## Put Down in Words

**Rating:** Mature  
**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Category:** M/M  
**Fandom:** Teen Wolf (TV)  
**Relationship:** Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski  
**Character:** Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Scott McCall, Sheriff Stilinski, Kira Yukimura, Lydia Martin, Laura Hale, Cora Hale, Jennifer Blake, Noshiko Yukimura, Melissa McCall, The Hale Family - Character, Erica Reyes, Vernon Boyd, Caitlin, Ken Yukimura, Claudia Stilinski (past)  
**Additional Tags:** Alternate Universe - College/University, Alternate Universe - Human, Professor Derek Hale, College Student Stiles, Nerd Derek Hale, Musician Derek Hale, POV Alternating, Age Difference, Derek adopts a dog, Slow Build, Sheriff Stilinski’s Name is John, Past Jennifer Blake/Derek Hale, Getting to Know Each Other, Past Melissa McCall/Rafael McCall - Freeform, Masturbation, Past Stiles Stilinski/Caitlin (brief), Caitlin/Emily - Freeform, Vernon Boyd/Erica Reyes - Freeform, Scott McCall/Kira Yukimura - Freeform, Slow Burn, Stiles Has Panic Attacks, Peter Hale is a really bad uncle, Asexual Cora Hale, Noshiko Yukimura/Ken Yukimura - Freeform, Misunderstandings, Angst, Mutual Pining, Bisexual Stiles Stilinski, Demisexual Derek Hale, Julia Baccari/Kali - Freeform, communication is important, CS Major Stiles, Cora Hale/Lydia Martin (implied), Dealing With Trauma, Frottage, Bottom/Derek (implied), Partly Sex Mostly Feels

### Stats:

- Published: 2017-04-01  
- Completed: 2017-04-27  
- Chapters: 31/31  
- Words: 203776

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**Summary**

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“I don’t think that’s on the syllabus, but we can check to see if there’s a spot open in any of his classes,” Scott said, grinning.

“This isn’t an actual professor, though,” Stiles insisted, unable to resist brushing his thumb over the sharp line of the man’s bearded jaw. He was laughing at something off-camera, the shot taken in three-quarters view, his coat collar casually rumpled and opened to reveal a sliver of a simple grey t-shirt. The whole thing was deliberately calculated to lend him a more accessible feel, and god help him, Stiles was falling for it.
When Stiles signed up for Dr. Hale’s intro to history class, he had two goals: knock out the credits his advisor was bugging him to complete before he graduated, and spend a few hours a week daydreaming about his sexy professor’s salt and pepper beard.

Derek, a few months away from turning forty and not sure when his life had started feeling so damn lonely, had never encountered someone like Stiles before. Bright-eyed, sharp-tongued, determined to throw Derek’s carefully cultivated world into disarray…and absolutely the last person Derek should be falling in love with.

Notes

(See tumblr for a longer list of characters/background pairings/tags than will reasonably fit on AO3.)

This entire thing began as a silly twitter thread with howlnatural and Infectedcolors about a year ago. When howlnatural, the enabler that she is, reminded me it existed, I thought: "Hmm. That idea does still interest me. I'll write up a quick fic for it in between my other projects."

Now here we are, 7 months and 200k later.

I have many people to thank. I don't think I could've kept toiling away at this story without the encouragement of all of you who showed interest in it. I also owe halesrepublic, bleep0bleep, and Emony an immense amount of gratitude. Their insightful suggestions have undeniably improved the final result.

Additional thanks to hpsdgirl, who checked my Polish, and to DakotaLIAR and andavs, whose incredible art you'll see in chapters 10 and 27. They have, as always, an enviable ability to capture exactly the right emotions for a scene. Some days, the desire to share their art was the only thing that motivated me to continue writing.

Inkforwords, another wonderful artist and an all-around great person, has spurred me on since the beginning and reassured me that this fic accomplished what I'd meant it to. You'll see her amazing art in chapters 6 and 31. And I can safely say that the story wouldn't exist at all without zerosince1982's positivity and faith in me, and the generosity and constant support from grasonas.

I could keep listing names, but I don't want this note to end up longer than the fic itself! Just know that if you've ever said a kind word about my writing, I've cherished it. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I truly hope that you enjoy this work; it's been a pleasure to create it, and it's difficult to believe I'm finally able to share it.
“You could try a philosophy class,” Scott suggested.

“Ugh,” Stiles replied feelingly. He was lying on his bed, tossing an old stress ball against the wall, focusing on maintaining a steady *thump pause thump pause thump* beat as Scott flipped through their university’s course catalog.

You were supposed to *squeeze* stress balls, technically, but Stiles had always found it more relaxing to throw his at things. When he’d told his therapist that, her mouth had thinned in an expression he was too accustomed to being on the receiving end of, particularly from authority figures. She’d set her notepad down, pressed lightly at the bridge of her nose, and told him she wasn’t sure their appointments were giving him what he needed. He’d agreed, although it’d taken his dad a little more convincing and had sent them down a long path of world-weary sighs and disappointed looks.

He was used to that, too.

He thumped the ball harder than he’d meant to, and it ricocheted off at a sharp angle, narrowly missing Scott, who managed to startle so wildly he dropped the catalog and rolled over it with the wheels of Stiles’s squeaky old desk chair.

“Nice reflexes; good to see you’re keeping those lacrosse skills fresh,” Stiles said supportively, and grinned when Scott shot him his best glare.

“What's wrong with philosophy?” he asked, wiggling the chair back and forth and huffing in annoyance as he tried to drag the catalog free without actually getting up.

There was a reason the two of them were friends, Stiles mused. He cast a longing, too-lazy-to-move look after the stress ball, which had come to a halt by the disturbingly large dust bunnies congregating around his bookshelf. His dad obviously hadn’t been vacuuming while he was away at school. Not that either of them had ever spent much time dragging out the vacuum while Stiles was still living at home. Come to think of it, he wasn’t entirely sure they even owned a working one anymore.

The ball grinned sunnily at him, its yellow surface and painted-on smile cracking from age and making its optimism feel even emptier than it had when his therapist had first handed it to him.

“What *isn’t* wrong with philosophy?” Stiles responded, his voice sounding bleaker than he’d meant it to, but Scott was smoothing out the catalog’s crumpled cover and didn’t seem to notice the shift in tone.

“It’s debating, right? Big theories and stuff. You’d be good at that.”

“Maybe, but have you ever *sat* in a philosophy lecture? The dudes who try to talk about shit in those classes are more obsessed with hearing their own voices than actually engaging in any kind of intelligent discussion. And if there’s more than one of those guys in the class, it turns into this horrible exercise in circle-jerk futility, where no one’s even bothering to listen to each other before creaming themselves over the brilliance of their own ideas.”

Scott lowered the booklet and eyed Stiles thoughtfully. “You got kicked out of one freshman year,
didn’t you? I’d completely forgotten about that.”

“I dropped intro to philosophy,” he corrected. “After I was asked to.”

Scott flipped a few more pages. “Okay, psychology then. You’d like that. Getting to dig around in people’s weird brains.”

Stiles stared pointedly at Scott, who failed to feel the intensity of his gaze until he tossed a pillow at him.

“Jesus, Stiles,” he said, ducking again, less violently this time.

“We have had this conversation,” Stiles said, soaking the words with as much wounded indignation as he could muster. “It was that 8 AM class I stopped going to after the professor spent an entire lecture describing the sexual thoughts he’d had in the bathtub. As a child. About his grandmother. He was greasy and weird and had a major boner for Freud, and that is not a thing you can deal with that early in the morning. If ever.”

“Oh yeah.” Scott shivered, looking vaguely ill. “I’d intentionally blocked that out of my memory. Let’s stop talking about it immediately.”

“Not the one who brought it up,” Stiles grumbled. “Why are we doing this, anyway? Why do I need one of these shitty side classes?”

“Because you still need gen ed credits, and you keep putting it off,” Scott repeated with remarkable patience, considering this had been their friendship dynamic over the last two decades: Stiles kicking and complaining his way through what he considered arbitrary requirements, and Scott steering him back on course. More or less. Other than the times they’d veered wildly in more interesting directions, tugged by Stiles’s creativity and imagination.

Those were, shockingly, also the times that had typically led to being grounded, but the temporary exhilaration had been worth it. Most of the time.

Stiles let out a long, gusty breath. “Fine. Hit me again. What’s next?”

Scott was quiet for a while, pages rustling as he presumably looked for something a little more eye-catching that wouldn’t trigger an immediate rejection. Stiles spent the time projecting his mental energy onto the smiling stress ball, willing it to roll across the room and bounce into his hand. Nothing happened, but he gritted his teeth and tried harder, some distant corner of his brain half-convinced magic was real, if you knew the proper way to look for it.

On the morning of his eleventh birthday, Stiles had carefully packed his action figures, toothbrush, underwear, favorite shirts, and second-best pair of jeans into his Batman suitcase and wheeled it to the driveway to wait for his Hogwarts letter to arrive.

He’d waited for three hours, shivering on the curb, as the soft rose-hued sunrise burned away into crisp blue skies. A sky you could drown in, he’d thought, lying back to stare into it, until the world began to tilt. He’d had to close his eyes before it swallowed him whole.

When he’d opened them again, his dad was standing over him, his face drawn and tired, fresh lines of exhaustion creased into his cheeks.

*Going somewhere, kiddo?* he’d asked, trying for a smile that didn’t quite land.

*Yeah,* Stiles had said, cupping a hand over his eyes to block out the sun so he could search the
empty, too-big expanse of the sky again. *I think my owl’s late getting here. But I was gonna say goodbye before I left. And I’ll be back for Christmas, I promise.*

His dad had shot a glance of his own heavenward, then sat down on the curb, too. *Mind if I wait with you?*

He’d shaken his head, secretly glad for the company. Learning magic would be new and exciting, but it was an awfully long way from home, and the past few hours of solitary vigilance had been chipping away at his bravery.

After another hour with his dad sitting patiently by his side, he’d sat up and pressed his face into his dad’s shoulder. *It’s not coming, is it,* he’d mumbled, his throat thick with guilt—because he’d felt *relieved,* too, at not being taken away from home.

His dad had wrapped an arm around him, momentarily shielding him from his own thoughts, keeping him safe. *I’m afraid not, kiddo. You up for talking about it?*

He’d stayed silent at first; he’d kept his plan close to his chest for months, his belief a delicately cultivated spell that he feared would evaporate once the words were released into the open air. *I need to go, dad. They have healing magic there. I could—* He’d choked on a wet sniffle, his face still buried in his dad’s uniform shirt.

*Oh, Stiles,* his dad had said, moving so he could wrap both arms around him, the scent of his aftershave sharp and familiar, grounding him on a world that’d rapidly turned dizzying, its comforting boundaries shaking and crumbling around him.

He’d caught a handful of his dad’s shirt in one clenched fist and sobbed, for the first time since his parents had sat him down and gently explained that all the visits his mom had been making to the doctor weren’t as routine and harmless as they’d initially tried to claim.

*She’s dying,* he’d said, and he could feel the words curving through the silence, looping tightly around his throat, then sinking back into his bones with heavy certainty. *She’s dying, dad, and I can’t do anything to stop it.*

*You can’t,* his dad had confirmed, his voice ragged. *Neither can I. Do you blame me for that?*

*No!* Stiles had said, genuinely startled by the question, his tears pushed back as he shifted into protective mode, ready to defend his dad against anyone who’d try to say otherwise.

*Then you can’t blame yourself either.* His dad had let the words hang in the air, then wiped them clear by rising to his feet, tugging Stiles with him. *How about you take your bag back upstairs and unpack while I get breakfast ready, okay?*

He’d clung for a moment, hugging his dad in silent thanks, then popped the suitcase handle up, sending one last look upward before letting his dreams dissolve. *Pancakes?* he’d asked hopefully.

*Chocolate chip,* his dad had confirmed, clapping him on the shoulder and keeping his hand there as they’d walked back up the driveway.

Stiles let his hand fall, giving up on his attempts to summon the ball of sunshine through sheer force of will. He shoved down the weird, illogical swell of disappointment and dug his fingers into his mattress to ground himself in the present reality.

It’d been nine years since his mom had died, and they’d let the date pass without comment this year. His dad had been working; he’d been getting a head start on studying for his finals. They were busy,
and the grief wasn’t fresh anymore, so they’d forgotten her.

The realization had struck while he was registering for his final year of classes, when he’d paused over an underwater basket weaving course he was both baffled to find on the schedule and convinced his mom would’ve tried in a heartbeat. *I should call her,* he’d thought, as he always did for a split second before he remembered that wasn't possible.

That was probably why he hadn’t been thinking clearly during the registration process, why he’d stopped looking for new options and had simply signed up for a full set of classes in his major. Why he’d gotten that goddamn passive aggressive email from his advisor, who’d written with politely threatening hints about his graduation status.

The world pitched off-balance, trying to shake him loose, and he squeezed his eyes shut and clung harder to his bed.

*C’mon, give me something,* he whispered to the universe. *Is a tiny bit of magic so much to ask?*

“That’s it!” Scott said, shattering the silence Stiles had been wrapping around himself.

The afternoon light pouring into the room seemed brighter suddenly, and Stiles sat up and scrubbed at his eyes in annoyance. “That's what?”

“History!” Scott said triumphantly. “I *know* you love researching things.”

He grimaced, making sure Scott saw his face before he let the disgruntled expression fall away.

“Oh come on,” Scott said in exasperation. His patience was finally wearing thin, but Stiles couldn’t conjure up a shred of remorse. “What can you possibly have against history?”

“History’s not the problem. The way it’s taught is. Especially at our school, where the professors are as old and dusty as the subject matter.”

“That’s not true,” Scott protested.

“It is! How can you be arguing with me about this, when you had Dr. Weber last year? More like Dr. *Cobwebs,* amiright?”

“He did fall asleep while reading from his lecture notes once,” Scott admitted. “But c’mon Stiles, you’re judging entire subjects based on one bad experience. That’s not very scientific.”

“I’m a computer programmer, not a chemist,” he said. “Leave the experiments to Kira and the mathematical proofs to Lydia.”

“Your degree has science in the title,” Scott objected absently. “And I thought you had to take a bunch of math at the start of your program. I remember you complaining a *lot* about...differential calculus?”

“Multivariable calculus and those goddamn horrible differential equations.” He’d spent a lot of time complaining about them to Lydia, too, who’d rolled her eyes and helped him through the worst patches. “But that was *then,* when it was all theoretical injections of knowledge. Now I’m fully immersed in things that I’m *interested* in studying, Scotty. All I want is to be left alone with my laptop and a site I can figure out how to hack into.” He cast a wary glance at the open doorway, where his dad always managed to be lurking in full Sheriff’s uniform whenever Stiles started talking about the less legal perks of his field of study. He was nowhere in sight, but he added a cautionary, “For the good of mankind. So I can hire myself out as a consultant to banks and government
Scott didn’t seem to be listening to him, a smile spreading slowly over his face as he continued reading through the course options. Stiles lifted his hand again and curved his fingers into a half circle, closing one eye until Scott’s sunshiney face was at the same angle as the abandoned stress ball. There was something creepy about handing a kid a bright yellow happy face and telling him to squeeze the shit out of it whenever he started feeling sad, he thought for what was probably the millionth time. Ms. Morrell hadn’t appreciated that commentary, either, but she’d mostly rested on platitudes and inspirational quotes, so he’d stopped listening to her early on. There were a lot of reasons that therapist-client relationship hadn’t worked out.

He mimed patting the top of Scott’s floppy-haired head with his still loosely cupped fingers. It was Scott who’d gotten him through that first year, when Stiles was struggling through the gauntlet of middle school social dynamics without his mom around to muss up his hair at the end of the day and help him come up with clever insults he was only allowed to say at home. Scott was, for all intents and purposes, his brother, and he couldn’t imagine making it through the full university experience without Scott there to back him up. Even if he did insist on forcing Stiles into truly awful classes that he hadn’t been able to talk his way out of yet.

Scott wheeled over to Stiles’s bed, using his feet to clumsily push himself across the floor, and held out the catalog, tapping at the page he’d marked with a finger. “History,” he said again. “Trust me on this one, dude.”

“I don’t understand why they still kill trees to make physical copies when the entire schedule’s available online,” Stiles said, mostly to be disagreeable.

“Not everyone’s glued to their computer screen,” Scott replied. “And anyway, I think it’s another advertising tool. Have you ever looked at the profiles they stick in for professors in the different departments?”

“No. That’d be more likely to drive prospective students away, if you ask me,” Stiles said as he took the catalog to see what Scott was so certain would tip him over into a decision he was absolutely determined not to make. “Oh,” he said, his voice coming out low and breathy, “fuck me.”

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“This isn’t an actual professor, though,” he insisted, unable to resist brushing his thumb over the sharp line of the man’s bearded jaw. He was laughing at something off-camera, the shot taken in three-quarters view, his coat collar casually rumpled and opened to reveal a sliver of a simple grey t-shirt. The whole thing was deliberately calculated to lend him a more accessible feel, and god help him, Stiles was falling for it. “They obviously used stock photography or hired some models, like they do when they’re updating their website and trying to make the campus look more diverse.”

“No, his name’s under the photo. And if you stop staring at his face for a second, there’s a whole box listing his publications and books and awards and a bunch of important research he’s done in his field. Look,” he said, stabbing a finger at the text Stiles had, indeed, completely skipped over.

“Dr. Derek Hale,” he read out loud. “He’s tenured. He’s been teaching there for a fucking decade, what the fuck. How is this the first time I’m seeing him?”

“Maybe you would’ve noticed him earlier if you’d listened to your advisor,” Scott said, and ducked when Stiles absently swiped at him. “Joking aside, though, he’s got an interesting course load.
Mostly graduate level, so you can’t get into those, but this Origins of Western Civilization one says it’s open to undergrads.”

“There’s no way there’s space available,” Stiles said mournfully. “The history nerds would’ve been lining up for days to get a piece of that.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Scott said with his trademark optimism. “And if not, you can always sit in on the first day of class and try to get in off the waiting list. That’s how I made it into Deaton’s bio seminar.”

“Which was only open to upperclassmen,” Stiles recited dutifully. “And you totally bonded, and now that you are an upperclassman, he’s your advisor and mentor and his recommendation’s gonna get you into an awesome veterinary school after graduation.”

Life didn’t work out like that for most people, though; Scott had always been an exception who sailed past obstacles by cheerfully overlooking them and assuming doors would eventually open if he kept knocking. Whereas they typically slammed shut in Stiles’s face. After which, the proprietors called the cops on him, the cops being Stiles’s dad, who’d show up and haul him away while making insincere apologies on his behalf.

This entire scenario might’ve happened several times during Stiles’s Small Business Ownership phase, which had involved him selling his old comic books door to door and frightening a succession of old ladies. Those same old ladies had bought Scott’s burnt cookies and pinched his cheeks, which Stiles had never quite forgiven him for. Some people were just so damn approachable.

He couldn’t bring himself to step away from this particular door, though. Not when there was a face like that waiting on the other side. “He probably has a beer gut that they’re hiding with the way they cropped the photo,” he said, and Scott’s grin widened until it nearly hurt to look at him.

“You won’t regret this,” he promised.

“I hope not,” Stiles said, still staring at the black and white portrait, wondering if Dr. Hale’s eyes were blue or green.

Chapter End Notes

Visit Dr. Hale’s faculty page, created by hales-republic. (Be sure to click the image for the full view!)

Next up: Introducing Derek
Derek knew exactly what to expect from the first day of each new semester. It’d been the same, with only minor variations, ever since he’d accepted the tenure offer and reconciled himself to staying in the same university town for the rest of his professional life.

Oregon hadn’t been his first choice. It hadn’t even been his fifth choice, when you truly dug down to what he’d anticipated doing with his degree. Not that history majors typically went out and changed the world; he could’ve paired it with a political science degree and gone into politics, like a few of his classmates had—one was a senator now—but that type of high-profile existence had never been appealing. He had expected to work his way up through the ranks of a top-tier university, though, earning the kind of salary and Ivy League status you dreamed about if you were a nerd who spent your teenage years with your nose buried in thick textbooks that you’d talked your older sister into checking out of her university library for you.

Laura had settled on the East Coast, as they’d always expected her to. It was part of the reason he’d chosen Princeton—that and the fact that he’d nearly cried when he’d opened the acceptance packet, thick with admissions materials and a letter that he’d kept in a frame on his wall until his diplomas replaced it. The program hadn’t been everything he’d dreamed, but it’d come close. The material was both challenging and fascinating, and the majority of his professors supported his determination to fast-track his undergraduate work. He’d dug in roots and had planned to stay in the area or, if none of his options on that coast panned out, to head back to California to be closer to Cora.

Everything had stayed on track for years, until he’d met Jennifer Blake, who’d fucked him, literally and figuratively, until she’d successfully slithered into the tenure track slot that’d been promised to him—only, he discovered too late, in conversations that didn’t produce the slightest paperwork trail to substantiate his claim.

_I don’t understand why you had to sleep with me to get it_, he’d told her, standing in his suddenly overpriced apartment as she’d packed up the few things she’d brought with her when he’d asked her to move in.

_Oh darling_, she’d said, pausing to cup his cheek in one hand, her long nails scraping down the skin he’d kept smooth for her. _That was just for fun. You looked so damn good in those pants; I had to see what was inside them_. She’d hooked a possessive finger in a loop of his jeans and blown him a kiss when he’d flinched away. _Don’t beat yourself up over it. I would’ve taken the position from you no matter what. You really think you’d get something like this at your age? With your level of experience?_

When his face had fallen, doubts about his abilities and true potential creeping in, she’d almost looked sympathetic.

_Aw, sweetheart, you really did. It’s a good thing you learned now, huh? While you’re still young enough to try for something...realistic._ She’d patted his cheek again, cast a last look around to be sure she hadn’t forgotten anything important, and swept out of his life.

The department chair—his former mentor—had sat down with him the next week. It was his duty, Dr. Williams had said, to regretfully inform Derek that since the search had concluded with another candidate, there was no funding available to allow him to continue his work at the university. Not
even in a postdoc position.

Dr. Williams hadn’t offered a letter of reference. He’d merely stood in the doorway as Derek had cleaned out his half of his tiny office, then had held his hand out for Derek’s key.

With bills and rejections from his backup choices piling up—he’d discovered that during her own wide-ranging job hunt, Jennifer had made certain allegations about both his personal and professional conduct, although the responses arriving on formal letterhead cited the declining economy—Derek was forced to begin casting his net farther, looking for a smaller school that’d be open-minded enough to accept both his stellar CV and his less enticing baggage.

So here he was, ten years later, roughly two hours southwest of Portland, closer to two national forests than to anything that could be termed a proper city. It wasn’t that he missed the urban environment itself—Columbia had been one of the first to turn him down, and he hadn’t been as torn up about it as he probably should’ve been—but when summer faded away to autumn and the trees around the campus turned red-gold and started dropping their leaves, he felt transported back to his younger self, caught between two worlds, still believing in a bright future where any path was open to him.

He stared at his bedroom ceiling, waiting for his clock radio to click on and announce the official start of his morning. After years of the same routine, his body was trained to peel itself free from even the most tempting dreams, ready to greet the first glimmerings of daylight. His mind wasn’t always inclined to follow, but it’d come to terms with its fate. For the most part.

On days like this, when he woke before his alarm, Derek indulged that regret-filled nook at the back of his mind. He let himself drift in the space between dreaming and waking, dwelling on thoughts of what could’ve been. What might have happened if he hadn’t let Jennifer approach him at a departmental cocktail hour, hadn’t let her slip her hands under his shirt and twist her lies around his heart.

If he hadn’t believed her when she’d torn his world down.

He’d given up, that’s what it came down to. He’d been more heartbroken by Jennifer’s betrayal than his pride would let him admit, and discouraged by the slow academic slog and the letters that sometimes took months to arrive. When he’d gotten the phone call from Tillamook University in Westdale, Oregon, a place he’d barely been aware of before stumbling across it during his panicked job hunt, he’d been eating cereal in his underwear, trying not to think too hard about how he’d be finding the money for the next month’s rent.

*It’s this or Burger King,* he’d told Laura once he’d made his decision.

She’d hugged him and pretended not to be tearing up when she called him an idiot for his morose assessment of his options. *Are you sure? This is where you really want to go?* she’d asked, making him look her in the eye when he’d told her yes.

Years later, he still couldn’t tell whether he’d been lying—to her, or to himself.

The university hadn’t guaranteed the tenure track; they’d told him his starting title would be “Assistant Professor,” which was good enough. Reasonable in an economy with slashed school budgets and an oversaturated market, and certainly more than his lowered expectations had let him believe he deserved. The outlook was promising, too. A smaller school meant the pressure was reduced, and the road to a full professorship would take less time, as long as he didn’t step out of line again or add any new mistakes to his stained record.
He’d been careful. Possibly too careful, if Laura’s periodic worried phone calls were any sort of
gauge. He’d dated, here and there, cutting things off before they got too serious. He’d read, and
written, and published, and presented at conferences, and perfected the art of grant proposals. He’d
shouldered heavier class loads than he needed and made tenure in well under the proposed seven
years. He’d celebrated his promotion by buying a house, which had only succeeded in making him
feel more adrift, a lone figure in a sea of empty rooms.

His radio spilled soft bars of classical music into the silence—skilled fingers drawing delicate music
from piano keys—and he closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath that only shuddered a little on the
exhale. Debussy, maybe, he thought, and nodded to himself when he picked out a familiar motif,
played pianissimo. He left it on as he slid out of bed: feet first, pushed into slippers to shield him
from the cold hardwood floors; then legs; then the heft of a body twanging with quiet aches that were
growing disconcertingly common in the mornings.

After his shower, he wiped away the condensation on the bathroom mirror and scrubbed a tired hand
over his jaw, staring at his water-blurred reflection, deciding whether to shave. The greys had started
in his early 30s, which he’d been grateful for at the time; he’d initially grown out his facial hair in an
attempt to look distinguished. Older, more ready for the career path he’d been targeting with all his
energy.

Old was true enough now, he thought—his beard had gone fully salt and pepper over the last few
years, and grey had started to streak along his temples—but there was nothing he could do to slow
the passage of time. There was no point in trying to disguise it. Who was he trying to impress at this
point, other than the twenty year old he still felt like, most days.

He caught a glimpse of that old self behind his eyes sometimes, felt that boxed-away burst of
enthusiastic optimism when he worked out a new angle on his research, or met a new crop of
students who could still go out and change the world. With his guidance and support.

Maybe, he thought, as he did at the start of every semester. Maybe there will be someone this year
who’ll make it all worth it. A student with a sharp mind and heady ambitions. Someone who’d come
to class brimming over with excitement about exploring old topics in new ways, eager to inject fresh
life into class discussions—

Derek braced himself against the sink with both hands and tried not to laugh at himself, at the kid
looking back at him in the mirror with wide-eyed hope, who never seemed to fully grow up.

I like my job, he reminded himself as he switched his electric razor on, blades at their usual setting,
and meticulously ran it over his cheeks and chin, smoothing stray hairs into an even trim.

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t entirely true, either.

The radio was playing another melancholic piece—Chopin this time, one of his nocturnes—when
Derek returned to his bedroom a little later to lay out his clothes for the day. He ticked everything off
on a mental checklist: shower, shave, teeth, breakfast, coffee, newspaper, stifled internal crisis. All on
track, and if he didn’t dawdle, he’d have plenty of time for a leisurely two mile walk to campus.

Some mornings, he preferred to sit out on his deck with an indulgent second cup of coffee, listening
to the birds calling to each other in the trees, watching fat squirrels rustling through dry leaves and
scurrying up the trunks. He’d think things like, I should get a dog, and then push his mug away
while his mind whirred through the implications of adding something else to his routine, of being
responsible for a living creature.

I could, though, he thought as he pulled on thin, dark dress socks and slipped his feet into his
impeccably polished shoes, then stood in front of the full length mirror in his closet to button his suit jacket and adjust his tie until the knot was resting at precisely the right angle. He was established enough now. He could pick out an older dog from the shelter, one that’d get enough exercise from walks through the neighborhood and gentle runs, that’d be content to sit under the desk in his office or nap underfoot during his lectures.

He wouldn’t be breaking any controversial ground, either; a couple of other professors brought their dogs to work, and one of the librarians had trained her chocolate lab to deliver messages through the stacks. The dog was wiggly and friendly and would stop to graciously let stressed-out students pet it and feed it treats they weren’t supposed to be smuggling in. Derek had spent his share of time sneaking into the library and stealing its attention away from students who frankly should’ve been studying anyway.

He gave his tie another minute adjustment and pushed back the stubborn strand of hair that always fell over his forehead. When he was younger, his little sister had stuck barrettes in his hair to keep it in place, a habit Laura’s daughters had somehow picked up. He grinned at the thought and added that to the growing list of reasons. Time with Uncle Derek and a dog should tip the balance into Laura flying them across the country to visit more often. Maybe he could talk Cora into coming up for an extended weekend, too. He hadn’t seen either of them since Christmas, and Cora had been dropping a few hints about some new relationship.

He checked his wristwatch. Time to head out. He liked getting to his lecture hall early to scope out the space, breathe in the scents of chalk and old books, and prepare himself for the hours of talking. It was stupid, really, but even after years of doing this, there was always a burst of anxiety sparking in his throat during that first lecture, when a crowd of new faces trickled into the classroom and turned their attention on him.

He turned off the radio, locked the door, and tried not to think about what it’d be like to come home to someone else, another human being who’d tug him back through the doorway by his tie and tell him all about their day.

*I’m not lonely,* he told himself, as he headed past the line of manicured lawns, the crisp, cool morning air setting his cheeks tingling.

That was definitely a lie.

***

He ate lunch in his office and used the two hour break in his schedule to check his email and ignore the influx of friend requests on Facebook. Somehow, after each of his classes—or possibly during, considering how often he saw them texting under their desks—an oddly large percentage of his students always managed to track down his profile and attempt to add him. He wasn’t sure what they hoped to accomplish. Find embarrassing photos of him? Dig up dirt they could use as leverage if their grades were struggling?

Even if he agreed to the requests, they wouldn’t find much. He rarely used Facebook. It was mostly convenient for keeping up-to-date on distant relatives and his former classmates, losing respect for acquaintances over their engagement in religious and political debates, and liking photos of his nieces. Still, though, there was no sense in providing a hint of encouragement, so he’d learned to build a Facebook check into his first-day-of-classes routine.

The morning lectures had gone well enough to leave Derek feeling relaxed and cheerful by the time his afternoon intro class swung around. It was the last of the day and the least intimidating of the bunch: undergrads were either bright-eyed and easy to please or so extraordinarily unmotivated that
there was little point in agonizing over how to engage them. He'd learned that lesson the hard way. When he'd first started out at Tillamook, he'd sworn to do everything in his power to make a difference in the lives of every last one of his students. He'd insisted on grading his own papers and carving out the space to answer any questions his lectures hadn't addressed. He'd stayed on campus late to provide additional assistance, leaving his door open well past the usual office hours.

With very few exceptions, the extra tutoring had seemed to make no discernible difference in the final grades. It'd taken him a while to realize the students who'd shown up at his office had been significantly less interested in European history than in his dating history. He hadn't realized it on his own, in the end. It'd taken an uncomfortable conversation with his department chair, who'd hemmed and hawed about Derek’s youth for so long (I know you're single, and good-looking, and close to your students’ ages) that he'd been convinced he was getting fired before he'd had a chance to prove his worth.

It’s understandable to be attracted to your students, but you’re asked to not act on it, she’d finally said, clearly exasperated at having to spell it out.

He’d been horrified, to put it lightly.

I don’t know what Jennifer’s been saying about me, he’d started, braced to defend himself against unjust accusations, but also prepared to grovel as much as possible to stay in the department’s good graces.

Dr. Yukimura had frowned at him, confusion furrowing her brow, before she interrupted him with an impatient gesture. I don’t know or care what rumors anyone from your past may have spread about you before you were hired. You’re an exceptional teacher, Derek, and your students are truly fortunate to be learning from someone as dedicated and passionate as you’ve proven to be.

Then I don’t understand, he’d said, feeling as lost as he had when Jennifer had announced she was taking his job and breaking up with him, a single earth-shattering thunderclap he was still recovering from. I haven’t done anything to warrant this kind of accusation.

Dr. Yukimura had looked apologetic. It’s not an accusation. I’m sorry if I’ve given that impression. It’s merely a caution, for your sake. There will be...temptations. Students who will cross certain lines, if given the opportunity. I simply want you to be aware, and to adjust expectations accordingly.

You’re saying I shouldn’t stay in my office after the rest of the department’s gone home for the day, he’d said, mind whirling through any missteps he might have already taken.

That would be wise. There’s no cause for undue concern, and you’ve done nothing wrong. You’re not the first professor, young or otherwise, to receive this kind of talk. She’d smiled at him, looking much younger than her fifty years, and his nerves began to dissipate.

He’d read up on her, and on the rest of his prospective colleagues, before he’d accepted the position. She’d been a surprise, in many respects. She’d also been inordinately kind to him since his arrival. If she felt it necessary to address his dynamic with his students, there was no question in his mind that it was a fair assessment.

Thank you, Dr. Yukimura, he’d said, rising to go.

Call me Noshiko, she’d said, standing as well and offering her hand. I’m hoping you’ll be here for a good long while. I’d like us to be friends.

The caution had been an entirely unnecessary one, as it’d turned out, and Noshiko hadn’t mentioned
it again in the intervening years. Derek understood the reason for it and couldn’t fault her for taking that extra step in ensuring the security and longevity of his position. She’d been, in her eyes, doing him a favor. She hadn’t known him back then, after all. Hadn’t yet been a close enough friend to understand that the thought of any relationship—much less one with an imbalanced power dynamic—had made his skin crawl for a significant amount of time after Jennifer.

When he did date, he preferred to meet the person through friends or colleagues, although more than once, he’d let someone strike up a conversation over drinks at a conference, knowing the two of them were on the same page and would merely nod at one another in recognition if they met at a later event.

Derek couldn’t imagine being attracted to one of his students. Not when he’d first started teaching, and certainly not now, when he was a solid two decades older than many of the undergrads. It didn’t stop occasional awkward situations, like the freshman who’d written a love letter in her blue book when she was supposed to be turning in her final exam, but he’d learned how to navigate those types of scenarios with minimal fallout.

No, there were a lot of things Derek had dealt with over the years, and a dizzying array of mistakes he’d had to recover from, but falling for a student was entirely out of the realm of plausibility.

He denied a final friend request, then powered his computer down and gathered his lecture notes. One last class before he could head home and decide what to do with his free Tuesday. Maybe he’d look into getting that dog.

Chapter End Notes

*Next up: Stiles meets Derek*
Stiles gnawed at his lower lip, his leg bouncing with nerves he couldn’t seem to restrain. Most of the morning had passed in a daze, his classes a blur of greetings and handouts and information that never mattered much on the first day, anyway.

He couldn’t explain why he was so anxious. He’d snapped something short and irritable when Scott had commented on it when they’d met up for lunch. He’d felt an immediate twinge of guilt and had fled it and their shitty off-campus apartment to try to walk off the jittery sense that he was gearing up for something big. Maybe it had something to do with getting up way too early and chugging down far too many cups of coffee; his heart was definitely racing, and there weren’t a lot of other reasons for that to be happening. Not when all he was doing was waiting outside a classroom for a subject he wasn’t the least bit interested in learning.

He texted Scott a brief apology and stared down at his phone until the thumbs up emoji came back, followed by: **good luck i believe in you dude!!**

Scott was one of those friends whose seeming inability to take offense at negative comments made Stiles both more likely to direct those types of comments at him and more prone to the crippling regret that inevitably flooded in after the fact.

He figured, from his extensive pop culture intake, that this was what siblings were probably like. Ones related by blood, that is—the kind running through both their veins, and not the smeared exchange of cut palms that Melissa had chewed them out for attempting when he was nine years old.

*Stiles said it’ll bond us for life,* Scott had immediately tattled, looking up at his mom with big, teary eyes.

*Stiles will not be hanging out with you until I have a long talk with his parents,* Melissa had countered, then sighed when Scott’s eyes had brimmed over and Stiles’s briefly shamefaced look had morphed into an outraged torrent of objections.

Neither he nor Scott had “real” siblings, but he imagined it couldn’t have turned out much differently if the two of them had come from the same parents. The thing about having a brother was that you hated his guts sometimes. But you never stopped loving him. Not for one minute, not really.

Stiles knew he’d gotten the lucky end of the deal, because there weren’t many people in his life who were willing to stick out his scattered attention span, periodically short temper, and inability to stay on the beaten path for long. Even their worst disagreements had always blown over in a matter of days, and Scott had forgiven Stiles every single time Stiles had gotten both of them in trouble. Scott was a godsend, when it came down to it.

Stiles wasn’t good at meeting new people.

Understatement of the decade.

He was starting out the fourth year of his program and hadn’t made significant progress in befriending any of his CS classmates—other than Danny, who rolled his eyes but didn’t say no when Stiles asked if they were friends. He didn’t say yes either, but he didn’t say much of anything to Stiles, so that wasn’t necessarily a solid indication either way.
He wiped his sweating palms on his pants legs and tried to reel his thoughts back in before they scattered in too many directions.

“Any time now,” he said to the universe, and the universe responded with a soft chuckle.

Stiles looked up, startled, into the most strikingly green eyes he’d ever seen.

“The other class not out yet?” Dr. Derek Hale, in the goddamn extraordinarily beautiful flesh, asked. He shifted the strap of his leather bag so he could smooth out the shoulder of his charcoal grey suit jacket and looked at Stiles expectantly when he didn’t answer right away.

Stiles’s throat clicked. “No,” he managed, exerting a significant amount of willpower to keep himself from sweeping his gaze up and down the professor’s body. He could save that for later; it’d be pretty fucking obvious when they were in such close range, with Dr. Hale’s eyes fixed so steadily on him. “I got here early. Overestimated how long it’d take to walk, I guess.”

Dr. Hale nodded. “It’s a smaller campus than you might expect. You’ll get used to it; find all the shortcuts that’ll let you sleep in later.” He checked his expensive-looking wristwatch, which Stiles frankly didn’t know anyone even wore anymore. Not when cell phones existed. “Shouldn’t be too much longer, though. Mind if I wait with you?”

Stiles grabbed the backpack he’d let flop across the bench next to him, and Dr. Hale popped open the buttons on his blazer—suit coat? Stiles was not prepared for this—so he could sit down more comfortably.

Stiles had worn his second-tightest pair of jeans and the dark red shirt he’d been told showed off his biceps and deepened the color of his eyes—there were advantages to befriending your high school crush and soaking up bits of her impeccable fashion sense. He was suddenly regretting, though, that he hadn’t paid more attention during the shopping trips she’d dragged him on after he’d finally quit hitting on her and had asked her to hang out as friends instead. Maybe he would’ve known to buy a fucking blazer or to toss his backpack, which he’d had since early high school, jesus, what a disaster this was already turning into.

They sat in silence for a breathless—on Stiles’s end, anyway—handful of moments, watching the closed door of the lecture hall.

Dr. Hale checked his watch again. “Ten ‘til,” he mused. “I didn’t think to check what was in the room right now; usually they’re not packed in this closely.”

“I checked,” Stiles said, in case there was any doubt creeping in about the validity of his initial statement. “I mean, not the schedule. But I wasn’t paying attention to the time and poked my head in, and there was definitely a room filled with people.”

Dr. Hale arched an eyebrow at him, silent but oddly expressive.

Stiles clasped his hands together in that way he always did when he’d been caught out in a lie and hadn’t thought through an exit strategy. It’d been a while since that’d happened, actually, but he wasn’t going to look at that too closely.

“I slammed the door open,” he amended. “And stood in the doorway, backlit by the sun, while my eyes adjusted—it’s weirdly dark in there? I don’t know if you’re on this whole professorial green building kick, saving the environment by reducing electricity use or whatever, but that has got to be hell on your students taking proper notes, or like...not falling asleep, in general, I’m just saying—and it turned out everyone in there was just staring at me, not making a fucking sound, like I was a social
experiment that hadn’t been on their exam prep, or a mummy come to life or something. So I booked it out of there.”

Dr. Hale chuckled, not seeming phased by Stiles’s nervous chatter. “I prefer keeping the lights on.”

His voice was smooth and softer than Stiles had been expecting. Throughout the majority of the summer, he’d been imagining—possibly at night, with his bedroom door locked and the ripped-out catalog page nearby—a gruffer, deeper tone, something dark and demanding to match the rough scrape of a beard against his skin, the grip of strong hands holding him down.

The fantasy version had been...undeniably appealing, but there was something magnetic about the man sitting next to him, like the world had shifted into a new dimension without him noticing, one where the colors were just the tiniest bit brighter.

Oh no, he thought, remembering a flash of brilliant red hair in third grade and the eight years it’d taken to start seeing Lydia as a real person—who was never going to date him—instead of the ideal he’d set up on a pedestal and dedicated himself to worshipping.

Dr. Hale turned those eyes away from the door and back on him, and Stiles could only summon, Oh well; too late, before his new ideal was speaking again.

“I see you have the advantage of me here, if you already know it’s my class next. I don’t think I’ve had you before?”

“No,” Stiles said, his mouth dry. “This is definitely my first time. I’m Stiles. I make terrible first impressions.”

“Not always,” Dr. Hale said, a hint of a smile curving his lips, but anything further he was going to say was interrupted by the door in front of them opening, a flood of students spilling onto the walkway. “I’ll see you inside; I’ll make sure the lights are on their brightest setting,” he said instead, re-buttoning his jacket as he stood, and leaving Stiles stunned in his wake.

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To his dismay, Dr. Hale was as breathtaking at the front of a lecture hall as he was sitting on a bench, bathed in the glow of warm, mid-afternoon light. His introductory remarks were succinct and efficient, and he seemed to expect his students to have already downloaded and examined the syllabus before arriving in his class.

“I know what some of you are thinking,” he said, his voice easily carrying to the back of the tiered seats, where Stiles had managed to squeeze into a desk before the room had filled. “History is dull. It’s dry, it’s boring, with rows of meaningless dates and names you’ll never have a reason to remember once you’ve handed in your exam and wiped your short-term memory clear.”

A girl a few rows away from Stiles giggled, then stuffed the end of her braid into her mouth to stifle the sound before its echo could carry too far.

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A girl a few rows away from Stiles giggled, then stuffed the end of her braid into her mouth to stifle the sound before its echo could carry too far.

“If I believed that, I wouldn’t be here, wasting your time. I can guarantee that I wouldn’t have dedicated my life to studying something that’s already dried up and lost all relevance. And I’ll promise you this: if you stick through this course with me, I’ll do everything I can to keep it interesting. The syllabus says we’ll be studying ancient civilization, but history has a long arm and a cyclical nature. We’ll be spending plenty of time talking about real world consequences carrying through to the society we all live in now. It may not always seem like it, and you might not think it from looking at me—” another girl let out a short, slightly hysterical-sounding laugh “—but your
professors were once students, too. We know what it’s like to be on that side of the room, listening to someone drone on about topics that don’t seem remotely applicable to real life.”

He turned to the chalkboard and wrote out his name and office information in an easily readable scrawl, then tapped the stick of chalk against the office hours for emphasis before returning it to the tray.

“If you sit through a lecture—at any point this semester—and find yourself confused, or bored to tears, come talk to me. Not every student learns the same way, and it’s my job to make sure you get the same information as your classmates. That’s my contract with you, and it’s more important to me than dates, or grades, or cramming scrambled pieces of information into brains that’ll spew them back out on exams without having truly learned anything.”

He took a breath and pushed back a lock of hair that’d fallen onto his forehead as he spoke. His hair was thick, dark, with hints of grey framing his face and catching the light on the softly gelled finger-combed waves curving back from his temples. Stiles ached with the desire to test its texture, to smooth away the chalk dust that he’d unknowingly left smudged at his hairline.

“One final note,” Dr. Hale said. “This is a communal experience, so don’t be afraid to raise your hand, or to speak up, or to engage with those around you, including outside of class. I’ll call on you occasionally and do what I can to guide you, but this isn’t high school. You’re adults, responsible for your own education, and you can steer your futures any direction you choose. And that is your part of our contract. Understood?”

He waited for the murmurs of acknowledgement, searching each corner of the room to be certain his words had landed. When he was satisfied, he nodded once, shortly.

“Then let’s begin.”

***

“He’s been sitting like that for the last hour,” Scott said apologetically. “You can pretend he’s not there, if you want. I don’t think we’ll be able to get him to move to the other room.”

“Has he eaten dinner?” Kira asked.

Bless her, she sounded like she was actually concerned about his well-being. Stiles switched into a thoughtful consideration of what life would be like with Kira as his best friend, instead of Scott. It held a certain amount of appeal at the moment. He’d table the idea for further examination at a later date.

“I gave him a bowl of soup, but I had to take it away when he tried to drown himself in it,” Former Best Friend Scott McCall said. “He gets like this sometimes. He’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“If you say so,” Kira said, sounding dubious. “I can come back later? I just wanted to see where you guys were living this year.”

“No, it’s cool,” Scott said, his reply accompanied by the squeaky, drawn out grooooooan of their front door complaining as he tried to shove it closed.

It’d swollen from severely inadequate weatherproofing, they’d figured, and at night, when the temperature dipped, it was nearly impossible to shut. Stiles wasn’t looking forward to colder days, when they’d be running to class and would have to waste precious minutes yanking at the door to make sure their few stealable possessions were secure. He couldn’t imagine how shitty their situation would be if they were somewhere other than the Pacific Northwest, where “weather” mostly meant
rain, maybe a few days of light snowfall, and the need to pull out heavier sweaters after Halloween. But maybe landlords would be required to take better care of their property in states that had summers and winters that could kill you.

He tabled that thought for later, too, then made a mental note by asking Scott to write it down for him.

“Look up regional differences in renters’ rights,” Scott recited as his pen scratched across the notepad they kept on their kitchenette’s tiny counter.

“So we can determine whether our landlord can be classified as lazy or criminally negligent,” Stiles added, turning his head to the side so he could see Scott writing the rest down. He’d been sitting at the table, his face buried in his arms, prepared to wallow in despair for the rest of the night, but his neck was starting to hurt anyway.

Scott capped the pen and tossed it onto the counter. “You ready to rejoin the living, buddy?”

“I’m doomed to eternal misery,” Stiles said, but got up to see what kinds of snacks Kira had brought as a housewarming gift. It’d probably been a mistake to go the off-campus housing route this year without investing more time in the search. They’d both wanted to stay in rent-free Beacon Hills for as much of the summer as possible, which meant they’d based their decision on photos that’d made everything look significantly larger. And cleaner. And less ready to crumble at a moment’s notice. Stiles had been too distracted by other considerations to properly vet their options, and they’d wound up with something habitable, but only just.

It wasn’t a great sign for how he’d manage the rest of the semester if he couldn’t find a way to kick his brain back into gear, but at least he had four days a week free from the bone-deep agony of sitting through Dr. Hale’s class. He wasn’t sure he’d survive it.

What a way to go, though.

“Cheetos?” he asked hopefully, hovering over Scott’s shoulder and reaching around to grab the bag from him. “Kira, have I ever mentioned what a beautiful person you are? I’m extending a formal invitation right now: you’re welcome here any time. Consider yourself an honorary third roommate.”

Kira blushed and darted a shy look at Scott, who was too busy digging into a package of Oreos to notice.

“Did we remember to pick up some milk?” Scott asked, obliviously bending down to search inside the heavily dented mini fridge they’d been dragging around since they’d moved into their freshman dorm. Fortunately, Stiles had thought to stick it in his Jeep as a backup beer fridge, not realizing at the time that the only appliances their apartment came equipped with were a hot plate and a toaster that sparked worryingly when you plugged it in.

“Sniff it to see if it’s still good,” Stiles said through a mouthful of bright orange cheese dust. “I had some with my cereal this morning, and my stomach felt like shit all day.”

Scott obligingly popped open the container and stuck his nose in the cardboard mouth, then shrugged and drank directly from the carton. He grinned at Kira, who smiled softly back at him and traced a finger over her upper lip to indicate that he’d given himself a milk mustache.

Stiles stuffed his mouth with another handful of Cheetos to stop himself from saying something he hadn’t fully thought through. Better to let Scott discover Kira’s pretty-damn-obvious feelings for him on his own time and decide how he felt from there. In the meantime, Stiles was going to enjoy the
hell out of her friendship. Especially if she kept bringing them food.

With the way Kira was watching Scott, though, seemingly attracted to even his disgusting Oreo-cramming habits—two at a time, crumbs spewing everywhere—Stiles didn’t think it’d take a whole lot longer for her to break and say something. There was only so much pining you could do before you either moved on or sat the person down and asked for a frank evaluation of your chances.

Stiles carefully ignored his own experience on the matter and his heart’s attempts to crawl out of his chest every time he thought about Dr. Hale’s first lecture. The urge to fling himself at the registrar’s feet and beg to change his major had been overwhelming, but he’d persevered. Managed to drag himself the three and a half blocks to the apartment complex instead, where Scott had promised to hide his computer until he was capable of preventing himself from trying something rash and completely irrational.

That was attraction, though. Pure and simple. Nothing more than a biological instinct that would surely fade away with further exposure.

Put that way, it was in his best interests to continue attending Dr. Hale’s class. To be certain that he burned this unattainable crush away before it spread too far.

I bet Dr. Hale doesn’t eat his Oreos like a goddamn animal, he thought, his resolution to nip the situation in the bud lasting for approximately five seconds.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek is a little less lonely
“I’d like to see this one,” Derek said, curling the tips of his fingers through the chain-link fence that separated the visitor section from the narrow staff walkway. The dog whose kennel he’d stopped in front of pushed its wiry muzzle forward, snuffling audibly, and its stubby tail began a steady metronome wag once it caught Derek’s scent.

“Are you sure?” the shelter worker asked. She was somewhere in her thirties, with masses of curly hair and a bubbly personality; she’d introduced herself as Kaiya and had let Derek take his time wandering around the rows of kennels but had appeared after his second aborted attempt to return to the front office to ask for her help. They must have security cameras set up. It made sense to build in an easy way to monitor the dogs from a distance, but Derek felt a twinge of embarrassment over the indecision he must’ve been projecting.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling more certain now that he was faced with it as a tangible prospect. Now that he had the dog—possibly his dog—following his voice with hopeful tilts of its head.

Kaiya made a thoughtful noise in her throat but unlocked the kennel, murmured softly to the dog, and expertly slipped on a collar and lead. The dog followed easily—no hint of resistance or fear, good signs for its adoptibility—as she led it to a small run off to the side, gesturing to Derek to follow.

“Take it slowly,” she advised once they were inside and she’d latched the gate and unclipped the leash. “Let her come to you. Hearing your voice will help.”

“Hey girl,” he started, not sure how to begin talking to an unfamiliar dog in front of a near stranger. It was unlikely either would be interested in hearing snippets of the book chapter he was in the midst of writing, or the lectures he’d prepared for the rest of the week’s classes. Simple was good. Stick to the basics. “I’m Derek. I’m here to see if you’d like to come home with me.”

Kaiya stifled what sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but she moved to the far corner of the run, making herself as unobtrusive as possible. The dog lifted her head from where she’d been sniffing at the ground around the entrance, probably sorting through the layered history of all the other dogs who’d been in her position, eager to charm their way into a potential new family.

“I guess you’re not a girl anymore, though, are you?” Derek continued when she turned in his direction but didn’t move closer. “You’re all grown up. You’re a lady now. What was it your kennel tag said? Lola?”

Lola perked up at that, her stub of a tail wagging again, and trotted over to Derek so quickly that she bumped into his legs. She didn’t seem bothered by the sudden impact or Derek’s huff of laughter and only backed away a couple inches to more easily reach the hands he was letting her sniff. She was tall enough for Derek to scratch behind her ears without stooping, but he crouched down anyway, and she immediately swiped her tongue over his chin.

“Hey now, fast mover,” he crooned, “none of that until we get to know each other better.” He stroked over her bristly face and to the surprisingly soft fur on her back, then down to the base of her tail, testing to see where she preferred being petted.
Everywhere seemed to be the immediate answer. She was wiggling, vibrating with energy and excitement, but never moving too far away, letting out periodic high-pitched whines that she'd cut off abruptly, as though she was making a studious attempt to be good.

“You're a good girl,” he assured her, and she responded by pressing into his hands and whimpering under her breath.

“She likes you,” Kaiya said from her corner, a note of surprise in her voice.

“Is she normally not this friendly?” he asked, giving in and sitting down on the ground so Lola could nearly crawl into his lap. “You're too big for that,” he told her, but kept petting her anyway.

“The couple who surrendered her said she had a lovely, sweet personality. Very affectionate, responsive, incredibly intelligent. We've seen glimpses of that since she's been here, but she's mostly been...” She chewed on the word for a bit. “Sad, is the best way to describe it. Dogs can get depressed, too, and they have no way of understanding why they're being abandoned by their loved ones.”

“Why did they?” He smoothed the eyebrow-heavy fur away from Lola’s eyes, clouded over with milky white cataracts. “Or is that an obvious answer?”

“It's one of our most common stories; they couldn't afford the care a senior dog with health problems requires.” Possibly worried that'd discourage him, she swung back into her chipper mode. “The great news is that she's fully trained, and there shouldn't be any behavioral issues. You said you wanted a dog that's good with kids?”

“Eleven and eight years old. They've had pets before—my family's used to having some animals around—but they're kids, so there will be some tumbling, roughhousing.” He grinned, thinking about the last time he'd stayed with Laura. “Occasional screaming, whether they're mad at each other or just having fun.”

Kaiya laughed. “Far too familiar with that one, I’m afraid.”

“You have some of your own?” he asked. Lola had planted herself firmly in his lap, leaning back against him so he’d have a better angle to scratch down her chest.

“Single mom of one,” she confirmed. “He’s in first grade, so he’s a handful, but out of my hands for a nice chunk of the day. Although you’re not really supposed to say that.”

He made a commiserating sound. “Kids are a lot of work. Especially when you’re on your own.”

She gave him an oddly penetrating look, seemed poised to say something, then tore her eyes away and used the toe of one boot to nudge some well-loved dog toys into a semblance of a pile. When she was done, she straightened her shoulders and began listing out more of Lola’s history and asking Derek a series of questions about his experience with dogs and his readiness to care for one that would require extra time, attention, and monetary investment. It felt like a job interview—something Derek hadn’t experienced for a while—but he answered honestly. Lola was already carving out a substantial place for herself in his heart, and any lingering doubts had fled the moment he’d touched her soft ears.

“I’m a professor,” he said when Kaiya asked about the amount of time Lola would be left alone during the week. “I’m planning to keep her with me as much as possible. You said her previous owners had kids; how is she around other adults, or in crowds?”

“Dog aggression can be a problem with Giant Schnauzers, but we haven’t seen any sign of that with
her. She’s standoffish with new people but not afraid of them. Once you’ve bonded, she’ll take her
cue from you on how to behave.”

“So as long as I’m calm around them, she will be.” He couldn’t help grinning at the thought,
wondering how she’d respond to the exasperation he tried to keep hidden from some of the people
who’d fumbled their way through his classes over the years. “Any other health problems to watch
out for?”

“Other than her vision, she’s a very healthy girl. She’s seven, which puts her in the ‘senior dog’
category and makes her a lot harder to adopt—sadly, people tend to turn away if a dog’s any older
than a year or two—but she should have a long life ahead of her.”

“A happy one,” Derek promised, and Lola stretched up to nudge his cheek with her nose, as though
she understood.

The paperwork didn’t take long to fill out, and Kaiya asked a few more questions as he worked his
way through the forms. After sniffing inquisitively around the front office and mapping out the space
to her satisfaction, Lola settled over his feet, keeping him anchored in place while she chewed on the
treat Kaiya had given her.

“I’ll pick her up on Saturday morning, if that’s okay,” he said when he reached the shelter’s policy
on same-day adoptions. The reasoning behind a wait period made sense, and he’d have an
opportunity to properly outfit his house before her arrival, but he couldn’t help feeling like Lola
would assume he’d abandoned her, too.

“Saturday morning will be perfect,” Kaiya replied. “You can bring the rest of your family by then, or
earlier in the week, if you’d like to get a head start on introducing them to Lola.”

“The rest of my family?” he asked, his brow furrowing in momentary confusion. “Oh, no. It’s just
me. The kids—those are my nieces. My sister lives in upstate New York, so they’ll only be around
Lola when I can convince them to come out for visits. Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all!” Kaiya looked oddly pleased about the clarification, and he didn’t make the
connection until she plucked a business card from her desk and wrote something on the back of it,
handing it to him with a hint of a blush. “We have a thirty day return policy if something doesn’t
work out with one of our dogs and their new homes; we want to be sure it’s a good fit, for both of
you. I doubt that’ll be a problem with you and Lola, but if you ever need any extra help, or want
advice, or to...talk. That’s my personal number. Call anytime.”

“Oh,” Derek said, thrown by the sudden shift into blatant flirtation. Was it possible it’d been there all
along? He’d been told by more than a few people that he had a habit of overlooking those kinds of
signals, but why would it occur to him to watch for that in this type of situation? Lola huffed out a
low grumble, already tuning in to his emotions. He bent down to pat her and pulled upon the politely
dismissive tone he needed a few times a semester with his students. “Thank you. I appreciate that. I’ll
give the office a call if I have any questions while she’s settling in.”

Kaiya’s lips quirked to the side in disappointment, but to Derek’s relief, she took the hint graciously
and moved back into the cheery, professional tone she’d been using throughout the rest of their
interactions. They parted ways with a friendly handshake, and Derek knelt down to promise Lola
he’d be back soon.

He didn’t know if she understood the words, but she stood politely, not tugging at her leash, and kept
her unseeing eyes fixed in his direction until he’d passed out of view.
“She’s a Giant Schnauzer,” Derek said, tucking his phone between his chin and his shoulder as he moved the oversized dog bed into a different corner and rearranged the starter set of toys he’d spent hours picking out. He’d focused on his Wednesday classes as well as he could but had driven the half hour back to the shelter first thing Thursday morning, eager to spend more time with Lola. The guy at the front desk—a harassed-looking younger man who’d seemed relieved to hear Derek hadn’t needed a tour—had given the two of them the run of a large outdoor play space, and Derek had spent a good chunk of the morning getting to know her before he’d had to leave for what seemed like an endless set of errands. “Did you get the pictures I sent you? She reminds me of you; she’s smart, and sweet on the surface, but it turns out she’s incredibly stubborn when you get down to it.”

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“Fuck you,” Laura laughed. “I did; she’s gorgeous. Is she a purebred? I’m surprised anyone would let a dog like that go. She must’ve been expensive.”

“It’s one thing to shell out money for a puppy, but they felt like they were facing a pretty daunting row of vet bills, and they were prioritizing their kids’ college funds.” He shook one of the balls before setting it back down; it jingled musically, which would make it easier for Lola to find. “It’s rough, but I get it. I have to admit I’m honestly a little relieved I don’t have to make the decision about paying for cataract surgery. They wavered on it for too long, and now it’s past the point where the likelihood of success outweighs the risks.”

“So she’s completely blind?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been reading up on it—shut up, I know—” Derek said, cutting her off before she could call him a nerd. He’d only picked up a few books on the subject; he’d done most of his research online.

“I wasn’t going to say anything!” she protested, clearly lying.

Talking to Laura always made him feel years younger, like they were still kids fighting over whose turn it was to do the dishes and who got to choose which movie to pop into the VCR. “Where I was going with that is that vision isn’t even a dog’s primary sense, so they can adapt to an almost completely normal life. She’ll have some trouble when she first moves in, but once she’s used to the space, she should be just fine. There are things you can do to make it easier, though. For instance, did you know—”

“Okay, okay,” she interrupted, as fondly impatient as ever. “I’ve gotta pick up the kids in a bit, so save the lectures for your students for now, alright? But Derek—I know you’ve been thinking about this for a while, but are you sure this was the right time to start all of this? Why not wait until the summer?”

Big sisters never grew out of giving unsolicited advice, Derek thought, rolling his eyes at her, and then double-checking to be sure he hadn’t forgotten they were on FaceTime. That had happened once before. Okay, twice, and she still hadn’t let him live it down.

“She wouldn’t still be there next summer,” he said.

Laura relented. “Okay, fair point. But why did you even start looking during your first week of classes? They started on Monday, right? Isn’t it going to be hard juggling a brand new dog with everything you already overload yourself with during the school year?”

That was one he couldn't answer. He tried a few different responses that sounded reasonable, but settled on the truth. Laura could usually see right through anything else. “I don't know. Like you
said, I've been wanting to, and something felt right this time, in a way it hasn't really before. And I was only going to look—" an excursion he did actually gear himself up for about once a year—"and when I saw her, I knew. I couldn't leave her there."

Laura remained quiet as he spoke, and for a few beats after. He could hear her moving around her house, shutting a couple of doors—probably house, then car—and starting up an engine. "Don't take this the wrong way, but have you thought about dating?"

"Laura," he said warningly.

"Cora’s been telling me the apps are getting better, and one of my friends—Clarissa, you know her—has been meeting some great people over the last couple of months. I just think—"

"Laura," he said again.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice sounding like her again, instead of some strange echo of their mom's. "I know you hate it when I bring it up. I just worry about you, Derek. I miss seeing you. I wish we lived closer."

"So you could poke your nose into my business in person," he said, knowing his tone was petty, but he’d thought they’d moved past this.

"Maybe a little," she said, with a laugh that made his irritation cross right into missing her, as it nearly always did.

"I thought you could visit," he said, instead of offering the apology they both knew he meant. "You and the girls. Rob, too, if he can get off work."

"I’d like to. Schedules are just..." She didn’t need to finish; they’d had this conversation many times, too.

"I know. But think about it, okay? Maybe Thanksgiving this year. We could have it at my place. You wouldn’t have to do any of the cooking."

"Tempting," she said, and he could almost hear her smile. "Okay, I need to get on the road, so I’m going to hang up before you start lecturing me about cell phone safety statistics. Talk to you soon?"

"It’s against the law," he reminded her. "You of all people should know that. And wait, before you go, what was that about Cora? Do you know who she’s dating?"

She let out a bright peal of laughter and started in on a terrible impression of his voice. "Laura, it’s rude to ask personal questions about your siblings’ dating lives. You big ol’ hypocrite."

"Yeah, yeah, but it’s Cora."

"Which is exactly how I feel about you, you grump. But seriously, they’re going to think I’ve forgotten about them. I gotta go, I’ll call you later. I love you!"

"Love you, too." He waited until the call clicked off before setting his phone down.

Knowing her, she’d probably immediately switched over to speakerphone and called Cora, but he’d learned to pick his battles. For now, he needed to take a few more passes around his house to see if he’d gotten everything lined up for Lola’s arrival.
Art by blizgori!

Next up: Stiles begins the seduction
“Okay, then what about this one?” Stiles dove back into his closet, rummaged around, and triumphantly pulled a long-sleeved dress shirt free. It’d been crumpled slightly, but he shook it out, assuming that would help with any wrinkles. He draped it over his torso and beamed at his laptop screen, where Lydia was impatiently tapping her nails on her open textbook.

“Better,” she said, “since I bought that one for you. But that was in high school; are you sure it still fits?” She cast an assessing eye over him. “You’ve filled out quite a bit since then. I doubt it’ll fit over your biceps.”

Stiles felt a flush of pleased surprise at the comment; he might have stopped having romantic feelings for Lydia when he was sixteen, but receiving a compliment from a beautiful woman was never something to sneeze at.

Although he did, violently, as soon as he had that thought, and Lydia’s cherry-red lips twisted into a grimace.

“Sorry Lyds,” he said, sneezing again, and wiping his nose on the sleeve of the flannel shirt she’d already rejected. “It’s this fucking apartment; either I’m allergic to it, or it’s full of mold. Possibly both. Can you be allergic to mold?”

“Yes,” Lydia said. “But I doubt that’s it, if you’re not having any other symptoms. You’re probably kicking up a ton of dust in that attempt at what you call unpacking.” She waved a disdainful hand at Stiles’s room.

“I am unpacking. The problem is that we have one dresser and one closet in one bedroom, and Scott and I are still debating who gets what.” He spitefully tossed his extra shirts on Scott’s side of the room. When they landed—halfway under Scott’s bed—they did, indeed, knock a small cloud of dust into the air.

“I don’t understand why you’re making such a big deal out of this, anyway. Haven’t you already been in class with this guy all week?”

“Twice,” he corrected. “It’s a Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And today, we’re turning in our first assignment, which means I might get to interact with him again, which means I need to look a hell of a lot better than I did the first time.”

“He’s already assigning work?” Lydia made an impressed noise. “I could learn to like this man.”

“Hands off,” he warned, and she scoffed at him. Which was fair: even if they were living on the same coast, it seemed unlikely that they’d ever compete for the same guys. For example, her track record so far was douchebags. Which he knew better than to say out loud.

She narrowed her eyes at him as though she’d picked up on what he was thinking. He clapped a guilty hand on his head—if anyone was going to casually pull out a surprise brain-reading superpower, it’d be Lydia—and tried to turn it into a suave hair-smoothing gesture when her suspicion deepened.

“What are you actually hoping to accomplish here? Are you trying to fuck him?”
“Uh,” he said, his brain shorting out at the idea. He hadn’t exactly thought that far ahead. Mostly, he wanted to sit in Dr. Hale’s class and stare at him. He’d spent part of Wednesday’s class composing exceptionally bad poetry and sketching Dr. Hale from various angles, but he had absolutely no intention of admitting that to Lydia. He hadn’t even told Scott about those particular creative exercises.

“Or are you trying to actually date him? Because, frankly, that’s a more difficult prospect, and the two scenarios will require entirely different wardrobe choices.”

“Honestly, Lyds, I’m not trying to do anything. I just...just help me not look like the guy you never gave a second glance in high school, okay?”

Her expression softened. “I didn’t want to sleep with you, Stiles. That doesn’t mean I didn’t notice you.”

“So that means my regular clothes are fine?” he asked hopefully.

“No. Because I wasn’t a forty-year-old professor whose salary depends on him not sleeping with his students.” She sighed. “This would be a lot easier if I could sort through that mess in person.”

He frowned down at the pile of clothes on his bed, not sure if she meant them or if she was referring to the larger, and possibly more baffling, puzzle of him as a person.

“Let me see the red plaid again. The lightweight cotton one.”

Stiles obliged and did a slow spin in front of the laptop when she twirled an imperious finger.

“Roll the sleeves up to show your forearms, and make sure you don’t fidget them back down before you hand in the paper; they’re your best feature, so you’ll want his eyes on them as much as possible. Or on your ass, but you’re already wearing the only decent pair of pants you own, so there’s not much we can do about that.”

“They’re tight,” he complained, and she smiled at him.

“That’s the idea. Okay, I think that’s as much as I can do from here, and my classes started last week, so I’m swamped. I’ve already spent too much time on this.”

“Thanks, Lyds,” Stiles said gratefully, bending down to bring his face closer to the camera, grunting when it made the tight waistband dig into his stomach.

“Text me how it goes. And so we don’t have to go through this again for a while—until you run out of them, or need another statement piece, wear your henleys, top buttons undone, sleeves rolled up. You’ll look casual but put together. Hopefully.”

He saluted in acknowledgement, and she blew him a kiss and closed out of the chat window.

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Stiles spent most of the class absently pulling his sleeves down over his hands so he could play with the cuffs, then rolling them back up with a spasm of guilt over repeatedly forgetting Lydia’s simplest instructions.

Dr. Hale was wearing a navy pinstripe suit this time, and Stiles debated the benefits of trying to snap a furtive photo for Lydia. She’d approve, he thought—the suit moved with him, a sleek, effortlessly tailored fit that made Stiles finally understand why Lydia had never seemed impressed by his
attempts to dress up in high school. He’d always gone with what he thought was a debonair sort of “casual” look, which he realized now translated to “baggy” and “ill-fitting.” Possibly “thrift store,” which was accurate enough, since that’s where he’d found the blazer for his junior prom.

_A bargain!_ he’d proudly told his dad, who had said vaguely encouraging things that Stiles now interpreted as his dad’s relief that he’d be staying single for a while.

He made a mental note to call his dad over the weekend to express his dissatisfaction over these Deep-Rooted Complaints that he’d only just discovered.

Unfairly distracting clothing aside, Dr. Hale was as dynamic as ever, keeping a good percentage of the room’s attention on him to a degree Stiles suspected wasn't entirely typical in a class of this size. While Dr. Hale had a full lecture mapped out and spent most of his time hitting key points that added texture and context to the reading he’d assigned, he invested an equal amount of energy in coaxing responses from the class, ensuring they remained engaged.

In short, he was mesmerizing. If any of Stiles’s high school teachers had shown even a fraction of Dr. Hale’s passion, Stiles might've ended up pursuing an entirely different academic path. At Beacon Hills High School, history had been the kind of class you slept through. On his more productive days, Stiles had used it to catch up on reading or to finish assignments for his other classes. He'd never once been pulled out of his own thoughts and spun into another time period by one of his instructor’s voices.

_Tell me again why I can't switch majors?_ he texted Scott.

When he lifted his head from his phone, Dr. Hale was angling an unimpressed look directly at him. The flow of his speech hitched for a moment, as though he was considering putting Stiles on the spot, but he redirected to a guy a couple rows from the front who was waving his hand in the air, eager to share his ideas.

The other student held Dr. Hale’s undivided attention while he spoke, but the moment he stopped, obliviously pleased with himself, Dr. Hale’s eyes strayed to Stiles’s row again.

“Any further thoughts on Mr. Fletcher’s assessment? Perhaps a counterargument from someone who read the situation differently?” He almost seemed disappointed when Stiles didn't volunteer an opinion. Another student pulled his gaze away by shooting her hand into the air, and Stiles breathed out, pressing his sweating hands against his thighs.

_Because you need to actually graduate this year_, his phone said, lighting up with Scott’s practical reminder. A second text followed a few seconds later, accompanied by a half dozen winking emoji and an eggplant. _And because they don't have a major in what you want him to be teaching you._

Stiles hastily pocketed his phone and did his best to project an aura of rapt attention for the rest of the hour. It didn’t take much effort, since listening to Dr. Hale was like diving down the best and most satisfying Wikipedia hole imaginable. Was that something he could write on the end of semester instructor evaluations? Did they still do those for tenured professors? He tore his straying brain back to the task at hand; he could start composing Appropriate Levels of Effusive Praise drafts later.

He lingered at his desk for as long as he could, pretending to shuffle notebooks and loose papers in order to buy himself some extra time. He didn’t want to be in the first crush of students stomping down the stairs and funneling past Dr. Hale on their way out the door; he needed some significant one-on-one time if he was going to make any sort of a lasting impression. If anything could be accurately stated about Stiles, it was that he didn’t stand out in a crowd.
Unless it was for something less than ideal, like yanking too hard at the unzipped Batman case stuffed at the bottom of his backpack and spilling its contents all over the floor, pens and flash drives and highlighters rolling under the nearby desks and forcing Stiles to drop to his knees to crawl after them.

He returned to his seat, panting slightly and tugging at his waistband as he sprawled as much as he could in the uncomfortable chair. He was tempted to pop open the button of his jeans, which he was fairly certain was leaving a permanent indentation in his tortured stomach, but that would undo all the hard work he’d put into looking like an attractive, dateable adult.

The waiting started to feel a little too obvious once he realized Braid Girl was determined to outlast him. She was wearing a pretty sleeveless dress, cinched at the waist and flaring out to show off her long, tanned legs. She glared at him, flipped her braid over her shoulder, and pointedly opened her textbook, plonking it down on her desk with a challenging **thud**.

*Fine*, he mouthed at her back in annoyance. It’d be awkward to be the absolute last person in the room, anyway; Dr. Hale must have other places to be, and proper flirtation required subtlety. Which Stiles had never possessed an ounce of in his life, but your college years were about maturing and learning new things, right? He totally had this.

He tripped on his way down, thumping his foot painfully against one of the chair legs and trying not to swear too audibly. Dr. Hale was accepting a paper from another student, but Stiles could’ve sworn he saw his lips twitch in a hastily repressed smile.

The problem with this entire plan was that Stiles hadn’t thought of anything to actually say while he was handing his paper to the world’s sexiest professor. It was enough, maybe, to be that close to him again, to catch a faint whiff of his understated cologne, to brush their fingers together in the exchange.

But when he turned to leave, Dr. Hale stopped Stiles with a light touch on the bare skin of his forearm.

“Stiles,” he said. “Would you mind waiting a minute?”

Stiles froze in place, staring at Dr. Hale’s hand—the long, sturdy fingers, the dusting of dark hair on his hands and knuckles. “I—sure, yeah,” he said, his brain still skittering over the fact that Dr. Hale remembered his name, despite Stiles’s subsequent attempts to duck anonymously into the back of the room, letting the others hog the spotlight.

He squeezed gently before letting go, and Stiles moved a few steps to the side as Dr. Hale projected his voice enough to reach Braid Girl.

“Ms. Sullivan, I’m afraid we need to clear out the room for the next class.”

She slapped her book shut and rose to her feet, but fluffed out the skirt of her dress and smiled sweetly as she headed down. Stiles spun around and rubbed a curious finger along the chalkboard, doing his best to not eavesdrop on their exchange. He managed, nevertheless, to overhear enough to smirk at Braid Girl as she left, her irritation thinly veiled.

“I know there are more modern methods,” Dr. Hale said from right behind Stiles, making him jump and hide his hands, an instinctive response to being caught doing something he might need to explain away. “But I guess I’ve always been a traditionalist.”

“You ask for the rooms with chalk?” Stiles asked when Dr. Hale picked up an eraser and began
meticulously wiping the board clean.

“As much as possible. They’ve been gradually replacing them with whiteboards or projectors, but I’ve dug my heels in where I can.” He shot a quick grin at Stiles, with a mischievous spark in his eyes that made Stiles weak in the knees. He didn’t even know that was a thing. Not in real life.

“There are some advantages to having tenure, and it helps when what I’m asking for actually saves the school money.”

“Is it an aesthetic choice, or—?”

“Maybe to some extent. Frankly, I hate PowerPoint presentations—putting them together or watching them—and it seems to give people an easy excuse to tune out, or even to fall asleep in a darkened room.” Dr. Hale sent another amused look Stiles’s way. “Mostly, though, the markers give me a headache, especially if you’re in a closed-up room with them all day. I don’t know how other people can stand it.”

“Maybe it gives them an extended high after a while,” Stiles suggested. “No, I’m serious! Maybe not intentionally, but it could be a thing that your body’s warning you against because you haven’t given in yet. Like—okay, I went to school with this kid named Greenberg who sniffed a hell of a lot of markers. He nearly passed out from it once, and when they took him to the nurse’s office, they found out his bag was totally stuffed with them. He’d been stealing them pretty regularly, and it was good that they caught him when they did, because they were this close to firing one of the administrative folks for misuse of funds or whatever. It’d gotten to be such a problem, they thought she was lying about the office supply orders and pocketing the extra money.”

“Snap judgments in academia, without an attempt to dig down to the truth? Sounds about right.” Dr. Hale huffed out a wry laugh. “So what happened to the guy? I imagine he was a truant from an early age. A glue stick gnawer in kindergarten?”

Stiles’s mouth hung open in momentary outrage before he remembered Dr. Hale had no way of knowing about his childhood. “Hey, don’t judge the glue-eaters for their attempts to catalog the world around them in different ways. Some of us grew out of that and became perfectly upstanding citizens.”

Dr. Hale laughed outright this time, dropping the eraser back into the tray and dusting his hands off. “I apologize for leaping to conclusions. I’ll try to keep a more open mind in the future. If it helps, I can tell you I’m pretty sure I ate paste when I was a kid. Although—my sister will deny this if you ask her—I’m also convinced I only did it because she told me it was candy.”

“So what happened to the guy? I imagine he was a truant from an early age. A glue stick gnawer in kindergarten?” Dr. Hale asked, grinning at him.

“Hm,” Dr. Hale said, his friendly expression dimming to a more reserved one. “When the circumstances are right, I suppose so.”

Stiles could feel him shutting back down, the professional veneer sliding into place, and scrambled for some way to bring back the lightly sarcastic, teasing-prone man he’d only begun to glimpse. “Did you hear,” he added in a rush, “about the marker incident that happened here? It was...a year and a half ago, I think?”

“No?” Dr. Hale said, and he sounded curious enough for Stiles to grab at the opening.

“I didn’t get to witness it firsthand, which, fortunately, also means I was completely free of suspicion. Not that—nevermind.” He cleared his throat, not ready to get into that line of conversation just yet; when you’re trying to impress someone, you don’t fly right into stories about the sheriff’s kid whose
early glue-chewing ways maybe hadn’t made him as much of a model adult (or teenager...or elementary schooler...) as he’d claimed. “Actually, I don’t know if they ever proved that anyone was responsible, or if it was one of those accidents that nobody’ll admit to because they’re afraid of repercussions.”

“Oh, that does sound familiar,” Dr. Hale said. He’d returned to the stack of papers and was beginning to absently straighten them into a neater pile, the edges carefully aligned. “Dr. Sanders? Whose structural formulas still haven’t been washed off the whiteboard in Reynolds Hall?”

“That’s the one!” Stiles said, stuffing his hands in his pockets before he could do something stupid like shoot approving finger guns at his professor. His pants were too tight to actually fit his entire hands, though, so he settled for hooking his thumbs in and rocking backward on his heels. “Not that exciting of an anecdote, I know, but the joke is that the structural formulas are wrong. Which is why everybody who’s actually taken a class from Dr. Sanders assumes that someone intentionally replaced the markers with permanent ones. There were pretty good odds he’d fuck up at least once, and this time the evidence would stick around for a while.”

Dr. Hale’s posture had changed, his body language suddenly...strained? Disapproving? Stiles tore one hand free from his pants, his shirt rucking up in the process, and ran his fingers nervously through his hair.

“I guess that’s a dumb story to tell a professor, huh? Loyalties and all. It’s just that he was a total douche to my buddy when he took his OChem class. Scott learns differently, so it always takes him extra time to settle in before he hits his stride and catches up with everyone else.”

“And Dr. Sanders didn’t understand or respect that.” Dr. Hale was focusing intently on sliding the papers into his soft leather bag, his thick eyebrows still drawn down in concentration, but the tense lines in his forehead had smoothed back out. “That doesn’t surprise me, based on other things I’ve heard, but rumors can be...misleading. I try not to assign much value to them until I’ve heard from a source I trust. But I’m sorry to hear that about your friend. I hope he’s had better luck since.” He folded the flap of the bag back down and paused before lifting it to his shoulder. “And for future reference, don’t worry about criticizing other professors around me. We’re not a hive mind, you know. We don’t rise and fall in unquestioning unison.”

“Not soldiers dedicated to the glorious cause of the university, got it,” Stiles quipped in relief. “I dunno why I brought it up. Another argument in favor of old-school chalkboards? Not that it’d be an issue with you, but.” He shrugged, honestly not sure how to continue. He couldn’t exactly admit the real reason for wanting to keep Dr. Hale around for as long as he possibly could.

“Impermanence can be a selling point. I appreciate the tip.” The corners of Dr. Hale’s eyes crinkled. “I take it you’re not a first year, then?”

“Oh, god no. I’m nearly done with this—uh, fantastic collegiate experience.”

“And your name is Stiles? I didn’t hear that wrong when I met you outside?”

“My...legal name is not, but yeah, that’s what I go by. Stiles Stilinski.”

“Hm,” was the response. “The last name will help; I haven’t been able to call on you in class without it. But the more pressing matter, and why I asked you to stay behind: I checked my registration list, and oddly, your name—or anything resembling ‘Stiles’—didn’t seem to be anywhere on it.”

Stiles aimed for nonchalant. “That’s probably because I’m not in your class. Technically.”
“You didn’t register for my class,” he said flatly.

“I would have! I tried. It was full, with this huge waiting list—you’re really fucking popular, in case you weren’t already aware of that—and the original plan involved me being convincing enough to talk my way in on the first day, but...” But then he’d actually met Dr. Hale, and the possibility of being told no wasn’t worth the risk of asking. “I was worried that if I brought it up, you’d tell me I couldn’t keep coming. So I just—” he made a curving motion with one hand, to signal sidling through the door “—snuck in and hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“I noticed,” Dr. Hale said, his tone impressively dry. “You must have noticed that I’d noticed, considering we’ve already had a conversation about you being in this class.”

“Not in so many words!” he protested. “I never actually said I was in your class. Or that I wasn’t.”

“Yet you did the assignment.”

“Well, yeah.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, a self-soothing gesture he’d picked up from his dad. His dad tended to employ it more frequently around Stiles than was strictly flattering. “It was easy enough. Short essay, yeah? On stuff we’ve been talking about all week, so it’s not like it was a chore. You said you wanted to get an early sense of our writing, and I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

Dr. Hale’s eyes were piercing, like he was trying to dig past the surface of Stiles’s words. “Do you want to be in this class, Mr. Stilinski?”

Stiles winced and wished, irrationally, that he’d taken longer to give Dr. Hale his last name. “I really do, yeah.” He braced himself to meet Dr. Hale’s soul-searching inspection full-on. His initial self-consciousness faded away the moment he realized this was the perfect invitation to stare directly into the eyes he’d been darting glances at all week as he tried—and repeatedly failed—to put down some description of them in words that wouldn’t fall immensely short.

They were some absurd combination of grey-blue-green, with darker green ringing the iris and a golden-brown starburst radiating out from the pupil, but even up close, he couldn’t name or identify every shade caught in them. It was like staring into the heart of a nebula, Stiles thought dizzily, his world tilting several degrees to the left, opening a path for something entirely new. For the beat of wings against a bright sunrise, the metallic bite of magic at the back of his tongue.

The spell broke when Dr. Hale spoke again, what must have only been seconds later. He sounded satisfied, as though he’d found whatever hidden truth he was seeking—and somehow hadn’t managed to sense Stiles’s heart thudding out of his chest.

“There’s time before the add/drop deadline; I’m sure I can pull some strings with the registrar. Why don’t you stop by and talk to her next week? I don’t want you doing the work and not getting credit for this class.”

“That’d be great,” Stiles croaked, a piece of him still fragmented into that alternate universe, where possibilities ran rampant. Where they could be talking about something more electrifyingly reckless than the simple transaction of adding credits to his course load. He swallowed and tried again. “Thank you, Dr. Hale.”

Dr. Hale reached out, a hairsbreadth from touching Stiles’s arm again, before drawing his hand back to curl it around the strap of his bag instead. His eyes were an utterly human—if still baffling—mix of colors now, but with a kindness shining through that was equally overwhelming. “I’ll see you next week, Mr. Stilinski. But remember Monday’s a holiday.”
“Wednesday,” Stiles said, and it felt like a promise.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek takes a walk
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lola had immediately, irrevocably, taken over Derek’s entire house. She was sprawled on her back in the living room, grunting happily as she dug her shoulders into the throw rug.

“You're a mess,” Derek told her fondly. He was watching from the couch, his coffee and newspaper forgotten on the dining room table.

She wiggled once more, for good measure, before careening to her feet and over to Derek, drunk on the delight of making herself at home. He obliged when she shoved her head into his hands, asking for the blissful scratches she already seemed to consider her due.

“You are not in charge,” he told her firmly. “I'm only petting you because I want to be petting you.” Everything he’d read about this breed over the past few days warned against letting them rule the roost, although it seemed like more of a caution for puppies who hadn't yet had their personalities fully ironed out. “I'm lucky you're already so well-trained,” he admitted.

He’d grown up with dogs, but they’d never been his dogs. They’d liked him and (mostly) listened to him, but for the most part, when his mom had come home, they’d sprinted to her side. Recognizing her as the head of their family, he supposed, the one they’d all relied on until...

Lola whimpered, nudging his hands away to rest her whiskery chin on his knees and stare unseeingly into his eyes.

“It's okay; it was a long time ago,” he told her, rubbing behind one of her ears until her concern melted back into bliss. His family was smaller now, and he couldn’t help wondering if he would’ve made some of the same decisions in his life if he’d been able to ask his mom for advice, but he knew he was lucky to still have close relationships with his two sisters. “You’ll like them,” he assured Lola. “Don’t pick up any ideas from them, though, because you’re not allowed to boss me around like they do.”

Lola mouthed gently at his hands, and he patted her one last time before getting up. "Time to burn off some of that energy. Ready for a walk?"

She danced around his feet as he gathered up his keys, her leash, and some plastic bags and headed to the front door. Kaiya had said she’d adapt quickly, but he still marveled at how at ease Lola seemed in her surroundings already, and how little her impaired vision hampered her movement.

“No tugging,” he reminded her, and she huffed through her nose but settled in next to him at a steady loping pace.

After living alone for so long, learning how to share space was a bumpier process than he’d anticipated. Lola had swiftly settled into his life like she’d always been a part of it, but there were times when she seemed to forget, for a few seconds, that she hadn’t returned to her old home and her previous family. She’d turn the wrong direction when trying to cross from the living room to the kitchen; she’d jolt awake, tense with excitement, when she heard someone passing by on the sidewalk, as though she was expecting someone else—someone not Derek—to come home. She’d whimper quietly sometimes, to herself, not looking for attention or reassurance; it was an unintentional sound, escaping from her lungs with each exhale simply because she was sad.
She liked Derek. He hoped, with that secretly selfish need to be someone's top priority, even a dog's, that she'd grow to love him. They were only on their third day together. They had time. And he understood, as well as anyone could, that you didn't recover from loss overnight. You didn't stop missing someone who'd left you alone in the world, especially if you couldn't comprehend why they'd been taken from you so abruptly, without even a chance at a proper farewell. Lola didn't have anyone who could sit her down to explain what had happened and why she wouldn't be seeing her family anymore.

Maybe a part of her would always be waiting for those familiar footsteps, for the warm, loving voice she'd known since she was a puppy. Or maybe she did understand that her loved ones had been yanked permanently from her life, but kept hoping, anyway.

Derek's fingers tightened around the loop of the leash, and he picked up the pace just enough to focus on his breathing, on the steady click of Lola's nails on the pavement, and not on the irrational idea of losing her, too.

With the adjustments he'd needed to make to his schedule—Lola's eyedrops; her morning ramble through the backyard; her impatient, bordering on frantic, scratching at the bedroom or bathroom door when he shut her out—he was leaving the house later than usual. It was an unseasonably warm morning, the weather still vacillating between summer and the slow encroach of autumn, and he was glad he'd checked the temperature before leaving the house.

He was less glad about his clothing choices—tennis shoes, loose basketball shorts, and an old tank top he'd dug out of a drawer—when he took the loop that curved around the woodsy side of campus and saw Stiles Stilinski wandering in his direction.

His first response shouldn't have been a knee-jerk impulse to turn around before Stiles saw him. This route was one of Derek's usual choices, and he'd jogged it many times before, encountering many other students, without ever experiencing a flash of panicked regret over not having taken the time to shower—or even glance in a mirror—before leaving the house. He tamped down on the errant thought, slowing to a walk to buy some additional time to collect himself.

His second response was even worse. He didn't recognize it at first—a curl of happiness in his chest, slowly unfurling at the sight of that artlessly tousled hair and the long, compellingly graceless limbs. He was pleased to see Stiles. There was something about him that held Derek’s attention. He couldn’t explain it, and he’d been doing his best to sweep it away and not think about it when Stiles wasn’t around, constantly pulling Derek toward him, like two magnets that merely needed a nudge to snap into place. Stiles was funny and clever and casually profane, and Derek enjoyed talking with him to a degree he didn’t traditionally experience with someone he barely knew. He wanted to get to know Stiles better. That was, potentially, a problem.

No, he told himself, not exactly sure what the reprimand was for, but certain he needed a marker to anchor the rational side of his brain.

Stiles had his head bent over his phone, not showing any indication of having seen Derek. Maybe, Derek thought, they would pass by each other silently, or with the barest acknowledgement. Or maybe Stiles had seen him and was pretending to text in order to avoid making eye contact. Derek had been the one to pull him into both of their conversations, after all, and Stiles was under no obligation to talk to one of his professors outside of the classroom.

No, he told himself again, when he recognized the path his thoughts were headed down and tasted the distinctive tang of disappointment churning in his throat. It’d be safer to move to the far side of the sidewalk, out of touching distance, and leave Stiles free to pass by in peace.
Lola took the decision out of his hands by lunging at an irresistible noise in the bushes—probably a rabbit she badly wanted to chase—and nearly tripping Stiles, who jolted to a stop with a, “Whoa!” and an almost immediate, “Dr. Hale!”

The note of pleased surprise sounded genuine, and that tendril of happiness sprouted leaves, twisting toward Stiles’s voice.

“Sorry,” Derek said, to Stiles and to the rational corner of his brain, which was knocking urgently against a door he’d slammed shut at the sight of Stiles’s warm brown eyes and slightly parted lips. *There’s nothing wrong with talking,* he told himself, and pushed a box in front of it.

“That’s okay,” Stiles said, and bobbed in place, as though he’d meant to crouch down but had reconsidered at the last second. “Is petting okay? I mean, if you’re not both in a hurry.”

“No, go ahead,” Derek said, unable to bring to mind any other plans he might’ve had for the day. “But talk to her first; she can’t see you, so you might startle her if you approach too fast.”

“Talking is a thing I can do,” Stiles said cheerfully, bending down and snapping his fingers at Lola, who turned to investigate the sound, her rabbit-hunting having proved fruitless. As promised, she took her cue from Derek and unhesitatingly welcomed Stiles’s overtures of friendship. “What a beautiful dog you are. Look at those eyebrows. And that beard. Who do you remind me of, huh?”

He angled a smirk up at Derek, who scratched self-consciously at his jawline.

“Careful about sitting down, Lola thinks she’s a lapdog,” Derek warned, trying not to acknowledge the sudden flare of anxiety over the visible signs of his age. Until recently, he’d been proud of the grey flecks in his beard, unable to commiserate with Laura, who stashed boxes of hair dye in her bathroom and grumbled about inheriting their mom’s dark hair. He hadn’t truly begun to feel old until he’d seen forty poking its grizzled head over the horizon, throwing his past into perspective, with the spectres of everything he’d assumed he would’ve accomplished by this point.

“I don’t mind,” Stiles said. He plopped down on the sidewalk and accepted the wiggling armful of dog that followed. “I think the grey makes you look distinguished,” he added, and Derek froze before his brain caught up to the fact that Stiles was still using his gruffly affectionate dog voice, tangling his fingers in Lola’s wiry beard as she tried to lick his face.

*Jesus,* Derek thought. *Get a grip.*
He’d never believed in midlife crises—they seemed like a poor excuse for men to rationalize blowing money on cars and younger women, with little basis in scientific or historical fact—but he couldn’t help wondering if this was what they felt like. Like your heart skipping beats, your hands sweating, your mind whirling through ways to encourage someone to talk to you.
Derek breathed out, then back in, carefully counting each inhale until he’d regained his self-possession. He was confusing himself by engaging in an unnecessarily detailed analysis of his own feelings. He’d befriended students before without the slightest hint of awkwardness or conflicted emotional attachments; he was still in touch with Isaac Lahey, who’d graduated five years earlier and continued to use Derek as both a reference and a sounding board each time he made a career change.

Stiles was intriguing and fascinating, a fresh breeze sweeping through a dusty classroom, and Derek was simply going through some sort of weirdly sensitive patch that blew their interactions entirely out of proportion.

It didn’t matter that Stiles was handsome or that Derek’s fingertips had tingled for long moments after he’d touched Stiles’s arm. The fact that Derek couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away from him sometimes didn’t mean anything. It was a part of Stiles’s personality; he was animated and loud, even when he wasn’t speaking. Derek was probably drawn to him because he had all the marks of a promising student: a quick mind, a creative instinct, and an eagerness to learn, even if it meant breaking some rules along the way. He was brimming with untapped potential.

He was also charming the hell out of Derek’s dog.

“She’s perfect,” Stiles said as Lola attempted to crush him by planting her paws on his shoulders and mouthing at his hairline. “I think she may be trying to eat me, but she’s so cute I can’t seem to care about it?”

“Lola, off,” Derek said sternly, and she huffed in annoyance but released Stiles and sat, turning her face toward Derek to find out what else he wanted from her.

“Wow,” Stiles said, lounging back on his hands now that he had freedom of movement again. “She’s really well-trained. I’m not sure even my dad’s dogs would react that quickly.”

“Your dad has a lot of dogs?” Derek asked, petting Lola as a reward, since he’d completely forgotten to bring treats with him.

“That would’ve been awesome when I was growing up, but they’re not actually his dogs. They’re the station’s. So they’re trained for tactical stuff, you know: tracking, drug-sniffing, search-and-rescue, that kinda thing. My dad used to say I was one of the station’s best-kept training secrets, because I was such a little shit, always trying to distract the dogs so they’d play with me. He figured it prepared them for real world situations.” Stiles wrinkled his nose, a shadow flitting over his features before he squinted up at Derek and brightened his tone again. “Not that it’s changed that much, honestly. Police dogs need love, too.”

“Your dad’s a policeman?” Derek must’ve sounded skeptical, because Stiles laughed.

“Sheriff, actually. I told you I was a respectable citizen.”

“I never doubted it,” Derek said dryly.

Stiles winked at him, a quick, natural gesture that Derek didn’t know how to react to, before plunging into a longer explanation. “He was a deputy when I was a kid—fresh out of the military when he met my mom—but he’s been the sheriff for ages now. It messed up my social life for a while, because people always assumed I was a narc, but.” He lifted his shoulders as much as he could without changing his position. “In all honesty, it probably saved me from spending time with some seriously douchey people.”

“If they were judging you based on evidence that slim, you were better off without them,” Derek
agreed.

“Exactly. I mean—I don’t know for sure that was it. They might’ve just disliked me.” He lapsed into silence, and Derek swallowed an assortment of possible responses that all seemed inappropriate somehow.

_That doesn’t seem possible._

_Their loss._

_Petty people try to break down anyone they envy or fear; I learned this the hard way._

Since she hadn’t received any further instruction from Derek, Lola took his divided attention as an invitation to creep closer to Stiles again. He sat back up so he could use both hands to rub at an itchy spot along her shoulder blades.

“But they gave you a hard time because of your dad,” Derek prompted, choosing the easy path forward.

Stiles shot him a surprised glance, as though he hadn’t been certain how closely Derek had been listening. “They did, yeah. I know cops get a bad rap, and believe me, my dad has _had_ some seriously shitty deputies he's had to deal with, but he's my dad, you know? They’d talk shit about him for doing his job. Like breaking up illegal raves, or confiscating fake IDs, or…” He hesitated, caution seeping into his voice.

Derek knew his face tended to telegraph “intimidating” more than “trustworthy,” but he did his best to arrange his features into something that’d demonstrate both his interest and encouragement. Based on the smirk pulling at the corner of Stiles’s mouth, he hadn’t quite succeeded, but his attempt was rewarded anyway.

“Or hauling my buddy Scott’s asshole dad off to jail when his mom finally pressed charges,” Stiles continued, ruffling Lola’s fur. “Coach McCall being the universally loved head of our high school’s football program, which went to shit after he was gone. A lot of people never forgave my dad for that.”

“It’s not easy being the one doing the thankless work,” Derek said. “He sounds like a good guy.” Like his son, he suspected. Derek was already forming a strong impression of Stiles as someone who fought tooth and nail for the people he cared about. _Their loss_, he thought again of those who’d shut him out of their social circles. _High school kids are idiots._ He’d been one once; he knew well enough what it was like to sprint through your days in a haze of hormones and ambition, feeling ten feet tall and immortal, until something crashed into your world and shook up your priorities.

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “We don’t always see eye to eye, but I can’t imagine—I’m just glad he’s around.” He used a forefinger to tickle gently at one of Lola’s heavy eyebrows.

Apparently deciding she’d exhausted his petting capacity, she trailed back into the bushes to sniff for other small creatures to chase. Derek followed her to pick up the end of the leash he’d let drop while she was safely wrapped up in her Stiles bonding. She snorted over her shoulder at him, acknowledging that he wasn’t going to let her flee into the wilderness after a squirrel, and then shoved her nose back into a clump of ivy, snuffling loudly.

“I was about to say something idiotic, like, ‘How can she even see through those things?’ before I remembered,” Stiles said, watching her pull something out of the ivy, then drop it obediently at Derek’s command. “I honestly don’t know if I would have realized she was blind if you hadn’t said
something. It doesn’t seem to bother her at all.”

“She’s already used to this path,” Derek explained. “I might vary it more after a while, but for now, I wanted to make sure she felt comfortable leaving the house with me.”

On their first day, after Derek had brought her home and carefully introduced her to all the rooms in the house, then let her map out the backyard, he’d taken her on a long, slow afternoon walk through the neighborhood, taking the loop from his house to the school and giving her time to explore and sniff along as much of it as she wanted. On the second day, she’d felt secure enough to stay by his side and keep pace with him. On the third...well, on the third, her confidence had led to nearly knocking Stiles over and roping him into being her friend.

Far too much like Laura, he thought again, but that inevitably led to a mental image of Laura meeting Stiles, which was a ludicrous path he absolutely could not let himself stray into.

“So it only happened recently?” Stiles asked, and Derek blinked at him in confusion before connecting the question back to his last comment.

“She went fully blind in the last year, but not while I had her. I brought her home on Saturday. We’re still in the acclimation stage, but she’s doing really well. As you can tell,” he said, gesturing at Lola, who’d progressed to rolling in the ivy, tugging painfully at Derek’s wrist as she twisted the leash. At this rate, she was going to need a bath by the time they got home.

“Oh wow,” Stiles said, sounding impressed. “I’d just assumed. That’s awesome of you, though.”

Derek shrugged it off, uncomfortable with the unearned praise. “She’s a good dog. She shouldn’t have been up for adoption to begin with. I was the lucky one, really. Like you said, it’s not always easy to remember that she’s missing one of her senses, because dogs rely so much on their hearing or their sense of smell.”

“So those get enhanced, and she leans on them more. That makes sense. I noticed she was sniffing me a lot when I was petting her.” He made a face and wiped his forearms against his jeans. “And chewing on me, so maybe taste is one she’s working on, too.”

Stiles was joking, but Derek hummed thoughtfully.

“Puppies partially learn by putting things in their mouths, so it’s actually possible that she’d revert back to something like that. Another way of cataloging her environment, if you will.” He tossed the phrase back at Stiles, not sure if he’d remember the details of their last conversation as vividly as Derek had, but unable to stop himself. Derek warmed to the subject, his brain dashing along branching paths as he teased out knowledge he hadn’t quite mastered yet. “It’s something to look into; I’ve been learning a lot, trying to get up to speed so I don’t take her resilience for granted. There are a lot of small changes you can make right off the bat, and some I haven’t decided on yet. For instance, there’s this whole school of thought around using texture and scent to guide her through the house, but I’m not sure if I—oh,” he broke off, more crestfallen than he should have been by Stiles leveraging himself to his feet, clearly preparing to escape before Derek swept him along in a barrage of information he didn’t particularly care about and would never be quizzed on.

“No, don’t stop!” Stiles said, bracing his fists in the small of his back and twisting his broad shoulders to loosen the muscles that had stiffened from sitting on the sidewalk. “Now that Lola’s befriending the bushes instead of me, it felt weird, and honestly kinda painful, to be craning my neck up at you from the ground. Also, I’m starting to think that might’ve been sweat, and not dog slobber, because I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but it’s fucking hot out here, and I think I’m probably getting a sunburn?” He held his arm out in front of him and turned it, presumably checking for early
signs of reddening skin.

“I’ve kept you,” Derek said contritely. “I’m sorry, my sister tells me I pitch into full professor mode if she doesn’t cut me off in time.”

“Why would I want to cut you off?” Stiles asked, his forehead furrowing in puzzlement. “Tell me more about that texture thing. Do you mix it with the scents, or is it separate?”

“Do you mind if we walk?” Derek ventured. “Or were you going in the other direction? I think Lola’s starting to get impatient, and I need to work out more of her energy before we head home.”

“Oh god yes, please,” Stiles breathed. He plucked his shirt away from his body and flapped it slightly to gather a wisp of a breeze. “Let’s walk on the shady side, if we can find one. Seriously, what is this weather? I think I’m actively melting. Poor Lola must be roasting with all that black fur, although that’s probably why she dove into the ivy; I should’ve thought of that.”

Derek laughed, and by the time the three of them had finished half the circuit and were cutting through the football field to find a drinking fountain, Stiles had peppered him with a series of insightful questions. Some of them were easy to answer; some, Derek freely admitted, would require more research.

*He challenges me,* Derek thought in delight, and rose to the occasion, forgetting about the worries he’d locked away.

Chapter End Notes

*Next up:* Stiles takes a cold shower
The apartment door was wide open when Stiles returned, the windows pushed up in an attempt to let cooler air circulate through, but he still felt like he was walking into a wall of heat. He’d left the apartment in an attempt to escape the sensation of his body trying to melt out of his pores—air conditioning was another “extraneous” feature the landlord hadn’t bothered to install—but he hadn’t expected to almost literally run into Dr. Hale.

Fuck everything, he thought as he shed his clothes on the way to the shower, stripping down to his boxers before registering Kira’s yelp of surprise as she slapped her hands over her eyes and ducked down on their dumpster-rescued couch.

“Sorry!” he yelled, shoving the bathroom door as closed as he could get it; it didn’t latch particularly well, either, so maybe it wasn’t even a weather issue with their front door. It seemed possible that their landlord had picked up random doors on clearance, not considering whether they’d actually fit into their frames.

He cranked the handle to the coldest setting he’d be able to stand and peeled his boxers off before pushing the mildew-stained shower curtain aside and stepping under the spray. He let the water cascade over his shoulders and tilted his face back to rinse the sweat out of his hair. He was tired, hot, and felt the beginnings of a headache throbbing behind his eyes, but it was all worth it for the way Dr. Hale had smiled softly at him when they’d finally split off, Stiles unable to come up with a logical reason to shadow him back to his house.

As it was, they’d spent a solid three hours together: talking, heaping attention on Lola, and steering clear of the occasional clumps of people who’d also chosen to spend their holiday outside.

Stiles chased a slippery nub of soap out of the cruddy dish and across the stained tub, finally getting a solid enough grip on it to slather it across his chest and down his arms.

He had not been prepared for the sight of Dr. Hale in a sleeveless shirt, his toned biceps on display, the tank a loosely fitting scoop neck that flashed Stiles tantalizing glimpses of taut pecs and frankly obscene chest hair. Even his calves were attractive; Stiles had jumped to his feet once he’d realized he’d been simply staring at the flex of the muscles in Dr. Hale’s legs, tracing the thick line of his thighs past the hem of his silky, lightly clinging shorts, unable to keep himself from picturing what it’d be like to tug them down, to fit his mouth over Dr. Hale’s cock.

He groaned and cupped his hand around his rapidly hardening dick. He felt a prickle of guilt over picturing the man who’d enthusiastically diverted into a half hour tangent about reward-based training methods, but he gave himself a few quick strokes to take off the edge, and before he knew it, he was bracing one hand against the shower wall, his abdomen tensing in a series of shuddery jerks as he spilled into the other.

“Goddammit,” he muttered, rinsing his hand off and swiping at the sticky tiles. If simply thinking about Dr. Hale could plunge him into such a hair-trigger state, he was going to have a hell of a time sitting in his classes, listening to his voice and doing his best not to imagine him whispering lowly in his ear.

The awful part, the thing that made Stiles want to thunk his already throbbing head against the
blessedly cool tiles, was that it wasn’t purely a physical attraction. He knew it was too early to start feeling this way. He knew he couldn’t fall headlong into the kind of emotions he sensed were waiting to overwhelm him, but Dr. Hale was different from what he’d expected. He was brilliant and kind and sarcastic and an exceptional listener. He was ridiculously easy to talk to. Easier than Scott, whom Stiles had known his entire life.

Stiles had never met someone, not even Lydia, who was able to so effectively keep pace with the rapid-fire onslaught of his ideas, matching him thought for thought, question for even more penetrating question. Who could push him, prodding at holes in his logic until he shored them up with better-considered evidence. Who treated him with respect and maybe even a tinge of admiration, as though Stiles was someone worth listening to.

_I like him_, he thought morosely.

He wasn’t supposed to like him. Lust futilely after him, sure. Indulge in filthy daydreams while staring at him at the front of the classroom: who would that hurt, when he had no intention of acting on it?

_Liking_ Dr. Hale—liking Derek, because he was more than a degree and a title—meant an emotional attachment that was going to wring his heart out and leave him in the kind of heart-wrenchingly unrequited despair that having a casual crush on a professor was supposed to prevent. It was like falling in love with a celebrity; nothing was going to actually happen, and any emotional upheavals were tempered by rationality.

But Derek Hale had the gall to be a real person, with a smile that completely transformed his already stunning face and ears that tinted pink when he wasn’t sure if he was being complimented. Not to mention his outrageously adorable dog and the itemized, color coded research Stiles imagined he’d already compiled as he threw himself wholeheartedly into taking care of her.

There was still time to stop this whole thing in its tracks, to back out and find another class to take. To cut off all contact before he got more attached.

The problem was, Stiles didn’t want to stop.

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“Just call me Erica,” the assistant registrar said when Stiles knocked on her office door and immediately stumbled over her name, not certain how to address her. “Not all of us are sticklers about our proper titles. You’re Stiles?”

“Stilinski, yeah,” he said, taking the seat she gestured toward. “Dr. Hale said he was gonna talk to you this morning about me registering for his class?”

“Derek came by,” she confirmed, but instead of typing the updated information into her computer and sending Stiles on his way, she steepled her fingers together and tilted her head to examine him.

He used the opportunity to take a quick inventory of her defining features, a process he’d honed from years of sneaking peeks at his dad’s arrest reports. She was younger than he’d envisioned: probably mid-30s, with wavy blonde hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, dark eyes ringed with heavy eyeliner, and red lips pressed into a contemplative line. A soft-looking zebra-striped shirt sat loosely on her shoulders, showing off her curves in a casual, understated way.

She was pretty, with the intimidating undertone that usually appealed to Stiles, but the only thought he could bring to mind was: _How well does she know “Derek”?_ When he’d referred to his friend in
the registrar’s office, Stiles had been picturing someone in her 50s, with a bad haircut and a disapproving curl to her mouth, whom Dr. Hale would be able to charm into giving Stiles an extra chance.

The charm might’ve still come into play, but Stiles hadn’t expected his heart to lurch over the idea. He shifted restlessly in his seat, not sure what Erica wanted from him. Maybe an argument for being accepted into the class? A signed note from his advisor? A description of what, exactly, he was expecting to gain from his time with Dr. Hale?

“I know the class is technically full,” he started when Erica showed no sign of making a first move. “But I haven’t had a problem finding a desk, so I’m guessing either people aren’t showing up to class, or the registration cap wasn’t actually based on the room capacity. It’s a big room. Possibly the biggest I’ve seen on campus, actually.”

The classes for his major were typically on the smaller side, so he didn’t have a ton of firsthand comparisons to go by, but the university prided itself on its low student to professor ratio, touting the personalized attention as one of its major selling points. Stiles could nearly quote the sales pitch; he’d been bombarded with it in glossy brochures and during the campus tour and freshman orientation. Despite his annoyance with the oversaturated advertising, he had to admit it’d been true enough for him. He may not have formed a significant number of social attachments, but he couldn’t fault the depth of his education.

According to the online course schedule, which he’d haunted regularly during the summer, constantly refreshing the page to check the number of available seats, most of the classes capped at around 40, with a good percentage in the 15-20 range.

Dr. Hale’s intro class had 116 slots. All claimed.

“Derek’s in high demand,” Erica said, examining the tip of one of her long, bright purple fingernails. Stiles suspected this was a variation of a conversation she had multiple times a day with a stream of students who believed they deserved unique treatment. “Especially when he takes on a lower division course, which doesn’t happen that often anymore. He’s finally easing off some.” Her voice dipped into something amused and intimate. “Not without protest, but that’s Derek for you. He works harder than anyone else at his level here, which he doesn’t ever seem to believe. You’d think a historian would be better at accepting empirical evidence.”

Stiles soaked up these new tidbits, his heart flopping fitfully over the display of longstanding familiarity.

“Why are you interested in this class?” Erica asked, shifting gears before he could figure out a way to pry more information out of her. Stiles rubbed his hands over his knees as he gathered together an appropriate answer.

“I’m behind in my core requirements,” he admitted. “My advisor told me I had to take one this semester and one the next, or I won’t be able to graduate. Which I think is—” He swallowed the rest of that opinion, remembering suddenly that he was talking to someone who worked in university administration.

“You think you shouldn’t have to take anything outside of your major,” Erica filled in. “When you’re this close to being done, you were probably hoping that we’d push you through to avoid the hassle of freezing your registration, especially since your grades are top-notch.”

“You checked my record?” he asked, and she arched an eyebrow at him. Of course she would;
keeping an eye on student records was literally her job.

“You’re an impressive student, Stiles. You could’ve graduated a year early at the rate you’ve been
going; your advisor should’ve suggested replacing a couple of your engineering electives with those
final core units.”

“She did,” Stiles said. They’d argued about it, in fact; Stiles hadn’t seen the point of knocking
something worthwhile off his schedule in favor of a filler class. He was taking robotics, for fuck’s
sake—one of her specialties, which he’d thought would put her a little more on his side. He wasn’t
going to drop that to fall in line with the administration’s liberal arts agenda. There was something
obscene about spending that much money on your education and not using it to cram as much useful
knowledge into your head as possible.

_You’re paying for it with a scholarship_, Dr. Ito had reminded him, her frustration reaching a boiling
point. _And you will lose that scholarship if you don’t fulfill this university’s requirements._

He’d given in and signed up for a film studies seminar, which actually hadn’t been half bad, but
nothing else had caught his eye in the next registration round. Dr. Ito’s subsequent emails had been
more polite but equally threatening.

Erica tapped at her keyboard and clicked her mouse into what was presumably the record of his
current schedule. When Stiles tried to lean out of his chair to see, she turned the screen farther away
from him. “You’ll have another heavy load this semester,” she said. “Nineteen units is significant;
you’re not running into senior burnout yet?”

Stiles shook his head and pushed himself to the edge of his seat, ready to argue. He’d maintained a
steady 19-20 unit load since his sophomore year and could easily do it again. While it meant he
didn’t exactly get a lot of _sleep_ during the semester, he wasn’t willing to let any of them go. “They’re
not offered next semester,” he said. “If I don’t take them now, I won’t get a chance before I
graduate.”

She swiveled in her chair to face him again. “I wasn’t going to suggest dropping them,” she
reassured him. “Even within the honors program, your grades are exceptional; you’re obviously able
to handle the workload, and that’s not really my call to make, anyway. But there are plenty of other
electives still open, and I can tell you that some will let you coast a lot more than Derek will. If your
whole idea is saving your investment for the classes you care about, there’s no reason for you to
squeeze into this one. I can help you choose a different one, if you want.”

He gripped at his knees, feeling the tide turning against him. “No, I—that’s exactly the issue I’ve
always had with them. That they’re a waste of time, when all you do is stick a chunk of credits on
your schedule that you skate through to tick off some arbitrary box. Dr. Hale’s class is _interesting_. I’d
rather do extra work where I’m actually _learning_ something. The last time I had to take one of the
classes like you’re talking about, I wanted to stab myself in the face with a pen.” And then he’d
dropped it and picked up more computer science units to replace it, but she didn’t need to know that.

Erica snorted softly. “And those are the kinds of statements that make me feel great about my job. So
it’s Derek’s class or a possible hospital visit?”

He shrugged, not willing to say no, when he was pretty certain a rejection at this point would lead to
him planting himself face-first on his apartment floor, which probably _would_ land him in a hospital
bed after he breathed in all the dust and mold trapped in the fibers.

“Are you aware there’s a waiting list?” Erica waited for his nod. “Yet you’re asking me to skip over
the people in line ahead of you, to make a special exception.”
He swallowed hard and twisted his fingers. “If it’s possible, yeah.”

To his surprise, Erica cracked a grin. She braced her elbows on her desk and propped her chin on her folded hands. “In the years I’ve known Derek, he’s never asked me for a personal favor at work. It’s not a thing he does; he’s a serious stickler for rules.”

“I understand.” Stiles said, his stomach dropping. He must have misinterpreted. *I’ll talk to the registrar* must have meant *I’ll ask her if there’s room in the class, and immediately drop the suggestion if she says no.*

“I don’t think you do,” Erica said. “But that’s okay.”

Stiles squinted at her. She was still grinning at him. “So I...can stay in the class?” he hazarded.

“I already registered you,” she said. “Let me know if you see any problems with your online profile, but you should be all set. I wouldn’t say no to Derek, and anyway, I’d intentionally underfilled his class so he wouldn’t kill himself trying to grade all those papers. If he insists he can handle one more, and if he wants that person to be you, I’m not going to argue about it.”

“Thank you,” Stiles said, with confusion threading through his voice. He pushed himself up from his seat—that’d sounded like a dismissal? Unless he was reading her wrong, which was entirely possible; she was confusing as hell.

Erica leaned forward and stuck her hand out, shaking his firmly. “It was nice to meet you, Stiles Stilinski. Don’t ask for any other rule-bending before you graduate, and keep this one under your hat, okay?”

“I will,” he promised, and she winked at him and made a shooing motion.

*Dammit,* he thought as he followed her command. *I like her, too.* Jealousy was a lot easier to deal with when you could legitimately despise a person, but she seemed like a genuinely good friend, and someone Stiles wouldn’t have minded getting to know better under different circumstances.

He saved his triumphant fist pump and celebratory hip-popping dance until he was safely out of the building and probably out of range of Erica’s windows. That was an entire semester locked down with Dr. Hale. Not bad for a day’s work.

Although the day wasn’t over yet; he checked his phone and veered down a path that cut across an ivy-choked stone bridge and up a slight incline, shaving precious minutes off his walk to his next class.

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The next two weeks passed quickly, Stiles’s other coursework picking up speed and demanding a good portion of his attention. With his typical “if I avoid it, maybe it’ll go away” method of handling situations he didn’t want to deal with, he’d taken all the warnings about senior burnout—Erica had by no means been the first—and shelved them to consider at some nebulous “future” time.

The future, as it turned out, sucked.

He wasn’t *burnt out*—he didn’t regret a single one of his classes—but he was tired. Bone-deep, losing-track-of-days tired. And it was early enough in the semester for that to be worrying.

When his phone rang, he was blearily poking a partially melted plastic serving spoon into a pot of mac and cheese. It was possible to cook more elaborate meals on a hot plate, but neither he nor Scott
were all that worried about their arteries just yet, and cooking took time and inevitably resulted in
every single dish they owned being piled in the sink until one of them got fed up enough to wash
them.

Stiles had given in a few hours earlier, after eating an entire bag of Doritos for lunch and realizing, as
he tilted the bag to catch the last bits of chip dust, that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had
something that could count as a “real” meal. Maybe Wednesday night, when Danny had ordered
midnight pizza for their group? Stiles had shoveled down four slices with barely a pause to chew and
swallow; Danny had frowned at him in disgust and moved to the other side of the table, but it’d still
been the most blissful experience of Stiles’s entire week. He’d also taken a leftover, cheese-
congealing half-a-pizza home at the end of the night, so maybe Thursday morning counted as his last
proper meal.

He dug his vibrating phone out of his sweatpants pocket, stabbed at the speaker button, and set it on
the counter.

“Which is the mold that’s bad for you?” he asked, giving the orange gloop one final stir before
spooning it into a freshly-cleaned bowl. The pot itself, he’d reluctantly decided, was too hot to eat
out of.

“Probably everything other than penicillin,” his dad said. “But I’m a sheriff, not a doctor. You need
me to call Melissa about something?”

“Nah,” Stiles said, blowing on the still-wet spoon he’d dug out of the dish drainer and burning his
mouth on the pasta anyway, too impatient and hungry to wait. He blew harder on the next attempt
and talked through the mouthful. “If you scrub it out of a dish and then put hot food in the dish, it’s
probably sterilized, right?”

His dad sighed. “I don’t think that’s how it works. Is this how you’ve been feeding yourself when
you’re away from home?”

“An unfair but mostly true assessment.” His dad was one to talk, though; if you didn’t tear plastic off
the top and shove it in a microwave, or if you couldn’t throw it on a grill and char the hell out of it,
his dad couldn’t cook it. It was no wonder Stiles had grown up with minimal culinary skills. “How
much do barbecues cost?” he asked.

“You’re not buying a barbecue. And before you try to convince me this is somehow a good idea—
even a little one will require propane, and I don’t want you and Scott messing with that on no sleep
and too many cans of Red Fizz.”

“Red Bull,” Stiles said. “I’m wounded, dad. You don’t trust me at all.”

“Usually apartment complexes don’t allow them, anyway. Does your unit not have an oven?”

“If by oven, you mean the actual, full-sized appliance that can fit more than a couple slices of toast in
it at a time—”

“I mean an oven, Stiles. There aren’t a lot of other interpretations of that word. Are you telling me
your landlord only provided you with a toaster oven?”

“Ah,” Stiles said. “No. We have a toaster. Two slots on the top, used to be white and is now some
disturbing shade of yellow, bent prongs on the cord. I’m a little afraid of it. Mostly I toast my bread
in a skillet on the hot plate. It works if you don’t walk away and forget about it.”

Stiles could almost hear his dad pinching the bridge of his nose. “How long of a lease did you sign?”
“Just for the school year! It’ll be fine, dad. We’re resourceful. In fact, I was cooking myself dinner right when you called.”

“In a moldy dish,” his dad sighed. He really did that far too often. It probably wasn’t healthy.

“Not anymore!” Stiles scraped his thumbnail over a crusty bit he’d missed on the outside of the bowl. “Anyway, it’s probably good for me. It’s boosting my immune system so I’ll make it through finals this year without even getting a cold.”

He moved the phone and the bowl to the couch so he could fling his legs over one of the arms as he ate. The couch was more of a loveseat, and much too small for two dudes who liked to sprawl out in their space, but it’d been working pretty well for Kira’s and Scott’s developing...something. It wasn’t a relationship yet, but the last time Stiles had barged into the apartment after a long night at the library, they’d jolted apart abruptly and looked guilty enough to satisfy his suspicions.

As long as they didn’t start having sex on the loveseat. Although, considering the extensive number of stains already soaked into the fabric, that probably wouldn’t be the worst their furniture had experienced.

“Do you think it’s possible to pick up diseases from old stains?” Stiles asked. “Asking for a friend. Who might’ve saved a couch from a dumpster without realizing what a pile of actual garbage it was.”

“Aw hell, kid,” his dad said. “We talked about you dropping a class and picking up more hours of work; is that something you’re still considering?”

“No, no, I’m fine. The friend with the cost-saving couch is totally happy with it and likes all his classes, and is definitely going to be on top of his projects by the time he starts getting calls for more shifts.”

“If you say so. But let me know if you need some money to get through next month, okay? I don’t want you starving to death.”

“What about you? What’ve you been eating while I’m gone? If you don’t say salads, I’m going to hack into your grocery account and set you up with some healthy deliveries through the rest of the year.”

“The produce will spoil,” his dad said. “And stop poking around in my accounts. If I didn’t know you’d memorized all my passwords the moment you learned how to read, I’d be worried about what your education is teaching you.”

“You really shouldn’t use the same password for twenty years, dad. I left last semester’s books in my room; you should read them when you get a chance. Start with *Computer Security in the Digital Age, 6th Edition*. It cost a hundred bucks more than the 5th edition, and I’m pretty sure the only change they made was updating the title.”

“I’ll get right on that,” his dad said, with the dry Stilinski sarcasm that Stiles had inherited in spades. “I miss you, kiddo. You doing okay? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“Just busy.” Stiles scraped his spoon around the bottom of the bowl, then set the utensil down on his chest so he could hold the bowl with both hands to lick it clean. In between tongue swipes, he added, “But I’m building a robot. It’s gonna be awesome. In a team, which is kinda shitty, since everyone else voted Danny the leader, and he shuts down a lot of my ideas, but I’ll send you videos of it in action once we get it working.”
“Sounds cool,” his dad said, trying to sound hip, and Stiles grinned at his phone. He missed him, too. He’d hook the grocery account up with some boneless chicken breasts and grillable vegetables. His dad would complain, but someone had to take care of him while Stiles was away.

That someone still being Stiles. After all, who else did they have?

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek faces his feelings
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oof, sorry,” Derek said when Lola leaped onto the couch and flopped her head into his lap, all in one smooth motion. He’d managed to move the hand holding his beer out of the way in time, but it’d still jostled enough to spill a few drops down his fingers and wrist. Since there wasn’t a napkin within reach, he debated between licking his wrist clean—before Lola had a chance to—or wiping the sticky liquid off on his jeans. He opted for the jeans, and Lola grumbled at him and swiped her tongue against his arm as much as she could without moving her head.

“Possessive, huh?” Erica asked from the doorway between the kitchen and living room, making a tsking sound in her throat. “I leave for one minute to grab some snacks, and your girl jumps right into my seat. I see how it is.”

“I can tell her to get down. I’ve been letting her on all my furniture, so she assumes she’s allowed everywhere, apparently even in other people’s houses. Don’t you, Lola?” he asked, tickling gently under her beard.

“She’s fine; that couch has seen better days,” Erica said. “But you are a big pushover.”

“That’s not true!” he protested, as Lola dug her chin into his thigh until he got the hint that her ears were itchy.

“A self-deluded pushover,” Erica amended. “Okay, the cabinets are kinda empty right now because we lost track of time this week and didn’t get a chance to stock them. But there’s some weird health conscious trail mix that you might be into—it has a bunch of stuff in it I don’t recognize, so there’s a ton left because I refuse to eat it. Or I can make some popcorn.”

“You have a stove popper, right?” he asked. “Or if it’s all bags, is there something with really light butter?”

“I do; I’m not sure if we’re out of the kernels. I can check. But I thought kettle corn was your favorite. I have a whole box of that.” When he didn’t respond immediately, she shook her head and disappeared back into the kitchen, her voice floating behind her. “Right, you assume Lola’s going to want some. Pushover.”

“She needs to broaden her vocabulary,” Derek muttered to Lola, who was already falling asleep, but twitched an ear in acknowledgement.

He took another long pull from his beer before setting it down on the coffee table and settling back into the couch, letting his body relax against the soft cushions. Erica was right; it’d been an exhausting week. While he was nearly tired enough to fall asleep under Lola’s warm weight and the soothing rhythm of her breathing, he was glad to be spending the last shreds of his weekend with friends.

He closed his eyes as he listened to the clatter of cabinets, the sussurating rush of popcorn kernels into a pan, the first few staccato bursts of transformation, followed by a rapidly increasing tempo, a frantic poppoppoppop that pushed the soft hum of his own thoughts into the background.

“You work too hard,” Erica said from right next to him, and he jumped, jolting both himself and Lola awake.
He rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes, trying to wipe away the filmy dreams still clinging to the backs of his eyelids. “It’s not that,” he mumbled, his tongue feeling thick and slow in his mouth. “Classes are about the same as always. But the one place where I’m not letting Lola have free rein is in my bedroom, which means neither of us has been getting much sleep at night.”

“Abandonment issues?” Erica asked, handing him a bowl of popcorn and curling into the oversized armchair with her own portion.

“I think so. She’s great most of the time, and she was even fine when I did a test run of leaving her alone in the house while I ran some quick errands last week. She whined a little, but she got pretty wrapped up in the puzzle-treats toy I left with her. So I don’t think it’s full-blown separation anxiety; it’s something about being separated from me while I’m in the house. Bedroom door, bathroom door...she hates both of them.”

Erica continued silently eating handfuls of popcorn, watching him with amusement, and he scrunched his eyebrows defensively at her. She licked the salt off her fingers and grinned around them before saying anything. “You set up a camera to record what she did while you were away, didn’t you? Or did you buy an actual nanny cam?”

“I used a regular camera, and it was only for about half an hour.” Derek let Lola delicately pluck a piece of popcorn out of his hand and then moved the rest out of reach. “I wanted to make sure she wasn’t getting destructive or doing anything to hurt herself.”

“So she doesn’t completely hate being alone; she just doesn’t like you ignoring her when you’re in the same space.”

He rubbed gently at the soft fur at the base of Lola’s ears, and she exhaled noisily in Erica’s direction—probably blaming her for both the food removal and the brief lack of petting—before relaxing against him again, content for the time being with the level of attention Derek was giving her.

“Maybe.” He’d thought at first Lola was bored. Dogs, like children, needed time with their humans, didn’t they? She was a senior dog, according to the shelter system, but she was still energetic enough to want walks, playtime, and a hefty percentage of Derek’s focus. In those early weeks, he’d tangled himself in guilt while trying to navigate better methods of balancing a new dog with a demanding job.

Maybe Laura was right. Maybe he’d leapt into this whole situation without properly considering how much of his so-called free time he spent lost in his books or his writing. He’d made the decision with his heart, not his head, despite knowing how that’d turned out in the past. What happened when you made a choice based on insufficient research, simply because you looked at something—or someone—and followed the throb of your heart, the chorus of yeseyesyesthisone.

He’d learned years ago that he couldn’t trust his heart. Not when the outcome was one that mattered—one that could dramatically change the course of his future.

“Your eyebrows are doing that thing again; you’re thinking dramatic thoughts,” Erica said through another mouthful of popcorn, and he flicked a kernel at her, unwilling to admit she was right.

“She’s fine as long as I leave the door open,” he said instead. It was, fortunately, a solution that hadn’t taken too long to discover. “I’ll work for hours in my study, and she’ll wander in and out, but she spends most of her time amusing herself in the living room or trying to track squirrels in the backyard. But as soon as I close a door, she has to be let in, or she’ll scratch and whine.”

The tips of Lola’s ears twitched sensitively, and he moved his hand to her bristly shoulders, letting it
rise and fall as she slipped back into a rumbly sleep, probably chasing dream-squirrels in a treeless
landscape. Could she still see in her dreams? Or was everything lights and shadows there, too, with
warm blurs streaking across her vision, tempting her to follow? Could she run freely in her dreams,
or did she hesitate now, afraid of stumbling into invisible barriers?

It was a thought he wanted to share, but even as the words formed at the roof of his mouth, he
realized he was picturing a different set of warm brown eyes, ones that squinted intently when Derek
spoke, as though his ideas were being passed through a layer of judgment that would grind them into
something clearer, brighter. Theories that’d be refined into fact, smoothed around the edges, polished
by Stiles’s sharp mind and clever tongue.

“You’ll figure it out,” Erica said, thankfully not attempting to interpret whatever Derek suspected his
eyebrows were doing as he tucked those images away for later perusal. “You’ve never met a
problem you couldn’t research the hell out of. D’you want me to grab you another beer? I didn’t
think to while I was in there.”

“No, I have a few more papers I need to grade tonight; I wanted to hand them back before my next
set of Civ ones pile in.” He scowled at her. “Don’t start.”

“I wasn’t going to pressure you about a TA,” she said, widening her eyes innocently. “Even though
not having a TA is depriving a qualified student, and probably a future professor, of the chance to
learn from one of the best in his field.”

“But it’s not fair to the rest of my students,” Derek insisted, grateful for the distraction and ready to
dig into the argument he’d had at least a dozen times with nearly everyone he knew. “When I’m the
one giving the lectures and assigning the work, I should be the one to assess it. And how am I
supposed to adjust my lectures if I don’t get a sense of how my students are absorbing the
information?”

“Oh, okay,” Erica said, waving him down before he could dive into his point-by-point analysis of
the benefits he felt his students gleaned from receiving the kind of individualized instructor attention
the university promised them. “Spare me the lecture, professor. This wouldn’t even be up for debate
if we worked at a bigger university. What I want to hear about is how that Civ class is going.”

His frown lightened into bemusement. “They’re doing well. It’s a real mix; there are some students
who’re struggling, some who’ll only show up on test days, and a few really smart ones in the batch.
But why are you asking? You never want to talk about my classes.”

“Is Stiles one of the smart ones?” she asked, and his confusion cleared before she’d finished the
sentence. He narrowly resisted the urge to toss another piece of popcorn at her, an instinctive make
her stop bugging me, mom!! response from growing up in a house with two sisters.

He was a grown man, he reminded himself. Who’d managed to befriend the one person at the
university who treated him exactly like his sisters did. Which was almost certainly why Derek had
started spending more time with Erica to begin with, but he wasn’t going to tell her that. Or Laura or
Cora. Or anyone else who could give him shit about it.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said, unperturbed by his glower. “You came into my office with those
big, sad eyes that you only get when you really want something. After all the effort you forced me
into taking on his account, you can’t blame me for wanting to know how he’s doing.”

“Was it actually against any rules?” he asked, worry creeping into his throat, and she sighed
impatiently at him.
“Derek, no. But because I knew you’d be like this once you were thinking clearly again, I checked on every single student on your waiting list to make sure their schedules were fine. There were only two who hadn’t signed up for an equivalent course, and because I’m the goddamn best there is at my job, I fixed that.”

“I owe you dinner,” he told her gratefully.

“Screw dinner,” she said. “I can cook for myself. Give me some dirt.”

“There isn’t any,” Derek said stubbornly. “He needed the class to graduate, and he had trouble getting in, so I told him I’d help. That’s all. I would’ve done the same for any student in his position.”

“He really didn’t,” Erica said.

Derek swore a good third of his frown lines were etched into his face from conversations with Erica. “What do you mean?”

“He didn’t need yours to graduate. I actually tried to move him into something a lot easier, like Marv’s public speaking class. Stiles seems like a talker, so that should’ve been a breeze. Plus, Marv’s like eighty fucking years old and gives everyone an A. He keeps getting these mild hints from his department chair about setting up a more concrete grading system—or retiring, for fuck’s sake—but he says it’s his job to make sure everyone has a voice, and as long as they speak up, why shouldn’t he reward them for that. He’s a total thorn in my side, but I guess underneath it all, he’s a nice enough guy.” She shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth and chewed it angrily.

Setting what appeared to be a personal feud between Erica and a soft-hearted communications professor aside for the moment, Derek sifted down to the part that had stood out to him. “Wait, are you saying Stiles isn’t a history major?”

Erica choked slightly on her popcorn and thumped a fist against her chest as she laughed. “Oh my god, Derek. No. He’s not.”

“I assumed...why else would he be so determined to stay in my class? He was showing up every day, turning in assignments...”

“Honey,” she said pityingly.

Derek winced. She never pulled out that tone unless he was being particularly obtuse.

“I read his first essay before I talked to you. If it’d been shoddy work, done by someone who showed no investment in the material, I wouldn’t have pushed it, but it was...” He stopped to locate the appropriate words. Impressive? Enlightening? Possibly the most engaging student essay he’d read in years? “It veered wildly off-topic,” he admitted, “but it was intelligently written. More robustly supported than a significant number of papers I’ve seen from doctoral candidates.”

“The academic speech,” Erica moaned, pressing her palm over her forehead with a pained expression. “You always do this when you’re feeling defensive about something.”

“I’m not being defensive,” he protested, then shut his mouth when he realized he wasn’t doing himself any favors.

She set down her popcorn bowl so she could tick descriptors off on her fingers while she listed them. “Intelligent. Driven. Creative. Sarcastic. And handsome, if a bit on the lanky side for my tastes.”
You probably haven’t seen him in short sleeves, Derek’s rebellious mind countered, before he bit his lip to silence it.

She wiggled her hand at him as though Stiles’s positive attributes were actually visible on her fingers. “He’s as much of an overachiever as you are. And I never thought I’d be able to say that about anyone. So I get it, Derek.”

“There’s nothing to get,” he said, and buried his shaking hand deeper into Lola’s fur, using her steadying warmth to ground himself.

Erica was pushing him into facing something head-on that he’d been pressing down into a back corner of his brain, with the lights firmly switched off. He knew it was lurking, this...this attraction to Stiles. But it wasn’t going to be a problem; Derek was an expert by now in repressing emotions he didn’t deserve to be feeling.

He could contain it. He was controlling it, keeping it unspoken and one-sided. Although he couldn’t help the pang that accompanied that thought—what it meant that the attraction remained entirely on Derek’s end—he had to admit that it made things easier. Stiles was friendly, and funny, and someone Derek wanted to get lost in conversation with for hours, but their friendly exchanges never strayed into the kinds of overt eye-batting, cleavage-accentuating, note-writing flirtations that Derek had become adroit at shutting down in their early stages.

When those incidents happened with other students, he handed the notes over to Noshiko, and she wordlessly added them to an overstuffed file they never mentioned. The “just in case” file; Derek didn’t like to think about the type of scenario that might require opening that folder and sending its contents up the academic ladder, but his record had been absolutely spotless thus far.

He wasn’t going to change that. And he didn’t particularly appreciate Erica’s insinuations that he’d already started filling an “it's too fucking late” file.

Erica was pursuing her lips thoughtfully, examining Derek’s body language more closely than he felt comfortable with. “I can still pull him out of your class,” she told him. “We’ll make sure he gets other units—from a different department.”

“No, and he wasn’t interested in my advice, but you? You, he'd listen to.” There was a creak in the floorboards, and she glanced quickly behind her before adding, “I know you’re trying to pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, but jesus, Derek, I’ve been your wingman before. I know your type better than you do. And you know I’m about a hundred million percent on your side. I’m just trying to keep you from backing yourself into a corner you can’t get out of.”

“Why does Derek have his ‘five seconds from fleeing our house’ expression?” Boyd asked, looping his arms around Erica from behind her chair and kissing at her ear until she turned to meet his lips with hers.

Derek averted his eyes—he might’ve been responsible for introducing the two of them, but he didn’t need an up-close window into the fiery passion that only seemed to burn brighter as the years passed. Erica’s laughter pulled his attention back before long, and he chuckled as Boyd attempted to squeeze into the chair, Erica winding up in his lap after a brief tangling of limbs, her face tilted up to his, both their expressions bright with amusement and love.

No one has ever looked at me like that, Derek thought, unable to suppress the jagged twinge of envy that curled through him at their comfortable domesticity. As much as he resisted misguided attempts
to “fix” his romantic life, he couldn’t help wanting that connection with someone. Soft lips against his, rumpled sheets that weren’t empty in the morning, a heart he could trust to keep his safe.

Storybook dreams.

It wasn’t a reality that seemed to be waiting on the horizon for him. He’d come to terms—for the most part—with the fact that longing for it only increased his dissatisfaction with his day-to-day life.

Unproductive thoughts, he reminded himself, squeezing them into a box that was already straining at the seams.

Maybe he should’ve taken Erica up on that offer of a second beer.

“How were the papers?” he asked, and Boyd grimaced. As an Assistant Professor whose upcoming tenure was likely but not yet guaranteed, he still did the bulk of his own grading, which meant he and Derek had plenty to commiserate over during exam weeks. It was also probably part of why Erica was so hard on Derek about not making the most of his options. Not a lot of people looked at Derek’s life and thought: that’s what I want for my future.

“Kind of a shitty batch,” Boyd said, snagging Erica’s drink and downing it in a few quick gulps. “I might need to soften the prompts for the next round. Sorry I took so long; I should’ve been done hours ago, but I had to go back through and adjust the curve once I realized the first set I’d finished was actually the best I was going to see.”

“I’ve been there,” Derek said with real sympathy. He’d felt like an utter failure the first time he’d experienced one of those classes. How could so many of his students completely miss the point of his lectures? It had to be his fault. He’d tortured himself over it for the majority of the semester, afraid to confide in anyone, certain that it’d provide the excuse the university would need to let him go.

He’d finally slunk to Noshiko’s office with a pile of papers that read like they’d been run through an automated text generator. Or through a wood chipper. He’d circled one particularly atrocious passage and pushed the offending paper across Noshiko’s desk, his shoulders hunched, his eyes downcast. It was the first time he’d seen her professional demeanor dissolve into girlish peals of laughter; it was also the day he truly began to see her as a friend.

Boyd had been hired a few years later, and while Derek had initially resisted Noshiko’s suggestion that he serve as an unofficial mentor—how the hell could he advise someone else when he was still fumbling his way through academia?—she’d turned out to be right, as always. Derek appreciated Boyd’s understated humor and steadfast calm. He was a rock to Erica’s white-capped wave: a deep-rooted tree wreathed in riotously blooming vines.

They were Derek's best friends. But there were things he couldn’t tell the two of them. Certain things he wouldn’t even allow himself to examine too closely.

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When Stiles slided into his seat, dropping his bag under his desk with the usual clatter that announced his arrival, Lola perked up and trotted over to him, carefully weaving her way through the students who were still making their way into the room. A few of them tried to pet her as she passed, but her trajectory was firm, and she politely but steadily pushed past them, shoving her nose against Stiles’s leg once she’d reached her destination.

Derek did his best to not watch Stiles’s enthusiastic greeting or to wait for the apologetic grin he’d inevitably tilt in Derek’s direction once Lola settled at his feet, where she’d remain for the rest of the
It was a position she’d assumed on the first day Derek had brought her to campus, and she hadn’t budged from the routine since. The chalk had slipped in Derek’s hands several times that afternoon, his palms sweating in guilty anticipation, but no one had questioned her greeting Stiles like an old friend. The other students seemed to think he carried snacks on him—what a cheat, Aimee Sullivan had muttered in front of Derek, subsequently showing up with dog biscuits Lola had turned her nose up at—or that this was perfectly ordinary behavior for her and Stiles had simply been the lucky recipient of her attention.

They didn’t know that in Derek’s morning lectures, she either napped under the board—sprawling out in his path so he’d constantly have to step over her—or stayed glued to Derek’s side, snubbing anyone who attempted to approach her.

They didn’t know that out of everyone she’d met thus far, Stiles was the only person she treated like an extension of Derek. She whimpered at him sadly when he left her behind; she dragged Derek in ever-hopeful searches every time they took a walk, vibrating jubilantly when they found him and sagging in disappointment when they returned home without him.

We can’t keep him, he’d told her after the third Stiles-free walk, and she’d peered sightlessly up at him, whining in confused judgment over Derek maintaining this unjust separation. I know, he’d confided, with no one else around to hear the truth. I’d like to see him, too.

Stiles was distracting enough without Derek’s goddamn dog falling in love with him. He’d moved to the front row once he’d been officially registered, and he’d immediately begun actively participating in discussions, spurring on more than one debate that Derek had narrowly missed getting dragged into.

Arguing with one of your students during class was inappropriate behavior. Tuning everyone else out to listen to a single person’s ideas was both unprofessional and unfair to the others. Derek knew this. But some days, it was incredibly difficult to resist the temptation; he had to force himself to extend the proper feelers instead, tugging responses out of other students, drawing them to a conclusion that rarely wiped the satisfaction off Stiles’s face.

When Stiles wasn’t speaking, he was usually lounging in his seat, his legs spread, his long fingers twirling a pen to some imaginary beat or shoving a thick highlighter into his mouth.

Erica wasn’t...right, exactly. But Derek, when he was thinking rationally, could see her point. It was hard to concentrate around Stiles.

More accurately, it was hard to concentrate on anything but Stiles, whose insightful observations during class made Derek want to stop everything and pull out his books to find the evidence Stiles was challenging, overturning his own assumptions to be certain he’d fully considered every possibility. Stiles was vibrant and untouchable, a shard of light diffused through a prism and sending much-needed color dancing across the classroom’s somber walls. Derek wanted to cup his hands around him, to drink him in.

To...embrace his intelligence. To engage with his quick wit.

In his more honest moments, Derek had begun to wish Stiles was a few years older, and not on Derek’s roster. If he’d met Stiles at a conference, or even at a bar...

He shook off the fragments of other universes, worlds where he and Stiles might’ve started off on a different foot, on a more equal level. Those weren't productive thoughts to dwell on. Stiles was his
student. End of story. A remarkably astute one, whom Derek was unlikely to ever forget. But once the semester ended, Stiles would quietly exit Derek’s life. He’d have no reason to stay in touch. Derek would never see him again.

It’s not wise to get attached, he’d told Lola days ago, who was now lying with her head weighing down one of Stiles’s sneakers, not having paid an iota of attention to his warnings.

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“I’ll take your papers as you leave,” Derek concluded, and the first wave of students surged toward him. Some paused to chat with him, a few making excuses for delayed work or attempting to hand him flash drives, claiming they hadn’t had access to a printer.

“I know that trick,” Stiles confided, none too quietly, as the final stream of students flowed out the door.

“Mr. Stilinski,” Derek said, trying not to sound as pleased as he felt. Lola, who’d trailed after Stiles, made no such attempt to mask her emotions. She dropped into an extended stretch, then yawned loudly. “Yes, I see you, too, Lola,” he said, stooping to give her a quick pat to acknowledge her greeting—even though she was the one who’d spent the last hour away from him. He suspected she was mildly irritated that she had to make that choice, when her preference would be to flop across both of them simultaneously. He shrugged away that image, letting it ripple off his skin, a phantom snapshot hanging in midair for a moment before dissolving.

Stiles propped his hip against the table Derek was stacking his papers on. Derek could feel his gaze lingering on him as he frowned in irritation at the essay that’d been printed on slightly heavier cardstock, its edges extending past the neat line he was attempting to arrange them into.

“Someone’s trying to stand out from the crowd, huh? I’ll bet you twenty bucks it’s Braid Girl.”

Derek huffed out a mild chuckle. It was, in fact, Ms. Sullivan’s, but that wasn’t something Stiles needed to know. “What trick?” he asked as a distractionary tactic, and Stiles took the bait.

“Ah, that! It’s a classic: the paper on the flash drive con. They’ll say they couldn’t find a working printer—amazing, by the way, how the computer center’s always magically down right before shit’s due—but what they’re actually doing is buying time. When you sit down to read them, I guarantee you’ll find out there’s a corrupted file; by the time you get around to asking them for a new copy, they’ll have had at least a couple extra days to finish writing.”

“Which is why I only accept hard copies; you act like I’m new to this,” Derek said, enjoying the surprised parting of Stiles’s lips, his mouth hanging open while he collected a new set of opinions to shoot Derek’s way. Before that happened, he couldn’t resist adding, “I’ll bet you twenty bucks you’ve used that method more than once. That should make us even.”

“Hah!” Stiles crowed, recovering with admirable speed. “I knew it. And yes, fine, I’ll admit it, but not since high school. I bought myself three weeks once, but that was because he was a lazy-ass teacher. I wouldn’t pull that shit on someone I actually respected.”

Derek arched an eyebrow at him, and Stiles flushed and swung his backpack around to dig through it.

“Here!” he said triumphantly, dragging out his assignment, along with a tangle of earbuds and a strip of hot pink condoms. “Shit, shit, shit,” he said, stuffing them back into the bag, laughing awkwardly.

“Busy weekend,” Derek found himself saying, against his will. He coughed, keeping his fingers at
the far edge of the paper, Stiles releasing his own grip with a jolt, seemingly as eager to avoid physical contact. “Glad you found the time to finish this.”

“No, I, uh.” Stiles lifted his earnest, almost bashful golden-brown eyes. “I wasn’t using them. Not that—I mean, safety first, right? I went to this club a while ago with my buddy, and there was this bowl, and I grabbed a handful because I thought it’d be funny to leave them around the apartment for the next time his not-quite-girlfriend came over.” He scratched self-consciously at the sloping bridge of his nose. “Which I realized, once I was sober, was probably on the douchier end of the spectrum. So I just kept them. They glow in the dark, though! It’s pretty cool. I could show you if we flipped the lights off, but that’s—yeah, okay, nevermind, that’s a weird thing to say, I hear that now.”

“It’s not my business what you do with your free time,” Derek said, colder than he needed to be. He couldn’t wipe away the image of Stiles dancing in a club, his lean body swaying into the curves of the throbbing, bass-heavy music, his full lips dragging along a girl’s throat, catching at her mouth, her lipstick—hot pink, too, pulling him across the room, an easy point of introduction—smearing across his sweat-slick skin. He didn’t...he didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he opened Stiles’s paper and flicked a dazed glance over the first few pages. It was oddly thick, much longer than it should have been, and—“Stiles,” he said, the name startled out of him. “This wasn’t the assignment.”

Stiles carefully zipped his bag and slung it over one shoulder, but his lips were pulling up and down in subtle increments, wavering between embarrassed and proud. “I had a little extra time this week,” he said.

“Enough time to write a ten page paper on the coping mechanisms of blind dogs in new environments,” Derek replied, making no attempt to restrain his skepticism. He folded a page back and turned it toward Stiles, as though he needed to be reminded how much work he’d put into it. “With illustrations.”

Stiles snickered at the drawing—a cartoonish sketch of a dog wearing a hooped harness that extended in front like a bumper, presumably enabling it to move without smacking face-first into walls. “Okay, I know Lola doesn’t need that, but I thought it might help to know how well she’s doing, in comparison with how it could be. But some of the stuff people have come up with is actually really cool. It’s nice, y’know? Finding ways to make life easier for your pets, instead of just...giving up on them when something goes wrong.”

“Yeah,” Derek said. It was why he’d adopted Lola; why he’d been drawn to her as she sat patiently in her kennel, waiting for her humans to come back for her. She hadn’t done anything wrong. She was a good dog—a beautiful, wonderful dog who’d simply gotten older, whose life was a little more complex to deal with. All she needed was patience, affection, and a few reasonable lifestyle adjustments.

Erica thought he was a tender-hearted softie who let people take advantage of him. Laura thought he was making rash decisions born of extended loneliness.

Stiles, somehow, understood.

His throat thick with words he couldn’t figure out how to say, Derek turned a few more pages, until he reached a “Separation Anxiety” heading, with a sketch of a Lola-lookalike pawing sadly at a closed door.

Stiles, who’d apparently shaken off the earlier awkwardness with no lingering effects—it didn’t mean anything to him, Derek reiterated in case his heart hadn’t gotten the memo yet—twisted around to drape himself over Derek’s shoulder as he read. They weren’t touching, but Derek froze in place
anyway, afraid to breathe too deeply lest it make Stiles’s firm chest brush against his back.

“This one sounded more like her,” Stiles said. His voice was huskier up close, tickling at the hair on
the nape of Derek’s neck. “That’s why I drew a schnauzer for that section. I don’t know how relevant
it’ll actually be...”

“Very,” he said, repressing a shiver when Stiles let out a pleased huff of air. “I was actually talking to
Erica about this last night. I’ve done some research of my own, of course, but there are things here I
hadn’t found.”

“Oh, cool,” Stiles said, drawing back, leaving Derek feeling bereft and still more than a little
shuddery. “That’s—yeah, that’s neat. Did she—I mean, she probably had some good suggestions.”

Derek chuckled at the idea. Erica? Helpful? “No,” he said. “Nothing like this. This is great, Stiles.
Really, thank you.”

When he turned, Stiles was smiling down at the ground, his mouth soft and pleased.

“I’m glad,” he said. “And I didn’t actually go completely off topic this time—the essay’s in there, too.
It’s the last few pages. But I got in this research loop, and I thought you might be interested in some
of it.”

“I’m interested,” Derek confirmed, watching Stiles’s throat bob in response.

“Good,” Stiles said. “Yeah, awesome. The last chunk’s probably the best place to start; I didn’t have
a lot of time to clean up the organization, so apologies for the window into my fucked up brain. But I
did some comparison between shelter animals and dogs with recent vision loss. There’re some
intersections that sounded a lot like Lola. She doesn’t seem to have trouble moving around, but she’s
really tactile, yeah? I noticed you always keep her with you.”

“As much as I can,” Derek said. “But the door part, in your drawing—that’s been a real issue.”

Stiles nodded vigorously. “I thought it might be. It’s a barrier. Because she relies so much more on
scents and sounds, when you shut a door, you’re slamming this damper over her senses, and it freaks
her out.”

Derek stared at him wordlessly, and Stiles shifted uncomfortably in place, rubbing at the back of his
neck.

“This is just me guessing, and I’m obviously not a dog scientist or anything. I did run some of it by
my buddy, though—he’s studying to be a vet—and he said my conclusions made sense, animal
behavior-wise. Mostly.”

There was a self-deprecating twist to Stiles’s lips now, and Derek reached out to touch his arm,
pulling back when he realized the contact was almost certainly unwelcome. Derek was as tactile as
Lola, but with significantly stronger layers of inhibitions, which meant few people knew that about
him. There was something meaningful, probably, about his boundaries constantly threatening to drop
around Stiles.

I’m his professor.

I’m twice his age.

“Thank you,” he said again, memorizing the responsive tilt of Stiles’s closed-mouth smile, the play of
emotions shifting so rapidly across his mobile features, Derek could barely keep up.
“Happy reading, Dr. Hale,” Stiles said, and when he added an “I’ll miss you” for a grumbling Lola’s benefit, Derek pretended, for a painful heartbeat, that Stiles was still looking at him.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles goes bowling
Chapter 9

Stiles braced his ankle against the side of the desk, confused by the sudden instability of the room—quiet, ground-rippling earthquake? a surge of dizziness from too many energy drinks and too little sleep?—but unwilling to pause in his work to investigate it. He only had a few more lines of code to debug. It was close enough to taste. In fact, if he concentrated hard enough, he could already feel it coating his tongue—a sugary tang and an unpleasant hint of copper.

Success tasted remarkably similar to the aforementioned energy drink, with a hearty dose of chewing at his painfully chapped lips until his teeth drew blood. How long had it been since he’d had something to drink that didn’t include an extra six helpings of caffeine? He switched to one-handed typing, groping for the water bottle he knew he’d left somewhere on the desk at some point in the past, but after the third crinkle of an empty chip bag—and possibly a box of cereal? something of the cardboard variety, anyway—he went back to his earlier task, having forgotten what he was searching for.

His chair rolled farther away from the desk, and he scrabbled at the keyboard. “Five more minutes, dad,” he mumbled, pulling his laptop into the safe clutch of his arms as he slid across the room and bumped to a stop.

“Dude,” Scott said disapprovingly, and Stiles angled his head back, thumping it against the headrest.

“Oh, hi,” he said. “Aren’t you late for class?”

“I was,” Scott said. “On Friday morning. But it’s Saturday now. I woke up an hour ago, and as far as I can tell, you haven’t slept at all. I tried to talk to you a couple times, but all you did was make weird noises. Have you been on your computer all night?”

“Mmm,” Stiles said, adjusting the angle of his screen so he could tap out another line of code.

“Stiles.”

“Yeah, buddy.”

Scott pried the laptop away from him and paused before closing the lid. “Do you need to hit save or something?”

“No, everything auto-saves, but—” Stiles frowned when the lid clicked shut. “I was almost done with that!” he protested.

“I really don’t think you were. C’mon, you’re going to sleep, and when you wake up, we’re doing something fun. Far away from campus.”

Stiles lifted his arms and let Scott drag his t-shirt over his head, grunting in irritation when the collar caught on his chin, then nose, before pulling all the way free.

“This is weird,” he grumbled, wrapping his arms sulkily over his bare chest. “I don’t like this.”

“That’s why you’re doing your own pants,” Scott said, snapping the shirt into a shared laundry pile they’d been building in the corner of the room. “I’ll set an alarm, but you’re turning it off your own
damn self, because my jaw still hurts from the last time you punched me when I tried to wake you up for class.”

“You shouldn’t ever interrupt dreams about superspies,” Stiles said, toppling out of the chair and in the general direction of his bed. “Ow,” he said, from somewhere on the floor partway under the thick wooden frame.

“Good enough,” Scott said, already on his way out the door. “Alarm’s on the desk! See you in a few hours.”

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“Shut it off, shut it off, why,” Stiles groaned, trying to bury his face in a pillow he couldn’t seem to find. His sheets were scratchy, scraping roughly at his cheek, and he rolled to his back, propelled by a series of violent, dust-induced sneezes.

There was a sock stuck in the ceiling. Which was slatted with wooden boards instead of the usual grungy stucco, and was significantly closer than it should be.

“Fucking Scott,” he swore as he wiggled out from under the bed, grimacing at the gritty, painful rasp of the carpet against his bare shoulders. He swiped the alarm off and pushed through the bedroom door, dropping Scott’s phone off at the couch before heading into the kitchen—sink full of dishes, right—and veering off into the bathroom to stick his head under the faucet.

When he reemerged, he was dripping a bit but felt significantly less like something many-legged and chalky had crawled into his throat and died.

“Why the fuck did you set an alarm instead of just letting me sleep, fucking hell,” he croaked, rubbing the grit out of his eyes.

“Because you would’ve lost half the weekend, dude, and you haven’t done anything but study in like a month,” Scott said. “You need a serious break.”

“You’re doing homework,” he said accusingly, gesturing at the books Scott and Kira had spread across the couch, sheafs of papers dripping onto the floor in front of it.

“Only until you woke up,” Kira chimed in. She bit shyly at her lip, then smiled at him. “We were thinking about bowling?”

It was edging on third-wheeling a date, which was a big factor in Stiles’s steady refusal of their attempts to hang out over the past week, but—“It’s by Cliff’s, right? Do they still have those two dollar happy hour tacos?” He wrinkled his nose. “I guess I should take a shower. Gimme ten minutes.”

***

“STRIIIIIIIIIKE,” Stiles sang, doing a slidey shuffle-footed dance at the end of the lane. The soles of his bowling shoes were at exactly the right balance of grip-to-slip, and he was making the most of the alley’s disco lights and loud music. Plus, they’d nearly drained their first pitcher of beer, so he was skimming through that light, relaxed state where everything around him was soft and pleasantly fuzzy.

“This was a great idea,” he said, trading spots with Kira. She swept her pigtails behind her shoulders and set her jaw as she selected a ball and prepared to send it rocketing toward the glowing pins. Stiles’s strike had been an entirely lucky toss; he and Scott were both collecting their fair shares of
gutter balls, while Kira was casually blowing their scores out of the water.

Life was beautiful enough, at the moment, for that to matter very little.

“Told you,” Scott said comfortably. “Maybe next time it won't take so long to convince you to stop being a hermit.”

**Hermit.** Stiles mouthed back at him. “What the hell, man, you're acting like I've been stuck in a cocoon for the last month. We just hung out. The three of us, like, two days ago or something.”

“You mean the Monday before last, when you came back from class, dumped your bag out on the floor, and announced that we were driving to the nearest abandoned parking lot to burn all your condoms? Because that's the last time I remember you agreeing to do anything with us.”

Stiles stuck the end of his hoodie string in his mouth so he could gnaw at the plastic coating instead of answering Scott. That hadn't been his proudest moment, true. But sue him for wanting to dispose of the evidence from one of the most humiliating moments of his entire life.

Which was saying a **lot,** his high school years being what they were.

Dr. Hale had been incredibly fucking nice about it, and the rest of the exchange had admittedly been pretty damn good. The awkwardness hadn’t seemed to leave a lasting impact, and he’d even paused to chat with Stiles when they’d seen each other outside of class a couple times afterwards, but holy **fuck,** Stiles couldn't stop cringing when he thought about the disdain furrowing those epic brows when he’d yanked loose the trashiest, most college-aged reminder of who went to grungy bars and who probably had fancy-ass, suit and tie date nights in jazz clubs. Or whatever it was Dr. Hale was into. Stiles would bet his nonexistent life savings that no aspect of it glowed in the dark.

“Why **is** so much shit in this town glow-in-the-dark?” he asked Scott, who shrugged and got up for his turn.

“College towns, I guess?” Kira answered as she sat back down and poured the last dregs of beer into her cup. “Cosmic bowling’s cool, though. Aren't you having fun?”

“No, I totally am.” He picked at the last bit of plastic on his hoodie string, prying at it until it came loose. The buzz was starting to wear down a fraction, and he felt exhaustion licking at the edges of his consciousness. One good nap—or even a solid night’s sleep—wasn’t enough to make up for the days of intellectual torment he’d been putting his body through. “Hey, I’m going to get us another one,” he said, grabbing the empty pitcher. “Be back in a bit.”

“But it’s your turn—okay, I guess we’ll wait,” Kira called after him.

Stiles flashed his ID at the bored bartender, who barely spared it a glance before pushing a frothing pitcher at him. He dipped a finger in the foam and licked it clean while he waited for his change. What the hell was the point of being legal, anyway, when you lived in a college town where most places went by European rules until they got a heads up that the police would be doing a cursory sweep for underage drinking. Ordinarily, that’d be one of the perks of living in nowheresville Oregon, but being able to use his real ID was the only advantage he could see of falling behind a grade during his mom’s illness. Not that he could use that reasoning with his I’ll-look-the-other-way-but-don’t-make-me-talk-about-it dad, who seemed to age a decade any time Stiles’s mom was mentioned.

More things he didn’t need to dwell on, if he wanted to keep from sliding from happy-drunk to locks-self-in-bathroom-while-Scott-bangs-on-door-drunk.
Not that the latter had happened. More than once.

To be fair to himself, that evening, midway through his sophomore year, would’ve been his mom’s fiftieth birthday. His dad had—in a rare moment of emotional openness—posted something sappy and fucking heartbreaking on Facebook, accompanied by a photo he’d dug out of some secret pre-wedding album Stiles had never seen. Facebook, for fuck’s sake. It’d sent random relatives and his dad’s old army buddies flocking to Stiles’s page, which he’d promptly locked down and thinned out to the few people he actually wanted to keep tabs on. Or the people from school who didn’t give a shit about him and his problems, anyway.

He left a couple dollars on the sticky bar top and crumpled the rest into a ball in his pocket; hopefully he’d remember to fish that out before he did laundry. Things hadn’t gone so well the last time he’d tried to pay for dinner with literally-launched money.

Lost in thought, he didn’t hear his name being called until a petite, pink-haired girl planted herself in his path, setting a steadying hand on his elbow so he wouldn’t lose his one-handed grip on the beer.

“Jesus, Stiles, you going deaf already? It hasn’t been that long since I’ve seen you, has it?”

“Caitlin! Hi!” he said in surprise. “Sorry, no, it's just fucking loud in here. Hey you. You look amazing. Is that real?”

He touched the sharply bobbed hair curving along her jawline, and she leaned in and gave his lowered cheek a quick, friendly kiss. “It’s a wig, you silly ass. You like it? I'm toying with the idea of trying something more permanent, but I'm torn between this and blue.”

“I like blue.” It’d been his favorite color for most of his life, although lately, he’d been increasingly drawn to shades of green for reasons he was definitely not buzzed enough to consider. “But the pink’s good, too. How’re you doing? You here with Emily?”

“Yeah! She’s sneaking some stuff in from Cliff’s so we don’t have to order any of the frozen shit they sell here. We’re over in Lane 2, with some of the other guys; you should join us. Unless you’re on a date?”

She made a teasing kissy-face at him, and he laughed. “I’m kind of on a date, but not mine. I’m here with Scott and his almost-girlfriend.”

“You single, then? Ready to mingle? There’re at least two girls and probably one guy in our group that I know for a fact would be all up on that if you’re interested.”

“Single, yeah,” Stiles said. “But I’m not really—” He stopped, not sure what he was trying to say. Caitlin had a habit of befriending beautiful people—the term smoking hot had applied in the past—and it had been a while. He’d been busy, and not particularly interested in anyone, and opportunities hadn’t really been coming up. They were reasonable enough excuses, but he should jump at it now, probably. It’d be a good way to release some tension, to unwind a little, like Scott kept insisting he needed to.

But something dark and sad twisted in his stomach when he thought about trying to hook up with anyone right now. Caitlin’s eyeliner was green, he thought stupidly. It glowed under the blacklights, but its electric shine was flat. Empty. It didn’t change colors when you looked at it. It didn’t make your breath catch in your throat as you tried to pin down some semblance of an accurate description.

“I’m not,” he tried again, and Caitlin shook her head, her pink hair swinging.

“No pressure, hot stuff. You should hang out with us anyway—catch me up on what’s going on
with you. You still doing computer shit, with robots and all that? Last I heard, you were trying to shift into...artificial intelligence?"

A clump of red-faced, boisterous frat boys jostled past them, and Caitlin jerked her head to indicate they should move out of the heavy traffic area. Stiles set the pitcher on a low wall that separated the bar, pool tables, and retro arcade from the lanes and wiped his damp fingers on his jeans.

“Still working with robotics, yeah.” He pulled out his phone and swiped through his photos until he found the set he wanted to show her. “We’re building this one; it’s mostly to give us a feel for putting together basic shit like functioning sensors, actuators, some intelligence. But not much. My team’s sticking to simple object manipulation and pretty limited navigational mobility, if we’re able to work out the kinks in that part.” Stiles had wanted to build functional legs; Danny had insisted wheels would be faster and easier to implement, and the majority of the team had sided with him. As usual. Stiles had been working on his own side projects, but he didn’t have the resources he needed. Or, as it turned out, the ability to completely forgo sleep in favor of lengthening his days. “I’m taking a couple CogSci classes this semester, too. The end goal’s computational neuroscience, if I can swing it, but that’s more graduate level, so I’ve gotta focus on laying the right groundwork.”

“That’s interesting,” Caitlin said, subtly checking the time on Stiles’s phone before handing it back. “So you want to figure out the connections between brains and computers, huh?”

“Memory, specifically,” he said, pocketing his phone and leaving his hand pressed against his thigh to hide its sudden tremble. “But hey, listen, you should get back to your friends. Emily’s gotta be waiting with the food by now. Let’s catch up later? You’ve still got my number?”

“I do,” she said, lifting up on her toes to smack another kiss on his cheek. “See you, Stiles. Don’t be such a stranger.”

Caitlin gave him a light wave as she headed for the far side of the building, and he watched her go before retrieving the now lukewarm pitcher, swiping halfheartedly at the puddle of condensation it’d left behind. He took the short set of stairs carefully, wondering how many people tripped down them on an average night—alcohol and darkness seemed like a bad combination—and made his way past lanes that were either filled with rowdy groups of friends or couples who’d started to take advantage of the dim lighting to grope at each other.

He walked straight past an exceptionally affectionate couple, doing his best to not witness the guy’s enthusiastic attempts to stick his tongue down the girl’s throat while she wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Get a room,” he muttered, then stopped short, peering up at the numbers over the lanes. He’d passed his without seeing Scott or Kira. He hadn’t been gone long enough for them to actually leave without him, had he? Scott would’ve texted him, though. He backtracked, and when he reached the nearly horizontal couple again, the girl caught sight of him and sat up abruptly—as much as she could, anyway, with another body pressed over hers.

“Stiles!” Kira squeaked, wiping at her mouth and shaking Scott’s shoulders until he peeled himself away from her and turned to grin sheepishly at Stiles.

“Hey! We were waiting for you to come back to finish your turn, and we got—”

“Distracted,” Kira finished. She was flushed with embarrassment, but there was a determined set to her jaw—much like her bowling expression—when she tucked herself into Scott’s side and slipped her hand into his.
“I brought some more beer,” Stiles said, lifting it as proof. “And uh, congrats?”

“Whoa dude, you too!” Scott said, inexplicably.

“Thanks? I mean, I do feel like I played a pretty pivotal role in—what?” He squinted suspiciously at Scott, who was pointing at his face in delight.

“You’ve got lip prints all over, man. I knew you were gone too long to just be grabbing drinks.”

Stiles bumped the proffered fist, still unsure what he was being congratulated on, then wiped at his cheek and checked the tips of his fingers, now glowing a vibrant orange. “Oh, that. I ran into Caitlin. You remember her.”

“Yeah I do.” Scott tried to waggle his eyebrows, which Stiles had told him before looked ridiculous.

Kira looked back and forth between the two of them. “Is she an ex? Or is that rude to ask? Sorry.”

“No,” Stiles said, overlapping with Scott’s far more excited, “Yeah!”

“Dude, you disappeared for hours at that party sophomore year. And you told me you hooked up with her.”

“We made out,” Stiles amended. Which was, granted, initially really fucking hot. Caitlin was gorgeous, with delicately pretty features, an eager mouth, and soft skin she’d kept encouraging him to touch. She’d approached him on the dance floor, then dragged him to a dark corner of the room and crawled into his lap, grinding down with her hips and pushing her breasts against his chest. He’d responded like any perpetually horny, anxious to blow off steam dude would’ve, and it probably would’ve gone farther if he hadn’t pulled back at the salty taste of tears streaking silently down her cheeks.

She’d split up with her girlfriend earlier that week, she’d told him through broken sobs, still in his lap, with his arms wrapped around her, but in a quick switch from frenzied lust to comfort. By the end of the evening, he’d talked her into calling Emily, and he and Caitlin had exchanged numbers and a promise to meet up for coffee. He’d met Emily a few times since then; she was equally beautiful, but he’d never gotten a chance to talk to her much. When she and Caitlin were together, it was like no one else was in the room, their bubble of happiness unbreakable.

“We’ve never had sex,” he reiterated when Scott’s dubious expression didn’t budge. “Seriously, dude, I wouldn’t lie about that.” He sat down and poured fresh cups for the three of them, draining half of his before Scott and Kira had even begun to reach for theirs.

“So she’s a friend?” Kira asked, licking at the foam on her lips, then giggling when Scott darted forward with a quick open-mouthed kiss to collect the drops she’d missed.

Like a goddamn puppy, Stiles thought in a mixture of affection and exasperation. Gross, though—not something he needed to see from a guy who was essentially his brother. “Yeah, she’s cool. She actually invited us to hang with their group tonight. Although I think that was partly because she was trying to get me to hook up with someone there. She loves playing matchmaker.” He finished the rest of his cup and refilled it.

“Dude,” Scott said. “You should go for it. We’ll be fine.” He beamed down at Kira, who hadn’t stopped smiling since Stiles had rejoined them.

“I can go if you need some...time to yourselves,” Stiles offered, only half-meaning it and making no attempt to get up. “But I’m not—uh, I’m not really.” He approximated an obscene gesture with the
hand that wasn’t wrapped tightly around the cup, threatening the stability of the plastic. “I’m good right now.”

“Oh,” Scott said, his face falling in sympathy. “Sorry, I forgot. But Dr. Hale—”

Stiles made firm eye contact and sliced a cut it out motion across his throat, and Scott ducked into his beer instead of continuing.

“Dr. Hale?” Kira asked curiously, missing the sudden tension and zeroing in on the name. “Oh, are you in Derek’s class this semester? I didn’t know that!”

“Derek?” they echoed in unison, swiveling to stare at her.

She blushed at the sudden shift in focus, probably not used to being the center of attention when the three of them were together, Scott and Stiles nearly always knee-deep in bro-time. It was hard to break that habit. “Yeah, my mom’s his boss? And my dad works with him, too. I’ve known him for a long time. The whole time he’s been here, actually.”

“Huh,” Stiles said as he processed this new information. He’d known Kira’s parents were both professors, but she’d only mentioned it in passing and hadn’t ever really talked about the details. At least not with him; Scott should’ve been more up-to-date on all the relevant Kira Facts, but he didn’t tend to catalog information about people to the extent Stiles did. He’d probably never even asked.

“Derek’s awesome,” Kira continued. “But he does assign a lot of work, so I get it—you being so busy and frustrated and everything. People see a totally different side of him when he’s in class. He’s a lot nicer, and funnier, when we hang out or when he comes over for dinner.”

“You have dinner with him,” Stiles repeated, envy curling around the words and consolidating into a petty knot in his throat.

“Yeah! Pretty often. Not as much lately, because he’s been busy with his new dog and everything, and my mom’s really picky about our carpet getting dirty, so we’ve gone over to his place a couple times instead. You’ve probably met her? The dog, I mean, not my mom. I think he takes her to class.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “Yeah, I have. He does.”

“I think you’d really like him! If you got to see him when he’s just being normal Derek, I mean, instead of his whole I Am Your Professor, Let’s Pretend We Don’t Know Each Other Until The Semester’s Over thing.” She deepened her voice into a gruff, robotic imitation, and broke out of the impression with a laugh. “You actually remind me of him sometimes. You’ve got a similar sense of humor, and you both do this thing where someone makes a comment, and you connect it to about a billion other topics at once. My mom says he’s probably the smartest person she’s ever met. Not around him, obviously, because he’s really awkward about compliments.”

“Also like Stiles,” Scott said with a grin.

“The—what did you mean by the professor thing?” Stiles asked, ignoring his best friend’s second attempt at a meaningful eyebrow waggle.

“Oh! I took his class my freshman year. He got all huffy and earnest about it and sat me down before the semester started to tell me I wouldn’t be getting any special treatment. Not that I thought he would; I signed up for his because he’s the best in his department. And it’d be weird to take my parents’ classes, obviously.”
“And he stood by it? The no special treatment warning?”

“And he stood by it? The no special treatment warning?”

“Yeah, of course.” Kira wrinkled her nose. “He gave me a B. I was kinda mad about it, but it was fair. I messed up on a couple of my papers, and I had one really bad exam. It was so embarrassing, though, because I found out later that my mom totally called him into her office to talk about it. Not to try to change my grade or anything, but to find out what was going on and if I was struggling too much in school.” She drew a pattern in the condensation on the side of her cup, briefly lost in thought. “He bought me froyo as an apology, but the grade stuck. He’s such a dork.”

“He sounds cool,” Scott said, and Stiles shot him a startled glance. Scott was supportive of Stiles’s ridiculous crush, because loyalty was one of Scott’s defining features, but he’d never really seemed to take it seriously. His tone was different now, though; there was a new thread of respect running through it, like seeing Derek through Kira’s eyes had given him a fresh perspective on why Stiles was so fixated on him.

“He is,” Kira agreed. “He just gets really antsy about stuff like breaking rules or showing favoritism. You’d get why if you knew the things he’s gone through, though. Some of it’s been...well, rough.” She bit her lip and peeked up at Stiles. “But you didn’t hear that from me. And he definitely doesn’t talk about it; I’ve just overheard my mom a few times.”

“I won’t say anything,” Stiles promised absently, his mind whirring, filing away all the new data he’d unexpectedly collected.

“He’s a good guy, that’s all I meant to say. It bothers me when people judge him too much for the way he is in class. I’ve even heard people call him names. Like...Professor Hardass.”

Scott snorted loudly, and Stiles stood up abruptly, making sure to kick at his definitely not cool friend’s ankle on his way to grab a bowling ball. “Is it still my turn?”

“Yes,” Kira said, but the word came out soft and dreamy, and Stiles rolled his eyes when as soon as he turned his back, he heard the wet, sucking sound of overeager mouths meeting again.

He considered himself at least partially responsible for this outcome, and he was happy for Scott, but he hadn’t thought through the massive PDA he’d have to deal with as a result.

“Mmmmm,” Kira sighed happily from behind him, and he shrugged and lined up the ball, sending it directly into the gutter, then nicking one pin on his second try. He kept his back firmly turned to the two of them; if they were paying attention, they’d know who was up next, and if they weren’t, he didn’t want to see what was keeping them otherwise occupied.

He pulled out his phone while he waited and navigated back to his photo stream, skipping over the robot in progress and the blurry video of a suspicious-looking mole he’d sent to a less than enthused Melissa.

Use your student health insurance, she’d texted back. An hour later, she’d added a slightly more helpful, It doesn’t look like anything to worry about. Don’t take that as encouragement to send me more.

He found what he was searching for and tapped at his screen to keep it from fading to black; the battery was low, and his phone had gotten as bad about taking impromptu naps as Scott had always been. There were several shots he’d snapped of Lola on one of their walks, and he lingered over each for a few seconds before moving to the one he’d had to talk himself out of making his lockscreen.
Derek hadn’t noticed him taking it; he’d crouched down to tug free a twig that Lola had been attempting to paw out of her beard, and Stiles had furtively captured the moment before stuffing his phone back in his pocket. In the photo, Derek was laughing, his head tilted back as Lola lunged forward to swipe at his face with her tongue in either thanks or retaliation. Stiles had gotten lucky with the composition; it wasn’t a professional photo, by any means, but the light had been just right, accentuating the sharp lines of Derek’s cheekbones and the extraordinary color of his eyes.

He looked ethereal. Otherworldly. Yet, at the same time, so human and touchable that it made Stiles ache with the desire to do just that.

Reluctantly closing out of his photos, he tapped open the Facebook app and scrolled through the news feed before clicking into the page he’d known the entire time was his destination. He’d never paid much attention to Kira’s account; it wasn’t like any of them could be considered active users. There were a few cute animal videos at the top of her timeline, and she had about three times the number of friends Stiles had collected.

Derek wasn’t hard to find; his photo was a badly framed selfie with Lola, her face taking up the majority of the space. Stiles saved it to his phone, then checked Derek’s profile. It was locked down, as much as anyone on Facebook ever managed; he could see a few scraps of information, enough to whet his appetite for more.

Who was he kidding, though? He didn’t need any additional encouragement. He held his breath as he touched the follow button.

*Shit,* he thought seconds later. *I should not have had that last beer.*

It was too late to take it back; all he could do was wait for a response.

Chapter End Notes

*Next up:* Derek attends a party
“Do I have to go?” Derek asked. He knew he sounded petulant, but Noshiko was used to dealing with his reluctance when it came to attending official university functions. It was bad enough that they were still featuring him prominently in their marketing materials, using photos from a session he’d been convinced to sit through the year he made tenure. It hadn’t been part of the tenure approval, Noshiko had told him later, sounding appalled at the idea of using active bribery to get him to smile at photographers.

He hadn’t sat for a new one since; he wondered if any prospective students actually paid attention to those faculty profiles. Maybe some of them showed up in class, puzzled by how he’d suddenly aged half a decade.

He scratched at the thickest patch of white hair at his chin, the area that’d gone grey first. Salt and pepper was a more accurate description of the current state of his beard—and one he used on occasion—but referring to it in those terms always made him feel like he’d been dished out on someone’s plate, well-seasoned and ready to be gobbled whole.

Maybe he held onto that impression because it was the way he’d been treated by the last person who’d purred out that phrase while stroking along his chest, trying to pop open the buttons on his shirt to see if his chest hair followed suit. That had, incidentally, happened at the previous year’s faculty mixer. Which was the event he was hoping Noshiko would give him a free pass to skip.

“It’s optional,” she said patiently, as she did every time they had one of these conversations.

“But it’s strongly recommended,” Derek finished, slumping in the chair he’d dragged to the side of her desk so he wouldn’t feel like he’d been called into the principal’s office.

“By the administration, not me.” She gave him a sympathetic pat on the knee. “Believe me, I’m fully aware how much you hate these things. But there’ll be prominent alumni and donors at this one, and I can’t help that they always ask after you.”

“I don’t understand why,” he sighed. Lola bumped her chin against his foot in response, and he jiggled it slightly to let her know he was still paying attention to her. “They ask about my books, but they never actually seem interested in the contents. I haven’t met a single one yet who’s read any of them.” He’d run into a few who’d asked him to sign their copies for him; it made him feel like a minor celebrity, but it didn’t change the fact that the binding was still pristine, the pages clearly untouched.

Noshiko did that thing with her mouth that signaled she was making her best effort to not smile at his discomfort. “How about this: you arrive half an hour late, stay two hours, eat some hors d’oeuvres and drink a glass of champagne, and I’ll get Kira to make that brownie dish you like the next time you’re over for dinner.”

“One hour,” he countered.

“Ninety minutes.”

He twisted his mouth in consideration. “The one with the cream cheese topping?”
“And extra chocolate chips,” she promised.

“I’ll try,” he said. “But don’t set a timer.”

“Of course not. And Derek?” Noshiko called as he was on his way out the door, Lola padding along after him. “It starts at 7, so even though I don’t care if I see you there, I will start getting anxious questions about you by 7:30. If it even takes that long. These things are bad enough without dealing with Alumni Relations breathing down my neck.”

“I’ll be there,” he said, even though it didn’t need to be stated; they both knew that despite his complaints, he’d be unable to overturn his habit of arriving on time, especially if his absence would cause an inconvenience for someone he cared about.

Noshiko leaned back in her chair, smiling at him thoughtfully. “And who knows? Maybe this time will be different.”

Derek grinned at her. “Maybe they’ll kick me out for bringing Lola with me.”

“You really should have thought about that before adopting a hypoallergenic dog,” she shot back.

“She could bite someone,” he said hopefully.

“Derek.”

“I’ll be there. 7:30 prompt. Ish.”

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By 7:10, Derek was already checking his watch from the edge of the room, where he’d tucked himself into a less visible nook to avoid people for as long as possible. Noshiko had shaken her head fondly at him when he’d arrived, but she’d left him alone thus far, skilfully steering talkative alumni out of viewing range. He cast a wistful glance at the doors to the raised wooden terrace, which had the double benefits of fresh air and a scenic overview, unfortunately cancelled out by its high visibility and limited space.

He made it another forty minutes with minimal interactions; the thickening crowd reduced his ability to remain hidden, but it also let him fade into the background to some extent. Lola helped, too. She was an easy point of conversation, and coming up with excuses to drift to another section of the room was easier when he had a fellow creature to blame it on.

“Sorry; I need to get her some air,” he told one elderly couple apologetically after weathering a sufficient number of stories about their time on campus and the amount of money they’d since donated in hopes of having a building named after them. Thus far, they’d only managed benches and brass plaques, so he didn’t feel all that bad about escaping to a clearer patch by the windows, where he could loosen his tie a few increments.

The catering staff was circulating more actively now that a substantial percentage of the attendees had arrived. Derek had snagged a glass of champagne from a passing tray during an earlier conversation; he’d been sipping lightly from it, mostly to give himself something to do. Now that he was, albeit briefly, on the outskirts of the crowd, it’d be a good time to grab some actual food. He mapped out the room quickly, gauging the distance to the nearest trays.

The catering company had decked its employees out in typical semi-formal fashion, and the white dress shirts and black vests—most of them ill-fitting—were easy to pick out from a distance. Derek let his gaze linger on one for longer than necessary, indulging in the sheer aesthetic pleasure of broad
shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, the slim-fitting black slacks perfectly displaying the man’s long legs and the appealingly rounded curve of his ass. It felt...nice to be attracted to someone. It frankly didn’t happen that often to him, and in situations like this, where the person in question was a complete stranger, it gave him the same relaxed rush of endorphins as walking through an art gallery or watching a sunset. He might not be able to take it home, but he could enjoy the experience while it lasted.

The man turned, his tray lofted easily in one hand, and Derek tugged his tranquil scrutiny back up the lean expanse of his body, dwelling momentarily on the biceps straining the fabric of his shirt, then moving on to the enticing curve of his throat, his dark, carefully coiffed hair, and a striking profile that was all too familiar.

Derek tore his eyes away as though he’d been burned.

He’d been carelessly checking out Stiles.

That wasn’t the part that surprised him the most; although he hadn’t anticipated Stiles being a part of this evening, there was nothing unexpected about being inexorably drawn to him. Derek hadn't come to terms with it, but he’d accepted it as something he wasn’t able to change. That he didn’t particularly want to change.

The disconcerting part was the relief he felt at the rush of casual attraction melting into pleasurable familiarity. He was glad the handsome caterer turned out to be Stiles. When he poked tentatively at the reasons behind that response, he had to flinch away from an explanation that slotted their interactions over the past month and a half into stark, too-honest terms.

It was easier to consider the timing itself. A month and a half. Was that really all it’d been? It simultaneously felt like nothing and an eternity; in roughly the same amount of time, he’d be handing in his final grades and saying goodbye to yet another set of students. They came in and out of his life so frequently, leaving fragments of memories behind, moving on to their varied futures while he stayed put.

That was one of the aspects of his job that Derek typically enjoyed; he’d been asked before, by chatty alumni and by people like Cora who didn’t understand staying in academia longer than you were forced to, how he didn’t get bored teaching the same topics year after year. The answer was simple. He might, if he treated his lectures the way some others in the department did. There was nothing appealing to him about resting on his laurels, wasting his students’ time by reading from a script he could have as easily handed to them in a printed-out booklet. The students made the difference. He adjusted his teaching methods according to the specific needs and learning styles of each class. He pushed himself to find new and interesting ways of presenting information; if he wasn’t stretching himself intellectually, how could he expect anyone sitting in his classroom to do the same?

It kept his mind sharp and his interest in the subject matter intact. Usually, anyway; he’d had his fair share of rough patches and disappointment, and a few semesters where he slid by more than he should’ve. It evened out over the years. One bad semester was almost always followed by a good one, the universe tipping the scales just enough to keep him from plummeting into total discouragement. Not that the universe had any particular interest in his wellbeing, but he liked to believe that the world was on a generally positive trajectory.

Maybe he was feeling differently this year because he was so close to crossing that forty year mark. Maybe the creeping sense of stagnation didn’t have anything to do with the mouthy challenge in the front row of his lecture hall.
He toyed with the idea of crossing the room, of catching Stiles’s attention, of engaging him in conversation. He discarded it before it could grow any roots or solidify into an actual plan. Stiles was working. Interrupting him, cornering him into talking to Derek—he’d likely be polite, but as uncomfortable under the surface as Derek felt during events like this.

Stiles hadn’t seen him yet; or if he had, he wasn’t making an attempt to seek Derek out. Once his back was safely turned again, Derek used the opening to slip out of the room and onto the terrace. There were glimmering lights strung along the railing and a heat lamp softly emitting warmth from the far corner. By this point in the evening, the crowd had moved indoors; the sun had fully set, and there was enough of an October chill to discourage lingering outside in thin dress clothes. Derek welcomed the change, breathing in the crisp air and exhaling the stale taste of unwelcome conversations.

He finished off his champagne and set the empty flute on one of the tall tables that’d been artfully scattered across the terrace with the intent of encouraging small groups to congregate and discuss supporting the university’s future. He understood the need for fundraising efforts—it helped to ensure his salary, after all—but he wasn’t built for marketing. Like he’d told Noshiko, he didn’t understand why he got dragged into the spotlight for these formal occasions; the history department was never a university’s poster child. As much as he valued his field, the headline-grabbing, groundbreaking work always came from the sciences. Why weren’t they getting hassled into making sales pitches to donors with thick wallets?

He saw Stiles’s silhouette—utterly recognizable now that he’d reconciled the unusual attire with the hoodie- and henley-wearing Stiles he knew—move past the brightly lit bank of windows. He twisted to stare out into the darkness, resting his arms on the railing and letting his eyes adjust to the dim glow of lamps set along the path that curved past the gently burbling creek. Lola, who’d been sniffing curiously at the wooden floorboards, probably hoping to find dropped bits of food, stiffened suddenly, her ears lifting and her face pointed toward the doorway.

Before Derek could think to snap a command, she’d woofed out a single low bark, a greeting she’d started using when her sensitive ears or nose caught a hint of Stiles on one of the trails around campus.

There were no new sounds for a few seconds after; Derek listened to the water tumbling over the rocks below, to the geese-like chatter of conversation swelling in the room behind him. Then, as Lola bumped against his legs, her entire body wagging in excitement, he heard footsteps approaching—always a fraction louder than they should be, with leashed energy thrumming through them.

“I should’ve known you’d be here,” Stiles said, and Derek took a steadying breath before turning to face him.

“I didn’t know you worked in catering,” Derek said, instead of, I had no idea you’d look this good in vests, or You should wear pants like that all the time.

“Decent money for the hours,” Stiles explained. “It picks up around the holidays, and the tips get better if you keep the drinks flowing.” He winked and handed Derek a fresh glass of champagne, the upward stream of golden bubbles shimmering in the soft lighting.

Simply seeing Stiles was heady enough; Derek set the glass down after the first sip. Rather than moving back into the room in pursuit of that extra cash, Stiles found space to put his tray down, too. He patted Lola on the head, then straightened up, his back to the railing, and slid his hands into his pockets, setting the taut muscles in his arms and the strength of his shoulders on display. It was a habit of his, one he didn’t seem to do with any conscious attempt to draw attention to himself.
It never failed to pull Derek to him.

“You got a haircut,” he said.

Stiles seemed surprised he’d noticed, but he ducked his head in a light nod. “Better tips,” he repeated, with a slanted smirk that indicated maybe he wasn’t as unconscious of his appeal as Derek had assumed. “I hate dealing with it, but sometimes it pays off.” He swept his eyes over Derek, up and down, and nodded again in approval. “I like your suit. You haven’t worn that one in class before.”

Derek instinctively smoothed down his tie—a satiny black, against a black shirt, accentuating the impact factor of the deep blue suit. It was one of his flashier outfits, and he only wore it for events where, despite his misgivings and attempts to slip into the shadows, he knew his appearance was meant to stand out in a crowd.

“Blue’s my favorite color,” Stiles continued, seeming determined to keep Derek off balance.

“Red’s mine,” Derek said. He reached to touch the jaunty bow tie that’d looked ridiculous on every other member of the catering staff. Stiles swallowed, and Derek realized, too late to stop, that the backs of his fingers had missed their mark, brushing instead against the delicate skin of Stiles’s throat. Stiles’s eyes were dark, and his perfectly shaped lips parted wetly when Derek dragged his gaze away from the bob of his Adam’s apple, the slight shadow of stubble he’d missed with the razor.

Stiles’s voice was deeper than usual, rough at the edges, when he spoke again. “I don’t mind it. But I’ve always thought blue was beautiful.”

“Your tie’s crooked,” Derek said, his own voice a little ragged, adjusting the fabric slightly with both hands to imbue the lie with some weight.
“Thanks,” Stiles said, low and confidential, making no attempt to move away. The moment hung between them, thick with possibility, until Derek gave the tie one final tug and realized something about it wasn’t quite right. He pushed his thumb underneath it and found the snap holding it in place.
“Is this a *clip on tie*?”

Stiles scrunched his forehead and said defensively, “The real ones are awful; I tossed mine a year ago and grabbed this one from a Halloween shop. No one’s ever noticed.”

Derek didn’t know why he found it so funny; he let go of Stiles, his shoulders shaking with laughter. Fortunately, the initial layer of offense spreading over Stiles’s always expressive features transitioned quickly into amusement.

“Oh my god, you’re such a fashion snob,” Stiles said accusingly. “Just because you always dress like a fucking—it looks exactly the same! And it doesn’t take me a fucking half hour to put on.”

“It’s just—it’s *you*,” Derek said, still laughing. The explanation didn’t make sense to anyone but him, but the tension snapped anyway, the two of them grinning at each other and letting the weirdness of the last few minutes slip away.

“I take back my compliment, you asshole,” Stiles grumbled, readjusting the cheap red fabric. He was still smiling, and Derek felt warm and happy, able to watch the nimble movement of his fingers without the usual gut-deep bite of guilt.

There was a clack of heels on the steps leading to the terrace, and they drew farther apart, Stiles pivoting quickly to pick up his abandoned tray. Derek relaxed when he saw the bright glint of Erica’s hair, followed closely by Boyd in a dark green suit he’d bought from the same shop where Derek had gotten his.

“That suit’s smokin’,” Erica said when she got close enough, greeting Derek with a light smack on the ass. It was a habit she claimed to have picked up from watching far too many sports; she mostly liked to employ it on Derek because it never failed to make him jump and blush. Locker room dynamics weren’t appropriate for the workplace, he’d told her sternly, but it was yet another component of their friendship that he accepted easily from her and wouldn’t welcome from anyone else. She tilted her face up to receive his part of the exchange—a kiss on the cheek—and turned to Stiles.

“Oh, you,” she said. “Well, this is a surprise.”

“Champagne?” Stiles asked, his face shuttering into a mask of professional detachment Derek had never seen on him.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Erica said, taking one for herself and handing one to Boyd before grabbing herself a second.

“You’re late,” Derek told her. “I thought you weren’t gonna show.”

“I had to wait for my date to dig himself out of his work, since I’m not _technically_ faculty and therefore not _technically_ invited to this shindig.” She clanked one empty glass back onto the tray and took a step back, comfortably slipping her hand into the crook of Boyd’s arm.

“What?” Stiles echoed.

“Oh, I guess you haven’t met Boyd yet. Boyd, this is Stiles. Stiles, meet my workaholic husband Boyd.”

Boyd nodded at him in greeting, and Stiles repeated, “Husband?”

Erica caught him sneaking a look at her hand, and she laughed. “Not a big fan of jewelry. I don’t
need a physical marker to remind me I agreed to spend my life with this guy.”

“I thought—” Stiles said, then shook his head, a smile spreading across his face again, transforming him back into the guy Derek knew. “Nice to meet you. So you’re a professor?”

“History professor,” Boyd said. “I work with Derek.”

“Jesus,” Stiles muttered, followed by something about *fucking models* that Derek didn’t quite catch. Erica snorted, which meant her sharper ears probably had, and Stiles’s face tinted slightly pink.

“I should go,” he said, pointing a thumb back at the hubbub in the room they’d been avoiding. “Finstock’s gonna blow a gasket if he sees me slacking off out here.” He hesitated, his eyes darting to Erica before returning to Derek. “It was good to see you, Dr. Hale.”

“See you next week, Mr. Stilinski,” Derek said, and watched him disappear back into the crowd.

“You see what I mean now, right?” Erica said, and Boyd made an amused noise, tipping back his champagne.

“I’m afraid to ask,” Derek said.

“You shouldn’t have to.” She rolled her eyes when he lifted his eyebrows in mute inquiry. “Derek, he literally just called you hot. To your face. Well, you and Boyd, but you’re the one he’s interested in.”

“He did,” Boyd confirmed. “Plus whatever was going on with you two before we got up here.”

“What did you see?” Derek asked, which he realized, as the words were coming out, was exactly the wrong thing to say.

Boyd shook his head, though. “Nothing, other than two people who obviously wanted to be a hell of a lot closer to each other. But you have a distinctive laugh, man. We heard it halfway down the path.”

“I wanted to witness it firsthand,” Erica contributed. “But he told me to stomp up the stairs to give you some warning.”

Derek shot a worried look at the windows, wondering who else had been paying attention.

“You’re fine,” Erica said. “Everyone else in there is drunk and loud and too self-centered to bother snooping on something that doesn’t impact them.” She finished off the second glass and dabbed at her lipstick with a cocktail napkin. “Anyway, I’m ready to head in. You may have your job locked down, but some of us still need to do some schmoozing.”

“Networking,” Boyd said.

“Kissing ass,” Erica said cheerfully. “Whatever you want to call it. Join us? We’ll use you as eye candy bait and then do all the talking so you don’t have to bother.”

Derek grimaced. It wasn’t the first time they’d made use of that routine, but he’d stayed long enough; he could head home. Give Lola her promised treat for behaving so well. Sit down with a book and a cup of something warm.

“The catering staff’s easier to watch from in there,” Boyd said with a faint, nearly hidden smile. Erica might be the more talkative one in their relationship, but that didn’t make Boyd an innocent party in
their schemes.

“‘I'll stay another hour,’” Derek decided. It was the right thing to do—helping a friend’s career any way he could.

He stayed two hours, picking up additional doses of energy now that he had his friends standing by to back him up and draw unwanted attention away from him. Erica made a point of flagging Stiles down as frequently as she could, especially once he switched from drinks to a desserts tray.

“Make sure you come back every time they give you a new set,” Erica told him. “Derek has a sweet tooth. He’ll want to try them all.”

“Like you don’t,” Derek said, frowning over the options—the lemon tart looked light and refreshing, but the sliver of a raspberry-chocolate bar was equally tempting.

“But I am honest about what I want in my life,” Erica said, and Boyd took hold of her elbow and gently steered her back into conversation with an emeritus professor who’d been giving him well-intentioned—if long-winded—advice on his career path.

“Try the lemon,” Stiles recommended. He leaned in, lowering his voice to an intimate whisper. “I'll swing by with the chocolate again if you hate it, but I gotta tell you, I've been sneaking the lemon ones. Three so far, and they only get better.”

“I trust your judgment,” Derek said, plucking one of the tarts from the tray.

Stiles’s eyes were warm and friendly, and Derek couldn't seem to look away from them as he bit into the dessert, then licked at his fingers to catch any stray crumbs.

“I gotta go,” Stiles said, slow and syrupy, his eyes dilated in the low light of their corner of the room. “But I'll be back soon with another round.”

Derek stayed until the last set of donors left, the scent of money and contented inebriation trailing behind them. He stayed until the catering staff began folding up tables and clearing away the last scraps of food.

“This is unusual,” Noshiko said, joining him where he was leaning against a load-bearing pillar and watching the caterers work. “I lost sight of you an hour ago; I assumed you'd ducked out when I wasn't paying attention.”

“I've been here,” he said, too worn down by the extended socialization to make any attempt at clever quips.

“My point is, you're still here. Don't misunderstand me: I appreciate it. But I'm surprised.”

“I'm waiting for Erica and Boyd,” he said, gesturing at where they...definitely weren't standing anymore. He blinked and swept his gaze over the rest of the room; his friends weren't anywhere in sight.

“Last I saw those two, they were kissing on the terrace,” Noshiko said, amused.

“Sounds like them.” He rubbed a tired hand over his jaw. “I guess I should head out, then.”

“She seems good for you,” Noshiko said, apropos of nothing.

“Erica?” She was a great friend, but he'd never think to use that statement to describe her. An
influence, maybe. A *good* one didn’t quite compute. Plus, she and Noshiko had never really gotten along. They respected each other’s professional achievements without any desire to strike up a friendship. Derek left it alone; he had enough experience with strong personalities to not force incompatible ones together.

Noshiko gestured at Lola, who was lying at his feet, flat on her side, snoring peacefully. “Having a dog seems good for you. You're more relaxed than I've seen you in quite a while. Happier. If it's not due to her…”

Her attention snagged on the scene in their direct eyeline, where Stiles was snapping a twisted-up tablecloth at one of his coworkers, then laughing at the response, his head thrown back, his hand gripping at the v-neck of his vest as though he couldn’t contain the outpouring of his own emotions.

“If there’s a different reason, my advice would be the same. Hold onto it. Anything that makes you this happy is worth whatever difficulties it brings.”

“Even dirty paws on the carpet,” Derek teased her lightly. “You just want me to show up at more of these things.”

“If I'd known all it took was a dog, I would've bought you one years ago.” Her phone buzzed, interrupting whatever she'd been about to add.

“Ken?” he asked, and she nodded as she typed out a reply.

Noshiko’s husband was friendly and personable: gentle where Noshiko was stern, yielding where she was inflexible, visibly demonstrating all the kindness that few people witnessed firsthand with her. Derek considered himself fortunate to know them both and to regularly spend time with them in less hierarchical settings than the academic environment. In public, they were a good team, with Ken generally fading into the background. In private, they were a perfect match, an example of the type of loving, mutually supportive partnership Derek periodically found himself longing to settle into.

Ken, though, had as little fondness for small talk as Derek did; he usually showed up for the first part of the evening, disappeared for a few hours, then arrived with the car when Noshiko was ready to leave.

“Keep what I said in mind,” Noshiko said in parting. “You deserve more happiness than you allow yourself, Derek. It'd be nice, as both your colleague and your friend, to see that mindset change.”

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Lola flopped onto her dog bed as soon as they walked through the door. They were still having some disagreements about where she was allowed to sleep and whether she got to check on Derek during the night to be sure he was still safely in bed, but she was doing better about respecting the boundaries he set. It worked best when she was exhausted. That’d been one of the suggestions in Stiles’s paper: setting concrete routines, like consistent exercise, that would anchor her day and head off unwarranted anxiety.

It helped that Derek already had a regular morning routine. Lola knew now that when his radio clicked on, it wouldn't be long before he emerged from his bedroom to ask her how she’d slept and to let her into the backyard to explore while he made coffee and woke up the rest of the way. His evenings had required more adjustment, but he'd been building in an extra set of evening walks and making conscious attempts to not lose track of the time while studying or writing.

He emptied his pockets and shook out his jacket before hanging it in the closet. He'd be due for a
round of dry cleaning soon, but it wouldn't be urgent for another week. Changing out of his suit and into sweatpants and slippers was the high point of most evenings, and he sighed with the usual level of contentment at the touch of far looser, softer fabric on his skin.

Padding into his study to flick on the light, he took a moment to envy Lola while his computer powered up. Sleep felt distant and, in his current state, unattainable. His body was still jittering with bursts of adrenaline from the energy he'd been forced to store up and expend throughout the day, and it would take a while to wind down.

He checked his university account; nothing urgent, but there were a few harried student emails he could respond to. While midterms were still two weeks away, the panicky overachievers were picking up steam, and some of the procrastinators had finally taken the warnings on their last paper seriously.

Once he was done with the last bit of work for the day, he scrolled through the news, catching up on headlines he'd missed while he was offline. There wasn't much that was both newsworthy and uplifting enough to pique his interest, so he pulled up Facebook instead.

Cora had posted a vaguely angsty status that hinted at relationship drama. He should call her that weekend; she still hadn't told him much about who she was dating, but she opened up on occasion, if he spent enough time talking about his day and letting her bring up hers in gradual, sideways hints. With the degree to which the two of them valued their privacy, it was remarkable that they ever had anything approximating an emotionally in-depth conversation, but it'd been known to happen. They were overdue for another one.

Laura had posted a new video of Eliza doing an acrobatic series of cartwheels and somersaults, taken by Emma, who was providing Olympic-style commentary as she filmed. He watched it twice, clicked to like it, and added a comment. He cleared out a couple of friend requests next—alumni who'd searched for him after the party, but whose claim on his time didn't extend to his personal life.

He stopped before closing out of that screen.

Stiles had sent him a friend request a week earlier. Derek should have denied it immediately. He shouldn't have let it sit, unanswered, Stiles’s face beaming at him every time he loaded the page.

He traced the cursor along the gentle slope of Stiles’s nose and clicked, almost as an afterthought, into his profile, most of which was visible. Either his security settings weren't high, or they dropped when you sent someone a friend request. Derek wasn't sure; he'd locked his account to everyone but friends, but he didn't have a lot of experience with these grey areas. Everyone in his life was either an easy yes or an easy no.

Stiles hadn't, since the beginning, been anything close to easy.

There weren't any new posts on his page, other than a couple of movie trailers that he'd shared without commentary. That lack of a ready opinion didn't seem like Stiles, at least to the extent that Derek knew him. He didn't harbor a shred of doubt over Stiles’s ability to verbally eviscerate anyone who disagreed with his analysis of a film. In fact, he wouldn't be at all surprised to discover that Stiles maintained a separate movie reviews site. If he did, it wasn't linked from his Facebook. That saved Derek the difficulty of deciding whether to subscribe to it, he supposed.

They had one mutual friend, Kira, which must've been how Stiles had stumbled across his page. Derek had been on tenterhooks for most of the Monday after the request; he'd prepared a dozen variations of the “it's nothing against you” speech, making the letdown as gentle as possible. They couldn't be friends, on Facebook or otherwise, and it was time he made that clear. By the afternoon,
he was convinced he was ready to sever all the ties he never should’ve formed to begin with, even though the words stuck in his throat each time he tried to practice them on a longsuffering Lola.

Stiles had chatted with him for a few minutes after class, as he always did now, but he hadn’t acted any differently. There was no awkward comment about the request. Nothing to indicate that anything had changed between them.

Maybe it’d been an accident, Derek had thought, musing over it during his walk home. That could happen. Stiles could've been on the site late at night, looking through his feed and navigating into Kira’s friends without noticing. Cell phones were tricky like that. Oversensitive. Prone to leading to misunderstandings. It was far too easy to send a text to the wrong recipient or click somewhere you hadn’t meant to.

With that scenario established as probable, he’d had a new excuse to leave Stiles’s invitation hanging. If he hadn't intended to add Derek, it'd create an unnecessarily awkward dialogue if he logged in one day to a notification about Derek’s rejection. It was only polite to let it be.

Several sets of photo albums were visible, Derek noted now that he was spending time browsing through Stiles’s page rather than pretending he didn't know about it. He was halfway through the third album before considering that Stiles might not appreciate the intrusion into his personal life if the request truly had been unintentional.

There wasn’t a lot to see, anyway. According to Stiles, he hadn’t been extraordinarily popular during high school, and that was apparent, to a certain degree. There weren’t a large number of recent group shots, either, or indications that he went the spring break/group vacation route on a regular basis. It wasn’t something Derek had ever really done—he’d always been far more content with a smaller set of close friends—but he was familiar with the idealized version of those years of your life.

A few people showed up numerous times in the photos, including a guy with shaggy hair and an easygoing smile who’d been tagged as Scott McCall, presumably the best friend and roommate Stiles mentioned frequently. A beautiful redhead made a number of appearances, sometimes with Stiles, and sometimes by herself or with a pretty brunette who’d also been in older photos with Scott. Lydia Martin. Another close friend? An ex? The most recent snapshot with her was from the summer, meaning she probably went to a different school, but she’d liked some photos Stiles had been tagged in a week earlier.

A week. Forgetting his newly formed decision to leave Stiles’s page before invading further, he navigated back to the photos he’d skinned past, since they mostly featured Scott and Kira—who was apparently dating Stiles's roommate. Derek hadn’t seen them in his news feed earlier in the week; Scott had uploaded them and tagged himself and Stiles, but not Kira. To keep her parents from seeing what she’d been up to, he suspected. She’d had a difficult enough time convincing them to let her live on campus and not poke their noses into her daily affairs. It was no wonder she’d keep a new boyfriend secret for as long as possible.

Or maybe Scott had simply gotten tired of tagging midway through the upload; the rest of the album, which Derek was able to access with no trouble, had blurry shots of a dark bowling alley, unflattering portraits of the three of them eating tacos in a better-lit bar next door, and a few additional photos with more than a sliver of Stiles’s face visible in them. One had clearly been taken by Stiles; he was in the corner of the frame, rolling his eyes, with two dark shapes interlocked behind him.

“Definitely going to pretend I didn’t see that,” Derek said to the screen. Seeing Kira kissing someone was essentially the same as it’d be with Cora. None of his business, unless they wanted to talk to him about it; not something where he had any need for visual proof of their relationship status.
Stiles was flushed, his hair more disheveled than usual, with streaks of what looked like blacklight paint on his face to fit with the apparent bowling night theme. He looked tired, Derek thought. Possibly a projection, since he was starting to nod off at his computer. He’d finish out the album and then shut his computer down and head to bed, like an adult who had better things to do with his days than spending an hour analyzing someone’s friendships.

There was another clear shot of Stiles near the end of the album, in profile and in better focus than most of the others had been. The bright orange paint was easier to see, too, and it took Derek a few seconds longer than it should’ve to identify the shape. The upper one was smudged partway up his cheekbone, but the lower mark was a clear lip print.

_That answers that_, Derek thought.

He’d tried to shake the images that’d been inspired by the condom incident, but he’d known it was a vain endeavor. What was he expecting? He hadn’t seen signs of a girlfriend, but it was obvious that Stiles was exploring the options that came with his level of attractive magnetism. _Good for him_, he tried to think, but he pressed a hand against his stomach, which had suddenly started to hurt.

Gut punched. It wasn’t a term he had a lot of familiarity with, at least not in recent years. He breathed through it, waiting for the pain to subside before he moved on.

When he closed his eyes, he heard Stiles’s voice, saw the mischievous twinkle in his eyes when he’d slipped Derek a soft, chewy ginger molasses cookie that the head of the catering staff had made a last minute decision to scrap. The cookies got too mangled when they tried to cut them into appropriate serving sizes, Stiles had said before lifting his vest away from his chest to show Derek that he’d stuffed three in his shirt pocket.

_I can bring you another one if you like it, but these are mine_, he’d said, proudly patting his chest and then making a face when he’d realized he’d smashed the cookies. _Uh—on second thought, you can have them if you want._

_Sorry_, Derek had said with some difficulty, wiping away a hint of laughter-induced tears from the corners of his eyes when Stiles shushed him, claiming Derek would get him in trouble with his boss at that rate. He’d still followed through on his promise of a more intact cookie; Derek had wrapped it in a napkin to save for later and had set it carefully on his counter when he’d gotten home.

When he opened his eyes, the disappointment fading back to a dull ache he could almost ignore, he took in the date stamped at the side of the photo, under Scott’s name. Regardless of what’d happened, Stiles had checked Derek’s profile that same night. He’d thought of him, for whatever reason. He’d reached out. He wanted to be Derek’s friend—because when Derek wasn’t making a deliberate attempt to delude himself, he knew that much to be true.

He clicked accept.

Chapter End Notes

_Next up:_ Stiles takes a walk
The trees rustled in the evening breeze, their leaves shaking loose in small clusters, sending brittle red-yellow stars whirling through the air and skittering across the sidewalk. Stiles had to shake his leg every few steps to free himself from yet another dessicated embrace. The leaves seemed eager to find a living creature prowling the paths in the hushed encroach of twilight; they brushed against his feet, creeping up his pants legs to flatten themselves against his bare ankles.

*Socks,* Stiles thought grumpily, twitching away from yet another itchy scrape of dried plant matter against his skin. He added laundry to the mental checklist of chores he’d fallen behind on, always putting the inessentials like dryer-fresh clothes off until the next day. Until “next day” turned into “next week,” and then another span of days passed, and Stiles found himself digging through his laundry mountain and determining that going without socks was preferable to double-wearing anything that’d spent that long buried under a festering pile of Scott’s boxers.

Gloves would be nice, too, he thought as he shoved a hand in the pocket of his zipped-up hoodie without dislodging the one keeping his phone pressed to his ear. He didn't need to wash any gloves, though; he needed to buy them, since he'd left his only pair at some forgettable bar during a pub crawl last Halloween.

“Talk to me about your frozen fingers when it starts snowing,” Lydia said on the other end of the line once he repeated that thought out loud.

“It's snowing already? Shit, that sucks.”

“Well, no. But the rain’s been icy for weeks. I’d welcome the snow at this point and as much of it as possible. It'll be easier to deal with snowbanks than surprise sheets of black ice.”

“I bet,” Stiles said; his experience on the matter was limited to the small flurries that periodically dusted campus in the winter, leaving a light, sugary coating that usually melted before it had a chance to make the footing treacherous. Parts of Oregon did collect more snow, and a good percentage of his classmates broke out skis and snowboards and headed to resorts in the Cascades on weekends. He’d gone once, with Caitlin’s group, which had been fun until he’d twisted his ankle while trying to hit on one of the ski instructors. He’d sworn off future trips; sexy ski lodges weren’t worth spending another winter in a cast.

“At least Allison says it’ll be warmer in Paris,” Lydia said, sounding wistful, her voice worn a little thin. She was partway through the first year of her PhD track program, carrying a heavier load than Stiles’s and even less willing to acknowledge her exhaustion. He was fairly certain Lydia had never asked anyone for help. From his childhood memories of her, he knew she'd been the kind of kid who'd taught herself how to tie her shoes and then judged anyone who hadn’t shown the same initiative. Like Stiles, who’d worn velcro for a decade, not because he didn’t know how to tie shoelaces, but because it was significantly easier to tear velcro strips free and run barefoot through the playground.

“I think it still rains a lot in December,” he warned her.

She made a dismissive noise. “Boston rain is dismal. Parisian rain is romantic. You should join us. Meet some hot French men; I’m sure we’ll find enough to share.”
Disregarding the part where she was inviting him to play wingman to his best friend’s ex, whose
decision to move to Paris had been the primary factor in their breakup, Stiles couldn’t imagine being
able to scrape that amount of money out of his bank account. Even with the ramped up influx of cash
from his catering gig, his savings were essentially nonexistent.

“Things with Aiden aren’t going well, then?” He winced. “Sorry. That was a stupid question.”

Lydia sighed. “He said I study too much. He was willing to stick around if I was willing to open up
our relationship.”

“So you kicked him to the curb. What an asshole.”

“He is,” she agreed. “He wasn’t wrong, though; neither of us was getting what we needed.”

“You’re not actually considering it, are you?” Aiden was, in Stiles’s opinion, the shittiest boyfriend
Lydia had dragged out of her seemingly bottomless barrel of terrible taste. For someone with
impeccable judgment in all other areas of her life, she had the worst dating history of anyone he
knew.

“Not with Aiden, no. But I’ve been thinking that it may be better for me to stick to casual for a while.
Maybe until I’m done with my degree.”

“That sounds like giving up. Which doesn’t sound like Lydia Martin. You okay, Lyds?”

“It’s a calculated compromise,” she said. “If someone comes along who’s worth spending more than
one night with, I won’t automatically rule them out, but my career comes first.”

“That sounds like Lydia Martin.” He grinned at his phone and kicked his way through a mass of
leaves that were threatening to spin into a mini whirlwind just off to the side of the path.

“What about you?” Which was also a Lydia tactic: deflecting attention once she’d decided she was
done sharing personal details. “You started this call with a ten minute rant about this Danny guy; is
something going on there? That kind of competitive antagonism and inability to stop talking about
someone is trademark Stiles flirtation.”

“First of all, I’ve grown,” he told her. “And second—absolutely not.” The idea shouldn’t have
triggered a disgusted shudder. Danny was objectively attractive, with an enviably athletic build and a
deep set of dimples that made everyone in his vicinity somehow miss that he could be as much of a
dick as Stiles was. Hell, even he liked Danny. But something about harboring that notion went
beyond simple disinterest. It felt wrong.

“Is he interested?” Lydia pressed. “With the way you tell stories, it’s hard to tell. It wouldn’t be the
first time you were convinced someone hated your guts when they were actually trying to ask you
out.”

“I don’t think so.” The truth was, he didn’t feel the slightest desire to explore the possibilities there.
“Even if he was, I’m not. I wouldn’t do that to—” He fumbled his words. Stopped.

Lydia, of course, heard the sentence he’d tripped over. “Are you secretly dating someone? Wait—is
this why you stopped sending me daily updates about that hot professor? Darrien. Or Dale?”

“Derek Hale,” he said, taking the bait she’d neatly laid out for him, but not willing to topple all the
way into her trap. “I’m not dating him, Lydia.”

She sounded triumphant anyway, which meant he’d probably skirted one trap without noticing the
hidden one she’d been steering him toward. “You know what you didn’t just say? That you’re not interested, when you couldn’t wait five seconds to stomp all over the appalling idea of liking your lab partner.”

“That’s different; you knew I liked him. Nothing’s changed. I’m not—I mean I’m still—” He was getting flustered, fuck. “I’m not dating him, though.”

“I thought you’d gotten over it,” she said. “So I let it drop. You never stop talking about someone when you’re into them.”

He had stopped, though. He’d sent Lydia photos at first, and they’d exchanged innuendo-laden commentary on Dr. Hale’s clothes, facial hair, and anything else they could think to talk about. It was fun and flippant until it wasn’t. Until he’s fucking gorgeous turned into I think I might like him and then plummeted all the way into a churning pool of emotions he hadn’t yet learned how to navigate and certainly couldn’t drag anyone else into.

Why shouldn’t he send Lydia photos of Dr. Hale’s ass? Or share sneakily taken short videos of the mouthwatering shift of his thickly muscled shoulders under the suit jacket he filled all too well?

Nothing’s changed, Stiles had told her, not meaning to lie. The attraction hadn’t changed. But the emotional impetus behind it had.

He wanted to take the words back: retrieve the texts he’d sent, delete the evidence, encircle Derek in a protective shield that would keep others from treating him the way Stiles had started out. Derek was beautiful, and fuck, Stiles wanted to tell him that, in a way that would convey the compliment without the discomfort of unwelcome advances. Derek didn’t deserve the people who showed up in his class only to drool over him. Who didn’t look past his outrageously gorgeous body to the brilliant mind and equally astounding soul.

“I don’t think it’s possible to stop being attracted to him,” he told Lydia. “But nothing’s going to happen, so there’s nothing to talk about.”

“This is one of the rare occasions where I wish we were Skyping,” she replied. He could almost picture the haughty hair toss that accompanied the statement. “Your face never hides anything. I’d insist on it, but it’s late, and I’m already half in bed.”

“I’m sure you still look great,” Stiles reassured her. Unnecessarily, since this was Lydia Martin he was talking to.

“Of course I do,” she huffed. “I only meant I’m too tired to bother. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s your call. But I still think Paris would be good for you. Nothing burns a misplaced crush out of someone better than a European fling or two.”

If you had the money to burn, too. Or the belief that there was some stranger in a foreign country who’d be enticing enough to make him stop caring about Derek, even temporarily. “I’ll think about it.”

“Do. Or at least come visit me at some point this winter. The snow lasts for half the year, so that gives you a big window.”

“I’d like to,” he said honestly. “If I could scrounge up the time and the cash, I’d be there so much you’d get sick of me, Lyds.”

“I’m willing to test the theory.” She sighed, so softly this time, Stiles barely heard it. He felt a smidge of guilt for breezing past the breakup with such clear relief over Aiden leaving the picture.
Regardless of *his* well-justified opinions about the guy, the asshole had meant something to Lydia. And he was one to judge, wasn’t he? Emotional investment wasn’t always logical.

“I hope you meet a dozen French men,” he told her. “An entire team of them. What sports are big in France? Soccer? You deserve an entire soccer team.”

“Football,” she said, in a much brighter tone than the one she’d begun to sink into. “You think you’re joking, but Allison actually dated a rugby player for a few months. Maybe she’ll introduce me to one of his bone-headed, concussion-prone, well-endowed friends.”

“Just your type,” he said dryly, unable to imagine Lydia with someone who didn’t at least attempt to approach her level of intelligence.

“Maybe it’s time to change my type.”

“Lyds,” he started, but she cut him off.

“It happened a few days ago, Stiles, and it was overdue. I’m fine; I’m just tired tonight. It’s been a long week.”

“Theme of the entire damn semester.”

She laughed lightly. “But when it’s over, we’ll think it flew by. That’s always the way it goes. Goodnight, Stiles. And good luck with your professor.”

“He’s not *my*—” he started, but the words fizzled into empty air, Lydia having already ended the call. He checked the screen to be sure they’d been disconnected, then stuffed his phone into his pocket, along with his chilled fingers. Valid commentary on East Coast winters aside, he was freezing.

In an attempt to generate some warmth, he’d been walking as he talked, without paying much heed to the direction. Twilight had faded into night, darkness draping over the quiet path, dotted with faint splashes of yellow light from street lamps that’d been spaced widely along the block. Closer to campus, the bulbs had been replaced with LEDs as a nod to both energy efficiency and increased safety for students walking home after dark. Here, in the peaceful neighborhood a few blocks from Derek’s house, the lights served as more of a point of reference.

*Here is the path,* they called softly, unblinking but unobtrusive. *Don’t stray from it.*

He hadn’t intentionally bent his steps in Derek’s direction, but he recognized the corner where they always parted; Stiles would wave and swing up the road he’d come down tonight, closing off the loop while Derek and Lola headed home. He’d never been the rest of the way. Never walked Derek to his door or indulged more than a passing fancy of catching a glimpse of where he spent his days. What purpose would it serve? The house would be modest, solidly built and set on a firm, steady foundation. Nothing could be gleaned from standing outside, dreaming of a stable future he might one day hope to achieve.

He crunched through a pile of leaves that had gathered around the base of a bench, scuttling up its legs to shiver in thin, dry whispers as the wind tugged at them. Stiles ruthlessly swept them aside to make room for himself and huddled with his shoulders around his ears, trying to decide what to do next. Where to go, more precisely, since his apartment wasn’t an option.

He’d considered and discarded the library. It closed at ten, which would only buy him a couple hours before he’d have to go on the hunt again. And he was already on shaky ground with the reference librarian; he couldn’t chance showing his face and tempting her to follow through on the threat of
banning his group the next time they tried to meet in one of the study rooms. Not as soundproof as they’d seemed, it’d turned out, and the other students on that floor hadn’t appreciated their lively debate.

He’d thought about Caitlin earlier, opening and closing her text thread a dozen times before dialing Lydia instead. Friendship came in tiers for Stiles, and the sad truth of the matter was that he only had two people he’d feel comfortable dropping in on unannounced, simply because he needed a place to crash. One was three thousand miles away in a nearly straight shot across the country, and the other was orchestrating the romantic date night that’d driven Stiles out of his crappy apartment to begin with.

Supportive best friends were all well and good, but he was finding it difficult to give a shit about Scott’s dating life while freezing his ass off on a stiff wooden bench. A bench he swore must’ve been engineered specifically to channel the cold, which was starting to seep through his jeans and lick up his ankles.

Staying outside for much longer was obviously not a great plan; identifying the issue, though, didn’t help him to come up with an immediate solution. He watched a thin cloud drift over the moon, blurring the sky momentarily before the wind pulled it apart. Like cotton candy, he thought, his stomach growling as the wispy shreds melted into darkness.

He could try a coffee shop, maybe. He’d brought his laptop; he could grab an espresso and a stale end-of-day muffin and get some additional work done. Or he could camp out in a bar for a while. Drown his sorrows in a few pints. Weave his way home, buying some earplugs and possibly an eye mask from a late night, aptly named convenience store. Anything would be better than sitting alone in the dark, with an occasional sweep of passing headlights illuminating his sorry state in brief, unforgiving flashes. At some point, the neighborhood watch would probably start twitching back their curtains, peering out at him and wondering which houses he planned to rob.

Wouldn’t that be an ideal way to meet Derek’s neighbors: lurking somewhere near his house, wearing dark clothes, with his hood pulled down nearly to his nose. He felt like a suspicious character. Mostly grumpy, though, and wishing he hadn’t told Scott it was totally cool to wine and dine Kira for the entire damn night. There would be rules established in future. Sex only permitted while Stiles was in class or otherwise occupied. Other forms of affection acceptable in small doses, with groping restricted to over-the-clothes touching whenever Stiles was within visual range.

Stiles was the furthest thing from a goddamn prude, but when a guy’s basically your brother, there are certain noises you never want to hear. Images you don’t want haunting you. It wasn’t that the two of them were deliberately flaunting their relationship; he could only imagine the horror on Kira’s face if she found out exactly how thin the walls really were and what dangers lay in bedroom doors that, like all the doors in their damn apartment, didn’t quite fit in the frame.

“I’ve seen things that can’t be unseen,” he told a leaf that’d tumbled carelessly into his lap. He could go back and do his best to sleep on the couch with a blanket pulled over his head, but the trauma from the last date night was still sharp.

He was still debating between coffee and alcohol when a familiar bark carried down the street. It could be any dog, of course, but he twisted to peer in the direction it’d come from, straining to pick a darker shape out of the shadows. He found two: that was Derek’s unmistakable form strolling a few steps behind a schnauzer who’d begun eagerly pulling at her leash.

Stiles stood, disrupting the leaves that’d been incrementally transforming him into part of the landscape, and pushed back his hood so he could make a quick attempt to ruffle his hair into something more presentable. He’d been making more of an effort since Derek had commented on it...
at the party. Since his casual touch had sent sparks cascading down Stiles’s spine. He’d spent the rest of the evening irresistibly drawn to Derek, seeking him out at every opportunity, unable to heed rational cautions.

Derek had been kind. Generous with his attention. Willing to overlook Stiles’s fumbling until their conversation eased into something more natural. And now here Stiles was, creeping in the literal shadows, never able to stop pushing past the point where a reasonable person would’ve been satisfied.

He came up with a dozen excuses for his presence while he waited for Derek to approach, but they were jarred loose in a disconnected tumble of vowels when Lola crashed happily into him.

“I’d apologize, but I think you must be used to her by now,” Derek said. He stood back, his body at ease, his clothing loose and soft in a way he only allowed outside of work.

“I don’t mind,” Stiles replied, as he always did. Lola’s nose was cold, and he steered her insistent face back to Derek so she’d press her warm fur against his legs instead. “You’re out later than usual,” he said, then bit at his lip.

Derek didn’t seem to notice the slip; maybe it wasn’t that abnormal to memorize someone’s schedule, when constancy and consistency were built into the fiber of that person’s being. “She doesn’t like the wind,” he said. “It stirs up the leaves and puts her on alert. She spends most of the walk startling, or snapping at what I assume she thinks are invisible creatures trying to attack her. I was hoping it’d die down if I waited. Save us both some stress.”

“I probably would’ve argued her side when I was a kid,” Stiles said, thumping gently over her ribs. “What a good guard dog you are, protecting Dr. Hale from the wind monsters.”

To Stiles’s surprise, Derek shuddered. “Please don’t make that sound like a legitimate possibility, or she’ll have to be satisfied with getting let out in the backyard at night. At least until we’re safely into November and done with all this.”

Stiles followed the arc of his gesture to a house down the block from where he’d been sitting. The porch light was flickering: an intentional effect, he realized once he took in the rest of the yard, smothered in thick cottony cobwebs. White sheets billowed from the trees, shifting eerily in response to the wind.

“You’re not a fan of Halloween,” he concluded.

“Never have been.”

“Not even trick-or-treating? The candy?”

“You can **buy** candy. I never liked the idea of collecting it from strangers. Or having them come to your house and bang on your door and threaten you for it.” Derek gave Stiles one of the silent appraisals that always preceded a tidbit of more personal information. “When I was young—maybe five or six—my mom hadn’t bought enough candy to last through all the trick-or-treaters, so we shut the lights off and watched TV in the den, with the volume turned almost all the way down.”

“We’ve done that before,” Stiles said, grinning at the memory of his mom tiptoeing around the house, both of them barely able to stifle their laughter at their increasingly elaborate attempts to outdo each other at being the most silent and spylke. His dad, who worked late most Halloweens, had come home to the sight of both of them crawling across the floor, pillows taped to their knees and elbows for maximum soundproofing. A couple of the pillowcases got ruined by the duct tape, but his
dad had simply shaken his head and retrieved extra cushions from the couch before joining them. It was one of the last good holidays they’d had with his mom.

Judging from the tight line of Derek’s jaw and his lowered eyebrows, his experience hadn’t led to a similarly positive outcome.

“You don’t have siblings, right?” Derek asked. He waited for Stiles to indicate he was correct; Stiles’s current irritation with Scott left him disinclined to make his usual disclaimer about family not always requiring a biological connection. “Well, my sister told me that if anyone else came to the door after the candy was gone, they could ask for anything they wanted, and the rules of Halloween meant we’d have to hand it over.”

“So kids could take your toys?” In all honesty, the idea appealed to him; as an elementary schooler, he would’ve taken advantage of that loophole to claim Jackson’s fully drivable miniature Batmobile, which was utterly wasted on an asswipe like him. Derek was shaking his head, though. “Wait, worse than that?”

“The witches come out after dark on Halloween,” Derek said, in what sounded like a paraphrased recitation of a story his sister had told him many years earlier. “You can trick them by wearing a costume, so they can’t tell if you’re a kid, or if you’re worth stealing. And if you’re too young to trick-or-treat, your candy supply keeps you safe at home. Once that runs out, if the witches knock at the door and ask for the youngest child in the house, the parents have to hand it over.”

“That is...diabolical,” Stiles said, with no small degree of awe, picturing a tiny, terrified version of Derek listening with wide eyes as his sister spun up the story.

“That’s Laura.” A soft smile crossed his face. “It’s ridiculous now, obviously, but I’ve always been freaked out by scary things. And since my younger sister wasn’t born yet, I was the one the witches would grab.”

“How long did you believe in that story?”

“For a lot longer than Santa. Fear’s easier to hang onto, so I believed Laura over my parents when it came to Halloween.”

“They’d tell you everything was fine, just to make you feel better. No matter what the truth was.”

Derek gave him another long, thoughtful look. “Yeah. I ran upstairs, locked myself in my room, and hid under my bed until they made Laura come apologize to me. She ended up promising that if the witches did show up, she’d give them candy from her trick-or-treating stash to make them go away. She had to promise the same thing every year until I was old enough to go door-to-door with her.”

“Is she like this with her kids now?” Stiles asked, caught between admiration and dismay, and Derek chuckled.

“My nieces are fearless. She’s got her hands full with those two. They don’t have a lot of their dad in them, other than the hair. They’re basically two mini Lauras, which serves her right for everything she did when she was a kid.”

“My dad always says he can’t wait to see how much his grandkids torment me. He also says to absolutely not count on him for babysitting duties if they do turn out like me.”

“You and Laura probably would’ve been two peas in a pod,” Derek said. He slapped at his thigh, and Lola moved back to his side. “You’re shivering. You headed somewhere?”
“Uh,” Stiles said. He’d nearly forgotten about the cold while he was talking to Derek, but his body twitched into a more violent shiver at the reminder. “I should be, yeah. I just hadn’t figured out where yet.”

Derek scrunched his eyebrows; Stiles had to admit that response hadn’t shed much light on his current circumstances. He tried again.

“I've been sexiled. Technically, I only had to leave our room, not the apartment, but they're really fucking loud. Heh. Doubly accurate. You wouldn't think it of Kira, but she gets into it. Points for enthusiasm. Zero possibility of me sitting through that without some mental scarring, though.” He broke off at the grimace chiseled into Derek’s handsome features.

Okay, from too little to definitely too much, shit, he'd plowed right past all those warning signs.

“Jesus, sorry, I completely forgot you know Kira. You know her parents.”

“She's an adult,” Derek said dismissively. “It’s not like I’m going to tell on her. But yes—I don’t need a play by play of what she does in her free time.”

“Who she does,” Stiles said, and snickered shamelessly at Derek’s exasperation. “Sorry, I really don’t want to think about it, either. We can move on. Forget I said anything. I’m just out for a walk. For my health.”

Derek cast a critical eye over their surroundings, probably taking in the long, silent street, devoid of anything to warrant a student wandering this direction when the other side of campus held all the well-frequented hangout spots. Stiles wrapped his arms over his chest, debating internally whether to flip his hood back up to shield his partially numb ears from the wind. It was starting to pick up again, and Lola jumped back, snapping her jaws at a clump of leaves that’d made a spiraling run at her paws.

Derek gave her a comforting pat, but instead of taking the opening to part ways, he fixed his gaze back on Stiles. “Have you eaten dinner?”

He hadn’t eaten anything substantial for most of the day, but he hadn’t thought his stomach had been that audible. It was a good suggestion, though, and a solid enough hint. It was about time for Derek and Lola to head home. “I guess I could stake out a table in a diner, yeah. Maybe a 24 hour one, if it’s not already clogged with midterms panic.”

Derek dipped his chin with a hint of a smile that brightened when he looked back up at Stiles. He was wearing sweatpants and a light long-sleeved shirt and had barely seemed to notice the cold as they were talking. Up close, though, Stiles could see pink tinting his ears and spreading in a soft, inviting flush across his cheekbones.

“No,” Derek said. “What I meant was the day got away from me, so I haven’t made dinner yet. There’ll be plenty to share, and you’re welcome to it. If you’re interested, that is; I don’t want to keep you.”

Stiles gaped at him. Was that—had he actually heard that right? Was Derek inviting him over? He scoffed, falling back on humor to keep from showing how hard his heart was hammering at the idea. “From shitty diner coffee and sticky tables I’ll have to peel my laptop off of? I think I can live without that.”

“That’s a yes, then?”

*What the fuck else would I say to you,* Stiles thought, but he went with a casual nod. “Yeah, sure. I
could go for that.”

“Great,” Derek said. “Let’s get you warmed up, then. You’re in luck; I’m only two blocks over.”

_Holy fuck_, Stiles thought, pacing his steps so he could watch the movement of Derek’s shoulders until he turned back to wait for Stiles to catch up.

Out of all the possibilities he’d envisioned for the rest of his dreary evening, this outcome hadn’t even entered his mind. Meeting Derek? Receiving an invitation to his goddamn house? The idea itself was too far outside the realm of possibility. He pinched himself to make sure he hadn’t fallen asleep on the bench. That was a thing, right? According to the books and movies he’d absorbed over the years, that usually happened during blizzards, when you were smothered by a thick blanket of snow, your limbs taking leave of you as your mind rose into an alternate, warmer landscape.

It wasn’t snowing, or anywhere close to it; he wasn’t dreaming.

And with Derek, Stiles was constantly learning, nothing was ever quite what you expected.

Chapter End Notes

_Next up:_ Derek makes dinner
Stiles was the kind of person who touched everything. Derek discovered as soon as he unlocked the front door and ushered him inside. Lola made a beeline for her water bowl and lapped thirstily at it, and Stiles followed her into the kitchen, trailing his hands along everything he passed: book spines, furniture, picture frames, the sleek black surface of the grand piano that, granted, dominated an entire corner of the living room and was hard to avoid.

Laura thought it was ostentatious: They make normal pianos, you know. Ones that would let you fit a second couch in here. You couldn’t even go with a baby grand? Rich, coming from someone who’d bought herself a Camaro when she passed the bar. Which she barely even drove but refused to sell; it was a near-permanent fixture in her garage, and Eliza was already dropping hints about her sixteenth birthday. Cute, but far-fetched. Laura might give her a car when she reached that milestone, but it sure as hell wouldn’t be the Camaro. By then, Eliza’s interests might have moved on to something flashier, anyway. Something bright and new that her friends would envy and her mother would hypocritically call a safety hazard.

At least it’s not a concert piano, Derek had pointed out, receiving a patented Hale eyeroll before Laura dropped it. Maybe she knew in advance what he would say and hadn’t wanted to hear the rest.

He’d measured everything to be sure it’d fit; he’d then arranged the rest of his furniture around the piano, achieving what was, to him, the desired effect. Once or twice a year, his house felt crowded, overstuffed with family who sometimes ran out of seating. It still worked, though. The kids would take over the rug in front of the fireplace, elbowing at each other and turning the shaggy fibers into a forest, or a prairie, or the surface of the moon. He’d move in a chair from the dining room and relinquish the couch to his sisters and Rob. That was the most packed it ever got. So far, Cora hadn’t brought anyone to meet the family, and neither had he.

Why invest in a piece of furniture that’d sit empty for the majority of the year? He didn’t pose this question to Laura; he could anticipate the downturn of her lips, the worry that’d crease her forehead if she thought he was hinting at some gaping hole in his life. He wasn’t. He liked his space the way it was. He liked coming home to everything just as he’d left it, knowing that no one had finished his leftovers, rearranged his toiletries, put the silverware in the wrong drawer.

What would Laura say now, though? How would she respond to the sight of Stiles examining all the magnets on Derek’s fridge and opening the freezer to poke his nose inside?

With anyone else, Derek’s hackles might’ve risen at the blatant investigation of all the corners of his life he normally kept out of view.

With Stiles, though, he found he didn’t mind. He basked in the friendly curiosity instead, each touch feeling like approval. Like Stiles was interested in Derek. In—well, in his house. Like he was eager to embrace being permitted into the parts of Derek’s life that others didn’t get to see.

“Grab the chicken out of the fridge while you’re in there,” he said, and Stiles startled as though he hadn’t even realized how visibly nosy he was being.

“Sorry, habit,” Stiles said, shutting the freezer door and rummaging through the contents of the fridge. “I’m so used to student housing now, being in a real house for a change made me feel like I
was back in Beacon Hills for a second. The way I grew up, my friends’ houses were basically alternate homes.”

“Scott’s?”

“Yeah, and Lydia’s, once things stopped being weird between us. And Heather’s—she was one of my best friends before she moved. Her mom used to babysit me when my mom—” His shoulders disappeared most of the way into the fridge, his voice muffled. He reemerged, frowning. “Anyway, I spent a lot of time with my dad’s deputies after that. Bouncing around to whoever had an afternoon off when my dad was on shift. Turned me into a nosy little shit, I guess. Your fridge is better stocked than most of theirs, though, I gotta say. I don’t even recognize some of this stuff.”

“Look in the meat drawer on the bottom,” Derek said, and Stiles dove back in to retrieve the chicken Derek had left to defrost overnight.

Derek moved to the pantry, touching Stiles gently on the back to let him know he was passing behind him, and pulled the rest of the ingredients off the shelves. Flour, olive oil, chicken broth, and spices. A box of couscous and a bag of shallots that he opened and checked over; he’d only bought them a few days earlier, but he didn’t take as much time to examine the produce when he knew Lola was waiting for him to return from the store.

“Got it,” Stiles said. “Anything else?”

“There’s a fruit basket on top of the counter; we’ll need either one big lemon, or two smaller ones.”

“One giant lemon, coming up.”

Derek heard the sink running, then a few drawers sliding open, one after the other. When he finished gathering what he needed and set his armload on the counter, he found Stiles waiting with a cutting board, a sharp knife, a measuring cup, and a citrus squeezer that Derek had forgotten he owned. A Christmas present from Rob’s parents, probably; they lived as far north as you could get without crossing the Canadian border, tried to convince Rob and Laura to spend every holiday with them, and seemed to absorb very little information about Derek, other than the fact that he liked to cook.

“We won’t need that,” he said, replacing the lemon press with the shallots, which he indicated Stiles should start peeling. He unbuckled his watch and switched places so he could wash his hands and dry them on a schnauzer-patterned towel Emma had insisted on sending him after the first time she and her sister had Skyped with Lola. Christmas this year was likely to produce much of the same, unless he explicitly told Laura to steer her kids away from themed gifts.

“We're not juicing the lemon?”

“We are,” Derek said, jutting his chin in the direction of Stiles’s big hands and sinewy forearms. “You’re plenty strong enough to squeeze it bare-handed. Those kinds of gadgets are hell to clean; they’re only time saving if you don’t factor in scraping out all the pulp.”

Stiles’s throat bobbed, and Derek lost himself for a moment in following the flush that was streaking down under the neckline of his hoodie.

“I forgot to ask,” he said, shaking himself out of it before he made Stiles feel awkward in his home. “Do you have any allergies? Food restrictions or preferences I should know about before we get too far into this?”

“I’m open to trying everything,” Stiles said.
“How about dates?”

Stiles blinked at him, his lashes long, dark, and distracting. “What?” he asked, pausing in his work.

“Dates,” Derek said again. “Do you like them? Or—have you never had them?”

Stiles’s flush deepened, and he ripped a stubborn patch free from the shallot he was still holding. “I’ve been on dates, yeah. If you’re asking about recently…”

“Jesus, no, sorry,” Derek said, snipping that dangerous thread before Stiles carried it to a conclusion he didn’t want to hear. It was probably rude to cut him off, but as curious as he had to admit to being about Stiles’s romantic history, he didn’t think he could handle Stiles’s particular brand of frankness on that topic. Derek took a few steps back and dug into the fridge, then presented Stiles with a flat plastic container of the fruit. “I wasn’t prying into your dating life; I was talking about these. I’m making a moroccan chicken dish, and I could leave them out, or add less, if you’re not a fan.”

“Oh,” Stiles said in a relieved exhale. He popped open the package and sniffed at the contents. “No, okay, that’s a much different question than—yeah, I haven’t had these before. Are they like figs? Because I do kinda hate figs. Mostly the texture, with those disgusting slimy seeds. You know what they make me think of? Kiwi. My mom used to try to trick me into eating those by telling me they were radioactive alien fruit, but I wasn’t buying it. *Not* worth the chance at superpowers.”

Always in past tense, Derek noted, fragments of his mom’s memories tucked away before he shared too much with someone he didn’t know all that well. It made him want to say something to bridge that gap. *I understand*, maybe, or *I lost my mom, too. I miss her every day.*

Instead, he sliced one of the dates in half so Stiles could see the interior. “No seeds or slime; it’s dense and sweet. I love them, but I know not all tastebuds are the same. I caught my niece trying to stuff hers down a floor vent when I added them to a different dish the last time they were here. And Cora’s not a huge fan, either. She’s more of a savory person.”

“I promise to not destroy your heating system if I don’t like them,” Stiles said, crossing his heart elaborately. “But yeah, sure, I’ll give them a try.”

They finished the rest of the preparations in an easy, shared silence, broken only by Derek’s instructions, occasional questions from Stiles, and the intermittent squeak of a toy Lola had dragged out to chew on as they worked. Once the pots were simmering, spices already warming the air, Derek nudged Stiles out of the kitchen.

“It’ll be a while until we’re ready for the next step. Go make yourself comfortable while I do the dishes. You can take your shoes off if you want.”

He heard a stray chord of his dad’s voice echoing through his: *take your shoes off and stay a while,* he’d always say in an exaggerated drawl when they had visitors. It was his dad he had to thank for any culinary talents he could be said to possess. His mom had been an exceptional businesswoman who cycled through three dishes whenever it was her turn to cook; Derek’s dad had experimented with recipes, letting Derek drag a stepstool into the kitchen so he could act as sous-chef and official taste-tester.

He hadn’t felt that kind of quiet camaraderie in years, which was probably why his guards were dropping with Stiles at his side. He snorted softly at the thought. Stiles didn’t remind him of his dad in looks, build, or any aspect of his personality, really. If anything, it was the sense of underlying strength, of a deep-rooted honesty and steadiness of character that you might miss if you only paid attention to Stiles’s rapid-fire speech patterns and occasionally over-the-top body language.
It felt right, having him here; at least until he saw Stiles staring down at his feet, then rubbing the toe of one shoe against his pants leg. “I don’t, uh,” Stiles said, everything in his body language suddenly screaming discomfort.

Derek quickly replayed what he’d said, sifting through for what he’d done wrong. Make yourself comfortable, he repeated to himself with a wince. It wasn’t why don’t you go slip into something more comfortable, but it’d clearly been close enough to a pickup line, and he’d dropped it on Stiles without thinking. He’d been doing a lot of that tonight: not thinking through the repercussions of his actions. He’d acted on instinct and against all logic in bringing Stiles into his home. He’d just thought...he hadn’t wanted it to end. He never wanted their conversations to stop, and tonight was no exception. He’d lingered outside for as long as he could, hanging on Stiles’s stories, jumping in with his own to keep Stiles from checking his phone or coming up with an excuse to be on his way.

I’m a selfish asshole, Derek thought, the words bubbling unbidden into his mind. Jennifer had told him that more than once over the course of their relationship. Not in those precise terms, of course: her words were honeyed, the venom masked by enticing kisses as she coaxed his body into responding to her, her breath hot in his ear, her nails sharp against his skin. The slippery criticisms were always mixed with enough praise to slide down his throat and fester painfully in his stomach.

After she’d left him, he’d done his best to banish the insidious self-doubts, but her parting words had felt like a brand. Be honest, Derek, she’d said the last time he’d seen her, stopping by her new office even though he’d been warned against doing so. If you’d known I was up for the same position, wouldn’t you have done the same? You act like such a sad little wounded saint, but you only want what’s good for you. Look at how miserable you are because I got what you wanted; how can you claim you loved me when you’re not even happy about my success? Admit it: you were using me, too. You just weren’t as good at it.

Laura would’ve insisted that was bullshit, if he’d ever told her more than the bare minimum of what’d happened between the two of them. He knew it was; he knew he wasn’t the kind of person Jennifer had done her best to twist him into believing he’d become. He hated that she could still get to him, all these years later, long after she’d probably forgotten about his existence. He hated that for the briefest flash, he’d seen her eyes instead of Stiles’s.

Stiles, who was flesh and blood and not a phantom. Who was standing in Derek’s dining room in baggier jeans than usual, gnawing on the string of a hoodie that’d gone through the wash with a leftover splash of bleach at least once. Who made Derek’s heart do inexplicable things, like it was trying to shove its way out of his chest to land in Stiles’s capable hands.

“You don’t have to,” Derek said, dragging himself out of the past and trying to lighten the comment to chase away any hint of an accidental come-on. “I don’t have a no shoes rule in the house; that’s one advantage of hardwood floors. Easier to clean.”

No matter what his subconscious was playing at, he hadn’t brought Stiles into his house with any ulterior motives. He imagined relating this line of thinking to Noshiko—worse, to her boss. He’d wanted to talk to Stiles, that was all. He’d wanted him to stop shivering; it was barely dipping below fifty outside, but Stiles clearly didn’t run as hot as Derek did, or deal as well with chillier temperatures. Stiles had said yes. He’d accompanied Derek of his own volition. But that was the crux of the inequalities in their relationship, wasn’t it? He had to be careful. He couldn’t be certain that Stiles meant it, that he hadn’t felt pressured, when he didn’t really know Derek. When he had no idea that Derek would sooner cut off one of his own limbs than engage in manipulative power plays with his job.

Derek hadn’t always been a pessimistic person. At his core, he still wasn’t, his innate optimism
shooting tendrils up through the layers of caution he’d packed over it. Those stubborn green shoots had been multiplying in response to Stiles, wrapping into a stable base for a soft-petaled bud that’d started to slowly, cautiously unfold.

He felt it begin to wilt, and he twisted on the hot water, watching the soapsuds foam over the dishes he’d stacked in the sink. Jennifer wasn’t right about him. She wasn’t. He knew that, but Stiles...

“Tara had a shoe rack by the door for visitors,” Stiles said, the awkward tenseness in his shoulders relaxing, but not quite gone yet. “She’s one of my dad’s deputies; been there forever. She watched me more than pretty much anyone else. She’s one of the nicest people I’ve ever known, but it drove her crazy how much dirt I was always managing to track in, even with my shoes off.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Derek said, but Stiles shook his head.

“No, I know. I just—I’m about to tell you something embarrassing, and I wanted to—put it in perspective, I guess. I was kind of a mess when I was a kid, but I’ve grown out of it. Even Tara would tell you that I’m a perfectly respectable houseguest nowadays. Have been, for years.”

“Oh,” Derek said, switching the water off and fixing his attention on Stiles.

“And of course you’re going to—” Stiles exhaled in frustration and tugged at the strings of his hoodie. “I’m not wearing socks, okay? That’s why I don’t want to take my shoes off. And it’s not like, some hipster fashion statement, or shoes where you’re supposed to be able to get away with that, although now I’m thinking I should invest in some of those. Or, y’know, in another bag or two of socks so I don’t wind up looking like an idiot in someone’s house because I’m super behind in doing my laundry.”

Derek’s lips twitched, and the vines strengthened, lifting the bud back into the light. “Okay,” he said again.

Stiles threw his hands up. “That’s it? Okay??”

“Did you not notice that I’m barefoot?”

“I noticed,” Stiles said, his eyes glittering dangerously, his chin jutting in irritation over Derek’s lack of—disgust? Was that what he was looking for? Disapproval, over someone going out on his own at night, not expecting to bump into anyone, and wearing whatever he’d grabbed on his way out the door?

“If you don’t care, I don’t care. If I’d realized you were so offended by the sight of toes, I would’ve left my socks on when I came inside.”

“I’m not—” Stiles clapped his mouth shut, glared at Derek, and kicked his shoes off, bending quickly to grab them. “I’m going to put these by the door,” he said, pointing adamantly at Derek. “And then I’m going to look at your DVD collection.”

“Blu-rays,” Derek said, picking up a dishcloth. It was pedantic, but he wasn’t that old. And they had better featurettes, which was his favorite part of movies, anyway. “You can put something on if you want?”

“Depends on what I find,” Stiles said, reappearing and perching on a barstool instead of following through with his threat. “I like this open layout. I might do my dishes more often if I was facing the TV instead of a wall.”

“Same with a washing machine?” Derek kept his face ducked down as he scrubbed at the cutting
board, but he couldn’t resist peeking up at Stiles, whose expression—a mixture of offense and amusement—was absolutely worth the mild dig.

“You’re an asshole,” Stiles said, sounding like himself again, and Derek grinned quietly into the sink. That was the thing about Stiles: he didn’t hide crucial aspects of himself. He didn’t pretend to be someone he wasn’t, or try to trick Derek into seeing him differently. He just was. And Derek couldn’t help being drawn to that quality in him.

“I’ve been told that,” Derek replied. The word felt different in Stiles’s mouth than when it was ricocheting around in Derek’s head, or even when he and Laura bandied it about. He wouldn’t go so far as to call it affection, but there was a rough tease to it that Derek, for better or worse, responded to.

Stiles pulled a fat peach out of the fruit basket and rolled it in his hands, rubbing absently at the soft fuzz. “I’m taking my story back. It was a hipster statement. I’m basically living in Portland; I’m all kinds of hipster. Like—what the fuck do they do, anyway? Wear wooden sunglasses? Drink cold brew coffee? Go bird watching? I do have a lot of flannel shirts.”

Derek laughed and wiped down the sink as the water drained. “Do you wanna borrow a pair while you’re here? Or I can crank the heat up some if you’re still cold.”

“I assume you mean socks and not fancy sunglasses,” Stiles said. He stroked a thoughtful finger down the curved surface of the fruit. “Can we pretend I said something really tough and impressive and you talked me into taking you up on it? Because frankly, I have no idea how you’ve been wandering around like that. It makes me want to put on five more sweaters.”

“It’s not that cold,” Derek said automatically, then softened the assertion in response to the dark look Stiles shot at him. “For me it’s not; you shouldn’t feel bad about needing to put on extra layers. I spent my college years in the Northeast. The first winter was brutal—well, it was fun, actually, until it didn’t stop, and then it was unbearable. But after that, you get used to it. Trial by fire. Or...ice, I guess.” He stacked the dishes that didn’t need handwashing into the dishwasher and shut the door; he’d wait to run it until after they’d eaten, or possibly in the morning.

“That’s what Lydia always says.” Stiles tossed the peach into the basket, then lunged for it when it bounced back out. “Whoops, sorry. Barely bruised; practically good as new.”

“Lydia’s your ex?” he asked casually, trying not to feel relieved when Stiles snorted.

“Middle school me would’ve loved that vote of confidence, but no. She’s my best friend, other than Scott. She’s at MIT, and she hates it. The weather, not the school, although I think that’s probably true sometimes, too.”

“I know the feeling.” Derek moved to the stove and lifted the lid off the simmering pot, releasing a cloud of spice-thick steam. He gave the contents a quick stir before replacing the lid and reducing the heat slightly.

“Do you miss it?” Stiles was rubbing his thumb along the edge of the marble counter, not looking at Derek.

“The winters, or Princeton?”

“If you have an answer for both, then yeah. I’m mostly wondering...do you regret leaving? Are you glad you ended up here?”

That was a thorny question; Derek didn’t know how to answer. He didn’t want to toss off the rote
lines he used with colleagues or at conferences. Complete disclosure was out of the question, though.

“Sometimes,” he settled on. It addressed both; while it summed things up for him, he knew Stiles would be dissatisfied, so he pressed on. “I loved Princeton. It was everything I thought I'd ever wanted. And Laura was at Columbia, and then at a firm in the city, so it was nice to be living near her.” He hadn’t seen her that often, their usually conflicting and absurdly busy schedules taking priority, but it helped to have her that close in case he ever did need her.

She’d never even met Jennifer while they were dating. That probably should’ve been an early warning sign, but Derek had seen it as a mark of Jennifer’s impressive work ethic, rather than an unwillingness to interact with his family or to spend time with anyone who was important to him. She’d effectively distanced him from the few friends who’d stayed in the area, convincing him night after night that she mattered more. That it was selfish and borderline cruel to go out without her, even though she'd disappear for long stretches of time, claiming to be working late on projects she wasn't yet ready to share with him.

That’d been one of her rare truths, in the end. Her project had succeeded. He'd lost what, at the time, felt like everything.

“Family’s important,” Stiles agreed. “I can't imagine being that far from my dad. Or Scott, even when he's being a horrible Casanova and I hate him.”

“Occasionally hating your family’s part of the deal.” Derek readjusted the fruit so their positions would be less precarious; he didn't need an avocado toppling onto the floor and Lola deciding it was a new toy that’d been dropped there for her to chase. “Laura’s been my nemesis and my best friend my whole life. So when I left...it was hard, for a while.”

Eliza was only a year old at the time; although he’d stayed in touch as much as possible, he’d missed out on watching her and Emma grow up. He hadn’t been able to help Laura work through the decision of whether to move out of the city. She’d claimed it wouldn’t have made a difference, but he wasn’t sure that was true. If he’d been able to find a position near her, would she have still agreed to leave? She’d loved it there. She liked the bustle, the twenty-four-hour nightlife, the melting pot culture, and the prestige of the cases her firm managed. But Rob’s position in the public defender’s office had gotten precarious, and their studio had started to feel too small for a couple trying to raise a child. In Syracuse, they had a house with a big yard, decent jobs, and a minimal decrease in the pressure Rob’s parents had been putting on them for years. Laura had refused to even consider Buffalo, but in good weather, they were only a couple hours’ drive away, so it’d been a reasonable compromise in her eyes.

Good weather was a rarity, though. Those kids were growing up with an understanding of cold that Stiles could probably never fathom.

Stiles reached for Derek’s wristwatch, which he’d left lying on the counter while they cooked. He ran his fingers over the glass face and along the soft leather band and rolled up his sleeves so he could drape it over his wrist, testing the fit. “Would she ever move out here?”

“I doubt it. We’ve talked about it, but she has a life there. Maybe if Cora and I were in the same place, but even then...at a certain point, you transfer loyalties to your new family. She can’t uproot Rob and the kids if it’s not the best move for all of them.”

Stiles grimaced at the thought but didn’t argue the point. His family was even smaller than Derek’s; it must gall him to envision a future where he might have to choose between a spouse and his dad. At the same time, though, his dad would be reaching retirement age sooner than Derek’s sisters would. It might not be as challenging to convince him to move to wherever Stiles ended up. Would it be
helpful to say that, though? He didn’t know enough about Stiles’s life to presume that his input would be welcome.

Stiles, though, had fewer inhibitions about prying into personal matters. “What made you choose this, then? If you loved Princeton so much, why didn’t you stay on the East Coast?” he asked, adjusting the watch that he’d succeeded in fastening. It looked good on him; it drew even more attention to his wrists and to the ropy strength of his forearms. Not that it was necessary; Derek had never experienced such an overwhelming attraction to someone’s hands before. He felt his nostrils flare as he inhaled sharply, telling himself that he needed to stop imagining how they’d feel on him. It wasn’t limited to that, though; every part of Stiles was hypnotizing, down to the quick working of his impossibly clever brain. He wanted, fuck, he wanted it all, but under no circumstances could he have any of that. He shouldn’t even be thinking about it.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles said, picking up on Derek’s pained reaction but, thankfully, not on the true reason for it. “I have a really bad habit of prying way too much. Curse of growing up as a cop’s kid, with easy access to all of his files.” He rubbed at his nose and coughed innocently. “Not strictly legal access, and my dad wasn’t aware of it until I was a lot older, but that’s not the point. You gotta get used to telling me to knock it off; that’s what all my friends’ve learned to do.”

“I don’t want you to knock it off,” Derek said. “I might not answer everything, but I’ve told you before I don’t get offended by questions. I like that you don’t step on eggshells around me.”

“That’s a dangerous thing to tell me,” Stiles said, the corners of his lips curving up.

“I can handle it,” he replied, his heart giving a treacherous thump at the glint in Stiles’s eyes. Dangerous ground indeed; he did need to make an effort to steer into safer waters. “There’s a longer story I can’t tell you right now. The short version is that you don’t always get what you want in life. Sometimes you take the choices that’re available to you.”

Stiles squinted thoughtfully at him, searching for the darker secrets Derek wasn’t revealing. “Lydia wanted me to join her at MIT,” he said, instead of attempting to skirt around the flimsy blockade Derek had set in the road.

“Were you considering it?”

Stiles fiddled with the watchband. “I thought about it. I got in, and Lydia warned me I’d be throwing a wrench in my future if I didn’t go with the best possible school. It took her a while to forgive me.”

“What made you decide against it?”

He let out a long breath. “A lot of things. The distance. The weather. The fact that as much as I love Lydia, I didn’t like the idea of living in her shadow and trying to latch onto whatever friends she’d already made after her first year there.”

“Oh,” Derek said. “I didn’t realize she’s older than you are.”

“She’s not.”

“She skipped a grade?”

Stiles unfastened the watch and set it back down, his eyes carefully fixed on the counter. “I fell behind one. Took seventh grade twice.”

“Now I’m the one prying,” Derek said apologetically.
“No, it’s okay. I don’t like talking about it, but it’s not—I don’t want you to think I was stupid or something. It was life stuff. Things happen, and when you’re a kid, you don’t always deal with them as well as you could.”

His mom, Derek thought, connecting all the hints Stiles had been dropping since they’d met. He must’ve lost her when he was only eleven or twelve years old.

“Anyway, it wasn’t so bad. It meant I got to be in class with Scott and graduate with him; I couldn’t really complain about that.”

“You and Scott grew up together, then? Outside of school? You’ve said you’ve known him your whole life.”

Stiles nodded. “Friends from birth, pretty much. Melissa—Scott’s mom—was my mom’s nurse. I was a preemie, so my mom’s doctor was on vacation that week, and she had to go with a last-minute switch. But Melissa had been there the whole time, from her first appointment, and my mom always said she couldn’t have done it without her.” His lips flattened out, and he made several attempts to bring them back into an approximation of a smile before giving up. “I was difficult even then, I guess. But they were joined at the hip after that, as my mom always put it. She was in the hospital room, holding Melissa’s hand, when Scott was born. Scott’s dad was—well, he wasn’t there. Couldn’t get away from the team during championship games.”

Coach McCall, who’d been taken to jail by Stiles’s dad. More pieces clicked into place, forming a portrait of an extended family that stretched past blood and into the bonds that formed when people stood by you during difficult times. Maybe Stiles’s family wasn’t smaller than Derek’s. It was just constructed differently.

You’d be lucky to be connected to a Stilinski, he thought, and curled his fingers against his leg so he wouldn’t reach for Stiles’s hand.

“So that’s my story,” Stiles said brightly, straightening on the stool and pushing off from the counter. “And that’s how I ended up here. I think it turned out okay, all things considered.”

I’m glad, Derek thought. I’m glad you made the choices you did, because it meant I got to meet you.

“I forgot your socks,” he said. “I’ll go grab you a pair.”

Lola lifted her head from her chew toy when he walked past her, but she didn’t follow. Their walk, shortened by her wind-fueled anxiety, hadn’t been strenuous enough to tire her out, but she’d been quiet and settled since they’d gotten home, content to bask in their presence without getting underfoot.

It probably felt right to her, too. Like having Stiles in their home was the natural state of things, the outcome she’d been expecting since she’d met and fallen in love with him.

Derek slid open his dresser drawer and selected a soft grey pair that Laura had bought for him after her failed attempts at knitting had resulted in uneven lengths of yarn that she couldn’t figure out how to turn into socks or baby-sized hats. “You can pretend I made these,” she’d said when he’d unwrapped them at Christmas.

“Not where you thought you’d end up, huh?” he said quietly.

He didn’t know if he was addressing himself or the socks, but he was tired of wading through a bog of self-evaluation and baseless recrimination. Stiles was here, Derek was making him dinner, and that’s all there was to it. Feelings happened sometimes, but part of maturity was knowing how to deal
with them without acting on them.

So why not enjoy it while it lasted? Set the feelings aside and indulge in an evening of the kind of conversation with Stiles that he always craved. Things would go back to normal after that—if not tomorrow, by the end of the year, when their lives would turn a page and Stiles would move on.

For now, he was here, and Derek was grateful.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles discovers hidden talents
Once Derek was out of sight, Stiles dug out his phone and turned on all caps to type a hurried message.

**AM IN DEREK HALE’S HOUSE. NOT A DRILL. FUCKING SCORE!!!!!**

He wanted to tell everyone he’d ever met. He wanted to climb on top of Derek’s roof and shout it down the quiet street until all the lights along the block flipped on. He wanted to take out an ad on the local news and hire a skywriter.

He deleted the text without sending it and slid his phone face down across the counter.

Scott didn’t even know about the walks that had now turned into a semi-regular occurrence. Lydia had no idea how often he and Derek talked, or how in-depth those conversations had become. Kira had never picked up the slightest hint that he was interested in his professor. And his dad...well, they never talked about relationships, anyway. He mostly checked in with Stiles to be sure he was sleeping and eating and not hacking remotely into the Beacon Hills Sheriff’s Department database for reassurance that his dad wasn’t overworking himself.

Derek had never asked Stiles to keep their interactions quiet. There was nothing to hide, no secrets that Stiles needed to keep safe. Hell, Scott spent as much one-on-one time with Deaton, if not more, since he was both Scott’s mentor and his boss at the vet clinic where Deaton was part-owner. So it wasn’t the mere fact that Stiles was getting to know his professor outside of the classroom; he was fairly certain Kira, for one, would have been delighted by the discovery, subsequently roping him into whatever hangout plans she formed with Derek.

Maybe that was why. Once he brought in other people, the dynamic would shift. He’d see Kira making Derek laugh. He’d listen as Derek patiently drew out information about Scott’s career ambitions. He’d be forced to face the stark reality that he probably wasn’t all that special to Derek. That even being in his house right now wasn’t as big of a deal as it seemed.

Stiles was no stranger to accepting harsh truths. His mom, Scott’s dad, the gritty world his own dad had unintentionally exposed him to by turning his station into a childcare center and his deputies into babysitters: it’d all led to Stiles facing a color-drained landscape, abruptly stripped of all the magic his mom had encouraged him to believe in. He’d grown up quickly after his mom’s death. Grief aged you in unexpected ways. It showed more on his dad, but it’d had an equal, if less visible, impact on Stiles. He was supposed to stay a kid. He was supposed to go to school, do his homework, come up with a science project, and start his first tentative forays into dating.

None of it had mattered. What was the point, when his mom could be there one day and gone the next, and everyone else acted like nothing had changed.

Or when Tara got shot on duty six months later—a domestic dispute that had escalated too quickly for backup to arrive—and Stiles spent another terrified night in a stiff hospital chair, waiting to hear if he was going to lose her, too. It turned out it’d been a clean shot, in and out with no lasting damage and only requiring minor surgical repair. Melissa had found him huddled in an out-of-the-way waiting room, skinny arms wrapped around his legs, his face pressed against his knees. She’d called his dad, who’d been frantically searching for him, not knowing that Stiles had been listening to the
police scanner when the call had come in.

You could lose anyone, at any time. Their heartbeat might flatline while you sit by their bed, holding their cold hand. They might be pushed, swearing and spewing threats, into the back of a sheriff’s cruiser. They might knock on a door, expecting to subdue a routine noise complaint, and be met by the flash of a gun, the searing punch of a bullet tearing through flesh.

They might move away and stop writing to you. They might start dating someone and gradually readjust their priorities, sidelining you without meaning to. They might kiss you at a party, fuck you in a room upstairs, and leave without even telling you their name.

They might treat you like you matter, like you’re someone important, like you’re valuable to a degree you’ve never really felt before. That was the worst of all. Because the inevitable outcome was the recoil when they discovered how you really saw them, what you wanted from them—the desires they’d had no idea you were harboring and that they’d never considered returning.

Stiles had swallowed a lot of bitter pills in his life. This was one he had no intention of taking until his mouth was pried open and it was shoved down his throat.

For now, he wanted to keep this—keep Derek—to himself. To cherish their time. To let himself believe, at least for a little while, that he meant something to Derek. That something about him was special.

The fucked up part was that he actually did believe it. Derek trusted him; there were stories he was holding back, secrets he wasn’t telling, but that was a mark of someone who valued his privacy, who didn’t invite just anyone into his home, who only shared parts of himself if he meant it. Who talked about his sisters like they were people Stiles might someday get to meet.

Fuck, Stiles thought, scrubbing at his face. Where the hell was Derek with the socks? He was getting maudlin. He was lightheaded and tired and hungry and so goddamn emotional because for the first time in nine years, he’d wanted to talk to someone about his mom. Someone who hadn’t known her, who didn’t have a history with Stiles that stretched back to the time when he went to school in homemade superhero costumes for the entire month of October, because Halloween shouldn’t be restricted to a single day.

He wanted to tell Derek about that, about his mother nodding in agreement and teaching him easier stitches on the sewing machine so he could help to craft his vision. He wanted to introduce Derek to the mother he remembered: the beautiful, always laughing woman who’d told him Polish fairy tales, who’d made his dad glow with happiness, who’d turned life into some sort of marvelous game that they were always one tiny step away from winning.

Lola’s collar jangled as she heard Derek approaching, and Stiles spun casually on the stool to face the hallway.

“ Took you long enough, ” he said, injecting cheer into his voice. The smile that followed was real, though, a helpless response that he had to struggle to hold back whenever he saw Derek. “ I was starting to think you were playing me with all your claims of clean laundry. You had to wash those, didn’t you, after making fun of me for my cleaning habits. ”

Derek tossed a wad of grey wool at him, and Stiles grabbed it out of the air, his old lacrosse instincts kicking in. “ The laundry room’s not by the bedrooms; it’s the door next to the pantry, but nice try. And these are ones I’ve never actually worn, so you can be sure they’re clean. ”

“ Ughhh, ” Stiles groaned happily as he pulled them on. “ God, that feels good. I think this is the nicest
Derek responded with one of his infuriatingly husky chuckles, which frankly did as much to warm Stiles. “I’ll tell Laura that. She’ll probably ship you a dozen pairs and then disown me for giving away my presents.”

Stiles rubbed the sides of his feet together. He’d only been half-joking about taking them home; they really were the softest, coziest foot blankets. This must be what it felt like when you put a cloth over a bird’s cage, or blinders on a skittish horse. Or maybe it was just Derek’s goddamned perfect smile that was making him feel so at ease.

“I’m sorry dinner’s taking so long to cook,” Derek added. “I hadn’t really thought about the prep time for this recipe; you must be starving.”

Stiles flattened his hand against his stomach, which was rumbling now that they were talking about food again. “It smells amazing. Honestly, at this point, I’m about ready to start licking the air.”

“I don’t think that’d help much,” Derek said. “It doesn’t really go with the meal, but if you want something to tide you over, I did pick up a fresh baguette from the farmer’s market earlier today. And there’s an artichoke-spinach dip I haven’t tried yet.”

“I can wait,” Stiles said, but Derek arched a disbelieving eyebrow at him and pulled a bread knife out of the block on the counter. “Or I can grab the dip while you’re doing that.” He hopped off the stool and went back to the fridge, this time with a slightly better understanding of Derek’s organizational system.

He plopped the container onto the edge of the cutting board and reached around Derek to snag one of the slices and drag it through the creamy mixture. He made another approving noise, and Derek used the flat of the knife to push a neatly sliced row closer to him.

“You sound like you’ve never eaten bread before, or is this how you respond to everything you put in your mouth?”

Stiles, in a state of bliss from Derek’s proximity and the mouthful of food, merely shoved in another slice and winked at him.

Derek abruptly shook the rest of the baguette back into its bag and folded the edge over, setting it aside. Stiles eyed it mournfully, but he was too busy chewing to explain that no amount of pre-dinner food was going to ruin his appetite.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Derek asked. He hesitated, his fingers brushing the surface of a bottle in his wine rack. “Water?” he ventured.

“I’m twenty-one,” Stiles said after sucking a stray bit of dip from his thumb. “If that’s why you’re being weird about offering me wine. I’m legal as legal can be. Turning twenty-two in a few months, even.”

Derek seemed about to say something, but he turned back to the bottles, twisting a few of them to check the labels. “Do you have a preference? I’m leaning toward a zinfandel, unless you don’t like reds.”

“Red’s fine with me. I defer to your judgment on wine pairings. Scott and I still drink disgusting cheap beer. Emphasis on cheap, not on us having less developed tastebuds.”

Derek smoothly uncorked the bottle and poured a modest amount into two wide-bowled glasses.
“I’m no expert,” he warned, indicating Stiles should take whichever glass he wanted. “I’m sure I’m committing wine travesties left and right. I go with what I like and probably get it badly wrong at least half the time.”

“My kinda guy,” Stiles said, lifting his glass to clink it against Derek’s. “You’re probably just trying to make me feel better about my ignorance, but I appreciate the effort.”

“I’m really not.” Derek set his glass down after swirling the wine and taking a small sip. “Cora’s a sommelier. I have to let her make all the choices when she’s around, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“In that case, I’d better never meet her. I can picture how well that would go.” The wine was on the fruitier side, slightly spicy, warming his throat as he swallowed, and Stiles couldn’t imagine anything that would tip him over into a deeper level of contentment than what he was feeling right then.

But Derek wasn’t having any of that. “She’d like you, actually. She’d pretend not to, at first, because she takes a while to warm up to people—she’s the least social of all of us and claims she hates everyone—but she’d definitely get along with you.”

“I dunno,” Stiles said dubiously. “I don’t make great first impressions.”

“You’ve said that. I haven’t found it to be true.”

Stiles tipped more wine into his mouth so he wouldn’t snap back with something like I don’t understand why you have so much faith in me or You can keep saying nice things; I swear I’ll keep my cool.

The latter was almost certainly a lie, so it was better to not make a promise he’d immediately break.

Lola leveraged herself to her feet, tired of her toy; its steady squeaking had faded into low, fitful grumbles as she wore out whatever squeezable insert had been sewed into the stuffed creature’s torso. She snuffled hopefully along the floor in case either of them had dropped food, then butted her head affectionately against Derek’s legs before dunking her whiskery chin into her water bowl.

“Water fountain,” Stiles said, and Derek glanced at him. He’d removed the couscous, starting another round of fluffing and steaming, while Stiles finished the rest of the bread Derek had barely touched. Stiles pointed at Lola with a dip-heavy slice. “Her water bowl. I didn’t notice it earlier; I heard it, but I thought you just had one of those little mood fountain things trickling somewhere.”

“It was one of the suggestions I came across when I was making a list of what to buy before I brought her home. The noise helps her find it, and I think she uses it as a marker to tell which part of the house she’s in.”

“She definitely knows her way around,” Stiles said, watching as she unhesitatingly crossed the dining room to jump onto her bed, nosing around for what turned out to be a less thoroughly-chewed toy.

“Lola,” Derek said when he noticed. “Toys away first.”

She shoved her nose into the bone-shaped fabric with a grumbling snort, ignoring him. When he repeated the command, snapping his fingers over the stuffed beast she’d left in the middle of the floor, she returned to the kitchen, retrieved the toy, and dropped it into a basket by her bed. She then turned her face expectantly in Derek’s direction.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly. “Go ahead now.”
She jumped back onto her bed and resumed what she’d been doing before he’d halted her in her tracks.

“What the fuck,” Stiles said. “How did you get her to do that?”

Derek returned the couscous to the stove and picked up his wine glass again. “I can’t take any credit.”

Stiles gave him an incredulous look. “Right, so she just started doing that all on her own.”

“To a certain extent, yeah. I had no idea she knew that command. Her owners dropped her off at the shelter with her vet records and what they considered crucial information, but that left pretty significant gaps. I’ve been learning a lot about her along the way, and one day, I got tired of tripping over her things and said, ‘I wish you knew how to put your toys away.’ Next thing I knew, she was scrambling to do that and then running over to me for praise.”

“Huh,” Stiles said. “I guess it’s a familiarity thing. You triggered something she probably used to do all the time.”

“I think so. She gets grumpy sometimes about being told what to do, but I get the impression she feels more secure when I seem to know what I’m doing. There’re probably some other commands she’s used to that I haven’t stumbled across yet, but we’re most of the way there.”

Stiles frowned at Lola, who was curled up on her bed, gnawing happily and paying no mind to either of them. "It makes no sense. Investing that much effort into a dog and then abandoning her like that?"

"Preaching to the choir," Derek said. He absently swept a trail of breadcrumbs into the sink. "You can't judge a person based on insufficient facts, though. With how obviously well-loved she was, I can only assume that to them, turning her over was the best way to ensure she had a good future with someone who'd be able to commit to taking care of her in a way they couldn't."

"Selfless, in their eyes."

"Could be."

"You're an awfully optimistic person for a historian. You always have such a positive outlook on things. I feel like if I spent my life studying all the ways humans have tried to destroy each other, I'd have a much bleaker view on the state of the world." Bleaker than usual, Stiles added silently, but he was pulled out of his thoughts by Derek's eyes—wide and startled, almost wounded.

"It's been a while since anyone's called me an optimist," he said, almost to himself. His voice strengthened again, his composure returning, and Stiles heard a hint of his lecture tone creeping in. "I take into account the long arc of history. Humanity's resilient. We're creative and stubborn, and we always rebuild from the ashes. There's something admirable about that."

"It'd be more admirable if we could carry on building without needing to burn everything down first."

Derek huffed out a soft laugh. "I sense a pessimist in our midst."

"I wasn't always," Stiles said.

"Neither was I," Derek echoed, and that, oddly, felt like the most intimate thing he’d shared all night.
No further confessions followed; his attention was swiftly overtaken by finishing up the meal, and he waved away Stiles’s offer of help, claiming he needed to concentrate on making sure everything was done at the same time. Stiles took it as an invitation to more closely examine the rest of Derek’s house.

He used the bathroom first—down the hallway, first door on the right, Derek said when he asked—then steered clear of the bedrooms and started with the movies, as he’d promised earlier. The selection was about what he would’ve expected: long rows of history documentaries, criterion collections, box sets of the extended versions of various blockbusters, a few TV shows, and a decent assortment of animated movies. For his nieces, Stiles guessed, although it didn’t sound like they were able to visit him that often.

He clicked the doors of the media cabinet shut and moved on to the framed photos that’d been neatly hung along the walls. Derek loved his family. It was visible in the decorations in his home and in everything he said; he talked about his sisters as much as Stiles talked about his dad and Scott, which was...pretty substantial. The one girl Stiles had semi-seriously dated at college—meaning regular sex for half a semester before she told him it wasn’t working for her—had told him flat out that she thought it was weird that he had so many stories about them. Off-putting, she’d called it.

Don’t you like your family? he’d asked in confusion as she’d tossed out her half-full iced latte and brazenly checked the time on her phone.

Not really, she’d said. Besides, I’ve got better things to think about.

They’d broken up, if you could call it that, a week later. Stiles hadn’t experienced the slightest sliver of heartbreak over it. He loved fiercely and unapologetically; he always had. And once he loved someone—really, truly opened his heart up to them, which was a rare occurrence—they were in his life for good. Maybe that was why he didn’t have a lot of people he could call at a moment’s notice. It made things difficult sometimes, but he couldn’t change the way he worked. And, truth be told, he didn’t particularly want to.

Derek’s emotions ran deep: Stiles could already tell as much. Stiles was a tempest, or waves crashing against a shoreline, a constant push-pull of emotional turbulence that frightened or swept away all but the steadiest and most grounded. Derek was the unfathomable ocean itself. Vast, extraordinarily beautiful, powerful, with depths no one could ever explore in their entirety. Stiles was beginning to suspect that he would gladly exhaust all the breath in his lungs trying.

He touched the edge of one of the few frames that contained a photo with Derek in it; most of them were of his sisters, his nieces, and juvenile artistic attempts that must also be credited to Laura’s kids. A large portrait over the fireplace held younger versions of the three siblings, plus a beautiful dark-haired woman and a man with Derek’s chin, jawline, and eyebrows. He’d gotten the rest from his mom, which Stiles wouldn’t necessarily have expected. He had her high cheekbones and finer features, with a delicacy about his face that was more striking when set against his dad’s relatively rugged good looks. In some ways, Derek looked even more like his mom than his sisters did, although Stiles wouldn’t have had trouble picking any of the Hales out of a lineup.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, then checked to be sure that Derek, now humming to himself in the kitchen, hadn’t heard.

If he hadn’t met Derek in person, or if the family resemblance had been any less glaringly obvious, he might’ve suspected their photos of being pulled out of photoshopped magazine ads. Every last one of Derek’s relatives looked like models. Models who seemed incapable of taking bad photos, at that. Even Laura’s kids were absurdly cute, with freckles and wildly curly red-orange hair they’d inherited from their dad.
Correction: he might not have believed the Hales were real people if he hadn’t met Derek in person and spent hours—okay, days—scrolling through every inch of Derek’s Facebook profile, learning anything he could about Derek’s life.

That had been yet another of Derek’s surprises.

The morning after the catering gig at the Faculty Club, Stiles had blearily checked his phone while still in bed. Thanks to the holiday weekend, he’d lined up four solid days of work, grabbing at every timeslot Finstock had thrown his way. He had two events booked for Sunday: an afternoon luncheon thrown by one of the larger churches in the area, followed by an evening wedding reception. Finstock was supposed to send out some final details about the wedding, since the bride had expressed concerns over the catering staff being mistaken for the wedding party. Finstock hadn’t been sure what that meant—no vests? no ties? different colored ties?—and was supposed to hear from the wedding planner by early Sunday morning.

Stiles had touched the hollow of his throat as he’d unlocked his phone, thinking about Derek’s intently furrowed brow as he’d adjusted the bow tie. About the rush of relief he’d felt when he’d met Erica’s husband, putting a distinctly platonic spin on Derek’s close relationship with her.

It didn’t mean anything had changed between him and Derek, Stiles had been sternly reminding himself since the night before, although his dreams hadn’t heeded the warning. They’d been filled with Derek: his touch, his voice, the heat of his body against Stiles’s.

That was probably why he’d blinked and rubbed his eyes that morning, grumbling, Dammit, I’m still asleep, when he’d seen the alert that Derek had accepted his friend request.

And now here he was, standing in a room he’d caught glimpses of in the background of photos. He’d already pinched himself once tonight, but he did it again, for good measure. He did it a little too hard this time, making himself wince and let out a slight yelp.

“You okay in there?” Derek called, and Stiles trailed back in his direction, rubbing at the spot on his arm that was probably going to bruise if he kept doing that all night.

“It keeps smelling more amazing by the minute,” he said, leaning against the counter and inhaling dramatically.

“Should be done in about ten,” Derek responded without pausing in what seemed to Stiles like some incredibly complicated culinary dance. To Stiles, pretty much anything that required more than one dish to cook qualified as complex, but he’d never thought he’d find the sight of a man stirring sauces and tenting foil over a platter sexy. That was probably just Derek’s effect, though.

“So I’m eating your leftovers?” Derek called, and Stiles trailed back in his direction, rubbing at the spot on his arm that was probably going to bruise if he kept doing that all night.

“I wouldn’t be able to eat this in a single serving,” Derek said, amused. He pointed to a cabinet on the opposite side of the kitchen. “Can you get us a couple of shallow bowls?”

Stiles set them down and went in search of utensils. “So I’m eating your leftovers?”

“Some of them. But don’t worry, I won’t starve.” Derek quirked a smile at him. “I really should’ve warmed up something from the freezer. Tuesdays and Thursdays are my usual weekday nights for elaborate meals, so I went on autopilot, I suppose.”

“Hey, I’m the new factor here; you shouldn’t be changing your normal schedule on account of me. Besides, all the anticipation is getting me worked up. I can’t wait to try this.”
“C’mere then.”

Stiles gave him a questioning look but moved to Derek’s side, then took the spoon he was holding out.

“That’s some of the sauce, with a bit of date. Tell me what you think so I know how much to give you.”

Stiles could identify a couple of the spices—cinnamon and ginger, with something behind it that gave it a kick—and he chewed thoughtfully, taking his time to swallow. “It is sweet. Almost candied? Really good, though.”

Derek had dimples, Stiles realized suddenly. Not as deep or obvious as Danny’s; they were harder to see under the beard, but that made the discovery feel more precious, like it was a hidden bonus that you only unlocked when Derek let you past a certain level of his friendship.

“You like it, then?”

“Yeah,” Stiles breathed, watching in awe as the dimples dug a little deeper into his cheeks, accompanied by a slight duck of his head, as though he was embarrassed by the compliment. Derek should smile like that all the time, he decided. Preferably at Stiles, as much as possible.

He made that his quest over dinner, telling a series of stories and calculating the degree of dimple he received in return for each. It wasn’t the most scientifically sound experiment, but it was the most enjoyable one Stiles had ever engaged in.

“I can’t believe I’m doing all the talking, and I’m still eating faster than you,” he said when he returned to the table after serving himself a second helping. “But I guess you’re used to eating like this all the time. For me, this is equal to like—Thanksgiving dinner, maybe. If I don’t completely stuff myself, I’ll regret it later, when I’m making myself ramen at home and thinking about how I could’ve eaten just one more forkful.”

“I can send some home with you, if you want.” Derek kept his eyes fixed on his plate, scooping up another bite of fragrant couscous. “And it doesn’t have to be the last time you ever eat like this.”

“If that’s a vote of confidence in my future as a chef, it’s ill-founded. I may work for a catering company, but I only serve the food. And sneak home as much of it as I can to supplement our diet, but that part’s a secret.”

“You’re as responsible as I am for how this turned out,” Derek said mildly. “But what I meant was that I nearly always cook too much. You looked in my freezer; there’re enough meals in there to last weeks. Maybe months.”

“You mean you’d consider giving me periodic doses of Dr. Hale’s Leftovers?” Stiles asked, perking up. “An awesome brand name, by the way, in case you ever want to patent yourself.”

Derek didn’t respond to the joke, simply saying, “Sure. Like I said, I’m only eating for one, but cooking for more.”

He almost seemed disappointed, a subtle shift of emotions Stiles wouldn’t have been able to read if he hadn’t spent the evening making a detailed mental map of every nuance of Derek’s expressions. Before he could sort through the possible reasons for the change, Derek was changing the subject by motioning at Stiles’s wine glass, which he’d also refilled.

“You said your birthday was in a few months. January, then?”
“Uh, April, actually. I guess that’s more like six months, but it feels soon. Why?”

“Just curious,” Derek said. “Mine’s in December; I was wondering if they were near each other.”

“Nope, although I wish that was true. I have the world’s shittiest birthday.”

Derek looked quizzically at him, then it clicked. “April 1?”

“April Fools baby, right here. Remember how I said my mom went into labor early? My dad was at work that day, and when she called him to tell him the baby was on its way...”

“Oh no.” The nearly imperceptible lines of tension smoothed out of his face, turning into dismayed amusement.

This was steadier ground, a story Stiles knew how to tell for maximum impact. “Yup. He thought she was playing a joke on him; nearly hung up on her because he was at a crime scene at the time. Once she was done with all the, y’know, horrible parts of giving birth, she teased him relentlessly about that.” It’d been a recurring theme on his birthday: the story of how his dad nearly hadn’t shown up at the hospital in time. It’d been a funny story until...well. Until it’d come true twelve years later.

“Was that something she would’ve done? Joking about it like that?”

Stiles swirled a piece of chicken through the extra sauce he’d spooned onto his plate. “Yeah. As much as she teased him about it, she always admitted anyone who knew her probably would’ve thought the same thing. She loved practical jokes and pranks; that’s sorta how she and my dad met, actually. She’d just quit working for this incredibly sexist guy who treated all his female employees like crap. It was one of my dad’s first weeks on the job; he picked her and a couple of her friends up for egging the guy’s house. He had to cite them for vandalism and property damage, because of course the asshole insisted on pressing charges.”

“But your dad got the other side of the story?”

“He did.” Stiles cast him a wry grin. “My mom was a talker; he had the whole story, plus some, by the time he got her to the station. And after all the paperwork was done and she’d paid the fines, he met up with her again, out of uniform, and asked her on a date. They got married a couple months later.”

His dad had credited her criminal activity with their meeting, but his mom was the kind of person who believed in fate. *If it hadn’t happened then, it would’ve happened another way,* she’d always said, smoothing out his dad’s collar before he left for work, their mutual adoration a steady, unshakeable part of Stiles’s childhood. *Some people are meant for each other. And you were my destiny, Johnny.*

“Maybe April Fools was fitting, then,” Derek said, as insightful as always. “It sounds like a date your mom would’ve enjoyed having set off as a special occasion.”

“She loved it. She used to tell me, every year, that she wished she could switch birthdays with me, because mine was so special. I hated it; lemme tell you, it made growing up fun. Mostly at school.”

His mom’s teasing was fun and playful, a natural part of her personality. The teasing he got at school was weighted by cruelty. The less creative bullies merely sneered at him; the more clever ones left empty giftboxes on his desk, or ones rigged with things that’d leap out at him, or gave him free sodas they’d shaken up first, or simply smirked and said *April Fool’s!* when they all RSVP’d to his birthday party and no one but Scott and Heather showed up.
They’re not worth your tears, Słoneczko, his mother had told him on his eighth birthday, when it’d taken him three hours to acknowledge that no one else was coming to share the cake he’d spent an excited week describing to all his classmates.

He’d grown up suspicious, questioning anyone’s attempts to befriend him, waiting for the moment when they’d rip the rug out from under him and laugh. It hadn’t happened in years, but childhood cruelties stuck with you. Shaped the way you responded to people around you, even if you knew your instincts were irrational and that your insecurities were at the root of your inability to connect with others.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said. “It’s not the same, but I understand the difficulty of having a holiday for a birthday.”

“You said December?” Stiles asked, and Derek nodded.

“Christmas Day.”

“Fuck,” Stiles said. “Huh. I’d still argue mine’s worse, but that’s a hell of a runner up.”

“It’s not all bad. It’s better as an adult, when you’re not expecting gifts and parties anymore.”

“That’s right...it’d be about the worst day of the year to try to get people to come over to your house on your actual birthday. That sucks.”

“It did. I’ve had maybe two real parties, that I can remember? A couple weekends early, so my friends’ schedules would be more clear. But I think of it as more of an advantage now. It’s the one time of year when I’m almost guaranteed to see my whole family.”

Optimist, Stiles thought again. “That’s a good outlook,” he said. “I guess the advantage of mine is that people kinda stop caring about April Fools once they’re past elementary school. Maybe middle school. Scott still tries to make a big deal out of my birthday every year, though, since it was always so terrible when we were kids.”

“He seems like a good friend,” Derek said.

“He is.” Stiles watched him for a few beats as they continued to eat; Derek managed to make even that look graceful, whereas Stiles was doing his best to not spill anything on himself and to remember to use his knife and fork instead of his fingers. “I know you said you didn’t want to hear details, but you should know that Scott and Kira aren’t just fu—uh, they’re not just sleeping together. He likes her a lot.”

“I wasn’t worried about her,” Derek said. “If she wanted to do casual, that’d be her call. But even then, he’s been your best friend for your whole life, right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Then he’s someone I’d trust to treat one of my friends well.”

Stiles’s grip on his fork clenched at the jolt that simple statement sent through his chest. He had no idea what he’d done to earn that degree of calm, unruffled trust. Scott deserved it—he was a damn good boyfriend, and even he and Allison had parted on friendly, if mutually heartbroken, terms—but Derek had no way of knowing that.

“Thank you though,” Derek added when Stiles didn’t fill the silence. “Kira hasn’t dated much, so I am glad to hear she’s found someone who’s good for her. And good to her.” He frowned
thoughtfully. “Although—I guess she might’ve had plenty of relationships she just didn’t talk about.”

“Not in the time I’ve known her; she’s been hung up on Scott for a while. This was a long time coming.”

Derek pressed his lips together as he cut up the last few bites of his chicken, clearly wanting to ask further questions but trying to respect Kira’s privacy. Stiles considered whether he’d be betraying any friend codes by saying anything else. He’d already let the worst slip; the rest was mostly damage control, since he didn’t always paint things in the best light when he was tired and frustrated, as he’d been earlier in the evening.

Derek’s inner battle concluded first. “Scott’s graduating this year, too?”

“Yup. One last semester.”

Tiny frown lines dug into the corners of Derek’s mouth, and Stiles examined him for a minute.

“Oh,” he said, a light bulb clicking on more slowly than it should’ve. “You’re thinking about what happens to Kira after he leaves, since she’s got another year left.”

“It’s not my business,” Derek said again. “I’m sure she’s thought about that much more than I have. I just...I know what time limits can do to relationships. And even if you start out on the same page, or if you don’t mean to get emotionally invested, it can be rough when the clock runs out.”

“I don’t know if they have any plans,” Stiles said, going with complete honesty. “It could last another week, or it could be a lifetime thing. What I can tell you is that Scott does casual just about as well as I do.”

Derek’s frown lines deepened.

“Which is to say, he sucks at it,” Stiles clarified. “He had one serious girlfriend all through high school, and he was devastated for like...two years after they broke up. He denied it, but I’m pretty sure he spent most of that time hoping she’d change her mind and they’d get back together. Kira’s the first person he’s shown the same kind of interest in. But because she’s so different from Allison, I think it took him longer to recognize what he was feeling. Or to feel okay about acting on it, maybe? I dunno, I’m the worst person to ask for romantic advice.”

“I thought,” Derek said, not completing the sentence. He gave Stiles one of his intensely searching looks again; Stiles was starting to get used to those, even though they made his heart flip every time. There was confusion in Derek’s eyes this time, though, and something else behind it. A hint of hope, maybe? Something wistful and soft, a flicker of longing that winked out while Stiles was still deciphering it. “I’m glad they’re happy,” he said, rather than finishing whatever thought he’d been puzzling through.

“Here’s to it lasting,” Stiles said. He lifted his glass, and Derek clinked his against Stiles’s, his lips tipping back up. That was better. “And besides,” he added, “Scott’s got a pretty sweet deal right now, with his mentor and job and everything. The closest fully-accredited veterinary school’s only like half an hour away, and there aren’t a lot of reasons for him to go anywhere else. I wouldn’t be surprised if he stuck around here for a long time.”

By the time they’d finished clearing away the meal—Derek putting away the rest of the food and wiping down the counter and stovetop while Stiles volunteered to do the dishes—he’d managed to relate Scott’s entire academic history, along with a good percentage of his own.

“I guess you don’t really care about any of that,” Stiles said in belated embarrassment when he set
the final pot in the dish drainer. Why didn’t Derek ever stop him when he started down one of these story spirals?

“Why wouldn’t I care?” Derek asked. “I’ve learned more about those two departments from you than from ten years working on this campus. I get so bogged down in my own world that I forget to check in on the interesting things other people are doing. I like hearing about it. I like hearing you talk about it.”

Stiles fumbled while hanging the hand towel back in its place. He spent longer than necessary adjusting it, temporarily at a loss for words. It’d be an exaggeration to claim that no one ever listened this intently to him, but Derek’s interest was almost palpable. He didn’t nod along, making encouraging noises at appropriate spots and asking questions Stiles had already answered in an earlier conversation. He remembered. Not everything, not all the time, but he slipped in the kinds of comments and insights that indicated a deeper connection than a single night together.

It probably had something to do with his chosen career; historians enjoyed gathering facts, didn’t they? And academia was—in its ideal form—a field you chose if you wanted to continue hunting down knowledge, keeping your mind from stagnating. It had nothing to do with Stiles, really, or with his life, which must seem like another drop in a bucket of hundreds of students Derek had met over the years. Maybe this whole night was a regular part of Derek’s routine: see a student in a pitiful situation, help the student, send them on their way, return to a life that has no permanent place for them in it.

Derek was polite and hospitable, but now that Stiles had been fed and sheltered for a considerable amount of time, he must be waiting for an opening to send him on his way. The apartment should be safe by this hour, as long as Scott and Kira remembered to put some clothes back on before wandering out of the bedroom. He should go. He should say something: Thank you for dinner, Dr. Hale. Keep it simple and let him hand over a Tupperware container and usher him out the door. Avoid the awkwardness of lingering after his welcome had been thoroughly worn out.

But Derek wasn’t hovering impatiently or giving any indication that he was anxious for the night to end. He was leaning against the counter, watching Stiles mess with the towel, relaxation visible in every line of his body. If Stiles had to put a word to it, he’d say Derek seemed happy.

“Gift from my niece,” he said when he saw Stiles watching him. “In case you think I’ve turned into the kind of pet owner who wallpapers his house with pictures of his dog.”

Stiles hadn’t actually been paying any mind to the kitchen’s decor, but he snorted and let go of what he now saw was dog-print fabric. “She’s pretty damn cute, so I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“Maybe in a couple more years. You’ll find me drowning in schnauzer potholders and sweaters. Scarves, maybe.” There was a sudden sad twist to his mouth, and Stiles threw a grateful thought after the third glass of wine he’d been smart enough to not pour for himself. It meant he had enough self-possession to not cross the short distance dividing them, to not test the texture of Derek’s beard, to not wonder—for more than a fleeting, wild moment—if his smile would return if Stiles kissed him.

Thank you for dinner, Dr. Hale, he thought again, forming the words carefully and bringing them to the tip of his tongue, unable to let them spill past his lips. He didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to release this night, to let it drift away as some distant memory he’d think of quietly years from now, wondering what might have happened if he’d been brave enough to stay.

He’d wait. There was no harm in that; he’d let Derek say goodbye first, and he’d take the dismissal gracefully, but he’d spent enough of his life shutting down opportunities before they had a chance to play out. He knew their friendship, such as it was, had one of those end dates Derek had been talking
about. It was delicate: a feather caught in a playful twist of wind, spiraling giddily until the weather shifted, until it dropped, losing even its mimicry of flight.

The fall would be more painful, he knew, the longer he let the wind carry him. It’d be more difficult to pick himself up, to crawl back to reality. But maybe it was worth it this time. He had two months left, after all, before Derek had every reason to forget him. Might as well make the most of them.

He couldn’t read Derek’s thoughts, but he could see them flitting over his face: a shadow, there and gone, a shiver of sorrow that he almost visibly shook off. It could’ve been the reminder of the physical distance between him and his family. Or maybe he was thinking of the shortened lifespan you accepted when you adopted an older dog. Stiles wanted to ask why his mood had shifted, to pry out the darkness Derek kept so carefully hidden, but he held the questions back, afraid to break through the intricate web of intimacy they’d been spinning.

Derek pushed away from the counter with a fluid movement of his hips that made Stiles wet his suddenly dry lips with the tip of his tongue. He stopped in the pantry doorway, and Stiles felt a low curl of heat at the sight of his shoulders filling out the frame. Spending long periods of time with Derek almost made him forget how goddamn beautiful he was. It was like having the Statue of David parked in your living room with coats and scarves draped thoughtlessly over it. Or, in this case, sweatpants and a soft maroon shirt that did nothing to hide the firm strength of the body underneath.

He didn’t seem aware of how stunning he was, though, maybe because he’d grown up with other beautiful people. At the Faculty Club, he’d been caught off guard whenever someone had approached him.

*I don’t understand what they want from me*, he’d confided one of the times Stiles had come up with an excuse to carry a tray in his direction. He’d frowned after an expensively dressed silver-haired woman who’d been neatly separated from him by Stiles’s tray and Erica’s quick conversational skills. *They ask me questions, but it's like they stop listening after a couple words.*

He’d sounded genuinely frustrated, and Stiles hadn’t seen any value in pointing out that before Erica and Boyd had arrived, Derek was a 10 swimming in a sea of 4s. A 15, really; Derek would break any chart you tried to squeeze him into.

Derek was asking him something, Stiles realized suddenly, and he blinked back to the present. Maybe the second glass of wine hadn’t been a good idea, either, but the alcohol was already reduced to a warm hum in his limbs. It was Derek’s proximity that gave him that slow, syrupy sense of heady intoxication.

“Or you might be completely stuffed,” Derek said. He was holding a silver box, and Stiles tilted his head to try to read the label.

“Are you offering me dessert?”

“I guess you could call it that.” He fiddled with the lid. “I could make you coffee instead? If you don’t like cocoa.”

“It’s *hot chocolate*,” Stiles said in recognition, utterly charmed. “God, you really do have a sweet tooth. How the hell do you——” He cut himself off.

Derek frowned down at the container. “I don’t eat *that* many sweets,” he said with a defensive, almost embarrassed tinge to his voice. “It’s a cold night. I thought it might be nice.”
“Hey, no. I wasn’t judging; you do you, dude. And yeah, sure, I’d love some. It sounds great. I just—look, all I was saying was that I don’t get how you can eat that kind of stuff and still—you know.” He indicated Derek’s superb body with a sweeping gesture.

Derek lifted his eyebrows in question, and Stiles sighed. Did he seriously have to spell it out?

“You’re in incredible shape. Did you convert one of your bedrooms into a gym or something? Or were you born with a ridiculously good metabolism?”

“Oh,” Derek said, the embarrassment definitely stronger now, but in a different, almost pleased, vein. It was an odd reaction for someone who must be inundated with compliments. “Uh, thanks. I have a few free weights in the garage, but I mostly use the university’s gym. One of the perks of working here.”

“Oh yeah. I haven’t been there in a while; I sorta forget it exists.”

“Really?” Derek was giving him a scrutinizing once-over, and Stiles straightened instinctively, pushing his shoulders back to stand taller.

“I’ve got a lotta classes,” he said, his turn to be defensive. “I mostly use the machines where you can read at the same time, because I’ve always got a shitload of work to do. But things’ve gotten more hands on, which means it’s harder to remember to make time for it.”

“I wasn’t judging.” Derek said, with enough amusement in his expression to indicate he was intentionally echoing Stiles’s earlier assertion. “Surprised, yeah. I would’ve thought you’d make use of the pool, or maybe the rock climbing wall. You’ve got the build for it.”

Stiles had no idea what that meant, but it sounded like a compliment; he’d take it. “Chlorine was hell on Scott’s asthma, and I kicked up a huge fuss about staying in swimming classes without him, so I, uh.” He scratched at his nose. “Rock climbing sounds fun, though. I’ve never tried it.”

“You don’t know how to swim?” Derek asked, latching onto the revelation Stiles hadn’t meant to let slip.

“Don’t know how is a strong way of putting it. Never learned is...more accurate. I stopped when we were in the stage where you hang onto the board and learn how to use your legs.” He mimed the motion, stretching his arms out and kicking one foot behind him, in case Derek needed a visual. He...very probably didn’t, and Stiles let his foot drop back down and scuffed his sock-clad toes against the floor. “I was good at it, though. Top of my class, if they’d measured things that way at that age.”

“I’m sure,” Derek said. He was still listening, but he’d moved back into the kitchen to pull down a small saucepan, which he filled with milk and set on a burner.

Stiles automatically went for the cabinet where he’d seen a mug-crammed shelf earlier in the evening. “Really, though, it hasn’t impacted my life that much. I don’t spend a lot of time in open water, where the ability to swim is a necessary life skill. I figure if I fall off a cruise ship or something, I’m pretty royally fucked regardless.” He selected two hand-painted mugs and grinned over the designs. Of course Derek was the kind of person who held onto every gift his family gave him—using them, too, and not stashing them in a back corner to only be taken out when they visited.

“Would you like to learn?”

He carried the mugs over and watched as Derek used slow, steady strokes to stir the dark cocoa into the milk. “Like sign up for a class or something, you mean? I dunno; wouldn’t I be stuck with really
tiny kids, or sad old ladies trying to do water aerobics?”

“I don’t think swimming lessons are restricted to those two categories. But no, I meant I could teach you.”

“You?” Stiles asked, his brain tripping over the thought of a fully shirtless Derek rising out of the pool, water streaming down his chiseled chest as he pushed back his wet hair, his biceps flexing tantalizingly.

“I was a lifeguard all through high school and a swim instructor for a few summers after.” Derek lowered the heat on the stove and gave the mixture a couple final stirs, thankfully unaware of the direction Stiles’s imagination had taken him. “Teaching you the basics wouldn’t be hard. Then you could decide if you liked it and wanted to keep going.”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said again. On the one hand, Derek in swim trunks or—if he was really fucking lucky—speedos. On the other hand, Derek was already bad enough in suits and sweatpants and tank tops. How was he supposed to function at the sight of him as close to naked as he’d ever get around Stiles?

“No pressure, obviously. Think about it, though; I’d be glad to help.”

Stiles squinted at him, unable to figure out his angle. “Is this a dig on me being out of shape? Because you’re the one who just made me gain like five extra pounds with your cooking tonight, buddy.”

Derek let out an abrupt, surprised laugh. “No, god, not at all. I didn’t mean it to come off like that. If you hate the idea, you can say so and I won’t bring it up again. Swimming is...” He let the word trail away, his forehead furrowing in thought as he switched the burner off and began pouring the hot chocolate into their mugs. “It’s the closest thing to being weightless, I guess. I use working out in general as a way to get out of my head for a while. To...push away things that’ve been wearing on me. And swimming, for whatever reason, has always felt more like escaping into another world. Everything’s quieter underwater, including your thoughts.”

Stiles nodded enthusiastically when he lifted a can of whipped cream, and Derek swirled a generous amount into both of their mugs, then sprinkled cinnamon on top before speaking again.

“Forgive me if I’m overstepping. It seemed like something you might appreciate.”

The whipped cream, Stiles thought stupidly, already drooling a little in anticipation, but of course Derek meant the offer he hadn’t met with equal enthusiasm.

The truth was, he did connect with Derek’s reasoning. His instinct was to crack a joke and avoid the subject, and he opened his mouth to do just that—it’d be easy to make a quip about the lopsided hearts looping around his mug, or the bubbly letters sprawling across Derek’s, complete with an extra “r” and what was either a lumpy flower or an octopus. Instead, he said, “One of my therapists used to tell me something similar.” That physical exercise would help him to channel grief and stress and the excess energy that left him unable to concentrate in class, he meant to clarify, but he bit his lip after the first statement, irrationally afraid Derek would react with disappointment or disdain. He knew therapy was a positive step in self-care, but it’d been another part of his childhood and teenage years that his peers had sensed as making him different from them: weaker, a wounded, broken kid with a dead mom and a cop dad who’d drag them down if they let him hang around for too long.

Derek didn’t flinch away from him. He didn’t display shock or surprise or any of the overblown responses the less logical side of Stiles’s brain had braced for. He was blowing gently on the surface
of his drink, a splash of whipped cream caught unnoticed on his bearded chin. His hair—without the usual gel to hold it in place—was still wind-rumpled, swooping negligently over his forehead. Stiles was entirely unprepared for the swell of emotion that rose up through his chest, tightening his throat.

“It doesn’t work the same for everyone,” Derek said eventually, without pushing Stiles to contribute anything further. “I swim a few times a week and go rock climbing with Kira sometimes, and Boyd and I spot each other in the weight room. Erica kickboxes. Laura says she gets all the exercise she needs from chasing down her kids and dealing with inept paralegals. So it’s really whatever works for you.”

“I might like to try; I’ll let you know,” Stiles relented, tracing around the rim of his mug then dipping a finger inside to test if it was cool enough to drink. The chocolate was less sweet than he’d expected; it had a dark kick to it that his experience with cheap grocery store packets hadn’t prepared him for. “Jesus, everything you make tastes amazing. Is there anything you’re not good at?”

Derek’s mouth slanted into a soft smile. “Plenty. I play to my strengths.”

“Hm,” Stiles said with heavy skepticism. “Well, I’ll wait for you to prove me wrong, then, because I’ve gotta say the evidence so far is pretty damning.” The dimples were back, he noted in delight, along with Derek’s seeming inability to take a compliment without redirecting the conversation.

“Did you ever find a movie you liked? Or did you just poke at everything and judge it.”

“The latter,” he said, grinning. Derek was definitely not rushing to kick him out, if he was hinting at starting up a movie next. “You have documentaries on wars I’ve never even heard of. You know that saying about not taking your work home with you? I think you missed that memo.”

“I have other genres,” Derek protested, and Stiles followed him into the living room so they could properly debate what qualified as a well-rounded film collection. For starters, Stiles stubbornly insisted, stamping “criterion” on the packaging was an immediate and unacceptable limitation that stripped out entire categories of movies that weren’t deemed sufficiently “artsy.”

Derek countered with an admittedly well-argued defense that mostly centered around his attachment to high-quality restoration and special features, which left Stiles ready to slap down his trump card.

“I have those!” Derek exclaimed, popping open the TV cabinet to prove his snobbish Blu-ray collection included a set of Star Wars DVDs. “And the LaserDiscs, too. I wish there was a better version of the original theatrical releases, but you take what you can get. Plus,” he said, clicking the glass door shut again, “you looked through all these earlier, so you’re just giving me shit for no reason, aren’t you?”

“You got me,” Stiles said smugly. He’d been enjoying Derek’s indignation, complete with animated gestures and an endearing slight stumbling over his words that happened when he was too engaged with a topic to take the time to carefully formulate his thoughts. Stiles had made that discovery during one of their walks earlier in the semester; he knew he shouldn’t take advantage of it too often, but Derek’s annoyance seemed minimal enough to be worth it.

He responded with what amounted to a full-body eye roll, and Stiles’s grin widened. God, he loved seeing this side of Derek.

“I’ll let you have your documentaries and boring-ass art films, because I do see hints of good taste in there,” he conceded generously.

“That means so much,” Derek said, his tone almost dry enough to burn.
“And you get bonus points for shunning the abominations that don’t deserve the term ‘special editions.’ The important question is, though, have you seen the despecialized edition?”

“That doesn’t sound like a real thing.”

Stiles launched into a lovingly detailed description of the only truly watchable version of his favorite movies. He concluded with, “I’ve got it with me on my—ah shit, I forgot it’s backed up on my external hard drive. The files were too big and started to make my laptop lag. Point is, you’re missing out if you haven’t tried it.”

“Apparently,” Derek said, his eyes crinkling. “Maybe you could show me some time? Or tell me how to find it?”

“Yeah! I could transfer it back temporarily. Hook my computer up to your TV and give you the full experience.” He could easily send a link, but he held back that information; he wanted to be present to catalog Derek’s reactions as they watched.

“Another time, then,” Derek said easily.

Stiles drew in a quick breath and fiddled with the strands of the shag rug they were both sitting on. Not only was Derek not sick of him yet, he wanted him to come back. It’d been a long time since Stiles had met someone he could see slotting into the heavily selective Best Friends category of his life; he was out of practice and fighting against the idea that a single wrong move would shatter all the progress they’d made. He never went Full Stiles on someone this early in their relationship, but from almost their first interaction, he’d been unable to keep up a pretense of self-assurance or...coolness that he simply didn’t possess. He felt safe around Derek. Comfortable in his own skin.

“Lola, no,” Derek said sharply, and Stiles turned to find her nosing at the mug he’d set on the slightly raised hearth to keep it from spilling on Derek’s furniture or leaving a ring on the hardwood floor.

“It’s okay,” he said, retrieving it anyway. “It’s empty; she wouldn’t get enough chocolate to hurt her.”

Derek checked his empty wrist, then the clock on the mantel. “I had no idea we’d been talking for this long,” he said, sounding genuinely surprised. “I have to say, you’re even more opinionated about movies than I’d expected. Tell me again why you’re not a film major?”

“Too many opinions,” Stiles said. “I took a class last year, actually.”

“And spent most of the time arguing with your professor,” Derek guessed, a little too accurately.

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “Citizen Kane was his favorite film. I mean, how clichéd can you get? Fucking ‘rosebud.’ Dude didn’t have a single original thought. And there he was, this old white guy teaching a class about Race and Film, pretending he gave a shit about any of it. I honestly don’t think he’d even watched half the stuff we were discussing. Bet he pulled ‘em off a list somewhere, along with a few op-ed pieces he’d stolen soundbites from.”

“Sounds like you got a bad one,” Derek said. “But the department’s worth another try. I co-taught a class a couple years ago, with Sabrina. Dr. Santos. You’d like her take on things, I think.”

“You taught film studies? Damn. I can’t believe I missed that.” Fucking Scott; why hadn’t he poked his nose into Stiles’s schedule earlier?

Derek nodded. He moved his drink to the TV cabinet so he could pet Lola, who was accepting it as a substitute for the treats she couldn’t have. “I don’t do it often, but it can be fun to mix things up.
Spend time in an area you don’t have much experience with. I handled the historical side, and she dealt with the actual film criticism. She didn’t really need my help, though. I liked it: being able to sit back and be a student again."

Words that would never come out of a lot of professors’ mouths, which Derek seemed blissfully unaware of. Did he have any idea how exceptional he was? Probably not: he was the kind of person, like Stiles or Lydia or both of Stiles’s parents, who didn’t believe in the concept of ‘good enough.’ There was always more to learn. Always a new personal best to strive for, then exceed.

“Tell me the truth: did you choose this career so you could audit a bunch of classes for free, for the rest of your life? Because I’ll admit I see the appeal.”

“It was a factor,” Derek said. He grunted when Lola licked his nose. “You need your teeth brushed,” he informed her. “You thought I’d forgotten about that tonight, didn’t you.”

“Does she actually let you do that? Scott had this dog—” for a few short months, before his dad had claimed allergies and made them get rid of it “—that hated when you touched his mouth. He’d growl and try to bite the toothbrush in half.”

“She minds it less at home. I have to take her to the groomers for her coat, and she acts like that’s some sort of horrible punishment. So I try to do as much as I can in a more familiar environment.” Derek scratched along her chest, and she sighed happily. “Don’t take this question the wrong way, but—you talk a lot about the bad experiences you’ve had with your classes. Has it been disappointing for you? Being here, I mean. Do you wish you’d gone to MIT with Lydia?”

A fair enough question, when Stiles had essentially asked him the same thing over dinner. He gave it some thought; it was worth more than a flippant reply. ‘I’m critical by nature. It sounds like a cop-out, I know; Scott gives me shit when he says I’m being too negative. It’s easier to talk about that side, though. I think the stories are funnier.’ Safer, too; there was a vulnerability inherent in sharing moments that had a positive impact on you, that helped to steer your life in a different direction.

“And nothing’s ever perfect; Lydia doesn’t sugarcoat how things have gone for her. Comparatively, I’d say I’ve actually come out ahead. My program’s had some bumps here and there, but overall, it’s been great. My only real complaint is that I haven’t been able to pack in more classes; I always feel like I’m missing out.”

“And that’s the road to academia,” Derek said.

“Or the life of a scientist. Unquenchable curiosity’s a bitch.”

Derek made a quiet noise of agreement. “I wouldn’t want to change it, though.”

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“Me either. It’s been hell trying to decide what to squeeze into my last semester.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t help that you have to take courses outside your program, either. Erica said you were annoyed by the requirements.”

Right. That conversation. He tried to remember if he’d said anything that would come back to bite him. Probably nothing Derek hadn’t already heard from him; if so, it was too late to worry about it now. “It hasn’t been all bad; there’ve been great professors mixed in, too.” I wouldn’t have met you, he thought. If he’d gone to MIT, if he’d chosen different classes for his final year, if Scott hadn’t decided to spend part of his summer talking Stiles into readjusting his schedule...he switched gears to cover up the swell of sentimentality, winking at Derek. “But don’t worry, Dr. Hale, you’re still my favorite.”
Derek’s mouth parted in an Oh of surprise. “I wasn’t fishing for a compliment,” he said, unexpectedly flustered.

“I know,” Stiles said. Aw fuck it, he could sound fond if he wanted to. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it.”

Derek’s eyes were softer tonight: the grey of pine-scented woodsmoke rising from a campfire; of fog rolling down a quiet street, wrapping slumbering houses in its embrace. Maybe it was the lighting—there was a brilliant pool spreading a little ways from the kitchen, but Derek had flipped off the dining room switch after they’d eaten, leaving this section of the house lit only by a small lamp near the couch.

Grey like the soft hair curling ever-so-slightly at his temples, and Stiles gripped harder at the rug under his fingers to keep himself from doing something incredibly stupid.

“I should clear these away,” Derek said after a long, weighted moment—if only from Stiles’s side, made honey-thick and languid by his imagination.

They both rose to their feet, Derek picking up the final remnants of their meal and Stiles stretching out his shoulders, feeling his joints pop and the muscles loosening, grateful for the change in position. Lola’s nails clicked along the hardwood floor, and he heard her lapping up the water from her fountain as Derek turned on the sink again.

“Nocturne in C Minor?” Derek’s voice was quiet, respectful, and Stiles nodded without turning to look at him. He felt, rather than saw, Derek sit down next to him, and he slid to the edge to make room.
“Chopin was my mom’s favorite,” Stiles said, not sure why he was sharing, but...after the way the rest of the evening had gone, it felt right. Like Derek was someone who’d understand.

“Did she teach you to play?”

He nodded again, then shook his head. “She tried. I was never patient enough to practice as much as I needed to. She played that one a lot, though. Said she liked that it was something that outlived him. That...even after you’re gone, people can find new things about you, can share them in a way that makes your impact on the world more substantial.” His throat choked, stopping anything else he might’ve tried to say.

Derek didn’t press him. He set his fingers on the keys instead, and Stiles released another shuddery exhale at the first stream of notes. There was a sensitivity to Derek’s playing, an emotional expression that transported Stiles to his living room back in Beacon Hills, sunlight pouring through the roped-open curtains, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air.

Life is too short to spend your days wiping away the proof of our existence, his mom had laughed as she’d brushed away a coating of dust that’d collected on the picture frames and knick-knacks jumbled on top of their upright piano. Her eyes—a slightly deeper brown than Stiles’s—were bright with excitement. She’d triumphantly shaken out a new sheaf of sheet music and had begun to pick out the notes. On her second pass, as her sight-reading improved, the music had turned into a liquid, trembling tumble, like water cascading over rocks, burbling into the distance, inviting them to chase after it. Listen, Słoneczko; have you ever heard anything so beautiful?

“Shit,” he said when Derek’s hands stilled at the end of the song. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I—” but Derek touched the back of his hand, and Stiles turned it over and gripped his tightly, hanging on until the emotional crescendo had passed.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said once Stiles had released him and wiped at his eyes. “I didn’t realize—I
shouldn’t have played it.”

“No, it was beautiful. That’s not something that normally happens... I don’t know why.” Everything was too close to the surface, maybe. He’d been opening up too much, wanting too much, investing in a sneak peek of the kind of life he wasn’t certain he’d ever get to have. “My mom would have liked it,” he said. She would’ve liked Derek, too, with his understated humor and finicky perfectionism and big-hearted kindness. Maybe that was the reason: the realization that anyone he met, anyone he might hope to spend his life with, would never get to know his mom. She’d never be able to tease them, mixing Polish endearments and insults, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Can I ask what happened to her?” Derek’s palm was still open in invitation, and Stiles twined his own fingers together in his lap so he wouldn’t give in to the urge to take hold of him again, to draw on Derek’s strength.

“She died. A few days after my, um. After my twelfth birthday.”

“Was it sudden?”

He shook his head. It wasn’t slow, either, not really, not when he would’ve gladly taken another half dozen years with her. Or even one year, or six more months. But how could you describe watching your mom waste away while you were helpless to do anything about it?

“It was a brain disease. We knew, for a while, that it was incurable, but it progressed faster than the doctors initially thought.” He didn’t normally tell people the rest: the outbursts; the locks they’d had to install on all the doors to keep her from wandering down the street at night in a thin nightgown, or in nothing at all; the personality changes that made her unrecognizable. “She wasn’t really my mom by the end. It didn’t make it easier to say goodbye.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek said again. It was a statement Stiles had heard too many times over the years, but it sounded different, somehow, coming from him. It went beyond a platitude, an attempt to say the right thing to keep the grief from touching you too closely.

“It’s hereditary,” he confessed in a rush. “It doesn’t mean it’s inevitable; there’s no other history of it in my family, as far as we know. And every percentage of likelihood makes it just as possible that it wasn’t passed on. But it still...” He swallowed around the lump in his throat. “How selfish is it to admit that when I think about it, about how horrible that last year was, it’s not just about missing her.”

“You’re afraid it might happen to you.”

He nodded, his eyes still wet, his eyelashes clumped. “My dad and I don’t talk about that part.”

They lapsed into silence for a few moments, and Derek touched the keys again, playing a short, hopeful refrain Stiles didn’t recognize. It was an absent gesture, and he stopped abruptly, as though he hadn’t meant to do it. His version of doodling, Stiles thought with a flutter in his chest that he didn’t try to repress this time.

“When you were talking earlier about your coursework,” Derek said. “You took all these different paths: robotics, game design, computer security, artificial intelligence.”

“A little of everything, yeah. I figured why not try it all when I had the chance.”

Derek gazed at him thoughtfully, his expression soft. “And you said that your focus this year is on—computer cognition? You’re taking mostly Cognitive Science classes?”
“Yeah, other than my robot-building one. And yours, obviously. The rest are stuff like machine learning. Basic issues in cognition. The computational model of the mind.” Stiles lifted his hands, still tightly linked together, to rub at his nose. “I wanted to use undergrad for a full breadth kind of approach, but the grad school plan is to focus in on computational neuroscience.” That was usually the point where someone who wasn’t on a similar career track bowed out of the conversation, their eyes glazing over, but Derek’s attention didn’t waver.

“Is that—” He stopped. “Maybe it’s something I shouldn’t ask. But are you following that path because of your mom’s illness?”

Stiles stared at him. “Yes,” he said simply, startled into honesty. “You’re actually the first person—no one’s ever made that connection before.”

“I don’t understand it,” Derek admitted. “You’d have to explain what it all means, and be patient with my ignorance; it’s completely outside of my areas of expertise. Or of any knowledge at all, really.”

“You want to hear more?” Stiles asked, needing the verbal confirmation.

“Of course. Unless it’s something you don’t want to talk about.”

“No, I do. I really, really do,” he said, not knowing until that moment how badly he’d been longing to share his theories and ideas—those grounded in science, as well as the wild daydreams—with someone else.

Derek shifted on the bench to more fully face him. “So the basis of it is that you’re trying to use computers to better understand the human brain? To potentially find a different way of breaking down neurological disorders?”

“Maybe even curing them,” he said. It was the dream he’d never dared to say out loud before. “Brains are computers, in a sense. Extremely complex ones beyond our current understanding, but they’re built to process information. You’ve got neural pathways, synapses firing, memory storage, right? You could think of it as a form of reverse engineering: figuring out what makes the human brain tick, and repurposing that in something that’s possible for us to maintain and troubleshoot. There’s a lot of ground to cover still, but it’s an area of technology where people are taking exponential strides.”

“And that’s why you took the artificial intelligence class.”

“Scientists are working on narrowing the gap between humans and technology. That’s one possible approach.” Stiles’s mind was jumping from thought to thought, eager to spill every drop of knowledge he’d collected over the years, but it was neither possible nor reasonable, even if Derek was willing to sit with him through all of that. He sorted through for what was more essential. “I’m obviously not the first person to think of any of this; there are studies on using neurochips as basically—I guess you could think of it as a pacemaker for a malfunctioning brain. You might be able to use them to regenerate brain cells. Maybe even rebuild memory.”

Derek was listening intently, and each time Stiles paused, he gently prodded him forward with another question. Eventually, they reached a point where Stiles trailed off and Derek simply blinked at him, looking tired and a little overwhelmed.

“Still Greek to you?” Stiles asked, energized enough from the discussion to engage in some light teasing.
“I speak Greek,” Derek said matter-of-factly. Because of course he did. “So no, this is something much worse. It’s fascinating, though. There’s a lot I’d never even thought about.”

“Some are pipe dreams.” He rubbed a palm over his face. The problem with running at peak capacity for hours was that as soon as you left an opening, exhaustion slammed in. It was like riding a caffeine high: as it was wearing off, you’d hang briefly at the top of the track, wheels grinding to hold you in place, before everything dropped out from under you. That was the point, too, when you began to question whether you’d jumped into oversharing territory. “Honestly, some of it probably makes me sound totally crazy,” he said, going for a laugh at his own expense. He’d dipped into the less rational side near the end, which he realized crossed from plausible medical advances into world overrun by machines.

“Not at all.” When Stiles greeted this statement with deep skepticism, Derek cracked a smile. “You know the Jules Verne example. You’re a science fiction writer or a madman until science catches up with human imagination. Then you’re hailed as a visionary.”

After you’re gone and someone else is carrying on your research, Stiles thought darkly, but he kept that retort to himself. Derek would only counter it with some sort of soul-affirming positivity, and he wasn’t certain he was emotionally capable of dealing with another instance of Derek looking into his eyes and telling him he believed in him.

“So you actually play this thing, huh?” he said, pointing at the piano. “And here I was spending the whole night thinking you were probably one of those guys who just keeps it around as a status symbol.”

“Do people do that with pianos?” Derek frowned, acting affronted by the very thought of it, and Stiles laughed.

“Yeah, dude. Especially a grand piano, c’mon. It’s like a sports car. It’s flashy, but do you drive it? Maybe around the neighborhood once in a while to impress the locals.”

“That would defeat the entire purpose of owning it,” Derek huffed. He stroked over the keys, as if in apology, then picked out a jaunty tune.

“That’s the part I don’t get,” Stiles said, intrigued by the effortless movement. “Sight-reading music is hard enough, but you obviously get better at that with practice. And I do mean you, not me. I never really improved.”

“Because you didn’t practice,” Derek reminded him.

“I’m not even offended, because it’s true.” He pressed down on an F sharp in reprisal anyway, assuming Derek would glare at him, but he simply adjusted, then wove Stiles’s next few notes into a semblance of something janglingly musical. “Okay, that. How the hell did you do that? It’s not just memorizing songs, either, which is the part I was prepared to be impressed by.”

“Improvisation,” Derek said, playing one final chord for emphasis. “It’s another way I clear my head. I’m not composing anything brilliant, and usually I’m riffing off something that already exists. Giving myself more leeway to not get it exactly right makes it easier to relax. There aren’t any mistakes; wrong keys are part of the flow.”

“See, I like the zen quality of that idea, in theory, but you obviously have to be skilled enough to make not-actually-mistakes that don’t sound like someone’s stomping on a cat’s tail. It works for you. You don’t wanna hear me try it.”
“Let’s do it,” Derek said immediately.

Stiles really should have expected that response.

He opened his mouth to object, more vigorously this time, but Derek’s eagerness was infectious, and he sighed in resignation. “Do what? More of my ‘hit random keys and see how you respond’ experiment?”

“You learned Chopsticks as a duet, right? Everybody does that when they’re starting out. Do you remember it?”

“Probably,” Stiles hazarded. “It’s been a long time though, man. I can’t make any promises.”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect. Play what you know, and if you hit a point where you don’t remember, fill it in with a chord or something else that feels like it’ll fit. Improvise.”

“You’re overestimating my abilities again,” Stiles warned him, “but I’ll give it a go.”

The song began well enough, Stiles relying on stored muscle memory that somehow hadn’t been fully wiped away by a decade of neglect. The plonky beat was familiar and fun, but when Derek started speeding up, Stiles faltered, losing the thread.

“Play a chord!” Derek said, slowing slightly to let him catch up.

“What chord?” he shot back in frustration.

“Any chord! Don’t overthink it.”

Stiles stabbed haphazardly at the keys, hitting what felt like twelve discordant notes in succession. Derek did his best to adjust to Stiles’s musical meltdown, but everything Stiles tried seemed to make it worse, until they heard a low, pained howl coming from the direction of the dining room.

“Oh god, I’ve broken Lola,” Stiles said in dismay, shoving himself away from the piano and slapping his hand against the wall to catch himself before his momentum propelled him all the way onto the floor.

Derek’s shoulders were shaking violently, and Stiles caught a glimpse of his face, red with badly contained laughter, as he was attempting to stabilize himself.

“Some help you are,” he muttered. “Jesus. That did not go well.”

“I’ll listen to you the next time,” Derek gasped, still laughing. “That was the worst thing I’ve ever heard. And my dad used to give preschoolers piano lessons in our living room.”

“You realize,” Stiles said grumpily, extricating himself from the piano and the tangle of his own limbs, “that you laugh at me a lot? A guy’s gonna develop a complex at this rate.”

Derek wiped at his eyes and, to his credit, did his best to stop. “I’m not laughing at you.”

“Not from my perspective,” he grumbled.

“I’m not laughing at you,” Derek said again, with emphasis. “But I can’t apologize for the fact that I like it when you make me laugh.”

“Really not seeing the difference.”
Derek smiled at him, then, soft and almost fond. “It’s a compliment, Stiles. I’m telling you being around you makes me happy.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well that’s...one of the nicer things anyone’s ever said to me.”

Derek did his embarrassed little head duck, which was stupid since he was the one who’d just given the compliment. Stiles tried to think of something to say in return, but his brain was feeling sluggish, and he swayed on his feet when he tried to stand.

“Wow, I’m way more tired than I thought,” he said. Drained would be a more accurate description; he felt like his insides had been scraped raw and stuffed back in. This was why he didn’t do emotions, generally. He tried bracing himself against the window—a wide pane with the blinds flipped open, framing a clear view of the sidewalk and street outside—and flinched away from the cold glass. “Fuck, the walk home is going to be awful.” He shivered at the thought.

“It’s late,” Derek said. He’d gotten up, too, and flipped on the entryway light.

“I know, I was just saying that.”

“No, I mean it’s four in the morning late. There’s no way you should be walking all the way back to campus at this hour.”

Stiles narrowed his eyes, too tired to argue, but not sure what the alternative was supposed to be.

“I have two spare bedrooms,” Derek clarified. “It makes more sense for you to stay here and head out in the morning. You’ll get more sleep, and I won’t worry about you wandering off the path and passing out in some bushes.”

“That only sounds a little like something I’d do,” Stiles said, closing off the sentence with a jaw-cracking yawn that proved his point. “If you’re sure that’s okay, I think I’d better take you up on that offer.”

“The bathroom has extra toothbrushes. Bottom drawer of the vanity; take whichever one you like.” He frowned. “Dammit, I still haven’t brushed Lola’s teeth.”

“Well,” Stiles said helpfully. “I think the piano experiment proved that she’s still awake.”

Derek gave an exasperated shake of his head, which transitioned into a yawn halfway through. He scraped both hands through his hair, leaving him looking sleepily rumpled. “She must be so confused about why I’m still up.”

“Sorry for throwing off your schedule,” Stiles said, but Derek waved dismissively.

“Not the first time I’ve seen the wrong side of the morning. Won’t be the last. And this was much more fun than panicking over a deadline.”

“Speak of the devil,” Stiles said when Lola poked a judgmental nose around the corner. “Did we interrupt your beauty sleep?”

“She’ll just conk out harder in class tomorrow.” Derek turned on the hallway light and slapped gently at the door frame as he walked by. “I’ll show you the bedrooms in a minute, or you can choose for yourself. Either one on the left.”

Stiles used the bathroom first, then splashed water on his face and gave himself a silent pep talk in the mirror. It mostly consisted of “be cool” and “holy shit, what.”
How the hell was he not only in Derek’s house, but getting ready to spend the night there? Not with Derek, granted. That was a bigger, more unrealistic dream than anything else he’d waxed eloquent over in the last hour. Hours? Jesus, had they really spent the entire night talking?

Four in the fucking morning, and Derek was acting like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to stay over. Maybe it wasn’t as big of a deal when you owned a house; with that much space, you expected people to be around to fill it. He paused to imagine the roles switched, what it’d be like to invite Derek to crash on his apartment’s filthy couch, but even the thought of him ducking through the weather-swollen doorway was too incongruous to stick in his mind for long. Stiles might be able to step up into Derek’s life for short, transcendent periods, but the reverse wasn’t true.

He pushed at his temples, trying to slow the whirling in his already oversaturated brain. He was going to need some serious time to himself to sort through all of this, once his rationality kicked back in. He...didn’t think he’d regret anything he’d told Derek. Not the bits about his mom. Not even the part where he’d basically cried in front of him, jesus, when was the last time he’d done that, with anyone? He’d rather gnaw off one of his own limbs than stick around after displaying that much vulnerability around someone. He should’ve been fumbling for his shoes after that, tossing a “goodbye” behind him as he fled.

Stiles wanted to share more, though.

That, in itself, was a revelation.

“This is getting you nowhere,” he muttered, and tugged open the drawer to dig for the promised toothbrush so he could go the hell to bed.

“Jesus, Derek,” he said softly.

There wasn’t an extra toothbrush. The space was packed neatly with stacks of toothbrushes—the nice kind, too, not the cheap ones with bristles that bent and flattened after one good scrub—plus shiny boxes of mint-striped toothpaste, even tampons, for fuck’s sake. He straightened up and, on an impulse, jerked open the cabinet doors over the toilet. Slender cans of shaving cream, packets of disposable razors, different kinds of body wash—cocoa butter, pomegranate and mango, some others he couldn’t see in the back. A pile of fluffy sponge things in bright colors. Kids’ shampoo with cartoon characters on the labels.

This wasn’t just a guest bathroom. This was a room stocked in anticipation of visitors who never came.

He peeled a new toothbrush out of its package, squeezed on some toothpaste from a meticulously rolled tube he found on the shelves behind the mirror, and closed everything else up.

The freezer filled with extra meals; the spare bedrooms that sat empty for most of the year. The sorrow-filled eyes that had conveyed empathy, not pity, when Stiles had been talking about losing his mom. He’d been envious of Derek: of what it’d be like to live in an honest-to-god house with a driveway and a yard and a bed without his best friend snoring a few feet away from him and a washing machine that didn’t suck up an endless supply of quarters. He hadn’t really thought beyond that. He tried picturing himself living across the country from his loved ones, seeing them once a year if he was lucky, coming home every night and waking up every morning to an empty house.

It was no wonder Derek had adopted Lola, but was it enough? He was the kind of guy who should have a family of his own by now: some incredibly beautiful, brilliant wife with an impressive career; a pile of kids running rampant through the rooms.
If he did get married in the near future, or even if he started dating someone seriously, would he still talk to Stiles? Because fuck this notion of losing touch at the end of the year. Stiles didn’t open up to just anyone, not like this, and if Derek was willing, Stiles would be the best fucking friend he’d ever had. He’d...fuck, he’d even play nice with his significant other.

He spat in the sink, rinsed, and made sure the toothpaste residue had been fully washed away before he twisted off the water.

The doors on the left side of the hallway were open, and Stiles poked his head into the first room. Queen bed with a red-checked quilt, wood furniture, more framed photos, including a few snow-covered cityscapes that must be from his time on the East Coast. The second room, across from the closed door that presumably led to Derek’s, had a more lived-in feel. This must be his study; it was crammed full with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the corner by the window taken up by an L-shaped desk with a computer and printer on one half and organized stacks of paperwork on the other.

Stiles riffled absentely through one pile. Densely researched essays for one of his other classes—European Intellectual Culture, according to the cover pages. The papers were studded with sticky tabs, which meant he must still be grading them. The pile next to it was taller, a full page of his always thoughtfully composed responses stapled to the back of each student’s work. He was pulling books off the shelves to examine the covers when Derek tapped lightly on the door to announce his presence.

“You’ve got your own library in here,” Stiles said, pushing a thick anthology back into place. There was a full shelf with “HALE” on the spines, and he recognized some of the other books from their optional additional reading list, which had reserved copies they could check out for a few hours at a time in the actual library’s reading rooms. He hadn’t managed to fit in all of them, but he’d done as much as he could, curious about what Derek considered extraneous material that he wouldn’t factor into grades but still wanted to share. He was pretty sure the reference librarian had a perfectly understandable crush on Derek; the only time she stopped frowning at Stiles was when she was retrieving the copies for Dr. Hale’s course. He gained some respectability from association, he supposed. He’d bet she’d never been invited over to look at Derek’s books.

Or been offered a folded stack of his clothes. “I don’t know what you usually wear to bed, but I brought you a few options in case you didn’t want to sleep in your jeans.”

“You must be tired,” Stiles said sympathetically. “You left one of your dress shirts in here.”

Derek looked confused, then laughed when Stiles plucked out a collared, button-up black shirt. “That’s a pajama shirt. It’s loose-fit, and a totally different material.”

“It has matching pants,” Stiles marveled, shaking those out. “God, I’d feel weird wearing these, like I was in costume or something.”

“Sweatpants and t-shirt it is, then?” Derek, thankfully, didn’t seem offended by Stiles’s exhaustion-diminished filter; he merely took back the fancy pajama set and left Stiles holding a soft pair of black sweatpants and a well-worn Princeton t-shirt. “Did you decide on this room? It only has a futon, but Cora says it’s comfortable.”

“Oh, I hadn’t made it that far,” Stiles admitted. “I was just snooping in your books. I guess I should go with the other one? It’s already all set up and everything. No levers and unfolding and possible late-night injuries.”

Derek chuckled. “Good call. In that case, I think I’m gonna head to bed. You need anything else?”
“I’m good. Thanks, Dr. Hale.” He meant it as overarching gratitude for the entire evening, but Derek simply nodded and wished him a good night.

When the door across the hall clicked shut, Stiles lifted the t-shirt collar to his nose and sniffed at it, disappointed to only find the fresh scent of laundry detergent. It was a stupid gesture; of course it wasn’t something Derek had worn recently or slept in.

It still felt indulgent to strip off his clothes and slip into Derek’s, to feel the fabric against his skin and close his eyes, imagining for a moment that the bed he was getting into had Derek waiting for him on the other side.

Chapter End Notes

*Next up:* Derek deals with the aftermath
Derek woke with gritty eyes that he had to struggle to pry open. The radio was mid-song, and he had a vague sense of hearing a good segment of it filtering into his dreams before the cymbal-clashing started in earnest and dragged him the rest of the way out.

“Rachmaninoff,” he croaked. “Oh god, what time is it?”

Too early, was the answer when he managed to roll his head to the side to peer at the clock. Every muscle in his body felt stiff and overtaxed, and if the rough scratch in his throat was any indication, he was on his way to picking up a cold. Despite that, he felt...happy. Oddly content. He lay in bed, reluctant to move just yet, letting the music swell in an enthusiastic crescendo as he tried to pinpoint the reason for his unexpectedly good mood.

It came to his sleep-thick brain slowly, in images that made his heart beat faster as he pieced them together. Laughing brown eyes, moles spattered in an inviting arc from slightly unkempt hair to the most perfectly shaped lips he’d ever seen. A flurry of fast-paced words with a wine glass waved carelessly as punctuation, the liquid inside sloshing dangerously. The quieter stories that came later: eyes that darkened with grief, and a hand that clutched his tightly. Lips that pinched in annoyance and embarrassment, then curved back into a smile at Derek’s too-honest words.

“You make me happy,” he repeated quietly, smiling up at the ceiling.

Stiles was in the next room, and suddenly Derek didn’t care about the low-grade headache creeping up the back of his neck or the very real possibility that he’d lose his voice by the last class of the day.

Which wasn’t to say that he relished the idea of getting out of bed. He sat up, grunting painfully, and decided to put minimal effort into being presentable; that could wait until after coffee. It was definitely a two, maybe three cup morning. He’d better get the pot percolating and start on the first as soon as possible.

To his surprise—and immediate dampening of his mood—Stiles’s door was open, the sheets thrown back and the bed empty. He hadn’t struck Derek as an early riser, but there was a lot about him he still didn’t know. It wouldn’t be a stretch to think he’d be better able to function on less than four hours of sleep. And it was possible he had an early class he’d needed to rush to first thing.

Or, Derek was forced to consider as he moved inside to smooth out the covers, he might’ve wanted to slip away before the awkward morning after conversation. It was a sobering thought. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had revealed things in the dead of night that they later wished they could take back. Derek hadn’t expected that, not from Stiles, but his track record with interpreting situations correctly had significant blemishes. It was shortsighted of him to expect this to be different.

And perhaps Stiles had the right idea; inviting him to stay the night wasn’t the wisest thing Derek had ever done. This way, they could more easily pretend it had never happened.

He’d need to strip the bed and run a load of laundry, but it wasn’t an urgent chore. No one else would be using the room for another month. Two, if Laura got her way for Thanksgiving.

He tugged the sheets up to the head of the bed and frowned: the quilt was missing. So was one of the pillows, for that matter. Knocked to the other side of the frame, possibly? He circled around it to
check but only found a crumple of jeans, a t-shirt, and Stiles’s hoodie.

“That’s...odd,” he said out loud, hope fluttering cautious wings again, and returned to the hallway, expecting now to find Stiles rummaging around in his kitchen.

Or on the couch, the quilt and one leg spilling off the edge, both arms thrown over his head, and Lola plastered along his chest, her muzzle resting against his throat. They were both snoring.

Derek exhaled a relieved laugh and wondered how inappropriate it would be to take a picture. Very, he decided reluctantly, and did his best to commit the sight to memory. Stiles was still wearing Laura’s socks, although one was dangling halfway off his foot. He probably was going to steal them at this rate. Derek wouldn’t lift a finger to stop him.

He made it into the kitchen without waking either of them and began the coffee preparations, working as silently as possible. If Stiles hadn’t set an alarm, he’d let him sleep. Even if it made absolutely no sense to opt for the couch when there were two perfectly good beds in the house—three, he tried not to think—and he’d clearly started out in one of them.

Derek had refilled his cup and rucked up his shirt to scratch absently at the trail of hair along his stomach when he heard a pained groan and a thump. He turned—he’d been gazing through the dining room window into the backyard, considering whether rain seemed imminent—to find Stiles picking himself up off the floor and apologizing to a disgruntled Lola.

“Morning,” Derek said, and dropped his shirt back down after a beat, suddenly remembering that he was still in his pajamas. He’d half-intended to shower and change before Stiles woke up, but he was still in a sluggish mode, where his primary thoughts were: This coffee is nice and Should I start breakfast?

“Morning,” Stiles echoed, his voice a little hoarse.

“Sleep well?” Derek asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, about that.” He sniffed at the air and eyed Derek’s mug hopefully. “Is that coffee? Is there more of that?”

“A whole pot. Grab yourself a cup. Cream’s in the fridge, sugar’s in the pantry.”

Stiles tripped over his dangling socks and bent to peel them off before pouring himself an extra-large mug he managed to dig out of the back of one of Derek’s cabinets. “Oh thank god,” he said, wrapping his hands around it and pressing his face lovingly against the rim. “It’s official, I’m marrying this coffee.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to officiate,” Derek said. He set his cup down so he could fill Lola’s bowl and shake in the appropriate dosage of her supplements. He wasn’t running too far behind schedule, all things considered; the trek to campus would simply have to double as her morning walk, and he’d extend their backyard playtime when they got home.

“Wait, can you actually do that?” Stiles asked after a delay.

“Marry you to your coffee? Afraid not.”

Stiles glared at him. His hair was wildly mussed, sticking up in unruly tufts, and Derek’s t-shirt—which apparently had large holes along the collar—was stretched halfway off one shoulder, exposing his collarbones and an expanse of pale, mole-spotted skin. “It’s too early for me to respond with the appropriate level of sarcasm. I meant do you have the—whatever it’s called. Marriage certification.
Part-time reverend cred.”

“I don’t.” He’d looked into it when Boyd and Erica were getting married; they’d been fighting over whose best man he’d be, and serving as the officiant had seemed like a logical compromise. In the end, Boyd had promoted his sister to best woman, and Erica had triumphantly picked out Derek’s suit. Purple, her favorite color, even though he’d privately felt it made him look like Willy Wonka.

“Hmm,” Stiles said. “Finally, a thing you can’t do.” He continued drinking as Derek washed his hands and started pulling out breakfast materials.

“You have an egg preference?”

“Scrambled,” Stiles said. “With cheese?”

“Cheddar okay?”

“Cheddar is perfect.”

Derek glanced at the clock. He was craving bacon, but the oven would take too long and he didn’t want to deal with cleaning grease spatters off the stovetop. “What’re your thoughts on sausage?” He made an elongated link shape with his hand to indicate what type he meant; he generally preferred the taste to that of the patties.

Stiles choked on his coffee, spitting some of it back into his mug. “...definitely like sausage,” he said after he was done coughing. “Was fun when I learned that about myself.”

Derek made a commiserating noise. “It’s not the healthiest. I try to limit it to when I’ve had a hard night and need my day started off right.” Stiles twisted his face oddly, and Derek rubbed tiredly over his eyebrows and through his hair. He’d need a lot more caffeine and some decent food before he was able to interpret Stiles’s ever-changing expressions. “Not that last night was—it was just long,” he said, in case Stiles had taken it the wrong way.

“Long and hard,” Stiles mumbled with a smirk. Before Derek had a chance to take that the wrong way, he added, “I’m also a big fan of sausage in the mornings. I’ll take as much as you can give me.” He was already looking brighter-eyed, recovering from the lack of sleep faster than Derek, as predicted. He poured himself a fresh batch of strong, dark coffee, leaving it black, and sat down on the bar stool he’d claimed the night before. Dragging his phone toward himself, he poked at it and grunted in irritation. “Battery’s dead. I really need to get better about making sure I have a full charge before I leave the house.” He didn’t seem overly bothered, though, and propped his elbows on the counter to watch Derek cook.

“So are you gonna tell me how you ended up on the couch?”

“Wasn’t intentional. And wasn’t a commentary on your mattress, which I would also marry if I could. I’ve never slept on anything that nice in my life.” He pointed at sourdough when Derek held up the toast options. “I was just about conked out when that girl over there came scratching and whining at the door.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry,” Derek said. “She’s finally stopped doing that with me, but I hadn’t thought about how she’d react to another person being in the house.”

“She might’ve stopped if I’d ignored it, but I was worried it’d wake you up. And I didn’t know if the guest beds were off-limits, so the quickest way to appease her was to camp out in the living room instead. I have no idea when she actually climbed on the couch with me; I passed out pretty fast once I was in here. The bed may be a heavenly cloud, but your couch isn’t too shabby, either.”
“Still,” Derek said. “She shouldn’t have done that. I’ll have to figure that out before she makes a mess out of the holidays.”

He could only imagine the kids using Lola’s anxiety as an excuse to do something like snuggle up on her dog bed with her. Then again, would she respond the same way to being separated from people she barely knew? In her mind, Stiles was as much hers as Derek was, and in her possessive little dog brain, it’d make sense for her to resent him shutting her out.

“Did I make things worse?” Stiles asked apologetically. “Is she going to start trying to drag you out of bed and onto the couch?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. She’ll be looking for you, probably.” And snubbing him for a while when he wasn’t able to produce her beloved Stiles. They were going to be a mopey pair for a few days; he could already tell.

“Anything I should be doing to help?” Stiles asked after a bit.

Derek would miss that part, too: Stiles navigating his house effortlessly, pouring orange juice and providing running commentary on his jam options. Slipping into Derek’s orbit with an ease and magnetism that pulled him ever-so-slightly off course. He’d wobble for a while once Stiles was gone, but he’d course correct eventually.

Breakfast was a quick affair; Derek skipped his leisurely headline perusal and left the dishes in the sink to deal with later. “When do you need to be on campus?” he asked, wanting a chance to say goodbye before he hopped in the shower.

“First class isn’t until 11,” Stiles said. He’d flopped back onto the couch and seemed to be in no particular hurry to rush out the door. “What about yours?”

“10.” He bent down to give Lola her eye drops and wash her face, gently cleaning away the food that had gotten caught in her beard. “I should start getting dressed. But if you need more time to shower and get ready, you can lock up after I’m gone. Just make sure the door’s latched.”

Derek considered and discarded the idea of offering some clean clothes for him to walk home in. Pajamas were one thing; Stiles potentially showing up in class wearing something recognizably Derek’s could raise eyebrows and uncomfortable questions.

“I was actually thinking I could walk with you,” Stiles said. “I can be quick.”

“Oh,” Derek said, and frowned. He wasn’t sure that was a good idea, either. What if someone saw them together? They hadn’t done anything wrong, of course, but that didn’t matter to people who created and shared gossip. They’d run with the worst possible version, not bothering to seek out the truth behind something that might appear dubious on the surface.

“Unless you’d rather not,” Stiles said. He’d stood back up and was thumbing uncertainly at the hem of his shirt.

Derek felt a wave of guilt crash over him. He was the one making this seem weird, letting his badly restrained feelings twist a perfectly innocuous situation into something to be ashamed of. “That's fine, too; I just didn't want you to feel rushed on my account,” he said, settling for a half-truth.

It was successful: Stiles beamed at him, and Derek resigned himself to the warmth that rebounded into his chest when he managed to make Stiles happy.

That contentment carried through his shower, and although he’d turned off the radio, he found
himself humming as he chose his clothes. He went with a classic black suit and a pale blue shirt, then put the tie back, deciding to leave his collar open at the throat. He'd be grateful for that as the afternoon wore on and he needed more cool air slapping against his skin, helping him in the battle to stay awake and alert.

Right now, he felt invigorated. He knew it wouldn't last, but he'd ride the swell while he could.

Stiles was in the living room, with damp hair and a tug-o-war rope that Lola was growling at enthusiastically. “We got bored,” he said when he saw Derek. “Although I might invest the extra time in my mornings if they produced those kinds of results.” He motioned at Derek's suit, and Derek smoothed down the lapel self-consciously.

Maintaining his personal appearance was a habit he'd formed early on, after he grew out of his big ears, gawky frame, the subtle lisp that still came out when he got excited, and two rounds of braces. He'd put conscious effort into transforming himself when he started college. No one there would know him as Laura’s nerdy brother, who'd started a History Club that only two other students had joined. Their activities had included watching and discussing documentaries and talking their parents or older siblings into driving them to museums. It was hard to compete with the other clubs’ pizza parties and much more popular members.

Erica teased him about wearing a suit to work every day. He'd had trouble explaining his reason. It was his armor, in a way. A shield against his insecurities and a reminder that he'd made it: he was successful, he was employed, and he'd earned a certain degree of respect.

Yet he'd never felt more like himself than when he was wearing pinstriped pajamas to make breakfast with Stiles.

It was worth thinking about, probably. He didn't have the luxury of indulging in that when Stiles was sitting on his floor, growling right back at his troublemaking dog.

“Thanks again,” Stiles said when Derek handed Lola’s leash to him so he could lock up. Stiles started down the driveway, tugging her along, and Derek shrugged but let him take the lead. Lola was wagging her whole body in delight, hurrying down the sidewalk without wasting time sniffing at the bushes along the edges.

“It's not a problem; we were heading the same way,” Derek said. He reached out to tug the strap of Stiles’s bag higher on his shoulder; he'd thrown it on carelessly after stuffing in the leftovers Derek had handed him, and it'd immediately started slipping. It was a quick adjustment that Stiles took in stride.

“No, for last night. For everything. I know it makes me sound like a total disaster, but when you found me on that bench, I honestly didn't know where I was going to go.”

“It was my pleasure,” Derek said honestly. He adjusted his pace slightly so he could keep in line with Stiles while stepping over the cracks in the sidewalk—a habit he'd carried over from childhood. “Do you think that's something that'll happen often?” he asked.

“Being sexiled?” Stiles cast him a quick sidelong look. “Yeah, if Scott and Allison are any indication, it'll be...frequent. Sorry,” he added, still seeming to think Derek was trying to keep tabs on Kira, or protect her from herself.

“If you need a place to go,” he started, the offer making his heart hammer. “You're welcome to come over. Any time.”
Stiles’s mouth parted. He was silent for about half a block, and Derek counted the sidewalk cracks until he spoke again. Seventy-two. Stiles’s voice was laced with humor: “You're trying to avoid the scenario where you find me frozen to death outside your house, huh?”

“I prefer avoiding paperwork where I can,” Derek said, responding in the same vein. It was the right answer; Stiles responded with a grateful grin. “I can give you my phone number,” he continued, fueled by an unaccustomed bravery.

Stiles grimaced, and Derek's heart sank for a second before he muttered, “Of all the times for my phone to die. But—it's on the syllabus, isn't it? I can get it from there.”

“That's my office line, not my personal cell phone. I imagine that I won't be hanging around on campus during the hours when you'd need to be clearing out of your apartment.”

“Right,” Stiles said. “Of course. Dammit.” He patted at his pockets—looking for a pen, maybe?—then lit up with inspiration. “I can give you my number? Then if you text me, yours’ll be stored in mine.”

Derek swung his bag around and slipped his phone out, waking it up and unlocking the screen. He carefully entered Stiles’s number as he recited the digits, then opened up a new text thread. After too much consideration, he typed: **Any time.**

They resumed walking again, Stiles having slowed to a stop when Derek’s texting caused him to lag behind.

“It’s really nice of you to open your home up, Dr. Hale,” he said, and Derek’s contentment wobbled.

It was odd to feel so close to someone without having ever heard your name cross their lips. He’d caught himself a dozen times, painfully swallowing down the *Call me Derek* that’d been at the tip of his tongue. Stiles’s consistent use of his title served as a reminder of where they stood. It would be wrong to push past that, to force the level of familiarity that Derek craved.

There was little logic in emotions, or in the kind of compartmentalizing Derek was engaging in. He was aware of his own irrationality and of the rules he kept sweeping aside when Stiles approached them too closely. *Dr. Hale*, though, was a barrier that Stiles was holding in place, whether intentionally or not, and Derek wouldn’t be the one to knock it down.

When they reached the pathway that cut through the right side of campus, leading to the cluster of humanities buildings where Derek spent most of his time, Stiles handed over Lola’s leash and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I’ve gotta go get changed before class,” he said, shrugging a shoulder at the wider path that stretched out ahead of them, bisecting the campus and presumably providing a straight shot to his apartment. He lingered, though, and the part of Derek that would ordinarily be twitching with the urge to check his watch lay quiet. In a decade of teaching, he’d never been late to one of his classes. There’d never been anything that felt more important to him.

Students hurried past in a steady rush, a lone bicyclist weaving around—and swearing at—a clump of guys playing frisbee golf. It was the familiar hum of campus life, a pulse he’d aligned his to many years ago. His heart was a few beats off now, rebelling against the road he’d paved for himself.

Stiles shifted in place—a restless movement, Derek thought, but not an impatient one. Before merging back into the foot traffic, he said, “I had a really good time.”

“Me too,” Derek said.
Stiles shouldered his way through the crowd; even from a distance, he stood out from them, his gait as familiar to Derek now as any other part of him.

He trailed his fingers over Lola’s uplifted, questioning head. “It’s just you and me again,” he told her.

***

“Derek. Derek. Are you asleep?”

Derek jolted, his chin jerking up. He wiped at his face and Boyd sat back, picking up his sandwich again. They were sharing their regular Friday afternoon lunch break, which usually consisted of exchanging notes on any particularly good books or articles they’d read since they’d last seen each other. It did not usually end in Derek nodding off while sitting at the table.

“Late night?” Boyd asked conversationally. “I haven’t seen you this out of it since the last time Erica dragged us clubbing. She’ll be pissed if she finds out you went without her.”

“No, I was at home all night. Didn’t get a lot of sleep; I guess it’s catching up to me already.” The first lecture had gone well; he was flagging some by the second, but it was a smaller seminar where he usually prompted his students to carry the discussion anyway.

“Ah, midterms prep? Clearing out your backlog before the next set’s in?”

He had meant to finish off one last round of papers, but he had the rest of the weekend for that. “No, I—had a friend over. We were up late.”

“Hmm,” Boyd said.

“Talking,” Derek said.

“Sure.” Boyd crunched on a carrot stick.

And that was the difference between him and Erica...although a part of Derek wanted him to push, wanted an excuse to talk about Stiles. He poked the prongs of his fork through his half-eaten lunch. “What do you think about midlife crises?” he asked.

“I think they’re bullshit. But if you bought yourself a motorcycle, I’ll support you. And ask to borrow it.”

Derek smiled to himself at the thought of picking out one with a sidecar he could buckle Lola into, shielding her eyes with a set of specially-made goggles. It was an image Stiles would appreciate. He gripped his fork more tightly so he wouldn’t be tempted to text it to him.

He hadn’t gotten a text back yet. He’d been restricting himself to checking between classes, reminding himself each time that phones took a while to charge and that Stiles was busy today, too. Besides, what would he say? Derek hadn’t exactly given him a conversational opening. It was more of a lifeline: call me when you don’t have anywhere else to go.

“Is this about the friend?” Boyd asked, and Derek hesitated before nodding. “Then I would say...trust yourself. If it’s something you feel good about, don’t waste time second-guessing it.”

He licked his lips, anxiety spiking. “What if it’s something I feel good about, but I can’t act on it? He’s...it really was just talking. He’s not someone who can be more than a friend.”

“Hmm,” Boyd said again. He peeled a dangling string free from his celery and wiped it off on his
napkin. “Is that because of him, or because you’re holding yourself back?”

“I can’t,” Derek said, frustrated and helpless. Even if Stiles was interested or willing to cross that line, Derek had his career to think about. His reputation. And for what? A few months, maybe, before Stiles moved on, either geographically or to someone who was closer to his age and who fit better into his lifestyle. That wasn’t an outcome Derek was strong enough to handle.

Boyd backed off; he didn’t know everything about Derek’s dating history, but his trust issues were old news. He appeared to be choosing his next words carefully. “You gotta do what’s right for you. I’ll tell you this, though; when you were thinking about him just now, before you started worrying about it? That wasn’t the face of a guy who wants to give up on something that could potentially be really great.”

Not just great. Great would be easier to set aside with only minor lapses into wistfulness. “When I’m with him, everything’s...perfect.”

“And when you’re apart, reality comes crashing back in?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well,” Boyd said, crumpling up his napkin and tossing it into the bin. “If you’re not planning to hang out with the ‘friend’ this weekend, whaddya say to grabbing some drinks on Saturday night?”

“Doyle’s?”

“Yup. Cab’s my treat so we can get sloshed. It’s been too long since we’ve said fuck it to responsibilities for a night.”

Derek turned his wrist to check his watch. One more lecture before his weekend could start in earnest. “I’m thinking about taking a sabbatical,” he said. It hadn’t been true until he spoke the words. He was tired. Not just today: this exhaustion was temporary, purely physical. It was a good ache, like the satisfying pull of sore muscles after a grueling workout. Lurking behind that, though, was a deeper weariness that had been creeping up on him for much longer. He needed the kind of break he’d never allowed himself to take. A real holiday, one that didn’t involve packing in extra conferences and agreeing to submit research to a half-dozen open access journals that were trying to prove their worth by publishing respectable scholars.

A vacation. What would that even look like?

“Yeah?” Boyd said, sounding surprised but supportive. A best friend Derek wasn’t always sure he deserved. “That’s a good idea. You’ve never taken one, have you?”

“Noshiko tried to push me into it a couple years ago. I was too busy to even consider it.” He glanced at the doorway of the history lounge, half-expecting her to sweep in to tell her side of the story. The building was quiet, though, most of their colleagues out for the day or heading to their 1 PM classes. Instead of asking why now—an answer that was probably easy enough to glean from the spaces between their words—Boyd went with, “When are you thinking you’ll do it?”

“Next year?” His schedule wasn’t set in stone yet, but it might not be enough notice. “Or the year after?”

“Mhm,” Boyd said, which was easy enough to interpret as: The more you delay, the less likely it is you’ll actually follow through. It was a fair enough reading of Derek’s typical reluctance to step away from his job. He meant it this time, though. The idea of being on campus next year, after Stiles
was gone? *That* wasn’t the good kind of ache.

“Anyway.” He brushed the conversation aside for later. He’d need to talk to Noshiko before he made any firm plans; she’d be sure to have an opinion. “You were telling me about that Hawkins paper?”

“Which put you to sleep,” Boyd said, but he started from the beginning.

***

Lola sat patiently at Derek’s feet as he wiped down the board in the lecture hall; she’d been sticking close to him all day, so he didn’t have to look for the reason when her collar jangled and she lurched upright.

He finished erasing the notes the last professor had, once again, left behind, and brushed the chalk dust off his hands as he turned to face the rows of desks. They were about three-quarters full, thanks to the threat of the upcoming exam. He’d never understood that logic, even before he switched positions in the classroom: did students really think they would be able to soak up the necessary knowledge in an hour or two when they’d been skipping his class all semester? The exam was created fairly. There were no trick questions, and he was always willing to listen to legitimate attempts to earn points back. He did his best, but he wasn’t infallible. There were, on occasion, unclear questions that could yield multiple answers. He’d run into that scenario as a student; it’d given him sympathy when addressing it from the other side of the desk.

Students who didn’t bother putting in the work but complained about their grades anyway? That was where his patience ran out.

He held a similarly disdainful stance on professors who phoned in their lectures or who were visibly bored or distracted during their own classes. Yawning counted in that category, and he fluttered his eyes closed and rubbed his knuckles down the side of his throat and along his collarbone in an attempt to suppress the one he felt building. It was a trick he’d picked up at some point; the skin-to-skin contact helped to ground him enough to bring even involuntary reflexes under some semblance of control.

“Oh *lord,*” he heard a female voice say, probably more loudly than she meant to. Ms. Sullivan, of course. Derek’s partially withheld yawn transitioned into a sigh. He’d made a point of propping his door open when she visited him during his office hours, and he always kept his desk firmly between them, being careful to limit the amount of time they spoke. He’d determined early on that she didn’t actually need his help; she was bright enough to do fine on her own. He suspected, though, that he’d be adding a letter to his Noshiko-maintained file by the end of the semester.

He’d expected it to happen less as he got older, but students were persistent. They got bored in class, he supposed. Anything started to look more appealing than actually paying attention to the lecture.

The heavy exterior door creaked open, and a couple more students slipped in and hurried up the stairs to take their seats. Derek checked his watch: right on time, although there might be other stragglers. He knew professors who refused entry once a lecture had already begun, which he felt was an overly strict mindset built more on maintaining their pride than on caring about the sanctity of the learning environment. For his part, he never minded latecomers as long as they were respectful and did their best to minimize interruptions.

Stiles was in his customary front row seat, his head bent over his notebook, Lola at his feet. He’d meant what he’d said about changing; his hair had been tastefully gelled, and he was wearing different jeans and a slim-fitting black coat with a high collar and a diagonal zipper. It was one Derek
hadn’t seen before. Wool, if he was reading the fabric correctly, which would be significantly warmer than his old hoodie.

Not important to think about right now. He thumbed at the lecture notes he’d set on the podium, reminding himself of the major points he needed to cover, and began.

They were about thirty minutes in, Derek having just managed to coax one of his less confident students into speaking, when Stiles dragged a bottle of soda out of his bag. It created a clatter that Derek ignored; eating and drinking during class was another area where he tended toward leniency.

Unless the drinking involved screwing the cap off a bottle that had been heavily shaken in transport, and said bottle choosing to spew its contents over everything within range.

Stiles yelped and grabbed his notebook and bag, lifting them to safety, and *Lola* yelped when the dark liquid foamed over the desktop and onto the floor where she was lying. She jumped up in a vain attempt to escape it, hit her head on the underside of the desk, and fled to Derek, her paws sliding in the mess, when he snapped his fingers to let her know where he was.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” Stiles said, starting to scramble out of his seat, and Derek silenced him with a look.

“There's no need to further disrupt my class, Mr. Stilinski. If you can clean the spill now, do so silently. If not, please save additional interruptions until after the room’s clear.” He nodded at the ginger-haired freshman in the back row, whose voice had faltered during the commotion. “Sorry about that, Mr. O’Leary. You were in the middle of an astute comment that I think would help us to frame the rest of today's discussion. Do you mind restating that for those who missed the last section?”

Stiles slunk lower in his seat as the discussion resumed. He’d ripped a few pages out of his notebook and dropped them on the floor in a rather inept effort to sop up some of the puddle and was now chewing disconsolately at his pen. He stayed seated until everyone else had left, Damien O’Leary pausing on his way out to shyly thank Derek.

That was one possible good deed for the semester. O’Leary was a nervous student who wrote excellent essays and gave off telltale signals of wanting to contribute his opinions, but who always shrank back from actually speaking up. Derek saw a definite history major in the making. Possibly even a future professor, if he got over his fear of public speaking. He’d need to remember to let him know that when handing back his midterm.

Derek stroked gently over the matted fur on the top of *Lola*’s head, checking to see if he could feel a lump or any sensitivity. The bump had been minor, startling her more than anything, but she was a senior dog; it didn't hurt to be careful. She merely twisted to lick the soda off his fingers.

“Is she okay?” Stiles asked. He was hovering at arms’ length, his face tight with worry.

“She’s sticky but fine. Looks like it’s gonna be a bath night.”

Hearing Stiles’s voice, *Lola* moved forward and pushed her muzzle into his shins to encourage him to pet her.

“Oh, thank god,” he breathed, dropping down immediately to let her lick his face. “I was worried both of you were pissed off at me.”

Derek paused in wiping away the exam schedule he’d written on the board. “Why would I be mad at you? It’s not like you poured soda over my dog on purpose.”
Stiles shot him a wounded look that quickly transitioned into something darker, his eyes sparking with offended anger. It made Derek’s breath catch. “You were pretty harsh. All I was trying to do was apologize.”

That hadn’t been Derek’s intention; he’d reacted to the situation, not the person, and the brief ripple of disturbance had, in his eyes, been easily smoothed over. “I didn’t mean to give that impression,” he said.

“Well, it made me feel like absolute shit,” Stiles snapped back. He stood back up so he could be at eye level with Derek. “It wasn’t even what you said. You looked right through me like you didn’t even know me. Like you were a completely different person.”

*From last night,* Derek filled in. *Shit.* It wasn’t anger, then: it was still hurt, sharply defensive. He glanced at the door, then double-checked the amphitheater seating to be certain they were alone.

“When I’m up here, in this role, I *am* a different person, Stiles.” He searched Stiles’s eyes for understanding.

“Mr. Stilinski and Dr. Hale,” Stiles said. His eyes were still dark, his mouth tight, but his shoulders had relaxed infinitesimally. He was willing to listen.

Derek didn’t know what to say, though. This was why he didn’t blur lines, why it was an absolutely awful idea to let someone stay in his house and show up in his class the next day. He couldn’t treat Stiles differently in this setting, but he’d obviously let his selfish enjoyment of Stiles’s company disrupt Stiles’s perception of where they stood. It was his fault, and he didn’t know how to fix it.

Stiles’s mind was working more quickly, and he spoke first, his voice dipping into his deeper register, clipped with emotion. “I’ve barely slept this entire semester. I’m exhausted every damn minute of every damn day. Sometimes I have no fucking idea what I’m doing with my life, but I’m doing it full throttle anyway. And last night was...” His lips twisted, and he tugged unthinkingly at the top of his zipper, sliding it partway up and down at the collar. “I told you shit I *never* talk about. And I felt okay about that today. I felt great about it, actually.”

“And then I treated you like a total stranger,” Derek said.

Stiles nodded. “I get what you’re saying. I do. And I know this, right now, is probably an overreaction I’m gonna kick myself about later. But it’s how I feel.” He shrugged, a hint of embarrassment starting to creep in. “And fuck it, I’m human, okay? I just wanted some goddamn caffeine.”

“Stiles,” Derek said softly, and Stiles lifted his narrowed, dark-lashed eyes back to him. “Your friendship’s important to me.” Stiles’s mouth twisted again, as if he wanted to protest the statement, and he snapped his zipper back to his collar and shoved his hands in his coat pockets, making the fabric pull tight across his chest. Derek pressed on. “You told me before that you’re not good at making friends. I’m worse.”

Stiles huffed out a disbelieving laugh, and Derek smiled wryly.

“You can ask Erica if you don’t believe me. I don’t...trust people. I don’t invite them in, figuratively or literally.” If Erica hadn’t been so persistent, or so much like his sisters, whom he missed constantly, he probably wouldn’t have befriended her, either. He was grateful for her. He was grateful for Stiles. Anxiety curled in his stomach at the thought of losing him because of a strict code of conduct he wasn’t able—or willing—to break. “I separate out parts of my life; I’m not saying it’s the right way to do things, or the only way, but it’s how I work. And I treated you today like I would
have anyone in the same situation, whether a close friend or a complete stranger. What you’re seeing
as cold and dismissive is me doing my job, the best way I know how.”

Stiles nodded slowly, almost visibly processing the information. If Derek could see inside his head,
he imagined there’d be gears clicking, each word pulled apart and slotted into its proper place.

“In class, you’re my student,” Derek said, making this part as clear and concise as possible.
“Regardless of what may be true elsewhere, when you’re here, you’re the same as every other
person in this room. No special rules apply.”

“I know, Dr. Hale,” Stiles said. His eyes were friendlier again, and Derek breathed a little easier. “I
didn’t mean to push you on that. I wouldn’t ask for them.”

The flare of worry at the back of Derek’s head began to dim. Maybe he hadn’t irrevocably ruined
things. Maybe he didn’t have to choose between friendship and his career. Maybe he could have
both, at least for a while.

“Does that mean we’re good?” he asked.

“I dunno,” Stiles said, with a mischievous twinkle. “Do I still have to clean up my mess? Or can we
pretend someone else did it and let the janitors deal with it?” He laughed at Derek’s answering
frown. “I kid, I kid! I know that’s a dick move. But seriously, all I seem to be able to do is spread it
around more. I’m kinda stuck.”

“I think I can find some paper towels,” Derek said. He was in no rush to head home, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles goes swimming
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Midterms sucked.

If Past Stiles had thought he’d been thin on sleep before The Week From Hell, Current Stiles would like to slap him heartily in the face and tell him to suck it up and count his blessings. He’d made it to the weekend basically dead on his feet, longing for the days when he felt justified cursing multiple choice exams. Derek’s short essay exam, while challenging in its own way, had been the easiest of the batch. Then again, Stiles had extra motivation to do the reading and pay close attention during class. He could hear Derek’s voice in the questions, and writing out his answers had almost been fun; it’d felt like a conversation, albeit one Derek would be grading with a critical eye.

Derek was one of those professors who genuinely cared about the wellbeing and academic progress of every single one of his students. He’d extended his office hours all week, coming in on Tuesday and Thursday as well, and Stiles had no doubt that attendance had been steady. He’d thought about giving him a break by claiming a time slot and using it to complain about his other classes, but that was coming dangerously close to using “professor time” for “friend time,” and Stiles wasn’t quite sure where the line was drawn. He’d taken Derek’s caution to heart. It was hard not to, when he’d spoken so earnestly and looked so relieved when Stiles had accepted his explanation.

They hadn’t had a lot of time to talk since, and even in the midst of the agonizing grind of an overfull academic schedule, Stiles had missed him.

He’d had one other exam, a term paper, and two classes that were largely project-based; despite his attempts to keep on top of his work, all the deadlines had come crashing down simultaneously.

The first phase of his group’s robot prototype was complete. That was a temporary relief. Danny had suggested they all take a week, maybe a week and a half, before diving into Phase Two. It was one of the few times Stiles had agreed wholeheartedly with him.

Derek’s exam had closed off his week, and he’d gone straight from there to possibly the worst catering experience he’d had yet—another wedding, this time with a bride who had a meltdown when she found out her perfectly exorbitant outdoor extravaganza had been rained out and had to be moved inside. The scramble to reorganize hadn’t been terrible from a catering standpoint, and the event hall they’d ended up in had seemed nice enough to Stiles. Fancy decor, lofty ceilings, built-in dance floor, and plenty of room to set up tables.

The bride hadn’t agreed.

In the middle of her reception, she’d gotten into an argument with Finstock and her wedding planner, a harassed-looking woman who’d appeared to be on her last straw, about their complete lack of foresight in keeping tents on hand as backup options. When the wedding planner had reminded her—in a brittle tone that indicated this wasn’t a new topic—that the bride’s parents hadn’t wanted to shell out the extra money, the bride had thrown a champagne bottle at Finstock, knocked over her cake table, and gone in search of her father.

The cleanup had been extensive, the tips abysmal, and Stiles’s low opinion of weddings further cemented. He had no idea where the groom had even ended up after the ceremony, and the bride hadn’t seem overly invested in finding out, either.
The rest of the weekend had been filled with corporate events, which were generally dull but comparatively lucrative. The trays emptied quickly, the managers made speeches that no one listened to, and Stiles weighed the demands of his wallet against the possibility of having at least one day a week to relax. Or sleep. Which was becoming an increasingly foreign concept.

“You could take a sick day,” Scott said, perching on the arm of the trash couch, which Stiles had claimed for his Sunday evening sulkfest.

“I need the money,” Stiles said. “And it’s been hard enough convincing Finstock to book me back-to-back like this. If I start showing weakness, he’s gonna give my shifts to someone else. How will we stay stocked up on ramen and mac and cheese then?”

“A sick day from class. Tomorrow’s like...a recovery period. Post-midterms; nothing important happens.”

It was an idea, but: “I don’t skip classes.” He never had, other than Flu Week during his second year, when Scott had found him lying on the cool tiles of their dorm’s bathroom floor, feverishly convinced he was missing an important quiz.

“I know you don’t, dude.” Scott patted at Stiles’s foot in commiseration, then started stroking it, which was fucking weird. Stiles kicked him to make him stop. Scott drew his hand back in apology, still eyeing Stiles’s socks enviously. “Where the hell did you get these? They’re like touching a cloud. Did Lydia send you a care package? Did you steal whatever was supposed to be for me?”

Stiles pulled his feet down and tucked them into the crack between the trash couch’s arm and cushions. “What, like I can’t buy my own clothes?”

“No ones that nice.”

When Scott wasn’t wrapped up in his own concerns, he could be annoyingly perceptive, and Stiles shifted uncomfortably.

“You’ve been kinda weird lately,” Scott said. “Is something going on with you? I know I’ve been busy with Kira and stuff, but you know that doesn't replace bro-time, right?”

“Just because I’m lying on a couch doesn’t mean this is therapy hour.” Stiles rolled his neck, the stiff muscles giving odd little crackling pops that he chose not to be concerned about. How long had it been since he’d exercised, though? Or done anything but stare at a textbook or computer screen?

Scott let it go. One of the benefits of being best friends for that long was knowing when to bug them to talk and when it’d only make them clam up more. Make Stiles close off, anyway; Scott had never been the kind of person who kept secrets for long.

“Speaking of Kira,” Stiles said nonchalantly, “when’s your next date night? Or to put it another way, when should I plan on getting out of Dodge?”

“Tuesday,” Scott said, brightening sickeningly. “But you know you don’t have to be gone for the whole night? I can text you when the coast is clear; Kira has an early class, so it probably won’t be all that late. She might not even sleep over this time.”

“That really shouldn’t be the first thing you’re thinking of in the afterglow,” Stiles said, neatly sidestepping the issue of where he’d be likely to end up for the night. “So Tuesday, huh? What’s the plan this time? Wine and roses? Frozen dinners and shitty beer? There’s a sale on twelve-packs this week; we should stock up. Prime lady-wooing material right there.”
“She’s really great,” Scott said, sliding into that sappy mode that made him instantly forget anything else was happening around him. It was one of Stiles’s most effective distractionary techniques, and it required very little to put it into motion.

He let Scott ramble about Kira for a good half hour or so before dropping in a suggestion about making a grocery run. Ordering pizza was easy, but *making* mini pizzas—in a skillet, on their hot plate—would be more romantic. Probably. Scott went for it, anyway, leaving Stiles free to dig out his phone.

He tried a few different versions, then settled on simplicity. **You doing anything Tuesday night?**

It took about fifteen minutes for his text alerts to ping, and he dove at the couch, having gotten up to pace around the room and pretend he wasn’t waiting anxiously for an answer.

>> **Cooking dinner for you? Preferably earlier this time.**

Stiles grinned stupidly at his phone. He’d been harboring a sliver of doubt over attempting to take Derek up on his offer. Was it too soon? Was he being too obvious? He knew it was supposed to be a desperate circumstances sort of situation and not him coming up with flimsy excuses to hang out, but Derek wasn’t quizzing him on his reasons. The opening was there, and all he had to do was take it.

Actually... he texted back, letting that message sit in their thread for a few seconds. He wouldn’t turn down a repeat of the last time, but in the spaces where he wasn’t cramming knowledge into his head or frantically trying to shape it into something he could hand in for a grade, he’d been thinking about the other offers Derek had made. Specifically, the one about swimming. It was the way Derek had described it: Stiles *needed* something that would strain his muscles and clear his mind.

Since that was far too much to put in a single text, he went with: **I was hoping for something more on the physical side?**

Stiles’s screen indicated that Derek was typing. The alert disappeared; he’d deleted whatever he was saying. It came back moments later, and this time the message popped up almost immediately.

>> **What do you have in mind?**

<< **Were you serious about teaching me to swim?**

>> **Yes.**

“Well I didn’t know,” Stiles told his screen. “Sometimes people say shit they don’t mean.” Or, in the heat of the moment, offer things they hope no one will actually try to take them up on. Even though that sounded nothing like the kind of person Derek was.

Another message pinged.

>> **Pool’s open until 8. What time are you free? Fair warning: the last couple hours get crowded.**

Stiles hadn’t really thought about that part; he imagined flailing in the shallow end, collecting judgmental looks from people who moved as easily in a pool as on a sidewalk. It wasn’t a pretty picture.

<< **Maybe it’s not such a good idea.**
For Tuesday, or in general?

He chewed his lip while he punched at the keys.

I’m a grown man who doesn’t know how to swim. I’m going to look like an idiot.

You won’t. Derek wrote back. Easy for him to say; he’d probably never looked awkward doing anything in his entire life. It’ll be the most clear early in the morning, but I gather that’s not ideal, either?

Yeah, I have class until 4. Forget it, it was a stupid idea.

Silence followed for about five minutes, and Stiles started clearing away the mess he and Scott had made during their midterms frenzy. It looked like a tornado had swept through their apartment, knocking every book open and spreading papers across the floor. He pried a notebook out from under the couch; it had a couple dried slices of pepperoni stuck to it. It was amazing, really, that they weren’t overrun by ants yet.

I know a guy, Derek finally said. Let me see what I can do.

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Stiles danced lightly in place at the back entrance to the Aquatic Center, trying to keep warm and burn off some anxiety. The building was dark, having closed up half an hour earlier, and the sky was definitely threatening rain.

Before he could get too deep into worries about being stood up—or somehow misunderstanding and winding up at the wrong door—he saw Derek coming down the pathway that curved around the back of the building. He was dressed in dark track pants and a slick rain jacket with the hood pushed back, yet his stride was as smooth as if he was wearing a ten thousand dollar suit.

“No Lola?” Stiles asked once the distance between them had narrowed.

“She’s camped out at home with a new toy. She hates the pool: the chemicals and the way everything echoes in there. It throws off all of her senses. I usually leave her with Margie at the front desk until I’m done.” Derek nodded at the dark windows. “Obviously couldn’t do that tonight.”

“Is that who—no, wait, you said guy.”

“I know a few people who work here,” Derek said. He pulled out a key and unlocked the door, then closed and locked it again once they were both inside. He handed Stiles a small flashlight and clicked on his own. “Watch your step.”

“This is totally clandestine, isn’t it?” Stiles asked gleefully. “We’re skulking.”

“I said I needed to get into the pool after hours; he said it was no skin off his teeth and he’d give me a spare key as long as we stayed safe, didn’t make a mess, and didn’t rat him out if we got caught.”

“I never figured you for a rule breaker,” Stiles said in approval, and Derek grinned at him.

“I believe in rules that keep people safe. Others are just guidelines, and sometimes you do more good by bending them.”

Every time he thought he couldn’t possibly find something that’d make him like Derek more, he came out with a statement like that. “Story of my life,” he said, and Derek shot him a look that
conveyed *I know* without any need for an exchange of words.

Derek led them past what appeared to be equipment and janitorial storage areas, then unlocked a door that opened into the men’s locker room. “No exterior windows in here, so we can turn on the lights,” he said, pocketing his flashlight again. “You can stick your stuff in my locker if you want, although with no one else around, it should be safe to leave out.”

Stiles set his bag down on one of the benches and did his best to not stare while Derek unzipped his jacket, hung it in his locker, and pulled off the plain black t-shirt he’d had on underneath. He then bent to untie his shoes, and Stiles bit his fist and pretended to dig around in his bag until he got himself back under control.

As impossible as it seemed, his imagination had been insufficient. Derek was as well-built as he’d expected, with sculpted muscles and invitingly chiseled abs that Stiles couldn’t stop thinking about stroking. Yet seeing that much bare flesh in person, close enough to touch if he could summon the bravery or stupidity, still knocked him off-balance.

Before Derek had turned his back, he’d caught a glimpse of grey-flecked chest hair and a dark trail that led to the waistband of his pants, which he was now hooking his thumbs under.

“Shit,” Stiles breathed when Derek peeled the pants off then tossed a questioning look over his shoulder. He was wearing swim trunks underneath—simple dark green ones that rode low on his hips—and Stiles fumbled at his bag again, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. “Wearing them *under* your clothes. Smart. I didn’t think to do that. Mine are uh—in here.”

“I’ll go rinse off while you change,” Derek said. He pointed at his locker. “And I have an extra pair of shower shoes, if you didn’t bring any. Everything’s cleaned regularly, but there’s a lot of traffic. Protection’s generally a good idea.”

Stiles sat down heavily on the bench when he heard the water turn on. He’d never been all that self-conscious about his body; while he might not have been the hottest guy in school, he was good-looking, and he had his own appeal that he’d learned to accept. But in comparison to *that*? His healthy self-appreciation wasn’t negated by recognizing he didn’t look like a freaking Bernini sculpture come to life. And while he knew Derek wouldn’t be actively checking him out, he’d never been as anxious about being attractive to someone.

He just...wanted to impress Derek. It was one of his primary goals for the year, actually. Hell, maybe for his life.

He pushed off his shoes, tucked his socks into them—plain white ones, not the Halesocks he’d been saving for cozy loungewear—and quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes, shivering as he stepped into the lurid swim trunks he’d bought at the quickie mart. That was a fun realization: when you haven’t been in a swimming pool since you were a kid, you surprisingly don’t have the gear for it sitting around in your closet. These had cost five bucks and were covered in some sort of crammed-together tropical fish and flowers design, with a bright blue background and an eye-searingly orange tie that he bundled into a haphazard knot. They didn’t seem like they’d fall down once they were soaked with water, but you never knew with fabric this cheaply made.

If the building ordinarily had heating, it was clearly turned off at night. He was rubbing at his nipples, which had pebbled from the cold, when Derek returned, a towel draped around his shoulders, his hair still dripping. His body was *obscene*. He tossed another towel at Stiles, who was barely able to catch it in time, his attention having been entirely fixed on a droplet of water that was tracing its way from Derek’s throat all the way down to the flexing grooves in his abdomen.
“There’s a bin we can drop these into when we’re done,” Derek said. He used the edge of his towel to wipe at his face. “You about ready?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m supposed to rinse off, too?”

“Pool policy,” Derek said. “They have a whole list of them printed somewhere. No lotion, no gum, no running, things like that. It probably doesn’t matter that much, but it’s habit by now.”

“I’ll be quick,” Stiles said. He kept his word, cranking up the water and sticking his head underneath, then doing a quick yank test on his wet swim trunks. Mostly good, although they were tighter-fitting than they’d looked in the package, and once they were plastered to his skin, they left very little to the imagination.

Well, fuck. Nothing he could do about that, and he didn’t really have confidence issues in that department, anyway.

Derek was waiting by the locker. Stiles scraped nervous fingers through his wet hair as he approached, conscious of Derek’s eyes on him. “So we’re really doing this, huh?”

“We’ll start in the shallow end,” Derek said. “And work at your speed. The moment you want to get out, we’re done.”

“I’m gonna really suck at this,” Stiles warned him, needing to make that abundantly clear before he demonstrated his utter lack of skill.

“Everyone does when they’re new to something,” Derek said calmly. “That’s the point of lessons.”

Derek shut off the lights before opening the door to the main pool area. Stiles had prepared to blink for a while to get his night vision back, but it was brighter inside than he’d expected. There was a large bank of windows making up an entire side of the building and curving partially over the ceiling, and moonlight was spilling inside, reflecting off the water.

“Wow. This is...really nice.”

“Alumni donations,” Derek said. “This entire center was rebuilt about five years ago.”

“By someone who’d spent his best years in the university pool, huh?” Stiles was about to make a quip about getting lucky, but he didn’t want Derek to start feeling weird about what they were doing here, late at night, alone in the dark. What a place for a romantic rendezvous, though. He breathed in past a sharp catch in his chest, thinking, He has the key now. He could come here any time he wants, with anyone else. Someone else who actually knows what the fuck they’re doing around water. That was another reason to not bring it up: no sense in giving him ideas.

“That’s the claim. My theory is that it was the most prominent way to get his name etched onto the outside of a building. That’s why it’s the McKenzie Center now.” Derek draped his towel over the lifeguard station and dove smoothly into the deep end. He came up smiling, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

“If you’re expecting me to do that,” Stiles said dubiously, but Derek pointed at the opposite end of the pool.

“Walk back and use the ladder on that side to get in. You’ll be able to stand.”

It was no surprise that Derek moved beautifully through the water; his strokes were long and fluid, his hips rolling slightly, and he reached the shallow end first. “It’ll be warmer once you’re in,” he
said.

Stiles slowly lowered himself into the pool, hoping he didn’t look as awkward as he felt.

“Step One: in the water,” he said, and Derek gave him an encouraging smile. God, he must’ve been a great swim instructor. Stiles would’ve been at the pool every damn day if someone like Derek had been the lifeguard on duty.

“Step Two: figure out what you already know. Do you think you remember how to kick, or do you need a refresher?”

“I was exaggerating some,” Stiles admitted. “Making it sound worse for story value. So...downplaying, I guess? I made it through treading water and some kicking and gliding before Scott’s asthma got too bad to keep going. I probably could make it across the pool; it’d just look really, really terrible.”

“And you’d lose your breath, wasting all your energy on excess movements.” Derek made a thoughtful noise. “Okay, let’s get you up to speed with freestyle. It sounds like we’ll mostly need to focus on your arms and your breathing.”

“The breathing always looks terrifying. I don’t understand how Olympic swimmers aren’t constantly swallowing water,” Stiles said. “Maybe that’s the secret; they all have hidden gills.”

“Probably,” Derek said agreeably. “First, let’s do some balancing drills to get you used to being in the water.” He guided Stiles through them: on his back, on his stomach, and some where he rolled from side to side and imagined that as a kid, he would’ve been picturing himself as a dolphin. Or, considering what a terror he was back then, he probably would’ve been a shark, snapping his way through the water and chasing the other kids as they shrieked in gleeful fear.

“I can move to the real stuff,” he said, rolling onto his back again and staring up at the ceiling. Floating was nice. He wondered if he could get away with going to the pool regularly and just...drifting around, forgetting his worries.

“You ready to try the basic stroke?” Derek asked.

“Ready and willing.”

“It’s simple: three main parts. Keep your face down, your eyes on the bottom of the pool, not ahead of you. Flutter kick with your feet, with your legs relaxed. And think of your arm movements like you’re pushing the water behind you with each stroke, which is what propels you forward.”

“That doesn’t sound simple,” Stiles said, but he flipped back onto his stomach and tried. It worked for a while, his confidence building, until he came up gasping for air in the middle of the pool, his feet kicking at a floor he couldn’t reach anymore. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he said, panicking, flailing with his arms and legs, completely forgetting how to tread water.

Derek was there in an instant, talking soothingly to him. “You’ll float, Stiles. Just like you were doing before. It’s the same thing. Relax your muscles, and you’ll be okay.”

“Fuck,” Stiles spluttered through a mouthful of water, but he focused on Derek’s voice, letting go of the tension in his muscles. “Shit,” he said once he was safely on his back, held up by the water he’d just been fighting against. He squeezed his eyes shut. That was incredibly fucking humiliating.

“You ready to try swimming back?” Derek asked.
“I don’t think I can,” Stiles said, his breathing coming shorter again, his body starting to sink.

There was an arm suddenly braced under his hips, lifting him back up, and Derek’s calm voice saying, “I’m right here, Stiles. I’ve got you, I promise.”

He talked Stiles through the rest of his panic, guiding him back to the wall, which Stiles clung to, despite the security of being able to stand again.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said before Stiles could bring himself to face him. “That was my fault.”

Stiles let go of the wall and twisted around. “Your fault? How the hell? That was on me; I freaked out for absolutely no reason.”

“You shouldn’t have been in a position where that would happen, or even swimming the length of the pool just yet.” Derek’s face was strained and sad, shadows falling over him as the clouds outside thickened. “I wasn’t thinking clearly; I can give you a recommendation for a good swim instructor here. It’s been years since I’ve done this, and I guess it’s not really like...riding a bike.”

“I don’t want another instructor,” Stiles said, moving closer. “I get panic attacks, okay? It’s a thing that happens with me. In water, on land, for no fucking reason most of the time. That wasn’t a full-fledged one, but you talked me down from it faster than anyone I’ve ever known, and that includes Scott and my dad.”

“Lydia?” Derek asked, looking weirdly vulnerable.

Stiles shook his head at the idea.

“Definitely Lydia. I love the girl, but she’s not the most patient person. She doesn’t like weakness in herself or in other people; I think it triggers her anxiety, actually, so she avoids those kinds of uncomfortable situations as much as possible. You dove right into it with me.” The edge of a panic attack, the emotional tumult of hearing his mom’s favorite music come to life again: Derek made him feel like it was okay. He guided Stiles through the storm and stayed with him until he was back on his feet.

“I still shouldn’t have let you—” Derek tried.

Stiles gripped his wrist, silencing him instantly. Derek looked down at their hands, then back up at Stiles’s face, his eyes wide, dilated from the darkness.

“I don’t wanna do that again,” Stiles admitted. “That really freaked me out, even though I know I should’ve been able to keep going, or stop and tread water. But if I quit now, I’m going to stay freaked out, and that means I’m probably never gonna try this again. And I don’t want to give up.”

“You’re sure?”

Stiles nodded firmly. “Positive. You said we’re done when I want to get out. And I’m saying we keep going.”

“We can try different methods. Move slower—no rushing this time.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, letting go of him once he was certain Derek wasn’t going to pull himself out of the pool and insist they stop. “So what do we do now?”

Derek rubbed at the spot where Stiles had been gripping him, not seeming to notice he was doing it. “Your stroke was actually great. All you need is to learn how to breathe properly; when you pull
your head up to gasp for air, your feet sink, which makes you lose that buoyancy that’s keeping you on the surface.”

“Side breathing,” Stiles said, still feeling shaky. “I’m familiar with the concept. It’s not that easy when I’m terrified of inhaling water.”

“I didn’t know you were afraid of the water,” Derek said, frowning at himself again, like he was blaming himself for not anticipating Stiles being a gigantic mess.

“I’m not afraid of the water. Just...of drowning in it.”

“But you trust me?” Derek asked.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, not having to pause to consider whether it was true. He didn’t trust himself. But he would put his life in Derek’s hands and believe, without a shred of doubt, that Derek would do everything in his power to make sure he was okay.

“Then trust that I’m not going to let you drown.”

“Or inhale water?”

“Or inhale water.” Derek was still frowning, more thoughtfully now. “It’d be best if I could start you out with a kickboard, but I don’t have the key to the equipment room.”

“We could break in,” Stiles said, then backtracked at Derek’s unamused expression. “Or not. That’s definitely not a thing I’d ever seriously suggest.”

“Let’s try getting you through a one-armed drill another way. If this doesn’t work, I’ll think of something else.” He held out his hand and lifted his eyebrows when Stiles didn’t immediately take it.

“Wait, are you roleplaying as my kickboard?”

“I’ll be holding you steady and supporting your outstretched arm so you’re free to focus on stroking with your other arm and rolling your head to the side to breathe. That’ll get you used to the motion without worrying about digging your shoulder in too far or overbalancing.”

“If you say so,” Stiles said, sliding his hand into Derek’s, who squeezed it encouragingly.

“You’re gonna do great, Stiles. Take your time with each breath. Exhale completely with your face down in the water, then turn your head to the side so your ear’s in the water and your mouth is clear. Breathe in until your lungs feel full. Then face down again, exhale.”

“I’ll try,” Stiles said.

It worked surprisingly well. For the first few panicky inhales, Stiles rolled too hard in an attempt to lift his face completely out of the water, and Derek braced his arm, guiding him into the right position. He was solid and secure, keeping Stiles balanced and talking him through each stroke, reminding him to slow down and kick lightly.

“Perfect,” Derek said after a stretch of time, letting go of him so they could pause to rest; Stiles had lost count of how often they’d crossed the width of the pool.

“Yeah?” Stiles asked, breathing heavily but grinning in excitement. “I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

“You ready to give it a go with both arms?”
“I can try,” Stiles said again, doing his best to not sound freaked out by the idea of doing it without Derek.

But Derek stuck close by his side, offering verbal tips and still reaching out to support him each time he turned his head, until he felt confident enough to speed up. He tuned out everything else then, listening to his own breathing, watching the shadows shift over the floor of the pool, feeling the water push past his ears, his arms cutting through it, bending it to his will.

On his final lap, Stiles pushed into the wall and folded his arms over the top of it. “Okay, that was awesome.”

“Tired?” Derek asked. Once Stiles had gotten into his stride, Derek had moved to one end of the pool to stay out of his way and keep an eye on him. Stiles had made that his goal: get to Derek, act like he knew what he was doing, don’t let the panic start clogging up his breathing again.

“Anxiety doubles the exertion,” he said, not even trying to put a mocking spin on it. It was the blunt truth; he could still feel the aftershocks of his earlier panic shivering through him.

“Swimming’s a full body workout; you have to build up the stamina and get used to drawing on different muscles. But you’re a natural.”

“You think so?” Stiles tried to shake some water out of his ears. His muscles were protesting, everything smelled like chlorine, and his tightly-cinched waistband was digging uncomfortably into his stomach, but he felt good about his progress. He was proud of himself and eager to soak up Derek’s approval. “I need to learn how to turn when I get to the end of a lap. And...how to do an actual lap that isn’t over as soon as I’ve started it.”

“It won’t happen in one day; fine-tuning your movements takes time. But you’ll get there. And I can teach you a few more strokes when you feel up to them.”

“So what you’re telling me,” Stiles said, playing it cool, “is that you’re willing to do this again.”

“Can’t let you learn the backstroke from someone else,” Derek said.

“That would probably be a disaster.” He watched Derek push himself out of the pool, mourning the fact that he had to choose whether to angle his gaze at his biceps—his muscles taut from the movement—or his ass—with the thin, wet fabric of his swim trunks molding to the contours of his body.

“You done for tonight?” Derek asked.

Stiles yanked his eyes back up to Derek’s face.

“I think that’s about all I can handle, yeah. Although—” He paused, putting his energy into pulling himself out of the pool. It shouldn’t have made him grunt from the effort, but his arms were noodly and twinging tiredly.

“You had another idea?” Derek grabbed their towels and tossed Stiles’s to him.

“Maybe not. But did I see a hot tub when we came in? Or was that my imagination?”

“Ah, yes. Hot tub, also known as the McKenzie Therapy Pool. I guess relabeling it makes it easier to sell as a physical fitness piece.”

“Well, if it’s therapy.” Stiles rubbed at the genuinely sore muscles in his arms and waggled his
“eyebrows at Derek, who didn’t need much convincing.

“Jets on or off?”

“If you even have to ask that,” Stiles said, and Derek rolled his eyes.

“Fine, get in, and I’ll fire it up.”

“Honestly,” Stiles said as he slid into the heated water with a happy moan, “don’t strain yourself trying to pretend you’re not into this.”

Derek muttered something he couldn’t hear and refused to repeat it. A few seconds later, the jets roared on, the smooth surface of the water churning with bubbles. Stiles re-angled his position and groaned in pleasure as one of the jets pulsed into his lower back.

“Are you getting in here or not?” he asked when Derek seemed to be taking too long to join him.

“Impatient,” Derek said. He slid in next to Stiles, their shoulders bumping as he settled into a comfortable spot. “Oh, that is nice.”

“Not part of your usual swimming routine, then?”

Derek sank down until only his head was above water, his eyes closed, his eyelashes long and dark. “It’s usually filled with people. Athletes. Couples. It feels weird for me to intrude.”

_I doubt anyone would mind you joining them_, Stiles thought. He leaned his head against the edge of the tub, giving himself a perfect angle to watch the clouds gathering outside, blotting out the moon and a good portion of their light. “This would be nice when it’s clear out,” he mused. “You’d be able to see the stars. I guess there’d be some light pollution, though.”

“Better than New York,” Derek said, his eyes fluttering back open. “Better than a lot of places, really. You grew up in a small town, right?”

“Beacon Hills. It’s small, but not tiny. I met a girl during freshman orientation who came here from a town with six hundred people in it. _Six hundred_. It was up in the mountains somewhere; she said they’d have to drive about an hour to make it to anything we’d call a big box store, or even to a supermarket. In comparison, it makes Beacon Hills feel downright metropolitan.”

“I don’t know what I prefer anymore.” Derek was staring at the windows now, at the rain that had started pattering against the glass, the musical sound reverberating through the quiet building, mixing with the low-toned churn of the tub’s bubbles. Stiles shifted to look at him instead, pulling his legs up to the sunken ledge so he could wrap his arms around his knees.

“You mean city life versus country life?”

“I have tenure,” Derek said, which wasn’t exactly an answer. He sighed, his chin dipping into the bubbles for a moment, then sat up straighter, pushing his shoulders out of the water. “I don’t mind it here. I’ve never been able to decide if I _like_ it here.”

“And tenure means you’re stuck?”

“Leaving a tenured position isn’t a smart move. There’s no guarantee you’d get another, and unless you have an offer already locked down, job hunting can be...uncomfortable. It can create bad blood in the department, or even with the university administration.”
“Where would you want to go? If you could choose anywhere in the world?”

“I don’t know,” Derek said. “It’s a sad answer, isn’t it? People should know what they want in life.”

“I think that’s expecting too much of people. We can’t all be Scotts. Or my dad.”

“They’ve got their lives in order, huh?”

“As much as you can. They decided what they wanted to be and went for it, never looking back. They have this single-minded focus I can’t even comprehend, not when it comes to careers. My dad’s gonna retire a sheriff after serving Beacon Hills for decades. Scott’s wanted to be a vet since we were little kids and he asked me to help him look up jobs that’d let him spend all his time with animals.”

“And you?”

“You know my story,” Stiles said.

Derek turned to smile softly at him. “I know a part of your history. Maybe a little of your dreams. What comes next? After graduation.”

“Grad school. I could go the corporate route after that and potentially make some serious cash, but I’ll end up working in some labs, probably. Experimenting on shit.”

“Trying to change the world.”

He could deny it or deflect with a flippant comment. But Derek knew that about him now, didn’t he? Knew that he had big dreams, anchored into his biggest fears. “When Scott wanted to be a vet, I wanted to be a superhero. Or a wizard.” He rested his chin on his knees, watching the turbulent surface of the water, the bubbles rolling and breaking, then forming again. “You know how you said there’s a fine line between sci-fi and the real world?”

Derek nodded, not needing to be reminded of the context. “Yeah. Imagination sometimes outpaces scientific discovery. That doesn’t make it inherently less valid or truthful.”

“Isn’t that a weird thing for a historian to think?”

“Because I’m studying facts?”

“And dates. Concrete records. Things you can point to as having actually happened. Or are you a Dr. Jones kind of historian? During your summers, you fly across the world, recovering holy relics.”

“Appropriating them for museums and claiming my expeditions aren’t ways to cover for my insecurities or make up for my damaged relationship with my dad,” Derek said, easily picking up on the reference; Stiles had seen that trilogy on his shelves, with the fourth installment noticeably absent. “Indiana Jones was an archaeologist. I’m just a regular historian who believes in facts but also understands that ‘story’ is an intrinsic part of the word. Every written account has a bias. Literature, art, other creative output: it tells you as much about a culture as a list of dates and events will. Imagination’s what makes us human. That’s what interests me.”

“What about things that’re a little more out there?”

“Like what?”

Well, he’d come this far. “Have you ever believed in magic?”
“I believed in witches,” Derek reminded him. “I don’t anymore, but I’ll admit Halloween still makes me uneasy.”

It was the only major flaw Stiles had been able to discover about him so far. Unlike Derek, Halloween was one of his favorite times of the year. Stiles had always seen it as a perfect opportunity to transform himself into the kind of person he wanted to be. As a kid, that meant he could wear a mask and pretend to be his favorite superheroes. As a teenager and then an adult, he could break away from people’s expectations and preconceived notions. He didn’t have to be Stiles Stilinski anymore. He could be anyone.

“My mom believed in fate,” he said. “She believed in a lot of things. She always said the world had more layers to it than we could understand. It was a flaw in how we were raised to look at it: straight on, instead of at the right angle to let us see behind the curtain.”

“So magician seemed like a realistic career goal,” Derek filled in, without a hint of mockery.

Stiles dug his chin harder into his knees and said the rest quietly, in an undertone he knew Derek would have to be paying close attention to hear. “I thought I could fix her.”

“When medical science fails, you start looking for other possibilities.” When Derek put it that way, it almost made Stiles’s childish delusions sound practical.

“All the doctors said it was impossible to do anything for her. That we were wasting our money trying to find a cure. My mom had always told me anything was possible, as long as you worked hard enough for it. It wasn’t true, though.” Or maybe he’d given up too easily. He hadn’t tried hard enough.

“Changing the world takes time,” Derek said. “If your mom believed in fate, she’d tell you that everything happened for a reason, wouldn’t she?”

Stiles closed his eyes to shield the emotions threatening to brim over. He’d always hated that phrase. Derek was right, though; it was exactly the kind of optimistic spin she would’ve put on her own death. “I couldn’t save her. But maybe because of what happened to her, I’d grow up to save other people like her.”

“It’s possible.” They were silent for a while, the rain’s tempo picking up, beating down against the glass. Derek cleared his throat, then, and asked, “Is this what you want to be doing with your life, or are you taking this path because you feel like you have to?”

“I don’t know.” No one had ever asked him that. Stiles had barely let himself dwell on the question. But he did have to, didn’t he? If he didn’t, who would? “What made you so sure this was the right career for you? Even if Oregon wasn’t your dream destination, being a professor was the right job, wasn’t it?”

“I love history. I love teaching. I’m good at it. I don’t know what else I would do. Spend more time writing, maybe. Travel. But that’s not exactly a career.”

“You could’ve run the McKenzie Aquatics Center,” Stiles said, in an attempt to make him laugh.

Derek merely smiled. “Now that would’ve been the real dream.” He shifted position, glancing at Stiles. “There is a reason I chose that job for a little while, though. Lifeguard, I mean.”

“For the chicks?” Stiles joked, and Derek rolled his eyes.

“Not exactly.”
“What, then?”

“When I messed up earlier; when you literally got in over your head because we were rushing the process—it brought some things back.” He shook his head before Stiles could protest—again—that nothing about that situation had been remotely Derek’s fault. “When Cora was a toddler, she almost drowned.”

“Oh god,” Stiles said. She was obviously fine now, but: “How? What happened? Did she fall in?”

“Was thrown in.” Derek’s face was tight with anger, the muscles in his throat tense as he presumably relived the experience. “It wasn’t malicious. Or so he said. My uncle Peter, my mom’s younger brother—he tossed her into the pool at our house because he said that’s how he’d learned how to swim. I don’t know if he was an idiot, or drunk, or a combination. We didn’t see him around much after that.”

“Jesus,” Stiles said, picturing how his dad would’ve reacted if anyone had done that to him as a kid. “I can imagine not. Did he go in after her once he realized what he’d done?”

“He said he would’ve. I don’t know if that’s true. I heard the splash, and I got to her first. I got her out. She’d swallowed some water, and she was obviously traumatized, but she was okay.” He turned to Stiles. “The weird thing was, I shouldn’t have been able to hear it.”

“She didn’t scream?”

“No, I think she was too in shock to even know what was going on. I was in my bedroom on the other side of the house, with music playing. My parents and Laura were in the living room, a lot closer to the pool. None of them heard a thing. I honestly...” Derek's eyes unfocused, his forehead furrowing in thought. “Afterwards, I wasn’t positive I’d actually heard anything, either. I just...knew. I was out of my room and running down the stairs, and I knew something was wrong and I had to get to the pool.”

“Like a premonition?”

“Yeah. With the adrenaline and everything, it’s hard to remember any details. I remember seeing my dad’s face, and my mom slapping Peter. And the hospital after, to make sure Cora was fine: every detail of that’s sharp, even down to the smells. But I barely remember jumping into the water. Some of it could’ve been my imagination filling in afterwards. But at the time, it felt...”

“Magical.”

“Yeah. Like I was meant to save her.” Derek touched Stiles’s leg, a light brush, gone in an instant, that he barely felt under the water. “I was eleven years old and struggling to make sense of a world where I’d just found out how easy it was to lose someone you love.”

Stiles drew that image into his mind: how would he have reacted if he’d lost his mom suddenly, in a freak accident, with no time to prepare? Even with the warning period they’d been given, he hadn’t said goodbye well. He hadn’t anchored in all the memories with his mom that he’d wanted. And he’d hated watching her waste away. He’d even hated her, a little, by the end, for not getting better. For turning his days into walking, dazed nightmares where everything was constantly going wrong, fractured into a facsimile of how it should’ve been.

He didn’t know. He couldn’t know, not without having gone through both scenarios. Derek hadn’t lost Cora, though. If magic was real, it was on his side, even if he hadn’t actively known how to summon it. Stiles tried not to let the envy rear its ugly head; that wasn’t why Derek had brought it up.
He wasn’t gloating over sidestepping the grief that haunted Stiles’s days. He was trying to share his own experiences. To talk about what was important to him, what had shaped his life. It’s not always about you, Stiles reminded himself.

“So working as a lifeguard was your way to be there for other people who needed help?”

“It wasn’t something I consciously thought about. I didn’t even really connect the dots until later. I taught Cora how to swim, though. She was terrified of the water—refused to go anywhere near it until the girl she had her first real crush on invited her to a birthday pool party.”

Well fuck, if that wasn’t cute as hell. “I really hope there’re pictures of that.”

“I’m sure there are. I’d ask Laura, but that would’ve been when I was...on round two of braces? And fully entrenched in being a band geek. No one needs to see those photos.”

Stiles sat up straighter. “I do. I definitely, one hundred percent do. Would Laura think it was weird if I messaged her out of nowhere? Would she send me photos if I asked?”

“Now I’m thinking that’s something I really shouldn’t have told you,” Derek said, but he was smiling. “I feel like I’m starting to boil in here; are you wanting to stay for longer?”

“No, I’m a lobster too,” Stiles said, pushing himself out of the water so he could lift his leg to examine it. “Not fully cooked yet. Guess I’ll have to come back for more another time. Hot Tub Therapy Redux.”

“Maybe that’s the real story behind the name,” Derek said, wrapping his towel around his hips when he stood. “More reasons to not get in here with anyone else.”

“Are you saying Stilinski Storytime is special?” Stiles asked, keeping the question in a safer, joking zone to mask how badly he wanted to hear the answer.

“It may be small-minded of me, but I’m not interested in hearing the water polo team’s secrets.” Derek linked his hands behind his neck and leaned into the stretch, making it frankly impossible for Stiles to look away from his long torso or the loose tuck of the towel that somehow, despite the swim trunks under it, made him feel like he was seeing something he wasn’t meant to.

“It keeps getting worse out there,” he said, twisting to focus on the rain-lashed windows instead. “I’m gonna get soaked.”

“You’re still coming over, right? It’s an apartment-ditching night?”

“If the offer’s still on the table, yeah.” Stiles had brought his own things this time: sleeping clothes, a toothbrush, his cell phone charger, something to change into the next morning.

“Only if you don’t spend the night on the couch again.” Derek nodded at the locker room. “Let’s get changed and lock up here. I was a little late meeting you because I had to find a parking space. I can drive us and keep off some of the rain that way.”

“I’ve never seen your car,” Stiles said, wrapping his towel around as much of his body as he could cover; the heat was already evaporating from his skin, and he was looking forward to bundling up in his warm clothes again. And getting into Derek’s car, which might have heated seats. Or leather ones. Definitely something sexy.

“You shouldn’t expect anything impressive,” Derek said. He must be used to people assuming he’d be driving something as impossibly eye-catching as he was. “Laura’s the car person in the family.
Now *that* is something she’d send you a dozen photos of, almost without you even needing to ask.”

“I think I’ve seen it, actually. The Camaro? She’s kissing the hood in her profile photo.” Stiles hadn’t gone so far as to *friend* her, but she was one of the most prominent people on Derek’s page. It’d be hard to miss her.

Derek’s laugh echoed across the quiet room. “Her kids *hate* that. She switches to ones with them sometimes, but she always goes back to that damn car.”

“You love what you love,” Stiles said. *Sometimes you can’t help it*, he thought as Derek paused to turn off the hot tub’s jets before joining him on the walk back to the locker room. *Sometimes you wouldn’t change it if you could.*

**Chapter End Notes**

*Next up:* Derek faces his fears
“Bet I can beat you to the top,” Kira challenged, cheating by making a dash for the wall while Derek and his belayer were still checking each other’s harnesses.

“That’s not safe,” he muttered.

“Denise already finished checking hers,” Mateo said. “You were slower with the rope today. Besides, we never have to worry much about you two; you know every inch of this wall.” Mateo gave him a thumbs up and stood back, hands on the rope and ready to take in the slack as Derek climbed. “Alright, you’re good to go.”

“Doesn’t mean we couldn’t make a mistake,” Derek said, giving his climbing rope one final tug before dusting his hands with chalk and beginning his ascent. Kira was fast and able to grip the smallest of handholds, but he used his height to his advantage, taking a shortcut that her shorter limbs meant she always had to bypass.

“That’s not fair,” she said when he came up alongside her, halfway up the wall.

“Can’t help the way I was born,” he said smugly. “Where’s all that big talk about your speed now, huh?”

Kira stuck out her tongue and folded her body in half, scrunching into a high step that pushed her above Derek; she then used her fingertips to pull her way up a series of shallow crimps she knew he avoided whenever possible.

If she was going to be that way about it: he planted his feet, built some momentum, and launched for a jug that was well above Kira’s current position, then focused on powering his way up the wall. They didn’t normally turn their climbs into a competition, but he was never one to turn down a friendly wager.

“What’s the bet?” he called to Kira.

“Loser buys lunch!” Her voice was closer than Derek had been expecting, punched by the exertion of contorting her body into positions that made her almost seem to fly up the wall.

“And winner picks the place,” he grunted, going for another dyno to make sure he kept his lead. He reached the top a split second before Kira, and she slapped the wall in frustration.

“I hesitated over one hold,” she exclaimed. “One hold! I almost had you.”

“There’s a new fusion place I’ve been wanting to check out,” he said, swinging to the side when Kira tried to kick at him. “Hey, hey, don’t get us thrown out of here. Climbing wall shenanigans are strictly against the rules. And we’ve got staff watching us right now.” He nodded down at Mateo and Denise, who didn’t look particularly inclined to report them.

Kira grinned at him. “Best two out of three?”

“If I win all three, you’re picking up the tab for dessert, too,” he said, then called down to let Mateo know he was ready to be lowered.
Kira beat him by a good margin the second time but was tiring by the third, having invested everything she had in scrambling up the wall at top speed. He’d conserved his energy, seeing how far ahead she was and correctly judging the likelihood of catching up in time, and was able to twist in place to grin down at her glowering face as she covered the last section of her final route.

“You can veto my choice if you’re really against it,” Derek told her as they left the building, collecting Lola on the way.

Lola was doing much better with increasingly long stretches away from him; she seemed to believe now that he’d come back, and in the meantime, she enjoyed her mini vacations, soaking up attention from new people who were eager to play with her. She’d even done okay with being left home alone for a chunk of Tuesday night, instantly forgiving him when he’d walked through the door with Stiles.

Of course, now she’d probably be expecting him to return from short trips to the grocery store with Stiles in tow, but Derek would cross that bridge when he came to it.

“I don’t have a preference anyway,” Kira said, linking her arm through the crook of his elbow and leaning affectionately against his side. “I’m glad you have more time to hang out today. I missed our climbing session last week.”

“Is that why you were so eager to make it a race? Midterms were that rough, huh?” They usually went bouldering or took turns belaying each other, but Kira had insisted on climbing together this time, clearly with the intention of pushing herself harder than she did when she was going at her own pace.

“They were okay,” she said. “I didn’t study enough for one of them, but I’m not too worried about it. I’ve been at the top of the curve all semester.”

“Making everyone else hate you for doing so well and knocking down their averages,” he teased her. She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Okay, are you gonna tell me what’s wrong, or should I keep guessing until I hit on the right one?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Kira said unconvincingly.

She tugged him to the side of the path so they could skirt a puddle; it was a clear, blue-skied day, but the ground was still sodden in places, and the rain was expected to return for the weekend. Derek had been debating whether to invest in a raincoat for Lola, but she didn’t seem to mind it so far. If anything, she relished the fresh scents the rain brought with it, and he’d caught her pouncing on earthworms and digging energetically muddy holes in the backyard.

He didn’t mind the weather shift, either. He spent more time drinking tea at the dining room table or staring out his study window when he was supposed to be working. It was less pleasant on campus; the history department was in one of the older buildings, and his office picked up a distinct damp smell during the winter months. He normally tried to counteract it with scented candles—pleasantly musky ones that made him feel like he was out in the woods—but they made Lola sneeze, and he hadn’t been able to come up with a decent alternative yet.

Lola stomped happily through a particularly deep puddle, splashing him up to the ankles. “You’re a pest, you know that?” he told her.

“But you love her,” Kira said.
“Of course I do.”

She sighed. “How do you know when you’re in love?”

And there it was. He should’ve guessed it’d be relationship troubles. “I don’t think I’m a good person to ask.” Pet adoption tips were a thing he could probably handle now. Actual human relationships, though—what did he know of love, other than how to choose the entirely wrong person at the wrong time?

“Oh,” Kira said slowly, pushing the words out like they pained her, “how do you know when you are and someone else isn’t?”

True, that was an area where he had significantly more experience.

“What makes you think he doesn’t feel the same way?” Everything Derek had heard from Stiles indicated otherwise. It could mean that Kira was worrying unnecessarily about the status of her relationship. It was equally likely, though, that Stiles, wanting his best friend to be happy, had an idealized perspective that skewed heavily in Scott’s favor.

“It’s a feeling I can’t shake,” she said. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while, and everything’s good. It’s great. He’s sweet and thoughtful and really nice to me. We were friends first, and moving to more has been...everything I wanted it to be, I guess.”

“Almost everything. Adding a qualifier doesn’t make you sound all that sure, Kira.”

“I know. I should be sure.”

“What’s missing? Is it that you’re not exchanging the actual words? Because you can tell as much from what someone does for you; maybe he’s not the kind of person words come to easily.”

“No, it’s not that. I don’t even know for sure if I feel that way yet. I guess I’m just worried that...I’m closer. That I could be in love with him, but I don’t know how to go about it. Or how to be sure.”

She lowered her voice as they walked past the Pizza-Yo-Self line. “Everything’s my first, you know? And for him, it’s not.”

This was probably why Cora talked to Laura, and not to him, about these kinds of things. Derek tried to say it carefully, delicately. “Level of experience isn’t that important. Not when you’re with the right person and when they treat you the way they should.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Kira said patiently; he was getting everything wrong. “Or...not just that. But he’s been in love before. With his ex-girlfriend, for a long time. And I think he might still be in love with her.”

Derek unlinked their arms so he could wrap his around her, pulling her close and bending to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Okay, first of all, you didn’t ask this, but I’m going to tell you anyway. These kinds of questions are normal. Everyone obsesses over them. How does he feel about me? How does that compare to his feelings for the person who came before me? It’s hard not to wonder.”

“I do know he cares about me,” she said. “I just think sometimes—he wasn’t the one who broke up with her, you know? He used to talk about her a lot when we were friends, before we started dating. She broke his heart. So if she showed up one day and said she’d changed her mind and wanted him back, would he stay with me? What if I’m just a backup option?”

“That’s something I can’t answer. And you won’t be able to, either, not by agonizing over it and trying to compare yourself to someone who isn’t even here. Or imagining a scenario that probably
“I know it’s stupid,” she said, and he squeezed her tighter again.

“I didn’t say that. You shouldn’t be anyone’s backup, Kira. But he’s the only person who can tell you what you need to hear, in the way you need to hear it.”

“I’m afraid to talk to him about it,” she admitted. “What if—everything’s still pretty new. What if I’m asking too much, too fast, making everything too serious, and he breaks things off?”

“Do I really have to say it? If he does break up with you just because you wanted to have a serious talk about your relationship...”

“...he doesn’t deserve me anyway,” she finished, rolling her eyes.

“It may be trite, but it’s the truth. And anyway, I don’t think he would. Scott’s never sounded like that kind of person.”

Kira drew away as they approached the restaurant Derek had chosen. It was sandwiched between a frozen yogurt shop and a gourmet hot dog stand where drunk students tended to flock at night. Derek wasn’t convinced the new offering would do well in this neighborhood—that particular storefront had changed ownership four times in the last couple of years, always seeming to miss the market with its target audience—but he was intrigued by the menu, and it had outdoor seating that’d make it easier to keep Lola with him.

The restaurant was about half full, with only one other table occupied in the roped-off outdoor area; the rain was holding, but the wintry chill in the air provided sufficient discouragement. The place might not last long, but Derek had to admit that was another secret, if temporary, bonus. It was nice to find something this close to campus that wasn’t overflowing with students.

Once they were seated and waiting for their food, Kira leveled an accusatory look at him. “I never said Scott’s name. How did you know who I’m dating? And how long have you known?”

Derek hadn’t even realized he’d slipped up; he’d been careful to let Kira tell him about Scott on her own terms, but with how frequently his name entered conversations with Stiles now, he’d forgotten how little he was supposed to know. And although he’d never actually met the guy, he felt like he knew him: his good heart, his genuine attachment to Kira, the careful planning he’d put into the next decade of his life.

“About Scott? For a couple of weeks,” he said.

She covered her face and groaned. “Have I been that obvious?”

“You’ve been happy. I probably would’ve guessed something was up, but I wouldn’t have known the reason.”

“I’ve wanted to talk about him; I didn’t know how. And I don’t want my parents knowing yet. Can you imagine what he’d do if my mom started asking him questions about his intentions, or whatever it is parents do to humiliate their kids’ first boyfriends?”

Noshiko would be an intimidating person to face if she was determined to pass judgment on you, but again: “I bet he’d do okay. Stiles says Scott’s always been good with parents.”

“Stiles?” she said, lifting her head again, her voice filled with confusion. “How do you—oh, that’s right, I forgot he’s in one of your classes. But why would he be telling you about me and Scott?”
And there was a tricky question. Derek went for honesty, with a little bit of a sidestep. “They’re roommates, right? He mentions Scott a lot.”

Kira laughed. “I guess it’s not all that surprising; I bet he even talks to like, baristas and cashiers about Scott.”

*Other people on the outskirts of his life who mean nothing to him,* Derek thought, oddly stung by Stiles’s best friend’s girlfriend having no idea he and Stiles were friends.

“It’s funny,” she continued, “I was way more worried about winning Stiles over than Scott.”

“What do you mean? Were you—originally interested in him?” Derek didn’t examine his relief when she shot that down immediately.

“Oh gosh, no. I mean, I like him, sure, but no, no. It’s just that Scott and Stiles are this completely inseparable duo. If *Stiles* didn’t like me, I don’t think Scott would’ve ever started dating me. I’m pretty sure he gave me his stamp of approval this year. And the same goes the other way around; I don’t think Stiles would ever seriously date someone who didn’t get along with his best friend, you know?”

That sting was sharper, digging under his ribs. It was an illogical response—he wasn’t trying to *date* Stiles—but for as much as Stiles name-dropped his friends or his dad, it was never in the context of Derek potentially interacting with them. Which wasn’t true of Derek’s stories, he realized. When he talked about his sisters, he was picturing their interactions with Stiles. He *wanted* them to meet. Erica and Boyd already knew and liked him; he wanted the same to be true of the rest of his family, too.

He’d even thought about the impossible scenarios, wondering what his mom would’ve said about Stiles, how his dad would’ve gotten along with him.

He fumbled for his glass, spilling some of his water, and Kira handed him her napkin to help him mop it up. She was still talking, not noticing Derek’s internal distress, which was good. She shouldn’t. It wasn’t something he could talk about with her.

“I’ve actually been thinking that Stiles is secretly dating someone, but Scott says there’s absolutely no way he’d be in a relationship without him knowing about it. More than that, even: he says that when Stiles is interested in someone, the whole world’s aware in like five seconds. Which is true; when I was first getting to know them, he had a crush on some girl—it didn’t last very long, and I think it was more of a ‘wow, she’s pretty and smart’ kinda deal, but he talked about her constantly. I guess that’s just how Stiles is; he can’t shut up about anybody he cares about.”

Derek tried to sip at his water, then set it back down. “So if that’s true, what made you think he’s dating someone?”

“Oh, he’s been disappearing at night. When Scott and I—” Kira cleared her throat and shot him a guilty look. “We uh, we’ve been dating. Like I said. And a couple nights, I’ve been at his apartment late, and Stiles never came home. The first time he showed up the next morning to change his clothes before class, but this week he didn’t come back at all until after he was done with his Wednesday night class. Which is over pretty late. Scott was worrying and texting him to try to find out where he was.”

“And he wasn’t replying?” Derek asked, thinking about Tuesday evening: the pool, the movie they’d watched after, with Stiles taking up too much of the couch with his long limbs and active commentary. The few times he’d glanced at his phone before turning it face down and ignoring it.
“No, he did. I don’t think he’d want to chance Scott freaking out and calling his dad or reporting him as a missing person or something.” She rolled her eyes; she obviously had her own opinions about her boyfriend’s anxieties over his best friend’s actions. ‘But it was all vague. Scott would ask where he was or where he’d been, and he’d say something like ‘out,’ and leave it at that. I think Scott’s actually less worried about him and more annoyed that Stiles is doing stuff he’s not telling him about.”

“They’re used to telling each other everything.”

“Everything that matters, anyway. Maybe he’s just studying and doesn’t think it’s important. Or he could be picking up extra jobs he thinks Scott will try to talk him out of. He works really hard. He’s kind of always stressed out about school and money.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’ve never thought about—if he and Scott talk to each other about everything, do you think they talk about me? Like—about things we do?”

“Like you said, when someone’s important to you, you’ll share things about them with the people close to you. But those two are like brothers; there are parts of your life you don’t usually tell your siblings.”

“That’s true.” Kira sighed and rearranged her utensils, polishing the bowl of her spoon. “I like him a lot,” she said when she was done putting them back in the exact same positions where they’d started. “I just really want him to feel the same way.”

“I know,” he said. “You can’t force that, but if everything I’ve heard about him is true, I don’t think you have much to worry about.”

“Yeah?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah. So tell me what’s different about this guy; why’s he the one who’s finally caught your eye, huh?”

She blushed, but it was the right thing to ask; her happiness picked up as she talked about how she’d met Scott, what she liked so much about him, and all the hopes she was sheltering for their relationship. There was nothing quite as sweet as your first love. Especially one that, as far as he could tell, had a good chance of lasting.

Derek listened, encouraged her stories, and barely thought about Stiles at all.

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“If anyone comes to the door, we’re not here, okay?” Derek instructed Lola, who merely yawned at him and went back to gnawing on the carrot he’d given her as a special Halloween treat. It was cheap and orange and gave her as much holiday excitement as he could muster for himself. He’d already switched off most of the lights, including the one on the porch, and had remembered at the last second to shut the blinds by the piano.

He picked up his book and arranged himself under the soft glow of the lamp he’d left on by the couch, preparing for a long, quiet night, with the trick-or-treaters hopefully picking up the hint from his uninviting and pointedly undecorated yard. It was hard to believe how fast the year was going. Laura had started calling him about holiday arrangements and asking him for a birthday wishlist. It was a part of her process every year, but she was pushing even harder for solid answers this time.

*Stop saying you’ll be happy with anything, you liar,* she’d said earlier that day. *There must be something you’ve had your eye on.*
Nothing anyone could wrap in a bow and stick under a tree. So yes, anything would be fine. Even the bouquet of novelty spatulas Rob’s parents would be sure to send.

His phone chimed from across the room. Probably Laura not taking no for an answer. He flipped another page. She could wait.

The phone chimed again and he sighed, sliding in a bookmark and wondering lazily if he could figure out how to get Lola to fetch it from the dining room table for him. Even if he could, that’d be a bad habit to start; he already had to keep an eye on her when she got in a counter-surfing mood.

“I’m coming,” he grumbled, prepared to send Laura an irritated *just buy the plane tickets and call it good* text to make her leave him alone. If she was bugging him again, she must be home from their trick-or-treating expedition. He stopped dragging his feet when he realized she might be sending photos of their costumes instead of waiting to post them online. The girls had described their plans in detail the last time they’d Skyped, but he hadn’t seen the fully assembled versions yet.

He unlocked his phone in a more cheerful mood, but the alerts weren’t from his sister. There were two new texts in his thread with Stiles.

**>> So on a scale from 1-10, how hard are you avoiding Halloween right now?**

**>> You don’t even have to answer that. More important question: you want some company being a holiday-hater?**

Stiles was the last person he’d expected to hear from tonight. They’d talked briefly after class, and he’d said something about going to a party with Scott and Kira. Derek hadn’t probed for more; he didn’t really want to consider the things people tended to get up to at those kinds of college events. He chose blissful ignorance when it came to areas of Stiles’s life that had no relevance to his.

Derek had put in an appearance for his regular Monday evening office hours but had ended them early, not seeing much point in keeping his door open when everyone was more likely to be pregaming than studying. On his way home, he’d crossed paths with dozens of this year’s variations of sexy costumes. There was an awful lot of exposed skin, considering the temperature, but that hadn’t stopped people back on the East Coast, either. He was probably just turning into a curmudgeon in his old age. Next he’d be shaking a walking stick at kids trying to trample his lawn.

**You don’t hate this holiday,** he texted back. The answer was almost immediate; Stiles must’ve been holding his phone, waiting for a response.

**>> HAH! I never said the company was me.**

**>> But it’s obviously me.**

Did he mean tonight? Was he deciding whether to leave the party? Derek checked the time—both on his phone and on the mantel clock—in case he’d lost serious track while he was reading. That did tend to happen sometimes, but it was still much too early for anything to be winding down.

His doorbell rang while he was pondering what to say. Apparently some people *didn't* take the hints, but if he stayed quiet, they’d probably go away. Lola lifted her head, the carrot tilting between her paws.

“Ignore them,” he told her, but she was already rising to her feet, her stubby tail wagging. She barked once before hurrying to the door.

That particular bark only ever meant one thing, and it got Derek moving, too, opening the door without even checking to see who was on the other side.
“Trick or treat,” Stiles said, grinning. He handed Derek a bag of mini Reese’s, then ducked down quickly to give Lola a few pats.

“You're not supposed to bring candy,” Derek said.

“I make my own Halloween rules. Anyway, I figured you might need to have some on hand. Emergency supply for any witches that could be wandering the streets tonight.” He winked at Derek, who was still blocking the doorway, holding the Reese’s with one hand, his phone in the other.

“I keep a just-in-case bag in the pantry,” Derek said, which was really not the most important thing to be addressing in that moment. Stiles was here. Choosing Derek on a night when he must have an incredible number of other options and other people he could be with. Derek had no idea how to even begin processing that.

“Of course you do,” Stiles said fondly. “So...I know I didn’t exactly give you time to reply. Or to actually invite me over. Is it okay if I come in, or d’you want a night to yourself? Because I can totally go.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, readying himself to leave. There was a clump of trick-or-treaters trailing up the sidewalk, and Derek shoved his phone into his sweatpants pocket so he could grab Stiles and pull him inside, shutting the door. “Oh okay,” Stiles said, going willingly.

“I’m trying to make it seem like I’m not at home,” Derek explained, feeling stupid about it now. No one was actually chasing him into his house. It wouldn’t kill him to give some kids some candy.

“Almost worked on me. With your porch light out and everything, I thought you might’ve gone out for the night. But no, you really are a grinch.” Stiles braced his hand against the wall to make it easier to pull his shiny black boots off—which took some effort—then set his backpack on the rug and flopped comfortably onto the couch.

“That’s a Christmas reference,” Derek said. “I only hate this holiday. And Valentine’s Day. And Easter decorations are kind of annoying if you’re not religious or a kid who loves bunnies.”

“Do you also hate fireworks? And turkeys? And everything fun?”

Holidays were something that picked up a much more depressing undertone when you got older and had no one to spend most of them with. Derek had fond memories of hunting for Easter eggs in their sprawling backyard when he and his sisters were young, and of lighting sparklers in warm summer evenings and tracing words through the air. Even though roughhousing had been strictly forbidden around fireworks, one of them would inevitably write some sort of an insult that led to a scuffle and occasional mild singeing. He pressed his thumb against the spot on his wrist where a couple of stray sparks had caught him when he’d been chasing Laura across the yard, yelling at her to apologize. She’d tripped and scraped her knee, so they’d called it even and made a pact to hide both injuries from their parents.

He couldn’t repeat those experiences. He could only cherish them, and change the way he celebrated holidays as an adult. Mostly it boiled down to not celebrating, although sometimes he let Erica drag him into things he would’ve avoided if he’d been left to his own devices.

“I’m selective,” he told Stiles. “What happened to your party?” He snapped his fingers at Lola, who was struggling with the choice between Stiles and her treat; she knew full well she wasn’t allowed to eat on any furniture, but she’d started sneaking it toward the couch anyway. She dropped to the floor with a disgruntled huff.

“Got bored.” Stiles gestured at himself. “Plus a shocking number of people had no idea who I was.”
“You’re Han Solo,” Derek said. It was an obvious and unsurprisingly attractive costume: snug-fitting dark pants with a red stripe, black vest over a partially unbuttoned white shirt, plastic holster at his hip. It wasn’t the most expensively produced version he’d ever seen, but it’d be difficult to mistake it for anything else.

“I know I am. Fucking Scott asked me if I was going as drunk James Bond. And then when we were at the party, three different girls dressed as like, sexy nurses and shit came up to ask me to explain my costume. How is it possible for people to have that little knowledge of pop culture?”

Derek set the candy on the dining room table, and Stiles twisted around on the couch to watch him. “They probably did know. It was an excuse to hit on you,” he said.

Stiles opened his mouth, then shut it with a puzzled look, as though the idea had never even occurred to him. “Huh.”

“Regretting leaving now?” Derek asked, ripping open the bag to keep his hands busy.

“No.” Stiles extended an open palm and Derek tossed him a peanut butter cup, unwrapping his own and biting delicately around the rim of the chocolate. Stiles shoved the entire thing in his mouth and folded the wrapper into his shirt pocket as he swallowed. “I was thinking about you.”

Derek stopped mid-bite.

Stiles picked a bit of chocolate off his shirt and sucked it off his finger, releasing the digit from his mouth with a wet pop. “With the costume and everything, I mean. It reminded me that we still haven’t watched the ultimate cut of the movies. I stopped by my place and grabbed my laptop; I thought maybe we could start with the first one, if you’re not doing anything else? I mean, clearly I’ve interrupted some sort of exciting evening.”

“I was reading,” Derek said. “I think you’re actually sitting on my book.”

“No, I moved it!” Stiles wiggled in place again and retrieved the book triumphantly. “We could have a reading night instead, if that’s what you were set on doing. I didn’t bring anything with me, but I can raid your shelves.”

“The party bored you, but sitting and reading with me wouldn’t?”

“I dunno,” Stiles said. “Those things are always the same. It’s crowded, people get drunk, somebody pukes on your shoes, somebody else locks themselves in the only functioning bathroom and pisses off everybody waiting in line. I don’t think I’ve actually had fun at one for a couple years now.”

It’d been many more years since Derek had made an appearance at that type of college party. He obviously wouldn’t fit in at them anymore, but he never had, really. He’d been the quiet guy who drank a few beers and retreated into a corner, either by himself or with the other people who got earnest and intellectual when the alcohol kicked in. Stiles, despite his constant assertions to the contrary, struck Derek as the guy who’d be the life of any party.

Yet here he was, wiggling his fingers for another peanut butter cup, acting like there was nothing more natural than showing up on Derek’s front porch just because he wanted to hang out.

“The book’ll hold,” Derek said. “Let’s hook up your computer and see if this thing’s as great as you claim. You’ve probably built it up too much.”

“Impossible. I swear it’s gonna blow your mind. You’ll never be able to go back to the old way once you’ve seen what my version’s like.”
I know, Derek thought as Stiles started digging through his backpack, pulling out his laptop and a bundle of cords and wires. It's already much too late to go back to the way things were.

“What should I do?” he asked. Turn the TV so Stiles could reach the back of it, maybe? Hold something while he worked? But Stiles waved over his shoulder.

“I’ve got this. You promised me popcorn as your part of the deal, though; you could get that started.”

“I have no memory of that conversation. It sounds like something you promised yourself,” Derek said.

“That’s...possible. Doesn’t mean it’s not a good idea.”

No sense in putting up a token objection when it was a foregone conclusion that he’d be giving in.

“How do you feel about kettle corn?”

“That doesn’t love kettle corn?” Stiles shot back. He was gently pushing Lola’s nose away from his jumble of electronics, so Derek left him to it and started gathering everything he’d need.

He had oil heating on the stove before long, with a couple of kernels dropped in to let him know when it’d be ready for the rest. The first batch was a small one that he made quickly and set aside. For the second, he sprinkled the sugar over the kernels and whirled the handle to keep it mixing steadily until the popping stopped.

“How hungry are you?” he asked, pitching his voice so it’d carry into the living room.

“I had dinner,” Stiles called back. “I’m not starving. Don’t feel like you actually have to feed me a meal here. You just can’t have an epic cinematic experience without popcorn.”

He’d make a third batch if it was needed, but this should be enough for now, then. He poured the slightly sticky mixture into two bowls, then found a way to balance the third on top so he’d only have to make one trip. Stiles had finished fiddling with the entertainment center and had the opening credits ready to roll.

“This one’s so I can give Lola a few pieces when she starts sniffing around for ours,” Derek explained when he set the smallest bowl down on the couch. “Very little oil, no sugar, salt, or butter.”

“And this is for me,” Stiles said, taking the much larger one Derek was holding out. “Now settle in and no talking during the movie.”

“You’re the one who has to comment on everything,” Derek protested.

Stiles leaned over and pressed a sugary finger over Derek’s lips. “Shhh,” he said. “Cinematic experience. We will discuss after. In detail.”

He’d been drinking, Derek thought as Stiles withdrew and started up the movie. Not a lot, but enough to loosen him up and drop some of the inhibitions that usually kept them from touching each other. Or maybe that was just the excitement over sharing something that was so special to him; either way, he tried not to move or lick his lips until Stiles’s attention was fixed on the television.

True to his word, Stiles stayed silent throughout the majority of the movie, although Derek caught him watching him instead of the screen more than once. Checking for his reactions to make sure he was enjoying it properly, which was as bad as narrating the climactic moments, so Derek schooled his expressions and calmly crunched his way through each delicious bite of kettle corn.
“You’re no fun,” Stiles finally muttered.

“Shhhh,” Derek said. “I can’t hear the dialogue; someone’s ruining my cinematic experience.”

Stiles retaliated by moving closer and stealing out of his bowl; his had long been empty and was balanced on the arm of the couch, out of Lola’s reach. She’d gotten bored and left them to it early on, anyway. Derek had refused to let her sit with them, not trusting her with so many temptations within sneaking distance.

Temptations indeed: Stiles was almost as close now as he’d been in the hot tub, which had given Derek a serious exercise in self control. He’d failed, ultimately. Controlling his physical reactions was one thing, but he’d never been as skilled at restraining the emotional side. That part kept getting worse around Stiles. If he just kept giving—his time, his attention, his empathy, his home, a tireless interest in listening to Stiles’s stories, potentially his heart—and took nothing, he was doing nothing wrong, he told himself, as he’d been doing from the beginning. Nothing that’d hurt anyone but himself.

He was starting to spend more time wishing, though. Idle daydreams had turned into active longing. It was a dangerous activity.

“Well?” Stiles asked expectantly when the screen faded to black.

“I get the impression only one response is allowed,” Derek said, and Stiles narrowed his eyes, clearly preparing for an outright battle if Derek disagreed with his assessment. It’d be fun to tease that annoyance out, seeing how irritated he could make Stiles before he realized he was joking, but he wasn’t in the mood to be an ass tonight.

They were still deep in discussion when Stiles stopped in the middle of a rant about fucking midichlorians to frown down at Derek’s pants. “I think your pocket’s ringing,” he said.

Derek hadn’t even noticed. He’d always been able to tune out his surroundings when he needed to—it’d helped his grades significantly throughout school—and tonight he must’ve been automatically filtering out anything that would distract from the man in front of him.

“It’s gotta be Laura this time,” he said. He tilted the screen so Stiles could see the first photo she’d sent. “I think your pocket’s ringing,” he said.

Derek hadn’t even noticed. He’d always been able to tune out his surroundings when he needed to—it’d helped his grades significantly throughout school—and tonight he must’ve been automatically filtering out anything that would distract from the man in front of him.

“Cute,” Stiles said approvingly. “So they went with Ginny and—”

“Dobby,” Derek pointed to the sock sewed to the front of Emma’s simple white shift dress. “And Eliza’s actually Hermione. She wanted to dye her hair so people wouldn’t mistake her for a Weasley, but Laura put her foot down.”

Speaking of which: he opened the next photo, with the additions of a wild-haired Trelawney and a burly, ginger-bearded Hagrid, and typed out a text.

<< Finally decided to let your hair go natural, huh? It’s a good look on you.

Her wig was probably supposed to be blonde, but in the photo, it had a distinct grey tinge, aided by the oversized, owlish glasses and sloppily assembled clothes, and Laura got the message loud and clear. He forgot that Stiles was still looking over his shoulder until he snickered when the reply came through.

>> Fuck you, you ancient fart. You wish you could be this hot at my age.
Learn to take a compliment, he wrote back. Tell the girls they look great. And to call me after school tomorrow?

>> Eliza says to tell you they made bank tonight. Don’t ask me where she picked up that expression. It sucks that they’re getting too old for us to sort through the candy and grab all the good stuff without them noticing.

<< Halloween’s for the kids. Aren’t you supposed to be less greedy when you’re a parent?

>> Myth of motherhood.

>> The least these little creatures can do is earn their keep in chocolate once a year.

“She’s a good mom,” he told Stiles, in case he was getting the wrong impression, but Stiles had been unabashedly enjoying the entire exchange.

“I can see that. They seem like a great family.”

“They are.” Derek knew he sounded wistful, but he couldn’t help it around this time of the year. Halloween was always the tipping point: everything after that would be darker and colder and filled with quiet longing for people he cared about.

You doing okay? I know things get rough for you when the holidays start, Laura sent, and he didn’t tilt the screen back quickly enough for Stiles to miss it.

It’s not so bad this year. He thought about it for a bit, then added, I’m actually having a pretty good night.

“You miss them, huh?” Stiles asked. He’d sat back, probably trying not to snoop on the last message, although Derek found that he didn’t particularly mind him seeing a window into his relationship with his remaining family members.

“It’s hard not to,” he said. He saved Laura’s photos into an album that he’d back up to his computer later and rubbed away a smudge on the screen once it went dark again. “That thing she said about the holidays...”

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Stiles said. He had his own phone out now, fiddling with it to show that he wasn’t intruding on anyone else’s private conversations. “I know I wasn’t meant to see that.”

“I wasn’t trying to hide it.” He traced his gaze along Stiles’s profile: his upturned nose, the three moles curving in a perfect semicircle around his ear, the one that someone’s lips would brush against if they kissed the corner of his mouth.

That was why Laura dealt with the holidays better, wasn’t it? She had Rob. Her kids now, too, but her husband had been her partner during the most challenging and rewarding periods of her life. She had someone to lean on. Someone who was by her side through thick and thin and who could share and understand her sorrow without being broken under it.

Derek knew Stiles wasn’t that person for him. Couldn’t be. And he’d already made the mistake of leaning too heavily on someone whose support wasn’t guaranteed. Who’d sent his life toppling out of his control by taking away something that it turned out had never really been there to begin with.

But it didn’t stop him from wanting to share pieces of himself. Or from shouldering the weight of Stiles’s sorrows. That’s what you did for people you cared about. That’s the way Derek was raised
to see it, anyway, idealizing his parents’ loving partnership, a dynamic that’d carried over into Laura’s life but had somehow completely missed his.

In the therapy pool, when he’d found himself telling Stiles about Cora, he’d come so close to sharing the rest. How after his parents’ accident, he’d lost any shreds of faith in fate or magic or anything that would let him pick meaning out of the world’s chaos. How his relationship with Jennifer a couple years later had, on his end, gotten too serious too quickly because he was grasping for someone who’d make him feel again. Until those new possibilities had fallen away, too, founded on a flimsy understanding of a woman who’d been nothing like the person he’d thought he’d loved.

Stiles finished whatever he was texting—maybe telling Scott where he was this time? or avoiding the topic again?—and glanced at Derek.

“My dad,” he said, although Derek hadn’t asked. “He deals with the less fun side of Halloween, so he always checks in with me to make sure I’m okay.”

“And to give you a chance to do the same,” Derek guessed.

“We’re all we’ve got.” Stiles tapped his phone absently against the couch. “It’s one of our things now; checking in with each other and seeing who can worry the most. He’s never said it, but I think he feels guilty. About not being there with me and my mom, right at the end.”

Derek sifted through what Stiles had told him previously. “You said you got a chance to say goodbye to her?”

He gave a short, pained nod. “In a sense. I was there, anyway. In the hospital, sitting with her. My dad was out on a call, and by the time Melissa was able to get patched through to him, it was too late. My mom had flatlined.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek said, wondering if he should back out of the topic, but Stiles seemed much steadier than the first time he’d brought her up. Talking about it helped sometimes. Derek knew that all too well, as someone who hated sharing his emotions with anyone but a select few and often trapped himself in his own head as a result.

“It was rough for me,” Stiles said, with a wry twist to his lips. “Obviously. Even though I was there, or maybe because I was there and it really fucked me up, I don’t know. And my dad...it was hard. He was so broken up over losing her, I honestly think he forgot about me for a while. Melissa took me home, and I stayed with her and Scott while he made all the funeral arrangements.”

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“Grief affects people differently.” Derek was too familiar with that knowledge, too. “It sounds like his instinct was to isolate himself—without thinking about how it’d affect you.”

“Yeah. I never told him this, either—there’s a lot of shit we don’t talk about—but for a couple days I honestly thought I was losing both of them at once. Scott being my actual brother wasn’t a bad thing—it helped a lot, actually, that I got to spend so much time with him then—but it was like my dad was punishing me for her dying, or something. Like he’d only been willing to deal with me as long as my mom was around, and now he had a chance to be free and live his life without constantly worrying about her wandering off, or me fucking up in school.”

That didn’t sound at all like the dad Stiles talked about, which meant they’d plastered over those wounds at some point in their past. But some wounds never totally healed. Some simply turned into bruises under the surface that might be invisible to others but still hurt when you pressed against them.
“You're a lot closer now, it seems like. So what changed?”

“He woke up, I guess? He realized that I was still around, and I was a kid who needed his dad to not be a mess. It took me a while to shake the idea that he blamed me for it, though.”

“For her death?” Derek couldn't help sounding incredulous.

“No. Or—a little, yeah, but even then I knew that didn't make any sort of logical sense.”

“It's hard to think clearly under those kinds of circumstances.”

“Yeah, it is. So imagine you're a kid whose mom just died from a disease that basically destroyed her brain. And you're sitting by the nurses’ station after the doctors kicked you out of the room where they're trying to resuscitate her, and your brain goes cloudy and dark and you can't think, and you start wondering if this is how it started for her, and if this is how it feels to be going crazy, and if every time your dad looks at you, he sees a ticking time bomb that's going to ruin his life again.”

Stiles stopped for breath. “Shit,” he said. “I keep doing this. I came over to have fun and to try to cheer you up, god, I swear I'm not always such a fucking downer.”

“You're not,” Derek said. “You weren't earlier, and you're not now. It's...the holidays. Believe me, I understand. That's why Laura was texting me that way, like your dad does. I don’t know how it is for you, but October through December’s always the worst for me. Everything gets closer to the surface, and not talking about it doesn't make it go away. It just leaves you alone with everything that's still pressing down on you.”

Stiles turned to face him fully. “You do understand. I think that's why I keep telling you this shit. But you haven't told me—and you don't have to—but how do you get it? Is it just, like, really fucking effective empathy? Or is it—” He glanced over his shoulder, at the full family portrait hanging over the mantle. “You never talk about your parents.”

A lot of people, if they noticed at all, seemed to take it for granted that Derek’s parents weren't around anymore. People die. There's no avoiding that. Maybe Stiles had been operating under the same assumption: Derek was older, ergo it was logical for him to have lost his parents.

His mom would've only been 65 this year; his dad would've been 66. They would’ve been a little older, with a few more lines worn into their faces, but he couldn’t imagine either of their energy levels dipping. Retirement is for people who don’t love what they do, his dad had always said when his friends talked about what their futures might hold.

Derek unwound a thick thread of grief and let it catch against the ones Stiles had been spinning his way. “They never got to see Laura’s kids. I think about that every time she sends me new photos of them. You know how parents are always sending relatives those school portraits that most people store in a drawer or maybe stuff into an album? My parents would’ve had the whole house cluttered with them. On the fridge, in frames on every surface.” His dad, especially, would’ve loved being a grandfather. Would’ve been testing out the girls’ musical interests from an early age, seeing what stuck and what he’d be able to teach them in earnest. Would’ve probably befriended Rob’s entire extended family and found a way to wrap all their holidays into one giant festivity.

“My dad has a drawer,” Stiles said. “Folders with photos of me and Scott, with information written on the back; mine are clipped to my school records. It feels a little like he’s keeping a file on me in case I ever really screw up and he has to figure out how to get me out of jail, but it’s just one of his weird job-related habits.” His tone was back to slightly aggravated affection, which was the way he usually talked about their relationship. It was clear that despite whatever misunderstandings they had—inevitable in any family—they loved the hell out of each other.
“I don’t know your dad,” Derek said. “Other than how you talk about him, and the kind of person you turned out to be. So I obviously can’t speak for him. But I know what it’s like to torment yourself over not being somewhere you should’ve been, or not being able to say the right things to them before they’re gone forever. Grief can make you selfish, without realizing that you’re hurting the people who still need you.”

“That sounds like personal experience speaking,” Stiles said carefully.

Derek took a breath and let the rest of the spool of grief spin faster, scattered images weaving back into a heavy tapestry of loss and self-recrimination. “It was right after I got my PhD. I told my parents they didn’t have to come, that they’d already seen so many graduation ceremonies, they’d be able to picture exactly what it’d be like without having to cross the country to sit through the whole boring thing one more time. But they could tell I wanted them there.”

His mom had pushed him into admitting as much; he’d wanted to see his parents’ faces in the crowd. He’d wanted them to smile at him with pride, to hand their camera off to strangers to take group photos with him in his full regalia. He’d wanted his mom to hug him and tell him she’d accepted the career he was pursuing, even though she’d tried to talk him out of it at least twice a year since he’d started college.

_Dad’s a teacher_, Derek had argued, and each time she’d countered with, _Yes, and he can do that because my income supports the whole family._

His parents hadn’t argued often—at least not in front of him and his sisters—but the biggest, most explosive fights he could remember had always centered around money. His dad was generous to a fault. He waived fees for private music lessons for kids whose families were struggling to pay their bills; he promised hefty donations to boost not only the high school’s music program, but to almost single-handedly save the theatre program when the district-wide budget slashing had stripped away support for the arts. He always picked up the tab during meals out, no matter how many other people were at the table with him. He’d stop to talk to anyone on the street corner, whether they were asking for money or for someone to sign a petition.

_Your father’s never been a practical man_, Derek’s mom had told him the year he’d plucked up the courage to announce he was dropping the dual business major she’d pushed him into taking on as a safety net. _You’ve always been more like him, and that’s what I’ve been afraid of. I love your father, but what kind of life do you think he’d be living if I wasn’t here to support him? Maybe if you were marrying into money, this path you’re taking would be reasonable, but Derek, honey, you’re not even dating._

_Jesus, mom, I’m not a gold digger_, he’d said, dismayed by what that indicated about his parents’ relationship, and she’d sighed over the phone and told him that wasn’t what she’d meant.

_I won’t be around forever_, she’d said. _And your sister’s going to have her own family to think of. And Cora—well, Cora will make her own way in the world. I’m worried about you being alone, that’s all._

After his ceremony, he’d smiled through a dozen photos, leaning down to kiss his mom on the cheek until she’d laughed, complaining about him smearing her makeup but hugging him close anyway. Things had gone well until the final lunch before his parents’ flight home, when he’d kicked his foot against Laura’s ankle under the table and brought up his big news: that there was a tenure track position opening up in a few years, and he was being groomed for it.

_I’m a shoe-in, mom_, he’d told her, brimming over with pride at his own accomplishments. _You’ll see._
She’d frowned, using the back of her fork to push a sundried tomato to the edge of her spinach salad. *Don’t set your heart on it, she’d warned him. I’m not saying you’re unqualified, but you’re young, honey. In this economy, and with the job market as flooded as it is right now, getting tenure at this age and at a place of your choosing just isn’t that likely to happen.*

He’d been angry and hurt. He’d stayed quiet through the rest of the meal, fuming as his mom quizzed Laura about her recent promotion and smiled approvingly through Rob’s colorful stories about his casework. Rob might not be making as much money as she would’ve preferred for one of her children’s significant others, but his work was meaningful, and Laura’s salary more than covered their lifestyle.

*I’m proud of you,* Derek’s dad had said quietly into his ear during their final hug. *Your mom is, too. She shows it in a different way.*

He hadn’t even remember the last thing his mom had said to him. He knew their parting hug had been perfunctory, at best; he probably hadn’t even lifted his arms fully to encircle her. He’d initially planned to go to the airport to see them off, but he’d bowed out at the last minute. Coming back via transit was a long, tiring trip that didn’t feel worth an extra hour or so with his parents, especially when it required so much stubborn energy to keep the tension between them intact.

He couldn’t tell Stiles all these details, but he laid out enough to set the scene and to give him a sense of what was coming next.

“Last words,” Stiles said, gravelly sympathy in his voice. “Does that mean...”

“Laura got the phone call.”

She’d called him first, then Cora when he didn’t pick up, then him again, over and over, until he’d answered his phone. Between her tears and the rushing noise in his ears, he’d barely been able to understand what had happened. There’d been construction on the road home, narrowing the lanes and slowing down traffic. Then the fog had started rolling in: the thick, soupy kind that he remembered from his childhood, when the headlights only cut through the first few inches.

“The police report said it was probably somebody with road rage; they’d been having a lot of those complaints since the construction started. Or it could’ve been a drunk driver. Whoever it was, they drove my parents’ car off the road, and they just kept going.” Derek rolled his lips together, trying to even out his breathing. He hated this part: guessing at what his parents’ final thoughts might’ve been. If they’d had time to reach for each other. If they’d been terrified, or if it’d happened too quickly for them to even process the pain. “My mom was driving. My dad never liked driving at night; he said the headlights gave him a headache. With his glasses.” He gestured at his face, registering dimly that his hand was shaking. All those years, and it was as fresh as if it’d happened yesterday.

“Fucking asshole,” Stiles said, low and furious. “My dad’s taken some of those shithole drivers off the road, but he’s told me—shit, I’m so sorry.”

About the crash sites, probably. The damage those kinds of accidents could do to both the vehicles and the people inside. He probably knew more than Derek did. Derek hadn’t wanted to see the details of the police report or the photos of the crumpled car. He’d left Laura to fly back to identity the bodies. He’d shut himself off from everyone for most of the summer, showing up for the funeral but barely speaking to anyone about what had happened. Everything he’d done from then on had been focused on following through with the last promise he’d made to his mom.

Jennifer had known about that. He’d told her how important the position had been to him, and why.
He’d thought she’d understood.

Maybe she had; in the end, she simply hadn’t given a shit.

“I don’t have any photos from my graduation,” he said. “I don’t know why that part sticks with me so much, but I don’t have a single tangible reminder of the last time I saw them. Laura and I didn’t take any photos, and my dad’s camera got smashed in the crash.” Laura had brought back a few of the things that’d been retrieved from the scene—the remnants of the film, their parents’ rings, the locket their mom had always worn—but he hadn’t been able to stomach looking at any of them.

Cora hadn’t been in the car. She hadn’t flown out for his graduation or gone home with their parents. He’d had trouble remembering that sometimes, in those early months, and would call each of his sisters, then hang up once he’d heard their voices. He couldn’t handle struggling through conversations about how any of them were coping; all he needed to know was that they were okay.

If any of the Hales had luck on their side, it was Cora. She’d graduated from high school a month earlier and insisted on moving down to LA right away. She’d always been fiercely independent, a quality that’d taken on additional importance that year. She’d refused to move to New York to live with Laura. She’d stuck it out with her roommates and her hostessing job, taking classes on the side and picking up an interest in the culinary industry that’d led to her current career. Cora was the toughest out of all of them, and his mom had known it. Derek had always been the softest. The most likely to screw things up, to need someone to step in and bail him out when he got into trouble. The one who’d be the most likely to fuck up other people’s lives in the process.

“The part that I can’t—” His breath hitched. “My parents took a late flight so they’d be able to fit in that last meal with us. The one where I...they both made it to my graduation, and they died because of it.”

“Okay, that is bullshit,” Stiles said, startling Derek out of his wallowing, but those words weren't followed by the irritated judgment he was expecting. Stiles swiped his forearm over his eyes, then stood up and motioned for Derek to do the same. He got to his feet in confusion, waiting for an explanation. “Stilinskis are huggers, okay, so just—”

Stiles had his arms around him before he knew what was happening. Derek tensed instinctively, but he shuddered in the next instant, lowering his face to push it against Stiles’s neck and letting their bodies press into the hug. He was warm, firm, slightly sweaty, and Derek had no idea when he’d last felt that secure in someone’s arms.

“Listen to me, okay?” Stiles said hoarsely into his ear. “That was not your fault, Derek. Nothing that happened to your parents was your fault.”

“But I,” he tried, and Stiles shook him slightly, then tightened his arms.

“Not your fucking fault, Derek. I’m sorry you didn’t get to say goodbye to them. And I’m sorry you lost them. And if you want to talk about it more, I promise I’ll do my best to listen half as well as you’ve done with me. But you need to stop blaming yourself for an awful accident that shouldn’t have happened and you couldn’t have controlled.”

“I didn’t know it was gonna be the last time,” Derek said, muffled by their position but unwilling to shift it. “I had no idea it’d happen like that.”

“I know,” Stiles said. “It’s the fucking worst thing in the world. But trust me, no matter how it happens, it catches you off guard. You never feel like you’ve done enough.”
He held on for a little longer, then peeled himself away slowly.

Derek felt unmoored, broken open with every emotion visible for Stiles to pry free, if he was so inclined. But he didn’t press further; instead, he merely shrugged off his vest and unbuckled his holster, tossing both over the back of the couch with a muttered comment about the costume getting uncomfortable.

“We’re doing a great job of cheering each other up tonight,” Derek said, and Stiles laughed shortly.

“Like you said—holidays. Honestly, it’s kinda nice to not have to fake it for once.”

*I’m glad to be spending this one with you,* Derek thought. He felt raw and vulnerable still, but inexplicably happy underneath it all. “Do you need to head out?” he asked, even though removing a layer of clothes seemed to indicate Stiles wasn’t in a rush to go anywhere. “Or do you feel like giving the second movie a try?”

“You know just how to tempt a guy,” Stiles said. “But we’ve gotta savor those. I’ll bring *Empire* over another time, once you’ve fully digested this one.”

“Okay,” he said, trying not to sound overly disappointed.

Stiles jerked his head toward the hallway. “If you’re not kicking me out yet, we can do that reading night thing still? I wouldn’t mind getting a closer look at your bookshelves again.”

“Of course. You’re welcome to them any time.” He scrunched his eyebrows at the soft expression that drew as a response. “What?”

“Nothing,” Stiles said. “It’s just...you keep saying that. I’m starting to actually believe it, I guess. You’re a good guy, Derek Hale. I think people should tell you that more often.”

Not Dr. Hale, Derek thought, startled to realize that it wasn’t the first time Stiles had said his name that night. He’d been too entangled in his own grief earlier to fully register that when Stiles had reached into his guilt to pull him out, he hadn’t been talking to his professor. *Derek,* he’d said, with a level of fiercely protective tenderness that hadn’t been connected to his name in a long time. If ever.

*Derek.* It was strange that hearing his own name could send such warmth wrapping around his heart.

Before he could finish processing the praise that’d been dropped in alongside it—or do something truly ridiculous like ask Stiles to say his name again—Stiles left the room to follow through on his promise of digging through Derek’s shelves in search of something that’d interest him.

It didn’t take long before there was a loud thump and pained swearing coming from the direction of the still-unlit hallway, and Derek shook himself off and went to rescue him. And his books, which stood little chance of being put back in their proper spots if Stiles was going to try to inspect them in the trick-or-treater-deterring dark, too.

Under the right circumstances—and with the right person sharing the night with you—Halloween really wasn’t all that bad.

“Old dog, new tricks?” he asked Lola, who’d decided to follow him now that he and Stiles were doing something potentially interesting again. “Hang on, don’t—” he started when her clacking nails sped up, then sighed when the yelp from his study indicated that Stiles’s eyes hadn’t quite adjusted yet. A black dog in an unfamiliar dark room was only asking for trouble.

“Your house is haunted,” Stiles informed him, blinking and frowning, when Derek turned the light
on and stepped inside the room.

“By someone not fully in control of his own limbs,” Derek agreed. “Fortunately, I’m getting used to having him around.”

Stiles narrowed his gaze, flicked off his cell phone flashlight, and pointed at him with the spine of a paperback he’d pulled off a non-academic bookcase. “That’s too close to being some sort of compliment, so I’m gonna let the insult slide. C’mere and explain your sci-fi collection to me. You have some serious gaps we need to address.”

“I’ve read more than I own,” Derek said. He still owned more books than he really had space to accommodate—thus turning an entire room into a miniature library—but he’d done his best to winnow them down to his favorites. Clearly there was something crucial lacking that he’d either need to defend or check out on Stiles’s recommendation.

He moved to Stiles’s side when he beckoned again. He was okay with either, really; the only thing better than a lengthy debate with Stiles was coming away from one of their interactions with new knowledge or a desire to continue seeking out more information. He always wanted more, regardless. More conversation, more time, more encouragement to dig into his soul and hold out the broken pieces without fear of having them knocked away or shattered further. He could definitely do with more of Stiles bumping their shoulders together and grinning at him while pulling book after book out to discuss their relative qualities.

He’d be happy with more of anything, even his least favorite night of the year, as long as Stiles was there with him.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles prepares for the holidays
“Dude, it’s totally cool if you’ve been hooking up with someone. You know I’m not gonna judge, right?” Scott burst out, with enough pent-up emotion to make it sound like he’d been holding back this earnest appeal for some time. Probably even agonizing over it.

Stiles guiltily stopped rubbing at the side of his neck where, weeks later, he imagined he could still feel the scrape of Derek’s beard. It’d become a new absent habit when he was studying or wrapped up in his thoughts; while one part of his mind was occupied, he’d let the rest drift into the memory of holding Derek—a man who’d seemed so strong and untouchable when they’d first met, but who’d fit into Stiles’s arms as if he’d been made for them.

The memory carried lingering comfort that Stiles could tap into whenever he was feeling stressed, or when the world was threatening to shake his white-knuckled grip on it. He might not have a handle on a lot of things in his life, but lending his strength to Derek had given him an oftentimes lacking sense of purpose. He’d had far more explicitly romantic or sexual interactions with others—some good, some bad, some definitely mixed—but never anything that’d been as infused with the idea that this was where he was meant to be. That when he was with Derek, he belonged. Their relationship might be strictly platonic from Derek’s side, but that hardly mattered. All Stiles wanted was to be with him to whatever extent was possible.

Scott couldn’t have possibly picked up on any of these thoughts; Stiles panicked for a second anyway and channeled his guilt into his best innocent expression.

He settled on a simple, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” That was more or less true; he’d been minding his own business, scrolling through the next semester’s course options in preparation for his registration time slot. There was no reason that he could think of for Scott to choose now to unfairly confront him about his personal life.

“I’ve been waiting for you to say something,” Scott said, sounding wounded. “But it’s been weeks, and I’m starting to think Kira must be right.”

“Kira thinks I’m dating someone?” That was kinda sweet of her, actually; Stiles was curious what type of person she was imagining him having landed. Maybe he could quiz her about that the next time she was around.

“Secretly dating,” Scott corrected. “Or just sleeping with. Like I said, no judgment.”

“I’m flattered you two apparently spend your date nights talking about the action I might be getting. Unless—is there something you need to talk about? Are things not going well with you guys?”

“Don’t flip this around on me,” Scott said with a deep frown. “I feel like I don’t know anything that’s going on with you lately. You’re never around anymore. I think this is the first night in weeks, probably, that I’ve seen you in our apartment for more than a couple hours.”

“Okay, that’s a major exaggeration.” Stiles tabbed open another class he needed to take a closer look at and turned his attention away from his computer for the time being. “You know how insanely busy I’ve been. You’re the one who’s been telling me all semester that I need to get out more.”

“Yeah, and I think it’s great that you are.”
“You don’t sound particularly happy about it,” Stiles pointed out.

“It’s not about that. It’s the fact that it’s not like you to keep me out of the loop. I told you the minute me and Kira hooked up.”

“You demonstrated. Scarred my brain and nearly got us all kicked out of the bowling alley.”

“You’re avoiding,” Scott said, his crooked jawline setting in offended determination. “You don’t have to tell me who it is, if you don’t want to. Just tell me there’s no reason for me to be worrying, and I’ll try to let it go.”

He was really set on this. Stiles let his annoyance soften, doing his best to think of how he’d react if Scott kept disappearing at night without explaining where he was going. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. I promise, okay? Everything’s totally fine. And for whatever record you’re keeping, I’m not dating or fucking around. I haven’t slept with anyone in...shit, I have no idea. I’ve completely lost track.”

“Not at the Halloween party?” Scott asked, still sounding suspicious, but always willing to believe the best of Stiles. Even when he was suddenly weirdly invested in Stiles’s romantic life.

He snorted in private amusement. “I definitely didn’t sleep with anyone that night. That party was shitty, though. You have to admit that. Or maybe you and Kira were too busy sucking face to notice. The music was crap and the beer was worse. I don’t think I knew a single other person there, so I skipped out early.” He was only marginally successful in keeping his face from softening at the memory of the rest of the night, but Scott’s rarely employed interrogation tactics were already flagging. He latched onto something Stiles hadn’t meant as an accusation.

“Are you okay with me and Kira? I mean, I know you like her, but you signed up to live with me, not both of us. She doesn’t have to come over as often if that’s why you’ve been leaving so much.”

“No man, I am not trying to get in the way of your awesome little romance.” He rubbed at his nose, then admitted, “It would be easier if we had a second bedroom, though. I kinda regret that we didn’t figure out a way to shell out for that this year.”

“Same, dude,” Scott said. “I mean it, though. If you’ve been pulling all-nighters to get away from us, that’s not cool. We can fix that. We can switch our date nights to earlier on Wednesdays, when you’re in class, or on nights when you’re working late.”

“Which is all fucking weekend,” Stiles groaned in exaggerated pain. Not that it needed much exaggeration; he couldn’t wait until he had his degree in hand and could start transitioning into work that’d have more relevance to his skills and training. Most grad programs offered better options than he’d been able to qualify for while grinding his way through undergrad. His current job had flexibility and decent pay on its side—definite advantages for someone whose class and study schedule was always fluctuating—but he was looking forward to the day he’d be able to rip off his bow tie and kick it into a dumpster. Or, better, yet, wrap it up in a box and give it to Derek to see him struggle through an attempt to appear grateful for something he’d absolutely never let near his perfect throat.

“So weekends and Wednesdays,” Scott said, persisting in setting ground rules for their apartment.

Stiles held back a sigh and let him carry on with the negotiation. The truth was, he probably should be reducing the amount of time he spent at Derek’s, anyway. He hadn’t intentionally been neglecting Scott, but if it’d been noticeable enough for him to be making this big of a deal out of it, he obviously needed to take a closer look at his level of engagement with his friends. And family—he hadn’t even
called his dad yet about Thanksgiving, which was next week, shit.

It wasn’t like Derek was the only thing crowding other important elements out of his days, although it was probably true that he saw less of Scott now that he’d slotted in their weekly swimming nights, biweekly walks with Lola, and an occasional sexiled sleepover. That was as much on Scott as it was on him, though. The rest of his hours were occupied by the same old time-sucks. Projects, classwork, hassling Finstock for as many shifts as he could manage, talking to Dr. Ito about possible career options, arguing with his robotics team over half the group’s attempt to lazily wiggle out of the ambitious goals the rest of them had for the semester. What the fuck was the point of taking a class like that if you weren’t going to squeeze every last drop of possibility out of it while you had access to the labs and equipment?

That was a stance he held in nearly every aspect of his life, which usually extended to his most important relationships. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, then, that Scott would notice the difference when he slipped out of a position of primary importance in his best friend’s priorities. Stiles hadn’t actually realized that was happening, but now that he was facing it head-on, the idea of cutting back on his time with Derek made his heart clench. He loved Scott—of course he did, he always would—but being with Derek was...nothing else could compare to it. He wasn’t willing to give it up.

“You sure there’s nothing you wanna talk about?” Scott finished, and Stiles shook his head.

“Nah man. You know me. My life’s an open book.”

“Right,” Scott said, looking dubious, but he let Stiles distract him into a breakdown of their final semester’s classes. While Scott didn’t have much leeway with his—he had a strict set of requirements for his degree—it was easy enough to get him talking about his hopes for that last set.

Stiles’s choices had been planned out for some time, too. More CogSci, an electrical engineering course with a focus on medical imaging, and others that would continue in the same vein. He had additional options tabbed across his browser now that he didn’t mention, possible branches that he hadn’t considered taking until Derek had begun unknowingly shifting his perspective on his own future. Only one of the three was practical, but he hadn’t completely talked himself out of the others just yet.

He would, probably. He wasn’t planning to mention them to Derek, either. He just couldn’t bring himself to rule them out until he was forced to face reality.

Another mindset he stuck to stubbornly in most areas of his life.

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“I’ll miss you, kiddo,” his dad said, disappointment heavy in his voice. “You sure you won’t be able to make it?”

Stiles moved to the side of the steps that led to the library; it helped to shelter him a bit more from the wind and prevented stressed students from giving him dirty looks as they navigated around him.

“I wish I could, but I’ve got so much on my plate right now. Even without the driving time, there’s stuff I can’t get done at home. It’d really set me back. And with so many other people clocking out for the holidays, I should be able to get some extra shifts lined up for the weekend. Think of it this way: I’ll be able to afford an extra-special Christmas present for you this year.”

“You being here is the only present I need,” his dad said, not even intending it as a guilt trip, but Stiles was momentarily swayed before he recovered.
“It’s basically one meal, dad. And face it, we’re both awful cooks anyway.”

“That argument might fly if you didn’t know perfectly well that Melissa invites us over every year.”

“Which means that you won’t even be lonely!” Stiles said triumphantly. “And Melissa won’t feel like she has to make pumpkin pie, since I’m the only person out of all of you with decent taste in food.”

“Pie should have texture,” his dad said on cue; it was a well-rehearsed point of contention. “Does that mean Scott’s staying behind, too? Or are you letting him borrow your Jeep for the drive?”

Stiles grimaced. That was the one downside; he didn’t like the idea of not having Roscoe around for his catering gigs, most of which weren’t easily walkable. He also hated handing his Jeep’s keys off to anyone else. Scott was a generally trustworthy person, but Stiles didn’t even let his dad drive Roscoe without carrying out an elaborate inspection for dents and scratches after.

If this was another ploy to get him to change his mind, he wasn’t falling for it.

“I’ve got a coworker I can carpool with while Scott’s gone, and he’s paying for a full tank of gas and a car wash when he gets back. It’s not a bad bargain.”

“If you say so.” His dad went quiet for long enough to make Stiles shift from foot to foot, wondering if the conversation was over.

Not that he was in a rush to go inside; he didn’t understand Danny’s insistence on periodically meeting away from the lab to brainstorm and sketch out ideas. Stiles worked better when he could get his hands on things, and nothing ramped up his irritability like the conviction that they were wasting a hell of a lot of hours when they could be actually working on their robot instead of sitting around a table talking about plans that’d get dismantled once they were tinkering with the moving parts. No one had responded particularly well the last time he’d commented on his not-so-obscure ability to think and work simultaneously. He tried to be a team player. He really did. But sometimes it was a little too difficult to hold his tongue.

“Should I be worrying about you?” his dad finally asked.

“Ugh,” Stiles said. “Have you and Scott been talking?”

“We might now that I know there’s something to talk about.” Dammit. He’d let that one slip right through, hadn’t he. “Think of all the openings we’ll have while you’re not in Beacon Hills to change the subject.”

“Nice try, pops. I’ll save you the trouble: Scott thinks I’m overworking myself. Which isn’t true, and it's a boring Thanksgiving dinner topic, anyway. I can send you a list of prompts if you feel like the conversation’s gonna run dry without me there? I know it's a real hardship not having me around to keep things hopping.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” his dad said dryly. “While we're on that subject, are you at least taking it easier for your final semester? It's about time for registration, right?”

“Finished mine already. I've got the same load as always. Going out with as much knowledge in my head as I can possibly stuff in there, thank you very much deeply flawed but ultimately rewarding educational system.”

“Anything interesting this time around?” It was a question his dad asked out of habit. It used to be accompanied by a second part—anything I can help with?—which had been answered by a
definitive no for so long that he'd finally dropped it.

This time, though, Stiles broke their routine. "I signed up to take Polish."

His dad was quiet, and Stiles held his breath, his lungs aching a little from the cold and the anxiety tightening his chest, until he spoke again.

“I didn’t know you were still needing to fill a language requirement.”

A sidestep; nothing about his mom. Stiles let out the air in his lungs with gusty disappointment that his dad could probably hear through the line.

“Didn’t need language, specifically. Just one last class outside my major.”

Another pause, then: “How much of it do you still remember?”

Stiles closed his eyes, an old scene flitting through in a series of images: his mom singing in Polish as she haphazardly tried to clean the kitchen, constantly getting distracted by something else—a phone call, a funny-looking cloud, a bird that sang back to her from a branch outside—or by stopping to ruffle Stiles’s hair as he sat at the table, attempting to focus on his homework. “Enough to pass out of the basic intro requirements. I figured I could start writing back to Babcia without having to look up so many words.”

“That’s a good idea.” More silence—this was far outside of their usual comfort zone—then a softening in his dad’s voice as he added, “I’m out of practice now, but I can help, if you want to use me as a resource. It’d be nice to hear some of that in the house again.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, clearing his throat when the word came out gritty with emotion. “Yeah, I can probably use some help. With my name, the professor’s probably gonna saddle me with some serious expectations, right? Can’t let her down.”

“You never could,” his dad said. “She’d—you know she’d be proud of you. Not just about this. About everything you’ve been doing.”

Stiles’s throat choked up further. That hadn’t been the her he’d meant. Fuck, crying outside of the library would be such a fucking cliché. “Thanks, dad,” he managed. “I’ll keep you posted, alright? Maybe I’ll try to pick up some of the books early so you can start polishing up your skills in advance.”

“I have some of your mom’s books here. They’re boxed up with her other things; I can pull them out for you if you want.”

Neither of them had touched her things in a decade. Stiles actually hadn’t been sure his dad had kept them; they must be pushed into the back of his closet, or stored up in the attic. Out of sight, never quite out of mind. “Wait until I’m home for Christmas, okay? I’ll go through them with you.” He couldn’t stand the thought of his dad handling that by himself, with an empty house and a bottle of whiskey by his side.

“It can wait. I’ll be seeing you in December, then?”

“Of course, dad.” Like he’d ever miss Christmas. Even if it was always a little sad and lonely with just the two of them, or the two of them plus Scott and Melissa.

“With your schedule getting so busy, I wasn’t sure. I’ll be glad to see you for as long as you can make it.”
Stiles winced and admitted, “It won’t be for the full winter break; holiday parties are too lucrative to miss. I’ll be home for a week, maybe? I can try for more.”

“Give me a heads up as soon as you can so I can plan out my shifts.”

“Will do, dad.” He checked the time on his phone; the call had gone longer than he’d anticipated. “I’ve gotta go. Study group. Talk to you later, okay?”

“Love you, kiddo,” his dad said, and Stiles echoed it before clicking out of the call. They always closed off conversations that way, no matter what. Stiles had recurring nightmares of his final words to his dad being something shitty, and since his dad had started up this particular tradition years ago, the same was probably true for him.

It made his thoughts skate back to Derek, and he pulled up their increasingly active texting thread. This was fast becoming another habit; he didn’t like going a day without hearing from Derek, and he’d taken to texting him random complaints or observations in order to keep their connection humming. Plus there were sometimes questions that were too important to wait until he saw him in person, like: Thoughts on pumpkin pie?

The response came as he was joining his group in what was theoretically the library’s most soundproof study room.

>> Firmly believe it should be available all year round. Are you pro or anti pumpkin products?

Definitely pro, Stiles sent, ignoring the impatient glare Danny was sending his way. So he was late because of a phone call with his dad; sue him for trying to be a halfway decent son.

>> I picked up three varieties of pumpkin beer over the weekend. Next time you come over we can do a taste test and decide what I should stock up on for the winter.

Only Derek would turn it into a culinary experiment, he thought fondly. Don’t have to ask me twice, he said before giving in to the peer pressure and pocketing his phone. Leave it to Derek to be more interesting than even robots, for fuck’s sake. Who would’ve thought that was possible?

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Lola dove after an enticing noise in the ivy, and Derek gave the leash more slack so her collar wouldn’t catch against her throat.

“You’re gonna get bruised wrists at that rate,” Stiles said, hanging back a little in case she scared another rat out of hiding. The last one had nearly dashed across the tops of his shoes, and he was still feeling jittery about it. Lola had sniffed at him in disappointment; apparently he hadn’t done his part in helping her catch the surprisingly large beast. “She’s so good off leash; I don't think she’d run off if you gave her more freedom.”

“It keeps us connected so she always knows where I am,” Derek said. He tugged lightly at the leash to see if Lola was ready to move on yet. She shoved her head deeper into the ivy in response, pushing her shoulders in, too. “She'd come if I called, but it actually makes her more anxious to go without. It’s easier for both of us to leave it on.”

“I guess her senses have a lot more to deal with out in the open like this.”

“Yeah.” Derek sounded more disconnected than usual, and Stiles twisted around to try to read the tilt
“Worried,” he decided. “What’re you worrying about?”

The eyebrows lifted in surprise, then shifted into mild amusement when Derek realized what he was doing. “Worrying about how good you’re getting at that,” he said.

“Lies,” Stiles responded comfortably. “You’re secretly pleased how close we are to being able to talk without actually talking. I went a good fifteen minutes the other night before I realized we’d been having an entire conversation without you actually saying a word. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Derek hid a smile, which meant that he was right, of course.

“So what’s up? You’ve got that ‘storm on the horizon’ glower.”

“It’s Thanksgiving,” Derek admitted, adjusting the leash again as Lola shook herself off and began trotting peacefully along the path in search of something else to investigate.

“I thought you’d decided to go to Laura’s?” Once Stiles knew the reasons behind Derek’s travel-related anxieties, it’d been easier to understand other tidbits he dropped into conversation. For instance, his reluctance to push his family into visiting him, even though it was obvious how disappointed he was every time they declined the invitation. He’d put on a brave face, telling Stiles it was cheaper for one person to fly out, anyway. Stiles had seen the massive turkey stored in the bottom drawer of his freezer. He’d been holding out more hope than he was willing to admit out loud. He definitely wasn’t going to acknowledge that now, so there must be something else weighing on him. “Did Cora change her mind again?”

“Twice,” Derek sighed. “Last I heard, she’s going to show up, as long as we all promise to not ask her any questions. I think she must’ve broken up with her girlfriend.”

“Rough time for that to happen,” Stiles said sympathetically. “At least she didn't wait until Christmas?”

“Small blessings.” Derek moved to the side of the path to let a biker pass them. “I wasn't thinking about her, though. It's Lola. She hasn't been away from me for that long. Not for more than a few hours at a time, and now I'm leaving her for almost five full days.”

Stiles hadn't thought about that; he'd assumed Lola would be going with Derek. When he said as much, Derek shook his head.

“I considered it. I've been weighing the pros and cons and trying to convince myself I'm making the right decision.”

“In leaving her behind?”

“Yeah. Travel’s stressful for animals, and I don't know if she's ever been on a plane before or how she'd react. Add in the adjustment time once she's at Laura’s and the fact that we'd be back on the plane by the time she'd figured out how to navigate her new surroundings; it doesn't make sense to disrupt her routines that much just to keep her with me.”

“It sounds like you made the right decision.” His eyebrows were in a definite self-directed anger zone now, though. “What's making you question it?”

“Should I be going at all?” Derek frowned down at his feet. “Laura was right; she warned me I wasn't thinking clearly when I adopted Lola. I didn't think about holidays. I didn't think about
conferences, which I've been able to avoid this semester, but they're a part of my job I can't get away from forever. And what about traveling for fun? What if I wanted to jet over to Europe for a month this summer? I didn't consider any of that before I brought her home.”

“Derek,” he said, touching his arm to break through the spiral he was sending himself down. “You can figure all of that out. One step at a time. It's not like you regret bringing Lola home, right?”

“No,” Derek said. “I don't know. I don't think so.”

“Try sticking to one response,” he said, and Derek shot him a look that was somewhere between annoyed and sheepish.

“I'm glad I have Lola. That doesn't change me being incredibly selfish about all of this.”

“Fuck that.” Stiles waved it away. “If giving a dog an amazing home and loving the hell out of her is selfish, we could do with more of that in the world. Besides, the fact that you're stressing about this proves you're thinking about way more than yourself.”

“There are holes in that argument,” Derek grumbled, but he subsided and let Stiles continue.

“Lola can't talk for herself, but as a reasonably logical person and a self-professed new expert in nonverbal communication—” that got a partial smile, which was the goal—“I guarantee you she's happier with the life you're giving her, even if she has to do without you for a few stretches here and there. So let's just focus on each scenario as it comes up, instead of anticipating everything that can possibly go wrong.”

“You're one to talk,” Derek said.

Stiles gave him his best eyebrow raise in response. “Exactly. I know this spiral better than anyone. Which means I know for a fact that you can't see clearly when you're in the middle of it, so you need someone like me to help steer you out.”

“One issue at a time,” Derek said, relenting, turning his torso slightly toward Stiles as they walked. Stiles was getting good enough at body language to recognize that as an invitation to keep going.

“What're your Thanksgiving plans for her? And don't tell me you're thinking about cancelling, because I will personally drive you to the airport and put you in that plane. I've never known anyone who loves their family as much as you do, and there's no fucking way you get to sabotage that for yourself this year.”

“Laura would probably fly out here to strangle me,” Derek said, amusement creeping through the anxiety. “I looked into local boarding places; there're some really nice ones.”

“But you think she'll think she's been abandoned again,” Stiles guessed.

“I'm trying to avoid that; if I'm not here, she should at least be able to feel like I'm coming back for her. She knows now that when she's at home and I'm out for part of the day, I'll be back. If I uproot her, there's no telling what she'll think or how she'll react. I hate the idea of putting her through that.” He bent to stroke the fur behind Lola’s ears when she circled back to him, probably responding to the stress laced through his voice.

“So the best solution would be for someone to stay in your house with her until you get back.”

“I should've gotten her used to a dogsitter or something.” Derek snapped his fingers toward an interesting-looking patch of bushes, and Lola perked up, forgetting his worry-scents and bounding
into the vegetation to give it a thorough sniff. “Boyd and Erica aren't going anywhere this year, so they've said they can either check in on her or keep her at their place. She's been there enough for that to give her some stability, I guess. It's the only workable option I can come up with right now; it's not ideal, but they're already going out of their way to help me out. Erica doesn't dislike dogs, but she doesn't particularly like them, either. It's a pretty big favor.”

“In human terms, they're friends who only get along with each other because they both care about you.”

“Essentially,” Derek said. “I know it's stupid to worry about it. She's a dog; she'll be fine.”

“She's a part of your family,” Stiles corrected. “You wouldn't be you if you didn't care about her this much.”

Derek hunched his shoulders as though he wanted to shrug off the compliment, but he stayed silent. Maybe he could sense Stiles's readiness to drive that lesson home. Stiles studied him for a bit longer, waiting until they were on the move again.

“Not to volunteer myself here, but did you know I'm sticking around for the weekend?”

Derek reacted with enough surprise to indicate that this was definitely news to him. “You hadn't said. I guess I must've never asked. You're not heading home to see your dad?”

“Not this year. I've gotta buckle down and get a shit-ton of work done.” He headed off the guilty expression he saw starting to cross Derek’s face. “Don't feel bad about assigning a paper that's due after the holidays. It's kind of a dick move, but believe me, your class is my easiest one. I'm totally fine in yours and behind in a couple of others right now.”

“I gave enough notice for everyone to have time to work on it before Thanksgiving,” he countered, with a degree of defensiveness in his tone that didn't quite bury the still-tangible guilt.

“And after all these years, you think people are gonna do anything before the last minute.” Derek was a hell of an idealist with far too much faith in his students. Yet another aspect of his personality Stiles was helplessly drawn to. He was starting to look slightly grumpy about it now, though, so Stiles carried on briskly. “Point is, you can obviously say no, and I won't take it personally at all, but it doesn't hurt to have options. This is me offering up my services.”

“You wouldn’t mind taking care of her for that long? Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of a working holiday?”

“It's not like hanging out with Lola’s a hardship,” he scoffed. In the interest of full disclosure, he did need to outline his qualifications so Derek could accurately compare them with those of his best friends. “I do actually have to work, though. Like, dressing up and serving food at parties work, not just slamming my head against my keyboard trying to make a paper come out faster. So I wouldn’t be able to be with her the whole time; unlike your job, mine would definitely frown on a big furry dog tagging along. For the rest of it, though, I’m gonna be camped out studying. It’d be nice to have her around to keep me company. I think my whole apartment complex will probably be dead silent and kinda creepy for most of the week.”

Derek’s eyebrows were starting to lift into a hopeful arch. “You’d be okay with staying at my house the whole time?”

“It’d suck to leave my shitty place for that long, but I guess I can suffer through it for your sake.”

“Generous of you.” Derek’s expression had brightened significantly, the frown lines smoothing back
out. “I’m flying out on Wednesday; do you think you’d be able to stay over on Tuesday night? You know most of her routine by now, but I can walk you through the rest on Wednesday morning and then hand the keys and everything over to you before I leave.”

“And I assume you have a full Guide to Lola ready to go.”

Derek gave him a small, private smile. “You wrote parts of it. Honestly, this lifts a huge burden off my mind. She’s a lot more comfortable with you than she is with Erica and Boyd.” The smile started to fade a bit, but he propped it back up as he added, “With you in the house, she probably won’t even miss me. She’ll never even notice I’m gone.”

“You know that’s not true,” Stiles said.

Although maybe he didn’t; Derek still had this weird idea stuck in his head that he was Lola’s second-best option, like he’d turn a corner one day and she’d drag her leash out of his hands to reunite joyously with her original owners. Stiles didn’t care how well they’d trained her or how much they’d probably loved her before giving her up: she loved Derek now. He was too close to her, probably, to see how devoted she was to him. If only he could write a fucking essay about that. Reasons Derek Hale Is More Worthy Of Love Than He’ll Ever Accept. Stiles could crank out ten thousand words on that topic without breaking a sweat.

“You’ll take good care of her,” Derek said confidently, the corners of his eyes crinkling with affection when Lola returned to his side for another quick round of shoulder scratches. Even with the leash connecting them, she was constantly checking to be sure he was still with her.

She’d be happy with Stiles until she realized she’d been left alone with him. He wasn’t sure what would happen after that; he wasn’t nearly as convinced that she’d handle Derek’s absence gracefully. Maybe they could bond over missing him. And if he had to sleep on the couch for a couple nights to appease her, it wasn’t like Derek would know. Between his job and his schoolwork, he probably wouldn’t be sleeping that much, anyway.

Stiles would be the best damn temporary stand-in he could. Derek deserved to spend a few days with his sisters without stressing about what he’d left behind; giving him that was the least Stiles could do. It’d even make skipping his own family dinner seem worth it.

“We’re gonna have an amazing time,” he promised Lola, who briefly swiveled an ear in his direction but otherwise ignored him. “Don’t tell Derek, but I’m gonna spoil you rotten. I bet I can teach you all kinds of new tricks before he gets home.”

“It’s more likely to be the other way around,” Derek said, possibly anticipating Stiles letting Lola control his sleeping arrangements. “I can tell you that if you’re able to teach her how to actually catch a squirrel, she’ll love you forever.”

“That’s our goal then. One captured squirrel, ready to greet you when you walk back through the door.”

“Can’t wait,” Derek said, his eyebrows now curving into a shape that roughly translated to ‘delighted by Stiles but trying to pretend otherwise.’ It was Stiles’s favorite expression, and it was getting easier to tug out of him.

“Gotta give you something to be thankful for, right?” he asked, grinning when Derek rolled his eyes without making any attempt to deny it. Score another point for the Stilinski charm: Stiles was definitely growing on him.
Next up: Derek gives thanks
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Smack!

Derek jumped in surprise, brushing icy snow away from his neck as he twisted to find his attacker. Emma dodged behind her sister, giggling, covering her face with her striped mittens so he wouldn’t guess who’d thrown the snowball at his back. He had to admit she had some impressive aim; those junior softball leagues were clearly paying off.

“You’re supposed to be making snow angels with us, Uncle Derek,” she reminded him, poking her head out to make sure the rebuke landed.

“He’s supposed to be shoveling the walkway, actually,” Laura said, sneaking up on her youngest daughter from behind and lifting her into the air as she shrieked, kicking her legs until her mom set her back down.

“Well, he’s not doing that very well, either,” Emma complained as she readjusted the color-coordinated knitted hat her mom had partially dislodged. “And he said he was gonna play with us.”

Eliza punched her sister in the shoulder; it rocked Emma in place, but her puffy coat absorbed most of the impact. “Stop being a baby, or he won’t do anything with us today.”

“I’ll come make snow angels with you girls as soon as I finish this,” Derek promised, before Emma’s stormy expression could transition into pushing her sister into the mini snowbank he’d formed by shoveling a little less than half of the path stretching from the front door to the sidewalk. The snowfall was only a few inches deep, so it really shouldn’t have taken him this long to make progress, but he kept stopping to peer down the street, his heart leaping into his throat every time he thought he heard a car approaching.

“You’re such a West Coast slowpoke nowadays,” Laura said. She grabbed Emma by the back of her coat to keep her from diving after Eliza, who was feigning innocence, even though Derek had seen her sticking her tongue out in a clear taunt seconds earlier. “You’re not used to snow like this anymore, huh?”

“It’s not that,” Derek said. It was a little bit that; he’d volunteered precisely because this type of weather had regained its novelty status for him. Shoveling snow was enjoyable in smaller doses, when it wasn’t a daily activity that stretched out for months on end. He liked the burn in his muscles and the satisfyingly visible patches of scraped-clear ground that he left behind him as he worked. He pushed the shovel under the next section of snow then paused when he heard another engine rumbling up the block.

Laura made a noise of sudden understanding. She let go of Emma after warning both girls that they’d be going back inside if they couldn’t behave. Moving to Derek’s side, she swept a last bit of packed-together ice off his jacket collar and lowered her voice so the girls would be less tempted to eavesdrop or chime in. “It’ll be at least another twenty minutes, maybe more, before they get here. You can stop jumping at every noise.”

“Telling me that doesn’t make me stop,” he replied irritably. “Driving in snow makes me nervous, you know that.”
“Which is why Rob went to pick Cora up from the airport. He’s been driving through much worse for his entire life. Well, okay, maybe not his entire life, but you know what I mean. And this is barely anything, Derek; they’ll be fine.”

“I know,” he said, but she wrapped her arm around him and pinched at his waist to remind him she was the same annoying big sister she’d always been.

“What’s the point of all these muscles if you can’t even clear a walk. Eliza would’ve been done with it ages ago.”

“I don’t wanna, mom,” Eliza whined, having obviously been listening to their conversation while trying to trip Emma into a snow-dusted bush.

“I didn’t say you had to, nosy thing,” Laura called back. “Leave your mittens on; I don’t want you freezing your fingers off.”

“What a loving mother you are,” Derek said, and she pinched him again.

“You better believe it. I have a mug that says it and everything.”

“Bet you bought it yourself.”

Laura gave him a dirty look. “If you must know, it was a Mother’s Day present. Those wonderful kids of mine stuck flowers in it that they pulled out of the neighbor’s yard. We’re lucky no one actually saw them do it; it’s beastly enough living in this neighborhood as it is.”

“Yeah? I thought you were getting along better with the neighborhood association.” Derek didn’t interact much with his; there were a few people he nodded and waved at in passing, and he occasionally had to trade mail when letters ended up in the wrong boxes. Otherwise, he mostly kept to himself. Laura, with her law degree, kids, and a nose for trouble, inevitably drew more attention than a quiet professor could do on his own. She also had a long-established habit of embroiling herself in the types of drama Derek took pains to steer clear of.

“I get along with them fine. Cheryl Fuckface is always bitching about something, but that’s pretty much the entire extent of her miserable personality, so I don’t let it get to me.”

“I don’t think that’s her real last name,” Derek said as he dug the shovel into the snow, slipping back into the repetitive motions some faraway echo of his muscles still remembered.

“Close enough.” Laura shuffled her flat-soled boots along the path, following him without making any offer to help. “You’re lucky, you know.”

“Because?”

“Because you live around people who mind their own business. Can you believe Cheryl tried to take legal action when someone on our block used the wrong kind of wood for their new fence? Imagine having that kind of life, where that’s where you choose to invest all your self-righteous indignation.”

“It must be a sad life.”

“Yeah, she’s a wretched old hag of a woman alright.”

Derek stopped at the sidewalk, which was already clear. Rob had shoveled the driveway before leaving for the airport, and either he or some of the other neighbors must’ve taken care of the public sections while Derek was still sipping his coffee and adjusting to the new timezone.
“No, I mean if she’s that fixated on getting angry about completely inconsequential things, her personal life’s gotta be rough. Doesn’t excuse it, but it makes me feel a little sorry for her.”

“God, when you’re not around, I forget what a softie you are,” Laura said, hitting him affectionately on the arm. It was no wonder her kids had turned out the way they had. “I missed you. You sure you can’t cancel classes for a week and stay longer?”

“I’m here through Sunday already.” It’d make Monday morning’s classes a challenge, but he’d wanted to stretch out his time as much as possible. “Any luck convincing Cora to switch her ticket?”

“No, she says she has to go home on Saturday and that we’re lucky to get her for that long.” She followed Derek’s gaze as an SUV turned into a driveway three houses down. “Seriously, try to stop worrying. Cora will be fine. You’ve been here in much worse weather, and we always come through in one piece, don’t we?”

All it takes is once, Derek thought, but he handed the shovel off to her and rubbed his gloved hands against his jeans. That little effort and they were already starting to cramp; maybe it was another sign of getting older. Or it could simply be his body adjusting to temperatures he wasn’t used to anymore; all he knew was that the cold made his bones ache in a way he didn’t remember happening when he’d lived out here years ago.

If he was struggling, Stiles would absolutely hate it. Following that thought, he dug his phone out and peeled off one glove, holding the leather between his teeth so he had enough freedom of movement to snap a photo of the white-blanketed yard. There were only a few flakes drifting through the air; it was supposed to be fairly clear for the rest of the day, with scattered snow showers picking back up before he left. He texted the photo, along with a screenshot of the temperature on his phone’s weather app, and frowned at Laura when he looked up to find her raising an eyebrow at him.

“Shouldn’t you be prepping for dinner instead of bugging me out here?” he asked while tugging his glove back on, avoiding her eyes.

“I’m waiting for you to get antsy about it and take over. Besides, how long does it really take to cook a turkey?”

“The fact that you still have to ask that question means I’ll be cooking Thanksgiving Dinner again this year, doesn’t it,” he said in resignation.

“I’m doing my part to keep tradition alive. If you weren’t here, you know we’d be having some delicious store-bought roasted chicken tonight.”

“And you’d be just as happy with a tenth of the work.” Every year, he threatened to not cook for them, and every year, he gave in and spent the majority of the day in the kitchen, with Laura drinking wine and trying to pry new stories out of him. He was a lost cause, and they both knew it.

“Mom, make her stop!” Emma wailed from across the yard.

“I’ll deal with this,” Derek said. “You go do an inventory in the kitchen and tell me if we actually have everything we need for tonight.”

“You’re my favorite brother,” Laura told him, blowing him a kiss as she headed toward the house.

“I’m your only—nevermind.” He stepped over the mini snowbank and helped Emma up, kneeling down so he could straighten her hat and tuck her curly hair back under it. “You okay there, muffin?”
“Eliza’s being a fuckface,” Emma said, her face flushed with anger, her green eyes snapping furiously. Derek stifled a laugh.

“Just because your mom uses those words, that doesn’t mean it’s okay to call your sister names,” he told her, keeping his face as stern as possible.

“She says it all the time,” Eliza informed him, seemingly not fazed in the least by the attack on her character.

Derek wasn’t sure whether she meant Laura or Emma and decided it was safer to not ask. Emma crawled onto his back and threw her arms around his neck, already forgetting whatever the fight had been about.

“I wanna snow-paint, Uncle Derek,” she said, kicking him lightly in the ribs so he’d know to give her a piggyback ride.

She was getting so big; his heart ached a little for the tiny warm bundles they’d once been, with big eyes and gummy smiles. He made sure he had a secure grip on her legs before he stood to his feet in a rush, making her laugh in delight from the sudden change in altitude. He let her guide him around the yard for a few circuits, pretending to chase Eliza, before swinging her around and giving her a kiss on the forehead, then setting her back down.

“Snow painting, huh? That sounds like a good idea to me. What about you, Eliza?”

“I guess,” she said, probably trying to decide if it sounded too babyish for her—as though she hadn’t just been running around the yard with them in a game of pseudo-tag. She was at the age where she periodically remembered it wasn’t cool to show too much excitement or to be too fond of your relatives; it was driving Laura crazy, and Derek had been tempted to pull out photos of her at the same point in her life, when she’d exclusively worn oversized t-shirts and black nail polish and refused to smile in family portraits.

Eliza kicked a foot through the snow, then added, “S’long as I get red.”

“You can start off with the red,” he agreed. Maybe he could mix up enough colors to keep Emma from fighting her for it. “Do you still have the spray bottles?”

“I think mom put them in the garage,” she said, looking interested despite herself.

“Why don’t you find those and fill them in the laundry room sink, and I’ll go grab the food coloring. Emma, you can help her carry them; I’ll be right back.”

Laura was, as he’d expected, drinking coffee and scrolling through her phone instead of sorting through the pantry. “You’re tracking up my nice floors,” she said calmly. “My kids tire you out already?”

Derek had taken his boots off before entering the house; he opened his mouth to tell her as much before deciding it really wasn’t worth it. “You only like me visiting because it gives you free labor,” he said instead.

“I’ll admit it’s a bonus.” She shut off her screen a split second too late; he probably wouldn’t have thought anything of it if she hadn’t made the innocent face that always meant she’d been snooping into something she shouldn’t have.

“Why’re you on my Facebook page?”
“Was I?” Laura asked, bringing her coffee cup up to her lips. She set it back down when he didn’t budge. “Fine, I was looking at who you’ve friended on there recently.”

“Why?” he asked, puzzled. He occasionally added people after conferences, although it wasn’t his preferred networking site, and sometimes an acquaintance from his past would stumble across him and send a friend request. Laura wouldn’t be interested in any of that. She’d only want to know if —oh, he thought, suddenly regretting having asked. Stiles. She’d seen him texting someone and instead of poking her nose directly into his business, she’d gone about it obliquely.

“I thought I remembered someone new popping up a couple months ago. I never got around to checking him out before because fuck that site. Every time I go on there, Peter’s sent me another friend request, like he hasn’t noticed me rejecting the last five. Not to mention my ex-boyfriends. You remember Bryan? He has five kids now and he still keeps trying to chat me up, the saggy old douchebag. You should really get on Instagram already, Derek.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving off the familiar refrain. Avoiding unwanted relatives came with the territory, and the less he heard about Laura’s exes, the better. He definitely remembered Bryan. He wished he didn’t.

He moved aside boxes in the cabinets above the stove to get to the tiny bottles of food coloring in the back; judging from their placement and a partial spiderweb linking them together, they hadn’t been touched since the last time he’d been here. Laura wasn’t big on baking, or what she called “that artsy fartsy crafty shit you’re way better at anyway, Derek, the kids keep asking when you’re visiting next.”

“Good thing I haven’t deleted my account yet, I guess,” she said. She never had been easy to shake off once she’d gotten her teeth into something. “Stiles Stilinski. Weird name. Cute face.”

“He’s Polish,” Derek said, grimacing as he wiped the bottles off on a paper towel. Hopefully the spider itself was long gone by now; he wasn’t squeamish, but he wasn’t a big fan of finding living creatures in food storage spaces. Still better than the mouse he’d discovered hollowing out loaves of bread in his apartment during undergrad. “And before you start—he’s one of my students.”

“Current or former?”

“Current.”

“Huh,” Laura said.

He waited for her to continue and huffed out a frustrated breath when she stayed silent. “And that noise means what?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you don’t usually add your students. At least not while you’re still teaching them. Makes a big sister wonder what’s different about this guy.”

Everything, Derek thought. He didn’t have any other response prepared.

“Lola likes him,” he said after shuffling through the shelves again, pretending to be occupied by looking for something else. “He’s taking care of her while I’m away.”

“Okay,” Laura said.

He shut the cabinet door and turned to face her. “That’s it? You’re not going to ask anything else?”

“You’ve told me to stop hassling you about things like this,” she said. “If you want to talk about him,
that’s different. I’m trying to be better about respecting boundaries.”

Derek examined her quietly. She had a few tired lines around her mouth that seemed new—or that hadn’t been visible through video screens—and slightly dark circles under her eyes, since she hadn’t bothered to put on makeup for a day spent at home with family. She looked so much like their mom had at her age: a mature, beautiful, confident woman who’d raised her kids the best she knew how. On an impulse, he bent down to press a quick kiss against the side of her head.

“What was that for?” she asked, scrubbing it away and scrunching up her nose as though they were kids again.

“I was thinking about how lucky your girls are to have you. Is Eliza starting to keep secrets from you?”

She propped her chin in her hand and sighed heavily. “How old were we when we had our first significant others?”

“Actual dating or crushes?”

“Whatever counts as private enough to hide from your parents. She seems so young to be pushing back on me already. Then I think back...I kissed my first boy when I was in...sixth grade? Chance Fredericks. He had such dreamy hair, and I bragged about being able to touch it until Monique stole him out from under me.”

“Childhood romance is brutal,” Derek said seriously.

Laura flicked him gently on the bicep. “And friendship is fickle. Point is, I guess she’s not that far off. I still see her as such a little girl, and she is. And a lot of the time, she still acts that way. But she’s starting to fight against it; I wasn’t prepared for that to happen so soon.”

“So what makes you think she’s hiding things? Or are you gearing yourself up for something that might happen in the future?”

“Call it maternal intuition.”

“She got mad at you for snooping in her things, huh?”

“Our first big fight,” Laura said, morosely swirling her coffee mug. “It’s a strange balance when you have kids. For their own safety, you can’t let them run wild, but you’ll drive them away if you push too hard. It makes me understand mom more than I used to.”

“She’ll talk to you about it when she’s ready.” If Laura’s resemblance to their mom was strong, Eliza’s personality was perhaps even more strikingly similar to her mom’s. Stubborn, willful, and exuberantly kind-hearted once she’d asserted her independence. “It’s not like I have any advice to offer; all I can say is try to remember what you were like when you were that old. You and mom were thick as thieves. How’d she get you to open up?”

Laura smiled sadly. “She always treated me like I was a grownup. Like I was next in line to take care of our family if anything—well, you know.”

“Yeah,” Derek said. It was a mantle she’d taken on after their parents’ death, even though he and Cora were both adults who theoretically should’ve been able to manage their own lives without help. Not that he’d been the best at proving that. “You’ve got your own kids now. You don’t need to take care of us anymore.”
“Working on it,” she said. “It’s not an easy habit to break.”

“Especially for someone as nosy as you are.” He kept his voice playful to show he didn’t mean it.
“Speaking of kids, I’ve gotta get back outside. No telling what they’ve been up to on their own.”

“Yell for me if there’s any maiming happening,” Laura said, swiping open her phone again.

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By the time tires crunched up the driveway, Derek had nearly forgotten to keep the usual anxieties
spinning through his mind. He tilted his head as much as he could and squinted up at the sky, where
Cora had come into view, peering down at him.

“I know traffic was slow, but I didn’t think you’d freeze to death before I got here,” she said.
“What’s going on with this wonderfully macabre crime scene?”

“Don’t move,” Emma demanded from somewhere near his feet.

“It’s called angel snow-painting,” he said, carefully not moving his arms; Eliza was still tracing their
highest arc. He could feel ice soaking into his scalp and through his jeans and was secretly grateful
the game would be ending soon.

“Angels crash-landed on earth and we’re detectives who have to figure out why,” Eliza explained.
“Okay, I think we finished this one. You can get up now. Dad, help him so he doesn’t mess up the
lines again.”

Derek took Rob’s hand and heaved himself out of the angel shape the girls had outlined in lurid red,
using the squirt bottles they’d switched to after tiring of spraying rainbows and flowers into the
snow. There were about ten dead angels scattered across the yard, yellow halos painted over their
heads to make their identity more clear.

“You could swap these out for lights and call it Christmas decor,” Cora said.

Rob let out one of his easy, booming laughs. “The neighbors will love that. Maybe we’ll put ‘em up
on the roof and see what happens. How you doin’ there, Derek?”

“A bit cold,” he admitted, swiping ice out of his waistband before it finished melting down his pants.
“How was the drive?”

“Not bad,” Rob said. “Busy for a holiday. Cora said her flight was packed.”

“Who knew so many people wanted to come this far north for Thanksgiving?” She wrinkled her
nose, looking exactly like Laura for a moment, but let Derek hug her in greeting. Cora hadn’t gotten
the tactile gene, a fact he often forgot when he hadn’t seen her in a while; he released her when she
patted him awkwardly on the back. “Hey munchkins,” she added, bracing her feet in the snow as her
nieces tackled her from either side. “It’s freezing out here. Are you all crazy? Can we go inside
before my eyelids snap off?”

“It’s gonna get way colder,” Eliza bragged, always eager to look cool in front of her LA aunt. Derek,
on the other hand, was apparently the relative she didn’t mind spraying food coloring on while
yelling at her little sister to draw more even lines. “I’d be fine in a t-shirt, but mom made me wear a
coat.”

“Because mom doesn’t want you getting frostbite,” her dad interjected. “Where is she, anyway?”
“Last I saw, in the kitchen, definitely not cooking,” Derek said. “I need to get started on that. Should we—I guess we can leave the yard like this.”

“Snow’ll cover it up again in another day or so; we might as well let it sit so the girls don’t talk you into doing it all over again tomorrow,” Rob said. “Emma, put those bottles away, will you? And Eliza, you wanna carry your aunt’s bags up to your room?”

“You’re sharing with me!” Eliza announced excitedly, diving for the suitcase before Cora could tug it out of the car. She and Emma had fought over that honor the night before, Eliza ultimately winning by pulling the age card. In another few years, she’d probably consider herself too old to camp out on her floor while her aunt took her bed; for now, it was an exciting occasion that the girls treated like a special sleepover. Emma would likely end up sneaking in, anyway, and they’d be up talking for half of the night.

“I brought you both some stuff,” Cora said, and Emma gave Derek a pleading look, her arms full of the bottles she was supposed to be emptying and returning to the garage. He took pity on her and gathered them up, nodding her in Cora’s direction. It was a holiday; if Laura was going to enjoy the freedom to slack off for a day, her kids could do the same.

The holiday goodies were usually clothes for the girls to sort through and play dress-up in. Cora, as she frequently explained, didn’t give a crap about clothing unless it was comfortable or useful, but her roommate was a fashion buyer who ended up with sample bags that she had no use for once she’d made her decisions. Cora pulled out an occasional item for herself—why not, if they were free, she’d say with a shrug—but mostly picked through them for anything that might fit the girls. It was another element that made her a huge hit whenever she visited.

Slipping past the excitedly chattering cluster, Derek went through the motions of dumping out the water and giving the bottles a quick scrub; he left them in the laundry room sink to dry and went back to his room to change into a fresh long-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans that didn’t have wet patches soaked into the denim. It was quieter in there, providing a momentary haven of peace. Nestled into the front corner of the house, his room was accessible via the garage and separated from the common areas by a slim hallway with doors that he could shut for additional privacy. He’d left those open, of course, enjoying the slightly muted sounds of a vibrant family.

Derek gave himself a few minutes to sit down on the bed and thumb through his phone before rejoining everyone. There were a couple of texts from Stiles, and as he read them, he scraped his fingers through his beard—a handy built-in shield from the cold that he probably needed to trim.

>> I don’t know whether I’m jealous of you or sorry for you. Maybe both.
>> Will that delay your flight home?

It shouldn’t, Derek wrote back. As my family would say, this is barely anything. You should see it later in the winter.

He let himself, just for a moment, picture Stiles wandering around the house, poking into things and complaining about not having shoes with water-resistant soles. This guest room was ideal for a couple; Laura had hinted at that in previous years, casually pointing out the king-sized bed, overlarge closet, and attached bathroom with a tub wide enough for two. If she’d had her way, Derek would have transferred to the university here, renting out this section of the house with a significant other.

At least it didn’t sound like she’d be sending dinner invitations to some random—and conveniently single—“friend” of hers while he was visiting this time. He hadn’t even realized the first one was a setup until the woman had tried to kiss him on her way out the door. He’d put his foot down after the
third one, a man who’d been physically his type but who’d been unable to handle the brutal competitiveness of a family game night.

If, as Derek was indulgently imagining, Stiles had been here, he wouldn’t have any trouble fitting in with the rest of the family. He’d win all of them over as quickly as he’d done with Derek—and while he was at it, he’d probably cheerfully crush them all at the games, too. Cora would drop Derek for anything that required a partner, snapping Stiles up and reveling in finally being able to emerge victorious.

His phone chimed with a new picture message—a photo of Lola sleeping in a slatted rectangle of sunlight—followed by a stream of texts.

>> We miss you.
>> “We” being me, Lola, and the sunshine on this coast.
>> Not that I’m bragging or anything. (I’m totally bragging.)
>> Did Cora make it in yet?

<< A few minutes ago. Safe and sound.

His worries, thankfully, had been unfounded yet again. That acknowledgement, small and free of judgment, eased something within him. Stiles was able to treat his anxieties as valid, encouraging Derek to express them without feeding into them. It was a coping strategy that Derek hadn’t always been good at leveraging. It helped to have someone to talk to who’d respond with both sympathy and unflinching honesty.

I miss you too, Derek wrote, then deleted it before hitting send.

I’ve gotta call my dad to see how many pies he’s eating without me, Stiles texted after a few more innocuous exchanges. Happy Thanksgiving, Derek. Send me photos of the food; if I can’t eat any of it, at least you’ll feed my envy.

<< I told you I’d cook you a meal as thanks when I get home.

Stiles had refused actual payment, telling him to “not make it weird; this is what friends do for each other.” He’d see about bringing him some sort of small gift as a token anyway. Maybe Laura would have some ideas now that she knew who was taking care of his house while he was gone.

>> Oh believe me, I haven’t forgotten.
>> My mouth’s been watering since you left. No sign of stopping.

For possibly the first time in his life, Derek had a flash of regret over spending a holiday with his family. It was a ridiculous thought that he quashed before it could gain too strong of a foothold.

After all, Stiles would be waiting for him when he got home.

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Friday passed in a happy family-filled blur. Derek didn’t remember to check his phone until late in the evening, when a fresh spattering of thick, wet snowflakes drove them all back inside. Everyone but Cora, anyway, who’d eaten three well-toasted s’mores before claiming that the fire pit wasn’t doing enough to keep her lips from going numb.

“Your phone’s been making noise,” she told him as he was unwinding his scarf and hanging his coat up. She was sprawled out on one of the couches, watching a reality TV show he didn’t recognize.
Even though the heater was set to a comfortable temperature inside, she was still bundled up in a heavy sweater, with a tasseled beanie she’d borrowed from Laura pulled down over her ears.

He tugged at the tassel as he passed by. “You’re acting like LA was in the middle of a heat wave when you left. Didn’t you say it’s been raining?”

“Not in the last couple days,” she said, turning the volume down a notch. “And anyway, rain doesn’t automatically mean freezing fucking cold. How anyone can stand to live in this godforsaken wasteland for any length of time is beyond me.”

“I could say the same thing about your smog.” Derek grabbed a blanket off the back of an armchair and tossed it over her. Bits of fluff stuck to his fingers, and he took a quick detour to wash off the sticky marshmallow residue before retrieving his phone from where he’d left it on a table by the back door.

“I think LA’s amazing,” Eliza was saying loyally when he returned. She pushed past her sister to take the prime spot on the other couch.

“You haven’t even been,” Emma snapped back, stamping her foot and looking dangerously close to tears for someone who’d eaten half of a package of marshmallows while demonstrating her superior toasting skills. A sugar crash, possibly, or an overload of excitement leading into her bedtime.

Cora headed off any further argument by sitting up, tucking her legs under the blanket and patting the cushion next to her. Emma stuck out her tongue at her sister and clambered up. Derek let the rest fade into the background as he checked his texts. There were a few from Erica, one from Boyd, and several from Stiles that ended with a worrying: Are you around? Can I call you?

It’d been sent about half an hour earlier, with nothing to indicate what’d triggered it.

**Sorry, I’m here now**, he texted back, trying not to imagine a burst pipe or Lola slipping her collar and running into the street. **Is something wrong?**

The request for a video chat popped up before Derek had a chance to move rooms, and he accepted the invitation, feeling his worries deepening in preparation for—what, Stiles’s face framed against a hospital pillow? It didn’t matter that the thought wasn't logical; as soon as the call connected, he quickly scanned the screen, looking for some hint of why Stiles would be reaching out like this.

“You're in my house,” he said before Stiles could greet him.

“Uh, yeah? Where else would I be?” Stiles’s voice was warm and amused, with a rough, rumbly scratch to it that sounded even deeper over the phone line than in person. It was amazing how much you could miss someone after only being away from him for a couple of days. Derek relaxed a bit at the sight of him—in perfect health, as far as he could tell.

“I thought something might've happened,” he admitted.

“I didn't mean to make it sound like an emergency. You can call me later, if now’s not a good time?”

“No, it's fine.” Derek ignored the curious glances both his sisters were sending his way. He could duck into another room or figure out how to lower the speaker volume, but that'd make it seem like he had something to hide. Which he didn’t. “What's going on?”

Stiles rubbed at his chin, his eyes darting to the side. “So you know how you tried to tell me Lola wouldn’t even notice you being gone?”
He nodded. By this point, Stiles was essentially her second owner; she moped some when Derek wasn't around, but it'd never turned into behavioral problems. He'd assumed the same would be true if her primary owner switched out for a few days.

“Turns out I was right,” Stiles continued. “As usual. I've been telling her I haven't dognapped her permanently, but I think she's stopped believing me. I figured calling you might help to reassure her that you haven't completely disappeared.”

Of course she'd feel abandoned. Past all the excuses he'd layered up to allow himself to leave, including his relief over Stiles volunteering to take care of her, he'd known that'd be the case. He sank down into the nearest armchair. He should've planned better—brought her with him or stayed behind. He didn't have to be here, neglecting his responsibilities.

“Oh, and that's why I didn't mention it earlier,” Stiles said. “Stop making that face. Let me start over: she's fine, your house is fine, everything is totally under control. I think she'll probably be a little happier if she can hear your voice, that's all.”

“Where is she?” Derek asked, trying to school his expression into a less guilt-riddled one.

“Camped out in front of your bedroom door. I keep showing her you're not in there, but she forgets or decides I'm a big fat liar and goes back to waiting for you to come out. Hang on, I'll go get her.”

The camera bobbed out of the living room and along the hallway, coming to a stop with Lola in frame. Sure enough, she had her nose pressed against the crack under the door, looking flatter and sadder than he'd seen her since the day he'd stopped at the chainlink fence in front of her kennel. He'd promised her then that she wouldn't be spending her days alone anymore. He hadn't technically broken that vow—in his entirely unbiased opinion, Stiles was a tradeoff anyone would be grateful to accept—but that was a hard concept to explain to a sorrowful dog.

“Lola,” Derek said, and she whined sharply, shoving her nose harder against the door, then standing to paw at it when he called her name again.

“Whoops,” Stiles said. “This is not going the way I’d imagined it. Lola, come here. Derek’s not in there: he’s on the phone. This phone right here. Don't lick it. Yes, I know it doesn't smell like him. Goddammit, your confused eyebrows are almost as bad as his sad ones.”

“Lola, sit,” Derek ordered, and the black blur nuzzling at the screen moved back and obediently folded her legs into a still confused but mostly seated position. “I'm going to be home in a couple days. I know you can't understand that, but I promise I'm coming back for you. Okay girl? I promise. I'm coming back.”

She tilted her head, following the lifts and dips in his voice.

“You have no idea what I’m saying, do you. Maybe it's still helping to hear me talking to you.” He kept his voice calm and soothing, hoping the words would matter less than the even, unhurried reassurance he was doing his best to convey through the phone line.

Stiles’s arm moved into frame, and Lola gave it a quick sniff and lick before heaving a disappointed sigh and letting him scratch behind her ears.

“You hear that?” Stiles asked. “That’s how she’s been greeting me since you’ve been gone. She sniffs me all over to make sure you’re not around, then acts like I’ve broken her heart. It’s enough to give a guy a complex.”

“She’s hard to please; she does something similar when you haven’t been by in a few days,” Derek
He heard a stifled *hmm!* come from somewhere behind him and remembered suddenly that they weren’t alone. This was a new scenario: while he wasn’t Dr. Hale around his family, he wasn’t sure if he was the same Derek with them as he was with Stiles, or with them plus Stiles. Maybe it was a barrier he was supposed to be reinforcing, keeping some sort of division intact between them. He didn’t want to be more careful, though. He *wanted* to spin the camera around and introduce Stiles to all of his loved ones, gathered in one room.

“Wait until you get back,” Stiles was promising. “She’s gonna knock you over as soon as you walk through the door. I bet if I filmed it and put it on YouTube, we’d go viral. Like all those videos of soldiers coming home.”

“Those are the worst,” Laura said.

Stiles caught it, of course, and his face swung back into view. He peered intently through the screen, probably trying to figure out who’d said that. “By worst, I assume she meant best. Those videos are fucking awesome.”

“She sends me links and cries,” Derek said, hearing Rob chuckle in confirmation.

“If you don’t cry at dogs welcoming their people home, you’re probably not human,” Stiles said. “Hey look, that’s the first time I’ve seen her pick up one of her toys since she had to settle for me as a babysitter. This is totally working.” The camera trailed after Lola as she dragged one of her toys to her bed and braced it between her paws to bite at a tempting seam.

“You know the camera part doesn’t make a difference to her,” Derek couldn’t help pointing out. “You could’ve just called me and put me on speakerphone.”

“Well, yeah. But the video was for you, not her. I thought you’d react better if you could actually see that she’s doing fine.” Stiles turned the camera back to his grinning face again, giving Derek mild whiplash from the quick scene changes. “Besides, how else would I get to appreciate the view? I’m liking the new hairstyle choices.”

Derek automatically patted at his hair, not understanding what that’d meant until his fingers brushed against the animal-shaped barrettes he’d completely forgotten about.

“Don’t take them out,” Emma insisted, climbing over the arm of the chair and into his lap to adjust the clip he’d knocked loose. “You promised, Uncle Derek. That one’s my *favorite*.”

“She’s into bunnies right now,” he explained helplessly, and Stiles’s grin widened.

“Hey, I think it looks great. Who’s this, Emma?”

“Hi,” Emma said, twisting around in Derek’s lap and prying his phone away before leaning comfortably against his chest. “Who’re you? Where’s Lola? Can I see her?”

“Sure,” Stiles said, and he zoomed in on Lola, who was chewing away with an earnest dedication that made it seem like she’d never been sulking at the door to an empty bedroom. Derek wondered how long it’d last; maybe he should schedule daily check-ins the next time he had to travel, or leave recordings of his voice so she’d feel connected to him. It was like that old idea of putting a clock in with puppies who’d been freshly weaned from their mother, missing the comforting tick of her heartbeat.

Emma’s curls tickled against his chin; he absently smoothed them down, snapping the barrettes free
from his hair and using them to pin some of her more wild curls out of her face. She barely noticed, too busy chatting eagerly with Stiles about what Lola had done that day. Apparently taking it as an invitation, Laura leaned over the back of his chair to greet Stiles, too.

“Hey!” he said in surprise. “Laura. Wow, you’re even prettier in motion.”

“I like this one,” she told Derek, who rolled his eyes and nudged Emma to shift the angle of his phone so all three of them would fit onto the screen. “So you’re Stiles.”

“In the flesh,” he said. He scratched nervously along his cheek, then blurted out, “Okay, can I just say that you have amazing taste? In socks, anyway. I’m assuming elsewhere, too, because that’d be a pretty specific area of fashion expertise or whatever, but I’ve only been exposed to the socks. I’m wearing them right now, actually.” He dipped the camera down quickly to show his feet. “They’re the nicest fu—uh, feeling things I’ve ever worn in my life.” His gaze darted guiltily to Emma, who was yawnning, her eyes drooping in exhaustion now that the Stiles-quizzing had been passed off to her mom.

Derek wrapped an arm gently around her and took the phone back before she dropped it.

“The socks I gave Derek,” Laura said, her tone probably unreadable to Stiles. Derek recognized that triumphant lilt, though, and he couldn’t quite hold back a grimace. Stiles in his house, wearing his clothes, was bound to look a certain way to anyone who entered the situation without knowing all the details.

“Oh sh—shoot,” Stiles said. “Right, the, uh, Christmas present. That I probably wasn’t supposed to bring up.”

“Because I gave them to him,” Derek filled in. “They’re nice, but I’ve never worn them. You should be happy with the regift; he appreciates them more.”

“They’re amazing,” Stiles said again. “I don’t know what they’re made out of, but I want an entire outfit in this material.”

“They’re cashmere,” Laura said, sounding deeply amused. “I don’t know about the practicality of a full cashmere suit, but Derek definitely has at least one sweater. The green one, right? You still have that, or did you give it away, too?”

“It was one pair of socks, Laura. And you didn’t even buy me that sweater.”

“Point is, you could try it,” she told Stiles. “And if you like it, let me know. There’s a shop here where—well, let’s just say there was some legal trouble a while back, and the owner’s been grateful ever since. He gives me great deals on the merchandise.”

“Honestly, Laura,” Derek sighed. She was making it sound like something deliciously dramatic, when the reality was that she’d run into the man at some fundraising function and had given him a little free legal advice over cocktails before Rob had shown up and dashed the poor guy’s budding hopes. For whatever reason, he still adored Laura, even after realizing she hadn’t been flirting. She had that effect on people. It was part of the magnetism that made her unstoppable in courtrooms.

“Don’t listen to him,” Laura said. “He likes to ruin stories.”

“It’s that annoying obsession he has with facts,” Stiles said, straight-faced, and Laura burst out laughing.

“Okay, I really like this one.”
“And you’re done,” Derek said. “Stiles, hang on a minute, I’m going to take you into the other room. Unless anyone else wants to get a few digs in first?” He angled the screen at Cora and Eliza; Cora glanced up and waved, but Eliza didn’t even notice, her eyes fixed on the television. “Where’d Rob go?”

“Upstairs to take a shower. Here, I’ll get Emma.” Laura picked up her daughter, who was heavy-limbed and largely asleep.

“Bye Lola,” she mumbled as she rested her head against her mom’s shoulder.

“It was nice to meet you, Stiles,” Laura said. “Keep that offer in mind, okay? I’m glad to see someone appreciating my gifts, even if it’s not this big lug.”

“He’s not so bad,” Stiles said, and Laura’s playful smile softened.

“He’s pretty okay most of the time. You two have a good night; I’m gonna tuck this girl in and turn in myself. Eliza, honey, you can finish this show, and then it’s bedtime for you, too.”

“Goodnight,” Derek said, standing partway up so Laura could peck him on the cheek without any danger of overbalancing with Emma propped against her hip. “Do you need help getting her upstairs?”

She merely scoffed. “I may be older than you, but I’m still in the prime of my life. I’ll see you in the morning. Remember you promised to make breakfast crepes with the girls, in case there’s anything you need to prep tonight.”

“She’s trying to impress you with her cooking knowledge,” he told Stiles, who laughed despite being unable to see Laura flipping Derek off in response.

“Crepes with Nutella!” Eliza added from her couch, her selective hearing kicking back in now that the topic was something she was interested in.

“Maybe for some,” he allowed. He wasn’t sure if Laura had any, but she did tend to keep a jar stashed in the back of a cupboard. He waved goodnight again, then cut through the breakfast area and into the sunken family room that at least gave the impression of added privacy.

“Whirlwind tour. Nice house,” Stiles said once Derek had flipped on a lamp and situated himself on one of the low-slung couches.

“Sorry, I forgot the video was still on,” he apologized, lifting the phone back to his face and wondering if Stiles had expected the call to last this long. Maybe he should be letting him go.

“Do you know I’ve never actually seen you in jeans before? It’s like a whole new side of you.”

“Really?” Derek scrunched his forehead as he considered it. He supposed he’d mainly seen Stiles in two contexts: in the classroom and when he was at his most relaxed at home. Suits and sweatpants. That didn’t leave a lot of room for normal casual attire, the kind of thing you’d wear when you were grabbing lunch with someone, or out for the night with friends.

“I like Laura a lot,” Stiles was saying, thankfully changing the subject before Derek could dig himself too far into an examination of what it meant that he’d never done something that simple and normal with Stiles. “She does realize, though, that I can’t actually afford cashmere clothes? I mean, the whole reason I love these socks is because they’re basically the fanciest thing I’ve ever owned.”

Derek chuckled. He probably shouldn’t reveal that Laura would gladly ship a whole box of sweaters
if Stiles dropped a hint that he’d accept the gift. It was tempting, but there was a fine line between generosity and charity, and something that strayed too far into the outlandish range would send Stiles’s pride spiking.

He steered them into safer waters and closed off the call some time later when his phone’s battery started dipping too far into the red.

“Safe for me to come in?” Cora asked, and he turned to find her standing at the top of the short set of steps that led down to the room.

“Were we that loud?” he asked, wondering what she’d overhead, and she shook her head.

“I was falling asleep in there and got up to grab some water. Heard you stop talking and figured you might be up for some company.”

“We might be able to fit one more person in this room if we really squeeze,” Derek said, motioning to the bank of cushioned seating that looped around a good three-quarters of the space.

“You know that's why Laura gives you shit about only having one couch. She has like sixteen. I feel like I'm in a display showroom sometimes.”

“My house always feels big until I come here,” he agreed. Too big, most of the time, although lately it'd been feeling just about right.

“At least you have a house,” she reminded him. “I'm not sure I can even imagine a future where I'm able to afford a mortgage.”

Derek inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement, not offering Laura’s typical rejoinder—what do you expect, staying in an urban part of California—or dwelling on the advice their mom might've given. He probably wasn't qualified to chime in there, anyway. He was doing better financially than he would've expected a decade ago, but the bills still pinched from time to time, and he hadn't forgotten the days when breaking the last egg in a carton would've sent him into a wave of panic and self-recrimination. He figured buying a house and having a steady income flow would've assuaged his mom’s worries to some degree. It was hard to know, though; he'd never quite understood what his mom had expected from him. The older he got, the more he thought maybe she hadn't really known, either.

“Do you know what this always reminds me of?” Cora asked. Her thoughts must've taken her down a similar path, because he was already nodding when she said, “The den in the old house.”

“The make out room,” he said, and she barked out a surprised laugh.

“Oh man, you too? I had my first kiss in there.”

“Me too. Pretty sure Laura did, too; it was the most obvious spot for it.” That wasn't strictly true; his first “kiss” had been...god, what was her name? Marilyn, in the third grade, who'd promptly giggled and run back to her friends in the playground.

His first real make out session, though, had been on one of the overstuffed, ultra-comfortable sofas in his parents’ sunken den. With Daryl, who'd come over to do homework and had ended up wanting to do something rather less studious. It was the first time Derek had really understood that he liked guys as much as he did girls, although liking Daryl, with his wandering hands and atrocious taste in books, had been a different story.

“Ugh,” Cora said, thumping her head against the back of the couch. “I kinda wish I didn't know that.
I thought I was so clever, taking her in there, and now I'm a little grossed out that everyone else got there first.”

“it’s not like any of us had sex in there,” Derek said, then paused. “Actually, Laura probably—nevermind, I don’t want to think about that.”

“Gross, stop!” Cora exclaimed, waving into the air like she could drive the words right out of her memory.

“You’re the one who started this conversation,” he pointed out, and she kicked an ineffective foot in his general direction.

“Don’t remind me. I barely like talking about sex as it is, and this is much, much worse.”

There was something a little off about that statement, an uncomfortable, almost sad edge to it that didn’t fit with the humor of the moment. He didn’t know whether to press for more or leave it alone; Cora made the decision for him by shining the spotlight back in his direction.

“You seem happy,” she said. “I didn’t want to say that around the others, because you know what they’re like.”

“Laura hasn’t been so bad.” The knee-jerk impulse to defend his sisters was too ingrained from years of practice, even when the implied criticism was coming from within the family.

“It’s true, though, isn’t it? Usually we’re both moping around some during the holidays, while Laura has this picture perfect family and home and everything. And this year, I’m the sad slob on the couch, while you’re in here, laughing with someone who honestly sounds really damn cool.”

“I thought you weren’t listening,” he said mildly, and she rolled her eyes.

“Your laugh carries, doofus. Besides, it’s not like you were hiding him when he called. That’s big for you.”

“He’s not—” He sighed. “There’s nothing to hide. Stiles is one of my students. He’s taking care of Lola while I’m here.”

Cora eyed him quietly. She didn’t talk much about relationships, but when she did, she always struck right to the heart of things. “You’re not dating him right now, but are you telling me you don’t want that?”

The answer should’ve been no. It should’ve been easy to fling that word at her and move on to a different topic, like Laura slipping on a patch of ice earlier that day and letting out a high-pitched shriek that the rest of them would gleefully spend the next three months imitating.

“I don’t know,” he said instead. “I can’t, not right now. I’m still teaching him.”

“But he’s out of your class at the end of the year?”

“In a few weeks, yeah.” Derek checked his phone just to be sure he hadn’t accidentally left it on somehow. “I don’t know, Cora. A month ago, I would’ve been pissed at you even saying that, but lately, I just…it’s been feeling different.”

“You’re really close. That much was obvious within a couple seconds of that call.”

That part, at least, was easy to admit now. “We are. I know it’s probably still too much, but he’s
honestly one of my best friends right now.” Derek scraped at a caked-on splatter of marshmallow that’d somehow made it onto his jeans. “I can’t help thinking that maybe, after some time’s passed, if he’s interested at all, we could see about giving it a try.” Saying it out loud for the first time made his voice come out shakier than he’d wanted.

“Judging from what I heard, I’d say you have a pretty damn good shot.” Cora didn’t ask him to delve into the anxieties still threading through the notion of transitioning to a different type of relationship, and he shot her a grateful look.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked, and she rolled her eyes, this time to hold back a sudden swell of tears.

“Not really.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t a huge surprise or anything. I was hoping she’d be different, but I wasn’t really fooling myself. They all end up wanting the same thing after a certain point, you know? And they don’t get it when I say I’m not that interested. Bridget was—I don’t know what I expected, but this time was pretty bad.”

“What happened?” He wasn’t completely following what the problem was, but a few of the hints he hadn’t originally realized she’d been dropping were beginning to coalesce.

“She acted like I’d been stringing her along, like I was pretending I was even attracted to her. She was hurt, I guess, but it made me feel like shit. I’d never lied to her. I’d left some stuff out, sure, but what am I supposed to do? Tell girls on the first date that I love kissing but don’t really want to...” She gestured vaguely, and Derek finally got it.

“Oh!” he said, suddenly out of his depth. He fumbled for something supportive and ended up with the supremely unhelpful, “Does Laura know?”

Cora huffed at him in exasperation. “I don’t understand why you always seem to think Laura and I have some special lady connection. We talk a lot, but you realize, don’t you, that you’re the first person I ever came out to?”

“Oh,” he said, startled again. “No, I didn’t. Really?”

“When I told you about Kimberly. And you didn’t say anything about how she was a girl, or I was too young to have a real crush, or any of that shit. All you did was give me a hug and offer to teach me how to swim so I wouldn’t be a completely embarrassing failure at her party.”

He’d had no idea that was the first time she’d told someone she was interested in girls. Cora laughed at the expression on his face, her sadness momentarily relegated to the back burner.

“So yeah, I’m ace. It’s not a secret or anything. It’s just weird to talk about it, mostly because a lot of people have no idea what it even means. Including, obviously, pretty much everybody I try to date.”

“Maybe you’re dating the wrong people,” Derek said. “If they’re demanding something you’re not comfortable with, that’s not the right kind of relationship for you.”

“Probably. Not the easiest thing to fix, though.” She sighed. “Relationships suck.”

“Don’t I know it.”
“Not in the same boat,” she countered, clearly not ready for him to commiserate with her too much.
“Yours doesn’t suck. It’s complicated, yeah; complicated isn’t always bad. And that part won’t be true forever.”

“Maybe,” he said, giving himself permission to hope, just a little.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles welcomes him home
Stiles’s phone vibrated across the table, and he reached to silence it before it woke Lola up. He rubbed tiredly at his face—his vision was starting to blur, which wasn’t a good sign—and checked the time on his laptop. 3:30 AM. Who did he know who’d be texting him at that hour?

“If it’s Danny hassling me again about this fucking deadline, I swear to god,” he said, dragging the blasted device closer and pulling up the text thread that’d been bumped to the top of the list.

Not much longer now, the message said, and all his irritation fled in an instant.

It was a response to the photo he’d sent earlier that night, after Derek was probably already asleep, showing the evidence of Lola’s new destructive tendencies. She’s started taking out her frustration on inanimate objects, Stiles had written under the image of a shredded-apart toy, its fuzzy guts scattered across the floor, the plastic squeaker torn open.

He started to type out a reply, then pushed the call button instead. Words were too difficult at this hour. Talking required less effort.

“Stiles,” Derek said after the second ring, sounding surprised.

Stiles closed his eyes, reveling in the smoothness of his voice, with just enough grit in it to remind him of the husky tone Derek picked up in his shoulder-shaking laughs. Also known as one of Stiles’s favorite sounds in the world. “Hey yourself,” he said.

“Did I wake you up? I thought you would’ve had your phone on silent.”

“Nah, I’m still awake. Will be for a bit longer. I’ve got a deadline Monday—er, I guess that’s technically tomorrow at this point—and it knocked me behind on some other stuff I was trying to finish before you got back. What time is that again? 4?”

“I should be there by 3. Depends on if we hit any delays; the first leg’s on time, but you never know with Chicago connections.”

“Cool,” Stiles said, absorbing some of that information and cracking a yawn through the rest. “I’ll probably sleep through some of your flight, then. Wait, are you already at the airport?”

“Unfortunately, yeah. We should be boarding in about ten minutes. Everyone here’s dealing with a turkey hangover. Weirks me out how quiet it is.”

“A lot of regular hangovers, too, I’d bet. At least that means you’ll probably be able to get some sleep on the flight, if everyone else is miserable and silent.”

“Sounds delightful,” Derek said. “Hey, we can push dinner to another night if you’re strapped for time. You’re working tonight, right?”

“No, I ended up flipping my weekend shifts. That’s the other reason I’m still up; we were supposed to get done at 9.”

“Went late?” Derek asked sympathetically.
“Didn’t walk through the door until after 11 and then had to take poor Lola out for a massively delayed walk. I feel so bad; I’ve been kind of a shitty dogsitter. I haven’t been around nearly as much as I thought I would.”

“Hey, no, it’s not your fault I spoil her. You’ve been doing great.”

“I’m trying,” Stiles allowed. No substitution for the real thing, but what can you do. “Anyway, anticipating that meal is the only thing motivating me right now, so unless you’re too worn out from traveling, I’m still on board.”

“It’ll help to have something to get me back into the right time zone. It’s not going to be hugely elaborate, anyway. You realize you’re not getting turkey, right?”

“I do know that much about cooking. What were you thinking? Should I make a grocery run before you get here?”

“Don’t worry about it; I’ll stop by the store on my way home.” There was the faint sound of an announcement in the background; probably a boarding call for another flight, since Derek kept talking, not seeming to be in a rush to go yet. “You said it’s been nice there; I don’t see any rain in the forecast, so we could fire up the grill in the back. Take advantage of the weather before it goes full winter on us.”

“Sweet, that’s actually a great idea. Because what that means is that you can get freed up to make a pie while I deal with the one type of cooking I’m a pro at. Plus I won’t feel like as much of a sponge this way.”

“This is supposed to be your repayment for taking care of everything while I’m away,” Derek protested.

“Fine, two pies and we’re even.”

Derek chuckled. “Pumpkin for both?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Then we can split grill duties. The crust’s the only part that takes any time with those.” Another garbled announcement filtered through; Derek paused to listen this time.

“Boarding call?”

“Business class. I’ll be in the next group. By the way, is Scott back yet?”

“He got in earlier tonight.” And had immediately displayed suspicion at the lack of evidence that Stiles had been anywhere near their apartment in the last few days. He’d accepted the work and project deadlines excuse—for now, anyway. Stiles knew he’d have to deal with that sooner or later. He’d prefer later; if he put it off, Scott might get distracted by reuniting with Kira and forget about it for another couple weeks.

Stiles still didn’t know how he was going to explain his relationship with Derek. The more he avoided it, the harder it got to put it in casual terms that didn’t betray how invested he was. And the last thing he wanted to deal with right now was well-meaning advice from his best friend on how to start detaching so he didn’t wind up with a broken heart.

Of course Derek had the worst possible timing. “I can pick up extra food if you want to invite him over.”
“Invite Scott?” he repeated in dismay.

Derek was quiet for a moment. “Both him and Kira. It’d give you a chance to have some of the Thanksgiving you missed, even if the menu’s slightly different.”

Stiles winced. It was a generous offer, and in another world, he would’ve jumped at it. As it stood, throwing Scott into that situation without sufficient preparation would only create a giant mess for all of them. He didn’t want to put Derek through that, and frankly, he didn’t want to deal with it right now, either.

“Yeah, I don’t know if that’s a great idea,” he said, then grimaced at the way that’d come out. “I mean, he’s probably tired from the drive and everything. I don’t even know if he’s free tonight.”

“Maybe another time, then?”

“...yeah,” Stiles said, after a delay that even he could tell had been drawn out for too long.

“I should go,” Derek said, sounding more subdued than he’d been before, almost distant. “You can text me if you think of anything you want for the grill; I’ll check it when I get to the store.”

“Have a good flight,” Stiles said, then thunked his head against the table once the call had ended. And that was why opting for a phone call at this ungodly hour was a stupid-ass decision he should’ve known would result in some crossed wires. He stood by the rejection of tonight’s invitation—it’d take more than a handful of sleep-deprived hours to bring Scott up to speed and instruct him on what he wasn’t allowed to quiz Derek about—but he should’ve been more enthusiastic about future openings. Who knew if Derek would bring it up again?

He lifted his head and slapped his laptop shut. He’d think about it again after getting some sleep. He might be doing Derek a favor, anyway; he was riding the holiday socializing high this morning and forgetting how draining people could be when you were meeting them for the first time. He’d be grateful once he’d sobered up some and realized what a hassle Stiles had helped him dodge.

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“Your schedule is really fucked up now, I’m sorry,” Stiles said to Lola, who continued peacefully sniffing at the same patch of bushes she always checked along their route. “What messages did the other dogs leave for you today, huh? Are they wondering why you’re only showing up at random times with an asshole who gets wrapped up in work and forgets he has a dog?”

She huffed at him, glancing behind her as if to ask what he was on about.

“Temporary dog, yeah, I know. Only about half an hour until your real owner comes home and makes everything better.” For her, obviously, although the thought of seeing Derek in person again had him nearly vibrating with excitement, too. There might’ve been a little shivering from the cold mixed in, but it was mostly excitement.

If it’d been left entirely up to him, he wouldn’t have called this grilling weather. It was nearly December now, and clear, sunny skies didn’t always correspond to warmth. Derek had sounded enthusiastic about it, though, which was good enough for him. He wondered absently if wearing gloves while you grilled was a safety hazard. Probably not, if you didn’t drag them or your sleeves through the flames.

“We’re gonna be so glad to see him, aren’t we,” he asked Lola.

She wagged her tail to acknowledge him and tugged him along to an intriguing section of fence at
“Dogs are lucky,” he mused as she scraped her paws through the soft dirt under the boards when she thought he wasn’t paying attention. “You get to welcome him back by leaping on him and licking his face.” He shot a furtive glance around in case someone in the neighborhood was snooping and would report his words back to Derek; the streets were empty, but he lowered his voice anyway. “Not that I’m saying I want to lick his face.”

Lola snorted, shaking dirt out of her nose.

“Okay fine, you got me. I’d be up for showing him some of the interesting things I can do with my tongue.” He jiggled the leash when she sneezed. “Stop judging me. You’re the one inhaling dirt right now, so you can’t talk to me about my life choices.”

They made a few more stops before circling back to Derek’s street. It took Stiles a minute to dig his keys out of his pocket, then to untangle them from an earbuds cord and a partially melted stick of gum that he didn’t even remember having stuffed in there.

“If that got on the inside of the pocket, laundry’s gonna be a fucking hassle,” he grumbled to Lola. “Chill, girl, why’re you so impatient to get inside? I’ll have this open in a second, and you can go back to ripping the head off another stuffed rabbit or whatever your violent little heart desires.”

Once he had the door opened a sliver, Lola pushed past him, tearing her leash free from his grip and letting out a frenzied yelp he’d never heard from her before. He heard her nails scrabbling across the hardwood floors, more high-pitched whimpering, then an Oof! in a human voice, followed by a pleased, husky laugh.

*Derek’s home,* he thought, his heart fluttering wildly.

The man in question was seated on the kitchen floor, wearing a soft yellow-and-black striped sweater—with Tillamook’s bumblebee mascot stitched next to the v-neck, because he was nothing if not a nerd—and jeans that looked like they’d been painted on. He was doing his best to pet Lola as she whirled around him in circles, alternately batting at him with her paws and slobbering along his chin and throat.

“Told you she’d freak out,” Stiles said. Derek looked up briefly, not making eye contact, then set his attention back on Lola. “Maybe next time she’ll believe me when I tell her you’re on your way home.”

“I was wondering where you two were,” Derek replied.

“Taking one last solo walk before you got here. I wasn’t expecting you yet; how long’ve you been back?”

“Only a couple minutes.” Derek gestured at the grocery bags still cluttering the countertops, then chuckled when Lola paused to lick his outstretched arm. He must’ve been in the midst of putting the items away when she’d interrupted him. “I should’ve texted you from the store. Traffic from the airport was a lot better than I’d expected.”

“Not complaining,” Stiles said—probably the biggest understatement he’d ever made. Fuck it—when Derek stood up to take care of the perishable items, Stiles went in for the hug. “Welcome back, dude,” he said, throwing in a couple of back thumps and keeping it short so Derek wouldn’t read too much into it.

Derek was smiling, though, when they parted. Whatever strange tension had been stretching between
them since that damned phone call seemed to have dissipated as soon as Stiles got his arms around him.

“You didn’t send me any specific requests, so I just grabbed the kinds of things I usually go for,” Derek said. He rummaged in the bags and pulled out a new box of dog treats.

“I’m sure those taste great, but I’ll pass for now,” Stiles said.

“For Lola, to keep her busy chewing on something that isn’t me. That one’s for you.” He indicated another bag that turned out to hold several cans of pumpkin. “Hope you don’t mind I’m not working from scratch this year.”

Stiles was too occupied lovingly pressing his face against the pumpkin label to answer.

“The rest you can look through; decide what you want for the grill and what to save for another time. I figured I might as well stock up while I was there.”

“And you got more of the good pumpkin beer,” Stiles said in delight, still cradling the can of pie filling and crowding in to look over Derek’s shoulder as he sorted through items to stash in the fridge. “Damn, you’re the best.”

A flush spread over the back of Derek’s neck, and Stiles breathed out, suddenly unable to stop wondering what it’d be like to kiss that warm, lightly cologned section of skin just under his hairline.

“That’s for you, too,” Derek said, and Stiles blinked until he realized he was being pointed toward a gift bag he hadn’t noticed sitting on the opposite end of the counter.

“What’s this?”

“It’s customary to open a gift and see for yourself,” Derek said, and Stiles crumpled up a wad of the tissue paper that’d been stuffed into the bag and lobbed it at him. Lola, still circling around Derek’s legs to make sure he wasn’t going anywhere, tilted her head when it bounced off his back and across the floor.

“Lola, don’t eat that,” Derek said, bending to retrieve it from her before she’d shredded too much of it. He gently steered her back to the half-chewed treat she’d abandoned in favor of haunting his steps.

Stiles reached for the gift bag again, not paying a whole lot of attention to it until he’d gotten his hand all the way inside. “Oh damn, you didn’t,” he breathed. He felt his eyes roll back in his head as he groaned, stroking what felt like an entire pile of the world’s most amazing socks.

“It’s to thank you for taking care of everything for me,” Derek said gruffly. He cleared his throat and added, “I know I’m not the best at demonstrating it, but you being here did a lot to keep me from worrying so much.”

“I told you this was a friends thing, no payment necessary. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not gonna complain too hard, because I fully intend to keep all of these.” He pulled out the first pair of socks—possibly the prettiest shade of light blue he’d ever seen—followed by a royal blue pair. The last set was black, and he murmured in approval. He might even be able to wear those with his catering outfit. It’d help his mood immensely; those damn dress shoes pinched.

“There’s one more thing in there,” Derek said when Stiles started to push the bag away.

Stiles poked his head back in and drew out what he’d assumed was a mass of filler tissue paper at the bottom. “What the hell, you didn’t need to get me this much stuff,” he said, then went silent when
he’d uncovered the buttery-soft leather gloves inside.

“The cuffs and lining are cashmere,” Derek explained, like Stiles would be disappointed by the change in material. “The guy at the shop said there’s some kind of nanotechnology in the leather that makes them work with touchscreens, so you won’t have to take them off if you need to use your phone or something outside.”

“I didn’t even take that good care of your dog,” Stiles said. “Goddammit, Derek.”

Derek ducked his head into his smile. “Laura said to tell you two pairs of the socks were from her; she’s claiming whichever ones you like best. And she helped me pick out the gloves. So I can’t take all the credit.”

“I’m probably never going to take these off,” Stiles said, drawing them on and flexing his fingers to test how supple the leather was.

“They look good,” Derek said. “I tried some different ones on, but our bone structure’s different; I was worried they might not fit you right.”

“They’re perfect.” He nudged Lola out of the way so he could hug Derek again, who chuckled against his cheek and squeezed back more than he’d done the first time.

“You might need to take them off if you’re going to follow through on your promise of doing the bulk of the cooking,” he said, and Stiles let go of him so he could ball up a gloved fist and punch him lightly on the shoulder. It ended up turning into more of a caress—the texture of Derek’s sweater under the leather was an intriguing combination—and he snatched his hand back before it got weird.

“Challenge accepted. I’m gonna cook the best damn steaks you’ve ever tasted.” He amended the statement when Derek arched an eyebrow at him. “Okay, they won’t be gourmet, but I can guarantee they’ll be good. Ultimate Stilinski-style.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Derek began pulling out pie tins and a rolling pin, Lola glued to his every movement, and Stiles brushed his gloves furtively over his own cheeks—damn, that felt nice—before dropping his new favorite clothing items back into the bag for safekeeping.

“Tell me which area you’re using so I can set up a chopping station for the vegetables,” he said. Pies took a while to put together, didn’t they? He might as well keep Derek company while he worked. They’d just spent half a week apart; Lola had the right idea in sticking close to him.

Once they were both situated, Derek rolled his sleeves to his elbows, flour distractingly dusted up his muscular forearms, and began working on the crust. Stiles started slicing a loaf of bread into grillable portions, garlic and herbed butter at the ready.

“So what happened with Finstock last night?” Derek asked. “Since you got to see him in the aftermath of the Black Friday incident after all.”

“Right! Last I’d told you, I hadn’t switched my schedule yet, so I’d thought I was gonna miss his Night After The Embarrassment cover-up attempts. Oh man, you remember that?”

“We talked about it two nights ago,” Derek said. “I’d hope my memory lasts a little longer than that.”

“Finstock’s sure didn’t. Or else he was doing his damned best to pretend nothing had happened.”

“I’d probably do the same in his shoes.”
“Which he somehow lost in the process of hitting on her,” Stiles said gleefully. “I kind of suspect she stole them to increase the humiliation factor. Oh god, I don’t think I was fully living before I knew what lovestruck Finstock was like.” Working a corporate event the afternoon after Thanksgiving had seemed like a special sort of torture until he’d discovered the company had shelled out for the services of Finstock’s catering and that of his bitter rival. Who, as it turned out, was a severely beautiful woman who made Finstock stumble over his words and run through a gauntlet of massively ineffective wooing methods every time he saw her.

“I feel a little sorry for him,” Derek said as he drizzled water over the mixture and began to form it into dough.

“It can’t be easy being that head over heels for someone who’s completely out of your league.”

Derek made a noise of agreement.

Stiles wasn’t a good enough person to not find it funny when it was happening to someone else, though. “So okay, yesterday—poor Fritz made the idiotic decision to show up sloshed.”

“Perfect opening for a distraction?”

“Exactly. Finstock tore him a new one. It was funny at first, but the lecture took so damned long, Fritz was sober by the end of it and the rest of us were wishing we were drunk.”

“Did he ever find his shoes?”

“Not that I know of. At least by yesterday, he’d come up with a different pair that fit a little better with his suit than the hot pink running shoes Molly’d let him borrow on Friday.” Stiles finished off the bread and moved to the bell peppers: a colorful assortment of reds, oranges, and yellows. “Huh, no green?”

“Oh, sorry if you wanted those. Red’s my favorite,” Derek said.

“I remember,” Stiles said, and Derek flicked some of the ice water at him, making him duck and swear.

“Not just for aesthetics. They’re sweeter.”

“Maybe that’s why I hated them when I was growing up; green was always cheaper, I guess, so that’s all we ever got.”

“Try one of the yellow ones and see what you think,” Derek said.

Stiles sliced off a chunk of pepper and popped it into his mouth. “Huh, yeah, definitely not as bitter as I’m used to.” He’d have to tell his dad about this; maybe giving him a selection of more palatable vegetables would help to increase his intake of heart-healthy foods. He held out a small, deep red slice, and Derek leaned over just enough to let Stiles slip it into his mouth.

Derek’s eyelashes fluttered, and Stiles held his breath at the brief brush of lips against his fingertips. “Good?” he asked huskily, and Derek nodded, a flush high on his cheekbones, his throat bobbing with the final swallow. Their eyes met, and Stiles rocked forward, his gaze dropping back down to where the tip of Derek’s tongue was sweeping over his lips.

Don’t ruin it, Stiles thought. It wasn’t the right time to push them past their easy, simple camaraderie. But it was the first time he’d let himself think, Not yet, rather than Not ever.
They returned to their tasks, Derek finishing his careful formation of two similarly sized balls of dough. “Rolling the crust would be easier if I let this chill for a bit first, but I’m always too impatient for that,” he sighed after a while.

“You mean you’re not the kind of morning person who wakes up at the crack of dawn to bake?” Stiles quipped.

Derek snorted as though that was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “I’m not a morning person.”

“What, seriously? You’re always up way before any part of my body is ready to greet the day.” Maybe not every part; even with the increased something hanging thickly in the air, Stiles knew better than to make that clarification around the guy who was responsible for most of his lazily lusty early-morning thoughts nowadays.

“Out of habit, not choice. Why do you think it’s so easy to convince me to stay up late with you?”

“Well, I was honestly hoping it had something to do with my sparkling personality.”

“There are always multiple factors when it comes to bad decisions,” Derek said, leaving Stiles unsure how much of that could be classified as a compliment and how much was just flat-out insulting.

“Speaking of bad decisions, we’re not actually going to be eating outside, are we? Because I’m up for this outdoorsy cooking deal of yours, but it’s still pretty damn cold out for extended exposure. Unless you have one of those patio heater things stashed somewhere.”

“I should get one,” Derek said, stopping mid-roll to think about it. “It’s a shame you haven’t been around in nicer weather; we’ll have to eat out on the deck more next summer.”

Next year, Stiles thought, warm with the promise of still being able to do this six months from now. “You totally do a Fourth of July barbecue, don’t you?”

“Sometimes; I usually invite Erica and Boyd over.” Derek used his forearm to rub at an itch on his nose, which left a streak of flour smeared across the elegant bridge and down his chiseled cheekbone.

For someone so meticulous, he did that kind of thing an awful lot. It was one of the subtle personality quirks that’d initially softened his untouchable beauty, making Stiles start to see him as a normal guy who did stuff like get chalk on his face during class without noticing, or forget to remove his niece’s hair clips at the end of a day. Stiles had carefully not let him know during their first video chat that he’d missed one, a barrette that’d looked suspiciously like a hot pink poodle tucked into his dark hair.

Seeing Derek with his family had been everything Stiles had imagined; being able to witness that snarkily affectionate dynamic, even through a small screen, felt like a special privilege it should’ve taken him at least another year to earn. He wondered if Derek was aware that Laura had immediately friended him on Facebook, or if she’d tracked him down on her own.

“Although,” Derek said, frowning suddenly. “You’re graduating. I’d forgotten. You probably won’t be here anymore by next summer.”

Stiles finished slicing the last butternut squash before answering. It was a topic he wasn’t ready to go into detail about yet. He’d been spending a lot of late nights considering his options for the next year, not even telling his dad or Scott everything that was going through his head as he tried to decide what’d come next in his life.
“Here’s the thing,” he said, making sure he sounded as serious as he could manage. “The idea of Erica and fireworks in one place scares the shit out of me, but if you’re having a summer barbecue, there’s no way I’m not showing up for that.”

“I’ll send you an invitation, then,” Derek said, his eyes crinkling around the corners as he went back to shaping the second pie crust.

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Once the calendar flipped solidly into December, bringing the end of the year far too close for comfort, everything in Stiles’s life that didn’t involve school or work slammed to a halt. He managed one more week of swimming with Derek and had to take a reluctant raincheck on the rest. Dropping a couple of catering shifts was another difficult decision that he put off for as long as possible, stubbornly denying he had a problem until Scott caught him falling asleep leaning against their microwave.

“I don’t need to call my mom to know that’s gotta be bad for you somehow,” he said while he was steering Stiles over to their trash couch. Stiles pressed his face against one of the disgusting cushions and listened to the pained grunt and screeching click as Scott yanked the microwave’s door open. That’d been a rescue item, too—a perfectly good appliance sitting by the dumpster for no apparent reason. Until they’d gotten it inside and discovered something had gone wrong with the hinges. The insides still seemed to work well enough, though. Food got hot, and that was what counted.


“It’s empty,” Scott announced. “Were you actually trying to cook anything in there, or did you just fall asleep while you were walking past?”

“Was studying. Lost my book though.”

There were more footsteps, a loud sigh, then something cold dropping onto his face and a heavy weight squashing his legs as Scott sat partially on him.

“I found your book in the mini fridge.”

“Right,” Stiles mumbled, pushing it off his face and onto the floor. “I think I was gonna grab some milk.”

“I know I’m a broken record, but dude, I’m worried about you. You’re always a zombie around finals, but this time it’s been like...the entire semester. Should I be doing something? Holding an intervention?”

“Ugh,” Stiles said, twisting so he could flop onto his back and see Scott’s worried face. “I’m tired, that’s all. I’ll be fine in another week, once everything’s turned in.”

Scott bit his lip, his expression drooping into a level of dejection that Stiles hadn’t seen since...hell, since he’d accidentally snapped the fender off Scott’s favorite Hot Wheels when they were reenacting a Beacon Hills police chase his dad’s deputies had described to them in greatly exaggerated detail. Both Stiles and the deputies had gotten a lecture on responsibility and truth-telling from Stiles’s dad.

“I just don’t understand why you don’t talk to me anymore,” Scott said sadly.

“What the fuck,” Stiles said. An immediate wave of guilt washed over him, and he scrambled to sit
up, pulling his legs out from under his friend and accidentally kicking him in the process. That was
probably a metaphor for something, but his brain was still too scrambled for that kind of intensive
thinking. “That’s not true. We talk all the fucking time!”

“Not about anything. You’re at work, or at class, or study group, or off on one of your secret things
you’re still lying to me about. I know you don’t have to tell me everything. It’s your life. You
just...you used to.”

“Dude,” Stiles said, feeling like shit. His “put it off until it goes away” method hadn’t been working
quite as well as he’d been telling himself.

“Dude,” Scott echoed, more sorrowfully. “If you tell me to leave it alone, I will. For real this time.
But I thought some of it might be on me, you know? Something I could try to fix. This year’s been
really different for both of us.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, grabbing onto a possible way out. “It’s not just me; it’s being a senior. You’re
juggling work and classes as much as I am. You know how hard it is. And you’re fitting Kira into
any free time you have, which I’ve gotta tell you is really tough to do when you’re always tired as
shit.” He thought of Derek’s quiet nod when Stiles had regretfully told him he probably wouldn’t be
able to get his head above water in time for any proper hangout sessions for—god, basically the rest
of the year now. He shook himself back to the present, with his mournfully pouting best friend. “It’s
still totally cool with me, by the way, that you’re making her a big priority. It’s what you do when
you’ve got someone like that in your life.”

“But you don’t have a Kira,” Scott said, staring intently at Stiles when he didn’t make eye contact.
“Or do you?”

“I’m not dating anyone,” he said, sticking to the most basic truth.

Scott had known him for too long to fall for that. “Friends with benefits, then?”

“I mean, not sexual benefits,” Stiles said, giving up. This wasn’t how he’d pictured telling Scott. He
thought back to the first time he’d seen Derek’s face, with Scott grinning and shoving the course
catalog under his nose, not knowing what the impact of his actions would be. The shitty part was that
Scott was responsible for all of this, and Stiles had been cutting him out because of some weird
instinct for self-preservation, mixed with a hearty helping of superstitious paranoia. He couldn’t
shake the sense that once he described what was going on, he’d lose Derek somehow.

It was a ridiculous thought. Just because you cared about someone—needed them to stick around—
that didn’t mean they inevitably had one foot out of your life.

“Benefits like these, then?” Scott asked, patting Stiles’s foot.

Stiles looked down at the light blue sock, unable to keep from smiling a little. “It was a gift,” he
admitted.

“From?”

Stiles self-consciously rubbed his knuckles over his cheek, feeling the scratchy stubble from a few
days of half-hearted shaving. “Don’t blow this out of proportion, okay? I’ve been hanging out with
Derek.”

“Derek...” Scott repeated blankly.

Right. In the early days when they’d still talked about him, they’d never really used his first name.
“Dr. Hale. We’re friends.”

That produced a result, if not the desired one. “Wait, you’re telling me you’re actually fucking Professor Hot-Ass, and you never told me?”

“It’s not like that,” Stiles tried, but Scott was on a roll now.

“Holy shit. You’re sleeping with your professor and he’s buying you stuff? For how long? You haven’t even mentioned him since...” Scott paused to rack his brain and then dashed off into another rampage of misassumptions. “It’s been so long, I can’t even remember. You used to not be able to shut up about him when you got back from class, and then suddenly you just didn’t seem to care anymore. I thought the shine had finally worn off or something. I mean, crushing on a professor usually kinda sucks after a while. Sucks, hah. Wow. I had no idea any of this was going on; I feel like an awful friend for missing all the signs. Damn, though, congrats.”

“Scott. Scott. Stop.”

Scott drew back from an attempted high five, confused by the snub. “Oh dammit. Did he just end things with you? Am I being super insensitive right now?”

“There’s nothing to end,” Stiles insisted. “I told you, we’re friends. That’s it.” For now, he kept to himself.

“Friends.”

“Yeah, I know you’re familiar with the concept. People who like spending time together and who do so on a semi-regular basis.”

“Don’t be an ass. You’re saying you’re not sleeping with him?”

Why was this so hard for him to understand? Stiles threw up his hands in annoyance. “No! We hang out. Talk. Watch movies. Shit like that. I do homework at his house when Kira’s here, or when I’m sick of inhaling dust and mold. At his really nice, really clean house.”

“You go over to Professor Hot-Ass’s house and you talk.”

“I like talking. And I like Derek. This isn’t some totally foreign concept. You have dinner at Deaton’s twice a week sometimes. You two have been friends for years. He’s probably gonna be the one to give you away when you get married.”

“You know I don’t believe in outdated traditions like that,” Scott said, not protesting the potentially imminent marriage itself, which was an interesting note Stiles made to follow up on later. “Anyway, the difference is, I never sat on this couch and spent three solid hours talking about how much I wanted to fuck Deaton.”

Okay, that was fair. Stiles shrugged to acknowledge the point.

“And I never hid it from my best friend,” Scott continued. “Or got defensive about it.”

“I don’t know what you want from me right now,” Stiles said in frustration. None of this was going the way he’d wanted it to. “Maybe I wasn’t talking about it because I didn’t know how to keep you from reacting like this. Fuck it, I’m too fucking tired to deal with this tonight.”

“Hey,” Scott said. “I’m sorry, dude. I thought I was being supportive. That’s what I mean; I feel like all we do is talk past each other lately. How am I supposed to respond the right way when I have
“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Stiles said, rubbing his hands down his face and wishing he could start this entire conversation over. He’d almost snapped at Finstock earlier in the week, too, his patience worn down to a hair-trigger temper by lack of sleep and deadlines that wouldn’t stop knocking him off his feet. “I’m being a shithead right now, I know I am. I just finished all my grad school applications, and I took so long on them, I’ve lost at least a couple days of regular study time. I’m freaking out a little bit.”

“It’s a lot easier when you’re only applying to one school,” Scott said. His had been finished a long time ago, with very little agonizing or soul-searching required. “You shoulda told me. I would’ve written you some kick-ass personal statements.”

Stiles laughed, Scott’s waggling eyebrows and goofy expression succeeding at cheering him up. “I should’ve had you write me a letter of recommendation. They ask for so fucking many now. I know I got a couple good ones. Dr. Ito’s was surprisingly nice—I had no idea she liked me that much—but I honestly don’t know if the others went with ‘dedicated, innovative researcher’ or ‘pain in the ass you should steer clear of.’ I miss the high school version. Remember how Mr. Koehler told us to just write our own, and he’d sign them?”

“I hated that. You’re good at that kind of thing; it feels awkward when I try. I’d rather have someone else say what they actually think about me.”

“That’s because you’re not worried they’d say negative shit,” Stiles said. “Anyway, they’re all done now, and it’s not like I can take back any of the time I spent on them.” His goal had been to get them out of the way before finals week; he’d managed it, barely.

“Did Dr. Hale write you one?”

“No, why would he? He’s not even in my field.” He’d considered it for about five seconds—Derek knew him better on a personal level than any of the professors he’d spent years building connections with—but it was an entirely different kind of dynamic. They could speak to his work. Derek had graded some of his papers, sure, but Stiles barely even thought of him as a professor anymore. He was just...Derek. A brilliant, nerdy, unexpectedly hilarious dude who liked hanging out with Stiles for some reason.

And who, Stiles had begun to secretly think, even though he absolutely wasn’t going to admit it in this conversation, might eventually consider being more than friends.

Scott shrugged. “Just wondering. Will you bite my head off again if I ask you more stuff?”

“Depends on the questions,” he said honestly, but kicked at Scott’s leg to show they were fine now. “I’ll be less grumpy about it if you make me dinner, because now that you’ve reminded me about the microwave existing, I’m pretty sure my stomach’s telling me I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

“Deal,” Scott said. “I think we have some frozen mini pizzas left. You get one for every story you tell me about how Dr. Hale turned into Derek when I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I guess that sounds fair,” Stiles sighed longsufferingly. The truth was, he was glad to finally have someone he could talk to about all of this. Scott would probably regret asking once he realized how many details he’d been storing up for just this opportunity.

Then again, Scott had known him his entire life. He should know what he was in for.
Chapter End Notes

For a visual of Derek's bumblebee sweater, please see bleep0bleep's adorable manip.

Next up: Derek discovers the truth
“This weekend? I don’t know if I can.” Derek stuck his fork into Erica’s hashbrowns, and she stole an entire slice of his French toast, plus his orange juice, in retaliation. Okay, he’d deserved that.

Boyd quietly slid his arm in front of his plate to prevent any brunch battles from spilling over into his territory. “If your excuse is needing to submit grades, it won’t fly. You already told me you finished off a stack of papers last night, which gives you a significant headstart over me.”

“For one of my classes. Well, one and a half.” Lola’s nose poked hopefully over the edge of the table, and he gently pushed her back down. She was supposed to be keeping a low profile to avoid any customer complaints, and anyway, the contents of his plate weren’t exactly healthy for a human, much less for a dog. But as Erica had said, it was nearly the end of the semester—about damn time to start celebrating. “And Western Civ’s exam is later this afternoon. I need to finish grading all those before everybody gets here.”

“Laura’s coming in on Thursday?” Boyd asked.

“And Cora’ll be here Friday.” Derek nodded at the waitress when she stopped by to refill their coffee. It was a briskly cold day, a fresh chill gusting into the diner every time someone opened the door, which made him appreciate both the coffee’s warmth and the energy-boosting caffeine even more than usual.

“Well, we’re leaving on Wednesday,” Erica said. “Boyd’s grandma’s insisting we get there in time for some kiddie pageant at their church.”

“My sister’s directing it,” Boyd explained. “Should be cute.”

“The point is, if you don’t go out with us this weekend, you won’t see us until next year.”

“What a shame,” Derek said dryly, taking his half-finished juice back from her.

“Did you at least stick to multiple choice this time? I tried to tell you we should limit the class size, but you said ‘no, Erica, it’s important to encourage undergraduates, especially undecided ones, to develop their interest in history.’ Bullshit. It’s important for you to go out drinking with your friends before they spend two weeks with a light-up-sweater-wearing family that sings carols around the piano every night.”

“A week and a half,” Boyd said.

“Multiple choice tests the students’ test-taking ability more than their knowledge of the material,” Derek said, pushing his stolen hashbrowns through the last of his syrup. “It’s short essay, like usual.” It was impossible to create a single exam that worked with every student’s learning style; at least this way, he gave all of them an equal opportunity to show their reasoning and potentially gain partial points for answers where the conclusion was flawed but the logic held merit.

“One day off won’t kill you,” Boyd said.

“The concert’s Saturday?” They both nodded.
“And we already bought you a ticket.” Erica produced it triumphantly.

Derek slipped it into his wallet, keeping an eye on his plate just in case she got any ideas while he was occupied. “Alright, it sounds fun. Besides, this way you can’t complain if I don’t go to a New Year’s party with you.”

“Like I’d even try that anymore. All the single people follow you around for a solid hour before midnight, and I end up having to rescue you every damn time. I’d rather enjoy a stress-free kiss with this sexy man.” She squeezed Boyd’s thigh—probably—under the table, and the two of them smiled at each other.

“We could do brunch again to ring in the new year,” Derek suggested. He tipped some more cream into his coffee and sat back in his chair, feeling full and content.

“Late brunch,” Erica said. “Because we’ll be drunkenly eating donuts in the morning and then going to bed.”

“It’s tradition,” Boyd agreed. “Late afternoon brunch can be a new one. You should bring Stiles.”

Derek didn’t want to admit he’d already been thinking about what it’d be like to sit at a table with his three best friends on January 1st, talking about resolutions that rarely lasted for more than a week.

“He might have other plans,” he said, the caution as much for himself as it was for them.

“Won’t know until you ask,” Boyd said.

It was hard to argue with that.

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The quiet scratch of pens against paper set a familiar, comfortable soundtrack that never failed to lull him into contemplative nostalgia. Derek closed his eyes briefly to breathe in the scents of the classroom: chalk, the wooden desks, the faintest hint of graphite. It’d been a fairly good semester, all things considered. It’d be nice to start cutting back on his class load next year, making more room for not only research and publishing, but for the other parts of his life he’d gotten used to neglecting.

Damien O’Leary was one of the first students to finish. “You said any format was okay for the extra credit?” he asked, his voice hushed out of respect for the others who were still working away at their answers.

“You don’t really need the extra credit, Mr. O’Leary,” Derek said. He took the proffered exam booklet and flipped it open to glance over the contents; while it was rare to have a high-performing student choke on the final, it’d happened before. In this case, though, everything looked fine. No empty sections, crumpled pages, or tear stains. It’d most likely be another A, cementing the one he was already earning in the class.

Derek included the same offer on his syllabus every year, reminding the class periodically that their grades could earn a reasonable last-minute boost if they provided proof of regular note-taking at the end of the semester. Unsurprisingly, the ones who followed through tended to be those who needed the help the least. In his earlier years, he’d patted himself on the back more than he’d deserved, under the assumption that encouraging note-taking was creating a clear improvement in his students’ grades. He eventually acknowledged that while paying attention to lectures and the reading improved their performance in the classwork along the way, it was far more likely that the students who’d put in the effort for the extra credit work would’ve done well regardless.
He left it in out of habit and lingering optimism; there was an occasional case where a student genuinely tried throughout the semester, attending every class, completing every reading, stopping by during his office hours, and struggling on the assignments anyway. It was possible it’d happen this year. He didn’t want to take away that opportunity from someone who needed it.

“I take notes on my tablet, so I printed them out,” O’Leary said. He handed over a thick binder that felt like it could’ve held a dissertation.

Derek sighed internally. He should’ve made more of a point of clarifying that digital files were fine for this particular assignment. That’d be a good addition for the next syllabus: encourage scans of handwritten notes, as well. By “show me your notes,” he’d meant exactly that; no one should be turning them into a separate, time-intensive project. This collection included a table of contents and what looked like color-coded sections. He set it down on the table, wondering if he’d even be able to fit it in his bag.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Leary. Will I be seeing you around the department next year?”

He nodded. “I registered for Dr. Boyd’s class, like you suggested.”

“Great, I know you'll do well in there. And remember, you can still stop by my office with questions. Or come by to chat with the other professors; we all have an open door policy in the department.”

“Thanks, Dr. Hale.” He hitched up his backpack and added shyly, “I think I’m ready to declare my major, actually. So if you have any advising spots open, I was thinking maybe...?”

“I’d be glad to. Let’s talk about it when you get back after the holidays.”

Could be another Lahey, he thought as O’Leary left the room. Isaac Lahey had started college with a similarly sharp intellect and uncertainty about his future. Once he’d found his footing, his confidence had blossomed and he’d risen to the top of his class. This outcome was exactly the kind of thing Derek hoped for every year. Guiding a bright, enthusiastic student into discovering his passion and establishing a powerful voice of his own—it made the occasional drudgery worth it.

“He has a good holiday break,” Derek said to the next few clumps of students. Most of them handed in their exam booklets and simply nodded at him before exiting.

Aimee Sullivan didn’t bother with the extra credit; she had an A, too, even though Derek privately felt she could’ve applied herself more. She skated by on assignments, capably parroting information without imbuing her essays with any spark that’d make them stand out from the crowd. She seemed to show up to class mainly to flutter her eyes at him; while he didn’t have any definitive proof, he suspected she participated in discussions mostly to draw his attention to her.

Sure enough, she managed to stroke down his arm when turning in her final. Derek wasn’t able to stop himself from instinctively jerking away, the unwelcome contact, even through the fabric of his suit, making his skin crawl.

“Happy holidays, Ms. Sullivan,” he said, pointedly cutting their interaction short.

“There’s a special Christmas treat in there for you,” she announced in a too-loud whisper before flipping her braid over her shoulder and walking away, her hips swinging.

The “treat” was a perfume-scented envelope with her name and phone number written on the front, next to a bright red lipstick mark. It was sealed, thankfully, since it was substantial enough to contain a potentially graphic letter that he had no intention of reading.
It wasn’t the first time something like that had happened, but it left him more shaken than was usual at this point in his career. It took a while to make the connection: it was something about the scrape of her fingernails, mixed with the lingering scent that gave him sensory flashbacks to the perfume Jennifer had always worn.

He forced a smile as the last few students left. It wasn’t the same perfume. She wasn’t here; she hadn’t been around in years. His chest shouldn’t be tightening from memories that didn’t matter anymore.

Stiles was, of course, the final person to vacate his desk. He plopped his exam down on the table and set his backpack on the edge to rummage through it.

“Don’t tell me you did the extra credit,” Derek said. Lola pressed against his legs, sensing the spike of anxiety that hadn’t quite dissipated yet, and he bent to pet her.

“I rocked those essays,” Stiles said. “This is mainly a bonus for you; consider it a window into my view of the class all semester. It’s illustrated.” He winked and held out a spiral-bound notebook.

Derek was smiling when he opened it. The first couple of pages held nothing unusual. There were some notes on the class and the syllabus that indicated Stiles had been putting in some significant research before the semester had even started. That was right; he’d forgotten Stiles hadn’t actually been registered initially. He’d pushed his way past any obstructions, even way back then.

He flipped ahead, skimming the messy handwriting, intending to shut the cover, pack up his things, and ask when Stiles would be heading to Beacon Hills—and perhaps more importantly, when he’d be returning. He’d confirmed his interest in seeing Derek’s sisters in person before he left, but unless he was planning a quick turnaround, he probably wouldn’t overlap with them for long.

The promised illustrations caught Derek’s eye then, and he stopped to take a closer look. He didn’t quite understand what he was seeing at first. When he did, the lights in the room seemed to dim, his heart thudding in his ears, his vision blurring. The drawings were of him. More specifically, of certain parts of his body, with “majoring in dat ass” written by an obscenely shaped arrow that pointed to a particularly exaggerated sketch of the object in question. He flipped on, finding badly written poetry that, at a quick glance, seemed to be about his eyes, his ass again, his “thick fingers” holding chalk, reflections on what an “eager mouth” could do if given the opportunity.

Bile rose into his throat in response to the lists that’d been scribbled down, with headings like “How to Fuck Your Professor 101,” “Hot Tips for Getting into Professor Hot-Ass’s Pants,” and “Win Over Canine Companion = Woo Dr. Hale?”

The latter had cartoony doodles of dogs in the style he recognized from the packet Stiles had given him much earlier in the semester. It was all here. Stiles’s plans to befriend him, to insinuate himself into Derek’s life, eventually to fuck him.

*It’s happening again,* he thought, remembering how Jennifer’s voice had sounded like that of an entirely different person when she’d told him: *The sad part was, it wasn’t even hard to figure out what you’d go for. All it took was a few compliments, a little sweet-talking, a sob story or two, and you’d do anything I wanted. I kinda felt bad for you by the end."

“Derek?” Stiles asked, his voice filtering in as if from the end of a tunnel. “What’s going on? You don’t look so good.”

He looked up in time to see Stiles reaching for him, and he flung out a protective hand to keep him at a distance. “Please. Don’t.”
“Derek?” Stiles asked again, sounding confused.

“I have to go,” he said. He shoved the papers haphazardly into his bag; the binder fit, he noticed, odd, unimportant details standing out in sharp relief while the rest of his surroundings faded into something dark and cold. He barely remembered to clip Lola’s leash onto her collar, and she whimpered softly, brushing her nose against his hands when they shook, the metal clip not connecting until the second try.

She followed him out of the room without protest, a steady presence by his side. Hearing the clicking of her nails against the paved pathway grounded him, giving him something to focus on, a tempo to match his breathing to. Knowing she was there, that she was relying on him, made him pay more attention to his surroundings than he would’ve been able to manage on his own.

He walked away from campus, winding his way through evening-hushed neighborhoods until he didn’t recognize the houses anymore. He walked until Lola pushed her nose into his palm again, asking silently where they were going.

He stopped, dropped his bag to the pavement, and crumpled into a seated position, wrapping his arms around Lola when she pawed her way into his lap. She swiped a questioning tongue at his damp cheeks, nibbled tenderly at his chin, then let him sit with her until the last shreds of light faded from the sky.

***

Noshiko looked up in surprise when he rapped on the doorway of her office the following morning. “Derek! I wasn’t expecting you until next week.”

“Sorry,” he said, then cleared his throat and tried again. “Is now a good time?”

“For me, yes, of course. For you? Based on how you sound, I think you’ll need to answer that one. Come in, shut the door.”

“I didn’t really sleep last night,” he explained once he was seated in the chair by her desk, his bag in his lap, Lola weighing down his feet, her back pressed firmly against his legs. She’d been refusing to stray more than a few inches away from him at all times, and his stupid, selfish heart was grateful for her.

“I can tell,” Noshiko said, kindly not commenting further on his appearance. She shut her laptop and swiveled to face him.

He lifted the flap of his bag and drew out the items he’d identified for Noshiko’s file. The perfume-scented envelope went first, and he wiped his fingers on his jeans before setting the rest down. It was a small batch this time: one other letter, a “thank you for being an awesome professor, Dr. Hale” note scribbled into the back of an exam booklet that he’d torn out in an excess of caution, and Stiles’s notebook.

“There might be more,” he said. “I haven’t had time to read through everything. Obviously. I just did a quick scan last night of what my students turned in.”

“A quick scan that kept you up the entire night.” She left an opening for him to elaborate; when he didn't take it, she merely said, “hm,” and retrieved his file from one of the cabinets an arm’s reach from her desk.

Derek watched her slide the new notes inside, joining messages that’d made little impact on him over the years. He’d forget about these, too, before long. Most of them, anyway.
This transaction was usually a silent one. Derek disposed of the slightly embarrassing parts of his job, Noshiko stashed them away without comment, and they spent the rest of the time either talking about ideas for the next semester or simply shooting the breeze.

When Noshiko touched the cover of Stiles’s notebook, he flinched. She let go of it and sat back. “An entire notebook? That's new.”

He had to resist the wild urge to take it back, to slip it inside his bag and pretend none of this had ever happened. “That one’s different,” he said. The guilt was thick, heavier than his fear of admitting out loud what damage had already been done. “I don't know if just filing it away...I don't know what to do about it.”

“Derek?” she asked, her tone even, calm despite whatever signals he was likely sending off. “Did something happen?”

He inhaled shakily, then, unable to look at her, said, “I fell in love with one of my students.” His heart lurched painfully after the quiet words were out.

“Does he love you?” she asked, and he jerked his eyes up, startled by the unexpected question. He'd prepared himself for the others, had paced around his living room for hours, thinking through every possible variation of how this conversation might go. This hadn’t been one of them.

Answering it hurt worse than any of the others would have, even the scenario where Derek had envisioned her suggesting that he tender his resignation, sparing him the official tiers of humiliation. “No. I’d thought—hoped—that he might. But no.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, and he felt the wound tear wider.

“I don't understand why you're asking me this,” he ground out, clenching his hands on his thighs, fighting to keep his emotions under check. “Don't you want to know what I did? How I fucked up?”

Noshiko sighed, her disappointment finally audible. “I've known you for ten years, Derek. An entire decade. And I'm only realizing now that I've failed you here. I'm sorry for that.”

“I don't—” He shook his head, trying to clear the fog. “Why would any of this be your fault?”

“Because this,” she said, patting the folder, “shouldn't have ever happened. Or at the very least, it should've been thrown out years ago.”

“It's a record,” he said, still feeling slow and stupid, exhausted from the toll his emotions had taken on him. “You said that as long as we kept a record of all of this, there wouldn't be any danger of repercussions. That my career wouldn't be in jeopardy.” There wouldn't be a repeat of the kind of situation that had happened back East, when an ill-advised relationship had torn his life from its moorings, setting him adrift.

“I gave you a mild caution that you turned into a sword hanging over your head.” Noshiko sighed. “When you came here, there was something wounded and frightened about you, and I didn't know how to respond to it at the time. I wanted you to feel comfortable here, to know that we trusted and valued you and would fight like hell to keep you if it ever came to that.” She touched the folder again. “This came about as a concrete way to file away your worries. If it was in here, locked up in my office, it couldn't harm you. I'd thought it was a clever idea. I didn't realize you've been taking it so seriously, for all these years.”

Derek stared at her. “You mean it's not university policy?”
“No. The administration has no idea this file exists. It never will, Derek. I meant it when I said we value you. I would certainly fight like hell to keep you. I've known since I first saw your application that you were someone special, and I've never doubted it since. Not for a single day.”

The reassurance slid off his shoulders, pushing him deeper into his chair. “That was when everything in there proved I'd done nothing wrong.”

“And you think that you have now?”

He nodded. “I told you, this one’s different. I made a mistake. I made...a lot of mistakes.”

“He's a student?”

He nodded again.

“And you've slept with him?”

“No! Of course not. He's still—he was still in my class.”

“Did your relationship with him change his performance in your class?”

“No.” Derek frowned at the idea. “I taught Kira. You know I don't believe in any kind of favoritism.”

“And I remember that conversation quite well,” Noshiko said with a soft laugh. “Both conversations: the one with you, followed by the one with my angry daughter telling me to butt out.”

He was still thinking about it, though—the raw, visceral reaction that seeing Stiles's handwriting was likely to trigger. “I might need help this time,” he admitted. “If I do a first pass on his exam, then bring it to you with a couple others from the class for reference, will you check to see if I've graded him fairly?”

“You want me to interrogate you. Fine: why don't you tell me about him? No details you don't want to share.”

He told her, slowly and haltingly, about how Stiles had anchored himself in his life. He told her about the walks, the dinners in his home, the swimming sessions that must be technically against some set of rules, the late nights that sometimes turned into sleepovers. He hunched his shoulders at that, expecting her peaceful expression to shift into disapproval, but she simply motioned for him to go on.

He left out the personal details—the story exchanges that’d he thought had meant something—but he told her about the rest. Giving out his personal cell phone number. Introducing Stiles to his family. Believing he was someone he could trust.

“Do you know what you've described?” Noshiko asked when he was done. “No, don't answer that. You'll want to accuse yourself again of something you haven't done. You were incautious, yes. But the only thing you've done was fall in love, and that's not a crime.”

“I'm older than he is,” Derek said. “Significantly older. I shouldn't have fallen in love with him. I
crossed lines that I shouldn’t have.” Lines that, before Stiles, had seemed impenetrable.

Again, Noshiko didn’t respond the way he’d expected. “Have I never told you about how Ken and I met?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve always assumed it was through work somehow.”

“Through work, yes,” she said, amused. “Ken was one of my students.”

Derek gaped at her, trying to process that. “He’s that much younger than you are?”

She laughed. “I’ll take that as a compliment. You should take it as a sign that even people close to you don’t always see what you feel like is some sort of glaringly obvious disconnect in your relationship—like an age difference. You know what our marriage is like now. Does anything about it seem wrong to you?”

“Of course not.” He looked at her, wondering why he’d never noticed it before. He’d absently noted Ken’s youthful appearance but hadn’t really thought about it beyond that. Noshiko was aging gracefully, as impeccably put together and beautiful as he’d remembered from their first meeting. She was twenty years older than Derek and still had far more light and fire in her than he did, most days. The few times they’d attended conferences together, he’d bowed out of the boisterous socializing while she was going strong at the hotel bar with a dozen other historians. He could acknowledge that age was an oftentimes meaningless factor; you couldn’t tell a lot about a person from a number. Still, though. “Can I ask—how big is the age difference? How many years?”

“Fifteen. He was a grad student, so the age gap was slightly narrower than yours seems to be, but it was still present. And trust me, I do understand what I suspect are your reservations. It was a consideration for both of us at the time.”

Derek pointed accusingly at the folder of apparent lies. “You’re the one who told me not to encourage any potential student interest in me. Isn’t that a little hypocritical?”

“Professor-student relationships are generally frowned upon,” she said in a reasonable tone. “I was giving you a caution based on personal experience. It’s not the end of the world when it happens; I won’t lie to you and tell you it’s the easiest path you’ll ever take.”

“What happened with the two of you?”

“How did it start, or how did we make it work?”

“The latter,” Derek said, then fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. “I have some familiarity with how it might begin.”

Her eyes grew distant, focused on some point in the past. “You know, I was about your age when I met Ken. He had such a creative, interesting mind. And he was kind. Quiet and thoughtful. Not funny at all, even though he thought he was.”

Derek snorted. “I’ve experienced his puns.”

She smiled. “They’ve gotten better with practice, if you can believe it. I know you didn’t ask for the backstory, but I think it’s worth sharing, because he wasn’t the type of person I’d ever thought I’d fall for. Actually, I didn’t think I’d end up with anyone. I was happy being single; I was focused on my career, and I didn’t have a lot of interest in pursuing serious romantic entanglements. I definitely wasn’t planning on having children. And then...”
“He came along and changed everything,” Derek said softly.

“Things changed for both of us. Between Kira joining the picture later that year and Ken deciding to finish out his degree elsewhere to avoid any backlash...” She shrugged lightly. “It seemed best to get married and relocate as a package deal.”

“And that’s when you ended up here?”

“I managed to find a job here at Tillamook, and he transferred to the University of Oregon. The commuting was rough on us, especially when we were raising a newborn, but it all came together in the end. It was easier for him to work his way into a position in this department. And now everyone here makes the same assumption you did about how we’d started out.”

Lola grumbled in her sleep; she’d moved into a more comfortable position as they’d been talking, although she’d made sure to keep her whiskery muzzle planted on one of his shoes. Derek glanced down at her, thinking about the advice Noshiko had given him months earlier. She’d been there for him from the beginning, always supporting and encouraging him. Believing in him, when he’d struggled with more self-doubt than it seemed possible for one person to internalize.

“Is that why you pushed for me to get this job?” he asked.

“Because I wanted to help someone else create a fresh start?” She made a thoughtful noise in her throat. “It wasn’t a conscious part of the hiring process. You stood out on paper, and your interviews and guest lecture clinched it. I would’ve wanted you in the department even if I hadn’t liked you as a person.”

“Good to know,” he said dryly, and she laughed.

“Which I do, for the record. I don’t think I say it enough, Derek: I’m proud of you. I’m proud of how far you’ve come as a professor, and I’m proud of who you are as a person. You should be, too.”

He swallowed thickly, rubbing his palms against his knees, feeling desperately unworthy of those words. “I can’t really—it’s hard for me to accept that right now. But thank you.”

“Ken was in love with you, too. That’s why your story had a happy ending, and mine won’t.”

He rose to his feet, taking hold of Lola’s leash as she shook herself awake.

Noshiko moved to the edge of her chair, reaching out to take his hands so he’d look her in the eyes. “I won’t give you too much advice if you don’t want it. But I will say that it took a while for Ken to talk me into trusting that what we had together was more important than what people might say about us. Are you willing to give up your chance at happiness because of the universe slipping a few years between the two of you?”

Her eyes were kind, and hearing this a few weeks earlier would’ve meant much more to him. He withdrew his hands gently, his voice wry and sad. “Ken was in love with you, too. That’s why your story had a happy ending, and mine won’t.”

He rose to his feet, taking hold of Lola’s leash as she shook herself awake.

Noshiko pushed Stiles’s unopened notebook across her desk. “You don’t need to give me this. I think you should hold onto it. Let yourself have some options, regardless of your final decision.”

Derek inhaled sharply and accepted the notebook, ready to toss it in the department’s padlocked
shredder bin as he walked out of the building.

After standing motionless over the bin for longer than was reasonable, his breath heaving, his heart hammering, he slid it back into his bag instead. He had no intention of looking at a single additional page; the humiliation of those initial ones had been enough to last him for a lifetime.

Still. Even though the mere sight of it made him feel like he had shards of glass shredding their way through his veins, he couldn’t bring himself to discard his last connection with Stiles. Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles deals with the consequences
Stiles watched in confusion as Derek essentially fled the classroom, not even stopping to wipe down the final instructions he’d left on the chalkboard.

“What the fuck,” he said to the empty room. His backpack was still sitting on the table, half-open, and he sorted through it, rearranging its contents as slowly as possible in case Derek returned to explain why he’d left so abruptly. The door didn’t swing back open, and when he fished his phone out—it’d been muted during the test; maybe Derek had texted an explanation?—the only notifications were from games he’d been using as study breaks.

“That was weird, right?” he said into the stillness, with, of course, no response. He shrugged, ignoring a creeping sense that he was missing something important. Maybe Derek had suddenly remembered an appointment.

He snapped a picture of Derek’s handwriting before erasing it from the board. It’d be a memento of the class. Something to look back on later, to remember what it’d been like when they’d first met.

Stiles stopped in the doorway and turned back, sweeping a long gaze over the rows of empty desks. He’d miss this room. It was an odd degree of nostalgia to have for a space where he’d spent so little of his academic career, but fuck it, he was graduating in a semester. He could take a few moments to appreciate a period of his life drawing to a close, and a room that he’d probably never be in again.

He shut the door and leaned against it for a few heartbeats, smiling at the bench where he and Derek had exchanged their first words. Who knew then they’d end up like this?

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The rest of his finals drained every spare bit of energy, and he spent a good chunk of Saturday sleeping off the stress before Scott and Kira dragged him out for celebratory drinks. At least they’d said drinks. Stiles squinted suspiciously at the neon marquee when they joined the line stretching around the building.

“This screams concert, not bar,” he said, and Scott clapped him enthusiastically on both shoulders, his grip affectionate and slightly too tight.

“Yeah, isn’t it awesome? I got you a ticket as a You Survived Another Semester surprise. Kira introduced me to this band, and I love ‘em.”

“They’re fun,” Kira assured him. “It’s like—electro-pop, I guess? You’ll see. I’ve seen them live once before, and it was awesome.”

“But there are drinks?”

“You can get as trashed as you want,” Scott said cheerfully. “They ‘check IDs’ at the door, but you could probably show them your grocery card and they’d wave you through.”

“Good, ‘cause I don’t want you young’uns getting turned away and ruining my night,” he said, laughing when Scott tried to get him in a headlock, resulting in a brief scuffle that made Kira cover her eyes and pretend she didn’t know either of them.
The line moved quickly, and Stiles nodded approvingly once they were inside. “Okay, this is better than I was expecting. How have we not been here in the last four years, Scott? This is somehow your fault.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Kira said, grabbing Scott’s elbow to steer him through the crowd. Stiles stopped staring at the elaborate decor—reds and golds, surprisingly classy for their college town—and followed. “…came here with my parents the first time,” she was saying when he caught up. “The acoustics sucked, and it took me a while to realize it’s because they bought us seats in the upstairs balcony. You’ve gotta do general admission.”

They passed through the spacious lobby, Stiles craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the merch table, and into the theater itself. Kira triumphantly waved at the three-tiered structure, with bars on every level and high ceilings that removed the sense of claustrophobia Stiles often picked up from music venues.

“Fine, you win,” he said. “I’m impressed. Should we be down on the actual floor, or can we hang out up here?”

“Up to you. I like being on the second level; if we grab a spot at the railing, we can see over the crowd on the floor but still be close enough to the stage. Unless you really wanna dance, but we can always push our way down there during the set.”

“Drinks now, decisions later,” Stiles said. “This is going to wipe out all the money I’m not earning by taking today off work, but fuck it.”

“It’s a celebration!” Scott yelled, tuning back into the conversation in time to be far louder than he needed for the mild hubbub of the initial crowd.

“You’re fucking right it is!” Stiles yelled back, meeting his fist-bump.

There were two opening bands, which meant that Stiles was warm, cheerful, and moderately inebriated before the main event took the stage. He shook his head when Kira asked if he wanted another drink, and she grabbed Scott by the arm again, dragging him after her. He went happily, grinning sunnily back at Stiles, who gave him a thumbs up.

“That’s my boy,” Stiles mouthed at him. It was getting to the point now where he barely remembered what it was like for those two to not be one inseparable unit. He wouldn’t be surprised if, after Kira’s graduation, Scott started putting out feelers about moving in together. It’d be weird to see his best bud transition to that stage in a relationship. A good kind of weird, though.

He leaned against the railing, idly watching the stage being cleared for the final set, his eye catching on a teal-haired girl moving through the mass of packed-together bodies. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Caitlin!”

It took a couple of attempts to get her to turn and confirm that he was, in fact, yelling at someone he knew. Once she did, she wove quickly through the crowd and—instead of detouring to take the short set of steps up to his location—got her foot on the base of the railing and climbed over. It was just high enough to make the effort a strain, and Stiles helped her over the last section, holding onto her elbows as she smacked a kiss against his cheek.

“Whoa there girl,” he said, laughing. “That one was pretty damn close to the lips.”

“Not the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. What the hell are you doing here, you hermit? It feels like it’s been a million years.” Caitlin kept her head tilted up, her face close to his. The venue
had gotten much louder over the last hour; his voice would probably be hoarse tomorrow, his ears still ringing from talking at exaggerated volumes.

“I’m third-wheeling Scott and Kira again. Emily down there somewhere?”

“In the thick of it. I’m supposed to be getting us some drinks before the good stuff starts, but she’ll forgive me for stopping to say hi to you. Come back down with me! We’ve got a prime spot right by the stage. We can elbow in a spot for you.”

“I’ve gotta wait for them to get back. I might try to find you later, though?”

“You’d better,” she said. “God, this was a hell of a semester, wasn’t it? I can’t believe we’ve only got a few more months and then we’re done with this place for good.”

The thought was more bittersweet than usual. Stiles considered telling her what he’d been dwelling on lately; it might be nice to gather her input on the changes he was considering making to his future. Her ear would be a safe one to bend, since she wouldn’t be approaching the news with his dad’s built-in worries, Derek’s biased point of view, or the context that Scott now had and Lydia would most likely guess. The idea came and went; it was easier to keep it to himself. “You know what I can’t believe? That you knew about this place, too. Why does no one ever fucking tell me anything?”

“Shut up, I’ve invited you at least three times. You always claimed to be too busy. Like I said, hermit.” She kissed the tips of her fingers, then pressed them against his mouth. “Something to remember me by, hot stuff. And to make that dude over there jealous, because he has not taken his eyes off you since I got up here.”

“More like staring at you,” Stiles said, twisting unsubtly to check anyway, then freezing. That was Derek standing across the room, in skintight black pants and a white t-shirt, his lips pulled down in a heavy frown.

Caitlin gave Stiles a friendly pat on the ass. “Go get him, stud. If you rope your guy, you can bring him down to dance with us. I’m off to do my lady’s bidding.”

“See ya,” he said belatedly, still staring at Derek, who’d turned his back as soon as they’d made eye contact. “Fucking weird,” he muttered out loud, not speaking to anyone in particular.

He’d been too busy to think about texting Derek since their last interaction. That wasn’t that unusual; forgetting to speak to anyone—even people in the same room as him, much to Scott’s annoyance—sometimes happened when he was putting his head down and focusing on something. The same wasn’t true for Derek. Yet Derek, who usually sent him at least a couple texts a day—maybe down to one on stress-loaded days when Stiles forgot to reply—hadn’t reached out during that time, either.

Maybe he simply hadn’t wanted to interrupt Stiles’s night with his friends. Maybe he was trying to give him space. It was up to Stiles, then, to march over there and let him know the space wasn’t needed and that hanging out with Derek at a loud, floor-shaking concert was the best way he could think of to close out this week.

“Derek!” he called when he got close enough. He waved awkwardly at Boyd, who was standing with his back against the wall, his arms folded, his face expressionless but somehow still threatening. Derek’s shoulders tensed, and he turned around slowly.

“Mr. Stilinski,” he said, colder and more detached than Stiles had ever heard him, even during the pointedly distant discussion periods in class. Stiles had gotten used to those, understanding the
reason. This was something else.

Stiles faltered. He glanced back at Boyd, whose expression was gradually shifting into something that’d be safe to call forbidding. Maybe he wasn’t supposed to talk to Derek around Boyd? That wasn’t right, though; they’d been friendly enough before. He took a fortifying breath and forged on, budding anxiety pushing his disorganized thoughts out in clumps.

“It’s always so weird to see you without Lola. Obviously she’d hate it in here. Noises. Crowds. The way it feels like the music’s changing my heartbeat sometimes, which kinda freaks me out, I’ll be real. You’re supposed to follow your heart, right? Not have it jump along after a bassline played by some dude with greasy hair.”

Derek’s mouth tightened. He spoke stiffly, reluctantly. “Lola’s at my house. I’m not planning to stay for more than an hour.”

“Smart, showing up after the openers are done. I wish I’d known you were coming, though. I would’ve—” He didn’t know how to finish that. What would he have done?

He watched as Derek’s eyes flicked, seemingly against his will, to the area where Stiles had been doggedly staking out his territory until he’d deserted it without a second thought at the sight of Derek.

“Shit,” he said, twisting quickly to check that—yep, their carefully chosen spot had already been filled in by other people. Kira might be irritated by that when she returned with Scott. At least Scott wouldn’t care where they ended up as long as he was with the two of them.

Scott, he thought as he turned back to Derek. Maybe this would be a good time for them to all meet? Friend groups mixing in a neutral setting, with the music keeping conversations light and hopefully on the more casual side.

That reminded him—he couldn’t help smirking about the thematic sketches he’d done in his notes during Derek’s lectures. Some of them stuck to the historical figures being discussed; for others, he’d amused himself by drawing caricatures of himself, Derek, Scott, Kira, Erica, and anyone else whose features were familiar enough to require little effort to get down on paper while he soaked in the information.

“Hey, what’s up with you, anyway?” he asked, jerking his chin up in light accusation and keeping the question playful. “Didn’t you like those incredibly historically accurate drawings? I wanted to show you exactly how much I’ve learned from you. You’ve been on radio silence since Wednesday; don’t tell me you’re stumped for a good response.” He’d expected at least an eye-rolling emoji and had hoped for one of Derek’s typically dry witticisms as he criticized the attempts at period-appropriate clothing while failing to hide that he was a fan of Stiles’s work. Or of Stiles in general.

Boyd abruptly seemed to grow a foot taller, looming in active threat now, but it was Derek’s face—drained of color suddenly, the icy facade melting to something stark and distraught that’d been hidden underneath—that made Stiles shrink back.

“I never thought you’d be cruel,” Derek said, his voice ragged, the words breaking as they grated their way out of his throat.

“I—” Stiles said, not sure what he was going to say next, but determined to say anything that would fix this, that would make Derek stop looking like he’d been abruptly stabbed in the gut. Before he could get anywhere with that attempt, he felt a vice-like grip on his shoulder, spinning him around. “Erica,” he said, bewildered.
“I didn’t think there’d be anything worse than standing in line for a two-stall bathroom at this place, but apparently there is,” she said, her eyes fierce and snapping angrily. “You’re not welcome here.”

“I—Derek?” he said, moving a couple steps away. “What the fuck is going on?”

Derek flicked another wounded glance at him, his eyes wide and dark in the room’s low lighting. “I’m sorry,” he said, soft enough to be almost inaudible. “Please, Stiles.”

“Scram,” Erica snarled, moving to Derek’s side and slipping an arm around him in—comfort? Why the fuck did he need comfort? Stiles fucking needed some comfort right about now. Why was Derek suddenly so unwilling to talk to him?

He backed away, bumping into a few people and offering vague apologies, watching as Boyd leaned in to talk quietly to Derek. Derek shook his head after a moment, his posture making him seem smaller and strangely vulnerable.

Something was hugely, horribly wrong, and Stiles had no idea what it was.

He headed dazedly to the bar where he was pretty sure his friends must still be waiting—what the hell was taking them so long? where was everybody?—and met them partway there.

“Oh no, did you change your mind?” Kira asked. “Everyone had the same idea, so the line’s huge. It’d take forever to get up there again. You can have some of mine, though.”

“No,” he said, whatever buzz he’d had left driven away by the sinking feeling in his stomach. “I’m okay, thanks.”

“Derek!” Kira exclaimed, and Stiles jumped, wondering how the hell she’d read his mind—but she was looking behind him, waving wildly. “Here, Scott, can you hold my drink for a second? I’m gonna go say hi to him.” She jostled her way through the crowd, tapping Derek on the shoulder when she reached him.

Derek turned, wiping the heel of his hand over his eyes, then bent slightly to return her hug, holding onto her for a long moment, then nodding along when she began chatting eagerly. He didn’t spare a single look in Stiles’s direction.

“Dude, are you okay?” Scott asked, trying to keep from spilling the drinks as others in the crowd broke around them, pushing past where they’d come to a complete halt.

“I’m not sure,” Stiles said. “I—I really couldn’t tell you that right now, buddy.”

***

Few things seemed worse than going to work with a raging headache that was part hangover and part Stiles’s inability to stop his mind from churning through every detail of his last few exchanges with Derek, over and over, searching for something that’d make him understand what’d gone wrong. He pushed his mouth into an approximation of a smile when Finstock pulled him aside and told him he was scaring the nice church ladies.

“That’s worse,” Finstock said, grimacing right back at him. “On second thought, you stay in here and make some of these tiny little sandwiches.”

“Tea sandwiches,” Stiles said automatically. And mini quiches. Normally he’d be finding ways to stash handfuls of the latter in his pockets to sneak home for a late dudebrunch of his own. Today he wasn’t feeling it.
“Right, right.” Finstock took Stiles’s tray away and passed it on to Molly, who sighed, straightened her bow tie, and began filling the slightly dented silver platter with selections from the piles of food she and Tamara had been in the middle of assembling.

“I don’t see why I need to smile to serve food,” Stiles grumbled once Finstock was out of sight again.

“It’s nicer in here anyway,” Tamara said. “You don’t have to talk to anyone. But don’t mess this up, or we won’t get our share of the tips.” She pointed him to the ham and brie, slapping one together to show him how it was done.

They lapsed into silence after that, leaving Stiles free to think about the dark circles under Derek’s eyes and the intense glare Boyd had been sending his way the entire time, even when all he was doing was saying goodbye to Caitlin.

“Oh!” he said suddenly, and Tamara jerked her head up from the curried chicken salad she was spooning onto slices of bread. “Sorry,” he said. “Just realized something.”

Could it be that Derek was jealous? He and Boyd had witnessed Caitlin’s casual intimacy and misinterpreted it? If Derek had known her, he’d understand that coming from her, things like ass-squeezing were an expression of platonic affection that she barely ever did, anyway. Usually she stuck to careless cheek-kisses in greeting and pet names that didn’t actually mean anything. If that was it, though, and it had to be—Stiles hadn’t done anything else that could be taken the wrong way—that meant he and Derek really had been tipping over into the more-than-friends category. He’d been suspecting it for a while, afraid to believe it until their post-Thanksgiving conversations had made the possibility too obvious to keep denying.

He congratulated himself on figuring it out so quickly, even with his brain a muddied-up mess from last night. He finished smearing some mangled, gooey brie onto his attempt at a fancy sandwich and slid his phone out of his pocket.

“Finstock’s gonna blow a gasket if he catches you,” Tamara warned him.

“Don’t give a fuck about Finstock right now,” he said back, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

<< If this is about the ass thing, you really shouldn’t have taken any of it seriously. 100% no romantic possibility there.
<< It was just a joke!
<< The whole thing, I mean
<< I mean ha, like that’s never happened to you before

He meant to say more. That hell, Derek was friends with Erica, whom he’d seen do the exact same thing to Derek. They were much closer friends than Stiles and Caitlin were, which meant that if anyone had a reason to harbor pointless jealousy, it sure as hell wasn’t Derek. And Stiles wasn’t jealous. Not anymore. True, there’d been a period when he was, before he’d understood the context of that relationship. Now though? He thought their friendship was great, and that Derek was fucking fantastic and should have dozens of friends who cared as much about him as Erica clearly did.

Before he could add any of that to the already scattered text thread, Finstock stomped back into the room, saw him slacking off on his work, and bellowed, “BILINSKI!!”

“Yeah, sandwiches, I know, I’m on it,” he said, shoving the phone away before Finstock could work himself up into confiscating it. He’d finish the thought later. Hopefully Derek would reply in the meantime, though, and let him know that everything was okay again, and that he wanted to meet up
to talk about...about whatever they were to each other now. They could do that, right? The semester was technically over. Derek wasn’t his professor anymore. They could be anything they wanted.

*I think he wants it, too,* he thought, hope sparking into a tiny, expectant flame.

***

Derek didn’t text. By the time work ended and Stiles was able to drive back to his apartment, throw his desperately-in-need-of-laundering clothes on the floor, and change into something that didn’t smell faintly of tuna and onions, he was too irritated to make another attempt. If Derek didn’t want to talk, fine. He’d spend the rest of his afternoon thrashing Scott in a few rounds of Mario Kart instead.

“So the concert was fun,” Scott ventured after a while.

Distractionary tactics during gaming were strictly forbidden; conversations could be innocent or a ploy, so Stiles merely grunted in reply while he waited to see which this was.

Scott twisted his controller, grimacing when he smacked off a wall while attempting to cut a corner to chip away at Stiles’s lead. He waited until the next race had started before swinging back into the conversation. “I think it’s cool that Kira has an actual CD collection. Like, physical copies, signed by the bands and stuff. She told me to thank you again for hanging out after so she could meet them.”

“I never knew she was that into music,” Stiles said. Apparently Scott wanted to talk about his girlfriend. That was familiar territory and an easy enough topic to navigate while maintaining his hard-fought winning streak.

“I can’t keep up,” Scott admitted. “I try to memorize some of the names so I can look them up later, but that only works like, a third of the time? Or less.”

“I don’t think she’s gonna quiz you, buddy.”

“No, but she always listens when I talk about the stuff going on in the clinic. Remember when you threw a book at me when I tried to tell you about the surgery I got to sit in on last week?”

Stiles shuddered. “Don’t fucking bring that up again. I’m still scrubbing my brain. You know how I feel about needles and shit.”

“Kira liked it. Even when I used the spaghetti to show her how Deaton let me poke around inside—” He cut himself off, sensing how little Stiles wanted to hear the details. “Anyway, I think it’s important to do the same for her. Show interest in the stuff she’s really into.”

“She’s into science, too,” Stiles pointed out. “Chemistry’s her major.”

“Yeah, I know. Majors and career paths aren’t everything, though. There’s a lot more to her than that.” Scott tripped him up with a well-timed ink spray that obscured the view of the track as Stiles was approaching a tricky jump.

Stiles swore, mashing the buttons harder like it’d help him to recover faster. Scott might actually come up ahead in this round. “Does she play anything?” he asked once they’d crossed the finish line.

“Yeah, she’d love to if we—oh, you mean instruments?” Scott scrolled slowly through the character options; he was always switching out between races, trying to find the fastest possible combination. Stiles settled on one and stuck to it, which made this part of their games annoying as fuck. He reached for his half-finished and mostly warm soda. Scott hovered over Yoshi, then flipped to Bowser at the last second.
“Brawn’s not gonna do much when I leave you in my dust,” Stiles said.

Scott ignored the taunt. “She plays the drums. Cool, right? She was telling me about it earlier today. I think she was about to invite me over to listen, or maybe even jam or something, until she remembered the set’s at her parents’ house and I haven’t actually met them yet.”

“Oh yeah,” Stiles said sympathetically. “Do they even know you exist?”

“Harsh,” Scott said. “No, I don’t think so. She hasn’t really said one way or the other, and I’m trying not to make her feel like she has to. Did I tell you I talked to my mom about her, though? Over Thanksgiving.”

“Bringing the parents in is some serious shit. How’s Kira feel about that?”

“She didn’t say much about that, either. She looked happy, though. I told her my mom’s excited to meet her. It probably won’t be until graduation, so there’s plenty of time to figure other things out.”

“Like if Kira’s gonna tell her parents she has a boyfriend before she has the majorly official graduation lunch with her boyfriend’s mom.”

“And you and your dad. We’re gonna do a combo thing like we did for high school, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, his kart drifting slightly off course before he corrected it. “Yeah, of course, buddy.” Graduation. Would Derek...? He shook the stray thought out of his head before it had a chance to send down any roots. Definitely too early to be wondering about that.

“She told me something else interesting, though,” Scott continued. “You’ll never guess who she does play music with. I mean, I knew they were friends, she’s said that before, but I’d kinda forgotten about it.”

“Who?” Stiles asked absently.

“Professor Hot—uh, Hale. I’m still surprised you didn’t go over to talk to him last night,” Scott said, jerking the controller to the side in an attempt to run Stiles-as-Waluigi off the road.

“If you’re ever gonna meet him, you really have to stop objectifying him,” Stiles said, his irritation spiking again. He swerved to avoid Scott and sped past him. “We stopped doing that months ago.”

“You stopped months ago. I didn’t know that until like, last week.”

Stiles let out a huff of acknowledgment. “I’m just saying that you’ve gotta watch yourself, okay? No slip-ups like that around him. I told you it’s not like that anymore.”

Scott glanced at him. “So he doesn’t know? I mean, you obviously wouldn’t tell him about the nicknames and stuff. But are you sure he doesn’t have any idea you used to be into him?”

“Why the hell would he?” Stiles powered up his star and used its brief burst of invulnerability as an excuse to crash through as many vehicles as he could before it ran out. “I don’t know what you and Lydia’s deal is. You have this idea of me that you can’t seem to shake. It’s like you think I have as much subtlety as...” He cast about for a good comparison.

“As you did in high school?” Scott finished. He used a Bullet Bill to calmly shoot past Stiles.

“People change,” Stiles said, sick of having this conversation. “I changed.” Derek was already being weird enough; he could only imagine how bad it’d be if he knew the kinds of shit Stiles had said in
At the beginning, when Dr. Hot-Like-Burning Hale was far more of a fantasy than a real person. He wasn’t sure which of them would be more embarrassed. Now that the semester was over, Stiles should probably shred his notes from that first couple of weeks, just to be sure they never...they never... “Oh fuck,” he moaned, standing abruptly and dropping the controller on the couch as he vaulted over the back and made a dash for the bedroom.

Stray thoughts were rapidly clustering together, tendrils shooting out from ones that’d lain dormant, connecting small moments that he hadn’t been able to properly interpret without the full story. He dumped his backpack out on his mattress, scattering papers as he searched, then dove for his desk, then under his bed, then into his closet.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” he chanted, like a mantra that would make his notebook appear.

Scott poked his head through the doorway. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“Fuck!” Stiles shot back, scrambling for his phone. He dropped it the first time—his hands were shaking, fuck—but he managed to unlock it and open up his message thread with Derek. He reread the last few, seeing them through Derek’s eyes this time, and sank to the floor, his legs suddenly feeling too wobbly to hold him.

Well, that explained everything. Derek’s coldness, the way he hadn’t been able to look at Stiles since he’d received the “extra credit.” Humiliation swept over Stiles first, followed swiftly by something darker and far more troubling.

It wasn’t just awkward avoidance, or even anger over some pretty offensive sketches that should’ve never been seen by anyone else. Stiles could’ve dealt with it if that’d been all it came down to. He’d done plenty of stupid shit before. He could’ve explained why it wasn’t a big deal, that the sketches hadn’t meant anything, that he’d stopped thinking about Derek that way as soon as they’d started to spend time together. He could’ve swallowed his pride and admitted that he’d been an idiot—a careless, thoughtless one.

That wasn’t the worst of it, though. There’d been pain in Derek’s voice when he’d asked Stiles to go. Pain that Stiles hadn’t understood at the time and had consequently chosen to ignore.

*I hurt him,* he thought bleakly. And he’d done it again today, twisting the knife when he’d imagined he’d been patching an easy fix over a minor misunderstanding.

He could still fix it.

He wiggled his head and shoulders under the bed, forming a partial shield against Scott’s concern, and pushed the call button.

“Please,” he begged when the ringing wasn’t interrupted by Derek’s voice, cautious but willing to hear him out. “Please pick up.”

On his third attempt, it went straight to voicemail. Derek had turned off his phone. Or possibly even blocked his number.

“...Stiles?” Scott was asking.

He squirmed back into the open air, dust and creeping despair clogging his throat, and tugged on his shoes. Scott watched as he fumbled with the laces and swore through the clumsy knots, then stepped aside so he could get to the front door.
“This fucking piece of shit,” he muttered, yanking at it until it groaned and finally gave way with a reluctant scrape and a squeal from the overtaxed hinges. He left Scott to deal with figuring out how to close it and changed directions twice before deciding to walk. Taking the Jeep would be faster; the walk would give him space to clear his head, compose texts he probably wouldn’t send, and think of exactly what to say to Derek.

*I’m sorry I drew a lot of pictures of your ass and then basically shoved them in your face and laughed at you about it wasn’t going to cut it.*

He still hadn’t thought of anything better by the time he reached Derek’s neighborhood. He hadn’t thought to bring his gloves, either; he turned up his coat collar and shoved his hands in his pockets, hoping his spot between a tree and a hedge would double as a windbreak. It was already serving as a decent vantage point from which he could muster up the last bits of his courage before crossing the street and knocking on Derek’s door.

“Just tell him the truth,” Stiles breathed, watching the words billow out of his mouth into the frosty air. It’d be warmer inside, that’s for sure. If Derek even agreed to let him in.

He was dreading this more than any conversation he could remember, including the one with his dad after a couple of his deputies had discovered a shirtless, pants unzipped Stiles making out with a guy in the alley outside Jungle. That guy—with rough stubble, rougher hands, and a few inches on Stiles in just about every direction he’d had the opportunity to test—had turned out to also be one of his dad’s deputies, new enough to have missed the memo that the Sheriff’s kid was technically an adult but firmly off limits.

*For fuck’s sake, kid, it’s not you being gay I have the problem with,* his dad had said, disappointment etched into his face.

*Bi,* Stiles had said. *Um. Also...sorry?*

*For?* his dad had asked.

*For corrupting your deputies?* he’d tried. *Sneaking into Jungle with the fake ID you thought you’d confiscated last week? Talking the bartender into giving me free shots? Trying to make my last year of high school memorable?*

He’d kept listing possibilities for a while; he still wasn’t sure which part his dad had been the most pissed about. It’d taken him a year to realize that the crossed arms and stony expression might’ve been his dad’s way of getting him to confess to all the pieces he hadn’t already known about.

Facing his dad’s disappointment was shitty. It was still nothing compared to looking Derek in the eyes and finding out if he’d blown any future their relationship might’ve had.

The neighborhood was dark and quiet in a way that the streets around campus never quite managed. That was probably why the first notes from the piano barely registered; Stiles was used to hearing other people’s music constantly filtering through his walls, along with snatches of conversations he’d occasionally eavesdrop on when he was bored and not wrapped up in his studies.

This, though, was softer, a ripple spreading through the air to where he stood in the shadows. He couldn’t hear enough to pick out individual notes, so he drew closer, his eyes fixed on the brightly illuminated window framing Derek as he sat at the piano, his back to the street. It might be Chopin. That was Stiles’s default guess when he didn’t know a composer, but the emotional quality of the music seemed to fit, its smooth melancholy rising into rapid, agitated trills that made tears spring unbidden into his eyes.
He let himself sink into the music, feeling for a few moments as if his soul had detached from his body, leaving his feet planted on the ground as it followed the notes’ soft, quavering appeal.

*I’m sorry*, he thought helplessly, watching as Derek finished out the song, then stopped, his head bowing, his hands lifting from the keys to cover his face. Even from the sidewalk, Stiles could see his shoulders shaking.

Stiles slammed back to earth, his limbs wooden and too heavy to move. Derek’s wrenchingly visible display of grief could be about anything, he told himself, not believing his own attempts to assuage his guilt. He didn’t know how to deal with this. He didn’t know how to open a conversation with someone he’d hurt this deeply, who now believed the worst of him, with evidence he didn’t know how to explain away.

He should drag his feet free, cross that final distance to Derek’s door, and tell him the terrifying truth: that he’d thought he’d understood what it meant to love someone or how vulnerable it felt to hold your heart out and ask someone else to accept it.

Turned out he’d never had a fucking clue.

Right now, Derek hadn’t forgiven him, but he hadn’t explicitly rejected him either. Interrupting him like this, when he was clearly in need of space, could so easily backfire. Dozens of potential scenarios spun through his head as he stood frozen in place.

*Showing up at my house when I asked you to leave me alone? Do you lurk outside my bedroom at night, too? This only proves what I’ve been thinking about you since I saw that notebook, Derek* would say before slamming the door in his face.

Or he’d look wounded, his cheeks gaunt, his eyes dark, as he said, *If this is your idea of friendship, I’m sorry I ever let myself care.*

Or: *I’m not upset with you; I’m angry with myself for unintentionally leading you on, when I’ve only ever seen you as a student I was kind to. I’m embarrassed for both of us that it got to this point.*

Most of them ended in, *It’s best if we forget this happened; if we never speak again.*

Lifting his hand to the door, baring his soul, and waiting for Derek’s answer would take more bravery and self-confidence than Stiles was sure he possessed.

In the end, he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

*Next up: Derek turns forty*
Laura wrapped Derek up in a bear hug like she hadn’t seen him in years.

“I left your house less than a month ago,” Derek grumbled into her shampoo-and-airport-scented hair, but he didn’t let go, either.

“You left being the key word there,” she said, giving him one final squeeze before releasing him so her daughters could leap at him, too. Rob gave him a friendly wave from the pile of carry-on luggage they’d apparently dumped off on him as soon as they’d disembarked, and Derek nodded back in greeting.

“I’d offer to give you a hand with those, but I seem to have picked up a pair of wild monkeys that smuggled away on the plane,” Derek said. He lifted a giggling Emma into the air, her little arms looped securely around his bicep.

“If I’m a monkey, what’re you, Uncle Derek?” she asked.

“A leopard who’s going to eat you,” he replied, snapping his teeth at her until she squealed and kicked her dangling feet against his leg.

Eliza rolled her eyes, grinning despite herself. Derek was kind enough not to point it out. He instead used his free arm to draw her back in for a second hug, indulging in a quick kiss to the top of her head.

“I missed you all,” he admitted. “Even this shrieking monkey. I think we might've discovered a new species.”

“Can you carry the new species to baggage claim, or will she be able to walk on her own?” Laura asked. She’d returned to Rob’s side to retrieve her oversized purse and slip her hand into the crook of his elbow.

“Are you moving into my house?” Derek asked, lifting an eyebrow at the size and number of bags already waiting to be dragged through the airport.

“We’re staying through the end of next week,” Laura reminded him, as though he hadn't been the one to negotiate for the longer stretch. “Do you expect me to look like a slob who only owns one outfit?”

“I expected you to leave some of your closet behind.” He lowered Emma gently to the floor, and she dashed for her suitcase—hot pink and covered in ponies.

Rob turned the handle so it’d be easier for her to wheel it out of the pile. “We also had to check a bag of gifts. My parents couldn't decide whether to ship the girls’ presents to your house or keep them for when we got back. We had to make a last minute decision to go ahead and bring them with us.”

“We’ll open those first on Skype so they can see, and then do the rest,” Laura said. She mouthed an apology at him, and he shrugged. They’d probably insist on singing happy birthday, too. He could deal with a little Christmas cheer from the in-laws in exchange for an otherwise uninterrupted week with his favorite people.
“I’m getting a dollhouse,” Emma announced with youthful optimism.

He glanced at Laura as they began walking toward baggage claim; the last he’d heard, the dollhouse she’d requested was hundreds of dollars and stamped as unlikely in light of all the other gifts she was receiving. Laura caught his eye and sighed. Still a no, then.

“Emma, honey, you put a lot of things on your list,” she said, with more patience than she probably felt. “Remember how we talked about you not expecting to get everything on Christmas Day, just because you wrote it down?”

If only that was how things worked; Derek had a few ideas for what he would’ve written on his list this year.

“Yeah,” Emma said doubtfully. “But I sent Grandma and Grandpa the list, too.”

“You saw the size of the suitcases we checked in. The dollhouse you wanted was probably twice that size. It wouldn’t have fit.” She mouthed fucking huge at Derek, and he tried to not snort in amusement. That was another reason Laura had vetoed his offer to buy it; it would’ve taken up half of Emma’s bedroom, which barely fit the existing clutter of bookcases and toy boxes and a much smaller but perfectly serviceable dollhouse.

“Oh,” Emma said. Her cheerful skipping slowed, her suitcase still bumping along behind her.

“I don’t want you to expect certain things and then be disappointed when you open up your presents. It’s more fun to be surprised, right?”

This coming from the woman who’d sent Derek her wishlist—ranked by level of interest—three separate times. He wisely kept his mouth shut.

Eliza took advantage of the break in conversation to tug at his cardigan sleeve. “Where’s Lola?” she asked, with a mild reprimand in her voice. It was possible she thought he might’ve simply forgotten his dog somewhere in the terminal.

“They spent the entire plane ride talking about meeting her,” Laura said. “Maybe we didn’t have to bring any presents. Playing with Lola’s enough of a gift, right kids?”

Emma turned around with a thoroughly unamused expression. Fortunately, she knew her mom well enough to recognize her particular brand of humor; that didn’t mean she had to appreciate it.

“She’s waiting at home,” Derek said. “She’s gonna be so excited to meet you, too.” He’d figured the airport would be overwhelming for her, and he’d been right to assume that between the extra bodies and all the bags, there wouldn’t be much room left over in his car for a dog. And while he was leaving her alone for a little longer than he would’ve liked, she’d get plenty of attention over the coming week.

It’d make everything a whole lot lonelier once they’d all left.

There was no sense in dwelling on that right now.

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“Well, hello you,” Cora said, dropping her bags in Derek’s entryway and crouching down to greet a wagging, socialization-blissed-out Lola.

As expected, Derek had found Emma curled up on the dog bed that morning; he’d carefully
separated her stuffed toys from Lola’s and carried her back to her sleeping bag before her parents had woken up. That would probably be happening all week. At this rate, she’d forget about the dollhouse disappointment and would be begging for a dog of her own. He was surprised Laura hadn’t already given in; she’d stuck with smaller animals, like hamsters and rats and guinea pigs, even though she’d always been as much of a dog person as anyone in their family. The girls were definitely both old enough now to share responsibility for a larger pet. Using Lola as visiting leverage might not work for much longer.

He stepped over Cora’s bags, shoving them aside enough to close the door. “Am I supposed to carry these to your room for you?”

“Five seconds of patience wouldn’t hurt you, you big grump,” Cora said. She gave Lola one final pat and bounced back to her feet, grabbing her bags and rolling her eyes when he attempted to help despite his feigned irritation. “I’ve got these. Go fuss over somebody else for a minute. God, every year you remind me more of dad.” She grimaced in apology as soon as she’d said it. All these years, and they still tiptoed around the memories of their parents. Or maybe they just did that around him.

“Take your shoes off and stay a while,” Laura called from the dining room, where she’d parked herself with coffee and a book earlier that morning, claiming no interest in going on an exploratory walk with Rob and the kids while Derek drove to the airport.

“Okay, true, he’s not exactly like dad yet,” Cora said with a laugh. She nudged at Derek’s leg with the toe of her boot, which she hadn’t bothered to remove yet. “I’m in your study, right?”

“It’s all set up. And if you need extra towels—”

“Yeah, yeah, it hasn’t been that long since I’ve visited. I can find my way around.”

He listened as she rolled her suitcase down the hall, Lola’s nails clacking along behind her until there was a soft thump and what sounded like Cora apologizing for a brief dog-and-bag entanglement. He sighed; he was doing his best to keep the floors clear and to remind everyone that Lola had his house mapped out in a certain way, but there was a lot of extra bustle and clutter to account for. And Lola didn’t seem to be overly bothered yet by the fact that she’d tripped over and bumped into a few things in areas where her path was usually unobstructed. It probably helped that she got extra attention and petting after each incident.

He bent to remove his shoes before joining Laura at the table. “Where’s everybody else?”

“Rob’s on the phone. The girls are playing some sort of spy game in the backyard, I think. They were talking about digging holes and making booby traps for burglars.”

“The only thing they’d catch with that is Lola,” he said, and she shook her head before he could stand back up.

“Don’t worry, I already told them that. Last I saw they were hitting each other with sticks.”

“Much better,” Derek said dryly. He crossed to the window to check on them anyway. Either they’d finished with that game or Laura was yanking his chain; they were currently engaged in what looked like a friendly but competitive cartwheel-off. Everything was so close to how he’d been picturing it. His family all together. The tree taking up too much space in the living room, making the whole house smell like pine. Peals of laughter ringing through his backyard, and Cora’s footsteps reentering the room. It was almost perfect—with one major component missing.

As though she’d read his mind, Laura casually asked, “So now that we’re all here, what time’s Stiles
“Right!” Cora said. There was a rattle as she dug through the candy jar he’d set on the table. “You said he was going to stop by, maybe even grab dinner with us before he drove home for the holidays.”

That had been the idea, yeah. They’d talked about it shortly after Derek had returned from Laura’s. Stiles had seemed excited about meeting everyone, if a bit nervous. Derek had been gradually fitting him into all of his plans: Christmas first, possibly New Year’s if Stiles was back in time, although he hadn’t broached that subject yet. He’d intended to, before. Well. Before everything had shattered.

“The kids wanted to see Lola; I’ve been looking forward to meeting Stiles,” Laura said.

“She’s been texting me a lot,” Cora confirmed. “It’s been annoying. Maybe she’ll stop after tonight.”

Laura laughed and, judging from the sound, slapped at Cora in retaliation. Derek kept his back turned to them, not trusting what his face was doing.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “He won’t be here tonight.”

“Really?” Laura asked, her disappointment audible. “Damn, did he end up having to leave earlier? We should’ve tried to get him over last night. I would’ve messaged him to talk him into it if I’d known.”

“No, that...” Derek breathed deeply, his nostrils flaring as he fought to keep his tone even. “Please don’t do that.”

There was a scrape as Laura stood up. “Derek?” she asked softly, touching him on the shoulder to get him to turn away from the window enough to face her. “What happened?”

“He’s not who I thought he was,” Derek said, trying to smile to let her know it was okay, that he was okay. It obviously didn’t work, because her face crumpled in sorrow.

“What did he do?”

“He might not want to talk about it, Laura,” Cora warned, and he shook his head.

“No, it’s okay. You should know what’s going on.”

“I did think you seemed a little sad,” Laura said. “Last night, when I teased you about almost letting dinner burn...I thought I was imagining things. I’m sorry, Derek.”

He’d been imagining things then. Until Laura had come in and broken him out of it, he hadn’t known he’d been standing silently in the kitchen, spoon suspended in midair while the sauce bubbled over on the burner, scorching the bottom of the pan. He’d been seeing flashes of Stiles out of the corners of his vision: the sudden slant of his smile, the warmth of his laughter, the way he seemed to fill up the room. Derek couldn’t escape him. There were memories of Stiles embedded in nearly every section of his house now.

“I don’t want to go into it,” he said, before his sisters could take his last statement as an opening to quiz him further. “The details don’t matter. I just found out that we were on completely different pages. I made a mistake, and I’m dealing with it now.” The wound had been too fresh when he’d told Boyd and Erica; he hadn’t shown them the notebook or described the contents in great detail, but they still knew more than he wished he’d shared. While their support did make him feel better, the thought of them hating Stiles wrenched at his heart. Stiles had looked genuinely surprised—hurt,
even—by the way Erica had treated him at the concert. That shouldn’t have happened, not like that, no matter what Stiles had done.

And the truth was, it wasn’t all Stiles’s fault. Derek had been the one to invest too much in the relationship, to convince himself it was something substantial. Even the level of his heartache was due less to what Stiles had actually done than it was to Derek’s disappointment over the massive gap between his expectations and the reality. He’d set Stiles up on a pedestal; whose fault was it, then, that he’d eventually toppled over?

He told his sisters as little as he could. Nothing that’d permanently taint their opinion of Stiles; enough to explain why he was likely to periodically disappear while they were visiting, his body still in the room but his mind somewhere far away.

“Why’d it have to happen at Christmas, though,” Laura finally said. “Not that it’d be better at any other time, but—”

“It’s a hell of a birthday present, right?” Derek said, attempting another wry smile. “I’m just glad you’re all here.” As much as it made him cringe to put his emotions on display, he couldn’t imagine going through this alone.

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He stopped by Cora’s room later that night. He’d already checked on Laura and Rob and had made sure the girls were warm and comfortable enough in their sleeping bags. They’d promised camping out by the tree—and thus within proximity of the pile of enticingly wrapped gifts—wouldn’t make them peek at the contents. At least they only had to make it through one more night of temptation. After Christmas, the biggest difficulty would be finding spots to stash all their new toys each night so his house didn’t turn into a minefield of Legos and scattered game pieces.

Cora was sitting on the folded-out futon, a book open in her lap. “Hey!” she said. “Heading to bed?”

“I’m pretty tired,” he admitted. “Sorry I didn’t clean up more in here. I meant to, but I only finished grading right before Thursday’s airport run. Feel free to move anything that’s in your way.”

“That explains this,” she said, turning the book so he could see the cover. “I thought you might’ve left it out for me as some kind of a hint, but that’s not your usual style.”

“Oh,” he said in embarrassment. “I can explain that.”

“Exploring the A in Sexuality,” she read. “What a title. Very academic. It’s not bad, though. Doesn’t seem to get too much wrong, at least in the parts I’ve skimmed so far. Where’d you even find it?”

Derek sat on the edge of his desk, lowering his voice in case this wasn’t something she wanted Laura and Rob to overhear. “I stopped by the bookstore when I flew back into Portland last month. I didn’t have a ton of time to browse, so I just bought a couple that looked interesting. Printed out some articles later on.”

“And that’s your usual style. My big brother and his research modes.”

“I didn’t know too much about it when you told me. I thought I should read up on it so I could...I dunno. Understand better, if you ever wanted to talk about it more.” He scraped his knuckles over his beard. “The thing is, there’s stuff in there I’d never really thought about before, that made a lot of sense. For me, I mean.”

Cora narrowed her eyes. “What’re you trying to tell me?”
He lowered his voice another notch. “It talks about a spectrum. I don’t know where you fall on it, exactly.”

“I don’t always know, either.” She tapped thoughtfully at the cover. “It’s complicated, you know? Understanding even your own sexuality. I think I’m pretty classic ace, though.”

“I think I might be grey-ace,” he said. It felt like a confession, and he held his breath after he made it.

“Hm,” she said, not sounding as surprised as he’d thought she would. “Demi?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even know that could be a thing. It fits, though.”

He’d had what he considered to be plenty of sex in his lifetime; he’d had casual flings and one night stands, and there was one woman he’d hooked up with at multiple conferences over the years before she’d settled down with someone else. He’d liked it, for the most part. He’d figured he was supposed to like it, anyway—that if someone showed interest in him, and they were both consenting adults who knew what they were getting into, there was no harm in it.

The thing was, he couldn’t remember truly wanting it most of the time. He didn’t like knowing next to nothing about someone before he slept with them; he didn’t like the feeling of slipping out of their bed and going home after to scrub himself off. He did it because it seemed weird not to. He did it because when people looked at him, they expected certain things of him. He started to explain a little of his thought process before stopping himself. “I’m sorry, you’re probably not comfortable talking about this kind of thing.”

“Well, not with my brother,” Cora said, laughing a little. “But this book—all your ridiculous books and articles, you giant nerd—should’ve told you there are a lot of variations even if you identify as purely ace. I’m not grossed out by the idea of sex or anything. Not by talking about it, and not even by having it. I’m just...not interested. I do it sometimes, when my partner’s really into it. And there are parts I’m more into, not because it makes me really feel anything, but because it makes me feel good to make her feel good, if that makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.”

She chortled, then pressed her hands to her mouth as though she hadn’t meant to let the sound out; it was the closest to a giggle that he’d heard from her since they were kids. “You’re blushing,” she said gleefully. “This is why you should learn to not leave these things lying around. You wanted a conversation; you got yourself a conversation.”

“I didn’t think it through,” Derek groaned, covering his face. Their laughter fed off each other, bouncing back each time one of them finally started to draw a breath and calm down.

“Shhh shhhhh,” she said after a while. “My chest hurts, ow. Laura’s going to barge in and wonder what the hell we’re talking about in here.”

“Oh my god, I do not want to bring her into this,” he said, which set them off again.

When they’d finally sobered up, Cora moved to hand the book back to him. “No, keep it,” he said. “Or hang onto it while you’re here, anyway. I’ve already read it.”

“And wrote notes in the margins. I didn’t read any of them when I was flipping through, in case they were personal.”

“No secrets. At least, nothing you don’t know now.” There might be some veiled references to Stiles, since reading those books had, in an odd way, pushed him over the edge in acknowledging
that his attraction was more serious than he’d been attempting to make himself believe. “It hardly matters now, anyway,” he said.

“Because we’ve already talked about it?” She tilted her head to the side a little, examining him. “Ah, because you’re in the ‘I’ll never love again’ stage. I’m familiar with that one.”

“And to think you told me a month ago that my relationship, such as it was, was the less miserable one. You think the same thing now?”

“You wanna know what I think?”

“Am I going to like it?”

Cora shrugged. “I think it’s interesting that you’re still protecting him. Whatever happened between the two of you, you’re shielding him from us. Normally I’d say that means you’re hoping you can work things out, but you seemed really firm on that earlier.”

“There’s nothing to work out.” He let out a long, tired exhale. “It was one-sided. I can’t blame him that much for not falling in love with me.”

“Well, I can. I think that makes him an idiot,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You have to say that; you’re my sister.”

“I dunno, I’d never say something like that about Laura,” she said, startlling a laugh out of him.

“I’m going to bed,” Derek said, standing back up. “Before you get me in trouble. See you tomorrow.”

She waved at him with the book, and he crossed the hall, closing his bedroom door behind him, then pausing at the sight of the garment bag he’d left hanging from the hook on the back. It’d been there since Thanksgiving. It was a pleasant reminder at first—a promise of something waiting on the horizon. Over the last week, he’d mostly been too numb to notice it.

He unzipped the bag and pushed the slick fabric back to reveal the cashmere-lined leather jacket he’d spent an inordinate amount of time selecting, with Laura’s help.

“It’s too much, isn’t it? he’d said at the last minute, ready to cancel the transaction and bolt out of the store.

Laura, in her typical big sister fashion, hadn’t tiptoed around her response. *It’s too much for a ‘thanks for housesitting’ gift. Probably even for a ‘you are a great friend I like a platonic amount’ Christmas present. For how you obviously feel about this guy, though? That’s up to you.*

*I just want him to be warm,* he’d said.

*Mhmm,* Laura had said, waiting patiently while he finished his internal freakout and slid his credit card across the counter.

He gathered the supple material in loose fists and pressed his face against the jacket, breathing in the scent of leather. “I still love him,” he said softly, letting the jacket absorb his secret.

The pain might fade after a while, but he didn’t know if that part would ever fully go away.

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“You’ve gotta blow out the candle!” Emma said excitedly. She was leaning far enough over the table to make it equally likely that she’d either blow the candle out herself or set her hair on fire.

Rob caught her by the collar of her shirt and dragged her back to a safer distance.

“I suppose I should be grateful you went with the one giant candle, instead of lighting the entire thing on fire,” Derek said. Even so, the oversized 40 seemed too heavy for the cake, its wide base threatening to sink through the top layer of chocolate. The frosting was already licking up the candle’s sides, and he watched as the first splatters of melted wax hardened on the decadent surface.

“C’mon, Uncle Derek, make a wish,” Eliza said—probably impatient because she actually wanted to eat the cake before he let the entire thing melt. “It’s extra powerful because it’s your birthday and Christmas.”

He closed his eyes, letting a wish swirl out of a pool of undefined longing. He couldn’t put concrete words to the shape that formed in his thoughts, but he gave it the space to gather, then sent it out with his breath.

His family was cheering when he opened his eyes. Ridiculous—blowing out a single candle was no great feat.

“Oh hush and enjoy it,” Laura said before he could express as much. She knew him far too well.

“It’s my birthday; you’re supposed to be nice to me.” He carefully extricated the candle and placed it on the side of his plate.

“This is me being nice to you,” Laura said. “You’d better cherish it; it’s all downhill from here.”

“Speaking from personal experience of turning forty two decades ago?”

“No, you ass, I meant—oh, nevermind, cut me an extra big slice.”

“Me too!” Emma piped in, throwing herself across the tabletop again, her plate pushed out appealingly in front of her.

“Where’s this from, anyway?” Derek asked once they’d all been served acceptable portions. Emma, who’d claimed she was full about two minutes into dinner, had already demolished most of her slice. Kids had a conveniently separate dessert stomach. He didn’t miss many aspects of being young, but that was one of them.

“I’m offended you think we didn’t bake this ourselves,” Laura said as she licked frosting off of her fork.

Derek raised an eyebrow and looked at Rob.

“We preordered from a bakery on the other side of campus,” was the more truthful answer. “Picked it up and brought it back when we took Lola for that long walk.”

“I’ll have to check it out. I wonder if it’s the one that—” Stiles told me about, he didn’t finish. He stuck a forkful of suddenly tasteless chocolate into his mouth. Laura kicked lightly at him under the table and steered the conversation elsewhere. He knocked his knee gratefully against hers and lapsed into relative silence as they scraped their plates clean. When they were done, Rob pressed him back down into his chair and offered to do the dishes.

With the kids, apparently; Derek winced, trying to ignore the clatter coming from the sink. He’d be
lucky if they made it through the week without at least one broken dish.

“How you doing, birthday boy?” Laura asked, joining him by the door to the deck. He’d let Lola out to run off some of her why-didn’t-I-get-any-of-that-cake frustration and was watching her brace her paws against a tree trunk so she could shove her nose into the bark to sniff for her favorite elusive squirrels. Cora had wandered after her, probably to get out of being roped into kitchen cleanup duties.

“It’s just another year,” he said. “Numbers don’t mean all that much.”

“I flipped out when I hit that milestone. Remember?”

Derek chuckled. “I don’t think I could forget that, even if I tried. I had to talk you out of quitting your job and buying a plane ticket to ‘see the world.’ Did you ever tell Rob about that freakout?”

She flicked at a fluttering insect that’d gotten caught on the other side of the screen. It shook loose, unfurling its wings and searching for another safe roost. “Of course I did. All you did was convince me that it was insane to leave my family for a year. So I tried to talk him into quitting his job, too, and pulling the girls out of school.”

It was a crazy idea. Part of him understood the impulse. “You start to feel like you’re missing out on things.”

“Pretty much.”

“Do you get past that?”

“If you’re looking for wisdom in my ‘old age,’ I don’t have it. I think you spend your whole life figuring things out. I have to accept that all over again at least a couple times a year. I mean, hell, Derek, I’m creeping up on fifty now, and I don’t feel any different inside than when I thought being eighteen was some incredible transitional point, and that thirty was as good as putting one foot in the grave. I’m not old, and neither are you. I bet you anything we’ll be having this same conversation when one of us turns eighty.”

“Good thing you’ll hit it first, then,” he said, grinning at her.

“Uncle Derek!” Emma called from the dining room. He turned, expecting her to be recruiting him for another round of Star Wars Battleship, one of the gifts that’d gone over particularly well. Instead, she was holding his phone. “You got a text. It’s from DO NOT ANSWER.”

“Emma, what have I told you about other people’s phones,” Laura said, her voice suddenly sharp. She crossed the room to take it from her now sheepish-looking daughter. “Should I...?” she asked Derek, her thumb hovering over the ‘off’ button.

“No, it’s okay,” he said, and she tossed it to him.

“I didn’t mean you should try to break it,” he protested, snagging it out of the air.

Stiles usually texted in short bursts, sending each thought as it sprang out. This was different: a single paragraph that he must’ve spent painstaking time composing.

>> Happy birthday, Derek. I know you probably don’t want to hear from me right now; you must think I’m a real asshole. I just wanted to send some birthday wishes and say I’m sorry about everything. I’d really like if we could talk when I get back.
Derek moved to delete it, but as with the previous texts, he couldn’t bring himself to take that final step. The screen went dark while he was still wavering over what to do. He set the phone on an end table, silenced now and face down. There was a reason he’d changed Stiles’s contact name: to remind himself that it was best to cut things off cleanly. He should’ve done it long before it’d gotten this bad.

“So who wants to be the one to clean up all this wrapping paper?” he asked, pitching his voice into a cheery tone to keep Laura’s sympathetic expression from transitioning into another attempt to talk about his feelings. “I say whoever’s battleships get sunk first, whaddya think, Emma?”

“They’re spaceships, and they don’t sink, they explode,” she said, already setting the game back on the table.

Hell, it wasn’t the worst birthday he’d ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles changes his mind
Stiles spent what must’ve been a solid fifteen minutes staring at his phone, hoping to see the line of dots that’d mean Derek was at least struggling with whether to respond. He eventually had to give it up and return to the living room before his absence brought up awkward questions he couldn’t remotely begin to answer.

Scott had been giving him worried looks all day. All week, really. When Stiles had finally returned from his failed trek to Derek’s house, he’d spent a few minutes angrily trying to shove the front door closed and had then made a beeline to the bedroom, kicking off his shoes, tossing his coat on the floor, and crawling under his bedcovers with the rest of his clothes still on, pulling his pillow over his head as an additional hint that he wanted to be left alone. He’d moped for the next two days, essentially sleepwalking through his catering shifts, before finally asking Scott if they could leave earlier in the week than they’d been planning. He’d been the one to initially talk Scott into driving on Saturday morning, anyway; he’d used extra time with Kira as a bargaining chip while withholding the fact that he was gearing himself up for an incredibly intimidating evening with Derek’s family.

Scott had visibly made a decision to not pry into the reasons behind the abrupt change of heart. All Stiles had said was that he needed to get home. He needed to get away for a while, to separate himself from everything that reminded him of Derek, to see his dad, to lie awake on his old mattress, wondering how he always managed to fuck things up so royally.

“Merry Fucking Christmas,” he muttered before squaring his shoulders and reentering the McCalls’ cozy, cider-scented living room. He retrieved his cup; the drink was warmer than it should’ve been, so someone must’ve topped it off for him while he was stressing his way through sending the text he’d spent several days formulating in his head. Despite all that preparation, he was already struggling to not obsess over whether he should’ve phrased bits differently.

“Okay, be honest,” he said, tipping his cup toward Melissa. “Do you have a spiked batch of this sitting around somewhere? Not that I’m telling you how to improve your recipes; I’m just saying this year could use a little bit of a kick to get it out the door.”

“That argument might hold if this was a New Year’s party,” Melissa said. “I really wasn’t looking to get my twenty-year-old kid—or the local law enforcement—drunk on Christmas.”

“The local law enforcement might choose to look the other way on holidays,” Stiles’s dad said. He was slouched comfortably in the armchair closest to the fireplace, wearing khakis and one of his “dress up” shirts—originally black, now worn at the collar and faded to a dark grey from multiple washes over what must’ve been decades by now. He probably hadn’t bought himself any new shirts in the past five years, at least. Stiles swallowed down a lump of affection over the familiar sight.

I finally understand where you got your fashion sense, Lydia had said after the first time she’d accepted an invitation to hang out at his house. Stiles had plucked self-consciously at his plaid shirt, looking down at his slightly baggy pants, and her tone had softened. I didn’t mean that to sound like an insult. My guess is your dad bought most of your clothes for you when you were a kid.

Stiles’s love for graphic t-shirts—the more ridiculous the slogan or pun, the better—had been something he’d inherited from his mom. The rest had come from shopping with his dad, who tended to buy Stiles a smaller version of whatever he was picking out for himself. Stiles couldn’t fault the
logic; if it worked for one of them, it’d work for both. Come to think of it, he was pretty sure he had a similar black shirt—a bit too small in the shoulders now—stuffed somewhere in his closet. He’d probably bought it under the vague impression, thanks to his dad’s influential style, that it was fancy enough for any high school parties he might get invited to.

“Shove over,” he said to Scott, who made room for him on the couch. “Have I told you guys Finstock’s favorite Cider Incident story?” Scott and his dad nodded wearily, but he launched into it anyway. Melissa had shaken her head and looked sufficiently encouraging.

When Finstock was a younger and—so he claimed—much handsomer man, one of his aunts threw a party with two crockpots of her famed holiday cider. The lids were both labeled: non-alcoholic for the kids, generously spiked for the adults. It took until late in the evening for Finstock’s aunt to think to check the counter; to her dismay, she discovered the lids had been swapped at some point during the festivities. Fortunately, or so the story went after all these years, she’d caught it before any real damage had been done, the kids probably too busy with an elaborate snowball fight in the backyard to stop for refreshments.

It was one of the speeches Finstock gave whenever they added new recruits before an alcohol-friendly event. And that’s why caterers are a necessary part of any decent society, he always finished. For the rest of the night, every single one of you is a Keeper of the Liquor. It’s a sacred responsibility.

We’re minimum wage superheroes, Stiles would say, and, depending on his mood, Finstock would either heartily agree or bellow at him to shut his mouth and take his job seriously.

Only a few more months until he could start thinking seriously about quitting. It used to be something that kept him motivated; lately the idea had been laced through with a good percentage of anxiety, bordering on dread. It must be nice to be the kind of person who always knew exactly what he wanted out of his life, Stiles thought when the conversation shifted into Scott’s post-graduation plans. Some days he had a hell of a time keeping the bitterness at bay.

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“You should’ve come with us,” Lydia said, pink-cheeked and happy on his computer screen. “How dreary is Beacon Hills right now?”

“It might not be Paris, but it’s not that bad,” Stiles said loyally. “We’ve been doing plenty of interesting stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” he said. “A new health food store opened on Foster. They had a grand opening with free samples. We ran into your mom there, actually.”

“Was she stuffing her purse with the samples?”

Stiles laughed. “Actually, yeah. My dad and I gave her our packets of tea. The stuff smelled kinda gross, so it was better than clearing it out of my dad’s cabinets the next time he runs out of storage space.”

“She’ll probably ship me some in my next care package.” Lydia shook her head fondly. “She always includes a ‘Best of Beacon Hills’ section, in case that’ll make me homesick enough to move back.”

“Funny how that doesn’t work.”
“Oh, it makes me homesick,” she said. “It’s typical parental torture; you know you’re living in a place that’s better for you, but you can’t help missing aspects of what you’ve left behind. As awful as your holiday activities sound, I have to admit a part of me wishes I’d been there.”

“It’s not easy being torn between homes. Or in your case, I guess it’s between home and Parisian nightlife.”

“You should’ve come,” she said again. “It’s even more beautiful at this time of year.”

“Are you talking about holiday lights or the guys?” he asked, to see whether she’d blush at the tease.

She didn’t. She merely leaned back in her chair, looking supremely comfortable and confident in her own skin. “Both, I suppose. Allison and I have been doing a lot of shopping. I wish I could stay through the winter sales.”

“That damn university schedule. Always ruining things, like designer bargain-hunting.”

“I’ll ignore the sarcasm and accept the sympathy.”

Stiles couldn’t think of a more apt summary of their friendship. “Tell me about your bargain-hunted men, then. How’d the rugby team pan out?”

_That_ pulled out the blush. Lydia tugged softly at her earlobe; it was a habit she’d picked up after getting her ears pierced in middle school. Stiles squinted at the screen to try to determine if it was the “there’s something I’m feeling shy about” tug, or the one that meant she was trying to mask a smile. Sometimes it was both.

“Oh stop,” she said, letting go of her ear. “Have I told you how creepy it is that you catalog people’s body language like that?”

“You’re one to talk,” Stiles said. “How would you know that’s what I was thinking if you weren’t busy reading mine?”

“Touché.”

“So spill. There’s some French guy you’re into, isn’t there?”

She gave him a sudden, mischievous smile. “Wrong.”

“Multiple French guys, then. At the same time? Lydia, you sexy beast.”

“Wrong again. You were on the right track with the rugby players; she’s in the women’s club here.”

He gaped at her. “Okay, you got me. That one’s out of left field. Or are you fucking with me?”

“Oh for heaven’s sakes, Stiles. Like you have a monopoly on being attracted to more than one gender.”

He winced. “Sorry; that came out really unsupportive and shit. But since _when_, Lyds?” He’d known her for most of his life, and she’d been upfront about her romantic relationships ever since the first time she’d cried on his shoulder about her breakup with Jackson. And then after the second breakup with Jackson, and the third, until she’d put her foot down on keeping a long distance relationship with the bastard active.

Not that she’d expressed it in those terms.
The point was, Stiles would’ve noticed if she’d ever mentioned a woman’s name in there. Unless... he started flipping through his memory of all the names she had shared over the years, testing for possible gender neutrality that he’d missed the first time around.

“Stop overthinking this,” Lydia ordered. She reached for her earlobe again, then dropped her hand and sighed. “Leaving aside a conversation about how sexuality isn’t strictly defined by experience: it was my first time. I wasn’t sure if I’d like it.”

“But you did?”

She eyed him for a moment to see if he was going to be gross and dig for details. Stiles put on his best offended expression; he’d moved way past that kind of thing, okay? This was genuine concern for a friend.

“I did,” she confirmed.

“I can’t believe I missed out on the chance to see you get a French girlfriend.”

Lydia made an impatient movement. “Mathilde isn’t anything serious. I’m not planning to give her my number when I leave.”

“Cold,” he said.

“Practical. We already talked about it.”

“You know,” Stiles said, “when we talked about you expanding your options, I’d mostly meant ‘stop picking up douchebag losers.’ I suppose ‘include women in the potential dating pool’ works pretty well, too.”

“As long as they’re also not douchebag losers,” she said, humor touching the edges of her mouth.

“Exactly.” He grinned at her, and she made a thoughtful noise.

“You look like hell.”

“Geez, thanks.”

She tapped at the corner of her eye. “Your smile’s not reaching here. Even though I’m taking time out of my incredibly busy holiday to tell you juicy secrets. So what’s going on?”

Denying it was getting exhausting. Stiles glanced at his door out of habit, even though his dad was at work for another few hours. “Lyds, you know how I was a giant creep in middle school?”

“And part of high school.”

“And most of elementary school too, yeah yeah I get it.”

“You’re not anymore,” she said. “I didn’t mean it earlier, about the body language.”

Stiles waved it away; that wasn’t what he’d been thinking about. He made brief, uncomfortable eye contact with the bright yellow stress ball that someone had retrieved from the floor and set on his desk. Probably his dad when he’d been searching for that computer security book Stiles had made him read a couple months earlier. He turned it so its soulless eyes and empty smile would face the wall instead of judging him. “How’d we become friends?” he asked.

“You started treating me like an actual human being instead of following me around trying to ask me
out. We’ve been over this.”

“And it didn’t weird you out that I’d been weird before? Like: if you’d found a pile of poems I’d written about you, you still would’ve started talking to me?”

“You gave me poems,” she reminded him. “You stuffed them in my locker every day for a week when we were reading Shakespeare’s sonnets. I don’t think you paid much attention to the class, though, because they were awful.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. Lydia had never given any indication that she’d read them; he knew Jackson had, because Jackson had recited one on the bus to an away game, accompanied by uproarious laughter from most of the team.

“It didn’t bother me that much because you were writing them to a girl who never existed,” Lydia said. “If you’d kept doing that sort of thing after we’d become friends, it might’ve been a different story. You didn’t, so it’s a moot point.”

“What if I’d written them before but you’d found them after?”

“This is starting to sound too specific to be a hypothetical scenario.”

He flicked the stress ball and watched it topple off the desk and roll across the floor: blank side, judgmental face, blank side, judgmental face, until it slowed to a halt, face down in the carpet. “I did something stupid. I don’t know how to fix it.”

“You haven’t mentioned anyone else this semester, so it’s safe to guess we’re talking about your hot professor?”

“You know those texts and shit I used to send you?”

“Oh damn,” she said. “He saw them?”

“Different things, same result.” Stiles scraped his thumbnail along a set of grooves on his desktop where he’d kept a prison-style tally of days he’d been unfairly grounded, until his dad had found out and put a stop to it. “I gave him a notebook at the end of the semester. It was supposed to be funny; I thought he’d like all the sketches I did, because he’s this gigantic nerd who’d appreciate getting an illustrated book of his lectures.”

“Wrong notebook?”

“Bad memory. The final wasn’t comprehensive, so I hadn’t even thought to flip back to the early pages. I just handed it in like a complete fucking asshole. I don’t know if he’s seen the rest. Judging from how he reacted after, he’s definitely seen the parts I didn’t mean him to.”

“And he didn’t listen when you tried to explain?”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry I was a humongous creep a few months ago; I promise despite all appearances to the contrary, I’m a perfectly respectable adult who’d never intentionally treat you like that?”

“It’s a start. It’s better than hiding in Beacon Hills and stubbornly breaking your own heart.” Lydia glanced at the top corner of her screen; it was the fifth time she’d done that in the past few minutes.

“You’ve gotta go, don’t you.”
She pursed her lips in apology. “I’m supposed to be meeting Mathilde; I didn’t know we’d talk for this long.”

“It’s okay, go join your French loverwoman. I’ll still be a fuckup the next time you call.”

“You’re not a fuckup, Stiles,” she said, sounding more impatient than comforting. “It sounds to me like he’s not aware that these drawings of yours aren’t current. Like I said, there’s a big difference between past indiscretions and making a friend uncomfortable.”

“What if he won’t agree to talk to me?” Forcing a conversation had the potential to make things worse. It’d been three days since he’d texted; he’d done a soft reset of his phone several times, in the wildly unfounded hope that there was some kind of glitch keeping Derek’s texts from coming through.

“Then you might need to give him space. Just make sure he knows the channels are open when he’s ready to talk.” Lydia tapped at her screen—probably on the image of his nose, her version of an affectionate farewell. “And Stiles? I’m glad we’re friends. If your professor’s got any sense at all, he’ll know being in a relationship with you—friends or otherwise—is worth the occasional headache.”

“Thanks a lot, Lydia.” It came out more honest than sarcastic, and she tapped the screen again.

“Happy New Year, if I don’t get to talk to you before then.”

“You should send me a picture of your lady so I’ll know who you’ll be kissing at midnight.”

“We’ll see,” she said before signing off. It wasn’t a no.

He shut his laptop and checked his phone again. The disappointment should be familiar by now; instead, it felt like a fresh cut every time.

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“Do you think college will seem this tiny after we’ve graduated?” Stiles straightened to his full height to amplify the feeling of being too large for their old high school. The once towering ceilings felt close enough to touch—if he stretched out and jumped a little—and he’d have to stoop to reach into even the tallest lockers. He’d go so far as to swear that the Beacon Hills High School sign outside was shorter than it used to be; maybe it’d been sinking into the grass so gradually, no one else had noticed.

“Maybe if you put on a sudden growth spurt,” Scott said.

“That’s the weird part! I haven’t gotten taller since we left. I mean, I don’t think I have. Maybe an inch? A couple inches?”

“A few inches can make a big difference.”

“That’s what she said,” Stiles said automatically. It was an old joke; Scott was immature enough to snicker anyway.

“Hey, look, our old lockers.” Scott stopped at his and tested the combination.

“I’m pretty sure they change them,” Stiles said when Scott tugged unsuccessfully at the lock. “Although I guess it wouldn’t be that surprising if they didn’t bother; they probably don’t anticipate graduates coming back to steal textbooks and shitty high school essays.”
“Like they don’t expect us to come back during the holidays and break in to wander around the school.”

“We didn’t break in,” Stiles said. He jingled the keys he was still carrying in case they reached any other doors that might bar their progress. “I’ve had these spares since freshman year. It’s not my fault their security is lax.”

“Why am I getting sudden flashbacks of being dragged into the principal’s office?”

“Hey, a few of those were your fault, too, buddy.”

Scott stopped in front of another bank of lockers. “It’s weird being here,” he said. “It’s like we never left, but it feels like it was a million years ago. At the same time.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” He watched Scott tracing a pattern on Allison’s locker, where the two of them had spent a good percentage of their high school years locking lips and blocking access to all the poor saps who just wanted to get through and grab their books. “Do you still miss her?”

“Not as much as I used to,” Scott said. He drew another phantom circle, then gripped his bicep briefly—an almost instinctive gesture. “Did you know Lydia’s spending Christmas with her?”

“I talked to her yesterday. Lydia, I mean, not Allison. I’m not sure where Allison was.” On a date, probably? It shouldn’t be awkward to say as much when Scott had a serious girlfriend; he stumbled over it anyway.

“She sent me an e-card on Christmas.”

Stiles assumed that meant Allison, not Lydia. “Really? I didn’t think anyone does those anymore.”

“It was something we used to do when we were dating. We’d send each other the stupidest ones we could find. The more cheesy the animation, the better.” He squeezed his bicep again. “She left the message pretty generic. I still felt weird about responding to it.”

“Kira?”

“Yeah.” Scott sighed and kept walking, heading toward the gym, where they were planning to “borrow” some lacrosse gear to revisit some of their glory days. Or, in Stiles’s case, their not-so-glorious athletic history.

Stiles followed, pausing a few times along the way to peek through classroom windows to see if anything else had changed substantially since they’d left. Some of the teachers’ names were unfamiliar, but the desks all looked the same. The hallways smelled the same, too. Unpleasant and mostly unwashed, with a faint hint of bleach. He wrinkled his nose and caught up to Scott, who was jiggling the locked door to the gym.

“I haven’t told her the truth yet about what my tattoo means,” Scott said as Stiles was pulling his key out of the lock—it stuck a bit, but it still worked. There were certain advantages to everything in this school being well past its ideal replacement age.

“You mean you didn’t tell your current girlfriend that you have a permanent memento of your previous girlfriend imprinted on your skin?”

“I get it; you don’t have to say I told you so.” He halted Stiles’s protest—he hadn’t said a thing!—by adding, “You don’t have to think it, either.”
“I can’t help what my brain does,” Stiles said. “I did tell you, though, that getting a tattoo for your girlfriend right after she’d broken up with you—again, mind you, it was already a pattern by then—wasn’t the best idea I’d ever heard of.”

Scott gave him a flatly unimpressed look.

“...okay, I see what I did there,” Stiles said. “So what’re you gonna do? Are you going to keep it a secret from her forever?”

“I didn’t mean for it to be a secret. It’s just that the first time it came up, we’d barely started dating.”

“And you didn’t want to start things off with: ‘By the way, Kira, remember that old girlfriend I said I was totally over? This stupid-looking tattoo my best friend tried to talk me out of basically means Scott and Allison forever.’ Can’t imagine why.”

“It stands for a lot of different things. I told her some of them. It’s about learning to be okay with loss and valuing everything that’s in your past, even the bad stuff, because it’s part of what makes you who you are.” He trailed into the equipment storage room and caught a lacrosse stick Stiles tossed him. “All I did was leave out the part where Allison was the reason I felt like I needed those reminders.”

“Real talk, buddy,” Stiles said. “If you replied to Allison’s card and she said she wanted to get back together with you, would you break up with Kira?”

“No!” Scott said, sounding appalled. “Of course not.”

“Then telling Kira about the tattoo shouldn’t be a big deal. She already knows Allison was important to you: key word was. Better to tell her now than to let it slip out when she starts getting to know more people who knew you back then. Hiding anything’s gonna make it seem like it matters more than it does.”

“Sometimes you’re pretty smart,” Scott said.

“When it’s not about my life, yeah.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna tell me what happened before we left school? Even my mom asked what was going on with you, and she usually tries to pretend like she doesn’t worry about you.”

“Melissa loves me,” Stiles said confidently. He knew it; she knew he knew it. Seeing her again at Christmas, when they felt the most like a family, had made him realize how much he’d missed her while he was away at school. She wasn’t at quite the same level at his dad, but both of the McCall’s were pretty damn important to him.

“She does. She said you didn’t seem like yourself, and she’s right. You’ve been off for more than a week.”

Stiles finished strapping on his padding and handed Scott a helmet that didn’t smell too much like sweat-soaked PE classes. “Can I ask you a question first?”

Scott sniffed at the helmet and made a face before shoving it over his hair. “Yeah, shoot.”

“What does Kira know about me and Derek?”

“Uh,” Scott said. “That you’re in his class? Were in his class, whatever. I dunno, we never talk about it.”
“You mean you haven’t told her yet?”

Scott frowned at him through the grill of his face mask. “No, that’s personal. You never said I could.”

Stiles thumped him affectionately on the top of his helmet, and Scott grunted in annoyance.

“I hate when you do that.”

“I know,” Stiles said. “C’mon, let’s go out to the field before we lose the light.”

They scrimmaged for a while—as much as they could with only two people—until Stiles collapsed into the winter-yellowed grass and peeled his helmet off, throwing an arm over his face to shield his eyes from the sun. “God, I’m out of practice. I suck at this.”

“You kinda sucked when you were still in practice,” Scott reminded him. So much for him being a good friend. He folded himself down next to Stiles, sitting back with a happy sigh. “It feels good to play again. Maybe I can find a local league or something to join.”

“Scotty,” he said. “I fucked up pretty bad with Derek.”

“Okay,” Scott said, as practical and steady as he’d been Stiles’s entire life. “So how do we fix it?”

“I have no fucking idea.” He crunched the brittle grass between his fingers and let the broken blades drift back into the dirt. “I’m gonna tell you what happened; please don’t pass any of it on to Kira. She and Derek are friends, and I don’t want her feeling like she has to choose sides.”

“I won’t,” Scott promised.

Stiles didn’t know how far that friendship extended: would Derek tell her anything? Or would he feel too hesitant to bring it up, knowing about her relationship with Scott? She wouldn’t choose Stiles over Derek, but her boyfriend would be a different story, and Scott would always side with Stiles, no matter what.

He tried not to think about it. All he knew was that separating Derek from anyone important to him was the last thing he wanted to happen. He wished he knew how he could tell him that.

In the meantime, it felt good to finally get some of his worries off his chest. He’d been holding it in for too long; he was tired of damaging one relationship after another. At least all it’d take to fix things with Scott was one good conversation.

The sun slowly set, hot pink and vibrant orange splashing against the horizon, fading from a burnt red glow to deeper purples and blues as they talked. Stiles reached for his phone out of habit, wanting to send Derek a photo before the colors were gone completely.

There was a text waiting for him, and he went silent as he opened it.

“What’s up?” Scott asked, twisting to see why he’d stopped.

“It’s Derek,” Stiles said. “He wrote me back.”

It wasn’t a response to anything he’d sent. Despite that, it was so distinctly Derek that it made Stiles flip over onto his side so Scott couldn’t see his face. Fuck, he’d missed hearing from him even more than he’d realized. He could almost hear Derek’s voice as he read the text; on his third time through, he touched the words to make them feel more substantial.
>> We got some snow this week. Mostly melted already; the storm’s moving south, and I hear the roads are icy. I don’t know when you’re heading back. If it’s in the next couple of days, be careful driving through the mountains.

Stiles sat up and cleared his throat. “It’s getting cold out here; we should head in. Lock everything back up in case anyone comes looking.”

“Are things okay now?” Scott asked, collecting all the equipment Stiles had abruptly walked away from.

“I don’t know.” It didn’t address the giant elephant in the room; he didn’t know if that meant it was still blocking their progress toward each other, or if this was an attempt to brush it away. He checked the time stamp. The message had come in about an hour earlier, while he was still trying to tackle Scott into the goal, since none of his other attempts at getting the ball past him had been working. Screw overthinking a reply and potentially missing whatever window Derek had given him.

<< Thanks for the heads up. We’re driving back tomorrow.
<< People give me shit about my Jeep, but Roscoe shines in this kinda weather.

He bit his lip, then sent one last addition.

<< I’ll text you when I get there, though, so you won’t worry.

The response came back faster than he’d dared to hope. It was a single word that told him very little of what Derek was thinking but made his heart skip a beat anyway.

>> Thanks.

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In. Out. In for a longer stretch, until his lungs expanded and he could send some of his anxiety tumbling out on the exhale. The administrative building, with its dozens of empty windows staring down at him, felt huge and intimidating, ready to snap at him as soon as he walked through the doors.

“Just fucking do it already,” Stiles said, making a passing student jump and clutch her bag before she realized he wasn’t speaking to her.

All he had to do was march in there and explain to Erica that he wanted to switch a couple of his classes. No big deal. Even though he’d been back on campus for a week, classes were starting on Monday, and he still hadn’t heard anything from Derek since that final text. It meant the likelihood of Erica being pleased to see him was below dismal.

“It’ll be worth it,” he told himself as he yanked the door open and dragged his feet down the slightly musty-smelling hallway. “Probably.” He’d already been putting it off all week.

Another student was in Erica’s office when he stepped through the open doorway. “Oh, sorry,” he said awkwardly, and Erica looked up, her smile tightening to something much sharper. “Should I—I’ll wait out here.” He indicated the hallway with his thumb and backed out of the room.

It took a few minutes for the other person—a nervous freshman, from the sound of it—to finish discussing his options and emerge clutching a printout of his new class schedule.

“Get in here, Stilinski,” Erica snapped impatiently.
“Heyyy, Erica,” he said, sidling in and going for his most charming smile.

“If you’re here to ask me anything about Derek, you can walk right back through that door,” she said.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said. It was mostly true. He had wondered if she’d let anything slip if he poked enough at a few tender areas. He’d also known it was a bad idea that was doomed to fail.

“Then sit down and tell me what you want.”

“Just regular registrar’s stuff, I swear. I’ve been trying to change my schedule online; the system keeps glitching when I try to drop one of the classes, so it won’t let me add the last one I need.”

“It’s because our shitty system needs an upgrade that the administration won’t pay for,” she grumbled, then pointed threateningly at him. “Don’t pass that on.”

Stiles silently slid her the sheet of paper where he’d written down the adjustments his schedule needed.

“Music Perception and Cognition,” she read as she typed the course number into her computer. “You’re a CS major. Why the sudden interest in music?”

“Electrical Engineering and Computer Science,” he clarified, then coughed when she gave him an annoyed look. “It’s more linked than you’d think: I’m already taking Computational Models of Cognition.”

He sank back into his chair when she glared pointedly at the finger he was trying to jab into the appropriate column on her screen.

He wasn’t sure if Erica was actually interested in hearing more, but he was interested in talking about it, so why not kill some time and fill the silence. “The other one I added is kind of a bridge class between the two. All knowledge is connected if you’re studying it from the right angle. So I’m mixing analysis of sensory responses to music with learning how to use computer programs to compose it. I’m still playing with ideas, but the central one right now is: if you understand the brain’s functions well enough to teach a computer to act like one, can it then produce music that’ll still appeal to an actual human brain in the same way?”

“Right.” Erica used the tip of one sharp-nailed finger to push his paper back to him, looking for all the world like a cat who’d dipped a begrudging paw into the snow and shaken it off in distaste. “So this has nothing to do with the fact that Derek’s almost as big of a nerd about music as he is about history?”

“It doesn’t...not have to do with that,” he said.

Erica folded her arms and stared intently at him. She was wearing a skintight, low-cut leopard print dress that didn’t seem completely appropriate for work, and Stiles kept his eyes carefully fixed on hers instead of on the cleavage her posture had pushed up.

“Hm,” she said. “This isn’t an essay answer, so keep it short. What is it that you want from Derek?”

“Right now?” he asked. He wanted a lot of things, but the most pressing concern at the moment was feeling more distant by the day. “For him to not hate me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Erica said. “I hate you.”
“Oh,” Stiles said, not sure what to do with either part of that statement.

“It doesn’t keep me from doing my job like a fucking professional. It does make me hope you trip and fall face-first into a wall on your way out of here. Or into the creek; that’d be good, too.”

He rubbed nervously at his nose. “That’s not a completely impossible scenario,” he admitted. “It’s been known to happen to me.”

Erica sighed. “I’m not getting in the middle of this. I think you’re a little piece of shit, and I’d like nothing better than to never see you again. Derek’s always been a lot nicer than I am. He wouldn’t appreciate me even saying this to you.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Stiles said. “If he’d just let me explain—”

She lifted her hand. “Stop. Not my business. I’m not your messenger, and trying to win me over (a) won’t work because Derek’s my best friend and I will always have his back, and (b) is a pretty damn stupid waste of time on your part. If you want to talk to Derek, talk to Derek.”

“I’ve tried,” Stiles protested.

“Have you, though?” Erica let the question hang for a moment, then straightened her dress and fluffed her curls. “Now get the hell out of here. Your schedule’s fine now, and I’m going to be busy all day unless IT finds a way to fix that damn glitch.”

He felt slightly dazed as he left. He stopped at the bridge outside the building and watched the creek gurgling its stubbornly sluggish way through the stones and ivy that were attempting to obstruct its path.

He was pretty sure Derek had instructed Erica to be nice to him, and that this was her attempt.

What he didn’t know was what that meant. What the hell was he supposed to do next?

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek makes a decision
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Transitioning back into teaching was more difficult than Derek had expected. Saying goodbye to his sisters had hit him even harder than usual; Laura had eventually patted him on the back and laughed, extricating herself from the hug with a promise to not wait a full year before visiting again.

Lola had gone through a brief rebellious period, which he really should’ve anticipated. While Derek simply moped around the house in his pajamas and slippers, Lola reacted to the sudden absence of so many new friends and admirers by chewing a chunk out of the corner of his bedroom door while he was sleeping. It was an impressive enough feat to almost overturn his initial frustration. He’d crouched down to check her teeth and paws—no damage there, fortunately—and scratch her belly while she sighed deeply to express how unhappy she was with him for closing himself off in his room and leaving her alone all night.

Which was exactly why letting the girls pamper her for a week was a bad idea. He’d let it happen anyway, and he’d had to wean her away from constant attention as a result. They were back to normal now; was it really such a good idea to disrupt their usual routine yet again?

He hesitated on his front porch and turned back. “Are you sure you’ll be okay? I’m only on a panel; they won’t miss me too much if I have to cancel.”

“Go,” Erica said, with more forceful exasperation than anyone wearing a fuzzy purple bathrobe had any right to sound. She coughed gently into a cupped palm. “Oh no, look how ill I am, good thing I’m taking a sick day to let your dog get used to me.”

“You don’t have to stay home with her; you can take her into the office,” Derek said. “Bring her something to chew on and take her for a walk at lunch, and—”

“Fucking hell, I know, you’ve told me this a million times. I’ll take her to work with me tomorrow, Boyd’s got a short day Friday so he’ll take her then, and both of us will make sure she gets all her walks and treats and regular meals and only misses you the acceptable amount. You’ve got a fourteen hour flight ahead of you. Save some of your worrying for how many crying babies will end up in seats near you.”

“I’ll call you from the Amsterdam stopover,” Derek said, retreating down the driveway. He’d already pulled his car out of the garage and loaded up his suitcase, but he’d had to run back in twice: first for his conference shoes, then for the recitation of some final instructions that Erica had impatiently tapped her fingers through.

“All right,” Erica said. “I’ll call you when I get to Warsaw.”

They left the context hanging; the paper proposal deadline for this conference had come right during that section of late December when leaving the country, trying to outrun the shattering of his own heart, had sounded like the best possible option. Two months later, Derek wasn’t quite as convinced that his decision had been thoroughly thought out. That any of the decisions he’d made in the last few months had been.

He resisted the urge to go back for a final farewell with Lola; he’d already left last night’s pajama
shirt on her dog bed and had stocked up on the good treats. Making a bigger deal out of his departure would likely be more upsetting than comforting. For her, anyway.

“See you in a few days,” he called, and Erica waved as he backed into the street.

Three days in Poland, excluding the extensive travel time. Derek hadn’t fully considered that, either, when he’d scrolled through the list of conference options, his attention snagging on the title for one in late February. His proposal for the panel on ideology and discourse had been easy to write, and acceptance had been swift and enthusiastic. It was a one-day conference with a smaller attendee list and little pressure; he was pulling material from some of his own recent publications on the topic, and he was genuinely interested in several of the other sessions.

It’d be a good trip. Get his mind off things.

He definitely wouldn’t be thinking about a man with dark golden-brown eyes and the most absurdly Polish name he’d ever seen on a registration list.

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The weather had promised flurries and “a bit of ice,” so Derek was mostly prepared for the temperature drop. It actually turned out to be less of a shock to his system than he’d expected; although ducking out of the airport and into a taxi had made him feel like he’d been slapped in the face, his skin stinging from the cold, the snow had been holding off thus far. With luck, it might stay relatively nice until his departure.

He pushed his thick scarf up to cover a little more of his throat and kept his pace at a brisk walk. Arriving halfway through Thursday and forcing himself to sleep on the plane meant he was able to build in some time to tour the streets around the hostel where the majority of the conference attendees were staying. He hadn’t seen much of anyone yet; he’d run into a couple familiar faces while dropping off his bags and changing into fresh clothes, but most of the others would probably be arriving throughout the afternoon and into the evening, depending on their points of origin and travel budgets.

Fortunately, being a fairly large name at a smaller private university meant he didn’t have to suffer through thirty hour flights with multiple layovers. There were certain advantages to swimming in a small pond.

It was less than a five minute walk from his hostel to the Chopin Museum. Derek hadn’t invested his usual level of planning into this trip, so stumbling across the stately building, framed against an impossibly blue sky, caught him off guard.

“Of course,” he said softly, bending his steps in its direction. Of course he’d choose the conference held in Warsaw. Of course it’d be conveniently located right next to one of the city’s monuments to the single composer who could make his heart ache the most. Of course the weather would be surprisingly mild for the season, the cold, clear skies bathing the city in sunlight that seemed to make everything glow. Of course the one person he wanted to share all of this with was the man he hadn’t spoken to since ensuring his safe return to campus after the holidays.

He’d thought about it on a near-constant basis. Stiles had texted a few more times—small things for the most part, quiet attempts to restart the conversations they used to have—and Derek had even seen him once on campus, walking with a couple of classmates. Or friends, maybe. They’d been too far away for him to initiate any sort of interaction—not that he’d known what to say, anyway. He wasn’t even sure if Stiles had noticed him. Derek had quickly switched directions before Lola had a chance to catch Stiles’s scent and take the decision out of his hands.
He’d checked Stiles’s Facebook profile on Valentine’s Day and the day after, hating the rush of relief he’d felt at seeing him tagged in one of Scott’s photos, caught mid-eyeroll, the caption reading: *Stiles calls it third-wheeling; I call it a holiday dinner with my two best friends.*

Derek didn’t know what he wanted anymore.

That wasn’t entirely true.

He wanted to redo December, to push the unopened notebook back at Stiles, to never see the contents and react with such violent heartbreak. He wanted to heal the scorched earth that incident had left behind them. He wanted to forget any of it had ever happened. He wanted Stiles here, with him, walking up the steps to the museum, discussing the collected manuscripts and letters in hushed tones, fervently debating which path to follow through the exhibits.

Early stages of exhaustion from his long flight began to creep in now that he was indoors and comfortably warm. He moved slowly from floor to floor, lingering in the music listening room and snapping a couple photos of the Pleyel piano, on which Chopin had composed his final pieces before his untimely death. It was a beautiful instrument, constructed of well-aged, polished wood that glowed under the lights in the salon.

The museum’s lowest level, sunk into the brick base that lofted the rest of the building well above the street, held a small concert hall with exposed brickwork lining the walls and curving along the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Derek was fortunate enough to be visiting on a day when a recital was being held there; it felt like a fitting way to close off his tour. He found a seat near the back, in a row with an Italian family he’d bumped into several times while exploring the exhibits.

“Scusi, è occupato?” he asked, and the woman smiled at him, gesturing for him to sit down.

“Di dove è?” *Where are you from?*

“Sono americano,” he said, pleased that even if his accent wasn’t perfect, his nationality wasn’t immediately obvious. Some of his language skills were getting a bit rusty; Erica was right, he shouldn’t have been so quick to pass up European travel opportunities over the last couple of years. As much as he loved visiting new places, he’d begun to tire of doing it all on his own. It’d make a difference to have someone to return to, even if he couldn’t bring that person with him on every trip.

Derek set that thought aside for the time being and spent the next hour letting the emotions of the music sweep over and through him, coursing through his veins and filling the hollowed-out spaces in his bones.

*Loss leaves you empty,* he mused as the small crowd funneled out of the building. He’d spent too much time drifting through life searching for a purpose, for something to ground him again. He was weary of holding onto heartache as the one solid thing he could always grasp.

He ate dinner near the museum and walked back to his hostel, detouring through a few more side streets and past a couple of small parks to extend his evening in the city as much as possible before turning in for the night. It was still early afternoon back home. If he texted Stiles now, he might catch him between classes.

As he’d done the last time, he skipped past the awkward pleasantries. He knew there was more they’d need to deal with at some point if they had any chance at rebuilding a friendship, but right now, he just wanted to talk to Stiles the way they used to.

<< Did you know yesterday was Chopin’s birthday? At least, according to some birth records
that he refuted. I thought it was worth saying happy birthday via his old piano while I was here, anyway.

The response came while he was undressing for bed after showering in one of the curtained-off stalls in the hostel’s shared restroom. He had a private room: a single bed with a thin mattress, a sink bolted into the wall, and a lamp that shed just enough light to read by. The slow encroach of travel-induced loneliness abated a bit as he read Stiles’s text.

>> Where are you?

Warsaw, Derek wrote back. He supposed he hadn’t exactly been clear to begin with.

>> For how long?

<< Through the weekend. I’m here for a conference.

When Stiles didn’t reply, Derek added, Have you ever been?

>> No.
>> My dad’s talked about us visiting my babcia. We never get around to it in the summer, and winter’s endless and we’d both freeze to death.
>> If you were there for longer, I’d say you should go look her up.
>> It’d make her day; she loves visitors.

<< Does she live in the city?

>> No, she’s in Świnoujście.
>> She moved to the seaside when she retired. Bought a cute little cottage.

<< Chasing a milder climate?

>> As mild as Poland gets, I guess.
>> It’s kind of a resort town, so it’s got a lot of amenities that make stuff easier when you’re getting up there in age.
>> She says it gets too touristy for her, but I think complaining about all the tourists is her way of guilt-tripping me and my dad for not coming to visit her.

<< Family can be like that.

Getting too deep into personal territory, perhaps; Stiles switched back to a safer topic before Derek could ask him additional questions.

>> So what else are you doing while you’re there? I’ve heard it’s a beautiful city.

<< It is. I’m leaving early Sunday morning, so I really only have one day to sightsee. I’m thinking of exploring some of Łazienki Park if the weather stays as nice as it was today.

Derek had picked up a guide book and some pamphlets after leaving the museum and had spent his solitary dinner carefully reading through the options that seemed the most plausible to squeeze into his schedule.

I’ll probably check out Ujazdów Castle or Wilanów Palace, he added, wondering how familiar Stiles was with the landmarks. I don’t know if I’ll have time to do both. Any suggestions?
Sounds like you’ve got it covered, Stiles said, and Derek’s heart sank a little at what he couldn’t help feeling was a brush-off. Pre-December Stiles would’ve been online halfway through the conversation, sending him a stream of ideas and links to obscure places he couldn’t possibly miss out on seeing.

Apparently texting someone out of the blue after months of silence didn’t fix everything. Derek didn’t know how to break through the wall he’d slammed between them, or if he was even ready to tear down all the defenses he’d been erecting. Thinking about Stiles still hurt. But not talking to him hurt, too. Lately, he’d begun to wonder if he’d been wrong to not let Stiles extend whatever explanation he’d seemed ready to offer. Derek cringed away from the memory of the last time they’d spoken in person, shutting it on the other side of a locked door to avoid it for a little longer.

**Are you heading to class?** he asked, trying to tug Stiles back to the more talkative stream he’d seemingly stepped out of, but he fell asleep—still holding his phone—before a reply pinged across the ocean again.

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The conference was being held in an older building that butted up against the hostel. It wasn’t the fanciest venue Derek had ever been in—that honor went to the three day, overcrowded historical society convention at a five star hotel in Houston a few years back—but there was something refreshing about its unpretentious charm.

His panel session was in a reasonably sized room which had been set up with rows of uncomfortable-looking chairs. Much to his amusement, it also had a chalkboard built into the wall. It looked like there was a screen that could be pulled down over it for a more modern presentation style, to match the projector setups available in the other rooms he’d glanced into along the way.

He tested the chalk on a corner of the board, then smudged his thumb over the mark to wipe it away. As far as he knew, his fellow panelists were also planning to do without visual aids for this session. That meant they didn’t have to settle for the gloomy yellow light filtering from the antiquated chandeliers. Pulling the heavy floral curtains back from the windows would let the morning sunlight stream in, giving the room a more cheerful, open feel. Maybe that’d help to keep people awake, too, along with the thick, dark coffee they’d be chugging, a few of them probably still cramming in the pastries that were up for grabs at a table near the entrance.

An hour and a half where he had to be alert, responsive, and theoretically eloquent, then he could relax for the rest of the day. Well, insofar as a crammed schedule of heavily academic discussions could be considered relaxing. The agenda was split into four sets of parallel sessions, with the keynote speaker taking the chunk of time just prior to lunch. Fortunately, the conference organizers also believed in frequent coffee breaks; those would probably prove necessary to make it through the entire day.

Derek pushed the curtains back a little farther, leaning absently into the window frame to watch the passersby on the street outside. It was still bright and beautiful, although patches of the sidewalks were glistening with ice that’d slicked their surfaces overnight, and darker clouds were gathering on the horizon. From the looks of it, it’d be a good day to spend almost entirely indoors.

There was a light cough from behind him; he ignored it, assuming people were beginning to filter out of the registration area and into their choice of the day’s first session. They wouldn’t be starting for a little while yet, and he wasn’t in the mood for general socializing.

A second cough, more intentional this time, was followed by a slightly amused, “Derek Hale. I’d recognize the exquisite lines of that back anywhere.”
A chill licked down his spine, and he drew away from the window, turning slowly to face a beautiful dark-haired woman in a simple black dress. Her blood red lips—the same shade as her sharply spiked stilettos—curved into a smile.

“Jennifer,” he said, the chill wrapping around his chest and tightening.

“Julia,” she corrected. “All these years, and you’re still not very good with names, are you.”

“I never knew you as Julia,” he said, as though she’d need that reminder. “I checked the schedule. You’re not listed on any of the panels.”

“Derek,” she said reprovingly. “Is that why it’s been so long since I’ve run into you at one of these things? Not since Chicago, remember?”

He did. It’d happened the year before his tenureship had gotten locked in; their interaction had been brief and humiliating. In short, it could be said he’d fled after responding to her greeting. Since she’d cornered him in a room where he was meant to be speaking in a few minutes, that wasn’t an option this time around.

“Your beard’s even thicker now; you’ve gotten awfully hairy, haven’t you,” she said, taking a few steps forward, her hand outstretched. Derek flinched away, badly.

“I see,” she said. She dropped her hand to rest on the back of one of the chairs instead, and her smile flattened out to an expression he couldn’t read. “I’m still the villain in your story. I thought we would’ve moved past that a long time ago.”

Derek’s voice was tight, clipped with the muddle of anger and embarrassment she always managed to send swirling through him. “There is no ‘we’ anymore. If there ever was at all.”

“Semantics,” she said with an elegantly dismissive shrug. She turned to wave another tall, beautiful woman into the room. “In answer to your question, I’m only here as an attendee. I’ll admit it was mostly an excuse for an anniversary trip; Kali’s never been to Poland. We’re planning to spend the next two weeks traveling through Europe.”

“Anniversary?” Derek echoed, accepting Kali’s introductory handshake out of habitual politeness, his attention drawn to the ring he probably wouldn’t have noticed without that verbal nudge. They were both sporting diamond studded bands. Jennifer’s—Julia’s—framed an emerald stone, while Kali’s held a ruby in a matching cut.

“Ten years,” Jennifer said. She wrapped an affectionate arm around Kali’s waist, and her wife smiled down at her.

“Five years of marriage. Julia likes to count from when we started dating.” Kali had a rich, throaty voice; in other circumstances, Derek might have found her pleasant, even charming. Then again, he’d found Jennifer enthralling right from the start.

“Ten years,” he said, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice as he looked back at Jennifer. Was that an exact number, or had she been...the entire time...?

“You really do take everything personally, don’t you,” Jennifer said, her voice still laced with light amusement. She sounded for all the world like she was chatting with an old roommate who was still inexplicably offended by some minor slight—as though the only thing she’d stolen from Derek was overpriced body wash or a novelty mug. “I met Kali shortly after I accepted the position at Princeton. Not everything centers around you and your wounded hopes, Derek Hale.”
It was a reprimand that struck home, as she knew it would. He could offer no response.

Kali nodded at the doorway, where others, including one of Derek’s fellow panelists, were beginning to filter in. “Should we take a seat?”

“I don’t know if Derek’s comfortable with us here,” Jennifer said sweetly. “Perhaps it’d be less intimidating for him if we tried the other session.”

That challenge sent steel back into Derek’s spine. Fuck this: fuck letting her get to him, turning him back into the orphaned post-grad who’d had no idea how he was going to make ends meet. He’d been doing this for too long—and doing it far too well—to let the old doubts sink back under his skin. Jennifer didn’t mean a thing to him anymore. She hadn’t for many years. She should’ve never mattered at all.

“No, stay if you’d like,” he said, stretching his face into a smile and gesturing politely for the two of them to go ahead and take a seat before the room filled. “You might learn something.”

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As the conference drew to a close, Derek made his farewells with those taking evening flights and declined the organizers’ offer of a city tour, citing jetlag. He’d rather tour at his own pace the next day, rather than tagging along in a group with a set agenda. And tonight, he had other reasons for wanting to change out of his suit and retrieve the phone he’d left charging in his room.

He checked his wristwatch, which was still set to the time back home. It’d be early in the morning for Stiles—probably too early for him to be awake yet. Still. He had to try.

<< You asked me if we could talk. I know I never replied, so I’ll understand if your answer isn’t the one I’m hoping to hear now. Is it too late to take you up on that offer?

Derek set the phone down and twisted the sink faucet on, staring into the mirror as he waited for the water to warm enough to splash on his face.

“You’re an idiot for not doing this sooner,” he told his reflection.

He’d somehow thought that he could avoid Jennifer for the rest of his life; while he’d been mostly successful thus far, all he’d done was hamper his own growth. Jennifer had immediately moved on, making a name and a life for herself. She was right—about that, if nothing else—it was his own fault he’d stuck to swimming around in the muck of his prolonged disappointment.

If he did the same thing with Stiles, all it proved was that he hadn’t learned anything from his past. He had to know where he’d made the mistake. Had it been in trusting Stiles to begin with, or in refusing to listen while the lines of communication were still open?

His phone pinged, and he wiped his face on a towel that’d been hung on a convenient peg by the sink. “Okay,” he told himself, his heart tumbling into acrobatics it hadn’t even remotely attempted when he’d seen Jennifer that morning. “You can do this.”

Yeah, Stiles had written.

Wait, I meant no, he added as Derek was trying to figure out what that one word response meant. Way to phrase that in the most confusing way ever. Just...yes, we can talk.

<< Can I call you? I think everything will only get more confusing if we try to do this via text.
You’re still international, yeah? I’ll get on Skype. Voice only though, because I’m still in bed and I don’t want this to be weird.

Wait. Forget I told you that.

This is already going well, Derek wrote. It was, though; he was smiling. Stiles had none of Jennifer’s sleek, calculated grace. Why had he been treating them like they were cut from the same cloth?

“Hey stranger,” Stiles said a few minutes later, his voice a little rough from sleep. Derek exhaled in relief, closing his eyes to bask in the sound. Five seconds in, and he was already fighting back a swarm of emotions. It was good they weren’t doing this where Stiles could see how much of an impact he was having.

“Did I wake you up?”

“No, Scott’s got a freaking 9 AM class for his last semester. His third alarm woke me up.” He paused. “I’m glad, though. I wouldn’t have seen your text until a lot later if I wasn’t already awake and fucking around on my phone.”

“When’s yours?” Derek asked. “Will you have to go soon?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Stiles said. “I know this may offend your professorial sensibilities, but I’d rather skip a class than miss out on whatever this is.”

“It could wait,” Derek said, and Stiles heaved an audible sigh.

“I haven’t talked to you since last year, Derek. School can fuck off right now, okay? Can you just—tell me what you want me to say, because I don’t really know anymore, and I’m sick of...all of this.”

“I don’t know what I want you to say,” Derek said quietly. He was sick of it, too, almost literally; his stomach was beginning to churn. He sat down on the edge of his bed. “Can I tell you a story first?”

“...okay?” Stiles said.

“It’ll give more context, I think.”

“Context would help. Because to be perfectly honest, I think I know what the trigger was, but I still don’t really understand what the fuck happened.”

“I have...issues,” Derek said, instinctively lowering his voice, as though anyone would be hovering outside the door, listening in. “I don’t like talking about them. But I think I need to; you deserve to know why I reacted the way I did.”

Stiles was quiet for a moment. “Okay,” he said. “Tell me your story.”

Derek’s stomach twisted again, and he took one deep breath after another until the cold sweat threatening to break across his skin faded to something more manageable. He sifted through to figure out which parts Stiles needed to know, and which would simply make everything harder and more uncomfortable to talk about. He should’ve outlined this. Made note cards.

“Before I moved to Oregon—no, I have to go back earlier than that. You remember how I told you about my parents?”

“Of course I remember,” Stiles said.
“I left a few things out.”

Derek dipped back into that painful section of his history to reveal the deeper insecurities he’d tried to shield from view the first time around. Giving the full details of that last conversation with his mother was as painful as he’d expected, but there was a satisfying component to it, too, like picking at a scab or peeling away the dried skin from an old sunburn. He felt fresher underneath—a little raw and sensitive, afraid to let anyone else touch.

Jennifer was the last person who’d heard about the essentially deathbed promise he’d made to his mother: to do something substantial with his life, to become someone she would’ve been proud to introduce as her son. Clinging so hard to his mother’s approval had felt childish even then and had only gotten worse over time. Back then, he’d thought that Jennifer’s advice had been wise. Mature. Well-intentioned.

You need to stop obsessing over ancient history, Jennifer had said, then chuckled at her own joke, scraping her nails down his bare chest as they’d lain in bed together. The only person I need to impress is myself. You should try it. It makes life a lot easier.

“I told you that everything that happened during that lunch was rough and that I’d felt guilty,” he told Stiles, leaving Jennifer out for now. “That’s a more complete picture of how it started to shape what I focused on after they were gone.”

“I’d guessed at some of that,” Stiles said. He sounded like he didn’t quite understand how Derek was connecting a difficult memory of his parents with what’d happened between the two of them. “If it helps you to talk about it, though...hell, you know I know how hard that is.”

It was enough of an olive branch for Derek to keep going. “I let it matter too much. It was the only thing I thought about for a long time after: become a professor, break some sort of record for being the top in my field, write groundbreaking papers that would change everyone’s views on history. It sounds ridiculous now, I know. It was an obsession.”

“I get it,” Stiles said. “It’s not exactly the same, but—I remember the last promise I ever made to my mom. When she was still coherent, anyway, before it didn’t really matter what I said to her, because she wasn’t really there anymore to hold me to it.”

“Was it a promise you could keep?” Derek asked.

“I’m still trying to. It sucks to look back on, you know? My dad and I were both there, and my mom didn’t say, ‘John, take care of our son after I’m gone,’ like you’d think someone would do when their kid’s not even a fucking teenager yet. She took my hand, and she made me look her in the eyes and promise to keep my dad healthy. I mean, I would’ve anyway; the idea of losing my dad, too, fucking terrified me. Hell, it still does. But I crossed my heart when I promised her, and that made it seem like a lot bigger deal. I used to feel like it linked us somehow—like if my dad had a heart attack, it’d kill me, too. Took me a couple years before I starting eating junk food again.”

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on a kid.”

“So was what your mom did to you.”

It wasn’t the same. Derek had been an adult. He should’ve been able to handle it. “I put the pressure on myself. It didn’t feel like pressure at the time, though, because I thought that everything was gonna work out. It was perfect. I was starting my job hunt, even though I thought for sure I was going to get the one I had my eye on, and I met this woman who was...everything I’d ever imagined. She was a few years older than I was, smarter than I was...”
Stiles made a scoffing noise. “Sorry. I just find that hard to believe.”

Flattering, but misguided. She’d certainly outsmarted him. “She had dual degrees in history and English literature and had been teaching both as an adjunct. She said that literature was her main love and that she was looking for a more permanent position in that field, but she liked listening to me talk about history, especially when I was practicing for my interviews.”

“Having someone who’s knowledgeable about the same things...that sounds nice?” Stiles ventured, and Derek laughed humorlessly.

She’d even taken notes—to help him refine his thoughts, she’d said, although they’d never really done that part. Mostly, those sessions had ended with his jeans unzipped and his mind too melted to worry about why she wanted to know so many details about his research.

“She introduced herself as Jennifer Blake. Turns out that was the first lie she ever told me.”

“...she lied about her name? Why the fuck would she need to do that?” Stiles asked, sounding nearly as baffled as Derek had been when he’d found out.

To make every single one of his memories of her ring false? “To keep me from finding out she was in the running for the same jobs, I guess. I still remember the look on her face when I came home and told her a woman named Julia Baccari had gotten my job—the one that’d meant so much to me, that she’d spent all that time listening to me talk about. That’s when she told me her name wasn’t Jennifer and that she’d be moving out, since her new paycheck would pay for her to get a nicer place closer to campus.”

“Fuck,” Stiles said. “That’s...I don’t even know what to say about that kind of betrayal of trust.”

“Neither do I,” Derek said. His arm was starting to get tired, so he switched his phone to the other side and rubbed at the sweat that had started to gather in his beard and along his hairline. He should’ve used a headset, but he felt like it would’ve made Stiles feel even more distant than he already was. This way, he was cupping Stiles’s voice in his hand, able to press it closer to his ear when he needed that comfort. “I’m not always very good at reading people. I took everything she told me at face value and never even considered that it might not be true. And then a few months later, she’d moved back out, broken my heart, taken my job right out from under me, and told me the whole thing was my fault for being so damn gullible.”

“That’s classic victim blaming,” Stiles said. “Like...textbook, but shitty as hell. You didn’t believe her, did you?”

Derek made a noncommittal noise. Of course he had. “Anyway, the reason I’m telling you all this now is that she’s here. In Warsaw. She came to my panel today.”

“Oh shit,” Stiles said. “Are you okay?”

That immediate rush to concern—the sense that Stiles would’ve been defending him against Jennifer if he’d been here—made Derek’s throat thicken with gratitude. Telling Stiles all of this before they’d sorted anything out between them might’ve been yet another stupid move in his life. He’d taken a chance. It felt, for once, like the right one.

“I wasn’t at first,” Derek admitted. “I’ve been living in some sort of weird fear of running into her and having her tear the blinders off everyone else so they can see how much of an imposter I am. She still gets in my head sometimes, when I’m teaching...I’ll remember the comments she used to make when I was coming up with sample lesson plans. They were never good enough. There was
always something to pick at, something that showed how inexperienced I was.”

“That’s bullshit. I don’t know if you’re okay with me telling you this anymore, but you’re the best professor I’ve ever had.”

Derek took in a sharp breath. He knew he was good at his job. He did. He was fortunate enough to have frequent affirmation from his students and colleagues, and he’d gotten better at pushing aside that little voice that always slipped into the back of his head to say that he wasn’t good enough, that he could be better if he worked harder. It’d sounded like other people’s voices in the past. It’d taken him too many years to recognize that it was his own voice echoing in his ears.

How to explain that to Stiles? He went slowly, working through his own thoughts as he spoke.

“The thing is, seeing her wasn’t that bad. We had an awkward exchange that was probably mostly awkward on my side. She was there with her wife, and after my panel, I barely even saw them for the rest of the day. She wasn’t stalking me; she wasn’t trying to undermine me in front of everyone else. She was right. I’ve been spending years dwelling on a few horrible months that barely made a mark on her.”

“That doesn’t excuse what she did.”

“No. I don’t think I could ever forgive her for that. Not that she’d ask; in her eyes, she didn’t do anything wrong.” He brushed the pad of his thumb over the bedspread’s raised pattern, following the loops and whorls. “All these years, I’ve been blaming her for ruining my life. She hurt me; intentionally, even if she claims otherwise. She wasn’t a good person. But I chose my own path; she didn’t force me to keep torturing myself over it.”

“Now you’re torturing yourself over the wasted time,” Stiles said, with a level of practicality that made Derek chuckle.

“You’re right. It’s a hard habit to break.”

“My therapist used to say: the past has led you to where you are, but that doesn’t make your future an inevitability. I dunno if she was quoting someone else, or if she just made it up one day and really liked it. It stuck with me, though, even though I didn’t totally understand it at the time.”

“Your past doesn’t have to define you,” Derek said. Although for someone talking to a kid who’d just lost his mom to a terrifying hereditary disease, it’d probably held a few different meanings.

“Yeah. I wish she’d said it that way; I used to think she was trying to tell me to stop being such a hyperactive little shit. Anyway, the point is, even with all the bullshit this woman—Jennifer or Julia or whoever—put you through, you made a damn good life for yourself. She didn’t win. You shouldn’t keep feeling like she did.”

It was true. Tillamook might not have been the future Derek had imagined for himself, but there were a lot of things he wouldn’t have now if his path hadn’t diverged. Most importantly, key people would be missing from his life: the Yukimuras, Erica, Boyd. Stiles.

Yet he’d almost let her take that away from him, too.

Talking about Jennifer was still easier than the next part would be. He wetted his lips, searching for the words.

“When she left me, she said a lot of things I haven’t been able to forget. I know some of that’s my...sensitivity. One of my biggest flaws is that I’m not very good at letting anything go. But one of
the things she told me was that none of it had ever mattered to her. I’d never mattered to her. It was just something fun to do...literally, I guess...while she was job hunting.”

“Which is what my texts to you sounded like,” Stiles filled in. “Holy shit, Derek.”

He licked his lips again. He was feeling parched—talked out and wrung dry. “I took it badly,” he admitted. He used his thumb and forefinger to push at the bridge of his nose, willing his voice to stay even. “I still don’t really understand why you did any of that. But...it’s you. So I’d like to try.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. “Shit. You’d think I would’ve planned a better answer by now, but I’d honestly started to kinda give up on ever hearing from you again. So I just...I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry about the drawings and the poems and all that shit.”

Derek swallowed down a surge of bile at the reminder. “It was a shock,” he said. Drawing too direct of a parallel between Stiles and Jennifer revealed more about his attachment to Stiles than he was comfortable unveiling, but it couldn’t really be helped. Not like any of that was much of a secret anymore. “It felt like it was happening all over again.”

“This is really embarrassing,” Stiles said. He took in a long, audible fortifying breath. “So I’m just gonna say it and get it over with. I find you...incredibly attractive. That’s why I signed up for your class. I mean, you’ve gotta know what your photos look like. You’re the single hottest person I’ve ever seen in real life.”

“Oh,” Derek said. Part of him wanted to be pleased by the flattery—it was a confirmation that the man he’d been pining after was interested in him, too—but being appreciated solely for his looks was neither new nor enjoyable.

“Wait, let me finish. Yes, that’s why I sat in on your class that first day. And for the first few, I admit I was mostly focused on how impossibly good-looking you are. Real people don’t look like that; I guess I wasn’t thinking of you like you were a real person. And I definitely didn’t think we’d actually become friends.”

“This isn’t really making things better,” Derek said.

“I know, I’m just trying to explain how it started. And why my notebook had kind of messed up stuff in it. But—did you look at the rest of it? Past the first few pages, after you ditched me in the room.”

The notebook was stashed in a locked drawer in his study. He hadn’t touched it since December. “No. I didn’t see how more of the same would help anything. I got the general idea.”

“That’s just it, though. The rest isn’t like that. I can’t lie and pretend like I didn’t draw that stuff. All I can say is that I really, really wish I hadn’t. And that I stopped. It hasn’t been like that for a long time. The rest of the notebook’s full of stupid shit that I thought would make you laugh. I would’ve torn out the other pages if I’d remembered them earlier...but it’s too late to think about that now.”

Derek switched his phone back to the other ear, pushing himself up the bed so he could stretch his legs out and rest his shoulders against the wall. It sounded like Stiles was pacing around the room—possibly through his entire apartment. He could almost picture the expressive gestures he was missing out on by only getting to hear Stiles’s voice.

“How many pages do I have to skip ahead to get to those parts?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Stiles said. “It doesn’t really matter if you never see them. I’d burn the entire fucking thing right now if I could.”
“That might be therapeutic,” Derek said. He could almost hear Stiles’s thoughts churning on the other end of the line.

“Could we make that a thing when I get back?” he asked. “Light up your fireplace and throw all that shit in. I’d take care of ripping the pages out for you.”

Derek was silent. He wasn’t sure he was ready to have Stiles in his house again.

Stiles sighed. “That won’t magically fix it, will it?”

Derek rubbed tiredly at his face. “It’s not just about the drawings.” He didn’t know how to explain his muddled, probably entirely unreasonable feelings. It wasn’t that he was specifically upset about them, or that he wasn’t able to take a joke. He couldn’t handle being the joke. The drawings were merely a symptom of a far larger problem. And was it really Stiles’s fault that he’d managed to stumble upon some of Derek’s deepest insecurities?

“It’s about me treating you like an object. Like Jennifer did,” Stiles mused, working through it out loud. “Okay, I think I get it, but tell me if I’m steering down the wrong track here. I made you feel like I was playing some sort of elaborate game with you, with a board that you weren’t even aware of until I flipped it on the last day of class.”

“That’s...reasonably accurate.”

“Then you should know that you matter to me,” Stiles said. “You matter more to me than just about anybody in my life. I wasn’t lying to you, and it wasn’t a game to me. It wasn’t some kind of distraction while I was trying to...I don’t know what you’re thinking. To get a better grade?”

He sounded disgusted by the idea, and Derek shook his head, even though Stiles couldn’t see the denial. He’d never thought that. Some part of him had always known, deep down, that Stiles hadn’t been using him, but he’d been too terrified to let himself believe it.

“You were my student,” he said thickly. “I let it all get out of hand. I’ve been blaming you for things, but I’ve been blaming myself for a lot more.” For falling in love with Stiles. For not thinking enough about the gap in their age; it’d only seemed relevant when he was already spiraling with anxiety about everything else. Like Stiles leaving at the end of the academic year, making none of this matter anyway.

“But I was your friend, too,” Stiles said, with enough hesitation that Derek immediately responded in the affirmative. “Do you believe me? That I...care about you?”

“I do,” Derek said. He bit at his lip, then added, “If it’s not obvious enough from this entire conversation...I care about you, too.”

“I think I’m getting that,” Stiles said softly. “Then can we start over?”

“I don’t think I can do that,” Derek said. Stiles made a wounded sound that he immediately tried to suppress, but not before it’d hooked into Derek’s chest. “Stiles. That’s not what I meant.”

“Derek,” he snapped back. “Then stop peeling bits of my heart off, okay?”

Derek brushed at his wet eyes, not entirely sure if he was crying or laughing. Leave it to Stiles to make him do both simultaneously. “Like you said, we can’t pretend this didn’t happen. And I want to be completely honest with you about what to expect from me—it’s probably going to take some time for me to get back to the way things were before. I want to. I’ll try to shut down the voices in my head when they crop back up. But...you may have to be patient with me. I don’t know if that’s
“Of course you’re worth it,” Stiles said, and Derek’s fingers tightened reflexively on his phone.

“Then can we talk about something else for a little while? Unless you have to go. I know I’ve kept you too long already.”

“I’m not ending this call until you make me,” Stiles said. “Tell me about your fancy-ass conference.”

Derek chuckled. “I wouldn’t use that term for it. Academia isn’t exactly glamorous.”

“You mean you haven’t been drinking champagne and eating chocolate-dipped strawberries while we were talking?”

“More like shivering and wishing they kept this room a little warmer. I think you’re right about only visiting in the summer, although I’m staying in what’s kind of a glorified dorm. It might be nicer at a hotel—or at your grandmother’s cottage.”

“I looked up the weather,” Stiles said. “It’s in the 30s this week, yeah? It’s not actually that much colder than here.”

“Better than it would’ve been a month ago,” Derek acknowledged. *I wish you were here*, he didn’t say.

“It’s crazy to me that you’re in Poland right now. Of all the places in the world to pick for a winter conference. Czy mówisz po polsku?”

“Only enough to know the answer to that is: no, I don’t speak Polish,” Derek replied.

“Tęskniłem za tobą,” Stiles said, his voice soft, nearly inaudible.

Those words weren’t as familiar to him; he frowned, trying to puzzle them out from the few Polish phrases he’d picked up. “What’s that one mean?”

“That I’m surprised,” Stiles said after a pause. Derek could almost hear the smile in his voice. “I’ve finally found something I know and you don’t.”

“I don’t speak every language,” Derek said. “And since you’ve got me on the hook here, I’ll admit I’m rusty in a lot of them.”

“Let me just point out how ridiculous it is that you can casually say ‘a lot’ in reference to the number of languages you speak. How many is it? Five? Ten? Two dozen?”

“Enough to get by,” Derek said. “Not Polish, though. I didn’t know you were fluent.”

“I’m not. My grammar’s atrocious. My professor says my pronunciation’s the best in my class, though; it’s annoying because she makes me read out loud, and everyone else kinda hates me.”

Derek had strong opinions about the value of singling out students in class—especially against their will. He filed that discussion away for a later date; he had a feeling Stiles would have a lot to say about it, too, and he’d rather save it for an in-person conversation where he could watch the play of emotions across his face.

“I didn’t know you were taking a language class,” he said instead. It was strange having such a gap in his knowledge of Stiles’s day-to-day activities. It made the changes in their relationship more stark and his regret over lost time sharper. There were so few months left, and he’d already missed out on
so much.

“Yeah, it’s my final elective. I thought Erica might’ve told you?”

She hadn’t. The truth was, he mostly avoided talking about Stiles; Laura asked about him occasionally, Boyd periodically clapped him on the back in silent solidarity, and Erica mostly glared and made vague threats under her breath.

There was a lot he needed to fix.

“It’s your turn for a story,” he said, grateful that Stiles had given him the chance to start up a new chapter. “Tell me about your semester.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles accepts an invitation

Translations:

Scusi, è occupato? - excuse me, is this seat taken?
Di dove è? - where are you from?
Sono americano - I'm American

Czy mówisz po polsku - do you speak Polish?
Tęskniłem za tobą - I missed you
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Derek’s warning was apt; things did progress slowly. In one sense, it was easy to exercise patience when the reward was a gradual increase of time spent together and a cautious return of those head-ducking smiles Stiles loved pulling out of him. The reminder was always there, though—Derek’s distrust stretching between them, making Stiles hesitate over statements or gestures he would’ve made without a second thought in the past. Everything felt weighted with meaning now, in a way he at least hadn’t been aware of before.

It was almost easier when they were separated by an ocean. Derek was responsive over texts—eager to talk, willing to share details of his day touring the city and the comedy of errors that attended his flight home. Stiles had let himself hope everything would stay that effortless when they saw each other in person again.

It didn’t. Derek came alone the first time, arriving a few minutes late to the cafe where Stiles had glared and elbowed his way into a sheltered corner table, hooking his ankle around the extra chair to protect it from those who didn’t believe his assurances that his companion was on his way.

When Derek entered the room, the breath left Stiles’s lungs. He looked better than he’d remembered, somehow: a model who’d strayed from a catwalk and into a crowded cafe bustling with students’ anxious chatter. Stiles belonged there, in his frayed jeans and the hoodie he’d opted for in a bid to look casual—like he wasn’t trying too hard to impress anyone. That’d been a bad decision, he decided abruptly. All it did was highlight the differences between them. Derek, in his charcoal grey suit and a dark red scarf he was unwinding from around his throat, revealing a matching silk shirt underneath, was unfathomably beautiful and entirely out of place.

He’d come there for Stiles, though. That had to mean something.

Derek stood in the entryway for a moment, casting his gaze around the room until it landed on Stiles. He nodded then—a simple, unreadable movement of his head—and threaded his way through the line snaking up to the register.

Stiles lurched to his feet, not entirely conscious of his own actions. All he knew was that he was glad to see Derek—that Derek was probably the best fucking thing he’d seen in his entire life, and all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around him and breathe in the scent of his cologne until he was sure this wasn’t another heart-shattering dream.

But Derek, who’d seemed calm and composed until then, took a step back from the table, his eyes widening in what looked like panic, his shoulders tensed as though he was seconds away from fleeing right back out the door.

“Sorry,” Stiles said, dropping back into his chair after an awkward moment where he didn’t know what to do with his arms. He pointed at the seat across from him, hoping he hadn’t already fucked everything up again. “I got you a muffin?”

Derek’s shoulders relaxed a fraction. He drew the chair out, draped his scarf over the back, and poked curiously at the top of the muffin. “Chocolate?”

“It was their last one.” Stiles quirked a hopeful grin at him. “I can’t even tell you how many people
I’ve seen drooling over it since I’ve been here. Thought I was going to have to start fighting them off if you took any longer.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Derek replied, although Stiles hadn’t meant that as a criticism. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down after giving Stiles a long, thoughtful look he couldn’t interpret.

Stiles watched him quietly picking at the muffin—pulling it apart on his plate but eating very little of it. “No Lola today?”

“I stopped by Erica’s office,” Derek said. He crumbled another section of the muffin, then shot a quick glance at Stiles. “I would’ve been here on time, but I thought—it seemed better to not bring her here.”

Because of the crush of people inside the building? Or because he was keeping Stiles at arm’s length still, not yet ready to allow that bond with his dog to reignite?

Stiles swallowed back the disappointment and gripped his half-empty mug, the heat already leached from the contents. Slow and steady, he reminded himself. He told you to expect this.

“Just to get everything out in the open,” he said, “I don’t have any intention of trying to hit on you. I’m not here because I’m working my way into dating you. Or anything along those lines.”

He’d gone with what he’d thought Derek needed to hear to relax around him, but Derek’s lips pulled down into a deeper frown. His eyes were fixed on Stiles, and Stiles tilted his chin in defiance, holding the gaze despite the increasing sense that everything he said was coming out wrong. Derek’s eyes were a darker green than he’d remembered, or maybe that was just the shade they’d taken on today: somber yet steady, like a forest braced against an oncoming storm.

“If that’s what you want,” Derek eventually said. He was the first to break their eye contact, and Stiles followed the dark flutter of his eyelashes as he looked down at the table.

“I want our friendship back,” Stiles said, aiming for starker honesty this time. “Can we go back to even a fraction of that? Not right this second, I know, but...tell me the truth, Derek. Do you think we can get there?”

Derek’s eyes flicked back to his, a hint of a smile touching his lips for the first time. “Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

It got better after that—little by little, one small victory after another that Stiles would do his best to not topple over while trying to push the set into a semblance of something more significant. Still, it took three agonizingly long weeks before Derek moved them out of their new routine, mostly composed thus far of texting that felt almost as frequent and normal as it’d always been, and conversations over coffee that took place once or twice a week and always ended far too soon.

“I was thinking,” Derek said in that third week, a heart still clinging to the surface of his latte, flecks of the foam caught in his beard.

Stiles tore his gaze away. You’re definitely not allowed to touch, he told himself. Resisting the urge to brush his fingers against Derek’s beard was still easier than tamping down his jealousy over the flirtatious barista who kept coming up with excuses to stop by their table.

“About?” he prompted when Derek didn’t seem like he was going to finish the thought. He compromised by tracing his fingers along his own chin until Derek got the hint and wiped at his with a napkin, the skin on his cheeks tinting pink.
The barista appeared out of nowhere, dropping a fresh pile of napkins on the table and smiling at Derek.

“Thank you,” Derek said, his puzzled gaze following her to the counter before shifting back to Stiles. “I thought they didn’t have table service here? We always clear away our own dishes.”

“They don’t,” Stiles said. It was a college joint that was nearly always filled to capacity; no one wanted or expected someone swinging around every few minutes to check on them, and the employees had better things to do. “She’s been trying to get your attention for the last half hour. I’ll bet you five bucks her number’s written on one of those napkins.”

Derek pushed the stack of napkins in Stiles’s direction. “If she did, it’s for you.”

Stiles scoffed loudly enough to make the girl studying at the table next to them pull one of her earbuds out to glare at him. “Oh fuck off, it’s a public place,” he told her, glaring right back until she deflated and returned to her books. Probably a future librarian in the making.

“I’ve never known someone so unfailingly polite,” Derek said in amusement.

“It’s what you l-uh-like about me,” Stiles said, recovering from the stumble by drawing Derek’s attention to his drink. “She drew a heart in your latte, dude. Girl’s not subtle.”

“You’re the one who ordered our drinks.”

“That’s—okay, that’s true.” Stiles sifted through the napkins until he found the one with her name—Maribelle—and a number. “Look, she wrote ‘give me a ring, sexy.’ She obviously saw you come in with me.” That was part of their routine now, too. One of them always stood in line while the other grabbed a table; the next time, they switched off to keep everything as even as possible. Although Derek looked a bit pinched and unhappy whenever it was Stiles’s turn to pay, he’d stopped arguing about it. So what if Stiles was perpetually broke? That didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of carrying his own weight.

Derek arched an eyebrow at him and said, “And what makes you think that message excludes you as an option?”

Stiles couldn’t help his pleased, startled response, or the heat rushing to his face. Before he could settle on a reply—wait, can we talk more about how you think I’m sexy? or this isn’t a contest, but if it was, I’m pretty damn sure you’d win—Derek had grinned at him, maintaining eye contact while he lightly tipped his mug to the side and spilled a few drops of his latte over the tabletop.

“Oh, no,” Derek said calmly. “How clumsy of me. I wonder how I’ll be able to clean this up.”

Stiles gaped at him for the few seconds it took for Maribelle to rush back to their table, cloth in hand. “Let me get that for you guys,” she said, smiling at Derek first, then at Stiles. She was pretty—short blonde hair cut in sharp angles at her chin, dark eyes, a row of piercings along one ear—and, flirtation with Derek aside, actually seemed like a nice enough person.

“Thank you,” Derek said when she was done. “Sorry about that. I would’ve used the napkins you gave us, but one of them had your number on it?”

Stiles reflexively kicked him under the table—what the hell was he doing?—but Derek’s expression remained serene. Maribelle didn’t react with the embarrassment he might’ve expected; then again, she hadn’t exactly been hiding her interest.

“I don’t give up that easily; I would’ve written it down again,” she assured him.
“The problem is,” Derek said, his smile wide, bright, and absolutely fake, “we weren’t quite sure which of us you were hoping would call you.”

“Oh!” she said. There was the embarrassment. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. I thought it was obvious. It’s not that you’re not—I mean, you are, you’re very, but I’m not really into...older men?”

“Then it wound up in the right hands after all,” he said, nodding at Stiles, who was still holding the napkin.

“Oh,” Stiles said, his brain shorting out from witnessing Derek turn on the charm simply to prove him wrong. How the hell did you shut down that kind of opening? What person in their right mind would tell Derek fucking Hale thanks but no thanks, you just don’t do it for me?

Maribelle, apparently, who was running with the opportunity Derek had handed to her. Stiles watched him as the barista spoke; although his lips still held a soft smile, the expression around his eyes was tight and guarded. “It’s just that I’ve seen you in here a lot,” she told Stiles. “I think it’d be fun. I didn’t wanna make a big deal out of it or anything—that’s why I wrote my number down instead of just asking you. Keep it; give it some thought, and call me whenever you’re interested.”

“What the hell,” Stiles said once she’d returned to the register.

“It seemed like you wouldn’t believe me without evidence,” Derek replied.

“That was a serious gamble, though. What would you have done if it’d been for you?”

“I knew it wasn’t,” Derek said. “I wasn’t paying attention at first. I was...otherwise occupied. Once I knew what was going on, it was easy enough to draw the right conclusion.”

“But I don’t want to call her,” Stiles said mournfully, crumpling up the napkin after making sure Maribelle was focused on a customer. “Stop playing wingman. You’re awful at it.”

The tense lines at the corners of Derek’s eyes softened. “You don’t?”

“Of course I don’t,” Stiles said, scrubbing at his hair in annoyance because he couldn’t reach across the table and shake his stupidly beautiful, stubbornly oblivious friend. “I just wanna sit here with you. And that little look at me and my deductive capabilities episode, charming as it was, wasted like ten minutes of our very limited time.”

“I didn’t know you’ve been counting,” Derek said. He was leaning forward now, his latte pushed to the side, his eyes searching Stiles’s.

“For fuck’s sake. Of course I am. If you don’t know by now that I...” He sighed in frustration. “Look, Derek. This Tuesday Thursday coffee thing is great. It really is. I was just thinking that maybe we could start switching it up a little?” Starting with removing the time limit set by Erica clocking out and waiting impatiently for Derek to pick up his dog.

“That’s actually what I was going to say earlier,” Derek said. “It’s supposed to be nice this weekend. I was thinking that we could do a barbecue again—a real one this time.”

Stiles had been hoping for something like expanding to an occasional dinner or resuming their walks with Lola. An invitation to Derek’s house was...bigger. “Sure, that’d be fun,” he said, keeping it casual. “Yesterday was the first day of spring, right? The end of winter’s a good thing to celebrate.”

“And your birthday,” Derek said. “Boyd and Erica would be there, if you’re okay with that. And Kira and Scott? Anyone you’d like to invite.”
“But not Maribelle,” Stiles joked, to buy himself a second to think.

“You could bring her if you wanted,” Derek said, looking amused but also ridiculously earnest. “Or if there’s someone else you’re actually interested in.”

“Seriously, stop,” he said, waving that offer away. “Wingman Derek is my least favorite Derek, okay? Also, you realize my birthday’s not until next weekend?”

“Yeah, I know,” Derek said, his eyebrows scrunching down in offense over Stiles questioning his memory. Fair enough: it was hard to forget an April 1 birthdate. He played with the edge of one of the napkins, appearing a little less certain now that Stiles had thrown a wrench into his suggestion. “That’s part of the idea, since you don’t like drawing attention to the date. And if that’s changed, or if I misunderstood, it’d still leave your actual birthday to do whatever you’d usually have planned with your other friends.”

Stiles couldn’t bring himself to speak for a moment. He shouldn’t have been surprised by the thoughtfulness. This was Derek. That came with the territory. It didn’t make it easier to work words past the lump that’d collected in his throat.

“Did Erica and Boyd actually agree to this?” he eventually asked, and Derek gave him an appropriately rueful look.

“There were some...misunderstandings that I’ve cleared up. I’m sorry if they’ve been rude to you.”

They actually hadn’t been all that bad, considering what they’d probably thought of him. It was nice, really, that Derek had friends who anchored themselves so firmly in his corner when they felt him being threatened. “They were being good friends. Can’t exactly fault them for that.”

“Still,” Derek said. He shredded the napkin into strips, then started absently weaving them together. “Is that a yes on the barbecue? It can be just the two of us if you’d prefer. Or if you say no to the whole thing, I won’t be offended.”

“No,” Stiles said, resting his hand over Derek’s, effectively halting the fidgeting that Derek didn’t usually display. He got distracted for a second, unable to resist tracing his fingers a little higher along the temptingly warm skin, until they nudged against the leather of Derek’s watchband.

“No?” Derek repeated, sounding disappointed, and Stiles retrieved his hand and flattened it against his thigh, his fingertips still throbbing with the sensation of Derek’s pulse. What had they been talking about? Right. A party with grilled food and Derek’s judgmental friends.

“I meant yes, obviously, it sounds awesome to me. What time were you thinking?”

“Whatever works best for you. I know you line up work on weekends, so we could do an early lunch or late dinner, depending on your shift.”

“Screw work,” Stiles said, his heart fluttering at the way that made Derek’s smile—smaller this time, but genuine—tip up the corners of his mouth. “It’s my birthday.”

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“That’s my shirt,” Scott yelped, yanking it right off Stiles’s back before he’d finished trying to stretch it over his shoulders.

“Ouch, what the fuck,” Stiles complained, rubbing at his neck, where a stray button had slapped painfully as the fabric was being whipped away.
“We haven’t worn the same size since middle school. Stop trying to ruin my stuff. What was wrong with the last ten shirts you tried?”

“Derek’s seen them,” Stiles said. He picked through them again: his favorite plaid button up, a black henley with a fresh hole splitting the seam under one of the arms, a series of graphic tees that might make Erica laugh but would also remind everyone of his age. Which they’d be particularly sensitive to anyway, since the entire thing was for his fucking birthday. “I should just not go,” he decided. That was better. He’d call it off, Derek could have a nice lunch with Erica and Boyd, and they’d go back to their coffee dates on Tuesday. No harm, no foul.

“Nope,” Scott said, planting a firm hand on his chest and pushing him back to the pile of discarded clothes on his bed. “You’re not standing him up. Are you seriously not even going to let me meet him?”


“But you don’t hate Derek,” Scott said, and Stiles groaned and flopped onto the shirt pile in defeat.

“I could never hate Derek,” he agreed.

“And Derek’s going to care a lot more about you actually being there than he is about what you’re wearing,” Scott concluded reasonably. “So get off your ass and put a shirt on—any shirt—so we can go pick up Kira.”

“If anyone tries to sing happy birthday to me, I’m leaving,” Stiles said as he struggled into a t-shirt, then peeled it off and went with one of his few dress shirts—a shiny black number that’d gotten him attention at a few clubs in the past. He left the top buttons open and rolled the sleeves up before making an attempt to tame his hair into something presentable.

“He saw you two days ago,” Scott sighed from the bathroom doorway several minutes later. “He knows what you look like.”

“Kira sees you every damn day. Do I give you shit every time you panic about one of your dates?” Stiles rubbed gelled fingers through his hair a final time and stepped away from the mirror in satisfaction.

“Yes, you do. You made fun of me for an hour after I got home last night.”

Entirely warranted: Scott had returned looking blissful and dazed, missing his left sock and with a suspicious-looking stain on his sweater and a purple bruise blooming along his throat.

“Who knew Kira was such an animal,” Stiles marveled. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to look her in the eye today.”

“We have a healthy sexual relationship,” Scott said, repeating one of the lines that he’d tried to use to quell Stiles’s laughter the night before. “And you’re doing your deflection thing again. Should we talk about the part where you just admitted that you’re treating this like a date?”

“I’m not,” Stiles objected. “It’s my birthday, and I’m seeing his friends. A guy has a right to want to look good.”

“If you say so.” Scott handed Stiles his jacket and tossed him the keys to his Jeep. “I still think we should fill Kira in on the way over. I know I promised I wouldn’t say anything, but she’s starting to ask a lot of questions that I don’t know how to answer now that you guys are hanging out again.
Distracting her worked last night, but I’m starting to feel kinda weird about keeping it from her.”

“Only the truest of bros would sex-martyr himself for a friend,” Stiles said, pressing his hand to his chest to signal his gratitude, and Scott huffed in annoyance.

“We were supposed to be studying. And she wanted me to help her decide on next fall’s classes. I didn’t even have any condoms with me.”

“I guess that explains the jizz getting all over your clothes. I’m still not feeling that sorry for you, buddy. You wanna know the last time I had sex, including a lovely lady just jerking me off? Me too. It’s been so long, I can’t remember.”

“Because you’ve been hung up on Derek,” Scott said. “The guy we’re seeing today. The guy I’m supposed to somehow keep my girlfriend from noticing you mooning over.”

Stiles resisted the urge to tug at his freshly coiffed hair. He got where Scott was coming from; he just didn’t know what to say. Derek was his friend. Couldn’t he leave it at that and agonize about the rest on his own, without people poking into his business about it? It’d been so much easier when he was spending time with Derek without anyone else knowing what was going on. Unsustainable, yeah, as it’d turned out. Still a lot less complicated than figuring out how to juggle friends and family with the guy he was hopelessly in love with.

True to Scott’s prediction, Kira broached the topic as soon as he’d merged onto the main street that curved around campus.

“I had no idea you and Derek were this close,” she said. It wasn’t an accusation; she sounded more puzzled than anything.

“You told me once you thought we’d get along,” he reminded her. He’d thought about that a lot. Wondered how other people would react to their relationship if they saw them together. Would it make sense? Or would they pull Derek aside and ask him what the hell he was thinking?

“Huh. Yeah, that’s true. I’d forgotten about that.”

He cleared his throat and caught Scott’s supportive nod. “Do you still think so?”

Kira waved the wobble in his voice away. “Oh yeah. I’m not weirded out about that part. I’m just surprised I didn’t know until he was throwing you a birthday party. I mean, I see Derek pretty often.”

“And he’s never mentioned me.” Stiles had known that was the case, of course, but actually hearing it was different.

“He has, actually. More than I’d realized, once I started thinking about it. That’s what makes me feel kinda ridiculous for not seeing it earlier. You could’ve said something, y’know. It would’ve been fun for all of us to hang out! Like today. Today’s gonna be awesome.”

He hoped she was right. He wasn’t really sure what to expect from the day.

Erica answering the door hadn’t been at the top of his list of ideal beginnings. She partially blocked the entryway, and for a few painful seconds, Stiles wondered if he was supposed to be giving her a password.

“Are those leather pants?” he asked stupidly.
She glanced down at the skintight fabric, her stance softening slightly as she dropped her arms to her sides. “It’s my day off, dickwad,” she said. Weirdly, that was the friendliest she’d sounded in a while. “Are you coming in or not? Hey, Kira.”

“Erica!” Kira squeezed past to give her a hug. “Where’s Derek?”

“Manning the grill. I think he bought out the entire grocery store. Boyd had to talk him out of the balloons and party hats, because we’re not five years old. Who’s this guy?”

“Oh! Right.” Kira grabbed Scott’s hand and tugged him forward. “I totally forgot you haven’t actually met Scott yet. Erica, this is my boyfriend. Scott, my friend Erica.”

Stiles made his way into the house while they were exchanging pleasantries, Scott likely charming Erica more than he’d ever managed. It felt weird to be there with the hum of other voices sweeping through the rooms. It was a stupid thought, really. This wasn’t his private space. It was Derek’s, and he’d been lucky enough to share it from time to time.

He could see Derek through the big glass door that led from the living room to the deck. Both he and Boyd had their backs to him, puffs of smoke curling out of the grill. Lola was snuffling along the fenceline at the far edge of the yard, probably having been shooed away from the piles of food.

When he slid the door open and stepped outside, Lola turned in curiosity, her nose lifted into the air, then let out a strangled whine and barreled toward him.

“Oh shit,” he said, laughing when she didn’t slow down quite enough to keep from knocking him off balance and onto his ass on the wooden boards of the deck. She wiggled frantically, flinging herself tongue-first at his face, then whipping around his body in a quick circle before attempting to lick and paw at him again. He tried to pet her; a difficult task, when she was constantly moving. “Hey, girl. Okay, calm down, I’m here.”

“She missed you,” Derek said. He’d apparently left the grill in Boyd’s care, although he wasn’t doing much in the way of rescuing Stiles from his vicious beast yet.

Stiles grimaced and wiped away the dog slobber that’d coated his chin, nose, and too much of his mouth for comfort. “Me too, but holy crap, I think she’s gonna give herself a heart attack.”

“Lola,” Derek commanded, snapping his fingers until she let out a pitiful whimper and dropped into a begrudgingly obedient crouch. “That’s a good girl. He’s not going anywhere, okay?”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” Stiles told her. He scratched along her shoulders, hoping that didn’t set her off again. She wiggled forward, plopped her head into his lap, and whined sharply through her nose while he continued petting her.

“That’s part of why I didn’t want to do this in a cafe,” Derek said. He folded himself down to sit next to Stiles.

“That’s...smart. I’d been thinking that you just...”

“Didn’t want you to see her?” Derek touched her fur, his fingers brushing against Stiles’s in the process. Stiles held his breath and let Derek move away first. “Like I said, she missed you a lot. I was worried that...if things didn’t go well, we’d have to start over. It’s hard enough grieving once. When you let yourself get attached again, if everything breaks apart then, that’s when it really hurts. It’s not easy to recover from that.”

Stiles touched the bristly hair along Lola’s chin when she nudged him. “So what you’re saying is that
we’ve passed that point.”

“I’d like to think so.” This time, when their fingers brushed again, it didn’t seem like an accident.

Stiles jerked his hand away from Derek’s when he looked up to find that the others had joined them on the deck. Scott was grinning at him, Kira’s mouth was open in a thoughtful oh, and Erica had her arms folded across her chest again. She was the first to speak.

“I’ve gotta say I’m glad you’re back, Stilinski. Dogsitting duties are killing me. That dog doesn’t like me one bit.”

Derek sighed, like this was an old argument he’d never been able to win. “She likes you as much as she likes anybody. She’s not really a multi-person dog.”

Erica pointedly looked down at Stiles, who was scratching behind Lola’s ears as she grunted happily, tilting her head to ensure he got all the proper angles. “She sits in a corner of my office with her back planted against a wall until you come rescue her. I’m cool with doing you favors, but this is one I’ll be glad to have off my hands.”

“Erica, I don’t think—” Derek glanced at Stiles, then away.

“Hey,” Stiles said, “I’m always happy to help take care of my favorite girl. Although you’re kinda overestimating my abilities; Derek must not have told you what a disaster Thanksgiving With Lola was.”

“What the hell!” Scott broke in. “You didn’t tell me that part. I knew you weren’t staying behind just to ‘study without distractions’ or whatever it was you said.”

Derek coughed lightly and rose to his feet with a degree of grace Stiles was fairly certain he’d never attain in his lifetime. “Scott, right? I’m Derek Hale. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Yeah,” Scott said. “Me too.” He frowned at Derek’s extended hand but took it after a pause that felt to Stiles like it’d stretched on for an eternity.

Goddammit, Scott. He’d told him to leave behind all the judgments he’d been forming in response to Stiles’s initially heartbroken storytelling. It was hard to blame him, though; Stiles still struggled with how to treat Allison, and all three of them had been friends for years prior to that final breakup. If it’d been Scott spending months staring listlessly into space about somebody he’d never even met, Stiles would’ve been far less polite upon a first meeting similar to this one.

Still. Things were cool now. He gave Kira an imploring look, and she snapped to attention, picking up on the hint faster than he’d actually expected. Maybe he should’ve pulled her into the loop earlier.

She linked arms with Scott and drew him to her side, then addressed Derek playfully. “You’re not supposed to tell my boyfriend how much I’ve talked about him. Now you’ve gotta explain that it was all good, and that he’s even more handsome than I said.”

It was Derek’s turn to throw a wordless appeal at Stiles.

“Alright,” he said, giving Lola one last pat before standing up. “Scotty, you still need to meet Boyd. And I need to take a look at this grill, because it kinda smells like whatever you’re supposed to be cooking is actually burning.”

“That’s because Boyd burns everything,” Erica said. “Derek was supposed to be handling that instead of getting distracted by pretty faces.”
“It’s charred,” came Boyd’s grumpy response, and Stiles was lucky enough to catch Derek’s and Erica’s simultaneous eyeroll.

He breathed a careful sigh of relief. Okay. Derek’s friends might not hate him after all. Whatever Derek had told them had substantially cleared the air; this could work.

They mostly ate standing up, since Erica hadn’t been exaggerating much about the food Derek had piled by the grill. There were sizzling steaks; skewers with selections of spiced chicken, tender lamb, shrimp, and assorted vegetables; delectably charred corn on the cob; seared pineapple slices; and even some sort of bacon-wrapped balsamic-drizzled peach delicacy that Derek claimed counted as dessert.

Stiles refilled his plate for the third time and bumped his shoulder against Derek’s. “You do realize you can choose one or two things when you’re throwing a party, right? You don’t actually have to provide every possible option.”

Derek ducked his head in embarrassment. “I wasn’t sure what everyone liked.”

“You mean you didn’t know what Scott liked, because you do know the rest of us pretty damn well.”

“He’s important to you,” Derek said, not even trying to deny that he’d been doing everything he could to impress Stiles’s best friend.

“Yeah, well. So are you,” he said, and Derek rewarded him with one of those increasingly frequent soft looks that Stiles had been cataloging and cherishing.

“Does that mean you’re having a good birthday?”

“Best one in years,” Stiles confirmed. There were the inevitable pangs that came with the date’s proximity to one of the worst days of his life: he couldn’t help picturing his mom teasing Scott about Kira or drawing Derek into an intensely technical and highly emotional conversation about music. In terms of actual realistic possibilities, though, everything was as close to perfect as it was likely to get.

Kira drifted back to the grill to grab another garlic shrimp skewer and used it to point accusingly at Stiles, then at the brightly wrapped pile of gifts sitting on the table at the end of the deck. “You told me and Scott not to bring presents. Now we look like terrible friends.”

“I didn’t know there’d be gifts!” Stiles protested.

“Which is why you should’ve let me issue the invitations,” Derek said. “Anyway, there’re only three. You ready to open them?”

“Don’t sing to him!” Scott warned as they approached the table, the rest of the group already arranged around it in a loose semicircle. “If you do, he might just leave the party, and I don’t really wanna walk back to campus.”

“I’d take the presents with me, though,” Stiles said. He picked up the first box, a slim yet surprisingly heavy package wrapped in colorful Sunday comics. There was no tag. He flipped it over a couple times to check, then tore the paper away from the corner, revealing what looked like a stack of —“Holy shit, vintage Batman comics?”

“Derek said you were a big superhero nerd,” Erica said. “Hopefully you don’t already have all those.”
“Oh man,” he said, touching the plastic slip covers reverently. “These are awesome, thank you so much.” He would’ve hugged her if he wasn’t about 80% positive she’d punch him for it.

“Mine next,” Boyd said, indicating an impeccably wrapped square box.

That one turned out to contain a scarf—thick, soft, and made out of wool that’d been dyed a shade of baby blue that almost exactly matched his Jeep. Derek’s influence again, he suspected. “This is perfect. Where’d you find it?”

“Ah, I made it. Knitting’s one of my methods of stress relief. Surprisingly relaxing.”

“Not for me,” Erica said.

“She ends up swearing at the yarn and blaming it for tying itself in knots,” Boyd confirmed with a pained nod. Erica simply slung a fond arm around him, not inclined to argue.

Stiles carefully folded the scarf and set it on top of his comics. The last gift, much larger than the others, must’ve been from Derek. “None of you put your names on things,” he complained. “Are you just waiting to see how I respond so you can claim credit?”

“I can grab a pen if it really bothers you,” Derek said dryly.

“Nah, that’d take too long. I don’t like waiting.”

“He’s actually opening these a lot more patiently than usual,” Scott said, and Stiles glared at him for the betrayal.

“Hey, be cool, man. No stories about Christmas when we were eight.”

“You were eight; I was seven, which is why it’s okay to tell everyone that I cried for most of the day after you opened all my presents before anyone else was even awake.”

“I rewrapped them!”

“And put your name on all the good ones.”

Stiles acknowledged this with a shrug. “I was still gonna let you play with them.”

“Generous to a fault,” Derek said.

Stiles scoffed. “Oh come on. You have two sisters; are you telling me you didn’t get into fights over shit like that?”

“Cora used to steal my action figures when she was mad at me,” Derek said. “You know how G.I. Joes have that screw in the back? She’d swap out their heads or arms or whatever and then strip the screw so I couldn’t change it back. She was kind of a menace.”

“Oh man, that’s diabolical. I wish—” Stiles cut himself off. I wish that I’d met her. Like he was supposed to over Christmas. Derek’s lips flattened out; even though Stiles hadn’t finished the thought, the rest of the message had gotten through.

Stiles went back to the gift, conscious of the others watching them, and peeled the wrapping paper away from a large white box with no markings.

“Mysterious,” he said. “Is this one of those things where I keep opening box after box until it turns out you got me a keychain?”
“Dammit, I should’ve thought of that,” Erica said. “Can I trade mine in and keep the comics?”

“Fuck off, no, they’re mine,” he told her, and she laughed.

“It was worth a try. Hurry up, Derek wouldn’t tell us what his was.”

He peeled off the tape sealing the box closed, huffed at Derek for making this process so difficult, and finally managed to pull the lid off. “An entire box filled with tissue paper, cool, it’s what I always wanted!” he said as he started tearing away at the next obstruction.

“Oh, wow.” That came from Scott, who was leaning over his shoulder to see better.

Stiles lifted the garment out of the box, its soft leather sleeves unfolding to reveal a jacket he would’ve been afraid to even touch in a store. He didn’t know enough about clothing to estimate how much it’d cost, but out of my price range seemed like a massive understatement.

“What the hell, Derek,” he said, his voice choked. The socks and gloves were one thing—meaningful but casual enough. Even so, he’d kept them stashed in a drawer, because touching any of them had made him feel like shit for so long, sending all the pain of losing Derek crashing back over him every single time. But this? This wasn’t the kind of thing you picked up on a whim.

Derek scratched at his beard. Bashfully? Nervously? It was hard to tell. He was definitely avoiding looking at Erica and Boyd, though. “I’ve had it since Thanksgiving,” he said. “It might be a little warmer than you’ll need for a while. It was—originally it was supposed to be your Christmas present.”

Stiles didn’t know why that did it. It was the reminder of all the time they’d lost, maybe. The gut-wrenching knowledge that in a slightly different timeline, he would’ve been surrounded by Derek’s family while opening this gift. Even now, all of this still felt like less than it’d seemed during that weekend in late November, when Derek had looked at him in a way that’d made him believe anything was possible.

“Is it—do you not like it?” Derek asked, and Stiles realized he hadn’t said anything; he’d simply been standing there, clutching the jacket, the world going hazy and distant as the wind rushed into his ears.

“I can’t do this right now,” he said, leaving the table abruptly.

He wasn’t sure where he was going; leaving the house was more dramatic than he was intending to be. He just needed...space. A few minutes by himself to push back the dizzying sensation flooding his brain and clouding the edges of his vision.

He ended up in Derek’s spare bedroom, which really only made everything worse; there were too many memories haunting it now. He shut his eyes, pushing back the rapid flood of images vying for his attention, and focused on the present. It was the only thing he could control.

Calming down was a slow, careful process he’d taught himself over the years. The key was to not rush. No gasping, no struggling after the phantom future moment where he’d be fine again. Each breath was equally important: holding it in his lungs, breathing it out, taking another until it began to feel more natural.

When he came back to himself, he found Derek standing in the doorway.

“I’m sorry; I haven’t been here long,” Derek said. “If you want me to go, or if you’d rather I get Scott, I will. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”
“I’m fine,” Stiles said, although he wasn’t totally sure that was true. He loosened his grip on the jacket that he’d apparently taken with him.

Derek seemed to accept that as a dismissal. He gave a short nod, his lips drawn down, betraying the distress he was clearly trying to hide. “I’ll leave you alone, then.”

“No, don’t go!” The plea jolted out of his throat and held Derek in place.

“Okay,” Derek said, slow and steady, his troubled expression lightening the smallest amount. “Then do you mind if I ask some questions?”

Stiles huffed out a laugh. “Stop with the eggshells. You’ve seen me like this before. I’m fine, I just needed a minute.”

“Was the jacket too much? Laura warned me it might be.”

“The jacket is fucking ridiculous and amazing, just like you, and I don’t think I’m nearly cool enough to wear it. But don’t get me wrong, that won’t stop me.” Stiles took in another deep, bracing breath. “The thing is, I know I promised I was going to be patient about everything with us. And I’ve been trying.”

“I know you have,” Derek said. He pushed his shoulder into the doorframe and crossed his arms, the sleeves of his lavender t-shirt stretching tight across his biceps. His mouth slanted unhappily. “It’s not working, is it?”

Stiles didn’t respond, and Derek let out a pained-sounding exhale, followed by a slightly wounded, “I thought we were doing okay.”

“We are. That’s the problem. I’m really tired of being just okay.”

Derek’s eyebrows pulled down. “Can you clarify that?”

Fuck, Stiles thought. Fuck fuck fuck why am I doing this.

He couldn’t answer his own question, but he could at least try to address Derek’s. “I’m not a very patient person. It’s kind of a bad trait for someone in a scientific field, I know. I think that’s part of why computer science appeals to me. Obviously things aren’t immediate there, either, but it’s hands on enough that when I get in the zone, I can stay up all night coding until I make something that works. And when I fuck up or something breaks on its own, I can debug it, line by line, until I figure out how to fix it.”

“And you haven’t figured out how to fix us.”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot. And you’re right, we’re good now. We’re fine. We’re friends again.” Stiles set the jacket down and pushed his palms against his thighs. He was feeling shaky and full of regret, but hell, he’d come this far. “I think that this might be good enough for you. Like—this feels like it might be your stopping point? And suddenly I was thinking about what we were like over Thanksgiving, and before that, and I still...fuck, Derek, I still miss you. You’re right here, and I still fucking miss you.”

He didn’t look up until he felt the mattress bow and settle under Derek’s weight. “I’m trying, too,” Derek said quietly, his knee nudging against Stiles’s. “Obviously not hard enough. I set a lot of guidelines, and you’ve been amazing about respecting them. I haven’t expressed that, and I should’ve. And I’m realizing now that I didn’t really let you do the same. So what can I do? What do you need?”
“I’m pissed at you,” Stiles admitted. “I understand why you reacted the way you did. Everything you said when we talked about this before—I get it. I reminded you of some really shitty stuff, and I get that sometimes you need to pull up your defenses to deal with that. But that doesn’t change the fact that you knew me. At least, I thought you did. The way we were—that wasn’t some casual thing I do with everyone. With anyone. I thought you got that.”

“I did. I still do.”

Stiles turned to him, the long-withheld anger vibrating through his entire body. “But when it came down to it, you tossed aside everything you knew about me, everything we...” His breath hissed in through his teeth, sharp and painful. “Everything we were to each other. And you didn’t trust me enough to talk to me.”

Derek didn’t flinch away from the eye contact. “I wasn’t fair to you.”

“You’re goddamn right you weren’t,” Stiles snapped, fueled by one last flare of anger.

He was already beginning to deflate. It was difficult to maintain any substantial righteous indignation with Derek that close to him, his face filled with empathetic concern.

“I wasn’t,” Derek repeated. His eyebrows lifted, softening his expression. “And I’m more sorry about that than I can tell you. If I could take any of it back now, you know I would.”

Stiles couldn’t keep his eyes from flicking down to Derek’s mouth—fuck, that was close, too. A couple inches more, a slight tilt of his head...and he’d ruin any of the progress they’d made. That was the last fucking thing he should even be thinking about in this moment.

“So what’re we gonna do about it?” he asked, his voice grating over the restraint he was funneling into every muscle.

“I don’t think that decision should be mine,” Derek said. “We’ve established that I pretty much have no idea what I’m doing here.”

“Like I do,” Stiles snorted, pulling himself slightly out of Derek’s orbit before he got drawn the rest of the way in. He thought through what it was he needed, what guidelines Derek was asking him to put in place to balance his. “You’ll trust me from now on? Anything that might happen—you won’t shut down, you’ll talk to me about it so we can fix it?”

Derek nodded. “I know this doesn’t really make sense, and it sounds like a line, but...the person I was angry with the entire way through wasn’t you, it was me. It’s hard for me to see other people clearly sometimes—even the people who matter the most to me—because when it comes down to it, I’m not very good at trusting myself. I make shitty decisions. And then when I try to fix them, I end up making even shittier ones.”

“Well,” Stiles said. “Some of that’s gonna take more time for us to work through, but good thing I’ve got that last part covered. If you’re not able to believe in yourself, I’ll believe in you twice as hard until you can.”

Derek’s smile made something in his chest flutter. “I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“It is after today,” Stiles said with a stubborn jut of his chin. “We’ll make it into some kind of self-sustaining trust loop. From now on, we’ve gotta rely on each other. You tell me when you’re worrying about shit or if I’m doing something that weirds you out or whatever, and I’ll do my damnedest to do the same so we don’t end up like this again. Deal?”
“Deal.”

They smiled at each other for a few beats, then Derek touched Stiles’s knee before standing. “We should get back outside before Erica traumatizes Scott too much. Or I should, anyway; you can hang out in here as long as you want.”

Stiles sighed and pushed himself off the bed, gathering up his new jacket, still warm from his body heat. “The bigger danger’s the two of them becoming fast friends and spilling all the dirt on us. You don’t need to worry about him; he’s tougher than he seems.”

“He,” Derek said. “I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“Dammit Scott,” he said—out loud this time—and Derek gave him a wry grin.

“I can’t blame him. I haven’t exactly been the nicest to you lately.”

“One, that’s false. And two, he’s doing his skeptical best friend pseudo brother thing. He’ll be over it in about a day, and after that you’ll see he’s pretty much the friendliest guy you’ll ever meet. Like, to a degree that would probably annoy me if he wasn’t already a permanent part of my life.”

“Do you talk about all your loved ones this fondly?”

Stiles smirked at him. “Hey, you just signed on for this. No backing out already.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Derek said with exaggerated solemnity.

Whatever this was. They hadn’t exactly defined the hum of interest vibrating between them, but it felt more open-ended now. Forget the rest of the gifts: this was all Stiles had wanted from the day. And there was still so much of it left to go.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek learns to trust
Chapter 26

Stiles followed Derek’s invitation with one of his own. Despite the positive outcome of their grievance-airing talk a few days prior, his voice had sounded odd when he’d asked, as though he’d expected—or perhaps wanted—Derek to turn him down.

“Absurd,” Derek told Lola, whose responding snort he took as agreement. Nevermind that she was busy pushing her nose against a tree trunk she’d insisted on stopping to investigate on their way to Stiles’s apartment. “Careful, girl; one of these days you’re gonna wind up with splinters in your nostrils,” he added in warning.

She sighed and let him gently cup her whiskery muzzle as an affectionate deterrent to the bark-scraping. Derek scrunched up his own nose in sympathy, wondering—not for the first time—how dogs could have such sensitive noses yet still manage to stick them in everything they came across. Including, last week, a rather close call with a neighborhood cat’s claws when Lola had simply been trying to check whether they could be friends. The cat’s answer had been an unnecessarily violent no.

Fortunately, that was the worst of their wildlife encounters thus far. While deer made appearances along the more woodsy trails and occasionally strayed out of the hills and onto populated streets, it’d been a good year or more since he’d seen any nibbling at the lush foliage in the yards around his, driving the neighborhood dogs into a frenzy. And, much to his relief, skunks hadn’t been a problem yet. He was dreading the day when Lola would attempt to befriend—or chase, depending on her mood—one of those.

“I’d recommend neither,” he told her.

When Derek was much younger, he’d read far too many books. Not that he’d changed much over the years, but back then, he’d had a heavy preference for animal stories. Thanks to his biased education, he’d believed that every creature in the sprawling woods outside their home was a potential best friend.

His mom had patiently released the succession of raccoons, lizards, snakes, and birds he’d brought home, but she’d put her foot down when she’d found him smuggling a baby skunk into his bedroom. Unfortunately, that’d merely served to frighten the skunk, who’d then thoroughly sprayed Derek, his mom, the geriatric family dog, and the hand-stitched quilt that’d been passed down to him from his grandma’s will.

It’d taken a lot of scrubbing to get the stink out of the fabric and out of his hair. It’d taken longer for his mom to let him enter the house without checking to make sure he didn’t have anything alive hidden inside his coat or in any of his pockets. After that, he’d been forced to narrow his dreams of pet ownership to a far more limited set of options.

Unfair, really. The third raccoon had lasted two whole weeks before his mom had found it tossing soda cans across the kitchen floor, having figured out both how to open Derek’s room door and the fridge door. If his mom had been more open-minded about the whole thing, one of the wilderness pets probably would’ve worked out. Eventually.

Lola licked Derek’s hand, having been patient with him for long enough. She hurried a few steps
away then paused to wait for him, indicating she wanted to take the longer, more smell-intensive route to the other side of campus. That was fine with him; he wasn’t in a huge hurry. In fact, he was a bit nervous. He could admit that, when Lola was the only one around to take notice.

“Sometimes I wish you could talk,” Derek said to her wagging tail as she trotted happily along the path.

He could call Laura, true. She’d listen and possibly even give decent advice, but first she’d want to know why he’d been jumping at shadows all afternoon, his heartbeat ticking up at the sound of new text alerts, and he wasn’t really sure he had an answer.

It was stupid to think that things had shifted so dramatically at Stiles’s party. There’d been moments, yes, where he’d felt the old sparks leaping between them, stabilizing into a current that he could still feel prickling under his skin. That wasn’t how Derek interacted with his friends, no matter how close they were. And he certainly didn’t get actual heart palpitations or sweaty palms on his way to their houses.

Stiles was attracted to him, too. That much was abundantly evident. But what else did he want? And what could Derek give him without shattering himself all over again? He had a pretty clear sense that sex would be on the table if he was open to it. Not tonight—at least, he didn’t think that was the reason for Stiles’s hesitation in asking him over—but all it’d take would be a few pointed touches, a momentary lapse in judgment, and he’d be able to feel Stiles’s body against him, inside of him, snapping that last connection into place and sending him toppling over an edge he’d never be able to return from.

He didn’t know if he could handle that. If a potential month, maybe two if he got lucky, of probably mindblowing sex would be worth the mourning period after.

Stiles wasn’t looking to date him. He’d said as much, putting everything out there so Derek wouldn’t misunderstand his intentions this time. Stiles didn’t seem to be interested in dating in general right now, which made sense for a guy who’d soon be moving to another school, most likely in another state. He was at a different point in his life—settling down wasn’t going to be high on his priorities for a while.

Not that it was necessarily even an age thing. That was something Derek had only started to figure out about himself this year, although the clues had been there all along, if he’d only known where to look. Hell, he’d bought an engagement ring for Jennifer. He hadn’t actually given it to her—he’d been waiting for the right romantic moment, and she’d beat him to the punch—but in his mind, it’d seemed like the inevitable conclusion. You met someone, you fell in love, you got married, you spent your life together. You weren’t supposed to get fucked over and tossed aside and lose all faith in forever afters.

More than once, Laura had shaken her head at him and sighed, For someone so rational, you make ridiculously emotional decisions, you know that?

Derek had always thought it meant that something inside him was broken. That normal people knew how to deal with their emotions and that his inability to reasonably manage his meant that, at the end of the day, he deserved to be alone. He was still more than a little convinced that was true.

When it came to Stiles, though, Derek’s usual avoid-and-ignore method had already proved to be insufficient. The emotions weren’t going away, and, according to that eye-opening conversation on Saturday, neither was Stiles. So should he go for it? Indulge in what he couldn’t deny he wanted right now, then let it slide into a long distance friendship where they might hook up once in a while whenever they were in the same vicinity.
It’s what a normal person would probably do. He kicked at a rock and watched it skitter off into the bushes, the noise drawing Lola’s attention until she’d listened for long enough to determine it wasn’t worth investigating.

He’d promised Stiles they’d talk through potential trouble spots earlier and more often, but he wasn’t sure an internal conflict over his own feelings counted. Tonight was just meant to be dinner and hanging out—Stiles’s way of paying him back for the last time they’d had a meal together, at a restaurant of Derek’s choosing.

Derek was trying, was the thing. He was making an effort to spend time in public places with Stiles, to connect him with his friends, to show that he was invested. He wasn’t sure that message was getting across the way he’d meant it to. At least meeting Scott—who wouldn’t be in the apartment tonight, Stiles had offered as a selling point—had been a step in more or less the right direction. By the end of the barbecue, Scott had gotten marginally less tight-lipped and disapproving, although the jacket incident hadn’t helped matters.

Erica, on the other hand, had completely changed her tune on Stiles. The two of them, plus Kira, had wound up in a debate that’d quickly left Derek’s comic book knowledge in the dust. He had all the basics down and could generally hold his own, but apparently there was an entirely separate level of superhero expertise he’d never even known existed.

Derek had retreated to the grassy stretch of the yard, where Scott and Boyd had started kicking one of Lola’s jumbo-sized tennis balls around as soon as the conversation had shifted to something neither of them appeared to know or care anything about. It’d turned into a fourway game of keepaway-fetch with Lola, and Derek had tried to encourage Scott to talk about himself without making it seem like he was playing some awkward—and probably unwelcome—older brother role.

He wasn’t sure if that’d exactly worked, either, but Kira had squeezed him tightly when they’d left, and Stiles had ducked back in for a quick leather-scented hug, so it wasn’t all bad.

And now he was standing outside a fairly rundown-looking apartment complex, double-checking the number Stiles had given him so he didn’t knock on the wrong door. The door in question turned out to be ajar, and Lola pushed the rest of the way into the apartment before he had a chance to give more than a cursory rap.

Well, then. That was one way of making an entrance.

“Hey, sorry,” Derek started as he unslung his bag and attempted to push the door closed—a more difficult task than he’d anticipated—but Stiles was cheerfully greeting Lola and didn’t seem to mind that the two of them had barged in.

“Oh yeah, you gotta put your shoulder into it,” Stiles said once he noticed Derek struggling. “I already had to yank it open for the pizza guy a few minutes ago, so I figured I’d just leave it until you got here. Here, hang on, there’s a trick to it.” He approached from behind, putting one hand on Derek’s shoulder to angle it against the wood and bracing the other on Derek’s hip to provide better leverage.

“I really don’t think this is the most efficient method of closing a door,” Derek managed after a few seconds of feeling Stiles’s heat all along his back, their hips aligning as Stiles pushed into him to demonstrate what he’d meant.

The wooden door creaked and groaned into its frame, the latch clicked, and Stiles stepped back, his face flaming. “Yeah, that’s, uh. That is how you do it. Um. Pizza?”
“If that’s what you consider dinner payback,” Derek said to make Stiles huff in annoyance and smooth over the momentary awkwardness.

“You’re damn right it is. I got us the best pizza in town.”

“I’ll believe it when I taste it.” Derek unbuttoned his suit jacket and, after a second’s thought, pushed it off his shoulders and draped it over the back of one of the chairs at the small table where Stiles was arranging the pizza boxes and a plastic container of salad.

“Healthy options,” Stiles said, nudging the latter closer to the plate he’d set out for Derek.

“Which I assume means you got the least healthy pizzas on the menu?”

“Damn straight.” He triumphantly flung the lid of the first box back.

Derek leaned forward, still unbuttoning the sleeves of his dress shirt so he could roll them up. A white shirt didn’t typically go well with pizza sauce; he probably should’ve asked Stiles what their dinner plans actually were before he’d gotten dressed that morning. “Is that...mac and cheese? On a pizza?”

“The other one’s barbecue chicken. I usually stick to it and a meat lover’s when I’m in a mood to treat myself, but this was on their special menu, only available through the end of March. We made it with a day to spare.”

“Well, best make the most of it, then,” Derek said. He dipped a finger into the cheesy orange mixture to test its taste, then slid a messy, dripping slice onto his plate. “Not sure we needed an extra large one for the two of us, but not bad.”

“Don’t you worry about that, Scott and I’ll eat whatever’s left over.” Stiles cleared his throat and ducked into the kitchen area. “You want a beer? Or two beers? I need to make some space in the fridge so the leftovers’ll fit.”

Derek glanced at where he’d assumed the fridge would be, then blinked and looked down. Stiles was crouched on the floor, pushing away Lola’s inquisitive face and pulling a six pack out of a tiny humming appliance that wouldn’t have fit even one of the pizza boxes. He rubbed at his neck in embarrassment when he turned to see Derek watching him.

“Not quite up to par with your place, huh?”

“You should’ve seen my first couple college apartments,” Derek replied.

He swept his gaze around the rest of the room, noting the battered furniture, poster-plastered walls, and piles of electronics and books. It wasn’t a large space, but it was homely. It felt warm and lived in—comfortably cluttered—and he found himself idly wondering how much of the decor was Stiles’s. Some was obvious—the vintage Star Wars posters, for example, which were framed and hung neatly instead of tacked to the walls. Others were harder to tell. Who’d get the television when Stiles moved out? Which of them would take the couch, or would they simply dump it by the curb and let the next set of college students sweep in to rescue it?

Derek picked out a slice of the barbecue chicken pizza to cover for the wave of sadness that thought had sent surging through him. At least he was getting to see Stiles’s place before any of that happened. He’d be able to picture the context of his stories now. And maybe Stiles would send photos of his next apartment, or upload them online where Derek could scroll through and get a sense of what was going on with his new life. Would that be weird to ask? He sighed and chewed on a sliver of red onion that’d fallen to the side of his plate.
“One for you, one for me,” Stiles said, returning to the table and plunking a beer in front of each of them. “I’m assuming Lola should not be eating any of this, right?”

Lola’s nose and front paws had crept over the edge of the table, and she swept her tongue out before Stiles could yank his plate out of reach.

“I brought some of her food,” Derek said. He snapped his fingers, and Lola grumpily dropped down from the table and flopped on top of his feet instead. He reached down to pet her, and she licked off the barbecue sauce he hadn’t fully wiped away.

“That means you’re staying for a while.”

Derek had thought that’d been the point of the invitation: dinner, followed by a mutual study session, of sorts. Maybe he’d misunderstood? Stiles was aiming a pleased smile down at his pizza, though, so Derek didn’t attempt to clarify the point. He took a swig of his beer—a cheap brand with a decent flavor—then ripped off his pizza crust and broke it into even, bite-sized pieces.

Stiles was already starting on his second slice of mac and cheese pizza, the yellow-orange sauce staining the corners of his mouth. He poked the tip of his tongue out to clean his lips, and Derek looked away.

“I brought some papers to finish grading,” he said. “Office hours weren’t too busy today, so I got through a decent amount. Still have a lot of reading left to do, though.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been switching your office hours around to hang out with me after class.”

Derek dabbed at his mouth with one of the pizza parlor’s rough brown napkins, checking to make sure he hadn’t dripped anything on himself yet. “It wasn’t a big deal. And Erica wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

All Derek had done was push his scheduled block an hour later. He got fewer drop-ins when he wasn’t teaching undergrad courses, anyway; most of his students knew him or the department well enough by now, and he could generally anticipate their needs. The worst it’d done was throw his dinner schedule off twice a week, which had been easy enough to balance by planning out quick meals he could heat up as soon as he got home. It’d certainly been worth it to drink coffee while listening to Stiles ramble on about some of his classes and his latest annoyances with the catering crowd.

Stiles plucked a cucumber slice out of the mostly untouched salad container and crunched it noisily, washing it down with the last of his first beer before popping the tab on the next and leaning back comfortably in his chair. “She seems to think I have some sort of leverage with you. Which is ridiculous. I mean, you didn’t cut back on your classes this semester because of anything I said to you about it.”

“I’d been thinking about it for a while,” Derek said, which wasn’t really the full story. Did Stiles need to know how much their conversations had made him rethink how he was spending his time? His priorities had been shifting so gradually, he’d barely even noticed himself.

“That’s what I told her.” Stiles rubbed his stomach, eyed the pizza boxes, then filled his plate again. “Still. Getting work out of the way and then hanging out is better, all around, and you shoulda told me earlier.”

“You could’ve been feeding me artery-clogging gourmet dinners all this time.”

“Exactly. Don’t even try to lie and tell me you’re not into this.”
Derek ducked his head to try to hide his smile. Of course he was into it. The dinner, the tiny table that barely fit both sets of their legs plus Lola under it, Stiles’s knees knocking against his, the knowledge that they had hours together still stretching ahead of them...it was probably the happiest he’d felt in weeks. Possibly even months.

“I guess it’s okay,” he said, and Stiles rolled his eyes and started gathering up the half-empty boxes.

“Okay, study time options are the table, with these shitty uncomfortable chairs but a hard surface if you’ll need that for writing, or the couch, which is equally...let’s use real estate terms and call it cozy. But a helluva lot softer. And we have a coffee table? Kinda? They’re technically crates that we stuck an old board across, but they work in a pinch.”

“Couch,” Derek said. “Looks to me like we’ll both fit. Unless you had a different preference?”

Or—that was stupid to say. Maybe Stiles had meant they’d each take one of the spots, rather than choosing one to squeeze into together.

Stiles simply nodded, though. “Works for me. My shit’s already on it, so just move whatever you want. And uh—I could grab a towel or something? For you to sit on.”

Derek lifted his eyebrows in question but didn’t receive an answer. He’d risen to his feet to help Stiles clean up; he needed to wash the sticky residue of the meal off his hands before he touched his students’ papers, anyway. Stiles kept trying to hipcheck him to take care of everything himself, so Derek moved to the sink and flicked on the tap. He dried his hands off on a paper towel and waited to drop it into the trash, watching as Stiles used a heavy glass bottle to compress the contents deeper into the plastic can.

“Uh,” Stiles said when he turned around. “That’s our highly professional method of fitting as much into the bag as possible.”

“You use a champagne bottle to save yourself the trouble of buying extra bags.”

“And making unnecessary trips to the dumpster.”

“I feel you on that,” Derek said. Stiles was looking jumpy again, like Derek was judging him for something he was half-wishing he’d thought of when he was stretched for money and hated going outside in winter. It wasn’t that. “It’s the juxtaposition of the trash with the champagne that gets me. That looks like a pretty fancy label.”

“Is it?” Stiles squinted at it, then set it back down by the can and rinsed his hands, wiping them off on his jeans. “Lydia sent us a couple bottles as a belated Christmas present. She brought it back from Paris, I guess. It was pretty good—champagne’s not really my thing. Scott and I split the first bottle, and he nabbed the second one for some romantic picnic with strawberries and shit.”

Derek bent to check the label again. “Parisian wine. Cora would love that. She went to Paris once, years ago, and she’s always talking about how much she wants to go back.”

“You should hook her up with Lyds. I mean, Allison’s the one who lives in Paris, so they’d probably get along, too, but Lydia’s the real wine snob. They’d be kindred spirits or whatever. She always gets irritated when we go out to dinner and I’m not that into the idea of splitting a hundred dollar bottle with her.”

“Everything over twenty bucks a bottle tastes roughly the same to me,” Derek admitted. “Don’t ever tell Cora I said that, though.”
“Your secret’s safe with me. Especially because I could say the same about anything over five bucks a pop, and your sister would probably hate me on sight for that.”

“She’d just say you needed more time and exposure for your palate to expand. I have no excuse, because she’s been trying it on me for years, and I’m a lost cause.” Derek took a picture of the label and texted it to Cora, then read her almost immediate response out loud. “She says, ‘I know you didn’t pick that out yourself, so you’d better introduce me to whoever did. Especially if she’s hot.’ Told you she has no faith in me.”

“Tell her to look up Lydia Martin,” Stiles said, poking his head over Derek’s shoulder to watch as he texted. “You saw some of her photos through my page, yeah? Cora should be able to find her profile, then, since I’m Facebook friends with all you Hales.”

“This feels weird,” Derek said as he transcribed Stiles’s instructions. “Am I trying to get my little sister a friend or a date?”

“Huh,” Stiles said. “That’s actually...huh. Well, whichever works. But if Lydia ends up uninviting me from the next Paris trip because she’s taking your sister, you’ve gotta make it up to me.”

“With a Warsaw trip?” Derek said lightly, not-so-secretly thrilled at Stiles’s easy assurance that they’d still be at that level of interaction a year or more from now.

“Not during Christmas, fuck no. But yeah. Another time, maybe. That’d be cool.”

He fidgeted around the room, not seeming to know what to do with himself while Derek retrieved Lola’s food and unfolded two portable dishes—one for water, and one for her meal.

“I’ll be ready in a minute,” Derek said. “You don’t have to wait for me if you need to get started on your own.”

Stiles let out a short, abrupt laugh and sat down on the couch, then popped back up. “Right, I was gonna grab you a towel.”

“Why would I need a towel?” Derek asked, still baffled by that offer. “You’re not sitting on one.”

“Well, no.” Stiles indicated his jeans—a nicely worn-in pair that stretched appealingly over his thighs, the color fading a bit from multiple washes. “You just look...really nice. I don’t want your suit pants getting fucked up on our kinda nasty dumpster couch. Or your shirt. Do you wanna borrow a different shirt? No, that’s weird, I’m not trying to get you to take your clothes off, forget I said that.”

Derek made sure Lola was properly situated in her new surroundings and could locate her bowls, then crossed over to the couch, brushed aside the notebooks scattered on one end, and pointedly sat down, propping his feet up on the coffee table crates. He lifted his eyebrows in challenge, and Stiles shook his head with a laugh.

“Fine, your loss, dude. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Stiles shifted through several different positions over the next couple hours, moving from laptop to notebooks to laptop again to a thick book with a Polish title. He settled down with that one, his back against the other arm of the couch and the book propped against his knees. He highlighted the pages heavily as he read, periodically consulting a Polish-English dictionary, then removing a tooth-marked pen from his mouth to scribble notes in the margins.

“Sunshine,” Derek said absently as he set another marked-up paper aside. He was writing out his more extensive comments by hand for now and would transfer them to printed form over the
weekend.

Stiles’s head snapped up, and he spat the pen out of his mouth. “What did you say?”

“Your name. Słoneczko. I looked it up, out of curiosity, after I got back from Warsaw.”

“How do you even...” Stiles said, his mouth gaping. “Right. The fucking enrollment list. Damn thing’s still on all my official records.”

When Derek had initially seen it, he’d spent a couple of seconds wondering if Erica had accidentally registered the wrong student. On further reflection, he’d concluded that the likelihood of there being two Stilinskis on campus seemed slim and that he wasn’t foolhardy enough to question Erica’s ability to do her job properly.

“Am I saying it right? I listened to a couple clips online, but you never really know with those.”

“Słoneczko,” Stiles muttered, and Derek tried it again, until Stiles confirmed he’d gotten the pronunciation down. “My Polish prof thought I was playing a joke on her at first. I told her to call me Stiles and forget she’d ever seen that.”

“It’s a nice name,” Derek said, and Stiles shot him a profoundly unamused look.

“It’s not a name.”

“It’s more interesting than Derek, anyway. Is there a story behind it?”

Stiles put his entire body into his sigh, stretching his legs across the couch until he’d fully invaded Derek’s space. It didn’t take much, really—it was a very small couch, and Derek had been comfortably aware of their proximity throughout the evening.

Without stopping to think about it, he touched Stiles’s leg, loosely wrapping his fingers around the fine bones of Stiles’s ankle, just under the hem of his jeans. He didn’t know why he did it—to hold him in place, maybe, to make sure he didn’t dodge the question. Or simply to complete that connection again, giving the current sizzling through them a path to follow.

Either way, it softened the annoyed slant of Stiles’s mouth, and he tilted his chin in that stubbornly defiant way of his before tucking his toes further under Derek’s thigh. Derek squeezed his ankle lightly before letting go and returning to the next paper in the stack.

“It’s a pet name,” Stiles said after a moment. “Term of endearment, I guess? Pretty commonly used in Poland. You probably figured that out.”

“That it’s not just ‘sunshine’ in its most literal meaning? Yeah.”

“It’s that, too, though. Sorta. My mom liked stuff like that. Anything with double meanings or extra layers you wouldn’t even know to look for unless you had the right key to start unlocking the story.”

There it was again: the magic beyond the mundane realities of the world as it was generally perceived to be. That brand of ever-so-slightly off-kilter creativity that her son had inherited and, Derek suspected, occasionally feared within himself.

“So what’re the double layers in your name? Or have I not earned the key yet?”

Stiles wiggled his toes a little under Derek’s thigh—it was strange, but it felt like an affectionate gesture, the equivalent of a pat on the shoulder from anyone else. “It was raining the day my mom
found out she was pregnant. It’d been raining all week, actually, which wasn’t really usual for that time of year, so stuff like traffic had gotten fucked up and my dad was working long, stressful shifts dealing with a lot of unhappy people. And my mom had been feeling pretty bad, which she was trying to keep from my dad so he wouldn’t worry. Basically, not a great time.”

He paused to check whether Derek was following, then plunged on. “It didn’t occur to her earlier that she might not actually be sick, because she’d had trouble getting pregnant. She and my dad had tried for a while, nothing had happened, and they’d kinda started to think they might never be able to. I dunno what they would’ve done. Tried treatments? Adopted? Just gave up on having kids? My mom never really said. But that day she went out, in the rain, and bought a box of pregnancy tests. And right when she was holding the stick up to see the result, the rain stopped. She exaggerated, y’know? Made things sound bigger and brighter than they actually were, but the way she told it, it was like someone had reached into the sky and twisted the tap off, and everything went quiet. And then the clouds broke apart and the sun came pouring through the window, and that’s when she knew she was having a baby.”

“She used a lot of pet names during the pregnancy. Some Polish, some English. I was her little miracle baby. Or her misiaczek—sometimes misiu, for short. Teddy bear, basically, so you don’t have to look that one up.”

“You could’ve ended up with that one, then,” Derek said, and Stiles snorted.

“True. I don’t know if that would’ve been better or worse. Anyway, słoneczko, her sunshine, was the one she used the most, until that was just how she thought of me. And when I was born, she and my dad realized they’d never actually agreed on a name. They’d talked about a few different ones and hadn’t really liked anything, and the months flew by and they got caught up in all the other baby prep and let it slide, and then suddenly she was in labor and trying to get my dad to show up, and the last thing she was thinking about was what I’d actually be called when I came out.”

“That’d happened to one of Derek’s friends, who’d officially been Baby Boy Gunderson on his birth certificate until his parents had made up their minds. Derek’s mom had planned all of theirs out well in advance. His, for instance, meant gifted ruler, and she’d raised him under the mistaken belief that he’d live up to that title. Having a name that stemmed entirely from deep-rooted love and a sense of joy and awe that’d lasted throughout the pregnancy didn’t seem half bad to him.

“No,” Stiles said, “The head nurse—Melissa’s boss, before she became the boss—was pressuring them to write something down, and my parents were so wrapped up in the moment that they didn’t really take the time to think about it. As she was lying there holding me, my mom looked down and said, ‘Ah, Słoneczko, what kind of life will you have without the right name to guide you?’ And she said I smiled at her—which I’m not even sure is possible, but this is my mom’s version of what happened, so grain of salt—and it was, quote, ‘Just like that beam of sunlight from the day I first knew you were a part of me.’ So that was it. Słoneczko Stilinski. I don’t even have a middle name.”

Derek touched his ankle again, and Stiles looked at him in surprise. “I think it’s a nice name,” he repeated. It was even more true now that he knew the full context. “She really loved you.”

Stiles’s mouth twisted. “Yeah. I dunno. She’s the only one who ever used it. I couldn’t really say it right when I was a kid, so as soon as I was old enough to talk, I shortened my last name to something my dad interpreted as ‘Stiles,’ and I liked that. I still do. It feels like me.”
“I like Stiles, too,” Derek said. “If your other name bothers you, I won’t use it anymore.”

Stiles tapped his pen against the couch, a thoughtful beat, like the thumping of a metronome. “It’s not that it bothers me. I’m not used to it anymore. And no one but my mom’s ever seen me that way. Like I’m—I don’t know. Something brilliant and transcendent.”

“She knew you were special,” Derek said quietly.

The pen stopped, and Stiles said Derek’s name, his voice sounding almost pained—but before he could continue, the front door jolted several times in its frame and gave way with a lurching groan. Lola had jumped upright at the first warning creak, braced to defend their territory against whatever monster was on its way inside, and Derek reached down to calm her.

It was only Scott, who shielded his eyes as soon as he saw them on the couch. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I’m not here. Keep doing...whatever.”

“You’re supposed to be with Kira, what the hell,” Stiles said, sounding irritated but not moving any farther away from Derek.

“I was. Her roommate came back from the library and kicked me out. Said I’ve been around too much and she was sick of my face. Hey,” he added with a hopeful lilt, “you got pizza?”

“Fridge. You get two slices, because I want the rest for lunch tomorrow.”

“Because work’s gonna be extra shitty, yeah yeah I know.”

“Fucking April Fools parties, who throws those? And gets them catered?”

“Hopefully people who tip a lot. And not with Monopoly money this time,” Scott said with a lopsided grin. “Thanks dude! I’ll get outta your hair.” Holding one slice, with another dangling from his mouth, he exited into the bedroom and pointedly slammed the door.

Lola jumped again at the noise and scrambled onto the couch, squeezing between Derek and the cushioned arm where he’d been neatly stacking his completed papers. He rescued them, grunting as Lola’s attempts to get comfortable shoved him a few inches closer to Stiles. She ended up with her muzzle resting on his thigh, and Stiles put his feet back once they were resettled.

“Cozy,” Stiles said with a grin, and Derek snorted.

He checked his watch. It was getting late; Scott’s return could serve as a hint that he should be on his way. Stiles didn’t seem to be pushing him out the door, though, and he did have a few papers left to get through. He swallowed back the I should get going and flipped open another essay.

They read in silence for a while, until Scott cranked up some kind of bone-grinding music in the bedroom and someone on the upper floor started stomping loudly.

“Are they trying to tell him to turn it down? Or having a dance party?” Derek asked. He remembered those days, too, when he lived in apartments with walls so thin that he could hear every last gasp and moan filtering through from his neighbors’ bedrooms.

“Both? Or they’re criticizing his taste in music. Who knows, I never talk to those jackasses.” Stiles tossed his books aside and pulled his computer back into his lap.

“I guess that’s one thing you won’t miss.”
Stiles tilted the laptop screen down so he could see him. “When I move out of this shithole?”

“It’s not so bad,” Derek said. He fiddled with the edge of the paper he’d just finished grading. “But yeah, moving has its benefits sometimes. Do you know yet what your new place will be like?”

“No. I haven’t actually...I have a couple weeks until I have to give firm answers on the schools that’ve accepted me.”

“You haven’t decided yet?” It was stupid to let that give him hope. It didn’t matter if Stiles made the decision two weeks from now; he was still leaving. But maybe he’d choose something relatively nearby. In Seattle? Were there programs there that’d appeal to him? Derek should’ve spent some time looking into this.

“It’s driving my dad crazy,” Stiles said with a wry quirk of his mouth. “I’m thinking through my options. It’s a big decision.”

“Who’re your frontrunners?”

Stiles tapped at the side of his keyboard, like he was using the beat to knock his thoughts into a more even line. “Caltech. It’s the obvious choice. It has the kinds of labs that it’d be a dream to work with.”

“Ah. That’s far away.” Derek smoothed out the essay page that he’d accidentally crumpled in response to Stiles’s answer. “It’s a good school.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “I don’t know. I haven’t made up my mind yet. I’d miss people.”

“Scott,” Derek said.

Stiles’s mouth did something soft and sad. “Yeah. Among others.”

Don’t be selfish, Derek thought, and took a breath before adding an encouraging, “You’ll figure it out. You’ve gotta make the decision that’s best for you. Don’t worry about the people you’ll be leaving behind. They’ll still be there for you, no matter how far away you go.”

“Yeah?” Stiles asked, and Derek swallowed at the vulnerable, oddly hopeful look in his eyes.

“Cora’s always telling me the planes go both ways between here and LA. It wouldn’t take that much effort for Scott to visit.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Would you visit? With me being there, and Cora, too. Two birds, one flight.”

“Yeah,” Derek said, happiness seeping through his veins. “Yeah, if you wanted me to, of course I would.”

“Good,” Stiles said. “I’m holding you to that, then.”

“You want me to put it in writing?” Derek quipped, and Stiles brightened and rummaged around in his pile of homework, handing Derek a notebook.

Derek chuckled and opened it, flipping past pages of technical diagrams that made little to no sense to him. When he found a blank page, he wrote, I solemnly swear to visit Stiles, wherever he ends up
When he handed it back, Stiles grinned and scrawled his signature underneath Derek’s.

“You wrote it down, so it’s a contract now,” Stiles said. “Even if I end up in some school overseas, I expect to see you showing up at my door.”

“I said anywhere, and I meant it,” Derek said. “Although—the closer you end up, the more often that’s likely to happen. Purely from a logistical standpoint.”

Stiles nudged his toes against Derek’s leg. “Thanks for coming over tonight, by the way. I know this isn’t your usual kind of haunt.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” Derek countered. “I like seeing where you live. Stiles, sometimes you...”

“Sometimes I what?” he prompted when Derek trailed off.

He scratched along his jawline, thinking of how to phrase it. “You act like it’s a hardship for me to spend time with you. To be in spaces with you where you’re comfortable. I wish you didn’t do that. I like who you are, Stiles.”

“Even with my trash couch and sticky champagne bottles and embarrassing roommate?”

Derek dragged the notebook back over and wrote, *All of it*, and underlined it three times.

*Same*, Stiles wrote after a moment, and when they went back to their respective work, Derek found himself hardly minding the approach of graduation at all.
After that, they began alternating whose place they spent time in, although Stiles suspected that Derek was mostly being nice about wanting to hang out in a crappy little one-bedroom when he had an entire house at his disposal. He said as much the next time he was at Derek’s, his things spread across the big dining room table while Derek put together a meal he claimed was quick and essentially effortless. Judging by how amazing it already smelled, Stiles figured that was somewhere in the vicinity of a white lie, too.

Derek simply arched an eyebrow and added some spices to a simmering pot.

“I’m serious,” Stiles insisted, never able to let things go when he should. “The last time you were over, Scott spilled soup on you. Three day old soup that we’d stashed in the fridge because it was nasty to begin with. Putting up with me? Whatever, that I get. I’m awesome. Putting up with Scott and the trash-house is a totally different thing, and you don’t actually have to be that nice about it.”

“I think Scott’s starting to warm up to me,” Derek said. He set a bowl of sliced apples next to Stiles, who immediately popped one in his mouth. “Stop that, that’s for the fondue. It’ll be ready in about five more seconds.”

“I’ve never had fondue,” Stiles said. “Sounds awesome. Should I be doing something? Cutting...what do you dip in it, anyway? Anything other than vegetables?”

“Fruit,” Derek said, pointing at the apples. Stiles grinned at his beautiful sarcastic face. “Bread. I have some deli meats to make the meal a little more substantial. Cubes of ham that work well for dipping, some prosciutto and things you can eat with or without the cheese. And no, our deal is that we trade off. This meal’s my treat. You bought us Thai food after the soup incident.”

“That’s true.” And it’d been damn good, too.

“And tried to make Scott pay for it.”

“He ruined your shirt! It was the least he could do, the cheap bastard.”

“I seem to remember someone with a similarly low income who didn’t buy Lola a meal after pouring soda all over her,” Derek said, returning to the kitchen to stir the pot again and gather the rest of the ingredients.

“That was an entirely different situation that I thought we’d moved past. She forgave me ages ago, didn’t you, Lola?”

Lola continued batting around the toy he’d brought her—a belated Christmas present, he’d told Derek’s skeptical eyebrows. It wobbled across the floor, burbling out ridiculously annoying noises each time it turned over, making it easy for her to find. So far, she was as obsessed with it as he’d hoped. Derek was less openly enthused but was being very patient about the clamor. He’d probably make it halfway through dinner before removing it from the room.

“Lola would let you pour soda over her every day and still love you,” Derek said. “Soup, too, I imagine. Move your stuff over, I’ve gotta put a trivet down.”
Stiles closed his laptop and set it on a chair where it’d be out of the way, then stacked the rest of his books on the far edge of the table. Lately he’d been caught in a weird semi-dazed state where he couldn’t fully comprehend that he only had two weeks of classes left in his undergraduate career.

“I’m fucking graduating,” he told Derek, who huffed out a soft laugh as he finished setting up the table.

“Congratulations?”

Stiles propped his chin in his hand and poked a fondue fork into the cheese. Derek skewered a slice of crusty french bread, dipped and twisted it to keep it from dripping too much, and held it out to him. Stiles opened his mouth, let Derek feed him, and sighed as he chewed.

“S’good,” he said. It was rich and creamy, with a Derek-typical kick to it. “Graduation, though.”

“Are you nervous about it?” Derek plated himself a neat arrangement of bell peppers, carrots, broccoli, apples, smoked sausage, and cubes of bread. He proceeded to delicately dunk each in turn.

Stiles’s fork dripped and drizzled across the tabletop until he tightened up his technique.

“Not nervous, exactly. It just feels strange. Like I’m jumping off a cliff or something. I don’t know why. High school to college should’ve been the bigger leap.”

“This is when you start really nailing down your career path,” Derek said. “It’s a big deal. And this degree’s a major accomplishment.”

“Major, hah.” Stiles caught a dangling rope of cheese with his tongue. “You’ll be there, right? All professors show up at graduation? The main one, not just the department-specific ceremonies.”

“It’s a requirement. Unfortunately,” Derek said. His forehead furrowed, his eyebrows pulling into a frown, which he quickly—and unsuccessfully—attempted to smooth out.

“Yeah, I guess you must get sick of sitting through the same thing year after year.”

“It does get a little repetitive,” Derek said, swirling a bite of broccoli through the cheese and putting it back on his plate without touching it. “It’s mostly that graduation ceremonies still remind me of mine. When my parents...” He made a vague gesture, enough for Stiles to connect the dots.

Right. The last time Derek had ever seen or spoken to his parents was at his post-graduation meal. Thank fuck that’d come up now, before Stiles had done something idiotic like try to drag Derek along to his celebration.

“It’s ridiculous for someone in academia, huh?” Derek asked. “You’d think it’d fade after a few years, but it never really has.”

“There’s no timeline for getting over things like that,” Stiles reminded him.

It was a talk they’d had before and would likely continue dealing with throughout their lives. The most mundane moments could trigger bad memories; having them tied to a specific event you had to relive every year while surrounded by hundreds of strangers seemed like a special brand of torture. And Derek, of course, would suffer through it silently while trying to downplay its impact on him.

He was already trying to straighten his shoulders, and Stiles could almost see him searching for a new topic to draw the attention away from him. Stiles jumped back in first.
“Did you know Mother’s Day’s the weekend after graduation?”

Derek shook his head. “No; I guess I don’t pay a lot of attention to those dates anymore.”

“It used to be one of my favorite holidays. You don’t really know this about me, because everything with us got royally fucked up before Christmas and your birthday, but I love giving people presents. I hate shopping for myself, thus the clothes.” Stiles waved at his flannel-and-jeans ensemble. “But when you go into a store and see something that makes you think of someone you care about, and then you get to wrap it up and wait for them to open it and see their expression... I dunno, man. It’s one of the best feelings in the world. And my mom was the best person to buy stuff for.”

That pulled out a hint of a smile. “Did she do the over-enthused excitement thing?”

“Did she ever. It was great. And Mother’s Day was perfect because the stores were stuffed full of things that were basically made for her. I have no idea if she actually liked all that cheesy shit, but she displayed all of it and showed it off to any of her friends who came over, so. As a kid, that was fantastic. And my dad made a big thing out of it every year. He’d buy her a bunch of flowers and the sappiest card he could find, and he’d tote me around until I found that year’s perfect present, and then we’d go out to lunch and talk about where we were gonna hide her gift so she wouldn’t find it ahead of time, and what we should make her for breakfast.”

“It sounds nice,” Derek said. “It was a tradition with both of your parents.”

“Yeah. My dad tried to keep that part of the tradition going by taking me out to a couple stores and to lunch the year after my mom died, and it was awful. Worst idea ever, I don’t know what he was thinking. We were both miserable, and we kinda silently swore to never try that again. And now we’re gonna be doing this big graduation lunch with Scott and his mom, and the stores are already filling up with all the balloons and stuffed animals and ugly picture frames that I can’t buy for my mom anymore. It’s not on the same level as yours, but I’ve been thinking about it, you know?” He stabbed at the last apple slice on his plate, wondering why it was always so easy to overshare with Derek. “My mom wasn’t there for my high school graduation, either, so it shouldn’t even feel like she’s missing at this one.”

“She’s your mom. Of course you’re gonna wish she was there for one of your big days.”

“Yeah.” Stiles knocked his foot against Derek’s. Or attempted to, anyway; he might’ve just hit a part of the table itself. “It’s a roundabout way of saying everybody deals with things in their own way. Graduation’s timing kinda sucks for me. And it sucks that you have to go at all. Can’t you get out of it?”

Derek arched an eyebrow at him, effectively conveying the message: Maybe, but then I’d have to talk about it.

“True, I guess that’d be pretty awkward to have to sit down and explain,” Stiles said, and Derek’s eyebrows tilted into mild surprise. “You’ve forgotten I speak these now,” he explained, tapping his own, far less eloquent ones.

Derek shook his head. “Of course you do.” He poked at his now slightly congealed vegetable, wrinkled his nose, and went with a bite of sausage instead.

Stiles speared a few more for himself, alternating meat with peppers and making his own version of a fondue shish kebab. It was messy and delicious and he couldn’t help moaning a little as he ate it.

Derek’s ears went pink at the tips, and he slipped Lola a carrot when she came over to investigate.
what they were doing and why they weren’t sharing any food with her. “I was wondering,” he said as Lola crunched happily at her treat.

That was his way of trying to open conversations where he wasn’t fully comfortable, so Stiles kept his voice light and casual when he replied, “Yeah?”

“I’ve been trying to teach myself some Polish. Do you think that’s something you’d be able to tutor me in? Not extensively; I know you don’t have a lot of free time with your studies right now.”

“You’re learning Polish,” Stiles repeated.

Granted, Derek already knew a number of other languages and could have a wide range of reasons for wanting to pick up another. Still. It was hard for Stiles to not take that as a direct attempt to connect with him on yet another level.

“Basic phrases for right now,” Derek said. “The sorts of things that’d be handy in another trip over there. I’ve been chipping away at it here and there; it’s slow going, and I think my pronunciation’s pretty rough.”

“Lyds did say she and Cora have been hitting it off,” Stiles mused, thinking of the playful travel pact he and Derek had formed.

More precisely, Lydia had texted, I got a friend request from a Hale. Is this connected to your professor? followed by She’s a little bit vicious, and you’re right, her taste in wine isn’t half bad. I like her.

The last message in that particular thread had been much more telling: If her brother’s anything like her, I’ll admit I understand the appeal.

Stiles wondered if Derek had been getting similar messages from Cora; if not, it was probably best to refrain from sharing too many of Lydia’s secrets. He settled for, “I suppose if you end up owing me that Poland trip, it’d be handy to have someone else around who can read street signs.”

“That’s what you’d be there for,” Derek countered. “I did okay in Warsaw, but in a less metropolitan area, I’d be lost without you.”

It was an innocent statement, but Stiles’s heart tripped over the sentiment anyway. He’d be lost without Derek, too. He had been for too much of this year already.

“Nie chcę cię stracić,” he murmured. I don’t want to lose you. Not again.

Fortunately, that seemed to be beyond what Derek had learned thus far; he tilted his head and squinted a bit as he tried to sound out the words. “I’m a reasonably good student, but you’ll probably have to start with something a little simpler than that,” he said. “Also, I think you’ve been downplaying how fluent you are.”

“Definitely not fluent. Getting better, though, and I’ve been remembering some phrases I haven’t heard in a while.” Perhaps awkwardly, many of them were endearments his mom had used with either him or his dad. She’d always spoken a mixture of Polish and English around the house, giving Stiles occasional lessons but mostly letting him pick up the language naturally. That grounding, incomplete as it was, gave him a baseline to jump off of while he studied. He was thinking about sticking with it after graduation; it’d be nice to feel comfortable in another language, especially one that made him feel closer to his family.
“Everyone has to start somewhere,” Derek said, and they spent the rest of the meal rehearsing some of the travel phrases Derek had been learning.

Unsurprisingly, Derek was an eager, clever student who’d flash between irritation at himself—at his inability to learn faster—and easy good humor at Stiles’s corrections whenever his tongue tripped over a word. It was probably one of the least efficient tutoring methods they could’ve gone with, but neither of them seemed to care.

“This is more fun than my actual schoolwork,” Stiles complained when Derek eventually cleared off the table and he was free to get back to his studies.

“What’re you working on?”

“The last few stages of all my projects,” he said, retrieving his laptop. He’d been jumping from one project to another and wasn’t sure which to resume first.

Derek’s mouth flattened a little at the vague answer. He nodded and went back to wiping off the counter, letting Stiles, as usual, decide how much he wanted to share about his life.

It wasn’t that Stiles had been hiding things. Not intentionally. He could understand Derek’s reaction, though; he definitely didn’t go into as much detail about his classes as he’d done before. Part of it was because he’d rather discuss other subjects during his Derek days—why rehash the nonsense he already spent too many hours stressing over?—and part was because he didn’t exactly know how to talk about his music-based classes. He glossed over them every time they came up, and Derek always let him steer the conversations away.

“I can show you a thing I’ve been working on,” he offered, and Derek set the cloth down, looking tentatively hopeful.

Stiles explained the context first, in broad brushstrokes. The intersection between music and math, the exercises in programming computers to compose music, his deeper interest in mapping all of this back to medicine and the human body.

“It sounded like an odd assortment of classes for your final semester,” Derek said. “I thought it was your way of cramming in a last hodgepodge of everything you hadn’t learned yet.”

“That does sound like me,” Stiles said, but Derek shook his head.

“Somewhat. It’s more like you to have a complex method of linking them all together into a much bigger picture. Your brain works in really interesting ways. I’ve been missing that part of it.”

“Well, sit down and I’ll play you the thing I have to turn in next week.”

Stiles was sweating nervously; it was too late to back out now, though. He opened up the program he’d been working on, unplugged his headphones, and pressed play.

Derek listened silently.

“It’s piano music,” Derek said when it was done. He sounded pleased by that, as Stiles had thought he might be. Perhaps he’d expected something flashier—with drumbeats, a saxophone solo, who knows.

“I wanted to keep it simple,” Stiles said. He rubbed at his neck. “So, um. What’d you think? I know it’s nothing special. It’s not really meant to be part of a soundtrack or anything. It’s more of an experiment.”
“I liked it,” Derek said, then scrunched his eyebrows. “Well—actually, it made me sad. I don’t know why. But it’s pretty, in an unusual sort of way. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything quite like it.”

“It’s my heartbeat.” Stiles drummed his fingers on the tabletop, then stopped himself. It was an irritating nervous habit he’d been trying to break himself of. “Not exactly my heartbeat, obviously. I wore an electrocardiogram for a day and then used the fractal patterns from that to create the main composition. There are a lot more layers to the heartbeat than you’d think; it’s not the steady pulse you’re used to checking for. There are a lot of little variations, especially in a healthy heartbeat—fluctuations that can translate into a pretty nice melody.”

“Does the melody come out the same every time?” Derek reached over with an aborted gesture, like he was going to try to press play again, before remembering the unspoken rules around touching other people’s electronics.

Stiles laughed and did it for him. When it finished, he switched to a second version he’d experimented with but decided not to turn in.

“There’s variation. Less than there would’ve been with my original idea, I think; I’m still kinda pissed I didn’t get the chance to try that. I’d wanted to use a brain scan. They’re fucking expensive, though, and my insurance wouldn’t sign off on an MRI for an undergraduate assignment.”

“They still turned out well,” Derek assured him. “And I’m sure it’s already a lot more complicated than what your class was actually asking for.”

That much was true. It was an easy course where people mostly just played with the software and cranked out simple arrangements. Stiles found that boring and wanted to stretch himself as much as possible.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll be able to do it another time. The results are interesting; I’d like to explore the concept more.”

“That second piece seems happier,” Derek said. “Why’s that?”

Stiles fiddled with the edge of his laptop screen. “I recorded the first one back in January. When...you know. When we weren’t talking. This second one was after we started up again.”

“Stiles,” Derek said, his eyebrows at a sorrowful tilt, an almost reverse V with a soft curve to them. “I’m sorry.”

“We’ve been through all that. We can’t keep apologizing forever, right?”

“No,” Derek said, “but I’m sorry, anyway. I wish...if you’d recorded mine, too. Back then. I think it’d be the same.”

Stiles touched his extended hand—the broad palm, the sturdy knuckles and strong fingers. Derek let him gently trace the crisscrossing lines on his palm that he might’ve, in another life, been able to read to determine their fate.

“Maybe someday you’ll let me do that,” Stiles said. “Record your heartbeat, I mean. We could see what they sound like if we mix them together.”

“Of course. Any time you like,” Derek said, curling his fingers around Stiles’s and stilling his restless movements. “I think it’d make a nice harmony.”

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Later, Stiles couldn’t exactly recall whose idea it’d been to resume their swimming dates. His, probably—he’d been wanting to for a while and had merely been waiting for the right moment to bring it up again. What mattered was that Derek had been just as eager to return to their old routine.

“I’ve still been swimming on my own,” Derek said as they slid into the water, side by side. “It’s not the same.”

Stiles hadn’t been back at all since they’d parted ways, so it took a few laps of the pool before he started feeling fully in control of his own limbs again. Derek stuck close by, ready to help if needed but content to let Stiles stubbornly forge his own flailing path, even if it meant he got splashed in the face more than once.

“Sorry,” Stiles spluttered after the third time Derek shook the water off his face and gave him a flatly unamused look. “I know I shouldn’t be the one laughing when I’m the swimming disaster here, but you look like a wet cat when you do that. No, no, wait, an angry bunny.”

“If that’s a quip about my teeth,” Derek said, his eyebrows digging down in offense, and Stiles failed at stifling another laugh.

“I love your teeth,” he said. He ruined the moment by attempting to reach out to touch them, forgetting that he needed both arms to tread water properly, and had to spit out water on his way back to the surface.

“Don’t drown yourself trying to give me compliments,” Derek said with a mixture of amusement and concern, hovering closer in case Stiles went under again.

“I’m fine,” Stiles said, kicking his way toward the wall to be safer anyway. “Hey, d’you wanna go see a movie with me this weekend?”

“You’re not going to be panicking about finals?” Derek asked. He cut through the water smoothly, looking goddamn fucking perfect as usual.

“Been there, done that. I actually only have two exams this time; the rest were projects, and they’re mostly done. I’m ready to start celebrating.”

Derek folded his arms over the side of the pool, casually setting his biceps and the marble-carved muscles of his back on display, and turned his head to look at Stiles. “What movie? I haven’t really been paying attention to what’s out.”

“I don’t know either. Stupid shit. But you know that hipster theater? The one that shows old movies, with couches and the in-house cafe and stuff.”

“I’ve never actually been, but yeah. It opened up a year or so ago?”

“I haven’t been either, but I’ve been wanting to. And they’re doing an Indiana Jones marathon. In order, one a night, starting with Raiders of the Lost Ark on Friday. I vote Friday or Sunday, obviously, since those are the ones worth watching.”

“I can make either,” Derek said. “Or both. You choose. Good call on skipping Temple of Doom, though. Part of me wonders why I even own it, but it’d leave a gap in my collection.”

“Because you couldn’t possibly toss out the collectors’ sleeve the trilogy came in,” Stiles said, trying to dodge when Derek flicked water at him.

“We can do Friday and see if we like it enough to go back?” Derek suggested. “Unless you don’t
actually have that much free time.”

“Nah, that sounds good to me,” Stiles said, pressing his smile against his arms. They were in the deep end, the bottom of the pool far away from his dangling feet, yet he felt safe here. Secure, next to Derek. Warm, even with the cool night air seeping through the big windows. The clouds pulled apart, silvery moonlight spreading across the calm surface of the water and accentuating the shadows and planes of Derek’s face.

“Masz takie piękne oczy,” Stiles said quietly.

“Something about my eyes?” Derek asked. Damn him and his quick ear for language. “I didn’t understand the rest.”

Stiles sighed and shifted so he was only propped against the wall by one arm, his body turned more fully toward Derek. “I said they were beautiful.”

“Oh,” Derek said. His eyelashes dipped, thick and dark, with water droplets still caught in them. “Dziękuję. Thank you. I don’t know how to say it back.”

“You’d say it back to me?” Stiles asked, his heart in his throat, and Derek nodded.

“Yeah. Of course, Stiles. You must know by now that I—” He pushed his chin into his arms, looking embarrassed.

“That you what?” Stiles asked, needing to hear Derek actually say it.

Derek lifted his head again, his eyes bright and earnest, silvery-green and more stunning than Stiles could describe in any language.

“That I’ve always thought you were beautiful,” he said.

Stiles’s heart thudded. This was it, he thought. He could still smooth it over. Leave it as friends who never made a move, who went on dates that weren’t officially termed as such, who endlessly circled around each other, never crossing that artificially created distance.

He tilted his head and sent a challenge into his voice. “Yeah? So what’re you gonna do about it, then?”

“I—” Derek made a wounded, frustrated noise, then lurched forward and caught Stiles’s face in his hands, their lips crushing together in a heated kiss before Stiles had a chance to catch his breath.
Stiles gasped into Derek’s mouth and gripped at his biceps, his fingers sliding off the water-slicked skin, unable to find a satisfying hold. They were slipping away from the edge, their bodies sinking...
lower in the water, and Derek responded with an impressive full-body surge, lifting them both enough to push Stiles harder against the side of the pool, where Derek’s weight against him could hold them in place.

“Shit,” Stiles grunted, hissing a sharp breath in through his teeth as his back hit the edge.

Derek immediately let go of him, which was the absolute last thing Stiles had wanted. The heat in his eyes was already dimming, vulnerability and regret flooding in to replace it.

“I’m sorry...I—I shouldn’t have done that,” he stuttered, and Stiles braced himself hard against the side of the pool, anchoring himself with one arm while reaching for Derek with the other. The angle was awkward, and they could’ve chosen an easier location, but fuck it, he wanted more of that. Right the fuck now.

“You surprised me,” Stiles said. “I like that kind of surprise.”

Derek moved back in—slower this time—setting his arms on either side of Stiles, his muscles flexing from the effort of keeping himself just far enough away to not touch. “Do you want this?” he asked, his eyes searching Stiles’s. It sounded more like: Do you want me?

It was enough of a plea for Stiles to pause, biting back the automatic response that’d get Derek’s lips back on his as fast as possible.

This wasn’t a thing they should be rushing, even if, to him, it’d already felt like the longest, slowest grind imaginable. He knew Derek well enough by now to recognize that what he said in this moment would matter.

He made sure their eye contact was locked in before he began. “I’ve been doing my best to respect the boundaries we’ve set. And I think it’s been working. It’s been great; I’m happy with our friendship. I really am. If that’s all we ever had, I’d still think I was one of the luckiest guys in the world. But Derek...I’ve never stopped wanting more.”

“Neither have I,” Derek admitted softly. The deep vulnerability in his expression hadn’t faded yet. It made Stiles reach out on impulse, thumbing a drop of water away from his lower lip.

Derek parted his mouth in response, taking in a quick breath. Stiles touched the side of his face then, and Derek leaned into it, his jaw pressed against Stiles’s palm, his beard as soft as Stiles had always imagined.

“Do you trust me?” Stiles asked, and Derek’s throat bobbed.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Then can we try this? See what happens? We can stop, any time you want. Go back to being friends. As long as we can keep that part intact, no matter what. Because Derek, I can’t lose you like that again.”

“Neither can I,” Derek said, then, with a sudden glint in his eye, carefully added, “Nie chcę cię stracić.” Because of course he was an information-hungry overachiever who’d looked that up after Stiles had said it to him. So much for slipping things in under the radar with that asshole around.

“You’ll never lose me, you giant, beautiful ass,” Stiles said, and this time, the kiss was gentler.

Long moments passed as they explored each other’s mouths, adjusting angles in minute, hitching degrees until Derek’s lips fit perfectly against his, until Derek opened his mouth with a soft sigh and
let Stiles sweep his tongue inside. It was dizzying. It was perfect. And it was, he realized when Derek shifted their hips together some time later, distinctly fucking uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asked, nipping lightly at the corner of his mouth.

Stiles groaned. “My back still kinda hurts, and I’m losing feeling in my arm. Pools sound sexier than they actually are. Can we move this? Not far, just—the hot tub, maybe?”

“Mmm,” Derek said, kissing him again, making Stiles forget what he’d been asking.

When he eventually pulled back, Stiles chased after him with an irritated noise. “Sorry,” Derek said, pushing a hand against his chest to hold him away. “You’re...really hard to resist. No more touching until we’re in the hot tub.”

They broke that rule immediately. Stiles got his hands on Derek’s ass as soon as they were out of the pool—a smart decision, as it turned out, because it meant he discovered his new favorite sound—a low moan that Derek made, deep in the back of his throat, every time Stiles squeezed with just the right amount of pressure.

“We’re gonna explore that more,” Stiles promised, and Derek huffed out a laugh, stepping down into the heated water and pulling Stiles flush against his chest, his tongue hot and insistent in Stiles’s mouth.

“I imagined you doing this,” Stiles gasped between kisses. “Before. All those other times.”

Derek swept the last word out of his mouth, so it ended on more of a guttural noise than an actual syllable. “Me too,” he said eventually.

“Really?” Stiles drew back. “How long?”

“I told you,” Derek said, kissing along Stiles’s throat when it became clear that he wanted to keep using his mouth for other purposes.

“You said always, which isn’t actually—ahhhh, fuck, do that again—always isn’t an actual unit of measurement.”

“Goddamn scientist,” Derek said, licking over the spot on Stiles’s collarbone where he’d used his teeth a few seconds earlier. “You talk as much as I expected, too.”

“Sorry,” Stiles said, and Derek pressed one more kiss against his throat before halting the rest of the attempted apology.

“If you’d listen for half a second, I’m telling you I had fantasies about us,” he said, his tone dry. “Where we fucked, and you wouldn’t stop talking.” He shifted his hips again, pointedly this time, until Stiles could feel the thick line of his cock.

“Oh,” Stiles said. “You’re into it.”

“I’m into you,” Derek corrected. He pressed his thumb against the corner of Stiles’s mouth, and his eyes darkened when Stiles drew it in. Stiles made a point of hollowing his cheeks as he sucked, then releasing him with a wet pop.

“Not yet, you aren’t,” he said, reaching down to get a better feel for Derek’s length. About as big as he’d imagined, and possibly a little bit thicker.
Derek groaned and grabbed his wrist before he could get his hand all the way inside the swim trunks. He’d briefly considered tugging down the waistband but had attempted to snake his way up Derek’s leg instead—the clingy material was looser there, and Derek was, he could already tell, deliciously sensitive along his inner thighs.

“Too much?” he asked, disappointed but ready to slow back down to whatever pace Derek was trying to set.

“No, it’s...god, Stiles, you’re amazing. But I don’t want—our first time shouldn’t be here.”

“If this is the ‘let’s move this to the bedroom’ part of the evening, hell yeah, I’m on board,” he agreed enthusiastically, and Derek pressed his face against Stiles’s throat. Laughing, he realized after a moment. “Honestly, I thought we’d be sexier than this,” Stiles complained halfheartedly.

The vibrations stopped enough for him to feel the curve of Derek’s smile against his skin. “I’m happy,” Derek confessed, and Stiles used the opportunity to dig his fingers through his thick, water-waved hair.

“...Are you kissing my grey hairs?” Derek asked, sounding amused but not attempting to stop him.

Stiles hummed in confirmation and kissed the tip of his ear, then the liberally grey-streaked strands he’d just tucked behind it.

“You’re the strangest person I’ve ever met,” Derek said, lifting his face so Stiles could more fully explore the texture of his beard and remind himself how Derek’s lips tasted.

It’d been a couple minutes, after all. Already, in his opinion, far too long to do without.

“Bedroom,” Stiles said after a while. Even with the jets off, he was starting to sweat more than was strictly comfortable.

“Shower first, then car, then bedroom,” Derek said, and it took them another ten or fifteen minutes to make it all the way from the tub to the locker room.

“Trunks on or off?” Stiles asked once they were inside the shower area, and Derek groaned and thumped his head against the tiled wall. Stiles crowded up behind him, kissing the light smattering of freckles along the tops of his shoulders and testing to see whether Derek’s nipples were sensitive.

Definitely yes. Derek caught his roaming hand and turned them so their foreheads were pressed together.

“If you take your trunks off, we’re not gonna make it to the car,” Derek murmured. “And I don’t—I don’t want it to be here, either. Not like this, not with you.”

Stiles kissed the stupidly noble slope of Derek’s nose, wiggled his hand until Derek released it, and retreated to the other side of the room.

“No touching, no dicks out, but we can still watch each other while we shower,” Stiles said, wagging his eyebrows and twisting the water on, yelping when the first burst came out ice cold.

So he wasn’t the most suave guy out there. Judging from the still very visible, almost painfully hard line tenting Derek’s swim trunks—his new boyfriend’s swim trunks?—Stiles had all the charm he really needed.
Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek lets go

Translations:

Nie chcę cię stracić - I don’t want to lose you
Masz takie piękne oczy - you have such beautiful eyes
Dziękuję - thank you
They held hands for the entire drive. When Derek first reached over, he’d felt a little ridiculous—
could he really not stand to be apart from Stiles for the few minutes it’d take to get home?—but Stiles
had taken his hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, even lifting it briefly to press his
lips against Derek’s knuckles.

Derek was still in a little bit of a daze and couldn’t help wondering if he’d be waking up to the radio
soon, reluctantly blinking away the last shreds of sleep-thick memories. Just to be sure, he squeezed a
little tighter, and Stiles squeezed back.

“Still here,” Stiles said.

*I love you,* Derek thought, as he’d been doing all evening. He’d ended up kissing Stiles every time
the words tried to escape—it was too soon, he knew it was too soon to say it—which served as
enough of a reward for both of them. It didn’t stop him from feeling it, though. All it did was make
the too-intense emotions exponentially harder to contain.

They kissed while they were waiting for the garage door to open, then again as it was closing while
they were inside, their seatbelts unbuckled, the ignition turned off, the engine still pinging as it
cooled.

Entering the house meant they had to stop for a few minutes while Derek brushed Lola’s teeth and
made sure the rest of her nightly routine was still intact, but Stiles stuck close by, touching Derek’s
back, shoulders, the nape of his neck, like he needed the physical reminders, too.

Derek got Lola settled and took Stiles’s hand again, leading him down the hallway to the one room
he’d always kept closed off to visitors. No one but Derek had ever slept in that bed. He wasn’t sure
anyone else had ever seen it, for more than a few quick glimpses; even when his friends or his sisters
visited, he kept the door shut out of habit, leaving it as his most private space.

He didn’t tell Stiles any of that. He simply pressed him against the door and kissed him for a few
more minutes, then reached around him to turn the handle and usher them both inside. They’d both
already removed their shoes, and Stiles had his shirt stripped off and his pants unzipped before Derek
had even finished shutting the door behind them.

“Impatient,” Derek said, stepping forward until the backs of Stiles’s knees hit the side of the bed and
buckled, sending him tumbling onto the mattress with a laugh.

Stiles spread his legs wide enough for Derek to step between them, then wrapped his warm, long-
fingered hands around Derek’s hips. “I’ve been patient for a long time,” he said, his mouth flushed
red, a little kiss-swollen.

He let out a satisfying gasp when Derek dropped to his knees and slid Stiles’s pants—a ridiculous
pair of khakis that showed he hadn’t started out the night thinking of sex—the rest of the way down.
Derek took it slowly from there, kissing the soft skin on the inside of Stiles’s thighs, stroking down
the hard muscles of his calves, and gently lifting one foot, then the other, to release him from the
fabric pooling around his ankles.

“Fuck,” Stiles said softly, a splotchy red flush staining his cheeks and spreading down his throat and
“That’s the general idea,” Derek said, pausing for long enough to pull his own shirt over his head.

This part felt familiar, and a band tightened around his chest at the sudden, unwelcome rush of memories of other times, other people, when he’d gone through these motions with little more than a low buzz of arousal and the sense that he was supposed to be enjoying it.

“Hey. Hey, Derek,” Stiles said, leaning forward and down, his palm cupping Derek’s jaw like he’d done in the pool. Like in the pool, Derek turned into it, grounding himself in the touch of Stiles’s skin against his.

_Stupid_, he thought. _It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t last. It doesn’t matter if it means more to you in the long run. He’s here with you now. He’s giving you this, tonight._

But Stiles wasn’t letting it go. “Are we moving too fast?” he asked in concern, and Derek snorted, a bit of his discomfort dissolving.

“We’ve been moving at a glacial pace. I know that as well as you do.”

“Yeah,” Stiles acknowledged matter-of-factly.

Derek winced. Not that he’d expected Stiles to disagree, but—Stiles shook Derek’s face a little to get his attention.

“Doesn’t matter. I meant what I said earlier. I’m interested in sex, yeah. Very, very interested.” Stiles’s eyes glazed over for a second before he pulled himself out of whatever daydream he’d slipped into. “I’m _more_ interested in you. And in sex with you, only when you’re comfortable with it.” He frowned slightly and amended, “If you’re comfortable with it.”

It was an odd thing to say, and the surprise must’ve shown on Derek’s face.

Stiles’s eyes crinkled affectionately. ”You have a bunch of books about sexuality in your study that weren’t there before. You’re not that subtle, big guy.”

“Right,” Derek said, trying to think what the covers would’ve indicated. He’d initially started picking up materials because of Cora, but that section of his shelf had expanded since Christmas, along with his interest in the topic. He hadn’t really thought about Stiles noticing them once he’d started coming over again.

“I swear I didn't actually mean to snoop,” Stiles said, assuming that was Derek’s biggest concern. “I opened one up, and the section on demisexuality was flagged and marked up pretty heavily, so that seemed important. I didn’t read your notes. I figured that's private, y'know? But I went home and did some reading on my own. You’re not the only one who researches shit.”

Derek thought back to the first time Stiles had handed in an essay—more detailed than it’d needed to be, impressive in both its depth and clarity—and to the illustrated Tips For Lola packet he’d filed in his study, along with his other books on dog care. ”I am aware of that,” he said.

Stiles scratched at his nose. ”So yeah. I'm running on guesswork; there's stuff I don't know about you, specifically. And parts I honestly don't understand that well yet, but I want to. I'd like to, if you'll let me try.”

Derek sighed and leaned forward enough to rest his head against one of Stiles’s knees. Stiles slid his hand back into Derek’s hair—he had an odd obsession with that, Derek thought absently. He didn’t
mind. There was something soothing about it, encouraging him to admit, “I haven’t always...liked having sex. With other people. I didn’t realize that wasn’t normal, that it wasn’t something everybody pushed through so they could line up those notches you’re supposed to get on your bedpost.”

“There’s not really a ‘normal’ when it comes to sex,” Stiles said. “It’s okay to not like it.”

“I do, though. I just like it a lot more when I’m...” This part was more difficult to say, and he felt his face heating. Stiles knew, though. If he’d looked up demisexuality, he’d know what Derek was really saying when he told him that right now, he was as far from disinterested as he figured a person could get.

“If you’re trying to tell me that you like me, I’m pretty okay with that, Derek. I like you, too.”

I love you, Derek thought, and tilted his face up so Stiles would kiss him.

Stiles drew him onto the bed, and they did that for a while, their only soundtrack the wet slide of their mouths meeting and the pleased sighs Stiles let out every time Derek did something he particularly liked. He really liked when Derek eventually pushed himself closer, tangling their legs and making an encouraging noise when Stiles gripped his hip in response.

“Wait,” Stiles gasped, his eyes clouded with desire, warring with the determination set into his jaw.

He really was a talker, Derek thought fondly, finally taking the opening to kiss that enticing line of moles along his cheek.

“Derek,” Stiles said. “Mmmmph, Derek.”

“Stiles,” he teased in return.

Stiles rolled his eyes and squeezed Derek’s hip until he took the hint and backed away.

Derek brushed their noses together. “What is it?”

“I’m trying to be responsible here,” Stiles said, diving at his lips quickly because neither of them was all that responsible. He frowned at Derek after another brief round of kisses, like that’d been remotely his fault. "I’m about a zillion percent on board, fucking obviously, but I’ve gotta make sure.”

“Oh okay,” Derek said. He thumbed at the mole at the corner of Stiles’s mouth and was rewarded by a kiss to the inside of his wrist. Then a nip, sharp with teeth, because this was still Stiles, after all.

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“Okay,” Derek said. He thumbed at the mole at the corner of Stiles’s mouth and was rewarded by a kiss to the inside of his wrist. Then a nip, sharp with teeth, because this was still Stiles, after all.

“First off, is this, right now, happening because you think we've reached the point where it's supposed to, or because you actually want to be doing this?”

"I want this," Derek said, with some impatience. Why were they still discussing it? "I want you."


"Next question?" Derek asked, and Stiles swatted at him lightly, a little harder than he probably meant to. Derek grunted and glared back.

"I'm not running a goddamn quiz show," Stiles said. "I'm trying to figure out if I'm pressuring you into sleeping with me."

"You're really not," Derek said, and, to prove his point, lifted his hips enough to hook his thumbs
under his boxer briefs. He slid them and his loose-fitting sweatpants down and off in one motion, kicking them onto the floor.

He stretched out on the bed then, raising an eyebrow at Stiles, who simply said, "Fuck," and scrambled up to straddle him, ducking down to give him a few more long, lingering, toe-curling kisses.

"If you're sure," Stiles said finally, and Derek nodded.

"I'm not breakable. You don't have to be so...careful with me. I want this."

Stiles's lips took on an argumentative twist, but he sighed and kissed Derek again, slower and far softer than Derek had expected from the fight brimming in his expression.

Derek sank into it, enjoying being able to stay in that space with him. Kissing was something he’d always liked and rarely got a chance to indulge in so thoroughly. Usually, his partners were anxious to get to the main event; even with Jennifer, when he’d been emotionally invested enough to respond to that part with sufficient eagerness, he’d always felt overly needy. Jennifer had certainly treated him that way. She’d kiss him—often with little enthusiasm—then impatiently push him away—either between her legs, or to the other side of the bed, depending on her mood.

He’d always known he was doing something wrong, that he wasn’t good enough. That he needed to be better, that he should be trying harder to please her. He’d often worked from some variation of that thought in his subsequent hookups and failed attempts at dating, the same sets of words running on a loop in his head, snagging against any insecurities they could find. *I'm doing this wrong. I'm not good enough. Why doesn't this feel the way it's supposed to?*

He nuzzled against Stiles’s throat, tears prickling stupidly at the backs of his eyes. He hated that he was thinking about her, even when everything finally felt impossibly right.

“What’s going on in there now?” Stiles asked, warm fingers brushing along his jawline.

“Thinking too much,” Derek said. “Sorry, it’s a hard habit to break.”

“Don’t I know it,” Stiles said. He looked happy, though—heavy-lidded and content, not asking anything from Derek that he didn’t want to give.

*This is the way it’s supposed to be,* Derek thought.

He cleared his mind of everything else, not wanting to miss a single moment of their time together. He shifted their position so he could more easily peel Stiles’s briefs down, watching his face as he did so. Stiles made a sharp, surprised noise and bit at his lip to hold the rest back.

"*Fuck,*" he moaned when Derek began stroking his cock, thumbing over the wide tip to catch the initial spurts of precum and ease the slick slide.

“*You’re beautiful,*” Derek told him again, and Stiles’s flush deepened.

“*You’re one to talk,*” he said, and pushed Derek’s hand away, flipping them so he was straddling Derek again.

It was Derek’s turn to bite back a moan as their cocks aligned—a too-brief catch and slide, a hint of what he could be feeling if Stiles would just *speed things up* a little.

Stiles was, with his typical bright-eyed interest, watching the play of emotions over Derek’s face. He
carefully reached for Derek’s wrists, then lifted them over Derek’s head, pressing them against the mattress. Derek, to his own surprise, immediately went boneless, taking in a deep, satiated breath.

“I thought so,” Stiles mused. “Tell me if you don’t like any of this, okay?”

He leaned down to meet Derek’s open-mouthed, eager kiss. Then, with one hand still wrapped around Derek’s wrists and the other arm braced against the bed to provide the right leverage, he began deliciously slow thrusts, his heavy cock slotting along the groove of Derek’s abs, dragging along his skin, his body weight trapping Derek’s cock between them and providing tantalizing friction.

Even with the precum steadily trickling along their cocks and the sweat beading up from the exertion, it was far too dry, and Derek pulled his knees up to keep Stiles still for a moment.

“Nightstand,” he said, and Stiles paused, his arm shaking a little as he held himself away from Derek.

“I wasn’t actually thinking of taking it that far tonight,” Stiles panted, blinking away the sweat dripping from his hairline. “Next time, though? Yeah, definitely.”

“I meant lube,” Derek said. “It’ll make things feel better. For both of us.”

“Right, obviously.” Stiles nodded several times in agreement and stretched across the bed, making an effort to disrupt their position as little as possible.

He returned with the bottle of lube and a strip of condoms, anyway. Derek squinted to try to bring them into focus as they dangled in front of his face. It was getting hard to pay attention to much of anything with Stiles’s cock bumping teasingly against his.

“These are out of date,” Stiles said. “It really has been a while since you’ve had sex, huh?”

“I guess so,” Derek said, wrestling the lube away from him and squeezing a generous amount over his own abs, since Stiles didn’t seem like he was about to do it any time soon. He dipped his fingers into a glob and stroked it over Stiles’s cock: that, at least, brought him back to the activity at hand.

Stiles let out a guttural noise and dropped the condoms.

“Me too, by the way,” Stiles said as he arranged them back into the right tangle of limbs. “A really fucking long time. That’s why this is going to be quicker than—ahhh—fuck, what was I saying.”

“You were fucking me,” Derek said, resisting the grip on his wrists just enough to get Stiles to press him down harder and pick up the tempo.

It got more difficult to talk after that, and Derek’s open-mouthed gasping turned into long, shuddery pants against Stiles’s throat.

Stiles eventually had to release him, needing all his limbs free to keep his thrusts at a steady rhythm, and Derek responded by sliding his hands along Stiles’s muscle-taut back, down to the firm curves of his ass, back up to the trembling that’d started along Stiles’s shoulders as he got closer to his release.

“Stiles,” Derek said, needing to tell him something, although he couldn’t remember what. “Stiles,” he tried again, “I...I...”

Stiles took pity on him and silenced him with a deep, almost bruising kiss that pulled all the remaining tension out of Derek’s body.
"I love you," he thought fiercely, pressing the confession into the delicate skin behind Stiles’s ear.

“You feel amazing,” Stiles managed, the words coming out in a torrent again now that his movements were breaking down into short, shuddery jerks. “I wanna be inside you next time. Tell me I can do that.”

“Yeah,” Derek said, and Stiles dragged his lips up Derek’s cheek, too far gone now for anything more substantial.

“I’ll open you up with my fingers, first,” he said, his voice thick with promise. “Tongue, too, if you’d be into that.”

“Yeah,” Derek said, and Stiles sighed heavily against his skin.

“Never tried that before.”

“You want to?” Derek checked, and Stiles laughed a little, as if the very notion of saying no was absurd.

“With you? Yeah. Wanna try everything with you.” He came, then, with a long, low groan, and Derek held him through the aftershocks.

It didn’t take Derek long to follow once Stiles got his hand around him, the muscles of his forearm flexing, his grip even more firm and tireless than Derek had let himself imagine.

Everything went silent after that, Stiles flopping down heavily against Derek’s chest. When his breathing started to even out, Derek shifted them enough to get a proper look at his face.

“So you’re the kind of guy who passes out right after sex,” he concluded, amused.

“M’not,” Stiles slurred defiantly.

He was sound asleep before the debate could go any further.

Derek enjoyed the closeness for a while, Stiles’s damp breath against his cooling skin more of a comfort than it really had any right to be. Eventually, he peeled Stiles away from him and made his way to his bathroom, where he ran hot water over a washcloth and wiped away the sticky mess along his torso. He rinsed the cloth out, draped it over the towel rack, and warmed another to gently clean Stiles’s cock and the smattering of spunk along his thick happy trail.

He folded him under the covers then, sliding in next to him but keeping a bit of distance, in case Stiles wasn’t a fan of being cuddled in his sleep.

“I love you,” Derek said quietly, liking the way the words seemed to fill the room. He let his eyes close, lining his breathing up with Stiles’s and slipping into calm dreams.

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He woke slowly, dragging himself to the surface for long enough to recall that Reading Week meant there’d been no need to set an alarm. More sleep, then, he concluded, stretching comfortably at the thought, all the way down to his toes, not bothering to pry his eyelids open to check the time. The morning could wait.

“Morning, sleepy head,” Stiles said, and Derek grumbled, pushing his face into his pillow and rubbing his beard along the silky cover. That sounded like an attempt to wake him up the rest of the
way, and he did not approve.

"You know, I never actually believed that bit about you not being a morning person," Stiles said thoughtfully.

He brushed Derek's hair out of his forehead, and Derek pushed into the gesture when his fingers stillled, willing to let Stiles keep them both awake if it meant he'd keep doing that.

Stiles laughed softly. "I can see it now, though. You're a big ol' grump in the mornings. Who knew."

"You talk a lot in the mornings," Derek muttered.

Stiles's hand had stopped moving again, so Derek put in just enough effort to tug him down from his propped-up position on a mound of pillows—where had he even gotten that many pillows? Derek never kept more than two on his bed—and into a much more comfortable reclining position, where Derek could rub his face against Stiles’s chest and go back to sleep.

"You claimed to like the talking last night," Stiles said, his fingers slipping back into Derek's hair.

"Mmph," Derek said noncommittally, and he did fall asleep again, Stiles's heartbeat providing a steady—and happy, he thought—rhythm to guide him back under.

The second time he woke, it was to an empty bed.

He panicked for the barest second—had he imagined the whole thing?—but there was still a pile of pillows clustered along one half of the mattress, and the sheets hadn’t fully lost their body heat yet. Stiles had probably gotten tired of watching him sleep. Derek had no idea how much time had passed, but it was well beyond the point when he should’ve been up to take care of Lola.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed—right, still naked, he should fix that—and gathered himself into some semblance of being presentable before shuffling out of his room.

“Morning,” he said gruffly, and Stiles turned, a pleased smile breaking over his face. He crossed the living room, got a hand on the back of Derek’s neck, and drew him into the first kiss of the day.

“I missed that,” Stiles said matter-of-factly.

He tasted like coffee, and Derek closed his eyes to blissfully breathe in the steam from the piping hot mug Stiles handed him.

“I feel like I should be offended that you’re way happier about that than about seeing me,” Stiles said, and Derek swallowed a mouthful before replying.

“I’m always happy to see you,” he said, reaching out to pull Stiles against him, then sneaking another sip of coffee over his shoulder.

“Since when are you a morning person?” Derek asked a bit later, once he started feeling a little more human.

They’d moved to the table, Stiles scrolling absently through his phone while Derek finished his coffee and read the newspaper. It was a little awkward at first—Derek had trouble figuring out how to balance his usual morning habits with his desire to stay in continuous contact with Stiles, but Stiles had solved the problem by hooking his ankle around Derek’s and keeping one hand on his thigh. It was a grounding touch with no further intent behind it, and he couldn’t think of a more pleasant way to begin a day.
“I’m not,” Stiles said. “I dunno, I haven’t been sleeping all that much lately. I think my body’s gotten used to grabbing four hours, max, and thinks that’s all I need anymore.” He flicked down the screen of his phone, his mouth curling in irritation. “Speaking of which—”

“You have to go?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve got a long shift today, since I cleared out the next two weekends. I need to get some studying in before going back to my important life’s work of carrying overpriced shit around on trays.”

“Need me to drive you back to your place?” Derek asked.

Stiles shook his head and squeezed Derek’s thigh again before pushing his chair away from the table. “Nah, you stay in your ridiculous tuxedo pjs and enjoy your day off. I dunno if I’ll be able to come over tonight, but tomorrow? Can I see you then?”

“Of course,” Derek said.

They spent a while saying goodbye in the entryway, Stiles finally making it most of the way outside before spinning back around to grab Derek’s ass and shove his tongue in his mouth.

“Oh, Stiles,” Derek said, grinning and straightening the collar of Derek’s pajama shirt. He kissed Derek once more, gently this time, lips only—okay, maybe a hint of tongue—then stepped back. “Tell me I’ve gotta go before I say fuck it and stay here with you all day.”

“I’ll still be here tomorrow,” Derek reminded him. “Thanks for letting Lola out this morning. And making coffee. And...everything. Text me how your day goes?”

“You know I will,” Stiles said, and with that, he was off with a final wave and a quick recovery from stumbling over some shrubbery at the edge of the neighbor’s yard.

Text me a selfie of you in your sexy pjs came through to Derek’s phone less than half an hour later, and Derek sent back a photo of them neatly folded on the end of his bed. He’d already showered and gotten dressed, fully awake after that last farewell.

He responded to Stiles’s sad emoji with, You’ll just have to see them again in person.

>> Fine. Then you won’t get a photo of me in my sexy-ass bow tie tonight.

<< I’ve seen it, remember?

>> I didn’t say there’d be anything else under it.

>> Or where I’d be wearing it.

That wasn’t what Derek had meant by “text me,” but if this was what it was like to date Stiles, he couldn’t say he minded.

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Derek made it most of the way through the afternoon before breaking down and heading to campus. He hadn’t been totally sure if Noshiko would be at home or in her office; he was lucky enough to find her reading in one of the armchairs in the history building’s lounge.

“Derek!” she said, setting her book down without bothering to mark her place.
“Am I interrupting?”

“I can’t make it through more than a page without getting distracted.” She motioned to the seat next to her, and Derek took it after a brief hesitation, Lola settling down at his feet. He’d had other things in mind, but they could wait.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “You sound stressed.”

“Not exactly stressed,” she said. “I had some news I’m still processing.”

“Good or bad?”

“Good, I suppose.” Noshiko gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Did you know Kira’s been secretly dating for months?”

“Ah,” he said. Perhaps he should’ve avoided this topic, after all. “I—did, yes. Did she just tell you?”

She inclined her head in a curt nod. “She wants us to meet him. And his mother. At his graduation lunch, next Saturday.”

“And you’re not happy about it.”

Noshiko made a considering noise. She clearly hadn’t fully made up her mind yet; thus the inability to concentrate while reading. “It’s sudden. Ken and I know nothing about him, and Kira’s springing it on us with so little notice. At this rate, I’m surprised she didn’t simply wait until after commencement to inform us we were going to lunch with a complete stranger. Or until her wedding day, to tell us to show up and give her away.”

“That’s a little extreme,” Derek said, and she softened infinitesimally.

“He’s her first serious boyfriend. It’s hard to know exactly how to respond.”

Derek shifted awkwardly in his seat; this was a private matter. Then again, both Noshiko and Kira were his friends, and she now knew that he’d been aware of the situation for longer.

“I think being happy for her is the first step,” he said. “I know it’s a sudden thing to wrap your mind around, but I’ve met Scott, and she’s spent some time telling me about him, too. He’s a good person. He makes her very happy.”

“She said the same.” Noshiko trailed her nails thoughtfully along the well-worn fabric on the arm of the chair. Judging from its appearance, she wasn’t the first person to do that. “I’ll admit—to you, not her, so don’t pass this along, please—that I looked him up. He’s a good student. Seems responsible and ambitious enough.”

“He’ll probably have his own veterinary practice in a few years. That’s his goal, to my understanding. But even if he didn’t...”

“It should be enough that he makes my daughter happy, yes, I know.”

“That’s my advice, anyway. She’s probably just as nervous about the lunch as you are. I imagine telling you about him was a big step in their relationship, so it’ll mean a lot to Kira for it to go well.”

“By imagine, you mean you know that to be the case, since you’ve actually discussed him,” Noshiko said.

Derek didn’t have much of a response to that.
“I’ll be polite, of course,” she said. “Meeting him and his mother on the same day, though. And apparently his roommate and his roommate’s father as well? It’s an entire meet the family scenario, where everyone already knows each other and Ken and I are the odd ones out. I’m used to handling these sorts of things at work, but not with my daughter in the mix.”

“His roommate’s going?” Derek asked. That rang a bell—Stiles had mentioned a graduation lunch, although he’d glossed over it fairly quickly—but Derek hadn’t known the Yukimuras would be involved. He tried to remember if Kira had mentioned this before. Not to his recollection. The last he’d heard, she was still trying to decide when to tell her parents and whether Scott was serious enough about her for that type of meeting to take place.

“That’s what she told me,” Noshiko said, starting to look more curious about his interest in the matter than he was ready for her to be at this point.

He added hastily, “If it makes you feel any better, she hasn’t actually discussed everything in great detail with me, either. She needed a little bit of a non-parental listening ear here and there, that’s all.”

“I’m grateful you’re around for that, Derek,” she said. “I’m a mother with mildly hurt feelings right now. When I look past that, it does help to know that she’s been approaching this as a mature relationship and hasn’t been entirely alone in it.”

“She hasn’t needed that much advice, really. You’re forgetting she’s an adult, making her own decisions about her life in a lot of different areas now.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten that, much as I try sometimes.” Noshiko shook her head, swinging her long hair over her shoulder. “Enough about my minor family drama. You came in here looking like you had something important hanging over you. Anything I can help with?”

Derek glanced at the line of closed office doors; the building was quiet for the time being, but there was no telling when students or some of the other professors would trail in and interrupt them.

“Ah, a private matter,” she said. “My office, then.”

She waited until they’d settled down again, the door shut behind them, before looking at him expectantly.

Perhaps he shouldn’t be doing this. If his boss was anyone but Noshiko—if he didn’t consider her as much a friend as a workplace superior—he wouldn’t be broaching this topic. Certainly not at such an early stage.

He went for a summarized version. No need for the context just yet. “What’re your thoughts on transferring between tenure track positions? I know it’s not ordinarily considered a wise move, but do you know anyone who’s successfully managed it?”

“Oh no,” Noshiko cried, as distraught as he’d ever heard her. “Derek, you’re not leaving?”

He scratched at his beard. “Ah, well, not yet. Maybe not at all. This isn’t a resignation. I’m just...curious about my options. If I needed to move to another city, another state, without losing all the progress I’ve made here.”

She made a visible effort to collect herself. Jumping right to the punchline apparently wasn’t the kindest method, after all; it was too late to attempt to soften the blow, so all they could do was forge on.

“Do you have somewhere specific in mind?” she asked.
“LA,” Derek said. “Well—possibly. Like I said, it’s not set in stone. I haven’t even checked job listings yet to see if there are any openings down there. I thought I should talk to you first. Get some input.”

“My input is that I don’t want to lose you,” Noshiko said, then pressed her face into her hands briefly before shaking herself back into a more professional demeanor. “Your sister’s in LA. Is everything okay with her?”

Great. Now she was under the impression he had a dire family emergency to deal with. “Cora’s fine. Everything’s fine, Noshiko. I just...”

He shifted his foot under Lola’s weight, thinking about what it’d mean to uproot her, too. It was a major decision he couldn’t make lightly; still, there was no harm in knowing whether it was at all reasonable to pursue it.

“It’s not a family thing, you don’t already have another job offer, and you would’ve told me if you were unhappy here,” Noshiko said, sorting through the scenarios that would lead to him leaving a position that, for all intents and purposes, was meant to hold him for the rest of his career. He’d overlooked how sharp she was, and she landed on the truth before long. “Romance, then?” she said. “You’re moving for someone else. Someone who isn’t actually in LA yet, thus the lack of urgency?”

“He’s not there yet, and he might not be there permanently.”

Which was another potential problem; moving tenure once would be hard enough. What if Stiles, graduate degree in hand, found a job across the country? Or out of the country? How many times could Derek conceivably follow him? Assuming, of course, that Stiles even wanted him to, which was by no means a given.

“He’s a student,” Noshiko concluded. “He’s the student. Oh, Derek.”

“We’ve sorted things out,” he said, picking at the seam of his pants. “For now, anyway. I haven’t actually talked to him about this. I didn’t want to get into any of it until I’d hashed out more details.”

“When I told you that I relocated for love, I wasn’t expecting you to use it as a guidebook for your own life.” Noshiko sighed and leaned back in her chair. “Well, as far as your career prospects, I’d say it’ll be difficult, but not impossible. It’ll depend on the compromises you’re willing to make—you know how academia is.”

Derek was aware of some of the risks. “If location’s my top priority, I may have to reduce my salary and likely accept an offer with limited credit toward tenure. I’d have to work my way back up the ladder.”

“Among other things. And you may end up in a department with less than ideal colleagues and course loads you won’t have as much flexibility in setting for yourself. I’m not trying to oversell you on staying, mind you. If you do decide to leave, you should know that you’ll have a glowing recommendation from me.”

“Thank you,” Derek said, unable to fully express his gratitude, but hoping Noshiko understood how important she’d been in his life over the past decade. “That means a lot to me.”

“You’re a valuable part of this university. More than that, you’re a very good friend, and I’ll be more sorry to see you go than I can say.”

“I’m not leaving yet; don’t start packing up my office,” he reiterated. He had no idea if Stiles was thinking in those kinds of terms, or if he was able to function at a far more casual level than appeared
to be in Derek’s wiring. The distance between LA and sleepy Westdale, Oregon might be precisely what he was looking for in a relationship.

“Then I wish you the best,” Noshiko said. “And goodness, hasn’t this put my problems in perspective? At least Kira’s boyfriend is staying in town. Regardless of how the lunch goes, that earns him some points.”

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Derek called Cora as he walked back home, taking the long, winding path by the woods so Lola would have more room to roam. He still felt some guilt over neglecting her that morning—even though it had been nice to have someone else around to share those responsibilities. He could get used to that. That was the whole problem.

“Whaddya want?” Cora answered. Some things never changed, anyway.

“Just calling to say hey. See how you’re doing.”

“Work’s shit,” she said. “So, you know, the usual. I think I’m about to get a promotion, though, which I can use to get another job that I can rub in my manager’s face.”

“Everybody needs their goals,” Derek said.

“It keeps me from stabbing him with a corkscrew. He made Anna cry again yesterday. And you’ll never believe this shitty wine he’s trying to make me unload.” With that, Cora was off on a rant about overpriced, overrated wine that paired so badly with everything on the menu, it made her want to gag when she saw customers drinking it.

“Plus, I’m almost positive he’s skimming off the top with this batch,” she finished. “I can’t report him because I can’t prove it, but something fishy’s going on.”

“Take care of yourself,” he cautioned.

“I can handle him,” Cora assured him. “I just wish I didn’t have to. Or that he was less eager to have all the ladies on staff handling him.”

“You could stab him with a corkscrew for that,” Derek suggested, and she laughed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find a less violent way of coping. Like I said, it’s job hunting right now.”

“I didn’t know you were looking,” he said, suddenly worried that—she wasn’t planning to move, was she?

“I send out my resume every time he pisses me off,” Cora said. “So at least twice a week. I’ve gotten a few bites, but nothing yet that I’m ready to jump at. Bitching aside, I’ve got a good gig here. I like everyone else I work with.”

“As long as they don’t get driven out by bad management, too.”

“Ugh,” Cora said. “Exactly. We should band together and start our own damn place.”

“You joke, but have you actually thought about doing that? You’ve got a lot of vineyard contacts and things now, right?”

“Yeah, but funds are a whole different thing. It takes a shit-ton of money to get that sort of business off the ground, and I barely have any savings as it is. I’d have to auction off some organs. A person
doesn’t need both kidneys, right?”

“Don’t sell your organs,” Derek said mildly. “If you need a loan—”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t ask you. The hazards of business partnerships with siblings aside, I know you’ve got a comfortable salary now, but I also know you’re not actually rich. There’s no way you’re draining your own savings to help me out.”

“I don’t have a lot of things to spend it on,” Derek said, not offended by her bluntness. It was true, though, that he wouldn’t be able to bankroll the whole venture, and dealing with other investors in an industry where he had no expertise wasn’t the most appealing prospect.

“Thanks for the offer,” Cora said. “Don’t make it again. Just show up for the opening night gala if I ever make it that far.”

“Sign me up for the best table in the house.” Lola brought him a stick, jabbing it uncomfortably into his shins, and he tossed for her, making sure it’d land in an area where the impact would create enough noise for her to easily locate it. “Hey, Cora—do you like living in LA?”

“About as often as I hate it. Why?”

“Making conversation,” he said, picking up the now slightly chewed up stick and throwing it again.

“I keep telling you that if you come visit me for a few days, I’ll show you all the good stuff. Bookstores, museums. Concert halls. What else do you like, you nerd?” She was laughing at him again, so he rolled his eyes.

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that.”

“That’d be awesome. If you visit me before I quit this hellhole, I can sneak you onto the reservation list. One of the few perks of working in a snooty place like this.” Cora’s voice went distant for a few seconds. “Sorry, Lydia was texting me.”

“Oh, was she?” Derek said. It was his turn to tease, and Cora responded with as much pained little sister exasperation as he’d expected.

“Don’t start. I can have friends, you know.”

“Hey, I can be interested in your friendships, too.”

“Mhm,” she responded, sounding dubious.

“So what’s she like, anyway? I only know what Stiles has told me. I guess he was right about the two of you getting along.”

“Hmm,” Cora said, probably considering how much information to arm him with. “She’s smart. She has a really sharp mind for business, actually, even though that’s not her field of study. I’ve been running some of my ideas past her, and she generally gives pretty good advice. And when she doesn’t, she’s fully on board with the corkscrew method.”

“Just your kind of girl,” Derek said, and could almost feel the resulting eyeroll.

“She’s a lot classier than I am, which might be weird? I dunno yet. Maybe it’s just the pictures she posts, and she doesn’t actually wear Louboutins to like...the grocery store. She got really excited when I told her about my roommate’s job and sounded a little disappointed that I don’t take more
“Maybe it’s not disappointment; could be jealousy that she doesn’t live with someone who can bring her free clothes.”

“Hah, maybe. We’ll see. I like her, even with the fashion diva side. She’s from Northern California—oh, Stiles’s hometown, I guess?—so she’s mentioned the possibility of dropping down here the next time she flies out to this coast.”

“That’s fast,” Derek said. “You’ve been talking for what, four weeks now?”

“Some people don’t move at a snail’s pace,” Cora retorted. “Speaking of which, how’s Stiles? The side effect of this whole butting-into-my-business thing of yours is that I now know you two patched things up. I wouldn’t have met Lydia otherwise.”

Derek had a sudden flash of worry—What had Lydia texted her? Had Stiles followed last night with an explicit play-by-play to all his friends? Had he taken photos while Derek was still sleeping?—before clamping down on the idiotic surge of distrust. That level of detail certainly wouldn’t have gotten back to his sister, which meant he could yank at that particular anxiety spiral, unwinding it from its source and lessening its ability to tangle around and immobilize him. For now, anyway.

_Stiles isn’t like that_, he reminded himself firmly.

This was precisely the sort of thing he was probably supposed to text Stiles about—_Hey, remember when I promised I’d tell you when I was worrying about things? You didn’t happen to tell your friends all the lurid details of us having sex, did you?_—but even as he composed reasonable-sounding variations in his head, he knew he wouldn’t be sending them.

“You’re being quiet,” Cora sighed. “You can’t pry Lydia gossip out of me and then clam up on me about your life. Fair is fair.”

“So you’re admitting there’s something to gossip about,” he said, and she went so silent he could almost see her trying to punch him through the screen. “Fine, I’ll stop. But—what has Lydia said? About us, I mean.”

“You and Stiles? Not much. Just that she’s glad to hear you’re talking to each other again. It doesn’t sound like Stiles has told her a whole lot of details, at least ones she’s willing to pass on. She’s still had access to more information than I have, though,” Cora added pointedly.

Derek bent to pick up the half-a-stick Lola had nearly tripped him with. “I haven’t really known what to say. It’s not like there’s been _news_, exactly.” Except for last night, but reporting back to his sister on his sex life was definitely outside of his comfort level.

“You not being heartbroken anymore counts as news. You were miserable over Christmas, Derek. I’ve never seen you like that.”

“Well. Good news, then? I’m not heartbroken anymore.”

“You’re impossible,” she said. “But I’m glad. You’re happy now? Things are good? I don’t need to dropkick Lydia out of my life in case Stiles does something shitty to you again and she sides with him?”

That was the kind of thing that started happening once you linked your friends and family together: if one piece broke apart, the entire chain could follow in a painfully chaotic tumble. Maybe that was why Stiles had taken so long to introduce him to Scott and why he wasn’t bringing up his graduation.
plans now. Maybe normal people didn’t spend a single night together and start worrying about events that could happen ten or twenty years into their future.

“Don’t base your friendships around me,” Derek said. “If I screw something up, that’s no reason for you to lose out on someone you’re interested in.”

“If you screw up,” Cora said in deep skepticism. “I know you didn’t want to talk about what actually happened back then, but you’re seriously not going to backtrack and try to act like it was your fault?”

Because even when you don’t tell your sisters the precise reasons behind your heartache, they’re honor-bound to paint you as the victim. As grateful as Derek was for the loyalty, it wasn’t an accurate portrait of what had happened, nor was it fair to Stiles. “It wasn’t entirely my fault. But I don’t want you thinking that it was entirely his, either. We had some crossed wires that we both needed to sort through.”

“Hm,” Cora said. “So whatever he did—you’re over it now? It doesn’t bother you anymore?”

Derek scratched behind Lola’s ears when she returned to him, having fully lost the stick this time, or having crunched it into splinters too small to retrieve. “We’ve moved past it,” he said.

Fortunately, that was as much as Cora ever dug into personal matters. “If you say so. Well, hey, I’ve gotta go. Tell me when you’re coming to visit, okay?”

“I will,” he promised. He clicked out of the call and checked the texts that’d been pinging in his ear over the last few minutes of the conversation. All from Stiles, of course.

>> Here’s where I admit that every catering event has been a million times worse since I got to spend one of them with you.
>> That was cheesy as fuck, wasn’t it?
>> I meant it, though.
>> Crap, Finstock’s coming. I just wanted to tell you I’m thinking about you tonight.
>> ...which is also cheesy, but fuck it, you know what I mean.

Derek took a screenshot of the texts so he could save them, considered sending that to Stiles to show he was even worse at reeling in his emotions, then decided against it. That was excessive, probably. He settled for four words that should be sufficient to convey his meaning.

<< I miss you, too.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Stiles goes all in
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stiles had never been happier. People said that about the stupidest shit—on holidays, after getting a test score back, when they came out of a movie that managed to not fuck up a beloved franchise—but they obviously didn’t know what true happiness felt like, because they didn’t know what it was like to date Derek Hale.

Now that he knew? There was sure as hell no going back.

Finals prep and his damned wallet-padding catering shifts meant that they didn’t get to spend as much time together as Stiles would’ve liked. Which, if he was being perfectly honest, would’ve been every spare minute of every single day. He probably owed Scott an apology for all the shit he’d given him about disappearing whenever he had a girlfriend, but even that would occupy a precious few moments when he could be taking sad-faced selfies and texting them to Derek with mournful captions.

You left my house five minutes ago, Derek reminded him on Monday morning, as Stiles trudged dolefully back to his apartment after spending the entire weekend in a blissful haze of hand-holding, popcorn-sharing, movie-watching, and mind-melting orgasms. The latter, of course, being the one part that didn’t happen in the movie theater, although the first rounds had taken place essentially as soon as they’d gotten home.

Home. He was starting to think of Derek’s house in those terms, which was probably dangerous. Then again, what other definition did he have now? Beacon Hills was his dad’s house—with a space that’d always be left open for him, yes, but it wasn’t the same anymore. Any apartment he could find with Scott was only a temporary option and not something he’d fondly revisiting years later, snapping pictures with the current residents’ permission and telling his kids about the time he’d downed so much Red Bull in one sitting, he’d genuinely thought he was having a heart attack until Scott had gotten him calmed down.

Why the hell was he thinking about kids? Did he even want kids? Did Derek want kids?

Stiles scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, trying to stop his brain from running too far down that path.

He was happy. Best to leave it at that and not freak Derek the fuck out by pushing this whole thing into overdrive. Hell, Stiles barely even knew what he wanted from one day to the next in most aspects of his life. All it boiled down to was this: when he was around Derek, his mind went quiet. Not static, not emptied out of his ordinarily rampant thoughts—that was all still there. But he could channel them somehow. Scrape his ideas against Derek’s steady, thoughtful questions until they were stripped down to their essence. Somehow it even worked when they weren’t talking; having Derek physically present gave Stiles a focal point for his sometimes scattered energies.

There was a common thread Stiles had heard in a lot of the relationships that’d cycled around him over the years, They make me want to be a better person. Scott had said it about both Allison and Kira, Caitlin about Emily, his parents about each other...Lydia hadn’t, to his recollection, but maybe that would change now that she’d started shifting away from the dregs of douchebaggery.

He wasn’t sure that was true for him exactly. Or maybe he was finally understanding what they’d all
meant. It wasn’t that being with Derek made Stiles want to change. It was more like it...gave him confidence to be who he already was. To forge a more substantial version of himself and believe that the guy he saw in the mirror was worth getting to know better.

Back when he’d had a crush on Lydia, and in a few of the relationships he’d tried to pursue at various points, Stiles had always ended up putting on some sort of mask. It hadn’t been intentional. It was an almost instinctive gesture, like interviewing for a job you weren’t quite sure you had the right qualifications to land. First you needed to slide on the face the person would respond to—you had to be someone else, someone impressive and knowledgeable and roguishly charming. Then you had to maintain it, which was where Stiles had struggled. He’d never been all that good of an actor. He was who he was, and people either appreciated him for it or shied far away.

He never felt like he had to pretend with Derek. The more he lapsed into simply being himself, the more Derek seemed to open up in turn. It was refreshing. Affirming. All those things he’d heard people say about their significant others without having his own point of reference.

Do I make you want to be a better you? he texted Derek, then waited for the answer, watching his screen as he walked, ignoring the early morning joggers and a few elderly couples out with their dogs.

You make me believe that’s possible, Derek replied. He sent a selfie, then—still in his pajamas this time, with his hair heavily rumpled and pillow creases on his cheek.

There was a self-deprecating tilt to his smile and a look in his eyes that clearly signaled that he was only snapping this photo because Stiles wanted it so badly. For someone who Stiles firmly believed could’ve easily made a living as a model, he was oddly reluctant around cameras. They didn’t make him nervous, Derek had explained at one point. He just felt weird about them and didn’t know what he was supposed to do when one was aimed in his direction.

You smile, Stiles had said, holding his screen out until they were both in frame, the morning light spilling through the slatted blinds and making Derek squint.

You’re not posting this anywhere, are you? Derek had asked, his eyes crinkling into a surprised grin when Stiles kissed him on the cheek at exactly the right moment.

Obviously not, Stiles had said, scrolling through the photo bursts and letting Derek choose which to delete. They’re for me to look at when I miss you.

Derek had looked oddly sad, then, wrapping his arms around Stiles and drawing him closer, as though Stiles had any intention of sprinting out of the bed. Send me one? he’d asked. I’ll be missing you, too.

The other bit of relationship advice Stiles had often heard was that when you met the right person, you knew. No one could explain how, and he’d learned that asking too many questions mostly resulted in irritation and a thin-lipped, You’ll know it when you see it.

It’d been a while since he’d believed that. When he’d met Lydia, he’d assumed that flash of fascinated interest was the spark you were supposed to feel with your soulmate. And wasn’t he lucky for discovering it so early in his life? Years later, as he grew up and matured through different levels of romance, he’d focused more on the unmistakeable low burn of sexual chemistry that flared up around potentially compatible partners.

None of it had really worked. He’d looked at them and thought, This feels different; this could be the one, but in the end, that hadn’t ever been true.
You can shape your fate, Słoneczko, his mother had told him once, when he was very little and had teared up after she’d read him a fairy tale that hadn’t ended the way he’d hoped. There’s a magic that comes from two people loving each other. You know I believe it happens when it’s meant to. But it’s not like these stories, with an unchangeable beginning and end. It’s living. It’s ongoing. Think of it more like those seeds Melissa gave us: you can choose which to plant, and which to nourish to keep them blooming. That’s how you keep the magic alive, my darling.

There was a nightmarish aspect to that kind of fate. With his mother gone, his father had begun withering away on the vine. Stiles, twelve years old and helpless to change any of it, watched the magic fade out of the world.

Perhaps his mother’s way of viewing things wasn’t for him. There were still aspects to learn from: the deep-rooted yet playful nature of their love, their dedication to solving disputes through frank dialogue. His mom had a temper—she would slam doors and stomp into the backyard to yank weeds out of the dirt, swearing in a steady stream of Polish. She always went back inside, dirt under her fingernails, once the anger was no longer steaming off her skin.

Of course we make each other angry, she’d told Stiles. How interesting would life be if we only ever had one emotion? We make each other happy, too. Someday, when you’re old enough for that kind of happiness, you’ll know.

“I think I get it,” Stiles said to the breeze that tugged at his hair as he walked.

The disagreements, the misunderstandings—while some of them could’ve been avoided, maybe they were meant to be. Maybe it was part of what had led him and Derek here. Was fate real? Probably not. But the sky was big and beautiful today, brimming with the magical possibilities Stiles had thought he’d lost.

For now, that was enough.

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“You keep checking your phone,” his dad said. It wasn’t a reprimand, but Stiles jumped anyway, guiltily flipping it face down as his dad reached around him to grab the salsa Stiles had left stranded by his plate. “You expecting to hear from somebody?”

“No,” Stiles said, a little too quickly.

He used a couple of his chips to scoop more salsa over his rice before his dad could empty the dish, then tried to make more of an effort to join in on the excited, occasionally awkward conversation bubbling around the table. Scott had cranked his enthusiastic friendliness up to a level Stiles wasn’t sure he’d ever witnessed, and Kira’s parents were visibly weakening under the pressure.

Not that they’d been rude at any point. Ken Yukimura was a bit quiet but cordial, with a tendency to crack terrible puns during some of the heavier pauses. He’d twinkled down at his plate after one particularly bad joke, which was when Stiles realized he’d been using them as an icebreaker to soften his wife’s initially chilly demeanor.

Derek always spoke highly of Noshiko, and Stiles could see why. She cut an intimidating figure, the kind of person who could sweep into a room and silence everyone with a few well-chosen remarks. Possibly even with a single look.

There’d been an odd moment when they’d gone through the initial round of greetings and Noshiko had cocked a surprised eyebrow at Stiles before taking his hand. It was like she’d recognized his
name, realized she wasn’t necessarily supposed to, and caught herself before saying anything. He wanted to text Derek about it. What did she know about them? Had Derek mentioned him? If so, when?

Stiles fought the urge to send those questions and a dozen others. Everyone had their bad days, the times when they needed to steer clear of certain dates or situations or even people who’d sharpen painful memories. He was giving Derek space this weekend. Keeping an eye on his phone in case Derek reached out but otherwise holding back any unnecessary reminders of a celebration he didn’t wish to revisit.

It sucked.

He poked at his enchiladas, unable to fully enjoy his meal, even though this was one of his and Scott’s favorite places. It was selfish to want Derek here with him. He couldn’t stop picturing it, though. Kira and Melissa were already chatting like old friends, and Noshiko had started smiling at some of Scott’s stories—he was telling her about the time he’d helped Dr. Deaton set a baby rabbit’s broken leg, effectively highlighting both his compassionate heart and his promising career path. It was a clever move, and Stiles would’ve found a way to send him an approving double thumbs up if he wasn’t so busy moping into his guacamole.

“You’re being pretty quiet for someone with a brand new diploma,” his dad said, triggering a surge of guilt that pulled him back to the present.

Right. He’d graduated. He was a graduate. He was excited about that! He had a degree and a bright future and a brand new boyfriend who was sitting at home right now doing god knows what while Stiles was stuck watching his best friend charm his potential in-laws.

“They hand us blank pieces of paper and mail us the actual diploma later,” Stiles said, and his dad rolled his eyes.

“I did go to school myself, kiddo. I know the ropes.”

“Yeah, but that was what? Eighty years ago? A lot’s changed, old man.”

“Still got my catlike reflexes,” his dad said, spooning the entire mound of guacamole from Stiles’s plate onto his.

“Fucking illegal move, I’m calling the cops,” Stiles protested.

His dad peacefully dipped a chip into his delicious stolen goods and said, “Avocados are a heart-healthy food,” which was another unfair move that Stiles couldn’t counter.

He grumbled and went back to eating his enchiladas and listening to Noshiko not-so-casually quizzing Scott on the business side of working in—or running—a veterinary practice.

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By Monday morning, Stiles was about ready to jump out of his skin with impatience.

“Bye dad, have a good trip, drive safely, tell me when you get home,” he rattled off, nearly shutting the car door on his dad’s leg.

“Why do I get the distinct feeling you’re trying to rush me out of here?” his dad asked, pushing the door back open so he could get all of his limbs inside the vehicle in one piece.
Stiles stuck his hands in his back pockets and rocked back on his heels, putting on his best aura of innocence. “Not rushing. Making sure you beat the rush. Of traffic. On your way home.”

“Mhm,” his dad said, clearly suspicious but not wanting to put in the effort required to dig more information out of him. “Make sure your new landlord follows up about those faucets.”

“And replaces that messed up burner on the stove, I’ve got it, dad. Love ya, see ya!” Stiles thumped on the car’s roof in farewell as his dad finally shut the door. He waved, waited for the car to turn the corner, and dug his phone out.

<< Goddamn, I thought he’d never leave.

Your dad’s heading home? Derek asked before long.

They’d barely talked all weekend—Derek busy finishing off his grades while Stiles spent far too many hours discussing his future with his dad—and he was beyond ready to change that.

<< Yeah.
<< Don’t get me wrong, I love him, and I’ll probably miss him about five minutes from now.
<< Just...parents, you know?

Stiles winced after sending that last message. Insensitive much? Even with all the reminders over the weekend, he’d momentarily forgotten that Derek didn’t have the luxury of bitching about his parents anymore.

And, as quickly as that, he regretted shoving his dad on the highway without hugging him at least three more times. Dammit. Scott had been the perfect son yesterday, too: taking his mom out to brunch and making sure she had enough gas and snacks for the road. Fucking Scott. Always breezing through life with a clear conscience.

Believe it or not, siblings are the same, Derek texted before Stiles had a chance to beat himself up about it for too long. I spend eleven months of the year wishing Laura lived closer, and then half the time she drives me absolutely crazy when she is around.

<< Still wouldn’t trade ‘em, though, huh?

>> Exactly.
>> So the weekend wasn’t great?

<< No, it was awesome!
<< Everything was cool until Melissa left and my dad insisted on helping out with packing and all the new housing shit.

Stiles was surprised their new landlord had even answered his phone on a Sunday, much less agreed to give them another walk-through of their new place. It was a good sign, really; the last time the bathroom drain had clogged in their current apartment, it’d taken three weeks for their landlord to even acknowledge there was a problem. He’d then come over with a coat hanger and a bottle of Drano instead of calling a plumber. The fucking thing still filled to about ankle-height when they showered for too long, but it hadn’t been worth dealing with another round of track-down-the-landlord.

While Stiles was rehashing that argument in his head again—dad, who cares if the wrong burner heats up when you turn on the stove, at least we have a fucking stove this time—Derek’s response
came through.

>> You’re already moving?

Huh. Had they really not talked about that?

<< Yeah, I thought I’d told you about the new apartment?
<< Sorry, I guess everything’s been crazy this month.

Stiles must’ve been so wrapped up in hammering out the details while juggling everything else in his overcrowded life that he’d forgotten to mention it. From start to finish, it’d actually happened rather quickly. They’d found the listing, toured the place, and signed the lease in a single afternoon. More split-second decisions his dad had shaken his head about, but he’d had to admit that they’d gotten a good deal. Especially after he’d seen where Stiles and Scott had been living all year.

Despite his dad’s insistence on helping him box up some of his books and plan out the most efficient ways of packing his belongings into his Jeep—conclusion: they’d definitely need to rent a truck—it wasn’t actually official until the end of May. He and Scott hadn’t wanted to move out during finals, so they’d had to swallow another month’s rent, but it’d all ended up working out, anyway.

The apartment opening up in June—with hardwood floors, a full kitchen, and, best of all, two bedrooms—was infinitely better than any of the earlier listings they’d scrolled through. It was right on the edge of their price range, but what the hell. They were graduate students now; it was worth stretching their wallets a bit to live in a place that didn’t feel like such a complete dump.

Derek’s next response was weird, and Stiles stared at it for a while.

>> Will I get to see you before you leave?

“What the fuck?” Stiles said out loud.

They were moving into a different part of town; it’d require a bit more time spent in his Jeep than on foot, since anything within walking distance of campus tended to be rundown or expensive or both, but it wasn’t that far. Stiles was already getting the better end of the deal. They’d weighed the options and decided to stick as close to campus as possible, since it was more convenient for both him and Kira.

Scott’s next step was to hunt down cheap used cars for his commute to veterinary school. He’d graciously turned down offers of help, which was probably why Stiles’s dad had doubled down on the apartment inspection. It was that trademark Stilinski inability to keep from sticking his nose into interesting situations. If he couldn’t pick out a car for Scott, he could make sure their living situation was up to his standards.

Not that it’d been a terrible use of the day, nor had it taken up all of it. Stiles just missed the hell out of Derek and had initially assumed his dad would be driving back to Beacon Hills with Melissa. Instead, he’d shown up in his own car with a list of ways to make Stiles think far too much about his plans for next year, interrupting his much more immediate plans to relax—or party hard in celebration of finishing off his first college degree.

I was planning to come over today? Stiles texted, frowning at his phone. Within the next half hour, actually, if you’re not busy. I was hoping to last night, but, y’know. Dad in town.

>> Never too busy to see you.
That was more like Derek, although it was still more clipped than usual. It’d probably be easier to figure out what was going on in person.

Stiles patted down his pockets, considered whether he needed to change or tell Scott where he was headed, then thought about his limited contact with Derek over the past couple days and how fucking amazing it’d feel to see his stupidly beautiful face. What the hell, he had his car keys on him.

<< Make that within the next fifteen minutes, then. I’ve fucking missed you.

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Derek opened his door with a slightly dour expression that melted into something much softer and happier by the time Stiles had finished greeting him.

“I missed you, too,” Derek murmured, his beard tickling a bit as it brushed against the shell of Stiles’s ear. “We should probably take this inside, though.”

Stiles unwrapped his limbs enough for them to both fit through the doorway, then crouched down to greet Lola, who’d been patiently waiting for them to get done with their strange new ignoring-the-dog habits. “Hey, honey, did you miss me, too? Did you? I bet you did. Where’s your wonderfully noisy toy that Derek hates?”

“In a drawer where she can’t get to it,” Derek said. “She knows now that when I bring it out, I'll be leaving her alone in the house for a little while. Move, your foot’s still in the way.”

“The biggest romantic,” Stiles said, standing back up to slide his hands under Derek’s shirt and kiss him again.

He could feel the tension in Derek’s back uncoiling, although not as fast as he would’ve liked. There was an almost desperate feel to Derek’s kisses—a hunger that seemed at odds with the amount of time that’d passed since they’d last done this. As much as Stiles had complained about it, he’d been at Derek’s only a few days ago. Being happy to see each other again was understandable. Flattering, even. This was something different. Something stranger and a little bit worrying.

“Hey,” he said, framing Derek’s face and brushing his thumbs gently along his cheeks, “what’s going on with you?”

It took a couple of seconds for Derek to speak, and even then, he sounded reluctant. “I didn’t know it was happening so soon,” he said. “I’d thought...maybe the end of the summer.”

“I didn’t know it was happening so soon,” he said. “I’d thought...maybe the end of the summer.”

“Thought what was happening?”

Derek’s eyes narrowed a bit in annoyance over needing to spell it out. “The move. You leaving. We never talked about it, but I thought you’d want to stay for a couple more months. With Scott. With me. I guess I should’ve asked. I’d just assumed you would’ve said something if you were driving down to LA right after graduation.”

“LA?” Stiles said, startled, his hands slipping down to Derek’s shoulders.

Derek brought his arms up, wrapping them around Stiles’s back to keep him from creating more distance. “For school,” he said, his expression sliding back into that resigned sorrow he’d been wearing earlier. “It makes sense; obviously you’d need to get settled in before it starts up in the fall.”

Holy shit.
Stiles pulled himself out of Derek’s embrace, slapping himself on the forehead and groaning in suddenly enlightened embarrassment. He’d been priding himself on how great their communication was. They’d never run into the kinds of issues that’d plagued Scott and Allison! Now that they’d sorted out that stupid screw-up from last year, everything else would be smooth sailing. *Stupid.* Why hadn’t he been paying more attention?

“I am such...fucking hell. I’m such a fucking idiot.”

Derek was watching him, his eyebrows scrunchedin concern. “It’s okay that you didn’t tell me. Like I said, I didn’t ask, either.”

“No, Derek, fucking hell.” Stiles steered him over to the couch, where it’d feel less like Derek was bracing himself for a goodbye kiss before being abruptly left behind.

“If you’re trying to prepare me for bad news, I think it’s a little too late,” Derek quipped, taking a seat next to him anyway.

“No, I’m just trying to tell you I’m an idiot who apparently not only didn’t tell his boyfriend he’d found a new apartment, he didn’t tell him it was in the same city. Derek, I’m not moving to L.A. I decided against Caltech.”

Derek’s jaw worked as he processed that information dump, and Stiles watched surprise and relief flit over his features.

“Boyfriend?” he asked finally.

Stiles rubbed at the back of his neck. “Uh, yeah. I guess we haven’t talked about that, either. That’s what I’ve been calling you? Not to everyone. To myself, mostly.”

Derek’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “I don’t mind if you tell other people that. It’s...nice.”

“Yeah?” Stiles asked hopefully, basking in that for a few seconds, until he remembered they still hadn’t actually resolved anything. He scooted a little closer on the couch and gripped Derek’s knee to make sure he was paying attention. “Did you seriously think I was just going to disappear on you?”

Derek shrugged, looking uncomfortable with the question. “Not disappear. Relocate with...minimal notice, maybe.”

“You ass,” Stiles said fondly. “I could barely stand spending a couple days away from you. What makes you think I’d be able to handle being in a completely different state?”

Derek lifted his eyes—wide and worried, but apparently no longer for himself. “You’re not staying for me, are you? Stiles, it’s your future.”

“Yeah, it’s my future, so I get to decide what’s best for me.”

This was...surprisingly awkward to talk about, which might be why he’d put it off for so long that he’d completely forgotten to ever bring it up. He had a lot of reasons for staying. While Derek was an important selling point, he wasn’t the *only* one.

“They have a good program here,” Stiles reminded him. “I’ve learned a lot and my professors have been really great and supportive, even when we drove each other crazy. I mean, you work here. You know what it’s like. That marketing shit about personalized attention is actually true if you take advantage of it.”
Derek nodded. “I know it’s been a good choice for you so far. You don’t think you’ll find more of what you need by switching to a place with new people? Or expanded resources?”

He’d been through this discussion already with his dad and Scott. It was funny how the most important people in your life kept trying to push you geographically farther away. As Stiles had told them, he was fully in touch with his priorities and frankly didn’t think there was a damn thing wrong with choosing a path that kept you closer to the people you loved.

“No. I really don’t. I spent a lot of time talking to as many people as possible at both schools before I made my decision. I would’ve had plenty of opportunities down there, but they’re giving me freedom here to pretty much design my own degree. It’s gonna be really cool. I’m excited about it. A lot more independent study, opportunities to work more closely with people on stuff I’m interested in, projects where I can experiment with the kinds of things I’ve always wanted to. I weighed my options. Staying here was a smart move.”

Derek put his hand over Stiles’s and squeezed lightly. “I’m glad,” he said. “Although it would’ve been nice to know earlier. I wish I’d asked you about it. I’ve been planning out all these ways to keep seeing you once you left.”

“You have?” Stiles knew he was beaming, but he didn’t try to hide it. “You really like me, huh?”

“Maybe a little,” Derek said, but when Stiles scrambled into his lap, he merely grunted from the weight, got his hands on Stiles’s hips, and let their bodies do the rest of the talking.

There was a lot that was easier to convey this way. It took us too long to get here, as he mouthed along Derek’s throat. I hated the thought of being that far away from you, as their tongues touched. I would’ve spent every day missing this, as he drew out one of Derek’s delicious throaty moans.

“Bedroom?” Stiles asked, smiling at Derek’s glazed over expression, so far removed now from the oddly hesitant man who’d met him at the door.

They took their time. All of this was still so new to them, their relationship in such early stages that everything felt like a first. They were exploring still: finding out what they liked, what brought up negative memories of the past, and where their preferences aligned or conflicted.

After the first couple of times, when they’d mainly been focused on getting to know each other’s bodies, Stiles had suggested that they try more things that Derek hadn’t done as much with other people in the past. It wasn’t a comparison issue. Their level of experience, as far as Stiles could tell, was more similar than he would’ve expected if he hadn’t known Derek quite as well. Derek’s experience was thornier than his, though. He tensed up sometimes, without seeming to know exactly why. He’d disappear in the middle of sex, mentally drifting somewhere far away and slowly reeling himself back through the sound of Stiles’s voice.

It required patience and sensitivity, and Derek occasionally picked up an embarrassed, defensive tone that meant that he was still panicking over Stiles deciding he wasn’t worth the effort.

There’s a lot I haven’t tried, Derek had admitted after a more direct line of questioning. They’d started to test out some of Stiles’s ideas, with an emphasis on taking the pressure off Derek and letting him relax as he gradually relinquished control. There were issues they hadn’t discussed in detail yet—Stiles wasn’t sure if they ever would—but it hadn’t taken much to gather the impression that Derek had typically spent so much energy trying to make sure his partner enjoyed the experience, he’d rarely done so himself.

Stiles made a point of regularly kissing away the furrowed lines on Derek’s forehead and assuring
him that giving him pleasure wasn’t exactly a hardship. They wouldn’t figure everything out in two weeks, or two months—possibly even two years?—but it wasn’t something he was going to tire of any time soon. If he could just get Derek to accept that, it’d make everything a whole lot easier.

Relationships were complicated, Stiles decided for at least the dozenth time since theirs had started. Good thing complicated was interesting. He’d never been able to resist a good mystery.

Derek was panting, his eyes heavy-lidded, his limbs loose and relaxed, his thighs still trembling a little on either side of Stiles’s hips. Stiles had already wiped Derek’s abs clean with a tissue and tied off and tossed his condom, moving away from him as little as possible. He liked the beautiful noises Derek made, his insistence on kissing as much as possible as they made love, the way he hooked his ankles together behind Stiles’s back to keep him from pulling out too soon.

“You feel so good, you know that?” Stiles told him again, unable to resist licking the dimple that popped into Derek’s cheek when he smiled.

Derek made an unintelligible noise, either acknowledging the praise or providing non-verbal commentary on Stiles’s fascination with the most peculiar parts of his body. Like the superhero-worthy dimple in his chin, for example, which Stiles licked next before making his way down to Derek’s collarbones and into the vulnerable hollow of his throat. He tangled his fingers in Derek’s chest hair and tugged a little, pulling out another soft groan that signaled Derek’s appreciation.

“I’m not nearly ready to go again,” Derek said. “I am impressed you’re still awake.”

“Hey, that only happened once—”

“The first three times.”

“—and it was because I’d been barely getting any sleep. I’m perfectly capable of functioning after sex.”

“Mhm,” Derek said, playing lightly with Stiles’s hair as he continued exploring his way down that beautifully toned, fantastically hairy chest.

One of Stiles’s favorite things about sex had always been getting to see, up close and personal, the different ways people’s bodies were put together. Most of the time, he’d had to settle for a quick fuck and a vague idea of visually appealing abs or breasts, since hookups weren’t usually all that eager to lie around cuddling after.

Derek commented here or there, often in amusement, but generally seemed to enjoy this part as much as anything else they did in bed. Maybe because it was a long, slow appreciation of his body where he wasn’t asked anything in return. Stiles would scrape his teeth experimentally over Derek’s nipples or tongue along his Adonis lines, simply satisfying his curiosity in those quiet post-coital periods.

Despite his protestations, he was a little tired today; he yawned partway down Derek’s torso and slid back up to settle against his side, Derek’s arms automatically wrapping around him. “You have so much hair,” he mumbled, touching the dark hair on Derek’s forearm.

He hadn’t expected that to be one of the things that made Derek tense, and he tilted his chin up to check Derek’s expression. Not upset this time. Self conscious? He didn’t push; sometimes Derek wasn’t comfortable explaining why he was uncomfortable. Stiles was trying to exercise patience there, too.

Derek seemed to be fighting an inner battle on whether to comment; he dragged the backs of his fingers along Stiles’s cheek, a gesture it’d taken a few nights to realize was some sort of odd method
of drawing comfort from his presence. “Does it bother you?” he asked eventually, his mouth soft with worry.

Stiles snorted before realizing it was meant to be a serious question. “Why the hell would it bother me?”

Derek had the perfect amount of hair, distributed in exactly the right parts of his body, unlike Stiles’s much smaller patch of chest hair and weirdly thick happy trail. Before he’d come to terms with his body—it wasn’t like he could change anything about it—Stiles had wondered why the hell all his hair had decided to concentrate into a line that led to his dick. Was it all the jerking off he’d done in high school? Like that old myth about hairy palms...but he was getting off track. He’d tell Derek all that later, when he looked less ready to jump out of bed, grab a razor, and lather his chest up.

Stiles tangled his fingers in the soft curls again—as inky-dark as the rest of Derek’s hair, with grey scattered throughout. “What’ve I ever done that made you think I wasn’t into this? Is it because I stopped ending every sentence with ‘that’s so sexy?’ I figured that was starting to get annoying.”

Derek huffed out a hint of a laugh. Partial success. “People haven’t always liked it,” he said, which was generally code for Jennifer didn’t.

Stiles felt his lips tightening in anger. Fuck that woman.

Derek didn’t like talking about her, claimed his experiences with her didn’t really bother him anymore, and seemed to think he was in the wrong for having let it impact him negatively in the first place. As far as Stiles was concerned, trauma didn’t have a threshold you had to meet, and its recovery didn’t have a fucking timeline, past which point you were no longer allowed to grieve about something that’d hurt you.

How the hell, he thought for the millionth time, did you look at a man like this and decide the thing you most wanted was to find insidiously effective ways to hurt him?

The worst part was that it didn’t even take much. Derek’s exterior—strong build, intimidating features, confidence seemingly exuding from every pore—was strikingly different from the extraordinarily gentle soul that lay beneath. That juxtaposition of strength and sensitivity seemed to trigger inexplicable cruelty in people like Jennifer. It made Stiles bristle with the urge to fight anyone who’d try to take advantage of it, who’d take pleasure in quashing Derek’s sharply clever sense of humor and the eager way he’d rattle on about any subject that caught his interest.

He’d hurt Derek, too, he remembered suddenly, and that knowledge clogged in the back of his throat. Even though they’d talked it out and engaged in multiple rounds of apology exchanges, he hated that Derek had ever seen him that way—as the kind of person who’d intentionally belittle him, treating him like something to be possessed, used, and discarded.

Stiles pressed his lips against the smooth, firm skin on Derek’s pec, one of the areas where his soft whorls of chest hair didn’t grow. “I like it,” he said. “I thought that was pretty damn obvious. But what matters is how you like it. If you’re into this ruggedly sexy natural look, so am I. If you felt like shaving, I’d be into that, too.”

A little furrow had dug in between Derek’s eyebrows as he listened, like he wasn’t sure Stiles meant it. “You have a preference, though.”

“Honestly? I’m still pinching myself that I’m even here with you at all. Body hair, no body hair...I really couldn’t give a shit about it, as long as it’s whatever way you want your body to be. That’s my preference. Because it means you’re happy. And that’s more important to me than anything.”
Derek tugged him higher up the bed, then, cupping Stiles’s face and kissing him with such
tenderness that the ache went all the way down to Stiles’s toes.

Stiles pushed them against the silky sheets, trying to keep that funny tingle from bubbling over into
something so light and buoyant it’d sweep all the way through his veins and lift him right off the bed.
When he closed his eyes, all his senses focusing in on the taste of Derek’s lips, the soft insistence of
his tongue, he couldn’t tell if he’d lost that battle—maybe they were already floating several inches
into the air, with no reason to ever return to the mundane solidity below.

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It took another week and a half before Stiles plucked up the courage to enact the plan that’d risen
half-formed into his mind during that moment.

They were a week shy of their one month anniversary. Stiles had considered suggesting his proposed
ceremony as part of the celebration, a way to say farewell to an unwelcome piece of their past while
greeting the future with a refreshed sense of hope, but had discarded the idea as overly dramatic.
Besides, Derek had already dropped a number of hints about Stiles’s availability for that particular
night, leading to the safe assumption that he’d either made dinner reservations or was planning out a
ridiculously romantic meal at home.

Stiles had never thought he’d meet someone whose over-the-top romantic gestures could so
thoroughly rival his own. He already had plans for their six month and one year markers, though, so
he could let Derek take the helm on these early ones.

The subject still wasn’t easy to raise, and Stiles wondered suddenly if walking Lola—hand in hand,
like one of those disgusting couples he’d complained about while secretly envying—really counted
as neutral ground. He’d wanted to bring it up in a space where Derek could react without feeling
trapped and where, if it somehow went badly, their surroundings wouldn’t be tainted.

“You know I can hear when you do that?” Derek asked as they stopped to let Lola roll gleefully in a
field she liked to inspect for mice and other subterranean beasts.

“Do what?” Stiles asked guiltily. He hadn’t been doing anything. He’d been thinking, but not out
loud, and Derek hadn’t acquired mind-reading capabilities last he’d checked.

“You’ve been starting to say something and changing your mind all morning. You do this exact
same sharp inhale every time.” Derek imitated it, twisting his face into some sort of weird—and
extremely inaccurate—impression of Stiles’s concerned face.

“Don’t quit your day job, babe,” Stiles said fondly, forgiving the insult. “That looked absolutely
nothing like me.”

“The point stands. Just spit it out. It can’t be that bad.”

“I don’t think it is. I just don’t know what you’ll think.”

“Well,” Derek said, “it can’t possibly be as bad as last week, when you decided you wanted to
christen your old bed before leaving your apartment but forgot to actually tell Scott.”

“I told him!” Stiles argued.

He’d specifically told Scott that it was a date night and had reminded him that morning. What he’d
neglected to do was clarify that by date night he’d meant for Scott to clear out of the apartment. Scott
had interpreted it as I’ll be at Derek’s all night, bring your girlfriend over for some sexytimes and had
stumbled into their bedroom, halfway through unfastening Kira’s bra, before Stiles had yelped and thrown a shoe at him.

“I still don’t understand how we didn’t hear them come in,” Derek said. He brushed a leaf out of Lola’s fur when she bounded up to make sure they hadn’t carried on down the path without her.

“The weather’s getting nicer. The door sticks marginally less when it’s warm out. Besides, we were pretty distracted.”

Derek grimaced, which wasn’t the reaction you’d ordinarily want from your boyfriend when you were talking about sex.

“I keep telling you they didn’t see anything,” Stiles assured him. “Especially not Kira. She had her back to us the whole time. And Scott swears he didn’t either, because he was all wrapped up in getting her clothes off, and then he fucking ran out of there with his eyes closed.”

Derek wrinkled his nose. “Not helping.”

Right. Kira being basically another one of his sisters. “Anyway, even if he had, which he didn’t, because we were under the covers, the most he would’ve seen would’ve been my pale ass. Which he’s seen before. Locker rooms? High school sports? Nothing new there.”

“What we were in the middle of is slightly different from what usually goes on in locker rooms after lacrosse games,” Derek said dryly. “Unless there’s something you haven’t told me about your team.”

Stiles shuddered at the thought of having sex with anyone from that team. “You’re not gonna let this one go, are you.”

“Let’s just say I’m glad you’re leaving that apartment, because I’m not sure I want to go back.”

Stiles sighed, a little woefully. He had wanted the memory of sleeping with Derek in as many meaningful spots around campus as possible. At least the Aquatic Center had been more successful — pool sex and shower sex had both been checked off the list already, with immensely satisfying results.

Do you even know how fucking obscene these shorts are? Derek had asked while attempting to peel the lurid, far too tight material down Stiles’s legs so he could blow him at the edge of the pool.

I meant to buy new ones, Stiles had admitted breathlessly. Never got around to it.

Their next date had included a trip to Target, where Stiles refused to let Derek buy him anything but did graciously permit him to view and vote on every pair of swim trunks. He ended up with a much classier, properly fitting dark red pair and a boyfriend who kissed him fiercely in the parking lot while whispering promises of another blowjob when they got home.

All in all, they’d had a pretty good run.

“Just tell me,” Derek said, starting to look worried now, which was the opposite of the effect Stiles was trying to achieve. Dragging it out was only making it sound like a bigger deal.

“I wanted to ask you if you still had my notebook,” he said.

Derek’s fingers uncurled from around his, leaving Stiles’s palm cold and empty, and his heart clenched. He didn’t need to clarify which one, then.
“Yeah,” Derek said. “It’s in a drawer in my study.”

“Okay, hear me out.” Stiles withheld his impulse to close that sudden distance between them; when it came to this topic, it was especially important that he let Derek be the one to decide when he was ready to be touched again.

“I’m listening,” Derek said. He snapped his fingers to call Lola to his side, clipped her leash back on, and softly rumpled her ears as Stiles explained his thinking.

His concern was that they hadn’t actually dealt with that whole thing in a way that’d keep it from festering and potentially becoming an issue again down the line. They’d mostly swept it under the rug—or locked it away in a literal drawer—which really only bestowed it with a level of power it’d never deserved.

Derek nodded slowly. “You still want to burn it.”

“Not necessarily. We could. If you still feel like it’s something you never want to see again, we could have a ceremonial bonfire and just drop the whole thing in. Burn the shit out of it and swear we’ll forget it ever existed.”

“But you’d rather...?”

Stiles scratched his nose. “I want us to look through it. Together. It’s going to be...kinda fucking embarrassing for me, but you also know how I feel about you now, so that’s not a huge surprise anymore. Obviously if you’re not comfortable with it, we can ditch the whole idea right now.”

Derek made a thoughtful noise and started walking again, bumping his shoulder lightly against Stiles’s. Lola trotted happily a few steps ahead of them.

“I was afraid of the dark when I was a kid,” Derek said conversationally. “Well, no, I was afraid of the things in the dark.”

“Ghosts and monsters,” Stiles filled in, not sure where this was going but ready to ride it out.

“All the things that creep out of the dark on Halloween are lurking in the shadows every night of the year when you’re a kid with an overactive imagination and an older sister who likes to tell you ghost stories when your parents aren’t paying attention.” His hand brushed against Stiles’s, and Stiles held his breath until Derek linked their fingers again. “Were you ever afraid of monsters in the closet? Or under the bed?”

Stiles frowned and thought back. “Not really? Scott slept with a nightlight for a few years when we were really little, but I dunno. With my dad being a cop, the things I was afraid of were more...concrete, I guess. Although my mom did sing me this little Polish lullaby every night that she said would protect me.”

Back then, when he closed his eyes at night, he’d picture the notes—golden and trembling in the air—sinking into the window frames and the walls, linking across the doorway to hold the room together until the daylight streamed back in.

“My problem was the window,” Derek said. “I had this big one in my room that looked out on the woods, so it’d be pitch black out there most nights. No street lamps, no headlights sweeping by, no voices of people on the sidewalks outside, like you get in more populated neighborhoods.”

Derek’s current neighborhood wasn’t all that busy either; since his bedroom faced his backyard, they mostly heard owls hooting softly at night and birds chirping themselves awake in the morning. It was
peaceful. A kind of uncomplicated stillness that Stiles was learning to appreciate. He certainly slept better in Derek’s bed, although there could be a number of reasons for that. The muscle-loosening relaxation of having regular, generally quite athletic, sex. The gradual reduction in stress as his class-related responsibilities tapered away. The grounding comfort of Derek’s presence next to him.

He wondered what Derek’s old house was like. It’d been sold years ago, and as far as Stiles knew, Derek hadn’t stepped foot in it since his parents’ death. He’d described parts of it, but were there photos that he’d be willing to share? Stiles had never really thought about how lucky he was to still have access to the house where he’d grown up. It’d be strange to lose that marker of his past, with the scuff marks on the kitchen linoleum from the time he and Scott were learning to rollerskate, and the odd little quirks of all the faucets and door handles, even the positions of the light switches. All those tiny, instinctive bits of knowledge that made a place familiar and secure—that made it home. Derek had lost his parents, and then he’d lost that, too.

Stiles stroked his thumb over the back of Derek’s hand to show he was listening. “Your bedroom was on an upper floor, wasn’t it?”

“Ghosts don’t obey the laws of gravity,” Derek said solemnly. “And monsters can scramble up walls and scrape their claws over windowpanes.”

“Good point.”

“My dad eventually figured out what was going on. Not that it took much detective work on his part. We’d all gone out to a movie and ended up having dinner after, and I’d forgotten to shut my curtains before we left. Usually when that happened, I’d run up the stairs and down the hall to my room as fast as I could, and reach in to turn on the light switch to drive away anything that’d been skulking around my room.”

“Sounds like a good solution,” Stiles said supportively. Derek shot him a slightly skeptical look. “Hey, I mean it! A lot of fear’s irrational. It’s pretty great when you can figure out ways to address it.”

“It can be. Sometimes it’s more like slapping a band-aid over a broken bone. The problem that day was that when I flicked on the switch, the filament in my lightbulb snapped, so there was a quick flash and then everything felt even darker than before. I freaked out a little bit and refused to go in my room until my dad came upstairs.”

“He replaced the bulb?”

“He did, but he left the light turned off and closed the curtains. Then he went in with me, promised me that absolutely nothing would harm me while he was there, and told me to go pull the curtains open. It was worse than if he’d just left them open, because I could’ve seen from across the room if anything was outside. And I’d built up this whole sequence of events about what would happen if I ever did look behind them at night.”

“If anything was hiding there, it’d be able to grab you before you could get away.”

“Exactly. Like you said, it’s irrational. If there really was a monster, a thin fabric barrier wasn’t going to hold it back. But I’d made it into one of my safety nets. Light on: I was safe. Curtains closed: I was safe.”

“And when your dad set up the room like that, he was taking away both your nets.” Stiles understood the logic behind it—there was nothing new to the idea of literally facing your fears—but he wasn’t sure that was the method he would’ve chosen.
“He was one of my nets, too,” Derek explained. “If he’d left me alone in there, there’s no way I would’ve ever done it. Sometimes you need the physical support, even if the person’s just standing, or sitting, with you.”

Ah. Stiles was finally starting to understand the point of this story.

“So I opened the curtains. And there was nothing there. Nothing jumping out at me, no glimpse of something dashing away into the treeline or waiting until my dad left to come back and grab me. Just moonlight and trees. The same view I loved during the daytime.”

Lola, in her efforts to constantly loop back to check on them, managed to tangle her leash around one of her legs, and they halted for a few seconds to free her. When they straightened back up, Stiles grabbed Derek’s hand again, not hesitating this time.

Derek responded by tugging him a little closer so they could indulge in a quick kiss—something they didn’t do often in public. It was distracting, and it took a second for Stiles to get back to the story. It didn’t quite feel complete yet.

“What happened after that? Were you magically cured?”

“No,” Derek said. “The fear stuck around for a while. But I had a way of pushing against it when it crept back in. My dad talked to me for a long time that night. He told me that having an imagination as vivid as mine was a gift and that I shouldn’t be ashamed of it. That it was okay to not be quite as tough as Laura. And that there’s nothing wrong with asking for help when you need it, even if you feel like it’s for something embarrassing.”

“That’s good advice.”

“Yeah; even if I haven’t always followed it.” Derek went quiet for a little bit, seeming to drift away on far-distant memories before pulling himself back. “He was a big believer in teachable moments. When we were growing up, he used to say all of these inspirational things that it took us a while to realize were mostly quotes from posters he had hanging in his classroom. That night, he dropped in a few soundbites about misdirected imagination. I was letting mine control me, instead of leveraging it into something beautiful or worthwhile. It’s a lesson that seems to need a lot of repetition.” He quirked an embarrassed little grin at Stiles. “I’m not fearless like you are.”

Stiles snorted. “Are you kidding me? Derek, you literally talked me out of a panic attack in a pool. Everyone’s afraid of some shit.”

“Yours are practical. Based on something tangible or realistic. Under the wrong circumstances, water can actually harm you. My window couldn’t.”

“Anything probably can under your so-called wrong circumstances.”

Derek made a dissenting noise; Stiles rolled his eyes fondly but didn’t otherwise comment. He wasn’t terribly invested in getting in an argument about who was braver and more rational. Even if his ridiculously handsome historian needed a few more lessons on how to treat himself with the level of kindness he extended to everyone else.

“Anyway,” Derek said. “That was my long-winded way of saying that you’re right.”

“Well, I already knew that,” Stiles said. “About what, though?”

Derek gave him an insufficiently amused look. “The notebook. I’ve turned its contents into a monster behind the curtain.”
“You think it’s not as bad as you remember it being?” Although he’d been the one to propose the whole thing, worry was sweeping back in now. What if Derek still found it upsetting? What if it made him start doubting their relationship again?

But Derek squeezed his hand. “I think I was barely even processing it at the time. I got so wrapped up in what I assumed it was that I never stopped to really consider how much was on paper and how much of a mess I was creating in my own mind. Stiles, I’m not saying we should do this so you can prove anything to me. I trust you. I’m sorry there was a point where I didn’t. I promise I’m not going to freak out on you again just because we look at a few pictures you drew of my ass.”

“Among other incredibly attractive features,” Stiles said, testing the waters.

Derek’s body language remained relaxed, and he kept a completely straight face as he said, “I can’t wait to see them, with the artist’s narration this time. You can tell me if your opinion’s changed since then.”

Stiles’s spirit lifted, optimism flooding back in a heady rush. Logically, he’d known things were vastly different between them now, but until this moment, he hadn’t been able to budge some of his lingering concerns.

“Well,” he said cheerfully, “I can tell you one thing right off. Now that I’ve gotten some firsthand looks at dat ass, I’m even more impressed.” He tugged himself free so he could reach around and smack it approvingly.

To Stiles’s delight, Derek simply laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Derek meets the family
“Tell me the truth,” Derek said, grunting as he hefted his end of the couch a few inches higher, “did you start dating me so I’d help you move?”

“I have been enjoying the view,” Stiles confirmed from halfway down the staircase, and a pained groan came from the upper landing. Scott was, it seemed, less appreciative.

“Can you guys stop? I can’t plug my ears while I’m holding this.”

“Fuck off, like you’re any better,” Stiles called back, and Derek sighed and braced himself on the steps, throwing his shoulder into the arm of the couch to counter the sudden increase of weight from Scott, predictably, loosening his grip to better argue with Stiles. It quickly devolved into a disagreement about who had been carrying the greater percentage of heavy items over the course of the afternoon.

“You’re holding a bag of pillows,” Scott snapped. “I took up the last four boxes of books.”

“And Derek and I carried in and set up both beds and the table while you were making out with Kira on the couch in the back of the truck. Which is why the two of you should be handling the fucking thing, but Derek’s too goddamn nice for his own good.”

Since the attention seemed like it might be swinging back to him for long enough to get a word in edgewise, Derek gritted out, “Seems like you could finish this after we get it upstairs.”

“Oh! Sorry dude,” Scott exclaimed, and the weight shifted back to a much more manageable level, their upwards progress resuming.

“And now you’re trying to kill my fucking boyfriend,” Stiles grumbled. “You okay, babe?”

“In one piece but considering a retraction of my offer of help.”

“I promise I’ll make it up to you once we get these new sheets all set up,” Stiles said, from much closer this time. Judging from Scott’s gagging noises, he hadn’t lowered his voice quite enough.

Stiles had explained those kinds of reactions were, weirdly, Scott’s way of showing his approval of their relationship. It means he’s comfortable enough around you to be a complete dumbass. And anyway, I’ve had a lot more years to deal with Scott’s gross PDA. He’s not used to seeing me bag the hot dude and bring him home.

“I don’t understand why you’re insisting on keeping this thing,” Derek said as they made it up the last set of stairs. “Your new living room’s bigger. You could fit an actual couch.”

“One that doesn’t smell like tuna and despair,” Kira agreed, holding the door open so they could more easily step inside and let the decrepit piece of furniture thump onto the floor.

“Money,” Scott said, overlapping with Stiles’s, “Nostalgia.”

They were apparently answering for each other, since Scott and Kira were the only ones who’d even considered having sex on those cushions. Well, out of their current group. There was no telling what
had been done to it in its earlier history.

Derek sat down on it anyway. He was tired, covered in a layer of sticky sweat, and more than ready to take a break. “That’s it for me. You guys can fight over who gets to carry the dressers.”

“I will,” Kira volunteered immediately. “I’m getting bored up here, anyway.”

She tossed Derek a bottle of water from the fridge—a real one this time, capable of holding more than a couple containers of leftovers—and unlooped Lola’s leash from one of the drawer handles where she’d been set up to keep her safely out of the way.

Derek patted the cushion next to him and called to her, and Lola cautiously picked her way across the unfamiliar room, following the sound of his voice until she could settle with her head in his lap. “Hey girl,” he said, scratching along her shoulders. “What d’you think of this place, huh?”

“It probably helps to have familiar furniture around,” Stiles said. “Especially one with such a pungent smell.” He leaned over the back of the couch, his arms linking loosely across Derek’s chest. “Thanks for helping out today. I’m sorry it’s ended up taking so long.”

Derek rubbed his cheek affectionately against Stiles’s bicep. Bickering and unfortunate heat wave aside, he liked being included in the day. The new apartment wasn’t their space, but helping to assemble and arrange furniture made him feel more connected to it. Plus, Stiles kept dropping casual comments that made it clear he was considering both of them in every decision he made. While the apartment belonged to him and Scott, a part of it felt like Derek’s, too.

He simply said, “Moving always takes at least twice as long as you’ve estimated. We’re actually doing pretty well. You’ve done a much better job planning all the logistics than I ever have on my own.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better, it’s working. Keep going.”

Derek chuckled. “Have I ever told you about my first apartment after undergrad? Or, rather, about the moving fiasco?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, the first lesson I learned was to never try to move by yourself. I had a friend who could only help out after he got off work, so I figured I’d leave the heaviest items for then and handle the rest on my own. Problem was, I was moving out of a neighborhood made up almost entirely of college students, which meant everyone was operating under the assumption that anything left by the curb was up for grabs.”

“Oh shit, I’ve always kinda worried about that. I try to check for free signs before taking stuff, but it’s hard to tell sometimes,” Stiles said, resting his chin on the top of Derek’s head. It was a position that must’ve been a little uncomfortable for both of them, but Derek was enjoying the closeness, even with their cooling sweat starting to stick their skin together.

“To be fair, nothing you’ve picked up off the curb can be categorized as something anyone would miss.”

“True,” Stiles said easily.

He’d refused multiple offers of monetary assistance but had given in when Derek insisted on at least buying him a new microwave that closed properly and didn’t make worrying noises when you tried to cook anything for longer than thirty seconds. Stiles was almost entirely composed of stubborn
pride sometimes, and Derek loved him for it.

“So what’d you lose?” Stiles asked. “TV? Stereo?”

“My dresser. Not the *entire* dresser, mind you. Just the frame. I didn’t have enough boxes to fit everything—”

“Because you filled them all with books.”

“Because I needed them for books,” Derek confirmed. “So I left my clothes in the dresser drawers but took the drawers themselves out to distribute the weight and make it easier for me to carry everything. Except I made the mistake of putting the empty dresser frame down by the curb, then going back up to grab a couple drawers before I put everything in the truck I’d rented. It was annoying to have to unlock and open it every time I had one little thing to put inside; I thought I was being efficient. I was only gone for a couple minutes, max, but when I got back downstairs, the dresser was gone.”

Stiles snorted, his chin bumping against Derek’s skull, the vibrations sending a tingle down through his jaw. “What the fuck. What would someone even do with that?”

“I have no idea. I stood there for a while, kind of gaping at the empty street—because whoever they were, they were long gone—but eventually I had to put the drawers in the truck and keep going. I suppose I was fortunate it wasn’t anything more expensive. It was still annoying, though. Stealing someone’s furniture is one thing, but at least have the sense to take a complete set instead of a useless frame.”

“Hm,” Stiles said. “I should probably go downstairs so that doesn’t happen to us. You and Lola guard the apartment, I’ll guard the truck, Scott and Kira can do the rest of the heavy lifting.”

“Yeah right,” Scott said, coming back through the door at that moment. “Get your ass back down there and carry your own shit.”

“Where’s the love?” Stiles asked. “Are we breaking up, Scotty? I feel like you’re not as invested in living me with as you’re supposed to be.”

“I’m invested in finishing this up and ordering pizza and drinking a helluva lot of beers with you to celebrate,” Scott said. He mopped sweat off his forehead and stopped to gulp down half a bottle of water. “It’s so fucking hot out there today.”

“At least it’s not raining?” Kira offered. She set another box of electronics down by the television. “And we’re almost done. Two, maybe three more trips.”

“Parting is such sweet sorrow,” Stiles said, bending farther down so he could get his mouth on Derek’s. It was an awkward angle that they made work until Derek’s neck started to hurt.

“Can’t believe you were giving us shit about making out,” Scott grumbled, and Stiles beamed at him.

“Can I help it that my boyfriend’s hot as hell in tank tops? Look at those fucking shoulders.”

“I’d rather not,” Scott said. “C’mon, we still need to get the truck back before 5.”

“Do you want me to get started unpacking?” Derek asked. “I can set up your books now that the new bookshelf’s put together.”

“And alphabetize them within their genres?” Stiles said fondly. “You giant nerd. Do whatever makes
you happy. You can even arrange my clothes by color if you want.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Derek said, and he tilted his face so Stiles could kiss him again before heading back downstairs.

It wasn’t Derek’s apartment. But it was already starting to feel like a second home.

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Between busy work schedules and last minute supply runs, it took most of the following week to finish unpacking everything and setting up the apartment to everyone’s liking. There were a number of items Stiles and Scott hadn’t considered needing: cookware, for one, since the idea of having an actual stovetop and oven was new to them. Next came stocking their fridge and pantry, then another trip to Target to pick out a new entertainment center to replace the one that’d broken in transit. Despite hours of effort and optimistic combinations of wood glue, super glue, and duct tape, it’d turned out to not be fixable.

“I know you like glass doors for aesthetic reasons, but I’m into easy access,” Stiles told Derek with a lascivious wink as they debated their options. They’d narrowed the choices down to three, and Stiles’s vote was the final one, since Scott had washed his hands of the entire thing. He claimed to be too slammed with work to go shopping and that it was Stiles’s fault they needed a replacement to begin with. Stiles, as both the more opinionated and money conscious one, agreed it made sense to leave the decision to him.

Derek was mostly tagging along for the company. They’d left Lola at home this time, since they’d anticipated this errand being a quick one. An hour in, they had a shopping cart filled with other odds and ends Stiles had suddenly remembered he needed, and they still hadn’t picked out the item that’d been the entire purpose of this trip.

Derek checked his wristwatch, not subtly enough to avoid getting caught.

“Hey, this isn't all on me, buddy. You're the one who talked me into buying dish towels,” Stiles said.

Which was true and had led to them stocking up on a number of other items in the kitchenware aisles. Initially, Stiles had objected to Derek’s criticism of the Costco-sized pack of paper towels he’d steered their cart toward. They were multipurpose, he’d insisted. And what Derek called “wasteful” he called “I don’t have to feed another load of quarters into that greedy-ass washing machine or fight people to get a chance to even use it, win-win.”

His tune had changed when Derek navigated them to the linens section and smugly pointed out the Star Wars set. Stiles had gone absurdly starry-eyed and had spent the next twenty minutes filling the cart with everything he could find in the same theme. Most of it had gone back on the shelves once he calmed down, but he’d held the toaster for long, sad minutes before setting it back in its place.

It’s shaped like Darth Vader’s helmet, Stiles had said mournfully, and Derek had patted him comfortably on the back.

The toast comes out of his head, he’d said. Does it help if I say it’s creepy?

Of course a new toaster’s the one thing we actually remembered to buy before we moved, Stiles had said, not remotely over his sorrow. He’d given the overpriced appliance a last, lingering look, and Derek had done a quick calculation of the next set of holidays, trying to figure out the earliest appropriate gift-giving one. Fourth of July? He could wrap it up in fireworks paper or—no, Rebel Alliance paper to emphasize Independence Day. Stiles would laugh and forget to be annoyed at
Derek buying him another housewarming present.

That'd have to be saved for a later trip, though. The toaster wasn't small enough to hide, plus Derek couldn't exactly sneak away without his absence being noticed. Not while Stiles was checking the price tags on the entertainment centers again, then shaking the displays to test their strength.

“This one,” he said decisively, and Derek helped him wrangle a long, flat box—assembly definitely required—into the cart.

He moved the lightsaber cutlery to the upper basket to keep the packages from getting crushed under the box’s weight, then asked, “How's Scott going to feel about this haul?”

Stiles scoffed loudly. “He probably won't even notice they're not normal handles. Doesn't matter, those forks are mine now. I won't ask him to split that part of the bill.” He tapped the furniture box. “It's already gonna be hard enough to decide who gets what the next time we move. Who gets the TV in the divorce and all that.”

“You're already thinking about moving out?”

“Not in the immediate future. I like this new place. But I'm willing to bet Scott will want Kira to move in after she graduates, and as much as I like her, I'm not sure I'd want to share what's still a pretty small apartment with a couple.”

“I guess you'll get a taste of it this year,” Derek said.

Now that there were separate bedrooms, Kira had been staying over fairly often. Even though Stiles would likely be at Derek’s house more frequently than the other way around, there'd already been one awkward encounter when Derek and Kira had run into each other in the hallway in the middle of the night, both looking for the bathroom. He'd been shirtless, wearing an elastic-stretched pair of Stiles’s pajama bottoms, and she'd been in Scott’s boxers and a t-shirt that was slipping dangerously off her shoulders.

Probably latching onto the same memory—or, rather, onto Derek’s agonized retelling of it when he'd crawled back into bed and buried his face in a pillow—Stiles said, “Plus I know it makes you feel weird when you're sleeping over when Kira's there.”

“I don't feel weird,” Derek said. At least they hadn't actually had sex that night—Stiles had an early morning brunch scheduled but claimed he'd be more rested if Derek was sleeping beside him—but the walls were thin and he'd much rather maintain his minimal knowledge of those parts of Kira's life.

“You do, and it's okay,” Stiles responded, wrapping an arm around Derek’s waist and kissing his cheek to show he didn't mind his boyfriend being a little bit of a prude. Then, since that'd maxed out his sweetness quota for the day, he slid his hand into Derek’s back pocket and squeezed his ass, keeping it there as Derek pushed the cart down the aisle, their steps aligning enough to make the slightly awkward position work.

“Anyway,” Stiles continued, “the place is definitely too small for four people, and even three's stretching it. I don't want to be a permanent third wheel.”

You could move in with me, Derek thought and wisely didn't say. He was well aware it was too early for that. Even if his house didn't feel complete anymore on the mornings when he woke up without Stiles.

Distracting himself from that line of thought took top priority; fortunately, it was easy enough to set
Stiles off on a detailed list of exactly what he'd take with him and what he'd leave for Scott. “He can keep the couch,” Stiles began generously.

Derek slowed down in the picture frames aisle, scanning the shelves while Stiles verbally categorized his substantial video game collection. “I’m listening,” he said when Stiles paused. “I just have no real opinions to offer here.”

“I know,” Stiles said. “You’ve sucked at every single one we’ve played. It’s okay, you can’t be good at everything.”

That analysis of his gaming skills was too accurate to be offensive. “Cora’s always been the gamer in our family. The girls tried to use her as leverage to get a new console over the holidays, but Laura and Rob aren’t as excited about the idea.”

“Games are good for you,” Stiles said. “Not as good for your wallet, true, but you learn a lot from them.”

Derek made an agreeable noise, not overly invested in getting in the middle of that debate, and picked up a simple silver and black frame. Or, he wondered, setting that down and touching one with inviting bronze details, would something in earthier shades better complement the gold tones in Stiles’s eyes?

“What’re you planning to put in that?” Stiles asked, pressing closer to Derek like that’d help to squeeze out an interesting answer.

He hadn’t actually decided yet. He just...wanted to keep some reminder of Stiles in his house. So far, the only photos he had of the two of them were low-quality ones that Scott had uploaded to Facebook after their last game night. Derek had barely been visible in them, since Scott’s focus was, as always, on Kira.

A portrait of Stiles on his own could work, he supposed, although it might be a little more embarrassing to explain when Stiles saw it on his nightstand.

Derek liked to have his family around in that way, making sure they were always easy to find when he was reading in the afternoons or working at his desk. Laura teased him about it—lightly, and with an edge of would you just move to New York already—but never failed to send him a fresh set of photos after holidays, birthdays, or school picture days. He framed the best ones, stored others in albums, and kept some on his fridge until they were bumped down by the next batch. That, in his firmly held opinion, was what made a house a home. Not everyone felt the same way.

A few years back, when Derek had given in again to the pressure to find a romantic partner, he’d done an uncomfortable circuit of possible hookup spots—in a distant enough area to avoid meeting anyone he knew—and had slept with a series of people he didn't much like remembering. There'd been one guy, though, who'd coaxed him into a cab to his house. The Mirror House, Derek had dubbed it when relating the experience to Boyd later, including just enough details to get the sympathy he was looking for, along with the encouragement to stop fucking people he actively disliked.

As its name indicated, the house had been filled with mirrors, like some cringeworthy museum of self. Derek had kept startling every time he turned a corner, confronted by his own shadowy figure and the lurking presence of the guy whose name he kept forgetting. There were full length, extra wide mirrors in the entryway, the bathroom, the living room, and, naturally, covering most of the walls in the bedroom.
The guy had checked his hair and teeth in most of them as they passed by, flexed at a couple, adjusted his crotch in one, and winked to another. When he'd disappeared briefly—to take a piss, he'd said, although the amount of time he'd taken probably indicated he was also admiring himself in the vaguely disturbing toilet-facing reflection—Derek had done a quick check for cameras and two-way mirrors. He'd considered leaving but hadn't been able to make up his mind before the guy came back.

He'd felt ill the entire way home.

Derek turned his face to nuzzle into Stiles’s soft hair, scented lightly with cinnamon from the pastry he’d eaten before absently running his fingers through it. Mirror Guy was ancient history, nowadays. Another bad decision he needed to stop kicking himself over. “I'm thinking about adding some art to the bedroom,” he said. “Which of your terrible poems do you like the best?”

Stiles choked on a laugh. “You fucking wouldn’t.”

“Hmm,” Derek said. “I don’t know. The rhyme scheme in that one about my eyes was...creative. They’re green, by the way. In case you hadn’t figured it out yet.”

“Fuck off, that’s an outright lie,” Stiles said, then cupped Derek's face in his hands so he could stare intently into his eyes. “You listen here: if you want a poem, I'll write you a goddamn poem. It still won’t be any good, but it'll be a hell of a lot better than that old shit you tried to make me recite to you.”

Derek chuckled at the memory. While he’d meant what he’d told Stiles about revisiting the notebook—he’d only agreed to do it because Stiles needed the closure, not because there were any doubts left on his end—he’d wound up being grateful for the suggestion. Mostly because he’d enjoyed being able to take his time flipping each page, gravely pointing at individual drawings and asking Stiles to relate what he’d been thinking as he’d sketched them. It’d gotten even better when Stiles had turned bright red and attempted to slam the cover shut before Derek could finish reading aloud a poem that sounded suspiciously like an ode to his tailor.

I could introduce you to him if you want, Derek had said. Or bring you along the next time I need to buy a new pair of slacks. He’s nearly eighty years old and completely devoted to fashion, so I’m not too worried he’ll steal you away from me.

Fuck off, you love my fashion sense, Stiles had grumbled, and they’d gotten derailed for a while as Derek returned the favor by explaining exactly how distracting Stiles’s clothing choices had been in class and how on board he’d be with seeing Stiles in a tailored suit of his own someday.

Good luck waiting for that, Stiles had scoffed. The closest you’re gonna get is my catering outfit, and I don’t think even I want to have sex in that thing. The bow tie, though? Yeah, that’s still an option.

I’m not having sex with you in a clip-on bow tie, Derek had said, although that’d shortly proved to be a lie.

Don’t even try to act like I’m the one with a fashion kink, Derek had protested later that afternoon, slapping the notebook on their disheveled bedsheets to resume their interrupted project. You have an entire page full of improperly constructed haiku about the three different suits I wore that first week of class. Here, read me this one about the pinstripes, I want to hear how you thought these lines could’ve possibly rhymed.

Stiles had lunged over Derek to try to rip the page out, and it’d taken three more laughter-filled hours
before they’d even gotten to the historically inaccurate drawings Stiles had originally intended him to see.

The notebook hadn’t bothered Derek for a long time, but all the sting was truly gone from it now, for both of them. The ability to spark Stiles's playful outrage while teasing him about it was simply a bonus.

Stiles tried to pretend like he wasn't grinning, too. He rubbed his thumbs gently over Derek's beard. “Seriously, babe. You know you’re hot as hell, but that's not what makes you amazing. If I could write a poem about that—or if I could even begin to put it down in words, I would.”

Derek never had been that good at accepting compliments. Before he could figure out how to respond to this one—could he reflect it back? offer to write his own inevitably inadequate poetry about what Stiles meant to him?—another shopper attempted to squeeze a cart past them with an impatient, “Excuse me.”

Right. There were less obstructive places to indulge in public displays of affection.

“Sorry,” Derek said, shifting their cart over and drawing Stiles to his side with an arm looped around his waist.

“Dr. Hale?” the shopper said in surprise, sounding much less annoyed now that she'd recognized him. “Oh my gosh! I didn't know that was you.” She glanced at Stiles, then at the intimacy of their position, and her eyes widened. “Oh...hi,” she said.

Derek squeezed a little at Stiles’s’s waist, telling him wordlessly he didn’t need to even consider whether to pull away. This was the first time they’d run into one of his students while visibly being a couple, and Derek was determined to not screw it up.

“Stiles, this is Constance Almer. She’s one of my graduate students.”

“Call me Connie,” she said, shrugging away her surprise and reaching out for a friendly handshake. “Even if Dr. Hale never will.”

“And you can call me Stiles,” he said, grinning at her. “I don't share his aversion to first names.”

She laughed and exchanged a few more pleasantries with Stiles, then chatted a bit with Derek about her next semester’s classes before heading on her way.

Stiles leaned comfortably into Derek the entire time, relaxed and casual, as though they had this kind of encounter every afternoon.

“She's nice,” Stiles said once they were alone again. “One of your advisees?”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “She’ll be finishing up her degree next year. It’ll be interesting to see who else I get in the fall; a couple others graduated this year, so I suppose I have some extra room now.”

Stiles made a skeptical noise.

“I'm not overloading myself,” Derek said. “I only take on the normal number of advisees. And you need to stop ganging up on me with Erica about that.” Erica had already given him shit about adding Damien O’Leary when his advising spots technically hadn’t had any openings yet.

“The fact that you even think she needs any help bugging you about your workload would irritate the hell out of her, just for the record. And anyway, that’s not what I was thinking.”
“So you were being coincidentally judgmental about something entirely unrelated.”

“That was a thoughtful noise,” Stiles said, which Derek still felt was only a half truth. “I was thinking about the rest of your advisees.” He rubbed at his nose; this slightly anxious gesture, at least, was one Derek couldn’t misinterpret. “I was wondering if I’d get to meet them all.”

“You'd want to?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Not all of them, necessarily—despite your unfair accusations, I don't actually know how many there are or how many cross over into true mentorship territory.”

“A handful,” Derek said. “Most students, as I'm sure you know, don't actually care that much about their professors’ input, other than meeting periodically to be sure they're on track for their degree.”

It wasn't meant to be a pointed comment, but Stiles flushed a little. He mostly mentioned his advisor, Dr. Ito, in contexts where she wasn't signing off on the precise schedule he wanted. Although that’d been changing as he talked more about Tillamook’s personalized learning environment and his professors’ openness to his proposed graduate track, Derek got the sense that he’d been slow to bond with any of them.

It was something it'd taken him a while to learn about Stiles. While he seemed, on the surface, far more open to new people and new experiences than Derek was, he'd snap closed at the slightest attempt to penetrate past that deceptively open layer. Like the Venus flytrap Derek’s dad had kept in his classroom: ridged with threatening teeth and sensitive to outside pressures, yet surprisingly beautiful and in need of delicate care.

“Deaton’s one of Scott’s best friends,” Stiles said. “I think he's more wrapped up in Scott’s life than he is with any of his other…mentees? But he has a few others, and they do group dinners at his house sometimes. Socializing, commiserating, talking about animal medicine. Networking, I guess you'd call it. Dr. Ito’s less interested in that kind of thing, but I’ve been to her house a couple times, too.”

“Ah, I don't really do that,” Derek said, and Stiles reached out to touch the corner of his frown—a simple, affectionate gesture that made Derek's heart flutter stupidly.

Stiles took over the cart then, steering them toward the front of the store. “Wasn't saying you had to. I've just been sort of assuming that it was one of those areas you kept roped off from your personal life. So it was…nice to meet Connie.”

He'd liked that Derek hadn't tried to hide him, he meant, and Derek felt a sudden wave of guilt. What had he expected? For Derek to shove him into the display racks and pretend they didn't know each other? Based on some of their past interactions in public settings, maybe so.

“Stiles, there isn't a separation for you.” He forged on before Stiles could get a contradiction out. “There was when you were my student. Especially when we were in class. I don't cross those lines. At least, I never did before you came along.”

That pulled out a smile. “I'm a troubleshoot boundary breaker.”

And I love you for it, Derek could barely keep himself from saying.

You need to stop, he told his traitorous brain firmly. Not in a Target. Wrong place, wrong time. It was getting harder and harder to hold the words back lately, but so far he’d been able to keep reminding himself that this was all still too new to take things to that level. He was afraid...of what? Of scaring Stiles away. Of saying the words and not having them echoed back. Of Stiles saying it back, but as a kneejerk response, without truly meaning it.
No. That wasn't Stiles. The Stiles he knew would, at worst, make a pained face and tell him he wasn't ready for that level of commitment yet. That he liked Derek but that love was a word he valued too highly to drop into conversation before he truly meant it.

Derek shook the thoughts away. He was trying too hard to preemptively break his own heart again. Stiles would make an even more pained face at that if he knew what was going on in Derek’s head.

“Troublemaker? That’s one word for it,” Derek said, and Stiles rolled his eyes at his teasing tone. “I’m sorry I’ve made you feel like there are boundaries now,” he added, more seriously. “I don’t have any with you. You’re a part of my life: of all aspects of it, to whatever extent you want to be.”

That was the right answer, apparently. Stiles stopped the cart so he could kiss Derek again—by a rack of brightly colored handbags this time, in an open area where anyone entering the store could see. Derek gave that a passing thought and let it go.

They parted after long, sweet moments, with Derek’s eyes closed to shut out the blinding overhead lights and better focus on the insistent, grateful pressure of Stiles’s always eloquent mouth.

He felt a little dazed all the way through the checkstand—Stiles wincing at the purchase price but handing over his card with a flourish—and out to the parking lot. Stiles so often had that effect on him.

“Now we’ll see if your shiny new car really does have more room than mine,” Stiles said, snagging the keys out of Derek’s pocket and opening up the back of the SUV. Still a little bitter about the time Derek had made the mistake of calling his Jeep old, then.

Derek helpfully stood back and watched Stiles arranging his purchases, muttering to himself as he shifted them to make them fit, then catching the bag of Reese’s that’d slipped out and threatened to tumble onto the asphalt.

Stiles tossed him one despite his lack of assistance, and Derek ripped open the bright orange package and let the peanut butter and chocolate melt on his tongue. “Satisfied?” he asked when Stiles finally slammed the hatch shut. They hadn’t even bought that much; Stiles was simply determined to make as much of a fuss as possible so he could later point out the Jeep’s advantages. Sometimes it seemed like he loved that thing—Roscoe, Stiles always corrected him—as much as Derek loved Lola.

“It’ll get us home,” Stiles said, then frowned abruptly, as though remembering home wasn’t actually a single location. Or maybe that was Derek projecting again. “You probably need to get back to Lola, don’t you?”

Derek turned his wrist to check the time, then glanced at the sun, dipping lower on the horizon than he’d noticed while wrapped up in Stiles’s presence. “I should. Even that awful noisemaker of yours will have lost its charm by now. If you hold off on putting the center together, though, I can come by later to help. Tonight if you want, or tomorrow, after you’re off work.”

“I don’t need construction help,” Stiles said.

Another falsehood. His right index finger was still bandaged from the last incident with a hammer—while putting together a piece of Ikea furniture that, incidentally, didn’t include a hammer in any section of its murky diagrams. Sensing Derek’s pointed gaze, he linked his hands protectively behind his back, the keys jingling.

“I was thinking you could come over for dinner,” Stiles said. “I’ll make pasta or something. We can
drink this bottle of cheap Target wine before Scott gets to it.”

“Well, there’s no way I can miss out on that.”

Derek stalked a few steps closer and slid his arms around Stiles, watching the way that made his eyes darken and his lips part, then yanked the car keys free from Stiles’s now unsuspecting grip.

“I’ll drop you off, rescue Lola, and head back over. Should I walk her first, or would you want to come with us?”

“You fucker,” Stiles said. “I guess I could stand to be around you for a little longer today. Bring her over; she can have some fresh sidewalks to sniff.”

Stiles waited until they were both buckled in and pulling back onto the road home—to Stiles’s apartment, Derek mentally corrected—before clearing his throat and speaking again. “Are you working on your book next weekend?”

Derek checked his mirrors, then over his shoulder, and changed lanes. Shopping on a weekday meant shorter checkout lines and emptier roads, but they’d gotten a late enough start and spent enough time in the store for traffic to begin picking up again. It’d take closer to half an hour to get home now, maybe a little longer. At least they weren’t making their way back from the Portland Ikea this time.

“Probably,” Derek said. “But you know my schedule’s flexible if you have something in mind.”

He was staying comfortably ahead of his deadline for precisely this reason. While he loved having more time dedicated to writing now that the summer was in full swing, he had no intention of letting it hamper his ability to say yes to anything Stiles thought up. They had a reprieve, such as it was, before Stiles dove back into his studies, and they’d talked about taking advantage of every moment possible.

Stiles didn’t bring up any of the suggestions Derek had expected, though. He stared out the passenger side window, tapping his fingers along the frame, and eventually said, “It’s Father’s Day. I thought it’d be nice to go see my dad, since it’s the first summer I haven’t been in Beacon Hills.”

“Oh,” Derek said, then tried to push his face back into a smile. They had months stretching ahead of them—there was no reason at all for that selfish twist of disappointment. If he’d had a chance to spend time with his dad again, he’d jump at it, and for much longer than a weekend. “That’s a good idea. He’ll be happy to see you.”

“Yeah. He’s still not all that happy about me staying here.” The thrumming beat went staccato, and Derek took his eyes off the road for a second.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Stiles snorted. “I’m trying to work my way into asking you to come with me. You’re not supposed to actually notice how nervous I am.”

“I’ll try to be less observant next time,” Derek said, still processing the rest of that.

A weekend trip had been one of the ideas they’d discussed. Seattle had been on the table, though, or maybe Vancouver. Not Beacon Hills. Not a Meet the Sheriff expedition.

“So?” Stiles asked, and Derek glanced at him again. He was biting at his thumb and staring intently at Derek, his body tensed for an answer. He’d been serious about the nerves, then. That warranted
deeper thought: was he concerned Derek would say no? Or that the Sheriff wouldn’t like him?

“You haven’t technically asked me yet,” Derek said, tamping down on his own rising butterflies. “But yeah, of course. Should I—I should buy him something. What does he like?” Should he turn the car around? Not that he’d go with Target as his first choice for an introductory gift for his prospective father-in-law—shit, he hadn’t meant to think that.

He shot another sideways look at Stiles, whose worried expression was softening.

“I haven’t even thought about what I’d bring him,” Stiles said. “I figure I’m enough of a gift. Gas money and all that. It evens out, right?”

“My guess is he’d rather skip presents in favor of seeing you for as long as possible. I don’t have quite the same advantage.”

“You’ll be with me,” Stiles said. He reached over to grip comfortingly at Derek’s knee. “He’s not gonna care about anything else, not when he gets to meet you.”

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Derek bought the nicest bottle of scotch he could find within a reasonable price range. “Reasonable” being the balance between winning the Sheriff over and not earning his son’s disapproval in the process. He’d bought a card, too, generic enough to not make it seem like he was trying too hard. He’d written his own message inside, beginning with thanks for welcoming me into your home and ending with the card dumped into the trash can in his study.

Browsing through those racks of cards—some attempting humor, some leaning hard on artificial sentimentality—had made Derek miss his dad more than he’d done in years. There’d been one in particular that he’d almost snapped a photo of to send to Laura: one of the cheesier options, with a vintage-looking illustration of a man with a thick beard and thicker glasses smiling down at a chubby kid sitting next to him on the piano bench. The script inside read, Just a note to say thanks for being an amazing father, and he’d had to grip at the rack for a minute until the biting sorrow passed.

It was stupid, wasn’t it, to wish he had his dad around to talk to before this trip.

Derek had spent a couple long evenings quizzing Boyd and Erica on their experiences meeting each other’s families. What were the pitfalls they’d run into? Had they made any mistakes that he should be careful to avoid?

He knew Boyd’s grandmother had been skeptical of Erica initially, not sure she approved of her favorite grandchild settling down with this brash, loud woman who admitted she hadn’t set foot inside a church more than a half dozen times in her life. She’d come around eventually, mostly because Erica dominated nearly every board game she’d ever tried; Grandma Boyd’s intensely competitive nature meant she’d claimed Erica for her team at every family event from then on. Apparently watching the two of them playing charades was quite an experience.

It wasn’t the most universally applicable scenario to draw from. And even if the Sheriff turned out to have a similar fondness for something like Monopoly or Clue, Derek tended to lose to almost everyone—including Laura’s kids. Unless it was a game that relied more on leveraging immense amounts of obscure knowledge.

“Does your dad like Trivial Pursuit?” he asked abruptly, and Stiles stopped humming along with the radio to squint at him.

“I guess? We have an old one stashed in the hall closet. It’s from the 60s or something.” He had his
window rolled all the way down, propping his elbow on the frame as he drove, and Derek cranked his down another couple inches to better circulate the air flow.

He breathed in the thick scent of pine, letting his eyes rest on the soft greenery around them. They were still a few hours out from Beacon Hills, starting up the final leg of the journey after a quick break at a gas station where they’d stretched their legs, stocked up on snacks, and met with what, to Derek, felt like unnecessarily intense small town judgment.

_They’re not used to seeing people who look like you around here. They probably think you’re a film star scouting out locations_, Stiles had said, dumping an armful of trail mix and potato chips into Derek’s lap so he could finish filling up the Jeep’s tank.

Derek brushed self-consciously at his slacks and wondered whether he should’ve gone with a henley instead of a button-up shirt. He’d left all his suits behind—even he knew that would be excessive—but he’d wanted to look nice. You dressed up to meet your significant other’s parents, didn’t you? Not that he’d had any experience with that since...high school, really, when taking a girl out meant showing up with flowers and a well-pressed shirt.

A wet black nose poked into the corner of his window, and Derek twisted a bit to check whether Lola was asking for anything, or merely curious about the new scents filtering through to her in the back seat. She seemed content enough.

This was the longest trip they’d taken together, and he hadn’t known how she’d handle the extended stretches in—despite Stiles’s insistence that his Jeep was in perfect condition—a rather rattly vehicle. She’d slept for most of it, squeaking her toys or nudging Derek’s elbow for chin scratches when she was awake.

“Chip me,” Stiles said, and Derek slipped a stack of Pringles into his open mouth, then licked the sour cream and onion flavor off his fingers. He twisted the top off Stiles’s soda before he could ask, figuring the high salt content would make that the next logical step.

They’d be arriving in Beacon Hills early enough to settle in a bit before dinner, which Stiles had assured him multiple times would be some form of takeout and that he didn’t need to volunteer to cook. He’d see if that changed by Sunday; the Sheriff shouldn’t feel obligated to provide for them on a weekend that was meant to revolve around him. Not everyone was comfortable with other people poking around their kitchens, though, so Derek would have to test that out in person.

Stiles started singing again, off-key and cheerful. He’d been in a fantastic mood for the entire drive.

Derek pulled another stack of chips out to give his jaws something to do other than clench in worry. He felt like he was stepping into an exam for which he hadn’t sufficiently studied. He should’ve looked up more information on small town law enforcement. On...what else did the Sheriff like? Derek didn’t know much about his interests.

He gave himself a few seconds to panic before pulling himself back to rationality.

That might actually be a good thing. It was awkward to meet someone for the first time with too much background information in your pocket. This way they’d be free to cycle through the usual getting-to-know-you conversations. And hell, one of the best parts of having a dog was the ability to fill any uncomfortable gaps with information about her. If the elder Stilinski was anything like his son, there wouldn’t be many of those, anyway. They’d talked off and on throughout the drive, but any silences with Stiles always felt like comfortable pauses, spaces where they could gather their breath and simply be with each other.
Cranking his window down a little more, Derek let himself sink back into the Jeep’s cracking vinyl and enjoy this densely tree-lined section of their route. It’d be nice to see Beacon Hills and go on Stiles’s promised tour of all his favorite places. Even though he swore it’d be boring, Derek didn’t care. At the end of the day, it was time with Stiles, and that was all that really mattered.

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The Sheriff flung open the front door with a wide, face-creasing smile that faded the moment he caught sight of Derek.

Derek had been hanging back a few steps, using Lola’s desire to sniff at the porch railings as a cover, figuring it’d be better to let the Stilinskis have their reunion before he barged into the picture. Stiles didn’t seem to notice at first; he lunged forward for an enthusiastically back-slapping hug, then turned excitedly to wave Derek forward.

“This is the boyfriend?” the Sheriff asked—dressed in a casual shirt and khaki pants but still holding himself with an air of authority that snapped through his voice and made Derek attempt to straighten any hint of a slouch out of his posture.

“This is Derek,” Stiles said. He’d started to pick up on his dad’s tone; Derek recognized the suddenly alert tension coiling through him. “I’ve told you all about him, dad.”

“You left a fair amount out,” the Sheriff said. There was a too-long pause before he held out his hand for a quick shake with little welcome behind it. “Stiles made it sound like you were one of his classmates. You’re not a student, are you.”

“No sir,” Derek said. He’d never been more conscious of his silver-streaked hair, which the Sheriff was narrowing his eyes at now, cataloging his appearance with understated intensity. “I’m a professor.”

“One of his professors?”

Derek shot a look at Stiles—a mistake, probably, but he’d had no idea this topic hadn’t already been covered. Stiles had said he’d told his dad about them. That his dad was looking forward to meeting him. Instead of describing Derek with any accuracy, he’d clearly painted a much more compelling portrait of an age-appropriate, father-friendly boyfriend whose appearance was completely at odds with the reality of their relationship.

“I took World Civ with him last year,” Stiles said, his voice dipping dangerously.

The Sheriff’s flinty blue eyes continued tracing over Derek, taking in the lines on his face, his clothing choices, his discomfort—which was probably reading now as an indication that he was hiding something. “Dr. Hale. You’ve mentioned him. I wasn’t aware they were the same person.”

Lola, having investigated as much as she wished for the time being, pulled at her leash hard enough to bump into the Sheriff’s legs. She snorted at the impact and sniffed loudly at him, possibly picking up hints of Stiles’s legs. She snorted at the impact and sniffed loudly at him, possibly picking up hints of Stiles’s scent in this new person blocking her way.

“Well, who’s this?” the Sheriff said in a much friendlier tone.

“Her name’s Lola. Is it okay that she’s here? Stiles had said you didn’t mind, but—”

“Oh, he did tell me that much,” the Sheriff interrupted, leaning down to pet her. “I just didn’t know she was going to be such a beautiful lady.”
Stiles dropped his bag inside the doorway with a loud thump. “Hey, babe, would you mind taking our stuff upstairs? You can get Lola settled in while I finish up out here.”

Derek nodded at the directions—straight up the staircase, then set their things down in the room on the right, with an implied *stay there until I hash this out with my dad*.

He barely registered the rest of the house as he passed through it. Comfortable, in that well-worn, personality-rich way that spaces picked up after years of the same people living in them. Carpeted stairs that squeaked in spots and rows of photos along the walls that, under other circumstances, he would’ve lingered over. It was a cozy house, with, as it turned out, walls that were too thin to hold its secrets.

“What the *fuck* was that?” filtered up the stairs before he’d made it all the way into Stiles’s room. Derek couldn’t catch the initial response as anything other than a low murmur. The front door slammed, then they moved deeper into the house—ironically, probably to keep anyone from hearing them.

“You promised you’d be cool,” Stiles was hissing angrily. “If I’d known you were gonna treat him like this, I wouldn’t have brought him here.”

The answering voice was still lower, but considerably more audible than it’d been before. “I was surprised. He wasn’t anything like I was expecting. How old *is* he?”

“I don’t see how that fucking matters.”

Derek winced and sat down in the desk chair, letting go of Lola’s leash so she could explore the room. The lack of an actual answer meant Stiles was defensive about it. He hadn’t told his dad the truth about them, and even with the evidence staring them in the face, he was pushing back on it. He was ashamed of Derek. Their age difference bothered him, just as Derek had feared all along while slowly convincing himself it wasn’t an issue.

“He looks closer to my age than yours,” the Sheriff was saying.

Stiles snapped back with something Derek’s suddenly ringing ears couldn’t process. Another non-answer, most likely.

“Is this why you turned down Caltech? Because he’s locked into his job?”

Derek closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands into them, taking in ragged breaths. Shit. This was it, then. It’d come sooner than he’d thought. He’d let himself believe that they’d have a few years, at least, before Stiles started to chafe at being linked with someone so much older, with an established life and career that was far harder to uproot.

The gap itself wasn’t that big of a deal, but as the Sheriff was calmly laying out, the future was an entirely different story. What would happen when Stiles finished up his next set of degrees? When he got job offers in other parts of the country? If he wanted to focus on his career for a while but still start a family twenty years down the line, when Derek might be old enough to head into retirement?

“And I’m not going to get into the fact that when you said you’d met in class, you neglected to mention the part where he was *teaching* that class.”

At this rate, they might not even finish out the summer.

“I love him, dad,” Stiles said. It was what Derek had been longing to hear for months. And he
couldn’t bask in it, because the answer was the same one he would’ve given to someone else in this context—the same thought that had been lurking in the back of his mind since he and Stiles had started dating.

“For now,” the Sheriff said. “People fall in and out of love, kiddo. You’ve gotta think about more than the here and now; I guarantee you that man’s invested in a lot more than you’ve planned out.”

Stiles was quiet long enough for Derek to hear the soft pops and creaks of the house settling.

“You’re worrying about him, not me,” Stiles said eventually. He sounded confused and a little less angry.

“I always worry about you,” the Sheriff said. “That’s my job, the one I’ll never quit, not as long as I’m still around and kicking. I also know you’re damn stubborn. No matter what, you’ll get back up there and make yourself the kind of life you’ve always wanted. And when you do move on to those next stages, if I’ve got the right read off him—and I’ve been doing this for a lotta years—you’re gonna break his heart. Is it better to do that now, or years down the line, when it gets harder for both of you? I could be wrong. You tell me.”

Derek got up then and shut the door. It dampened the sound enough for him to tune out the words, his movements around the room helping to further reduce their voices into an indistinct rumble.

He set Stiles’s bag on the bed and carefully unpacked its contents into an empty drawer. The stack of underwear, the shirts, the extra jeans, the not-so-subtly crammed in box of condoms that Derek had repeatedly removed while Stiles was deciding what to take that morning. There’d been absolutely no chance that they’d be having sex this weekend, not while they were staying in his dad’s house. Stiles had insisted it was better to be safe than sorry.

Derek left the box inside the now empty bag and propped it neatly against the wall. He hefted his suitcase onto the bed next and removed a pair of jeans, a black t-shirt, and a pair of casual sneakers to replace his carefully polished dress shoes. When he’d finished changing, he folded his travel clothes, zipped them into his bag, and placed it by the door. Lola sniffed at it briefly before ducking under the bed to investigate whatever interesting things she could find about Stiles’s other life.

You couldn’t explain any of this to a dog. And why would you try, when she was enjoying herself so thoroughly? Derek took a page out of her book and let himself indulge in a brief tour of the room.

There was a layer of dust over nearly everything; it was clear that Stiles hadn’t been home in a while and that his dad left the room alone while he was away. It was cluttered with everything you’d expect: sci-fi and comic book anthologies prominently featured on the bookshelves, with a scattering of action figures and cheap plastic trophies that seemed to be mostly for Little League and a couple of science fairs.

Derek stopped in front of a haphazardly assembled collage that covered a good section of one of the walls. It was composed of a hodgepodge of movie tickets and other memorabilia that high school aged Stiles had considered important to hang onto. The photos were mostly of Scott—shaggier haired but the same friendly smile—with Lydia tacked in at the corners, and a few other people he didn’t recognize.

The door clicked open. Derek turned, doing his best to slide on a more welcoming expression than he could really muster at the moment.

Stiles took one look at him and scrubbed his hand over his face. “Shit. You heard all of that, didn’t
“Parts.” Derek set down the Han Solo figure he’d absently picked up, thinking of that Halloween when Stiles had shown up at his house with exactly the right combination of wit, roguish charm, and unexpectedly generous honesty. “I should get a hotel,” he said. “I didn’t think to check whether any around here allow pets.”

“Fuck,” Stiles breathed, looking distraught now. He crossed the room and started to grab Derek by the shoulders, then took a step back when he saw Derek tense at the motion. “I’m sorry he was like that, okay? I know it makes things weirder than we wanted them to be, but please don’t leave. He’ll be cool from now on.”

“I’m not upset with your dad,” Derek said.

Stiles tilted his head in a narrow-eyed examination that now read as an exaggerated version of his dad’s habits. It was far warmer, though, with concern brimming behind it.

“Which means it’s me you’re mad at.”

Derek started to deny it—he wasn’t angry with anyone. He was tired. He wanted to lick his wounds in peace for a while. But he’d promised to be more open about things like this, hadn’t he? That didn’t make it easier.

He kept it simple, drilled down to the point that’d hurt him the most. “You didn’t tell him about me.”

“I did!” Stiles protested. “You know I did. He’s known about you for ages now. It’s not like I was springing a surprise boyfriend on him.”

Derek arched an eyebrow, and Stiles sighed gustily, his entire body swaying with it.

“Okay, fine, I didn’t tell him everything about how we met. I never lied. I didn’t say you were an undergrad with me. He assumed that all on his own.”

“You left it out for a reason.” Derek sat back down in the desk chair, the emotional exhaustion seeping heavily into his limbs. He didn’t need to maintain equal height with Stiles while they had this out; he wasn’t trying to win anything here. “My family knows you’re a student,” he added, perhaps a little meanly.

“And I haven’t met them, have I?” Stiles snapped back.

“And I’ve told you I’m sorry about that. I can’t drag them across the country at a moment’s notice. The next time I see them, I—well, I wanted you there with me,” he said, amending it to past tense. That might not be an option anymore.

Stiles’s mouth flattened unhappily when he caught that. He closed the door—a belated attempt to give them at least an appearance of privacy. “Look. I didn’t tell him about you being my professor because I didn’t want him to form an opinion before he got to meet you and see what you’re actually like.”

“That worked well,” Derek said.

Stiles let out a short laugh. “Yeah. You know how my ideas go. Not all of them pan out.”

Derek hesitated; even with Stiles, it was incredibly difficult to air some of his insecurities. “Was that what happened at graduation?”
Stiles looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“When you didn’t want me at your graduation lunch.” The mere act of saying that out loud left his chest tight and cold all over again. “Was that because you hadn’t figured out how to tell him you were dating me?”

“Jesus,” Stiles said. “Derek, no.” He crossed the room in a few quick strides and followed through with his earlier aborted attempt to set his hands on Derek’s shoulders.

It was a solid, comforting gesture that made Derek give in and lean forward to wrap his arms around Stiles’s waist, his face pressed against the taut muscles of his abdomen. Stiles slid one hand into Derek’s hair, leaving the other firmly grounded on his shoulder, and Derek shivered a little at the familiar intimacy.

Stiles stroked his hair as he spoke, the strands slipping through his fingers over and over, in a pattern they both knew well by now. “You have no idea how much I wanted you there. I mean, obviously you don’t, because you’ve been thinking this entire time that I didn’t. I missed you the whole fucking weekend.”

“Then why?” Derek asked, muffled against the fabric of Stiles’s shirt, feeling like an idiot for needing an answer.

“I thought you didn’t want that.” Stiles’s throat clicked with a harsh swallow. “Your parents. Everything you told me about how you feel about graduations. I didn’t want to bring that up for you. And with you being the way you are, I figured if I gave you an option, you’d say you’d come, whether you wanted to or not, and you’d be miserable, and I would’ve caused that.”

“You were trying to spare me.” Derek chuckled then, feeling the vibrations rattling through Stiles. “We’re awful at this.”

“We’re getting better.” Stiles’s hand stilled. “I’m not ready to stop trying,” he said, with a question mixed in.

“Your dad’s the most important person in your life. I can’t be someone who drives a wedge between the two of you.”

“You’re not,” Stiles said. “I mean—the rest of what you just said, there’s a lot more to discuss in there. But my dad and I are fine. You must not have listened to everything, because we sorted it out. He feels like an ass. Which he should.”

“It’s supposed to be his weekend. I’m already ruining his Father’s Day.” Why would he like Derek at this point? Not the man he expected his son to be dating, and now someone who’d showed up to derail the precious time they were meant to be spending together, setting his son against him and creating a tension-charged environment. He might tolerate The Boyfriend to keep the peace, but that’d be about it. And here Derek had spent the last two weeks thinking about what it’d be like to have another Stilinski in his life—someone who, from what Stiles and Scott had said, was everything you’d want a dad to be.

He’s awesome, dude, Scott had told him just a couple days earlier. Stiles has probably told you I didn’t exactly hit the dad jackpot. But Stiles’s dad always treated me like part of the family. We don’t talk about that too much, but he’s always been there for me and my mom. I used to wish he was my real dad; it’d make me and Stiles actual brothers, y’know?

I think you already are, Derek had said, and Scott had beamed at him, then at Stiles, who was
emerging from the bathroom, hair wet from his post-work shower. He hated the stink he brought home from working with food all day—something Derek never noticed, but Stiles would often refuse to touch him until he’d been scrubbed clean—and still spoke longingly of the day he’d get to quit.

Yeah, I guess i’m pretty lucky, Scott had said. Derek had been feeling much the same way.

“You haven’t ruined anything,” Stiles said, pulling away from Derek a bit so he could more effectively frown down at him. “None of this is on you; you’ve barely even talked to him. If you’d be more comfortable staying at a hotel, I’m not gonna stop you, and I’d go with you if you wanted, but I...fuck, man, I really, really wish you’d stay here. I know it’s kinda shitty for me to put pressure on you to get to know him better. It’s just...he’s my dad. I know you get that.”

Derek stood, and Stiles immediately tucked his head into the space between Derek’s shoulder and neck, warm breath gusting over his collarbones, his hands clutching at Derek’s shirt.

“Family, huh?” Derek said, and Stiles laughed.

“This isn’t how I meant today to go.” He sounded relieved, though, now that Derek didn’t seem to be on his way out the door.

Derek’s problem had been his assumption that he’d breeze right past the parental disapproval stage. That had actually been Boyd’s warning, and he’d already ignored it. Stupid, really. If his parents had been around, his mom would’ve grilled Stiles for hours about all of his plans for the future and how he meant to fit Derek into it. It was only fair for the Sheriff to do the same.

It didn’t matter that Derek was forty fucking years old or that Stiles was one of the most level-headed people he’d ever met. Parents never stopped being parents. That meant taking the bad with the good and appreciating that even when they stumbled, they thought they had your best interests at heart.

He pressed a kiss into Stiles’s hair. “Remind me to tell you the things Boyd’s grandma said to Erica for a solid year before she decided to accept her into the family. Your dad’s got nothing on her.” All he’d done was not love Derek right off the bat and accurately analyze how much of a head-over-heels goner he was.

“So we’ll try this again?”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “I’m sorry I took it so personally. I don’t want you taking my insecurities out on him.”

“You are my priority,” Stiles said, squeezing Derek until his bones creaked. “You better damn well remember that.”

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It went much better the second time. They finished unloading the Jeep, which mostly meant figuring out where to put Lola’s bed. In the bedroom, they decided after some debate. Leaving her downstairs in an unfamiliar house worried Derek. What if she went looking for him in the middle of the night and stumbled on the stairs? Or if she sought out her water dish and couldn’t find her way back to her bed? Or if she chewed on something she shouldn’t, which she really only did when her anxiety was spiking, and she seemed okay so far, but—

Stiles interrupted him by giving him a light push toward the staircase. “Just put her in our room. I’m cool with that. Then you can stop bitching about how there’s way more of a tangle of furniture here than in your ridiculously spartan place.”
“My house has a perfectly acceptable amount of furniture. Forgive me if I like leaving room to breathe,” Derek countered, knocking his hip against Stiles’s and making him squawk in annoyance as he lost his grip on the snacks he was carrying, the lid popping off the can of Pringles.

“Dammit, don’t eat those,” Stiles said, dropping to the floor to gather the collapsed tower of chips before Lola could gobble up them up.

The Sheriff was standing back and watching them with an amused tilt to his mouth. When he caught Derek’s eye, he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that was easy to read. That’s my son. What can you do?

Derek smiled back, tentatively, and Stiles groaned from where he was still crushing chip fragments into the carpet. “Dammit, don’t start with the eyebrow conversations about me.”

“Don’t assume everything’s about you,” his dad said mildly.

Stiles sat back on his heels, accusingly holding up a dessicated french fry he’d retrieved from somewhere under the couch. “What the hell is this? No, Lola, it’s not a treat for you. It’s my dad cheating on his diet and being really terrible at hiding the evidence.”

“Derek,” the Sheriff said, “why don’t you and I look through some take-out menus and decide what to order for tonight. Stiles seems like he has his hands full.”

“Full of judgment for your shitty life choices!” Stiles yelled after them as they escaped into the kitchen.

“My heart’s as healthy as his,” the Sheriff said. “I guess he inherited the worry gene from me. Claudia was never like that.” He withdrew a stack of menus from a drawer, dropped them onto the kitchen table, and tapped the one on top. “Help me narrow these down, and I’ll pour us a drink. I know we should probably wait until after dinner to open up that scotch, but I think we’ve both earned a taste, don’t you?”

Derek accepted the tumbler the Sheriff set in front of him and slowly relaxed as the conversation turned into a friendly chat about his trip to Warsaw. Stiles, who was thumping around upstairs, likely rearranging the room to set up a cozy corner for Lola, apparently had shared more details than their initial interaction had made it seem.

“It makes a lot more sense now that I know you were there for a conference,” the Sheriff said. “You only had a few days to explore, right? What’d you manage to see?”

They compared notes from the last time the Sheriff had been there—before Stiles was born.

“It was supposed to be our honeymoon,” he said. “Claudia wanted to show me where she’d grown up; I don’t know if Stiles ever told you she was born in Poland?”

Derek nodded. She’d moved to the States as a teenager, stayed for college, picked up a few jobs that were meant to be temporary, got arrested for defying misogyny, and married a deputy. Exactly the kind of path he’d expect from someone who’d given birth to Stiles.

“Her mother always thought she’d move back home after sowing her wild oats. She didn’t like me too much for being the guy who took away that dream. Add to that my military service and my badge and the fact that I was generations removed from knowing anything about my own Polish heritage; I wasn’t anything she’d wanted for her daughter.” The Sheriff swirled the amber liquid in his tumbler. “It was the biggest blow out I’d ever been a part of, and I didn’t grow up in the best household, so that’s saying something. It killed me that Claudia broke things off with her mother
because of me, when they’d always been so close. I didn’t want that for my family. I was the guy who came in and ruined their relationship.”

Derek swallo...
convinced he was about to be kicked out of the house, and now this?

He thought of the way Stiles had held him upstairs: the panic in his expression when he’d seen the still-packed bag sitting by the door, and the wobble in his voice when he’d told Derek he wouldn’t stand in his way if he wanted to book that hotel. His willingness to leave with Derek—although that was something Derek, too aware of the importance of family, would’ve never asked of him. His steady insistence on maintaining the lines of communication they’d set up, even when the going got rough.

*He loves me*, Derek thought, wonder giving the words buoyancy.

The Sheriff reached across the table, gripping his hand in a firm, pointedly prolonged shake, his smile warm and inviting. “I’m very happy to meet you, son.”

“That means a lot, sir.”

“You’re a Stilinski now, with everything that comes with that, heaven help you. Call me John.”

“I will, sir, thank you,” Derek said, unable to tone down what he knew was a truly ridiculous smile. What the hell, it was obvious the depth of his attachment to Stiles wasn’t any kind of a secret.

John shook his head, grinning, and poured them each another finger of scotch. “We’ll work on that.”

Chapter End Notes

*Next up:* Stiles makes a promise
When Stiles clattered back down the stairs, Lola at his heels, he found Derek and his dad laughing in the kitchen. “You started drinking without me,” he huffed, to cover for his relief at how well that’d worked out. Then again, once his dad promised to do something, he always followed through.

His dad waved at the empty chair; Stiles detoured to the cabinets first to grab himself an extra tumbler. “I’m telling him about the first time your babci flew over here.”

“When she talked her way into first class and somehow almost ended up on the wrong plane?”

“Fortunately, she knew enough about US geography to recognize that we wouldn’t be able to pick her up from Chicago O’Hare. God, she’s always hated flying. She did it, though, every couple years, complaining the entire time.”

“She finally stopped when she decided I was old enough to raise myself without her help. And that she was too old to stress her way through airports and all-day flights.”

“Is that why she didn’t come to your graduation?” Derek tilted his face up in a familiar invitation when Stiles headed back toward the table, and he bent down to kiss him without pausing to think about it.

“Hah,” Stiles said afterwards, a little embarrassed. That—probably wasn’t what Derek had actually meant for him to do in this moment. Then again, his openly happy expression hadn’t changed; he merely looked expectantly at Stiles, waiting for him to either sit down or answer.

Stiles obligingly dragged a chair out, making sure to not bump into Lola, who was sniffing around the base of the table for dropped food. “Yeah, she made it to my high school graduation, and she said she’d fly out again if I was going for a higher degree, but she’d wait ‘til I was done. Only a PhD’s good enough for Babci.”

“Derek said the two of you are thinking about a trip out there?”

“I mean, when I can afford it, yeah,” Stiles said.

He poured himself some of Derek’s absurdly expensive gift. Derek had spent forty minutes earnestly discussing liquor with an enthusiastic salesperson, Stiles hanging back and trying not to knock a paycheck’s worth of bottles off the shelves. He took a sip and nodded in approval. He didn’t know a lot about liquor, but that tasted damn good.

“Maybe I can save her the next trip and make a ticket to Poland my doctorate gift to myself,” Stiles added. Although Babci was kinda getting up there; he’d feel like shit if he put it off for too long. He’d already been turning down her periodic offers to pay for his flight, not comfortable with taking money from an old lady on a limited income.

“I was actually thinking about making a quick trip down to LA this summer,” Derek said.

“Really?” That was news to him.

Derek fiddled with his glass. “Yeah. To visit Cora. She’d love to see you, if we went during a patch
of time you both have off work.”

And that was his boyfriend: taking a comment made in the heat of the moment and immediately acting on it. Stiles knocked their feet together under the table, keeping an eye on Derek to make sure he’d made contact with the correct person. “That’d be awesome. And a lot more doable, especially if we drove.”

“Yeah, I was thinking we could build in a few extra days to drive along the coast. The 1’s beautiful, even if it is slower going.”

“You could break it up with a stop at Big Sur,” his dad suggested. “Might be a bit late to get reservations. Worth checking, though; Claudia and I spent one of our anniversaries there. Sort of our second honeymoon, years down the line.”

“Huh,” Stiles said. “When was that? Was I around?”

“You were pretty little. Melissa watched you, and when we got back, you refused to go home unless we took Scott with us.”

“Oh yeah.” Stiles vaguely remembered that now. Scott’s dad was always on better behavior when other people were around, especially a kid with a cop dad and absolutely no shame about passing on anything he’d heard or seen in the house. Scott had teared up when the Stilinskis arrived to take his buffer home. Things weren’t nearly as bad then as they’d gotten later on, when Melissa had taken the necessary steps to get out of the situation, but Scott was the kind of kid who thrived on positive feedback and encouragement. He’d never gotten any of that from Rafael, who’d somehow managed to be an incredible coach and an absolutely shitty father.

People still asked Scott sometimes, when they found out he’d been largely raised by a single mom, whether that’d been difficult for him. He’d shine his optimistic Scott smile at them and say no. That his last name was the only thing he’d gotten from his dad; Melissa was the one who’d taught him how to work hard and care about people, and he’d never needed anyone else.

Stiles felt the same way about his dad. Well, no, it wasn’t the same situation: Stiles never stopped missing his mom, and Scott was genuinely glad to have Rafael out of his life, reducing their household down to two. But Stiles’s dad had, with some stumbles here and there, stepped up to be everything a grieving twelve year old, then teenager, then twenty-something had needed.

And now here his dad was, describing his favorite vacation spot as Derek listened intently. It’d been too long for him to remember the name of the place they’d stayed, but the rest was still sharply detailed, and he was relating every last bit of it.

Derek shot a quick, conspiratorial smile at Stiles, and he grinned back. You get to deal with this now, he mouthed, covering it with his glass when his dad turned to draw him back into the discussion of possible stopping points.

“Elephant seals,” Stiles said. “In San Simeon. Remember, we did that the year before mom got sick? Lola’d have fun chasing those.”

“I’m not doing anything illegal,” Derek said, and this time Stiles and his dad rolled their eyes at each other.

“Good luck sticking to that with this guy by your side,” his dad said, and Stiles proudly tipped his glass at him. Damn straight.

“Did either of you actually order any food?” he asked, squinting at the liquid still in his glass to
decide whether he should wait for his meal to arrive before refilling it.

His dad gave a sheepish shrug, and Derek pushed over a menu that’d been sitting by his elbow. “We decided on the place, unless you want a veto.”

“I’ll call it in,” his dad offered, and he was halfway out of the room before Stiles realized why he’d be eager to take on this responsibility.

“Fucking,” Stiles said, standing abruptly, then pointing at Derek. “I’ll be right back. He’s not getting away with all meat dishes.”

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“I can’t find my phone,” Stiles said in annoyance hours later, patting at his pockets, then at Derek’s, just in case he’d picked it up on accident.

“Stop groping me,” Derek said, firmly removing his hands.

They’d closed and locked the bedroom door, but Derek was still being skittish about any under-the-clothes activity. Not that Stiles had actually been trying for that. He just wanted his damn phone. He was going to...what was he going to do? He flopped backwards on his bed.

“M’not drunk,” he said. Driving for six hours took a lot out of a person. Follow that with several waves of emotional panic, then far too much food and an even more generous portion of warm conversation: he had a right to feel fucking wiped.

“Didn’t say you were.” Derek patted at his knee, then picked a phone up from where it’d been charging on the desk.

Stiles turned his head to squint at it. Judging from the boring case, it was Derek’s, not his.

“You want me to call it for you?” Derek asked.

He was already dialing before Stiles had a chance to say either way, so he stayed sprawled out on the bed, stretching until he felt muscles pop satisfyingly along his neck and shoulders. He really wasn’t used to spending that much time in a car. What was he planning to do once he had his phone? Right. Text Lydia to make sure their LA dates didn’t overlap. While it’d be fun to see her, too, he didn’t exactly want to get in the way of whatever it was she and Cora were doing.

“It was in your shoe,” Derek said, stooping to retrieve it. “I’m not even gonna ask.”

He didn’t bring it over immediately, so Stiles propped himself up on his elbows to see what he was doing. Staring down at the screen, apparently. He had a soft smile playing over his lips—probably not reading some sort of vaguely incriminating text from Scott, then.

“It’s a phone,” Stiles said. “It’s almost exactly like your phone, except cooler because it’s in a Batman case. You’ve seen it a million times. Toss it over.”

Derek carried it over instead, because he was a practical person who cared about possessions and probably also suspected Stiles’s coordination wasn’t at its optimal level. “I’ve never seen that photo before. When did you take it?”

Stiles racked his brain to think of what photos he had stored on his phone. He wasn’t a terribly interesting person in that regard; he definitely didn’t have any nudes sitting around. Anyway, Derek wasn’t a nosy enough person to go digging around without just asking him first.
“The one you have for my contact,” Derek clarified. “Of me and Lola.”

“Oh yeah. I guess you aren’t normally looking at my phone when you call it.” He sat up the rest of the way, planting his feet back on the carpet, so he could unlock the device and swipe to the photo again. “It’s a good one, huh? I took it way back when we first started going on those friend-walks.”
“You didn’t even have my phone number then.” Derek tugged his shirt off, rolling his eyes when he caught Stiles shamelessly watching the show.

“Thanks for pointing out how damn long it took to woo you.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing?” Derek asked with a saucy eyebrow arch as he peeled his tight jeans down his thickly muscled thighs.

“Damn right. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I kinda have a crush on you.”

“I’ve guessed as much,” Derek said, stepping between Stiles’s legs to let himself be kissed. The bed wasn’t quite lofted enough to make that a comfortable position—Derek had to stoop a bit—but they made it work. “I’m still in my underwear,” he said eventually, like Stiles hadn’t noticed the tight black boxer briefs.

“Yeah you are.” He indulged in a double-handed squeeze, and Derek sighed in an attempt at irritation that came out rather more breathy. “Go put on your sexy pajama suit,” Stiles said, tugging Derek’s face back down so he could kiss the tip of his nose.

“They’re normal pajamas, and you’re getting a pair for Christmas,” Derek threatened.

“I want silk. Red silk, that’ll make you happy,” Stiles said, stripping his own clothes off quickly and flinging them on the floor.

Lola jumped, startled awake by the thump of fabric near her bed, and he shot a guilty look at Derek. He’d completely forgotten she was there. She’d had a long day, too; his dad had played fetch with her outside for a good hour after dinner, the motion sensors snapping on and off as she dashed around the moonlit yard.

He’d volunteered to dogsit for as long as they wanted, whenever they wanted. If they followed through with the numerous European vacation plans Derek kept hinting at, it’d be nice to have Lola safely being spoiled by her doting grandparent.

Derek finished changing and moving his clothes into the drawer under Stiles’s, then went to say goodnight to Lola. “Light off?” he asked when he was done talking quietly to her, and Stiles shook his head.

“Leave it on, I wanna look at you for a bit.”

Derek, to his credit, didn’t even roll his eyes this time. He merely slipped under the sheets that Stiles had lifted up in invitation, grunting in only half-hearted complaint when Stiles elbowed him in the ribs a couple times while they were trying to fit on the mattress. It wasn’t exactly made for two broad-shouldered men to lie comfortably side-by-side; Stiles, for his part, didn’t mind that he ended up partially draped over Derek. He used the proximity as an opportunity to smooth back Derek’s thickly waved hair. He loved when it reached this softly mussed state—far enough into the evening for his gel to be almost completely losing its hold on it.

“Do you know,” Stiles said conversationally, “you’ve got that superhero kind of hair.” Derek blinked sleepily at him, so he explained, “It’s so dark it almost goes blue in highlights. I always thought that was just a quirk of comic book illustration, but here you are, in living color.”

“Greyscale now,” Derek said, and Stiles loosely twisted one of the thickest grey sections around his finger. It had the same soft, almost silky texture as the rest of Derek’s hair and stood in such stark visual contrast.
“That’s beautiful, too,” he said.

Derek’s lashes fluttered over those impossibly hued eyes. *Green*, Derek had claimed, as though you could reduce them down to a single color.

His eyebrows pinched into his thinking-deep-thoughts expression. Before Stiles could decide whether to smooth it out with his thumb or his mouth—both methods having proved equally effective—Derek said, “Jestem w tobie zakochany.”

A carefully enunciated *I’m in love with you* that, being Derek, he’d probably spent considerable time practicing.

“Dammit,” Stiles said. “You heard that too, didn’t you.” He’d said a lot while he was boiling over downstairs, furious with himself for not planning this whole trip out better and needing his dad to understand how terrified he was of losing the goddamn love of his life.

“I heard parts,” Derek confirmed, as he had before. He touched the sensitive inside of Stiles’s wrist, where his pulse was throbbing. “I love you, Stiles.”

Stiles bit his lip, feeling shy suddenly, in a way that wasn’t usual for him. Derek obviously already knew. Still, it felt like they were signing something, as they’d done with that joking contract months earlier. *I solemnly swear to visit you*… well, they’d followed through with that one, hadn’t they?

“I love you,” Stiles said, almost surprised to not see the letters swirling through the air and linking them together. Three simple syllables that didn’t feel like nearly enough to make Derek understand how irrevocably he’d handed over his heart. “I wish there were stronger words for it.”

Derek’s dimples popped into his cheeks then, and Stiles poked at one accusingly.

“That’s why you used Polish, isn’t it.”

“I’ll say it in every language I know, if you want,” his ridiculously romantic boyfriend said, and he proceeded to do just that while Stiles laughed in unrestrained delight, making him repeat a few of the prettier-sounding ones so he could try them out.

“Kocham cię,” Stiles said eventually. “That’s a quicker way to say I love you, for future reference. And with that, I am officially fucking wiped. Let’s do a repeat performance of this tomorrow, though.”

“For as long as you like,” Derek promised.

While Stiles reached for the light switch—it was convenient having his bed by the wall, although it was still a bit of a stretch if you were too lazy to get out from under the covers—Derek retrieved something he hadn’t noticed him putting down on the desk earlier.

“I found Lola chewing on this,” Derek said. “Doesn’t look like she swallowed any of it, but it’s decorated with plenty of brand new teethmarks. I hope it wasn’t something meaningful.”

Stiles flopped back onto his pillow, squinting down at the object Derek was holding. His eyes were slowly adjusting to the soft spill of moonlight through his open curtains. “Waited until the lights were off to tell me, huh?”

“Harder to see the damage that way,” Derek said, placing it in his hand.

The partially gnawed stress ball winked at him: missing one eye, its smile decidedly lopsided now, it
looked cheerier and more optimistic than it ever had.

“All these years, you were trying to tell me something, weren’t you,” Stiles said to it. The rose-colored-glasses shit that he’d always hated, the assurances that the future would get better, that he’d come out on the other side of the nightmares, that he just had to keep going even when it seemed impossible: turned out it was actually true.

He patted it gently on the top of its irritating round head—slightly dented now—before handing it back to Derek. “I don’t think I need this anymore.”

Stiles drifted off to the sound of Derek’s steady breathing, Lola’s more guttural snores, and the wind absently scraping a tree branch against the side of the house. If he’d been more awake, he might’ve asked Derek if that bothered him—they could trim the branch tomorrow, he thought drowsily. Maybe clean out the attic while they were at it; there were photo albums up there that Derek might like to look through.

A whispered kocham cię stirred his hair, and Stiles arched into it with a happy murmur, letting the words wash him the rest of the way into a dreamless slumber.

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On the last morning before they left Beacon Hills, Stiles drove them on a few final errands around town. The first stop was a one hour photo developer; Derek, looking a little embarrassed but determined, had asked if Stiles’s dad would mind taking a few photos of them. Thanks to his dad’s immediate and intensely enthusiastic response, they’d ended up mugging their way through the prom-style photoshoot that Stiles had mostly skipped over during high school. Much like actual prom, a large number of the photos were too ridiculous for anyone else to ever see, but they’d had a blast taking them and then groaning through a slideshow of the results.

John, you should be in some, too, Derek had said after a while, and they’d pulled out the tripod for the first time in years. Since Stiles's mom had been around and they took annual photos for holiday cards, probably.

Their group shots had turned out surprisingly well once they’d figured out the proper timing—in the first couple, one of them was inevitably out of the picture or only blurrily in frame, trying to rush back before the shutter snapped. They’d gotten the hang of it eventually, and his dad had made Stiles click back to the group shot he wanted to frame.

I want an 8x10 of that one, he’d said decisively. It’d be the newest addition to the Stilinski Timeline collection that stretched all the way up the staircase, beginning with their wedding photo and ending with Stiles’s high school graduation, his babcia too busy trying to fix the angle of his tassel to respond to Scott’s insistence that she smile at the camera.

His dad could’ve handled it on his own at a later date, of course, but Derek had looked too genuinely touched by the gesture for Stiles to even consider putting it off. They were printing a few of their less cheesy couple shots for Derek, too, who apparently wanted them for his bedroom and office, the giant dork.

I could take sexy photos for you instead, Stiles had said with a lewd eyebrow waggle, only remembering his dad was still around when Derek’s ears and the tops of his cheeks flamed a vibrant red.

...Fully clothed, tasteful portraits? he’d amended, and his dad had shaken his head and left them to it.
In other words, it’d pretty much been the perfect weekend.

They bought ice cream cones and wandered leisurely while they waited for the photos to process, looking in store windows and occasionally stopping for meet-the-boyfriend introductions when they ran into someone who knew Stiles or recognized him thanks to his dad’s prominent position in the town.

“I’m pretty sure that woman just wanted to pet Lola,” Derek said, crunching the last bit of his cone and tossing his napkin into a trash can outside the hardware store. They’d stopped there because of the row of plants along the sidewalk that Lola wanted to sniff and the stream of people that Stiles could waylay as they headed into the coffee shop next door.

“You didn’t know me when I was in high school,” Stiles said. “This town’s full of people who did. Beacon Hills Reunion; you’re damn right I’m going to show off my smoking hot boyfriend.”

“Should’ve brought your robot, too,” Derek said. He flipped his sunglasses open and put them back on when they started walking again; while they were standing in the shade, he’d had them folded over the already obscenely scooped neckline of his flimsy t-shirt. Appropriate summerwear, if you were the kind of person who didn’t notice passersby walking into poles because they couldn’t tear their eyes away from you.

It was definitely on the side of too warm for close contact, but Stiles slipped his arm around Derek’s waist anyway. He’d put a hell of a lot of work into that robot. Dr. Ito had kept the damn thing at the end of the semester, effectively shutting down their group’s arguments over who got to take their project home, so he only had photos and videos as proof of their results. Derek had patiently watched every last one, listening to his complaints and assurances that it worked even better in person.

“Is that your way of telling me you’re tired of being paraded down Main Street?” Stiles was already planning another one of these tours over the winter holidays; it’d be cold enough then to pull out his leather jacket and hopefully run into more people who’d been dicks to him during school.

“I’m telling you that you’re impressive enough on your own. And that we should probably pick up the photos and move on to the next item on the list. We still need to get back and say goodbye to your dad; if we leave too late, we’ll be driving after dark.”

“I’ve got it all mapped out,” Stiles promised. “We’ll be back in time to watch the sunset from your deck.”

Even so, he almost took their final stop off the agenda. It’d been such a pleasant day; did they really want to end things on a downer? He stopped at the intersection on the edge of town long enough for Derek to touch his forearm and incline his head at the road that led up the hill to the graveyard.

“Let’s at least stop and say hi,” Derek said. He was holding a brightly colored bouquet of gerbera daisies in his lap—their second to last errand, added at his request. He’d told Stiles he hadn’t wanted to show up empty-handed.

Stiles flicked his turn signal on, even though there were no other cars in sight, and eased his mom’s old Jeep up the gradual incline. There were a few other cars parked along the road that circled the grassy expanse at the top: a groundskeeping truck, the lawnmower a low buzz at the far side of the graveyard, and sedans and minivans momentarily empty of the other families who’d come to pay their respects.

“Should I leave Lola in the car?” Derek asked.
Stiles shook his head. They didn’t abide by strict rules here; he’d seen people walking their pets, picnic blankets spread between headstones, and kids shrieking with laughter as they played tag or hide and seek. His mom wouldn’t have wanted to be laid to rest anywhere that’d been less full of life. When he was old enough to really think about it, he’d been grateful that they had proper headstones in Beacon Hills, rather than the barely personalized flat plates that turned most modern cemeteries into clinically sliced checkerboards.

“She’s over here,” he said, leading the way to the maple that marked her resting spot. She’d asked for that once she knew that her prognosis was terminal and that she didn’t have a lot of time left to make plans with a clear mind.

*I don’t expect you two to spend a lot of time up here,* she’d said. *I won’t be here anymore, my darlings. My Słoneczko’s too young for this still, so I’m looking at you, Johnny. Don’t let life pass you by because you’re missing me.*

She’d chosen a plot by a tree that she’d loved for its autumn-blazing colors, and for the surprisingly comfortable bench set under it. She’d known her husband too well: although he didn’t really talk about it, Stiles was well aware his dad often took his lunch breaks there when he was on shift.

She’d picked out her headstone, too, and Derek stifled what might’ve been a laugh when they halted in front of it. Stiles shot him a smile that only had a little heartbreak in it. “She had that custom made. She wanted to leave a mark and do something that’d cheer us up when we visited her.”

“It’s a piano,” Derek marvelled. He started to reach for the carved marble keys, then stopped himself. Waiting for an introduction first, Stiles realized, and he took Derek’s free hand to steady himself and make sure his mom got a clear picture of their relationship.

“Mom, I want you to meet Derek. He brought you flowers because—” He wiped roughly at his face, more emotional about this whole thing than he’d really expected.

“Because I’m dating your son and I want to make a good impression,” Derek finished. He set the bouquet carefully at the base of the piano. “It’s nice to meet you—can I call her Claudia?”

“She would’ve liked that,” Stiles said, his throat tight.

They sat on the bench for a while, arms wrapped around each other, Stiles slouching some so he could rest his head on Derek’s shoulder.

“She wanted a real piano,” he said when his voice was ready to work again. “A full sized one with working keys and everything. She had these dreams about this section of the graveyard turning into an informal open air concert hall. Or not even that, really. Nothing fancy. Just a place where people could stop by and play whatever they liked. She wanted to be someone who kept encouraging creativity and just...joy, I guess, even after she was gone. My dad couldn’t make that happen, obviously. So they settled on this instead.”

“I think it’s beautiful,” Derek said. He shifted a bit on the bench, looping Lola’s leash around one of the slats and pulling his phone out. He tapped at it and set it on his knee. “For you, Claudia,” he said. Stiles sucked in a breath at the first ripple of music. “Chopin?”

“Predictable, I guess,” Derek said. He smoothed his thumb comfortably along Stiles’s waist. “It’s one of his happier nocturnes. I thought she might like that.”

She would’ve loved it.
When the last notes faded, they sat in silence, listening to the wind whispering through the leaves. One shook loose and spiraled down to land on Lola’s leg. She jerked her paw away and snapped at the wayward leaf, then rolled onto her back with a grunt, her feet waving in the air as Derek bent to tickle gently at her belly.

“You’re dad was right, you know. You didn’t have to stay at Tillamook.”

Stiles nudged at him until he turned his face back where he could see it. Derek’s sunglasses were hooked into his shirt again, his eyes unshielded and gold-flecked in the sunlight filtering through the branches. “What’re you saying?”

“That I would’ve gone with you if you’d asked. I’ve been putting feelers out about other positions. I talked to Noshiko about it.” His hand tensed a little on Stiles’s waist. “The morning after the pool,” he admitted.

Derek didn’t need to clarify further. He still got the same awestruck look every time they kissed, like he was never expecting it, like he’d been handed a gift he was too overwhelmed to unwrap, but that night had been the first time Stiles had seen it.

Derek’s eyes fluttered closed when Stiles leaned forward to touch their lips together—just a soft brush, a thank you that he couldn’t express any other way.

“I had a lot of reasons for staying,” Stiles said. “You were a major one, though. And it was the right choice.”

Derek pressed their foreheads together, getting his hand around the back of Stiles’s neck to hold him in place for a moment. When he sat back, his eyes were shining a little. “I kept telling myself that sometimes loving someone means letting them leave you.”

“Self-sacrificial bullshit,” Stiles said. “If I left you, I’d be leaving my own heart behind, and that’s not very practical of me, is it?”

Derek chuckled softly. He touched the corner of Stiles’s mouth. “I don’t want you to leave me. But keep in mind when you finish out this stretch—if the world’s calling you elsewhere, no matter where, I’ll come with you. I want you to know that’s an open invitation for the future.”

“A permanent invitation? No expiration date?”

A flicker of anxiety passed over his face. “I know you can’t promise me forever.”

“Is that what you want?” Stiles asked, shifting as close to him on the bench as he could get, searching Derek’s kind, ridiculously selfless eyes.

Derek ducked his head, the tips of his ears flushing slightly. “I think I’ve wanted that since the first day we met. I know I said I don't really believe in fate. But...”

“We met when we were meant to,” Stiles said, echoing the line he’d grown up hearing his mom say to his dad. “And some people are...meant for each other.” He swallowed a painful lump in his throat, his eyes prickling, as he felt his mother’s words traveling from a cherished corner of his brain, bittersweet on his tongue, with a sharp magic to them he’d never tasted before. “You were my destiny, Derek.”

The maple’s leaves rustled quietly as they kissed, its branches creaking a bit but sheltering them from the limitless sky, holding them in place in a world too big and beautiful to ever fully understand.
“We should head out,” Derek said eventually. “Your dad’s expecting us back, and we’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. He stopped to touch his mother’s headstone, brushing stray bits of freshly mown grass off the keys, then linked his fingers with Derek’s. “I’m ready to get started.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Jestem w tobie zakochany - I’m in love with you
Kocham cię - I love you

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You can find me on tumblr or at Appreciate Derek Hale. If you download fics instead of always reading them on AO3 like I do (what can I say; I like this site’s setup), ePub appears to be the best format for viewing the beautiful embedded art. Check out this post for a full list of the wonderful pieces folks created for this fic.

And a multitude of thanks to all of you. It’s been amazing sharing this story with you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!