Howlin' For You

by Lenore

Summary

A college AU with strippers, crime bosses, and a mystery to solve.

Notes

I've been working on this story since June, and my dear no_detective has been so incredibly insightful with her feedback and generous with her time all this while. I could not have finished this without her utterly invaluable help!

ETA: Now there's podfic! You can find the story read by the lovely Knight Tracer available here.

There are awesome ways to celebrate a twenty-first birthday, Stiles feels, and then there is this: opening the door to find an officer of the law standing on his doorstep, scowling as if Stiles is wanted in three states and the District of Columbia for grand theft donut. Apparently, the universe doesn't care that he's been counting the days until he was legal since the tenth grade.

"Can I help you, officer?"

"We've had complaints about noise." The policeman is as muscled as a person can be without
tipping over into the steroid-abuse end of the scale. He gives off a definite hard-ass vibe, and his features are so symmetrical it's difficult to believe he exists in nature. In fact, it's entirely possible that he a) just stepped out of gay porn, b) sprang fully formed from Stiles's filthiest fantasies, or c) all of the above.

He also looks like he could break Stiles in half with his little finger. If the pissed-off glower he's sporting is any indication, he just might do it too, for the high crime of being forced to actually work on what should be a sleepy Wednesday night in this college town.

"Noise. Really?" Stiles shakes his head and plasters on his most innocent expression, hoping he doesn't stink too much of the Jack he was just chugging.

Unfortunately, his oh-so-unhelpful friends choose that moment to let out a collective "whoo," the noise rising and falling like a roller coaster, only much, much lewder. Sounds like somebody's doing a body shot off somebody else.

The officer raises an eyebrow, and somehow this one small gesture manages to convey: *Yeah? You want to try that again, dickbrain?*

Stiles lets out his breath. "Okay, yeah, so maybe we have been a little—I'll just go tell them to—"

He waves his hand vaguely in the direction of the living room. "We'll tone it down."

"I'm going to need to come inside and investigate," the officer informs him. The flat, stern line of his mouth doesn't bode well.

"Wait. What?" There's no probable cause to search the place. Stiles doesn't need to be a sheriff's son to realize that; he just needs to have seen an episode of *Law and Order*. "You know you can't just—"

But the officer is already pushing his way inside, muscling up into Stiles's personal space. "Come on."

He clamps his hand down around Stiles's wrist, fingers squeezing against bone, and that is not hot. It's police brutality. Sadly, Stiles's cock doesn't seem to understand the distinction.

The officer drags Stiles down the hall to the living room, and when they round the corner, he expects it to have something of a dampening effect that he's in the process of being wrongfully arrested in his own apartment, *on his birthday* no less. But his so-called friends just start hooting more loudly and actually cheering, and Stiles is starting to take offense when he notices that the officer has a duffel bag slung over his arm.

That's not standard issue, Stiles thinks, and then the officer unzips the bag and out comes a portable stereo.

"Oh my God," Stiles groans out loud. "Tell me you guys didn't."

He looks around frantically, searching for Scott, who just shrugs and grins.

"Fuck. You did," Stiles says to himself.

"I'm Officer Derek," the not-actually-a-policeman announces, punching a button on the portable stereo. Suddenly Collide's cover of "Baby Did A Bad Bad Thing" is bouncing off the walls. "And you've been served." He rips off his shirt and tosses it at Stiles and starts to do this thing with his hips that probably isn't even legal. If he were a real cop, he'd have to arrest himself.
"Does no one remember that my father works in law enforcement?" Stiles throws out there.

His friends are too busy encouraging Officer Derek to answer. The guy really knows how to work it, Stiles will give him that, pulling his belt free from his uniform pants very slowly, a loop-by-loop tease. Stiles would close his eyes, or at the very least look away, because there are worlds colliding here that should remain completely and forever separate, but he's just not that strong. So he leans against the bookshelf, doing his best to appear nonchalant.

Derek is rather taciturn for a stripper. Stiles isn't sure the guy actually knows how to smile. But he's smoking hot, and every move he makes looks like sex standing up. Frankly that more than makes up for any surliness of attitude as far as Stiles is concerned.

Officer Derek's pants have been slowly slipping down his hips since he lost the belt, and he solves this problem by whipping them off, twirling them over his head like a lasso and letting them fly. Lydia triumphantly comes up with them. Someone passes Stiles a bottle. He has no idea what's in it—even after he's tipped it back—but he downs whatever-it-is in greedy gulps. By now, the only thing Officer Derek has left on is the skimpiest thong that ever thonged, and Stiles can't help noticing that he has quite the natural talent there.

Here's another way he didn't plan to celebrate his twenty-first birthday: getting obviously, painfully hard in front of everyone he knows. Sometimes he wishes his friends were just a teeny-tiny bit less supportive of his lifestyle. It would be a whole lot less embarrassing.

The song changes—"Spin Spin Sugar," hardly an improvement—and Officer Derek crooks his finger at Stiles, still surly, but also somehow sexily come-hither. If Stiles manages not to develop a grumpiness kink, it will be a minor miracle.

"Go on, Stilinski." Jackson pushes him roughly by the shoulder, urging him forward. "We paid good money for this. You'd better fucking enjoy it."

"I'm fine right here." Stiles mulishly digs in his heels. "Let's leave the dancing to the professionals."

Stiles's asshole friends instantly break into a chant, "Dance, dance, dance," even Scott, who does at least have the good grace to duck his head guiltily when Stiles catches his eye. Stiles does his best to mentally project: Okay, buddy, let's see if there's any more help with your history research after this betrayal.

If Stiles lets out an honest-to-God yelp when Officer Derek grabs him by the wrist and reels him in, well, it's not as if he has preternaturally gorgeous, mostly naked strippers manhandling him every day, okay? Anyone would yelp.

Officer Derek is a wall of muscle, hard and hot and sheened with sweat, and Stiles manfully resists the urge to put his fingerprints all over that skin. Officer Derek, however, doesn't cooperate with the no-gratuitous-touching plan and keeps his hand clamped to the small of Stiles's back, not allowing any distance between them. Apparently he's a sadist. Or a tease. Or a sadistic tease even. When Derek shoves his thigh between Stiles's legs, Stiles manages not to moan out loud, but he can't help grabbing at Derek's shoulders. He needs something to hold him up. His knees certainly aren't doing the job.

Derek smirks, as only a person who knows how devastatingly attractive he is can smirk. He doesn't rub his thigh against Stiles's dick, but he does leave his leg right there, so Stiles can embarrass himself as much as he wants. It's his birthday, and he's only human, so he ruts against that magnificent thigh maybe just a little bit. Or, okay, possibly a lot.
God. He hasn’t been this horny since he was first learning what his dick could do.

This dirty dancing thing is clearly going to turn the corner at any moment from mild embarrassment to the kind of life-altering humiliation he’ll revisit in therapy ten years down the road. He really should stop, but apparently his hips have quit listening to his brain. Sweat has started to soak through his clothes, and he’s got that prickly feeling behind his eyes. Any touch could be the one that sets him off.

He’s more or less making his peace with the fact that he’ll probably need to transfer after this night is over when the song abruptly ends. On cue, Derek steps back, and Stiles is taken so much by surprise he nearly falls headlong into him. Everybody starts clapping and cheering, because apparently that’s the end of the performance.

Of course, it is. Stiles wants to laugh—or, okay, maybe cry. He actually thought there was going to be an orgasm involved here. How hilariously ironic. It’s so much more his luck to be left with blue balls on his birthday.

Derek accepts thanks and compliments with the same taciturn expression he’s worn all evening. Some of the girls slip him their numbers, and Stiles thinks he sees a couple of the guys do the same, even though he really thought those dudes were straight. It seems Officer Derek’s appeal spans the Kinsey scale.

"Is there a bathroom I can use?"

It takes a moment for Stiles to realize that Derek is talking to him. Dying of sexual frustration does nothing to improve his ability to focus.

"Oh, uh, sure." He gives directions to the bathroom off his bedroom, since that’s the only one he can be sure isn’t an EPA superfund site in the making.

"Thanks." Derek hefts his bag and takes off down the hall. Every set of eyes follows his progress or, more to the point, the progress of his bare ass.

Stiles is still so hard he could cry. Happy fucking birthday.

"Hey, that was pretty awesome, huh?" Scott slings his arm across Stiles's shoulders. When Stiles does the sarcastic eyebrow lift at him, because dudes are so not Scott's thing, he amends, "Well, you liked it, right?"

"It's certainly an experience I won't soon forget."

College hasn't improved Scott's ability to recognize sarcasm at all, and he beams, totally pleased with himself. "Oh, hey. I almost forgot. Here." He shoves a wad of crumpled bills into Stiles's hand.

"You shouldn’t have," Stiles says wryly.

"I didn't. I mean, it's for Derek. When we booked him, the guy we talked to was really clear what would happen if we forgot to tip the dancer. He sounded large. And mean. And he knows where we live."

"But—why—I don't want to do it!" Stiles estimates his ability to control himself around Derek at about forty percent. Okay, that may be overly generous. Besides, the whole cash transaction thing is bound to be awkward.
"Go pay your birthday present," Jackson interjects. "None of the rest of us wants to stuff it down his thong."

Stiles darts a hopeful look at Danny.

"He's not my type," Danny insists.

"He's everybody's type," Stiles mutters and heads off to find Derek.

The bathroom door is closed, and Stiles loiters by the dresser, feeling like an interloper in his own room. He's got that in-between kind of drunkenness going on, having downed too much Jack not to feel it but not enough to give him the stupid kind of happiness that only comes from a fifth of bourbon. He really should have brought the bottle with him. By the time he gets back out there, Jackson will probably have finished it. The fucker.

At last, the door bangs open, and Derek comes out, and Stiles doesn't mean to open his big stupid mouth. He really doesn't. "Oh my God." It just comes spilling out.

Derek pauses, shirt in hand, to give Stiles a cool look. His hair is damp, and for whatever reason, he hasn't bothered to zip up his jeans. Derek doesn't believe in underwear when he's on his own time; this is what Stiles gleans from the view down the open vee of Derek's fly.

"Here." Stiles shoves the wad of bills at him, in a move that adds painful new shades of meaning to the word "awkward."

It's his birthday. Why won't the floor just open up and swallow him already?

Derek pockets the money, and he still doesn't zip up his jeans. "You want something." It's not a question.

"No! Well, yes. Except no. I mean, not that I wouldn't want—" He cuts his eyes toward Derek, and, holy shit, who wouldn't? "I just mean, that would be tacky, right? I bet it happens all the time. People come onto you—people you've, um, entertained. I should go. Leave you to—"

Thinking about Derek getting dressed inevitably leads to a renewed awareness that Derek is half naked right at the moment, and that flusters Stiles enough that he manages to stumble over his own feet and pitch forward, right onto all that half-nakedness.

He flails, and, wow, maybe he's drunker than he thought, because the simple act of righting himself suddenly doesn't feel so simple. Derek is no help at all. He doesn't push Stiles away. Doesn't do anything but stand there looking amused. Sure, Stiles thinks bitterly, now he can manage an expression other than sullenness.

"There's no way you're actually legal," Derek decides, with a sarcastic slant to his mouth.

Stiles takes exception. "Dude, you're at my twenty-first birthday party!"

Derek doesn't answer, but he is kind of staring—and, whoa, is that Stiles's mouth he's staring at? Stiles is pretty sure it is.

He's celebrated his birthday with at least fourteen different kinds of alcohol, and Derek is quite possibly the most gorgeous man he's ever seen, so it seems like an awesome idea to say, "I could prove it to you." He licks his lips, to make it perfectly clear what he's offering.

A sound spills out of Derek, needy and half-choked, and this really seems to Stiles like his cue to
drop to his knees. That no-underwear policy of Derek's comes in extremely handy now. Stiles licks his lips and puts his mouth on Derek's dick without having to waste valuable time wrestling with clothes.

Derek freezes. "God—" He lets out a strangled noise when Stiles curls his tongue around his cock.

That doesn't sound like a complaint—and Derek's dick is definitely with the program—so Stiles keeps going. He's been hard since Derek ripped off his uniform or, okay, maybe since he first appeared at the door. Stiles knows he's good at giving head—he's been told—but Derek doesn't grab his ears, doesn't try to fuck his face, doesn't even move. Stiles flicks his gaze up, and Derek is staring down at him, eyes wide and intense. There's something in his expression, this half-starved stray dog look, as if—is it possible that a man as hot as this has been going without? That really doesn't seem very likely.

But the possibility turns Stiles on even more, and he uses every trick he has, does every dirty, filthy thing with his mouth that he can think of. When Derek finally grips the back of his neck and thrusts into his mouth, he feels a decided flash of victory.

"I'm going to—" Derek grates out, voice low, his thighs tensed, his breath coming quick and erratic.

Stiles isn't quite at the defcon level of drunkenness where it seems like a good idea to let a total stranger come in his mouth, and he pulls off, gets a hand around Derek's cock.

Derek watches every pull of Stiles's hand, his lips pressed tightly together, a desperate, almost wild light in his eyes. It's seeming more and more as if Derek hasn't been touched in way too long, and Stiles twists his wrist, rubs his thumb beneath the head of Derek's cock. He wants to make it good.

The noise Derek lets out when he comes sounds almost pained, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Stiles's dexterity is somewhat bourbon-impaired, and he manages to get jizz splattered on his chin and all down the front of his T-shirt. He's panting and still down on his knees and trying to get the shirt up over his head when Derek decides that now is the time to zip up his jeans.

"What—" Stiles starts to ask, because as far as he's concerned the party's just getting started.

"Happy birthday," Derek says in a clipped monotone, hoisting his duffel bag over his shoulder and heading for the door. Practically running, actually.

He darts one last guilty glance back at Stiles and then he's gone.

Stiles stares disbelievingly. "Hey, don't you maybe want to—you know, reciprocate?" he says, even though he's talking to an empty room. "A little? No? Okay, then. Thanks for coming."

He ends up frustrated and alone, squirreled away in the bathroom, jerking off, hoping that no one hears him. This is one birthday tradition he'd really like to quit.

If Stiles wanders around in a daze for days afterward, absently touching his lips, imagining that they're still swollen, well, that's no one's business but his own. Probably no one will even notice.

"Did you have sex with that stripper?" Lydia asks at lunch, narrowing her eyes at him. "Or have you just been fantasizing about it?"

Unfortunately, Lydia notices everything.
"No!" he denies hotly, because he's not giving details, and she'll so try to wheedle them out of him. "To either thing. Absolutely, totally not."

She spends another two seconds giving him the squint eye and then turns her attention to Jackson, badgering him into going to the French film retrospective she's hot to see. They haven't been a couple since high school, but that doesn't make Jackson any less whipped. Stiles sinks down in his seat, relieved to be out of the glare of Lydia-curiosity, only to notice that Allison is smiling at him in a knowing way. He gets suddenly very interested in the soggy fries on his plate. Sometimes, having friends is almost more trouble than it's worth.

At least, he can count on Scott to be utterly oblivious.

Scott plunks down next to Allison, takes a bite of his burger and makes a face. "God, I can't believe it's time for mid-terms already. I'm so screwed." He looks around the table, searching for commiseration, sensing absolutely no undercurrent of anything.

He's pretty invaluable this way, actually.

Stiles approaches midterms in his usual fashion, with many long, sleepless nights and inhuman amounts of caffeine. Fortunately, his favorite coffee shop is conveniently located between his apartment and his classes. He stops off before his Chem mid-term, yawning and strung-out, for a latte with as many shots of espresso as will conceivably fit into the cup.

He takes a long, grateful sip as he steps outside and abruptly stops in his tracks. He's sleep-deprived and not yet completely re-caffeinated, and it's entirely possible that he's hallucinating. Because he could swear that's Derek across the street, fully clothed and having what looks to be a pretty tense conversation with an industrial-sized scary dude who would fit right in on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

After another big sip of coffee, Stiles decides that it is actually Derek and not just his imagination, and, hey, Stiles is only human. He lingers there on the sidewalk, staring.

Maybe Derek senses that someone is watching, because he darts a glance over his shoulder and freezes when he spots Stiles. His expression quickly rearranges into a scowl. Okay, so that really doesn't look like Derek is happy to see him, and he does have a Chem midterm to take. He should go.

Any moment now.

Derek exchanges a few last words with the scary dude, and Stiles really wishes he were close enough to hear what that's about. His curiosity is killing him. Derek starts across the street, heading right for him.

"Don't forget what we agreed to, Hale," the scary dude calls after Derek.

That means—Derek Hale. Just knowing his full name feels almost unbearably intimate, heat flashing all though Stiles as his unhelpful brain serves up sense memories of Derek's fingers clenched on the back of his head.

A moment later, Derek is standing right there, still scowling.

"Um," Stiles says, very intelligently.

"What are you doing here?" Derek asks, voice flat, jaw tightly clenched.
Stiles blinks in confusion. He considers saying, "Getting a latte?" Because it's the truth! But Derek's expression has darkened, and "hulking" is a word that could be applied to him, and Stiles starts to babble, because that's just what he does when he's nervous, "Hey, it's a college town, and I'm a college student. A college student with a midterm to take, actually. So—" He really needs to get out of there before he starts sounding any stupider.

"Wait," Derek says. Or orders, really. It's definitely not phrased like a request. "About the other night, that shouldn't have happened."

Stiles goes absolutely still, and then he has this frantic oh shit, oh shit panic bomb going off in his head. "Look, I'm really sorry, okay? You're incredibly hot, and I was pretty drunk, and I thought you were into it, but if you weren't—" He trails off miserably.

Derek frowns. "It wasn't that I didn't—I just mean it was unprofessional. I'm not supposed to do things like that."

"Oh. Um. Okay?"

Derek nods, very seriously. "Good. I'm glad we got that cleared up."

"Yeah. Me too. Clarity. Always awesome." Oh God, why is he still talking? Someone kill him now.

"Didn't you say you have a midterm to take?"

"Oh, yeah. I should—" Stiles flaps his hand vaguely in the direction of the Chem building and slinks away.

Why does his life have to be this ridiculous? He has no clue.

Probably the sensible thing to do is to forget all about Derek—Derek Hale, oh my God—but is Stiles really a sensible kind of guy? Apparently not.

He holes up in his room, sitting cross-legged on his bed, hunched over his laptop as he works his Google-fu, because naturally this is what you do when you learn the full name of the incredibly hot stripper who regrets letting you blow him.

There are a whole bunch of mentions in archived copies of the local paper, most of them in the high school sports pages. Apparently Derek never met a team sport he wasn't captain of. Stiles makes loud awwwing noises over pictures of a teenaged Derek looking variously triumphant and determined and, after the occasional defeat, like the worst loser ever.

He's somewhat startled to find that Derek graduated from the university six years ago and then has to give himself a lecture about making stupid assumptions. Hot people can be smart, too. Look at Lydia. Still, he does have to wonder why Derek chose to be a stripper when it seems he had plenty of other options. Maybe he just likes being drooled over?

Stiles works all his Google tricks, scraping the proverbial bottom of the Internet barrel, but the Derek trail goes cold after college. No Facebook, no Linked In, no online resume, no "tall, dark and taciturn seeks same" personal ads, not that Stiles can find anyway. And if it existed, Stiles would definitely have found it.

What kind of person leaves no trace of their existence online? Someone who's either seriously paranoid or who has something to hide, a voice in Stiles's head pipes up. It sounds suspiciously like
his father's voice. He studiously ignores it.

He has better things to think about. Like how good Derek looks in a thong and how soft his skin feels, in sharp contrast to all that hard muscle. Possibly Stiles becomes more preoccupied by these thoughts than he realizes.

"Dude, there's something seriously wrong with you," Jackson says later that day, hunched over his bowl of electric-orange mac and cheese as he watches *Sports Center*.

"Bite me," Stiles says automatically, because this is their relationship.

Back in Beacon Hills, if someone had predicted that one day he would have Jackson Whittemore for an apartment mate, Stiles would have laughed himself sick. But at the end of freshman year, the guy Stiles and Scott had been rooming with transferred to Columbia, and Jackson got de-pledged from his fraternity for sleeping with the rush chairman's girlfriend, and it just kind of worked out. Mostly, it's been okay. Days and days will go by when Jackson completely forgets he's a douchebag and then suddenly he'll remember again. Like today.

"Seriously. I'm asking," Jackson persists. "What's up with you?"

"You do seem kind of out of it," Danny chimes in, slouched on the sofa, flipping the pages of his physics book.

It's on the tip of Stiles's tongue to shoot back: *People who don't actually live here don't get to have an opinion.* But the truth is that Danny spends far more time here than he does at his dorm room, and he washes more of their dirty dishes than Scott and Jackson combined. Probably he has squatter's rights.

"There's nothing up with me," Stiles maintains.

*Derek Hale.* It's been three days, and Stiles still can't think the name without a crackle of excitement, like he has a secret. His leg jiggles up and down, and he can't sit still. It's a minor miracle that he managed an A on his Chem midterm. His focus has been for shit since that morning outside the coffee shop.

"Jesus," Jackson huffs. "I thought you took pills for that hyperactivity bullshit."

"I grew out of that!"

Jackson directs a pointed glance at Stiles's jiggling leg.

Stiles is ready to hurl off another volley of "bite me," but he's cut short by the door banging open.

"Hey." Scott drops his backpack on the floor. "What's going on?"

"Something's up with Stilinski," Jackson quickly answers. "Isn't it, Danny?"

"Something does seem to be up," Danny confirms.

Scott darts a look at Stiles. He's the only one Stiles has told about what happened with Derek, and in true friend fashion, he does his best to throw Jackson off the trail. "Oh, uh, maybe it's just leftover stress from midterms?"

"If he doesn't get over it soon, I'm going to kick him until he cries," Jackson says, as if this is a perfectly reasonable thing to do.
Stiles gives him the stink eye.

Scott shoots Stiles a sympathetic look. "Maybe you could go to the gym? Work off some of that, uh, excess energy?"

"That's a good idea," Jackson says. "You are still carrying around that freshman fifteen, and it's junior year, dude."

Stiles raises his eyebrows in the most sarcastic fashion he can manage. "Wait. Did I just hear the person shoveling petrochemical-based cheese-food into his mouth call me fat?" He turns indignantly to Danny. "Do you believe that?"

Danny holds up his hands in the familiar *I am Switzerland* gesture.

"I have an athlete's metabolism," Jackson says smugly.

Stiles snorts. "You haven't played lacrosse since high school."

Jackson's eyes narrow murderously. That same fraternity rush chairman was also captain of the university's lacrosse team.

"Hey," Scott quickly interjects, the peacemaker as ever. "You know you always feel better after a workout." He nudges Stiles's shoulder. "Go on. Let off some steam."

Stiles lets out a put-upon sigh. "Fine. But for the record? I'm as svelte as the day I arrived for freshman orientation."

Scott gives him a crooked grin. "Noted."

"I don't think that word means what you think it means," Jackson says.

Stiles throws a copy of *Being and Nothingness* at him.

The gym is ridiculously crowded, and Stiles stalls just inside the door of the cardio room, thinking maybe the universe doesn't actually want him to work out and he should turn around and head home. But then a treadmill opens up right in front of him, which seems like a sign of a different sort. Also, it is kind of true that he could stand to work off some of his "excess energy," euphemism very much intended.

Stiles doesn't hate running, but he doesn't exactly love it, either. His approach to a workout is basically to turn off his brain and bulldoze his way through it. Maybe that's why he's already two miles into it before he notices Derek across the room. For a moment, he honestly thinks he must be seeing things, and that disturbs him enough that his stride falters, and he almost takes a header off the machine.

He regains his footing, and the Derek-mirage hasn't disappeared, and he realizes: *Holy shit, that's actually Derek!*

Derek runs as if he's got something personal against the treadmill, as if it insulted his mother and challenged his masculinity, as if he's trampling it into submission. That should be kind of psychotic, not hot, but once again, Stiles's body has its own ideas about these things. No one who's older than sixteen should have as many erections in public as he's had lately. Really, it's starting to become traumatic.
He takes a last, lingering look at Derek—with his gorgeous, flexing quads and his anger issues that could be seen from space—and calls it a day. What he needs now, in the worst possible way, is a cold shower.

The locker room is far less busy, thankfully, and Stiles chooses a shower stall in a nice, private corner. Maybe he'll skip the cold water and jerk off instead. Knowing that Derek is nearby sends an anticipatory shiver down his back.

He stands under the spray and soaps up, and he's just starting to rub his chest, tease himself a little before he gets down to business, when the stall's curtain is yanked open.

"Hey, this one's taken," he calls over his shoulder.

His hand stops mid-motion, and all he can do is stare. At Derek. Who is standing there without a single stitch of clothing on. He's more naked now than when he was stripping float through Stiles's brain. Then Derek is on him, pushing him against the wall of the shower, the close press of heated skin and hard muscle. God, so much muscle.

"Are you following me?" Derek demands, his breath hot against the side of Stiles's face.

Stiles is horny, yeah, but not so horny he fails to find that insulting.

"No! God. Ego much? Also? I don't have to follow anyone around to get laid. There are plenty of people who'd be perfectly willing—"

Derek grabs the soap out of his hand.

"Seriously, you don't have to be such a—"

The sentence ends in a high-pitched squeak when Derek puts his soapy hands on Stiles's body.

"Shit," he says, with a shaky breath out.

"I shouldn't do this," Derek says, more to himself than to Stiles, sounding decidedly pissed off about it.

But he doesn't stop.

There's nothing leisurely about the way he touches Stiles. No buildup, no slow exploration. He rubs at Stiles's nipples until Stiles is shaking and muttering curses, and then his hands move on, down and down, soaping between Stiles's thighs, into his cleft, thumb catching against his hole, making Stiles shake some more.

Derek drops the soap, and then he's working Stiles over with both hands, cupping his balls, jerking his cock.

"Oh, God," Stiles moans.

"Shhh." To punctuate the command, Derek bites Stiles's neck, hard, and Stiles moans again, even louder. That is so not the way to shut him up.

Derek huffs, and he pushes Stiles's legs apart with his knee, nudges his cock between Stiles's thighs. Stiles flails, panicked that Derek is going to fuck him without a condom.

"Relax. I'm just—" Derek thrusts into the space between Stiles's thighs, and he sucks the same spot where he bit. No doubt he's leaving a mark, and Stiles will endure endless mockery for that from
his friends. His reaction to this is to—loll his head to the side, begging for more. When did that become a thing? He really doesn't remember that ever being a thing before.

Derek speeds up the motion of his hands, and it's too tight, too much, and God, it's so fucking good. Stiles squeezes his thighs closer together, and Derek lets out this low rumbling noise, kind of a growl actually. He's still making the growling sound when he comes.

_Fuck, fuck, fuck_, that's the sum total of Stiles's vocabulary when he goes off in Derek's hand.

Stiles is panting, knees not as sturdy as he'd like them to be. Derek pulls away and leaves as abruptly as he appeared, tossing over his shoulder as he goes, "Your stride's too long when you run."


For days afterward, one persistent question hovers in the back of Stiles's thoughts: What _was_ that? He hasn't been this confused since puberty.

He doesn't have any idea what to call this thing with Derek, doesn't know if it even is a thing. One-night stand went by the wayside when it happened a second time, and "fuck buddies" implies more frequency and a degree of commitment that they don't have. They've never even kissed. Secretly, Stiles has the heart of a taxonomist. He likes to know what he's dealing with. When it comes to Derek, he has no clue.

Clearly, he needs advice, and he flips through his mental Rolodex for candidates. Jackson is out for obvious he's-a-douchebag reasons, and Danny has made it clear on more than one occasion that just because they're both gay doesn't mean they ever need to talk about their sex lives with each other.

Scott is Stiles's best friend and usually his first choice in confidantes, but when it comes to matters like this, Scott tends to go wild-eyed and start stammering. Stiles once spent a whole fifteen minutes furious at him for being freaked out whenever Stiles wanted to discuss his boyfriends only to remember that he's just as deer-in-headlights about heterosexual relationships and the only reason he's had a girlfriend since high school is because Allison is driving that bus.

For a moment, Stiles considers Allison, but she'll be too concerned about where this thing with Derek is leading and if Stiles will end up getting hurt. What Stiles needs is someone practical, a strategist, someone who doesn't worry too much about his feelings.

"I knew you had sex with that stripper," Lydia declares triumphantly when Stiles explains the situation over happy-hour beers.

"Yes. Fine. You're omniscient. Can we move past the gloating to the advice-giving already?"

Lydia gives him a long, assessing look. "Okay, but first I need to ask: is this a stalking situation?"

"No! I'm the one who keeps running into him."

"I meant you. Are you stalking him? Because whatever the _Twilight_ books might have led you to believe, it isn't romantic, just creepy and kind of pathetic."

"Thanks for the tip, Lydia," he says dryly. "and, no, I'm not stalking him. It just keeps happening at random. That's the issue. The randomness. I would like it to happen on purpose and far more often."
Lydia shrugs. "So, what's the problem? You know where he works. Go down there and see what happens."

Stiles's shoulders slump. "Actually, I have no idea where he works."

"At the same place where all the strippers in town work? At the lone strip club? They have Gay Mondays?" She stares at him, more incredulous by the second. "How are you a gay guy in this town and you don't know that?"

"It's not like we have a newsletter!" Stiles huffs. "How do you know about it?"

She flips her hair back over her shoulder. "I know everything."

It would be a lie to say that Stiles has never wondered about Derek's career as a stripper, whether it's all private parties or if there was somewhere Stiles could go to see him at work. Now that Lydia has helpfully supplied the answer, Stiles can do his research. The club doesn't have a website—which seems like something of an oversight in their business plan—but they have made quite the impression on the local police blotter. Half a dozen brawls, two raids looking for illegal drugs, citations for underage drinking, and that's only in the past three months. Nice place Derek works.

No indictment for strip club owners on money laundering charges crops up when Stiles digs a little deeper, a headline from last year. Next to the article is a picture of a perfectly ordinary looking middle-aged guy, Gaving Rooney according to the caption, and an unnamed thug known only as "Rooney's co-defendant," who sports such a vicious sneer it's entirely possible he eats kittens for breakfast.

"Oh, shit," Stiles says out loud when he realizes the thug is the same guy he saw talking to Derek the other day.

Then he gets to the really eye-opening part of the article: The prosecution's case fell apart when their star witness, accountant Peter Hale, failed to appear in court. Hale, who was also implicated in the money-laundering scheme, had agreed to testify against Rooney in return for a lighter sentence. Police are treating his disappearance as suspicious. A spokesperson for the prosecutor's office said, "We could be looking at a possible homicide."

Stiles stares at the words on the screen. Hale isn't an especially uncommon name. Maybe there's no connection? After some more frantic Googling, he finds the answer on a genealogy site, where someone has painstakingly put together the family tree for the Hales who live a few towns over. Peter is Derek's uncle.

Maybe this should put a damper on Stiles's plans to visit the strip club, but yeah, not so much. Derek is not only a wet dream come to life, but also a mystery to be solved. There's no way Stiles can resist that. He can only hope that his evening out doesn't end in embarrassment. Or a trip to the emergency room.

The club sits approximately three feet outside the city limits where the ordinances governing entertainment are, apparently, a lot more lenient. A sign tacked up on the ramshackle building proudly declares: No obscenity laws! All nude! Stiles swallows, his mouth suddenly dry as he's swamped by memories of all-nude Derek.

"ID," barks the guy at the door, a tank-shaped man wearing a Don't fuck with me T-shirt and, against all odds, a beret. Stiles does a double-take when he realizes it's the same kitten-eating thug from the photo.
Stiles pulls out his wallet, and it's stupid that his heart races. He's legal, and money laundering is, like, a white-collar crime, right? The guy squints at the driver's license and then at Stiles and finally nods him inside. "Two drink minimum. Don't even think about trying to sneak out on that. I got a memory for faces."

"No problem," Stiles says, with a weak attempt at a smile.

The bar is in fact his first stop after he's scurried inside. He feels better once he has a bottle in hand, and he downs half his beer in one gulp. This evening is definitely going to require the gentle lubrication of alcohol.

There's a main stage and two side stages—or, okay, they're actually cages, with men dancing in them, naked except for shiny black boots and teeny-tiny little scraps of fabric covering their dicks. Stiles guesses they must reserve the all-nude action for the dancer on the main stage. At the moment, that's a beefy blond wearing a tuxedo tie and nothing else, sporting such over-developed pecs they're practically man boobs, grinding his hips to "Sharp Dressed Man."

It's spectacularly cheesy, but somehow that makes it less embarrassing than Stiles feared. He slows down his beer drinking and takes a more leisurely look around.

The club may call this Gay Monday, but the crowd is mostly women: a few students, some twenty-somethings dressed up like they just came from the office, a big group of women in their forties who are the rowdiest ones of all. Stiles's eyes go wide when he notices the professor he had for Econ last semester, and he ducks behind a handy pillar before she spots him in return. There are some things he really doesn't want to share with his teachers.

The beefy blond finishes up, and waiters circulate through the room, supplying more drinks. It occurs to Stiles that he doesn't actually know what the lineup is for the evening. Derek might already have performed. He might not even be working tonight. Stiles is calculating how long he'll hang around waiting—maybe three or four more dancers—when there's a drum roll and the house lights go low and a voice comes out of the darkness.

"Are you ready for more?" High-pitched cheers break out across the room. "Our next sexy hunk is a relative newcomer, but you've made him a crowd favorite. Welcome back El Lobo himself—Derek!"

The crowd goes wild, clapping and whistling and stamping their feet, making the walls shake. Despite the noise, Stiles can hear his own heart. It sounds like a drag race happening in his chest. Derek is going to take off all his clothes in front of all these people. Stiles can't sit, can't stand still. He might even have forgotten how to breathe.

For one crazy moment, he considers leaving, because maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. Then Derek takes the stage to "Howlin' For You."

There's no cop uniform this time, which should be a relief, except what Derek is wearing instead—well, Stiles can only hope there's no such thing as spontaneous human combustion, because if there is, these are probably his last moments on Earth. Derek is all bare skin and dark leather: shirtless beneath a leather jacket, sporting low-slung pants with a studded belt and a decorative buckle in the shape of a wolf. His feet are bare.

Stiles has no idea why that's what gets him most, but, God, Derek's naked toes.

There's nothing cheesy about Derek's performance, at all, and it's different than what he did at Stiles's party. He stares out at the crowd, eyes glittering, as he unzips the jacket, as if he's daring
them to watch, daring them to cheer and clap and want him. He prowls along the edge of the stage, just out of reach of outstretched hands, and slinks out of the jacket. It should come across like a tease, but it's more like Derek is stalking the audience. Sexy predatory stalking. Not creepy Edward Cullen stalking.

Stiles has two completely contradictory reactions: part of him wants to get Derek the hell out of here, away from all these grabby eyes and even grabbier hands, and the other part just wants to watch and watch some more, not looking away for a second. He's no expert on strippers or anything, and maybe this is just wishful thinking, but he can't help feeling that Derek doesn't really belong here. That he's more than this.

The uniform pants Derek wore at Stiles's party certainly fit snugly, but compared to the leather, they were downright conservative. The leather molds to him, breathes with him, hugging his hard-muscled thighs, accentuating the curve of his ass, showcasing the bulge of his cock. Sense memories swim up from the fantasy centers of Stiles's brain: the taste of Derek on his tongue, the clench of fingers on his skull, the slick slide of Derek's cock between his thighs.

The belt comes off with a flourish, and by now, the audience has been worked into a desperate froth. Derek doesn't make them wait long for the pants. The G-string is also leather, and Derek runs his hands over his hips, playing with the straps, as if to say: *You want this off, huh?* The audience lets out a collective gasp, and possibly Stiles's voice is among them. Possibly. He can't confirm or deny.

This torture goes on for a long time—centuries at least—and then finally, finally, the G-string goes sailing into the crowd, and Derek's wearing nothing but a smirk.

*Where does he put his tips?* Stiles wonders in a lust-induced daze.

Derek keeps dancing, hips working, gorgeous and utterly nude, half hard, and completely unselfconscious. Stiles, on the other hand, can feel his cheeks burning, and he's sweating beneath his clothes. He's way more than half hard.

The music builds to a climax—Stiles can't think the word without flushing even more—and strobe lights start to lick across the crowd. Stiles has kept to the fringes, practically hugging the wall, lost in the shadows, but a flash of the strobe catches him just as Derek happens to look his way. There's an instant of recognition, Derek's eyes going wide and then narrow, his jaw tightening. Stiles should have realized that Derek might not be happy to see him here.

However displeased Derek may be, it doesn't keep him from giving the crowd the big finish they're clamoring for, and by the time he's done, every person in the place is on their feet, applauding like maniacs and throwing cash onto the stage.

Stiles waits until Derek has made his exit before breaking for the door. He runs right into the kitten-eating thug. "I got a memory for faces, remember?" The guy scowls down at him. "And you got another drink to buy, boy."

"Oh, uh, can I just—" Stiles fumbles out his wallet and tries to push a few bucks at the guy, which earns him a glare that might possibly be the last thing he ever sees. "I'll be at the bar."

He rushes off, and because his luck rolls that way, he runs into Professor Fisher, literally, causing her to drop her plastic cup filled with something that's way too pink.

"Mr. Stilinski!" she says with dismay. Whether it's because Stiles is clumsy or he's caught her at a strip club, he can't decide.
"Another one of those," Stiles tells the bartender, who serves it up and says, "That's ten bucks."

Stiles stares, because should a magenta disaster in a plastic cup really cost ten dollars? That would buy at least a month's worth of Ramen. "Fine," he grumbles and counts out the ones.

This should be Professor Fisher's cue to say thank you, but instead, she reminds him, with a disapproving look over the top of her glasses, "It's customary to tip."

"That's great," Stiles says, digging the last two bucks out of his wallet. "Thank you."

Professor Fisher turns on her heel, her gauzy hippie skirt swirling around her, and she heads back to her table, where a contingent of the university's female faculty are clapping their hands and chanting, "Lobo! Lobo!"

Stiles runs the hell out of there before Derek appears for an encore or he spots any more of his professors.

He lets out a breath when he hits the cooler air outside, and his shoulders start to unhunch. The parking lot where he left his Jeep is just a couple of doors down, and he doesn't bother to hurry now that there's no chance of being caught in Derek's glare.

In retrospect, maybe that's a mistake, because a fast-moving blur comes out of nowhere and throws him up against the wall. "Dude, seriously, a mugging?" he says with dismay, careful not to look at the guy, so hopefully there will be no ideas about getting rid of the witness. He's on the verge of hyperventilating when he realizes that the body pressed against his feels oddly familiar.

"What are you doing here?" The growly voice is low and heated against Stiles's cheek, and, yep, that's Derek all right.

A suspicious person might start to wonder why Derek seems so paranoid every time they run into each other, if that's a sign that there's something not-so-savory going on with him. A completely lust-crazed person would just blink helplessly and think about how good Derek smells.

"Nothing. You know—" Stiles can feel himself getting hard again against Derek's thigh. Which is totally not his fault! Who asked Derek to go around all sexy in his leather jacket, and be all growly and manhandling, and get up in Stiles's personal space, so close that Stiles will still feel the imprint of him hours later? Not Stiles! Uh-huh.

Derek stills, scrutinizing Stiles, his gaze intense and unwavering. "Oh," he says at last, and he drags his thumb across Stiles's open mouth. "It's like that."

Stiles's first instinct is to argue, because, well, that's pretty much always his first instinct, but he can barely breathe, and he's hard against Derek's thigh, and what he wants more than anything is to rub off against him. So, yeah, it's exactly like that.

"I really shouldn't do this, not again," Derek mutters under his breath, not that this is going to stop him, apparently. "Come on." He starts down the block.

"What? Where—"

Derek looks irritably back over his shoulder.

Derek keeps walking, and Stiles has to run to catch up. "Here." Derek stops at a car parked along the street and opens the passenger side door.

"But—what about my—" Stiles jerks his hand in the direction of his Jeep in the parking lot. "I can follow you back to your place."

"There will be cars three deep blocking you in. This place is a mad house on Mondays. I'm leaving now. Are you coming or not?"

"Wow, do you actually practice being a dick?" Derek makes an impatient face at him, and Stiles lets out a heavy sigh. "Fine." He gets in the car.

Maybe Scott won't give him too hard a time when he has to haul Stiles back down here to retrieve the Jeep. God. The things a guy does to get laid.

They drive for a while, headed back toward the university's center. Derek has gone stonily silent, and Stiles, uncharacteristically, can't think of anything to fill the empty space. It's not the most comfortable ten minutes he's ever spent, but it does give him time to ponder Derek's situation a little more. The announcer said that Derek was new. Maybe he just recently came back to town? Maybe that's why he's working at the club? Just until he finds something better. Stiles would ask, but this isn't a date, just a hookup, and Derek doesn't exactly seem like he'd appreciate questions.

Not that he minds asking them, apparently. "So, do you always get in the car with strangers?"

Stiles laughs, because he's not a seven year old who needs a lecture on stranger-danger. That must be Derek's idea of a joke, right? Except Derek is watching him speculatively, as if waiting for an answer.

"Hey, it's not like you're a serial killer," Stiles says, lightly, brushing it off.

"You don't know that." There's no inflection in Derek's voice, nothing teasing, no stern note, and that's—kind of creepy, actually.

"Ha ha, not funny, dude," Stiles says weakly, watching Derek uneasily out of the corner of his eye. He really doesn't want if only he'd listened to his brain instead of his dick etched on his tombstone.

It's something of a relief when they pull up outside one of the apartment complexes that fringe the campus instead of, oh say, an empty lot where a body could be conveniently stashed. Stiles lets out his breath and thinks he was probably right that Derek hasn't been back in town very long. No one who lives in these apartments is putting down roots.

They get out of the car and start up the walk, and Stiles's feet just—stop. His gut tells him that this is okay, that Derek is safe. But his brain has gone into overdrive, whirring through all his many questions. Why has Derek come back to town? Does this have something to do with his uncle? What was Derek doing with the scary dude from the club that day? Could he be involved in something shady?

Derek waits, looking more annoyed by the moment. Finally, he rolls his eyes and asks, "Should I take you home?"

"You're not actually a bad guy, right? It's just that you have the stupidest, most fucked-up sense of humor ever. Is that an accurate summary of the situation?"

Derek shrugs. "I guess you'll have to come upstairs and find out." There's just the barest hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.
"You are such an asshole," Stiles huffs, but he continues on up the walk.

Derek slips an arm around his waist and leans in close, dropping his voice down low. "You realize that 'come upstairs and find out' is exactly the kind of thing a serial killer might say."

Stiles tries to elbow him, but Derek manages to dodge it. "Oh my God, I seriously fucking hate you!"

"Come on." Derek pushes Stiles up the stairs.

The apartment appears neat and a bit empty, in that guy-who-lives-alone kind of way. At least, that's Stiles's impression from the little he sees of the place. Derek doesn't bother with the tour. He hustles Stiles down the hall to the bedroom.

Stiles digs in his heels in the doorway. "How do you know I'm this easy? Maybe I want you to buy me dinner first. Or at least order a pizza. Maybe I want to watch whatever you've got on DVD or have a long, meaningful conversation about Kierkegaard."

"You don't," Derek says, with infuriating certainty. "You want me to fuck you. You've wanted it since I showed up at your door."

"That's a very high opinion you have of yourself. Also? I'm way more subtle than that."

"You're really not." Derek shoves Stiles into the bedroom, then just stands there, watching in this intent, unwavering way that's apparently supposed to be deeply meaningful.

"What?"

"Get your clothes off." Derek's voice comes rough and urgent, and his eyes glitter in the half-darkness.

"Hey, I'm not the stripper here," Stiles says, because he's kind of nervous and also his mouth just does this thing where it opens and stuff comes spilling out.

Derek narrows his eyes and takes a step toward Stiles. "Get your clothes off, or I'll take them off you."

"Okay, okay." Stiles starts to unbutton his shirt, not that he's against Derek undressing him, but he suspects that way lies a lot of ripped clothing. Also, the sooner nakedness happens, the sooner they will be having sex. Stiles is completely pro this.

He ditches his plaid shirt and his T-shirt and his undershirt, and Derek watches with a dry, quizzical look. *Exactly how many pieces of clothing are you wearing?* He makes no move to undress himself.

"Yeah, I see what's happening here. This is some kind of quid pro quo thing, right? Because I've seen you strip. Twice, actually." He can't help grinning. Those were two very memorable occasions. "But here's a question. What if I don't want to put on a show?"

"What if I don't want to fuck you?" Derek shoots back.

Stiles scrambles out of his jeans and underwear and kicks them away. He stands there naked and hard and already panting a little, while Derek goes all caveman silent again, not moving, not taking off so much as a sock, just staring and then staring some more.
Stiles tamps down the urge to wrap his arms around himself, but he can't keep from talking. Story of his life. "Okay, so not all of us spend every spare minute at the gym because an education is important and there's a lot of studying to do and only someone who gets naked for a living needs to look like—" He waves his hand at Derek. "I want it noted for the record that I'm as svelte as the day I arrived at this school, and I know exactly what the word 'svelte' means."

"Do you always talk this much?" Derek sounds like he's genuinely wondering and also like he means shut up. Stiles definitely has something to say about that, but he doesn't get the chance. Derek grabs him by the wrist and yanks, and Stiles more or less falls onto him, because that just seems to be a thing that happens in their not-exactly-a-relationship, and then they're kissing. Finally. Thank God.

Derek's version of kissing involves some manhandling and lots of tongue, which Stiles is totally down with, and when Derek scrapes his teeth against this very sensitive place on his neck, Stiles gasps and let his head fall back.

"So that's what it takes to get you to shut up." Derek mouths a line down Stiles's throat, biting and sucking and making Stiles crazy. "I can work with that." He tosses Stiles onto the bed with casual strength.

Twice now, Stiles has watched Derek strip, but that was business. This time when he takes his off clothes, there's no show at all. It's perfectly matter-of-fact. He even folds his T-shirt. It's the hottest thing Stiles has ever seen: Derek getting naked so they can fuck. Oh God, yes please.

Even when Derek crawls up the bed, eyes glinting in the dim light, it's not a performance; there's just something naturally predatory about him. El Lobo, indeed. He keeps advancing until he's on top of Stiles, his body a warm weight, making Stiles sweat in the best possible way. Derek doesn't so much kiss him as consume him with tongue and lips and teeth, demanding and taking and demanding some more, hands moving at will over Stiles's body, everywhere, anywhere he wants.

It doesn't take long before Stiles is gasping and shaking and completely overwhelmed. He never wants it to stop.

Derek startles a yelp out of Stiles when he flips him onto his stomach, and then Stiles's noises turn encouraging as Derek pushes Stiles's legs apart and drags his tongue up the back of Stiles's thigh. What he's not expecting is for that tongue to keep going, and he sputters helplessly as it blazes a warm-wet trail along the curve of his cheek and into his cleft.

"Are you—do you realize—I mean, okay, yes, obviously you know what you're doing, and not that I don't appreciate the effort, but you don't have to if you don't want—" Derek pulls Stiles's cheeks apart and pushes his tongue inside him. "Oh God! I take back it! You totally have to!"

No one has ever done this to him before. Why has no one ever done this before?

Stiles isn't particularly suave when it comes to sex. Doesn't believe that's even possible, because it's sex. But with Derek, he's a sloppier, more desperate mess than usual, grabbing at the pillow and rutting against the mattress and making a disaster of the sheets. His babble turns even babblier, and he just really, really needs Derek to fuck him.

It's possible that he's actually saying that out loud, over and over again.

Derek nearly upends the nightstand in his haste to get at condoms and lube. Stiles appreciates that kind of commitment. When Derek touches a slick finger to his hole, Stiles shakes his head emphatically. "Don't need it. Come on. Put your dick in me. Put it in me now."
Let it never be said that he is not also committed to the cause of fucking. Because he so is.

"Put it in me," Derek snorts, but Stiles can hear the tearing of foil and the wet, fleshy sound of Derek slicking himself, so he's willing to ignore that little bit of mockery.

Then Derek pushes into him, and he doesn't even remember what "mockery" means.

Stiles has made eager use of his college years, with the kind of sexual fervor particular to those who show up at freshman orientation still virgins. But none of that sex was anything like this. Derek fucks him like the world is going to explode at any moment, like this is the last thing either of them will ever do. He's relentless and rough and, oh God, so incredibly good at it. Stiles balances awkwardly on one arm and manages to get a hand on himself. He's shaking all over, and he doesn't want to come so soon, would love for this to go on forever, but it's just too much.

He really hopes the wail he lets out when he comes doesn't have the neighbors calling 911. This isn't Beacon Hills, and his dad isn't going to respond to the complaint, but that only cuts the embarrassment factor by half.

Derek pulls out and rolls Stiles over onto his back, and Stiles has a cartoon character moment, his eyes actually popping out of his head, when he sees that Derek is still hard. Very, very hard.

"You want me to—" He reaches out to get a hand on Derek, who bats him away. "My mouth? You have to take off that condom first. Hey, I know where you were just putting your tongue and all, but still—"

Derek puts his tongue in Stiles's mouth, because that's just what Derek would do. "Gross," Stiles mutters, but he doesn't stop kissing back. It's sex. It's supposed to be filthy.

Derek returns to that spot on Stiles's neck that he really seems to like, lavishing attention on it with tongue and teeth. Who even goes around giving other people hickeys after the twelfth grade? Derek, apparently.

He moves on to Stiles's nipples, biting hard enough to make Stiles buck up and grab at his shoulders, which does nothing but encourage him. He works a thigh between Stiles's legs and rubs it against his cock. It's too soon, he isn't ready, and his still blurry brain can't decide if the hot flare of sensation he feels is pain or pleasure.

"Okay, I may be, statistically speaking, at the peak of my manhood," he pants out, "but I still have a refractory period longer than five seconds. You can't just expect me to—"

Derek slides down and bites him on the thigh, and Stiles lets out a very loud noise, and his cock valiantly does its best to get hard again. Five-second refractory period is apparently a go.

By the time Derek actually fucks into him again, Stiles is breathless and writhing helplessly beneath Derek and his eyes are watering, because that's how much he needs to come. Again. Already.

Derek is less frantic this time, although still not particularly gentle, filling Stiles up with long, hard strokes, hitting the sweet spot every time, until Stiles is reduced to a quivering mess and an endless stream of please, please, please. Derek's expression has gone stark, and he stares, his gaze never leaving Stiles's face for an instant. He hardly even seems to blink, like he's trying to remember everything, like he's desperate to make it last. There's an elemental fierceness to him, as if he's not entirely civilized, and maybe that should be scary, but it's not. It's just incredibly hot.

When Derek has wrung a second orgasm out of him and finally come himself, Stiles flops back
against the pillow and tries to remember his own name. Eventually it comes to him.

He knows that the thing to do now is to get up and put his pants back on and go. Probably that's what Derek expects. But his pants seem very far away down there on the floor, and his Jeep is all the way back at the club.

So he does the sensible thing and passes out instead.

Stiles wakes up the next morning with a full bladder, no idea what time it is, and Derek's arm slung heavily across his waist, more or less pinning him to the mattress. In most circumstances involving a gorgeous naked guy, Stiles would totally be down with the staying-right-there plan, but he has to pee, and when he finally manages a bleary glance at the clock, he lets out a heart-felt, "Fuck!" He has twelve minutes to get to French class, which is at least a ten-minute walk away.

Derek tightens his hold when Stiles tries to scramble up. "Come on, dude." Stiles pushes at Derek's arm.

Last semester, he found out the hard way that Professor LeSange really meant it when she said every unexcused absence would cost them half a letter grade. He's working on a 4.0 this semester, and he so doesn't want to have to get a doctor's note for this.

The death grip on him relents enough that he can slip out of bed, and he manages all of one step toward the bathroom before some very sensitive nerve endings send a rather emphatic message to his brain.

"Oh my God," he complains, because as far as he's concerned, suffering in silence isn't manly; it's passing up an opportunity to lay the appropriate blame. "You couldn't have taken it a little easier on my ass? I've got some very important sitting down to do today."

"Good luck with that." If Derek looked any smugger, Stiles would have to throw something at him.

It takes Stiles approximately three seconds in the bathroom, which is three seconds he really doesn't have to spare, and he comes back still somewhat hobbled by all the filthy-hot sex he had last night, but at least he has on clothes now.

"Okay, I'm going to—" He jerks his thumb toward the door, in a vague go maintain my perfect GPA kind of way.

Derek just lies there, watching him, and Stiles thinks maybe he looks a little wistful about it? Okay, whatever, probably Stiles is projecting. He goes back over to the bed to kiss Derek goodbye anyway, because that's what he wants to do. Derek can just suck it up if he doesn't like morning-after displays of affection.

But judging by his reaction, Derek likes it just fine. He leans up to meet Stiles's mouth and slides his hand around Stiles's neck, thumb stroking in dizzy-making little circles, and they kiss for a long time. When Stiles straightens up, he's dazed and a little bereft. He really wanted that kiss to go on and on.

God. Somehow this thing with Derek has zoomed right past casual into something that could break Stiles a little if he's not careful.

"You're going to be late," Derek reminds him, but not in an asshole way.

Stiles makes it as far as the doorway before the urge to whirl around and blurt out, "I don't even
have your phone number," becomes too overpowering to fight. It comes out vaguely accusatory and definitely needy, and he doesn't care.

Because, seriously, is a phone number too much to ask when you've had repeated, if somewhat random, mind-blowing sex with someone?

"I know where you live." That might sound like a brushoff, except that Derek's voice has dropped into the low-gravel of filthy promises.

Possibly that should be a little creepy, but Stiles heads off to class grinning, feeling warmed through.

Nothing can ruin his good mood. Not even the fact that Professor LeSange counts it as an absence if you're more than ten minutes late. He's going to have to run at least part of the way to make it in time, and he's definitely going to feel that in parts of him that had way too much fun last night. It doesn't matter. Derek knows where he lives.

He takes his usual shortcut, up the side staircase, past the hedges, and around the corner, up the walk that goes past the statue of 19th century California statesman Thomas Starr King or Old Starry as he's more fondly known. Past the totally drunk girl slumped against the base of Old Starry. Stiles stops with a loud squeak of sneaker rubber.

"Oh, uh, hey, are you okay? Can I call someone for you?" He waits for an answer or perhaps the sound of retching, but there's nothing. "I'm just saying. The grounds crew has kind of this thing about Old Starry. They're going to be pissed if they see you."

Still nothing.

Stiles hesitates, because Professor LeSange, because his 4.0, but at the end of the day, he's his father's son, and the rule is: if someone needs help, you help them. He moves closer. "Are you sick?" He takes a few more steps. "Or hurt?" And then he's close enough that he can see her wide, staring eyes.

I should have known. That's what spins around his head in that numb moment as the shock starts to set in. He should have realized as soon as he spotted her. He's his father's son, and he's seen more than one episode of CSI, and no one alive could appear that still.

He fumbles his phone out of his backpack and manages to dial 911 even though he can't really feel his fingers.

By the time Stiles finishes answering questions and giving his statement, he's spent the entire morning at the police station. The desk sergeant sends him away with a note for Professor LeSange, and for one truly alarming moment, Stiles thinks he's going to lose whatever's left of last night's meat loaf all over the police station floor. That is so not how he wanted to come by an excused absence for his class.

The cops offer to drive him home, but he walks instead, slowly, with great concentration on each step, so he doesn't have to think about anything else. The apartment is empty when he lets himself in, everyone else at class. A hollow rumble from his stomach reminds him that he hasn't had anything to eat lately. When he thinks about lunch, though, he tastes bile in the back of his throat. So, yeah, later for that. He takes a shower that he barely remembers by the time he's out of the bathroom, then flops onto the sofa and stares at the ugly water stain on the ceiling. His nerves are a hopped-up jangle, and the utter stillness feels unbearable.
He takes out his phone, because he could always call his dad. No, no, he can't do that. If he tells his father what happened, he'll freak. Stiles stuffs the phone back into his pocket, only to yank it back out again half a second later.

"Stiles?" His dad sounds confused when he answers, because Stiles doesn't usually call him at work, and then his voice sharpens with concern. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Hey, why would something be wrong? Can't a guy just call his dad to say hi?"

There's a pause. "Stiles." It's his measured spill it right now tone, and that's been working on Stiles since he was born.

He spills it. Maybe he gets a little hysterical on certain details about the dead girl's incredibly dead eyes, but he refuses to feel embarrassed about that. This is not the kind of life experience he's supposed to be acquiring at college.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," his dad says, with reassuring fatherly gravity. "Do you want me to come down there? I could take off a day or two."

"No, that's okay. I'll be all right. But thanks, Dad." Just knowing that his father would come if he asked makes Stiles feel better.

"I'll check in on you tomorrow." His dad starts to hang up and thinks to add, "I'm sure I don't need to mention this, since you're always assuring me that you've grown out of that recklessly inquisitive phase of yours, but I'm going to say it anyway. This is a matter for professionals, Stiles. You leave the investigating to the police."

Sometimes Stiles regrets his youthful forays into junior crime-solving—except not that time he hid in the morgue, because that was highly educational—if only because his father will probably still be giving him talks like this when he's forty.

"Dad, I promise you. I don't want to be any more involved in this than I already am. If I could Superman myself backwards around the earth and take a different route to French class, I would."

Okay, that sounds kind of selfish when he says it out loud, but if he thinks too much about that poor girl—yeah, there's that bile taste again. The bodies in the morgue seemed so much less real, less like they'd been wrenched from life, and Stiles isn't that same clueless kid anymore.

The ensuing pause sounds decidedly skeptical. "Okay," his dad says at last. "Call me if you need me. I love you."

"Love you too, Dad."

It gets quiet again after he hangs up, but not for long, because his roommates, including Danny with the honorary title, come barreling through the door en masse.

"Dude," Scott says, with big saucer eyes. "We heard what happened. Did you seriously see it?" He drops onto the sofa next to Stiles and then frowns. "Is that a hickey on your neck?"

"No!" Stiles insists, turning up his collar to hide it.

"I bet you puked," Jackson says with snide certainty.

"Why don't we let him tell us the story?" Danny suggests mildly, with the saint-like patience it would take to be Jackson's best friend.
Something unclenches in the pit of Stiles's stomach now that the apartment's usual balance of chatter and assholery has been reestablished. He tells them what happened, only leaving out the stuff about Derek, because that's private, and the part where he called his dad, because Jackson is the kind of jerk who would make fun of him for that, possibly for the rest of his life. When he's finished, he lets out his breath. It's a relief not to be alone with it anymore.

This rosy feeling of togetherness lasts maybe an hour. Then he seriously wants to stop thinking about that poor dead girl with the terrible dead eyes, but no one else is interested in talking about anything else. By the time evening rolls around, Stiles is actually kind of hoping they'll go out and he can be left in unbearable silence again.

For once, he gets what he wished for.

"It's just that I told Allison—" Scott starts guiltily. "But, hey, if you want, I can call her, tell her I can't—"

Stiles shakes his head. "Dude, I'm totally not going to be responsible for your girlfriend getting pissed at you. I'm fine. Really. Go." He makes shooing hands.

"We're going to happy hour at The Garrett. You want to come?" Danny offers.

"Thanks, dude. I've got stuff to do." Mostly freak out and be traumatized, but that counts as stuff, Stiles decides.

"I still bet you puked," Jackson tosses over his shoulder on his way out.

"Thank you for your support," Stiles calls after him. "I'm glad we could bond over this terrible tragedy."

It takes about thirty seconds after they've gone for the unnerving stillness to set back in, and then Stiles wishes he could call them back again. Apparently, this is just the yo-yo emotional course he's going to be on tonight.

His stomach goes from rumbling politely to growling insistently. He tentatively imagines food, braced for a less-than-positive reaction, but there's no bile taste this time.

In the kitchen, he contemplates his options. Yogurt that Allison bought in a fit of "my boyfriend is going to die of malnutrition"? No. Leftover Chinese takeout so ancient it's practically from the Mesozoic era? No. That green protein gunk that Jackson insists is the breakfast of champions? Even Jackson doesn't actually touch that stuff.

If ever there were a time for comfort food, this is it. Stiles isn't exactly a cook, but when his mom died, he learned to make the things that most reminded him of her. Mac and cheese with bacon was her special extravagance, and it's Stiles's favorite. He just happens to have all the ingredients. Delicious, fat-filled comfort food, here he comes.

Someone knocks at the door as Stiles is waiting for his dinner to finish baking. He assumes that Scott has forgotten his keys yet again or maybe Jackson's food-mooching radar has alerted him to the fact that there's a large casserole ready to come out of the oven.

But it's Derek standing there.

"You know where I live," Stiles says stupidly, grinning, because his day has sucked, but here at least is something to be happy about.
Derek steps inside. "I heard what happened."

Stiles's mood takes an instant nosedive. It seems Derek has the same prurient interests as everyone else, and he's hurried right over to get the gruesome play-by-play. Great.

"Are you okay?" Derek cups Stiles's cheek and looks him in the eye, intently, as if the answer is really important.

It takes Stiles a moment to put that two and two together and get: Derek doesn't care about the gruesome details; Derek is only here for me. Thank God.

"You know, nothing that a few decades in therapy won't fix." He means to sound breezy, no big deal, but his voice cracks, ruining the effect.

"Stiles." Derek squeezes Stiles's shoulder, and his voice goes gentle. "What happened today—it's okay to be freaked out about it. Anybody would be."

Stiles leans closer. "I'm freaked out," he admits in a small voice.

Derek nods, and the grip he has on Stiles's shoulder stealthily transforms into a hug, and Stiles collapses against him. Pretending to be tough is hard work.

"You're okay," Derek says, over and over while he rubs Stiles's back, as if he's trying to convince him that this is actually true.

Stiles would happily stay like this—if not forever, then for a really, really long time, but there is the issue of his man cred to consider. He takes one last moment to enjoy having Derek's arms around him and then makes himself pull back. "Thanks."

Derek nods. His expression goes distracted, and he tilts his head back and sniffs the air. "What smells good?"

Stiles laughs, and that feels better than anything else could right now. "You're one of those hopeless single dudes who survive on Hot Pockets, aren't you?"

Derek scowls darkly.

"Yeah, good luck with the mean face ever working on me again now that I know you're a big softie who cares about my emotional well-being. Come on." He jerks his head toward the kitchen. "You can stand around impatiently waiting for food while I set the table."

Derek keeps out of Stiles's way as he moves around the kitchen to fish out plates and find enough silverware and fix glasses of water, but he stays close enough that he's a constant, reassuring presence. There's definitely a nightmare or two in Stiles's future, but at least for now he feels like he's standing on solid ground again.

"Grab us some beers," Stiles calls over his shoulder and carries the mac and cheese out to the table.

Derek pounces on his food as soon as they sit down, shoveling it in with the kind of intensity Stiles hasn't seen since the aftermath of Lydia's last ten-day cleanse. "Good," Derek grunts, with his mouth full.

Stiles nods—he's not even going to pretend to be modest—and he digs into his own meal. The first bite of mac and cheese is mm, bacon-y, but the first sip of beer is possibly even more awesome. "I bought this myself with my very own ID," he tells Derek with a satisfied smile. The thrill of being
legal has yet to wear off.

Derek snorts. "Like you weren't already doing that."

Stiles shakes his head. "My dad is the sheriff in our town, and there was this very humiliating incident involving a fake ID when I was in the eleventh grade. I might go so far as to call it scarring. After that, I was strictly a 'get someone else to use their fake ID for me' kind of guy."

"Your dad's a cop?"

"Yes," Stiles says, and it occurs to him that maybe this could be an issue. "Um, so is that going to be a thing? I mean, I know that in your profession you might not have exactly cozy feelings toward law enforcement—"

"Stiles—"

"But my dad is seriously cool, and, you know, he's my dad, so—"

"Stiles." Derek waits until he finally meets his eye. "It's not a problem."

Stiles breathes out. "That's good."

"So," Derek glances around at the otherwise empty apartment, "your friends didn't stick around?"

Stiles shrugs. "They had plans."

Derek presses his mouth into a thin line, as if he doesn't much care for this answer.

It's impossible not to feel pleased by Derek's concern, although he doesn't want to get into a conversation about what dicks his friends can be. "So what did you study when you went here?"

Derek's expression abruptly turns sharp and wary. "How do you know where I went to college?"

"It's called Google, dude. And it's no big deal. I was just curious about, you know—" You. "Never mind." He fixes his eyes on his plate and crams in another forkful, swallowing around the tightness in his throat.

The uncomfortable silence drags on a moment longer before Derek says, "Philosophy."

Stiles snaps his head up and stares.

"I could have discussed Kierkegaard last night if you hadn't wanted to fuck instead." Derek's smile is slow and really dirty.

Stiles swallows hard again, although for an entirely different reason this time. Whatever this is between them, it's now grown beyond random sex to include house calls to express concern and Derek giving out actual information about himself. The taxonomist in Stiles still doesn't quite know what to make of it, but the gooey center of him, the part that has secretly watched The Notebook half a dozen times and not just because Ryan Gosling is hot, takes in the development with a flutter of anticipation.

When they finish eating, Derek insists on washing the dishes, which he does with the speed and thoroughness of a trained professional. Stiles can't help goggling at him.

"I worked at a restaurant to help pay for college," Derek explains.
"You aren't working tonight, are you? I mean, it's just Mondays at the club, right?"

"For dancing, yeah, but that doesn't pay all the bills." Derek rinses the last plate and takes up a dishtowel to dry. "I also bartend at this place downtown. But it's my night off."

"I have my own room," Stiles volunteers. "Here. In the apartment." If there were an award for the most awkward come-on line ever, he feels certain this would be in the running for grand prize.

"Are you asking me to stay?"

"Are you saying yes?"

Derek doesn't answer straightaway. He puts away the last of the dishes and wipes down the counter and dries his hands. Stiles is just about to start babbling a gazillion different versions of "never mind" when Derek throws down the dishtowel, circles his arms around Stiles, crowds him back against the cabinets, and kisses him with extreme attention to detail.

Stiles is breathing hard by the time Derek pulls away. "So that's a 'yes', right?"

Derek licks up the tendon in Stiles's neck. Sounds like "yes" to him.

In his room, they take off their clothes and lie down together, and Stiles thinks that given how absolutely sucktastic his day has been, with that picture of the dead girl still shimmering at the edges of his vision, maybe he won't actually feel like doing anything about the fact that Derek is naked and in bed with him.

It takes about three seconds to realize that he'd have to be dead for that to be the case.

Derek pulls Stiles on top of him and strokes his hands over Stiles's hips and kisses as if they have all the time in the world. Stiles likes the unhurried part and the part where Derek is touching him but—he pulls at Derek's shoulders until Derek gets the hint and flips them, stretching out over Stiles, letting Stiles bear his weight.

There. Now it's perfect.

They kiss some more, and when the need sparks, Stiles wraps his legs around Derek's waist, and they shove their bodies together, like dick-happy teenagers, until they've gotten each other sticky and sweaty and sated. Stiles grabs a tissue from the box on the nightstand and makes a sleepy, flailing stab at cleanup. Derek snorts at the half-assed effort and takes over, doing a much better job.

Derek could get up now and put his pants back on and leave—this is a possibility, Stiles know. Instead, Derek settles back down and slips his arm beneath Stiles's shoulders and tugs until Stiles is nestled close at his side with his head tucked beneath Derek's chin.

Stiles is falling asleep when he feels the whisper of words against his forehead. "I'm going to make sure you stay okay."

For the entire next week, there is exactly one topic of conversation on campus, and that is the poor dead girl who, if the papers are to be believed, is actually the poor murdered girl. The only thing that makes this slightly less excruciating for Stiles is that once more details come out about her—Vicki Simms, a sophomore marketing major and KKG sorority sister—Stiles's story of discovering the body becomes yesterday's news.
"So, do you really think it's connected to the murders over in Stockton last semester?" Danny wonders aloud over tacos and Coronas at their favorite Friday night dinner spot. "That's what the papers are saying."

Stiles makes a skeptical face. "The cops weren't even sure the three deaths in Stockton were connected. All the victims died in different ways, and one of them might have been a suicide. What's the link to Vicki Simms? That she was also a college student? Pretty weak." His friends take a moment out from their tacos to stare at him, all except for Scott, who gives him a proud little smile. "What? Cop's kid here."

"Anyway," Lydia says, making it clear she's changing the subject. "I hear congratulations are in order." She smiles at Stiles. "Way to go bagging the hot sex worker."

Stiles is pretty sure that what she really means is, I told you my plan would work, and that her congratulatory smile is actually for herself. He knows for a fact that he didn't tell her about what happened with Derek. He fixes an accusing look on Scott, who quickly drops his gaze, and it's easy to connect those dots. Scott told Allison who told Lydia, and at this point, probably the only person who doesn't know is Stiles's third grade teacher. Even that isn't a sure bet.

"He seems nice," Danny offers helpfully.

Scott snorts at this, and Stiles glares until he hangs his head, although even that isn't exactly apologetic.

"He is," Stiles tells Danny. "He's very nice."

Okay, fine, that isn't the word he would choose to describe Derek, but Scott seriously needs to get over his issues. So there had been something of an awkward morning-after when Derek slept over that night. Stiles has been putting up with Allison's frilly little unmentionables drying in his bathroom for the past two years. Scott can learn to deal with Derek's quirks.

"Your boyfriend isn't nice," Scott protests, with an irritated frown. "He growled at me and Jackson."

Stiles shrugs. "Maybe he doesn't like your faces."

Scott sputters, looking betrayed, but before he can say anything else, one of Jackson's bubble-headed hookups plunks down at their table. Stiles thinks her name is Mandy, or Sandy, or possibly it's Kandi with a heart over the "i."

She quickly swings the conversation back to the murder. "Did you guys hear that Vicki Simms was working as a call girl?" Probably she means to sound scandalized, but her delight in spreading the gossip is utterly transparent.

Stiles pushes back from the table with a loud scrape of his chair. "I'm going to take off." He tosses some cash onto the table.

"Hey." Scott shoots him a concerned look, his forehead scrunching up, and this is why Stiles can never stay mad at him, even when he has more or less called Stiles's—whatever Derek is—a jerk.

"I'll see you back home," he tells Scott.

They walked to the restaurant, since it's not far from their apartment and nobody wanted to be the designated driver, and Stiles cuts across the quad, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched against the gathering chill.
Derek is working tonight—the strip club was rented out for a bachelorette party—and right now he's probably backstage getting ready. Stiles fiddles with the phone in his pocket. He doesn't usually bug Derek when he's on the job. Shouldn't now. But.

"Stiles," Derek's voice is sharp with concern when he answers. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. Just—sometimes people really suck, you know?" He breathes out, feeling oddly defeated.

There's a beat while Derek sorts that out. "People have been saying things about the murder victim?"

Stiles pauses at that. Murder victim? For a moment there, Derek sounded a lot like Stiles's dad. Huh.

"Stiles?" Derek prompts.

"Yeah." Stiles nods, even though Derek can't see him. "I realize that I didn't know her, but I did find her, and I feel—I don't know, protective or something. That probably sounds stupid."

"It sounds honorable and decent." Derek's voice is firm.

Stiles can't help smiling. "See, that right there? That's why I keep you around."

"Come by tonight after I finish up at the club," Derek says, sounding amused and also very, very sexy. "I'll try to give you a few more reasons."

Wednesday becomes Stiles's favorite day of the week. He only has one early class, and Derek shuffles his schedule so he's off from all his jobs. They spend nearly the entire day together, usually at Derek's place, since Derek isn't much on hanging out with Stiles's friends. Not that Stiles can blame him for this exactly. Derek is six years older, and some of Stiles's friends—okay, mostly Scott—give him wary looks that pretty clearly translate to: *If I'd known my friend was going to end up dating you, I would have gotten him a Target gift card for his birthday*. It's simpler when it's just the two of them.

Sometimes they spend all of Wednesday in bed, and sometimes they just chill out. Occasionally, Derek actually tells Stiles stuff about his life, stories from back when he was in school or funny things that happened at the club. How Derek got from college to stripping remains a blank that he stubbornly refuses to fill in. But still. Stiles now possesses some actual knowledge about him. This is awesome.

"Do you think Kafka was on something?" Stiles asks aloud, turning the page of *The Castle* with a sigh. "Maybe this story makes sense if you're high. Or maybe Kafka was like: You know what? I'm going to write the most fucked up, torturous thing I can imagine so sometime in the future college students will have to suffer through it. Actually, I'm going to write my paper on that. *Kafka: A Sadist With A Plan*. What do you think?"

Derek doesn't look up from his copy of *Treasure Island*. "I think that's a great idea if you want to fail the class."

"Says the one of us who gets to read a comprehensible book," Stiles grumbles. Why did he sign up for *Many Shades of Discontent: The Literature of Alienation* again? He really can't remember.

Derek just rolls his eyes, without the least bit of sympathy. Stiles sighs and considers flipping
ahead to the end. He actually startles when Derek's landline rings. That's never happened before, not in all the time that Stiles has spent there. Derek seems just as surprised. Or, okay, more like freaked out. He stares at the phone as if it might explode at any moment.

"Um, do you want me to get it?" Stiles volunteers.

"No," Derek tells him, voice tight, all the comfortable ease from just a moment before completely drained from his expression.

He yanks up the receiver, angrily.

"Yeah?" Apparently, he isn't too happy to hear from the person on the other end of the line, because he presses his mouth into a thin line. His expression only grows tenser as he listens. "No, that's not going to happen. I already told you why not. I don't want to go into it again. Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not going to change my mind. No, don't do that. Seriously. I have to go now, Mom." He hangs up quickly, banging the phone down.

Stiles stares. He can't help it. That conversation was with Derek's mom? He has no idea what to say, and for once he manages not to run off at the mouth. He shifts a little closer to Derek, trying to silently radiate support.

Derek stares absently off into space, his jaw still tightly clenched, his expression so bleak it makes Stiles want to hug him. "What I do—it gets between me and my family."

"They don't understand?"

"They don't know," Derek says flatly.

Stiles's eyebrows shoot up at that. "Maybe you could tell them? They might surprise you."

"That can't happen." There's a ringing note of finality to it, and Derek eyes Stiles, as if he regrets mentioning anything at all.

"Hey." Stiles lays a hand on Derek's arm. "That was only a suggestion. You don't have to do anything you don't want. Obviously. But you can talk to me, okay? I'm on your side."

After a long pause, Derek admits, "I miss them. My family."

Stiles nods. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that." He presses closer against Derek's side. "I know it's not the same, and nothing makes up for missing your family, personal experience talking here, but you're not alone, okay?"

Derek touches Stiles's cheek, and the look on his face—it's so fucking wistful, as if he's imagining a day when Stiles won't be there, as if somehow it's inevitable. And that's just not okay with Stiles.

He grabs Derek by the shoulders and pulls him into a kiss, determined and a little furious, as if he's trying to wipe away Derek's doubt with his mouth, with the edge of teeth, with his fingers clenched against Derek's biceps, hard enough to leave bruises. Derek relaxes into him by degrees, kissing back, bringing his hand up to brush over Stiles's hair.

There's still something clenched in his expression, a trapped sort of desperation. It takes until after they've devoured enough Thai food for four people and watched two-thirds of the Lord of the Rings trilogy and gone to bed—clutching each other and moving together, with Derek so deep in Stiles that all the dividing lines between them are blurry and meaningless—before that look disappears at last.
Thursday morning happens way too early. Stiles has French at ungodly o'clock, with Professor LaSange's draconian policy on absences, and now that autumn has set in, it's not even light yet when the alarm on his phone starts beeping. He stumbles around Derek's still-dark bedroom, looking for his jeans, trying not to be resentful that Derek is cozy beneath the covers. Is it really worth leaving his naked, sleep-warm kind-of-sort-of boyfriend for academic achievement? Stiles quickly calculates his GPA if he gets an A- in French.

"You're going to class," Derek rumbles, his voice low and rough with sleep.

Stiles rolls his eyes. "That's easy to say when you're the one still in bed." He plucks down on the edge of the mattress, ostensibly to put on his shoes, and spends the time kissing Derek good morning.

"If you go now, you'll have time to stop at the coffee shop on the way."

"Is this what our relationship has come to?" Stiles scoffs playfully. "You bribing me with lattes?"

Derek kisses him again. "Go. Get caffeine. Thank me later."

By midday Stiles's four-shot latte has worn off. Derek was restless last night, which made Stiles restless, and that's starting to catch up with him. He yawns his way through his Chem lecture, thanks the schedule-making gods that his next class isn't until three, and shuffles out of the building, intent on heading home for a nap.

"Mr. Stilinski?"

Stiles turns, and it's a guy built like a rectangle, with a buzz cut and a really ugly tie. Clearly a cop. "Yeah?"

The cop pulls out his badge and flashes it. "Detective Saldana. We have some more questions for you regarding Victoria Simms. If you could come down to the precinct with me, I'd appreciate it."

"Hey, I'm all about helping you guys out, but I've got a class at three—"

Detective Saldana puts on the same polite protect-and-serve smile that Stiles's dad uses whenever he's not going to take no for an answer. "I'm sure your professor will understand."

Stiles lets out his breath. "Okay. Fine." He doubts there's anything he can tell them that they don't already know, but, whatever, if asking him all the same questions again will help them find that poor girl's killer, then he'll happily repeat himself.

It's only after the detective has shut him up in the back of his police-issue sedan and shot him a narrow-eyed backward glance in the rearview mirror that it occurs to Stiles to that maybe the cops are looking at him as more than a witness. He hears his father's voice in his head: Never trust cops, always ask for a lawyer. That had been a frequent bit of advice his dad had doled out, leaving Stiles to roll his eyes and wonder aloud if his father was really worried he was going to take up a life of crime and, also, did he not remember that he was a cop? How do you think I know you can't trust cops? was always his dad's answer.

At the station, the detective leads him into an interrogation room, windowless and dingy, painted such a hopeless shade of institutional gray it's like a preview of prison. It smells the way
interrogation rooms always do, like a mix of old coffee and armpits.

"Have a seat." Detective Saldana waves his hand toward a chipped Formica-toppped table.

Stiles drops onto a chair. "I really don't know what more I can tell you."

The detective takes the seat opposite him and gives a little shrug. "Maybe nothing, but we have to look at every angle. You understand."

Stiles nods along. He totally understands. This is the bullshit cops spout to put potential suspects off their guard.

"So, we're taking a closer look into Ms. Simms. What her habits were. The places she typically went. Who she hung out with. Refresh my memory for me, Mr. Stilinski. Did you know Victoria Simms?"

Stiles shakes his head.

"Ever notice her around campus?"

"No, the only time I saw her was when—" He swallows hard.

"Uh-huh," Detective Saldana says, in an unnervingly cagy way. "That's interesting, because when we looked at Ms. Simms' transcript and compared it to yours, we found that you'd had two classes together." He pulls a sheet of paper from a folder and pushes it across the table at Stiles.

It's Stiles's transcript, and two of the classes he took back when he was a freshman have been picked out with yellow highlighter. "Okay, these are both required courses. Everybody takes them. We're talking like five hundred people in a lecture hall. I didn't get to know anybody."

"What about him?" Detective Saldana shows Stiles a photograph of a nerdy looking guy wearing glasses and styling a sweater vest. "You recognize him?"

Stiles studies the picture a moment, but it's not remotely familiar. "Never seen him before."

"His name's Marshall Jenkins," the detective prompts.

Stiles shakes his head. "Never heard of him either. Did he have something to do with what happened to Vicki Simms?"

Detective Saldana's already serious expression takes a turn toward all-out grimness. "He was found dead in the laundry room of his apartment building last night."

Clearly, the detective is trying to spring a surprise, and it works. Several long beats of silence go by, with Stiles too shocked to say anything. "You think the two cases are connected?"

The detective's face is so carefully blank it's like the Platonic ideal of expressionlessness. "We haven't learned enough yet to speculate. But here's something we do know. Before moving to his current residence, Mr. Jenkins lived in the same apartment complex that you do. Like I said, we're looking into every possibility. So I'm going to need to ask you where you were between midnight and two a.m. the night Ms. Simms was killed and between ten p.m. and midnight last night."

Okay, maybe Stiles is starting to understand where his dad was coming from. He hasn't done anything wrong, totally has an alibi, and still he's sweating beneath his clothes like he's as guilty as—a totally guilty person.
"I was with my boyfriend both of those nights." Stiles's voice squeaks just a little. Definitely scratch "life of crime" off his list of potential careers. He would very much like never to be interrogated by the police again.

"All night?" Detective Saldana asks, with skeptically raised eyebrows.

Stiles nods emphatically. "Absolutely. Every minute. Both of those nights were very much of the not-sleeping variety, if you know what I mean—" He trails off when it occurs to him that he's just made allusions to his sex life to a homicide detective who quite possibly thinks he's a crazed killer. Why does he always have to overshare? If only there were an answer to that question.

"I'll need your boyfriend's name, address and phone number to confirm that." Detective Saldana gives him a pad of paper, and Stiles quickly scribbles down Derek's information.

The detective glances at the pad when Stiles passes it back, and for just a split second, Stiles could swear he sees surprise flit across the man's face. But then, just like that, the polite, protect-and-serve smile is firmly back in place. "Okay, thanks, Mr. Stilinski. We appreciate your cooperation." He gets to his feet.

"That's it?" Not that he wants there to be more. The fact that people confess to crimes they didn't actually commit makes so much more sense now.

"We'll be in touch if we have any more questions." The detective disappears out the door.

The last thing Stiles expects when he leaves the police station is to find Derek lurking outside, looking like a rebel with too many causes, wearing his leather jacket and a really pissed-off scowl.

"What did you tell them?" he demands just as Stiles asks, "They already got in touch with you?"

Derek gives him a blank stare, and, okay, that is confusing. "You didn't get a call from Detective Saldana?"

Derek frowns. "No. What are you doing here?"

Stiles explains, about the most recent murder and the unfortunate coincidences that linked Stiles to both the victims, about Derek being his alibi. "I'm pretty sure that means I'm not a suspect anymore."

"Suspect," Derek repeats, his expression darkening. "You had a lawyer, right? Tell me you weren't stupid enough to talk to the cops without one."

Stiles makes a face. "Okay, now you sound like my dad. Which is a little too weird for me, actually."

Derek just keeps leveling this *I am not impressed with you right now* glare at him.

"Okay, okay," Stiles huffs. "Maybe it wasn't the smartest decision ever. But I really did want to help them find out who hurt that girl. How did you know I was here anyway? What? Do you have a secret mole in the department?"

For a second, Derek just stares, and then he kind of—snaps, grabbing Stiles by the arms and getting all aggressive up in Stiles's personal space. "Don't ever say that again."
Stiles has never seen Derek so unhinged, and it's freaking him the hell out. "Oh my God, do you have a source in the department? Are you—" Stiles's eyes go wide and his mouth drops open. "Did you think I was here because of you? Because, one, I don't even know your middle name, much less anything the cops would care about, and, two, I wouldn't do that to you, and, three, oh my God, Derek, what are you involved in? Does this have to do with your uncle Peter? Are you mixed up with those same scary dudes? Fuck, are you—" He flaps his hands. "Doing money laundering stuff? You have to tell me, okay? We can figure a way out of it. Because, dude, you seriously need to stop."

Derek's face practically turns to stone at that, and his grip on Stiles's arms is starting to hurt. "How do you know about any of that? Tell me." He shakes Stiles a little.

And that—that's just it. Stiles has had enough. "How do you think I know about it?" His voice rises angrily. "If the Internet had never been invented, I wouldn't know anything about you at all. It's not like you ever tell me anything."

Derek doesn't answer, just shakes his head and keeps on shaking it, which is fucking unnerving. It only gets worse when he finally does talk. "This was always a bad idea."

"Really?" Stiles says cuttingly. "You're lurking outside a police station, asking me what I told the cops, and I'm the bad idea? Don't make me get you a dictionary."

The tension stretches out a moment longer—a moment that feels like a hundred years are packed into it—and then Derek lets out a breath, and his grip eases on Stiles's shoulder. "Tell me what the cops said. Do they think the two murders are a coincidence? Or are they linked?"

Whoa, big change of subject, and it takes Stiles a beat to catch up. "Um, well, the detective asking me questions wasn't exactly chatty, but I got the impression that they don't really know yet."

Derek takes that in. "Okay, until we find out more, I need you to be careful. Stick with your friends. Don't go out alone at night. All right?"

Stiles nods very solemnly, because Derek's expression is serious business, and if he wants to believe that Stiles is actually capable of doing what he's told—well, okay then.

Derek watches him closely. "Good," he says at last, "because things are getting complicated. I don't know—I may not be around to look out for you."

Stiles ducks his head and stares down at his sneakers. "Is this your way of breaking up with me?"

"No. It's my way of trying to keep you safe."

Stiles pulls his gaze up, and Derek's face—that's not an I want to break up with you look. Sadly, Stiles knows about these things. "I don't understand what's happening here, like, at all."

"It would make my life so much easier if you'd just leave it that way, but I know better than to hope for the impossible." Derek brushes a quick, exasperated kiss to Stiles's mouth.

And then he's gone.

Over the next week, Derek's idea of "keeping Stiles safe" starts to seem a lot like they have, in fact, broken up. Stiles doesn't see him even once in all that time, and he's gotten more familiar with Derek's voicemail than he ever wanted to be. It's not as if there's a lot of nuance in Derek's gruff, "Leave a message," to ponder.
"Hey, Derek, it's me. Again," Stiles says, with a sigh. "Not really digging the whole radio silence thing. Or the disappearing act. So how about we do something tonight? There's a party happening later if you're interested, or we could just hang out here or at your place, or…whatever. Call me back, okay?"

While he's leaving the message, Danny keeps darting sideways glances at him, and Stiles is pretty sure, much to his mortification, that there's some pity action going on there.

"What?" he snaps once he's hung up.

Danny just shakes his head. "Nothing." He goes back to reading, pretending to be deeply interested in *Being and Nothingness*, which Stiles knows for a fact isn't humanly possible.

At least Stiles doesn't have to worry about Jackson or his babe-of-the-week—Sandy or Mandy or Kandi with the heart over the "i"—feeling bad for him. They're completely oblivious to everything that's not about them. Stiles never thought that complete and utter narcissism was a quality he'd come to appreciate, but such is the state of his life right now.

If Derek honestly wanted to keep Stiles's curiosity at bay, he really shouldn't have gone incommunicado on him. That's Stiles's rationalization for why he's spent his Derek-less week burning up the Internet, searching for more information on—well, everything. Stiles pulls his computer off the side table and balances it on his lap. Time to get back to work.

He starts with Peter Hale, sifting through articles and photos from the money laundering case. Peter is the very picture of a man who has gotten in way over his head, more nervous and hunched in each successive photo. Except for one, Stiles notices. Peter is half turned in profile and clearly doesn't know the camera is there. There's what can only be described as a smirk on his face, and his body language—it's like he's someone completely different, a cocky someone who feels perfectly in control.

Interesting.

The rest of Derek's family appears to be completely respectable, not to mention environmentally conscious. They own an organic farm about an hour north of town, and according to online reviews, there's no better source for free-range eggs. Derek's older sister, Laura, also an alum of the university, has her own combination coffee shop and bookstore in their hometown. When Stiles tracks down Laura's Facebook page, he finds a treasure trove of family photographs, with many shots of a very young, smiling Derek making waffles with his mom and splashing in the waves at the beach and opening presents on Christmas morning.

Stiles takes a moment to linger. Young, smiling Derek is about as cute as a person can be.

The next phase of his research is far less uplifting. Gavin Rooney owns both the strip club where Derek works and the bar where Derek works, along with other businesses and real estate holdings scattered around the county. The kitten-eating thug's name is, against all odds, Lesley Coleman, although he prefers to go by "Shark," because who wouldn't?

Stiles isn't proud that he uses his dad's passwords to get into databases he really shouldn't have access to, but to be fair, he is always reminding his dad to change them, to no avail. Shark has a long record of arrests for relatively minor things like bar brawls and public intoxication, with the occasional 30-day sentence served in county jail.

Gavin Rooney is a different matter entirely. He's been tied to loan sharkering and extortion. There's also a mention of gun running, although the evidence there was pretty flimsy, plus there's the
money-laundering thing. An all-around bad guy, who has been tried but never convicted. Mostly because witnesses keep mysteriously disappearing, like Peter Hale did.

_God, Derek, what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into?_

"I just don't get it," Sandy-Mandy-Kandi's loud sing-song-y voice breaks through Stiles's concentration.

He rolls his eyes and takes the mental tally of how many times she's said that this evening. He comes up with twenty-three, but to be fair, he's been preoccupied with his Derek research and he was definitely tuning her out during _Sports Center_. That number could conceivably be higher.

"What don't you get?" Jackson makes an impatient face at her, because he's just as big a douche to the girls he's boning as he is to everyone else. "It's lacrosse. It's not that complicated."

Mandy-Sandy-Kandi scrunches up her nose. "But why are there sticks with those little net things? It's so silly looking."

"Why are there—" Jackson stares at her.

Mandy-Sandy-Kandi huffs out a breath. "I'm just saying."

Meanwhile, Danny is once again deeply immersed in _Being and Nothingness_, not paying this ridiculous conversation the least bit of attention. Stiles often envies Danny's Zen-like imperviousness to any and all stupidity going on around him. Stiles himself has actually begun to look forward to the moment when Jackson and Mandy-Sandy-Kandi will slink off to go have sex in Jackson's room, because at least then he can turn up the volume on the TV and ignore that they exist.

He checks the time. It's twenty minutes later than the last time he looked. Is that too soon to leave another message for Derek? Okay, probably. He lets out a sigh and pulls up a file on his computer, the one named _Vicki Simms_Marshall Jenkins_, because who really believed he would stay out of it? No one who knows him even the least little bit, that's who. Minding his own business, not exactly his specialty.

There's not much in the file, only what he's been able to track down through Google and glean from Facebook. Vicki is from back east, some town in Rhode Island that he's never heard of. She went to public school, came to the university on a scholarship, and worked part-time in the library. Marshall Jenkins was the son of professors, grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, went to an expensive sounding private school, and got his undergrad at Stanford. Vicki Simms was studying biology, and Marshall Jenkins was working on his doctorate in English. There's absolutely nothing connecting them, not that Stiles can find, except of course that they're both dead.

"How much longer do we have to watch this?" Mandy-Sandy-Kandi asks fretfully. Really not a lacrosse fan, that one.

This thought reminds him of what she is a fan of: gossip. He's got a potential source of information sitting right here in his living room, even if she does register "extremely sketchy" on the old reliability scale.

"Hey, um—" Oh God, what is her name? He takes a shot. "Brandy?" And congratulates on his powers of random guesswork when this actually gets her attention. "I was just wondering. How well did you know Vicki Simms?"

She shrugs. "We weren't, like, BFFs or anything, if that's what you mean. Her sorority house is
right across the street from mine, so I saw her around. And I know a girl who knows a girl who knew her pretty well."

"What about Marshall Jenkins?"

Her face goes blank for a moment. "Oh, wait. You mean that guy who got killed the other night?"

Stiles nods. "You don't know if he and Vicki knew each other, do you?"

She thinks for a moment. "Not that I know of, but they could have. Oh, hey, but I did hear something about that Marshall guy. Word is he was living with this other guy. This much, much older guy. And he, you know, had to pay the rent." She adds in a stage whisper. "Not with actual money."

Stiles regards her sardonically. "So, he was a kept man? Is that what you're telling us?"

Brandy nods earnestly. "And Vicki was an escort, so I guess that does sort of give them something in common. Maybe the killer's got some, like, moral issues or something." She shrugs.

"That's quite a theory you've got there. Maybe you should give the police a call and clue them in —" Stiles stops mid-mockery, because what if Brandy is a crime-solving idiot savant who has somehow managed to stumble onto the link between these cases? What if it is some deranged Moral Majority type who thinks he's doing humanity a favor by ridding the world of sex workers and other people he considers deviants?

What if—Derek!

Stiles grabs for his phone so frantically he knocks a pile of papers off the end table.

"Hey, asshole, watch it!" Jackson snaps. "That's my statistics homework. You're picking up that shit."

Stiles would give him the finger, but that would take up valuable time when he could be calling Derek to warn him. The phone rings and rings. "Come on!" But of course there's no answer, just Derek's charming voicemail message. Stiles leaps up and grabs his jacket, and just before the door bangs shut behind him, he hears Danny say, "Hey, I thought we were going to the party?"

It's a quick drive downtown, but finding a place to park takes forever. Stiles jogs the five blocks back to the bar, coat turned up against the needle-sharp wind.

There are something like twenty thousand students at the school; it's not very likely that he's going to wander into the path of danger, especially if Brandy's theory is right. But, okay, maybe the uncharacteristically empty streets have a menacing feel to them. Twice he thinks he hears something behind him, only to look back and find nothing. God. Get it together, he tells himself.

He never sees it coming. That's becoming a thing. One moment he's walking along, and the next someone's grabbing him, forcing him around the corner, into the alley and up against the wall. He flails and kicks and tries to bite, but the iron grip on him doesn't relent.

When Derek's glowering face emerges from the gloom, caught in a spill of light from a nearby streetlight, Stiles curses, loudly and colorfully. "You have seriously got to stop doing that!"

"What are you doing here?" Derek demands. "I thought you were going to be careful."
"No, no, you don't understand," Stiles tells him excitedly. "I'm not the one who's in danger. You are. Or at least you could be. Which I would have told you on the phone if you ever bothered to answer it."

"I told you I have stuff going on. What makes you think I'm in danger?"

"The least likely source ever." He explains about Brandy and the theory she helped to spawn.

Derek starts shaking his head early into the story and refuses to stop.

Stiles's voice rises, maybe a little shrilly, because this is what extreme exasperation will do to a person. "Will you just listen? It makes sense when you think about it."

"I can take care of myself, Stiles, and you shouldn't pay attention to whatever rumors are flying around. Anyway, the victims have all been students. I hardly qualify. You don't need to worry about me."

"But—"

"This isn't yours to figure out. Leave it alone." Derek grabs him by the arm and starts pulling him along. "Come on. I'm taking you home. Where are you parked?"

"How are you going to get back to work?" Stiles protests, not that this dissuades Derek from the manhandling.

"I'll take the bus. Now, where's the damned Jeep, Stiles?"

Stiles tries making conversation on the ride back to the apartment, but Derek just stares aggressively out the window.

"I'm so glad we could spend this time together," Stiles mutters dryly.

When they reach the complex, Derek insists on walking Stiles to the door—which would be endearing in other circumstances, but right now it just makes Stiles want to kick him.

And still, he can't help pathetically asking, "So are you coming by later?"

Derek shakes his head. "I'm busy."

"Can we see each other tomorrow night?"

Another head shake. "I'm covering someone's shift."

"Well, maybe I could come see you at the bar?"

"No," Derek says sharply. "I'm working. You'll be a distraction." He lets out a sigh at Stiles's hurt expression. "Don't look at me like that. I'll make it up to you when I can." He gathers Stiles's face in his hands and kisses him and takes all of three steps before whirling around to add, "Be more careful!"

Stiles sighs and lets himself inside and trudges down the hall. He stops short when he finds the living room full of his friends—Scott, Allison and Lydia have joined the crew he left behind—and they're all watching him uneasily. Apparently, they've been making use of the apartment building's spit-and-Kleenex walls to eavesdrop.

"Don't even start," Stiles warns them. He already knows that Derek is being an asshole. A hot,
uncommunicative, over-protective asshole that Stiles really misses. A lot.

"Um," Scott says tentatively. "Are you okay?"

Stiles lets out his breath heavily and flops down onto the sofa. "I just wish he would talk to me, you know?"

Scott nods and presses his shoulder to Stiles's in a best friend show of support.

Jackson snorts. "Seriously, Stilinski. You just want him to talk to you? Are you a total pussy or what?"

"Shut up, Jackson," everyone else says in unison.

Brandy looks lost at sea, as she so often does. "I don't get it. Why is everyone suddenly all tense?"

The next few weeks prove to be just as Derek-free, much to Stiles's very great disappointment. Day after day goes by, and Derek is still too busy working and "taking care of stuff" to spend time with him. On the rare occasions when he actually bothers to answer his phone, he's distracted and abrupt, a master of monosyllables. He doesn't even stop by for a booty call, despite Stiles dropping more than a few hints that he'd be open to it. Stiles has taken to jerking off a truly embarrassing number of times a day. He hasn't been this sexually frustrated since he was a virgin.

It's getting harder and harder to see any difference between Derek breaking up with him and—whatever this is. If Stiles weren't such a big, infatuated idiot, he'd move on already.

Apparently, he's not alone in this thought.

On Friday, he streams out of Chem class to find Lydia and Allison waiting for him with their serious faces on.

"We're taking you to lunch at The Garrett," Lydia announces.

"As tempting as greasy burgers and soggy fries are, I was actually planning to—"

Lydia latches onto one elbow and Allison the other, and they propel him along the sidewalk. "Or this is good, too."

Stiles gets mushrooms and Swiss on his burger since Lydia is paying. This earns him a dirty look, which he meets with a blithe smile. Serves her right for hijacking him.

"Okay," he says once they've snagged a table. "Not that I'm not totally awesome, but I assume you haven't dragged me to lunch for my piquant opinions and witty repartee. So what is it?"

Allison and Lydia exchange a look brimming with silent communication, and Allison gets elected spokesperson. "Stiles, we know you're really into Derek, and that's great and all, but we can't help noticing that he's not around much. And he doesn't even call. And we just really think you deserve better, you know?"

Stiles looks back and forth between them. "Wait. Is this an intervention?"

"No!" Allison insists at the same time that Lydia says, "Duh."

Stiles lets out his breath. "Okay, look, I know Derek's been kind of an asshole lately—"

Lydia snorts. "Kind of? He's totally an asshole, Stiles. He doesn't call, doesn't spend time with you,
refuses to get to know your friends, and yet continues to string you along instead of letting you get on with your life. That's Jackson levels of douchery."

"Hey!" Stiles objects, loudly.

He's not a self-deluded doormat, whatever Allison and Lydia might think, and he will totally call Derek on his shit, just as soon as he gets the chance. But saying that Derek is like—that's going way too far!

"Jackson," Lydia reiterates, over-enunciating each syllable. "Also, it's entirely possible Derek is a criminal. Did you know his uncle was involved in money laundering? That the people he worked for probably had him killed? That Derek now works for those same people?"

He stares at her. "How did you—"

She makes a face at him. "Like you're the only person who can Google."

"Not that we're saying Derek is a criminal," Allison interjects diplomatically.

"I'm absolutely saying that," Lydia maintains. "Do you want to end up on an episode of Dateline?"

"We just want you to be with somebody who appreciates you. Not someone you have to bribe with sex to spend time with you," Allison says, with an I'm sorry to have to bring this up look on her face.

"Wait. What makes you think—" Stiles shakes his head. Scott is a big, stupid eavesdropper with an even bigger and stupider mouth.

Lydia's expression turns infuriatingly pitying. "I know you haven't had a serious boyfriend before, so maybe you don't realize this, but that's really not cool."

"I've had boyfriends!" Stiles declares hotly. "Or at least, I've had—boys. And this, whatever it is between me and Derek, it's just a phase. He has stuff going on right now, really important stuff, and I'm a sexy distraction."

Lydia's look of pity deepens, as if she's no longer just concerned about his taste in men, but also his grip on reality.

"Thanks a lot," he tells her.

"Stiles, we don't have anything against Derek," Allison says. "We're just concerned about you. We want you to be happy."

"And I appreciate that, okay? But I'm really fine—"

Brandy interrupts mid-protest, plopping down at their table, knocking into Stiles with her bag and nearly spilling Lydia's diet Coke. "Oh my God, have you guys heard? Turns out Vicki Simms wasn't working as an escort at all. That was actually a girl in Tri-Delt. And that Marshall Jenkins guy? You know how everyone said he was 'paying the rent'? Turns out the older guy he was living with was actually his uncle. Like his real uncle, not his air-quotes uncle." She shakes her head sadly. "I don't know how these crazy rumors get spread around, I really don't."

Stiles can only stare.

After he's finally liberated from lunch, he heads to his afternoon classes, and that's when the doubt
starts to creep in. Is he really fine? Does he honestly believe that Derek is just busy? What's he doing that's so much more important than spending time with Stiles? They haven't had sex in—he's lost count, and, yes, their relationship is not all about the hot-and-filthy, but—Stiles really needs to be hot and filthy with Derek before he forgets what that was even like.

Okay, maybe he did need that intervention. Maybe it's time to draw a line with Derek. Stop being Pushover Stilinski. From now on, it's put up or shut up.

"This isn't a good time," Derek says when Stiles calls to inform him of this decision. "Where are you? You're not doing anything stupid, are you?"

"Hm. Does trolling for potential serial killers qualify as stupid?" he wonders aloud.

Derek grinds his teeth loudly enough that it can be heard over the phone. "Stiles."

"I'm going to class! What do you think I'm doing? Anyway, the reason I was calling… we've haven't seen each other in a while, and I know you've got 'stuff' going on, and you're putting in all those extra hours at work and everything. So I was thinking maybe I should come down to the bar tonight. We could—"

"No," Derek says flatly. "Go home." He hangs up before Stiles can fire off even one snappy comeback.

Stiles does go home after class, but not because Derek told him to, just because he doesn't have anything better to do.

In a perfect world—where academic ambition was the singular driving force in his life and that ADD situation was as firmly in the rearview mirror as he likes to pretend it is—this would be a prime opportunity to make progress on his econ project, lab report, and English paper. Instead, he divides his time between lying sprawled on his bed, staring at the ceiling, getting in some Olympic-caliber moping, and time-traveling back to his adolescent rebellion days, plotting ways to annoy the crap out of Derek.

At last he decides that if Derek won't come to him then he'll go to Derek. He grabs his backpack, shoves some books into it and heads over to Derek's place. There's no answer when he knocks, but Stiles isn't going to be put off that easily. If it takes a siege to get Derek's attention, then he'll happily camp out on the steps all day.

Or, as it turns out, for three hours. Econ project, done. Lab report, done. Ass half numb, check.

When Derek does finally show up, it's almost comical the way he stops in his tracks and stares and tightens his jaw like a disapproving parent. Okay, no. It's actually not funny at all. "How long have you been here?"

"Hey, Stiles. Sorry I haven't been around at all and keep ignoring your calls like a douchebag. It's awesome to see you." Stiles lays on the sarcasm as thick as it will go.

Derek's jaw goes a little tighter, and he grabs Stiles under the arm and drags him into the apartment.

"I ask you to do one thing," Derek says, once they're behind closed doors. "Give me some time. How hard is that?"

"How hard is that? Okay, let's overlook for a moment that you're being an asshole, and I'll tell you how hard it is. My friends staged a fucking intervention. Depending on who you ask, either I'm
totally whipped or you're a dick who's just stringing me along."

"I'm not stringing you along. I just—it would be better," Derek hesitates before adding, "safer, for you, if we don't see each other for a while."

"Why would it be safer, Derek? Seriously. You can't just say things like that and not explain."

There's a war going on in Derek expression, and Stiles really wants to know what that's about. Eventually Derek lets out a sigh. "Can't you just trust me on this?"

Stiles shoots back, "Can't you trust me enough to tell me what the hell is going on?"

Derek heaves another sigh and gives Stiles a long, calculating look before taking a predatory step in his direction.

"Oh, no, no, no, don't think you can use sex to—"

Derek lunges, or, okay, possibly Stiles meets him halfway, and, God, it's been too long. Way, way too long.

"Okay," Stiles says, when he can actually take in a breath. "You can. Use sex. That's a pretty effective strategy, actually."

Derek starts throwing off clothes, his own and Stiles's, as if he's afraid Stiles might change his mind and want to talk it out instead of fuck it out. No chance of that, but Stiles keeps that to himself. He's highly in favor of fast-tracked sex. Derek yanks open the drawer of the end table to get to a stash of condoms and lube. Keeping supplies in strategic locations through the apartment so they can fuck in any room—Stiles appreciates the foresight.

There's a script in his head for how this goes, and it includes his head thrown back and his legs spread and lots of begging. So he just kind of stares, his brain lagging behind, when Derek pushes a foil packet at Stiles, slicks up his own fingers—and oh God, pushes two of them into his ass.

Derek doesn't take his eyes off Stiles for a second while he fingers himself, and Stiles can't get a hand on own his cock fast enough. The air feels like it's simmering in his lungs, and his heart is practically banging against his ribs, and he chants in his head, *Not going to come before I fuck Derek, not going to come before I fuck Derek.*

He can only watch in a daze as Derek rolls the condom onto him. "I didn't know you'd want—"

Derek's breath is hot against his ear. "I want everything."

He drops onto hands and knees, right there, on the ugly burnt sienna carpet, and there's a sudden rush of breath, so loud it's like a cartoon sound effect. It takes Stiles a moment to realize it came from him.

The muscles in Derek's arms flex, and his thighs are welcomingly spread, and Stiles is only human. There's staring. Possibly also some drool.

Derek glances back impatiently. "*Stiles.*"

*I'm going to fuck Derek,* Stiles thinks stupidly. He drops to his knees and puts his hands—possibly they're shaking a little—on Derek's back. He's totally in favor of advancing the cause of sex, but first he needs a moment. Maybe Derek's gorgeousness should have become commonplace by now, but it still feels like a discovery. The perfect ripple of his deltoids and strong curve of his spine,
slim hips and hard muscled thighs—possibly Stiles has found religion.

"Come on," Derek practically growls, and he's vibrating beneath Stiles's hands, ready to, ready for —

"Oh my God," Stiles gasps as he pushes inside.

Derek is such—he feels so—for once, Stiles has no words. He grips Derek by the hips and thrusts, less of a rhythm and more of a wild need to be as deep inside him as he can get. God, oh God.

"Fuck, come on," Derek grits out. "Stiles."

Stiles is still only human, and he pretty much goes to pieces at that. At least, he thinks to get a hand on Derek's cock, and the good news is that wild flailing is apparently a turn-on for Derek. His body tightens around Stiles's cock, and he spurs over Stiles's fingers. Stiles totally loses it, babbling a whole bunch of stuff he'll probably find embarrassing later and sagging against Derek's back after he's come.

"You're comfortable," he slurs against Derek's shoulder blade.

"You're heavy," Derek says dryly. "Get up."

Stiles's completely manly, un-whimper-like noise of protest fails to convince Derek that staying just like this is perfect, perfect, couldn't be better.

"I really hate you," Stiles complains as Derek cruelly makes him move.

Once they're cleaned up and sprawled in Derek's bed, though, Stiles can admit that moving was a good plan. "Okay, I don't hate you." His voice is drowsily slurred, and the words almost get lost, mumbled against Derek's shoulder.

Derek runs his fingers through Stiles's hair, and if Stiles isn't so cozy and drifting, he'd butt his head up against Derek's hand to demand more of that.

"Go to sleep," Derek says, with a kiss to his temple.

In the morning, Stiles wakes up Derek-less, which is not exactly what he was hoping for, but at least the apartment doesn't feel empty. Derek must still be around somewhere. Stiles is calculating ways he can lure him back to bed when Derek appears, grim-faced and impatient, in the bedroom doorway, putting an abrupt end to his scheming.

"I need to get to work," he says, which sounds a lot like get out.

"When I come down with emotional whiplash, I'm suing your ass," Stiles say sourly. Bullshit like this shouldn't happen before coffee. That needs to be a rule.

Derek looks kind of sorry for a teeny-tiny split second before resuming the scowly face of doom.

"Yeah, yeah," Stiles says as he fishes his jeans up off the floor. It's not like the scowly face of doom is something he hasn't seen before.

Derek turns stiffly on his heel and leaves Stiles to finish getting dressed. What the hell is wrong with Derek? Stiles thumps out to the living room as he wrestles himself into his hoodie.
"What the hell is wrong with you?" he demands, because in a pre-caffeinated state the filter between his brain and his mouth—what filter, really?

"Stiles." Derek's jaw is clamped so tightly shut the word barely manages to escape. He keeps eyeing the door as if he's trying to magically will Stiles on the other side of it.

"Fine." Stiles pats the pocket of his backpack, looking for his phone, because he's going to need to spend valuable class time polling his friends by text about what this latest batch of mixed signals could possibly mean.

He tries not to listen to the little voice in his head that keeps saying: Don't be an asshole. You know it's over. That was definitely a goodbye fuck. On top of everything else, he can't find his phone.

"What?"

Stiles shakes his head. "Nothing. Just—" He does a more thorough search of his backpack. Still nothing. "I must have left my phone at home."

Derek stares at him. "Are you telling me that you're wandering around campus without your phone when there have already been two murders?"

"Yes. It was all part of my brilliant plan to draw out the killer. Because when are you the most likely to stumble across a murderous maniac? When you have no way of calling for help."

Stiles thinks the sarcasm is perfectly clear. If there's one thing he's good at, it's sarcasm. And yet, Derek looks like he can't decide whether to have an aneurysm or just shake Stiles really hard.

Stiles throws up his arms in exasperation. "I forgot it!"

"Forgot it," Derek says flatly. He shakes his head and strides into the kitchen and opens a drawer. "Here. Take my old one. I haven't cancelled the service yet. Keep it in your backpack for the next time you forget."

The completely unnecessary amount of mockery loaded onto that last word deserves at least a fuck off, asshole, but Stiles is too worried about what's coming next.

For good reason, it turns out. "Stiles," Derek starts, very gravely. "I can't—we really shouldn't do this anymore."

"Yeah," he says glumly. "I had a feeling that was a goodbye fuck."

"I don't want your friends staging interventions. That isn't fair to you."

"Who needs fairness?" Stiles blurts out, desperately. "That whole fairness concept, totally overrated."

Derek's expression turns even bleaker. "Don't say things that like. You shouldn't put up with shit from anybody."

"So don't give me shit! How hard is that?"

This logic seems pretty infallible to Stiles, but Derek just shakes his head. "Right now? It's impossible." He presses a last, quick kiss to Stiles's mouth and takes a step back.

It's amazing how much meaning can be packed into three feet of distance, Stiles absently notes through the numb haze of Fuck, Derek just broke up with me.
"You can keep the phone," Derek says, as he holds open the front door. "I don't need it back."

Stiles goes, with as much dignity as he can manage, head up, back straight, because he's not going to beg—he's just not. When the door bangs shut after him, he flinches. It sounds way too final.

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By lunchtime, Stiles's feeble attempt at dignity has worn off, and he can't keep himself from drooping pathetically over his half-burned grilled cheese and semi-wilted side salad.

"I'm really sorry," Scott offers, with best-friend earnestness, patting him awkwardly on the arm.

"Dude, you made me an intervention playlist composed entirely of Britney's 'Criminal' on repeat."

Scott pouts. "I still don't understand why Allison and Lydia wouldn't let me be there. I'd be totally helpful at an intervention."

Stiles sighs. "The point is, you never even liked Derek."

"Yeah, but you did."

"I really, really did." Stiles droops a little more.

"Did you ever think that maybe—" Scott hesitates, darting a cautious look at Stiles. "Don't get mad, okay?"

"Okay." Stiles is pretty sure he's too depressed to manage actual anger, no matter what Scott says.

"It's just—I saw this story on TV, where there were all these assaults in this neighborhood, and this guy kept telling his wife to be careful and stuff, and he was acting all weird, going out 'to jog' in the middle of the night, and coming home late for dinner without any explanation. And it turned out he was the one doing the attacking."

"Was that on Dateline? Seriously. No more crime TV for any of you."

This does not make Scott look any less worried.

"I appreciate your concern, but my former boyfriend isn't a crazed killer. I would know, okay? Also, I was with him both nights when the killings happened."

Scott leans forward in his chair, earnestly. "Maybe he slipped out while you were sleeping."

"Yeah, and maybe he was the second gunman on the grassy knoll. When it becomes clear that Scott doesn't get the reference, Stiles takes a moment to heap blame on the Beacon Hills educational system. "There wasn't much sleeping going on. Or any, actually, during the time-of-death windows. I could give you a detailed account of Derek's movements if you really want to hear it."

"Dude, I believe you," Scott says. "But come on. You have to admit there's something weird about Derek. I mean, he did growl at me and Jackson that time. Like seriously growled."

"You startled him!"

"We said good morning. What's he so jumpy about if he's not up to something?"

"Okay, look, I know I don't have a lot of evidence to back this up, but I just really feel like Derek's a good guy. If he's involved with people who are breaking the law, it's only because — " Stiles
hesitates and then lowers his voice. "I think maybe he's an informant for the police. It would explain why he's so jumpy all the time."

Scott's eyes go big and serious. "Yeah. Because those people would totally kill him if they found out."

"Yeah," Stiles manages, his throat painfully tight. Fuck. He really doesn't want anything to happen to Derek.

"Do you think—maybe he just doesn't want you to get hurt? That's why he—" Scott waves his hand. "You know."

"You can say he broke up with me, Scott. It's okay. I promise not to weep into my iceberg lettuce. And, yeah, I have thought—okay, hoped that maybe—but he could have just gotten tired of me. Awesome as I am, there is some precedent for that."

"So what are you going to do?"

Stiles slumps a little lower. "What can I do?"

Scott shrugs. "I don't know. But you always do something."

Stiles sits up straighter. "I do, don't I?" Then he remembers Lydia's advice from way back when: You know where he works. Go down there and see what happens. He starts to smile.

"You just thought of a plan, didn't you?" Scott says. "And it's really going to piss Derek off, isn't it?"

Stiles leans back in his chair. "Oh, yeah."

It's perfect.

Stiles begins to rethink this opinion about fifteen minutes into said plan. Showing up at the bar during Derek's shift seemed like a two-birds-one-stone flash of brilliance. He could scope out the place, maybe get a look at Derek's boss, see if anything set off his Stilesy sense. At the same time, he'd be right there, happying it up at Happy Hour, ordering cheap drink after cheap drink. Derek would have no choice but to talk to him.

He hadn't counted on the salivating throngs loitering at the bar, four people deep in places, drawing out their order-placing so they can drool over Derek a little longer. It takes an infuriatingly long time to make it to the front of the line.

"Um, hi," he says, feeling suddenly awkward when he's finally face-to-face with Derek.

Derek's wearing his usual scowl, as if that's part of his uniform for work, but his expression goes even stonier at seeing Stiles. "What do you want?"

"Just to talk, okay? Maybe when you have a break—"

Derek slams a Rolling Rock down in front of him. "Two dollars."

"Actually, I'm more of a Stella kind of guy—"

Derek glares impatiently.
"Fine," he grumbles and digs two bucks out of his pocket. "But you can forget about a tip. You didn't even give me the beer I want. Now can we just—"

But Derek is already looking past him to the next person, his face so blank it's as if they don't know each other at all, as if Stiles has ceased to exist. Stiles ends up exiled to a table in the corner, not without bitterness. Every time he tries to make eye contact, Derek pointedly looks away. Stiles huddles over his crappy beer and wishes he had some company to soften the blow of utter rejection.

"I'm coming along," Lydia had insisted when she'd heard the plan, getting that determined crease between her eyes that Stiles long ago learned not to argue with.

The problem is: some people simply aren't meant to sit at a table in the corner watching other people have fun. Stiles lost Lydia in the crowd about five seconds after they got there. At the moment, she's dancing with a gorgeous, willowy girl, quite possibly a model, whose long, straight dark hair looks like a curtain closing whenever it falls across her face.

Stiles drinks his increasingly too-warm beer, watching what appears to be every attractive person on the West coast sidle up to the bar to flirt with Derek. His big plan to get Derek to confide in him—or, hey, at least give him the time of day—seems increasingly ridiculous.

Time to cut his losses, he decides. He starts scanning the dance floor, but the willowy girl is dancing with someone else now, and he can't see Lydia anywhere. He does, though, spot another familiar face, and that person is watching him. Shit. It's Gavin Rooney. Stiles can't look anywhere else, frozen to the spot.

Oh fuck, he thinks when Rooney starts toward him.

"I might have to send my guy at the door to have his eyes checked," Rooney tells him. "Because you look like you're all of sixteen."

Don't panic, don't panic, Stiles tells himself. Just because a suspected criminal who may have murdered Derek's uncle is talking to you that's no reason to freak out. Strangely enough, this mental pep talk doesn't make him feel better.

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Stiles says at last, with a nervous, high-pitched laugh.

Rooney doesn't so much as crack a smile.

"No, but seriously, totally twenty-one here," Stiles adds quickly, digging out his driver's license. "Why does no one believe in my hard-won legality? Please don't make me tell you the embarrassing cautionary tale of how my father, the sheriff, put an end to my fake-ID days back when I was sixteen."

He's rambling, oh God. Of course, he is. Someday, he'd liked to learn another coping mechanism for dealing with sheer pants-shitting terror.

The hard, suspicious stare lingers a moment longer, and then Rooney relaxes and actually smiles when he hands back Stiles's license. There's nothing about him that screams I am a money launderer and possibly also a killer, but then, as Stiles's dad is always quick to point out, it's easier to succeed at crime if you don't actually look like a criminal. "I've gotten a few of those middle-of-the-night phone calls about my son. I don't believe I've seen you around before. What do you think of the place?"

"Oh, great. Really—" The sentence ends before it can get started. If Stiles's night weren't already sucking enough, over at the bar there's a blonde in a tube top that can barely contain her leaning so
far into Derek's personal space he practically has his nose in her boobs.

Gavin follows Stiles's gaze, and his expression lights with understanding. "Ah. So, I'm guessing you're the reason Derek never flirts back with the customers."

Stiles isn't Derek's reason for anything anymore; he counts it as a victory of mind over mouth that he manages to keep this to himself. Derek pushes the blonde girl's drink at her with a look that says you and your tube top need to get the hell away from me. That doesn't seem like the best way to hang on to a job, but it does make Stiles breathe out in relief.

Rooney regards the scene with a wryness that borders on dismay. "Usually, I like my employees to be friendly with the customers or at the very least polite, but I guess people must enjoy the challenge. Derek's my most popular bartender."

"Yeah, surliness just kind of works for him."

They watch as Derek practically snarls at a twinky boy in skinny jeans, who seems to mistake this for flirting and bats his eyes harder.

Stiles sighs. This is what he gets for falling for someone who is, literally, walking porn.

Rooney shakes his head, as if he can't imagine why he hasn't fired Derek already. "Anyway," he tells Stiles, "have fun."

When he's moved on, thank God, Stiles resumes his search for Lydia. He finds her at last on the outskirts of the dance floor with two guys competing for her attention, both of them meaty and blockheaded just the way she likes them. Stiles waves her over, and she counters by waving him onto the dance floor. It's a battle of wills, and Stiles has never won one of those with Lydia, a record of defeat that stretches all the way back to the third grade.

So he dances.

Sort of by himself at first, trying to look like that's just a thing he does because Goldfrapp really gets him going, but he's pretty sure he just seems pathetically alone. He's considering doing the slink of shame back to his table when he gets dance-jacked by a guy wearing an extremely tight-fitting black T-shirt and sporting artfully crafted facial hair. A hot guy, not that it really matters. Stiles is so not ready to start something with anyone else, not when the thing with Derek still feels so unresolved.

But Stiles does like "Ooh La La," and, fuck, he's having a bad night. So he lets himself go to his sweaty, moping-free, grooving place. He gets so caught up in it that it startles a squawk out of him when a body pushes against him, plastering itself all along his back. There's a low growl in his ear, a familiar growl, and Stiles feels that in absolutely every part of him.

"Derek," he says breathlessly, leaning back against him.

Derek bites Stiles's neck hard enough to make Stiles gasp out loud, and he slides his hand around to palm Stiles's dick through his jeans, rubbing possessively. Stiles's eyes droop closed, everything else forgotten, and he presses into Derek's hand. God, it feels so good being touched like this. He really wants—

Derek's voice is harsh and tight, his mouth right at Stiles's ear. "What did you tell Rooney?"

Stiles's eyes snap open. "What?" This is followed by an indignant "ow!" as Derek wraps his hand around Stiles's wrist, tight as a manacle, and starts to drag him.
"I thought we'd gotten past the manhandling stage of our relationship," Stiles complains. "Oh, wait. We're actually past having a relationship at all."

They end up in the bathroom, door locked, Derek three-feet deep in Stiles's personal space, grim-faced and apparently waiting for an explanation—about what Stiles has no idea.

"What is your problem?" His voice rises in annoyance.

Derek crowds closer. "I need to know everything you said to each other. It's important."

"It was nothing!" Stiles huffs out. "He took exception to my baby face, and I had to establish my grownup cred. It's not the first time that's happened, you know."

"What else?"

Stiles's mouth slants with sarcasm. "Well, we did discuss what a very charming way you have with the customers."

Derek's nostrils actually flare at this, which is beyond ridiculous. He must realize he's the surliest bartender in the world.

"Did you tell him anything about me?" Derek demands.

"No! What? You think I'm going to say something to get you fired? Because, trust me, you're already working hard on that. Or maybe you think I'm such a stupid asshole that I'm going to tell him my theory that you're an informant working with the police?"

Derek's face goes absolutely incandescent with rage, and his hands close on Stiles's shoulders, alternately squeezing too hard and shaking him like a ragdoll, as if he can't make up his mind what makes the better outlet for his fury. "Don't you fucking say things like that. How many times do I have to warn you? Just shut your mouth, Stiles."

As if that's going to happen. "You don't have to do this, Derek. I know what he did to your uncle. But it's not worth it, not worth—I'm sure your uncle wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

The last word gets knocked out of him as his back connects with the wall, and, yeah, that's definitely going to leave a mark. Derek looms, glowering and savage looking. "You don't know what you're talking about. So shut up. Or so help me I'll shut you up."

It's not an idle threat. There's real violence behind the words, and that hurts the way a burn does, searing and sudden and fuck. It also pisses Stiles the hell off, and it's the pissed-off part of him that has control of his mouth. "Oh, yeah? You want to shut me up, Derek? Then go for it. Do your worst."

He doesn't want Derek to hit him, but there's something almost expectant in the way he waits for it. In a weird way, it'll be a relief. Derek's fist will put an end to all this fucked-up waiting and hoping he's been doing, far more final than any breakup speech could be. Stiles is no one's punching bag.

"I knew you were going to be nothing but trouble the first moment I saw you." Derek's voice is thick and rough next to Stiles's ear, breath hot, and Stiles can't help shivering, which makes Derek groan and bite him hard on the neck.

"What—" Stiles says fuzzily. He's never been more thoroughly confused in his life, all of him except for his cock, which has very clear ideas about what it wants.
Derek shoves Stiles's T-shirt up to his armpits, yanks Stiles's jeans and underwear down past his hips, and sinks to his knees on the less-than-hygienic floor.

"Oh," Stiles says, very intelligently, and when Derek starts to lick him, "Oh my God."

Derek directs a be quiet glare up at him, and that right there—that's probably the most unrealistic expectation ever. Derek is really good with his mouth, and Stiles has missed him so much. There's no tease to what Derek's doing—grimy public bathroom and all—just firm, hot pulls of his mouth that have Stiles clutching at the tile, his knees watery and weak. Stiles bites his lip and grabs onto Derek with his other hand, and when he comes, it's hard and fast.

He's still panting, flushed and a little light-headed, when Derek yanks his jeans back into place and zips him up.

"You can't just distract me with sex," Stiles protests, not sounding very believable although he totally means it.

Derek kisses him and pushes him away. "And you can't go around saying shit that could get us both killed."

Stiles stares, his mouth dropping open and working like a gold fish's. "Oh my God, you really can't say shit like that without details!"

Derek's face shutters closed. This is clearly the end of the conversation as far as he's concerned, and that is absolutely unacceptable to Stiles.

"Derek," Stiles says, with a cracked, begging note that he really wishes wasn't there.

"Stay out of it. Don't come back here. Don't ask questions. Just let me handle it." Derek fires off his list of commands, clipped and clearly not to be questioned, and he already has his hand on the door when Stiles says, "No."

Derek turns back, impatient and irritated.

"No," Stiles says again, more firmly, and it feels like he can finally breathe again. "I can't do this anymore. I need you to talk to me, let me in, let me help you. If you can't do that, then I—just can't."

Derek doesn't say anything, doesn't move, just stands there watching him, and the moment seems to stretch on forever, the silence loud and unsettling. Then he opens the door, and he's gone.

And Stiles has his answer.

December feels like it comes out of nowhere, fallen leaves suddenly ankle deep on the quad and a faint scent of wood smoke hanging in the air. A week goes by, and then another, and then it's been a month, and no one else has turned up dead. The entire town lets out a collective sigh of relief. There are no more grim-faced public service announcements from the mayor on the local evening news. Sorority girls start leaving their canisters of mace at home. And Stiles has mostly gotten to the place where he doesn't miss Derek anymore. Okay, no, not really. But he's at least made his peace with it. Oh sure, sometimes, when his phone rings, he still has a lurching moment when he wishes it was Derek, but he never actually expects it will be. And it never is. Stiles doesn't call him, either. He meant what he said. He couldn't keep going the way things were, and Derek made it clear that nothing was going to change.
If he snatches up the paper every morning and reads with his heart in his throat, desperately hoping not to find a three-line article on the back pages, Local man missing, feared dead, well, that's his secret.

"You know what you need?" Scott says over breakfast.

"Selective amnesia?" Stiles pokes at his Captain Crunch with peevish swipes of his spoon.

"No," Scott says, making a face. "Amnesia comes from head injuries, and head injuries are bad. I was thinking more along the lines of a party."

Stiles just shrugs, but Jackson takes an interest. "Did someone say party?"

Scott and Jackson decide on an end-of-semester get-together before everyone heads off for the holidays, and they e-mail a bunch of people about it, and Stiles tunes the whole thing out as much as possible. He promised to show up. He can't be bothered to care.

And yet, when the day-of rolls around, he somehow gets stuck doing the pre-party shopping.

In his defense, Scott looks like he'd offer up a kidney to get off the phone with Allison, anything to avoid their painful, hours-long annual conversation about holiday plans. "It's just, you know, that your dad doesn't really like me?" He makes helpless eyes at Stiles.

Stiles pats him on the shoulder and absolves him of responsibility.

Jackson, on the other hand, has no excuse, except for that fact that he's a douche. "This party wasn't my idea. So it's not my problem, is it?"

Why is Stiles friends with him again?

Naturally, this would be the one day that Danny is nowhere to be seen. Stiles stomps off to his Jeep, regretting the unreasonable sense of responsibility he feels to supply their friends with junk food and muttering under his breath about lazy assholes who better at least be vacuuming while he's gone.

The one upside to shopping solo is that the snack selection is all about what Stiles wants. He scoops the store's remaining supply of Ruffles into the cart and gets two industrial-sized tubs of dip, because a chip without dip is a travesty at the very least, possibly even a heresy. He walks right past the Funions, Jackson's favorite, without a second glance, because he is completely capable of grocery shopping vengeance. Also, Funions are disgusting, and Jackson reeks for days after he's eaten them.

Booze has already been checked off the list. They still have a cabinet filled with leftover bottles from Stiles's birthday, and people always bring stuff. That just leaves the keg to pick up. The slightly shady warehouse down on First Street is the town's go-to place for beer, supplying restaurants, bars and, probably less strictly legally, college parties.

The guy in the warehouse office grunts, "ID," when Stiles explains why he's there.

"You look like you're sixteen."
"Yeah, I get that a lot," Stiles tells him in a deadpan. "Can I have my keg now?"

"Back there." He jerks his thumb. "My guy brought it out for you."

Stiles pushes through the door and finds himself on the loading dock. The keg is there, but otherwise the place is deserted. "Maybe a little help?" Stiles calls out.

There's no answer.

"Fine," he sighs.

He pulls the Jeep around and hefts the keg, panting and heaving. Not once, but twice, he nearly drops the thing on his foot.

An amused voice asks, "Do I have to worry about competition?"

Stiles startles hard and whips his head around, and, shit, it's Gavin Rooney. What's he doing here? What does he want? Stiles is halfway to a panic attack before it occurs to him that, duh, he's a bar owner. He probably has business to take care of.

"Sorry," Rooney says ruefully. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you. So, I'm guessing you're having a party?"

"Well—" Stiles wonders what the statute of limitations is on feeling like a juvenile delinquent. He hopes he stops apologizing for legally consuming alcohol sometime before he's thirty.

Rooney laughs good-naturedly at his fluster. "Say no more. I have a son about your age. You want some help with that?"

Actually, it would be awesome if you could go away and stop freaking me out. Stiles fumbles around for some polite way to put this. Too late, though. Rooney is already grabbing one end of the keg, and then there's nothing to do but go along. As it turns out, keg wrangling is a two-person job. They soon get it settled into the back of the Jeep.

"Thanks," Stiles says, really meaning it. "My deadbeat friends will thank you too when I get home and don't kick their asses."

Rooney laughs. "No problem. Have fun."

He starts toward the warehouse office, and the thing is: he really does seem like a regular guy. Stiles wonders if maybe he's misjudged him. Not everyone indicted is guilty. Rooney's phone rings, and he stops to answer it. Stiles hops into the Jeep, buckles up, and he's about to head off when something about the grim set of Rooney's jaw makes him pause.

"When was this? Do you know how serious it is?" He glances sharply at Stiles, and that's—Stiles can think of only one reason for that.

He's out of the Jeep like a shot. "Is it Derek? Did something happen to him?"

Rooney holds up a hand. "Okay. I'm on my way. Call me back when you know more."

"Tell me," Stiles demands once Rooney has hung up.

Rooney's expression takes on an effortful calm, the way Stiles's dad looks whenever he has to break bad news. "We don't know how bad it is. The details are sketchy. But there was some sort of altercation at the bar. A customer was very obviously high, and he had a gun, and Derek's been
taken to the hospital."

A hurt animal noise wants to come out of Stiles, but his lungs have seized up, and even breathing doesn't come easily. He's too stunned to do anything more than stand there listening to the freaked out voice in his head repeating, *Oh God, Derek.*

Rooney must recognize the shock on Stiles's face, because he takes charge. "Come on. I'm going to the hospital. I'll take you. You shouldn't be driving right now. I can have one of my guys pick up your Jeep and take it back to your place."

Stiles nods numbly and follows Rooney outside and into his waiting car. Even the muscle memory part of Stiles's brain isn't working right now, and Rooney has to reach across to fasten his seatbelt. They drive, and Stiles stares out the window, only vaguely aware of the passing the scenery. Rooney doesn't talk, and Stiles is grateful for that. Words might break him.

These are the longest moments of Stiles's life. Too long, some still functioning part of his brain eventually realizes. He makes himself pay attention to where they are. It's nowhere near the hospital.

"Shouldn't we be going—" Stiles points in the opposite direction.

"They took him to county, not the university hospital."

Stiles knows he's not exactly at his information-processing best right now, but why would they do that? The university hospital is five minutes away from the bar. It doesn't make sense that—

Adrenaline hits him hard, a burning danger-danger cocktail in his blood, but he tries not to jump to conclusions. *Think,* he tells himself. Why would Rooney want to trick him? The only thing they have in common is—he swallows hard. What if Rooney found out that Derek is a police informant? What if he's kidnapped Stiles to use him as some kind of leverage? *Fuck.*

That not panicking thing? Really hard to do.

Okay, okay. Plan A. He fumbles his phone out of his pocket. "I better call my apartment mates. Let them know I'm not going to make the—"

Rooney matter-of-factly takes the phone from Stiles's hand and chucks it out the window.

*Oh God.* "Okay, I know Apple has some issues with the whole child labor thing, and that's totally not cool, but I kind of needed that."

"No, Stiles, you really didn't," Rooney says, with such eerie calm that Stiles would almost prefer yelling. "I lied to you."

Oh, shit. That cannot be good.

"I don't actually have a son your age. I did, but he died."

This is not what Stiles is expecting, at all, and he just barely manages, "I'm sorry."

Rooney nods. "Do you want to know how he died?"

"If you want to tell me?"

"My son was in his last year at USC. He was out with his friends, drinking, being boys. You know how that is, don't you, Stiles? Misdemeanor public intoxication. A night in jail. That's all it should
have been. But he never walked out of that place alive. A drug overdose. That's what the LAPD said."

His eyes spark with outrage, and the way he looks over at Stiles, it's clear he's waiting for some kind of reply.

"I'm sorry," Stiles repeats numbly.

Apparently this isn't the right answer. "Come on!" He slaps his hand against the steering wheel, and it takes every last ounce of self-restraint Stiles has to keep from flinching. "My son didn't do drugs. He knew better. All of his friends said they'd only been drinking. So how does a kid get drugs when he's locked up in a cell? Someone fed them to him. That's how. They couldn't get to me, no matter how much they investigated. So they killed my son instead."

_Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it._ Now isn't the time for Stiles's usual kneejerk defense of the police, even if there are so many other explanations for what happened to Rooney's son. Using reason on someone who's meandered into crazy talk never works.

Unfortunately, Stiles's face is a billboard, advertising every thought he has. He hopes maybe someday this will change. Today is not that day, apparently.

"You don't think the police do things like that, do you? Don't think your father ever would."

Fuck. Why did he tell this maniac anything about his dad? Why does he always have to talk? He makes himself take a breath. Losing his shit isn't going to help anything. "There's always an investigation when someone dies in police custody. Was there any evidence—"

Rooney laughs, a bitter, jarring noise that sends a shiver down Stiles's back. "You think those investigators did anything more than go through the motions? Accidental death. That's what they said. Even if someone had been found responsible, what's the worst that would have happened? They got fired?" He shakes his head. "No, there's only one thing to do when someone hurts your child. And that's to repay the favor. Quid pro quo."

Stiles doesn't want to connect the dots. Seriously. He'd like to click a button and pause his brain, but the dots just keep flashing in his head, demanding that he draw the line, the really scary, kind of sickening line between them. Rooney's son was a college student. Vicki Simms and Marshall Jenkins were students, as were the kids killed over in Stockton. Maybe they all had ties to someone in law enforcement? Maybe Stiles is trapped in this car, breathing distance away from the person who killed them. Stiles, whose father is a sheriff. Oh God, please let him be wrong.

But he isn't. "I was never sure if the cops were purposefully holding back the law enforcement link or if they were just too stupid to figure it out." The evident pride Rooney takes in his psychotic handiwork—yeah, time to be scared shitless.

Stiles's backpack sits in the floorboard, its weight pressing against his ankle, a constant reminder of Derek's phone in the front pocket. Stiles makes himself keep his eyes off it. If he grabs for it now, it'll just end up tossed out the window too.

"You're my two-for-one," Rooney tells him, with such a satisfied smile it's just deeply disturbing. "I get to make your father suffer the way I have_and_ teach your ambitious little wannabe of a boyfriend a lesson about overreaching."

Stiles tries not to react to that. So Rooney hasn't found out that Derek is informing on him, it seems. At least that's something, right? "Derek's not my boyfriend anymore. We broke up. Also,
and this is not a criticism of the guy or his chosen lifestyle, but how is it overreaching to be a stripper-slash-bartender?"

Rooney smiles wryly. "Well, I do have to give him credit for knowing how to keep his mouth shut. I thought he would have told you more. Derek's been trying to insinuate himself into my business since his first day on the job. Just like his Uncle Peter. And I've been letting him think it's working. Because maybe, just maybe, Derek knows where his uncle is hiding with my ten million dollars."

"But I thought you had him—" Stiles blurts out before he can stop himself, and Rooney slants a sharp look at him. "You're Derek's boss," he says hastily. "I Googled you. I've Googled everything about him."

Rooney laughs. "You must have it really bad. Well, Stiles, don't believe everything you read. The stories of Peter Hale's demise are greatly exaggerated. And he's hardly the mousy accountant turned brave witness the prosecution tried to make him out to be. This whole thing was his idea. He set it up. And when it started to go bad, he turned on me, helped himself to my money, and is probably laughing at me from some beach in Mexico, the asshole."

"Derek isn't responsible for what his uncle did." Stiles doubts reasoning is going to work here, but you're supposed to keep them talking, right? "And my dad didn't have anything to do with what happened to your son."

"And my son didn't have anything to do with my business! They didn't have to kill him!"

Stiles has been a paragon of self-restraint so far, but this, just, no. "That makes no sense! Let's leave aside for the moment that you're making all kinds of assumptions about what happened to your son. He died in L.A. You're killing people here. How does it accomplish anything to hurt perfect strangers who have never done anything to you so you can cause horrible grief to other perfect strangers who have also never done anything to you? That's beyond fucked up."

Rooney smiles, with a hint of what might actually be admiration, and that's possibly more disturbing than anything else. "It's too bad. I like you, Stiles. You're the only one who wasn't begging by this point."

Stiles knows the absolute wrong thing to do is to consider worst-case scenarios, but he can't help it. The reality sinks in that he might not get away. Scott and Jackson think he's out shopping. They won't miss him yet, maybe not even for hours, and there wasn't anybody around at the warehouse. No one saw him get into Rooney's car. He has to blink back a hot prickle behind his eyes when he thinks about never seeing his friends again, never seeing Derek.

When he thinks about his dad—he can't think about his dad.

"You're close to your father, aren't you?" Rooney's voice is a low snake-hiss of glee.

And just like that Stiles is done with what-ifs. Fuck what-if. He is so getting out of this. No one's going to make Stiles's dad sad again the way he was about Stiles's mom. No one's going to make Derek think this is his fault. Stiles absolutely refuses to be murdered when he has a fucking 4.0 GPA. Not to mention that this whole crack-brained revenge scheme is totally stupid. He's fundamentally opposed to dying for stupidity.

At some point while Stiles was too busy freaking out to pay attention, Rooney looped around, and now they're headed back toward the university center. But where? Vicki was killed on the grounds, but Marshall Franklin died in his own apartment building. Stiles's heart drops all the way down to his stomach when he thinks about who might be back at his place—Scott and Jackson for sure,
probably Danny, maybe other people who came over early for the party. Every friend Stiles has could be there. Shit.

They speed closer to downtown, and Stiles pushes the panic away. Focus. There's a stoplight at practically every intersection. All he has to do is wait and—

Something blunt and metal-heavy butts against his ribs, and Stiles doesn't need to look to know it's a gun. "I'd appreciate it if you'd cooperate, but I can kill you right here if you prefer."

The landmarks start to look increasingly familiar, and Stiles has this stomach-churning idea where they might be going. When they arrive, pulling up outside Derek's building, Stiles glares. You sick son of a bitch.

Rooney smiles. "Two-for-one, remember? When the police find the body of Derek's former boyfriend in his apartment, I'm sure they'll draw the logical conclusions." He motions with the gun for Stiles to get out. "Don't forget I can kill you at any moment."

They head up the front walk, Rooney sticking close, the gun hidden between their bodies. They pass a girl with long blonde hair, one of Derek's neighbors, probably on her way to class. She flashes an absent smile at Stiles, as if she can't quite place him, and Stiles wants to grab her arm, wants to scream: He's got a gun! But that would just lead to—he smiles back at the girl and lets Rooney hurry him up the stairs.

"You have a key?" The gun is still jammed against Stiles's ribs, and he tries to plot the trajectory of a bullet—would it hit his heart, his lungs?—but it's hard to do math when he's panicked. Also, there's no part of him that he wants to get shot.

"Yeah," Stiles quickly lies. "I was supposed to give it back, but I didn't. Let me just—" He unzips the pocket of his backpack, and his fingers brush against Derek's phone. This may be his only opportunity. "It's in here somewhere." He screws up his face in concentration and pretends to dig around while he works on sending a text, a skill he learned back in high school.

Unfortunately, Rooney has a more suspicious mind than Stiles's teachers. He clamps down on Stiles's wrist, takes the phone and grinds it under his heel before Stiles manages to hit send.

"The key?"

Stiles bites his lip. "Yeah. About that. We never actually made it to the key-sharing stage of the relationship. I guess we'll have to go somewhere else."

"That's too bad. Hale really should have appreciated you more. Fortunately, though, I made a copy of his keys for myself." He pulls a key ring from his pocket and pushes it at Stiles. "You can do the honors."

Inside, Stiles breathes in the familiar air. There's a strong wave of fake pine scent from the household cleaner Derek uses and a faint hint of tomato sauce. Derek must have had spaghetti last night, probably from a can, if Stiles knows him. A pile of library books sits on the dining table, waiting to be returned. Breakfast dishes are stacked up in the drying rack on the kitchen counter. Stiles can't think about Derek coming home to find—no, just. Not going to happen.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your son," Stiles says, trying the empathy tack one more time. "If those cops in LA are responsible, they should go to jail. But taking me away from my dad isn't going to solve anything. You don't have to do this."

"But I do," Rooney says bleakly. "This is all I have. I wasn't there when my son needed me. I
couldn't save him. And now no one can save you."

He lifts the gun, and Stiles looks around wildly for something, anything he can use to get out of this. The only thing in reaching distance is the can of Lemon Pledge that Derek must have left out the last time he dusted. Stiles grabs it, with a little thank you to Derek for being such a clean freak, and aims the spray at Rooney's eyes, because that's the kind of thing that works in movies. All Stiles gets for the effort is the butt of Rooney's gun hard against the side of his face, a bright flare of pain that leaves him momentarily stunned, and the rusty taste of metal in his mouth that he knows is his own blood.

"You think you can fight your way out of this? You can't." Rooney sounds almost mournful, but he lifts the gun again, aims it, and Stiles hears the distinctive sound of the hammer being pulled back.

People talk about your life flashing before your eyes, but all Stiles's thoughts desert him like a flock of birds flying away. There's just the windy rush of air in his lungs and the leaden drumbeat of each second as he waits—

For the door to be kicked in and Derek to come storming inside. Oh, thank God.

Derek has a gun of his own, and it's trained on Rooney. "Police. Drop it," he says, slowly advancing, not taking his eyes off Rooney for a second.

Police? Stiles thinks he can't possibly have heard that right, and yet the way Derek holds himself, the way he's handling the gun—Stiles has been around cops pretty much since the day he was born. He knows one when he sees one, and, shit, Derek's a cop. He'll need to think more about that later. Right now, he's too busy being happy that he's not dead. It's over. Oh, thank God.

Don't celebrate too soon—Coach Flinstock always used to say that, and Stiles really should know better. Rooney grabs him and pulls him into a headlock and jabs the gun beneath his chin. "You drop it. Or I'll splatter his brain all over the rug."

Stiles shakes his head, as much as he can with the gun so tight against his throat. "Don't, Derek." It's not like Rooney is going to let them go if Derek cooperates. Both of them will just end up dead.

An interminable moment goes by while Derek considers his options, completely blank-faced. "Okay," he says at last, holding up his hands in surrender and putting the gun down on the rug. "We can—"

The moment he straightens up, Rooney fires. The round hits Derek squarely in the chest, and he spins and drops.

Stiles really needs his eyes to be lying liars who lie, because that didn't happen, that can't possibly have happened, but there's a hysterical voice in his head that won't shut up, no, no, no, no, no, no, and did it suddenly get loud in here? It's seems really loud. Eventually he realizes that's because he's screaming.

Rooney yanks Stiles back when he tries to get to Derek. The way he's looking at Derek's limp body, as if he's admiring what he's done, that just—it's pure instinct to lash out. He hits Rooney with the backpack, because somehow it was still on his shoulder. There's not as much force behind the blow as he would like, bad angle, but it catches Rooney off guard, and the gun goes flying.

They both leap for it, and Stiles nearly has it, but Rooney grabs the tail of his shirt and twists it until it's trapping Stiles's arms like a straight jacket. Stiles flails and kicks out, and he manages to catch Rooney in the chin, which makes him let go. Stiles scrambles for the gun, and Rooney gets
there at the same moment, and they grapple back and forth for it. Stiles might have a slim build, but he's stronger than he looks. Unfortunately, Rooney has the preternatural determination of the demented, and he wrenches the gun away at last.

He heaves himself to his feet, red-faced and panting, gun trained on Stiles, and this is it, Stiles knows. He closes his eyes, and a loud percussion cracks the air, but strangely there's no pain. His eyes snap open, and it takes a moment for his brain to sort out that he hasn't been shot. Then Rooney hits the floor heavily next to him.

Derek is standing, arm still extended, gun in hand. Not dead. Not even bloody. Bulletproof vest, Stiles distantly realizes. He makes the mistake of looking at Rooney, and there's a world of blood there, his eyes wide and blank, just like the terrible dead eyes of the girl he killed. Maybe there's a brutal justice in that, but all Stiles feels is shocked horror, and he wants to look away, but he can't stop staring. Derek pulls him up from the floor, saying his name like a thankful prayer, his arm tight around Stiles's waist as he gets him outside, away from the blood and those staring eyes.

When the paramedics arrive, they insist on prying Stiles away from Derek, even though he keeps telling them that he doesn't want to go, that his cheek doesn't hurt that much.

"Stiles," Derek says coaxingly. "Just let them look at it."

They take him down to the ambulance, and he sits on the back of it, legs dangling over the side, as a paramedic with blue-gloved hands and a sympathetic look gently probes his cheekbone and checks him for signs of a concussion and gives him a butterfly bandage when he refuses to be taken to the hospital.

The place is crawling with cops by now, and Stiles watches for a glimpse of Derek, but he only spots him once, on the far periphery of the action, listening with a tight-jawed look as another cop in a suit yells at him. Stiles is guessing that's his boss.

Once the paramedics have cleared Stiles, the police ask him to come down to the station to answer questions. Stiles goes, but he insists on calling his dad on the way, because cops hear things, and he doesn't want his dad to hear about this from anybody but him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" his dad asks at least four times, doing his best not to sound panicked and not succeeding at all. "I can call the police captain. Tell him you can't answer questions until you've been checked out at the hospital. I'll leave right now. That should put me there around ten—"

"Dad," Stiles says, with all the calmness he can muster. "I'm okay. Really. You don't need to come down here. I'll be home next week for Christmas."

There's a pause while his father considers this. "Okay. But call me in the morning. I want to know you're okay. I love you."

"I'll call you every day, I promise. Love you too."

At the station, they install him in an interview room, bring him a cup of the foulest excuse for coffee he's ever tasted. Detective Saldana sits down across from him, with a much gentler manner now than he had before, and he patiently takes Stiles through what happened. Stiles answers, numbly, his voice sounding very far away, like it belongs to someone else.

When he gets to the part about Derek bursting in with a gun, more dots connect. "Wait. You knew he was undercover, didn't you? That's why you got that look when I gave his name as my alibi."
"We got the word from upstairs. Keep away from Hale. I didn't know why." It's clear that's all he's going to say about it.

They go on with the questions until Stiles can't think of anything to add. Detective Saldana sends him out to the hall to sit on a plastic chair while they decide if they're through with him or if they need to ask more questions.

Someone sits down beside him, and it's a true testament to how out of it he is that he doesn't realize at first that it's Derek.

"Here." Derek pushes a cup into his hand; it's a latte from Stiles's favorite coffee place. "I had one of the guys pick it up for you."

Stiles nods and takes a sip, and even though coffee is always comforting, it doesn't help him stop shaking. Derek lays a hand on his back, tentative at first, as if he's not sure the touch will be welcome, and then more surely when Stiles leans into him, rubbing his palm in circles. Stiles manfully resists the urge to crumple against Derek because—actually, he doesn't know why. Fuck that. He crumples.

"How did you know where I was?"

Derek tightens his hold on Stiles. "The phone I gave you."

"You were tracking me?" Stiles asks, incredulously.

Derek rolls his eyes. "All phones have GPS. You know that."

"How did you even know I was missing?" Stiles really hadn't thought anyone would.

"I had a meeting with my PD contact this morning. He gave me the heads up that the two murders might have some connection to my case. Vicki Simms hung out at the bar, and Marshall Jenkins had been to the strip club a few times. He mentioned that they both had relatives in law enforcement, which might only have been a coincidence, but detectives were looking into it."

"And you knew my dad is a sheriff."

Derek nods. "And you'd been to the bar and the club, and you'd talked to Rooney, and—I just thought I should warn you. So I called your cell and then the phone I gave you, and you didn't answer. I called your apartment, and your roommates said you'd gone shopping but that you should have been home already." He shakes his head, as if he doesn't really know the answer. "I just had a bad feeling."

Stiles nods. Cop's intuition. It's a thing. He slides a sideways glance over at Derek. "I guess you really don't hate the police, huh?"

"No." Derek's voice goes quieter. "I'm sorry, Stiles."

Stiles shakes his head. "It wasn't your fault Rooney came after me, and I know you couldn't tell me about being a cop. I get that." Then something occurs to him, a truly sucktastic something, and he asks, uncertainly, "Was it just part of being under cover? Me and you?"

Derek gives him a look like, And you call yourself a cop's kid? "Does that sound like standard procedure? My captain just reamed me out, twice actually, for losing my focus over 'a hot piece of college ass' and nearly getting you killed."
"You didn't nearly—wait." He tilts his head to look at Derek. "I'm a hot piece of college ass?"

Derek lets out an exasperated huff, but there's what looks like a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I want—" He goes very still. "But I understand if you're—if you don't. I lied to you. And put you in danger. And I know I was kind of an asshole."

"Kind of?"

The way Derek glares at that—it's just so perfectly Derek that Stiles has to laugh, and then he can't stop, and there's more than a touch of hysteria creeping into it. Derek pulls him closer and squeezes his shoulder, and this is good. Stiles could stay just like this.

"I still want to if you do," he says softly, and that's not the most well organized sentence he's ever put together, but he hopes that Derek gets it.

Apparently, he does, because Derek holds his gaze and says, "I do too," and kisses him.

Of course, the captain picks that moment to come out of his office. He rolls his eyes at the two of them and says, "Take the kid home, Hale. And I don't want to see your ass in here for a week."

Derek screws up his face as if he might argue, but then—doesn't. From what Stiles knows about how cops operate, this time off is probably not up for debate. Derek drapes his arm around Stiles and walks him downstairs.

Out in the parking lot, they get into Derek's car, and Stiles thinks about his Jeep with a little pang of yearning. He and that Jeep have been through a lot together. They're bros. The neighborhood down by the warehouse—well, Stiles just hopes he sees his poor Jeep again with all its parts still intact.

"I had some uniforms take it back to your apartment," Derek says, as if he can read Stiles's mind.

Stiles sighs in relief, and then something occurs to him. "You know what this means? I have a keg, and I'm pretty sure the party is cancelled. So I say we get really, really drunk. Because we deserve it."

"Yes," Derek quickly agrees. "Let's do that."

They head off, and every passing landmark makes Stiles want to kiss it. The hardware store that smells like cats and the ugly concrete parking garage built on what used to be a park and the vegan restaurant with the inexplicable dancing mango on the sign—Stiles loves them all.

When they pull up at his building, his friends are waiting in the parking lot, because Derek must have called them. Scott jumps on him before he can even get all the way out of the car, hugging him so hard that his ribs will still feel it tomorrow. Lydia says, "Don't hog him," and then she's clutching at him, tiny and fantastic-smelling and surprisingly strong. Everyone else wants a turn too, a blur of people who are happy to have their Stiles returned to them safe and sound. Even Jackson gives him an awkward one-armed hug and mutters, "Glad you're not dead." Stiles can feel Derek watching all of this, taking it in, his eyes warm with approval.

And Stiles is still smiling, the whole time.

As it turns out, the party isn't cancelled, just transformed into a smaller, more select gathering. They stream into the apartment, and someone taps the keg, and Stiles gets the first plastic cup of
Stella, because he totally deserves it.

"Um, you don't have to stay if you don't want." He knows hanging out with his friends isn't exactly Derek's thing.

Derek gives him a look, eyebrows drawn together. He grabs his own plastic cup of beer and slings an arm across Stiles's shoulders as if he's not planning to move it for the rest of the night.

Stiles leans into him and admits, "Okay, yes, I did really want you to stay."

They settle onto the sofa, and Derek keeps him close, and this is good. Very, very good.

Allison curls into the other corner of the sofa. "I guess we really didn't need that intervention, huh?" The corners of her eyes crinkle as she smiles.

Lydia flops down across from them. "The secretive, withholding, possibly criminal boyfriend turns out to be the hero. How often does that happen in real life?"

There's a beat, and then in unison they say, "Awwwww!" Very loudly.

"That's kind of sickeningly sweet, actually," Lydia says, with a bright smile.

Stiles turns to Derek. "This is probably not the end of the embarrassing things that will happen tonight, in case you were wondering."

"I think I can handle it." Derek brushes a kiss to Stiles's temple.

This earns them another round of "awwww!"

"The first time we met Derek," Danny muses, "he was a cop-stripper who was actually a cop. That's very meta."

"You can't have been on the force very long. How'd you land such a big assignment?" Jackson asks, because he's just stupidly competitive about everything.

"I had the right background," Derek says. "A family member with ties to Rooney. I went to the police academy back East, so people around here didn't know I was a cop. All my bosses had to do was scrub that from the record, and I could go under cover as myself. It seemed like a good plan at the time." He tips back his cup, and suddenly he looks beyond exhausted.

Stiles can only imagine what a toll it's taken on him to be cut off from everyone and everything he cares about. He gives Derek a quick kiss and takes the plastic cup out of his hand. "You definitely need another beer."

They all have more. A lot more.

Everyone gets loose and mellow, all but Scott, who decides it's time to get his blame on. "It's totally your fault Stiles got caught up in this," he tells Derek. "He never would have met those people if it weren't for you. And you made him really sad, too." He doesn't add you totally suck, but it's very much implied.

"Scott—" Stiles starts, because he would very much like for this extremely awkward conversation to stop. As soon as possible.

"It won't happen again," Derek says quietly.
Scott gives him a long, narrow-eyed look before nodding.

Stiles huffs out a breath. "Oh my God, can we stop doing this now? You go get another beer." He points a finger at Scott. "And you." He tilts his head to look at Derek. "Later, we're going to have a talk about how what happened wasn't your fault at all. But right now, I just want to enjoy the fact that I'm here and so are you."

It takes a moment, but the corners of Derek's mouth finally lift into something that's almost a smile. "Okay."

By the time everyone leaves, reluctantly, in the early hours of the morning, Stiles feels heavy-lidded with beer and exhaustion, comfortably blurred around the edges. Scott refuses to let him go to bed without one last bone-crunching hug of thank God, you're not dead.

"That's good, dude. Yeah. Let's hug it out," Stiles slurs against his shoulder, not quite as steady on his feet as he was a few hours ago.

Derek guides him into his room, shuts the door and helps him out of his clothes, which is a good thing, since he seems to have sacrificed his manual dexterity to the keg gods.

"Come on." Derek pulls back the covers, and Stiles gratefully slides into bed.

Derek stands over him, watching, and Stiles figures this is when Derek will say his goodbyes. It's not as if he's ever been a fan of sleeping over at Stiles's place.

"Thanks," Stiles mumbles, and he means for being here tonight and for saving him and for not being a money launderer and for—so many things.

Possibly he's actually saying this out loud, a rambling stream of consciousness, because Derek leans down to kiss him. "Why don't you tell me in the morning?" He strips the shirt up over his head and kicks off his jeans and slides in next to Stiles.

"Mm," Stiles murmurs happily.

He wriggles closer and gets his head on Derek's shoulder, and, God, it's been so long. Derek feels so good, warm skin and hard muscle, and Stiles really—yeah, not so much. "Thought I'd have to be dead not to have sex with you. Maybe just dead drunk."

Stiles can hear a low rumbling beneath his ear, Derek laughing, and that's really—he likes that sound, a lot. He sighs and curls even closer, and there's so much he wants to ask, even though he can feel sleep tugging at him, his eyes already too heavy to keep open.

"Wha's gonna happen now, you know, with the cop stuff?" he manages.

Derek's fingers stroke though his hair. "I don't know. Some of my decisions weren't the best. This was my first undercover assignment, and I think—probably my last. I want a life."

Stiles knows—okay, he hopes—that last bit is about him, and he would smile if the corners of his mouth weren't so tired. "Your family?"

"I can explain to them why I 'quit' my career and went to work for a criminal."

"Tha's good." It's getting so hard to stay awake. "How'd they talk you into the stripper thing? Good cover, but can't imagine cops lining up for that."
"It was my idea, actually. Washing dishes wasn't the only thing I did to pay my way through college."

Stiles can hear that Derek is smiling. It's probably a filthy smile. If only he had the energy to open his eyes and see.

"When—what did you—" He doesn't know why stripping to pay tuition is different—and by different, he means hotter—than stripping while under cover, but somehow it is.

"Shh," Derek tells him, with a kiss to the top of his head.

"But—"

"Ask me in the morning."

"M'kay," Stiles says.

Because he can. Because Derek will still be there. That's the most awesome thought to fall asleep to.

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