if it's torture.

by orphan_account

Summary

“I’m – I’m working on my next book.”

That, out of everything, anything on the face of the god damn planet, is not what Stiles had expected Derek to say. After everything that’s happened, after Spark and the mess that it was, and after Derek firing then rehiring Lydia, and after Derek pointedly avoiding his office study for months upon months, and after Stiles not hearing a word about any new projects, never seeing Derek writing anything down… Stiles would have thought that aliens invading was a more viable possibility than Derek writing a new book.

He’s made his money, more than anyone else needs in a lifetime, and Stiles thought that meant that he would be done. Maybe Stiles forgot that money isn’t why Derek does what he does, after all, and that’s not fair to him. “Oh,” Stiles says, because he honestly can’t think of anything, not a single thing else, to say.

I had to write an ending. What I write is the only thing I have any control over – in my mind, I rewrite my own history again and again, hoping if I can put it into words enough times, I might be able to make it a reality.

I had to write an ending. I had to. And I’m sorry, for that. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 1).

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“People think that he’s not like the rest of us – like, how could I have ever wanted to leave him or break up with him?” Stiles looks past the camera and swallows. “He’s Derek Hale, didn’t I know how lucky I was? Didn’t I know what I had, that I would never find someone like him, that I was throwing away…everything? Like he’s a god.”

There’s a beat of dead air, the interviewer looking at him with one finger pressed over her lips.
while she listens, eyes narrowed like she’s trying to understand what he’s saying. She isn’t, Stiles doesn’t think anyone is, but he had expected nothing less.

“They forget, I lived with him. I know what he looks like in the morning and what he does when he thinks no one is looking,” he quirks a single eyebrow and then smiles, barely enough for the camera to catch it even if it were to zoom in closer on his face. “To them he’s untouchable. To me, he was anything but.”

More silence, and then she opens her mouth like she’s got a follow up question, but then her mouth just hangs open, silent. She shifts her eyes to someone behind the camera, as if looking for help or assistance, and then Stiles sits up straight and huffs a sigh.

“He’s not the sun and the moon. He’s a person, like any other – just a person with a lot of money.”

She taps her lips once, twice. “So – you’re saying you and Derek aren’t together anymore.”

He snorts, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “I’m saying he’s not too good to answer for his own misgivings. He’s – human.”

She hums. “He’s not that, either.”

Stiles stares at her, and then he nods his head. Of course, no, Derek isn’t human. Funny how with most other werewolves they have to spend their entire lives proving to the rest of the fucking world that they’re as good as everyone else, that they can do what everyone else does, that they deserve to be treated the same as humans – while Stiles has to sit here and prove that Derek isn’t better than the rest of them. Isn’t he a god, they wonder. Isn’t Stiles a joke. Isn’t the entire life that the two of them have together built on nothing but money, and sales, and interviews, and pictures?

“He pulled the last book he was meant to put out, and people have speculated –‘ all they ever do is speculate, and something tells Stiles they wouldn’t be able to come up with the truth even if they spent ten years poring over all the details available to the general public, “…that it’s because you pulled it before it got put out.” She crosses her legs, one over the other, and fixes him with a look that suggests this is exactly what she thinks, herself. “You didn’t like the way Beacons made you look –“

“And how did Beacons make me look?” He asks, and from the corner of his eyes, he sees someone from the crew shifting uncomfortably. Likely because this entire interview, which he never wanted to do in the first god damn place, is going to hell in a handbasket.

She does that lip tapping thing again, and Stiles sets his jaw. “You tell me.”

Stiles has spent nearly a year now ruminating over the way that Beacons had made him look. He had no choice. People’s eyes lingered on him longer as he passed them on the street, as though they were searching for something inside of him or on his face that was anything like the way Derek had written it. As far as Stiles knows, most people came up empty handed – there was no one who could find the boy from Beacons, not anywhere else but in the pages of that book.

Derek is the only one who ever knew what he meant by how he wrote about Stiles. Derek is the one who sees Stiles the way he’s written. Everyone else sees a person, a face, and Derek sees – a dream figure.

And so Beacons made him look like a person who didn’t live up to his hype, and people started wondering if maybe Derek needed to get his glasses prescription updated, or something. That wasn’t Derek’s fault, not necessarily.
When Stiles doesn’t answer and the dead air goes on for longer than anyone in television is comfortable with, she runs a finger across her brow in frustration and sits up a bit straighter. “You never answered my question earlier,” she prods, and Stiles looks past her head and glares. He knows the question she’s referring to. It’s only been the question on everyone’s lips since the day Derek broke contract – and that was five months ago.

“Which question?”

Her mouth twitches. She hates him. She cannot fucking stand him. She doesn’t know him, not at all. She’s just like the rest of them. The only difference is, she’s the one who managed to bag him for an interview – through no work of her own. Lydia shoved him into the outfit and the studio and the room and the chair, right in front of the camera, squeezed his cheeks to get him to smile, is standing fifteen feet away from him with her arms crossed over her chest as she watches all her hard work get poured into what is sure to be the most awkward and uncomfortable ten minutes of television in recorded history.

“Are you and Derek still together?”

Stiles lifts his upper-arm and turns his hand backside forward in her direction, so that the golden engagement band catches the lights of the studio, glitters in the camera and everyone’s eyes. He wiggles his fingers just a little, mockingly, and her eyes go comically wide, like she can’t believe what she’s seeing. Clicks of cameras going off, a sharp intake of breath, and Lydia smirking so hard Stiles can hear it.

The interviewer leans forward as though she wants to get a better look at it so she can confirm it’s real, that it didn’t come out of a Cracker Barrel box or a vending machine somewhere. Her hand reaches out as though to grab Stiles’ wrist, her mouth opening to ask another question, and Stiles raises an eyebrow.

“Done,” Lydia’s voice cuts through, and then her body is blocking Stiles’ face in the monitor he can see from where he’s sitting. She’s waltzed directly onto the set, much to the shock and chagrin of the crew that’s burst into motion and sound since the moment Stiles raised his hand, but she ignores everything and everyone, setting her eyes on Stiles alone. “We’re done, he’s done.”

“But I’m –“

“You got your five minutes,” Lydia snaps, and the other woman leans back into her seat with her mouth hanging open – there’s genuine fear there, and Stiles doesn’t blame her. “Stiles, up, we’re going.”

Stiles stands and pulls down on the hem of his shirt, casting his eyes over the room with barely restrained disdain. If he had his way, he never would have set foot in this place. If there’s one thing he’s learned since becoming Derek’s whatever, it’s that any interview held anywhere, be it harassment on the street or in a nice studio like this one with one of the most popular television personalities in the country, is a hell akin to nothing else on planet earth.

Stiles always thought Derek had been being dramatic when he’d complain about press tours. Now, he knows that it’s pretty much the one thing Derek has never over exaggerated about. And it’s worse when you’re Stiles Stilinski – it’s worse when you’re the person that so many people hate it’s a wonder no one’s managed to fucking assassinate him yet.

Derek would say that’s not true. But then, he says a lot of things.

Lydia keeps her hand on the small of Stiles’ back as she guides him off the set and past all the
people staring at him, eyes following him even as they’re moving out the door and into the winding halls of the offices. She guides him down the carpet, past hanging framed awards and pictures of celebrities, and she doesn’t say a single thing to Stiles until she’s got him behind the closed door of the dressing room they stuffed him into, his name typed up and misspelled (Stilinsky) on a printed out sheet of paper.

Likely, if Derek were the one they had managed to get an interview out of, they’d have had a gold star with his name engraved hanging on the door. But they got stuck with second best. Not even – tenth best, maybe.

“That was fine,” she offers, which is Lydia’s way of saying that it actually went pretty well, in spite of her less than nothing expectations.

Stiles undoes the buttons on his shirt and frowns. It went terrible, the more he reflects on it. He sat there and acted like he was being tortured in an underground bunker, turned his nose up at half the questions he was asked, made Derek out to be anything less than the perfect superstar his fans think of him as. If there was anyone left who didn’t want him dead, after watching that interview, their minds will quickly be changed, Stiles is sure of it.

As if she can read his mind, she reaches out and gives his hair a quick swipe, affectionate and gentle as she ever is. “Does it matter what they think of you?”

“Um,” he starts, giving her a look, “according to you, yes.”

“Oh, honey. I don’t care what kind of obsession anyone has with you or what impression anyone gets. Love you or hate you, people will still watch you and read about you. You know why?”

Stiles frowns even deeper. “Because I’m being shoved down everyone’s throats at every possible opportunity?” They haven’t stopped talking about him for months, upon months, upon months. It’s like he’s the only hot topic anyone has left to discuss anymore.

She smiles with all her teeth, the most predatory she’s ever looked to him. “Because you’ve got that ring on your finger. You could punch a baby, kick an old woman’s cane out from under her, and blow up an orphanage – and I’d sell the follow up interview on the Oprah network for millions.”

Stiles glances down at the gold band himself. He remembers how it looked on Derek’s floor, the night that Stiles read the manuscript for the now-destroyed and dead forever Spark, small and insignificant and silly. But on his finger it looks mammoth, and he’s sure on camera it’s even more than that. More than a symbol of Derek and Stiles’ love, it’s Stiles’ ten million dollar check into notoriety, possibly for the rest of his life.

It would be easy to take it off again and leave it on this carpet, he knows. It would have been easy to leave it on Derek’s carpet as well. But he went back, and he picked it up and let Derek put it back on his finger and say he was sorry, and that was Stiles’ decision to make. He made it. He’s standing here, now.

“Please tell me no more of those interviews,” he begs as hard as he dares, and Lydia fixes him with a steady gaze.

She smiles at him that condescending way she always has, because some things never change, no matter what happens. “I told you it was just the beginning.”
What were you thinking? Do you ever wish you hadn’t met him? Do you ever think you could be somewhere else, with someone else, better off? What if he’s not what you think he is? What if you change your mind? What if he changes his? What is it about him? What is it about you?

I don’t know. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 14).

Derek’s house has a tendency to get bigger every time Stiles leaves and comes back to it. It’s like it sprouts new rooms and longer hallways, the lights get brighter, the amount of empty and cavernous space grows and grows, and it gets somewhat quieter. Stiles has often wondered why Derek insists on living in a house this large when there’s no one there but him, and all of the things he cares about are stocked into his bedroom and his library – even his fridge is only home to some Starbucks drinks and Chinese food takeout containers.

Though, it’s not true that he’s the only one that lives there anymore. It’s Derek and Stiles’ house, now – though the only part of it that truly feels the least bit like home is their bedroom. There’s an entire wing of the place that Stiles has never set foot in, and Derek doesn’t even mention. For all Stiles knows there’s a homeless guy squatting in an empty bathroom over there. Derek would stumble upon him one day and act genuinely shocked and befuddled – how could this happen, how could this happen, and meanwhile Stiles would just finish eating his breakfast and shrug and mention the fact that Versailles never had any god damn squatters because at least they knew how to tone it down a little.

Stiles gets back from Los Angeles and dumps the keys to the car Derek bought for him two months ago onto the kitchen counter, and then he hovers for a second with his hands on his hips. He looks at the sink, notes that it’s empty aside from their plates from breakfast, which can only mean that Derek hasn’t eaten since then. He glances at the clock on the stove reading nine o’clock at night in glowing blue, sighs through his nose, wonders if Derek has even stepped foot outside of their bedroom since Stiles left. He does that – vanishes for entire days just because he can.

The stairs are solid marble coated with a carpet, so they make no noise as Stiles trudges up to the second floor in his bare feet. He’s learned that there’s a team of people who appear once a week to comb the entire house, shampooing the carpets and dusting the untouched furniture and scrubbing down the half-used stove until everything sparkles like it’s brand new. Like they live in a model house, and Stiles sometimes hesitates before reaching out to touch something, feeling like he’s somehow an intruder in a house that isn’t his.

Really, it’s not his. Not even the room Derek specifically designated as Stiles’ own, filled with his own tag sale furniture from childhood, and his books and movies and knick knacks. As many times as Stiles tries to explain the feeling to Derek, Derek just shakes his head and insists that it’s all half his, all of it, even the stuff they barely ever look at.

In their bedroom, Stiles breathes a sigh of relief at the mingling scent of Stiles’ cologne and Derek’s book collection, at the sight of the unmade bed and their clothes strewn all over the floor. This, Stiles thinks as he half throws himself on top of the bed, could be an entire house all on its own. This is their real home – all the rest is just extraneous and unnecessary.

He lies there face down for a minute or so, and then the door to the master bathroom is creaking open and a puff of steam smelling like Old Spice and Derek comes wafting out, so Stiles lifts his
head and squints.

Derek is standing there with a towel around his waist, hovering in the doorway with an amused twist to his mouth. He says, “so I’m not a god.”

Stiles huffs and burrows his face back into his pillow. “Shocking and upsetting in equal amounts,” he drawls, and he hears Derek’s huff of laughter, and then his padding footsteps as he moves to the closet. “How do you even know what I said already? This was literally four hours ago.” And the interview isn’t even supposed to air for another few weeks. The amount of editing they’ll have to do to make Stiles seem like anything but a despicable troll must be astronomical.

“They sent me the transcript.”

Stiles has squinted his eyes and demanded to know who they are about a half a million times, and Derek’s answer is always boring and convoluted, so Stiles has just given up asking altogether and started imagining. He imagines there’s a room of men in suits somewhere, overlooking Los Angeles and puffing on cigars, tracking Derek and Stiles’ every movement like hawks, keeping written records in filing cabinets of what Stiles says and does and eats and thinks about. It might not be that far from the truth.

“I never realized how charming you are.”

“God,” Stiles moans, and tries for a moment to asphyxiate himself with the pillow. “It was bad. I know.”

“You were just being honest,” he sounds amused and unbothered. “You never learned that rule number one for being in front of a camera is to lie through your teeth no matter what they ask you.”

“Lydia was creaming herself the entire time, I think.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Stiles looks up from the pillow to see Derek’s got on a pair of boxers, his wet hair dripping onto bare shoulders. “If it’s as entertaining as it seemed to be, we’ll be getting press out of it for months after the fact. Nothing makes her dick harder than that.”

“And what a big dick it is,” Stiles sits up and leans back against the headboard, sighing through his nose while Derek seems to be rummaging in the closet for something to wear. Like, real pants, and a real shirt. “How come you’re not getting into your PJ’s?”

Derek turns, one eyebrow up into his hairline, and smiles at him with all his teeth. Stiles narrows his eyes – that’s an odd facial expression for Derek to have. “I thought we’d go out.”

For a moment, Stiles can only stare as Derek pulls out a pair of black slacks, watch as he shoves one leg in, and then the other. “Go out?” He repeats, incredulous.

“Yes. As in, exit the house, get into the car, drive away –“

“I know what you mean,” Stiles cuts him off before he can go any farther. “I just meant – it’s 9:30 on a Wednesday.”

“I, too, can read the calendar.”

“And you want to go out?”

“I do. Do you have homework?”
Stiles applied to a handful of schools a couple of months after the whole Spark debacle happened, after he and Derek reconciled and started getting photographed again and the rumor mill started working him up to a level of notoriety that made it impossible for him to work in the service industry any longer. People would come in and recognize him, several times every single day, and they would ask what he was doing there, why he was waiting tables when he’s dating Derek fucking Hale. And then word spread of his actual work place, and people started driving up from places like Nevada and Montana and New Mexico just to burst in and cry and demand to get their picture taken and is Derek around can we talk to Derek?

He couldn’t work any longer, that much was evident – but he couldn’t do nothing. So he applied, got into his top choice, and started taking classes. He’s doing pretty well as a matter of fact, much better than his first sashay into higher education. It’s amazing what a person can do when they’re not smoking weed every single day and wasting all their pocket change on handles of liquor.

“I got my paper in already,” he says carefully, watching Derek button up a dark purple shirt. It’s one of his nicer shirts. Stiles has called it his favorite before. Stiles is suspicious. “That’s not the point. My point is –“

“Here, I’ve already picked some stuff out for you,” Derek moves to his dresser and pulls a small pile of clothes off the top – Stiles’ clothes. Khakis and a short sleeved button down. “Put these on, and we’ll go."

The clothes are deposited in Stiles’ lap, and then Derek stands back and stares at him for a moment, waiting for Stiles to move. Stiles looks down at the clothes, and then looks back up to meet Derek’s eyes. “Are you feeling okay?”

Derek gives him a look. “Like it’s so odd that I’d want to take my fiancée out to a nice dinner.”

“No,” Stiles says slowly, “but you have to admit, you’re not exactly Mr. Social on any given night of the week, so excuse my surprise.”

“Well I’m channeling Mr. Social tonight and I’m taking you out, so get dressed.”

Stiles snorts and works on shrugging off the shirt he already has on, giving into the ridiculousness. Most nights, Derek just wants to putt around on his laptop, or pal around with Stiles, and he’s always fine with watching Netflix or giving Stiles’ papers a read through before Stiles turns them in – because, again, he’s not much for the going-out. Something about being the most famous werewolf in pretty much the world has him reluctant to step out of his house, and Stiles understands.

Especially lately. Lately, ever since Spark, Derek and Stiles have been treading dangerous ground. Walking fragile lines and tip-toeing around certain issues. They’re still engaged and that much is as true as anything else, but they haven’t really started planning it. There’s no date, no venue, no nothing. Just an amorphous blob of a concept that the two of them will at some point legally seal the deal and all that. Case and point, they don’t go out much anymore.

Stiles is happy for the change, suspicious as it might be, so he dresses and fixes his hair, and then follows Derek out to the garage. They get into the Range Rover, and the second the key is in the ignition, one of Derek’s dorky books on tape starts playing and Stiles immediately bursts into laughter.

“Stop it,” Derek chides, but his lips are curling upwards in spite of himself. “It’s better than the nonsense you listen to when you drive.”
“Um, iconic mid-2000’s pop-punk bands aren’t nonsense.”

Derek purses his lips, and then they’re zooming out of the garage and down the driveway, past security, off the grounds altogether. Stiles shuts off the book on tape and watches the streetlights flash across Derek’s face in the dark, leaning back into his seat. “How come your books aren’t on tape?”

“Oh, God.”

“It would be so funny. Let me record them. I’ll do people’s voices. Here’s my Lydia –“

He opens his mouth to do his patented Lydia impersonation (it involves holding his nose and lisping out high pitched nonsense), but Derek reaches across the center console and flicks the shell of Stiles’ ear. “I don’t do books on tape because who wants to listen to me talk at them for hours on end?”

“I can name like a million people off the top of my head.”

“I guess you’re right,” he gives Stiles an eye. “Some people still like me.”

Some people, Stiles thinks, staring at the side of Derek’s face. The reality is, the world loves Derek Hale. Always has, and likely always will. It’s a concept that blows Derek’s mind to the point where he can’t even wrap his brain around it, refuses to accept it. In Derek’s mind, he’s just the fuck up who passively let his family burn to death and lived to write about it. He still can’t fathom how he has any money, let alone a following that has, lately, started to include nearly everyone who’s ever set foot inside a Barnes and Noble.

“Including me,” Stiles says, and Derek smiles at him with his teeth again. Stiles smiles back. Derek is in a good mood, tonight. Those nights are few and far between, so Stiles will take what he can get.

After another fifteen minutes of driving, Derek abruptly starts pulling to a stop outside of the one, the only, Howl. Also known as Stiles’ least favorite place on the fucking planet even now that he and Lydia actually relatively get along and she’s stopped treating him like a fucking invalid. The place just, first of all, grosses him out, and second of all, is filled with not-so-happy memories. Memories of pre and post-Beacons nonsense, and Lydia looking at him like she wants him dead, and Derek being evasive, and – well. Enough said.

Reading Stiles’ silence and grave facial expression, Derek says, “I’ve just gotta stop in and ask Lydia something really quick.”

“God,” Stiles leans back in his seat and makes no move to unfurl himself from his seatbelt, even as Derek is climbing out. “I’ll stay in the car and wait.”

“You’ll come inside,” Derek corrects, and Stiles shakes his head no.

“I will sit here and wait.”

Derek’s door slams shut, and then he’s walking around the front of the car – and then he’s pulling open Stiles’ door and unbuckling his seatbelt. “Hey –“ Stiles protests, but Derek has already got the seatbelt off and safely tucked into its home. He fits his hands around Stiles’ hips and starts lifting him, and Stiles squawks his indignance so loud it echoes off the tops of the buildings. “Hey! No werewolf strength!”

Sometime after they became official official, Derek had made a very odd and serious promise
to never use his superior strength against Stiles in any way, shape or form. Stiles had just sort of blinked and nodded his head, because he never foresaw it being an issue. What was Derek ever going to do to him? Claw him to death? Mostly, he’s just been opening pickle jars and lifting Stiles’ furniture up the stairs.

Apparently, dragging Stiles out of the car to get him inside of Howl doesn’t count in Derek’s mind as an abuse of his power. Derek pulls him out onto the sidewalk and locks the car with a honking sound, while Stiles curses and flails his arms in an attempt to angle away from Derek’s hand on his back, pushing him forward.

“And we’re going in through the front way?” Stiles’ voice is shrill in his own ears, so he can only imagine what it’s like for Derek. “Derek, I swear, I swear to God, I can’t go in there –“

Derek purses his lips in a way that suggests he’s trying to hold back a smile and urges Stiles forward toward the blacked out front doors, where a bouncer is standing and watching this entire exchange with little to no expression on his face.

“You remember what happened last time? I still have to pour bleach into my eyeballs every time I think of it,” he shudders at the memory itself. He had used to say God only knows what kind of things happen in a werewolf BDSM club, because surely there could never be a limit to the depravity, but now, Stiles knows what happens there, too. Day after wretched day he wishes he didn’t.

“Close your eyes, then.”

“What do I do about the sounds?”

Derek growls under his breath, and Stiles clamps his jaw shut and sighs through his nose as the bouncer pulls the velvet rope out of their way and gestures for them to walk inside. Derek pushes Stiles forward, and Stiles tries to dig his converse into the concrete, to no avail. He goes stuttering forwards under Derek’s hand, and then the door is open, and they’re standing in the foyer.

Stiles blinks around himself. Last time he and Derek came in this way, this room was lined nearly wall to wall with people milling around looking like extras from the Rocky Horror Picture Show, drinking wolfsbane and eyeballing Stiles like fresh meat as they waited for their turn in – God help them all – the dungeon.

Tonight, it’s empty. As in, not a soul in sight. The front desk where a woman usually sits and glares everyone down is unmanned, and the place is eerily clean and quiet, reeking of Lysol and bleach. Stiles doesn’t even want to think about why a club would need to be cleaned with bleach, so he pointedly changes his train of thought, looking back to Derek. “Is it a slow night, or something?”

Derek side-eyes him. “I guess so,” he says, evasive as ever.

Stiles’ suspicion only grows. He looks around at the empty couches and the dim lights, glares through the windows at the bouncer standing outside, at Derek’s purple shirt, and then promptly plants his feet with a skid of rubber on the floor. Derek takes two steps and then looks back – only, he doesn’t look annoyed. He looks amused.

“I refuse to take another step until you tell me what’s going on,” he says, chin raised in the air, and Derek smiles bigger.

“It’s just behind here,” Derek juts his thumb toward the door to the main part of the club, and Stiles nearly has an aneurysm.
“Isn’t that the room where –”

Derek cuts him off, and it’s a good thing, too – Stiles doesn’t know if he could fully finish that sentence either way. “Not tonight. Come on, baby, come on,” Derek gestures with his fingers, his other hand pulling on the handle of the door.

Stiles hesitates for another second longer, but Derek just blinks steadily at him with that stupid smile on his face, and really, how can Stiles truly say no to that face? If the place is really as dead as it seems, then Stiles might get away with seeing only a couple of things that will scar him eternally – and that, he can live with, so long as Derek is in this mood.

With a sigh, he steps forward, and Derek puts his arm around his shoulder, before pulling open the door.

It’s pitch dark inside, where usually there are lights flickering all over the place, the bar all purple and red while some indiscernible club music blares over everyone’s heads. Stiles steps inside beside Derek, and then the door closes behind them nice and loud, so they’re very nearly in the pitch dark. Stiles can’t see shit at all, but he’s sure Derek can see just fine.

“Is it movie night?” Stiles whispers, clutching onto Derek’s arm as he takes two hesitant steps forward. The place is deathly quiet and eerie – all Stiles can see are the few slants of light peeking out from underneath the doors they just came through.

Abruptly, the overhead lights flick on, so bright in contrast to the pitch dark he had just gotten accustomed to that Stiles has to squint against them and cover his eyes for a moment. After that split second of shock is over and done with, Stiles is treated to a loud burst of what has to be close to a hundred voices yelling SURPRISE!! at him at the top of their lungs.

He jerks backward, startled and knocking into Derek – a solid weight that stops him from going any farther. Stiles adjusts to the bright light, finally, and he takes in several very important details all at once. First of all, the gigantic balloons hovering over everyone’s heads that read the number 23 in glittering gold, second of all a crowd of Stiles and Derek’s (mostly Derek’s, because – Stiles has three fucking friends) friends, and third of all…a cake. A big one, at that.

Stiles turns to Derek, confused and bewildered, heart pounding in his chest while everyone laughs and claps and stares at him. Somewhere to their left, Scott blows on a party horn once, twice, three times, until Lydia smacks it clean out of his hand.

Stiles meets Derek’s eyes as a slow smile spreads across his own face, and Derek says, “happy birthday.”

Stiles’ 23rd birthday isn’t until the weekend, but if Derek tried to orchestrate a surprise party for him on his actual birthday, Stiles would have him figured out within the second. Really, it’s a miracle in and of itself that Stiles didn’t sniff this out at all, or at least that Scott didn’t spill the beans. “You planned me a party?”

“I got the idea for a party,” Derek corrects, “I paid for the party.”

And Lydia did the rest. She picked out the big golden balloons and ordered the double chocolate cake after asking Scott what his favorite flavor was, and she had a team of people come in and tear apart her own night club (Stiles has already noted that some of the more disturbing fixtures of the place are nowhere in sight – a small miracle), and she made all the phone calls, while Derek stood back writing the checks.
Stiles grabs the collar of Derek’s shirt and pulls him down for a kiss, hard and sincere. Of all the things that Stiles ever thought Derek capable of, even coming up with the idea for a surprise birthday party was so far out of the realm of possibility in Stiles’ mind. Not that Derek isn’t thoughtful, when he wants to be, and not that he isn’t caring, when he wants to be, but Stiles has noticed a bizarre selfish tendency Derek has to not do something for someone only because he doesn’t want to have to deal with it. A surprise party, with all these people and all this noise is exactly the kind of thing Derek would hate.

But Stiles likes it, and Derek knew that. In that vein, it’s the nicest thing anyone has ever done for him.

When they pull apart, Derek pushes Stiles by his shoulder toward the rest of the party – the food and the people and the music. “Go on. Have fun.”

The first person that Stiles gets intercepted by on his way into the crowd is, of course, Scott, sans party horn, but already with a plate of snacks. He’s got a pile of doritos that keep swishing and sliding across his paper plate with every movement he makes, and Stiles focuses in on this detail and imagines Lydia shopping at Party City for paper plates, imagines Derek going over his bank statement and seeing a receipt for a 99 cent pack of the things, and for some reason it’s all so ridiculous he could burst out laughing.

If it were Derek’s birthday, there’d be crystal plates and an ice sculpture and a meal served at a table, because that’s what Derek likes. But Stiles likes pigs in a blanket and stupid ironic plates with Superman on them; if there’s one thing that could have ever proven to Stiles that Lydia has officially gotten over her irrational hatred of him, it’s the fact that she bought those god damn plates.

“Happy birthday!” Scott yells at him, and Stiles thanks him after a quick hug. “You know, I’ve never been here before.”

“That’s not a surprise,” Stiles tells him, gesturing around at the parts of the décor that couldn’t be covered up by streamers or balloons. There’s a gargoyle looming over their heads from the rafters of the lights, and Stiles mentally names it Mo.

“You have no idea how hard it was for me to keep this secret from you,” he confides this like it’s some big shocking secret, and Stiles nearly rolls his eyes. He can take a wild guess at just how many times Scott almost blurted it out in the past few weeks. Probably the only reason he managed is because Lydia must have threatened him with something really petrifying.

“How long have you known?”

Scott lets out a puff of air from between his teeth as he thinks about that for a moment. “Maybe a month?”

Stiles raises his eyebrows. That’s even longer than he’d thought.

“And I hope you like your present. You’re a hard person to shop for now, you realize. I mean, what do you get a person who has a joint bank account with a millionaire?”

Stiles has started asking himself the exact same question, night after night. The joint bank account thing was Derek’s idea (because of course it was) and Stiles wasn’t necessarily in a position to disagree. So as far as anyone is concerned he literally has somewhere in the double digits of millions stuffed into a plastic card in his wallet. What could he possibly want for, anymore?
The rest of the party goes exactly how Stiles could have imagined it would. Erica gets too drunk, because for some reason Lydia thought an open bar would be a good idea with this particular set of people, and has to be carted out the back door by a handful of Derek’s friends that Stiles has only ever met (seen, really) once or twice. Derek’s friends have always been some great big mystery to Stiles because he never talks about them, or even mentions them in passing, until they show up at some party and pat him on the back like they’ve done nothing but talk for weeks when Stiles knows it couldn’t be the case.

Erica’s drunken buffoonery is the most interesting part of the night – nearly half the people present are Derek’s whatever’s, and they’re all terribly boring. Publishers or editors or people he met once at a party in Beverly Hills, and Stiles knows Derek only had them invited so the party felt bigger. Stiles has never cared that his list of contacts is a page long (if that), but Derek couldn’t throw a giant party in Stiles’ name with no one in attendance aside from Scott, Allison, Erica, and maybe an old co-worker or two.

So, Stiles more or less accepts the pleasantries of happy birthday’s from strangers with a grain of salt, and has a few shots of tequila, and eats his cake and feels just fine. At one point, he catches sight of the always elusive Kira and Boyd hovering off to the edge of the bar. Not mingling. Barely even looking at anyone else. Just standing there, not even drinking or eating, watching the rest of the party pass them by like it’s not something they’re a part of at all.

Stiles has only met them a handful of times. And each time, Kira has been friendly enough, and Boyd distant enough, and Derek just shrugged his shoulders like what can you do?, and then carted Stiles off to meet someone else. Maybe Stiles just doesn’t get how packs work – but aren’t they supposed to talk to each other more than once every three months in order for it to be an actual… pack? Apparently not.

Either way, Stiles makes no moves to approach them, having next to no fucking idea what he would say to them even if he did, and crosses the dance floor instead to move to the balconies. Outside, the air is much less stagnant and heavy with sweat and body heat, fresh and light. There are a handful of vaguely familiar people milling about, smoking and drinking and eyeing him like they might start talking to him if only for the novelty of speaking to Derek Hale’s fiancée, the star of Beacons – the one who doesn’t actually exist.

Luckily, Derek comes out only a minute or so behind Stiles, holding a drink in his hand and looking characteristically blank faced. The drink isn’t alcoholic; Stiles knows just from looking at it. Plus, Stiles has had about three rum and cokes and as many shots, and someone has to drive them home. Leave it to Derek to be the responsible one in the relationship.

“Hey,” Derek says to him, ignoring the way that people suddenly give them both a wide berth. A girl in a sequin mini dress actually steps back until she bumps up against the railing just at the sheer sight of him – and Stiles wonders suddenly if there are some people here who aren’t supposed to be. Shit; three years ago, Stiles would have done just about anything to sneak into a party hosted by Derek fucking Hale. “Had enough to drink?”

“No nearly,” Stiles says, but he smiles and leans back against the railing so Derek can box him in. “I can still see straight, so.”

“So how come you’re standing out here all by yourself instead of inside at the bar?” Derek raises an eyebrow at him, so close to him now Stiles could move forward a couple of inches and be kissing him, just like that.

Stiles looks away, off the balcony, across Beacon Hills in all its glory. A town the size of a pin on a map, surrounded by mountains, so the skyline can only stretch as far as it’s allowed. “It’s quite an
interesting assortment of people you’ve got in there.”

Derek nods like he agrees. “You think you’ve got no friends. All I have are acquaintances and people who only like me because I’ve got a name people recognize.”

Running his fingers along the collar of Derek’s shirt, Stiles hyperfocuses on the fabric, swishing it between his skin and trying not to look into Derek’s face. “But you really got out my address book, huh?”

“Scott’s number I already had. Erica I had to dig a little bit for. But –“

“But, I mean, you invited all my friends.” He pauses, purses his lips. “My – family.”

Realization dawns across Derek’s face quickly, and then just as quickly as it’s there, it’s gone, and his expression is just a blank slate all over again. He reaches his hand up and strokes his knuckles across Stiles’ cheek, down his jawline, coming to a stop right up against his neck. His hand is warm and soft instead of hard and calloused – he sits in a room and he writes on a laptop, and that’s all the work he’s ever done with his hands. It makes him gentle, in some respects. In others, it makes him more brutal than anyone Stiles has ever met before.

“Your father screens my calls to begin with,” he starts in a low voice, and Stiles looks away. “When Lydia finally did manage to get through to him, he didn’t…”

“…seem particularly thrilled at the prospect of coming along to something you were involved with,” Stiles finishes for him with a nod of his head, like he expected as much. Derek watches his face carefully for a few moments as though he’s waiting for Stiles to burst into hysterical tears, but the seconds pass and Stiles just stares at the way that girl’s dress is glittering in the city lights. “His only son’s birthday party and he can’t be fucked to show up just because – just because.”

Derek sighs through his nose and takes a sip of his drink. He probably wishes the thing had some wolfsbane rum in there right about now. “I don’t know what to say.”

He’s started saying that more and more often lately – that he just doesn’t know what he’s meant to say in any given situation. It’s something Stiles suspects he’s been working on, in light of everything that’s happened between them, and also just in light of his own personal problems. Instead of stalking off or staying silent or being evasive and moody, Derek will sigh and admit that he just doesn’t know what to do, what to say, or how to make anything better.

Stiles leans forward and presses his face into Derek’s neck. For ten entire seconds, he hides from the rest of the world, pretending that he and Derek are all alone on this balcony, in this building, in this town. They never are – not even in their bedroom, with all that security and all the cameras. There are still lights on them, even then. Stiles feels eyes on the back of his neck everywhere he goes.

“Thank you,” Stiles says into his ear. “For my party.”

“I’m sorry about –“

“It’s not your fault,” Stiles says as he separates from him, keeping one hand locked on his shoulder. “It’s my problem.”

Stiles waits for Derek to start off on his spiel about how it’s your problem that I created Stiles, I’m the entire reason he wouldn’t come, I’m the entire reason you and your father haven’t spoken in months, because I fucked everything up between you just like I fuck everything up – but Derek says nothing. His jaw works, and he gets a very familiar look on his face, but he says nothing.
Stiles kisses him again, just for the sake of it, and takes the fingers of Derek’s free hand in his own.
“And you know, I was thinking.”

“That’s never a good thing.”

“I was thinking about September.”

“September,” Derek repeats, like he’s unsure what the word means all of the sudden.

“Yeah, you know. Seems like a good month.” He lets the sentence hang there for a moment while Derek stares at him with a crease in his brow. “To get married.”

He hasn’t been being naïve. He’s known good and well that Derek has been waiting, and waiting, and waiting for Stiles to be the one to make the first move on the whole wedding thing. He knows that Derek has felt like it’s all been balancing on a knife’s edge, and if he pushed Stiles any more than he might have already been, then it would’ve been too far, and Stiles would’ve snapped.

So it’s not a surprise this time when Derek flashes that rare smile of his, all teeth and dimples and shining eyes. “Even with everything –”

“Yes,” Stiles says.

“Yes. Even with your dad, and –”

“Yes. Even with anything, anything Derek.”

Anything.

**

I realized at some point that I had never been in love before. I think I forced myself to believe that I loved Kate because it gave me an excuse; I was sixteen and stupid and in love with a woman who turned out to not be who I thought she was, and even worse still. It was my get out of jail free card to pretend I was blinded by an emotion too strong for a kid to handle. And with Jennifer, I wanted to prove to my sister, to my friends, to myself that I still had the capacity for feeling anything, anything at all, even in the wake of everything that had happened to me. I used love like that, in a sense, and it wasn’t even really the emotion I was using. Just the word.

* I had never been in love before. I didn’t know what to do with it. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 2).

**

A popular late night activity for Stiles and Derek is to sit on their bed either watching Netflix until they both fall asleep or screwing around doing their own separate things while making the occasional commentary to one another. Tonight, Stiles has got his homework out, notes and pens all scattered across his side, while Derek sits on his laptop reading e-mails and responding to e-mails and in general being Derek Hale.

After fifteen minutes on the same statistics question, Stiles is just about to slam his textbook shut and give up on higher education altogether, or at the very least ask Derek for help, when he looks up and finds Derek in – well. Rare form. Derek’s still got that laptop perched in between his
fingers, but he’s staring at it so intently that Stiles thinks for a moment he’s looking at a picture of Kate Argent’s face, or something.

Closer examination shows that his fingernails have gone to claws where they rest on his thighs, that a set of fangs has elongated over his bottom lip. And his eyes.

They’re bright red. Stiles has only seen any of these components of Derek give or take four times, in extraordinary circumstances. So seeing them now, in their bedroom, for next to no reason… Stiles nearly doesn’t know how to react.

“What?” he says, shoving his books aside so they topple off the side of the bed with _thump_, _thumps_. The noise startles Derek, who blinks his eyes in Stiles’ direction a couple of times, the red even more eerie than Stiles remembered, and sets his jaw. “What, whoa, are you looking at pictures of squirrels again?”

Derek gives him a look that’s actually effective at shutting him up for once. It might be hard for Derek to look at anyone or anything with half his wolf face out without looking like a predator, even when it comes to Stiles. Stiles swallows and looks away, unable to look directly into them. Without a word, Derek takes the laptop off his own body and shoves it into Stiles’ hands, almost hard enough that Stiles falls off the bed – but he catches himself at the last second with a huff.

“Tone it down,” Stiles says, and Derek makes a noise from the back of his throat that might be apologetic, or might be – well. He doesn’t know. Stiles sets the computer down on his own lap and sits criss cross, tilting the screen back so he can get a better look at whatever has gotten Derek so riled up.

It looks like 4chan, actually. Stiles is about to roll his eyes and tell Derek of course 4chan got him all worked up into a tizzy and why was he even looking there to begin with, doesn’t he know how terrible and awful it is all the fucking time – but his eyes catch on his own name written somewhere in the post, and the words die off in his throat. With one last final glance in Derek’s direction – who has got his face turned away, breathing heavily like he’s about to morph into an entire wolf right here and now – Stiles frowns and starts reading.

_I really think that Stiles Stilinski has been sent specifically to Derek as a reincarnation of Kate Argent, insomuch as I have long suspected him of plotting to destroy his entire life and career._

Stiles looks away from the screen, stares blankly off into space for a second, and then laughs. He laughs, and laughs, and laughs, but when he looks to Derek, he finds the same subdued half-werewolf sitting there, growling low under his breath. “It’s not funny,” he warns, his voice close to not-human.

The chuckles die down a little bit, but Stiles has to cover his mouth with his fist to control himself before he goes back in to keep on reading.

_When he and Derek first met, Stiles worked at McDonald’s. He had no money, dropped out of school, etc. etc. These are all the markings of a gold digger, yes, which had been my initial thought about him. I thought he would take Derek for millions of dollars and then vanish off the face of the planet, which truly would have been preferable to what I suspect is happening now. Stiles took a big chunk of Derek’s money I’m sure of it though I can’t prove it in spite of the rumors that Stiles and Derek share a bank account now, and even got Derek to write half a book about him. Beacons is the worst thing Derek has ever written and it’s because of Stiles._

“Now that’s just stupid,” Stiles rears his neck back and shakes his head. “The rest of this I’m like whatever, but Beacons as the worst thing you ever wrote? Give me a fucking break. How can
someone dislike me so much that they can’t even see how good Beacons is? Is hatred of me really that blinding for these people?”

“It gets worse,” Derek assures him in a low voice, and Stiles frowns and keeps going.

Already Derek’s career is going to the dogs. Sure Beacons might have been a best seller, but I again believe it’s because Stiles is a satanic force at work. The only reason Beacons sold like it did even though it’s a pile of unreadable drivel about him, of all things, is because it’s about him. Stiles is a demonic entity, possibly a part of the illuminati, who has brainwashed Derek to see him as the love of his life, and has brainwashed all of you to buy into it. I’m the only one who can see through Stiles’ lies. Don’t forget that Stiles somehow manipulated Derek into breaking a multi-million dollar contract over a book that he didn’t like. If Stiles has the power to make Derek do something like that, who else can say what he has the power to do?

“The scariest part about this,” Stiles begins, shaking his head and smirking, “is that this isn’t even written like a psychopath writes, you know? Like – this is just some person who you would talk to on the street and never know they were the person who has a million magazine cut outs of my face with the eyes scratched out all over their bedroom wall.”

Derek still seems wholly unamused, even at the mention of Stiles being a quote unquote satanic force at work, which Stiles is going to be laughing about for weeks to come, and Stiles doesn’t get why this of all things has made him wolf out for the first time in months.

When Stiles starts in on the next paragraph, he suddenly understands.

All of this is why I intend to free not just Derek Hale from Stiles’ clutches, but the rest of the world as well. In the spirit of Kate Argent, who is definitely his predecessor if not the one coaching him through all of this, I’ll take Stiles out to the preserve (the kid is weak, and you can tell – it wouldn’t be hard to wrestle him into the back of a car if you knew what you were doing), and find the ground zero for Derek’s family home. The exact coordinates on the map are a little iffy, but how hard can it be to find a giant fire-ridden clearing in the Beacon Hills’ tiny preserve? I’ll tie him to a chair, douse him in lighter fluid, and light him on fire – I’d let Derek watch, just like he had to watch his family burn to death from the sidelines.

Stiles purses his lips. When he slams the laptop closed, he can’t help but notice that the hairs on the back of his neck are standing straight up on end, goosebumps all over his arms, that his hands are shaking, just a little bit. Derek usually pointedly avoids finding things like that to read about Stiles, and Stiles only ever uses the internet now for the Lydia-mandated official twitter he has – and kids are tame on that. Sure, there’s the occasional rot in hell slut and DEREK IS MINE reply to one of his innocuous tweets, but mostly he scans through and reads are you ever going to come to Italy? and dad with emojis.

Nothing, nothing at all, like this.

He shoves the laptop away and thinks that Derek’s reaction entirely makes sense, and Stiles is scared himself – but really, the situation isn’t about him. That person would never be able to get close enough to Stiles to ever do a god damn thing to him, let alone drag him out of Derek’s house and set him on fire, somewhere, so Stiles is creeped out, sure, but he’s not genuinely petrified.

Derek, on the other hand. He’s got his hands balled into fists, squeezing so tightly that blood is starting to leak out from the cracks between his fingers, and his eyes are still bright red and scary, but Stiles reaches out and touches him anyway. Derek only slightly flinches from the contact, and Stiles pulls himself even closer.
“Hey,” he says, almost in a whisper. And then again, as he drapes one leg over Derek’s body to straddle his lap, pulling their bodies as close as he can get them. He presses his forehead to Derek’s and meets those red eyes head on, one hand on the back of the werewolf’s neck and the other on his chest, grounding him. “I’m okay. We’re fine. It’s just some nutcase on the internet. They’d never be able to touch me. You know that.”

Derek’s heavy, wet breaths fan across Stiles’ face, and there’s nothing but that sound for a few moments as Derek wrestles with himself, to keep himself grounded. Really, Stiles has only ever seen Derek lose control two times before. The first was at that party when they first started going out, and even that was just his eyes and a little bit of growling. The second time was during a fight with Lydia – that was claws, and eyes, and growling. But Stiles has never, never once, seen the entire werewolf face on Derek’s. That seems deliberate, now that Stiles is thinking about it.

Case and point, Stiles is flying blind on how to deal with Derek like this, and he doesn’t know if pressing himself right up against Derek’s body is necessarily the right thing to do, but he keeps doing it anyway.

“I’m right here,” he goes on. “No one will ever touch me. Not while you’re around, right?”

It takes another second, but Derek’s breathing evens out, and his eyes open again to reveal hazel-green. Serene and calm and pretty, so Stiles smiles at him and strokes his hand across Derek’s face, feather light.

Derek’s fingers run up Stiles’ chest through his shirt, and Stiles notes that they’re blunt instead of sharp, breathing a sigh of relief. “Welcome back to reality,” he teases, a smile in his voice, and Derek ducks his face into Stiles’ shoulder.

“Stuff like that,” he begins, voice muffled, “makes. Me. Crazy.”

“I know.”

“Just the thought of it –“

“I know.”

“It was so – I could see it in my head. I know what – I know what someone sounds like when they’re burning to death.”

Stiles takes a deep breath through his nose, and plants a kiss on the back of Derek’s head, running his fingers up and down his back. Of course he does. He probably has nightmares of those screams every single night.

“How could someone who claims to be a fan of mine ever even think…”

“They’re mad I get the dick and they don’t?”

Derek lifts his head out of Stiles’ shoulder to give him an unimpressed glare, but after several seconds of Stiles smiling at him and raising his eyebrows, Derek’s lips start to curl upwards of their own accord and he shakes his head. “God, it’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not, but this is what I do. I make not-funny things funny as a way of dealing with them. You like that about me, remember?”

Derek nods his head, and then focuses his eyes on Stiles’ collarbones, his neck, his jawline, before meeting Stiles’ eyes head-on. He shakes his head, like there’s something about Stiles that he just
can’t fucking believe. “If anything, anything ever happened to you, I couldn’t live with myself.”

“Shh.”

“It would be my fault,” Derek says, and Stiles has to resist rolling his eyes. There’s no use in arguing with him – as far as Derek is concerned, if Stiles were to get attacked by a rogue fan, even just a slap in the face on a red carpet somewhere, Derek would go fucking bananas and tear the place apart, and then he’d lock himself in a closet and torture himself because it’s all his fault. There’s no debating it, no rationalizing it. Stiles just hopes no one ever does really slap him in the face on a red carpet, just so he wouldn’t have to deal with Derek in the aftermath.

So, Stiles doesn’t even bother trying. He kisses Derek’s cheek, and then his neck. Derek angles his face in such a way that Stiles’ lips bump against his own, and then they’re kissing, Derek’s hand strong and human on his shoulder, pulling him in closer. There’s nothing but the sound of Derek’s hand moving up and along Stiles’ clothed back and the often-times gross smack of their lips moving together, and if Stiles focuses hard enough, he can hear that old grandfather clock ticking from down the hallway in Derek’s study.

Stiles breaks the kiss and licks at Derek’s ear, panting heavy right into the shell of it. “Hey, fuck me,” he says, and Derek’s body goes stiff underneath his own. “Come on. Prove to me no one gets to put their hands on me but you.”

Derek responds by bodily lifting Stiles up and half-throwing him onto the bed beside him, face up, so Stiles can’t help but burst out laughing as the bed jiggles underneath his weight. His fingers fumble as he slides his pajama bottoms and briefs down his legs, and Derek has to help him pull them all the way off and fling them somewhere across the room. Miraculously, Derek’s already got his shirt and boxers off – like he just tore them right off in the split second Stiles wasn’t looking at him.

Stiles struggles with his shirt for a minute, cursing under his breath while Derek collects the bubblegum lube from the bedside table, leaning his body over Stiles’ as he reaches. “I can’t –“ Stiles starts, muttering and flopping around as his arm gets stuck in one of the holes in his shirt. Apparently fed up with Stiles’ fish out of water routine, Derek simply plucks his fingers into the shirt and tears it clean off with a resounding riiipp noise, tossing the bits and pieces of it over his shoulder and then squeezing lube onto his fingers like nothing just happened.

Stiles, even though he’s seen Derek do the same thing upwards of a dozen times before, gapes with his mouth open and shakes his head, even as Derek lifts Stiles’ legs up to get better access. “Okay, you really need to stop doing thaaattt –“ he cuts off in a high pitched squeak as two wet and big fingers slide inside of him. “I won’t have any shirts left if you keep it up.”

Derek smirks, like he doesn’t much mind the thought of that, and Stiles just lies there and experiences the alien-yet-familiar feeling of Derek working him open. It’s actually been a little while since he’s had this. Don’t get Stiles wrong, they’re still physically unable to keep their hands off of each other for any extended period of time, but Stiles has just been so busy with school and Derek busy with cleaning up the mess after Spark and hiring a new team of people and working things out with Lydia that a lot of their sex has boiled down to chuckly fooling around in either one of their cars before a meeting or a class. And last time they managed to go all the way, Stiles had topped.

So it’s been, give or take, two weeks since he was last underneath Derek. Derek props one of Stiles’ legs up on his shoulders and holds the other one up with his free hand – somewhere around their one year anniversary, Derek stopped taking so much time to prep Stiles like he used to be
obsessed with doing before. It was like he was always afraid that if he didn’t go a full four fingers before anything else that he would hurt Stiles. Now, he’s learned that three minutes three fingers works just as well as anything else, and slides all the way in in one smooth push.

Stiles’ body jerks just a little bit with every thrust, so he inches his way up the bed bit by bit until the crown of his head is touching the headboard and he can’t go any farther. Derek manhandles his legs a bit, bending them back as much as he can and using them for leverage as he fucks into Stiles the same way he always has – fast, and good.

“When’s the last time –“ his sentence is cut in half by a quick gasp from Stiles, “…anyone ever fucked you aside from me?”

“Jesus, that’s –“ he reaches out and tries to touch Derek, but his own legs are in the way, so all he can do is scrabble his hand against Derek’s fingers where they’re holding his ankle. “…you know it’s been – a year. A year and a half.”

Derek grunts his satisfaction with this answer, and Stiles thinks that’ll be the end of that, but then Derek is piping up again, talking over a moan. “When’s the last time anyone fucked you the way I do?”

Stiles rolls his eyes – half in annoyance and half in pleasure. “Aw, what do you want me to – fuck – say?” He pants for a second, and then smiles lazily before putting on a mocking tone of voice. “No one’s ever fucked me like you do, alpha, you’re the best, you’re the –“ Derek starts in on a punishing pace, apparently fed up with Stiles’ teasing, and Stiles can’t even remember what he’d been saying.

“I love that this shuts you up,” Derek pants, bending over Stiles’ body just a little bit more so Stiles’ legs burn with the pull.

“You shut up,” Stiles snaps, but its venom is lessened by an entirely too high pitched squeak that follows it. He bites his lip and reaches his hand down to stroke himself where he’s hard and wet and ready for it, eyes rolling back into his head. His toes are just starting to curl when Derek snatches Stiles’ hand away – and then the other – pinning them both in the air right above Stiles’ chest with one firm grip of his fingers. “No, please –“

“Shh,” Derek chides.

Stiles struggles to free his wrists, even knowing it’s a complete and total waste of his fucking time – he’s just that far gone that he almost can’t even think straight. “I have to come, I have to –“

“You will,” Derek promises, slamming into him so hard Stiles sees stars for a fraction of a second, “just be quiet.”

The seconds drag on that way like torture. Stiles’ legs still throbbing from the position they’re in, though the sensation is entirely dulled as Stiles focuses on Derek touching that one spot inside of him again, and again, and Stiles’ hands itching to reach down and touch himself, and Derek’s breaths hard enough that the air hits Stiles’ chest. And Stiles realizes that, no. No one else has ever fucked Stiles like this before, and he’s almost certain no one else ever could. No one else could hold Stiles’ legs and wrists in just two hands while simultaneously screwing him this well – it’s just not physically possible.

Of course, there’s not physically possible and then there’s Derek.

Stiles comes, finally, and he tries to muffle himself against his own shoulder to absolutely no avail.
He sputters something unintelligible even to himself when he finishes, and then he just lies there like a dead fish as Derek works himself off inside of him, hips stuttering and then coming to a slow stop. They stay quiet aside from their panting for a moment, and then Derek lets go of Stiles’ wrist so they flop onto the bed also like dead fish, and then his legs, so Stiles starfishes out on the bed and goes limp and numb.


Derek gives him a lazy grin, sprawling himself down beside Stiles. “That good, huh?”

Stiles chews on his bottom lip and then turns to burrow himself into Derek’s chest. Derek allows this with a huff of laughter, ignoring how sweaty and sticky and gross Stiles is – which is just something unfair. Derek literally doesn’t sweat. No matter what they do, he stays dry as a bone. It’s infuriating, especially after sex.

“I love you,” Stiles tells him, and Derek kisses his forehead. “You’ll protect me from everyone and everything. I never ever worry.”

Derek is quiet for a long time. He strokes his fingers gently up and down Stiles’ bare arm, but otherwise, he’s completely motionless. Stiles starts to think he’s falling to sleep, so he closes his eyes and tries to follow suit.

When he wakes up some time later, he’s in relatively the same position as before. He’s still snuggled up against Derek’s chest, forehead pressed into his shoulder, and Derek’s arm is still around him. He blinks a couple of times, notes that the light in their bedroom is still on, that it’s still dark outside, and then looks up to find Derek’s eyes open and looking right at him.

Stiles flicks his eyes just past Derek’s head to the clock on the bedside table reading three o’clock in the morning, and then takes another look at Derek. He’s got bags under his eyes, and his mouth is set tight and serious. “Have you slept at all?” Stiles asks, voice raspy and quiet.

Derek shakes his head no.

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Stiles sits on the hood of his car outside of his father’s house for at least fifteen minutes, sipping at a hot cup of coffee and glaring out at the tree line. It’s funny how there are things about this house that are almost exactly the same as he remembers them from childhood – the bottom step leading up to the porch has a chip in it that he used to trip over every morning on the way to school. The second story hallway window has always reflected the same tree. The driveway has tire marks from his mother’s old Jeep still burned into the pavement.

And here Stiles sits, against a shiny silver Lexus that Derek paid for, feeling like he hardly even recognizes this place anymore. Or, maybe even more to the point, that the place hardly recognizes him back.

He throws his empty coffee cup into the passenger seat through the open window (because after the first few weeks of driving this thing around he stopped treating it like fine china) and straightens up to his full height, squinting at the sunlight through his sunglasses. This conversation will not go well. He knows that. He also knows that it’s without a doubt one that he has to have, whether he or his father like it or not.
They haven’t spoken to one another in…well. Not since he and Derek got back together after Spark happened. January, give or take a week or two. It’s closing in on June now, the summer setting in hot and heavy, and marking five long months of dodging calls and pointedly ignoring one another. Derek has been as supportive as physically possible, but for him, it just doesn’t make sense how Stiles could possibly be so upset about it. He wouldn’t understand, so Stiles never really faults him for it.

Taking a deep breath, he skis up the steps two at a time, and doesn’t hesitate before ringing the doorbell. He barely has the time to marinate on how fucking ridiculous it is for him to be ringing the god damn doorbell at a place that used to be his own house, that he used to be able to barge right into even after he moved out, before his father is pulling open the door and giving him the eye.

Stiles smiles as best as he can and gestures to himself like here I am!!, and his father blinks at him steadily. “Hi, dad,” Stiles greets, voice cracking just a bit with how much forced cheer he’s putting into it.

“Stiles,” his father says with half the enthusiasm. At least he looks a little surprised. When his eyes slide past Stiles’ shoulder to land on the shiny new car sitting in the driveway, they narrow, just a little bit. “The werewolf drove you here.”

The werewolf. Stiles could scream. He really fucking could. Instead he counts backwards from three in his head, and mildly corrects, “that’s my car, actually.”

A long, pregnant silence passes in between them. Stiles had forgotten about an important factoid concerning his old Jeep – it was his mother’s car. Now, he didn’t forget that in and of itself, but he did forget that the fact that he doesn’t cherish it and drive it everywhere anymore might in some sense be seen as a…well. A bad thing. Especially to his father. He stutters to rectify this, running a hand nervously through his hair. “The Jeep is in one of Derek’s garages. It – I couldn’t drive it anymore because it’s really…um. Unique. Conspicuous. People kept uh – finding me. Following me around.”

One time, a teenage girl trailed him to the gas station and leapt out of her car the second he did without even taking her keys out of the ignition or putting it in park. The car drove itself directly into the mini mart, and Stiles stood there, sunglasses dangling from his fingers, slack-jawed, as cans of energy drinks rolled themselves about the parking lot after spilling from a fridge struck by the vehicle.

But, she got her picture.

“I guess this is so discrete,” he gestures to the Lexus again, and Stiles swallows. It’s a nice car, yes, and it shines really bright in the sun, and Derek washes and waxes it in perfectly timed intervals so it always has that fresh out of the dealership glow, but – okay. The man has a point.

Changing the direction of the conversation the only way he knows how, Stiles blurts out, “I turned 23 a few days ago,” a decibel or so too loud, and his father shuts his mouth with a click. “Maybe you heard about it.”

Lightning quick, he says back “I’m sure it was in a magazine somewhere.”

Stiles sometimes forgets that his affinity for sarcasm and whip-fast cutting remarks comes from somewhere, and it wasn’t exactly his mother. It takes him a full four seconds to recover from the sting of that, and by the time he does, he’s just angry. “Or it was in a phone call from my fiancée, asking you to come to my birthday party. Which you didn’t come to.”
“I had to work that night.”

“Are you going to invite me in at any point, or?”

Instead of stepping aside to let Stiles past, the Sheriff leans up against the doorway and crosses his arms over his chest, giving Stiles a very measured and controlled look, as though he’s trying to seem detached, when Stiles knows better than that. “So what have you been doing? Other than luxury car shopping.”

Stiles breathes through his nose. He shouldn’t take the bait – but he does. “I go to school.”

“I heard you don’t work anymore,” he almost cuts Stiles off with this, and Stiles nods his head.

“I couldn’t really get away with that. I’m – front page.” There’s no way to say that without it sounding pretentious, but pretentious or not, it’s the truth.

“So how do you afford your rent?”

It’s a loaded question. Both of them know it, in the silence that follows. “I moved in with Derek.”

“I bet he likes that,” a solemn smile crosses his face and he shakes his head incredulously, almost like he honestly cannot believe it. “You have no income and no place else to go, driving around a car with his name on the title, your tuition at his fingertips.”

He’s just listed facts, true as the sky being blue, but Stiles can read between the lines. He controls you, his father is saying. He controls your entire life, and you just sit back and let it happen.

“Oh, dad,” Stiles shakes his own head. “Don’t.”

“He snaps his fingers and your whole life could come crashing down, all because you let him pay for all of it.”

“It’s not like that,” Stiles hisses through his teeth, but he knows it’s no use. It’s never been any use – his father won’t listen. His father hates Derek, and even that feels like too small of a statement to carry the weight that it needs to.

When Derek and Stiles got back together after Spark, his father more or less told him that Stiles was throwing his life away. That marrying Derek would be like marrying his abuser, or something – and Stiles wondered how his father could even see it that way. Yes, Derek had fucked up before, and yes there had been fights and crying and an entire book full of lies but it’s just because Derek can’t – God. Stiles can’t go over this again. He just can’t.

“You’re still getting married.” It’s not a question. Stiles’ hand is right there, hanging limp by his side, and the engagement ring keeps catching the sunlight and glittering obvious and ostentatious. Stiles feels, bizarrely, like shoving his hand into his pocket. “That must have cost, what? A thousand dollars?”

Stiles looks away. Somewhere more in the realm of four thousand. And that was penny change to Derek.

Reading his silence for what it is, his father looks at him, almost like he doesn’t believe his eyes. “This isn’t you,” he says, and Stiles rubs his eyes. “The car, and the money, and the house, and the ridiculous ring. None of it.”

“I know you think Derek has a gun to my fucking head, forcing me to eat caviar and drink champagne, but the reality is that I just want to be with him, and he just wants to be with me, and
that’s as complicated or fucked up as it gets.”

“Your mother’s car, that she left you in her will,” he goes on as though Stiles hasn’t spoken, and Stiles can’t do much except for stand there like a stranger, uninvited from his own childhood home, “sitting in one of his garages like it’s nothing to you. What do you think she would say if she saw you as you are now?”

Stiles has a dozen responses to this. That his mother for one would be happy that Stiles was, that his mother would have helped him plan the wedding, that his mother would have come to his birthday party no matter what. But he says none of that, because he can’t go around and around in circles like this anymore. He just can’t do it. “Don’t wait for an invitation,” he says with finality, shoving his hands into his pockets and turning on his heel to walk away. “Maybe you’ll read about it in a magazine.”

He slams his car door, barely glances at his father’s silhouette still hovering in the doorway frozen still like a statue, and guns it so hard out of the driveway he likely ruins the tire marks his mother left behind. Just another thing for his father to hate him for, Stiles guesses.

The entire drive out of town toward Derek’s house consists of punching the steering wheel repeatedly and shaking his head. He’s so upset he doesn’t bother turning on the radio. He just sits there in silence and mutters under his breath, until he’s shouting at himself in the confines of his own car as the cars in the other lane whizz past him.

“He just doesn’t fucking understand,” he hisses at nothing, pursing his lips and then immediately opening them again. “Nobody – nobody fucking–“

He cuts himself off and shakes his head again. Nobody will ever understand – nobody has ever felt anything like this before. In the rational part of his brain, Stiles can get entirely where his father is coming from. He knows what Derek and Stiles must look like from the outside, especially to someone like his dad. He knows that Derek has messed up before, he knows that what he did was wrong and he’s done a half a dozen more wrong things than that. That’s rational.

What Stiles feels about Derek isn’t. People like to write love songs and movies and books about how oh so happy it is to be in love, and isn’t it great, and no one ever cries about anything, and everyone is always nice, and says just the right thing. Real life, real love, just isn’t like that. It’s absurd to Stiles that his father looks at what he and Derek are and sees abuse, and sees Derek controlling Stiles, running his entire life - because Derek couldn’t ever be that way, not intentionally. It’s – it’s not his fault.

It’s not Stiles’ fault, either. He can’t help himself. There’s a hundred reasons why he and Derek should quit while they’re ahead – but they don’t make sense to him when they’re alone together. Derek and Stiles could never ruin each other, it’s everyone else that’s the problem. The money, and the fame, and the books, and the people. If Derek was just a person, and Stiles was just a person…

There’s no use thinking like that. They are what they are, and this is what they get.

Stiles worked himself up so much he didn’t notice that he was suddenly going 75 in a 35, an easy thing to accomplish in a car like a Lexus where the engine is quiet and purrs instead of roars like the Jeep did when it went anything over 20. One second he’s thinking about punching his steering wheel again just for the hell of it, and the next he’s seeing tail lights in his windshield getting closer, and dangerously closer, and closer still, and then –

People have said Stiles is a good crash driver. He’s crashed the Jeep into so many things before it’s
a wonder it’s still in one piece, let alone a semi-running machine. He’s quick, so he manages to
swerve at the last second, right before he would’ve went slamming into someone else, and instead
careens off the road with a thump as he goes over a hill. There’s a solid moment where he feels the
car suspended in mid-air, and then slam. The perfect place to put a telephone pole – right on the
side of the road.

And as he’s sitting there, a little bit of blood trickling out of his forehead and a sharp, unignorable
pain in his arm, it’s all he can do to thump his head back on the headrest and shake his head up at
the ceiling of his car. “Of course,” he says. Of course.

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“Hey,” Derek’s voice sounds the same as it always does whenever he answers Stiles’ calls. It’s the
halfway through the second ring pick up that suggests he had been staring dismally at his phone
during a terrible meeting with his board of advisers (or whatever the hell they are) just waiting for
Stiles to call and give him an out.

“Hey,” Stiles says back. He kicks his legs out a few times. “What’re you doing?”

“Experiencing the phenomenon of how time literally slows to a snail’s speed in Lydia’s office.”
Stiles blinks out across the room, frowning and wondering what he could be doing in Lydia’s
office, today and now. He hasn’t been there in months. “What about you?”

Stiles frowns again, this time more intensely. He feels the hospital bracelet sliding around on his
wrist as he moves the phone away from his ear for a brief second to take a deep breath, in and out,
and then brings the phone back. “So – you remember the Lexus.”

“Hm,” Derek intones. “I think I remember that bullet point on my credit card bill, yes.”

“You remember it fondly. In your memories.”

There’s a pause. A pause that suggests Derek might be putting two and two together a lot quicker
than Stiles would have hoped. “Where are you right now?” He asks, voice very measured.

“Where are any of us, really, in the grand scheme of –“

“Stiles.”

Stiles huffs out a sigh and scrunches uncomfortably in the cast and brace they’ve got around his
shoulder and arm. “Don’t freak out. I mean it.”

A long silence that suggests Derek is either clawing his way through some upholstery in Lydia’s
office or slowly chewing off his own fingers extends between them. When the ambulance had
shown up, their first question was whether or not they could call someone for him, and Stiles
nearly babbled out Derek’s name before he could think about it – luckily he caught himself. It
would’ve been bad, very very bad, for Derek to get a phone call from a paramedic or random police
officer explaining in a detached tone of voice that Stiles was being taken to the hospital, and no
they can’t release any information, family members only.

“I’m okay,” he goes on. “Everything is fine. I – okay.” He sighs again. “I crashed the Lexus.”

“What?”
Stiles pulls the phone away from his ear, scrunching his eyes shut. “Totaled it, possibly. I don’t know. It would cost more than the actual car to fix it, which I think is the definition of totaled, actually. Or totaled means total destruction, in which case, I don’t know if that’s accurate. It – it might still run. I don’t know. It was blinking its hazards last I saw it, so –“


Stiles fiddles with the bandage on his forehead. “Um – Beacon General?”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” There’s a sound like nails on a chalkboard from somewhere in the background – likely the sound of Derek pushing his chair back. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m not dead,” he announces.

“Are you concussed?”

“What? No! I’m – well, I don’t know.”

“Oh, my God. Just –“

“You just,” Stiles interrupts before Derek can even start. “You. Just get into your car, and drive here, and come to the emergency room, and – you’ll see I’m fine. Don’t. Freak out.”

It’s only fifteen minutes later that Derek is sweeping into Stiles’ room, or rather his side of a room, where he’s perched on the edge of the bed, kicking his feet out and staring down at the linoleum floor.

The first thing he does is gently grab Stiles’ chin with two fingers, turning his face this way and that as he examines it for damage. He’s got a scratch right near his eye that’s more like a cat-scratch than anything else, and the real wound on his forehead has been patched up nice.

“It’s just my arm,” Stiles tells him, voice a little too high. “It’s broken. It’s okay.”

“It’s broken,” Derek repeats tonelessly.

“I know the concept is foreign to you lycans,” he pulls his chin out of Derek’s hand and glowers down at his feet instead. “But we humans break bones every now and again. And the Lexus –“

“I don’t care about the car,” he insists, and takes Stiles’ chin again. “Jesus Christ.”

“I’m fine.”

Silence, and Derek traces his eyes along Stiles’ face for a long moment. If Stiles didn’t know any better, he’d say that Derek was committing the moment to memory – all the tiny little details and intricacies of what Stiles looks like and where he is. Maybe so he could write it all down. “What about the other person?”

“Huh?” Stiles asks, scrunching his eyebrows together.

“The other person in the accident. The other car.”

Stiles looks at him for a second. “It was a telephone pole.”

Derek takes a breath in like he’s about to say something, and then he just…doesn’t. His mouth hangs half open, half a sound coming out of his throat only to get cut off abruptly like he can’t even, and then he just shakes his head. “You crashed into a telephone pole,” Derek repeats,
maybe just to see if it sounds any less ridiculous when it’s said out loud. Judging from the expression he makes after the fact, Stiles would guess not.

“Well, sorry, I didn’t ram into a minivan with a baby on board bumper sticker!”

“How did this even happen?”

Stiles gestures to their surroundings – the flimsy curtain hanging between them and someone who Stiles is ninety percent sure is already dead, and the nurses and doctors walking past their door every fifteen seconds, and machines and the general smell of death. “Do we have to talk about this here and now?”

“Yes,” Derek says, leaving no room for argument.

With a long suffering sigh, Stiles puckers his lips. He meticulously starts picking at the fabric of his jeans with the fingers on his good hand, while Derek just stands there and watches him, waiting. Derek has a miraculous talent for doing that. He’ll sit there and wait, and wait, and wait, and can do it all day, until Stiles says something, anything. It’s half his best character trait and half his worst. “I went and saw my dad.”

That alone might have answered Derek’s question, because Derek doesn’t ask anything more after that. He just nods his head, like suddenly it makes all the sense in the world, and Stiles could’ve shut his mouth and left it at that. But he can’t sit with his feelings, or make anything out of them like Derek can, so he does the only thing he knows how to do – tries to make a joke out of it.

“Guess you won’t be the only one without any parents at the wedding,” he tries, but it falls flat when his tone is wrong, and his voice cracks over more than one word, and Derek doesn’t smile. Derek always knows when to not smile.

He tries to just not, but his eyes water up. And he tries to look away or angle his face so that Derek won’t be able to see, but it doesn’t matter either way. He starts crying, because his father won’t speak to him and won’t come to his wedding and because he’s just lived through a traumatic experience and crashed his car and broken his arm, and Derek is just standing there being him, and Stiles…can’t.

“Okay,” Derek murmurs. He pushes Stiles’ face into his shoulder with one hand on the back of his neck, and strokes his fingers up and down Stiles’ good arm, but otherwise seems hesitant to jostle him too much. “I – okay.”

“Not okay,” Stiles says into Derek’s shirt.

Derek is quiet. And then, “no, I guess not. I’m sorry I can’t…fix it.”

There’s nothing that Derek could do, and at this point, Stiles doubts there’s anything that he could do himself. They’re at a stalemate, frozen still, and his father won’t budge, and neither will Stiles, and Derek is just the bystander who got himself roped into all of this.

“He’ll come around, I think.” The words sound awkward coming out of Derek’s mouth. Maybe just because he is self-admittedly terrible at comforting people, or maybe because they’re just not true, and he knows they’re not.

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I could lie to everyone else, I could write an entire book of fabrications and denials, I could novelize him, make him up entirely from scratch, and I could turn him into a monster just to try and cope with the fact that he was anything but. I could.

So I did. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 24).

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One thing no one ever mentions about breaking or fracturing limbs, especially very important ones, is how god damn hard it is to sleep. Stiles would say that he spent most of the night tossing and turning, but he couldn’t even move, really. Every time he even slightly shifted a shooting pain would start at the base of his spine, paralyzing him for moments at a time. And inevitably, the scent of that would shake Derek awake from whatever cat nap he kept managing to fall into, and then he’d ask about the pills, and Stiles would say he doesn’t need anymore, and on and on.

Eventually, he took the pills and knocked out at four in the morning. When he wakes up, it’s bright light outside like afternoon, and Derek’s side of the bed is empty, all of his covers pushed to Stiles’ side or draped over him. He grumbles a bit as he slowly works himself into a sitting position, wincing as his entire body feels like one big bruise, and then he just sits on the bed frowning at his sheets.

“Derek,” he calls in a rasp, knowing that even if Derek were in the mysterious wing of the house all the way on the direct opposite side from where Stiles is right now, he’d be able to hear Stiles calling his name. A couple of minutes pass, and then Derek is poking his head in through the doorway and giving him a bit of a tight smile.

“Awake?”

“No,” Stiles grumbles. “Sleep walking, actually.”

“Uh huh,” Derek pads inside in bare feet, wearing sweatpants and an old sleep shirt of his. It reads BEACON HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL BASKETBALL in old faded letters and sort of squeezes him at the shoulders. Still, every time Stiles sees him wearing it, he sort of has to cock his head to the side and blink, and remember that there was a time where Derek had a life so completely opposite to the one he lives now, it’s a wonder the same person lived them both. “Need help up?”

“Help, help,” Stiles makes a grabby hand in Derek’s direction, “I need you to saran wrap my cast.”

Derek doesn’t even pause as he takes Stiles’ good arm and gently works on lifting him up off the bed and onto his feet. “Are we taking it to a potluck?”


Derek gets him up on his feet, a little wobbly, and then picks up Stiles’ pain pills and rattles them around a bit as he pops two out into his palm. “So why are we turning your arm into leftovers?”

Stiles accepts his pills and the glass of water from his bedside table, swallows them both in one big gulp while Derek watches him like a hawk. He has a tendency of doing that – Derek still probably religiously checks Stiles’ medication strip in the bathroom at the end of the week to make sure all the little boxes for each day of the week are empty. “Well, I do love the concept of bathing.”

“Oh, right.” Derek sets the pill bottle down and gives Stiles a once over – from the bandage still on his forehead, to the slight bruising around his collarbones, to his arm, covered up in a green cast
and looking certifiably ridiculous. “Breakfast?”

“Brunch, I’d say,” Stiles corrects, glancing out at the sun spilling onto their bedroom floor with a squint.

“If you want to split hairs, it’d be more lunch.”

As they walk down the hall and the stairs, Stiles watches the back of Derek’s head, observes him in his unshowered, sweatpants glory, and thinks that he hasn’t seen Derek like this in quite a while. He’s always so done up, usually, especially these days. “Have you heard anything about the Lexus?”

“It’s gone.”

“What?” Stiles stutters to a stop on the landing, nearly sliding across the marble floors, but Derek just gives him a raised eyebrow and a look like *yup.* “It wasn’t that messed up when I last saw it.”

“Bigger pain in the ass to get fixed than to just get rid of it,” he shrugs. “You weren’t attached.”

No, Stiles definitely wasn’t *attached,* but… he sort of liked that car. Then again, it’s not really Derek or the car’s fault that the thing got ruined, and Derek’s right. For him, it’s less of a pain in the ass to just buy a new one than it would be to go through the process of getting it back up to its original glory. He chews on his lip as they finally reach the kitchen, and then watches as Derek pulls a plate covered in tin foil from the oven. Likely, the maid came and cooked breakfast, made up a plate for Stiles only to discover he was still in his pill-induced coma, and then left it for him per Derek’s request.

He sets the plate down in front of Stiles at the island, hands him a fork, and then plops himself down on his own stool and starts futzing around on his laptop without another word. Stiles eats his lukewarm sausage links and slightly soggy waffles, and Derek’s fingers work on his keys, and those are the only sounds likely for miles.

Derek hyperfocuses on his screen like Stiles isn’t there, a furrow in his brow and a frown on his face, and Stiles says, “I was thinking about pizza for dinner.”

The response Stiles receives for this is a noncommittal grunt and a shrug of shoulders, and then the silence starts up again. Stiles eats another sausage, chews, chews, swallows. “Do you even have saran wrap?”

“This is a house,” Derek tells him blandly, still not looking away from his computer. “And I am a person. So yes.”

Another stretch of silence passes, and Stiles starts to feel a little ignored. It might be the pain pills or the fact that he’s needy anyway from having been in an accident and spending so long in the hospital, but he stares at the side of Derek’s face and feels—well. Something that’s vaguely familiar, from a long time ago, but that he can’t put his finger on.

“Are you mad at me?” Stiles finally blurts when it gets to be too much, and Derek looks at him in surprise, away from his laptop for the first time in ten minutes—like he genuinely doesn’t know where this is coming from. “About the car? Because—”

“What? The car? No, Jesus Christ,” Derek shakes his head and scoffs. Right, Stiles thinks with a huff—how ridiculous he is to think for even a second that Derek would be angry about Stiles destroying a 45,000 dollar luxury car. “I’m not mad.”
Stiles chews his food slowly, and then pushes what’s left around on his plate. “You seem mad.”

“I’m not.”

“My arm hurts even worse when you tell lies,” Stiles prods, and Derek rubs at his forehead. Stiles knows all the buttons to press when it comes to Derek – he’s perfected the art of wheedling information out of him, no matter the cost.

Derek stands up from the island, walks over to the counter, and slowly opens up the bottom drawer with a whirr noise. He picks up a box of saran wrap, drops it down on the countertop, and doesn’t do anything for a second. Finally, he turns back to where Stiles is sitting, and he puts his hands on the table, palm down, and looks Stiles right in the eyes. “I’m – I’m working on my next book.”

That, out of everything, anything on the face of the god damn planet, is not what Stiles had expected Derek to say. After everything that’s happened, after Spark and the mess that it was, and after Derek firing then rehiring Lydia, and after Derek pointedly avoiding his office study for months upon months, and after Stiles not hearing a word about any new projects, never seeing Derek writing anything down… Stiles would have thought that aliens invading was a more viable possibility than Derek writing a new book.

He’s made his money, more than anyone else needs in a lifetime, and Stiles thought that meant that he would be done. Maybe Stiles forgot that money isn’t why Derek does what he does, after all, and that’s not fair to him. “Oh,” Stiles says, because he honestly can’t think of anything, not a single thing else, to say.

Derek looked like he had been expecting that exact reaction, but he still flinches, just a little bit. In silence, he opens up the saran wrap and unwinds a big piece, ripping it off, and motioning for Stiles’ arm. Stiles holds it out, and neither of them say a word as Derek meticulously begins wrapping the plastic all over Stiles’ cast.

This is just a touchy subject. Maybe they never really sat down and talked about everything the way that they should have, but after all the fighting and arguing, Stiles guesses that neither of them had it in them any longer. It was never about the sheer fact that Stiles was in them, never once, because if anyone can remember – Stiles green lit Beacons even after reading all that Derek had to say about him, in spite of what anyone says about it.

But Stiles never said that Derek wasn’t allowed to write about him anymore. In fact, just the opposite. It’s just that when months passed and Derek hadn’t even touched the door to his study, Stiles thought it was all over, and done with. They had walked a fragile line for too long, and Derek writing another one of those god damn books might have been the thing that would wind up breaking it.

“I think it’s great,” Stiles half shouts, and Derek looks up at him with raised eyebrows. “The book. It’s great.”

Derek blinks at him for a moment. “You do,” he says, no inflection. Like he doesn’t quite believe it.

Stiles nods very pointedly, almost jostling his arm and ruining Derek’s creation. “I think it’s – yes. I think it’s great. You – should. Do that. Write a new book. It’s what you do, after all.”

“It is,” Derek agrees with his own nod. “It is what I do.”

“And you do it well, and people will buy it.”
Derek puts the finishing touches on Stiles’ cast and then runs his fingers along all the edges of the plastic, making sure every last inch of it is covered nice and snugly. “Do you want to know what it’s about?” The question comes out awkwardly, like he doesn’t want to ask it, and like he doesn’t want to hear Stiles’ answer.

Swallowing, Stiles asks, “what’s it about?”

Derek meets his eyes for a moment, and then a smile crosses his face. It’s not a particularly happy smile. No, it’s a smile that Stiles has learned to know very, very well in his time with Derek. “The truth.”

Letting out a breath he didn’t realizing he was holding, Stiles nods his head. The truth. That thing that Derek had such a hard time with last time, that Stiles is suddenly terrified to read about himself.

But he reminds himself that he agreed to this. He lets Derek walk away to do whatever it is he has to do, padding out of the kitchen until his footsteps get so far away they’re silent, and reminds himself that he said yes. Not just about Derek writing about him, but about this entire life to begin with.

Derek asked him, well over a year ago now, if he had a problem with the way Derek’s life was. If he could handle the attention. If he could deal with being scrutinized. If he could live with having his personal life thrown out into the public eye, turned into metaphors and prose for Derek to make money off of.

He had said yes.

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Allison pauses in stirring sugar into her coffee, and Scott blinks at him fifteen times in five seconds. They do that couple’s thing where they share a quiet look with one another, and Allison looks like she’s daring Scott to say something, and Scott looks like he’d rather stick his hand in a vat of poisonous snakes than do any such thing. In the end, Allison wins the silent argument, and Scott turns forward to address Stiles once more.

“I thought,” he starts, keeping his eyes downcast on his hands where they’re resting on his own cup of coffee, “that you two agreed,” the half sentence hangs there, and then Scott clears his throat and finishes, “that he wouldn’t be writing about you anymore.”

“I don’t know where you got that idea,” Stiles scoffs, shaking his head. “My exact words were, yes you can write about me.”

“I thought you told him never to write about you again,” Allison says, a confused tilt to her voice.

“That literally never happened. I never told you that happened,” Stiles squints across the café, where a teenage girl keeps looking over her shoulder at him every ten seconds on the dot. “Why do you think that happened?”

“Because it seems boneheaded to me that you wouldn’t tell him that,” Scott says with finality. And maybe he’s right about that that. “It seems stupid, after everything that’s happened…”

After everything that’s happened, maybe Stiles should be running as fast as he can away from the entire situation. Maybe he should’ve gotten a contract, where Derek swore he wouldn’t write about
Stiles anymore, where Derek would have to only mention him in passing like Derek does with Laura. “It’s also not how our relationship works,” Stiles decides out loud, shaking his head. “I’m not going to tell Derek what he can or can’t write, so long as it’s the truth. If I told him not to write about me anymore – I mean if I really felt that I couldn’t stand it if he did – then why not just break up with him?”

Allison purses her lips like she might disagree, but won’t say anything about it.

“It’s what he does. It’s his life. I’m not going to control him.”

“All right,” Scott says slowly, “maybe I see the point. But what I don’t get is –“

“And, really, there’s no reason for me to just instantaneously think that I’m a main feature of this book. He’s told me less than nothing about it, mostly because I won’t ask, in his defense, and I might be – jumping the gun.”

Some more blinking from Scott’s end. “Okay…”

“And I don’t know what he’s saying about me if he’s saying anything at all. For all I know, I’m mentioned twice and it’s all about my dick or something, which would be – okay –“

“Why are you rationalizing this to us?” Allison interrupts, putting down her cup of coffee with a bit of a clink on their table. “You’re the one who seems to be upset about it.”

Stiles stares dismally into his latte, lips pulled down into a tight, tense frown. He had called Scott the moment Derek went up into his study and demanded a coffee date, because he had something really important that he needed to talk to someone about. When they all sat down, Stiles immediately blurted out the news as though he were announcing death counts from a terrorist attack. So it makes sense why they would be confused now about why Stiles is trying to make it seem like it’s not that bad, when he’s the one who’s acting like it is.

“It’s just.” He purses his lips, adjusts the sling on his shoulder. He very nearly doesn’t know what it’s just. “The whole book thing. And the him writing them thing. And the me being in them thing. It’s just – it’s been like walking on eggshells every time it’s come up, ever since Spark. It’s not that I have a problem with it in the most literal sense it’s just…I don’t know what to say about it.”

“Like you said. It’s his entire career and life,” Allison lifts an eyebrow, and Stiles frowns even more deeply.

“So if we can’t talk about it, then that’s…it’s just going to get worse.”

“Exactly,” she agrees, and then she says nothing else. Stiles has already figured it all out for himself, but now he just doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do about it, and Allison can’t necessarily help him. This is Stiles and Derek’s relationship. That means that Stiles or Derek or both of them should be able to deal with it on their own.

He takes a long sip from his cup and notices that girl from earlier trying to take a discrete over-the-shoulder picture of him, while her friends do their absolute best to look casual about it. It doesn’t bother Stiles like it might have a year ago, when Beacons was number one and Stiles was just starting to get recognized. Now, he gets recognized everywhere he goes, and he doesn’t do much aside from shrug and smile and stop for pictures.

A lot has changed since Beacons came out, actually. Nearly everything.

“When all that happened, it came pretty fucking close to ruining everything. It was so…” he smiles
ruefully, shaking his head. “No one’s ever hurt me like that before. And I think he would say the same about me walking away.”

“Yeah,” Scott agrees. He remembers good and well what it was like those first few weeks after the fact.

“But he doesn’t fucking – he won’t speak to me about certain things, and I don’t think he realizes how much that’s going to bury us. He thinks he can just write his books and say he loves me ten thousand times and that’s all it is, but – there’s more. There’s got to be. Right?”

“Communication for starters,” Scott says. “Which Derek has never exactly been the King of.”

Stiles knows this, he does. He knows that Derek refusing to openly talk about anything and just running away and hiding in his work and his art has the potential to be their entire downfall – it’s already almost happened three times. Stiles can’t live through a fourth.

“Then I need to talk to him,” Stiles concludes. His friends nod at him like dashboard dogs across the table, and the girl across the room gets her picture, and the Range Rover sits outside in the parking lot with a driver that’s doing a crossword as he waits for Stiles, and this is all a part of his life. This is who he is now.

“Speaking of talking to certain people and certain conversations that you’re not very interested in having,” Scott begins, leaning across the table with a bit of a pained expression on his face. “Spoken to your father lately?”

Stiles looks at his hands and shrugs his shoulders. “We don’t talk,” he says simply. There’s nothing more to say about it, and Scott and Allison share another one of those looks with one another, but neither of them say anything else on the matter.

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Stiles finds Derek in the exact place he had expected to – hidden away in the cave that is his study, surrounded by post-its and empty coffee cups. He never turned the light on even though the sun is fading quickly, so the entire place is dark and a little colder than the rest of the house. Derek’s fortress of solitude.

“Hi,” he says when he comes in, and Derek turns like he’s actually startled. Stiles wasn’t exactly quiet since getting home, thumping around all over the place looking for things and making a general mess out of their bedroom since everything is a much messier task when you only have one working arm, and Derek is a god damn werewolf. Likely, he was so engrossed in whatever it is he’s writing that he completely forgot another person lives in this house with him.

“Hey,” Derek greets. “Is your arm feeling all right?” His voice sounds nervous. As Stiles approaches the desk, the throne really, Derek’s fingers work over his laptop like he’s going to close the document he has open – and then he freezes at the last second, as though he realizes what he had been doing. He swallows, leaves it open as he drags his fingers slowly away from the keys, and turns to face Stiles head on.

“Dull, constant throb. But fine.” Stiles perches himself on the edge of the desk with his back to the laptop. Doesn’t even try to sneak a peek at a single word Derek has written there already. Derek notices this, and keeps flicking his eyes between his screen and Stiles’ face, like he expects any second that the fact that the two of them are in the same room together will cause a split in the
Derek leans forward, interested, and Stiles produces his old copy of Reborn, turning it over so that Derek can look at the cover. When he sees it, he smiles just a little bit, not a full blown grin – but that fond, gentle smile people get when looking at memories. Stiles open up the front cover to show Derek the old Stiles <3’s Derek and Derek’s signature.

It all seems so long ago, now. Lifetimes away. They were different people – Stiles was someone else when he wrote that he loved Derek, and Derek was someone else when he signed it, and they’re all brand new and shiny now. Unrecognizable.

“You know I really loved this book,” he hugs it up against his chest with one arm as if to emphasize his point. “I still really love this book. It really meant a lot to me when I was a kid, and it means a lot to me now. I have all my favorite parts,” he opens it up and flips through the pages to show Derek, stopping and pointing at specific paragraphs, “highlighted and underlined. I’ve read some parts of this book so many times I have passages memorized, still.”

Derek’s eyes trace Stiles’ fingers, and then the book, and then up to his face. He looks like he’s confused about where this conversation is going. Derek knows all of this, Stiles has told him and shown him all of this before.

“I just – I love your books. I really do. And I would hate it if for one second you thought that I felt any other way about them.”

Realization dawns across Derek’s face, and he moves like he’s going to interrupt, but Stiles stops him before he’s ahead.

“I don’t want you to think you can’t tell me about this kind of stuff anymore, just because last time was – you know.” Yeah, Derek knows. “Writing is what you do. It would kill me to think that you couldn’t talk to me about it.”

Silence falls over them, seconds passing by, the grandfather clock ticking and ticking. Derek’s hands are white-knuckled where they’re gripping the arms of the chair he’s sitting in, and he stares at Stiles’ face for what feels like a long time. Then, he leans forward like he’s going to kiss Stiles, the same thing he always does to evade having a real conversation about something, and so Stiles angles his face out of the way and puts his hand against Derek’s cheek to stop him. “No,” he says gently, and Derek blinks at him. “Say something.”

They stare at each other. Derek looks about ready to get up and walk out of this room, he really does, but Stiles knows that he won’t. He can’t. He loves Stiles too much to do something like that.

“Please,” Stiles pushes.

Derek’s eyelashes fall against his cheeks as he looks down, maybe unable to meet Stiles’ eyes head on, but he opens his mouth all the same. “I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. About this.” His voice is low, quiet. “I want me writing about you to make you feel…important. I think I ruined that, last time.”

Leaning down so he’s almost pressing his lips against Derek’s cheek, Stiles says, “you made me feel used, last time.”

Derek pulls back and makes a face like that’s absolutely and literally the worst possible thing that Stiles could have ever said, but Stiles doesn’t care.

“It’s the truth,” he insists, putting his hand on Derek’s shoulder before he can pull too far away.
“You’re the one writing a book about the truth. You should care to know what the truth even is.”

Derek frowns down at his hands and looks miserable. Like he’s being tortured in some underground bunker somewhere, and Stiles just sighs and waits for him to say something else. It’s like pulling teeth, with him, and he’s just lucky Stiles loves him enough to sit here and do this with him. “I’ll change that. With this one.”

“Okay,” Stiles agrees.

“I mean it. It’s – you’ll see. You’ll see everything before I put it out, before the editor even sees it. I won’t… keep secrets like that. Not anymore. Not from you.”

Again, Stiles agrees, “okay,” and puts his palm against Derek’s cheek.

For the moment, it seems that neither of them have any more to say on the matter. Derek’s laptop screen has gone dark and there seems to be no more coffee left in his cup, so it’s no surprise when Derek leans back in his chair with a creak. Interestingly enough, Derek doesn’t look relieved to have that conversation over and done with – he actually looks even more uncomfortable than he had during the actual discussion. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Then, opens it again. “Your father called.”

Stiles’ eyes nearly bulge out of his head. “He called?”

Derek nods his head, with a look that suggests that he also cannot fucking believe it.

They don’t have a landline at the mansion, because nobody fucking does anymore. Which means if Derek is saying that his father called, and it sure as fuck wasn’t to Stiles’ phone, then it was directly to Derek’s. In his mind, he can already imagine what a phone call from the Sheriff to Derek would even be like. It isn’t good. It isn’t fucking good at all. “To say what?” Stiles demands.

“Don’t get worked up,” Derek warns, flicking his eyes to Stiles’ bum arm. As if he’s worried that Stiles will get himself so riled up that he’ll injure himself even more in the process. It’s not unlikely to happen, if Stiles is being honest with himself.

“I’m not. I just want to know.”

Derek runs his hand along his jaw and looks out the window, frowning. “It wasn’t pleasant,” he starts carefully, and Stiles nods his head like motherfucking duh. “I don’t mean to sound like I’m on his side or anything,” before Stiles even has the chance to blanch at the term his side, Derek continues, “but why would you not tell him yourself that you got in a car accident?”

It takes a moment for his mind to catch up to that sentence. When it does, he leans back and makes a long groaning noise, shaking his head at himself. Right. That. “I think he forfeited his right to get phone calls from me regarding my health and wellbeing a couple of months ago.”

“Stiles,” Derek says his name all low, like he’s disappointed.

Yeah, Derek is right. It was wrong for Stiles to not call his father, no matter how much they’re arguing or not speaking or whatever it is they’re doing. A parent deserves to know when their child gets hurt, at the bare minimum. Stiles doesn’t really want to admit this out loud, because it feels terrible enough being inside of his own head, so he just huffs. “Well, how did he even find out to begin with?”

Derek leans forward and wakes his computer up, clicks away from his word document to go into his browser instead, and there it is. An e-mail attachment from Lydia Martin, a picture of one of
those ridiculous gossip magazines (OK!, or InTouch, or whatever the fuck), with a headline reading STILES’ ACCIDENT in garish pink lettering. There’s actually a picture of him there, too. Not a picture of him post-accident, mind you, but a paparazzi picture of him looking generally upset from maybe four or so months back. A candid of him looking upset isn’t that hard to find, and everyone who gives half a shit about him has likely already seen that image anyway, but all the same. It’s weird to see it like that.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “How does my father see that, and yet I don’t even know it exists?”

“Grocery store line,” Derek shrugs.

Stiles feels shitty all over again. How awful that must have been. His father standing in line at the grocery store with a basket full of food for a dinner he has to cook for one person to eat all alone in a house he bought to have a family in, looking over and seeing that. “And what did he say to you about it?”

Derek’s lips curve down even further. “You can Mad Lib that.”

Stiles sure can. And how dare you buy my son that car, knowing it’s dangerous, blah blah, and how dare you even exist, blah blah, and eat shit, blah blah, and my son and I aren’t speaking because of you, blah blah.

“Maybe you oughta talk to him.”

“Maybe I oughta take my pain meds and go to sleep,” Stiles hedges, muttering under his breath.

“Stiles,” Derek says his name like that again, “I know you’re angry with him.”

“I’ve transcended angry. I’m livid. I’m fuming. You didn’t hear the way he talked to me and the things that he said,” Stiles shakes his head just remembering that conversation.

“…but haven’t you tried seeing it from his perspective?”

“Oh, don’t start. Your opinion on yourself means dick all to me at this point, and I just don’t want to hear another thousand word essay about how much you suck and about how right my dad is to hate us being together.”

“I’m not saying he’s right,” Derek shakes his head. “I’m saying – he sees it. Like a dad does. Like I’m – I’m not someone you should trust. I’m not, you know that.”

“God, shut up with that.” Stiles can’t with Derek’s self-deprecation right now. He can’t.

“I don’t care what he thinks about me or us,” he goes on like Stiles hadn’t spoken. “But it’s – you can put on the act all you want. But I know you. And I know how it makes you feel that you two aren’t speaking.”

Stiles looks down at his hand and gets that feeling in his throat he always gets whenever he thinks he might start crying. For all intents and purposes, they are the last immediate family that either of them has anymore. Sure, Scott is like a brother and Melissa is like a second mother, but neither of them really are either of those things.

And Stiles has got Derek now. Who has the Sheriff got?

“I’m tired of crying about it,” Stiles shrugs, and blinks furiously to keep the tears already forming
out of his eyes. “My arm hurts. I’m tired. I feel terrible.”

Derek won’t argue the point any more than that. He just nods his head and looks disappointed, but he won’t say anything else. Stiles knows that. “Bed time.”

Stiles stands from Derek’s desk and nods. “Will you come? Help me in my pajamas and all?”

He glances back at his laptop – at the picture of Stiles looking miserable from post-Spark backlash, the headline next to it, and his word document waiting for him. “Yes,” he decides, slapping his laptop closed with a loud smack.

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It was always funny to me when people would act like every perceived fight, or every proven fight, or anything that seemed to go even slightly wrong with our relationship – that must have been Stiles’ fault. The fact that I didn’t put Spark out, the lost manuscript, must have been Stiles’ fault, and he must have forced me and Lydia to go along with everything he said like some kind of puppet master with the mark of the devil on his forehead.

Meanwhile, all he ever really did while I was writing that piece of shit was love me, and support me, and believe the best of me. Spark kept me awake at night. While I would lie there listening to Stiles’ breathing, I would think about how I had only just written an entire twenty pages about how I hated him, couldn’t stand him any longer, could barely be in the same room with him. And then I’d wake up in the morning and he would kiss me and treat me like a genius, a god, a person who deserved him, and I’d go and write another twenty pages about how he disgusts me.

And you think I’m someone to look up to. And he’s the person you revile and despise. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 70).

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“How long are you supposed to keep that stupid thing on?” Lydia demands, wrinkling her nose as she appraises Stiles in all his glory. They’re sitting in the back room at Howl, because where else, and Derek has on an actual suit and tie, because what else, and Stiles has got on a flannel and jeans he’s had since senior year of high school that say SCOTT WAS HERE on the ass, because what else.

“The cast?” Stiles clarifies, even though he knows good and well that’s what she means. “Well – I’m free of the sling, at least.”

“It’s starting to smell.”

“Only to your noses I bet,” Stiles looks at Derek, who just sits there and doesn’t make any sort of commentary – which means it does smell to his sensitive werewolf nose. He just won’t say anything about it. “And anyway, like another month.”

“A month?” She looks at him like that’s just about the worst thing Stiles could have possibly said. Worse even than World War 3 just started. “We don’t have that kind of time, Stiles.”

Stiles and Derek share a look. “Like it’s my fault.”
“It is your fault,” she snaps irritably, sitting up straighter in her seat and giving Derek a very pointed look before turning back to Stiles. “You crashed the car into a pole, you broke your own arm, and now we all have to deal with it.”

“I don’t see how my broken arm affects literally anyone else on planet earth except for me,” Stiles looks to Derek for back up, but again, he just sits there placidly like this isn’t something he’s even fully involved in – it’s just happening to him, and he’s just here, like a statue or a piece of scenery.

Lydia raises her chin into the air with all the pomp and circumstance of the president of the United States doing the State of the Union address, and says, “because we need to begin promotion.”

“Promotion,” Stiles repeats.

“Yes. You’re writing a new book, is that right?” She addresses Derek, who just looks at her with his lips in a line and nods his head once. “Right. There’s a new book. And a new book means –“

“I thought a new book meant a book tour. Like, Derek at malls signing things and talking to the fans and being nice to people for one month out of the year,” Stiles jokes, and Derek actually raises his eyebrows in amusement, nudging Stiles in the side with his elbow just enough to make Stiles hack out a laugh.

“It does mean that,” Lydia agrees, ignoring their antics. “It also means shoving your faces down everyone’s throats so they have next to no choice but to buy the book when it comes out. You know. Because everyone will want to know what happened,” she gives Derek a really big smile, all teeth and dimples and slightly unnerving. “I told you it wasn’t all bad didn’t I?”

Stiles shifts just a little uncomfortably and tries to sink down into his chair. Of course Lydia would be able to find a silver lining in the entire debacle that was Spark – and really, it’s not like she’s wrong. Everyone knows there was a fifth Derek Hale book that never made it to shelves, and everyone knows Derek destroyed the one and only manuscript, and everyone thinks that Stiles commandeered the entire thing, either because he’s an evil genius or because…well. There’s a lot of speculation about that. It’s good press. Of course.

But this is a conversation he doesn’t have much of a part in, after all. Lydia and Derek have always made that very clear to him. Sure, he’s good for camera action and to just exist and be written about, but when it comes time for the actual book, he’s as good as useless.

“What do you want this time?” Derek asks, voice sounding tired. “My arm? My leg? My soul?”

“I want E! True Hollywood Story and Barbara Walters,” she shrugs, and Stiles waits for Derek to say absolutely not, I refuse, I won’t – instead, Derek just sighs and nods his head. “But I don’t want you,” she drags the word out for entirely longer than necessary, pointing one finger at him before slowly angling it in Stiles’ direction. “I want you.”

Stiles blinks at her. “For what.”

“For Entertainment Tonight.”

“Like – to come along, or?”

“I want you to do the interview.”

“You want me to watch the interview.”

“I want you to sit in a chair, and answer questions, and be filmed while it happens.”
Stiles looks at Derek, who just puts his phone down and looks like he saw this coming a mile
away, giving Stiles a bit of an apologetic look. Apologetic, indeed, but he doesn’t for five seconds
look like he’s trying to get Stiles out of it. “Me?”

“You.”

“Do I have to remind you, I’m not Derek Hale?”

“Everyone knows who you are, so that’s not the fucking issue.”

“Then why, in God’s name, why in Lucifer’s reach, would you make me do an interview when
people don’t give a shit about what I have to say?” He gestures out at nothing, like the entire
world, or at least all the YouTube commenters the world has to offer, are standing in this room
right now. “When people hate me?”

Lydia’s face slowly spreads with a smile, and it’s all condescending like Stiles doesn’t even know,
like Stiles can’t fucking fathom, like Stiles is so silly and stupid. “Because more people watched
the last interview I made you do than tuned in for the VMA’s.”

Stiles blinks at her. Then, he blinks at Derek. Then back to Lydia.

“Millions of people watched that,” she goes on, crossing her legs under her desk and tapping her
heel against the side of it, “which means that millions of people give a shit about what you say and
what you do. Do I need to remind you that ten million people follow you on twitter?”

Stiles has stopped looking at that number – it started to freak him out. He would send out a tweet
about cooking spaghetti and two thousand people would fav it within the first ten seconds; it
started to get more than a little daunting, as one could imagine, so he stopped looking at the
numbers and started just tweeting and immediately exiting out of the app. “But—“

“People want to know. They want to know what you think about, what you do, what you and
Derek do, what happened with Spark. And what people want to know, they’ll pay to know,” she
taps her pen on her desk in a constant rhythm, giving Stiles that same knowing smile from before.
“Do you want to take advantage of that, or not?”

He has de ja vu of a time, standing behind the counter at McDonald’s with Erica Reyes, eating
chicken mcnuggets out of his pocket, where Erica had looked at him and said take advantage of it.
She had been referring to Derek’s money and fame and status, and she thought (as did Stiles) that
the two of them were never going to last, or even be anything remotely close to official. Neither of
them could have foreseen how everything would turn out. Neither of them could have imagined
Lydia Martin looking at Stiles from across her desk in Howl, raising her eyebrows and saying word
for word almost what Erica had said to him then.

Only, Stiles isn’t taking advantage of Derek this time. He’s taking advantage of the millions of
people who are actively rooting for him to fail.

“Okay,” Stiles agrees, leaning back in his seat. “Just one can’t hurt.”

Derek smiles at him, either because he’s pleased or because Stiles looks happy himself, Stiles isn’t
sure. “Just one,” he rolls his eyes. “That’s adorable.”

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Lydia adjusts and readjusts the lapels on his jacket about a dozen times, patting him on the shoulders and moving one strand of his hair just a little to the left, while a woman he only just met an hour ago grabs his face and tells him to sit still.

She starts attacking his face with another makeup brush, dragging powder all over his cheeks and jawline, while Stiles makes a face and tries to angle away from it.

“You look nice,” Lydia says, and then grabs him by his jacket again, this time much harder. “Remember that just because something wasn’t asked in the pre-interview, that doesn’t mean that they won’t drop it on you out of the blue while they’re filming.”

“Right,” Stiles agrees, again trying to duck away from the powder brush to no avail.

“Just keep the objective in mind. You’re not saying anything concrete about the new book,” she pulls a gelled group of hair up higher, “you’re giving the title of the dead manuscript, but you won’t say specifically what happened. It was bad. Make it look like it was bad.”

That shouldn’t be hard, Stiles thinks bitterly.

“But don’t say how it was bad, don’t say why. Look sad at the mention of it. Make it seem like you just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” They’ve already gone over all of this about a dozen times. Derek had been there for a lot of the coaching, sitting back with his arms crossed over his chest listening to Lydia drill Stiles on what not to say, on how to act, how to look, how to sit in the chair, and on and on and on. He hasn’t been particularly thrilled about the entire thing, Stiles would guess, but he’s also not being openly hostile. At a certain point, Stiles thinks that Derek relinquished some of his power to say no to any of this.

For a while, he tried to hold on tight to keeping Stiles away from it all, out of sight out of mind, but then he did write Beacons, didn’t he? Then he forfeited his right to shield Stiles away from any more of it. Stiles is as much a part of this entire charade as Derek is – and that means Stiles has to do the same as Derek has always done.

“Make it seem like not knowing what happened just isn’t an option for these people.”

They drag Stiles out onto the set – which is weird to see in the first place. Like someone’s nice living room, only it’s more like half a room, with the carpets and the walls and the couches, but no ceiling. Surrounded by a sound stage and lights and cameras and people milling around that turn their heads but try to look nonchalant as he walks past.

He gets dumped into one of the couches, and then the makeup brushes start up again, and a microphone gets clipped onto his shirt at some point in the tizzy, and by the time the air clears, the woman they’ve got interviewing him is standing there right in front of him, holding her hand out.

Stiles feels it’s appropriate to stand up when a woman is introducing herself, so he moves to do just that – but she stops him with a smile. “Don’t stand up on my account.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, settling back in slowly and taking her hand as it’s offered.

“Nicole New,” and Stiles has heard that name before. It’s not the kind of name that anyone reacts to with any level of excitement, but it’s definitely an oh, right, her type of recognition. She has interviewed a lot of people on this show, and it’s on every Sunday night at the exact same time, and people watch it, so of course Stiles has heard of her before.
“Stiles Stilinski.”

She nods her head like I know. And that’s the exact moment he realizes that his name is worth something to these people. To a lot of people. You say it to someone and they don’t say oh is that the kid who…nobody really wonders anymore. His name is too unique to begin with, and now he’s…well. Stiles doesn’t really think he has the right term for who or what he is anymore. “It’s nice to meet you,” she tells him as she sits down on her own side of the coffee table, crossing her legs daintily and holding a stack of cards in her hand. Stiles thought she’d be reading off a teleprompter or something, but no – there’s all the questions she intends to ask him, sitting in her hands.

Stiles swallows, wishes he could reach over and take them out of her hands, but instead just sits there and feels uncomfortable. “You too.”

“I’ve actually interviewed Derek a couple of times,” she smiles with all her teeth, lipgloss spreading. “He’s – well, he answers the questions.”

“To some extent, at least.”

“Well, you’d know all about what he’s like. It’s pulling teeth, but they’re really good teeth. You know?”

Oh, boy. Does Stiles ever fucking know.

“Fifteen seconds,” someone yells out from over their heads, somewhere behind the lights in the darkness where Stiles can only make out vague shapes of people and things. Nicole adjusts herself in her seat, gives Stiles a wink.

“Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not,” Stiles says, and tries to really look like he’s not. He doesn’t know how good of a job he does at that, because she just smiles at him like she thinks he’s cute, and then fixes her cards, pushes a strand of hair out of her face, and looks at him steadily.

Stiles looks back at her, and then, action.

“It’s so nice to have you here on the show,” she tells him, and Stiles sees a red blinking light from somewhere to his left and thinks of Derek. “You know, you’re actually a pretty hard person to nail down for a chit chat.”

Stiles hesitates. For just a moment, everything that Lydia told him goes flying out the window. He forgets what he’s supposed to be doing, why he’s here, who this woman is, how he’s meant to sit or act or speak. This isn’t anything like the interview Lydia forced him into to announce the engagement – this is going to be broadcast across major networks and will be tuned into the second it goes live. This isn’t just some YouTube interview that kids will sit around commenting on because they have nothing else to do.

What Stiles says and does on this show could define the success of Derek’s next book. He hadn’t thought of it that way when he was agreeing to this shenanigan, but now he can’t see it any other way.

The dead air hangs on for seconds, minutes in television time, and finally, Stiles clears his throat. “Well, Derek and I have a lot in common.”

She gives him a placating face that says we’ll edit that out in post, and smiles again. “Right, of
course. And I see that your car accident wasn’t just gossip fodder for the tabloids,” she gestures to his cast, hidden underneath the sleeve of his jacket but half visible all the same.

He looks down at it himself as if he forgot it was there and then holds it up for everyone to get a good long look at. “Unfortunately not, no. I actually and truly broke my arm driving into a pole.”

She grins. “In a brand new silver Lexus.”

“Well, what can I say?” He shrugs his shoulders, all nonchalant. “It’s how the other half lives.” Cocky, arrogant, self-centered –

“So, your real name isn’t Stiles. And I mean the name on your birth certificate.”

“My real first name is MacKenzie,” he says, and Nicole makes an understanding face.

“I guess we know now why you go by Stiles. Does Derek even call you MacKenzie?”

“No one calls me MacKenzie. Not even my own –“ his voice falters for half a second but he catches himself, forcing a smile on his face, “…father.”

She laughs, so Stiles does, and he starts to feel very much like a zoo animal on display. “So, MacKenzie –“

“Don’t,” he warns, but he smiles.

“So, Stiles. It’s interesting to be having this conversation with you rather than Derek.”

“We decided to give him a break.”

“But, we hear that Derek is actually working on his next book.”

Stiles reaches forward and grabs that mug of water off the coffee table, takes a big old gulp, and swallows. “He is, actually.”

This is the information that Nicole wants. She leans forward just slightly, with that same smile that she had first greeted him with – only this time, it doesn’t feel even half as friendly or welcoming as it did. It feels a lot more predatory. “His past books have always had a bit of a theme – his first three seemed to central around the same one, to an extent.”

“His first book is more of a coming of age, dealing with shit type of a thing,” he gestures his good hand a bit to make his point. “His second is all about how he thinks he’s risen above his past, and his third is about how he hasn’t done that at all, and his fourth –“

“Is about you,” she cuts him off.

Stiles smiles. It’s a warm, genuine smile that makes him feel light as he does it. “It’s my favorite. I read, sometimes, longwinded explanations of why it’s his worst book because horror of horrors, I’m in it, but. It’s my personal favorite.”

“Mine, too,” she promises with a wink, and Stiles has this bizarre and unwelcome thought of her masturbating to page 436 of Beacons. He has to bury his mouth in his water mug to cover up the hysterics. “But you have this idea that people don’t like you. I’ve read that before.”

“A lot of people don’t like me,” he nods his head. This is fact, to him.

“You seem perfectly nice in person –“
“I’m not that nice,” he interrupts with a snicker. “I’m not mean, but I’m not particularly nice, either. I’m dating Derek Hale. You think we’d get along if I were all sunshine and daisies all the time?”

“That,” she says, with a genuine eyebrow raise, “is a very good point.”

It is a very good point. Derek and Stiles’ entire thing, their entire mental connection, is based on their temperaments. They’re both sarcastic assholes, at the end of the day. Derek is just more moody about it, so people think he’s all deep and brooding, when really, he’s just a fucking asshole.

“But people don’t like you, okay,” she concedes to the point. “Why do you think that is?”

“Pick a reason. Because Derek likes me, because Derek writes about me, because I live with him. I guess none of it really has anything to do with me, but really more about him.”

“When Beacons came out,” she starts, settling in like she’s gearing up for a very long spiel, “it was the first time people knew anything more about you than what the tabloids had to say about you. It put you in a very different light, I think. Do you agree?”

Stiles hems over that for a second. This question was offered up to him in the pre-interview as well, and he had sat there and mulled it over for a long time, trying to think of what he could possibly have to say about it. Even moreso, what he even thought about it. “I think in Beacons, it’s me through the eyes of someone who looks at me with rose colored glasses on,” he admits slowly, and Nicole nods her head, listening intently. “I tell people all the time that the boy from Beacons doesn’t actually exist anywhere except for – there. In those pages. In Derek’s words only.”

“Well,” she cocks her head to the side, “he really loves you. That’s what I took away from that book. That’s what I took away from that book. I think most people took away the same. If it makes you feel any better.”

Oddly, it does. No one has ever said that to him before – that Beacons was just about how much Derek loves Stiles. It’s always been about how much Derek is obsessed with him, or how much Derek has to say about him, or how much Derek likes having sex with Stiles. Never just flat out how much Derek loves him.

“So this new book,” she flips a card over, looking up for a moment as though she’s collecting her thoughts. “We were wondering, or I was at least, what the new theme is.”

Stiles shakes his head. “I haven’t read it,” he admits.

This seems to absolutely blow her mind. She knows this. She has the notes from the pre-interview, she has the general gist of what this entire interview is meant to be about – but she feigns ignorance and surprise as easily as anything else. “You haven’t read it?”

“I didn’t even read Beacons until its final edit. People think I’m up Derek’s ass the entire time he’s writing, but really, he writes, and I’m not usually around.”

“Then let’s change gears and talk about a book you did read.”

Stiles takes a deep breath. He does it inadvertently, just gearing himself up for a conversation that is sure to be awful, but he knows that this is exactly what Lydia expected from him with this entire interview. To look like it causes him physical discomfort to deal with this subject. And it does.

“There was a book, publicly titled the Lost Derek Hale Manuscript, that you allegedly had pulled and burned before it could ever be published,” she leans her chin in her fist, smirks at him like she
cannot fucking believe she got so lucky as to have this interview herself. “What about that is true?”

Stiles blinks at her once, twice, and lets the silence hang in between them for a solid six seconds. This will not be edited out. They’ll let that dead air hang like a pall, like a silent statement. “There was a manuscript,” he admits. “Derek – it –“

As he stutters for another few seconds, Nicole sort of gestures her hands like okay, okay, let me guide you. “Was this unpublished manuscript about you, as well?”

“It wasn’t about me,” he says slowly. “It was about the boy from Beacons.”

She smiles at him, almost condescending. It’s like she doesn’t get it, but she knows what he’s doing.

“That person doesn’t…exist. And the person from Spark, he doesn’t exist either.”

“Spark?” She clarifies, eyebrows shooting up into her hairline. If she had a microphone in her hand and it wasn’t already pinned to Stiles’ shirt, she’d be shoving it right up against his mouth, turning to the camera man hissing are you getting this?

“That’s what it was called.”

“What it was called. Past tense.”

Stiles smiles, all sad and kicked-puppy like. “Far as I know, it doesn’t exist anymore.”

She rubs her forehead briefly, glances somewhere past Stiles’ head like she’s just taking it all in, and then sits upright, ramrod straight. “How much truth is there to the claim that you – you know. Threw it into a fireplace or something.”

“First of all, even if I had, it’s the 21st century. There are backups of everything, it’s not so Little Women anymore. Second of all, not very much. I – when I –“

Again, she gestures her hands like she’ll fix this for him, but he just talks right over it.

“I wasn’t supposed to have read it. Let’s put it that way. I – happened upon the unfinished manuscript. And I read it.”

She clears her throat. “And what was that book about? If not you, then what? Who?”

Stiles thinks. He thinks, and he thinks, and he thinks, of something to say. Lydia told him to be coy, to not be specific, to play cat and mouse until people are salivating just to know something, anything, any tiny morsel of information. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he decides.

She takes in a deep breath through her nose, and then she looks like she’s trying to strangle a pleased smile. She manages to wrangle it, and then she puts on a sad, understanding face – that’s the take that they’ll actually use, Stiles is sure. “Okay,” she agrees amiably. “Then it must have been bad, if you wanted it pulled so bad.”

“I never said I wanted it pulled. He pulled it himself, because he realized it was wrong, what he was doing.”

She knows that he won’t answer anything more specific about it, so she just switches cards, a little frantically, actually.

“If you want to know so bad, then buy the book.”
“The new book deals with – Spark?” She says the name uncomfortably, still getting used to how it feels in her mouth.

Stiles looks down, to really sell it. He opens his lips and then goes quiet for seconds on end, before looking up and nodding his head. “The new book is the truth.”

“Well,” she leans back in her seat. “I can’t wait to read it. Is there any release date yet?”

“Spring,” Stiles says, and she nods her head, grinning.

“It was nice talking with you, Stiles.”

“And you, too.”

Cut.

Stiles stands up immediately, and then Lydia is there, and Nicole New is just left sitting there looking a little crestfallen at not being able to corner Stiles and harass him for more private details. Lydia sweeps him off set, bolstered by one of Derek’s familiar looking werewolf security guards, and off they go. “That was great,” she tells him enthusiastically – at least, as enthusiastic as Lydia gets about anything that isn’t a MAC store.

“Was it?” Stiles asks her. For some reason, his hands are shaking.

“It was. You really looked like you were being tortured somewhere, haunted by a dark past. It was cinematic.”

Cinematic, Stiles thinks. He wonders when he and Derek’s lives became this – became interviews and lies and cinematic. And he realizes it started with Beacons, it really did. Derek chose to write about him, and Stiles chose to let him put that out there, and from there they became figures in a movie to people. Everything that happens to them is fodder for a book, and Stiles wonders when they’ll start getting offers for movie adaptations.

And who would they find to play that nameless and faceless stranger, that laughs like Stiles, that smiles like he does and talks like he does, but isn’t him, not at all?

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I don’t know what I was thinking. People will ask me what was going through my mind, what I thought I was going to accomplish, what I thought Stiles would say about it when he found it – and I don’t know. I had something in my hands that was beyond describing, and I thought if I couldn’t find the words then I must be a failure, and I couldn’t be a failure when he looked at me the way that he did.

It took me this long to learn that there are some things not even Derek Hale can put into words. I know pain so well I could write it with my eyes closed. Genuine happiness, apparently, I struggle with. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 14).

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“September 13th is a Friday this year.”
Derek looks up from his laptop, pen dangling out of his mouth, tipped over cup of coffee next to him on the desk, spilling a couple of drops off the edge. He drops the pen out of his mouth into his lap, blinks at Stiles as he rolls away from his work, and gives him a look. “Is it?”

“It is,” Stiles says, stepping farther into the study as he clutches his day planner. “And I thought Friday the 13th would be a really good day to get married.”

Derek gives him yet another look. “You’re joking.”

“Are you superstitious?” Stiles heckles him. “You believe in vampires, and unicorns, and, say, werewolves?”

“Stiles –”

“You think if we get married on Friday the 13th that Jason Voorhees is gonna show up and hack us to death.”

Derek sighs and leans back in his chair with a squeak. Stiles has often wondered why he doesn’t buy a new one of those – it looks like it survived the fire and has been carted around from place to place for years, and squeaks like an old man. “I think it’s gonna be bad luck.”

“Puh,” Stiles scoffs, rolling his eyes. “It would be fun. We could have it be Halloween themed, and wear costumes.”

“You’re. Joking.”

“Absolutely I am,” Stiles agrees, “the fact that you even have to clarify it anymore makes me question this entire thing. But for real, I was looking at September 14th.”

Derek picks up his pen again and balances it in between two fingers, smiling and twirling from side to side in his chair. “Why then?”

“Well,” Stiles glances down at his planner again, cheeks feeling hot out of nowhere, where the square for the 14th of September is sitting and waiting for him to write something in it. “I like the 14th. And I like September. And it’s a Saturday, so people can fly in on Friday. You know. Because I’m inviting everyone, from all across the globe.”

Before saying anything, Derek stands up from his chair and puts his pen down, making his way toward where Stiles is hovering with easy, carefree steps. He takes the planner out of Stiles’ hands and observes the 14th himself, raising his eyebrows. “Hm,” he says, cocking his head to the side. “There is something about it.”

“Right?” Stiles agrees, and Derek laughs because he’s just fucking with him, but Stiles doesn’t care. He really doesn’t.

Looking up, Derek smiles at him with all his teeth and says, “I think the 14th sounds perfect.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, feeling light. “The 14th, then. We’re getting married on September 14th.”

“We are.”

It’s easier to conceptualize the actual day when he has a real date – he can imagine the weather, and the climate, and what everyone will be wearing, and how he wants the venue to look. All of it. It’s amazing what a simple date can do. “Now that that’s out of the way,” he clears his throat before he does something stupid, like get emotional over a square on a day planner, “we can start
making real plans. First off, I want a ten foot tall ice sculpture of me, presiding over a much smaller ice sculpture of you.”

“She wants one too, Derek,” Stiles meeps. “She’s been looking at wedding cake pictures.”

“Naturally,” Derek rolls his eyes, but then he takes Stiles by one of his shoulders – the good one and gives him a very serious look. “Listen. I have to talk to you about something.”

“Uh oh,” Stiles meeps. “No serious talk after picking a wedding date. It’s bad karma.”

“It’s wedding talk,” Derek argues, so Stiles just purses his lips and makes a face like I’m listening.

“I know that you’ve already got it in your head that the party planning committee is you, and Erica, and Scott, and Allison. And that’s great, and I have no problems with that,” he stops for a second, and then sighs. “…but can you try to include Lydia?”

Stiles rears his neck back and makes a sound like he’s just been forced to stick his hand in something wet that’s been left at the bottom of the sink for too long. “God.”

“Stiles. She’s my best friend.”

“Can’t you make me add Boyd to the committee instead? He’d be great. No input, no thoughts whatsoever. Just what we need.”

“Stiles.”

Stiles huffs out a great heaving sigh. He’s acting like a little kid who’s being asked to invite his annoying cousin to his birthday party, he knows, but still. Lydia and Stiles might not be hostile toward one another anymore, but they’re certainly not fucking friends. Too much had already happened between them to be anything but tolerant of one another. And, on top of that, Lydia is a controlling manipulative psycho – Stiles will say he wants the colors to be white and green and she’d go no, red and green like a fucking Christmas tree or something, and somehow, that’s how it would all turn out. Stiles loathes the fucking thought.

But, Derek is right. She’s Derek’s best friend, and Stiles is marrying Derek and not Scott, so he needs to at least slightly include her. She’ll be Derek’s best man, after all. She deserves to go to the bachelor party and help pick out flowers just like the rest of them.

“Fine,” Stiles hisses. “But I swear to God, the second she tries to make me wear a purple suit, I’m going to walk out.”

“Understood,” Derek agrees, nodding his head emphatically. “And I’ll talk to her too. It’ll all be very…civil.”

Right, Stiles thinks bitterly. Civil. “Anyway,” he pushes Derek out of the way and beelines it for his desk, shoving his blinking laptop back farther on the desk to give him room for his notepad. He slaps it down, grabs the pen Derek had been holding earlier and clicks it, and sits down in Derek’s squeaky writing chair. “The guest list.”

Derek squats down next to him, leaning his chin on Stiles’ forearm as he starts to write.

“Scott,” he starts, scribbling Scott’s name like a third grader across the page. “Erica, Allison, Melissa…”

“Kira, Boyd,” Derek offers, and Stiles nods and writes them down, too. “Lydia’s family.”

“Oh, right, the Joyless Luck Club.” All the same, he writes down Martin Family.
“My sister.”

“Yes,” Stiles agrees as he writes. “Mrs. Norris.”

“Who –“

“My next door neighbor who I grew up with,” he explains, and Derek nods his head. “Cousins from my mom’s side…”

“My editors.”

Stiles makes a face. He’s only ever met them once, but they remind him of the Addams Family. And he doesn’t mean in the fun, quirky, have a laugh or two type of way. He means in the worst possible fucking way. He writes them down too all the same, name by name.

After a beat, Derek sighs and says, “your father.”

Stiles doesn’t even pause to think about it. “He’s not coming,” he says quickly, shaking his head. “Now, how about your security team?”

Derek pulls the pen out of Stiles’ hand, confiscating it so Stiles has to turn and look at him. “We’ll send him an invitation.”

Petty and stupid and childish, Stiles just frowns and says, “well, he won’t come.”

“Then, it doesn’t matter whether we send him an invite or not, does it?” Before Stiles can stop him, Derek leans over Stiles’ arm and scribbles Stilinski across the page, right next to Scott’s name.

Stiles sits there for a moment, stewing in silence. He doesn’t know what to say or do. He doesn’t like talking about this with Derek, or really talking about it at all. So he doesn’t. “In that vein,” he clears his throat and pulls the pen out of Derek’s hand, “we’ll invite some other members of the squad. Marsha, Parrish, Rhonda…”

“Sure,” Derek agrees.

They wind up taking Lydia along to help them pick out the save the dates within the next week, and Stiles handwrites all the envelopes himself. When he gets to his father’s, with his childhood address, he hesitates, but scribbles out the envelope all the same and stuffs the card inside. All it says is Derek and Stiles’ names, and the date, and it has a nice red trim and crisp block writing.

But when it comes to his father, it’s hard for it to feel like it’s anything more than a white flag.

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Stiles decides to have a party at Derek’s house the night that his interview with Nicole New is set to air. He invites his friends, Erica and Scott and even Allison much to Derek’s awkward chagrin, and then he goes out of his way to orchestrate Kira and Boyd tagging along as well.

Derek had sort of stuttered for a moment like “er, I don’t think this is something that would interest them at all,” and Stiles had frowned and said why, because I’ll be there?

“You have this idea that they don’t like you,” Derek said, all condescending and eye-rollly. “They just don’t know you.”
“Well I know that,” Stiles pilfered Derek’s phone out of his hand and made quick work and finding Boyd in his contacts list, right in between the name of some guy Stiles vaguely remembers meeting at a party a few months ago, and one of Derek’s advisers. “Which is why I’m inviting them over so they can get to know me.”

Derek looked equal parts helpless and annoyed as Stiles pressed the phone to his ear, watching with a frown on his face as Stiles tried and failed to have anything but an awkward clipped conversation with Derek’s packmate. Boyd is hard to deal with on any given day of the week – mostly because he acts like everything that’s going on around him is a waste of his time, but that only ever feels emphasized by Stiles’ presence. Stiles thinks that Boyd hates his guts on principle alone sure, but he also thinks that Stiles has a particular way of being that just drives Boyd fucking crazy. All the same, he agreed to come along if only out of fear of what Derek would do to him if he disappointed his fiancée.

Kira was another matter. She answered expecting Derek, seemed at least politely surprised to get Stiles instead, and then accepted his invitation with an offer to bring some food along with her.

“They’re going to kill me before night’s end,” Stiles said after hanging up on Kira, and Derek pinched the bridge of his nose and said not another word about any of it. Stiles might get what Stiles wants, but that doesn’t mean Derek is always going to be hip-hip-hooraying about it while it’s going on.

He sends Stiles off with a team of security to the grocery store, partly out of concern for his well being but mostly because Stiles still has a bum arm and needs people to do his bidding for him, comes downstairs half an hour before it’s to start in clean clothes all freshly showered, and somehow manages to look only vaguely put off when Scott shows up with Allison in tow.

Scott wraps Stiles up in a hug being mindful of the arm issue, delivers a patented handshake to Derek, and then Allison is standing there in the foyer looking uncomfortable and awkward. The sheer fact alone that she was willing to show up, and that Derek was willing to come downstairs, shows a clear want the both of them have to just sort of…get over it? But it’s not that easy.

Allison has come to events before, like for example Stiles’ birthday, but that was easy. She came, the crowd was big, Derek saw her and avoided her like the plague, that was the end of it. This is a much more intimate setting.

With an Argent in his house. Correct Stiles if he’s wrong – but the last time an Argent got anywhere near Derek’s house, things didn’t exactly go so well. It speaks volumes of Derek’s drive to make he and Stiles’ relationship healthier and more established that he’s willing to do this.

“I brought macaroni and cheese,” she announces, holding the dish out in her hands as either a peace offering, or just something to protect herself with should things get ugly. “I hope no one has a dairy thing. Derek?”

Derek’s jaw works. For one suspended moment in time, Stiles really thinks he’s about to smack that thing out of her hands and claw straight through her neck, make an example out of her or something. Instead, he swallows and tries to look casual. It’s more awkward than anything else. “Werewolves don’t have allergies. Or, er – lactose intolerance. Or whatever.”

“Derek has no whatever,” Stiles concludes, taking the food out of Allison’s hands. She looks even more awkward without it, dropping her arms down to her sides and shifting closer to Scott for a buffer. “Did you know he’s never even had a cold?”

“Really?” Allison seems genuinely interested. “Do you sneeze?”
Stiles could burst out laughing, but Derek just sort of smirks and shrugs his shoulders. “I have before. Mostly my ailments are reactions to the general climate.”

She nods her head, laces her fingers together in front of herself, and then moseys over to where Scott is already grazing at the chip bowl. Once she’s out of ear shot, Stiles whips around and faces Derek head on, leaning up close to his ear to make sure he won’t be heard. “That went well,” he says, and Derek makes a face.

They won’t ever talk about it, Allison and Derek. Derek is too closed off and Allison is too nice to ever bring it up – so the elephant in the room will sit, and sit, and sit, always like a pall in between them. It’s not Allison’s fault, and Derek knows that, and Allison does too. It’s just...hard. It will never be easy, and neither of them will try. That’s fine.

Lydia appears without knocking – just sweeps inside with a bottle of champagne that she immediately pops open with a bang, startling Allison into knocking over a can of coke to spill all over the marble counters. “Congratulations on doing what I tell you to,” Lydia says as she pours Stiles a flute, handing it off and cheering him with the bottle.

“Thanks,” Stiles rolls his eyes but drinks it down nonetheless, until the glass is empty and Derek is suggesting that he take it slow, tonight.

By the time Kira and Boyd are arriving, the interview is only two minutes away from starting, and Erica has popped the popcorn and everyone is all situated around Derek’s biggest television in his biggest room – also known as the one they hardly ever use. Derek actually had to spend ten or so minutes scratching his head and futzing around with wires before he even got the thing to turn on, while Erica heckled him.

They come inside without knocking just like Lydia had, blink steadily across the room like a pair of twins, and then slide their shoes off and walk across the carpet toward the rest of the group without saying a word.

“Oh, hey,” Stiles greets, turning to meet Derek’s eyes for just a fraction of a second – mostly for back up. “You guys are just on time.”

“I brought an ice cream cake,” Kira announces without even saying hello, and Stiles again looks to Derek for back up, even though it’s useless. “It’s in the freezer.”

“A good place for it,” Stiles concurs, eyes following them as they sit down on the ground, right in front of the television, criss cross, while Derek just stands there looking like he couldn’t give less of a fuck. Later on, Stiles is going to demand what it even is that the three of them talk about – if they ever even do, honestly. Stiles almost can’t imagine Boyd saying an entire sentence, let alone carrying on a conversation.

They watch commercials for another minute more, muttering amongst themselves and drinking more alcohol than is entirely advisable for this specific group of people, and then a familiar theme music starts, coupled abruptly with Nicole New’s cheery voice.

Stiles shushes the room at large, his champagne sloshing a bit onto the floor as he shoots forward and uses the glass to point at the screen. “It’s starting!” He shouts, and the room quiets aside from Erica’s loud slurping at what little drink is left in her glass of ice.

Nicole goes through a litany of other things she plans on talking about in the half hour segment, none of which are things Stiles is particularly interested in, and then within seconds Stiles’ face is there. In high definition, on a giant flat screen in Derek Hale’s living room, Stiles blinks serenely
out at nothing and smiles with all his teeth.

“You look like you’re photoshopped,” Scott comments from his spot right beside Stiles on the couch, cocking his head to the side as he observes the jumbo-Stiles right in front of his face, lighting the entire room up.

Television Stiles nods and smiles, and Stiles for some reason can’t tear his eyes away. Everyone has seen themselves on camera at some point in their lives, but Stiles has never seen himself this… huge, before. This blown up, this larger than life, this…eerily perfect. Like Scott said. Photoshopped.

“…Derek and I have a lot in common,” his own voice says from the speakers, and the hairs on the back of Stiles’ neck stand up on end.

“Holy shit,” he says, wrinkling his nose up. “Is that what my fucking voice sounds like?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Lydia mutters, and Stiles picks up a throw pillow and lobs it as hard as possible in her general direction. She dodges it easily and primly, forking up some more of Allison’s macaroni and focusing back in on the television screen like a hawk.

“I can’t get over it,” Scott goes on, as the Stiles on the screen starts talking about his real name. “You literally look like an alternate universe version of yourself.”

Stiles observes himself and tries to see what Scott is seeing – really, all he sees is a Stiles with a lot of make up on, in good lighting, smiling and laughing in a pretty television set. Is that alone what makes him look so different to even his own best friend? Or is there something about Stiles now, ever since Beacons came out maybe, that has been inherently changed inside of him, that is now only noticeable to the people close to him when they look at him through the lens of a camera?

Nicole mentions Derek’s new book, and Lydia holds her hands out imperiously to the room at large, putting her plate and fork down. “This is important,” she says.

Stiles watches himself take a nervous sip out of his mug of water, and he notices how the different shots of him moving in this one ten second period of time make him look – it makes him look nervous. And evidently so.

“A lot of people don’t like me,” his voice says, and Erica scoffs.

“You’re such a martyr,” she accuses, and Stiles can’t help but watch himself and think – that’s exactly what people have always said about Derek. That he’s a self-deprecating martyr, constantly making jokes at his expense, laughing about the fact that people hate him and want him dead because what else is he supposed to do about it? After all, they’re right, aren’t they?

When they start talking about Spark, from the moment that Nicole brings it up, Stiles gets to watch himself look like he’s about to either start shouting or crying. He watches the way that he can’t directly meet Nicole’s eyes, the way that he nervously fidgets his fingers when he hadn’t even noticed he was doing during the actual filming of this ridiculous thing, how he blinks more times than is entirely necessary.

A gap of silence – Stiles swallowing and looking down at his hands, the one peeking out of his cast included, and Nicole blinking serenely at him as she waits for him to speak. The living room is silent, as well. Scott is watching this with rapt attention, as if he doesn’t already god damn know all of this anyway, and Allison looks similarly engrossed, Lydia serious, Kira and Boyd somewhat startled, and Derek –
Derek just sits perched on the arm of his couch, arms crossed over his chest, watching with a blank expression on his face. He looks oddly detached, considering the circumstances; and Stiles knows Derek well enough by now to know what that look actually means.

He imagines that anyone else watching this right now, all the fans of Derek who despise him and are only watching to get some information on his new book, all the fans of Derek who love Stiles and squealed in delight as soon as his face showed up on screen, and anyone who just casually reads his books and is watching as they wash dishes or brush their teeth – all of them must be just as fascinated by this as the people in this room are.

Lydia leans forward like she’s watching her son play soccer, while Stiles opens and closes his mouth on screen, and then finally – “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“There it fucking is,” Lydia points to the screen, triumphant and proud. “That’s how you sell a fucking product.”

Whether she’s talking about the book or Stiles himself, Stiles doesn’t know. At a certain point, he guesses he stopped caring.

“Oh, my God,” Erica has her hands on her cheeks, like she’s just so shocked she can’t even fucking handle it. “I want to read that book so bad.”

“You already know what happened, you were literally there,” Stiles half-laughs, and she turns to look at him with big eyes.

“I know. But – I just – I need to read it.”

“Exactly,” Lydia takes another bite of macaroni and looks entirely too smug for Stiles’ comfort. “What did I tell you? I told you to make it so people couldn’t stand to not fucking know the whole truth, word for word, in its entirety.”

“Apparently, I did a pretty good job,” Stiles muses to himself out loud, leaning back into the couch and sinking into the cushions. The interview ends, and the television Stiles smiles in a way that doesn’t reach his eyes, and people will gif that moment and pick it apart and wonder at how miserable he looks and what happened and how could anything that bad have happened?

Everything he does under a microscope. Everything he says torn apart like food for the vultures.

But Lydia does have a point – people will buy it. They’ll buy into all of it. Derek will sell millions and he’ll sign the books and smile and pose for pictures and they’ll look at him like he’s still a god, no matter what he admits to in his new one. No matter anything. He’s untouchable in spite of all else.

Across the room, Derek meets Stiles’ eyes, and they stare at each other while everyone else around them more or less erupts into their own separate conversations. Stiles wants to asks him what he thought. What he’s thinking right now. What all this even means, for him. What they’re going to do. If Derek is happy with the decisions they’ve made.

Derek is hard to read on any given day – especially if you don’t know him. And no one does, like he always used to say. Nobody fucking knows him, not at all, no matter how many times they’ve read his books. But Stiles knows him. Better than most anyone else.

The corners of Derek’s lips curve up into a smile. Not the kind that he doles out at events just to appease the people and make it seem like he’s not all bad - but a genuinely pleased one. Stiles doesn’t know what to make of it at first, so he looks away and takes another long sip of his
champagne.

When he’s saying goodbye to everyone, Kira and Boyd vanishing like clouds of smoke as soon as
the cake was cut and Erica having to get herself an uber because she had too much to drink, Scott
stops him in the doorway.

He hesitantly looks over Stiles’ shoulder, where he can see Derek in the kitchen saran wrapping
some snacks still left over, and makes a point to close the front door behind them, so they’re
standing underneath the porch light in that ethereal yellow glow. Allison hovers off to the side,
looking a bit uncomfortable, and Stiles sighs through his nose.

“He could still hear you just fine even if you whispered with the door closed, Scott,” he gestures
behind himself, to the general area where Derek is probably hovering and doing exactly that.
“What’s up?”

“Just—” he frowns, and then quickly tries to cover it up. “Are you sure you want to use that like
this?”

“Use what like what?”

He puts his hand on Stiles’ shoulder, thumb dipping over his collarbone. “That was a really bad
thing that happened,” he says this in a low voice, likely still convincing himself if he talks quiet
enough Derek won’t be able to tune into it. “I just wonder if you really want to exploit your own
pain like this.”

Stiles looks at him, and almost manically, he smiles. Grins really, with all his teeth out and his eyes
crinking at the corners. It must be a strange expression for Scott to see considering the topic of
conversation, but Stiles just can’t help himself. Because he’s finally

got it

– he finally understands.

Scott has said the one combination of words in the one setting where Stiles would ever be able to
put two and two together.

He understands, now, what Derek’s books have ever been about. What his entire purpose has been
up to this point, and beyond it, likely. Stiles gets it.

He’s a part of it now.

**

People love to read about other people suffering. No one wanted to read a book about how happy I
was or how well Stiles and I were doing – they wanted me to tell them he was crazy, that he was
going to kill me in my sleep or something. They wanted to hear about how we fight all the time and
how I really thought I’d fallen in love but I hadn’t. They wanted blood and guts and a massacre to
watch like in a colosseum. I tried to give them that, with Spark, because it’s all I knew how to do.

In the end, even the destruction Spark left behind in its wake without even having been published
did exactly that. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 145).

**

“Stiles. I love you. I would do anything for you. I would die for you.” Derek pushes Stiles’
notebooks away from him, so they skid a bit down the bed until they come to a stop, forlorn. “I
“Come on!” Stiles pleads, perching on his knees to grab at his notebooks from where Derek had more or less thrown them. He clutches them against his chest with his good hand, turning back around to face Derek with big eyes. “I can’t do it, I’m not smart like you!”

“First of all, you are smart,” Derek rolls his eyes. He’s only had to tell Stiles the exact same thing upwards of a dozen times since Stiles started school again. “Second of all, I got my GED, and I nearly flunked out of Algebra two sophomore year. I cannot do math.”

“That’s such horseshit,” Stiles hisses, slapping the notebooks down on the bed and glaring at them. “I’m rethinking this whole higher education thing. Who needs it? You never went to college.”

“There’s not a doubt in my mind that if you sat there for longer than two minutes trying to understand calculus, you’d get the hang of it.” Derek sits up off of his pillows and picks his phone up from the bedside table, likely opening up his e-mail. Sometimes Stiles wishes he were crazy enough to go into Derek’s phone and see what all these e-mails are about – how many times a day can Lydia, or his editors, or his publishers really fucking harass him? Apparently, a lot of times, every hour on the hour. “I guess you won’t be majoring in math.”

“I’m going to major in photography.”

Derek looks up from his phone. “Every single picture you’ve ever taken has your finger in the corner.”

“Okay, then,” he taps his pencil against his chin. “Music.”

“You’re tone deaf.”

“I am not.”

“That’s exactly what tone deaf people say,” Derek mutters under his breath, and Stiles wants to smack him up the side of the head with the brunt of his cast. His arm doesn’t hurt much anymore – he’s approaching the day when they’ll cut off his cast and his arm will be free.

“I have no interests. I’m a shell.” Stiles huffs and flops into his pillow, covering his face with his notebook. “I’m never going to declare a major. I’m going to wind up just living in your house, going from silver Lexus to silver Lexus, no hobbies, no job, just glomming off of your money and success until the day I die.”

“You know,” Derek says in a tone of voice that Stiles recognizes very, very well, “I can get you a job.”

Derek has made this offer so many times now it’s a wonder he doesn’t have it tattooed on his body just so Stiles won’t forget about it. “Oh, right. Slaving underneath Lydia Martin or one of your Tim Burton style editors –“

“Why do you always say stuff like that about them?” Derek demands. “They’re not that strange.”

“I think they’re Satanists, first off –“

“That doesn’t mean what you think it does.”

“Satan is in the name of the thing!” Stiles shouts, like he has a dozen times before. “That’s the end of the discussion!”
“The point is, I could get you a job, and you’re just being stubborn.”

Stiles takes the notebook off of his face to find Derek hovering over him with a crease in his brow, looking annoyed. Every time this particular conversation of theirs comes up, he is. “Because I don’t want you to just hand me a job in a field I have little to no interest in. No offense.”

Derek purses his lips, but he’s not offended.

“I just don’t like anything, or care about any of this shit enough to like – pursue it. I don’t know what I’m doing,” he frowns at his textbooks, his backpack, his laptop. “It’s why I left the first time. I don’t know why I have no drive or interests or passions. It’s – I don’t know. It makes me feel shitty.”

There’s silence for a few moments, while Stiles pointedly avoids eye contact and fiddles with a loose thread in the sheets, and Derek looks pensive, as though he’s trying to think of what to say. “You like reading,” Derek offers.

Stiles snorts. “Me and the rest of the free world.”

“Average people do not read as much as you do, Stiles. I don’t think you’ve realized that.”

He hems over that for just a moment. True, he devotes a large portion of his leisure time into completing reading challenges he finds on the internet, and has a collection of books large enough to rival a small town library, but those things alone don’t necessarily mean anything to him. It’s just a hobby of his, nothing more, nothing less.

“There’s more money to be found in books aside from publishing them or writing them,” Derek shrugs. “Major in lit and get really pretentious and become a mean librarian for all I care – I just care that you’re doing what you want to.”

Stiles hasn’t always taken advantage of the fact that he’s in a rare position. Other kids who want to major in literature or English, they get lectures from their parents and friends about how it’s a waste of time and money. That they’ll never be able to find any job that pays enough to make the schooling worth it, that they’ll be buried in debt for the rest of their lives.

But, Stiles. He can major in literature with a focus on fairytales or something equally ridiculous, and spend the rest of his life being a weird hermit with a Beauty and the Beast style library, and there’s really nothing stopping him. He can do anything.

“Okay,” Stiles sits up all the way, and all his notebooks tumble down onto the floor in a cacophony. “I declare. My major.”

Derek nods his head slowly. “Okay. There’s – there’s paperwork you have to fill out, and a –“

“Well, I know that,” Stiles hisses, rolling his eyes. “I’m just – I’m declaring.”

“Okay,” Derek agrees, and he does seem pleased.

“Now, I need some sweater vests,” he winks at Derek, who pinches the bridge of his nose, “literature majors always have sweater vests. And some loafers. And a coffee mug with a Shakespeare quote on it. Et tu, café?”

“They’re going to love you in 101.”

Stiles leans forward to kiss Derek, and Derek is always open to that idea, so they go on like that for
a few minutes until Stiles’ calc homework is all but dead to them both, and Derek’s e-mails are a thing of the past.

Derek had just attached himself to Stiles’ neck for what’s shaping up to be a half-way decent hickey, when a disembodied and grainy voice sounds out from somewhere to their left.

“Mr Hale,” it calls, and Derek sighs through his nose and drops his forehead onto Stiles’ shoulder. After another second, “Mr. Haalllllee,” in a sing-song voice. “There’s an individual out here trying to enter the premises.”

Derek keeps his hand on Stiles’ back, but he uses his other one to paw around for the walkie talkie he must have perched on his bedside table. He gets his hand around it, puts it up to his mouth, and hisses, “is it the pizza guy?”

There’s some static, and then the head of his security – a tall alpha werewolf named Marley that wears her hair in pigtails and drinks an entire pot of coffee a day sitting at her post – is saying, “Do you think I’d call up about a pizza guy?”

“I think you’ve done so before just to piss me off.”

A pause. And then, “it is not the pizza guy. It’s the Sheriff.”

Stiles pushes Derek away, off of his body, and sits up ram rod straight, alert. “It’s my dad?” He asks Derek, who blinks at him like uh… – and then Stiles rips the walkie out of Derek’s hand and puts it to his own mouth. “It’s my dad?”

“I was under the impression you guys had cameras for a reason.”

Stiles spazzes his way off of the bed, landing on his cast for a moment and then righting himself quickly, before falling clean off the bed onto his ass in a pile. Derek makes a noise of concern, reaching down like he’s going to help Stiles up and check him for injury, but Stiles has already shot up to his feet by then, staggering across the room to where a dusty old computer monitor is sitting with a dark screen.

He turns it on, is greeted by the sight of the ten security cameras in little boxes that Derek has set up across the property. There’s the handful that overlook different entrances from the woods, and then the front door, the garage, some interior ones just in case anyone ever did manage to get inside, and then the front gates.

Where there the Sheriff’s car sits, and there his father stands with his arms crossed, fixing his gaze in between the handful of security guards surrounding him and likely asking him a whole host of questions.

“It’s my dad,” Stiles confirms, turning over his shoulder to look at Derek. For his part, Derek looks mostly surprised, and really Stiles can’t say that he feels any differently. For all the time that Derek and Stiles have been together, even for all the time that Stiles has lived in this house, his father has never once set foot on the property. He’s never even seen it, Stiles doesn’t think, at least not outside of aerial Google Maps views that the fans have gathered and pore over every couple of months like a gang of bloodthirsty hyenas.

Some more static from the walkie, and then - “Am I letting him inside, or?”

Stiles looks at Derek as if to ask permission, and Derek waves his hand like go ahead. “Yes, he can come up.”
“Heard,” Marley mutters, and then the walkie goes silent.

Stiles puts it down, puts his hands on his hips, and then turns around and faces Derek fully. “My dad is here,” he announces.

“So I heard,” Derek agrees.

He stands there for a second just soaking it in, trying to comprehend this at all, and then he bursts into motion. He flies across the room, rips his sweatpants off and pulls the first pair of jeans he can find off the floor and starts shoving his legs into them. “You need to put on some god damn pants,” he half-yells at Derek when he stays seated on the bed for too long.

Derek looks down at his comfort clothes – the old sweatpants he’s had since he was eighteen, and a t-shirt from some no-name rock concert he went to once. “These are –”

“Those are dirty and disgusting and I can’t stand them, you need to put on. Pants.”

“Okay, Jesus,” Derek says quickly, standing from the bed and hurrying to his closet. For some reason, Stiles’ heart is pounding in his chest as if it’s not his dad, the man who raised him, coming up the driveway, but something far more sinister than that.

He starts frantically picking clothes up off the ground and stuffing them into the hamper, and then piling everything he can’t fit in there underneath the bed, kicking at his books and his laptop until they slide along the carpet into the darkness.

“You could do that,” Derek says in a voice that’s far too laid back for Stiles to even fucking deal with right now, “or we could just not take him up here.”

Stiles looks up and finds him in dark jeans and a clean black t-shirt, at least, so he doesn’t absolutely lose his fucking mind, but he does sort of bare his teeth in Derek’s general direction. “He’ll want to see how I live. He’ll come into this room whether I say he’s allowed to or not.”

“And he’ll be shocked that you don’t pick up your dirty clothes?” Derek raises his eyebrows in disbelief.

Either help me or shut your god damn mouth, I mean it, Derek.”

Derek raises his hands in surrender, eyes going wide and a slow smile spreading across his face. “All right. Jesus. You’re freaking out.”

“My dad is here!” Stiles’ voice sounds incredibly shrill in his own ears, reaching a register only dogs can hear – which explains why Derek winces and again lets an incredulous smile cross his lips.

“I didn’t hear you the first seventeen times.”

Overcome with emotion – the chief of all of them being absolute downright terror, followed closely by unmitigated rage that Derek isn’t grasping the gravity of the fucking situation here, Stiles grabs the first thing he can get his hands on. Which just so happens to be an old copy of Beacons that Derek has sitting around on his dresser from when he was still hemming and hawing over how he wanted the layout of the book to feel or whatever the hell.

He takes it in his hands, the fingers from his almost-healed arm scrabbling along the edges as it tries to overcome the cast, and tries to rip it in half at the binding. Derek stands there, amused, for seconds on end, watching Stiles struggle and grunt with the thing. It’s a hard cover five hundred
Of course he can’t just rip it in half like the god damn hulk.

Derek pilfers it away from him, and without even barely having to try, tears it in two right down the center with a short *ripping* noise. Pieces of pages go flutter to the ground, one of the wooden covers slaps onto the hardwood underneath their feet, and Derek drops both halves still in his hands with a very smug expression on his face. “Was that satisfying for you? Are you calm now?”

Stiles is just about to open his mouth – to say what he doesn’t know – maybe just one long strangled scream. But the doorbell rings.

The thing about Derek’s doorbell is that it can’t just be downstairs. The house is so big that it has to echo, resound in as many rooms as it possibly can. So it starts downstairs and Derek hears it, his ears perking up as he focuses in on it, and then it enters the hallway, and then it starts on the stairs, and then in Derek’s bedroom. It’s a robotic bell tone that comes from a little speaker set up somewhere over their heads, and Stiles glances up at the ceiling like he senses the devil will rise out from the drywall at any moment, and Derek sighs.

“C’mon,” he says, taking Stiles by the wrist, stepping over the mess of ripped up Beacons under their feet.

Once they’re in the hallway, Stiles says, “what if he’s here to say he’ll never give us his blessing on our wedding and that he threw the save the date in the garbage?”

“He’d drive all the way out here just to say that?” Derek shakes his head.

“I don’t *know* what he’d drive all the way out here just to say,” Stiles hisses in a stage whisper, somehow overcome with the terror that his father can hear them, even though they’re only just now descending the steps. “That’s what I’m worried about.” They reach the landing, and start crossing the hallway toward the foyer where the front door sits and waits, huge and ominous. “You’d be able to smell if he brought along wolfsbane bullets to shoot you with, right?”

Derek lets out a short guffaw. “Yes, Stiles. He smells like regular bullets, I promise you. He’s not here to try and kill me.”

That’s something that could easily be debated, but they’re only three steps away from the front door, and Stiles’ throat feels dry. He hasn’t spoken to his father in almost two months. And he hasn’t had a conversation with him that wasn’t awful since…since Spark. And that was almost a year ago, at this point.

Stiles gets afraid in this moment that he won’t know how to talk to his father anymore if they aren’t fighting. And so he thinks he’s going to have to get into another fight, and he doesn’t think he can survive another one.

He’s not the one who winds up pulling open the door. Derek is. Stiles just stands there, with his faded green cast covered in signatures and Derek’s random doodles and a thin layer of grime from wear and tear, when his father comes into view in the entryway. He’s got his hands on his utility belt, and his cruiser is parked behind him in the driveway, looking absolutely bizarre. Neither Derek nor Stiles have ever parked in the driveway, so really, to see a car there at all is a little Twilight Zoney in and of itself, but still.

“Sheriff,” Derek greets, pulling the door open all the way so the sunlight spills in across their floor. “This is a surprise.”

Stiles’ father looks at him. He looks, and looks, and looks, and Stiles can see the gears turning in
his head already. Stiles knows what he wants to say. He wants to say you absolute fucking piece of garbage or something along those general lines. Stiles can guess.

Unbelievably, he doesn’t. He says, “yeah, well. I was in the neighborhood.”

“There is no neighborhood,” Stiles deadpans, and his father’s eyes swivel right over to him. “We’re the only house for miles.”

“Well,” he begins, and then says nothing else. Derek looks in between them for a moment like he’s watching Wimbledon, and Stiles cannot fucking believe that for once in their relationship, Derek is the one who has to break up an awkward situation.

He clears his throat and says, “well, come in.”

“Thanks.” Inside he comes, one foot after the other, and Derek closes the door behind him and then they’re all standing in the foyer looking at one another, like a bunch of strangers. Derek looks at Stiles, who looks back, and then looks at the Sheriff, who looks at Stiles, and the cycle goes on like that for a long time. “This is a nice house. A little Henry the 8th. But nice.”

Stiles scoffs. “Henry the 8th,” he mutters under his breath, rolling his eyes. Instead of taking the bait, his dad zeroes in on his cast and gestures to it with two fingers.

“You want a tour?” Derek asks. He sounds awkward even as he tries to sound friendly.

“A tour would take two hours,” his dad jokes, and Stiles thinks it’s a dig so he gets angry and opens his mouth, starting off with a you know what – but Derek cuts him off.

“Coffee?” He asks, loudly, and the Sheriff nods, giving Stiles a heated look before walking past him to follow Derek into the kitchen down the hall.

As they walk, Stiles tugs on Derek’s shirt sleeves so he stays back a step or two and his father moves forward ahead of them. It gives them just enough space for Stiles to pull on Derek’s ear and hiss, “why are you acting so weird?” Because a Derek that willingly opens the door for Stiles’ father and actually makes a valiant effort to small-talk with man isn’t exactly a Derek that Stiles is familiar with. It’s like watching a dog walk on its hind legs.

Derek looks at him with a frown on his face. He leans down and whispers in Stiles’ ear, “because this situation is making you miserable.” Without another word, he moves ahead again to catch up with the Sheriff, leaving Stiles trailing behind and blinking at his back.

He’s right, of course he is. Derek is usually right about most things. Stiles is unhappy and sad and depressed and a million other adjectives in relation to this situation with his father. He wouldn’t ever admit it out loud, because he’s stubborn and prideful, but all of that is going on. Of course Derek is perceptive enough to tell without Stiles saying a word about it.

Derek pulls out the coffee pot, still half full and steaming hot from earlier in the day, and pours a hefty amount into Stiles’ no prob-llama mug, before handing it off to the Sheriff. Who accepts
with a grunt, takes a long sip, and then the silence descends once more. Stiles refuses to say a word, not a single fucking word, because he still maintains that he has done next to nothing wrong in this entire situation. He refuses to be the one to break the ice, when he’s not the one who turned their relationship into an iceberg in the first place.

And the Sheriff, bless his heart, has never been very good at emoting. True, Stiles got his snark and biting sarcasm from his father, but his openness and ability to speak his mind came from his mother, and only his mother.

And, Derek – well. Suffice to say they’re all uncomfortably quiet for long enough that Stiles starts to think leaping out the window and making a run for the woods sounds like a much better alternative than standing here.

Unable to hold his cone of silence for another second, Stiles blurts, “did you come here for a free cup of coffee, or?”

His father puts the mug down on the counter with what might quality as a slam – but since it’s got a goofy looking llama wearing a bowtie on the side, it doesn’t have the desired effect. Then, he puts his hands on his hips, and levels Stiles with a look that used to have him bursting into tears and admitting wrongdoing when he was a kid. Since he’s 23, all he does is square his shoulders and raise his eyebrows. “I got your card in the mail,” he says.

Derek and Stiles share a look. “So you finally came to terms with the fact that wedding isn’t just some huge charade to make you angry –“

“Stiles,” the Sheriff pinches the bridge of his nose, but Stiles keeps talking.

“…but that we actually and truly are getting married and there’s a real date and everything.”

“I will admit,” he straightens up and then sighs, so he deflates again just as quickly, “that for a time, I had… hoped – you and Derek would. Not be together anymore.”

“Shocker,” Stiles deadpans, while Derek just leans back against the kitchen island with his arms crossed over his chest, listening intently.

He looks at Derek, and then he looks at Stiles, and then looks back and forth between them a couple more times as if he’s trying to see what Stiles sees in him. Or as if he’s trying to understand how they could possibly work as a couple, how they even talk, what they even talk about, and on and on. It’s the same way that some of the girls look at Stiles when they run into he and Derek both on the street somewhere – like there’s just something they’re not getting about it.

“I’m not entirely okay with this,” he finally says. “I think you’re too young and this whole werewolf mystical mumbo jumbo is a bunch of garbage.”

“I told you he’d drive all the way up here just to say that,” Stiles mutters to Derek, but the Sheriff talks right over him.

“I think he’s a dangerous liability with anger problems that could snap you in half like a twig if he ever lost his cool,” Stiles raises his eyebrows like sure, why not, “and I think the way he talks about you in those nonsense books of his is inappropriate, and I hate this god damn mansion.” He pauses, whether for dramatic effect or just to let the moment and his words sink over the other two men in the room, to let all the nastiness and disapproval of it waft over them like a fine musk. “…but I realize that you really – love him.”

The words sound awkward coming out, like he has to physically force them, and even then, he acts
like he just put something unsavory in his mouth the second he says them.

“And you’re going to do what you want. I would spend the rest of my life kicking myself if I missed my own son’s wedding.”

Stiles hems that one over, giving Derek a quick glance that isn’t returned with anything but a single eyebrow raise. Well, what do you think? “Even though you think the wedding is a sham and Derek has a gun to the back of my head –“

“I don’t’ think that,” he insists, shaking his head. “I think he’s done enough already.”

“You keep contradicting yourself. You’re okay with the wedding, you want him dead, you think I have good judgment, you think Derek beats me every night –“

“I’m saying I’ll come to the god damn wedding and give my blessing, but I don’t have to like him!”

“Well…” Stiles trails off, looking to Derek for a back-up. As usual he’s about as useful as a stick with eyes, standing there and blinking at the two of them with an unreadable expression on his face. It’s not like any of this is exactly news to him – he knows good and well what the Sheriff thinks about him and always has, so he just stands there and looks entirely unaffected and unmovd. “…can you at least be quiet about it?”

There’s an eyeroll and a sigh, but eventually, his father nods his head yes.

“So you’re coming to the wedding,” Stiles confirms, like he still can’t really believe it until it’s the actual day and his father shows up in his suit and doesn’t shoot Derek through the head before the ceremony ends.

His dad looks at Derek for a moment, hands on his hips, and frowns. Then, he looks at Stiles and smiles, just a little bit. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Stiles hems that over some more, playing with a loose thread on his pants. “Are we speaking again?”

“Yes,” he says, and draws closer to Stiles, and closer, until he’s wrapping his arms around his son’s body and pulling him tight against him. Stiles hugs back, even with his cast arm, and closes his eyes against his father’s shoulder. He smells like Old Spice and coffee and his office, and like Stiles’ childhood – Stiles hadn’t realized how much he’d miss that. “I’m sorry,” he says into Stiles’ ear, and Stiles almost starts crying, but chooses to stifle himself instead.

He pats his dad on the back and pulls back, looking into his eyes for a brief watery smile. Then, he gestures at where Derek is hovering awkwardly off to the side like a third wheel. “Now, come on and shake hands, you two.”

The Sheriff’s face very clearly says aw, hell… like it’s the very last thing he wants to fucking do, but when Derek steps forward and holds his hand out, he does the same, begrudgingly. They shake once, harder than is entirely necessary, making incredibly aggressive eye contact, but they shake and let go and then step away without a word.

“Great,” Stiles says with mock enthusiasm, but it’s better than nothing. It really is. Maybe his father will ultimately wind up trying to punch Derek in the face at the rehearsal dinner and maybe he’ll spike the punch with wolfsbane so Derek gets fucked out of his mind and can barely even say his vows – but it beats the alternative by a longshot.
“It looks weird.” Stiles holds his arm up in the passenger seat of the Range Rover, so the light streaming in from the windshield will catch it more brightly. “I look naked. It looks like there’s something missing. Maybe I’ll buy a half a shirt sleeve and wear it up my arm, just to feel like myself again.”

Derek observes Stiles’ bare and castless arm himself at a stoplight, picking it up by the wrist and turning it this way and that. “It does look weird.”

“Right? It’s all pale and hairy and mysterious looking.”

“In your arm’s defense,” he drops it back into Stiles’ lap, and Stiles holds it up again, examining it piece by piece, “it’s always been pale and hairy.”

Stiles snorts and nods his head. “You got me there.” Still, his arm feels light and weightless, and the breeze hits it much more soothingly than it does his other arm – it’s only been about half an hour since they left the doctor’s office to get the cast sawed off and his arm critically examined to make sure it healed properly. “Hey, now that I’m a real boy again, you know what that means.”

Derek takes his eyes off the road for just a second to give Stiles a bemused look. “You’ll start playing video games again.”

“No,” Stiles says. And then, “well, yes, but even more important than that…is you and me.” He gestures in between them with one finger, and Derek blinks at him, completely stupid and oblivious. Stiles throws his head back against the seat and sighs, long and loud, in frustration. “I’m talking about sex, Derek.”

“Oh, right,” Derek laughs, switching lanes and shaking his head, “how could I not realize it sooner?”

Unbelievably, the two of them actually haven’t had real sex since Stiles first broke his arm. And that was two god damn months ago. They haven’t gone that long without sex since – well. Since meeting each other, essentially. There have been blowjobs and handjobs and all that nonsense, which has been fine, but Stiles’ arm was just too much in pain or too much in the way for them to do anything more than that.

It’s been a long time. The more Stiles thinks about it, the longer it starts to really feel.

Derek pulls into a convenience store parking lot, citing something about needing a coffee, and then he closes the door and leaves Stiles alone in there to his own devices. Stiles watches through the wide windows while Derek walks down the aisle and opens up the fridge, scanning glass Starbucks bottle flavors until he grabs his usual – Caramel every single time, Stiles doesn’t even know why he bothers pretending like he’ll get anything else. He watches when a girl double takes him as they pass each other and Derek gives her a thin smile, and then as Derek pays and says something to the cashier, who says something back.

They shake hands, Stiles rolls his eyes, and as Derek is walking out, the cashier stares after him with a bit of a slack jaw, looking around to see if anyone else just saw that – if there’s anyone who would ever believe him that Derek Hale just came in and bought an overpriced, not-that-great coffee drink from the rinky-dink little store he works at.

Derek gets back in the car, closes the door. Before he can put the key in the ignition, Stiles reaches
over and grabs him by the neck, pulling him in for a kiss. Derek is as happy to oblige as he ever is, putting his hand against Stiles’ collarbone and shifting his body to face him as much as he can in their positions.

“Hey,” Stiles says when he gets the chance, panting right into Derek’s face – he’s sure he has coffee and bagel breath, but Derek doesn’t seem to mind. “…we should do it right now.”

“Huh?” Derek asks, oblivious as ever, brows knitting together.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Let’s have sex in this parking lot.”

“Oh, my God,” Derek looks like he doesn’t know whether to laugh or climb in the back to put the seats down. “Right now?”

“Yeah, right now, right here,” Stiles kisses him again, and then his face, his neck, his jaw. “Come on, it’s been months.”

“I don’t see why we can’t wait until we get home,” Derek contends, even as Stiles is making a valiant effort to suck a mark into his neck. It never works, never has never will, and even when Stiles does manage a little red skin action, it goes away within the first minute it was there to begin with. Disappointing, to say the least.

Stiles grabs Derek’s hand and unceremoniously shoves it into his own lap, where he’s already started to get hard, and Derek sort of just raises his eyebrows and gives Stiles a very critical look. “You got hard from watching me buy coffee?”

“You’re so sexy, I don’t think you realize,” Stiles presses Derek’s hand harder against himself and Derek just sits there and lets it happen, seeming half amazed and half amused. “You’d be sexy as a garbage man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Derek promises.

“Are we doing this?” Stiles demands, and in response, Derek squeezes the front of Stiles’ pants of his own volition. Stiles jerks, thumping his head back against the seat and hissing a curse out from between his teeth.

Then, unbelievably, Derek takes his hand away, picks up his keys, and starts the car. Stiles feels like rolling down the window to dump Derek’s coffee onto the pavement if only to get some form of carnal satisfaction, and hisses, “you’re going to do that to me, and then leave?”

“Jesus,” Derek hisses, throwing it in reverse and nearly going fifty in his haste to back out of their parking space, “I’m just moving the fucking car. We can’t have sex parked right in front of the convenience store window, Stiles.” He makes a good point at that, but Stiles sits there, annoyed and aching hard, while Derek relocates the car in front of a series of shrubs. “Jesus fucking Christ. I forgot how much of a fucking – horndog you can be.”

The seconds tick past, while Derek parks and pulls the keys out of the ignition, and Stiles narrows his eyes and tries to think of a response. “I – have never – in my life…heard you say the word horndog.”

“It’s the best I could think of,” he snaps like he’s annoyed about it, but all the same he reaches over and kisses Stiles like he means it.

“I didn’t think you even knew that word,” Stiles pushes him away and unbuckles his seatbelt, making awkward work of climbing into the backseat. His arm sort of wobbles a bit when he tries to
put too much pressure on it to climb over the console, and Derek grabs him to hold him back.

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” Derek warns, taking Stiles’ arm in his hands and holding it hostage so Stiles can’t use it any longer. “I’ll put you back there.”

“And how –”

Stiles’ words get cut off by Derek literally lifting him up by his hips, so Stiles squawks and flails his limbs a bit in the air. Derek tosses him like a sack of potatoes – or, even lighter than that…like a loaf of bread – into the backseat, where he flops onto his back and blinks in surprise.

“Fucking hell,” Stiles says as Derek finds his own way into the back. Once he’s got his entire body back there, crowding up against Stiles’, he makes a gesture and takes Stiles’ hips again.

“One more row,” he says, and then Stiles is being dropped unceremoniously into the way back, ass landing on the uncomfortable carpeting with a thud. He waits while Derek climbs over himself, and then they’re back in the confined space together, sitting on the ground and looking stupid.

“How far do you think you could throw me?” Stiles asks, leaning into Derek’s personal space, but not kissing him, just yet.

“I don’t think about tossing my fiancée around like a football very often, believe it or not.”

“Just guess,” Stiles pushes, climbing into Derek’s lap and pushing his body right up against his chest. “Just a wild shot in the dark. I weigh 156 pounds, for reference.”

Derek leans his head back against the window and sighs through his nose, like he thinks this conversation is ridiculous. “Pretty far.”

Stiles raises his eyebrows. “Could you punch a hole through the car?”

“Why are you asking me this?” Derek half laughs, surging forward to kiss Stiles on the lips, to run his hands up and down Stiles’ stomach.

“It’s just – I don’t know,” Stiles laughs and shakes his head, “it’s sexy. It’s my kink.”

“Your kink is me punching holes through cars?”

“Yes, okay? Shut up. Shut your mouth,” Stiles manages this effectively by pressing his lips against Derek’s, but he can still feel Derek’s mocking smile against his own. Stiles and Derek have had the awkward kink conversation before, mostly because Stiles imperiously forced it on them. He had started to just fucking wonder – Derek’s best friend owns a BDSM club, and yet Derek had never once tried to make Stiles wear assless chaps. It was getting suspicious.

As luck would have it, Derek stammered through the entire conversation with ruddy red cheeks (when Stiles hadn’t even known werewolves could blush that strongly), and admitted that he doesn’t have any fucking kinks. At least, none like that. Which was a relief, because Stiles would argue that his kink is having orgasms, point blank.

“Me on top?” Stiles asks, and Derek’s eyes are hooded when he nods his head in confirmation. Stiles leans back and pulls his shirt over his head, knocking his hands against the ceiling a couple of times, while Derek makes quick work of his own without bumping into anything at all.

Derek pulls himself up onto his knees and sort of manhandles Stiles out of his way, so he can undo his pants and pull them down to his knees. Which leads to him having to awkwardly shuffle his
way across the bottom of the car toward the second row of seats, prompting Stiles to snort and cover his mouth to keep the hysterics at bay.

“Har har,” Derek rolls his eyes. It only gets funnier when he has to lean his body over the tops of the seats, bare ass in the air, while he fumbles around in the seat pockets for lube that Stiles knows for a fact is hidden somewhere back there. It’s actually incredible the number of places the two of them have stashed lube before – there’s some in their bedroom of course, more in the living room, and there was even some in the Lexus before it met its maker.

Derek hands Stiles the bottle – grape, of course – and then leans himself over the seats, resting his head in his arms and waiting. Stiles bites his lip and squeezes a fair amount onto his fingertips, putting his dry hand on Derek’s shoulder when he’s done and sliding two fingers inside with no warning. “Hey, you know what I’m thinking about?”

“Sex?”

“Well, that, always,” Stiles agrees, gently and carefully working Derek open, “but also about the first time we did this.”

“Had sex?”

“In the Range Rover, I mean. Which is coincidentally the first time we had sex.”

Derek pauses for a moment, like he’s remembering, and then he laughs. His body shakes a little with the movement and Stiles smiles, running his fingers up and down Derek’s back.

“Is it funny to you?”

“It’s funny to think about being that way again,” Derek says, shrugging his shoulders. “We’re – you know. Different people now.”

Stiles finds it hard to disagree. Back then, it wasn’t just his circumstances that made him different. Sure, he worked at McDonald’s, had failed out of school, and had absolutely no plans for his future whatsoever, but those things weren’t really him. Now, he acts differently and holds himself differently, he knows he does. Living in Derek’s life has changed him. Has made him into this alternate universe version of himself that he couldn’t have imagined back then, not even in his wildest dreams.

He spends his time differently. He dresses differently. He talks differently. It’s been nearly two years since they met each other formally, and he still remembers Derek admitting that he had loved Stiles in that weird cosmic werewolf way for years, by then. But Stiles isn’t that person anymore.

Stiles leans forward and presses his lips against Derek’s ear, his nose pressed into his hair. It smells like the shampoo they both use, and something else that’s just Derek. “Do you still love me, like that?”

Derek turns his head like he’s surprised, and it’s not because of Stiles pushing in a third finger, Stiles can tell just from the look on his face. He furrows his brow, but he smiles incredulously. “Why would you even ask me that?”

Stiles looks down, watching himself work, and then he shrugs. “I just wonder. You know we’re not the same, and I just thought –“

“You could become anything you wanted to be, Stiles, and I’d still love you.”
“You love me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like – how you did. At first.”

Derek gives him another long look over his shoulder, and Stiles doesn’t meet his eyes. This is a moment that Stiles has gotten very familiar with. He’ll ask a question like this, or try to bring up a serious conversation that requires Derek to be entirely more open than he’s ever comfortable with being outside of his books, and Derek will kiss him or distract him with something else or change the subject. Stiles waits for that, biting his lip and focusing entirely on the task at hand.

Instead, Derek faces forward and bows his head, sighing through his mouth and looking vulnerable. Which is not something he has ever looked – not since he gave Stiles that first copy of Beacons and asked Stiles what he thought of it. “People change all the time. Every day is an opportunity for someone to become someone else, and you’ve – you do that. I’ve never seen anyone do it like you do it. I…like that about you. You adapt, I can’t explain it. And I had to change how I love you to keep up with it. There’s no such thing as loving one person the same way for all of eternity, Stiles. You can’t even love someone the same way for an entire day.”

Stiles had paused at some point during that, staring at the side of Derek’s face with what might classify as awe. That sounded exactly like something that Stiles would have read in one of Derek Hale’s books, would have put the book down after reading and stared up at his ceiling as he thought about, as a sixteen year old kid trying to figure out who he wanted to be. Derek’s never talked like that, like a page out of his book, at least not in Stiles’ presence.

Stiles doesn’t say anything. He pulls his fingers out and lines himself up, putting one hand on the back of Derek’s neck, and starts sliding inside. After a couple of seconds, Derek still and Stiles silent, Stiles says, “is that okay? Does it hurt?”

Derek snorts. He shakes his head and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “I’ve told you a dozen times, baby, that even if you really tried to hurt me doing this, you couldn’t.”

With a short burst of his hips, Stiles pushes all the way in quick as lightning, burying as deep as he can get. Derek stiffens and jerks forward, hissing, “Jesus,” under his breath, and Stiles smirks at the back of his head.

“Did that hurt, babe?” He mocks, sarcasm dripping from every inch of his voice, and Derek turns over his shoulder and gives him a look. The only time Stiles ever uses pet names is when he’s being a little shit, and Derek knows it good and well.

He gently pulls in and out a couple of times, just to get Derek used to the feel of him after having gone this long not having it, and then evens out to his usual pace. It’s just enough that Derek breathes shallowly through his nose and grips the leather of one of the seats, but stays otherwise silent. Derek is classically always pretty quiet during sex, no matter what they’re doing – it must have something to do with how he’s pretty quiet during any other time of the day, as well, so Stiles never takes offense.

He takes his cues on how well he’s doing from Derek’s body language, the pace of his breathing, how tight he grips onto Stiles’ hand when he reaches it out and links their fingers. The main difference between Derek being on top and Stiles being on top is that Derek tends to be more – and Stiles is picking his words carefully with this one – brutal in how he approaches the entire thing. He manhandles Stiles where he wants him, holds his hands down, and fucks him, while demanding the entire time for Stiles to say this and say that and on and on. It’s all crazy carnal desire and
shouting orgasms – which is all well and good.

But times like this? It’s quiet and gentle, and Derek kisses the back of Stiles’ hand while he holds it, and Stiles kisses the side of his neck and rests his forehead on his shoulder blade, and Stiles whispers, “I love you,” into his hair.

Derek starts squeezing Stiles’ hand tighter, almost to the point of it hurting, which is Stiles’ first indication that he’s getting close. Stiles uses the one free hand he has, incidentally the one that’s only newly freed from its shackle of a cast, to hold Derek’s hip in place as best as he can, and speeds up just enough that Derek makes a small noise from the back of his throat.

“I’m gonna come,” Derek hisses under his breath.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Stiles snarks, and Derek doesn’t even have the time to make a retort. Stiles manages to press into just the right spot, and Derek’s body tenses up around Stiles as he goes stiff and comes. Stiles presses forward, a little more erratically now that Derek is already working himself through his orgasm, and bends his body over Derek’s, pressing his chest against Derek’s back and panting right into his ear.

Derek stays relatively still while Stiles finishes, coming down from his own orgasm, and by the time Stiles is grunting into Derek’s ear and slowing down, Derek is observing the mess he’s gone and made of his own car upholstery.

Stiles pulls out carefully, in spite of Derek’s constant claim that Stiles can’t hurt him, and flops backwards to rest on his haunches, huffing.

“Do you have any napkins?” Derek asks him.

Stiles stares at him for a second, sweaty, mind a complete blur, and shakes his head slowly. “You think I just walk around with napkins on my naked body somewhere? Yeah, there’s a stash of them up my ass.”

Derek looks at him. “I meant generally. Somewhere in the car.”

“No, no napkins. Who cares?”

With a finger point at the ground and some of the backs of the seats, Derek says, “the car cares.”

“That’s your mess. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Right. You were completely innocent in all the proceedings.”


Derek looks like he’s about to bring up the chocolate milk on the laptop debacle, the one that’s still talked about in hushed whispers by the maids. It was one of Derek and Stiles’ more prolific shouting matches, and the entire staff heard nearly every word of it, from Derek telling Stiles that he needs to act more like an adult straight down to Stiles shouting that Derek cares more about his money and his books than he ever has about Stiles. Classic.

Either way, Stiles stops him before he gets the chance, grabbing him by his chin and kissing him. “So you know,” he starts, running his fingers down Derek’s bare chest, “I feel the same way about you. All the stuff you said, earlier, I – I know that feeling.”

“I know,” Derek says. “Believe me, I know.”
Stiles asked me a few times, back when we weren’t really talking but just going around and around in circles trying to clean up the mess that I had made, how I could have written something like that. How did I do it? How could I even make myself do that?

I would go into my study, a room which Lydia and I had banished him from on the grounds of him being a distraction, sit down, open my laptop, and would ask myself what it was about him that I liked. I liked that he was open, and so I twisted it around so that he was crazy, overemotional, manipulative. I liked that he would always answer the phone when I called and sounded happy to hear from me, and so then he was obsessive and controlling. I liked that he was human. So he became a fragile, useless toy that crawled his way into my head just to get what he wanted out of me. If the Stiles that was sitting in front of me, real and tangible and alive, would smile and ask me how my day was and offer to cook dinner, then the Stiles that would be immortalized in Spark would ask me where I had been all day, why I didn’t call, how come I never have time for him, how come I never do this, how come I never do that, why don’t I really love him, and if I did, then where are the keys to my Mercedes?

He was a character for me to play with. I turned a real living person who loved me into a jumble of words that hated me. I never told him any of this. I didn’t think he would be able to understand. I guess he knows now. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 143).

Lydia smacks a magazine down on her desk in the back room at Howl, so hard that a couple of post-its and other important documents go flying in the air from the force of it, knocking onto the ground in a flutter. She looks at Derek, a glint in her eyes like she might just knock everything off her desk, climb over it, and strangle him with her bare hands. And then she looks at Stiles, much the same way.

Derek just covers his face with one hand, motionless, his lips in a firm and hard line, while Stiles leans over and gets a closer look at the two page spread himself, mouth hanging open. Sure enough, in glossy immortalization, there Derek and Stiles are. Having sex in the back of the Range Rover in a parking lot. There are a half dozen images there, when Stiles knows there are likely hundreds stashed away in some papparazzo’s lucky camera, but these are likely the best ones that he captured and sold for – God. Stiles can’t even imagine how much a picture of Derek Hale just existing goes for, let alone an image of Derek Hale having sex is worth.

Thankfully, the angle of the pictures and the limitation of the car windows only allows for the top halves of their bodies to be captured, but it’s enough to tell what’s going on. It’s more than enough to tell exactly what was happening back there. Stiles doesn’t know whether to laugh, scream, cry, or – all three, at once.

He reaches his finger out and points at one in specific. He says, “you look good in this one, Derek.”

When he looks over at Derek, his hand is still plastered over his eyes, but his lips twitch. Like he’s about to burst out laughing. Lydia throws her hands in the air in frustration, and then slams her hand down on the magazine hard enough that Stiles jumps back in surprise. “Are you – no. Let me start over. Let me even think for a second about how to address either one of you.”
She walks away. She takes two steps, her back turned to them both, with her hands on her hips, and stares out her window. She stays like that for seconds on end, glaring out at her spectacular view of the building right next to hers, and says nothing. Doesn’t even move. She’s still as a statue, but Stiles can tell she’s practically fucking vibrating with rage. She has no outlet for this frustration right now – what’s she going to do? Hit Stiles in the face? Claw Derek to shreds?

Stiles leans over the space between he and Derek’s chairs and stage whispers, “I think she wants to spank us.”

Lydia whips around and comes toward him. Derek doesn’t move to protect him, so Stiles thinks it’s a safe bet that she won’t actually physically strike him, but she does stop a few feet in front of him, holding her hands out in a mock-strangle, and growls under her breath. She really does, Stiles thinks, eyebrows raised and smile spreading across his face. She would, if she thought he could get away with it, there’s no doubt in Stiles’ mind about that.

Instead, she takes a deep breath, and presses her hands together in front of her face, as if in prayer. “I feel, that there was a conversation that took place once. Between you and I, Derek.”

Derek nods his head.

“Where I said, above all else, please Jesus Christ, above all else…Don’t. Do this. To me.”

“I fail to see how you’re involved,” Stiles says, and Lydia picks that magazine up again and shoves it into his face. She literally grabs him by the back of the head, and shoves his face into the pages of the magazine, so that his arms are flailing and he has no choice but to stare at all the pictures up close.

“The second anything like this reaches public consumption, it becomes my problem.”

“Any publicity is good publicity,” Derek mutters, and Lydia drops the magazine into Stiles’ lap, while he sits there looking dazed and startled, huffing out a breath from his nose.

“How am I more upset about this than you are?” She demands, and even as Derek is opening his mouth to counter it, she’s talking over him. “How are you so calm and whatever dude about all of this, when this is your pet human that everyone is ogling? Is this so chill to you?”

Derek lets the pet human comment go right over his head and sits up straighter, narrowing his eyes.

“It bothers me, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“I more or less begged you to not have sex in public,” she goes on from her earlier statement, as if Derek’s not even speaking, as if she’s all alone in her room just ranting to herself. “All the fifteen year old girls and their parents who won’t let them buy your books now! It was bad enough you had to go NC-17 in Beacons. Now I have to deal with this. I hope you’re both very pleased with yourselves.”

“How was I supposed to know there was some creep with a camera hiding in the bushes?”

“Because you’re Derek Hale and you were fucking Stiles Stilinski. Of course there was a creep with a camera, Derek, Jesus Christ. Of course.”

“Be that as it may,” Derek waves his hand in the air as if pushing the statement away from himself altogether, “what’s the – let’s just not argue about it, all right? Just – what’s the damage, here? Let’s get to that.”

Lydia purses her lips, and shoots a look at Stiles like she’s still thinking about slapping him across
the face even though he’s hardly said a word. Then, she sighs through her nose, and click-clacks back over to her desk chair, where she collapses back into it and takes a long glug of her latte. Stiles wouldn’t be surprised to learn it’s sweetened with marshmallow vodka. “To start with, it’s the most googled topic of the day. The specific phrase being Derek Hale Stiles Stilinski sex pictures.”

“Oh, my god,” Stiles slaps his hand over his mouth before he bursts out laughing, and Lydia narrows her eyes at him, but ignores him all the same.

“Second of all, it’s trending on twitter.”

“Please tell me it’s hashtag Rover sex. I’m begging you.”

She looks at him, sighs, and says. “Unfortunately not,” she rubs her temples for a second, like she has to get herself together before speaking the words, and says, “it’s hashtag Derek bottoms.”

Derek and Stiles share a befuddled look for a second, all raised eyebrows and incredulous smiles, and then Stiles shakes his head with a light laugh. “Aw,” he mocks. “I love the straights.”

“I hate them,” Lydia hisses – while, by the way, she is one. “I hate this entire thing. I hate the images, I hate the reaction, I hate this entire situation.”

“I still fail to see the big deal,” Stiles interrupts before she can really go off. “Like – okay. I’m a little embarrassed. I’m sure Derek is too. But it’s not…the end of the world? Derek is releasing the new book in a matter of months, now, so it’s not…I mean. People will want to read it more, now. There’s an image to page 436 of Beacons. People probably want another scene to apply the pictures to.”

Lydia frowns, shaking her head like he just doesn’t get it, but Derek nods his head like he agrees entirely. It’s his job as Stiles’ fiancée to go along with every word he says, of course, but he does look like he genuinely agrees.

“Listen.” She begins, but Stiles is already taking out his phone and opening up his twitter app, tuning halfway out of the conversation as he opens up a tweet. “I understand you think that the two of you fucking in plain view of anyone who will see it is all good and well and fun, but for my own sanity, for me, please don’t put me through this ever again. I’m begging you. You don’t understand that you’re going to be asked about this in every interview, everywhere you go, for the next two years. The straights as you so lovingly refer to them are going to say shit like so Derek, an alpha werewolf, takes your dick up his ass? Wow, how quaint!, and you won’t think it’s so cute and funny then, MacKenzie.”

She gets interrupted by her phone pinging, shoots them both murderous looks, and picks it up. She observes her banner notification on the lock screen, and literally, screams. The windows fucking rattle. “Stiles!”

“What?” Stiles half laughs, while Derek sits up straighter in his chair and sighs something under his breath.

Lydia holds the phone out for both of them to look at, and there it is. Since Lydia likely subscribes to his tweets and gets notifications on them just to lurk his life even harder than she already does, there’s a notification reading @therealinski : #RoverSex

“I was just thinking maybe I could get it started, since no one else has the good sense to do it themselves!”
“I’m quitting,” Lydia snaps, throwing her phone face down on the desk. “This is my letter of resignation. I can’t anymore. I physically can’t.”

“Just relax,” Derek insists, but he’s laughing under his breath, struggling to keep his smile at bay.

“Your father has seen these pictures, Stiles!” She shouts at him, officially going for a new method of getting to his head. “How does that make you feel?”

Stiles shrugs, slow and lackadaisical, like he can’t even be fucked to give his full physical power to the action. “It makes me feel like laughing.”

“I’m done,” she says with finality, standing up from her chair. “Finished. He’s incorrigible,” she points at Stiles, then at Derek, “and you’re like his little sidekick, egging him on.”

“Just relax,” Derek repeats. “Go have a drink, you’ll calm down. Fuck’s sake.”

She storms out of the room muttering under her breath, slamming the door so hard on her way out that the picture frames rattle on the wall, and then Stiles turns to face Derek himself. “Is she really mad?”

“Oh, she’s mad,” he nods his head. “She’s not really quitting, though. Trust me on that.”

“Do you agree with me?” Stiles asks. “That it’s not that big of a deal.”

“It makes me angry,” Derek shrugs, “it makes me want to find whoever took those picture and rip their heads off, but. You’re right about the book. It can only help sales, I guess.” He frowns, looking down at his hands in his lap. “Then, I guess I start to wonder when I started focusing on sales so much.”

Stiles looks at the side of his face, and he doesn’t know what to say about that.

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“This is so much of a nicer TV than we have ever played on,” Scott comments, still staring at the ridiculous television that Derek has set up in the living room. It looks a little bit odd, the scene they’re living right now – in a room that must have cost somewhere in the double thousands of dollars to decorate, from the curtains all the way to the leather furniture, there Stiles and Scott sit. Surrounded by empty soda cans and bowls of Cheetos, sitting on the floor with cables and wires, playing video games.

“You’ve only said so a thousand times,” Stiles says, and Scott nods.

“I just can’t get over it,” he gives Stiles a big smile, patented Scott McCall, “Might I remind you my birthday is coming up?”

“Already noted,” Stiles promises him. “But that seems a conversation more for Derek. He’s the one with the check book.”

“Sure. I’ll walk right up to your fiancée and tell him my birthday wish list.”

“The thing is, he’d grumble about it, but then he’d go out and buy everything if only so he doesn’t get an earful from me.”

“I love that you’re with him,” Scott says. “I really do.”
A few seconds of silence pass aside from the sounds from the game, and then Scott abruptly pauses his side of the screen, so Stiles pauses his own too. He’s quiet for a moment, and then he turns and faces Stiles head on, a serious look on his face. Since seeing a serious look on Scott’s face is always cause for concern, Stiles puts down his controller and turns to face him as well, a frown on his face. “What’s up?” He asks.

Scott sighs through his nose, and then he says, “look. I know I haven’t always been the biggest cheerleader of you and Derek’s relationship.”

Stiles blinks at him. “You haven’t been?” The most Scott has ever done is be on Stiles’ side whenever he was mad or upset with the man – which is best friend code anyway.

“In my own way,” he admits, and ah, there it is. Scott would never act like Stiles’ father and stop talking to him for being with Derek, never in a million years, because it’s just not how he’s hardwired. He’s passive. He’ll smile and nod and then go home to Allison and rant and rave for hours on end, and then Stiles will call and he’ll pretend like he hadn’t just called Derek a fucking cock behind their backs. “I will confess, in the confines of the cone,” he gestures around themselves in a boxy motion, alluding to the invisible cone that falls over the two of them whenever they’re talking about something secret or private that means no one is to ever know about it except for them, “that I haven’t always been supportive.”

“Okay,” Stiles nods his head. “The cone acknowledges and hears this.”

Scott fiddles with some of the fibers of the carpeting, and then he sighs again, dropping his shoulders and looking small. “It was just always very weird for me. I don’t know if I ever said it, but you and him together…it was always strange. It was like – you, and all these nice things, and Derek being who he is, and now you’re…you’re Stiles Stilinski.”

“Always have been,” he says slowly. “Except for when I was really little. Then I was MacKenzie Stilinski.”

“I mean, you’re in magazines, and when we go out to get pizza people stop you and ask for pictures. I don’t know if I ever made it clear or – even suggested that it was weird for me.”

There have absolutely been instances like that before. One time, Stiles and Scott went out for ice cream, and the girl behind the counter started crying into the rocky road and Stiles felt obligated to let her come out from behind the counter to get a picture. Scott had sort of stood off to the side, and no one there even acknowledged him. Stiles hadn’t given it thought at the time, because immediately after this they walked out and Scott was being his normal self, but Stiles had forgotten in the face of so much else how Scott has a tendency to push bad feelings away if only to not start an argument.

“But it’s been weird. Okay? I admit it. I’ve felt weird about it, and I’ve felt left out, and I’ve felt…I don’t know. And I guess for a little while I started to resent Derek because he represented all that stuff. You know?”

Stiles nods. “I get it.”

“I kept thinking you would be different one day, and that you would stop calling me because you’d get a new best friend from Hollywood who drives a Mercedes and lives in a really nice house and – it’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Stiles promises him, “it’s stupid that you would think I would do that, yes, but it’s not stupid that you felt that way.”
Scott doesn’t meet his eyes. “I know now that you wouldn’t do that, but it’s still an adjustment for me. I didn’t want to say it ever, because I knew it was an adjustment for you, too, and you didn’t need me or my feelings to get in the way of what you were dealing with yourself. Look at all this stuff you have,” he gestures to the room at large, and Stiles scans his eyes over it himself – and he sees where Scott is coming from. Back when they were kids, even just a few years ago, this same scenario would be played out in Stiles’ childhood bedroom on a little 24 inch screen, with off-brand soda and Stiles grousing that he had to get up for work in the morning so he couldn’t stay up too late.

“All this stuff doesn’t change who I am,” he insists, and Scott nods his head.

“I know, I know. I get that. But my whole point is that – I did resent Derek. I don’t anymore. I am totally into this relationship, I swear. I’m super supportive,” he smiles, a really understanding, genial smile, “I see how much the two of you really love each other. It makes me happy to see you happy.”

Stiles leans forward and wraps Scott up into a bear hug, which Scott returns with equal enthusiasm, patting him on the back and squeezing tight enough to strangle him. “And I’m happy for you and Allison,” Stiles says into his back. “I think that’s great, and you both deserve it.”

When they pull apart, Scott has a pensive expression on his face. “I know it’s awkward, her around –”

“Hey,” Stiles cuts him off, shaking his head. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that, right? It’s not your fault, it’s not Allison’s fault, and Derek knows that. He’s not angry at her or you. Just – his emoting can be a little off.”

“Okay,” Scott says, agreeing if only because Stiles says so. “Then there’s no ill feelings about her coming to the wedding…?”

“Um, she was invited personally. The invite was signed by both me and Derek. Of course there’s no bad feelings. Of course, if she tried to show up and bring her psycho grandfather along or have Kate broadcast in via satellite from prison, that’d be an issue.”

Not getting that it’s a joke, Scott’s eyes go huge and he insists, “she would never.”

Stiles doesn’t even bother with alerting him of the sarcasm – he just pats Scott on the back and gestures back to the screen, unpausing his own game. Scott follows soon after, and then they go on like that until the doorbell rings. Its monotone bell rings out over their heads, eerie as it ever was, and Stiles tosses his head back and shouts, “Derek!”

There’s silence, even though Stiles knows good and well that he heard him.


After another few moments, Derek comes padding barefoot into the hallway and peers into the living room with a frown on his face. He’s got on his patented writing clothes, the ones he slept in, and woke up in, and ate in, and then went right back to writing in. “You can’t pause that thing?”

Stiles just shrugs his shoulders and smirks, but Derek sighs and approaches the door all the same, pulling it open to reveal the pizza delivery kid. Every single time Stiles and Derek have had food delivered, he wonders about what the delivery kid thinks about this entire scenario. They usually order with a fake name (today, Stiles had gone with Bob Barker), so they never know for sure that they’re going to Derek and Stiles’ house. But, when they pull up to the security detail and the gate
and see the house looming and huge up on the hill, they definitely get the idea.

For his part, the pizza kid just looks a bit frazzled, accepts his tip with gratuitous thank you’s, and then vanishes with a bit of a skip in his step, off to twitter to announce he just handed a pizza to Derek Hale.

Derek drops the pizza down on his thousand dollar carpet with a smack. “There you go,” he says, and Stiles pauses the game and looks up at him from the ground, smiling.

“You want to eat with us?”

Derek runs his fingers through some of Stiles’ hair, but he shakes his head. “I’m getting close to the end. I’d like to be done by the end of this week.”

Stiles nods his understanding, and he wonders about that book. He doesn’t ask about it, not the way he did with Spark, and Derek didn’t even tell him any of the sordid details of Beacons until it was in Stiles’ hands – so Stiles can only wonder. He imagines that it’s a lot like Beacons, like the book he would have written had Spark never gotten in the way in the first place.

Really, he has no way of knowing until it’s in his hands.

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Stiles is sitting at the island in the kitchen before classes, eating lucky charms and poking around in the newspaper. Derek still gets them delivered, and if questioned on this fact, he’ll go on a long spiel about the dying art of journalism and the importance of printed news and articles and bore everyone to tears, so Stiles has stopped asking or mocking and just surfs around for the comics and the arts and leisure. He can be such a pompous snob, Stiles has always thought so, but then, he’s earned the right to be. He is, after all, Derek Hale.

Derek had been asleep when Stiles got up at seven am, had still been asleep when he’d come out of the shower, so he assumed that he would be sleeping like the dead until well past when Stiles would be gone. Instead, Derek emerges from the darkness of the rest of the house, in sweatpants, shirtless, and he has something in his hands.

“Look who joined the living,” Stiles greets, shoveling another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. “I’d have made pancakes if I knew you were going to be up. Now I’m out of time.”

“I don’t need pancakes,” Derek argues, still clutching that object to his chest. “Good morning.”

“Yup,” Stiles agrees. “I’ll make breakfast for dinner, how’s that sound?”

“That sounds great.”

“Pancakes? Eggs?”

“Hashbrowns, too.”

“Have you thought at all about the menu for the wedding?” Stiles asks as he stands from his stool, moving to put his bowl in the sink. Derek watches him go, his eyes trailing after him a bit creepily. “It’s just that we’re inviting all these people with different dietary restrictions. Like the vegetarians.”
“I hadn’t thought about it,” Derek says honestly, “have you?”

Stiles shrugs. “I thought comfort food. Because there’s such a wide arrangement. Like, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, fried chicken, all that stuff. Biscuits. Fried vegetables.”

“Lydia will likely try to convince you to do 500 dollar a plate filet mignon.”

Stiles scrunches his nose up. “Do you like that?”

“I like steak.”

“Then we can have steak, too. What’s the budget, by the way?”

Derek looks at him steadily for a second. “The budget.”

“Yes…” Stiles says slowly, like he’s speaking to an idiot. “As in, the amount of money we can afford to spend on this entire thing.”

Out of nowhere, Derek is slamming whatever was in his hands down on the counter hard enough and loud enough that Stiles startles, jumping back a bit and nearly losing his backpack in the process. “I’m done with the book,” he blurts.

Stiles looks down at the counter, and sure enough, it’s a manuscript. He swallows, heavy and hard, because the last time he saw one of these things, looking as it is, it was…Stiles doesn’t have to go there anymore, but sometimes his mind just goes. He examines it for just a quick second, notes a short title and Derek’s name underneath, and then looks up to meet Derek’s eyes.

Christ. Derek is sweating, Stiles swears to God that he is.

“I’d like you to read it,” he goes on, speaking fast and nervously. “Before anything else, I really want you to read it.”


“It’s not very well edited. I mean, I’ve edited it, but it’s not – officially edited. It’s a second draft, maybe. So there might be typo’s and other things, um – factual errors. You can – you can correct stuff if you want. I’d like that, too. You have a red pen?”

Derek’s never been much of a rambler, but here he is, rambling, like a fucking idiot, and Stiles is just standing there clutching his backpack, having next to no idea what to say. He wants to talk about the wedding menu again, honestly. A much safer topic of conversation. “I have a red pen,” Stiles agrees, nodding. “But I’m not an editor.”

“That’s not the point,” Derek picks the manuscript up from the counter, shoves it against Stiles’ chest, and gives him a pleading look. “Please read this. And write what you think. Or tell me.”

He just looks so serious, and shy, and terrified, it’s all Stiles can do to take the thing into his hands and nod his head. “I’d love to,” he says carefully, and then Derek leans down and pecks him on the lips, wishes him a good day at school, and vanishes back up the steps.

Stiles stands there in the kitchen for a moment, feeling a little whiplashed. He takes off his backpack to drop the manuscript inside, but before he does, he pauses and actually gives the front cover a good long look.

_Drown_, he reads, and furrows his brow.
I had backed myself into a corner. I feel like I’ve lost sight of everything that I ever wanted, the entire reason I got into this business to begin with. I didn’t even write my first book to get into a business; I did it to tell the world something I thought was important. I wanted to tell stories about being a werewolf, about what it was like to grow up the way I did, what it was like to face discrimination and prejudice and to watch my family die because no one else would talk about it. I never did it to make money, or be a household name – and I wonder, even now, what I was meant to be saying with Spark.

Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I wrote a story, absolutely. I wrote garbage. I wanted people to talk about me, and I wanted those sales figures, and I wanted Stiles to still think of me the way he always did – like a god. He didn’t deserve anything less.

I realized I had to start over, I didn’t have a choice. I had been burning for so long I forgot what it was like to do anything but pick through the ashes and the debris – I had to throw myself into the ocean, and drown, start all over from the ground up, to ever be able to do right by him again. (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 389).

Stiles bursts into Derek’s study, slams the manuscript down on his desk, and says, “you cannot fucking publish this.”

Derek looks surprised. He’s got a forkful of rice-a-roni coming towards his mouth, but he puts it back down into its container. It’s an old Ziploc container leftover from a dinner Stiles made at least three nights ago – and there Derek is, eating it at his desk in the near dark like some sort of a weird shut-in. It doesn’t even look like he heated it up first. It’s a good thing he’s rich enough to have an entire staff attend to his needs plus Stiles, otherwise he would’ve been weeded out by natural selection, Stiles is sure of it. “You finished it already?” Derek asks, and he sounds skeptical.

Derek had only given Stiles the manuscript earlier in the day, and it’s only six o’clock now, so he understands why Derek might be confused. “I skipped my Astronomy class to finish it,” he says by way of explanation. Really, he had an extra fifteen minutes before his first class of the day, wound up getting obsessively sucked into it, and sat in the exact same location for five hours poring over it. And then spent another two hours re-reading and re-reading certain parts over and over, completely baffled. There are entire sections of this book that he would be damned before letting Derek put out into the general public. Literally damned.

“You are not putting that book out,” he points to the thing, and Derek furrows his brow.

You read it at school?”

“Yes!” Stiles says, “you can’t –“

“Stiles. You took out an unpublished Derek Hale manuscript at school.”

“Yes, yes, I did –“
“Oh, my God,” he leans back in his seat, shaking his head. “I didn’t think I’d have to tell you to be fucking discrete!”

“Nobody saw!” He argues. But now that he thinks about it, there were a handful of kids walking into his Astronomy class, the same ones that always stare at him for too long because they know exactly who he is, that sort of eyeballed him a little bit harder than usual when they saw what was in his lap. Even if they didn’t see the cover or the title or any of it, a bound manuscript isn’t exactly the most inconspicuous thing on planet earth to just be sitting around with, especially when you’re Stiles fucking Stilinski. “Well – okay. Nobody really saw. And that’s not the point. My point is that --”

“I can’t have any single piece of that book leaking,” he insists, looking very serious about it, “or Lydia will have my god damn head.”

“Nobody saw the fucking book except for me, okay? I’m trying to talk to you about something!”

Derek leans back in his chair and sighs through his nose, makes a hand gesture like go on, but Stiles knows he’ll be getting a ten thousand word lecture at some point in the near future about carrying Derek’s unpublished works around like a ding-dong.

“You…” he starts, gesturing to the manuscript sitting on the desk. It’s crinkled at the edges in some parts, and the binding is all cracked from how many times Stiles opened and closed and reopened and reclosed it throughout the course of a single day. “…I literally can’t stand idly by and let you publish that.”

“Why?”

“Has anyone else read this? Anyone aside from me?”

“Lydia,” he says, “Kira and Boyd just got copies today like you did.”

“And not a single one of them have told you how insane it would be for you to put that out into the world?”

Derek furrows his brow, shaking his head. “Where is this coming from?”

Stiles picks Drown up and waves it in the air for a moment for dramatic effect, so its pages flop around like fish out of water. “From this! Derek! You can’t – this is – you’ve gone too far this time, you really have!”

“I’m trying to understand what the problem here is,” Derek says in a low voice, face looking darkened by shadows and even more menacing than usual, “but you seem to be struggling with being direct.”

Stiles puts the thing down again and then he takes a step back, shaking his head. “It was like reading a fucking suicide note from Kurt Cobain or something. Or, like, get your head out of the oven Sylvia, there’s still so much to live for -”

“What?”

“It’s good. Is that what you want me to tell you? It’s a really fucking good book, but it’s too – you --”

Derek watches him for a moment as he struggles to string words together, and then he sighs through his nose. “It’s the truth.”
“I know that,” Stiles shoots back. “But it’s – there’s such a thing as too much truth.”

“I was just being honest, which is what all four of my books before this one had been about. Honesty.”

“There is such a thing as too much honesty, too!”

“Is there something I wrote about you in there that made you uncomfortable?” Derek demands, leaning forward just slightly so the light catches him better, and Stiles can actually look in his eyes. “If there is, you can tell me, and I’ll take it out.”

“It’s nothing – it’s nothing specifically you wrote about me,” Stiles hisses, running a hand through his hair in frustration, “it’s…the entire book as a concept. There are certain things you can’t tell everybody, Derek, you can’t always be an open book like that for the entire world!”

Drown is, essentially, the longest and most prolific confession for a wrong-doing Stiles has ever read. It deals nearly entirely with Spark, how it came to pass, why he did it, what he was thinking, how he’s the worst person alive for doing it, how he can’t forgive himself, how he still loses sleep over it, how the rest of his entire life will be defined and marred by the fact that he ever chose to write it. Never mind the fact that the thing is long gone, burned in a pit somewhere never to be seen again as far as Stiles knows, and never mind the fact that Stiles goes entire weeks sometimes without even remembering it existed – Derek apparently has spent the last four months crafting a four-hundred-page book about another book that the world never got to read.

He never outright says it, not in so many words, but it’s obvious to Stiles that him writing that fucking book was just one more way for him to torture himself over it. And Stiles – he can’t put his support behind something that Derek created to punish himself. He just can’t do it.

“Derek,” he starts, taking a step closer when Derek has gone silent for too long. He crouches down to get on his level, frowning and taking him by the hand. “It’s a really good book. It’s one of the best you’ve ever written, maybe second only to Beacons. But it’s - they don’t need to know about this. They don’t need to know any of it. Especially not in the way you’re treating it.”

Derek looks at him very hard, very steady. He says, “and how am I treating it,” with no inflection. Stiles looks down at where their fingers are joined, and squeezes, just once. “Like your own little torture chamber.”

“No,” Derek argues very sternly. “That’s not how I thought about it. You’re looking at it from the wrong perspective, you really are.”

“You want to put this book out so people will read it and think you’re terrible just like how you think of yourself,” Stiles says quietly, even as Derek continues to shake his head, “that’s not fair to you, I won’t let you do it.”

“It’s not about them,” Derek snaps, so hard and loud, nearly a yell, that Stiles pulls back a bit in surprise. Derek very rarely ever yells, especially not at Stiles. “All those people that buy these stupid fucking books, I don’t care what they think about me, or you, or anything about my life after they read it. I don’t care about that. And it isn’t about me, either.”

Stiles swallows, feeling shaky, for some reason.

“It’s about you. You weren’t reading between the lines well enough to see what was right in front of you – it’s not about punishing myself for doing anything. It’s not about what people are going to buy into. It’s for you. You alone.”
Of course, the book is about him. He mentions Stiles by name. He never did that in Beacons, if anyone can remember that. In Beacons, he was the boy from Beacons. In Spark, he was the boy from Beacons that ruined Derek’s life. In Drown, he’s Stiles. An actual person that lives and breathes and does all the things that Derek says that he does. Not a single chapter passes by where Derek doesn’t call him out directly by name, and Stiles would shudder to think what a keyword search of his name in the word document of it that’s sitting on Derek’s laptop right now would return – just how many results would come up.

But Stiles hadn’t thought what Derek had meant to do, with that.

“It’s an apology,” Derek goes on, voice lowering, getting softer and gentler, soothing almost.

Stiles takes a deep breath in, He could see that – he really could. Some passages in that book read like atonement. “I don’t understand, if the book is all for me, why you need to publish it.”

Derek smiles. A gentle, sad smile, and he reaches out and touches Stiles’ face. “The book is for you,” he says, “all the words in it, just for you. But I have to publish it because I – have to. For me.”

There are certain things about Derek that Stiles thinks he’ll just never be able to understand. They’ll spend the next x amount of years of their lives together, maybe fifty, sixty, or seventy, and still, there are just little tiny facets of Derek that will be lost on Stiles. This is one of them.

“If you told me not to publish it, you know I wouldn’t do it,” he goes on, and Stiles knows he means it. After all, he did it with Spark, according to popular opinion – and he can do it with Drown, too. And the people will speculate, and murmur when he walks past, about how he has complete and total control over everything that Derek does, and it’s scary for one person to have all that power, and isn’t he awful, and don’t we despise him, and can you believe it?

But Stiles cannot do that. Not just because of what people would say about him, though that is a concern, but because this is what Derek does. This is what Derek promised he would do from the start of everything.

Stiles can never say that Derek didn’t warn him. He warned him over, and over, and Stiles nodded his head, he agreed, he said yes. This is how it is. And Stiles can’t and won’t keep Derek from doing whatever he needs to just so he can sleep at night.

“Publish it,” Stiles says, and Derek looks at him almost suspiciously. “I mean it, Derek. It’s your book, and if you want to put it out, then that’s your call. I’m just the feature, you know.”

Another one of those sad little smiles is given to him, and Stiles can only smile back and lean up to kiss him on the lips. “You really think it’s a good book?” He asks when they pull apart, and Stiles scans his eyes over Derek’s face, again and again. One word from Stiles saying otherwise, and he’d throw the entire thing out.

Luckily, the truth of it is really and honestly, “it’s one of the best things I’ve ever read. Couldn’t put it down. There’s something about it, I don’t know. It’s…”

“…like reading a trainwreck or a car crash. All detailed out and given to you bullet by bullet,” he offers, and Stiles nods his head. That’s exactly it. The inability to look away from something so terrible, so fucking awful, you just have to keep staring and staring until you’ve got it memorized. That’s what Drown is like.

Like one long, over-explained, over-detailed article about a car crash.
“One of the *best* books I’ve ever read,” Nicole New is saying, smiling all big and huge like she’s on a billboard somewhere. She holds her copy of Drown up for the camera, so it shimmers in the studio lights. It won’t be released for another two weeks, but here Stiles and Derek are on the start of promo tour, caked with makeup and wearing ridiculous clothing they wouldn’t ever wear anyplace else but this studio, smiling and nodding idiotically. “Really. A *really* good book. I wish I had something more eloquent to say about it, but really – just – good stuff.”

She probably nearly shit herself when she got to certain parts of that fucking book. Like halfway through chapter one, when Derek admits what Spark even was and what it entailed, she literally must have thrown herself through her window. She strikes Stiles as the type of person who literally thrives off of drama like that. Hell, half of Derek’s fanbase is likely the same.

“Now, this is the kind of book you have to read for yourself,” she says, not to either Stiles or Derek, but to the camera directly. Stiles and Derek just stare at the side of her face, useless and utterly voiceless. “You can’t just take my word for it, or listen to your friends telling you about it when they read it. You need. To read this yourself. Experience it.”

“It is an experience,” Stiles agrees, lips thinning over his teeth as he smiles.

She finally puts the book down on the coffee table, almost right in front of where Stiles is sitting, so he gets another good long look at the cover art. It’s been nearly five months since Stiles first read that second draft, and since then it’s been sent out to editors, who sent it back within the week gushing and raving and demanding immediate publication at earliest possible convenience because it’s perfect, really, *don’t change a thing except for this huge list of adjustments we have.*

“So. This is almost like a fictional novel in the way that we can talk about it, here and now,” she sits up straight and looks right at Derek with another dazzling smile, “because we don’t wanna spoil it for anyone who won’t be getting their copy until the public release date.”

“Right,” Derek agrees. He sounds a little more than annoyed, but Stiles is sure he’s the only one who knows him well enough to be able to pick up on that tone.

“What *can* we say about it, actually?”

Derek and Stiles look at each other. Stiles opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, but can’t think of anything, and Derek does the same back to him, and then the three of them all laugh like jolly old chums. Really, this was rehearsed and forced on them in the pre-interview, and Stiles feels awkward and jerky as he moves.

“Let me ask you something else, then. What was it like, to write this book? Considering its subject matter. I mean, to me, it just felt so…it almost felt like I wasn’t meant to be reading it. Like it was only ever meant for one person to read,” her eyes flick to Stiles very deliberately, and he has to hold back the eye roll.

“When I sat down to write it that first day, I…sort of approached the entire thing with this idea that I had to be. Almost more honest than I had ever been before,” he nervously pulls down on the hem of his shirt, and then sits up straighter as if to make up for the way his voice sounds a little too thin, right now.

“I think your past books were also very honest, almost to the point of discomfort, but even those
can’t really touch this one. Is that just because of the specific subject matter, do you think, or?”

Derek looks like he’s churning that around in his mind, for just a moment or so. He looks down at his hands, then turns to Stiles very briefly, and then he nods his head. “I think it’s just like you said. This is the first time I’ve ever written a book with a specific someone in mind. A reader, and not just a subject.”

She smiles again, like she just loves the sound of that. “Beacons wasn’t really for Stiles, is what you mean.”

“Beacons was about Stiles. But not for him.”

“And Drown?”

“You read the dedications and acknowledgment pages,” Derek says with a smile of his own. “You know who it’s for.”

In two weeks, Drown will be loaded onto shelves in Barnes and Nobles and Targets all across the United States and beyond, sold for twenty four dollars and fifty cents a piece. An entire piece of Derek and Stiles’ lives, the worst part of it by far, reworded and sold like a commodity to these people. Stiles has often sat down and asked himself, again and again, is he okay with this? Is he all right with this?

Again and again, he’s come to the conclusion that he is. As many times as he’s read and re-read all the revisions and edits and final copies of the thing, he can’t think of any real reason he should have an issue with it, and he likes the book so much. He really does. He thinks about certain lines from it all the time and still gets that same connection to Derek he used to always get even before they ever met one another – like Nicole said. One of the best books he’s ever read in his life.

He’s fine with it, he knows he is. But there’s something nagging him in the back of his mind, telling him that even though Derek insists that Drown is the final chapter of Spark, so they can move on, be done, get closure…there’s something about it that isn’t over. Not yet.

In the five months leading up to release week, they went through Thanksgiving with much less fanfare than the last one, and had a real Christmas at his father’s house, with Erica and Allison invited this time, and it was fun and nice and one of the best holidays Stiles can remember ever having. Now it’s March, and Drown is coming out on April 2nd, ringing in Spring in its own little way, and things are so good – they really are.

They’re so good.

He waits for the other shoe to drop, near constantly.

“And you two are getting married very soon, isn’t that right?” Nicole prods.

“Yeah, this September,” Stiles says. “Still a bit of a ways away, but it feels close when I think of how much there still is to do.” Stiles and Derek still have very long back and forths concerning the food – Stiles has held stern and fast to his belief that there needs to be macaroni and cheese, and Derek has gotten frustrated and shouted something about you can’t have macaroni and fucking cheese in the same room as a ten thousand dollar chandelier, Stiles more times than Stiles could count.

“I just have to say,” Nicole puts her hand over her heart, and Stiles gears himself up for some real feaux-genuine bullshit to come spilling out of her mouth, “I think it’s amazing after reading this book, how much the two of you have managed to overcome in your relationship. I mean, if I were
you, Stiles…”

Stiles has heard the same thing, over and over again, ever since early copies of Drown have been sent out to people in the business just like herself. He actually received a very well written letter from Dr. Phil encouraging him and Derek to come on the show and “work out some of their very obvious relational and communicational issues”. He imagines that when the general public gets their paws on the thing, they also will bombard Stiles with the same question over and over again.

*How can you stand it?* Stiles stands it just fine, all things considered. That said, he knows where Nicole is coming from. Anyone else in Stiles’ shoes might have ran for the hills after that whole debacle happened, but here he is. On television, doing what he always imagined he’d do if he and Derek ever got together.

“Relationships are built on things like this, I think,” Stiles says, while Derek shifts a bit in his seat, looking uncomfortable. “I think there have to be road bumps. Otherwise, it would be boring.”

“What a way to think about it,” Nicole tells him, very sincerely, like she’s amazed or something. Stiles leans back in his seat as the rest of the interview goes on without him, while Derek monotones his answers and Nicole fake laughs and loves every second of it, and millions of people watch and countdown the days for themselves to have their own copies.

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They hold the release party for Drown in Los Angeles, which felt ultimately counter-productive to Stiles. First of all, he and Derek couldn’t even drive down there together – Derek had to drive himself up early and deal with the entire charade a whole day beforehand, for what reason Stiles has no idea. But Stiles wound up making the drive by himself the day of, in yet another silver Lexus, vanishing out of the mountains of Beacon Hills and down into the deserts. The venue is a gigantic mammoth of a place, with chandeliers and fine carpeting and large marble pillars surrounding the main hall.

Unlike Beacons’ release party, which is the only thing he really has to compare this one to, Drowns’ is much more all-inclusive. There’s not two stories, one separating fans from the rest of the higher-ups, but it’s all mixed on one gigantic fucking floor. The only fans who managed to get here are the ones who had enough money to afford the ludicrous ticket price – so when Stiles first walks in, he’s not greeted the way he was at Beacons.

At Beacons, he walked in and people said hello and how was he, shook his hand, and then immediately launched into longwinded small talk with Derek, the more interesting person of the two of them. It was fine.

Here, the doors open up for him, and he’s bombarded with what can only be described as the loudest and most startling sound he’s ever heard. People *scream*, one long drawn out noise, and Stiles walks along down the carpet leading him into the main party with a smile plastered on his face, because what else is he supposed to do?

Derek is here, somewhere, but Stiles has no idea where just yet. He’s been thrust inside with no one but a small pack of a security team, men that block him when a girl tries to get too close to him, that shout things like *stay back* loudly in his ear so he flinches. One of them grabs him by the scruff of his neck when he tries to move his way toward the snack table, citing something about *not yet*, which made Stiles frown. At least they don’t try to cart him away from the alcohol. Stiles couldn’t have survived that one.
He gets his patented Long Island Iced Tea, stands there at the bar drinking and getting heavily eyeballed by the bartender, and puts his hand in his pocket. The room is gigantic, he thinks as he sips. This is the biggest room he has ever been in. Madison Square Garden is not this fucking big.

There’s a table set up at the very front, with chairs and microphones, that Stiles knows he’ll be forced to sit at and take questions from the lucky fans who got selected to even speak to him. It won’t be that bad, he knows, because diehard fans of Derek’s are all teenage and young adult girls that are generally shy and polite and won’t ask ridiculously inappropriate questions like, say, Nicole New would, and Derek will be in his element talking with them, so Stiles has decided to grin and bear it.

Right behind it, there’s a giant blow up image of the Drown cover art. It looks better on the book itself, Stiles thinks, but there it is. It’s what anyone would expect – blue, angry looking waves, with the word DROWN stamped over it in gigantic black lettering, Derek’s name small and in iridescent blue down at the bottom, so it shimmers in the light.

Stiles is just about to ask his security detail if he can have something to eat, now, when a small pack of girls wearing party dresses, looking about aged seventeen, begins to approach him. They look nervous, clutching copies of Beacons against their chest so tightly you’d think they were their lifelines, wearing Derek Hale bracelets and smiling hopefully at him.

One of the guards reaches out to stop them from getting any closer, but Stiles grabs his arm. “It’s okay,” he says, and the girls titter in delight.

“Sorry to bother you,” one of them, perhaps the ringleader, cuts in a little quickly, her voice high pitched and squeaky with nerves. “We just wanted to say hi.”

Stiles smiles at them. “Hi,” he says, and they chime hi back at him in a chorus.

“We brought our books…” she trails off, holding her own copy out a little expectantly, “you don’t have to, but I was wondering –“

Stiles takes the book out of her hands and is instantly handed a black sharpie by one of the other girls, who looks like she’s about to faint just from having her fingers brush up against his own. “You guys don’t have Drown yet?” He asks, opening up to the title page of Beacons and scribbling his signature across it quickly. He hands it back to her, and takes one of the other girls’ when it’s offered.

“They haven’t started selling them here yet,” another girl pipes up, sounding upset about it. “The shelves are all sectioned off. Not until the stroke of midnight, I guess.”

“That,” Stiles starts, taking another Beacons in his hands and signing it, “is bullshit. How much were tickets for this thing again?”

They look sheepish, but one of them speaks up all the same. “A thousand dollars.”

A thousand fucking dollars. Derek had nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with that. Stiles is positive of it. “And they won’t let you buy a copy of the book until exactly midnight?”

“I guess not.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Stiles says, handing the last book to the last girl, “Derek would let you buy them right now if he had any say in the matter.”

“We know,” they all say at varying intervals, nodding enthusiastically. Stiles wonders at that –
what do these girls think they know about Derek? They’re right, all the same – if Derek could control it, he’d rip down the barricades between his fans and the book and let them at it whenever they wanted it, but what is it about his temperament or anything he’s ever said makes them think they know that?

“You guys want a picture?” Stiles changes the subject, and it works like a charm. They fall into a tizzy of surrounding him, handing all their phones off to an annoyed looking security guard, and then he stands there for ten seconds smiling with his arms around strangers while the pictures get taken on each phone, one by one.

When it’s all over and done with, they thank Stiles profusely and give him hugs, which he accepts one by one. Before they disappear to filter back into the party and post their pictures with him to twitter or wherever else and scream about it for a while, he asks them, “have any of you girls seen Derek? I haven’t spotted him yet.”

A manicured fingernail gets pointed off in the direction of the snack table, where, there’s the man of the hour, eating a pig in a blanket and talking to someone Stiles vaguely recognizes. Kira and Boyd are just behind him, looking nice and dressed up and just slightly less annoyed than usual. Stiles thanks the girls, and stalks off in that general direction, his security in tow.

He understands the fact that he has a need for security, especially considering the specific place he’s in right now, but really, one would have been fine. Two, okay. But four? Unnecessary and over the top. As far as the eye can see, the room is werewolf girls and regular human girls, the occasional gay kid thrown in for good measure. Not a single one of these girls would do anything more than try to sneak attack hug him, and really, Stiles doesn’t have much of a problem with that in the strictest sense.

Girls try to approach him, holding out books and nervously saying his name, and every time Stiles has to shove the animals of his security away and tell the girls it’s fine, it’s okay, scribbling his signature fast as lightning and taking a quick picture. Finally, Stiles snaps “just fucking let me talk to them, it’s not that big of a deal,” to the security team at large, well within ear shot of an entire pack of fans, and that part of them goes a bit quiet for a moment. But at least he manages to deal with a few more of the fans without anyone trying to tackle teenage girls to the ground.

After a solid twenty-five minutes, Stiles finally makes it to the other end of the room, where, luckily, Derek is still standing and gorging himself on snacks. Far less of the girls seem to have the courage to attempt to approach him, and that likely has something to do with the fact that he’s – well. Derek Hale. Not nearly as approachable as skinny human Stiles.

“Hey,” Stiles says when he’s close enough, and Derek is already opening up his arms for a big hug, which Stiles more or less jumps into his arms for. It’s been a day since they’ve last been in the same room with one another, and this isn’t exactly the ideal location for a reunion, but they’re here anyway.

“I heard you yelling at the security,” Derek says to him when they break apart, and Stiles rolls his eyes. “They’re only there to make sure you don’t get whacked off.”

“Right. The werewolf Mafioso, undercover as a teenage girl who wants me to sign their book.”

Derek smiles at him, and then gestures to the whole room, big as it is. “Well, this is it.”

Stiles nods his head. “Versailles in action.”

“It’s not that big,” Derek contends, scanning his eyes over the room. There are handfuls of girls
everywhere, turning their heads and looking at where Derek and Stiles are standing, shamelessly taking pictures and whispering to each other and laughing.

“Was the Staples Center booked tonight, or something?”

Derek narrows his eyes, but he laughs all the same.

“Hey, did you know that they’re not letting anyone buy the book until exactly midnight?”

“Who isn’t?” Derek demands, exactly like Stiles thought he would, and Stiles smiles.

“They. The amorphous blob of people who run everything you can’t. I was talking to some girls earlier, and they had me signing copies of Beacons, all these girls are actually – none of them have Drown yet because The Man won’t let them buy it.”

“What kind of Nazi Germany bullshit is this,” Derek mutters, looking around like he’s honestly about to hunt down someone and demand that the barricades be taken down. “If they think they’re all gonna line up all nice and wait to get their books, they’re insane. They’re just begging for someone to get hurt.”

“That’s what I said,” Stiles agrees.

Derek puts one hand on Stiles’ shoulder, still looking around for someone to talk to about this, and he must find them, because he pats Stiles on the back and says, “let me go deal with this. You stay, eat, talk to the girls, and I’ll – fucking do damage control I guess.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, accepting a kiss on the cheek and another back-pat. “Come back in time to eat a little yourself, before panel!”

Derek vanishes into the crowd, met with a handful of HI DEREK!!!’s from the crowd, which he accepts with a broad wave as they all part for him to pass through. The security men stay glued to Stiles’ side, even though Derek is much more likely to be attacked than he is, and Stiles stands and picks up some food, munching on it for a moment.

He turns and notices Kira and Boyd are still standing there, hovering really, and Stiles swallows. “Oh, hey,” he says, and they both nod in greeting. “Are you guys having fun?”

Boyd shrugs, and Kira nods her head as she takes another sip of her drink. “It’s better than being home,” she offers, and Stiles doesn’t know what to say to that. They stand there in awkward silence for a moment, and Stiles starts wishing he hadn’t even acknowledged them at all.

Then, a new song starts playing and Stiles smiles, turning to face them again. “I like this song,” he says, and they both nod again before looking away, silent. After another beat, Stiles tries, “what kind of music do you guys like?”

“This and that,” Kira says, and Boyd mutters something about not this under his breath. The silence descends once more, since neither of them are giving him anything to work with – which is really saying something, because Stiles has always considered himself a generally amicable person. Either way, Stiles gives up on the entire thing altogether, going back to ignoring them until they eventually saunter off by themselves.

Derek finally comes back to the snack table a good twenty minutes later, and he looks incredibly put out. He grabs at Stiles’ drink and takes a long sip, and then snatches a handful of potato chips out of the nearest bowl and starts munching on them like they’ve personally wronged him. “I sense that you couldn’t get them to change their minds.”
Derek swallows his food and scoffs, rolling his eyes. “They said it would be too difficult to arrange anything but what they’ve got set up now. They’ll be eating their words when someone gets hospitalized because of that mess, they’ll see.”

Stiles can only imagine what’ll happen when the barricades get pulled off and the clock strikes midnight. First of all, he doesn’t think that what they have lined up on those shelves is exactly the same number of people who are milling around here right now, waiting for their copy. Stiles can only pray there are boxes upon boxes of Drown behind the shelves, otherwise, there’ll be some kind of a riot. Second of all, not a single person in this room is calm about the fact that they’re getting a copy of the book. It’s going to be a stampede.

“Well,” Stiles says, putting his hand on Derek’s shoulder. “You tried, and I support you.”

“Thanks,” he grumbles, but gives Stiles a small smile all the same.

Stiles checks the time on his phone and sees that it’s 10:30, almost time for them to take the stage and accept questions and do the whole fanfare bit of the event, so he sighs and picks up a plate from table. “You should eat something more substantial than chips,” he says, picking up some finger sandwiches and piling them on top of the plate, “there’s still a lot of this party left to get through.”

“Have you had enough to eat yourself?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been stuffing my face since you left,” he promises, which is true. He hands Derek a plate piled with sandwiches and pasta salad, and Derek takes it and starts eating without complaint. “Are you nervous at all?”

“For what? The panel? No. It’s going to be the same dozen or so questions they always ask –“

“Not about the panel,” Stiles corrects. “About the book coming out at all. I mean – all the things you said in there, and all these people reading it, are you –“

“No at all,” Derek interrupts before Stiles can finish. “Not even a little bit. It’s just the truth.”

Stiles frowns at him. “That’s not scary to you?”

“The truth isn’t scary. The truth is very, very easy once you manage to get it out,” he runs his hand up and down Stiles’ back. “Lies are much scarier.”

Stiles thinks about that for a moment – how scary Derek might have ever thought Spark was. He imagines if Derek had really put that book out, and how he’d have to keep up that charade for however long his publishers would insist upon him to do so, and then he’d have to keep telling that same lie over and over again, for the rest of his life, even when he and Stiles would’ve gotten back together. An entire book of lies that he’d have to remember, memorize as well or even better than he could remember the truth.

And yeah. That does sound scary.

Derek eats and drinks for another few minutes, while Stiles fields some interactions from the fans and signs their books and smiles at their compliments, and everything seems to be going very well, for the most part. No major disasters just yet, but there’s still going to be an hour of Stiles sitting up on a stage with a microphone in his face, so there’s a lot left waiting to go wrong, just yet.

Five minutes before they’re meant to go backstage and get ready to go on, Lydia appears. She’s wearing a gown with her hair pulled back out of her face, storming through the crowd in heels high
enough to break an ankle, but she’s practically running. She’s got this look on her face that Stiles thinks he’s never seen before – it’s a lot like the look she had on when she saw those pictures of Derek and Stiles having sex in a magazine, but worse.

It’s more than anger, annoyance at something having gone wrong in her perfect little bubble that she carefully maintains and watches over. There’s something akin to genuine worry and fear on her face, mixed in with anger, and mixed in with anxiety. It’s the oddest expression he’s ever seen on Lydia’s face.

She approaches them and gives Stiles what he would quantify as a very apologetic look, and then focuses all her attention on Derek. She puts her hand on his wrist, very light, like she’s about to deliver a death blow. She holds it there for just a moment, keeping his eye contact, and then she leans up and presses her mouth against his ear.

Stiles can’t hear what she says, but he sees in perfect flying colors the aftermath. Derek drops his plate, so it clatters to the ground and sends whatever food he has left on it flying across the tiles, prompting the security team to leap into action as though they’re expecting a threat. None comes. Derek stands there, stock still as a statue, all color drained clean out of his face, even after Lydia pulls back and looks at him as if waiting for instruction, or some kind of reaction at all.

Derek looks at Stiles. And then he quickly looks away.

“Is everything okay?” Stiles asks, stepping forward to try and touch Derek’s shoulder. But, Derek pulls away, lowering his eyes, finally shaking himself out of his stupor.

No one answers him. Lydia says, “come on,” in a tight voice, taking Derek by the hand and motioning for him to follow her through the crowd. Stiles stands there for a second as they turn to go, unsure of whether or not he should follow them. But, Derek turns back, this unexplainable look on his face.

He says, “baby,” in a low voice, and gestures with two fingers for him to come. So, Stiles does. He walks toward Derek, who takes his hand and squeezes hard and comforting, and then they navigate through the sea of people. This time when security barks at girls to stay back, Stiles lets them.

They manage to make it through to the outside hallway, where there are photographers and people all milling about casually in ball gowns and suits, and then Lydia leads them to a specific door a few doors down from the big hall. She pulls her keys out of her handbag, and Stiles notices that her hands are shaking. She fumbles around in the jumble of her key ring for a moment, and Stiles uses that opportunity to again ask, “what’s going on?”

Derek doesn’t look at him, or even acknowledge that he spoke. He stares straight ahead at the wooden door, face blank, and dismal, and Stiles can only stand there with his heart pounding in his chest.

Lydia gets the door open, and they all spill inside. It looks like Lydia’s command central, with a couch and a desk that has her laptop sitting on top of it, some empty coffee cups and a half eaten sandwich sitting beside it. The second the door closes behind them, Derek rounds on Lydia and shouts, “how did this happen?”

“You’re asking me like I fucking orchestrated it,” she snaps. “I had spoken to them a thousand times, I had tried to get them to sign a silence agreement, I did everything in my power to stop this from happening!”

“Evidently, you didn’t try hard enough, Lydia.”
Lydia scowls. “I’m not the one who wrote the fucking book, Derek.”

“What’s going on?” Stiles demands, loudly and more forceful than when he had tried before. “Did something bad happen?”

For a moment, the room is silent. Derek palms his forehead, steps away with his back turned, shaking his head again and again like he’s even trying to wrap his brain around this, and Lydia just stands there, in her pretty dress, looking stricken.

After so much silence passes with Derek not saying a word, not even looking at either of them, Lydia clears her throat and says in a quiet voice, “it leaked.”

Stiles raises his eyebrows. “Drown leaked? It comes out in less than two hours. That’s not…that big of a deal.”

There’s some more quiet, and then Lydia is staring daggers at the back of Derek’s head. As if he can sense this, Derek heaves out a great big sigh, lowering his head. When he turns back around, he doesn’t meet Stiles’ eyes, not for seconds on end. When he finally does, Stiles thinks he looks like he’s about to start crying. Stiles has never seen Derek cry before. “Not Drown. Spark.”

Stiles fixes his gaze in between Lydia and Derek both, and he waits for a punch line. When they both keep looking at him with varying levels of dread, Stiles knows that he won’t be getting one any time soon. They’re not kidding. He stays quiet, a thousand thoughts churning around and around inside of his head, standing stock still in this exact spot, as if he physically can’t move from it.

Lydia clears her throat again and opens up her MacBook on the desk, waking it up from slumber. The first thing that greets them when her screen lights up is a sight that Stiles thought he would never, never anywhere else but in his horrible, awful memories, would see again.

He only ever read it once. But he wouldn’t be able to forget those opening lines for as long as he lived. And it’s all there, all of it, in a PDF file four hundred pages long, sitting and waiting for the world to read it.

“The link is being passed around on twitter, tumblr, facebook,” she says in a low, gentle voice, as if she’s talking to a wounded animal. “It’s been downloaded over ninety thousand times already. We’ve – we’ve been working on tearing down the links, but once that many people have it we…we can’t do. Much about it.”

Stiles has never in his life heard Lydia stammer like that before. It’s as much an indication of the gravity of the situation as he’s likely to get. He looks to Derek for something – anything. Some kind of indication that this isn’t true, or real, that it couldn’t possibly be, that all of this is a game, some kind of sick fucking joke, or something.

But Derek is deathly serious, face ashen pale, and he’s looking right back at Stiles. He offers nothing.

“You told me,” Stiles starts, taking a step closer to where Derek is standing, “you promised me…”

“Stiles,” Derek tries to start, but then can’t finish.

“You swore up and down, over and over again, that that didn’t exist anymore.” He thrusts his hand in the direction of where the PDF is sitting open on Lydia’s computer, mocking him in all its brightness and existence. “You said you burned the only fucking copy that there was, you said –”
“I did burn the only physical copy there was,” he says, in a placating tone of voice, but Stiles almost loses his fucking mind all the same.

“How do ninety thousand fucking people have it if you got rid of it!”

Derek rubs his hands down his face, again and again. “I – once something is put into a computer, or a file drive, it doesn’t just vanish, Stiles! It doesn’t work like that!”

“Don’t you fucking talk down to me right now,” he advances on Derek in such a way that it must suggest he’s going to hit him, but Lydia doesn’t try to stop him, and Derek only puts his hands up in the air, palms out, as if in surrender. “You promised me, you did, you promised me that no one would ever be able to read it, and no one else had ever read it –”

“I know, I know, god dammit, I know. It’s – listen, please listen.” He holds his hands out to put them on Stiles’ shoulders, but Stiles steps back, shaking his head, and Derek lowers his hands slowly, jaw tightening. “I hadn’t given that book to anyone else but my publishers at the time,” he says evenly, and Stiles knows the lot. The same group of people who tried to sue him when he refused to publish. “They had PDF copies, file drive copies, at least – at least a dozen different digital manifestations of the book.”

Stiles steps back and nods his head. If he had known that, all the way back then, he never would have thought himself safe.

“I didn’t tell you that because I didn’t need you to worry about it and I thought – I thought no one could be that shitty of a person to…” he trails off, and Stiles almost can’t fucking believe him.

“A group of people who sued you and tried to force you to even write that book to begin with, and you think they wouldn’t do this,” he grits out between his teeth. Derek stands there and looks fucking miserable, and Lydia hovers off to the side like she doesn’t even know what to say, which is a first, and Stiles knows the lot. The same group of people who tried to sue him when he refused to publish. “They had PDF copies, file drive copies, at least – at least a dozen different digital manifestations of the book.”

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Derek sighs through his nose, and puts his hands on his hips. “It would hurt you,” he offers in a low voice. “You’re the one who ruined their entire business with me, who cost them millions in legal fees, who – tore down their entire empire. Some of those people, they’re on unemployment now. They…”

They just wanted to hurt him. That’s all this is. Ninety thousand, and counting, and counting, and counting still people are going to read that book. And it’s representative of one of the most awful times of Stiles’ life, and it’s awful, and it says things about him in Derek’s own words that make him feel like throwing up, and someone out there who has never met him, never spoken to him personally, just wanted to get revenge on him for something that was out of his control.

Stiles doesn’t know what else he’s supposed to do. He steps backwards, until his knees bump up against the couch wedged up into the corner, sits down, puts his face in his hands, and cries. He can’t stop himself – it’s one of those moments where something is just too much for a person to handle mentally or emotionally that there’s nothing else they can do, except for let themselves absolutely and completely break down.

He cries so hard he starts to feel like he can’t breathe, and when he takes his hands off of his face to try and suck more air into his lungs, Derek is right there in front of him. He’s kneeling down on
the ground in front of Stiles, looking more miserable than Stiles has ever seen him, and Stiles can’t afford the mental space to be angry at him.

He reaches down and presses his face into Derek’s neck, and Derek wraps his arms around Stiles’ body as tight as he can, rubbing soothing circles up and down his back. Stiles cries, and cries, and cries, until Derek’s shirt is soaked, and Derek has given up completely on trying to soothe him with gentle shhh’ing.

“I’m so sorry,” Derek says into his hair, squeezing tighter for just a fraction on a second. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. Oh, my God, I’m so sorry.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Stiles says brokenly into Derek’s neck, and Derek murmurs I know, and that’s all there is to it. There’s no real comfort that anyone could offer. Millions of people will have either read snippets or the entire thing by tomorrow morning, and yes, maybe the sales of Drown will double, or triple because of it – but Stiles is a person, not a commodity. And people are going to read that thing and they’ll think everything in it is the truth. That Drown is the lie. He knows it.

He can’t live with that.

“Derek,” Lydia says softly from somewhere to their left. “People are starting to…”

“Lydia,” Derek warns, growling into Stiles’ hair. Stiles is still inconsolable, fisting his fingers into Derek’s shirt and clinging for dear life so he won’t leave. He knows that Lydia is going to try and drag Derek off to do his job, to talk to the fans, to be Derek Hale, and everyone loves him, and isn’t he so fucking great? “Not right now.”

She’s quiet for another moment longer. And then, “if I can’t get you out there, they’ll come and drag you out themselves.”

Both of them know it to be true. Derek isn’t just Stiles’ – he can’t sit here all night, or for the next day, or the next, just holding Stiles until all of this passes. Millions of other people are waiting for him, a thousand of them waiting out in that room down the hall right now.

Derek’s body loosens, so Stiles knows he’s about to unfurl himself from Stiles’ grasp, and Stiles tries for a moment to keep his clutches buried deep into him, but he knows it’s useless. “Don’t,” he tries, voice sounding small. “Please, please, I need you, I need –“

Derek is already leaning back in to pull Stiles back up against his chest again, pressing his lips up against Stiles’ ear and murmuring it’s okay, I’m here, it’s all going to be okay.

“Derek,” Lydia says, much more forceful, and Stiles knows he has to go. He slowly ungrips his fingers from Derek’s shirt, and Derek even more slowly pulls back. He looks up into Stiles’ face, which must look terrible right about now, red and blotchy and almost unrecognizable, and then he says, “you stay and wait here for me. I’ll be back in an hour, and then –“

“No,” Stiles rasps, shaking his head. “No, I – I have to leave, I can’t stay here, I can’t be here.”

“I have to leave,” Stiles half-shouts this, and Derek closes his mouth. “I have to – I can’t…” not here. Not with all those people in that room, waiting for him. Some of them might already know that Spark leaked. Some of them might already have it on their phones.

Derek sighs through his nose, and then he stands up to his full height from the ground and snaps
his fingers at the security guards that Stiles had forgot even existed, much less that they were standing in this room with them. “Take him out of here,” he demands, and they all nod their heads, probably excited about having something to do other than stand there feeling awkward while Stiles has an emotional and mental break down. “And you,” he points at one of them individually, “drive him home, make sure he gets inside all right. Understand?”

Some more nodding, and then Derek is carefully pulling Stiles up from the couch and guiding him by the small of his back to the gaggle of men waiting for him. “I’ll be home as soon as I can,” he says into Stiles’ ear, rubbing his hand up and down his back. “Please wait for me. Okay? Please don’t…” he trails off, and Stiles knows he’s going to say please don’t leave.

One of the guards opens up the door, and then Stiles is out, away from Derek and Lydia, by himself in a crowded hallway. He lowers his head, and the men surround him very strategically so everyone knows it’s him but can only sort of see him. It’s not so bad, at first. He knows that people recognize him, and some of them try to get his attention, but he keeps his head down, neck hanging low.

It gets worse outside. There are dozens of photographers waiting the second the doors open, and Stiles has no choice but to cup his hands over his eyes to shield them from the flash, so hopefully none of them get a picture of him crying. Of course, the pictures of him blocking his face will be incriminating enough – but Stiles doesn’t care, not right now. The cameras click and flash and people call his name, but Stiles curls into himself as best as he can.

The valet is just bringing his car back around when Stiles gets to the stand, and his keys are handed back to him without a word, and the guard pilfers them out of his hand and puts him into the passenger seat, and then they’re driving away.

It’s a long drive back to Beacon Hills from Los Angeles, and it’s nothing but Stiles and a stranger the whole way back. He starts crying again the second they’re on the highway, and for a while, it really seems like neither of them are going to say anything. It would have been entirely better off that way.

Then, he actually pipes up. “That Derek Hale,” he starts, and Stiles just wants to open up the door and leap out of it, even though they’re going over seventy. “not a real good guy, is he?”

Stiles says nothing.

**

*I won’t write another book about my life, not ever again. Haven’t you gotten enough yet? Aren’t you entertained?* (Drown, Derek Hale, pg. 365).

**

Stiles wakes up to a gentle hand rubbing his back up and down, up and down, until he’s cognizant enough to open his eyes and blink hazily across his bedroom.

Well. Not his bedroom. He had gotten home the night before, walked into his and Derek’s bedroom and decided that he physically couldn’t deal with Derek getting home and waking him up and starting an argument, or a fight, or even worse – just a normal conversation. So he thought that Derek would get the idea that he didn’t want to be spoken to or woken up by hiding away in the guest room farthest away from their shared room.
It’s bright light, morning outside, and Derek must have gotten home somewhere around three in the morning. At least he got the hint and waited until day time to try and even approach Stiles, much less wake him up.

Stiles blinks his eyes and sees Derek crouched down next to the bed, a frown on his face, lit up by the sunshine coming across his features in slants through the blinds. “Hey,” he says gently, still moving his hand up and down Stiles’ back. “Sleep okay in here?”

With a heaving sigh, Stiles sits up all the way, inadvertently knocking Derek’s hand off of his back as he does so. He runs his hand through his hair, and takes note of his surroundings in their entirety. An otherwise untouched room, with nothing but his nice shoes and pants and dress shirt tossed haphazardly onto the ground, the bed all mussed from his tossing and turning. “What time is it?” He asks, voice raspy.

Derek hesitates for a moment. He stays crouched down next to the bed, unmoving, and then he very carefully says, “the plane leaves in four hours.”

It’s unbelievable, truly unbelievable, that Derek is this fucking naïve. Or stupid, maybe. Or, even more likely, absolutely out of his fucking mind.

Stiles throws the covers off of his body and makes a chuffing noise, crossed between an indignant laugh and a scoff. He puts his feet on the ground and then just sits on the edge of the bed, running his hands up and down his face, rubbing his eyes and breathing steadily. “You know I’m not going.”

A shuffle of movement from behind him, and Derek rounds the bed in front of him, standing on two feet and looking at Stiles with a blank expression on his face. “I don’t know that,” Derek argues. “I don’t know that, because you are going.”

“Derek,” Stiles doesn’t have to work that hard at making his voice sound pathetic and pleading and desperate – it happens naturally. What Derek is asking Stiles to do is, admittedly, something they had always planned on him doing from the start of all this anyway, but in light of everything that happened just last night, Stiles cannot believe Derek is really standing there asking him to fucking do this.

He’s trying to make Stiles go on tour with him. He’s trying to get Stiles on his private jet, shuttled from city to city all across the United States and a couple of places in Europe even, to sit there at a table right next to Derek. While Derek signs books and talks to the fans who love him so much, adore him, would do anything for him – but pass that copy of Spark all around the internet, heedless to who it hurts and what it does to anyone else. An endless month of nothing but that, and that, and that, again and again.

“I can’t do it without you,” Derek pushes, and Stiles shakes his head as he stands up, picking up the discarded articles of clothing if only to have something to do with his hands. He rips the shirt off the ground like he’s angry at it, and then tosses it onto the bed without a care in the world, moving to do the same with the pants.

“I can’t do it period,” he makes himself say, voice going thin. “The way they’ll all look at me. You know what they’re saying. You don’t have to look to fucking know what they’re saying about me, and I don’t need any of it said directly to my fucking face.”

Derek takes him by his shoulders after he throws one of his shoes across the room with no clear destination in mind, hauling him off and away from the other one before he throws it through the window. He pushes Stiles’ back up against the wall, not hard, but just enough to box him in, and
looks right into his face. “You don’t have to go to any of the actual events, I promise,” but Stiles
doesn’t believe him.

They’ll make him go. He knows they will. Maybe not Derek, and maybe Derek would fight for
him to be left back at home, but they will make him go. Lydia and Derek’s advising team and the
fans and the interviewers. They’ll shove him into a chair and put hair and makeup on him and force
him underneath spotlights to smile and laugh as people ask him so you’re an unbearable harpy
who can’t make Derek happy, is that about the size of it?

“I can’t,” Stiles insists. “I can’t do it, Derek, I can’t.”

Derek sets his jaw and shakes Stiles by his shoulders, just once. “I can’t be away from you for
another month like last time, especially not – not now. I can’t just leave you like this.”

“Then don’t leave.”

But then, that was never actually an option, never once. It doesn’t matter what happens – Derek
will go on that fucking promo tour, hell or high water. It’s how he is, how he’s wired. It might be
the only thing that Stiles could ask him to do, or not to do, that Derek couldn’t give into. Not only
that, but Stiles can only imagine what the financial cost of cancelling that many back to back
events in so many cities would be, what the fallout would be, what people would say.

So, Derek just looks at him, and then looks away, shaking his head, and he doesn’t have to say
anything.

“You are never going to change,” Stiles hisses, trying to shove Derek off and away from him, but
Derek holds his ground steady, grabbing at Stiles’ wrists and holding them down before he does
something crazy like slap Derek across the face. “All of this, the end of the fucking world, and you
won’t do this for me!”

“The end of the world?” Derek repeats back to him, incredulous. “Stiles, it’s – I know it seems bad
now, but it’s not like that.”

Stiles almost can’t believe Derek could even say that to him. He’s got this whole speech churning
in his head, working itself into a frenzy – how dare you discredit how I feel, how dare you suggest
this is anything but the worst fucking thing that’s ever happened to me, and you wouldn’t
understand, you couldn’t understand, the world will always love you and it will always hate me
because you’ve done this, but he stops himself right before he opens his mouth.

It’s not Derek’s fault. Yes, he wrote that book, and yes he had intended at some point to put it out.
But he didn’t. Stiles asked him not to, and so he didn’t, and he did his best to have it destroyed and
wiped off the face of the planet altogether, but it wasn’t that easy. Derek didn’t leak Spark himself,
he couldn’t and wouldn’t ever do that to Stiles, not even a stranger he hadn’t met before.

“It feels like it is,” Stiles says in a small voice instead, chin wobbling with unshed tears, and Derek
sighs and presses his forehead against Stiles’.

“It seems bad now. It will only seem worse if you lock yourself up in this house for a month and
shut the rest of the world off. Please come with me,” he closes his eyes and almost kisses Stiles,
brushing their lips together feather-light and gentle, “you don’t have to set foot in anything you
don’t want to, I swear on my life. Just – don’t make me get on that plane by myself.”

Stiles knows that Derek is right, in spite of all else. If Derek left him here by himself, Stiles would
resent him for it, and he’d hole himself up in his bedroom and cry, and cry, and cry, and he’d
vanish from the public eye for so long that everyone would know that’s exactly what he was doing – it’s almost too humiliating for him to even imagine it.

He wraps his hand around the back of Derek’s neck and pulls him forward for a kiss, hard and intense, clutching his other hand into the collar of Derek’s shirt and holding on for dear life. He pulls back, smacking his head into the wall as he does so, and meets his eyes.

Derek swallows, tracing his eyes over Stiles’ face a couple of times as if he’s searching for whatever it is that Stiles isn’t saying. “Are we okay?” Derek asks.

He remembers what he had said to Derek, months ago now, when Derek had asked him if even with everything that’s happened, if Stiles still wanted to marry him. Sometimes Stiles thinks that anything could happen between them, and Stiles would still nod his head yes to that question. But then he knows there are limits, there have to be limits to what he’ll put up with. This is close to it.

But it’s not the breaking point. “I’ll come with you,” he says, running his hand through Derek’s hair. “But I’m not…happy.”

Derek frowns, looks miserable, but he nods his head in understanding. “Your bags are already packed,” he says quietly, and Stiles nods his head, remembering packing those stupid bags himself just two days before all of this. Seems like a lifetime ago, now. How happy he was, how he thought everything had finally fallen into place.

Stiles showers and dresses, gets into the car and lets Derek drive him to the airport where security is already waiting for them, and they take them out onto the tarmac to board Derek’s private jet, and people take pictures of them from a distance – even from that far away, Stiles can hear the click-click.

The jet is nicer than Stiles remembers. He’s only ever seen it once, and he didn’t actually go anywhere on it – Derek mostly just took Stiles there to brag about it in his own way, and then they had sex in the cockpit because – well. It was the cockpit and Stiles thought it was funny and Derek thought it was childish and stupid but they did it anyway.

He throws himself down into one of the seats, leather and smooth and soft, right next to the window, doesn’t take his sunglasses off, and sulks. Derek sits in the seat across the aisle from him, and Lydia has taken it upon herself to sink into the couch up against the wall, already drinking liquor and looking entirely too pissed off for her own good.

“You two look fucking fantastic,” she hisses irritably, and Stiles doesn’t even acknowledge her. He just presses his forehead against his window and shakes his head, sullen and silent. “Just try not to look like you’ve been fighting all night when you land in Houston – there’ll be people lined up waiting, you know it.”

“We’re not fighting,” Stiles says back quietly. “We’re just not talking.” What is there to say?

“Even better,” Lydia downs her glass in one go, not even wincing from the burn. “Before we take off I have something to say.”

“Oh, boy,” Derek drawls, and Lydia very nearly throws her glass at his head.

“Not to you, you fucking cock,” she snaps, and Stiles would be laughing at that if he weren’t so hard pressed on being miserable, “to Stiles.”
Stiles looks up and away from the window in surprise, focusing his attention on her with a steady blink.

“Stiles,” she begins, holding her hand out in his general direction even though both of them are too far away from each other to ever reach, “darling, honey, innocent baby. I’m sorry that this happened.”

“How much have you had to drink?” Stiles asks her, narrowing his eyes.

“As much as the situation warranted,” she says back in a dark voice, and that more or less answers that question. “And anyway, it doesn’t matter. So, the entire world read that fake book that Derek wrote. You’ll see. In three months’ time, you’ll be laughing about it.”

Stiles can’t even fathom that, right now, but he has no choice but to nod his head and go back to his window-staring.

When they land in Houston, there are indeed packs of people already waiting for them. They step out into the main terminal, and are greeted with screams, upon screams, upon screams. Stiles keeps his head down and walks straight ahead, and Derek, in rare form and character, doesn’t stop for a single one of them, even when they beg him and scream his name and wave their copies of Drown in front of his face as close as they can get.

Maybe he’s mad at them, Stiles thinks to himself, watching Derek’s back move as he stalks past all of them without even a passing glance in their direction. This amorphous blob known as his fans. Maybe he’s angry that they essentially did this to him, to them. But then, that isn’t fair. There are likely tons of them that refused to download it, or share it, or any of it, just out of devotion to him and what Derek would personally want.

Of course, none of them could stop themselves from reading tiny snippets in articles posted about the entire thing, but who could blame them? Stiles tries not to look at any of them because he’s afraid of what he’d see in their faces if he did – disdain, or pity. Which is worse?

The hotel room is nice, because it couldn’t ever be anything less than that. It overlooks the city perfectly, all the way from the tippy-top of the building, but Stiles closes the curtains the second he puts his bags down and flops face down into the bed, barely glancing at the view, or the television, or noticing how soft the sheets are.

Derek trails in after him and thumps his bags onto the ground. And then he’s silent for long enough that Stiles suspects he’s either going to stay silent, or he’s just gearing himself up for some sort of a speech. Stiles lays there and waits for either outcome, and when he hears Derek’s short intake of breath, he just closes his eyes and tries to burrow himself deeper into the mattress, like he could somehow make himself disappear.

“So, is this how it’s going to be?” He asks, and Stiles says nothing. “You won’t talk to me, or look at me, and you’ll be sulky and silent for the entire trip?”

Stiles huffs and lifts his head, glaring in Derek’s general direction. “What do you want me to say?” Stiles demands. “What is there to talk about? What can I possibly fucking say?”

“I don’t know,” Derek throws his hands up, voice getting thinner in a very familiar way. “Just don’t – do this. Please don’t just shut me out, it’s not going to help a god damn thing, and you know that.”

Turning over and sitting up all the way, resting his body back on his hands, Stiles looks at him...
steadily. “You know, Derek, maybe if a year ago I had said *please don’t write something like that about me* –“ Derek palms his face before Stiles is even finished, knowing what’s to come, “… maybe none of this would happened.”

“I can’t argue with you,” Derek growls, and then he starts pacing, almost manically, back and forth in the same five foot area of space, “I can’t fucking argue with you.”

He’s said as much before – any time it would get this bad, he would just hiss that and Stiles would storm out of the room because what the hell else is he supposed to do? This time, there’s nowhere else for him to fucking go, except this room, in a strange city, miles and miles away from home. “I don’t know how to handle this situation. I don’t know what you want me to do or say, but I’m not going to lie. I’m not going to pretend to be fine, when you know – none of this fucking is! None of it!”

“I can’t fix it. It’s out of my hands, it happened, I – I don’t know what you want me to do. I can’t make it any better. I can’t…”

“Then maybe I should just fucking leave,” Stiles mutters under his breath, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at the closed curtain a little vindictively. “Call off the wedding, move out, start over on my own.”

“Then why don’t you?” Derek spits at him, and Stiles looks down into his lap, and he thinks. He thinks, and he thinks, and he thinks – one reason, he wonders to himself. One fucking reason to leave, and he’ll take it, and run with it.

All the reasons he comes up with, they just fall short. Everything he could use to talk himself out of this hotel room and out of this city and back home, none of it holds a candle to his desire to just… stay put. Wait it out. Brave the storm, and maybe, mind the pun, wind up drowning in it.

It’s what people do for each other. It’s what you do when you love someone. It gets bad, and then it gets worse, and then it gets so fucking terrible it’s like there’s never going to be any way out… and then it’s over. And you wonder how you ever made it out alive, but you did. Stiles has done the same thing for Derek, over and over, and Derek has done the same for Stiles, over and over, and it’s like the second they catch their breaths again, everything goes to shit.

It’s scary to think the cycle won’t ever end. But what else is Stiles supposed to do? What else is Derek supposed to do?

“The same reason you don’t,” Stiles tells him, and Derek thumps his head back against the wall, hard and final. They can’t keep going around and around, not like this. Not about the same thing. Stiles can only say *how could you write that fucking book* so many times, and Derek can only explain it back to him so many times, and they can only toss back and forth the same thoughtless, spineless, gutless insults so many times until it all becomes redundant. They’ve driven themselves to the point of silence.

They’ll stew in it. It’s all they can do. Stiles looks across the room at him and he wonders, *what have you done to us?*, and Derek looks back at him, but they say not a word. The argument is over.

When Stiles doesn’t show up at the signing and the interview, people talk about it. All they ever do is talk about him. All Derek ever does is talk about him.

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“Where are you right now?” Scott’s voice is tinny, and lacking in its usual enthusiasm over the phone. He sounds upset, to say the least, which is saying a fucking lot where Scott is concerned.

Stiles looks out his window, trapped in Atlanta for lack of any better way to describe it. “Georgia. Where are you?”

“God!” Scott sounds angry, now, which again, a novel experience. “I’ve been trying to call! I mean – I’ve been trying to – well. I’ve been meaning to call. I’ll admit I’ve also been waiting for…the storm to pass. Before calling.”

“A wise choice,” Stiles says. “I don’t cry anymore about it, so there’s something.”

“Aw, Jesus. Is Derek there right now?”

Stiles settles deeper into the blankets of the bed, and he shakes his head, even though Scott can’t see that over the phone. Derek is away doing Derek Hale things, sent off after awkwardly hovering in the doorway, wondering if today will be the day that Stiles finally gets out of bed and comes with him instead of stewing in his own misery. It’s been a week since they’ve left, and they’ve seen Miami and Houston and Atlanta, back to back to back, and Derek leaves their hotel room and comes back always to find Stiles in the exact same place that he’d left him. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m wondering how candid we can be,” he mutters, and then takes in a deep breath. “I have a confession. I want this out on the table in between us right now, no secrets, no bullshit.”

“Okay.”

“I,” he begins, all pomp and circumstance and intense, “…I read some of it. The leaked book.”

Stiles had expected as much. “Hasn’t everyone?”

Scott is quiet for a moment, and then he lets out a bit of a melancholy laugh. “Yes. Yeah. I – I haven’t spoken to anyone recently who hasn’t brought it up. That’s awful, I shouldn’t have said that.”

He traces the pattern in the hotel quilt with one finger, lips puckering up. “You don’t have to shield me from the big bad world, Scott. I already know how shitty it can get, believe me. I’m living it.”

“The thing is unbelievable,” Scott bursts out, now that Stiles has more or less given him the go ahead to rant and rave about Spark in all its awfulness. “It’s like – what kind of mind, what kind of sick, twisted mind, could produce something like this? Let alone four hundred pages of it!”

“I only ever read the first chapter or so myself,” Stiles admits, and Scott scoffs on the other line. “You don’t have to shield me from the big bad world, Scott. I already know how shitty it can get, believe me. I’m living it.”

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“I only ever read the first chapter or so myself,” Stiles admits, and Scott scoffs on the other line.

“That’s good for you,” he says darkly, and Stiles wonders. He’s never, not once, wondered before what else lied in wait for him in the pages of that book, because as far as he was ever concerned, it was gone. And he didn’t want to know either way. “How are…you and Derek? I mean. You went on the tour. You don’t go to any of the events, as I hear about near constantly, but you’re there. With him.”

“Me and Derek,” Stiles starts, and then he closes his mouth and can’t think of anything else to say.

“You guys…er. Talk?”

“He talks,” Stiles says evenly. “I mostly just nod my head and sleep through it.”
“So sunshine and puppies, I guess.”

“I guess.”

“Listen – this is terrible. I won’t even lie to you or act like it’s anything less than that. It’s the worst thing ever.”

“Right?” Stiles half-shouts this, eager to finally have someone on his side apart from Lydia, who’s too much of a constant-tipsy annoyance these days to have any kind of fucking validation. “This sucks. This is so fucking shitty.”

“It is,” Scott agrees instantly. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

The line goes quiet, and Stiles is just happy to hear Scott’s even breathing on the other end of the phone for a few moments – he hasn’t had very much company aside from Derek this past week. He’s a social creature by nature, and even though his hermitism is self-imposed, he can’t help but feel like he’s starting to crawl out of his skin with the time he spends all by himself.

“…listen,” Scott starts again, voice sounding softer. “…I don’t know how to say this right. But let me just – I want you to be happy, and I want you to have what you want, and I want you to be with – whatever or whoever makes you feel that way. I’ve told you this. I just – don’t get angry. I know I just said a month or so ago that I was happy for you and Derek, but just let me ask you this question. Is Derek really that thing for you, even with everything that’s happened?”

“He’s always that thing for me,” Stiles says before even thinking about it, and Scott sighs over the line.

“Okay,” he sounds like he’s given up completely, more or less. “So you’re not leaving him.”

Stiles looks around himself. At his situation, at his life, at all of these things. It’s not that easy, he thinks, it’s just not that easy. His friends might tell him to stop, to quit it with Derek Hale once and for all, it’s too much now and he’s gone too far and they’ve reached a point of no return, but Stiles won’t hear it. He can’t anymore.

As many bad things have happened, so many more amazing things have, as well. Derek and Stiles are it for one another. Everything else is just excessive details. “Is that book really as bad as you say it is?”

Scott is quiet for a moment. “No,” he decides. “Not after I read Drown.”

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Because Stiles is perhaps the greatest masochist ever to walk the seven continents, he opens up his laptop and hovers in the google search bar for at least twenty minutes, watching it blink and wait for him to make up his mind. Search it or don’t, he dares himself, and then he keeps obsessively glancing at the door to his hotel room in case Derek were to come sweeping in at any moment.

Then he thinks it’s fucking ridiculous that he should be afraid of Derek seeing him doing this. God, it’s his right at this point. He deserves to fucking know. He purses his lips and types in the keywords slowly, feeling a pang of either horror or just blank depression at seeing how instantaneously google suggests the exact thing he wants. He fantasizes for a second about looking at a google keyword cloud, to see just how many people in the past couple of weeks have searched for the exact same thing that he is, but then he stops himself short. That would just be abusive to
himself.

More results come up than he’s comfortable with. There’s no use in getting upset about it, he knows, but here he goes – upset at the search results before he even gets to the real meat of the matter. He locates a download link within two minutes of searching, slams down on the enter key before he can stop himself, and then watches as it loads, and loads, and loads.

The PDF file pulls up, and there it is. *Once upon a time*, he reads, and bile rises up into his throat. He swallows it down and skims past the first twenty pages, all of which he’s read before and has no interest in doing so ever fucking again, until he gets to around page thirty-five, chapter two. He stares at the numbers for a second, eyes narrowed and lips curled downward, and then he doesn’t know if he can even bring himself to look at the rest.

There’s so much in here that he doesn’t know. He knows the generals, as Derek has told him and as Derek had alluded to in Drown, and even vague assertions and incomplete summaries of everything it says has been more than enough. Still, a part of him is self-destructively obsessed with reading more of it – like picking at a scab when it would heal if he just left it well enough alone.

He sits there for at least a full five minutes memorizing the *Chapter Two* insignia, and then his heart nearly jumps clean out of his body into the toilet when the door to their hotel room bursts open, hard enough that it bangs against the opposite wall. Stiles nearly brains himself in his effort to get the laptop off and away from his lap, closed tight with a slap, tangling himself up in the sheets and almost toppling over the edge.

When he rights himself, he sees Laura Hale standing five feet away from him, while the door slowly closes behind her with a *swshhh* noise. They blink at each other for a moment. She looks exactly the same as she had the last time that Stiles had seen her in person – dark jeans, hair pulled up high on her head, a crisp black t-shirt, and a slight twinkle to her eyes that suggests that even though her face is blank, she thinks something is funny.

She gestures to the laptop Stiles had all but tossed across the room. “Porn?” She asks, deadpan.

Stiles breathes out a sigh of half-relief, half-not, pressing his palm to his forehead. “I thought you were Derek,” he says.

Her eyebrows raise. “Derek would be upset with you watching porn?”

With an unimpressed glare, Stiles slowly collects the laptop from the end of the bed, pulls it open so the screen lights up, and shows its contents to Laura. She leans down to get a better look at it, and her eyebrows raise even higher into her hairline. “Well, that’s stupid of you.”

“Is it?” He asks, narrowing his eyes. “*Is it*?”

“Yup.” She tosses a bag onto the bed beside him, landing with a hard thump and some rattling like there are morroccas or something inside of it.

“What are you even doing here? How did you get in here?”

She smiles at him all benign and innocent, climbing up onto the bed on her knees beside him and then sinking down, like she belongs there. “I came out to be supportive to my brother. And I wrestled the keycard out of him before he could change his mind.”

“You’re not staying in here, are you-”
“No, I got my own room,” she looks at him for a long moment, leaning her chin into her fist and smiling like she’s looking at a tiny little animal in the forest she wants to take a bit out of. “I’m here to do some damage control.”

“Damage control,” Stiles repeats.

“So, over a year ago,” she begins, and Stiles is already pre-emptively rolling his eyes, knowing that she’s going to sit here and force him to listen to everything that she has to say whether he likes it or not. “…I was in Tijuana, and I was in a really shitty motel and I got a phone call from Derek. He told me in so many words that something bad had happened, or something bad was happening, and he didn’t know what to do about it.”

Over a year ago. Stiles doesn’t need the complete and total calendar to suss out exactly which time frame she’s pointing out to him right about now.

“He wasn’t necessarily specific about how he’d fucked up this time, but I knew it was about you and of course it was. Remember our conversation at that bar, that one night?”

Her cornering him in front of the bathrooms and ambushing him with all that nonsense about how Derek is a fuck up. About how he’ll do anything to sabotage himself and his own happiness, how he’ll write about it all because he doesn’t know what else to do with his own mistakes. Yes, Stiles remembers it well. It’s funny how he thought that she was just talking down on Derek because that’s what siblings do to one another, how he put almost no real thought into anything that she had said.

When she had been right. Straight down to the details. Stiles guesses he knows better than to question anything she says, now.

“I know him better than anyone else. Even better than you,” she smiles at him, and then she sighs through her nose. “He was stupid to think that book wouldn’t leak, knowing those old publishers of his. What a bunch of fucking cocks. I saw it coming, but I have to say, even I’m surprised by the general reaction that’s been, you know. Caused.”

“I’m not,” Stiles says. He’s really, really not. He always knew how bad it would be if anyone got their hands on that book. He always knew that.

“I know you’ve been avoiding seeing what people are saying, because you’re not so stupid as to spend any kind of time seeking that shit out. But I’ll give you the brief overview.”

“I really don’t want to –“

“I know, but I’m telling you anyway,” she gives him a stern look, and Stiles can only run his hands down his face and accept his fate. He doesn’t want to know. God, he doesn’t want to know.

“People think that Derek is some kind of incredible, humble martyr. It’s insane. How he wrote Spark and then he wrote an entire book, doing nothing but apologizing to you for it. Admitting that he was wrong, and then telling the entire world he was.”

“And the entire world won’t even fault him for it,” Stiles grumbles, looking down at his hands.

“No,” she agrees. “But you will. You have. Derek doesn’t need revilement or torture or punishment from any of those people that read his books and talk about him and follow him around. You’re the only person who could ever see him as anything less than an untouchable, infallible god, and it’s the only real punishment he needs.”
“I’m not punishing him,” Stiles insists, shaking his head. “I’m – god. I’m just reacting to it the only way I can. It’s not about him.”

“They feel sorry for you, you know. Every day you don’t show up, they post those pictures of you crying outside of the release party –“

“Oh, Jesus…,” he moans. “I thought I had covered that up.”

“Look. I know you thought you had had closure from Spark and everything that happened between you two because of what happened, but it was just – it wasn’t real closure.” She reaches out and touches him on the arm, gentle, likely more gentle than she’s been with any other living thing or person in a very long time. “This is real closure.”

Jumping all the way into the bottom of the ocean, where the light doesn’t touch, letting all the most awful things that could possibly happen happen, and drowning. Coming out the other side, having survived it. That’s closure. Stiles knows. He thinks that maybe this had to happen, it had to happen to them for them to ever truly get over it, but that doesn’t make it any easier to live with.

“That’s just my two cents,” she pulls her arm away and shrugs, as though that’s the end of the entire conversation. She glances down at her nailbeds and examines them carefully. “And don’t read that stupid fucking book. That, you don’t need to know about. If you’re going to hole yourself up in a cave reading books,” she reaches into her bag and digs around for a moment, pulling clothes out and scattering them across the bed and the floor, and then rips a copy of Drown out from somewhere in the recesses. “Read this.”

She slides it across the comforter toward him, and Stiles frowns down at it. It looks well read already, even though she can’t have had it for more than a couple of weeks. “I’ve already read it.”

“Read it again,” she presses before Stiles is even finished talking. “Read it now. After all this.”

Stiles looks at it for another moment longer. He knows that Laura will not walk out of this room until he agrees and takes it, so he picks it up and puts it on the bedside table, thumping it down like he’s angry about it. “All right. I will.”

“Good. Great!” She spreads herself out on the bed, getting comfortable. “Now. What kind of amenities do we have in this establishment? Room service? Champagne, perhaps?”

**

*Take this as your 400 page apology note.*

*Do not feel obligated to forgive me.* (Drown, Derek Hale, title page).

**

Laura’s copy of Drown has a long handwritten note scribbled across the title and acknowledgements pages, Derek’s chicken scratch near illegible as he drones on and on in small handwriting. Stiles figures it’s none of his business and skips through it quickly, opening it up to the very first page of the very first chapter. He reads the same opening lines he had read months ago, by now – so they should be familiar to him.
The problem is, they’re not. Not really. He reads them, and then he reads them again, and then he has to close the book and stare up at his ceiling, closing his eyes and sighing through his nose. *I’m sorry, I think on a nearly daily basis. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.* No, Stiles agrees. No it certainly wasn’t meant to be like this. For the life of him, he can’t figure out how they got to this point.

He finally picks the book back up again and reads another page or two before he has to stop again, sighing through his nose and shaking his head at himself.

When he first read this, he was obsessed. He cruised through the entire thing lightning quick, absorbing as much as he could as fast as he could – he had already moved on and forgiven Derek, by that point. He didn’t need *Drown* so much, back then, when they were actually talking to one another.

Now, he figures he does need it. And Laura was right.

He reads it well into the night, until his eyes start to burn and the words start jumbling together on the page. Until he thinks there’s no more information he can possibly absorb. And besides, he gets the general gist of it by now, he really does. It’s only what Derek has been trying to say to him for weeks, now, for months, for a year since *Spark* first happened.

It’s just that, before, he didn’t understand. Like he said after he first read it, he thought this entire book was just about Derek punishing himself, and went on to think so even in spite of Derek’s insistences otherwise. He always thought all of Derek’s books were some way of torturing himself, because of how Derek wrote them.

Derek isn’t a masochist, not in the strictest sense of the word. It’s just that he’s honest. Maybe not in person, because he can’t bring himself to be that candid when looking someone right in the eyes. But he’s the most honest, brutal, and straightforward person Stiles has ever met, when it comes to his books. And Stiles gets it now, he really does. After all this time.

Derek comes stumbling back into the hotel room late enough that Stiles is fast asleep by that point, Laura’s copy of *Drown* open and nearly all of the way read on his chest. He sits up, startled, and then the light flicks on, and there Derek is. His eyes are all glassed over and he has a plastic cup in his hands with a neon straw, suggesting that he was at the bar until they closed and forced him out the door, pouring what was left of his wolf whiskey directly into the plastic cup and shooing him off.

“You’re drunk,” Stiles assesses, and Derek looks confused by the statement for all of five seconds, blinking at Stiles like he’s a mirage, or something.

“I had a little bit to drink.” Derek sort of shoots himself forwards awkwardly, tries to put his drink down on the bedside table and winds up missing by an entire six inches, so the cup and ice all go spilling on to the carpet. Derek’s credit card will be billed for the stain, so Stiles doesn’t worry much about that for the moment.

“That’s a little bit, I guess,” Stiles mutters, and then he sighs and puts Laura’s book down beside him on the bed, before standing up and coming around to Derek’s side, where he’s still just sort of hovering and looking baffled by the very fact that Stiles is here at all. “Come on. Pajamas and bed.”

As soon as Stiles is close, putting his hands on Derek and moving to shrug the jacket off of his
shoulders, Derek sort of huffs a laugh and resists a bit, taking a step back. “Oh, you’re talking to me now, is that it?”

Stiles tries again to reach for Derek’s clothes to get him out of them and into bed, but Derek dodges away and nearly flops over like a big tree from the force of it, staggering back. “I don’t want to go to bed, I want to talk to you,” he hisses, and Stiles raises his eyes to the ceiling, asking God for assistance, please, Jesus. “Come on, don’t be like that.”

“It’s three o’clock in the morning. This is how three o’clock in the morning Stiles is.” Stiles manages to get his hands on Derek’s jacket, sliding it off his arms and dumping it on the ground for the time being, and then he starts work on unbuttoning Derek’s shirt, while Derek just sort of stands there, and then leans over Stiles’ shoulder and breathes choppy, wet breaths right into his ear. He smells like he drank the entire liquor store, and really, it wouldn’t be a surprise to turn on the news tomorrow and see a story about an entire store somewhere in the Atlanta area being ransacked by two people who looked a lot like Lydia and Derek.

“You smell good,” Derek tells him, and Stiles just sort of nods and goes mmhmm. The shirt comes off, and then Stiles works on Derek’s belt with steady fingers, and Derek frowns off into the corner of the room, looking very serious. “Stiles,” he starts, and Stiles looks up to meet his eyes. “There’s something happening inside of me.”

“What?” Stiles asks, rolling his eyes. He stands up straight and looks into Derek’s face and he sees – well. Ashen pale cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and a general look like he’s about to… “Oh. Oh. Here, come on,” Stiles grabs him and manhandles him to the best of his ability towards the bathroom. Derek staggers and mutters but comes along anyway, as he’s directed and forced, and Stiles manages to get him onto the tiles. The hard part is dragging him over to the toilet, because Derek resists like he doesn’t know what Stiles is going to do to him. It’s like he really thinks Stiles is going to shove his face into it and drown him or something – a perfect revenge, pun and all. Finally, Derek pukes. Right over Stiles’ shoulder. He misses a little bit, but most of it does go where it’s meant to, and Stiles is more ready, and angles Derek right over the toilet so there’s no spillage onto the floor or onto Stiles himself.

“God,” he hisses, while Derek sinks to his knees and Stiles goes with him. “I didn’t even know werewolves could puke.” They at least don’t do it very often, unless incredible amounts of bad clams or liquor are involved, which explains why Derek almost didn’t even know what was happening to him when he got the feeling in his stomach.

Derek pants, leaning his forehead against the bottom of the sink and swallowing, making a face like it tastes bad, and it really must. Stiles leans back against the wall and makes sure Derek stays on his side, in case another round of puking comes, so he doesn’t choke and die in his sleep.

He looks just about ready to pass out, when Derek reaches out and grabs onto Stiles’ leg, fingers gentle and barely pressing. “I would do…anything,” he says, voice thin and small, so unlike him, “to take it all back. You know that.”

Stiles shushes him and cards his fingers through his dark hair, frowning up at the ceiling. Yes, he does know that. Of course he does.

In the morning, Derek comes out into the bedroom, where Stiles is already awake and flipping through the television channels, and he announces, “I just woke up on the floor.”

“Don’t act like it was my decision,” Stiles defends, smirking to himself while the news plays in the
“I tried to move you. It was like trying to lift a brick wall.”

“I remember…” he begins, and Stiles turns to face him completely, “…the hotel bar. And Lydia. And then Lydia ordering another round of shots. And after that – I can’t remember.” He blinks, looking appropriately mystified. “I can’t remember anything.”

“Is that the first time you’ve blacked out drunk?”

“Yes,” Derek admits, looking out the window and frowning. “Also the last.”

“You puked,” Stiles accuses, and Derek again looks absolutely shocked. “Have you ever puked before?”

“God. Once,” his eyes get a bit far away as he remembers. “There was a taco.”

“Well, you taco-puked last night, too.”

“A word to the wise. Don’t ever try to keep up with Lydia at the bar.”

“Noted,” Stiles nods. Derek moves around about the room, opening up his suitcase and selecting an outfit, and he doesn’t seem that lackadaisical or slow or like he has a headache the size of Texas pounding out the inside of his brain with a hammer. Which is suspicious. “Are you even hungover?”

“Don’t get hangovers,” he says, pulling out some pants and a shirt and laying them on the bed, “it passed while I was sleeping and my body worked it out.”

“Fuck. You.”

“I’ve got to get ready,” Derek says, looking at the time on the clock. “I’m supposed to be in a car heading to the venue already.”

Stiles is quiet for a moment, watching Derek collect his shampoo and body wash, and then he clears his throat. “I wanna show you something.” Stiles says.

Derek stops what he’s doing and looks up at him with a comically surprised expression on his face – eyes all big, mouth hanging half open. “You do?”

“Yes, I do,” he says. He reaches behind himself to grab at the bedside table, picking up Laura’s copy of Drown and dropping it down into his lap. Derek watches him with a cautious gaze, eyes zeroing in on the book as he assesses the situation.

He’s had that book in his hands a hundred thousand times by now, signing it and smiling and nodding as people tell him over and over how much it meant to them, and how amazing they thought it was, and how it was the greatest thing they ever read. Thousands of people have told Derek that to his face already, in the past week alone.

And when Stiles holds it in his hands, he looks uneasy. As though Stiles’ opinion alone is the only one that he cares about, has ever cared about, will ever care about.

“I reread this yesterday and this morning,” he says, and Derek swallows. “I think I – I finally realized something about you that I’ve been trying to change. And maybe that’s for the best in some cases, but in others maybe it’s just…how you are.”

Derek looks confused, and nervous. But he says nothing.
“I know how you use writing. I’ve always been jealous of how you can make it – do things. Like they aren’t just words on a page. You know?’”

He clears his throat, dropping his shampoo down onto the dresser next to the television. “Where are you going with this?”

Stiles looks down at the book in his hands, at the angry blue waves and Derek’s name emblazoned in blue, and his fingers trace over the letters. “I know you’ve said sorry to me so many times in person, to my face, with your voice, that it’s almost started to lose all meaning. You say sorry out loud and it – it doesn’t carry the same weight.”

“I know,” Derek says in a low voice. Of course he knows. He sat down and he painstakingly wrote this book, that must have been so hard for him, so fucking hard for him, all because he knows sorry only goes so far. He dragged it out, made it into a story, published it for the entire world to know just how fucking sorry he is, all for Stiles’ own benefit.

“All those times I yelled at you about how you can’t be as open as you are in your books,” Stiles smiles ruefully, and then he holds Drown up out of his lap. “I get it now. What you do – no one else could. Not a single person.”

Derek nods his head. He’s going to be late, Stiles knows he is, and Lydia is going to freak the fuck out and he’s going to have thousands of people standing in line waiting for him, that love him and would do anything just to see him in person – but he’s standing there, waiting. All for Stiles.

“I wrote something for you,” Stiles says, opening up Drown and pulling out a folded up piece of paper he wedged in there a couple of hours before Derek had even woken up. He unfolds it, piece by piece, the crinkling very loud in their otherwise dead quiet hotel room, and holds it out for Derek to take. “Since we’re all about writing.”

Derek steps forward, eyes zooming in on the piece of paper. He can tell even from where he’s standing that there’s hardly anything written on it, Stiles can tell, and there must be a thousand different scenarios for what it could possibly say running through his head right about now. Things like I have to leave or I sold the ring or any number of other equally horrible things. But he comes close, and he takes the paper out of Stiles’ hands.

He looks Stiles right in the eyes before he looks down at the paper. And there’s something there in his face that Stiles doesn’t have the words for, couldn’t ever think of the way to describe even if he sat for hours and tried his level best.

Finally, his eyes scan across the sheet of paper. Once, twice, a third time, before he finally rubs a hand across his jaw and nods his head.

“You know I’m not eloquent like you when it comes to the written word,” Stiles says in the silence, watching as Derek takes in a deep breath. “It might not be 400 pages –”

“It is to me,” Derek says, voice sounding tight.

On a piece of paper he had torn out from the stationary pad the hotel provided for them, Stiles had scrawled only two sentences, in a pen that kept running out of ink, so he had to press down hard and trace over some letters more than once.

_I forgive you. I think we’ve both drowned enough._

Derek keeps that piece of paper clutched tight in his fist, as though he’s terrified to let it go, and advances on Stiles quickly. He crosses the distance between them in a matter of a second, and then
he’s bending down and wrapping his arms around him, holding onto him as tight as he dares, pressing his lips against Stiles’ temple and breathing him in. “Everything got so out of my hands,” he starts, but Stiles shushes him.

“We don’t need to talk about it anymore, we don’t need to talk about it,” Stiles insists, hugging Derek tighter. “We don’t need to think about it. Please just…” he burrows his face into Derek’s shoulder, taking in the scent of him.

“I want you to be happy,” Derek says, almost helplessly.

Stiles sighs into Derek’s shirt, and then lifts his face to open his eyes and stare over Derek’s back across the room. Somewhere on the other side of the city, people are starting to wonder if Derek if ever even going to show up. It’s a wonder Lydia isn’t breaking down the door right now, yelling and screaming. “I will be,” Stiles promises. “With you, I will be.”

Derek pulls back and looks Stiles dead in the face, takes his chin in his fingers and traces his eyes over Stiles’ nose, lips, his cheeks, his neck. “I’m not writing another book like that, not ever again.”

“You said as much in Drown,” Stiles quirks a brow. “I knew you weren’t kidding.”

“I’m done with all of this. I’ve done enough to you because of it.”

Stiles doesn’t meet Derek’s eyes. He just trails his fingers up and down Derek’s bare arm, relishing the feel of Derek’s skin underneath his own. “Things will never be the same between us again,” he starts, and Derek looks at him like he knows this, he has known it for a while. “You remember when we first met?”

“I bought a McFlurry and threw it in the garbage the second I walked outside,” Derek recalls, smiling all big, in a way Stiles hasn’t seen in over a week. “I went home and I wrote about you.”

Stiles smiles back at him. “Things have changed between us so many times I almost can’t believe we’re the same people. Stiles from Beacons and Derek from From the Ashes…they’re gone. Aren’t they?”

Derek nods his head. They are. Long gone. “Who are we now?” Stiles wonders aloud, and Derek looks down, eyelashes landing on his cheeks.

“We’re not characters in books any longer,” he says in a low voice, and Stiles sighs through his nose. “We’re real people.”

Imagine that, Stiles thinks, carding his fingers through Derek’s hair. Imagine being a real person, instead of just an idea that someone puts into words, or a faceless figure that does all the right things and says just what he’s meant to and always smiles, or a dream boy.

Imagine being a character come to life, broken out of the confines of paper and ink.

**

I guess there was a lot that genuinely and truly did happen between us that I could have written about that would have been just as entertaining as the shit that I made up just to keep your interest. He and I have been through everything together, have seen all the worst and best things that a relationship between two people has to offer. I could’ve written about a night in Los Angeles he got
so angry at me he flipped his dinner off the table and walked out of the restaurant, or a night in
Manhattan where he wouldn’t speak to me, or a night in our bed where I woke up from a nightmare
and he talked me down, or that time in Hawaii, or San Diego, or all the thousands of times he’s
told me he’s loved me and looked at me like I was something more than words. I could’ve written
all of that, and you’d have paid to read it.

But it’s just none of your fucking business. (Derek Hale, Drown, last page.)

**

They finish the promo tour. They go to places like Fargo that Stiles thought only existed in weird
indie movies and places like Brooklyn and Nashville and Albuquerque where everyone is nice to
him and gives him presents and asks how he’s doing and if he’ll take a picture with them. The
book sells as well as Beacons did in its first month (it actually sells more than Beacons did, by a
margin not that much bigger, but a margin all the same), which is a mammoth accomplishment as
far as Lydia is concerned.

“He should’ve dropped in sales,” she says matter-of-factly one night after her third glass of wolf-
wine, looking very put out about being in a nice restaurant in New York City. “I guess we have
Spark to thank for the fact that he didn’t.”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles drawls, stabbing a potato on his plate a bit harder than is entirely necessary,
while Derek saws into his steak and watches him with a close eye. “I thank God for Spark every
single night.”

“What a goldmine,” Lydia murmurs mostly to herself, getting that far away look she gets on her
face whenever she starts remembering Derek’s assertion that he won’t fucking write books like this
anymore. When she read it in Drown, Stiles guesses she thought he was kidding or something. He
was not kidding. Derek doesn’t kid, not about his books. “What a shame.”

“Shut up and drink your wine,” Derek hisses, and Stiles smirks and tries to hide it by taking
another bite of his own steak.

Derek has insisted he’s going to start writing actual fictional novels, which Stiles can’t fathom,
frankly. Not that he thinks that Derek will be terrible at it, seeing as how Spark is a thing that
happened and people seemed to have enjoyed that for the most part, but it’s just hard for him to
imagine. Derek creating characters and alternate universes and having people be half-unicorn or
some shit like that. Derek’s books have always had an air to them – a specific Derek Hale
air,
written in his voice and his tone from his own head.

In his fictional books, there’ll be a different narrator. It’s crazy for Stiles to think about.

When they get back to the hotel room, Stiles opens up the curtains and looks out across the city, all
lit up and huge and sprawling, and Derek closes the door behind them and then leans his back up
against it, sighing. It’s the last night of the tour. They’ll go back home to Beacon Hills tomorrow,
and Derek won’t start another book, and they’ll have time to just be themselves and do things
together that won’t ever get written about, and then in three months they’ll get married.

They won’t ever do anything like this ever again. This tour, these arguments, this city, this hotel
room. They’ve done so many things in the past couple of years, seen so many places and been so
many different people, and all of it, for some reason, feels like it’s ending. Like they’re shutting
the book and starting in on another one – or, better yet, there won’t be any book at all. It’ll just be
“What’re you thinking about?” Derek asks him, stepping farther into the room, only lit up by the city lights streaming in through the window. He comes up behind him, just close enough that Stiles can almost feel his body, but not quite.

“How everything is changing,” Stiles says honestly, and Derek sighs through his nose and rests his chin on Stiles’ shoulder.

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“No, it’s just—change. It’s weird. You get nostalgic, is all.” Stiles turns around and looks Derek in the eyes, a sad smile crossing his face. “We really did things, you and I.”

“We’re not dying,” Derek rolls his eyes, and Stiles shakes his head.

“No, I guess not,” he agrees, looking out at the city once again. “I just miss it sometimes, and then I want to go back to how it all was, way back at the start. Then I want to change everything, and then I want to just stay exactly where I am.”

Derek makes a sound of interest from the back of his throat. “That’s why I wrote all those books. Changing the story to how I liked it, even when it was the truth. I edited it in little ways. Made it more interesting or less sad or more sad, depending on how I felt that day.”

“Do you think you’re gonna miss it?” Stiles asks him, crossing his arms over his chest as he stares out the window, at the lights glittering off the bay. “Writing about your life, like that?”

“I’ll still write about my life,” he insists. “I just won’t publish it.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, surprised, eyebrows raising up into his hairline.

“I’ll let you read it,” he promises, kissing the crown of Stiles’ head and reaching down to hold his hand, tangling their fingers together. “Only you.”

They stand in silence for another minute or two, and Stiles thinks about all the things about him that he’s read in Derek’s books. He thinks about all the time that’s passed since Beacons, since the first time he read it, surprised at all the things Derek would never tell him out loud, surprised at how Stiles almost sounded like a different person when he read himself in Derek’s words. It feels forever ago, now.

It feels like it happened to someone else, almost, but it was him. All of it was.

“I don’t think I’ve ever said it before, and I’m sorry it’s taken so long,” Stiles starts, and Derek squeezes on his fingers a little bit tighter to show he’s listening, “but thank you, for writing about me.”

Derek is quiet, and he’s surprised, Stiles can tell. He probably never thought Stiles would say something like that, considering all of the bad things that have happened to them because of those books.

“You made me feel lucky. I should’ve said so earlier.”

Derek and Stiles stand there, thousands of miles away from home, foreign and strange lights slanting across their faces. And Stiles used to wonder what it would be like, all the time, to be immortalized in one of Derek Hale’s books. He used to daydream about it in high school, tapping
his pen on his notebook and resting his chin in his palm, staring out the window and imagining being this person that he is right now.

It’s all over, in more ways than one. No more books. No more interviews. Derek will publish fiction and his diehard fans will gobble it up while everyone else loses interest, and Stiles might get asked from time to time about Spark, and Derek might get asked sometimes how Stiles is doing, but it’s done.

There were parts of this entire charade that made Stiles feel so terrible. And he knows Derek feels the same. But it’s crazy, it really is, that he knows he wouldn’t take any of it back. Not even Spark. What hasn’t absolutely destroyed them has hardened them. Stiles isn’t afraid of what people will say about him, not anymore.

Derek turns the light on, so the room is less romantic and more clinical, and Stiles sits down on the edge of the bed. He thinks – this is the last time I’ll ever feel like this, and Derek won’t tell anyone about it. This moment dies here between the two of them instead of made utterly invincible in ink by Derek’s own hand.

It’s theirs and theirs alone. Stiles smiles. He hasn’t felt completely alone with Derek in so long, in months, in decades, in the entire seventy years it feels like they’ve known each other.

“Do you still think I’m making a mistake?” Stiles asks him, recalling their conversation after Spark, over a year ago, now.

Derek doesn’t think about it. “I don’t, no,” he admits, sounding a bit bashful. “Not anymore, I don’t.”

Decades, they’ve spanned in the course of only two years. Entire lifetimes, long enough that even 400 pages couldn’t ever do it justice.

**

I really think sometimes I’m doomed to spend the rest of my life just writing and writing and writing, all alone, all by myself. Writing myself out of other people’s lives and writing myself back into misery, all the time. I think sometimes it has to end at some point, and I wait for something to pull me out of it. A lighthouse in the middle of the ocean, or a wave to come and put out the last of the flames still burning over the wreckage. Something. Anyone. (Reborn, Derek Hale, pg. 246).

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