s not for you’ and that’s that. Can you tell I’ve had this conversation a lot?”

He stops, takes a huge gasping breath and refuses to meet Peter’s gaze for the next thirty seconds. Peter didn’t know Stiles was capable of embarrassment.

“You’re asexual,” he finally sums up, deciding to ignore the intensely personal revelations and focus on what matters, here, now.

At least it gets Stiles to look at him again, wide-eyed and visibly surprised. Peter scoffs. “I did go to college, too, you know? In this century.”

Stiles gapes. It's an unfairly attractive look on him, but now that he knows – Peter blinks the split-second idea away. A small part of him is whining in despair because he wants, he wants, he wants, but Peter has never been one of those men who confuse sex with closeness.

Relationships, for him, have always been about people, not sex. The ones that were about sex weren't really relationships. Just mutual release.

So what matters is, “So, just asexual, or aromantic, too?”

His heart is not in his throat, his hands are not sweaty and he is not hanging onto Stiles' lips like the answer will decide the fate of the known world. Peter is a successful lawyer in his thirties, has a house, a car and three children. He's not in highschool and this is not a crush.

Stiles' mouth snaps shut with an audible click. “Just ace. I... just ace.”

And because Peter is not a helpless, fumbling teenagers, the shudder running down his spine is not relief. “Fantastic,” he comments and his voice is rock steady. “Then I should probably make use to your friends' multiple offers to babysit and ask you out for dinner, shouldn't I?” he drawls, all smooth and slick and not a tremor in sight, even though his heart is beating out of his chest like he's sixteen and risking his first post-game fumble in the shower all over again.

For a moment, it looks like Stiles is going to start questioning him. Does he know what he's getting into? Is he sure? He can see the demands piling up on his tongue, but in the end, he swallows them down and does Peter the same courtesy Peter has done him: he doesn't doubt that Peter knows himself.

“That, uhm.” He scratches his head, ducks his gaze away, then squares his shoulders and deflects like a pro. “Are you sure you want to leave your kids with those maniacs?”

“Lydia seems like she has a good head on her shoulders.” One out of eight isn't too bad, is it, Peter wonders, forcing his hands to unclench at his sides.

Chuckles. “Yeah. She's pretty good at faking that.”

“But, yes, I am sure I trust your friends with my children, Stiles.” If only because they are Stiles' friends and who is he kidding, Peter is so far gone, he's pretty much halfway to the moon. “So?”

“Yes? I mean, yeah, I mean, yes, Peter, I would like to go on a date with you.” He blushes beautifully.

And because his image is already ruined, Peter lets a ridiculous grin spilt his face. “Fantastic.”

+

And now that we're all here, let's take a moment to appreciate the word count, mkay?  
50goddamnK. What am I even doing anymore?

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

Warning: May contain traces of typos. But I've been fiddling with it way too long already.

People. Guys. Folks. My lovies. I will never be over the support you're still giving me for this story. Thank you.

And a quick disclaimer: Updates are going to be slower from here on out. And by slower I mean more sane-people-ish with an update every eight to fourteen days instead of two a week. No worries, though, the rest is all plotted out (We're looking at 26 chapters at the moment) and abandoning the story isn't even on the table.

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After that night, all Peter wants is to drag Stiles away from everything and sweep him off his feet. Unfortunately, reality with children looks slightly different. As such, Cora's birthday needs to come first.

Another consequence of that evening, aside from Peter's return to teenage idiocy, is that the children have decided the extended Stilinski clan are now their friends. And they need to come to Cora's party. The slightly hunted looks on their faces as they announce that convinces Peter to give in because. Because.

Because the last time they went to the zoo, they came home to find their loved ones dead and the easiest way to stop that from happening again is to keep everyone they even remotely care about close. So Paige and Helen are invited, along with Stiles' friends and it's enough.

Enough to keep Laura's shoulders squared as she carries Cora's diaper bag, enough to keep Derek talking through the drive.

It's enough for them and sometimes, Peter cannot get over how fucking *brave* those children are.

He explained the situation to Stiles the day after *that night* and Stiles, in turn, packed up everyone and dragged them along on the day of. Not that they resisted. At all. Apparently, these people think spending their Saturday afternoon at a toddler's birthday party is the best possible way to waste a weekend. Even Erica is there; though she doesn't stop complaining about her ankles, the heat, and Boyd's damn sperm for more than two minutes at a time.

Kira brought a camera and keeps snapping candid shots of everything, Isaac and Scott only make marginally less of a mess than Cora while eating cake and Lydia and Boyd provide a

deadpan commentary from the peanut gallery that has Helen in stitches. Derek and Paige hold hands by the time they reach the tigers and Stiles won't stop cooing.

At the end of the day, the children are cured of any nascent phobias concerning zoos and Peter congratulates himself on a job well done.

Then he moves on to more important matters: How to woo the hell out of Stiles.

+

Scott and Kira volunteer as baby sitters. Peter tries to talk sense into them, but they insist. Scott offers to let them look at the puppies within the children's earshot and after that, there's not withdrawing the offer anyway.

Peter resigns himself to getting a dog soon and then sets about plotting the perfect date, which happens on a Sunday.

He drops the children off at the McCall/Yukimura household, leaves a laundry list of instructions, a ton of toys and three car seats, has a little heart attack and then picks Stiles up only fifteen minutes after their agreed upon eleven am.

Allison opens the door, levels a spoon full of cereal at him threateningly and tells him to have Stiles back by midnight.

"He turns into a pumpkin then and no-one wants to see that." Then she aggressively chews her cereal and adds, "And if you hurt him, I will shoot you."

"Alli!" Stiles chides, squeezing past her while bussing her cheek and then beaming up at Peter. "Hi!"

Peter grins helplessly back. "Hi."

Allison retches and slams the door shut, catching Stiles on the ass. He yelps. Doesn't stop smiling.

There is a moment where they just stare at each other, neither doing anything. Then, abruptly, Stiles' expression changes to a visible 'fuck it' and he leans up for a brief kiss, all nice and chaste.

Peter chases those lips, gets in his own kiss and then remembers that he's a grown man and not a twelve-year-old. He gallantly offers Stiles his arm and asks, "Shall we?"

"We shall," is the answer. "Where shall we?"

"Surprise."

"Oh, I love surprises. What is it?"

Peter raises an eyebrow. *Really?*

An unapologetic shrug. “It was worth a try. How are the minions?”

“They were fine when I last saw them. I gave Scott permission to sedate them when they get too much.”

“Peter!”

“What? He’s a vet. He knows what he’s doing, I presume.”

Stiles snorfles gracelessly and lets himself be folded into the passenger seat of Peter’s car and driven for almost an hour of easy banter, endless jokes and wonderful, delightful flirting.

By the time they pull up to the highly recommended diner Peter found them online, he’s so distracted from being curious, that he doesn’t even notice they’ve stopped at first. Once he does, he frowns.

“Is this the surprise?”

Because no matter how good the food, a roadside diner isn’t exactly a date surprise. Peter parks and shakes his head. “This is the pit stop we make so you don’t stoop to gnawing on me.”

The younger man pouts. “What if I want gnaw on you?”

Mind. Gutter. With a Herculean effort, Peter hauls it back out. “Do you?”

Stiles seems to honestly weigh the thought for a moment before dropping his crossed arms. “Nope.”

“Then don’t,” Peter returns and that’s that. If this goes anywhere (please god, please), then they’ll no doubt need to have a conversation about dos, don’ts and general boundaries at some point, but technically, this is their first date. The question of whether or not Stiles minds if Peter jerks off in the same bed as him can be answered later.

(But not too much later.)

They get a window seat and order quickly before turning back to each other.

For the first time since they met, awkward silence descends between them, until Stiles, abruptly turning into a wide-eyed twink, demands in too flirtatious a voice, “So tell me about yourself, Peter. What do you do?”

Peter stretches his legs between Stiles’ and answers, “I’m a lawyer. A fairly successful one, actually.” He cranks up the smarmy asshole routine just because he knows Stiles will get a kick out of it.

A slow blink, big eyes. “Wow. So you must be rich, right?”

“I do alright.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“My nieces and nephew live with me.”

“Oh, how nice of you to take them in! That must be really hard!” He bats his lashes at Peter and Peter almost loses it right then and there.

“Very,” he manages. “They’re dreadful monsters, all three of them. I’m considering sending them to boarding school and hiring a nanny for the youngest one. I’m quite busy, you understand.”

“Oh, of course! A successful man like you doesn’t have time for little brats!”

It’s the expression of the woman one table over that does Peter in in the end. He starts chuckling at the same moment Stiles dissolves into outright giggling, holding his stomach. “That was terrible,” he gasps.

“I think I did rather well at hitting all the evil business man clichés.”

That gets him a thumbs up and a breathless smile.

The woman next to them exhales noisily and visibly relaxes. Stiles, of course, notices and isn’t shy at all about leaning over and patting her hand. “No worries,” he reassures her. “Peter is an amazing uncle. I should know. The way he indulges those kids is making me rich.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “As if I haven’t noticed you giving us a discount at the store.”

There’s that smile again, bright enough to light up a room. The woman shakes her head, smiling. “I was hoping you were kidding, because that sounded awful, but you two have amazing straight faces.”

“First time in a long time anyone’s called me straight,” Stiles kids. “Even when I was with Lyds, everyone always assumed I was her sassy gay friend, not her boyfriend.”

“I wonder why,” Peter deadpans. Stiles is wearing the Cult of Awesome t-shirt. The farting unicorn is hidden under a flannel shirt right now, but Peter knows it’s there. He *knows*. He is also strangely charmed by the fact that Stiles is wearing a ratty joke shirt on their date because he knows it was picked on purpose.

The woman extricates herself with a last smile, finishes her drink and goes to pay at the counter. Leaving them right back where they were five minutes ago.

Eventually, Stiles shakes his head. “I got nothing. None of my first-date spiels cover knowing the other person for months beforehand.”

“Me either. So let’s not treat it as a date. Let’s just...,” Peter can’t even say it. It’s too much of a goddamn movie cliché.

Stiles, luckily, has no such compunctions. “Be ourselves?”

“Yes.” It worked in the car. Hell, it’s worked for the past few months. Two shy kisses and a midnight confession don’t change anything.

“Alright then,” Stiles starts. Pauses. Dives in. “Have I told you about this organic fibers obsessed mom that keeps coming in and pissing me the fuck off? Because I don’t often daydream about mutilating people with craft tools, but damn, that woman....”

+

The actual surprise, Stiles discovers, pleasantly full after a fantastic burger and fries, is a craft fair another half hour’s drive from the diner.

For their first date, Peter takes Stiles to an actual *craft fair*.

Stiles is in *heaven* and Peter is so, so totally going to regret this at some point in the immediate future, because Stiles is going to want to stay here forever and he’ll probably forget all about Peter within the next fifteen minutes and it’s terrible, but there is so much to see and there’s a stand selling jewelry made out of clock and computer parts and he *knows* Kira and Alli will adore those necklaces and there was a tie-dye yarn booth a row over, he needs to have a look at that and maybe Lyds would like those earrings?

“I may have made a tactical error,” a dim voice mutters somewhere at the edge of his hearing. Stiles waves a vague hand at it and starts haggling for those computer key cufflinks.

His dad’s going to love them!

And hour (or three) later, Stiles surfaces enough to notice that a) he has six different bags in his hands, b) his feet hurt, c) he’s sunburnt, and, most importantly d) Peter is still trailing after him like a faithful puppy. Or significant other.

The feeling does not put a horde of rambunctious bats into his belly. Does not.

Total lie.

“I am so sorry,” he blurts, because this is a date, it’s an awesome date and it’s all for Stiles and he’s been rude as fuck and Peter deserves better for generally being an amazing person and specifically not running from Stiles screaming when he let the ace bomb drop. For not even flinching.

Peter just laughs and takes the bags from him. “I expected you to zone out,” he allows. “It’s highly entertaining to watch you go into zombie mode.”

Stiles cringes.

“And I haven’t just been following you around,” Peter amends, holding up two bags of his own. Stiles recognizes the logo of that one place that customizes crochet needles with hand carved wooden grips. “I got one with a Batman emblem for Derek.”

They have Batman needles? He needs one! How did he miss that? Bad Stiles! Focus!



“Still, that was kind of shitty of me.”

Peter shakes his head. “How about this, I’ll go drop the bags by the car, you have another look around and when I get back, we’ll find something to drink and you can make it up to me.”

It’s clearly a pity thing, letting Stiles make amends, but it’s also a fantastic idea, so he nods and restrains himself from glomping onto Peter and never, ever letting him go again because Stiles knows that, objectively, he’s kind of a horrible person, and he doesn’t deserve someone like Peter Goddamn Hale.

He doesn’t. So he smiles and nods and waves until he spots a stand selling hand spun yarn, and is that alpaca?

By the time Peter returns from the car, Stiles has made fast friends with a woman named Hallie and her girlfriend, Mali, who are both aggressively hippy and make their own, handspun alpaca yarn. They have an alpaca farm and everything. How cool is that? Stiles buys enough for a very nice set of hat-scarf-gloves in a muted blue (organic dyes, of course) and the price is totally ridiculous, but it feels like tiny little clouds, so.

He’s exchanging business cards with Hallie, talking about maybe stocking their yarn on a trial basis, when Peter reappears in his line of sight and he loses a few seconds just staring because, objectively, Peter Hale is one hot piece of ass. Stiles may not want to tap that, but he can sure appreciate every perfectly sculpted inch of it.

“Okay,” Mali says, draping herself over Hallie’s shoulders and following Stiles’ gaze. “I don’t swing that way at all, but wow.”

“I’m keeping him,” Stiles blurts, suddenly defensive, like a little kid with his favorite toy. She can’t have Peter!

Hallie gives him a look that reminds him of Lydia.

“Seriously,” he defends. “He’s good with kids, reads classic literature, has a wicked sense of humor, gets along with my friends, didn’t even twitch when I told him I’m ace and now he’s actively feeding my yarn addiction.”

“That does sound like a keeper,” Hallie agrees complacently, probably rethinking going into business with Stiles because he just outed himself as a spastic puddle of idiocy. Whatever.

Peter’s almost within earshot now, and the poleaxed expression he’s wearing is a bit worrying, so Stiles snags his cloud yarn and waves goodbye to the ladies. “Call me about that yarn, I’d love to have it at the store,” he manages as an afterthought and then he’s off.

Peter’s chest makes a good Stiles-stopper. He smacks into it, grins, leans up for another quick peck, *because he wants to* and then asks, “Okay, what’s up?”

“Scott just called.”

“Really? Did something happen to the kids? Are they alright? Do we need to go back?” He’s already moving sideways to round Peter and start toward the car, they can probably make it back in an hour if they hurry and -

A chuckle. “Slow down. Everything’s fine. It seems Derek finally cracked and told him where we are.”

“So?”

“So Scott called to give me his condolences on losing you to craft this early on. And then he offered to pack up the kids and drive out to meet us somewhere for dinner so we don’t have to head back just yet.”

As if Scott gets to judge anyone’s date ideas. Stiles had to plan all of Scott’s dates for him until he was twenty-five and Kira took over for good. Still, “This is why I keep him around. What do you think?”

Because Stiles is well used to the gang crashing his private outings, but Peter might not like the idea.

“They’re already on their way. They’ll call when they’re here and we’ll find a place to eat together.” He sounds okay with that. Actually, he sounds content and Stiles thinks the poleaxed expression might have been more awe than... something else. Because Scott and Kira did just volunteer to spend several hours in the car with the kids just to help out Peter’s date.

Most people might not appreciate having their kids and their date’s friends with them on part of their first date, but Stiles and Peter have been doing everything backwards and sideways from the start, so this is perfectly fine. In fact, it’s fantastic, because Stiles hasn’t seen the kids in a few days and he’ll never admit it (lie!) but he misses them.

They grew on him way too quickly.

“With the way Scott drives, we have at least another two hours.” He stops briefly, considers one hundred and twenty minutes spent in a car containing Cora, Laura and Derek, shudders and moves on, “So something to drink, a bit of shade, and then I want to check out the Batman hooks?”

Peter smirks that disconcertingly wicked smirk of his, nods and offers Stiles his arm again. “Lead the way, sweetheart.”

Stiles does.

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They end up at McDonald’s, because Laura insists, and it’s awful.

Stiles loves every second of it.

+

(Best date ever.)

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# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

As ever, thank you all so very much.

This one is a bit short, but it sets the scene for the rest of the story and I'm sorry to say there's a bit of sad before the happy comes. Give me a chance, alright? I'll fix it, I swear.

+

Things settle.

Or rather, they become.

The children already adore Stiles as much as Peter does (although, thankfully, in different ways) and Stiles seems to be as smitten with the Hale contingent as they are with him.

After that first date – which was spectacular, if Peter does say so himself – the floodgates are open.

Stiles becomes a fixture on Saturday outings, comes over after work just to hang out and eat their dinner leftovers, Peter drops by the store for lunch at least twice a week. Liam learns to deal with the terror triplets.

One day, when Peter is stuck in court unexpectedly, he calls Stiles and Stiles has no problem at all picking the children up and taking them into work with him. Peter informs the school and daycare that Stiles is to be put on the approved persons list and never takes him off again, which segues neatly into Peter upping his work hours from three days a week to four.

Stiles picks the kids up from school when Peter can't and he, in turn, fetches them from *Yarnsome* after work, more often than not kidnapping its proprietor while he's at it. He doesn't think the children even notice that he's working more, too enamored with the concept of spending more time with Stiles.

Erica comes by one afternoon and insists that Boyd practice diaper changes on Cora, then plants herself on the sofa with a magazine and proceeds to discuss icky boys with Laura for an hour.

Lydia takes the girl shopping with Allison and brings her back with an expression of abject disgust and three new superhero t-shirts that makes Stiles green with envy until his ex-girlfriend and best friend present the adult versions of said shirts to him with a resigned sigh.

Scott realizes that the puppy thing might have been an error in judgement (read: put ideas into their heads for which Peter is liable to murder him) and convinces the children that they should go the keep-a-cactus-alive-first-route to make sure any puppy given into their care will be well looked after.

Peter changes the cactus clause into a plant-of-his-choosing clause and isn't above buying them the most fragile ones he can find. He's only drawing out the inevitable, but, as he tells Stiles, "Every day without a dog to add to the madness is a good day."

Once the summer starts, Kira periodically whisks the kids away for wedding related things and on those days, they sedate Cora with a lot of action and heavy foods before enjoying some quiet time together.

They have a few conversations about boundaries where Stiles hems and haws a lot and makes noises about forcing Peter into something he doesn't want. Peter rolls his eyes a lot, feels secretly flattered and assures Stiles that not getting to dip his dick is a small price to pay for a functioning relationship with an intelligent human being.

It's crass, but it does the job. It helps that Stiles respects Peter's choices as much as Peter respects his and they eventually stop questioning each other. In the younger man's words, "We're so fucking adulting, I can't even. Now kiss me."

Stiles stays over that night, for the first time, and there are cuddles and kisses and a Derek-bomb at five am.

It's good.

Strike that, it's fantastic.

Of course it doesn't fucking last.

+

"Laura, no," Stiles chides, pulling the strawberry jam out of her reach.

"Laura, yes," she snaps and lunges across the table for the jar.

Stiles leans backwards in his kitchen chair and puts it on the counter, firmly out of her reach. "You have enough. Other people like that stuff, too."

He tactfully doesn't mention that Derek always puts some on his second pancake, because that would result in Laura pressuring Derek into giving up his portion, which would result in grumpy eyebrows all day long.

Peter, feeding Cora with soggy pancake pieces and mashed banana, watches and pretends not to feel ridiculously weak in the knees at the fact that Stiles *knows these things*.

It's official. No-one at the office can ever find out about Stiles. Ever. His reputation would be utterly ruined the first time he smiled like an idiot at the mere mention of the younger man's ridiculous name.

For fuck's sake.

Cora agrees by aiming a wad of banana spit at his forearm.

He gives her a little rap with his knuckles on the back, just enough for her to look up and notice his disapproving face, because he knows she does it on purpose, then passes her more pancake. When she eats it without protest, he kisses her nose because everyone seated at the table already knows he has no dignity left and his niece is a goddamn masterpiece of genetics and adorableness.

“But Stiiiiiles,” Laura continues her assault.

Stiles leans over and snags a piece of her strawberry jam slathered pancake. He puts it in his mouth and chews slowly around a shit-eating grin.

(Bad image.)

“Stiles!”

Another piece. She tries to fend him off, but he's quick with a fork. After having witnessed the way Allison continuously tries to nab his food, Peter understands why.

After he swallows the second bite, under loud protest from a fuming ten-year-old, Stiles points out, “Well, you're not eating it, are you? You're too busy complaining.”

Laura opens her mouth, red-faced and ready to spit fire. Stiles brandishes his fork.

Laura closes her mouth.

Then she picks up her own utensils and starts eating. Between sullen bites, she shoots him her best hangdog expression.

He snorts. “I grew up around Scott, Lala. You're but a novice in the art of puppy-dog-eyes. Sorry.”

Laura sighs and, impossibly, has no comeback.

Derek looks at Stiles like he has seen the face of god.

“You're mean,” she tries eventually, last ditch effort.

“Not news,” Stiles agrees, then adds, “Now finish up, I have a surprise planned for you lot.”

For another few beats, Laura stares. Then she decides to drop the act and grins widely before joining Derek in trying to needle Stiles into details.

Peter wipes Cora's face for the third time in under two minutes and carefully keeps his mouth shut about today's plans, lest they figure out he knows what's up and turn on him instead.

Unfortunately, Stiles is a traitor and not above throwing others under the bus. That, or he decides he's been strict enough for a day and it's Peter's turn to spoil the fun. "I don't know, Peter. How good a surprise do you think it is?"

Peter snaps his fingers and points towards the front door. While the children follow his one hand like well-trained dogs, expecting an answer to magically materialize through on the front stoop, he uses his other to flip Stiles off. By the time they realize the ruse and turn back, he's perfectly composed again.

"Sta," Cora announces.

In front of her, Peter's phone starts dancing on the table.

Beacon Hills area code.

+

Stiles watches all color drain from his boyfriend's (he gets to say that now) face and immediately rounds the table to grab Cora and haul her onto his hip. She clings like a koala baby, used, by now, to never having to sit in her highchair. Instead, she gets ferried from lap to lap and hip to hip. In passing he notes the number on the screen, nostalgically familiar from days spent running around with Scott without telling either of their parents where they were.

It's the number of Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital.

Peter stands to leave the room and Stiles snags Derek, who makes to follow, by his collar.

"Stay, Derbear," he orders and uses the nickname-caused explosion of Mount Derek to distract the children until their uncle returns, more than ten minutes later,

His face is perfectly composed and his hands are hidden in the pockets of those goddamn soft-washed, threadbare, super-tight jeans. He looks absolutely controlled.

The children take less than three seconds to realize something is really, really wrong.

"Uncle Peter?" Laura asks, her voice small.

Peter takes a deep breath. And another. Then he carefully sits down and leans on the table. "The hospital just called," he says.

Derek gasps. Laura shrinks into her chair. "Is it Mom?"

Stiles closes his eyes and buries his face in Cora's downy hair because he remembers this conversation. He remembers how it ends. "What happened?" he asks, to spare Peter from having to say 'yes'.

"Do you remember when we talked about why your mother doesn't wake up?"

The older children both nod and Laura dutifully recites, “Mom is hurt a lot from the fire and her body is trying to heal, so she doesn’t have the energy to wake up but she loves us and misses us.”

Peter turns his gaze on Derek, who turtles into his t-shirt and nods mutely, stubby fingers picking at a scab on his forearm.

“Do you remember what I told you about her brain?” He goes on before either child can answer. “I told you that her head is hurt as well from the fire and the doctors don’t know if that injury is going to heal.”

Christ. How do you explain head trauma and fourth degree burns to a pair of children? Stiles doesn’t envy Peter any of those conversations. It must have been hell, prying the kids away from their mother’s bedside, getting them to understand that, despite being there, Talia Hale wasn’t really *there*.

“Last night, your mother had a brain stroke. That means something went wrong inside her brain The doctors helped her, but they want us to come to Beacon Hills. Do you understand?”

“We’re going to see Mommy?” Derek asks, a ghost of his usual voice. He’s given up on the scab to stare at Peter wide impossibly big eyes.

Peter nods and Stiles doesn’t cringe. He doesn’t.

Instead he watches their uncle send Laura and Derek off to start packing for a few days. He waits until they’re out of earshot before asking, “What’s going on?”

Peter presses the heels of both palms against his eyes, a moment of weakness. A moment of grief. Talia isn’t just the children’s mother. She’s Peter’s sister, too. “Talia was officially ruled brain dead this morning. They want me to pull the plug.”

Well. Fuck.

Stiles stands, presses a kiss to Peter’s temple and then passes him his youngest, because the other man needs it. Then he gently says, “Pack. Help the kids. I’ll grab a few things from my place, get someone to cover the store and then call my dad. He has the room to put us up. Meet back here by noon?”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Stiles.”

Stiles grins brightly. It’s the kind of grin that makes Lydia call him a forest fire with something in her eyes that he’d call fear on anyone else. “You didn’t ask.”

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“Stiles? Morning, son. I didn’t expect to hear from you again so soon.”

Stiles shrugs and presses the phone tighter to his ear, tucks it against his shoulder. Pulls a bag down from his closet and starts throwing in clothes. “Sorry to call so early, but I... you remember Peter?”



As if he couldn't. Stiles rambles. A lot. Their weekly phone calls for the past few months have mostly been 'Peter said' and 'Peter did' and 'Peter's kids are perfect terrors'.

The Sheriff chuckles and confirms, "You mentioned him once or twice. Or maybe several dozen times. His eyes are very blue."

Right. This is embarrassing. "I may have neglected to mention that Peter is from Beacon Hills?" Stiles hedges.

"He is?"

"His last name is Hale, Dad."

The silence across the line is deafening as the Sheriff puts two and two together and gets four surviving Hales. "He's Talia's brother?"

"The one and only."

"You didn't tell me." There's hurt in his father's voice, the old, familiar kind. The kind Stiles hears every time the man thinks he's intentionally being cut out of his son's life.

"You would have gone digging, Dad, and I didn't need you to stir up stuff. Peter and the kids are... they're not for stirring up."

"I wouldn't have hurt them," the Sheriff defends and Stiles, okay, Stiles knows that. Knows his father would have only gone digging to make sure Peter is good enough for his only child.

But Stiles has always been protective of what is his and Peter is definitely that. So are his children. It comes down to trust. And Stiles loves his father, he does, but he hasn't entrusted the man with his tender spots in a long, long time.

The silence stretches until Stiles adds another pair of socks to the pile and switches tracks. "The hospital called. Talia was declared brain dead this morning after a stroke. Peter is packing up the kids right now. We'll be down there around four. I wouldn't ask, but the last thing they need right now is to be cooped up in a sterile hotel room. Do you think-"

He gets cut off. "Of course, Stiles. I... of course. There's three kids, right? Two school aged and a baby?"

"Cora turned one last month," Stiles confirms. "She runs. And fetches."

The inside joke falls on deaf ears. "I'll fix up your old room for the kids and the Johnsons next door have a little one. They'll lend me their portable crib if I ask. Are you and Peter...?"

"We'll take the guest room. Or the couch. Wherever, Dad. Thank you."

"You sound like you really like this guy, Stiles. Of course I'll help." There's only honesty in his father's voice and Stiles, Stiles closes his eyes and breathes, suddenly reminded that he loves this man, loves him and always has, just as his father loves him. It's why they can hurt each other so much.

“I do,” he confesses, voice thick. “And thank you.”

A sigh. “I’m glad you’re letting me help. Call me when you get close? I’ll try to hustle up Melissa. Maybe she’ll be able to help.”

They hang up and Stiles stares at his phone for a long, long moment before shaking his head and giving up packing for a lost cause. Instead he dials Liam to inform him of his change in schedule and goes in search of Alli’s supreme skills in pragmatism and hugging.

... Mostly hugging.

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# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

Hi!

Disclaimer: After the last chapter, it should be a no-brainer, but this one might kill you a little bit, so be warned. It gets better, though. Cross my heart.

As ever, thank you.

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Peter is a little bit disappointed in himself for not seizing the opportunity presented to him. Stiles' childhood home. His father. His old stomping grounds. So much to find out, so many embarrassing secrets to tease out, so much to learn about the man behind the wheel of his mom-mobile.

Instead he's sitting in the passenger seat with Laura's empty juice pouch clutched in one hand, hating every second that brings them closer to Beacon Hills.

To Talia.

To having to explain to three children why he's essentially murdering their mother.

Stiles has the kids playing the Yellow Car Game, only instead of hitting each other, they get a gummy bear for each find. It took them a while to get into it, but eventually, the combination of sugar and boredom got to them.

"I saw it first!"

"No, you didn't!"

"Poophead."

"Dork!"

"Donkey!" Stiles interrupts before offering, "Bear for each. Now focus, it's a tie."

Peter, who hasn't been paying a lot of attention, but enough to notice that Laura gets at least twice as many points as Derek, hitches up an eyebrow. "Really?"

Stiles winks at him. The accompanying smile almost erases the tense lines around his mouth.

“Why do you know so many car games anyway?” He asks, as Stiles turns back to the road. Before the Yellow Car game it was the License Plate Game and before that the Silence Game and before that, Peter has no idea.

Stiles shudders a little. “Once,” he intones, “when I was young and stupid, I went on a road trip with Scott and Isaac. *Scott and Isaac*.”

“How far did you get before you considered murder?”

“Vegas,” the younger man answers, pauses. “Barely. And only because they were hungover from our going-away party and slept until the border.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter watches the *Welcome to Beacon Hills* sign flash past. Population: tomorrow one less than today.

“We’re here!” Laura crows, stuffs a handful of gummy bears into her mouth and then absently passes the bag to Derek to pacify him. Not that he’s complaining. Apart from announcing his wins, he hasn’t spoken in hours.

“Almost,” Peter cautions. “We’re going to meet Stiles’ dad in a bit. “

“The Sheriff?” Laura asks, voice awed. “I want to be a sheriff when I grow up.”

One with fangs, claws, and a fishtail. Possibly wearing a pink tutu and a space suit. Armed with a wand. She also wants to be a weremaid princess for Halloween and Peter has no idea how to swing that. Talia would know. She’d laugh herself sick, pat her insane kid on the head and whip up the most amazing costume a ten-year-old with too much imagination could ever want.

‘Would’.

It’s the most terrible word in the English language.

“Well,” Stiles answers while Peter drowns in self-pity, “he retired a year ago. But he’s still pretty cool. For a parent, you know? And he promised to go grocery shopping, so there’s going to be all kinds of cool snacks at the house and pizza for dinner because Dad can’t cook to save his life. It’ll be cool.”

“And then we’ll go see Mom?”

Choking. Not drowning in self-pity, choking on it.

It’s stupid, really. He thought he got done with this grief almost nine months ago, but it seems all he did was push it aside. At this point, the kids are taking it better than he is. But then, they don’t really understand, yet. He’s told them, but he can tell it hasn’t sunk in. The tightening of Stiles’ slender fingers around the world says he noticed it, too.

They both stopped listening at, “We’re visiting Mom.”

God knows how they’ll react when reality hits home.

Fuck Talia for leaving Peter to deal with it. Fuck her for not being able to just lie there and keep holding on. Fuck her for not being able to die on her own. Just. Fuck her.

“I’ll call the hospital and see if they’ll let us in that late. We might have to wait until tomorrow.” (God, please.)

“Dad was planning on calling Mel when we talked. If she’s working tonight, we can go whenever.” For the benefit of the peanut gallery, Stiles expounds, “Melissa is Scott’s mom. She’s a nurse.”

Then, before Laura can decide she wants to be a nurse as well as a sheriff, the car turns sharply into a driveway.

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The front door opens before Peter has finished untangling the kids from the backseat and Stiles corrals them before they can run into traffic, unloading the trunk at the same time. His dad’s leaning on the porch railing, watching and suddenly, abruptly, Stiles is struck by how domestic this must look. He and Peter, three kids. Like a family.

Like this is how it’s supposed to be, when it’s barely been months. Only one month of dating. It feels like it, though. It feels right and that’s way too scary to contemplate right now.

(Like Stiles hasn’t always been fully aware that being with Peter means being with his children, too, that dating means family, more than it means romantic candle light dinners. Like he doesn’t want exactly that.)

In his own way (as much as he is capable of the emotion), Stiles is ashamed for loving this so much, for taking it and running with it. But then, seeing himself through the Sheriff’s eyes, he often is.

“Hi, Dad,” he greets, shouldering Cora’s diaper bag and the duffel with the bare essentials, nudging Derek along the slightly overgrown path and up the porch steps, where his father waits with a short, awkward hug.

He makes to take a bag, but Stiles shakes his head, shoves Derek forward as a peace offering. Tries to introduce them and only gets a little face smashed painfully into his crotch. He hisses and carefully maneuvers the boy sideways, shrugging apology.

His dad looks from Derek to Stiles and back, something unreadable in his gaze. Then Peter and the girls make their way over. The adults shake hands.

“Peter Hale. You grew up well, I heard,” the Sheriff teases and right, pool incident.

“I like to think so,” Peter promptly banters back. Stiles is the only one who hears the strain in it. But then, luckily, Laura takes over talking for all of them, introducing herself and rambling on about guns and crafts and crochet and mermaids and Peter and being home and Derek and Paige and bumblebees and being a princess police woman and Stiles pities her, a little,

because he knows all too well how most people react to kids whose emotions burst out of them in unintelligible bursts of verbal vomit.

He takes her by the hand, interrupts her flow. “Let’s get inside before you completely bowl him over, okay?”

To his credit, the elder Stilinski just laughs. “Son, I survived you. This lovely lady isn’t going to make a dent.”

“She’s going to take that as a challenge,” Peter warns, but it’s already too late.

Laura sets her jaw and pushes inside. Derek looks around, decides to take his chances and scurries after her, pulling his little sister along in his wake. Cora takes a second to gain traction, then overtakes him and starts yanking *him* along instead.

The adults are left outside.

“Have you heard anything new?”

Both Stiles and Peter shake their heads.

“Melissa is on shift tonight, in the ER. Find her and she’ll wrangle you access, she said. I fixed up your room, Stiles, for the older two, and got a collapsible playpen from the neighbors. They said it doubles as a crib, I put it into the guestroom. I... is there anything you need?” He looks terribly eager to be of use and Stiles impulsively leans in for another hug, this time holding on longer than three seconds.

“Thanks, Dad. And I’m sorry for springing this on you.”

“Not your fault. And I don’t mind. The house is way too empty and Parrish keeps kicking me out when I hang around the station too long.” A self-deprecating grin follows and Stiles knows it’s the same he’d see in the mirror, if he looked closely enough.

“You need a hobby.” It seems nicer than telling his own father he needs a life.

They trundle inside after the babies and Stiles feels like stepping through a magical time portal or something. He hasn’t been here in... years, really. Last year, his dad came up along with Chris to spend Christmas with the gang. The years before, he worked and Stiles didn’t bother coming down, too caught up with the store and the gang. They talk on the phone, they Skype. They send pictures per e-mail, sometimes.

But Stiles hasn’t physically been here, in his home town, in the house he grew up in, for at least four years.

Nothing has changed. Not the pictures on the walls, not the threadbare rug in the living room, not even the stain on the couch where Stiles spilled coke when he got in a tickle fight with Scott at the age of twelve.

And Stiles knows why. Knows it was his mother who hung those pictures, who chose that rug and bought that sofa. Knows that, after her scent faded and her clothes were eaten by moths,

this is all his father has left.

Stiles moved on, eventually, badly, full of rage. But he did. His father didn't. Hasn't. Won't.

Does Peter notice how abruptly the gallery of Stiles' childhood ends?

He doesn't ask, just shuffles toward the stairs, starts putting bags where they need to go, stops abruptly halfway between bedroom doors. The landing is freshly painted. The same shade of yellow it's always been, yes, but it's a new coat of paint. He exhales, slowly, stupidly relieved.

At least that.

"Like it?" his dad asks, directly behind him. He jumps straight out of his skin.

"It's not exactly a bold, new choice."

"Smartass. The paint was peeling. I thought... well. Maybe I'll work my way through the house. I've got the time."

It sounds like the old man is asking permission. Stiles just nods, drops Laura's bag in his old room. She's going to get a kick out of the Godzilla (vintage by now) posters.

Then he unearths his phone, wiggles it. "I should call Scott. We had a wedding thing planned tomorrow and since I'm bailing, he actually needs to make his appointment on his own."

Which they all know is a problem. Kira texts Scott his day's appointments every morning and he still manages to forget at least one a month, the giant fucking potato.

A nod. "Maybe we can talk wedding gifts later? I have no idea what to get them."

It's Stiles' turn to nod and then he flees, dialing as he goes. The phone rings, then goes to voicemail. Hanging up, he fires off a text with the details and a request for Scott to call back.

The answer comes when they're sitting down with the promised pizza.

*Dude, I got it. Don't worry bout us. Cn't call now. Later. Say hi to the rents.*

It's weird because Scott is one of those freaky people who prefer talking over texting, but Cora has gotten a hold of a slice of ham and is using it to bitch slap her brother, so Stiles puts it out of his mind.

For now.

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The hospital hasn't changed either. It's still a black, sucking vortex of misery and despair, full of the dead, dying and grieving.

... Or maybe Stiles is just biased.

From the expression on Peter's face, he might not be the only one.

They head for the brightly lit ER entrance and spend a good ten minutes standing around like tools until someone can find Melissa for them. It's a quiet evening and she just started her shift, so her grin is brighter than it will be in a few hours. She hugs Stiles, nods to Peter with recognition in her eyes and then immediately kneels in front of the kids and makes friends for life by pulling cherry suckers out of a random pocket and offering them up.

Cora tries to eat hers with the wrapping still on, but after that, all three of them follow the adults upstairs docilely.

"You're magic," Stiles observes as he watches them trundle along, oldest to youngest, in a neat little row.

Mel laughs and wraps an affectionate arm around his middle to squeeze him into her side. "I managed to get you and Scott through to adulthood. Of course I'm magic."

Then she takes a long, not very subtle look at Peter and his brood and adds, "You know, I always secretly wished you kids as bad as you were."

It's way too early for that joke, so Stiles clacks his tongue and counters, "I don't know, I think my kids turned out alright. I mean, Lydia at least, right?"

Because for a few weeks there, in high school, they all called him mom as a joke and it hurt, but it was also weirdly wonderful while it lasted. Melissa looks at him, at Peter, nods and detaches. "Wait here, I'll see if I can hustle up Doc Thompson. He said he'd be in late today."

The kids suck, Peter pretends to study the posters on the walls and Stiles regrets that he ever stopped his nervous habit of biting his thumb.

Five minutes later, Melissa comes back with an aging black man with a friendly smile and bids them goodnight, reminding Stiles to call if he needs anything while they're here. She squeezes Peter's hand and then returns to her duties.

Doctor Thompson shakes his head at her fondly, then bids them to come along, showing them to Talia's room.

Stiles never consciously met Talia Hale, so he doesn't know what she looked like before the fire, but now she's little more than a ghost. Heavy scarring, some of it still not healed, covers most of her skin. Her hair is buzzed short, her nails neatly trimmed, her collarbones starkly visible above her nightgown.

The children freeze. Who can blame them? Peter and Stiles do, too.

Then, softly, after a very long silence, Laura whispers, "They took the bandages off."

The doc, bless him, finds his voice while Peter and Stiles are still busy with their breaking hearts. "We also put up all the nice cards you sent. See?" He points toward the wall behind them, directly across from the bed. It's plastered over with children's drawings. Some kind nurse must have spent hours putting them up.



The wall of crayon seems to break through the haze, because Derek squares his shoulders and determinedly takes off his Batman backpack to dig through it and pull out another lopsided scarf. Red and orange and he wouldn't tell anyone who it was for. He looks up at Stiles, question in his eyes.

Together, they place it gently on Talia's lap, where the covers protect whatever pink scars the acrylic yarn might irritate. Derek stares at the placement for a moment, then nods his consent. The scarf can stay there.

Cora gets dumped at her mother's feet and, miracle of miracles, instead of turning into her hurricane self, quietly starts cooing. Then Laura clambers onto a chair by the bed and starts informing her mother of everything that happened in the past six months and Stiles decides, once and for all, that Talia and Paul Hale must have been amazing people.

Their children are more than enough proof of that.

"Mr. Hale," Stiles hears the doctor ask quietly as he hovers, making sure Cora doesn't take a swan dive to the floor. "Could we talk in my office?"

Peter shoots Stiles a look, Stiles is already nodding and the two men leave the room just as Laura gets to her second meeting with Stiles, in the park. Her narration hitches, stop-stutters in the place where craters should be, and then skips ahead to Alli and Lydia taking her shopping.

Derek, meanwhile, has found Talia's hand in the sheets and is stroking it silently.

Stiles draws up another chair, sits down and keeps vigil.

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# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the long wait, but this chapter killed me. I also feel like I crammed far too much into it to do any one thing justice, but it needed to happen and I think we're all done with drawing it out.

As ever, thank you for your support.

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To date, Stiles and Peter have spent the night in the same bed exactly twice. The first time was because they'd spent a full eight hours running after the kids at the park and there were no fucks left to give.

The second was more planned and resulted in a hands-off dance the likes of which Stiles hasn't experienced since he and Scott entered puberty and sharing a bed became suddenly, unexpectedly... hard.

Peter tried way too hard not to cross any imaginary lines and Stiles was marginally terrified of accidentally turning the other man on, not because he was afraid of what Peter might do, but because it seemed mighty unfair.

That night, it took two hours until they both got so exasperated with their over-thinking that they almost simultaneously decided *fuck it* and just went for it. After that, it was nice. Still all elbows and knees, but nice. Like it could be amazing with a little practice.

And now here they are, in his father's house, both dressed in sweats and t-shirts in case of nightmares and nightly children, exhausted to the bone and wrung dry. Stiles falls asleep on his back, with Peter's face buried in his sternum, feeling guilty because emotional distress is apparently a wonderful antidote to awkwardness and this is the bed snuggle Stiles has had in years.

Two hours later, he wakes alone.

It's weird, how that seems strange after only two nights.

He waits for a bit, but Peter doesn't return. Too curious to fall back to sleep, Stiles gets up and checks first on Cora – fast asleep – then on the other munchkins – also asleep. The emotional stress of the day seems to have worn them out far beyond nightmares.

That leaves only the place where, in time honored Stilinski tradition, all the sleep-deprived must go: the kitchen.

Somehow, Stiles isn't surprised at all that Peter found his father's super-secret whiskey stash above the sink. He is surprised that Peter seems to be nursing a single glass and staring into space.

Stiles pads closer on bare feet, runs a hand through the older man's hair and then sits next to him, scooting his chair closer carefully.

"Can't sleep?" he asks, redundantly, because it's as good a conversation starter as any.

Peter grimaces and stops fiddling with his tumbler. "What gave you the idea?"

"Call it instinct," Stiles counters, stealing the glass for a sip and a shudder. He hates whiskey.

Peter chuckles.

"Want to tell me what the good doctor said?" Too familiar again, too close, and it's funny how he didn't ever feel that way at home. Only here, in good old Beacon Hills does he suddenly second guess his every move. So he adds a reluctant, "You don't have to, though."

A headshake. A frown. A sip. "There's absolutely no chance of her waking up anymore. As the word 'braindead' implies, I guess, but I thought there might be some way, some chance." Peter's smirk is bitter. "Some small sliver of a hope that I could use as an excuse to keep her alive. To not have to deal with this *fucking* mess. Damn her. Damn her to fucking hell, for doing this."

He shudders, falls silent. Stiles' hand hovers over his shoulder, suddenly insecure, until Peter leans, by the slightest degree, toward him. Then he hugs the man. Long. Hard. Tight.

Peter hugs back and after a long while, he whispers into Stiles' neck, "I don't know what to do. How the hell do I tell them that I'm killing their mother?"

+

Stiles doesn't waste time on platitudes, on denials. They both know that the morality behind letting Talia die doesn't mean shit. Not here, not now, not to three kids about to become orphans for good.

By Peter's hand. By Peter's word. By his power, the power vested in him by Talia and her lawyer. It's going to be him, giving the permission to pull the plug on the machines keeping his sister breathing and her heart beating.

That means he'll be the one killing her.

And Peter, Peter has hated his sister a lot. As a child when she was too old to care about him, thought of him as a pest more than a sibling. As a teenager when he lived in her shadow and nothing he did was good enough. As an adult, when she had the picture perfect life and he had a career and an empty apartment.

But he's never hated her as much as he hates her today.

Stiles holds on to him until Peter decides it's time to let go, then sinks back into his chair, a thoughtful frown on his tired face. There are dark circles under his eyes and Peter and his godawful mess put them there, dragged the man back into a town he escaped from a decade ago.

"Was that a rhetorical question?" he finally asks and Peter takes a beat to figure out what he's talking about. Then he shakes his head.

Stiles nods, shrugs, leans back. "Okay, so. Feel free to tell me to shut up because I don't really know shit about raising kids – "

Peter rolls his eyes so hard he might see his brain for a moment, there. "Bullshit. I pride myself in being personable, but I have yet to meet anyone you don't see through in under five minutes. My children, at least, are no different."

Stiles pauses, mouth open, something bright shining in his eyes. "Even you?" he asks, not really managing to downplay whatever he's thinking.

Peter just looks at him.

"Tell them the truth," the other man says, rather than asking again. "Tell it how it is and don't dumb it down or pretty it up because they'll figure it out anyway. And then just... just be there. Let them hate you, let them curse you, let them cry. Be there. Hug them. Listen to them. Just... Peter, just do what you've been doing, dude. Love them. Love those kids, because you're, like, the best thing that could have happened to them in this shitty situation and they love you, too, even if they might hate you for a little while." He waves both arms in the air, flounders, repeats, "Just be there."

He sounds... Peter has no word for how he sounds. Desperate is too strong a word, eager not enough. Like he needs, really, truly needs for Peter to get this right. To do right by his children.

His. For good now. Talia will never wake and reclaim them. He leaves that particular thought right where he found it, at the edge of his mind, untouched. Later.

Instead, for the first time since they got here (It's been less than twenty-four hours since this morning, since that breakfast and that phone call.), Peter looks at Stiles.

Looks at him, with his ridiculous shirts, his bright grins, his openness, his quirks and crafts and jokes and unfairly gorgeous face. With the friends he calls family and the father he doesn't mention unless directly asked, with the tattoos that tell his life's story, but put the years between his mother's death and Allison's arrival in brackets. Stiles, whose baby face looks down at anyone passing through the hallway of this house, gap-toothed and innocent and then stops, abruptly, whose childhood bedroom is half shrine, half graveyard, whose entire life is back home and whose father is here.

He knew, of course he knew, that Stiles has his own scars, those demons he carries on his back in the shape of wings and shadows. But being told about them in a bright, public pool is

quite different from seeing them in every corner of a long-dead house in the middle of the night.

“Where is she buried?” he asks, far too impulsive, stupid, he’s never this careless, not ever.

But Stiles just shrugs. “She isn’t. She wanted to be cremated. Dad took care of it. There wasn’t really time for it. Just, one day,” he points toward the living room. The urn on the mantle, the one Peter assumed held a grandparent, or some other, more distant relation. Not his mother.

Claudia Stilinski didn’t get a funeral. *Stiles* didn’t get her funeral.

He leans over, takes Stiles’ hand, squeezes. “Thank you,” he says. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

That gets him a smile, warm and soft, followed by a kiss. “You’d be fine.”

He pulls back, Peter chases, and for a moment, they just sit there, kissing like teenagers to the ticking of the kitchen clock above the door. Then a shuffle of feet behind them draws them apart.

Sheriff Stilinski (retired) hangs in the doorway like smoke. Lingered. Peter pats Stiles’ hand, stands, thinks of tattoos and mothers and funeral and decides, “You two need to talk. I’ll be upstairs.”

He slips past the older man, shoulders brushing, and ignores both the grateful look and the muttered, “Traitor,” that follows him out.

+

Stiles hates Peter. Just a little bit.

For leaving him with his dad. For knowing that he needs to be left with his dad.

The man hesitates for a moment, then steps fully into the kitchen. He takes the chair across from Stiles, instead of the one Peter vacated. Puts the table between them. Stiles watches, decides *fuck it all* and grabs the abandoned tumbler and bottle.

He pours a hefty helping and downs it in two gulps, waits out the resulting full-body shudder and then meets his father’s gaze. Out of curiosity, he tips the bottle in his direction.

A headshake is his response, followed by, “I bought this right after Christmas. Before you ask.” It’s summer now, and two thirds are left in the bottle, even after Peter got a hold of it.

“I wasn’t going to ask. I’m not your keeper.” He sounds angry, defensive. Why does he sound like that? He’s not seventeen anymore. His father’s drinking – or lack thereof – hasn’t been his business in years.

That earns him a wry, sad smile and another headshake. “Bullshit, kid. You’ve been my keeper for over twenty years and I let you. And I can never make up for that.”

That's... unexpected. And an entire new topic for them to cut each other with. "Dad--"

"No. I... there's some things I need to say, son, and I have needed to say them for years. Let me get them out, please?"

Stiles is helpless in the face of the simple fact that his father wants to talk to him. A small part of him, the part that sometimes holds on to the string around his wrist and doesn't look at his wings in the mirror for weeks, wants to jump up and down in joy because *daddy wants to talk to him (Him!)*. He inclines his head. *Go on.*

"I was standing there," the Sheriff points toward the doorway, "for a while. Long enough to hear what you told Peter. And you know what my first thought was?"

"I thought you want me to shut up?" He raises one eyebrow, chews on his lip ring, makes sure his grin is shit-eating. Yep, he comes by that sardonic glare honestly.

"I thought, well, damn. I wish Stiles would have been there to tell me that when Claudia died. And I realized that I still do it."

Okay. Stiles expected a uncomfortably emotional conversation. One in good, old, Stilinski men style, where they start their sentences, never finish them, nod and grunt a lot and then go their separate ways. It's the kind of conversation they've been having for decades.

He didn't expect... this. At all.

"Do what?"

He eyes the bottle speculatively, but resists. His elbows are suddenly tight and he feels flushed all over. More is probably a bad idea. Even if he might not want to remember this tomorrow. Fucking Peter.

"Rely on you. When I got shot, I promised you to do better. And I did. I stopped drinking, I scaled back my hours. I did what you asked me to do. And that's the damn problem, Stiles. Our entire relationship is based on me doing what you say. Back in the day, you told me when you needed money, told me when we needed groceries, what to eat, hell, you made my doctor's appointments for me. And even now, you dictate the terms of our relationship. You tell me where to be and when to call, when to visit. That's the damn problem."

So it's Stiles' fault, all of a sudden? He opens his mouth to let a scathing comment fly, when his father forestalls him with a raised hand.

"No, son. I'm not making accusations. I wasn't there and you picked up the slack. By the time I finally got my shit together, there was no room for me in your life, so I waited for you to make room for me. Only that isn't ever going to happen because, Jesus, kid, you don't need me. You might have, once, but I fucked that up. You've been the parent in this relationship for the longest time and I... no more.

"I keep waiting for you to come home, but your home isn't here anymore and I," he stops, starts, stops again and Stiles stares, because somehow, for the first time in an age, his father

has surprised him.

“I want to be part of your life. And from now on, I’m going to be. Because I’m your father and it’s damn time I acted like it. The phone works both ways and waiting for you to call while I wallow in guilt is a pretty shitty way to live.”

Stops again, takes a deep breath. Stops. Stiles doesn’t think he has ever heard his father speak that much. Not ever. Not even when he gave his election speeches. Not even... he thought it was him. Thought his dad didn’t care, didn’t approve, didn’t want to be closer. Thought the queer son with the tattoos and the kooky little store wasn’t worth the time. Thought his dead mother’s eyes in his own face were too much. He thought...

Somehow Stiles always thought it was his fault. He always thought...

“Classic only child,” he can hear Isaac say with an eye-roll, psych textbook on his lap, smarmy grin on his face. “Always think it’s your damn fault. Newsflash, we’re living in a heliocentric system, not a Stilescentric one.”

“You are part of my life,” is the first thing he manages to say after a long beat of silence.

A snort. “You’re head over heels in love with a mid-thirties single father of three who I once arrested for skinny dipping in the school pool after hours and I barely even knew you were dating. Your kitchen furniture is more part of your life than I am.”

Peter didn’t mention the skinny dipping part. “You want me to sit on you?”

“Smartass. No. I want to be there, phone calls, Skype, visits. You’re less than a three hour drive away, we can see each other more than once a year.”

“So why don’t we?”

“I just told you-“

“Yeah, no. You kept waiting for me to make the first move. But why?” His voice breaks. He hates himself, just a little. For that. For how important this is, suddenly.

“Because I was never there where it mattered. So what right do I have to be there now?”

Stiles snorts, a choked-off, half-angry, half-disbelieving sound. “So your solution to never being there is not being there some more?”

“Well,” is the dry answer her gets, “you weren’t here to tell me what to do.”

It’s not an accusation, more of a joke, a wry observation. Sarcasm that isn’t really. The way they’ve communicated for over twenty years in the absence of Claudia Stilinski to translate for them. And just like that, they find their footing again on familiar ground.

“Yeah, sorry. So this plan of yours, what’s it entail?”

Slowly, his father heaves out of his chair, grabs the bottle and glass, puts one in the cupboard, the other in the dishwasher. “For now? For us to grab some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be hard enough without being sleep deprived.”

Considering the time, the train for that has left the station a while ago.

The Sheriff wipes his hand on a random towel, sets it down by the sink, leans against the counter. Looks at Stiles. Then he announces, “I’m coming with you to the hospital tomorrow. Later today. Whatever. There’s too many kids for the two of you to console on your own. I can at least take little Cora.”

Telling. Not asking. Not waiting for an invitation. Slowly, Stiles inhales. Then he exhales. After that, he nods.

“Okay.”

Okay.

+

It’s not until he’s lying next to Peter again, almost asleep, that he realizes his father said ‘in love’ and Stiles didn’t even think to contradict him.

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## Chapter 22

### Chapter Notes

This chapter was delayed by the Munich shooting, the weather, a shitload of work and sheer fucking laziness.

You're still all wonderful, even though I get the feeling I lost a few people with the slower update rate.

ETA: Most of this story has a soundtrack, but for this chapter in particular, it's Casper's *Ariel*, which is the most hopeful goodbye song I know.

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The funeral is a quiet, small affair.

It turns out that a year-long coma is enough to make a lot of people forget about you, so the only ones witnessing Talia Hale's last journey are the Hales, the Stilinskis and a small sprinkling of guilty looking friends.

Maybe there would have been more people if they'd waited longer, but the funeral home director is an old high school friend of Peter's and he was content to hurry things along for the kids' sake. Two days after the machines are turned off, Talia is buried.

Stiles' dad has Cora, who is unusually subdued, soaking up everyone else's misery despite not knowing what's going on. She has no idea that what is being lowered into the ground is her mother, that the tombstone next to them was once her father. All she knows is that her favorite people are sad, so she's been fussy for the past three days.

Laura is standing next to Peter, clutching his hand like a lifeline, gaze fixed on the coffin like she's afraid to blink. She isn't crying. It worries Stiles that she isn't crying, that she's spent the past two days being an amazing big sister to Derek and forgot her own grief over it.

Peter assures him that this is how she coped after the fire, too. Days and days of stoic silence, of being there for others, until, eventually, when things calmed down, everything came rushing out.

"She's too much like her mother," he told Stiles when he asked. "Talia never got emotional until the crisis was dealt with. Then she'd lock herself in her room and sob for hours."

Mentally, Stiles is already trying to figure out a schedule for the next few weeks that will allow him to be there when Laura finally breaks.

But she's not the worst of the bunch, no. That's Derek. Derek who screamed and railed and punched at Peter when he explained what was going to happen to their mother. The boy broke his silent streak to scream 'murderer' at the top of his voice for what felt like hours. Wouldn't let Peter or Stiles near him, wouldn't stop crying. It got so bad he had trouble breathing before he exhausted himself and collapsed into quiet whimpers.

Laura got involved then, pulling him away and somehow, some way, that ten-year-old girl managed to explain the concept of mercy to her six-year-old brother in a way he understood. The adults hadn't even been aware that Laura understood, yet.

But after a while, they'd come back and Derek had blinked big, teary eyes at Peter, quietly asking, "Mommy won't hurt anymore?"

And when Peter had nodded, he'd sobbed, once, and climbed into Stiles' lap to quietly cry himself to sleep.

He's still crying now, head wedged into Stiles' neck while Stiles' arms go numb from holding onto the boy for so long. But he's not putting the kid down before he's ready to go.

They asked for a short service, but the elderly priest that was the only one available on such short notice loves to hear himself drone on. Or maybe Stiles zones out, because he jumps badly enough to almost drop Derek when a hand touches him on the shoulder, gently.

He knows that hand even before he turns, has known it all his life. Scott smiles, lopsided and sad, ruffles a hand through Derek's mop of hair and mutters a quiet, "Hey, buddy."

Derek manages a wobbly smile in return before turtling back into himself. On Stiles' other side, Allison is hugging Laura with one arm, squeezing Peter's hand briefly in sympathy. She nods a greeting to Stiles and Scott whispers over the droning, "Sorry, we're late."

As if that's the point. Stiles wasn't even aware they knew when the funeral was, let alone that they were planning on attending, and yet here they are, on a weekday, a three-hour-drive from home, for no reason other than, well.

"You're just right, man," Stiles answers, meets Alli's gaze across Laura's head. She moves one hand to her torso, lightly taps one hip. The one with the image of a pair of knitting needles stretched across it.

Stiles blinks rapidly a couple of times and squeezes Derek a little tighter.

After that, things go faster. They throw flowers into the grave instead of soil, in deference to the children. Derek made a crochet square of bright red yarn, an object with no use but to be passed on with his mother.

"Red is her favorite color." Stiles spent over an hour finding the right shade with him yesterday. He wants to be let down to throw it on top of the coffin, stands there clutching it for a minute and then, with a whisper no-one can decipher, drops it into the open grave.

And then it's over.

There is no wake. The Sheriff offered to let them have one at the house, but Peter refused. “Talia hated wakes,” he said, somberly and with a grin that spoke of fond memories.

Scott and Allison deliver their condolences after the other guests, bestow hugs upon everyone and apologize to Peter for being late.

“I didn’t know you were coming at all,” the man confesses, sending Stiles a confused look.

He shakes his head. “Wasn’t me.”

“I called your dad last night,” Scott answers with a shrug. “The others would have come, but we didn’t want to overwhelm you. Besides, there was kind of a thing going down at home.”

Stiles, who’s been wondering why the hell everyone was avoiding his calls and being super evasive in texts, puts two and two together and gets, well. Not four. Something else. Someone else.

He nods, and pointedly doesn’t ask, even though he wants to *explode* with curiosity. Later. Not here. Not now.

“You didn’t have to come all the way out there,” Peter continues, unaware of the byplay, but Allison simply pulls Laura closer and announces, “Yes, we did.”

Because Stiles brought them home, introduced them to all the people that matter in his life, was careful with them when he’s usually loud and brash and careless and all of his friends know what that means, even if Peter and the children don’t, yet.

He combats the sudden urge to cry by burying his face in Derek’s hair and breathing deeply. Rapid blinking is involved. If anyone asks, it’s fucking allergies. Fight him.

Peter gives a ragged chuckle and opens his mouth to say something, when he’s rudely cut off. “Peter.”

The entire group turns to face one of the few guests who are dispersing across the cemetery, back to their cars.

Peter stiffens. “Duke,” he greets, twenty degrees colder than Stiles has ever heard him.

The man standing a few feet away is older than Peter by maybe a decade, but he wears it well, salt and pepper hair, a well-tailored suit, a perfectly straight back. His voice is smooth, cultured. Stiles remembers that he was the first to show up, even before the actual family. He stood at the open coffin a very long time.

“Talia would have hated this,” the man remarks. His accent is British, making him sound a lot smoother than the rude words deserve.

Peter rolls his eyes, utterly graceless for once. “Talia hated funerals. She wouldn’t have cared.”

“She might have, if you hadn’t thrown her life away so easily.”

Wow. What the fuck?

Peter doesn't visibly shift, but Stiles can tell his boyfriend is suddenly furious. He moves to put Derek down, but Scott is faster, taking him from Stiles instead. Allison takes Laura, Stiles' dad still has Cora (miracle of miracles!) and the three of them take all the children to the cars.

Stiles takes two steps to Peter's side, curls their hands together. It's not a subtle move, but fuck subtle. That Duke guy, whoever he is, just accused Peter of killing the kids' mother on a whim. At her damn funeral. With said kids within earshot.

Shots. Fucking. Fired.

No way is Stiles not staying right here, next to Peter.

"Talía was dead, Duke, what was breathing was the machines," Peter corrects icily and Stiles has no problem imagining him like this in court, cutting and deadly.

The guy – Duke – shakes his head derisively. "And this? A pitiful funeral, not even a wake? I know you and Talía never saw eye to eye, Peter, but this is petty, even for you." He sounds... kind, almost, lulling, gentle. Like a parent scolding an idiotic child. Stiles loathes it almost as much as the words themselves.

Instead of being cowed, Peter only grows more furious. "Funerals are for the living and I have three children to think of."

"Talía's children."

There and then, Stiles decides whoever this guy is, he hates him. Because he's effortlessly dragging up every doubt Peter has ever had, about Talía, about the children, about his skills as a parent, without even trying. Just casually flinging one emotional hand grenade after another at Peter's face, in that polite, cultured tone of his.

But whatever Peter might be feeling doesn't show on his face. He smirks, razor sharp, counters, "Talía and Paul's, Deucalion, and you never could stand that, could you? Did you imagine she'd wake up one day and fall in love with you after all these years? That she'd forget the husband she held on to even as they burned and be happy with you?"

Duke's face crumbles to nothing at that, his polite sneer dropping into something horrible in under a second as Peter's counter attack hits and hits *hard*, and Stiles gets it. This is grief, in its own way, no different from him picking fights with Jackson almost daily for months after his mother died. Lashing out. Spreading the pain.

This man loved Talía Hale and Peter turned her machines off. Derek got to hit and scream, but adults aren't allowed to react like that.

Peter has no pity. "You were my sister's best friend, so I'm not going to punch you in the face, but if you ever accuse me of murdering my own flesh and blood again, no matter how

politely you phrase it, especially *in front of my children*, I am going to destroy you. Is that clear?”

“Your children?”

“Yes,” Peter snaps. Snarls, really, absolutely, lividly ferocious. “Mine. There is no-one else left. Now get the fuck away from my family.”

Duke shoots Stiles a look, like he expects some sort of defense. Then he turns back to the open grave, hunches into himself. Shakes his head. “She deserves better,” she mutters, mostly to himself.

Peter strangles Stiles’ hand with his and quietly allows, “We agree on that much. Goodbye, Duke.”

Then he turns and pulls Stiles along, toward where the others are waiting. Just like that, the rapid fire fight is over. Peter won, for whatever that’s worth. When Stiles looks back, Duke is still there, watching as workers show up to start filling in the grave.

For a minute, Peter’s silent, then he offers, “Duke and Talia went to college together. They both wanted to save the world and he somehow got it into his head that they should do it as a couple. Then Paul came in and suddenly the great Talia was happy barefoot and pregnant. Duke never forgave that.”

“And never stopped loving her, either,” Stiles adds, because that much was obvious.

Peter doesn’t answer.

“You know it’s not true, right? This was not the easy way, you didn’t take the cop-out, you didn’t act selfishly.”

“And yet,” Peter answers, “my sister is dead.”

Stiles tugs him to a halt, steps in front of them so they’re face to face. “People die, Peter,” he scolds, holding that blue, blue gaze. “And others live. And if you mix those two things up, you get,” he pauses, flips a hand in the direction of an open grave and a badly grieving man, “well, *that*. Talia’s dead. Paul is dead. You’re not, the kids are not, I’m not.”

Those are separate statements of fact and it’s taken Stiles years to understand that. That ‘I’m alive’ and ‘Mom is dead’ have nothing to do with each other, that one is not conditional to the other, that there is no cause and effect. People live. People die. You do what you have to and keep going.

“We’re not. That’s what matters. That’s what you focus on. Forget Duke, forget what he said. Focus on that.”

Peter takes half a step into him then, until their foreheads press together and hums, thoughtfully. Then, completely out of the blue and far too on-point, he asks, “What’s the demon on your back, Stiles?”

Stiles laughs helplessly. He had to fall for the smartest man he's ever met, didn't he? The only one who'd make a connection like that, even with his mind half-addled with grief and exhaustion. "I think you've already figured it out."

"I want to hear you say it."

He never has. Not to Erica, who designed the wings, not to Allison and Isaac who have made a game of trying to figure it out. Not to Scott and Lydia who look at him, sometimes, like they almost know. Almost get it. Not even to Boyd, who took one look at the gruesome, perfect lines of the wings and nodded solemnly. He doesn't know if any of them understand what they truly mean.

Fuck Peter for being so impossibly clever, for listening so well, for making Stiles give so much away.

"I'm not dead," he says, low and secret, because he may not really want to, but it's also a relief to finally be rid of it. "That's the demon on my back." He licks his lips, presses them, briefly, to the other man's. "Don't let it be the demon on yours. Now come on. The kids are waiting."

Peter whispers something that might be, "Where have you been all my damn life," and then they head toward the car.

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They have a picnic. Allison braved a kitchen for sandwiches, Scott provides a ton of candy and soda and they sit on the blankets scrounged together from three different cars, eating quietly. Allison gets Laura to tell her about Talia and it becomes a game they draw Derek into, remembering her. The kids and Peter trade off, sharing little stories, jokes, memories, and the sun and warmth, the familiar park and the candy work their magic slowly, until most of the gloom has dissipated for the moment.

"This is a good way to send someone off," the Sheriff tells Stiles at some point, too low for anyone to overhear.

"With sunshine and laughter?" Stiles hazards.

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't give you this for Claudia. That I took it from you."

"It's okay. I got over it, eventually."

His father shifts a little to look at him, then, eyes narrowed in scrutiny. Stiles half expects more self-recriminations, but he gets a fond shake of the head instead. "Yeah, you did."

He chuckles quietly. "Thanks, by the way. For the last few days. You were a great help."

"You're welcome, son."

"Is she asleep?" Scott suddenly interrupts, in a loud whisper. In response, Laura shifts to curl closer around a snoozing Cora and Alli nods.

“I think so.”

Scott suddenly grins, uncontrolled glee. “Okay, then. We didn’t want to say anything because this is their mom’s day, but I’m going to legit burst. Sorry, Peter.”

Peter frowns, a bit confused, but Stiles is on his knees in front of Scott, whisper-begging, “Tell me you have pictures, tell me, tell me, you fuckers, I hate you for not telling me. I would have been there.”

Allison snorts. “You still can’t clone yourself. And Erica did just fine terrorizing everyone without you.” She makes a thoughtful face. “Although keeping everything out of the group chat was a pain.”

Scott pulls out his phone, fucking finally, and Stiles makes an uncoordinated grab for it. Scott lets him have it and he punches in the unlock code, pulls up the gallery and swoons very quietly.

“Alicia Reyez, seven pounds four ounces, ‘big as fuck’, to quote Erica, healthy and with her mother’s lungs,” Allison provides as Stiles jams his shoulder into Peter’s to share the pictures.

Alicia has her mother’s nose and eyes and her father’s coloring, along with a thick mop of black hair and incredibly wrinkly, tiny hands. Peter watches over his shoulder, slinging one arm around his waist, offering a sincere, “She’s sweet. How’s the mother?”

Both Scott and Allison flinch, which is more reassuring than it should be. If Eri can make people flinch, everything is fine.

“When?” Stiles asks, passing the phone to his dad for baby-fuzzies once he’s seen every picture five times.

“The day you left. When you texted me about the appointment, we were already at the hospital.” Scott grins, probably at his ninja secret-keeping skills, which have always been shitty, before adding, “Cora can have a friend now and Erica,” he stops, scratches his head. “Well...”

“Erica and Boyd said you’re welcome to bring the kids by when you get home. Isaac said it might help them, to see her.”

Under his breath, Stiles starts humming the tune to Circle of Life. Peter snorts and quietly contemplates his sleeping brood for a moment. “It might. We’ll definitely come visit soon. Out of curiosity, if nothing else.”

“Peter Hale, interested in babies,” Stiles summarizes. “Who’d thunk.”

“I have depths,” Peter deadpans.

Yeah. Yeah, they’ll be okay.

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# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

And we are done. I'm so happy and blissed out on your reaction to and support of this story, especially considering it started as a blind experiment in writing, no plan, no nothing, and somehow, turned into this. Which it wouldn't have without you all.

So thank you. So much.

I hope you enjoy this last bit and that it brings some closure to this entire mess of a story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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“And. We. Are. Done!” Stiles declares, snipping the last thread with a flourish and brandishing it like a victory.

Allison, sitting cross-legged next to him on the floor, little Ali on her lap, rolls her eyes. “About time,” she declares, wiggling her finger happily in the newborn’s hand. The baby is every bit as fussy and loud as her mother and running her parents ragged. Stiles has never seen Erica look this desperate in his life and even Boyd looked *emotional* earlier, which is a minor apocalypse in itself. So when they shuffled in, zombie-like, for movie night a few hours ago, Allison made an executive decision and kicked everyone right back out before shoving the two happy parents into her bedroom and bidding them a good night.

She’s been entertaining Tiny Ali ever since while commenting Stiles’ quilting skills and procrastination techniques. As if. He still has a full three days until the wedding. He’s totally within his timeframe. (Haha, no!)

“You’re just jealous you don’t get something this awesome,” he declares and rucks the quilt up into his lap. The ombre design was hell to work because the pieces are all tiny, tiny, tiny and he feels like he’s been over every inch of this damn quilt at least seven times with his sewing machine, but the end result is worth it. It’s fucking gorgeous, okay? He’s totally taking pictures for the Wall of Fame in the store.

“I have a baby,” Allison defends, looking like she’d like to brandish said baby, but is restraining herself. Barely.

He shouldn’t have let her kick out Peter, too. Then he’d have a baby to throw right back in her face. Possibly literally. Cora discovered jumping last week. The menace now reaches doorknobs. She can’t turn them yet, but she’s been found dangling from them more than once. Stiles is lobbying for deadbolts on all doors everywhere, ever.

But since he doesn't have a baby, he just sighs and looks around at the craft debris all over the living room floor. He's tempted to leave it all, but someone's probably going to trip and die and then Scott's wedding will need to be postponed and he'll be sad. So he rolls to his feet and starts gathering up things, carrying them back to his craft room by the armful. He dumps most of it on a half-empty shelf and then stops, looks around. Frowns.

Back in the living room, he makes a face at his roomie. "Where the hell is all my shit?"

Allison pointedly covers Tiny Ali's ears. As if that isn't a lost cause anyway, with Erica for a mother. "At your other craft room?" she asks, a bit incredulous. When he just looks at her blankly, she elaborates, "Your craft room at Peter's place."

"I don't have a craft room at Peter's place," he rebuffs, then stops, thinking of the empty bedroom where he's started storing some of the projects that inevitably migrate to places where he spends a lot of time. There's a rocking chair in there that Peter removed from the nursery once Cora started trying to climb it. ("She'll break her neck. I hear that kind of thing is frowned upon.") And a tiny little desk for Derek, who likes to crochet when Stiles does, and Laura, who draws and babbles at them. And a little radio on the windowsill and possibly six or seven bags of yarn. And the adult sized desk that showed up last week.

"I have a craft room at Peter's place," he corrects slowly, trying to come to terms with the realization.

Alli snorts and rolls her eyes. Hard. "Duh. When are you moving in anyway?"

Shit stirrer.

"What? Whoa! No! It's been, like, a few months. Way too early to move in with anyone. No-one is moving anywhere." He flails a little before making the 'break' sign with both hand, slamming his palm on top of the fingertips of his other hand vigorously. Stop, stop, stop, *whoa*.

The patented Argent Bitch Please Look <sup>TM</sup> loses none of its potency through baby proximity. "You've slept here twice in the past week, Stiles," his best friend schools him. "Where did you spent the other five nights? Under a bridge?"

"I'm just helping out with the kids," he defends.

"All night long?" she asks, her tone of voice implying a multitude of things. Bodily fluids things. Eugh.

He blushes, squirms and resists the urge to throw something at her. Dirty pool. "It's not like that and you know it."

Tiny Ali coos.

Big Alli grins. "Yeah, I know," she relents, "and I think it's amazing that you've found someone who accepts you as you are, ace and all, but it doesn't change the fact that you live

together about 5/7th of the time. And, uhm...,” suddenly it’s her turn to squirm. “I think maybeIwanttomoveoutsoontoo?”

“What?” He blinks, slowly, because she cannot have said what he thinks she just said.

“I think I might want to move out soon?” She winces preemptively and tags on a little smile to take away the sting. She wants to leave?

This is news to Stiles. “What? How? Who? When? Where?”

A shrug. “That one company I’ve been translating manuals for between books, the Greek one?”

He has some vague recollection about her going on about shitty manuals, so he nods.

“They’re starting up a new product line soon and they offered me a year-long contract with them directly.” She pauses. “In Greece.”

Wow. “Wow. Are you thinking of going?”

She half shrugs and winces a little as Ali starts gumming on her finger. That kid is gonna want a trip to the milk bar soon. “I think it might be the change of scenery I need to get out of my funk? And that it’d be new and exciting and maybe I’d have the time there to, you know, try and write that novel? You could all come visit in the summer.” She blushes as she confesses the novel part, ducking her head, like she’s ashamed of having dreams and Stiles wants to hug her and smother her in blankets.

Instead, he tries to imagine Allison in a skimpy bikini on a balcony somewhere in Greece, writing a bestselling novel while drinking ouzo and driving all the local boys crazy. It’s a beautiful image.

“I’ll miss you,” he says, knee-walking closer to give her that hug after all, which she returns instantly, even as she protests, “I haven’t decided yet. And anyway, it’s not until spring next year.”

“You’ve already considered apartment logistics. You’re going,” he counters, knowingly. Because once she starts plotting details, Alli is committed.

And she deserves this. She deserves everything she wants, always, forever. Because she’s had it hard and she’s worked hard and she’s been lonely and hurt and she fixed herself. She’s the strongest person Stiles knows.

She shrugs. “So, you and Peter and the kids? Shacking up? That’s an option?”

Suddenly, Stiles has to laugh. He tries to stifle it, lest he wake Erica and Boyd or scare the baby, but god. “Look at us,” he chuckles. “A few months ago we were getting drunk bemoaning that everyone’s getting married and having babies and now here we are. You’re going to move to Europe and I’m thinking about moving in with my boyfriend and his three kids.”

They caught up, he thinks. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they caught up to their friends. A thought strikes him and in an awed whisper, he asks, “Is this growing up, Alli Cat? Are we *adulting*?!”

She leans into his side and deadpans into his ear. “I think so.”

They both pull back and stare at each other for a long moment. Then they dissolve into giggles.

“Took us long enough,” he manages between bouts before abruptly jumping to his feet and grabbing for his phone.

Erica and Boyd have taken over Alli’s bed, so they’re one short, and he suddenly wants to see Peter.

It takes three rings for the other man to answer and when he does, Stiles opens with, “Have you been buying furniture for a craft room for me at your house?”

Silence.

Then, “Maybe.”

Allison and Tiny Ali both makes faces at how ridiculous he is. Clearly, doing this with an audience was a bad idea.

“I’m coming over.”

He hangs up, briefly considers packing a bag and then decides against it because he has at least two changes of clothing and a toothbrush at the Hales’. Officially, it’s for when baby accidents necessitate a change of clothing. Unofficially, that’s a bullshit excuse.

He presses a kiss to both Al(l)is’ foreheads, ruffles the hair of the adult one and flees into the night.

Peter is waiting for him on the front porch, arms folded across his chest, one eyebrow raised. Stiles kicks the car into park and bounces up to him, giving him a peck on the cheek before announcing, “I’m an adult!”

Peter, bless him, just deadpans, “Thank god. Otherwise, what I do with you would be illegal.”

Mhm. “I don’t think anything we do is actually illegal. In the sex-act kind of way, I mean.”

“I’m still glad you’re an adult,” is the response and Stiles beams at his nonchalance.

“You still don’t get how amazing it is that you’re okay with the no-sex-acts thing, but that’s okay. I’ll explain it to you one day, but for now, I just kind of needed to tell you something. It’s probably way too early for this, but you have been buying me furniture without me noticing and Alli is moving to Greece and Scott and Kira are getting married and there’s a baby and Liam asked for more hours over break and there’s *you* and Laura asked me if I’m coming to her school thing next week and there’s *you* and I love you.”

He's known since that night in his father's kitchen, but with three grieving children, a wedding to plan, a store to run and everything else, there hasn't been time to think about it in more than passing. But now here it is, and he thought it would be terrifying, but it's not. Not at all. Instead it's all fuzzy warmth and nights spent snuggled up in bed, usually with one to three children piled on top.

Peter chuckles at his rant and counters with a simple, "I know."

...

No way.

"Did you just fucking Han Solo me?"

A blink. Peter runs a hand through his perfect, gorgeous hair and sighs like Stiles is an idiot. "No. Well, actually, yes, but not intentionally. Stiles, you've been dealing with me, my kids, my dying sister, all our hang-ups and issues and fuck knows what else for months, without ever hesitating or flinching. Technically, we've been on exactly one date but we've been acting more like a married couple than most married couples I know. Why else would you do all that, if you didn't--"

It's funny how suave Peter Hale can't seem to voice those two little words, stumbling over them like a school boy reciting poetry.

"Love you?" Stiles suggests.

Eye roll. Cockiness restored. "Yes. And I love you, too. Obviously." He pauses for a soft smile to mitigate the fact that he's kind of an asshole, even while making declarations of love, and adds, "Now can we please get inside? The phone woke Cora and she's been banging her rattle against the bars of her bed like a tiny convict, waking up the entire house."

"Really?" Stiles can feel his eyes grow wide at the image. "I need to see this!"

Peter moves sideways to let him hurry past, following him inside. "Just put her back down afterwards," he demands. "I'll knock the rest of the children back out."

At the foot of the stairs, Stiles stops, belatedly remembering that they were having a moment, just now. "Peter--"

"Later," the older man interrupts, smiling. "Kids first."

"Promise?"

Peter rolls his eyes. Again. Why did Stiles have to fall for the sass master himself?

"Promise."

Oh, right. That's why.

Upstairs, Cora bangs her rattle and garbles along.

Okay then.

Stiles grins.

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## Chapter End Notes

If there are any scenes left you'd like to see in this verse, leave me a comment. I'll put them all in a hat, draw three and write them as sidestories.

'till then, consider yourself adored.

## End Notes

If you haven't read the rant at the beginning, please do?

Also, [come visit me at my playground](#). There's random fandom stuff all over and the occasional DVD commentary on this fic.

And when the link inevitably crap out again because it hates me, just find me under wordsformurder.

Now also featuring pictures of various craft projects mentioned in the story.

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