Cornerstone

by Vendelin

Summary

Suffering from PTSD, ex-Marine Derek Hale moves back to Beacon Hills to open a bookshop and find a calmer life. That’s where he meets Stiles, completely by accident. Stiles is talkative, charming and curious. Somehow, despite the fact that he’s blind, he’s able to read Derek like no one else.

Notes

MENTIONS
(this section will contain a whole lot of name dropping and me spewing love over the people who made this fic happen, so you can scroll past if you want)
people:
java-genie: thank you for the encouragement, for reading this fic in the middle of the night when I needed feedback and support, and for your military knowledge. <3
rizuno: Lis, who’s been cheering me on this entire time, who’s beta read and come up with suggestions. Huge thanks for sharing your your knowledge about the Marines as well. <3
attoliancrown: Beth, who stayed up with me at odd hours to word war during NaNoWriMo, because if you hadn’t this fic would’ve never been written. Thanks for cheering, thanks for being such a good friend <3
broodingsoul: JOSH, who is basically the entire reason this fic got finished in the first place.
You’ve read this fic so many times, over and over, from first draft to finished product. You’ve helped me so much with creating this fic, and been so supportive, and it would never have been what it is today if you hadn’t agreed to beta. And I probably wouldn’t have gotten to know you, for which I’m ever grateful. THANK YOU <3

foreverblue_navy: Beth, who asked me to write blind Stiles in the first place. It’s been an interesting process and I’ve had to develop my writing so much, thanks to your prompt. Thank you <3

avengingmidgard: Gab, who’s been my beta for years and years, and you always do such an amazing job!

vinterdrog: Carro, because you’re always so honest when you give me feedback.

maichan: Mai, because you wanted to do this collab with me, and you’ve also done some super great beta work. I’m forever grateful for that. However, your art is something extraordinary and what you’ve created for this story is just incredible.

tsuminubiara: Tsumi, because that one time you asked me if you could do art for this fic, and I told you that I had to ask Mai first. And then it turned into this threeway collab, and your pieces are just out of this world. But not only did I have a great experience collaborating with you, I’ve also gained an amazing friend. <3

NOTES
This fic began as a prompt from Beth (foreverblue-navy) who wanted Blind!Stiles where Derek reads to him. This then evolved into a story where Derek is a broken Marine, suffering from PTSD, who moves back to Beacon Hills to open a bookshop, and that’s where he meets Stiles.

It started out as my NaNoWriMo project, but then ended up taking me four months to complete the first draft. It never would’ve worked without the amazing support and encouragement I’ve had on tumblr, and especially the amazing people listed above.

I got a lot of inspiration from The Lucky One, with Derek’s incident with his nephew, for example, and some basics about his history in the Military. The story itself isn’t the same, however.

I’ve casually decided to ignore some of the canon birthdays and stick with others, just because it worked better for me.

FACTS/RESEARCH:
I’ve done research to make sure I treat these subjects as delicately and correctly as I can. However, I’m no expert on PTSD and even though I have quite a few Psychology courses on University level, there is still a possibility that I’m incorrect, no matter how much research I’ve put into this. Please feel free to point this out to me!

Since I’m not blind, and don’t actually know anyone who’s blind, I put a lot of time into reading blogs written by people who are blind (especially by people who weren’t born blind) and I’ve also watched Blind Film Critic’s YouTube videos religiously. I’ve also done some research about the medical aspects, but most of Stiles’ story is actually put together from many different people’s stories.

The quote Derek is referring to, concerning PTSD, is actually said by Army Veteran Daniel Somers. The full quote reads: “I am left with basically nothing. Too trapped in a war to be at peace, too damaged to be at war.”

Since I live in a country where we basically have no military, all facts in this story comes from java-genie and rizuno, who have a lot more knowledge about these things because of
family members in the military, as well as a general interest. Thank you!

Beth, who prompted me, also wanted a Braille Tattoo. I’ve done my best to find how these actually work, and I’ve used the solution/technique that seemed to be the best (surgical beads), according to the articles I could find. For obvious reasons, I decided to not describe the making of the tattoo, in detail.

(Blind Film Critic) http://blindfilmcritic.com/, (National Center for PTSD Home) http://www.ptsd.va.gov/,
Beacon Hills is the slow town it’s always been. Perhaps it has expanded during the last eight years, but it’s mostly like Derek remembers it. Some of the shops are still exactly the same as they were when he left.

It's different from New York, he realises as he sits in a small café next to the cramped art gallery. There aren't as many diversions demanding to be felt, seen, experienced. Not as much for his brain to handle. He is calmer here, less on edge. It doesn't feel like such an effort to go outside as it does back in New York, where he still jerks when someone slams the door to the cab a little too hard, right next to him.

Handling his dead uncle's paperwork takes less time than he counted on. Despite Peter being very little like himself the past years, he did manage to write a will, which makes the situation a lot less complicated. Derek and Laura are his only living relatives, and he left them an enormous pile of money and belongings they have no use for. Seeing the figures Peter's lawyer has written down for him makes him feel odd, like he's making money on someone else dying. Perhaps he should give it all to charity.

It's on his way back from the meeting with the lawyer to the small hotel where he’s staying, that he
notices the small music store cramped between a coffee shop and a flower shop. There’s a big sign on the door, cut out from cardboard with red, uneven letters forming the words: FOR SALE, with a phone number beneath them.

For a moment, he thinks of the piles upon piles of books his uncle has left him, the entire library from Peter’s house, the contents of which are substantial, and contemplates buying the store for his inheritance and selling them all there. Like a secondhand bookshop, except that he has no idea what books he would be selling. Perhaps he could set the price at a couple of bucks each. It would be a good way to get rid of them.

He pushes away the thought a moment later, deciding not to think about it. It's far off and he's only here for another couple of days before his flight home. He counted on this taking longer. Laura had asked him to go, when they had received the phone call from their uncle's caretaker. She didn't have time and Derek understands that, what with having a kid and husband, and a job. Derek has none of those things.

It's been eight years. He hasn't been back to Beacon Hills since he left for New York, for college, with the exception of that first Christmas. The gas explosion happened in May. He couldn't stomach going to the funeral, but he sends flowers to their graves for every birthday and holiday. He hasn't been to see them.
He calls Laura later, just to let her know what the will said. She just sighs when he starts reading his notes from the notepad to her.

“Derek, I don't care about how much money he left us.”

Derek shrugs. “I figured I should tell you anyway.”

“Tell me about Beacon Hills instead,” she says, and Derek can hear her shushing Josh, his nephew, on the other side of the phone. Old guilt tugs at his gut briefly, but he pushes it away.

“It's the same.” He looks out the small window of his room, on the people walking up and down the street below, and listening to the odd silence he's not used to. It's quiet. “It's all the same.”

Laura hums thoughtfully. “Figured as much. Do you like it?”

“Haven't really thought about it.” His gaze catches on a girl carrying a stack of books, and frowns to himself. “I walked past a shop today. It was for sale.”

“And?” she prompts.

“I entertained the thought for a while, that maybe I could sell Peter's books there. He left us the entire library.”

She hums again, sounding a little more pleased this time. “That's a great idea.”

“Not really. I don't live here,” Derek points out.

“But you could.”

Derek frowns again. He doesn't like when she uses that tone. Like she knows something that he doesn't. “It's not for me.”

“You don't know that until you've tried. You like books and reading.”

“It's not even remotely the same thing as owning a bookshop.”

He can almost hear her rolling her eyes. “I think it would be good for you.”

“I don't live here,” Derek says again.

“There's such thing as moving,” she points out. “It's not like you have a bunch of belongings you'd have trouble bringing. Or an entire life you'd leave behind.”

He doesn't. His apartment is sparsely furnished and the walls are bare. He doesn't even have a TV. The only people he spends time with in New York are Laura and her family. He’s tried reconnecting with college friends, but his life is so different from theirs. And asking someone from the corps to grab a beer with him is out of the question.

“Just think about it, okay?” Laura says.

Derek doesn't reply.

“I think it would be better for you. The pace is a lot slower there than it is here, and you might need that. Plus, your therapist thinks you need to start doing something with your life.” It's highly
unfortunate that Laura happened to be born before he was. She's taking the older sister role way too seriously for his liking.

“I don't want to.”

“Just think about it,” she reiterates.

Derek shuts her out for the rest of the conversation, but it's like she knows, because she starts talking about work.

◊

The thought haunts him.

It makes him angry, because he knows that's what she wanted all along. Every time he walks past the closed music shop, he glares at the sign and it starts to irk him when it's still there a couple of days later.

He hasn't told his therapist, nor has he asked for her advice, because he isn't interested in buying a shop. He doesn't want to deal with customers. At the same time, he knows that Laura is right. This place is better for him. He can feel it already, despite the fact that it's only been a few days. He's calmer now than he has been in a while, even though he's in a much better place than when he just had come home. Back then he couldn't even handle the sounds of gunshots from the TV screen.

He's more stable now, and the bundle of thoughts in his head, the mess of his reactions to things, are easier to deal with. Easier to make something out of.

Still, Beacon Hills is calm, slow-paced as Laura put it. He doesn't want to like it, considering the history he has here, but he does.

The sign is still there, hanging in the window of the shop, when he walks back from the café to his hotel room to pack up his things and take his flight home which leaves in a few hours. He stares at it for a long time, and then fishes his phone out of his pocket to dial the number.

It bothers him how easily manipulated he is by his sister.

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The shop doesn't cost him a lot of money. It's much less than Derek expected, and perhaps that's because it's located in Beacon Hills as opposed to New York, or perhaps it's due to the fact that the owner seems like she's been trying to get rid of it for ages and is sick of the place. He signs the papers fifteen minutes before he has to leave for the airport.

It surprises him when he comes back home and Laura isn't laughing in his face. Instead she helps him pack up his belongings and drives him to the airport a few weeks later.

“If you don't call me at least once a week, I'm coming down there to check on you, got it?” she says and pulls him into a hug that makes him feel a little uncomfortable.

“Got it,” he replies as she lets him go, and reaches out to ruffle Josh's hair. He still feels guilty about what happened with Josh just a little over a year ago, and wishes he could forget it. Somehow he knows that Josh hasn't forgotten either.

“We'll come visit whenever you want, if we're able, and you will come home for Christmas, or I'll send you all my bills.”
Derek just shakes his head, suppressing a smile, as he heads towards his gate.

Beacon Hills is still the same when he steps out of his cab. He really needs to get himself a car, because there is no subway to take or that many cabs available for him to hail around here. He'll drop by the car dealer during the week, as soon as he’s settled in.

The shop's previous owner had told him about the small apartment located above it, which he could get with the place if he wanted it. Something Derek finds utterly convenient. Dealing with real estate agents and the mess of apartment hunting isn't something he's up for. He received pictures of the apartment in an e-mail, and it looked fine. Still, he's nervous as he steps through the door. New places are always hit or miss for him these days. If it doesn’t work, it will never work. There is no in-between.

The shop is empty, but there is a layer of dust on the floors and the shelves the previous owner left behind for him. There is a counter with an outdated cash register on it, with a notepad lying next to it. A number is scrabbled across it, and when Derek compares it to the one in his phone, he recognises it as the previous owner's. Behind the counter there is a door standing open as if to invite him, and he can see a staircase on the other side.

Derek hoists his duffle bag onto his shoulder and fumbles in his jeans pocket for the set of keys, as he walks up the stairs. The steps creak slightly under his weight and the unfamiliar sound makes his skin itch slightly. He's used to the elevator in his apartment building back in New York.

The door to the apartment is ajar. It’s not very sturdy-looking and isn’t fit to be a front door. Derek assumes that he will have to use the shop's door for that. The place isn't big, just like she had told him. There's a small pantry, because Derek wouldn't call four cabinets, placed two-and-two opposite of each other, cramped up under the roof next to a small window, a kitchen. There is a real stove, though, and a turquoise combined fridge and freezer. The rest of the space is mainly just one large room, shaped like an L, curled around the pantry and the bathroom. The latter is fine, much better than Derek expected, but he still wants to shape it up a little. Floor heating would be nice.

He moves around, takes in the details, strokes the dust off the surfaces with his hand. The floors are dark hardwood with scrape marks from furniture. Some of them are imprinted, saying things such as fruit centrale and random years. Most of the walls are painted dull white, and there are a couple of holes in them from nails, for paintings he assumes. But one of them is a bare brick wall, and there is another which consists of multicoloured planks. The short part of the L, the bottom, has a sloping ceiling and a skylight. He figures that he can put his bed right opposite of it, enabling him to stare at something outside when he can't sleep.

Derek is certain that the apartment would have cost him another two or three zeros if it had been located in New York. It feels like it will work out, as soon as he's able to get settled in and get some furniture.

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It takes him almost the entire summer to get things set up. He gets the bathroom touched up, buys a Camaro and orders new furniture online. He doesn't help the delivery men to get the boxes into his apartment, but waves them off when they offer to put it all together. He needs something to do when he isn't filling the shelves in the shop with his uncle's books. He puts some of them aside; the ones he recognises from childhood or a few that he would like to read. The rest of them go up on the shelves; they are just things he wants to get rid of.

Sleeping is hard. His new bed is comfortable, but unfamiliar, only allowing him two or three hours of sleep at night, most of them filled with familiar nightmares. They don't affect him as much as they
used to, back when they weren't so familiar. Even though he still wakes up sweaty and sometimes screaming, they don't hold him hostage for hours afterwards anymore.

It's the beginning of August when he finally turns the sign on the door from CLOSED to OPEN.

A part of him had expected something to happen. As if there would be customers spilling through the door as soon as he sat down behind the counter. There is no one. It makes it easier to relax. He’s bad with people. It's not like he was ever particularly good at handling himself when people were being difficult, but since he’s come back from the war, he isn't very good at handling people at all. Ms. Morrell tells him that it's normal for his condition, but it makes him feel broken.

A couple of days after he first turned the sign, an older lady steps through the door and peers at him curiously. This is one of the reasons why Derek chose to leave this place to begin with – he isn't fond of all the curiosity among neighbours. The way they feel like they have the right to know everything. Back in New York, no one even looked at you twice.

She eyes him for a moment and Derek finds himself staring back. He should probably smile, but he doesn't.

“You're new,” she points out and cocks her head to the side, as if to evaluate him. Then her eyes grow bigger for a moment, as if in realisation. “No, you're an old one who has returned.”

Derek shifts in his chair. “Yes.”

“You're the Hale boy.”

He nods.

“It's nice to have you back,” she says and smiles a bit, before she disappears out the door again, without even as much as looking at the books.

Derek finds himself frowning over her appearance for the rest of the day.

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The shop is more frequently visited by customers after that. Not that that is saying much, because all in all, there are probably four of them a day. Derek assumes that the rumour about his return has spread. He spends his days reading, and decides to set up a bell at the door, connected to his apartment upstairs, to let him know when customers enter while he eats lunch.

Most of them exchange at least a few words, since that's what you do around here, but some of them do stay for longer chats. Derek isn't very talkative, but he gets through it. It's less hard now than it was at the beginning.

Time goes slow, and he calls Laura once a week as promised. As he hits the middle of August, he realises that he has had the most uneventful summer in years. It's been good for him.

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Derek looks up as the bell chimes over the door. He rolls his eyes when he notices a guy in big, square glasses, beanie and a plaid shirt walk through the door. With a dog. Derek doesn't know what it is with the people in this town and their dogs, but they bring them into the stores constantly. It happens at least twice a week.

“You're not allowed to bring the dog into the store,” he says and turns his eyes back to the book,
laying open on the counter. Kafka. Derek isn't convinced about his writing talents just yet.

In his periphery, he sees the guy tense up for a moment. “Where am I?” he asks, sounding a little cautious.

Derek rolls his eyes, sighs through his nose and glances at the watch on his wrist. For Christ's sake, it's not even past three in the afternoon. On a Wednesday. It's too early for anyone to be drunk. “In a bookstore,” he explains, and makes his voice the same as when he explained to Josh that he had done something wrong. When Josh was three.

“Oh.” The guy frowns and scratches his cheek for a moment. “I'll leave. I don't read books.”

Derek wants to glare, but he doesn't. Much. “Kids these days,” he mutters under his breath, and knows that he most likely sounds exactly like the lady who was in a couple of days ago and scolded him for having tattoos. This guy can't be more than five or six years younger than him, which means that he's out of high school, and therefore doesn't qualify as a kid.

The guy tenses even further and Derek decides to look up at him. He seems pissed off. Derek assumes that he heard that comment, because if it's about the dog, he needs to realise that not everyone loves your pet as much as you do.

“I'm blind, you idiot,” the guy snaps and it's the last thing Derek expected.

For a long moment, he is sure that the guy is lying – he's wearing regular glasses – but then he notices the harness on the dog, which looks like a golden retriever, and across the chest it says: Service Animal and on the side: Please don’t pet me. I’m working. Derek feels incredibly stupid.

“But you wear glasses,” he points out, instead of saying anything that is remotely close to an apology.

The guy gets this look on his face, like he's talking to a lesser intelligent being. “People with perfect vision wear glasses, too. Welcome to the twenty-first century, dumbass.”

He is out the door before Derek can say anything else. By far, this is the most eventful day he's had since he came here. He wonders if this could get filed under discrimination, since the guy apparently is blind. He didn't think blind people looked at you when they spoke, but perhaps that's nothing but his prejudice speaking.

Sighing heavily to himself, he decides to forget all about it.

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Two weeks later, to the day, the guy walks through the door once more. The dog is with him again, and Derek notices now, for the first time, that there is a small version of the Captain America shield on its harness.

He clears his throat awkwardly, trying to make sure that the guy knows that he's there. Eyes flicker in his direction instantly and Derek stands from his chair, pushing it away loudly. He realises that he's being ridiculous a second later, but it feels like he has to make a lot of noise.

“Hey,” the guy says after a moment, and Derek wonders if he should have said something first. Perhaps that would have been the polite thing to do. He shouldn't be this uncomfortable, since he’s been around men and women who have lost limbs, who have severe external and internal damage. Strangely enough, that felt nothing like this.
“Hi,” he replies, clearing his throat again, because his voice sounds rough.

The guy scratches his jaw and looks like he's contemplating something. “I just came to apologise,” he blurts at the same time as Derek says:

“I shouldn't have said what I did.”

The guy's mouth twitches. “I just came to apologise,” he says again, slower this time. His hand opens and closes on the handle to the dog's harness. “And for bringing the dog. Again. It's kind of a package deal: where I go, he goes. Oh, well more like the other way around, actually. I guess I could've brought my cane instead, but it makes me feel blind.”

Derek blinks. He isn't sure if it's supposed to be a joke, but the guy smiles tentatively a moment later and Derek guesses that it was. It's kind of funny. He huffs.

“It's fine,” he says. “I didn't notice. The first time. That it's a guide dog.”

The guy is silent for a while and Derek takes to looking at the dog. Someone has penned a Captain above Service Animal on its harness. Derek huffs again.
“I'm sorry for lashing out at you,” the guy says. “I was confused. There used to be a music store here. I like music, and the guy who worked here before, I know him a bit. I've been away for a while, four months, so I didn't even know that the place was up for sale. I thought I'd drop by to hang out with my friend, his name's Isaac by the way, so I was just kinda thrown.”

Derek stares at the rapid movements of the guy's mouth while he's talking. His ears are already tired. This kid is worse than the middle-aged lady who constantly tries to get him to date her daughter.

“I bought it a few months ago.”

The guy shrugs. He's silent for a moment and Derek feels severely awkward.

“I'm Stiles, by the way.”
"Derek."

Something flitters over the guy's — Stiles' — face and he smiles a little bit. "So, the talk around town tells me you're from New York."

Derek huffs. Of course people are talking about him. "Yes."

"They also make it sound like you're a superhero."

"I'm not. I'm a Marine. Was."

Stiles cocks his head to the side and Derek feels like he's being stared at. "Too bad," Stiles says finally. "I was hoping Steve could get a companion."

At first, Derek doesn't get who Steve is, but then the guy motions towards the dog, who's still sitting calmly at his feet.

"Sorry to disappoint."

Stiles gives him a wry smile. "It's okay. Steve has me. I have to get going, but it was nice to meet you."

Before Derek has a chance to reply, Stiles pushes the door open and disappears down the street. Derek scrubs his hand against his thigh for a moment, not sure how to react. He pulls the chair back in its usual place and grabs his book, which is still lying open on the counter, and tries to find the paragraph where he left off. He still isn't sure if he likes Kafka.

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It's a Monday when Stiles comes by again.

"Hi," Derek says awkwardly, once again feeling as though he has to make himself known somehow. Stiles smiles.

"Hey, Derek. What's up?"

Derek looks around for a moment. At the empty shop. At the new book lying in front of him. He started this morning and he’s already halfway through. It's a short one. "Not much."

Stiles takes a couple of steps towards him and there is an uncomfortable silence, before Derek remembers how to interact with people.

"You?"

Stiles shrugs. "Nothing much. I'm supposed to hang out with my buddy, Scott, but he's running a bit late, so I figured I could hang out here for a while, if it's okay?"

"Uh. Yes, sure."

Hanging out. Derek hasn't done that since college.

"Do you have a chair?"

Derek scrambles to stand up and puts the chair just beside the counter, next to where Stiles is standing. They're almost the same height, Derek notices, when he's this close. He reaches out for a moment, almost out of reflex, to grab Stiles' arm and help him sit down, but he stops himself halfway
“Do you need help?” he asks instead.

“No, I'm fine. Thanks.” Stiles' hand finds the back of the chair without much trouble, but Derek still feels like he should reach out and do something. He doesn't. It's obvious that Stiles doesn't need his help anyway, because he sinks down in the chair without trouble and Steve sits down next to him.

“He's very well-behaved,” Derek comments. It's easier to talk about the dog.

“When he's working,” Stiles grins.

Derek looks down at the silky-looking fur and the big, kind eyes. Then he looks back at Stiles, who has his hands clasped between his thighs and legs stretched out in front of him.

“So what're your and your friend's plans?”

Stiles shrugs. “We'll see. Probably eat a lot of junk food—“ he pats his flat stomach at that, “—and maybe talk a bunch of crap about people we know. And people we don't know.”

“Sounds good.”

“What do you do when you hang out with friends?”

Derek is silent for a long time, until Stiles starts fidgeting uncomfortably in his chair. “I don't really hang out,” Derek says finally. Truth is, he doesn't have that many friends. His closest ones are dead, or like him, too broken to function with other people properly. There is Laura, but she usually makes him cook for her and sits on his kitchen counter and complains about work a lot. Those days used to be Derek's favourites, but she's on the other side of the country now, so there are only phone calls.

“Right. I bet all your friends are still in New York.”

“Right,” Derek agrees quietly.

“You know,” Stiles begins and he's scratching his jaw again. “If you want to hang out sometime, you're more than welcome to tag along.”

“Thanks.” Derek folds the corner of a page to his book, but immediately smoothes it out again. He uses an old receipt to mark his page instead, and closes the book.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip and looks in Derek's direction. “Actually I don't know how old you are, so I'm sorry if we're like kids to you and you think we'd be boring and stupid.”

Derek shakes his head rapidly for a moment, before he remembers that Stiles can't actually see it. “I'm twenty-six. I don't think you're kids who would be boring and stupid.” His voice sounds stiff, but Stiles smiles all the same.

Derek allows himself to look at Stiles for a moment, at the brown of his eyes behind the lenses of his fake glasses, the splatter of moles across his face, and the tufts of dark-brown hair sticking up around his beanie. He has long limbs, wide shoulders and a slim waist. Today he's wearing a Superman t-shirt beneath a cardigan and the really slim kind of jeans that Derek can't wear because his thighs are too big. He gets irritated with himself for thinking that Stiles looks so well put-together for someone who can't actually see.

“So, you're the strong and silent kind, huh?” Stiles asks and it feels like he knows exactly what
Derek has been thinking.

Derek shrugs, but then sighs frustratedly to himself. “I guess. My sister used to be the one talking.”

“Can I ask you something?” Stiles looks serious suddenly and Derek knows this is when the questions about his time serving will come. They always do.

“Yes.”

“Would you mind if I came by to hang out sometimes? I don't really have a lot to do since I took a break from college, and not that many people seem to drop by here either.”

“I like it that way,” Derek says defensively and then he frowns down at the counter. “I mean, it's fine if you want to come by. I don't mind. Just don't feel like you have to.”

Stiles shrugs. “I don't. I just like talking to people who don't interrupt me much.” And then he winks. Winks. Derek didn't think anyone did that anymore. “Can I bring Steve?”

“Sure.” Steve is still sitting there, looking like he hasn't even moved a paw during the entire conversation.

“If it bothers you, I can leave him with my dad.”

“No, it's fine. You can bring him.”

Stiles nods to himself. A moment later, his phone rings and he has to lift his hips from the chair to be able to slide his fingers into his pocket and get it out.

“Hello?” Stiles greets, answering the phone, after thumbing the screen like he knows exactly what he's supposed to do. “Hey,” he says then, recognition in his voice. “Yeah, I'll be right there. See you in a bit.”

“That was Scott,” he tells Derek and stands up. Steve is instantly on his feet next to him. “He's done at work now. Thanks for entertaining me for a while. See you around, Derek!”

“See you,” Derek finds himself saying as Stiles reaches the door and disappears outside. He isn't sure how entertaining he was, but perhaps Stiles just wants someone to listen. Being used to listening to Laura, Derek doesn't mind.

The apartment feels silent and calm that night. A couple of ladies chatted his ears off the last hour or so, before he closed the shop for the day, making the silence up here feel like a blessing. He takes a shower, washing his hair thoroughly and quickly, before he takes a look at the sticky notes on his fridge – his version of a to-do list. There is nothing posted about today and he searches his memory for a moment, just to see if he can come to think of something he should take care of. Nothing comes to mind, and since it isn't on a sticky note on the fridge, it's nothing important.

He sinks down on his couch, sweats and worn-out t-shirt soft against his skin, and grabs the remote to put something brainless on. He likes music shows, such as American Idol, or The Voice. But he's wary of the movie channels, unless he knows what's on. Commercials are a pain, because they are unpredictable. Derek isn't as easily triggered anymore, but this is a new place for him, and he's still a bit on edge because of everything unfamiliar.

After checking a few channels, he settles for reruns of Temptation Island. They yell a lot, but it's nothing like war. And there's no immediate danger. The strangest part is seeing other people fuck on screen and not remembering what it's like. What it's like to feel like that.
It's almost two AM before he decides to try to get some sleep, and turns off the TV. The sheets are still crisp, even though he washed them a couple of days ago, and cool against his skin when he slides into bed naked. It took him a long time to feel comfortable not sleeping fully clothed. Now he almost has to. As if to make a point to himself that he's safe.

His meeting with Stiles has somehow set his head spinning. He suspects that Stiles hasn't always been blind, not with the superhero references on his clothes and on Steve's harness. Not with the way his eyes automatically turn in Derek's direction when they talk. He isn't sure. It's probably just his prejudice speaking again. Why wouldn't blind people know about superheroes? Derek doesn't want to ask Stiles about it, because he himself doesn't like to be asked.

It's almost five in the morning when he finally falls asleep. At least there are no nightmares tonight.

◊

Derek is beginning to slowly settle into his routine. He gets up at seven AM and works out for an hour and a half – a run through the biggest park and then strength training – and then he showers and eats breakfast, before he goes down to open the shop at ten. Then he continues to read his book, or starts a new one if he finished the last. He either buys lunch in the café next door, or heads upstairs to his apartment. Wednesdays means calling Laura and on Fridays he allows himself a couple of beers. On Sundays the shop is closed and on Mondays he goes through the shelves to see if he should put up more books.

He doesn't sell a lot, which is fine. It was never his goal anyway. With the inheritance from his uncle, and the money left to him by his family and their life insurance, he doesn't have to work another day in his life and still live well. Money isn't an issue. It is, however, easier to have his life back in routine again. Back in New York he could sleep for as long as he wanted, which often completely messed up his diurnal rhythm. Now, he has to wake up, even the days when he's barely slept more than a couple of hours. It's a pain trying to get himself out of bed those days. Even worse doing his workout routine, but it's easier to fall asleep at a decent hour the following night if he does. The only days he allows himself to sleep in are Sundays, since the shop is closed.

Stiles shows up sometimes and Derek gives him his chair, moving it to the same spot where he put it the first time. It's usually when Stiles is heading somewhere else, and sometimes he doesn't want to sit down, because he's only dropping by to say hi. Derek occasionally feels uncomfortable around him, feeling like Stiles has a different view on their relationship than Derek does. To Stiles, they seem to be friends. Derek isn't sure what to call it, even though it has become nice to listen to Stiles talk on and on about things Derek isn't involved in. It's become a welcome break during the week, when Stiles spends a few minutes with him.

This morning, however, Stiles walks through the door just moments after Derek turns the sign to OPEN and is just about to sit down in his chair.

“Hey, Derek,” Stiles greets a little hesitantly, as he steps through the door. Steve isn't with him today, which is confusing to Derek because, so far, Stiles hasn't dropped by without him once. There is a folded stick in Stiles' hand, however. It surprises him that it feels exactly like Stiles said that one time: his lack of vision is somehow more obvious now, with the stick in his hand, than with a guide dog by his side.

“Hi,” Derek replies and it looks like Stiles relaxes slightly. “You're here early.”

“Will it bother you?”

“No, of course not.” Derek pulls out the chair to its usual place and heads toward the back room.
“Just going to get another chair. I'll be back in a second.”

“I don't really have to sit down, you know,” Stiles says when Derek gets back, another chair in his hand. “My legs still work, even though my eyes don't.”

Derek shrugs, then curses inwardly because he never seems to learn. “It would be rude to leave you standing,” he amends.

Stiles is silent for a long, long time after sitting down. For so long that Derek starts getting uncomfortable and worried.

“Well, a bookshop?” Stiles asks finally.

“My uncle left me with an entire library of books I didn't want.”

“A reason as good as any, I guess.” But Stiles looks disappointed.

“I like reading. It's been...good for me.”

“I used to like reading, too,” Stiles shares unexpectedly. “I wasn't always blind, you know.”

“I know,” Derek says, before he can stop himself. “I figured.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Will you ask me what it's like?” There's a harsh edge to Stiles' voice that makes Derek frown.

“Do you want to tell me?”

“No.” A muscle in Stiles' jaw jumps, as if he's biting the inside of his cheek.

“Then I won't ask.”

A look flickers across his face, one that Derek doesn't recognise. Stiles falls back into silence, but it's less uncomfortable than before.

“I hate when people see me as a good deed,” Stiles mutters after a few minutes have passed.

Derek doesn't know what to make of that. “What do you mean?”

Stiles looks less on edge now. Kind of weary, but not upset.

“I was getting my morning coffee and I didn't bring Steve, because he's with my dad today. My dad loves Steve, so sometimes I just let them hang out. It's like grandpa and grandson time for them. So this dude comes up to me, even though I can handle myself just fine, saying: 'I'll help you' and grabs my arm and pushes me down in a chair, saying that he's done his good deed for the day.”

Derek doesn't know what to say.

“I get that people get insecure, you know, because they don't know if they should offer help or not. I'm not a dickhead. If you ask politely I'll tell you that I'm fine, because if I need help I'm comfortable asking someone. But I guess it's okay, people want to be nice and maybe some don't feel comfortable asking for help, so there are people offering it instead. But I feel so degraded and like they expect me to be helpless when someone just grabs me and pushes me down in a chair, like there's no way I
could do that on my own. How do they think I got there in the first place, you know?"

Derek doesn't know, but he has a feeling that it's a bit like when people find out that he's a veteran, and immediately thank him for his service, reminding him of things he's trying to forget. As if their gratitude would make anything better. Regardless, it isn't hard to see Stiles' frustration.

“T'm sorry you had to start your day like that.” It feels inadequate, but he has no idea what to say to make things better.

“I just left.” Stiles shrugs like it's no big deal, but his face says something different.

“It was very disrespectful of him.”

“Yeah, it goddamn was.”

They are silent for a long time. Derek doesn't know what to say, but Stiles looks like he's far away in thought anyway.

“Do you want a coffee?” he asks, when Stiles has been silent for almost twenty minutes. It takes him a second to remember that it might be a touchy subject, but Stiles looks up and smiles.

“Yeah, that'd be awesome.”

“I'll be back in a sec. They have good coffee next door.”

“You know, I'm perfectly capable of tagging along.”

Derek scrutinizes Stiles for a moment, trying to read if he's offended, but it doesn't look like it.

“Sure. If you want.”

Stiles gets up from the chair and stretches a little, like his back is stiff. Then he motions for Derek to come closer, which is a bit confusing.

“Come on. I'm just gonna grab your arm.”

Oh. Derek has seen that on the street sometimes.

“Is there something I should do?” he asks, when Stiles' fingers curl around his upper arm and dig into the sleeve of his t-shirt.

“No. You're going to walk like a step in front of me, and I'll feel when you're walking on stairs or, you know, if there's a curb or something.”

Derek feels bad for asking so soon after the shitty start of the day Stiles has just had, but Stiles doesn't look like it bothers him. Perhaps it's not something he expects people to know. Derek just has to be respectful about it.

It takes less than a minute to get inside the coffee shop next door, and people are staring at them. Derek's skin crawls and he resists the urge to pull his arm from Stiles' grip. It's obvious that they all know exactly who Stiles is. The girl at the register looks up, smiles at them briefly, and then returns to taking the order of the customer in front of her.

“What's good?” Stiles asks and Derek almost jerks away again, because Stiles’ mouth is almost brushing his ear.
“I usually just get black coffee.” He sees Stiles' smirk out of the corner of his eye.

“For some reason I'm not surprised. I'll just have a hazelnut latte, please, Gretchen.” Stiles directs his last sentence to the girl behind the register, now customer-free, who just smiles wide.

Derek shouldn't be surprised, but he is. Stiles must have recognised her voice when she was talking to the customer before them.

“Black coffee for you, Derek?” The girl, Gretchen apparently, asks and turns to him.

“Yes, please.”

Derek pays for the coffee, even though Stiles starts to protest.

“I asked you if you wanted coffee, remember?” he points out, when Stiles gets that edge in his eyes. He's suddenly worried that he's coming off as trying to make Stiles his good deed as well.

“Fine,” Stiles grumbles, but he looks warmer now. “Next time it's my turn, got it?”

“Got it,” Derek sighs.

Once back in the shop, Derek sits down behind the counter and Stiles on his usual chair. The silence is less tense now.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” Stiles asks suddenly and then quickly returns to sipping his coffee in a way that makes Derek suspect that he's trying to either come off like it's not something he cares a lot about, or perhaps he's just in need of a distraction.

Derek's mind reels, his body growing tense. “What do you mean?” he manages, finally, his voice stiff like a board.

Stiles points at his eyes. “The no-vision thing. The lack of sight. The blindness.”

“No.” Clearing his throat, Derek tries to pretend that he's talking to someone as familiar as Laura. “All your talking, though.”

Stiles chokes on his coffee, but he's grinning against the mug. “Asshole.”

Derek smiles to himself.

“Seriously, though?” Stiles insists.

“No,” Derek says again, feeling more secure with his answer now. However, he gets a skeptical look in reply.

“I don't know how to behave most of the time,” he confesses after a moment. “It's because it isn't familiar. It's like that with most new people. For me.”

Stiles leans back in his chair and chews on the plastic lid to his mug absentmindedly. “Thanks for being honest.”

“It doesn't mean that I don't want to be,” Derek continues quickly when Stiles frowns. “That I don't want to be more comfortable. I just...people.”

Stiles grins against his mug again. Derek feels like he's being the joke of something that he doesn't know about.
“Not that good with words?”

“It's either this or rudeness.” It isn't that Derek is incapable of stringing words together into sentences. It's that he isn't very good at doing it without saying something he doesn't necessarily mean. He used to better at this, but he's out of practice. It's harder to read people now than it was before.

“I think I'd like a bit of rudeness.” Stiles winks at him.

Derek is confused.

◊

“You don't have to feel awkward because you don't know,” Stiles tells him one day. He's fiddling with a Rubik's Cube, and has been for the past hour. The fields are all white, but there are symbols on them; dots in different formations. Derek assumes it's braille. It's kind of ingenious.

“I don't want to offend you.”

“It's not offensive not to know. It's offensive thinking that you know and do stupid stuff and then defend your actions with stupid arguments when someone calls you out on it, instead of just admitting that you didn't know and apologise.” Stiles licks his lips and his fingers trail over the squares of the cube, like he's trying to get the full picture.

Derek doesn't know how to reply.

“I'm not a dick. I know you're not trying to make me feel–you know.” Stiles shrugs.

Derek doesn't know.

“People can get hurt even if they know you don't mean it.” He thinks about his nephew for a second. He knows that Derek was in a bad place at the time, that Derek didn't realise it was him. He knows that Derek's brain told him he was in danger by reflex, because he'd been at war for too long to remember what it's like to not be in danger. It doesn't change the fact that the relationship between them hasn't been, and perhaps never will be, the same since.

“What are you worried about?” Stiles puts the cube down on his lap and he looks over at Derek expectantly.

“Nothing,” Derek replies automatically.

Stiles rolls his eyes.

Giving in, Derek mutters: “I don't want to be like the guy in the coffee shop.”

“Derek, let me tell you a thing.”

He knows instantly that this isn't going to end well.

“You're nothing like the guy in the coffee shop. You're the guy who tells a blind guy that he isn't allowed to bring his guide dog into the shop.”

Derek groans. Stiles looks like he's having a great time.

“You wear glasses!”

“I heard that it's a cool hipster thing.”
“Well, you heard wrong.”

Stiles snorts. “You wanna know something else I've heard from very reliable sources?”

“When you put it like that – probably not.”

“I've heard you're quite the hottie,” Stiles says, ignoring his input. “A tattooed hottie.”

Instinctively, Derek touches the tattoo of the Eagle, Globe and Anchor on his arm, just barely visible under the sleeve of his t-shirt. He rubs a hand over his eyes, hoping that a good answer will have turned up once his vision is clear again. But nothing.

“I'm curious about your reliable sources.”

“It would be unethical of me to expose them.”

Derek strongly suspects that it's one, or a few, of those older ladies who sometimes come by just to pinch his cheeks. He had no idea people did that anymore.

“This is where you tell me if they're right, or if I should sue them for lying.”

“I'm not the right person to make that call.”

“Utterly disappointing.” Stiles sighs, tossing the cube aside after a while and looks in Derek’s direction. Almost like he's waiting for something.

“Do you, like, order in books, too?”

“Not so far. Why?”

“No reason.” Stiles shrugs, but then he seems to change his mind. “Actually, yes reason. I was wondering if you could look up braille books or something. Maybe there are more available for you, because you have a store.”

“I could check. Are they hard to get a hold of?”

Stiles shrugs again. “It's more like the same situation people have when they wanna go to the movies and they live in a really small town. You know, where they only have one auditorium and it's not even in a real theatre, but in like a church's cellar or something. And they only show movies on Sundays and you have to wait like two years for them to get to your city, when everyone else has already seen it, and for some reason illegal downloading isn't possible. If you have really bad luck, someone's gonna say that it's for devil worshippers and you won't get to see it at all.”

Derek huffs out a laugh. “You could have just said: Yes, Derek, there aren't many to choose from.”

“I like creating a picture.”


“It's too weird. I mean, there's the same voice for every character. First there's this girl saying stuff like: 'Oh my god, Christian. You're so beautiful.' And then there's the same voice saying: 'I'm going to spank you now, Ana.' It's just weird.”

Derek feels like he's choking.
“I just miss it. Reading. I miss reading.” Stiles' face is turned in the other direction now. Away from Derek. Derek, who has never contemplated that reading isn't a given for everyone in this country. Up until now, he has assumed that some people love to read and those who don't like it deserve longer jail sentences if they ever commit a crime.

“I'll do what I can,” he promises and Stiles nods absently. Derek suspects that he's far away in thought again.

“Thank you,” Stiles says after a long while.

◊

Derek calls Laura that night. She sounds stressed, which means that he's going to try to cut the conversation short. This way, she won't have to feel bad for having other things to deal with.

“Made any new friends yet?” she asks and Derek can hear clatter of porcelain and pots over the phone. “One more, Josh,” she adds sternly. Derek assumes that his nephew once again has tried to escape eating the boiled potatoes.

“Derek?” she asks, when he hasn't replied.

“Sort of.” He isn't sure if he can count Stiles as a friend, but he's an acquaintance and Derek assumes that she wants to hear about those as well. “A few people drop by the shop regularly.”

“Great!” The other end is suddenly much more quiet. Perhaps she walked into another room. “Anyone you spend more time with in particular?”

Derek feels himself growing a bit defensive. He knows that she's trying her best to be interested in his life and supporting of him, so she wants him to tell her everything that's going on in his life. It feels like she's snooping, but perhaps she's just worried that they will drift apart.

“There's this guy who drops by a couple of times a week and hangs out for a while.”

“Tell me more about him,” Laura prompts immediately.

Derek thinks for a while, trying to collect the knowledge he has of Stiles. “He's younger than me. A bit. I'm not sure exactly how old he is.” Which is something that he hasn't even realised before. “He talks a lot. I guess he's nice to have around.”

“You should have a TV show marathon with him, then.”

“That probably won't happen.”

“Derek,” she scolds. “You have to try and make some friends. You need friends, no matter what you think.”

“He's blind. I don't think he watches TV shows.”

Laura grows dead silent on the other end and Derek can't help but smirk. It's not often she's at a loss for words.

“Oh,” she says eventually. Then the tone of business in her voice is back again. “Well, invite him over for dinner then. I assume that he eats.”

“Of course he eats,” Derek mutters.
“So cook him something nice. He deserves a three-course meal if he can stand being around you that often.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “Tell Josh I said hi.” And then he hangs up.

A couple of days later, Stiles sits on his usual chair and thumbs on his phone. He has earphones in and Derek has just come to the conclusion that Stiles is listening to music, when he lifts his phone towards Derek.

“What are you doing?” Derek asks and steps around the counter to look.

“Instagramming your face,” Stiles replies and thumbs on the screen before he says: “This is Derek. Period. If I managed to catch him on a photo. Period. He lets me hang out at his shop while he's not working. Period.”

Derek stares. He looks over Stiles' shoulder and sure, there are the words Stiles just said.

“Why are you wearing headphones?” he asks, when Stiles has uploaded the photo and locks the phone.

“I thought Siri reading my messages and comments on Instagram would be annoying for you.”

Derek is just about to say that he has no idea what Instagram is, when the phone says: “9:42 One new notification.” Stiles thumbs at the screen. “Instagram,” the phone says then.

“What? You didn't think blind people use Instagram?” Stiles asks and thumbs the comment on the screen. The phone speaks up again: “LydiaM: What a hottie. Should we be worried for your safety?”

It sounds ridiculous with the unnatural voice and the emphasis coming out wrong sometimes, but Derek can hear the comment perfectly.

“Cool, huh?” Stiles asks and locks the phone again.

“Yes,” Derek agrees, wholeheartedly. Cool doesn't exactly cover it.

“You want me to delete the photo?” Stiles asks and he suddenly looks a little cautious.

“No. It's fine. I think my sister would have a good laugh if she saw it. I bet I looked ridiculous.”

Stiles grins. “I didn't know you have a sister.”

“I do. Used to have two.”

Stiles' face falls. “I'm sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologise for.” It's Derek standard reply to comments like that. It's not that he doesn't think they mean it when they say it. It's more the fact that their apologies don't change anything.

“So your sister, is she still in New York?” Stiles looks a bit awkward, and perhaps he's feeling exactly like Derek does when he thinks he's offended Stiles.

“Yes, with her family.”

“You miss her?”
Derek shakes his head. “No, we talk once a week. I think she's more worried about me than I am about her, to be honest.”

This seems to spark Stiles' curiosity. “Why's that? You're a grown up.”

Derek frowns to himself, thinking about the times Laura has found him locked in his closet or huddled in a corner somewhere. It's been a long time since those days, but she is always worried that his situation will get worse again.

“I think she's just worried because I'm on the other side of the country now, and she wants me to make friends.” Derek rolls his eyes, and judging from the way Stiles smiles a little, the tone in his voice betrays his feelings about that more than a bit.

“I'm an awesome friend.”

“She thinks I should invite you over for TV show marathons.” It's meant as another example of Laura's ridiculous ideas, but Stiles lights up.

“What show?”

Derek frowns for a moment, unable to reply.

“I don't know. What shows do you watch?” he asks finally.

Stiles shrugs. “I'm not picky. It's not a show, but I'd like to watch the first Hunger Games movie. Scott tells me it's awesome.”

Derek doesn't know much about The Hunger Games, but he's seen the trailer and it doesn't look like a movie he should be watching. But Stiles looks so hopeful. “Okay. We could watch that.”

“Awesome.” Stiles gives him a huge smile, and Derek wonders for a moment how all of his teeth are so even. Perhaps he's had braces when he was younger.

“Do you want to eat something, too?” he asks carefully, suddenly remembering Laura saying that Stiles has earned himself a three-course meal. Derek won't make anything that extravagant.

“Sure.” Stiles nods eagerly. “Are we doing this at your place?”

“If you want.” It feels odd picturing Stiles in his apartment.

“Cool. Where do you live?”

Derek blinks for a moment. “Here, actually. Well, upstairs.” There's a strange tug of satisfaction in watching Stiles' eyes widen at his words.

“That's awesome. How do I get there?”

“You have to come in through the shop.” Looking around, Derek hopes to gain inspiration. “There's a door behind the counter with a staircase. To upstairs.” He rubs his face, trying to get his idiocy to disappear.

“There's a door with a staircase?” Stiles winks at him.

“You know what I mean.” Derek sighs through his nose.

“So, when are we doing this?”
“When do you have time?”

Stiles chews his bottom lip for a moment, as though he’s trying to remember his schedule. “Friday? I have to meet up with my dad first, but I'll come by after that.”

“Drop by whenever you're free.”

On Thursday, Derek cleans his apartment to make sure everything is in order. He's not a particularly messy person to being with, considering all his years in the military and not having that many belongings. He knows that Stiles can't technically see if his place is a complete mess or not, but it seems rude to invite someone over without cleaning properly first. It's annoying, because his usual cleaning day is Saturday.

Stiles texted him this morning to tell him that he's bringing the movie, something Derek had completely forgotten about up until then. He looks down at his list, scribbled on the back of an envelope, of things he has to get and things he has to do before tomorrow. He hasn't watched a movie with a friend in so long that he's worried that he's forgotten how it's done.

The place looks okay and he has prepared the meal for tomorrow. Scanning the apartment for a moment, he tries to think of things that could be a problem for Stiles. He ends up moving a lone plant from just beside the door to a corner.

< Are you bringing Steve? He texts Stiles, realising that he doesn't have dog food. Is he supposed to have dog food?

It takes almost forty minutes before he gets a reply. He has been watching the clock the entire time, worried that he won't get an answer before the store is closed for the night.

> If it's okay.

< Yes. Do I need to get anything?

> No I'll bring everything he needs as long as I can borrow a couple of bowls from you

< Sure

Some tension bleeds from his body. He texts Laura, asking for advice. She calls him less than a minute later.

“Advice for what?” she asks, skipping over the greetings completely.

“Have I forgotten anything?” He looks down at his list on the counter again.

She hums thoughtfully and then starts asking him questions, like she has a list, too. “Do you have food?”

“Yes.”

“Snacks?”

“Yes.”

“Movie?”

“No, but Stiles is bringing it.”
“His name is Stiles?”

Derek hasn't thought of it as a strange name until now. “Could be a nickname.”

“Better be. Something to drink? With and without alcohol?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“Condoms?”

Derek blanches. “What?”

“Isn't it a date?”

“No.” He frowns. “We're barely friends.”

“ Barely friends with benefits?”

“Just friends.”

Derek doesn't remember what attraction on any kind of level feels like. He doesn't mind having Stiles around. It's generally a nice break from his book and the calm of his shop, but Stiles has a habit of stirring up his thoughts in a way that makes it difficult for him to sleep at night afterwards. It feels like Stiles’ talking is still buzzing in his ears when he goes to bed.

“What are you planning on doing?”

“He wants to see The Hunger Games.”

“I thought you said that he was blind.”

“He can still like movies. He wasn't always blind.”

Laura is silent again for a long time. She sounds more serious than she has since the beginning of their conversation, when she says: “Are you sure that is a good movie for you to watch?”

“I don't know yet. I can't shelter myself forever.”

“Call me when he leaves tomorrow, okay? I don't care what time it is. I need to know you're okay.”

“Fine.” Derek knows that he sounds like it's a pain, but he's secretly relieved. Quite honestly, he isn't sure how he's going to react and it worries him.

He fidgets in bed that night. It's almost 3 AM and he's been watching reruns of Temptation Island, again. He wonders what time Stiles is planning on dropping by, if he expects dinner to be ready when he does, or if he wants to help with the cooking. Derek isn't sure if Stiles drinks alcohol, if he's even allowed to. Laura's assumption that it's a date makes him worry as well. There's a small, nagging voice in the back of his head, suggesting that perhaps Stiles thinks so too. Derek doesn't like to worry. His mother always said that he was constantly thinking too much about things, and she was right, but at the time it was more about girls and dates, than holding his life together. Perhaps she would be disappointed in him, if she had known what a wreck he turned out to be.

It's after five when he finally falls asleep.
Derek is tired and just wants to leave the shop closed for the day and go back to bed, when his alarm awakes him a couple of hours later. He shouldn't, because he needs to keep his diurnal rhythm, and sleeping however long he wants is only for Sundays.

Being tired also makes him more anxious, and along with barely knowing anything of the plans for today, or how Stiles sees things, his brain ticks rapidly. His morning workout makes things better, cleanses his head for a while, but close to noon things are worse again.

He refrains from texting Stiles, realising there's no real reason to. How Laura managed to talk him into watching a movie and eating dinner with someone he doesn't know, he has no idea. The more he thinks about it, the more uncomfortable he grows. They're not really friends, him and Stiles. He has no idea how old Stiles is, or what he does with the rest of his life when he isn't spending time with Derek.

Realising this makes him antsy, and his thoughts start ticking again.

It's almost closing time when Stiles walks through the door and Derek is so tired that he's sure that he could sleep for an entire day. Stiles, on the other hand, is smiling and he has buttoned his plaid shirt today. Steve is by his side and Derek has missed having him around a bit. Stiles usually takes his cane these days, for some reason.

“Hi,” Derek greets and watches Stiles' smile grow wider.

“Hey, Derek. What's up?”

“Just about to close the shop. I need a serious dose of caffeine. You?” His tone might be a bit clipped, but he's too tired to do anything about it.

“I'm good.” Stiles shrugs, but he looks less excited now. Derek notices the movie in his hand, when he walks past to lock the door and pull the window blind down. It's useless really, since he has a display window which anyone is perfectly capable of looking through, but it's routine.

“You hungry?”

Stiles seems to hesitate. “I could eat.”

He's very quiet even as they step through the door to Derek's apartment, and Derek isn't sure why things suddenly seem so stiff between them.

“So,” he says and blanks out for a moment. “I don't know– Should I do something?”

“With what?” There's a defensive tone to Stiles' voice now.

Derek looks around the apartment, briefly noticing that he hasn't made the bed properly when he left this morning. The covers aren't tucked beneath the mattress well. “Show you around.”

Stiles seems to hesitate for a moment, then the corners around his eyes soften somewhat. “Okay, yeah. I'm just gonna free Steve from his duties. He might get a bit jumpy, since he hasn't officially met you before.”

Derek is okay with that.

He watches as Stiles crouches in front of Steve, who's sitting obediently on the floor, and starts unbuckling his harness. Steve's tail starts thumping the floor more eagerly for every buckle that gets undone and Derek finds himself smiling.
When Stiles gets up, Steve stays sitting on the floor obediently, but he watches Derek with interest now, alternating with glancing up at Stiles, like he's waiting for something.

“Where should I put this?” Stiles asks, holding out the harness.

“Is the coat rack fine?” Derek asks. “It's just by the door.”

“That works great.”

“You want me to?”

Stiles hesitates again. “Sure.”

When Derek is back in front of them, silently wondering if things will be this awkward for the rest of the night, Stiles turns towards him. “Ready to get smothered in love?”

It takes Derek a moment to realise that Stiles is talking about Steve. He huffs. “I think so.”

Stiles does something with his hand, and in an instant, Steve is whining at his feet, rubbing his head against Derek's thigh.

“He doesn't get to do this when he's working, you know, so he's taking it all out when he's allowed.”

Derek crouches down and instantly gets a wet nose bumping his face. It surprises him a little, pleasantly so, that Steve doesn't try to lick him, but he keeps putting his nose against Derek's cheeks. His fur is soft under Derek's hands as he gently strokes Steve's head and flanks.

“He's a great dog,” he says softly.

It's a surprise when he feels Stiles' tentative fingers brush his shoulders and then curl more firmly around the muscle there. Derek wonders for a moment if he did something wrong for not showing Stiles where he is, but it doesn't seem like a problem.

Steve gets tired of him after a while, and trots over to the couch. He sighs heavily as he lies down.

“He's such a drama queen,” Stiles snorts.

“He takes after his owner.”

Stiles glares, causing Derek to smile. “Shut up.” There’s a beat of silence, and then: “Still wanna give me that tour?”

“Am I supposed to do it in a certain way?” He stands up and Stiles' hand slides down to hold his arm, like when they go to the coffee shop.

“It's not that important since I'm not living here, but it would be nice if you could show me the bathroom. I probably won't find it myself after we've been moving around here in a bit, but it would be good to be able to find my way around in there.”

“Of course.”

Derek always feels like he has to walk slowly when he's walking with Stiles. Something he has been told to stop with repeatedly – since Stiles isn't a senior citizen.

He shows Stiles the bathroom. It's rather small, so it isn't very difficult for Stiles to find his way around it. The toilet is almost right inside the door, and the sink is next to it. Stiles hums
appreciatively as he touches the cold porcelain, and nods to himself, as though he's pleased by this.

“Did something happen today?” Stiles asks as Derek shows him around the living room area, and at the same time contemplating if it's inappropriate to show Stiles his bedroom. Perhaps it would be rude not to.

“What?”

“You seemed really off when I got here.” Stiles motions in front of his face with his hand, mimicking something shutting down. Derek guesses that he must have caught the tone of his voice.

“I'm just a bit tired. Coffee will help with that.”

“Didn't you sleep well?”

Hesitating for a moment, Derek looks at Steve who's dozing off by the couch. “No, I couldn't fall asleep.”

Stiles nods knowingly. “I get like that sometimes, too. If you want to postpone, that's fine.”

“It's no problem. I'll just have coffee,” Derek repeats.

Stiles squeezes slightly around his upper arm, but Derek doesn't know if it's consciously or just a reflex.

“Derek, I don't want to intrude.”

“You're not intruding. I invited you.”

“Technically, your sister told you to,” Stiles points out.

“She's on the other side of the country – she can't force me to do anything.” In general, it's a lie, but not in this case.

Stiles looks like he's about to say something more, but then decides against it. “Okay, so show me the rest of you place.”

“This is it.”

“You don't have a bed?” Stiles quirks an eyebrow. Derek thinks he's mistaken when he finds it a bit suggestive.

“I do. I didn't know if you would think it's inappropriate.”

“I'm inappropriate,” Stiles says, as though that changes everything. He smiles. Wide. Derek resists the urge to duck his head, even though Stiles wouldn't know.

“For some reason I'm not surprised,” he says instead.

He halts in front of the bed, and it feels odd when Stiles reaches out to touch the covers. His fingertips dig into the fabric.

“It's nice,” Stiles says after a while, touching the lamp on Derek's bedside table. His fingers slide across the cover of a book lying there. Derek expects it to feel intrusive, but finds that it doesn't.

“How can you tell?” Derek asks and gets a smile in reply.
“Well, I can't judge your sense of colour matching, obviously, but it's nice for me. It's easy to get around. You're a neat freak, which I've suspected for a while, but this kind of proves my suspicions. I don't have to worry about stepping on some kid's legos spread over the floor or a bunch of stuff that wasn't there yesterday.”

“Uh. Thanks.” Derek isn't sure if it's meant as a compliment entirely, but since Stiles did say that his apartment is nice it would be rude not to say thank you.

“You're really not a talker, are you?” Stiles' smile is a bit secretive this time. “I thought you'd warm up eventually, but you're still like one of those vending machines that you have to shake violently or hump like a rabbit, to get something out of them.”

“You hump vending machines,” Derek states flatly.

“Ah. Used to.” Stiles is still smiling, as though this is nothing strange at all.

“There's not much to say.” Derek shrugs. “I don’t have a whole lot to tell.”

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” Stiles asks suddenly. “Other than the no-vision thing. Like, does Stiles in general make you uncomfortable? Yes, Derek wants to say. It's partially true. Stiles does make him uncomfortable in a sense. It could be because Stiles is the first person he has spent time with in a long time, except for his sister and her family. It takes some time getting used to.

Stiles looks worried about his silence, so Derek forces himself to speak.

“It's not you. I'm like this a lot. With most people.”

“I see. You know that you can always ask me to leave and if you think I'm annoying when I come by when you work, you can do the same, okay? I won't take offence. Well, maybe a little, but that's fine. It's just my pride you'd be hurting.”

“I feel so much more comfortable asking you to leave after such a convincing speech.”

Stiles cracks a smile. “You don't have to hang out with me, or put up with me, just because I can't see. It's not that I lack in the friends department. I just felt like maybe you need someone to hang out with, too.”

Derek wants to say no. He doesn't like when someone points out potential weak points in his persona. Laura would agree with Stiles, however. It has been nice having him around.

“I don't mind. It isn't as if I have a lot to do at work anyway.”

Stiles reaches out to grab onto his arm again. Derek looks over at Steve briefly, but he's still lying by the couch, now watching them with interest. Derek wonders what he's thinking.

“How you want me to set the table while you cook?” Stiles asks.

“Sure. If you want to.”

Stiles shrugs. “Yeah, I'd get bored waiting.”

Derek makes himself a cup of extra strong coffee as he starts on the food, needing to boost his energy. He doesn't have a particular interest when it comes to cooking, but he's all right and it's not like he can skip eating. Usually, he goes for something that mostly cooks itself, or gets take out, but
he thinks that tacos are easier when you don't know your guest all that well.

Stiles sets the table, asking where things are when he needs to. Derek doesn't interfere more than by answering them. Sometimes the porcelain clinks, as if the glasses accidentally bumps against the plates, but Derek does that himself regularly.

“What are we having?” Stiles asks. When Derek looks up, he's still standing at the table and he's holding up his phone. It’s talking again, and Derek suspects that he's posting something to Instagram.

“Tacos. I hope that's okay.”

“I love tacos.” Then he thumbs the screen and the phone's angular voice says something that Derek doesn’t quite catch, because his own buzzing with a text. Just as he types in the pin code, using his pinky since the rest of his fingers are greasy, he hears Stiles say:

“Eating tacos with Derek and I set the table. Period. How skilled am I? Question mark.”

Derek glances over at the table. It looks perfect. Stiles has even folded the napkins he found in a drawer into some kind of flower, and Derek doesn't think he would be able to do that even though he can see.

His text is from Laura.

> How's it going? Is he cute? Show me a picture!

Derek groans and locks the phone again, putting it back in his pocket.

“What?” Stiles prompts.

“My sister texted me.”

“Is it bad?”

“It is this time.”

Stiles snorts. “Tell me what she said.”

“No,” Derek refuses. There's no way that he's reading that text out loud.

“Oh, come on, Derek! It isn't fair. I can't steal your phone and look for myself when you're in the bathroom.”

Derek hesitates for a moment. It feels like he's being mean if he doesn't tell Stiles what it says, since he can't look for himself. On the other hand, Derek's texts are his.

“She's just asking how things are going,” he amends at last.

“Tell her that you're starving me to death.”

Rolling his eyes, Derek returns to the stove. “You could've eaten before you came here.”

“You promised me food, dude. I love food. I had to make sure there's enough room for it.” Stiles pats his stomach.

“You're ridiculous.”
Stiles tssks. “I'm awesome.”

“What do you want to drink?” Derek asks, deciding to change the subject.

“What are you offering?”

Opening the fridge, Derek scans the shelves. He went grocery shopping just yesterday, but he's not sure what he thought about buying and what he actually bought. “Beer. Soda. Water.”

“Beer,” Stiles states firmly, but then he taps his fingers against the table. “I mean, unless you're not having beer.”

“I can have a beer.” Derek shrugs. It's Friday after all. “Are you old enough to drink? I don't want the police banging on my door because I have corrupted kids into underage drinking.”

Stiles rolls his eyes heavily. “Yeah, I turned twenty-one in January. And my dad's the Sheriff, so I think you'd be okay otherwise, too.”

“If your dad's the Sheriff, I have a feeling that things would be worse than if he hadn't been.”

“You're underestimating how much my dad loves me, man.”

He puts a beer in Stiles' hand instead of answering and places the food on the table.

“Are we going to do this twenty questions thing now or later?” Stiles asks as he slides down onto a chair.

“I didn't know we were doing that at all.”

“Dude. We know way too little about each other for two people who have been hanging out this much. You didn't even know how old I am. We have to fix this.”

Derek hesitates. Having people prying into his life is the last thing he wants, but he figures that Stiles is right in a way.

“You're free to pass any questions,” Stiles clarifies.

“I won't be able to come up with anything.”

“Okay.” Stiles drums his fingers against the table for a moment, before he lights up. “What about this then: I ask you questions, and then I have to answer the same question for myself.”

Derek hesitates. It's a good deal. That way Stiles won't ask too personal questions and Derek won't have to put up with the pressure of coming up with good ones. “Okay, fine.”

It's interesting watching Stiles put food on his plate. For a second, he has a minor internal freak out, wondering what he was thinking when he decided to serve a blind person tacos. They’re messy and he hasn't thought of that at all. The panic fades rather quickly, however, when he sees how efficiently Stiles is able to eat. A person who doesn't know that he can't see would likely not notice anything, but Derek watches in fascination how Stiles uses his fingers to make sure that nothing is placed outside the tortilla, or how he hooks his finger inside his glass to make sure that he isn't filling it up too much.

“Are you completely blind?” Derek finds himself asking.

Stiles pauses for a moment and Derek is instantly worried that he stepped over a line. Stiles was
supposed to be the one asking the questions.

“I'm legally blind, but not a hundred percent. I can see shadows and sometimes shapes on a good
day. Light messes up everything for me. Evenings work the best, because sunlight's a pain in the ass,
to be honest. It would be better if I was completely blind, because this is mostly just distracting.”

“Oh.” Derek doesn't know how to reply to that.

“Are you from New York?” Stiles asks. He wipes his hands often, Derek notices. Perhaps he's trying
to make sure that the juices from the minced meat isn't running down his hands. Derek usually
doesn't notice that until it's already running down his forearms and dripping all over his clothes.

“No. I grew up here. I moved away for college.”

“What did you study?”

“History.”

Stiles makes a sound of surprise at that.

“That was the plan, anyway. I enlisted in the Marines instead,” Derek clarifies. Sometimes it still irks
him that he never finished, but at the same time, there was never any doubt of what he was supposed
to do with his life after the fire.

“You didn't get a degree?” There is no judgement in Stiles' voice. Only curiosity.

“No.” Derek folds his tortilla slowly. “I only completed one year. After that, I signed up.”

Taking another bite, Stiles is silent for a while. “When did you come back?”

“Eighteen months ago.” It starts feeling more like an interrogation, so Derek clears his throat and
says: “I thought you were going to answer your own questions as well.”

Stiles makes a face. “I'm not from New York either—“

With a sigh, Derek wipes his fingers on the napkin.

“—and I went to Stanford. Still going, sort of. I just took a year off,” Stiles continues, with a small
grin that makes Derek sure that he fully intended to cause the momentary frustration.

Derek knows about Stanford. It's a prestigious college and Stiles must have had great grades to be
able to go there. It isn't a surprise, when he thinks about it, because there has never been any doubt
that Stiles is smart. However, Derek hasn't paid much thought to the subject before.

“What do you study?” he asks then, realising that he's been silent for too long.

“I'm majoring in music, science and technology. Yeah, I know it's a bit--“ Stiles motions with his
hand in a way that doesn't make Derek understand entirely what he means. “—but, as I said, I took a
year off.”

Derek is just about to ask why, when Stiles continues:

“Is it cool if I ask you about your years in the service?”

Frowning, Derek puts his food down on the plate before he's taken another bite. “I'd rather not talk
about it.”
“Okay, that's fine. We don't really know each other that well anyway.” It's said with a smile, which is a relief, since Stiles doesn't seem disappointed. “Okay, so I've been hanging out with you a lot, but I haven't really come across a significant other. Are you dating someone?”

The question comes as a bit of a surprise. “No.”

“Me neither. No one wants to date the blind guy.” Stiles says it as joke, but Derek strongly suspects that he doesn't find it all that funny in reality.

“You've never dated?” he asks carefully.

Stiles shrugs at that, looking oddly embarrassed. “I was weird first year of high school, and then—“ he points at his eyes, indicating the loss of his sight. “I've always been kinda odd. Odd looking, too. Too skinny and gangly and severely lacking brain-to-mouth filter. I had this huge crush on a girl for such a long time, but she was dating this douche bag and she still is, by the way. And then, my first year of high school, I realised that I'm more gay than anything.”

An expression Derek can't quite place spreads across Stiles' face, almost like he remembers something nice.

“I saw this dude, he was much older, but he was gorgeous. He threw a ball in my face the summer before I started high school, and I was thrilled, because I thought that meant that he'd noticed me, since he apologised and everything.” Stiles laughs and shrugs a little. “I'm pretty sure that he didn't even know my name, or even remember my face two seconds later. Back then, I was too much of a coward to ask anyone out and when I went to college, I kind of assumed that people would just say yes because they feel bad for me.” Scratching his cheek, he smiles apologetically. “Wow, end of monologue. Sorry.”

“I don't mind,” Derek says honestly.

“It's embarrassing.”

“No.” He isn't exactly sure if Stiles is referring to his lack of experience or his talking. Either way, he doesn't agree.

Stiles snorts. “How many twenty-one year olds do you know who haven't kissed anyone?”

“All of them.”

There's a strange satisfaction in watching Stiles' eyes grow wide.

“You're the only twenty-one year old I know,” he explains after a moment, and there's a second of worry before Stiles starts laughing.

“When was the last time you kissed anyone?” he asks then, abruptly switching the subject.

Derek thinks hard. It's been long, but there was Jennifer whom he dated briefly after his first tour. “Six years ago.”

Stiles' eyes grow wide once more. “What?”

“What.”

“Nothing,” Stiles says hurriedly, but he looks a bit dazed. “I just—okay. People keep telling me how hot you are, so I'm just surprised.”
Derek scrubs his hand over his face in frustration. He keeps getting the looks-card thrown at him, and he doesn't know how to react to it.

“Why, though?” Stiles asks then.

“I kept going back, signing up for more tours. And the interest just wasn’t there.”

Softness spreads over Stiles’ features. Derek hates when he gets unwanted sympathy. “You don’t have to pity me. I don't suffer.”

“That’s not what I meant, Derek.”

“Are you finished?” Derek asks, standing up. He wants to clean the table. Busy his hands with something. “With dinner,” he adds, when Stiles stares in his direction and looks crestfallen.

“Yeah, sure.” The look on Stiles' face as he pushes away the plate, makes Derek feel guilty.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” he says quietly as he takes the plate.

“It’s fine.”

He rinses the worst off of the plates and leaves them in the sink. Looking over his shoulder, Stiles is still sitting at the table, clutching his beer in both hands and running his thumbs around the edge of the bottle over and over.

Derek clears his throat and struggles to find something safe to talk about. His gaze stops at the bag of cheese balls. “Do you want snacks?”

Stiles just nods in reply.

When Derek puts the bowls down, he helps Stiles over to the couch. He's certain that Stiles would have been able to do it himself without much trouble, but the last thing he wants is Stiles feeling like he has to fumble his way to a spot that Derek can find in his sleep. Especially when things suddenly are so tense between them.

As soon as Stiles gets a hold of a bowl, however, he seems to turn more into his usual self. “I'm so excited! I've been looking forward to watching this forever. Have you seen it?”

“No, I haven't.”

“Awesome, then we can both be overwhelmed by its greatness.”

It's a bit odd to watch a movie with a voice explaining exactly what's happening on screen, but it's easy to get used to. The movie itself is okay at first. For quite a long time, actually. Just as he's starting to relax, about the same time as the games begin, his skin starts crawling. They have been uncharacteristically quiet, for being them, with Stiles not talking and not prompting Derek to engage in dialogue. He gets that it's because Stiles is listening, and the movie is pulling Derek in, in a way that he doesn't like. A part of him wishes that Stiles would talk more now, force his mind off of things.

They're sitting close together, since the couch isn't all that big, and Stiles' thigh barely touching his own suddenly makes him feel crowded and overwhelmed. Cornered. He tries to look out the window when the mass slaughter begins, telling himself that it's just a movie, but the movie voice is explaining everything so vividly to him that he can't escape it. He's seen and been in situations so close to this.
Curling his hands into fists, nails digging into his palms, he tries to make his nerves and senses focus on something else. But sweat is already breaking out all over his body.

Steve yips suddenly, drawing Derek's attention briefly, and Stiles' concentration seems to break for a moment. He turns his head towards Derek, who looks the other way, even though Stiles can't see it.

His t-shirt feels damps and plastered against his chest. It's made of cotton, but right now it feels suffocating. Pressing down over his chest, setting his head into a spin.

“Derek?” Stiles says, and his tone makes it sound as though he's been saying it a couple of times before. His hand comes up to touch Derek's arm. Tentatively, but there. Derek doesn't know if he has blacked out for a second mentally, or if this is the first time Stiles has tried to get his attention.

“Hey, Derek, you need to say something, okay? You're making me worried here.”

It takes Derek a second to realise that the TV screen is blue and the Blu-Ray turned off. He blacked out, then.

“Sorry,” he manages, voice sounding rough and unused. He winces when Stiles' hand touches his damp shirt, feeling as though it's betraying him.

“What happened?” Stiles asks, with a worried frown on his face.

“Sorry,” Derek says again, briefly noting Steve laying over his feet. “I should probably take a shower.”

Stiles opens his mouth and then closes it again, as if he wants to ask something, but then thinks better of it. “You want me to leave?”

“You don't have to. If you want.”

“I'm asking what you want.”

“You don't have to,” Derek says again, having no idea what he wants. His brain feels numb. Foggy.

“I'll stay then.” Stiles' voice is soft.

Derek nods absently, momentarily forgetting that Stiles can't see it, and locks himself into the bathroom. His fingers are unsure and he feels shaky when he undresses. He tries to go slow, to focus on his breathing, on slowly unwrapping the mess of thoughts in his head, putting them back to order. The water is a bit cold, but it makes him feel like his body is waking up from being turned off. At the same time, his senses feel hyperactive.

He doesn't shower for long. Even after he's finished toweling himself off, he still feels weak, like his body is trembling, but he feels better than he did before. He grabs his sweats from the hook on the wall, realising that he didn't think about bringing fresh clothes, and the t-shirt he wore for two hours yesterday. They will have to do. His jeans and t-shirt are left in a heap on the floor. Avoiding the mirror, he steps out of the bathroom. Embarrassment finds him as soon as he closes the door and he notices that there's a mug with steaming tea waiting for him at the kitchen table. Stiles has his hands in his pockets, slouching slightly where he stands.

“Sorry for going through your kitchen,” is the first thing he says.

“It's fine.” Derek is expecting questions, since Stiles usually has so many. To his surprise, there are none.
"I thought maybe you'd like a cup. I like it sometimes when it's late and I don't want coffee."

"Thank you." Derek sits down on a kitchen chair and stares at the mug for a moment. The rational part of him knows that it's just a movie, making him feel ridiculous. In addition to that, guilt comes creeping up on him, as soon as he remembers how excited Stiles was to finally see it. "Do you want to keep watching the movie?" he asks carefully.

"Nah." Stiles shakes his head rapidly, and perhaps Derek's reluctance is obvious. "I don't feel like it. That Peeta guy was kinda lame."

Derek smiles in spite of himself. He's pretty sure that Stiles will try to watch the movie as soon as he gets another opportunity, but Derek's also grateful that he pretends otherwise.

He drinks his tea in silence and Stiles doesn't say much, either. Steve rests his head on Derek's thigh and Derek's hand keeps finding its way back to petting the soft fur at the dog's neck. There's a huff and an accusing look whenever he stops, so Derek assumes that Steve isn't complaining either.

"He likes you," Stiles says suddenly.

"He's a good dog," Derek replies, more to Steve than Stiles.

"Yeah, he's a good friend."

Looking down at Steve, who raises his eyebrows at him, Derek can't argue with that. Their conversation is quieter after that, like Stiles has decided to slow down his talking speed and select his choice of subject more carefully. He still does most of the talking, but he doesn't corner Derek into answering questions or providing his opinion like he usually does. On a normal day, it's likely only positive that Derek is forced to use his words instead of body language, to re-learn how to interact with people socially in a way. Right now, he's grateful that Stiles seems to have a lot better social tact than he seemed at first.

It's dark outside and long past midnight when Stiles starts talking about leaving.

"You want me to walk you?"

It's a small town and Derek is certain that Stiles is fully capable of making his way home safely on his own. However, he wouldn't mind the fresh air, or the opportunity to know that Stiles really did make it home safely when he goes to bed later. Derek feels uneasy about the fact that Stiles could be an easy target for someone who wanted to hurt him.

"I'm not a high school girl you've taken on a date, Derek."

"I could use some fresh air." He shrugs. "I figured I could keep you company at the same time, if you like."

Stiles hesitates, brows drawing together.

"It's not because I think you can't walk home on your own, because I know you can. You do it every other day we spend time together."

"Ugh. Fine," Stiles sighs. "Steve will be thrilled, since he can have his night walk right now then, instead of when we've made it home to get my cane."

Derek looks down at Steve, who looks like he's half-asleep with his eyes closed and head resting heavily on Derek's thigh.
“I mean, if you're okay with the whole—“ Stiles makes a grabby hand gesture.

“It's no problem.”

Stiles smiles. “People who don't know me are going to think that I'm drunk probably.” This doesn't seem to bother him.

“Probably,” Derek agrees.

“Or that you're my hunky boyfriend who's walking me home after a super hot date.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “You seem caught up on my looks.”

Stiles winks at him. “I know what your biceps feel like. It's very promising for the rest of you.”

“You want to feel the rest of me?” It slips out before he has the chance to realise what it sounds like he's suggesting.

“Are you offering?” Stiles grins.

Derek scoffs, unsure of what to say or how to react.

Stiles lets out a dramatic sigh. “I guess I have to stick with the biceps, then. Such a hard life.” At that, he squeezes slightly around his bicep, as if for emphasis.

“Yeah, you look like you're suffering.”

Once they get going, Stiles is more social. It's as though the previous strain between them has gone away, and things are back to what they usually are. The streets are deserted, but Stiles clearly knows where he's going. Walking his usual half a step behind Derek, he gives firm instructions of where to turn and what streets to cross.

“Usually I count steps, because it's the easiest way to keep track of where I am. But when I'm talking to someone I give directions, because there's no way I have enough concentration to count and talk at the same time,” Stiles explains, like he's read Derek's mind.

“I thought Steve did that for you.”

Stiles snorts. “No, Steve has no idea where to go. I mean, if I said 'let's go home', he'd probably know, but it's not like he has a GPS in his brain. His job is to keep track of traffic and stairs and stuff like that, you know, but I had to go into training for like two months to learn how to work with him. It's more difficult than it looks.”

Derek has no trouble believing that.

Stiles lives quite close to him, just across the street from Derek's favourite Thai food place, which makes it a lot easier for him to remember where it is if he ever comes for a visit. The building is a three-storey, red brick building, and has a dangerous-looking fire escape trailing up the facade, mostly covered in ivy.

“Which floor is yours?”

“Three out of three. I like having a view.” Stiles winks at him in that stupid way that always makes Derek wonder how he's supposed to react.

“You want me to walk you upstairs?”
“Do I look like a drunk who can't walk on his own?”

“No.”

“There's your answer.” For a second, Derek is worried that he's said something offensive by mistake, but Stiles smiles. “Thanks for walking me home, though. I'm sure Steve appreciates it a lot.”

As Stiles lets go of his arm, Derek takes a step backwards, suddenly feeling awkward about the lack of personal space. “Thanks for stopping by. I'm sorry we didn't get to finish the movie.”

“Oh, please. I don't have a hobby. I can watch that whenever I'm bored sometime.”

Derek nods to himself, glancing up the building for a moment, wondering which windows are Stiles'. “See you around,” he says, when silence has been laying thick between them for too long.

“See you, Derek.”

Stiles disappears inside then, holding Steve's leash tightly in his hand and Derek waits outside, watching through the windows of the door. He just wants to make sure that Stiles finds the stairs all right. A moment later, he feels guilty, when he watches Stiles grab the railing just as if he was a seeing person. Derek should read up on things, kill his ignorance a bit.

◊

“Dude, why are there no good places to sit in this place?” Stiles whines days later, when the iPad he's been trying to balance on his thighs has clattered to the floor for the third time in as many minutes. He's been going through the messages on his phone at the same time, one earphone plugged in and the other dangling around his neck.

“It's not a library,” Derek points out.

“It's fine.” Stiles waves him off and then lowers his voice like he's sharing a secret. “I'm friends with the dude who owns this place. He's got a soft spot for me.”

Derek huffs out a laugh. Idiot.

“You can sit behind the counter if you want.”

“Ooh, can I play with the cash register?” The way Stiles' face lights up at that is highly amusing. “No.”

“Aw, Derek, don't be such a buzz kill.”

Derek just ignores him, but Stiles makes his way behind the counter anyway and steals Derek's chair. Sometimes Derek wonders if Stiles is actually blind for real.

“Really? You're going to steal my chair, too?”

“Why yes, I'm your guest.”

“I should kick you out.” He watches as Stiles plugs in another set of earphones in his iPad, putting one of them in his free ear.

“Stop un-guesting me,” Stiles mutters under his breath, concentrating on something else completely.
“That's not even a word.”

Yanking one earphone out, Stiles straightens the way he does when he's about to make up something ridiculous. “I'm all for linguistic progress. People should be able to make up their own words.”

“That wouldn't work.”

“Derek.”

He keeps quiet for the rest of the day. It's when Stiles is about to leave that he scratches his chin and looks like there's something he wants to say, but isn't sure if he should.

“This guy asked me out on a date.”

Derek almost drops the book he's reading. It irritates him, because he doesn't care if Stiles is dating someone.

“Great.”

“Yeah, he seems cool.” Stiles says it easily, but the way his fingers are plucking with the cords to the earphones is giving him away. “Says he's been checking me out for a while. He thinks I'm hot, apparently.”

“Good thing he asked you out then.” For some reason his voice sounds mechanical, even though he's happy for Stiles. He is.

“Yeah, I'm just nervous, you know. I don't know what to do on dates.”

As if Derek has a lot of experience with dates lately. “You talk about yourself. So that won't be a problem for you.”

Stiles tries to look offended, but he's failing miserably. “No, but honestly.”

Derek shrugs, closing his book. “Depends on what you're doing for your date.”

“Uh. Dinner.”

“Then you're going to talk a lot.” There's not much else you can do at a dinner.

“Okay.” Stiles shrugs, and then chews on his bottom lip for a bit. “Nothing more?”

“What do you mean?”

“When does the making out get into the picture?”

Derek fiddles with a bent corner of his book as he watches Stiles shift on his chair. “Depends. You can choose that yourself.”

“I just want to know what he's expecting.”

“He shouldn't expect anything,” Derek says firmly.

That earns him a dramatic sigh in reply. “Yeah, sure, he shouldn't. But what if he does? It's not like I have a whole lot of options if I don't want to be single for the rest of eternity.”

“Don't worry. You'll die before you reach eternity.”
Stiles throws a book at him. It hits Derek straight in the chest, but luckily it's a thin paperback.

“Oh god, sorry. I didn't think I'd hit. I never hit.”

Derek grabs the stress ball Laura sent him in the mail last week, and throws it at Stiles' head. Stiles flails and glares, but he looks like he's trying to suppress a grin.

“Oh great, you're that guy. The guy who throws stuff at the blind dude. *That* guy.”

Derek just rolls his eyes.

“Honestly though. Help a friend out here.”

“You shouldn't do anything you don't want to do. That's all the advice I have for you.”

“Maybe I *have* to, if I don't want to be single.”

“It's better being single than having to do things you don't want to do.” *Trust me,* he wants to add, but refrains from it. Stiles would just ask. He asks about everything.

“That's easy for you to say. You're not the blind, gay virgin.”

“No, I'm not.”

Suddenly Stiles grins. “It would've been a real plot twist if you had said yes there, actually.”

Derek smiles a little to himself. “It would. Could be my secret identity, for all you know.”

“You're Daredevil.”

“I don't think he's either gay or a virgin,” Derek points out.

“Oh please,” Stiles scoffs. “Look at his costume!”

“What about it?”

“One: it's like leather or something, and his mask looks like it's taken from a bad BDSM act. Two: no one gets laid in a costume like that.”

Derek is a bit startled by his own laugh; sudden, loud, carefree. Stiles is laughing too, and he looks like he's proud of himself. He soberes quickly, however.

“Honestly, though.”

“I *am* honest. Things will just end badly if you do things you don't want to do.”

“And what if I get there and I do want to, and I don't know how.”

He tries to think of what Laura would say. She's always been much better at these things. “Everyone's been there at some point. He'll have to show you the ropes, if he knows them. If he doesn't, you can figure it out together.”

“That's stupid. You sound like those people who try to be sex-positive and teach teens to respect themselves and stuff.”

“Such bad people. They should burn in hell.”
Stiles laughs, making Derek smile to himself.

“So, when's the date?”

“Friday. I'm nervous.”

“You'll do fine,” he promises.

The entire Friday, Derek feels oddly twitchy. Things instantly become even worse when Stiles doesn't drop by or text him. Somehow, he feels replaced, against his better judgement. Not exactly sure what his place was to being with. It's not like he wants to date Stiles himself, so it isn't jealousy. He just feels uncomfortable about the whole thing.

He's staring at the display of his phone, constantly pressing the home button to keep track of time. A nature show about sloths is on in the background, and it's almost nine. He still hasn't heard a word from Stiles.

For a moment, he thinks about sending a text. Just something casual, to ask about how the date went or how he is, when his phone beeps. It's a little past eleven by then. He's relieved for a second, but something chafing settles in the pit of his stomach as he reads the few words on the screen.

> I really like this guy :)

Derek doesn't know how to reply properly to that. What is he supposed to say, anyway?

< I'm happy for you. He settles on this at last. It's true. Of course it's true. Why wouldn't he be happy about Stiles finding someone?

He calls Laura, even though it's Friday. She answers on the second ring, and her voice is sleep drunk when she grumbles something as a greeting.

“Shit. I forgot what time it is.”

“It's fine. What's wrong?” she asks quietly, and he can hear her get out of bed, and then a door closing.

“Nothing's wrong.”

“Liar.”

“Nothing's wrong,” Derek insists.

“Okay.” It doesn't sound like she believes him. “How are you, then?”

“I'm good.”

“Okay.” She doesn't seem to believe him now, either. “Did you have another movie night with your Stiles-friend?”

“No. He's on a date.”

Laura pauses for a moment. “I see. I didn't know he was taken.”

“He isn't. It's their first date.” There's a rerun of some Tonight Show episode put on mute on TV, and he watches the guest settle in the chair for a moment. He doesn't recognise her and he has no idea when that guy from SNL became the host, either, but he's out of the loop with most pop culture
nowadays.

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I don't feel anything about that. He can go on dates with whomever he wants. If he wants to.”

“Okay.” Laura pauses again. “Is the person he's dating nice?”

“I don't know. Haven't met him.”

“But does Stiles like him?”

“It sounds like it. Well, that's what he texted me right before I called you.”

Laura hums at that, as though something just became much clearer to her. He hates when she does that. Especially if he doesn't get the same epiphany himself.

“Isn't that good, then? Since you're not interested in him.”

“Maybe I'm just worried,” Derek admits, thinking that that's probably why he's been feeling odd the entire day.

“I know, but he's legally an adult in every sense of the word there is, right? He has to make his own decisions and mistakes.”

“It doesn't have to be a mistake. Maybe this guy's the one for him.”

“Isn't that a good thing?” Laura asks again.

He asks himself the same question. Because isn't it? She babbles on for a while, as though she knows he's tuned out to dig through his own thoughts. She hangs up on him twenty-five minutes later, and there's another text from Stiles waiting for him.

> We're going out again next week :D

Derek shuts his phone off.
Stiles drops by the shop the next day. His visit comes with an odd mix of feelings. On one hand, Derek is somewhat relieved that he hasn't decided to stop coming by at all, because as someone who likes routine, Stiles' visits have become a natural part of his week. He isn't sure how he would handle suddenly not having Stiles around. On the other hand, Derek doesn't feel like hearing about last night’s date, but he assumes that he'll have to. They're friends. Friends do that for each other, he figures.

“Hey, Derek.” Stiles is smiling wider than usual.

“Hi.”

“How's it going?” Stiles sits down in his usual chair. Derek has stopped moving his own from behind the counter, and instead brought a second chair a few weeks ago. It's easier that way.

“Fine. You?”

“I'm awesome.”

And so it begins, Derek thinks.

“We went to this new Indian place, and the food was great. He was really nice and easy to talk to, and doesn't care at all that I can't see. He doesn't even ask me weird questions about it. Apparently his cousin is blind, too, so he doesn’t act weird or feel uncomfortable around me.”

Derek wonders absently if Stiles finds it annoying that he's sometimes still uncomfortable. Mostly because he doesn't know how to handle the situation, rather than Stiles himself. However, Stiles deserves someone who isn't awkward around him. Not that that has anything to do with Derek.

“That's great.”

“Feeling the enthusiasm flooding from you here,” Stiles says good-naturedly. “Can't you be happy for me? I'm finally seeing the end of my virginal state. You should be proud.”

Derek doesn't even reward that with a reply. Like Stiles' virginal state has anything to do with him.

Seemingly unfazed, Stiles keeps talking about the date. Too many details for Derek to care about, but Stiles already seems smitten and the guy does sound great, so he assumes that's a good thing.

“So, you wanna hang out again sometime?” Stiles asks suddenly, bringing Derek out of his attempt to count the books on the shelf nearest to where he's standing.

“Sure. Whenever you're free.”

“When are you free?”

“You know the opening hours to this place, so anytime except for then.”

Stiles snorts. “You make it sound like I'm the only person you hang out with.”

Derek doesn't reply. He's never been big on friends, but before his first tour, people tended to want to spend time with him and he accepted it. Now, he usually doesn't have enough mental energy to spend hours and hours, several days a week, with a large group of people.
“Saturday?” Stiles asks then, and his voice has an odd, cottony tone to it.

“Saturday works fine.”

Stiles sits quiet for a while. He has his earphones in and is scrolling on his iPad. He says a few words every now and then, probably having Siri write something for him, but he doesn't strike up conversation with Derek.

It's almost closing time when Stiles looks up and by then, Derek has almost finished his book.

“Is it normal to constantly text someone you're dating?”

“I have no idea.”

Stiles frowns for a moment. “You haven't dated?”

“I have,” Derek says awkwardly and concentrates on finding his bookmark to put in the book. “But it was a long time ago.”

“You make it sound like you're eighty.”

Derek doesn't say that sometimes it feels like he is.

“So what are the plans for Saturday?” Stiles is easy like that nowadays. When Derek doesn't answer, he changes subjects or does something else for a while, as though it doesn't bother him.

“I don't know. What do you want to do?”

Stiles shrugs. “TV show marathon? Something less violent this time.” Then he brightens considerably. “We're watching The Hunger Games on Friday, so you don't have to feel bad about that.”

It's not meant to hurt him, he knows that, but he still feels like a disappointment. It's just a movie. He can't even do that. “Sounds good.”

“Maybe you could pick something?”

“Sure.”

Stiles is silent for a long time. “You want me to go?”

“If you want.” Derek shrugs. He doesn't, but it isn't like he's been doing anything but text his date the entire time, and the few words spoken here and there is breaking his concentration on reading.

“Yeah, okay.” Stiles unfolds his cane and leaves.

Derek can't find it in him to ask him not to.

Stiles doesn't come back until Thursday the following week, and Derek has almost given up on him showing. He's contemplated sending a text to say that he's sorry, but he isn't sure what to apologise for.

He's had trouble sleeping the entire week. Falling asleep has been difficult; his brain just seems to never stop spinning, and the times he actually manages to, he's plagued by nightmares and wakes up every other hour. So when Thursday comes around, he's so sleep deprived that he's considering sleeping pills.
“Hey, Derek,” Stiles says and he looks like he's half expecting Derek to ask him to leave.

“Hi.”

It's good to see him. It feels comforting.

“How are you?”

Derek glances down at the big mug of coffee in front of him. “Okay.”

“Tell me what's up?” Stiles prompts as he sinks down onto his chair. It's still standing in its usual place.

“Trouble sleeping again,” he confesses.

Stiles frowns at that, clasping his hands between his thighs. “That sucks.”

“I guess. You?”

“I'm alright. Nervous about tomorrow and stuff.” Stiles gives him a one shoulder shrug and taps his forefingers against each other.

“Still feeling good about this guy?”

Stiles hesitates for a second too long, making Derek suspicious. “What?” Derek demands.

“It's the sex stuff. Makes me feel a bit weird.”

“What about it?”

“We've only been on one date and we talk every day and stuff, but it seems like he wants to tomorrow, and I'm just not sure.”

Derek watches Stiles for a moment. He looks anxious, fingers tapping unknown beats against his thighs, his cheeks, his phone. “Don't do it, then.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

Derek makes a sound of frustration. It feels as though he isn't reaching through. “It is easy.”

“In theory, yes.” There's a hopeless look on Stiles' face now. Like he's torn. “Like, how do you know if things are headed that way?”

“It seems like you've already noticed,” Derek points out, but he gets a shrug in reply.

“It's not the same. I mean, in conversation and in reality.”

“You know what it's like when you kiss now and then you'll notice the difference.” Derek doesn't mention anything about hands wandering, bodies pressing together, or loud panting. He feels queasy from just thinking about it.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip for a moment. “We haven't really kissed yet.”

“I thought you said he wanted to have sex with you next time.”

“He did. I mean, he does.”
Hearing that, doesn't make him feel any better. Even when things move fast, people tend to kiss at least once, if they have the chance, before they get into bed. Derek doesn't think things can change that much during a handful of years. “He knows that you're inexperienced, right?”

“Uh.”

Derek's heart sinks. “Stiles,” he sighs. “You should tell him.”


“It's not for his sake. It's for yours.” He scrubs a hand over his face, frustration making his skin prickle. It feels like his brain is swimming, with too much information and too many thoughts pulling him in different directions.

“I don't get why you care so much. It's none of your business, either.” There's a tick in Stiles' jaw, and he's clearly irritated. “It's not like it's a virtue and you have to protect it.”

“You're right,” Derek agrees, knowing that he's crossed a line. “I shouldn't interfere.”

“No, you shouldn't.” For some reason that seems to make Stiles even more irritated. “It seems like you're hoping that I'll stay single.”

“That's not true.”

“What? Was it better for you when we could be two socially maladjusted guys?” Suddenly Stiles' tone is harsh and Derek is more taken aback than he wants to admit.

“That's not it.” His brain scrabbles to remember how to handle situations like these, but he's drawing a blank. With Laura it's easy. He knows her limits and she knows his. With Stiles, it's different.

“You know what, I don't think we should hang out anymore. You don't want me to get somewhere. You just want me to be like you.”

Derek clamps his mouth shut. He isn't going there, knowing all too well that Stiles is baiting him and he's not going to fall for it.

“That's fine,” he says again, for some reason. It seems to anger Stiles more than whatever else he expected Derek to say.

“You're such an asshole.” Stiles disappears out the door faster than Derek expected. He's secretly grateful that Stiles has Steve with him today, because he isn't sure that Stiles would have managed that without walking into something with only his cane.

He sinks down in his chair behind the counter, when the door swings shut behind Stiles' retreating form. He feels strangely lonely. More so than he has in a long time. There's something definite with the way Stiles has left now. Like he isn't planning on coming back. No matter how fine Derek was with being alone before, it feels like something worth dreading now.

That evening, he watches nature shows again. He doesn't remember what it is about tonight, even though he's staring at the screen. His mind is too occupied by other thoughts. Calling Laura is out of the question, since she would get worried and they spoke just yesterday. After yanking a Post-it from the fridge, the one saying: Stiles, Saturday, he tries reading. It doesn't work either.

He ends up making a cup of tea, absently realising that he hasn't had any since Stiles was over at his place. Drinking it feels comfortable in a way, as though his mind becomes calmer with each sip.
He busies himself with going over his notes for Thanksgiving. It's still a ways off, but he wants to remind himself. There's a list of what to pack and a reminder to put up a note on the shop door, letting customers know that it will be closed during the holiday. Another sentence, scrawled at the bottom, reminds him to order flowers. He knows he could go to the graveyard himself, but he doesn't want to. It's been eight years, and he hasn't been there once. Still, it feels too soon.

It would be a lie to say that he misses New York, but as he thumbs through the album on his phone, he realises how much he misses Laura and her family. He feels a little less alone after scrolling through the pictures once more.

Going to bed feels odd, as though something's wrong. He doesn't know what, exactly, but perhaps it's guilty conscience for how his friendship with Stiles ended. Perhaps there was some truth to his words. It's possible that he wanted someone as maladjusted as him, so that instead of getting better, he would have an excuse not to. It seems reasonable for a moment, before he realises that even though Stiles is overly social and perhaps a bit too trusting when it comes to new people in his life, he isn't maladjusted. Having no sexual experience isn't the same thing. Being blind definitely isn't.

Derek stares out the skylight for a while. The sky is cloudy, so there's nothing but darkness out there. He knows nothing about this guy Stiles is dating, but it makes him uncomfortable that he seems to want to take things five steps further in one go. If Stiles had seemed up for it, he wouldn't care, but now it feels as though Stiles thinks that he's supposed to want it. Not necessarily that he does.

It's almost dawn when he falls asleep.

◊

Over a week passes without a word from Stiles. Derek saw him briefly from afar at the store the other day. He was with his dad, Derek assumes, because the man wore a Sheriff's uniform. He had decided to disappear between the shelves as quickly as possible, before Steve had a chance to notice him.

It's almost one o'clock Saturday morning, when his phone starts ringing, waking Derek from his trance-like state in front of the TV. When he sees Stiles' name on the display, he thinks about declining the call, but then decides against it.

“Hello?” he answers.

“Derek?” Stiles' voice is slightly high-pitched. Upset. Forcing Derek alert in a second.

“What's wrong?”

“I'm sorry,” Stiles breathes. “I'm sorry for what I said. I'm sorry for calling you so late. I don't have anyone else to call. My dad's out of town and Scott's back at college.” His voice is shaking and Derek thinks he might be crying.

“What's wrong?” Derek asks again, already pulling on a shirt and jeans.

“Can you come over? Please?”

Derek racks his memory for directions. For a moment he seems to be drawing a blank, but then he remembers that it's right across from his favourite Thai food place. Letting out a small breath of relief, he says: “Yeah, I'm on my way. Do you want to keep talking?”

“No, I'm okay.” He doesn't sound okay.
“See you in a bit,” Derek promises.

He might or might not jog down the street towards Stiles' building. He takes the stairs two at a time, briefly glancing at the name tags on the doors. It isn't until he reaches the last staircase that he remembers Stiles talking about liking having a view. The door says Stilinski, and there's a piece of tape covering the initial to Stiles' first name.

After pressing the doorbell, Derek stands there impatiently for a moment until Stiles finally opens the door as far as the security chain will let him.

“Hey, it's me,” Derek says softly. Stiles' face looks puffy, lashes spiky from tears, as though he's been crying. Derek's heart races like it's trying to escape his chest.

Stiles opens his mouth as if to say something, but then he closes the door again. Derek can hear him fiddling with the chain, before the door slides open once more.

“What's wrong?” he asks as soon as he gets past the door.

Stiles' hand trembles as he closes the door again, and locks it, making sure the security chain is back on.

“I–” he starts, but his voice breaks and he closes his eyes, as though he's trying to compose himself.

“Are you hurt?” Derek looks him over, but his clothes look unruffled and all visible skin unscathed.

Shaking his head, Stiles reaches out and Derek takes his hand without thinking.

“You need to sit down?”

Stiles shakes his head again and takes a deep breath. “No, I'm not hurt or anything.”

“What's wrong?” Derek asks for what feels like the billionth time.

“You were right.” There's a hollow tone of disappointment in Stiles' voice.

“About what?” But his mind is already reeling with suspicion.

“About Brian, the guy I am, was, dating.”

It doesn't feel the least bit good to have his suspicions confirmed. “Come on. Let's sit down somewhere.”

Stiles nods finally, and leads him through the hallway into a square kitchen with an equally square table. The cabinets are all opened, things spread haphazardly over the countertops. Some boxes are opened, tea bags and soup mixes scattered across the surface. Derek can't wrap his head around it.

As Stiles sinks down in a chair, Derek takes the one next to his, instead of the one opposite.

“It's...” Stiles trails off and gestures around the room. “I followed your advice last week. You know, said I wasn't ready yet. Probably sounded like some teen movie. He said he was fine with it, but, I don't know, I felt a bit weird around him. I said I wanted to get to know him more and he said it was alright.” Stiles shrugs, drumming his fingers against the table and Derek feels anxious waiting for an explanation. “Then today, I felt like I wanted to break things off, because even though he was fine with me saying no, I... it didn't feel right. So I told him that, and he got mad.” Stiles' fingers start drumming harder, distracting Derek from the hard look on his face for a second. “He got up and started doing things, and I didn't get what he was up to, but he just told me that he was cleaning off
the table before he left. I guess I thought that was okay, you know. I didn't really think twice about it. Just kinda thought it was understandable that he was upset but cool that he was civil, and stuff. So I went to take a shower, because I felt awkward around him, and he'd said he'd leave when he was done.”

Stiles takes a deep breath. “Then, I came back out and– and he had moved my things.”

It takes a moment for Derek to understand, just as Stiles continues to explain:

“I have everything in their respective places, because I need to know where they are. I can't see them, you know. I can't look for them, when I need them. I just...I know he did it on purpose. To make me feel helpless.” Stiles rubs a hand over his face, sucking in another breath. “Well, he fucking succeeded.”

It's been a long time since Derek felt anger. Felt anything extreme in any way, to be perfectly honest. Now, however, it feels like it's boiling beneath his skin. The raw feeling is so unexpected that it takes him a moment to find proper words. “That's disgusting.”

“I know I was mean to you. I said stupid and mean things. I'm really sorry. I've been thinking about texting you, or calling you to apologise, but it felt like–” Stiles scratches his chin and makes a frustrated sound. “–but it felt like I already ruined our friendship, you know. Thank you for coming anyway.”

Derek can't quite place the look on Stiles' face, but he looks younger than usual somehow, and suddenly he's not sure how to provide comfort. “Of course I'd come.” Looking around the room, at the mess of kitchen supplies and boxes of food, he decides to do something. He's better at that than talking. “I'll help you put your things back in place.”

Stiles' eyes widen momentarily. “You don't have to. That's not why I asked you to come over. I just don't want to be alone. My dad'll help me when he gets back.”

But Derek's already on his feet, eyeing the mess in the hopes of figuring out where to start. He tentatively grabs a box of crackers. “I want to. Just tell me where it's supposed to be, and we'll sort it out.”

Stiles slumps in his chair, reminding Derek briefly of that morning he came to the shop after the incident with the man at the café. “I've never felt this helpless before,” he confesses, sounding a bit reluctant. As if he's admitting to something shameful.

“You're not helpless,” Derek protests.

“Obviously I am. I need you to put things back for me and I can't even find my own tea.”

Derek glances down at the tea bags lying on the kitchen counter, wondering if he should offer making a cup, but then decides against it. “Needing someone else's help doesn't make you helpless,” he says quietly.

Stiles rolls his eyes, but Derek thinks it looks like he's smiling slightly, too.

It takes them three hours before the last container is back in its place and Derek has gone through every cabinet twice, to check with Stiles that everything really is where it's supposed to be.

Stiles has slowly come back to his normal self, making fun of Derek with a wink, or casually explaining why blue cheese is amazing on gingerbread cookies. Derek doesn't believe that for a second. When Stiles absentlly thumbs his phone for the time, learning that it's four AM, he looks as
shocked as Derek feels.

“Holy shit. I'm sorry.”

“You didn't force me to stay,” Derek points out, and looks over his shoulder when he hears Stiles drum his fingers against the table again.

“You want tea before you leave?”

Derek hesitates for a moment. It's late and he should be up in three hours for his regular workout. But it looks like Stiles doesn't want to be alone just yet. “That would be nice,” he agrees, against his better judgement.

He sits down as Stiles gets up to retrieve two mugs from a cabinet, oddly pleased when Stiles grabs two tea boxes from another. “What flavour? I have Russian Earl Grey and Vanilla-Rhubarb.”

“Either. It doesn't matter.”

Stiles sighs loudly and mocks putting his head in a cabinet and closing the door repeatedly. Derek gets the message.

“Fine. The first one.”

The boxes are slightly different in size and Stiles doesn't seem to have any trouble telling them from each other. He pulls out two bags and fills the electric kettle with water. Derek listens to the odd kind of sizzling, before the water starts boiling. He's never been big on tea before, but it seems to be something Stiles goes to for comfort. Derek remembers all too well how there was a mug waiting for him after his failed attempt with watching The Hunger Games.

“Thank you,” he says, when Stiles puts down the tea in front of him.

“Thank you,” Stiles says, and his knuckles are white against his mug, like he's clutching it tightly. “For coming over.”

“Any time.” It sounds awkward, but Stiles doesn't seem to care.

“I'm sorry for last week.”

Derek shakes his head. “You've already apologised. And you were right, I shouldn't have interfered. You should be allowed to make your own mistakes.” So what if he uses Laura's words? “He could've been right for you.”

“You're ridiculous sometimes,” Stiles says, smiling against his mug.

“My sister would agree with you on that.” Laura really would. He continues to drink his tea in silence and is surprised when Stiles does the same, until he puts down his now empty mug in front of him.

“You wanna hang out tomorrow? Uh, well, technically it's today.”

Derek accidentally takes a too big gulp of tea, and it burns it's way down his chest and stomach. The hot ache seems to linger. “Yes, sure.”

The smile he gets in return is wide, genuine. “Thanks for having my back.”

Derek snorts. “No problem.”
“If you want me to kick someone's ass sometime, I'll do it.”

He can't imagine Stiles kicking anyone's ass, so instead of answering, he just snorts again.

“Are you heading home, or do you want to crash here?”

“I need to head home. I think I forgot to turn off the TV.”

Stiles nods, tapping his fingers against his mug. “But you still wanna hang out tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, drop by when you're free.”

Thirty minutes later, Stiles sees him off at the door. He squeezes Derek's wrist tightly for a moment, before allowing him to leave. Derek isn't sure what that means.

“Where's Steve, by the way?” he asks, just as Stiles is about to close the door after him.

“Away with my dad. Brian didn't like him, so I was stupid enough to listen to that.”

Derek wants to say something to that, but it feels like he's swallowed too much tea in one go again. “If you don't want to walk home tomorrow, you're free to stay the night. Just bring whatever you need.”

“Dude, sleepovers like I did with Scott in first grade? I'm so down.”

Rolling his eyes, Derek says goodbye and walks down the first flight of stairs. He waits there for a moment, listening to the sounds of Stiles locking the door, just to make sure that he doesn't forget. It's five AM when he gets home. Two hours of sleep makes him even more tired than he was when going to bed, but he forces himself outside to do his regular workout anyway. He needs to stick to his routine.

Stiles drops by just before Derek is about to close up. There's a bag slung over his shoulder and his cane is in his hand. He looks tired, too, but relaxed.

“Hey, Derek,” he says as he walks through the door.

“Hi.”

“How tired are you?”

“Not as tired as I thought I would be,” Derek confesses. His workout gave him some energy and, on top of that, he's gone to the café next door for espressos three times today.

“How many hours of sleep did you get?”

“About two.”

Stiles stares for a moment. “Shit, I'm so sorry.”

“Don't worry about it.” He glances at Stiles' bag. “Are you staying over?”

Stiles pats it absentely. “If it's still okay.”

“I told you it was fine.”

“What do I know?” Stiles spreads his arms, shrugging. “It could've been your severely sleep
deprived brain talking.”

“It could have been,” Derek agrees, smiling to himself.

“So what's the plan? Is there a plan?”

“Pizza? TV?” There isn't a plan. It never crossed his mind that he should come up with one, but Stiles just nods eagerly, like he doesn't mind. Derek locks the door and turns the sign, then closes his current book and leaves it at the cash register.

They end up on Derek's couch with pizza and beers. Stiles looks at ease and relaxed. It's nice seeing him like this. He talks a lot, per usual, and perhaps Derek has missed his babbling a bit. They mostly watch sitcoms, because Stiles seems to enjoy them even though he can't see what's going on on screen. A couple of times he asks Derek, but he mostly laughs along with the audience.

“Reruns of Temptation Island up next. Do you want to watch that?”

Stiles hums and nods, sipping his beer. He laughs a lot at people's stupidity, which is something Derek can relate to. Then he grows uncharacteristically quiet when they start fucking on screen.

The second time a couple starts going at it, Stiles clears his throat and nudges Derek a little with his knee. “Am I interpreting this wrong, or are they having sex?”

“No, they are.” As soon as the words are out there, Derek feels odd looking at the screen, and settles his gaze just beside the TV.

“I wonder if it's more awkward for me, who only has the sounds to listen to, or for you, who has to watch, too.”

Derek laughs, flickering his gaze briefly to the screen again. “They're under a blanket. You can't see anything.”

“I guess we're basically in the same boat, then.”

Stiles' side presses against his own. Thigh against thigh, arms against arm. Their shoulders bumping. Derek wonders if Stiles has moved, or if he hasn't noticed until now how close they're sitting. There is a surge in his stomach that he doesn't recognise. He swallows heavily and glances to his side. Stiles' eyes are fixed on the screen, as if out of habit, and his mouth is slightly open. His lips look a bit swollen, like he's been biting on them again. Perhaps his ears are playing tricks on him, or maybe Stiles really is letting out a slightly unsteady breath as the girl on the screen suddenly gets a bit louder. His hands are clutched in his lap, the veins on his forearms clearly visible under his skin. The nails bitten and fingers long.

Derek's stomach surges again, and for a moment it feels like he's lost his breath. He's forgotten this feeling.

“Well, this is awkward,” Stiles says after a moment, and just like that, the spell is broken. Derek smiles to himself.

“You could say that.”

“I don't think a lot of people watch this with their friends.”

“Do you want to switch to something else?”
“Nah.” Stiles shakes his head. “I've dealt with awkward boners my entire life. I think I can handle them in your company as well.”

Derek swallows and his gaze flickers down to Stiles' crotch before he can stop himself. Whatever he expected to see, however, is hidden beneath Stiles' strategically placed hands.

He forces himself to snort, trying to not make things awkward. He gets a grin for his efforts, so it might be working. He feels a bit warm in his t-shirt and resists the urge to pull at it a little bit, to let some air in beneath the fabric. It's confusing. His body has suddenly remembered what want is, but it's as if his brain hasn't yet caught up. Perhaps it's in shock, considering that he hasn't felt anything remotely close to sexual interest in years. He can't even remember the last time he jerked off. It's out of question, of course, since Stiles just broke up with the other guy, whose name Derek has already forgotten, and since they're friends again.

There's something comforting with it, despite the slight frustration, however. It's like he's finally found a missing piece of himself. One that's been missing for so long. One that's a given for so many others.

They stay quiet until the commercial break, when Stiles turns slightly towards him. “Are you...” He trails off and clears his throat, for a moment. “Are you only into girls?”

The question takes Derek by surprise. Even though Stiles seems to be okay with asking whatever personal questions that come to mind, they've never touched sexual subjects concerning both of them. The question might not make it obvious, but Derek has a feeling that he knows where this is heading.

He shakes his head, feeling the heat spread up his neck. “No. Not only girls.”

“Oh.” Stiles clears his throat again, and scratches his cheek. “Have you ever been with a guy?”

“Yes.” It's been long since. Back in college, when things were a lot easier than they are now.

Stiles nods to himself, as though he's confirming something in his own mind. “Did you like it?”

“Yes,” Derek says again, feeling more secure with himself suddenly. He has nothing to feel awkward about.

Stiles nods again. It looks a bit stiff, and if the odd light from the TV screen isn't fooling him, Derek thinks Stiles might be blushing.

“I was thinking—” Stiles grimaces, hesitating, before he starts over. “I was thinking that I could get comfortable with someone I trust.”

Derek had suspected where this was going since Stiles' first question, but he's still surprised. He has no idea how to feel about this, because his body is telling him one thing and even though his brain isn't exactly protesting, there's a small voice in the back of his head, saying that this is a bad idea. “Okay?” he says, buying time.

“You know, practicing kissing. And maybe other stuff eventually.” Stiles scratches his cheek again and Derek wants to pull his hand away from his face. “Uh. With you. I mean, I understand if you don't want to, but I figured that I could ask.”

Derek rubs a hand over his face, frustrated with the lack of response from his brain. His body is stirring, blood flooding south from some realisation his head hasn't gotten yet. Maybe it's the sudden need to touch someone, kiss someone, that he physically wants, but just hasn't understood.
“It's just that...I feel safe with you.”

Something ticks in his chest, and he stops to look at Stiles for a moment. He looks nervous, teeth worrying his bottom lip and his thumbs engaged in some kind of wrestling match.

“I haven't been with anyone in years,” Derek confesses. “I'm not sure if I know how to make things work. If I could make them work.”

“I get that.” Stiles nods, eyes flickering in Derek's direction for a moment. Big, bright, nervous and somehow still hopeful. It's odd, for all the insecurities Stiles seems to have about his lack of sight and his inexperience, he has a confidence and courage to simply throw himself out there, that Derek doesn't have. That he doesn't think he's ever had.

“We could try. If we don't rush things,” Derek says finally.

“Just as friends.”

“Yes, just as friends,” he confirms.

Stiles swallows and nods. “Can I ask you something weird?”

“Go ahead.” Derek wants to say that he's already asked all the strange questions, and that one more won't make a difference.

“Can I touch your face?”

Still, it's not what he expected. And at the same time face-touching is something he's been thinking about, and assumed was simply another one of his misconceptions.

“If you want.”

Stiles nods and turns fully towards him on the couch, pulling one leg up under him. “I just want to get an idea of what you look like. Besides from what people tell me.”

Derek refrains from asking what people tell Stiles, because he most likely won't want to know. Instead he watches as Stiles stretches out his hand, palm up, stopping between them like he's waiting for something. It takes Derek a moment before he realises that Stiles wants him to take his hand and guide it to his face. He grasps Stiles' hand gently, always worried about surprising him, and then slowly places it against his cheek.

Stiles' eyes widen slightly, as his fingertips make contact.

“What?” Derek asks immediately.

“I just didn't expect stubble,” Stiles mumbles, mostly to himself it seems. Then, his second hand finds the other side of Derek's face, and he closes his eyes, like he's trying to create a picture on the inside of his eyelids. His fingers trail gently down Derek's jaw, thumbs grazing the underside of his bottom lip. Then they find their way across his face, mapping his eyebrows, sliding down the bridge of his nose, trailing his hairline. Palms rubbing his stubble, fingertips investigating the shells of his ears.
Art & Art by Maichan
Derek’s skin feels like it's buzzing, his head spinning rapidly and he feels a bit out of breath. Stiles' fingers slide down his neck, along his shoulder and down his arm, until he can grasp Derek's hand and place it against his own cheek. Derek watches as Stiles' eyes crack open, and then flutter shut almost immediately again, letting his thumb lightly glide over Stiles' mouth, gently pushing his bottom lip down slightly. He hesitates there for a moment, a part of him scared of the way his body seems to have gotten a hold of him, but then he gives in. He leans in slowly, knowing that Stiles will have plenty of time to pull away or stop him if he wants to. Instead, Stiles leans closer, meeting him half way.

He's a bit hesitant, mouth clumsy. But Derek goes slow, moving his lips gently, deliberately, letting Stiles catch on. It seems like his body remembers how it's done, better than his mind. Stiles is a fast learner, eager but accommodating. He lets out a low sound when Derek pulls away, and makes a small aborted move, as if stopping himself from following.

Stiles licks his lips slowly, seemingly unaware that he's even doing so, and opens his eyes. Derek can barely keep himself from leaning in again. The realisation makes his world feel like it's turned upside down.

"Wow," Stiles breathes. "I think that's the best first kiss anyone can ever ask for."

Derek's reeling mind stops with a screech. "First?" he echoes.

Nodding shortly, Stiles picks on his nails. "Yeah, I didn't really get to that part with Brian. I don't think he was into making out unless it turned into something more."

That draws out a sound of frustration from Derek. He hopes that he never learns who Brian is.

"Should I have said that before? I thought you knew."

"No, it's fine." Derek pulls back. Getting another beer will give him a breather, a moment to put his mind back in order. But Stiles grabs at his hand, before he can break their contact.

"Hey, Derek, don't regret this. Please. Just because I don't--because I haven't kissed anyone before."

"I'm not. I was going to grab another beer."

Stiles' fingers spasm against his wrist for a second, and then he lets go. "Oh, okay."

"You want one?"

Stiles reaches for the table and shakes his beer bottle when he finds it. "Yeah, thanks."

They keep watching reruns after that. Much to Derek's surprise, things don't get awkward, even though he expected them to. Stiles is the same, apart from the fact that he's sitting closer now. It feels okay. Usually body contact makes him freeze up, but he's had time to get used to Stiles. Compared to some of his fellow Marines, who use sex to distract themselves, Derek's already crossed one night stands off of his list of opportunities. Now, however, it feels like something's woken up.

Stiles starts leaning more heavily against him sometime past midnight, and when Derek looks down at him, his eyes are closed.

"Hey, do you want to go to bed?" Derek asks, nudging him carefully.

Stiles yawns, blinking sleepily. "Yeah, I think I'm ready."
“Clearly.”

Stiles pulls a face in reply and goes for his bag. It's still standing where he left it, right inside the door, because Derek has made a promise to himself to not move anything from where Stiles has left it. Yesterday was enough of a realisation.

“Hey, can I borrow some toothpaste? I forgot mine.” There are pajama pants and a t-shirt neatly folded on the floor next to where Stiles is crouching, and on top of them a toothbrush.

“Sure.” Derek hesitates for a moment. “It's on the bottom shelf in the cabinet.”

Stiles mocks a salute with his toothbrush, smiling, before he disappears into the bathroom. It's oddly pleasing seeing him find his way without much hesitation in his steps.

Derek changes into his ratty sweats and worn out t-shirt and sits on his newly-made makeshift bed on the couch. It's just a spare blanket and a pillow, but he's made do with less in the past. When Stiles comes back out, he's wearing plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt with a Star Wars print. He scratches his chin, eyes flickering around the room, until Derek accidentally bumps his knee against the coffee table.

“Am I taking the couch?” Stiles asks and walks over to his bag again, to put his regular clothes and toothbrush away.

“I thought you could take the bed and I'll sleep on the couch.”

There's a moment of hesitation, before Stiles says: “Yeah, okay.”

“Do you want me to show you?” Derek asks, wondering if he's rude for not offering sooner.

“It's there, right?” Stiles points in the direction of the bed. “Just past the bathroom door and then around the corner?”

It's impossible not to be impressed. “I can't believe you remember that.”

Stiles smiles then, looking proud. “I have to have a good memory, you know.”

“It's still impressive,” Derek says curtly and watches carefully, the muscles in his thighs tense, prepared to move if necessary, as Stiles makes his way towards the bed. He follows the wall, briefly touching the handle to the bathroom door, and then curls his hand around the corner when he reaches it. He slows down then, walking more carefully with an arm half-stretched out in front of him.

“How stupid do I look?” he asks just as his thigh bumps against the mattress.

“Not nearly as stupid as you think.” It's the truth. Derek is certain that he would look a lot more stupid if he was trying to find his way in a pitch black room. He figures that it's easier for Stiles in his own home, where he knows the space so well. Stiles crawls onto the bed, touching the pillows carefully.

“How stupid do I look?” he asks just as his thigh bumps against the mattress.

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“How stupid do I look?” he asks just as his thigh bumps against the mattress.

“Which pillow’s the best?”

“That one,” Derek says when Stiles grabs at it, and then watches as Stiles buries his face in it.

“Mm, yeah, it's awesome.”

When Stiles lets out a small, pleased sound, Derek realises that the sheets aren't exactly new. He's a terrible host. “I changed the sheets yesterday,” he says hurriedly. “But I slept in them last night. If
you want me to, I can change them. I forgot.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Stiles is already slipping beneath the covers and piling the pillows in the middle of the bed. “It just smells like you.”

Derek snorts, trying to push away any thoughts connected to the fact that Stiles doesn’t seem to mind that the sheets smell like him at all.

“As long as there aren’t jizz stains on the pillow, I’m fine.”

“There aren’t.” Even though he hasn’t been interested in anything sexual in a long time, not even masturbation, his body still acts on its own in his sleep sometimes. It doesn’t happen often, and he always changes the sheets afterwards.

“You could totally lie and I wouldn’t know,” Stiles mumbles, but he’s already burrowing deeper in the sheets, and seems about half-asleep. He looks at home there.

“I could.”

Derek settles against the couch cushions and the pillow from his bed, turning the TV on mute. He hasn’t planned on sleeping much, worried about having nightmares when Stiles is staying over. It’s been quiet for a while, when he hears the sheets rustle and Stiles clearing his throat.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

“Is that couch comfortable to sleep on?”

Derek doesn’t tell him that sleeping isn’t his plan. “I don’t know. I haven’t really tried.”

“Tell me something,” Stiles says and when Derek looks over, he’s playing with a loose thread he’s found in the pillow case. Derek hasn’t noticed it before, so how Stiles managed to even find it he doesn’t know.

“What?”

“I figured you have trouble sleeping and stuff. Because of things you told me.” Stiles shrugs, like he’s trying to make it sound casual. “Does it have to do with your time serving?”

Derek hesitates. “I guess.”

“Is it nightmares?” Stiles asks immediately.

Derek pauses again, unsure of how to answer, if he should answer. He doesn’t know Stiles all that well, when it comes down to it. On the other hand, Stiles was the one calling for help just yesterday. Derek’s mother used to say that for trust to be real, it has to go both ways.

“Usually,” he says, finally. “If I can fall asleep at all.”

Stiles nods to himself. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

He gets an eye-roll for that. “I can be sorry about things that aren’t my fault too, you know.”
Clearing his throat, Derek decides to look at the TV screen again. “If I'm lucky it will go away eventually.”

“Do you want to share the bed?” Stiles asks, forcing Derek's gaze back to him. “Just sleeping. No funny business.”

When Derek doesn't answer, he continues:

“Since you're used to sleeping here and not on the couch, I mean. And you're way too chivalrous to ever let me sleep on the couch. The bed's pretty big--“ Stiles spreads out like a starfish, as if to prove his words. “–we could totally fit.”

Derek has no idea what to say.

“I'll wake you up if you have nightmares. If you promise to do the same for me.”

“You have nightmares?” Derek finds himself asking.

“Yeah. Maybe I'll tell you about that sometime.”

That makes Derek smile slightly despite himself. Typical of Stiles to bait him with his own secret, just because Derek isn't sharing many of his own.

“Fine. But I'm taking back my best pillow.”

“Never.” Stiles tucks it under his arm and moves towards the other side of the bed, when Derek turns the TV off and sits down on the mattress. “It's mine forever now.”

Derek doesn't tell him that his best pillow is the one he brought with him to the couch. “Alright. Since you're the guest.”

Stiles looks utterly pleased as he snuggles into the pillow again, and Derek watches him settle in for a moment. He doesn't remember the last time he shared a bed with someone. Just for sleeping. To be perfectly honest, he isn't even sure that it's ever happened since he was young enough for slumber parties.

There's a moment of silence, before Stiles clears his throat. “Your tattoos,” is all he says.

“What about them?”

Even without turning towards him, Derek can feel and hear Stiles fiddling around on his side of the bed.

“I just sort of wish that I could see them, or even feel them, you know? But I can't.”

Derek thinks about apologising, but he's quite sure that's not what Stiles is after. “Do you want me to describe them to you?” he asks instead, feeling as though he's treading in deep water. Stiles grows still for a second, and Derek fears for the worst, until he says: “Would you?”

Nodding, Derek looks down on his arms and his chest. “Sure.”

The USMC, *Semper Fidelis* and The Eagle, Globe and Anchor are all fairly easy to explain, because Stiles has seen them on other Marines before. Even the *Death Before Dishonor* stretching across his shoulders is pretty simple. It's more difficult to explain on a safe, non-personal level about the personal information on his chest, or his family's names circling upwards on his other arm. Stiles doesn't ask, as though he's sensing that Derek doesn't want to explain, or perhaps he's not thinking
too much about the meaning behind them.

“Thank you,” Stiles says quietly, sounding sleepy, when Derek has finished.

“No problem,” he replies. “Do you want to know anything else?”

When he looks over, he finds Stiles smiling slightly, most of his face buried in his pillow. “No, that’s all the interrogation I have for you today.”

“Goodnight,” Derek says, but he feels a little lighter somehow, when Stiles mumbles something unintelligible in return. Derek still needs to get up and drink a glass of water over by the sink, before he’s able to go back to bed, however.

Stiles is already asleep, facing Derek’s side, one hand curled around the corner of his pillow.

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When he wakes up again, it's dawn outside. It takes him a moment to remember why the bed feels so warm, but then he notices Stiles' foot pressing up against his leg and the soft puffs of his breathing from the other side of the bed.

Derek is surprised that he hadn’t been woken up by a nightmare. His body feels more rested than in a long time, even though he hasn’t slept for that many hours. He's still tired, eyelids heavy, and when he glances over to Stiles briefly, noticing how he's still clutching the pillow like he hasn't moved an inch, he decides to try to get a few more hours of sleep.

Movements from the other side of the bed wake him briefly, but when he cracks an eye open, he finds that Stiles is just nuzzling his pillow and moving into a different position. He mumbles something to himself that Derek can't catch, and his hair looks like a mess. There's a patch of skin showing between the waistband of his pajama pants and where his t-shirt has ridden up slightly that Derek wants to trail with his finger. Stiles sighs heavily in his sleep, and then goes still once more.

Derek isn't far behind.

“Derek.” Fingers nudge his arm gently. “It's time to get up.”

As he blinks awake, Derek is surprised to find Stiles sitting fully dressed in fresh clothes on his side of the bed. Derek looks over at the clock on his bedside table and is surprised to find that it's nine-thirty. It's been a long time since he slept for this many hours in one go.

“Fuck,” he mutters under his breath, mostly to make sure that Stiles knows that he's awake. “I usually don't sleep this long, so I never set an alarm.”

“You totally slept through mine, so I'm not sure that would've helped.” Stiles is smiling and his hand is still resting on Derek's arm.

“Are you going somewhere?” he asks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“I thought you were opening the store at ten.”

“It's closed on Sundays,” Derek yawns, and stretches until his back pops. When he looks up, he finds Stiles looking stunned for a moment.

“Oh right, we've never hung out on Sundays before. I always eat lunch with my dad and stuff.”

Derek makes a sound in agreement, even though he doesn't remember if this is true. There's no
reason for Stiles to lie about it.

“I just got up and got dressed for no reason,” Stiles whines suddenly.

“It's nine-thirty.”

“Dude, it's a good day when I get up before ten.”

Derek huffs out a laugh. “Go back to bed, then.”

For some reason, he didn't expect Stiles to do just that. So it comes as a bit of a surprise when Stiles rids himself of most of his clothes, keeping only his briefs and t-shirt on. He slides down next to Derek, effectively taking up that two foot space between him and the edge of the bed. Derek moves away slightly, and watches as Stiles reaches towards the bedside table and fumbles for a bit, before he finds a good place to put his glasses. Derek will never understand why he insists so much on wearing glasses when he has no use for them, but it has become such a part of Stiles that it's odd seeing him without them.

For a moment, he wonders if Stiles is aware of how close they're lying, when Stiles reaches out to touch his arm. “I was wondering something.”

“Okay,” Derek says, trying to focus on something else than the way Stiles taps his fingertips against his skin.

“I know we're friends, but if we weren't, you'd find me attractive, right?”

The question makes Derek frown, as he's trying to figure out the reasons behind it. “Why are you asking that?”

Stiles scrunches up his face. “No reason.”

Somewhere, Derek knows that it's about reassurance and confirmation. Perhaps Stiles wants to make sure that Derek doesn't see this thing they've started as a good deed. As if some kind of casual relationship between them would be charity from Derek's side.

“You're a good-looking guy,” he says finally. “I don't think anyone would disagree with me on that.”

Stiles falls silent for a moment. “So it's a yes, then?”

“Yes.”

There's another silence, and Derek assumes that Stiles is contemplating what he's just said.

“It's weird you know.” Stiles says, breaking the silence. “The only picture of myself that I have in my mind, is what I looked like before—“ he points at his eyes, “—and I used to be this gangly kid with a buzz cut and scrawny limbs and my eyes looked too big for my head.” He shrugs. “People keep telling me that puberty was nice to me, but there's no way for me to know.”

Derek hesitates for a moment, watching Stiles chew on his bottom lip and it seems like he's far away in thought.

“I don't know what you looked like before, but you don't have anything to be self-conscious about.”

Stiles ducks his head, but Derek manages to catch the smile on his face. He isn't sure if he said something unintentionally funny, or if he made Stiles happy, but he hopes for the latter.
Veterans Day arrives sooner than Derek would have liked. It's his least favourite federal holiday. He's managed to ignore the fact that yesterday was the corps’ birthday, but today is usually way worse. He assumes that some war veterans don’t mind being honoured. With right. Many of them are true heroes. Especially those who are able to come back and live a somewhat normal life, with family and friends. Derek has given up on envying them long ago.

Veterans Day mostly feels like a mockery to him. There's nothing honourable about his time serving. On this day, he usually keeps himself locked up indoors. In New York that was easy. His neighbours didn't care what his profession used to be, as long as he didn't play loud music after ten at night. In Beacon Hills, things are different. Everyone knows who he is here. Some of them remember him from when he was a kid, going to school, growing up in front of them. Some of them only know who he is because of town gossip. But they all know that he's a veteran, there's no doubt in his mind about that.

For one, some of his tattoos are clearly visible. *Semper Fidelis* on his arm is a pretty big tell, above the eagle, globe and the anchor – the very symbol of the Marines – and beneath it a proud USMC. Had anyone seen him without his shirt, they would've noticed his own name and date of birth, along with a bunch of other information on his chest. It's not something he's done for its looks, but rather in hope that if he died over there and his tags had gone missing, someone might be able to identify him and notify his family. Well, Laura. The rest of his family – the ones that are no longer here – have their names tattooed on his other arm, circling upwards around his bicep. He likes them there. While he was serving, he would sometimes find comfort in closing his other hand over them, and still feel like they were there with him. On his back, across his shoulder blades, stretch the words: Death before Dishonour. He feels as though he's let that saying down.

As soon as one person found out that he used to be a Marine, they all knew. That's how small towns work. That's also the biggest reason as to why he decided to go to college on the other side of the country, somewhere where anonymity was easier.

Stiles drops by just before lunch. “Hey, Derek.”

Steve is with him, like most days. He sits down at Stiles' feet, seemingly ignoring Derek for his duties.

“Hi.”

“You wanna go out and grab lunch? You eat for free in the entire town.”

“All six restaurants,” Derek snorts.

“I'm *starving.*”

“I can make you something,” Derek offers instead. Free dinner is out of the question. It's a way of saying thank you to veterans who have done their duty, for their sacrifices. Even though Derek spent about three months in a hospital and lost most of himself overseas, eating a free meal like he's deserved it is out of the question.

“But it's Veterans Day.” Stiles says it like it's supposed to change Derek's mind.

“I know,” he mutters in reply and expects questions.

Instead, Stiles pauses, before he does something with the hand that's he's been holding behind his back. It looks like he's tucking something into his back pocket. “Okay, you can cook for me instead.”
Stiles is silent for most of the lunch. Uncharacteristically so. He eats with good appetite, however, so Derek isn't sure why he's so quiet. Steve is lying by the couch, chewing on a toy Derek got him when he was grocery shopping the other day. Stiles claims that he's going to spoil Steve rotten, but Derek doesn't care.

Just as they're about to clean the table, the bell downstairs rings, indicating that someone's entered the shop.

“I'll clean up. You go,” Stiles tells him.

There are a few people downstairs. At first he's surprised, because it's rare that any customer comes in other than alone. It's just that kind of shop. This time, there are four of them and Derek doesn't realise what it's about until he notices the flowers in the little girl's hands. He thinks they're a family, judging by their ages and similar features.

“Hello, Derek,” the woman says. “I'm sure you remember me. I was in here the other day and I bought a book from you.”

Derek doesn't remember her.

“Hi,” he replies instead.

She smiles at that, as though he just confirmed her assumption. He lets her believe that.

“We just came by to thank you for serving our country. We brought flowers and a homemade pie.” The girl holds up her hands with the flowers, and the boy is holding the pie like it's something sacred.

Derek wants to throw up.

“It's important to us to show our gratitude,” the man says.

Derek doesn't know how to respond. How does one say no to this? When they are assuming that they're doing something nice. It isn't nice.

He hasn't heard Stiles in the staircase over the buzzing sound in his ears, but suddenly he's beside Derek, hand grasping his arm gently.

“Derek's just a bit thrown.” He turns in the direction of the family. “Thanks so much for bringing these. I'll take care of them.”

Derek sees him stretch out his hands, waiting for them to hand over the items, which is something he never does otherwise. Derek has long since assumed that it makes Stiles feels like he's at other people's mercy when he does that. Like he's trusting their goodwill to hand him things. For a second the family stands there frozen, but then they shuffle into action and leave a moment later.

“Lock the door,” Stiles says firmly, forcing Derek into action. Taking orders is somehow built into his backbone by now. “And turn the sign. You're closed today.”

Relief floods over him when he turns the sign and pulls down the blind.

“Thank you,” he mumbles and takes the pie and the flowers from Stiles' hands. He leaves the flowers on the counter, thinking that the family will probably appreciate it if they come back another day. How Stiles managed to get downstairs in one piece, he has no idea, because as he turns around to head upstairs with Stiles' hand on his arm, he realises that Steve isn't with them.
“How did you get downstairs?” he asks.

Stiles rolls his eyes heavily. “Using my legs.”

Resisting the urge to do the same, Derek rephrases the question: “How did you get downstairs and manage to find me, without breaking your neck?”

“Steve's a nice guy. Sometimes he helps me out when he isn't officially working, but then he saw me grabbing onto you and went upstairs again. That's what you get for spoiling him.”

“Pretty sure he would come running down the stairs if you called for him.”

“I don't know. You've messed up his priorities now.”

Derek feels a bit nervous for a second, until he notices the glint in Stiles' eyes. Idiot.

“I saw a documentary once, about a guide dog who led people over piers and stuff like that. Let's hope I didn't mess up Steve's priorities that bad.”

Stiles snorts. “Dude, he'd jump in right after me if that was the case.”

Derek doesn't doubt that for a second. The pie goes into the fridge on Stiles' orders, even though Derek wanted to throw it away at first.

“You never know when you're going to be in desperate need for pie!” Stiles objects and Derek assumes that it means that Stiles might want pie later, or the next time he visits.

Stiles offers to crash on his couch when night falls, but Derek declines. He doesn't need anyone else to think about today. It's a relief when Stiles seems to understand perfectly, but he still looks hesitant when he leaves. Perhaps he's worried about Derek. Which is ridiculous, since Derek's been handling himself just fine for a lot longer than he's known Stiles.

He doesn't see it right away. Not until he's pouring himself a glass of water later that night. It's lying on the chair Stiles used, like it's accidentally fallen out of his pocket without him realising. It's a card, a bit crumpled like it's been treated carelessly, and Derek knows what it's for even before he picks it up. Clearly, this is what Stiles hid in his pocket when he came into the store today. It looks like a scrapbooking card, with too many details on it, and Derek remembers the ones Laura did when she stayed home with Josh and had too much free time on her hands. This one's store bought, however, with a printed text on the inside saying: *Thanks for being you*. There's an uneven line of handwritten letters below, and he realises that Stiles must have written that bit himself. *You are awesome!* -S.

Suddenly, Derek's throat feels a bit tight. For some reason he doesn't think that Stiles writes by hand much, considering how much he uses technology, and it must be difficult writing neatly when you can't actually see.
Derek expects to feel like he did when the family stood in his shop, wanting to give him things for serving their country. As if they know what he actually did over there. Instead, he tries to flatten the card out somewhat, smoothing the bent corners and puts a piece of tape on a flower that's on the verge of falling off. Then he places it on his fridge, next to his sticky notes. He puts the magnet on the inside; not because it makes it easier for him to flip the card open if he wants to re-read the text there, but because the front is so bent and crumpled that the card might risk falling down if he'd put the magnet there instead.

He contemplates sending a text to Stiles, thanking him, but decides against it. He doesn't think Stiles wanted him to get the card, obviously noticing that Derek isn't one to celebrate Veterans Day. He'll tell Stiles about it some other time. It's better that way.

He tries going to bed early, but sleep doesn't come to him. At two AM, he gets up and decides to go for a walk. Unsurprisingly, his feet carry him to the memorial. It's too late for anyone else to be there but him. He doesn't say anything, doesn't touch anything. He just stands there. It's been a while since he wished that he was one of them. The best heroes are the ones remembered. He isn't a hero. He
killed men he was supposed to be protecting. For that, he earned himself three months in a hospital and a purple heart. It's still locked in one of his drawers, hidden beneath clothes that he never wears.

He's standing in the shadows of an oak tree, feeling as though he's doing something wrong, like he has to hide. Despite the fact that no one would bat an eye if they found him here.

It's difficult. He's not going to pretend otherwise. It feels like he's mocking their memory by being here, but he has to be here. Has to see where he could've been and where he's sent others.

He stands there for two hours, doing nothing else than looking. It seems more like fifteen minutes, but when he leaves, muscles stiff and limbs groaning in protest, his phone tells him that it's four AM. He needs to sleep.

He decides to keep the shop closed the next day. People tend to make it their mission to make up for forgetting about days like Veterans Day, by putting in even more effort. Derek had to stop eating at his favourite diner back in New York for this very reason, when he was offered a free meal the following day, just because the waitress had forgotten about him being a veteran the day before.

Lord of the Flies keeps him company until lunch, and he wonders why the hell he thought this was a good book for him. It's easier to read than watching a movie, however. Skipping pages, skimming paragraphs. It's not too complicated.

His phone buzzes on the coffee table as he's contemplating making himself lunch, and he sees Stiles' name lighting up the screen.

“Hello,” he says, answering the call.

“Hey, where are you?” Stiles' tone is a bit worried.

“Home?”

“The door's locked.”

Oh, right. “I decided to keep closed today.”

Stiles hesitates. “Is it still okay if we hang out?”

Derek glances around the apartment and it's tidy enough. “I'll come let you in. Stay put.”

He hears Stiles mutter something that sounds a lot like well, where the hell else would I go? before he hangs up. Stiles is standing just outside the door, as expected, wearing an Iron Man t-shirt and a cardigan. He's skipped the beanie today, but the glasses are still there. Derek has stopped asking him about them.

“Come on in,” he says as he swings the door open.

“Hey.” Stiles smiles and stops right inside the door. “Where are we going?”

The question makes Derek frown. He assumed that they would stay inside. “What do you mean?”

“Duh, do we hang out here or at your apartment?”

“Upstairs, if that's okay.”

“Yeah, yeah, that's totally fine.” Stiles' words come out a little fast, and there's suddenly a faint splash of colour on his cheeks.
It's fascinating to Derek how people flush differently. On himself, it colours his entire face and sometimes neck evenly. On Stiles, it comes in blotches, first beneath his cheekbones and then his throat.

Steve throws himself at Derek's feet as soon as Stiles has let him out of his harness. He's whining like he can't get enough of Derek's belly rubs and as soon as Derek crouches in front of him, he bumps his nose all over Derek's face.

“Oh, get a room you two,” Stiles sighs, rolling his eyes, like he knows exactly what's going on.

“You're just jealous.” Derek scratches Steve behind his ear and gets an agreeing yip in reply.

“Yeah, that I definitely am.”

Derek thinks he's ridiculous.

Once Steve is satisfied, lying on the floor next to the bed and chewing on his toy, Derek looks up at Stiles who's sitting on the couch. He's doing something on his phone with his earphones in, making Derek suspect that he's either texting someone or doing stuff that he doesn't want Derek to know about. Perhaps both.

“What did you want to do?” he asks as he sits down next to Stiles, who shrugs in reply.

“I don't know. Hang out.”

“How very specific of you.”

Stiles grins and pulls his earphones out. “Scott's coming home over Thanksgiving. Wanna meet him?”

“Can't. I'm going to New York.”

Stiles' face falls for a second, before he's back to smiling again. “Yeah, of course. You should spend it with family.”

“I guess.”

“If the plans change for some reason, you're welcome to the Stilinski-McCall combined Thanksgiving dinner. You won't regret it.”

“You celebrate with Scott?”

“And his mom. You'd think his mom and my dad would hit it off, since they're both single and pretty hot for their age, but they're just friends. Scott and I are like brothers. We met when we were four, in the sandbox, and we decided that we were going to be best friends. We have been ever since.”

Derek smiles a little at that. “Who does your mom celebrate with? Scott's dad?” It's meant as a joke, but Stiles' face falls completely this time, and Derek knows that he's said something stupid.

“No, my mom's dead,” Stiles says after a long silence.

“I'm sorry.” Derek wants to reach out and touch him somehow. Comfort him. But he's not sure that he remembers how to do that anymore. “My mom's dead, too.”

“I'm sorry.”
Derek frowns over himself. “I didn’t say that to make your situation any less hard. I just wanted—“

“–Wanted me to know that I’m not alone. Yeah, I get it. I don’t assume that you’re a horrible person, Derek.”

They don’t talk about it, however. It’s clear that Stiles doesn’t want to, and Derek isn’t up for it either. Instead they go back to their usual routine, with watching TV shows. Well, Derek’s watching. Stiles is half-lying on his couch, slouched in a position that will definitely end up giving him back problems before he’s forty, and he’s working his phone again. Every now and then, he says sentences that doesn’t make it any easier for Derek to figure out who he’s talking to, or about what. He concentrates on FRIENDS instead, figuring that Stiles wants some company while not actually hanging out. That’s perfectly fine with Derek.

“Hey, do you wanna try making out for a sec?” Stiles says an hour later. He’s been silent, drumming his fingers against his phone for the past minute, so Derek figures that there’s something he wants to say or do. Something that he hasn’t worked up the courage to bring up just yet. It must have been this.

“What?”

Stiles plucks at the hem of his shirt and then reaches up to scratch his cheek. “You know, maybe? I want to try.”

“It’s just like kissing, but longer.”

“But longer,” Stiles agrees.

Derek’s gaze falls to his lips for a moment. Stiles has been biting them again, because they’re plump and red. Out of nervousness, probably. He hesitates for a long moment, asking himself if this is really a good idea, and just as Stiles starts to fidget as though he’s about to leave, Derek gives in.

“Okay.”

Stiles’ eyes widen. “Really?”

“I said yes.”

“Technically you said okay.”

Derek sighs heavily through his nose.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Stiles says hurriedly. “How do we do this?”

Derek looks at him. At the nervous way he clutches his phone in both hands – and it’s probably the only thing keeping him from scratching his face – and the way his teeth are worrying his bottom lip.

“You can start by putting down your phone.”

Stiles mutters something under his breath that Derek isn’t able to catch, but it sounds like complaints. The phone ends up on the coffee table, despite that.

“Okay, so now what?” He sounds impatient but as though he’s trying to act the very opposite.

Derek grabs his waist and pulls him closer, bringing a yelp from Stiles.

“Sorry,” he says, cursing inwardly over his stupid idea.
Stiles is close now. So close that Derek can feel his breath on his face, as Stiles turns to him, pulling one leg up under him on the couch, so that they're facing each other.

“No, pretty sure being manhandled is a thing I can put on my like-list when it comes to these things.”

Derek huffs.

It looks like Stiles is going to ask him now what? another time, so Derek slides his hands down to the outside of Stiles' thighs and leans in slowly. He pauses as their lips graze briefly, making sure that Stiles has time to pull back. But Stiles only pushes in closer. His hands slide up Derek's arms, stopping where the sleeves of his t-shirt begin, closing over the names of Derek's family. Derek kisses him more firmly this time, opening his lips just slightly so that he can get Stiles' bottom lip between his, sucking gently until Stiles' fingers dig into his upper arms.

Stiles adapts quickly, only letting his tongue touch Derek's lips, but never further than that. It feels like his skin is buzzing, his brain going a bit numb. Stiles just takes whatever he's offering, and then gives it all back to him. Eager, willing. Never pushing.

When Derek finally pulls away, Stiles' lips are even more swollen than before, and he's breathing heavier. Just as he opens his eyes, he darts his tongue out like he's tasting his lips.

“Are you holding back on me?” Stiles says, and he looks a bit like he wants to provoke Derek into making out with him again.

“Wouldn't want you to get another awkward boner.”

Stiles huffs out a laugh, eyes darting away. “Too late for that.”

There's a sudden surge in his stomach, making him lose his breath. It's probably the biological instincts in him that have been dormant for years, up until recently. He takes a deep breath, trying to force himself back to normal again.

“It's embarrassing. I feel like I'm fifteen.”

Derek smiles to himself. “I think it's pretty common.”

“For virgins?”

“I guess.” His gaze falls to Stiles' crotch, and yes, his pants look tighter than usual. Derek swallows heavily. “More?” he asks, before he can stop himself.

Stiles nods, and he seems as breathless as Derek feels. Eager, but breathless.

“Can I touch you?” he asks.

Derek hesitates. He has no idea how he'll react to that. “Where?”

Shaking his head, Stiles sucks in a breath. “Not like that. I mean, uh, I wouldn't mind, but I mean—” he gestures to his own torso. “You know, moving my hands and stuff. In safe places.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, and it feels as though he has a cramp in his chest.

“You can, too.” Stiles moves a bit closer, spreading his legs a bit, like he's trying to make room for Derek between them. “If you want.”

The bulge in Stiles' pants is so obvious now, and Derek thinks it's a ridiculous question. Before he's
got a chance to answer, however, Stiles speaks again:

“Can I go first this time?”

Derek smiles to himself, thinking for a moment that this reminds him of his first kiss during the first year of high school. “Sure.”

Stiles' hands find his arms again, slowly trailing them upwards until one of his hands is on Derek’s shoulder and the other gently curling around his cheek. It just makes him feel even more like he's back in high school, but the concentration in Stiles' eyes is so obvious that he keeps quiet. Surprisingly, his heart is drumming rapidly just like it did back then.

Leaning in closer, Stiles grazes his thumb over Derek's bottom lip. Derek keeps very still and closes his eyes just as Stiles' lips find his, seemingly without any difficulty. The angle is a bit off, until Stiles tilts his head and Derek isn't able to do anything but respond.

At first, it's much like before. But Stiles deepens the kiss quickly, pressing closer, forcing Derek to react. His fingers curl in Derek's hair, holding him still, and the other hand slowly smooths over his chest and stomach. He feels, more than sees, Stiles' tiny sigh as he does.

Derek decides not to move his hands, letting them stay resting on the outside of Stiles' thighs. It feels too intimate, and he's worried that he'll pressure Stiles into something that he isn't truly comfortable with. That's until Stiles gently grabs his hand and puts it on his hip, slowly sliding it upwards. His grip is loose, like he wants to make sure that Derek knows that he easily can back out of this if he doesn't want it. But once Derek has started, it's difficult to stop.

He likes the surprisingly solid feel of Stiles' stomach beneath his palm, and the way his breathing heaves under his touch. Stiles' kisses get rougher, more demanding and less precise, as Derek slides his hand across his chest and then down again.

When Stiles starts leaning backwards, locking one arm around Derek's neck to make him follow, he does so willingly. Looking up briefly, he measures the room on the couch behind Stiles. It's not enough for them to lie down, he realises and locks an arm around Stiles' waist to stop him. They could slide down the couch towards Derek's end a little bit.

“Don't stop. We can sit. Just don't stop,” Stiles says breathlessly, breaking their kiss.

“I'm not stopping. We just need more room.” Derek moves backwards, pulling Stiles with him by the hips. He sees Stiles' breath hitch in his throat.

“Yes, definitely into the manhandling.” He goes willingly, when Derek pushes him backwards, and his legs spread like it's the most natural thing to him to make room for Derek between them. His throat feels dry as he easily makes out the hard line of Stiles' dick through the fabric of his pants. He inches his fingers up underneath the hem of Stiles' shirt, feeling the muscles of his stomach bunch and relax at the touch. Stiles reaches for him, grabs at his shirt and pulling him down.

Need punches through him, expected but still somehow coming as a surprise, when their bodies are lined up. Stiles' hips ground up against his own, like he can't help himself. Fuck, Derek doesn't want him to.

“Is this a good idea?” he asks, despite the fact that he was the one pushing Stiles down just moments ago. And despite the protests his body is making.

“Yeah, best idea ever.” Stiles nods frantically and tries to pull him down again, but Derek resists, desperately trying to clear his head. “Come on, Derek.”
“But you haven't done this before.”

“I haven't done anything I've done with you before. I want to, though. Now.”

“You sure?”

“Oh my god, Derek. Yes.” Stiles grinds against him again, as if to prove this.

Derek decides that he's old enough to make his own decisions.

This time when Derek kisses him, Stiles gets frantic more quickly. His mouth grows hard and needy, and he makes these little sounds that Derek isn't sure that Stiles is even aware of himself. His hands are everywhere and his legs have tangled themselves with Derek's, as if to make sure that he's not going anywhere.

The next time Stiles grinds against him, Derek rolls his own hips in return, and shit, he's forgotten how good friction feels. A sound slips out through his nose, but he doesn't care, because Stiles is nodding again.

“More. Oh god, more. Do that again.” He rolls his hips over and over up against Derek, and Derek is forced to hold him down, at first making Stiles protest, until he grinds their hips together. This time more forceful than before.

It's like watching Stiles come apart. And it's the best thing Derek has ever witnessed. At first, Stiles makes small, needy sounds. Then his head drops back, like he's unable to keep kissing and Derek lets his mouth find Stiles' throat instead, slowly covering every inch of skin with his lips. That's when Stiles starts growing loud, and the way he presses his hips back against Derek's becomes more frantic. Stiles moans, unabashed. His fingers curl in Derek's hair, thighs locking tighter around Derek's hips as if he feels the need to hold on. Derek keeps going, keeping his rhythm, even though Stiles tries to speed it up.

“Derek,” he groans, fingers spasming against Derek's arm and in his hair. “Derek, if you keep going I'm going to come.”

“Yeah,” Derek breathes. Surprised over how wrecked he sounds. “I want you to.”

Stiles screws his eyes shut with a little moan, his mouth growing lax, like he's letting go. He gets louder again, making Derek twitch and leak even more in his pants. For a moment he thinks it's like when he was in high school again, but then Stiles comes, and he's clutching Derek tight, like he needs someone to hold on to, body spasming. And Derek decides that this is a completely different league than high school.

Derek lets him come down, petting his hair a little, even though he's sure it's just awkward. Stiles doesn't seem to mind, though.

“Oh god,” he groans suddenly, covering his face in his hands.

Derek feels a surge of panic, and sits up. “What?”

“I can't believe I did that in front of Steve.”

Derek looks around, finding Steve's tail sticking out by the bed, like he decided that he'd give them some privacy. “I don't think he cares.”

“I feel so gross.”
Derek’s gaze snaps back to Stiles’ face, expecting to see someone who's already regretting everything. That doesn't seem to be the case, however. Stiles is flushed, eyes a bit glassy, but he's smiling a little.

“About what?” Derek asks.

“I just creamed my underwear. They're super gross.”

Derek snorts. “I'll lend you a pair.”

“I can't believe I did that like some fifteen year old.”

“I liked it.”

Stiles stills for a moment, and then his eyes widen as if in realisation. “But you didn't.”

“Didn't what?”

“Cream your underw–I mean, come. You didn't come.” Stiles is suddenly talking very quickly.

Derek shrugs, and rearranges himself in his pants a bit. “No.”

Colour rises to Stiles’ cheeks and he's scratching his jaw again. “I'm sorry. God, this is embarrassing.”

“It's not,” Derek protests.

“Yes.”

“No, it isn't.”

Stiles makes a frustrated sound. “But you didn't come. Therefore I failed.”

“It almost never happens that people come at the same time. You don't have to worry about that.”

He watches as Stiles rubs a hand over his face, still clearly frustrated. “But I wanted to make it good for you.”

Derek sighs inwardly, reminding himself that this is all new to Stiles. He helps Stiles sit up next to him on the couch. “It was good for me.”

Stiles doesn't look like he believes him, drumming his fingers against his knee. “You want me to do anything?”

“No, it's fine.”

“But I owe you.”

Derek grabs his wrist when Stiles tries to pull away. “You never owe me anything when it comes to sex. Do you understand?”

The words seem to take Stiles aback for a moment, but then it's like the meaning of Derek's words sink in and his shoulders relax. “I'm just worried that you'll grow tired of me.”

“I don't want you to do anything for my sake. This isn't about pleasing me.”

“It's about pleasing you too, though.”
Derek pulls a hand through his hair, trying to find the right thing to say. “It’s about making it good for ourselves and each other, as long as we feel comfortable with it, yes.”

Stiles drums his fingers against his thigh again, biting his lip. “Are you sure that you don’t want me to do something?”

“I’m sure. Maybe next time.”

He gets a nod in reply. ‘Sorry for making things awkward.’ Then Stiles pulls a face. “Can I still borrow a pair of underwear? I think I need to clean up before this dries.”

Derek digs around in his underwear drawer, finding a pair of boxer briefs that Laura got him for Christmas one year. They’re nice looking, but the openings for the legs are too tight for his thighs. He figures they’d fit better on Stiles.

Stiles finds the bathroom on his own, but sticks his head out and asks Derek to show him the towels and the soap. Then he locks himself in there for a good twenty minutes, giving Derek some time to calm down. He’s just about to ask if Stiles wants lunch, when the screen on Stiles’ phone lights up with the word DAD.

“Your dad’s calling,” he says loudly, walking over to the bathroom door, phone in hand.

“Ugh, can you answer? Tell him I’m baking or something. Anything, except that I’m in the bathroom cleaning jizz off my body.”

“I can’t talk to your dad,” Derek protests. “He doesn’t know who I am.”

“Sure he does,” Stiles scoffs. “I talk about you.”

Looking down at the phone, Derek tries to decide what to do.

“Derek! Answer!”

“Fine.” With a sigh, he answers the call. “Stiles’ phone.”

“This is Stiles’ dad, who am I talking to?” The authority in his voice is familiar to Derek, without having met Sheriff Stilinski himself before. He assumes that it’s just something that comes with having a position in command.

“Derek Hale, sir. Stiles is, uh, baking right now.”

“Derek, huh? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

He doesn’t ask, not sure that he wants to hear the answers. “You, too, sir. Do you want him to call you back?”

“I was going to ask him to have lunch with me, but since he’s baking at your place, I’m going to assume that he’s eating with you.”

“I’ll tell him to call you later.”

“You do that, son.”

Derek doesn’t remember having a more awkward phone call in his entire life.

“What did he want?” Stiles asks, when he opens the door a while later.
“Ask you if you wanted to grab lunch with him, but he assumed that you'll be eating here.”

This makes Stiles grin. “Tough luck. Now you'll have to cook for me.”

“I think I'll live.”

Stiles is more relaxed during their meal, making Derek relieved. The last thing he wants is for Stiles to feel awkward around him, because of some dry humping on the couch.

They spend the rest of the afternoon watching movies and making popcorn. The popping still sounds a little too similar to gunfire for Derek’s taste, but it's a relief to not be left alone, and perhaps Stiles is staying for that particular reason, even though Derek hasn't asked him to.

◊

A few days later, Stiles is lounging on Derek’s couch, Steve lying at their feet, and fiddling with his phone. He's been tense the entire afternoon, but Derek hasn't asked what it's about. He figures that Stiles is a lot better when it comes to talking about things than him anyway.

“Is it cool if I stay over?” Stiles asks, when it's almost eight.

Perhaps that's why he's been tense.

“Yes,” Derek says. “Do you have things for Steve?”

Stiles swears under his breath. “No. I guess I better get going then. It's about time for him to eat.”

“You want me to walk you home?” He watches as Stiles stands up, picking his phone from the table to put one earphone in.

“No, I'm good. Thanks for offering.” Stiles smiles briefly, before he thumbs the display. Derek assumes he's checking his messages. He crouches to pet Steve before he's leaving, and when he looks up again, he notices Stiles' pale face.

“What's wrong?”

Stiles takes a deep breath, and then smiles. “It's nothing, really. Just Brian.”

Straightening immediately, Derek feels his pulse quicken. “What did he say?”

“Nothing bad, really. Just asked if I was home.” It seems like Stiles is trying to sound unaffected, but his voice wavers slightly at the last word.

“Like he's threatening you?”

At that, Stiles shakes his head, and it looks sincere. “No, I don't think so. He's sent me a lot of texts to apologise for what he did. Eventually I forgave him. Well, I said I did, at least. Now he wants us to hang out again.”

“And what do you want?” It's no secret that Derek doesn't like Brian, even though they've never met, but the important thing is how Stiles feels about him.

“I very much don't want to hang out with him again. Ever.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you home?” Derek asks carefully. The last thing he wants is for Stiles to feel as though Derek thinks he's helpless, but this entire situation is unsettling.
“Would you? It's not that I think he'd do anything. I just don't want to have to talk to him.”

“It's no problem. I could use a walk anyway.”

Stiles hesitates for a long time, chewing on his bottom lip. Derek has learned to wait him out. “Do you wanna stay over?”

“At your place?”

That makes Stiles roll his eyes. “Yeah, you already live at your place.”

Derek almost says no, before he stops himself. Stiles will have to take Steve out on at least one more walk before going to bed, and perhaps he'd feel better if he had Derek around for the night. Truth is, Derek would probably feel better, too.

“Okay,” he says, nodding. “What should I bring?”

“Toothbrush. Whatever you sleep in. Uh, I hope you don't mind sharing a bed?”

“We've already shared a bed. Obviously I don't mind.”

Stiles scratches his cheek. “Mine's smaller than yours, though.”

It is smaller than Derek's. Quite a bit actually, but still wide enough that it'll probably fit them both. Stiles' apartment is quite small overall. There's one room, containing a couch, a TV, a bed and a desk with a lot of technical things that Derek can't identify. Several instruments are lined up against a wall, confusing him at first, until he remembers that Stiles is usually studying something with music at Stanford. Everything is in perfect order, leaving him unsure of where he should put his things so as not to mess anything up.

“Where can I put this? My bag.”

Stiles stops to think for a moment. “Put it on the bed for now. We can move it to the couch when we go to bed.”

The couch is too small for one person to sleep on comfortably, even though he's sure he could make it work if Stiles changes his mind. Still, he'd prefer to share the bed.

“You're very neat,” Derek states, looking around once more, something he didn't notice when he was helping Stiles putting his kitchen back together.

Stiles shrugs at that. “I didn't used to be. My room was a real mess and stuff always got lost. But when this happened—” he gestures towards his eyes. Something Derek has noticed that he does a lot when he talks about losing his sight. “—I had to make sure everything had a place, and keep it like that, because I can't look for things myself.”

“I get that.”

“You're very neat,” Stiles counters.

“How d'you know?” Derek regrets his question a moment later, thinking that he's being rude, but even so, Stiles doesn't seem to mind.

“Because I don't have to worry about stepping on anything, and you don't have that many things lying around that I can stub my toes on.”
“Marine.” Derek shrugs. “And I don't have a lot of stuff that can make my place messy, either.”

He hesitates as he looks towards the dresser and the closets lined up against one wall, but then curiosity gets the better of him. “Can I ask you something? I guess I'm being very ignorant.”

“Feel free.”

“How do you pick clothes?”

The smile he gets in reply is big and bright. “That's a good question. It's way better than when people ask me how I know when to stop wiping.”

Derek ducks his head, smiling for a second.

“I'll show you.”

Stiles opens his dresser. T-shirts are put in neat piles, folded carefully. They are colour coordinated, Derek notices.

“As you probably can see, since I can't, I have to put each colour in a specific pile, so I know that I'm getting a blue shirt when I want one, you know? I have all my t-shirts in one drawer, the ones without print on the left side and the ones with print on the right side. I have sorted each type of clothing into different drawers, or in my closet. Some of my button downs I recognise by the tags, because they feel different on most shirts.” Stiles shrugs. “And sometimes I button them differently on the hanger. You know, to tell them apart. I use the same system when I do my laundry.”

Derek resists the urge to open the rest of the drawers to investigate. “That's impressive,” he says honestly.

“It's more of a necessary thing. I mean, since I haven't always been blind, I kind of know what look I'm going for. I can play with colours and stuff, at least a little bit. An acquaintance, who's blind since birth, he has to trust other people to match his clothes for him.”

Derek hesitates for a long time, before he asks this next question. “Do you think it's easier for you, because you haven't always been blind, or harder?”

Stiles closes the drawer slowly and scratches his chin. It looks like he's thinking about his answer, but he doesn't look offended. “Both. It's easier because people aren't as uncomfortable around me in general, since I tend to look at them, or at least in their direction. I know what stuff looks like. Colours and animals and --” Stiles flings out his hands. “-- and like the sky. I guess if you're uncomfortable, I could pass for 'normal'. But at the same time...I know what I'm missing out on. For the guy I mentioned before, someone else's looks don't matter, or the general appearance of things, because it's not something that he's ever experienced. He's got other ways to value things, but I guess I'm already a bit ruined by society in that sense. For me, it will always be something that's missing. It doesn't matter how much someone describes another person for me, it'll never be the same thing. I miss it, you know. A lot less than before, but I do.”

It's difficult to grasp. In some ways, Derek can understand. He knows what he's missing out on, too, when it comes to functioning like a normal person, even though his problems are different. “I'm sorry.” The apology feels inadequate.

“It's not your fault.”

“I can be sorry about things that aren't my fault, too,” Derek says, using the same answer Stiles gave him a while ago.
Stiles smiles. “Hey, you wanna get take out? I don't feel like cooking.”

“Sure. We could pick it up and take Steve for a walk.”

Steve, who is currently licking the remains of his evening meal from his bowl in the kitchen, doesn't seem to care much.

As they're making their way back home, Stiles carries the bag with take out food in one hand and holds onto Derek's arm with the other. Steve is trotting on the other side of Derek, glancing up at them every now and then, as if to check that they're still with him.

“Thanks for staying over,” Stiles says, squeezing his arm for a moment.

“I don't mind.” Hesitating, Derek glances at the houses they walk past. “I didn't want to be alone anyway.”

“The other day was crappy for you, huh?”

“I don't think crappy covers it.”

Stiles squeezes a little harder.

It's strange, how easy things are with Stiles. Derek is less awkward around him now, when he’s not constantly worried about offending him. Stiles is surprisingly understanding.

“How often do you want to punch me for doing and asking ignorant things?” he asks.

Stiles shrugs. “Basically never. Sometimes I get frustrated for a moment, but then I remember that you're not Scott, who knows the deal by now.”

Frowning, Derek tries not to feel too guilty.

“It's not because I think that you're ignorant,” Stiles continues. “It's because you used to be constantly worried about hurting me. I just forget sometimes, because I mostly hang out with the same people I've been friends with for a long time.”

“I just don't want to ask you stupid questions.”

“But it's fine to ask. Usually. I mean you haven't asked me half the stuff that people usually ask. It's like legit stuff that you wanna know. Like you're curious about me, not just my awesome x-ray vision.”

Derek snorts.

“And I guess I keep you around, because you don't put up with my shit.”

“You've never been shitty.”

“That's because you don't pity me. You know, a lot of people seem to think that I'm stupid. It's even worse than when people are insecure and worried about hurting me. That's also frustrating at times, by the way. This one girl panicked when she asked me if I had seen the news, and then she had a major freak out and said: I meant heard the news.”

Derek clears his throat, wondering slightly if this doesn't apply to him to. “I feel like that all the time,” he confesses.
Stiles shrugs and he looks a little uncomfortable for a moment, before he says: “I don't know. It just... it doesn't feel the same when it's you.”

Derek doesn't know what to say, so he keeps quiet for the rest of the walk, until Stiles changes the subject to things that don't boggle his brain. Discussing comics is safer. They're halfway through dinner when Stiles gets a text and puts an earphone in to listen to it.

“Did that guy send you another text?” Derek asks, when Stiles puts his phone away again.

“Brian? No, that was just Scott. He's finally reached another level on Candy Crush and had to share his victory.”

At first, Derek thinks this is a joke that he doesn't understand, but Stiles looks completely serious.

“Thank god it wasn’t Brian, though,” Stiles continues. “I don't want to talk to him more than I have to.”

“I get that.” Derek nods to himself, returning his focus to the food.

He has no idea why he can't stop looking when Stiles undresses after they have brushed their teeth, preparing for bed. He's wearing bright purple briefs with white seams and Derek finds that it somehow really gets to him. He swallows when Stiles turns towards him, revealing the trail of hair on his stomach that disappears beneath the waistband.

“Is it cool if you sleep closest to the wall? The risk of me maiming you when I try to get to the bathroom in the middle of the night is considerably less if you do.”

“That's fine.” He's not a hundred percent sure what he's agreeing to, however, because he's getting distracted by the way Stiles scratches his stomach. Which is surprisingly toned. Like the rest of his body.

Stiles rolls his eyes and smiles, as though Derek has said something funny.

“What?” Derek demands, forcing himself to snap back to reality.

“You always say that. It's fine, or That's fine.”

“But it is.”

Stiles just shakes his head, smile growing wider.

Derek concentrates on ridding himself of his clothing, leaving them folded on the couch, on top of his bag. He gets in before Stiles, and realises just how much smaller the bed is when they're both lying next to each other. They can both lie on their backs without touching, but it's by a hair. Stiles twists around, like he's looking for a better position and Derek thinks about turning the other way, just to make sure that he isn't invading on private space.

“I was wondering something,” Stiles says suddenly and turns towards him. Derek can feel his minty breath on his face.

“Okay?”

Stiles slides a fingertip down Derek's side, like he's following the bumps of Derek's ribs. The light touch makes it feel like his nerve endings are collapsing. He understands what this is about, when Stiles is silent, scratching his cheek. Derek waits it out.
“I was wondering if I could try giving you a hand job, maybe.”

Derek watches the flush spread rapidly down Stiles' chest, growing bigger than just the usual splotches on his face. His stomach surges painfully.

“Okay, that was a dumb idea.” Stiles pulls back his hand after Derek’s been silent for a long moment, almost like he's been touching something he knows he shouldn't, and looks severely uncomfortable. “I'm sorry.”

“It's not dumb,” Derek manages finally. “I was just surprised. We can try, if you want, but you can't just stick your hand down there.”

Stiles rolls his eyes at that, but he isn't hiding his excitement very well. “I know. Making out first, hand jobs second.”

Derek snorts in an attempt to hide that he's already halfway onboard with the plan. “Good thing you already know how to talk dirty.”

There's suddenly a dangerous glint in Stiles' that makes Derek's skin tingle. He just barely resists reaching down to palm his dick.

“You want me to talk dirty?”

“No, I'm good,” he says immediately.

Stiles' hand finds his face and a second later, his lips find Derek's. The kiss is a bit impatient, like he's been ready for the next step for a while. That's not what surprises Derek, but the way he suddenly feels the same way himself. Stiles leans over him on one elbow, letting his free hand slide down Derek's torso. His touch is gentle, barely-there, but the buzz on Derek's skin is spreading like fire.

“It's easier,” he gasps, breaking the kiss, as Stiles' hand reaches the waistband of his underwear. “It's easier if we lie next to each other, or if you sit on top of me, instead of carrying your weight.”

Stiles pauses momentarily, and then carefully lies down on his side. When Derek turns toward him, it feels more as if he's gravitating than moving at his own will.

“I want you to touch me,” Stiles says as his fingers graze a nipple.

“Where?”

“Everywhere. Anywhere. I just want your hands on me.”

Derek swallows. Touching Stiles hasn't been something he's craved. Until now. He slides a hand up the smooth skin of Stiles' thigh now, listening to the sharp intake of breath, and lets his thumb slide just beneath the seam of the leg opening to Stiles' briefs. He finds Stiles' lips again, kissing him slow and hard. Maybe he slides his hand up further, just a bit, letting his thumb dig into Stiles' thigh. He gets a breathy sound against his lips in reward. It goes straight to his dick, making him harden further and suddenly it's frustrating that Stiles' hand slips once more down his stomach and then pauses at the waistband of his boxer briefs.

“Do what you like on yourself,” Derek says, surprised by how hoarse his voice is, and breaks the kiss for a moment. “If I don't like it, I promise to tell you.”

Stiles nods, looking breathless, his chest is heaving. Then he moves his hand, lightly caressing Derek's dick through the thin fabric of his underwear. There's already a wet spot of pre-come
staining them, and Stiles bites his lip as his fingers reaches it. The muscles in Derek's thigh twitch and he has a hard time deciding if he should look at Stiles' face or where he's gently tracing the outline of Derek's dick with a distant look in his eyes, like he finds it fascinating. Derek doesn't remember the last time he was touched like this, and it feels like his senses are hyper, catching every little touch of a fingertip.

He reaches down, putting his own hand on top of Stiles' and making his touch firmer, biting back a groan. When he looks up, the distant look on Stiles' face is replaced by concentration and his heavy breathing is the only sound he makes. Derek almost loses it, with the way Stiles seems to be putting everything into palming him through his underwear.

Derek groans quietly when Stiles slips his hand just a bit lower, his fingertips grazing Derek's balls. Spreading his legs a little, placing a foot on the bed, Derek moves closer.

"Will you help me get your underwear off?" Stiles licks his lips, and he looks a little dazed.

"Yeah." Derek can hear the roughness in his own voice and he pushes his underwear down, kicking them off to somewhere. Stiles is hard too, clearly, pressing against Derek's thigh through his briefs as he moves in closer again. Derek guides his hand back, not sure if he really has to, but he just needs it on his dick now.

Sucking in a breath, Stiles wraps his fingers around Derek's cock for the first time, and strokes down the length agonisingly slowly. All Derek can do is stare. Stare at those long, slim fingers working up and down, how they're squeezing tighter around him, pulling sounds of approval from him.

"Is it good?" Stiles asks, pulling him from his trance-like state.

"Yeah," he groans, just as Stiles strokes him again. "Give me your hand."

Stiles hesitates, but then holds out his hand. Derek brings it to his mouth, licking long, wet stripes over his palm and his cock twitches when Stiles gasps. When he moves Stiles' hand back down to wrap around him again, he almost bucks off the mattress.

"Better?" Stiles breathes, and Derek can't even bring himself to reply.

Stiles starts exploring quickly, and Derek learns what Derek likes fast. It's as if he's determined to catalogue everything that makes Derek want to fall apart, even though he never asks. For a while, he rubs his thumb over the head of Derek's cock over and over, until Derek is so close to coming that the muscles in his stomach ache. Then he rolls Derek's balls in his palm until Derek has to pull him in for a kiss, to not lose it completely. The best part is seeing Stiles enjoying himself. How he soon forgets about being insecure and instead relies on Derek correcting him if there's something he doesn't like. So far, there's been nothing.

"I wanna be on top of you," Stiles croaks suddenly, as though his throat is dry. And Derek can't do anything but help him climb on, straddling Derek's thighs. Stiles' face is flushed, lips plump and red, and his hair is a mess. He looks perfect where he's sitting, underwear tenting and partially wet.

"I want to make you come," Stiles says then, determined, and Derek feels his toes curl from the words alone.

"Yeah," is all he manages. "Can I touch you?"

"You don't have to ask." Stiles rubs his palms over Derek's chest, down his stomach and for a moment he seems lost in sticking his forefinger in Derek's bellybutton.
“Yeah, I do.” Because he does. He needs to make sure that Stiles is okay with this, no matter how obvious it seems. “Can I?”

“Yes.”

It's awkward, with Stiles straddling him and neither of them want him to move off to get his underwear properly out of the way. Instead, Derek works his cock out through the opening at the front, feeling slightly lightheaded as he curls his hand around the silky-hard skin. Stiles arches into his touch as he strokes down the length, and his fingers spasm around Derek's dick. It only takes a couple of strokes before he's thrusting into Derek's hand, and it's too much of a turn on in itself that Derek can't even care about the jerky hand-motions Stiles does as he's stroking him off.

“Fuck, I just–”

“Yeah, come on,” Derek urges, rubbing Stiles thigh with his free hand.

Stiles bites his lip hard and he lets go of Derek's dick for a moment, stabilising himself with his hands against Derek's stomach. And then he comes with a low, throaty sound, his body jerking, hot and white across Derek's stomach and chest. Fuck, Derek almost comes untouched just from watching him.

Stiles seems to white out for a moment, and Derek has to reach up and steady him as he slumps forward a little, petting Stiles' thigh slowly with his other hand. It takes a few moments for Stiles to come down, just as his come is cooling on Derek's skin.

“I can still do you, right?”

Derek nods, and suddenly his body is hyper aware again. “Yes, please.”

Stiles tucks himself back in his underwear again before he wraps his hand around Derek's dick. And fuck. Digging his fingers into Stiles' thighs, Derek just holds on, allowing himself to let go for the first time in years. He's not going to last long. Not with the way Stiles strokes him and massaging his balls. Not with the way Stiles' thighs squeeze around his hips. It takes five strokes before his hips heave off the mattress and the muscles in his stomach draw tight. He might have made a sound. He doesn't know, because it's like his body is too overwhelmed by the experience of an orgasm after such a long time without them that he can't concentrate on anything else but the way his entire body just drowns in it.

“Sorry,” he breathes when he's calmed down enough to realise that his grip on Stiles' thighs is going to leave bruises behind. But Stiles just rubs his arms, whispering nonsense that Derek can't catch over the whooshing sound in his ears.

“That was hot,” Stiles says then, voice louder, like he hasn't heard Derek's apology.

Derek hums in agreement, his brain feeling numb. He barely has energy to help when Stiles slides off of him to collapse on the bed as well.

“Do you want to get cleaned up?”

“Yeah.” Looking down at the mess on his stomach, he realises that wiping himself off with a kleenex isn't an option. “It won't be so hot in a while, when it's all dry.”

Stiles laughs and when Derek glances over at him, he looks a bit proud.

Cleaning up leads into a late night snack. At least, that's what Stiles calls eating five sandwiches and
an apple. He's sleepy and soft, as he moulds his body against Derek when they're back in bed later.

“Is this okay?” he asks, but it sounds like he's already half asleep. “Or do you need lots of space?”

“It's fine.”

That makes Stiles snort, and he's breathing soundly when Derek realises that it's because he's said it's fine again. As he pulls the covers up further and tucks them both in, Derek finds, with Stiles' breath ghosting across his shoulder, that it actually is fine.

◊

He doesn't remember when he fell asleep, but he wakes with a jolt. He's too warm, skin sticking to Stiles, where they're lying pressed against each other. It seems like Derek moved even closer in his sleep. For a moment he isn't sure what woke him, but then there's movement outside the front door. He frowns, and a second later, someone knocks.

Stiles just stirs next to him, apparently less easy to wake than Derek.

“Stiles,” he says gently, nudging the arm lying across his stomach. “Someone's at the door.” That's all it takes to wake up Stiles.

“Wha-?”

“Someone's at the door.” Just as he says it, there's another knock, slightly harder this time.

“What time issit?”

Derek reaches across Stiles on the bed, and presses the home button on Stiles' phone on the bedside table. “Twenty to four.”

“Who's knocking now?”

He's about to say that he has no idea, when he notices several text notifications on Stiles' phone. They're all from the same person.

“Brian has texted you several times,” he says. “I didn't mean to snoop. I just used your phone to check the time.”

“Don't worry about it.” Stiles waves him off. “It's him I'm worried about. If that's Brian out there now, I'm officially creeped out.”

That's understandable. Derek thinks for a moment that Brian has left, but then there's another series of knocks, even louder this time.

“Do you want to get the door?”

Stiles shakes his head. “No.”

“You want me to?” His pulse is quickening, and it's an unsettling thought that Brian perhaps has sent a number of texts and then decided to come for a visit instead, when there were no replies. Unease is nagging at the back of his head.

“Do you want to?”

“Sure. You can wait.”
“Don't punch him,” Stiles says quietly as Derek climbs over him and out of bed. Steve whines from his place just inside the door, and as Derek pads over he becomes fully aware that he's only in his underwear. *Don't punch him.*

Nudging Steve aside gently, Derek slides the security chain open and unlocks the door. Brian is nothing like Derek imagined him. He's somewhere between Derek and Stiles in age, and shorter than both of them. His hair is light and floppy in a surfer hair cut and his eyes are light, dazed. He seems drunk.

*Don't punch him.* The thought never crossed Derek's mind until now, when he sees how Brian blinks at him in confusion. For whatever reason he decided to come here, to see Stiles, while being this drunk, Derek suspects that it could have ended badly.

“Who are you?” Brian slurs, and he sways slightly where he stands. Definitely drunk.

“Do you realise how late it is?”

“I'm looking for Stiles.” Brian cranes his neck, as if he's trying to look past Derek into the apartment.

“He's asleep and he doesn't want to talk to you.”

Brian takes a step back, eyeing Derek from head to toe, and then backs further. “What are you doing here if he's asleep?”

“I was asleep too. Until you decided to wake me up.” Derek knows he looks pissed off. He also knows that his workout routine is showing. That's fine with him.

Brian seems to notice this, too. Then, he seems to realise that Derek is only in his underwear.

“Dude, how did you get him to put out?”

Anger coils in the pit of his stomach. He hopes that he still knows how to handle himself when he's angry. “You should leave. I don't think you should contact Stiles again unless he contacts you first and explicitly tells you that he wants to hear from you.”

Brian's brain seems to connect, finally. “I never meant to hurt him, you know.”

“It's none of my business.” Derek hopes that this guy won't start mouthing off, worried that the little self-control he has will snap if it comes down to that. “He'll contact you if he wants to talk to you. Until then I think you should stop coming by or texting him.”

Brian sighs heavily, stumbling a little as he attempts to lean against the wall. “Yeah, fine. I just feel bad.”

“You're not making things better by behaving like this.”

Shoulders slumping, Brian nods. “You're right.”

“Are you getting home safely or do I need to call a cab?”

Shaking his head, Brain pushes away from the wall. He's unsteady, but at least he's wise enough to reach for the railing. “No, my friends are waiting outside. I just wanted to come by and check if Stiles and I are okay. Obviously we're not. But you're right. This is just weird.”

Derek nods. “Good. I'll let him know that you came by. I'm sure he'll contact you when he's ready.”
Brian hesitates for a long time. He looks like he wants to say something, but knows that he should get going. “You take care of him.”

“Stiles can take care of himself,” Derek says. Because it's true.

Brian nods and disappears down the staircase. Derek watches him go. He stays put, listening to the door downstairs open and close and the sound of a car driving off much too fast outside, wheels screeching. He locks up carefully and when he walks back into the room, he finds Stiles sitting at the edge of the bed, Steve's head resting on his thigh.

“You okay?” Derek asks and steps closer.

Stiles nods. “Thank you. It's embarrassing that I need you to do that. Clearly I can't take care of myself.”

Derek sits down next to him, the mattress dipping further under his weight. “You can. If you were home alone you wouldn't have opened at all. Which is normal and completely fine. I'm sure a lot of seeing people wouldn't have, either.”

Stiles leans into him and Derek isn’t sure where to put his arm. They usually only touch when Stiles wants to practice something, or when they're walking somewhere.

“I don't think he would've hurt you. He's just confused.”

“He's too much.”

“Yes,” Derek agrees. “Let's hope he was sober enough to remember not to contact you again unless you want him to.”

Stiles, however, seems like he wants to change the subject. ”Do you want to go back to sleep?”

“If you want.”

Steve lies down on the floor when they get in. Derek first, closest to the wall, and then Stiles climbs under the covers after him. It seems like Stiles' mind is buzzing with thoughts, because he turns restlessly and Derek is wide awake after his encounter with Brian. He reaches out, telling himself that perhaps casual touching is okay between them in situations like these, and rubs his hand up and down Stiles' arm.

“I'm glad you're here,” Stiles sighs and moves in closer, tucking himself in against Derek's chest. Derek doesn't pull back when Stiles has fallen asleep.
Chapter 3

Stiles comes by more often after that. Every other day, at least, and he often stays over, or invites Derek to spend the night at his place. Sometimes Stiles wants mutual hand jobs. Sometimes he just wants to talk. Sometimes he only wants to watch a movie and to not say anything at all. Derek is getting accustomed to having him around. It's not stressful for him anymore, when he knows that Stiles is coming over for dinner, and he doesn't feel as anxious about asking or saying the wrong things.

Thanksgiving is closing in on him, and he reluctantly drops by the flower shop next door to place an order for his family. The woman behind the counter looks surprised when Derek says that he wants them delivered to the graves and not to pick them up personally, but she doesn't say anything about it.

It feels strange leaving Beacon Hills for New York. He puts a sign on the door, letting customers know that the shop's closed over Thanksgiving, but that he'll be back the following week. Stiles has made him promise to text. He's big on texting.

The flight is exhausting. He's not used to being around so many stressed people at once and landing at the airport just outside New York doesn't make things better. He's wired and exhausted by the time he's standing outside Laura's apartment. He's forgotten how overwhelming this city is, and how different things have become for him since he moved to Beacon Hills. New York is never silent.

Laura opens the door with a huge smile and hugs him so tight that Derek can feel it in his ribs. He hugs back. He's missed her, despite their weekly phone calls.

“Hi baby bro,” she says, and it looks like she's on the verge to tears for a moment, but then she smiles again. Josh peeks out from behind her, smiling too, and relief punches through Derek so violently that he almost drops his bag.

“Hey, kiddo,” he says, ruffling Josh's hair. Perhaps Derek spending time away has been good for all of them. “Where's Mike?” he asks then, turning back to Laura, as he steps inside.

“He's flying in from D.C. tonight.”

Mike's flight gets delayed, but they play cards for the rest of the evening until he comes home. He's a best-selling author, and a quiet person in general. Derek likes him because he manages to bring a smile to Laura's face that hadn't been there in years before she met him.

When he's lying in bed later that night, he gets a text from Stiles.

> Hey :) Did you get there alright? Steve is missing you already Scott tells me he looks depressed

There's a photo of Steve attached. He's lying on the floor by a couch Derek doesn't recognise, and he looks miserable.

< Trip went fine. Pet Steve for me while I'm away. I'll make it up to him when I get back.

It takes him almost fifteen minutes to write the text, because it either feels too short and a bit like he's irritated, or it's too wordy. In the end, he just presses send and tells himself that Stiles won't care.

It's almost one and he's long since the only person awake. He's not tired enough to sleep and his
current book is spread open on his stomach, cover up, as he's texting. It takes less than a minute before he gets a reply.

> Shouldn't you be asleep? I'm already in bed and you're three hours ahead of me

< Can't

Derek sends back. Almost immediately, his phone starts ringing, Stiles' name lighting up the display.

“Hi,” he says, answering the call.

“Hey.”

He can hear the smile in Stiles' voice and feels his body relax against the pillows.

“Hi,” Derek says again and feels like an idiot when Stiles laughs.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, I'm in bed. The rest of them are asleep at the other side of the apartment, so I'm not bothering anyone.”

There's a moment of silence before Stiles speaks: “It feels weird not having you around for like a week.”

“I'll be back on Monday.”

“Yeah, but it's Wednesday now.”

Derek huffs out a laugh. “So what did you do today?”

“Not much. Found myself getting dressed and about to head over to your place when I realised that you wouldn't be home. So Steve and I spent the morning sulking until Scott came home from college. We spent the rest of the day with him, and then got back home a couple of hours ago and I thought I'd text you before going to bed.”

“Sorry for leaving you guys stranded like that.” Derek smiles to himself.

“Please, it's not like Steve and I need you to have a good time, right Steve?” Somewhere on the other end, Steve whines.

“Traitor,” Stiles mutters, but then his voice grows softer. “What did you do today?”

Shrugging, Derek folds the corner of the page he's on, despite the fact that he hates when people do that, and puts his book away. “I spent most of it travelling, and then I had dinner with Laura and her family.”

“Sounds nice. Is she younger or older than you?”

“Older. Three years.” Derek hasn't realised that Stiles might not know much about his family until now. The only conversation Derek remembers having is telling Stiles that he used to have another sister as well. “She's married and has a kid.”

“Oh right, yeah, you told me that a while back.” So they have talked about Derek's family, then. “Do you miss them when you're over here?”
“Not really,” Derek says, despite his earlier realisation that he has missed them. “We talk on the phone every week. It's nice being away from the stress here.”

Stiles laughs at that. “Yeah, stressful isn't something you can call Beacon Hills, at least.”

“No,” Derek agrees.

They're quiet for a while, but it's not uncomfortable. He listens to Stiles' breaths and the distant sound of Steve chewing on a squeaker toy.

“I've been wanting to ask something,” Stiles says suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Go ahead.”

Stiles is quiet again, but Derek's used to it now. He knows what it's about.

“I’d like to try blow jobs when you get back.”

“That's not a question.” Derek knows full well what Stiles means to ask, but his stomach contracts so hard that he loses his breath and train of thought for a moment. He needs to buy time. What he wants to do and what's wise to do might be two different things entirely. But perhaps they're not.

“Well, can I?”

“Yes,” Derek says without thinking. He reaches down to adjust himself, surprised by how much Stiles wish to move forward is affecting him.

“You're not doing this just because I want to, right? You need to want it, too.”

“I do. I want it.” Ridiculously much.

Stiles draws an unsteady breath and Derek can hear the rustling of fabric over the phone.

“Do we...” Stiles trails off and clears his throat. “Do we need protection for that?”

“It's either that or we go and get tested.” Derek hasn't had sex since last time he got a paper in his hand saying that he's clean, but he's willing to do it again to make sure that Stiles knows that it's safe. Even though he knows that Stiles has only been with him, and they haven't done anything further than hand jobs, he still wants it on print.

“It's not like I can buy condoms when I grocery shop, because I have to either bring my dad or ask a clerk for help. And my dad's already got high blood pressure, so asking him to pick a good brand is out of the question. If I ask a clerk, the entire town will know within two days anyway. It's not that I care that people know, but my dad would probably have a heart attack no matter if I asked him personally or if he found out while getting his lunch. I think he's pretending that it isn't possible to have sex if you're not in a steady relationship that has a parent's approval.”

Derek smiles at that. “Then we get tested.”

“Yeah, okay. That works.” Stiles clears his throat. “So is there going to be a big dinner tomorrow, or something?”

“No, it's just Laura and her family. We're the only ones left.”

It's almost as if he can hear Stiles thinking on the other end. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asks finally.
“No, it's okay. Is it going to be a big dinner for you?” Nowadays, he's sure that Stiles wouldn't ask if Derek didn't make it clear that he wanted him to, but it still feels safer to steer the conversation in other directions. Away from him.

“Same as usual. Me, dad, Scott, Scott's mom, Scott's girlfriend will probably drop by when she's sick of her own family. So not very big, no.”

“Sounds nice, though.”

“It usually is. You're welcome next year if you don't want to leave for New York.”

Derek picks at his book, flipping through the pages at random, as he smiles. “I'll be sure to remember that.”

“When will you be back on Monday?”

“Late evening, if everything goes as planned. I should be in town around ten at latest.”

“If you want, I could come to your place and spend the night. Or you could come to mine.”

Derek thinks about it for a moment, comparing the thought of coming home to his own dark apartment and having to wait for Stiles, as opposed to going directly to Stiles' apartment, where he'd have an excuse to not unpack right away.

“Can I use your shower if I come to yours?”

“Sure. I'll have dinner ready too, if you think you'll be hungry.”

Derek gets this odd feeling, like something's too big for his chest. He shifts in his bed. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

“Do you think you can sleep better now?” Stiles asks with a yawn.

Derek isn't tired, but his mind feels calmer than it has all day. “I think so. You?”

“Definitely.” Stiles sounds as though he's already half asleep. “I'll text you tomorrow if I get the chance.”

They hang up after that, but Derek can't sleep until he's jerked himself off slowly to vivid pictures of Stiles sucking him off, and himself with Stiles' cock in his mouth. He can't remember the last time he jerked off before this, but it feels good. His body is heavy and content when he finally lobs the kleenex into the trashcan on the other side of the room, and pulls up the covers.

Thanksgiving dinner is nice. He eats too much and his cheeks hurt from smiling. Later that evening Josh is long since asleep and Mike's in his home office, checking his email. It's just him and Laura at the kitchen island, with two glasses of wine and an almost empty box of salty crackers.

“You look good,” Laura points out, smiling. “Do you like living in Beacon Hills?”

Nodding, Derek twirls his glass slowly between his fingers. “It's been good for me.”

“It really has,” she agrees. “You're less jittery now. You're smiling again.”

“It's easier when I have some routine, I guess.”

“How's your friend? Stiles, was it?”
Derek has a feeling that he knows where this is going. “He's good.”

“You're still friends?”

He nods again. There's no way that he'll ever mention the nature of their friendship. She doesn't have to know that. “Seems like it. We spoke on the phone yesterday.”

“When? I didn't notice.”

“It was late. You were already in bed. Why?”

“I'm just curious, that's all. It's nice knowing that you have someone who calls you and checks up on you. That you have other people in your life, rather than just us.”

“He makes me laugh.” It slips out before Derek is able to stop it. He tries to emphasize the fact that it isn't a big deal with a shrug, but he's not sure Laura believes him. She always read too much into things.

“That's good.” Her smile is a bit odd. Too soft. “Do you miss him while you're here?”

“No. It's the routine I miss.”

“And he's part of it?” she prompts immediately.

Sighing, Derek nods. “We spend a lot of time together. He comes by the shop often.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

“What is this? An interrogation? No, I don't. Do you have pictures of all of your friends?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. It's called Facebook. Super convenient.”

“We've already had this discussion. You can't make me get a Facebook.”

“That was so not the point of this conversation,” she sighs.

In that moment, his phone buzzes on the table next to his glass. Unsurprisingly, it’s a text from Stiles.

> Hey big guy! Happy thanksgiving :) You busy?

Derek glares at Laura as she bows her head down suspiciously over her glass, like she's hiding her face.

< Hi. Happy thanksgiving. A bit, talking to Laura. Want me to call you later?

The reply comes almost immediately.

> Sure thing! Tell her I say hi

“She says hi,” he informs her awkwardly.

“He texts?” she asks, incredulous.

He grows a bit defensive at that, for some reason. “Yes, why wouldn't he?”

“How does that work?”
“He speaks to his phone, and it writes the text for him.”

Shrugging, she sips her wine. “Of course. So clever.” And then her face lights up dangerously. “Ask him to send a picture!”

“No.”

“Please, Derek. You owe me. I made pineapple pie, just for you.”

“You bought it from the bakery on the corner.” But Derek is weak and gives in almost immediately, when she starts nagging him.

< Laura wants a picture of you. She's forcing me to send this. Death threats are involved.

> Don't you want a picture of me too? :( 

Derek is certain that Stiles is grinning back in California right now. Stiles and Laura are never allowed to meet.

< No.

His phone is silent for so long that he starts to worry that he misunderstood Stiles, and that he was truly upset about Derek asking for a picture on Laura's behalf, and not his own. When he refills his and Laura's glasses, his phone buzzes again. There's a picture of Stiles there, waving and smiling widely at the camera. Someone else must have taken it, because it's taken a few feet away, showing Stiles' red and blue plaid shirt over a white t-shirt, and his long-fingered hands. He's wearing his usual glasses, but no beanie, and his hair looks soft and messy. And he seems so very happy. Something tugs in Derek's stomach, and he finds himself wishing that Monday would come sooner.

“Well, here you go,” he says, when he realises that he's been looking at the picture for too long, and reluctantly hands Laura the phone.

She looks a bit surprised, but it's quickly replaced with a small smile that Derek has never seen before. “He's wearing glasses.”

“I know.” Derek sighs and rolls his eyes. “It's a thing he does. Says that if people with perfect vision can wear them because it's hip, than he can too.”

“He certainly has a point.” Laura hands the phone back to him. “He's very cute.”

Derek wants to shrug, but since she's right, he decides to nod instead. “I guess.”

< Thank you. She thinks you're cute.

It takes a few minutes before he gets a reply.

> Clearly she's my soulmate. Too bad that she's married and that I'm gay.

Derek snorts out a laugh, earning himself another curious look from Laura, but she doesn't ask.

< Tough luck. You should go for being a monk instead.

> I'm so offended right now. Call me when you're free

Derek doesn't get the chance until around two in the morning. His body is buzzing with alcohol and
the bed feels more comfortable tonight than it did last night. He types a text to Stiles while brushing his teeth.

< Are you free to talk?

> Call me in ten

Derek calls him after fifteen.

“Hey,” Stiles breathes. The other end is so silent. No sound from a TV or other people. Not even from Steve's chew toys.

“Hi. Is it a bad time?”

“No, I just said goodnight to everyone and locked myself in my old room.”

“Sorry. I thought you'd be home by now.”

“I'm spending the night at my dad's.”

“Okay.” Derek doesn't know what to say. His brain feels a little numb. “Did you have a good Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. Awesome as always, but I'm exhausted, so I told them that I'm going to bed.”

“You don't have to for my sake. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Can't. Going away with Scott over the weekend. Plus, I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

Stiles laughs at that. “About nothing in particular. Just talk, you know.”

The blanket feels too warm suddenly and Derek kicks it off. “Sorry for making you take the picture.”

“You're apologising a lot tonight,” Stiles points out. “Is there a reason? Did you sell my cute butt to Satan, or my soul to some weirdo at a crossroads?”

Derek feels as though he's missing something. “What?”

“Never mind,” Stiles sighs, and then his tone turns into a mock whine. “And it was worth it, since at least your sister thinks I'm cute.”

“You know I do.” He's already said as much. Even Derek remembers that.

“Such feeling right there. I can't take it, honestly,” Stiles deadpans.

Derek scoffs. “I've already said that you're good looking.”

“Seriously Derek, can't take all the poetry you're waxing about me right now. I'm getting all flustered.”

“I'm hanging up on you.”

Stiles laughs, and then he falls quiet.

“I guess I won't talk to you until Monday, then?” he asks, realising that Stiles is going away for the
weekend. The plan wasn't for them to call each other every night, which doesn't explain at all why not talking for a few days makes him feel odd.

“Yeah, that's cool, right?”

“Of course. Why wouldn't it be? Do you want me to call you when I'm an hour away?”

“Yep.” Stiles is quiet again. “Do you have to go? I know it's late, but maybe we could talk for a bit longer.”

Those words make Derek feel a little better about them not talking this weekend. “I don't have to hang up yet.”

“What are you doing this weekend?”

“Not sure. Nothing special, I think. Just spending time with them. What are you and Scott doing?”

“We just figured that we needed some bro time, so we're going to LA. We can't spend as much time with each other now like we did in high school, so we created this tradition where we go away for a weekend a couple of times a year instead. We're not allowed to text or call anyone unless it's an emergency.”

“That sounds like a good deal.”

“It is,” Stiles agrees. “I miss him when we're not hanging out.”

“I get that. He's your best friend.”

“Yeah, he's like my brother, even though we're not actually related or anything.”

That makes Derek think of Boyd. They were much like that. Brothers in arms. Best friends.

“Derek?” Stiles says, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Sorry.”

Stiles keeps talking for a while, about everything and nothing. Derek doesn't contribute much, but at least Stiles' talking takes his mind off of painful thoughts. After an hour, Stiles grows silent and all Derek can hear is deep, even breaths from the other end.

It feels as though something's swelling in his chest, when he realises that Stiles has fallen asleep. “Goodnight, Stiles,” he says quietly and listens to Stiles' breathing for another moment, before he hangs up.

It's easy to fall asleep after that.

The next morning, Derek has a text waiting for him when he wakes up much later than normal.

> Sorry for falling asleep on you! Call me when you're an hour away on Monday. Have fun this weekend!

He doesn't bother with replying, since Stiles isn't allowed to call or text back anyway. Which is fine. Derek wasn't planning on them having much contact at all during Thanksgiving anyway. It just sort of happened. Not that he minds, because it's been nice, but he can't complain now.

He spends the afternoon walking around with Josh. They look at old buildings, because Josh is
fascinated by them. They're so different from the skyscrapers that look as though they're mostly made out of glass.

“What's that?” Josh asks, pointing at the cornerstone in a stone wall around a church.

“It's a cornerstone,” Derek explains. “It's the first stone placed when you start building a wall, like this one. Every other stone is set in reference to this, so it's important that you do it right.”

Josh hums, touching the stone carefully. Whoever built the wall made sure that the cornerstone was slightly different from the rest of them. Perhaps to make it easier for themselves as they built, or maybe because they wanted to make the first stone special.

“Derek,” Josh says and looks up at him after a moment. “You love me right?”

Derek blinks, frowning down at him. A part of him wonders if Josh doubts how much Derek loves him after what happened almost two years ago, just after Derek had gotten back from the hospital. Terrified. Broken. Josh had jumped on him while he was asleep, and Derek's brain, still trapped in a war, assumed that he was being attacked and had almost strangled him. That was when Derek realised that he needed help. Needs help.

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Good, because I want McDonald's.”

Internally, Derek sighs in relief, but he pretends to frown further. Josh clearly doesn't buy it, because he just fires off a cheeky smile and sticks out a mangled twig he must have picked from a bush just now. “Please?”

“You're a menace,” Derek sighs. “You know that, right?”

“Does menace mean that I get McDonald's?” Josh sticks the twig into Derek's belt loop when he doesn't take it from him.

Derek gives up. “Yes.”

He spends the rest of his stay alternating between playing board games with Josh and avoiding Laura's questions. She's awfully curious about Stiles, and Derek suspects that Laura will end up visiting him soon, if he doesn't play this right.

He reads out loud to Josh on his last night, secretly touched to the bone that Josh trusts him enough to have Derek read him bedtime stories. The last time he was allowed to do that was when he was home right before his last tour. It's nice, having Josh tucked beneath his arm, against his side, and looking at the pictures together with him. Derek has to carry him to bed that night, because he's already fast asleep after the fourth book is finished. Derek hasn't stopped reading once he got the chance to make up for his mistakes.

Josh looks small and fragile, where he lies in bed, tucked beneath the SpongeBob sheets. Derek lingers for a while, placing Josh's plush giraffe under his arm and makes sure that the rocket ship lamp on the window sill is lit before he leaves. No matter how annoying Laura can be, he probably should ask them to visit him sometime soon.

She's smiling at him when he exits Josh's room, after stepping on some legos that have probably crippled him for life.

“He's going to miss you when you leave.”
“I'm going to miss him, too.”

“He's always looked up to you, you know. And he loves you. He always has.”

“I hurt him.”

She pats the seat next to her on the couch. Derek goes reluctantly.

“Yes, you did,” she agrees. “Josh is a clever kid for his age, though. I think he got it from his mom. He knows that you were ill. That you are ill. He knows you're better now, too. That you wouldn't do it again. You've apologised to him, talked to him, despite how much you usually avoid talking. He understands, Derek.”

“I don't know.”

“I do. And Josh does. If he wasn't comfortable around you, or if we didn't trust you around him, you wouldn't be here. You'd be sleeping at a hotel somewhere.”

Technically, Derek realises this. It's his own guilt nagging in the back of his head. Hearing Laura say it out loud, especially after spending so much time with Josh, it makes a lot of difference. Makes it easier to breathe.

“You belong over there, though. In Beacon Hills. It's better for you.”

“I think so.” Derek nods. Coming back to New York, it's become much clearer to him that he can't stay here. Not when there are places like Beacon Hills, where he can function almost like a normal person.

“You're looking better than you have in years, despite not being in therapy even though you should be. Even before your last tour, you weren't you anymore.”

Taking a deep breath, he nods. War changes people. After seeing what he's seen, doing the things he's done, you're not the same anymore. Back then, he was functioning, at least. After his last tour, there was no hope of him ever returning to who he used to be. Another soldier once described it as being too trapped in a war to be at peace, and too damaged to be at war. Derek doesn't think anyone has ever expressed it more perfectly.

“I should probably take up on therapy, however.”

“I think that would be good,” Laura says softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “Does Stiles know?”

“Know about what?”

“About your condition?”

Sighing, Derek pulls his hand back. “You make it sound like I have a leg missing.”

“You haven't told him, have you?”

“Why would I? We're just friends”, he mutters defensively. He gets an unimpressed look in reply.

“Friends who text each other selfies.”

“You asked for one!”
She only smirks at that, like she knows something that he doesn't. Derek hates when she does that.

“When are you seeing him again?”

“Tomorrow,” he mutters, knowing full well what she's going to make of this.

“Don't you get back really late?”

“Around ten.”

“See, that's late. And he's still coming over to your place?”

“No.” Derek glares at the coffee table, and then crumbles. “I'm going to his place when I get back.”

Laura laughs and shakes her head. “Even if it's true that you're nothing more than friends, it's clearly a good friendship for you to have.”

Deciding that he's above replying to that, Derek goes to bed. For a moment, he contemplates texting Stiles, but decides against it. Stiles told him to call an hour away from Beacon Hills, and perhaps this pact he was with Scott is still on until tomorrow. Derek figures that Stiles could need some space from him, too, even though the past days have felt incredibly long.

After an hour of restless tossing, he gives up and decides to get a cup of tea. To his surprise, he finds Mike at the dining room table, typing away on his computer.

“Can't sleep?” he asks, briefly looking up from the screen.

“No,” Derek confesses. “You?”

Mike shrugs. “No, I’m just behind on a deadline. I have another few chapters to send to my editor in the morning, and I’m still half a chapter short.” Then he stops, flexes his fingers and gestures towards the electric kettle on the table. “Grab a mug and tea, if you feel like you need some company.”

Sometimes Derek wonders if Mike knows him a lot better than he appears to, but he doesn’t comment on it. Instead, he grabs a mug from a cabinet and chooses a tea flavour he thinks he recognises from Stiles selection, before he sinks down in a chair.

“How’s Beacon Hills treating you?” Mike asks, closing his laptop.

“It’s good, I guess. Better than here.”

“You're more talkative than you used to be,” Mike points out, but there’s a hint of a smile.

Clearing his throat, Derek concentrates on stirring his tea. “I sort of met someone who doesn’t give me much of a choice,” he amends finally.

“Laura told me.”

Derek isn’t the least bit surprised by that. However, the next thing Mike says is a lot more intriguing.

“I have contacts working on a project for people with vision impairments, in hopes of enabling them to read more than what’s currently possible.”

Derek remembers surprisingly well how Stiles complained about not having a very big selection of things to read. “How?”
“It’s an e-book reader, that has a refreshable braille display, using electroactive polymers to raise braille dots on the display,” Mike explains, like that is something Derek is expected to understand. He doesn’t ask, however, interest piqued.

For a moment, Mike is silent, but then he gives Derek another one of his small smiles, and says: “Perhaps Stiles would like to try a prototype?”

“Would that be possible?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mike promises. “I’ll set you up with a few of my contacts. A perfect Christmas gift, right?”

Derek can’t argue with that. His body buzzes with a new kind of excitement, as he realises that he might be able to provide Stiles with something he might have been missing. He’s only partially involved in the conversation after that, mind caught up in the idea of a braille e-book reader for Stiles.

He doesn’t fall asleep until four.

◊

When he finally picks up his phone and calls Stiles, it's later than he counted on. He texted as soon as he got off the delayed plane, to make sure that Stiles is aware of him being late. It's almost half past ten now, and Derek still has about an hour’s drive left.

“Hey,” Stiles greets when he picks up, and to Derek's relief he doesn't sound irritated.

“Hi. I'm an hour away now.” He pauses, suddenly worried that their plans are cancelled because of him being an hour and a half later than they first planned. “If you still want me to come by.”

“Yeah, I do.” There's a smile in Stiles' voice. “Dinner will be ready when you're here. Hang up on me now, because it's stupid to talk on the phone while you drive, okay?”

Derek doesn't have a chance to reply, before Stiles hangs up on him.

It's possible that he speeds a little the last few miles. He's just eager to be done with travelling and he's extremely tired. He tries not to think about the condoms and lube in his bag, which he bought on his way to the airport, insisting on catching a cab instead of Laura driving him for that particular reason. She would've laughed at him if he told her the truth. He's not expecting anything; it's just to make sure that they don't end up in a situation where they have to choose between no sex and unsafe sex.

He feels strangely comfortable as he walks up the staircase in Stiles’ building to the top floor, taking the steps two at a time. Steve yips when he knocks, and then there's the familiar sound of Stiles' steps. For some reason, he holds his breath as the door opens, eyes raking over Stiles like they're trying to make up for lost time. He's wearing the same plaid pajama pants that he wore when he slept over at Derek's for the first time, and a purple hoodie. There are no glasses, however, and his hair looks a bit rumpled. Derek's fingers suddenly itch to reach out and grab a hold.

“Hey.” Stiles' smile is huge and he almost sounds breathless.

“Hi.” He walks inside when Stiles steps aside to let him in.
He gets a brief hug that's over before he's able to drop his bags to return it properly.

“Missed me?” Stiles laughs.

“Maybe,” Derek says quietly and looks down at Steve, who's whining at his feet.

“We've missed you, too.”

Somehow, Derek expected a kiss, and has to remind himself that they rarely touch when there isn't some kind of sex or making out involved. He crouches down to pet Steve, who presses his nose all over Derek's face.

“Do you want to eat or shower first?” Stiles asks him, and Derek had completely forgotten about being promised a shower. His body aches for it, suddenly, but it seems like the dinner is already waiting on the kitchen table. The shower can wait.

“Eat.”

Stiles smiles again.

He doesn't realise that he's starving, until he sits down and the smell of stew and potatoes hit his nose. “It smells good,” he comments.

“It's something my mom used to make.”

Derek doesn't ask. Instead he fills his plate when Stiles tells him to, and lets Stiles talk while he eats. He assumes that Stiles has already eaten, considering that he's sticking to a cup of tea, and the fact that it's midnight. It makes it easier for him to talk all the more, and Derek finds it difficult not to smile, despite the fact that Stiles is talking about getting a flat tire which isn't particularly funny.

“Did you and Scott have a good weekend?” he asks finally.

The question makes Stiles light up. “Yeah, it was great. We went to a bar and got drunk. Pure awesomeness.”

“Glad to hear it.” Derek bites back a smile and doesn't comment on the fact that it's perhaps not what he would label as an awesome weekend. As long as Stiles is happy, it's good. “When did you get back?”

“This morning. Dad picked me up and Scott drove back to his college. I've been sleeping on and off the entire day. We didn't have time for that this weekend you know.”

“Understandable.”

Stiles keeps talking about the bar they went to, and people they talked to. He seems particularly fascinated by an older guy who came onto him. Derek decides to pay most of his attention to his food when the conversation steers in on that subject. He's just very hungry.

“It was just weird, you know? According to Scott he was pretty hot too, for an older guy, and he was talking to me like a normal human being—“

“Why wouldn't he?” Derek interrupts.

“Some people get uncomfortable. You did, too.”

Deciding that he's finished eating, Derek pushes the plate away. “Sorry.”
“I didn't mean it like that,” Stiles sighs. “It's just that it was nice for a change.”

“I get that. It must be refreshening.” Derek knows that he sounds stiff. He has no idea why, but this guy makes him uncomfortable, like Brian did.

Stiles shrugs. “Are you finished with your food?”

Glancing down at his plate, Derek nods. “Yeah, it was great. Thanks.”

“No problem. There's a spare towel in the bathroom if you want it. Feel free to use soap and whatever else you need.”

“Do you want help with clearing the table?” Derek asks carefully. It feels as though he's done something stupid.

“No. Why would I need help with that?” There's that edge to Stiles' voice again.

“It feels rude to leave you with the dishes, when I was the one eating.”

At that, Stiles seems to relax slightly. “No, it's fine. Go shower.”

It's not nearly as relaxing as Derek expected it to be. Even though his body enjoys the steady pressure of water against his back and neck, his head is spinning relentlessly with confused thoughts. He's sure that he's ruined something, but he's not exactly sure of what. Rinsing the shampoo from his hair, he decides that he's going to have to ask Stiles about it.

Stiles is putting the last of the clean dishes back in the cabinets when Derek emerges from the bathroom. He pauses for a second when Derek closes the bathroom door. Perhaps it's his way of acknowledging him.

“The dinner was great.”

As he watches, Stiles dries his hand on a checkered towel and puts it back on its hanger. He turns towards Derek and smiles a little.

“Good. I wasn't sure if you like stew, but I figured that it was worth a shot, at least.”

“Thank you for making me dinner in the middle of the night.”

“It's not a problem.” Stiles hesitates then. “Do you still want to spend the night?” he asks, making Derek frown.

“I thought we'd already decided that?”

Shrugging, Stiles concentrates on wiping water from the countertop. “Just checking if you've changed your mind.”

Taking a deep breath, Derek scrubs a hand over his face. This is not what he wanted to come home to, but it's his own fault and he's going to have to fix it. “I'm sorry for being irritated before. I'm really glad that you had a good weekend with Scott. Maybe it's because I'm tired from the trip. I don't know why I reacted like that.”

“Don't worry about it,” Stiles says, but tension has bled from his shoulders. Derek welcomes him when he steps close, allowing himself to hold Stiles against his own body for a moment. “Let's go to bed, grumpy,” Stiles mumbles against his throat.
Derek rolls his eyes at that, but Stiles is right. He's dead tired and could really use some sleep. “Sounds good.”

“Still okay with sleeping closest to the wall?”

“Of course.”

He watches Stiles strip again, wondering if it's wrong, since Stiles can't see that he's staring. It takes him a second to realise that Stiles is very aware, however. He takes off his clothes slowly, angling his body towards Derek as he does. It's not a coincidence.

Derek's seen Stiles naked before. A number of times now. However, all of those times have happened in a sex haze where Derek wanted nothing more than to get Stiles' hand on his dick and vice versa. Now, however, he realises for the first time that Stiles' body is surprisingly toned. He's noticed before, but not like this. Stiles is lean, yes, but there's more definition to him than Derek's been aware of. Derek stares a moment at the swell of his ass in his, once again, very colourful briefs. Today they're rainbow striped, making Derek smile.

He finds himself walking closer, nosing at Stiles' neck and locks his arms around his torso. “I like your underwear.” Perhaps it's the lack of sleep and the fact that they haven't spoken in days that brings it out in him. For a second, he's worried that he's stepped over a line. But the way Stiles presses into him and his badly suppressed shudder, makes it all worth it. It doesn't seem like he minds.

“How hot in them?” Stiles asks, and Derek can hear the grin in his voice.

He just hums in reply, pressing a kiss below Stiles' ear. His body grows warm when Stiles leans in against him, and even though he's too tired for anything remotely sexual, it still feels nice. Stiles seems to feel much the same, not pushing anything further than letting Derek slowly run his hands up and down his sides. It's difficult not to; Stiles' skin feels so soft and smooth.

“So do you,” Stiles says, unexpectedly.

“Yeah?” Derek doesn't point out the obvious. Doesn't ask how Stiles can possibly know that. He probably came to that conclusion based on other things than looks alone. Derek doesn't really care, because hearing it makes him feel good.

“Yeah,” Stiles breathes and turns around. Pressing his body against Derek's, he tucks his head under Derek's chin. His hands glide up Derek's stomach and chest, and Derek notices how he pauses at his scars. Stiles has touched his torso before, but Derek suspects that he wasn't aware enough to notice the scars at the time. He's healed now, but the scars are ugly, permanent reminders. Stiles' breath hitches for a moment, and he seems to hesitate before his fingers gently trace the scar beneath Derek's ribs on the left side. It's a few inches long, and it feels as though the skin is burning under Stiles' light touch.

He lets Stiles trace it a couple of time, and then reaches up to move his hand to the next – the one below his collarbone. It's odd. He doesn't like them, doesn't want people looking or acknowledge them. Usually he ignores them in the mirror, as well. It feels different now. It's like letting go, handing himself over.

Stiles traces that scar as well. Derek ignores the small ones; they're merely scratches compared to these. He moves Stiles' hand to them one at a time: to his shoulder, to his thigh, to his hip. And then to the scar on his right side, below his chest. The one that stays as a reminder of his punctured lung. Stiles inhales sharply then, his fingertips pressing harder. It's the ugliest one, taking forever to heal
“Are these...?” Stiles says, and then trails off, as if he's not sure how to ask.

Derek waits him out. With anyone else he would've interrupted them now, with a sharp yes and then ended the conversation. Now, he needs to hear it. Needs Stiles to acknowledge them, and he doesn't know why.

“Are these from your time serving?” Stiles finishes quietly now.

“Yes.”

“Can I–can I touch them again?” There's a softness to Stiles' voice, but Derek doesn't recognise it as pity. It's something else. Something that makes him feel less exposed.

He nods, clearing his throat. “Yes.” And then he movies Stiles' hand to the first scar again, sucking in a breath in surprise when Stiles crouches to touch it with his lips. Derek expects it to feel wrong, for it to make him uncomfortable. Instead, he feels like crying for the first time in eighteen months.

Stiles kisses them all and when he's done, Derek feels exhausted and his body aches like he's run a marathon.

“I've missed you,” Stiles says quietly, thumb stroking Derek's cheek. He seems to know that Derek isn't ready to talk about it. “We should go to sleep and spend tomorrow in bed.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Derek agrees, ignoring the fact that the sign on the shop's door says that it's supposed to be open again tomorrow. Perhaps he was delayed in New York for a day longer.

Stiles takes half a step back, before he leans in and brushes a brief kiss onto Derek's lips. It's just that. A kiss. Nothing more. Derek doesn't remember the last time he had one of those. One that wasn't for Stiles to experiment, or supposed to lead to something more.

The bed feels comfortable and familiar when he gets in, and even more so when Stiles lies down next to him. Derek isn't sure if it's because of the smell he's so used to now, or the feeling of Stiles scooting close to him. They don't even attempt to sleep apart. Derek welcomes him, holds him close, and he's out before he knows it.

Despite his travel the previous day, he wakes up early and climbs out of bed to relieve himself. Steve looks up from where he's lying on the couch, a place where he isn't supposed to be, but Derek isn't going to tell on him. When he gets back, he digs out the condoms and the lube from his bag and puts them on Stiles' bedside table. He isn't expecting anything, and isn't even sure if they'll come in handy, but he would rather have them close at hand if they do, than have to get up and dig through his bag.

Steve's still lying on the couch, but he's watching Derek expectantly. He's probably expecting his morning walk. Derek should probably do his morning workout, but since he worked out the day before yesterday, even though it was a Sunday, he'll allow himself to have the morning off.

“Hey, Stiles,” Derek says quietly and touches Stiles' arm, which is hanging out over the side of the bed. “Want me to take Steve for a walk?”

Stiles groans, turning over in the other direction. “Only if you come back to bed afterwards.”

“Promise.”
It doesn't take more than Derek pulling on a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt and grabbing the leash from the hanger in the hallway to have Steve thumping his tail against the floor at his feet. They don't go that far. Only a few blocks around the neighbourhood and through a park. Steve looks like he wants to go back to sleep as soon as he's relieved himself a few times, and Derek is starting to long being back in bed as well.

"Feel like heading back home, buddy?" he asks, and Steve whines. "You got it."

Stiles is still sleeping when Derek unclasps the leash after closing the front door behind him. He's moved over to Derek's side of the bed, like he's been searching for the warmth in Derek's old spot. Climbing back in bed, he decides to let Stiles sleep for as long as he needs, and drifts into a slumber. It's not even six in the morning.

The next time he wakes up, it's because Stiles is stirring next to him.

"Morning," Derek mumbles, when he sees Stiles blinking sleepily.

A slow smile creeps to Stiles' lips and he turns towards Derek. "Morning."

"Slept well?"

"Mm," Stiles groans and stretches. "Did I dream, or did you really take out Steve for a walk?"

"I really did."

"Thank you." And then, Stiles' mouth is on his, with everything they were too tired to let out yesterday. It's soft and harsh at the same time, and Stiles is rolling over onto his back and spreads his legs open for Derek to get between them, even before Derek is on top of him to nudge them apart.

"Do you even realise how difficult it has been being away from you and not being able to talk to you, or jerk off because I shared a hotel room with Scott?"

Derek huffs out a laugh. "I better make it worth the wait, then."

"It's already worth the wait," Stiles groans, as Derek grinds down on him.

"Want me to blow you?" Derek asks and a low sound stutters out of Stiles, as if surprised.

"What?" He looks confused and then a bit nervous. "I haven't had time to get tested--"

"I bought condoms," Derek interrupts before Stiles gets too carried away, and suddenly the confusion and nervousness is exchanged for something more excited.

"Really?"

"I figured that we might not be patient enough to wait for the tests."

Stiles opens and closes his mouth a few times. "Holy crap. Yes. Yes, please. What should I do?"

"Nothing." When Stiles hesitates a little, Derek adds: "Just lie back."

He lets Derek press him back against the pillows, and whimper. He takes his time. Revels in the taste of Stiles' skin on his lips, the feel of Stiles' nipples hardening under his tongue. The sound of his breathless moans and the way his hips twitch under Derek's hands when he dips his tongue in Stiles' bellybutton. He mouths Stiles through his underwear, licks the outline of his cock and the soft swell of his balls. Stiles' legs fall open for him, like they're too weak not to.
Impatience gets a hold of him quickly, and he carefully pulls Stiles' underwear down slightly. After placing a quick kiss at the dip of Stiles' hip, Derek reaches out for the condoms, ripping one packet open and gently slides it down over Stiles' cock. He licks the head, and then slides his lips down the length, pulling Stiles' underwear off the rest of the way. The taste of latex on his lips isn't that great, but realising that he's going to suck Stiles off more than makes up for it.

He licks down the length, rubbing his tongue around the head over and over, and Stiles is already shaking under him.

“Derek,” he whimpers, and his voice sounds broken. “Please.”

Derek just goes lower, slowly licking his balls, then sucking them into his mouth one at a time. He thinks he hears Stiles sob, and his cock twitches when Derek slides the flat of his tongue back up the underside of it, until he can close his lips around the head.

Stiles' moan is loud and throaty, making Derek reach down and palm himself as he gently sucks Stiles into his mouth. Stiles' hips twitch and rise from the mattress, but Derek holds him down, taking him deeper every time he bobs his head. Stiles hands are everywhere; stroking his hair, touching his cheek, as if he wants to feel it hollow when Derek sucks him into his mouth again.

The sounds are the best part of it. The unabashed, needy sounds that has Derek on the verge of coming even without touching himself properly. He sucks harder and lets go of Stiles' hips when he feels like he can take it, and reaches down to stroke himself. Stiles’ hips rise from the mattress again, surprisingly controlled this time, as he pushes into Derek's mouth slowly and then hesitating.

“Is this okay? Can I do this?”

Derek pulls off and kisses Stiles' thigh briefly, before he says: “Yeah, I want you to.”

Stiles bites his lip hard, before nods. “Pull away if it gets too much.”

“I will,” Derek promises. “But I want you to come in my mouth.”

He can see the muscles in Stiles' stomach bunch at his words, and a low whine slips out of Stiles' mouth. “Okay, okay, yeah, I can do that.”

Stiles groans loudly when Derek takes him back into his mouth. Stiles' hand is in his hair, and Derek holds still, relaxing his throat as Stiles slowly starts thrusting into his mouth. At first, it's slow and shallow, as if he doesn't quite trust Derek to take it, but he quickly grows impatient and desperate, pushing deeper, faster, and Derek tries to jerk off matching the same rhythm.

His throat feels sore, jaw aching, and spit is running down Stiles' cock, making it sloppy and wet. But he's never been harder in his life, moaning despite having his mouth full. That seems to push Stiles over the edge and he doesn't go quiet. He keeps thrusting, head tipped back, fingers twitching in Derek's hair and makes desperate sounds at the back of his throat. Then his back snaps up and he comes, for what seems like forever, in Derek's mouth. Derek follows just a moment later. Groaning, with Stiles still in his mouth, he reaches up to hold the condom in place as he pulls off. Stiles is still panting heavily, chest heaving, as Derek ties it off and tosses it into the trash, and then collapses next to him on the bed.

“Oh my god,” Stiles manages finally and Derek smiles, even though his jaw aches. “I think my brain died.”

Derek huffs out a laugh, too tired to say anything. He feels as though he could go back to sleep right now.
“That was the best thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“Well, I’m glad.” Derek’s voice is absolutely wrecked, but Stiles just shivers as if he likes the sound of it.

“You have to teach me that.”

“If you want,” Derek promises.

Nodding, Stiles takes a deep breath. “I feel sticky and a bit gross, but honestly, I’m up for at least a nap.”

“A agreed.”

Stiles scoots close to him on the bed, and Derek finds that he doesn’t mind, even though he’s sweaty and overly warm, and that Stiles’ skin sticks to his.

They combine breakfast with lunch when they wake up. Stiles looks all rumpled and sleep soft, and his long-sleeved shirt is on inside-out, but when Derek tells him he just shrugs. Keeping his hands to himself while watching Stiles blink sleepily and slowly sip his coffee, between chewing his bacon and toast, is quite the challenge for Derek.

Stiles smiles, soft and warm, after being quiet some time. “I like this.”

“What?” Derek asks, confused.

Stiles shrugs. “This. All of it.”

Derek’s not sure what he’s referring to, but he thinks that he agrees. He likes this, too.

“You wanna go for a walk with Steve and then go back to bed?” Stiles asks him as they clear the table, pulling at the hem of Derek’s shirt.

They spend the afternoon lazily making out in bed, and then Derek blows him a second time. He’s pretty sure he smells, but Stiles doesn't seem to mind.

It feels odd going back to his own apartment that evening. He wants to spend a second night, but knows that he needs to get back to his own place, his routine, and wash up his laundry before going to bed. The shop needs to open again tomorrow. Stiles pouts a little as he leaves, but Derek thinks that it might be a bit of a relief for him as well, since it's been so intense.

His own apartment feels silent and empty as he sinks down on his couch, zapping through the channels, with the dryer running in his bathroom. He contemplates showering, but decides against it, no matter how much dried come he must be covered in. Most of it is probably on Stiles' sheets, and Derek needs to shower after his morning workout tomorrow anyway.

◊

However, their routine gets a little rocky after that. Stiles doesn't come by as often, but when he does, he's his usual self. It makes Derek confused. Around the middle of December, about two weeks before Christmas, Stiles is sitting on his couch, looking absolutely exhausted.

“What's wrong?” Derek asks and Stiles blinks as though he was just about to fall asleep.

“Just really tired, that's all.” He shrugs.
“You haven't been around much lately,” Derek points out, even though it shouldn't be a problem for him.

Stiles grimaces. “Sorry. I've had stuff to do.”

Derek waits for an explanation, but there is none. “Okay.”

Suddenly, Stiles stands and goes for his bag. For a moment, Derek thinks he's going to leave, but then he says: “I forgot to show you this. I got my results back today.”

He thrusts a somewhat crumpled paper in Derek's direction, who needs a second to realise that it's the result of Stiles' STD test.

“Right,” he says and takes it. It's no surprise that Stiles doesn't have any, but it's still a relief to have it on paper.

“Squeaky clean, right?” Stiles looks slightly less tired now, when Derek hands the paper back to him.

“Congratulations.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “You got tested too, right?”

“Yes, I'll go get my results.”

Stiles stops him as he's about to stand up. “What am I going to do with them? I trust you.”

Derek shrugs. “I figured you might want to take a picture and send it to someone. They could verify that I'm telling the truth.”

“I trust you,” Stiles repeats firmly.

“You shouldn't. You should never trust anyone when it comes to that. That's how people get STDs in the first place.”

“Wow, Derek, you have such good faith in humanity.”

“I'm a realist.”

Stiles snorts. “That's a strange pronunciation for pessimist.”

Sighing, Derek goes to retrieve the results. “Please do it.”

“People will know we're having sex if I do.”

“Like you haven't told your friends already.” It's a stab in the dark, but Stiles flushes. Thinking that maybe it was a rude comment, Derek adds: “Either way, I don't mind.”

“Fine, just give it to me.”

Derek hands the paper over and helps Stiles with aiming the phone camera right, when he asks. Stiles takes care of the rest.

“You realise that even if we don't use protection from now on, you'll still have to with others? I'm going to have to trust you on that.” Derek feels motion sick just thinking about it.
Stiles stares. “What?”

“If you have sex with someone else you have to –” Derek starts explaining, but Stiles cuts him off.

“I heard you, but I don't get what you're talking about. Why would I have sex with anyone else?”

Confused, Derek tries to wrap his head around that. “Well, you wanted to do this as friends, and I guess that means it's not an exclusive arrangement.”

Stiles' eyes grow impossibly wider and he opens and closes his mouth a few times, as though he's searching for words. That's rather new. “You have sex with others?” he manages finally.

“What? No.”

“Then why would I?”

“You were the one who wanted to get comfortable with someone,” Derek says defensively, making Stiles sigh.

“Well, I'm not.”

They're silent after that. For a long time. It's tense and Derek knows he's said something stupid, but he doesn't know what. He's not sure why their conversation might have offended Stiles. Using protection with other people is how it has to work. It's not like they've done anything but quick hand jobs lately, and the last time was over a week ago. Stiles hasn't seemed interested and Derek doesn't want to push.

Stiles' phone buzzes after Derek's been staring blankly at the TV screen for so long that his neck feels stiff. Stiles puts an earphone in and Derek pretends like he isn't curious, even though he is. Sometimes he wonders if Brian and Stiles are in contact again, but he doesn't want to ask. It's none of his business.

“Okay, so Scott tells me you're good.” Stiles sounds tired.

“Okay.”

“Care to tell me what's going on with you lately?” Stiles asks and turns towards him on the couch.

“With me?” Derek replies, before he can stop himself.

“Yeah, you've been grumpy and even more quiet than usual the last couple of times we've hung out.” Stiles shrugs.

“It's not like we hang out that often anymore anyway,” Derek mutters. If Laura would hear him now, she'd slap him across the back of his head.

“Well, here's a surprise for you, Derek. You have two functioning legs and you know where I live. You're more than capable of actually seeking me out when you want to spend time with me, not just sit around and wait for me, and then sulk if I don't drop by.”

Derek looks away. He hasn't thought of that. “But you always come by,” he says quietly, feeling ridiculous.

“I've been caught up in stuff.” Stiles waves a hand airily, as if it's supposed to mean something to Derek. “I'm bad at keeping track of time when I do. Do you feel like I'm ignoring you?”
Derek shrugs. “Not really.”

Stiles ducks his head and it looks like he's smiling. But when he looks up again, he's serious. “I'm not doing anything with other people.”

“She neither,” Derek says immediately.

“I can promise to tell you if that ever becomes the case, if you want?”

It's partially a relief, knowing that he'll let Derek know if he starts seeing someone. But a small voice at the back of his head whispers that Stiles' words still open up for the possibility that he will. “I guess. I can do that, too.”

Stiles scoots closer. “You're such an idiot,” he says fondly, shaking his head as though Derek has missed a big point everyone else knows but him.

“No,” he mutters, but Stiles just laughs.

“Come on, give me some cuddles.”

They both know Derek is a terrible cuddler, but he lets Stiles manhandle him until he has his arm around Stiles' shoulder, and Stiles' legs in his lap.

“See, this is really nice.”

“You look really uncomfortable,” Derek points out.

Stiles laughs out loud at that. “Yeah, I need to work a bit on my flexibility, obviously.” He flops down on the couch instead, but his feet stay in Derek's lap, who gives up on not touching them after a moment.

“This is great, though,” Stiles comments sleepily after a while. Derek's been absently rubbing his feet, lost in the soccer game on TV. He only hums in reply. It feels as though something has relaxed behind his ribs, if only just a little.

Stiles doesn't come by for another few days after that, but Derek figures that it could be a way for Stiles to see if he's actually capable of stopping by himself. It's Friday evening when he puts his shoes on and makes his way over to Stiles'. The air is chilly now, reminding him of what time of year it is. Soon, he'll be back in New York to celebrate Christmas.

The braille e-book reader hasn't showed up yet, and he's starting to suspect that it might not make it in time. He should order something else as a back up plan. He's not sure that Stiles even expects him to buy anything, but either way, he feels as though he should. The other day, he was looking for braille books, but there aren't many to choose from except for the classics and the most popular ones. He should probably have another look soon, if the e-book reader doesn't show up.

A few people greet him on the street. Derek doesn't know their faces, but he returns their greetings all the same. It's not until he walks up the stairs in Stiles' building that he starts to feel nervous. He hasn't thought about the fact that Stiles might have someone over already. He's stated before that Derek isn't his only friend, whereas Derek only has him, which makes it less difficult for Stiles to visit.

He knocks on the door and is relieved when he hears Steve's immediate bark on the other side. At least Stiles is home, he thinks. When no one comes to open, though, he starts to think that he might have been wrong. He waits a while, before he tries knocking again, once more hearing Steve barking
in response. When there's no answer this time either, he shrugs to himself and turns to the stairs
again. Perhaps Stiles doesn't feel like having someone over tonight, or maybe he's too busy to open
the door.

Derek's halfway down the staircase when he hears the turning of a lock and a door opening.

“Hello?” he hears Stiles' voice.

It takes him a second to stop and turn around, to get back up the stairs, at which point Stiles is
already closing the door again.

“Wait,” Derek says, when he realises that he needs to make himself known.

“Derek?” Stiles asks and the door shuts with a bang.

Staring at the closed door for a moment, Derek isn't sure how he's supposed to interpret that. But
then he hears the rattle of the security chain and the door swings open once more.

“Hi,” he says and lets his gaze travel over Stiles, who's wearing worn out sweats and a t-shirt with a
print so faded that Derek can't make out what it is. His hair is sticking up in various directions, like
he's been tugging on it, or perhaps been asleep.

“Hey.” Stiles' smile is a bit sheepish. “Sorry. I didn't hear you knock at first.”

“Is it a bad time? Were you sleeping?”

“No, it's fine. I'm just working on something. What time is it?”

Derek glances down at his wrist watch. “It's eight-thirty.”

Stiles swears under his breath. “I haven't had dinner or taken Steve for his evening walk. Crap.”

Derek isn't sure how to react to that. If he's supposed to offer to leave once more, or comfort Stiles.

“Do you want to come in?” Stiles asks. “I'll just take a shower and maybe we can take Steve for a
walk and pick up take out?” Stiles scratches his chin. “I'm the worst. I told you to come over
whenever you felt like it and when you do, I'm a mess.”

“It's fine if you don't have the time. I'll just come by another day.”

“No! I should probably stop for the day, anyway.”

Derek hesitates. It feels as though he's intruding.

“Please? I could really use a break.”

Glancing down, Derek notices Steve who's sitting at Stiles' feet, with his tail thumping the floor, like
he's dying to say hello.

“What do you want to eat? If you take a shower, I can take Steve for a walk and pick something up.”

Stiles' eyes widen. “You don't have to.”

“It's not a problem.”

“Are you sure?” Stiles asks, biting his lip.
“I'm sure.” Derek can't help but smile. “Steve and I have some catching up to do.”

The corners around Stiles' eyes crinkle when he smiles. “I'm starting to suspect that Steve is the only reason you're hanging out with me.”

“I'll never confess.”

Stiles laughs. “Asshole. I want pizza. Can we have pizza?”

“We can have pizza.” Derek accepts Steve's leash when Stiles hands it to him. “Anything in particular you want?”

“Nah, I'll take whatever you're having.”

“Got it.” Derek is secretly grateful, because he won't forget that. It would be embarrassing if he forgot Stiles' order, when it was the only thing he'd have to remember.

“Do you want to do anything particular later?” Stiles asks suddenly.

“I'm up for anything.”

“Good to know.” And there's that stupid wink again. “See you in a bit.”

Steve drowns him in love as soon as Stiles allows him to leave the apartment. He can hear Stiles snort, before the door closes again and Derek clasps the leash onto Steve's collar.

“How's it going, buddy?” he asks softly, and strokes Steve's silky ears. “Long time no see.”

Steve whines at that and bumps his nose against Derek's cheek.

They take a longer walk than usual. Derek thinks that perhaps Stiles has been so consumed by his work that Steve hasn't gotten out much at all today. He's trotting happily beside Derek, as they head to the pizza place furthest from Stiles' apartment. The clicking of Steve's claws against the sidewalk and the soft sound of his breath calm Derek. It's nice. Having company who seems to like you unconditionally, no matter your history, is a luxury. Perhaps he should get a pet of his own.

Stiles' hair is damp when they return, and he's still wearing the sweats, but he's got a different t-shirt on this time.

“Pizza!” he exclaims with a grin, when Derek hands him the boxes. He disappears into the kitchen and as Derek unties his shoes there's an even happier: “You got me an entire pie!”

“No, that one's mine. I just got you a slice.”

“Lies. I totally just poked both of them to check. They're now covered in my germs. Maybe you should give me yours, too.”

Derek snorts and puts his shoes aside, before entering the kitchen. “I'm pretty sure that I'm 'covered in your germs', too.”

Stiles laughs. “Yeah, definitely. You want beer?”

“Please.”

“In the fridge.” Stiles nods towards it, while he cuts the tops off the boxes and carries them to the table.
Derek finds a six pack of beer and a frightening amount of Red Bull when he opens the fridge. There is a very small amount of actual edible food. He doesn't comment on it, however, certain that Stiles just isn't up for cooking. Instead, he grabs a couple of beers and closes the fridge.

“Steve! Dinner's ready!” Stiles calls, and a moment later, Steve comes skidding into the kitchen, just barely managing not to trip Derek.

“Your dog almost killed me.”

“That's what you get for spoiling him. He doesn't value you anymore.” Stiles grins as he hands a fork and knife to Derek, apparently remembering that Derek isn't all too fond of eating with his hands, and sinks down in the kitchen chair.

“So what are you working on?” Derek asks, as he carefully cuts up his second slice.

“It's a thing for school.”

“I thought you'd taken a year off?”

Shrugging, Stiles chews on his slice. “It's not really like that. I mean, I have, but they gave me the opportunity to work on a project and that's why I've taken the year off.”

“Okay?”

“I can't tell you about it.” Stiles grimaces around his pizza. “I wish I could, but it's nothing official yet. I don't want to jinx it.”

“It's fine.” Derek understands that perfectly. He used to be the same, when he was playing lacrosse in high school. When he first got picked for first line, he didn't want to tell anyone until it was official, worrying that someone would tell him it was a mistake. “I'd like to know when you're able to tell people, though.”

“Trust me,” Stiles laughs. “You'd be among the first people I'd tell.”

Derek smiles into his beer.

They end up in front of the TV after that. Derek feeling tired from too much pizza and Stiles looking as though he's in more or less the same situation. There are a lot of movies on, but none Derek feels like watching. When it's almost midnight, he stands.

“I should probably head home. It's pretty late.”

Stiles stares up at him. Sometimes his gaze finds Derek's so perfectly that he forgets that Stiles is actually blind. “You're not staying over? Did I do something?”

Derek blinks. “No. I didn't bring my things. I wasn't sure if you were even home. I didn't want to assume anything.”

Stiles grabs at his hand, squeezing his fingers. “I want you to stay,” he says. “What do you need?”

“I didn't bring clothes. Or a toothbrush.”

“We can share my toothbrush and you can change when you get home in the morning.”

Derek hesitates. He isn't sure if it's a good idea.
“Please?” Stiles breathes and tugs at his shirt until Derek leans down over him. Stiles' hand finds his face then, gently stroking from his forehead to his jaw, before he leans up for a kiss. He tastes faintly of beer, but Derek feels himself crumble, realising how much he's missed this. It's been a while.

“Please?” Stiles says again, when he creates a fraction of space between them, before he leans back in again.

“Okay,” Derek agrees, defeated, and allows Stiles to pull him even closer.

“I've missed this,” Stiles says when he pulls back for air, a little out of breath, his lips swollen and red. Derek wants to bite them.

“Me, too,” he confesses.

They take turns with Stiles' toothbrush and Derek figures that it isn't that weird, despite how intimate it feels.

“It's like kissing,” Stiles says and spits toothpaste into the sink. “Except that there's this stuff involved.”

Derek leans in to kiss him then, toothpaste smearing his lips, and Stiles smudges him across the cheek with the toothbrush.

“Oops.” Stiles looks way too innocent for it to be convincing as he puts it back in his mouth. Derek could pinch him for that.

“Want me closest to the wall?” Derek asks as he folds his clothes over the armrest of the couch. Stiles is lying in bed already, wearing Batman briefs, with the covers still pushed back for Derek to get in.

“Want you on top of me,” Stiles smirks, as if he knows exactly how Derek's stomach contracts at that.

“Is that so?” he asks, and walks over to the bed. He glances down, and yes, Stiles is definitely interested.

“Yeah,” Stiles breathes and reaches for him. “I've been jerking off to you for weeks. I need the real deal.”

Derek snorts, but leans down and something inside him is very pleased by the way Stiles spreads his legs for him. He feels at ease when his body comes in contact with Stiles' as he lowers himself down on top of him. And the way his long legs intertwine with Derek's, hands rubbing down his back to find his ass and squeeze.

Derek pushes back into it, unable to stop himself and finds Stiles' lips. For a moment, it feels as though his body has been screaming for this, without Derek hearing, until now, when it goes dead quiet and pleased.

Stiles seems intent on holding him close, because when he breaks the kiss, he presses Derek down against him. Holding him there, and not complaining when Derek lets him take his entire weight. He can feel Stiles' lips brush his temple and his fingers play with the hair at the nape of his neck. Oddly enough, it feels more intimate than anything they've ever done.

“I'm glad you decided to come by,” Stiles mumbles into his hair and Derek just hums, face buried in the crook of Stiles' neck.
“Not just because I like hanging out with you, which I do, but because I've been worried for a little while that you only put up with me because I come by all the time. I started feeling a bit intrusive, you know?”

Derek rises onto his elbows, creating enough space between them to be able to look at Stiles' face. “I didn't realise that.”

“I know. You're kinda dumb when it comes to your social skills.” Stiles grins and Derek rubs his stubble against his throat as punishment. If it had been said by someone else, he might have been hurt. Somehow, it's nothing but playful banter now.

“Why didn't you just tell me that instead of disappearing?”

“I didn't come by less often to test you. I already told you that I've been busy and when I start doing stuff, working, I lose track of time easily and barely remember to eat properly. I haven't even gone to the gym like I usually do.”

“You go to the gym?” Derek smirks. It shows. Stiles has a slender frame, but his body is well-toned. It's especially clear over his shoulders and the lack of puppy fat on his stomach. Derek doesn't think that Stiles is the kind of person to ever get chubby, but there's definitely more tone to him than he would naturally have.

“Oh, shut up. Not everyone can have a body like this,” Stiles snorts and squeezes Derek's ass. Obviously, he knows that Derek is joking.

“I like your body,” Derek whispers against the skin at Stiles' collarbone, nipping there gently. Stiles lets out a breathy laugh.

“I do,” Derek insists.

“Does it turn you on?” There's a tone to Stiles' voice that tells Derek that he doesn't really believe him. There's also an edge that makes him suspect that Stiles very much wants to, however.

“Yes.” Derek presses his lips just above a nipple, and then grazing it gently with his teeth. “Very much.”

Stiles lets out a gasp and his fingers twitch as he drags them up Derek's back and touches his face.

“I like these.” Derek turns his head, capturing one of Stiles' fingers between his lips, sucking gently on the tip before he bobs his head and takes the rest, curling his tongue around it.

Stiles whimpers. “Yeah?”

Derek hums, opening his mouth to let another finger in when Stiles taps it against his lips.

“What else?” Stiles asks, when Derek lets them slip out, leaving traces of saliva on his chin.

“These,” he murmurs, leaning in closer and kisses Stiles' lips gently.

“This,” he continues, brushing his nose against Stiles'. He lets his lips slide down Stiles' throat, the dip there, and down his chest. “All of this,” he whispers, teasing nipples into hard buds with his tongue, hearing a ragged breath leave Stiles' mouth. He goes lower, kissing a path down Stiles' stomach, tongue dipping into his navel and following the trail of hair down to the waistband of his briefs. “And this,” he continues, pressing his face against Stiles crotch, feeling his hard cock twitch.
against his cheek. “All of it,” he sighs, kissing the insides of Stiles' trembling thighs, squeezing his calves, before stroking his hands upwards again, moving back to lean over Stiles once more. Stiles, who looks close to wrecked, his eyes a little glassy.

“Holy shit,” Stiles whispers and pulls him close, kissing him hard. “You almost made me come from just that.”

Derek smiles against his lips, grinding their bodies together and shuddering from the needy sound Stiles lets out.

“Want to come in my mouth?” Derek asks, teasing at the waistband of Stiles' briefs with his fingertips. He can feel Stiles' entire body grow rigid for a second, like he's trying to keep himself under control.

“Can I?”

“Yeah. Let's get you out of these.” He pulls the briefs down as Stiles lifts his hips. For a moment he just looks at Stiles cock, lying hard, head red and dripping against his stomach. He kisses Stiles languidly, taking his time, wanting to make up for the past week or so. He creates a trail of small, quick kisses down Stiles' neck, chest and stomach, letting him know where he's heading, stroking the jut of his hip with his thumb. Then he just lets himself taste, gently licking the drops of precome, before sliding his lips down the length, and then up again, over and over, until Stiles tugs at his hair, whimpering.

“So close. Please.”

Derek wraps his lips lazily around the head, sucking gently, and fuck it's so much better without the taste of latex. Suddenly, he's so overwhelmed by the realisation that he's tasting Stiles in his mouth that he loses his focus for a second.

“Please,” Stiles begs, bringing him back, and Derek can't say no to that.

He moves lower, slowly taking in more. Stiles holds on to his hair like it's the only thing saving him from losing it. Then he comes, groaning, hips bucking against Derek's hands and Derek just holds him there, feeling the warm come fill his mouth in spurts, before Stiles relaxes the grip of his hair, slumping back against the bed.

“Wait,” he breathes, reaching up and lets his fingers rest at Derek's throat. “Now.”

Derek swallows, watching the expression of disbelief flicker across Stiles' face.

“Shit, you really did it.”

“I told you I would,” Derek says, and his voice sounds rough. He moves up Stiles' body again, kissing him gently, letting him taste himself.

“It's your turn. What do you want me to do?” Stiles asks, squirming a little against him, but he looks exhausted.

“Just stay put.” Derek pulls his underwear down a bit, and lets his cock slide against the soft dip in Stiles' hip. “This okay?”

Stiles swallows, nodding. “You sure you don't want me to help out?”

“Yeah, I'm almost there.” He can't help but grunt as he rubs himself, cock slick with precome,
against the soft skin. Stiles' lips are on his in an instant, and then his hands start to travel; up Derek’s sides, down his back, grabbing his ass and pushing him closer. Urging him on. It feels like his body is short-circuiting, nerve endings hyperactive, when Stiles' long fingers spread his cheeks, gently dipping between them and sliding down his crack. Derek groans, helpless, trying desperately to both press back against Stiles' hands and rut against his body. The message seems to get across, because Stiles' hands slide lower, his fingertips grazing Derek's hole and that's all it takes. His orgasm slams into him, forcing through his body, making it jerk in spasms. Stiles holds him close as he comes, pressing soft, wet kisses against his temple. And for a moment Derek feels as though it's never going to stop.

He slumps, catching his breath and Stiles pets his hair, fingers gently tugging at his ears and then scraping his nails carefully up Derek's neck, making him shiver.

“Sorry for collapsing on you,” he mumbles once he's regained himself enough to control his body, and pushes off, even though he doesn't want to.

“You're not that heavy,” Stiles says and tugs him down for another kiss.

“I made a mess on you.”

Stiles smiles like he couldn't be happier about this. “Yeah, you did.”

“We should clean you up before we go to sleep.”

Stiles groans as he gets up, not bothering with pulling his underwear back on, and pads into the bathroom. Derek follows him after a moment, kicking off his boxer-briefs, making them slide towards the couch. He'll get them tomorrow.

Stiles is just drying off his stomach with a towel when Derek joins him. He washes up a bit, too, with warm water and with Stiles sliding a hand up and down his stomach, as though he doesn't want to leave before Derek does.

Steve is trotting back into the room from the kitchen when they get back into bed. He sighs heavily as he lies down next to the couch, looking suspiciously at Derek's underwear.

“Don't be such a drama queen,” Stiles tells him. “You should be happy for me. At least one of us is getting laid. Thank god it's the one who still has his balls.”

Steve gives him the most judgmental stare Derek has ever seen, and he can't help but laugh.

“What?” Stiles asks.

“He didn't seem overly impressed by that,” Derek explains. He watches as Stiles gets in, still naked. He's warm and dry against Derek's body, as he moves in close.

“Did you set an alarm for tomorrow?” Stiles asks him.

“Eight. It should give me some time to change clothes at home.” He'll work out tomorrow evening instead.

“Change it to seven and we'll have breakfast together,” Stiles mumbles and he looks pleased when Derek reaches across him to thumb at his phone. It takes him a moment to change the alarm, because Stiles takes the opportunity to bite his chest, grinning madly when Derek yelps.

“Be nice, or I'll sleep at home.”
“Don't threaten me.” Stiles moves in closer again when he lies back down, and Derek finds it strange how easily their bodies fit together. After a moment, Stiles shuffles around a little, stirring Derek from his semiconsciousness. “So, are you going to New York over Christmas?”

“Yes, I'll be back after New Years.”

Stiles' fingers still where they have been tracing a pattern on Derek's arm. “That's a long time.”

“I guess.” Derek hasn't thought about it much until now. Not really. Laura has expected him to celebrate Christmas with them, like he's done for years now, except for when he was stationed overseas. He hasn't quite realised that he'll be away from Stiles the entire time.

“I get that you want to be with your family, because you're here the rest of the time. It's not that.” Stiles grows quiet.

“I'll call you.”

“You better,” Stiles mutters.

“Are you celebrating with Scott and his mom?”

“Yeah, we have been for years now. If you change your mind, you're more than welcome to join us.”

Derek leans in closer, noses at his cheek. “Thank you. I'll remember that.”

◊

Derek's using the laptop Laura forced on him when he moved here. He uses it about two times a month, when he's paying bills. Right now, he's trying to find braille books for Stiles, since the e-book reader hasn't arrived yet. Perhaps he can make up for his absence during Christmas with a few books. Especially since he remembered the other day that Stiles asked him about braille books months ago, and he'd forgotten. He finds The Hunger Games series, and decides that he doesn't care that they're about $75 each. The only problem is that he has no idea if he's supposed to order them in Grade 1 or Grade 2 braille. Whatever that means. He reluctantly decides to text Stiles about it.

< What's the difference between Grade 1 and Grade 2 braille?

It takes a long time before Stiles replies, and when he does, Derek gets why. He wonders for a moment why Stiles didn't just call instead, considering how long his text is, but perhaps he's busy and doesn't want to get held up on the phone.

> Grade 1 is basically when you write using the braille alphabet. It's for people who are new to it or maybe don't speak English as a first language. Braille 2 is with contractions and stuff, to make it faster to read. Some common words are just one character symbols instead of the full word. It also makes the books less thick because they don't want blind people to break their backs at 35 for carrying around books that weigh the same as a baby elephant

Derek snorts. Grade 2 braille seems like the right choice, then. He orders all three, hoping that they'll make it in time and his phone buzzes with a new text just as he's put in his credit card information.

> Why are you asking?

Derek hesitates for a moment. He doesn't want to ruin the surprise if it's not absolutely necessary.
< Came across it and didn't know the difference. Thought I'd ask you instead of using google. Hope that was okay

> Yeah totally okay :)

Stiles doesn't have a lot of time to spend with him the following week before Derek leaves. He drops by a couple of times and Derek visits him one evening, but he feels like he's intruding when Stiles has to spend most of his time in front of his computer with headphones on. It feels okay anyway, for some reason, that they don't spend that much time together. It's obvious that Stiles has his hands full with his project, which he still can't tell Derek about, but at least Derek knows that he isn't being ignored.

He gets a text a couple of days before his flight to New York.

> Do you want to spend the last night before you leave with me? I could come to you

Derek smiles a little to himself.

< I'd like that

He gets a smiley in return and assumes that that makes it a date. Well, not a real date. Stiles' books arrived a couple of days earlier and Derek decides to wrap them just before Stiles intends to drop by. He's never had any real talent for this, to be honest, but they look decent enough when he gives up and heads to the coffee shop next door to buy two hot cocoas.

Walking out of the coffee shop, he bumps into Stiles. Steve's not with him, which is a slight disappointment, because Derek would've liked to say bye to him too, but at the same time, this makes their evening a lot easier.

“Hi,” he says and gets an odd feeling in his chest when Stiles cracks a big smile.

“Hey, Derek.”

Derek wants to kiss him, but he isn't sure if Stiles would be comfortable with that in public. Everyone knows he's the Sheriff's kid and Derek doesn't know how much Stiles' dad knows about their relationship. Instead, he hands Stiles one of the mugs and lets him into the shop, before locking and turning the CLOSED sign. The smell of the lasagne Derek has prepared wafts down the stairs.

As soon as they get inside the apartment door and Stiles has rid himself of his shoes and bag, he moves in close, locking his arms around Derek's waist. It's brief, but Derek's quite certain that it's Stiles' way of trying to make up for his absence lately.

“So when's the flight leaving tomorrow?”

“Noon. I have to leave early.”

Stiles nods. “Yeah, you should definitely eat breakfast at the airport after checking in, though. That way you can spend more time with me before you leave.”

“I could,” Derek agrees and watches Stiles drink his cocoa for a moment. It was his plan anyway. That, or grabbing a bagel to eat in the car.

Stiles doesn't talk much during the dinner and it has Derek a bit worried.

“Something wrong?”
Stiles looks up then, like he's been far away in thought. “Sorry. It just feels crappy that you're leaving.”

“You know I'm coming back, right?”

“Yeah I know,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes. “I'm mostly mad at myself because we could've spent time together if it wasn't for all the stuff I have to do.”

“It's fine. We're spending time together now.”

Stiles smiles a little at that. “Yeah, that we are.”

They end up on the couch later. Per usual. Stiles is sitting close to him, his body pressed against Derek's side and even though the TV is on, neither of them is paying it any attention.

They don't say much, however. It's like Derek's departure tomorrow is hanging over them like a rain cloud and Stiles seems down. He feels a bit dulled himself, like it's not something to look forward to, spending Christmas with his family.

“Sorry for being such a party pooper,” Stiles says after a while.

“Don't worry about it.” Derek wants to reach out and squeeze his hand, or put an arm around him, but decides not to. “It feels weird for me too,” he confesses instead.

Stiles sighs and reaches out, rubbing his hand over Derek's thigh. It's not in a sexual way, but rather as if he's trying to comfort Derek. The odd thing is that it's working.

“I know I've been working a lot lately and that I haven't really made time for you. Sorry about that. I kinda regret it, now that you're leaving and I won't be able to spend the time I worked hard to make free, with you.” Stiles scratches his chin and makes a frustrated sound.

“But Scott's coming home for Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, and Lydia, and Danny, and you know, the rest of them.”

Derek doesn't know, but he assumes that they're people Stiles knows from high school, since they all seem to live here.

“You'll be busy with them, then. I'm sure you won't even notice that I'm not around.”

That makes Stiles snort. “That's bull. I've spent so much time with you that I feel weird whenever I'm not.”

“I'm not leaving forever. I'll be back after New Year’s.”

“I know,” Stiles sighs. “It's just that I wish that you were at least back for that. The fireworks and stuff.”

Derek closes his eyes briefly. “Maybe next year.” He's not a fan of fireworks. Last year he locked himself into his apartment's gym in the basement, blasted music and worked out for four hours straight. He felt like someone had ran him over with a truck for a week afterwards, but it worked. He made it through.

“Yeah, next year,” Stiles agrees with a nod.

They're silent for a while again, but it feels less heavy now. Somewhere Derek feels good about
Stiles missing him, because that means that Derek won't be the only one. Such a big part of his life consists of Stiles that it will be hard to find a routine without him, even though these past few weeks has given him some practice.

“I got you something for Christmas,” Stiles says suddenly. “You can have it now, if you promise not to open it until it's time.”

“I promise.” Derek's suddenly very happy that he bought another gift for Stiles, since the e-book reader hasn't arrived yet. “I got you something as well.”

“You did?” Stiles brightens considerably at that, as though he hadn't expected this.

“I'll go get it, but you can't open it either.”

“Fine, but only because I know you'll open yours if I open mine.”

“It's not like I can check if you've cheated,” Derek points out.

“Stop giving me ideas. You're the worst when it comes to that.”

Derek smiles to himself as he grabs the presents from his bed. They're heavy in his hands, and it won't be difficult for Stiles to figure out that Derek's bought him books. The ability to tell a gift containing a book from any other seems to be trained from age three. Hopefully Stiles won't be disappointed about that, like Derek used to be when he was a kid.

“Merry Christmas in advance,” Stiles says and hands him a rectangular present, neatly wrapped in silvery paper, once Derek has returned to the couch.

“Thank you.” Derek eyes it curiously, trying to figure out what it is, but the shape makes no sense to him. “Merry Christmas,” he says instead and offers the pile of three wrapped gifts to Stiles, who accepts them. There's a surprised look on his face when he feels their combined weight.

“Did you buy me an elephant?”

Derek smiles, surprising himself by remembering Stiles talking about braille books weighing the same as a baby elephant long ago. “Yes.”

“I'm going to need a wheelchair after this,” Stiles mutters as he touches the gifts.

“I'm sure you will.”

Stiles rolls his eyes at Derek's unimpressed tone.

“Okay, so, now that I've been sulking for a good part of the night, can we spend the rest of it cuddling?”

“If you want.” Derek wants to, he thinks, but it has to be Stiles' choice.

“Yep, just give me a sec. I'm gonna put these in my bag.”

Derek watches him carefully put the books in his backpack and close the zipper, his fingers making sure that no corner gets stuck, as he does.

He puts his own present on top of the bag he's packed for tomorrow and feels reluctantly curious about its content. Knowing Stiles, it's probably nothing he's expecting.
Much to his surprise, Stiles rids himself of his jeans then and there, and puts on sweats that he's brought with him. “You know,” he says, as if sensing Derek's gaze. “Getting my cuddling uniform on.”

Derek laughs. “You think I should, too?”

“Yeah, dude, since when are jeans the stuff to get cosy in?”

“Point taken.” Derek changes his pants too, and when he's back on the couch, with Stiles next to him, it does feel a lot more comfortable. It doesn't matter that Laura's told him that no one should ever show themselves in sweats in front of anyone who isn't related or married to you. Stiles doesn't seem to mind, however, since he's fiddling with the inseam of Derek's sweats.

The touch lacks sexual intention, which surprises Derek. It's as if Stiles only needs to touch, and Derek realises that he’s missed it, too.

“We can talk on the phone, right?” Stiles asks, as he drags Derek's arm to rest around his shoulders.

“Of course. We did that last time.”

“I just want to make sure. It wasn't exactly our initial plan last time.”

Derek shrugs. “It would feel weird not to, I think.”

“Yeah, I think so too.” Stiles grins against his shoulder then. “Want me to send you more selfies?”

The one Derek received during Thanksgiving is still in his phone. “If you want.”

“No,” Stiles says, straightening. “See, this is how it works. When I ask you what you want, you need to tell me what you want, and not change it around to a question about what I want.”

“Yes, I want you to,” Derek sighs, giving up.

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” Grinning, Stiles pinches the inside of Derek's thigh lightly, making his leg jerk.

They're closer after that. Physically as well as mentally, in a way. Derek keeps his arm around Stiles' shoulders and Stiles leans into him, touching him like it comes naturally. Usually, Derek needs to feel as though there's a mission with his touching, like when they're having sex. For Stiles, it seems to be a lot more relaxed and easier than that. It's so simple, accepting Stiles' touch. Derek's body knows it by now. He knows it. He's found himself missing it every now and then, lately.

There's a Christmas concert with Mariah Carey starting on TV and Derek drifts away in the music, despite the fact that he isn't her biggest fan. Perhaps it's the soft, flickering candles on the screen and the sense of peace. When he glances to his side, he finds that Stiles' eyes are closed, his head resting on Derek's shoulder. He isn't sleeping, since his fingers are still tracing patterns on Derek's leg, but maybe he feels at peace, too.

“Do you want tea?” Stiles asks after a long while, which Derek has spent in a state of semiconsciousness.

“Sure, I can make some.”

“I'll help.”

While filling the electric kettle with water, Derek watches Stiles as he grabs mugs from the cabinets
and finds the boxes with tea. Derek's made a point of not moving anything, and he's even made tags to put on the shelves to make sure that he doesn't misplace anything by mistake. It's oddly satisfying to see how easily Stiles finds his way around the kitchen these days.

“No milk, right?” Stiles asks as he opens the tea boxes to smell them. Then, he pulls out Derek's favourite and the flavour Stiles always has when he's here.

“No thanks.” Derek's never been big on tea before, but he's come to understand what Laura meant when she said that it's nice and calming to have tea with someone else.

Stiles looks a bit sleepy as they sit down at the kitchen table. The Christmas concert is still on in the background and, with the darkness outside, it feels like Christmas Eve. Derek gets that odd swelling behind his breast bone when he watches Stiles stirring his tea and his chin resting in his hand.

“When you come back from New York,” Stiles says suddenly. “Do you want to do like last time?”

“That'd be nice.” The idea of having someone waiting for him when he gets back is the best thing he's thought about in ages.

Stiles smiles. “I'd like that.”

“I'll go to your place as soon as I get back.”

“Right away?”

“Right away,” Derek promises.

When they go to bed, Stiles kisses him for a long, long time, but doesn't take it further. Derek feels surprisingly content with curling up together, tangled in each other afterwards. It's odd. Odd, and nice.

He has a hard time falling asleep. It isn't because he's anxious, but it's distracting listening to Stiles' slow breaths and the way he's pressed up against Derek's side. His fingers itch, and they don't stop until he's brushing back the tuft of hair falling over Stiles' forehead. It's fascinating, watching Stiles smile slightly in his sleep. That's something Derek didn't think happened outside of movies. He also didn't count on how it now makes his stomach contract.

When the digits on his phone turn to three, and then keep on ticking, he starts to get frustrated. He suspects that a subconscious part of him is nervous about going home for Christmas, even though he doesn't exactly know why, and his head doesn't seem to be able to stop spinning. With a sigh, he untangles himself from Stiles as gently as possible, and gets up, stretching his stiff limbs. He grabs a glass of water, leaning against the kitchen counter and looks down on the empty street below. He's leaving tomorrow.

There's a draft from the window, spreading goose bumps across his skin and he absently rubs some warmth to his arm. A rustling of sheets pulls him from his thoughts as he refills his glass, and a moment later, Stiles' sleep-drunk voice reaches him across the room.

“Derek?”

“I'm here. Just getting water.”

“Come back to bed.”

“Soon.” At first, he thinks about leaving it at that, but then decides to tell the truth. “Can't sleep.”
Stiles is silent for a while, and Derek's sure that he's fallen asleep, until he sees Stiles' sleep-rumpled form pad across the floor and stop, hesitantly, halfway to the kitchen. His hair is sticking up in various directions and the waistband of his briefs has been pushed down slightly over a hipbone.

Derek smiles to himself. “I'm at the kitchen sink,” he says and reaches out when Stiles comes close enough to touch. With a sigh, Stiles buries his face in his neck, his fingers curling around Derek's waist.

“Wanna talk about it?” he mumbles, thumbs gently rubbing up and down the lowest ridges of Derek's ribs.

Talking has never been Derek's strong suit, but with Stiles he's never had much of a choice. “I don't know why,” he confesses. “My head won't stop spinning.”

“Why didn't you wake me?”

“Didn't think it was worth waking you for. You can't do anything about it anyway.”

Stiles huffs like he's been offended. “I happen to have amazing back scratching skills that will clear your head in seconds.”

“Back scratching?” Derek wants to scoff, but at least Stiles is trying.

“Don't sound so disbelieving. Drink that up and I'll prove you wrong.”

Derek empties his glass and allows Stiles to pull him back to bed. It's more tempting going back there now, when he isn't the only one awake.

“Okay, lie down with your back to me, and I'll scratch until you fall asleep,” Stiles promises him and reaches out as Derek lies down, stroking his arm for a moment.

“That could be several hours,” Derek points out.

“Trust my skills, Derek,” Stiles chides and Derek is about to protest, but then Stiles drags his blunt nails down his back and his mind goes echoingly blank. Stiles moves in closer, barely putting any distance between them.

“Do you want me to hold you when you've fallen asleep?” he asks softly.

“If you want.”

“Derek.”

Right, no putting his decisions on Stiles.

“Yes.”

It's oddly calming. Stiles' nails make his skin tingle and his body shiver, much like that time Laura pushed a head scratcher down on his head. His mind goes blank immediately. It doesn't take long until he starts drifting off and feeling his body grow heavy. Tired.

“Going to fall asleep soon,” he mumbles.

“It's okay. I'll be right here,” Stiles says softly, and he keeps going and going. Even when Derek's so far away down the road to sleep that he's certain that Stiles will stop, he keeps going.
When Derek awakes a few hours later by his alarm, Stiles' arms are holding him close and his hair is tickling Derek's neck when he stirs and groans in protest. Derek is dead tired, but his mind is still calm. Turning the alarm off, he turns to move in closer to Stiles, who opens his arms for him.

"Don't want you to leave," he mumbles against Derek's temple and Derek knows, because he feels exactly the same.

"I know." They stay in bed another twenty minutes, doing nothing but lazy kissing and touching skin.

Stiles seems a bit off, like someone's dulled his personality, when they get dressed. It makes Derek feel bad, but it isn't like he has a choice. He's not going away forever, even though it sort of feels that way at the moment. When he comes back from the bathroom, after brushing his teeth and attempting to do something about his hair, Stiles looks more relaxed and at ease. Perhaps he was just tired.

"Do you mind dropping me off before you go to the airport?" Stiles asks and Derek blinks, feeling a bit stupid for assuming this without really asking.

"Sure. I thought we'd decided that already."

Stiles smiles. "Thanks."

The car ride is strange. Derek wants it to go on forever, but it feels as though two seconds have passed as they pull up in front of Stiles' building.

"Do you have time to walk me to my door?"

The question surprises him, because Stiles has never wanted to be walked to the door before. Perhaps he feels like Derek, and wants to drag this out as long as possible.

"Sure."

Stiles is silent during their walk up the three flights of stairs to his door. He stops outside, weighing back and forth on his feet slightly. "Can I ask something of you?"

"You could try," Derek says and smirks when Stiles pulls his special fed up expression. "Yes, you can."

"Kiss me senseless before you go, will you?" Stiles' face turns a little red. "Like in stupid movies."

"Here?" Derek asks, before he can stop himself.

"Yeah, push me up against the door and everything. As long as you save my back from the handle."

Derek huffs out a laugh, but quickly grows serious as he steps in close, watching Stiles draw a quick breath. Derek doesn't push him up against the door; he curls his hand around Stiles' jaw and kisses him slow and hard, bruising his lips until they're swollen and red, until Stiles' fingers spasm in the fabric of Derek's shirt. Until Derek has to pull back to get his breathing back under control. Stiles looks lightheaded.

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but it was way better than I expected."

The airy tone of his voice makes Derek smile, and he wipes Stiles' bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. "I'll text you when I get there."

"No, call me."
“I'll text you when I get there and I'll call you when I go to bed,” Derek rectifies.

“Deal.” Stiles smiles at him, still slightly out of breath. “Just one more.”

Derek leans in again, somewhere aiming for a similar kiss, but it ends up being a brief, sweet peck that for some reason leaves his body buzzing in a completely different way. He's always considered pecks much more intimate, because they're not a lead up to sex. It's confounding him, even though he's the one behind it.

“Have a safe trip,” Stiles says quietly, and Derek gives him another peck, before he pulls back and turns towards the stairs.

“Thanks. I'll talk to you in a few hours.”

“I need to teach you what a few really means,” Stiles sighs, but he's smiling as he unlocks his door and turns towards Derek one last time. “Bye.”

“Bye.” His steps are an odd mixture as he walks down the stairs and to his car. A part of him feels light and carefree, considering what just happened. But he's still leaving. For a little over two weeks. It isn't long. He's been away for months from the people he cares about before, not knowing if he was ever going to come back. This isn't like that, but he's still got a heavy pressure over his chest.

The flight is, thankfully, uneventful. He's seated next to a middle aged woman who drinks until she passes out, and stays that way for most of the trip. Derek doesn't mind. He's not a fan of the cramped, confined space to begin with, but the lack of turbulence and a chatty neighbour make it bearable.

Laura picks him up at the airport, and Josh is holding up a sigh with DEREK written across it in letters that are of uneven size and different colours. He hugs them both close, grateful that seeing them again is taking off some of his focus from leaving Stiles behind.

“How was your trip?” Laura asks, as he loads his bag into the trunk of her car.

“Okay. Endurable.”

“Sounds exciting,” she deadpans, smiling wide.

Derek glares at her.

“How's your Stiles?”

“What's a Stiles?” Josh asks from the backseat and Derek wants to refrain from answering, but he can't.

“He isn't my Stiles and he's good.”

“I'll ask all the embarrassing questions later,” Laura promises, making him groan. He doesn't doubt that for a second.

“Please don't.”

He ends up building with Josh's legos for most of the evening, silently cursing the kid's bad sense of colour combination and the way he ruins whatever Derek has put together (“Look, I improved it, Derek!”). When it's Josh's bedtime, Derek is grateful that he doesn't have to read the bedtime story, because his body is already stiff from sitting for so long.
Instead, he pulls out his phone from his bag, which has been there since he got off the plane and turned it back on. That's when he notices the endless rows of texts on his display.

For a moment, he thinks that something has happened, throat contracting hard, when he notices that they're all from Stiles. But then it hits him – he had promised to text. Five hours ago.

Swearing under his breath, he hurries into the guest room and scrolls through the messages. At first they're casual, but then they gradually turn more worried.

> Hey did you get there alright?

> Derek I think you've forgotten to text me ;)

> Please let me know if you made it to NY safe
Derek I really need you to contact me I'm worried

Call me

I'm getting worried for real now Derek

Did you get in an accident?

Derek I don't know why the fuck you're not contacting me but I need to know that you're okay

Fuck Derek please just call

Derek swallows heavily. The last one was sent fifteen minutes ago and he can easily imagine Stiles' worry. He would feel the same if the roles were reversed. Hitting the call button, he waits with his heart in his throat, as the signal goes through. He knows Stiles is going to be very mad at him, with right.

“Hello?” Stiles answers on the sixth ring.

“I'm sorry,” Derek blurts immediately, feeling as though he has to get it out before Stiles has the chance to make any other assumptions. “I'm sorry. I forgot. There was so much happening at once and my nephew...” he trails off.

Stiles doesn't say anything for a while. “You forgot?”

Derek rubs a hand over his face. Stiles doesn't know about his memory, and of course this feels like a slap in the face to him. “I'm sorry. When I got off the plane, there was a lot of other stuff I had to think about. I didn't expect my nephew to be there at the airport, and he wanted to play when we got back to the apartment.”

Stiles is quiet.

Closing his eyes, Derek takes a slow breath, trying to calm his reeling brain. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to leave you hanging.”

“Leave me hanging? I thought you were in a hospital or even dead, Derek!”

“I'm sorry.”

Stiles is silent again and Derek doesn't know what to say. Instead he sits there, breathing, listening to Stiles' breaths on the other end. It sounds like he might be crying. Derek hopes it's from relief. Perhaps a bit because he's pissed off, too.

“I didn't mean to be a dick.”

“I was really worried,” Stiles says quietly.

“I know. I saw your texts. I'm sorry.”

“That's not even the worst part, you know. At first I was really worried that you were just ignoring me, like you weren't all that into texting or calling once you got there and had other people to hang out with. And then I started worrying about you being in an accident and had my dad looking up stuff, you know, as much as he can. But people get freaking hit by cars like every five minutes in New York, so there was no chance in hell that I would ever know if something happened to you,
unless someone called me. I've been alternating between worrying about you lying in a hospital or in a morgue somewhere, with your head bashed in, or you in a bar with some friend, forgetting about me, because you suddenly have better things to do.”

“I didn't do any of that,” Derek mumbles. “I was building lego houses.”

“I–“ Stiles starts, but then it's as though he's just heard what Derek said. “You what?”

“I've been building lego houses for the past four hours.”

Stiles is painfully quiet for a moment, but then he makes a sound that's suspiciously similar to a laugh. “For real?”

“Yes,” Derek sighs. “I built a god damn village, but then Josh kept ruining everything.”

“Derek, how old are you, again?”

“Shut up.”

Stiles starts laughing and Derek's okay with that. He can sacrifice some of his dignity to make Stiles feel a bit better.

“I'm really sorry that I forgot texting you. I promise to try and not do that again.”

“You promise that you'll try to not forget?” Stiles snorts.

“It's the best I can do,” Derek says defensively. “I can't promise not to forget again, because at some point, I'll probably break that promise.”

Stiles takes a deep breath. “I'm just glad you're okay.”

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“I think you gave me ulcers, to be honest.”

Derek laughs quietly. “Sorry about the ulcers.”

“I'll send you my medical bill.”

“You do that.”

They're silent for a while, until Stiles clears his throat and says:

“So, how was your trip?”

“Uneventful. The woman next to me passed out from being too drunk, so that was a relief.”

Stiles makes an amused sound. “Wow, classy.”

“It could've been worse.”

“Yeah, she could've hit on you.”

Derek smiles. “She could. It was probably a good thing that she passed out instead.”

“Yeah. How's your sister and her family?”
“Good, I think. Josh is in bed and Laura’s husband is working. I guess he’ll be home later, or tomorrow.” Shrugging to himself, Derek sits down on the bed.

“Do you like him?”

“Her husband?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess. He's nice. He's good to her.” And Mike makes her happy. That's really all Derek can ever ask for.

“That's good to hear.”

They're silent again after that.

“Well, this was the worst possible start of the time you're going to be away.”

Derek smiles bitterly to himself. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“Well, you have to make up for that.”

“And how do you propose I do that?”

“Call me often and say nice things.” He can hear the grin in Stiles' voice.

“I'll try to call you every day if you want me to.”

“Yeah. I'm going to be busy with my friends, I guess, but I will make time for you.”

“If you're busy I'll just call another day,” Derek assures him. The last thing he wants is for Stiles to feel as though he needs to be available at all times.

“But I want to talk to you, idiot,” Stiles sighs, but there's a fondness to his voice.

“Okay, then. Are you busy right now?”

“No really. I'm at my dad's, you know, because I was freaking out a bit. I'm about to go home. Can you call me in forty minutes, or so? If it's okay. If you're busy we can talk tomorrow instead.” Stiles is talking so quickly that Derek is barely able to catch what he's saying.

“I'll call you in forty,” Derek promises. “I need to get ready for bed anyway.”

“Okay, yeah, good. Talk to you in a bit, then?”

“Yes. Sorry for worrying you.”

“It's okay now. You don't have to keep apologising for it.”

“All right. I'll call you later.”

“You better.” Stiles laughs and then Derek’s phone beeps like Stiles has ended the call.

Laura’s looking at him funny when he comes back out.

“What?”
“You disappeared awfully quick,” she smirks.

“I remembered that I forgot to text Stiles when I got here. He was worried. And angry.”

“Understandable. Didn't you tell him that you forgot?”

She says it so easily, like she's expecting Stiles to know that Derek's memory isn't the way it once was.

“I did.”

Laura scrutinizes him for a while, and then sighs. “You still haven't told him about your condition, have you?”

“You make it sound like an STD,” Derek protests.

“Well, there's only one letter missing, so I'm not that far off.”

He snorts, suddenly wishing that he'd stayed in his room.

“You need to tell him, Derek. He deserves to know.”

“It's no one's business but mine,” he mutters and sits down on a chair.

“He's your boyfriend.”

“No, he isn't.” He sighs heavily, rubbing a hand over his face.

“He isn't?” Laura asks, her eyebrows rising dangerously.

“No, it's not like that.”

“If he isn't your boyfriend what is he then?”

Of course Laura had to understand that there's something between them that isn't exactly the normal kind of friendship. Derek hesitates for a moment, before replying. “It's more of a friends with benefits thing.”

“Does he know that?”

“It was his idea.”

Laura sits down opposite of him and pushes the bag of Josh's candy towards him. “Eat. I'll buy him some more tomorrow. He'll never know.”

Derek takes a piece reluctantly. “I have to call Stiles back in thirty minutes.”

“I won't stop you. We're just gonna talk a bit.”

“Do I need to call my lawyer?”

She glares and Derek shrugs, giving in.

“Okay, so you're friends with benefits, but you spend time with him a lot, right?”

“I guess. Every other day, or so.”
“And you always do the dirty?” She waggles her eyebrows and Derek tosses his candy in her face.

“Not that that's any of your business, but no, we don't.”

“See, this is what I'm talking about.”

Derek's not following her trail of logic at all. “What.”

“Derek, here's the thing,” she says and uses that voice that makes Derek feel like he's in a therapy session. “You're calling this guy when you're here, and you did that last time as well. You see him a lot, and you even cancel our weekly phone calls sometimes, because he's at your place, or you're at his. Which is fine, because I want you to be happy. You bought him a Christmas present and you do other things than just have sex.”

“So?”

“So just because you don't explicitly state that you're in a relationship, it doesn't mean that you're not! You can call this casual sex all you want, but don't try and tell me that you wouldn't care if he told you that he had to break things off with you, because he's dating someone else.”

Derek gets up from his chair, feeling queasy. He doesn't need more to think about. “I think your thirty minutes are up.”

“It's been five.”

“I guess I'm bad at counting.” Then he takes refuge in his room. Laura obviously doesn't understand his relationship with Stiles at all. Even though they're comfortable with each other and do things other than have sex, it doesn't mean that their relationship contains other feelings than friendly ones. Derek likes having him around, and even though he finds Stiles good looking, there's nothing there between them.

He lies on his bed, staring at the ceiling for the reminder of the forty minutes and then calls Stiles, who answers on the second ring.

“Hey,” he says, and he sounds a lot more relieved now.

“Hi. Did you get home alright?”

“Yes, my dad was trying to give me a lecture on how I always overreact to things, so I made sure to get out of there a little quicker than usual.”

“Good for you.”

“Did you get ready for bed?”

Derek looks down on the jeans and t-shirt he's been wearing all day. “No, I forgot,” he sighs. “Laura came up.”

Stiles laughs. “If you get ready, I'll wait.”

Derek hesitates, but then he gets overwhelmed by getting under the covers and falling asleep after he's been talking to Stiles. “Alright, hang on a few.”

He might have broken some record of his, when it comes to brushing his teeth and getting out of his clothes in the shortest amount of time possible. Laura only smirks at him, when he hurries through the apartment to get his bag. He pretends that she doesn't exist.
“Okay, I'm back,” he says as he presses the phone to his ear and slides under the covers.

“Welcome back.”

Derek scratches his chest, getting that odd swelling sensation again, and somehow knows that Stiles is smiling.
Chapter 4

Derek spends the next day avoiding Laura's conversations at all costs. While Josh is at his day care, he watches TV shows and only leaves his room to eat. The evening is filled with another round of lego houses.

This night, he's the one reading Josh his bedtime story and then leaves the room reluctantly, after turning off the lights.

“I made you tea.” Laura pushes a mug into his hand as soon as he's closed the door behind him. She must have been waiting for him. There's no way out of this.

“Thanks.”

She gives him this look. The one that tells him that he has to do what she says, or she'll tell him off. So when she walks over to the couch and curls up on one end, Derek sits down at the other.

“I'm not going to tell you how to live your life, Derek,” she says softly. “I just want you to realise certain things. It might be better in the end, you know.”

“It wouldn't,” he disagrees. “It was his idea to have this relationship and I'm not going to change it. We're just friends.”

“Okay.” She nods and takes a sip from her mug. Derek expects her to give him her usual knowing look, but she seems sincere. “As long as you're happy and no one gets hurt, baby bro.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“It's my privilege.”

“It's bullying,” he mutters and sips his mug.

“It really isn't,” she scoffs.

They're silent for a long time. Silent enough to hear the clatter of Mike's typing in his office.

“So, please tell me more about him,” Laura prompts. She holds up a hand when Derek opens his mouth to protest. “I know you're just friends deluxe, but since he's the only one you hang out with over there, that I know of at least, I'd like to know more. Except for the fact that he's absolutely adorable and has eyes like freaking Bambi.”

“He does not have eyes like Bambi,” Derek sighs.

“Yes, he does! I'd take his eyelashes any day.”

Derek resorts to rolling his eyes.

Her head falls back against the backrest of the couch with a thump. “Derek!”

“Fine. What do you want to know? I don't remember what I've told you before.” Oddly enough, it feels good to talk about Stiles.

“How old is he?”
“Twenty-one, turning twenty-two in January.”

“Short, tall? Chubby or skinny?”

Derek gives her an unimpressed look.

“Fine, what does he do?”

“He's taking a year off, working on some project, but he's usually studying at Stanford. Something with music.”

Laura nods, looking impressed in a way that makes Derek feel strangely smug. “Stanford's a great school.”

“I know. He's smart.”

She asks him about Stiles' education after that and Derek answers to the best of his ability. He doesn't know that much, and he might have forgotten a few things, but he tells her about Stiles' project, even though he still doesn't know what it's about.

“Was he born blind?” she asks, suddenly.

“No.”

“How did it happen?”

“I don't know. I haven't asked. I don't think he wants to talk about it. The only thing I know is that it happened sometime in high school.” Lately, he's been thinking more about this. It's one of the bigger unanswered questions about Stiles, but he imagines that Stiles has a few of those of his own, as well.

“Poor kid.”

“He's doing great.” Even if Derek doesn't know how it happened, he does know that Stiles is perfectly capable of handling himself.

“It's got to be hard, though, losing your sight.”

Derek shrugs. “Sometimes, I think. I don't think he considers it an ideal situation, but he's got his own place and manages his own life.”

She smiles softly at that. “He seems like a good guy.”

At that, Derek just nods.

“What's his family like?”

“I don't know. I haven't met them. His mom's dead and his dad's a sheriff, but that's all I know.”

“Oh, cop kid.” She winks at him.

Derek doesn't bother with a reply. Truth be told, he isn't sure he wants to meet the Sheriff, because he's worried that they wouldn't get along.

“I know you got him something for Christmas, but what is it?”

“Books,” he says absently, still too caught up in a hypothetical meeting with Stiles' father. Therefore,
it takes him a moment before he realises that she's staring at him. “Braille books,” he explains. “The Hunger Games series.”

“Oh god, I thought you were the worst person on earth there for a moment.”

Derek snorts. “My memory isn't that bad.”

They drink their tea in silence for a while after that.

“I always miss them so much during Christmas,” Laura says suddenly and Derek feels a sharp pang between his ribs.

“Me, too,” he confesses and lifts his arm as she moves in closer, resting her head against his shoulder.

“They'd be proud of you, Derek. No matter what you think,” she mumbles softly into his shirt.

He stays silent. Somewhere hoping that she's right, but at the same time wondering if she isn't biased because he's the only one she has left. Of course she's grateful for that. Derek sure knows that he is.

When Mike exits the office, he looks at them for a moment and makes another pot of tea and a round of toast. Mike doesn't have the most outgoing personality of all the people Derek knows, but he's one of those who always seems to know what to do. And he's good for Laura, which means that Derek can't dislike him.

Mike tells them about his new book project after that, somehow knowing that they need to listen to someone else talk for a while, to get their minds off of things. He's not usually a big talker, but again, sometimes it's needed.

Derek feels a bit numb when he goes to bed, as if his entire body has somehow gotten a too big shot of anaesthesia. He checks his messages and finds one from Stiles. To his relief, there's only one.

> Hey how are you? Busy?

It was sent two hours ago. It's late in Beacon Hills now, and even later in New York. Derek decides to send him a text instead. Stiles could use some sleep if he's still working hard.

< Sorry for not replying. I'm OK. You?

His phone rings five minutes later, just as he's finished brushing his teeth and getting undressed.

“Hey,” Stiles says, as soon as Derek presses the phone to his ear without even saying anything. Stiles' voice is soft, like he knows, and Derek's chest does this painful thing where it feels like all his ribs are constricting.

“Hi,” he replies quietly.

“I thought you could use some company. You know, like a friendly voice in your ear as you go to bed.”

Derek smiles to himself. “Thanks.”

“I was with Scott the entire day today,” Stiles says and yawns, like he's exhausted. “It was awesome. I've missed him.”

“What did you do?” Derek slips under the covers, suppressing a sigh as he leans back against the
“Talked, mostly. Ate junk food.” Stiles is silent for a while. “You guys should meet sometime.”

“Sure,” Derek agrees, not sure if he actually wants to, but Scott is Stiles' best friend and Derek thinks it might be good for him. Try to make a good impression, at least.

“Did you build lego houses today?”

“Yes.”

“And they look awesome?”

“They did, until Josh rebuilt them.”

Stiles laughs at that, and Derek is suddenly overwhelmed by how much he misses Stiles' laugh. “I used to do that, too. My dad gave up on building things with me, because he could spend hours on some creation and I played with it for like twenty minutes, before I made it into something better.”

Derek snorts. “Well, you're still creative, at least.”

“Yeah, maybe my creativity comes from all my architectural brilliance.”

“Don't strain anything.”

Stiles huffs, then sighs. “I kinda miss you.”

Sucking in a breath, Derek concentrates on arranging the pillow under his head. “Me, too.”

“It's been two days,” Stiles snorts. “We're pathetic.”

“I'm sure it'll feel easier when your friends are all back and you have things to do.”

“Probably,” Stiles agrees. “Still looking forward to when you come back home, though.”

Home. Yes, Beacon Hills is his home now. Derek smiles to himself. “Yes.”

“You didn't open your present yet, did you?” Stiles asks, changing the subject.

“No, it's still in my bag.”

“You didn't have it in your carry-on baggage, right?”

“No, why?” Derek asks with a frown.

“Just imagining the faces of the x-ray personnel if you had.”

Derek wonders if he's supposed to know what Stiles has gotten him at that, but he doesn't. “What did you buy?”

“You'll see on Christmas day. No cheating!”

“I won't. Did you open yours?”

“Nope, but it was close last night. Actually, I had planned to give you chocolate, too, but then I ate it in a weak moment of frustration, while I was working.”
It isn't hard to picture Stiles doing just that, and Derek laughs to himself. “I'm not surprised. When are you going to tell me what it is you're working on?”

Stiles hums thoughtfully. “Not sure yet. Probably won't be long.”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

“I won't be able to talk with you for a couple of days, because I'm going to have a marathon sleepover slash psychological breakdown due to lack of sleep, with Lydia.”

It's not supposed to make him jealous, Derek gets that. It's just that he doesn't want to think about Stiles not-sleeping when he's staying over at other people's houses.

“Are you doing anything in particular?”

“She's going to help me out with my project. She's not musical at all -- I guess she's way too logical for that -- but she's a genius so I figured she could help.”

For some reason, it feels like a big deal that Lydia gets to know more about Stiles' project before him. He doesn't quite get why, though.

“I hope she can help you out then,” he says after an awkwardly long pause.

“Yeah.” Stiles sighs a little, when Steve whines on the other side of the phone. “I know, buddy. Life's miserable without Derek, right?”

And just like that, Derek doesn't really care that Lydia gets to know everything before him. At least he has an in with Steve.

Stiles keeps talking about his day after that, and Derek mainly listens. It's easier when he can concentrate on other things. It's been many years now, but sometimes the loss of his parents still feels as fresh and raw, as if it were yesterday. Stiles doesn't ask why he's down, but he seems to know, and perhaps the reason isn't what's most important to him.

He falls asleep with the phone still pressed to his ear, and when he wakes up a couple of hours later, Stiles has ended the call and sent him a text.

> Goodnight. Sleep tight :)

He puts his phone on the bedside table and falls asleep almost immediately again, which is unusual for him at this time of year. He sleeps in the next morning, and when he wakes, everyone has gone to work. It's nice being alone for a few hours, eating breakfast in peace and not having to think about saving coffee for anyone else.

He decides to go out after that, to finish his Christmas shopping. He hasn't even started, to be honest. The only one he's bought gifts for is Stiles. He gets a lego castle for Josh and suspects that he'll have to help building it. Mike's easy, too. He likes books about writing and dictionaries. Derek gets him the latest one, including synonyms, and a book he finds at random with tips on how to prevent writer's block. He hopes Mike doesn't already own it. Laura is harder, because she isn't keen on things, much like Derek. It isn't until he walks past a beauty treatment salon that he decides to buy her some alone time to use whenever she needs it. He's sure that she'll make comments about him finding her in need of grooming, but they'll both know what it's about.

He walks around after that. Living in Beacon Hills has made him less on edge, and unlike his last time in New York, the sounds don't bother him as much. He buys Josh a Merida doll at the Disney
store as well, when he happens to walk past. He hasn't seen the movie, but she's got a bow.

Central Park is crowded, but in a way that doesn't make him feel suffocated. New York's streets make him feel like that a lot of the time, but Central Park is too much of an open landscape, despite the fact that it's located in the middle of Manhattan. He sits on a bench with hot chocolate and his bags, watching a few guys toss a baseball between them. A little further away, there's a soccer game going on.

He sits like that for a while, buying himself a pretzel and another hot chocolate when he gets cold. It's nicer than sitting inside. At least he gets to experience New York again. He's missed it. It's more alive than Beacon Hills. There's a pulse. Beacon Hills feels like it's comatose compared to this.

Laura is home when he gets back and she isn't quite able to hide her relieved sigh when he steps inside the door.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing,” she says lightly.

But Derek knows. She always worries when he's away. Once, he ended up having a panic attack on the street, after someone decided to throw a few homemade firecrackers in an alley just as he was walking past. The sound had bounced off the walls like gunfire and Derek's body had seized in panic, his brain shutting down. It had been a short while after he was let out of the hospital and considered well enough to be on his own. He wasn't. Laura's convincing way of talking to people had gotten him to her house safe and sound, relatively at least, by her cop friend who had sent a couple of cars looking for him. He'd been hiding behind a dumpster in an alley, sweating and shaking, and it had taken them thirty minutes to get him to calm down enough to realise who they were. Since then, Laura has always been worried when he's out alone for too long. Even though she never says anything about it.

“I got the last presents.”

“You mean all of them?”

He shrugs in reply and she laughs. “Typical you, Derek.”

“It felt unnecessary to drag them with me on the plane,” he says defensively. “And there's nothing to get in Beacon Hills. They have Walmart and Karen's Clothing Dynasty.”

“Ah, Beacon Hills,” Laura sighs and pretends to wipe away a tear. “Such a metropolis.”

“It has its perks.”

“It does,” she nods. “It's obviously good for you. You're not as jittery anymore.”

“I was never jittery.”

“We can pretend that, if you want.”

Derek doesn't reply. Instead, he fishes his phone from his pocket and checks his messages, but Stiles hasn't sent him any texts. It makes him feel a bit left out, even though he hasn't sent any to Stiles either.

He spends the next couple of days walking around in Central Park, watching the people there. He sends a text to Stiles, casually asking how he's doing and mentioning a few things about his day.
There's no reply, but Stiles had told him that he's spending a couple of days with Lydia. Those couple of days aren't over until tonight anyway, and maybe he's busy, since tomorrow is Christmas Eve. He's probably spending Christmas with Scott and his mom.

Derek helps decorate the tree the next day, trying to prevent Josh from putting all the decorations at the bottom and on only five branches. He doesn't succeed fully, but it looks all right when they're done. The lights are the best part. Soft and dim, when they let the rest of the apartment go dark. Derek sits on the couch with a mug of coffee and just looks at it that night. His phone rings when it's a quarter to two, and something relaxes in his chest when he notices Stiles' name on the display.

“Hi,” he says, answering the call.


“No, I'm staring at the Christmas tree.”

“Cosy. Are you busy?”

Derek looks around, as if out of reflex, but the apartment is still dark and quiet. “No, the rest are asleep.”

Stiles takes a breath. It's loud in the silence. “How are you?”

“I'm good. Is anything wrong?”

“No. Everything's fine. I'm just tired. Had a fight with my dad.”

“What happened?” Derek sits up straighter, shaking his head to get rid of the drowsiness.

“I try to make him eat healthy, since he's got high cholesterol, but he keeps eating junk food and red meat and stuff. It just makes me mad. It got worse after mom. Like he stopped caring, you know? Today I just snapped, because I'm still here.”

Derek wishes he was close enough to touch. “I'm sorry to hear that,” he says, knowing that it's inadequate. “Are you okay now?”

“Yeah, I'm just tired. I'm in my old room, and it's...it's just difficult sometimes, you know?”

“I get it,” Derek answers truthfully. “But are you okay?”

Stiles is silent for a moment. “I feel a bit better now. I just need to talk for a while if that's okay.”

“Of course it's okay,” Derek says softly.

“What have you been up to since the last time we talked?”

Derek tells him about buying Christmas gifts and spending his time in Central Park.

“I want to go there one day,” Stiles interrupts him suddenly.

“You haven't been?”

“No, but it's on my bucket list.”

“It's the best place on Manhattan.” Perhaps Derek should take him at some point. “What did you do with Lydia?”
“Worked on my stuff. I had to get a second opinion on a couple of things, and I know she's always honest, no matter if it hurts. I think I solved it.”

“Okay, that sounds good.” It still makes him feel left out, that Lydia knows but he doesn't.

“I'll be able to tell you soon,” Stiles says, as though he can read Derek's mind.

“I look forward to it.” He can't quite imagine what it is, which might make him even more uncomfortable about the fact that someone else knows before him. If he'd been able to guess, it would've felt easier.

“Me, too. I'm nervous, though, since I don't really know if you'll like it.”

“I don't doubt that I will.”

They're silent again for a moment, and Derek thinks about heading to bed, but then decides against it. He'll grow more tired if he lies down, and Stiles wants to talk. “Did you just work?” he asks then.

“Nah, we hung out, too. Skype doesn't really make up for the time we spend apart. I used to have the biggest crush on her, you know.”

Derek didn’t know, and he tries to not let it get to him. “I thought you were gay,” he says quietly.

“I am. I just didn’t realise that back then. I was like fourteen.” There's a moment of silence. “Are you jealous?”

“No,” Derek says immediately.

Stiles doesn’t say anything for a moment. “We're close friends now. I'm really glad I stopped being that creepy friend-zoned guy.”

Derek doesn't know how to reply to that.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” Stiles asks then, changing the subject entirely.


“Did you put mine under the tree, too?”

“No, do you want me to?”

Stiles falls quiet again. “Nah, you probably shouldn't. Maybe call me when you're about to go to bed and open it then?”

Derek frowns. “Okay. Why?”

“You'll understand when you see it.”

That doesn't straighten out any question marks for Derek.

“What about your gifts? Should I wait with them, or...?”

He feels like there's a hidden message here, that he isn't able to decode properly. “No, you can open them whenever you want.”

“My dad won't need therapy if I do?”
Derek blinks. “No?”

Stiles hums thoughtfully. “I'll put them under the tree then. That way I'll probably get the most presents.”

“And you ask how old I am,” Derek snorts.

“There's a difference, Derek! You don't grow out of wanting Christmas gifts, but you grow out of building lego houses.”

There's a beat of silence.

“Actually no, I don't think you grow out of that, either,” Stiles admits.

Derek huffs out a laugh. “Good to know. I was thinking about therapy.”

“Therapy dude,” Stiles sighs. “It's such a dick sometimes. Especially when you don't feel like going.”

The words take him by surprise and he opens and closes his mouth for a moment, looking for words.

“You're in therapy?”

“Yeah, once a month nowadays. It used to be once a week. Guess I got better, right?”

Derek frowns. “Guess so.” He knows he should get back into therapy somehow, even though he's moved away from his therapist. It would probably be good for him, even though he's functioning better now than he has in years. He's still not well. He isn't sure if he's ever going to be fully recovered, either, but something tells him that he won't. Forgetting the things he's seen and experienced, the things he's dreaming about constantly, just doesn't seem possible.

“Derek?” Stiles' voice brings him back, and it sounds as though he's been trying more than once.

“Sorry, I got lost in thought.”

“Is there a problem with me being in therapy?” The confusion in Stiles' voice is clear, which isn't strange at all, considering every other person is in therapy these days. It's just that Derek's always felt so alone when it comes to it. He refused going when his family died, but when he got back from his last tour, there wasn't another option left.

“No, of course not. I've been in therapy, too,” he confesses quickly. It feels weird, like he's admitting to a weakness, even though Stiles has just told him the same.

“No now, though?”

“No, not since I moved.”

Stiles is silent for a moment. “Do you want to go back?”

“No, I guess I got better,” Derek says, using Stiles' words. He knows he probably should, though.

“It's nice talking to you again,” Stiles mumbles, switching subjects again. “You talk more on the phone than you do face to face.”

“I talk more with you than I do with anyone else.” Derek shrugs to himself.

“It's probably because you can't just nod or shake your head,” Stiles laughs.
There is probably a big amount of truth in those words, Derek suspects. “I think you're right.”

“So what do you want to do when you grow up?” Stiles asks, changing the subject for the third time.

“I have a bookshop.”

“I know, Derek. I hang out there with you every day, basically. Is that what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

“Maybe,” Derek mutters defensively. “I haven't decided yet.” A part of him wants to finish his degree, but he knows that wouldn't be possible. Not with the stress during midterms and finals. Not with all the other students constantly around him. He used to find them annoying even when he was somewhat mentally healthy.

“Do you like it?”

“It's okay.” It's something that he's capable of doing, but he doesn't let Stiles know that. “It suits me. What do you want to do?”

For a moment, Stiles hesitates on the other end. “Maybe something with music production. I like that.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Yeah. I mean, that's why I chose to study this, but it's scary.”

Somehow, it feels reassuring that someone who seems so brave and smart, confident in his own intelligence and knowledge, can be scared of what the future brings. “I've seen all your instruments. Do you play them all?”

“More or less. There are some I know better than others and a few I barely know at all. I mostly do things with my computer now, though, but sometimes I add elements from acoustic instruments. I think it makes a nice combination. Two things that are very different, but they can really bring out the best in each other if you use them right, you know?”

“I don't, but it sounds good,” Derek confesses. Laura usually says that he's tone deaf, which probably isn't very far from the truth. He likes music a lot and used to listen to it constantly before. Since his last tour, he craves the silence more than anything, but he sometimes misses the odd euphoric sensation he could get from going to see a concert or a musical. Perhaps he could find his way back to that.

“Maybe I could show you sometime. If you want.” Stiles adds the last part a little hastily, as if he's worried that Derek wouldn't. It's odd, however, because he suspects that the music is a big part of Stiles, and yet it's still something that he hasn't gotten to see or experience.

“I'd like that a lot.”

“Do you know any instruments?” Stiles asks.

“Triangle. That's about it.”

That makes Stiles laugh and Derek smiles a little to himself.

“You're the next Bach.”

“Just wait. My time will come.” He's starting to grow tired, and decides to lie down in bed instead.
He prefers sleeping in his room, instead of ending up on the couch and having to spend tomorrow with a kink in his neck. “Hold on a sec. I'm just going to get into bed. I don't want to sleep on the couch.” He undresses quickly and brushes his teeth poorly, but he can make up for that in the morning.

“Beds are more comfy than couches, honestly,” Stiles says when Derek returns to the phone.

“You say that like it's a big discovery,” Derek snorts.

“It is! I've done research on this. A lot of it, too.”

“I believe you.” The sheets feel cool against his skin as he slides in. It's like his body draws a content sigh of relief as he settles in.

“So, what are you wearing?” Stiles asks and Derek rolls his eyes.

“Clothes.” A T-shirt and boxer-briefs.

“Wow, that's the sexiest thing I've heard all day.”

Derek pulls the shirt over his head and tosses it on the chair by the door. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“It doesn't matter. I'll save the phone sex for tomorrow. I think it'll be more useful then.”

Derek has no idea what to make of that. He's not entirely sure how phone sex even works, and he doesn't know why it would be more useful tomorrow. However, phone sex on Christmas Day does sound like something they shouldn't be doing and something very good, at the same time.

“As long as we don't get interrupted,” he says finally. He's too tired to be turned on, but he's sure that he will be tomorrow, when he wakes up and realises what he's been promised. He highly suspects that that's been Stiles' plan all along.

“There's a lock on my door,” Stiles informs him.

On reflex, Derek glances at his own door. “Mine, too. I guess we're safe.”

Stiles takes a deep breath and he sounds more serious when he speaks next. “Thanks for staying up to talk to me. I really needed this.”

Suddenly, Derek feels like there are way too many miles between them. “I don't mind. I like talking to you.”

Stiles snorts. “Sometimes I don't know if you're sarcastic or emotionally constipated.”

With a sigh, Derek rolls his eyes. “I mean it.”

“Emotionally constipated it is, then.”

“I'm contemplating on hanging up on you,” he lies.

“Empty threats totally get me every time.”

He's confident that Stiles is grinning.

They don't speak for much longer than that, since they're both tired and Derek is sure that he's going to be forced out of bed for an early breakfast tomorrow. He looks over at Stiles' gift, lying on top of
his bag, still rectangular and suspicious. It's impossible to make out what it is. He's thought about wine, but the box isn't big enough and no one would find that difficult to open in front of their family. Now, he's drawing a blank. Stiles' mind seems to be a dangerous place, sometimes.

Falling asleep comes quickly, since he's so tired, and it feels like he's only closed his eyes for a brief moment, when there's a sharp knock on the door. The light outside tells him that it has been several hours, however.

He groans when there's a second knock, and forces himself out of bed and into a pair of sweats and a clean t-shirt. They're all sitting at the kitchen table, eating, when he walks out. Josh looks like he's overly excited, constantly staring over at the pile of gifts with a longing look in his eyes. Derek remembers that feeling, even though it was twenty years ago.

“Good morning,” he says as he sits down.

“Morning,” Josh chirps, mouth full of breakfast.

“Did you sleep well?” Laura asks, giving him an all too knowing look over her coffee mug.

Shrugging, Derek pours one for himself. “When I finally went to bed.”

Mike nods at that. “Heard you talking on the phone when I was up using the bathroom.”

Derek wants to go back to bed when Laura winks at him.

“A friend called.”

“Was it Stiles?”

“Who's Stiles?” Josh asks immediately.

“He's Derek's friend,” Laura informs and simultaneously stops him from adding another spoon of cocoa powder into his mug.

Josh looks a little surprised at that. “Oh.”

Perhaps he didn't think Derek has friends. Laura seems to share that opinion, since she's constantly trying to make them something they're not. It's annoying.

“When's it present time?” Josh asks, after he's downed his cocoa in one big gulp. Derek doesn't know how the kid's throat isn't burning.

“In forever,” Laura tells him. “So you better take a shower and get dressed, because that makes time go faster.”

With a groan, Josh disappears towards the bathroom.

“How was Stiles?” she asks immediately, and Derek feels like he's nailed to the spot by the intense look in her eyes. He's grateful that she isn't saying happy birthday, at least.

“Never said he's the one I talked to.”

“It's pretty obvious, though, since he's the only friend you've got.”

Derek is about to protest, but then he realises that she's right. Perhaps he should put in some effort to make other friends. On the other hand, he's not very good at being social, and perhaps having only
one friend is the ideal situation for him.

“He was good,” he mutters finally.

“Glad to hear it. Wish him a Merry Christmas from me when you talk to him next time.”

“I probably won’t.” Derek shrugs when she glares at him.

He ends up playing with Josh for several hours, leaving Mike and Laura with the food. He's certain most of it's bought from a restaurant or caterer anyway. Laura isn't big on cooking and Mike is writing too much to care about it. Whenever he's free, he seems to prefer spending time with his family over standing in the kitchen. They both make good money, however, and Derek suspects that ordering food isn't a big deal to them.

Josh is so excited that he needs to go to the bathroom once every twenty minutes. Derek takes the opportunity to restore the houses that have been 'rebuilt' during that time. It's almost an entire village now, and Derek has spent more hours than he'd ever admit on building a church and a grocery store, as well.

Dinner is uneventful, but good. He likes the typical Christmas food, and since he only eats most of it during this time of year, he doesn't grow tired of it.

Josh runs to the bathroom one more time, before they sit down and hand out the gifts. Derek gets three, which is three more than Derek asked for. He used to hate being born on the 25th, because his presents were always combined Christmas gifts and birthday presents, and everyone tended to be too caught up with Christmas to care much about it also being his birthday. He's glad for it now, though, because he can pretend like it isn't there.

As he looks over, he notices an excited Josh behind a small mountain of gifts, and smiles to himself. Derek’s first gift contains a button-up in a ridiculously soft material and a knitted cardigan. The second one is a book series from a Swedish author Derek hasn't read before, but he thinks the first book has been made into a movie with Daniel Craig. They look interesting. The third one is a drawing from Josh of him and Derek together, and a bracelet made of multicoloured plastic pearls threaded onto a stretchy band. It looks ridiculous around his wrist, but the pleased look on Josh's face when he keeps it on makes it worth it.

The lego castle makes Josh so ecstatic that he forgets to eat his fair share of Christmas candy. Derek lets Laura coax him into eating it instead. He spends most of the remainder of the evening helping Josh put the castle together, and Josh places the Merida doll on top of it when they're done. Josh falls asleep after haphazardly brushing his teeth, and his pajama top is on backwards. Derek tucks him in, before he leaves.

Laura and Mike are cuddling on the couch when he exits Josh's room. He lets them be, retreating to his own room, and his eyes instantly fall on Stiles' wrapped gift that's still lying on top of his bag. Derek picks up his phone. He's let it stay on his bedside table the entire day, feeling as though Christmas with family is more important than a stray text here and there. He's already promised Stiles to call tonight anyway.

There are a couple of text waiting for him, both sent around lunch.

> oh my god you got me the hunger games

> all three. Best gifts ever. PS I totally won the gift competition. Call me tonight
Derek smiles to himself. At least the books were appreciated. He'd been worried that Stiles had already read them, or wasn't interested in reading them. Thankfully, that wasn't the case.

A quick glance at the digital numbers on his phone tells him that it's 9 PM in California and that he should wait at least a couple of hours before calling. He sends a text in stead.

< Glad you liked them. Let me know when you're free for a call. No rush.

He zaps through the channels on his TV a couple of times, not sticking to anything in particular, but a few minutes of a TV show here, half an hour of a movie there. He's mostly waiting for time to pass.

When his phone finally rings, it's almost three in the morning and he's almost asleep.

“Hello?” he croaks, rubbing a hand over his face in hope of growing more awake.

“Shit, were you sleeping?” Stiles asks immediately.

“A little bit,” he confesses and forces himself to sit against the wall. His vision is a bit blurry and he feels groggy, but he's determined not to fall asleep again.

When Stiles speaks next, his voice is ridiculously soft and Derek doesn't get why. “Do you want to go back to sleep?”

“No, I'm good.”

“You sure? We can do this tomorrow instead.”

“I'm sure, just hold on a sec.” Without waiting for a reply, he goes to get himself a glass of water and ice in the kitchen, pressing it against his face a few times, before drinking it. He refills it once before going back to his room. “I'm back.”

“What did you do?”

“Had to get a glass of water.”

“Did you have a good day?” Stiles asks and Derek thinks that he can hear him get into bed on the other end.

“Yeah, it was alright. You?”

“Same. Thanks for the books.” Stiles sucks in a breath. “You didn't have to do that for me.”

“Have you read them before?”

“No, I didn't even know they were available in braille. And you got me all three. They must've been ridiculously expensive.”

“It's nothing,” Derek says firmly, because it isn't. Even if he hadn't had the financial resources he has now, just knowing that Stiles was happy to receive them would've made it all worth it.

“Did you open yours?”

“No, I thought you wanted me to wait until we were on the phone.”

“Okay...” Grabbing the present from his bag, he settles on the bed. “Why?”

“Uh, maybe I wasn't really thinking of how you'd take it.” Stiles makes a sound at that, as though he's said something wrong. “Not, you know, take it. Uh.”

That's when Derek's mind clicks. The rectangular shape of the gift suddenly makes a lot of sense, and he now understands why Stiles didn't want him to open it in front of other people.

“Derek?”

“Sorry, I just think I figured out what you got me.”

“Are you going to hang up on me?” Stiles asks carefully.

“No?”

“Are you mad?”

Truth is, Derek doesn't know what he is. He's certainly not mad, but he's having a hard time deciding if he's turned on, or a bit scared. “No.” The sound of gift wrap tearing seems so loud in the silence, and then he's holding a brown cardboard box in his hand. Probably discreet for a reason. When he opens it and turns the box upside down, a purple, glittery dildo and a tube of lube falls out on the mattress.

“Purple and glitter?” he snorts.

“What?” Stiles squeaks. “I asked Lydia to order black! It was supposed to be bl

ack!”

The horror in his voice makes it impossible for Derek not to laugh.

“I want to kill myself a little bit. It was supposed to be a sexy thing! I was sorta hoping we could do sexy things together while on the phone, since you're away. Including that thing.” Stiles' voice is a little higher than usual and Derek only laughs harder. “Now it's like I've given you Edward freaking Cullen's dick for Christmas!”

Derek's stomach hurts and he has to wipe his eyes free from tears. He can't remember the last time he laughed this hard. “I'm sorry,” he manages at last and takes a deep breath. “I'm sorry.”

Stiles waits for him to calm down before he speaks again. “I didn't realise until today that maybe I stepped over a line. I don't even know if you use toys. I should've asked first.”

“I don't,” Derek answers honestly. “I mean, I haven't before.”

“It's okay.” It comes out quickly. “You can throw it in the trash.”

“That's not what I meant.” Derek swallows as he picks up the dildo from the bed and weighs it in his hand. It's not overly long or thick, and somewhere between solid and jiggly. He doesn't remember the last time he did something like this. He did bottom a few times in college and liked it, but he's not sure he'd be comfortable with it now. His trust might still be too fragile.

“No?” Stiles breathes.
“We can give it a try,” Derek finds himself saying, then he hesitates for a moment. He's not sure how to say *I don't know if I can bottom for you.* “I'm not sure that I'll be able to do it with you. In person.”

“No! No, that's not what I meant,” Stiles blurs. “Actually, I was kinda hoping for you, uh, you know, fucking me when you come back.”

Derek feels a little lightheaded for a second. Clearing his throat, he gives into the thought of that for a moment, and yeah, he could do that.

“If you want,” Stiles adds quietly.

“Yeah, yes, we could try,” he agrees quickly and hears Stiles sucking in a sharp breath.

“Yeah?”

“As long as you want to.”

“I do. Have been for a while, but I didn't know how to ask. It's easier to talk to you about these things over the phone.”

“You can talk to me about it in person as well.”

“I know, it just feels less awkward when I know you can't see me blushing like a crazy person when I do.”

Derek smiles to himself at that. “I don't mind you blushing.”

“Idiot,” Stiles mutters, but he sounds fond. Then he clears his throat and Derek knows immediately that his mind is back to their previous subject. “So, you wanna try out your gift?”

Nodding to himself, Derek reaches down to press a hand to his crotch. “Yeah.”

Things get a little hazy after that. He plugs in his handsfree, and then simply gives in to Stiles' voice in his ear, telling him what to do. It starts out easy enough, Stiles asking him to touch every part of his body except for where he’s getting hard. He never thought he had sensitive areas until now, when running his hands up the inside of his thighs made his cock twitch and leak, his breath hitching.

“That’s good, right?” Stiles’ voice in his ear makes him shudder.

“Yeah,” Derek croaks.

“Spread your legs for me.”

Derek feels them fall open as if on command, he doesn’t even care. He manages to make some kind of affirmative sound, and Stiles sucks in a breath in his ear.

“Good. You’re so good, Derek.”

A thrill runs along his spine. Fuck, he never thought he’d be into being praised, but suddenly it’s all he wants.

“What now?” he manages.

“Lube. I want you to prepare yourself for me. Just...just rub first.”
Derek groans, the muscles in his stomach contracting painfully. He doesn’t even remember the last time he fingered himself. It’s been years, but suddenly he can’t wait. His fingers shake when he squeezes lube onto his palm, warming it briefly, before he spreads his legs further and reaches down, sliding his fingers below his balls and crack.

His body jerks at the contact, and Stiles makes a little sound in his ear, like he knows exactly what Derek’s doing. He rubs his fingers against his hole gently, circling, trying to get both his brain and body to relax a bit. It feels like he’s on fire.

“Fuck,” he breathes as he presses his fingertips experimentally. He spreads his legs further, giving him better access, and the lube dribbles down his crack, probably getting on the sheets, but he doesn’t care. “Stiles,” he breathes. “I want…”

“Yeah,” Stiles croaks. “Yeah, put them inside. I want you to fuck yourself with your fingers.”

Derek’s hand spasms at the words, and he makes a strangled sound. He wasn’t counting on phone sex being anything for him, but now he wonders why they haven’t been doing this the entire time he’s been here.

His body protests a little as he presses against the rim of his ass, but then quickly relaxes and – oh fuck.

“S’good, right?” Stiles pants on the other end. “You like that?”

Derek doesn’t think like covers it. It feels like his body has collapsed on itself, trying to handle the sensation of something inside him. He feels on the verge of breaking, but content at the same time. And when he experimentally moves his finger, he forgets how to breathe for a moment.

“Fuck, Stiles,” he groans, pushing back against his hand.

“How many?” Stiles asks and Derek can hear the unmistakable sound of him stroking his dick on the other end. “How many fingers?”

Derek swallows furiously, his mouth feels so dry. “Just one. More?”

“When you’re ready. Shit, you sound so good.”

Derek groans again, pushing in another finger after a while. It burns a little, but it’s soon exchanged for the white-hot pleasure that courses through his body every time he pushes his fingers inside. He’s so hard that it hurts, balls drawn up tight against his body and he’s not sure how he’s ever going to manage this long enough without coming. But he wants that toy.

“Are–” Stiles whimpers on the other end and Derek shudders. “Pretend that it’s my fingers.”

A sound punches out of him and his hips lift from the bed at that. And then Derek can’t not imagine Stiles’ fingers there instead of his own. He’s sure that they’d make him feel incredible. “Yeah, I want them.”

“Want me to work you open with my fingers?” Stiles breathes.

“Yeah, yeah,” Derek nods desperately, adding a third, and fuck that feels good. “Please.”

“You ready for more?” Stiles sounds breathless, and Derek isn’t really sure that he is, but he wants. So much. He reaches out, searching for the dildo in the mess on his bed. He slicks it up haphazardly, dribbling lube over the sheets and on his body. He gathers some in his hand and lubes himself up as
much as he can. His hand is shaking a little as he grabs the toy and reaches down, and his body jerks at the unfamiliar feeling against his hole.

“Shit,” he breathes, sucking in a deep breath.

Suddenly, Stiles seems calmer, less frantic than just a moment ago. His voice is low and calm in Derek's ear, grounding him. “Go slow. You’re doing so good,” he says softly. “Stop if it doesn’t feel okay.”

He’s sweating like crazy, hands slipping on the toy as he does his best to push in slowly. At first, he feels like it’s not going to work, even though he knows it’s possible. But then, it’s like something gives in, just as Stiles repeats: “You’re doing so good.”

A small moan slips out as he pushes it in inch by inch, and it feels like his heart is in his throat. “Fuck,” he manages, just to let Stiles know. “Fuck.”

“So good,” Stiles soothes again. “Shit, Derek, you’re so good. How does it feel?”

“Fucking incredible,” he whimpers as the toy glides over his prostate and his vision goes white for a moment.

Then he allows himself to get lost in the sensation, in how it’s filling him up over and over again, how his hand slips against the end of it. How he can’t keep quiet once he’s started and Stiles keeps urging him on.

“I want you to come with it inside you,” he breathes finally. “Fuck, Derek, I’m so close.”

His legs shake as he pushes himself back over the toy again and again, muscles burning, cock leaking steadily against his stomach. He reaches down, strokes himself quickly, in time with Stiles’ tiny moans.

“Yeah, me too. Come on.”

Stiles moans loud when he comes, and Derek follows a moment after. His entire body seizes up, muscles contracting so hard that it hurts, and it feels like it keeps going forever. He lets out a sob, screwing his eyes shut as his vision goes blurry.

It feels like hours before he’s able to catch his breath and slowly let the toy slide out. The feel of it isn’t nearly as amazing now, afterwards, and he’s suddenly aware of how much of a mess he’s made. The sheets are sticky from sweat and lube, and his body isn’t much better off; stomach and chest striped with come.

“You okay?” Stiles asks lowly.

“I think so,” Derek replies truthfully. Right now he’s not even sure what his real name is. “I should take a shower. I don’t think Kleenex will get this.”

Stiles laughs on the other end. “I’ll wait. Call me when you’re done. Take your time, but I want to say goodnight before we go to sleep.”

Derek blinks, winces as he sits up. He feels a bit faint. “Yeah, I’ll call you in a bit. I should probably change the sheets, too.”

“No rush, just promise to call.”
“I promise.” His fingers feel numb when he hang up. It’s a better kind of numb than in the past.

It takes him twenty minutes to shower and put on fresh underwear, change his sheets and put the dildo at the bottom of his bag. The last thing he needs is Josh finding it and asking Laura what it is. Derek would never be able to live that down.

He calls Stiles as he turns the lights out and gets into bed.

“Hey,” Stiles answers on the second ring.

“Hi.” It feels a bit silly that he’s in his bed, smiling to himself, but there’s no one here to tell on him.

“Everything okay?” Stiles asks. He sounds a little rushed, as though he’s been worrying.

“Yes, everything okay.” Derek smiles again, when he hears the little sigh of relief that Stiles lets out.

“Tired?”

“Very. In a good way.”

“Yep,” Stiles agrees and laughs a little breathlessly. “That was definitely a good way.”

They’re silent for a moment, and Derek wonders briefly how they came to this. To calling as often as possible, to phone sex, to Christmas gifts. To the point where he misses Stiles when they’re not talking or spending time together.

“I really look forward to when you come home,” Stiles says quietly. “It’s weird without you. I mean, I have my friends and everything, and it’s nice to be around them, because we’re not able to hang out that often since they’re away at colleges all over this freaking country. But it’s weird. Without you.”

“I know.” Derek traces the pattern on the sheets for a moment. “It feels weird without you, too.”

“When, after New Year’s, are you coming home?”

Derek hasn’t really planned for this, to be honest. The initial plan was to stay a while longer; perhaps a week or so into January, but right now, he’s not sure he wants to anymore.

“I’m not sure yet. It might be a week or so, after.”

“After New Year’s?” Stiles asks, and Derek can hear the disappointment in his voice. “That’s almost two weeks from now.”

It seems even longer put like that. “I’m not sure yet. I might come home sooner.”

“I really hope so,” Stiles sighs, then he seems to pull himself together. “But I mean, it’s great that you’re spending time with your family. I’m just being selfish.”

“It’s impractical that they live so far away.”

“But you’re not moving back there, are you?”

The strangest thing is that Derek doesn’t even have to hesitate before he says: “No, Beacon Hills is my home.” So much has changed.

“So what are your plans for New Year’s? Gonna see the ball drop?”
“No, I’m probably going to stay here.” He can’t stand the crowd, the suffocating excitement.

“Which is probably a good idea, because people would fight each other to get to kiss that face.”

Derek snorts. “If they did, it would be in vain.”

“I wish I could, though.”

Derek wishes that he could, too.

◊

When New Year’s arrives, Derek isn’t ready. He’s anxious about the fireworks, and he’s anxious about Stiles spending his evening at a party Lydia is hosting. He’s got no right to be jealous, and there’s no reason for him to be, but there’s an uncomfortable lump in his stomach anyway.

Dinner with Laura and her family is uneventful. They leave him alone as much as possible, and he knows that she’s worried, too. Josh and Mike are going to watch the ball drop, but Laura’s going to stay with him. A part of him whispers suspiciously that they’re worried about him hurting Josh again. The more reasonable voice tells him that of course a kid his age wants to see something like that, if he manages to stay awake for that long.

“How are you holding up?” Laura asks him, when they sit down on the couch in front of the TV. She’s turned the volume down to the point where it’s almost impossible to hear anything, but he’s grateful for it.

“Antsy,” he answers truthfully. “Anxious.”

“You’ll be fine,” she assures him, squeezes his arm. “You’ve looked pretty happy these last few days. Something you want to talk about?”

He’s been talking on the phone with Stiles almost an hour every night since Christmas Day. About everything and nothing. It’s hard picturing going to bed tonight, when he won’t be able to.

“It’s just–” he shrugs. “–I’m feeling at home over there.”

“I’m happy for you.” She smiles, and even though he knows it’s perfectly genuine, there’s a sadness to it.

“I’m not leaving you forever,” he sighs. “I’ll come visit. And you’re welcome to visit, too.”

“We will.” It sounds like a promise. “I want to check out your shop and your Stiles.”

“He’s not my Stiles,” Derek sighs again, but she only grins in reply.

His phone buzzes just before midnight, and his skin has been crawling for a couple of hours already. It’s a picture of Stiles, taken by someone else, where he’s doing a kissy face to the camera. He looks drunk and absolutely perfect.

The text itself reads:

> Happy New Year! I miss you. Wish I could give you one of these in person

< Happy New Year! Miss you, too. Hoping that next year you can.

He’s not sure the message makes a lot of sense, but it seems like Stiles understood what he was
trying to get across, because there’s an instant reply with only five hearts. Derek snorts to himself.

When he looks at the picture again, something cold washes over him, and realisation hits like a punch in his gut. Laura was right. He’s in love with Stiles.

“Fuck,” he whispers and puts the phone down on the coffee table.

“What?” she asks instantly, looking up from where she’s been staring at the screen.

“You were right.” When she frowns, he continues: “I’m in love with him. What the fuck do I do?”

“Derek,” she sighs, but it sounds fond, and she puts her arm around him. “How can this be of any news to you?”

For a second, he’s about to protest, but then he realises how blind he’s been. It’s so obvious, and it has been for a while. Probably to anyone except for him.

“It’ll be okay,” she says softly. “I’m about a hundred percent sure that he’s into you, too.”

“You can’t know that.”

“If it was just about the sex, do you really think he would care about calling you every night? Would he even text you right now? Think about it. He’s at a party, probably with a whole bunch of horny singles and assholes who are willing to lie about their relationship status and cheat on their partners–”

He’s been trying not to think about this all day, but it’s making him feel queasy.

“–and still, he’s texting you something that makes you smile like you did in first grade, when you came home and told mom that you were going to marry Jennie McKenzie. You’re on the other side of the country, Derek! There’s no way he’s texting you in hopes of getting laid tonight. If he wanted to, with the way he looks, he would already be getting laid.”

“It’s just...it was his idea to do this as friends. He wanted to get comfortable with someone.”

Laura squeezes his arm gently. “You know, friends with benefits are basically doomed to end up with at least one person falling for the other. You guys are lucky, since you both did.”

Derek takes a deep breath. “I think I need to head home earlier than planned.”

She smiles softly. “I figured.”

It makes him worry. He wonders when he let his guard down. When he let Stiles get so close. After a moment, he realises that perhaps it all happened on day one. When Stiles walked into his shop and flipped everything upside down. When he proved to be everything and nothing of what Derek thought him to be.

“Derek, things will be okay. From what I’ve gathered, Stiles is a sweet guy. As I said, I’m a hundred percent sure that he’s into you, but if I, for some horrible reason, am wrong, he’d let you down nicely. You already know that he cares about you. Do you think he would ever consciously hurt you?”

Derek swallows at that, shakes his head. No, Stiles would never hurt him on purpose. However, Derek is afraid. He doesn’t remember the last time he did something like this – jumped without being sure that there was someone there to catch him.

“Don’t call him tonight, though, because you’re not at your best and if he’s been drinking, he’s not
fit for this discussion either. Talk to him when you get home. When you can do it face to face.”

“I wish I could just write a note,” he sighs.

It had worked with Jennie McKenzie after all.

“You have to take a chance every now and then,” Laura says a matter-of-factly, making Derek roll his eyes.

“You sound like a fortune cookie.”

That’s when the countdown starts on TV.

“Are you going to take the chance next year?” she asks, raising her coffee mug as if ready to toast with him once the ball drops.

He hesitates for a couple of seconds, but then reaches out to grab his own. Hell, he has to do something. Hopefully Stiles feels the same way. His stomach swoops at that.

“I will,” he says firmly and knocks his own mug against hers, just as the ball drops. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year, baby bro.”

He manages to catch a flight two days later, and his stomach gnaws at itself the entire trip. Every night, he’s been calling Stiles, who was overjoyed when Derek told him that he’d be back in Beacon Hills the next day. Derek’s going to spend the night at his place again, like last time he came back from New York.

Walking up the stairs to Stiles’ apartment feels oddly unfamiliar, like he hasn’t done this a bunch of times before. He wonders if he should explain right away, or wait until tomorrow. It’s pretty late after all.

Stiles opens almost immediately, and he’s just like Derek remembers him: eyes bright behind the glasses he insists on wearing, hair messy and thick, and a smile on his face that makes it hard not to crowd him against the door post.

“Hi,” Derek breathes, and his throat feels oddly thick, as though they haven’t seen each other in years rather than a couple of weeks.

“Hey,” Stiles replies and reaches out for him. He buries his face in Derek’s collar when he steps close, and just breathes for a moment. But then, just as Derek has been able to awkwardly get them inside the door and lock it, Stiles lips are on his, fingers pulling Derek close by his shirt.

“Welcome back.” Stiles sounds a little breathless when he finally pulls away.

Seeing him again makes it ache behind Derek’s breast bone. He’s mostly glad to be home, to be close to Stiles again, but there’s that tiny ounce of worry now, too. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too.” Stiles hauls him in by the shirt again, and Derek doesn’t care that the door handle digs into his back as Stiles pushes him against it, because this is so much better.

Stiles doesn’t pull away again, until Steve whines at their feet.

“It’s been a competition here, about who’s been missing you the most.”
Derek smiles as he crouches in front of Steve, who looks like he’s doing everything he can to keep himself from jumping. Instead he whines, alternating between pushing his nose all over Derek’s face and lying down on the floor to have Derek scratch his belly, tail thumping happily as he does.

With a snort, Stiles rolls his eyes and disappears into the kitchen. “When you two are finished loving each other, there’s dinner here for you.”

“I’ll be right there.” Steve’s eyes go droopy when Derek scratches him behind the ear, and perhaps he takes another few minutes before he goes to have dinner.

It’s so familiar going to bed with Stiles again. He knows their routine by now; they always undress separately, but somehow manage to end up making out to some extent either before getting into bed, or right after. He smiles to himself when he sees The Hunger Games lying on Stiles’ bedside table with a bookmark in it.

“You know, I’d ask if it’s okay if I read some before sleeping,” Stiles says suddenly, like he’s read Derek’s mind. “But I actually think I’ve missed you more than I want to know what happens next.”

“What an honour,” Derek snorts, but in reality, he’s flattered.

“You have no idea.” Stiles smirks then, tugging him closer by the waistband of his underwear and kisses him.

They fall asleep tangled in each other after messy hand jobs and haphazard wiping with Kleenex. It takes Derek a moment longer, as he looks down at Stiles, who’s lying curled into his side. For a second, it feels like he’s suffocating with the way his chest swells at the sight of Stiles’ half open mouth and his fingers intertwined with Derek’s. It’s scary, realising that he’s lost himself completely to someone else. It’s incredible at the same time, finding that he’s still capable of it. That he’s found a new foundation, solid enough to take it.

He presses a brief kiss to Stiles’ temple, promising himself to come clean about his feelings soon, before he drifts off.

◊

That doesn’t exactly happen. Stiles is still busy with his project most of the time, but he promises Derek that he’s reaching a point where he can tell what the project actually is. When they spend time with each other, it’s mostly Derek making them dinner while Stiles takes the opportunity to read for a while. He always asks if Derek wants help first, but it’s obvious that he doesn’t have time to read otherwise, so Derek lets him be.

The e-book reader arrives a week into January, and he wonders briefly when Stiles’ birthday is. He’s not sure if Stiles has told him an exact date, or if the only information he’s gotten is that it’s this month.

It mostly feels okay. Except for that nagging voice in his head, saying that he should confess to his feelings soon. It feels like he’s lying to Stiles sometimes when they’re in bed, even though they haven’t done much other than kissing lately – Stiles has been too tired. Derek doesn’t mind just getting to share sheets and some breathing space. It’s nice just to have him around.

It’s the third week into January when Stiles turns up, after days of not seeing each other, with a battered, pink shoe box in his hand. Steve isn’t with him today, and it takes a moment before Derek
realises that Stiles is crying.

“What’s going on?” he asks, heart rate picking up as he rises from the chair and hurriedly makes his way over to where Stiles is standing. Derek watches him furiously trying wipe away his tears, before reaching out to stop his hand. “What’s going on?” he asks again.

“It’s my birthday,” Stiles says quietly after a moment, and Derek’s stomach drops.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know—” he begins, but Stiles just shakes his head.

“No, I know you didn’t know. I just—I’ve been blind for like six years and they still give me birthday cards.”

Derek frowns, trying to understand for a moment, before Stiles straightens and wipes his nose on his sleeve, drawing a shaky breath. “Can we go upstairs?”

“Yeah, of course, just give me a moment to close up.”

“I’ll wait here.”

He watches for a moment as Stiles sits down on the chair behind the counter and folds his cane, briefly noting that tears are still running down his cheeks, before he locks the door and turns the sign. He closes up quickly, not bothering with dusting the shelves or counting the profit. Instead, he writes a quick sticky note and puts it on the register, before gently cupping Stiles’ cheeks and wiping away tears with his thumbs.

“Ready?” he asks.

Nodding, Stiles rises and grasps his arm as they make their way upstairs. Derek’s stomach is swirling with worry, and he doesn’t exactly understand what Stiles meant with the birthday cards.

They end up on the couch and Stiles is clutching the shoe box in his lap. Derek moves in close when Stiles grabs for him, and rests an arm around his shoulders.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he says, trying to make his voice as gentle as possible. “What’s with the birthday cards?”

Stiles is silent for a long moment, gaze averted as though he’s far away in thought. When he speaks, his voice sounds almost hollow. “My mom used to give me cards for everything. It was her thing. Birthdays, passing a test, basically anything.” He shrugs, perhaps to play down the way his voice grows thick as he speaks, and pokes at the contents of the box as if to distract himself. Only now does Derek realise that it contains a number of colourful cards. “She was always so good at reprimanding me, because she made it sound like a compliment.” He makes a little snort, sounding fond. “I don’t remember how it happened, but a car got over on the wrong side of the road and it was like a complete head-on collision kind of thing.”

There’s another long pause, and Derek finds himself holding his breath. He strokes Stiles’ shoulder,
letting him know that he’s still listening. That he’s still here.

“And the next thing I remember is waking up in a hospital with no mom and no vision, and my dad was in a state where he just had to deal with everything, despite the fact that he’d just lost his wife and– It was the worst year in my life. After that, I reached some kind of acceptance, you know, tried to roll with things. I got Steve, too. It was easier with him, because he didn’t break if I cried.”

Stiles sucks in a a shaky breath, leaning into him. Derek knows the torn situation so well, the one with fond memories and helpless grief all mixed together. Where you’re able to laugh one second, and the next feel like you can’t breathe. Somehow, you just get by.

“But every year I get cards. What am I going to do with them? I can’t read what they say, and isn’t that what they’re for? I know they don’t mean it like that. That it’s a thing they do without really thinking about it, you know? But I just–” he cuts off, shrugging. “It’s the only thing I have left from her that actually means something, and I can’t fucking read them.”

Derek grasps his hand, squeezing gently, when it looks like Stiles is going to toss the box away from him.

“And you don’t want to ask anyone to read them for you?” he asks carefully.

Stiles shrugs, fingers trembling under Derek’s hand. “I haven’t told anyone. Not even Scott. I just feel stupid. They’re cards.”

“They’re memories.”

Stiles nods, and it looks like it’s more to himself than Derek. He’s silent for a moment, before he looks up – his gaze meeting Derek’s in that unnerving way it sometimes does, that makes him forget for a moment that Stiles actually can’t see him – and says, “Would you? Read them to me?”

Derek hesitates, wondering if that’s really what Stiles wants, but then again, he wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t. “Yes, if you want me to.”

Stiles nods again, fingers working over the cards in the box.

“Which one do you want me to read first?” Derek asks then. His throat feels a bit tight, and he knows that Stiles has just let him in. Told him everything.

Taking his time to choose, Stiles digs around in the box for a while. Derek doesn’t know if he’s able to tell them apart, or if he’s just trying to decide which one he’s going to pick.

“I’ll read as many as you want me to,” he clarifies. “I have all night.”

Stiles takes a breath and nods, fingers finally closing around a card and hands it to Derek. “Can you tell me what it looks like?”

Derek flips it over in his hand, careful not to bend any corners. “It’s white with three balloons. One blue, one yellow and one red.”

“I remember that one,” Stiles says quietly. “I think it was for my thirteenth birthday.” He moves in closer, curling his fingers around the hem of Derek’s shirt, before he nods.

Derek clears his throat, opening the card carefully and smiles a little at the neat handwriting. “This past year has been tumultuous,” he reads. “In March you got grounded for the first time...”
Stiles snorts a little, smiling to himself, as though he remembers that event well.

“– and in June you and Scott attempted a secret camping trip in the woods, until you came home, so scared of the potential threats of wild animals that grounding you for a second time didn’t even feel necessary. You’ve also made us proud so many times during the year, like you always do. With your courage, and dedication and intelligence that leave both your dad and I dumbstruck, asking ourselves who you inherited that from. Today, it’s your thirteenth birthday and now you’re suddenly a teenager. We could never be more proud of being your parents. Love, Mom & Dad.”

Stiles is crying again, but it seems different this time. Derek holds him close, pressing a kiss to his temple, before giving the card back.

“Another one?” he asks gently, and Stiles nods, digging through the bunch once more.

This one is of a frog in a swimsuit and sunglasses, and for Stiles when he first learned how to swim.

Derek reads for hours, and even though at first Stiles cries to a lot of them, he also starts laughing after a while. He shares the stories of what his mom has written, explains references that Derek doesn’t get, and smiles even when there are tears.

“Thank you,” he says, when Derek has read the last one and they are putting them all back in the box.

Art by Tsuminubiaru
“I’ll do it again, any time you want.”

Stiles kisses him then, hard and slow, his hands clutching Derek’s face like he doesn’t want to let go. It’s desperate somehow. Raw.

“How can I stay over?” Stiles asks when he pulls away, licking his lips.

“Of course.”

“I should call my dad. To let him know. I bet he’s worried.”

“Didn’t you tell him that you were going here?”

“Yeah, but I was kinda upset. I should probably just let him know that I’m alright.” Stiles fishes his phone from his pocket, putting one earphone in before he thumbs the screen. He grimaces slightly after a moment, making Derek worried.

“What?”

“Just seven texts from Scott and a missed call from my dad.”

“Are you sure you want to stay over?” Derek asks, because the last thing he wants is for Stiles’ family and friends to feel as though he’s pulling Stiles away from them.

“Yeah, I’m just gonna call them and tell them I’m fine.”

“I’ll make dinner in the meantime.” In such a small apartment it’s difficult to give some privacy, but he busies himself with making tomato sauce and spaghetti, and does his best not to overhear anything Stiles says on the phone.

He’s setting the table when Stiles gets up from the couch, putting his phone away.

“What are you making?”

“Pasta and tomato sauce. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, perfect. I’m starving.”

Derek scrutinizes him. He looks tired and his face is a little swollen from the crying, but he’s smiling now. “Everything okay with Scott and your dad?”

“Yeah, they were just worried and feeling bad, you know. It’s all good now. I think they’re relieved that I’m with you.”

“They are?”

Stiles shrugs, nodding. “Yeah, they know you’re awesome.”

Snorting, Derek pulls him in close. “Still staying over?”


Stiles eats quickly, like he truly was starving and then he leans back in his chair with a sigh, waiting for Derek to finish his plate, too.

“I think I need to marry you. Your food is awesome.”
Derek pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth, and he’s really trying not to read too much into it, but his stomach is already doing happy spins. “I could live with that,” he says, hoping to sound normal.

“It’s a deal, then,” Stiles grins.

They go to bed almost immediately after doing the dishes, since reading Stiles’ cards postponed dinner to nearly ten PM. It surprises him when Stiles takes off his underwear, too, because he only sleeps naked after some kind of sexual activity. He turns to Derek then, goosebumps spreading over his skin, and he looks vulnerable. Exposed somehow.

“If it’s okay with you, I want you to fuck me.”

Derek opens his mouth, trying to say something. Anything. But he’s trying to wrap his head around the words.

“Are you sure?” he manages finally. Even though Stiles mentioned this when they spoke on the phone while Derek was in New York, he still wants to make sure. Today must’ve been a rough day for him.

“Yeah.” Stiles swallows and nods. “Yeah, today is – I want it to be today.”

“Okay.” Derek nods, stepping closer. Stiles shivers under his touch as he runs his hands down his arms. “Just let me know if you change your mind. No matter when it happens.”

“It’s not going to happen,” Stiles breathes, pressing in closer.

“But if,” Derek says again, making sure that Stiles knows.

“I promise.”

Derek kisses him carefully, because he’s planning on taking this slow. Stiles is warm and pliant under his hands, calmer than he usually is. Less frantic, less rushed. Derek kisses him until Stiles’ mouth opens willingly for his tongue, until they’re both breathing hard and Stiles’ erection is pressing against his hip.

“Take your clothes off,” Stiles breathes, when they break apart. Derek had almost forgotten that he’s fully clothed, while Stiles is naked.

Humming in agreement, hands going for his fly, Derek kisses him again briefly. “Lie down.”

He watches as Stiles nods, and notices how his hands tremble slightly as he gets on the bed, lying down on his back. For a moment, it feels like Derek’s seeing him naked for the first time; long, lean limbs and a trail of moles across his pale skin. Derek knows exactly how soft Stiles will feel under his hands.

Leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor, Derek climbs on the bed after him, lowering himself between Stiles’ legs, as they spread for him. Stiles looks nervous, chewing his bottom lip until it’s swollen and red.

“You look amazing,” Derek says, voice raw, and leans in for another kiss as soon as Stiles’ lips part, as if to say something.

Taking it slow gets more difficult after that, with Stiles’ hands continuously finding new, sensitive spots on his body, seemingly exploring every inch of his skin. It feels like he’s burning, as he presses
open-mouthed kisses onto Stiles’ neck, the soft swell of muscle on his shoulders and the dip just by his hipbones.

The way Stiles arches beneath him, the little sounds he make when Derek dips his tongue into his navel, and the way his thighs tremble when Derek runs his hand up them, parting them further, forces him to close his eyes and suck in a breath.

Stiles groans, mumbling something under his breath, when Derek licks the precome from the head of his cock, feeling it twitch under the flat of his tongue. And then he does it again, and again, and again, until Stiles is panting and whimpering, his hands clutching hard at Derek’s shoulders.

“Fuck, Derek, I just–” A moan slips over his lips, when Derek licks a long, wet stripe from the base to the tip. “–god, just fuck me.”

“You sure?” he asks, moving up Stiles’ body again, and pressing a kiss just below his ear. He reaches for the lube, as Stiles nods shakily, his back curling as he moves to grind their bodies together. Derek drops the lube twice, distracted by the wet slide of Stiles’ cock against his own. “If you don’t stop that–” he groans, pressing Stiles down with a hand on his hip. “–I’m going to come.”

Grinning, Stiles grinds up against him again. “I want you to come inside me.”

Derek screws his eyes shut, dropping his head to Stiles’ shoulder and lets out a low: “Fuck.” The thought of coming inside Stiles makes him lose his breath, and Stiles seems to realise just that, because he grinds up again, moaning.

“Yeah, you better hurry up, because I’m getting impatient.”

Derek does his best to go slow, warming the lube in his hands before he starts to work Stiles open. It’s easier to regain his control, when he sees Stiles tense up as the first finger breaches him, reminding him that Stiles hasn’t done this before. Derek kisses him hard and slow, a little because he wants Stiles to focus on something else for a second, but mostly because he can’t stop himself when he sees Stiles’ mouth go slack.

It doesn’t take long before Stiles is pushing back against his hand, feet digging into the mattress.

“Give me another,” he pants, fingers digging into Derek’s shoulder as if he needs something to hold onto. “I need another.”

Derek knows he’s leaking steadily, knows his hands are shaking slightly, as he pushes another finger in. It aches low in his belly, and he has to stop Stiles’ hand when he reaches to wrap it around Derek’s cock.

“I told you,” he says, surprised by how wrecked he sounds, and he watches Stiles shiver. “I’m going to come if you do that.”

Stiles’ hand falls to his thigh instead, rubbing absently, as he starts pushing back against Derek’s fingers, working himself open as though he can’t stop himself. His face and chest are flushed, his breath heaving, as he takes Derek’s fingers so easily now.

“Fuck, that feels so good,” he whimpers, when Derek adds a third, watching Stiles’ body stretch around them.

Stiles’ cock is dripping against his stomach, and the constant stream of unintelligible words as he takes Derek’s fingers over and over again, makes Derek feel faint.
“You ready?” he asks, because he’s not sure he can keep himself from coming much longer, either.

Nodding, Stiles sucks in a breath and parts his legs further, reaching for him.

Forcing himself to think, Derek reaches for the bedside table again. “Do you want me to use a condom?”

“No,” Stiles says quickly, voice raw and hoarse. “I want you to come inside me,” he adds, as though Derek would’ve ever forgotten that.

Swearing under his breath, Derek grabs the lube and perhaps he uses a little too much, as he slicks himself up, but he prefers messy to unnecessary pain.

Stiles jerks slightly when he feels the head of Derek’s cock against his hole, and Derek murmurs an apology, when Stiles reaches down to wrap his hand around his cock, holding him in place.

“Okay?” Derek asks, kissing him briefly.

“No,” Stiles says quickly, voice raw and hoarse. “I want you to come inside me,” he adds, as though Derek would’ve ever forgotten that.

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“Okay?” Derek asks, kissing him briefly.

“Yeah, just surprised.” And then Stiles nods, as if to tell him to keep going.

Derek pushes forward slowly, carefully tracking the expression on Stiles’ face to keep himself from thinking about how tight he is. There’s a small crease between Stiles’ eyebrows, as though he’s not able to completely place the feeling. But when he pulls his hand back, grabbing Derek’s arm, his mouth grows more lax with every inch he takes.

He lifts his hips experimentally, meeting Derek in a shallow thrust, and a surprised sound escapes him. Then he nods, as if to tell Derek to keep going. “More.”

So Derek does it again, pulling back slightly before pushing into him once more, moving as slowly as he can to allow Stiles to get used to it. But it doesn’t take long before Stiles grows impatient.

His hands start to wander from Derek’s hair and shoulders, to his back and down his ass, squeezing and pushing as if trying to pull him back again.

Rearranging them slightly, maneuvering Stiles’ leg over his hip, and finding better leverage, Derek slides into him again. Slow, deep, and with the way Stiles’ head drops back against the pillows, keening, he knows that he’s found the right spot.

“Right there,” Stiles breathes, nodding frantically. “Fuck, right there.”

Groaning, Derek thrusts into him again, desperately trying to concentrate, to make sure it’s good for Stiles. But then Stiles starts pushing back against him again, digging his feet into the mattress.

“Come on,” Stiles whispers, pulling him closer. “Harder.”

Derek can feel sweat trickling down his back and forehead, and he buries his face against Stiles’ throat as he lets go, thrusting into him over and over again, feeling unravelled. Judging by the look on Stiles’ face, when Derek sits back on his heels, holding Stiles’ hips in place with his hands, he’s not much better off.

Stiles’ fingers dig almost painfully into his thigh, the other seeking the headboard above him for leverage. His eyes are closed tightly, and his skin is shining and slippery with sweat. He’s the hottest thing Derek’s ever seen, and the muscles in his thighs twitch when Derek reaches down to wrap a hand around his cock.
A long stream of curses slip over Stiles’ lips, and it takes three quick strokes before he comes all over his stomach and chest, body spasming around Derek. And fuck, that feels incredible.

“Are you sure?” Derek manages when Stiles has calmed down somewhat, because he’s so close to coming.

“Yeah.” Stiles pulls him down, closer, their bodies flushed together. He digs his heels into Derek’s thighs and pushes back in every thrust. “Come on.”

Groaning, Derek lets go, snapping his hips erratically and screwing his eyes shut as he comes. Stiles strokes his back, pets his hair, murmurs nonsense in his ear that’s just barely audible above his own heartbeat and ragged breathing.

When it feels as though he can move his limbs again, he pulls out and rolls off Stiles to lie down next to him on the bed. Stiles’ hand is still trapped under his back, but neither of them has the energy to care.

“Wow,” Stiles says after a long while of silence. He’s still out of breath, chest heaving, and he’s messy from sweat and come. “I think–yeah.”

“You think what?”

“I don’t even know.” Stiles laughs breathlessly and grabs at Derek to pull him close enough to kiss. “That was awesome.”

Humming, Derek moves in closer, thinking that they should probably shower, but this is so much better.

“Turns out my birthday didn’t end up shitty after all.” Stiles combs his fingers through his hair, holding him close when Derek buries his face at his throat. “And I’m not just talking about the sex. You’re really something, you know that right?”

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” Derek says, instead of replying.

“I’m glad I did.” Kissing the top of his head, Stiles tugs at his ears and sighs. “I feel like my body is immobile, but I think I’d be grateful to my past self tomorrow if I showered now.”

“I don’t even understand that sentence.” Derek grins when Stiles pinches his side. “But yeah, a shower is probably a good idea.”

It takes another fifteen minutes before they manage to make it out of bed. Stiles makes a face, as he walks towards the bathroom.

“Is this gonna start dripping out of me or something?”

“Yes, where else did you think it would go?”

“No regrets,” Stiles says, winking. He pulls Derek close again when they’re under the spray, kissing him.

Derek nips at his jaw, squeezing his ass the way Stiles does to him sometimes. “How are you feeling? Sore?”

Stiles pauses, as if to think. “No. I mean, yes, in general, but you know. No.”

“Good.” He’s just about to lean in for another kiss, when he realises something. “I have a gift for
At that, Stiles’ eyes widen in surprise. “You do? I didn’t think you knew when my birthday was.”

“I didn’t, except that it was in January.” Derek clears his throat, feeling a little awkward. “I ordered something for Christmas, but it didn’t arrive on time, so I figured I’d save it for your birthday.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

Stiles smiles at that. “Well, I do like it when you want things.”

Snorting, Derek slides the shower door open. “I’ll go get it and make tea, if you want some?”

“Yeah, thanks, I’ll just clean up.”

Derek suspects that Stiles isn’t really comfortable enough to shower as thoroughly as he wants, with Derek in there with him. “Take your time.”

He feels a little bad for not having wrapped the e-book reader, but he hopes Stiles won’t mind. As the water boils, he picks Stiles’ favourite tea from the cabinet. He should buy another box next time he grocery shops, since there are only a few bags left.

“Derek,” Stiles says, sticking his head out the bathroom door.

“Yes?”

“Can I borrow clothes? Like comfy clothes.”

“I think I like you better without them,” he says, walking past the bathroom door, smiling to himself as Stiles ducks his head, grinning.

He makes a sticky note on the fridge about buying more tea, after providing Stiles with sweats and a t-shirt, and places the e-book reader on the table. When Stiles emerges a moment later, filling out Derek’s t-shirt at the top but not at the bottom, Derek has a hard time keeping his hands to himself.

“I didn’t have time to wrap it,” he confesses as Stiles’ fingers make contact with the box.

“Oh no, you’ve disappointed me greatly now. Despite the mindblowing orgasm and the fact that you even got me something at all, I really can’t overcome the fact that you didn’t wrap it.” The grin Derek receives when he sighs is huge, making him smile.

Stiles investigates the box for a while, until he finds where it opens. His curiosity is fascinating and amusing, and Derek forgets about his tea in favour of watching Stiles open his gift. When he gets the e-book reader in his hand, he frowns a little in confusion.

“What is it? Is it a tablet?” he asks, running his fingers around the edges.

“It’s a braille e-book reader.”

The look of disbelief on Stiles’ face causes him to worry a little. “A what?”

“It’s like an e-book reader, but the display has little holes to enable the braille, and changes when you read,” he explains quickly, probably somewhat incorrectly, pulse picking up.
Stiles runs his fingers over the display and then, he reaches into the box again and retrieves a small instructions book. Derek is pleased to see that it’s also in braille, and the next moment he wonders why he’s surprised by that at all.

“Oh my god,” Stiles whispers. “Are you serious?”

“Is something wrong?”

“You’ve just given me something I didn’t think even existed.”

Derek clears his throat awkwardly. “Laura’s husband helped me out. Contacted people he knew who were developing this, and they sent it to me.”

Stiles eyes grow wide and then soft. “It must’ve cost you a fortune.”

“It’s nothing.”

“No, it is. It’s actually—I can read whatever I want. Without breaking my back.” Then he’s making his way around the table, carefully straddling Derek where he’s sitting on the chair, kissing him. “You just keep doing these ridiculous things for me. How am I ever going to repay that?”

You already have, Derek wants to say. Instead he goes with: “It’s nothing. I’m just happy that you like it.”

“Thank you, you dork.”

Derek expects him to move after that, but Stiles stays put. “Are you going to sit here all night?”

Waggling his eyebrows, Stiles pets his arm. “I figured I could let you feel some of this as a thanks.”

Snorting, Derek reaches for their mugs, pressing one into Stiles hand. “You’re ridiculous.” He can’t say that he minds much, however. Stiles isn’t very heavy, and he rearranges after a minute, swinging both legs over on one side.

It’s almost morning when they finally go to bed for sleep. Stiles curls around his back, pressing a kiss to the nape of Derek’s neck.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“You’re welcome,” Derek squeezes his hand. “And thank you.” For sharing, he means even though he doesn’t explicitly say so. Stiles seems to understand all the same.

“You’re welcome,” he says, repeating Derek’s words and pressing another kiss to his neck.

◊

“Derek, you need to talk to him,” Laura sighs when they’re speaking on the phone a week later. He still hasn’t been able to tell Stiles how he feels.

“I don’t know how.”

“Ask him out on a date, then, if you don’t want to make an entire confession.”

It’s a terrifying thought. Not only because Derek hasn’t been on an actual date in years, but also because there’s a risk of Stiles saying no. There’s also the risk of Stiles saying yes, because he doesn’t realise that Derek doesn’t want to hang out the way they usually do.
“It’s not that easy,” he amends finally.

“This guy is already super into you. When are you going to realise that? You are two dorks who love each other, but no one wants to say it.”

“He usually tells me what he wants. I’m pretty sure he would’ve told me if he likes me.” Sighing to himself, Derek feels his stomach drop. Things have been great with Stiles lately, but it’s just what it’s always been.

“It’s very different admitting to needs and wanting to do something about them, and admitting that you have feelings for someone who you don’t think feel anything for you.”

Derek hates it when she’s right. Mostly, because she’s giving him hope.

“I guess I’ll have to talk to him,” he says eventually because he does. It’s not fair to either of them if he keeps doing this, while feeling the way he does. Don’t those things always end badly?

“It will be fine, Derek. Trust me.”

It’s a week into February when he finally does something about it. Stiles is sitting on his couch, reading something on his e-book reader, and Derek’s been standing awkwardly at the kitchen table for fifteen minutes, trying to work up enough courage.

“What are you doing on Friday next week?”

Stiles looks up, a little confused, as though he’s been too absorbed in the story to remember that there’s a real world around him. “On Valentine’s Day?”

“Yes.” It feels like he’s sweating, and he wipes his hands on his pants.

“Uh. Nothing?”

“Do you want to have dinner with me? Somewhere?”

Stiles’ eyes widen, eyebrows rising, and his mouth falls open a fraction. “What, like a date?”

For a second, Derek is on the verge of backing out, laughing it off, saying that of course it’ll just be them as friends. Instead he croaks, with his heart stuck in his throat: “Yes.”

It feels like hours pass, but it’s likely only a second or two, before Stiles cracks a huge smile. “Yeah, I’d love to.”

Relief rushes over him as he realises that there are no misunderstandings in this. Stiles was even the one asking if it was a date.

“When?”

“Eight?” He’s going to have to make a reservation.

“Eight is awesome.”

Next Friday, Derek’s oddly nervous when he walks up the stairs in Stiles’ building the following Friday. It’s ridiculous, since they’ve been spending time with each other for months, and doing pretty much anything people dating do as well. It’s just that it’s real this time.

He’s made a reservation at the Thai place just around the corner, because Stiles didn’t want to go
anywhere fancy. It’s a relief, since the restaurant is small and Derek won’t have to worry about the place being too crowded.

Just before he knocks, he smoothes his hands over the button-up he got for Christmas, which Laura told him to dress down with the cardigan he got as well. He’s grateful for her advice, because right now, it feels like he’s suffocating from this alone.

He knocks, silently wondering if it’s normal to be this nervous about going on a date with someone you’ve been having sex with for months. It takes a moment for Stiles to open, but when he does, Derek forgets all about being nervous for a second.

Stiles is wearing a blue button-up, and dark jeans, and he looks absolutely perfect.

“Hi,” Derek says and tries not to smile too big.

“Hey.” Stiles fiddles with the hem of his shirt, like he’s nervous, too.

“You look great.” He isn’t sure if that’s the right thing to say, but Stiles stops fiddling almost immediately and his shoulders relax.

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yes.” Derek reaches out to take his hand, squeezes it a little. “You ready?”

Stiles nods, smiling as he squeezes back. “I’ve been ready and sweating for two hours. How pathetic is that?”

“That makes two of us,” Derek confesses, and Stiles leans in to press a quick, closed-mouth kiss to his lips.

“Thank god.”

Spending time together in public is a new thing for them, however. The waitress is a little awkward around Stiles as first, when she realises that he’s blind, and Derek is worried that it’ll upset Stiles. He doesn’t seem to mind too much, after correcting her and making a couple of jokes, however. Most of his concentration is on Derek, anyway.

“So, I can finally tell you about my project, if you still want to know?”

Derek puts his fork down and wipes his mouth on the napkin. “Yes, of course. I’ve been waiting for you to tell me for months.”

The smile spreading over Stiles’ lips looks proud, as though he’s glad that Derek is still interested. “Well, my college got this question about helping out with a dance project. It’s a charity thing, where the money for the tickets goes to a fund for children with cancer. Anyway, they asked if my college had someone they thought would be able to create some music for them, and they offered it to me, and here I am.” He speaks very fast, a little bit like he’s embarrassed. “It’s not a big thing. I mean, I know I’ve made it sound like it’s me featuring the Swedish House Mafia, but it feels huge to me. The dance group is really cool, apparently, and they do things like this for charity a lot. I figured it was a great thing to start with, you know?”

Derek smiles, chest swelling with pride. He’s sure Stanford has a lot of students in Stiles’ program, and still, he was the one they asked. He reaches across the table and grasps Stiles’ hand, when he starts fiddling with the napkin. “That’s fantastic. Congratulations.”
“Maybe you’d like to see it when it’s time? Their performance, I mean, but my music will be there, too.”

“I’d love to. If you want me there, I’ll be there.”

Stiles threads their fingers together briefly, before sliding his hand over Derek’s. Just now, he realises that Stiles’ fingers are ridiculously long.

“Yeah, I really want you there.”

They talk about other things after that. Stiles’ friends, Mike’s books, good movies, and it’s been over two hours when Derek finally pays the check.

“You don’t have to pay for me,” Stiles protests.

“I asked you out, remember? That’s why I’m paying.” It’s only fair.

“So next time, it’s my turn to ask you out, and I’ll be the one paying.” It’s a statement rather than a question, and Derek gets a little warm inside. He can’t say no to that.

Outside Stiles’ apartment, Derek crowds him against the door and kisses him for a long, long time.

“Want to stay over?” Stiles asks as he pulls away, smiling with his hand still in Derek’s hair.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

There’s no Steve in the apartment as Stiles unlocks the door to let them both in. It’s a relief in a way, because Derek really isn’t up for an evening walk right now. Not after his first real date with Stiles.

“I think this counts as a crime,” Stiles says later, when he slides his hands up Derek’s arms, squeezing his biceps. “I think the sleeves of your shirt are screaming for mercy.”

Snorting, Derek takes to unbutton Stiles’ shirt instead. As he does, he realises that it’s the first time he’s ever gotten to undress Stiles.

“Thank you. For tonight,” he says quietly, as he pops the last button open.

“I’m glad you asked me. Really glad.”

“Me, too.”

It’s the best thing Derek’s done in years. He hesitates after sliding the shirt off of Stiles’ shoulders, and then leaning in to kiss a trail from Stiles’ ear to his collarbone.

“You okay with this?”

“Very.” Stiles nods, fingers digging into Derek’s arms. He lets out a little whimper when Derek bites down around the muscle on his shoulder. “Very a lot okay.”

It’s different this time. He lets Stiles be in charge, and ends up on his back with Stiles straddling him. They go slow again, like last time, with Stiles riding his fingers until his nails dig into Derek’s chest. And then sinks down over his cock. He rides Derek with a patience Derek didn’t think he had, rising and falling slowly, rolling his hips experimentally until he finds a way that makes them both gasp. Derek holds on to him, fingers digging into his hips, guiding him, grounding him. Stiles comes first,
white ropes over Derek’s hand and stomach, and then jerks Derek off until he can’t hold it anymore.

Derek is certain that this is happiness, when he pulls the covers over them both later that night, with Stiles already asleep at his side.

◊

The next few weeks pass in a hazy blur of happiness and sex. Stiles works a lot, but he makes time for Derek at least every other day, even if it’s just for a couple of hours, or an overnight stay.

Derek doesn’t think he’s stopped smiling since he woke up after their first date. Over all, not much has changed between them. Except for Stiles kissing him in public and holding his hand in the grocery store. Other than that, it’s more like they’ve put a label on something that was already there. But Derek likes this label.

“Hey,” Stiles says, where he’s lying on Derek’s couch reading on his tablet. “Do you want to go with me to the Beacon Hills Museum’s 75th anniversary?”

“When’s that?”

“Saturday three weeks from now. And also, my dad wants to know if you’d like to come over for lunch on Sunday.”

Derek looks up, swallowing. Sooner or later, meeting the parents has to happen, but it’s frightening nonetheless. However, he likes Stiles, and avoiding it will only make him more anxious about it in the future. “Sure.”

“Yeah?” Stiles smiles.

“Yes.”

“He’s going to love you,” Stiles hums under his breath. Derek isn’t as convinced.

◊

As it turns out, Stiles’ father is a man of authority. Derek can almost smell it on him when he opens the door for him and Stiles that Sunday. He’s wearing regular clothes, but it’s a thing that shows in posture and expression.

“Derek,” Stiles’ father says and extends his hand. He doesn’t smile, but there’s a softness around his eyes that gives Derek some hope.

“Mr. Stilinski,” he replies, shaking his hand firmly. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“I’ve been trying to for months, but Stiles hasn’t let me.”

Stiles makes an exasperated sound next to Derek and clears his throat. “Dad, let us inside. We’re starving.”

Stiles’ father steps aside and gestures for them to come in. It looks like time stopped sometime before Stiles moved out, because there are still beat up sneakers standing inside the door and a hoodie hanging on the coat rack.

“Stiles tells me that you’re a Marine,” Stiles’ father says halfway through dinner, and things have gone surprisingly smooth. Derek expected an interrogation, but all he’s gotten are a few genuine questions.
“Was.” Putting the fork down, he wipes his fingers on the napkin. He doesn’t want to talk about this, but of course Stiles’ father is interested. “I came back about two years ago.”

“How many tours did you do?”

“Three.” He makes an effort to keep eye contact, but all he wants is to concentrate on something else.

“And where were you stationed?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Dad,” Stiles hisses, his fingers find Derek’s knee beneath the table, squeezing lightly.

“I’m sorry, Derek,” Stiles’ father says, looking apologetic. “Interrogation is in my backbone. Who wants dessert?”

“Yes, please.” Derek nods, but he’s feeling a bit sweaty, not exactly sure why. People tend to ask him about his time serving, and even though he doesn’t want to talk about it, these questions are usually the ones he considers safe.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says, when his father leaves the room to retrieve the dessert. “I told him not to ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s okay.” He feels more grounded the moment Stiles squeezes his knee again. “I get why he’s asking.”

“He makes a mean red velvet cake, though.” Stiles smiles, steering the conversation to safer subjects. “That’s the perk of having Sunday lunch here.”

As they walk home, with boxes of leftover cake, Derek has to agree. It feels like a victory that he’s been invited back next week. Stiles’ father even smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners the very same way Stiles’ do, as he shook Derek’s hand before they left.

“He likes you,” Stiles says, squeezing Derek’s arm.

“I hope so.”

“He does. I have a feeling that he’s gonna call me tomorrow and gush. He doesn’t look like the gushing type, but he definitely does it in secret.”

Smiling to himself, Derek finds that he’s looking forward to next week’s Sunday lunch in some way. “In that case, I hope he does.”

“You’re staying the night, right?” Stiles asks as they reach his building. It’s still early afternoon, but they rarely spend the nights apart anymore. He’s surprised Stiles even asks.

The other week, he found an extra toothbrush waiting for him in Stiles’ bathroom cabinet. Since then, Stiles has had one at Derek’s apartment, as well.

“Yes, if that’s okay.”

Stiles snorts. “Of course it’s okay. It’s always okay. Scott’s coming over though. He’s in town, because his mom’s birthday was yesterday. Do you wanna meet him, or do you want me to call you when he’s left?”
A part of him wants to go home and breathe for a while. He’s already exhausted after meeting Stiles’ father. On the other hand, he knows that Scott isn’t in town often, and the look on Stiles’ face makes it obvious that he wants them to finally meet.

“I’ll meet him. If he doesn’t mind having me around.”

“He’s wanted to meet you since the first time I mentioned your name. I’m pretty sure he’s gonna be thrilled.”

Stiles is right. Scott really is excited about meeting him. He’s as good as everything Derek’s imagined, with an open, kind face and constant attempts to include Derek in the conversation, when it strays towards high school memories. He somehow manages to do so without pushing, which is a relief, because meeting two new, important people in one day is already taking a toll on Derek. His brain feels slow and fuzzy, and he’s beginning to get a headache. It’s impossible not to like Scott, though. Even Steve abandons Derek in favour of him.

Smiling to himself, Derek clears the table of pizza boxes and empty soda cans as Stiles and Scott start talking about what people they knew are doing now.

“Hey, so Derek,” Scott asks, looking up from where he’s sitting. “Did you go to Beacon Hills high school, too?”

“I did. I wasn’t there during your time, though. Since I’m twenty-seven.”

Scott is just about to say something else, when Stiles flails where he’s sitting.

“What?”

Confused, Derek tries to figure out what he’s reacting to. “What?” he asks finally, when he comes up with nothing.

“You’re twenty-seven?” Stiles looks as though he’s not sure whether he’s surprised, or angry.

Scott looks just as confused as Derek feels, only shrugging when Derek catches his gaze in hopes of an answer.

“Yes?”

“You told me you’re twenty-six.”

Derek isn’t sure that he remembers that event clearly, but it must’ve been sometime around when they first met. “I was at the time.”

“When’s your birthday?” Stiles prompts, then, and considering the way Scott looks a little awkward, Derek’s sure he’s done something wrong.

“Christmas Day.”

Stiles looks like he wants to say something for a second, but then nods to himself, before he changes to subject to something else. Derek returns to doing the dishes after a moment, still confused. He’ll ask Stiles about it later.

However, Stiles manages to corner him the very moment Scott has left the apartment.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!”
“I don’t really celebrate my birthday,” Derek tries. Sometimes he even forgets he has one, until Laura reminds him.

Stiles rubs a hand over his face, and then sighs, as if irritation is running off him. “But maybe I want to,” he says softly.

“You didn’t really tell me when your birthday was either,” Derek points out carefully.

Stiles opens and closes his mouth for a moment, before he rolls his eyes. “Alright, fine. But I’m still a bit pissed.” Stiles scratches his cheek, and then adds: “Maybe mostly because I was hoping to do something half as awesome for you as what you did for my birthday.”

“This year,” Derek promises.

“It’s almost an entire year left,” Stiles points out. He has this hesitantly hopeful look on his face that makes Derek feel as though he’s missing something in this conversation.

“I know?”

Chewing his lip for a moment, Stiles reaches out to pull at the belt loops of Derek’s jeans. “And you still want me around by then, to make your birthday awesome, you think?”

So that’s what Stiles heard in his previous statement. To be perfectly honest, Derek hasn’t really thought about it like that, about a future. He’s just always assumed that it’s a long term thing, as though there’s no other option.

“Yes,” he says, leaning in to press his mouth against Stiles’. “Very much so.”

He can feel Stiles’ grin against his lips.
Chapter 5

The Beacon Hills Museum’s 75th Anniversary is the entire town’s place to be tonight, it seems. Derek feels as though he can’t breathe properly, as he walks with Stiles through the swarm of people. It isn’t crowded, per se. They have no trouble walking freely to look at the art, but there’s a tension in the air that makes him uncomfortable.

Stiles’ focus is elsewhere: talking to people, checking his messages on his phone, replying to them. Usually, Derek doesn’t mind, but right now a distraction would be appreciated.

“Do you want to go outside for a moment?” he asks, as he starts flinching when someone speaks loudly too close to him.

Stiles looks up from his phone, pulling the earphone out and nods. “Sure. The fireworks are soon starting anyway. I hear they’ll be incredible, and I wouldn’t want you to miss them.”

For a second, Derek thinks he’s going to faint with the way his chest seizes up in panic. It feels as though his vision whites out, if only for a second. He knows that he should say something, explain why this is a bad idea. But the words get stuck in his throat, and all he can do is walk outside with Stiles, as though his body follows the stream of people on its own accord.

It’s chilly outside and the sky is clear above them – perfect for fireworks. Stiles keeps talking next to him, but Derek can’t hear a word he says above the rushing sound of blood in his ears. He’s sure he’s sweating, even though it feels like he’s freezing. Breathing deeply only works for a moment, before the people around him keep pressing closer.

“It’s almost time,” someone says next to him. The words make their way through the humming in his head, sounding distant and robotic.

He closes his eyes, trying to ground himself using Stiles’ fingers on his arm. But as the first firework explodes across the sky, the only thing he can remember is Reyes and Boyd lying on the ground. As the next firework goes off, he’s sure that he’s back in the mountains. Caught. With gunfire ripping the air around him.

Stiles’ fingers slip from his arm as he tears through the crowd, and someone falls to the ground behind him. A voice calls his name, and he yanks himself free from someone who tries to stop him. He’s not sure where he is, as images of dead bodies, of people getting shot, of bullets tearing through his body flash across his cornea, blurring what’s real and what’s not.

He hides, just like he did back then. And blacks out.

When he wakes up again, feeling beaten and worn, he finds himself in a back alley behind a dumpster. It takes a moment before he remembers why he’s here, and not in his own bed, and almost has a panic attack as the memories flood over him.

He finds his phone in his pocket and is relieved over the fact that he hasn’t lost it and that it’s only been a couple of hours. There are a number of missed calls from Stiles, and a couple of texts, asking him where he is. There’s a few calls from Laura as well.

Just as he’s about to press Stiles’ name to call him back, she calls him again.

“Hello?” he says, answering the call. His throat feels sore, and his voice is hoarse, making him wonder if he’s been screaming.
“Derek? Where are you?” The panic in her voice is so clear to him, even through the slow fog in his brain.

Looking around, he heaves himself upright. “I’m not sure. In an alley.”

His legs feel a bit wobbly as he makes his way to the main street. He recognises the buildings around him, and realises with a rush of relief that he’s just around the corner from his shop. “I’m almost home,” he adds, still feeling as though his brain is somewhat disconnected.

“We’ve been so worried,” she says and it sounds like she’s about to cry. “Stiles called me, because he couldn’t get a hold of you, says you just knocked him over and ran away.”

Derek has to lean against the nearest building and close his eyes at that, feeling the panic rise again. His memory of what happened is a bit blurry, but he clearly remembers someone falling to the ground behind him. It must’ve been Stiles. Derek knocked him over. And ran away.

“I didn’t–” he begins, but he has no idea what to say.

“I know, Derek. We know. Maybe you should come here for a few days. Or me to you?”

The thought of simply lying in bed, waiting for her, is frightening. He’s worried about confronting Stiles. Derek knocked him over and left him behind. All he needs is to get out of here. Now.

“I’ll come to you.”

Derek isn’t exactly sure how he managed to pack his bag and catch a last minute flight to New York, but he’s here now. His mind still feels foggy and slow when he gets off, and like it’s been too tired to react to the overcrowded plane, or the screaming child next to him.

Laura is waiting for him, pulling him into a bone-crushing hug as soon as he’s close enough, but his arms feel too heavy to return it.

He doesn’t hear a word she says during the car ride to the apartment, and crashes on the bed a moment later. Thirteen hours later, he wakes up, with his brain somewhat back to normal speed, and realises what he’s done.

He never should’ve left.

“Are you awake?” Laura asks, as she cracks the door open. Sometimes Derek wonders if she’s got a sixth sense for this kind of thing.

“Unfortunately.”

She sits down next to him, gently patting his arm. There are dark circles under her eyes, and her hair is in a messy ponytail. It looks like she’s wearing her pajamas. Shame curls heavily in his stomach – she hasn’t been able to sleep.

“Are you okay?”

“No really,” he replies truthfully and tries not to think about the flashbacks. “I really thought I was past this, you know.”

“I called your therapist, and she told me that it’s normal to have setbacks. She also thinks you should go back into therapy.”
He probably should, considering yesterday. “I just left him there.”

“Derek,” she says softly and squeezes her hold of his hand when he tries to pull it away. “You had an attack. It’s not your fault.”

“I just left him there,” he repeats. He doesn’t quite remember how it happened.

“Derek.” Laura’s voice is firmer now. “He’ll understand.”

“He doesn’t know,” he whispers. And now it’s too late to tell.

“I don’t think you’re giving him enough credit.”

He turns the other way, staring into the wall until she leaves. It isn’t until two days later that he actually gets out of bed. Laura’s tried a number of times, but when the door glides open early on a Monday morning, and Josh’s nose appears in the crack, he crumbles.

“Derek?” Josh stage whispers. “Are you awake?”

“Yes.”

The door opens further, and Josh pads into the room with his giraffe under one arm, and a plush golden puppy under the other. He climbs onto the bed without asking and places the stuffed animals on either side of Derek’s face.

“Are you sick?”

“In a way,” Derek admits.

“What kind?”

“It’s in my head.” For a moment, Derek thinks about leaving it like that, but Josh cocks his head to the side and looks intently at him. “You know I was away, right? With the military.”

“In a war.” Josh nods.

“Yes, in a war. You see and experience horrible things when you are over there, and even when you get to go home, it kind of sticks in your brain. Sometimes you think you’re still in a war, even if you know you’re safe.”

For a moment, Josh seems to think about this, and then he nods. “Like when you came back. It was the war in your head, right?”

Closing his eyes, Derek swallows. He’d give anything to take that back, almost strangling his own nephew. “Yes, that was the war in my head. I’m better now, but I’m not well. Sometimes I still feel like I’m back there.”

“Did it happen again?”

“Not exactly.” He pauses until Josh takes the puppy and makes it nose at Derek’s face. “I ran away from Stiles.”

“Was he mean?”

“No, he wasn’t. We were at an event, and they had fireworks. Sometimes that reminds me of war, and I got scared and ran away.”
“Why didn’t he run after?”

“Because Stiles can’t see. He has a dog, almost like your dog—” Derek takes the puppy from Josh hands and places it on his own stomach. “–he’s called Steve. He helps Stiles when he’s walking somewhere.”

“Do you think I can pet his Steve-dog?” Josh asks, pulling a little at the puppy’s ears.

A few days ago, Derek would’ve said yes without hesitation. “I don’t know, kiddo. I think I hurt him when I ran away from him.”

“Well,” Josh says with a sigh. “You can say sorry.”

Derek wishes it was that easy.

A week passes without him turning his phone on. He thinks about calling Stiles, but it feels like too much time has passed now, and he has no idea how to explain. It feels like he’s lied, like he’s lured Stiles into something that wasn’t real, by not coming clean about his condition.

Going back to Ms. Morrell is somehow a blessing. She doesn’t scold him for his arrogance, or judge him for the way he left Stiles behind. She never judges.

It takes another week before he realises that not only has he left Stiles, and their relationship behind in Beacon Hills, but also his entire life. His shop, his routine, his everyday life.

Now, he has no idea how to get it back. Running away was the worst decision in his life. Except for not telling the truth from the start, that is.

“Derek, time is running out. If you want Stiles back, you need to do something now. Time isn’t standing still in Beacon Hills while you’re here, do you realise that?” Laura says, putting a coffee mug in front of him.

“It’s too late anyway.”

She rolls her eyes at that. “You have such faith in people, Derek. This is Stiles we’re talking about.”

“I lied to him.”

“Don’t you think he knows you well enough to know that you’re damaged from your time serving?”

“No. We’ve never talked about that.”

She sighs. “I still don’t think you have anything to worry about. Maybe you should talk about this first thing when you get back.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Yes, you are,” she says firmly, and Derek knows she’s right.

Another week later, there’s a print out from a newspaper and Laura’s phone lying unlocked on the kitchen island when he finally gets out of bed to have breakfast. He knows she’s made it on purpose, since her phone always locks itself after a certain amount of time.

He pulls the paper towards him, frowning as he reads the article she’s printed for him. It’s about Stiles. Derek doesn’t realise it at first, because it uses his given name, which is something Derek isn’t even going to try to pronounce without some guidance. It’s about his show, with a date and time in
LA, and how Stiles is going to become something big with his talent.

There’s a mixed feeling of pride and pain as he reads. Proud that Stiles has accomplished something that’s going to take him somewhere he wants to go, but it’s painful that Derek isn’t there to share the news in person.

At the bottom of the paper, Laura has scrawled: *I have a ticket for you, and you’re going.*

He glances at her phone then, frowning as he picks it up. At the top it says *gotheextrastiles* and beneath that three numbers for photos, followers and following, and a picture of Stiles’ face. There’s a short profile, saying: *Blind people can use Instagram, too.* Derek almost puts the phone away again, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Clearly, Laura’s trying to make him understand something. Perhaps it’s time that he does.

Most of the pictures are of random things; a blurry picture of a tree, half of Scott’s face, a selfie that Derek scrolls past quickly, because he can’t deal with it. But then there are some photos that he can’t look away from. A picture of the e-book reader Derek gave Stiles, with the caption: *Best birthday gift ever!* A slightly blurry picture of Derek’s back as he’s cooking (*This sexy beast is cooking yummy dinner for me right now*). There’s one of the books Derek gave him for Christmas, with a row of hearts underneath and nothing else.

He scrolls further and stops again when he sees a picture that must be from an old photograph. It’s of Scott and Stiles, but they’re kids, smiling wide to the camera with watermelons in their hands. Beneath it, Stiles has written: *#tbt*, but Derek doesn’t know what that means.

There’s another picture with that caption, where Stiles and Scott are slightly older. In their early teens, Derek suspects. He doesn’t know if it’s Stiles’ *studmuffin* t-shirt, or the buzz cut that triggers it, but suddenly he realises that he’s met Stiles before. Years ago.
And Stiles has told him that story. Derek remembers it so well now, with his memory triggered. It was the summer break just before college, when he was playing lacrosse with some friends on the school field to pass time. Two younger kids were sitting on the stands, ogling them, but Derek hadn’t cared much about them until he accidentally shot a ball straight in the face of one of them. Stiles. It had been Stiles. Stiles who had gotten a nosebleed, but had still been staring up at Derek like he had fallen out of the sky, and spluttering something that it wasn’t his favourite way to get hit on, but that he could make it work.

He remembers Stiles talking about it that day in the shop, saying that he’d been crushing on Derek at the time. Derek’s hands shake as he scrolls through the rest of the pictures. There are a few of him that he wasn’t aware of Stiles taking, but he doesn’t care.

He needs to let Stiles know that they’ve met before.

The show is in three weeks, and Derek knows he’s going. It’s a new motivator for him, every time he wakes up in the morning and every appointment with his therapist, it’s what’s driving him now. When he sees Stiles again, he needs to be in a better place, going somewhere.

“I think it’s time for you to find a new point of reference in life,” Ms. Morrell tells him one day. “It’s impossible to move forward if you’ve chained yourself to the past.”
Derek isn’t quite sure what he means, until he takes Josh to that old church, with the cornerstone in the wall around it.

“What was it, again?” Josh asks, carefully tapping the stone.

“It’s the first stone they set, and every other is in reference to it.” Perhaps that’s also what Ms. Morrell meant, that he needs a new one, because his own current cornerstone is crooked, stuck in his past, and therefore everything else in his life will be, too.

“Hm,” Josh says and reaches up to grasp his hand. “I think I want chicken nuggets now.”

Derek doesn’t exactly believe in fate, but sometimes there are things that make him wonder. Like now, when Josh insists on them taking a detour, conveniently having them walk past a body art parlor. He doesn’t care much at first, considering there’s no need for him to get a new tattoo, and he’s not interested in piercings, until he sees the words **Braille Tattoo** on a paper taped to the inside of the window.

“What are we doing?” Josh sighs, when Derek halts him to read what it says.

“I just need to look at something.”

*We use surgical beads* the paper explains, and Derek doesn’t exactly know what that means, but it sounds promising. The picture shows raised, inked dots, just like braille, but on skin instead of paper. He’s not sure that he’ll ever be able to get Stiles back, but moving to Beacon Hills and meeting him is perhaps the new point of reference he needs in his life. Because that’s when he started living one, again.

Getting the tattoo is slightly more painful than getting a regular one. Apart from inking the dots onto his skin, he also needs surgical beads inserted, so that the tattoo actually is possible to read for someone who can’t see. It’s right above his ugliest scar, because he’s not going back to that now.

Laura tells him that he’s an idiot, despite the fact that her eyes get watery, and Mike just looks at it in fascination.

“I’m going back to Beacon Hills,” Derek tells Ms. Morrell on his last session before his leave. “Can you recommend me someone else in the area?”

She looks at him, and smiles for the first time since Derek first started seeing her. “Well, my brother happens to be an excellent therapist.”

Before he leaves, she wishes him good luck, and he’s confident that he’ll need it.

The plan is to go straight to the show after his flight lands, which is a bit dicey, since there’s a risk that the flight gets delayed. However, he’s sure that he’ll back out if he gives himself more time to think about what he’s going to do. Seeing Stiles again isn’t exactly the easiest thing he’s done lately. He might not ever want to meet Derek again, and that’s a risk that he’ll have to take.

He does his breathing exercises throughout the flight, and dumps his bags in his hotel room, before he catches a cab. So far, everything’s on schedule.

Laura put him in a blazer and a button-up, and Derek is happy that she did now, when he sees the line of people outside the building. At least his clothes fit in. Stepping out of the car, the anxiety finally manages to catch up to him. It makes his skin itch and crawl as he goes to stand in line, making sure that the ticket is in his pocket.
Thankfully, he doesn’t recognise anyone. He’s sure that he sees Scott somewhere at the front, but it’s only for a second.

< Not sure I can do this he sends to Laura, hoping to distract himself from everything else.

> You can and you will.

< What if he tells me to go fuck myself?

> At least you’ll know

It’s not the confidence-inspiring speech he’d been hoping for, but she’s right. Not finding out will be worse, because then he’ll always wonder.

The line moves slowly, and grows longer behind him as time passes. He looks around nervously as he hands his ticket to the girl at the door, but there’s no sign of Stiles, or anyone that Derek recognises.

“Thank you for your generous donation, sir. We’ll be sure to mention it to the creators.”

Blinking, Derek has no idea what she’s talking about, but then again, Laura probably donated in his name. Not that he minds, it’s for a good cause.

“Creators?” he asks, but he’s got a feeling of whom she’s talking about.

“Stiles Stilinski, and Bounce, the dance group,” she explains, smiling.

He’s sure that his smile in return mostly looks like a pained grimace, but she doesn’t seem to notice. He isn’t sure if Stiles finding out about him making a donation is a positive thing. Perhaps it’ll seem like he’s trying to buy himself back.

Laura got him a seat at a balcony, for which he’s grateful. There’s more space between the seats there, making him feel less suffocated than he would have if he’d been sitting in the endless rows of the crowd beneath him. His hands feel sweaty and shaky as he leafs through the program, and his heart does a double take when he sees Stiles’ name. He hopes he’ll be able to ask how to pronounce it one day.

Most people seem to be here for the dance group, but as the lights dim and the crowd quietens, there’s one long note from a string instrument and the next thing Derek knows, he’s forgotten about everything else.

Stiles’ music is a mix of pumping beats and traditional orchestra, put together in such a way that it seems to fill every cell. Derek’s got goosebumps all over his body, sometimes forgetting to even watch the talented group dancing on stage, because it’s like the music is under his skin. And he doesn’t want it to end.

For every new song, the pride in his chest swells further, and by the end it almost hurts. The good kind of hurt. When the music dies out, he’s in this odd state of both feeling empty and euphoric at once, and his mind feels oddly clear. He stands up with everyone else, clapping, and his throat contracts as they call out Stiles’ name.

Derek hasn’t seen him in so long, but it seems like it was yesterday. Stiles is wearing a button-up and a bow-tie, snug jeans and converse, but no glasses, and Scott walks with him on stage. It burns behind his eyes, and he claps harder, palms aching, as he tries to focus on something else.
His plan is to go back to Beacon Hills and seek out Stiles tomorrow, or the day after that, depending on when he gets back. He hasn’t counted on Scott spotting him in the crowd in the entry hall, calling out his name. There’s no way for Derek to pretend that he hasn’t heard.

“Hey, man,” Scott says, looking a little awkward as he manages to make his way through the sea of people around them.

“Hi.” Derek is expecting a punch in the face, but Scott only gives him a sad smile. Somehow, that makes him feel worse.

“How are you?”

From pure habit, he almost says good, but something tells him that Scott already knows that’s not the case. “Better,” he says instead.

Scott nods at that. “I’m glad you came. Are you – are you here to meet him?”

Derek’s stomach sinks. He was supposed to go back to his hotel, think about what to say when he finally meets Stiles, because he’s been staying away from thinking about that on purpose, only dealing with one stressful thing at once. However, it’s not like he can say no now.

“Is that a good idea?” he asks instead.

Scott bites his lip, and Derek wonders what he’s doing here at all. It feels like he’s intruding. “Yes. I mean, it would’ve been a better idea like four weeks ago, but–yeah, you should.”

Taking a deep breath, Derek nods. “Okay, yeah. I was going to wait until tomorrow, but I guess I’d better do it now.”

“Yeah, he’s going to Hawaii tomorrow. On vacation. To get away from things.”

To get away from us, is what Derek thinks it means. From him and Stiles.

“Lead the way,” he says, and for every step he takes through the crowd, following close behind Scott, his heartbeat picks up another notch.

Scott takes him to a back room, big enough to room a few people, but small enough to make Derek feel trapped. Stiles is there, sitting in a chair with Steve at his feet. He’s not in his harness and yips when he notices Derek. A look of disbelief flutters across Stiles’ features, and then it’s as though his face shuts off right in front of Derek’s eyes.

“So, I found Derek in the crowd, and uh, I figured you guys need to talk. I’ll be outside.” Scott bangs the door closed after exiting and Derek feels panic rise in his chest for every second that ticks by without being able to come up with anything to say.

“Hi,” he manages at last.

Stiles looks away without answering, and Derek can see his fingers closing around Steve’s collar, knuckles turning white.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes, watching Stiles close his eyes, and it feels so inadequate. “I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t know what else to say.

They’re quiet for a long while, and Derek just waits. Waits, and waits, and waits, hoping that Stiles will say something. Anything.
And then, finally: “Why?”

Derek wishes he could sit down, but there’s no other chair. “I’m ill. I suffer from PTSD. It means Post-Traumatic Stress—”

“I know,” Stiles interrupts. “I know what it means. I know that you suffer from it. I’ve known for ages.”

The only thing that comes out when Derek opens his mouth, is a little sound at the back of his throat. He doesn’t know how to react. “Oh,” he manages at last.

“Just why? It’s been over a month. Do you honestly think you can just come back and things will be okay again?”

“No.” Because he doesn’t. Of course he doesn’t. “I needed some time. To get things sorted.”

“And your phone and every other way of communication didn’t work, so that you couldn’t let me know just that?” Stiles snaps.

“I—” Derek begins, but Stiles cuts him off again.

“You know, I thought this would go fairly easy. That I would be okay, because Laura’s been keeping me updated about your well-being since you fucking ran away from me. I thought I’d be able to be cool, you know, say that everything’s fine, that I understand that it’s not really your fault. But you know what? It’s not that easy. For some reason, you’ve been thinking that I’m not capable of figuring out that you have PTSD after what happened when we tried to watch The Hunger Games, or the nightmares you have almost every night. Or the fact that you have scars that I don’t think anyone can have without suffering from something, because of how they must’ve gotten there. Just why didn’t you think that you could tell me? I told you everything.”

It’s Derek’s time to close his eyes now, shutting everything out for a moment. He’s never realised that he’s had nightmares around Stiles. “I don’t know,” he whispers. “I was ashamed. It felt like I lied to you.”

Stiles makes an exasperated sound, and when Derek opens his eyes again, it looks like he’s about to cry.

“You know when Brian moved everything in my kitchen?” Stiles asks suddenly, and he sounds calmer now.

“Yes.”

“You did the same thing. Not with my stuff, but you messed up my head. Instead of not being able to find my stuff, it was like I couldn’t find myself. You were basically everything for so long, and then you just ran away.”

Derek screws his eyes shut again, trying to calm his breathing. It feels like a slap in the face, well-deserved, but it still hurts. “I’m so sorry,” he breathes. “I never meant to do that.”

“I know.” Stiles nods. “I thought it’d be easy to forgive you. To move on from this and just pretend like it didn’t happen. I knew you’d be here today, you know. Laura told me. But it’s like...I can’t right now. I need some time to sort this out, too. To think things over. I’ll be in Hawaii for three weeks, and maybe after that. Please don’t contact me while I’m away. If I want to talk to you, I’ll let you know.”
Swallowing heavily, Derek does his best not to break apart. “I understand.”

Stiles nods again. “Good.”

Derek’s about to leave, when he remembers something else. “I just have to tell you something that I realised while I was away.” He watches Stiles’ fingers stroke Steve’s ears, listens as Stiles takes a deep breath, and then he gets a little nod in reply.

“I didn’t remember until recently. But we’ve met before. I mean, before I moved back here.” He clears his throat, trying to figure out how to put this. “I’m the one who threw a ball in your face,” he says finally.

To his surprise, Stiles actually smiles a little. “I know, Derek. I’ve known since the first time you told me your name.”

“You have?” Derek asks him in surprise.

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because neither of us is the same person that we were. I figured that there was no need to tell you, since you didn’t remember yourself when I told you the story.” Stiles pauses for a moment. “Yeah, I had a crush on you when I was a kid, but it’s like when you’re crushing on a celebrity, you know? It’s just an idea of someone you like, and the way they look. I thought it’d be awkward if I told you. Especially since I found that you’re so much better than anything I imagined, you know?”

“You mean was,” Derek corrects.

“No, I don’t,” Stiles sighs. “You still are.” Then he stands, holding tightly to Steve’s leash. “Thanks for your donation, by the way. Maybe I’ll see you when I get back.”

Derek opens the door for him when he passes. “I hope so,” he says before Scott offers his arm to Stiles, and watches them walk away.

◊

They are three horrible weeks.

Laura has taken to calling him every day lately, and he’s grown restless, constantly anxious. He goes back to his old routine, and it works surprisingly well, somehow keeping him balanced, even though it feels like he’s about to capsize at any moment. Dr Deaton turns out to be a great therapist, working in a very similar way to his sister, which makes the transition easier for Derek.

The first week, he checks his phone constantly, but after seven days without a word from Stiles, it stays in his pocket. When he changes his sheets, he finds a forgotten sock that belongs to Stiles, and has to sit down for thirty minutes, throat burning. He flips open the card Stiles wrote for him on Veteran’s Day every time he walks by the fridge, tapping a finger over the uneven line of: You are awesome! -S.

It’s warm outside when the three week mark passes, with no sign of Stiles. For some reason, Derek expected to have him standing at his doorstep a week ago. Impatient, as always. When another two days pass, he gives up.

He’s just about to close up that Thursday evening, when the door opens and Stiles steps inside.
Except for his tan, he’s everything Derek remembers, down to his Captain America t-shirt.

“Hello?” Stiles asks carefully, and for a second Derek thinks his chest is going to collapse, just from hearing his voice.

“Hi,” he manages at last.

An odd series of expressions flitter across Stiles’ face: relief, nervousness, worry that and ends somewhere around determination. Derek only feels empty somehow, already given up.

“I didn’t know if I’d be able to make it,” Stiles begins cautiously, and folds his cane.

“Okay.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Stiles says softly and takes a couple of steps forward.

“I understand.” Something makes Derek want to back away, to keep the distance between them, but he stays put.

“Can we go upstairs?”

“I’d rather not,” Derek replies lowly, because he doesn’t want to be trapped up there with nowhere to go. For a second, Stiles looks surprised, but then the corners around his eyes soften, as though he’s understood something.

“Derek, I’m not here to tell you that I don’t want to see you again.”

It takes a second, before he understands what the words actually mean. “What?” he asks, anyway, making sure that he’s not misunderstanding anything.

“I’ll let you close up, and then we’ll go upstairs and talk, okay?”

“Okay,” Derek finds himself saying, and there’s this odd buzzing under his skin, as he walks past Stiles, for some reason feeling as though he doesn’t quite have the right to look at him properly. He takes more time to close up than usual, fingers trembling, and he loses his grip of the string to the blinds several times before he’s able to pull it down over the window.

His gaze falls on the cane in Stiles’ hand, only now realising that he’ll have to lead Stiles upstairs. It feels strangely difficult, having Stiles touch him again, but he doesn’t have much of a choice.

“Okay,” he says and stops by Stiles’ side. He watches, out of the corner of his eye, how Stiles raises his hand and then stops just before his fingertips make contact with Derek’s arm.

“Is this okay? I can walk on my own, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay,” Derek lies, and when Stiles’ fingers close around his arm, it feels like a punch to the gut. He sucks in a breath through his nose, trying to compose himself, hoping that Stiles can’t feel how badly he’s suddenly shaking, all over.

“You’re such a bad liar,” Stiles sighs and his thumb rubs circles against Derek’s muscle. “Come on, let’s get you to that couch.”

One flight of stairs feels like a marathon run and when he finally gets to sink down on the couch, his body feels achy and vulnerable. Stiles sits down on the coffee table, just a foot away from him. He looks older, somehow.
“So, I’ve been in Hawaii for three weeks,” Stiles says and his fingertips drum against his knees. “And–” he trails off, biting his lip before he continues. “And I sort of realised that even though I was very mad at you, I can’t really let you go, you know?”

Derek isn’t sure he understands, so he stays quiet.

“I...I wish you would’ve told me, I do. But it has to be your choice, you know? To share. You shouldn’t have to, just because I want to know. Remember that time I was upset about a man in the coffeeshop? The guy who saw me as his good deed for the day, and I asked you if you weren’t going to ask me what being blind feels like. You just said: *Do you want to tell me?* When I told you *No*, you made such a simple deal out of it and said: *Then I won’t ask.* What I’m trying to say is that I’ll be here when you feel like you can tell me, but there’s no rush, okay?” Stiles clears his throat, intertwines his fingers, only to reach up and scratch his cheek the next second. “I realise that just because I share things with you, you’re not indebted to me, when it comes to sharing your own. That’s not how it works, and I know that. I just started thinking that maybe I was doing something wrong, because you didn’t let me know. Like you went out there with me, to the fireworks, instead of telling me that you couldn’t. I know, I can’t expect you to, but I wish you would. I mean, I wish you’ll learn to trust me enough some day, and until then I’ll be right here.”

Derek doesn’t realise that he’s crying, for the first time since he came back from the war, until he tastes the wet salt on his lips when he licks them.

“I’m sorry,” he manages at last, and watches Stiles’ hands twitch in his lap.

“I know, it’s okay,” Stiles says softly. “We’re okay.” And when Stiles’ fingertips make contact with his knee, when his hand squeezes just above it, it feels like Derek can breathe again.

Stiles slides down on the couch next to him, tentatively rubbing his arm. “I’m going to hold you for a little bit, is that okay?”

“Yeah,” Derek croaks, his throat feeling tight and his eyes burning. It’s like he can’t stop crying now, once he’s started. Stiles gets on his knees next to him, locks both arms around him and squeezes enough to make him feel grounded.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” Stiles whispers against his hair. “I was ready to go back after a week, but my dad convinced me to stay, said I needed to come to terms with my decision, and not rush it. And then, when I got back, I got nervous. Worried that maybe you’d moved away again. But you hadn’t, and now I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Stiles’ fingers dig into his back, as Derek presses closer. He doesn’t care that his nose is running, that he’s still crying, because Stiles just scrapes his fingernails over Derek’s scalp and pulls fingers through his hair.

“I’m back in therapy,” he confesses after a long while, not knowing what else to say.

“Good,” Stiles says, tugging gently at his ear. “I think that’s good.”

“I want to get better.”

“You are, and you will,” Stiles promises. “But you have to remember that there’s nothing wrong with you. It’s about what happened to you, and there’s no shame in that.”

There’s no good way to reply to that. Instead, Derek takes a deep breath, trying to remember what Dr Deaton told him during his last session: *it has to be your decision.* He wants to share, he wants Stiles to know, but he hasn’t spoken about this with anyone that he cares about before, and he’s
scared. It takes almost an hour of silence to find his courage. An hour of which Stiles seems to be completely okay with just holding him, mumbling nonsense into his hair that Derek can’t quite catch.

“\text{“I want to tell you,” he says at last, straightening but grabbing a hold of Stiles’ hand.}"

“\text{“You don’t have to. There’s no rush. I want to be with you whether you tell me in a year or twenty.”}"

“\text{“But I want to,” Derek repeats firmly. “I’ve been wanting to for a while. I think it’s time. I trust you.”}"

Stiles nods then, squeezing his hold of Derek’s hand. “\text{“Okay, take your time.”}"

It surprises him how hard it is to find words for something that has been controlling his mind for years now. To his surprise, Stiles stays quiet and still, except for his thumb rubbing over Derek’s.

“\text{“I enlisted after my family died, because my mom was a Marine before she had Laura. She retired when she got pregnant, but it felt like the best way to honour her memory. I was proud to be a Marine, to protect our country.”} He trails off, wondering why it’s so difficult to talk about even though he’s lived with it for so long. “\text{“I was a sergeant, and a team leader, responsible for two Marines, Reyes and Boyd. They became my family, because that’s what happens when you have to trust others with your life.”}"

Glancing over at Stiles, who’s still quiet and listening, he decides to continue.

“\text{“The terrain in Afghanistan is traitorous,” he explains. “The mountains are a death trap. We were in a situation where we had to choose if we were going to wait for back up, or continue. I opted that we continue, because I didn’t want us to be in the same spot for too long.”} He decides to skip the unnecessary discussions and arguments. Several other sergeants had disagreed with him, but some had taken his side. In the end, the lieutenant had to make a decision. “\text{“Our lieutenant had to make the call, and she decided that we needed to keep going, partially based on my advice.”} Suddenly, it’s like he can smell it in the air. Sweat, dust, and dirt. Stiles squeezes his fingers slightly, pulling him back. His hands are shaking now, but Stiles keeps his hold, strokes his fingers gently. “\text{“We were ambushed,” he manages finally. “I–I don’t remember exactly what happened, but we were basically trapped. I had my men to keep safe. They were my responsibility, and I told them I’d get them out of there.”} He takes a deep breath, tries to keep his voice steady. “\text{“But I couldn’t.”}"

Stiles’ hold gets tighter, perhaps unconsciously, but Derek can’t look at him right now.

“\text{“My lieutenant and I were the only ones to survive. She’s in a wheelchair, and I’m=”} he shrugs. “\text{“And I’m–”} he says again, but nothing comes out.

“\text{“You’re here, and you’re alive, and that’s what matters,” Stiles whispers softly. “And now I understand why you never tell me what you want.”}"

Derek blinks, because he hasn’t even realised that.

“\text{“It’s okay, though,” Stiles says. “You’re lucky I can read minds.”}"

Snorting, Derek looks at him. A part of him is surprised that Stiles is still here, a much bigger part asks him why he ever thought any different. Of course Stiles is still here.

“\text{“Thank you.” Stiles smiles softly. “For sharing that with me.”}"

“\text{“Thanks for listening.”}"

“\text{“Always,” Stiles promises and moves in closer, pressing a kiss to his temple.}”
Derek doesn’t know when he fell asleep, but when he wakes up again, he’s lying on top of Stiles on the couch, head resting on his chest. Stiles is asleep, breathing soundly beneath him, and for a moment Derek thinks he’s dreaming. It takes a second to remember Stiles walking into the shop, saying that he wasn’t leaving.

Derek’s left arm is asleep, and he sits up to increase the blood flow. Stiles stirs beneath him when he moves, and his shirt as ridden up his stomach, revealing a broad strip of tan skin.

“Stiles,” he says carefully, nudging his leg, but he only gets a grunt in reply. “I think the bed’s more comfortable.”

“As long as I don’t have to leave,” Stiles grumbles and Derek freezes for a moment.

“You never have to leave,” he says, watching Stiles’ eyes blink open and a slow smile spreading across his lips.

“Come on.” Stiles holds out his hand. “Get me to the bed, big guy.”

Derek snorts as he gets off the couch to pull Stiles onto his feet. They help each other undress, and it gets a little complicated when Stiles tries to undo his pants as Derek wants to pull Stiles’ shirt off, but they work it out. Derek folds their clothes, putting them in a pile on top of the drawer.

When he turns around, seeing Stiles in his bed, his sleep-mussed hair against his pillows, his slim fingers playing with yet another loose thread he’s found, his chest hurts for a completely different reason than it has lately.

Stiles reaches out for him as soon as he gets under the sheets, moving in close, like everything is back on track again, like things never de-railed.

“Hey,” Stiles says quietly, touching his chest. “We’re okay, right? I mean, we have some things to sort out, but we’re okay?”

Derek catches his hand, squeezing his fingers. “Yes, we’re okay.” Then he leans in close, pressing a kiss to Stiles’ lips. “Thank you for coming back.”

“I’ve been in love with you since that time you spent an entire night putting my kitchen back in order. I was never planning on going anywhere,” Stiles whispers against his mouth, and then kisses him. “I’ve missed you.”

Derek presses in closer, chest swelling with Stiles’ words. “Missed you, too,” he says at first, but then he adds: “I think I’ve been in love with you since the first time I saw you standing in my shop, calling me a dumbass—” Stiles snorts at that, and Derek decides to make the leap. “—But it took a picture at New Year’s for me to get that. And then another few weeks away from you to realise that I think I love you, as well.”

Pulling away slightly, Stiles’ hand slips down Derek’s side. “Promise me to let me know, if you ever need to get away to sort things out again.”

“I promise.”

“And I love you, too,” Stiles says slowly, like he just now remembers that he has never told Derek that before, and then a big grin spreads across his face. “I kinda wish I could go back to my old self with a nose bleed at the lacrosse stands and tell him that life will suck for a few years, and then things will get better, and then you’ll land that. And then I’d point at you, and think that it’s weird that you wouldn’t be able to give me beard burn, because you wouldn’t have a beard back then. And then I’d
tell my past self that no matter what I imagine you being like, the real you, several years into the  
future, is so much better.”

Derek doesn’t know what to say to that, so instead, he kisses Stiles who makes a small sound of  
surprise, before he responds. For a moment, it’s just that: kissing, but Derek feels himself grow a little  
frantic, needing something more. It takes another few seconds, before he realises what it is that he  
wants.

Breaking the kiss briefly, he tries to read Stiles’ expression. “Can I ride you?” he asks bluntly, and  
Stiles looks almost as surprised as Derek feels. But he needs it. If Stiles is willing.

“Are you sure? You have nothing you have to make up for,” Stiles says carefully.

“If you want to, I’m sure.” Derek nods, heart beating rapidly in his chest. He watches as Stiles sucks  
in a breaths, and then nods.

“Yes, shit, I didn’t think–” He shakes his head, to something Derek doesn’t understand. “–yes,  
yeah, I really want that.”

Derek kisses him again, crowding him against the mattress, and Stiles hands are everywhere, just as  
frantic and impatient as Derek feels. They don’t waste much time on foreplay, besides grinding  
together, mouths never quite leaving each other.

It feels like he’s shaking, when he reaches over to the bedside table to grab the lube, and Stiles  
pushes the sheets back, sitting up to lean against the headboard. Derek just looks at him for a  
moment, at the flush spreading across Stiles’ skin and how his eyes flutter shut when he reaches  
down to stroke himself.

Stiles’ lips are on his again, as soon as Derek straddles him. “There you are,” Stiles murmurs, his  
hands covering every inch of Derek’s skin; groping, soothing, caressing.

They make a quick work out of preparation. At first Derek uses his own fingers, but Stiles replaces  
them with his own after just a moment, and Derek has to grab onto his shoulders to keep steady,  
because fuck. He groans, dropping his head to Stiles’ shoulder, pressing back against the long, slim  
fingers that are working him open.

He gets desperate fast, reaching down between them to stroke lube down Stiles’ cock. And when  
Stiles pulls his fingers out, making him feel oddly empty, in favour of rubbing his thigh and  
steadying Derek with a firm grip around his hips, Derek sinks down over him. His thighs tremble,  
and it burns, probably more than necessary, but it’s exactly what he wants right now. What he needs.

Stiles groans beneath him, fingers spasming against his thigh, as Derek takes all of him. A strange  
sob pushes out of him, as he circles his hips experimentally, and Stiles’ nails dig into his skin.

“Oh god,” Stiles breathes, and reaches up to grab the hair at the nape of Derek’s neck, pulling him  
close in a kiss. “You feel so good.”

It’s quick and unrefined, more need than finesse, but Derek doesn’t care. He rises and pushes himself  
down again, feeling the slow, sweet drag over his prostate. His legs ache, and there’s that wet sound  
of too much lube and skin slapping against skin, but he doesn’t care. Stiles doesn’t either.

Instead, Stiles reaches down between them, strokes down the length of Derek’s cock a few times,  
before rubbing his thumb over the head until Derek’s back snaps up painfully, as he comes, legs  
clamping beneath him. He doesn’t even notice Stiles coming, until they both slump down against the  
pillows.
“Holy shit,” Stiles breathes, rubbing his hand up and down Derek’s back. “That was amazing.”

Derek can’t manage anything but nodding, brushing their lips together briefly, before slowly letting Stiles slide out of him.

“I think we ruined the sheets,” Stiles says suddenly, closing his eyes as though he’s about to doze off. His hand slides to Derek’s front, gently stroking his chest and ribs.

Wincing, Derek figures that he’s most likely right. There’s probably come, sweat and lube everywhere. “I don’t care.”

Stiles’ hand pauses, suddenly, and it takes Derek a moment to realise that it’s stopped over his new tattoo. Frowning, Stiles runs his finger over the raised dots several times, and Derek holds his breath.

He can see Stiles mouth the letters: C-O-R-N-E-R-S-T-O-N-E. Then he does it again.

“I wanted to do something. That you could see, too,” Derek says carefully, remembering that time Stiles asked about his tattoos.

Stiles’ fingertips tickle his skin as he reads the word again. “But what does it mean?”

“It’s the foundation stone, the first one you set, every other stone will be in reference to it so you have to get it right,” he begins, partially repeating what he told Josh ages ago. “My therapist told me that I need to stop living in the past. I figured I needed a new start, like a new reference.”

“A new reference for what?” Stiles asks curiously.

Derek looks at him for a moment, at the mess of his hair, how he still looks a little out of it, and it feels like Derek’s chest is going to crack open. When he speaks, he does his best to keep his voice steady:

“For building a better future.”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Derek looks down at the flowers in his hands, and tries to navigate through the cemetery. They’re lying on a small hill, surrounded by a low hedge and there are already flowers on their graves. Laura was here yesterday.

It feels odd, seeing their grave stones. He always knew they were here, but at the same time it’s as though he hasn’t understood until now. He traces Cora’s name gently, and puts her flowers down, next to the pink ones that are already waiting. His parents share a stone, together even in death.

“Sorry for taking so long,” he says, as he sets their flowers down, too. “I needed to figure some stuff out, first. I know you’ve been worried, but there’s no need anymore. I’m okay now, and I’ve found someone who’s okay with me, too.” Talking to them feels so much easier than he thought, and it’s almost like he can’t stop. “You would’ve liked him. He’s moving in around Christmas, because it seems unnecessary for him to have his own apartment when he’s at my place all the time when he’s home from college anyway.” He pauses, straightening the vase. “I’m in college, too. Only online courses, but I want to finish my degree. I’m doing pretty well, and I think you’d be proud of me.”

After a second he adds: “I’m proud of me.”

He crouches down, removes a few dying branches from the flowers that have been there for a while. “I miss you, but things are good now. We have everyone waiting for us at Stiles’ father’s, but I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

He finds Stiles standing by the car, Steve at his feet. He’s been visiting his mother’s grave.

“Ready to go?” Derek asks when he’s within earshot.

“Yeah,” Stiles asks, leaning in to give him a quick kiss. “There’s a Thanksgiving dinner waiting for us.”

A dinner with Stiles’ family, including not only Scott and his mother, but Laura, Mike and Josh as well.

“I have a feeling Josh is tearing your dad’s place apart.”

Stiles snorts. “My dad loves Josh. I don’t think he’d care if he tore the house down.”

Smiling, Derek leans in for a kiss.

“Everything okay?” Stiles asks gently.

Taking a breath, Derek pauses to check. “Yes, everything’s good.”
the end

Graphic by Maichan

Chapter End Notes

I'm on tumblr, come say hi! :D

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