Your Vision Borrows Mine

by hazyascent

Summary

Stiles has encountered a fair share of monsters before, way out of his league - the kinds that children are afraid are hiding in their closets and under the bed.

He’d even become one himself when he was void. The nogitsune was in his house, his body, and his mind.

But the worst monster he’s ever faced took even more from him and got away with it.

It’s why Stiles has never really been as terrified of werewolves and kanimas and darachs as he should have been. They’re really not that scary, relatively speaking, and he has a whole team on his side. They always found a way to win - until they lost someone they really loved.

Stiles doesn’t know how to be normal, not after everything he’s done and everyone he’s hurt. The nogitsune is gone, but another monster is on its heels.

His uncle is back. And Stiles has never felt more alone.

NOTE - This story is 14 chapters + a short epilogue. Any postings beyond 15 are “extra” materials, such as an alternate ending, bonus scenes, author’s notes, etc. This story is complete at 15/15, but installment counts will go up (16/16 and so on) with extras.
Chapter 1

Hi there! Some extra info about trigger warnings (in addition to the tags) -

If the behaviors of an abuser or the reactions of the person being abused are too much of a trigger for you, please do not read this story and please continue to take care of yourself!

I don’t think this is physically vulgar, but it could be considered at times physically graphic? And also emotionally graphic? I don’t go into very much physical detail, except at the beginning, because I felt that I needed to establish how this all takes root.

The abuse is portrayed as ongoing and systematic in nature. It may feel like it’s endless. I have not personally experienced anything like this and I’m not sure I really appreciate the spectrum of ways people could react.

There are references to past, very underage (10-11 years old) sexual abuse and fleeting ideations of suicide.

I’m not that experienced/savvy with tags, so if you think I need to tag something specific, please let me know.

Also, if there is any doubt, I really do love the Stiles character! I don’t want to waterboard him or pour sugar in his gas tank or torture him in any way!

[Posted 4/13/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been nearly three weeks since they trapped the nogitsune. Argent and Isaac are gone, the two biggest reminders of Allison. No one knows if or when they’re coming back. But they all know Allison isn’t.

They’ve grieved in their own ways. They never gathered in a circle, sharing their favorite stories about her and crying on each other’s shoulders. There was a memorial event at the school, but Stiles couldn’t bring himself to go. He knows Scott went, but left halfway through. Lydia didn’t attend at all, either.

They don’t avoid the topic altogether, but it’s delicate. Stiles wonders if they just don’t grieve with him. Maybe they grieve together in secret. They keep telling him it’s not his fault, just like it wasn’t Jackson’s fault when he killed people under Matt’s control. Stiles knows it’s not the same, though.

Jackson hadn’t been mindfucked like Stiles had. Jackson was never cognizant of what he did when he was the kanima. His experience was limited to what people told him later, and no one went into detail. He hadn’t even believed it when Stiles told him point blank that he was killing people. He never really carried what he had done at Matt’s beck and call. For him, they were just broad stories, sliding off a borderline nonexistent conscience to begin with. There was no residue. But Stiles remembers everything. He feels everything.
Neither of them had ever consented to being controlled, but Jackson hadn’t been extorted into it. Doing terrible things as a tool in misguided desire for revenge was less horrifying than doing them because subjecting people to pain and strife was a super fun hobby.

Jackson left town afterwards and didn’t have to live in the detritus of what had happened. Jackson had killed people, and that was just as real as what Stiles had done, but he hadn’t killed anyone in their group. He hadn’t killed one of their own.

Stiles can hardly look at himself in the mirror without thinking about what he did. He doesn’t know how everyone else doesn’t feel the same way when they look at him. He finds that he feels the most at ease around Derek, probably because Derek wasn’t close enough to Allison to trigger Stiles’ guilt. He doesn’t look at Derek and feel himself choking on apologies.

It’s not just Allison, either. One day, when he was out eating pizza with Scott, he recognized a petite blonde across the restaurant. Deputy Harper’s widow. Harper died in the explosion in the police station, the one Stiles set off after he mailed in a bomb sealed up in an innocent-looking cardboard box. He remembered how much care Mrs. Harper used to put into her appearance, always with perfect makeup and immaculate clothing. That seemed to have gone by the wayside, as her face was bare and she was wearing a frumpy t-shirt and baggy jeans. She looked lost.

The days passed in a haze as Stiles tried to settle back into his own skin. Stiles could see everyone around him slowly adjusting to their new normal. It was an undeniable sign that he was supposed to be adjusting, too.

But he doesn’t know how. So he’ll just fake it until he makes it.

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Stiles has done the math. He knows the regular household expenses and is intimately familiar with the recent increase in ad-hoc ones - namely, his bills from Beacon General and Eichen House. He knows the amount of his dad’s biweekly take-home paycheck and that the invoice for the car insurance premiums just came in the mail, plus there’s the property taxes due soon, the Jeep has been cranky, and Stiles’ lacrosse gear is on its last legs. If Stiles had his way, they would also have a little cushion just to be safe, in case his dad gets hurt at work or he has any hiccups with his heart, but at this rate, that cushion is going to be the random coins lost in the couch.

Over breakfast one morning - whole grain cereal with skim milk and half of a grapefruit for his dad, Pop-Tarts and coffee for himself - Stiles says casually, “I think I’m gonna get a part-time job.”

Noah raises an eyebrow and Stiles is indignant. “What! I have skills, I can do menial labor like any other self-respecting teenager!”

“Noah raises the other eyebrow at Stiles. “Scott has a job, he’s held a job for a couple of years now and he’s fine.”

“Stiles, I like the initiative, but weren’t you just saying you’ve been pelted with homework and you’re going to have to put in more practice time if you have any hope of playing in any games this year? And how are you going to keep a job on evenings and weekends if you have to drop everything last-minute because your friends need you, or the entire town is going to hell in a shapeshifter handbasket?”

“It’ll be fine!” Stiles insists. “Scott works for an emissary. I doubt the twenty-year-old manager at the movie theater or the hipsters at the coffee shop will be as understanding of your other priorities.”
“I could work for an emissary,” Stiles muses.

“Take it easy, Stiles. You’ve been through some pretty heavy stuff. Enjoy being a kid for a while longer.”

“I just think it would be good if I could help out around here. I cause a lot of trouble; the least I can do is help out with some expenses.”

“You don’t need to help with expenses,” Noah says, squinting. “Expenses are fine.”

“Dad, you don’t have to hide it from me. I saw the late notices for the MRI bill. And I know Eichen House costs an arm and a leg. Why it does, I don’t know, it’s certainly not for the top-of-the-line bed restraints and super-professional Haldol warriors.”

Noah ignores Stiles’ crack completely with an emphatic wave of his hand. “Stiles, the bills are handled. I just deferred the MRI payment until my next pay period because I was negotiating the final amount with the hospital and insurance company. Eichen House has almost all of their patients on an installment plan because no one can afford to pay in lump sum. Relax, okay? There’s nothing to worry about.”

Stiles doesn’t look convinced - it’s the same expression he has when his dad says he had a grilled chicken salad for lunch at the station - but he knows better than to argue. His dad isn’t wrong, anyway. What kind of employer would put up with Stiles’ unorthodox comings and goings, never mind his ADHD and charming personality that doesn’t always charm people?

He’s not going to let his dad get the last word, though, so he barks at him to finish his grapefruit and stares at him unflinchingly until every last bite is gone.

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Stiles caresses the Jeep’s steering wheel, begging it to be gentle on his wallet, and takes his car to the shop about a mile from campus. Scott volunteers to go with him, leaving his motorbike in Stiles’ driveway so they can walk from the mechanic’s to the high school.

Scott could have followed him to the shop and then driven them both, but the walk is a nice throwback to simpler days, before they were rushing off to deal with life-or-death situations. Back when their biggest problems were bright red nose zits and covering up ill-timed boners in the middle of math class.

It quickly becomes clear to Stiles that this one-on-one bro time has other motives than just simplicity, but he isn’t irritated by Scott’s concern. Scott is a great best friend. And Stiles doesn’t really expect people to believe he went from 0 to 60 on the mental health scale like he’s Jackson’s Porsche tearing out of a parking lot.

“I don’t -” he tries to explain to Scott, “yeah, I admit there’s still some PTSD. But I’ll be okay. I’m dealing with it.”

“I just really want you to know that I’m here for you. Anytime, anywhere.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll be okay. What happened to me wasn’t permanent. I’m bouncing back. I’ll get there.”

“It could have been any one of us,” Scott says. “It was just bad luck. You didn’t do anything. If it wasn’t you, it would have been someone else. It could have been me. It could have been Allison.”
Scott’s voice gets a little tight when he says her name, and Stiles blinks hard. “The nogitsune could have picked Allison, and I could have died instead. That would be a little better.”

“Dude.” Scott shoves his shoulder and nails him with a first-rate puppy dog face. “Don’t say that. That wouldn’t be better. And even if that had happened, then she’d be the one standing here blaming herself when it wouldn’t have been her fault, either.”

They walk in brief silence until Scott speaks again. “Listen, we can blame anyone, really, but it wouldn’t mean anything because it’s no one’s fault. Is it Deaton’s fault for letting us die in the ice baths to save our parents? Is it my fault for not stopping it and trying to find another way, even after Deaton warned us about the darkness we would bring back with us? Is it Derek’s fault - well, all of us, really - for not figuring out Ms. Blake was the darach earlier?”

Stiles thinks about Allison again, and everyone else who died because of him - his dad’s co-workers and friends, people at the hospital - people who had loved ones, but were stolen away. Death is permanent. They don’t have the privilege of bouncing back the way Stiles does.

“Do you ever think about it?” Stiles asks, his voice low with sadness. “When I stabbed you with the sword?”

Scott’s brows knead together. “No.”

“But you remember it? You remember how it felt?”

“Yeah, I mean, yeah, I remember that it happened. But I don’t think about it. It’s not that I make myself not think about it. I just … don’t.”

Stiles sighs roughly. “I can’t believe I did that -”

“It wasn’t you, Stiles. You could be holding a sword right now and I wouldn’t think about what the nogitsune did. The nogitsune is gone. This?” Scott gestures to Stiles. “This is just you now.”

Stiles knows that Scott’s right. It’s just him now. But even without the nogitsune, Stiles still feels this constant darkness, different from what he was carrying with him after the nemeton. The darkness from the nemeton was an external energy - a darkness of potential. This new darkness clinging to him is one of consequences, of things that he’s done and can’t take back.

“My dad has been asking me about counseling,” Stiles says. “He says it’s normal and nothing to be ashamed of. He says that officers have mandatory counseling after they discharge their firearms, and they have to get cleared by the psychologist in a wellness check. He wants me to talk to someone before I get too deep into the next fucked-up thing that happens here.”

“That’s probably a pretty good idea, Stiles.”

Stiles’ shrug extends from his shoulders all the way down to his fingertips. “I mean, sure, in theory. But I can’t tell a counselor what really happened. And what’s the point in trying to talk to someone if I have to talk around the truth? I don’t even know what I would say. I can’t lay it out like, oh, this evil fox possessed me because I died for a few moments and released its latent spirit to save my dad and my friends’ parents. If I can’t even talk about what really happened, I don’t see how that’s going to help me.

“The only person who knows this shit exists is Morrell. And I don’t care about her qualifications or abilities when she told me to my face she would have no problem putting me down by lethal injection. So no, she’s not on my list of trusted headshrinkers.”
Scott shakes his head. “But didn’t she say that when you were in Eichen House? She was really saying that about the nogitsune. She wasn’t saying that about you.”

“Point taken, but that wasn’t a great, reassuring moment for me. I’d rather not spill my guts out to someone who can be so merciless, so easily.”

“So you’re not going to, with anyone…?”

Stiles understands Scott’s insistence. Scott is the son of a nurse and has grown up believing a medical professional can help with almost anything. He’s also aware that Stiles is their token human who doesn’t heal like the rest of the pack does. He knows Stiles needs more help than everyone else.

Scott will never say it, or even think it, but Stiles is the obvious candidate for ”Most Likely to Create a Shitstorm Because of Weakness.”

“Counseling costs money, Scott. And my dad doesn’t care about that, but he should, and I’m not gonna run up more bills if it’s not gonna help. That’s the last thing we need.”

“I don’t know, man. I still think it’s a good idea. Even if it’s not a counselor. You can talk to me, your dad, Deaton, a lot of people.”

“I’ll be fine,” Stiles says. “I didn’t expect to feel like my old self again overnight. But I’m getting better.”

Scott tucks his thumbs under his backpack straps. “You would tell me if you wanted to talk?”

Stiles nods resolutely. “Of course, man.”

As they approach an intersection, Scott presses the “walk” button and Stiles toes his sneaker at a loose rock on the sidewalk. Even though he has no desire to talk to or see Ms. Morrell again, he remembers one thing she told him last year that had struck a chord with him.

*If you’re going through hell, keep going.*

“I’ll be fine,” Stiles repeats to Scott as they cross the street. “I just have to do the time.”

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After lacrosse practice, Stiles pulls his phone out of his locker and opens his texts. His dad had sent him a simple “call me” message at first, and then an hour later, once he probably remembered it was a practice day, texted again with a longer message. *Off shift at 5. Come home for family dinner, have a surprise for you.*

Lydia had given him a ride to school that morning since the repair shop had kept his Jeep overnight, but he and his car are due to be reunited that afternoon. Stiles takes a quick shower and dries off the best he can. It’s a cold afternoon in December and his hair is still a little damp, but it’s a short walk to the shop and a beautiful day outside.

Things get even better when Kevin, the mechanic, gives him the bill for the repairs and it’s far less than Stiles thought it would be. Kevin’s a nice guy and he already knows he’s going to get plenty more business from Stiles as long as he’s driving his mom’s Jeep, so he had given him a break on the labor.

“Thanks, Kevin,” Stiles calls out as he leaves.
“No problem, Stiles! I’ll see you back in here in about 3000 miles, max.”

“Har har,” Stiles retorts, although he knows it’s true. “My duct tape will see that challenge and raise you 1000.”

When Stiles barrels into the house, he has no real concept of this mysterious surprise. Some things he had ruled out already - basically anything that costs money - but maybe his dad is going to take him to the shooting range and actually let him handle a gun. Or he’s secretly been dating Scott’s mom and is going to finally come clean.

“Dad!”

“Back here, son!” Noah calls from the kitchen.

“Kevin basically did the work for free,” Stiles says, sliding the straps of his backpack off his shoulders. “Like, at a sweatshop rate -"

Stiles trips over his own feet and windmills his arms a little to stay upright when he enters the kitchen. His dad is there, as expected, finishing a stir fry on the stovetop. Standing next to him is a broad-shouldered man whom Stiles tries never to think about.

“Surprise!” Noah says, giving one last stir before he turns the heat off.

Stiles drops his backpack at his feet with a resounding thud. He stares at their visitor with unblinking eyes, jaw dropped, and hands twitching.

Noah and the other man laugh boisterously. “He’s always the one giving me surprises,” Noah crows. “Finally I got you this time!”

“Hey, Stiles!” the man steps forward and wraps him in a big bear hug.

Stiles doesn’t react at first until he remembers his dad is standing right there. “Hey, Uncle Clay,” he says, more subdued in his response.

Clay is still hugging him, so Stiles doesn’t have a choice but to hug him back in return. His dad can’t see his face, so he doesn’t have to fake his enthusiasm there. Stiles had almost invited Scott over for dinner before he saw the text from his dad and is really glad he didn’t in the end. He doesn’t need Scott and his werewolf senses picking up on the disparate emotions in the room.

Clay is tall and densely muscled, a former high school athlete who kept up with most of the regimen as an adult instead of peaking early and falling into a spare tire and reminiscing about the good old days. He’s as bulky as Boyd was, except Stiles never looked at Boyd and saw his uncle; they were different in every other sense of physicality and personality. Boyd was a decent guy who had been really lonely and wanted something better out of life. Stiles would have hated it if Boyd had reminded him of Clay. He would have hated it if he had thought of Clay when he saw Boyd clawed to death and Derek kneeling next to him, devastated and guilt-ridden.

Stiles knows that Clay is conventionally good-looking. If he hadn’t known on his own, he couldn’t have missed the way the other moms looked at Clay when he picked Stiles up from school or extracurriculars. The only time Sierra Baxter, the most popular girl at Beacon Elementary, had talked to him was to tell him her mom thought Clay was cute and to ask if he was Stiles’ dad and was he married.

Clay finally lets go and Stiles pulls away readily. “You should have seen the look on your face,” Noah says, taking the brown rice out of the rice cooker.
“Yeah,” Stiles manages, moving his tongue around to try to relieve the sudden dryness in his mouth. “Yeah, you got me, all right. What are - what are you doing here?”

Noah laughs again. “Sorry, Clay, I swear this kid was not actually raised by wolves. I mean, we did a little better than that. He does have better manners.”

Stiles shrugs self-consciously. “No, I just meant - it’s been a long time. I thought - Dad said that you live in Florida now.”

“I did,” Clay answers. “Going through some life changes, so I figured I should get a change of scenery, too. But look at you! You’re all grown up. I remember when you were running around here like a little gremlin.”

“Yeah. I’m not little anymore. I’m seventeen now,” Stiles says, adding a little emphasis to the words that hopefully doesn’t sound weird to his dad. “I turn eighteen in April. I’m basically an adult.”

“You sure are. I’ve missed so much.”

“Well, not anymore,” Noah says before turning to Stiles. “Clay’s going to be staying with us for a while.”

Stiles can’t even try to pretend with the fake bullshit. “Here?”

“Yeah, he’ll take the guest room again.”

“It’s so great to see you guys,” Clay says, effusive in his warmth. Noah gives him a big smile in return and Stiles misses a couple of beats before he plasters a similar reaction on his face.

“Hey Stiles, can you set the table?” Noah asks.

“Sure.” Stiles occupies himself with the administrative task so he can buy a minute or two of not paying attention to their new guest.

“Can you grab me a beer, Stiles?” Clay asks.

“Yeah,” Stiles answers mechanically.

“Noah, you want?” Noah considers for a second before Clay cajoles him. “Come on, you’re off work for the rest of the night.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Stiles, can you get me one, too?”

Stiles reaches into the refrigerator and double-fists the cans before setting them down at the corresponding place settings. He doesn’t want to see it as his serving Clay. He’s not serving Clay any more than he’s serving his dad. He’s just being a good host.

There’s a steady stream of chatter over dinner, mostly between Noah and Clay. Stiles chimes in, too, when directly spoken to, and often enough that he doesn’t seem oddly quiet, but he’s not really listening to what they’re saying. When they’re speaking, Stiles is mostly freaking out a mile a minute.

Halfway through dinner, Stiles feels like his face is on the verge of giving away all of his real feelings, so he excuses himself to go to the bathroom. After closing the door, he slides down against it until he hits the floor, gripping the back of his skull through shaky breaths.

He can’t believe Clay is back. The uncle who ended his childhood is back.
Stiles doesn’t remember a lot about Clay’s first stint living with his family. There are gaps in his recall, but he remembers too much at the same time.

Clay used to live in San Diego, but he had been around, visiting his big sister and her family a couple of times a year. Stiles had viewed Clay as an older brother more than another father figure since Clay was over ten years younger than Claudia. He was fun, loud, and gregarious, endearing himself to Noah quickly with his big personality and serving as a good counterpart to Stiles’ antics and disposition. Stiles liked having a partner in crime.

Clay had come around more often once Claudia’s dementia began taking hold. Noah had needed the help shuttling ten-year-old Stiles to and from school, taking him to the hospital for his frequent visits, checking on his homework, and trying to give him some semblance of stability and routine. At the time, Stiles had greatly appreciated Clay’s presence, acutely aware of his mother’s worsening condition and the strain his father was under. Stiles thought Clay loved him.

Then Claudia was gone.

Stiles had been so devoted to her, happy-go-lucky most of the time, but fiercely protective when it came to his mother. Nothing could compare to the joy in his heart when he made her laugh, or smile, or conspiratorially return an impish wink. He knew his dad loved her with everything he had, too, and that he had been aching at the loss while putting on a brave face for his son.

So Stiles put on a brave face of his own and poured a lot more energy into cracking the best jokes to make his dad happy, even if just for a moment. He wasn’t perfect, and he cried sometimes in front of his dad, but only when he really couldn’t help it. Usually, when he felt a wave coming on, he would say he was going to his room to play and then curl up on his bed to cry by himself.

They were a team. That meant he shared the duty of keeping what was left of the family together.

In the aftermath, Clay moved into the Stilinski house to continue with functional support and relieve the pressure of everything falling onto Noah’s shoulders. He found a local job in construction with the intent of staying in Beacon Hills indefinitely. Noah was given a promotion soon after that - a step up in pay he needed to support Stiles on his own and an increase in responsibility that gave his life renewed meaning. It meant that Noah wasn’t around as much, but Stiles could see that it was good for him, and that it helped curb his recent uptake in drinking, too. His dad was an important man who did important work, protecting everyone in the town.

Clay was there to keep Stiles company, and he had tried to make things seem fun. He would take Stiles to do fun things, like eating ice cream sundaes or going to the park to throw a football around. But he would also have his fun with Stiles inside the house, personal and alone. To this day, Stiles hates banana splits and has zero interest in football. People assume he doesn’t like it because the sport is beyond him physically and he doesn’t have the body for it. They don’t know the loathsome association Stiles has between football and his body.

Stiles had grown up the son of a police officer. Of course he had known about stranger danger, things that kids shouldn’t do, things that people shouldn’t ask kids to do, and that he could tell his parents anything. But he couldn’t make any sense of it as it was happening. Stiles didn’t mind acting like a grown-up sometimes - helping make dinner, raking the leaves, doing the laundry, putting the grocery list together - but the other stuff felt so wrong. He knew it was wrong. He hated it. It was horrible. Really, really horrible.

But Clay took care of him. His parents loved Clay. He had loved Clay. Clay had the same eyes as
his mom. Clay made his dad’s life so much easier. Clay liked being with Stiles so much.

Looking back, Stiles knows he has repressed a lot. He’d had to. But not everything. He can be too exacting at times. His ADHD gives him problems focusing, but some things are indelibly imprinted in his brain. He knows that Clay first touched him on January 5, 2005. Clay made him return the overture on January 10th. They had been in a sexual relationship for 8 months and 12 days.

Then Clay met a woman who lived in the Bay Area and became very serious about her. He moved in with her and Stiles hadn’t seen him since - until now. Clay sent the Stilinskis Christmas cards every year, but Stiles never looked at them. His dad would make passing comments about Clay, his new family, how he had moved to the East Coast, and what he was up to, but Stiles didn’t care.

That was the only time in Stiles’ life he had ever been happy that someone had left him behind. He had prayed for it.

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When Stiles was younger, it didn’t always happen at night or in his room. Sometimes it was during the day or in Clay’s room. The only main restriction was his dad couldn’t be at home.

Stiles is terrified to think of what might happen now. Maybe he’s too old. Hopefully he’s too old, and Clay really only came back for a temporary place to stay.

Noah is down the hall, tucked away in his room. Stiles is almost certain that Clay won’t come in to see him, but he’s jumpy and on edge, his gaze constantly floating back to the doorknob. He was never allowed to lock the door before. It was one of the rules.

Before he climbs into bed and turns off the lights, he debates whether to lock the door now, his hand hovering over the knob for what feels like an eternity. In the end, he doesn’t turn the lock, stubborn in the hope that he’ll be safe.

Stiles doesn’t sleep a wink the entire night. He just buries himself under the covers and rotates through the various breathing exercises he was taught by the child psychologist to get a grip on his anxiety.

And nothing happens.

As he gets ready for school the next morning, he heaves a nervous sigh of relief before putting on his hoodie. “Everything’s going to be fine,” he mumbles to himself while running gelled-up hands through his hair. “Everything will be fine.”

The kitchen is empty when he enters, but his dad had clearly been through earlier because he’s left the pot of brewed coffee half-full. Stiles needs it - every last drop, really - since his head is feeling a little cloudy from the supremely unproductive all-nighter.

He’s pouring the rest into an insulated tumbler when Clay comes downstairs, hair in disarray and clad only in his boxers.

“Hey, kid,” Clay greets.

“Hey,” Stiles says stiffly.

Clay walks past him and gives his red hood a friendly tug. “Oh, you’re drinking the rest.”

“Yeah.” Stiles grabs his backpack off the counter and hurries out. “Sorry.”
Stiles isn’t the least bit sorry, though. Clay can make his own damn coffee.

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Stiles isn’t a virgin, and odds are high that he lost his virginity at the youngest age of everyone in school, but he actually likes it when people think he’s one. He’s usually never above telling a good story – real or fictional – but he has no desire to create a First Time experience for the consumption of others. He’s not a kiss and tell kind of guy anyway, but he can’t refuse to tell Scott at least some of the details because he tells Scott everything.

Almost everything.

So the public record is that Stiles is a virgin, and it’s never bothered him to hear scornful remarks from asshole bullies or pitying encouragement in the locker room. It’s okay if people think he can’t get laid. He talks about it like he wants it the same way any other guy his age does. It’s partially true – Stiles does have a vague interest in sex, considering he knows almost the entire general population of the free world enjoys it. Maybe one day he will, too, but desiring it mostly feels like a pipe dream.

He’s wondered in the past if his years-long crush on Lydia was something that he’d concocted to let him feel normal but with none of the hands-on experience. Lydia had barely ever looked his way before werewolves erupted the status quo in Beacon Hills. She probably hadn’t even known his name. She probably thought it was Stan or something like that.

When he would see her flick her strawberry hair over a shoulder or solve a really hard problem in class, Stiles knew the attraction was real. He’s just always doubted that it was sexual attraction, because there’s a big difference between thinking someone is amazing vs. wanting to get naked and penetrative with them.

He doesn’t know what would have to happen for him to want to get naked and penetrative with anyone. Being so vulnerable and exposed, trusting someone else with his body, and managing his own ability to lock away the memories of being tortured by intimacy.

It’s an impossibly, unattainably high bar.

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Later that night, Stiles patters down the stairs with a dry throat. He’s pretty sure he left enough milk in the refrigerator for tomorrow’s bowl of cereal, but he’ll make a game-time decision about whether he wants to drink the rest of it now or pump himself up with some coffee. He’s still dragging from being up all night and he knows it’s a bad idea, but he might be up late tonight, too.

Unsurprisingly, the nogitsune gave zero fucks about homework or exams, but at least Stiles is back in control for the last month of the fall semester to overcompensate during finals. Coach Finstock had even let him write an additional paper for extra credit. He’d been convinced Stiles had mono because of the alarmingly dark circles under his eyes and the distinct lapse in sarcastic peanut gallery comments when he even bothered to show up to class.

He has a couple of things he needs to finish tonight, but he’s mostly planning to do more research to try to demystify Lydia’s banshee powers a little. After school, Stiles had sifted through some material of Deaton’s and brought a few things home with him. Knowing what she is hasn’t made Lydia feel that much better when she doesn’t understand what that means and what she can do. She’s good at playing it cool, covering it up with posturing and attitude, but Stiles knows she’s unsettled and he really wants to help her.
He’ll never forget the way she shrieked Allison’s name when she was stabbed.

As Stiles gets to the bottom of the staircase, his steps slow and grow quiet as he hears voices floating over from the kitchen.

“So what happened with you and Chrissy?” Noah asks. “I didn’t want to pounce on you yesterday - that was about welcoming you back - but you guys seemed happy.”

Stiles sits down on the last step and leans against the wall while he listens, softly chewing on the drawstring of his hoodie.

“She says she met someone else. Wants the divorce so she can move on and be with this other guy. He probably has money or something.”

“Oh, man, I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“It figures,” Clay continues. “Guys like us, we do the hard work other people don’t want to or can’t do, and I get dumped on while some glasses-wearing nerd swoops in.”

“What does this mean for you and your stepson? I know you had formed a strong bond with him.”

“I won’t be talking to or seeing Charlie again. She made that clear. She doesn’t have room for me in the family anymore. Doesn’t exactly gel with her plans for a new life with this other dude.”

“Maybe she’ll change her mind. Everything’s so fresh and emotionally charged right now. Time might help.”

“Oh, there won’t be time. She wants a fast divorce. Can’t wait to move on. I guess that’s good because she’s not even really asking for anything. No alimony or child support. Charlie’s not my actual kid. And we didn’t have much property to split. We broke the apartment lease and we each took our own cars. I let her have all of the furniture because I didn’t really want to haul that back from Florida anyway. The lawyers will take care of all the other shit, I don’t know.”

“How long are you thinking of staying in Beacon Hills? Are you just passing through to get your bearings or you interested in more?”

“I’m not really sure,” Clay says. “I just wanted to go back to a place that felt familiar. A place with real family.”

Stiles rolls his eyes dramatically. ‘Real family.’ Sure.

“You know you’re welcome to stay here with us as long as you want,” Noah offers generously. “The guest room’s got your name on it.”

“Thanks, Noah. You know, I always teased Claudia that she married up.”

Stiles hears the unmistakable sound of beer bottles clinking against each other. “I used to tell her that, too,” Noah jokes, “but somehow I don’t think she took it as well coming from me.”

“You and Stiles, you’ve built such a great thing here, even without her. I don’t want to wear out my welcome, but yeah, I think I’d like to stay for a while. But I’m not gonna be a freeloader. I’m getting divorced, but I’m not hard up for cash. Chrissy and I had a joint account for shared expenses and separate accounts for everything else.”

Noah won’t hear of it. “You said it, we’re family. Family doesn’t pay rent. Well, there are
exceptions. If Stiles is still living here when he’s 25, you’re damn right he’ll be paying me rent. And
utilities.”

“I’m sure I can land a construction job just like last time, no problem. And don’t chase me away from
contributing around here. There are probably a ton of things I can help with around the house.”

Stiles realizes that he’s practically gnawing on his drawstring at this point like he hasn’t eaten in
weeks. How long will Clay really be living down the hall from him? How exactly does he plan on
lending a hand?

The refrigerator opens, punctuated with a couple of pops and enthusiastic hisses. Stiles sighs heavily.
They’ve always been drinking buddies. They could be drinking for a while. It’s not even 10 pm.

Stiles doesn’t want his dad to be lonely. He’s always surrounded by people at work, but he’s the
boss so he doesn’t socialize with the other personnel the way he would his friends. Everyone in town
knows who he is, but that doesn’t translate to a wide and consistent social circle. His crazy work
schedule doesn’t help, either.

Noah still wears his wedding ring and hasn’t been on a single date since Claudia died. Stiles has
come to terms with the idea of his dad dating - preferably Melissa, and if not her, someone
sufficiently awesome - but he can’t help but think it’s nice for his dad to have company around the
house. Someone other than Stiles. Stiles doesn’t really count.

Milk and coffee forgotten, he troops back upstairs to finish the rest of his homework. When he finally
turns in for the night, he doesn’t lock the door again. His dad is home.

With each passing day, Stiles’ control over his apprehension grows, but when he’s not at Scott’s
house, he still lies awake every night, riddled with worry and trying to figure out what to do if Clay
tries to touch him again.

It had always been their little secret. At first, Stiles had been so confused and scared that he went
along with it. Clay had told him that he could never tell anyone or all kinds of bad things would
happen. His dad would get fired because they don’t let people on the police force if they didn’t know
crimes were happening in their own homes. Some people might even think his dad knew what was
going on and just looked the other way. They would think he was a terrible father. Child Services
would come and take Stiles away, and he’d have to leave everyone he had ever cared about. His dad
would lose the only two things he had left - his son and his career.

Stiles knows better now - it doesn’t really work like that - but there’s still a grain of truth in what
Clay had said. If people knew about it, his dad wouldn’t get fired, but they might see him differently.
Stiles has seen a lot of cases stump his dad, but that had never destroyed his confidence or dulled his
efforts. But seeing this all unravel when he was technically a bystander the whole time - Noah would
never really believe he could help anyone again. He wouldn’t wear the badge anymore when all he
saw in the mirror was a failure of the worst kind. Child Services wouldn’t actually remove Stiles
from his home, but there would be a lot of questions. Ones that could be satisfied, but not without
leaving the two of them with permanent scar tissue.

Clay hadn’t been completely wrong. Secrets were better. They offered protection and discretion -
two things Stiles has had in short supply recently.

But that doesn’t mean Stiles wants any new ones. He’s older. Bigger. Smarter. Louder. He’s fought
real-life monsters. He’d even become one himself.
He’s no longer that little kid who can be pushed around and molded so easily. He wants to believe that that’s enough. But he’s seen the covert way Clay looks at him now that he’s back. The way Clay’s gaze follows him.

After they had trapped the nogitsune, Noah had taken down the security camera he’d set up in Stiles’ room. Stiles didn’t need to be monitored anymore and was entitled to privacy. If he was still under surveillance, nothing could happen in his room. Clay couldn’t make him come to the guest room in the middle of the night, either. But the camera isn’t going back up, and even if it did, Clay would probably just break it.

In the darkness of his room, Stiles repeats countless times in his head that he can stand up for himself. He’s six years older and over fifty pounds heavier. Even so, he’s not a big guy and Clay is still much stronger than him. If it comes to it, he can’t win in a physical match. He knows he has to fight back. But just like everything else these days, he doesn’t know how.

His cleverness has helped him out of a variety of situations before, but he doesn’t think that will make a difference to Clay. Stiles isn’t going to be able to talk his way out of it.

Talking is never what Clay wanted Stiles to use his mouth for anyway.

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Everything starts falling apart less than a week after Clay’s return.

Stiles wakes up at the sensation of something touching his face. He drowsily swats at what he thinks is an itch, but bolts upright when he feels Clay’s hand.

The familiar fear races back like it had never left in the first place. Every pep talk he’s given himself flies out of his head. It’s like he’s been programmed to be afraid of Clay and he can’t seem to override the sheer panic. He should have locked the door. But that’s not allowed and he would only be punished.

“Stiles.”

Stiles scoots away, but he closes the small gap between himself and the headboard quickly and then there’s nowhere to go. “Clay, please. Please! I don’t want to.”

Clay sits down on the bed and keeps touching him, his hands dancing all over, until he takes hold of Stiles’ narrow hips to end his squirming. Stiles feels ten years old again, trapped and knowing he can say no a million times but it doesn’t mean anything and it never stops anything.

“You should leave,” Stiles says, this time with more resolve in his voice.

“Your dad’s not home.”

“You should LEAVE.” Stiles tries to stare him down, but he doesn’t have any leverage. “I’m not gonna do it. Not again.”

“Stiles.” Clay seizes his wrist and Stiles tries to yank it away unsuccessfully. Clay’s grip is too strong. “Stiles, I’m not asking.”

Stiles lashes out with his other arm and shoves Clay away. It catches him by enough surprise that he slides back a few inches, but he reciprocates by grabbing Stiles by the back of the neck, pulling him forward, and squeezing down so hard that Stiles yelps loudly.
“Don’t fight it, Stiles. When you fight it, you’re telling me you want me to be rough.”

“That really hurts,” Stiles chokes out.

“So don’t fight it. Okay? Stop fighting.”

“Just leave and I won’t fight.”

Clay releases him and Stiles recoils. His momentary relief goes to the wayside when he sees that Clay only let him go so he could take off his boxer briefs. Clay’s already fully aroused and clearly uninterested in going anywhere, grabbing Stiles’ wrist again and guiding Stiles’ hand exactly where he wants it. “Damn, your hands got so big.”

Stiles cringes away, tucking his chin into his shoulder and clenching his eyes shut.

“You know what to do.”

Even though Stiles does in fact know what to do because of the horrible lessons he got in fourth grade, he’s paralyzed. He’s not even sure he’s breathing.

Clay places his hand over Stiles’ and leads him through the first few strokes. “You just need a little warm-up, that’s all.”

“No …” Stiles whines, even as he pushes down the resistance and follows the motions.

“Stiles, I’m going to come tonight. You can do it like this, or I can try something else. Something better. Do you understand?”

Stiles nods jerkily, but still doesn’t look at him. “We don’t have to …”

“That depends on whether you get me off this way. Can you do that?”

Stiles whimpers and blinks out a few tears, but he forces himself to keep stroking. “Yeah, just like that,” Clay says. “A little faster.”

Clay cups his hand around Stiles’ neck again, this time lightly, almost affectionately. “You’re so grown-up now, Stiles. Have you been with anyone else?”

Stiles balks. There’s no good answer. Telling the truth and saying “no” is too gratifying for Clay, like he marked his territory and it’s still holding up after so many years. Lying and saying “yes” makes it sound like Stiles gives it up, so who cares if Clay comes back for more?

So he doesn’t say anything and Clay keeps going. “I can tell you haven’t. You don’t remember how good it is. There’s so much I can teach you.”

Stiles wants to scream at him, that he doesn’t care about any of that because it’s FINE, he’s happy being the kid at school who never gets any play and no one expects to know what he’s doing, except he can’t talk over the huge lump forming in his throat.

He definitely isn’t able to talk through Clay leaning in and claiming his mouth, hot and aggressive. Stiles hates the kissing, but at least Clay only does it sometimes. Stiles has heard the cliche - prostitutes don’t kiss because it’s too personal - and while he isn’t a prostitute, he wholeheartedly agrees. Kissing is supposed to be simple and low-engagement - it’s only first base and kids do it, after all - but it’s not any of those things. It’s way too close, breathing the same air, a tongue probing his mouth, faces drawn together.
It’s elective. Clay doesn’t need it, but he makes Stiles do it anyway.

When Clay’s other callused hand reaches into the waistband of Stiles’ pajama pants, Stiles inhales sharply, then whimpers again once Clay makes contact. He’s completely limp.

Clay palms him possessively. “See, it’s not just about me. It’s about both of us.”

Stiles’ hand is shaking uncontrollably and he thinks he’s forgetting to move it at times, but he really has no idea, because all he knows is Clay is touching him and it’s starting to fucking work and he’s getting hard. His body is turning against him, like it’s a stranger. Like it wants him to hurt, like he hasn’t hurt enough in the last year.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Clay says with an air of easy encouragement. “Just let it happen. You really did grow up well, didn’t you?”

Stiles is crying audibly now, head lolling back and teeth biting his lower lip so hard he’s almost bleeding. Clay’s heavy breathing and the sounds of slick skin-on-skin movement aren’t enough to drown it out.

Clay pulls Stiles closer to him and kisses him again. “What’s the number one rule?”

Stiles doesn’t answer quickly enough, so Clay squeezes down a little too hard between his legs. Stiles jerks forward at the painful pressure, groaning as his eyes fly open. “Don’t tell anyone,” he blurs out.

“Say it again,” Clay commands, staring right at him.

Stiles looks away. “I can’t tell anyone,” he whispers.

“What happens if you do?”

“Trouble.” Stiles’ eyes are wide and trembling and he still doesn’t look at Clay. “For everyone.”

“You were always such a smart kid.”

Even with Stiles’ uncoordinated, erratic strokes, Clay comes first, striping the bottom of Stiles’ shirt and then coating Stiles’ hand with the final remnants.

“Oh, that was great,” Clay moans. “It’ll be even better when you aren’t so rusty.”

He leans in, resting his sweaty temple against Stiles’. “Come on,” he coaxes. “It’s your turn. I bet you can go two, three times in a row, no problem.”

Stiles shudders, his mind on the brink of shutting down completely. The last thing he wants is to go two or three times.

“Stiles, come on,” Clay says more insistently.

Stiles exhales unevenly, right in Clay’s ear, and he immediately realizes his mistake when Clay’s ministrations start to pick up. Stiles shuts his eyes even tighter. Instead of letting his mind go blank, he tries to think of someone, something he finds even mildly sexually attractive. The sooner this is over, the better.

He rapidly swirls through visions - some guys, some girls - but not of people he knows. The only thing that sticks is a cute brunette from a porn video that Scott had wanted to watch online a couple of years ago. He doesn’t really remember what she looks like, but the image Stiles vaguely recalls is
safe. Distant and removed.

When he finally comes with a gasp of shock and horror, he slumps down, hollowed out and empty. He can’t trust himself. He’ll never be able to trust himself again. He hasn’t trusted himself in so long.

“I knew you would like it,” Clay murmurs before raising a finger to his mouth and licking off some of Stiles’ shame.

Stiles’ only response is to pull his knees in closer for shielding. “Taste how sweet you are.” When Stiles doesn’t look up, Clay pushes another finger in his face and past his lips as they twist in displeasure.

“I did what you wanted,” Stiles sobs. “Can you go now?”

Clay picks up the underwear he had casually tossed at the foot of the bed. “You were great,” he says as he leaves.

Stiles stays hunched over for a while before he rights himself. His hand brushes against the wetness soaking into his shirt, and he urgently tugs it over his head and throws it on the floor before curling up in a ball.

He knows he’s a gross, snotty mess, but he doesn’t care, because he looks on the outside how he feels on the inside. He didn’t even get naked - he didn’t even take any clothes off with Clay - but he feels so stripped down.

Stiles tries to self-soothe with his breathing exercises and the consolation that they didn’t fuck. The former helps a little; the latter, not at all. The latter reminds him that they’ll fuck later. It’s just a matter of time.

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Stiles is still out-of-sorts the next morning. He had taken a long shower afterwards and put clean sheets on his bed, but things like that are cosmetic and minuscule to him. They don’t change what happened. He feels simultaneously adrift, like he’s having an out-of-body experience, and caged within his skin.

He climbs into his Jeep and drives to school, making turns on auto-pilot, until he goes left instead of right a few blocks from campus. A different set of familiar streets pass by before he rolls through a set of open gates and slows down on a narrow, curved road.

Stiles pulls over and parks about fifty feet away from his mother’s grave, but doesn’t get out of the car. Taking the keys out of the ignition, he rubs his thumb against the bottom of the steering wheel over and over. He’ll just forge an absence note for first and second period with his dad’s signature and turn it into the front office. As long as he doesn’t do that very often, he won’t get caught.

Stiles chews on his lower lip and glances over in the direction of her headstone. “Mom,” he says, chest tight.

After she died, he lost count of how many times people told him or his dad that she would always be watching over them. In the moment, he had found a small modicum of comfort in that, in thinking that she wasn’t completely gone.

But once Clay started touching him, Stiles rejected the idea. He would never want her to see him like that. It would be as if she’d died and gone to hell, because how else could a loving mother be tortured with knowing her child was being hurt so badly?
Stiles has never been much of a spiritual person - neither has his family - but he knows her soul is at peace somewhere. She isn’t looking over him.

Even so, he still has this abstract belief that he can talk to her on some level, like the line of communication only goes one way and only when he chooses. He just can’t talk to her about this. He would break her heart.

“I miss you, Mom,” Stiles whispers. “I miss you so much.”

He closes his eyes and leans forward, resting his head on the steering wheel and letting the silence wash over him.

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Fall semester finals start soon, so Stiles is hunkered down at his desk, alternating between math problems when he’s tired of words and his last English paper when he’s tired of numbers.

As his door swings open, he talks around the highlighter in his mouth when he assures, “Dad, I swear I’m studying and not Netflixing, look at all of this brain sweat -“

“Not your dad.”

The marker drops ominously on the desk and Stiles stares at Clay in the doorway. He’s certainly sweating now.

It’s only been two days and it’s not even past 9 pm yet. But Clay’s always has a strong sex drive. At least when it comes to Stiles.

“Noah's not off the clock for an hour. So we have a little time.”

Stiles shifts his eyeline over to the blinking cursor on his laptop screen, willing the letters to devolve into nonsense. That was the beginning of one of the worst periods of his life, something he would never want to repeat, but he would give anything for this to be just a dream.

The characters don’t do anything, though. The text stays as is, perfectly readable. He doesn’t bother counting the fingers on his hands. They’ll add up to ten.

Clay steps inside and shuts the door. Stiles instinctively rolls his chair backwards away from him, but Clay advances into his space and cards a hand through Stiles’ mussed hair, resting his palm on the back of his head. Stiles knows what it means. Clay never hits him, though Stiles doesn’t know if he just didn’t think he needed to with a pre-pubescent child, or maybe he didn’t want to leave incriminating injuries behind with a police presence in the house. He asserts his dominance in other ways.

Pushing down forcefully, Clay catches Stiles by surprise and he tumbles out of the chair. Stiles barely has time to break the fall with his hands instead of landing with a crack on his knees.

“Ow, fuck,” he grinds out, sucking air in through his teeth.

“Great, we’re on the same page. Since you’re down there …”

Stiles is flexing his wrist, the unlucky main point of impact, when his blood goes cold at the sound of a zipper opening. He snaps his head up, jaw dropped with unease, and immediately looks down again when he confirms what Clay wants.
Clay places his hands under Stiles’ chin and maneuvers him into place. “Go on.”

When Stiles hesitates, Clay shakes his head, shoving his jeans and briefs down his hips. Suddenly, it’s right in Stiles’ face and there’s nowhere safe he can look.

“I missed your little mouth,” Clay says, tracing his thumb along Stiles’ lower lip.

Stiles closes his eyes and mashes his lips together, silently bracing himself. “Don’t - don’t choke me,” he forewarns, blushing hot and red. “I ate dinner already, I’ll throw up all over you.”

“You and your gag reflex …” Clay recalls with a soft, almost fond smile. “I didn’t ask too much of you before, you were too delicate. But you’re old enough now to learn how this really works.”

When Stiles begrudgingly opens his mouth and lets Clay in, he immediately grimaces and it only gets worse as his senses are flooded. Clay is expecting him to follow all of the verbal coaching, except he can’t, because his gag reflex wasn’t just an excuse and he can’t breathe. Tears are slipping down his cheeks, but he doesn’t know from where, whether it’s a function of his nervous system not getting enough oxygen or something more intangible.

Blow jobs require more active skill than getting fucked, and Stiles doesn’t think he’s very good at either, but definitely not at sucking someone off. He would be genuinely embarrassed about his lack of prowess if he was with someone he actually liked, but here with Clay, being good enough is just about surviving. The weight on his tongue is an anvil and it’s so hard not to feel hopelessly bitter inside when that’s all he tastes.

Clay doesn’t go so deep that he chokes Stiles after all, but Stiles doubts that’s out of charity - more so that he doesn’t want chewed-up bits of food and stomach bile on his most prized of body parts. He doesn’t pull that hard on Stiles’ hair until the very end, when he grunts loudly and holds Stiles in place, forcing him to swallow.

Once Clay lets go, Stiles falls back, sitting on his feet and cowering. He tries to catch his breath, taking in big gulps of air, but that only seems to highlight the lingering salty muskiness. It’ll be like the time he made brussel sprouts for his dad and sampled them himself, instantly hating them. Brussel sprouts were all he could taste for a week after that. He’s going to taste Clay for days.

“We’ll keep practicing,” Clay promises. Stiles glares up at him. “You’ll be able to take all of me soon.”

In the bathroom, Stiles momentarily considers buzzing his hair again so Clay isn’t able to grab so roughly, but he quickly decides against it. Everyone told him how much older he looked after he grew it out. He doesn’t want to go back to looking fifteen again. Clay would probably come into his room every night if he did.

He just pukes in the toilet twice instead.

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Stiles is a self-described “clumsy little fucker,” but he’s well-versed in low-key spying, especially in his own house. He’s done it his whole life, for silly things like uncovering hidden birthday surprises or serious things like sneaking peeks at case files. He knows a lot of things he’s not supposed to know.

He’s spying again when he overhears his dad and Clay talking during lulls in a basketball game - it’s like dividing walls were made for lurking around. It’s been a long time since there’s been another person in the house regularly, having conversations with his dad face-to-face.
“Sorry, I didn’t mean to see it,” Clay apologizes. “I gave my lawyer this address because he was going to mail some docs to me, so I was going through the stack on the table and saw the open bill.”

“Yeah,” Noah says wryly. “It’s a little hard to miss the big red ‘Past Due’ stamp at the top, huh?”

“So what’s going on? Stiles was in the hospital a couple of months ago? Is he okay? Is he sick?”

“Oh, no no no, it’s not - he doesn’t have what Claudia had.” Stiles slumps against the wall. That had been a shitty week. “He’s fine. But we had to run some tests and they weren’t cheap.”

“I’m going to suggest something and I need you to sit there and listen. Why don’t I just loan you the money?” Stiles doesn’t hear his dad say anything, but figures he must have made quite the face because Clay insists firmly, “Noah, come on.”

“We’re okay, but thanks, Clay, I appreciate the offer.”

“So this is probably the wrong time to tell you I saw the other bills, too. What’s Eichen House?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. He got his skill at spying from his dad, but Clay’s just being nosy and definitely playing dumb. There’s no way he didn’t google Eichen House and doesn’t know Stiles had an in-patient stay at a mental institution. Perfect. Something else Clay can try to exploit.

“It’s nothing - Stiles was just having some trouble sleeping and he got some treatment. It’s why we got the MRI. But he’s fine now.”

Stiles smirks. He got his on-the-fly lying talent from his dad, too.

“Just take the money,” Clay says. “I can write you a check right now.”

“No, we’re fine -”

“I’m serious. You’re already letting me stay here; think of this as rent for a while."

“Clay -”

“I haven’t forgotten about that time I was in between jobs and you and Claudia helped me keep up with my student loans. I’m just returning the favor. It’s just helping offset some unexpected expenses.”


“Fuck, I’m not some suit at a bank. We’re family. Take your time. Don’t worry about finances. Just be happy that he’s okay. This is for Stiles. Stiles is what’s important.”

Stiles wants to punch Clay in the face. Or kick him in the junk. Actually, both. But he can’t, not when he can hear his dad thanking Clay appreciatively and offering to get him another beer.

Noah probably feels like a huge weight has been lifted off his chest, but Stiles pulls at the neckline of his t-shirt like it’s a too-tight tie, or a noose, that he’s been wearing all day. As much as he wants his dad to be under as little stress as possible, he knows it’s not that simple. Everything comes with a price.

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The next day, Noah has an overnight shift and Stiles retreats to Scott’s. They both have an exam to prepare for, but not in the same class, so they don’t actually need to study together. Stiles pushes the
reality of what he’s avoiding to the back of his mind. He can’t think about it.

Two nights later, though, Scott has a study date lined up with Kira, so Stiles leaves the McCall residence around 7 pm. Melissa is there, fully aware of Scott’s plans, so Stiles doesn’t even try to use Scott as an excuse. If he tells his dad he slept at Scott’s house, he might get caught in the lie if his dad mentions it to her later.

He trudges home in time to have dinner with his dad and Clay before Noah goes to the station. Stiles avoids eye contact with Clay as much as he can without being too obvious about it. It’s not that hard to do when he asks his dad a lot of questions about work and mostly looks at Noah or down at his plate.

As Stiles rolls a spoonful of peas around in his mouth, he thinks about ducking out again after dinner with a made-up reason for spontaneously leaving. But part of him is afraid of what Clay would do to get him back in line. He’s already skipped out once.

Stiles is messing around on the computer when Clay makes his appearance, wearing only low-slung sweatpants. Stiles stares down at his hands and refuses to look at him, not even when Clay comes over and grips his arm, pulling him over to the bed.

“Clay, don’t. Please. Don’t. I don’t want to do this,” Stiles implores, his voice shaking. It won’t change what Clay does, but it makes a difference to Stiles to say no. He’ll never say yes first. Never.

Clay leans in and kisses him before mouthing into his ear, “Just relax. Then you’ll want it.”

When he reaches for the waist of Stiles’ jeans, unbuttoning and unzipping in quick movements, Stiles says, crying soundlessly, “I wish you didn’t.”

“Aren’t all your friends having sex?” Clay asks, pushing Stiles down on the mattress and undressing them both. “Isn’t everyone?”

Stiles winces and shakes his head. “They’re with their girlfriends - they want it, I don’t want -”

“You can think of me as your boyfriend. It’s easy.”

Stiles squirms and then freezes when Clay climbs on top of him, grinding down and nipping along his collarbone. The anguish is crystal clear on Stiles’ face, but Clay can’t see it. It never matters anyway.

“I’m her kid,” Stiles whispers, but Clay doesn’t seem to hear him.

“Turn over,” Clay says as he lifts himself off.

Stiles is glassy-eyed and panting. He hears the hum of Clay’s voice but his mind isn’t translating the words into actions, so Clay grabs Stiles’ hip and pushes through the rotation for him.

He’s so tight that Clay opens him up for a while. Even the first finger is rough and Stiles just won’t yield. He can’t. He’s not feeling right in his head, and the second Stiles’ breath catches in a particular way, he deflates with the knowledge of what’s about to happen. His lungs aren’t expanding, his throat is closing up, and his whole body is growing taut as it desperately craves air it’s not getting or doesn’t think it’s getting.

“You’re not dying,” he tries to tell himself, except he IS, so the usual self-assurances ring vacant and impotent. He can’t fight the panic attack and Clay at the same time. He has to fight the lack of air. It’ll kill him faster and more directly than Clay will.
Clay nudges Stiles’ knees farther apart and pushes forward. Stiles gasps at the blunt, localized pressure and manages to make one last-ditch effort to escape. His hands are seizing up but he claws at the sheets, trying to find leverage to get away.

“Let me in, Stiles,” Clay coaxes.

Stiles shudders involuntarily, memories of the nogitsune overtaking him. The attack is escalating. His chest isn’t unclenching and he can only draw in shallow, ragged wheezes. He can’t see anymore, but he doesn’t know if his vision is blacking out or he’s simply shut his eyes.

“Just let me in.”

He’s back there in the dark, desolate basement of Eichen House, saying no, but it doesn’t mean no. No means he’ll just be manipulated into something he doesn’t want. No just leads to the ante being upped until he has to say yes. He doesn’t have a choice anymore. The only way he can exercise any agency at all is in how hard the road to yes is.

Stiles has lost all control of his body, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel anything. He definitely feels the burn of penetration, of Clay pushing inside him through the unforgiving tension.

It’s happening again. He’s that isolated eleven-year-old again.

He’s done this before, but it’s still unbearable and the panic attack isn’t subsiding. His brain keeps commanding his arms and legs to fight back, his lungs to stop hyperventilating, his voice box to scream and yell, but he’s not sure if he’s doing anything at all.

Stiles doesn’t know how long Clay fucks him. He just knows he let it happen.

After Clay pulls out, Stiles inches away, dizzy and nauseated and still struggling to fill his lungs. Clay rubs at his exposed back, palm streaking through the perspiration growing cold on Stiles’ aching skin. “I know it hurts,” Clay says. “It’s just been so long, it’s almost as bad as the first time. You’ll get used to it, and then it’ll be good for you, too. You’ll want it all the time.”

Stiles turns his face into the pillow, his temple sinking into a wet spot that’s been collecting his tears for how long, he doesn’t know that, either. Years, probably.

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Once Stiles is able, he pulls himself together enough to crawl out of bed, put on his boxers, and stumble down the hall to the bathroom. As he waits for the water to heat up as hot as it will go, he reaches back behind him, fingers skittering against the sore flesh, his cheeks burning with indignity.

His shoulders slump with an uncomfortable twinge of relief when the wetness on his fingers is just lubricant. Clay used a condom. He always used to, but Stiles can’t take that for granted. He had to double-check.

A dense cloud of steam has filled the bathtub so Stiles climbs in and stands under the stream, head bowed, breathing raspy and pained, and arms folded around himself. His entire body is still fraught with the muscle strain of the panic attack and the stalled emotional processing of what just happened.

“You’re okay,” he whispers. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

He keeps saying it, even though he doesn’t know to whom. He hears the words, but they don’t sound meant for him, because they don’t have any impact. He doesn’t feel the words at all. But he still repeats them, a rhythm that accompanies the pounding of his heart and the steady flow coursing
The onslaught of revived memories on top of the physical act is all too much. He remembers how Clay had held him while he bawled during the first time. All those other times he had cried and said he didn’t want to do it, please don’t make him, and Clay had hugged him and told him it would get better the more they did it. Stiles hates that he had reacted so impulsively, turning into the artificial love and support offered by the person who drove him to need it. At the time, he hadn’t been thinking. Everything just hurt so much that he had taken comfort any way he could get it.

Stiles had berated himself for giving Clay the encouragement to keep going, but over time, he had stopped being as hard on himself. Whenever he saw kids that age, how unassuming they were, how they processed the world around them, he cut himself a little slack. He had been like that. Before Clay changed him.

He’s not surprised by Clay’s small aftercare gesture. It’s part of his M.O. Stiles just wishes he had jerked away from it. He probably would have if he hadn’t been emerging from the panic attack. Though escaping the touch of his hand but not the infinitely more intimate violation wouldn’t have made him feel any better.

He doesn’t remember if he said no, and if he did, how many times. Maybe he didn’t say no enough. Clay doesn’t think he likes it, but maybe he needs to go down swinging. Maybe he’s not being unambiguous enough.

Stiles feels like he’s been turned inside out, like nothing makes sense anymore. When the hot water becomes noticeably cooler, he snaps out of the trance, grabbing the soap and scrubbing himself over and over, even as the water turns so cold he’s shivering. He doesn’t stop until his fingers cramp up from clutching the soap bar for so long.

He turns the shower off, and after two seconds, turns it back on. He’s not done yet.

After a few more minutes, Stiles shuts the water off for good. He knows that he can only wash away what’s on the surface. Everything else stays, burrowing under and polluting him. Showers are just a band-aid on a gaping wound. He could stand there all day and it wouldn’t change anything.

His body doesn’t belong to him. It hasn’t for a long time.

Stiles feels like complete and total shit in the morning.

Scott texts him to ask if he wants to grab breakfast burritos at their favorite Mexican place before school starts. Without even considering it, Stiles texts back twenty minutes later that he overslept and won’t have time. He’s not the slightest bit hungry anyway.

His body still hurts all over and his eyes are pink and tight from crying so much. If anyone asks, he’ll just say he was up late cramming for History. Conveniently, it’s his least favorite class and makes for a believable lie.

There’s an old bottle of Visine in the medicine cabinet, just outside of the expiration date, so Stiles squeezes a few drops into each eye and throws the rest in the trash, making a mental note to buy a new bottle later that afternoon. Normally he forgets these kinds of simple errands unless at least two people remind him, but he won’t be forgetting this one. Not a chance.

He’s brimming with anxiety and a hard edge of paranoia when he walks through the double-doors of the school. What if he’s different now? What if people can tell what just happened?
The average person wouldn’t notice anything, but his friends, the people who matter to him - like Scott, who has off-the-chart senses and knows him better than anyone in the world, even better than his dad - what if they look at him and somehow just know?

He takes the avoidant approach by staying in the library before the first bell rings and doesn’t see any of his friends until third period. When he takes his usual seat behind Lydia and next to Scott, Scott greets him with a grin and suggests breakfast the next day.

Stiles returns the smile genuinely. No one ever has to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Avoiding being at home is at times easy and other times rather difficult. After school and on weekends are no problem. Lacrosse practice, team projects, normal socializing with friends, and pack business are status quo and keep him plenty occupied. His dad already understands this.

Except all of those things aren’t enough. They don’t give him regular reasons to be elsewhere overnight. Christmas break is coming up, too, which should be two weeks of freedom, but will actually be a constant effort to justify being somewhere else.

Ever since Noah found out about werewolves and Stiles stopped worrying him half-to-death with his sociopathic split personality, he’s been taking more night shifts than he used to. The force is leaner now - multiple homicides over time will do that - but it’s not really a high-demand/low-supply issue. The Sheriff is the kind of captain who will go down with his ship. As the only person at the station who knows about the supernatural, he feels a professional and moral obligation to increase his presence at night. Stiles doesn’t blame him. His dad’s honor is a big part of why Stiles turned out to be a good kid in the end, even after losing his mother so painfully and being terrorized by his uncle.

But it means more nights alone with Clay. Noah gives Stiles more independence than he deserves, but he does expect Stiles to sleep at their house more than he’s over at a friend’s place. His group of friends is larger than it had been before Scott became a werewolf, but Stiles doesn’t sleep over at Lydia’s or Kira’s or Malia’s. They don’t have that kind of relationship. He could probably get away with it every now and then at the Martin or Tate house, since Mrs. Martin and Mr. Tate keep intermittent, at best, tabs on their daughters, but it would be really weird. He’s only known Malia for a short time, and while he’s closer to Lydia, the unrequited, though well-extinguished, crush takes slumber parties off the table.

During the first couple of weeks after Clay’s return, Stiles had been at Scott’s house more than usual, to the point where Noah pulls him aside one day and tells him to be home more, because it’s kind of rude if he’s giving off the impression that Clay isn’t welcome.

Stiles is on the cusp of claiming Clay won’t be offended, because Stiles is a high school student, and high school students are never home, but he stops himself as he realizes it isn’t just about what Clay thinks. The point is that his dad recognizes the marked increase in his absence.

“He’s working through a hard time right now,” Noah says. “Divorce is tough. Clay’s whole life is up in the air. Family helps you through challenges like this.”

“Yeah,” Stiles fidgets, “I know.”

Noah must have picked up on some nerves because he puts his hand on Stiles’ shoulder and squeezes. “Listen, it doesn’t have to change anything. We can talk about werewolf stuff in my office or when he’s not at home. Or just go out and have a father-and-son dinner. Clay’s not going to find out about it. You hid this from me for a long time, and I’m the damn Sheriff. Just have all of your
pack meetings at Scott’s house, or Derek’s.”

Stiles nods. “How long do you think he’s going to stay?”

“I don’t really know, bud,” Noah shrugs. “As long as he needs. We have the empty room, and I’d like to return the favor of how he was there for us when your mom was sick and after she passed.”

Stiles gulps, but makes his head bob again. Yeah. Some favor.

“Don’t worry so much, Stiles. He won’t suspect anything. And it’s nice to have him around. It’s like a piece of your mom is here.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, still fidgeting. “I miss her.”

So Stiles agrees with his dad without further comment. He knows what will happen if he continues his lesser presence at home. His dad is going to think that Stiles is still hiding things from him and he’ll feel so hurt. Why doesn’t Stiles trust him? Once Stiles had finally come clean about werewolves, he had accepted it without pulling the authoritarian Dad card in demanding Stiles have nothing to do with the supernatural going forward. Noah hadn’t even done that after the nogitsune possession and quasi-exorcism.

Plus, it’s really nice, the thing he and his dad have now, working side-by-side like peers sometimes. And if not peers, then at least like a father who respects the value and competence his son brings to the table. Stiles doesn’t want to jeopardize that dynamic.

He quickly evaluates an alternative - no one said he couldn’t have people sleep over - but that’s even more problematic than his staying somewhere else. Scott’s really the only friend who would spend the night, and Stiles is already taking up a lot of his free time when he’s at the McCalls’. Scott has his burgeoning relationship with Kira, and Stiles is many things, but he’ll burn in hell before he’s a cockblocker.

Stiles is also a little uneasy about bringing Scott into the Stilinski house. He can be pretty adorable, all puppy dog eyes and sweet smiles. Stiles can’t completely rule out that Clay would want a piece of that, but he hadn’t seemed interested in fourth grade, and Stiles probably hadn’t needed to try so hard to keep Scott away from him back then. It’s not really about putting Scott in danger, though, since he’s a werewolf now. Mostly, Stiles doesn’t want to invite anyone further into his home in the off-chance they pick up on anything nefarious.

Besides, Stiles knows that Clay makes things really difficult if he has to wait longer. When he gets it pretty regularly, he’s easier to handle.

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Stiles is still awake in bed the next time Clay comes into his room and shuts the door. Bewildered, he scrambles to sit upright.

They’ve never done this while his dad is home. He wasn’t expecting this to happen tonight. He thought he had a pass.

Clay isn’t empty-handed, but Stiles can’t tell what he’s holding with only the moonlight streaming in. “What are you - my dad’s here,” Stiles says, as though maybe Clay forgot somehow.

“I know,” Clay says, sitting down in front of Stiles and touching his cheek, “but you’re so sexy and beautiful.”
Stiles shrinks away, his shoulders drawing up by his ears. No one has ever thought he was either of those things. Just Clay. Only the uncle who likes to play dirty games with kids. That’s the kind of person who thinks Stiles is beautiful.

He looks down at the items Clay set down next to him, but he can only make out a roll of duct tape. Goosebumps pepper his pale skin as he skittishly asks, “What’s that for?”

“You were such a tease, you remember that? Batting those pretty eyes at me, running around with your popsicles …”

“I never did that,” Stiles says, shaking his head.

“That’s the best kind of tease. When it’s so natural, it’s just a part of you.”

“I’m not - I didn’t - my dad …” Stiles tries again. “He’ll hear.”

For a moment, Stiles thinks about being loud enough for his dad to wake up. He will never be able to physically overpower Clay. But he doesn’t have to if his dad is there.

Like Stiles, Noah is chronically sleep-deprived given his work schedule, so when he gets to, he sleeps like the dead. His room isn’t so far down the hall, though. Stiles could manage to wake him up before Clay regains control, but in the back of his head, he knows the issue has never really been whether his dad is around. Stiles could have told him at any other time.

Noah’s awareness is more terrifying than his lack thereof. Stiles can’t even picture the look on his dad’s face upon discovery, or the way he’ll look at Stiles from that point on. Once Pandora’s box is open, he won’t be able to close it. He can only tell his dad if he’s 150% sure he wants him to know. There’s no room for doubts, and that’s not compatible with giving in to hysterical impulses to be spared and saved.

“Don’t worry about that,” Clay says, tugging Stiles’ shirt off. “We’ll make sure he doesn’t.”

Clay grabs Stiles’ left wrist and pulls it closer to him. Stiles resists, but Clay pulls a short zip tie around it easily and threads a second tie through.

When he yanks Stiles’ other arm forward, Stiles lurches away. “Clay, no, please, you don’t need to - I’ll be quiet -”

“It’s too risky. Like you said, your dad might hear if you’re too loud.”

Stiles’ heart is leaping out of his chest and his stomach is dropping to the floor. He doesn’t want to be so trapped. He’s been restrained before. It’s not a new experience.

There was that time he’d lured everyone to Derek’s loft and pretended to surrender himself to his dad, only to taunt him with an easy snap of the handcuffs just as the sun set. He’d risked their lives and tricked them all into protecting him from the oni by using them as disposable shields.

Or that time he was in the basement of Eichen House, strapped to an old chair and giving himself up to secure Malia’s safety in a twisted hostage exchange.

The last time he was gagged, he was back under the nogitsune’s control, still doling out pain to everyone around him. He’d been physically subdued with kanima venom, but the paralysis didn’t help him. It temporarily protected his friends, so that was enough, but it didn’t mean the nogitsune was incapacitated. It was still in Stiles’ head, and no amount of venom could muzzle it.
Stiles can’t go back there and re-live those moments, but he knows he will. He won’t be able to help it. If Clay binds and gags him, he’ll be caught in the worst combination of his past and present.

His eyes dart around the room half-crazily, looking for a way out that doesn’t exist. “I’ll be quiet, I promise - I won’t fight it - just please - not like this -”

He’ll have another panic attack. He hates them with a passion, absolutely hates losing control of his mind and body like that on the basest of levels. The panic attacks make him look and feel so frail. They feel like there’s a chance he could actually die in the moment because his sense of self-preservation is so defective.

The only good things about the previous attack were it dulled Stiles’ attention to the sex itself and kept him from lashing out in a way that would only get him in trouble. So maybe his instincts work better than he thinks they do. He really doesn’t know anymore.

Clay is having a hard time zipping the second tie into place with just one hand, so when he lets go, Stiles jerks his arm back and sits on his fingers.

“I’ll be good, I swear,” Stiles pleads. “I’ll be good.”

Clay reaches for his arm again, but Stiles locks his elbow and doesn’t budge. “You’ll make sure your dad doesn’t hear you?” Clay says.

Stiles nods vehemently. “He won’t wake up. I’ll be quiet.”

“You’ll be a good little boy for me, like you used to?”

Stiles is faint, his head suddenly light as a balloon. He remembers how it used to be, when he was so afraid and Clay didn’t hurt him as much when he complied. He opens his mouth to agree, but he can’t bring himself to say it, so he just nods again instead.

“Take off your pants and get on your knees and elbows,” Clay instructs, shoving the roll of tape off to the side.

Stiles follows the order and hugs his pillow length-wise underneath him, the closest thing he can get to a security blanket considering he can’t actually have a blanket. He tries to block out the rustling of fabric behind him, the crinkling of foil, and the cold, slick fingers opening him up.

It becomes impossible to keep distancing himself once it crosses over into excruciating - Clay’s too big, Stiles is too rigid and unaccommodating - and his throat is straining with suppression.

He squeezes the pillow closer, shoving his face into it to swallow up his pained cries. Finally, he gets a little more acclimated and it doesn’t feel like Clay is trying to murder him. It almost seems like Clay is being gentle this time, not that Stiles has a reliable sense of how he was a couple of days ago.

Clay is either showing a small degree of kindness or just as invested that Noah doesn’t hear them. Stiles has no idea. Every time he thinks he might explode from trying to keep it all in, he pulls hard on the zip tie secured around his wrist, eliciting a sharp sting that reminds him it’ll be so much worse if he’s too noisy.

When it’s over, Stiles collapses in a pool of misery. There’s no rushing off to the bathroom today. The pipes aren’t old, but they’re loud enough in the still of the night that they’ll wake his dad up. Stiles can’t get caught taking a long shower and coming out of the bathroom with total cry-face at this hour. The only explanation that would make any kind of sense is nogitsune nightmares, and Stiles isn’t going to go down that road with his dad.
He can barely sleep, so when six o’clock rolls around, Stiles feels like he’s been waiting days to clean himself up. Under the hot spray, he neurotically fingers the half-band of purple bruising forming along the top of his wrist. He’ll just wear his watch one notch tighter to keep the bruise covered until it heals.

After school, Stiles goes back the drugstore, this time to buy a package of baby wipes to keep under his bed. Clay has made it clear - Noah is not a factor and Clay will come for his fix regardless. All Stiles can do is prepare for it.

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Stiles knows it’s not healthy, but he can’t help but think that Clay might leave him alone if he was bigger, more ripped, more like the other guys on the lacrosse team. More like Danny or Jackson. Or Derek, for that matter. If he looked like Derek, maybe Clay wouldn’t bother. Derek is intimidatingly strong, probably the best-looking guy Stiles has ever seen, but maybe Clay isn’t into that. Maybe Clay just likes boys who look like boys. Whether they’re ten years old or seventeen.

And since Clay isn’t choosing to leave him alone, if he was stronger, maybe he could make it happen.

Stiles doesn’t usually do a lot of the “extra” athletic stuff. He never misses practice unless there’s a werewolf situation, and he goes to all of the games, even if he’s just keeping the bench warm. He has a surprising amount of dedication for someone who barely gets any real playing time. But a lot of his teammates live on another plane of immersion, constantly talking about the best protein powders and supplements and muscle isolation.

After lacrosse practice, Stiles waves a hasty goodbye to Scott, who gets cleaned up in record time in order to meet up with Kira, and ventures into the weight room. He would normally be a little self-conscious and unsure of what to do, except he’s spent plenty of time spotting Scott and whispering feverishly to him about that day’s inevitable crisis. As a werewolf, Scott has no functional need to lift weights, but he still does it as team captain and to stave off suspicions about how he can be so strong on the field when his resistance training pales in comparison to the rest of the team.

But for his part, Stiles has never been that interested in acquiring big muscles. They’re not going to fix his most fundamental athletic problems - minimal coordination and natural talent - anyway.

“Stilinski! Haven’t seen you in here much. Finally gonna get rid of those noodles you call biceps?”

Stiles rolls his eyes at the obnoxious senior heckling him from the pull-up bar. He doesn’t care what Stansfield thinks; he’s so basic. It doesn’t bother Stiles. At least Jackson’s obnoxiousness was ridiculous enough to be occasionally entertaining.

“Shut up, bro,” Danny says, walking by with a towel slung around his neck. “He’s got nice arms.”

Stiles shoots him a nod of appreciation and Danny shrugs at him good-naturedly. Stiles knows his physique is nothing to write home about, but he’s always been okay with it. Is he fragile compared to Scott? Definitely. But as a human, he’s always felt pretty proportional, slender all over with compact tone.

“Want a spot?”

“Yeah, man, thanks.”

“So what do you lift?” Danny asks as Stiles takes off some of the weight plates already hanging on the bench press bar.
“Not this much,” Stiles laughs. “I don’t even really know.”

“Getting a jump start on a New Year’s Resolution?”

Stiles shrugs. Sure, that sounds good. It’s so convenient when people fill in blanks for themselves, even when they’re wrong.

“It’s cool to try to better yourself. That’s why I’m taking a calculus class at the community college.” Danny replaces the plates that Stiles removed with lighter ones. “Okay, try this. I think you can do it.”

Stiles settles down onto the bench. “How heavy is this?”

“How heavy is this?”

“Not gonna tell you. If you think you can do it, you can do it. Don’t worry, I’m spotting you, just go for it.”

It’s tough, but Stiles is able to eke out eight reps before his body screams at him for no more. Danny coaches him through a series of other exercises, this time with free weights. He keeps up a fairly steady stream of conversation, mostly about calculus, but is careful to interject as necessary with form corrections. Stiles knows that Danny knows he’s in pre-calc and like any sane person, isn’t fond of it. He suspects that Danny is just trying to distract him from the strain or motivate him with subject matter a hundred times harder than chest flys and hammer curls. Either way, it works.

“I think that’s good for today. Awesome job, man. Legs and back tomorrow? I can show you more stuff you can do on your own over break.”

“You want more foreplay, to relax you?” Stiles says quietly. “I have to be able to play. I can’t – can you –”

He’s taking too long and Clay is running out of patience, already slipping his hands under Stiles’ shirt. “Exhibition? So it’s not a real game?”

“It’s a game. It’s pre-season before we come back from vacation.”

Clay doesn’t stop pawing at him as he strips Stiles of the material. “Don’t you normally sit on the bench?”

“Yeah, but a couple of the guys are sick so Coach might put me in.” It’s sort of true - Stansfield and Kerr have colds, but they’ve still been coming to school and practice. They’ll play.

“Please,” he continues, mortified. “Just - don’t be too rough -” Stiles knows he sounds pathetic. There’s no way Clay doesn’t think so, too.

“Sure,” Clay drawls. “You want more foreplay, to relax you?”

Stiles swallows. Foreplay takes longer. It seems like a mockery of normal sex. “I don’t want it to hurt.”

“But that’s part of it. Pain makes it good, it makes you feel alive.”
Stiles bites back his usually unbridled sarcasm. Life makes him feel alive. This is like being snuffed out. “I just - can you not - it’s just - too hard - I can’t -”

“It’s up to you. You have to relax more,” Clay says, cupping Stiles’ chin in his hand and running his thumb over the cluster of moles.

Stiles cringes away from the exploring fingers. “I can’t,” he insists. “I can’t.”

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Stiles does sit on the bench during the entire game. Both teams want to win, but Clay was right - it’s fairly casual, mostly meant to give the students something to look forward to after finals and help them work out any remaining tension. Finstock also likes to use it as an excuse to shout borderline profanities at the team and tell them all the things they need to do over the holidays so they’re not a complete embarrassment when the real season starts.

Stiles usually has a lot of mental energy to kill - the sport of lacrosse itself isn’t enough to preoccupy him - but he stops craning his neck at the stands to people-watch when he sees Clay take a seat after the second quarter starts. Clay doesn’t even like lacrosse, so Stiles has no idea why he’s here. It’s not like Stiles is going to leave the field so they can fuck in the parking lot.

He doesn’t care if Clay asks him later about why he didn’t play. He’ll just point out the neanderthal oaf that is Stansfield and say he got over his cold. Stiles cares a lot more about the fact that Clay is sitting behind and one person to the right of Melissa. He definitely prefers to keep the suckage of his life separate from the warm fuzzies.

He can’t bring himself to turn around and look at them, though, out of fear that Clay will think Stiles appreciates his presence and/or Clay and Scott’s mom are talking. It’s been six years since they’ve seen each other, so hopefully they don’t remember. Melissa is a good-looking woman, but she’s not Clay’s type so he might not recognize her.

After the game ends, Scott trots over to him, having scored the winning goal, and whips off his helmet. “You were awesome,” Stiles says.

“Thanks, dude!” Scott is beaming, even more so when he waves at his mom. “Hey, is that your uncle?”

Stiles groans under his breath and steels himself for whatever comes next. Sure enough, Clay and Melissa are standing together, chatting. Ugh.

Scott drops his gear and runs over to them. Stiles has no choice but to follow, though his steps are drawn out and devoid of Scott’s pep. As he approaches them, Scott and Clay are finishing a one-armed bro-hug and Stiles groans again.

“You’re all grown up, too!” Clay is saying. “Like this one over here.”

Stiles forces himself to smile, albeit awkwardly.

“How long are you staying in Beacon Hills, Clay?” Melissa asks.

“A while. Put down some new roots, spend more time with family.”

It takes Stiles every ounce of self-control he has to refrain from making a face. Melissa smiles, though, with a friendly offer. “Well, we should definitely have the three of you over for dinner soon.”
“That sounds great, I look forward to it.”

Melissa jiggles the keys in her hands. “I’d better get going, or I’ll blow my chance to get in a nap before I have to go back to the hospital.”

“Nice to see you again, Mr…” Scott trails off with a cute, slightly embarrassed expression. “Um, I’m sorry, I forgot…”

Clay and Melissa laugh at his well-meaning discomfort. “Oh, don’t worry about it. Last time you saw me, you were still in elementary school. It’s Gajos. But you can just call me Clay.”

“Okay, Clay,” Scott says. “Hey, Stiles, Call of Duty after we hit the showers?”

“Yeah!” Stiles agrees, suddenly perking up. “Yeah, let’s go to your house. We’ll keep it down, Mrs. M.”

Scott nods seriously. “We’ll whisper when we cuss each other out.”

“Okay, boys,” Melissa says as she leaves. “See you at home. Stiles, you’re free to stay the night, of course.”

“I’m going to sleep over at Scott’s,” Stiles immediately tells Clay, even if it sounds like he’s repeating to a small child. “Come on, Scott, let’s go.”

“All right,” Clay waves. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Clay!” Scott calls out. He doesn’t notice that Stiles walks away without another word.

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Winter break is just as stressful as Stiles thought it would be. Clay keeps coming into his room like Stiles is the present he gets to unwrap over and over again.

When Stiles can’t get to a weight room, he does other workouts on his own before he starts migrating to Scott’s house to use the dumbbells the McCalls keep in the garage. Melissa doesn’t bat an eye when she comes home from the hospital to find Stiles sweating up a storm and Scott nowhere in sight.

Christmas Day is better, though. The Stilinskis spend the holiday at the McCall house since Melissa miraculously got the day off and Noah is only working in the morning. Clay comes, too, but it’s not his turf so Stiles knows he’s not going to try anything inappropriate. He’s not an idiot.

Scott’s always loved Christmas and his enthusiasm has never failed to be infectious. It was probably the only thing that got Stiles through his first Christmas without his mother. There’s way too much good food at dinner, and gatherings like this make Stiles feel like one day, they really could be one happy family (ignoring Clay, of course). He helpfully points out to his dad and Melissa that they’re standing under the mistletoe, earning a loud whoop from Scott and a bashful laugh from Melissa. When their parents shrug at each other and Noah gives Melissa a peck on the cheek, Stiles is equal parts happy and wistful.

Melissa is back on shift for a couple of days and then she and Scott are headed to Oregon to visit her aunt. They invite Stiles along and he couldn’t have said yes any faster. Four whole days away with people he loves and it’s totally on the up-and-up. He can’t get in trouble with Clay for leaving when it would be way more suspicious if Stiles didn’t want to go.
He has a blast, even though it rains half the time they’re in Oregon, and he almost starts to forget what’s waiting for him at home. When Melissa drops him off at his house, he thankfully observes that Clay’s truck is nowhere to be seen. It’s New Year’s Eve, so his dad is working and Clay is already out, too.

Stiles showers and changes in peace before heading out again to a party at Lydia’s house, planning to crash on her couch or go home with another friend - any friend - and stay there.

There’s no way in hell he’s going to ring in the new year with Clay.

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Unlike almost every other student, Stiles is happy that vacation is over and the spring term has started. School is a welcome distraction. A constant reminder that life goes on, no matter what’s happening in his own home. There’s always another test coming up, another project to do, another chapter to read, all building up to the end of one semester and the start of a brand new one.

Stiles has always been an excellent student, despite his attention-deficit problems. He’s determined not to let that change, especially now that the stakes are higher than they have ever been, academically. He wants to be able to go away somewhere on scholarship because his dad won’t be able to afford the cost himself. Stiles isn’t sure how long Clay will be around - maybe even longer than last time - and he needs to be able to get out of the house after he finishes high school. No nearby community college and bumming around his dad’s house, that’s for sure.

After the MRI scare, Stiles is incredibly grateful to still have a healthy, functioning brain. It’s validating to push it through difficult chemistry equations, Spanish translations, and English essays.

He still has his mind. And he knows he can make it handle anything.

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Clay loves taking Stiles from behind, says he can go deeper that way. Stiles hates it however he has to do it, but it feels a hair less intimate like this.

At least that’s what he used to think. Clay shows him how much more intimate it can really be when he reaches around and brushes his fingers against Stiles’ navel, missing his mark by a couple of inches.

“No!” Stiles gasps. “No!”

He tries his hardest to twist away, but he can’t get far enough. Clay makes a second attempt and this time, gets his intended purchase. “Stiles, it can be good for you, too.”

“No - don’t touch me -”

Clay pumps his hand in time with his hips. “You only think it hurts because you won’t let yourself enjoy it.”

“Stop, stop, please -”

“Stiles,” Clay warns.

“No, please …”

He knows it’s pointless to argue. Clay varies his pacing, and at one point, hits something inside Stiles
that makes his whole body quiver. Stiles groans through clenched teeth as Clay keeps aiming for that spot, like he wants to give Stiles pleasure for once, as though he ever could in their abomination of a relationship.

Clay eventually comes first, but he waits to pull out until after Stiles does, too, some of it shooting onto his own chest and the rest spilling over Clay’s fisted hand.

Everything goes staticky gray and Stiles feels like he’s suffocating. It should feel familiar - the trampling rush of shame that hits him whenever he comes - except it’s not the same. It’s starting to feel different. The guilt is drilling into his bones. How many times can Clay do this, make his body betray him so completely, before Stiles has to admit that part of him must like it? It’s the purest, most primal form of gratification, and it doesn’t matter that it feels like death to him, because it’s still happening.

He’s still complicit.

Stiles knows that the nogitsune made him do worse things. It made him inflict death on others. But he doesn’t even have that excuse anymore, because the nogitsune is gone. It’s just Stiles now.

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Stiles has specific rituals he follows after Clay visits him. His dad isn’t home, so Stiles takes an extended hot shower. When he is, Stiles scrubs all over with the baby wipes, going through sheet after sheet in a frenzy. After he cleans himself up, he strips the bed of the sheets, throwing them into the corner of the room and replacing them with a fresh set. He always has an extra set of clean linens in his closet now. If his dad is working in the early morning, Stiles runs the dirty sheets through the laundry. If he can’t do that without being noticed, he washes them the next chance he gets and tucks them back into his closet for later. The Visine drops make an appearance before he goes back to bed and again in the morning when he wakes up.

While he’s in the middle of his routine, filling the washing machine in the garage, a part of Stiles wishes Clay had come back into town earlier, when the nogitsune had him. That version of Stiles wouldn’t have allowed Clay to use him and hurt him. He probably would have killed his uncle without a second thought, not at all personally responsible, if the others are to be believed, but entirely responsible at the same time. Havoc was the nogitsune’s game; it very well might have been offended by anyone giving it a run for its money.

And if the nogitsune didn’t kill Clay, Stiles probably would have fallen on that sword as his divine move after all.

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The attack on the Walcott family was pretty damn gruesome, so Stiles knows any direct surveillance of the crime scene is off the table. The Walcott house is crawling with police officers and no amount of shenanigans is going to score him a stealthy peek.

Plus, he understands now that it’s disrespectful. Especially when it’s so fresh.

When he was slightly younger and much dumber, he didn’t really appreciate these things. Maybe losing his mother at such a young age gave him a bizarrely detached and jaded perspective on death as a defense mechanism. He isn’t really sure.

Scouring the Preserve in the middle of the night for half of a body (which half: unknown) had seemed like a cool adventure. Since then, he’s seen a lot of things - too many things - and he
understands better what death means. It’s never a cool adventure when it’s real.

He had not thought it was cool when Melissa showed him Heather’s pale and slack body in the morgue. People he barely knew - popular kids from both high schools in Beacon Hills - had pinged him on Facebook, saying they’d heard he was one of the last people to see her before she disappeared, wondering if he had any details. He hadn’t replied to any of the messages.

He hadn’t pitied Matt and he certainly hadn’t justified Matt’s bloodthirst for revenge, but it wasn’t cool that Matt drowned in a nearby waterway, even after Matt had just put a bullet in his best friend, threatened his dad, and temporarily paralyzed him and Derek.

He hadn’t thought it was cool when Cora stayed in a coma for so long, circling around the sinkhole of death. Even though he had once thought it was awesome searching for a dead body, when he found out the body was that of Laura Hale - Derek’s only known family left (who wasn’t rage-filled and faking catatonia), he had felt a pang of regret. So when fate brought Cora back to Derek, Stiles had not thought it was cool that Derek was on the cusp of losing his last living sister a second time.

He had, however, respected the hell out of Derek for giving up his alpha powers to save her.

He definitely had not thought it was cool that Allison had died tragically in Scott’s arms. Or that her father hadn’t had a proper chance to grieve before he put on his pragmatic hunter hat to manage the public perception of what really happened. He had not thought it was cool that Argent’s loss of his whole family was basically his worst nightmare for his own father.

Stiles doesn’t want to be overdramatic and conclude that death follows him. He knows it doesn’t. There is a bigger picture at work. But death is always around. It used to be that death occurred in situations where he was a secondary player at most. Until he became a serial killer and made it happen himself.

But none of this changes the fact that something new and insidious has found its way into Beacon Hills. He needs as much intel as he can get, just not at the crime scene.

Thankfully, the hospital is a public place and there are no laws or decency rules that prohibit him from going there. The surviving son checked in yesterday, and Stiles heard on his police radio that the bodies of his family are still at the ME’s lab, too.

After school lets out, he heads over to see what he can find out. Maybe that Sean kid will want to talk to someone his age or Stiles will overhear key information from doctors or nurses. Maybe someone will accidentally leave a patient file unsecured from grubby high school clutches.

It doesn’t feel good to be at the hospital, though. He has to hold back the urge to apologize to every employee he sees. ‘Did I kill any of your friends here? I’m sorry about the rampage. Or are you new? I’m the reason there was a job opening.’

Still, he knows he’s the best-suited out of everyone to glean information through social engineering and other tactical maneuvers. Scott is too genuine of a person, so he hardly ever reads into what people are saying. Lydia is smart and sneaky, but it’s too obvious when she’s working an angle because she’s never had to hide that that’s exactly what she’s doing. Beautiful people get away with a lot. Derek just glares and stares and arches his eyebrows, or on occasion, flirts strangely well. Yeah, beautiful people get away with a lot.

They didn’t grow up with a police officer as a father, spending countless hours at the station or reading about interrogation techniques on the internet for fun.
None of that does him much good, though, and after nearly half an hour, Stiles has come up pretty empty, but he’s willing to keep at it. Striding through the corridors of the third floor, he turns a corner and almost runs directly into Melissa.

“Stiles!” she says in surprise.

“Hey, Melissa.”

“How are you?” she asks, her hand on his arm. She’s asking in that real way in which she honestly wants to know and the standard pleasantry response of “I’m good, how are you?” is not going to cut it. He sees her all the time at Scott’s house - hell, he just crossed state lines on vacation with her - but that doesn’t mean she’s any less interested in him right now.

Stiles is mostly honest with her, lying only by omission, when he tells her, “Kind of tired these days.”

She immediately goes into mom/nurse mode, which is easily 5x mom-only or nurse-only mode. He sees the look in her eye and knows where her train of thought has gone, so he tries to placate her with emphasis on how tough junior year classes are and the PSATs are coming up again, with National Merit scholarships at stake. She laughs at that, because Scott has never mentioned National Merit scholarships to her before. He’s still stuck on his Word of the Day calendar.

“Don’t worry - no vacancies for Japanese foxes with a hard-on for the darkest timeline,” he says, gesturing with kinetic fingers to his forehead. “It’s just normal, hormonal, teenage crazy in here.”

“Okay, Stiles,” she says quietly. She reaches up and cups his face in her hands. Such a mom. The best mom. She’s the best mom in the world who is still alive.

He gives her a lopsided smile. “Really, I’m doing okay. A lot better than a couple months ago.”

Again, it’s technically not a lie. A couple months ago, he was killing and maiming people for kicks.

Melissa pulls her hands away after giving his cheeks an affectionate squeeze. “Did you see your dad here? He was just here.”

“Oh yeah? I must have missed him. What’s going on?”

“You should ask him,” Melissa says with a skeptical tilt of her head. “He’ll tell you what he thinks you should know.”

“Hmmmmmm, yeah,” Stiles says, leaning back on the heels of his shoes nonchalantly, “I would do that, you know, if it was at all relevant to me.”

She smiles at him and hits his shoulder lightly. “Good luck with those PSATs.”

“I don’t need luck. I have alacrity and assiduousness on my side.”

“Teach that to Scott, will you? At this rate, he’s only learning 365 new words a year.”

“Will do, Mrs. M.”

“Well, it was great to see you, sweetheart, but I gotta get back to work, okay?” Melissa says, enveloping him in a sincere hug.

Stiles relaxes into the embrace and hugs her back. It’s nice to be loved with no strings attached.
He’s struck with a sudden surge of warmth and he feels himself wanting to tell her, his tongue starting to articulate thoughts he hasn’t even chosen yet. He wants to tell her everything. He wants her to take care of him and make it all go away. He wants her to help him be able to be happy again.

But Stiles doesn’t tell her. He can’t. It’s too awful. She would believe him, every word. But that’s awful, too. Then she’ll know. And he can’t ask her not to tell his dad. She’s a medical professional. They’re required by law to report abuse of a minor.

He can’t bring himself to imagine how his dad would feel if he found out from someone else. Even so, he would believe it, every word.

But that’s awful, too.

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Clay likes to keep the lights on when Noah isn’t home. He takes his time, too, when he knows no one else is around.

From his position straddling Stiles’ hips and holding him down, Clay traces along Stiles’ arm from shoulder to elbow. “You’re bulking up a little.”

Even though Stiles started lifting so that it would be noticed, the attention makes him extremely self-conscious and uncomfortable. It’s more of an appraisal, really, with hints of appreciation.

It’s a compliment.

Clay likes it.

“And your shoulders are getting broader,” Clay observes, his hands traveling up.

Stiles’ frown deepens, his brow creasing with aggravation. He had been working out because of Clay. He didn’t do it FOR Clay.

He doesn’t go back to the weight room.

-----

There’s a little sense of déjà vu, but this time, it wasn’t intentional and the alpha who turned the beta did it with all of the best intentions. Stiles wasn’t there for either instance, but he contributed to setting both in motion.

That cold winter night a year ago, when Stiles was fascinated with the idea of a dead body in the woods and took Scott along for the ride, he hadn’t had the slightest clue how their whole lives would change after his dad caught Stiles roaming around and left Scott out there alone.

That afternoon at lacrosse practice, he’d had no idea that egging Scott on to challenge Liam Dunbar would lead to a leg injury, hospital visit, fall off a rooftop, and a last-second save via a fucking insane bite to the arm.

Liam would have died without Scott’s intervention, but it’s funny how any trust that would have earned is wiped out by, well, the fucking insane bite to the arm. Scott didn’t help the situation any further by tying Liam up and depositing him in his bathtub. Stiles loves the guy more than life itself, but Scott could use some work in the planning department.

Stiles doesn’t really blame Liam for deck ing him and sprinting out of the McCall house. He still
doesn’t like the kid - Liam obviously already had a dark side before transferring to Beacon Hills High - but he feels bad for him. Liam didn’t ask to be attacked by a wendigo and survive just to potentially die if Scott’s bite doesn’t take.

Scott is still a little shaken up about how aggressive he was during practice in the first place. Stiles assures him it’s not his fault, but he knows how Scott feels. He was a part of it, too, but he had meant it when he had told Scott that it was okay to want something for himself. Stiles doesn’t want Scott to remember this as the kind of thing that happens when he does.

They accost Liam at school the next day, decidedly not dead and his arm freshly healed, and Stiles breathes a sigh of relief. It’s only the beginning of another massive change in their lives, one that Stiles would much rather do without, but the last thing he would ever want for Scott is to feel what it’s like to kill someone and have to try to live with that.

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Stiles grits his teeth, head down and eyes squeezed shut, and just tries to get through it.

He has little tricks for exceeding his limits, like in cross-country, when he doesn’t think he can go any further, he’ll stop thinking about everything else but counting steps and letting them add up until he’s finished. Or during his short-lived dalliance with weight lifting, struggling through reps, he would listen to Danny’s monologue of the day, or if he was by himself, zero in on the movement of his elbows or his knees.

But he doesn’t have anything in his arsenal to manage this. He’s not going to concentrate on the pushing in and pulling out or the muted, but still obscene, noises.

All he can do is tell himself over and over that this is just sex, nothing new, so it doesn’t have to be a big deal and it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just getting fucked one more time. People have sex all the time.

Clay is grabbing Stiles’ hips with bruising pressure and thrusting into him even harder. He changes the angle so abruptly that Stiles cries out in a little bit of surprise, mostly discomfort, and suddenly, Clay’s weight is on his back, breath hot in his ear as Clay warns him, “Shhhhhhhhh, we don’t want to wake up your dad.”

Stiles whimpers, a distressed, strangled sound, and bites his lip.

No. No, he doesn’t.

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Noah is home in time for dinner, but Stiles hasn’t even thought about cooking anything yet. When it’s just Stiles and Clay, they don’t eat together. They each do their own thing. Stiles isn’t sure if his dad knows that, but he’s never asked.

It’s been a long day for the sheriff, but he stops by Stiles’ room before he changes out of his uniform. “Pizza?” Noah suggests with an optimistic shrug.

Stiles narrows his eyes at him. He’s got his dad’s number. “Thin crust. Lots of veg. Salad. No buffalo wings.”

“You got a deal, kid.”

“I’ll order online,” Stiles says, turning back to his laptop.
“Grab one of Clay’s credit cards for that, will you? I think I saw his wallet on the kitchen counter. He lost a bet the other day, so he’s paying.”

Stiles nods woodenly. “Okay.”

He goes downstairs, and sure enough, Clay’s wallet is right where Noah thought it was. It makes Stiles ill-at-ease to eat food that Clay is paying for, but his dad wants to settle that bet and it’s technically peanuts compared to what Clay already lent them to cover Stiles’ medical bills.

Stiles opens up the weathered leather and reaches for the first credit card he sees. As he pulls it out, he finds an old picture tucked in behind it, edges ratty. With immediate recognition comes a sinking, stomach-churning feeling.

It’s a picture of him when he was around nine or ten years old. A picture Clay has been carrying around ever since.

He hears his dad humming down the stairs, so Stiles hurriedly tucks the photo back inside, heart pounding at the very idea that his dad sees it. Stiles doesn’t want to hear about how nice it is that Clay has kept that close to him for so long - not when he probably just jerks off to it.

The next day, when Clay is on the back porch with his dad, Stiles sneaks into Clay’s room and finds his wallet on the guest room bureau. He’s determined to do what he should have done the first time - take his photo and burn it.

Because he has more cushion time than he did earlier, Stiles goes through all of the slots to make sure it’s just the one picture, but it turns out there’s another. Stiles yanks it out, only to discover it’s not of him. It’s some other kid around the same age. He flips it over, but there’s nothing written on the back.

Then it hits him like a ton of bricks.

This must be Clay’s soon-to-be-ex-stepson.

Stiles drops both the wallet and the photographs like they’re on fire. After he snaps out of the haze, he snatches the photos up, puts the wallet exactly where he found it, and hustles back to his room.

He knows Clay is going to be super, majorly pissed when he finds out they’re missing, and he’s going to know who took them, but Stiles doesn’t care.

He knows he’s going to be in a lot of trouble, but it’s worth it.

At lunch, Stiles mindlessly chews his turkey sandwich, only half-listening to the conversation at the table. Lydia, who’s in AP Biology this year, is talking about the current genealogy unit, plus the documentaries she’s watched, and the extra library reading she’s done on top of that.

One of the professional journal articles was about mating within families and the chromosomal impact. Lydia finds it academically fascinating, but Scott just looks grossed out. “Isn’t that what happened in The Hills Have Eyes?” he asks.

“Well, it takes a lot of cycles of inbreeding to get to THAT point,” Lydia clarifies.
Stiles puts his sandwich down and picks at the crust. He supposes that he’s lucky he’s a guy and can’t get pregnant. Doesn’t have to worry about getting knocked up by his uncle. Their kid would probably be a homicidal maniac with severe ADHD, depression, and three and a half eyes.

He doesn’t feel lucky, though.

“See, even Stiles has lost his appetite, and he can always eat!” Scott crows.

Stiles smiles at them weakly. “Yeah, not a fan of brother/sister sexy times.”

Lydia and Kira exchange triumphant glances. “And THAT’s payback for that horror show of a movie you tried to make us watch last week,” Lydia says. “Think about that the next time you’re in charge of curating.”

Stiles can tell Scott wants to ask, “what’s curating?” but just assumes the meaning from context instead.

“I nominate Bride Wars for the next movie night,” Kira volunteers with a giggle.

“Ugh! The bottom of the barrel of chick flicks!” Scott throws a strip of string cheese at her, making her laugh harder. “I’ll take brother/sister sexy times over that, any day!”

Kira throws the cheese back at him and it sticks to Scott’s eyebrow. “Stiles, help me out!” Scott says, elbowing him.

“Pick whatever,” Stiles replies absently, pushing the rest of his lunch away from him. “It doesn’t matter.”

Stiles does end up paying for taking the pictures. It might not have been worth it after all.

It’s not until two days later after his dad leaves for another night shift that Clay comes into his room again, the energy palpably different from the start.

Stiles subconsciously pulls the covers up higher, but Clay rips them away from him before pinning him down on the mattress, one knee digging sharply into his rib cage and an arm gripping the opposite shoulder in place.

“What did you do?”

“Clay -” Stiles starts.

Clay brings his other hand up to hold Stiles down by the throat. “Did you steal from me?”

Stiles tips his head back as far as he can, but he can’t really do anything else but make wheezing noises until Clay relaxes his hand slightly. “Yes,” he manages to croak. It’s not like Clay doesn’t already know.

“You little shit. Never, ever touch my things.”

Stiles nods with the limited range he has. His vision is starting to blur at the edges, and his hands instinctively go up to try to pry Clay off his neck, but to no avail.

“Why did you do it?”
Stiles doesn’t know how to answer. Because it makes him want to puke that Clay carries trophies around to fuel his sick little fantasies?

“You take everything,” he chokes out brokenly.

“Give them back, Stiles.”

Stiles tries to respond but the lack of air is a real problem, so Clay finally takes his hand away from Stiles’ throat. “I can’t -” Stiles groans as Clay delivers a pointed nudge with his knee, “I threw them away.”

Clay hits him across the face - hard - eliciting a harsh gasp from Stiles. It definitely stings, but more than anything, Stiles is stunned.

The hand is back on Stiles’ neck as Clay glowers down at him. “When your dad asks what happened to you, what are you going to tell him?”

Stiles squirms. “Lacrosse.” Concealment is one of the only things on which they see eye-to-eye.

“Do you have anything else to say to me?”

“I’m sorry…”

“Stiles, you promised you would be good.”

Clay releases his throat and Stiles reflexively coughs a few times. The relief is short-lived, though, because Clay doesn’t do any kind of prep - he just peels their clothes off and fucks into Stiles mostly dry, with no hesitation or care and only the pre-lubrication from the condom to help.

Stiles is actually glad his dad isn’t home because he can’t shut up, it hurts so much. At one point, Clay pounds into him so forcefully that his whole body surges up and he crashes into the headboard, seeing stars.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps out, pushing against Clay’s shoulders desperately. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

Clay doesn’t say anything back, but Stiles thinks he eases off the pressure just a little bit. Or maybe it’s just his imagination. The burning sensation doesn’t dissipate, though, even after Clay is done.

“You’re bleeding,” he says, getting up unceremoniously. “You’re going to want to take care of that.”

Stiles can’t stop shaking or crying, and he curls into himself, facing the wall. This might have been the worst time. Possibly worse than the first time after Clay came back. Maybe worse than the very first time when Stiles was a tiny little thing, barely eleven years old and five feet tall.

Well, no. Not worse than that.

The sex has always been about power. Stiles understands this. He’s googled child abuse before, and then wiped his entire browser history five times to be safe from accidentally prying eyes.

But this time was about violence and punishment and retribution - a desire in Clay that Stiles created. It’s his own fault. He shouldn’t have acted out.

He knows Clay was being so brutal to send him a message. It doesn’t have to be like this. Behave or else.

Message received.
The droplets of fresh blood come out of the sheets fairly easily. It helps that Stiles has blue linens and has never had anything close to white ones because he’s a messier-than-average boy, not Martha Stewart.

The actual bleeding is more alarming. He’s bled before - the first time, and other instances since - but it’s mostly stopped by the time he gets out of the shower. Just in case, he does what he’s done in the past, fashioning a makeshift pad out of toilet paper - emasculating as that is - and maneuvering it just so in his boxer briefs. He’ll check it in the morning and figure out what to do then if the tearing is still a problem. It’s a bridge he doesn’t end up having to cross, so he’s thankful for that, at least.

After he comes home from school the next day, he looks in the mirror hanging over his dresser to gauge his cheek. He’s been checking its development every couple of hours or so. The bruise has started to turn bluish-purple but is not as bad as Stiles thought it would be, considering how hard Clay hit him.

His friends had fussed over him when they saw the blossoming mark, but the lacrosse lie had worked just fine. He wasn’t sure if anyone could tell he was limping a little, but no one asked, so maybe they assumed it was lacrosse-related, too. It’s an aggressive sport, even if you’re not first line. Especially if you’re not first line and you’re not great at being the winner.

In the reflection, his peripheral vision catches something unfamiliar, out of place. One of the picture frames he keeps along a row of his bookshelf is empty behind the glass. Stiles picks it up and turns it over in his hands.

It used to happily display a photo of him at the beach during Spring Break a few years ago. That’s easily one of the top five adventures he and Scott have shared.

But it’s gone now and it doesn’t matter that Stiles has the image saved on his computer and can easily print out a new copy.

He’s so fucking angry he feels like he’s choking again, and he doesn’t know that he’s burst into tears until he tastes salt on his lips. He puts his head in his hands, fingers fisted at his hairline. He can try to get the photo back, go through Clay’s room until he finds it. But he’ll just get in trouble again.

It doesn’t really matter anyway. The memory of that trip is already ruined.

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After dinner, Noah and Clay go out to the back porch again and relax on the deck chairs. Clay’s drinking from a bottle of scotch, but Noah isn’t partaking since he has to report to the station later. Stiles finishes washing the dishes, not paying much attention to the idle chatter flowing in through the open window until he hears his mother’s name.

As they start trading stories about Claudia this and Claudia that, Stiles turns off the water and leans in closer to the window. He and his dad don’t talk about her that much. He thinks about her a lot, but mostly of his own memories stuck in time.

Stiles spends the next half-hour sitting against the cupboard doors, forearms resting on his bent knees. Just listening. Almost all of these stories are new to him, though he’s not surprised - wife and sister stories are a lot different than mom stories.

Noah is laughing at some points and outright guffawing at others. Stiles can hear the wistful fondness in his dad’s voice, and he finds himself smiling and huffing out little breaths of joy along with him.
He thinks if he’d had the chance to know his mother as her own distinct person, not just as his mom, he would have loved her fifty times as much.

Stiles rocks his head back, tapping against the cupboard.

His dad is so happy.

Clay isn’t all bad.

A familiar static cuts in as his dad’s radio goes off. The station is calling him in half an hour early because one of the deputies came down with food poisoning in the middle of his shift.

“I’m gonna finish the rest of the bottle before I head in,” Clay says.

“Have at it. Just don’t get behind the wheel.”

Clay laughs. “Wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll just stay here with Stiles.”

Stiles jumps up and hurries out of the kitchen before his dad comes back inside.

Yeah. Clay will just stay here.

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Later that night when Clay comes in, Stiles is so pissed – how dare Clay sit around and reminisce about his mom and make his dad laugh like Stiles hasn’t heard him do in a long time, and then just hours later do this? His baseball bat would love to take a crack at Clay’s head.

He’s not sure if he’s still being punished, but he doesn’t want to test Clay, especially not when he’s been drinking. Stiles doesn’t think he can take being torn apart again. He can’t act out again. It’ll just make it worse.

So he does exactly as Clay tells him and tries to forget about his parents while he does it.

Chapter End Notes

I promise Derek gets more integrated into the story as it moves along! The "slow build" tag is there for a reason! Thanks very much for the support and readership!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Oops, I'm sorry about any weirdness with chapter 3 when I first posted. There was something screwy about it on my end, so I deleted chapter 3 right after it initially went up and replaced it with this fresh pass.

Thank you for reading as always!

[Posted 4/28/17]

Driving back from Scott’s house, Stiles is in such a daze that he blows through a red light without even realizing it until he’s gone through the intersection. Gasping in surprise, he quickly checks the rearview mirror for any cars swerving in the perpendicular lanes behind him, but he doesn’t see or hear anything.

Rattled, Stiles pulls over into the next parking lot on the right and slides into a spot. It’s well past rush hour, so he’s lucky that the roads are mostly empty. He tells himself that if cars were on the streets, he would have known to brake and wait the light out, even on auto-pilot, but he knows it was dangerous. He was dangerous.

As he cups both sides of his neck with his hands and rubs out the tension, his pulse slows back down to normal, but he doesn’t feel like heading home yet.

Stiles inhales and exhales loudly. “Dad, I need to talk to you,” he says, experimenting with the words. He doesn’t know what to say next. Maybe he’s not starting the conversation right.

“Dad, I need to tell you something.”

The words still don’t magically appear in his brain. Okay, he can work up to it. “Dad, I need to talk to you. I don’t think Clay should stay here anymore.”

He visualizes his dad’s confused face and hears his equally confused response. ‘How come? Stiles, what do you mean?’

Stiles remains, for once in his life, speechless. Shaking his head and cursing under his breath, he folds the sun visor down and looks at his eyes in the mirror. It’s not the same thing as being face-to-face with his dad, but it’s the only substitute he has at the moment. If he can’t say it out loud to his own reflection, he won’t be able to say it to someone he loves so much.

He can’t bring it up and not follow through. If he chickens out, what is he going to do then? ‘He should leave because he drank the rest of the milk and put the carton back in the fridge. Ha ha, just kidding, Dad.’ His dad is going to think he’s on drugs or something.

It’s weird looking at his own eyes while he tries to piece together some kind of approach. Seeing how hard it is almost makes it even harder. “Dad, can I talk to you? I need help with something.”

Sighing, he scrubs a hand back and forth through his hair. Just rip off the band-aid. “Dad, Clay
comes into my room and makes me do things.”

It tumbles out of his mouth in a rush and he stares into the mirror before barking out a short, derisive laugh. “Yeah, no, you can’t say that,” he mutters to himself.

Telling his dad is going to be way too hard. Rolling his shoulders out, he thinks about maybe telling Scott. That could be easier. Not as heavy as telling his dad.

“Scott, I need to tell you something,” he begins. “I’m having a problem with my uncle.”

But just like his mock dialogue with his dad, he doesn’t know how to explain it. Even if Scott, predictably, replies, “What kind of problem?” Stiles doesn’t know how to answer. With his luck, he’ll end up talking about empty milk cartons in the refrigerator with Scott, too.

Scott is his oldest friend. For a long time, his only friend. They truly will be Best Friends Forever. Scott loves him, always has, always will. They would do anything for each other.

Objectively, Scott’s moral compass is stronger than his. Stiles has no problem acknowledging that. Generally, it’s an asset, but Scott doesn’t work in gray areas nearly as well as Stiles. He’s not as good at seeing the ambiguous complexities in reality.

It’s so obvious when it’s not happening to you, Stiles thinks. Tell someone. Go to the police. Stop it yourself or tell someone who can. The consequences are incredibly messy, though. It’s not that simple. Scott will understand that Stiles feels the way he does, but Scott’s number one priority will be to protect him and he’s afraid of what Scott will think that means.

They’ve butt heads before on the right thing to do. Stiles had been less-than-pleased at Scott’s secret master plan to deceive Gerard Argent by dosing him with mountain ash and ultimately using Derek, despite his protests and paralyzed vulnerability, to turn Gerard into a sniveling mess.

It wasn’t really the secret that bothered Stiles so much. Of course, he would’ve liked to have known in advance, but it was Scott’s approach that didn’t sit well with him. It had struck Stiles as really icky, for lack of a better word, but he didn’t know if that was his own bias talking. Even though Scott had thought Derek was a total butthole at the time, he was still a person with the right to control his body.

Scott had had his reasons for being so uncharacteristically underhanded, though. Gerard had dared to lay a hand on Melissa, who was still reeling from the discovery that her no-longer-asthmatic son was actually a werewolf. Parents as a hot button, Stiles gets it. Add in the previous mutual distrust between Scott and Derek and it’s no wonder Scott didn’t pursue an above-board partnership. But why didn’t he tell Stiles, though? Probably because he knew Stiles wouldn’t approve. Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Now that it’s Stiles’ family and his sanity on the line, Stiles just can’t take the chance that he and Scott are at odds about how to handle the situation. Scott won’t see it as gray as it really is, and Stiles is the one who will pay the price.

Telling Scott also means that Scott will have to keep the secret from his mom. Melissa can never know; she’s a mandated reporter. Scott has kept secrets from her before, but being a werewolf was his secret to keep. Stiles’ secrets would be a burden on him and a wall between him and his mom. It’s not really fair, and if Scott has a weak moment in which he impulsively tells her everything, it’ll be game over for Stiles.

Really, there’s no shortage of reasons why Stiles shouldn’t get Scott involved. He already has so
much going on as it is - the deadpool, processing his own feelings about Allison, moving on and figuring out this thing between him and Kira, mentoring Liam, rebuilding some kind of relationship with his father, and reasserting his dominance on the lacrosse team.

Lacrosse is the least important thing on that list, but Stiles really does want Scott to have something for himself. The deadpool is a big fucking deal and the bounty for his death is $25 million, for Christ’s sake. At least let the guy be captain.

The heady responsibility for the beta he created isn’t like joining a club that meets once a week after school. Scott turned Liam, essentially upending his entire existence, and Liam can’t be expected to navigate his new werewolf side by himself. It’s not safe for Liam or Beacon Hills. Scott doesn’t need anything else on top of all of this.

Scott isn’t responsible for Stiles. Scott has already spent months laser-focused on saving him. It’s not always about him. It shouldn’t be, anyway.

Their friendship won’t be the same if Scott knows. He’ll worry about Stiles all the time. All the fucking time. Scott won’t want him to do anything even remotely dangerous, relegating him to the role of research geek who stays behind in the loft, because he won’t risk Stiles being hurt when he’s already been hurt so much. Scott will frame it like intel is the most important thing, like Stiles is the hacker making everything possible while everyone else is just the mundane muscle, but Stiles will know why things have changed. Even though Scott might eventually revert to normal, it’s not worth it.

Stiles just can’t lose anything or anyone else. He needs Scott exactly the way he has him now.

Frowning, he hits the steering wheel in frustration. It feels mildly cathartic, so he pounds on it, again and again, until he miscalculates and a blow lands in the wrong spot, accidentally blasting the car horn.

Stiles jumps back to reality, physically and mentally, and swivels his head around. There’s only one person in the parking lot, loading up his car with groceries, and he doesn’t seem interested in the source of the honk.

In the visor mirror, Stiles looks at his reflection again, but still comes up empty. Staying silent is a constant struggle, but it’s the default when he doesn’t know how to tell someone. He can’t really blow his whole world up while fumbling over the explosives.

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On his way out of the station after checking in with his dad about any potential deadpool activity, Stiles makes a detour and helps himself to a seat beside Parrish’s desk. Parrish looks up, eyes shining and a tiny smirk on his face. “What kind of trouble have you gotten into today?” he asks.

Stiles laughs. “Nothing, man, I swear. Actually, I just wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Sure, as long as it’s not a practical joke on your dad. I like getting a paycheck and having a roof over my head.”

“It’s not anything bad. I was just wondering if you could teach me some basic self-defense. You must know a ton of stuff, between the police academy and the Army.”


“Just don’t tell my dad, okay?” Parrish looks a little confused. “No - I mean, it’s not a secret, really -
I just - you know how it is around here. Weird shit happens here. It would just be good if I was a little more … prepared? And I don’t want my dad to worry because he thinks I’m worried or getting into situations I shouldn’t be getting into. I’m not.”

“Stiles, I’m totally game to help you, but he’s my boss -”

“Oh, come on! Bro! Like bosses are supposed to know everything. Like they should know about all of the website traffic on the job and if people are engaging in time theft in the break room. This isn’t bad. We can just meet a few times somewhere other than here. It’ll be fun. And you’ll be doing something good for society.”

Parrish shrugs. “I’ll definitely teach you, but if your dad asks me a direct question about it, I’ll probably just tell him.”

That’s good enough for Stiles. His dad can’t ask Parrish about his meet-ups with Stiles if he doesn’t even know about them.

Stiles has given up lifting weights, but he’s started to see the appeal of being able to defend himself. It strikes him as a little silly that he hasn’t really learned how to yet.

Part of it is he’s the only quasi-defenseless human, except for Lydia, and she at least has a scream that could lay an MMA fighter out. The flipside of being the sole human is that everyone else has supernatural powers. He’s always trusted that someone will have his back. It’s not foolproof - he still got beat up by a grandpa - but for the most part, it works. And while learning self-defense isn’t like training for the Olympics, in his world, for him, it would feel like training to beat Usain Bolt in a race. He’s still just human.

Stiles has a nagging feeling now, though, that it’s time to learn. He doesn’t know if he’ll use it. But … just in case.

It should have been easy to find someone to teach him, given his group of friends, but he doesn’t want to answer any of their questions about his sudden aspirations.

Ironically, if things were the way they used to be, he would have gone to Allison for help. She wouldn’t have thought twice about it, understanding the need to compensate for vulnerability, and she would’ve respected Stiles’ request to keep the lessons a secret. Allison would have explained proper techniques of throwing a punch or escaping a hold better than anyone. When she fought, it came from a place of real skill because she couldn’t rely on brute strength like everyone else could. She couldn’t take a hit and magically heal like everyone else could.

It took Stiles a month after Allison died to stop referring to her in the present tense. Even Scott made the adjustment before he did. It has to be past tense, because she’s gone now. Stiles killed her.

Parrish is the best option he’s got.

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Stiles is on his knees again, cold and vulnerable in his nakedness, but he doesn’t dare show a trace of a shiver. He doesn’t want Clay, who in contrast, is hot and assured in Stiles’ mouth, to try to warm him up.

“Let’s see those big brown eyes,” Clay says, pulling on Stiles’ hair and forcing him to peer upward.

Stiles doesn’t really know what he expected - probably just Clay watching him lecherously - but he tries to jerk away in shock when he sees Clay’s phone pointed down at him.
He doesn’t get very far as Clay tugs harder to compensate for Stiles’ flailing. Stiles scrunches his eyes shut and groans, but he can’t pull off.

His face burns with the twisted voyeurism. He doesn’t hear any shutter clicks. Clay isn’t taking pictures; he’s filming.

“You’re my little star, you know that?”

Stiles looks down as much as he can, teardrops sliding off his sweeping lashes. Clay pulls up again to regain optimal exposure.

“You’re so photogenic, the camera loves you.”

Even with the sickening turn of events, this is one of the best chances Stiles has ever had to stop the physical act, and maybe even get away. He’s not pinned down bodily and Clay’s hands are occupied, with just one pressing down on his head. He could ruin the video by changing it to capture defiance instead of submission, but he can’t - not really - because that won’t be the end of it and Stiles will just get in trouble. If Clay wants a pornographic video of Stiles, he’s going to get it, one way or another.

As Stiles works up and down, making his mouth and his hands do the things Clay tells him, Clay showers him with dirty talk about how much Stiles loves this, how thirsty Stiles is for it, how he can’t wait to come all over Stiles’ face. Trite things, but they hurt all the same. Stiles doesn’t muster up much of a response, though that’s not really the point. Clay’s probably just doing it to hear himself speak with Stiles stretched around him.

The only, albeit microscopic, silver lining of the phone is that it blocks part of Clay’s face from Stiles’ view. The little glass square covering the lens is a barrier in the moment but an unemotional snitch ultimately. Stiles hasn’t felt like this since the MRI machine read every detail of him, deep down below what anyone could see on the surface, when he had to lie there and bite back the anxiety and dread for an agonizing length of time. All to get an image that apathetically announced, “Stiles, you’re doomed,” and brought tears to his dad’s and Melissa’s eyes.

Clay’s fist is back in his hair and Stiles’ self-consciousness falls to the wayside when Clay starts thrusting. Stiles is choking, almost frothing at the mouth, and his eyes are wide and wet, urgently begging for mercy. He scrabbles at Clay’s hips with his hands, trying to force a reprieve, but gets the opposite when Clay goes in deep and holds him there.

Stiles’ panicked whines are stifled and he darts to his redeveloping instinct to stop fighting. When he pushes Clay, Clay pushes back even harder, so Stiles immediately drops his hands and hopes that Clay rewards him.

“Oh, you don’t like that?”

Stiles’ world is getting fuzzier and he can’t hear anything but faraway white noise. He thinks about just giving in to the suffocation and passing out. He always gives in. This would be no different.

Clay lets go of him altogether and Stiles recoils. His hard coughs do nothing to ease the irritation in his throat, but every lungful of air fades the opaque circles dancing before his eyes.

“Get back over here.”

Stiles looks up at him, and from this vantage point, he can see Clay clearly. He was wrong earlier about the opportunity. Clay isn’t even touching him right now and he still has all of the power. Clay’s up there, Stiles is down here, collapsed at Clay’s feet like that’s where he belongs. Stiles
wipes at his face, but he’s such a disaster that it barely helps.

As he rises up on his knees again, Clay hums approvingly. “Yeah. Open up that whore mouth.”

Stiles dry-heaves and it takes him a good long second to realize it’s just a phantom gag triggered by those words. Shoulders shaking with a fresh sob, he parts his swollen lips and Clay immortalizes every lurid frame.

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Most of the time, Stiles is able to repress that incident. But afterwards, whenever he sees Clay staring at his phone, he can’t help but wonder whether Clay is staring at him.

The next morning, he comes downstairs to find Noah and Clay sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. His dad is leafing through a case file and Clay is holding his phone, a look of concentration on his face broken up only by occasional spoonfuls of cereal.

He’s probably just on ESPN, reading game scores from last night, but Stiles’ paranoia kicks in and he wonders if Clay is watching him with the sound turned off. Watching him while sitting within spitting distance of his dad. Clay can watch Stiles whenever he wants now.

Stiles turns away and hurriedly heads out the front door. His stomach had been growling earlier, waiting impatiently for carbs and caffeine, but he’s lost his appetite.

He should have left Clay’s jerk-off material in his wallet.

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For a couple of days, Stiles thinks about trying to use the video Clay made of him. It’s beyond humiliating - it’s obscene and repulsive and he doesn’t want anyone to see him naked and used like that - but it’s a smoking gun that’s pretty black and white. There wouldn’t be as much “he said/he said” controversy. It clearly happened, Stiles is a minor, and they’re related. Those are facts.

It doesn’t all hinge on interpretation of consent. The law says he can’t consent because he’s underage, but even if it did, Stiles probably has that on his side, too. He hasn’t seen the footage and never wants to - if Clay ever tried to make him watch it, he would probably puke and almost certainly have another panic attack - but he’s sure it’s obvious that he’s not a willing participant. Even when he doesn’t say no, and even when Clay makes his body react, he’s sure his face never looks like he wants it.

That video alone could be enough to shut everything down. Clay would be persona non grata in the family and go to prison. He would be released at some point, and Stiles would honestly be afraid for himself when that happened, but that would be a worry for another day.

All of the other undocumented things Clay has done don’t need to be made known. Stiles would tell the investigators that that was the only incident. No one, including his dad, would have reason to think it had gone any further. From what Stiles remembers of that night, Clay never said anything on tape alluding to previous or regular abuse. On the record, it would only be forced oral, just that one time. Clay sure as hell wouldn’t volunteer more information.

It wouldn’t be that complicated for Stiles to trigger. He’d just have to get a burner phone, disguise his voice, and anonymously call into the station with a Good Samaritan tip. Or maybe just man up and report it himself - what’s the difference when he’s already in the video, clear as day? His dad wouldn’t handle the investigation because of the conflict of interest, but it would still be a devastating and painful revelation for him, still intensely damaging to their relationship. The video doesn’t show
an attempted sexual encounter. Stiles didn’t stop it. It shows a completed one. It shows him swallowing.

He has no idea how he would explain to his dad why he didn’t stop it.

The other problem is that Stiles is only seventeen years old, so the video constitutes child pornography. Production of child pornography, far worse than possession. It could become a federal matter. That’s way too much attention. The feds have come through town before; that’s not news and it wouldn’t necessarily set off a host of additional gossip and speculation. The upside of being a minor is his identity is supposed to be protected, though that’s no guarantee. People could find out. Most have looser lips than Stiles.

Scott’s dad doesn’t work those kinds of cases, but for all Stiles knows, his name is already in FBI records because Agent McCall hasn’t kept Stiles out of his notes. He would probably be informed of the child porn and assault charges, the case unrelated to his own in nature but overlapping in one of the parties. The idea makes Stiles’ skin crawl. He’s coming around to Agent McCall and doesn’t think he’s as much of a Grade A asshole as he once did, but no one wants their best friend’s dad to know these things about them. Especially in this situation. Stiles doesn’t want his best friend to be in the dark while the father that abandoned said friend knows all about it. But Stiles doesn’t want Scott to know, either.

The good and bad thing about hard evidence is it doesn’t leave as much to the imagination. Every detail is out there. Every image, every sound. And as clear as Stiles thinks the video is, it’ll be heavily scrutinized. By people with a variety of motives and purposes.

And his dad might see it.

He can’t do it.

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The deadpool is no joke. People have died. They’re dying.

For Stiles, though, it perversely supplies something else to focus on besides school, and he’s intensely motivated. They haven’t deciphered the entire deadpool yet, but Stiles is sure that all of his friends are on it. Every single one. As the lone human, he’s not being targeted. But his friends are being hunted and there is a frightening chance they don’t all make it out alive.

This is what his life really is. This is what’s most important to him, besides his dad. This is what he pivots everything else around. It gives him perspective. He’s not being targeted.

He feels really shitty about it, but it also gives him an excuse for the anxiety he can’t completely hide from Scott.

They’re all gathered at Derek’s loft, trying to strategize. Derek thinks they need to concentrate their efforts on who’s behind the deadpool and shut it down. “The assassins aren’t taking out supernatural creatures for shits and giggles. It all comes down to the money. If they don’t get paid, there’s no incentive. So we find this asshole, take him out, get the bearer bonds back, problem solved.”

“But that could take forever,” Scott argues. “Who knows how long? We already know some of the people in the pool. We need to focus on protecting them, or they’ll all wind up dead before we figure out who’s pulling all the strings.”

Lydia, for her part, is sitting by herself in a corner, eyes closed and breathing steady, waiting to channel something she still doesn’t understand and doing her best to block out what must feel like
absolute screaming from the others.

Much to his surprise, Malia agrees with Derek, because his idea is the most direct and aggressive, and that’s more her style anyway.

Kira looks back and forth between Scott and Derek with uncertainty. “Maybe we can sort of do both? Protect the people on the list, and if anyone comes after them, capture the assassin and use him to trace back to the Benefactor?”

“That’s not gonna work,” Derek says. “There is no real link between the assassins and the Benefactor. Not until the funds are wired, which requires proof of death, and the wire transfer is so encrypted to hell, the NSA probably couldn’t break it.”

“Stiles, what do you think?” Scott asks.

Everyone turns to stare at him standing off to the side and poring over every detail of what they now refer to as the Deadpool Murder Board. He’d had to construct it and keep it updated at Derek’s place since he can’t exactly keep his boards up in his own room with Clay in the house.

“Huh?” he says blankly, whirling around with a marker cap hanging out of his mouth.

The others all start talking over each other at the same time, so loudly that Lydia comes over just to know what all the fuss is about. Stiles goes back to the Murder Board and tentatively draws a line with a hovering question mark between two of the photos.

He’s not sure how long after that he feels Scott standing next to him, touching his elbow. “If this is too much for you,” Scott says, and Stiles can hear the concern in his voice before he sees it on his face, “I mean, with everything you’re dealing with. Just take a break, bro. We’ll be okay.”

Stiles gives him a hard look. “Scott, I’m fine. Yeah, things are crazy. But there’s no way I’m taking myself out of this for even one second.”

“I get it, I’m not saying you can’t help us. Just look out for yourself, too. I just – I worry about you.”

Stiles smirks at the irony. “I don’t have a price on my head. I worry about YOU.”

“Well, we’re not really getting anywhere trying to brute-force our way past the rest of the encrypted lists anyway. We’ll probably just have to wait for Lydia to get some rando banshee message.”

“And I wanna be here when she does.”

“But your PTSD –”

Derek walks by at that moment and Stiles exchanges head nods with him. “Is under control,” Stiles interrupts. “Not gone, but I can handle it. I mean, don’t we ALL have some PTSD after everything that’s happened?”

Scott opens his mouth, closes it, and finally speaks. “It’s been a rough year,” he concedes.

“Have YOU gone to talk to someone?” Stiles asks, quirking an eyebrow just shy of accusation.

“Me?” Scott is visibly surprised. “No.”

“You thought your best friend was dying from a horrible brain condition. You were ready to turn me and take the chance that you would kill me instead of save me. You had to watch me hurt people over and over. You trusted me and I shoved a sword right through you. So I could feed off all of the
pain that I had created and manipulated you to absorb. You had to watch me almost kill myself.”

As Stiles rattles through the list, he can see Scott’s face falling, just thinking about it. Even though Stiles feels like a horrible person, he has to make the point. But he doesn’t mention Allison by name. He took her life - he’s not going to use her as a bargaining chip, too. “I don’t think that I got away more unscathed than you did. But you’re doing okay now. Just please accept that I will be okay, too.”

Scott looks at him, puckering his lips a little, and claps him on the shoulder. “Yeah, you’re right, bro. I know I gotta let you do this.”

Kira is motioning for Scott to come over, finally catching his eye with her wave, and he gives Stiles one more glance before going over to her.

Stiles turns back to the board and soon after, Derek stands next to him. “He’s worried because he can smell it all over you,” Derek says.

Stiles scribbles some notes in the corner. “What does a guy have to do to smell like apple pie and unicorn sparkles?”

“Instead of crippling anxiety?”

When Stiles shifts his gaze from the clear surface to Derek, he finds that Derek is already staring at him, arms crossed. He’s probably been boring a hole into Stiles this whole time.

“It’s been a rough year,” Stiles repeats.

“You’re terrified,” Derek says matter-of-factly.

“Well, no shit, Sherlock. Someone – multiple someones – want to cut my friends up into bite-size pieces. I think I’m entitled to be afraid.”

“Yeah.” He’s still staring.

“Listen, big guy, you better get back in there, because you take another 30 seconds with me, Scott’s gonna launch some hair-brained scheme that – surprise – will end up with the hospital being ripped apart for the 14th time. And you’ll probably get impaled on a lead pipe. Again.”

Derek gives him another long stare before rejoining the group. Stiles furrows his brows, refocusing on the board. They have bigger problems than his secret sex life and future nervous breakdown.

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Stiles involuntarily spasms, but he doesn’t say anything as he keeps his eyes trained on the ceiling.

“I don’t have any more – that was my last one. Do you have one?”

“No,” Stiles answers in a small voice. He never has any. He never used to need them.

He hopes, knowing he’s being foolish, that this means they’ll stop for tonight. Maybe he’ll just have to give Clay another blow job and it’ll be over.

Clay peels the latex off and haphazardly throws it by the bedside. Stiles can hear the soft, wet squish as it lands on the hardwood floor.
Clay grabs at Stiles’ legs, raising them up again and over his shoulders. “It’ll be okay,” he says, re-entering with a grunt, skin-to-skin contact in a way that Stiles has never felt before and overpowers him with disgust and grief. “You’re clean.”

Stiles flushes with shame and bites the inside of his cheek. He hasn’t been clean for seven years.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” Clay pants. “I’m gonna come inside you so hard.”

Stiles’ face contorts and collapses into an uncontrolled ugly cry that he hides behind his hands, but Clay doesn’t seem to care.

It feels like forever until he delivers on his filthy promise and leaves Stiles to the relative safety of solitude. Stiles throws the discarded condom away and obsessively scrubs himself with the baby wipes, going through the rest of the package, but it’s not enough. He’s marked inside and he has to wait to try to wash it all away because his dad is asleep.

Stiles curls into a fetal position, not bothering to strip the sheets, either. Inconsolable, he tries not to think about what they just shared, something that should only be done in the presence of absolute trust. Something that means the violation is complete. Stiles will carry a part of Clay with him wherever he goes.

Clean bedding is irrelevant at this point. He’s too fucking dirty and used up.

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Stiles goes to the drugstore before first period the next day, in a hurry to replenish his supplies and capitalize on a time he’s less likely to run into other students or adults he knows. He picks up the largest Visine bottle on the shelf and more baby wipes with familiarity.

The condoms are different, though. He knows where they’re kept, but he doesn’t know exactly what he’s looking for. He’s old enough not to skulk around the prophylactics like it’s a scandal, so he stands there for a few minutes, evaluating his options. The only other person in the store is in the chips and dip section anyway.

There are so many different kinds to choose from, for all types of preferences and desires. Just not for what Stiles needs. They don’t have condoms for people who don’t want to feel anything. They’re extra thin or ribbed or lubricated with warming gel or flavored.

They’re all for pleasure.

Sighing, he grabs a box of the basic kind - definitely not the ultra thin ones - because the last thing he needs is less of a barrier between him and Clay.

He barely slept and is totally exhausted, so Stiles turns out of the aisle to find his last purchase of energy drinks. Someone else has come into the store and he glances over at Stiles at the sound of his footsteps.

It’s Chris Argent.

Stiles sucks in a breath. Scott had told him that Argent had returned to Beacon Hills and saved Scott’s ass yet again in the woods the other night, but Stiles had not really thought about the actuality of seeing him again.

“Hi, Mr. Argent,” he says lamely. “You’re back.”
“Stiles,” Argent greets. He doesn’t sound angry or accusatory or wrecked or vengeful.

Stiles strategically rearranges the packages he’s holding to make sure the condoms are blocked from view by the wipes. “How are you?”

Argent’s light blue eyes blink at him. “I heard about Kate. It was time to come back from Paris.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” Stiles says. “Anything I can do to help. I mean, I know there’s a lot going on -“

“Scott’s new beta,” Argent muses. “And the deadpool.”

“But Kate’s a priority, too,” Stiles is quick to assure. “We’ll find her. We’ll get her back.”

Argent nods, then gestures to Stiles’ hands. “Baby wipes, huh? How much has really changed since I left?”

“Oh, no. No, I don’t - no babies here. They’re to keep in my car. I’m always spilling stuff in there.”

Stiles catches himself before his flailing knee-jerk response to awkward conversations kicks in. No need to send condoms flying in Argent’s face. It’s pretty awkward, though. Argent just lost his daughter and now he’s faced with the notion that Stiles may suddenly have a kid of his own somehow.

The circle of life for a hunter can be that cruel, though.

Stiles is able to hold back physically, but he can’t help himself from word vomiting. “I know I said it before, but I’m really, really sorry about Allison. I miss her a lot. I think about her every day.”

Argent’s lips form a thin line of difficult acceptance. “I do, too.”

“I’m really sorry,” Stiles repeats, and Argent nods at him again before walking away.

Stiles watches his retreating back until he stops at the check-out counter. Argent is the only person Stiles knows who possibly compartmentalizes better than he does, but he knows it still has to hurt like hell. Stiles was devastated when his mother died, but to have your only child violently ripped away from you less than a year after losing your wife?

Looking down at the contents in his hands, he goes back to the condom aisle to grab another box.

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Lydia has been driving herself crazy trying to decode the rest of the deadpool. She’s never met a puzzle she couldn’t solve before. Her math teacher gets annoyed with her sometimes when she answers exam questions using methods they haven’t covered in class.

Stiles is hopped up on coffee and they’re both huddled at his desk. Clay knows she’s there, so he’ll leave Stiles alone. It’s the only way Stiles can even begin to concentrate.

Lydia is his only friend who has met Clay since he came back. Scott doesn’t count since he knew Clay from years ago. Clay was charming as always when he greeted her earlier that evening, immediately getting on her good side by commenting on her beautiful hair color and not asking her if it’s dyed.

Stiles hadn’t meant for them to cross paths, but Lydia had barely given him any notice that she was coming over. While she and Clay exchanged pleasantries, Stiles watched him like a hawk, scanning for any less-than-upstanding indications from him, but he saw nothing.
“Let’s go,” Stiles had prompted her, nudging her towards the stairs. “Homework.”

“It was nice to meet you, Clay,” Lydia said, smiling.

Clay reciprocated with a smile of his own. “Likewise.”

In the half hour that’s passed since, they’ve made zero progress on the deadpool. “I’m afraid people are going to die because I can’t figure this out,” Lydia admits, slouching uncharacteristically.

Stiles squeezes her shoulder. “It’s not your responsibility. We’re lucky to even have you and your powers.”

“I don’t like feeling this helpless. I’m not a helpless person, Stiles. I wish I had a problem I could handle.”

Stiles looks at her frustrated profile for a while, for so long that he feels like Derek staring at him, but if anyone is used to Stiles’ locked gaze, it’s Lydia.

Lydia would know what to do about Clay. Stiles is so lost; he has no idea himself. But Lydia almost always knows, and in this case, would probably take a very balanced approach, both cerebral and emotional. He could stop thinking in useless circles and just follow her lead. She would know what to do.

That’s Stiles’ own part-cerebral reasoning. The emotional part is problematic, though.

He isn’t still infatuated with Lydia, and probably never really was. Even though the crush is history, it would feel entirely too strange to have gone from, “I was convinced you were the love of my life and I’m a little surprised you never filed for a restraining order,” to, “I’m glad we’re friends now, even though that never would have happened if my best friend wasn’t a werewolf and you weren’t … whatever it is that you are,” and then finally, “Can you help me deal with my uncle and all of the traumatic sex we’re having?”

Lydia has some experience with creepy uncles, but that’s all the more reason to keep her out of this.

She genuinely cares for him, he knows that. Stiles can already picture her big hazel eyes misting over after hearing something this terrible has happened to him. He no longer hopes that she sees him as a viable boyfriend prospect, but he doesn’t want her to see him as a victim. Her respect was too hard-won. He wants to keep it.

And really, the only way Stiles can ever tell anyone is because he knows the love is true.

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In order to catch Clay before he leaves for the construction site, Stiles wakes up earlier than usual. He’s not sleeping much as it is, so he doesn’t really care about cutting half an hour from his REM cycle. It makes his stomach turn to seek Clay out, but he has to do it. He can’t sit through a day of school without settling this.

Noah is still asleep upstairs, but Stiles waits outside, leaning against his Jeep and twirling his keys nervously. Clay won’t touch him if a neighbor might see. When he hears the front door of the house open and close, he stands up straighter and tries to mask his edginess.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Clay says, sauntering over.

Stiles cringes as Clay moves in too close to him. “Not today,” Stiles says. “I can’t -”
“Can’t what?”

“It’s her birthday,” he says, voice low and gaze downcast. He doesn’t want to see the look on Clay’s face or the glint in his eye. If it doesn’t matter to him, if he still wants to fuck, Stiles will know without a doubt that Clay’s heart is so dark it’s beyond redemption.

That will mean nothing is off limits. Nothing is sacred.

“I know.”

Stiles can’t read his tone at all. “My dad’s working tonight. But you’re not - we’re not gonna -”

“Not today,” Clay echoes.

Stiles sags with relief, sniffling a little. “Thanks,” he breathes nervously. He knows it’s fucked up to say that, but he still sort of means it.

“We’ll just make up for it tomorrow, yeah?”

The other shoe drops and Stiles isn’t surprised. You just don’t get something for nothing when it comes to Clay. It’s always quid pro quo.

“Yeah,” Stiles whispers.

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Later that night, Stiles goes to the police station to continue the annual tradition he shares with his father. Noah always chooses the meal and never fails to push Stiles’ standards of what is acceptably healthy. They eat dinner together in his office and talk about real things, not the day-to-day topics of recent crime stats or how Stiles did on a midterm.

They talk about what Stiles wants to do once he graduates, and that it’s okay for him to leave Beacon Hills; Noah will be fine. They talk about Stiles being over Lydia and his anxiety about trying to stay close to Scott in college. They talk about what Noah might do when he retires. Stiles watches as his dad twists his wedding ring around his finger, a long-standing habit that he’s no longer aware of when he does it.

After they finish eating, Stiles pulls out a cardboard box containing three red velvet cupcakes from a local bakery. Noah and Stiles each polish off one and leave the third one untouched. The next day, they usually share it, the final remnant of the birthday celebration, dancing around the unspoken fact that Claudia isn’t actually there.

“Hey, why don’t you give the last one to Clay?” Noah suggests this time.

Stiles jerks his head in surprise. “But that one’s for -”

He doesn’t finish his thought. They both know whom it’s for, and that neither really cares about claiming half of the cupcake later. It’s never been about eating the cupcake.

After a stilted pause, Stiles nods self-consciously. “Yeah, sure,” he agrees distantly.

They clean up the trash from their take-out dinner and Noah gives Stiles a long hug before he goes home. “Thanks for coming by today.”

“Of course,” Stiles says, eyes damp. He’s already planning to come home every year in college for this occasion. “It’s her day.”
As he walks out to his Jeep, he thinks about the last time he remembers having red velvet cupcakes with his mom for her birthday. She used to bake them herself and let Stiles sneak tastes of the cream cheese frosting while she was working and he was running around her, laughing and trying to help. He thinks he was eight years old. Everything was so much better back then.

Stiles starts the engine and listens to it purr. Impulsively, he reaches over to the passenger seat, opens the bakery box, and shoves the remaining cupcake in his mouth, devouring it so rapidly he almost literally inhales it.

When he gets home, Clay is in the living area, watching a game. Stiles walks right past him and up to his room.

True to his word, Clay leaves him alone.

It’s always been hard for Stiles to observe his mother’s birthday. But in a really weird way, this was probably the best one since she died.

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Stiles uses the Visine and the wipes the next day, but the condoms stay sealed shut.

Clay insists they don’t need them anyway and it feels so much better for both of them bareback. “We’re exclusive,” Clay says. “You’re not with anyone else.”

Stiles tries to disagree - he needs protection - but it doesn’t matter.

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Crime scene tape makes another appearance at the high school after Garrett poisons Brett with his lacrosse stick. His psycho girlfriend tries to finish the job, only to get greedily delusional that she could cash in on Scott’s assassination, as if she and her garrote are any match for him.

Parrish takes Violet away, but Noah is still on-site, conferring with Scott and surveying the locker room.

Relief is painted all over his face when he turns to hug Stiles. “Don’t worry, Dad,” Stiles reassures when Noah lets go. “I didn’t even run into the locker room until Scott dropped her ass. And Garrett never would have shanked me with his miniature prison shiv.”

“Kids killing kids, sadly that’s nothing new in the world,” Noah laments. “But kids killing kids like this? Because of a murder-for-hire list? Freshmen showing up on campus to kill their classmates? This school has never been a bubble of safety, not with everything that’s happened, but I can’t believe I really have to be scared that other human kids are going to come after my own son here.”

“I’m not in the deadpool,” Stiles reminds him. “They don’t have any interest in me. I’m just glad Scott’s okay.”

Noah hugs him again compulsively. “I know you worry about me constantly because of my job, but I worry about you because of everything you’re involved in. This damn town draws in too much darkness. I worry that one of these days, a monster is really going to get you and there won’t be any going back.”

Stiles blinks. He feels like he blinks a hundred times before he replies. “No. I’m okay, Dad. I met my lifetime quota with the nogitsune.”
Technically, his dad gave Stiles an opening - he couldn’t have queued it up any better - but there’s no way Stiles is going to take it. They’re in semi-public and the timing is terrible. ‘Sorry, Dad, I know you’re relieved that I’m safe, but I’m really not, because your beloved wife’s brother is a pedo who can’t keep it in his pants.’

Stiles’ phone chimes in his pocket and he reads the text from Derek quickly. “Dad, I gotta go - Derek’s here - we need to take Brett to Deaton’s. He’s pretty messed up from whatever Garrett did to him.”

Noah gives him another quick squeeze before Stiles dashes out of the locker room and into the hall, where Derek is patiently waiting for him.

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Stiles has managed to be somewhere else most of the last four nights, coming home only to change, grab something he needs, or check on his dad.

It hasn’t been that hard. Life has been pulling him in so many directions between school, lacrosse, and the deadpool. One night, his dad had even called him and Scott over to the station to run some evidence by them and get their opinions. After that, Stiles had curled up on the couch in Noah’s office and slept until morning, content with the 0% odds that Clay would try anything there, of all places.

Stiles is pushing his luck in keeping such an absent profile at home, but once the slew of excuses presented themselves, he couldn’t not use them. He knows he’ll have to start sleeping in his own bed soon or he’s basically poking the bear with the thorniest stick possible. He’ll have to start soon - maybe after one more day.

He’s been struggling with some economics concepts since Finstock’s real-world examples are pretty terrible, so he heads over to his favorite coffee shop to keep studying after the campus library closes. Stiles would think it’s the sleep deprivation getting in the way, except the last few nights have been more restful than usual.

Two espressos later, Stiles has settled into such a groove that he probably wouldn’t have noticed his phone ringing if it wasn’t vibrating on the table right in front of him.

“Stiles!” He sits straight up in his chair at the hysteria in Scott’s voice. “You need to get over here - I’m at your house - oh my God, what did I do -”

“Scott!” Stiles quickly shoves his things in his backpack and heads towards the exit, waving off an annoyed look from another patron. “Scott, what’s wrong?”

“Just come over here - right now, please!”

Stiles pushes the door of the coffee shop open forcefully and starts running towards his Jeep. “Is it my dad? What’s going on? He’s not supposed to be at home - he’s at the station -”

“It’s not your dad,” Scott says, strained and shaken. “I’m sorry, Stiles - I fucked up so bad -”

“Scott, just breathe, okay? Do you need your inhaler? Do you even have it?”

“No, I don’t need it - just - I’ll explain you get here …”

“I’m only a few miles away. I’m almost there. Do you want me to stay on the line?”
“No - just drive safe, okay?”

Scott hangs up and Stiles feels like every neuron in his brain is firing. He doesn’t know if Scott said it had nothing to do with his dad so he didn’t freak out and cause an accident on the short drive over.

Stiles pulls into the driveway crookedly and barely remembers to turn the engine off before he jumps out and barges through the front door. “Scott! Scott!”

The first floor feels so still that Stiles doesn’t even check all of the rooms, instead racing up to the second floor. At the top of the staircase, Stiles rounds the corner at warp speed and skids to a stop, nearly falling over and face-planting in the hall.

Scott is hunched down against the wall, his hands and mouth covered in blood. Clay is sprawled lifelessly a few feet away, covered in blood in an entirely different way and lying in a puddle of viscous crimson.

“Stiles,” Scott says, almost like a question. “Stiles, I fucked up.”

Stiles recovers from his off-kilter balance and slides onto his knees next to Scott. “Oh my God, what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Scott says, sniffling. His voice is shaking. His hands are shaking. Stiles can’t stop staring at the blood. “Lydia said she left some notes in your room the other day, she was gonna text you about them, but I told her I would stop by, it was no problem. I came up here, and your uncle -“

“Scott,” Stiles says, grabbing Scott’s shoulders in alarm, “Scotty, what did he do?”

Scott just shakes his head and stares at Stiles with wide, disbelieving eyes. “I don’t know why - he tried to -”

Stiles stares back at him, and he’s sure Scott sees the exact instant his expression goes flat. “No …”

“He wouldn’t stop trying, and I wolfed out, I don’t know what happened! And then - Stiles, Stiles, I killed him. I’m so sorry, don’t hate me. I didn’t mean to do it, I killed him.”

Scott’s agitation is only growing, so Stiles squeezes his shoulders firmly. “Scott, it’s okay. Just take a deep breath.”

“It’s not okay! I don’t know what happened,” Scott repeats, his face twisting in simultaneous distress and confusion. “He said he was tired of waiting, I don’t know what he meant. I’ve seen him, like, maybe twice since Christmas? He was tired of waiting. Waiting for me? I don’t understand, Stiles -”

“I’m the one who should be sorry!” Stiles wails. The walls are closing in on him. “He shouldn’t have come after you like that. He didn’t want you. He wanted -”

“I killed him,” Scott repeats. “I’m a killer.”

Scott slips out of control, his claws emerging and fangs dropping. His eyes flash, too, and Stiles reels back with a gasp. “Scotty. Your eyes.”

Even though his claws are still bared, Scott touches his temples in a panic. “What? What’s wrong with them?”

Stiles lets out a shuddery breath. “They’re blue.”
Scott’s face bears only fear and guilt now, even as he changes back to human form. “Because I …”

“I’m sorry, Scott. I’m so sorry.” Stiles wraps his arms around him tightly. He never wanted Scott to know what it’s like to kill someone, but it’s too late for that and it’s all his fault.

“What are we gonna tell your dad, Stiles?”

Stiles tears up and doesn’t answer right away. Scott’s blue eyes mean he took an innocent life. Just because Clay took innocence doesn’t make him innocent. But the blue eyes say otherwise, and Stiles almost chokes on it.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Scott groans, but Stiles beats him to it, turning away and puking next to the pooled blood.

Stiles jolts awake, panting and wild-eyed. He feels around in the dark to confirm he’s in his bed and it was all a nightmare. The only thing that carried over to reality is the queasiness, but he breathes through it until his stomach calms down.

It was just a dream. It wasn’t real. It doesn’t mean anything.

-----

Every night is the same. The hypervigilance keeps Stiles awake and wears him down at the same time, but he still tries to sleep and is under the covers, facing the wall, when he hears the telltale signs.

His door opens and shuts quietly, followed by a soft footfall. Stiles curls his fingers into the sheets swathed around him. At the whisper of his name and the drop of a hand on his shoulder, he inhales sharply.

“Please -” he murmurs as he rolls over.

Even in the darkness of his room, he can see that it’s not Clay. It’s Derek.

Stiles is startled, getting an inch or two of air before settling back down and pushing the blankets away. “Fuck, what are you doing here?” he hisses.

Then Stiles remembers. He had broken the news to Derek earlier that night on the phone. Derek was the last cipher for the deadpool. Allison, Aiden, Derek. Derek had accepted this development fairly passively on the other end of the line, with a light puff of breath and a simple “okay,” followed by silence and a detached-sounding, “so I’m going to die.”

He starts to come into better focus as Stiles adjusts to the dim light streaking in through the window. “Is there anything else I should know?” Derek asks. “Anything you’re not telling me?”

Stiles sits up and rubs his face. “No, Lydia just cracked it a few hours ago. Nothing new.”

“Sorry I woke you up,” Derek says, taking a place next to Stiles on his bed. “You okay? You seem kind of weird.”

Stiles narrows his eyes at him. “Hello there, blackest pot. You interrupted a bad dream, that’s all. Public speaking. In front of a bunch of clowns. And sharks.”

“I can go, if you want to get back to that.”

“No, stay. You’re already here. Why didn’t you come through the window?”
“I did. Just not yours. I had to go in through the back. One of your neighbors across the street is smoking on his front porch and I didn’t want him to report me.”

“Oh, Mr. Bristow. He’s on the patch, trying to quit. I see that’s going well for him.” Derek is quiet beside him, so Stiles barrels forward. “Sorry for not telling you in person. That was probably a shitty way to hear.”

Derek shrugs. “It’s okay. Doesn’t change the fact that my name unlocked the last list. Doesn’t change whatever that means.”

Stiles was being truthful - he wants Derek to stay. A bomb was just dropped in Derek’s lap and he doesn’t want Derek to go back to the loft alone, but he made that offer without really thinking. Now that his brain has caught up with his mouth, he’s a little worried. What if Clay comes in while Derek is there? It’s 2 am, but that’s not too late, given past history. Every other time Stiles has had someone stay over (almost always Scott, plus Danny that one time to finish a lab write-up, and Liam, somewhat reluctantly, on another occasion), he’s made sure to make it known so that Clay doesn’t try anything. How is Stiles going to explain it to Derek if Clay comes in at this hour, wearing just his boxers and reeking of desire and perversion or something?

“Come on,” he says, getting up from the bed and crossing the room to turn on the light switch and lock the door.

Stiles grabs a piece of paper on top of his desk and takes a seat, pulling over the second chair for Derek. It’s a printout of the same decoded list he read to Derek over the phone, but he figures it’s different seeing with his own two eyes.

“Maybe you all have something else in common. I mean, maybe it’s just as basic as alphabetical order. Like you’re the first three in the alphabet.”

Stiles reaches for his notepad, wishing they were at Derek’s so he had his boards, and rapidly scrawls as names pop into his head -

Allison
Lydia
Scott
Derek
Malia
Kira
Aiden
Ethan
Peter
Liam
Kate
Erica
Boyd

“Boyd,” Derek says softly. “He’s before me.”

“No.” Stiles draws a line through the name and scribbles “Vernon” next to it. “No, he’s last.”

“Cora?”

Stiles shakes his head and eliminates Ethan’s name, too. “She’s not here; the deadpool doesn’t seem to include supernatural creatures outside of Beacon County. Obviously there are more in the world
than just the ones on the list. Like Jackson.”

“You’re not on this list.”

“Oh.” Stiles scans it quickly. “Well, I’m a regular ol’ homo sapien. No powers.”

“Allison, though. Not supernatural.”

“Well, she’s a hunter. She was one …”

“But what about Argent? He’s a hunter, he’s back now. If Allison’s name counts, so does his.”

Stiles shakes his head again. “No, he literally just came back from France. Before the ciphers were chosen.”

“So what IS your real name?” Derek asks.

“Ha. You’re not very good at being sneaky. I wasn’t born yesterday. As far as you need to know, it’s Stiles.”

“But -”

“Listen, the Benefactor didn’t mine the Social Security database to get our official names. Derek before Stiles.”

Derek chews at his lower lip, and Stiles wonders if that’s what he looks like when he does that. “Lydia senses death, though.”

“It could be a metaphorical death!” Stiles grasps at, his voice rising and then quickly dropping again. “Like, you permanently say goodbye to your beard. Or gluten.”

Derek side-eyes him with a tiny smirk. “I would never give up gluten.”

“It’s all gonna be fine, Derek. The ciphers could honestly be completely random. Like drawing names out of a hat.”

“A death hat,” Derek says. “Like a fucking fedora or something.”

Stiles snorts a little. “You’d look good in a fedora. Tip it down, right here on the left …”

“Doesn’t go with the leather jacket.”

“Your face doesn’t go with the leather jacket,” Stiles quips, even though it doesn’t make any sense and is completely and utterly untrue.

Derek shifts his weight and looks down at his fidgeting hands, the overhead light casting a crisp shadow across his face. “Brett and Satomi’s pack. Almost all of them are dead.”

“What?” Stiles’ eyes bug out of his head. “How? When? Why didn’t you tell me this earlier? Would you have left without telling me?”

“Malia and I found them in the Preserve tonight. Seems like they were poisoned.”

“Wolfsbane? Like Brett?”

“No, it was … something else,” Derek says, his voice hollow. “It was a massacre.”
“Hey, man.” Stiles knows this isn’t Derek’s first massacre, and he rests his hand on Derek’s forearm and squeezes. “I’m really sorry.”

“I would have told you to try their names as the last cipher. But no need. You and Lydia already cracked it.”

Stiles squeezes Derek’s arm again. “Tell me everything.”

After Derek recaps his evening for Stiles, he looks at the time, yawns, and stands up awkwardly. “I guess I should go. Let the sharks have you or whatever.”

“You can just stay over.” Stiles finds himself suggesting. “Even werewolves can fall asleep at the wheel, yeah? No use tempting fate with a possible cipher connection. And by connection, I mean randomness …”

“Your dad,” Derek says.

“It’s fine. I locked the door. And he’s asleep.”

“So where does Scott usually crash?”

“Oh, there’s a sleeping bag in the closet,” Stiles gestures. “It’s decent enough, even on the hardwood.”

Derek shrugs. Of course he does. Derek used to live in a burnt out, dilapidated house with a nasty forest breeze. A thin sleeping bag on engineered wood probably feels like an angel’s cloud to him.

“But you don’t have to sleep on the floor. I mean, you can sleep in the bed.”

Derek’s eyebrows frown. “Are you going to sleep on the floor instead?”

“No,” Stiles says, slightly baffled. He climbs in, shuffling over to the right side, closest to the wall. “We can both fit, it’s a full-sized bed.”

“Oh.” Derek looks at the bed, to the closet, and back to the bed again. “Okay. I don’t - I just have the clothes I’m wearing.”

“You don’t keep pajamas in your utility belt?”

“I don’t even really have pajamas.”

“So are you saying you DO have a utility belt?” Stiles receives a withering glance in return. “Whatever, just do your thing. But keep your thing covered.”

Derek shucks off his shoes and most of his clothes, keeping his boxer briefs and his henley on, before starting to slide into the bed. For a second, Stiles panics internally and thinks he’s screwed himself with yet another impulsive offer. He washes his bedding religiously, but what if that’s not enough? What if Derek can smell Clay all over the mattress? But Derek doesn’t react, and instead just nestles his head into the pillow next to Stiles before giving a little sigh.

“My bed at home is a lot bigger than this.”

“Oh, shut up,” Stiles says, punching him on the shoulder.

It feels kind of good, Derek next to him. Better than kind of good. He’s not sure exactly how he feels beyond that. A little bare, even though he does have sleep clothes on. Warm, though that might just
be Derek burning like a furnace. Helpful and useful, keeping Derek company after he stumbled onto mass murder. Protected. Derek will always protect him.

Sleepy, as Stiles drifts off more easily than he has in months.

When Stiles wakes up in the morning, Derek is gone, but Stiles has two unread texts from him. One at 5:32 am that says, “Going home now, thanks for hogging the blankets,” and no emoticon. Stiles assumes the tone is Derek’s equivalent of a normal person adding a smiley face with tongue sticking out. The second is time-stamped 5:49 am. “Made it, didn’t die.”

As he slowly blinks himself further awake, Stiles has another “oh shit” moment. What if Derek or Scott or someone else - eh, maybe Liam - comes up to his window one night when Clay actually IS there? He’s both amazed and relieved it hasn’t happened already.

So he adds another step to his ritual, always turning the blinds shut and locking the windows before he goes to bed. He knows a simple lock can’t keep Derek or Scott out, but it’ll at least slow them down a little bit and give Stiles some warning.

It’s something. It’s more than he gets from Clay.

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Clay has just pressed into Stiles, barely establishing any kind of rhythm, when a door opens down the hall and they both freeze.

Noah is awake.

Clay lunges forward and claps a hand over Stiles’ mouth. When he leans over, he drives a little deeper inside and Stiles can hardly contain his revulsion. They hear the footsteps fade away, followed by the distinct creak of the third staircase step from the top.

With Clay bearing down on his back, Stiles can’t stay upright anymore - he doesn’t want to - and he cautiously collapses onto his stomach, taking Clay with him.

“Just be quiet,” Clay whispers. “He’s probably just getting some water or something.”

“I can’t breathe,” Stiles wheezes.

Clay turns them on their sides so he isn’t blanketing Stiles with his weight, but Stiles squirms with discomfort; Clay is still inside him. He tries to slide forward and away, but Clay holds him close with a firm arm around his midsection.

“You should pull out,” Stiles insists urgently. “You should go. My dad might come in here.”

“He’s not going to check on you,” Clay whispers back. “You’re not a little kid. Don’t move and keep your mouth shut. We’ll be fine.”

As much as Stiles doesn’t want to be found like this, he assumes Clay doesn’t want that even more. Getting caught means very different things for each of them.

A sudden rush of adrenaline courses through him. Stiles doesn’t recognize it at first - it’s a foreign feeling with Clay - and then he realizes this is what it must feel like when Clay isn’t in total control. Stiles has never had any kind of leverage over him before.

Once his dad comes back upstairs, he’ll be so close. Stiles would just have to make enough noise to
attract attention. His dad doesn’t have to actually see anything that bad - that’s the stuff of Stiles’ nightmares. He would make sure Clay has disengaged before Noah bursts in.

There’s really no other conclusion to be drawn, even if they weren’t completely naked. There’s only one reason Clay would be in his room at this hour. One look at Stiles’ ashen, teary face and Noah would know instantly without a single word exchanged.

But Stiles doesn’t know what his dad would do in the immediate rage. Beat the shit out of Clay? Sure, okay. Kick him out and cut him off forever? Great. Rush back to his room and open the gun safe? Shoot Clay in cold blood, like a textbook example of a crime of passion? Strangle Clay with his bare hands? Get hauled away to prison if a neighbor hears the shot and calls it in? Collude with his son in a frenzied cover-up that eats away at him for the rest of his life? And how would Stiles even begin to explain all of this to him afterwards? What if Clay fights back and kills his dad in ‘self-defense’?

They hear the third step again and Noah’s footsteps, this time at a distance and drawing closer. His heart in his throat, Stiles bites down on his lip to stop himself from crying. His dad is right there. He’s right there.

Clay preemptively covers his mouth again and Stiles coils up with the pressure of staying silent until his dad closes his door and disappears behind it.

“You did good,” Clay says. “Just give it a few minutes, to be safe.”

And they wait, Clay still spooned up behind Stiles, still inside him, for Noah to fall back asleep, unaware that his son is slowly and secretly dying. When Clay determines enough time has passed and starts grinding against him, Stiles keens, thin and reedy, but he doesn’t get in trouble because no one can hear them. They’re alone again.

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It feels warped and grotesque, but Stiles is vaguely almost grateful that Clay only comes after him in one place. It always happens in the same secluded place, every time.

When he was void, he kept coming to consciousness in different locations, only hazily aware of how he had gotten there. He made his rounds in Beacon Hills, bringing about terror and destruction wherever he went, aiming for specific people or turning innocent bystanders into victims. Everyone was at risk. People gave up everything to save him.

It’s lonely, being there with Clay, but in that little world, Stiles can’t hurt anybody else. There’s no collateral damage. His room, his bed, his body - those are no longer safe places, but at least it’s only him who gets hurt.

Chapter End Notes

FYI for clarity's sake - I am following many canon events in s3 and s4, but not all. Some I am disregarding -

1. I ignored the Mexico trip and de-aging of Derek, which would have happened in the
chapter 2 timeframe (Stiles went to Oregon with the Mc Calls instead). I probably could have made it work within this story, but it would have been more effort than it was worth.

2. I am also ignoring the whole storyline of Derek losing his werewolf powers, though that would have been interesting to incorporate, especially since a few people have asked about whether Stiles' were-friends can sense his anxiety.

3. Stiles was at Eichen House with Malia (that was alluded to in the beginning of chapter 2), and they were in the basement together when the nogitsune returned and forced Stiles to "let him in," but they definitely did not have extremely questionable sex there, and they are obviously not dating. For a second, I thought about weaving in their inappropriate basement sex, as though Stiles, fully cognizant that he's only temporarily free of the nogitsune and may very well die, didn’t want to die with his only sexual experience being with his uncle, but I just didn’t see that being a priority to him in that moment. He was in suspended hell - not thinking about sex before dying/killing. It would have been gross and unfair to both Stiles and Malia as characters.

4. Derek and Braeden aren't love interests.

5. There was a reference to Heather, also in chapter 2, but nothing about the fact that Stiles was eager to have sex with her in her basement (what is it with Stiles and basements?) / wine cellar. Stiles in this story would not feel that. He also wouldn't have had that whole "someone needs to sex me right now" freakout in the locker room, even as a cover-up to keep Scott thinking he was still a virgin.

6. Scott and Stiles do not find $500k in Hale bonds in Garrett's locker. If they had, I'm pretty certain Stiles would have taken enough to pay back his uncle and end that leverage. No moral debate on that for him. I don’t know how he would have explained to his dad that he repaid the loan, but he would have figured something out.

In future chapters, I'll make sure to state whether anything important in canon did not carry over into this story. Thank you for reading!
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the direct and indirect feedback you’ve been giving me! It's so motivating! lol and to think I was going to wait until I finished the entire story to post anything. I would have been limping to the finish line if I kept it all internal like that. The readership support has been great! I just saw that this story had passed 200 kudos when I posted today! Gracias!

This chapter is a couple of days later than I intended - I went out of town without my computer, and for some reason, I was getting blocked in trying to pull some parts together. But it's done and now I can work on finalizing chapter 5!

[Posted 5/8/17]

After Stiles takes another long shower, he turns sideways in front of the bathroom mirror, angling his left shoulder as much as he can to inspect the damage in the reflection. He grimaces at the minor injury before reaching across his chest with his right hand to run his fingers over the indentations. The teeth marks are an hour old and still well-defined, the product of unchecked force. They don’t look too angry, though.

He’s never been bitten before.

It’s almost happened, but not quite. When Scott had first been turned and had unstable control over his wolf form, he had given Stiles a fire extinguisher a good scare, but no bites. Scott had given the bite to the nogitsune, which still wore Stiles' face, but it wasn’t Stiles.

Malia had some difficulty managing her shift after years of living in the wild as a coyote, but she hasn’t bitten him. During the last full moon, she’d lunged at him, against her restraints and with fangs bared, but he’d talked her down in the end. Even Peter, that fucking asshole, had grabbed his arm like he might do it, but still hadn’t bitten Stiles without his consent.

The kanima paralytic delivered by Jackson through a tiny cut on the neck wasn’t a bite. And Derek, for all of his early threats of “I’ll rip your throat out with my teeth” has only ever ripped throats out in defense. He’s never bitten Stiles, either.

Perfect. More de-virginization courtesy of his uncle.

Stiles hears Derek’s voice echo in his head - ‘the bite is a gift’ - and his mouth twists in shame. If Stiles showed this to him, he probably wouldn’t be so emphatic about that anymore. Not that this is what Derek meant in the first place.

He pinches at the skin a little, purposely trying to aggravate it to determine if it’s close to breaking and spilling blood. It doesn’t seem like it, but Stiles covers it with a square piece of gauze and tapes along all four sides just in case. He has no intention of taking it off until the marks are gone. Once the “gift” he never wanted fades completely.
Stiles shuts his locker and turns on his heel, making a snide face when he sees Stansfield walking down the hall in his direction. Whatever. Stansfield is one of the most annoying dudebros in the whole school and he’s treated Stiles like gum on his shoe ever since Scott’s stock on the lacrosse team rose, but he’s nothing Stiles can’t handle.

Stiles is torn between ignoring Stansfield’s incoming insult or throwing one five times as clever back, but it’s a moot point because Stansfield passes him without a word.

Stiles looks over his shoulder at the hulking senior with slight confusion, but he shakes it off quickly. He’s not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Who has two thumbs and doesn’t mind being ignored sometimes? This guy!

It doesn’t escape Stiles when it happens again during lacrosse practice that afternoon. The team has split into smaller groups to run some drills, and Stansfield doesn’t needle Stiles by sending him an impossible shot or body-checking him as he runs by. He just plays like a somewhat normal person.

During a break, Stiles flags Scott down. “Hey, did you tell Stansfield to lay off or something?”

Scott takes a long gulp of water from his bottle. “No, I don’t fuckin’ talk to that guy if I don’t have to.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, shrugging in obtuse satisfaction. “Maybe he asked the wizard for a brain and actually got one.”

“Yeah, I mean, even someone as thick as him was bound to get it sooner or later. Why bother picking on you? He’s probably just tired of it, it’s not worth it for him anymore.”

Finstock blows his whistle and screams at first line to take the field. Stiles sits on the bench, not minding the extra time to catch his breath. First line isn’t allowed off the field until they can get a goal past Liam, so they’ll probably be there for a while. It’s like Finstock has forgotten there are other team members even present.

Stiles takes another glance at Stansfield and raises his eyebrows as Stansfield makes a sophomoric joke and looks around for high-fives from his lackeys. So he didn’t get any smarter and he’s just as douchey as always. Stiles doesn’t really care. All he knows is he doesn’t seem to exist to that dumbass anymore. Fantastic.

In his inertia, he contemplates the idea that Clay could get tired of him one day, too. Lifting weights wasn’t the way to make that happen, but it’s theoretically possible. This is the human psyche, not hard-and-fast scientific principles.

What would it take for Clay to get bored of him? Stiles knows he must be terrible in bed, considering he hates having sex with Clay with every nano-fiber of his being, but that has never been why Clay does it. It’s not like Clay thought a ten-year-old would be an expert in providing gratification. Stiles isn’t any better at that, even seven years later.

Clay hurts him to feel powerful. Maybe the appeal will fade if he doesn’t get that rush of power anymore, but Stiles doesn’t know how to balance the scales. IF he can balance the scales. Every time he’s pushed back, Clay has put him right back in his place.

If the power comes from taking what he wants from someone who doesn’t want to give it, Stiles can only try to control one part of that equation. He can’t stop Clay from trying to take it, but the second part - whether Stiles wants it or not, or at least whether Clay thinks he wants it …

Stiles feels like death warmed over at the idea of faking it like he wants it, too. There’s no way he
could make himself act that way. It doesn’t have to be like the overly enthusiastic gay porn he’s seen, but he can’t imagine touching Clay or making sounds like he’s happy about it.

His head fills with memories of Clay telling him he’ll like it, that it’ll be good for him, that he’ll want it, too.

No. Acting like he enjoys it won’t take Clay’s power away. One day he’s making Stiles do it, the next day Clay’s converted him and brought him over to the dark side. Clay won’t be stealing it anymore, not when it seems like everything he’s said came true and now Stiles wants to give it to him. That’ll just give Clay more power than he ever thought possible. He’ll keep coming back to that well to revel in that feeling again and again. He’ll think he’s not doing anything wrong. That nothing he’s done was wrong.

Stiles grinds his teeth. It would never get that far anyway - he’ll never be able to fake something so disgusting and vile. His blood pressure is rising, but he calms himself down by telling himself there’s still a sliver of possibility. Stansfield doesn’t bother him anymore and Stiles didn’t do anything to make that happen, at least not that he’s aware of. Stansfield’s bullying is a tiny blip compared to what Clay does to him, but Stiles isn’t ready to let go of the little glimmer of hope. It’s all he has left.

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No one’s there when Stiles comes home early, so he goes into the kitchen to make a sandwich and grab some junk food from the secret stash his dad doesn’t know about. He only had coffee for breakfast and half of a burrito and an apple at lunch, but was unaware his stomach was rumbling until he arrived at his unoccupied and peaceful house.

Finstock had raged at first line and then abruptly and atypically cut practice short. The rumor is he has some kind of bizarre rash and is going to the hospital to get it examined, but it’s irrelevant to Stiles why he dismissed everyone. Logging an hour or so playing Halo sounds much better than chasing the ball around.

After taking his plate upstairs, he tosses his backpack by his desk and shoves a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth. Basic coordination while chewing seems to be eluding him today as he struggles a bit to get his arm out of his hoodie.

“Hey, Stiles.”

When Stiles whirls around, a big chunk of cookie breaks off and falls to the floor, crumbs of various sizes scattering. “Uh,” he mumbles, hurriedly swallowing down.

Stiles didn’t hear Clay come home, but here he is. “You’re not usually back by now,” Clay drawls.

“Yeah,” Stiles says quietly, suddenly wanting to put his sweatshirt back on. “I’m gonna - I gotta head out again -”

Clay points to the uneaten sandwich on Stiles’ desk. “Really? Doesn’t look like it.”

“I just stopped here to eat and change. Scott’s waiting for me.”

“He’s not outside, though.”

“No, but I can’t be late -”

“You can be a little late,” Clay says, shedding his jacket with far more ease than Stiles had just displayed. “I had a real shit day at the site. You need to help me blow off some steam.”
Stiles just stares at him, eyes quaking a little. When he was younger, Stiles had spent a lot of after- 
school and summer break hours with Clay, so it naturally followed that they’d also had private time 
during the day. Even with activities here and there, like soccer practice or hanging out at Scott’s 
house, Stiles wasn’t nearly as busy as he is now. Clay would pick him up and there would be a 
stretch of hours before Noah came back from the station. Plenty of time for Stiles to recover and go 
back to pretending he was a normal kid.

But Stiles had forgotten what it felt like, being forced into sex with the sun shining obliviously on his 
face and everyone else awake and alert, going about their business in the safety of their homes.

Clay was happy to remind him.

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As Stiles approaches his room, he’s caught off guard by muffled noises cutting through the quiet. His 
Jeep is the only car parked in front of the house, and he doesn’t think his dad would let in an 
unsupervised contractor, nor does he know of any work that needs to be done in his room.

He reaches into his pocket to palm his phone, about to text Scott and ask if he’s here, but he shakes 
his head at the thought. He can just ask directly. It could be Derek, too. They’ve both been in his 
house before without him.

“Dad? Scott?” he calls out.

Stiles doesn’t have a good feeling about this, and it only multiplies when he turns the knob on his 
doors, only to find it locked.

“What?” he mumbles to himself and tries again. No dice.

He presses his ear to the door and the sounds become more distinct. He knows those sounds. He’s 
been haunted by them.

It’s Clay and his sex noises. Stiles panics and pats down his own chest for reassurance that he’s 
outside in the hall, not inside with Clay. There’s no real acknowledgment of the relief, though, 
because if it’s not him in his room, who the hell is it? Is Clay just jerking off by himself in the middle 
of the day? In Stiles’ fucking bed? On the clean sheets that Stiles painstakingly maintains to eliminate 
all traces of him?

Stiles pounds on the door. “Hey! Get outta my room!”

After a few more insistent thumps, Stiles backs up and kicks in the door as hard as he can. It’s a 
simple lock, so the door flies open and he rushes in.

Clay’s there, just like Stiles suspected, but there’s someone underneath him, someone Stiles can’t see 
around Clay’s broad form. “What the hell are you doing -” Stiles starts to yell, but he grinds to a halt 
and his heart falls out on the floor once he steps close enough to see.

It’s Allison.

He gasps, almost taking in too much air, and bolts forward to pull Clay off of her. Clay anticipates 
the motion, pushing him away, and Stiles falls back hard, sliding further on the floor once he makes 
contact. Instantly, he gets up and rushes Clay again, except Clay disappears and he’s barely able to 
stop himself from falling forward.

It’s just Allison lying on his bed now. She’s dressed, but a dark red stain is spreading across her
“Allison!” Stiles screams. “Allison!”

She’s too injured to talk much, her breaths shallow and her eyes wide as she stares up at him. “I’m sorry, Allison,” he cries while putting pressure on the wound. “I’m sorry. It should have been me.”

Stiles wakes up in a cold sweat, fingers convulsing. Derek is crouched next to him, one hand still on Stiles’ shoulder.

“Where am I?” Stiles asks, looking around and realizing he’s lying across Derek’s couch. The last thing he remembers is being at a pack meeting and Malia complaining about being hungry. “Where is everyone?”

“They all left a few hours ago. You fell asleep and Scott tried to wake you up before he took off, but you were out cold. He texted your dad from your phone to say you’re sleeping over at his house.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, yawning. “What time is it?”

“It’s after 3 am.”

“Sorry to crash here.” Stiles fumbles around to disentangle himself from the blankets someone covered him with. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“It’s fine,” Derek assures. “I know you haven’t been sleeping much.”

“Yeah, I’ve been kind of tired lately,” Stiles admits.

“Is it because of the nightmares?”

Stiles sits up, suddenly feeling wide awake. “What do you mean?”

“You were having a nightmare. Yelling in your sleep.”

“Oh shit, did I wake you?” It’s a mostly silly question - Derek’s hearing is so good that a church mouse could wake him up.

“No, I said it’s fine. Are you okay? You were saying Allison’s name.”

Stiles shivers at the memory of the dream. “I - I was?”

“Yeah. It sounded bad.”

Stiles closes his eyes and falls back on the couch. “She died, Derek. It WAS bad.”

“You should try to sleep some more,” Derek says, squeezing his shoulder. “You don’t have to go to school for hours.”

“I don’t really know if I can.”

“But you’re tired.”

“I know, but I’ve been having … I’ve been having some problems sleeping.”

Derek looks at him closely, and Stiles knows what he’s thinking. Isn’t this exactly what happened when the nogitsune had first taken hold of him?
“It’s nothing mystical,” Stiles insists. “I just have a lot going on and my default is to amp up. I have a hard time getting my brain to turn off sometimes.”

“Allison wasn’t your fault, you know.”

Stiles nods out of habit. Everyone says that. He made them live with it, but they don’t live with it the way he does.

“Do you want, like … some warm milk or something?”

Stiles feels a little bad for chuckling - Derek’s obviously trying - but he does anyway. “I’ll take a shot of whiskey if you’ve got it.”

Derek smirks. “Not for you.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Do you want to watch tv or something? Let that lull you to sleep?”

Stiles sits up and curls into a corner of the couch to make room for Derek to sit on the other end. Derek flicks on the tv and they share the blankets, settling into some late night reruns turned down low. Stiles can feel Derek’s eyes on him, watching him, but he stops noticing it a few minutes later, once he dozes off and sleeps straight through to morning.

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The pack congregates again the next night at Derek’s loft, breaking up fairly quickly this time with little fanfare. Stiles had been able to map out a little more on his murder board, but the additions aren’t answering any questions. Everyone is aware by now that Derek’s name unlocked the last section of the deadpool, but no one has brought it up.

The PSATs are just around the corner and some of them are more nervous than others. Lydia, of course, isn’t anxious at all since she’s happy with her scores from last year and isn’t trying again. Scott’s worried about getting a high enough score to keep the UC system in play as an option - it’s not like his GPA is doing him big favors there. Kira’s parents don’t usually put a lot of academic pressure on her, but she feels compelled to do well on the exam to prove to them it wasn’t a mistake to stay in Beacon Hills. Malia’s mostly just aggravated about sitting there for hours trying to understand anything in the test booklet.

Selfishly, Stiles feels vindicated by the collective display of exhaustion. The fatigue Derek saw from him the previous night is pretty much mirrored by his friends. They didn’t have nightmares about their murderous past, but they were definitely flagging.

In advance of another cram session, Stiles accompanies Scott to grab something to eat. Or to be more accurate, Scott eats and Stiles drinks more coffee. “Dude,” Scott says in between bites, “I think Derek is sad about something.”

Stiles shrugs. “Yeah, you’re right. So very different from his normal, sunny disposition.”

“I don’t know, but I can tell something’s going on. But I can’t talk to him about it - we’re sort of brothers now, but not bros like you and I are bros.”

“Well, someone wants his head on a stick and will pay $15 million for it. That would make anyone unhappy.”
“But Derek doesn’t get down about stuff like that!” Scott insists. “He gets angry. He’s not like, crying because the Benefactor doesn’t want to be best friends with him.”

Stiles stirs some hazelnut creamer into his coffee. “I don’t know what to tell you, man, that’s all I’ve got.”

“It kind of …” Scott says tentatively, “it kind of seemed like he wasn’t sad until you showed up.”

“What?” Stiles asks, gaping at Scott. “What the fuck?”

“I don’t know, Stiles, maybe I’m reading into it, but he asked me if you’re okay. I told him you have a shit-ton on your plate and you’re working through the nogitsune stuff, but that we’ve talked about it and you’re dealing with it. He seemed … okay with that.”

Stiles shakes his head. He’s not annoyed - not exactly. He doesn’t know what he feels. “Honestly, I think he’s only asking because I zonked out on his couch last night, but I don’t know why he’s talking to you about me, and I don’t think he was acting any weirder than usual. I had some beef jerky in my backpack - maybe he was just really hungry or something.”

“Oh, is that what that was?” Scott says, squinting. “I smelled that, too, and it DID make me hungry. That must be why I was craving salami.”

Stiles just shrugs again and doesn’t say anything, which is perfectly fine because Scott keeps on going. “Can werewolves even get depressed? I mean, I know people can, and dogs can. Should I ask Deaton? …”

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Stiles spits the last of the toothpaste into the sink and rinses out the foamy remnants. Clay appears behind him in the mirror before he hears Clay over the sound of the rushing water. A second ago, Stiles’ mouth was minty fresh, but now it’s just sour.

Clay pins him against the counter, casually observing, “We look so good together.”

Stiles looks down, eyes half-closed, so he doesn’t have to see their reflection in the mirror. If they look “good,” it’s because they’re related and their features and coloring are complementary. Not because they’re America’s Sweethearts on the cover of People magazine.

Clay’s half-hard already and Stiles’ heart skips a beat, then speeds up into overdrive when Clay slips a hand between them and down the back of Stiles’ pajama pants. The mirror could be good for something. He could shatter it with his fist and slash his wrist wide open with a jagged shard.

“Come on,” Clay says. “Let’s go to my room.”

As Clay takes Stiles by the bicep and leads him down the hall, he doesn’t resist. He hasn’t eaten anything all day - he has no appetite at all - and his blood sugar is probably going haywire.

Stiles tries to turn off all of his feelings and it sort of works. He doesn’t have any physical energy, so maybe his emotions won’t have any fuel, either. The change of location and the subsequent carnal agony don’t really register for him.

When Clay is done, Stiles feels so numb that he merely turns away on his side. He could get the hell out of there, but he’s so fucking tired.

His vision comes into focus as he stares at the window. His mom had made those curtains. Noah
couldn’t stand to keep them in his room after she died, so he’d moved them to the guest room.

The weight on the bed shifts behind him as Clay gets up. “Did you ever love her?” Stiles asks, just above a whisper.

“Of course I did,” Clay answers, barely missing a beat.

Stiles sniffs harshly and rubs at his face. “What … what would she think … of this?”

Clay pauses this time. “She would never know, Stiles.”

Stiles bursts into tears. “I wish she was here …”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, an endless wave of guilt sweeps him under. He’s not trying to insinuate his mother would protect him while his dad wouldn’t. Or that he only wishes she was still alive because then Clay might never have touched him. Or that he’s angry with her that she’s not there to help him.

He doesn’t mean any of those things. He just misses her so much. He’s always been the kind of boy who needs his mom. For a second, he wonders whether he would confide in her about the abuse and he honestly doesn’t know. He might keep secrets from her, too.

“It’s okay,” Clay says quietly, reaching out to stroke between Stiles’ shoulder blades. “It’s okay.”

But it’s not okay, and Clay is the absolute last person in the galaxy who can convince Stiles otherwise, so he just keeps crying. Clay climbs back in bed, curling up behind him. It’s just like after his mom died and Clay started their private playtime, when Stiles was never sure if Clay meant any of the comforting things he said or did.

“I miss her, too,” Clay murmurs, and Stiles loses it completely.

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Parrish lives in a fairly nice apartment complex, complete with a communal gym that works out well for his self-defense tutelage. This is only Stiles’ third time meeting up with him, but Parrish is a calm and unflappable teacher, so Stiles feels like he’s picked up a decent amount. He’s not ready to take to the streets and kick some ass, but he’s not skinny and defenseless anymore, either.

“Do you think you could show me some stuff where it’s not someone coming at me? Like, I’d have to get out of it instead of thwarting it?”

Parrish nods. “Sure. Anything in mind? Or just start with something and we’ll go from there?”

“Uh …” Stiles thinks, “like what if someone has me pinned down and is like, choking me?” He pauses again, fully aware of how specific and immediate that was, so he covers quickly. “I’ve seen it in a lot of movies.”

Parrish doesn’t seem to have noticed. “Yeah, let’s do that. Hit the mat, Stilinski.”

As even-tempered and diligent as always, Parrish talks Stiles through a couple of techniques and they run the sequence over and over again until Parrish gets up and stays up. “Let’s break for five,” he suggests.

“Most people can’t keep up with me,” Stiles jokes. “I’m an amazing physical specimen.”

Parrish stretches his neck side-to-side with a grin. “You could be ready for the octagon any day
“I really appreciate this, Deputy Parrish,” Stiles says, raising his arm to wipe stray sweat off his face with the shoulder of his t-shirt.

“It’s no problem, Stiles. And you can call me Jordan. People I body slam for recreational reasons can call me Jordan.”

“Honestly, you’re the best. Thank you for doing this even though you know you can’t get brownie points with my dad.”

“A well-trained community is a safer community,” Parrish says congenially. “And who knows, maybe one day we’ll see you working as a deputy at the station, too. But I doubt it - you could go all the way if you wanted. FBI, CIA, whatever you want.”

“After my undefeated MMA career, you mean. Seriously. I owe you one. Just let me know if you need a coffee bitch at the station or a designated driver or whatever.”

“Actually, there is something you can help me with.” Parrish smiles impishly at him. “Since we’re friends and all. So, Lydia. Do you think I’m too old for her?”

Stiles laughs. “Six years is not too old. I would do a six-year difference, no question.”

“Stiles,” Parrish says, taking a step back, his face serious and stony, “I can’t let you date twelve-year-olds.”

Stiles’ eyes go wide and he hustles to walk back the foot in his mouth. “No - you know I’m not - that’s not my type -” Stiles slugs Parrish in the arm when he starts cracking up. “Okay, wise guy, how about I choke you this time?”

They resume the simulations, Parrish increasing his resistance as Stiles gets more comfortable with the moves. Stiles doesn’t know when he’ll use what he’s learning and if it’ll be even mildly effective when the threat is real, but it’s good practice. He might never use this against Clay or the assassins or any creatures, but the lessons are empowering in their own way. No one can ever take this away from him.

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The aborted PSATs are on Saturday. As Stiles is being walked in to the locker room with a gun pointed at his back, all he can think about is saving his friends. He will never tell this man where his friends are. He will never give them up.

When he turns around, the assassin puts the gun right up to his forehead, counting to 3. Stiles squeezes his eyes shut and trembles, not with fearlessness but stubborn bravery. He will never, ever give his friends up.

After the assassin counts out “2,” his mind suddenly buzzes with something different -

This could be my escape. It could all be over now.

He hears a loud bang and feels a wet spray hit his face. At first, he thinks the bullet hit him and the spray is his own blood. When his eyes fly open in shock, he sees the assassin fall to the ground with Agent McCall standing over him in a hazmat suit, like a big yellow Gumby.

Scott’s dad starts explaining what Melissa told him about the cure for the virus, and Stiles’ mind
races again to catalogue the information before his legs take their turn, sprinting to the Hale vault to tell Scott.

He doesn’t have time to think about the tiny seed of disappointment in the pit of his stomach, the seed that knows he will live to see another day. He’ll live to go back to his bedroom another day.

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“I want to try something different.”

Stiles shrinks back, folding into himself tighter. Clay follows his movement, boxing him in with an arm braced against the headboard on either side of him.

“You’re gonna be on top so you can ride me.”

“No!” Stiles squeaks out. The blood is somehow rushing out of his head and pulsing loudly in his eardrums at the same time. “No. No.”

Clay leans over to kiss him. “You’ll like it,” Clay says. “You’ll be in control this way.”

Stiles blanches, beads of sweat forming in the hollow of his throat. Clay wants him to do the work, to make it happen. He can’t. He CAN’T. “No …”

“I thought you would like that. You don’t want the control?”

Stiles shakes his head adamantly. It’s not control. Or power. It’s not freedom. He won’t be pressed down by Clay the way he normally is, but he’ll still be a prisoner. Except this time, he’ll be a prisoner inflicting his own punishment.

“Tell me what you want.”

Stiles tears up and puts his forehead in his hands. This must be some kind of sick joke. He’s already tried, so many times, to tell Clay what he wants, but it’s off the table. He can’t have that.

“Are you going to have one of your tantrums again? Even when I’m being so nice?”

Stiles almost shouts that he wants Clay to go play in traffic, but he swallows the words down. He’s on the verge of another panic attack, one that he won’t try to quell, because if he can’t breathe or move his body at will, he can’t do what Clay is asking of him.

“It’s okay,” Clay consoles, threading a hand through Stiles’ hair and scratching at the nape of his neck. “I know what you want. I’ll take care of you like I always do.”

Clay pulls at one of Stiles’ ankles, dismantling the little ball of fear that Stiles had formed and guiding him into a familiar position on his knees with Clay behind him.

Midway through, Clay grunts, “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” He’s met with silence. “Answer me, Stiles. This is what you wanted.”

Stiles still doesn’t say anything until Clay smacks his thigh roughly. “Yes,” Stiles finally whispers.

“You never say yes to me,” Clay says. “I like it. You wanted it like this, right?”

“Yes,” Stiles manages to repeat before his throat closes up bleakly.

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Stiles no longer wishes, even in the slightest, that Clay was around when he was void. The nogitsune would never have helped him. Stiles wouldn’t have woken up in random parking lots or at the school, stumbling back in control. He would have woken up in his own bed in the middle of the night. The nogitsune would have peeled back just as Clay was coming into Stiles’ room for another taste.

It would have left him there to suffer, and before the tears and other fluids were even dry, would have returned to feed off the pain Stiles was drowning in - not just from the sex, but from being allowed to reclaim his body only to have to surrender it to someone else.

The nogitsune would have worn that vicious little sneer and lapped it all up.

Stiles would never have been able to survive that, being passed back and forth, outnumbered two to one. That would have been the end of him.

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The economics study group Stiles sometimes meets with in the library works through most of the study guide before people have to start leaving. He doesn’t really need the study group - not quite yet - but he can feel his focus on academics slipping. The reinforcement of the material can only help him, and it’s nice being around other students outside his usual circle. Ones who don’t know him that well so he doesn’t have to pretend as much.

At first, school had represented a positive area of fixation and a long-term path out of his living situation, but it’s also become a great way to prevent any red flags from his friends about his anxiety and occasional aloofness. How much of a mess could they think he is when he’s pulling down straight A’s, even with the deadpool threat? They have to believe he’s fine. Not perfect, but he’s doing okay.

Stiles climbs into his Jeep and throws his backpack over to the passenger side. He hasn’t checked his phone in a couple of hours, so he pulls it out of his pocket and flicks the screen on.

The only notification of real interest is a text from his dad saying he’ll be home around 9 pm. Stiles checks the time - 5:30 pm - and looks out at the sun dipping lower into the horizon.

He starts the engine with a sigh, but lets it idle for a while in park. Shifting gears, he moves to a corner of the lot, away from the buildings and shielded by nearby trees.

Stiles clambers awkwardly into the backseat and lays down, using a discarded hoodie he had left there as a makeshift pillow. For someone like him who can’t sleep anywhere without his regular pillow, it doesn’t offer much comfort, but it’ll have to suffice.

He somehow manages to nod off and when he wakes up, it’s pitch black around him. Screwing his face up to squeeze out the residual sleepiness, he checks the time again - 9:17 pm.

Stiles stumbles back to the front seat, only mildly refreshed. The nap helped, though, given how poorly he’s been sleeping at night. He had slept dreamlessly for nearly four hours, something he hasn’t done since he fell asleep at Derek’s in the front of the blinking television.

As he pulls up in front of his house, he sees his dad’s car already parked in the driveway and his palms start sweating in relief. His dad’s presence doesn’t stop anything, but it’s better than being in the house alone with Clay. It’s sort of bone-chilling to have his dad so close by when it’s happening, but ultimately, it’s better to have, floating in the ether, a reminder that someone loves him, pure and simple. It takes a tiny bit of the edge off the fact that someone else just loves to hurt him.
The next forty minutes will be the fastest and slowest forty minutes of Stiles’ life.

Scott’s faked death looks all too real and Stiles has to keep reminding himself that it’s just a ruse. A really, really convincing ruse that could easily turn real if the plan goes awry.

Stiles and Argent are paired together at the hospital, corresponding with the Benefactor. Stiles wants to apologize again for Allison, but it’s not the time or place. They’re all used to working with a real sense of urgency, but knowing that Scott is counting on them to identify the Benefactor and wake him up before it’s permanent lights out is urgency with a capital U.

Argent is all business, too, not that he was ever one for hanging out and shooting the shit, never mind with kids his daughter’s age, never mind with the kid who killed his daughter, so Stiles stays focused and on track. It doesn’t hurt that he popped an Adderall an hour ago.

There’s a bit of musical chairs as Argent leaves to tap into the hospital security cameras, sending the feed to the laptops Stiles is watching with Liam and Kira. When one of the feeds cuts out, Liam and Kira run off to investigate, leaving Stiles on his own.

Then the power shuts off and Stiles’ eyes flick up at the dark bulbs overhead. He hopes this isn’t an omen for what’s to come. Stiles finds Argent in the halls, who takes off as well and tasks Stiles with watching over Scott in the morgue as the most impotent guard on the team.

The longer Argent is gone, the more agitated Stiles gets. Something must be wrong or else Argent would have come back already.

Argent returns, just not the way Stiles expected, as he flies through the swinging double-doors and across the tiles. Stiles comes face-to-face with Kate Argent, and it seems like such a mindfuck - she can’t really be the Benefactor, can she? - but she claims she’s not. This would be a great time to have a werewolf with them, because neither he nor Argent can sense with utmost confidence whether she’s lying. It probably wouldn’t matter, though, because Kate is such a sociopath that she could probably say she’s the one who really shot JFK and pass the most advanced lie detector without a hitch.

Argent and Kate tussle a bit, but it’s nothing more than a few love taps in the grand scheme of how much they could try to fuck each other up. Argent seems to believe her when she says she’s not the Benefactor, but he doesn’t back down. She’s not walking out with Scott’s body. She’s not walking out with Scott’s body. Argent pragmatically talks her into leaving by convincing her that leaving Scott with them is in her best interest. It doesn’t satisfy her own closely-held and mysterious agenda, but letting someone else hunt down the person hunting her via the deadpool is good enough for her, for now. The enemy of my enemy is my friend and all of that.

The idea makes Stiles want to snort disdainfully in her face. He doesn’t see her as his “friend” and he’s sure none of the other pack members do, either. He’s sure that Derek doesn’t. That heartless bitch killed almost everyone in his family and is back, stronger and bitchier than ever. Stiles doesn’t know what she’s really after, but she’s mostly stayed away from Derek, so that’s good enough for him. It seems that Kate isn’t the only one compromising these days.

There are only three minutes left on the timer when Kira manages to revive Scott. Stiles takes a peek at Argent when Scott wakes up, and he’s characteristically stoic. It must be like a knife in the heart, though, seeing this and wondering why everyone else gets another chance to live but the people he loves. Kate came back from the dead and they share the same blood, but she violated everything that Argent stands for and they’re on opposite sides more than they’ve ever been. She doesn’t count.
Peter died as an alpha and came back, granted without the alpha powers. Jackson died as a kanima and was reborn as a werewolf. Scott’s a werewolf, so he can also survive things Allison couldn’t, but why does Stiles get to walk around like nothing’s happened? He’s just a strictly average human who nearly died because of the nogitsune. Why does he deserve to live when others don’t get to? What did he ever do to earn that?

Maybe he’ll spend the rest of his somehow-spared life trying to earn it.

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After the first time Stiles comes before Clay does, Stiles runs through all of the hot water again and then some. He puts on sweatpants and cries in the bathroom, curled up against the vanity. The acoustics make his sobs bounce off the walls, but he can’t go back to his bed. The bathroom is his only sanctuary in the house, where he goes to try to rid himself of the violations.

When it happened, Stiles had slumped down bonelessly. He needed it to be over, but he had to wait because Clay wasn’t done yet. He had to wait because his body felt and expressed the apex of pleasure before Clay’s did. Stiles doesn’t have words for how disgusted he is with himself. He doesn’t know how he could ever do that. He’s more broken inside than he ever thought.

He’s used various ways to delay orgasm before, by himself - who hasn’t joked about Margaret Thatcher naked on a cold day? - but the idea that he’ll have to make himself think of repellent things with Clay makes him feel physically ill. Because apparently, he doesn’t find being forcibly penetrated by his uncle to be repulsive enough. He has to do something extra to keep from getting off.

This isn’t what he meant when he had speculated about taking away Clay’s power, and it’s confirmed every shred of doubt he had that it could work.

Stiles doesn’t know if Clay can hear him crying, but it’s probably okay if he can, even if Clay’s going for round two and rubbing one out in the guest room. Stiles almost wants Clay to hear it because that’s the only way he can try to challenge the validation Clay must have felt when he came. His little laugh of satisfaction spoke volumes.

Stiles tucks his face into his knees. Clay probably thinks Stiles’ actions spoke volumes, too.

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Stiles waits on the sidelines at the end of practice for Scott to finish talking to Finstock and Liam. He has to squint into the sun to watch them, though, so he turns to his left and sees Stansfield talking to another student, a younger boy slighter in frame and height and whom Stiles doesn’t recognize.

The kid hands some papers to Stansfield and leaves. It could be perfectly innocent, but Stiles knows bullying when he sees it.

“All right, I’m done!”

Scott is suddenly next to him and nearly everyone already headed towards the locker room five minutes ago, so they take their time walking over.

“Hey, so you know what,” Scott says, “it’s not you.”

“Huh?” Stiles knocks his lacrosse stick against Scott’s in confusion. “It’s not you, it’s me?”

“No, I mean Derek’s not being weird because of you.”
“Well, that was never an actual idea. I think it’s pretty well-established that Derek is weird because
of Derek.”

“I’ve seen him by myself twice in the past week and he’s still pretty bummed out. Something’s really
bothering him, but I still don’t know what it is. I could ask him, but he’s probably not gonna cop to
it. Malia would be able to tell, too, if she, like, cared about him or anyone’s feelings, ha ha.”

Stiles thinks it’s pretty strange that Malia and Derek turned out to be cousins, but haven’t talked
about it or acknowledged it. It’s a new development for both of them, and he doesn’t think that either
of them has accepted it as real yet. He kind of wants to talk to Derek and point out, “look, you’re not
alone, you have family,” but it’s really complicated. The only surviving relative Derek really felt
close to was murdered by their own uncle, whom Derek in turn killed, only for him to rise from the
dead and keep a tenuous relationship devoid of any meaningful trust with the nephew who killed
him. Derek missed years with Cora, didn’t even know she was still alive, only to reunite briefly
before escorting her back to a totally different continent. And acknowledging Malia as Peter’s
daughter basically means Derek has to accept that Peter procreated, so, yeah, Stiles thinks it’s a little
weird that Malia and Derek don’t seem to be bonding at all yet, but he kind of gets it.

Family can be a touchy subject, no matter how much you want one.

He doesn’t say any of this to Scott, though. That would be the antithesis of projecting very little
thought about Derek.

“Who knows with him?” Stiles says breezily. “He could be grouchy because Cosmo says stubble is
so last season.”

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Malia is in desperate need of math tutoring. Lydia’s notes help condense the material down to a
manageable amount, but it’s still hieroglyphics to Malia.

Stiles isn’t known for his patience, but he’s certainly more patient than Lydia is in explaining these
things and he knows the lessons like the back of his hand.

He likes Malia. In some ways, she’s an exaggerated version of him. He’s moderately socially
awkward. She’s a lot socially awkward but has no idea she is, nor does she care. Stiles isn’t that
inclined to use his filter. Malia doesn’t have much of one at all. Her honesty isn’t brave or confident
or self-possessed as much as it’s her pure default. But Stiles still admires it on some level. She
doesn’t struggle with honesty the way he does.

When Malia asks him for help, he readily agrees. At first she says she’ll come over to his house, but
he demurs quickly, just in case Clay is there. He can’t have them in the same vicinity together. Not
that he’s worried about Malia - only an idiot would think Malia couldn’t handle herself - but her
instincts are the most animalistic of any were-creature Stiles knows.

He can’t take the risk that she understands that Clay is a predator.

Malia suggests the library, but Stiles steers her over to a table outside the school instead. There’s
more privacy that way, so she’s free to flash her eyes in frustration or lament about how useless math
is and she never needed it living in the forest.

She’s making faces and sighing angrily, but she’s slowly starting to grasp what Stiles is explaining.
It’s one of the differences between him and Lydia. They’re both smart, earning similar grades in their
classes, but Lydia’s kind of intelligence floats up. She’s always reaching for the next new thing to
learn. Stiles’ intelligence floats out and down. It’s part of what makes him so good at cracking a mystery and conveying it to everyone else.

After a couple of hours, neither of them can take it anymore, so they decide to call it a day. “Thanks, Stiles,” Malia says. “Do you think you can help me later this week? I can probably do okay on the test now, but I need better than a C to pull up my grade to passing.”

“Yeah, sure. No problem.”

“Thanks,” she repeats. “If there’s anything I can do for you, just name it. Not that you need deer meat or someone’s ass kicked. You don’t need deer meat, do you?”

Stiles shakes his head. As she starts packing up her things, he thinks about telling her.

They don’t have history. They’re friends and they can rely on each other in the throes of a fight, but they’re not that close. He hasn’t been best friends with her for most of his life. He hasn’t crushed on her for most of his life. He wasn’t raised by her.

Malia is someone he can tell and not worry about burdening her. She won’t react with her heart the way everyone else will.

She hadn’t been there for most of the time he was possessed by the nogitsune. He wouldn’t be putting her through the wringer again, like he already did with his dad and all of his other friends.

He won’t have to worry that she’ll tell anyone else. That isn’t Malia’s style. She doesn’t process gossip as titillating or as a way of bonding with people.

But he’s not sure what telling her would accomplish. Maybe just to get it off his chest. It wouldn’t be so she could give him any counsel or psychological support. He doesn’t think she’s really capable of what he would need.

She wouldn’t make him feel badly about it. Or she wouldn’t mean to, anyway. But the more Stiles thinks about it, the more he realizes she couldn’t possibly understand. He’s not a helpless little kid anymore. She’ll never understand why it’s gone on for so long, why he hasn’t made Clay stop. She would have made him stop.

Stiles decides not to say anything. She won’t understand enough. But mostly, it seems like a total dishonoring of their friendship to tell her. Malia’s like Teflon when it comes to emotions - almost nothing sticks to her or bothers her, though that’s at least partially because of the unconventional way in which she grew up. The only weight she carries with her is the responsibility she feels for the deaths of her mother and sister.

If Stiles tells her, she’ll know how wrong it is, and there’s a decently good chance she’ll just follow her instincts - do whatever it takes to protect her friend. Killing won’t seem wrong to her, not when Clay is doing what he’s doing, not when Stiles is too human and too weak to protect himself.

Even if it’s not what he means, it’ll feel like he’s exploiting her experience killing her family and leveraging it to kill Stiles’ for him.

They’re so different in that way, their fight or flight impulses. She would fight. She would end it.

Most of the time, he fights. He can be really reckless about it, even. They’ve all told him to be more careful.

But not with Clay. Stiles doesn’t fight or flee. He just takes it.
On the way out of pre-calculus, Stiles catches sight of Stansfield harassing the same kid again. From the little bit of digging Stiles has done, he now knows that the younger boy is Trevor Hemmings, a smart sophomore who’s really not that geeky or likely to attract the attention of a bully. As Stiles approaches, Stansfield pokes Trevor in the chest and gives him a hard stare before walking away.

“Don’t worry about him,” Stiles says, sidling up to Trevor. “His bark is worse than his bite. Because he gets too distracted by tits and beer to remember to bite.”

Trevor looks up at Stiles in surprise. “Oh! Hi Stiles.”

Stiles is a little pleased that the underclassman already knows who he is, but he promptly checks his ego. He’s used to being known by association - best friend of the hotshot lacrosse captain, puzzling companion of the striking and intimidating Lydia Martin, and son of the sheriff. It’s not like he does anything worth being known for.

“What’s his deal?” Stiles asks. “Is he bothering you?”

To Stiles’ surprise, Trevor laughs a little. “Nah. I’m supposed to be tutoring him so I can earn money to cover my car insurance. Once I get my license, that is. But he bugs me to do all of his homework for him. That’s what tutoring means to someone who shouldn’t have passed eighth grade.”

“What a dick.”

“I don’t really mind,” Trevor shrugs. “It’s way harder to actually tutor him. I still get paid either way because our moms are co-workers at the bank and his mom pays my mom directly. He can’t hold the money over my head and I’m okay doing his work if that saves me the headache of trying to teach him. Also, I don’t get my face rearranged. Choice seems pretty clear to me.”

“Well, I hope he doesn’t push you around too much. I’ve been there.”

“It’s not too bad. I just started tutoring him a couple of weeks ago, and it’s just for this semester. His parents want to make sure he doesn’t have to go to summer school in order to get his diploma. That could besmirch the glorious Stansfield name. But I’ll be too busy driving my dad’s old car to care either way.”

Stiles smirks. He likes this kid.

“I gotta get to French class,” Trevor continues. “Thanks for looking out, Stiles. See you later!”

Stiles takes that as his cue to haul ass over to his next period, too, but he doesn’t pay any attention to the bleary history lecture. He’s already read the chapter anyway.

It all makes so much more sense now. Stansfield didn’t stop snarking on Stiles cold turkey. He just found a new focus for his attention and aggression.

On the way to Oak Creek to save Lydia, Stiles had insisted that Scott and Isaac not let anyone else get hurt because of him. He’d expected to them to keep that promise, no matter what it took. He and the nogitsune had physically separated, but were clearly still tied together. He’d expected them to kill the nogitsune even if it meant killing him, or kill him if it meant the nogitsune would be stopped.

His demand was asking a lot of them, Scott in particular. Scott just doesn’t think like that; he’s the classic hero of the story who always thinks there’s another way. He doesn’t understand that sometimes there is no other way.
If Isaac had known that Allison was going to die that day, he would have done what Stiles had asked - killed him and ended the maniacal game, once and for all - but hindsight is 20/20. The first kill would have been hard for Isaac, especially since he had decided he was one of the good guys, but he would have done it.

As much as Scott loved Allison and believes that everything doesn’t have to come down to a Sophie’s Choice moment, Scott would have, deep-down, sacrificed her in the natural course of battle before accepting that killing Stiles was the right thing to do. Ending his life would have been the hardest thing Scott would ever have to do, but Stiles needed him to keep everyone safe.

And now it’s Stiles’ turn to do what’s so hard, what he’d tried to make Scott promise him.

No one else can get hurt because of him. Stansfield’s transition to Trevor doesn’t seem to be a problem for the easygoing sophomore. But Clay isn’t Stansfield, and if he moves on to another kid, his next target isn’t going to shrug his shoulders, indifferent, and let it roll off his back.

As long as Clay is getting his jollies from Stiles, the Trevors and the Charlies of the world won’t be on his radar. It might nearly kill Stiles to do it, but it’s only fair. It’s his turn now.

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Stiles wakes up groggily, his body aware of some kind of disruption, but his mind taking time to catch up.

When he feels a heaviness holding him down and an unwanted intrusion already inside him, he whimpers and instinctively reaches back behind him to push it away. It’s fruitless, though, because he doesn’t put much force into it and his arm is caught easily.

“Clay - what -” Stiles starts to grumble.

He’s lying on his stomach, his shirt rucked up, his boxers pulled off, and Clay’s knees bracketing him. There’s no build-up this time, at least not one Stiles is aware of, and Stiles’ brain is still coming online without any opportunity to adjust.

“My dad -” he says, voice thick with slumber.

“He’s not here.” It doesn’t take much more for Clay to bottom out. “I like you all sleep-warm like this. You take it so much better.”

Stiles goes helplessly rigid, wondering what’s wrong with him, how could he have slept through this, why doesn’t he ever protect himself? Doesn’t he hate it? He probably would have woken up earlier if he wasn’t so fucking tired that his body shuts down so much when it finally gets any rest, but he can’t get out of this vicious cycle.

After some slow and deliberate thrusting, Stiles feels the weight lifting away and Clay pulling out. “What -”

“Come on, get on your back.”

Stiles does so reluctantly, and Clay leans over him, removes his shirt, and arranges Stiles the way he wants. When Clay pushes back in, Stiles groans and arches off the bed. He’s stretched out a little, but it still hurts. It hurts more than the initial entry. When he wasn’t even conscious.

Clay reaches up to brace his hand on Stiles’ shoulder for leverage. “Hey, look at me.”
Stiles struggles to meet the dark eyes hovering above him. The instant they connect, he flinches hard.

Clay and Claudia really do have the same eyes. Except they don’t - not at all, because his mother had never, ever looked at Stiles like that - but they have the same eyes.

He can’t help it when his own start to wander off to the side. Clay slides his hand over so his thumb is resting on Stiles’ throat and pushes down. Yelping, Stiles twists away.

“I told you to look at me.”

Stiles twitches when their eyes lock again. It’s the worst. It’s so much worse than kissing while fucking.

Eventually, Stiles feels his eyelids closing and doesn’t try to stop it until Clay presses with his thumb again.

The longer they look at each other, the harder it is for Stiles to hold back the tears. He doesn’t try to stop that, either. Clay doesn’t say anything, his hips doing all of the talking as he watches Stiles underneath him.

He looks so turned on.

Stiles can’t do it anymore. His mind drifts and ultimately rests on an image that’s the opposite of Clay’s hungry, controlling gaze. He sees warm green eyes instead, smoked through with a hint of brown and a slight edge of blue.

When Clay finishes inside him, they’re still staring at each other, but Stiles vaguely feels like he’s with someone else entirely.
Stiles turns eighteen in a couple of months and fakes enthusiasm every time Scott talks about it. Scott’s already amped up about the big day since his own birthday isn’t until after summer vacation, which feels decades away to him.

It’s a milestone, but it’s also pointless. Being legal doesn’t mean Stiles will wake up that day and find that Clay has lost interest in him or somehow decided he should stop putting his junk everywhere. Turning eighteen just means he can legally consent to sex, but his consent isn’t even an afterthought - it’s completely extraneous. Sex with relatives doesn’t become legitimate, either, no matter how old he gets. Getting older actually makes it seem worse, like he’s a willing party. No one thinks ten-year-olds in sexual relationships with relatives want to be there. Not so much when both people are adults.

A small saving grace is that Stiles won’t have to spend his birthday with Clay. He’ll definitely have other plans with his friends that night, and Noah won’t mind if he doesn’t come home, even though it’s a weekday, just as long as he doesn’t drink and drive. His dad knows better than to try to make Stiles promise not to drink at all on such a momentous occasion.

But Clay will think it’s a big deal, too, and Stiles is dreading whatever special thing he’ll want to do to celebrate. It’s not Clay’s birthday, but it might as well be.

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Noah gets home in time for dinner and recruits Stiles’ help in washing his car before the sun goes down. “The birds were really into target practice today,” Noah says, turning the pressure up on the spray.

“So this is why you asked me to come out here,” Stiles says. “Because I’m an expert at cleaning up a shitshow.”

As they soap up the car, they chatter mindlessly and Ms. Mueller from down the block walks by with her dog, waving flirtatiously at Noah. Stiles razzes him a little and winds up on the receiving end of a brief burst of water.

“Hey, have you lost some weight?” Noah asks.

Stiles looks down at himself. His clothes always fit him a little big, but the clinginess of his damp t-shirt does nothing to mask his true frame. “I’m a string bean, Dad,” he covers. “It’s just really easy to tell when I get a little … stringier.”

Noah steps up to Stiles, trying to gauge. “Maybe you’re having one last growth spurt. Are you taller now? You seem the same height.”

“No, I just look skinnier because I was lifting weights after practice for a little while, but then I stopped and went back to normal.”
“Oh, yeah, you’re right, now that you mention it. You had picked up some muscle. Why’d you stop?”

Stiles gestures to himself dramatically. “Daddy-o, come on. That isn’t really my wheelhouse. It was a worthy experiment, but then I went back to where my heart is. World of Warcraft and comics and not being allowed into cool places because of strict no-plaid rules.”

Noah snickers. “You know I don’t care what you look like and I’m relieved the legendary Stilinski gut has skipped your generation, but maybe don’t drop anymore weight. Don’t want you to disappear right before my eyes.”

Stiles nods. He’s heavier than he was when he made his ‘147 pounds of pale skin and fragile bone’ declaration, but he’s definitely gotten thinner lately. He’s straddling a fine line with his weight and needs to move squarely back to the side of imperceptibility.

“So what are you thinking for dinner? Feel free to fatten yourself up. I won’t even try to talk you into letting me have a bite.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Stiles answers, preoccupied and detached. He’s going to have to make himself eat more, at least enough so people don’t get suspicious. He’s always being pushed into something. “I’ll just do whatever you want.”

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Stiles taps a nervous rhythm on the steering wheel with his left hand as his right reaches to put the car in reverse. He doesn’t end up changing gears after all, though, favoring a longer drum solo instead.

He’d pulled into a gas station a couple miles from home, taking his time filling up the tank. After he drove away from the pump, he spontaneously detoured into the parking strip off to the side so he could run into the convenience store and buy a soda. The Stilinskis have soda at home in the fridge, but Stiles didn’t mind taking a few extra minutes to grab one.

That was fifteen minutes ago, and the bottle is still unopened. His hands fall to his sides before he brings them up to the steering wheel again, but this time, white-knuckling it in his grasp.

Stiles jumps at a sharp knock on his window and he turns with a startled gaze to find Derek standing there. “Hey,” Stiles says as he brings the glass down. “Wassup?”

“Nothing. What’s up with you? I got here almost ten minutes ago and you’ve been sitting here this whole time.”

“Oh. Nah, I wasn’t just hanging out. I was texting.”

“You know you can just call someone and have the same conversation out loud in thirty seconds.”

“I’m not in any hurry to get home, it doesn’t matter,” Stiles says.

From the way Derek is looking at him, Stiles wonders if he has something hanging out of his nose or this is part of Derek’s weird “I’m paying attention to your emotions - I just learned what emotions are yesterday” campaign. Stiles would rather it be the former.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes a little. “I have a Coke and my phone, my lot in life is complete. What could be wrong?”
Derek shrugs. “Relationship problems?”

Stiles does a double-take. “Huh?”

“You seem distracted. With your texting?”

“I’m not dating anyone.”

“Well, labels aside -“

“I’m not anything anyone.”

Derek shrugs again. “If you say so.”

Stiles checks the time; it’s barely after 8 pm. If he leaves now, he’ll be home in five minutes. “Hey, you eat already?”

“No, not yet. I was going to, but I got sidetracked when Argent asked me to check something out.”

Curiosity piqued, Stiles raises his eyebrows. Now that’s a story he has to hear. “Do you wanna grab dinner? I don’t have to be anywhere. I could eat. And I need a recap of the latest episode of Argent & Hale. I didn’t know you guys were full-on buddy-buddy now.”

“We’re not.”

“Well, tell me all about it over a burrito and fries. Just follow me to Miguel’s. Not your restaurant. A different Miguel.”

Derek scoffs to cover up a half-smile. “Of all the names to pull out of nowhere. You couldn’t have gone with something mysterious and Italian?”

Stiles leans out the window to yell at Derek as he walks back to the driver’s side of his car. “You mean like Mario? Or Luigi?”

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“Hey,” Clay says, sitting on the bed and tugging Stiles in close. “I have something for you. It’ll help you loosen up more. It’ll make everything even better.”

He pulls a crumpled tissue out of the pocket of his sweatpants and opens it up to reveal a round, white pill. Stiles eyes it suspiciously - uh, no, he doesn’t swallow things of unknown origin and makeup. It might be a simple muscle relaxant, but it’s probably a roofie or something.

The idea of not really being there while he’s actually there admittedly has a tiny bit of appeal, but Stiles is scared Clay wants him to take it so Clay can do some freaky shit to him. Stiles flashes back to how hollow he felt when Clay started fucking him while he was asleep, and he shakes his head without another thought.

“Are you sure?” Clay asks, as though he’s ever cared what Stiles wanted. “You don’t want it to be easier?”

“I don’t do drugs,” Stiles states firmly.

“You like it harder.”

Stiles shakes his head again, avoiding eye contact. “I don’t do that stuff.”
Clay stuffs the tissue back in his pocket before he draws closer for a kiss. Great. It’s going to be one of those nights.

“But I kind of like you more relaxed,” Clay says, his lips fluttering along Stiles’ jaw. “You are so fucking tight, I love it, but sometimes it’s hard to get it in unless I hurt you. Do you want me to hurt you, Stiles?”

Stiles’ breath hitches. “You’re just - you’re just gonna do whatever you want.”

“Do you want me to hurt you?” Clay repeats.

“No,” Stiles whispers, “but you already are, you’re already here.”

“Can you relax for me on your own? Or do you want the pill?”

“I don’t want it.” He means everything, but Clay will never hear it that way, no matter what Stiles says.

Clay runs his fingers up Stiles’ bare back and kisses him again. “Relax for me, honey. Just relax.”

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The next time is on Friday night, and it’s like Clay hasn’t been able to think about anything else. Stiles comes home late because of a game, a narrow victory over Woodrow Prep with which he had nothing to do, but at least he got a few minutes on the field. He didn’t score, but his dad had been able to stop by before his overnight shift to catch him running around. Nothing will top his dad’s excitement during his first game or at his first in-play goal, but Stiles never gets tired of his dad being proud of him.

Stiles ate a burger and fries afterwards with Scott, but he’s still thirsty, so he grabs the half-empty Gatorade he had left in the refrigerator.

It’s all a blur after that.

Stiles wakes up alone in his bed the next morning. His head is foggy and he anxiously becomes aware of his undressed, sore body as his fingers sluggishly survey all of the new marks and dried semen. There’s some in his hair, on the side of his face, a little crusted onto his eyelashes, between his thighs, everywhere. Below the waist hurts even more than his head does and his chin trembles when he realizes he was bleeding again.

His thoughts are frantic. How out of it was he that he didn’t wake up during sex that rough? That he doesn’t remember sex that rough?

He doesn’t remember anything.

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On Sunday morning, Noah goes out for a jog. He hates them, but Stiles is always pestering him about getting more exercise and they had agreed on two weekly runs, five miles minimum.

As Clay is cooking Denver omelettes with egg whites and no cheese, Stiles takes the window to confront him. He hasn’t forgotten what happened the last time he really fought back - Clay might retaliate - but Stiles can’t let this go. It terrifies him that his body was used in ways he doesn’t remember. Not really being there while he was actually there was not easier at all. Clay could have done anything when he was passed out.
Stiles stands in the doorway of the kitchen, eyes flashing. “Never do that to me again,” he hisses.

“Do what?” Clay asks, removing the eggs from the pan.

“You know what! I’ve done everything you wanted.”

He’s never been scared quite like this before. He can feel any last pretense of control slipping away from him. Every time he thinks he’s figured out how to manage this, the equilibrium is shattered because Clay keeps pushing. He always wants more, and the power dynamics feel more volatile than ever. Stiles doesn’t know how much more he can give. He doesn’t know how much more of this he can take.

“Kids your age are always experimenting with stuff like that. You’ve never had hard liquor or smoked a joint? Snorted a line?”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it,” Stiles sneers. “I told you no the other night, and you drugged me anyway!”

Clay is eating his breakfast at the kitchen table like they’re talking about the weather. Stiles hopes he chokes on a bell pepper. “It loosened you up.”

“I said no!” Stiles yells, gesturing wildly. “I didn’t want that! I wasn’t relaxed - I blacked out!”

Clay just shrugs at him. For a second, Stiles sees red and pictures himself stabbing Clay in the throat with his fork. Impulsively, Stiles advances towards him, towering over Clay for once, and slams his hand down on the table. “I didn’t even do anything wrong!”

“It wasn’t a punishment, Stiles.”

“What did you do to me? I know it was really bad if you had to knock me out to do it.”

“It didn’t hurt, though.”

Stiles’ pulse is thundering. That’s not what he’d thought while sobbing in the shower the previous morning. He feels like they’re on two different planets. “It did! It hurt when I woke up. It hurts to not remember anything.”

“So you want to remember,” Clay says.

“No, I -“ Stiles winces and presses his palms against his temples. “You don’t have to take it like that!”

“How do you want it then?”

Stiles has nothing but contempt for this weaponized question. Not at all, he thinks. Never again. Not with you. Never with you. Only with someone who loves me, who doesn’t want to hurt me, ever.

He jumps at the sound of the front door opening and closing. “What do you want from me?” he whispers dejectedly before Noah walks in, winded and sweaty.

“I’ve earned my gold star for the week.”

“What does the GPS say?” Stiles asks.

“5.7 miles,” Noah says, quite pleased with himself. “I’m gonna bank that extra 0.7 and run less next time.”
“Nope!” Stiles is quick to deny him. “That’s not how it works.”

Noah shoos Stiles off. “The one who pays the mortgage makes the rules.”

Stiles turns away, his emotional eruption still seething below the surface, but not before Noah catches a glimpse of his teary eyes. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“He cut the onions for the omelettes I made,” Clay replies.

“Yeah,” Stiles says simply. It makes his stomach turn to spontaneously conspire with Clay to keep their secrets from his dad, like they’re in this together.

Noah spies the plate waiting for him and lights up. “Oh yeah, I’ll run a little extra if that gets me a hot breakfast.”

“No problem,” Clay says. “It was a piece of cake.”

“This guy.” Noah smiles and jabs a thumb in Clay’s direction. “What a pal. We’re going to keep you around here forever.”

Stiles takes a step backward, and then another one, and another. “I have to go,” he says. “I have to go to Scott’s …”

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Noah gets shot in the shoulder in yet another standoff at the police station. Stiles would have stopped to check on Parrish, who suddenly seems just as strange as everyone else in Beacon Hills, but his dad is his priority and Stiles rushes to the hospital at his side. He’s relieved out of his mind that the wound isn’t life-threatening, but his nerves are still frayed like hell. A few inches in another direction and the story could have been very, very different. Even with the non-critical injury, his dad is going to require surgery.

It’s just so hard to watch someone you love so dearly in pain.

The doctor comes in and Stiles steps away from the bed and to the chair off to the side. Although he’s not an active participant in the doctor-patient conversation, he listens intently to everything the doctor says as he stares down at his shoes. When his dad is signing some forms and asking about the cost of the surgery, Stiles’ ears perk up at the poorly-veiled tension in his voice.

After the doctor clears the room, Stiles tells his dad he knows about the money Clay lent him, and that’s why the collections calls stopped, his dad didn’t need to keep drawing an advance on his salary, and the maxed out credit cards haven’t burst at the seams yet. Noah is pissed, a special kind of irritation he never brings out at work. It’s reserved only for his son, who snoops around his things out of the sincerest concern and responsibility he shouldn’t be bearing.

Noah tells Stiles this in no uncertain words. He’s the dad, Stiles is the son. It’s his job as the dad to take care and Stiles’ job as the son to be taken care of.

Stiles hates hearing things like that. He’s grown up too fast for half of his life. He’s been dealing with adult issues for a long time.

He kind of understands, though - what father would want his teenage son to know he’s only getting by because of help from an in-law - and he’s willing to compromise. They’re supposed to take care of each other, Stiles says, but they’re technically still at an impasse. His dad just doesn’t challenge him on it because the morphine drip has started working its magic.
Stiles clenches his jaw tightly, fists curled in his lap. Yeah, his dad can never know about all of the bad touching. Noah would never forgive himself for it and it would destroy their relationship. Like he had inadvertently sold his own kid. Stiles would never be able to put the train back on the tracks.

He sighs and leans forward, his head between his knees to ward off the lightheadedness he feels coming on. He’s already made his dad worry so much already. Not just with the MRI and Eichen House bills, staggering as they were.

He was young when his mom started her slow decline, so he mostly has only random snippets of memories from that time. But he can only imagine how his dad must have felt when the technician showed him Stiles’ brain scan, somberly informing him of the implications.

It was all just a nasty little trick and it turned out that Stiles is neurologically fine, but that doesn’t change the days during which his dad thought he was going to lose Stiles in the same horrific way he had lost his wife and become a widower. Actually, this would have been even worse - they don’t even have a word for a parent who loses their child, it’s such a terrible thing - and Noah would have become, forever more, a party of one. Just like Stiles ended up doing to Argent.

Stiles has watched over Noah’s diet like a hawk for years, granting concessions only when earned and making sure to reward his dad by being The Best Son Ever (for 24 hours) when his dad’s check-ups showed improvements. But the anguish of knowing what his brother-in-law has done to his only child, that he’s the one who let this traitorous abuser into their home, that he’s been in Law Enforcement for decades but never caught on to what was going on just 50 feet from his own bedroom, that his son kept these dirty, dirty secrets from him for so long -

That might end up killing him well before a stray bullet, curly fries, or an extra brownie do.

And Stiles cannot have that. It’s not going to happen.

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Stiles doesn’t go home that night, opting to camp out in the unforgiving hospital chair and stay with his dad. He falls asleep fitfully, econ textbook in his lap, only to jerk awake in the dead of night, pupils blown and breath ragged from a nightmare.

He’d dreamed his father had died from that gunshot. He dreamed of the funeral. There were a lot of people there, but he doesn’t recall their faces. But he remembers dropping to his knees on the soft grass and wailing next to the casket. He remembers Scott’s arm wrapped tightly around him. Scott was crying, too. He remembers feeling totally alone.

The cemetery disappeared and he was back at his house with a lawyer in the living room telling Stiles all kinds of things he didn’t want to know. His dad had managed to stay current on the mortgage and had a life insurance policy, but it won’t be enough to keep up with the liability. Stiles could get a job, but he’s a teenager. He can’t afford to keep the house. He’s going to have to give up the only home he’s ever known. The place where he grew up as a child with his mom. The place where he and his dad found a new way to go on with a giant hole in their hearts. He’d been sure that his memories of his parents would fade without this house. He can’t hear his mom’s giggle anymore if he’s not in their kitchen. He’ll forget the twinkle in his dad’s eye, too, he knows he will.

Then some other lady told him that his status as a minor means he’s in the custody of a new guardian. Clay is the guardian. That’s what Noah’s will said. Stiles protested, his whole body strained but his arms flailing. He doesn’t have to go with Clay. He’ll be eighteen soon.

But the lady said he’s not an adult yet and he isn’t allowed to be on his own. He’d asked about
emancipation, but was quickly informed that the process would take so long, he would turn eighteen first. Stiles insisted that he could live with the McCall family; he knew Melissa would say yes. He’d always thought of her as a second mother, and he knew she’d always thought of him as a second son. But the lady told him no. Melissa isn’t his legal guardian. Clay would have to give up the custodial rights first.

Suddenly he was in his bedroom. Clay was there, too, grabbing Stiles by the collar and slamming him up against the door. “It’s just you and me, Stiles,” he’d said. “We don’t have to sneak around anymore.”

His parents were both gone. He belonged to Clay in every sense.

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Stiles realizes that the window for exposing the video has passed. It’s too late now.

At least with the blow job, Stiles knew what had been preserved for replay, but he has no idea what Clay did to him during his pharmaceutical blackout. He doesn’t know whether Clay took more videos or pictures and what might they might show. They could be really bad. Worse than he’s able to handle. If he reports the video he knows exists, the police will access everything Clay has on his phone. It’s too big of a risk. It could ruin everything.

He can’t ask Clay about it, either, and take the chance that Clay hears the pained inquiry as an invitation to create more footage because he thinks Stiles wants it or because he knows Stiles doesn’t. He can’t steal Clay’s phone and try to see for himself. Danny might be able to get past the lock screen, but after how mad Clay was about some old pictures, Stiles can’t even imagine his blazing fury if Stiles deleted his videos. If it was even remotely possible, Clay would probably do something crazy like keep him as a sex slave down in a hole, with only the occasional company of lotion in a basket.

Stiles doesn’t feel regretful or relieved that using the evidence is no longer an option.

He feels nothing.

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Stiles has to stop midway through the dank, shadowy corridor of Oak Creek, pitching over to the side as his legs collapse underneath him and he slides down the concrete wall. He’s just so weak.

For the first time in a while, he’s the only inhabitant of his body. Scott’s off like a rocket ahead of him, but Lydia stays, struggling to pull him up and drag him along. Despite his battle with staying conscious, he’s fully aware of how incapacitated he feels. The nogitsume will make sure he’s nothing without it.

They’ve barely made any progress when Lydia’s grip on Stiles fades. He manages to loll his head in her direction, but she crumples to her knees next to him and screams bloody murder.

Lydia turns to look at him with wide eyes and whispers urgently, “Stiles, we have to go. We have to go now!”

She loops her arm around his waist, helping him the rest of the way out of the tunnel. When they approach the others in the courtyard, Stiles sees them crowded around in a ring formation.

Scott rushes to his side and takes the load off of Lydia’s dainty form, walking Stiles over. “Stiles, I’m so fucking sorry. It all happened so fast - there was nothing we could do - I’m sorry -”
Stiles jerks away from Scott and falls to the ground when he sees who is at the center of the crowd. He screams. He screams for an eternity.

Frantically, he crawls over to his father lying awkwardly on the pavement. “Dad, Dad!” he yells, running his hands over the large, wet crimson patch on Noah’s uniform. Once he finds the source of the bleeding, he kneels by Noah’s side, applying pressure firmly. “Dad, I’m here, we’ll get help! Just hang on!”

Allison crouches down across from him. “Stiles.” He gasps at first - she’s alive - but he can’t be relieved, not when his dad’s life is hanging in the balance. “Stiles, I’m sorry - he’s gone -”

“No!” Stiles cuts her off harshly. “Don’t you fucking say that! Did you call 911? Tell them it’s the sheriff and they’d better haul ass over here!”

Someone places a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, and he whirs around to see Derek standing behind him. Stiles looks up at him, vision blurred out with tears, and Derek returns his sorrowful look.

Stiles’ chest is wracked with a few hard sobs before he stops pressing down on his dad’s abdomen in order to check for active vitals. They all seem to think it’s over. But they don’t understand how his dad’s heart will beat for him, how his dad will breathe for him.

He desperately hovers two fingers over his dad’s carotid artery, and after some agonizing moments, leans over his face to detect any respiratory signs. “Dad, come on!” Stiles begs. “Come on, come on …”

Stiles is on the fringes of becoming unglued and he knows it, but he doesn’t care because he’s not going to give up on his dad. He raises a hand and strikes Noah across the face. His friends gasp around him, but he doesn’t care about that, either, because this has worked before. He’s revived people he loves by hitting them in the face before.

But Noah doesn’t do anything. He hasn’t moved since Stiles rushed over. Stiles cradles his dad’s head in his lap, smearing red and still pleading. He can’t bring himself to stop. There’s no pulse, no breath, no life. His dad is already gone and Stiles didn’t even get a chance to say “goodbye” or “I love you” or anything.

Noah died without any family, like the universe was getting back at him for not being there when Claudia passed on. His dad was only at Oak Creek to help Stiles, and this is what he got for trying. A decisive stab wound to the gut from one of the oni.

Stiles has blood on his hands.

He clutches at his dad tightly, rocking back and forth. “I’m sorry, Dad,” he cries. “I’m sorry, I should have killed myself when I had the chance -”

Scott’s next to him now, telling him gently, “Stiles, I’m so sorry. It’s too late. We have to go. It’s too late.”

“No!” Stiles shoots daggers at Scott with his eyes. “No, I’m not leaving him!”

“We gotta go, we can’t be here,” Scott attempts a second time, pulling at Stiles’ stubborn arms. “Stiles, come on.”

“Stop it!” Stiles forcefully pushes Scott away from him and turns back to his dad sharply. “Just leave me!”
There are hands on him again, one bracing his shoulder and the other pushing down on his chest. Stiles is bubbling over with hysteria, lashing out once more. “No!”

His arm is stopped in mid-air, and he jerks against whoever has gotten in his way.

“Shhhh, Stiles.”

“Dad?” he mumbles, starting to wake up. “Dad, I’m so sor-”

Stiles’ eyes open and he’s alert enough now to freeze with realization. It’s Clay who’s holding him in place. Stiles is panting, drawing in erratic, heaving breaths. “Where’s my dad?” he wheezes.

“He got home a couple of hours ago and took a painkiller,” Clay answers. “He’s out like a light.”

Stiles swallows hard and stares up at the ceiling to try to reorient himself. It seemed so real. Except it wasn’t. His dad’s still recovering from that gunshot wound, but he’s safe. He’s not dead. Stiles didn’t kill him.

It doesn’t really feel like he’s woken up from his nightmare, though. Stiles feels like he’s coming undone, like all of the pieces he’s been trying to hold together with scotch tape have broken apart and are floating away from him.

A couple of stray tears escape when he blinks, and they just keep falling, one after another. Stiles is sick to the very core of his soul - what’s left of it - that he could ever mistake Clay’s touch for his dad’s.

He doesn’t have any fight left. He doesn’t deserve to fight.

Stiles rolls over on his side, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his boxers and pulling them down before Clay even asks.

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Stiles is freaking out. He curses loudly and kicks at the front tire of his Jeep before leaning forward to rest his palms against the hood. He’s glad no one is around to see this. He’d parked around the corner from Eichen House, and Parrish had given Lydia a ride home in his cruiser.

Stiles fucked up. He’s losing it.

He and Lydia almost died. They’re clever people, no doubt, but Stiles dropped the ball and ignored the little voice in his head telling him not to trust Brunski, the snot-nosed weasel.

Brunski had tasered them, tied them up, and almost shot them up with God knows what so they could overdose on the floor of the Records Room, in the exact same building where Stiles had let the nogitsune back in for another round of terror.

He’s being sloppy. He’s sure he would never have exposed Lydia to that kind of danger if he was thinking clearly. He may be just human, but he’s smarter than that. Lydia is in the deadpool; she’s worth $20 million. $20 million! Brunski wouldn’t need much motivation to kill Stiles, given their past interactions and because he just doesn’t like the look of Stiles’ face. Tack on Stiles’ Scooby investigation and it’s easy to want to get rid of the little annoyance. But Lydia represented Brunski’s never having to work another day in his life while living as lavishly as he wanted. That’s an irresistible temptation for someone as morally-challenged as the Eichen House orderly.

Once Stiles saw Brunski with that cassette tape, he should have grabbed Lydia and ran the hell out of
there. But he didn’t. He followed Brunski into the Records Room like a lamb going to slaughter and took Lydia with him. He’s a fucking idiot and almost got another one of his friends killed. What good is he in this pack, anyway? He’s supposed to be the critical thinker.

Stiles is on the cusp of hyperventilating, so he curtails his angry internal tirade long enough to get his breathing under control. At least Parrish showed up to save them, to do what Stiles couldn’t do. Didn’t do.

He has to get his head on straight. He can handle the ordeals with Clay, but he can’t allow them to threaten the safety of his friends. If he can just bury it all deeper, he won’t be such a liability.

The Benefactor has to be stopped.

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“So this is it,” Derek says, staring at the expanse of powered-down machinery exposed behind the drywall.

Stiles gesticulates wildly. “It’s crazy. I still don’t get it. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“I guess it makes as much sense as Peter’s pissed-off, comatose subconscious creating a deadpool.”

“And a banshee enacting it on his behalf, what, just for kicks?”

“With his stolen money.”

“To hunt and kill supernatural creatures, of all things. Why was he so mad at them? Like, you’d think his hit list would just be Kate? Fuck. Fuck! This is mind-boggling.”

Derek is squinting in a way that’s borderline unattractive, but Stiles can’t fault him for it. “And how did you turn this off? You didn’t break it. I would have smashed the shit out of it.”

“You and Malia think alike. I shut it down with a key.”

“What, there’s a key? What? How did you know that? Leave it to you to figure something like that out.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck. “Honestly, that wasn’t me. I’ve been … off lately. That was Lydia. She’s the one who knew to look for it in an old wine bottle. I just happened to dig it out.”

“This is so weird,” Derek says, running a hand over his face.

“I know, right? And really, not a good place to hide a key. I hear Mrs. Martin loves her red wine. Sometimes too much.” Derek squints at him again. “What? I can say that, because my dad likes the booze, too. God, I’m a horrible son.”

Derek just stares at the computers with his arms tightly crossed. “Too fucking weird.”

“Hey, so Lydia said we should take all this stuff away. She doesn’t want it here anymore and we’re gonna have to redo the drywall so her mom never finds out. Can I keep it all at your loft? My dad’s not gonna love it stored in the garage, and my uncle –” Stiles, almost stumbling over his words, “um, I’d rather he not ask any questions, either.”

“You really want to keep this junk?”

“It’s kind of cool, when it's not, you know, serving as an instrument of mercenary death. It could
even come in handy someday. I’d like to poke around it a little. I mean, look at it. It’s so old. It’s older than me. It’s older than YOU.”

Derek raises an eyebrow at Stiles. “I’m not that old.”

“I never said you were!” That’s basically true.

“I have the space for it,” Derek concedes. “But we’re going to have to lug it up the stairs at the loft.”

Stiles blinks at him guilelessly. “I’m sure that’s no problem for you.”

“And make sure it’s as useless as a pile of scrap metal. I’m not going to sleep under the same roof as machines that could turn on one day and try to kill me.”

“That’s why we have to stop Skynet.” Derek’s mouth turns down in confusion. “Come ON, man. Terminator? Are you serious? You’ve got nothing?”

“It sounds familiar.”

“Ugh, I don’t even know what to do with you anymore.”

“So what do you think it meant, my name being the last cipher?” Even though the deadpool has been deactivated, Derek still sounds uncertain.

“Maybe it really was random after all,” Stiles shrugs, aiming for nonchalant. “It didn’t mean anything.”

“My name came off the list. Did that mean nothing, too?”

Stiles had been wondering the same thing ever since the deadpool had been updated, notably omitting Derek’s name and reassigning his bounty to Liam. “Have you been getting along better with Peter or something? Maybe he, like, took you out of the deadpool without realizing that’s what he was doing. I mean, he was never on the list himself.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s possible. I just … It could have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, after you told me I was the third cipher. But I felt it. In my bones. I was going to die.”

“Lydia isn’t always right. She has a miss every now and then. She ‘only’ scored in the 98th percentile on the PSAT last year.”

“She just decoded the deadpool, though. She didn’t build it.” Derek sighs loudly. “This shouldn’t bother me. Look at our lives. I could die at any moment. But somehow, this was just different. Knowing it was going to happen, but not being able to stop it. Anticipating it. Dreading it.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

Derek is silent for a few moments. “No. No, I don’t.”

“Maybe we legit changed the course of events. I told you not to give up hope, man. It’s never too late.”

“Yeah. I guess not.” Derek shakes the tension out of his shoulders and motions towards the computers with his head. “Do you want to start moving this junk out now?”

“If by that, you mean, do you want to laugh at me trying to move it and then you actually do it all by yourself, yes, yes, I do.”
Derek gives him a mildly withering look, but there’s no bite to it. Pushing his sleeves up to his elbows, he gets to work demolishing the rest of the drywall surrounding the open hole. Stiles stands back, rolling his eyes but marveling a little as he watches Derek make quick work of it with his bare hands.

“Okay,” Derek finally says, brushing stray dust off his sweater. “I’ll grab each one first, pull it out of the wall, and then you pick up the other side. I don’t really need you to carry it. Just get the other end off the floor. We’ll have to take multiple trips to my place in your Jeep.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Stiles salutes.

“Are you sure you can do that with your hand?” Derek gestures to a red scrape where Stiles’ palm meets his wrist. “Is that still bleeding?”

“Oh, this?” Stiles holds his palm up and scrunches his nose. “It’s no big deal. I was just too clumsy when Malia and I were opening up the wall earlier. It’s fine.”

Derek really must be doing all of the work because the equipment feels light in Stiles’ arms, but he knows it’s bulky and heavy. Once they get to the top of the staircase, Derek maneuvers so he goes down first and undoubtedly takes all of the weight.

“You need to chill out,” Derek says, nostrils flaring a little.

“For the love of all things that make zero sense today - and that’s A LOT - you have got to stop sniffing me.”

“We’re all safe now. You and your hyperactive brain can stop stressing out so much.”

“I’m not - oof - stressed. This is the manly smell of exertion.”

“You don’t smell like that at your games.”

“Because I sit on the bench, Derek!” Stiles yells as they navigate the last turn out the front door. “You know, this isn’t helping your rep as the adult creeper at the high school.”

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Before Stiles is even halfway down the stairs, he hears Clay’s raised voice on the phone from the kitchen. He’s not yelling, but he’s clearly not happy. There’s no real reason to keep it down since Noah headed out early to drive to Folsom to consult on a case there.

Stiles doesn’t care about anything going on with Clay and he doesn’t intend to eavesdrop, but it’s impossible not to hear Clay’s side of the conversation. It’s barely past 7 am, but Stiles quickly realizes Clay’s talking to his lawyer, probably one based in Florida where his divorce is being settled.

“I don’t really care what she says! She wanted the divorce, she said she would pay those legal fees … Okay, fine, whatever … Yeah, I know she said no more direct contact, that’s fine with me … No, I don’t want this to get messy, either. I’m gonna bite my tongue and I expect Chrissy to do the same … She’s the one who wants this to happen so fast - mudslinging isn’t gonna help. I wouldn’t believe anything she says about me, anyway …”

Stiles rolls his eyes and leaves the house quietly. Clay doesn’t need to know he heard any of that. Stiles doesn’t want to be roped into Clay’s personal life anymore than he already is.

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Standing in front of the metal door, Stiles is suddenly overcome with uncertainty. When he’d rushed out to his Jeep and torn away from the curb, he hadn’t really thought about where he was going. He just drove until he found himself parked again. Then he’d sat in the car for almost five minutes, trying to get a hold of himself and straighten up so he doesn’t look like a total psycho, but he knows he’s still a mess.

It’s late and he doesn’t even know if Derek is home. He’s almost positive Derek is not out socializing, but if Derek’s not there, Stiles doesn’t know where he’ll go. Derek gave him a back-up key for pack business, but Stiles doesn’t feel right using it for his own reasons.

He knocks on the door, no louder than usual. Even if Derek is asleep, he’ll still hear it. The door unlocks and slides open, revealing Derek in just a pair of jeans and mild bedhead.

“Stiles,” Derek says, eyes widening when he sees Stiles’ disheveled, teary appearance. “Are you okay?”

He steps forward from the doorway and Stiles rears back reflexively. “Sorry,” Derek mumbles, lowering the arm he’d reached out.

Stiles looks down, his left arm slack and his right arm clutching his left elbow. He should have figured out what he was going to say before he knocked, but he can barely think at all. He would have spent the whole night in his car if he had to sort out the right things to say first.

“Stiles, what’s wrong? Is it your dad?”

“No,” Stiles says, mostly to Derek’s bare feet. “He’s okay. He got called away to Folsom. They had a weird animal attack out there and they thought he might be able to help.”

“What happened? Is Scott okay? No one’s called me about anything.”

Stiles’ gaze flickers up and he wipes at his nose with the back of his hand. “He’s okay. I mean, I assume. I haven’t talked to him tonight.”

Derek opens his mouth but closes it before he says anything. His leg twitches like he’s about to approach Stiles again, but he holds back, nostrils flaring slightly. “Were you at a party?”

Stiles closes his eyes in shame. Of course that’s what he smells like to Derek. A vague waft of alcohol compounded with bodily fluids. Because that’s normal teenage fun. Drinking and exploratory sex and having the time of your life.

“It’s a Tuesday night,” Stiles says. “I don’t get invited to Tuesday parties. Or Friday ones.”

“Stiles. Something’s obviously wrong. Please just tell me.”

“Derek …”

“Just come in, Stiles. You wanted to tell me, right?”

Stiles nods, head down again, and puts one foot in front of the other. When he passes Derek in the doorway, he hears Derek inhale again and just like that, the tears are back.

Derek shuts the door behind them and turns around expectantly. “Stiles, it’s normal to experiment. And normal to have conflicted feelings about being with guys, it can be really scary -”

“Of course you know I had sex!” Stiles wails, arms floundering in misery. “It’s all over me, right?”
“Was this - if it turned out to be casual, just messing around, guys can be jerks, especially if you want something more.”

“I don’t want any more,” Stiles mutters, crossing his arms over his chest to try to control himself, only to uncross them almost immediately because he has to swat helplessly at a fat tear rolling down his cheek.

“Okay.” Derek chews on his bottom lip. “I’ll just shut up and let you tell me.”

“I’m in a lot of trouble,” Stiles finally blurts out.

“What kind of trouble? Is someone hurt?”

Stiles huffs. He can’t say it. “Yes.”

Derek’s eyes rake over him. “Is it you?” Stiles shivers as Derek gets proverbially warmer, but he just can’t say it. “Stiles,” Derek tries again, stepping closer and putting his hand on Stiles’ shoulder. “What happened?”

“I - Derek - it’s -“ Stiles shakes his head and looks down again. “My - he hurt me.”

“Your boyfriend?” Derek asks softly.

“I told you, I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“The guy you’re seeing, then?”

“I don’t know why you think I’m seeing someone. I never was! I don’t have anyone! Not anyone I want. It’s just my uncle -“

Derek gasps and squeezes Stiles’ shoulder, probably harder than he means to. It’s probably supposed to be encouraging, but it’s too hard. Angry, almost. “What are you - what did he do?” Stiles’ face crumbles under Derek’s scrutiny and dissolves into sobs. “Stiles, did he …?”

Stiles is unsteady on his feet and he preemptively crouches down, anxiously reaching for the floor in case he blacks out. He feels like the wind has been knocked out of him. Derek follows him, kneeling and hovering over him. “It’s okay, you can tell me.”

“You already know,” Stiles whispers, slumping down further. “You know what he makes me do.”

Once the words are out, Stiles feels completely disconnected from his own body. He sees Derek move closer and then the effort of supporting himself is no longer necessary as Derek pulls him in and wraps his arms around him. The burden of his secrets doesn’t magically go away, but the pressure of keeping it all in dissipates, even as he braces for the consequences of the truth.

“I tried to get away,” Stiles cries. “I really did, I promise. But I couldn’t - they wouldn’t let me go -”

Derek swallows hard. “Your uncle. He’s been here for months, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Has this happened before?” Stiles doesn’t answer. “This whole time? He’s been doing this to you for months?”

“He’s in my house, Derek. He’s in my room. He’s always there.”
Stiles cries like he hasn’t shed a single tear until now. He cries harder and longer than he ever has before. It’s just so easy, though, now that he’s finally doing it in front of someone who cares, someone who will listen, instead of the deaf ears of his abuser or the solitude of his own unraveling mind.

Derek just holds him and rides out the peaks and valleys. “I’m so sorry, Stiles,” he says mournfully during one of the lows. “I’m so sorry.”

Stiles sniffs wetly. “I’m sorry I’m putting this on you - I know it’s fucked up -”

“No, come on, it’s fine. Not fine that he’s hurt you like this. But don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

Stiles closes his eyes and sighs. He can’t shake the butterflies about what coming clean means, but it’s nice not to be alone anymore.

“Stiles?”

“Yeah?”

“Earlier, you said - they wouldn’t let you go -”

Stiles whimpers, contracting even more in Derek’s arms. “He was out drinking earlier, he brought a friend back with him …”

“Oh, fuck,” Derek breathes.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Stiles sobs. “I can’t, I need help, Derek … please, please help me …”

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Stiles doesn’t know how long they stay collapsed in a tangled pile on the cold floor. If Derek told him it had been two hours, he would have believed it easily.

Derek shifts his weight and unwittingly cracks his back. “Oh,” Stiles says, pulling away and swiping at Derek’s shoulder, wet from his tears and probably his snot, too. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, Stiles. It doesn’t matter.”

Stiles rolls his own cramping shoulders back and unfolds his legs out from underneath him. His left foot is mostly asleep.

“Do you want to go to the hospital?” Derek asks.

“No,” Stiles says, drawing his knees in and clutching at his shins. “I can’t go there.”

“Are you hurt?” Derek presses his hands against Stiles’ face, double-checking for injuries and pushing his hair back to make his hairline visible. “I smell a little blood. Is it your hand still?”

Stiles flushes pink. “Not there,” he mumbles, looking down. “It wasn’t that much. It’s probably stopped by now.”

Derek’s hands shake a little as he pulls away. “Why can’t you go? You might be hurt. You’re hurt.”

“I can’t - Scott’s mom might be working - she can’t see me like - I don’t want her to …”

“I can call and find out if she’s on shift.”
“No, if I go, they’ll have to report it to the police. I don’t want anyone to know.”

“Are you sure? They can collect the evidence -”

“No!” Stiles shoots down. “No police, no charges, nothing.”

Derek touches Stiles’ arm gently. “They can help with other things, too. Like … exposure?”

Stiles’ brow creases. “I don’t underst -”

“Your health?”

Stiles blushes hotly. He’d forgotten that Derek could smell everything. “My uncle doesn’t like to use - he doesn’t - but he told his friend he had to. His friend used one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, mouth puckering. Derek can smell everything. “The other guy didn’t - he pulled out and … on my back. Not, you know …

“Sorry,” he rambles further. “I usually take a long shower afterwards, but I had to get out of there - I just got dressed and ran. I didn’t - I didn’t clean up very well -”

“Hey, don’t be sorry, I’m glad you left so fast.”

Stiles shrugs helplessly. “I don’t need to go to the hospital, Derek. This time isn’t that different from all of the others. If my uncle has any STDs, he’s already given them to me. Today doesn’t make a difference.”

“I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do, Stiles. So we won’t go to the hospital. But if you want to, at any time, just tell me and we’ll go.”

“I don’t want to,” Stiles reaffirms. “I’m not going to change my mind. I can’t go there. I just want to shower. I need to shower.”

“Okay. Maybe you’ll feel a little better afterwards.”

Derek helps Stiles to his unsteady feet and leads him to the bathroom, which isn’t as dungeon-like as the rest of the loft. “I’ll give you some privacy. Take as long as you want. I’ll bring you some clothes.”

Derek shuts the door behind him when he leaves and Stiles sheds his clothing, feeling for his back and cringing at the residue. Right before he steps under the spray, he hesitates, even though he’s still adamant that no one else knows about this. Preserving the evidence only matters in a court of law, and he will never square off against Clay there in front of an audience.

The hot water feels like magic and Stiles imagines every speck of DNA washing away. He clears the mucus from his nasal passages and rubs at his eyes a little, but not too much, since they’re sore to the touch. When he sees a series of small bruises forming on his hips and thighs, he looks away quickly. He doesn’t know whose fingertips left each one.

“Stiles?”

Stiles turns the water down, but not off, at the sound of Derek’s voice through the door. “Yeah?”

“I left some clothes out for you. Do you need anything else?”
“Um,” Stiles thinks, “do you have Visine?”

Derek has had red-eye problems in the past, but of a totally different variety. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t … I can get some, but I’ll have to go to the store, and I don’t want to leave you here alone.”

“It’s okay, Derek. I can be alone.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call Scott over here? Or anyone?”

“Yes!” Stiles says sharply. “I’m sure. Don’t tell. Okay?”

“Okay, I won’t. I won’t say anything. Do you want anything else?”

“Do you have aspirin? I have a headache.”

Derek does in fact have aspirin on hand - specifically for Stiles and Lydia, but also for incidental usage by people like Argent and Noah. “Yeah, it’s in the medicine cabinet.”

“Okay.”

“Anything else? Just ask.”

“Um, I think I’m okay,” Stiles says, but they both know he is not okay.

“I’m gonna run down to the store really fast. I’ll just be fifteen minutes, I promise.”

Stiles is quiet for a moment. “Derek?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t do anything,” he says somberly.

Derek pauses, but not for so long that Stiles is unsure if Derek understood. “I won’t, Stiles.”

Once Derek and his super-hearing are gone, Stiles drops to his knees in the shower and throw up the contents of his stomach. He feels a little guilty about it, but the purge goes down the drain like it was never even there.

Stiles scrubs and scrubs, using copious amounts of Derek’s body wash. The visual and olfactory cues are helpful reminders that he’s somewhere else now - not at home and not with Clay. He doesn’t want to leave the bathroom and be by himself in the austere loft until Derek is back, so he waits for the sound of the heavy front door being pulled open and shut before getting out of the shower.

After he dries himself off and wraps the towel around his waist, he opens the bathroom door to find what he was and wasn’t looking for - namely, a neat stack of clothes to the left and no sign of Derek lingering and staring. The dark gray sweatpants fit Stiles decently in length and the black t-shirt is probably too small for Derek now since it’s only a little baggy on Stiles.

There’s no underwear, not that Stiles blames Derek for that oversight or would actually wear his anyway. Stiles is going to burn or otherwise dispose of his own boxers, stained with semen and little drops of red. He’d already confirmed in the shower that he had stopped bleeding, so what Derek left him is fine. He’d be mortified to bleed on Derek’s clothes, no matter what assurances Derek gave him.

Stiles picks up what he was wearing when he left his house, tossed into a heap on the floor, and folds
haphazardly. A wrinkled orange t-shirt, purple hoodie, and some khakis he’d worn a couple days earlier and spilled ketchup on. Even with his dearth of fashion sense, he knows this is an eyesore combination, but he’d been in such a hurry to run away that he had just pulled on the first things he grabbed. He’ll burn these, too. He’s never going to wear them again.

The second time he opens the bathroom door, he still doesn’t see Derek, but he can hear him moving around in the kitchen. Stiles tentatively pads over, arms crossed over his torso. “Hey,” he says softly.

“Hey, Stiles.” Derek’s fussing over some glasses as he glances at Stiles and doesn’t visibly cringe, so Stiles figures he doesn’t look like a completely unhinged lunatic anymore. “Did you find the aspirin? I’m making some tea, it’ll be done in a sec.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Stiles says. This is bizarre. Derek. Steeping hot tea.

His eyes wander to the plastic bag on the countertop and he opens it to find his much-needed eyedrops, a toothbrush, and a variety of his favorite snacks - a box of Red Vines, a package of barbecue potato chips, and peanut butter cups. “Are these for me?”

“I didn’t know if you would want to eat anything. It’s hard to find comfort food at this hour, so this is the closest I could manage.”

“Thanks.”

Stiles just stands there under the lights of the kitchen and before he knows it, Derek brings a steaming glass over and sets it down in front of him.

“I don’t … I don’t know what to say,” Derek tries, his usually bright eyes dim. “I honestly … this is out of - I don’t -”

“It’s okay,” Stiles shrugs. “I don’t think there’s a ‘For Dummies’ book about this kind of stuff that people leave out on their coffee tables.”

Derek embraces him again, tentatively at first but growing more assertive as the seconds tick by. “Does this help? Or do you not want to be touched?”

“No - no, it’s - it’s okay,” Stiles stutters. Derek had never touched him like this before tonight. He’s at a loss for why Derek would want to now that he’s heard the tip of the iceberg of what Stiles let his uncle do to him.

“Your heartbeat seems better.”

“There’s the Derek Hale I know,” Stiles muses. “Total stalker.”

Stiles squeezes a little tighter and rests his head against Derek’s shoulder. Derek’s own heart sounds and feels strong underneath him.

They don’t talk for a while - Stiles doesn’t really know what to say, either - until Stiles tilts his face and breathes in a faint whiff of detergent from Derek’s henley.

“Am I - do I smell clean?” he asks nervously.

“Yeah.”

“Would you tell me if I didn’t?”

“Yes.”
“Really?”

“Yes,” Derek says, closing his eyes briefly. “I wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

Stiles just murmurs something unintelligible and pulls away. He doesn’t want to make Derek uncomfortable. At least not more uncomfortable than he already has.

Derek takes stock of the tea and pushes it closer to Stiles. “Here, if you want some. This should have cooled off enough. Maybe it’ll help you sleep.”

Stiles takes a long sip and feels the liquid slide down and settle in his stomach. He’s not much of a tea drinker, but taste aside, it’s impossible to deny how calming it can be. After a few more sips, he holds the glass in both hands like he’s just come in from a snowstorm and lets the warmth sink in.

“What do you want to do? Do you want to talk? Or just get some sleep?”

Stiles is exhausted, his mind so jumbled up that he’s not sure he could sleep, no matter how hard he tried. But he’s even more unsure that he can talk about it, either. As endlessly as he’s thought about it over the past few months, those words are meant for him only. He doesn’t know how to talk to someone else.

“I’m really tired, Derek. I’m so tired.”

“Come on,” Derek says. “Maybe if you lie down, you’ll be able to sleep.”

Derek’s loft is huge, but not the epitome of comfort. He has a decent couch that easily seats four or can accommodate two people lying down. Derek’s bed is a dream, though, according to Lydia and her high standards. She’s the only pack member who’s ever laid down in it during a particularly bad episode of banshee hearing when she thought her head was going to explode. That had been nice of Derek, Stiles remembers thinking, because his sheets must have reeked of her expensive French perfume afterwards.

He sinks into the plush mattress with a soft sigh, as it turns out Lydia’s taste is as well-calibrated as Stiles presumed. If he can’t sleep here, with the protection of a werewolf to boot, he won’t be able to sleep anywhere.

Derek sits on the other side of the bed, looking down at him. “Are you still in pain?”

Stiles squirms a little on his back, ostensibly to keep settling in, but his shoulders tighten up and he doesn’t meet Derek’s eyes. “Yeah, kind of.” He holds out his right hand, knuckles a little swollen. “I tried to punch him. Not well.”

Derek covers it with his own hand. Stiles watches his veins turn black and feels the pain ebb away, leaving slight lightheadedness in its place.

“And my ribs,” Stiles says, running his fingers over the left side of his torso. “I didn’t - when I tried to get away - he grabbed me, I fell and hit the corner of the bed.”

Derek scowls and skitters his touch to where Stiles indicated. “Do you think they might be bruised or fractured? When I take the pain, you won’t be able to tell anymore, but it won’t actually heal you. If you need medical attention -”

“They’re okay, Derek. I don’t need a doctor. It’s just regular bruising, I think, not a bone bruise.”

Derek leeches the ache away as Stiles blinks a few tears away. “Better?”
“I should have fought harder …” Stiles says critically, his lip curling in self-loathing, “even if they beat the shit out of me. You would have made it all go away.”

Derek is so quiet that after a few moments, Stiles glances at him, but immediately looks away. He seems angry and sad. More angry than sad. Maybe more sad than angry. Stiles doesn’t know.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Stiles. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

Stiles keeps squirming. “Just you know - I mean - just.” Stiles trails off, still looking elsewhere. “Would that mean - where would you have to? …”

“Not direct contact,” Derek answers. “Just close. Like, I couldn’t do it touching your nose.”

Stiles’ mouth twists as he considers. After a few beats, Derek continues, “But if you’re not okay with it, I don’t have to. I just need to know if you want it to feel better.”

Stiles bites his lip. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Can you turn on your side?”

Stiles obliges, turning to face Derek, and Derek’s hand comes to rest on the thin cotton at the base of Stiles’ spine. “I’m just going to -”

“Just do it,” Stiles whispers.

Derek’s hand is warm where it makes contact with the slice of Stiles’ bare skin just above the waistband. His fingers dip slightly under as he watches Stiles’ face intently for signs of discomfort. Stiles doesn’t react, though, and just stares at a small thread defect on the hip of Derek’s own sweatpants.

Derek’s veins run black again and Stiles’ eyelashes flutter. “Is that better?” Derek asks.

Stiles’ voice is small and breathy, but clear. “Yeah.”

“It’s pretty late,” Derek says. “It’s almost three. Just close your eyes and try to sleep, okay?”

Stiles nods as Derek lays down next to him and layers them both with blankets before turning the light off. The light from the crescent moon is faint, and there’s hardly any white noise, either, because Derek doesn’t have a variety of electronics softly buzzing in the background.

Stiles tries to do what Derek told him, but he can’t shut his brain off. He thinks about last week’s history lectures, expecting it to lull him to boredom, just like they do in class, but that doesn’t work, either. There’s nothing to keep the flashes of memory at bay and Stiles flinches as he’s hit with little bursts.

“Stiles?”

He inhales roughly. “It’s too quiet,” he whispers.

He remembers grimacing when his door started to open. The confusion, then the abject fear, when there were two silhouettes. His futile attempts to escape. He’s never begged like that, ever. He can hear the echoes of his screams. There were so many hands, holding him down, touching him, taking from him.

“Stiles,” Derek says, reaching for his shoulder.
Stiles tries to respond, but his throat is tight with jagged whimpers.

“Stiles.”

“I’ve never felt like that before,” Stiles chokes out, crying absently.

Derek moves closer and wraps an arm around Stiles’ chest, spooning up behind him. “You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you here.”

“How could he do that to me?” Stiles sobs. “How could he just … just give me away like that?”

“I don’t know, Stiles.”

“I’m used to him using me, like he owns me. I don’t want to be his. But I don’t know why he wanted to share me, like I’m nothing. I gave him everything. He made me give him everything. And then he gave me away.”

Derek is silent, the sheets rustling as he tightens his hold and rests his forehead against the back of Stiles’s neck.

“I know Clay never actually cared about me. But this is the first time I ever really felt like … like I was just a hole …” Stiles’ voice nearly breaks off altogether. “I don’t even know the other guy. I don’t know anything about him. But he knows me now.”

“I’m going to be right back, okay? Just one second.”

Derek leaves the bed and Stiles shudders without him. He shouldn’t have said those things. It’s too much. No one wants to hear that. Normal people can’t hear shit like that without wanting to blow their brains out.

“Here, Stiles,” Derek says, coming back into Stiles’ line of sight with a box of tissues and setting it on the bed next to him.

“Thanks …”

“Just let it out, okay?”

Stiles doesn’t want to have another crying fit, but he can’t help it. The dam has already been reopened. He cries until it’s more painful to keep going than to taper off. He doesn’t know how his head isn’t dehydrated like an old raisin. His chest almost hurts from the constant gasping breaths.

“It’s too quiet. I can’t block it out.”

“We can sleep by the tv again. Do you want to do that?”

Stiles sniffs. “Can you just talk to me? Just … you can talk about anything.”

Derek pauses for a few seconds before starting to tell Stiles stories from his childhood, easy ones that roll off the tongue and enable him to keep going without lapsing into thought.

Stiles closes his eyes and focuses on the rumble of Derek’s low voice between his shoulder blades, the familiar timbre slowly beginning to soothe his tortured heart.

He isn’t aware he had nodded off for a bit until he wakes up to Derek still talking, this time about a family vacation to Disneyland. Stiles knows that Derek is paying vigilant attention to his breathing and the tension in his body easing away. Derek sensed the second he fell asleep, but kept going
anyway, kept extending the lifeline, no matter what.

“Thanks, Derek,” he interrupts drowsily. “I knew I could come here.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

An unanticipated lull in posting on my end! After the first chapter or two being very "all Stiles, all the time," here's a chapter of "all Stiles and Derek, all the time."

And thank you so much for the support via kudos, comments, subscriptions, etc.! It means a lot to me that there’s interest in this story. I write for myself and have been writing for myself, but now that I’ve gotten out of my own little world and have been posting for consumption, of course it feels satisfying to get any reactions from the people consuming.

Please enjoy!

[Posted 6/4/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles blinks his eyes open slowly, warm and comfortable in a way he hasn’t felt in a long time. He doesn’t remember where he is until he catches a glimpse of the brick wall nearby. His eyes dart in another direction and he immediately regrets it, squinting at the morning light streaming in through the enormous panel of windows.

Derek’s arm tightens around his waist. “Go back to sleep,” he grumbles.

“What time is it?” Stiles asks, turning his head and partially rolling over in Derek’s direction. “It’s a school day.”

Derek snorts. “Like you’ve never missed school before.”

“Yeah,” Stiles concedes, turning over all the way.

Derek’s face is mostly smushed into his pillow. “You need more sleep.”

“Okay.” It’s true. His headache has lessened to a dull throb in the background, but his body is still telling him to recover. As he tucks into Derek’s shoulder, Derek shifts and pulls him in.

The second time Stiles rouses, he still has no idea what time it is, but now a glass of water and the items Derek had bought are on the bedside table next to him. He lifts Derek’s arm away and reaches for the eyedrops, but Derek doesn’t stir.

After he wets his scratchy eyes, Stiles grabs the toothbrush and heads for the bathroom. He doesn’t look great in the mirror, but not God-awful, either - certainly not like he did the previous night. Splashing water on his face and brushing away the cotton mouth feeling help a little.

When Stiles comes back to bed, he sees Derek is awake, too. “Morning,” Derek says.

“Morning.”

“Did you get enough rest?”
“Yeah, I think so.” Stiles gulps down the entire glass of water and checks his phone. It’s almost 10:30 am. He hasn’t slept this much in one night since forever. Since before the nogitsune.

“You feel okay?”

“Yeah, my knuckles are okay,” Stiles says, lying back down and facing him. “And my ribs, thanks.”

“How’s your headache?”

“That’s better, too.”

“Come here.” Derek cards a hand through Stiles’ hair and absorbs the residual pain. “I should have just done that last night.”

“Sorry if I scared you. Coming over here like that.”

“I’m glad you felt like you could, though.”

“Yeah. Thanks for letting me stay.”

“Of course, Stiles. You can always use the key I gave you, too.”

Stiles nods wordlessly. Derek knows now. It doesn’t smother Stiles with anxiety the way it would if it were his dad or Scott, but his friendship with Derek has changed irreversibly.

Derek knows enough, but he doesn’t know everything. He doesn’t know a lot of things. His understanding of the timeline is basic, and in a way, it doesn’t really matter how often he thinks it happened - once is one time too many and painful enough. There must be so many blanks his mind is struggling to grasp or filling in with guesses out of pure inability to withhold the speculation.

“It’s kind of weird now that you know,” Stiles says, blurt out exactly what’s on his mind.

“But it’s good that you’re not keeping it all inside. That must have been really, really hard.”

Stiles smirks a little with a mild undercurrent of irony. “For a long time, I thought people finding out would be way harder than keeping the secret. You can’t really take it back once someone knows.”

“Are you okay that you told me? Do you want to take it back?”

“No,” Stiles says. “I don’t want to.” He doesn’t have to think about it. The uncertainty of how to navigate the truth out in the open is still unnerving, but having someone support him in this abyss is worth it.

“So what do you wanna do now?”

Stiles closes his eyes. “Like right now?”

“In general. What do you want to do about him?”

“I don’t…” Stiles opens his eyes and looks into Derek’s, like maybe he’ll find the answers there. “I don’t know.”

“Your dad doesn’t know?” Derek asks, but it’s not really a question. “Of course not. Your uncle would be eating through a straw if he knew.”

“He doesn’t know.”
“Are you going to tell him?”

“No.”

“Okay. If you want to keep him out of it, we can. We’ll take care of your uncle ourselves.”

“I’ll think about it,” Stiles says quietly. “I’ll think about it and I guess, um, let you know what I want
to do later.”

Derek’s left eye quirks. “But we have to get rid of him.”

Stiles breathes in deeply. Last night was so surreal - being so badly hurt by someone way too close to
him and a complete stranger, finally spilling his sordid secrets, fucking falling asleep in the solace of
Derek Hale’s fucking arms. But now everything feels way too raw, way too fast.

“I know. I just need some time.”

“Okay. Okay.” Derek nods his head in short movements, lips pressed together. “He just - he can’t
hurt you again.”

“I didn’t,” Stiles tries to explain, “I didn’t come here because - I came here because I had to get
away. I know it sounds crazy, like how could I not know what I want? What have I spent the last
couple months doing, if I wasn’t thinking about how to end this? What was I thinking about when he
was - while he was …?”

“Yeah, I know it must be complicated. It’s been going on for so long -” Stiles flushes with
embarrassment and Derek immediately backtracks. “No, I don’t mean - he really -”

“It’s okay. I’ve thought that, too. He did it because he knew he could get away with it. He kept
doing it because I let him get away with it. He knew I wasn’t gonna tell. He took advantage of me,
of how I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Stiles, I don’t think that -”

“It’s okay,” Stiles repeats, staring up at the rafters. “I know. There’s something wrong with me. You
would never have let someone do that to you. Let alone over and over. I’m really sucked up. There’s
something really wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. He’s the fucked up one.”

“I don’t know,” Stiles shrugs. “I haven’t really been in the best headspace, either.”

“Your head is probably all over the place. It’s hard to cut through all of the noise. But you don’t have
to. I’ll take care of it.”

Stiles sits up, charged with anxiety. “I know what that means,” he says, shaking his head. “I know
what ‘take care of it’ means.”

Derek matches his posture, just as tense. “He fucking deserves it! After what he did -”

“You can’t kill him, Derek! I don’t -” Stiles stops short, wringing his hands. “My mom.”

“I didn’t know her, Stiles, but I know she loved you and if she were here - if she’s anything like my
mother - she would kill this fucker with her bare hands and spit on his grave.”

“Derek, I said no! No more death, okay? I’ve been at the center of too much bloodshed and I can’t
keep - it has to stop! I had this - this thing in my head that loved to kill, and that’s supposed to be gone! I can’t. I don’t want that.”

“Okay, then I’ll just seriously fuck him up. I have no problem with that. He’ll live, and he can think about what a waste of space he is for the rest of his miserable life.”

“It’s not that simple, Derek.” Stiles rubs at the pulse point on his wrist to try to keep his bearings. “I can’t kill him, but I don’t know what to do if he’s just … out there. If it’s not me, it’ll be someone else. He’ll find someone else.”

“Stiles, you have to think about yourself right now.”

“I am! You don’t understand. I can’t live with myself if another person gets hurt because of me.”

“And you haven’t changed your mind about reporting it?”

Stiles’ pupils dilate with a sharp pang of fear. “No. No, I can’t. I’m not gonna do that. I can’t go to the police. People will know. I’ll have to tell people - total strangers. Or people that I know. My dad’s co-workers. I’ll never be able to get away from it. Neither will my dad.”

“It’s okay, Stiles. You don’t have to tell anyone. But if that’s not an option for you, and you’re scared that he’s going to do this to someone else, I can make sure he never touches anyone ever -”

“I already told you, the nogitsune was always looking to kill. But it’s just me now, and I have to - I can’t be like that again! I have to be different.”

“You wouldn’t be doing it, Stiles. It would be me, and it’s okay, I understood a long time ago that I’m a predator.”

“Derek!” Stiles huffs and abruptly gets out of bed. “This is MY family. My pack. You don’t tell me what to do with my pack. I told you I need time - I need to figure out what to do -”

“Stiles -”

“Listen, man, you don’t have a leg to stand on! You still let Peter come here even after EVERYTHING he’s done. Don’t tell me what I should do about my own family when Peter’s still around after he killed your own sister!”

It’s a cruel thing to say, but Stiles doesn’t think it’s any less true, and Derek’s not the type of person who backs off just because someone asks him to. He backs off when someone goes toe-to-toe with him. That’s part of why he and Derek have ebbed and flowed so dynamically the whole time they’ve known each other.

“Stiles,” Derek says, standing up, his eyes flashing. “I DID kill him.”

“Yeah, and then he totally mindfucked Lydia into bringing him back from the dead, what a heartwarming redemption story. Totally deserving of your company now. You may have meant it the first time you slashed him up, but he’s back and you obviously don’t wish he had stayed dead or you’d give it the good old college try again.”

Derek’s shoulders slump. “I don’t,” he says, shaking his head, “I don’t even know what we’re fighting about. I just can’t - this has to end. I know you know that. You said you can’t do this anymore.”

“I know,” Stiles relents, all of the previous edge absent from his tone. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have
said what I said. You’re just worried about me. I know the way I showed up here - of course you want to fix it. And I asked you for your help. You really did me a solid, and I just bit your head off.”

“It’s okay. It didn’t really bother me. And you were kind of right.”

“Not really. Not the way I said it, anyway.” In the cold light of day, Stiles suddenly feels ill-at-ease with Derek and starts walking away from the bed and into the main living space. “I’m really sorry. I should - I should go.”

“Hey, wait,” Derek calls out.

Stiles picks up his wallet and keys from the kitchen counter, slipping them into the pocket of the borrowed sweatpants. “Thanks for letting me stay here last night,” he says with a genuinely appreciative wave.

Derek follows him. “Stiles, wait, where are you going?”

Stiles shrugs. “I’m gonna go to the rest of my classes today.”

“What about after?” Derek says, eyes piercing through him like lasers. “Okay, I understand. You need time, you get time. But you’re not going home.”

“Derek, just -“

“You can’t go back there. You have to come back here, or go to Scott’s, or fuck, I don’t really care - go to Kira’s and zap light bulbs all fucking day with her.”

Stiles rubs at his temples. He can’t discern whether it’s pressure from the headache returning or the sudden push to know what to do about all of his problems when he hasn’t known for months.

“I’ll be fine,” he says unconvincingly. “Listen, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, I really do. Please don’t do anything, or say anything to anyone, okay? I know why you feel the way you do - I mean, last night was bad - it’s not usually like that - that was the worst it’s ever been, you just saw me at my worst -”

Derek shakes his head, mouth tight. “So if he does it again, but he’s by himself, then it’s okay?”

Stiles feels his defenses flaring up again on autopilot, but he pushes them down and moves towards the door. “I’ll be fine.”

“Stiles, come on, you don’t have to go,” Derek says, trailing after him. Stiles doesn’t turn to face him, mostly because he doesn’t know what else to say.

Grabbing Stiles by the wrist and placing the other hand over his heart, Derek yells, “I can’t take this from you!”

And he’s right, nothing happens. They stand there for a few long moments, but there’s no physical pain to be siphoned away. It’s just a black, soul-crushing mess that’s immune to any and all werewolf tricks.

Derek can’t magically do anything about how much it hurts on the inside.

Stiles looks at him with weary eyes. “Honestly, Derek, I can’t even think two hours ahead right now. I just want to go to school and be a normal teenager.”

Derek doesn’t release his grip. “Stiles, I can’t let you go back there with him.”
“Derek, I’m not going to. But I gotta go …” Stiles tries to pull his arm away, but he’s no match for Derek’s strength. “I gotta make it to fifth period. We have a quiz today and I already told Scott he could copy off me. He texted after I didn’t show up to third period. He probably thinks he’s gonna fail because I didn’t answer.”

“Stiles,” Derek says, squeezing a little harder. Stiles winces in surprise and Derek drops his wrist like a hot poker. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Stiles takes the opening and walks backwards towards the front door until his heel connects with the metal. Derek watches as the distance between them grows and Stiles almost concedes and stays, even if it means he doesn’t get the breathing room he’s desperate for. He’s never been particularly claustrophobic, but the air feels thin around him.

He slides the door open, turning back briefly one last time as he crosses the threshold. “Thanks again,” he says softly.

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Stiles goes home to shower again and change clothes, but only after he confirms that Clay’s truck isn’t parked in front of the house. If Clay hadn’t gone to work, Stiles would have resorted to plan B – showering at the McCall’s house if Scott’s mom wasn’t there and going to the nearest Target to buy a new pair of khakis. He could get by wearing Derek’s t-shirt to school, but not the sweatpants.

He makes it to campus with perfect timing in the middle of lunch period, so no one notices that he’s actually arriving for the first time that day.

“Hey, man,” Stiles says, sliding in next to Scott at their usual table.

He knows he still looks bad from crying so much, but he tries to overcompensate with a note of levity in his voice. Eyedrops, a good night’s sleep, and hot showers can only get him so far. Even if he were a girl who could wear makeup, he wouldn’t know the first thing about faking a bright and happy glow.

Scott says as much. “Oh wow, you look like shit.”

Stiles has a lie at the ready, one that covers a lot of bases. He’d been messing around with the deadpool equipment and driving Derek so crazy that Derek tried to slow his roll by letting him have some vodka leftover from the blacklight party. The only problem was he’d overestimated his tolerance, so he’d slept in and is still hungover. He could have gone the simple ‘I have a cold’ route, but Stiles isn’t going to remember to keep coughing and sniffing for a couple of days.

“Derek shouldn’t have let you have so much,” Scott says, a little disapprovingly. “I mean, I kind of figured him for a killjoy chaperone.”

“He’s not a chaperone as much as he’s the pack’s accidental Computer Club President. And I think he just likes laughing at my drunk ass.”

Scott nods in total agreement. “You are a pretty funny drunk.”

“And don’t worry, I would never leave you in the lurch. I’m ready for the quiz and I’ve perfected the angle to tilt my paper so you can see it.”

“Thank God, man. I gotta get my grades up a little. I don’t want my mom to start worrying about me again like she did last year.”
Stiles understands a thing or two about that. “By the way, she wanted me to explain to you the words alacrity and assiduousness.”

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It turns out that missing biology class that morning hadn’t been a great idea since the lecture wasn’t based on any textbook material. Danny, aka The Greatest Lab Partner to Ever Lab Partner, offers to give Stiles his notes and go over them because his meticulous drawings don’t really speak for themselves. Stiles is surprised by the generosity - while he had thought they were becoming friendlier, this is kind of next-level - but Danny waves the kind gesture away.

An hour after the final bell, Stiles walks out to the parking lot and finds Derek leaning against his Jeep. Except Stiles knows it’s not a Sixteen Candles re-enactment where he gets everything he ever wanted and eats cake while sitting on a glass tabletop.

“How long have you been waiting out here?”

“Since last period let out.”

Stiles raises his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah, that’s not conspicuous at all …”

“I waited for most of the time inside,” Derek shrugs, motioning to his conspicuous Camaro parked the next aisle over.

Stiles pulls at his backpack straps nervously. “An hour is a long time.”

Derek shrugs again. “I meditated,” he deadpans.

“So …” Stiles says, toeing at the ground.

“I don’t like how we left things this morning.”

“Can we talk about this somewhere else?” Stiles cranes his neck, checking in all directions of the mostly empty parking lot, but there’s no one there. Just his own personal pseudo Jake Ryan.

“Yeah, sure. I’m sorry I pressured you. It’s just that - you said it’s either you or someone else, and it can’t be you. I’m not okay with that.”

“I wasn’t going to go home. My dad’s not back yet.”

“When will that be? In a day or two? You’re going to stay at my place until your dad is back, okay?”

Stiles nods. Derek doesn’t need the gory details. He doesn’t need to know it didn’t make a difference whether his dad was home or not. It’ll just highlight how complicit Stiles was, putting that much effort into keeping the secret from everyone. He’s not blameless. And maybe Derek will think there’s something wrong with his dad, too, just like Clay had warned him would happen if anyone found out.

“Thanks for putting up with all of this shit,” is all he says instead.

“I need to know you’re safe,” Derek says. “It’s not a burden. I want to do it. It’s for me as much as it for you.”

“I’m not very good at talking to someone about this,” Stiles confesses. “I’m just not used to it. Sometimes I would try to tell myself it was mind over matter. That I just had to figure out how to forget about it and move on. But I couldn’t do it.”
"You weren’t being weak, Stiles. No one could just forget it. He did fucking horrible things to you. He raped you. It was incest."

Stiles hasn’t cried all day since he woke up, but tears spring to his eyes as though they’ve been there all along. It hurts to hear the words out loud. They’re not a revelation - Stiles has been living with it for years and Derek for almost a day - but they’re too real. They cut through the last of the waning facade Stiles had tried to put on that morning, like he’d done every day since Clay came back.

He covers his face with his hands, drawing in a shaky breath. “Oh no, I’m sorry,” Derek says gently. “I’m sorry, Stiles.”

Stiles’ legs feel like jelly. When his knees stop working, he starts to keel over, but Derek rushes to catch him. “Pan - panic - attack,” Stiles gasps out against Derek’s chest.

Derek holds him up as he breathes through it, and the attack recedes faster than it usually does.

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Once Stiles is in better control of his faculties, Derek helps him into the passenger side of the Camaro and drives off the school grounds. Even though Stiles looks out the window the entire time, he isn’t really paying attention and doesn’t put together where they’re going until they arrive.

Derek pulls up to an area of the Preserve that Stiles has never been to and puts the car into park. “No one can hear us here.”

Stiles has been on the receiving end of that sentiment before, but this time, there’s nothing threatening or foreboding about it. The Preserve is peaceful and undisturbed.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Derek says. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah.” Stiles flashes Derek a small smile to prove it. “Don’t worry about it. I freak out like that sometimes. You’ve just never seen it.”

“I’m not good at talking, either. Well, you’re great at talking; you talk a lot. But I’m not good at it in general. And I’m worse at listening. I’m trying to be better.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, I should be better at it. You need me to be better.”

Stiles shakes his head. “You’ve been really good to me.”

“It’s so hard for me to see you going through this, but it’s sort of simple, too, because the only thing that matters to me is that you’re safe. But that shouldn’t be the only thing. What you want also matters. If you don’t know what that is yet, that’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“Okay - okay, thanks.”

They’re quiet for a few moments, and Stiles’ mind races to think of how he can ease the stress he’s heaped onto Derek, who’s obviously trying so much to say or do something helpful, but doesn’t seem to believe he’s making a dent at all. Stiles isn’t doing him any favors when all Derek really knows is he’s been assaulted for months, culminating in the cruelty that drove him to Derek’s doorstep. Derek could be picturing something way worse than reality in his head.

“He doesn’t usually hit me,” Stiles says, “if that makes it any better, I guess. He doesn’t, like, beat
me into it. He’s a lot stronger than me, so he could. I can’t really explain it. I know none of it must make any sense to you. Like how does he make me do it if he doesn’t physically force me into it. Does that even mean he forced me.”

“He did,” Derek cuts in bitterly. “He twisted you up inside. I can hear it in your voice. Some people would say that’s worse than hitting you.”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods. “He forced me. But I don’t know if that’s what he thought he was doing. He would always say that I wanted it. That I liked it.”

Stiles doesn’t elaborate, partly because that’s disgusting enough, but really because Derek can never know about the times his body basically did show Clay that he liked it.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell your dad? It doesn’t have to be telling him as the Sheriff. Just telling him as your dad.”

“Would you want to tell yours something like this?”

“No.” Derek wipes his mouth with his palm and props his elbow on the console between them. “I understand. But do you think keeping this from him is going to help you more than it hurts you? You guys are so close. I just - I don’t want this secret to drive a huge wedge between the two of you.”

“He can’t change what happened. Clay’s the one who did what he did. But I’m the reason my dad didn’t know sooner. I’m the one who kept the secret. I didn’t say anything, and telling him now will only hurt him. Once I didn’t tell him after the first time it happened, it just got harder and harder to even think about trying. And it was a really rough time - he was dealing with a lot, my mom had just died, and -(“)

“What?”

Stiles replays his last few words in his head before answering. “Oh, um -”

“She died years ago.”

As he watches the gears turn in Derek’s head, Stiles cringes a little. The conversation probably only lulled for half of a second, but it feels like a lifetime.

“Stiles, this was not - it’s happened before.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says simply.

Derek’s jaw locks with a dark scowl. “Jesus Christ. You were a child.”

“I was ten.” Stiles jumps in his seat a little when Derek’s hands suddenly flick open with his claws. “I’m sorry …”

“Stiles, don’t -”

Derek’s face crinkles as he looks up at the sun visor. Before Stiles knows what’s happening, Derek swings his door open and stalks out of the car.

Biting his lip, Stiles leans forward so he can see better through the open driver’s side. Derek stops walking around twenty feet away, hands on his hips and head down, but he doesn’t turn around. Nervously, Stiles kneads his fingers in his lap and finally just stares straight ahead when Derek doesn’t come back right away. After a few minutes, he hears footsteps and Derek’s weight being
planted firmly back in his seat.

“Sorry,” Stiles says in a small voice.

“Stiles, you have nothing to apologize for. Zero. I just. Didn’t want you to see how mad I was. But not at you.”

“So now you must really get why I can’t tell my dad.” Stiles tries to keep his tone a little lighter to try to turn the mood, like there’s anything remotely amusing about what he just said, but it doesn’t really work.

“Let’s get some air,” Derek says, pulling the keys from the ignition altogether. “I know a good place nearby.”

They walk in silence that doesn’t really feel like silence with all of the ambient noise of nature. Derek puts his hand on Stiles’ shoulder and squeezes before looking at him with a more relaxed expression. Whether it’s real or forced ease, Stiles can’t really tell, but he understands the attempt to diffuse any tension Derek thinks is still lingering.

Stiles hears the stream before he sees it. The sloping of the land makes it seem more tucked away than it really is.

“I come here when I need to think. This is my favorite spot right here.” Derek sits down on a patch of grass and Stiles follows suit next to him. “It’s close, but far enough away that it’s usually pretty dry. And you can see the water cascading down those levels of rocks over there.”

“It’s really nice. I like it.”

“I’m sorry he did that to you,” Derek sighs. “Just when I thought he couldn’t be a sicker fuck, there he goes.”

“At least he left, eventually. He moved away and got married. He’s only back now because he’s getting divorced. I don’t know if he came back because he didn’t have anywhere else to go, or if it was because of me. Because he got away with it the first time and he thought he could do it again. And he did - I gave him exactly what he wanted.”

“It’s not your fault, Stiles. You were just a kid. Trust me, I know bad guys. They get their hooks into you, no matter what you do.”

“It didn’t used to be like this.” Stiles squints at a bird pecking away downstream. “He used to help my dad take care of me. And I was kind of a handful, so it wasn’t easy. We used to be friends. I thought we were real friends. But everything changed and I know it was wrong, but I didn’t - I couldn’t stop it. I know I should have told my dad, I should have told someone, but I didn’t. I wasn’t supposed to.

“And then he came back. I’m about to turn eighteen and he still sees me as that sad little kid who will do whatever he says. I didn’t think that’s who I was anymore, but when he came back, that’s who I became again. Or maybe that’s always who I was. Maybe I never stopped.”

Derek contradicts him flatly. “You were never that. At least not as long as I’ve known you. You’re a sarcastic, mouthy guy who’s independent as fuck and usually propping other people up.”

“Maybe. But things are different with him. When he’s there, I’m the person he makes me when all I want is for him to be the person he was before.”
“It’s okay if you are,” Derek broaches, “because you’re allowed to have a lot of different feelings about it. But are you - are you protecting him?”

Stiles slams his hand down on his knee with more force than he intended. “No! No. I remember how it used to be, when he was my friend, when I loved him and I thought he loved me. But I don’t care about him anymore. He made sure of that. I’m just so … so stuck.

“The nogitsune destroyed me from the inside-out,” Stiles continues, wiping at a stray tear. “Just like he did. But at least after the nogitsune was gone, I still had my friends, my dad. And everyone keeps saying that it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t do those things, it was the nogitsune who did them. But if people know what Clay did … I did it, too. It was me. I’m not a kid anymore, Derek. I should have done more to stop him. But I didn’t, and he kept coming back, and I just took it. I don’t want everyone to know that. I’ve always been weird, spazzy Stiles. And that’s okay, I can own that. But I can’t own this. I don’t want people to see this when they look at me.”

“Okay,” Derek says, nodding. “Okay.”

“I mean, you do, right?” Stiles gazes off into the distance. “Now that you know.”

“No. I just see you.”

“But you do,” Stiles claims. “That’s why you were so nice to me last night, why you took care of me. Because you see this when you look at me.”

“Stiles. I did those things because we’re friends.”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, yeah. I know we’re friends.”

“I think I understand what you mean, at least a little bit.” Derek picks at a little patch of grass between them. “I always felt like Laura could only see the fire when she looked at me afterwards. She said she didn’t, but it took a long time for me to start to believe her.”

“How long did it take?”

“After she was already gone, actually. It was Cora, when she was here and we had a lot of time to talk. I had to hear it from another person. It’s not like I thought Laura was lying to me, but there was always a part of me that thought, I’m her only family left. So she had to make herself keep me and the fire apart in her head or else she wouldn’t be able to suppress the anger and the blame.”

“You know, when my mom died - I was there. I was there by myself when she flatlined. My dad was on duty, so he was out on a call. It was a car accident. So he didn’t - he wasn’t able to come to the hospital for almost an hour after she passed. And I understand. That’s the way his job is. But I was there by myself when the doctors rushed in and they couldn’t bring her back. Scott’s mom wasn’t working that night, either. It was just me.”

“I didn’t know that, Stiles. I’m sorry.”

Stiles shrugs. “It’s okay. I mean, I’m glad I was there, at least. That she wasn’t by herself. But I know my dad has never forgiven himself for that. For her or for me. He feels like he wasn’t there for me.

“I think that’s why he - why I get away with a lot. Even before Peter turned Scott, and definitely after. He’s busy, but he’s not an absentee father. He cares about me a lot, so much. But all the suspicious stuff - being out late, turning up at crime scenes, having shitty explanations for everything - he’s not dumb or neglectful. He’s not too lazy to be a parent.
“But he feels like he left me there by myself as a kid, to deal with the hardest thing that’s ever happened to us. Something a kid should never have to deal with alone. So what is he gonna do, you know, when he thinks he made me grow up too fast as a ten-year-old? Treat me like a child now that I’m older? It’s kind of too late for that. He does with basic things, like bills and money, but it’s hard for him to do that when he thinks he made me be an adult when my mom died.

“So, like, I can’t - he can’t ever know what Clay did. It’ll just hurt him so much. He’s the best dad, Derek. And he’ll never think that he is if he knows what happened.”

Stiles is clenching his fists so tightly in his lap he’s almost shaking, but he doesn’t realize it until Derek reaches out and lays a hand over them. “You have every right to be angry. It’s a lot better than being mad at yourself. And a lot more accurate.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Stiles says, flexing his fingers out as if he can push the rage away from him. He knows he’s been angry for a long time. It’s just always taken a backseat to other pressing emotions.

Derek pulls them both up so they’re standing. “It’s okay to let yourself feel that anger towards him. It might help. Just use me as a punching bag.”

Stiles stares at him, lips parted in confusion. “I’m not gonna - no -”

“It won’t hurt me, Stiles, you know that. Just punch me. Say what you want to say to him and let me have it. If you don’t feel any better, okay. But if you do, that’s good.”

Stiles lands a trial punch with half-force below Derek’s shoulder and reflexively glances at him in mild horror. “It doesn’t hurt,” Derek insists. “Go for it.”

This time, Stiles hits a little harder, and again, each time with more power, until he starts to forget that he’s hitting a person at all.

“How could you do that to me?” he spits out with a particularly vigorous blow. “Why did you pretend to my friend?”

The punches do feel good. Seeing red feels good. “How could you pretend to care when all you wanted was to ruin me?”

“What did I do to make you want that?”

“Are you even a little bit sorry about any of it?”

Stiles’ voice is rough and strained from the growing exertion and rage. “Did you know you were gonna do this when you were holding her hand in the hospital?”

“You promised her you would help take care of me!”

“Did you ever mean it when you acted like his friend? Or was that all a big lie, too?”

“They trusted you!”

“How could you do this to us?” Stiles trails off as he sinks to his knees and catches his breath.

Derek crouches down in front of him. “You okay?”

Stiles swallows around his dry throat. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. That was - it helped. That felt -” He pauses, suddenly aware of the adrenaline rush and his damp cheeks. “Thanks for that.”
“No problem, Stiles,” Derek says, reaching for Stiles’ hands. “You landed some good ones. Did they hurt?”

“No, I’m good. No pain. For a brick wall, you somehow have a marshmallow side to you.”

“What, you mean this?” Derek feigns ignorance and pulls the hem of his sweater up, revealing a few inches of his six-pack.

“Ugh, God, I hate you,” Stiles mumbles with a half-exasperated smile.

He sits back on his heels and Derek rotates to sit beside him again, cracking a knuckle with a sharp ominous pop against the babbling of the water. “He’ll be gone soon, Stiles.”

“Yeah.” Stiles gives a perfunctory nod, trying to keep the optimism at bay. “Yeah, I hope so.”

“He will be. I know you said no killing -”

“I asked you for help,” Stiles interrupts, “but it has to be on my terms.”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course. You should get what you want. And not get what you don’t want. But holy shit, Stiles. This fucking guy. Everything he’s done. He should burn in hell.”

“He probably will, someday,” Stiles says. “But we can’t be the ones who put him there now.”

“I know. But he hurt you so much. I would just - love to …”

His claws come out again, but he retracts them as quickly as they appeared. “But - my mom …”

Stiles protests faintly.

Derek doesn’t say anything at first. He just puts his arm around Stiles and rubs his shoulder. “I know,” he finally replies. “Peter is my mom’s brother, too.”

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As Stiles and Derek are walking back to the Camaro, Stiles’ phone rings. Normally Stiles would just ignore it, but his dad has his own jaunty ringtone.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, kiddo. You doing okay without me?”

Stiles laughs a little. “I had to learn how to tie my own shoes, but that’s what YouTube is for. What’s going on in Folsom?”

“I don’t think it’s anything supernatural, but if these really are animal attacks, they’re pretty weird. I’m going to stick around for a couple more days to make sure.”

“Okay. So you’ll be back on Friday?”

“Yeah, I should be, and I was thinking about taking some time off. Finally relax a little after taking that bullet and this out-of-town business. Are you okay if Clay and I go fishing for the weekend? We used to do that all the time.”

Stiles still despises that his dad and Clay are buddies, but the upside is this buys him more time away from Clay. “You deserve a break, Dad. Go kick back and play with your slimy worms. It’ll be quiet over here. Nothing crazy.”
“Thanks, son. I’ll check with Clay and let you know what we decide. You and I, we’ll do something fun after I’m back.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Hold on a sec.” Stiles hears some muffled chatter in the background. “Stiles, I gotta go, the ME report on one of the bodies is ready.”

“Okay. Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, kid. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Stiles says, hanging up.

“So your dad’s not gonna be back for a while?” Derek asks.

“Well, he’ll be back sometime on Friday, probably while I’m at school. Then he and Clay might go fishing this weekend. So once they figure that out, I’ll know, like, what’s going on there. Who’s going to be at my house and when.”

“You won’t be at your house until your dad’s back, I know that,” Derek says, shifting in reverse. “You’re never going to be alone with your uncle again.”

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Derek turns onto Stiles’ street, slowing down about four houses away from the Stilinski house. “Is he home?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says with displeasure. “That’s his truck over there.”

“Okay.” Derek pulls over to the curb, still a fair distance from Stiles’ house. “I’ll distract him while you go through the back and get your stuff. I can knock on the door and ask for your dad. Or do something way more satisfying. Like throw a rock through his windshield.”

Stiles allows himself a tiny smirk, but shakes his head. “Don’t do that,” he says. “Clay will think I did it.”

“Oh, fuck that guy,” Derek mutters and Stiles has to laugh.

Luck is finally on his side, because at that moment, Clay appears, walking down the driveway. “That him?”

“Yeah,” he says with displeasure. “That’s his truck over there.”

“Okay.” Derek pulls over to the curb, still a fair distance from Stiles’ house. “I’ll distract him while you go through the back and get your stuff. I can knock on the door and ask for your dad. Or do something way more satisfying. Like throw a rock through his windshield.”

Stiles allows himself a tiny smirk, but shakes his head. “Don’t do that,” he says. “Clay will think I did it.”

“Okay, go get your stuff. Whatever you need for a few days.”

Stiles opens the passenger side door, but turns back to look at Derek when he doesn’t move. “Are
“I’ll stay here. In case he comes back for some reason. If I call, don’t even pick up. Just run out the back door.”

Stiles hustles inside and up the stairs to pull out a duffle bag from his closet. He doesn’t really think Clay is going to come back, not unless he forgot his phone or something, and there’s nothing to be afraid of in his empty house, but he just wants to go back to Derek.

He quickly grabs some clothes, basic toiletries, his laptop, and some things for school before shoving them into his bag and leaving without a backwards glance at the literal scene of the crime.

When Stiles climbs back into the Camaro, Derek brings the engine to life. “Oh wait - do you need your pillow?”

“Oh. Yeah, I forgot it.” Stiles had not gone anywhere near his bed, but he glances down at his bag as though he wouldn’t know if he had packed his pillow otherwise. “No, it’s okay. I don’t need it. I slept pretty well at your place without it.”

“Okay. Let’s stop at the school so you can get your car.”

On the way to campus, Stiles looks out at the Beacon Hills landscape fly by. Derek falls into silence, too, but it’s companionable rather than uncomfortable - it’s not like they haven’t talked so much already. Stiles wouldn’t be surprised if Derek had spoken more words in the last 24 hours than he does in a normal week. Maybe more than he does in a slow month.

Even though Clay was unaware of their presence, seeing him again after what he just did agitates Stiles more than he’d care to admit. It feels strange in his bones that this recent, almost unspeakable betrayal by someone he doesn’t recognize feels so much more intense than the ongoing betrayal of someone he thought he knew.

Bringing someone else feels like the most violent thing Clay has ever done, and that’s including that awful, awful time Clay took his virginity. Stiles had never wanted to be in an alliance with Clay, but he’d worked tirelessly to keep the secret - something he was so sure Clay wanted, too. No one ever had to know. It was supposed to be a secret. Stiles had agonized over telling someone for months, but he never did, only for Clay to break that unofficial pact first. It had seemed so easy for him to turn around and tell some other guy, just some friend he made at work, like it was the simplest thing in the world and there were no consequences to bear - at least not negative ones.

Stiles has always hated Clay’s possessiveness and the way Clay acts like what they have is special, a heartbreaking perversion of the bond they should have shared through his mother. But then Clay gave him away as though Stiles was something he could loan out, like a bowling ball or some tools, like he’s in charge of Stiles’ place in the universe, whether it’s “special” with him or in the gutter, forced into an anonymous act of brutally intimate domination. That power play was so painfully dismissive and demeaning that despite everything, his anger is still dwarfed by his fear of Clay.
He doesn’t know what Clay would do next time, how it would keep escalating.

Stiles sighs with a shuddery breath into the orange sunset.

Hopefully he’ll never have to find out.

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After dinner at a Thai place that Derek likes to frequent, Stiles flops down on Derek’s sofa and toes his sneakers off. “Hey, so,” Derek begins, sitting on the coffee table across from him, “I’m the muscle, that’s what I do. I don’t really know anything about this kind of stuff.”

“It’s okay,” Stiles reassures. “You’ve really helped me a lot. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t come here last night.”

“Well, yeah,” Derek shrugs. “All of your friends live with their parents.”

“No, it’s not that.” Stiles blinks in rapid succession. “That’s not why I came here.”

Derek shrugs again. “I know I don’t know how to help you. And then we got in that fight this morning, and then at the school…”

“It wasn’t really a fight, Derek. It was … a heated expression of counterpoints.”

“Okay, but I don’t want to have heated expressions. Or give you panic attacks. I just want to help you, but I’m no authority, so …” Derek hands Stiles the generous stack of papers he’d retrieved before coming over to the couch. “Here’s some - it’s online resources to maybe help you work through what he did.”

Stiles flips through the papers on top in disbelief. “What - where did you - you got this for me?”

“After you left this morning, I went to the library. I’m not as good with research as you and Lydia, but even I can google.”

Stiles can hardly picture Derek frowning his way into the public library, sitting down at a random computer, looking up information for surviving sex crimes, printing out hard copies, and then tucking them under his arm like it’s no big deal. Really, only Derek Hale could do something like that without nearly dying of self-consciousness.

“Thanks,” Stiles says softly, tapping his fingers against his neck. His eyes flit up to Derek, who’s watching him with uncertainty, and he offers a grateful nod in return. “Thanks for thinking of me.”

“I read some of it, too.” Derek fidgets with a shade or two of awkwardness. “I learned some things. I’m still learning.”

“Cool,” Stiles replies before immediately shaking his head in a gesture of ‘what the hell did I just say?’ and thumbing through a few more printouts.

“I know I could have just e-mailed you the links,” Derek says, “but it didn’t seem like enough. I needed … something I could feel in my hands, or else it didn’t feel like anything.”

“Yeah, I get that. If it’s okay, can I keep this here? Like, tucked away where no one else will find it? I don’t want to bring it home. If my dad sees it - there’s no way I could talk my way out of that - he’d never believe it was for a school project.”

“Sure.”
Stiles gives him a small, lopsided smile. “And then you can read the rest.”

Derek smiles back. “I will.”

“Oh man,” Stiles says, stretching with an exaggerated groan. “It’s been a long day. Thank God I don’t have that much homework.”

“Before you get to that, we should probably talk about one more thing.”

Stiles stiffens at the nerves in Derek’s voice. He can tell a walking-on-eggshells topic is about to come up. “Uh, like what?”

Derek picks up a brown paper bag, neatly folded at the top, from beside the coffee table. Stiles peeks inside and sees his clothes from the night before. A quick glimpse is more than enough for him, so he immediately closes the bag and pushes it away from him.

“What is there to talk about? I’m going to throw these out now. I just forgot to last night.”

“Okay. That’s an option. But - maybe do you want to wait a little? Trash pickup is tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, his face blank. “Great. So why would I wait?”

Derek licks his lips nervously. “You don’t have to throw them away now. In case you feel differently later.”

“I don’t need them, Derek. I want to get rid of them.”

“What I mean is … don’t take this as pressure. I am not telling you what to do. I know you said you don’t want to report it -”

“I don’t,” Stiles says matter-of-factly, his expression now stony. “Nothing has changed about that. Nothing will change. So I’m more than happy to toss these now.”

Derek nods. “Okay. I’m just saying. You can throw them away whenever you want, but when they’re gone, they’re gone.”

“Derek!” Stiles pauses to reel himself back in. He doesn’t want to get in another fight, especially not when he’ll be the only one yelling. “I’m not going to change my mind. Even if I ever do, which I won’t, it’s too late. I already showered.”

“Yeah, I know, but. There’s evidence on your clothes.”

Stiles shakes his head. “So what? I’m not reporting him. Either of them. My clothes aren’t enough. And they’re probably contaminated anyway. Did you touch them? They probably have your skin cells and DNA on them by now, just from being in your loft.”

“Skin cells are different.”

“Different than come, right?” Stiles says bitingly. “Skin cells are all over the place. Come says you got fucked. But it doesn’t mean assault. It just means someone shot their load on you. In you. Whatever.”

“Stiles, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to - to pick at the wound again. I understand why you feel this way. I just know sometimes people change their minds about things over time.”

Stiles closes his eyes and thinks about what it would be like if he reported it. What if he tells people
and it doesn’t go anywhere? What’s the point of telling people the most humiliating things about himself if there’s no trial? That’s really the only point of filing a police report. Most cases don’t make it to formal charges, anyway. And even if his case does, a trial has terrifying drawbacks. It means more exposure. It means being a victim all over again in closed-doors public. It’s a jury’s job to evaluate everything about the victim and their alleged victimhood. Sure, it’s supposed to be about the defendant, but it never works out that way. All eyes will be on Stiles. All scrutiny will be on him.

His clothes had incriminating DNA on them, but that doesn’t make a trial a slam dunk. The defense gets to present their own case, and Clay would take Stiles down first, or at least take Stiles down with him.

He still has a little more than a year left in high school. What if everyone finds out about it? It just takes one kid hearing something he shouldn’t, and then the rumor mill will go nuts. That’s what he’ll be known for. ‘Stiles Stilinski, the Sheriff’s kid who said his uncle sexually abused him - who knows if it’s true, but either way, he’s a real head case. And what the fuck is wrong with the Sheriff? He either raised a sociopath or is literally the worst at his job.’

Stiles finally has real friends - plural. Plural! All he wants is to live the senior year dream with them and have fun together before they inevitably scatter after graduation. But he won’t be able to do that if he can barely make it one day on campus without the whispers and the looks and people fucking knowing what he said his uncle did. This isn’t something people forget about - it’s not idle chatter about who hooked up at whose party last weekend. He’ll have to transfer - far away enough that the gossip doesn’t follow him. The other high school in Beacon Hills isn’t an option. They’ll have heard all about it, too, and it’ll be even worse there because he won’t have his friends by his side and those students won’t know anything about him except the accusations.

Stiles tries to back his perspective up a little - there could be some good things about coming forward. His dad would never speak to Clay again. Clay would be proverbially dead to Stiles and Noah, the kind of dead Stiles can definitely get behind. Not wanting to report it is a huge reason why Stiles can’t tell Melissa, but once it’s out there, he can finally talk to her. Melissa gives really good hugs. If Clay was convicted - and that’s a super, intimidatingly big “if” - he’d have to register as a sex offender. People would know what he’d done and his usual charming tricks might not work anymore.

Unless, of course, nothing happens because no charges are brought against him, or he wins the case, or he plea-bargains down to a lesser crime with little to no consequence. Which is usually what happens. Stiles is aware of the statistics. No one ever wants to be a statistic, but it’s not always up to them.

“Stiles?” Derek says.

Stiles doesn’t know how long he was just sitting there, lost in his own thoughts. He shakes his head again. “I’m not reporting it.”

“Okay. I just wanted to ask. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

“I don’t.”

Derek leans over to pick up the bag. “How about this - what if I just put this away in that far corner for tonight? And then anytime you want after tomorrow morning, if you want to throw it out, go ahead. No questions asked. No more talks. You can do what you want.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay, that’s fine,” Stiles agrees, even though he still has no intention of turning his clothes in as evidence. The compromise is for Derek, not for him.
“Okay. Sorry for beating a dead horse on that. I know what you want; I won’t mention it again.”

“You’re just looking out for me. Thanks for caring. And not mentioning it again.”

A slightly stilted pause ensues until Stiles cracks a small smile. “Can we just have a normal night now? I’m just - I’m emotionally done. For life, maybe.”

“Yeah, of course. Normal is good.”

Stiles parks himself at the main table and spreads out his laptop, lecture notes, and history textbook. Derek patters around the loft for a while, tending to his own agenda. Stiles has never really thought about what Derek does at home - surely he doesn’t vacuum or grow his own herb garden or play video games - and he doesn’t really pay attention this time. After spending nearly the entire day together, it’s nice to be without walls but still be their own separate people.

After a while, Derek takes the stool on the opposite side of the table and sits down with a book about one-third finished. “You don’t have to supervise me,” Stiles jokes.

“No, I’m fine,” Derek says. “This is a good book; I want to read it.”

Stiles eventually finishes his history paper and claps his textbook shut with crisp accomplishment. “My brain is so fried.”

They turn in for the night at the same time - maybe Derek really is supervising him - and for a second, Stiles isn’t sure if he should sleep on the couch. It’s a little presumptuous otherwise. Last night was a different story. Today is not last night.

“Do you even like the right side?” Derek asks. “That really matters to some people. I didn’t ask you yesterday.”

“No, I don’t care,” Stiles answers, pleasantly surprised they’re on the same wavelength. “I’m only picky about my pillow. And yours are really nice, so I’m good.”

At first, they mostly stay on their own side of the bed, and Stiles has another momentary burst of awkwardness because the night before had been so crazy emotional and, well, kind of cuddly. He doesn’t need that kind of comfort tonight, but he rolls over from his back to his side to face Derek, and Derek does the same.

“Good night, roomie,” he quips.

Derek laughs. “Your half of the rent is due on Friday.”

Stiles closes his eyes and Derek slings an arm around him, hand resting low between his shoulders. “I’ll fall asleep easier if I can feel your heart,” Derek says.

Stiles just nods. Sometimes he forgets that his friends are were-creatures. This must be a pack thing - what they do with injured pack members. “You can hear it, too, right?”

“Yeah,” Derek acknowledges, “but it’s not the same as feeling it under your fingertips.”

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Stiles starts to feel more normal in his skin on Thursday, once he’s back to his routine and even though he’s under a different roof.

Derek wakes up when he does, except while Stiles gets ready for school, Derek freakishly starts his
morning workout, doing things with his body weight that Stiles would never bother to attempt with
his own that’s at least fifty pounds lighter.

“Bye, Arnold!” Stiles calls out when he leaves.

It’s easier to concentrate during class without the backburner anxiety of what’s going to happen after
he leaves the shield of campus. Lacrosse practice is status quo - more bulging neck veins from
Finstock, more Scott furtively coaching Liam in balancing power on the field with his werewolf
strength, and more missed goal attempts from Stiles, but he appreciates those mundane things more
than ever.

When Stiles comes ‘home’ to Derek’s place that evening, he asks Derek again for a normal night. He
just wants a full normal day for once. The only time they talk about Clay is after Noah calls Stiles to
let him know the details of his weekend trip.

“My dad’s going to drive back from Folsom tomorrow mid-morning and he and Clay are gonna get
on the road ASAP,” he tells Derek. “And they’ll be back on Sunday night.”

“Okay. Okay, so for sure you won’t see him for a few more days. And your dad will be back, too.”

“Yeah. And then my dad will probably be at the station all day and night on Monday, since he’ll
have been gone almost a week.”

“Where does your uncle think you went after you left last night?”

Stiles shrugs. “I don’t know. Probably Scott’s. That’s the most logical guess.”

“Do you think he’s worried?”

“About me? No. He doesn’t give a shit about me unless he wants to -” Abruptly changing course,
Stiles resets his statement. “No, the only thing he’d be worried about is if I told someone or someone
found out. And he knows I won’t tell. If he thinks I went to Scott’s, he probably thinks Scott still
doesn’t know. And he doesn’t think I went to the police if no one has shown up to talk to him.”

“We can talk about what to do about that asshole -”

“Today weekend,” Stiles interrupts. “Later. Today is a normal day, right?”

“Yeah. We pinky-swear and everything,” Derek says, even though they definitely did not interlock
pinkies.

And it does feel like a normal night after that, right down to drifting off with Derek’s arm around
him. The things he had felt that time Derek had crashed in his room, seemingly eons ago, rush back
to him again - the bareness, the warmth, the sleepiness. The protection. Derek will always protect
him.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took me so much longer to finish writing than I thought it would! Actually,
I thought I would be done last weekend and almost ready with 7.
I’m not exactly sure why this one was so challenging for me - you’d think writing the abuse would be the hardest part. Possibly because the pacing is pretty different from the previous chapters, which are mostly a compilation of a lot of short-to-medium length scenes (usually around 15-20 per chapter). Chapter 6 is comparable length (just north of 10k words), but there are less than half as many scenes and most are on the longer side, plus they are fairly talky and continuous (only over the course of two days) - not much skipping around in time.

I hope what transpired in this chapter helps in seeing a little beyond the pretty horrific cycle of escalating abuse from chapters 1-5. Also, to be clear, I hijacked the scene where Derek lets Stiles beat up on him from the actors and modified it. I feel kind of bad for doing that, because in my mind, the actors are completely separate from the story, and that’s important to me because of how dark the content is. Of course, that can only go so far - it’s still their faces and their voices that they’ve given Stiles and Derek and that we’re all familiar with - but I prefer to keep them as separate as possible. That said, when the idea occurred to me earlier in the week, I wanted to use it and didn’t really look back. Eep, sorry, guys! (I don’t even want to say their names in relation to this story.)

Derek also still drives the Camaro, not the FJ Cruiser or whatever it was. I love the Camaro!

As always, thanks so much for reading this far and any feedback!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This is the longest stretch it’s taken me to finish a chapter. I hope to not repeat that again! For chapters 1-5, I had the majority already written before I started posting. I was really just getting the scene order down and finishing up on average 4-5 scenes during posting dates. I wasn’t nearly as far along in chapters 6 and on, so that’s why it’s taking me longer to complete and post. I have the outlines, I know what’s going to happen, and I assure you in no uncertain terms, this story will NOT be dropped as a WIP.

I don’t think this counts as a spoiler for all intents and purposes, but FYI, I think this story will come in at 11 or so chapters. Earlier, I thought it was going to be 9-ish, but now I’m seeing how the scene skeletons are really coming together with word count. With a book you’re reading in your hands or a show/movie you’re watching, you usually know how long it is and where you’re at in the story, so I wanted to give some sense of that here.

Also, to clarify, the weaving in of canon that’s happening at the same time as this abuse arc is over. Just as I ignored the first two episodes of s4 (trip to Mexico and de-aged Derek), I ignored the last two episodes (the return to Mexico, the berserkers, more Kate nonsense, full-shift Derek and the return of his powers, and sadly, Argent coming in to save the day like a boss). Obviously Derek doesn’t leave Beacon Hills in this story, and the events of s5 don’t take place until the end of summer. Though, even if canon s5 kicked off right away, I would have only selectively adapted s5 canon to accommodate Derek still being around. (I also don’t think Stiles in this story needs to deal with the total trustworthiness of Theo Raeken!)

TBH, I have only watched the show up through 5A. If there are things that happen after 5A that make what I’ve depicted seem strange, that’s not on purpose. I just don’t know that it’s strange in the first place. I am sure I will catch up at some point, but my main TW focus right now is this story. I also miss Derek and know that the quality of the show really goes downhill, and then Stiles is barely in s6, so that’s not really helping my viewing motivation.

Thank you so much as always for your readership and your wonderful feedback!

[Posted 6/26/17]

On Friday afternoon, Noah sends Stiles a text to let him know that he and Clay are about to head up to the lake, followed by a picture of them standing next to a tackle box resting on the hood of Noah’s car. Stiles smiles - he likes seeing his dad happy, and he can tell by his dad’s posture that the healing gunshot wound isn’t bothering him very much - but he still hates the companion. In a fit of compulsion, he downloads the picture and crops in only his dad before saving the modified version and deleting the original.

Finally, it’s safe for Stiles to go back home after school. There’s no lacrosse game that night, so he could go out instead, but he doesn’t want to. What a waste of predictably having the house all to
himself. There were times with just him and his dad when he felt lonely, but he’s all too thrilled to be home alone this weekend.

It hadn’t been hard to be at Derek’s the past few days without anyone knowing. Derek’s place is ideal for agenda-driven pack meetings, since as Derek just pointed out for other reasons, the rest of them all live with their parents. Even so, they don’t use his loft for recreational group activities. They’re not friends with Derek like that.

Ever since the deadpool was cancelled, everyone’s been able to go back to their regular lives. Once a threat has climaxed, it always seems like they spend at least half as much time afterwards getting the things and the relationships they had been neglecting back on track. The pack still meets up for social reasons, but they’re not in each other’s pockets and they don’t necessarily all hang out together every time. Scott and Kira are taking advantage of a lacrosse-free Friday and having a much-needed date night, but even if Scott was free, Stiles probably would have just made up a reason about why he was already busy.

Stiles is downstairs for almost half an hour when he remembers that he still needs to wash his bedding. He had run out so quickly after the worst night of his life that he hadn’t thought about anything else. Trudging upstairs, he does a double-take when he sees his bed is no longer in disarray like he anticipated.

The sheets and pillowcases have already been washed and the bed made. Stiles’ mouth goes dry in a panic - did his dad do this? - but he immediately realizes, no, it wasn’t him. He probably wasn’t even home long enough before he and Clay left for their trip. If he got in early, doing his son’s laundry would have been no higher than priority #614 on his mental list.

Stiles still curses at himself momentarily for the oversight. What if his dad had seen his room and his suspicions had been aroused? What if he somehow knew - hey, sex happened here? If grilled, Stiles would have lied and made it seem like it was a consensual hook-up with an appropriate partner, but that’s a conversation Stiles could do without.

His face twists in aggravation as he realizes that Clay must have cleaned up. At some point between Tuesday night and that afternoon, Clay had stripped the linens, washed them, and put them back on like nothing had happened. When Stiles had come back on Wednesday to grab some things, he hadn’t really looked at his bed. He doesn’t remember it being neat and tidy.

But when it seemed like Stiles wasn’t going to come home for a while, Clay must have thought he would need to take care of it himself since Stiles wasn’t around to do it like always. Stiles fumes, but tries his best to brush it aside. He still takes the bedding off, though, to run through the washing machine again. He doesn’t trust anything Clay does.

His appetite still isn’t what it used to be, but it’s coming back, so he spends the evening laid out with junk food and video games. Literally hours of sitting around under a blanket in a thin t-shirt and boxers with no one around to tell him he’s being a slutty tease or make him want to throw up what he’s managed to eat.

After he turns out the lights and settles into bed, he tosses and turns with no end in sight. He just can’t sleep. There’s no threat, no reason to panic - he’s safe for a couple more days, at least - but the dark cloud above him isn’t budging.

He tries to think of happy or silly things to temper his mood, like the goofy dance his dad does when he’s drinking, the upcoming Mets season, or the fucking ridiculous hat Greenberg was wearing the other day, but none of it works.
It’s not that he’s gotten too used to sleeping with someone else. He only stayed with Derek for three
nights, and although he’s slept with Clay countless times, he’s never actually slept with Clay. Clay
usually leaves after he gets what he wants, paying no attention to the explosion of despair he casts
aside.

When Stiles had seen Clay’s friend standing behind him in the doorway, he’d freaked out and tried
to bolt, even though it was pointless with his exit blocked by the people he was trying to get away
from. He only succeeded in getting the wind knocked out of him when he hit the bedframe in the
struggle.

Even as Clay was getting on top of him and pulling his clothes off, Stiles had still been in denial
about what was happening. Maybe the friend was just there to watch. Not that Stiles could handle
having an audience to begin with - someone else enjoying the show, officially rendering Stiles the
minority who didn’t like it - but he couldn’t have been there to actually do anything. Maybe a blow
job at the most. Clay would never do that to Stiles. Clay would never let someone else have him. He
didn’t want to belong to Clay, but he did - Clay loved being the only one - except Stiles was made to
realize in the most painful way that he was just an object, not a person.

Stiles hadn’t looked at the other man the entire time, not until Clay finished and his friend started to
get undressed. Crying and protesting, Stiles had scrambled to escape from underneath Clay, but it
was no use. Clay just held him down tighter, leaning down to whisper in Stiles’ ear.

“Don’t be scared, okay? It’ll be fun, you’ll like him.”

Stiles had tried to run again when Clay got off of him, nudity be damned, but the window of
opportunity was too short before his friend took Clay’s place and dismantled the only traces of sanity
Stiles had left.

Stiles swallows hard as he remembers the complete stranger pushing inside him - how it felt to be
shown he was nothing, that he had nothing because everything kept being taken from him. He must
have been screaming too loud for Clay, who pet the back of his head and told him not to worry, he
was wearing a rubber, like that was the only point of contention.

He wonders who Clay’s friend thought he was. Maybe Clay told him he was staying with friends, or
that he and Claudia were step-siblings and Stiles wasn’t related by blood at all. Maybe the other guy
didn’t know how sick it really was. But no matter what, he had to know that Stiles didn’t want it. It
wasn’t consensual. Stiles had made that clear in how much he had fought and how hard he had
yelled and cried. He had cried so much.

“Sometimes he takes a while to get into it, but he comes pretty hard.”

Stiles squeezes his closed eyes tighter and exhales through his mouth louder, trying to find relief in
the rhythm and the audible confirmation that he is in fact still breathing.

Clay had talked about him like he wasn’t even there, playing his typical word games and passing off
minute truths as reality. Maybe Clay really did believe most of what he said - Stiles isn’t sure. Not as
sure as he would be if he had never given Clay an inch to turn into a mile.

He didn’t come that night, though. Stiles didn’t get hard in the first place. It’s a small consolation, but
he’ll take it. He doesn’t think he could handle the disloyalty of his own body again on top of
everything else. At least his body reacted to the pain and terror the way it should have, for once.

“He’s not here,” Stiles repeats to himself when the breathing exercises alone don’t work. “He’s not
here, it’s not gonna happen again.”
Maybe that wasn’t the first time Clay had brought someone else along for the ride. Maybe it’s just the first time Stiles knows about. He still has no idea what Clay did to him while he was drugged. He’ll never know.

It might be better that he doesn’t. Stiles can only imagine how much harder it would be to sleep if he had to relive that night. Clay might have been right that not knowing hurts less. A part of Stiles feels permanently dead inside that Clay had been a little right about some things.

Stiles sits up in the dark, slouching against the headboard. He reaches for his phone to check the time, but it lingers in his hand for a few seconds. Before he can think about sending a text or placing a call, he sets it back down. Derek is already coming over in the afternoon.

Stiles takes another deep breath and wipes at his eyes. He has to be able to go at least one night without a crutch.

Or at least one night without a person as a direct crutch. Finally, Stiles gives up and pads down the hall to his dad’s room. Out of habit, he knocks before going inside. Of course, it’s empty, and Stiles climbs under the covers of the hastily-made bed, wrapped in the comfort of the father who isn’t there and doesn’t know, but loves Stiles so damn much that it can’t be any other way.

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Stiles meets up with Malia in the morning to finish a presentation - surprise, her Spanish is also terrible - and then afterwards, goes for a run with Scott and cycles through some lacrosse drills.

Scott shares the PG version of his date, but Stiles doesn’t have much to offer in return. “I dunno,” he says, shrugging. “I just bummed around and shot up some aliens.”

“Isn’t it so great, though? We actually have time and energy to just bum around now.”

“Finally, we caught a break,” Stiles agrees.

“I don’t know if we would have survived the deadpool if it kept going.” The residual tension in Scott’s voice is at odds with his ease in catching the ball from Stiles. “It was just too much. It used to just be one bad guy we were fighting. We might not have known who he was at first, but it was usually just one. But lately it’s been too much all at once. The alpha pack, Deucalion, the darach. All that shit with the nogitsune. Then the Benefactor and the buttload of mercenaries. So many people out to get us.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, tapping his stick against the grass.

“But we survived. You’ve been so anxious, bro. It’s over now. I know the timing was bad - too soon after the nogitsune - but you gotta take care of yourself, okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods. “I think I underestimated how this would all hit me.”

“It’s over. No one’s coming after us anymore.”

Stiles nods again. “Yeah. I hope so.”

Scott reaches out and claps Stiles’ shoulder. “I know I’m not supposed to be worried about you and you’ll talk to me when you want to, but fuck it - you just haven’t been yourself.”

“I know. But like you said, it’s over now and I can just work on - I don’t know, I guess moving past all of this bullshit and getting right in my head again. No big distractions.
“I don’t even know why you’re trying to reassure ME,” Stiles rambles with a befuddled laugh. “$25 million was up for grabs in exchange for proof of your death.”

“But that’s why,” Scott explains. “Sometimes it’s harder when it’s happening to someone else and you want to do everything you can to help them.”

Stiles taps his stick again and raises it up, so Scott takes the cue and backs up before tossing the ball back. “Thanks, Scotty,” Stiles says, receiving an encouraging smile from Scott in return.

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Stiles is barely out of the shower and heating up Chinese food from the night before when the doorbell rings. It’s late in the day for lunch, but he spent more time with Scott than he initially intended and needs at least a snack after his workout.

As predicted, Derek is on the other side of the door when Stiles swings it open. “Orange chicken?” Stiles asks, holding the container out with two forks stuck inside.

“Good afternoon to you, too,” Derek replies, spearing a piece on top before handing the food back to Stiles.

After finishing the leftovers at the kitchen table, they migrate to the living room couch. Ostensibly, it’s so Stiles can show Derek a movie streaming on Netflix that he might be interested in, given the book he was reading the other day, but Derek has other ideas.

“I know it’s hard to talk about,” Derek acknowledges, “but he’s gonna be back tomorrow. So …”

Stiles sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well, no killing. I think we’ve gotten on the same page there.”

Stiles gives Derek a sarcastic thumbs up. “This whole topic is me at my most clear-headed and decisive.”

“He has to leave, though. He cannot be here with you. Ever again.”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods.

“I can scare him badly enough that he never comes back.”

“Scare him off as …?” Stiles probes. “Scare him off as yourself? Or as grrrr?”

“I only got a quick glance at him the other day. I know he’s my size, at least, but it’s not a problem - I can take him.”

“Ohbsviously,” Stiles says, not at all facetious.

“I’m just not sure that one man would be enough. A werewolf, though - that would chase him out of town fast.”

“I mean, you’re probably right about that, but would you really wolf out in front of him? Kind of flies in the face of blaming every weird sighting in town on mountain lions or bath salts.”

“Not in front of him so he could ID me as a human. But yeah, I could run him off as a werewolf. Make him see he’s not the alpha male, so to speak, and there will be consequences for him if he stays. He’ll know he doesn’t stand a chance if he tries to fight me.”
“People don’t do things like what he did and stop,” Stiles says. He still feels unsettled, despite the idea of Clay’s departure. “I don’t know if he can stop. Or maybe he can, and I just didn’t try hard enough.”

“I don’t know what’s going on in that fucked-up head. But there’s nothing you could have done. Predators don’t get persuaded out of being predators by their prey. Nature doesn’t work like that.”

“He can’t hurt anyone else, Derek.”

“I can get him to leave just by attacking him and making him afraid for his own life. But if he doesn’t know why I came after him, there’s no way he’ll change his behavior. I’ll have a little talk with him. He won’t have any doubts when I’m done about what will happen to him if he pulls this fuckery again.”

Stiles rubs at his temples and drags his hands down his face. “Do you think that’ll work? He might be terrified in front of you, but when he’s living somewhere else, he’ll have a clean slate and won’t think he’ll get caught if he goes back to his old tricks.”

“He’ll be face-to-face with a werewolf. He’ll already be seeing things he can’t believe, outside the realm of what he ever thought possible. It’s not too big of a stretch to make him think my supernatural powers can find out where he is and if he’s being a fucking shitbag.”

“And then he’ll know I told. That’s the only way you would know what he did.”

“Are you worried about that?”

“I don’t …” Stiles shakes his head to himself, confused about why it matters to him at all. Not telling has been the number one rule for such a long time. It’s been drilled into him, but Clay’s not calling the shots anymore. Clay just doesn’t know it yet.

“If you think he’s going to be pissed at you, don’t worry. He’ll never touch you again, Stiles. Not when he thinks you have a line out to a big, hairy, fangy monster that could gut him like a fish or slice his throat in a second.”

Stiles’ eyebrows raise before pinching together. “Once the shock wears off, he’ll probably be really surprised he got as far as he did with me. I mean, if I could just sic you on him, why didn’t I do that right when he came back?”

“The important part is that you’re doing it now.”

“But the other thing is he can’t be so fucking freaked out that he tells my dad about you. A lot of people wouldn’t tell the police something like that, but my dad is his brother-in-law. Clay’s not gonna think he’ll treat him like a crazy person with hallucinations. No way is he going to tell my dad why you came after him and what you said, but Derek, he can’t tell my dad anything. Clay might not know what to call you, but my dad will know he’s talking about a werewolf and he’ll come to us for help. Probably tell Argent, too, that there’s another wolf in the area threatening his family. Scott will waste all kinds of time helping them look, and we’ll have to play dumb. My dad’s not gonna give up - he doesn’t give up when it comes to family.”

“I’ll make sure your uncle knows it’s in his best interest not to say anything,” Derek pledges, his claws coming out again, but this time as a controlled demonstration. “When will they be back tomorrow?”

“Not until way after dinner, I think. Could be pretty late. Depends on when they leave the lake, plus they’ll stop to eat on the way home.”
“And what’s happening on Monday? You said your dad will probably be at the station for a while? Double shift?”

“Yeah, not because he has to, but he’ll want to. Clay will go to the construction site during the day and he usually goes to this bar he likes on Monday nights because they have drink specials.”

“Okay,” Derek says, nodding in thought. “Okay. I’ll follow him then and look for the right opening. I mean, fuck, it might actually be better if I do it after he’s already a little liquored up. Not so drunk that doesn’t remember it or thinks he imagined it -”

“He won’t get hammered. Not when he’s supposed to go back to the site again in the morning.”

“That’s good. Drinking, but not drunk. If he tries to tell anyone else, they’ll just think he’s knocked too many back. Or that he’s high. Well, your dad won’t think that, but your uncle won’t be talking about monsters with him.”

Stiles nods. Monday is only two days away. His heart flutters with an avalanche of emotions - possibly every emotion under the sun.

“Do you want to be there?” Derek asks.

It’s such a basic question, but Stiles honestly hasn’t considered that. The thought has literally not occurred to him. He’s seen himself as mutually exclusive from any plot to stop Clay because he’d never been able to make it happen before.

“Um …”

At Derek’s prompting, Stiles thinks about what it would be like, confronting Clay with Derek at his side. It would be a novel experience, seeing Clay scared shitless. The shoe will finally be on the other foot. Stiles will finally be able to see the power shift so dramatically that Clay will never bother him again. He wouldn’t dare it.

But Stiles also thinks about the last time he was with Clay and all of the memories he replayed in his head the night before. In theory, Stiles has all kinds of things he wants to know from Clay, that he wants to tell him. With Derek there, Clay will have to answer and listen, but Stiles can’t imagine what Clay could possibly say that would make him feel any better. “I’m sorry” would sound ridiculously insincere. “It wasn’t anything you did” wouldn’t mean a damn thing. “I would take it back if I could” would just make Stiles want to scream at him that he’s the one who kept starting it. Starting it over a whole year of Stiles’ short life.

It might feel good witnessing an explicit victory to punctuate this drawn-out nightmare, but Stiles really just wants to forget that Clay even exists.

“I’ve already spent the last three months with him. I never want him to see him again.”

“Okay, Stiles. I’ll take care of it.”

Stiles looks down as his lap, kneading the palm of one hand with his other hand. “Are you sure you’re going to be able to hold back from … gutting him like a fish, or doing anything in the general gutting territory? Even mildly? Maybe I should come with you.”

“No,” Derek says. “You’re not coming. I’ll be fine. I’ll make sure you get what you want. Doesn’t really matter what would feel good for me.”

“But maybe I should -”
“You’re not coming, Stiles. It’ll be fine.”

Out of a bad, long-dormant habit, Stiles sucks at the tip of his thumb nervously. “Okay.”

“Too bad there’s not enough of the nemeton left to make a big enough box to trap him inside,” Derek says. “I guess that only works sometimes.”

Stiles can’t help but chuckle at the joke. “Yeah, that tree stump isn’t gonna do it.”


Stiles smiles a little again. “No, I can’t do that. The only way he wouldn’t bleed out is if he went to the hospital and that’ll be another shitstorm. And I … I don’t think I want to hurt Clay like that. I swear I’m not protecting him. I just … that sounds pretty bad.”

“Is it wrong that I want to hurt him like that?”

“No,” Stiles shrugs and tilts his head to the side, resting it on the top of the couch. “You’re just being a good friend.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, poking absently at Stiles’ knee. “I won’t actually do it, but I can at least threaten him with that if he doesn’t leave quietly and quickly.”

“Ugh, I just realized. What if you clawed him so deep that it turned him, like Peter turned Kate? I know you’re not an alpha anymore, but - Clay as a werewolf. Way worse than him now.”

“Well, I guess I wouldn’t be able to use my hands. Maybe some pruning sheers or something. Is that better?”

“Dull, rusty pruning sheers,” Stiles elaborates with a yawn. “Sorry.”

“How’d you sleep last night?”

Stiles shrugs. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“Do you know when I’m lying because of your werewolf senses or am I that transparent now?”

“You’re a very good liar, Stiles. Too good. You just seem a little tired, that’s all.”

“I didn’t really feel right sleeping in my bed. I’ve done it before after he’s … but not after the last time. I slept in my dad’s room like a four-year-old with a stupid bad dream.”

“You know you could have called me, right? Or you could have come back to the loft.”

Stiles presses his lips together, chagrined but still clinging to swiss-cheese hope. “I meant it earlier when I told you I need to know I can handle stuff on my own. But I guess I can’t.”

“Stiles, this isn’t a wound or a broken bone that’s supposed to heal like science. Pain like this, it’s going to take a while. Probably a long while.”

“It just took me so long after the first time, when I was a kid,” Stiles says, trying to keep the resignation at bay. “I don’t want to have to wait that out again.”
“You’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for. Not many people could get through what you’ve had to deal with. I couldn’t. But it’ll take time.”

Stiles bites his lower lip. “When you’re going through hell, keep going,” he quotes a little skeptically.

“You don’t have to go through it by yourself.”

“No,” Stiles says, surveying the determined set of Derek’s face. “I don’t.”

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Once Derek’s stomach starts growling, Stiles suggests dinner and Derek responds with an easygoing nod. Stiles assumes Derek is always hungry, having to support that much muscle. There’s an awesome barbeque place Stiles loves over half an hour away, but Derek doesn’t mind driving and Stiles doesn’t mind sitting shotgun in the gorgeous and well-maintained Camaro.

“It’s really good,” Stiles says, hyping it up at a red light. “The wolf in you may never want to leave. And we won’t run into anyone we know.”

Derek’s gaze flicks over to him and Stiles’ eyes widen in realization. “Not that I don’t want to be seen with you. You’re -” Stiles prattles, gesturing up and down to Derek, “all of this and I’m just an awkward high school kid.”

“You are awkward,” Derek agrees, somehow still sounding tactful even though tact is not his forte at all, “but that’s just you being yourself. Of course it doesn’t bother me to be seen with you.”

“Yeah, no, me neither.” Stiles shrugs, palms open. “It would just be kind of weird if we ran into anyone. Anyone in the pack or another student who would say something about it on Monday. And they would say something. Because you’re you and I’m me. It’s a Saturday night and we’re going out to eat.”

“I get it. You don’t want anyone to catch us on a date.” Stiles’ jaw drops silently and Derek smirks. “I’m teasing you.”

Stiles side-eyes him and laughs back. “Well, you are going to pay, right?”

At the restaurant, they don’t talk about Clay at all. Even assuming no one around them has supernatural hearing, they both know by now that they don’t always keep their voices down in the heat of the moment, so it’s not a good idea to talk about it in public, despite their best intentions. It’s not a particularly good food-adjacent topic, either.

As Stiles tears into his tri-tip, Derek pops a slice of jalapeño sausage in his mouth and hums in satisfaction. “Good pick, Stiles.”

“I have excellent taste,” Stiles replies, partially cheeky but also dead-serious.

“Laura was the best cook in the family growing up. Even when she was young. She could barbeque like a champ.”

“Oh yeah? What was she like? If you want to talk about her, I mean. You don’t have to.”

“No, it’s okay,” Derek says. “I should talk about her more. Keep her memory alive. The only person around who knows her is Peter, and I’m not going to talk to him about her.”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods. That would be just a little awkward, reminiscing about the days before Peter
basically went crazy and tore her in half. “You can talk to me.”

“When we were kids, we didn’t really get along that well. My mom was always breaking up fights. She said it was because we were too different and too similar in some ways - like two peas in a pod that didn’t seem to get that that’s what we were. But things started to change in sixth grade. I think we just got to a point where we stopped being so bratty to each other and were more open instead. She was always smarter than me. And funnier. Well, everyone’s funnier than me.”

“That’s not true,” Stiles denies, even though he knows why Derek thinks that. “You’re funnier than the librarian.”

“We used to rebel sometimes and cover for each other. She wasn’t supposed to date until she turned sixteen, but she met this guy she liked the year before and we’d pretend that she and I went somewhere when she was really meeting up with him. I’d just hang out at the comic book store until she came back to get me. When I started getting interested in girls, she answered all of my questions and helped me figure out what to say to the ones I liked.”

“So many thoughts,” Stiles says, swallowing his mashed potatoes quickly. “First, you like comics? You should check out my collection. Well, it’s not really a collection - I’m not trying to build one - but I’ve acquired a lot over the years. You might like some of them.”

“Yeah, probably,” Derek says. “Comics are timeless.”

“Second, that’s pretty cool you guys ended up being so close. I’ve always kind of wanted a sibling. When I was a kid, it seemed awesome to have my parents’ undivided attention, but once I got older and it was just me and my dad, sometimes I thought it would be great to have another kid in the house. But I also had Scott, who essentially is my brother. We’ve always been pretty inseparable. I can tell him almost anything.”

Derek thankfully doesn’t point out the exceptions to telling Scott anything. “That was the best part. I could tell Laura anything. But I didn’t - I didn’t tell her about Kate. Not until after. Not until after she cost us everything.”

Stiles shakes his head, his face turning a little red with fury. “That hose beast is a fucking psycho. Not your fault. She was motivated enough to do and say whatever she had to to play you.”

“Yeah. She played me, all right.”

“I’m really sorry for what I did,” Stiles says gingerly. He can’t stand to see Derek feel so guilty, even if changing the subject highlights his own shortcomings. “Like, finding Laura … at your old house. Looking for her. That was a shitty thing to do. And I’m sorry I rubbed so much salt in the wound when I got you arrested for it.”

“No, I understand. It’s not like I came across as a Boy Scout when we met.”

“Boy Scouts don’t usually lurk around the woods, dressed like they’re on their way to a leather bar.”

“Oh, come on, I was not dressed like that.”

“You were, from the waist up,” Stiles counters. “But you left the assless chaps at home, I guess.”

They leisurely finish their meal, in no hurry to go anywhere and completely unaware of other patrons coming and going around them. Stiles stretches his arms over his head and emits a rather indelicate burp. “Sorry,” he says, laughing.
Derek snickers at him. “Who exactly is part animal at this table, anyway?”

Stiles digs into his pocket and pulls out his keychain and then a packet of gum that had been buried underneath. “Want a piece?” he offers.

“Sure.” Derek accepts and chews thoughtfully. “You know, you should use your key.”

“What?”

Derek taps the sole copper-colored key on Stiles’ keychain. “For my loft. You can come over anytime. You don’t have to ask first or let me know. I don’t even need to be there. Come over whenever you want.”

“Okay. Thanks, Derek.”

When the waiter brings the check, Stiles reaches for his wallet in his back pocket, but Derek waves him away. “You were right, I was going to pay. Laura taught me that, too. A gentleman always pays,” he says with mock conviction.

“There’s a gentleman here?!” Stiles asks, earning a kick in the shin for his trouble.

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It’s late when they get back to the Stilinski house, and Derek shrugs off his jacket and throws it on the couch. Scrunching his shirt sleeves up, he heads upstairs and motions for Stiles to follow, eventually crossing the threshold of Stiles’ room.

“What do you think about rearranging your furniture? Everything makes sense where it is, but you know, just to change it up.”

“Okay, yeah. That could be good.”

“I know feng shui.”

Stiles gapes at Derek. Feng shui is not something he associates with Derek’s sensibilities or his residence. “Really? I mean, sure, even Wolverine spent some time in Japan,” Stiles says, and then cuts Derek off before he can interject. “I know, I know, feng shui is Chinese.”

“I don’t really understand anything about that.”

Stiles throws his pillow at him. “Jerk.”

Even if Derek did have any knowledge of the design philosophy, it wouldn’t really matter, because that kind of harmony isn’t what they’re going for. After they’re done moving things around, Stiles’ desk is now along the wall next to the window, where his headboard used to be. His previous bed placement was the most natural, but moving it to the other side and at an angle perpendicular to where it was before completely changes the vantage point. Derek fills in open spots with the dresser and bookcase before stepping back to evaluate.

“What do you think? Maybe you’ll have an easier time sleeping in here.”

Stiles takes one more look around his revamped room. “Yeah, I hope so. It really does feel different.” He blinks sleepily, tired from the food coma, the physical effort, and the rough night prior. “There’s an extra toothbrush in the medicine cabinet. You’re gonna stay, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll stay. Enjoy the fruits of my labor. It was mostly my labor.”
Stiles laughs and flips him off. “Let me remind you, I moved the desk chair myself. So there’s that. And I reconnected all of my cables, which are just one big noodle salad to you, I’m sure.”

When they’re ready for bed, Derek strips down to his tank top and boxer briefs, perpetually warm, and Stiles changes into a soft, worn-out t-shirt and his pajama pants with fish on them.

The hovering streetlight streaks in through the window, keeping the room from plunging into complete darkness. Stiles turns to face Derek, who becomes more defined as the shades of black grow more nuanced. It feels like forever ago in the forest, when Stiles first looked into those eyes uneasily and only saw defensiveness and wrath staring back.

“Are you cold?” Derek asks. “I’m not, but it’s not usually this chilly.”

“A little. I have extra blankets I can grab.”

Stiles moves to roll out of bed until Derek pulls his arm back. “Just get over here,” Derek says, and they come together like magnets.

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The next day, Stiles is so high-strung about their scheming that, if completely up to him, he’d have all of the tactical details and logic worked out in advance. Stiles has always prided himself on tackling problems with a heavy combination of deductive skills and instinct. His yarn mapping and murder boards are built around them.

That style doesn’t really suit Derek, though. Derek usually just wants to know general ideas about who, where, when, and how. He’d rather think on his feet by reacting to what’s actually happening instead of adjusting the intricacies of a plan on the fly.

Stiles doesn’t question Derek’s apparent self-confidence. Physical threats and intimidation are in his wheelhouse. Stiles is as much of a believer in Derek’s ability there as he isn’t in his own.

Derek’s phone buzzes in his pocket and he flicks over to the message. “It’s Deaton,” he says. “He wants to see if I can stop his office sometime today.”

“Oh? What’s going on? I haven’t heard a thing.”

“Nothing to be alarmed about. When it’s quiet, it just gives him time to do emissary work that isn’t because of an emergency. I think he just wants to show me something and see if I recognize it or know anything about it from my mother.”

“Okay. You don’t have to stick around with me,” Stiles says. “I have some homework to finish up, but I’ll go to your place after I’m done and text my dad that I’m staying over at Danny’s. And I’ll just let my dad assume I’m at home tomorrow while he’s at the station all night.”

It’s unlikely he’ll get caught in that lie; his dad has never met Danny’s parents and wouldn’t know it if he was standing right next to one of them. It’s better than saying he’s at Scott or Liam’s, only to get busted if his dad goes to the hospital and runs into Melissa or Liam’s stepdad. The odds that Danny or his parents come into the station for some reason are also next to zero.

It’s not really a big deal - the worst that could happen is Stiles’ cover story is blown and he has to give his dad some kind of explanation - but he really just wants everything to go as smoothly as possible. As smoothly as turning an angry werewolf loose on the scourge in his life can go.

Stiles watches Derek type out a quick reply before mindlessly turning his phone over in his hands.
“Derek?”

“Yeah?”

“When you … see Clay tomorrow … Can you take his phone, too?”

“Yeah,” Derek answers, forehead wrinkled in confusion. “But what if he doesn’t have it on him? He probably will - everyone does - but why do you need it?”

Stiles looks in his general direction, but can’t make eye contact. “He took a video of me …”

Derek’s shoulders tense up and Stiles’ face burns with mortification. Derek doesn’t need to know what it’s of, or that Stiles isn’t sure if the video is all Clay has.

“I didn’t, like, pose for it,” Stiles says quietly. Even though it sounds awful, he does need Derek to know that part.

“I know you didn’t. Of course you didn’t.”

“I just don’t want him to have it.”

“I’ll get it back,” Derek promises. “Just let me know if there’s anything else.”

“Um, well, there is something,” Stiles says, hemming and hawing a little. “I forgot about it yesterday. My uncle loaned my dad some money. Even if he takes off all of a sudden, my dad’s not gonna forget. It would be really weird if Clay leaves and stops talking to my dad. He’ll keep trying to pay Clay back.”

Derek’s mouth tightens. “How much?”

“$5000. At least.”

“Christ,” Derek says, his voice weathered. “Stiles.”

“We needed it,” Stiles explains, hanging his head. “It was for my stupid medical bills and some other stuff. Everything was piling up and my dad was barely staying afloat on his credit cards, too. The loan really helped my dad out. He was hiding it, but he was stressing pretty hard.”

As Derek inhales deeply, Stiles can hear the unmistakable anger in it. “I would have just given you the money. It’s just money. Even with the Hale vault being robbed. We got most of it back, and I have other assets.”

Frankly, the idea had never occurred to Stiles. He had only talked to Scott about the money issues, and the McCall’s had been going through something similar. That was all of the talking he felt he needed at the time to commiserate. Stiles spends most of his time around teenagers who aren’t independently wealthy, so he had forgotten about his one adult friend who has means. Not that he would have asked Derek for that kind of help back then, anyway.

“I couldn’t have taken it. Even if I could, my dad wouldn’t. In what world do you think you could offer to help him out like that and he’d happily hold out his hot little hand?”

Derek frowns. Stiles isn’t sure if it’s at the idea, or the truth behind it, or both. “The money means nothing to me. I can give it to you now.”

“But that doesn’t - the only thing that will seem normal to my dad is if he pays Clay back. Even if Clay gets the money from someone else, my dad won’t know that. And I’m not giving Clay yours
just so he can turn around and collect from my dad, too.”

“We can use that, in a gross way,” Derek realizes, “if your dad and Clay keep in touch. It’ll be easier for us to keep tabs on him and know where he is.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you might be right.” Stiles shivers with the thought of Clay still walking away with his dad’s friendship intact. It sounds small, but to Stiles, that’s a pretty big prize. “And I really don’t want my dad getting suspicious if Clay blows out of town and avoids my dad’s attempts to stay in touch. It won’t make any sense.”

“I don’t want your dad to pay him back. That asshole doesn’t deserve it.”

“I know. But we have to.” Stiles feels his eyes pooling with wetness. “Or else it’s like we took his money. It would be like - like …”

Stiles doesn’t finish, trailing off, but Derek finishes for him. “Like he paid for you.”

“I was never - he didn’t - I’m not his whore.”

“No,” Derek says, his expression deathly grim. “You were his family.”

Stiles is useless at school on Monday. During last period, he, Scott, and the girls arrange via group text to meet up for dinner after lacrosse practice. Stiles is grateful for the coincidentally helpful timing. Even Lydia is coming, finally emerging from her own post-chaos shell. She’s been spending most of her free time with her mother and learning whatever she can about her family history.

It feels good to laugh and joke around with his friends, not worrying if making plans is going to be a moot point because one or more of them get maimed by then.

“Dude, what are we doing for your birthday?” Scott asks. “It’s coming up so fast.”

Kira squees and claps her hands together. “Ooh, this is already my favorite conversation of the day.”

Stiles smiles at her; she really is a sweetheart. Scott’s lucky to have her. “Well, I’m saving the big Vegas trip for Scotty’s 21st. I’m good with anything, really. I just want to spend it with you guys.”

“Hmmmmm,” Scott comically arches an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want to leave it up to me? You might wake up the next day with a tiger tattoo on your face.”

“Think a little smaller than that. Paintball?”


Malia grabs a french fry from their communal plate. “He means it’s unfair to him and Stiles that we would destroy them on a paintball field.”

“I got it!” Scott exclaims, dramatically waiting until all eyes are on him. “Remember that beach trip we took a few years ago? We should do that again. No adults this time. Maybe change up exactly where we go, but let’s combine Spring Break with Stiles’ birthday.”

Stiles thinks about the last time that trip crossed his mind because of the stolen memento. He didn’t mention that to Derek, not that he’s going to give Derek a fucking laundry list of things to “work out” with Clay that night. He wants that video way more than the photo.
“Yeah,” Stiles says, nodding at Scott. “Sounds awesome. Great idea, I’m down.”

Lydia’s already talking about shopping for a new bathing suit while Scott and Kira have their own side discussion about the odds her parents let her go away with him for a few days. Stiles is personally unconcerned about both - his dad will definitely give him the green light and clothes are barely on his radar.

Under the table, he checks his phone, but there are no texts from Derek yet. Not that Stiles expected anything - it’s way too early for that - but he keeps the message window open for a while before opening the thread with Derek.

“Thank you,” he enters.

“I haven’t done anything yet,” Derek replies immediately.

“Yes, you have.” Hitting the “send” button and palming his phone back in his pocket, Stiles looks up in time to laugh at Coke coming out of Scott’s nose.

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Waiting for Derek to come back to his loft is quite possibly, Stiles thinks, the slowest time has ever passed. After five minutes feel like fifty minutes, Stiles is borderline convinced something fundamental has changed in the cosmos. Or maybe there really is a superhero out there with the ability to freeze time, except Stiles is the only one immune.

He paces every square inch of the loft. Texts his dad to make sure he’s still not planning to come home until the morning. Peruses Derek’s refrigerator and kitchen to take stock of his food inventory. Feeling like a weirdo with no boundaries, but not really caring, he goes through Derek’s bathroom cabinet, looking for any safe medicines to make him drowsy enough to nap through the suspense until Derek returns and wakes him up. A Benadryl or something, even though he’s 99.99% sure Derek can’t have allergies if being a werewolf cured Scott of his asthma.

Just as he figured, he comes up empty, so he starts pacing and chewing on his thumbnail again. Mid-stride, he catches sight of the seemingly innocuous paper bag in an empty corner of the loft.

Picking it up, but not wanting to look inside at its contents, he opens the heavy door and closes it behind him. For once, he doesn’t mind going down the stairwell to the ground floor so he can toss the bag straight into a dumpster. Without even a backwards glance, Stiles heads back upstairs. It feels a touch impulsive since he’s mostly looking for ways to kill time and occupy himself, but he’s still unwaveringly steadfast in his decision not to report Clay or his friend.

He grows so antsy inside that he tries his luck outside on the concrete balcony. Looking up at the stars decently lit up in the sky, he makes up his own constellations before pulling out his phone and scouring the web for any new articles about the Mets. His narrowly specific interest in sports has worked as a timesuck in the past.

When Derek comes home, Stiles stands up ramrod straight at the sound of the front door. He turns and sees Derek, gesturing through the windows for him to stay where he is.

Stiles breaks out in a sudden cold sweat, even though he’s surrounded by crisp March air. As Derek steps out onto the balcony, it takes every bit of emotional fortitude Stiles has not to jump all over him for information.

“He’s leaving tomorrow,” Derek says simply.
Stiles grabs at Derek’s fingers, restraint out the window, and scans them for any signs of blood. He trusts that Derek kept his promises, but reality sometimes calls for judgment and divergence. His hands and fingernails look clean, though, and a quick glance up confirms no errant dots of red splashed on Derek’s face or neck, either.

“I can’t say I didn’t lay a hand on him,” Derek says, a shade of satisfaction ringing through. “But I didn’t actually hurt him too much. He walked away. Petrified, but he walked away.”

“What happened? Tell me, tell me.”

“I followed him from your house to that bar you said he would go to. He didn’t see me. I didn’t go in. But when he left a couple hours later, I pulled him into a side alley and made his future very, very clear. I almost wish you had been there to see his fucking face. He’s done here. And he knows it.”

“So he’s going to leave and then what? He’s gonna stop?”

“I put the fear of God in him. I don’t know if it’ll work, Stiles; I’ll be honest. But I don’t know what would. Except for the friendly pruning shears.”

Stiles sighs. He’s sweating again. Going to the police was no guarantee, either - far from it. “I don’t know, Derek,” Stiles says helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay.” Derek draws Stiles in close to him. “This was never going to be clean. It’s okay. You can’t be responsible for everyone. There was only so much you could do anyway.”

“I threw my clothes out,” Stiles admits. He hadn’t felt any regret when he’d lobbed the brown bag over the dumpster rail, but now he feels so selfish.

“We’ve let other bad guys go before. Right or wrong, we’ve done it. We’ve let them go, or not chased them down to end it when they got away. Kate. Gerard. Deucalion. And you said it yourself. Peter came back and I didn’t do anything. Like being dead for a month was enough of a punishment, so oh well. Like I knew he was never going to hurt anyone again. But I didn’t know that. I really can’t compare my uncle to yours - your uncle is a hellspawn demon - but we’ve made that choice before and let people go.”

Stiles screws his face up. “I guess. Maybe I fucked up. I don’t know.”

“No, you’re okay. It’s okay. Oh, and I have something for you,” Derek says, pulling away only to fish something out of his jacket pocket.

Derek hands Clay’s phone over to Stiles, who warily takes it from him. Stiles swipes at the screen, but as he expected, the lock screen appears. He hadn’t asked Derek to get the code from Clay - hadn’t even thought of it, but impetuously thinks he doesn’t need it as he throws the phone down on the ground so forcefully that even Derek steps back at the rebound.

Stiles doesn’t stop there, slamming his heel on the cracked screen a few times. Breathing hard, his vision sweeps from his dirty white Adidas to Derek’s boots. “Can you …?” he asks, and Derek picks up on his request, bringing down his own sturdier sole with his exponentially greater strength.

“Sorry, I’ll clean this up,” Stiles apologizes, beginning to gather the scattered fragments together.

Derek drops to his knees next to him. “That can wait. It’s just trash.”

“Everything’s gone now.” Stiles swallows and blinks hard. “Everything’s almost gone.”
“Tomorrow, it’ll be everything.”

Stiles nods with a series of short sniffles, reverting to clearing the mess. “But you’re still here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Derek says, brushing Stiles’ hands away and picking up the pieces for him.

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Even compared to Monday, Stiles is an absolutely distracted mess on Tuesday. At lunch, Scott nudges him and whispers, “are you still taking your Adderall?”

Noah didn’t go into the station until the afternoon, so Stiles beats him home by a few hours. Clay’s truck isn’t there, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

When he lets himself into the house, his heart pounds with hopeful expectation and realistic pessimism. He believes everything Derek told him, 100%, but Stiles can’t allow himself to believe that Clay followed through until he sees it with his own two eyes.

He doesn’t even bother putting his backpack down before venturing upstairs and to the guest room. Twisting on the straps with his long fingers, he stands in the doorway and takes in every sign that Clay has vacated. The closet door is open and looks empty from this angle. The top of the dresser is bare.

Stiles carries his rapid inspection over to the bathroom. Some of Clay’s things are still there, but they’re the disposable items that can be thrown away, like his toothbrush. His electric razor isn’t on the countertop and his hair products aren’t in the cabinet.

Breath shallow, Stiles drops his backpack off in his room and returns to Clay’s room, this time to check the closet completely and open and close all of the dresser drawers. Compulsively, he takes the sheets and pillowcases off the bed to initiate into his secret laundry ritual.

The washing machine is churning away as Stiles passes through the kitchen, getting rid of everything he can find that’s only used by Clay. His favored coffee creamer is about a quarter full when Stiles dumps the rest down the sink and throws the container in the trash. That’s followed by the dense protein bars Clay keeps in the pantry and a couple bottles of the pale ale that his dad’s never really liked. Once Stiles is satisfied there’s nothing else, he takes out the trash, checks on the wash cycle, and bounds back up the stairs.

Abruptly aware of the stillness of the house, Stiles sits down on his bed, hunched over with his elbows on his knees, and doesn’t move for a long time. His phone vibrates with e-mail and text alerts, but he ignores them.

Clay is actually gone and hopefully never coming back, thanks to Derek. Stiles thought he would feel happy - elated and excited, maybe - but he doesn’t, not exactly. He’s so relieved that he readily accepts the accompanying tears that flow, but he doesn’t really feel a sense of closure at all. He knows he’s safe now and that counts for a lot - it’s everything - but there’s an emptiness inside he just can’t shake.

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Noah calls out to Stiles as he walks down the hall, stopping by Stiles’ room to check on him. They hug vigorously after their week apart and Noah notes the changes to Stiles’ room with surprise.

“Wow, when did you do this? I like it.”
“Oh, this?” Stiles scratches the back of his neck. “Over the weekend. Was in the mood. Derek helped me.”

The Derek detail is unnecessary, but Stiles doesn’t mind putting it out there experimentally, just to see how his dad reacts to the concept that he and Derek are that friendly and Derek was in their house during an unchaperoned weekend.

“Good man,” Noah says, looking left and right to take it all in.

“Yeah. For sure.”

“Hey, did you happen to see Clay when you got home from practice today?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. He had to take off, actually. A friend reached out to him about a new job opportunity, and I guess it was too good to pass up. He had to drive out there and be ready to start at the end of the week.”

“Okay.” Stiles has almost no reaction otherwise until he overcompensates with a typical rubber-faced expression, shrugging his shoulders and frowning in an “oh, you don’t say?” manner. “Where’d he go?”

“Arizona somewhere. Ugh, that summer heat. But it’s a good move, I think. I’m glad that’s looking up for him; he needed something promising after the whole divorce business.”

“Yeah … he had to get out on his own again.”

“Clay came by the station to say goodbye before he hit the road, but it makes sense he didn’t get a chance to see you or talk to you in person - class was still in session.”

“Book-learnin’ waits for no one, Dad,” Stiles says, trying his damnest to keep it breezy. “He excited?”

Stiles really doesn’t give a shit, but he’s opening up any door he can to ascertain how committed Clay was to leaving for good and if he did or said anything that seemed off to his dad.

“Yeah, I think so,” Noah answers. “A little harried, but this came out of nowhere, so I get that. It’s just like him to blow out of town as spontaneously as he came in. Ahh, youth.”

Stiles shakes his head sardonically. “Okay, Dad, chill. I’m not putting you in a retirement home anytime soon. Let’s go have dinner.”

“Oh, you haven’t eaten yet? It’s kind of late.”

“No, not yet. I was waiting for you,” Stiles says honestly.

“Just you and me, kid,” Noah says, ruffling Stiles’ hair.

Stiles returns the affectionate gesture. “Just us.”

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Stiles is trying to muscle his way through the last two pre-calculus problems when his phone chirps happily.
“OK cancel the sads.”

Stiles texts Scott back with “?” and puts his phone in his lap.

A minute later, Scott chirps back. “At Derek’s. He is happier today.” Then again as Scott clarifies, “Happier for Derek, anyway.”

Stiles leans back in his desk chair, smiling down at the screen. He would be at the loft, too, except it’s fight training tonight and he wouldn’t really have anything to contribute except for snark. Fighting a were-creature is nothing like palling around with Parrish. Besides, his dad is going to be home any minute and Stiles is looking forward to spending time with him again. Back-to-back dinners are rare for them.

“I think the deadpool really did bother him more than we thought,” Stiles responds. It’s true - just not the whole truth. Probably only about 5% of the truth.

“I guess so.”

“Tell Derek and everyone else I say hi.”

“D says hi back,” Stiles reads, and for a moment, forgets about the emptiness.

Hey,” Derek says later that night, climbing in through the window.

Stiles slides over on his bed. “Hey, Derek.”

“Sorry I didn’t get here earlier.” Derek sheds his leather jacket with a soft creak of the material. “Malia was really scrappy tonight. Honestly, that girl could probably fight for days.”

“I bet she has,” Stiles speculates.

“I parked around the corner, on the side of the street your dad doesn’t drive past to get to the station.” Stepping out of his clothes, Derek takes his place next to Stiles. “My hair’s still a little wet from the shower. Sorry about that, too.”

“No, it’s fine. You smell good,” Stiles observes, sighing a little. He knows that smell. He’d lathered himself up with layers and layers of it after he’d showed up on Derek’s doorstep and tried to wash himself of his last harrowing encounter with Clay.

“You’re just okay yourself,” Derek mumbles.

Stiles laughs, quietly because his dad is asleep. He inhales again, subconsciously moving closer, and Derek leans his head away, opening up more room at the crook of his neck.

For a while, Stiles thinks about using his junior detective skills to find Charlie Swanson. It can’t be that hard, even though he’s only about fifteen years old by Stiles’ estimation. And it certainly would be easier to find Chrissy and her paper trail. Stiles has never been under the impression they’re hiding while the divorce is being finalized.

He thinks about telling Charlie that he’s taken care of Clay (or had him taken care of, to be more accurate), and did his best to make sure Clay never touches another kid again.
He’s not sure how Charlie would respond. How he would want Charlie to respond. Whether they would talk just the one time and then go their separate ways. What it would be like if they kept in contact. Whether Charlie is super fucked-up over what Clay did to him. When it started. If he even knew Stiles existed. If he’s pissed that Stiles didn’t tell anyone about his own earlier abuse, allowing Clay to roam freely and look for new targets. If he understands why Stiles didn’t say anything because he didn’t for a long time, either. How his mother found out about it. Whether he told his mother himself. How that’s redefined their relationship.

But Stiles doesn’t do anything. They started the process of severing ties with Clay months ago. Stiles has no business pushing his own thoughts about closure on them, potentially opening up scabs of wounds that may only be starting to heal. For all Stiles knows, he could end up making things a lot worse.

It’s also entirely possible that he’s read the situation all wrong, and things he thought were true were just false assumptions. Maybe Chrissy left the marriage because she really did fall for some other guy. Maybe Clay never abused her son, and he kept the picture of Charlie in his wallet for legitimate, non-disgusting, non-criminal reasons. Maybe Stiles is the only one Clay has ever wanted to control and hurt.

How incredibly awkward it would be if Stiles reached out and Charlie had no fucking idea what he was talking about.

What if Charlie told his mom what Stiles told him, and it took on a life of its own in the divorce? What if Chrissy was so repulsed that she wanted to use it against Clay in court? Would that trigger a police investigation? Even if Stiles refused to get involved, could he really put the genie back in the bottle? His dad would definitely find out. Stiles didn’t work so hard to keep the secret only to have it blow up in his face because he told someone he shouldn’t have.

He’d been so sure earlier that he wasn’t the only one. He’s still pretty sure of that. But Stiles doesn’t think he really knows anything anymore. The more he thinks about it, the more he realizes he doesn’t know what he’d gain from talking to Charlie.

There’s only one person he wants.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for reading! See you at chapter 8!
Hi readers - kicking off the workweek with chapter 8! Thank you for all of the kudos, wonderful comments, and subscriptions! This story has taken up so much real estate in my head for months and I’ve invested so many hours that it’s amazing to know that people are enjoying it. My heart goes a-flutter, for real!

[Posted 7/17/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stiles sleeps a lot. He’s sure it’s in large part due to the long-term sleep deprivation and the biological need to heal his brain and his body. During the three weeks in between trapping the nogitsune and Clay’s arrival, Stiles had experienced something similar. He’s felt something like this before, right down to the lost little echo where his heart should be. Where he thinks it is. The sleep deprivation is a big part of it, but it’s not the whole reason.

The irony isn’t lost on Stiles. He had slept terribly when the nogitsune had been inside him. Even after Stiles was no longer void, he felt void, just in a different sense. Clay came back, filling him up in the worst possible ways before leaving him destroyed and empty inside. Just like the nogitsune, Clay’s gone now, too. But Stiles still feels void.

He sleeps a lot, but he also doesn’t sleep. Sometimes he can’t. The dreams are as vivid as ever. The only change is that Clay will never again be the one who shakes him awake. When he’s there, it’s Derek who gently guides Stiles out of his slumber. Derek was right - he can’t take the emotional pain away - but it doesn’t ache quite as much when Derek is next to Stiles.

Whether he’s asleep or not, Stiles definitely lies around liberally, swinging back and forth between exhaustion and overtiredness. He’s listless and on edge, even though he doesn’t have anything to be scared of anymore. The lingering fear doesn’t listen to his constant reminders that nothing is going to happen.

Clay isn’t going to climb into his bed or reach between his legs or fuck him so hard he limps to the bathroom afterwards. Stiles knows this, but the residue is there, deep in his core. So really, he’s not completely hollowed out. He still has the callous souvenirs that Clay forced on him.

His mind knows Clay is gone, but it’s still wired just like it was when Clay was in the house. His body is starting to get used to being left alone, but he still flinches in the dark, anxiously expecting to be used up and damaged.

Strangely, it felt a little easier in the days right after he admitted his disaster of a life to Derek. Those few days were fueled by the anticipation of excising Clay out of his life. They were building up to something that was discreetly done, the way Stiles wanted, without a crest of drama and limelight.

But even without that climax, everything crashed down into an ensuing silence that isn’t peaceful. It’s so fucking quiet. Stiles doesn’t have anything significant enough to distract him from living in the wake of what Clay did to him. He doesn’t wish for another supernatural crisis or for his dad to get hurt again, not at all. He just doesn’t want the silence and all of the space that leaves for the constant
swirl of painful thoughts and feelings.

He doesn’t know what to do with the lock on his door. He can do whatever he wants, but he doesn’t know what that is. He can lock his door now, but it’s weird to do that while he’s simultaneously telling himself he doesn’t have to keep anyone out. He can keep it unlocked, but that makes him feel like he’s still following all of the rules.

Stiles continues to wash his blankets and linens frequently when his dad isn’t home, except now he does it out of paranoia that Scott will come over unplanned one day and smell Derek on his bed. He doesn’t have Scott over very often, usually opting to meet somewhere else, but he still runs the washing machine just in case.

His frequent showering habit is alive and well, too. Not in the middle of the night and not for an hour or longer at a time, but in addition to his regular grooming, Stiles showers and changes clothes if he’s been with Derek before he knows he’s going to see Scott, Kira, Malia, or even Liam.

He’s not ashamed of all of the time he spends with Derek, but he’s not ready to explain to anyone how close they’ve become and why. For now, he wants to keep it quiet. He wants to keep their time together to themselves. It’s theirs. No one else’s.

Even so, Stiles hates the trade-off. He hates the excessive laundry and showering. Derek isn’t someone he should be cleansed of. His touch and his scent are not things Stiles wants to get rid of.

He hasn’t asked Derek whether he does anything like this on his end. Derek’s of the same mindset about the rest of the pack picking up on their growing friendship and he’s the expert on how their powers work, not Stiles. He’s doing whatever he needs to do. It’s probably easier for Derek, though, because he doesn’t see the pack nearly as often as Stiles does at school or in their off-time.

He sees Stiles, though.

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Although he already knows Derek is out getting his car washed and waxed, Stiles comes over after school and sets up camp at the table. A lot of bad things have happened here - the oni confronted them multiple times, Stiles and the nogitsune kicked Derek’s ass like he was a featherweight, Boyd died just a few feet away - but Derek’s loft feels safe to him.

He idly wishes Derek was around, but he’s not a newborn baby who always has to be watched. Stiles can’t help it, though. He wants to be with Derek all the time - being with Derek always makes him feel better - but he’s not sure if it’s unhealthy. Stiles stays at his own house half the time, lest his dad notice anything, and Derek only comes over about half of that time, but maybe Stiles is depending on Derek too much, and in ways he shouldn’t be.

He googles around for it, trying to understand what constitutes an appropriate dynamic between the rescuer and the person he rescues. He finds a fair amount of dialogue about emergency personnel - police officers, firefighters, doctors, paramedics. It’s a little helpful, but not really. Those people mostly save strangers on the job. They don’t usually have relationships with the people they save. They’re not supposed to, for obvious and justifiable reasons. They do their jobs and move on.

Derek didn’t help him because it was his job. Even taking into account his wolf instincts to protect his pack - that’s not really a job. They’re friends.

Stiles keeps exploring until he’s really not finding anything at all useful anymore. After skimming some humorous critiques on a blog dedicated to terrible Lifetime movies, he shuts his laptop closed.
With a sigh, he abandons the table and goes over to the bed, crouching down next to it and reaching his arm all the way under until his fingers brush against the stack of papers he’s looking for. Pulling out the documents Derek printed out at the library, Stiles settles in on his side of Derek’s bed to read.

He’s looked online for information about sexual abuse before, but that was a long time ago, and his lens had been different. He was barely a teenager and alone back then. He’s almost an adult now and he’s not alone anymore, but he’s also a repeat victim who couldn’t stop what was happening to him. He still has a lot to learn, no matter what he thought he knew.

Stiles finishes one section and flips to the next, titled “How to Respond to a Survivor.” Yes, he does talk to himself a lot, but not as an outsider, so he almost turns to the next section, stopping only when he sees handwritten markings on the pages. By simple process of elimination, Derek must have read this one already. Stiles knows that Derek likes food a little saltier than he does, and that Derek paradoxically stretches like a cat when he wakes up in the morning, but it’s not like Stiles thinks “that’s Derek Hale underlining” or “looks like a Derek Hale asterisk to me.”

Interest piqued, he glances through the parts Derek marked up.

*Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the survivor, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.

*Leave any “why” questions or investigations to the experts - your job is to support this person.

*Remind the survivor you are there for them and willing to listen to their story. Remind them there are other people in their life who care and that there are service providers who will be able to support them as they recover from the experience.

*If a minor discloses a situation of sexual abuse, you are required in most situations to report the crime.

There’s something scribbled out next to this part - Stiles thinks it might be a question mark - and then a clearly marked “x” to the right of the scribble. Stiles exhales, grateful that Derek listened to what he wanted, despite its opposition to what the resources specified. He knows why the abuse is supposed to be reported, but he just can’t do it.

*Reassure the survivor that surviving sexual violence doesn’t change the way you think or feel about them.

This bit is starred and underlined twice. So are short statements of "Avoid judgment" and "Remember that the healing process is fluid."

Chewing on his lip, Stiles takes stock of the markings one more time before turning the page.

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As Stiles had gotten older, he learned more about STDs and the consequences of sexual activity the same way everyone else did - health class, raunchy talk with his friends, television. He had started to wonder, what if he was sick, what if he had something and didn’t even know it? From what he had heard, undiagnosed STDs could become serious problems if not taken care of, and he didn’t want that to happen to him. He didn’t want to walk around wondering if Clay was still infecting him, long after he had left.

When Stiles was fourteen, he decided enough was enough and took the bus an hour outside Beacon Hills to a Planned Parenthood clinic. There were closer locations, but he wasn’t taking any chances of running into someone who knew him, unlikely as that might be, or recognized him or his name as
the son of the County Sheriff.

He had been incredibly anxious, unsure of how the medical staff would react to someone his age coming in alone. He knew he didn’t have to have a guardian present and could just pretend he had been happily sexing it up with someone his own age, but what if they could tell? What if the staff, who talked about sex with patients all day long, could tell that he was on the wrong end of the consent spectrum? Maybe he didn’t come across as being fourteen years old and trying to be responsible with his sexual health. Maybe he read more like a scared kid trying to clean up a mess he was pushed into.

Stiles had awkwardly answered the questions he was asked during the exam, ears blushing pink the whole time. He had been honest for the most part. It helped that there was no criticism from the nurse or the doctor. By then, he figured he was probably a dime a dozen there, just another sexually active kid.

He was screened for a litany of STDs and had to come back for some of the results, but the HIV test was a quick one, with results in about half an hour. He had been so relieved to hear he wasn’t positive that he almost lost his shit right there on the spot.

Before leaving, he paid out of his savings and made a follow-up appointment to come back for the remaining test results. A week later, he found out he was negative across the board.

Thinking he could finally put this all behind him, he had cried for twenty minutes during the bus ride home.

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Stiles drives back to the same clinic after school, opting to go by himself. This is too personal, and if the results aren’t good, he knows he’ll want to be alone while he starts to process.

But mostly, he doesn’t want anyone to look at Derek with him, like he’s the reason why Stiles needs to go to Planned Parenthood in the first place, when Derek is actually the only thing keeping him sane.

He understands sex and its ramifications better now than when he was fourteen, but in some ways, he’s much more nervous for this exam. Clay had always used condoms when Stiles was younger. Stiles doesn’t really know why Clay had grown so casual about them this time, but by Stiles’ own admission, Clay didn’t have to worry about catching any STDs from him and his tragically short list of partners. Clay hadn’t given much thought to protecting Stiles, with the exception of the menage a trois from hell. Though that must have been for selfish purposes, too, to keep him pristine for more unprotected sex.

When Stiles was a kid, Clay probably couldn’t risk leaving trace evidence behind. Not when Noah kept taking Stiles to the doctor to monitor his Adderall dosage after his mother died and he was having difficulty managing his moods and behavior. Not when Stiles sucked at sports and could stumble into an injury and a hospital visit on any given day. It was a big enough gamble keeping Stiles’ mouth shut back then, never mind under the authoritative prodding of a medical professional. He couldn’t exactly be relied upon to hide any smoking guns, too.

Not like Stiles at seventeen. Stiles had covered it up over and over again, disposing of as much evidence he could, as quickly as he could. STDs don’t care about post-coitus clean-ups, though. Those are usually too late.

The clinic has his records from his previous visits and the doctor wants to update his history, so Stiles
tries to maintain the honesty as much as possible.

How many partners has he had?
Two.

Were his partners men, women, or both?
Men.

He first began to have intercourse when he was fourteen?

Stiles nods mutely at first, then yelps out a hurried “yes” in case she needs verbal confirmation before she can move on. Fourteen is normal-ish. Eleven years old is not. He hadn’t told the truth the first time he came to the clinic, either, but he doesn’t think it’s that important in order to be tested.

Does he always use a condom?
No.

Has he had unprotected sex as a recurring practice?
Yes. Stiles can’t stop the bloom spreading across his cheeks. It sounds so irresponsible.

Is he aware of the ways to protect himself?
Yes.

Does he know the proper way to use protection?
Yes.

Does he have access to protection?
Yes. The doctor stresses the importance of using condoms and tries to give him some, but he shakes his head, telling her he has them at home. He doesn’t tell her he has two unopened boxes. She doesn’t press him about why he didn’t use condoms when he says he has them, but Stiles still feels ashamed.

Has he had sexual intercourse while under the influence of any substances?
Yes. But just once, he’s quick to clarify.

Has he ever been pressured into sexual intercourse?
Stiles hesitates enough that the doctor must know the answer is not a resounding “no,” but Stiles says “no” anyway. He’s not here to talk about being abused. He would never admit it to her, even if she asked more follow-up questions.

Is he aware of the resources available to him if he is being pressured into sexual intercourse?
Yes, but he doesn’t need them.

It’s a peculiar feeling, talking about it but not talking about it, with someone who doesn’t know him and will never know him. He didn’t feel this way the first time he came in, but he had been a lot younger then and a lot more terrified of diseases he hadn’t really understood. This woman cares
about his health, and that’s great, he needs that, but he doesn’t have to share anything else. It’s liberating to be able to tell someone partial truths and not feel the crushing weight of consequences he can’t walk away from.

Maybe confessions aren’t as all-or-nothing as he had thought they were, but he still knows he can’t tell his dad or Scott any of it.

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After fighting through an annoying bout of rush hour traffic on the highway, Stiles walks into Derek’s loft and is greeted with the alluring smell of pasta.

“I made spaghetti,” Derek calls out from the kitchen.

“Oh, yum.” Stiles sneaks around him to grab a little taste from the pot. “It’s really good. Wanna eat at the table like civilized folk or on the couch in front of the tv like actual people?”

“Table,” Derek says. “I don’t want any pasta sauce stains.”

“Can you even tell when you keep this place dark as shit?” Stiles jokes, but amiably sets the place settings while Derek serves up two bowls.

“How was practice today?”

“Oh, no practice. I - uh - I would have come over earlier, but I had an errand. I went to Planned Parenthood so I could get tested for STDs.”

Derek sets the bowls down on the table, ignoring his as he rests his palm on the small of Stiles’ back. “How did it go?”

“Negative for HIV. I have to wait a week for other results to come in. And I’ll need to go back another time, later. I mean, to be as conservative as possible. Sometimes things take a while to show up, so I need to check again in a few months.”

“Okay. Do you want me to come with you?”

Stiles shrugs. “Maybe. That might be okay. We can talk about it more when it’s coming up.”

“Okay,” Derek says, sitting across from him.

They eat in silence for a little while, punctuated with little slurps that neither of them are self-conscious about, and a sheepish “oops” from Stiles as a meatball gets away from him and rolls across the table.

“Derek?”

“Yes?”

“Can you catch any STDs? I don’t know how that all works.”

Derek shakes his head. “No, I can’t. I mean, I can’t stay sick. My cells heal.”


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“Stiles?”

Stiles startles awake, blinking at Derek coming into focus next to him. Everything seems so black and fuzzy.

Derek is already sitting up, and he reaches over to turn on his bedside light. “Stiles, are you okay? You were having another nightmare.”

“I was?” Stiles turns his head and feels the feathery cushion of a pillow underneath him. “I don’t even remember going to sleep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Stiles sits up, too. He never wants to talk about it, but he has enough secrets rattling around in his head already. Some that he’ll never, ever tell Derek.

“My uncle was in the hospital. He needed a bone marrow transplant.”

It hadn’t seemed like a bad dream at first, and he doesn’t feel guilty for thinking that. Disease takes a lot of people away. A lot of wonderful, amazing people. It’s no skin off Stiles’ nose if it takes away some fucking terrible people, too. It’s not like he’s the one who made Clay sick.

“He was getting worse. So my dad wanted us to get tested. He wasn’t a match, because no duh, they’re in-laws. I didn’t want to get tested, but I had to, or my dad would wonder what was wrong.” Stiles swallows. “I was a match.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah. So I was supposed to like, fucking save him. Literally give him the life force from my bones after everything he already took from me. But I decided not to do it. I told my dad I wasn’t going to do it.”

Derek smirks, his features going murderous for a moment. “Too bad for that piece of shit.”

“I told my dad,” Stiles sighs, picking at an imaginary loose thread on the blanket, “and just - fuck, the look on his face, Derek.”

“I’m sure he was disappointed, but it was a dream. It wasn’t real.”

“I know. But it felt real. It felt real when he drew his gun on me. He looked right at me and said, ‘What the hell are you? You’re not my son. My son would never do this. You’re not my son.’”

Stiles’ voice is shaking too much to go on, but he’s already covered the most crushing part of the dream anyway.

“Your dad would understand why, if you told him. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says with a sniffle. “It just sucked, though. A choice between telling him what really happened or letting him think I was evil again. He thought I must have been the nogitsune again.”

“What did you do? Did you tell him?”

“No.” Stiles rests his cheek against Derek’s shoulder. “You woke me up, so I didn’t have to.”

“I had just gone to bed anyway, so I wasn’t really asleep. You’ve been asleep since 6,” Derek informs him, much to his surprise.
“Really?” Stiles checks the time on his phone. It’s past 1 am. He’s already slept a full night’s worth, but somehow he’s still exhausted.

“Yeah. I tried to wake you up to see if you wanted to eat dinner, but you crashed pretty hard. Are you hungry? Do you want to eat?”

Stiles smacks his dry mouth a couple of times before lying back down. “I’m really tired.”

“Okay. We’ll go back to sleep.”

Derek turns out the light and settles under the blankets again. Stiles wasn’t lying - he’s tired and doesn’t feel like getting out of bed at all - but he’s not sliding right back into unconsciousness. He’s not sure if his mind is on the defensive, making it impossible for him to have another nightmare, or just totally out of whack with his body.

After a while, Derek says, “You’re still awake.”

“Yeah, but I’m not hungry.”

Derek turns on his side, reaching over Stiles’ torso, and Stiles turns in the same direction, too. It feels nice, the way Derek is lightly scratching his fingers across his stomach.

“I’m worried about you,” Derek says quietly, nestled in behind him.

“I’m just tired,” Stiles whispers back.

“Okay.”

“My mom used to scratch my back when I was a kid and home sick from school.”

“Do you want me to do that?”

Stiles is too sluggish to feel awkward, and regardless, he’s quickly learned how tactile Derek is in his comfort. Stiles never would have guessed it before, but it makes a lot of sense. Derek’s genetically driven to take care of his pack. Actual wolves lick each other’s wounds clean. A little cuddling is nothing compared to that.

“No, I like it like this.”

“You probably don’t know, but I often get mistaken for a Polish woman.”

Stiles cracks a smile. “Oh yeah, that’s definitely what I thought you were when we first met. A Polish lady with a leather fetish.”

Derek keeps up his scratching motions. “Do you want me to talk you to sleep again?”

“No, this is good,” Stiles murmurs, and falls asleep a minute later.

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Carefully balancing the pizza box on his raised knee and against the front door, Stiles maneuvers his key in the lock and pulls the door open with one hand.

“I picked up a pizza for dinner,” Stiles says, spotting Derek at the main table. “A compromise between the toppings you like and I like. No pineapple for you, pffft.”
Stiles sets the box down in the kitchen, rooting around the cupboards for paper plates. He knows where the actual plates are, but Stiles prefers eating pizza on bendy paper plates that he can just toss out with the box.

“Derek, you coming?” he calls out when he doesn’t hear any footsteps.

“Can we talk first?”

Stiles cautiously closes the cabinet he had peeked into. “Um, sure.”

As he approaches the table, Derek gives him an appreciative smile. “Thanks for getting food. You know I’m always starving after trying to do any research.”

“What’s up, nerd?” Stiles asks, taking a seat directly on the tabletop next to Derek, legs dangling and facing the opposite direction. He’s careful not to disturb the array of papers spread out. “Oh, ley lines, cool.”

“You seem better today. I’m glad you’re eating.”

“I told you, I was just tired.”

Derek leans against the table, slightly bent at the waist and palms flat on the surface. “Stiles, I … I can’t help you any more,” Derek says, eyes downcast.

Stiles deflates, his spine curling as his shoulders drop. He hadn’t needed a google search after all to help him figure out if he was relying on Derek too aggressively. He just had to go to the source.

“I know,” Stiles says softly, staring at his hands. “I put way too much on you - I made you feel like you have to look out for the broken kid who has nowhere to go -”

“Stiles, no, I mean, I want to. I want to help you with whatever you need. I just don’t know how. I think you need more than what I can do. I’m not enough.”

“You are, though,” Stiles protests, whipping his head up to catch Derek’s profile. He doesn’t care if he sounds like he’s whining. “Why can’t I just be tired? Can’t I just be sad sometimes?”

Stiles’ eyes prick with tears, so he looks away before Derek can see. That wouldn’t help his argument at all.

“I’ll always be here for you,” Derek says, sliding a hand over so it bumps against Stiles’ hip. “You’re going to have good days and bad days. I just think a professional counselor can give you things you need that I can’t.”

Stiles frowns and bites the inside of his cheek. This kind of discussion isn’t unfamiliar to him, though it feels like so long ago that he and Scott had talked about seeing a counselor after the nogitsune mess, and before that, the several conversations with his dad. Except in this case, he doesn’t have the obstacle of how to explain or talk around the supernatural. This is a humans-only problem, but it doesn’t make it any better.

“It’s okay to talk to someone,” Derek continues. “I know it’s painful and it’s hard to trust people, but it can help to talk to someone who’s had training and you don’t have to answer to in your regular life.”

Stiles nods like a puppet. The idea makes sense, but it’s incredibly difficult. For so long, only he and Clay knew. He was okay telling Derek, but he’d thought that it would stop there.
“I went to therapy for a while,” Derek admits. “Years ago. In New York.”

Stiles’ jaw drops inelegantly. “You did?”

“Don’t you remember how well-adjusted I was when we met?”

Stiles scrunches his nose in confusion. “Oh. Oh! You’re joking.”

“Not about going to therapy.”

“So did it help you? …”

Derek opens his mouth and closes it, then opens it again. “Yes. It didn’t fix a lot of things, but it helped. Sometimes I went by myself. Sometimes Laura came with me for like, joint sessions. Sometimes she went by herself. It was all her idea.”

“Oh.” Stiles is still astounded, picturing Derek lying on a couch and talking about himself and his feelings.

“I didn’t want to go. But Laura threw down the gauntlet. She said she couldn’t watch my downward spiral anymore.”

“Downward spiral?”

Stiles is working on being more sensitive to other people’s feelings, but that doesn’t mean his curiosity has been dampened. He can’t imagine what it was like for Derek to lose his whole family at the hands of someone who had pretended to care about him. He might understand more if Clay had killed his dad, but not even Clay was that bad. He’d shredded Stiles’ innocence and ruined him forever, but Clay hadn’t taken away nearly all of the love in his life.

“After the fire and everything, we thought New York would be a good place to go. Totally different from Beacon Hills. No ties there. A fresh start. And it mostly was. No one there knew what had happened to us, and it was easy to hide what we were. I know what you mean about it being too quiet sometimes. That wasn’t a problem in the city. There was always so much going on there, I’d have to seek out silence if I wanted it.

“Laura was taking college classes and trying to figure out how she wanted to fit into the world. I got my GED, but I didn’t have any purpose anymore. There were a lot of ways to lose yourself. I made friends, but it was pretty superficial. We just partied all the time, and I slept with a lot of people. Guys, girls, it didn’t matter, just as long as they didn’t know me or anything about me. I always found them, because someone can’t be using me if I approach them first and I don’t let them in. There could never be another Kate.”

“Did that make you feel any better?” Stiles asks, pupils huge with shock.

“No,” Derek says, picking at a piece of lint on his sweater, “it didn’t. Doing that stuff didn’t help at all. I just didn’t feel anything, day after day. Laura couldn’t stand it, so she made me talk to someone.”

Stiles nods and only has eyes for his fidgeting hands again. Derek’s situation was worse than his - sex and intimacy felt like death to Stiles, but it had actually meant death for Derek.

“I get that it’s really hard. And I don’t think that seeing a counselor or a psychologist is going to be this cure-all. But you’ve been hurt so, so much, Stiles. If someone can help you through that, I think it’s worth a try.”
“Mmmmmm,” Stiles hums noncommittally. He doesn’t ever see himself acting out the way Derek says he did - partying is one thing; hook-ups are another, especially with strangers. He could never be with a stranger ever again. Even if he was in control, it would never feel right. He would never choose that in the first place.

But he understands Derek’s point. There are a million and one ways for what happened to break him even more. Clay’s gone, but Stiles still feels trapped by him.

“Do you think you might be willing to try? It could help. There are people who specialize in helping survivors of -”

“Abuse,” Stiles interjects. He knows what it was - he knows what Derek calls it. Derek is right, but that doesn’t mean Stiles can hear the words. He’s not there yet. Which is probably just another sign he needs professional help.

“Yes.”

“I mean, I guess I could. I should probably wait a little while, though. Counselors are mandated reporters for child abuse. I’ll have to check the laws to make sure I know what I can tell someone without them having to report it. I might have to wait a while so I can talk about it like it just happened, after I turn eighteen. I didn’t go through all the trouble of not reporting it just to tell someone who has to.”

“I wish you didn’t have to think about things like this,” Derek says, with that mix of sadness and anger that Stiles has seen from him many times already. “I wish you could just do what’s best for you.”

“I’m almost there. Maybe I can go see someone once summer vacation starts. I don’t know. I can’t really afford it. I’m on my dad’s insurance and I’ll have to go through his plan, so he’ll know. He’ll see the claims. But I guess I could just lie and tell him I’m seeing someone for the nogitsune PSTD and not, you know, handsy uncle PTSD. It’ll probably depend on the co-payments, though. I don’t know how much it’ll cost.”

“No,” Derek shakes his head. “You shouldn’t worry about the money. Or your dad finding out. Just go. I’ll pay for it.”

Stiles gapes at him. “I’m not gonna - take your money, Derek -”

“I have money, Stiles. And I’m not talking about the millions from my family’s vault. I have my own money. I don’t spend it. I don’t care about buying things. Obviously. Look at how I live.”

“Like Edgar Allen Poe’s #1 groupie,” Stiles says, gesturing around the loft.

“Okay, I’ll let that one slide this time.”

Stiles side-eyes him. “Nevermore.”

“That’s two strikes, Stiles.” But Derek is smiling a little, the way he almost always does at Stiles’ innocuous little barbs these days. “I have money that I don’t use. Please let me help you.”

Stiles returns his small smile, cheeks lightly tinged with pink. “I’ll pay you back someday.”

“No,” Derek says, resolute. “You’ve saved my life how many times now? I’m the one who’s finally you back.”
Derek’s loft has quickly become Stiles’ favorite place in the world. He isn’t able to spend as much
time there as he would like, but he takes every chance he gets around his own schedule and his dad’s
comings and goings.

In the loft, he doesn’t have as many secrets. He can be himself there - he can say and do anything
there - and Derek guards it like a fortress. Stiles pities the fool who would ever come in and lay a
hand on him. Derek would literally tear them a new asshole, and not in a way that could ever be
repurposed for fun.

They’re not playing house, not exactly, and even if they are, Stiles doesn’t think there’s anything
wrong with it. It’s important to him to contribute, so he doesn’t mind buying groceries or washing the
dishes or restocking the paper towels when they’re running low. These are all things he would do at
home with his dad.

Any other person would look around Derek’s loft and have a few choice words for it - dark, gloomy,
maybe even depressing, but it’s none of those things to Stiles.

It’s easier to concentrate on his homework there than in his own room, and Stiles is propped up
against the headboard, plugging away at some Spanish translation worksheets that aren’t due until
next week. Derek’s sitting next to him, his nose in a different book than he was reading a few days
ago.

Stiles’ phone vibrates next to him, displaying a text message from his dad about an issue with the
pipes at the station. Noah might be home late the next morning if a plumber can’t fix it on an
emergency nighttime call and they have to wait for standard business hours.

“Blehhhhh,” Stiles says aloud. “My dad. Another disaster at work.”

“Oh, do we need to go over there?” Derek asks, about to rise out of bed.

Stiles laughs. “No. Not unless you want to roll up your sleeves to like, unclog the toilet. I don’t know
really know what it is. Some kind of plumbing issue. I was exaggerating.”

Derek purposely jostles Stiles’ leg when he settles back in. “Okay, weirdo.”

He goes back to reading and Stiles struggles with irregular verb conjugations until breaking the
silence a few minutes later. “I never thanked you for what you did at the station.”

“Which time?” Derek has a point. He’s been to the police station on so many occasions, of his own
volition and not.

“When the bomb I mailed went off. The deputies told me you shielded Argent and saved him from a
shit-ton of glass shrapnel. Probably would have killed him.”

“Oh, yeah,” Derek says. “I didn’t even think about it when it was happening. It was instinct.”

“You stopped me from killing my friend AND her dad. Making part of my legacy ending theirs. And
then you saved my dad from the Mute at the school, too.”

Derek sets his book down and regards Stiles seriously. “I would never let anything happen to your
dad.”

“You’re a regular Captain America, huh? Just saving people everywhere,” Stiles jokes. Out of the
corner of his eye, he sees Derek’s muscles go taut and expects it to dissipate quickly, like Derek’s just shifting his weight, but it doesn’t. “Well, maybe you see yourself more as the Incredible Hulk. ‘You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.’ Heh. That suits you.”

Derek’s jaw tightens, too. “I didn’t - I didn’t save you, Stiles.”

“Yeah, you did, you wolfed out on Clay and made him leave.”

“But that was too late.”

“I told you not to do anything earlier.”

Derek sighs and looks away. “I should have known,” he eventually says. “I should have done something sooner.”

“How could you have known?” Stiles asks, reaching for Derek’s arm. “No one could have. I made sure of that. Not even my dad could have known, and he like, lives in the same damn house.”

Derek is quiet again, his lashes lowering with guilt. “I was there, too.”

Stiles pushes his Spanish homework away, the textbook falling on the floor with a loud smack and the worksheets flitting down on top. “What do you mean, you were there?”

Derek still won’t - can’t - look at him. “I went to your house one night, except that time your neighbor wasn’t smoking, so I climbed up towards your window -”

Stiles shakes his head in harsh movements, already in full denial but nauseated anyway. “No - you didn’t -”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Stiles.” Derek finally faces him, his gaze overflowing with remorse. “I didn’t know.”

“Did you see us?” Stiles asks, his voice rising and constricting at the same time. “What did you see?”

“I didn’t see anything. Your blinds were closed. I only heard -”

“Oh God.” Stiles swallows the growing lump in his throat. He had forgotten that blinds and locks do nothing to curb werewolf hearing. “You heard us.”

“No,” Derek tries to assure, “I mean, I didn’t actually listen. I got close enough to hear two heartbeats so I left -”

“So how do you know it wasn’t Scott sleeping over?! What else did you hear?”

Derek looks down again. “Not much. Just the heartbeats, they were fast, but everything was pretty muffled, even for me. But now, it seems so clear what it really was -”

“We were fucking,” Stiles spits out.

“Stiles, I’m so sorry. You don’t know how sorry I am. I should have known. But I just turned around and left you alone.”

Stiles’ lip curls in all-consuming self-hatred. “You couldn’t have known what he was doing. You just thought I finally got laid. You thought - you wanted to give me privacy …”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t - if I had just stopped and thought about it -”
“What was there to think about? You didn’t want to intrude.” Stiles pulls into himself, tucking his knees in and hugging around them. “Did it … did it sound like I liked it?”

“I didn’t listen.”

“But you didn’t - I didn’t sound like I hated it?”

“Stiles, I didn’t listen. But I shouldn’t have left you there.”

Stiles coils in more. “He always said that I liked it. That I couldn’t admit it, but I liked it.”

Derek rubs up and down Stiles’ hunched back. “He knew you didn’t.”

“I don’t know.” Stiles blinks away a couple of fat tears. “Is this why you thought I was dating someone?”

“Yeah.”

Stiles sucks in another deep breath. He hasn’t forgotten what Clay said the first time they had sex after he came back. ’You can think of me as your boyfriend.’ Clay might have romanticized their relationship and what they were to each other, but Stiles never did, not even close.

It hurts in ways Stiles didn’t think were possible that Derek thought they sounded like boyfriends. His heart feels icy and bleak in his chest. Derek didn’t see them, but he heard them together and they sounded normal enough that Derek thought it was normal sex. That Stiles wanted. Consensual.

Derek’s not to blame, not in the slightest. The dishonorable distinction belongs to Stiles. Keeping quiet because his dad woke up and walked out into the hallway was one thing. But Stiles hadn’t even known someone else could hear them - there was no reason to represent the sexual encounter as anything other than controlling, heartless abuse - except he apparently did do just that, because Derek and his werewolf ears overheard it and walked away.

Stiles wonders what would have happened the night Derek was there - if he hadn’t just taken it, if he had done or said something that, even in just those few seconds, had given Derek pause - what would have happened if it had been one of the many times Stiles had cried or fought back or begged Clay to stop -

No, he realizes sharply. That’s not what he would have wanted, even in hindsight. It’s bad enough that Derek knows things because Stiles told him. At least Stiles still has control over that. He doesn’t want Derek to know things because he was there - because he caught them in the act and saw things he can’t unsee, learned things he can’t unlearn. Derek knows the things Stiles chose to tell him. That’s very, very different from Derek’s having actual memories of Stiles in his worst, weakest moments.

What if it had been one of the times Clay had made him come? What if Derek had heard that and didn’t understand it later when Stiles told him about the true nature, because hadn’t Stiles liked it, didn’t he get off on it?

Stiles bites his lip and turns towards Derek, clumsily grazing his cheek against the knee of his pants to wipe at the wetness on his face. What’s wrong with him that he could do that? Could he really blame Clay for any of it when he was giving so many mixed messages? He was part of the problem, wasn’t he?

Maybe Derek had come by on one of the nights his dad was home, and that’s why Stiles had been so quiet, bottling it all up inside. That doesn’t really make Stiles feel any better, though. He might have
had a reason for not fighting back audibly, but just the possibility that both his dad and Derek were there, and Stiles didn’t do anything to stop it, or to help someone help him - he feels more useless and defenseless than ever.

“When … when was this?”

Derek’s eyes turn as dark as Stiles has ever seen them. “A while ago.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know, Stiles. Probably a month.” Stiles nods, growing more numb by the second. “I’m so sorry. You’d been acting weird and I knew there was something wrong. I should have helped you.”

“No. No.”

Stiles shuts his eyes. A whole month. If he had gotten Clay out of his life back then, how many fewer times would he have had to try to purge himself of Clay’s unwelcome “gifts?” He would never have been roofied. He would never have been forced to open his legs for some random guy he didn’t know.

“It’s not your fault. I didn’t want anyone to know. So you were basically giving me what I wanted. I worked really hard to keep it a secret. You gave me what I wanted - while he was giving me everything I didn’t.”

“Fuck, Stiles,” Derek says, his voice cracking, and Stiles immediately curses his unintentional choice of words. He hadn’t meant it as a guilt-trip, but how is Derek supposed to take it any other way? “I’m gonna regret this until the day I die.”

“No, that’s not what I -“ Stiles starts, but he stops dead in the middle of his insistence when Derek blinks and a drop falls.

Suddenly, they’re clutching at each other, and Stiles doesn’t know who made the first move or who needs it more, but he grabs on to Derek like the fate of the world depends on it.

“I wish I had stopped him earlier,” Derek whispers. “I never seem to know what it is until it’s too late.”

“It’s okay,” Stiles says, relaxing a little in the embrace. He’ll keep saying it until Derek believes it. “If you hadn’t made him leave when you did, I’d probably - I’d probably be with him right now. You did save me.”

“But -“

“You did everything you could,” Stiles says. “You saved me.”

Like usual, Derek wakes up during Stiles’ morning routine, but stays in bed, doing his cat-like stretches that Stiles would never tell him are cat-like.

“Good morning,” Stiles says, walking over to the bed after brushing his teeth.

Derek rubs at his eyes and rolls over leisurely. “Morning.”

Stiles hasn’t changed out of his pajamas yet, so he gives in to temptation and crawls back in bed. He got up early to begin with. Derek is still so warm and toasty from sleep that Stiles knows he made the
right decision.

“Sorry about my breath,” Derek mumbles, much to Stiles’ amusement.

“Whatever, I don’t care. I’m not the one who can smell a drop of blood from miles away.” Stiles snuggles down under the blankets, his head still on his own pillow, but as close to Derek’s as he can get. “Can I ask you something?”

Derek opens one eye. “This sounds promising.”

“What did you mean yesterday? When you said you don’t know what it is until it’s too late?”

Derek’s other eye pops open and he pauses. “I …” Derek trails off. “I guess I meant, I never … I never seem to know …”

Stiles watches Derek closely, but lets him find his own way and doesn’t interrupt to prompt him. He seems so atypically unsure, though, that Stiles reaches out and places his hand over Derek’s.

“It’s happened before,” Derek says. “Not the same thing, but I don’t - it always happens right under my nose. People got hurt and I didn’t see it coming. I’m always too blind to see the signs.”

“Like what?” Stiles can’t help asking.

Derek closes his eyes. “Kate. I don’t know why I thought she actually cared about me. I was young and stupid, but you’d think that would be even more reason for me to get it. Like why would she want to be with me? Why didn’t I see it?”

“I hate her,” Stiles seethes petulantly. “She took advantage of you, and for what? Her stupid, twisted, pointless code? Because she’s too psycho to realize she’s the one who wrecks everything she touches?”

“I used to wonder what she said about me, to the other hunters, to Gerard,” Derek adds, unable to suppress the venom in his voice. “Sometimes I still do. If they laughed about the dumb kid who thought she loved him, and who trusted her just because she said the right things and we slept together. I think one of the things that hurts the most is that I used to genuinely like her. I cared about her. And then she turned around and did that. It was all a lie.”

Stiles nods. “Yeah, I know how that feels. You’re right, it’s not the same thing, but I know.”

“She killed everyone. Almost everyone. I don’t know why she left me standing. Part of me thinks she hated me most of all and wanted me to lose everyone.”

“But none of that was your fault. She lied about everything. You couldn’t have known then, just like you like you couldn’t have when you came to my house.”

Derek shakes his head. “I just can’t get it right, though. Yeah, I was young with Kate. But I wasn’t a kid with Jennifer -”

“What?” Stiles snaps in surprise and preemptive disgust. “What did she do?”

“It was only once. Right after that big fight with the alpha pack at the mall, when you guys thought I was dead. She helped me get back here, but I wasn’t healing right. I know we had sex, but I don’t - I know I was there and I know what happened, but I don’t … remember making it happen. I liked her and I didn’t know what she really was yet, but I don’t know why I did it.”
“She must have done something to you. All of that sacrifice bullshit made her stronger. She got in your head or something. Fuck! These fucking bitches everywhere.”

“I don’t know, Stiles. It just didn’t feel like me. It was like … it was happening to me … but without me.”

“I sort of know how that feels, too,” Stiles commiserates. “Clay drugged me one time. He roofied me, and when I woke up the next morning, everything hurt and I didn’t remember a damn thing. I still don’t know what he did to me. She probably kind of … did something like that to you, just not with a pill.”

Derek huffs. “I should have gutted that fucking guy after all.”

“I hate that Jennifer did that, but you can’t blame yourself, Derek. I thought she was just the hapless substitute teacher, too. We all did. She seemed nice and she fooled everyone.”

“It was weird,” Derek said, squirming a bit. “After we found out she was the darach, she kept making it about her real face, like that was what people - what I would think was ugly about her. She wasn’t pretty, but that wasn’t the ugly part. She’d already shown that to me that night in my loft. I just didn’t seem to realize it at the time. I didn’t get it afterwards, either. I still liked her. I fucking kissed her again after that night.

“And I can deal with that. That was nothing compared to what Kate did. I tried to brush it off, like it didn’t matter. Just because it took me so long to catch on twice doesn’t make it a pattern. Three times, though? Isn’t a coincidence. You needed help, and I was there, but I didn’t do anything. I knew something was going on with you, but I left you there. I didn’t know because I never know when sex isn’t right. I’m always too late. And you got really, really hurt.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry again,” Stiles says. “Or I’m going to have to tell you it’s not your fault again, and around and around we go.”

“Well, I guess it’s too early in the morning for that,” Derek concedes. “That’s more of a post-lunch conversation.”

“Thanks for … thanks for telling me. You didn’t have to.”

Derek shrugs. “I know. But after everything you’ve told me, there’s nothing I can’t tell you.”

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Derek and Stiles are across from each other on Derek’s bed, a Go board and pieces between them. It was a silly, little idea of Stiles’, to learn how to play this game that had featured so prominently and darkly in their lives earlier, but he figured it was a good way to normalize it and restore it to its status as merely a game.

They’ve been at it for a while when Stiles goes to the refrigerator to grab a couple of beers. Derek is nice enough to let him drink moderately, but also uptight enough that he finds it unacceptable to furnish a minor with light alcohol and have him drink by himself. Beer is just about the taste for Derek, but he drinks it with Stiles anyway.

As Stiles passes through the loft, he looks through the panel of windows with surprise. After he sits back down on the bed with the two opened bottles, he says, “I totally forgot it was a full moon! I wouldn’t have asked you to learn Go on a full moon.”

“Why not?”
“’Cause it’s kind of complicated,” Stiles says. “And I wouldn’t have wanted to distract you from like, anchoring and not shifting.”

“I don’t need to focus on my anchor that much. I have it under control.”

“But it’s - it’s anger, right? You grab onto anger.”

“I used to. Not anymore.”

“Really?” Stiles’ forehead creases. “So what’s your anchor now?”

Derek blinks and sits all the way up, no longer leaning over the board. “Anger was my anchor when that was all that I had. And that was a reflection of the past, everything I had lost. But I guess in the last year or so, I stopped thinking like that. I started to focus more on what I could have, instead of the pain. And that actually works a lot better to keep the wolf under control.”

“What you could have?” Stiles repeats, taking a long pull of his beer.

Derek shrugs. “I lost my whole family and for a long time, I just had Laura. And then Peter killed her, and I only had him, but I didn’t want him. That was my circle. I was alone. Cora was back, but then she left again. But now … I have a pack again. I know I’m not that close to everyone - just you - but it’s relationships and a trust in people I haven’t had since Laura was still here. When I realized what I have now, I started thinking about what else could be out there for me, if I wasn’t so angry all the time.”

“You can have nice things, Derek,” Stiles says seriously. “You deserve them.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, raising his own bottle and clinking it against Stiles’.

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Scott comes by Derek’s place to drop off some more reading material from Deaton. “Hey, buddy,” he says when Stiles opens the door. “How’s the research on the ley lines going?”

“Snail’s pace, but whatever,” Stiles replies.

Scott digs a book and a few loose-leaf papers out of his backpack. “Sorry I’ve been so busy lately. I probably wouldn’t be any help when it comes to stuff like this, but I know I haven’t been that available.”

Stiles waves his concerns away. “No problem, man. I’m cool - I’ve got my own shit going on, and you have a hot girlfriend and a son now. You need to spend a lot of time with them.”

“Liam’s not - I’m his alpha, not his dad!”

“You birthed his lycanthropic ass,” Stiles says, sitting back down at the table. “You’re his dad.”

“It smells different in here,” Scott sniffs. “It smells like … it smells like your house.”

Stiles looks up from his laptop innocently. “Oh, what? Yeah. It’s air fresheners. The same plug-ins my dad buys.”

Scott laughs. “Okay, sure, why not? Of course that’s number one on the list for this fixer-upper. Air freshener.”

“What’s going on?” Derek asks, coming down the spiral staircase and crossing his arms.
“I was over here the other day and it kind of stunk,” Stiles rambles. “It smelled like butt. I mean, not Derek’s butt. Not that that smells. I mean, maybe some bad guys got in here. Their butts.”

Standing behind Scott, Derek shakes his head at Stiles in half-pity and half-exasperation. Stiles goes for broke; he can’t help it. “Or you know, this place isn’t exactly modern. Who knows how many dead rats are in the walls?”

“Rat butt!” Scott crows as his phone starts ringing. He answers it in a soft voice, so it must be Kira, and signals ‘five minutes’ to them with one hand before going back to the hallway and closing the front door.

Derek glances at Stiles incredulously and Stiles meets him halfway with an ‘eeeeeeesh’ face. “Wow, for such a sneaky guy, you’re not very smooth.”

“I know.” Stiles hits his palm to his forehead. “I’m just working out the kinks. I’ll get it together. Why didn’t you stop my verbal diarrhea?”

Derek shrugs. “I was waiting for you to completely go off the rails and suggest Lydia’s butt.”

“Ooooh, she would never. She’ll cut you in your sleep if her banshee hearing caught that.”

“Well, in spite of your sterling explanation, at least this’ll help blend our scents together and keep our cover. And the freshener is pleasant, I’ll give you that. Even though you told Scott my place smelled like shit.”

“I didn’t say shit!” Stiles says indignantly. “I said butt! Two different things!”

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Scott made the “fixer-upper” comment offhand, but it’s stuck with Stiles ever since. He considers the loft in its current state to be quintessentially Derek, but it could use some work. Now that there’s downtime from fighting for their lives, it seems like a good opportunity to spruce the place up.

When he’d suggested it, he hadn’t been sure what Derek would think, but Derek had nodded agreeably. “It could be a little more welcoming,” he said. “You gonna help me out with this the way you helped me move your furniture?”

“Yep,” Stiles grinned. “I’m the project manager, and you - well, you do everything else.”

They head to the hardware store later in the week to stock up on some initial home improvement supplies. “What do you think?” Stiles asks, pointing out some wallpaper with a pink and purple flower design. “It’s screaming your name. ‘Derek, buy me, love me!’”

Derek merely shakes his head and strolls over to the power tools aisle, where Stiles grunts a couple of times. “What manly men we are,” he says with one last grunt.

He’s rewarded with a withering glare, so he shrugs apologetically, but then Derek growls, not loud enough for anyone else to hear, and Stiles laughs with his whole body.

As they load up the Jeep with their purchases, Stiles looks across the street to the other side of the shopping complex. “My favorite ice cream place is over there.”

“You want ice cream? It’s still pretty cold out.”

“Dude, it’s never too cold for ice cream. Besides, it’s inside the mall, by the food court. It’s not cold
in there.”

Once they’re standing in line at the shop, Stiles holds his tongue, but is ready to veto Derek if he wants anything boring, like vanilla or strawberry. They each get two scoops in a waffle cone, and to Stiles’ satisfaction, Derek opts for the more creative flavors.

After finding a couple of seats in the brightly lit food court, Stiles makes googly eyes at his cone before digging in. “So, so good.”

“That girl over there likes you,” Derek says. “To your left.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Stiles refutes, not bothering to check for himself.

“She does. She keeps looking at you.”

“Well, there you go.” Stiles rolls his eyes. “If she’s looking in this direction, she’s looking at you.”

“She’s not, Stiles. I can tell the difference.”

“Oh yeah?” Stiles asks, raising his chin slightly in challenge. “How?”

Derek wipes a napkin down a streak of ice cream melting on his thumb. “When someone’s looking at me, their tongue is usually hanging out of their mouth and they forget to breath. And blink.”

“My God.” Stiles rolls his eyes again, more dramatically than before. “I’m sitting with the president and founder of the Derek Hale Fan Club.”

They both laugh and Stiles kicks Derek’s leg under the table, but he loves the sarcasm. Sarcasm is something Stiles knows inside-out. He’s heard Derek be sarcastic before, but never really knew how much it comes out until recently. For Stiles, sarcasm developed largely as a defense mechanism until it just became a part of him - a very prominent part he puts on display without thought. But for Derek, it’s something much closer to the vest - something he chooses to let people see.

“What’s the difference?” Stiles asks.

“What?”

“You said you can tell the difference. What’s the difference? How is she looking at me?”

Derek smirks, but with nothing but kindness. “Like you’re the world’s most adorable puppy.”

“Oh, now I know you’re fucking with me.”

“No, I’ll prove it to you,” Derek insists. “She’s the cute blonde girl, like sixteen or so, sitting with her Asian friend. She’s still checking you out.”

Derek looks over to his right for a few seconds and turns back to Stiles. “She didn’t react. Now you look.”

Stiles does and spots her easily, thanks to Derek’s description. Almost immediately after his gaze lands, she giggles and looks back at her friend, all the while turning an incriminating shade of pink.

“Told you,” Derek says smugly.

“What, you want a prize or something? You wanna try this?” Stiles offers, tipping his cone towards Derek. “The red velvet is fucking bomb.”
Derek shrugs and leans forward to take a bite. “Oh yeah, that’s really good.”

“You can have some more,” Stiles says charitably.

“I would, but you’re going to break her heart. She’s going to think we’re together.”

“Psssh, yeah, okay. I’m not chopped liver, but I’m not caviar, either. I can’t get guys who look like you. She just thinks we’re cousins or something.”

Derek raises an eyebrow and Stiles gestures back and forth between them. “Okay, so, we don’t look anything alike. Maybe fifth cousins then. Sixth. Tenth. Twentieth? We only share a relative from way back in 1524? Yeah, okay. Not related at all.”

“Clearly, what you need is more sugar. Want some of mine?” Derek asks, and Stiles is more than happy to sample the churro-flavored ice cream that Derek chose.

“Fuck, that’s the shit. And I want to try your peanut-butter-fudge-pretzel later, too.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Stiles licks around his lips in an effort to catch any stray splotches. “This is how you know we’re ride-or-die friends. Sharing ice cream.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, pulling his cone away from his mouth and resting his forearm on the table. “You’re kind of my best friend.”

Stiles is momentarily speechless and he’s not sure what exactly he’s doing with his face, but he must be doing something, because Derek adds, “It’s not a big deal. It’s not like there’s a lot of competition. It’s like someone saying they’re the fastest swimmer in Antarctica.”

Stiles guffaws. “You really know how to flatter a person.”

“No, you know what I mean,” Derek says, smiling, too. “I used to spend a lot of time alone. I wasn’t lonely. Not really. But I really like having you around. I like you.”

“I like you, too, big guy,” Stiles says, jokingly punching Derek’s shoulder. “You’re swell.”

“I don’t expect you to say it back or anything, obviously. I know Scott’s your best friend. You have a lot more friends.”

It’s true. Even though Stiles would normally put himself in the 10th percentile of friends population, that still means he’s got more friends than 10 out of 100 people. There’s no shame in Derek being one of those ten. Besides, percentiles like that are just numbers. They don’t take into account quality.

“Yeah, he’s my best friend,” Stiles agrees. “But you’re … you’re …”

He crinkles his nose up in thought. Stiles doesn’t know what to call Derek.

“It’s okay,” Derek says, mirth and understanding in his eyes. “It’s funny when you don’t have anything to say.”

“You’re the only one I could go to,” Stiles blurts out. “Maybe a little bit because we weren’t super close yet, like I am with my dad or Scott. But I knew I could trust you. I needed you. I need you.”

Once the words are out of his mouth, Stiles feels his face heat up. He’s not embarrassed by what he said, but he still worries that he’s putting too much pressure on Derek, that he’s making Derek feel
like he has to live up to being everything under the sun, or else Stiles will shatter into tiny pieces.

“You’re my best friend.” Derek repeats, this time without any disclaimers. “I need you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed more perspective on Derek this chapter! Also, the citations came from RAINN’s website - please be aware of this organization as a resource for support! I updated the chapter count to reflect 8/11 since I still believe this will conclude at that point. Thanks as always for reading this far and letting me know what you think!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hi readers! Here is chapter 9! I so wanted to finish this faster, but I took about a week and a half off from writing, and for some reason, this one really kicked around in my head a lot - way more than any other chapter. It was hard to migrate it from thinking about it all the time to settling all of the big and little elements in actual words. Literally, one scene would take me three or days of writing here and there to finish. Oh well!

Please enjoy! As always, thank you so much for reading this far and sticking with it. And thank you for the feedback! I’m pretty wow’ed about this having almost has 650 kudos so far, and I love all of your comments! It’s really fun to know what makes an impression on people.

Chapter 10 will be posted in less time than it took chapter 9 to go up, haha.

[Posted 8/14/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles goes back to the clinic to get the rest of his test results, breathing an immense sigh of relief when they’re all negative. He’s not out of the woods yet, but when he comes back in a few months for a new round of screening, he won’t be as nervous.

The lack of infection makes Stiles feel a little better for all of the obvious reasons, but it’s also a small step forward in further detaching himself from Clay. Even though it’s been a while since the last time they fucked, Stiles’ skin still crawls with the sharing of DNA in a disgustingly intimate way, rather than the normal, smiley family tree way. He can take all of the showers he wants to, but he’ll always be contaminated. Clay’s burrowed himself inside for keeps. At least Stiles doesn’t have a disease as a take-home favor from that endless party.

Derek doesn’t go with him to the clinic. In the back of his mind, Stiles had worried about the long drive home with Derek in combination with the potential sucker punch of positive results. Instead, Stiles drives back to the loft with just his own thoughts and a podcast his dad told him to check out.

Derek’s been busy the last few days anyway, surveilling the Preserve for a potential disturbance. Stiles knows he could have told Derek of his plans and Derek would drop his own in a heartbeat, but Stiles doesn’t really want that. He needs to be strong enough, independent enough. There’s nothing shameful about having support, but he can’t be useless without it.

Stiles is reclining on the couch, feet propped up on the coffee table and computer running warm on his lap, when Derek comes home later that night. He looks taxed, as though he’s been on red alert for hours.

“Hey, Derek,” Stiles greets. “Did you catch that wily gopher digging holes into the landscape?”

Derek sits down next to him, toeing his shoes off and sighing. “I’ll tell you about it after I shower. I feel gross and dirty.”
“Okay. Make sure to get behind the ears and in your belly button.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Derek says, stepping over Stiles’ knees and checking his balance by palming the top of Stiles’ head.

Stiles ducks down with the easy force and laughs, going back to his homework until he gets tripped up over a word he wants to use in his essay, but is eluding him. He reads the half-written sentence out loud, like the rest of it will appear out of nowhere, but it doesn’t.

Thinking and chewing on his pen, he moves his laptop and pulls forward to get off the couch. Maybe a snack will get his brain going, but he gets distracted looking down at Derek’s shoes. There’s something off about them, but Stiles can’t quite put his finger on it until he realizes it’s not what’s there. It’s what’s not.

Derek’s boots are pretty clean for plodding through the forest. There’s no caked mud or significant swatches of dirt. Stiles feels like a meta-creeper again, nosing around the possessions of the biggest creeper he knows, but he picks up the shoe closest to him and turns the sole face up. It’s dirty, but the grooves don’t have damp soil or crunched greenery mashed in like Stiles would have expected.

“Huh,” he ponders.

Stiles hears the bathroom door open, so he hurriedly places the shoe back where he found it. He knows he’s not doing anything wrong, but he’s practically been bred to be sneaky and hide it.

Derek rejoins him on the couch, this time in dark sweatpants and pulling on a black tank top. “How’s your work going?”

Stiles shrugs and closes his laptop altogether. “I’m at a natural stopping point. This isn’t due tomorrow anyway.”

“So you wanna hang out with me now?”

“Sure.”

Derek turns sideways on the couch to face Stiles directly, his left leg folding underneath him. “I have something to tell you.”

“Okay,” Stiles says slowly.

“I wasn’t doing surveillance in the Preserve.”

“Okay,” Stiles says again, but this time completely bewildered. Derek’s shoes already made that clear, but it’s a little different hearing it from Derek himself. “What have you been doing then?”

Derek purses his lips. “The other guy.”


“Do you want to leave that alone?”

Stiles’ eyes shift right, then left, and back right again. “What do you mean?” he asks warily. “I don’t … there’s nothing … I don’t know him.”

“But if you could know something, would you want to?”

Stiles fidgets, his hands in his lap, until he still can’t contain his nervous energy and they come up to
grasp at his neck. “I don’t know. I don’t know, I’ve never thought about it. But you know something already, don’t you.”

Derek’s brows furrow. “Yes. But we don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Derek, you can’t –” Stiles stops short at the sheer lunacy of just ending the conversation now. “You can’t just open that can of worms and then say never mind!”

“I’m sorry, Stiles, I didn’t mean to - hurt you - I never want to do that - I guess I was trying to … That night, you said he knew you now, but you didn’t know anything about him, and you were so … crushed. There’s not gonna be closure, not really. But I wanted to give you a choice between not knowing anything and knowing something. In case you didn’t want to live with the only option they gave you, of not knowing.”

Stiles folds in on himself, and Derek lets him physically and mentally retreat. He really has never thought about it. Part of it is denial, he can admit that. Despite how much it had hurt, he can still mostly block out that one time. When he doesn’t, he remembers it like it was yesterday. He’s afraid that it’ll always feel like it happened yesterday, so he doesn’t allow himself to think about it at all.

Lifting the denial means asking himself a lot of questions he hasn’t asked before. There are some things he’ll never know - what Clay did to him when he was passed out, how Clay could have ever done these things to him in the first place.

Knowledge isn’t always power, and it’s not always free - sometimes you have to pay for it with pain - but at least it’s on the table. Derek is telling him it doesn’t have to be a total mystery, like a cruel joke played at his expense that he still knows so little about.

“I know I should have talked to you first,” Derek continues. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you, and I thought it might be easier - it might not be as hard to talk about it if I had any real information. But of course you’re upset, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“No,” Stiles says softly. “You’re just trying to help me.”

“But if this doesn’t help - we can just forget about it. Okay?”

“How do you even know anything anyway? You weren’t there. I was there and I don’t even know.”

“That night I confronted your uncle, I made him tell me who he was.”

Stiles sways unsteadily for a second. “But why?”

“Because your uncle was the only connection. That was the only way we would ever know. I’m sorry, Stiles. I shouldn’t talk about it like I didn’t do it for selfish reasons, too. I couldn’t let him just walk around, living his life - not after what he did. And I know he’ll never have to answer for any of it if no one else knows who he is.”

“So that’s what you’ve been doing lately?” Stiles asks, his voice low and skittish. “Digging into him?”

“I’ve been following him. I watched him on Sunday and the last couple of days.”

Stiles’ fingers dance anxiously back and forth across the underside of his jaw. “So like … what did you find out?”

“He didn’t do anything alarming, not that I saw, anyway,” Derek says. “He doesn’t have a family.
No kids, thank God. He goes home after work. Lives in an apartment over in Willow Heights. Plays in a softball league on Tuesday nights. He went to a bar last night and tried to pick up a girl, but she wasn’t interested. I watched to see if he got aggressive or angry, but he didn’t. He just walked away.”

Stiles’ shoulders wilt. He hadn’t been interested, either, but the guy hadn’t walked away. But it’s probably different when you have a ringleader by your side, giving you permission to take whatever you want. Doing it behind closed doors, so you won’t get caught. Knowing the sad little victim isn’t going to tell anyone.

“Are you sure it’s the right guy?”

“Yeah.”

“You know he’s who Clay told you it was, but how do you know it’s the right guy?”

“I guess you and your uncle are the only other ones who would know that.”

Stiles nods, wiping at the corner of his eye. “Just another one of our little secrets,” he says sourly.

“I took a couple of pictures of him on my phone. Do you … want to see?”

Reflexively, Stiles almost throws up in his mouth a little. He thinks about telling Derek, “no, maybe later,” and maybe later will really be later, or maybe it’ll be never. This is nothing compared to identifying someone in a formal police line-up and everything that comes with reporting it, but Stiles is screaming internally nonetheless.

“Yeah,” Stiles finally says. “Just show it to me.”

“Are you sure? We don’t have to.”

“Just show it to me.”

Derek pulls his phone out of his pocket and clicks over to his picture gallery. Stiles stares at the photo, expressionless. It’s just some guy walking in a parking lot. Probably mid-30s. Dirty blond hair, jeans, and a t-shirt. Out in the late afternoon sunlight, fully-clothed, benign - it’s a totally different context, but Stiles knows.

“That’s him,” Stiles confirms before turning away to rub at his forehead.

Derek shifts to sit next to him hip-to-hip, looping his arm around Stiles’ back. “I shouldn’t have done this.”

Stiles slumps against him. “If I only faced the things that weren’t hard, I would never get out of bed. Putting my head in the sand like an ostrich doesn’t change anything.”

“Does knowing help at all?”

Stiles pauses before answering. It makes that night more real. It makes what this stranger did to him more real. But it also makes this person less of an unknown quantity. Stiles doesn’t know him and never wants to, but the imbalance doesn’t seem as severe and biting as it did earlier.

This man is out there in the world, whether Stiles wants to know anything about him or not. The fears he had about Clay and what he might do to someone else all apply to this guy, too. So what if Derek didn’t see him acting like a pushy asshole and he took “no” for an answer that one time when
he probably wasn’t drunk? That doesn’t amount to much when Stiles knows exactly what he’s capable of. There had been nothing unclear about the word “no” when it was coming from Stiles. And even if Stiles hadn’t actually said it, what kind of person takes sloppy seconds from some kid who’s crying his eyes out and nearly convulsing in anguish?

He could still do it again, and if he does, Stiles can’t help but feel that that’s on him. It was Clay who made his friend a party in all of this and Stiles teems with resentment, but he also reserves some of the responsibility for himself. He’s the one who didn’t come forward.

Stiles can’t rewind and make different choices that night, and even if he could, with a little more clarity of mind because of the time that’s passed, he still doesn’t think he could have gone to the hospital. He couldn’t have laid there under the fluorescent lights for that exam, all the while wondering if Melissa was going to walk in or how his dad was going to feel when he got the call. That’s the deal Stiles ended up making. Stiles can keep his secrets locked up, but his abusers are free.

“I don’t really know,” Stiles hedges. “It’s just … some things hurt even when they’re the right thing. Like re-breaking a bone to set it properly. But other things just hurt, and that’s it.”

“Do you want me to talk to this guy, too?” Derek asks. “I’ll do it. But not if you don’t want me to.”

Stiles’ thought pendulum swings in the opposite direction. Derek may not have seen anything violent from this man, but he knows where Stiles lives. He thinks Stiles is weak - an easy target. What if threatening him makes him lash out? Someone who could do what he did isn’t going to go just doing whatever he has to for self-preservation. As awful as Clay is, there are boundaries he wouldn’t cross. He pushes Stiles around in private to make him submit, but Clay has stakes and history in their family that his friend doesn’t, and that makes the other man’s potential unpredictability beyond what Stiles can manage.

“I don’t know, Derek. I just don’t want to make things worse. He can find me, you know. Or my dad. I don’t know what he would do.”

“I can keep my eye on him, too. You don’t have to do anything.”

Stiles sighs. He’s going to carry this burden forever. He might as well have a better idea of what it is. “I think you’re right. I think it’s better that we at least know.”

“I shouldn’t have gambled that you might think so. I should’ve talked to you first. It was just driving me crazy. I wanted to know for myself, and I didn’t want you to stop me before I tried.”

“I get it,” Stiles says. “You did it because you care. If you didn’t, you would be fine with whatever.”

They lapse into silence - for Stiles, that is. He knows that Derek is listening to the thrum of his heart. Stiles doesn’t have the luxury of that comfort, though, and his mind keeps somersaulting until it finally lands at a sinking realization.

“What else did Clay tell you?” he asks, bracing himself for anything. It terrifies him that Derek might know things that Stiles didn’t share with him. “What did he tell you that I didn’t?”

“Nothing,” Derek answers. “I don’t know anything else. He doesn’t get to talk about you, Stiles.”

“What’s his name? His friend? What’s his name?”

Derek shakes his head. “I don’t …”

“But you know what it is.”
“I don’t think you want to know.”

“Why?” Stiles says, automatically suspicious. “Just tell me!”

Stiles is morbidly curious in general, but he doesn’t need to look inside a package in the freezer marked “Dead Dove: Do Not Eat” to know there’s a fucking dead dove in there. Except this isn’t curiosity; it’s far too much agitation and trepidation to go away on its own.

Derek shakes his head again. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done this.”

“Just tell me, Derek. I want to know. Even if it hurts.”

Derek twists in his seat to pull Stiles into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry, Stiles. It will.”

He squeezes closer when Stiles coils up into a ball of prickly nerves. “His name is Scott,” Derek whispers, and Stiles pays for that knowledge with a flood of tears.

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There’s no practice after school, so Stiles takes advantage of the extra free time by doing errands and then finishing some homework before his dad gets home from the station and they can unwind together.

On his way out of the drugstore, Stiles mentally runs through the list of items he meant to pick up for the loft. He really should have written this down so he wouldn’t be struggling to remember. What was that third thing Derek had said he needed?

He’s trying his best to reconstruct that conversation in his head when hands grip his midsection from behind - one cupped at his waist and the other looped around him entirely - and his body is pulled up and backwards.

His vision cuts out, snapping to black with just faint shadows of motion. He’s falling somehow, but he doesn’t know much more than that as he loses his sense of orientation completely.

The hands are grabbing at him with more pressure and in different places as he goes down. He anticipates hitting the mattress with dread, but he never seems to make contact with the soft material. His legs flail, trying to regain any kind of balance, until the sensation of falling isn’t as intense.

Stiles can’t breathe, sucking in whatever he can manage through his mouth as his head flops back and to the side, rolling to a stop against the back of his shoulder. Someone’s yelling right in front of him, muted at first but growing so insistent that once Stiles can make out any of the words, it’s probably been going on for a while.

“Stiles! Stiles! What’s happening? Stiles, are you with me?”

The darkness slowly gives way to blurry shapes and colors and sunlight. As his line of sight clears up, Scott’s distraught face is hovering just inches from his.

“Stiles!” Scott keeps yelling, grabbing Stiles’ shoulder with one hand, grazing his hair, and Stiles’ other arm to pull him forward.


“Don’t talk, just breathe,” Scott instructs him, sounding a tiny bit calmer after getting a response.

“Where’m I,” Stiles tries to ask again. Picking his head up, he makes out the gray asphalt underneath
him and his sprawled legs. Apparently he’s sitting down?

“The CVS parking lot. I don’t know what just happened! I’m really sorry, bro! Hey, can you look at me?”

Stiles’ head is starting to feel a little more normal on top of his neck and he follows Scott’s command. “I am, right?”

Scott stares at him for a while. “Okay, your eyes are staying focused, that’s good. I think you had a panic attack. I’m sorry - I didn’t think - you were coming out of the store and you didn’t see me, so I ran over and picked you up. I was just messing around. I didn’t mean to - I just thought you’d -”

“No, it’s okay, Scott,” Stiles says, sounding better and better with each word. “Not your fault.”

“What happened? I haven’t seen you have one of those in a while.”

Stiles inhales and exhales a few more times, buying him time before answering. “Gerard,” is the first plausible thing that pops into his head.

“What?” Scott says, confused at first, then leery. “Is he out? Isn’t he still bleeding black shit in that facility?”

“No, I just -” Stiles reaches up to push his hair off his forehead with an increasingly steady hand. “He’s not out. You just surprised me, that’s all. When you grabbed me, I guess I flashed back to after the game. When he and his goons grabbed me.”

“Oh, no. Fuck, I’m sorry to dredge that up. I know that was scary.”

“It’s okay,” Stiles says, giving a reassuring smile and rubbing away the sweat beads behind his ear. “I’m okay now. You didn’t do anything. It was just a fluke. And if I’m going to have a weird flashback, it might as well have been Gerard. You know, before he took me to play bingo at the local church and listen to old Sinatra records.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, man? Let me go in and grab you some water.”

“No, really, I am - look, I can walk a straight line and everything,” Stiles contends, getting to his feet and doing just that.

“So where you headed?” Scott asks, forehead still creased with worry. “I’ll come with.”

“I’m fine, Scott. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, it’s cool. I’m not letting you drive right after this and I have time to chill. Come on, I’ll keep you company.”

“Okay,” Stiles accepts with a shrug. “I was going to the hardware store after this. Derek’s fixing up his place a little and I’ve been helping him.”

“What, really?” Scott says, his forehead now creasing with disbelief. He’s a real spectrum of emotions today.

Stiles isn’t sure what Scott finds more shocking - Stiles’ regularly spending time with Derek for personal reasons or being even remotely handy. “Yeah,” he answers matter-of-factly. “I’ve never done this kind of stuff before, so it’s fun to learn. And Derek’s a pretty cool guy to hang out with. We should hang out with him more, you know, when we’re not running for our lives.”
“Okay, sure,” Scott says amiably. The forehead creasing is gone altogether now, even though he’d normally be a little skeptical. But after Stiles’ bizarre collapse, Scott would probably agree to anything.

“Scotty, it’s not just us against the world anymore. I mean, you’ve got Kira and Liam and that friend of his. Mason?”

Stiles doesn’t mean it as needling, but moreso a gentle reminder that they have bigger social circles than they used to. If Scott can rub elbows with freshmen who just landed on their radar, there’s really nothing weird about Stiles becoming better friends with someone they’ve known for a while and allied with fight after fight. Stiles and Derek have always been on the same side.

They leave Scott’s motorbike where it’s parked and Stiles tosses Scott his keys so he can drive the Jeep. Scott seems legitimately interested in hearing what they’ve been working on, expressing relief that Stiles isn’t doing it by himself. He’s a fan of Stiles with all hands and feet intact, devoid of tetanus and infected splinters.

Stiles is fully aware that he’s saying Scott’s name more than usual, but it doesn’t seem to breach into ridiculous or maybe Scott’s so used to hearing it that the frequency is going over his head. Stiles knows why he reacted so strongly when Derek first told him, but as he tries to make the dust settle, he’s thinking more and more that it doesn’t have to be so hurtful. On some level, names are arbitrary and common. They can be arbitrarily changed however Stiles wants. He himself chooses to go by a modified name rather than his given one. There’s nothing stopping him from pretending to the point of belief that the other man is really a Bernard or a Dwayne. He doesn’t know any of those.

Still, Stiles is determined to truly reclaim that name, without any smoke and mirrors. It belongs to his best friend, his oldest friend in the world. It’s supposed to be good. It can’t have any control over him. That person can’t have any control over him.

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The little things Derek and Stiles have done around the loft have started to add up. In particular, installing more overhead lights and switching to brighter bulbs have really made a difference.

Derek likes working with his hands and has undoubtedly more dexterity than Stiles has in his own klutziness. Neither of them really have the know-how behind home improvement, but that’s what google and youtube are for, and Derek is persistent, always finding satisfaction in finishing a project.

Stiles picked up the take-out dinner, so Derek is washing the dishes while Stiles takes off wandering without purpose, stopping in front of the massive, irregularly-shaped hole in one of the brick walls. Doing something about the hole is too big of an endeavor for their current to-do list, but he surveys it thoughtfully.

They can always leave it as is - decently arched, but ragged. It has a certain character that’s consistent with the rest of the loft. Stiles doesn’t know what makes the most sense in trying to fix it, whether it’s evening out the bricks by sheering them off to line up and opening up the hole even more, or by laying down some extra brick inside the frame to construct a smaller, but normal rectangle-shaped doorway. The latter seems easier in terms of labor, but there’s no way new bricks will match existing ones.

Stiles steps closer, running his fingers randomly across the brick edges and the chipped surface of the bonding cement. The edges are dirty and worn from continued exposure, except for a stretch that looks markedly cleaner and rougher.
“What’s so interesting?” Derek asks, now by his side with lemon-fresh hands.

Stiles tilts his head. “Was it always like this?”

Derek gives him a funny look. “Yes, Stiles. There was always a fucking gigantic hole in the wall.”

“No, I mean was it always this big,” Stiles elaborates, pointing at the lighter part of the edges.

“Oh, that. No. That’s … new.”

“From fight training? Who threw whom into the wall? I’m gonna laugh so hard if it was Kira who threw Scott.”

“No, no one in the pack.”

“Was it one of the oni fights?” Stiles asks, still confused. He’s helped clean up after many a disaster in the loft, but he doesn’t remember a small section of the wall being demolished. This looks more recent. Not as far back as the nogitsune, and definitely not as long ago as the alpha pack.

“No, it wasn’t a fight.” Stiles’ mouth parts in a silent question. “It was just me.”

“What were you doing?” Stiles wonders, laughing a little as he pictures Derek doing something ridiculous like tricks on a runaway skateboard or indoor batting practice.

“I was mad,” Derek says, shrugging. “So I punched it.”

“What?…” Stiles scans the wall again, fully digesting how much of the brick was probably knocked out. Glancing down at the floor, he spots tiny particles of scattered debris that Derek must have missed when he cleaned up. “Why were you so pissed?”

Derek doesn’t say anything, so Stiles straightens up and faces him at eye-level. Derek’s neutral expression doesn’t give much away, but it seems forced.

“I was mad,” Derek says, parroting his simple response.

Stiles nods slowly. “Do you wanna watch a movie?” he suggests after a beat.

“Sure. You can pick, of course. I don’t know anything.”

Nearly half an hour into Forgetting Sarah Marshall, curled up on the couch with a blanket and sharing the rest of the Red Vines, Stiles catches Derek’s eye.

“Thanks for fighting for me. For everything you’ve done. I know this hurt you, too.”

“It’s okay,” Derek says, offering him the last piece of candy. “I’m just sorry I don’t handle it well. Like the other day. I was wrong to do that without talking to you first.”

“The moment I told you, I brought you into this mess. And I don’t get to say you have to be a robot about it. I wouldn’t want that anyway. I want you the way you are. Robot-Derek only 20% of the time.”

“Hey!” Derek protests. “I’m down from 40%, okay?”

Stiles raises his arms, bent at the elbows, in small mechanical motions. “Beep boop. Er-ror, er-ror, cannot compute.”
He goes flat on his back as Derek tackles him, wedging fingers underneath his biceps clenched down against his rib cage. “Not fair!” Stiles wheezes through giggles. “You’re cheating!”

“Don’t blame me, blame my programmer,” Derek retorts, not relenting until Stiles is so out of breath he has to.

“I almost peed all over you,” Stiles taunts between gasps.

Derek raises an eyebrow. “Marking your territory?”

“With incontinence, yes.” Stiles sits up, pulling the hem of his shirt down. “Look what you did. You missed part of the movie.”

“Stiles, I think I get it. That’s Sarah Marshall. And he’s trying to forget her.”

“You are vastly oversimplifying a movie that includes a vampire musical.”

“Vampire musical!…” Derek mulls as he straightens the blanket back over them.


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When Stiles fixates on something, it’s almost impossible for him to let go, no matter how much he wants to. He tries his hardest not to think about Clay, but it’s futile. He can’t take it anymore, so during biology class, he leans over and asks Danny if they can meet after practice.

Now that Danny knows about werewolves, he’s pretty amenable to lending a hand. Stiles doesn’t tell him this isn’t werewolf-related, although it technically is, since Derek’s already involved.

It’s not an off-the-wall request to ask if Danny can put together a recent data trail on someone. Stiles has Clay’s Social Security number, information for two of his credit cards, his unchanged cell phone number, his last two addresses in Florida, and parental names, but says he can try to find anything else Danny may need.

Danny shrugs, agreeing to help with his usual even-keeled temperament. Stiles doesn’t have to con him into it, which is nice, because if he did, he’d really have to ratchet up the payoff. Basic shirtlessness probably wouldn’t suffice this time. Derek might have to do some pull-ups in his underwear or something.

Stiles feels a ripple of guilt for even thinking that, because flesh isn’t currency and he of all people knows better. But the guilt is followed by a small touch of normalcy, of the old Stiles who could crack a sarcastic, inappropriate joke without overthinking it or meaning any harm.

Danny also doesn’t really bat an eye when Stiles asks him to keep it between them, since he’s just working on a potential lead and it’s not worth worrying Scott and the others. It’s times like this when it helps to have a known history of being a weird kid. People just accept the weirdness and don’t think twice about it.

Two days and a few text exchanges later, Danny e-mails him what he was able to run down. He says it was a breeze, but Stiles still insists on gifting him with a container of his favorite muscle recovery powder.

When Stiles fixates, he obsesses, but it still takes him another good night’s sleep before he can summon the courage to look at the attachments.
People always talk about how great exercise is for the mind and body, so Stiles is game to try. Lacrosse practice doesn’t really count since the little that Stiles does isn’t enough. He doesn’t want to go back to weights - the memories still make him a little queasy - but he’s okay to pick up some more running. It’s something he can do immediately, with no lessons or equipment required, and hopefully it’ll help him during cross-country season, too.

Derek joins him, even though he’s probably a little bored with the speed and the scenery. He prefers running through the Preserve, but Stiles is skeptical about his ability to run through that maze of uneven terrain, even if Derek lets him set the pace. Instead, they huff and puff at dusk through the suburban concrete jungle to a local park and back.

Towards the end of their loop, they come to a stop at an intersection. Derek pushes the button while Stiles leans over, hands on his knees and welcoming the respite with open arms.

“You good?” Derek asks.

Stiles nods, but makes a face. “This must be how my dad feels. Maybe I should go running with him more often. Find a better benchmark than running with a werewolf.”

“We all have our things,” Derek says. “This is how behind I feel when you make pop culture references.”

They jog across the crosswalk, but once they’re on the other side, Stiles slows down to a walking pace. Derek looks over his shoulder at him questioningly, like Stiles might be injured after all, but Stiles sets him straight.

“I’ve been thinking about Clay,” he says, making another face.

Derek has a rare graceless moment when he almost stumbles. “You have?”

“Danny helped me track him down. He’s in Phoenix. So he didn’t lie about going to Arizona.”

“Does he know anyone there?”

Stiles shrugs. “I’m not sure. We don’t have family in Arizona. And he’s been living at an Extended Stay Hotel. He probably knows someone there, like maybe a high school or college friend but not a ‘sure, come over and crash at my house indefinitely’ kind of friend.”

“What do you want to do?”

Stiles presses his lips together, sure that he’s stinking with anxiety now way more than sweat. “I need to know he didn’t just move on to some other kid.”

Derek nods, but the sharp angle of his jaw shifts slightly as it clenches. “Yeah. Has this been bothering you because of how I followed his friend?”

“No! You didn’t do anything wrong. I mean, Clay left, but I’m kind of always thinking about him and he’s not gone. He’s somewhere. It hasn’t been that long and you scared him shitless, but I let him go and … he could be doing anything now, with anyone. I want to believe he’s not, but he didn’t even wait a week until he tried it with me again.” Stiles hangs his head in disgust. “It took less than a week for him to size me up and figure out he could go in for the kill.”

Derek slings an arm around Stiles, paying no regard to the stickiness of his neck as they walk the last
block of Stiles’ neighborhood. “You have an address, right? I’ll go to Phoenix. Scope him out for a while.”

Stiles pinches the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell my dad so I can leave -”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

“It’s weird, though,” Stiles says, “like I just send you out to deal with my problems while I sit around and do nothing. You do fucking everything for me.”

“Stiles, you don’t do nothing. There is no way in hell this guy is ever getting near you again. And you’ve been dealing with a lot. All kinds of things in your head. That’s really important. It’s way harder than me showing up somewhere and saying, ‘surprise, motherfucker.’”

Stiles laughs under his breath. “Oh yeah, what an entrance. Can you also do the finger guns at the same time? Pew, pew, pew!”

“I’ll book a flight for tomorrow afternoon. That way I can keep tabs on him for a big chunk of the weekend. And Monday, at least.”

“You don’t have to drop everything like that. I’m sorry to make you give up your free time like this.”

“Stiles, I have a lot of time. I don’t work, I don’t go to school, I don’t really have family. And even if I was really busy, I would still make as much time as possible for this. I’d rather be hanging out with you, but it’s not a hardship for me to go. I want to do it. And it’ll be good to get in his face again so he doesn’t get too comfortable. He should know that he can’t hide.”

“Thanks, Derek. I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“What would you … what if I see him doing something suspicious?”

Stiles’ mouth turns downward, immediately vexed but also fearful. “Fuck, ugh, I …”

“It’s okay,” Derek says. “This time I’ll draw some blood so he knows I’m serious. I know - still no killing - but a little bloodshed isn’t killing.”

“I was fooling myself when I thought it was possible to scare him into stopping. If he might be hurting another kid …” Stiles sighs deeply. “I’ll have to report him. It doesn’t matter what it means for me. It doesn’t matter that I don’t have any evidence anymore. I can’t do nothing while someone else might be hurt, just because he’s not getting it from me anymore.”

Derek’s face darkens. “He was taking it. He was violating you.”

“Yeah,” Stiles mumbles, quiet as a church mouse.

“I know you still feel like you did something to make him think it was okay,” Derek says, stopping dead in his tracks to look at Stiles. “But you didn’t and he knew that. That’s why he worked so hard to make you think otherwise.”

Stiles stares down at his sneakers. “Sometimes I don’t know if I’m just always running away from it. Now I might be literally running away. I don’t know if I’m ever actually running towards something else.”

They start walking again with just a few houses to go, and as they make their way up Stiles’ driveway, Derek rests his hand on Stiles’ back. “You are. He’s never going to hurt you again. You
have your whole life ahead of you.”

Stiles nods, but knows that that’s not how Derek felt after the fire and he and Laura tried to start over in New York. No offense to Laura, who seems like an amazing big sister, but she was grappling with intense fallout on her end, too. Derek probably didn’t have someone as incredible and unyielding as him for support.

Maybe that’ll make all the difference for Stiles.

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Sitting on the edge of Derek’s bed with an empty overnight bag next to him, Stiles watches as Derek selects and tosses various items of clothing over. Derek has pretty nondescript clothes in general - basic colors and silhouettes - although he doesn’t look nondescript wearing them.

“Maybe you should bring a hat,” Stiles suggests. “One with a brim, like a baseball cap, not a beanie. So you can pull it down over your face if you need to.”

“He won’t know it’s me, even if he looks right at me on the street,” Derek says. “He’s never seen my human face. And he’s not going to.”

“Yeah, but what if he sees you showing up in the same places he’s at?”

“I don’t have to stick that close to him, honestly. I can hear without being that close and I can track him by his scent.”

“Just use mine,” Stiles insists, finding his own Mets cap in the dresser drawer where Derek lets him keep some things.

Derek acquiesces and takes it from Stiles’ outstretched arm, though Stiles isn’t sure if Derek is just humoring him. Either way, it gives him some peace of mind as he sits back down.

Derek takes a seat as well to arrange his clothes in the bag, bringing everything into order. “I’m really going to miss you,” Stiles says.

Derek glances over, eyelashes fluttering, and before he can say anything, Stiles asks, “Do people not tell you that?”

“It’s … it’s been a while.”

“Laura,” Stiles says simply.

“Yeah.”

“People should tell you that,” Stiles insists seriously, grabbing Derek’s hand to make him stop folding for at least a second. “I know you’re going to be back in three days, but I’m going to miss you a lot.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Derek says with a little smile.

Somehow, it just feels different from all of the other touches, across all of the fleeting brushes and the more encompassing snuggles. Stiles gazes at their fingers loosely laced together, at the way Derek’s index and ring fingers twitch as he tries not to curl in.

“Are we just best friends?” Stiles asks, almost inaudibly.
Derek’s features open up in surprise before he replies in the same tone. “What else would we be?”

“I don’t …” Stiles tries, fumbling aimlessly. “Do you …”

“Would you want something else?”

“Would you?” Stiles is just as timid, but he’d already decided not to keep his head in the sand, so he forge ahead. “Would you ever … could you ever … want me?”

Derek’s fingers do contract this time, drawing closer. “Yes.”

“What else do you think would have to happen…?”

“Nothing else,” Derek admits, and Stiles’ eyes go wide and expectant. “But this isn’t the right time. It’s too fast.”

Derek looks down, making it that much harder for Stiles to read him. He doesn’t say anything for so long that Stiles is on the cusp of backing away and saying, “never mind,” but before he can, Derek leans in and presses his lips to Stiles’. It’s soft and close-mouthed, but he lingers, and it doesn’t feel like a planted idea or a consolation prize.

It feels like a promise.

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It’s hard with Derek away, but Stiles tries to see the silver lining in it. It’s a chance to test himself and make sure he can function without having Derek to run to at any given time. He feels closer to Derek than ever, but he’s still his own person.

Derek’s invitation to come over whenever he wants still stands, but Stiles intends to stay at his own house while Derek is gone. He doesn’t think his dad is getting suspicious about when he is and isn’t at home, but he might as well make it known he’s around, just in case.

Derek texts when he lands and every now and then afterwards, but their chats are short because Derek has never been and never will be someone who carries on entire conversations that way. Stiles knows Derek’s trying to stay focused on his objective, too, so Stiles doesn’t ping him too often and they don’t talk about Clay.

They don’t text or call about the kiss, either, which Stiles isn’t surprised by. When Derek had pulled away, they just stared at each other for a couple of seconds before Derek stood up and picked up his bag.

“I gotta get going or I’ll miss my flight,” he’d said with a final hug. “Try not to pick up any lovesick girls at the mall until I get back, okay? Fight ‘em off with a stick if you have to.”

At first, Stiles hadn’t been sure if it would be an awkward cliffhanger, just dangling out there long enough that it would be exponentially awkward to talk about days later instead of minutes later. He realizes, though, that the time apart gives them space to think instead of rolling right into a discussion about what this all means. Stiles heard him loud and clear - he thinks it’s too soon, given everything Stiles has been through - but Derek is still open to it. In some way, at some point down the road, although that could mean anything.

Derek’s going to have a lot of opportunity to think during the next few days of justifiable stalking. On his part, Stiles still has his normal environment and routine, sans Derek, so that keeps him occupied enough.
Everyone meets at Lydia’s house on Sunday afternoon to continue their vacation planning. Lydia’s already seized control of the hotel selection and reservations, but no one has a problem with that because it’s one less thing to personally fuck up. They’re going for two nights - a good length of time while still being able to do other things during their break. That’s the longest Kira was able to convince her parents to let her go anyway, and that’s with misleading them to think she’s sharing a room with the girls, not Scott.

Having five people in their group doesn’t usually produce an actual fifth wheel situation since only two of them are dating, but it’s much more highlighted in a roommate situation, as the obvious pairings are Scott and Kira, and then Lydia and Malia, with Stiles on the outs. Not that he minds. Having so few friends and losing his mom growing up made him pretty independent.

“But it’s your birthday,” Kira says, frowning.

Stiles can tell from her glances with Scott that they’re having a somewhat clumsy silent conversation. If he were a betting man, he’d put $100 down, easy, on the lovebirds trying to shift gears so Scott and Stiles end up in one room and Kira, Lydia, and Malia in another, but Stiles won’t stand for that.

“Well, technically, my birthday is before we’re even gonna be there,” Stiles says, as though that makes it a non-factor.

“Stiles,” Lydia chimes in, and for a second, he thinks she feels bad enough for him that she’s going to suggest he stay with her and Malia, and that’s just. Fucking hilarious.

“Can I invite Derek?” he asks. It sounds spontaneous, and in a way it is, since he hasn’t checked with Derek if he even wants to go with them. But in a different way, it must have always been in the back of Stiles’ mind on some level. It had never registered to him that the beach trip would mean days apart.

“Oh,” Lydia says, her cheek dimpling in a note of surprise.

Malia and Kira don’t have enough history with the pack to think there’s anything particularly notable about that request, but Scott just nods, unfazed, thanks to Stiles’ progressive sharing of the time he spends with Derek. “Yeah, sure,” he says. “He could probably use a break from Beacon Hills, too.”

“Cool,” Stiles says, his face a mask of measured satisfaction. It’s not like they were ever going to say no. Like Kira said, it’s his birthday, so Stiles gets what Stiles wants. “See, now we don’t have an odd number. Problem solved.”

It’s easy to frame it as prompted by logistics and sensible because of Derek’s growing association with the pack, so even Lydia’s initial wonder flutters away quickly, especially as she moves into other details of the trip.

“Hey, so are we gonna drink, or what’s the plan there?” Scott asks.

“Well, we can’t drink in public,” Lydia says. “So we’ll have to do that at the hotel. Maybe we can all get rooms in a block so we don’t have to worry too much about disturbing the peace. My mom - or any college - isn’t going to love an arrest record.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Scott says. “But we can do it. So like, regular alcohol for Stiles and Lydia, and spiking with wolfsbane for the rest of us.”

“Derek can buy the alcohol,” Stiles volunteer, even though that’s yet another thing he hasn’t asked Derek about. He knows Derek will do it, though, even if he says no to the trip. He’ll still make the liquor store run for Stiles in Beacon Hills.
Scott whoops happily. “Perfect!”

Suddenly, bringing Derek along goes from a recent fringe idea to integral and explicitly welcome. Underage teenagers are so easy.

“So who’s handling the wolfsbane?” Kira asks. “I wouldn’t know how much to mix in to get that ‘weee, I’m floating!’ feeling and not that ‘weee, I’m jumping off the roof’ feeling.”

Funnily enough, everyone looks between Stiles and Lydia, the ones who don’t need wolfsbane in the first place. “You’re better at chemistry than I am,” Stiles defers. “I mean, aside from that shitshow of a birthday party when you spiked the punch so hard we all went aggro. But that wasn’t your fault.”

“What?” Malia asks.

Scott raises his eyebrows. “Oh God, I don’t even know where to start with that one …”

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Derek returns on Tuesday evening, so Stiles goes to the loft after school, nervously waiting to hear what happened. He can’t stay long, though, because Noah’s going to be home soon and they’ve already made plans to watch a baseball game that night, now that the season’s finally started.

To kill time, Stiles opens up his laptop and sets up some google alerts. It’s something he’s been meaning to do for a while, and now is just as good a time as any. Clay has a fairly uncommon name, so Stiles probably doesn’t need to get too in the weeds with the alerts, but he does anyway, starting with basic variations - “Clay Gajos” and “Clayton Gajos” - and then mixed with hot button keywords like “coach,” “school,” “married,” and “arrested.”

He’s about done when Derek comes home, obviously tired but happy to see Stiles. “Hey,” Derek says, setting his bag down and taking the seat across from Stiles at the table. “What’re you doing?”

“Not much,” Stiles says, shutting his laptop and peering over at Derek with as much restraint as he can exert.

“Well, I didn’t see him do anything or go near anyone suspicious. He just stayed at his hotel or went to the gym or out with friends. I sat a few seats down from him at a bar so I could eavesdrop. Don’t worry - I kept my back to him so he didn’t see me. It sounds like he’s got a friend in Phoenix he used to work with when he was still living in San Diego. Lots of talk about the good old days there, back when they were both single. His friend is married now, but no kids. They don’t want kids. Your uncle told him he’s just laying low while he gets his life back together. I followed him on Monday morning to a cement company, so I guess he really does have a job there.”

Stiles nods, though he’s not sure what he was expecting. It’s not like he thought Derek would catch Clay red-handed. At least Clay’s not living with children or teenagers, though.

“Did you … did you talk to him?”

“Once I had the chance to. I couldn’t around the hotel because of security cameras, but he stopped at a convenience store on Sunday night, so I pulled him around into a dark corner outside, away from any doors and the parking lot.

“He’s definitely still pretty scared of me, of whatever he thinks I am. He freaked that I knew where he was, even though he moved. He kept saying he hasn’t done anything. And I think he’s telling the truth - that he hasn’t done anything since the last time I confronted him. His vitals were all over the
place, but not because he was lying.

“I cut him on the shoulder so he would have that reminder of how bad this could get for him. So hopefully he thinks karma has finally caught up with him. Karma that he can’t outrun unless he stops giving it a reason to chase him.”

Stiles just shrugs mutely. He doesn’t know why his stomach is churning. Isn’t this what he wanted to hear? That Derek didn’t find anything to worry about and Clay seems to be bowing to the threats made by someone who put him in his place?

He’s still afraid of what could happen, though. Clay can’t just turn off his urges like a light switch. And is this what Stiles is going to have to do now to tell himself it’s okay that he didn’t go to the police? Have Derek spy on Clay and his friend all the damn time? And what if things don’t seem so innocent - then what?

“Are you okay, Stiles? You seem really upset.”

Stiles hunches over. “No, I mean - thanks for going and doing all of that stuff for me. It sounds - it sounds okay, I guess. I just don’t know if this is ever gonna end. Do you think I should have reported it?”

Derek shakes his head. “You did what was right for you at the time. This isn’t two plus two. There’s no single answer that’s right for everyone.”

“‘I just -” Stiles says, getting up from his stool in brittle frustration. “I don’t know. I don’t want you to have to manage this for me. Because then that’s like saying it’s all on you to keep them from hurting anyone, and that’s not fair, because it’s me who didn’t do anything and put you in this position.”

“Stiles -”

“But it’s not like going to the police meant that everything was going to be okay, either! I got rid of everything. Clay washed the sheets. Who would even believe me? Yeah, my dad would, my friends would, but the system? Who would believe me?

“Do you know what people would say?” Stiles asks, pacing back and forth and clutching at the cuffs of his plaid shirt. “The Sheriff’s teenage son and his brother-in-law? It doesn’t even matter what I said happened. He and his lawyer would do whatever they had to to discredit me. And fuck if I haven’t made it easy for them to do that.

“They’d say I’m just a big liar, a kid who doesn’t have many friends and goes through life almost invisible, so now I’m trying to get attention any splashy way I can. You think they wouldn’t find out about all of the times I’ve been sent to detention by Harris, all of the classes I’ve missed, because I must be acting out and I don’t think I have to follow the rules like everyone else?

“Or that my dad even got fired once because of me,” Stiles rambles on, waving his arms maniacally at times, “because I stole a police van and basically kidnapped another kid, so Jackson’s dad took out a restraining order on me. Or that you got arrested for a murder you didn’t commit because of what I told the police. Harris is nowhere to be found, the Whittemores are in London, but they’d put you on the stand to testify that you didn’t do it, and that I’m the one who said you did. You can only claim the Fifth to avoid self-incrimination. They’d use you against me to paint me as a liar.”

“I wouldn’t - I would tell them we’re friends now, Stiles - people know that -”

“Yeah, exactly! We’re friends now. And that’s what they would say. I accused you and it wasn’t true, even though we became friends. Am I a fucking psycho or something? Is that what I do to
people I like? How big of a leap is it to say that I’m accusing Clay, even though he’s my family, and
that’s not true, either!

“God, and that econ test where I went on and on about the history of male circumcision. That might
even be in my student file. I know Finstock told my dad about it in a parent-teacher conference. And
other kids know, too, because I was stupid enough to talk about it. Can you imagine - they call
Finstock to testify about that so they can really hammer home the point that I’m the one who doesn’t
have any self-control and I’m the one who makes things sexual even when it’s completely
inappropriate?

“And I’m always at the crime scene. Always! Why am I always there? Do I have an unhealthy
obsession with violence? Why do I gravitate towards it? Are the crime scenes not enough for me
anymore? Did I have to invent a crime and put myself at the center of it? What kind of arrest record
would I have if my dad wasn’t the sheriff? Maybe I’m so used to getting away with stuff that I’m
bored and trying to make trouble.

“And if I said that it happened over and over again - they’d ask for all of the dates and details, and
you don’t think my dad would look at his work schedule and figure out that he was home with me
some of those times? Do you know what that would do to him? What’s worse than thinking you left
your kid at home to be abused? Knowing that you were there when it happened. And they’d put him
on the stand, and ask him if he heard or saw anything, or even suspected anything, because if he did,
he would’ve done something about it, right? Because he’s supposed to be a great dad and a great
sheriff, but since he didn’t suspect anything, nothing must have happened, right? He didn’t hear
anything and he didn’t do anything because it NEVER happened.

“I couldn’t even try to leave the really bad stuff out, because once you don’t tell the whole truth, you
get too tripped up in what to say and what not to say, and they catch you in one lie and it’s over. I
can’t - I wouldn’t even know how to explain how Clay did what he did now without saying what he
did seven years ago. And fuck that, I don’t want people knowing that I was getting bent over by my
uncle when I was in fourth grade!

“And this is just stuff that comes to mind. Give them time to prepare a defense and I’m done. I’d be
the fucked-up kid who’s been medicated for ten years and lost his mom, and is so fucking in the head
and must really HATE her because he pointed the finger at her brother and is trying to show
everyone on the doll where the bad man touched him.

“He knows I was at Eichen House last year! He gave my dad the money to pay that bill. You know
what that looks like, on top of everything else? I’m unstable and I need help, but I obviously haven’t
gotten it because I fucking made all of this shit up.”

Stiles sighs, his agitation reaching the breaking point as tears pool in his eyes. “And that doesn’t even
include the things I did when the nogitsune was inside my head. I know my dad and Argent erased
the video surveillance at the hospital, but that doesn’t mean people didn’t see anything. And maybe
they just fucking let it go at first because they think they don’t know what they saw - they saw crazy
shit when the nogitsune was around, and I’m just a kid, right? The Sheriff’s kid. But then it comes
out that I’m making these allegations and they start thinking, maybe there’s something wrong with
this kid after all, maybe I should tell someone what I think I saw, where he was when all this shit was
happening, when people were hurt. When they were dying!”

“Stiles, Stiles, slow down,” Derek says, finally interjecting. “I don’t want to cut you off - it’s good to
get this out, you can’t keep it all inside, but don’t hate yourself over this. You haven’t done anything
wrong.”

“The truth doesn’t matter when you report someone,” Stiles laments, coming to a stop after doing his
best to wear a hole right through Derek’s flooring. “It just matters what people think. What you make them think.”

Derek circles around the table to stand in front of him, hands on his shoulders to try to ground him. “I understand. I know how things can look one way but be another. How someone can say things about you that aren’t true, but they still take on a life of their own. It’s okay that you didn’t report it. It was your decision to make. And you’re right. It’s not like reporting it would have fixed everything. It was a really tough call.”

Stiles shakes his head, squinting through his self-contempt. “I could have been smarter about it. You tried to get me to go to the hospital, but I wouldn’t go. I washed everything off. You tried to tell me to save my clothes, but I didn’t. I left my house for so long that Clay cleaned everything that I left behind. Fuck, you even got that fucking disgusting video back and I destroyed it. Maybe Clay saved that file to the cloud or something. Danny might be able to hack into his account or his new phone and get a copy. Maybe if I still had all those things, I wouldn’t sound like such a liar. But when people believe you, they know the truth, and the truth is just so fucking ugly that I don’t want anyone to know it.

“But it’s too late, and it’s not enough. Even if I could prove that we fucked, I’d have to prove that I didn’t want it. You know how this shit works. Guys always want it, right? That’s what a lot of people think. And if guys don’t want it, it doesn’t happen. Yeah, it’s my uncle and that’s really gross, but if I didn’t want it, how did it happen? Where were all of the signs of physical abuse? Who saw me with bruises or broken bones or anything that says, ‘someone forced me to do this?’ I had a bruise on my face once. Just once. That’s it. So he didn’t make me do it, right?

“Or maybe I’m the one who went after him, and I’m getting back at him now because he pissed me off. You know, because I can’t get laid, so I went to someone who would give it to me, even though he’s my uncle, and so what if I had that video and people saw how he treated me, the awful things he said to me, because I’m so messed up that I wanted it like that -”

Stiles flashes back to all of the times he said no, how he could never get what he wanted - and just the idea that other people might think he did want it, that he liked it, just like Clay said he did -

His demeanor crumbles instantaneously and the pooled tears fall easily as Derek hugs him close. “I’m sorry,” Stiles says, his head on Derek’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Derek soothes, hands scratching at Stiles’ back like his mom used to do. “Like I said before. You’re going to have good days and bad days. Bad days don’t make you weak.”

“I just wish I was stronger.”

“Have you looked into any therapists?” Derek asks gently.

Stiles turns a little pink with embarrassment. He hasn’t done anything about that since their previous conversation, which he thinks of as a mini-intervention in his head. “I do need to talk to someone,” he admits. “I’ll do some research online and find some options that might be good. It might take me some time to find a good fit, someone I can trust, but I need to do it.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. It’s too much to try to come to terms with everything on your own. Or with me saying dumb things in your ear.”

“You don’t say dumb things.”

“Maybe not all the time,” Derek concedes, squeezing him tighter.
Stiles pulls back and gives Derek a tiny smile. “And you’ll know if I’m going or not since you’re footing the bill, right?”

Derek thumbs away a drop of moisture at the edge of Stiles’ chin. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, nodding almost excessively in an attempt to regain his composure. He has to stop crying so he looks normal by the time he gets home. “I’ll start looking.”

Stiles’ phone chirps with the text notification sound assigned just to his dad, so Stiles knows he’s leaving the station. “I should take off,” Stiles says, reluctantly disentangling himself. “Thanks, Derek. You’re the best.”

The parting kiss doesn’t come up, and Stiles actually doesn’t want to discuss it tonight, even if they had the time. Derek already thinks Stiles has too much to work through and it’s too soon, so it seems incredibly unproductive to bring it up now, after essentially talking about how screwed up Stiles still is. It might even be the kill shot to whatever they could have between them.

Group hang time is an acceptable topic, though, so Stiles doesn’t have a problem probing Derek’s interest in that.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you,” Stiles says. “You know how I told you earlier that a bunch of us are going to the beach for a few days next week? Do you want to come with us? If you don’t mind going with high school kids?”

Derek gapes at him a little. “You want me to come?”

“Yeah, of course. Scott and Kira, Lydia and Malia, and then you and me.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay. That sounds fun.”

“Okay, cool, I’ll tell everyone and give you the details once Lydia finalizes. They’re excited you’re coming. Not just me, I mean.”

“And before you go,” Derek says. “Your birthday this week.”

“I told my dad I wanted to spend it with him since I’ll have plenty of friends time next week. So you wanna do something the night before? Like, go out to dinner or something?”

“Sure, you pick, whatever you want.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you here and then we can go.”

“Sure.”

Stiles shoves his laptop into his backpack and heads out, turning around to pull the door shut. “I’m really glad you’re back,” he says. “And that you’re coming with us. Three days is too long.”

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Stiles patters around Derek’s kitchen, taking the hash browns off the stovetop. With a sigh of relief, he uncrosses his figurative fingers that the plan to get Derek out of the loft lasted long enough for him to finish cooking everything.

He’d set up the dominoes the day before, telling his dad just enough about their latest ley lines research to get him interested, but feigning ignorance about all of the details. Sure, Stiles had
exaggerated the seriousness of their recent discoveries so Noah felt more inclined to get more information quickly, but if asked about it, he’ll just blame it on a misunderstanding.

Derek, however, can explain it all, so he could come by their house with the findings and documentation before his dad has to leave for his night shift. Add to that a special request that Derek pick up some local craft beer that’s only available on the other side of town, and Stiles has the loft all to himself to set up.

Just as he’s walking the potatoes over to the table with a plate of crispy bacon strips, the front door slides open. “Stiles?” Derek asks incredulously.

“Perfect timing! I just finished! Hope you’re hungry.”

Stiles walks back to the kitchen, Derek on his heels in a sustained state of shock. “Stiles, what is all this? You said you wanted to go out tonight.”

With a playful smirk, Stiles nods his head towards the bowl of scrambled eggs and tall stack of pancakes. “Can you do me a favor and grab those?”

Still dumbfounded, Derek does as asked while Stiles brings the sliced fruit and bottles of syrup and ketchup before sitting down at the generous feast.

“Stiles, what is this?” Derek repeats, sitting down across from him.

“It’s breakfast-for-dinner,” Stiles answers matter-of-factly.

“I know, but -” Derek pauses to absorb all of the scattered plates. “How did you know?…”

“Because you told me,” Stiles says, pouring some orange juice for Derek and then for himself. “That night I came over here, I mean. When you told me all that stuff about your family.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t … I didn’t really think you were listening. You were going through a lot.”

“I know I was.” Stiles smiles at Derek drowning a few pancakes in syrup. “But I heard you.”

“I don’t even know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just eat up. I know it’s not the same, not without a big family bustling around, but I thought it would be weird to invite the pack. They would shit their pants that I did this, I think.”

Derek shakes his head. “No, just us is nice … but I can’t believe you did this. It’s your birthday. You cooked me one of my favorite childhood traditions for YOUR birthday.”

“I know,” Stiles shrugs cheerfully. “But this is what I wanted. I wanted to do this.”

“Everything smells really great. Thanks for doing all of this work.”

“Well, I hope it tastes even better than it smells.”

And it does, in Stiles’ not altogether humble opinion. Seeing Derek happy is the gift that he wanted. Hearing him talk more about his family, about how he was the official pancake flipper as a child and Cora would try to hoard all of the ham for herself, is the gift he didn’t even know he wanted.

“Here comes the best part of a good meal,” Stiles says, sated as Derek eats the last bit of eggs, leaving just some hash browns and fruit. That works for Stiles. He’ll just have that for breakfast
tomorrow before he goes to school. “The clean-up.”

“You’re not lifting another finger. I’ll take care of that.”

“At least let me help clear the table,” Stiles says, not at all envious of the stacks of pans, plates, and utensils that need to be washed.

Once the remaining mess has been moved back to the kitchen, Derek veers away from the sink, picking up a small box on the counter that Stiles hadn’t noticed before. Derek must have brought it home with him, but Stiles didn’t notice that, either.

“Hopefully you didn’t have so many pancakes that you don’t have any appetite for dessert,” Derek says.

“Oooh.” Stiles hops up on the counter by his side. “No such thing as too many sweets. My dad would disagree, but it’s my party and I’ll have cake if I want to.”

Derek opens the box, revealing a vanilla cupcake with chocolate frosting, rainbow sprinkles, and a thin candle patiently perched in the center. As Derek rummages around a few kitchen drawers for a lighter or matches, Stiles contemplates prospective wishes.

He knows what he would have wished for earlier, even if it was ludicrous that Clay would finally leave him alone just because Stiles willed it to happen around the day he was born. That’s a moot point now that Clay is gone. Derek took care of that for him.

When Derek strikes a match and lights the candle, holding the cupcake up to Stiles’ face, Stiles doesn’t wish for anything when he blows out the flame. So much has happened in the past year - so much has happened to him, been forced on him - that it makes wishing seem like his life is still helplessly out of control, and it’s not. Even if he wishes for an external force to make all of his problems go away, that’s meaningless. It isn’t going to happen. And he needs to save himself, not whisper into the ether for something else to do it for him.

Stiles lifts the extinguished candle up and drags it through the frosting. “Mmmm, ’s good,” he says, licking the dangling blob off.

“Can I try some?” Derek asks.

“Yeah, of course,” Stiles nods, and before he knows what’s happening, Derek’s hot, wet mouth is on his.

A buzz of electricity courses through him, and it just keeps growing, warmer and fuzzier with each passing second. Derek sets the cupcake down, freeing both hands to cradle Stiles’ face tilted upward.

The kiss is determined, but not aggressive, marked with physical pressure but no emotional pressure. Stiles flushes with how much he wants this. With how unfamiliar it is to want it.

Derek pulls back so he’s not crowding Stiles anymore. “I know this is fast, but … there’s something here, right? I’m not in any hurry. We don’t have to do anything. I don’t want to do anything else. I just wanted to kiss you again. Was that okay?”

“Was that -“ Stiles starts to ask, thoroughly confused. “That couldn’t have been more -”

Words don’t really seem like enough, even if they’re written in the sky above them, so Stiles leans up further into Derek’s space, capturing his mouth again and blurring the lines of where he ends and Derek begins.
Stiles gets it now - why people like French kissing - what it’s like to have his lips moving against someone else’s, to feel their breath on his face, and to be so perfectly synced, but still need even more.

He leans a little too far forward and nearly loses his balance on the counter, throwing his left hand down to keep from toppling over entirely. Laughing as he realizes he missed smashing the cupcake by only a couple of inches, Stiles shrugs with self-deprecation.

“Okay, see, that’s how you kiss and then that’s how I do it. Compare and contrast.”

Derek suppresses his own laughter through mashed lips. “It was a perfect ten until you got to the dismount.”

“Just keeping you on your toes, Hale.”

“Yeah, you sure are good at that,” Derek says, his eyes crinkling.

They kiss again, but without the urgency and novelty of the previous times. There will be many, many more to come, Stiles is sure of that.

“Happy birthday, Stiles,” Derek says softly, lips skating to the corner of Stiles’ mouth and across his jaw.

Stiles smiles, his heart floating out into the palm of Derek’s hand. Those kisses are the gift he’s waited his whole life for.

And just like he thought, he hadn’t needed any wishes after all.

Chapter End Notes

It's important to me to try to show the ups and downs of Stiles' trauma recovery, so even though he has some really hard times, they're not so constant that he is unable to also feel happiness and genuine appreciation for things in his life at other times.

The birthday kisses were a very loose take on the ending of Sixteen Candles. If you haven’t seen this seminal 80s movie, I highly suggest it! At the very least, you can see the ending on youtube. The reference goes back to chapter 6 when Derek is waiting for Stiles outside of school and Stiles thinks of him as his own pseudo Jake Ryan.

Originally I thought this chapter would include Spring Break, but there wasn’t any room - not without going way, way beyond my normal target of 10k - 11k words to more like 20k, heh. Chapter 9 was already over 12k. So if you’re looking forward to their little beach trip, you’ll get it in chapter 10!

Thanks, and I hope you liked 9! Please feel free to hit me up in the comments!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Happy post-TW finale! Regardless of what I thought of the show itself, it gave a lot of gifts to the fans over the years and I’m thankful for that! I got into the show pretty late in its run and I still marvel at how prolific and active this fandom is, even after losing some great characters and dropping in quality.

Ugh, and thank you for your patience with this chapter. It took me forever around other things that sprang up in life. (Life? What’s that?) And in general, I find the longer, talkier scenes more time-consuming because there are a number of things I’m trying to bake in and construct in aggregate.

Also, I made a revision to the total chapter count. I previously thought it would end after chapter 11, but it’s really going to be more like chapter 13. There's no way I can fit the remaining scenes in one or two more chapters. I hope you enjoy chapter 10! As always, thank you so much for your feedback!

[Posted 9/25/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Almost half an hour after Stiles texts Derek that he’s home, Derek steps in through the open bedroom window and waves at Stiles sitting at the desk. “Happy birthday,” he says officially, leaning down to drop a kiss on Stiles’ temple.

“Thanks again,” Stiles chirps. “Just a sec, I’m e-mailing Scott the answers to the econ practice quiz.”

Derek takes a seat on Stiles’ bed, arms extended behind him to prop up his weight. “Sure, no problem.”

A steady stream of taps later, Stiles swivels in his chair and abandons his computer for the much more enticing spot beside Derek. “Okay, all done.”

The previous night, they hadn’t done much else, true to what Derek had asserted. The spooning was familiar, but also shiny and new with the acknowledgment that it wasn’t merely platonic and there was a whole slew of options beyond that.

“Did you have fun with your dad?” Derek asks.

Stiles beams just thinking about it. Noah had been so surprised and happy when Stiles told him he wanted to celebrate his birthday together rather than with his friends. His dad had worn a tireless grin all night and Stiles still feels a deep and prideful sense of “I did that.”

“Oh yeah, tons. We went to get these burgers we really like and then we played laser tag.”

“Really?”

“Laser tag is awesome,” Stiles says unapologetically.
“I’m sure it is - I’ve never played - but your dad is a sheriff. Doesn’t that give him an advantage?”

“Psssssh, you’d think, but I have all the gaming experience with first-person shooter, plus I’m way more spry than he is. So we’re kind of fairly matched.”

“Who won?”

“We tied. We always play an even number of games to allow for a potential tie. It’s a little more fun if we both win.”

“I’m glad you had such a good time today.”

“I’ll take you there sometime. But I think you’ll still win with your werewolf senses and all. I’ll have to figure out how to get us on a similar playing field. Like you have to wear noise canceling headphones. And probably a blindfold. And I’m not going to even explain the rules to you. Yeah, that might help.”

Derek laughs. “There are special herbs you can use to mask your scent, too.”

“Well, stink me down and prepare to meet your doom, Derek.”

“Oh,” Derek says, clucking his tongue, “I sort of think I did, that first day I met you.”

“Haha, smartass.”

“You were wearing that bulls-eye shirt. How ironic.”

“You remember what I was wearing?”

“Yes,” Derek blushes, “like you remember my alleged leather fetish.”

“With the sleeves that are too long. You were scary, but like, in a really hot way. And then you didn’t turn out to be scary at all. Still hot, though.”

Derek laughs again, this time only a few pitches below an actual giggle. “Yeah,” he says, smoothing back Stiles’ hair. “Not scary, huh?”

“I like these sleeves, too.” Stiles takes Derek’s other hand and traces the seam of the thumbhole sweater resting along Derek’s palm. “I almost don’t want you to take this off.”

Derek raises an eyebrow. “Oh, really.”

“I don’t feel like going to sleep yet, but can we get in bed anyway?”

As Stiles pulls the covers back, Derek stands up to get undressed, but he leaves the sweater on. Stiles slips his unzipped hoodie off his shoulders, his own t-shirt staying in place, and cuddles up to Derek, whose arm is stretched out just under the edge of Stiles’ pillow.

“Sorry I didn’t get you a present,” Derek says. “I know things you like, but I wasn’t sure what to get.”

“Derek, I don’t want you to buy me stuff, like a new video game or shoes or whatever. You’ve given me so much already, and a headshrinker’s gonna cost as much as, like, dozens of 18th birthday presents.”

“Okay, but if you think of something you want -”
“Well, then. My dad’s an especially deep sleeper after a fatty meal and some exercise. We don’t have to be so quiet. He’s not going to catch us.”

“Catch us doing what?” Derek asks, his nonchalant innocence sold out by the small quirk of his mouth.

He lifts himself up and over so he’s above Stiles, who revels in the feel of Derek’s lips. Mild kissing is enough to get his heart racing and he’s sure Derek can sense that, but he’s just as certain that Derek can’t really smell any fear emanating from him.

It’s repugnant, but Stiles only knows how to kiss the way Clay taught him. He’s stared at other people kissing before, probably not helping his image at school, but he’s watched them just to see other styles and movements. Not that that ever helped. Observation was one thing. Stiles didn’t have anyone to practice on.

Then Clay returned and picked up right where he left off. But Derek doesn’t kiss like Clay does, so Stiles takes it all in, hoping that he can learn to do things differently. In a way Derek likes and that’s separate from his desperately unwanted sexual history.

Derek breaks the kiss to peck at the tip of Stiles’ nose. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course. You don’t always have to ask.”

“Part of me feels like this is wrong,” Derek confesses. “Like I’m taking advantage of you.”

“You’re not,” Stiles insists. “I want to be with you.”

“It’s just that you’ve been through hell, Stiles.”

“But I want it.” The words feel foreign on Stiles’ tongue, but he’s never meant anything more.

Still hovering, Derek purses his lips. “Maybe we should wait. I should give you more time.”

Stiles turns away, tucking his chin into his shoulder in an attempt to hide how crestfallen he truly is. “When can I - when will it be okay?” he asks, his voice hoarse. “For me to - to be loved?”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant,” Derek says. He lies back down on his side and pulls Stiles in close. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“So why do we have to wait? We’re not even really doing anything.”

“It’s just a lot for you right now, I think. Not because of you. But aren’t there rules or suggestions that people dealing with serious things shouldn’t get into new relationships too quickly?”

“Well, yeah,” Stiles admits. “I think that’s the general idea for people recovering from, like, alcoholism and addiction. Or going through a really rough break-up. But I don’t think this is like that.”

“No, it’s not. Even so, it’s probably good for you to just focus on yourself, though.”

Stiles sighs. Clay’s nearly a thousand miles away, but he still won’t let Stiles have anything.

“I can focus on myself and have room for us, too,” Stiles contends. “Those things aren’t mutually exclusive. You’ve helped me so much.”

Derek nods, tracing a random little pattern on the back of Stiles’ shoulder. “Why do you like me?”
“What do you mean?” Stiles’ brows pinch together. “Why are you asking like that’s a real question? Do you - honestly, do you think that’s the only reason why?”

“Maybe not the only one,” Derek says, still tracing. “But it’s the big one, right?”

“Derek. Yeah, that’s huge - I mean, you fucking saved my life. But I don’t, like - I’m not confused. I’m not mistaking the gratitude for deeper feelings. I’ve felt something for you for a long time - I probably didn’t really realize it, out of self-preservation or something, maybe. But I’ve always liked you. You’re loyal and you would do anything for the people you care about. You don’t bullshit because lies just aren’t worth your time. You’re stubborn and you challenge me, but you still listen to me and put up with me when I’m annoying, which is hardly ever, by the way. You understand a lot of me, and the stuff you don’t, I know you would try to. You get what it’s like to be alone, but you don’t choose to be with someone just so you won’t be anymore. I’m like that, too. People have to earn their way in. We have so much fun together and I like making you smile and I love making you laugh.”

In spite of himself, Derek seems a little more persuaded. “I don’t feel this way just because of what you did for me,” Stiles continues. “I like all of the things about you that led you to do those things.”

“I’ve …” Derek begins, “I’ve been interested in you for a long time, too.”

Stiles’ eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets. “Really?”

“Why is that so hard to believe?” Derek wonders, wrapping his arm around Stiles.

“Because you’re you and I’m me,” is Stiles’ internal default response, but he exercises a modicum of self-control in not blurting that out. “Because I’m too weird and silly –”

“I don’t wanna hear that,” Derek interrupts. “I never would have seen that awesome vampire puppet musical if it wasn’t for you.”

“So why do you like me?” Stiles asks, borrowing Derek’s line.

“I like the fire inside you. You’re loyal, too, and clever, and totally funny and weirdly funny at the same time. You’re never boring. I can’t be with someone who sees how I look and wants me to be normal, with normal life experiences, like things come easily to me. But you’re complicated, too, and you accept me even though I’m not that normal guy. You stick your neck out for what you think is right and it’s not that hard to overlook when you’re being annoying, which is slightly more than hardly ever, by the way. You’re emotional, but that’s a good thing, because it’s honest and I need that. I wouldn’t normally show much emotion otherwise. I’ve been living a stoic life for too long.”

Even with the elaboration, Stiles is still stunned. “Would you have ever said anything to me?”

“I like to think so. At some point. But I don’t know when. I just never had the nerve to do it. I guess in the back of my head, I thought I would just know when it was the right time. Like something would happen and I would know. Even if I had to leave town for a while, and when I saw you again, I would have to tell you because I missed you.” Derek shrugs. “But I didn’t want to leave.”

Stiles can’t really blame Derek for his hesitation. It’s not like Stiles was ever going to spell out a message for Derek with Valentine’s candies or test the waters with an overt pick-up line he could pass off as a joke.

“We could have danced around it forever without doing a single thing,” Stiles says, unsettled in that realization. The current debate about waiting longer pales in comparison to never having something to begin with. “That would have really sucked.”
“Honestly, I don’t know if I would have told you until you came home from college after freshman year.”

“Why so long? That summer’s over two years away!”

“I wanted you to get out of this town and everything that comes with it. Have some real freedom. And if you got to do that and still wanted to try something with me, then maybe it was supposed to happen.”

“Like after I was normal, with normal life experiences, like everything comes easily to me?” Stiles repeats skeptically. “That’s never going to be me. I’d rather be abnormal with you.”

“You should put that on a t-shirt. They’ll sell themselves.”

Stiles laughs, but soon dwindles into silence that’s only broken by Derek’s poking at his side. “I hate that Clay brought us together,” Stiles says bitterly.

He’s done a lot of coping in his life, and he knows one way to move past something bad is to find some meaning in it, but recognizing Clay as the impetus for his progressing relationship with Derek feels like saying it was born out of poison.

Derek is quiet for a few moments, too, as he lazily strokes Stiles’ hair. “He didn’t.”

“We never would have - we wouldn’t be so close now if he hadn’t … And you never would have kissed me.”

“You’re the one who brought us together. When you knocked on my door that night. It was you.”

Stiles considers this with a tentative nod. “Maybe you’re right. You’re gonna have to help me along sometimes. I don’t have any relationship experience.”

“Ha,” Derek scoffs, and Stiles hears the same caustic notes he couldn’t control. “I don’t have - I’m not good at … I’ve mostly only had dysfunctional flings. With shitty people. It’s never real.”

Stiles slips his hand under the bottom of Derek’s sweater, running his fingertips up and down the ridges of Derek’s tense abdomen.

“Except for you. I think this is real. Right?” Derek asks.

When Stiles tilts his chin up, Derek looks so insecure he’s almost unrecognizable. “Yes,” Stiles promises, “I know it is.” He watches Derek with rapt attention as the uneasiness slowly melts away with each caress. “I know it is.”

Derek exhales, content and warm. “Is it okay if I take this off after all?”

“I told you, you don’t have to ask for everything.”

“I’ll ask,” Derek says, managing to pull his hands through the sleeves and shimmy out of the clothing.

Stiles lays his head down on Derek’s moderately fuzzy chest, pulsing calm and steady in Stiles’ ear. “I’m glad the nogitsune didn’t try to come after you.”

That would have ruined everything. The nogitsune had been in his head, and it must have known how he subconsciously felt about Derek. In that window of time before they realized that Stiles wasn’t Stiles anymore - if the nogitsune had gone to Derek to seduce him and plant those seeds of
chaos, twisting something hopeful into another trick, their friendship would never have been the same afterwards, even if they didn’t have sex. With the clarity of what really happened and traded apologies that weren’t necessary, Derek would have pulled away. He would never have made another move after that, and Stiles would have been too embarrassed and self-conscious to initiate, either.

If the nogitsune had put a wall up between them, Stiles is almost positive he wouldn’t have run to Derek for help with Clay. And forget it if Derek and the nogitsune in Stiles’ body had fucked. Stiles wouldn’t have gone to anyone. Clay would still be breaking him, doing God knows what at this point.

But really, Stiles’ heart aches imagining how Derek would have felt after being duped like that, thinking he was finally getting something he wanted, only to discover it wasn’t genuine at all. Yet another villain in his bed, hurting him, convincing him irreversibly that he doesn’t know when sex isn’t right, and that it’ll always be that way.

“What? It couldn’t have possessed me. I didn’t die with you and Scott and Allison.”

“Yeah …” Stiles says, but doesn’t clarify. “The nogitsune was drawn to darkness. Allison, she’d had some of that for a while after her mom died. But the nogitsune chose me. It knew how dark I was inside. Clay destroyed me when I was a kid. He made the nogitsune want me. And then Clay came back. I’ve only been wanted when it was bad. I don’t know how to be wanted when it’s good.”

“I can understand that … it’s scary. After I got older, I realized Paige was puppy love more than anything else, and I hate that she died because of that. But everyone else - I’ve never been with anyone who actually cared about me. They’re usually just using me.”

“I would never do that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But I’m just worried that -” Derek says, stumbling over his words, “like you’re coming out of a really bleak place. And you’re reaching out for something you think can make you happy. But I don’t know if that’s me.”

Stiles shakes his head. “You do make me happy. You don’t see it, but you do.”

“Everyone around me. My entire family. Everyone who died in that fire. Laura. I killed Peter. Paige should never have needed that mercy killing. I punctured Jackson’s neck after Kate shot me with that wolfsbane bullet. Even when I did what he wanted and bit him, he turned into a killing machine. Boyd and Erica died because I made them part of my pack. Cora was taken because of me, and she almost died. Everyone gets hurt because of me. That’s all they ever get.”

Stiles buries his face in the crook of Derek’s neck, holding on to him so close he could almost swear their heartbeats are syncing up. “No, not me,” he breathes.

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Before heading out of town, Derek and Stiles stop at Lydia’s house to load up as much of the group supplies they can fit in the Camaro. True love’s kiss from Stiles can’t make the Jeep any more reliable, so it’s a no-brainer that they take Derek’s car instead. Lydia transports the rest and drives off to pick up Malia and Kira first and Scott last so that Mr. and Mrs. Yukimura don’t realize he’ll be there, too.

Lydia had booked the three hotel rooms, but also gave the front desk Derek’s name in advance since they weren’t sure who was going to arrive first. Despite Derek and Stiles’ head start, the other car
beats them, courtesy of Stiles’ insistence that they stop for lunch and multiple bathroom breaks.

When they check-in, the woman behind the counter inquires whether they prefer a king bed or two queens. Derek doesn’t bat an eye when he specifies the king bed and asks where the other two rooms under the reservation are located. Upon hearing they’re on the east side of the hotel, Derek just as casually asks to be placed on the west side.

“More privacy,” he says, and Stiles just stands next to him and smiles at the woman.

They collectively agree to take it easy and lounge around poolside for the rest of the afternoon. Stiles, Lydia, and Kira are more concerned about not getting too much sun than Derek, Malia, and Scott, so they set up camp on some lounge chairs shaded under umbrellas.

It’s fucking unreal to see Derek in board shorts and sunglasses, on display like some kind of male model. Stiles has seen way, way more of Derek’s skin before and it never gets old, but this happy beachwear is unprecedented.

Stiles has no reason to be tired, but he stretches out on his stomach on the reclining chair, pillowing his face on his crossed arms. Bits and pieces of noise float around him, but he doesn’t pay them any heed.

He eventually falls asleep, but doesn’t realize it until he jolts awake, an avalanche of fear consuming him. Drops of moisture have sprayed across his back, and his eyes fly wide open at the sensation. It takes him a second to reconcile the brightness around him and the freedom of his limbs with the darkness and restraining hands he was expecting.

Even as he realizes where he is, he still streaks his fingers through the wetness, sighing with relief when it’s just water. Looking around, he sees a couple of cute but rambunctious kids nearby playing with water guns. That’s all it was. Just a poorly-aimed toy. Not the physical pleasure of someone else enjoying his misery.

“Got a case of the jimmy legs?” Lydia asks, head buried in a book to his right.

“Oh yeah,” Stiles laughs neurotically. “Maybe I had too much coffee on the drive.”

His pulse doesn’t slow back down to normal for a while, though, and he gauges whether anyone else has picked up on his terror. Kira’s peacefully napping on the other side of Lydia, and Derek, Malia, and Scott, who could hear his frantic heart if they were paying attention, are tossing a beach ball around the shallower end of the pool.

Part of Stiles almost gives in to the panic, but he does his breathing exercises quietly so Lydia doesn’t notice. After a few minutes, he dives into the pool to join the game, getting so waterlogged that a splash on his skin means nothing.

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They head over to the beach to start their bonfire festivities for the evening, laden down with coolers, beach chairs, and blankets. Lydia planned more casual activities for the first day and Stiles couldn’t be happier about that. She can be pretty extra about a lot of things, but she understands the simpler pleasures in life, too. Especially after how complicated everything has been.

Throwing a Frisbee around and putting on more layers of clothing are broken up by a consistent flow of eating. Lydia and Stiles get a jump start on dessert, huddled together at the bonfire pit and holding matching sticks of marshmallows.
“Jackson would have loved this, if he was still here,” Lydia says. Stiles listens for any indications of wistfulness in her voice, but it sounds like a mere observation.

Stiles laughs. “Yeah, that’s what we’re missing today. His aggressively hilarious snark.”

With a laugh of her own, Lydia nudges Stiles with her elbow. “I think even he’s grown a lot since Scott was bitten. We all have.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees, “it’s been … a hell of a year.”

Lydia pulls her marshmallows from the fire to check on the char before sticking them back over the flames. “I can’t even imagine this group a year ago. Isn’t it so weird? Out of all of us, you and Scott were the only ones who were already friends. And now we’re all together, and on vacation with Derek Hale.”

“It’s okay that I invited him, isn’t it?” Stiles asks, worrying his lip.

“Stiles, of course.” Lydia looks at him like he’s said something crazy, like he’s given her fashion advice. “He’s part of the pack. He’s with us when times are tough; he should be with us when we’re having fun, too.”

Stiles looks across the pit to where Derek is cooking a couple of hot dogs for himself and Kira, who’s giggling at his side and telling some story that involves a lot of gesturing. “Yeah, I’m really glad he’s here.”

“He’s surprisingly fun in his own way,” Lydia says, cranking the observations up a notch. “And I never really realized how cute he is. I’ve never seen him smile so much.”

Stiles is sure his cheeks are reddening, but there’s no way that Lydia’s noticed - not when she’s looking at Derek, too. Just like her Jackson comment, she seems neutral. Stiles doesn’t think that she’s baiting him to get a confession of “OMG yes, girl, I would climb him like a tree” or that she’s suddenly interested in Derek herself.

“Speaking of cute,” Stiles says, wiggling his eyebrows at her, “I have it on very good authority that a certain deputy wants to pass you a ‘Do you like me? Check yes or no’ note.”

It’s Lydia turn to blush now. “Stiles, let me make my s’mores in peace!” she says, starting to assemble the other components on her plate.

“You deserve a good guy like that. He’s great. When he asks you - and he will, at some point - you should say yes.”

Lydia smiles at him and Stiles grins back. They really have grown up. His obsessed fifteen-year-old self would never have believed he and Lydia would one day be talking about boys they like, albeit one above-board and the other unwittingly.

As Malia comes over to grab one of the s’mores Lydia’s melting together, Stiles takes his own s’more to the other side of the pit. “How’s your hot dog?” he asks Derek.

“Really good,” Derek says. “Maybe I should get a barbeque. So I can grill at home.”

They’ve been very discreet so far with the pronoun game, not once making the mistake of saying “we” to the others or in their earshot when it wouldn’t make any sense. Stiles is quite practiced already, particularly with his dad and Scott. He doesn’t run home to tell his dad about everything he and Derek do together.
Stiles realizes with a stab of sadness that Derek probably doesn’t have too many people to cover up around. He hopes that Derek gets to publicly enjoy being one-half of “we” sometimes, whether it’s telling the cashier ringing up his groceries, “we’re in the mood for filet tonight” or the car detailer, “my boyfriend is pretty clumsy so I’m sorry about all of the junk on the passenger side.”

Kira is off sharing her hot dog with Scott while Malia and Lydia eat their own s’mores and giggle at the inevitable mess. “You want some of this?” Stiles whispers. “No one’s paying attention.”

Derek checks to confirm himself before taking a bite out of the gooey dessert Stiles holds up to his mouth. His teeth catch the edge of Stiles’ finger and Stiles squeaks softly in surprised delight. There still aren’t any eyes on them, though, so Stiles doesn’t care what kind of goofy, happy expression he has on his face. The moment feels so perfect that it would be worth being caught in the G-rated act of intimacy, but still, it’s nice to keep this to themselves for now.

“Have you talked with Malia very much?”

Derek shakes his head. “A little bit at the pool.”

“Maybe you should go talk to her. I know it’s kind of awkward, but she’s your family.”

“Yeah,” Derek says. “I don’t really know what to say to her - it’s not really the same thing as going to a family reunion and talking to relatives you don’t know. This is a whole different kind of long-lost relative. But you’re right.”

“Well, she meets all of the basic criteria for getting to know better,” Stiles tells him, ticking them off with fingers. “She’s alive, so there’s that. And also, hasn’t fundamentally betrayed you, which is a real winner.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Derek leaves his side to join Malia and Lydia while Stiles plunks down on a chair next to Kira in Scott’s lap. Stiles can’t hear Derek and Malia talking since he has boring old human ears, but he’d rather let them build the relationship mostly on their own anyway. It’s not long before he and Scott are regaling Kira with supernatural tales that preceded her arrival in Beacon Hills, but he can’t help sneaking peeks at Derek every once in a while.

It hadn’t occurred to him earlier that Derek might not be comfortable at a bonfire because of the flames, but the scale and nature are glaringly different from the ones that claimed his family, so he seems perfectly fine around them. They illuminate his face in dancing waves, showcasing every laugh and smile he shares with the girls.

Stiles could never have imagined this group together, either, back in the days when Scott was useless without his inhaler and Stiles had mostly made himself forget about the secrets he’d buried in a shallow grave, even though he could never really hide the scars, too. But everything about this group feels right. Everyone feels right.

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Stiles can’t believe he woke up at five o’clock in the morning on his vacation. This is in direct violation of normal human behavior.

But Derek had been so convincing during the car ride the day before that Stiles couldn’t help but get on board with his idea to literally get on a board in the ocean. He’d been so animated about surfing - in Derek terms, that is; on Stiles’ own scale, probably around a 5 - that Stiles, wide awake at the time, had wanted nothing more than to enjoy that with him.
No one else in the pack had expressed much interest when they mentioned it at the bonfire, but Derek was unfazed. It also means they have more alone time since they’re definitely going back to sleep afterwards and won’t be meeting up with everyone else until later in the afternoon.

With Stiles lagging behind, they get large coffees on the walk over to the rental shop. The coffee can’t work miracles, but it’s helping, and once Stiles has his feet in sand, he’s starting to perk up. He’s a little nervous, though.

“Like I don’t want to mislead you,” Stiles says, pulling at the arm of his wetsuit. “I know you’ve seen me achieve monumental feats in a swimming pool, but I’m not a great swimmer and I’m not that comfortable in the ocean, let alone when I can’t see through it. And if I go under, I don’t know if you can find me that easily. You can’t track me by smell and is super-swimming a werewolf power? Because I don’t think so.”

“We’re not really going to surf,” Derek clarifies. “You can’t learn in one morning anyway. I love surfing, but I really just wanted to be on the water again. I’ll show you here on shore how to jump up on the board and stuff like that. Just so you know. But I thought we could just paddle out and enjoy nature when not many people are out here.”

Derek talks Stiles through some basics, which Stiles is able to do, but this platform is stable and the waves certainly are not. They take their time paddling out to a relatively calm area, staying out of reach of the bigger ones.

“You good?” Derek calls out.

“Yep, no problem.”

Derek sits up on his board, legs dangling over either side, and Stiles tries to mirror him, except he accidentally falls into the water instead. Sputtering with laughter, he surfaces and gets back on with Derek’s help.

“So I’m officially awake now.”

“Freezing cold water will do that for you.”

Stiles looks back at the shore they left behind. It’s not super far away, but Stiles would never venture out this distance on his own. He can do anything with Derek at his side, though.

“I love the Preserve,” Derek says, “but the forest can’t offer everything. My dad used to take me surfing when I was younger. He said it was the human part of me that felt so connected to the ocean.”

Stiles is all ears. He’s such a chatterbox about his own father, but Derek has never talked about his.

“He taught me how to become part of the wave. It was our thing together. But I haven’t been out here in a really long time. They’re all gone.”

“Hey,” Stiles says softly, “if this is a sad memory for you, we can go back.”

“No, it’s good. Those are great memories with my dad. We had so much fun. It’s good to think about that. And I wanted to show you this. My dad would always tell me that the world was so big. I could go anywhere, I could do anything. Sometimes, when I had a stupid problem or I was angry about something, I would forget that. But when we were on the waves, I would remember again.”
Stiles gazes out at the deep water in the horizon, how it goes on and on, farther than he can see and
down below what he can fathom. Seagulls intermittently soar above them and the white noise isn’t
just white noise - it’s something bigger than him, a constant that doesn’t fail, a universe of so much
more potential beyond what a single person has done to him.

“I really like it out here,” he says. “Thanks for taking me out. And telling me about your dad. I like
knowing stuff about you.”

Derek smiles. “My pleasure.”

They bob up and down along with the sea, just existing with it and talking about less serious things
until Stiles has a very serious proposition.

“Hey, can we do that thing, that couple-y thing people do, when they’re on surfboards side-by-side
and they kiss?”

“Sure,” Derek says, taking it upon himself to close the rest of the distance between them. “And if
you fall in again, I’m quite the lifeguard, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

“Haha, you’re a real com-” Stiles starts to retort, but the words are lost to Derek’s mouth.

Marine kissing is quickly becoming one of Stiles’ favorite new hobbies - definitely worth the price of
admission, despite all of his grumbling when Derek nearly had to pull him out of bed that morning.

“Let’s head back in so I can try to help you learn on the small breaks in the shallow water before we
call it a morning.”

“Okay, sure,” Stiles agrees.

“But first, do you wanna see me ride a wave out here?”

Stiles brightens even more. “Yes! Yes, totally. I would love to.”

“Okay, I’m going to paddle out to closer to those guys,” Derek says, pointing. “You - you just stay
here, and don’t try to do anything yourself. Just sit here. I’ll come back and we’ll paddle back in
together.”

As Derek stated earlier, he’s out of practice, so he wipes out on the first moderate wave, much to
Stiles’ amusement. He catches the second one easily, though, and the third after that, and Stiles is
awestruck. Derek in board shorts and sunglasses was unreal. Next to that, Derek surfing is basically
otherworldly.

Back at the hotel, Stiles takes a shower while Derek goes to a nearby cafe and grabs something for
them to eat. Chewing on his half of the breakfast burrito, Stiles opens his suitcase and pulls out a
fresh pair of boxer briefs.

He’d stopped wearing them when Clay was in the house. Stiles had always viewed them as
utilitarian, but with Clay, they felt too provocative, like Stiles was teasing him, so he’d taken to only
wearing his baggier boxer shorts.

Stiles pulls the gray briefs through his legs easily, finishes the rest of his breakfast, and eagerly climbs
under the blankets. Derek emerges soon after, fresh from the shower and not hungry since he ate his
portion of the burrito as he walked back to their room.

Derek doesn’t put a shirt on before he joins Stiles for their nap. They’re barely wearing anything, but
the plentiful covers and shared body heat is enough. “You’re a lot warmer than a wetsuit,” Stiles mumbles into Derek’s chest.

“You should just wear me always,” Derek jokes.

They’re both tired, but not too tired for a few more kisses. “I like this better,” Stiles says. “Just going with it. Not doubting it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. There are way too many things in the world that we could doubt. But not each other. Never each other.”

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They don’t set an alarm, waking up again of their own accord. Stiles checks his phone and reads a text from Scott, letting him know that the others went down to the beach to lay out and play around in the water. He texts Scott back that they just woke up, only to find it’s good timing since the rest of the group is coming back to clean themselves up.

Derek licks a stripe up Stiles’ neck and Stiles unconvincingly protests, exclaiming he’s going to have to shower again. They’re sharing a room, so of course they’re going to smell like each other and they don’t have to hide that on this trip, but Stiles can’t exactly meet up with a bunch of were-creatures covered in Derek’s saliva. As Stiles showers again quickly, Derek gets dressed and stops at a store to pick up everything on Scott’s list of requested booze.

After they all meet up in the lobby, they spend the rest of the afternoon riding around on rented bikes and relaxing into the easy schedule and lack of urgency. Dinner is casual in dress, but nice on the menu, and even nicer when Lydia surprises everyone by paying the bill, with thanks to her mother.

The anticipated highlight is the after-dinner party, gathered in Scott and Kira’s room since they ran into the neighbors in the hallway earlier and found out that most of the rooms around them are occupied by college students who won’t mind a little noise.

Scott’s like a kid in a candy store with the assortment of liquor Derek brought, and Lydia has the good sense early on to separate the wolfsbane-laced alcohol from the non-laced. She’s conservative in how much she mixes in, noting that the weres can just drink more if they want, but it would be a shame if any of them got shitfaced before 10 pm.

Stiles paces himself with beer and only occasional hard liquor. He has a great buzz going on - maybe almost too close to the manageable threshold - but he’s all-in when Scott proposes a toast to a round of shots that have materialized out of nowhere.

Scott passes them around the room, careful to give the right ones to Lydia and Stiles. Stiles’ breath catches in his throat when he smells the alcohol in his shotglass. Moving it away from his nose, he blinks a few times and grinds his teeth.

“Stiles,” Scott says as they all raise their drinks in a circle, “you made it, buddy. Maybe because of everyone in this room - actually, possibly in spite of everyone in this room - but you made it and I honestly can’t wait to be brothers with you for eighteen more years, and another eighteen after that, and another eighteen after that.”

Everyone clinks their glasses and tips them back like pros, except Stiles has a hard time getting it down, and for a nanosecond, thinks he’s going to choke on a clumsy swallow, but doesn’t.

Derek sidles up to him and cocks his head in a question, not wanting to say anything out loud because everyone but Lydia will be able to hear him, even if he whispers.
Stiles shakes his head at him, eyes wet. Cradling Stiles’ elbow, Derek starts to walk him out of the room. “We’ll be back,” Derek says to everyone else. “We’re gonna go back to our room for a minute.”

Stiles feels okay on his feet, but Derek puts his arm around his waist to help him along anyway. At a certain point, there’s no way the pack could hear them, but they wait until they’re behind the closed door of their own room before saying anything.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asks gently.

Stiles shakes his head again wordlessly. Derek’s eyebrow raises in appraisal, but not for long, because Stiles rushes into the bathroom and kneels over the toilet, vomiting.

“Oh, no, are you trashed already?”

Stiles reaches up to push down the flushing lever and pants over the bowl as it fills up with clear water. “No.”

“Did you eat something bad at dinner?”

“No,” Stiles says distantly.

“Does your stomach feel okay now? Are you coming down with something?”

“I’m not - not sick like that.”

Derek crouches behind Stiles, hands in his hair to lightly massage the scalp. “What’s going on?”

“Can you pass me the mouthwash?” Stiles asks, closing his eyes.

Derek pushes up to grab the tiny plastic bottle by the sink and passes it to Stiles, who swishes the rest of it in his mouth and eventually spits it back out into the toilet.

“This is a good sign,” Derek says, “if you think you’re not going to throw up again. Are you in pain? Do you want me to take it?”

Stiles sighs heavily. “There’s nothing … I’m physically okay.”

Derek stops talking, giving Stiles room to speak up when he wants to, but still ghosts his fingers over Stiles’ now much-emptier stomach.

“I don’t like tequila,” Stiles finally says.

“It’s okay. We won’t drink that anymore.”

“I used to like it. I’ve had it before.”

“Okay.”

Derek probably feels Stiles start to cry in his body before he hears it. “That’s what they’d been drinking that night. Before they came up to my room. I could taste it in his mouth. I could smell it on both of them.”

“Oh, Stiles. Yeah. I think that’s what I barely smelled on you when you came to my place. Fuck.”

Stiles sniffles hard, making an unbecoming noise, but it’s Derek and besides, Stiles has just puked in
“You know you didn’t have to drink that, don’t you?”

“I know I didn’t have to,” Stiles says, trying to get control over himself. “But the shots were already poured and I had a flashback in front of Scott not too long ago and he saw me lose it. I explained it away, but I didn’t want it to be weird again. He knows I like tequila - that I liked it before - I don’t want him to think there’s anything wrong - I thought I could just gulp it down really fast and it would be fine.”

“Okay. No more tequila. Ever.”

“It’s never going to be over, is it?” Stiles asks mournfully.

Derek rests his chin on Stiles’ tense shoulder. “It’s never going to be like it didn’t happen. But it’ll keep fading.”

“Good days and bad days,” Stiles echoes.

“Today is a good day, though. It was a wonderful day. This was just - it’s a bad blip on an otherwise wonderful day. And you’ll have good blips and bad blips, too.”

Backing away until he meets the wall, Derek leans forward to pull Stiles along with him, supporting him between his bent legs and splayed knees. “I feel better,” Stiles tells him. “I feel a lot better. We can go back now.”

“Let’s just relax here for a few minutes, okay?”

Stiles murmurs his assent, turning to nestle into Derek sideways. “If you were still an alpha, you could take the memories, right?”

“Technically, yeah.”

“But would that mean you would have them instead? You would know everything I used to know?”

“Yes.”

Stiles tucks his head in the space under Derek’s chin. “You’ve been through so much shit. I wouldn’t want you to live with knowing exactly what happened to me, anyway. It’s okay. I can.”

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Stiles and Derek eventually rejoin the party, staving off any concerns when Stiles rubs at his flushed cheeks and shrugs. “Now that’s what I call an eighteenth birthday celebration - drinking, puking some up, and coming back for more.”

“You okay, man?” Scott said, pausing mid-pour.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Probably just got it in me to stick to beer and like, one more shot. Not tequila, though. I think that one stopped agreeing with me a while ago.”

Scott tosses him a can of Sam Adams instead. “Okay, take it easy.”

Ultimately, the party had already peaked before Stiles and Derek left, so they didn’t miss very much at all, and everyone keeps slowing down to the point where they’re mostly just nursing whatever they have in their hands.
Kira is lightly snoring in the bed and Lydia’s eyes are almost as red as her hair when the group calls it quits for the night. Being the least drunk, Derek and Stiles putter around, efficiently cleaning up most of the mess so Kira and Scott don’t think they’re in a landfill after they wake up the next morning.


“Best trip ever,” Stiles concurs, and he completely means it, blips and all.

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For obvious reasons, everyone sleeps in late the next day. Thankfully, Lydia makes sure everyone gets up in time to get themselves decently presentable and check out of their rooms by the deadline. Lunch is leisurely, as no one is in a particular hurry to drive back to Beacon Hills and they’re still a little hungover.

Kira changes her mind about not buying an offbeat dress she saw in a store earlier, so she and the girls are going back to get it before they leave. Scott volunteers to go with them, even though it’s shopping, because he’s riding with them anyway and as he so earnestly tells Kira, “your face makes my head stop pounding.”

Derek generously offers to pay for lunch and they split into their two groups. “You don’t have to wait for us,” Lydia says as she stands up and pushes her chair back in. “You can just take off.”

“Okay,” Stiles easily accepts. “We’ll text you when we’re back safe. You guys do the same.”

Once they’re alone, Stiles sips at his iced tea while Derek signs the check. “Almost back to the real world,” Stiles says. “I kind of miss the loft, though.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Can we walk over to the pier one more time before we leave?”

Derek smiles. “Sure.”

Their banter is casual as they take off on foot. “I would stay at your place today,” Stiles says, “but my dad’s not working an overnight so I should probably be at home.”

“That’s okay,” Derek says. “I got you for two nights already. Just let me know if you want me to come by.”

“Will do,” Stiles replies, scooping up Derek’s hand in his.

They look out at the water for a while until Stiles glances at his watch and sighs. “We should probably get going soon.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s take a picture first,” Stiles suggests, reaching for his phone in his pocket. He starts to navigate to the camera option when he stops in his tracks. “Oh, wait. We can’t. Your eyes will do that glowy thing.”

“No, I can control it. All of the weres can. I control it all the time, actually. I only turn it on when I want to, like for mugshots. I mean, that would be a pretty shitty weakness otherwise. Hunters could identify us just by taking photos. They could find us with long-range cameras and we’d have no
fucking clue. I can be in photos.”

“Oh, cool,” Stiles says, pleasantly surprised. He’ll have to talk to Scott and the rest of the pack about this later. “So we can get our selfie on?”

“If you want to use those words, sure.”

They lean against the railing while Stiles fiddles with his phone, trying to figure out at which angle and distance to hold it. Derek, of course, is no help. He may be able to appear in photographs just fine, but he hardly ever takes any himself.

As an older couple passes by, the woman stops and circles back to them. “Oh, you boys are just darling,” she says.

“Thanks,” Stiles grins. He has no idea whether she thinks they’re just friends or more, but he’s okay either way. The one thing he knows is he will never introduce Derek as his cousin Miguel again. This amazing man is with him by choice, not tethered to him by bloodlines.

“If you’d like, I can take that picture for you,” she volunteers. “We’ll make it perfect.”

“Thank you!” Stiles hands her his phone, making sure she knows where to push. “It’s such a beautiful day, so we’re just trying to get a nice shot. Like from the chest up, if you can.”

“Of course, sweetie.”

After Derek thanks the kind woman again and she goes on her way with her husband, Stiles eagerly examines the pictures. They’d opted to take two for good measure, standing close and smiling at the camera, but in between those posed shots is a candid one she must have snuck in there.

Their faces are turned inwards, laughing about something Stiles doesn’t even remember. Derek’s eyes are glowing after all, but so are Stiles’, both pairs locked on each other and ablaze with joy from the best kind of secret.

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Stiles wakes with a distressed gasp, swatting harshly at the hand on his shoulder.

“… a dream, Stiles,” he hears faintly.

Stiles looks in the direction of the words, but his heart is pounding too loudly in his ears to notice anything else.

“Stiles?” Derek asks, touching his shoulder again, but much more gently this time.

“Is it still there?” Stiles asks, the anxiety woven with terror.

“Is what still there?”

Stiles bolts upright in a panic, pulling at his earlobe. “Is it still there?”

“What -” Squinting in confusion, Derek sits up and leans over to follow Stiles’ gesture, peering at the kanji symbol for “self” that the oni left behind. “Yeah, it’s there, Stiles. It’s still there.”

“Okay,” Stiles pants, drenched in sweat that’s seeped through his t-shirt and matted down his hair. “Okay, good.”
“It’s all right,” Derek says, taking a familiar soothing tone. “You were having a nightmare, but it was only a dream.”

Instinctively, Stiles curls into him, breathing so hard it easily eclipses his hammering pulse.

“I’m sorry I didn’t wake you up earlier.” Derek palms the back of Stiles’ neck. “I must have been sleeping pretty hard.”

Stiles still doesn’t respond, but Derek probably doesn’t expect him to. He’s not having another panic attack, but waking up from a dream and falling back into reality isn’t usually seamless for him.

Even pressed against Derek’s warmth, Stiles shivers. “You’re really cold,” Derek murmurs.

“Sorry …”

Derek slides his hands under Stiles’ shirt, rubbing the clammy skin on his back. “It’s okay.”

“I’m gross.”

“It’s okay, but you’re soaked. You won’t get warm this way. Can I …?”

Stiles nods and Derek tugs the shirt off before folding his arms around Stiles again. “That sounded like a pretty bad one. What happened? What did he do?”

“It wasn’t about him,” Stiles whispers. “He wasn’t there.”

“Oh?” Derek says, before taking a completely different pitch altogether. “Oh. What you asked me - behind your ear -”

Stiles sags against him. “Yeah. I know I should be over it; the nogitsune was months ago.”

“You were possessed, Stiles. That was really fucked up. Of course it still bothers you.”

“I was void again,” Stiles tells him, shivering this time from the idea rather than the cold. “It was like I’d never stopped.”

“But you did. It was a dream. What’s real is it’s over and you’re safe.”

Stiles chokes down a sob, pressing his cheek against Derek’s shoulder. “Maybe this time, it wasn’t real. But that doesn’t change everything that’s already happened.”

“I know,” Derek says. “That wasn’t your fault, though.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Stiles repeats, his voice breaking. He pulls back from Derek to bury his face in his hands. “It wasn’t my fault. You think it wasn’t my fault?”

“Stiles, you didn’t do anything wrong. You weren’t in control -”

“I wasn’t in control?” Stiles looks up, chin quivering and eyes red-rimmed. “I remember everything that I did. The worst part is I remember liking it. Because I felt powerful. I felt fearless - and most of all, in control.”

Stiles is crying without restraint now, hands twitching erratically. He needs to crawl out of his own body and stay out. He doesn’t want it - it’s only a vehicle for delivering pain.

“How could I feel like that? How could I like doing those things? I thought I was okay being human,
having human limits. If I wanted to have powers, I would have let Peter bite me that day, before you killed him. But there’s something really wrong with me, Derek. Everyone says it wasn’t me hurting people. But I still felt - I remember liking it - I -"

“No, Stiles -”

“So I deserved not having any control! I deserved to be powerless, to feel nothing but afraid. And Clay came back and made me all of those things, and I fucking deserved all of it …”

“Stiles, no, no one could ever deserve that. He was your flesh and blood and what he -”

“I hurt so many people, Derek. I had to pay for that - Morrell says the universe needs to maintain the balance -”

Derek hugs Stiles’ shaking form close to him, Stiles’ gasps for breath warm and humid against his neck. “That’s not what she meant,” he argues. “That’s not it at all. She’s talking about something else.”

“How do you know that? I can’t just get away with what I did, with how I felt. That’s evil shit right there. I told you I’m really fucked up, you just don’t want to believe it -”

These realizations had likely been bubbling under the surface for a long time and are almost too unnerving to talk about, but Stiles doesn’t hold back. Derek already saw the intense freak-out anyway, and Stiles doesn’t want to keep things caged up inside - not when Derek is right there.

“It was another trick, Stiles. The nogitsune made you think you felt like that, like it made you and your dad think your brain was shrinking.”

“No,” Stiles says, whimpering, “I felt it.”

“Does that even sound like you?”

“No, but - people don’t always know the worst parts of themselves. I don’t want that to be me, but it was.”

“Stiles.” Derek leans back, brushing his hand up Stiles’ forehead and through his saturated hair. “It wasn’t. It’s just like your uncle. The nogitsune kept trying to make you think you liked it, just like he did. But they were both wrong. You have to know they were.”

Stiles swallows thickly between hard sobs. Derek’s touch is always calming, but he can’t make this go away.

“You know,” Derek says, “there’s that concept that people are the hero in their own stories. People like Kate and Gerard, they think they’re the heroes, no matter what they do. But for some reason, you see yourself as the villain when you’re not.”

“But Derek -”

“You were never the villain. We were fighting for you.”

“But he came back now, Derek. Why did Clay come back now?”

“Like you said, he was getting divorced and was looking for a place to stay, right? Not because you deserved to be punished. He wasn’t your penance. The nogitsune took away all of your choices, and so did your uncle. That’s not balance. If anything, the universe owes you for the rest of your life.”
“Yeah, the divorce, but - he didn’t have to move back here - he came here for me …”

Derek resumes his comforting back rub. “So if that’s true, when would you have been done paying? Being forced to do what he made you do - how much would have been enough?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says, shaking his head. “People died, Derek. They died. They’re never coming back. Allison died. Deputy Harper’s wife, she probably lies in their bed alone, crying herself to sleep every night, because I killed her husband in that explosion.”

“So someone should get into your bed and make you cry, too?” Derek grits out through his clenched jaw.

“I know it doesn’t change anything, but I couldn’t just walk away after that.”

“Stiles, I wish you could see that you were the nogitsune’s victim, too. You shouldn’t feel guilty over what it did. Or for surviving when not everyone else did. I don’t want you to turn out like me.”

Stiles hiccups and crinkles his nose. “What?”

“I don’t want you to still be blaming yourself for everything, years from now. You’ll hate yourself and it’ll define you for so long you won’t even remember the way you used to be. So we’re gonna have to do something about this, okay?”

“I’ve started trying to find a therapist,” Stiles says. “But I can’t talk to one about the nogitsune.”

“You can talk to me, okay? I want you to.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, nodding. “I’ll try.” He grimaces when he wipes at the fresh tear tracks and touches the hair at the back of his neck, which feels just as damp as his face. “I should shower. I must smell so fucking salty to you.”

“But your chemosignals are better now,” Derek assures. “I don’t care about the sweat.”

“I’m gonna get cleaned up.”

“Are you going to be able to go back to sleep afterwards?”

Stiles shrugs. “Probably not. But I’ll keep it down so you can sleep.”

“Do you want to order some pizza and watch a movie? Pizza’s probably the only thing still open right now.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, smiling a little. “But really, you don’t have to stay up with me.”

“No, I’m awake. It’s a Friday night, so we can go back to bed whenever and sleep in. And do something fun later. Like maybe you can take me to laser tag? You wanna wear that bulls-eye shirt for old times’ sake?”

Stiles gives Derek one more squeeze, disregarding the slight adhesion of his sticky skin, before he heads to the bathroom. “I think we’re way past that by now.”

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A rainy Sunday evening marks the end of Spring Break and catches Stiles and Derek by surprise. They traipse up the stairwell to the loft, dripping buckets of water along the way. Laughing as they stumble through the front door, Stiles is suddenly clamoring to take a hot shower and put on warm
clothes, now that those two things are in such close proximity.

But it’s Derek’s place, after all, so he politely says, “You can use the bathroom first.”

Derek shrugs. “I don’t get as cold as you do. Go for it.”

Stiles has no problem obliging and runs off, the heavy hems of his jeans slapping the concrete floor loudly with each step. “I’ll try to keep it under two hours!” he jokes.

After about five minutes, Derek comes in and Stiles squints at him through the frosted glass door. “Is it okay if I join you?” Derek asks. “But I can wait, too.”

“No, it’s fine, come on in.”

They’ve seen each other naked before, without an amped-up charge of sexual energy, so Stiles isn’t worried or embarrassed. Derek’s not shy about his body, either - why would he be? It’s fucking amazing.

Stiles hears Derek stumble around and bang into the wall. “Fuck,” Derek mutters.

“What’s wrong?” Stiles pokes his head out and cackles at Derek’s efforts to peel his stubborn, wet jeans down his pinking thighs. “Dude, you have werewolf strength. Or you can just cut them off with your claws.”

“I’m not cutting these, they’re my favorite pair.”

Stiles murmurs in consensus. Derek looks great in them. He’d have to insist on some kind of commemorative ceremony for the shredded ribbons.

“Did you have this much trouble? You turned on the water pretty fast.”

“No, but I’m a beanpole and everyday is Leg Day for you.”

When Derek finally slides into the stall, Stiles is in the midst of soaping up and moves out of the way so Derek can occupy the showerhead for a while. “Mmmm, that feels good,” Derek mutters.

Stiles passes the soap to him and they do a natural little dance, sidestepping to change positions. When Stiles moves so Derek can have the water again, the suds slide off Derek’s muscled form and Stiles can’t help admiring.

Derek seems so much less guarded with his hair down instead of styled up. Or maybe it’s just the way Derek’s looking at him. Without thinking about it, Stiles reaches out and brushes a few locks off to the side.

They kiss languidly, Derek letting Stiles have most of the spray and Stiles’ arms coming up around Derek’s shoulders. The water doesn’t do much to soften Derek’s stubble, but Stiles likes the light scrape of it against his skin - the perfect metaphor for Derek’s rough edges on the surface juxtaposed with his soft, tender kisses. This is what kissing was always supposed to be like.

It’s the first time in a long time Stiles has stood in the shower and not willed it to cleanse things it can’t. But, Stiles thinks idly as Derek’s tongue presses against his, the new light in his life might be able to.

Stiles knows he’s hard - they both are - but they don’t do anything more and Derek’s hands never trail below Stiles’ waist.
“Do you want to …?” Derek starts to ask after a while, and Stiles’ eyes flick open, uncertain. He wants to. He wants to do everything with Derek. But it’s not that simple. It might never be.

His mouth has gone dry, in stark contrast to the water descending on him. If it was possible, Stiles would be sweating, too, and as it is, he can feel the anxiety building in his chest. He blinks a few times and gives a shaky sigh.

This was good while it lasted. Derek will see now how massively far he is from being able to give him anything. It was one thing for Derek to see him broken because of the abuse, but in the cocoon of safety and love? It hasn’t been that long, but Stiles doesn’t know when he’ll be able to do all of the things that come with a monogamous, trusting relationship. He really can’t ask Derek to wait around for him forever. It’s not Derek’s fault - he’s been so patient as it is - but Stiles can’t give him what he’s worthy of.

“No - I meant, do you want to touch yourself?”

“What?” Stiles jerks his head in surprise. “I thought you wanted -”

“No, I don’t mean - you don’t have to do anything. With me. I don’t need anything. But if you want to - for yourself…”

Stiles is silent for a moment, unable to remember the last time he did that. It’s been months, he’s certain.

“You don’t have to. But if you want to, I can leave you alone, if you’re more comfortable that way,” Derek offers, beginning to pull away and move towards the shower door.

“No!” Stiles grabs Derek’s arm, fingers slipping against his damp skin. “I want you here. Stay, please.”

Derek cups his hands around Stiles’ hips and turns him around to face the tiles, the hot water still running down his back. Careful not to press against him from behind, Derek loops an arm around Stiles’ waist and strokes the base of his spine with the other hand.

Stiles starts out gingerly, almost experimentally, like he hasn’t done this hundreds of times before and it isn’t just like riding a bike. Physically, he knows exactly what he responds to, but his brain has been so mixed up and scrambled for so long that he has no idea how it will react. He associates coming with self-destruction more than pleasure.

Derek must feel the tension flaring throughout him, because he flattens his hand against Stiles’ stomach and kisses along the stretch of Stiles’ neck, nuzzling his nose against the symbol behind his ear.

Stiles reaches up with his free arm to steady himself against the wall. Derek murmurs, “It’s okay, I got you,” and holds him a little tighter.

Right before he comes, Stiles gasps out Derek’s name and his legs begin to falter. But Derek is right there, just like he promised, catching him before Stiles even realizes he needs it.

Chapter End Notes
A few things in particular here …

The show has addressed that the glowing eyes in photographs happen, but even in
canon, there have clearly been instances in which they haven’t (like Derek’s driver’s
license). And logically, it seems like it would come up all the time, just in daily life,
because wouldn’t these teenage were-creatures have to take class pictures and end up
getting snapped in candid shots or sports coverage for the yearbook and things like that?
Never mind the notation I included about the vulnerability being a tremendous tip-off to
a trained hunter. That said, it’s a little odd for Stiles and Derek to talk about it like this is
new information (post-season-4!), but oh well!

You may have noticed that I took some lines verbatim from canon in the nightmare
scene. I absolutely hated what they wrote for Stiles in episode 4.4, was it?, about how
he felt with the nogitsune. It made no sense to me at all, didn’t seem necessary for the
scene, and was salt in the wound after Stiles not really struggling with his possession
after it was over and the collective short-lived mourning of Allison. I just roll my eyes
whenever I hear it in the episode, but it was actually compatible with this story, so I
guess crappy canon can work for fanfic, so … thanks, bad TW writing? …

Lastly, hopefully that scene gave some additional dimension to how Stiles feels and why
he feels that way, whether he knew it or not. There were times during the abuse in
which he thought Clay was punishing him or was afraid that Clay would, but ultimately,
he believed on some level that the entire ordeal was a punishment he deserved for his
time as the nogitsune. We all know he didn’t, but Stiles was so trapped in that vicious
cycle, grief-stricken that his abuser had returned and falling deeper and deeper as it
escalated, that he really couldn’t think straight about it.

Thanks for reading and supporting! I wrote a massive portion of this story before I
posted chapter 1, but all of the words I’ve written since posting have been a completely
different experience once the writing process became more interactive.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Yeah, it’s the weekend! Thanks for your patience in between chapters 10 and 11. As I get into the final chapters, I’m just so grateful for the readership and interest. Thanks for your support!

[Posted 11/03/17]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As he waits for his laptop to boot up, Stiles opens his binder and carefully pulls out the digital photos he had printed out at a Target kiosk.

On top is a group shot Stiles had taken during their last beach breakfast. He’d been coming back from the restroom and taken advantage of the opportunity to capture everyone unaware and spontaneous. Stiles pins it to the corner of his wall collage as an easy reminder of what he works so hard to protect and why he doesn’t run away from every disaster that pops up, even though he’s not special like everyone else.

The second picture is different, though. The candid photo from the pier of just him and Derek takes his breath away. He stares down at the glossy surface, not sure if he’s more mesmerized by how happy he or Derek looks. He still can’t believe he can even feel like that after everything that’s happened.

As much as he loves the pack, this one deserves its own place. His eyes trail around the room until they land at the vacant spot in the row of pictures on his bookshelf.

Licking his lips nervously, Stiles pulls on his bottom desk drawer and retrieves the empty frame he’d tossed in so many months ago to keep out of sight. It looks no worse for the wear, but Stiles thoroughly wipes the glass and the border with the hem of his t-shirt. Clay’s phantom fingers and his prints aren’t going to get anywhere near this photo.

After popping the picture in and fastening the backing in place, Stiles turns the frame over and smiles, faintly grazing the image of Derek like that makes it more real.

Walking over to his bookshelf, he returns the frame to its original place, in between a family photo of all three Stilinskis when Stiles was in kindergarten and a much newer one of just Stiles and Noah after Stiles got his driver’s license.

Stiles is tempted to leave it there, except he knows he can’t, at least not yet. He and Derek aren’t all over each other, but it’s clear as day that they aren’t just friends. The total heart-eyes would be obvious to anyone who saw them, and that’s not really how Stiles wants anyone to find out.

He picks up the frame again, giving it one last gaze before gently placing it face-down in his top drawer.

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Painting is tedious, but Stiles doesn’t mind it so much when he’s got good company. The bathroom
isn’t that big to begin with and Stiles can already see how much nicer it’ll look with the light bouncing off the soft blue color.

“I think I want to tell my dad,” Stiles says. In the doorway, Derek tweaks his head just a few degrees, but Stiles immediately knows what he’s thinking. “Uh, no! I meant about us, I want to tell my dad about us.”

“Oh,” Derek says, still surprised. “Okay.”

“Do you not want me to?” Stiles asks, lower lip sticking out in a fake pout. “Are you embarrassed to let my dad know you find his mini-me insanely attractive?”

“I don’t even know where to start with that,” Derek replies dryly. “And trust me, I never think of your dad unprompted when I’m with you. Nor do you even look alike. You’re definitely your mother’s son.”

Stiles puffs up with gratification. There’s nothing at all wrong with more closely resembling Noah, but his mom was just so pretty.

“So for real, are you okay if I tell him?”

“Sure, he’s your dad.” Derek pauses in thought, the corners of his mouth curving down a little. “He’ll be okay with it, right? Or do you think he’ll … say no?…”

“He’s not gonna say I can’t go out with you,” Stiles assures. “I’m an adult now.”

Actually, Stiles knows nothing of the sort as a fact, but he just can’t imagine that his dad will insist he can only spend time with Derek if it’s a life-or-death situation, but never if it’s about affection and warmth. Noah might not jump for joy and shout that he’s going to Disneyland, but he’s not going to send Stiles to a monastery.

“That doesn’t mean he’s going to like it.”

“My dad likes you, Derek. Sometimes he calls you on his own -”

“For supernatural matters -”

“Yeah, but if he didn’t like you, he’d just call Argent or Deaton or someone else.”

Derek scratches at a smear of paint on his bare shoulder. “Well, I guess that should be comforting. I’m ahead both of them in the line of whom your dad might tolerate dating his son.”

“Dude, don’t worry about it. He’s come a long way since he first met you. Not as much as me, of course. He’s never stared into your eyes, all dreamy and shit. Well, I haven’t caught him, anyway.”

“Does your dad even know you like guys?”

Stiles cracks his neck. “He doesn’t not know. He won’t be surprised, I don’t think. He knows I was into Lydia for a while, but I’ve kind of joked with him about it before. He joked back that I can’t be into guys, not dressing the way I do.”

“Your clothes aren’t that bad,” Derek smirks.

“So I can’t wait to throw that back in his face, like, look, DAD, look who likes me and my rainbow of plaid shirts,” Stiles continues, gesturing in big circles at Derek. “This wondrous vision. Of steely glares and thigh muscles that could kill a horse.”
Derek nods. “That is exactly what I want engraved on my tombstone.”

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“Die, you damn dirty alien,” Stiles mumbles in the midst of an epic Halo battle, perched on the edge of his bed and leaning so far forward that his back is going to be very cranky later.

“Ah yes, you’ve finally uncovered my true identity,” Noah pipes up. Stiles’ eyes snap towards the voice, where Noah is lingering in the hallway, his uniform shirt partially unbuttoned.

“Hey, Dad.” Stiles scrambles to pause the game before it gets too away from him. “How was work?”

“It was good. Followed some leads on a convenience store robbery that look like they’re going to pan out. Also rescued Mrs. Manchester’s cat from a tree. Saving this town, one miracle at a time. And hey, prom’s coming up, isn’t it? We started talking about adding extra personnel on shift that night, just in case. You planning on going?”

“Ehhhhhh,” Stiles ruminates.

They don’t exactly have the best track record when it comes to school dances, not that Stiles thinks anything like sophomore year’s winter formal might happen again. Mrs. Martin and Mr. Yukimura have already signed up to chaperone prom, so that’s made Lydia and Kira less enthused about going.

Lydia doesn’t have a guaranteed go-to guy to hang off her arm like she usually does, but she’s fine with being an independent woman. Scott’s a little self-conscious under the attentive eye of Kira’s dad. Not just because of the cliche that Scott’s going to try to get under his daughter’s skirt on such a seminal high school occasion, but something about a disastrous wasabi incident, too. Malia understands math better than she understands the point of prom. Thumping bass, low lighting, grinding with abandon? Sure. Structured, sanitized school dances? Nope.

Stiles shrugs. “There’s always next year. I don’t need to go as a junior. And I don’t really think it’s my boyfriend’s kind of thing, either.”

Welp. There it is. It’s out there now.

“Actual boyfriend? Or is this another misdirect to get you out of a compromising position I’m not even aware of this time?”

“No, he exists. He’s not imaginary. Geez, a kid gets caught outside a gay club after it becomes a super weird crime scene, or makes up an entire troupe of Boy Scout friends when he’s five years old, and no one ever lets him forget it.”

Noah looks mostly curious and actually pleased about Stiles having a love life. “I didn’t know you’ve been seeing anyone.”

“Yeah, he’s great,” Stiles says, shrugging again in an effort to play it cool. “It’s actually - well, Derek. Derek’s my boyfriend.”

“Oh, okay.” Noah crosses his arms across his chest, head bobbing in thought. “I think I can see it. How long have you been dating?”

“Um …” Stiles trails off. He doesn’t even know what counts as their first kiss. The simple peck on the lips before Derek went to Phoenix? The birthday kiss topped with frosting and sprinkles? “Not that long. But since we’ve known each other for a while, it feels like longer.”
“He went on vacation with you?”

Stiles has seen Noah grill people before - himself on numerous occasions, of course, and at work - so he’s aware his dad is just asking the question, but Stiles still has the decency to fidget.

“Yeah, it was six of us. A big group. But it’s Derek. You know him.”

“Is it serious?”

Stiles nods with nary a speck of sarcasm. “Yes. He really means a lot to me.”

“So how did this happen?” Noah asks, stepping into the room to sit next to Stiles. “Who made the first move?”

Huh. Stiles has to think about that one. He supposes it was him, when he asked if Derek could ever want to be with him. Or maybe it was Derek’s bashful assertion that Stiles is his best friend, which is basically the equivalent of anyone else taking a bullet for someone. Though it really started way before that, when Derek was the only one keeping him together.

“We just started hanging out a lot after the whole Benefactor thing, you know, since we weren’t so busy not being killed. We were already friends, but it just kind of … I wanted more, and he wanted more, so now we have more.”

“How much more are we talking about?”

“Uh, with a lower-case m. Not upper-case. No upper-casing around here. I mean, you like Derek, right? He’s almost like an unofficial deputy.”

“Yeah, I like Derek. I trust him. I’ve trusted him with your life before. Which … you’d think that would be the biggest thing I could trust him with, but trusting him to keep you alive is not the same as trusting him with you while you live.”

“But it’s okay, right?”

Noah smirks in amusement, like Stiles ever really asks for permission in the first place. “Derek is not exactly whom I always pictured you with. But I know he looks out for you. I don’t love the age difference -”

“A millimeter, Dad.”

“Almost six years, son.”

“I’m very mature for my age,” Stiles says. Somehow it’s God’s honest truth and a joke at the same time.

“You have your moments,” Noah concedes as the most accurate characterization. “It doesn’t matter to me that he’s a man, if that’s what you’re worried about. I just want you to be happy.”

“We really, really care about each other,” Stiles says, his eyes big and sincere. His dad doesn’t always know when he’s lying, but he must know he’s not right now. “You know this past year has been really hard on me. The nogitsune and other stuff. He really helped me with that.”

“I don’t doubt his motives, Stiles. As complicated as his baggage is, it also makes him very clear and simple to me.”

“Right, like he’s not some entitled douchebag frat boy who will say or do anything to get what he
wants. I could do a lot worse, Dad. And in some ways, I could not be with anyone better.”

“I know we’ve already had the birds and the bees talks -”

“Yes, those were … extremely fun and not at all awkward.”

“Listen, kiddo, I’m a little relieved to not have to worry about pregnancy, but that’s not all there is. I was your age once, too, you know. I know how exciting it can be, and experimenting is part of growing up. You’re eighteen now, but you’re still in high school. Just because you’re legally an adult doesn’t mean you know everything and can do whatever you want.”

“I don’t want to just do whatever I want. If I did, I wouldn’t have told you. But I wanted you to know.”

“I know you’re not a little kid. Just make sure you think everything through. I trust you, but that doesn’t change your limited experience -”

“Ugh,” Stiles groans. “Let’s not talk about my experience or lack thereof. Derek doesn’t have a lot of experience with relationships, either. So we’re kind of on the same page there, even with the age gap. Which is very small.”

“Does he sneak in here at night?” Stiles opens his mouth with an audible inhale, but Noah cuts him off and continues. “Stiles, I already assume he does. You and Scott have been climbing through each other’s windows since the beginning of time. I don’t see why Derek would be any different.”

“Yeah, he stays over sometimes,” Stiles confirms, looking down. The honest approach is probably best. “But we don’t do anything to be worried about.”

Noah arches a skeptical eyebrow and Stiles doesn’t blame him. Stiles is allegedly a healthy young male - why isn’t he losing the battle to out-of-control hormones? And Derek is so incredibly beautiful - why isn’t Stiles tripping over himself to rub up against all of that?

“I promise, we aren’t having sex. I don’t - I don’t really want to, not yet. Not for a while.”

Noah doesn’t look any less dubious. “Stiles, I want you to know you can talk to me. And I’ll know if something is happening in here under my own roof.”

Stiles swallows a lump in his throat. The average horny teenager would probably be thrilled that that’s not really true in practice, but Stiles isn’t - not after all the rounds he quietly endured with Clay that disproved the theory.

“Honestly, Dad. I’m not just saying that to try to trick you. I really want to take things slow. So does Derek. It’s not a wham-bam-thank-you-werewolf thing. It’s more … more emotional than that.”

Once the words hit Stiles’ own ears, he knows that they’re not helping his dad’s comprehension. “Emotional,” Noah parrots, clearly bemused.

“Arg,” Stiles says. “I don’t know how to explain. We care more about how we feel here -” pointing to his head, “and here -” then to his chest, “than we feel, like all around here,” he finishes, gesturing below the waist.

“Okay,” Noah relents after so much insistence from Stiles. “But when you get to a point where you think you want to move to that level, you have to be safe and protect yourself. Emotionally, yes, but also physically. You know what I mean?”
Stiles nods. It’s not his dad’s fault he doesn’t know Derek has already protected him more than anyone in the world except his own parents. “Yeah, Dad, I get it.”

“And never trust the other guy to have condoms. Be responsible and have them yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s what the fake Boy Scouts taught me,” Stiles cracks. “Be prepared.”

After a moment, he stands up in a tentative, stilted motion, feeling the need to make sure his dad understands he isn’t actually so flippant about the topic. Striding over to his dresser, he crouches down and opens the third drawer down, fishing around in the very back and pushing aside some pajamas he doesn’t wear anymore.

“I mean, I have these,” Stiles says, holding up one of the unopened boxes of condoms he’d purchased earlier.

It’s gross to show them to his dad, considering why Stiles got them in the first place, but if they can have a tiny, positive impact now in reassuring Noah, at least there’s that. Stiles doesn’t even know why he still has them. If he and Derek ever have sex, it sounds like they don’t need condoms to prevent transmission. And even if they decided to use them anyway, Stiles would never reallocate the ones he’d bought for evil incarnate to the virtue steadfastly at his side.

Noah gets up slightly, still hovering over the mattress with his knees bent, to peer closer. “Good,” he notes with satisfaction. “Hey, it’s still shrink-wrapped.”

“Like I said, I haven’t needed any with Derek yet.”

Noah stretches out for another glance. “Two boxes, Stiles?” he asks, spying the second one still resting in the drawer. “Really? But I’d rather see you overzealous about this kind of thing than reckless.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dad. I’ll be safe with Derek.”

“And I do not want him sneaking into your room, like he’s a criminal or he’s doing something wrong. He can come through the front door. He should come through the front door.”

Stiles closes his dresser drawer and sits back down next to Noah. “So he can sleep over? I mean, literally just come over and spend time with me without having to go home just because society and circadian rhythm say it’s time to go to sleep?”

Sometimes Stiles likes to beat around the bush, getting implied consent by what he doesn’t say, but he knows what he wants and needs to make sure he can have it, even if that means being super direct and risking refusal.

Noah’s eyes narrow a pinch. “Stiles—”

“I won’t lock my door …” Stiles says impulsively, feeling his mouth go dry. It should be an innocent compromise, but it was a strict, enabling rule for so long that it’ll be a while until it doesn’t carry that heavy implication. “I mean, if that makes you feel better.”

“That’s not necessary. You two have been through a lot. I understand that you feel you have built a connection with him. And I can’t deny that he’s saved my own life before. I know that what you have been through is more than a few months of doing homework together or going to the movies.”

“So … is that a yes?”
“See my earlier comment about coming in through the front door.”

“Can I sleep over at his loft?”

“Do you already? When you say you’re at Scott’s, or when you say other people are staying over at Derek’s, too?”

Stiles nods. “Sometimes. But we’re not doing anything bad, you know. We just like being together.”

“Okay, some ground rules. You are not in an adult relationship yet, just because Derek’s an adult and your birthday passed. But I trust you. You’ll be making a lot more decisions on your own when you go to college and I don’t think it hurts either of us to adjust over time instead of opening the floodgates once you’re away on campus.

“You’re right, at least I know Derek. I trust his sense of honor, even if I don’t love everything about him and how he lives. And I have to admit, I wouldn’t mind knowing you’re not by yourself every time I have an overnight shift, now that it’s just the two of us again. So yes, you can sleep over at his place, but no more than twice per week. And he can sleep over here no more than twice per week. No sneaking around and no bending of these allowances, which are probably way too generous to begin with.

“I need to know when he’s here, even when I’m not, and I need to know when you’re there. No sneaking, Stiles. I believe you that you’re not in a sexual relationship, but I’m not naive - there will come a time when that changes. But be smart about it and you can always come to me to talk. Your grades have been great, but if they start to slip, I’ll have no choice but to assume it’s because of Derek and you will have to spend less time with him and more time studying.”

Stiles pauses in his series of nods. “Is that all?”

“You want to add to that?”

“No! No, I just mean, that’s all pretty reasonable, Dad. Thanks for trusting me. I promise, I won’t let you down. Part of being an adult is showing you I’m not going to pull any stupid teenage shit.”

“I don’t want to send you the wrong message, Stiles. It’s not like the only thing that’s important is sex. That’s a piece of it, but really, I just want you to have good, healthy relationships. You can always talk to me about that, too. I know that sounds weird, coming from your old man who hasn’t been in a relationship in almost a decade.”

“No,” Stiles refutes, “you had Mom. I had great role models.”

All of Stiles’ patchy childhood memories of his parents might be distorted by the passage of time and the rosy sheen of a kid’s perspective, but he knows they were magic together. Stiles has never been able to grasp how Clay could be related to his kind, nurturing mother.

“Well,” Noah says, tilting his head, “you were a kid, so you didn’t really see what really goes into a relationship, but at the core, just respect and love each other and be good to each other. Be better with each other.”

Stiles nods effusively. “That’s all I want. He makes me better. I just want to be good with him.”

“Oh, buddy.” Noah slings an arm around Stiles’ shoulders. “I’m really proud of the man you’re becoming.”

“Can you not say anything to anyone about Derek? We haven’t told the rest of the pack yet. We’re
enjoying this in private for a while longer.”

“Sure. I won’t tell the other kids in our WhatsApp group chat.”

Stiles juts his chin out suspiciously. “How do you even know what WhatsApp is? What’s going on here? Do you have a social life I don’t know about? I need to know everything.”

“Right now, the only addition to my social life is Mrs. Manchester’s cat. Who is not on WhatsApp, I should clarify. And I’m not done knowing everything yet. Answer one more question for me.”

Stiles grumbles. “I’m not making any promises. If it makes one or both of us tremendously uncomfortable, I’m just going to abstain.”

“What does a guy like Derek Hale like to do on dates?” Noah asks, squinting. “Scott on dates, no problem; he does regular human things all the time. But Derek? I can’t even picture him going to the dry cleaners or putting quarters in a meter or making reservations at a restaurant. Do you go to places that require reservations?”

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Stiles’ phone dings in his pocket and he hustles down the stairs, taking a sharp turn at the bottom. Jerking the front door open, he exercises some control only in closing it behind him with a soft click.

“Hey,” he says with an even softer smile.

Derek moves the bottle of chilled merlot he’s holding back and forth between his hands. “Hey.”

Stiles takes stock of Derek’s dark jeans and forest green sweater. It looks really soft - is it cashmere? Is Derek Hale wearing fucking cashmere? It makes sense that Stiles has never seen this top before, though. It’s not really battle or lounge apparel.

“You look really nice. Green is a great color on you.”

“Thanks,” Derek says, nerves creeping into his voice. “I’ve never met any parents before. I mean, just Gerard, but -”

“That fucking guy was a cancer on humanity before he even had cancer. He doesn’t count. He’s a non-entity. My dad is awesome, and you already know him.”

“I know, but that was before. He didn’t think of me as the guy dating his only kid.”

“Yeah, no,” Stiles says, running his hands over Derek’s shoulders, “he just met you as a sullen maybe-murderer, then sullen non-murderer, and then hairy, fangy werewolf.”

“Oh God, I hope he remembers the non-murderer part. That one seems a little more trustworthy.”

“Don’t stress, dude. My dad didn’t invite you over for a grand inquisition. He just wants to acknowledge that we’re together and he’s fine with it. Get to know you a little better. And you’re allowed to stay over tonight. It’s not a ruse to try to smother you with a pillow. He said it himself - you’re allowed to sleep over. Them’s the rules.”

Derek bites his lip. “It feels weird, though. The first time he invites me into his home like this, and I’m going to go upstairs later, like, ‘thanks for dinner, try not to think about all of the things I’m doing to your son?’”

“He knows we’re not like that. But he’s realistic - he knows we might get there, and I’m not saying
he’s totally thrilled about all of the things you could do, but he’s the kind of dad who feels safer if it’s at home, not running around in secret. He just thinks we’re going to sleep, anyway.”

“Do you think this is okay?” Derek asks, raising the bottle. “I didn’t want to come empty-handed, but hard liquor seemed like I’m telling your dad, the Sheriff, that I think he drinks a lot. And beer’s too casual. Wine seems normal, but then I wondered if that makes it look like I drink a lot, and maybe I give you alcohol, which I do, but he doesn’t need to know that. Maybe I should have brought a pie.”

“No, it’s perfect, thanks,” Stiles says, blushing on the inside that Derek cares so much. “Come on, my dad’s setting the table.”

Stiles had started dinner himself and Noah helped him finish it once he came home from the station. It shouldn’t really make a difference, but Stiles finds it’s nice to cook for three, the way his mom used to. It’s nice knowing that most of the food is going to be eaten right away at the dinner table instead of being boxed up in tupperware as leftovers. Like at a home with a whole family and not two people with mostly divergent schedules.

“No, it’s perfect, thanks,” Derek says, placing the bottle down on the table and extending his hand. “Thank you for having me.”

Stiles pinches himself to keep from laughing. Not to be rude, but this is the same scowling loner who didn’t want anyone to get within twenty feet of him a year ago, and now he’s using formal greetings like approval means everything to him.

Noah meets him halfway and shakes his hand vigorously before surveying the bottle. “Good choice, Derek. I’ll pour some out.”

Stiles busies himself checking on the chicken parmesan and roasted yams and carrots in the oven. He deems them ready, setting the casserole dishes in the middle of the table, while Noah tosses the salad and drizzles it with dressing.

Noah’s already at the head of the table and Stiles takes the seat across from Derek, now realizing there are only two glasses of wine on the table and neither are near him. “Where’s mine?”

“Oh, you’re too young,” Noah answers. “You can just leave that to us. There might be a juice box in the fridge, though.”

Stiles plays along with an elaborate sigh, but he doesn’t mind grabbing a soda. As long as his dad is okay with the age difference, he’s happy.

“So, Derek,” Noah says, cutting into his chicken, “what have you been up to since the Benefactor mess?”

Derek tells Noah about the home improvement projects, supplying more detail as requested, mostly with respect to Stiles’ exact contributions and occasional mishaps. Stiles interjects with his version of events, though he’s quickly discovering Derek’s not the one who’s been queued up for a hard time.

“You don’t let him do anything with the electrical, do you?” Noah asks, pulling a “yikes” face.

“Oh no,” Derek replies. “I know Stiles has a certain spark, but he shouldn’t get anywhere near that stuff. The whole block would be out of power for days.”

“Hey!” Stiles jabs the air with his fork. “That’s probably true, but how does one learn if not through failure and infinite darkness?”
Derek laughs. “We’re redoing the bathroom right now. Just painted it and I’m going to change out the light fixtures and hardware this week.”

“Sounds like you’ve been busy,” Noah says. “It’s nice that you got a chance to relax at the beach with Stiles.”

Derek’s gaze flicks over to Stiles, whose expression clearly tells him not to panic or feel guilty. “Yeah, it was a lot of fun. It was really helpful for pack bonding.”

“Derek took me surfing,” Stiles informs. “Sort of. I mean, I didn’t really surf. But we paddled out and it was so peaceful. I loved it.”

Noah perks up. “I used to surf when I was younger. I mean, much younger, before you were born, Stiles. I’m glad you tried it.”

“I didn’t know that,” Stiles says. His brows furrow as he mentally flips through the older Stilinski photo albums, but he doesn’t remember seeing any pictures. “You should pick it up again. I know we’re too far - you can’t just wake up and grab a board - but we should go out there sometime. I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Noah nods, smiling fondly.

They further settle into easy conversation, with Derek relaxing more and more. After Noah explains a new true crime podcast he’s been trying out during stakeouts, Derek recommends a couple of recent books he’s read. Neither book sounds familiar to Stiles, but Derek reads so much that Stiles could never keep track of his activity unless he really tried.

“Hey, Derek, do you have a dry cleaners you like? I’m looking for a new one.”

Stiles almost chokes on some yam, but manages to swallow down the pulpy piece.

“Oh yeah, I go to Sterling Cleaners on Thorn Street. They’re really good. Like, not when I have clothes covered in blood - I don’t take that in, obviously. But they just did a great job with my comforter.”

“You give them a stamp of approval?” Noah asks, turning to Stiles. “You like Derek’s comforter?”

Stiles laughs, pushing his finished plate away from him. “Yeah, Dad, I use it sometimes. When I’m studying on the couch to earn my perfect grades or outlining grand plans for world peace.”

Derek takes a sip of his second glass of wine, leaving about a modest amount behind. Noah eyes it and cocks his head towards Stiles, who punches his fist in victory when Derek hands him the rest.

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“This stupid history paper,” Stiles gripes at his desk later that evening. “I wish you were one of those supernatural creatures that’s hundreds of years old, so you could just tell me from first-hand knowledge what happened. That would be so much faster.”

“Sorry,” Derek shrugs, but he doesn’t sound the least bit sorry as he stretches out on Stiles’ bed with a comic book. “I’m just a 23-year-old lycanthrope. Would you really prefer it if I was a 500-year-old vampire or something?”

“Only when it comes to shortcuts on homework. The only thing I might actually change about you is your snoring.”
“Come on, how terrible could it be if you’ve never mentioned it before? It’s probably on par with your farting in your sleep.”

“I don’t!” Stiles squawks indignantly, though he realizes he has no basis for denying. “I mean, I probably do …”

The bedroom door is wide open - Stiles left it that way on purpose - and Noah stops in, leaning against the frame.

“I might need to go in to work later tonight,” he tells them. “Parrish is starting to feel under the weather, so if he needs to duck out early, I’ll pick up the slack for him.”

“Hope he’s okay,” Stiles says, throwing a wadded up piece of paper at Derek’s chest.

“He’s survived the Army and Beacon Hills so far; I think he’ll survive this.”

Stiles misses an easy catch as Derek throws the ball of paper back. “I’m just gonna finish some homework and then we’ll go to bed.”

“Okay.” Noah’s gaze sweeps across the room quickly. “Have a good night.”

He turns to leave, pulling the door shut behind him. Eyes wide in exaggeration, Stiles gasps at Derek. “My dad wants me to get laid.”

“I didn’t get that from him at all.”

“Didn’t I tell you he likes you?” Stiles asks, quite pleased with himself.

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Stiles presses the doorbell once, the chime sounding out on the other side. It looks like Argent is home - his car is parked outside the apartment complex, at least - but Stiles is far less sure that Argent will answer once he looks through the peephole.

As Stiles debates knocking as one last attempt, the door swings open.

Argent rubs at his ever-graying beard. “Stiles.”

“Hi, Mr. Argent,” Stiles says. “I don’t mean to bother you, but do you have a few minutes?”

Argent takes a few steps back and opens the door wider so Stiles can come inside. He hasn’t seen Argent much lately, just here and there when it had seemed like there might be a new threat in Beacon Hills, but the last couple of instances had all been false alarms. He’s a little surprised that Argent hasn’t picked up and moved somewhere else for a fresh start. The fact that Gerard is being cared for in a facility nearby must not really matter. Argent hasn’t stayed for him.

But, Stiles reasons, Argent’s identity as a husband and father is now just in his heart, making his hunter purpose more prominent in his day-to-day life. With the nemeton attracting supernatural energy, Beacon Hills is still in need of experienced defenders.

Stiles glances at the couch, but rests the backs of his thighs against the arm instead of sitting down. Argent let him in, but that doesn’t mean he’s a guest.

In the moment, Stiles feels really bad about finding any amusement in Derek’s butterflies before dinner with his father. This isn’t the same thing and Stiles had known Derek was worrying about nothing, but it probably would have been better, karma-wise, to tease him a little less about it.
Stiles doesn’t even have anything to offer Argent, who stands opposite of him in the arch. Just endless, inarticulate apologies.

“How are you?” he asks, easing into it.

Argent shrugs. “Keeping busy. I just got back from helping an old hunter friend of mine in Seattle. What about you?”

“It’s been quiet on the monster front, but obviously you know that, or you wouldn’t have left town for a while. I’m doing okay. Ups and downs.”

Stiles licks his dry lips. Easing into it isn’t getting him anywhere but Awkwardville, population 2.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time, but I wanted to tell you again how sorry I am about Allison. I would do anything to get her back. It should have been me, not her. I don’t even really know why I’m here, because I don’t expect what I just said to mean anything to you, or maybe it makes even worse. But it’s okay to blame me. Saying how sorry I am isn’t enough. I can’t - I can’t make it better - nothing’s gonna bring her back - but if you want to be angry with me for it, that’s okay, you should be -”

Looking as collected as always, Argent holds a hand up, palm facing out. “Slow down, Stiles. I don’t blame you. I never did. Even right after it happened. I know what a hunter’s life is like. It’s different when it’s your kid, but I still didn’t … I wasn’t looking for someone to be angry with. I was angry enough at myself. If I’d only gotten there sooner, if I was protecting her like I should have been, maybe I could have pushed her out of the way or jumped in front of her to take the hit.”

“She never should have been in danger like that in the first -”

“Stiles, I’ve already had a conversation like this with Lydia.”

“What?” Stiles straightens up, shoulders squaring. “Why?”

“We talked right before I left with Isaac. She felt like it was her fault, too. Because Allison was trying to rescue her.”

“Lydia only needed help because I took her.”

“No, you didn’t,” Argent says slowly. “The nogitsune took her. You had already separated by then.”

Stiles’ features pinch together. “But I knew how dangerous it was. No one knew that more than me, and I should have done something about it when I had the chance. Even after we’d separated, we weren’t totally split - if I’d just ended it - ended me - the nogitsune would’ve been gone and Allison never would’ve fought the oni. I made her make the sacrifice that I didn’t.”

“That’s not on you. The nogitsune compromised you so much to begin with.”

“And she died because I wasn’t strong enough,” Stiles reiterates, slumping against the couch again.

Argent shifts his footing to redistribute his weight. “When I was in lockup after McCall arrested us, I told Derek about these Germanic warriors called berserkers. They ritualistically channeled the ferocity of bears until they became them. I’ve seen it myself, a teenage boy who had done the same thing. He was killing people because he wasn’t human anymore, and I killed him because that was the only thing we could do. But I didn’t feel any remorse. There was no hope for him. I didn’t kill that boy - the monster had already snuffed him out. I only killed the monster.”
Stiles is pretty sure he knows where Argent and Derek’s time in lockup fell in the whole sequence of events. After they’d trapped the nogitsune, Stiles had spent days constructing the timeline based on what other people told him. He’d wanted to bridge all of the gaps between the bits and pieces he was aware of, but mostly, he’d needed a distraction from the very real consequences.

“Yeah, that was when I’d checked myself into Eichen House,” Stiles sighs. “Deaton’s poison wasn’t going to keep the nogitsune away for long. And when I was in there, Morrell said she was going to kill me by lethal injection if she had to. She had the right idea. Doing the right thing isn’t usually the easy thing. But she didn’t get a chance before the nogitsune came back. I should have just let Morrell do it. Or taken care of it myself.”

“Stiles, I’m not done yet. Derek asked me if I would feel any remorse putting you down. I told him yes, but not for a nogitsune. And I meant it, but unlike that boy I killed, you were still there. If anyone - you, me, anyone - had killed you, that would have meant we’d lost hope it could be any other way. And that’s not how we do things with friends and family. I couldn’t have come to terms with Allison’s death if I was hopeless, or let Isaac stay in France to start a new life, or come back here to this life, if there was no hope.

“The last time I was with Allison, I taught her how to make silver bullets, but she wanted to make arrowheads instead. She wasn’t worried about herself because she believed in her causes so much. She was only worried that something might happen to me. I got to hear her tell me she loved me one last time. The last time I talked to her on the phone, she was on her way to get Lydia back. My last words to her were ‘wait, Allison, wait,’ but she wouldn’t wait because she said there was no time. She was full of confidence and hope.

“Allison was always choosing her own way and doing what she was thought was best. She was so proud of what we were doing. But she could never be prouder than I was of her. If I could have anything in the world, it would be her. Even though I can’t have that, I’ll always have the gifts she gave me. She led our family like the great Argent women before her, and she was nothing like my father or my sister. I won’t get to see Allison graduate or get married, but I was lucky enough to see her be the best of what my family has to offer. She wanted to fight for her friends, no matter what that meant.”

“She was a great person,” Stiles says, trying his hardest not to blink over his teary eyes. “I’m sorry she’s gone. I’ll fight for her, too.”

Argent gives Stiles a sad little smile. “That’s the thing. I know a lot of shit goes on here, and you kids are always getting dragged into it. Or jumping into it to protect someone else. But when I ran up in the courtyard and saw my girl lying there, I didn’t think, ‘I wish she was still here so she could keep fighting.’ It seemed so clear to me then that I really just wanted her to have a life. But that’s not who she was. She picked that battle, and she understood the risks. I didn’t train her to be invincible. I trained her to make a difference and follow our code. And she did that to the very end. That’s what she wanted.”

Stiles nods, looking down so Argent won’t see him cry. “She made a huge difference. We wouldn’t have known about the silver if it wasn’t for her. She was our friend. We loved her.”

“I don’t want you to carry this with you.” Argent steps forward and places a hand on Stiles’ shoulder. “Any more than I want to carry the guilt of not being there to save her. I’ve had a long time to think about this. All we can do is move forward. If you want to honor her, just live your life. I know you’ll have your fair share of battles, but make sure you’re living, too.”

Stiles nods again, still looking down, until Argent raises his other arm and suddenly he’s hugging Stiles, like a real hug, not a one-armed macho hug. It’s not the biggest gesture in the world, but it’s
the most emotion Argent has ever directed at Stiles by far. It feels strange to be embraced by someone Stiles thought he had hurt so much, but even the worst pain can fade or be made into something good sometimes.

“I will,” Stiles whispers.

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Even though it’s springtime, it’s still quite brisk at night during the last lacrosse match of the season. The team didn’t do nearly as well this year as they did last year, but Stiles doesn’t care about championships. Scott doesn’t even really care about them very much anymore. Now it’s just fun and games instead of fighting for popularity and dodging fresh-faced, all-American assassins.

A few minutes into the first quarter, Stiles is already restless, puffing visibly into the air around him and watching each breath linger and then disappear. He shifts on the bench to look over at the modest bleachers. Melissa’s there, joined by Liam’s stepdad, and near them is a pretty woman who some of the seniors have speculated is Finstock’s girlfriend.

His line of sight quickly moves to the most stunning person in the stands. Derek’s sitting along the top row with Malia next to him. Kira passes an open bag of gummi bears around and laughs when Derek pours some into his hand, wrinkling his nose and trying to offer a few back to her.

Stiles chuckles under his breath. They must be the white bears.

Malia humors him and takes what he’s extending, popping one in her mouth easily. She’s not picky. Kira says something that makes the other two laugh sharply, Derek’s teeth bright against his dark stubble as he grins.

Stiles could sit there and watch them forever. It’s not like he’s going to get called off the bench anyway, and he doesn’t feel a pang of allegiance that dictates he pay attention to Scott and Liam. He sees them play all the time.

But Stiles forces himself to look away, focusing on the field for the rest of the game, because he’s sure it’s written all over his face that he’s fallen in love with that smile.

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Cuddled up on his side, everything feels nice and warm, even when a weight drapes itself over Stiles’ back. Eyes still closed, he whines a little, clinging to his nap, but tries to scoot over to make more room.

“Mmmm,” Stiles sighs sleepily, “Derek.”

The coziness vanishes into thin air as the weight becomes too insistent and forceful. There’s nothing but menacing chills when Stiles awakes, coming face-to-face with his worst, soul-killing fear.

“Clay!” Stiles gasps, struggling with suffocating panic to get out from underneath him.

Clay looks the same physically, but the expression on his face is more feral, with any and all restraint he’s ever shown nowhere to be found.

“I’m not that fucking amateur,” Clay snaps, pushing Stiles flat on his back and straddling him, hands clamped down on Stiles’ flailing wrists.

“No!” Stiles cries out, voice splintering. He’ll always be that terrified ten-year-old with his uncle, but
this can’t be happening. It can’t be real. This was supposed to be over. “You can’t be here - you’re supposed to be gone - get off.”

“Oh, I’ll get off,” Clay agrees, gripping Stiles’ wrists so tight he’ll leave bruises.

Stiles wheezes, desperate for air. He can’t have another panic attack. It’ll be the same cycle, all over again. He’s already crying, a Pavlovian response he can’t control, and the growing congestion in his nose isn’t doing him any favors. He won’t be able to stop anything. He can’t do this. He’d rather die than do this again.

“Derek,” he rasps in distress, but it’s useless. Stiles had come over after practice and crashed on the bed by himself, wiped out from a late night of studying.

“If you fucking say his name one more time,” Clay says, jostling Stiles’ pinned arms in his fury, “you don’t want to know what I’ll do to make you forget it.”

“Clay, please - you left! You left, you told him you would stop -”

The setting sun dips below the horizon, leaving Stiles in the cold. The light streaking through the windows is minimal, ghosting savage shadows across Clay’s face. It hovers just inches above Stiles, drinking in every drop of terror and submission.

“That was all for show, Stiles. I just had to wait it out and keep tabs on you. I didn’t know who your werewolf was, but you made it so easy for me to figure it out. You come here all the time. Is that why you got so brave all of a sudden? You found some other dick that doesn’t mind when you just lay there like a dead fish, and you thought you could get rid of me? It doesn’t work that way, Stiles. I leave when I say I leave.

“You know, I can be brave, too. It’s simple once the playing field is even. You have a creature friend, I have a creature friend.”

Stiles stops squirming and avoiding Clay’s gaze, looking at him head-on with jumpy trepidation.

“What? What do you -”

“I actually met her years ago. The first time I lived at your house. I met her at a bar. Crazy hot. Crazy, period. She was talking to some nerdy professor kind of guy. He was way beneath her, but I chatted her up afterwards. She’s the most fucked-up, badass person I’ve ever met.

“It’s been a while, but I found her. Figured someone like her might know about the things that go bump in the night in this town. And what do you know, turns out she’s one of those things, too. You think you’re safe now because of your little wolf? He’s nothing, Stiles. Now that I know what he is, I could crush him with a single bullet. But I don’t have to. Because my jaguar will do it for me.”

Stiles tenses so severely, eyes huge, that he thinks his bones could crack. “You’re lying,” he denies, mostly to keep a shred of hope alive.

“Kate has no use for you. But she said she would help me get you back if it meant breaking you up from her old pet. That asshole’s not going to interfere anymore, Stiles. Not when he’s got his own problems.”

“That vile bitch will get her ass handed to her if she tries to fight Derek,” Stiles spits out, pure venom. “You’ll see. We don’t belong with the villains.”

“It’s a little too late for that,” Clay says, undeterred. “You all thought she had left town, just like me. She has the element of surprise, and she’s smarter than him. He’s just a dumb animal. He’ll walk in
here, guard down, thinking it’s just his twink whore waiting for him. He’ll never see the wolfsbane bullets coming. Kate brought a couple dozen. Don’t think she’ll need them all, though.”

Stiles bucks up, throwing all of his weight against Clay, and manages to get an arm loose, but Clay grabs it again before he can inflict any damage.

“When he comes in here, he’ll hear you if you make a sound and I can’t have him on offense. So you’re going to be quiet, okay? You know how. You did it all the time for me.”

“Clay, just take me and go,” Stiles pleads, biting off a sharp sob. “You don’t have to hurt him. He only went after you because I told him to. He’s just a puppet. You can have me, let’s just go, right now. Please! Please, let’s just go.”

“That’s not the deal I made,” Clay says. “Kate gets her man, too. And if you don’t shut the fuck up when he comes up here, she’s not going to kill him right away. She’ll just take him down a few pegs so he can watch us. He should see how you really like to be fucked. And I know you love an audience.”

Stiles feels like he’s lost his mind completely, hand-in-hand with the impending hijacking of his body. It really does still feel like yesterday that Clay was pumping into him under his friend’s watchful gaze before Clay handed him off for another go. Being forced into this in front of Derek would be a thousand times worse than being passed around like trash.

He can’t stay silent. Even if he doesn’t say a word, he can’t stop crying. Derek will hear. They’re going to be punished. Stiles is going to get him killed - Kate’s going to kill him.

No. No no no no no. That can’t happen. Derek’s innocent. Derek saved him.

Stiles has to be the only punching bag. He can take it.

“You’re sorry excuse for a boyfriend only threatened me and knocked me around,” Clay says. “You let me go. I knew deep-down you wanted me to be free. You wanted me to come back someday.”

“Please, Clay … you don’t need him, let’s just leave,” Stiles begs again. “Let’s just go.”

Clay smirks at him, leaning in close to whisper. “You’re my favorite, Stiles.”

The groaning sound of the heavy door slices through the air. Stiles opens his mouth to yell, to give Derek a fighting chance, but before he can, all he hears is the echoing pop-pop-pop of a firing gun.

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The moment Stiles jolts awake, he’s overwhelmed by tremors, even as he starts to piece together that it was only a nightmare. The absolute worst one he’s ever had. The flesh on his arms is raised with goosebumps and his eyes dart around in anxious scrutiny of his surroundings.

He’s by himself in Derek’s bed, his thoughts slowing down from a racing, almost erratic pace. He remembers that Derek’s doing more fight training with the pack, but this time out at the Preserve. It rained earlier that afternoon and Derek had wanted to get some practice with the extra complication of more chaotic elements.

“Derek?” Stiles calls out anyway. Of course, Derek doesn’t answer him, but he’s still too unnerved to contain the jitters. “Is anyone there?”

He doesn’t expect an intruder to volunteer their presence, nor does he expect to be able to do much
about an intruder in the first place, but Stiles slides out of bed to check all around the loft and in every dark corner.

No one’s there. When he stands motionless and listens for any other sound, he doesn’t hear anything, either.

Climbing back into bed, he grabs his phone and stifles the urge to call Derek. Even if he tries to pass it off as a friendly check-in, Derek will sense something is wrong. He can get through this himself. Just because it felt real doesn’t mean it was real.

Stiles isn’t surprised he’s still groggy. The quality of his nap couldn’t have been very good - not with dreams like that. Mumbling to himself, Stiles navigates away from his messaging app and over to an ambient noise app he’d recently bought.

He clicks through the buttons to select the ocean waves and turns the volume up so it wraps around him. The crash of the surf fills the loft and Stiles shifts over to Derek’s side of the bed, pressing his face into Derek’s pillow and reminding himself of the great, big world outside of his nightmares.

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Stiles wakes up again when he feels the mattress dip down next to him. This time, it’s pleasant and welcome. This time, it really is Derek, sitting by Stiles’ hip. Derek’s hair is freshly washed so he must have showered already.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Derek says. “Nap well?”

Stiles rubs his eyes and sits up. He hasn’t brushed his teeth, but Derek leans in for a quick peck anyway.

“It was okay. Kick some ass?”

Derek frowns. “We’re too sloppy. We need to work as a group better. But they all have the right attitude. Most people wouldn’t be willing to slip and slide on the mud like that while getting beaten up. I’m glad I brought extra towels and clothes to change into before I drove home.”

“I should come out with you guys next time. Show everyone how it’s done.”

“Well, we don’t want to embarrass them like that,” Derek says, laughing. The humor dissipates, though, as he watches Stiles’ face. “Are you really okay? You seem rattled.”

Stiles shrugs. “It’s nothing. Had another bad dream, but it’s fine. I went back to sleep.”

“I’m sorry, Stiles. I wish I’d been here.”

“I’m kinda glad you weren’t. I had to deal with it on my own.”

“Okay.”

Stiles squeezes his thigh over the blankets, deep in thought. “I’m stronger than I think I am.”

“Definitely. You’re the strongest person I know.”

“I can fight harder than I think I can.”

“Maybe not against the pack in a mud pit,” Derek says, moving closer, “but you could put me to shame.”
Stiles cups a hand at Derek’s waist, inching forward as well. He feels more grounded that way. “Because I’m not alone anymore. It’s not just me and every fucking shitty thing I’ve ever felt in the last seven years. Things can be different now.”

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It’s not that late when Stiles walks into the living room, greeted with the noise of the television and Noah relaxing on the couch. Stiles isn’t sure when his dad got home, but it must have been a while ago if he’s changed into casual clothes, kicked his feet up, and cracked open a beer.

“Hey,” Noah says, tearing his eyes away from the baseball game. “I thought you were staying at Derek’s today.”

Stiles had in fact texted his dad that after school, but he shakes his head as he takes the adjacent seat. “Nah, I changed my mind. How’s the game?”

“It’s a blowout, but maybe these guys will rally in the end.”

They watch the game for another half-inning, the score remaining the same. “Did you get your math test back?” Noah asks.

“Yeah, I got a 96%. Second-highest grade in the class.”

“Okay, great,” Noah says, bopping him on the arm lightly. “Change your mind about prom?”

“No,” Stiles says with a cross between a scoff and a laugh. “Did you have a good shift? Any more kitty friends?”

“Slow day all-around. Not even a rogue hamster in sight. Not that I mind. It’s good for my blood pressure every now and then. We tried out the new donut place down the block, but I only had half of a maple bar, I swear.”

The inning ends with an easy double play and the game cuts to commercials. Stiles watches the ad intently, even though he doesn’t care about the foofy cologne. The next one for a cliched action movie is barely any better.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“I …” Stiles says, twisting his hands in his lap. “I need to report a crime.”

Chapter End Notes

I know some readers have been wondering if the Sheriff would ever find out, so that is no longer ambiguous! I just couldn’t see him finding out at a significantly earlier point in this particular story. In the first act when Stiles is suffering so much, he’s doing it alone and he’s being isolated / isolating himself as he tries to cope with the escalating abuse. He’s very much in his own head, actively trying to keep anyone from finding out. Then in the second act, when he tells someone, he literally only tells that one person and that’s
all he can handle. So the tone shifts from that total isolation to being in a two-person world as he works through the initial stages of trying to recover and process the abuse.

Before Stiles moved into the third act of telling his father, a few things happened.

1. He had an almost entirely “positive” experience of Derek knowing, and he never regretted telling Derek.

2. His world was reintegrating, progressively allowing people into his life more.

3. He rode the ups and downs of recovery and was starting to better accept that rollercoaster as something he could manage with the help of others.

4. He was able to reclaim some of the things that Clay had ruined for him - the fun beach memories and the stolen picture, coming to his lacrosse game, celebrating his 18th birthday, his clothes (specifically, the kind of underwear), sexual pleasure. The shower scene at the end of chapter 10 obviously wasn’t a cure-all, but it was a first step, one that was taken in the only place where Stiles had felt sanctuary from his abuser, but he very willingly let Derek into.

5. He told the Sheriff about his and Derek’s relationship. That wasn’t a bad secret, but it was sort of a “gateway” secret that opened the door to telling him something so devastating later.

6. He’s starting to let go of the idea, bit by bit, that he deserved to be hurt the way Clay hurt him because of what “he” did and “felt” when he was possessed by the nogitsune. Also, the survivor’s guilt isn’t driving his actions as much and he was on some level inspired by Allison via his talk with Argent.

So all these things have helped him forge ahead in biting the bullet and dealing with everything that comes with disclosing his painful secrets. He knows it’s going to be a rough journey, there’s no doubt about that, but the fact that he has good things in his life and has been able to feel real joy, despite what Clay did, gives him hope that he can still have those things, even with the additional trauma of coming forward. It doesn’t have to be about loss.

He’s now ready to do what he had been willing to do earlier to kill the nogitsune, but didn’t do - throw himself on the (this time, proverbial) sword. In this case, it doesn’t have to mean death, but he can try to stop Clay from hurting anyone again. Nothing will change who the nogitsune hurt or killed, but Stiles can do something about this other monster, even if it comes at his own expense. Life has been getting better for him, but now he has the strength to not just focus on chasing that - he has the strength to essentially take huge steps backwards in his happiness, as coming forward is going to be quite difficult. Like Allison, he’s picking his battles, and he’s finally gotten to a place where he’s picking this one.

I think that’s the general gist of it (the real gist - not the “Stiles heroically rescued grimacing Derek and still has all ten toes” gist). If I left anything out, I’ll go back and update this note later.

Probably the only other thing to mention is that I only wanted to write Noah finding out because Stiles chose to tell him. I can totally see interesting things happening if Noah found out on his own or he had caught the abuse in the act, but I very much wanted Stiles to have a sense of choice and control over that discovery as part of his healing,
instead of it being another heartbreaking thing that he had no say in.

One more miscellaneous note - since I didn’t write in the season 4 opening and ending in Mexico with the berserkers (basically pretended that didn’t happen), Argent had to explain to Stiles what berserkers were. For all intents and purposes, Stiles has never seen or heard about one before.

Thanks as always for reading! I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Hi, I’m so sorry for the delay in posting a new chapter! For sure, I will be finishing this story. There is zero chance (to the extent that I can control as a singular human, and not a Master of the Universe) that it will not be completed. I think about this story so much (too much) every day, but getting the words drafted and edited is sometimes more of a process than I would like.

I hope you enjoy!

[Posted 1/8/18]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The television is immediately forgotten as Noah turns away from the screen, oblivious to the flashing illumination.

“What do you mean? What crime?”

To his credit, Noah doesn’t seem like he’s apprehensive it’s a crime Stiles has committed. Stiles opens his mouth to speak, but nothing will come out. As he hesitates, Noah looks like he’s starting to wonder if Stiles really did do something illegal after all.

“Dad, I … first, you should know that I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Noah flicks the game off altogether. “Stiles, what happened?”

It was so much “easier” telling Derek, who had put the pieces together himself based on what he could sense and what little information Stiles gave him. Stiles grapples with what to say, how to say it, how much to say, where to start, if he can soften the blow somehow. If it’s too late to change his mind.

Stiles has never talked to his dad about these kinds of cases before. Noah must have worked them - it’s near impossible that he hasn’t after all of his years of service - but that’s not the police work he shares with Stiles.

Noah is more versed in sexual assault than average, given his profession. He’s seen the dark side of people over and over, in a way that probably lessened his perceived threat of supernatural creatures, once he found out they existed. They’re not the only monsters out there.

But he’s still a father first. Fathers don’t mentally process abuse the way a sheriff does. Noah may have experience with the subject matter, but this is so, so personal that it doesn’t really matter what cases he’s handled.

“Um …” Stiles says, looking to the left of Noah’s fixed gaze. “It was a little while ago. I’m okay now. I …”
The right words are still eluding him and Noah is already reacting defensively. It’s obvious Stiles didn’t merely have his wallet stolen or graffiti sprayed on his Jeep.

“Stiles, what crime? What happened?”

Squirming, Stiles breathes in and out again. Fuck. Just rip off the band-aid. There’s no perfect introduction to this.

“I was assaulted,” he says, barely audible before returning to his mantra. “But I’m fine.”

“What do you mean, assaulted?” Noah asks, reaching out to touch and examine Stiles’ face in reflex. “Did you get jumped at school? When? I don’t - you never looked hurt.”

Stiles goes along with it and lets Noah turn his face this way and that way to see it from all angles. “No, not like that.”

Noah’s brow creases in confusion. As inconceivable as it is to be direct about it, Stiles can’t bear to make his dad fish for what he’s really saying, like guessing something so awful “correctly” is Noah’s responsibility now.

“Nobody beat me up,” Stiles says. Just fucking rip it off. “I was sexually assaulted.”

Even though this isn’t news to Stiles, hearing those words out of his own mouth shock him, but that’s nothing compared to Noah across from him, biting back a heaving sob.

“God, no,” he utters, hands over his mouth in desperate denial. “No. No.”

That’s all it takes to get Stiles going. “I’m sorry, Dad,” he says, wiping an emerging tear away with the heel of his hand.

Noah hugs him close, almost to the point of crushing him, but it’s comforting anyway, knowing his dad is right there. Stiles doesn’t see his dad crying, but it hurts to feel it and hear it. Noah keeps palming the back of his head, like he’s a puppy or something, maybe because he needs to know Stiles is right there, too.

“Dad, I’m okay,” Stiles says, sniffling. “I’m okay.”

Pulling back, Noah appraises him critically. “You’re not okay. You can’t be. Someone hurt you - what - how bad was it …”

“It was bad,” Stiles mumbles as he avoids eye contact. He’s not going to make his dad guess, but he can point Noah close enough to the severe end of the spectrum. He’s not stammering and crying over a light grope.

“When was this?”

Stiles blinks in what feels like slow motion, unsure of how to answer. It’s a loaded question. “A couple of months ago,” he finds himself responding.

“Who was it?” Noah asks. “Do you know who it was?”

Stiles swallows loudly, but his throat is incredibly tight and won’t unclench. He doesn’t think he can look at his dad when he tells him, but he can’t look away, either.

“It was …” he tries, shrinking down as his shoulders drop. “It was … Clay did it.”
The light in Noah’s eyes goes out and Stiles is flooded with a new rush of hysterics, internally screaming, “come back, come back,” like that light will be gone forever.

Noah can barely even speak, he’s so beside himself. “What did he make you do?”

“All the things,” Stiles sobs. “I’m sorry, Dad, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I’m sorry I let him do it …”

“Oh no, I know you didn’t let him, I know it wasn’t like that.”

“I didn’t make him stop - I couldn’t - he made me -”

“When was this?” Noah asks again. “When? Where was I?”

Stiles twitches in his delay. “Um … it was that week you went to Folsom.”

“I left you here with him for days! How could he do this? I left you alone with him …”

Stiles bites his lip to try to make his chin stop quivering. He can’t let his dad think this wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t gone on that work trip. It’s all going to come out when he files the police report anyway.

“That wasn’t … that was one time. But not the only time.”

Noah’s face crumbles, squinting through a pained exhale. He understands. Stiles can tell he understands what this all means.

“How long? When was the first time, Stiles?”

Stiles rolls his lips together and out. “It was after Mom died.”

“Oh my God, Stiles …”

“I’m okay, Dad, I’m okay. I don’t even remember everything from back then. I promise I’m okay.”

“You were just a baby,” Noah cries. “You were so little …”

It’s irrelevant that Stiles was not actually anything close to a baby. He’ll always be that bright-eyed and loving boy to Noah, even decades from now. Stiles feels a part of himself splintering at the idea that that’s who Noah sees in the moment - that kid who was once happy, who hadn’t been defiled and betrayed, who thought his parents would always protect him.

“I let him stay here and he - how could he - why did he -”

“It’s not your fault, Dad. I didn’t fight hard enough. He didn’t hit me, I shouldn’t have let him do it, I should have told you, but he said I couldn’t, and I didn’t - but once I was old enough to know better - I was seventeen, I was old enough -”

“Fuck, he really got you, didn’t he,” Noah realizes, his anguish plummeting to a new low. “I’ve seen this before. With other kids … The grooming, the lies, the control - all of it - he did it and I didn’t see it. I’m so sorry, Stiles, I was so blind, I didn’t see it … I should have known. You shouldn’t have had to tell me. I should’ve known.”

“No, I didn’t want you to,” Stiles denies. “I hid it for a long time. You know I can be really good at hiding things.”

“It doesn’t matter, you’re my child, you’re a part of me. It was happening right in front of me. You
were suffering and I let that snake into our home … I never would have let him in if I had known. He would be six feet under if I had known.”

“I know, Dad, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But I’m okay, you have to know that I’m okay.”

“If he were still here, God help me …” Noah trails off miserably as it dawns on him. “He left so quickly. He left right after I got back from Folsom. That was the last time? It only stopped because he left?”

“Yeah,” Stiles hedges. It’ll devastate his dad to hear why. “I … I told Derek and he made Clay leave.”

Stiles doesn’t miss the intense hurt that flashes on Noah’s teary face. “You told Derek?”

“I’m sorry - I just - I had to tell someone - it was too much that time - it was -”

“What did he do, Stiles?”

“I couldn’t take it anymore, I couldn’t stay here, so I left but I didn’t know where to go, so I went to Derek’s and I stayed with him. I told him and he let me stay with him and when you guys came back from the lake, Derek wolfed out and confronted him and made him leave.”

Bracing himself with this next truth, he debates not saying it at all, but he’s going to have to tell his dad at some point. He can’t learn about it for the first time when Stiles reports it.

“He had a friend, and he made me … I …” Stiles can’t finish - it’s too awful - but he doesn’t really have to.

“That fucking piece of shit!” Noah yells, erupting in a burst of fury, the same thing that broke Stiles pushing him over the edge, too. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

Noah jumps to his feet, startling Stiles with the sudden movement. Before Stiles realizes it, Noah is running up the stairs like he’s on fire.

“Noah!” Stiles calls after him, following clumsily and nearly skidding into a fall at the base of the staircase.

Frantic, he pictures himself trying to hold his dad back, but getting handily defeated. This could be a warped version of a mother lifting the weight of a car to rescue her kid. And Stiles is barely over a buck fifty. He’s no car.

Shifting gears, he runs to the front door, yanking it open. “Derek,” he says, keeping his voice down. He’d forgotten what time it was, but the stillness of the neighborhood reminds him that shouting isn’t the best idea.

Derek’s parked a couple houses down, probably with the window open. Stiles hears a car door shut, followed shortly by Derek hustling up the driveway.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, stepping inside.

Stiles meets him in a panic. “I don’t know - my dad - he’s really pissed - I don’t know what he’s gonna do -”

He hauls ass upstairs, Derek on his heels, and his suspicions are confirmed when he gets to Noah’s room. His dad’s still wearing his pajama pants, but he’s pulled on a jacket and is punching in the
code to his gun safe.

“Dad, you can’t go - you can’t go after him.”

“Stiles, let me take care of this,” Noah insists. In his frenzy, he’s entered the wrong code and has to try again.

Stiles pulls at his arm. “Dad! He’s in Arizona! You can’t drive there and what, shoot him with your service weapon?”

“I don’t care if I get caught!”

The safe beeps open, but Stiles lunges forward and shuts it closed. “Dad, please. I know you’re really angry and he deserves it, but I need you here. You can’t leave! You can’t get caught. You can’t kill for me, please don’t leave me.”

Stiles’ pleas are enough to slow Noah down, and when he catches sight of Derek in the doorway, he starts to come out of the mania entirely. “I’m not going to leave you.”

“Okay, good,” Stiles breathes. “Please.”

“Derek,” Noah finally acknowledges. If it’s not clear that he knows about Derek’s role in this by the way he says his name, it is by the glance Stiles exchanges with Derek.

“Yes, sir.”

“Derek’s - I had Derek come in because I wasn’t sure I could stop you, but -”

“I’m not going to leave you,” Noah repeats.

“Yeah. No, you’re not.” Turning to Derek, Stiles gestures in a general direction. “Can you wait for me in my room?”

Derek steps back and away, closing the door behind him. Weary and overwhelmed as the pendulum swings the opposite direction, Noah sits down on his bed and Stiles joins him.

“I’m sorry I told Derek, but not you,” Stiles says. “I know that wasn’t right.”

“I’m so sorry you didn’t think you could stop me, but -”

“No, Dad, it’s not - I just - it was - I don’t -”

Noah wraps his arms around Stiles. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you the first time you told me about werewolves. I’m so sorry, Stiles. I’m sorry I showed you - I know why you think I might not believe you about this.”

“Dad, Dad, no - I didn’t think you wouldn’t - that was different! That was - I know werewolves sounded like crazy shit - I know that was hard to believe, and I shouldn’t have said Mom would have believed me about them.”

“I believe you, Stiles. About all of it. I will always believe you.” Noah hugs Stiles even tighter. “I will always, always believe you.”

“I just didn’t want you to know. Once you knew, you would know.”

“Yeah.” Noah heaves a big sigh to regain his bearings. “Yeah, now I know. I’m here and I’ll always
be here.”

Stiles lets out a small, weird, nervous laugh. “So what do we do? I know I need to report him. Derek chased him away, but that only protects me. I know reporting him means telling more people, but … I have to. It took me a long time to get to this, but I have to do it.”

“I’ll get things going with that tomorrow, Stiles. I’ll be with you the whole way.”

“I don’t have any proof,” Stiles says, pulling back chagrined. “I got rid of all of the physical evidence a long time ago. It was stupid of me, I know. I don’t know how I’m going to do this. I can’t relive it. I don’t know how to explain it to anyone.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time, kiddo. One step at a time.”

“It’s gonna be hard for you to hear it. You’re gonna hear stuff that’s like …”

“I’ll be okay. Stiles. No more secrets.”

“He raped me,” Stiles whispers. “He raped me like I was worthless. I had to … with his friend like I was trash.”

It breaks his heart to say it and make his dad cry about it all over again, but Stiles has to get used to calling it what it was. What everyone else is going to call it.

It was all rape. He still struggles with that label, but whether it was way too real with his uncle or way too real with a total stranger, it was all rape. Not scary private games that other people couldn’t know about or sex that Stiles couldn’t admit he wanted.

Noah knows it, too.

Stiles’ eyes well up with tears. His dad’s going to live every day from now on thinking his kid was raped over and over in their own home while he did nothing.

That’s never going to change.

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As Noah heads downstairs to double-check the locks, Stiles retreats to the bathroom to wash his face and compose himself. When he’s done, he looks to his right towards his closed bedroom door and then looks left towards his dad’s room.

Trudging down the hall, he raises his hand and knocks lightly, pausing a few beats before opening the door. “Dad?” he calls out with hesitation. The lights are on, but his dad is nowhere to be seen.

Noah ducks out of the en-suite bathroom, looking like he was trying to do the same thing as Stiles was, but far less successfully.

“Are you going to be okay?” Stiles asks, fidgeting with the cuffs of his shirt.

“Don’t worry about me, Stiles,” Noah says, eyes pink and voice still ragged.

“I can stay in here with you. I’m gonna stay with you.”

“It’s okay.” Noah drags his hands over his face. “Go be with Derek. I need some time to myself anyway.”
“Are you going to be able to sleep?”

Noah ekes out a small smile to reassure him. “Don’t worry about me so much.”

Stiles shifts his weight from one foot to the other and back. “I’m just gonna be in my room if you need anything.”

“I don’t…” Noah starts to reply. They both need a truckload of things, but they’re not going to happen overnight.

“I’ll be in my room,” Stiles repeats, lingering helplessly before leaving.

He’s greeted by Derek sitting up against the pillows, wearing Stiles’ earphones and cradling his phone in his hands. Stiles doesn’t know what Derek’s listening to, but he appreciates Derek’s efforts to give them privacy.

His feet heavy and his heart heavier, Stiles slinks inside as Derek rips the earbuds out. In quick motions, Stiles climbs onto the bed and tucks in tightly to Derek’s side. “I think I just ruined my dad’s life,” he sobs.

“Don’t,” Derek murmurs. “You didn’t ruin anything. You told him about someone who did, behind his back. And about something your dad would want to know.”

Stiles sniffles through his stuffy nose. As drained as he is physically, it’s nothing compared to how raw he is inside, like industrial-grade sandpaper has been ground against his soul.

“I knew telling him was gonna be a nightmare. But I didn’t know it was gonna feel like this …”

“I’m so sorry, Stiles, I can’t imagine.” Derek repositions his body, pulling Stiles into a more comfortable position. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Stiles shakes his head. He barely has anything left and he knows he’s going to need it for the next day. “I’m all talked out, I think.”

“I know you took a nap earlier, but you need some rest. Do you want a sleeping pill? Or an aspirin?”

Derek leans forward, bringing Stiles with him at a straighter angle. When Stiles picks his head up, he spies the pills Derek’s already retrieved on the bedside table, along with his trusty Visine bottle, a box of tissues, and a glass of water.

“You didn’t,” Derek murmurs. “You didn’t ruin anything. You told him about someone who did, behind his back. And about something your dad would want to know.”

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“I’ve gone through your medicine cabinet before, too,” Stiles mumbles. On any other occasion, he would laugh at the joke, but there’s no room for that tonight. Misery doesn’t really love all company.

“Your head must be pounding,” Derek says. “Can I take the pain? And you can try a sleeping pill to knock you out. These look mild enough. I don’t want you tossing and turning.”

Stiles hums wordless assent, closing his eyes when he feels Derek’s fingers in his messy hair. The last time Derek took away the pain from a headache, Stiles remembers vague light-headedness, but now that sensation feels like a hint of liberation.

He takes the pill that Derek offers him next and downs the glass of water. Next, a couple of drops go into each eye on autopilot. Stiles is a pro at superficial recovery attempts.

“Let’s get you into some pajamas, okay?”

Stiles shakes his head again. Changing into different clothes seems like way more energy than he can
muster, though he manages to shuck off his pants and button-up shirt before deeming that good enough.

Derek undresses similarly before pulling the covers back. Clinging to Derek again, Stiles focuses on his breathing while Derek soothes him with a tried-and-true back rub.

“Can you -” Stiles asks in a small voice, “can you keep an ear out for my dad? I don’t want you to stay up all night, but if you hear anything that sounds out of the ordinary, can you wake me up?”

“Of course,” Derek answers.

“I don’t think he’s going to go anywhere. But he’s taking this really, really hard and I don’t want him to be alone.”

“I’ll be on the alert.”

“Thanks, Derek.”

Stiles tries to clamp a lid on his emotions, too antsy to wait for the sedative to do it for him, but the active undertaking has the opposite effect, bringing everything to the brittle surface.

He’s getting a little drowsy, but before he can manage it, he’s crying again - cascading sobs that make it difficult to gulp down sporadic air. “I was so scared to tell him for so long that I took whatever Clay made me do. But I ended up telling my dad anyway, but now it hurts so much more because it went on for so long.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Derek hushes.

Stiles hiccups so abruptly that he almost bites his tongue. “I told him anyway, and it’s like everything I did with Clay in secret was for nothing and just made it all worse. If I’d just said something right away - none of this would have happened and my dad wouldn’t feel like such a fucking failure …”

Derek rubs his thumb back and forth over Stiles’ heart. “I wish I could take this from you, too.”

Stiles burrows further into him, not really caring that he’s making Derek’s tank top messy. Even though sleep seems like an impossible concept, it does find him, eventually. It might be the pill, swooping in to carry him away from his grief, but as Stiles drifts off, all he feels is Derek’s arms around him.

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Stiles doesn’t know why he wakes up in the middle of the night. It can’t really be because of the absence of Derek beside him, but when he reaches over sleepily, he realizes Derek isn’t in bed at all.

He must be in the bathroom. Stiles closes his eyes again, but after what seems like five minutes, he’s still awake and Derek is still gone. Stiles slides his hand to Derek’s side of the bed, which is unambiguously cool. Derek hasn’t been there for longer than just five minutes.

Getting out of bed, Stiles opens the door quietly. He feels like he’s unleashed so much disruption that he can’t help but default to ginger, almost timid movements now. Some people don’t even believe Stiles is capable of timid movements - he usually isn’t - but he’s living in an upside-down world now.

The crack under the bathroom door is dark. His face screwing up in confusion, Stiles walks down the hall in the other direction where his dad’s bedroom door is ajar, revealing darkness there, too.
A flash of panic hits him and he’s suddenly no longer sleepy at all, but he quickly realizes that no, his dad didn’t take off. There’s no way Derek didn’t hear that, or that Derek did hear it but left Stiles by himself.

Avoiding the creaky third step as he goes downstairs, Stiles tiptoes to the first floor. His ears perk up when he hears muted sounds and he creeps towards the kitchen as they get clearer.

Sneaking around a werewolf will never get easier than on his own turf. His scent is already everywhere, so it probably doesn’t register to Derek that Stiles is in the vicinity. Stiles doesn’t think Derek is paying any real attention, either, based on the conversation.

“And Stiles - are you really? …”

“Yes,” Derek says. “It’s real.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean - you’re the only one who knew. I wasn’t sure if Stiles said you’re his boyfriend to explain why you spend so much time together.”

“We’re really together. I understand if that concerns you. I don’t think it did before, but that was … before. I would never, ever hurt him. I’m sure it’s hard to believe he would even want to be in a relationship right now, but we’ve talked about it. I don’t think I’m taking advantage of him. I hope I’m not.”

“Okay.”

“Are you concerned about us?”

“No. I think you’re good for him. Not that I know anything about what Stiles needs right now. I had no idea. About any of this. In my own home, under my watch.” Noah’s voice sounds strained and Stiles sits down on the floor, resting against the wall for support. “What that bastard did to him … I’m not worried about you with my son.”

“Like Stiles said, we don’t really do anything,” Derek says. “I’m not with Stiles for that. We’re taking it slow … I probably took it too slow.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve … my feelings are not new. If I’d told Stiles how I felt earlier, maybe we would have been together when Clay came back. Maybe I could have protected Stiles or Clay wouldn’t have come after him again. I wish I’d taken the risk. But I didn’t.”

He’s not speaking very loudly, but the regret in Derek’s voice rings clear. Stiles bites his thumbnail, dissecting what Derek just said in deep thought. Clay might have thought the opportunity he once had had disappeared. He still would have had some access, living in the same house with Noah gone at any given hour, but would Clay really have met boyfriend-Derek and kept thinking, “yeah, Stiles is a great target!”

Derek’s big enough to be the physical threat Stiles never was. Clay would’ve had to conservatively assume they were in a sexual relationship. Would he have tried it anyway, knowing any real physical force was off the table if it left behind marks or other injuries that Derek might see? What if Derek could tell Stiles had been with someone else? How sure could Clay be that Stiles wouldn’t say anything to Derek? That he would go to such lengths to lie that he would rather let Derek think he was cheating instead of being abused? Would Clay really be that brazen?

Probably not.
But the same way Stiles doesn’t like to think he has the abuse to thank for his relationship with Derek, he doesn’t wish for the relationship earlier just so Clay wouldn’t have touched him again. It’s not Derek’s fault; he can’t see the future. Derek is so hard on himself that he doesn’t see it that way, but Stiles will make him see it.

“What happened first?” Noah asks. “He told you or you started dating?”

“He told me.”

“Yeah.” It’s quiet except for a rumbling scrape over and over, like Noah is pushing a glass around. “He trusts you.”

“He came to me because he needed somewhere to go. And we weren’t really close yet, he said so himself. It was a lot of pressure for him to deal with someone else knowing. He wanted to tell you, but he was so terrified of what that meant. He really loves you.”

“I don’t blame him for anything. I’m glad he wasn’t always alone, though. You’re an honorable man, Derek.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything. I - I didn’t think of it as lying. It wasn’t my place. He wanted to keep it a secret. I couldn’t push him or make decisions for him. Maybe I should have. There were probably a lot of things I did wrong. But I just wanted him to get what he wanted. He never gets what he wants.”

“No. He doesn’t.” Noah sighs. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it. He was supposed to be safe here. But he was being tortured, he was hurting, he was being hurt, and it was like I didn’t see him at all. I didn’t protect him. I have to protect him. I have to.”

Noah’s obviously crying again and Stiles’ Pavlovian response kicks in as his tear ducts threaten to spill over, too. Derek will know he’s there if he sniffs, so Stiles stares at some dust bunnies on the baseboards to pull himself back from the ledge.

“He needs me to be strong,” Noah continues. “I can’t let him see me like this anymore. I need to focus on him and what he needs.”

“I know how you feel. Well, no, I don’t - it’s different with parents. But it’s really hard sometimes. I hate what Stiles went through. I hate that guy, I fucking hate him. When I had him right in front of me, right under my claws, I wanted to do so much … My mom told me that I’m a predator, not a killer, but I was so ready to be that killer. Ripping his throat out would have been way too good for him. I wanted to make it hurt. I wanted him to know exactly why he was dying like that.

“But Stiles said no. No killing. He doesn’t want anymore death. Stiles didn’t want me to pound his face in, either. Hurting that asshole might have made me feel better, but I’d still be sad and angry on the inside. I don’t know what to do with that. And I don’t want Stiles to see that, either. So I kind of get it. And I used to have a dad, too. I get it.”

Derek’s tearing up, too, trying to talk through it like it’s not happening, and Stiles is back on the brink of losing his shit. Derek hardly ever cries.

This is what he’s done to the people he cares so deeply about.

Suddenly overcome with guilt for eavesdropping on private moments that weren’t meant for him, Stiles pinches the bridge of his nose and returns to bed just as quietly as he left it. There’s a hollowness in his chest that he walked away from Derek, but that wasn’t the right time.
He’s torn between waiting up for Derek to come back and falling asleep so Derek doesn’t realize that his absence was noticed, but Stiles’ body ends up making the decision for him. Some indeterminate time later, he’s roused from slumber by Derek getting into bed and spooning up behind him.

Stiles doesn’t cop to knowing Derek wasn’t just in the bathroom. Instead, Stiles rolls over and faces him with a sleepy moan.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Derek asks.

“No, it’s okay.”

In the dark, Stiles can’t tell that Derek had been crying or how much, but he’s more than willing to let Derek believe that Stiles is none the wiser. This isn’t the right time.

Stiles runs the palm of his hand against Derek’s stubble. “I love you,” he whispers, pressing their noses together.

Derek blinks back at him, his lashes lowering so close to Stiles’ own. “I love you, too.”

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“Stiles?”

Stiles awakes again at the gentle shaking of his shoulder. Noah’s crouched by the bed, looking like he’s aged ten years in ten hours.

“Hey, Dad,” Stiles says, squinting through his dry eyes.

“How’d you sleep?”

Stiles shrugs. “Okay. How about you?”

Noah mirrors his shrug, but his face says he slept like shit.

Neither of them say anything about Derek asleep and pressed up next to Stiles. It’s allowed and obviously Noah was well aware that Derek is there, but Stiles figures it’s a little different once a parent sees it in person. On the other hand, Derek’s not just some boyfriend and he knows so much already, so there’s really no reason they can’t talk with him in the room.

“I let the school know you’ll be absent today,” Noah says. “And I took a personal day, too. I made some calls and we’re going to head over to the station in Modesto after lunch, okay? No one under my command can be involved in the investigation.”

Stiles nods. He’d known his dad wouldn’t handle anything personally, but it hadn’t occurred to him that no one in Beacon County could, either. That makes sense, though. With the allegations being made by the Sheriff’s son about the Sheriff’s brother-in-law, any evidence has to be gathered and analyzed at arm’s length, beyond reproach.

He supposes it helps in other ways not to have any kind of relationship with the investigators outside of this case. There’s really no such thing as separating this trauma from his home, but at least Stiles can walk away from the Modesto officials cleanly, once this is over. If this is ever over.

“You can go back to sleep if you want to. We don’t have to leave for a couple more hours.”

Stiles nods again. “Are you okay?”
Noah’s shoulders sag a little. “Go back to sleep, Stiles. You had a rough night.”

After Noah leaves, Stiles reaches for his phone on the nightstand. It’s past 10 am. He fires off a quick text to Scott that’s technically true - “went to bed last night as one big snotball, out today” - and lays back down, staring up at the ceiling.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Derek asks, apparently awake the whole time.

“No, that’s okay. But thanks for offering. I need to go with just my dad. He needs to know he’s enough.”

“Of course. But let me know if you want to talk after you come back. It doesn’t matter what I’m doing.”

“I’ll call you.”

“It’s okay if you don’t, if you’re not up to it.”

Stiles chews his lip with no restraint. Telling the police is going to be so different. He really doesn’t know how he’s going to feel then. Probably like crawling into a deep, dark hole and dying alone. He’s still trying to come to terms with confessing to his dad, and to add this on top?

He flashes back to that night he fled to Derek’s loft and how he had refused so staunchly the idea of anyone else knowing. Being willing to tell total strangers right after telling Noah is probably a sign of strength he didn’t have before, but he doesn’t feel strong today.

It’s ironic that reporting the horrible ways he was victimized is supposed to help him take control and stop being a victim. Maybe. Stiles knows it’ll hurt more than he realizes if the police doubt his story or think he doesn’t have a case, but he has to try.

Having his dad is enough. Having Derek is enough. He doesn’t really have any control over anyone but himself. Doing whatever he can now to end Clay’s reign of terror is just going to have to be enough, too.

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The drive to the police station is quiet, with just the radio playing on low volume, but it’s not eerie or uncomfortable. Stiles doesn’t even feel the pressure of the silence between him and Noah. In his head, it’s not silent at all as he gazes out the window, thoughts chaotically churning in his head.

When Noah puts the car in park, Stiles stiffens with anxiety, his mind suddenly going blank.

They’re here.

“I know you’re scared to tell the detectives what happened, but they’re not judging you. If they press for more information or clarification, it’s not because they don’t believe you. They just need to understand what Clay did and how to build a case.”

“Okay.”

“If you don’t remember something, it’s fine to say you don’t remember. If you want to take a break, we’ll take a break. If something’s too hard to say, I’ll try to help you find a way to say it. And if that means I have to leave the room because you don’t want to say it in front of me, that’s okay.”

Stiles’ palms grow damp and his throat dry. The third time is not a charm. He’s really going to have
to get into the details with the investigators, something he’s never done before. The things he’s revealed to his dad and Derek are nothing compared to what he’s going to have to divulge now.

“I think I understand why you didn’t tell me,” Noah says. Stiles looks down at his seat belt button, clicking and unclicking it over and over. “That’s what you knew.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“It probably … it probably felt like quicksand.”

“Yes,” Stiles blurts out, whipping his head up to face Noah.

“You were just doing what you thought you had to do to survive.”

The clicking suddenly seems too loud so Stiles forces himself to abandon it, even though he immediately fidgets for something else to do.

“Whenver I tried to fight it, it just got worse,” Stiles finally says. “So I stopped fighting. I know I didn’t have to fight by myself, and if I’d told you, it would have been over, but I just … I’m really sorry.”

“Stiles, he put you in an awful, unthinkable position. I know you. I know you don’t take shit from anyone. He really, really manipulated you so he could do this. That is not on you. You trusted him, and you were a child. You’re my child.

“I’m the dad, you’re the son. It doesn’t always feel that way, and I’m so sorry for all the times I made you feel like you weren’t just the kid. But you need to let me be the dad now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“It’s not about me and my feelings. You are the priority.”

“But it is!” Stiles insists, the words flying out of his mouth before he can stop himself. “It’s about you, too. I can’t not care about how you feel.”

Noah kneads his fingers together, his knuckles going white. “Did he tell you that you had to do those things and keep those secrets because of me?”

Stiles’ cheek tickles as a heavy tear slides down. “No,” he says, even though that was part of it. But just part of it. There were a lot of reasons Stiles had endured the abuse for so long.

Noah rubs his forehead with his right hand, turning away so Stiles can’t see. “Stiles.”

“We’re a team,” Stiles says, choking up. “We’re a team, Dad.”

“Yeah.” Noah sniffs hard and squeezes Stiles’ hand. “We’re a team. But I’m the dad and you’re the son. I need to take care of you.”

Stiles squeezes back. “Yeah. You’re the dad. You’ve always been my dad.”

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Walking into this police station is an odd, sobering experience. Stiles has spent a lot of time at his dad’s station, but that was more of a second home to him, with Scott’s house in third. Even when Stiles was actively lying to his dad or doing things he shouldn’t be doing there, it always felt like his turf.
He tunes out while Noah speaks to the front desk sergeant. It’s not until a middle-aged brunette comes out to greet them that he pays attention again.

“Sheriff Stilinski, I’m Detective Altman. And you must be Stiles? My partner and I will be taking your statement today. This way, please.”

Noah shakes her hand before they’re led into a gray room with sparse personality. It seems dull and drab at first, but Stiles sort of appreciates the sterility. He doesn’t want to be stared at by posters of kids who are learning there’s no hope with dope or flyers for missing persons.

Detective Altman’s partner, a younger man who doesn’t seem beaten down at all by the job, enters the room shortly after Stiles takes a seat. “Detective Marino,” he introduces himself. “I hope the drive over here wasn’t too bad, Sheriff Stilinski.”

Noah waves him off. “It was fine. And you can call me Noah. I’m not a Sheriff here. Well, I guess I am. That’s the only reason we’re not reporting in Beacon County.”

“This can be a very trying experience,” Altman acknowledges, taking the lead. “Why don’t we work through the basics and go from there? Let’s start with your name.”

“I go by Stiles, but that’s just a nickname. I’m not actually Stiles Stilinski. My birth name is Mieczyslaw.” Of course, he gives the name letter-by-letter instead of confusing them with his usual line of “it’s spelled the way it sounds.”

“How old are you, Stiles?”

“I turned eighteen in April.”

“Can you tell us about the crime you’d like to report?”

Stiles stares down at his hands laid flat in front of him. This already feels unreal and he hasn’t even said anything yet. These people don’t know him. They don’t have any context for his personality, his history, or the way he thinks about or reacts to things. His dad says they’re not going to judge him, but don’t they have to? They can’t possibly believe everyone about everything that’s brought to their attention.

His knee bouncing nervously, Stiles curls his fingers so his nails dig into the table. The upside is law enforcement isn’t going to get emotional about anything he says. His dad will, but Stiles doesn’t want to do this by himself.

“My uncle Clay - my mom’s brother - he’s been … abusing me since I was a kid. Since I was ten.”

“What kind of abuse?”

Stiles licks his dry lips, still fixated on his hands. “He lived with us for about a year. At first it was just touching. He wanted to touch me, then he wanted me to touch him. And then he wanted to see things and do other things. It just kind of kept escalating from there. After I turned eleven, he was … we’d started … we were having sex. I didn’t - I didn’t even know you could have sex like that. It didn’t matter that I didn’t want to, but it stopped after about eight months, when he moved out.

“My mom had already passed and I didn’t tell anyone. He kept telling me not to. We never did anything when my dad was home. So no one knew.” Stiles shrugs to himself. “That was seven years ago. I know there’s no statute of limitations for kid stuff, but I don’t have any evidence from back then. He came back to town this past December and moved back in. I was still keeping it a secret from my dad, and Clay wanted to do that stuff all over again. He did do it all over again.”
“Is the abuse still occurring?”

“No. It stopped a couple of months ago. He moved out again in March.”

Stiles has no interest in telling them what - or rather, who - prompted Clay to leave. It’s not like Clay would ever say anything about werewolves if interrogated. Not unless he wants to add “possible drug user, suffers from hallucinations” to his profile.

“And you didn’t turn eighteen until April, you said? You were a minor?”

“Yes. I was still seventeen.”

“Where did this happen?”

“Usually my room. Once in his room - he was staying in the guest room. But usually in my room and at night. But not always.”

“And how frequently?”

In his peripheral vision, Stiles catches Noah rubbing at his neck angrily, so he averts his eyes more to the right. “Um, like, two or three times a week.”

“Do you know of any witnesses? Anyone who may be able to corroborate, even if they didn’t know what they were witnessing at the time?”

“No. No witnesses.”

Derek and his werewolf hearing aren’t viable, and all he heard was two people having sex anyway. He’d have to lie about what he knew to establish any testimony about who it was and what they were really doing.

“Your father was not at home at the time?”

Stiles dies a little more inside as he answers with Noah sitting right next to him. “When I was a kid, no. Clay always waited until my dad was at work. But this last time he was here … sometimes we weren’t alone. We were really quiet. I … he told me to be quiet. And I didn’t want my dad to find out.”

Noah hunches forward with his head down. Yeah, it’s not law enforcement who’s going to get emotional. “I’m really sorry I covered it up,” Stiles whispers.

“Would you like to take a few minutes?” Marino offers.

“I’m okay,” Noah says, looking up at Stiles. “I’m okay if you’re okay.”

Stiles just nods at Altman for her to resume her questions. “Was your uncle ever violent with you? Or did he threaten you with violence or bodily harm?”

“Not really.”

It should be a good thing - something that Noah doesn’t have to feel badly about, for once. But Stiles can’t help but think about what the absence of violence means and how it indicates that he wasn’t so physically dominated he didn’t have a choice. He submitted for other reasons. He had choices. He just didn’t opt for any of them.

“Can you clarify?” Altman prods gently. “Is that a no?”
Stiles purses his lips. “He didn’t usually hit me. And he never threatened me with a knife or a gun or anything like that. He slapped me hard once. And choked me. But that’s because he was really mad about something I’d done.”

Noah looks at Stiles, ostensibly scrutinizing him in the moment but actually searching his memory. “He hit your face?”

“Yeah.”

“I only remember that bruise you had. You said it was from lacrosse practice.”

Stiles shakes his head, flushing from the lie. “It wasn’t lacrosse. It was him.”

Noah huffs loudly through his nose, but doesn’t say anything further. Frankly, Stiles is amazed at how much self-control his dad is exhibiting, but this might be the Sheriff in him dovetailing with what he wants as a parent. Both sides of him know it’s better for this interview to proceed as smoothly as possible.

“So I guess he wasn’t physically violent with me. I mean, he was. He still assaulted me. Just not by physically forcing me into it. Other than, I guess, holding me down sometimes.

“There was someone else once,” Stiles is loathe to admit. “My dad was out of town and Clay came back to the house one night with one of his friends. They were drinking and they came upstairs and - I didn’t know him. I had to, with Clay, and then they made me, with his friend. That felt really violent. But still, he didn’t hit me.”

Marino pauses in his notetaking. “Can you describe this other man?”

“Um, he’s an inch or two taller than me, like six feet tall. Bulkier, but not fat. Basically like someone who works outside instead of sitting behind a desk all day. I think maybe mid-30s and dirty blond hair. He worked with Clay at the same construction site, but I don’t know where that was. His name is - his name is Scott.”

Noah can’t suppress his gasp. “Do you know him, sir?” Marino asks.

“No,” Stiles answers for him glumly. “It’s just that Scott’s my best friend’s name, too.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything about how Derek had looked into this Scott guy, either. Maybe he should have asked Derek for more specifics, but it might be better that he doesn’t have them - not unless he could somehow explain how he knows it was Scott what’s-his-last-name who lives in Willow Heights. Rapists don’t generally pass on contact information to the lucky objects of their assault so they can keep in touch.

“I know where Clay’s job site is,” Noah supplies. “He was working on the new condos going up in Beacon Hills at the intersection of Main and Doyle. But I don’t know any of the people who work there. I don’t know this animal.”

“We’ll run him down and see what shakes out,” Altman says. “And we’ll let you know about coming in to identify him in a line-up.”

Ordinarily, Stiles would be uneasy about blowing an ID by not being able to remember what this man looked like or getting confused across similar-looking people, but his earlier recognition of the photo Derek had showed him reassures him somewhat.

The vague confidence absorbs a little of the apprehension about another confession. “Clay - he also
put something in my drink once.”

“What?” Noah spits out in a spike of fury, the father in him taking over. “He did that?”

“It was after a game. The one we played against Woodrow. I had an open Gatorade in the fridge and Clay must have assumed I would drink it after I got home. My dad had an overnight shift, so he came to my game and went to work. I woke up the next morning in my bed and I knew what Clay had done. I mean, I don’t know exactly, I’d blacked out, but I knew I’d been drugged and I knew he’d done stuff to me. He’d offered me a pill a couple of days earlier, but I didn’t want it. I confronted him about it later and he freely admitted he’d slipped me something.”

“I left you with him,” Noah seethes, wiping his hand over his mouth. “I should’ve finished that drink instead of you, and then he could’ve had a great time explaining it to me.”

Stiles looks down at his hands again. He should really trim his thumbnail when he gets home so it’s not so jagged.

Altman takes Noah’s outburst in stride. “Did you seek medical attention after you suspected you had been drugged?”

“No,” Stiles says, shaking his head in shamefully confirming that once again, he has no evidence of anything. “I didn’t go to the hospital or a doctor. There are no medical records. I didn’t have any blood tests or urine tests done or anything like that. I just detoxed on my own.”

“Did you seek medical attention after any of the assaults?”

“No. My friend tried to get me to go to the hospital after … after I was with both of them, but I didn’t want to go. I don’t have any proof. I always cleaned everything up. That time, I left my house and Clay did it for me while I was gone. I had the clothes I was wearing that night, but I …” Stiles sighs deeply. “I threw them away. I shouldn’t have done that. I messed up.”

“We can send CSU out to process your room as the primary site of multiple assaults. Time has passed and the scene has been cleaned, but we could get lucky. It’s worth trying for a case like this.”

Stiles isn’t sure if this is normal procedure. They’re talking about child sexual abuse, after all, and Stiles knows enough about legal definitions that sex abuse involving kids under fourteen is an elevated crime. But maybe he’s getting special treatment because of his dad’s status. Perversely, he wonders if reporting a traumatic crime and getting VIP treatment is a best or worst prize.

“There might - it’s possible there’s other evidence,” Stiles says. He’s already dealt a new blow to his dad with the drugs; he might as well double-down now that that open wound is exposed. “It’s not mine, though. I don’t have it. He might not have it anymore, either. But he … he took a video of me with his phone. Not of … um, penetration. It was oral.”

It’s the weirdest Hail Mary Stiles has ever proposed, never mind that he’s well aware he destroyed Clay’s phone after Derek took it. The video is gone. It doesn’t exist anymore unless Clay had copies, and that idea disgusts Stiles so much he wants to puke.

“He taped you?” Noah asks, his voice cracking. “He taped you doing that?”

“Yeah.” Stiles feels his face getting hot from the humiliation and he chants to himself not to cry. He’s made it so far with the detectives without crying.

“That motherfucker,” Noah mumbles. He clenches his fists in his lap, but when Stiles touches his forearm with light fingers, some of the tension dissipates.
“There might be something to that,” Altman says. “You said he no longer lives at your residence. Do you know where he is now?”

Noah hands her a piece of paper. “He’s in Arizona. Last I knew, he was staying at a hotel, but it’s possible he’s been there long enough that he’s found a more permanent place to live. I don’t know. Here’s the address and his cell phone number.”

Altman exchanges a glance with Marino. “He’s crossed state lines?”

“Is that a problem?” Stiles worries.

“No, but we’ll have to bring him back to California. Different procedures.”

Stiles mentally reins in his cautious optimism. “So you have enough to arrest him? It’s just my word. He’s going to deny everything. It’s my word against his. He’ll say I’m lying.”

“We’ll work on getting a warrant for his phone and anything related - computers in his possession, e-mail and cloud accounts. And we’ll see if we pick up anything from your room. Even if we come up empty, we still have some options. We’ll talk to him. But I need to be very clear with you - any warrants or arrests do not mean charges will be filed. That depends on how the case comes together and the District Attorney’s determination.”

“Yeah, okay.” Stiles hadn’t really hoped for anything more than that to begin with.

“Have you spoken to him about the abuse?” Marino asks. “Does he know that you’re filing a police report?”

“He has no idea,” Noah says with the biggest “fuck you” scowl Stiles has ever seen. “He can find out when his pedophile ass gets arrested and read his Miranda rights.”

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After entering his room, Stiles toes his shoes off and haphazardly leaves them strewn along the path to his bed, where he flops down on his back.

“It’s been a long day, huh?” Noah asks, sitting down, too.

They had stayed at the station for what felt like an eternity, reviewing and clarifying timelines and details. Stiles had come prepared with dates he’d been able to trace back that morning for a number of instances, but that had been so depressing. It helped with the credibility of his allegations, but making the frequency of the abuse so tangible and watching his dad try to reconcile those dates with his own schedule, just like Stiles thought would happen when he found out, was no picnic.

Stiles pulls himself up into a similar position. “Yeah.”

“I’ll call you out of school again tomorrow. Do you want to go back on Monday?”

“Yeah, I suppose. Yeah. I’ll be fine. School is a good distraction. Are you working tomorrow?”

“No. I’ll be here when the CSU techs come to sweep your room. I can’t do anything - I have to stay out of it - but I want to know that it’s happening.”

“Should I even - I mean, I guess I shouldn’t sleep here tonight,” Stiles says. “This is way beyond clean-up and contamination, so I really don’t think they’ll get anything, but maybe I should just leave it alone.”
“You can go to Derek’s if you want.”

“No, that’s okay. I want to stay here. Can I sleep in your room?”

“Sure, kiddo. You feel like having dinner?”

“No, not really.” Stiles sighs, but digs up some new resolve. He’s not on board with his dad skipping meals because of this. If Noah doesn’t eat until he’s “over it,” he’ll turn into a walking skeleton. “But we should eat.”

“I’m not hungry, either.”

“We should eat. I don’t feel like cooking. So it’s probably cereal or we order something.”

Neither Stiles nor Noah make a move to get up. It’s only five o’clock. They’ll eat eventually.

“I need to make a doctor’s appointment for you so you can get checked out.”

Stiles shakes his head. “It’s okay. I already did.”

Noah sits up straighter in surprise. “You went to Dr. Green?”

“No.” His dad didn’t miss any insurance paperwork; there wasn’t any. “I went to Planned Parenthood.”

“Oh,” Noah says softly. “Everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I need to check again in a few months, just in case, but I seem healthy.”

“Okay, good. Great. That’s a relief.”

“I know I should - I should see a therapist, too. I’ve started looking for a one. I mean, I can’t pick just from a website - I’ll have to try it out in person to find someone I’m comfortable with.”

“Yes,” Noah says, nodding. “Yeah, I don’t … I can talk to Social Services, if that’s okay with you. We interface with them regularly on cases. They probably have some good recommendations. But don’t worry, they won’t know I’m asking for you. For us.”

Stiles feels terrible - absolutely fucking terrible - about how absolutely fucking terrible his dad must feel, being so cut out of everything until now. As if Stiles suffering in isolation wasn’t bad enough - Noah’s just found out Stiles handled his medical needs and was starting to work on his psychological needs, all without a word to or from his dad.

“You wanna help me pick one?” Stiles asks. “You should probably come with me. Sometimes I’ll need to go by myself. And sometimes you’ll probably want to go by yourself. But we can go together, too.”

“Okay.”

Stiles doesn’t mention how they’re going to pay for therapy. They’ll figure that out down the line. Even though Derek was going to cover it before, that plan is officially out the window now that Noah has been clued in. There’s no way his dad’s going to step aside while Derek provides for Stiles in his place.

“We should get you a new bed,” Noah says, patting the mattress next to him. “After CSU gathers whatever they can, we can toss this one.”
“No, you don’t have to,” Stiles shrugs. He’s managed to sleep in this bed, despite everything that Clay has done. It hadn’t been easy, but his dad doesn’t have to spend more money to replace it.

Noah won’t settle for anything else. “A bigger one, too. A queen-size bed will fit. And that’ll be more room when Derek comes over.”

Stiles almost insists that it’s not necessary, but he swallows it back down. His dad hasn’t even had a day to process all of this. Stiles has had seven years, and although that duration wasn’t exactly clear-headed and the continuation of the abuse is pretty fresh, it’s still a huge head start.

His dad is going to be reeling from this indefinitely. He needs to feel like he’s not on the sidelines anymore. Buying something to give Stiles a small sense of a clean slate isn’t just for Stiles.

“Okay,” Stiles agrees. “But I don’t need anything fancy.”

Noah lets out a sad little chuckle. “You always want fancy stuff, though.”

“Yeah, but the Louis Vuitton flannels are worth it.”

Their usual banter still flows, but there’s a vacancy underneath it that Stiles hopes will fill up as they slowly move forward.

He won’t always be void. He can’t be.

In the lull, Noah glances around the room, pausing at the dresser. “Stiles. Those condoms - you and Derek don’t - why do you …”

Stiles sighs, hugging himself and gripping his elbows. “They weren’t for Derek. They were for him. He ran out of his … I didn’t want that to happen again … so I got some myself …”

“But they’re still in the shrink-wrap.”

“He didn’t want them,” Stiles murmurs, eyes down. “He liked it better without.”

Stiles’ shoulders slump and he can’t bring himself to look at Noah, tearing up at what his dad must be thinking. At least getting professional help was productive, even if Stiles did it by himself, but Noah can’t feel a scrap of relief from this. Stiles basically went out and bought condoms for his own premeditated assault. He chose to do that instead of just fucking telling his dad about it.

And after he was denied them and the defense they offered, he still didn’t say anything. That wasn’t enough, just like the drugging wasn’t enough. Just like the rape porn wasn’t enough. It wasn’t until Clay expanded the party that Stiles reached out, but he ran to someone else instead.

This is going to keep happening. It’s already come up plenty in just one day. There will always be more band-aids to rip off. His dad will dwell on all of the details, tormenting himself with everything he can recall from both times Clay lived in their house, looking for and finding little signs and red flags he’ll be convinced he should have noticed.

“I just didn’t want to lose you,” Stiles tries to explain again, rubbing the palms of his hands back and forth against his thighs. “I love what we had. I knew you would believe me, but I didn’t want you to know this stuff about me. I didn’t want it to change things between us. It wasn’t you. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t tell you because of me, not you. You trusted me, and I didn’t -”

Noah loops his arm around Stiles’ back. “Hey, hey, hey. You didn’t break my trust. The person who did is going to rot in prison for it.”
“Maybe.”

“It kills me, what he did to you. It kills me that I wasn’t there for you.” Stopping to take a deep breath, Noah wipes a hand across his eyes. “But you weren’t responsible for that. He made you carry that burden, too. But I needed to know. It’s not about me knowing and hurting vs. me not knowing and not hurting. Not knowing and not hurting doesn’t exist. Sparing me from that isn’t an option. I don’t want to not know when you’re in pain, when you need help.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, his voice small.

“I know you hate to see me in pain, too. But we have to accept that the only way is to face it, okay? If we try to avoid it, it’ll always be out there, haunting us. None of this is going to be easy. We’ll deal with all of it together.”

Stiles mashes his lips together to suppress another apology. The blame merry-go-round is going to pummel them into oblivion if they don’t find a way to get off that ride.

They need more time - a lot more. As much as Stiles has had a head start on Noah, it’s still been less than a day for him, too, since his dad found out.

It hurts so much because his dad loves him to the ends of earth and beyond. Their love for each other had always been wielded by Clay as a silencing weapon, one that had worked almost as long as Stiles can remember.

Except it was never a weapon, not at all.

It’s the purest, brightest thing Stiles has ever known. It’s what kept him from being truly alone with Clay and losing himself entirely in the abuse. It’s the only way he was able to move on after his mom died. It’s the only reason Stiles thinks he might be able to love Derek the way he deserves to be loved.

It can outlast all of the pain - every relentless, searing drop. Maybe it really had been a weapon all along, belonging to Stiles until Clay distorted it so crudely as leverage. Clay doesn’t have control over it anymore, though.

Stiles tips his head to rest against Noah’s shoulder.

That love is safe and sound, exactly as it should be.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter didn’t include nearly as many scenes as I had imagined when I estimated 13 chapters. So it’ll be more like 14 in total. I continue to have wildly inaccurate estimations of word count to cover all of the details. A lot of fitting big and little pieces together.

I really wanted to finish chapter 12 so much earlier. I thought about it all the time, in a lot of places/times I really shouldn’t have (haha, like at work or holiday parties), or in the middle of the night. Even when I was actively in front of my computer, I’d be planning things out and later realize, “oh, really? I only wrote 100 words? But I thought
about it so much.”

This one was the most challenging to write. Wow, this was hard. More so than chapters 5 and 6, when Stiles tells Derek and the immediate aftermath. The stakes just seemed so much higher here between Stiles and Noah (a chapter full of Stilinski Family Feels, for those who’ve been waiting for that!), and then with the official police involvement.

Speaking of the police, I am not an expert on that and I put together something that seemed realistic enough based on some online research. I think it plays well enough for a layperson who’s watched a few episodes of “Law & Order,” but I’m positive there are procedural inaccuracies that would bother a better-versed reader. I did my best, though!

Chapter 13 will not be as difficult in terms of so much “hmmmm” time and not enough productivity, so I plan to have it up soon! Some of the scenes I wrote for chapter 12 got pushed to chapter 13, too, so that’s less for me left to write in the next installment.

Thanks as always for reading and happy 2018!
Hi, readers! Please be advised that this chapter contains some descriptive language about the abuse Stiles suffered in earlier chapters.

And thank you so much for the kudos, comments, subscriptions, etc. Wow, this story has passed 1000 kudos and honestly that concept wasn’t even a hopeful gleam in my eye when I started writing this. It means a lot to me that people out there are reading and enjoying (“enjoying”) this, and in some instances, really taking something away from it. I really can’t even say - that’s such an amazing feeling, like I’m floating away on Fizzy Lifting Drinks or something. (No ceiling fan included, though!)

I hope you like the chapter! Thanks for reading!

[Posted 2/4/18]

Almost on auto-pilot, Stiles navigates the gentle curves of the narrow roadway with great familiarity. He’s never had much of a pre-planned schedule for visiting his mother, but he’d woken up on Sunday morning wanting to see her.

As Stiles pulls within decent viewing distance, he spots a lone figure sitting in her section with a pop of yellow flowers. He’s sure it’s Noah, but double-confirms by looking for his dad’s car.

Stiles assumes that his dad talks to his mom about a lot of things, whether they’re important, silly, or stupid, but this time, he has a distinct feeling about the topic of one-way conversation. For all he knows, Noah has been here every day since Stiles confessed everything. She’s not alive anymore, but she has a right to know and Stiles should have told her earlier.

He can’t hear Noah or see his face, but there’s no way this isn’t intimately harrowing, requiring privacy and distance. Natural eavesdropper or not, this is another instance of dialogue that’s not for him. Instead of proceeding forward, Stiles hangs a right to head out of the cemetery before his dad sees him.

He’ll come back later. His mother should at least hear from him directly that he’ll be okay and none of it was ever his parents’ fault. Maybe he’ll bring some daisies to add to the bouquet, too. She always liked them.

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After Stiles leaves the cemetery for the second time, he meets up with Lydia and her meticulous economics notes. He’s so appreciative of her offer to help him catch up after being out “sick” for two days, he doesn’t even crack any jokes at an incoming text from Parrish lighting up her phone.

When he comes home later that night, Noah is still at the station and the house is empty. Stiles has new inanimate company, though.

A bedframe and queen-size mattress, adorned with fresh sheets and bedding, were delivered and set
up while he was out. As much as Stiles is convinced there was no evidence left behind on his old bed for the CSU analysts, at least now he’s sure he’ll be laying his head down in a clean place. Innocent, even. Unknowing.

Stiles runs his hand along the soft thread of the comforter. His dad really went all out.

“Wanna come over?” he texts Derek.

Stiles has seen Derek since he reported Clay to the police, but only at the loft. Once Derek responds affirmatively, Stiles sends a message to his dad, as promised, to inform him Derek is spending the night.

The bigger bed is a pleasant upgrade, despite Stiles’ earlier insistence that he didn’t need one. Derek finds him starfished out, taking up most of the room and pointing to a sliver of space on the right side.

“That’s for you,” Stiles offers generously.

“Oh, is that how it is,” Derek says, kneeling between Stiles’ splayed legs. “How’s everything going with your dad? Now that it’s been a few days.”

Stiles sits up to face him. “I think he’s better. Compared to when I told him, I guess. He feels like he has to make up for not knowing about it, but I know this part is weird for him. Because he’s in law enforcement and he can’t do anything for the investigation himself. I’m kind of worried that he sees himself as being useless as a dad and a Sheriff. But we’ve been spending a lot of time together so I think that maybe helps.”

“I’m sure it does,” Derek assures.

“I’m going back to school tomorrow. Back to regular life.”

“Regular is good.”

“Yeah, it is. So I need my regular cuddles, too.”

Derek laughs, like the idea of him cuddling is absurd, but he’s a great cuddler. “I think I can spare some.”

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Sometimes Stiles wears Derek’s clothes, but only around his loft and usually in a lounging, kickback sort of way. Derek’s leather jacket is different, though.

He’d seen it hanging in the back of Derek’s closet, initially drawn to the whiskey color. “Matches your eyes,” Derek had said from behind him. It’s been broken in well, worn lovingly over a long period of time, but it no longer fits. Derek had shucked it off the hanger and plopped in in Stiles’ surprised arms, insisting he make good use of it.

It’s a tad big in the shoulders on Stiles, but he’s pleased to realize not too big. The jacket is beautifully made, but Stiles mostly loves having something of Derek’s so close to him.

Mornings are still crisp enough to wear heavy layers comfortably. The first day he wears it to school, Scott gives him a friendly slap on the back. “This new?”

“Sort of,” Stiles says, pulling his math book out of his locker. “It doesn’t fit Derek anymore, so he
“Oh, okay. It looks good on you, man.”

“Yeah, right? It’ll come in handy, too. You know, when we’re rasslin’ with punkass werewolves or druids or lizard men. Or is this gonna be the year of lizard ladies? Hoodies and button-down shirts are for lightweights.”

“Cool, I like it!” Scott smiles at him. “Like you’ve got some armor.”


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Stiles is a legal adult, but he’d told the detectives they could contact him through Noah, who understands police procedure and implications far better than he does. He would just repeat everything the detectives told him to his dad anyway.

In the middle of the week, they head back to Modesto for the line-up identification. It hadn’t been hard to find Clay’s friend. Even if there were multiple Scotts on the construction crew, Stiles had given a good enough description that narrowing it down couldn’t have been much of a challenge.

Detective Altman guides Stiles and Noah into a small room with a large one-way mirror. The line-up stage is empty, but Stiles’ eyes automatically flit to the six feet marker along the side measurements.

He’s never been in this situation, on either side of the mirror. Frankly, he’d considered it more likely that he’d be in a line-up himself after getting caught doing something he shouldn’t have been doing. What’s a little crime when your friends’ lives hang in the balance?

A man wearing a suit and glasses opens the door to join them. “This is Mr. Davis. The suspect engaged counsel after we brought him in,” Altman says.

Noah nods curtly at him. Stiles assumes it’s the most he can muster out of respect for the legal system and civil rights, even if Noah wants to deck anyone who actively works to clear his son’s abusers. Stiles doesn’t acknowledge the defense attorney at all.

“Each man is going to step forward when called so you can get a better look at them and their profiles,” Altman instructs. “Take your time in deciding if you see the perpetrator in the line-up. Please wait until all have been called forward before identifying anyone.”

“Oh, okay,” Stiles says.

“Noah nods curtly at him. Stiles assumes it’s the most he can muster out of respect for the legal system and civil rights, even if Noah wants to deck anyone who actively works to clear his son’s abusers. Stiles doesn’t acknowledge the defense attorney at all.

“Each man is going to step forward when called so you can get a better look at them and their profiles,” Altman instructs. “Take your time in deciding if you see the perpetrator in the line-up. Please wait until all have been called forward before identifying anyone.”

“Okay,” Stiles says.

“Bring them in,” Altman cues through an intercom.

Five men troop in and turn to face them. They look similar enough that someone with only a vague idea of the right person would struggle.

Stiles shoots a glance at Noah - one that clearly says, ‘I don’t need any more time’ - but obediently waits through each one stepping closer when it’s his turn. He’s suddenly so grateful that Derek had done his own rogue reconnaissance and told Stiles about it later. Stiles probably would have picked the right person on his own easily, but he can’t leave anything to chance, not with the gravity of being correct.

“It’s #4,” Stiles says, once the last person rejoins the line-up. “He’s definitely #4. That’s him.”
Davis murmurs something to Altman and leaves the room. “What does this mean?” Stiles asks her.

“The identification was important to build on the details of your police report, but we need to do what we can to move beyond testimony. Now that we have his fingerprints, we can run them against the ones we picked up on the footboard that don’t match either of yours, Clay’s, or the elimination prints.”

Stiles rubs at his cheek. He had washed his bedding extensively, but he hadn’t wiped down the furniture itself. Even though he and Derek (well, mostly Derek) had physically handled his bed when they rearranged his room, they hadn’t unwittingly wiped away existing prints in the effort.

Getting temporary stand-ins for Clay’s prints instead of waiting for him to be booked in Arizona had been simple for CSU. His prints were still all over the guest room. Stiles had also asked Derek to submit fingerprints and a DNA swab since he was sure anything CSU picked up is from one of them, whether it’s a loose hair or saliva on a pillowcase.

Derek’s prints are already on record because of his arrest for Laura’s murder, but Stiles hadn’t wanted to proactively lead the detectives to that. They might find out about the arrest on their own, and if they do, they’ll notice Noah’s name all over the report, but they haven’t said anything about it. It’s not directly relevant, but even so, it’s eyebrow-raising. A Sheriff’s kid who comes in alleging repeated sexual abuse and incest is now dating and sharing a bed with a man his father once arrested for homicide.

“We’re still processing the DNA as well,” Altman adds, “but so far it appears to belong to only two people.”

Stiles looks down at his feet and nods. “Yeah, it’s just me and Derek. So that’s a bust.”

“The prints may come back as a match. We’ll let you know.”

There’s a decent chance that they’ll match. If the prints on Stiles’ bedframe don’t belong to the four most likely people already screened, the only other real possibility is either Scott. Stiles hasn’t asked best-friend Scott to submit elimination prints, though. He’s not going to let something like this be the reason he finally spilled what was happening. Besides, it’s not really important whether the prints are his Scott’s, the way it’s important to explicitly identify that Derek is the source of DNA in Stiles’ bed. It just matters if the prints are the other Scott’s.

“What’s his name?” Stiles asks. “Not just his first name.”

“Scott Quinn.”

Well, that’s who he is now to Stiles. Quinn. He doesn’t deserve to be called Scott. “So even if the prints are his, they’re just fingerprints. They’re circumstantial and he’ll just try to explain it away, even though I’d never met him before and he’s definitely not my friend, so why would he touch my bed? Because he wants to hang out with a high school student? It was all totally normal and above-board except now I’ve gone crazy and accused him of assault?”

“Anything helps, Stiles. We’re still putting together the story that the evidence tells.”

“The evidence I didn’t get rid of,” Stiles sighs, running his hands through his hair and trying not to actually pull at it. If he’d kept his clothes and gone to the hospital before showering, he could prove that Quinn hadn’t just come into his room to play video games or read comics. Proving they fucked isn’t everything, but it’s a lot more than what he’s got right now.

“Stiles, don’t beat yourself up over that,” Noah says with a firm hand. “You were going through
Stiles fidgets with his collar. “And what about Clay? What’s happening to him?”

“He was taken into custody by Arizona police,” Altman confirms. “He’s still there, in the process of being extradited. Local police were also able to retrieve his phone and laptop per the warrant and they’re in our possession now. The tech team is reviewing the devices to determine if they hold any evidence. We should know something soon.”

Stiles looks at Noah, overwhelmed with mixed emotions of hope, pessimism, fear, and uncertainty. He can’t help but wonder what Clay is thinking and feeling. If he’s finally getting a taste of his own medicine, scared shitless without any control. Or maybe he’s not sweating at all, knowing there’s nothing but the word of an Adderall-laced teenager who’s a documented troublemaker. Clay’s manipulated his way with Stiles for years. After that, establishing reasonable doubt is a piece of cake.

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Stiles’ leg jerks abruptly in his sleep, bringing him back to the waking world. Derek is still out next to him, features relaxed and mouth slightly parted. Even though they have more room in Stiles’ new bed than they used to, they don’t really use it, preferring to lie adjoined and attached.

They’d both been tired that evening. Stiles had stayed up especially late the night before, studying for an economics test and silently worshipping Lydia for saving his ass. Derek and Argent had been investigating a disturbance near the nemeton, one that ultimately seemed like a bunch of kids messing around.

Stiles remembers falling asleep not long after it grew dark outside, but now it’s close to ten. “Derek, get up,” Stiles says, nudging his shoulder.

Derek opens his eyes, but just barely. “No.”

Stiles laughs at his petulance, prodding him again. “You have to go home. This’ll be the third night this week you slept here. And if I go back to your place with you, I can’t stay on Saturday night.”

Derek sleepily bats at Stiles’ hand and pulls him closer. “But your dad said I could come over whenever.”

“No, he said two nights -”

“That’s not a rule anymore,” Derek murmurs.

“What?” This is news to Stiles.

“He probably forgot to tell you.”

“I guess? Well, even if you misunderstood, we have plausible denia-”

“I didn’t misunderstand,” Derek says, giving Stiles a quick kiss. “So I’m gonna move in.”

“Ha, I don’t know if you want to share a bathroom with me every day,” Stiles jokes before growing serious. “That was nice of my dad to change his mind about that.”

“Now I believe you that he wants you to get laid.”

Laughing for real this time, Stiles gets more situated for more than just a nap by fluffing his pillow, tugging his t-shirt off, and adjusting the blankets over them. He nestles himself up against Derek,
enjoying the warm contact, while Derek makes a small pleased sound in his throat and places a hand on Stiles’ lower back.

“I love it when you touch me,” Stiles says.

Derek seems more awake now. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think about it a lot. During class, when I can’t sleep at night, stopped at red lights.”

“Oh, you do?”

“All the time. It calms me down.”

“Good.”

“It’s the oxytocin.”

“What?”

“Oxytocin. It’s a hormone released when people are bonding. It makes them feel really good. Almost like you’re on a high. Not a drugs-high. But really good.”

“Is that how you feel?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I like that.”

“Does it happen to werewolves?”

Derek thinks. “I would assume so. A big part of me is still human, even if that’s not a thing for wolves.”

“Do you - does it feel -?”

“Yeah,” Derek answers. “Yeah.”

“I mean, there are contextual factors, too. Oxytocin amplifies feelings that already exist. It doesn’t automatically make people happy. Like, it can actually amplify negative emotions, depending on the circumstances.”

Derek smiles a little. “Like, if you’re with someone who shoved your face into a steering wheel?”

“Hey, that wasn’t so bad,” Stiles said, smiling back. “Like you said, I knew what that was for. And then you saved my life ten minutes later, so that was pretty good. I put a check box in the ‘net positive’ column for that.”

“I am sorry for hurting you that time, though.”

“You didn’t,” Stiles denies, even though he definitely remembers thinking ‘ow’ after Derek reacted to his provoking. “And that was a long time ago. You would never hurt me.”

“I will, though? There will be times when I hurt you and I don’t mean to. And you’ll hurt me, too.”

“Yeah, like normal relationship stuff, though.”

“You think we could have something normal?”
Pulling back so he can look at Derek’s face, Stiles regards him with solemn eyes. “I have to warn you. I’ve heard relationships based on intense experiences never work.”

“No, I don’t think that’s -” Derek starts to refute.


Derek doesn’t bat an eye at another pop culture reference from Stiles. “What am I supposed to say back?”

“Okay. We’ll have to base it on sex then.”

Derek pauses. “Okay. We’ll have to base it on sarcasm then.”

“That’ll work, too,” Stiles laughs, curling in again and weaving his legs with Derek’s. “For real, though. I think our version of normal is all we need.”

“Yeah. Normal for us. So where is that quote from, anyway?”

Stiles’ jaw drops. “Are you fucking with me? ‘There’s a bomb on your bus?’”

Derek’s forehead creases. “It’s an action movie?”

“Derek. What did you even do before you met me?”

“You know,” Derek says, stroking up and down Stiles’ back, “I’m not really sure.”

Derek kisses him again and Stiles can practically feel himself melting. “Can you - with your claws? ...” he asks.

“Yeah,” Derek says, bringing them out easily on command and continuing his light massage.

Stiles sighs breathily. “You would never hurt me.”

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Between third and fourth period, Stiles pulls his phone out of his pocket as he ambles down the hallway. It had vibrated against his thigh a few times during class, probably signaling pointless e-mails or barely understandable messages from Scott texting in his own pocket without looking.

He’s right on the first guess, but wrong on the second. He does have a text, but it’s from his dad. “Call me when you’re not in class,” is all it says.

Stiles heeds the direction and Noah picks up on the second ring. “Hey, Dad, what’s up?” Stiles asks, speaking a little louder than usual because of the chatter and noise around him.


The din around Stiles disappears instantly. The only things that exist to him anymore are his dad’s voice and the phone in his hand. Reaching for the doorknob closest to him, he steps inside the unoccupied janitor’s closet.

“What?” Stiles isn’t sure if he’s feeling a little dizzy because of this revelation or the smell of cleaning products blasting him in the face. “Really?”
“I’ll come pick you up after school. Or why don’t you come home and leave your car there? I’ll meet you at home and we can drive over.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, his voice thin and muted.

“Stiles, just breathe, all right? Evidence is a good thing. He’s going to go away for a long time.”

“Yeah, I’m okay, Dad.” Stiles sucks in some air loudly for his own benefit and his dad’s. “I’m fine.”

“I’m going to call Marino back and let him know we’ll be there later this afternoon. I’ll see you at the house, son.”

Stiles murmurs some kind of goodbye and hangs up the phone. He wants to stay hidden away, but the bell for next period is going to ring any minute now and the bleach is going to give him a headache.

During pre-calculus, he asks to go to the restroom, but instead sits down on a bench outside and calls Noah back. “Dad, I have to know. I can’t wait.”

“I’ll come get you now and check you out at the front office.”

Before fourth period ends, Stiles is summoned out of class. Taking his things with him, he stops by his locker to swap books out so he has what he needs. He won’t be coming back today, but he should be okay to miss classes here and there. His friends noticing is a higher risk than his grades are.

“Marino didn’t pick up, so I left a message that we’re on our way,” Noah says once they’re in the parking lot. “I’ll try him again when we get off the freeway.”

Stiles nods, too keyed up and uneasy to really engage in any kind of conversation. The police found something. Maybe it’s not of Stiles, though. He’s still not sure if Clay has hurt other people. Or maybe he has an affinity for downloading illegal porn.

Stiles isn’t crossing his fingers, thinking, “I hope some other kid got naked for him!” but if the police have direct evidence to back up Stiles’ specific claims, they have the blow job video. They’ve watched the blow job video.

He’d volunteered that information to the police to help his case, but it doesn’t feel like a blessing as much as it does a curse. The incident was months ago, but it’s not confined to that space and time. The isolation of the abuse had been so lonely and painful, but the exposure doesn’t feel any better.

It’s better than the alternative of having nothing to validate his allegations, though. So maybe Clay’s trophy is going to end up being a sick gift that keeps on giving, just not the way Clay thought it would.

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They haven’t heard back from Detective Marino by the time they arrive at the Modesto station. “He’s probably just tied up with something,” Noah says. “I’ve been there. Or his phone died. Also been there. I’ll try Detective Altman.”

She doesn’t pick up, either. “Sorry,” Stiles says as they walk into the station. “I guess I made us drive out here early for nothing.”

“Not for nothing. If we have to wait a while, that’s okay. I couldn’t have waited until the end of the school day, either. I’d rather wait here.”
Noah greets the front desk sergeant cordially. It’s not the same sergeant as their previous visits, but he acknowledges the beige uniform Noah’s wearing.

“I’m Noah Stilinski, here on a personal case. I’ve been trying to reach Detective Marino or Detective Altman. Are they available? I left a message, but they’re not expecting us so soon.”

“Detective Altman is in court today, but Detective Marino is here,” the sergeant explains. “I’ll call down for him.”

The sergeant doesn’t have better luck, though. “Can you go back and find out where Marino is?” he asks of an officer standing nearby.

Stiles and Noah take a couple of seats off to the side. “It’s okay, son,” Noah says. “We’ll wait.”

When the officer comes back and reports to the sergeant, they learn that Marino is in a meeting with the District Attorney. Stiles supposes it’s vaguely encouraging that both detectives are engaged with the legal system at the moment. Those efforts can’t be for his case - it’s too early for that - but at least the ones they’re working aren’t dead ends.

“Are you nervous about the therapy appointment?” Noah asks him, referring to the one he’d made earlier.

Stiles shrugs. “I guess I should get used to telling more people I don’t know about what happened. Maybe it’ll make testifying seem easier. It’s not easy, though. To talk about. And the whole point is to deal with all of the feelings … like, make peace with what I can and cope with what I can’t, so I know that’s good, but I just get so anxious. Therapy is supposed to make me better, but then I’ll feel like I should be getting better, even if I’m not.”

“There’s no time clock on this, Stiles. You take as long as you need. But you do need this. Even though it might have felt like you worked through it alone after he did those things to you when you were little. Especially because you didn’t have someone after that.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, twirling the drawstring of his hoodie around his finger. “Can you go with me?”

That hadn’t been the original plan. Stiles was going to go by himself the first time so he could be free to say whatever he wanted. But now, he doesn’t want Noah to drop him off like he had to at Eichen House. His dad can come inside.

“Sure, of course. Of course.”

Stiles takes his phone out of his pocket to distract him. He couldn’t wait until after school to find out what evidence the police uncovered, but the way it’s looming is unsettling.

He’s in the middle of playing his turn against Danny in Words with Friends when the sound of doors opening and multiple footsteps float through the entrance. Noah’s chair jolts next to him roughly, startling him so much he almost drops his phone.

“You’re fucking dead,” Noah hisses, standing up.

Stiles’ head snaps in the same direction, his breath literally being taken away by two police officers escorting in Clay, his hands cuffed behind him.

When Clay sees them just feet away, he instinctively freezes in his spot and Noah advances towards him. “You’re fucking dead to us - you’re not in this family anymore!”
One of the officers pulls Clay back as the other lunges forward to keep Noah at a distance. “She’s rolling over in her grave, you know that, right?” Noah fumes with a harsh stab of his finger.

Stiles rushes to grab him. “Dad! Dad, come on!”

The officer closest to Noah moves to restrain him, but Stiles is able to wedge himself between and separate them without further uproar. “Sorry, we’re sorry,” Stiles says to the officer.

Noah holds his hands up and takes a step backward. The officers cut him some slack - it’s probably Noah’s uniform talking again - and let it go.

On his part, Clay keeps his head bowed as the officers resume walking him further into the station. Stiles watches, but not with the same laser focus as his dad. He had never wanted to see Clay again. Watching Clay handcuffed in custody is one thing. Making eye contact is another.

“You don’t look at him,” Noah snarls as they pass, just in case Clay is tempted.

None of this is lost on the sergeant, who directs the officers, “Get Marino out here ASAP, too.”

Detective Marino emerges a few minutes later, full of apologies. “I’m so sorry about that. He was supposed to be transported in earlier this morning to be processed, but they were running late. I should have told you in my message -”

“You didn’t know we would be here,” Noah says, getting his bearings again. “It’s all right.”

“I couldn’t wait,” Stiles explains.

Noah’s eyes are still glassy. “He looks just like her. But he’s a complete stranger, he’s a monster. She would never recognize him. We don’t know him.”

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They follow Marino into the same interview room from the first time they came to file the police report. The recognition should be soothing, but it’s not. Recognition doesn’t mean comfort. Stiles hadn’t felt comforted the nth time he and Clay fucked. If there’s evidence of his abuse, that’ll be familiar to him - he was there, after all - but that won’t feel comforting, either.

“Let’s start with the other physical evidence,” Marino suggests. “The two fingerprints on your footboard are in fact a match for Scott Quinn.”

Stiles lets out a huge breath and nods in small, neurotic motions. That’s not damning, but he’ll take the baby steps.

“Between that and already matching a few of Clay’s prints, we can put them both in the immediate vicinity. That’s not as compelling for your uncle, considering he lived in the house and is a family member, but it’ll be a little trickier for his friend. However, there was no incriminating DNA from either suspect.”

Stiles nods again. That’s what he’d thought. “But you found something else, too?”

“We did,” Marino confirms, his voice transitioning into a softer tone at a slower speed. “We processed Clay’s phone and his computer, and also combed through his e-mail and internet activity. We found three videos.”

Time comes to a complete standstill as Stiles’ heart pounds in his ears. “The one I told you about?”
“Yes.”

“Are they all of me?” Stiles whispers, cringing from his fingertips to his toes. “I only know of one.”

“Yes, they’re of you.”

Stiles blinks hard and can’t bring himself to look at his dad or the detective. He’ll cry for sure. If his dad is already tearing up, Stiles won’t be able to stop his own internal meter from flipping straight to ‘basketcase.’

“I need to see them,” he says. “I need to know what’s on them.”

He doesn’t want to, but he has to. What else did Clay tape him doing? Stiles had never considered the possibility that Clay had hidden cameras. He’s not savvy enough to have a regular feed, and looking back, there’s no way he could have had one unless it was picture-only. Stiles had talked about were-creatures and the Benefactor and turning Liam in his room for months, but Clay didn’t seem to know anything about those things. The way Derek tells it, Clay didn’t act like he knew all about werewolves when they finally met outside that bar.

“All right,” Marino agrees, like he’d expected that response. “I’ll bring in a laptop.”

“Just me,” Stiles blurts out. He finally turns his head towards Noah sitting next to him with his jaw tight and eyes narrowed in despair. “I don’t want you to see this. I’m sorry, Dad, I just can’t -”

“It’s okay, son,” Noah interrupts quietly, running his thumb aimlessly across his badge. “I understand.”

“Sheriff, I’ll have an officer help you to the break area for some coffee.”

Noah stands up, but before he walks towards the door, he drops a hand on Stiles’ slumped shoulder and squeezes in reassurance. “Thanks, Dad,” Stiles says. “You can get anything you want from the vending machine, too. I won’t judge.”

Noah doesn’t laugh on his way out with Marino, not that Stiles expected him to. He’s not really going to eat all of his feelings, but Stiles wouldn’t blame him if he tried.

Alone in the room, Stiles breathes long, deep, and loud, one after another, the way he does when he senses the threat of a panic attack. As much as talking about it makes him relive what happened, watching it will be a next-level nightmare.

Stiles has a choice, though. He doesn’t have to see it. He could leave it in the hands of the police and the DA’s office to file charges and prosecute to the best of their ability.

But Stiles can’t do that. He needs to know what was in those other videos. He needs to know exactly what someone else will see and how they make his claims look. He has to understand how Clay captured his pain for his spank bank without him even knowing.

He needs answers.

When Marino comes back into the room, Stiles is breathing like a normal person again while gnawing on the last bit of thumbnail he can reach.

“This is going to be difficult,” Marino says gently. He opens the screen and Stiles stares at the 15-inch portal that’s going to take him back to some of the lowest points of his life. “You can stop or take a break at any time.”
Stiles looks away. “You’ve watched them, right?” he asks, eyelids fluttering to keep the tears back. “So you already know what he did.”

“I know what he did in these videos, yes.”

“Let’s just do this,” Stiles says. “It’s not going to get any easier. I can’t really brace for this.”

Stiles commands himself to focus on how this will be perceived by a court of law, by a jury, and not on what he’s doing or how he felt or how broken he was, but he can’t close himself off enough to be that clinical.

He already knows what’s on this first clip, but even though he remembers so much of it on his own, it’s still a harsh figurative slap in the face to see his literal face at that angle, kneeling at Clay’s feet and pleasuring him like that. Being talked down to like he’s just there as a convenient, warm receptacle along for the ride. Like the aggressive blow job was hot and sexy.

His tongue feels heavy in his mouth, so he rolls it around to remind himself that it’s free and not held down the way it is in the video. At least - “at least” - no one can clearly see his whole body. He watches the slightly younger version of himself try to avoid the attention of the camera to no avail. The blade twists deeper when Clay blocks his airway and he reacts out of panic before submitting like always.

When Clay lets go of him and he falls back, finally able to breath, Stiles hiccups through a sob. Yeah. There he is, naked for anyone to see. He doesn’t try to get away. Clay tells him to get back to business and he does it.

Stiles is too close to the edge, so he tries to detach himself and forget that the person being hurt like that is him. He knows exactly what happened, but is that what the video shows?

He can’t help but notice how it appears like he just takes it. He doesn’t fight. Not really. He’s not restrained, either. Clay doesn’t threaten him or hit him. The bruise on his cheek is still healing, but it’s lighter and he’s on the lacrosse team. He can’t prove that Clay is the source of the fading mark.

It isn’t even clearly Clay in the video. It’s just certain parts of his body that, well, could be verified as his. It’s his voice and the video was on his phone, too, but is that enough?

All it takes is one person - maybe a man, but not necessarily - in the jury box to think, “if anyone ever tried to make me do that, I would kick their ass. This kid isn’t really a kid, he’s almost an adult, and he says he didn’t want it, but he didn’t try to stop it or run? Or was he okay with it at the time?”

It should be clear that he’s miserable, but is it? Or could anyone see this and wonder, “some people, their eyes water like crazy when they give head. I had an ex like that. Is he really crying? He went along with it and maybe it really was dirty, rough sex like the defense says? I can’t send someone to prison if I’m not sure.”

Stiles goes dizzy for a second, terrified of what might be on those other videos. If it’s one of the times he got hard - if there’s evidence that he came when Clay fucked him - Stiles might just retract his statements to the police and refuse to go any further. No one can see that. No one would believe him.

The longer he watches the forced vulgarity, the more he realizes it’s not reliving the experience that’s the hardest. Neither is playing devil’s advocate with outside perceptions.

It’s seeing himself and what he did through Clay’s eyes. His vantage point.

This is how he liked Stiles best.
Stiles remembers how it was when he was a kid. It wasn’t those first times that Clay touched him, looked at him, or wanted to teach him secrets that were the worst. Stiles really didn’t like it, but he hadn’t started at the very bottom.

Clay hadn’t been mean, not back then. Clay would hug him and tell him he was such a good boy after they were done. Stiles knew his mom’s behavior was off once she got so sick - she hadn’t meant it when she accused him of trying to hurt, even kill her - but he’d just wanted to be good. Clay thought he was good.

It took a few weeks of steady descent before Stiles finally started to understand. The secret things they did in private - they weren’t just in addition to the nice, fun things they did in public. They were the priority. They were what Clay really wanted from him. The nice things in front of other people were an afterthought.

Stiles had already given up by the time Clay seemed to decide Stiles was “old enough” and wanted to do more than rubbing himself between Stiles’ legs. By then, Stiles had known everything else but the sex was an illusion. Sex was how Clay liked Stiles best.

And that’s never been more obvious than it is now as Stiles watches this video, shot from a device that’s just a proxy for Clay’s possessive stare - all the way through the climax, Clay’s empty vocal appreciation, and Stiles’ coughs, head down in humiliation.

The footage ends, leaving the room silent except for Stiles’ quiet crying.

“Fuck, this fucking sucks,” he says, wiping his face with some tissues Marino had given him.

“You don’t have to continue,” Marino prompts. “It’s perfectly okay to stop.”

“I can’t.” Stiles blows his nose. “I have to know.”

He sniffles as Marino opens the next video. It’s a total mystery to him, seconds away from being revealed in all of its lurid anti-glory.

Not much of anything is shown as Clay activates the camera on his phone, but once he turns the lens in the right direction, it’s all so clear to Stiles when this was taken. He doesn’t know why he didn’t realize it before.

Stiles is lying on his bed, naked on his stomach, but not as exposed as the blow job video, depending on interpretation. He doesn’t stir while Clay moves his hips and legs into a more favorable position.

Nor does he move when Clay enters him carelessly. His face is turned to the side, eyes shut and mostly in the frame of the video that’s occasionally shaky from the handheld nature, but more so because Clay is too active on his own to keep it steady.

Stiles isn’t so tired or fucked out that he fell asleep. He’s not closing his eyes in ecstasy.

He’s unconscious. He’s completely unresponsive.

Clay’s fucking him hard, too, from the sound of it, without worrying about Noah hearing them or Stiles not being able to take it. No wonder Stiles woke up the next morning with crimson stains on his sheets.

This meshes with what Stiles had suspected Clay had done while he was passed out, but it chills him to the bone to watch it play out. Sometimes the camera pans to his slack face, other times it’s more focused further south on the act itself, and Stiles nearly crawls out of his skin following Clay’s
perspective all over again.

Clay’s face isn’t in this video, either, and unlike the first one, he’s not talking, so his voice isn’t incriminating him, either. He’s just grunting a lot. The grunts, the slap of skin-on-skin, and the taxing of the bed are the only audio components. Stiles is too far under to make a sound.

Stiles balls his fists into the pockets of his hoodie, gripping the material so tightly he’d have harsh indentations in his palms if the cotton wasn’t in the way. He’s past trying to clean up his tears that intermittently blur the crisp lines of the video. He wishes he was wearing Derek’s jacket today.

The images jostle around as Clay repositions, leaning forward and holding his phone in the hand propping his weight up next to Stiles’ head. In preserving the full picture to jerk off to later, Clay’s face and most of his body are now visible as he keeps pumping into Stiles’ prone body.

There’s a crude sense of relief that Clay’s unequivocally identified himself, but the relief is fleeting in the background, the way Clay is in the background of the video. From this angle, Stiles’ face is so close in the foreground, continuing to show no signs of awareness.

It hurts like Stiles never anticipated, seeing himself like this. How did he get here? He knows he had reasons for not telling anyone, even if that meant the abuse wouldn’t stop, but it’s a hard pill to swallow that his actions had led him right there, to that moment.

Stiles wants to push through the screen and shake himself by the shoulders - yell and scream at himself to wake up - but he cries a little harder, wondering if it even made a difference that Clay drugged him and he couldn’t fight back. How much had he ever really fought back in the first place, even when he was wide awake? Being knocked out just gave him an excuse for not doing anything.

Clay groans and goes still, no doubt leaving Stiles with a sticky memento he’ll never really wash away, before the video cuts off.

“I can’t -” Stiles begins, but doesn’t know how to finish. “I know that’s what he did, even thought I didn’t really know, so I don’t know why - why does it feel like this?”

It’s a rhetorical question that Marino doesn’t try to answer. Stiles isn’t actually waiting for one anyway. He just looks down, a stray tear falling onto the table.

“This might be a good time for a break,” Marino says. “Or we can stop here. It’s your decision.”

Stiles shifts his gaze up, rolling his eyes at himself. “There’s one more. I can do one more. If I don’t see it for myself … I’m not gonna ask someone to describe it to me. I can do this. I’m just - I’m glad my dad’s not here to see it.”

He doesn’t need a date-stamp on the last video to know it’s from the same night. Stiles is still unconscious, his lashes thick and dark against his pale skin, but this time he’s lying on his back. It looks like Clay straddles his chest, stroking himself with one hand and filming with the other. It’s not too long before Clay comes, getting the money shot as he shoots ropes of fluid across Stiles’ face.

Stiles winces through it. These videos explain the way he woke up the following morning, so he did get some answers after all. Nothing close to satisfaction or understanding, but some of the blanks are gone.

“And that’s everything?” Stiles asks, straining to talk when he’d rather just curl up into the fetal position for eternity. “He didn’t have anything else?”

Marino nods and slides the box of tissues closer. “That’s all we found of this nature.”
“So …” Stiles hedges. “So there weren’t any other kids?”

“Not of this kind of evidence.”

“It was just me,” Stiles says, shoulders shaking. “It was just me.”

Like before, he’s not wistful as though he hopes there were others, but he’s not pacified, either, like lack of other media means Clay never hurt anyone else. Being an amateur pornographer might just be a new hobby of Clay’s. Or he was Clay’s muse. Stiles will never be less honored to be something in his entire life.

“How can I have a few minutes before we call my dad back in?” Stiles asks. “I - I just need some more time.”

“Yes, of course.” Marino closes the laptop and scoops it off the table. “I know he’ll want to have some sense of the new evidence. I can explain to him the generalities without going into details. Or if you’d rather do that -”

Stiles’ eyes widen. He hadn’t wanted his dad to see it for himself, but he doesn’t think he can tell his dad about it instead. “No. I don’t need to. I wouldn’t know how. So if you could do it …”

“I’ll fill your dad in and give you some privacy. When we’re ready to come back in, I’ll knock.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says, barely over a whisper.

When he’s by himself again, his emotions stall out, but one shaky breath later, he’s crying with abandon. Stiles keeps telling himself these are good developments - he has some evidence now, he knows what happened to him when he was drugged, Clay is in custody - but he’s still grasping to feel like he has any power. Like he isn’t still a victim.

He’s not sure if he’ll always be Clay’s victim.

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Stiles is more composed by the time Noah and Detective Marino return. It doesn’t hurt that they took a while. Marino’s a professional. He didn’t stumble over a longwinded summary with his dad. Noah, whose eyes are pink, probably needed his own time to process.

“Who’s going to see the videos?” Stiles asks.

“They are not just evidence of sexual violence,” Marino explains. “You’re eighteen now, but you were a minor at the time of the recordings, and child pornography is very protected in the legal system. There are other considerations that could have bearing, but in general, copies will not be made and the recordings will only be viewed by those on a strict need-to-know basis. The DA’s office will see them, of course. Clay’s lawyer will be privy through the discovery process to prepare adequate defense, but will not receive a copy. No one will be able to see these images at their own discretion.”

“Do you know if he released them anywhere?” Stiles asks, an alarming thought suddenly occurring to him. “Did he e-mail them to anyone, or post them online, or anything like that?”

“We have not found any evidence of distribution.”

“So what does this mean? As proof? He can’t deny it, but he can - he can lie about it, make it sound like it was something different.”
“He should be dead-to-rights,” Noah insists, grinding his teeth.

“Ultimately, it’s the DA’s office that will determine and pursue charges. Some things are more unambiguous. He had these videos. Stiles, you were a minor. He’s in them -”

“It’s not obvious,” Stiles worries. “Sometimes you can’t see him.”

“The videos were initially produced on a device other than the phone he was carrying at arrest, but we can establish it’s him, even without his face.”

“He can’t claim consent,” Noah says. “Stiles didn’t consent. He was underage. He was drugged. That’s not ambiguous, either.”

“The defense will attempt to argue otherwise -”

Noah huffs in exasperation. “Stiles didn’t drug himself!”

“They will do whatever they can to sway a jury member. I’ve heard a lot of doozies in a courtroom, so I wouldn’t be surprised by any claims made about consent. Our focus will be on building the strongest case we can.”

Stiles bites his lip. There were no recordings from the night that Clay and Quinn both assaulted him. He doesn’t know if he could bring himself to watch one if it existed, even for the reasons he watched the blow job video.

“What about Quinn?” Stiles asks. “Just two fucking fingerprints, my side of the story, and that’s it. He’s gonna get away with it. And I know - I know Clay’s the big fish, but Quinn took something from me, too, and I can’t prove it.”

“That will be more challenging,” Marino concedes. “But the DA can figure out how to best approach that. They can demonstrate that your allegations against your uncle have some support. That may help in filing charges against his friend, too. And if they’re able to file, they might try them together on some charges, unless the defense requests their cases be severed. There are a lot of different ways this can go. I’d really just defer to the DA’s office to clarify as we move forward.”

“Is he going to get out on bail?”

Stiles can’t wrap his brain around the idea that Clay could be out on the streets again. He’s not that worried about Clay approaching him - not between the presence of his dad and Derek - but Clay might do anything now that he’s been arrested and knows his pornos are in police custody.

“His bail hearing hasn’t taken place yet, but that’s up to the presiding judge and whether Clay has enough assets to post bond, I’m afraid. You’ll be advised if that’s the case.”

Stiles looks over at Noah, who has a better idea of Clay’s financial situation than he does. “It had better be a high bail,” Noah mutters. “I don’t know who would help him. I wouldn’t, even if he said none of it was true and it wasn’t my own child who was hurt.”

That’s enough for a small internal smile for Stiles. He may always be Clay’s victim in his own head, but his dad will never be Clay’s friend or brother-in-law again. Just like his dad said - Clay’s not in the family anymore.

Clay never deserved them.
When Stiles gets home, he heads straight to the shower and stays under the falling water for nearly an hour. Clay hasn’t touched him in over two months, but he doesn’t feel clean. Not after those flashbacks courtesy of Clay’s highlight reel.

He stays the night at Derek’s loft, but the first thing he does there is shower again. It’s overkill and he knows it, but he gives in to the compulsion. Derek’s not going to smell anything on him but his residual shame and anxiety. He can only dream of being able to scrub that off.

Derek is on the couch when Stiles emerges from the bathroom, covering his heat-warmed, blotchy chest with a t-shirt. “Hey,” Stiles greets.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Today was really hard. I don’t really want to break open the details right now. It’s just - I’ve had enough of that for a while. All I can do is wait and see what happens.”

Suddenly he wants nothing more than to be next to Derek. Derek welcomes it, too, when Stiles slides onto his lap, a knee on either side of Derek’s hips.

“I wish I hadn’t let him see me so scared,” Stiles admits. “That must have been like a drug to him. He couldn’t get enough.”

Stiles shudders, unable to control himself, and Derek’s hands come up immediately, rubbing the goosebumps from Stiles’ arms.

“Anyone would have been petrified,” Derek says. “That’s a normal reaction.”

“I wish I’d been stronger, though.”

It’s not just a physical thing. He’d looked weak and vulnerable in Clay’s videos, but Stiles had felt so small with Clay in every way. All the muscles in the world wouldn’t have offered much defense when he was roofied, but he still wonders if Clay would’ve come after him again if the opportunity hadn’t seemed to be there.

“You are, though.”

“No,” Stiles shrugs, tracing along the curve of Derek’s bicep. “Not like you. He definitely didn’t see me like that. I’m just this scrawny, little -”

“Hey, come on. Who held me up in a pool for two hours? While I was dead weight?”

Stiles raises his eyebrows at the memory. “Oh, that one really burned,” he says, kneading his left pectoral.

“You’re not scrawny or little. I love your body.”

Stiles squirms, not at all used to positive attention paid towards it, never mind from someone whose pin-up calendars could sell to the blind. “You do?”

“Yeah, because it’s yours.”

“I wish I could give it to you,” Stiles says impulsively.

“What?”

“I just …” Stiles struggles to explain. “I don’t know. I want to give you everything, but I can’t. Not
yet. I don’t know when. And it just doesn’t feel right. To do that to you? I know we joke about it, like hahaha, it’s cool, but if we’re not going to have that kind of relationship, isn’t that sort of like being just friends in the first place? We could be friends, and you could be free to do whatever.”

“Stiles.” Derek’s mouth sets in a thin line. “I don’t want to be just friends with you. Not unless that’s what you want.”

“No, I don’t want that … but … you have needs, almost everyone has needs, and your balls are gonna get so blue -”

“My balls are fine, Stiles. They’re great. So’s my right hand. And my left hand’s not too bad at it, either.”

Stiles sighs, the voice in his head harping on about how his amazing boyfriend has to get himself off like he’s not a boyfriend. “I just feel like it’s always you doing stuff for me. Me, me, me. I don’t want it to always be about me.”

Derek tips his head back against the couch, appraising Stiles critically. “You don’t think I get anything out of being with you?”

“Like, I know you get some laughs here and there -”

“You’re way more than jokes and punchlines.”

“Yeah. I know some pretty good limericks, too.”

“Stiles, I love being with you. You’re not a burden, you don’t deprive me of anything, and this relationship is not one-sided. I wish your uncle had never been born, but I don’t mind looking out for you at all. You look out for me, too. I just really want to be there for you. After falling for Kate’s tricks and sort of helping her kill my family … and not being able to take care of my pack when I was an alpha … it’s nice to do right by someone for once.

“It can be really dark, you know?” Derek goes on, his eyes taking on a faraway glaze until he blinks and it’s gone. “To be young and think you’ll always be alone on an island. Like love is something other people have, and it’s not for you. I didn’t think I could ever have that again. But now I do. It’s not just the laughs.”

Stiles cups the side of Derek’s neck with tender fingers. “You should have anything you want.”

“Sex is easy,” Derek says, before catching himself and shaking his head. “No, I mean, it’s not that sex is easy. But if you want sex, it’s not hard to get. Having a connection with someone is really different. That’s a lot harder. That means so much more to me than a sexual experience.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, obviously not totally convinced.

“I’m not in any hurry. I don’t want to rush it. We’ll have sex when it’s right. Whenever that is. And if we don’t, I don’t have a problem with that at all.”

“You’ll know when it’s right,” Stiles agrees, the left side of his mouth quirked up in encouragement.

Derek smiles. “I’m going to get it right with you.”

“Yeah. You will. And you’re pretty good about not treating me like I’m made of glass, too. You can still, you know, tease me and give me a hard time about stuff and roll your eyes at me. Like you used to.”
“Oh, you might end up regretting you said that.”

Stiles laughs and leans in for a kiss, Derek’s hands dropping to the strip of bare skin at Stiles’ waist. “We can do other stuff,” he says. “You’re nothing like him. I don’t - when you touch me, I don’t think about him. I want to be close to you.”

“You’ll tell me, though, right? If I do anything that reminds you of him?”

Stiles nods and bumps noses with Derek. “Yeah. But don’t … I don’t want you to be too hesitant. I don’t want that. Even if it’s similar, I’ll know the difference.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll never think that you’re him, Derek.”

“Are there any things I should stay away from? Any triggers?”

“We did everything together,” Stiles shrugs helplessly.

“No,” Derek argues, rubbing that spot behind Stiles’ ear. “You didn’t do it. He did it to you.”

“He was my first.” Stiles briefly slips back into mourning. “My first kiss. My first everything.”

Derek wraps his arms around him and presses his lips against Stiles’ temple. “Not your first everything.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, resting his head on Derek’s shoulder.

“You need me to survive, right? That’s why you aren’t letting me go?”

Stiles smiles, grabbing on tighter. “Yeah. Sure. That’s always been the only reason.”

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His backpack stuffed to the gills and a separate duffle bag in his hands, Stiles dumps both on the floor and starts to empty their contents on Derek’s table. The piles of promotional materials slip and slide against each other, some falling off the table completely, but Stiles doesn’t mind since there’s no sense of order to them yet anyway.

At the sound of Stiles’ settling in, Derek comes downstairs. “What’s all that?” he asks.

“Oh, it’s college stuff.”

“For every college in America?”

Stiles smirks. “Yeah, every single one except the all-girls schools.”

It’s an exaggeration, but Stiles really does have a colossal amount, even though he’s only interested in a portion. He’d been steadily adding his name to mailing lists since the beginning of junior year, but after Clay moved back in, Stiles had signed up for the list of any school he came across.

There was little consistency in who retrieved the mail - mostly dependent on schedules - but Stiles had been more than happy to flood the mailbox with college materials. Clay definitely saw them when he brought the mail inside, and when Stiles did, he’d leave the stack on the kitchen counter for a day or two. His dad might have thought Stiles was being lazy, but he couldn’t have been working any harder to constantly remind Clay he was going to escape someday, out of Clay’s reach, no
matter what Clay thought he could pull. Dorms and shared bunk beds with a roommate aren’t exactly what abusive sexual encounters with asshole uncles are made of.

Stiles isn’t going to leave for college for over a year. It seems like a lifetime ago that he’d been so resigned to the possibility of Clay being around for that long. He’d been flailing so much internally that he really was going to try to live through that. If Clay hadn’t gotten so out of control, maybe Stiles wouldn’t have fled to Derek’s. Maybe he never would have told anyone.

With everything else weighing so heavily on him now, thinking about his long-term future is still a welcome respite, especially since he can think about going away to school like a regular teenager instead of a caged animal.

Tongue darting out the side of his mouth, Stiles takes a seat and debates various segregation methods. Actual, no, and possible consideration first? Then state schools vs. private? Increasing tiers of cost? Geographic region?

“Is it okay if I keep this stuff here? I’m not sure if I’ll have space in my room to keep it organized.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Stiles digs out a pen and a highlighter from his backpack in case he wants to mark anything up. Derek stands beside him, half-watching Stiles flip through and half-absorbing it himself.

“Look at this crazy idiot,” Stiles cracks, pointing at a featured student who’s smiling way, way too hard about the computer science program.

“That could be you. If you go to school there, you could be the crazy idiot who lures other nerds in.”

Stiles picks up the next brochure for a liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. “Cool, a lake on campus. And this foliage reminds me of the Preserve.”

“Yeah, kind of.”

Stiles adds it to the ‘maybe’ stack and moves on to NYU, which is a definite ‘actual consideration,’ except it’s so expensive. “Would you come with me?” he asks. “Like, if I move somewhere else?”

The question should feel gutsy and bold, but it doesn’t to Stiles. Their relationship is new enough that such an inquiry would normally seem like a premature, stage 5 clinger ‘abort, abort’ situation. He’s also pretty sure most couples wouldn’t talk about sharing a life together in a new place before they at least share a sex life in their current one, but he and Derek aren’t most couples.

“Deadlines for apps aren’t until the end of the calendar year,” Stiles rambles on. “And fall semester is a long time from now, so we don’t have to talk about it anytime soon. Just wondering.”

Derek’s fingers flit through the hair at the nape of Stiles’ neck. “I would go anywhere with you.”

Stiles beams at him. “You would?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I like waking up with your freezing cold feet poking mine. Beacon Hills will always be a home to me, but it’s not the only one. I’ve left before and I can do it again. I just can’t leave you.”

Stiles unsuccessfully tries to tame the smile on his face. He’d understand if Derek stayed to stand against evil with Argent and his dad, but there’s more to life than fighting. They could manage a long-distance relationship, and in some ways, that would make the limits on their physicality less of a
choice and more of a circumstance, but he doesn’t want to be apart from Derek, either.

“You could go to school, too,” Stiles suggests with speculative eyes. “If you want to, I mean. You don’t have to. It’s just - you read a lot. But I don’t know if you’re interested in academics like that. How come you read so much?”

Derek shrugs. “I just like to. I’ve never really thought about it. It’s just how I learn about lives other than my own.”

“Yeah, you could go to college to like, get a white-collar job, I guess? Like if you want to be an architect or a professor or something. Or you can go purely to learn.”

“Who would even want me?” Derek wonders, sifting through the glossy brochures.

Stiles blinks up at Derek’s profile. “A lot of people,” he volunteers softly.

“I’ll be 24 when you go to college, almost 25.”

“Dude, there are graduates in their seventies. You’ll be a spring chicken. You haven’t even hatched, compared to them. Freshman classes are full of kids who’ve come straight from high school. Not a lot of life experience. Not like you. Colleges like that. But you have time to mull it over, and I have stuff on so many schools. You can always look more if you want to.”

Derek licks his bottom lip. “Okay. Maybe.”

Stiles slides his ‘no’ pile so it’s flush with the ‘maybe’ one. He’d been planning on tossing the ‘no’s’ into the recycling bin, but he nixes that idea, just in case any of those schools are of interest to Derek. “You can do whatever you want,” he repeats. “I’ll just be happy if we’re together, wherever it is.”

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Well before the first bell rings, Stiles takes a pass by the nurse’s station, covertly taking stock of whether anyone is around. A front office aide is dropping a folder on the nurse’s desk, but once she turns on her heel and leaves, the room is empty.

With one last glance around, Stiles steps inside. Unzipping his backpack, he pulls out the shrink-wrapped boxes of condoms and places them in plain sight on top of a filing cabinet.

He doesn’t need them. Or want them. Not considering why he bought them. He’d thought about giving them to Scott, but Stiles has no idea if Scott and Kira have gone all the way. If they haven’t, getting free condoms might not feel awesome. Stiles doesn’t even know how he would explain to Scott why he bought so many in the first place and then didn’t use them. There are cheaper ways to make water balloons.

With prom this weekend and graduation on the horizon, hopefully the condoms can find their way to celebrating students who are happy to be having sex.

He’ll be like them, someday. No pressure.

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Dr. Kendall is easy to talk to. She has a pleasant, open face and blue-gray eyes that don’t look at Stiles or his dad with judgment. She doesn’t interrupt or make assumptions, either.

When Stiles sits down on the couch in her office, he wonders if he’s actually ever going to stretch
out on it, gesturing wildly in his articulation like people seem to do in movies. Probably not. This time, definitely not. He and Noah sit side-by-side opposite Dr. Kendall’s chair.

Stiles is nervous, bouncing his knee like he’s had ten cups of coffee, but they don’t even talk about his trauma for a good half-hour. She just asks questions about things like their family, relationship, support system, hobbies, and what they like to do together.

The abuse isn’t an elephant in the room. It can’t be when they all know that’s why they’re there and Noah is paying for this. It’s refreshing, though, not to dive right in to the deep end, like, “hi, nice place you’ve got here - now let me tell you all about how horribly my uncle betrayed us and scarred me for life.”

Towards the end of the session, they nudge closer when Dr. Kendall asks where everything stands in the basic timeline.

“The last time it happened … it’s been almost three months,” Stiles answers. “The police have collected some evidence, but that’s still pending. It’s never going to happen again - at least not with him and me - but it’s not really over. I finally told my dad pretty recently, so that’s … we’re just starting to work through it.”

“I’m going to give you an index card,” Dr. Kendall says, passing one along with a pen to each of them. “And I want you to think about your primary goals here in counseling. What you want to accomplish. Take your time, write it down, and I’ll keep these for reference. We can evaluate the reality of these goals in our early sessions, and also reflect on them as we go along, individually and together, to make sure we’re addressing your needs and building success.”

Stiles falls into deep thought, struck by the fact that he has to think about it this hard. What he hopes to accomplish in therapy is not the same thing as what he wants or what he’s ever wanted. In a fantasy world, he would want all of this to never have happened. That’s not practical, though, so he pulls himself back to the confines of this room.

After a couple of minutes, Stiles scrawls in his typical capital letters -

*I want my dad to forgive himself. He’s the best dad. He didn’t do anything wrong and he couldn’t have done anything differently.*

He hands the card to Dr. Kendall, who skims it along with the one Noah filled out before Stiles finished his.

“Oh.” she nods, placing the index cards face-down next to her and distributing new ones. “Let’s do this one more time. We’ll use both sets. But this time, I’d like for you both to write down your primary goals for yourself. Not the other person. For yourself.”

Oh. Stiles furrows his brow at that, initially unsure of how to proceed. It comes to him quickly, though, this time writing -

*I want to forgive myself.*

Dr. Kendall nods to herself when she reads their second cards before broaching how often they’d like to come in and how they’d like to balance individual and family sessions.

Stiles participates in that conversation, but his mind is still stuck on his personal goal. Forgiving himself seems almost unattainable. He’s not sure if he’ll ever be able to do it, no matter how much he talks it out and other people tell him to let himself off the hook.
But compared to where he’s been, he’s amazed that he’s managed to get this far. So, he supposes, anything’s possible.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know how werewolf DNA works. I don’t think there’s a canon answer? But I stopped watching after 5A (and to be honest, who can remember many details from the … interestingness … that was 5A). I wrote the DNA here as scientifically human. It’s hard to write around it in general if werewolf DNA is fundamentally different and not human. Any werewolf attack that’s investigated by authorities and involves forensic analysis would lead to a lot of questions if DNA found is mysterious - neither human nor wolf nor any known species. Having DNA that appears to be wolf DNA is weird to me because that ignores their very human parts. Plus, werewolf attacks would never seem suspicious in terms of, “oh, what did this???” If anything, authorities would be baffled as to how those attacks happened in areas that don’t have wolves. And I don’t think werewolves as a rule don’t leave DNA behind, like they’re Dexter Morgan killing and dumping a body.

Also, if you’re a One Tree Hill fan, it’s entirely coincidental that Stiles’ two abusers are named Clay and Quinn. Lol. I don’t put much thought into last names of original characters (Clay’s is dictated by canon), but when I typed out both of their names together for the first time, I laughed and decided to keep it that way.

Only one more chapter left! (Plus an epilogue.) I’m getting excited, guys! I’m sad for it to end, too, but I’m excited!!

Thanks for reading and letting me know what you think!
Chapter 14

Hi readers! This is the last chapter! There will be a short epilogue that follows as well, but this is almost the end. I’m almost there! Thanks so much for joining me all the way through!

As I stated last chapter, I’m not a legal expert and didn’t try to be one in writing this arc of the story. Suspend your disbelief if you know the details of criminal prosecution, please! This chapter was a tough one to pull together, in a few different ways. I hope you enjoy!

[Posted 3/12/18]

Stiles walks into the meeting with the Assistant District Attorney with a churning swirl of emotions. Everything’s migrated more and more out of his control as they’ve moved along. When he’d reported Clay and Quinn to the police in the first place, all of the information had come from him. Even though the uncovered videos technically contributed to a better offense against Clay, processing them mentally had still made Stiles feel like he was back on defense.

The District Attorney’s office isn’t his lawyer. They don’t take orders from him and they have their own objectives. The anticipation of what the ADA thinks is the most actionable course has Stiles on pins and needles. He braces himself for the worst, but he doesn’t share those thoughts with Noah. Maybe the ADA will tell them the cases are losers or Clay’s going to get a slap on the wrist. Stiles knows a conclusion that the allegations aren’t worth pursuing isn’t the same as ‘Stiles, you’re not worth it,’ but it’ll still hurt like hell to hear it. The system of law and order isn’t perfect, but he didn’t go through all of this to continue being a victim who has to watch the criminals get away with it. Not that he can really blame the system in and of itself. Stiles had opened the door and then some to this potential outcome. He’d actively gotten rid of evidence and waited so long to come forward. That’s on him.

When ADA Liang sits them down and opens by talking about plea bargains, Stiles feels as conflicted as ever. What she’s saying is reasonable - most felony charges are settled in a plea and going to trial is uncommon - and at least they’re not being shut down.

He already understands the basic pros and cons of plea bargains, but mostly in a theoretical sense. It’s totally different when the stakes are personal. He’s all for guaranteed convictions and being spared the experience of testifying. He can’t sit on the witness stand through a brutal cross-examination, hoping that a jury of strangers believes him beyond a reasonable doubt.

That all comes with a cost, though. He gets, but he has to give, too.

“Clay is willing to plead guilty,” ADA Liang explains, “but the most he and his lawyer will take on the child pornography is one felony count of production.”

Noah rolls his eyes. “One count. When he knows there are three videos from two different days.”
“On the sexual abuse, they’re taking a hard line there, too, at two felony counts of forcible rape of a minor older than fourteen.”

“These assholes have to be joking,” Noah fumes. “That’s their idea of negotiating? Cop to less than the bare minimum of what we could prove in court?”

Stiles sighs and looks away. The video evidence is compelling, but not bulletproof. Of course his dad sees it that way, but his perspective is one of a heartbroken father. He believed Stiles from the start. To him, the videos mean a jury has to believe Stiles because it’s not just his word. He probably doesn’t think about the videos the way Stiles does, in terms of how someone else could interpret them and how Clay’s lawyer could try to poke holes in them.

The child pornography is what it is. Context doesn’t matter. He was underage. But the sexual acts, despite their graphic nature, aren’t exactly straightforward. They’re statutory rape by definition, but not necessarily forcible rape by perception. Clay doesn’t have the wiggle room to claim nothing ever happened, but he’s not boxed in without options, either. He has his own lawyer, not a court-appointed public defender with more cases than manageable. Stiles has no idea how good Clay’s lawyer is, but he wouldn’t be surprised if Clay was spending every dime he has on his defense. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that being broke but free is infinitely better than having a savings account while rotting behind bars.

Even the videos where Stiles is unconscious could be spun somehow, Stiles is sure of that. If Clay’s lawyer is serious about getting a ‘not guilty’ verdict at trial, he’ll go for the jugular. Once the defense is through with him, Stiles will be painted as an unstable drug-using liar who was perfectly fine with the incest because he wanted the sex. His public appearance and behavior while the nogitsune was inside him might come back to fuck him over again, too. He’ll be framed as a kid who graduated from messing with his Adderall to experimenting with other pills.

“As part of the deal, Clay will also confess to what happened that night with Scott Quinn,” ADA Liang says. “We don’t have a strong case against Scott, so that’s a very meaningful concession. We can’t move forward with charges against him without a more robust case or getting him to take a deal of his own. Usually, we use the little fish to help us catch the big fish, but with the nature of the evidence that we have, it’s really more the other direction this time.”

Noah is growing more bitter as the conversation continues. “Well, that explains it. Clay’s lowballing on the charges because he thinks he has some leverage.”

Stiles rubs his cheek in anxiety. Clay doesn’t just think he has leverage. He has it, period. That’s the other side of plea bargains. Clay can plead to reduced charges as long as he gives something in return.

“That’s the only way to get Quinn, right? Without Clay flipping on him, he’s just going to walk away?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Once he finds out that Clay rolled over on him, we can try to strike a plea deal with him as well. But that’s dependent on cutting a deal with Clay in the first place.”

Hunching over, Stiles clasps at the cuffs of his button-down shirt. ‘We don’t have a strong case’ is generous phrasing. He doesn’t wonder why the ADA thinks there’s not enough to go to trial. They don’t have anything against Quinn beyond the fingerprints and Stiles’ statements. His allegations about Clay are partially supported, but his credibility there doesn’t extend to ‘surely, anything else said about anyone else must be true.’ There’s no real physical evidence and Stiles doesn’t have especially incriminating elements in his testimony. Even if Quinn has a particular birthmark or scar below the belt, Stiles didn’t see it and can’t describe it.
He needs a rabbit out of a hat to take down Quinn, but it makes him want to puke that Clay could be that rabbit.

Stiles knows, though, that Clay isn’t offering this up for Stiles’ sake. Clay is doing this for himself. He didn’t give a fuck about Stiles unless it was about getting a fuck out of him. Clay’s the one who brought Quinn along in the first place. He probably bragged to Quinn about this hot little piece who does whatever he wants. He’s the one who helped hold Stiles down so Quinn could find out personally.

“Clay gave me to him,” Stiles says, his voice cracking. “He gave me to Quinn, and now he thinks he can give Quinn to me just so he can score a better deal for himself.”

Noah pats Stiles’ thigh in commiseration. “I know, Stiles. He makes me sick.”

“Yes, this is a lot to process,” ADA Liang sympathizes. “My office is committed to victim advocacy, but ultimately, we have to do what’s best for obtaining convictions with the resources we have. Agreeing to a deal with Clay gets us him in prison and the ability to put another predator there, too.”

“I still want Clay on aggravated child assault charges,” Noah insists. “He should get a longer sentence for that. He didn’t mess with a kid who’s almost legal. He hurt a child. Stiles was younger than fourteen. That has to be on the sex offender registry. I want them to know who Clay is in prison. He can’t spin stories that he got screwed over for sleeping with someone who was almost eighteen.”

“He won’t plead to that. He knows the evidence we have only speaks to recent activity. We can still pursue those charges, but that would have to be at trial. Taking this to court isn’t out of the question here, but that takes some of the certainty out of the situation. We have all the makings of a good plea. Stiles, do you want to testify?”

Stiles blinks back the tears he can feel forming. He wishes there was some kind of omniscient being to tell him what to do.

Two counts. That’s it. It’s not that Stiles had ever thought Clay was going to be charged with every single time. Stiles doesn’t even know how many times it happened and he doesn’t want to do the math. He’s too afraid to consciously think about how often Clay coerced him into going along with it, but even without a finite number, he still knows it was in the dozens, maybe close to fifty, and that’s only counting penetration. Maybe it’s more than fifty?

Stiles can’t fight for all of those times, even if he really wanted to. He doesn’t know how well Clay has mentally catalogued each instance and can challenge his allegations that every time was rape. If Clay’s lawyer grills Stiles, under oath, about the time Clay asked him if that’s how he wanted it and he said yes, or when Clay crawled into his bed and he took his clothes off without being asked - Stiles can’t lie about that. Perjury is serious business. He’s an easy liar, but not good enough to deny those things happened and look like he really means it. Getting tripped up in a lie just hands over more points to the defense. He can explain those incidents all he wants, but maybe it’ll just look like he left room for Clay to misinterpret.

Even so, there’s a huge difference between two and fifty. If he wants the possibility of legal justice for something in that middle ground, he’ll have to convince the DA’s office to go to trial. He hasn’t even convinced himself that he wants go to trial.

The cross-examination and judgment from the jury are only part of his reservations. He’ll be risking the chance that a jury doesn’t believe him, but he’ll also have to talk about what happened in front of Clay. He could play it like he’s in a position of power, but his testimony doesn’t mean he wins.
Stiles will relive it all. And so will Clay, listening to Stiles’ account of what Clay did to him. It’s another trade-off Stiles isn’t sure he can manage. He has to draw the line at being a victim in Clay’s eyes somewhere. He doesn’t want to give Clay the satisfaction, even if it could mean more prison time.

“Not - not really,” Stiles admits. “But … I would. I would do it you thought it made sense to push for more than Clay’s lawyer will agree to.”

“Something else to think about is speed. A plea deal will move relatively quickly, bringing you some closure sooner rather than later. Once we agree on terms, my office will prepare the required paperwork and Clay would formally agree to the terms of the plea at a hearing. Sentencing generally takes place within a few weeks after. If we take this to trial, the process is more protracted. It would not be resolved before the end of the year. Clay would be given time to prepare a defense and we could be subject to continuations and other aspects that could draw this out further.”

Stiles nods with a tinge of resignation, woven with a counterbalancing relief that he isn’t the one who has to know what decisions are the right ones. “So under a plea … how long would Clay go away for? Would he serve real time?”

“We would push for the maximum in the pre-sentencing report, which would be up to 30 years on the combined charges.”

“But the judge makes the decision?” Stiles asks, nervously fingering the buttons on his cuffs. “Does he have to do what you recommend? Could the judge sentence Clay to less time?”

“Well, there are different levels of severity and sentencing guidelines for every charge,” ADA Liang says. “It is possible to sentence concurrently instead of consecutively for multiple charges or to use a guideline that stipulates less than the maximum.”

“If the judge decides on a lighter sentence, that’s not enough,” Stiles chokes out, his eyes welling up again. “Not just for me. I’m not saying I know what’s enough punishment for what he did to me, and that’s not it. But if he gets sentenced to less - like twenty years, he could be out on parole in, what, fifteen? He won’t even be in his mid-50s. That’s too soon. He can’t be released unless he’s old and feeble and can’t physically hurt or threaten someone else.”

“It’s very likely in a plea deal that the judge will follow suit with the range specified in the pre-sentencing report. He’ll go away for a long time, Stiles. His lawyer knows it, too. They’re willing to deal so they don’t take the risk that he dies of old age in prison.”

“And if you get Quinn to take a plea, too, what would his sentence be? Would you let him plead the charge down?”

“We will still push for one felony count of forcible rape of a minor over fourteen, but we may have to concede on that to reach an agreement. The video evidence we have against Clay is a weightier bargaining chip than his confession as an acknowledged sexual abuser is against Quinn. When all is said and done, I think the sentence under a plea deal would be around five, maybe seven, years, but he would also be required to register a sex offender, no question.”

It’s not a contest, but even if it was, Clay has hurt him so much more than Quinn has. Regardless, it still stings something awful to hear the limits of how Quinn might pay for what he’s done. With good behavior, he’ll be out sooner than that, too.

Taking a deep breath, Stiles focuses on the closure that the ADA mentioned. He’ll probably stay hyper-focused on it all day, just to keep his spirits up. This will far exceed the passive closure Stiles
felt when he was eleven and Clay moved out of the house. Yeah, Clay stopped abusing him, but he was still out there and he still came back to do it again.

Even though it’s not ideal, this is progress. Clay will finally be stopped, period.

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Noah puts the keys in the ignition, but doesn’t start the engine. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says. “I feel so unsure about everything. It’s not up to me, though, so I don’t think it really matters that I’m unsure.”

“It matters, Stiles.”

Restless and jittery, Stiles folds his hands in his lap. “I guess this is good? I mean, I know it is. Parts of it are. I don’t have to testify and this isn’t going to drag out. Clay’s going to be convicted. I need this to be over. I really need this to be over, Dad.”

“Yes.” Noah squeezes his arm and squints at him. “You won’t be in this limbo for much longer. That’s important.”

“I don’t want Quinn to get away with it. But Clay thinks he can trade people, like they’re just pawns for him to use.”

Noah huffs. He knows what it’s like to be in that position unwittingly. “He’s a fucking waste of space.”

“I just … I can’t shake the feeling that if I’m okay with the plea deal, then … I’m saying it’s okay that he does shit like that. Like, hey, if I can get something out of it, it’s fine, it’s cool.”

“Stiles, the expression ‘the lesser of two evils’ exists for a reason. It doesn’t mean that you condone anything Clay does. He treats people like objects so he can hurt the innocent. That’s not what you’re doing at all. This way, both of them go down and this ordeal isn’t even more painful for you.”

“Yes, I guess,” Stiles says, but he’s still uneasy. “It doesn’t feel like I’ll owe him something and he’s not doing this to help me, but it feels gross to benefit from anything he does.”

Nodding stiffly, Noah slumps down and cradles his forehead in both hands. “Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Stiles, I …” Noah says, bringing his hands down in frustration. “I took his money.”

“Oh, yeah. That.”

“I don’t want it anymore. He acted like it was no strings attached, but now I know. I don’t want it, but I can’t give it back to him just so he can put it towards his legal fees.”

“He doesn’t have to get it back, Dad. And we don’t have to keep it.” Stiles shrugs with dark humor. “Dr. Kendall’s gotta get paid somehow, doesn’t she? I mean, the least he could do is cover some of that.”

Noah sighs angrily. “That’s all his fault -”

“Which is why his money isn’t going to be used by us for super-fun times. It’s because of him. So
we don’t owe him, right? We don’t owe him a fucking cent.”

Noah’s face pinches like he’s sucking on a lemon, but he eventually relents. “Yeah. He’s not getting anything else from this family.”

Stiles nods about that point, but his cloud of ambivalence is still hovering. “Dad, do you think the plea deal is enough? I know you want him to be punished more -”

“Oh, son, I didn’t mean - when I said that - yes, I’d like that, but you don’t have to put yourself through another hellish experience trying to make it happen.”

Stiles turns to Noah. “But do you think he’s going to be punished enough?”

“Thirty years is a long time, Stiles,” Noah answers, holding Stiles’ gaze. “Even if he doesn’t get the maximum sentence. Clay may not die an old man in a state penitentiary, but he won’t be living. And we’ll be off his chessboard forever.”

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He’s willingly taken up running, but Stiles isn’t a huge fan of distances. His mind can handle marathon thinking while his body prefers sprints.

He still runs with Derek, though. Stiles doesn’t have the same kind of mind-body connection that Derek seems to during physical exertion, but he does like how running lets him indulge anything from mental chaos to zoning out altogether.

After cutting through the Preserve, they stop for a break at the stream Derek had taken Stiles to months ago. “It’s your thinking place,” Stiles immediately recognizes.

“Yeah. I thought you might be full of thoughts after your meeting.”

Stiles flicks away the sweat trickling down his temple. “Here are my thoughts about your thoughts about my thoughts …” he quips as they sit down a few feet back from the water.

He explains the earlier discussion with the ADA, finding it easier than in real-time because he’s relaying it on a factual basis rather than an emotional one. Derek fluctuates between nods and frowns as Stiles speaks, asking intermittent questions for clarification but reserving judgment.

“So what do you think?”

Derek tilts his head. “To be honest, I’m not the right person to ask. I don’t really understand the human justice system. I know bits and pieces in very specific ways - the police investigated the fire and you know I’ve been arrested myself -”

“You’re welcome,” Stiles cuts in, nudging the toe of Derek’s shoe with his.

“It’s not something I think about much in my own life. Growing up, my family mostly relied on a different set of rules and structures. And even though most of my family’s gone, that doesn’t mean I live in human society the way you and your family do. I think I made things harder for you after you told me. Because I didn’t encourage you more to go to the hospital or the police. I didn’t keep your clothes, either.”

“That’s not your fault,” Stiles says, pulling at his damp shirt to fan air over his torso. “Or your responsibility.”
“You were in a bad place. I should’ve helped you more from your perspective as a human, but even now, it’s a little hard for me to have an opinion about how exactly he - they - go to prison when I still just want to rip their throats out. And not with my teeth. That would be too kind. Maybe with barbed wire dipped in acid. But I just don’t want you to be hurt again. That’s all it comes down to for me. I want what you want.”

“How would a werewolf pack handle something like this?” Stiles asks out of curiosity.

“Oh, my mom would have gone full vigilante,” Derek says, flicking out his claws.

“To the death?”

“Yeah. I think so. Not that that’s objectively the right thing to do, always. I know why you didn’t want me to kill your uncle. And I know why you didn’t want your dad to, either.”

“Is it crazy that I fight scary monsters way more powerful than I am, but when he did all of those things to me, I barely did anything?”

“No,” Derek says. “With supernatural beings, it usually isn’t personal like that. Even when it’s personal - like vengeance for something - even if they want to make you suffer, it’s not like that. And in packs, as long as other werewolves don’t go too far trying to claim territory or establish dominance, blood is shed when necessary and punishment isn’t death. It’s banishment or blacklisting and that kind of thing. But if it’s about something really intimate and evil, it gets really murky. Yeah, with the supernatural we’ve faced in the last year, so much of it has been about figuring out how to beat them. But just because your uncle is human doesn’t make the answer any easier.”

Stiles feels flushed all over, but doesn’t think it has anything to do with the exercise. “I don’t even know how I let it get so bad. I don’t know why I stayed home that night. My dad was going to be in Folsom for at least a couple of days. He wasn’t going to notice I wasn’t there. If I’d just crashed at Scott’s or somewhere else, instead of being in my room when Clay and Quinn were there … it might never have happened.

“I don’t know why I didn’t leave,” Stiles continues, shaking his head at himself, “but Clay’s worse when he doesn’t get what he wants, and I was just too used to … giving it to him, I guess. I hate that I don’t even recognize myself when it comes to him.”

“He fucked with your head, but there was never anything wrong with you.”

“I don’t know. There must have been. But I guess if that hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have reached out to someone until I don’t even know when. It just feels weird. I’m not grateful for the tipping point. I don’t feel like, oh, it’s okay, Quinn can just walk because it was only once with him and that’s what pushed me to tell you. But I haven’t come to terms with the deals yet. I need more time.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to feel happy about it.”

“What would you think if it was you? Human justice system aside. Just the idea. I still remember what you said after you chased Clay out of town. We’ve let other bad guys go before. I just don’t want to now, at least when it comes to Quinn. But that means using something Clay gave us and cutting him a break.”

“Well …” Derek ponders, stretching his legs out. “If I think about Kate and the other hunters who killed my family -”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to bring that up -”
“It’s okay, Stiles. I wouldn’t have let humans handle them, but if they did, I think I would feel a lot like you do. I would’ve wanted those hunters to pay for it, but struggled with Kate getting too much out of a deal to make that happen. Just because they’re not the ones who tricked me and used me doesn’t make their actions nothing.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I have to keep looking at the bright side. I get a lot without having to give much more.”

“So what’s next?” Derek asks.

“They’re going to settle the details of the plea agreement. Agreements, plural, if they can get Quinn to plead guilty, too. Then there’ll be a plea hearing and after that, the sentencing. It’s going to be easier to go to these things once school lets out next week.”

“Can I come to the plea hearing?”

“Yeah.” They’re sweaty and dirty, but Stiles presses a firm kiss to Derek’s cheek anyway. “Yeah, I’d like that. I want you with me.”

Derek nods. “Always.”

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Stiles googles for other cases for hours, finding it’s a common practice to plead crimes down to such a degree. He only stops looking when he can’t take it anymore. Some situations are nothing short of a fucking tragedy.

Before he goes to bed, he shifts gears and searches for something else instead. Scribbling down notes, he leaves them on his desk with no further action that night. It’s far too late in the day, even if he wasn’t being a total chicken about it.

The next afternoon, he hunkers down in his room and paces for a few minutes. It’s after 3 pm, so this could be an acceptable time to call, factoring in the time difference.

Stiles punches in the phone number he’d written down earlier, debating whether he hopes someone answers or it goes to voicemail, buying him more time.

The line picks up on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Is Christine Swanson there?” Stiles asks, swallowing in an effort to moisten the dryness in his mouth.

“This is Chrissy.”

“Hi … My name is Stiles. I know you don’t know me, but you were married to my uncle.”

Chrissy pauses. “Oh. Hello, Stiles.”

Stiles doesn’t know what to make of the lull. Maybe it meant nothing, but there’s something loaded about it.

“Um, I don’t know if you’ve heard yet -”

“Yes,” she says, her tone still sounding off. “Your father called me.”

“He did?” This is one of those times Stiles isn’t sure if his dad purposely didn’t tell him something or
it just slipped his mind, like when he did away with the limits on how often Derek can sleep over.

“The divorce had already been finalized when …” Chrissy pauses again. “I hadn’t been communicating with him through our lawyers anymore. I didn’t know until your father told me.”

“What did he say?” Stiles asks, suddenly panicking about who else knows and what they know.

“That Clay’s in a lot of trouble. For inappropriate behavior with children. He thought I should know. In case …”

Stiles waits on his end, wondering how long he should give Chrissy to finish.

“My son says nothing happened,” she finally says. “I didn’t think anything had, or I wouldn’t have - he said nothing happened.”

“Oh.” Now it’s Stiles’ turn to go quiet. “Okay. Yeah. That’s good.”

“I didn’t -” Chrissy stammers. “I didn’t know - it was you - are you okay?”

Stiles blinks rapidly and sits down on his bed. He hadn’t thought his dad had told Chrissy everything. It’s easy to believe Noah would have known about it, even if it didn’t involve Stiles, and Chrissy must understand that. Clay had been living with them, Noah is - was - family, and he’s in law enforcement.

There’s a split-second where Stiles thinks about deflecting like it wasn’t him, but it doesn’t feel normal now that he’s stopped keeping the secrets. “I will be,” he says in a general, but honest, statement.

“How old are you?”

“I’m eighteen. But I wasn’t when it happened.”

“I’m so sorry, Stiles. He is not the man I thought I was … What’s going to happen to him?”

Stiles sighs. “He’s going to get jail time, but I don’t know how much. I don’t want him to get out, but I don’t know. If there were other charges, he might get a longer sentence.”

He can’t stop the compulsion to dangle that out there. Chrissy already said that Charlie wasn’t a victim, but maybe she didn’t know there was any incremental value in coming forward.

“He deserves it. Anyone who hurts kids like that does. Again, I’m really very sorry. I wish you hadn’t been hurt so badly. And that I had seen him for who he really was.”

“I get it. He’s really good at tricking people. I know.”

After a few more seconds of white noise, Stiles clears his throat. “Okay, well, um, I just wanted to let you know, in case you didn’t. So, um, yeah. He’ll be going away for a while, so you don’t have to worry about him being a part of your life.”

“Thank you, Stiles. Please take care of yourself.”

“I will, thanks. Bye.”

Stiles hangs up the phone and flops on his back to stare up at the ceiling. He doesn’t know what the truth is, but he’s going to have to take what Chrissy said at face-value.
She has every right to protect her son, however she feels necessary, if he needs to be protected. If anything ever happened to Charlie, Stiles can’t force it out of him or his mother. It’s his story. It’s his life.

Stiles isn’t entitled to that anymore than someone else is entitled to his story. It’s been hard enough telling people, and that was of his own volition and his own timing. If he’d been compelled to reveal the truth before he was ready, he’s not sure how he would’ve dealt with that additional loss of control.

Everyone should be able to make their own choices. Everyone should be able to write their next chapter themselves.

When the nogitsune had taken control of his body and shortly after, Clay did, too, Stiles hadn’t felt like that right was his anymore.

But it is now.

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Clay’s plea hearing is a formality, but Stiles needs the formality to make it real. The charges have been ironed out, just as ADA Liang had described, explicitly documented in legalese, and preserved for all time. Still, Stiles is scared to really believe it until it becomes Official, with gavels banging and Clay saying “guilty” out loud.

Right before the hearing begins, Stiles takes a seat between Noah and Derek behind the prosecutor’s table. No one seems to be there to support Clay, but he still has friends across the country in the places he’s lived. No family, but he has friends. It’s not surprising to Stiles, though, that Clay didn’t call them up to talk all about his current situation and future long-term home.

Even though Clay doesn’t seek them out in his field of vision, he must have anticipated their presence. It’s only when someone walking in drops her phone loudly that Clay turns his head to look.

They don’t make eye contact, but Stiles knows Clay has seen them. He wonders if Clay recognizes Derek. Maybe not, and not just because of Derek’s disappearing eyebrows when he wolfs out. Logically, Clay must wonder who is this man he’d never laid eyes on while living at the Stilinski house. Stiles and Derek aren’t showing affection towards each other like a couple, but Clay must know that Derek isn’t some random friend Stiles casually told about the hearing. Derek is special.

But it doesn’t matter if Clay puts two and two together about Derek and the creature that threatened him to leave and followed him to Phoenix. He can’t do anything about it, and Derek would crush him like a bug if he tried.

When the judge eventually lists out the charges and Clay verbally pleads guilty to each one, Stiles holds his breath, grasping hands with Derek to his left and Noah to his right so hard that his knuckles go white.

The gratification is cautious at first, but it builds with every lapping wave. Stiles is already right where he belongs, flanked by his dad and the love of his life, and now they’re one step closer to putting Clay where he belongs, too.

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Stiles wakes up late on Saturday, cozy from the sunshine streaming in and Derek’s body spooned up behind him. Even though nature’s alarm clock isn’t always the most welcome, it’s nice going to bed
without the blinds shut like he used to.

When Stiles stirs, he feels it, even clearer and warmer than the sun. Derek’s hard. Totally hard. Hammering-nails hard.

“Sorry,” Derek mumbles, awake now, too. He backs away and Stiles immediately hates the empty spot he leaves. “Sorry.”

“Wait,” Stiles says, rolling over to face Derek, who’s fairly rumpled with bedhead and a few days of stubble.

“Sorry, I didn’t -”

“I know, it’s just a morning thing,” Stiles says. “Do you want to take care of it?”

Derek tosses the covers off. “Oh - uh, yeah, I’ll be right back -”

“No, I mean. Don’t go.”

“Stiles -”

“Stay with me,” Stiles pleads in a quiet rumble.

“Are you sure?” Derek asks, sliding closer again.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure.”

Derek crosses over onto Stiles’ pillow, kissing him with a patient thirst. Stiles opens up further as they share a breath and Derek runs his fingers along the curve of Stiles’ ear.

“Tell me if you don’t like it, okay?” Derek murmurs against Stiles’ cheek.

“Okay,” Stiles agrees, angling for another kiss.

Derek reaches into the band of his boxer briefs, and Stiles is so, so tempted to drop his gaze there, too, except he can’t take his eyes off of Derek’s perfect face reacting to his own movements.

At first, Derek stares back, but then shuts his eyes for a few moments, his mouth going slack. “I’m just going to …” he says, pushing his underwear further down his hips.

Stiles has to look now, mesmerized by how completely fucking gorgeous Derek’s hands are, stroking himself with confidence. Stiles could replay that image in his mind thousands of times and it would never get old.

“Fuck, you smell so good,” Derek says.

Stiles tilts his shoulder so Derek can get a better scent from the crook of his neck. “Is that better?”

“Mmmm, yeah …” Derek nips at Stiles’ collarbone, prompting a giggle, before sweeping his lips up the delicate skin.

Stiles laughs again, much lower in pitch this time, and Derek disengages from his neck to peer up at him, a gentle smile perking up. His pupils are huge, but his eyes go soft with that mix of green, blue, and brown that Stiles has adored for so long.

Stiles reaches down and touches Derek’s hand, making him groan in pleasure, until Stiles keeps
“No,” Derek says, beginning to pull away.

“Do you not want me to?” Stiles whispers.

“You don’t have to, I’m not -”

“I want to,” Stiles insists. “I want to.”

He tugs Derek’s hand away, quickly replacing it with his own and growing more assertive with each stroke. Stiles is intimately familiar with what he likes, but what he wants to know more than anything is what Derek likes and how he responds. It doesn’t matter what he’s been taught. He doesn’t want to remember that, anyway. He just wants to start over.

“Oh my God,” Derek breathes, arching into Stiles’ touch and slipping a hand over his waist.

Stiles sighs as Derek’s palm moves to the small of his back, under his shirt. “You know I love that.”

“Take it off, can you take it off?”

Stiles stops to pull at the hem of his shirt while Derek helps him get it over his head and on the floor. Ghosting his knuckles all the way up Stiles’ back, Derek swoops in for another kiss that feels endless.

“Are you close?” Stiles asks.

“Yeah, I’m getting there,” Derek nods, playing with the front waistband of Stiles’ briefs. “Can I - is it okay if I?”

“Yeah,” Stiles gasps, and just like that, Derek’s strong fingers are wrapped around him and it’s like nothing Stiles has ever felt before.

They watch each other wordlessly, swallowing escalating whimpers until Derek bites down on his lip and groans, his entire body tightening up as he comes. His hand tenses in the heat of the moment and it doesn’t take much longer for Stiles to finish.

It’s like a dream. Stiles knows it’s not really - it’s just two guys who love each other trading handies on a lazy morning - but for him, it’s like stepping into a life he’s never lived before. One that he didn’t think he would ever have.

Stiles opens his eyes - he doesn’t remember closing them - and gives Derek a reassuring smile. “That was awesome.”

“Good.” Derek strips off his briefs and wipes them against his sticky skin before cleaning Stiles up in a similar manner. Tossing them to the side, he pulls the sheets back over them and cuddles up again.

“I’m glad you liked it. I did.”

“I liked it,” Stiles sighs, drawn out in his euphoria. He sort of wants to take his underwear off, too - it’s the only thing keeping them from shared nudity - but he’s so relaxed and boneless that he doesn’t want to move at all.

“Your dad better not walk in on us like this. I think he’d take back the whole ‘yeah, your boyfriend can sleep in your bed whenever you want’ thing.”

“He might not actually mind,” Stiles considers. “I mean, that I’m not so messed up I can’t do
“Maybe. Did you lock the door last night?”

“No. I don’t need to when you’re here.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” Stiles answers. “Yes, I promise. I like that you care so much if I’m ready for things, but you don’t have to check all the time. I appreciate it, but you can try whatever you want, whenever you want. I trust you. I’m not going to be scared of you. And - and I think … I won’t mind telling you if I’m not ready. I kind of want to be able to say it, because I know you’ll listen. I can say not yet and you’re hear it as no and it’ll mean no.”

“Okay. I understand. But I still want to take it slow. Just because we did that doesn’t mean the floodgates have opened. I don’t expect anything from you. And this doesn’t mean it always has to be okay if I want to do it again.”

“I’ll want to do it again.”

“Okay. Like we talked about. You can start it, or I can and you can tell me yes or no.”

“Yes, sir,” Stiles says with a flirty lilt. “So what do you think it’ll be like? When we finally have sex.”

“Well …” Derek mulls over, “it goes without saying - simultaneous orgasms.”

Stiles laughs. “Of course. And double rainbows outside on a cloudless day.”

“I think an angel might even get its wings.”

“It’s basically a cure for death.”

Derek quirks an eyebrow. “Seriously, though? I think … I don’t think it’ll be … it’ll feel like a big deal and it will be, but also … it’s not this end-all, be-all thing. I don’t want it to be. I want it to be important, but not like everything’s hinging on that. Our relationship, you feeling like you’ve put your past behind you. Am I making sense?”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods. “Yeah, you are. I want that, too.”

“Sex won’t be perfect, like teach-a-class-on-it perfect. But I promise you’ll feel loved and safe.”

“Yes.” Stiles bites the inside of his cheek as he thinks about Derek’s own plagued sexual history. He deserves so much better. Derek will feel loved every day of the rest of his life if Stiles has his way. “Then it’ll seem perfect, even if it isn’t.”

Derek winks. “Oxytocin, right?”

“You’re a good student,” Stiles says, petting Derek’s head in a smart aleck gesture. “Or maybe I’m just the best teacher. I’m a good student, too, though. You won’t always have to approach me with such a soft touch. It’ll be good once we’re having sex and I know I’m into it. You can just pounce on me.”

“Oh, uh-huh? Pounce on you like a puppy, maybe.”

Stiles gazes at Derek innocently, all big brown eyes and long lashes, before snapping his jaws
towards Derek’s nose and triggering a round of hysteric.

“I don’t want to make you feel self-conscious or anything,” Derek says after he’s calmed down, “but you look really beautiful when you come.”

Stiles barks out another peal of laughter. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, your cheeks turn really pink and your eyes get all fluttery. And your mouth is just amazing.”

Stiles grows warm in his skin again. “You look really good, too. Like this.” He frowns past the point of physical discomfort. “Sourwolf.”

Derek pushes his shoulder playfully. “Exactly like that,” he says, grinning wider when Stiles makes the face one more time.

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Now that it’s officially summer, a barbeque is practically obligatory. Hosting one is also fun way to pull everyone together. The schedules of the pack are so disparate this year, now that they can all drive and have bigger goals and dreams than they used to.

Scott’s doubling down on his growing interest in becoming a veterinarian, which means taking advantage of the free summer and working more hours at Deaton’s clinic. It doesn’t hurt that he ends up with extra money for dates with Kira, either. Ever the overambitious learner, Lydia’s started an intense summer class at a nearby university. (The only time she’ll ever go to a state school, she says, as though it isn’t flagrantly obvious she’s going to end up at an elite institution.) Stiles doesn’t keep tabs on Malia, but he knows Derek’s hung out with her here and there, and he’s very into that development.

Noah is more than happy to fire up the grill, but more than that, Stiles suspects his dad wants to see him have a good time with his friends. On some level, it’s a distraction from the pending resolution with Clay, but that’s only a small part of it. This is what their lives really are.

After Stiles puts out more finger-foods and refills the bowls of chips, he scans the backyard occupants with his typical eagle eye. Lydia didn’t show up with Parrish, but they’re sitting in some lawn chairs, close enough that they seem to be poking their heads out of the dating closet.

Stiles wonders if he and Derek are just as obvious, but the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes they must not be. Someone - Scott, at least - would have said something to him if they had caught on. With Derek getting increasingly embedded into the pack over the last few months, it seems normal that he and Stiles are closer.

As much as Stiles will always have some secrets from some people, Derek won’t always be one of them. He’ll tell his friends at some point. Soon. He’s just not quite there yet. He can only take so much change and upheaval at one time.

Stiles will tell Scott one day about Clay, too. He doesn’t know when, but not for a while. That’s way too much to unload. He really doesn’t want to tell any of his friends until he can unequivocally convince them that he’s dealt with it and he’s honestly fine now. That requires the passage of time. They’ll never believe him if it’s too fresh.

It’ll be okay if Scott’s hurt that Stiles didn’t tell him earlier. It’ll be okay that Scott would’ve wanted to support him through this trauma, but Stiles didn’t give him the chance. Scott will have to be okay with how much Stiles hid from him.
Stiles has walked harder paths. His dad and Dr. Kendall keep reminding him to focus on himself, and he’s taking that pass to alleviate the guilt of keeping the secrets. As much as he would appreciate the concern and love from Scott and his other friends, he doesn’t have to manage the stress of their reactions, at least not right now. The choices are his.

Argent came to the barbeque, too, and Stiles is more than a little pleased that he accepted the invitation. Stiles still meets up with Parrish every now and then for all of the above-board defense lessons, but Stiles has started training with Argent twice a week for the dirtier stuff. Initially, it was to be more capable protecting himself and the pack, but it’s actually pretty fun. Argent shows him weapons and tactics his dad never would, and Stiles is handling them better than he thought he would. Throwing knives is probably his favorite.

It’s not Stiles’ intention to replace Allison - he could never - or even Isaac, but Argent seems to like having him around. They’ll keep fighting together on the same side, just like Allison would have wanted.

Stiles notices that Argent is talking to Melissa and his eyes narrow in observation. This is beyond polite interaction. Melissa says something that makes Argent laugh. He doesn’t take his eyes off her as she touches his arm.

Ooh, this is new. Sure, he’d love it if his dad and Melissa were together instead, but he’ll definitely take this. Honestly, at this rate of secret and burgeoning couples, Stiles’ revelation about his relationship with Derek is going to seem ho-hum.

His stomach growls, so he double-checks the snacks one more time before glancing over at the grill. Noah and Scott are tending to the burgers and carne asada when Derek comes up from behind them to pass around sodas. They pop open the cold cans and Noah says something that makes them all nod before clinking their drinks together.

Stiles stands there, watching the three most important men in his life all together, and his heart feels so full it might burst.

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Stiles is more nervous for the sentencing than he was for the plea hearing. This is it. This is where Clay’s fate is unveiled.

Commingled with the uncertainty of the ruling is also a blanket of relief that the uncertainty isn’t even greater. This whole process would have felt so much different if the case had gone to trial, everything up in the air for months, maybe even a year, only to potentially end in a ‘not guilty’ jury verdict. Clay might have gotten a harsher punishment that way, but he might have emerged with barely a scratch as well.

Stiles doesn’t have the pressure of trying to influence the sentence here. The judge isn’t going to change his mind at the last minute and Stiles has already spoken with the assigned probation officer for the pre-sentencing report. He hadn’t cared much when he got teary during that meeting and with that audience. Clay wasn’t there to get off on it and Stiles had needed the officer to understand the depth of the betrayal and the violation so he could include it in his report.

When it’s time for the victim impact statement, Stiles fusses with the knot of his tie and mentally repels the sweat away from his palms. He isn’t required to dress up, but he wants to appear serious and grown-up to the judge. It’s mostly for the judge, but Stiles can’t deny it’s a little bit for Clay, too. He wants Clay to see who he is now - not the young boy he once was.
As he stands up, Noah gives him a supportive nod and Derek reaches for his hand to give a quick squeeze. At the podium, Stiles takes a deep breath before opening up the two folded sheets of paper in his hands and smoothing them out. He has to sound strong - he can’t waver - not now in front of Clay.

“For a while, I didn’t know what I was going to say today. I stayed silent about the abuse for so long and I’ve only recently started to talk about it. I had never wanted to see Clay again, but things have changed since I last felt that way. I think technically I’m supposed to address the court, but I’m going to address him instead, if that’s okay.”

Clay keeps his head angled down towards the table in front of him, not looking at anyone, but Stiles doesn’t need Clay’s eyes on him. Clay’s ears are enough.

“I didn’t have a voice with you before. Any time I tried to say no, or make you stop, or show you how much I hated it, you would tell me things like, ‘I’m just teaching you,’ or ‘I know you’ll like it,’ or ‘you just have to relax more.’ When you would say that I wanted it, too, I don’t know if that was to confuse me or to convince yourself. You said I could never tell anyone about what we were doing because everyone would get in trouble and I would lose everything. It would all be my fault.

“Except none of this was my fault. It wasn’t my dad’s or my mom’s. It was all you. It was always just you.

“People have told me my whole life that I’m smart - even too smart for my own good - but I didn’t feel smart when you were there. My dad is a Sheriff. He’s spent his entire adult life in law enforcement. My mom died of dementia when I was little. I know the world can be dangerous and it isn’t fair. I know there are bad guys and bad things out there. I’ve seen them before. They’re really scary, but I’ve stood up to them firsthand.

“But I didn’t know you were one of the bad guys until it was too late. People think rape happens with strangers, being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Or on a date with someone who pretends to be safe, but isn’t. But I was just a kid. I knew to be careful with strangers. I knew that private areas were supposed to be private. But I didn’t know what to do about you, the uncle who pretended to be safe, who pretended to be my friend. I didn’t know what rape was. I didn’t even know what to call it when you did it. I found out online. Because I was ten when you first put your hands where they shouldn’t be and looked at things you shouldn’t have looked at. And you pulled me in so deep with you that I didn’t know how to get out. A ten-year-old shouldn’t have to know that.

“You’re not being held accountable here for what you did to me back then, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. You know it did. That’s a big part of why you were able to sink your claws into me again, when I was seventeen and when my friends think I would obliterate anyone who tried to touch me like that.

“You know me in ways you never should. You broke me down and molded me into what you wanted me to be. But that was never me. You never had the real me.

“I’m so sarcastic I can be pretty mean. I don’t know what I’m doing half the time, but people look to me to figure something out and I usually do. I’m the kind of guy who doesn’t have anything to bring to a proverbial gunfight besides a baseball bat, and I show up anyway.

“I know how to fight for things. Actually, I’m not sure I know how not to fight. You were the exception, though. You made sure of that. You groomed me with your fake love and your authority, and after my mom - your own sister - died, you buried me in unsharable secrets and you shut me up with so much guilt and shame I never wanted anyone to know what you’d done to me.
“My parents trusted you with the most important thing in their lives. I don’t remember a lot from when my mom was dying in that hospital bed, but I know she was comforted by the idea that my dad wouldn’t have to do it all alone. That you would be there. And you were there, but for yourself, to do all of those sick things. Everything was a lie.

“You betrayed us. You betrayed them. You made me betray them, too, when you made me complicit in the lies. You made me your partner-in-literal-crime. You were ruining me, but I kept holding on to the idea that it didn’t have to ruin everything else in my life. I didn’t want anything else to change, so I convinced myself that I could just lock the abuse away in my mind. I had all kinds of ways of trying to cope. I took the energy I should have spent fighting you or reporting you, and I used it to hide the truth for years.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forgive you for how you hurt me. But even if I do, I will never, ever forgive you for what you did to my parents. I’ll never forgive you for what you made me do to them.

“I don’t feel any pride or victory about finally telling someone. It sort of bothers me that I only stopped keeping the secret because I couldn’t anymore, not because I decided on my own that it was time. You made it happen after you brought someone else along with you. But maybe I’ll find it perversely satisfying someday that you brought the beginning of the end on yourself. I don’t know why you passed me around like that - if you wanted to show off your toy, if I was being punished for something, I don’t know - but when you did that to me and left me lying there, I couldn’t do it anymore. I was drowning. I needed help. So I got it.

“I understand what a victim impact statement is, but I’m reluctant to speak about the full weight of your crimes on me. Not because I can’t, but I don’t really want to talk in detail about how you made me feel, how you physically and emotionally hurt me, what it was like to live with the fear of the next time on top of the memories of every time before that. I can’t give you one last chance to relive it all. You’re not getting one last trophy from me.

“I still have a really hard time thinking of it as what it was, but euphemisms soften the truth. You know what you’ve been charged with and what you’ve pled guilty to. But that’s only the tip of the iceberg and I want you to hear the words from me for once. Because I have the power now. You don’t have anything. You just have an orange jumpsuit and a daily hour of supervised yard time waiting for you.

“You molested me over and over. You raped me for almost a year. You raped me when I was a terrified eleven-year-old and you came back to do it again, but this time, you came back angry in your need to control someone, and you took all of that out on me.

“You’re a child molester. You’re a child pornographer. You’re a rapist. You’ve been disowned by your family. Because you’re an incestuous child rapist. That’s what you did to me. I don’t know if you see it like that, or maybe you rationalized all of it in your head, but that doesn’t change what you are.

“Your sentence will be far too short, no matter what it is. I really don’t know what you’re going to do with the rest of your life. But I don’t care, because I’m done with you. Maybe you’ll use your time locked up to do something good. To be better. If you don’t, your legacy will be being hated by the people who used to love you. Until they got to know who you really are. That’s what your existence on this planet will amount to. The world was worse because you were in it.

“But me? I’ll be fine. There were times when my life was worse because you were in it, but you’re not anymore. I still have a lot of love around me. I will still have a great life. You didn’t steal that from me. I’m taking it back. I’m taking everything back.
“Enjoy prison.”

After closing, Stiles looks up at the judge, barely registering his response from the bench. It’s sympathetic, but it’s not really about what the judge says. Stiles only needed to be heard himself.

The adrenaline doesn’t dip until he’s seated again with his dad’s arm around his shoulders. He’ll do this one more time, later at Quinn’s sentencing, to stare down that asshole and get some closure with him, too. That statement won’t be as biting, though. It couldn’t possibly be.

Stiles doesn’t cry, at least not until the judge issues a sentence of 25-30 years. Noah grabs him sideways in a tight hug like he’ll never let go, but he finally does, allowing Derek to cup the side of Stiles’ face and kiss him just below his hairline.

He looks at them with damp cheeks and a small, vindicated smile. All of the previous insecurities he’d had about how long Clay stays locked up are nowhere to be found.

Every day Clay serves is another day he isn’t free. And every day he serves is another day Stiles is.

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After Stiles composes himself in the bathroom, he regroups with Derek, but Noah is further down the hallway, talking to ADA Liang. Stiles catches his eye, motioning in a general direction and mouthing ‘outside.’

Under the blue sky and surrounded by light air, Stiles and Derek face each other on the courthouse steps. “It’s finally happened,” Stiles says.

“I’m really proud of you. Not just today, but everything you had to go through to get here.”

“This isn’t the end, I know that. I have a lot more work to do in therapy. I’ll never forget what he did. And this will always be a part of what made me who I am.” Stiles shrugs. “But I like who I am. Glaring flaws and all. He doesn’t get any credit, though.”

“Fuck no,” Derek dismisses. “You’re amazing in spite of him.”

Stiles looks off to the side, blinking into the sun. “Maybe this is the reason I survived. Why Allison died for me. So when he came back, I would ultimately do this. Make it so he can’t hurt another kid. If he hadn’t come back, he might never have been caught.”

“You paid too high of a price for that, but if thinking that gives you peace, go for it. You have a lot more to do on this earth, Stiles.”

The idea fills Stiles with a liberating optimism he hasn’t felt in a really long time. It’s empowering on its own, but he wants to share in it.

“We’ll get her, too,” Stiles says.

“What?”

Stiles stands up straighter in his conviction. “Kate. I know she’s skipped town - she’s God-knows-where - but someday, we’ll get her, too.”

Derek is silent for a few moments, hands in his pockets. “I… I appreciate the sentiment, Stiles. I’d be happy to see her get what she deserves, but she’s gone. If she comes back, I’ll go after her, but if she doesn’t, I’m not going to lose any more time to her. I want to live my life without her in any way.
She made me who I am, too. And I didn’t like that person for a long time. But I want to leave her behind. I have other things to live for besides the rage and revenge."

Stiles draws him into an emphatic embrace. “You have a lot more to do. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“Yes, you could,” Derek says over Stiles’ shoulder. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

“But I wouldn’t have. You know I wouldn’t have.”

Pulling back, Derek raises an inquisitive eyebrow. “So this courthouse has a Justice of the Peace, right? You wanna make an honest man out of me?”


He stops tripping all over himself once Derek can’t contain his laughter. “You told me to give you a hard time. And I said you might regret that.”

Stiles can’t help but smile back. “We really are basing this on sarcasm, aren’t we?”

“Well, we have to make this intense relationship work somehow.”

“I know you’re not an alpha anymore,” Stiles says, taking Derek’s hand in his and playing with his ring finger. “But you’re a great one. You’re my family.”

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Stiles understands - Derek is a werewolf and he has werewolf instincts - but he still gets caught off-guard sometimes by how often Derek likes to sniff him.

They’re curled up together on Derek’s couch, making use of the upgraded entertainment system Stiles has progressively built up. It’s fairly pedestrian for any millennial, but a huge leap forward from what Derek used to have. Stiles has made it his mission to impart his pop culture wisdom.

Derek’s forehead is creasing at Inception, Stiles close to his side and a blanket draped over them. During a break in the action, Stiles catches Derek turn slightly towards him and breathe in.

Stiles obliges by arcing his head away. “Should I go through my dad’s old stuff in the attic and see if I can find a rousing bottle of Drakkar Noir?”

“Mmmmm, uh-huh, if you want.”

“You don’t even know you’re doing it half the time, do you?”

“Doing what?” Derek asks, looking at Stiles’ collarbone to his mouth before smelling him again.

Stiles smiles. “Would you still do this if I came over here straight from lacrosse or cross-country, all sweaty and gross?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Derek answers, totally serious.

“You wolves are so weird. What’s so great about a stinky boy?” Derek gives him a look and Stiles revises. “Okay, that sounds bleh. I mean, a stinky MAN.”

“I love the way you smell.”
“That’s because you haven’t gotten a whiff of the Drakkar yet…?” Stiles smirks. “I don’t even think Scott smells his mom’s enchiladas this much and they’re apparently better than sex.”

“You just smell happy. I guess I missed that. I hated knowing how miserable you were all the time, even when I didn’t know why.”

“But present-day eau de Stiles turns your frown upside down?” This time, Derek does laugh. “I must have really reeked of it for you to know it was some serious shit.”

“No, not really,” Derek says, rubbing little circles on Stiles’ shoulder. “The emotional scent isn’t that strong, honestly. It’s competing with so many other things around you. You have to really zero in on it.

“You know I’m not the most … socially-skilled person. I don’t read people well. So the chemosignals are the easiest to go by. That’s probably why Scott doesn’t sense it the way I do. He doesn’t rely on it. Scott may be an alpha now, but I was born a werewolf and I’ve been navigating through scent instead of …”

“Emotional intelligence?”

“Ha. Sure. I’ve been doing that for a long time.”

“Scott knew I wasn’t doing great, but he backed off when I told him to. I guess he was okay giving me Best Friend Space. But he knew you were sad about something. He kept asking me about it.”

“I probably wasn’t hiding it as much as you were,” Derek says. “I don’t think I was hiding it at all.”

Stiles laughs. “You’re not that great at hiding, in general.”

“You know, I didn’t even know at first by the way you smelled. You were still dealing with the nogitsune fallout, but it was more than that. I only started paying attention to that once I realized something was really off.”

“So what made you suspect anything to begin with?”

Derek reaches over with his other arm and brushes a thumb across Stiles’ cheek. “Your eyes,” he answers, because no one carries hurt in their eyes like Stiles Stilinski.

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This time at the Preserve is more along Stiles’ jam. Derek parks the Camaro in a grassy spot under the shade and it’s so peaceful with just the birds chirping happily around them.

“This is where it first started,” Stiles says. “When we first met. You shot laser beams at me and Scott and said you would have us charged with trespassing.”

“Oh, you trespassed, all right.”

“You let me in,” Stiles shoots back cheekily. “Eventually.”

“You made it impossible not to.”

Stiles leans across for a kiss, but the center console keeps them more separated than Stiles would like, so he comes up for air. “I’m gonna climb over -”

“Yeah, okay,” Derek says, sliding his seat back as far as it’ll go and lowering it to the most
Stiles scoots over to straddle him in as graceful a maneuver as he can manage, almost releasing the parking brake and hitting the horn in the process. “Oops.”

“I hear that a lot with you.”

“This is a pretty classic high school romantic-comedy move.” Stiles runs his fingers along the black leather upholstery by Derek’s head. “Super hot boyfriend drives a sexy car and takes spunky, geeky date to a quiet make-out spot.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure there’s a lot more to life than being really, really ridiculously good-looking.”

Stiles cackles with pure delight. “Oh my God. All of my indoctrination is paying off. You’re totally speaking my language now.”

“Your language now I speak,” Derek says under his breath.

“Wow, you’re really bringing out the big guns to seduce me.”

“Is it working?”

Stiles answers him with his mouth rather than his voice, losing all track of time laid out over the driver’s seat. Their clothes stay on, but Stiles likes having the intimacy from just their unbreakable bond.

Noah’s text notification rings out from the pocket of Stiles’ jacket, discarded on the passenger side. Stiles sits up too quickly at the alert, bumping his head against the roof of the car.

“Ow,” Stiles says, laughing and reaching up to cradle the spot with his palm.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, it was just a tap,” Stiles says with a smile. “No big deal.”

Stiles sways a little, from lack of coordination more than disorientation, and Derek’s hand instinctively flies up, pressing against Stiles’ chest to steady him.

“You are, you know,” Stiles says, covering Derek’s hand with his. “Taking it from me, I mean.”

Derek takes Stiles’ other hand, holding it to his own heart. “You are, too.”

“Yo, my phone is DYING,” is the first thing Scott says when he jogs into Derek’s loft.

“High school boys and their internet porn.” As always, Lydia is blithe, strolling in behind him.

“It’s not porn! I just keep falling in a Snapchat hole!”

Scott looks at Derek standing by the main table and gives him a sheepish grin. “It’s addicting, I have a problem.”

Derek returns his gaze with an impassive one. “What’s Snapchat?” he asks with even less emotion in his voice.
“Here, I’ll show you! I’ll use my last 8% of battery to show you.” Scott reopens the app and holds his phone out so Derek can see the last video he was viewing. It’s mindless product plugging from a celebrity Derek doesn’t recognize, not that that means anything.

Derek’s brows furrow. “I don’t get it.”

Scott stares at him with a look that clearly says, ‘And people think I’m dumb.’ “It’s videos. You make videos on your phone and you post them on the internet.”

“But why is it called Snapchat?”

“Because you snap a video on your phone and you post it.”

“But isn’t Twitter really Snapchat? People chat on Twitter. In a snap. Those short little messages.”

“Ahhhhh, GOD!” Scott cries out in exasperation, even though Derek sort of has a point and to have that kind of discourse shows Derek has come a long way with social media.

Derek just shrugs at him, unblinking.

“So can you help an alpha out and let me use your charger?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s plugged in next to the bed. Outlet on the right side.”

Hustling across the loft, Scott passes Stiles going through new college materials at the coffee table and sends him a peppy wave. “Give me life!” Scott exclaims, unplugging the charger and suddenly freezing.

Stiles sees it in his peripheral vision the moment it happens. The moment Scott gets it.

Still standing by the bedside, Scott draws in a conscious breath, and then leans a few inches over the blankets and does it again. He cocks his head to the side as his brain catches up with his olfactory senses.

Stiles’ scent is all over the bed. It’s soaked in him, tightly intertwined with another scent that Scott expected to be there.

He locks eyes with Stiles. His expression is blank, but he knows.

Stiles looks back at him with a smile slight in appearance but brimming with affection.

Scott raises his eyebrows. ‘Are you sure?’

The right corner of Stiles’ mouth lifts up. ‘Positive.’

Scott gives Stiles a crooked smile of his own and makes a crude gesture of a circle formed by two fingers on one hand and the opposite pointer finger moving in and out of it.

Stiles rolls his eyes comically and flips a different hand signal in return.

Scott ambles over to Stiles, who tells him, “It’s not about that. I mean, it’s about everything. This is really good for me.”

“Wow, okay.” Scott slides his uneven jaw from one side to the next. “Sorry, I’m, um, surprised? I mean, sex I get. And I know you’re good friends. But I didn’t know that … there was more?…”
“No, I know,” Stiles says. “We were trying to keep it between us, at least earlier, anyway.”

Scott’s brow is crinkling more and more, but Stiles knows it’s because he’s processing, not disapproving. He can see the gears in Scott’s head turning, trying to pick up on the signs scattered all along. “So like, this has been going on for a while? You’re in a full-blown relationship?”

Stiles licks his lips, grappling with a response. As much as he knew he would tell his friends at some point, he hadn’t really thought about how.

“Have you ever felt so much hurt,” he asks, blinking and straining to keep his voice even, “you don’t think you can come back from it, but then you see yourself through someone else’s eyes, and it changes everything?”

“Bro,” Scott reaches out for Stiles’ forearm. “I’m so sorry, man, I said I would be there for you - I didn’t realize it was like that -“

“I didn’t want you to,” Stiles interrupts, placing a hand over Scott’s. “I didn’t want anyone to know. I was … struggling with everything and I wanted to do it alone. It’s not that I didn’t want you. But I thought I had to do it alone, until suddenly I wasn’t, because Derek was there.”

Scott’s mouth is still slightly agape, but he tries his best to shrug it off. “I’m just glad you’re doing better. I don’t really need to understand it. You don’t have to explain it to me. It’s your business. The only thing that matters is you’re happy. And that makes me happy.”

Stiles squares his shoulders, buoyed by the lessening burden he’s been carrying. “I’m ready to let go and be hopeful about the future. Derek’s a huge part of that. I couldn’t have done it without him.”

By now, Scott has turned insanely curious, but judiciously sticks to his just-declared resolution. “Wow, so I guess I owe him. Like maybe I’ll finally let him win a fight or something.”

They burst out laughing, prompting Derek to look up from where he’s been listening to Lydia chatter over some old, weathered book. Stiles knows he’s heard every word without even trying and gives him an ear-to-ear grin.

Derek smiles back, a bright spark in the clear eyes of a misunderstood monster who has never actually been one. But Stiles saw through it - saw through Derek, in more ways than one - to fight against the real darkness and take everything back. To believe in what he could have, instead of living in all of the pain.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, on one hand, it felt vaguely inappropriate for me to write an impact statement, even in a fictional setting, soon after the very real, devastating ones from the Nassar sentencing. I heard about them, but didn’t read them so I wouldn’t be unduly influenced. That said, it made sense within Stiles’ journey for that to be the end of his interaction with Clay, so I wrote one. My intention is not to exploit or piggyback on the real-life trauma of real-life survivors.

The title of the story is a take on a lyric from "Ordinary Day" by Vanessa Carlton.
Specifically, the line is "as I looked up into those eyes, his vision borrows mine." The title probably doesn't make much sense as applying to this story until the last chapter / final scene. (Not that I think this song really encapsulates Stiles and Derek together. Haha, that would honestly be something more along the lines of "Issues" by Julia Michaels or "Beautiful Thing" by Grace VanderWaal.) I have so much I want to say but I'll just put all of that in a separate Author’s Notes.

Anyway, I'm so happy to have reached this point of the story, both in terms of where Stiles and Derek ended up and also for me as a writer, pulling this all together. I started writing this over a year ago and never anticipated how much satisfaction I would get out of this.

I hope you as a reader got something out of this, too! Thank you so much for clicking and for any feedback!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I’ve only watched up through season 5A, so I didn’t make any specific references to anything that happened in seasons 5 or 6 during senior year of high school.

So let’s dive in!

[Posted 3/25/18]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Stiles applies to numerous colleges in the fall, he mostly intends to stay close to home and his dad, but he keeps his options open. Once a formal acceptance needs to be tendered in the spring, he and Noah have made so much progress with Dr. Kendall that Noah actively encourages him to go wherever he wants, even if it’s on the other side of the country. Physical distance isn’t even a pale threat to how tight-knit they’ve become.

Ultimately, Stiles chooses UCLA for a lot of reasons. In-state tuition, broad academic choices, pleasant winters, far enough from his dad to be independent but still not too far, and a fun place to live and host the pack when they pop in. Derek happily agrees to move down with him, just like they’d talked about.

Before Stiles submits his enrollment paperwork, Derek suggests, “Hey, maybe you should stay in the dorms for the first year. To get the full on-campus experience. I can rent a separate apartment and you can come over whenever you want, but you’ll still be close to student life and your new friends when you’re at the dorms. Best of both worlds.”

“No,” Stiles stubbornly refuses. “I want a Derek/campus hybrid, not a campus/Derek one. If we live near the school, I’ll still have student life and new friends. What’s the point in having my own room when I have to share it with some rando - who could be cool, but maybe not - and when I’m going to spend nights with you?”

Derek still has some doubts. “I don’t know, I don’t want you to miss out on anything. And if you give up a dorm room now, you can’t necessarily get one later in the school year, can you?”

“I’m not gonna want one,” Stiles says, resorting to practical considerations to convince him. “And it’s dumb to pay unnecessary fees for student housing and meal plans. Please, sir, I’m but a penniless street urchin.”

Derek relents and they share a comfortable apartment near campus. Every now and then, Stiles misses the loft and how Derek had made it a nice home for them without completely eliminating its “Derekosity,” as Stiles calls it. The loft will always be there, though, along with his Jeep. Stiles left it back in Beacon Hills since it’s not reliable enough at every whim and need, especially compared to a bike and Derek’s car.

They’re well-acquainted with co-habitation, but doing it full-time away from family is a big step up, albeit a quite welcome one. Stiles doesn’t live with Noah anymore, but he’s still living with family, one that he chose, right by his side.
Noah visits twice during Stiles’ freshman year and again after spring finals. Stiles secures a coveted summer job doing grunt work for a psychology professor writing a new book, so he doesn’t have as much latitude to come back to Beacon Hills until Labor Day.

Stiles and Derek already covered more touristy sites with Noah during his earlier visits, so this trip is mostly about relaxing and filling each other in on more substantive updates than phone calls and e-mails allow. Stiles can’t wait until he turns 21 so he can take his dad around to his favorite bars that he definitely doesn’t use a fake ID to get into.

On Sunday morning, the day of Noah’s departure, Noah and Derek wake up early to go surfing, a nice tradition that’s taken shape over the last year. Stiles never goes since they’re much better than he is and he doesn’t want to hold them back. Besides, it’s good bonding time for them and he can barely get up hours later to start the coffee machine and wait in line for the amazing gourmet donuts a block over.

After an early dinner, Derek drives them to the airport and Stiles pledges to fly north for a weekend before September if he can. At the curb, Noah wraps Stiles in a tight hug.

“Thanks, son,” he says, and Stiles opens his mouth to ask, “For what?” until he sees Derek handing Noah his overnight bag from the trunk.

Back at the apartment, Stiles and Derek unwind in bed with their laptops and discussion of fall class registration coming up. Derek had applied to UCLA during Stiles’ freshman year after all and was accepted, much to his surprise and none of Stiles’. Stiles purposely hadn’t completed some of his General Education classes yet so he and Derek could take at least a couple together. Stiles knows Derek’s excited about being in school again, but it’s nothing compared to how excited Stiles is for him.

“Hey, what do you think about sociology?” Stiles jokes. “You can become an expert on human society.”

Derek laughs. “What, I’m not doing such a bad job at that anymore, am I?”

“No,” Stiles says, poking him in the ribs. “Just thought you might like that more than math.”

Even though Stiles had been busy at school the past year, Derek hadn’t exactly been sitting around looking for things to do. When they first moved, Stiles joked that Derek should get a job as a personal trainer or club bouncer and just stand there, doing nothing, while the money just poured in. But Derek has carved out his own place, volunteering at animal shelters and for environmental causes, which makes a lot of sense to Stiles, and becoming a regular fixture at various canyon trails and libraries.

Derek had even looked after another tenant’s four-year-old son every Tuesday afternoon when her regular babysitter had a class conflict during spring quarter. Stiles will never forget the little glow in his heart the first time someone mistook Sam as Stiles and Derek’s child at a nearby playground.

“So what else are you going to take?” Derek asks. “Getting any closer to figuring out your major?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Arg.”

Stiles is still hemming and hawing over his major, or possibly majors. He’s tried a lot of different things so far, from lab sciences in case he wants to go into forensics to the student newspaper to indulge his lifelong curiosity and snooping. He thinks he wants to pursue law enforcement - possibly a federal agency or working as a profiler - or maybe he’ll be a therapist one day and help other
people the way Dr. Kendall helped him. Most people wouldn’t associate Stiles with the level of sensitivity required for a job like that, but he knows he has it in him.

“I’ll figure it out. I’m not worried. And I don’t want to try to finish earlier anyway. If you take more classes and finish a year early, we can graduate together. And maybe Scott really will transfer to a school down here and he’ll graduate at the same time.”

Like Stiles, Scott had originally planned to stay in northern California, except he actually did. His grades weren’t good enough to get into UC Davis out of high school, but he’d still wanted to become a veterinarian, amending his plans to transfer to Davis. Freshman year was an awakening, though, forcing him to evaluate whether his genuine desire could overcome the difficult curriculum and technical proficiency needed.

When Stiles talked to him the previous week, Scott was waiting to see how his spring grades turned out to make a decision about continuing or cutting bait on that aspiration. He could use a fresh start, so he’s considering picking another direction, getting his grades up, and transferring to a southern California college after sophomore year.

It’s been harder for him to come to terms with the idea of leaving Beacon Hills, but it’s overdue. He keeps getting sucked back into supernatural drama and Melissa doesn’t want him to lose his future over it. People like Argent, Noah, and Liam can handle things without him. And speaking of Argent, he and Melissa are still going strong, so Scott doesn’t have to worry about his mom being lonely, either.

Once Scott comes down, even if it’s farther away like San Diego, they’ll be able to see each other without as much as effort as is required now. Maybe then Stiles will kick back with him and some beers and finally tell him about Clay. It’s all rearview mirror, so Scott should have an easier time taking it in when so much time has passed and they’re physically hundreds of miles away from where it happened.

Both of those things have unequivocally helped Stiles deal with it. He almost never thinks about Clay. Clay exists out there, but he’s penned in and won’t be breathing free air for a long time. Nothing has been erased, but the memories feel less personal now.

When Stiles had told Dr. Kendall that he’d achieved his goal of forgiving himself, he’d mostly meant it. To this day, it’s hard not to play mental games with himself about the choices he made and the things he did or didn’t do, so he’s not sure if he’ll ever mean it 100%.

But it’s okay if he doesn’t. That’s enough closure for him. It was never going to be perfect, anyway.

Stiles glances over at Derek, still scrolling through the class schedule. “Derek?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to. I want to do it.”

Derek’s eyes widen as his finger lifts off the trackpad. “You want to?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, nodding and turning to him.

It hasn’t been that hard to go over two years without sex. They do everything else - Stiles is comfortable with blow jobs by now, both in his own capabilities and the payoff - and their relationship and their lives are so full it takes the edge off any sense of deprivation. Stiles is aware that Derek may secretly feel otherwise, but Derek never puts any pressure on him. He takes consolation in being able to give Derek something special and fulfilling, even when he doesn’t give
Derek everything.

They’ve talked about sex before, numerous times, when it was merely a conversation about how to approach something they weren’t going to do anytime soon.

“Do you know what you want? Or what you don’t want?” Derek had asked.

“Um … I’m willing to try anything with you. But I don’t want … please don’t ever tell me to relax. I know if you say it, you’d be saying it to be nice and soothing, but that’s not - that’s not what he meant when he would say that to me. And I think … I just don’t want to hear it from anyone.”

“Okay. Okay, sure. I won’t do that. Do you want me to do anything else that’s different? I mean, anything that I don’t already know.”

“I don’t know,” Stiles shrugged. He’d fantasized about being with Derek before, but clarity on his triggers was a different story.

“Do you think you might be more comfortable if you were topping? That would be different, right?”

After a pause, Stiles said, “But you always top when you’re with guys? You’ve never bottomed?”

“No, I’ve never,” Derek admitted, “but I’m open to it. I never liked any of those guys. It was just a physical act. I would do it with you and it would be great.”

“It’s okay. I get what you’re saying about it being different, but I don’t really need to play around with positions like that. When we have sex, I want you to fuck me. I want to feel good being fucked.”

“Okay.”

“Even when I decide I’m ready, I think it’ll still be a little awkward, just ‘cause, you know, of all my baggage. But please trust me when I say I’m ready. I know you care about me and want to make sure I’m okay, but I don’t want you to treat me like I have reasons to not be okay. I don’t want to be reminded that I have reasons, even though I know I do.”

“I understand.”

“And I don’t want to do it on an important day, like a birthday or anniversary or something. Or at least I don’t want to plan for it on an important day. That’s too much anticipation and I don’t want to tie it to some important event. I’m good with just, you know, a random day. Whenever.”

Stiles and Derek have stayed true to that sentiment. Birthdays and special occasions came and went with other kinds of affections and celebrations.

They didn’t have sex on prom night, either. As blasé as Stiles had been about going to prom as a junior, it felt much more compelling as a senior, with the pack on the cusp of following post-graduation plans. Derek had been a little anxious about going - “what if everyone looks at me with you, like who is this old guy hanging out with high schoolers?” - but Stiles had reassured him repeatedly.

“Oh come on, that’s your whole motif. Own it. And if anyone raises an eyebrow, it’s because they’re jealous you didn’t come with them. Lydia’s going with Parrish as friends, even though they broke up, and you guys are the same age. He’s a deputy, too. So if there’s any pearl-clutching at anyone, it’s at them, not us.”
That night had lived up to its advertised milestone - not so much because of the actual prom, but because of the company, the laughs and the bittersweet appreciation of enjoying what they all had together, while they still had it. Stiles had even coaxed Derek into dancing with Malia.

“What?” Stiles said. “It’s not like you actually brought your cousin as your prom date.”

They post-partied at Lydia’s house and Stiles and Derek spent the early morning hours at an all-day diner, munching on waffles and coffee before ordering take-out breakfast to bring home to Noah.

Half the senior class probably had sex on prom night, but if there’s one thing Stiles knows, it’s that he and Derek aren’t like everyone else.

Today fits the general definition of “a random day” and Stiles feels confident in the spontaneity. He’s still riding a bit of a high from his dad’s visit, but he knows he’s not being unduly influenced.

Some things have been so complicated for either or both of them that simplicity really suits them sometimes. Stiles is pretty sure the t-shirt he’s wearing has a small tear in the armpit and his underwear is not his best, but they don’t need anything fancy.

“You want to right now?” Derek asks, needing the extra confirmation.

“Yeah. Right now.”

“Are you su-” Derek stops himself before he finishes the question. “Okay. Okay.”

“I mean, you want to, right?” Stiles asks, suddenly dawning on him that he’s taking for granted what Derek wants.

Derek kisses him softly. “I would love to be with you.”

He sets both laptops on the safety of the bedside table and roots around the drawer until he finds the bottle of lube. Stiles pulls his shirt off - no need for Derek to actually see the thumb-sized hole there - and Derek sheds his tank top, too. Blanketing his weight over Stiles, Derek grinds against him with slightly less intensity than his kisses bear.

Stiles hasn’t had sex in over two years, but Derek has gone even longer. He hasn’t been with anyone since Jennifer nearly three years ago.

“This is finally happening,” Stiles says, unable to keep himself from stating the obvious. “I’m glad I can finally do this for you.”

“Hey.” Derek pulls back entirely, running his hand through Stiles’ messy hair. “It’s for both of us.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. It’s just that - I trust you with everything and now I can finally show you that.”

“You showed me a long time ago. You’re the only one who ever deserved to be in my bed. It didn’t really matter so much what we did in it.”

“Like Sudoku?” Stiles jokes, but a gasp swallows up his laugh as Derek’s mouth works his way down Stiles’ chest to his happy trail.

Derek has always been really into foreplay, but for a while early on, Stiles wasn’t sure if that enthusiasm was inherent or a function of foreplay being the most they did. But Derek is no different now, even with the promise of more, as he removes his briefs quickly but takes his time stripping Stiles down.
Stiles watches Derek’s slow, deliberate motions, drinking up every line of Derek’s frame, captivated like he’s never seen them before.

“Come here,” he says, reaching down to palm the ridges of Derek’s abdomen and sliding his hands closer to the cut of his groin.

“No, let me take care of you first,” Derek offers, scooting to the foot of the bed.

Stiles opens his knees to give Derek access. When Derek swallows him down, Stiles shudders and presses his hands into the sheets.

Derek’s tongue is so skilled that Stiles’ struggle to control himself doesn’t wane until Derek extends a bent arm across his hips to hold him down. Except Stiles doesn’t feel restrained or caught. He’s safe with Derek. Derek understands him. Sometimes, Derek anticipates what he wants and needs better than Stiles does for himself.

He isn’t self-conscious being vulnerable with Derek, but he’ll never really get used to the way Derek worships his body. Absolutely fucking worships it.

It’s electric, being treasured so much. Stiles can’t distinguish between the butterflies from being loved like that and the butterflies from having sex again.

Derek fumbles for the lube, finding it only when Stiles nudges it into his hand. With a quick flip of the cap and a generous pour, Derek slips a finger inside and Stiles squirms from the burst of pleasure. Derek’s diligent attention continues, ramping up until Stiles can’t take anymore without coming.

“Derek, Derek,” he pants. “Wait.”

“Are you sure?” Derek asks, pulling off with shiny red lips and a teasing smile.

“Yes. The universe wants us to have those simultaneous orgasms, remember?”

“Mmmm, but you taste so good.” Derek crawls back up so that he and Stiles are face-to-face. “I want to make sure it doesn’t hurt you. I could open you up all day.”

Stiles knows Derek’s not exaggerating - he really wouldn’t have any problem setting up camp down there - but Stiles is ready. His body’s ready. His mind is, his heart is, every tiny part of him is.

“I just want you inside me. Not your fingers. I want you.”

“Okay.” After Derek prepares himself with more lube, he raises Stiles’ legs and spreads them wider.

“Sorry if I come really fast.”

He’s so matter-of-fact about it that Stiles can’t help but laugh before clamping his hand over his mouth in mute apology. He never, ever wants to make Derek feel bad about sex. Not when Derek does everything to make him feel good about it.

Derek laughs with no filter himself. “It’s okay, I was just kidding. I was lightening the mood, in case you’re nervous. I’m a little nervous, too. But I can go more than a couple of minutes, thanks.”

“Hey, wait a sec.”

“It’s okay to change your mind,” Derek says, concern written all over his features.

“No, I still want to - I just wanted to tell you, before we actually - you should know how much I fucking love you. Not because we’re fucking. I just love you.”
“I love you, too. More than you could ever know.”

“I don’t know, I’m a pretty smart guy,” Stiles quips, but any further thoughts of joking disappear completely once Derek presses into him, intermittently pausing with caution to let Stiles adjust.

“Oh my God.”

“Am I hurting you?”


Derek pumps his hips at a gentle pace, watching Stiles for non-verbal cues as he moves.


“Should I stop?”

“No, no, don’t stop.”

He loops his arms around Derek’s neck, drawing him closer so their lips can connect again. Derek happily follows his lead, sliding his tongue into Stiles’ mouth and nipping at his neck, the scratch of stubble complementing the friction below.

Stiles shuts his eyes and loses himself in the all-consuming sensations. He used to fear all of the terrible things he’d done that brought Clay on him as a punishment, but in this moment, all he can do is wonder what he’s done to earn Derek as a gift.

“You’re gonna come inside me, right?” Stiles pants.

“If you want me to, yeah.”

“I want it. Please.”

Stiles opens his eyes to see Derek hovering above him. He would know that beautiful face anywhere.

He blinks and his mind darts out of the present and into a memory. A flash of seeing those wildly chromatic eyes at another time, back when he was so desperate for comfort in the unending pain that he’d subconsciously run to a symbol of that solace.

“You were always there for me,” Stiles whispers. “Even when you didn’t know it.”

Derek slows his thrusts. “What?”

“I think I was holding on for you. Even when I didn’t know it.”

Derek stills completely and cups the side of Stiles’ neck. “Are you okay? I know I’m not supposed to ask, but …”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, nodding with a smile, and with another blink, the tears are gone. “I’m just happy. I’m just really happy.”

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Fall quarter starts next week so students are trickling back to campus. Until now, the main source of Stiles’ enthusiasm has been Derek’s upcoming start as a student, but it’s nice to diversify.
Stiles grabs lunch with a group of friends from chemistry class to catch up on the last few months. Everything clicks back into place, just like old times, but without every single one of them getting a different answer to a study question.

Lindsay pulls some tortilla chips from the communal bowl. “My little sister is driving me to eat carbs, guys. I’m eating fucking carbs because of her shitty taste in boys.”

“Are you sure she’s not just being a normal teenager?” Jenna asks.

“Okay, that’s one thing, but this guy is a total douchebag. And he’s totally trying to take her flower. Yeah, that’s right. I used that cringeworthy phrase. Because it matches how gross he is.”

Will shrugs and pushes the chip bowl closer to her. “Did you try reverse psychology?”

“Didn’t work,” Lindsay says. “And now that I’m back at school, she doesn’t have anyone telling her this is a bad idea and he’s going to keep trying to slime his way into her panties.”

“Oh, man,” Holden half-laughs, half-groans. “I’d really rather you go back to talking about her flower instead.”

“The first time doesn’t have to be with The One, but it should at least be someone who treats you right. He’s too much of a bonehead. It’s not like I think she’s too young. I mean, I was sixteen when I lost my virginity. How old were you guys?”

Jenna swirls through the rest of the salsa. “I was seventeen.”

Everyone cites ages that are pretty average for the general population, but when it’s Stiles’ turn, he says, “Twenty,” and everyone’s jaws drop.

“But you’re twenty now!” Lindsay says, doing a double-take. “And you’re gorgeous. Derek’s gorgeous! And the chemistry is like …”

Lindsay trails off, her fists in the air and opening up like fireworks. Stiles laughs at her theatrics, but he understands the incredulity.

He doesn’t think he’s lying or revising history as he pleases. It’s an accurate answer based on his interpretation of the question. When people ask about that, Stiles doesn’t think they mean, “when was the first time you had sex, even if someone forced you into it?”

They’re asking about a consummated choice. Clay doesn’t count.

Rape isn’t sex. It feels like sex and it is sex, but it’s not.

“Wait, are you religious and I didn’t know?” Will asks. “It’s cool if you are. I just never knew. You guys have been together for a while. Like, years.”

“No,” Stiles says, shrugging good-naturedly. “We weren’t in a hurry, that’s all.”

“You have way more willpower than I ever gave you credit for, Stiles.” Still in stunned disbelief, Lindsay furiously sips at her iced tea. “Because I would have jumped Derek on the first date. Possibly right at our table in the restaurant.”

Stiles laughs with another shrug. “Better to be really old than really young. He’s The One, but we wanted to wait. It didn’t bother us. Not when we’ve shared so much and we like so many things about each other.”
“Exactly!” Lindsay crows. “Stiles, you should Skype with my sister or something. Like, if she heard it from a really cute boy with a good heart, she might start to believe me when I say there’s a guy like that out there for her, too.”

“Hello?” Holden makes a show of looking affronted. “I’m sitting right here. I’m wonderful and adorable, too.”

Stiles’ friends start chattering around him, but the conversation fades to the background as he pulls out his phone and shoots Derek a text. “Lindsay wants to fuck you in the middle of an Olive Garden.”

Derek replies immediately. “What?” Then a minute later, “I’m sure this makes perfect sense, if I knew the joke. Tell her I’m a man of means and we can go to Macaroni Grill.”

Stiles giggles to himself, but no one asks what’s so funny because they haven’t noticed or it’s obvious to whom he’s talking by the look on his face.

“Boyfriend veto,” Stiles texts back. “She can’t have you. You’re mine.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Derek replies.

Stiles leans back in his seat, sending a row of green check marks followed by another one of hearts.

Derek is and always will be his first, his last, and his only. And Stiles wouldn’t have it any other way, either.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that’s it! That’s the end of the official story. I hope you enjoyed it! I sure enjoyed writing it. (Well, as much as one can enjoy writing awful, soul-crushing abuse. But yeah! All of the other stuff was great for me!)

Oh, and to clarify/refresh memories if need be, the part where Stiles remembers seeking solace from Derek is from the end of chapter 4. It’s been a long time since that chapter was posted and I don’t expect anyone to remember that if they read it when it first went up.

Thank you so much for reading and for any/all feedback you’ve left for me over the course of this story! I so appreciate it. This is the first story I’ve ever finished so it means a lot to me that it was well-received.

In addition to the complete 15/15 story, I will be posting additional materials, such as an alternative epilogue (from when I was going to end the story in a different manner, earlier on) and author’s notes. Plus maybe more, if I am inspired to write additional scenes! I’m very attached to this universe, guys. Lol I spent a lot of time with it, so it’s hard for me to say goodbye. Accordingly, the story will update to 16/16 and 17/17, etc.

Oh, and another thing I’ve really been thinking about since chapter 8/9 or so is writing a “sideways” version of this story, where everything from chapters 1-mid-5 are the same, but when Stiles goes to Derek for help, they end up going to the hospital. From there, I
can play with changing variables and outcomes like who knows what and when, how resolution plays out, etc. It seems like a good way for me to acknowledge the different paths Stiles, Derek, and their loved ones could have taken because situations like this are so dynamic and dimensional. I'll write at least one or two shorter, happier stories first, though. Haha. Because Stiles and Derek deserve to be happy without so much angst.

Again, thank you for coming along on this journey with me! It's been a wonderful experience for me. Please feel free to let me know what you think!
Hi everyone! I took a long, unintentional break in posting. I meant to take a short one after finishing the epilogue, but that break grew leaps and bounds like I fed it Popeye’s spinach or something.

This is an alternative ending. Originally, I wasn’t going to write Stiles telling Noah what had happened. I felt that that was a realistic representation of a traumatic experience like this, but I’m really glad that readers were vocal about wanting Noah to find out or looking forward to him finding out. It gave me pause to re-evaluate the arc of the story, and I’m way more satisfied with everything that came out of Stiles telling Noah the truth. (That’s also part of why it took me longer to post the later chapters of the story - I had to re-work the sequence of events and incorporate things I hadn’t planned on writing.)

So the proper context for reading the alternative ending is -

1. Stiles hasn’t told Noah about the abuse, and therefore, hasn’t reported it to the authorities or pursued any legal measures. Nothing as a result of these actions in the official story - Clay’s extradition, prison sentence, plea bargain to implicate Quinn, etc. - happened.

2. Pretty much everything else did happen. Stiles told Noah about his relationship with Derek, Noah was receptive to it, Stiles and Derek made some advancements in physical intimacy, Stiles told Scott about his relationship with Derek, etc.

And this one is around the length of a normal chapter, so here we go! Thanks a ton for your interest and support!

[Posted 6/20/18]

All that stands between Stiles and summer vacation is one more exam and a final paper. Writing that paper isn’t how Stiles would prefer to spend his Saturday afternoon, but at least that’ll open up his evening for Derek to come over.

He’s deep in thought, editing a hastily written paragraph when he nearly jumps out of his seat at sudden movement in the corner of his eye.

“Holy shit, Dad!”

“Sorry I scared you.”

“What are doing here? I feel like you just left for your shift.”

“Yeah,” Noah says, uncharacteristically subdued after getting the better of Stiles. “I was at the station, but I came home.”
It’s obvious from the solemn look on Noah’s face that he didn’t merely forget something and make a pitstop for it. “Dad, what is it?”

“I just got some bad news, Stiles.”

Stiles shuts his laptop and pushes it to the side altogether. The good thing about their immediate family being down to two people is that both are clearly accounted for.

Noah sits down on Stiles’ bed, motioning for him to join. Stiles can’t get there fast enough as his chair rolls away with the momentum of his abandonment.

“Did you just get a call from the doctor or something?” Stiles asks, bracing himself for the worst. He never worries about frontotemporal dementia with his dad since Noah isn’t in the same genetic line as his mom, but he worries about everything else.

“No, no, I’m fine.” Noah places a hand on Stiles’ shoulder. Oh God. This is going to be bad. “It was from the police in Arizona. Clay’s been in an accident.”

The whole world comes to a complete standstill around Stiles. “What kind of accident?”

“He lost control of his car somehow in the middle of the night and slammed into a tree. I’m so sorry, Stiles. He didn’t make it.”

With a choked gasp, Stiles starts shaking uncontrollably. He feels like his head is doing one thing while his eyes are rolling around independently and the rest of his body isn’t even there at all.

He’s crying now - unabated ugly crying - and Noah’s brave face disappears, too.

“I know, son, I know,” Noah says, grabbing him in a big hug.

“What - what happened?”

Noah pulls back. “It seems like he was going really fast and then something went wrong. It was late, so he might have had something to drink, but they don’t know for sure yet. Maybe an animal ran out into the road and he swerved. By the time someone else passed and Emergency Services arrived, it was too late.”

Stiles hugs him again, letting Noah rock them back and forth at a gentle, easy tempo. “It feels like yesterday that he was here. But he’s with your mom now. It’s hard not to think he’d be fine if he hadn’t left, if he was still here, but life has its own plans for everyone.”

Stiles cries over his dad’s shoulder like he’ll never stop, not caring in the moment that Noah thinks he’s distraught because Clay’s dead. Well, he IS crying over that, but not with the emotions and for the reasons that Noah presumes.

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Noah is in no particular mood to report back to his shift, but goes in for the other half later that night. With the school year almost over, there will definitely be some raucous parties disrupting the suburban peace.

“I’m okay, Stiles,” he says as he picks up his keys from the kitchen counter. “It’ll be a good distraction. And I don’t mind trying to keep kids who’ve been drinking from driving. It’s … timely. It might make me feel a little better.”
“Okay, Dad. Be safe. Derek’s going to stay over, too.”

“Yes, that’s good. You shouldn’t be alone, either.”

Twenty minutes later, Derek strides into the house with a dvd from Redbox and a new book recommendation for Noah. Stiles usually finds it hilarious that he’s turned Derek into a guy who rents movies at the grocery store, but his normal level of amusement is eluding him today.

Derek takes a seat on one end of the couch while Stiles sits perpendicular on the other side, stretching his legs out so his feet rest snugly in Derek’s lap.

“You want me to rub these bunions?” Derek teases.

“I don’t have bunions,” Stiles says, pointing to the fourth toe on his right foot. “That one’s a little weird, though.”

Derek slides a hand over Stiles’ ankle. “Oh, it’s completely disgusting. But I’ll still rub your nasty toe if you want me to.”

“No, that’s okay. It should air out.” Stiles keeps the joke running with a vigorous wave. “Hey, and um, that’s a wrap on your days of traveling the world to do covert surveillance for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Clay. He’s dead.”

Derek’s eyes go wide and then contract with tension. “Wait, what?”

“Yeah. My dad got the call earlier today. Clay crashed into a tree. Car’s totaled. Well, he is, too. He might’ve been drinking. Tests are pending, but he probably was. He doesn’t usually drive drunk, though. So I don’t know what happened.”

Scooting to the Stiles’ end of the couch, Derek reaches for him as Stiles tucks his bent knees over Derek’s lap.

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy,” Derek says, his voice sharp and crisp. “I would say he deserved what he got, but I can’t, because he deserved a hell of a lot worse than that. Did he hit anyone? That would be just like him, to hurt someone else as his dying act.”

“Yeah, at least that worked out. It was a single-car, single-person, single-tree accident. And now he’s gone. Not just from my life now. He’s gone, period.”

“I hope he suffered.”

“That wouldn’t have been so terrible.”

“Actually, I wish he had died ten years ago. Before he ever touched you.”

“Yeah.” Stiles has thought that on more than one occasion before, too. “That would’ve made things a lot easier. I used to think, if anyone in my family had to have dementia, why did it have to be my mom? Why wasn’t it him instead? But it didn’t work out like that. And I had to stop thinking about it. It just made me sadder when he was doing all of that stuff to me.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I don’t really know,” Stiles admits. “I lost it when my dad told me. Of course I’m relieved that
Clay’s not a danger to anyone anymore. Part of me is happy. But like, a weird kind of happy. It’s sort of like after you ran him out of Beacon Hills. I came home from school and he had left. I was relieved, but it didn’t feel like happiness.

“That’s something people say, you know? If you’re out for vengeance, once you get it, you don’t necessarily feel that much better, because it doesn’t change whatever happened that made you seek vengeance. Whatever you lost, it’s still lost. However you were hurt, you were still hurt. And I don’t know, maybe sometimes it’s like that when someone who hurt you dies. I’m sure some people would love to dance on that person’s grave. I’m not sad, no way, but I’m still trying to sort everything out.”

“I can understand that. It’s black-and-white for me, but there are a lot of reasons why it’s more complicated for you.”

“This doesn’t change what he did. I’ll be dealing with that for a long time. On some level, probably for the rest of my life. And it totally fucking sucks to see my dad mourn him. Clay never should’ve had his friendship and he doesn’t deserve his sorrow now. But that’s my fault, too. I didn’t say anything, so what the fuck else is my dad supposed to feel?”

“It’s not too late to talk to him, if you want to. It would be different now that you don’t have to worry about what he would do about Clay, or other people finding out. It could just be your dad. No one else has to know. You two could get through all of this together.”

“Yeah.” Stiles bites his lip, sure that Derek can smell his mood shifting to fear. There are still plenty of things to be afraid of, even with Clay’s demise. “I don’t know. I’m not ready, and I don’t know if I ever will be. I don’t know how to make myself ready.”

“It’s okay. You should do what feels right for you. Clay’s not around to push the burdens on you anymore. Which is what he did. He made you responsible for all of the consequences. It was always you who had to pay for everything.”

Stiles sighs. “Great, I get a pass to be even more selfish.”

“What? Why do you think that?”

“I can’t help it. I feel like … like, the fact that he died makes it okay that I didn’t report him - like it lets me off the hook, but I didn’t do anything. I let him go.”

“Stiles, you are not being selfish about this. I can promise you that.”

“I was rationalizing it all to myself before… That he wouldn’t do it again, like I could be the puppet master pulling his strings by threatening him through you. But he couldn’t be controlled. I couldn’t do it before, and I couldn’t do it with you, either. That’s not the way his mind works. I wanted to keep believing it was possible, though. So I could make myself feel better. And now that he’s dead, it’s like, wow, how convenient, I didn’t do the right thing, but I don’t have to take responsibility for that. No harm, no foul, right? Like what’s the difference when he got behind the wheel and took himself out?”

“I know you never wanted anyone to go through what you did. And the idea that someone could have … yeah. I get that you feel really guilty about that. But I said it before - everything was at your expense. I just hope that you can let go of the guilt. It'll take some time, but I really want that for you.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right. And what’s kind of weird is I feel guilty for being let off the hook, and then I feel guilty for something else I could’ve done, but didn’t. I didn’t know he’d die on
his own, and what if I had asked you to kill him for me after all? Even after how I felt about the
nogitsune and not wanting to kill anymore. I told myself I could never do that again, but if I’d
decided to sic you on him like that - I would have slid right back into killing, and for whom? For
him? For that piece of shit? And to needlessly drag you down with me? Fuck that.”

“I wouldn’t have felt bad about doing it, though. It wouldn’t have been on my conscience. Honestly,
I would’ve slept better afterwards.”

“You’re not a killer, Derek. I don’t want to be one. I don’t want to make you one, either.”

“You’re not and you didn’t. I don’t really believe in karma, but he got some. Finally. The world is
down one sadistic pedophile. And you can focus on getting better without worrying about what he’s
doing or who he’s with.”

Stiles musters up a reluctant smile in spite of himself. “Do you think Hallmark makes a card for this
kind of occasion? ‘Congratulations on the death of your sadistic pedophile uncle? Here’s some
balloons and a quarter?’”

“It IS a weird thing to celebrate, but it deserves something, at least. Do you want to go to your ice
cream place?”

The memories of the first time he took Derek there bring a real smile to Stiles’ face. “Ice cream is
never a bad choice.”

“We can share again, too.”

Stiles knows exactly what Derek means, but he nods at the broader sense of the words.

The best decisions he’s ever made were sharing his secrets and his life and his heart with Derek.

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Over the next two weeks, life goes on, just like the platitude says. For everyone but Clay, that is.

Noah is back on his regular schedule and Stiles has quickly grown accustomed to the freedom of
summer. He’s been coming to terms with his mixed feelings about Clay’s death - slowly - while still
leading his dad to believe they’re rebounding from the same unambiguous grief.

A month ago, he would have been struggling to stay awake during history class. But on this bright
afternoon, he’s pouring over research materials at Derek’s loft and looking for an odd symbol the
pack has seen carved into multiple trees in the Preserve.

Maybe it’s just a code that a couple uses to say they love each other, like a mysterious version of
initials inside a heart, but it’s possible it’s a symbol for something more nefarious. Even though
nothing strange has actually happened and it’s probably innocuous, Stiles would rather actively
check on his own.

Someone’s at the door, but Stiles is too busy to be bothered and doesn’t get up from his stool. Derek
comes downstairs to answer it, earning a jaunty salute and “thanks, Jeeves” for his trouble.

Peter waltzes in like he owns the place just because Derek does. “Hello, Derek.”

“Hey,” Derek replies, sounding a few degrees more cordial than Stiles would have expected. “So
what did you bring?”
That explains it. Peter’s bearing gifts that Derek is actually open to.

Peter holds out a wooden box, covered with enough dust that Stiles can see it from where he’s sitting. “I was in the family vault the other day and I found a box of Talia’s you might want.”

“Thanks.”

In classic Derek fashion, he manages to sound both appreciative and gruff as he takes the box and sets it down on the table. Out of curiosity, Stiles cranes his neck to see what’s inside - some jewelry that looks like they could be heirlooms, a man’s watch, and some old photos.

“Almost everything was in the house, but she didn’t keep everything there.”

“Oh.” Derek’s voice is lighter and quieter this time. “Thanks.”

“So what mischief are you digging up?” Peter asks, turning his attention to Stiles.

“This,” Stiles says, waving a circle over the cluttered tabletop, “is me using my brain. I know you’re not used to that kind of work.”

“I understand effort, Stiles. I’m even known to exert it every now and then.”

Stiles raises his eyebrows with a sidelong glance. “I’m sure it’s hard work being an ambassador for the American Association of Deep-V Shirts.”

“Ah, yes. Exactly who I should be listening to for counsel.” Peter gestures towards him with two flippant fingers. “I’m loving today’s couture, by the way.”

Stiles glances down at his comfortable striped top, gray pants, and All-Stars sneakers. “It’s what the French call ‘not overshadowing the inner beauty.’”

“Oh, I always thought that glow of yours was dramatic teen angst and self-importance. My mistake.”

Stiles gives a sarcastic fake laugh, but he’s not aggravated in the least. He’ll never care much about clothes, no matter who tells him to, and Peter’s one of the few people around who can verbally spar on his level.

“I kept one of the pictures, Derek,” Peter says, apparently deciding he’s done talking to Stiles. “But I have it with me if you’d like to see it.”

Peter opens his wallet and pulls out a small photograph from the cash sleeve. A piece of paper follows it, flitting underneath the table, but Stiles barely notices. Derek’s too interested in the photo, and that gets Stiles’ attention more than Peter’s unintended littering does.

It’s a picture of Talia and Peter as kids. Stiles mostly forgets that Peter was a kid once, like they all were.

“Yeah, keep it. And thanks for these.”

After Peter leaves, Derek looks through the contents of the box one more time before closing it. “I’m gonna put this in a safe place,” he says, heading back upstairs.

Stiles resumes his research, taking a break only when his pen rolls onto the floor. Crouching down to retrieve it, he grabs Peter’s trash at the same time. When Stiles turns the paper over in his hands, he almost disregards it altogether - it’s just a coffee receipt - until his eye catches the address of the coffee shop. His heartbeat accelerates and alarm bells go off in his head when he sees the date, too.
He has no idea if this means anything. It can’t. He hopes it doesn’t. Because there’s just no way.

But he has to find out.

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Stiles is polite enough to refrain from pounding on the apartment door, but the insistence behind his loud knocks is crystal clear.

When Peter swings the door open, Stiles holds up the small piece of paper. “You dropped this.”

Interest piqued, Peter reaches forward to take it, but Stiles whips his hand back. “What were you doing in Phoenix anyway?”

Peter’s right eyebrow barely twitches. “Since when did you get so curious about my personal life? If you’re not careful, I’m going to start thinking you like me.”

“Just answer the question.”

“If you must know,” Peter drawls, extending an arm casually to lean against the doorframe, “I have a girl there.”

“Oh yeah? What’s her name?”

“Amber.”

“Bullshit. You didn’t go down there for some girl.”

Peter smirks. “You obviously don’t know Amber.”

“YOU don’t know Amber, because she doesn’t exist.”

Stiles shoves the receipt towards Peter. “This coffee shop is two blocks from -” He almost literally bites his tongue to reel himself back in. “What were you really doing there?”

“Why is this of such interest to you?”

“No reason,” Stiles says, the words hanging heavy between them.

“Well, now that it’s clear we’re talking about nothing -”

“Do you really expect me to think -” Stiles cuts in, face hardening. Peter blinks at him. “Is this supposed to be a coincidence?”

“Stiles, I don’t have time for these little games -”

Stiles doubles down on his demands. “Fuck, Peter, why did you go there? You go to places like Monte Carlo or Turks and Caicos or Santorini! You don’t vacation in Arizona.”

“Calm down.” Peter pokes his head out into the hall. “If you’re not going to leave, at least come inside. I don’t need nosy neighbors taking notice of nosy teenagers visiting me.”

Peter steps back and Stiles storms in, crumpling up the incriminating receipt in his hand. He’s hardly through the posh entryway when he spins on his heel. “Why won’t you just tell me?”

“I can’t help that you don’t care for my responses.”
The anxiety in Stiles’ body winds up even tighter. He and Peter could go back and forth indefinitely, neither of them giving an inch until someone ultimately walks away.

Stiles’ shoulders falter with the pitch of his voice. “What did you do?”

Peter merely shakes his head in return.

With a deep breath, Stiles quickly weighs his options. There’s a sliver of chance that Peter really does have his own independent travel agenda and he’s not playing around at all. That’s the only story Stiles is going to get unless he can find some way to coax or trick more out of Peter, but that requires giving up something himself and dangling some bait.

“I knew someone in Phoenix,” Stiles broaches. Even with such a vague reference, a ripple of discomfort courses through him before he manages to add, “Maybe you knew him, too.”

His increasing lack of composure must reach Stiles’ face because Peter doesn’t quite continue his end of dodgeball. “I might have,” Peter says. “It’s possible.”

“I used past tense on purpose. Because he died.”

Peter crosses his arms over his chest. “If you believe in an afterlife, he must be right where he belongs.”

“What do you know, Peter?” Stiles doesn’t mean to sound tired and defeated as a manipulation tactic. It just happens. “Just tell me what you know. Please, I don’t wanna … I don’t have time for games, either.”

A few moments of silence pass as Peter side-eyes nothing in particular. “I know … enough.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“I don’t know details. But I know what he was.”

Stiles swallows audibly and doesn’t look at Peter, either. How could he possibly know? No one has ever guessed. Even though Stiles hadn’t actually said the words that night he showed up on Derek’s doorstep, he’d said enough for Derek to piece it together. Derek hadn’t really guessed as much as he’d interpreted correctly.

But what was there for Peter to interpret? How could he have been suspicious about anything? Peter isn’t in his life. Stiles didn’t leave any clues for him.

Eyes narrowing in skepticism, Stiles resumes his defensive stance. “Who are we even talking about? What who was?”

“Your uncle.”

Fuck. Stiles bows his head, not wanting Peter to see the reaction all over his face. The mystery is starting to dissipate with Peter’s confirmation, but it also leaves behind the stark feeling of being caught. Fuck fuck fuck.

Stiles never asked for Peter’s observation or his version of consideration. Stiles was never supposed to get caught. It had been a secret for so long from everyone, let alone from someone like Peter.

“Were you spying on me?” he yells, looking up at Peter with a venomous glare.

“No. Not on you.”
Stiles exhales, his rage feeling more oddly placed by the second. “Derek.”

“I like to know what my nephew is up to, yes.”

“What the hell, do you, like, have his place bugged or something?” Stiles huffs, riding a new wave of distrust. “Or do you lurk around dark corners and listen to me pour my heart out to him?”

“No, Stiles.” Despite Peter’s less acerbic touch today, he’s not above a nearly imperceptible eye roll. “I just paid attention. Something was eating at him. More than usual, anyway. And I couldn’t figure out what. It didn’t make sense. Not when he finally had the boy he always wanted.

“I don’t have listening devices, nor do I sit by the vents with popcorn to overhear anything.” Peter cracks his neck. “But I’ll admit I’m not above some good old-fashioned poking around. Finding out anything about you - well, that was purely unintentional. Once I found that stack of papers under Derek’s bed … I didn’t expect that.”

Stiles sighs and presses his lips together. He’d forgotten about the online research Derek had printed out for him, marked up with Derek’s handwritten notes and auto-stamped with the date.

“That was for someone else,” Stiles argues. He would never suggest that they were for Derek himself.

Peter stares at him. “Who else?”

“So you just decided it had to be me? And you kept going, assuming all kinds of things about what happened and who was involved?”

“I am very aware of everyone who comes and goes, Stiles. At this rate of shitstorms in Beacon Hills, any self-preserving person should be. It wasn’t a terribly difficult puzzle after I realized there was one to begin with.”

Stiles ekes out a small smile, dark and humorless, as his own self-preservation comes out in the moment. “Wow, so you think you know a bunch of shit that’s not even true, and you went to Phoenix based on that sad house of cards? Your judgment is not getting any better, man.”

“Okay,” Peter says, dialing it back at Stiles’ challenging tone. “If you say so.”

That’s what Stiles wanted, but once he gets it, there’s no satisfaction or relief. It’s just a dead end unless Stiles pivots.

He takes a step forward, but can’t bring himself to keep walking, eventually past Peter and out into the hall. “Did you kill him?” Stiles asks, so quietly that he almost can’t hear himself.

“What do you want me to say, Stiles?”

“The truth.”

“You sure? A minute ago, you were in favor of your own narrative.”

“I want to know what you did.”

Peter uncrosses his arms. “You already do.”

Tears spring to Stiles’ eyes, but he doesn’t see much point in trying to mask his thoughts and emotions anymore. Not after what Peter’s uncovered and the actions he’s taken.

Peter makes a detour to the refrigerator first, retrieving a bottle of water and setting it in front of Stiles, who ignores it. He can’t think about hydration at a time like this.

“It was a car accident,” Stiles says. “It looked like an accident.”

“Well,” Peter sighs, “I couldn’t exactly unleash the wolf the way I normally would. Once your father heard it was an animal attack, he’d be suspicious, no matter what the local police said. So would Derek. So would you. It didn’t have to be ‘no questions asked,’ but no one could ask those questions.”

“How did you do it?”

“I followed him to a bar and staked him out for a while to get a read on him. Then I took the next seat over and made nice by pretending I gave a shit about the game playing on the tv and buying him a couple of rounds. We bonded over some crass comments about other people. Crass is beneath me, but I can go low when called for. I said something rather inappropriate about this pretty little twink who walked by, and that captured his attention. It was like he’d found his own kind.

“So we made plans to go out the next night. Met at another bar, and I told him I knew a great place he’d love. He’d had a drink already, but he was fine to drive. We were zipping along a stretch of road when I told him, ‘I know about you and Stiles.’ The way he jerked his head at me - that was it. That was all the confirmation I needed. So I yanked the steering wheel and crashed into a tree at full speed. Your name was the last thing he heard before he died. He knew why it was happening.”

Stiles shakes his head in all-consuming disbelief. He understands the words coming out of Peter’s mouth, but he can barely comprehend them. “You were in the car with him?”

“A wreck like that, people don’t look at all the blood and think there must have been another person there. No one could have walked away from that. No human, at least. I extricated myself with some scrapes and bruises of my own, but that’s nothing for someone like me. So yes, it did look like quite the accident, didn’t it? Just a somewhat inebriated man with compromised motor skills, unable to brake in time.”

Burying his face in his hands, Stiles breathes in hard, one after another. It’s not a looming panic attack, but he’s so overwhelmed and shell-shocked. Even though he’d proactively accosted Peter in his own home with speculative accusations, he wasn’t prepared for this.

“I know there’s only one reason he left Beacon Hills alive,” Peter says. “Derek would have done it himself, unless you didn’t want him to. But it’s fine. I’m used to being the bad guy. Not following the rules. Not that I had any rules imposed on me in the first place.”

Stiles pulls his hands away and looks Peter dead in the eye. “Why did you do it?”

Peter stares back like it’s obvious. “He was a bad man.”

“I know that! But there are tons of bad people out there, and -“

“Family does a lot of things. Sometimes good things. Sometimes they do terrible things, even if they weren’t of the right mind when they did them.” Peter’s mouth puckers at the thought. “But they don’t do that. No one should ever do what he did.”

“I can’t - you really - because of that?”
“He was killing your spirit, Stiles.” Peter nudges the unopened bottle closer. “And you’re the only interesting one, anyway.”

Stiles is vaguely embarrassed that Peter is watching him cry, but at the same time, it doesn’t really matter. What are a few tears between him and the ubiquitously peripheral sort-of-villain, sort-of-antihero who happens to be his boyfriend’s uncle and also the murderer of his serial rapist?

“I can’t even imagine -” Stiles stammers. “I don’t know what you must think of me.”

Peter takes a few beats before speaking. “If it was always about brute force, I would win every time. And if it was always a battle of wits, you would win every time. But it’s usually more complicated than that, isn’t it?”

Stiles swallows. “Were you ever going to tell me what you did?”

“No.”

“My dad doesn’t even know about any of this,” Stiles admits in a whisper.

“I know he doesn’t. There wouldn’t have been anyone to kill if your father knew.”

Stiles stands up, gingerly testing his legs’ ability to bear his own weight. “I don’t … I don’t like that you do.”

It doesn’t feel ungracious or rude to say that, even after what Peter’s revealed to him. It just feels honest.

Peter cocks his head to the side. “I’m quite sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“So we’re never gonna talk about this again, right? And you’re not gonna tell anyone?”

“What’s to tell?” Peter asks with a shrug. “Run along now. Go play your juvenile video games or eat your processed food or give that grouchy nephew of mine a kiss. Whatever it is that you do.”

Stiles turns to leave - this time able to physically do so - but wavers when he turns his hand on the doorknob. He has no idea what else to say to Peter, so he doesn’t say anything at all.

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It takes Stiles two days to talk to anyone besides himself about his mind-blowing conversation with Peter. He almost lets two days turn into three days, but he bites the bullet after he and Derek climb into bed.

“So … “ Stiles stars, sitting up against his fluffed pillows, “Clay didn’t die the way I told you he did. Well, I thought he died that way when I told you, but it turns out it wasn’t like that.”

Derek blinks like Stiles is telling him a confusing riddle. “He didn’t die in a car crash? But the police said -”

“It was a crash.” Stiles turns to the side so he’s facing Derek completely. “But it wasn’t an accident.”

“How do they know that? Did he do it on purpose?”

“No. He didn’t mean to do it. Someone else was there. They did it.”

“So he was run off the road?”
Stiles licks his dry lips. “Sort of. Yeah. There was someone else in the car, and that’s why it crashed.”

“Oh. Well, I hope that person doesn’t feel bad about it, like they killed someone worth living. But wait - I don’t understand - if there was someone else, why didn’t the police tell you that in the beginning -”

“Because they didn’t know, Derek. Clay was alone in the car by the time anyone came.”

“So how do they know now?”

“They still don’t. They still think it was an accident.”

“But you -” Derek says, “you don’t?”

Tucking his knees into his chin, Stiles looks down at his toes and back up at Derek’s face. “It was Peter.”

Derek’s lips part as he reels back, sucking in a breath. “What do you mean?”

“Peter made Clay crash.”

“What?!“ Derek pulls at the blankets covering him from the waist down like he’s going to get out of bed, but he doesn’t actually go anywhere. “He told you this?”

“Only after I confronted him -”

“But that doesn’t mean he’s telling the truth. This is Peter. If he’s lying about this, I’m gonna fucking beat his ass -”

“He’s not lying, Derek. I really don’t think he is.”

“But …” Derek shakes his head to himself, hands cupped over his nose and mouth. “Why would he do that? How does he even know who Clay is? I don’t even …”

“You know how Peter is. Just because you don’t see him doesn’t mean he’s not there and he’s not reading into things.”

Derek looks sick to his stomach - not quite green in the face, but getting there. “Does that mean he knows? About what Clay did to you? You didn’t want anyone to know. That’s personal. That’s your personal business.”

“He doesn’t, not really. He kind of figured out the broad strokes, I guess. But not any details. And I sure didn’t tell him that stuff.”

“He violated your privacy, Stiles. I’ll kick his ass anyway, just for that.”

Stiles is quiet as he rubs his thumb in repetitive strokes. It’s probably not the best idea in the world to clarify that Peter was actually scrutinizing Derek when he stumbled onto Stiles’ sordid past. Or that he started to put two and two together once he found the papers Derek printed out. Derek didn’t out him, but he’ll feel responsible as though he did.

“I don’t think he was trying to. It just kind of … happened.”

Stiles pauses again. He can’t attribute this to Peter sensing his moods well enough to suspect he was being abused, either. Not after the guilt Derek’s felt and probably still feels about not knowing Stiles
had been suffering so much.

“I think maybe I was just a lot better at hiding it in front of people when I knew they were around,” Stiles continues. “Like my dad, Scott, you, the rest of the pack. But when I didn’t know anyone was around, I wasn’t as good at pretending.”

The words spill out of Stiles’ mouth before he really even thinks about them. He’s not making them up. They’re true. But if they’re technically lies about how Peter came to know anything about Clay - well, Stiles is confident that they’re white lies told out of the best intentions. He just can’t risk hurting Derek. Not over this.

“So he - he found out, and the next natural step for him was to leave the state and orchestrate an apparent accident to cover up his murder of the guy he thinks hurt you? What the fuck?”

Well, yeah, that’s one way to put it.

“I mean, he also subconsciously put together a hit list including supernatural creatures who’d never done anything to him, so …”

This time, Stiles bites his lip after he speaks. It’s not the same thing at all, and it doesn’t alleviate any tension by referencing one of the more ridiculous things Peter’s done.

“When did he tell you all of this?”

“A couple of days ago. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you then. I needed time to digest it before I could talk about it.”

“Yeah,” Derek rubs at his face with rough strokes before carding a hand through his hair. “Yeah. You must have been really fucking stunned.”

“I could barely string together a coherent sentence. But I’ve thought about it a lot.”

“Why did he - okay, I’m not saying if Peter knew someone hurt you like Clay did, he wouldn’t give a fuck. But what he did - I don’t know - is there something else going on? This would be the most despicable leverage in the world. If he ever tries to hold this over you -”

Stiles shakes his head. “He didn’t do it for, like, an ace up his sleeve he could pull out when it suits him. At least, I don’t think so. He wasn’t even going to say anything about it -”

“Or he wanted you to think you dragged it out of him.”

“I really don’t think so, Derek. When he finally told me, he was different … He’s still Peter, he didn’t turn into a different person, but I think … I know he’s done some really awful things. But when he’s thinking straight, he’s not - Peter’s not really like that. And Peter’s not like him.”

“Yeah,” Derek sighs. “That’s true. Even hardened criminals in Supermax have a code of honor. Even murderers have it out for child abusers.”

Stiles leans into Derek’s side and wraps his arms around his torso. “I know this is a lot. It was for me, too. You might feel better after it has a chance to sink in.”

“What made you ask Peter about this in the first place?”

“When he was over here giving you that box of your mom’s things, he accidentally dropped something in his wallet. When I picked it up, I saw that it was a receipt from Phoenix, the day before
Clay died.”

Derek doesn’t say anything for a long time. Stiles tightens his embrace, but doesn’t prod him into talking any further.

“Are you happy he did it?” Derek finally asks. “I know you’re happy Clay’s gone, but are you happy about what Peter did?”

“Honestly, all of that stuff I said before, about not wanting anyone to kill for me after everything with the nogitsune - I still mean it. Peter ended up being a loophole I didn’t ask for - a way to take care of Clay while I don’t have to be responsible for it. And I guess I don’t feel responsible. It’s just … weird.”

“I should have done it. If anyone was going to do it, I wanted to.”

“No, I get it. Really.”

“It’s selfish of me, but it just doesn’t … I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right. Because I love you so damn much and I didn’t – he did –”

“You listened to me. To what I wanted, to what I didn’t want. You don’t know how much I needed that. I was fucking starved for it.” Stiles looks directly into Derek’s eyes and holds his steady gaze. “You gave me what I needed. Not Peter.”

“I’m sorry, Stiles, it’s not about me -”

“Yeah, it is. It’s about you, too. You’re involved, too. And it’s fucking nuts. This dirty secret used to be between only me and Clay, and now it’s turned into this crazy family affair. It’s okay to have your own feelings about it. You should.”

“I’ll get over it,” Derek says. “It doesn’t help you if I don’t. Once the shock passes, I’ll get over it.”

“I need to tell my dad,” Stiles sighs. “I can’t … it was one thing for you to know when he didn’t. But now that Peter knows - or has general awareness, I guess - my dad can’t not know.”

“I’m sorry Peter forced your hand like that.”

“No, it’s okay - he didn’t. Not really. Well, maybe a little. But it’s time. I can’t keep putting it off. Like I said, I don’t know if I’m ever going to feel ready on my own. So maybe it’s not the worst thing to have some other motivation.”

“Are you going to tell him what Peter did?” Derek asks.

“Hell no,” Stiles says, not even entertaining the idea for a second. “Take how you feel about it, multiply it by a thousand, and that’s a drop in the bucket compared to how my dad will feel. He doesn’t need to know everything.”

“No, he doesn’t. I can eventually accept what Peter did for you, but I don’t think your dad will.”

“I don’t think Peter would want my dad to know, either. I’m sure he knows you’re going to find out from me.” Stiles presses his cheek against Derek’s shoulder. “He was never going to tell me in the first place. I don’t think he wanted me to know that he helped me.”

“Yeah.”

“But you know,” Stiles says, curling into Derek, “I sort of think he did it for you, too.”
Stiles is a bundle of nerves before the next breakfast-dinner he and Derek planned. A tiny part of it is he’s not sure the new hollandaise recipe he’s trying is going to work out until he sees it with his own two eyes.

Experimenting with food is not a big deal, though. Experimenting with company is really different.

When he opens the door, he finds Peter waiting with a cold bottle of champagne that might cost as much as Noah’s mortgage payment.

“Hey, Peter,” Stiles says with an awkward wave. “You made it.”

“I didn’t happen to have other plans already, so.”

Peter follows Stiles into the loft and to the dinner table that’s been set up for three. “Derek’s here; he’s just finishing the eggs.”

“I didn’t bring any juice for mimosas. Thought mimosas might be too cute.” Peter smirks, but there’s no edge to it. “Derek does like cute, though.”

Stiles laughs, despite the figurative ice that still needs more breaking. “He seems to have a pretty high tolerance for it.”

“I bet.”


Stiles doesn’t know how to say ‘thank you’ - or if he wants to in the first place - for anything else. Refreshments are easily within bounds, though.

“Eggs are done,” Derek says, emerging from the kitchen.

Stiles looks from Peter to Derek and back again. “I’ll, uh, start bringing everything out,” he offers.

Once he disappears around a corner, Stiles stops in his tracks and listens as closely as he can.

“Domestic life is a good look on you,” Peter says.

“I…”

Peter cuts Derek off. “I’m not needling you. I’m glad to see you’ve realized that home is wherever you make it. Doesn’t have to be a charred building. This isn’t as nice as my apartment, of course, but it does the trick.”

“We like it here.”

“Thank you for the invitation.”

“It’s … we always make a lot of food and you’re one of those people who loves brunch, so I figured why not.”

“Why not, indeed.”

They’re silent for a few moments, but Stiles doesn’t hear a peep of movement, so they must still be
standing across from each other.

“He doesn’t owe you anything,” Derek says evenly. He’s not bordering on aggressive. If anything, he’s matter-of-fact.

“I didn’t think he does.”

“He’s an amazing person. He isn’t weak, he didn’t have -”

“He did nothing wrong. I know that. And it was a righteous kill, Derek.” Peter is quiet again. “But a little more so for me to do it than you.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m going to help Stiles. You’re a guest, so go ahead and have a seat.”

As inconspicuously as he can, Stiles rushes into the kitchen like he’s been there all along. By the time they’re serving themselves from the communal plates and bowls, the atmosphere of the loft has relaxed organically, like this isn’t the first time the three of them have willingly socialized together.

Peter opens the champagne, pouring into two of the flutes. “You’re not going to report me to your father for serving you underage, are you?”

“I think he’s got bigger fish to fry in this hellmouth of a town.” Stiles taps his empty glass. “Fill ‘er up.”

The conversation isn’t as stilted as it initially was, but that’s partially because Stiles is there to keep it going and act as a bridge between Derek and Peter.

Baby steps. Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“Maybe we invite Malia next time?” Stiles suggests after he swallows a huge bite of waffle.

Peter doesn’t look up from his plate, but Stiles catches a faint ghost of a smile behind Peter’s fork.

“Yeah,” Derek says. “We can do that. This is for family.”

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There will never be a ‘right time’ to tell Noah about what Clay did to him, but Stiles hems and haws about finding a relatively ‘better’ time like that might exist.

The opportunity never presents itself, though. Noah’s usually pretty tired after work and Stiles doesn’t want to spring it on him earlier in the day before a shift. He doesn’t want to ruin a perfectly good day off, either.

But working around Noah isn’t really the heart of the issue. It’s not about finding a nice, convenient hour like Stiles’ confessions will cease to exist beyond that window. The hard part is saying the words out loud and breaking his dad’s heart. Knowing that Noah will never really be whole again afterwards. Never being able to go back to the days when Noah thought he’d done the best he could with Stiles after his mother’s illness and death.

There’s no such thing as a ‘better’ time. There’s just … time.

When Stiles comes back from splitting a pizza with Scott one night, Noah is already relaxing on the couch with a beer in one hand and the remote in the other.

Stiles takes the empty seat next to him. “Hey, Dad.”
“Hey, Stiles. You wanna watch the rest of this game with me?”

“Yeah, sure. How was work?”

“I’d almost venture to call it a little boring today.”

“Boring’s not always bad.”

They watch the batter hit two foul balls in a row before swinging and missing entirely. As the inning ends, the game cuts to a commercial.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“I ….” Stiles says. “I know you’re still sad about Clay.”

Noah frowns. “Yeah. And I hate that you had to lose another member of the family. It’s so soon after what happened to Allison, too.”

It’ll be a while before Stiles doesn’t feel a pang of guilt when he hears her name. It doesn’t matter what other people tell him. Even though Argent doesn’t blame him, Stiles can’t magically stop blaming himself. So he has some sense of how his dad will feel once he knows the truth. At least Stiles thinks his guilt over Allison will lessen over time. He doesn’t think his dad’s guilt over him will.

“I’m not sad, though,” Stiles admits.

“Everyone has their own way of working through death. It’s good that it’s not weighing you down.”

“No … I was never sad that he’s gone.”

Noah’s chin swivels towards Stiles as though he’s not sure he heard correctly. “What do you mean?”

Stiles blinks slowly, fully aware that he’s passing the point of no return. “Clay’s not who you thought he was.”

It’s a bold statement about the recently deceased, but Noah didn’t mishear and there’s no positive way to construe it.

“Stiles.” Noah’s voice is low, unease peaking through the hollow tone. “Why would you say that?”

“Dad …”

“Stiles, who was he?”

Stiles can’t exactly spit out, “A child abuser!” but he can’t think of any words that will be easier to process. He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing will come out.

Noah shuts the television off, enveloping them both in the stillness of the room. Stiles’ eyes turn glassy and he shakes his head, choking on something he hasn’t even said.

“Stiles.” Noah repeats.

He grabs Stiles and pulls him in tight, because he knows. It could be so many things, but he knows
Stiles audibly sobs once, and then it’s all over with the full waterworks. It’s like a twisted reenactment of the day Noah told him that Clay had been in that accident, except this time, Noah’s crying over a different loss entirely and the true reasons behind Stiles’ emotions are on the cusp of being exposed.

They stay that way for what feels like eternity before Stiles is able to speak again. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before …”

“What did he do?” Noah draws back from the hug to touch Stiles’ wet cheek. “How did he hurt you?”

Stiles lowers his eyelashes. His dad’s face is too close. He can’t look Noah in the eye. “I’m okay, though,” he says, sniffling. “I’m okay, Dad.”

“You’re not, Stiles. I know you’re not. Just tell me what he did, okay? So I can help you. I need to help you.”

“Dad …”

“Did he touch you?”

“Yes,” Stiles whispers.

Noah’s face falls to pieces, but he has to know. “What did he make you do?”

“Everything,” Stiles sobs. “I’m sorry, Dad, I shouldn’t have - I didn’t say anything - I let it get so bad -”

“Hey, come on,” Noah says. He looks like he’s dead inside, but he’s still focused on Stiles like always. “It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t let anything happen. Do you understand me?”

Stiles nods because he knows it’ll mean something to his dad, but he doesn’t really feel it.

“How long has this been going on?”

Wiping at his eyes, Stiles bites his lip. “Since Mom died.”

If Stiles thought Noah had hit rock bottom already, he was wrong, because Noah keeps plummeting with every revelation. “Fuck, Stiles, I let him stay here,” he wails, completely beside himself. “I thought he was taking care of you, and he was … he was hurting you so much -”

“It’s not your fault, either, Dad. You didn’t know. I tried really hard to hide it.”

“I let him come back here …”

“Because I didn’t tell you -“

“You shouldn’t have had to, Stiles. I’m trained to see abuse. I’m supposed to see it. But I let you down, I didn’t protect you. I should’ve known. You must have told me in a hundred different ways and I didn’t see it. I let that motherfucker come back and he did it again, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, squirming with the confirmation.

Noah slams his hand down on the end table so hard that Stiles jumps. “If that goddamn piece of shit
wasn’t already dead, I would skin him alive. He’s lucky he left and got in that accident. He got off easy.”

Stiles pales one shade whiter. He isn’t going to tell Noah about why Clay left town and how he really crashed his car. It’ll kill his dad to know that Derek and Peter made those things happen while Noah was none the wiser.

There’s a huge valley between pretending the abuse hadn’t happened and telling Noah everything. Noah doesn’t need to know the graphic details. There’s no point. They’re just more knives to the gut.

Confessing details is only “productive” if they’re spilled for a course of action. But Clay’s dead. Stiles isn’t going to report him to the police. No one is going to hold him accountable for his crimes now that he’s gone.

Noah doesn’t need to know how often it happened or that sometimes he was home, sleeping down the hall at the same time. He doesn’t need to know how Clay groomed Stiles and intimidated him into silence. His dad doesn’t need to know about the blow job video Clay made, or when he drugged Stiles, or the time he passed Stiles around to his friend.

With a sinking realization, it dawns on Stiles that Clay’s friend IS different. He’s still here.

Stiles could tell his dad about him and they could do something. Nothing may come out of it, but Stiles hasn’t really thought about whether he wants to report him. His dad is such a mess - hell, who is he kidding? Stiles is one, too - that he can’t even think of dropping another bomb right now.

“You’re the best dad,” he says instead. He means it with every cell in his body, even though he sounds weepy in his conviction. “I don’t want you to think you’re not. I love you too much.”

Noah takes Stiles’ hand in a viselike grip. “You’re my son. I will never fail you again. I’m so sorry you didn’t think you could tell me.”

“I didn’t think that -”

“I don’t blame you if you had any doubts. I didn’t believe you when you first told me about werewolves. I’m the one who showed you that you might not be able to come to me -”

“Dad, that’s not the same thing!”

“But I believe you, Stiles. About all of it. I will always, always believe you. I promise.”

“I knew you would. I just didn’t want you to know that stuff about me.”

Noah palms the back of Stiles’ head with equal parts love and protection. “But I do now. And we’re gonna get you help, okay? Starting tomorrow. I’m taking tomorrow off and we’re going to start figuring this out.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, his chin quivering.

“God, you must have felt so alone. But I’m here now, okay? It’s you and me. That will never change.”

Noah hugs him close again, and this time, Stiles relaxes in his arms. His dad’s right. He HAD felt incredibly alone, by Clay’s design and his own self-loathing imposition.

That’s what Clay had turned him into. An abused kid paralyzed with fear of anyone finding out. An
abused kid who felt painfully isolated when his dad wasn’t there and even when he was.

But Stiles has always had his father, right there with him. He couldn’t see that clearly before, but Clay’s lies and manipulation are finally dying off, just like he did.

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It helps that Stiles doesn’t feel like they’re responsible for figuring out how to heal by themselves. Noah gets a referral for an experienced therapist, and Dr. Kendall guides them through the landmines they know are there and the ones they can’t even see yet.

Talking about it is a rollercoaster - chaotic ups and downs rather than a stable direction forward. They do make progress, though, even though it can be hard to remember that when they’re slogging through the lows.

Stiles ends up telling Noah more about the abuse after all. Despite his initial thoughts that sharing details isn’t productive, he comes to realize that’s not exactly true. It’s not like Noah wants to know more so he can beat himself up over it or convince himself that next time, he’ll be a good dad who recognizes abusers and keeps them away from his son.

No matter how much it hurts, Noah wants to - needs to - understand what Stiles went through. It’s about shouldering the burden together and being a team again. Even though no one can really take Stiles’ pain, whether they’re a werewolf like Derek or a loving father like Noah, they can be there at his side, sharing it in a way that breaks it down and weakens it.

Even so, it’s still a gut-wrenching experience telling Noah about the last time Clay assaulted him. The way Clay betrayed him and hurt him is a special, bottom-of-the-barrel kind of evil, but there’s something particularly cruel about bringing a stranger along. It damn near kills Noah to hear about it.

He takes Stiles to file a police report, but charges aren’t filed against the other Scott because there isn’t enough of a case. Stiles isn’t surprised - it’s just his word, he got rid of the physical evidence, and so much time has passed. He specifies their connection through his primary abuser, but Clay’s gone and that only fills in gaps in his story on paper.

Noah is pissed to hell and back, but Stiles knows that charges not being filed just means they get a ‘no’ that’s easier to handle in some ways. Stiles is sure he would never win at trial, even if he bared all of the scars on his soul for a jury of people who probably don’t even want to be there.

Stiles finds out his full name, though. Scott Quinn. Derek already knew it, but it’s a little meaningful to Stiles to get something out of the system. Stiles also takes a tiny bit of comfort in creating a paper trail that says Quinn was accused of sexual assault. It doesn’t keep anyone safe, but that’s all Stiles can do above-board. He doesn’t want there to be a next person who gets hurt, but if there is, they won’t find a dearth of history.

It’s not much, but he’ll have to take it. It’s what happens to so many people. Clay and Quinn didn’t strip him of his humanity and he doesn’t want to be a statistic, but they made him one. The least he can do is create a record declaring his statistic status so he’s no longer silenced on top of everything else.

If anyone could figure out how to get away with murder, it’s Noah, but Stiles makes him promise not to put Quinn six feet under. (And Noah would dig the whole six feet, too, not bury the body in a shallow grave like so many amateurs do.) Stiles also knows he could plant enough seeds with Peter about Quinn, but he doesn’t want to be a two-time beneficiary of Peter’s code.
Allison’s death wasn’t Stiles’ fault, but he needs to walk a very clear line of not being a killer, either
directly or by utilizing a proxy. His mind isn’t in a strong enough place to play in such gray,
irreversible areas, and even as he moves further along in his recovery, he doesn’t think he ever wants
to.

With the promise intact, Stiles is positive that Noah will keep close tabs on Quinn going forward, and
even on his deathbed, will make sure someone he trusts takes up that mantle. And Stiles is a-okay
with that. He’s pretty convinced that Derek already helps Noah with that endeavor anyway.

It had been painful for Noah to find out that Stiles had fled to Derek for help months before, but the
ugly ache evolved into an increasing appreciation for everything Derek had done and still does for
Stiles. For the man Derek is.

But Stiles will never change his mind about not telling his dad about Peter. It’s just better if Noah still
thinks the car crash was an accident.

Even though some secrets remain, their bond grows stronger with each passing day. It was with
them, front and center, the day they took the trash cans out to the sidewalk and dumped Clay’s ashes
inside.

He never deserved them.

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“This is a lot of food,” Noah says, carrying the tray of biscuits up to the loft. “And Derek’s going to
have plenty already, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but lest you forget, it’s three weres and two humans. Derek doesn’t eat that much before we
have these dinners anyway. So he’ll be starving.”

Stiles balances the apple butter on top of the container of sausage gravy so he can open the door.
“Morning, guys,” he greets, even though it’s six o’clock at night.

The frittata that Malia places on the dinner table makes Stiles’ mouth water even more than it already
is, and they’re all too happy to dig in once everything is properly arranged and everyone is seated.

It’s so bizarre to Stiles, seeing Peter pass the fruit bowl to his dad, but it won’t always feel that way.

No one chooses their flesh and blood, but families don’t have to be based on that. And they can be
more than that.

As Derek slides the last strip of bacon onto Stiles’ plate, Stiles plants a slightly greasy kiss on his
cheek.

No matter how complicated and imperfect, they can be born out of love.

Chapter End Notes

The official story is still The Official Story for me, but I found it really fun and satisfying
to play with this alternative ending. It’s so different from chapters 12-14 and I enjoyed
that a lot. It’s valid to feel that Stiles and Derek didn’t do the right thing by “letting” Clay leave because they couldn’t guarantee that Clay wouldn’t hurt anyone else and had no idea that Clay would cease to be a problem. I think that’s a realistic representation of abuse/assault, though - sometimes people don’t come forward (and even if they do, it doesn’t always end with protection of the public through substantial incarceration).

But if I stuck with that as the official story arc, it would be difficult to end the story with Stiles feeling a certain level of peace if Clay was still out there. The last scene of chapter 14 was always going to be the last scene of the story, minus an epilogue. I hadn’t really figured out how I was going to close that gap between Stiles’ continuing feelings about Clay and him getting to a “good enough” mental place. So that’s another reason why I think chapters 12-14 were the best course - not just for the characters, but from a storytelling perspective.

Oddly enough, this ending was really built off of Peter, but I ultimately added in the section where Stiles tells Noah after all, just in a different sequence of events than in the official story. And that was kind of interesting to write compared to the scene in chapter 12 - namely, that people don’t have the exact same conversation about something if it happens at two different times. There may be similarities in central points and how they are said, but it’s not the exact same.

I have a whole bunch of things to say about Peter and this take on family in the alt ending, but I’ll save that for my self-indulgent author’s notes later. lol.

Oh, and I think the epilogue still works on top of this ending, like this course of events occurred, and then later on in college, the epilogue occurred.

So no matter how you slice it, Stiles and Derek keep building their future together, take their time to have a meaningful, happy sex life, and Stiles sees Derek as the only one he’s ever really been with.

Thanks all for reading this far and I will be back with some extra scenes! (I know from comments that people really want the next one I’m planning.)
Now that Scott has officially turned 21, it’s a no-brainer that Stiles takes him out drinking with their legitimate IDs. It’s late on Friday night and the bar is out of the way to begin with, so it’s not crowded and they’re tucked away in a corner by themselves. There will be plenty of time to hit up more popular, rowdier places on Saturday.

The first night of Scott’s visit is just for them. He has a few weeks under his belt as a junior at UC Santa Barbara, which is certainly closer to Stiles than he was before, but not close enough for spontaneous pop-ins. It’s not a problem, though, since Scott’s pretty dedicated to a Tuesday - Thursday class schedule. Driving to LA for the weekend is a relatively easy endeavor.

“Dude, I just started and the parties have been killer,” Scott says. “Oh yeah, and I saw Kira before I moved down.”

“That’s cool that you guys are actually still friends instead of just saying you will be.”

Stiles knows there are no hard feelings involved in their mutual break-up last year, but it still takes effort to keep in touch across physical separation and change. When Kira went back to New York for college, she and Scott tried a long-distance relationship, seeing each other whenever she was in town to visit her family, plus the couple of times he had flown out to see her. But once her parents moved back to the East Coast, too, coming home for her no longer meant Beacon Hills, giving Kira and Scott enough pause to re-think their relationship.

“She spend the summer in New York?” Stiles asks. “Did you go out there again?”

Scott finishes the rest of his beer as he waves to the waitress halfway across the room. “Nah, she came back to Beacon Hills for a wedding. Do you remember Emily Sutton? She got married. To Greenberg!”

Stiles slams his near-empty glass on the table. “No fucking way.”

“Yeah,” Scott grins. “No way. No, really, she married some guy we don’t know, so Kira was back for a weekend. She came over for dinner at my mom’s house, just like old times. She’s happy doing her own thing. She was happy for me, too, that I’m getting my own change of scenery.”

“Yeah, man. Pretty sweet.”

Scott smiles at the waitress when she stops by. “Another round?”
“Sure thing,” she says before rushing away.

“Do you miss Beacon Hills?” Stiles asks. “Besides your mom, I mean.”

“Well - that’s my home, but it’s not so much that I miss it or that I’d rather be there than away at school. I worry a little about what might be happening, but between my mom, your dad, Argent, and Liam, I’m pretty sure at least one of them will tell me if I should come back for something.”

“After all, you only have classes three days a week,” Stiles laughs. “They know you can spare some time.”

Scott laughs, too, as the waitress returns and sets their beers down. “Hey, I’m efficient. But seriously, there are a lot of good memories there. Some not-so-great. And some really not-so-great. But I’ll always miss the great things. We’ll never be those ages again. When I look back on growing up with you, I really miss that.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

Scott covertly pulls a small vial of crushed wolfsbane from his pocket and spikes his new drink. No one is looking their way, but it’s always easier to hide it than explain why he seasons his alcohol like a crazy person.

Stiles watches him go through the fluid motions. With no one sitting near them, they have some privacy. Scott’s already laid down the conversational groundwork by talking about the past.

Gathering himself mentally, Stiles takes a generous gulp of his beer for liquid courage. “Hey, uh, do you remember my uncle?”

“Yeah!” Scott perks up at the random reference. “Clay came back for a while, what was it - a few years ago? Like junior year? It wasn’t our last lacrosse season.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“So what’s going on with him? Wow, it’s been a long time.”

Stiles tilts his glass slightly to the left and then to the right. “Actually, he’s - he’s in prison.”

“Holy shit.” Scott stares at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. “For what? Did he really do it?”

“Yeah, he did it,” Stiles says, his voice dropping lower. “Fuck. He never seemed like … What’s he in for?”

Stiles doesn’t know what Scott is picturing in his head, but Stiles is sure it can’t be the truth. As far from reality as they may appear, stealing cars or robbing banks are still more likely suspects than sexual assault.

People don’t think they know criminals like that. It’s a big factor in how Clay went undetected for so long. He’s young and good-looking, outgoing and well-liked. He was trusted. He doesn’t “seem” like a predator. People think their spidey sense would go off if they knew a predator.

Running his hand up his jawline, Stiles speaks behind his thumb. “Rape.”

“Oh my God, are you fucking serious? Is she okay?” Scott’s expression of general shock gives way to concern before giving his head a hard shake. “What a dumb thing to say. Of course she’s not.”
Stiles watches a bloated drop of condensation run down the side of his glass. “He’s okay.”

“Fuck him,” Scott blurts out, running with his interpretation of Stiles’ answer. “You said he did it.”

“Yeah.” Stiles nods stiffly. “And child porn, too.”

“Ugh!…” Scott’s face contorts in utter condemnation. “That’s so fucked up. These are kids! I can’t fucking believe this. I can’t imagine how you feel - he was living in your house!”

Stiles presses his lips together and gazes just above Scott’s head. “Yeah. He’s a monster.”

Scott is still staring at him, but Stiles doesn’t say anything else as the silence grows more palpable.

“He was … he was living in … in your house,” Scott repeats, his speech slowing with every word.

Eyes flicking down to a nick in the tabletop, Stiles fidgets with his hands in his lap.

“Stiles?”

“It was me,” Stiles says, his admission landing like an anvil. He looks back up at Scott. “It was me.”

Scott gasps, shoulders tightening and neck tensing. “Oh my God,” he whispers.

“I’m fine now. It was years ago, Scott. I’m fine.”

It doesn’t really matter how much Stiles has coped with it because the pain is fresh and cascading when someone else finds out. Even after everything that’s happened - telling Derek and his dad, filing a police report, persevering through the legal system, and countless sessions with Dr. Kendall - it’s still so hard to say it to someone new.

Scott is up and beside him, hugging him in the booth before Stiles knows it. “I can’t believe this. No - I do - but I don’t want it to be -”

“I told you, man, I’m okay,” Stiles says, shrugging through his teary eyes.

When Scott leans back, it’s obvious he’s on the brink of crying himself. “How could he do that? What happened?”

Stiles pauses, internally wrestling with how much to say. This time, telling Scott is just about telling Scott. It’s not about sharing the information necessary to get help.

He laughs, nervously and inappropriately, but also a genuine, unfiltered reaction. “I haven’t told anyone new in a really long time. The last person I told was my therapist.”

Stiles is “out of practice” with the disclosure, but it had never been anything close to easy. The gap in time is only part of the difficulty. Even when he thinks or knows that the other person isn’t going to judge him, he’s never really figured out how to explain it. People want to understand, but the truth is so complicated. His role in it is so complicated.

If he’d been assaulted in a physically violent encounter, people would understand more easily how it happened. He wouldn’t have to say that much. But the way Clay worked him and exploited him for so long - how he got sucked into the abyss - it’s not amenable to a capsule explanation, like a straightforward “he had a knife to my throat” or “I was passed out, sloppy drunk.”

Well, he WAS passed out that one night, but those are details Scott doesn’t need. And as awful as that experience was, it’s such a small piece of what Clay did to him. It was a consequence that
doesn’t really help anyone grasp how the situation became so bleak and dire in the first place.

“I don’t know,” Scott says, voice trembling. “Just start with something and we’ll go from there.”

Stiles rubs the heel of his palm against his temple. “It’s such a cliche.” The bitterness has faded, but it’s still there. “He made me into a fucking cliche. All of it. The sneaking into my room at night. Telling me to keep quiet, threatening me that no one could ever find out or I’d be sorry. Getting me to hide it from everyone. Walking around my house - around my dad - like we were a normal family.”

“Oh fuck, Stiles. He - it wasn’t once -”

“It was a regular thing,” Stiles says. “He forced me into it and I just … I guess I totally lost myself. What I wanted didn’t exist around him. It was only what he wanted, and he wanted everything. It was right after the whole nogitsune mess, too. I was in pretty heavy denial about how brittle and vulnerable I was. It was so easy for him to prey on me and I didn’t know how to get out.”

Stiles’ mouth scrunches up. “I learned in therapy to stop blaming myself, but I don’t know. There’s a fraction of me that still thinks I could have done things differently. By now, I don’t think that little voice will ever go away. Not completely. It could have been so different if I hadn’t let him have that control over me. But I did and I don’t know how to explain that. Honestly, and maybe this sounds dumb, but I was kind of … kind of embarrassed. That doesn’t seem like the right word. Maybe … humiliated. I don’t know.”

He feels himself shaking, talking about this again, and he grabs onto his thighs to try to contain himself. Even though he’s not getting into the grotesque details and he’s certainly been through tougher discussions, the fact that the abuse isn’t dominating his life anymore means it’s a bit of a shock to his system to bring it up to the surface. It’s another trade-off in a long line of trade-offs he’s had to manage.

“Hey,” Scott says. “You don’t have to defend yourself. Definitely not to me. And not to anyone.”

“At least I got some closure. Like I said, Clay’s in prison because of what he did. Some of it. He only got nailed for two counts, but that was the easiest way. He didn’t go on trial and I didn’t have to testify, so he was sentenced during summer break. It was all taken care of by the time we started senior year.”

Scott blinks the wetness away and his eyes move back and forth in stilted movements. “Junior year … that summer … why didn’t I notice? How could I not notice? Those few times I saw him - he was over for Christmas -”

“Yeah.” Stiles slumps down, making himself smaller. “I’m sorry about that. I didn’t tell you what was going on and I let him into your house -”

“Stiles, I don’t care about him being in my house! I only care about you! And I didn’t help you. I’m sorry, Stiles. I’m so sorry …”

Scott is openly crying, either unable to hold back or altogether uninterested in doing so. The bar is still fairly empty, so it’s not a big deal even if they go full-out and make a scene. Anyone who notices them can make their own assumptions, guaranteed to be incorrect. They probably look like someone just died, or to be less morbid, like they’re going through break-ups. Or maybe like they’re breaking up with each other.

“It’s not your fault, Scott.” Stiles vigorously pats his hand three times before clutching it firmly.
“There’s no way you could have known. I didn’t want anyone to know. And it probably would have freaked me the fuck out if anyone had, like, figured it out. I kept it a secret until I was ready to talk about it. As ready as I could be, I guess.”

“When you told your dad? He must have been fucking devastated.”

“Yeah, he was,” Stiles nods. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done, I think. Maybe that sounds weird, like isn’t being abused the hardest thing? It was … but it also wasn’t. Telling my dad was worse. It took me so long to tell him. And you’re really close to me, too, that it felt impossible to tell you. But I snapped - I couldn’t take it anymore. So I told somebody. I had to. I told Derek.”

“Oh,” Scott says softly, his hand going limp in Stiles’. “Yeah. Derek.”

“I didn’t choose him over you,” Stiles is quick to add.

“Yeah, no - I’m not - God, I wish I had known, but I’m glad you let someone in. Whatever you felt you could do. And that’s around the time you guys became a thing -”

Stiles cuts in sharply. “But he never took advantage of me.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t think that!” Scott says, eyes huge.

“Derek was really, really great to me.” Stiles breathes in deep, pushing the rush of emotion down. “I was in such a dark place. He was so supportive of whatever I wanted and whatever I thought. He helped me rebuild myself and then rebuild my life. We were friends first, but he just, like, loved me, you know? And I loved him so, so much. I finally had something pure and honest besides that fucking disaster Clay left me with. Something that made sense.

“Derek waited years for me,” Stiles sniffs. “We didn’t have sex for years, and it didn’t even bother him. Because I was enough. We didn’t need that to be together. I learned how to be happy again without the physical stuff, and that made it possible for me to … want it. All the safety that Clay took from me - I got it back.”

Scott’s forehead creases as he processes everything that Stiles has said. “Yeah. Thank God he was there. I knew you guys really cared about each other, but I had no idea …”

“I told him first because it, like, didn’t change anything about my daily life once he knew. Well - it did - but it just sort of … added to it? In a good way. He wasn’t that tight, everyday presence for me before I told him. I lived with him knowing my secrets for a few months and that helped me come around to the idea that I could tell my dad after all. It didn’t have to be a secret from everybody.”

“Yeah. You couldn’t do it all at once. That would have been … too much. Way too much.”

“Once I told my dad, we reported Clay and he took a plea bargain. He’s locked away for at least twenty years, hopefully. My dad and I were in therapy for a long time. We started that summer and kept going all through senior year. That really helped. So I’m okay now. And I’m really, really sorry I didn’t tell you. I know that sucks. I don’t want you to think that I didn’t trust you.”

Scott sighs. “You were living in a nightmare, Stiles. And you didn’t owe me anything - not when you were going through something like that. Fuck, I must have bugged you about so much stupid shit. Like it mattered, but it didn’t. I was going on and on about things like what to get Kira for our anniversary or not being able to understand the lectures in biology.”

“No, I liked that, though. You were the one really important person in my life who treated me like always. And I really liked that. Derek knew, and then my dad knew. And I had to focus on recovery.
That was a lot to deal with, but with you, I could be a version of myself that hadn’t been hurt the way Clay hurt me.”

“I think I get it. And if that’s what you wanted, then that means it’s good.”

“You WERE there for me,” Stiles insists. “I promise. You were there for me exactly how I needed you. Even though you feel like you weren’t, you were.”

“Well, at least I did something that helped. And thanks for telling me now. Because that probably means you really are doing a lot better.”

“Yeah. I’m better.” Stiles shrugs. “I could have told you earlier. But once we graduated and we weren’t always together, I guess I wanted to keep the time we did spend together about shits and giggles. I didn’t want to go all Debbie Downer on you.”

“You can go down on me whenever you want!”

In spite of themselves, they both chuckle at the unintentional innuendo, breaking the tension. “See, that’s kind of what I mean,” Stiles says. “I can always laugh with you. I didn’t have anything to worry about, but I was probably a little afraid to jeopardize that.”

Stiles rolls his head back, looking up at the ceiling. “I’m pretty sure I know the answer to this. Based on your reaction just now, I’m even more sure. But I have to ask. Clay never did anything to you, did he?”

Scott jumps in his seat. “No! No, man. Never.”

Stiles sighs with a flood of relief. He’d figured as much, but at the same time, he’d never really known that he wasn’t hoping for the best and selling that to himself as reality.

“Are you sure? What about when we were kids? Are you sure you’d remember?”

Scott swallows loudly. “Because he was - with you - even back then?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says in a small voice.

“Fuck, Stiles. We were, like, in third grade.”

“It was fourth,” Stiles clarifies, as though one year makes any kind of difference at all.

“I can’t even - what a sick fuck -”

“I’m just really glad he never hurt you. I didn’t think he had, but I didn’t know 100%.”

“100%, he never did anything to me,” Scott shakes his head, face falling with renewed misery. “But I hate that you can’t say the same thing.”

“He really fucked me up, but I managed to come out of it. You were critical in that. Trust me.”

“This makes me think about the last few years so differently,” Scott admits. “There’s this giant part of you that I didn’t know. For, like, half of your life. I’m so sorry, Stiles.”

Stiles hugs him again, lingering as he speaks. “You do know me. You know me. I didn’t think of it as not letting you see me. The person you knew - that kept reminding me of how I could be. My life wasn’t always going to be about being abused. And with you, it wasn’t.”
“But you’re okay with the fact that I know now?”

Stiles nods and releases his grip. “Yeah. It was time. And I told you because I wanted you to know. No other reason. The other times, I chose to tell someone, but part of it was because I had to. When I told Derek, it had gotten so bad with Clay that I couldn’t stay at my house anymore, alone with him. He’d pushed me off the ledge. When I was going to report Clay to the police, I couldn’t do that before telling my dad. And I told the police because that was the only way I could try to get any justice and keep Clay from touching anyone else. Derek talked to me about going to see a therapist for months before I finally did, because by then, I’d told my dad. I wanted him to believe I was getting better and I needed him to feel better, too. But … this time, it’s not out of obligation. I wanted you to know.”

“Now that I do, you can always talk to me about it,” Scott says. “Anytime. About anything. I’m here for you. The way I wish I had been all along.”

“Yeah. Thanks, man. I know you’re not far. And that you’re barely in class,” Stiles jokes as he swipes at his eyes. “One more round? End on a good note?”

When the waitress comes around again, Stiles orders a pair of vodka shots. “You just turned 21,” Stiles says. “We gotta have more than beer. Go a little bigger.”

Once they have their shots, Scott’s about to tip his glass back when Stiles stops him. “What, no wolfsbane?”

“No, dude. I don’t - I know this was hard for you to talk about. And I’m not gonna have a drink that might actually make it hard for me to remember everything. Not like it’s all so awesome to remember, but you decided to tell me and I’m not going to forget any of it, like you told me for nothing or it’s so easy for me to forget. Not when you can’t.”

It’s true. Stiles will never forget what Clay did or how Clay made him feel. He could drink so constantly his brain never fully sobered up and he would still remember the secret touches and the painful, lonely desperation. But that’s okay. Stiles can live with it. He has amazing people who will share the remaining burden with him, and they’ll never see it as one. To them, it’s just dulling the sharp edges with their love.

“To my brother,” Scott says, clinking their shotglasses together.

Stiles smiles. “And to mine.”

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They catch an uber ride back to Stiles’ apartment, where Derek is initially nowhere to be seen. One of his textbooks is wide open on the coffee table, though, with a yellow highlighter nestled inside.

Stiles shrugs out of his hoodie. “He can’t be asleep already.”

As if on cue, Derek emerges from the kitchen. “Hey, guys. Have a good time?”

“Yes,” Stiles says, stepping up to him so they can share a quick kiss.

“Mmm, vodka,” Derek muses. “You’re not drunk, though.”

Stiles’ red-rimmed eyes haven’t cleared up yet, so he looks a little drunk, even though he’s not acting it. “Nope. I could maybe go for something salty, though. Do we have any chips?”
He pulls back and moves right, but Stiles stops in his tracks at the sound of rustling motions behind him.

Scott is standing where he previously was, wrapping Derek in a long, two-armed hug. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

Derek is visibly surprised, eyebrows raised and glance darting to Stiles immediately. Stiles nods in exchange, and while the nod by itself doesn’t say much, the look on his face must, because Derek understands exactly what Scott is talking about.

“Thank you for everything you did,” Scott slightly elaborates.

Derek thumps Scott on the shoulder and hugs him back. “Of course.”

What happened to Stiles didn’t just happen to him. It happened to the people he holds so dear to him, too. Even though Scott didn’t know about it until an hour ago, it still affects him. And it doesn’t just change Stiles’ relationships with them. It changes their relationships with each other. Stiles saw it firsthand between his dad and Derek - as much as Noah was already okay with Derek as a boyfriend before he found out about Clay, he closed ranks with Derek like they were family once he knew the truth.

It’s no stretch that something would also shift between Scott and Derek. Stiles can see, clear as day, how their friendship is forever changed now. The antagonism between them is long gone and they have a fundamental trust in each other, but Stiles wouldn’t have exactly characterized Scott’s feelings towards Derek as loyal. At least not until today.

Scott lets go and runs his hands down his face. “Oh, shit, I’m tired.”

“I’ll grab some blankets for you,” Stiles offers.

As Stiles retrieves some light linens and an extra pillow, Derek cleans up his study materials. Unfolding the flat sheet and placing it over the couch, Scott flops down and pulls his shirt off.

“Night, Scott,” Stiles says, following Derek into their bedroom.

“Good night, man.”

After Stiles shuts the door behind him, he relieves himself of his own shirt and khakis.

“How’d he take it?” Derek asks, undressing as well.

“Like I thought he would. He was really sad for me. And really guilt-ridden that he didn’t know. I think he believes me, though, when I say I’ve mostly moved past it. So I hope he can move past the guilt, too.”

“How do you feel?”

“It’s good that he knows. Not because I was dying to gossip about it with him. I never felt like it put distance between us, but now that he knows, I sort of feel this extra connection with him. I like that.”

“I didn’t know you were going to tell him.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it ever since he said he was going to come down here a couple of weeks ago. You’re the one who made me see it was okay to tell other people besides you. Even though I was really scared to. Everything was better after you knew.”
Stiles climbs into bed as Derek pulls the covers back. “You know what my dad said after I told him we were together? Well, he said a lot of things, but he told me that relationships should be about being good to each other and being better with each other. I told him that you do make me better. You always have. I couldn’t have this life without you.”

“I think you know where I’d be without you,” Derek says, rolling over to face him.

“Wondering which shade of dark gray to decorate your loft with? Sticking to your old quota of one smile every two months?”

Derek laughs. “I wouldn’t have a home without you. Wherever you are, that’s where I belong.”

“Sounds like a real power ballad, Meatloaf.”

Derek slides a knee in between Stiles’ legs as his hand rubs circles into the small of Stiles’ back. Stiles enjoys the gentle touch and the peaceful quiet with closed eyes for a couple of minutes.

“Remember when you said that I wasn’t being punished for the terrible things I did when the nogitsune was inside me?”

Derek frowns. “I was on board with all this rehashing of memories tonight until you brought that up. You don’t still think that, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Stiles says. “You said that wasn’t balance. And with everything that happened with the nogitsune and Clay, the world owed me. For the rest of my life?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Stiles says, pulling Derek in close and kissing him breathless. “Thanks for settling that debt.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel strongly about Stiles not telling everyone in the 14 chapter + epilogue story. To me, it’s realistic that a survivor of such trauma would not necessarily tell all of their closest loved ones, and in no way did I mean it as a devaluation of Scott and Stiles’ friendship. It’s part of Stiles’ continuing journey to disclose to Scott, but it doesn’t happen soon after Stiles stops keeping all of the secrets or in the couple of years that follow. Even though he waits a fairly long time and he’s come so far in his recovery, it’s still hugely meaningful for him to reveal this.

I didn’t write Stiles telling Scott about Clay’s friend because the crux of Stiles’ disclosure was about Clay. Stiles didn’t drop a bombshell like that and add, “by the way, Clay also made me do these other things with other people …” I envision Stiles later telling Scott more bits and pieces, like when Quinn comes up for parole in the near future, but I don’t think Stiles ever tells him Quinn’s first name.

As always, thanks from the bottom of my writing heart for reading this far! I’d love to hear what you think! Hope to see you at my next posting!
Hi readers! Here are my “Author’s Notes” that go into more detail than the post-chapter notes. It’s been a while since I first posted chapter 1, so while I’m aware of various things as the writer, it’s harder to pick up on them reading as chapters go up.

The notes are split up in the following way -

- General notes about the characters
- General notes about the abuse
- Specific notes (sort of DVD commentary style)

Thank you so much for coming on this journey with me! I had very particular ideas of what I wanted to happen in this story, but readers and comments played a big part, too. I revised my initial plot arc in a way that really made the story better, so thank you! Every positive interaction - whether directly through comments or indirectly through kudos, subscriptions, etc. - was a wonderful bright spot in my day and I really appreciate that virtual rainbow. I’m catching up on replying to comments now.

I’ve already posted the “extra” scenes I had planned, but I very well may post others, so if you’re subscribed, you’ll see when those go up. Being outside of the official story opens up other possibilities, like writing “extra” scenes that aren’t from Stiles’ POV. Stiles’ POV was an essential part, but of course that means it was all through his lens. How he perceives other characters is how they are presented, and if he’s not present in the scene, it’s not included (unless he’s eavesdropping).

The other story I’m working on now is from Derek’s POV and Stiles is much happier and freer, which is a nice change of pace to write! Please check it out when I post it, if you like!

[Posted 9/16/18]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**General Character Notes**

**Stiles** - I love Stiles, I really do. Even though I wrote him going through some really horrible things, I think you can tell that I love him. I hope you can tell, haha!

Some people may find Stiles out-of-character, but Stiles here isn’t the same character as in s4 of the actual show for two big reasons -

- He was groomed and abused by a formerly-trusted family member over a long period of time as a child, when he was very impressionable and susceptible after Claudia’s death. This predisposes him to certain thoughts and behaviors he wouldn’t have in canon.

- He’s still traumatized by and guilt-ridden from the nogitsune possession he just experienced. Canon didn’t really indicate any PTSD (or other consequences, besides no more Allison) at
So I think the essence of Stiles is still intact in this story, but it’s also combined with the repercussions of his previous suffering.

To me, Stiles is a perfect character to build this kind of story around. He has so many layers and feels and thinks so much. He’s super expressive, but at the same time, can conceal a lot if he wants to.

The entire story was built around the trauma of serial abuse. So by design, Stiles wasn’t going to report it right away or find some way to stop it himself quickly. Sure, in a more impersonal situation, I can see canon-Stiles lashing out by grabbing his baseball bat, wielding a knife he hid under his pillow, or something like that. I can also see canon-Stiles plotting to frame a villain for a different crime, like, “I don’t want anyone to know what you actually did, but I’ll get you sent away for something else instead (by planting drugs, for one example), and I’m not going to feel bad about that. I beat you because I’m smarter than you.” That’s the kind of thing he could do if the bad guy is arm’s length, but this is so intensely personal and he’s been made to feel so confused/ashamed that he’s very compromised.

I really, really want to stay away from anything like, “Stiles would never take that kind of abuse,” because that implies that anyone who has been abused in a serial manner isn’t strong enough, and I don’t believe that at all. At all. It’s not about being strong or tough - there were a lot of factors that made Stiles vulnerable while he’s for all intents and purposes also a BAMF. While I fully acknowledge that abusers look for opportunities, I don’t think that part of the opportunity that Clay seized was “Stiles isn’t strong enough.” Stiles was groomed, exploited, and silenced in ways that co-exist with his strength as a person.

Derek - Oh, Derek. I really loved writing parts of him that were rarely shown in canon because he’s got so many walls up. I’m really glad people seemed to enjoy his characterization here, too!

The walls come down so quickly for him - how can he think about protecting himself (as though he needs to protect himself from Stiles) when Stiles has been hurt so much and shared these awful secrets with him? He’s all in when it comes to helping Stiles, and Derek’s path is to listen to him and support him in whatever he says he wants or doesn’t want. Even if Derek should advise Stiles differently, as he’s theoretically thinking more clear-headed than Stiles is, he forges ahead with what Stiles wants. (One exception is when Derek seeks out Quinn without telling Stiles first, but he comes clean pretty quickly and acknowledges that he didn’t have Stiles’ approval.)

Derek’s priority is simply Stiles. He failed so much as an alpha - something he had strong beliefs about - so I really liked writing him as being exactly what Stiles needed here, when it mattered so much and Derek doesn’t think he knows what to do.

On one hand, he doesn’t, but on the other hand, he has some base understanding. He’s had his share of dubious consent or non-consent in the past, combined with deception, loss of agency, and mindfucking. While he knows those were different experiences, there’s a part of him that understands how being so personally manipulated, used, and ashamed feels.

As much as the focal point is Stiles’ trauma, Derek’s helping Stiles through the difficult recovery has a side effect of helping Derek think about his own past in a way he’s never done before. That pain and self-loathing aren’t as actively bubbling for Derek as they are for Stiles, but they’re still there all the same, preventing Derek from taking important steps forward in his life until he comes to terms with his past, too.

Honestly, as much as I wanted (needed) Derek to give Stiles what he needed after everything he had endured, I was cognizant of not making Derek “perfect.” I couldn’t bear to have Derek do or say
anything hurtful to Stiles by accident, though. I understand that some readers may think Derek made some big mistakes by allowing Stiles to get rid of evidence and continue to cover up the crimes, and that’s valid. As much as Derek’s abiding by what Stiles wanted gave Stiles a sense of control, there was a cost to that as well. But I think Derek accepted that cost.

Noah - I know it’s fictional, but I feel badly about keeping Noah in the dark. Again, by design, that was required in a story about long-term abuse, but it sucks.

It’s awful that Noah didn’t recognize that Clay was abusing Stiles, and I preferred to write it as him not knowing his brother-in-law as well as he would know his biological brother. Also, he projected some of his affinity and love for Claudia onto her brother. I can’t even imagine how Noah would have felt if it was his own brother who had hurt Stiles like this behind Noah’s back.

He never suspected what was going on, and beyond his atypical, busy schedule, misplaced trust in Clay, and being a heavy sleeper, there are other contributing factors. Unlike a spouse who leaves the marital bed in the middle of the night, Clay and Noah obviously didn’t share that kind of space, so Noah didn’t know that Clay had gone to Stiles’ room, even when Noah was home at night.

Eventually, Stiles is mostly able to “forgive himself” for what had happened, but it’ll never be quite 100% and he’s okay with that. To be honest, I don’t know if Noah will ever be able to do the same. They’re in different roles, though, so I think that’s to be expected. As a parent (never mind as an officer of the law), on some level Noah will always be haunted by a fundamental sense of failing his son.

I started writing this story around October 2016 and his name was “John” in my draft chapters. I didn’t start posting until April 2017. After canon officially made his name “Noah,” I thought it would be weird to post a story with “John” after he was declared to be “Noah,” so I replaced his fanon name with his canon name. It legitimately made some sentences sound different, and I didn’t like it! But oh well. Ha! - and it turns out that it’s not weird at all to stick with the name “John” - but too late for that, he’s Noah here.

Claudia - Stiles has a lot of feelings about and loyalty to his mother and those feelings really complicated the situation for him.

Obviously, Claudia never knew what kind of person her brother really was. I purposely made Clay so much younger than her because that meant by the time she left for college, he was about seven years old. Even though she probably came home for summer vacation, she was off building her own post-grad life by the time he was eleven. She wasn’t around Clay day-to-day after that, except for short visits, so she didn’t witness anything he may have done or said that was questionable, nor was she around to exert some positive influence on him after his childhood. (Not that that would’ve made him different.)

Clay - Well, now, what else to say about this evil shitbag? I fully admit his characterization is pretty one-dimensional. The story is from Stiles’ POV and therefore isn’t a “balanced” portrayal of Clay. Stiles didn’t really see Clay as anything but his manipulative abuser. When Claudia comes up in implicit or explicit reference, there’s a side of Clay that clearly regards her well, but he doesn’t get any points for that. It doesn’t erase the abuse and actually makes it worse because he still perpetrates the abuse despite the reminders of her.

I also had no interest in humanizing Clay to the extent that there was a shred of sympathy for him in any way. Even if he helps old ladies cross the street and volunteers at puppy rescues, or had his own past being abused, he’s still inflicting a lot of pain and destruction. There are more layers to Clay as a person, but they’re irrelevant to Stiles and me (and I think to readers, too).
Scott - It was never my intention to minimize Scott’s friendship with Stiles or make it seem like they aren’t very close. They are undoubtedly BFF. His lack of awareness of the true situation was mostly a function of Stiles being really invested in hiding it, not of Scott being a bad friend or not caring. Stiles hides it from everyone - the closer someone is to him, the more it scares him if they knew.

I think I covered most of Stiles’ thought process about Scott’s knowing in the story, but I also don’t believe that all people would know if their best friend was going through something like that. Also, I didn’t write the secrets between Scott and Stiles as a means to elevate Derek, as though Stiles and Derek couldn’t or wouldn’t grow closer as long as Stiles had Scott to lean on. Stiles and Derek’s intimacy didn’t come at the expense of minimizing Scott.

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General Notes about the Abuse

To be totally clear, I in no way condone child abuse or sexual abuse of any nature!

I chose to write a story about long-term abuse because I wanted to delve into the complicated psychology involved as the abuse escalates and the downward spiral unravels. I think it goes without saying that no two experiences are the same, and this is a fictional account of a specific situation.

I also really wanted to incorporate a totally human villain. Clay’s not supernatural, but that doesn’t mean it’s easier to triumph over him than a supernatural villain. Because it’s so personal and doesn’t involve the supernatural, it’s not pack business, so Stiles doesn’t feel like he has to share anything with them or else he’s leaving them in the dark when they have direct stakes in it, too.

It wasn’t my intention to exploit the fictional abuse, and I really hope it didn’t come across as gratuitous for the sake of being gratuitous.

There are 24 distinct scenes or references to abuse, plus the undefined number of times Clay abused Stiles over winter break. About half of these scenes depict all or part of the abuse while the remaining half are references to or depictions of before or after the physical act.

It’s fairly graphic at first to show how Stiles slips back into the pattern of abuse and silence, and it steadily gets worse as Clay becomes more aggressive. Stiles starts out very isolated in his own home and grows increasingly isolated as he withdraws into himself and actively hides the truth from everyone he knows.

Sexual body parts are never mentioned - hands, arms, backs, etc. are - but never sexual body parts. It’s from Stiles’ POV and of course, what’s happening sexually is a big part of his trauma, but he detaches from it psychologically in order to survive. The focus is mostly on the emotional trauma that he can’t escape, no matter what he does.

(In contrast, when Stiles and Derek consummate their relationship in the epilogue, there’s a reference to Derek’s groin, which was a mistake at first that I was going to take out. But I kept it in, because as much as Stiles is still focused on how he feels emotionally/psychologically, he feels more freedom and ability with Derek to think about it in sexual terms, too.)

There are so many abusive scenes that no way was I going to write them as more sexually graphic than I thought was necessary. I can’t write that and I think it would be really, really hard to read, especially as a reader who doesn’t know if and when Stiles will get any help.

I also wrote longer chapters because I wanted a lot of things to happen in each chapter - advancing both the abuse and how Stiles struggles to manage it, plus any other concurrent plots, like the
weaving in of the Benefactor canon storyline. If I’d made the chapters half the length (about 5k words), I think that could have been hard on a reader to be on chapter 10, but the abuse is the worst it’s ever been and when is any relief in sight? When???

Clay is outwardly cruel in his domination, but he wasn’t like that when Stiles was a child because he didn’t need to be in order to take advantage. When he comes back to Beacon Hills, though, he’s fresh off the end of his marriage, which has triggered some very toxic underlying anger and desire for control, and now Stiles is older, so Clay’s tactics are different.

Clay doesn’t physically force Stiles to submit to him (for the most part - there are some instances in which Stiles is hit or held down). It’s not really an option in perpetrating serial abuse, anyway. Clay could assault Stiles using explicit violence, but that’s not something he can do over and over again, even if he was careful not to hit Stiles’ face. Violence might not keep Stiles’ mouth shut and Clay would have to work really hard to hide the signs of violence.

He overpowers Stiles psychologically, leveraging the previous grooming and knowledge that Stiles never told Noah about the childhood abuse. One of Clay’s general patterns is creating the illusion of choice, but it’s always between something awful and something else even worse. Like the first time Clay comes into his room and it’s either hand jobs or “something else, something better.” Or the first time Clay abuses him while Noah is home - Stiles freaks out at the possibility of being tied up, so he’s obedient in order to avoid that.

When Stiles “chooses” the lesser of two evils, it’s not a choice - it’s just the less painful path - but it sucks Stiles in deeper and cultivates the feeling that this isn’t just happening to him. It makes him feel like he’s participating, like he’s condoning it somehow, and that fills him with so much shame that he can’t tell anyone.

Objectively, Stiles knows he could get help and the abuse would stop if he sought help. It’s a simple concept in words, but so, so difficult to do. People who have been abused have had so much taken from them already and been burdened with so much. I think it’s natural to feel like coming forward and dealing with all of the consequences is an increasing burden that’s too much to bear. The abuse would stop, but so many other things would start, and Stiles wasn’t ready to deal with that until much later.

Keeping it a secret and coping with the continued abuse is obviously not the same thing as indicating that the abuse is preferable to what he would have to do to stop the abuse. That’s an extension of the illusion of choice from Clay and the options being something awful and something even worse.

Clay obviously doesn’t know about Stiles’ recent trauma with the nogitsune. He may have heard bits and pieces about Allison’s death, whether it’s Noah and Stiles talking at home or Clay hearing people talk about her while he’s out and about. That trauma and guilt make Stiles even more susceptible to the abuse, but Clay doesn’t know that. He just watches Stiles and Noah, reading into them enough to believe he can manipulate Stiles so grievously and get away with it.

Clay doesn’t think Stiles is weak. Stiles may think that of himself, but Clay knows he’s not, and that was a source of satisfaction for him to be able to control such a smart, outspoken, and independent kid.

Stiles also feels a tremendous amount of shame from coming during the abuse, which makes his dark secrets even more unshareable. It’s no consolation to him that he doesn’t want to do it.

Clay works to make it happen, but he doesn’t do it for Stiles’ sake, as though he wants to give Stiles
pleasure (or that he even could in the context of rape). He does it to stoke Stiles’ feelings of guilt and responsibility. It’s another way of controlling, confusing, and silencing Stiles. He knows Stiles hates it, but he likes to elicit that physical reaction, knowing it’s at odds with what Stiles actually wants. Clay does it to feel powerful and remind Stiles he’s powerless. When Clay makes Stiles come that first time in chapter 1, it helps set the tone for the resumption of the long-term abuse.

On some level, I think Clay occasionally entertains the idea that Stiles secretly enjoys it - like whenever he feels an iota of needing to justify what he’s doing, like whenever Claudia comes up - but he knows Stiles doesn’t.

Stiles has read enough about sexual assault (even before Derek printed out those resources for him) that he understands he can’t help reacting that way. He understands that it’s not uncommon for rapists to purposely bring male victims to orgasm because it decreases the chances that the victim tells someone, but he can’t see those facts anymore when he’s dying inside. He’s also afraid that it doesn’t matter what he knows. Clay could interpret his physical reaction as enjoyment or permission (or forgiveness).

There’s a reference in chapter 8 to secrets Stiles “will never, ever tell Derek.” This is the main one. Logically, he knows his loved ones wouldn’t blame him, question him, or think he must be messed up to do that. But he can’t tell anyone this. He would never talk about it with Noah (I mean, it’s his dad) and he doesn’t see it as a necessary detail with Derek.

I think part of it is, as far from ready as he is to be fully intimate with Derek, he still wants Derek to see him in a sexual way. They’re not having sex and Stiles doesn’t know when he’ll be ready, so he’s afraid of anything that could take away Derek’s ability to see him in a sexual way - to have sexual desire for him. Stiles doesn’t think he can fulfill that desire, but he doesn’t want to leave Derek with even less and make it harder to sustain their relationship long-term. Derek straight up loves him and it wouldn’t change his feelings, but Stiles won’t even think about risking it.

I like to think Stiles ends up talking to Dr. Kendall about it, though, and she’s able to help him move past that shame.

Some other themes I didn’t get into that much are -

**Sexual orientation** - Stiles is bisexual and he isn’t confused about whether he likes guys or if he does because he’s been influenced by the only (non-consensual) sexual encounters he’s ever had (with a man). He doesn’t want to have sex, but he hasn’t sworn off it, either. He mostly sees enjoyable sex as this far-off, unattainable dreamworld that may never be reality for him.

Derek is also bisexual, mentioning it to Stiles in passing but not dwelling on it to explain or offer many details. It’s just a fact. They don’t struggle with their attraction towards each other from the standpoint of basic orientation, nor do they see the other person as “well, he’s straight,” as though being more than friends is out of the question.

To be clear, Clay identifies as straight. I hate the misconception that men who abuse other males are necessarily gay. In some cases, I’m sure this is true, but it really pisses me off when I see homosexuality conflated with predatory behaviors. It was all about opportunity to Clay. He created the opportunity with Stiles and took advantage of the trusted access he had to Stiles. It had nothing to do with Clay being a male and Stiles being a male. (And the same goes for any other victims Clay may have hurt.) There are certain things that Clay did to control Stiles that he might not have done to dominate a girl, but Clay is straight.
Similarly, Clay isn’t exclusively a pedophile, attracted to Stiles as a pre-pubescent child, but not any longer after Stiles got older. It was always about the opportunity, whether Stiles was a child or not.

**Not being believed by loved ones** - There’s no way that Stiles’ loved ones wouldn’t believe him. The thought never crossed my mind. So Stiles doesn’t have to wrestle with how to be believed or if he’d done things that make him appear less credible to his dad, Derek, Scott, etc. In some ways, his closeness with Noah and Scott makes it harder for him to tell them, which is part of why Stiles told Derek first. It definitely isn’t the only reason Stiles told Derek, though.

**Disclosure in romantic relationships** - Derek already knows about the abuse before he and Stiles get together romantically, so Stiles doesn’t have to go through the experience of revealing this painful part of his life, either in the middle of a relationship or at the start of one. They enter into something more, aware of Stiles’ baggage (and Derek’s, for that matter) and knowing it has an impact on their relationship.

**The cycle of abuse** - With violence and abuse, sometimes it’s a vicious cycle in which a victim later becomes an abuser to others, due to a variety of reasons - they believe this is normal, they don’t know how to interact with people or manage their emotions/conflict otherwise, they mirror the behavior they were exposed to, etc. I think it’s clear that Stiles is not going to evolve from the abused to the abuser. Hell no. Not in my universe.

It’s definitely unclear why Clay is an abuser and whether he had previously experienced abuse himself. I don’t have any particular loyalty to Claudia’s father as a general concept, but in my head, he did not abuse Clay and set him on a path of being an abuser himself. I think it would be hard for Claudia to have grown up in a household like that and not have known or been exposed to abuse personally, even with the age difference between her and Clay. To me, this is very different from Noah living in the same house as Clay and not knowing he’s an abuser.

However, Stiles experiences certain aspects of the abuse cycle - his grooming and victimization as a child predisposes him to be assaulted again later in life. Statistically, victims of abuse have higher chances of re-victimization later (and not necessarily at the hands of the same person/people) than the general population, which is so unfair and tragic.

On Derek’s part, he’s also been taken advantage of and abused in his own ways, but like Stiles, he’s not going to go from victim to abuser, either. As much as they’ve both been hurt, it’s just not who they are to hurt anyone, and their repeated victimization at the hands of someone they used to trust comes to an end once they are with each other.

I purposely left it ambiguous whether Clay had abused his ex-stepson. Stiles suspects he did, and even though he hopes he didn’t, he’s always aware of the distinct possibility. The nightmare Stiles has in chapter 11 (when Clay comes back with Kate) reflects Stiles’ lingering concerns. When Stiles dreams of Clay telling him, “you’re my favorite, Stiles,” he references Stiles’ fear that Stiles wasn’t the only one.

Stiles doesn’t know everything, and that’s something he has to come to terms with. Even as he uncovers more information (like in chapter 13 when he finds out what Clay did to him while he was drugged), the police don’t find any evidence of other victims, and Stiles gets more resolution when Clay is incarcerated, Stiles will never have all the answers. Even though Chrissy says nothing happened, Stiles doesn’t know if the answer is really face-value, or maybe she’s protecting Charlie or he didn’t tell her the truth. He learns to live with the ambiguity because he can’t have closure that’s dependent on total clarity.
To be honest, I think Clay did abuse Charlie or possibly one of Charlie’s friends. It seems highly unlikely that he would have abused Stiles so horrifically, but when he wasn’t with Stiles, he wasn’t acting on his urges. I don’t think it’s fair to put that back on Stiles, like he allowed others to be abused because he didn’t tell Noah or the police about Clay when he was young. He was a child victim and had been turned inside out. I get that people may feel like it was his responsibility when he was seventeen because he’s older now - and that Derek should’ve had taken a different course of action since Stiles couldn’t/wouldn’t - but Stiles was a victim struggling to care for his own psyche and Derek was doing whatever he could to respect that.

Some of the things said and the language used are because the story is from Stiles’ evolving POV. Stiles didn’t “let” Clay abuse him, it wasn’t Stiles’ fault, he didn’t make objectively wrong choices, etc. He’s very, very hard on himself, but I hope it’s clear that I don’t actually think these things. I would never want a reader to take anything negative away from the story, like these are actual judgments regarding sensitive, traumatic situations.

Calling it “abuse” is easier for Stiles to handle. For him, it’s a broader word that means he’s being mistreated, but not specific as to how. He knows he’s not in a “relationship” with Clay, either, but he uses that terminology at times to take the edge off what it was really is.

The word “rape” isn’t used until chapter 6, and it’s Derek who says it and it hurts Stiles viscerally to hear it. Stiles doesn’t refer to it as rape until chapter 12, when he tells Noah and is about to report the abuse to the police. And then that word keeps coming up after that as more people become involved and use it, too. Stiles isn’t managing it by himself in his head anymore and he slowly comes to stop avoiding the terms for exactly what it was.

Stiles sees himself as broken, and in a sense, he is. It’s hard to recognize the gravity of what Clay did to him while arguing that he’s not broken, like it wasn’t that bad. But he’s not irrevocably broken and he does put the pieces back together, bit by bit. On a related note, Derek did not “fix” him. Derek helped him heal, but Stiles did the hard work himself and Derek was not his knight in shining armor who swept in to save him. Stiles does see Derek as saving him, and I think that’s an entirely fair perspective on his part. And Derek sees Stiles as saving him, too, from a life of not being able to trust and love anyone as a result of the betrayal and loss Derek had been subjected to.

I don’t think Derek took advantage of Stiles, but I understand if others may think differently. Even though they took things very slow and Stiles was with Derek because he wanted to be, Stiles was still in a vulnerable place and perhaps the best thing for Derek to do would have been to wait until Stiles wasn’t in as much pain. But my own perspective is that the relationship isn’t inappropriate.

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Specific Commentary Notes

Here are bits and pieces about some of things and people over the course of the story.

First, a couple of the peripheral characters -

**Stansfield** (the bully in the early chapters) - His main purpose in the story is to depict Stiles reacting as we would expect him to, consistent with canon. Stiles doesn’t give a shit about how Stansfield treats him - he views Stansfield as a minor annoyance at most. That’s the Stiles we’re used to. He doesn’t slink away or get put in his place.

But with Clay, Stiles is very different. Clay has a hold over him that no one else does, and naturally,
that means Stiles is not the same person he is with everyone else. There are multiple references to
following rules, behaving, getting in trouble, etc. with Clay.

The Stiles we know doesn’t usually care about those things. He has no problem pushing back and
pushing boundaries, and he mostly gets away with it. If he doesn’t, he disregards any fallout or asks
for forgiveness after-the-fact. Asking for permission first or doing exactly as he’s told isn’t his style.
He doesn’t have a problem dealing with the consequences of his actions, either. (Getting his dad
fired in season 2 is an exception.)

Clay changes him, though. He takes so much from Stiles, including his identity and his self-esteem.

Later on in chapter 4, Stansfield begins leaving Stiles alone, but that’s only in favor of pushing
another student around. That’s a much more benign contrast to the situation between Stiles and Clay,
and how Clay isn’t just going to forget about him the way Stansfield did, nor is it okay for there to be
another recipient of Clay’s attention.

Danny - I just like any excuse/reason to mention Danny! But also, his friendship with Stiles was to
convey that Stiles is liked by others more than he realizes. His self-image is so poor, coming off the
nogitsune trauma and being abused by Clay again, that he doesn’t see it, even though anyone else
would be able to.

On a similar note, that was the part of the purpose of the girl in the mall food court (chapter 8). It sets
the stage for some cute interaction between Stiles and Derek, but I also wrote her in as another
demonstration that Stiles doesn’t recognize when other people like him and he doesn’t believe that
they do. (No duh that he’s not able to see that Derek likes him so much, either.)

After Stiles takes the photos from Clay’s wallet, he sees what happens when he pushes back against
Clay. Not just the direct physical and sexual consequences, but also the residual ones, like when
Clay doubles-down by stealing one of Stiles’ photos to replace the one Stiles took. It’s Stiles first real
taste of fighting back, and it plants seeds of doubt and worry about what will happen if he keeps
doing it, never mind if he tells someone. Something as “small” as taking Clay’s trophies backfired on
him in a way he hadn’t thought through.

As much as the Benefactor storyline made no sense in canon, I was pretty happy to weave it in here.
It set up a situation where Stiles viewed himself as “safe” when he was simultaneously unsafe in his
own home. It also made Stiles feel like those stakes were so much higher in comparison to the abuse,
so his focus should be on the Benefactor.

Once Clay loaned Noah money to cover the bills Stiles had incurred at the hospital and Eichen
House, Clay basically became Stiles’ benefactor. When it comes to the Benefactor, Stiles thinks he’s
the only one who’s not being targeted, but when it comes to Clay, he IS the only one being targeted.
The demise of each of Stiles’ friends is worth millions, but his own goes for a mere $5000. None of
his friends really got hurt by the Benefactor or his proxies, but Stiles was hurt in horrific ways.

Stiles cycles through the possibilities of telling a lot of people - Noah, Melissa, (even Claudia, kind
of), Scott, Lydia, and Malia - but that consideration consistently ends in talking himself out of it and
reminding himself of all the reasons he shouldn’t or can’t tell them. He doesn’t consciously think
about telling Derek, which makes sense on one level because he and Derek aren’t friends like that
yet (not that Stiles and Malia are, either). I mostly meant it as Stiles not thinking about Derek so he can’t talk himself out of telling Derek.

When Stiles thinks about telling Lydia, but ultimately doesn’t, that last line of “And really, the only way Stiles can ever tell anyone is because he knows the love is true,” is supposed to foreshadow how Stiles feels about Derek, even though he doesn’t really realize it and is not in the right mental place to think about it.

There are other hints of Stiles’ subconscious feelings for Derek, such as at the end of chapter 4 when Stiles dissociates from the assault and sees Derek’s eyes instead (and I don’t think he knew what he was doing at the time). In chapter 5, Stiles has the nightmare that Noah died at Oak Creek instead of Allison, and Derek is there, putting his hand on Stiles’ shoulder for comfort, similar to what Stiles did for Derek when Boyd died. Derek wasn’t at Oak Creek in canon, but Stiles places him there in his dream, when something terrible has happened, because Stiles wants/needs him.

When Derek stays for part of the night in Stiles’ room (chapter 3), Stiles could have had him leave after they talked, but he doesn’t, even though he knows he’s taking a real risk that Clay wants to come in later. Stiles even locks the door, which is against the rules, but there’s a part of him that doesn’t care. He wants Derek there with him. He doesn’t want Derek to be alone after seeing that massacre of werewolves, which isn’t the same as the massacre of his family, but close enough, and he draws some comfort from being with Derek, too. Clay left him alone that night, though. I couldn’t have written his being angry about being locked out (because of Derek’s presence) and then punishing Stiles later for not behaving.

“It doesn’t matter.” Stiles says and thinks this a lot, about a variety of things, as he falls deeper into the black hole of abuse. He means it when he’s talking about the next movie to watch or what to eat for dinner because he doesn’t care, not with everything else going on. But moreso, he’s getting so used to being shown by Clay that what he wants and how he feels don’t matter.

The tipping point that brings Stiles to Derek’s doorstep is incredibly cruel. I didn’t write it as cruel for the sake of cruelty. Stiles understood exactly what Clay was doing to him, but he doesn’t want to see it as rape. He knows that’s what it is, but as a coping mechanism, he can’t actively think about it that way. Additionally, Stiles is still confused by the seemingly “normal” relationship he and Clay used to have, even though it wasn’t real.

But when Stiles is assaulted by someone he doesn’t know, it’s so much harder for him to deny what it was. It terrifies him and it feels like rape, even though it’s always been rape. Clay opens their dirty secrets up to another person in a sickening way and then Stiles opens up, too, as the first step in breaking out.

Involving another assailant is also a parallel to how Stiles was victimized by the nogitsune and then very shortly after, by Clay. There’s a part in chapter 4 (where Stiles realizes that the nogitsune would never have helped him with Clay) that foreshadows what Clay and Quinn do to him in chapter 5 -

“Stiles would never have been able to survive that, being passed back and forth, outnumbered two to one. That would have been the end of him.”

When Clay and Quinn take their turns with him, that’s the last straw. Stiles can’t take it anymore -
it’s the end - but it’s not the end of him because he’s not alone anymore.

In chapter 7 when Stiles and Derek are having dinner at the barbeque place and talking about Laura, Derek describes his relationship with her, but it could kind of describe Derek’s relationship with Stiles, too, if you take out the specific context -

“When we were kids, we didn’t really get along that well. My mom was always breaking up fights. She said it was because we were too different and too similar in some ways - like two peas in a pod that didn’t seem to get that that’s what we were. But things started to change in sixth grade. I think we just got to a point where we stopped being so bratty to each other and were more open instead. She was always smarter than me. And funnier. Well, everyone’s funnier than me.”

I posted the ice cream scene in chapter 8 after season 6A had aired, but I might have written that scene before the 6A finale. I don’t remember. Either way, I didn’t purposely hijack the Stiles/Scott scene where Stiles tells Scott he’ll always need him. I didn’t watch season 6 except for the 6A finale because I thought that would be Stiles’ last episode.

When I wrote the scene, that’s just how it organically unfolded, and besides, I think the vibe is totally different than the canon Stiles/Scott scene. That one was about two best friends going their separate ways, but reaffirming their bond. The scene in this story is two best friends explicitly acknowledging their bond for the first time. (And of course, Stiles can have more than one best friend, so the fact that Derek means so much to him doesn’t take anything away from Stiles/Scott.)

A lot of scenes take place in Derek’s loft because that’s a safe place for Derek and Stiles to talk about serious things in private. Stiles is also “hiding” how much time he spends with Derek, so that’s not amenable to being seen together in public constantly. (Nor is Derek used to being out and about in public socially.)

Derek steadily works to make the loft more of a home, ostensibly because Stiles comes over a lot and the loft is pretty bare bones. But Derek also does it because having Stiles around makes the loft feel more like a home. It’s not just a roof over his head anymore. Derek finally has a reason to view it as a home and want to build something. Stiles shares that space with him seamlessly, feeling like it’s a home, too - contributing to household errands, knowing his way around the kitchen, having a drawer to keep his things in, and so on.

A lot of scenes also take place in Derek’s bed or Stiles’ bed in particular. Of course, that’s where Stiles has nightmares that Derek can help him through and shed light on where Stiles’ head is at. These scenes also show the growing closeness between Stiles and Derek, even when they were 100% just friends, but also as they pursue something more. In bed is where Stiles has been hurt so intensely and felt so much fear, but with Derek, he feels safe and he is safe. And Derek needs to know that Stiles is safe there, too.

Stiles and Derek do so easily for each other, and with so much conviction, what they can’t do for themselves. With another voice they love and trust standing up for them, they start to believe more and more that what happened to them wasn’t their fault, whether it’s Stiles with the nogitsune or Clay, or Derek with Kate (and his family’s deaths) or Jennifer. Arguably, Stiles needs this more than Derek does because of the horrific abuse on the heels of the nogitsune and Allison’s death, but Derek really needs it, too. It doesn’t seem that way to Derek because he doesn’t think he’s actively
struggling, but he’s passively dealt with what happened by hating himself and closing himself off to the world.

It would normally terrify Derek to put himself out there and truly care for someone, opening himself up to the possibility of being hurt, but it doesn’t feel that way to him under these circumstances. His need to care for Stiles and be there for him far outweighs the fear of being hurt.

In chapter 9 when Stiles and Derek are out for a jog, “[Derek] prefers running through the Preserve, but Stiles is skeptical about his ability to run through that maze of uneven terrain.” That was an intentional reference to a Dylan O’Brien movie. There’s an unintentional one in chapter 1 (“The First Time”) which makes sense because it’s about Stiles’ not being a virgin. This one in chapter 9 just kind of came up and then I kept doing it. There are other references in later chapters to Deepwater Horizon, American Assassin, and The Death Cure. Scorch Trials is way too specific of a name, hahah. Maybe I’ll do the same thing for Tyler Hoechlin’s movies in the Derek POV story I’m working on.

Stiles’ rant in chapter 9 about how easily his case could be picked apart is a heartbreaking reality. He’s not “the perfect victim” that people will necessarily believe. We all know he’s telling the truth, but he’s very quickly able to point out all kinds of things about his past and the details about his situation that could give people pause about his credibility. I didn’t write that to dissuade anyone from reporting assault, but it’s a very valid fear of Stiles’ and it partially explains why he won’t tell his dad or the police about Clay.

Chapter 10 is a little early for a sort-of sex scene, given everything that Stiles has been through, but it wasn’t approached as one by either Stiles or Derek. The showering together started out as functional. The bathroom had long been Stiles’ safe place where he had tried to cope and cleanse himself alone, but he explicitly allows Derek to come inside with him. Even when things take a more sexual turn, it’s only about Stiles’ pleasure, so it’s nothing like the abuse inflicted on him.

I really wanted to show that Noah was okay with Stiles dating Derek and their physical closeness before he knew what had happened to Stiles and how Derek had helped him. (And Noah really does believe that they aren’t having sex - he doesn’t think Stiles is lying about that.) Some parents might not be okay with their son’s boyfriend sleeping over, but Stiles is eighteen, Noah knows he’s experienced a lot more than the average kid, and Noah really doesn’t want Stiles sneaking around. Maybe Derek isn’t the ideal boyfriend, but Noah trusts him and his intentions enough that he doesn’t think he needs to keep boundaries between Stiles and Derek. He understands they’ll probably have sex at some point and that’s okay with him; it’s not like he can stop someone as headstrong as Stiles from doing that anyway.

When Stiles is watching Derek in the stands at the last lacrosse game of the season, there’s a little callback to the “someone could be falling in love with your smile” line from season 1. Which is especially sweet to me here, considering how little Derek smiled in canon and how he smiles much more now that he and Stiles are closer.
At first I wasn’t going to write Stiles and Derek saying they love each other because they’re constantly showing each other that they do. I didn’t think they needed to say it. Then I changed my mind and wanted them to say it, and I’m happy with where they do for the first time in chapter 12 (after Derek’s conversation with Noah in the middle of the night and Derek comes back to bed). It’s not the happiest of moments, but it doesn’t have to be. It just has to be honest and I think it brought them both a lot of comfort.

LOL I don’t know where Beacon Hills is in Northern California, so I took a stab at an approximation (based on zip codes mentioned in the Teen Wolf wiki - many thanks to them!). Maybe Modesto doesn’t make any sense, but I didn’t want to pick a really large jurisdiction anyway.

I think by the end of chapter 12, there’s a certain sense of hope that wasn’t quite there before. There’s a realized spark of hope in chapter 11, plus all of the things Stiles had slowly been able to reclaim from his ordeal with Clay, but once Noah knows, I think Stiles starts to genuinely see a path out of the abuse and the aftermath. It comes with a lot of low moments - telling his dad the truth, telling other people the truth - but that’s what he has to do to move forward and it’s finally something he feels he can do, even though he knows it’s going to be tremendously difficult and he can’t take it back.

Noah was already okay with Stiles and Derek sharing a bed, but he doubles down on that in chapter 13 now that he knows about the abuse. Noah buys Stiles a new bed so he doesn’t have to sleep in the one where he was so hurt for so long, but Noah knows that’s just one part of it. His respect for and trust in Derek grows leaps and bounds, literally overnight, and he understands that Stiles feels safe with Derek in that place. His thought process naturally goes to allowing Stiles to be with Derek there, without the previous limitations he’d previously set when Stiles first told Noah about his relationship with Derek.

The videos Clay made of Stiles were disgusting. I didn’t write them in to hurt Stiles even more. They served a few different purposes -

- They clued Stiles in to a previous unknown that he didn’t think he would ever know - namely, what Clay did to him while he was passed out.
- They bolstered Stiles’ allegations, so that Stiles didn’t have to regret that he’d gotten rid of evidence and hadn’t gone to a hospital for a rape kit.
- Clay’s downfall was sealed by evidence that he kept himself because he wanted the trophies and he had a big enough ego to think it would never backfire on him.
- They gave the prosecution the leverage Stiles needed in order to guarantee some kind of conviction, not proceed to trial, and take a chance on the verdict.

On top of Stiles’ poor self-image, it’s really hard for him to see the way Clay saw him - literally, through the videos Clay had taken. But even with that poor self-image and seeing himself through Clay’s eyes, it’s seeing himself through Derek’s eyes that ultimately wins out. (Where the title of the
I wanted Stiles to wait a long time until he and Derek actually had sex, but I wanted to close the story (minus the flash-forward epilogue) with the clarity that Stiles is continuing to make progress towards sexual intimacy, hence the mutual hand job in chapter 14.

Also, it’s a bookend to the first time Clay started abusing Stiles again in chapter 1. That mutual masturbation was forced on Stiles and he was terrorized, but with Derek, literally in the light of a brand new day, a similar physical act is so completely different. Stiles wants it, he’s safe and loved, it means something totally different if Noah were to catch them, and it’s one more thing he’s able to reclaim along his recovery.

When Derek tells Stiles he realized there was something really wrong because of Stiles’ eyes, I liked that because it had nothing to do with his supernatural senses. Derek used his human observation to pick up on something and persist in a way that no one else in Stiles’ life really did. (Even more so than Scott.)

I wanted to give Stiles and Derek some elements of the sweet high school relationship that Derek didn’t get to have (little moments with Paige don’t count) and Stiles thought he would never have. Parking and making out, without any pressure to have sex, was one of those moments. So were the ice cream date, all the times they went out to dinner together, their movie nights, and going to prom (even though Derek was in his mid-20s at the time).

They were doing very relationship-like things before they entered into a relationship. I think it’s important that they strengthened their friendship before moving into anything romantic - obviously because Stiles is going through a lot, but also because it allowed them to get to know each other a lot better, so they could later believe that the other really was interested in the person that they were, not who they thought they were.

At the very end, I like the idea that Stiles’ anchor is the same as Derek’s from chapter 8. But more than that, I like the idea that their anchor is not each other, per se - it’s a grounding concept (“what they could have, instead of the pain”) that they fulfill for each other. It just seems more inherently earned to me that way.

As far as Derek in college goes, I don’t see it as him having these grand plans for academia now, or on the other end of the spectrum, going to college merely because Stiles is. As much as the story is about Stiles reclaiming his life, Derek also has the chance to have the kind of life he could have had before everything spiraled to shit as a teenager. He can go to college without having everything figured out. He can use what he learned there or go in a different direction after he graduates. Just like a lot of his peers living “normal” lives.

I wanted them to wait until they consummated their relationship, and I chose to make it happen two years in because I liked the idea that they were perfectly content with each other’s companionship and Stiles could take his time. I also prefer the idea that having sex isn’t the barometer for Stiles’
successful recovery. He’s come a very long way well before he and Derek have sex, and having sex is an “extra” - it doesn’t define him.

Also, after the scene in chapter 10 when Derek tells Stiles that he didn’t think he would tell Stiles how he felt about him until the summer after Stiles’ freshman year, it made total sense to me to use that timeframe for the next step of sex, too. Stiles’ reaction to that revelation is, “Why so long? That summer’s over two years away!” But Derek could wait that long for Stiles and he had no problem waiting that long.

When they’re having sex, Stiles flashes back to the time at the end of chapter 4 when he dissociated and subconsciously ran to Derek in his mind. Also, Derek tells him, “this is about both of us,” which is a callback to that awful first time Clay comes in his room and says, “it’s not just about me, it’s about both of us.” It’s another similarity to Stiles’ time with Clay that’s the polar opposite of his time with Derek. When Stiles tells Derek, “no, you’re perfect,” it mirrors the first time Clay assaulted Stiles without a condom. This feels totally different, too, coupled with Stiles asking Derek to come inside him and expressly consenting.

I don’t think of Stiles seeing Derek as “his first, his last, and his only” as revisionist history. It’s Stiles drawing lines around the abuse, acknowledging it, and sequestering it away from the rest of his life - his consensual life. It happened, and if he was asked by, for example, a doctor about his sexual history, I don’t think he would say that he didn’t have sex until he was 20. But outside of a context where it really matters when he physically was part of a sexual act, I think he would stick with Derek as his first. Derek doesn’t think similarly for himself, but he definitely thinks Stiles is the only one who has ever mattered.

Regarding the alternate ending - Ahhhh, Peter.

I definitely prefer the official ending, but this one was fun to play with. Originally, I wasn’t going to write Stiles telling Noah, but the more I thought about it, plus comments from readers, I realized that, as realistic as it may be for Stiles not to tell tell Noah, something had to happen to Clay. So before I changed my mind and brought Noah into the loop, I was trying to figure out how to get some closure with Clay being out in the world. Death by a natural cause isn’t satisfying enough, even if it meant he couldn’t hurt anyone else and Stiles wasn’t burdened by letting him go free. And if Clay died at the hands of someone else, in my mind, it had to be Peter.

I didn’t want to write Stiles changing his mind about killing Clay (or anyone). With his post-nogitsune guilt and how long Clay had abused him, it didn’t strike me as right for him to, months later, be okay with killing Clay. I didn’t want Stiles to have blood on his hands like that. I also didn’t like how that could leave a feeling of, “if Stiles had just killed him early on instead of waiting so long, he would have been spared so much pain.”

Derek wouldn’t have killed Clay, knowing that Stiles didn’t want that. He would never defy Stiles on something so major, like Derek had to indulge what he wanted personally as though Stiles saying “no” wasn’t enough. (Not that this is anything like Clay’s doing what he wanted personally despite what Stiles wanted.) I didn’t want Derek to secretly kill Clay and keep something so huge from Stiles, either.

So if Stiles and Derek don’t kill Clay, and Noah doesn’t, either, because Derek is the only one who knows, who could do it in a way where it’s not a total affront to the characters? Well … it would have to be someone who found out on their own and had no qualms about taking that kind of action on their own - and who else is that but Peter?
Peter definitely looks out for #1 and he doesn’t have a problem doing that at the expense of others, even if he cares about them. But in Clay’s case, Peter seemingly does something that’s not specifically for himself, but for people he cares about - and he does care about Derek and Stiles.

A really fun thing for me in writing the alternate ending was writing the characters as not saying what they really mean. In the official story, the main characters show they care about each other (except for Clay, obviously) and they talk to each other with genuine statements. Even though they may withhold information, what they do say is mostly straightforward in how they feel about each other. That gets changed up in the alternate ending as Stiles and Peter, and Peter and Derek, are often saying things indirectly or veiled. They don’t have the trust required to say what they mean, but they can read between the lines.

Peter’s a hard character to redeem because he was written out of the gate as having killed Laura. I wasn’t trying to redeem him, per se, but I did want to make clear that he’s very different from Clay. There were some references in the story about how Derek and Stiles recognize that both uncles are their mother’s brother and they’ve both done awful things in the past. But Peter is not like Clay.

Peter says, “he’s used to being the bad guy,” and yes, he’s done some terrible things. But this arguably wasn’t one of them. Shortly after, he refers to Clay as “a bad man,” which is true. Clay is the bad guy here, and Clay and Peter are worlds apart.

As much as Clay was Stiles’ “benefactor” financially, Peter was his “benefactor” when he killed Clay. Stiles doesn’t want Peter to do it again with Quinn, but that doesn’t change that Peter did it for him once. What Clay did as his benefactor was completely selfish whereas Peter didn’t even want Stiles to know what he’d done and it wasn’t for Peter’s advantage.

Another thing I liked about the alternate ending is it delved more into Derek’s relationship with his remaining family and rebuilding something with them. I’m happy with the official story, where Stiles helps Derek enjoy happy memories of his family and Derek finds a new family with the Stilinskis, but I was also happy to write more about the Hales.

Peter didn’t kill Clay in order to get closer to Derek, and he certainly didn’t know that he would be brought into a resurrected Hale family tradition and be invited to spend more time with Malia, but when Derek did that, all of the remaining Hales (sans Cora) were able to reclaim some of the things that villains had taken from them in the past, too.

I can absolutely picture in my head Peter’s chatting Clay up at a bar and ingratiating himself in that smarmy way Peter’s so good at. But at the same time, every lecherous smile he gives is just hiding Peter’s total contempt for Clay. 100%, he enjoyed killing Clay. He looked forward to it and didn’t have any doubts when he jerked the steering wheel to slam the car into a tree. When he told Clay, “I know about you and Stiles,” it was as good as saying, “This is for Stiles.” He didn’t suffer long-term from the crash, but it still hurt before he healed and he didn’t care about that.

Another thing I liked was I think it meant something for Stiles to hear it wasn’t his fault from someone he doesn’t have a loving relationship with. It’s easy for him to think his dad and Derek are being so supportive and adamant that he didn’t do anything wrong because they love him so much. It’s not that Stiles thinks Peter doesn’t care about him at all (and he can’t really think this once he finds out what Peter did), but I think it helps Stiles hear from a person like Peter that he isn’t to blame.

One of the themes of the whole story is family, good and bad. Stiles has Noah, the only parent he still has and whom he loves to the moon and back; Claudia, his dearly departed parent he loves deeply; Derek, the family he chose; and Clay, the relative who abused him and used his family against him. The last scene in the alternate ending, with references to how families aren’t just about
bloodlines and they can be born out of love, is a callback to chapter 10. Back then, Stiles thought that attributing his relationship with Derek to Clay was like saying it was born out of poison. Except now, Stiles has adjusted the way he thinks about it for the better. It’s not a choice he made out of something bad - it’s something he chose because it was good.

Back to the bonus scene and the official story - another major theme is choice. Everyone has their own path and this just happens to be the one Stiles took. Stiles didn’t have any when he was abused, but he is able to make decisions for himself as he chooses once the abuse is over. He chooses to tell Derek, he chooses not to go to the hospital or report to the police, he chooses to run Clay out of town, he chooses to start a relationship with Derek, he chooses to tell Noah, he chooses to go to the police after all, and so on. No one makes those decisions for him, and that’s a huge part of Stiles’ regaining control over his life. Of course, the decisions he makes have ramifications that aren’t always “optimal” (not that optimal is objective in the first place), but they’re his decisions and that is a huge factor in his psychological recovery and restoration of agency.

With Stiles telling Scott about the abuse, I think it’s nice to see Stiles continuing the theme of choice and bringing Scott into the know once he felt it was time - not because he had to tell Scott as a prerequisite for something.

Even years later and with his best friend for most of his life, Stiles still feels compelled to “explain himself.” It doesn’t matter if there isn’t any external pressure actually there, but Stiles can’t help but feel like he has to justify how the abuse occurred and persisted the way it did. Scott says he doesn’t have to defend himself and his actions, but that’s a cross that Stiles will bear for a really long time. Stiles has triumphed over his abused past, but it’ll never be like it didn’t happen and all of the feelings are gone completely.

But, like Stiles tells himself, that’s okay. His life has been far from perfect, but he’s okay.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe I made it this far! This was undoubtedly worth all of the hours, the late nights, the mental real estate, and the opportunity cost of what I could have been doing instead of writing.

If you’re curious about or have other thoughts on anything, please feel free to comment below and I’ll reply accordingly! Thank you as always for reading!
Hi again, readers! I hadn’t initially intended to write this bonus chapter, but I got an idea in my head and I wanted to do it!

I hope you enjoy this part from the Sheriff’s POV. It takes place after Stiles tells Noah about the abuse (mid-chapter 12). These are brand-new scenes as the Sheriff moves through the non-linear grief process, i.e. they are not existing scenes from chapters 12 - epilogue, but from the Sheriff’s POV instead of Stiles’.

I first thought about incorporating some of this content in the potential sideways story I’ve mentioned in previous notes (in which Stiles goes to the hospital after he runs to Derek), but I don’t think they could really fit there. A sideways story would still be Stiles’ POV, and he can’t tell the story from his dad’s POV.

While I can slip pretty easily into Stiles’ POV as I’ve designed for this story, writing from Noah’s POV was a challenge - different and exciting, though! The scenes came together slower than they usually do, but I tell ya, I could have gone deep with this. Like, written chapters of Noah’s experience. But as it is, I kept it to just one regular-sized chapter.

I am also going to be catching up on some older comments I neglected to reply to earlier. I’m slapping my own hand now in admonishment. For the back-half of the story, I was mostly in a shame spiral of spending most of my fic time trying to finish chapters and feeling like I was behind.

Thanks as always for making it this far in the story and I hope you enjoy this new bonus! I am working on a couple of other stories as well, so if you’d like to know when those go up, please user-subscribe! I may also write more under this particular story, too. I love this little universe, so I’d be happy for the inspiration bug to bite me again!

p.s. I apologize for any weirdness with this chapter! I posted it, deleted it, and reposted it to try to fix a wonky error.

[Posted 1/25/19]

Noah sits back on his feet so he’s no longer hovering over the toilet. Five minutes ago, his body had retched like he was going to puke, but he might be in too much shock to actually do it.

His entire world has shattered in the blink of an eye, but the only thing Noah can really think about is that his son’s shattered eight years ago and he’s been wading through the shards alone ever since.

After standing up and rinsing his mouth out, Noah wearily gauges his blotchy, haggard face in the mirror’s reflection. Stiles had been so concerned about him, like Noah is the primary concern after everything Stiles confessed about his real history with Clay.
Noah couldn’t care less about how he’s faring. He’s not the one who was hurt. He would take it all from Stiles if he could, but he can’t. He should have protected his son from that sick bastard in the first place, but he didn’t, so it’s his fault almost as much as Clay’s. His inaction is nearly as much of a crime as everything Clay did.

He can’t bring himself to fully comprehend what Stiles has been through. That might be the initial shock, too, but it’ll fade and he’ll be left with the harsh reality. That’s how it should be, though. Stiles shouldn’t be in that reality by himself. Even with Derek there, Stiles needs what’s left of his family. And fuck it all to hell if Noah doesn’t give Stiles every last part of him to help his son come out of this intact.

Exhausted and wide awake at the same time, Noah staggers over to his bed like he could sleep even a wink. With the additional trauma of reporting to the police ahead of them, Noah has to at least try to sleep so he’s alert and present for Stiles.

His eye wanders to a picture frame he keeps on the bedside table. Claudia and Stiles, back when he was around eight or nine, are just in the backyard, but they look so carefree and joyful. It was before Claudia started to get sick, so it’s one of Noah’s favorite photos. He likes having the image out so it exist in the world and not merely in his head.

But he can’t have them looking at him when he’s failed them both so grievously. He doesn’t deserve the happy memory and they shouldn’t be forced to look at him, either. They can’t smile at him like that anymore.

Noah picks up the frame to hide it away, but allows himself one last glimpse. Staring down at it, he’s in a trance until a teardrop quickly splashes onto the glass over Claudia’s face.

He doesn’t deserve this, either, but Noah clutches the picture to his chest, holding them close as he sags against the headboard in a deluge of grief. “I’m so sorry,” he tells them, head bowed. “I’m so sorry…”

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It’s “already” Sunday. More than three days have passed and Noah hasn’t come to talk to Claudia until now.

Thursday and Friday had been dedicated to Stiles and the police investigation. Noah worked a few hours on Saturday, but he hadn’t been too busy to see her. It’s not a simple errand, though. He needs buffer time before and after. He needs an undefined amount of time to tell her.

But time is meaningless now anyway. It passes quickly and slowly while it doesn’t pass at all.

Noah needs to figure out how to break it to her, but he’s at a loss and can’t put this off any further. He’s fairly sure she hasn’t already found out from Stiles. Stiles had struggled so much in telling him and he hadn’t seem practiced at all. Whatever words Stiles used with Derek were different. As strong as that kid is, telling your deceased mother something like this is … Noah can’t begin to imagine it.

Telling your deceased wife something like this isn’t any easier, but it shouldn’t be another burden that Stiles shoulders. He’d already had to sit there with Noah, fumbling for an explanation that was clear but not explicit, one meant to minimize and manage Noah’s painful eruption while tearing open his own scar tissue as though he was okay.

Claudia’s not really here, but Noah and Stiles have never completely believed that they’re only talking to a gravestone when they visit her. Sure, Noah’s had one-sided conversations with her that
were meant for him, like when he’s making a decision by talking out loud amidst her balanced energy, but he came here for a reason today.

He regularly gives her updates on Stiles, but every single one since her death seems false now. Technically, they were mostly true. Stiles earned those grades, caused that trouble, and did all of those other overambitious things that have littered his journey to adulthood. Except they’re all cast in a different light - in the grotesque context of a silent, unsharable pain that Stiles handled by himself. And despite their degree of truth, there’s a whole other life that Stiles had been manipulated into - a whole other life that Noah had omitted in his updates because he was oblivious. He’s sold Claudia eight years of lies. She’s been resting in peace because she was deceived by someone too clueless to know it was deception.

It’s so distressingly clear now how Stiles really grew up, and all of the hallmarks he was robbed of along the way. If Noah doesn’t count the years Stiles can’t possibly remember because he was too young, he’s been smothered by the dark shadow of forced incest longer than he hasn’t. Even if Noah does count every year, the rapes have still dominated Stiles’ existence.

It’s not that Noah had wanted to walk in on Stiles experimenting with warm apple pies, nor did he want Stiles to base his whole existence on the pursuit of getting laid, but he did want Stiles to have normal, healthy adolescent and teenage experiences. It kills Noah that that’s never actually been the case.

Werewolves and supernatural phenomena definitely place an asterisk next to “normal,” making it challenging at times, but Noah still thought Stiles had his share of crushes (mainly on Lydia), gone to school dances, looked forward to losing his virginity - all of that.

But Stiles didn’t have a “normal” first kiss. The crushes couldn’t have felt altogether real to him, like he’d wanted to take them to the next level and turn them into something tangible. Sex should have been something Stiles was excited about, even though it wouldn’t live up to the hype until later on in life. The sex talks Noah had given him as he got older - as uncomfortable as they were for Noah, how must they have really felt for Stiles, like he didn’t already know all about the worst kind of sex? Like the cautionary tales and dangers that Noah told him about could ever hold a candle to the ones he’d already been subjected to first-hand?

If Stiles wrestled with intimacy issues, they should have been due to arguably run-of-the-mill reasons, like a girl who cheated on him or irrational fears about letting someone see the real him. Not because sexuality had been pushed on him before he understood it or wanted it. Not because someone who should have protected him and loved him as his flesh-and-blood chose to do the complete opposite. Not because that person brainwashed him, conditioning him to submit and believe that what he wanted had no value.

The whole time, Noah had thought their lives as a family were split into two distinct phases - before Claudia’s death and afterwards. The break wasn’t that clean - there was that long, trying period of time during which Claudia had grown sicker and sicker - but her death was the pivot point.

It still is, but it’s so much more loaded than Noah ever realized.

This news will crush her. Even though she’s physically gone and her reaction is only in Noah’s mind, it still matters. He was supposed to honor her and the life she didn’t get to live with them. In the back of his head, he’s terrified she won’t believe he did, but he knows he didn’t, so of course she should think so, too.

She won’t think that, though. That’s not her nature. She’s too good. He doesn’t want her to blame herself. Clay is her brother, but it’s not her fault that she wasn’t there with Stiles to deter Clay or
otherwise protect him from Clay. It’s not her fault that she didn’t know who Clay really was.

And that’s what Noah tells her. His throat strains with the words and he takes a cue from Stiles, using softer phrasing and indirect statements to deliver the blows. She doesn’t need to know details. She absolutely doesn’t need to know all of the things Stiles told the detectives.

He places the fault squarely on him. He’s the one who should’ve known, but didn’t. He’s the one who should’ve stopped it from happening, but didn’t. It’s his fault that Stiles had to process by himself as a child. And it doesn’t matter that at seventeen, Stiles wasn’t a child anymore. It doesn’t make it any easier for him. The pain is just as real as it ever was. Stiles being older so he can process it differently doesn’t mean it hurts any less. In some ways, it might actually hurt more.

“I wish I could change it all,” Noah says, wiping away the tears. “I wish I could go back in time and pull myself together after you were gone. Be the dad Stiles needed me to be. Not the dad who could barely get through the day and relied on someone else for help.”

Noah is drowning in a sea of “if only” thoughts, each one leading to another. If only Noah had seen the warning signs early and busted Clay for the child pornography he must have been looking at. If only that time Clay had visited them when Stiles was a toddler, Noah had just stood there and let Clay die as he choked on a piece of steak, instead of giving him the Heimlich maneuver and saving his life.

“I’m here for him now, I promise you, Claudia. I’ll be the dad he needs. I’ll die before I let him down again.”

A big part of that is being strong for Stiles. Noah can’t allow him to feel responsible for his dad’s mental well-being on top of everything else. It’s supposed to be the other way around. The developing legal process will be incredibly stressful and humiliating for Stiles, and with summer vacation coming up, Noah isn’t sure if no classes mean fewer demands on Stiles or more idle time to spin out.

Noah sighs. If the whole world could feel it, they would. “Remember how Stiles would insist on making dinner sometimes? The kid’s six years old and he’s adamant he’s going to take care of us. Those PB&J sandwiches were messy, but they tasted pretty damn good, didn’t they?

“I’ll take care of him for the both of us, honey. I’ll take care of him the way you would have.”

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Noah strides through the hall on the way to the courthouse holding cell. As the escorting bailiff lets Noah through a heavy, secured door, they exchange a head nod before Noah continues alone.

He’s had countless interactions with prisoners in the line of duty, being the good guy on the right side of the line against his fair share of deplorable criminals. But this is completely different. He doesn’t usually have anything personal at stake, and he’s never come face-to-face with the devil himself. And when it comes down to it, the line of duty as a father is the only one that’s really important anyway.

While Noah has seen Clay at the various court proceedings, they haven’t been in a position to actually speak in months. The last time they “spoke” was at the Modesto station when Clay was brought inside in handcuffs. Noah doesn’t regret his outburst that day. If anything, he’s rewound it over and over in his mind, thinking about all of the other things he could have and should have said.

He hasn’t been able to move forward in any way without knowing Clay will pay. Noah’s been stuck
in a hellish stasis since he found out, with the exception of dropping lower at especially painful moments, like the discovery of Clay’s videos, and the temporary buoys of happier moments, like the barbeque he and Stiles just hosted. The plea agreement had been encouraging, but it’s not enough.

Clay has just been informed of his fate and Stiles ripped him a new one while barely moving a muscle, so Noah has the upper hand this time. It’s probably undeniable to an observer, but Noah doesn’t really feel it. Even though the uncertainty of whether Clay will be punished for his crimes is gone, the certainty of what Clay did and the fact that it can never be undone is written in stone. Forever engraved in Stiles’ heart and mind.

Clay is standing in the holding cell, his back mostly to Noah. At the sound of someone approaching, he reflexively turns and looks up, but averts his gaze once he identifies his visitor.

“Surprised to see me?” Noah says. “Don’t be. This isn’t my holding cell, but I still know a lot of people.”

Noah walks right up to the vertical bars. He would never do that with most felons, but he isn’t afraid of Clay. What could Clay possibly do to him that would matter? He actually wants Clay to try something. It would give Noah a great excuse to lay his hands on him. Choke him out, at least. Let him die this time, even though it’s too late. Drain the fight out of him, just like he tried to do to Stiles.

Clay takes a step back. “What’s wrong? You’re not proud of what you’ve done?” Noah challenges. “Or do you only feel good about it with a scared kid?”

Noah pauses, the space between them thick with tension. “No scared kids here. Just me. I know where all of the cameras are. I know exactly where to stand if I want to conceal something. And we won’t be disturbed, I’ve made sure of that.”

Clay opens his mouth like he’s foolishly about to speak, but Noah cuts him down with lightning in his eyes.

“No! Shut your fucking mouth. I’m not here to listen to you. There’s nothing you could say. The court gave Stiles the chance to confront you. It’s my turn now.”

Noah slides his hand through the bars, jabbing his finger towards Clay. “You took that beautiful, innocent child - HER child - and did those disgusting, vile things to him. Used and abused him like it was nothing. And you have no remorse. The only thing you feel bad about is that you got caught. How could you fucking do that? He did nothing to you but love you! You’re fucking sick. You did what you did, and the way you did it - you loved hurting him. There’s no excuse for any of it!”

Of course, Clay doesn’t look at him or verbally respond. Noah already told him to shut the hell up, but there really IS nothing Clay can say. He can’t deny it. He can’t make empty, fake apologies. He can’t brag about it, like there’s any benefit to rubbing it in Noah’s face. Not when he’s locked up in a cell. Even if Noah doesn’t feel like he has the upper hand, there’s no way that Clay doesn’t understand that he’s lost.

Noah knows how important it was to Stiles not to cry during his impact statement. He sort of thinks he should feel the same way, but he doesn’t. Noah wasn’t Clay’s victim. He’s not the one who absolutely cannot let Clay see him hurt again. After all those years Clay kept Noah in the dark, Noah wants him to see the pain he feels. He needs Clay to see it.

It won’t change anything. Clay won’t feel guilt or regret in return. It won’t show him the error of his ways, but Clay is not allowed the privilege of denying the destruction he left in his wake.
Noah seethes, his voice trembling. “That loan you gave me. That fucking money you offered me, like you were helping us. To play nice to my face while you played dirty with my son. And you NEVER loved her. You couldn’t have. Not when you took advantage of her death to take advantage of Stiles. Just because she’s not here doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt her, too. You … what you did killed her all over again.”

Clay’s still looking down. Spineless coward.

“I hate you so, so much,” Noah manages through tears. “You don’t know how much I want to tear you into pieces. But I don’t need to. Stiles already ended you. You helped him dig your own grave. You thought you were so untouchable that you kept evidence of your own crimes. You didn’t see anything wrong with those videos. But everyone else did.

“I said before that you’re dead to us, but we had to slog through all of this shit first. And now that you’re here, it’s finally true. You don’t exist. Your actions weren’t nothing, but YOU’RE nothing. Nobody cares about you. You’re fucking dead. Considering where you’ll be spending the next decades, you’ll wish you really were.

“Punishment is supposed to be rotting in prison. What happens on the inside to certain kinds of criminals - I don’t condone that. I usually try to be a bigger man than that.” Noah’s lip curls into a hard snarl. “But not for you.”

Noah pulls back, gathering his bearings. Even though he’d obsessed over that last encounter with Clay, he hadn’t planned out what he would say this time. He’d known it would be for naught. The red-hot rage would guide him.

That parting shot is good enough for him, but with a flash of thought, he leans back in.

“Stiles and Claudia will be together again someday. They’ll be so happy. God willing, I’ll be happy with them, too.” Noah smiles faintly. “But if I don’t end up there, that just means we’ll meet again. And that should terrify you way more than being behind bars or burning in hell without me.”

Noah glares at him for so long, the holding cell cloaked in total silence, that the seconds must be crawling by for Clay. It’s not uncomfortable for Noah, though. He feels it now.

Clay is the loser.

Inhaling through his nose, Noah spits near Clay’s feet. “Worthless piece of shit,” he hisses before turning his back on Clay for the very last time.

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Stiles is out for the afternoon with Scott, and Derek usually doesn’t come over in the middle of the day if Stiles isn’t at home. It’s a perfect time for Noah to take care of some personal tasks, uninterrupted and alone.

He pulls the volumes of thick photo albums out of the living room cabinets, approximating timeframes by looking at the first few pages so he can arrange them in chronological order. He’ll still go through them all, page-by-page, but there are certain periods of time that are more relevant than others.

It’s hard to look at old photos of Claudia and their family when he knows he’s going to alter some of them, but it has to be done. He’s not defacing. He’s salvaging.

She wouldn’t want any pictures of Clay around, either. Past versions of Clay don’t get to keep a
home in the albums, tucked away so close to the people that Noah treasures.

Clay mostly appears growing up or as an adult with just Claudia and/or their parents, but there are also some photos with the whole Stilinski family. Noah refuses to get rid of any pictures of Claudia, so he crops Clay out with straight cuts as much as possible. Even though the remaining portions are odd dimensions, Noah places the trimmed photos back in their original places.

There aren’t any recent pictures of just Clay and Stiles - not with cameraphones now, and regardless, Stiles hadn’t volunteered to be in any pictures with Clay since his return. The old photos of the two of them go right into the shredder.

It hurts to do that to Stiles, but Noah reminds himself that he’s not really shredding images of his son. He’s destroying the keepsakes of Stiles with his abuser. There’s no salvaging that, even after selectively cropping out.

Noah doesn’t remember the last time he saw Stiles look at any of the albums, but it’s bound to happen sooner or later. When it does, Stiles will obviously notice the modifications and extra white space on the pages. It’s one thing for him to see a cropped picture of his mom or him with his parents. The phantom of Clay’s presence lingers in what’s missing from the original 5 inch x 7 inch blocks, but he’s nowhere in sight.

But Noah can’t leave behind images of Stiles alone - not when Stiles will know what was used to be there. Just him and his rapist. And really, it doesn’t matter if the pictures were taken before or after the child abuse started. Keeping the “after” pictures is a non-starter concept. Not with whatever may have been going on in Stiles’ head when the pictures were taken. And it’s not much better keeping the “before” pictures of Stiles, back when he could smile and mean it, because he had no idea what the motherfucker next to him was going to do to him later.

It’s all too sinister. It’s unbearable. Noah doesn’t want to keep any mementos of Stiles’ time with Clay, and neither would Stiles. There are plenty of inarguably good photos of Stiles throughout the years anyway. He won’t miss these. He should never have to see them again.

Noah feels a tiny bit better once he’s done, but not really. After the CSU team swept through the guest room for any evidence, Noah hired two different sets of cleaning crews to thoroughly wipe out all traces of Clay, to the extent possible. Cleansing the family photos was the last thing Noah could think of to rid their home of that fucking fuck.

Excising Clay from the albums is easy and tangible. There’s a point to it, but it also seems pointless at the same time. How does it really help Stiles heal? Nothing about Stiles’ path to healing is easy. Very little of it is tangible. Is this all Noah is good for? Messing around with some pieces of paper?

He means every word of the promises he made, but if he’s too inept to make good on them, they’re just as meaningless as everything else.

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Noah hangs up his desk phone, the hearty congratulations and appreciation from Mayor Hadley still echoing in his ear. “Keep this up, and your re-election next cycle is all but guaranteed.”

Arresting the key players of an identity theft ring plaguing multiple cities is an important win, but that’s a bold statement, what with Beacon County’s history of unsolved, mysterious crimes. Even so, voters have short memories. It won’t take much more to push the message that Sheriff Stilinski is still the right choice to protect the residents.
The deputies outside his office are in great spirits as well, crowded around a table holding cartons of celebratory chicken wings, chips, and cookies.

Before he takes his first bite, Parrish sticks his head in Noah’s office. “You gonna grab some, boss? We couldn’t have done it without ya.”

“Yeah, I’ll be out in a few. I just gotta finish a couple of things first.”

As Parrish turns to leave, Noah motions to him to close the door behind him. Noah hunches over in his chair, only looking up when his computer dings with new e-mails. He doesn’t need to open them to know they’re more back-patting “attaboys.” It’s obvious from the subject lines.

Noah buries his face in his hands. “Fucking fraud,” he mutters.

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“How have you been sleeping?” Dr. Kendall asks.


“Why do you like it?”

Noah’s a heavy sleeper and he’s as tired as he’s ever been. Objectively, sleep is good. It’s a healing, restorative function for the body and mind, but there’s more to healing than basic physiology.

“I like being more aware of what’s going on.”

“Have you noticed anything?”

Usually, nothing’s going on. He lies awake in his bed, listening to everything but hearing nothing. Clay’s not sneaking into Stiles’ room anymore, so Noah doesn’t even really know what he’s so vigilant for.

He doesn’t see or hear anything, even when Derek is staying over. Stiles isn’t having sex with him, that’s for sure. Noah had believed it when Stiles first told him, and he definitely believes it now that he understands how complicated sex must be for Stiles.

There’s nothing to worry about, Noah supposes. Stiles isn’t being hurt. It’s not just that Clay’s gone - many nights, Derek is there, so Noah has that extra assurance of Stiles’ protection. But whenever Noah closes his eyes, he doesn’t feel any sense of peace unless he’s so fatigued he can barely make it to his bed.

How could he not know? Looking back, he sees the red flags. The most insidious kind of red flags. The ones that seem normal in real-time and only blink crimson in hindsight.

After Claudia died, Stiles had been withdrawn or unusually quiet sometimes, but Noah thought he missed his mom. Whenever he asked Stiles about it, he’d always get that answer back. Noah had no reason to doubt it was true because he’d felt just as much sorrow himself. He hadn’t stopped to probe for anything more.

Stiles doesn’t see it as a failure - not even now that he’s older and had more time to think about it - but for Noah, that’s exactly what it was. It’s not Stiles’ job to wave the red flags in front of Noah’s face. Noah can’t even speculate what Clay’s betrayal must have felt like to Stiles back then, never mind how sickeningly possible it is that it hadn’t even seemed like betrayal at first because Clay had convinced Stiles it was something else altogether.
But Noah? He shouldn’t have been living his life and sleeping at night when Stiles was being molested and raped.

“No,” Noah answers. “Things are fine. But I like being up to know they’re fine instead of assuming they are. I’m there for Stiles at night and when he’s awake. I’m fine.”

“Do you think you’re rested enough to perform your job duties?”

Noah rubs his face and laughs, empty and flat. “Apparently, I’m doing a bang-up job at work. Just closed a major case.”

“You don’t sound happy about that.”

Being an officer of the law serves a real purpose and Noah knows it hasn’t been in vain. Personally, though? It feels hollow. Clay knew he was in law enforcement and still hurt his baby. In his house. While he was home. Clay hadn’t been afraid of being caught by Noah. Even if he didn’t see Noah as incompetent, Clay didn’t think he was enough of a threat to indulging his repulsive desires. Once he started, he kept going because Noah hadn’t caught on.

“I’m thinking about retiring anyway,” Noah says. “I’ll finish up my term, but then I’ll call it a day. I won’t be working such odd hours anymore. There won’t be any risk of burning the candle at both ends. Nothing will keep me from being around for Stiles.”

Dr. Kendall tilts her head. “Is Stiles staying local after he graduates?”

“He’s thinking about it, but I don’t want him to do that just for me. I want him to go wherever he wants to go.”

“So if he moves away for school, what will you do after that?”

Noah shrugs. He hasn’t thought that far. Stiles still has senior year left and won’t have to make acceptance decisions about college until the spring. “I’m not financially ready to retire, whether Stiles goes to a cheaper school or not. I can always get a job in private security, one with a standard 8-to-5 schedule. I’ll figure it out. Maybe I’ll pick up and move closer to his college. Don’t kids love that? When they try to leave the nest, but the nest follows them?”

Scott Quinn will probably be out on parole before Stiles graduates in five years. What a fucking joke. Noah can make sure he never gets near Stiles once he’s released. Or maybe Noah will even keep a regular eye out on that shitstain himself. No reasonable person could blame him for that. An acceptable form of stalking must be surveilling your kid’s rapist like a hawk.

“It’s great that you’re so dedicated to Stiles, Noah. You two clearly have a very special relationship. But have you put any thought towards yourself?”

Noah’s brow creases. “Stiles was very concerned about how this has affected me, but we’re on the same page. We’re working through it together.”

“Are there things you can’t or don’t talk to Stiles about? Let’s make sure you’re addressing them. I sense a tremendous degree of guilt from you.”

Nothing that Dr. Kendall is saying is surprising, but Noah doesn’t know how to respond. The guilt is all-consuming. He can talk about it until he’s blue in the face, but it’s not going anywhere.

He extracts his wallet from his back pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “I’ve been making a list. I can’t help it.”
“What’s on this list?”

Noah heaves a long sigh. “The things I missed. What Stiles tried to show me. I missed it all when he was a kid. And then I let Clay back into the house all over again. The way Stiles reacted when he walked into the kitchen and Clay was there. How he would ask me about how long Clay was going to stay. He was sleeping over at friends’ houses until I told him not to do that so much. He was losing weight when he doesn’t even have weight to lose in the first place. I keep adding to the list when I remember something else. I can’t help that, either.”

“You carry this around with you,” Dr. Kendall observes.

“Well, I don’t know where I’ll be when I remember another thing, so …”

“I don’t think you would forget. So what would it mean to you to leave that list at home? Or to stop keeping it altogether?”

Noah shakes his head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because …” Noah shifts his weight, running his thumb along the folded seam of paper. “Because I can’t let it go. Stiles doesn’t get to. He doesn’t get to just ‘leave it at home.’ He doesn’t get to make it go away like that. All these things - they happened. They happened whether it’s in writing or not.”

“Yes, you’re right - the abuse happened. How do you think it affects you to keep this list with you? Do you think it helps? You or Stiles?”

“I … I don’t …”

“Noah, I’d like to try something, if you’re open to it,” Dr. Kendall broaches.

He nods in confirmation and she continues. “As you work through your grief, you have to process it within the context of all of your distinct identities - principally, as a father and as a sheriff. So if you’re comfortable with this, I’d like it if you came to our sessions, including the joint ones with Stiles, out of uniform. It may be inconvenient to change into street clothes if your appointments are right before or after your shifts, but I’d like to primarily focus on you as a father first. Your other roles are important, but let’s take it one step at a time.”

“Okay,” Noah says, looking down at his beige clothing and the glint of light reflected off of his badge. “I can do that.”

“There’s something else I’d like to show you. I’ve already asked Stiles if it’s all right for me to share this with you, whenever I feel it’s right.” Dr. Kendall opens a folder on the small table next to her chair and produces an index card. “This is from our very first session.”

Taking the card as Dr. Kendall passes it to him, Noah flips it over and reads Stiles’ handwriting -

_I want my dad to forgive himself. He’s the best dad. He didn’t do anything wrong and he couldn’t have done anything differently._

Noah cups a hand over his quivering mouth, tears falling down his cheeks. “How do I do this?” he asks, his voice thin and high. “This is what he wants, but I can’t give him this, either. I can’t do anything for him.”

“It’s for you, too,” Dr. Kendall says gently. “It’s a long process, but I have every faith that we’ll get
Noah pulls his shirt over a plain white one, securing each pair of buttons on auto-pilot. He’s never really cared about the aesthetics of clothes in general - must be genetic - but the beige color of the uniform has particularly suited him lately. It’s all very blah on the outside.

Standing in front of his full-length mirror, he makes sure he’s presentable enough as he tucks his shirt into his pants. Yeah, this is adequate.

With a frown, he fixes his collar. “Another day.”

He’s about to step away and reach for his keys on his bed, but stops himself while still in front of the glass.


So he forges ahead experimentally. “You’re the best dad.” Noah shakes his head before he even realizes it. “You didn’t do anything wrong and you couldn’t have done anything differently.”

He doesn’t believe it, though. They’re just words.

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The summer sun is dipping lower into the sky, so Noah and Stiles sit on the back porch to unwind. On the way out, Stiles grabs a cold beer from the fridge and pauses with the door still open. “Can I, too?…” he asks with a hopeful expression.

“Yeah,” Noah agrees. “Go for it.”

He’s a sheriff, but not a total stickler for the rules. It’s just one beer and Stiles isn’t driving.

“Thanks, Dad.”

They pop their cans open, side-by-side, as they share information about their respective days. “Hey, did you watch that youtube video I texted to you earlier?” Stiles asks.

“Oh, not yet. I didn’t get around to it.”

Noah had been busy at work, but he hadn’t forgotten and he had breaks here and there. He gets a little sensitive about watching videos on his phone sometimes. It’s dumb and he knows it, so he hasn’t mentioned it to Dr. Kendall. Or Stiles, so his son still sends him videos that Noah knows will be funny or cute or ridiculous. They’re nothing to be sensitive about.

But he still feels sick to his stomach about the videos Clay made. He’s not sure how the case would have turned out if the police hadn’t seized that evidence, but he doesn’t appreciate one bit that the videos existed to begin with. They existed because Clay wanted to look at those images and hear those sounds whenever he wanted. Making Stiles do those things hadn’t been enough for Clay. No, he’d wanted to relive the moments at will, too. He’d wanted to celebrate what he had done and how much he had hurt Stiles.

The sexual abuse happened. Nothing can ever change that, but the fact that Clay extended the life of
the assaults beyond his and Stiles’ own memories by filming them is coarse salt in the wound. Noah will never forget Stiles’ voice dripping with fear when he’d asked Detective Marino if Clay had shared the videos with anyone. They’ll never really know for sure, but the tech analysts don’t think so.

Stiles has been able to find some closure in putting Clay and Quinn behind bars, even though that isn’t the end of the trauma in the grand scheme of things. He still has to wrestle with the aftermath, but “at least” it’s aftermath.

If Clay had circulated the videos, the victimization and lack of control would never end. After being assaulted so many times by Clay and then being “shared” with a stranger, Stiles would have to live with knowing other strangers could watch him like that, probably getting off on it because they liked what they saw. Because they liked his pain or didn’t even recognize it as pain to begin with.

Locking Clay and Quinn away doesn’t do anything about faceless random people on the internet. Noah could be the Supreme Master of the Dark Web and he still wouldn’t be able to wipe every video or picture from anyone who had them.

The ensuing relief that Stiles doesn’t have to deal with that, on top of everything else, has minutely chipped away at Noah’s perpetually kindled anger. Even so, he’s desperate for their lives to get to a point where small victories are actually victories instead of lumps of coal.

“It’s a couple of cats play-fighting in a huge nest of yarn,” Stiles elaborates.

Noah takes a sip. “Sounds fun. I’ll check it out.”

Stiles’ mouth puckers to the right. “How’s it going with Dr. Kendall? You saw her a couple of days ago, right?”

Noah can’t even grumble a tiny shred internally about how perceptive his son is. It can be a thorn in his side (or someone else’s side, usually), but he’s thankful for life skills. “Yeah. It’s good. It’s good to take some quiet time to talk. I’m all about anything that can get me in a better position to help you.”

“It’s really hard, I know,” Stiles says. “Coming to terms with all of this … Because you can’t force it - there isn’t, like, a list of things you can do to make it happen. But it also doesn’t happen by luck or chance or some magic amount of time that’s passed. So you’re in this super weird place. But it does start to feel better, bit-by-bit. More like a yo-yo, though. For me it’s been like that, anyway. Some days are better than others. Is that how it is for you?”

Noah doesn’t really know about the “feeling better” part. The bits might be nanobits for him. “Something like that.”

Stiles hums and falls silent as he nurses the can in his hands. Noah settles into the calm until Stiles pipes up again.

“What I said at Clay’s sentencing … that I was going to take everything back. But I can’t. It depends on what I mean by that, I guess. I can’t actually get it all back. I can’t say that it doesn’t hurt anymore. And even if it didn’t, that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt before - like I didn’t feel that and it wasn’t a big deal. But I meant I’m going to take back everything that I can get back. I can still mourn what I can’t void out, but I can’t feed it like it’s this living, breathing thing. Because I’m the one that’s living and breathing.”

Noah’s cool blue eyes meet Stiles’ warm amber ones. “You’re a survivor, Stiles.”
“Yeah,” Stiles says. “So are you.”

“Stiles…”

“Dad,” Stiles says, shrugging with his left shoulder, “you were a victim, too.”

‘No’ is on the verge of flying off the tip of Noah’s tongue, but he sucks it back in and thinks it to himself instead. ‘No. No, you were the victim. You were preyed upon, terrorized, violated beyond belief. In isolation. I left you alone. I didn’t see it. I’m not the victim. I’m the bystander who did nothing.’

“How’d you get such a good head on your shoulders, kiddo?”

“I’ve had more time to think about this than you have,” Stiles says. “I know you think that sucks, because it does suck. But I didn’t even tell you until I’d gotten to a place where I could, so I’d already started to deal with things. And now I have you to lean on. But you can, you know, lean on me, too.”

Noah blinks a few times. He’s made a lot of promises about being strong for Stiles, but maybe he should be more open to being strong with Stiles. Noah has fought it whenever Stiles insisted they were supposed to take care of each other, but is that really weakness that has to be compensated for? Or is it one being pulled up more than it’s the other bearing the load?

“Oh, hey!” Stiles jumps up with a flourish. “I almost forgot. Derek and I tried out a recipe for caramel brownies while you were at work. They’re really good. Hold on, I’m gonna grab a couple.”

As Stiles disappears back inside, Noah closes his eyes and rests his head against the back of the chair. He tastes peanut butter and jelly on his tongue.

It’s as good as he remembers.

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Derek is a regular fixture at the house.

Noah finds it reassuring. Stiles is as fiercely independent as he’s always been and he’s legally an adult, but he needs support and love. From everyone, whether they know about what he went through with Clay or don’t.

Derek makes Stiles feel safe, so Noah has zero objections to his presence or revoking the previous limits on the overnight stays. Stiles can have whatever and whomever he wants. He could ask for anything and Noah would spare no effort or expense getting it for him.

At first, he’d thought Derek was “just” a boyfriend, except it turned out that Derek was the only one who had done right by Stiles. Even though every parental cell in Noah’s body wants to be by Stiles’ side constantly, he also doesn’t want Stiles to feel smothered or prompted into more PTSD than he’s already wrestling with. Derek’s companionship shares the coverage in a natural way that Noah has faith in and Stiles doesn’t find overwhelming.
Now, Derek is seen. Gone are the days of climbing through Stiles’ window and sneaking around at night. After Stiles told Noah about his dating life and Noah insisted Derek be upfront about his visits, Derek has entered through the front door as instructed. It’s felt different to Noah since finding out about Clay, though. Derek has always been coming over for Stiles, but Noah hasn’t always known what that meant. He appreciates it more than he’d ever thought possible.

Derek has his own key and lets himself inside. The neighbors recognize him as Stiles’ older boyfriend, waving to him out of familiarity. The “older” part isn’t important, but no one with functioning eyes would look at Derek Hale and think, “yeah, he must go to Beacon Hills High, too.”

When Noah notices things like how the slightly squeaky back door doesn’t squeak anymore, he knows it’s Derek who fixed it. Stiles has lived with that squeak for so long, it probably doesn’t even register for him anymore.

When there are new groceries in the kitchen that he didn’t buy, Noah follows up with Stiles or Derek so he can pay the right person back. More often than not, it’s Derek who went shopping, but he won’t hear of reimbursement.

“I’m eating a lot of your food in the first place,” Derek insists. “I’m just replenishing.”

After dinner one night, Stiles heads upstairs to change his t-shirt, the errant splashes of marinara sauce too prominent on the light gray cotton. “I know we’re going to sit in the dark movie theater,” he tells Derek as he runs off, “but I want to stop for ice cream, too.”

Ice cream seems to have some kind of special meaning for them. It’s very sweet. Innocent. Maybe Stiles can still experience some normalcy in teenage relationships after all.

Derek begins clearing plates off the table, but Noah takes the ones in his hands and carries them over to the sink himself. “Relax, Derek. Have a seat.”

Wordlessly, Derek obliges. Noah isn’t really sure if he interpreted that as an order from his boyfriend’s father or a friendly request.

“You don’t have to earn your keep in this house,” Noah says.

“Yeah,” Derek nods. “I know.”

Noah runs a stream of water over the dishes, but leaves them to be washed later and sits down next to Derek. The dishes can wait.

“It’s just kind of nice.” Derek shrugs. “Being around a family. I like to do things.”

“Sure.” And Noah really does get it. It’s already occurred to him that one of the biggest changes when Stiles goes away to college will be the reduced sense of day-to-day family. As much as their schedules often differ, they’re still very aware of the other person and how they share their space and their lives. “I like that, too. The give-and-take. Doing things and having things done for you.”

Derek’s steady demeanor breaks with a small, spontaneous quirk of his mouth. “Yeah, Stiles is a giver. No matter what else is going on, he does it without even trying.”

“You do a lot around here, too.”

Derek blinks, his gaze meeting Noah’s. “I like to,” he repeats.
“You’ve done what no one else could do, probably. He loved me too much to tell me.” Noah blinks back, but more labored. “And I understand that. I’m his father. But I will never stop being grateful that somehow, he knew he would come to love you so much he could tell you.”

“Yeah,” Derek says. He’s quiet, but it’s not awkward. “Me, too. I really love him, too.”

“Your parents would be so proud of you.”

Even though Derek is only 23, he’s still able to grow far more impressive facial hair than Noah ever has in his entire life. But dammit if he doesn’t look like a kid in this moment.

“I hope so,” Derek says, bobbing his head in a short, staccato rhythm.

Noah presses his hand down on Derek’s shoulder and squeezes. “I know so.”

Stiles was right. Neither of them were ever going to move past this by luck or chance. But as true as that is, Noah can’t help but think they got so lucky with Derek.

Well, Noah did. It wasn’t luck for Stiles, unless Noah counts Scott getting bitten as the dumb luck event that set everything in motion, including Stiles and Derek coming into each other’s orbits. But Stiles didn’t see Derek as an ally by accident. In their own way, they earned that mutual trust.

Without that, Noah doesn’t know where Stiles would be. Would Stiles have ever said anything? And if he had, at what price? What inconceivable thing would Clay have done to push Stiles so far over the edge that he had to confess to somebody else? Or would he be so physically hurt that he couldn’t hide it, no matter how hard he tried?

There are some things that Noah will never be able to do for Stiles, no matter how much he loves his son. There are some things that Stiles needs from a peer, a friend, a partner. A mate.

Without Claudia, it’s just been Noah and Stiles - the two of them against the world. Clay had been there, too, off-and-on, but he doesn’t count. That motherfucking scumbag doesn’t fucking count. So after they lost their true third nearly a decade ago, it’s been just the two of them.

Derek makes a pretty good third, though.

He belongs there.

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After Stiles comes home from a leisurely lunch with Scott, he’s in a video game mood, so he and Noah huddle together on the couch to play. Noah’s terrible at all of the games, regardless of whether they’re sports, fighting or adventure, but it’s totally worth it. Stiles is so animated and lighthearted next to him, throwing out all kinds of intermittent commentary.

“Dad, Dad, what are you doing?!”

“We should get your eyes checked out soon.”

“That was … that was actually good. Was that by accident?”

“I feel like you think this is Tetris.”

Noah stays with Stiles until he absolutely has to head upstairs to get ready for his night shift. He moves through his routine quickly, intermittently checking his watch, until he’s just about done.
Appraising himself in the mirror as usual, Noah smooths his hands over the front of his shirt and breathes in deeply. “Forgive yourself,” he says to his reflection. “You’re the best dad. You didn’t do anything wrong and you couldn’t have done anything differently.”

Noah has repeated this to himself at least once a day since he first started, but this time, it feels … okay. Not great, but he doesn’t feel like he’s full of self-serving lies.

He whispers the mantra again as he adjusts his belt. On his way out of his bedroom, he spontaneous detours over to his bedside table. Picking up the picture frame he’d laid face-down months before, Noah positions it back to the way it was, the smiling faces filling up the room again.

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“You’re wearing your uniform today,” Dr. Kendall says.

Noah nods in acknowledgment. “Yeah.”

He hasn’t worn his uniform to a therapy session in over a month. Sometimes, it’s because an appointment with Dr. Kendall doesn’t bookend a shift, but other times, he’s purposely worn different clothes as she had suggested.

Stiles doesn’t know anything about this and probably hasn’t noticed it during their joint sessions. Or he has, but he’s taken it at face value.

“He’s a pretty big deal,” Stiles jokes.

Noah plays along. “Don’t wanna brag, but I have my own reserved parking space.”

“So how are you two doing? Anything you’d like to share first?”

“School is starting up again soon,” Stiles says. “I’m looking forward to that. I haven’t been in school without this hanging over me in almost a year. Well … I guess more than that, all things considered.”

Noah grips Stiles’ hand. “It’s been a really long time.”

“Yeah, so it’s a fresh start,” Stiles says. “I can just throw myself into AP classes, applying to colleges, hanging out with Derek and everyone, stuff like that. And whatever else comes up.”

He sends Noah a sidelong glance and a knowing smile. They can’t advertise werewolves in front of Dr. Kendall, but Noah understands exactly what he means.

A part of Noah wants to shield Stiles from being hurt ever again, no matter the source. Threats from the supernatural world bring a different kind of chaos and pain, very real and sometimes irreversible. That’s as daunting as it ever was, but in some ways, it pales in comparison to what Stiles has fought through. Of course, Noah wants Stiles to be safe, but knows Stiles can’t live solely for that goal. With his best friend, boyfriend, and other friends fully embroiled, Stiles will never choose to walk away from what they might need. At least not for as long as he lives in Beacon Hills.

It really is Stiles’ choice. He’s the one who creates his path. Noah will always be there with him - physically or in spirit - but Stiles is in the driver’s seat.

He’s capable of doing anything. He HAS done anything, from harboring gut-wrenching secrets and laying himself out, raw and vulnerable, to a system he couldn’t control. Whether he was ten years old and alone or eighteen years old and bearing the strain of disclosure, Stiles got up every damn day and lived for so much.
There’s no reason why Noah can’t do the same. He has the ultimate inspiration.

Claudia deserves a million thanks for that. Things didn’t go her way in the end, but Claudia never stopped fighting, either. Stiles truly is his mother’s son.

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Noah’s cemetery visits have become more fluid as he pops in and out more frequently, the way he used to. He doesn’t have to mentally prepare as much.

After laying down a handful of fresh flowers, Noah takes a seat by Claudia’s side. “Stiles is doing okay. Hopefully you see it, too, when he comes by. He’s so grown up, Claudia. It’s so amazing to watch. I know it’s not all good. Which makes it even more amazing.

“He has a boyfriend. Derek. He’s probably told you all about Derek. You’d like him.” In spite of himself, Noah has to chuckle. “Maybe not at first. I didn’t. But Derek is a good man. He takes care of Stiles, but still lets Stiles dote on him. You know how Stiles is. He’s a protector, you know?”

Noah looks up at the clear, blue sky and then back to Claudia’s grassy home. “We’re doing better. So don’t you be worrying about us, okay? I thought about going to visit Clay now that he’s in the state pen, just once, just to see him there for myself, but I decided against it. It’s not worth it. We’re done with him. Please don’t think about him, either. As much as you can manage, that is. I know. I still do, sometimes. But think good thoughts for us instead.”

A few birds chirp by overhead as Noah nods to himself. “That’s what I’m trying to do.”

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The turning of the leaves in the fall are accompanied by parent/teacher conferences. They’re old hat to Noah, who’s heard the gamut about Stiles’ behaviors and accomplishments since the kid was in preschool.

Apparently, Stiles’ AP Chemistry teacher has been looking forward to meeting him. That’s a good sign, although Stiles’ third grade teacher had been insistent about having a conference, too, and she’d had a real air of “who spawned this undomesticated little creature?”

Mr. Watson actually requested that Stiles attend as well, so all three of them take a seat around one of the lab tables.

“ Sheriff Stilinski, I wanted to make sure you knew about Stiles’ exceptional performance so far. Stiles, you’ve really got a mind for science. You see things and think about things the other students don’t.”

Stiles blushes. “I like to solve problems. I guess I sort of see the problems and the lab experiments as puzzles.”

“Have you thought about pursuing a career in science? You could tackle problems all day long. I think you’d be great at it.”

“Kind of,” Stiles says, looking at Noah. “I’ve definitely thought about going into law enforcement, too. But maybe, like, forensics. Do you really think I could go all the way? AP Chem is just one class. I don’t know if I could make it past all of the biology and physics, too.”

Mr. Watson nods emphatically. “It’ll be challenging, but I think that’s part of why you’d like it so much. And with college applications due soon, I’d be more than happy to help you explore your
“What do you think, Dad? Should I try to fill your shoes, but as a lab rat trying to crack cases? Like, the coolest rat in the lab?”

With a grin, Noah ruffles Stiles’ already messy hair. He couldn’t be prouder of his boy who’s almost too smart for his own good, except that Stiles’ brand of smart is probably never really a bad thing. His intellect was probably just as important as his heart in surviving so much, no matter how hard it was and how impossible it seemed.

Before Noah can indulge his natural impulse to attribute that to Claudia again, Stiles turns back towards Mr. Watson. “My dad’s the best,” he says, “I’m just like him, you know.”

Stiles laughs and it sounds so pure. Noah glows with a soft smile in return.

Yes. Stiles is his father’s son, too.

Chapter End Notes

Similar to how Stiles and Derek found strength in the way they felt about each other and the way the other person saw them (back to the title “Your Vision Borrows Mine”), I wrote something similar happening to Noah and Stiles. He blames himself and feels so much anger towards Clay (and inwardly, too), but as he sees himself through Stiles’ eyes, that helps him move forward and gives him “permission” to do so.

Anyway, thanks again for reading! Nearly all of the chapters have been 25+ pages in Word, using Cambria font size 12. (I write in Scrivener, but export the compiled scenes into Word and then copy/paste into AO3 from there.) So after 19 posts, I’ve basically written about a ream of paper, which I can’t believe, and you’ve read about a ream of paper, which I can’t believe! I appreciate that so much!

And thank you for any comments and feedback! Until we meet again!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!