

The Importance of Turning Around Three Times Before Lying Down

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The Importance of Turning Around Three Times Before Lying Down

by [otter](#)

Summary

It's like this dog has walked out of all of Stiles' childhood dreams and into the real world just because Stiles wanted it hard enough. He is the most awesome dog *ever*, and he and Stiles have a *bond*. A deep, unbreakable bond because this animal is his soul mate, obviously. Now he just has to convince the dog of that.

Notes

New author's note many years later:

I wrote this story eight years ago, which physically hurts me to admit because I'm very old. And for most of that time I've kind of wanted to change it. At the time in the Teen Wolf fandom with this pairing specifically, I very much felt a vibe of readers being really dissatisfied if you posted a fic and it didn't get even a little explicit, so there was a pretty shoehorned sex scene in this and I haven't really been happy with it since I wrote it. There's a lot of trauma Derek's dealing with here and his relationship with Stiles is a comfort for him, and I just sort of want it to be warmer and less explicit. So I've finally gone in and revised the story to something I feel a little more comfortable with, and I'm honestly really happy with it now as it stands. I've also revised the rating because it's pretty PG-13 now.

Readers have loved this story and no shade to anyone who dug it with the more sexual content in it. But I left it unchanged for so long because I was worried about disappointing people, and these days I'd just rather be true to how I feel about it, if that makes sense. I've written plenty of porn for this pairing (and I also have complicated feelings about high school aged characters and media depictions and the implications of how we see teens in real life, because I contain multitudes) but this just... made me feel better to change that in this story. So I hope you guys are understanding about that if you've dropped by for a re-read, and hell, maybe it'll even make it a little fresh for you.

There are podfics of this story [by reena_jenkins](#) and [by TheGirlintheBar](#) if you'd like to hear an audio version of the original as it was.

You can also read the original version of this story translated to [Spanish](#) by Lostwolfowinter and [French](#) by TheGirlintheBar!

Chapter 1

Later, he'll realize that bringing the dog home isn't the best idea he's ever had.

Stiles isn't about "later," though. He's all about living in the now. Well, in the now-and-everything-leading-up-to-now, which is maybe just another way of saying that he thinks about everything except the future, which is another way of saying that he doesn't think things through. That's what his dad will say, anyway.

It's all lies, horrible lies, because Stiles totally thinks things through, it's just that he's an optimist. In his mental version of his future, his dad is unable to resist the dog's many charms, and Stiles and the dog become best friends and constant companions, and maybe one day his steadfast protector saves him from certain doom when he like falls down a well or something. The point is, if one day he falls down a well and he *doesn't* have a dog, he's just going to die down there, all alone in the wet and cold, so *having* the dog is really a preventative safety measure. Like a seatbelt.

"I don't really think your dad's going to buy that argument, Stiles," Scott says, with the doubtful look that makes his face look kind of like the wrinkly Shar Pei puppies in the cage behind him.

Stiles is really tempted to dig out his phone and take a picture of their matching worry-faces but to do that he'd have to take his hands off the dog on the exam table, and he doesn't want to. It's *his* dog. This is important bonding time. He's pretty sure the first forty-eight hours are crucial for like... imprinting. Like ducks.

"You just don't give my powers of persuasion enough credit," Stiles says. He has his fingers buried in the thick ruff of fur at the dog's neck, and he's determined not to let go. It's fate, he's sure of it: Stiles and this dog are *meant to be*.

"You don't have any powers of persuasion," Scott says. "If you did you'd already have a dog. You've been begging your dad for one since you were like *five*."

"I know! That's why he totally owes this to me. He's been depriving me for my *entire childhood*. And now that I am nearly a man, it's important that he allows me to make my own life choices."

"I don't think he's going to buy that either," Scott says. He uses his gentle tone of voice like he's delivering bad news, but it's not bad *news*, just pessimistic predictions based on a lack of positive thinking. Like a weather report. "Listen, dude, I totally agree that you should have a dog because you are seriously killer at cuddling puppies when you come by here after school. But just maybe... *this* dog might not be the right one for you."

"Oh my god, are you *kidding me*?" Stiles says, and he thinks he's a miracle he even manages to say anything around his shock and dismay, because what is Scott trying to do here, make him cry? "This is the most awesome dog that has ever existed. This dog is *perfect* for me."

“He was growling at you the whole time when you brought him in here, Stiles. And not like ‘hey somebody just hit me with a car and my leg hurts’ growling. More like ‘I am going to rip your face off with my teeth’ growling. How did you even get him in your car?”

Stiles shrugs and strokes one finger along the top of the dog’s very long snout, from the top of his nose to the warm, soft fur between his eyes. “We have a special bond,” he says, gazing fondly down at the sleeping face of his new forever friend. The dog looks kind of ridiculous because he’s still sedated enough to be totally stoned, blinking super-slowly with his long pink tongue unfurled messily on the exam table. “We have a *deep rapport in our souls*, Scott. He trusts me. Also he was a little unconscious at the time.”

Scott’s looking at the dog’s mouth too, but he doesn’t seem to just be taking a moment to appreciate the adorableness of the dog’s sleepy drool face. And it’s not even professional interest either; it becomes apparent that he’s not checking the dog’s breathing or the color of its gums when he says, “His teeth are freaking *huge*, Stiles. And so’s his whole skull. And his feet.”

“I know, he’s like the most bad-ass beautiful dog who ever lived,” Stiles agrees. It’s true, he just didn’t expect Scott to admit it, since Scott is suddenly totally anti-dog, since on this crucial matter Scott has apparently abandoned Team Stiles.

Seriously, though, this is like the most amazing dog that Stiles has *ever* seen, and Stiles has seen a *lot* of dogs, because his dad’s refusal to let him get one has contributed to Stiles’ compulsive window-shopping at dog adoption websites online, where he likes to fall completely in love with at least one dog per week. He can see now that those were nothing but shallow infatuations, because *this* is love, and this dog is clearly meant for Stiles because he’s basically everything Stiles has ever wanted. He’s huge, for a start, which is great because Stiles has always liked big dogs the best, has always harbored a secret fantasy of having a canine soul-brother so big it could put its paws on his shoulders to give him a hug, and this dog totally qualifies for the position on size alone. (Although in retrospect, that year Stiles spent trying to convince his dad that they should get a Great Dane might have hurt the dog cause more than it helped.) He takes up the whole exam table, and this is the *big* exam table, the one Stiles himself once stretched out on for a very uncomfortable nap. The dog does have pretty huge feet, like snowshoes, and his legs are really long like he’s maybe young and still growing into them. He’s dark but not quite solid black; his coat has these awesome kind of silvery undertones around his eyes, down the sides of his neck and along the lines of his flanks and haunches. He looks kind of like the German Shepherd on the K-9 unit at the sheriff’s department, if that dog had been bombarded with gamma radiation and turned into the magnificent doggy version of the Hulk. He looks like how Stiles has always pictured Sirius Black’s dog-shape. It’s like this dog has walked out of all of Stiles’ childhood dreams and into the real world just because Stiles wanted it hard enough.

“He is pretty awesome looking,” Scott admits. “He just doesn’t seem like a *dog* to me. He looks more like a wolf.”

Stiles sighs, because Scott’s attempts to talk him out of this are just getting desperate now. They’ve discussed this. There is a *special bond*. “Scott, there aren’t any wolves in California. There haven’t been for like eighty years.”

“Okay, but people breed them, Stiles. Like as pets. Maybe he escaped from somewhere? And there are wildlife sanctuaries that have wolves. Doctor Deaton said he used to work with a vet who treated like bears and hyenas and things at one of those places.”

“I don’t know why you’re trying to talk me out of this,” Stiles says. He narrows his eyes at Scott because Scott’s not being rational about this. Maybe he’s just worried that Stiles won’t hang around with him as much now that Stiles has his own living patronus. “He’s just a dog, Scott. Look at him. He looks too pathetic to be a wolf. Let’s think this through.”

It’s no lie, the dog does look pretty pitiful. Aside from how ridiculous his face looks (Stiles is beginning to think that Scott gave the dog way too much sedation, because he’s looking pretty rough), he’s got a shaved patch on his front leg with a catheter sticking out, which is connected to the IV fluid bag. His other front leg is encased in a shiny new cast that stretches nearly the whole length of the leg and which Scott for some ungodly reason has chosen to finish off in bright lime green. The dog’s skinnier than he ought to be, his coat gritty with dirt and little bits of leaf and all the signs of a sad, lonely life lived in the woods, abandoned and uncared for. It makes Stiles kind of sad just looking at him.

“Well,” Scott says, and Stiles can tell just from the tone of his voice that he’s wavering on his stupid anti-dog stance. “I guess you could just take him for awhile, while he’s recuperating? Then if your dad’s *really* pissed we can find him a good home.”

“He already has a good home,” Stiles says, and then just in case that makes it sound like he stole the dog from somebody’s yard and then concocted the rest of the story, he adds, “by which I mean *my* home. Dad’s going to love him. Or grow to love him, at least. Just you wait and see.”

“Sure,” Scott says, though he sounds doubtful. “Is your dad at home now?”

“Nah, he’ll be out all night, probably. He got a call earlier about a body in the woods. I was on the way over to your place to tell you about it, actually; I totally forgot about it when I saw the dog get hit.”

“Wow, that’s a little more excitement than we usually get around here,” Scott says, looking wide-eyed. “Do they know what happened?”

“I don’t think so,” Stiles says. “Some hikers found the body, but that’s about all I know. Well... they found half the body.”

“That’s... disgusting,” Scott says, his face screwed up in a grimace.

“I know, right? I was going to suggest we go looking for the other half, but now I have responsibilities. I need to get my bad-ass new dog home and nurse him back to health. Are you finished with him? He still looks kind of dopey.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m done,” Scott says, and starts unwinding the tape from around the catheter so he can take it out. “When he started waking up before I gave him another dose of sedative, so he might be out of it for awhile. I’ll give you some medication to feed him for the pain, and

antibiotics. You can just put the pills in some meat or peanut butter and he'll probably take them no problem."

"Are you even qualified to do this?" Stiles asks him, while they're carrying the dog out to the Jeep. It's a lot easier with two people to do the carrying and with the dog currently unable to threaten anybody's life; the dog's still mostly asleep when they get him settled in the back. "You're not going to get in trouble with Deaton, are you?"

"Well, I'm not going to *tell* him," Scott says, like the idea of honesty is absurd, which is a fair point because they *are* teenagers. Full disclosure isn't really their strongest point. "I'll clean up in there, it won't be a big deal. He'll probably know I did it anyway and be secretly happy that I didn't bother to call him in for it; he always has like book club or something on Fridays, he doesn't really like to be interrupted."

"Huh," Stiles says, and closes the Jeep's back door on the sight of his doped-up pet. "Allowing teenagers to run x-ray machines and set casts without any sort of professional certification seems kind of unprofessional."

"Oh, sorry," Scott says, and he's sounding kind of pissy now so Stiles should've maybe shut his mouth like five minutes ago. "We can go back in and I'll take the cast off so you can come back during business hours and pay Deaton to do it."

"No no, you did a wonderful, fantastic job, Scott, you are the best friend ever and might I say that you are a staggeringly good veterinary technician."

"You're damn right. I already gave him shots for tonight so you can start his pills in the morning, just follow the directions on the labels," Scott says. He hands over a pair of plastic bottles, which Stiles stuffs into his pockets. "I'll call you tomorrow to make sure your new dog hasn't eaten you. Seriously, man, be careful okay? That's a really big dog and he didn't seem all that friendly. When you put the muzzle on him so I could do the catheter he was kind of making murder-eyes at me."

"Don't worry about it, Scott, really," Stiles says, as he climbs into the driver's seat. "I'm sure when he's feeling better his attitude will improve. Plus, we have a--"

"Bond, yeah, I know," Scott says, but the look on his face is less *I recognize your deep spiritual connection* and more *I know what you're going to say because you always say stupid things*. Which is unfair because usually Scott's the one who says stupid things.

"He totally loves me," Stiles agrees, and drives off into his new, glorious future of dog ownership.

Chapter 2

His new dog totally does not love him. And his attitude does not improve.

Stiles stops at the Pet Emporium on his way home, slipping in a bare five minutes before the closing time posted on the door and pointedly ignoring the glares of the employee behind the counter. That employee turns out to be Greenberg, a surly kid who Stiles only kind of knows from the lacrosse team -- he only kind of knows most of the kids on the lacrosse team because Stiles and Scott spend all their time on the bench -- but Greenberg seems okay with helping Stiles out when it becomes obvious that Stiles is about to spend kind of an excessive amount of money.

He starts with a tag, because he doesn't ever want to get separated from his canine companion, so while Greenberg is setting up the computerized engraving machine with Stiles' details, Stiles roams the rest of the store, loading himself down with all the accessories of dog ownership.

A collar seems like a logical place to begin, and he finds one in plain, sturdy black leather that's going to look awesome on his dog. There's a matching leash so he grabs that too, and then bowls and beef jerky treats and a big, soft dog bed. He makes a trip to dump all that on the counter so he can free up his hands for more, and then he ends up with a couple of tennis balls and a plush squeaky toy shaped like a squirrel and some rolls of plastic bags for cleaning up dog crap and a huge bag of shockingly expensive premium kibble. Then he goes maybe a little bit crazy and picks up a rope for playing tug and a frisbee and like five different kinds of grooming brushes and some nail clippers and dog shampoo. And a book about basic obedience training. And a book about training dogs to do tricks because it's going to be *hilarious* when he trains that huge dog to roll over and sit up like a circus pony. When he gets all of that stuff up to the front, Greenberg smirks and asks him if his dog is house-trained, and since he doesn't actually know, Stiles goes and hauls half the aisle of cleaning products back to the counter because if his dog pees inside the house and Stiles isn't able to absolutely eradicate all evidence, his dad is going to *murder* him, and then it'll be Stiles' body people are searching for in the woods.

Getting it all out to the Jeep takes another couple of trips, and he has to kind of cram everything in to the passenger seat area because the dog -- who is beginning to really wake up now, groggily trying to push himself up onto his elbows -- is taking up pretty much all of the usual cargo space in the back. Once he's finally got everything loaded, Stiles climbs into the driver's seat, pulls the shiny new dog tag from his hoodie pocket and uses the little included keyring to attach it to the collar.

When he twists around in his seat and reaches out to put the collar on the dog, the dog growls and tucks his chin against his chest like he knows he's kind of out of it but he's still offended by this entire thing.

"It's important, okay?" Stiles says. "Like always carrying your wallet and wearing clean underwear. Work with me here, dude."

The dog doesn't work with him, but that's okay because the animal's obviously still too groggy to get much of a say in things, so Stiles just does it anyway, quickly wrapping the collar around the back of the dog's neck and buckling it awkwardly at the front. The dog shoves his muzzle against Stiles' hands and for one heart-stopping moment Stiles thinks he's going to seriously be bitten by his own dog, but the dog ends up just sniffing at him instead, snuffling along the ridge of his thumb and then up to the pulse point at his wrist.

"Okay, seriously man, your nose is really cold," Stiles tells him. "And wet."

The dog huffs at him and looks away, as if to say that he didn't want to smell anything of Stiles' anyway, but the dog's wearing the collar and Stiles still has his hands so *mission accomplished*.

Once he pulls into the driveway at home, which is thankfully still devoid of his dad's police cruiser, the dog is pretty much fully awake. He sits up to look around out the windows when the car stops, but he moves gingerly and lets out a little involuntary whimper when he tries to put too much weight on his casted leg.

"It's okay, don't move, we're here, home sweet home," Stiles babbles to the dog, while he digs the leash out from his shopping bags and circles around to the back of the Jeep.

When he opens the rear door, the dog recoils back, and his eyes dart from one side of Stiles to the other, like he's trying to decide which direction to jump in his bid for freedom. His muscles are already tensing and he's got his mouth open in a snarl that seems almost automatic, like threatening to kill people is just his usual thing and he's not even thinking about it. He won't *really* rip Stiles' throat out with his massive teeth. Probably.

Stiles throws both his arms out without even thinking about it, creating a really flimsy makeshift barrier of his own body parts, and says (kind of hysterically and far too loudly), "*Wait!*"

The dog stops snarling and stares at him like *Stiles* is the one acting crazy. Which, hello, he's not the one doing a Cujo impression. Stiles takes a deep breath, his arms still outstretched, and decides they need to talk this out.

"Okay, listen. I know dogs don't understand English but I'm totally going to level with you anyway, okay dude? Here's the situation. You're hurt. If you go running off, you're probably just going to make it worse, or you'll get hit by a car again or something, and if that happens I swear to you that I will seriously cry. You don't want to see me cry; I'm an ugly crier. And anyway, I saved your ass tonight because if I hadn't been there that second car would've hit you too and you'd totally be done for. So I really think you should just crash with me, because you totally owe me one. You owe me several, actually. I just bought you food and a comfortable bed and a ton of other stuff, and Scott gave me some pills to help the pain and keep your leg from getting infected, which you're really going to need to take. So I think you should just rest up here and take it easy until your leg's better."

The dog just stares at him, which is really about what Stiles would expect, since he just word-vomited at an animal that can't understand a thing he says. So that's great. But the dog hasn't started growling again, and the tension kind of goes out of his muscles, and then he heaves

this enormous sigh like Stiles is a total idiot but the dog's going to humor him anyway. So Stiles puts his arms cautiously down, and the dog makes no move to escape. He doesn't even show Stiles his teeth again or make any threats of horrible bodily injury.

Stiles leans in, slowly, brandishing the clip end of the leash to plainly telegraph his intentions. The dog just sighs again, rolls his eyes, and looks away like he can't believe this bullshit is his life. He seems kind of resigned to his fate after that, though, because once the leash is on he gets up carefully and moves to the edge of the open door, like he's trying to figure out how to get down without causing himself any more horrible suffering, though he probably prefers the pain to Stiles talking at him.

"Oh hey, I'd better just lift you down," Stiles says, and then he does it before the dog has a chance to change his mind. The dog is *really heavy*, and he has this look on his face like he's never suffered such horrible indignities in his life, but Stiles is the one who's going to wind up with the hernia so he doesn't know what the dog's problem is.

"You ready? This is going to be awesome," Stiles says. He walks up to the front door at a definite strolling pace, pretending that this is how fast he normally walks because the dog is moving kind of like he hurts all over but Stiles gets the sense that if he thought Stiles was coddling him he'd probably do... something. Something bad. Maybe break Stiles' own leg so he can see what it's like. Stiles doesn't mind, though, because he remembers when he first picked the dog up off the street, walking in the pool of headlights cast by the stopped car that had nearly run the animal over a second time, he was pretty sure the dog was dead. So he's mostly just happy to see his furry friend on his feet at all, even if the experience has left the dog feeling vindictive.

They get into the house without incident though, which is great because Stiles isn't sure whether the dog's ever belonged to anybody before or if he's been trained to walk on a leash or anything like that, and the dog's so big that Stiles has to admit to being a little worried that he could just pull the leash right out of Stiles' hands and be gone. The dog doesn't seem interested in escape right now anyway; from the almost drunken way he's walking, he mostly seems like he's interested in a nap.

When they get inside, the dog looks around like he's doing a tactical assessment of the room, then he looks at the couch like he's doing some kind of comfortableness assessment, and apparently he likes what he sees. He starts limping determinedly toward it, and Stiles' life flashes before his eyes.

"Oh my god, no," Stiles says, and lets the dog hit the end of the leash he's still holding onto, because *no*. The dog looks *pissed*, but Stiles is not going to debate on this subject, because he will not allow this beautiful partnership to be cut tragically short by his dad just because his new dog wants to have rights to the furniture. "I am not even kidding, dude, if there is a single dog hair on that couch I'm pretty sure my dad will kill me. In fact, it's probably best if you pretty much stay wherever I am, just for right now, until my dad gets used to the idea. That way he can rest assured that I am one hundred percent committed to your constant care and he can totally pretend you're not even here. We can set up your new bed in my room, how's that sound?"

The dog huffs out a breath, looks at the couch like he's trying to decide whether it's worth ending Stiles' life over, and then finally makes a really grumpy noise that Stiles chooses to take as agreement. Stiles leads the way to the stairs, keeping the leash loose as sort of a peace offering, but still keeping it *on* just in case the dog tries to make a break for the living room instead. It's slow going again up the stairs, but when they finally reach the top and Stiles gets the dog into his room, he feels like he's won half the battle. Which of course is a false sense of achievement because his dad isn't home yet so really the battle hasn't even started.

"Okay," Stiles says, and unsnaps the leash, leaving the dog free to wander the room at will, which he hopes won't turn out to be a horribly disastrous idea because for all he knows this dog could be the most destructive animal on the planet. This could be like the velociraptor of dogs and he's going to close it in his bedroom, where his *computer* is. "I'm going to go get all your stuff out of the Jeep and then I'll hook you up with some tasty dinner and stuff, okay? Just do me a huge favor and don't destroy anything. Cool?"

The dog just stands in the middle of the room and stares at Stiles like he's mentally deficient.

"Cool!" Stiles agrees with himself, because the dog being unable to speak means that Stiles gets to make up his own mind about what the dog would say, and he likes to think the dog would agree with him. "I'll be right back!"

It takes another two trips to haul in all the stuff he bought, and then he has to find a place to hide some if it so his dad won't know about the dog the instant he walks in the door. It'll be nice to have a little time to ease into it, get him used to the idea, maybe bribe him with breakfast first. Maybe if Stiles cooks bacon -- real bacon bacon, not the lower-fat turkey kind -- his dad can be persuaded to agree with anything.

Stiles ends up hiding half the stuff in the kitchen pantry; his dad never really even opens the pantry, because the pantry is where they keep ingredients for *cooking* things, and Stiles is the only one who cooks anything. His dad's version of "cooking" involves Hungry Man dinners and the microwave.

Once some of the things are put away, Stiles grabs the big fluffy dog bed and the squeaky squirrel and hauls them upstairs with him, but when he gets back to his room it becomes immediately obvious that the dog's not going to be needing the dog bed. He seems to like Stiles' bed just fine.

"Dude, I call foul," Stiles says. "Do you have any idea how dirty you are right now? I probably can't give you a bath for awhile with that cast on, but you could've at least given me a chance to bust out the grooming stuff before you defiled my bed."

The dog, who seems to have fluffed up the comforter into a slightly nest-like configuration and is also sleeping with his head actually *on a pillow*, just opens one eye, takes in Stiles and the brand new dog bed, and then grunts and closes the eye again. It's a total brush-off, is what it is.

Stiles knows better than to tell the dog to get off the bed. He's clearly an intelligent animal, and who knows, maybe before he was a bomb-sniffing dog or a seeing eye dog or a mad scientist's experimental superdog. He might very well be able to perfectly understand any one

of a hundred verbal commands and perform the tango on cue. Even if that was the case, Stiles is still one hundred percent certain that if he tries to tell the dog “off,” it will only stare at him in its haughty and condescending way while making judgments about Stiles’ life.

The only way to beat him, Stiles is sure, is to outsmart him. So Stiles goes back down to the pantry, cuts open the bag of dog food (which was so expensive that Stiles isn’t sure whether it’s actually made out of caviar), and dishes out the recommended serving into one of the new metal bowls. The other bowl he fills with water, and then he carries both of those back up to his room, ready to make his triumphant return and reclaim the space that is rightfully his.

He opens the door and crows, “Dinner time!” and shakes the kibble in the dish.

The dog lifts his whole head this time, staring at Stiles with interest, nose raised to scent the air, but then he just makes a disgusted noise and flops back down again.

“Come on, dude! Dinner!” Stiles rattles the kibble again, but the dog only grumbles and wriggles himself against the bed, like he’s settling in for the long haul.

It’s probably not the best way to start out their relationship, but Stiles is smart; he can recognize when he’s beaten.

He leaves the kibble and the water, hoping that maybe the dog’s just shy and he’ll at least eat something, like maybe while Stiles isn’t looking. Instead of staying and sulking over the loss of his bed, because he doesn’t want to give the dog the satisfaction, Stiles goes back down to the kitchen, takes last night’s leftover rotisserie chicken out of the fridge, adds a pile of steamed vegetables that his dad keeps “forgetting” to take with his lunch, and heats the whole thing up in the microwave.

He takes his own dinner back upstairs with him, because he’s not sure how long he’s willing to leave the dog unattended, and there are probably about a thousand things he needs to Google to not screw up this dog ownership thing completely.

The second he steps into the room again, this time with a steaming plate of his own delicious food, he has the dog’s full and complete attention. The dog’s ears swivel toward him and stay locked on like a laser-guided missile system, and he can see the dog’s nostrils flare and the dog’s eyes narrow like he’s... well, like he’s trying to figure out whether the food is going to end up inconveniently scattered all over the room when he takes Stiles down like a gazelle.

“Don’t even *think* it,” Stiles says in his best commanding voice, which actually isn’t all that good. “You have your own food, why don’t you eat it?”

The dog sniffs sharply, as if to say that his own food is beneath him, and keeps staring at Stiles’ like it’s his birthright. It just figures Stiles would acquire a dog with an attitude problem.

“No way, dude,” Stiles says, and seats himself in his computer chair like it’s a throne, like Stiles’ awe-inspiring power to do things the dog can’t really do, like sit in rolling chairs, should give him the final say in all matters. He holds his plate in one hand and punches the power button on his computer with the other. “This is my dinner,” he says, and spears a piece

of chicken as if to demonstrate, popping it into his mouth and chewing with overblown relish. Then he points his fork toward the untouched bowl and its bounty of kibble, and says, “That’s *your* dinner. Which you should eat, because it cost a small fortune. It has like, actual buffalo and fruit and things in it. You’ll like it.”

The dog doesn’t move to get up from the bed, just watches Stiles with narrowed eyes while Stiles shovels a forkful of steamed veg into his mouth. After a long moment, full of accusing silence from the dog’s part of the room, the dog flops dramatically back onto his side again, feigning disinterest.

“Alright, but that’s all the food you’re going to get,” Stiles says, feeling like he’s getting off to the right start by putting his foot down on this. “So you’d better get used to it.”

The dog growls like he’s thinking about compromising by making Stiles into his dinner instead, but it’s obviously a hollow threat because he doesn’t even bother to sit up again. Then, as if the idea has just come to him, he squirms against the bed, flopping from the far side right into the middle, rubbing himself frantically against the blankets and sheets like he’s trying to scratch some full-body itch. He leaves behind bits of woodland vegetation and wiry black dog hairs and an ample dusting of grunge on the previously fairly-clean sheets, and then settles with a luxurious groan right in the center of the bed, like he’s finally made himself comfortable. He’s sort of on his back now, though lopsidedly because he can’t wave the leg with the cast up in the air like he’s doing with the other ones. His head is upside down when he opens his eyes to stare at Stiles as if to ask what exactly he’s going to do about it.

Stiles stares right back, then spins his chair around and lifts his feet, deliberately, one at a time, up onto the bed. He hasn’t taken his shoes off yet and they’re not exactly clean, especially since the dog dripped blood on them earlier, but Stiles just crosses one ankle casually over the other, leans back in his chair and takes another bite of chicken, because he can.

“I’m on the lacrosse team,” Stiles tells the dog. “You’ve probably never seen a boys’ locker room, but let me assure you that I feel a perfectly comfortable with a certain level of filth. Also, as your friend I just want to let you know that when you roll on your back like that you look like a puppy, and it makes me want to rub your belly.”

The dog stares a moment longer, like he’s just trying to prove that nothing Stiles has to say will have any effect whatsoever on his life choices, and then he slowly rolls onto his side again, facing away this time, as if he does not currently have and has never had any interest at all in Stiles’ dinner. Stiles watches the dog pretend to sleep for awhile, and he’s pretty sure he can see the exact moment when pretending to sleep becomes actually sleeping, because there’s this last little bit of tension that goes out of the dog’s ears, and then about ten minutes later, when Stiles is finishing up his dinner, the dog actually starts to snore.

Stiles is pretty sure his dog is secretly a killing machine, but the snoring is *completely adorable*. And the dog must be tired, because he doesn’t wake up again, not to the clattering of the keyboard or the opening of the door when Stiles goes out to return his plate to the kitchen and clean himself up for bed.

When Stiles is ready to sleep himself, the dog still doesn't stir, not even when Stiles climbs into bed beside him. So Stiles does the only thing he can do, as the human being in this relationship, the one who is completely and utterly in charge here: he squeezes himself into the less-than-half-a-bed that has been left to him, curls his body up against the dog's back, and goes to sleep.

Chapter 3

When Stiles wakes up, it's to the sound of a low, dangerous growl and the unnerving sensation of being watched.

At first he thinks it's the dog doing both of those things, because as far as he can tell, bared teeth and creepy staring are the dog's favorite activities. It's definitely the dog doing the growling at least, and not like, a mountain lion that's climbed in the bedroom window. This much is obvious because Stiles can *feel* the sound rumbling out from someplace deep in the dog's chest; it's vibrating Stiles' bones where he's wrapped both arms tight around the dog in his sleep, and where his breastbone is pressed against the dog's back. He can feel that noise in his heart, which is an interesting and vaguely unsettling sensation.

But the dog's still facing away from Stiles, which means the dog *isn't* the one Stiles can feel staring at him, which means Stiles is *so screwed* right now. He takes a second just to get his proverbial game face on, and when he looks up, his dad is standing in the doorway with an expression on his face like he's seriously considering going back downstairs to get his service weapon. Whether he's planning on shooting Stiles or the dog is kind of unclear. It's probably a fifty-fifty chance, just whichever one of them gets in the way of the bullet first. Maybe he'll eeny-meeny-miney-mo it. He does look genuinely freaked though, and not just over Stiles' new illicit dog ownership, so it probably has something to do with how the dog's showing off his huge canine teeth and doing his best impression of a rabid dingo.

Stiles gives himself a little pep talk that mostly consists of *okay, you can do this and just act casual, nothing to see here*, and then he says, "Hi, dad." He lifts a hand to rub the sleep out of his eye, then flicks the tip of the dog's ear with his fingers while he tells the dog, "Knock it off, that's my dad."

The dog abruptly stops growling and grumbles instead, grouchy as always, then squirms around until he's lying more on his stomach than his side. He shoves his wet nose into the hollow between Stiles' neck and the pillow, and it's kind of cold and uncomfortable but Stiles gets the feeling the dog is doing it to make a statement, since he also looks like he's mad about being woken up. Stiles doesn't give the dog the satisfaction of recoiling like he really wants to, even when the dog gives him a sly look through one slitted eye and flicks out his tongue to lick a wet stripe just under Stiles' ear.

"Dad, it's really early," Stiles says, looking at his dad and aiming for both put out and nonchalant. "It's *Saturday*, we should all sleep in."

"Yeah, well, apparently I should've been home even earlier," Dad says, in that *what the hell, son* tone that Stiles knows so well. "You do realize that when I said no to a dog — repeatedly, over more than a decade — that I was talking about *all* forms of canine, right? You can't actually get around it on a technicality by bringing home a *wolf*, Stiles."

"Oh my god, what is it with everyone?" Stiles says, groaning. He hauls the dog in a little closer, squeezing his arms around the dog's neck like he might have to physically prevent his

dad from dragging the dog right out of the house. Surprisingly, the dog doesn't resist, and instead just licks him again. "He's not a wolf, dad, he's just a super-majestic dog. I'm pretty sure a wolf wouldn't let me live to tell the tale if I *snuggled* it."

Dad sighs, leaning against the door frame. "That's at least a wolf hybrid, Stiles, it has to be. They're illegal to possess in the state of California, by the way."

"You have no proof," Stiles says, narrowing his eyes at his dad.

"I don't actually need any, *son*, since you're not keeping it either way." Dad crosses his arms over his chest, doing his best to look like an immovable object.

"Dad, you always tried to teach me to do the right thing, and I have to say right now I'm disappointed in you," Stiles says. "I heroically saved this dog's life, got him medical attention, and provided him shelter, and now you want me to just kick him out on the street? That's pretty heartless."

"You're pretty insufferable," his dad parries, and then points at the collar around the dog's neck. "Does he have tags?"

"He didn't even have a collar when I found him," Stiles says. "And he doesn't have a microchip either, Scott checked. Come on, dad, this is totally meant to be. Me and this dog are soul mates."

Dad groans. "Okay, kid, for starters, you can't just steal somebody's pet. I'm sure it has an owner out there somewhere who's looking for it right now. Also, you skipped the part where you *ask* me whether you can bring home a dog. That part's important because it's the part where I say *no*."

"Dad--"

"You're going to make up some posters to try to find its owner, Stiles," his dad says, and his tone says this is going to be the end of this conversation, and he isn't screwing around. This maybe wasn't the best day to spring this on his dad, because the guy looks kind of wrecked, like he -- well, like he spent the whole night in the woods looking for half a dead body. Probably takes it out of a person. "You're going to put up those posters around town *this morning*, and you're going to make a sincere effort to find the owner or you're going to be grounded for the rest of your life. Clear?"

"But I can keep him if nobody calls," Stiles says, and tries to make it more of a statement than a question.

"No, but if it's well-behaved I'll consider letting it stay a few days while you're looking for the owner. That animal's *your* responsibility for now, kid, so don't screw this up."

"I won't, I promise!" Stiles says, already planning how he can turn 'a few days' into 'forever and ever.' It's a start, anyway. He propels himself out of bed with a fresh jolt of energy, ready to be up and moving around and doing... something. Probably starting with a shower because now he smells like dirt and dog. The dog watches him like he's a particularly hilarious

sitcom, which probably he kind of is because he's not even been up for twenty seconds and already he's tripped over the dirty jeans he left on the floor and nearly taken a header into his computer monitor.

"I'll start some breakfast," Dad says, sighing like he knows his son is a lost cause. He's muttering to himself as he retreats back downstairs, but Stiles doesn't bother trying to listen because it's most likely to be imprecations against his own character, and he doesn't need that kind of crap for his self-esteem.

He has a lot to do this morning, anyway, because the work of a dog owner is never done. He showers in about five minutes flat, because he's eager to get back to the dog, and then he gets dressed and takes the dog with him downstairs, where his dad is apparently making an attempt to cook turkey bacon and eggs. He'll probably overcook both, but Stiles has learned to live with rubbery eggs, so he just ignores the whole scene and rummages in the fridge, looking for the ideal pill delivery system. He comes up with a brick of cheese and cuts a few chunks off so he can stuff the antibiotics and the painkillers in them.

When he turns around, the dog is sitting primly just inside the kitchen entryway, watching Stiles intently, as if somebody told him to sit and stay. Dad is watching from the corner of his eye, and seems kind of impressed despite himself. Even when Stiles turns around with the two lumps of cheese in his hand, the dog doesn't budge, apparently happy to wait for his treats to be hand-delivered, and when Stiles offers them to him gingerly, one at a time, the dog just takes each one carefully between his teeth then swallows them whole, like he knows the pills are in there and doesn't want to bite down on them.

"Nice manners," Dad says, begrudgingly. "You could learn a thing or two from that dog."

"Please, I taught him everything he knows," Stiles says, and ruffles the dog's ears casually in a way that he hopes conveys their deep and abiding connection.

The dog doesn't really help with that; he just huffs like he's offended by Stiles taking the credit, then gets up and walks to the front door like he's impatient for his human servant to take him outside. At least the dog's moving better today, like the sleep did a world of good for his aches and pains, and he's much more bright-eyed this morning. He's not even limping much, although he still moves awkwardly with the cast on.

The rest of the new morning routine goes surprisingly smoothly. It turns out the dog does know how to walk on a leash, and he paces along right next to Stiles as they meander around the block. He refuses to behave like a normal animal and just relieve himself on the grass, but he does climb halfway into a hedge and growl at Stiles until he turns around, at which point the dog apparently feels like he finally has enough privacy to go. Stiles stands guard and tries to look casual, even though he's aware that what he actually looks like is a nutcase trying to take a leashed hedge for a walk.

When they get back to the house, breakfast is ready, such as it is, so Stiles brings down the dog's dishes and puts them in the corner while he and his dad sit down at the table. The dog wanders over to investigate the dishes and Stiles is sure that he's going to eat -- last night's kibble dinner is still piled in the bowl -- but instead the dog just laps up a long, leisurely drink from the water bowl. Then he comes over to the table, sits on the floor, and watches them dig

in to their bacon and eggs. He doesn't beg or whine or drool, but he *does* look openly resentful.

Stiles tries to ignore it, because he read last night on some website that giving a dog any sort of attention while you're at the table eating is just going to encourage shameless behavior in the future, and the last thing he needs is for his dog to start trying to steal his dad's breakfast.

It turns out that he's underestimating the dog, though. Stiles steadfastly ignores everything at the table, from the dog's glaring to his dad's unspoken judgment, choosing instead to stare down at his eggs which are, in fact, both rubbery and bland. When he looks up again, the dog has migrated from his previous seat and is suddenly sitting right next to Stiles' dad. He's still polite, not pushy, but his look's turned from righteous anger to pathetic beseeching, and every once in awhile he ducks his head like he's embarrassed to be begging. It's like watching a little street urchin begging for more porridge. It's undignified, is what it is.

Dad is staring back at the dog, frowning, and that's when Stiles realizes a couple of things. First, he knows with a sudden clarity that he'd almost call clairvoyance that his dad is about to feed the dog an entire slice of bacon. Second, he knows *exactly* why his dad has been denying him a dog all these years.

"No, dad, don't--" Stiles warns, his own fork clattering back onto his plate, like he's going to lunge across the table and stop this train wreck before it starts.

It's too late. Dad's already holding out the piece of bacon and although the dog takes it gently, keeps his teeth as far as they can get from Dad's hand, the entire slice is gone in an instant.

The dog looks at Stiles and narrows his eyes like he's just daring Stiles to make another move, so Stiles eases himself back into his chair, knowing when he's beaten. He's beaten a lot lately, as it turns out, but only since he brought home the dog.

"He's hungry, Stiles," Dad chides, holding out a chunk of scrambled eggs cooked brown. The dog doesn't seem to mind Dad's truly absent culinary skills. "Why haven't you fed him?"

"I *have*," Stiles moans. "But he's not going to eat his kibble when you're feeding him *bacon*. This is why you always said no to a dog, isn't it?"

Dad scowls, but he doesn't stop feeding the dog from his plate. The dog just takes each offering daintily, pausing every now and again to chew with visible relish and shoot Stiles triumphant looks.

"There are a lot of reasons we can't have a dog, Stiles," Dad says. Usually he sounds exasperated when they have this discussion — it's a regular family tradition — but this time he sounds kind of pained, like he doesn't want to be reminded of the reasons himself. That's... odd. "Neither of us are home enough. You're going to be going off to college soon; I can tell you right now that they don't allow dogs in dorm rooms, and I'm sure as hell not taking care of your dog for you for four years. Plus there was the incident with the hamster when you--"

“That’s enough!” Stiles interjects, shooting a wild-eyed glance at the dog. “Let’s not talk about that in front of the dog, okay Dad?”

Dad gives Stiles a long, steady look like he’s trying to see inside his son and figure out where things went so horribly wrong, like maybe there’s just a part broken and if he slots it back into place his kid will turn out alright. It’s kind of insulting, but also bizarrely comforting, in its own way. Probably because his dad looks at him like that so often.

“And anyway, I’m not going to let you deflect this time, buddy,” Stiles says, pointing an accusing finger. “You don’t want a dog because you would be completely at its mercy. Dogs are like your kryptonite, aren’t they?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Dad huffs, while he’s dotingly tearing his bacon into bite-sized bits for the dog, nevermind that the dog’s idea of ‘bite-sized’ is basically an entire human hand.

“Dad, you’re feeding him your breakfast off your own plate.”

“He’s injured, Stiles, he needs to keep his energy up,” Dad says, and the dog shoots Stiles a look like, *Yeah, Stiles, I’m a delicate fucking flower, just deal with it.*

“If I tried to eat off your plate, you’d smack my hand and tell me to get my own,” Stiles points out.

“Of course I would, but you’ve got thumbs, you can cook your own bacon,” Dad says, as the last of his eggs disappear down the dog’s gullet.

Stiles groans and gives it up, digging back in to his own breakfast vindictively, as if to prove that he’s above all this. It really is kind of horrible though, and he gives up halfway through, dumping the dog’s stale kibble into the trash can and scraping the remnants of his own meal right into the bowl.

His dad doesn’t say anything about it, but the dog practically swaggers his way over to the food dish to enjoy his spoils.

Chapter 4

Stiles makes the posters like his dad told him to, but he chooses not to go easy into that good night, because this dog can't possibly have an owner, and if he does then clearly they are totally crappy at owning a dog and Stiles should get to keep the dog anyway.

He doesn't put a photo on the poster, because his dog is ridiculously awesome-looking and he doesn't want a bunch of scammers calling trying to stake a claim. He also doesn't design his poster on the computer like he would for a school project because maybe then if the dog really does have an owner then they'll see the handwritten posters and figure the dog has found a kid to love him, and whatever asshole lost this glorious dog in the first place will realize what an idiot they are, turn over a new leaf, and leave Stiles and his dog the hell alone.

So Stiles takes a piece of printer paper, and finds a thick magic marker. He writes at the top, *Found dog*, and at the bottom his own cell phone number. And then he wonders how he should describe the dog so that somebody could potentially, but not necessarily easily, recognize him.

He thinks about it for awhile, and then he writes a few things down. He goes through three drafts before he has a flyer that he's satisfied with. The finished product reads:

Found dog

Black-ish

Very large

Extremely surly

Will not eat dog food

Kind of a jerk actually

Refuses to answer to the name Dude

For being purposefully vague, it's actually a really accurate summary. Stiles draws an unflattering cartoon rendering of the dog in the corner, and calls it good.

+++

Stiles takes the dog with him while he's hanging up the "found dog" posters, but he leaves Dude in the Jeep, because a) it's not really that good idea to take a dog with a broken leg for long walks all over town and b) he doesn't want anybody to see his dog, connect it with the "found dog" posters, and realize that it's *their* dog. He has to hang the flyers all over town, even in the high-traffic areas he'd rather avoid, because his dad spends a good part of his

workday driving around Beacon Hills and he's going to know if Stiles half-asses it. So Stiles hangs flyers up in all the places he should, like the bulletin boards at the coffee shops and the lamp post right outside the pet store, and as he tapes each one up he sends a little prayer out to the ineffable universe in the hopes that the flyers will be somehow magically just not very noticeable, that nobody will really see them at all, that nobody will call.

It's a depressingly short period of time that passes -- only three hours after they get back home -- before somebody calls. Stiles is sitting on the floor in his room, the better to commune with the dog on its level (although actually when Stiles is sitting on the floor the dog is taller than him, which is disconcerting). He's trying to entice Dude to play with the squeaky squirrel, and it isn't going well, because when he squeaks the toy the dog doesn't even tilt his head adorably to one side like all the dog videos that Stiles has watched on YouTube. Actually he doesn't even *look* at the squirrel, he just stares at Stiles like, *Really?* and looks bored.

That's still an improvement though over Stiles' previous attempt at togetherness activities, only a half an hour ago, when he pulled out the beef jerky treats and the book on obedience training and got down to business with trying to teach the dog how to sit. That all ended in tears and heartbreak and jerky treats scattered all over the floor, which the dog cleaned up with his mouth like he was doing Stiles a favor. After he was satisfied that all the treats were in his stomach, he did finally sit down, but it was less like obedience and more like a taunt.

And okay, maybe the squirrel isn't Stiles' best ever idea, but it's also kind of his last idea. He is determined to make this dog like him, but the dog also failed to show any interest in the tug rope, the frisbee, or the tennis balls, and short of feeding the dog every last scrap of human food in the house, he's not sure how to accomplish that. Probably that's what the dog is angling for, but Stiles refuses to believe that he's inherited his dad's genetic predisposition toward dog-related weakness. Stiles is stronger than this. Stiles is going to find a way to prevail.

He tries tossing the squirrel straight up in the air above the dog, so the dog can jump up and catch it, because Mr. Davison at the end of the block has a labrador that goes absolutely insane when Stiles does that, but Stiles' dog shows no signs of excitement whatsoever. He only catches the toy out of self-defense, to keep it from landing on his own head, and he doesn't even have to move to catch it; he just tilts his head back and opens up his massive jaw, and the toy just sort of lands there like a perfect pop fly.

Dude drops the squirrel onto the floor between his front feet, and he inspects it for a moment like he's trying to figure out what's supposed to be appealing about it. Then he presses down on it with his good foot, and while the toy lets out a wheezing squeak like a death cry, he stoops down and sets his teeth into the plush fabric and tears it apart with a single small pull, like he's eviscerating a real squirrel.

A bit of stuffing spills out, and so does the plastic squeaker from inside. The dog looks at it like he's disappointed there's no real viscera, then he looks at Stiles with a false apology in his eyes, like, *Oh, sorry, did you want to play with that some more? I didn't realize.*

The phone rings when they're in the middle of a deep exchange of meaningful looks, which on Stiles' side are meant to convey disappointment and on the dog's side are... actually

probably also meant to convey disappointment, come to think of it. The phone breaking things up is kind of a relief, until he picks it up and the screen just shows “withheld” instead of a phone number or a name from his contacts list. There’s a twist of apprehension in his stomach and Stiles thinks about not answering it, but then whoever it is will just leave a voicemail and also his voicemail greeting has his name and it’s not like there’s more than one “Stiles” in Beacon Hills or probably in the world, so if they really want the dog back they’re going to be able to track him down and--

He accepts the call before he has a chance to start hyperventilating and says, “Yeah?” into the phone, which is probably not his most formal and respectful greeting ever, but screw anybody who wants to take his dog, seriously. Dude lifts his head and stares at Stiles and the phone, like he’s listening. He probably is, since he’s got a stake in this whole thing too.

“So I lost my dog, and he is kind of a huge jerk, now that you mention it,” says the voice on the phone, which sounds like a girl -- actually a hot girl, with sort of a husky timbre to her voice. She sounds the way people sound when you can’t see them but you can still tell they’re smiling. “I’m not sure if it’s my dog you have though because I probably wouldn’t describe him as surly so much as just the king of all grumpiness. It’s a fine distinction.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, slowly, because he actually really wants to agree with her that that’s pretty spot-on, but then he’ll have to admit that he’s got her dog and he’s not alright with that. At all. “Um, can you describe him?”

“Very large, black-ish,” she says, obviously reading from the poster, and Stiles has one moment of soaring joy that she’s just some random person and Dude isn’t her dog at all before she goes on and all of his hopes are dashed. “He looks like he’s still growing into his paws, even though he’s actually not, and his eyes are sort of yellow and he’s got a little bit of gray around his face and the sides of his neck. His ears are pointy and he looks like a wild animal which is partly because he’s got a little wolf in his family tree and partly because as much as we tried to teach him manners, it just never really stuck. What else? Um, he likes to growl a lot and he doesn’t have a sense of humor.”

Stiles clears his throat, which is basically just his best bet for keeping himself from crying. Because that description is really accurate, but also Dude’s ears are pricked forward and there’s an intent look on his face like he can hear the voice on the other end of the line and he recognizes it.

“Yeah,” Stiles says weakly. “He really doesn’t have a sense of humor, you’re right. You should hear some of the jokes I’ve told him, and he hasn’t laughed *once*.”

The girl laughs, which is kind of gratifying in its way but isn’t really enough to make the situation any less shitty. “That sounds like him,” she says. “Is he okay? I got worried when he didn’t come home.”

“Well, he got hit by a car,” Stiles says. “Almost two cars.” He hopes she feels fucking awful because her dog almost died and really she’s an unfit parent. Guardian. Owner. Whatever. She let her dog play in traffic, is his point. “He broke his leg, but I guess it wasn’t as horrible as I thought it was at first, because I took him to my friend, who works at the vet’s, and he

said it didn't look all that bad on the x-ray. He'll be okay, I guess. I mean, he's doing fine and I have antibiotics and things for him, and his leg's in a cast."

"God, fucking day," the girl says, almost under her breath, and the cheerfulness that was in her voice only a moment ago has completely bled away. "That's really... fuck. Thank you, for finding him. And taking care of him. And obviously being an amazing person. What's your name?"

"Stiles," he says.

"I'm Laura. Stiles, I really do appreciate everything you've done and it's even been awesome talking to you like a normal person because there was a death in my family last night and with the dog running off on top of that I kind of felt like I was going to lose my mind. I hate to impose on you any more, but could I pick him up? Like right now? I'm just leaving the sheriff's station and I want to go back to the motel and sleep for about a million years, and I'm not sure I can do that without a dog to cuddle."

Dude whines, low and distressed, and squirms his way under Stiles' arm like he hears the word 'cuddle' and feels it's necessary to enact that plan immediately. Stiles tightens his arm around the dog's neck and half-buries his face in the soft fur at his throat. "Yeah, I... that sounds fine, I guess. I could meet you there, if it's easier? My dad works at the station."

"Oh no, I don't want you to go out of your way. Just give me directions and I'll be there before you know it."

He doesn't want her to be there before he knows it, but he gives her directions anyway, and if he spends the whole time after he hangs up clinging to Dude's fur and crying, there's nobody to know but the two of them, and he doesn't think Dude would tell. The dog doesn't even fidget or look embarrassed -- not that Stiles notices, although he's kind of too busy having an emotional breakdown to notice anyway -- which is downright charitable of him.

Stiles eventually drags himself up, though, because he knows exactly how long it takes to get from the sheriff's station to his house, and it's going to take a few minutes for Dude to get down the stairs with the cast in his way. He times it pretty well, at least, because Dude's just negotiating the last step, with his cast held out awkwardly in front of him and a really put-out look on his face, when the doorbell rings.

Laura *is* hot: she's brunette, athletic, and pretty, and she's got to be at least in her mid-twenties, all of which would make her pretty far out of Stiles' league even if he wasn't already thinking of her as the killer of dreams. But she also was apparently telling the truth about her incredibly terrible day because she looks sort of awful, with dark circles under her eyes and her hair pulled back into a messy, lopsided ponytail. She smiles at him, but it's tight and tired.

"You must be Stiles," she says, and steps right in the door to hug him like they're new BFFs. Which kind of makes Stiles mad because *Dude* is his new BFF and he will not have his dog replaced by... his dog's owner. He pauses to reflect on how much his life sucks, and then he hugs Laura back, because he's just never going to turn down free hugs.

Laura seems to need them anyway, because the moment she's let go of Stiles she catches sight of the dog, and if Stiles has any doubts about her dedication they evaporate pretty quickly when she drops to her knees, throws her arms around Dude's body, and squeezes like she's trying to suffocate him, burying her nose in his fur and breathing in his eau-de-dog like it's better than just plain oxygen. Dude's going kind of nuts too, wiggling and crouching and licking frantically at Laura's face, trying to squeeze closer to her which isn't actually possible according to the laws of physics.

When she's done hugging, Laura grabs the dog by his scruffy cheeks and gives him a shake, staring at his face and saying, "You are such an idiot. *Never do that again.*" There's enough strident distress in her voice that it kind of seems like she's talking about something other than the obvious, but Stiles probably shouldn't judge because he's been having serious man-to-man conversations with the dog since he first picked him up off the road last night.

"I really can't thank you enough," Laura says finally, straightening up. Her voice wavers a little like she's going to cry. She's just short enough and the dog's just tall enough that she can keep petting his massive head without even having to bend over. "I'd like to give you a reward or something? I definitely want to pay you back for the vet."

"No need," Stiles says, waving his hand dismissively, trying to be cool and probably utterly failing. His voice sounds even rougher than hers did. "My friend Scott is the vet's assistant, he did it for me for free. You don't need to give me anything or -- I mean, just take care of him, right? Try to break that nasty habit he has of playing in traffic."

Laura laughs and grabs the dog by the scruff of his neck, giving him another shake. "You hear that?" she says to Dude. "He's got a point."

The dog just chuffs an almost-bark, and seems pretty happy about the rough handling. Maybe he would've felt like playing earlier if Stiles had challenged him to a wrestling match or something. Now he'll never know.

"Right," Stiles says, and clears his throat because he can already feel the lump in there. "Well, I should let you go, it sounds like you've had a bad day and I don't want to keep you. Um, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," Laura says. Her face goes a little blank and the dog whimpers and presses himself against her legs like he can feel the sudden weight in the room.

Okay. Awkward. Stiles gives Laura the bottles with Dude's pills, and he offers her the leash, which she takes but seems kind of hesitant to use. Something on Stiles' face must show what he's thinking -- which is that this is undoubtedly how the dog ended up being hit by a car in the first place -- because she ends up snapping the lead onto the collar, even though it's obviously not their usual routine.

"Thanks for taking such good care of him," Laura says. "You're a good kid, Stiles. Maybe we'll see you around?"

"Yeah," Stiles says, and even he can feel that his smile isn't all there. "You've got my number... feel free to call me. You know, if you need a dogsitter or something."

“Sure,” Laura says.

Stiles is sure that she’s never going to call him, ever, but it’s not like it makes any difference to the current sucky situation. Dude noses at his hand as they go out the door, and there’s a brief brush of tongue against Stiles’ thumb, and then they’re both gone, walking away down the sidewalk toward the sleek black Camaro waiting at the curb. Stiles doesn’t stand and watch them -- or at least, he pretends not to stand and watch them, which means he closes the front door instead of standing there like a creeper (he was just beginning to learn that skill from Dude’s example). He goes back up to his room like he’s planning to do something productive, but instead he peers out the window and watches the car. Dude’s just finished squeezing himself into the backseat, which seems hardly big enough for a dog like him, then Laura glances back at the house like she’s checking to make sure Stiles isn’t watching from the door, and then she reaches in after the dog and--

And when she straightens up again, she’s got both collar and leash in her hand, and she tosses them down into the passenger seat footwell like garbage. The engraved tag with Stiles’ name on it glints once in the sun before Laura shuts the passenger side door, circles the car, gets into the driver’s seat and pulls away. Dude is nothing but a dark shape hardly visible through the back window, and Stiles can’t tell whether he’s looking back at the house, looking for Stiles.

But why would he be? He’s just a dog, and his real owner has come to take him back, so he’s exactly where he belongs. Still, it takes a few minutes for Stiles to realize how tightly he’s clenching his fists, and another few to get around to uncurling them.

When he finally turns away from the window, all he sees are his dirty sheets and the disemboweled carcass of a squeaky toy, and it shouldn’t be enough to make him cry again, but it is.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After the first week, Scott hesitantly suggests that they could use some of Stiles' dog stuff at the clinic, if he wants to get rid of it, so Scott takes the big bag of dog food and all the special cleaning supplies and odor sprays and the surviving toys and even the dog dishes.

After two weeks, it's obvious that Stiles was right and Laura isn't going to call.

After three weeks, Stiles still sometimes thinks he sees a dark shape from the corner of his eye, and has to stop himself before he can turn around, looking for Dude.

Stiles stops asking his dad for a dog.

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So it's a surprise when, in the fourth week, he runs into Laura -- almost literally -- in The Magic Bean. He's just walking out while she's walking in, and though everybody knows that those entering to acquire coffee must yield to those exiting carrying precious spillable coffee, apparently Laura doesn't know that. Apparently nobody has ever explained that rule to her, which shouldn't be a surprise since she also doesn't leash her dog and doesn't bother to call people who would really like to hear from her and as it turns out she's kind of a jerk, just like her dog but in a much less charming way. So Stiles is walking out of the coffee shop and somebody opens the door, chivalrously, and Stiles is just opening his mouth to say thanks to whoever that was when Laura walks through the open door from the other side.

Stiles dodges one way and hopes that Laura has the good sense to dodge in the other, because the coffee in his hands is hot enough that it's scorching his fingers a little even with the cardboard sleeve on it. But they are obviously ships meant to collide in the night; she is the iceberg to his Titanic, and he knows somehow that this is all going to end badly, just like his last meeting with her did, only this time it's going to be his body that is left a burned and desolate landscape, instead of just his heart.

He's saved at the last minute by a crushing grip around his elbow, and another hand that comes out of nowhere to pluck his drink from his fingers. The momentum as he's jerked out of Laura's path sends him crashing instead into his rescuer, but since his rescuer is a ridiculous wall of muscle, who doesn't even sway *or* spill a drop of Stiles' coffee (even when Stiles bounces into him like a pinball), it all turns out fine.

Well, fine-ish. Because Laura's still there, and Stiles isn't overjoyed to see her. She's probably perfectly nice. Maybe. But in his head her very existence is now associated with the kind of bone-deep dejection that people don't just recover from overnight.

"Oh my god, Stiles, are you okay?" Laura asks, and clutches at his elbow on the other side, so that he's pinned between her and-- and--

Stiles forgets what he was going to say, because the guy who's holding him up is kind of stupidly beautiful, and Stiles should probably get away from him now before his hands decide to take the initiative on their own and like... touch the guy all over.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I'm good," he says, and takes a step back to put a little space between himself and Laura and probably-her-boyfriend. The guy holds Stiles' coffee out to him, and Stiles takes it back gingerly, too aware of its precious mortality. "You've got awesome reflexes, dude."

The guy doesn't say anything though, just stares at him, which Stiles is kind of used to since he's known far and wide for his ability to talk *at* people more than *with* them. Dazed stares often come with that territory.

"He does, doesn't he?" Laura says. Her hand's still on Stiles' elbow, but at least now it's more just resting there solicitously rather than actually holding him up while he falls face-first into the impressive pectorals possessed by her companion the brick wall. "Hey, we were going to buy some lunch and coffee, will you join us?"

He wants to say no. He does. Because it's not really fair to ask him to sit in his favorite coffee shop and face a reality in which Laura has the world's most beautiful dog *and* a dark, intense, ruggedly handsome boyfriend while Stiles has nothing and no one. (Well, he has Scott, but Scott's more concerned these days with the new girl at school who has yet to really notice him. And he has his dad, who's never known really how to deal with Stiles' grief, particularly not when it's over a dog.)

Laura seems to sense that he's trying to think of an adequate excuse -- he's probably telegraphing it by looking up the mostly-empty street like he's longing for escape -- so she seals the deal with, "I'll give you an update on how Dude's doing."

Damn it. She has him.

"His name can't possibly really be Dude," Stiles says.

"Oh, it's not," Laura says, "but I kind of like 'Dude' better. I've been using it all the time since I brought him home. It makes him give me that one really cranky face, the hilarious one?"

"I remember it well," Stiles says, nodding sagely. "I uh... yeah, I guess I can hang around. I would like to hear how he's doing."

"Great, that's great!" Laura says, and seems to mean it. She doesn't actually tug Stiles back into the shop by the arm, but she clearly wants to.

She steers them toward an open table near the coffee bar, except her boyfriend says, "No Laura, this one," and points instead toward the little table nestled right up in the big bay window at the front of the shop, which is just opening up. It also happens to be Stiles' favorite table, because the afternoon light coming in through that window makes that whole spot kind of deliciously warm, and there are potted plants clustered around that make that particular table more private than the others. It's also pretty much everyone else's favorite

table, probably for the same reasons, but Laura's boyfriend sidles up to it and shoots a glare at a couple of people who were obviously going to make a move for it, and the table is somehow miraculously theirs by the time Laura redirects herself and Stiles over to it.

"Awesome," Stiles says, and doesn't politely wait for anybody else to choose a seat because his favorite seat is the one against the wall and closest to the window. (He told Scott once it was because of his training as a secret agent, that he had to have his back to the wall and a vantage point of all entrances and exits, but mostly it's because it's a lot more interesting than facing the wall and it's nice to be able to stare distractedly out at the street when he's thinking.) Stiles slides into the seat, and Laura's boyfriend actually pulls out a chair on the other side for her, which seems kind of gallant in an old-fashioned way that might be vaguely insulting toward women. He asks Laura what she wants to eat, then stalks off without another word toward the counter.

"So you go to Beacon Hills High, right? How's school going?" Laura asks, and it's just small talk but she actually seems to maybe care.

"It's fine," he says, with a shrug. "Just homework and practice, kind of boring."

"Practice?" Laura repeats, raising an eyebrow.

"Lacrosse," Stiles says. "I don't actually play in the games, like ever, but my best friend wanted to try out for the team and he wanted me to do it with him, so."

"That's adorable," Laura says, grinning. "You're a pretty good friend, huh?"

Stiles shrugs, blushing, and looks down at his coffee. "Not that good. I mean, lacrosse is okay, and it'd be better if we were first string, but I'm kind of glad they left Scott on the bench too because at least that way I have company. If I had to sit on the bench and watch him being a sports superstar all by himself I'm not sure my sense of self-worth could take it."

Laura's laughing when her boyfriend gets back, which makes Stiles flinch back a little because he was *not* flirting and he doesn't know why the guy is suddenly all up in his business. But all the guy does is slide a plate in front of Stiles, like he thinks Stiles ordered something. He puts a sandwich in front of Laura, then stalks wordlessly away to the counter again, to pick up a bowl and a couple of mugs that are there waiting for him.

"Your boyfriend's a real chatterbox, guy doesn't seem to know when to shut up," Stiles says, maybe with a little too much forced cheer, because his heart's hammering a little from how close the guy got and there was a second there when Stiles thought maybe he was going to get punched.

"Derek's my brother, actually," Laura says, and when Derek chooses that moment to come back with the rest of his purchases (soup for himself, and coffees for two), Laura absolutely doesn't do the polite thing and stop talking about him. "It'd be easier if he wasn't, though, because then maybe I could blame his antisocial behavior on his upbringing."

Derek doesn't provide any sort of witty rejoinder, or even acknowledge that his sister's been smack-talking him; he just slides into a seat and puts his head down over his meal. Which

wouldn't be all that unusual except that the seat he slides into is the one next to Stiles, and the table's pretty small so their shoulders kind of brush together, and Stiles isn't sure exactly what's going on here but he feels like it's somehow more than it seems to be. He recalls that being a theme, with Laura: layers on her layers. Which would be a totally valid lifestyle choice if he was only talking about her fashion sense. As far as Stiles is concerned layers are always going to be hip.

Derek, on the other hand, doesn't bother with layers -- literal layers, Stiles isn't sure about the metaphorical ones yet -- which makes sense because if Stiles had a body like that he wouldn't hide it either. Derek's wearing a pair of jeans that are distressed less in an artful way than just a lived-in one, and a charcoal gray henley that hides nothing of the sculpted contours of his chest and shoulders. When he leans over his soup bowl, Stiles can see the enticing lines of his shoulderblades through the cotton. It's all kind of ridiculous, mostly in the way that Derek is sitting *next to Stiles* looking like that. Stiles doesn't understand how any of this is his life.

Also, the food. Because: "This is like my favorite thing on the entire menu here," Stiles says, picking up his fork and pointing down at the plate in front of him. The dessert is a pumpkin sheet cake, slathered in cream cheese filling and rolled up into a sort of loaf, a thick slice of which is now on Stiles' plate.

"Is it?" Derek says, hardly glancing at him, and the look on his face is perfectly neutral, like it's all just crazy random happenstance. It can't possibly be crazy random happenstance.

"Yeah, I get one almost every time I come in here, except I didn't today because I'm broke and they're like four dollars a slice. Which I guess is fair for something that tastes so good I suspect the white powder they dust it with is actually cocaine instead of sugar."

"Huh," Derek says, although it's more of a grunt than a sentence. Either way it's not exactly the sort of response that invites further conversation.

"Seriously though, how did you know? Are you like some sort of dessert psychic? You can't see the future but you can see what someone's favorite type of cake is?"

Laura's laughing into her hand like she doesn't really want to restrain herself but doesn't want her laughter to put an end to the conversation, either. Derek just glares at her and mutters, "Shut up and eat, Stiles," which actually makes Stiles feel a little bit better because everything's been feeling strange and off-kilter but people telling Stiles to shut up brings the whole thing back to a sort of comfortable normalcy.

"Okay, but if I'm shutting up you need to tell me about Dude," Stiles says, and points his fork at Laura before he finally dives into his plate with the enthusiasm he was holding back out of politeness. His cake tastes like magic, like it was baked by Christmas elves and unicorns.

"Oh, yeah, he's doing fine," Laura says. She's already plowed through half her sandwich and turns out to be less of a coffee sipper than a coffee chugger, which is unfair because it makes Stiles like her more and he's actually not all that enthused about liking her at all. It's just that he's been there before with her and it all ended in tears. Literally. "I took him back to see the vet and apparently the break wasn't that bad, because it healed really fast. He's already out of the cast."

“That’s good,” Stiles says, kind of absently. His mind is already wandering, wondering what Dude looks like on four good legs, what he looks like when he’s running and playing and bounding around like normal dogs do. Somehow he has a really hard time imagining Dude doing any of those things at all. Probably even when he feels fine he just sits in shadowed corners and stares at people like they’re personally responsible for all of his unhappiness. “He must be pretty happy to be back home.”

Laura shrugs and looks at her brother, who doesn’t look back at her. He’s staring into his soup like it holds all the answers to all the questions of the universe, or maybe like he can read the clinging remains of beef stew like other people read tea leaves.

“He’s okay,” Laura says. “He’s never really *happy* though. We’ve had a rough couple of years, and then our uncle died, and everything’s just been kind of a mess. Dogs are territorial, you know? All this upheaval isn’t great for them.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says, and it’s all sort of awkward but he does actually mean it. “It was your uncle they found in the woods, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Laura says, at the same time that Derek looks up, scowls, and snaps, “Can we not talk about this?”

“Sorry,” Stiles says again. He shrinks back in his chair a little, doing his best impression of the blank wall behind him. He’s a lot like his father in that he’s not very good at dealing with other people’s grief, either. He probably spent a little too long drowning in his own to ever develop the necessary skills.

“It’s fine,” Laura says, and there’s a thump under the table that makes the dishes rattle. From the pained look on Derek’s face, Stiles can only assume that Laura has just delivered a sharp kick to her brother’s shin. “That’s why I didn’t call you, though. Which I wanted to apologize for, because I probably should have, you were probably worried. You know, about Dude.”

“That’s okay,” Stiles says, even though it wasn’t at the time, because there’s not really anything else you can say when you’ve been moping about missing a dog you had for all of a day and the other person’s been dealing with the death of a family member. It kind of puts things into perspective, and Stiles’ new perspective says he’s kind of been an asshole about the whole thing. “But I was serious about the dogsitting. If you need it. You know, to have one less responsibility for a day or two, or if you have to go out of town or... something. Whatever.”

And that was maybe not the best idea, because Derek’s staring at him again and Laura’s just half-smiling almost bitterly and she says, “If only it were that easy,” and Stiles realizes that possibly his offer just sounds like he’s still focused on getting their dog back into his house and not actually genuinely helping with their problems. Which if he’s honest, the idea’s a little bit of both.

He scoops the last bite of his cake roll onto his fork, even though he isn’t really ready to eat it yet. He wants the dessert experience to last longer but he’d really rather have something to do with his mouth that doesn’t involve sticking his foot in it. He thinks about taking a vow of silence, but he’s honest enough with himself to realize it’s impossible, even if he limits

himself to not talking just for the remainder of this impromptu lunch date. He doesn't even have his food to distract him anymore so he turns desperately to his almost-empty cardboard coffee cup, looking out the window and thinking longingly of escaping this conversation.

Under the table, Derek's leg presses against his, and it's warm and dense with muscles and probably the contact itself is a complete accident, but it's kind of nice anyway, like there's some sort of solidarity between them. It only lasts for a moment anyway, and then Derek abruptly levers himself up from his seat, collecting all of their now-empty dishes and even prying the mostly-empty cardboard cup from Stiles' fingers. He doesn't say anything as he walks toward the counter again, and Stiles is starting to realize that's a theme with him, the brooding silence. It works for him, anyway.

"Don't mind Derek, he's always like this," Laura says. "Moreso lately; he's got a lot on his mind. I should probably get him home before he kills a barista with his teeth or something."

Stiles looks over toward the coffee bar, where Derek looks like he's getting along with the barista fine, and is... actually, is taking back Stiles' cup which appears to have been freshly filled with more coffee. But Stiles can still see the wisdom of getting the poor guy to some less stressful surroundings, because his shoulders are hunched like he's expecting somebody to come up and hit him from behind, and he's got his head ducked down like somebody's *already* hit him. When he turns around and comes back to the table for some reason there's this terrible look on his face like something really bad has happened, though what could possibly have gone down in the one minute he's been away from the table is a mystery, at least to Stiles. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that the last thing Derek needs is to be sitting in a coffee shop with a stranger talking about a dog.

"Can we go?" Derek asks Laura, sliding Stiles' refilled coffee cup across the table into his hands without even looking at him. "I have things I need to do today."

Laura's gone a little pale too, like she knows exactly what's wrong and is freaking out a little about it. She's already standing up as she says, "It was really good to see you, Stiles, seriously, take care of yourself, okay?" and they're both out the door before Stiles can even offer any polite but impersonal goodbyes of his own. Which okay, weird. Stiles is accustomed to being the most socially awkward person in any given room but even he knows that was just bizarre.

He watches them through the window as they walk out to the Camaro at the curb, Laura saying something that Stiles can't hear, Derek still looking tense and obviously not answering. Stiles is still watching when Derek turns away from the car, looking back toward the shop, his eyes meeting Stiles' through the window. Stiles gives him a tentative smile and raises his hand in a little wave that's mostly wiggling fingers.

Derek doesn't wave back, just keeps staring for one long moment then ducks into the passenger seat of the car, and then they're gone.

Stiles stays for awhile, telling himself that he's perfectly justified in doing so just because he has the most awesome table in the whole coffee shop, possibly the most awesome table in the whole *town*, and he's not going to waste it. He sits and sips his fresh coffee and stares out the window. Nothing in particular is happening out there anymore, just people coming and going,

cars rolling past, red and yellow autumn leaves drifting down one at a time from the trees along Center Street, but he isn't really watching any of it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Just FYI Stiles' dessert is a slice of [pumpkin cake roll](#) and it really is made by unicorns and Christmas elves. It is the most magical dessert that has ever existed. If you've never had it I feel really sad for you.

Chapter 6

When Stiles gets home an hour later, Dude is sitting on the front porch, looking morose.

Stiles slows down when he catches sight of the dog, thinking that any abrupt move might send Dude running off to who knows where, but Dude doesn't move, except that his tail starts tentatively wagging when Stiles gets to the porch steps.

"Hey, dude," Stiles says, softly, and Dude's mouth gapes open and his tongue lolls out between his huge teeth.

Dude walks over casually, like just dropping by here is something he does every day, and when Stiles stoops down, the dog pushes his body right into Stiles' arms, demanding a hug. Stiles is more than happy to oblige, reeling Dude in with his arms and giving him a long, lingering squeeze, inhaling that familiar but half-forgotten doggy scent and pressing his face into the silver fur edging Dude's neck. It feels really awesome, and this is just one of the many reasons that Stiles has always wanted a dog: because they're so much easier than people. There's never anything awkward about giving a dog a hug or even asking a dog for one; all you have to do is crouch down, look welcoming and be prepared to get drooled on. Actually, Scott's kind of like that too, which is maybe why they're friends.

When Stiles straightens up, after an embarrassingly long interval clinging to an animal like he's depending on it completely for his own mental well-being, Dude just presses his entire body weight against Stiles' thigh and sighs like he's satisfied, which actually warms Stiles' heart a little. Stiles drops a hand down to curl against Dude's massive head and keeps it there, even though that leaves him unlocking the door with his left hand and trying not to fumble the keys.

Dude walks inside with him, which at this point is not at all a surprise, and strolls right into the living room like he owns the joint. Stiles is about to yell at him to not, under any circumstances, climb up on the couch, when he realizes his dad is already in there, slumped on the cushions, and Dude has only gone to say hello.

"I thought we didn't have a dog anymore," Dad calls out, trusting that his son is somewhere in the vicinity. He's trying to sound cranky but there's a mushy undertone in his voice and he's ruffling his fingers through the thick hair over Dude's shoulders.

"He was sitting on the porch," Stiles says. "I'll call Laura."

He doesn't really want to call Laura. Even aside from the fact that he'd much rather just steal her dog and never hear from her again, he's also not quite sure where they stand, after that more-than-slightly-bizarre lunch and the way Laura and her brother took off. It would've been enough to heavily damage Stiles' self-esteem except that he's pretty sure *they're* the weird ones and it has nothing to do with him. He still digs his phone out of his pocket, though, and retreats into the kitchen so he won't be talking over whatever it is his dad is watching on TV.

Laura picks up on the fifth ring, and says, "Hello," in that neutral-yet-wary tone of voice that people use when they think they might just be answering the call of a telemarketer. Which is pretty definitive proof that Laura not only never intended to call, but also that she didn't even bother saving Stiles' number into her phone. Typical.

"Hey Laura, it's Stiles," Stiles says, trying to sound upbeat instead of pissed off. He is kind of pissed off, though. "Your dog just turned up at my place, if you wanted to come pick him up."

"Oh," Laura says, and she sounds genuinely surprised by this turn of events. "I'm sorry, Stiles. I-- he's a pretty serious escape artist. Has a tendency to disappear on me at the best of times, but he's kind of pissed at me right now. I hope he's not being a bother."

"He's fine," Stiles says. "But if he has a habit of getting out maybe you should keep a collar on him, at least? You've still got the one I had on him, feel free to use it."

"He slips collars, too," Laura says. Her tone is just casual enough to set Stiles' teeth on edge, because it's always excuses with her and it just burns a little too see anybody fail to appreciate what they have quite as spectacularly as Laura is right now.

"Whatever," Stiles says, and sounds sharper than he really means to. "Are you going to come get him?"

"It kind of sounds like he wanted to visit," Laura says. She's hesitant this time, so she's definitely picking up how mad he is. "And you said before that you wanted him to. So if it's okay with you, he can just hang out there for awhile. Just kick him out whenever you're ready; he'll come home."

"Oh my god," Stiles groans. "You do realize that you're seriously like the worst pet owner ever?"

"I never claimed to know what I was doing with all this," Laura snaps back. "He's more of a handful than you think."

"Alright, so take the night off, that's what I *offered* with the dogsitting thing in the first place," Stiles grumbles back. "But I'm not just shoving him out the door to make his own way home. I'll drop him off. Where do you live?"

"You really don't need to do that, he's fine to--"

"It's that or I keep him until you come to pick him up yourself," Stiles says. "I've got my own car; I don't mind."

Laura sighs. "Okay. You know the old Hale house, right?"

"Yeeeeeeeah," Stiles answers slowly. "You mean the one that burned down a few years ago?"

"That's the one," Laura says.

"I honestly don't know how to respond to that," Stiles says, because he does in fact know that house. It's a fire trap for all that it's burned down once already and the county's been trying

to obtain ownership of the land it sits on so they can demolish the place before any middle school kids manage to fall through the rotting floorboards and kill themselves. (There was a close call last Halloween; Stiles' dad griped about it for days.) It isn't like anybody still cares for the property, much less lives in the house, which means that either Laura is squatting or--

"Oh my god, you're Laura and Derek *Hale*," Stiles says, and he realizes he's stating the should-have-been-obvious but he just somehow can't keep the words in at *all*.

"You're only now realizing that?" Laura says. She sounds like she's trying not to laugh at him. "I thought we were local celebrities or something. Every time I go to the grocery store people whisper and point."

"Wow, that sucks," Stiles says, heartfelt, feeling kind of knocked on his ass by the whole thing. He's not good at sympathy either, but he still feels it, a vague churning of nausea in his stomach when he thinks about how many people died in that fire, how much it must have hurt. How much it must have hurt the couple of people who lived, too. "I feel like I just took this conversation to a really awkward place."

"Oh, don't worry, it started out pretty awkward," Laura says, brightly. "I'm going to hang up on you now. Seriously, though, you should just kick the dog out and he'll end up back here. I promise he won't get hit by any cars this time."

"You can't know that," Stiles says to dead air, because his phone informs him that Laura has already hung up on him.

When he goes back into the living room to ask his dad what he wants for dinner, he finds his dad and the dog both curled up on the couch, watching reruns of *M*A*S*H*, both of them already half-asleep. Stiles boggles at it for a moment: the dog's butt tucked up against his dad's thigh, his dad absentmindedly burying his fingers in the fur at Dude's flank, Dude with his chin resting on his crossed paws in a pose that could look regal and kingly if not for the way his eyes blink sleepily and his cheeks puff out a little with each breath.

"I can't believe you let the dog up on the couch," Stiles says.

"We saved you a spot," his dad replies, ignoring the fact that the "spot" is only about six inches wide, unless Stiles is willing to somehow shoehorn himself in under the dog's head.

Stiles goes back into the kitchen, reheats a few plates of leftover vegetable lasagna and brings them out to the living room so they can eat on the couch. He ends up squeezing himself in underneath the dog after all, although it's kind of awkward to eat with Dude's huge paws and even-more-huge head in his lap, because the dog keeps squirming trying to beg food out of him, and Stiles ends up eating with his plate held up in the air, which his dad thinks is hilarious but is actually just tiring. After awhile the dog gives up, and Stiles uses him as a lap table instead until the food is gone.

They all sit like that together for awhile, the dog stretching out gradually to take over more and more space, his body becoming increasingly heavy and boneless, until it's nearly time for bed and Stiles figures he ought to drive the dog home. He stands up to get his keys, and the

dog gets up too, slowly and laboriously, stretching his front end out even while his back end is still on the couch, like some sort of highly advanced and complex yoga move.

“You’re seriously going to give a stray dog a lift home?” his dad says, raising an eyebrow. “What is he, your date?”

“I’m pretty sure there are laws about loose dogs, *Sheriff*,” Stiles says. “I’m just looking out for public safety.”

“Big of you,” says Dad, in a tone that implies that he’s laughing inside at Stiles’ expense. It’s a really familiar tone.

The dog also makes a noise that seems like the canine equivalent to laughter, and then he saunters to the front door like he’s intending to wait to be let out. It turns out the “waiting” part is only implied though, because when the dog gets to the door he jumps up with his front legs, bracing them against the door and the frame, and with one casual swipe of his paw he has the deadbolt unlocked. Then he puts one of his forelegs over the top of the doorknob and curls his heavy padded foot around it, and it might be sort of inelegant but it still works. The knob turns, the latch clicks, the door opens just enough that Dude can get a paw into the gap to pull the door all the way open, and then he slips through and pads down the front steps like this is something he does every day.

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After that, Dude starts just dropping by a couple of times a week, like he has nothing better to do than stalk Stiles around town. “Stalk” really is the appropriate word, too, because it isn’t just Stiles’ house where he turns up; sometimes he watches lacrosse practice from the trees beyond the bleachers, and on one memorable occasion he even lets himself in to the boys’ locker room after everybody else has cleared out.

That last incident is a particularly unforgettable one, because it comes after a seriously brutal lacrosse practice where Jackson, apparently having finally noticed that Stiles has had a crush on his girlfriend since forever, seems to feel that the appropriate response is burying Stiles’ body in the turf at every opportunity. Stiles is accustomed to being the team’s designated checking dummy, but this is kind of excessive, particularly when Stiles gets cross-checked in the face when he hasn’t even got his helmet on, and when Jackson delivers a punishing illegal body check while Stiles is *actually sitting on the bench*. It’s all really stupid -- because it’s like Jackson thinks that Lydia is actually going to *notice* Stiles and Stiles is ever, in any way, going to become a threat, which is almost hilariously far-fetched -- but it doesn’t seem so bad when Dude sidles up next to Stiles in the locker room and leans in, licking tentatively at the blooming bruises that are coming in along Stiles’ ribs, while Stiles gingerly hugs him.

It turns out that having his own dog, even if he’s on like this weird unspoken canine timeshare with that dog’s actual owner, is just as awesome as Stiles always imagined it would be. It’s well-timed too, because it’s only a few days after Dude starts his every-breath-you-take routine that Stiles loses Scott entirely. Well, mostly. Because Scott’s completely in love with a girl from school named Allison, but he’s also completely failed to get her attention, due to a combination of factors. Those factors being, in no particular order: sucking at lacrosse, being Stiles’ best friend, being not-popular, and being too shy to just talk to her like

a human being even though she seems perfectly nice. Stiles does his best to help because that's what friends do, but his best is basically giving Scott pep talks which Scott ignores because Stiles' only advice is that Scott just needs to get her attention somehow, and Scott is too shy to actually do anything to make that happen.

It happens anyway, because Scott is just lucky like that, although Scott probably wouldn't have actually chosen for it to happen the way it does, which is that Scott finds himself running late for biology at the same time Allison is running late for English, and they're the only two people in an otherwise empty corridor, and when Scott realizes that this may be his one and only chance to talk to her, he starts panicking, then he starts hyperventilating. Then he starts having an asthma attack. And *that*, Allison notices.

All's well that ends well, though, at least for Scott, because he does have to suffer through an asthma attack which always sucks no matter how routine they might be -- Stiles has seen enough of them now that just the sight of Scott gasping for breath makes his own chest hurt -- but he has his inhaler, and he also ends up sitting on the floor with Allison beside him, leaning into him with her whole body and rubbing gentle circles on his back, coaching him through slowing down his breathing and waiting until he's calmed down to ask if he's okay because she knows he can't answer until then and isn't she just *amazing*, Stiles?

Stiles learns about all of this in intimate detail during third period, including what Allison smelled like and how soothing her voice is, so he isn't entirely surprised when they walk out of school at the end of the day and Allison is waiting outside the front doors, wanting to know how Scott's feeling. Things between the two of them just naturally take off after that, leaving Stiles with a best friend who now exists mostly in absentia.

Stiles is okay with it, really, especially because now he has Dude to hang out with. The dog turns up more and more often, and they get into the habit of taking long walks into the Beacon Hills Preserve, because Stiles appreciates nature and he also feels like it's safest to try to draw the dog away from city streets where cars are a thing. It's Dude's idea to turn their leisurely walks into impromptu runs, but Stiles surprises even himself by not objecting too much. Running turns out to be not so bad when Coach Finstock isn't there hurling abuse at him, and there's just something infectious about Dude's joyful energy when he's bounding down the trail on his long legs, happy just to exist, present in the way that animals always manage effortlessly. Sometimes he disappears into the underbrush to investigate an intriguing smell, and sometimes he circles around to the rear so he can launch a surprise attack, nipping playfully at Stiles' heels, but mostly the dog just keeps pace at Stiles' side, happy to stay even without a leash to tether him.

That means something, but Stiles doesn't want to look at it too closely, for fear that whatever it is will disappear.

Considering how much time he spends in the woods now, it takes seriously a long time -- at least a week -- before he comes across the Hale house. He's still learning the trails through the Preserve, figuring out where all the paths lead and which ones are best for loop runs, so he tries to explore a new route every day, and just statistically it makes sense that eventually he's going to come across the trail that leads into the Preserve and then loops around, promisingly, back toward the road. Except that first it runs actually *off* the Preserve and into

what Stiles is pretty sure is private property, and he knows where they're headed before they even get there because Dude starts hanging back, whimpering a little under his breath, like it's too early and he doesn't want to go home yet and he *swears* he doesn't hear his mom calling him for dinner.

Stiles huffs out, "Relax, I just want to get a look at the place, I'm not trying to drag you home against your will. You'd just escape and show up at my house again anyway."

That seems to mollify the dog a bit -- well, the tone of Stiles' voice must do it, anyway, because dogs can't actually understand full sentences in English, especially not this particular dog who still can't seem to get his head wrapped around the idea of "sit" for all that he's completely capable of opening doors on his own -- because he comes along willingly enough and he doesn't leave when they reach the edge of the treeline where it opens up to the Hale property.

Stiles is expecting the house as he last saw it, at least a year ago when he convinced Scott to come out here to poke around the burnt-out shell of the place with him. They only stayed a few minutes because ash turned out to be a pretty bad idea overall with Scott's asthma, but what Stiles remembers most is what the house looked like from the outside, the way the blackened remains of the second floor hung in empty air, how the whole place looked like something massive had come along and just taken a bite out of it.

What's standing in the clearing now, however, is something completely different. The footprint of the old house is still there, but the shell of it is gone, completely demolished and even hauled away, because there's not even a single piece of scorched wood left. It looks like someone is in the process of ripping up the foundations, too, because the concrete is broken in places like somebody's been taking to it with a sledgehammer.

Standing further back on the property, a bit closer to the far edge of the tree line, there's a brand new house. It's smaller than the one Stiles remembers -- smaller even than the half a house that the fire left behind -- but it looks new and cozy, and the walls are mostly less-flammable stonework which was probably a conscious decision on somebody's part. It looks rustic and charming and it's obviously only been recently finished, because there's a stack of lumber sitting next to it and power tools still set up. Beside it is the skeleton of what might become a shed or a greenhouse, and it's a work in progress but Stiles can still tell somehow that it's going to be beautiful when it's all done. It's going to be like something straight out of a charming countryside-themed Christmas card.

There's a big pile of rocks in front of him, just outside the treeline, and he climbs up on it for a better look because if he's a little higher up he thinks he might be able to see whether that outbuilding is a greenhouse or not, and he's maybe too curious about whether Laura or Derek are into gardening, and the dog yelps sharply, and Stiles is absolutely not picturing Derek shirtless and sweaty and pushing a wheelbarrow or something, and--

And the pile of rocks isn't actually a pile of rocks, and climbing up on it is not, as it turns out, his best idea to date.

He can feel the surface beneath him snapping the moment he puts his weight on it, and where he expected more stone beneath his foot there's only wood of the old and obviously rotten

variety. His foot punches through it like it's paper, and then the rest of him follows, down into the dark.

Chapter 7

There are actually a lot of things to be thankful for, in this particular situation. Like, one of the best things is that Stiles doesn't hit his head on the way down. Sure, it's not great that he's ended up chest deep in frigid water, but at least he's not *drowning* in it while unconscious, so that's a point for Team Stiles right there. He also hasn't broken any bones or really particularly injured himself, so all he has to worry about are a few scrapes and bruises and how exactly he's going to get out of here before he dies of hypothermia.

Which, he'd just like to point out right now that *he was right all along*, because his dog? Totally like a safety belt. Preventative measure. There for him when he needs to send for help because he has *actually literally fallen down a well*. It's possible that he jinxed himself by ever thinking this could be a possibility.

When he looks up he can see Dude peering down at him, his doggy face creased with an expression that manages to convey both worry and anger. He growls, and the noise echoes right down the well until it sounds like a dozen wild animals all grumbling their disapproval from every direction.

"Okay, I know, that was pretty stupid," Stiles replies, leaning back against the slimy stone wall of the well so he can look up without getting a crick in his neck. "On a list of stupid things I've done, this is definitely in the top five. Well, top ten. Twenty, at least. But luckily, you're here! This is your moment, Dude. Run home, find Laura or Derek, and tell them I've fallen down the well."

Dude makes a weird sound in reply that sounds sort of like a bark and sort of, strangely, like a yodel. Then his face disappears from view and there's a faint rustling that Stiles recognizes as the familiar and beloved sound of dog paws on grass, and then nothing.

The nothing goes on for long enough that Stiles starts getting kind of worried, but it's probably not *actually* that long. It just seems that way because he's starting to shiver and his clothes are clinging in really uncomfortable ways because his track pants aren't the worst thing he could be wearing for this adventure but they really aren't designed to be worn swimming, either. Also, there's some plant life or something floating just under the surface of the water that he can't exactly see properly in the shadowed gloom of the well-bottom, but it keeps drifting into him and *touching* him and no matter how irrational it is he can't stop thinking about the shrieking eels in *The Princess Bride* and he's just starting to panic, *just a little bit*, when he hears the sound of movement again.

"Dude?" he calls out, tentatively, because it doesn't really sound that much like the dog.

The face that peers down at him this time from the top of the well is a lot less furry. It is just as frowny, though. There's some sort of a family resemblance there; it's maybe like that thing he's heard about where people start resembling their pets.

"Did you seriously try to send the dog for help?" Derek says, squinting at him like he's a complete idiot, which okay, he *is* the one at the bottom of a well, he's willing to concede the

point.

“Don’t laugh at me, it totally worked,” Stiles says, pointing a finger that’s dripping with water and algae and who knows what else. “You’re here! Mission accomplished! Lassie ran home and told his master that Timmy was down the well!”

“Timmy never actually fell down any wells on that show,” Derek says. He’s got something in his hands that looks like a coil of rope, thank God.

“A technicality,” Stiles says, then pauses to consider exactly what Derek has just said. “Wait a minute, do you seriously have an encyclopedic knowledge of every episode of *Lassie*? Because I’m not sure I’ve ever actually heard anything more hilarious than that.”

“It’s not supposed to be viewed as a *documentary*, Stiles,” Derek says, dryly, just as he unceremoniously drops the knotted end of the rope down the well. It smacks Stiles right in the face, which is really just adding insult to... insult. “The dog didn’t run home to find help, he took off into the woods. I’m only here because I saw you from the house.”

“No, he wouldn’t do that to me,” Stiles protests, even as he’s looping the rope around his chest. “We’re bros. He’s my soul mate.”

Derek chokes on something that might be a laugh. “He’s probably chasing a rabbit,” he says, twisting the metaphorical knife.

He starts hauling on the rope though, careful and slow, pulling up steadily as Stiles awkwardly uses his sodden feet to walk up the wall. It’s not that different from rappelling the rock-climbing wall in gym class, and when Stiles gets to the lip of the well he grasps desperately at the stone, scrambling one leg over the top until he can barrel-roll his way to safety and beautiful, blessed, dry and solid ground.

Derek’s not lying. The dog is nowhere around, and Stiles can see all the way to the house from here, can see plain as day that Dude’s not waiting on the porch or rolling in something foul-smelling in the yard. There’s a possibility, given his extraordinary door-opening capabilities, that he’s actually inside the house, pulling out the first aid kit and a spare set of dry clothes and using his nose to dial 9-1-1. But it’s depressingly more likely that he’s in the woods somewhere, chasing a squirrel or snapping his jaws around dust motes in a picturesque shaft of sunlight. Maybe he’ll pick a flower in his teeth and bring it back to the stone wall like a bouquet to a gravestone, to mark the resting place of the dearly departed human companion that he left to die in a well.

Stiles loves that dog but it’s possible that either he’s been overestimating the animal’s intelligence or he’s been overestimating Dude’s affection for him. Maybe he’s been projecting. Just a little bit.

At least Derek still likes him. Well, likes him enough to rescue him from a well, anyway, or possibly just doesn’t want to deal with the paperwork and police interrogation that would inevitably happen if a corpse were discovered in a watery and suspicious grave on his property.

“You alright?” Derek asks him, and Stiles realizes he’s been lying spread-eagle on the grass maybe a little too long.

“Sure, I’m fine, just peachy,” Stiles says, and doesn’t get up because he’s actually a little bit achy and he’s pretty sure he’s quivering which is probably the shock or possibly the fact that he’s absolutely drenched. “Do you think I could borrow some clothes?”

Derek snorts, and holds out a hand to help Stiles to his feet. His palm is callused and warm and he’s *really* strong. Like, *really*. “Only if you shower first. You’re kind of... slimy.”

Stiles shrugs, and pulls his sodden shirt away from his belly, like that’s going to help it dry faster. All it does is air the fabric out just enough that when it plasters itself to his skin again, it’s a whole new level of cold.

“I can agree to those terms,” Stiles says, because he was going to ask for a shower too, and just the thought of steamy-hot water and a fluffy towel are enough to make him shudder with wanting.

Crossing the clearing to the house, trailing behind Derek, is sort of like doing a walk of shame, but without having actually gotten any sex first. So maybe not the walk of shame, but definitely the walk of poor judgment. The view’s not half-bad though, almost worth falling down a well for, because Derek’s apparently too busy marveling at Stiles’ lack of self-preservation skills to notice that Stiles is currently committing to memory the way Derek’s ass looks in those jeans.

It looks *really good*. For the record.

Although, maybe he does notice, because when they get up onto the big front porch -- it’s even got a bench swing, these people are ridiculous -- he doesn’t reach for the door. Instead he folds his arms across his chest, turns around, stares Stiles down, and says, “Strip.”

Stiles just stutters to a stop, instead. Not just physically either; it’s more like everything just stops for a second, including his brain -- *especially* his brain -- and when it all starts up again it’s as if everything in the universe has shifted slightly to the left, if the left can be assumed to be the more porny direction. There might’ve been a time or two, deep in the night, not that he’s admitting this has ever happened, that he’s thought about Derek saying that exact word to him, growling it out like an order, which is *exactly* what it just sounded like.

So when Stiles says, “Huh?” through his wide-open mouth, what he actually means is, *Are you going to take me right here on the bench swing?*

Derek seems to miss the subtext, because he just says, “Your clothes are wet. The place is enough of a mess without you dripping everywhere and bringing that stench inside.”

And okay, sure, he does kind of smell really a lot, and in fact he smells specifically like that geriatric turtle that was the classroom pet when he was in second grade, sort of like mold and decay and imminent death. Stiles can admit that his latest escapade has not been good for his personal hygiene, but he’s still not entirely comfortable with stripping off his clothes in front

of Derek and the great outdoors and possibly the dog if the little bastard's watching from the woods somewhere. Mostly it's about Derek, though.

He doesn't even know why he likes Derek so much anyway, because Derek is cruel and heartless, even when he's offering to help, like when he raises an eyebrow at Stiles and says, "Do you not remember *how*? Do I need to undress you like you're five?"

Stiles resists the urge to say *oh my god, please do* (he thinks triumphantly, *see dad, I do have a filter after all*) and instead reaches down to the hem of his shirt and strips it off over his head.

He is immediately aware of how skinny, pale, and overall *cold* he is, so he does his best not to look at Derek for fear that Derek will be looking back. He kicks off his shoes, then peels off his socks too because they *squelch* every time he moves which is disgusting. His track pants mostly take themselves off, succumbing to gravity under the weight of all the water that's clinging to them, and he kicks them off, leaving himself in bright red boxer briefs that were maybe not the best possible underwear choice this morning, now that he thinks about it.

He's just going to *not* think about it, is what he's going to do. He even straightens his back, looks up at Derek and lifts his chin like he's completely comfortable in his body (he's not) and doesn't see a thing wrong with primary-colored underwear (he didn't, until just now) and has absolutely no problem with anybody at all seeing him almost naked after a near-death experience (he probably wouldn't care except it's *Derek* who is the hottest guy that Stiles has ever actually laid eyes on in person).

Mercifully, and kind of disappointingly, Derek isn't even looking; he's already turned around and is opening the front door, not even checking to make sure Stiles is following, like he wouldn't particularly care if his dog's best friend actually froze to death on the porch.

Derek wasn't even exaggerating, the inside of the house *is* a mess. There are tarps and ladders and things all over the place, plus drippy-looking cans of paint, and only half the kitchen cabinets are hung, but the living room looks at least mostly finished and there's even a couch in there in front of the world's most awesomely massive stone fireplace. It's obvious that when everything is done the house is going to look like a spread in *Better Homes and Gardens*, but right now it sort of looks like they're twenty minutes into an episode of *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*. (Not that Stiles watches that or is in any way conditioned to start crying like a little girl the moment anyone says the words "move that bus.")

"We're still finishing it up," Derek says, and his expression is kind of defensive, like he feels like Stiles is disrespecting the house of Hale.

"It looks *awesome*," Stiles says. He's glad he fell into the well now instead of later, because when it's done this is going to be a seriously upscale house, the kind of house he's typically not allowed in even when he's perfectly clean and dry.

Derek shrugs, but he looks kind of secretly pleased as he leads Stiles up the stairs to the second floor. "It's Laura's design," he says, "and she's the one who bossed the contractors around through the building phase until everything was perfect. I'm just extra muscle when she needs some manual labor done."

“Manual labor is a noble and underrated profession,” Stiles opines, which possibly doesn’t make any sense because Derek said “muscle” and Stiles’ eyes immediately snapped to the expanse of his back and oh god, this is getting *way too difficult*. Derek is going to catch him staring and throw him back down the well, and the dog who was supposed to be his contingency plan is going to be no help at all, as per usual. “So Laura’s an architect?”

“She just finished school a few months ago, before we moved back,” Derek says. “I guess we’ll know she really earned her degree if this house doesn’t collapse on us.”

“Hah, yeah,” Stiles says. “Because-- wait, it’s not actually going to collapse on us though, right?”

Derek just rolls his eyes and gives Stiles a shove through one of the open doorways leading off the upstairs hallway, and it’s actually... really super-nice. The upstairs looks truly finished, painted and furnished, and the room they’re in now is obviously Derek’s own bedroom; it’s kind of doing funny things to Stiles’ insides, just standing there in Derek’s inner sanctum, and he’s really got to get a handle on this because he’s starting to sound like Scott mooning over Allison. The walls are painted in shades of green not unlike the forest outside, and the furniture is all sturdy-looking and so rustic he can see the knots in the wood, and everything’s really neat and tidy in a way that Stiles is completely unaccustomed to. He’s standing there staring at the fairly massive soft-looking bed when it occurs to him that he’s wearing nothing but his underwear and he really wants Derek to just push him down there and--

Derek’s hand on his shoulder makes him jump a little and snap back to the reality in which this is just a destinkifying and not actually any kind of a seduction.

“Shower,” Derek reminds him, and pushes him (more gently this time, thankfully) toward the bathroom.

Stiles hurries through a shower, because he’s always been kind of awkward at other people’s houses, like he’s completely terrified that he’s going to accidentally make a mess or leave some knickknack two millimeters out of place and he’ll never be invited back again. He uses Derek’s soap and shampoo because otherwise he’s never going to get the algae smell out of his hair, but he’s careful to turn the bottles back exactly the way he found them, rotating them so the labels face just so, exactly as Derek left them.

When he gets out, all wrapped up in a big fluffy towel that is both more comfortable and a more efficient cover-up than his soggy underwear was, he finds the bedroom empty, but there is a stack of clothes set out at the foot of the bed. There’s jeans, a t-shirt, and a thick flannel button-up, and maybe Stiles isn’t built enough to fill the clothes the way Derek would, but they’re comfortable and dry, which is really the whole point. Derek’s even left out a pair of heavy socks and scuffed hiking boots that are only maybe half a size too big, proving that he actually is kind of considerate in addition to being generally surly.

Stiles finds Derek himself back downstairs, standing at one of the big living room windows, staring out at the maybe-greenhouse, looking broody, hands curled around a cup of coffee. There’s a second mug sitting on a side table, which he picks up wordlessly and presses into Stiles’ hands.

“We don’t have a washer and dryer hooked up yet,” Derek says. “But I bagged up your wet stuff for you.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says. He sips his coffee. It’s all kind of awkward. He’s wearing Derek’s clothes and they haven’t even been on a date or anything (yet) but this whole scene almost feels intimate, like he could just step into Derek’s space and press his lips to Derek’s skin and this line of thought *really isn’t helping him*. He clears his throat and says, “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Derek looks at him sharply, like he’s thinking of at least a dozen different things he doesn’t want Stiles to notice and isn’t even sure which one Stiles is talking about. *That’s* interesting; Stiles might need to revisit that thought later.

“You don’t even have a fenced yard,” Stiles says. “Laura’s always talking about your dog like he’s the Harry Houdini of animals but he doesn’t even need to *escape* from anywhere. She just lets him out the door and he goes wherever he wants, am I right?”

Derek shrugs one shoulder, almost looking embarrassed. “Pretty much,” he says.

“She is the *actual worst*,” Stiles says, with feeling.

“Yeah, well, I guess there’s a reason he’s always over at your place,” Derek says. He turns away and sits his coffee cup down, clearing his throat like he’s a little desperate to change the subject. “Come on,” he says, and scoops a jangling key ring out of his pocket, fidgeting nervously with it in his hand. “I’ll give you a lift home.”

Chapter 8

Dude doesn't turn up for a week after that, which might have something to do with Derek's justified mortification over his family's pet-keeping skills, or might have something to do with Dude's crushing shame at leaving his human soul-brother to die in a well.

Derek, on the other hand, Stiles is suddenly seeing *everywhere*.

It's little things mostly, and entirely coincidental. Stiles is coming out of the post office while Derek is climbing into his truck across the street; Derek's back is disappearing around the end of the block when Stiles and Scott come out of the burger joint on Center Street; Stiles is filling up at the gas station when he sees Derek's truck rumble past on the state highway. It's all ships-in-the-night, and they're not even close enough encounters for a wave or a hello; maybe they've been bumping into each other for ages and Stiles didn't even notice because he didn't know who Derek was (didn't know how Derek looked with his jacket off and his shirt stretching across his shoulders and yeah, okay, Stiles is a healthy, bisexual teenage boy: he'd have noticed Derek, if he'd seen him around like this before).

So it's kind of a relief when Stiles finally comes across Derek somewhere that he can corner him instead of just gazing wistfully as their paths fail to truly cross.

"You need to stop following me around," Stiles says, and drops himself into the seat opposite Derek, who happens to be sitting again at Stiles' favorite table in The Magic Bean.

Derek flinches and looks almost guilty, but he's too busy chewing on an extremely large bite of turkey club to defend his honor, which is exactly why Stiles timed this whole thing the way he did. It's essential that he gets himself in and settled comfortably before Derek even has a chance to tell him to go away, which is why Stiles has already slung his backpack underneath the table and is doing his best to look completely attached to his chair, like his person and this chair will never again be parted.

It would just be a bonus if Derek actually choked on his sandwich in his surprise and Stiles had to give him the Heimlich to save his life and there was touching and Derek was like in his debt *forever*. Not that Stiles has thought about it.

Derek doesn't tell him to go away, though, and he doesn't choke either, which is both a relief and a pity. He just swallows his bite of sandwich and chases it with coffee, and then repeats, "Following you?" in the style of a leading question.

Stiles waves a hand, dismissively. "I keep seeing you all over town, it's weird," he says. "If you wanted to see me that bad, you could've just called. I know I'm irresistible." He leans in over the table with his chin propped on his hand and bats his eyelashes, which probably just makes him look like he has a tic, but whatever, Stiles totally pulls it off.

Derek stares back at him, inscrutable, over the rim of his coffee cup. Then he puts it down and says, completely straight-faced, "I don't have your number."

And Stiles seriously can't, for the life of him, believe that that actually worked. Like he wasn't even actually approaching it as a line because he realizes that there is *no universe* in which Derek Hale wants to date him. Which is why he stammers and stumbles over the next part, which consists mainly of, "Well, give me your phone, we can fix that," and also nominally of Stiles almost knocking over Derek's coffee cup.

But Derek does hand his phone over, and Stiles adds himself into the contacts list while Derek just watches him, expression flat and frustratingly unreadable. And when Stiles hands the phone back, Derek stares at the display for a moment like he's committing the number to memory, before he slips the phone back into his jacket pocket.

"Did you come in here for lunch?" he asks. "Or did you just see an available target and go for it?"

"Two birds, one stone," Stiles says. "I'm a fan of multitasking."

Derek just grunts in response, but then he mutters, "Stay here," and pushes away from the table, stalking up to the counter instead. When he comes back he's got food and coffee, both of which he puts down on the table in front of Stiles, and *again--*

"This is my favorite soup," Stiles says, staring doubtfully down at the bowl as he sips at his coffee. "*And* this is exactly how I like my coffee. I was just kidding before about the dessert-psycho thing, but seriously, do you have a food-related superpower? You can tell me. I can keep secrets, Derek, I *swear*."

"The girl at the counter knows your order," Derek says, and glares like staring Stiles into submission is some sort of valid tactic, which *no*. Stiles' dad gave up on *that* one years ago. Perhaps, given time, Derek will learn these things, but it's probably best if Stiles keeps Derek away from his dad, because it's better if they don't compare notes.

"Uh, that girl goes to my school," Stiles says. "Actually, she was in the same middle school, too. We've seen each other pretty much every school day for *years*. She doesn't know my order, Derek. She doesn't even know my *name*." To demonstrate, Stiles turns and waves at her. She just frowns and looks around like she's trying to figure out who he's waving at. "That was pretty good, actually," Stiles muses, as he turns back to Derek again. "Usually I'm straight-up invisible. You're not the only one with super-powers, buddy. We should get together and start a team, like really lame X-Men. I'll invite Scott; his amazing ability is continuing to date his girlfriend without his girlfriend's dad actually murdering him. It's pretty special. I think we could do a lot together for the cause of vigilante justice."

"Scott?" Derek says, and it sounds strangely like fishing.

"My other BFF," Stiles says, and though he realizes his mistake immediately, it's already too late to stuff the words back into his mouth.

Derek's eyebrows shoot up. "*Other?*" he says, and maybe Stiles is wrong, maybe his superpower is just repeating select words from the sentences others have spoken before him, or maybe when it's Stiles talking he only actually listens to one word in ten anyway. Either way it's just Stiles' luck that he listened to the *wrong word*.

"Oh, not-- I didn't mean *you*," Stiles says, his mouth dropping open in horror, and then he realizes how *that* sounded and he considers just slowly slithering from his seat until he's underneath the table, and then maybe doing a slow-mo army crawl getaway until he's out the door. Then after that he can move to another country and become a fugitive from his own life, but he doesn't want to end up being a goat herder in Mongolia so instead of the undignified retreat he settles on undignified word-vomit. "I mean, not that you *couldn't* be my best friend, I bet you'd make a great best friend, like if you wanted to you could probably be really supportive and understanding with just your eyebrows. I'm just trying not to be presumptuous because I don't think we've known each other long enough yet for you to really be able to appreciate *my* best-friend qualities, like my ability to lie convincingly about sleep-overs and my skills in Call of Duty. I mean, generally people like you aren't willing to be seen in my company which is why when I said 'other BFF' I meant *your dog*."

Stiles finally stops himself by actually physically clapping a hand over his mouth, and he follows that up with carefully sliding his soup (he hasn't eaten it yet, it's going to get cold and this whole incident is going to become a double tragedy) and coffee to one side so that he can more effectively curl himself face-down into the tabletop. It's sort of like his own personal version of becoming an armadillo.

Derek is silent for a suspiciously long time, like long enough that Stiles is beginning to think that he's already used his skills of ninja stealth to sneak away while Stiles wasn't looking. And then he finally says, "People like me?"

Stiles groans against the hand that he still has clapped over his mouth before he peels his fingers away. He curls himself a little tighter against the unforgiving wood of the table top. "Oh my *god*, use your own words, stop stealing mine," Stiles moans, and refuses to look up. "Yes, *people like you*. People who are like *really stupidly gorgeous*. I'd draw you a picture but my skills are not up to adequately capturing the glory of your jawline, okay?"

There's another pause, and then Derek clears his throat like he's expecting something, so Stiles looks up to see what it is he wants, but Derek's just watching him still, kind of wide-eyed. He opens his mouth, and then shuts it, like he's just realized he's not allowed to say *My jawline?* because Stiles will seriously lunge right over this table at him.

"I don't really know what to do with that," Derek finally says, and then, "Your soup's getting cold."

"Slow down, Casanova," Stiles says with a snort, but Derek has a point so he pulls his soup bowl back over, picks up his spoon, and fills his mouth with soup so at least if anything else spills out it'll just be food.

Derek's finished with his meal by now, so he just sits there watching Stiles with that completely unreadable look on his face, drumming his fingertips a little on the table. After awhile, when Stiles is scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon, doing his best to consume every delicious drop, Derek says, "You really like that dog, don't you?"

Stiles drops his spoon into the bowl like it's a gong and rolls his eyes. "*That's* what you've taken away from this conversation? Yes is the answer. I *love* that dog, Derek. Everybody knows I love that dog. And I'm not gonna lie, it bothers me that I'm the only one who seems

to, because your dog is *awesome*, and I don't even care that he doesn't understand 'sit' and he eviscerates toys instead of just chewing them and he plays in traffic and when I need him most he leaves me to my doom. He's totally my best friend, and the best thing is that he doesn't argue with me about it or ditch me for somebody else and he listens to all the stupid shit that comes out of my mouth, and the worst thing is that he's not even my dog, which is bullshit because your sister, seriously. *Not even a collar*. She shames dog owners, is what she does." He pushes his empty bowl away and himself up, his chair scraping against the tiled floor as he stands. "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I've probably horribly embarrassed myself enough to reach my yearly quota and I need to leave before I say anything else. Well, except um, thanks for lunch?"

Derek just nods, looking dazed as hell and not saying anything, and Stiles doesn't look back as he escapes out the door, thinking it's probably the last time he'll see anything more of Derek than the guy's truck passing on the highway.

He's wrong, as it turns out. *Really* wrong.

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Dude shows up again the next day like he's never been gone, and he doesn't look even slightly apologetic about the incident with the well.

He's also wearing a familiar, almost-new leather collar, a tag hanging from it with Stiles' name neatly engraved in the metal. It's the same one Stiles bought ages ago at the Pet Emporium, the same one he was sure that Laura would have thrown away.

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Things get a little bit weird after that, weird enough that Stiles thinks that maybe he's actually literally dreaming and later he's going to wake up and feel deep regret about his real life and his choices.

The first weird thing is the collar, because what does that even *mean*, but also Dude's gotten kind of... clingy. The dog's always managed to be simultaneously quietly affectionate and openly grumpy, and Stiles isn't even sure how Dude pulls it off without straining something but suddenly he's both openly grumpy *and* cuddly as hell. He doesn't just settle on the floor next to the couch anymore, he has to be *on* the couch, and not just on the couch but in Stiles' business. Every time Stiles flops down to sit anywhere at all, the dog is only moments behind, scrambling onto the next seat and shoving himself right into Stiles' space, curling up so that his back arcs under Stiles' arm and his head winds up on Stiles' thigh or pressed uncomfortably into his kidneys. That's not even counting all the times that the dog just *sits* next to him, leaning their shoulders together, sometimes propping his chin on Stiles' shoulder so that his doggy breath washes against Stiles' neck.

He doesn't always stay long, when he visits, so maybe he's just trying to aggressively fill some sort of snuggle quota, but mostly it means that every time Stiles turns around the dog is just *there*, like an inconveniently placed speed bump waiting to knock Stiles on his ass. Sometimes Dude even stays the night, climbs into Stiles' bed and stretches out like the whole

thing is his domain. Stiles usually wakes up at some horrible hour with sweat dripping from his body and his mouth full of fur.

Stiles *loves* it.

The other weird thing is Derek, who Stiles doesn't expect to hear from *ever*; unless maybe the guy is looking for his sister's dog. Derek completely defies Stiles' expectations, though, by sending a text the day after their meal at the coffee shop. To Stiles' unending surprise, it doesn't say, *Please stay away from me forever*, or even, *I was just wondering, when you talk it seems like you don't ever pause to breathe, are you the way you are because of oxygen deprivation?*

What it actually says is, *laura has bad taste in tv. there are ppl catchin catfish w their feet. why is this my life*

Stiles just blinks at it at first, because he understands that it's Derek (and he wastes no time in programming the number into his phone), he just doesn't understand *why*, in a more general sense. Why Derek is texting him, why Derek is talking about catfish, *any* of it.

He texts back, *At least they're not using that technique on the show about hunting alligators.* Then before Derek even has a chance to reply, he follows it up with, *Don't let the dog watch that show, it'll give him ideas about gator wrestling.*

Derek replies that in a dog versus alligator fight, the dog would totally win every time. Derek doesn't say "totally" because he's really not a "totally" kind of guy, but Stiles is gratified at least to know that Derek has completely misplaced faith in his dog.

The weirdest thing, out of the laundry list of weird things, is that it becomes *normal* after that, firing off text messages at each other about nothing in particular. Derek's a lot better at talking when there's no actual verbalizing involved.

Still, texting alone isn't entirely satisfying, and there's no reason they can't be doing *more* than texting, by which he doesn't exactly mean making out (although he would *love* to be making out) but at least *hanging* out should be on the table.

Stiles firmly believes that he who never asks will never receive, so after an extra two days of agonizing over exactly *how* to ask, he sits down at his desk on Saturday morning and sends, *you want to hang out?* because his ten thousand previous mental drafts were not very straightforward and it seems best just to go for the throat. Then he puts his phone aside and starts up a fresh game of Plants vs. Zombies to distract himself so he doesn't go crazy waiting for an answer.

He doesn't have to wait long. Derek's text says, *was abt to go running want to join? meet at mine*

Which is how he ends up at the Hale house, completely dry this time and *not* smelling like swamp water, wearing his usual track pants and Beacon Hills Lacrosse windbreaker and trying not to stare at what Derek looks like in a pair of basketball shorts and a clinging thermal top. Stiles isn't very successful, but it's the thought that counts.

"Dude, I think you're forgetting something," Stiles says, as he casually stretches one leg up behind him and tries not to fall on his face. Derek just looks at him blankly, so Stiles supplies, "Um, shoes?"

Derek looks down at his bare feet, wiggles his toes thoughtfully, and says, "It's better without them."

"Oh, you're into the whole barefoot movement thing, huh?" Stiles says. "That's cool. I'm kind of afraid to try it, like I have this special talent for disasters so I kind of feel like I should maintain as many barriers as possible between myself and the world. Probably I should invest in a crash helmet, too."

Derek snorts. "You're not that bad, Stiles," he says, and it sounds almost like a compliment, even if it's sort of an awkwardly backhanded one. "Things get easier, once you really finish growing."

"Yeah, right," Stiles agrees, doubtfully. "Hey, so are we bringing the dog? He's my regular running buddy but I promise he won't be jealous. We can make it like a team thing."

"He's not around," Derek says, vaguely. He jerks his head toward the trees and the trailhead, a kind of question, but mostly it seems to be an avoidance tactic.

Stiles wants to ask, but he probably won't like the answer -- seriously, is it that hard to fence a yard in? -- so he just settles in at Derek's shoulder, keeping pace when Derek starts them off at an easy jog. Derek certainly doesn't seem to mind the pine needles blanketing the trail once they reach the cover of the trees, and he dodges nimbly over tree roots, splashes heedlessly through puddles. His bare feet are nearly silent on the forest floor, and Derek doesn't speak, though he certainly isn't breathing hard enough to prevent him from talking.

They run a long, lazy loop around one of the Preserve's longer trails, one that Stiles has traced plenty of times with the dog for company, and being with Derek isn't really much different. Stiles doesn't mind that Derek isn't really a talker, and he doesn't feel the need to fill Derek's silences either, because nothing about them feels empty. There's something comforting in the sound of feet against earth and the rush of air from someone else's lungs.

When Derek slows to a walk in one of the open meadows -- Stiles knows this one, too, he had a wrestling match with the dog here once, and he lost but who's the dog going to tell? -- Stiles isn't even slightly out of breath.

"You've got good endurance," says Derek, and his eyes running up and down Stiles' body seem more like an athletic assessment than a come-on, which is maybe disappointing but is definitely a starting point, because at least Derek's *looking*.

Stiles shrugs. "I never really ran before, for fun I mean; the dog kind of got me started. I'm thinking about maybe trying out for track next year."

"Yeah?" Derek says, and his grin is wide and uncomplicated and kind of transforms his face. His front teeth are ridiculous bordering on adorable. "You'd do well cross-country, definitely. How's your speed?"

Stiles matches Derek's smile with one of his own and says, "Let's find out." Then he takes off.

He makes for the house, because they're not too far from it here and he's not going to be able to maintain much distance at this kind of speed; he'll be ready to collapse by the time they get there. If they even make it that far: Derek's hot on his heels and Stiles has a sneaking suspicion that if he's not quick enough this game's going to end in a tackle. Not that that sounds like a bad idea to him -- sort of like a high-velocity full-body hug with the hottest guy he's ever seen, which would make the eventual landing probably worth it -- but he's got some pride. He takes a flying leap over a downed tree and then breaks off onto a deer path, staying up on the forefoot, and completely ignoring the burn in his legs and the ache in his lungs.

Stiles breaks out of the treeline at the Hale house with a triumphant whoop and lets his speed wind down, stumbling a little on fatigued legs and raising his arms in victory, which is of course the moment that Derek hits him.

It's gentle, as tackles go, mostly because Derek catches him with an arm around the waist and then more or less throws his own body to the ground, so that Stiles has a Derek-shaped landing pad. It's not exactly a *soft* landing pad though, because Derek's body is basically one sculpted slab of solid muscle, which Stiles could see quite clearly from a distance and probably doesn't actually need to know close-up and first-hand because in about two seconds he's going to seriously embarrass himself.

"Cheater!" Stiles gasps, because even a careful tackle involves too much gravity. "You can't tackle me after I've already won!"

"Oh, I just assumed the front porch was home base," says Derek, with a cocky grin on his face, and Stiles can't help it, he doesn't even think about it, he just looks at the curve of Derek's mouth and then he leans in to taste it.

He's half-expecting to be unceremoniously shoved off, or gently pushed away, even as he's pressing his lips to Derek's, even as his tongue's flickering out to taste. He's half-expecting that maybe Derek will let him have this, for a minute or two, or that Derek will just be confused into stillness, which could be awkward. What he's not even remotely expecting is the way Derek actually reacts: he makes an animal sound in the back of his throat that Stiles can feel vibrating through his own body where their chests are pressed together. Then Derek surges up and kisses back, rolls them over, his hands clutching at Stiles' body, his mouth opening eagerly, and maybe Stiles feels a little bit sheepish about how hard he gets and how quickly, but Derek's answering hardness is pressed against his leg and Stiles can't find a single thing in this scenario that he really needs to worry about.

And then Laura says, "Oh my *god*," in a voice that cracks in the middle with something like horror.

Everything happens really quickly after that. Derek's eyes widen and his head snaps up and his whole body tenses; Stiles can feel it through the hand he has hooked into Derek's waistband, can feel the clench of abs against his knuckles and the jolt like an electric shock that goes through Derek's whole body. And then he makes a noise that sounds like something

dying, and he shoves himself to his feet and literally *runs away*, disappearing right back into the trees.

Stiles watches him go, propped up on his elbows, and then flops back into the grass, arms outstretched like he's waiting for his lover to fling himself back into his arms. Or like he's trying to make snow angels without any snow. Both eventualities are kind of equally unlikely.

"That's enough to really damage a guy's self-esteem," says Stiles.

"No joke," Laura agrees. "Sorry. For interrupting, I mean, but also just generally? Because I like to think we raised him right but obviously he needs a remedial course in gentlemanly behavior. I give him an A plus for stoic man-pain though, he's top of the class with that one."

"Yeah," Stiles says, and tries not to sigh it kind of dreamily because that's just pathetic.

"You hungry?" Laura asks, and he can actually *hear* her holding back a joke about how much he's exerted himself, which he appreciates.

He says, "I could eat," then drags his protesting body up and into the house.

Chapter 9

"So, this is awkward," Laura says brightly, as she slides onto the stool next to Stiles at the kitchen island.

It's *really* awkward, actually, but Stiles is sure he doesn't need to point that out. It's also a little bit nice. The kitchen's been finished, along with the rest of the house, and everything looks immaculate and new but there are promising signs that the house will eventually just look pleasantly lived-in: a pair of dirty boots left just inside the back door, a little cluster of unwashed dishes next to the sink, a trashy novel lying face down with its spine creased on one of the living room side tables. Stiles is a little bit afraid to touch the granite countertop for fear that he'll leave smudged fingerprints, but he doesn't really think that anybody would mind. He's happy to dig in to the grilled cheese sandwiches Laura has made, anyway: there's a whole *pile* of them, cut into triangles and forming their own little melty delicious tower on a single plate.

"I feel like I should ask you about your intentions, but mostly I'm just wondering if you know what you're doing," says Laura.

"I can honestly say that I don't have the slightest idea," Stiles tells her, around a crispy bite of sandwich.

Laura makes a thoughtful noise and then says, "That seems appropriate, considering." She stuffs like half a sandwich straight into her face and drums her fingers on the counter while she chews with a thoughtful look on her face. "You're the only friend he has, you know. I mean, aside from me, and I don't really count because he's forced to hang out with me, it's like it's my birthright to make him do things he doesn't like."

Stiles shrugs. "I don't have a lot of friends either, but I like to think I make up for lack of quantity with a surplus of quality."

"That's what I'm saying," Laura says, and snaps her fingers at him, like that's supposed to mean something. "You guys are tight, right? He talks to you about stuff."

She phrases it like a statement but it probably ought to be a question because she is *so wrong*. "Not anything important," Stiles says. "And mostly we text."

"Ugh, do not tell me about your sexting."

"I've never sexted in my *life*," Stiles says, because somebody's got to defend his honor. "It's so sad. I bet he'd be good at it. He's better with words when he has time to think them over."

"Yeah, but sometimes you can't give him time to think," says Laura. "Sometimes he just freezes up, without somebody around to give him a push."

"And sometimes when you push apparently he goes running off into the forest, never to be seen again, and misses out on some sweet sandwiches."

"Extenuating circumstances," Laura allows, and licks buttery crumbs off her fingertips. "So he hasn't told you anything about what's going on with him."

"No," Stiles says. He frowns at his sandwich, suspecting it may be a delicious, cheesy bribe. "And if he did, I wouldn't be sharing it, anyway."

"Oh, I already know all about it, I don't need an informant," Laura says, waving a hand like he's being ridiculous. "I was just hoping he was confiding in you, you know? Opening up a little. God knows he won't talk to me about any of it. Normally Derek keeps people at more of a distance. Like he'd prefer if his closest acquaintances lived in I don't know, *Michigan* or something, and if they moved any closer he'd start to get pissed about how much they're pressuring him."

Stiles blinks. It's hyperbole, sure, but it's also not really the Derek he knows, the one who buys Stiles soup and tells him to eat it before it gets cold and encourages him about joining the track team.

"So, what you're saying is that he likes me?" Stiles says, just to clarify. "Because from where I'm standing it seems more like he's probably going Robinson Crusoe in the woods right now to avoid ever having to speak to me again."

"Nah, he's just embarrassed. I embarrass him, with everything I do, but especially with boys. He's only a year older than you, you know."

Stiles frowns. "He is? I mean don't get me wrong, I didn't think he was a middle-aged middle manager or anything. He just seems older."

"He's going through a lot, like I said. Has been going through a lot, for awhile. We both have." She stared at him, like she was trying to decide what to say, and then told him, "I'm only twenty, you know. We had to grow up fast." Then she clapped her hands against her thighs like 'good talk!' and turned back to the stove, picking up the used pan and dropping it in the sink. "He'll be fine, he just gets kind of stuck sometimes. So, like I said: a little push."

"Or a little time," Stiles replies, trying and failing to sound stern. Mostly he's just uncertain, because this whole topic seems a little heavy and he's not equipped for this emotional shit, least of all with her; she's kind of a lot. "I mean, you're making it sound like he's got some serious problems, Laura. Maybe you should let him deal with them in his own way, in his own time."

Laura makes a "pffffsh" noise and follows it a dismissive gesture that Stiles would probably be familiar with, if he had any siblings of his own to heap scorn upon him. "Right now he's got enough problems to fill a math book, Stiles," she says, and she's staring at Stiles in a speculative way that's making him really, really nervous. "But I bet you're really good at math."

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Derek still hasn't shown up by the time Laura ushers Stiles out the door and walks him to his Jeep. He's not exactly happy about it, but mostly he just feels a little sad, because if Derek's

going to have some sort of emotional meltdown Stiles would just feel better about the whole thing if he was around for it. He might not be a qualified counselor but he thinks he'd be really good at petting Derek's hair and doling out soothing shoulder-rubs.

"Don't worry about him, he'll turn up eventually," Laura says. Her hand's curled around Stiles' elbow like he's escorting her when really it feels a lot more like she's trying to prevent him from running away before she's finished with him.

"I'm sure he's fine," Stiles says, even though he's not really all that sure at all. For all he knows Derek will deal with their moment of awkwardness by running away to join a monastery and taking a vow of celibacy.

He knows Derek's lazy texting syntax and his habit of overusing smiley faces like he's trying to make up for how much he doesn't actually smile in real life. He knows Derek's extremely strong opinions on real maple syrup and his hatred for the History Channel and what his mouth tastes like. And now he even knows that Derek's apparently struggling with something that he needs help with. That doesn't mean Stiles knows how to *be* the help he needs.

It's kind of a lot to take in.

"He's always fine," Laura says, as she opens the Jeep's driver-side door for Stiles like she firmly believes the age of chivalry is not dead. "That's his whole problem."

"Profound," Stiles compliments, as he climbs into his car. "Just, when you see him, would you tell him to call me?"

"Oh, no problem," says Laura. Her grin is too sharp, with too many teeth. "I'll give him a nice *push* in your direction." And then she slams the Jeep's door shut dramatically shut behind him.

He gapes at her through the window for a second, and then he reaches down for the crank handle and rolls the window down. "That doesn't work as a dramatic gesture," he points out. "Like, I'd have to actually turn the Jeep on and drive away, which I'm not going to do because *don't push him*, Laura, seriously. I'll see if he wants to talk about it. Whatever it is. But that's *it*. Alright?"

"Sure, Stiles, no problem," Laura agrees, in a way that actually means 'I am in fact ignoring everything you say because I'm the older one and I know better.' Stiles is beginning to see why Derek complains about Laura all the time. "How about I leave Derek alone, but I give *you* a little something to think about?"

"Oh god," Stiles says, and curls himself over the steering wheel so he can rest his forehead on it because she's giving him a headache. "Why are you so awful?"

"Aw, come on Stiles, I'm not that bad," Laura lies. She leans right in the open window, peers at the gear shift, and then says, "Put the clutch in, I'm gonna need you to drive away in a second to help me out with my theatrical timing, okay?"

Stiles does it automatically, then wonders why he does, because Laura's getting all up in his space reaching for the ignition and the key he's already slotted into place. She twists and the Jeep's engine catches with its usual rattle. He just stares at her, wondering if she has some sort of older-sibling power to hypnotize people into doing her bidding.

"Okay, I think we're ready," Laura says, seeming satisfied with her work. "So I'm going to tell you a secret, and then you're going to drive away and give it a long, hard think when you're not too busy thinking about other long, hard things." She waggles her eyebrows at him and he groans, puts on the brake and pops the emergency so he'll be ready to roll away when she's finally finished torturing him.

"God, just tell me already, I'm seriously going to cry in a minute," Stiles tells her.

Laura grins at him, apparently delighted with her good works, and then she leans all the way in the window, lips right up against his ear, and whispers, "The secret is, *we don't own a dog.*"

Then she steps back, and when he stares at her and stutters, "Wait, what? You-- I-- what?" she just smiles and waves and loudly says, "Bye, Stiles! Drive carefully!" and then traipses off back to the house.

Stiles sits in the Jeep, just idling, for a good five minutes before he manages to put the car in gear and pull away. He takes a small, vicious thrill in ruining the timing of her big reveal, at least, but it doesn't actually make him feel any better as he drives down the empty highway toward home.

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Stiles spends a lot of time that day thinking about Derek, and whatever's going on with Derek, and also what the fuck is it supposed to mean that they *don't have a dog*? He wants to look at Derek's dumb face and maybe hold his dumb hand and also tell him how dumb his sister is.

But he's going to need Derek to come out of the wilderness for that to happen, so he sends Derek a text that says, *You actually are my other BFF. Right after the dog. Call me?*

When Derek finally does call, it's ten o'clock at night and Stiles is half-asleep in his bed, but it's Derek's name on the caller ID so he scoops up the phone, presses it to his ear and says, "Hi."

Derek says, "I'm sorry," like he's been holding it in his mouth for hours and he can't say anything else until he blurts it out. He sounds a little downtrodden and miserable.

"Don't worry about it," Stiles says. "Now that I know your sister a little better, I might make a habit of running away in horror every time I see her, too."

The laugh that Derek barks out over the phone line is, Stiles realizes, the first one he's heard from the guy (verbally, "lol" doesn't count). He silently congratulates himself.

"I talked to your sister," Stiles says, "Which sucked because she's kind of weirdly invasive, isn't she?"

"She really is," Derek agrees easily. He sounds like he's loosening up a little. "What did you talk about?"

"Mostly you and how totally good I am for you, which I already knew because I'm awesome," Stiles says. "And then when I was leaving she said something completely bizarre. Did you know your sister is like... a riddlemaster or something? Like is it just her hobby to confuse people until their brains explode?"

"Uh, no?" Derek says, like he thinks it's a trick question. "What did she say?"

"She said you guys don't own a dog. Which I don't-- what does that even mean?"

There's mostly silence from Derek's end, except the faint sound of his breathing, which sounds like it's picking up, although maybe that's Stiles' imagination.

"It's like some puzzle she wants me to figure out," Stiles adds. "Is this like Gollum and Bilbo? If I can't come up with the right answer, is she going to eat us whole?"

Derek clears his throat. "Possible, but unlikely," he says. "I'm surprised she even-- huh. So what's your theory?"

"My theory?" Stiles repeats. "About the dog? The best one I've got going so far is that your sister's one of those people who doesn't believe you can truly own an animal and if you love something you should let it go. I do have strong evidence for this theory because she seems to let the dog go like every single day to just wander around doing whatever he wants which sometimes involves getting hit by cars."

"That was *one time*," Derek says, sounding kind of aggrieved on the dog's behalf.

"Yeah, but am I right?" Stiles says.

"No," Derek says, and he sounds a little smug.

Stiles hums under his breath, mulling it over, and then says, "Okay, so what else can it mean? Are you gonna give me a clue, anything?"

"Seems like cheating," Derek says, like he's never cheated at anything in his life, which is a blatant falsehood.

"You shouldn't help your sister, she's already evil enough," Stiles says. "Okay, you don't own a dog. So... he's not actually yours because you guys stole him from somebody. Somewhere there's a little child crying herself to sleep at night because you made off with her only companion."

Derek snorts. "No."

"He's actually a stray who doesn't belong to anyone, but you've been pretending he was yours because you saw me hanging the 'found dog' signs and you saw how hot I was and wanted all up in this."

"If I had I'd have been pleased at how well it worked," says Derek. "But no."

Stiles taps his fingers against his own sternum in counterpoint to the rain that's drumming on the roof, thinking of all the ways a person can end up with a dog they don't technically think belongs to them. And then, just like that, he gets it.

"Was he your uncle's dog?" he says, soft and careful.

Derek lets out a sound that's somewhere between a growl and a sob, and when he says, "I don't think I want to play this game anymore," his voice cracks over the words.

Stiles doesn't say anything, just listens to Derek scrambling for his composure and wishes the guy was there, in the room, where Stiles could hug him. Stiles makes wordless hushing sounds, the same way his mom used to do when he was crying, and wishes he knew how to make it better.

"Were you close, you and him?" Stiles says, after awhile, and then he wants to kick himself because Derek has only just gotten it together, and a change of subject would probably be better. "I'm sorry, you don't have to--"

But Derek only sighs and says, "He was my favorite. We had a pretty big family, lots of aunts and uncles and cousins running around, and we had a big house too so Uncle Peter and his wife lived there with us. He was my hero, when I was little."

Stiles waits, but Derek doesn't offer any more, so he says, "You miss him."

"All of them, every day," says Derek. "But Peter maybe most of all."

"You've still got his dog to remember him by," Stiles offers, feebly.

Derek laughs, but it's a sad, broken sound, and he says, "No, Peter never kept a dog. Wrong again."

It's Derek's way of changing the subject, so Stiles takes it and runs with it, whooshing out an exasperated sigh and ignoring the ache in his chest in favor of lightening the mood a little. "I'm going to end up getting desperate with the theories here, man. Maybe you're in some kind of weird dog-worshipping cult and you think the dog owns *you*."

Derek's laugh is a little lighter this time. "Kind of feels that way sometimes," he says. "Try again."

"Hmm," Stiles says. "Well, Scott thinks the dog's actually a wolf, so maybe *you're* the dog. Wolf. Maybe you're a werewolf. It would explain a lot about your broody eyebrows, I think."

Derek doesn't laugh. Derek... doesn't say anything at all.

"Hey, you still there?" Stiles asks, after a long, silent moment. "Derek?"

Derek says, "I'm coming over," and Stiles doesn't say anything at all, because Derek's already hung up on him.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's not Derek who actually turns up.

Stiles is already downstairs, polishing off a slice of leftover pizza and waiting for Derek, watching the cold, driving rain of an early winter storm drumming against the kitchen window, so when he hears the doorbell it isn't a surprise.

When he opens the door and there's nobody human out there, that's a little more strange.

Dude doesn't wait for an invitation. He's soaked and there's mud spattered on his legs but he just pushes right past Stiles and into the house. Stiles is still standing in the open doorway, looking around like he's trying to figure out where the hell Derek is even though obviously the dog has come alone, and by the time he turns around the dog's already halfway up the stairs and he's left wet footprints across the carpet that Stiles is going to have to clean up later.

"Don't climb into my bed like that!" Stiles shouts up the stairs, closing the door and throwing the bolt.

The dog's not in his bed when Stiles gets upstairs, though; he's just standing in the middle of the room, completely drenched, and his eyes lock on Stiles once he walks through the door.

"Okay, so this is fun," Stiles says. He's got a thick towel in one hand that he snagged from the hall closet on his way in; it's probably not going to be enough to really dry the dog off, but at least he can take care of some of the mess. He turns around to close the bedroom door behind him, so the dog can't streak off and decide to wallow his muddy ass all over the couch or something.

When he turns back, the dog is nowhere to be found and Derek Hale is standing in the middle of his bedroom, rainwater dripping from his hair and clinging to the rest of him, mud spatters on his calves, his body completely naked.

Stiles blinks. And okay, maybe he stares. A lot. Because Derek is kind of a wet dream usually, even when he's clothed, but now he's taking the wet part at least pretty literally and he looks... he looks like something beautiful and broken and wild.

Derek doesn't say anything, just keeps staring, and Stiles takes it as a bad sign for his own sanity that he's started to think of Derek's creepier qualities as being kind of endearing because mostly Derek's just *awkward*. Like he doesn't know quite how to wear his incredible skin and he doesn't know what to do with it when people want to be around him.

So Stiles stares back, because he can, and uses his time wisely, uses it to process just exactly what's going on here.

"I was *right*," Stiles finally says -- crows, really -- and he raises both arms in victory, which ends less than gracefully when he loses his grip on part of the towel and it flops half-open across his face. "You are *totally a werewolf!*"

Derek looks at him like he's crazy, but really Stiles is *crazy-awesome* because he's willing to bet most people don't handle this information quite as gracefully as he is right now.

"Can I have that towel?" Derek finally says, which is Derek-speak for 'Yes, Stiles, you are totally right and also devastatingly attractive.'

"You're hopeless," Stiles tells him, affectionately, and he doesn't give Derek the towel. Instead he unfolds it completely and then takes it over there himself, throwing it over Derek's head and scrubbing it over Derek's hair.

Derek just stands there, his hands dangling at his sides, letting Stiles towel his head off like he's a kid, shoulders slumped like he's expecting to be kicked at any moment.

"This explains a lot, actually," Stiles says, and hands the towel to Derek for... the rest. All the rest of that. "There were times when I was talking to you -- dog you, I mean -- and I could totally feel you judging me. Plus, real dogs are not that relentlessly grumpy."

"Shut up," Derek grumbles, which really just proves Stiles' point.

"It's okay," Stiles tells him, trying to use those two words to cover the wide range of things that are okay: that Derek's surly, that he's gotten mud on the carpet, that he's a terrible communicator, even that he's been expressing his love by *being Stiles' pet dog*.

"It's not okay," Derek tells him, miserably. "You don't even know how not okay it all is."

"Then tell me," Stiles suggests.

"I killed my uncle Peter," Derek says, so softly that Stiles almost can't hear, but he does, he does hear it, and it's... he really doesn't know what to say to that, so he doesn't say anything. "He was going to kill Laura, and I just... tore his throat out. That's why that car hit me that night, why there was so much blood, I just... I loved him and I killed him and I couldn't handle having all that on my hands, not with everything else, so I just ran and--"

He cuts off with a strangled sob, and Stiles opens his arms to pull him into a huge he doesn't even have to because Derek collapses to the floor instead, falling into Stiles' arms and taking him down too, burying his face against Stiles' shoulder and just crying, like it's all being ripped right out of his stomach.

Stiles doesn't really know what's going on and is basically just completely out of his depth here because *werewolves*. But he's perfectly capable splaying one hand against Derek's bare back, curling the other around the nape of his neck, and just holding on for dear life.

It doesn't take long for Derek to start pulling himself together again, but Stiles keeps his grip even as he feels Derek desperately trying to pull the tatters of his control back around his shoulders, and Stiles can't imagine how that's going to help anything.

So he starts touching, in long firm strokes down Derek's back just the way he knows that Derek likes it -- because it's the way the *dog* likes it -- and he can feel Derek gentle under his hands. Derek's breathing slows and his hands come to rest lightly against Stiles' thighs, but he keeps his wet face snugged tight against Stiles' throat.

"Better?" Stiles finally asks, and runs his fingers into Derek's hair again, gently scratching at the back of his skull.

"Yeah," Derek sighs, and even his voice sounds wet. "Thanks. I guess I needed that."

"I guess so," Stiles agrees, a little mesmerized because Derek's hair is really, really soft. "You realize I have a lot of questions. Like somewhere in the neighborhood of ten million of them."

"Yeah," Derek agrees again. He sounds morose but it's also mostly his default state of being so there's that.

"You can answer them tomorrow," Stiles says, granting the poor guy a reprieve. "You want to sleep?"

Stiles gets him some clothes -- a t-shirt and some loose basketball shorts because Derek's too tall for Stiles' sweatpants -- and ushers him into the bed like he's a tired kid. Derek's even *worse* as a human being than as a dog because he's even *bigger* and he's better at sprawling and Stiles kind of loves him, maybe more than a little bit.

"God, you're not a werewolf, you're a freaking *octopus*," Stiles grumbles, as he shucks off his own clothes and climbs in to the narrow slice of bed that's been left to him. Derek just makes an agreeing noise and rolls over, clinging limpet-like to Stiles' body, snuffling his cold nose against Stiles' neck.

"You'll stay," Derek murmurs, half statement and half question, his mouth against Stiles' shoulder.

"You followed me home," Stiles whispers back, tips Derek's chin up so he can press the words right into his mouth with a kiss. "I'm keeping you."

+++

The Stilinskis don't actually have a dog, but there's one that turns up sometimes, anyway. He acts like he's a little ashamed to be there; he slinks in guiltily with his ears downcast and his tail drooping between his legs, like he's trying not to be noticed.

But the Sheriff scratches the dog behind the ears as he passes by, and Stiles greets the dog with a bone-crushing hug and overenthusiastic fur-ruffling, and he pauses every now and again to drop noisy kisses against the animal's skull and murmur nonsense in his ears. Sometimes they curl up on the couch or the bed and the dog can just lie there, not doing anything at all except listening as the boy talks about his day or tells stories from track practice or just breathes, slow and steady and reassuring, in and out.

The dog doesn't visit very often anymore, though. Usually it's Derek instead, who helps Stiles with his homework and plays video games and more often than not sneaks out before the Sheriff gets home because Stiles' dad loves the dog and he likes Derek but he's not as crazy about older boyfriends just as a general rule of policy.

But sometimes Derek and Stiles curl up on the couch or the bed and they just lie there, and Derek talks about his day or tells stories about his family or just breathes, slow and steady, in and out.

Chapter End Notes

AHHHHHHH OMG I REALLY FINISHED IT.

Eternal love and gratitude to abby for cheerleading me through and also telling me when I was screwing it up and flailing just when I needed someone to flail, every time.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my own stately dog, without whom I feel I would have been unable to capture just how subtly, gracefully dickish a dog can be. :D (I guess I should also thank him for occasionally -- but only occasionally -- allowing me to write without driving me insane. You're the best, buddy.)

The title is from here:

"A boy can learn a lot from a dog: obedience, loyalty, and the importance of turning around three times before lying down."

- Robert Benchley

Edit:

OMG FAN ART YIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS. [Birddi](#) has made this fantastic and amazing rendering of Stiles' "found dog" poster:

FOUND DOG

Black-ish

Very large

Extremely surly

Will not eat dog food

Kind of a jerk actually

Refuses to answer to the name Dude



Also [spuzz](#) made a graphic to accompany this fic as part of a GRAPHICS BATTLE. OMG that sounds so much like srs bzns. [LOOK HOW BEAUTIFUL IT IS.](#)

And finally, cheesefake has created a beautiful illustration of Derek the grumpy-faced wolf-dog, which you can find [here on tumblr](#) or [here on DeviantArt](#). Wonderful.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!