

## You cannot love him...

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/72862251) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/72862251>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Teen Wolf (TV)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Peter Hale/Stiles Stilinski</a> , <a href="#">Derek Hale &amp; Stiles Stilinski</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Stiles Stilinski</a> , <a href="#">Derek Hale</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Mates Peter Hale/Stiles Stilinski</a> , <a href="#">Established Relationship</a> , <a href="#">Stiles Stilinski Loves Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Peter Hale Loves Stiles Stilinski</a> , <a href="#">Good Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Unrequited Love</a> , <a href="#">Unrequited Crush</a> , <a href="#">Derek Hale is Bad at Feelings</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Moving On</a> , <a href="#">Protective Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Stiles Stilinski is a Nice Thing</a> , <a href="#">Pack Alpha Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Derek Hale Needs Therapy</a> , <a href="#">Whumptober 2025</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Hopeful Ending</a> , <a href="#">Sexual Content</a> , <a href="#">Mild Sexual Content</a> , <a href="#">Possessive Behavior</a> , <a href="#">Possessive Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Derek Hale Loves Stiles Stilinski</a> , <a href="#">Pack Dynamics</a> , <a href="#">Love Confessions</a> , <a href="#">Peter Hale is a Little Shit</a> , <a href="#">Caring Peter Hale</a> , <a href="#">Miscommunication</a> , <a href="#">Praise Kink</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 21 of <a href="#">Whumptober 2025</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Whumptober 2025</a>
Stats:	Published: 2025-10-21 Words: 11,785 Chapters: 1/1

# You cannot love him...

by [Anything00but](#)

## Summary

Peter knows- he just knows that Derek has a developed feelings for Stiles. He can see it in every look Derek gives the human, every time Derek's voice soften just for Stiles. And Peter won't stand it even though he knows that Stiles is his and Stiles would never stray from him. Derek needs to lose his feelings before something happens.

## Notes

Okey, this wasn't intended to come today, but the story I had for this day, it's just so so dark that I don't know if I want to post it. So I picked this up from later date and now I need to write a new story 🥺 😊

**No. 21:** “Sold my soul, broke my bones.”

Kneeling | Makeshift Splint | Brainwashed | alternate prompt **Innocent Bystander**

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Peter has known for a while now. Definitely long before Derek knew it himself. Long before those flickering glances and tensed silences becomes anything more than confusion in the younger Hale's chest. It had began subtly, the way Derek's voice softens around Stiles, how his eyes follow the boy through the room. And Peter possessive as ever, notices. Of course he notices because Stiles is his and he isn't planning on sharing. And Stiles remains blissfully unaware. He's too wrapped up in their life together, too grounded in the years they have carved out, the battles they've survived and the unspoken vows whispered under sheets. He trusts Peter with a depth that makes the older man's chest ache sometimes. It's loyalty. It's love of the purest form, an anchor for both of them.

And Peter? He's not a man easily shaken but Derek's feelings aren't harmless. They simmer beneath the surface with a certain guilt that makes Peter almost pity the boy. Almost, but Derek should know better than touch what doesn't belong to him. Better yet- not even look towards Stiles while he's battling with those unwanted feelings.

Stiles has wandered off to help Lydia with runes or records one night that Peter doesn't care because it leaves him alone with Derek in the kitchen. The air between them is strained like a wire pulled too tight.

“You should stop,” Peter say, casually sipping his wine, eyes not leaving the glass.

Derek stiffens: “Stop what?”

“You know what,” Peter says, not elaborating further.

The silence that follows is heavy. Derek leans against the counter jaw clenched.

“It's not like I-” Derek tries to argue.

“But you do,” Peter's voice cuts sharp, “Don't insult us both by pretending otherwise.”

Derek doesn't respond right away, his fists tightening at his sides. His familiar Hale eyes meet Peter's with the barest glimmer of defiance.

“I would never do anything to hurt him,” Derek finally gets out.

“I know,” Peter answers, voice softening dangerously, “But feelings can rot. They grow in silence and twist and what you feel... it's already a betrayal. Not to me but to yourself

because he will never be yours. Stiles is mine, not just in name or body. He chose me over everyone. Over you.”

Derek looks away, breathing tight.

“I’m not angry,” Peter says, almost gleeful, “Not yet, but I will be if you make me remind him and I don’t think any of us want that.”

There’s nothing more to say. And when Stiles returns a while later laughing about some nonsense with Lydia, he slips into Peter’s space easily, curling a hand around his wrist like he always does. Peter meets Derek’s eyes over Stiles’ shoulder and smiles. The message is clear.

Mine.

Stiles doesn’t notice the way Derek quietly slips out of the room. He doesn’t see the way Peter’s gaze follows him. All he knows is that Peter’s hand is warm where he holds it, and that being close to him always feels like the world makes sense again.

“You okay?” Stiles asks, squeezing his fingers, “You’re all broody. Broodier than usual, I mean. On the Hale scale that’s like a category 7.”

Peter hums, smoothing his thumb over the inside of Stiles’ wrist: “I’m always okay when you’re with me.”

Stiles narrows his eyes: “That’s sweet... and suspicious.”

Peter only smiles: “Can’t I just love you in peace?”

“Sure,” Stiles says stepping closer, chin tilted up, “As long as you’re not plotting murder while doing it.”

Peter’s lips curve in amusement: “If I was, you’d be the last to know.”

“Exactly my point,” Stiles huffs but laughs.

He kisses Peter then, a soft press of lips that spoke of years spent surviving together, fighting for each other, choosing each other over and over again. And Peter lets himself melt into it, taking comfort in the way Stiles leans into him without hesitation. But later, after everyone has gone to bed, Peter sits on the edge of their shared bed watching Stiles sleep. He looks so peaceful like this. So his and yet Peter can’t stop thinking about Derek’s face, or the way he’d clenched his jaw and looked away. Peter has seen what longing does to people. He’s seen obsession take root, and love turn to something twisted when left unspoken for too long. Derek won’t act, he’s sure of that. But he also knows emotions have a way of bleeding into actions.

And Peter has worked too hard for Stiles.

He leans down brushing a kiss to Stiles’ temple, whispering against his skin: “You’re mine.”

Then he stands, silent as a ghost, slipping from the room. He finds Derek in the backyard standing in the cold night air like it could wash away the thing sitting heavy in his chest.

“You need to leave for a while,” Peter says quietly.

Derek turns, startled: “What?”

“Take a mission. Go scout something. Go anywhere that isn’t here,” Peter says, more like orders.

“That’s not your call to make,” Derek argues.

“It is when it concerns Stiles.”

Derek’s face twists: “I wouldn’t-”

“But you want to,” Peter says, stepping closer, “And I don’t trust what that might become.”

Derek’s silence is confirmation enough.

“I’m not giving you a choice,” Peter says, eyes glowing faintly with the weight of his authority, of his claim, “You go. You figure yourself out and when you come back, if you come back, those feelings better be dead and buried. Or I will bury them for you.”

The tension crackles between them like lightning, but Derek finally looks away.

“Fine,” Derek mutters.

Peter exhales slowly: “Good.”

And as Derek turns and walks away, Peter stands alone under the moonlight victorious because no one touches what is his.

The next morning, Stiles wakes to sunlight pouring through the curtains and the quiet rustle of Peter dressing beside the bed. He blinks blearily, stretching, then sits up with a yawn.

“Hey,” Stiles says, voice still sleep-rough, “Where’s Derek? I didn’t hear him sulking in the kitchen yet. That’s, like, a daily tradition.”

Peter glances over his shoulder, buttoning his shirt: “He left early this morning.”

Stiles frowns: “What do you mean, “left”? Left where?”

“Out-of-town recon mission,” Peter says smoothly, crossing the room to press a kiss to Stiles’ forehead, “Something came up. He volunteered.”

“Since when does Derek volunteer for anything?” Stiles mutters, rubbing at his eyes, “Especially alone.”

Peter smiles, brushing a thumb across Stiles’ cheek: “Since I suggested it might do him some good. He’s been restless.”

Stiles squints at him: “Restless how?”

Peter sits on the edge of the bed, careful, composed: “You’ve seen it, haven’t you? The way he’s been pacing around like a caged wolf, throwing himself into training, brooding more than usual. I thought it best that he had something else to focus on. Somewhere else.”

Stiles studies him for a moment, suspicion creeping into the lines of his face.

“So you just- sent him away?” Stiles asks.

“I didn’t send him,” Peter says with a quiet chuckle, “I made a suggestion. He chose to go.”

Stiles frowns, chewing the inside of his cheek, “He didn’t say goodbye.”

Peter’s fingers thread gently through his hair: “I think he didn’t want to make it a thing.”

“Still. Kinda weird,” Stiles mumbles, leaning into the touch despite himself, “What’s he even scouting?”

“Just some rumors of rogue activity further north. Nothing serious.”

It’s a lie dressed up in easy confidence, and it settled into Stiles like a pebble dropped in still water. Small, but creating ripples. Peter sees it. He sees the flicker of doubt, the way Stiles’ eyes linger on him a moment too long. Stiles isn’t stupid and he knows something is going on. But Stiles doesn’t press. He simply nods and says “Okay,” before crawling out of bed and tugging on Peter’s shirt like a robe.

Peter stands behind him as he brushes his teeth, arms sliding around Stiles’ waist, chin resting on his shoulder. In the mirror, their eyes meet.

“You miss him already?” Peter asks, quiet but curious.

Stiles blinks at the question: “What? No. I mean- yeah, kind of, I guess. He’s pack. I worry about him.”

Peter nods slowly, brushing a kiss just behind his ear.

“I’ll protect everyone in this pack,” Peter murmurs, “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says softly, “I know.”

But that pebble keeps sinking. And somewhere deep inside, a part of Stiles begins to wonder if Peter is protecting the pack or is he protecting something else entirely.

The days that follow are normal, but just off enough to make Stiles feel like he is living in a world one degree out of sync. Peter is attentive, more than usual. Always near, always touching his fingers brushing the small of Stiles’ back in the kitchen, ghosting along his wrist when they passed in the hall. And it isn’t that Stiles doesn’t love it. He does. Peter’s attention has always been a warm weight on his skin, grounding and possessive in a way that makes Stiles feel wanted and safe but now, it feels like a shield. Like Peter is trying to wrap himself

around Stiles too tightly. Like he's hiding something. The others don't say much about Derek's absence. When Stiles asks Lydia, she just shrugs.

"Peter said Derek took off on some scouting thing. You know how he gets when he's moody."

Which isn't wrong. But still.

It has been a week. No calls. No updates. No texts. Not even to him and that's wrong. One night, Stiles sits on the front porch wrapped in Peter's jacket, staring up at the stars. The night is quiet. He barely notices Peter approaching until the older man sits beside him, thigh pressed warmly to his.

"You've been quiet lately," Peter says.

"So have you," Stiles replies without looking at him.

Peter tilts his head, watching him: "You don't trust what I said about Derek."

Stiles finally meets his eyes: "I don't know. I want to. I always want to trust you."

Peter's expression softened: "Then trust me now."

Stiles hesitates, biting his lip: "You didn't answer the real question, though."

"What question is that?"

Stiles turns to face him fully: "Why did you want him gone?"

Peter's eyes flicker: "I told you. He needed space. He was becoming a risk to the cohesion of the pack."

"That's not the same thing as protecting him. That's managing him," Stiles' voice is soft but sharp, "And you're not usually that generous."

Peter exhales slowly, almost like he's deciding how much to give away. He leans back on his elbows, eyes drifting to the stars.

Peter says at last, "I know what it looks like when someone wants something they shouldn't. When someone looks at you the way Derek's been looking at you."

Stiles' breath catches.

"He didn't say anything," Peter adds quickly, "And he wouldn't. He's too honorable but feelings like that left unchecked, they fester. They turn into something worse and I won't let anyone, even family, complicate what we have."

Stiles stares at him, stunned, the words sinking deep into his chest. He hadn't seen it, or maybe he had, but refused to believe it. Derek has always been quiet with him, careful. But

now Stiles replays moments with a different lens. The extra seconds of eye contact, the soft way Derek would say his name, the way he always sits too close when there is space.

God.

“I didn’t want to make this your burden,” Peter says gently, “So I made it mine.”

Stiles is quiet a long moment. Then he leans into Peter’s side, head resting on his shoulder.

“You’re such a bastard sometimes,” Stiles murmurs.

Peter smiles: “But I’m your bastard.”

Stiles huffs a laugh, though his chest still feels tight. Peter might be telling the truth but Peter always tells the truth in ways that leave just enough shadow behind. And Stiles can’t help but wonder- is Derek really off getting clarity? Or had Peter made sure he wouldn’t come back until he’s sure Stiles wouldn’t go looking for him? And maybe worse... why does that part of him- small and buried- feel relieved?

He closes his eyes pressing his face to the curve of Peter’s neck. Peter holds him tighter, watching the darkness beyond the porch like it owes him something.

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It’s a quiet morning. The sun is just starting to warm the kitchen through the tall windows, casting gold across the table. Stiles is perched on the counter, barefoot, legs swinging lazily and sipping coffee from his favorite mug. He’s wearing one of Peter’s shirts- soft and a little too big. It hangs low on his collarbones, one side slipping off his shoulder like it’s made to invite trouble. Peter is at the stove humming something low under his breath as he stirred eggs, glancing back every so often to admire the view. Stiles catches him looking and smirks around the rim of his mug.

“You keep staring at me like that, and breakfast’s gonna burn.”

Peter doesn’t answer. Just give him that knowing smile that says, let it burn then. The creak of the front door is subtle and the footsteps that follow are familiar. Peter doesn’t turn, but Stiles does. Derek stands in the entryway of the kitchen still dusted in road grime, dark duffel slung over one shoulder. His eyes sweep the room once, just once and then they land on Stiles. And they linger. There’s a beat too long where he doesn’t speak.

Stiles blinks in surprise, setting his mug down: “Derek? Jesus, you’re alive.”

That snaps Derek out of it. He drops the bag with a dull thud and gives a short nod.

“Yeah. Sorry. Should’ve called.”

Peter turns slowly, spatula still in hand and says in a voice cool as winter air: “Yes. You should have.”

Derek ignores him, eyes still flicking over Stiles. Over the shirt, the bare skin, the intimate casualness of him perched in Peter’s space. And Stiles doesn’t miss it this time. The way Derek’s jaw tenses, something unspoken flickering across his face. Stiles hops off the counter and crosses the kitchen, stopping just shy of touching Derek.

“You look like hell,” Stiles says softly, “You okay?”

“I’ve been worse,” Derek says, his voice rough, “Got what you needed, by the way. Info on that rogue group up north. They’re scattering, nothing organized.”

Stiles nods, searching his face: “You should rest.”

“I will,” Derek answers, eyes darting briefly to Peter behind him, “Eventually.”

Peter’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes: “How noble.”

Derek doesn’t respond. Stiles, still too aware of how he must look, tugs the edge of the shirt closer around himself.

“I’m gonna go grab a hoodie. Be right back.”

Peter’s eyes never leave Derek as Stiles leaves the room. And once they are alone, the air shifts.

“I thought I made myself clear,” Peter says, low.

“You did,” Derek’s voice is steady, but there’s a sharpness behind it now, “Doesn’t mean I stopped caring.”

Peter steps forward: “Then you’re more foolish than I thought. Because he’s mine. Every piece of him. And you-”

“I know what I am,” Derek snaps back, “I know he doesn’t want me like that.”

Peter tilts his head, studying him: “Then why are you still looking at him like he’s yours to want?”

Derek’s breath catches just slightly. But Peter sees it. He can sense it.

“You can stay,” Peter says, voice cool and smooth like a blade, “But you will behave. You will remember your place. And you will not, under any circumstances, make him feel guilty for loving me instead of you.”

“I wouldn’t do that to him,” Derek’s hands curl into fists, “But you would.”

Peter’s smile is all teeth: “I already have him, Derek. I don’t need to play games. He loves me, I love him- there’s no room for you in there. So stay away and don’t make this his

problem to solve when it's you who doesn't know how to act."

And in the quiet that follows, Stiles returns, now zipped into one of his own hoodies, his expression neutral but his eyes flicker between them catching the last traces of something unspoken.

"Everything okay?" Stiles asks, cautiously while settling back to Peter's side.

Peter turns to him with a disarming smile: "Of course, darling. Just catching Derek up on everything he's missed."

And Stiles smiles back. Derek sees the way Stiles' eyes linger on Peter a little too long. Sees the way Peter's fingers brush the small of his back as he passes. And Derek knows that he's too late. Years too late. He should have acted years back when Peter was out of the picture, but as soon as the older man had come back, Stiles had been a goner. Peter had wanted the human and he had gotten the human. And Stiles likes it, likes being with Peter, likes being pampered, loves the intense way Peter loves. And Derek sees it- he does. But that doesn't mean he can stop looking. Stiles sits back down at the table. He watches Derek from the corner of his eye, quietly processing the subtle shift in the air. Peter sets a plate in front of him with eggs, toast, perfect as always and kisses his temple like nothing has changed.

And maybe for Stiles nothing has changed.

"Eat," Peter says softly, "You'll need the energy."

Stiles gives a quiet laugh, but it's distracted: "Not for any particular reason, I hope?"

Peter's smile is amused as he answers: "We'll see."

Derek still hasn't moved from the doorway. He looks like he wants to say something but can't find the right words. Eventually, he crosses the kitchen and sits at the far end of the table. Derek doesn't look at him, just pours his coffee in silence. The breakfast is quiet, the kind of quiet where every fork scrape and every breath is magnified. Stiles glances between them, then down at his plate, picking at his toast.

"You're really not gonna tell me what happened while you were gone?" Stiles asks eventually, directing the question at Derek.

Derek shakes his head, "Nothing important."

"Seems like something," Stiles presses, "You disappear for weeks. No calls, no updates. That's not like you."

Peter is silent, eyes fixed on his food like he isn't even listening.

Derek hesitates: "I needed space to clear my head."

"Because of me?" Stiles asks, voice quieter.

The question lands like a dropped match in dry grass. Peter's gaze flicks up sharply landing on Derek, warning and a threat all at once. Derek finally looks at him and for a heartbeat, the mask slips.

"Not because of you," Derek says, "Because of how I see you."

Stiles freezes. Peter doesn't. He reaches over, slowly and brushes the crumbs from Stiles' cheek with the pad of his thumb.

Stiles swallows hard, feeling uncomfortable to be put in that situation: "Derek...."

"You don't have to say anything," Derek cuts in quickly, "I'm not here to ruin anything. I just needed to be honest."

Stiles doesn't speak right away. There's a heaviness in his chest he can't name. Guilt? Pity? Something else?

"I care about you," Stiles says eventually, "But not like that. Not the way you want me to-"

Derek nods: "I know."

And he does but that doesn't make it easier to sit here and watch Peter press another kiss to Stiles' temple like he's sealing a victory.

"I'm going to go clean up," Derek says, standing too abruptly, "Thanks for breakfast."

He leaves the room without another word. Stiles stares down at his half-finished plate, suddenly not hungry.

"You handled that well," Peter leans in, voice low and intimate.

"Don't," Stiles gives him a look.

"Don't what?"

"Don't act like this is some kind of game you won."

Peter's expression darkens: "It's not a game, I agree. But I won all the same. And I'll keep winning, because he doesn't have what you need. He never will."

"And what exactly do I need?" Stiles looks at him, jaw tight.

"Me," Peter's smile returns, dark.

Stiles doesn't argue. He can't because a part of him, that stubborn and tangled and too deeply entwined in Peter Hale part of him, knows it's true. But another part, the quieter one, the one that watched Derek walk away without looking back- That part wonders what would've happened if things had been different. What if Peter had never returned to Beacon Hills? What if Peter hadn't wanted him? What if-? If he had been different. And that thought haunts him more than he's willing to admit. Derek doesn't come down for the rest of the day and

Stiles doesn't go looking. Not because he doesn't care but because he knows Derek needs the silence. And because he also knows that if he goes upstairs, Peter would be at his back in a second, not out of jealousy, but instinct.

And Stiles understands that instinct.

By the time evening falls, Stiles is curled on the couch with his legs across Peter's lap, some old movie playing low on the TV. Peter's fingers trace idle circles along his shin.

"I didn't say thank you," Stiles says after a while, not looking at him.

Peter tilts his head: "For what?"

"For knowing. For doing what I couldn't with Derek."

"You're not angry?" Peter's fingers still.

"No. I think if you hadn't stepped in, I might've tried to fix it. Tried to soften it for him and maybe that would've made it worse," Stiles shakes his head.

Peter gives a small, satisfied hum: "It would have. You're empathetic to a fault and that's why you have me."

"Because you're so good at boundaries?" Stiles grins content.

"Because I'm good at enforcing them," Peter smirks and there's something dangerous in it.

Stiles reaches out and threads his fingers through Peter's: "You always know how to make me feel protected. Like I'm not supposed to apologize for being loved."

"Because you're not," Peter's hand tightens around his.

They sit in silence for a while longer, the kind that feels like breathing in sync.

Then Peter says:, "He'll stay. For now. He's not a threat, not anymore."

"I know," Stiles looks up at the ceiling, voice quiet, "I do feel bad, though."

"You can feel bad," Peter allows, "Just don't feel guilty."

"You say that like they're different," Stiles gives him a look.

"They are," Peter turns toward him, expression softening as he speaks, "You didn't invite his feelings. You never led him on. You've been mine since the beginning."

And it's true. That is the thing that matters most to Stiles. Not loyalty born of obligation but of choice. He has chosen Peter when he could have walked away. He stayed through the slow trust, through the sharp edges. He stayed because Peter saw all of him and never looked away. He's never once doubted the love between them. It's twisted in all the right ways. Stiles might question Peter's methods sometimes, but never his heart.

Stiles leans in, brushing his mouth against Peter's in a slow, easy kiss: "You're it for me, you know."

"I know," Peter smiles against his lips.

And from the hallway upstairs, just out of sight, Derek stands in the shadows, listening. Derek isn't trying to torture himself. Not consciously but somehow, he always ends up there, in the kitchen doorway, or at the edge of the living room, just far enough away to pretend he isn't watching, but close enough to see everything. Like now. Derek stands frozen in the hallway, hidden behind the sliver of wall. He hadn't meant to linger, but he hadn't been able to stop himself either. Every moment he witnesses between them chips away at something inside him he hasn't even realized is still intact. Because it isn't just the love between them. It's the comfort. The familiarity and the kind of ease that only comes from time and shared scars. Peter for all his sharp edges and cool control, looks soft around Stiles. And Stiles, he glows in Peter's orbit and not because he needs Peter to shine, but because he wants to. And that is worse than the rejection. Derek has never even been in the running. He'd seen something wild in Stiles, something bright and clever and aching to be held and thought maybe he could be the one to hold it. But Peter had already gotten there first with hands that knew exactly when to grip tight and when to let go. With one last look, Derek turns around and heads back to his room.

Later that night, Derek tries to stay in his room, headphones on, trying to block them out. But he can still hear Stiles' laugh echoing down the hall. He lays back on his bed, arm flung over his eyes, and lets the ache settle deep in his chest. Peter had what Derek didn't even know he needed. And Stiles has everything. Love, place to call home, purpose and Stiles has found all that in Peter. Derek doesn't even hate them for it. He just wishes he could forget but he didn't know that the real hell was only coming.

---

Derek offers to do a supply run with Stiles. It's supposed to be neutral ground- milk, eggs, flour, nothing dramatic. But halfway through the store some stranger brushes too close to Stiles, muttering something under his breath. Stiles doesn't even flinch. He just blinks, turning his head and there's Peter. Appearing out of nowhere like summoned by a shift in the air. Peter's hand is on the small of Stiles' back automatically, body angled between him and the stranger with a lazy smile that holds all the weight of a loaded weapon.

"Problem?" Peter asks, voice all velvet threat.

The guy backs off instantly and doesn't even look at Derek. Later, in the parking lot, Derek watches as Stiles elbows Peter gently.

"You were across the store. Did you feel that?"

Peter just looks at him and answers: "Of course."

“You’re terrifying,” Stiles shakes his head, grinning.

Later that day tempers flare during a pack meeting with Scott pushing for one decision, Peter for another. It’s tense, voices raised, the room crackling with dominance and half-restrained snarls. Stiles doesn’t speak until Scott says something that questions Peter’s place at the table. And then Stiles stands.

“Don’t talk to him like that.”

Scott tries to backpedal, but Stiles is already in front of Peter who sits perfectly still behind him. Derek sees it, the way Peter’s hand comes up to rest gently against the back of Stiles’ thigh. A reminder that he’s there, always.

And when the meeting finally ends and everyone file out, Peter rises behind him and says only: “That was reckless.”

“You’re welcome,” Stiles turns to him smirking.

Peter kisses him like the argument had only made him love him more. Derek turns to look the other way because that kind of love- it’s dangerous and selfish. It’s all consuming. And he would want that, more than anything.

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Derek has really tried to keep his distance from Stiles. The best he can while still living under the same roof. But it’s difficult to avoid the human when Stiles is literally everywhere, and he’s just so perfect, just too much himself. Stiles finds Derek on the porch steps just after dawn, hoodie pulled over his head, hands braced on his knees. He looks like he hasn’t slept again. Stiles holds out the mug. Derek doesn’t take it at first but after a beat he accepts it. Their fingers brushes, barely and Stiles sits down beside him with a quiet sigh. They sit in silence for a few minutes, the steam curling up between them.

“Are you okay?” Stiles finally asks.

Derek doesn’t look at him: “I’m fine.”

“Yeah, that’s not an answer. That’s a reflex.”

Something flickers across Derek’s face then. Something raw and for a moment, Stiles thinks he might reach out. Say something honest, something that would pull the ache between them into the open. But then the door creaks behind them and Peter steps into the doorway. Shirt unbuttoned, hair damp from a shower, eyes immediately scanning the scene. Stiles feels the shift. Feels Derek retreating into himself again.

“Everything alright?” Peter asks, deceptively calm.

“Yeah,” Stiles answers easily, “Just catching up.”

Peter's gaze doesn't move from Derek: "Good. You've been quiet lately."

Derek stands abruptly, still holding the mug.

"Thanks for the tea," Derek says to Stiles, "I should get ready for patrol."

And then he's gone. Peter watches him go with a narrowed gaze, arms folding across his chest. Peter steps closer, crouches in front of him and rests his hands on Stiles' knees.

"I'm not jealous," Peter says quietly, "I'm protective."

"I know," Stiles murmurs, "But sometimes those look the same. And he's hurting."

Peter's jaw tightens: "And if he turns that hurt into something else?"

"Then we'll deal with it. Together," Stiles touches Peter's cheek, thumbing over the skin there.

But Peter's silence lingers a beat too long. Because he already knows what's coming. He knows Derek. Knows that look in his eye, and he knows how dangerous hope can be when it has no place to land. Peter has spent too long building a home with Stiles to let anyone crack its foundation. Especially family. Not even Derek has a place to destroy what Peter has built with Stiles.

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It's just supposed to be sparring. Routine they have done a hundred times but something in Derek is off. The man is too aggressive in how he moves. Peter notices it first as he watches from the sidelines, arms folded, expression unreadable as Stiles moves around the mat with practiced ease. The pack has cleared out but Peter stays. Always does when Stiles is fighting. Derek goes in too fast, barely pulling his strength. Stiles counters, but his eyes narrow slightly in a silent warning.

"Easy," Stiles says, breathless but still playful, "We're not trying to decapitate each other, right?"

Derek doesn't answer. The next strike is sharper, more emotional than strategic and Stiles stumbles just for a second. And Peter is there in seconds moving across the mat before anyone can blink, hand clamping around Derek's wrist mid-swing.

"That's enough," Peter commands coldly.

The air turns tense. Derek looks down at Peter's hand, then into Peter's eyes. Stiles steps between them quickly.

"Hey- hey, it's fine. He didn't mean-"

Peter's voice doesn't rise, but it cuts like a blade: "Intent doesn't matter when control is lost."

Derek wrenches his hand back and leaves the room in silence.

Stiles turns to Peter, frowning: "You didn't have to go full Hale."

Peter looks at him, jaw tight: "And he didn't have to act like he was fighting for something more than practice."

Peter watches Derek's back as the man retreats away from the training and pulls Stiles closer to him.

---

It's a few weeks later when they celebrate Stiles' birthday. A quiet celebration for Stiles' birthday, the pack gathered in soft laughter and warm candlelight. But Peter has planned it all. All the small touches Stiles hadn't expected. Stiles' favorite pie instead of cake. His favorite beer chilled just right. A new worn leather journal, monogrammed, tucked into wrapping paper with a note that simply said: Because you think too loud sometimes. Love, P. Stiles beams, glowing in that soft way only Peter can pull from him. And Peter kisses the corner of his mouth like they are alone in a room full of people. Derek watches from across the table, his drink untouched. Later, Stiles finds him in the hallway outside the kitchen.

"You okay?"

Derek shrugs: "You two seem good."

"We are," Stiles smiles with no hesitation.

Derek hesitates before asking, fearing the answer: "He planned the whole thing?"

"Of course," Stiles says, with warmth in his voice, "Peter remembers the things I forget to admit I want."

Something flickers across Derek's face. Regret, maybe. Or something sharper. But before Stiles can comment, Peter calls his name from the living room. Stiles turns towards the sound and in that time, Derek slips away. Later that night after the party has ended, Derek comes downstairs for water and pauses outside the living room. The fire is low. Stiles is curled against Peter's chest, head on his shoulder, half-asleep. Peter has one hand stroking gently down Stiles' spine, the other holding a book, eyes scanning the page as if he's done this exact thing a hundred nights before. Stiles murmurs something sleepy. Peter bends his head and kisses his temple.

"I've got you," Peter whispers.

And Derek, standing in the dark, feels something cold and hollow settle deep in his chest. Something he knows isn't fair. The following morning it's barely sunrise when Derek walks

into the kitchen and finds them already there. Stiles in Peter's lap, half-wrapped in a blanket, mug clutched in both hands. Peter's arms are around his waist, chin resting on his shoulder, murmuring something low that makes Stiles smile sleepily. Derek freezes at the threshold before he can make himself move again, acting like nothing bothers him. Peter sees him first. His gaze meets Derek's over the rim of Stiles' coffee mug. Challenging. Stiles turns when Peter squeezed his hip lightly.

"Hey," Stiles says, voice rough from sleep, "Want some? I made extra."

Derek shakes his head, too tight: "Didn't mean to interrupt."

Peter's voice is velvet and steel: "You didn't."

"You live here too," Stiles mumbles sleepily.

But Derek has already turned, walking out before the kettle even whistles. He stays in his room until dinner time.

Kira is laughing. Jackson is grumbling about something and Lydia is halfway through a story. And Peter? Peter is slicing Stiles' steak for him without being asked, eyes never leaving the conversation. Stiles rolls his eyes, but leans into his side and steals one of Peter's fries in retaliation. Peter doesn't blink. He just slides the entire plate toward Stiles with a soft unguarded smile. Derek stares hard. He knows Peter and Stiles aren't rubbing their relationship on his face- at least Stiles isn't, but it still grates him. His feelings haven't gone anywhere and it feels like they are only growing day by day, making roots, cementing themselves inside him.

---

It's late and everyone is tired, arguing over patrol shifts and strategies. Derek makes a suggestion, one Stiles disagrees with reasonably but Derek bristles.

"I know you think everything Peter does is gospel," Derek says, too sharp, "But maybe we could try thinking for ourselves."

The room goes quiet. Peter doesn't speak but his eyes land on Derek, judging and before he can open his mouth Stiles speaks.

"I do think for myself. I just happen to agree with him and I don't need your approval for that."

Derek's jaw flexes, something bitter flashing across his face. Peter doesn't even look away from his notes.

"You can question my logic all you like," Peter answers, "But you don't get to insult Stiles in the process."

It's over in seconds. And Derek sits back, swallowing everything he wants to say. The meeting drags on and Derek keeps quiet. The meeting ends and most of the pack heads to bed, the house settling into its usual creaks and sighs. Peter heads out, tracking something on the edge of their territory, giving Stiles space, though he doesn't say it aloud. Stiles finds Derek on the back deck, sitting in the dark with nothing but the moon above and a barely touched glass of whiskey by his side. He doesn't say anything at first, just sits down beside him, legs drawn up. They listen to the wind for a long time.

"I miss when we used to talk," Stiles says finally, voice quiet, "Even if it was just grunts and death glares. At least it was something."

Derek doesn't look at him.

"You've been avoiding me. Not even subtle about it, either. And before you say you haven't- come on. You live in a house full of werewolves. You really think I don't notice?" Still nothing. Stiles shifts, folding one leg under himself to face him more fully, "I just- I care, okay? And I'm not asking for some deep emotional purge. I'm not trying to drag something out of you that you're not ready for."

He pauses, watching Derek's profile, shadowed and still.

"I just want to know you're okay. Because, look," Stiles continues, tone softer now, "If I've done something- if I hurt you somehow, I don't even know how but if I did, I want to fix it. Or at least acknowledge it."

Derek's hand tightens on the armrest. Because how can Derek confess that he would love nothing more than to take Peter's place. To have Stiles looking at him like Stiles now looks at Peter. To have that kind of undivided love and attention, that devotion the two share. But Peter had warned him, told him to stay away- Stiles waits, giving him the silence to speak into, if he wants to. But Derek doesn't and minutes pass. Long, stretching minutes full of words that never make it out of his mouth. Eventually, Stiles nods slowly. Not hurt, not angry- just sad.

"Okay," Stiles says gently, "I hear you. Even when you don't say anything."

He stands, giving Derek a last glance, not expecting an answer anymore.

"I'm always here," Stiles adds, voice barely above a whisper, "But you already know that."

And he walks back into the house, the door clicking softly behind him.

The next morning, Peter returns just as Stiles is pouring coffee. There's a soft kiss to his temple, fingers brushing down his back. But when Peter sees Derek coming down the stairs, eyes a little bloodshot and mouth set in a tight line his attention shifts. There's no question in it. Peter's gaze lingers a moment too long. Then he turns away with a subtle smirk, one arm sliding easily around Stiles' waist.

"You look tired," Peter says, deliberately loud enough for Derek to hear, "Everything okay?"

“Didn’t sleep great,” Stiles blinks, caught a little off guard.

“Guess I’ll just have to exhaust you properly tonight,” Peter tugs him closer.

Derek stiffens where he stands and Peter doesn’t look at him again but he doesn’t have to. Peter keeps his distance the whole day, but Derek can feel his eyes on his all the time he leaves his room. The older man is watching him and Derek knows what’s coming. It’s only a matter of time.

It’s just past midnight when Peter finds Derek outside, on the edge of the woods.

“You think no one noticed?” Peter says after a long moment, voice calm.

Derek doesn’t respond but Peter continues anyway.

“Stiles may still think the best of you. He wants to believe you’re just hurting. Confused... Lonely,” His head tilts, voice lowering, “But I see what you don’t say. What you want and haven’t asked for.”

Derek’s fists clench. Peter smiles.

“You’re not going to take him from me, Derek. You never had him to begin with.”

Derek’s jaw tightens: “I never tried to.”

“No,” Peter says, “You just hoped he’d fall into the space you kept warm for him. Too late now, isn’t it?”

Peter starts to walk away, then pauses.

“And one more thing,” Peter adds without turning back, “If you ever touch him with anything other than brotherhood in your heart I will end it.”

Then he’s gone.

---

Everyone else is gone for the weekend. Visiting family, doing anything that doesn’t involve being under one roof with two men whose bond has become impossible to ignore the past few days. Stiles sprawls out on the couch with a book. Peter cooks dinner just for the two of them. There are wine glasses, a fire burning low, music playing soft and low from someone’s forgotten playlist. And now late evening, Peter has Stiles pressed to the mattress, their room flooded with warmth and the scent of skin and home. The door deliberately left ajar, let the hallway catch the breathless sounds of lips parting, the soft hush of fabric sliding off flushed skin, and the low, intimate hum of Peter’s voice curling possessively around Stiles’ name.

“Mine,” Peter murmurs against his neck, one hand over Stiles’ ribs, the other cradling his jaw as if he is something precious and breakable.

Stiles arched into him, head falling back.

“Always.”

And Peter smiles darkly because he heard it. The sound of keys at the front door, boots being kicked off too quickly. Derek stepping into the house and stilling completely. From where the door is open just enough, Peter knows the acoustics well, every sound will carry. He dips his head lower, brushing his mouth along Stiles’ throat, a slow bite trailing into a kiss as Stiles moans softly, hands gripping at Peter’s back. Downstairs, Derek stands frozen, listening. He doesn’t mean to. He should have turned away. But he doesn’t. He can’t.

Peter’s voice floats down like silk and razors: “You feel that, sweetheart?”

Stiles gasped: “Y-yeah.”

“Good. Because I want you to remember it when we’re surrounded. When they all look at you and forget who you belong to.”

Peter moves shifting his grip, making Stiles gasp again.

“Say it.”

“Yours,” Stiles chokes out, raw and honest and so achingly sure.

“Louder.”

“Yours. Always.”

Peter kisses him then like he’s etching those words into his lungs. Derek’s claws pierce his palms where he stands. And Peter knows because the house was supposed to be empty. Just for them for the weekend. Derek’s return is unplanned, barely a day early. He hadn’t texted ahead, hadn’t wanted to disturb anything but somehow Peter had seen it coming. Derek stands there, duffel over his shoulder, fully expecting to drop it in his room and take a shower. The sounds drift down from upstairs. A muffled moan, the kind torn from someone without meaning to. His body knows what it meant before his brain caught up.

And then he hears Peter’s voice.

“Keep your hands there, sweetheart. That’s it.”

Stiles’ laugh follows, breathless and loose with want: “You’re such a- ah... control freak.”

“I like knowing what’s mine.”

Peter’s tone is low. Possessive in all the intimacy and the bedroom door is open. Derek shouldn’t move. Should turn around, walk out, run. But his feet carry him up two stairs, then four. Until the soft creak of the landing underfoot betrays him. But the sounds from upstairs

don't stop. And then he sees them. The door is cracked open and the sight through it sears into him. Stiles is on his back, flushed and pliant under Peter, Peter's shirt half unbuttoned, sleeves rolled to the elbows. His hands frame Stiles' hips, grounding, claiming what is his. And Stiles is glowing, open and trusting, his hands tangled in the sheets above his head.

Then he laughs again, soft and wrecked: "Peter, you're so- I love you."

Peter doesn't respond with words. He leans down, mouth catching Stiles' in a kiss that is pure possession, like he's devouring a prayer meant only for him. Derek's breath catches. And then Peter lifts his head, eyes flicking up toward the cracked door. He sees him and their eyes lock. Peter doesn't stop. He smirks. He brushes his fingers up Stiles' side drawing another sound from him, desperate and Derek watches, frozen in place, shame and longing choking him. Peter mouths one word as their eyes hold.

"Mine."

Then he reaches up, still without Stiles knowing and pushes the bedroom door almost shut with the barest nudge of his foot. Not all the way but enough. Derek doesn't move. Not for a long, long time. He doesn't move until Peter's eyes leave his and that door drifts mostly closed. His heart pounds loud in his ears as he turns away, slow and careful, like any noise might betray him further. He takes one step. Then another. The hallway feels impossibly long. Behind him, the bedroom sings. Stiles' voice is rough with need, trailing broken syllables of Peter's name like a litany, like worship. The kind of sound that only comes from being known so completely, so deeply, that there's no space left for fear or doubt.

"Please," Stiles breathes, wrecked and open, "Don't stop... God, Peter please-"

A choked, helpless sound follows. A gasp that's half-laughter, half-plea. The creak of the bed.

Peter's voice, low and viciously tender: "You're doing so well for me, sweetheart."

Derek's spine locks. He reaches his room and slips inside, shutting the door with a soft click that feels far too loud in the heavy quiet of the hallway. But nothing drowns out the sounds. Not the door. Not his breath. Not the pounding in his head. They still come. Stiles' moans, needy and high and so real. Peter's voice, possessive, slow, and praising like each word is being etched into Stiles' skin. Derek sinks to the edge of his bed, fists clenched tight in the sheets, jaw clenched harder.

The walls aren't thick enough.

"God, Peter.... yours."

His eyes shut tight. He tells himself he should have known. He did know but knowledge doesn't dull the ache in his chest, or the sting of hearing what love sounds like when it's not meant for you. Peter had made sure he hears every second of it. Made sure it's burned into him.

The morning light is filtering through the tall windows as the house slowly wakes around them. Stiles is still asleep upstairs sprawled across the tangled sheets, a bite blooming fresh and dark along his throat, barely hidden by Peter's old shirt. Peter's downstairs waiting. He knows the exact moment Derek steps off the last stair. The hesitation in his breath. The echo of guilt in his heartbeat. The subtle shift of someone trying not to be seen. It's too late for that. Peter's leaning against the kitchen counter, coffee in hand, composed.

"Sleep well?" Peter asks, voice smooth and disarmingly pleasant.

Derek doesn't answer.

"No? Hmm. I did," He takes a slow sip, "Then again, we were the only ones supposed to be here last night."

Derek's jaw ticks but he still doesn't speak.

"You knew we were alone," Peter goes on, voice low now, just for him. "You knew this house was ours for the weekend. And yet you came back early."

He sets his coffee down carefully, deliberately; "You heard him. Didn't you? You heard what he sounds like when he says my name. When he begs."

Derek's hands are fists at his sides, shoulders tight with restrained fury or shame. Peter doesn't care which.

"You stood there and listened," Peter continues, voice a whisper now, deadly soft, "You crossed a line you shouldn't have even looked at. And I let you. Not out of kindness, I wanted you to hear it. Feel it. Know without question what you never had, and never will."

Derek's breath shudders but he doesn't look away. So Peter leans in, just enough for his voice to slide past skin like a blade.

"Stay. If you want, but understand this, Derek. That boy upstairs- my mate, my anchor- he doesn't belong to you. Not in memory. Not in fantasy or in any desperate corner of your mind."

A pause and Peter steps back, smile razor-thin. Derek sits at the table, a mug between his hands that has long since gone cold. He hasn't slept. He hasn't even changed from last night. His eyes are shadowed, fixed somewhere on the floor, but his senses stay stretched too far. Then he hears it- bare feet padding down the stairs. A soft, sleepy yawn.

"Morning," Stiles says, voice hoarse from sleep and something else.

Something Derek remembers hearing far too well the night before. He looks up. Stiles freezes in the doorway for a heartbeat too long, eyes wide, mouth parted in surprise. He hadn't expected Derek. That much is obvious. Then the flush hits him, rising from his chest to his ears.

"Oh," Stiles says, "You're... back."

Derek gives a stiff nod, eyes skimming over Stiles just once before dropping. Stiles is wearing Peter's t-shirt again- the one that hangs low and loose over one shoulder, collar stretched just enough to show the faintest marks on his throat. Stiles shifts uncomfortably, pulling the fabric closer without quite knowing why. Before he can say anything else, arms slide around his waist from behind. Peter presses a lazy kiss behind Stiles' ear. Peter guides him into the kitchen, past Derek and doesn't stop until he is settled firmly in his lap, arms around his waist like a throne. And Stiles lets him because this is normal. Theirs. But now with Derek watching he feels it more. The press of Peter's chest at his back. The soft bite of a smile against his jaw. The hand resting low on his hip, thumb dragging idle circles over bare skin where the shirt had ridden up. Stiles tried to keep his gaze on the counter, but he could feel Derek's discomfort, see it in the tension of his shoulders, the way his hands gripped the mug too tight.

He clears his throat: "Didn't know you were coming back early."

Derek's voice is flat: "Didn't know I'd be interrupting."

The words aren't angry, they are just honest. Stiles blinks, flushes deeper and looks quickly away. Peter's hand curves up to his chest, fingers splaying possessively beneath the soft cotton of the shirt. His lips brush against Stiles' jaw smiling. He doesn't say a word because he doesn't need to. The message is clear. This is mine. And across the kitchen, Derek finally stands and without a glance, he leaves the room. Only then does Peter chuckle pleased, mouthing lazily at Stiles' neck.

"Well. That was awkward."

Stiles elbows him weakly, but can't stop the embarrassed smile tugging at his lips.

"Asshole."

Peter only hums.

The sun is high, filtering through the trees outside, casting dappled shadows across the floorboards. The house is quiet again. Peter had gone off on some errand, leaving the air just a little easier to breathe. Stiles finds Derek in the backyard, sitting at the edge of the porch steps, elbows on his knees, staring out toward the treeline like it might offer him answers. He approaches quietly, but doesn't hide his presence.

"Hey."

Derek doesn't turn: "Hey."

Stiles sits beside him, not too close.

"I didn't know you were coming back," Stiles says eventually, "I swear I didn't. If I had-"

He trails off, unsure how to finish. If he had... what? Stayed quiet? Pretended Peter didn't exist just to keep the peace? He sighs.

"I'm sorry you heard any of that. I wouldn't have let it happen that way if I'd known."

Still, Derek doesn't look at him. But something shifts in his jaw.

"You didn't know," Derek says, low, "But he did."

"What?" Stiles blinks.

Derek turns then, just enough for their eyes to meet. His gaze isn't angry, just worn raw: "Peter knew I was coming back."

"No, he didn't. He said-" Stiles shakes his head slowly.

"He knew," Derek cuts in, quiet but certain, "He heard me come in. He looked right at me when it was happening. He left the door open."

Stiles freezes. The words sink in like cold water. He tries to process it, piece it together. Peter had- Stiles swallows.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Stiles asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Derek huffs a humorless sound.

"What would it have changed?"

Stiles doesn't know. He looks down at his hands.

"I don't want to hurt you," Stiles says softly.

"You didn't," Derek glances at him, voice tight, "He did."

That lands heavier than either of them expects. Stiles sits with the truth of it. He doesn't try to defend Peter because maybe part of him isn't entirely surprised. And maybe another part of him needed to understand why Peter had done it. Why Peter had made sure Derek heard. Or maybe he already knew. Stiles finds Peter later in their room, half-dressed, casually drying his hair with a towel after a shower. His shirt clung damp to his torso, and the scent of his skin, clean and familiar, greets Stiles. But Stiles doesn't move to touch him. Peter notices instantly. He tilts his head, towel still in his hands, one brow lifting.

"Something wrong?"

Stiles leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. His eyes are softer than his voice.

"Derek told me you knew he was back."

Peter stills for the barest second, then resumed drying his hair, unbothered: "Did he?"

"He said you looked right at him. That you left the door open."

Now Peter pauses again, this time turning to face him fully: "He's not wrong."

Stiles holds his gaze, searching: "Why?"

“Because he needed to hear it,” Peter says calmly, “To see it.”

“That I’m yours?” Stiles asks quietly.

Peter crosses the room in three slow steps and stops in front of him, his hand rising to tuck a strand of hair behind Stiles’ ear with infuriating gentleness.

“No,” Peter says, voice low and sure, “That you were never his.”

The answer hits harder than Stiles expects, because it isn’t possessive. It’s factual, like Peter has known all along what Derek can’t admit to himself. Stiles doesn’t flinch but he does let out a slow breath.

“You could’ve just told him.”

“I did,” Peter says, “Every day you choose me. Every time you reach for my hand without thinking. He didn’t believe it. He needed something undeniable.”

“And you thought that was the way?” Stiles asks, a faint trace of disbelief, though not anger.

Peter’s fingers brush his jaw, thumb resting just under his chin: “I thought he’d stop hurting himself if I made it hurt just once.”

Stiles’ heart pulls tight at that. The brutal honesty. The quiet cruelty for kindness. He reaches up laying his hand over Peter’s.

“I love you,” Stiles whispers.

“I know,” Peter says, eyes dark and certain, “And so does he now.”

---

The pack is gathered in the living room that evening, half-listening to a documentary Stiles had thrown on more for background noise than interest. Pizza boxes sit abandoned on the coffee table, drinks half-finished. Laughter comes easily from others. Peter sits on the couch, lounging with practiced ease, his fingers occasionally brushing the nape of Stiles’ neck where he sits in front of him on the floor. Every touch is casual. Possessive in that quiet, unshakable way Peter has mastered. Derek is in the armchair nearby, watching. Trying not to watch but failing. He keeps telling himself it doesn’t mean anything, that it shouldn’t hurt but it does. Every goddamn second of it.

Stiles says something, teasing Peter about how smug he looks all the time and Peter, with a slow grin and a squeeze to the back of Stiles’ neck, murmurs just loud enough for the group to hear: “Well, when you’ve got everything you want, it’s hard not to.”

The words are pointed for Derek and Derek snaps, standing abruptly, the motion jerking heads toward him.

“You’re a bastard,” Derek bites out, eyes locked on Peter.

Peter tilts his head, brows lifting with mock surprise: “Only just now figuring that out?”

“You knew exactly what you were doing,” Derek accuses, his voice sharp and rising, “With the door. With the timing. With everything.”

Stiles starts to rise from the floor, eyes wide.

“Derek-”

“No,” Derek snaps, eyes still on Peter, “He wanted me to hear. He wanted me to see.”

“And you did,” Peter answers smoothly, like it costs him nothing, “Finally.”

“You used him to hurt me,” Derek’s fists clenches.

At that, Peter stands calmly, that chill blooming behind his eyes.

“No,” Peter says, low and lethal, “I used your fantasy to set you free.”

“Bullshit,” Derek growls.

Peter steps closer, each word like the slow snap of a trap closing: “You looked at something that was never yours and tried to hold it in your heart like a secret. That’s what hurt you. Not me. You.”

Derek’s hands tremble, his eyes burning but not with rage, broken. Stiles steps between them now, palm against Peter’s chest, voice urgent.

“Enough.”

Peter doesn’t argue but he keeps his eyes locked with Derek’s, unapologetic and final.

“I didn’t take him from you,” Peter says, “He was never yours to begin with.”

Silence falls, Derek’s breathing heavy in it. Then he turns and walks away. This time he doesn’t look back. The house feels hollow after Derek leaves. Everyone else makes themselves scarce soon after. The tension lingers like smoke long after the fire is out. Now, the moonlight pools in through the kitchen windows. Stiles finds Peter leaning against the counter, a glass of whiskey in hand untouched. His posture is relaxed, but something in his shoulders gives him away. He’s too still.

Stiles steps into the room slowly. Peter doesn’t look up right away.

“Didn’t mean to scare the children,” Peter says dryly.

“That wasn’t for them,” Stiles murmurs, crossing to him, “That was for you and Derek.”

“I told you before,” Peter says, voice quieter now, “He needed to feel it. There was no other way he’d let it go.”

Stiles nods, folding his arms: “You were right. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt.”

“Wasn’t trying to be kind,” Peter says softly, looking down at his glass, thumb tracing the rim, “I was trying to end it.”

Stiles steps closer, until his chest brushes Peter’s folded arm.

“And did you?”

“I don’t care about Derek’s feelings for you. I care about the weight they were putting between us. I won’t share you, not your heart, not your loyalty, not even in someone else’s dreams,” Peter’s eyes lift again, slow and clear.

Stiles reaches up, fingers curling into the front of Peter’s shirt: “You never had to worry about that.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Peter murmurs, “I was claiming what’s mine.”

“I’m already yours,” Stiles whispers, leaning in then, pressing his forehead to Peter’s, eyes fluttering closed, “Always have been.”

Peter’s hand slides to the small of his back, pulling him closer.

“I know.”

---

Things don't go back to normal right away. But Derek stays. He doesn't disappear again, doesn't vanish into the woods like he used to when everything hurts too much. He speaks less. Stands further away during meetings. Avoids looking too long when Stiles walks into a room, especially with Peter close behind. Which is always. Stiles doesn't drift from Peter. If anything, the whole thing has only drawn them closer. Their intimacy became subtler, less performative. There are no more lingering looks across rooms meant to prove a point. No teasing touches for anyone else's benefit. Just small things now. The way Peter wordlessly slides a cup of coffee into Stiles' hand every morning. The way Stiles reaches for Peter's wrist before walking into any unfamiliar situation, grounding them both. The way their eyes find each other across every conversation, like they are still talking underneath it all. It cuts deeper than the door left open that night, because it's real. The kind of thing he's never had, not even with the people he has loved.

He doesn't say anything about it. The tension settles over the pack like a storm that never broke. Until one day, Peter finally addresses it. They are in the backyard, late afternoon sun casting long shadows. Some of the pack are training, others milling around. Derek has been keeping his distance all day. Peter has been patient but he's not a saint. He walks right up to Derek without warning, hands in his pockets and voice low enough that only they could hear.

“You’re going to have to move on, Derek.”

Derek doesn't look at him: "I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Peter says sharply, "You're punishing yourself every time you look at him. And you're punishing me every time you pretend you're not."

"I'm not doing this with you," Derek's jaw tightens.

"You already did."

That finally pulls Derek's gaze to him, sharp and cold: "What the hell do you want from me?"

"Nothing. I have everything I want but if you're going to stay, you don't get to sulk and simmer like a ghost haunting your own grave. You either bury it or you leave."

Derek doesn't answer right away. But something in his shoulders finally gives, just a fraction. He knows Peter isn't wrong.

"He doesn't pity you, Derek. He cares. That's why it hurts. So do something with it. Let it go. Or you'll lose the pack too," Then Peter turns and walks back toward the house, back toward where Stiles waits in the doorway, arms crossed, his eyes never leaving either of them.

It's late after most of the pack had already called it a night. Stiles had gone outside for air, hoodie zipped up against the breeze. He leans against the porch railing, eyes on the dark treeline, mind quiet for the first time all day. Derek's voice cuts into that silence softly.

"You really love him, don't you?"

Stiles doesn't jump. He had heard Derek step up behind him, quiet but not invisible. Still, it takes him a second to answer.

"Yeah," Stiles says finally, "I really do."

Derek steps up beside him, keeping his distance but close enough that Stiles could feel the weight of his presence.

"I don't get it," Derek says, voice low and almost vulnerable in its honesty, "What do you see in him that's so--"

"Don't," Stiles interrupts, tone firm, "Don't make me defend it. You wouldn't understand."

"I want to," Derek said, softer now, "I want to understand what makes him the one you look at like that."

"He knows me," Stiles says, "Without asking. Without doubting. He's not afraid of me or the choices I make. He sees the worst in me and he still chooses me."

"And you think I didn't?" Derek asks, pain sharp under his words, "I saw you too."

“But you never chose me,” Stiles says, finally turning to him, “You wanted me. You needed me. But it was always a weight between us, wasn’t it? A maybe. A someday. Peter never made me wait.”

That silence that follows is heavier than the night around them. Stiles pushes off the railing, turning to head back inside. Derek reaches out.

“Stiles-”

Fingers curl around his wrist, not tight but holding. And everything changes. Before Stiles can react, the front door slammed open. Peter is there in an instant eyes burning with cold fury. He crosses the distance in a blur, hand yanking Derek off Stiles and slamming him back against the porch post with a growl so low it vibrates the wood.

“Touch him again without permission,” Peter hisses, “And I will break that hand.”

“Peter!” Stiles reaches out, but Peter doesn't flinch and doesn't look away from Derek.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Derek says, voice strained as Peter’s arm pressed into his chest.

“No,” Peter says, voice ice, “You just meant to keep him long enough to ruin him.”

Stiles steps between them now, shoving a hand against Peter’s chest, not pushing him away, just anchoring him.

“Stop. Please,” Stiles pleads, eyes flicking between them.

Peter’s breathing slows. His grip loosening but the threat in his stance stays. Derek straightens, rubbing at his shoulder where he’d hit the post. His eyes meet Stiles’, guilt swimming in them.

“I just needed to know,” Derek says, quietly, “Why it wasn’t me.”

Stiles doesn’t look away: “Because it was never supposed to be.”

Peter finally looks at Stiles now, eyes softening as the edge melted from him. And Stiles, without hesitating turns to him, stepping into his space. Peter wraps an arm around his waist, drawing him close. Derek watches them for a moment longer. Then he turns and leaves again. The door has barely shut behind Derek before silence settles again, thick and heavy. Peter stands still, arms loose around Stiles’ waist, but his body is still coiled. Stiles presses his forehead to Peter’s chest, exhaling slowly. The steady thud of Peter’s heart beneath his ear helps ground him.

Neither of them speaks for a minute.

“You always go too far,” Stiles tips his head back, meeting Peter’s eyes.

Peter smiles faintly: “You didn’t stop me.”

“I didn’t want to,” Stiles admits.

Peter studies him for a beat.

Then, voice low, honest: “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” Stiles shakes his head, stepping back just enough to lean against the porch railing, “He just needed answers and I didn’t want to be the one to give them.”

“You did anyway,” Peter moves to stand beside him, shoulder brushing his.

Stiles lets out a quiet laugh: “Yeah. I guess I did.”

A long pause stretches between them again, but this time it isn’t tense. It is full of quiet understanding and mutual weight.

“You’re mine,” Peter says softly, without a hint of question.

“I always was,” Stiles looks at him then, calm and unwavering.

Peter reaches over, brushing his fingers down the side of Stiles’ neck, thumb resting over the pulse there.

“Even when he looks at you like you are the only light left?”

“Especially then. I know what it’s like to be wanted by someone who only sees the shine. You look at all of me and you stay,” Stiles leans into the touch.

Peter leans down, brushing a kiss to his temple: “Always.”

Stiles turns into his arms, letting Peter hold him there against the night. There’s nothing left to say after that. Derek’s gone. The storm has passed and what remains between them isn’t shaken- it’s reinforced.

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The pack has gathered an easy, casual thing. Food, music, drinks. No threats looming. Just the rare illusion of peace. Derek hovers on the edges all night, drinking more than he usually does. A beer became two, then three. Then whiskey, poured too strong and too fast. Peter watches him. Of course he does because he’s always aware. Always calculating. But he says nothing, keeps Stiles tucked under his arm, his attention soft but ever-present. The others eventually filter out, the night winding down. But Derek stays and so does Peter. The silence between them in the aftermath of laughter and fading conversation is thick. Derek leans against the counter in the kitchen, glass in hand, eyes red-rimmed. Peter enters slowly, the quiet click of his boots against tile somehow louder in the stillness.

“You’re drunk,” Peter says, not unkindly.

Derek scoffs: “No shit.”

Peter pours himself a glass of water. He doesn't offer one to Derek.

Derek stares at him. His voice, when it comes, is rough: "Why you?"

Peter's eyes flick up, brow arching.

Derek steps closer, not aggressive, just unsteady: "Why is it you that gets him? What makes you think you're good enough for him?"

Peter takes a slow sip of water, unbothered. Then he looks at Derek fully.

His voice is calm when he answers: "Because I don't pretend to be better than I am."

Derek flinches like it is a slap. Peter continues, stepping toward him: "I don't ask Stiles to shrink himself. I don't look at his power and see a weapon or a danger. I see a partner. An equal. Someone I admire."

He tilts his head: "Can you say the same?"

Derek's jaw clenches: "I cared about him."

"I know," Peter says, without malice, "But you hoped he'd become easier. Softer. Maybe even safer and I never once needed him to be anything but exactly what he is."

Derek looks away, the burn of truth biting through alcohol.

Peter's tone softens, just a little: "You wanted him to fit into your idea of right. I wanted to tear the world apart to build one that fit him. That's the difference. And he chose me, Derek. He chose this. You don't have to like it but you need to accept it."

Peter doesn't wait for a response. He leaves the glass of water on the counter and walks away. Derek doesn't follow. He stands there alone with the ache and the truth Peter has handed him. It's unvarnished and sharp, like everything Peter ever gives. It takes him a few days. The hangover lingers longer than the ache in his head. But the words Peter had said "I never once needed him to be anything but exactly what he is" they stuck. Derek doesn't avoid the pack house, not completely. But he comes late. Leaves early. Sits on the edges. Watches Stiles laugh too loud at Peter's dry commentary. Watches the way Peter's hand would settle lightly on the small of Stiles' back when he passes behind him. Watches how Stiles leans into him like it's second nature like being with Peter is simply where he belonged. And he finally lets himself see it clearly. It isn't a performance. It is real.

That night, Derek lingers after everyone else has gone. Stiles is in the garden, barefoot in the grass, humming something tuneless as he checks on a row of plants. Derek approaches slowly.

Stiles looks up, smiles soft and tired: "Hey."

Derek doesn't say anything at first. Just stands there, hands in his jacket pockets, watching the man he once imagined loving in a life that is never meant for him.

“I talked to Peter,” he says at last.

Stiles tilts his head: “I know.”

“He was right,” Derek continues: “About all of it. I wanted you to be something I could handle. Something simpler but you were never meant to be simple.”

Stiles blinks slowly: “That wasn’t fair to either of us.”

“No,” Derek says, “But I get it now. And I’m done chasing ghosts.”

Stiles looks down, then back up: “That can’t have been easy to say.”

“It wasn’t,” He tries to smile, “But holding onto something that isn’t mine- that’s harder.”

Stiles steps forward and pulls him into a hug. It’s warm and familiar but not romantic. And Derek finally understands the difference. When he pulls back, there are tears in his eyes. But they don’t fall. He nods once, a quiet goodbye without needing words. Then he turns and leaves, not broken but finally, finally healing. And as he walks away from the garden, the house, the life that never belonged to him, he feels something loosen inside him. Not the love. That would take longer. But the ache?

That is finally starting to fade.

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