...And Miles to Go.

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**Summary**

Clint sometimes protects himself too well. Sometimes Phil Coulson does the exact same thing. This occasionally leads to heartache, strife and Natasha Romanov kicking your ass six ways from Sunday.

Or

The one time Clint said no to being fake husbands with Coulson and never got a chance to explain why.

**Notes**

I think maybe the tags might be misleading? It's all there, but I talk around a lot of it.
"No," Clint said automatically.

Coulson blinked at him, startled, "What?"

"I can't do it," Clint said again, without thought, the idea of trying tied him up in knots.

Coulson's entire face changed, it closed down, tightened and then blanked. "Agent Barton, you cannot refuse an operation based on personal prejudices, that's not how it works."

Clint's entire body went hot and then cold, terribly cold. "Silverberg gets a shellfish allergy written into all of his undercovers," he blurted hastily, trying to sort through his options. Could he do it, could he let Coulson think that he-- well it would be one way to keep it hidden, but he wasn't sure he could stomach the idea himself.

Coulson's face went even blanker, if that was at all possible. "You cannot seriously be attempting to claim religious exemption."

Yeah even Clint found that hilarious, even if at the moment he felt sick to his stomach. They stood there, staring at each other and with each second Clint could literally feel Coulson's regard for him cooling one degree at a time until finally it shattered, fragile and small, as it smashed into the unforgiving ground. He was still trying to figure out what to do when Coulson's shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly and he closed the folder on his desk.

"You're dismissed, Agent Barton."

Clint didn't want to leave, the look Coulson gave him hurt and the situation seemed to be running away with him before Clint could make any decisions, but he'd had no warning, no lead time, no moment to work out a plan, an escape that left him with any of his dignity in tact.

"I said," Coulson wasn't even looking at him anymore, "dismissed." His voice was cold, terribly cold and devoid of emotion.

"Sir," Clint croaked, trying to put to words everything that had just gone wrong, but he couldn't do it before Coulson cut him off.

"Leave."

"Please, let me--"

"Later."

That last one was not just an order but an angry snap and Clint backed out of the office before he could make things worse. Coulson had never used that tone with him, even at his worst fuck ups, even at the beginning when he'd been a mouthy little punk with issues with authority because all of his interactions with authority up until Coulson had been assholes whose entire self worth seemed tied up in being in charge.

"Barton," Coulson whipped out before his door could finish swinging closed.

"Sir?" Clint asked automatically reaching out to hold the door open, a thin thread of hope glowing inside of him.
"You're suspended," Coulson informed him, staring hard at his computer screen, but he wasn’t typing anything, his eyes were unfocused, unseeing, "go home."

“Sir?” The water was closing over Clint’s head and he couldn’t get enough oxygen to breath, a crash of noise startled him out of his thoughts. On the floor, there was a broken mug, one of the standard black SHIELD ones, behind his desk Coulson was breathing hard and it looked like he hadn’t moved, only there was a dent in the wall at approximately head height and there were shards on the floor.

“Go. Home.” Coulson said again.

Clint went.

By the time he’d paced the length and breadth of his apartment a dozen times Clint felt like banging his head against the wall. God, if he’d been afraid of losing Coulson’s trust, his friendship, by explaining, then he sure managed to do it anyway by not. He should just tell him, it couldn’t possibly be worse than it was now. Only the idea of opening himself up like that was painful because in the end he was pretty sure this was what he would end up with anyway. An awkward ending to the best relationship, other than Tasha and he’d probably lose her soon too, of his life.

By the time the knock on his door startled him out of his thoughts, his apartment was most likely the cleanest it had ever been. Clint had always been a stress vacuumer. He didn’t expect to find a tired, disheveled looking Coulson waiting on his unwelcome mat. He gave Clint a sullen look but waited for an invitation before coming inside. Clint moved his body out of the doorway, too shocked by the amount of emotion on Coulson’s face to do anything else.

Coulson strode in, stopped in shock and for a moment forgot whatever was on his mind as he took in Clint’s unbelievably organized living room and then slowly that look of absolute delight slid from his face and if Clint could stop it somehow he would have because it made him ache as Coulson looked wearier and wearier.

“Our assignment has been handed off to Henderson,” Coulson said in a clipped tone Clint had only heard him use on other people, “it needed two people who know each other well enough to fake the required relationship,” he barked out a laugh, “I guess we were wrong for it anyway.”

“Sir,” Clint opened his mouth but the words caught in his throat again, there seemed no easy way out of this mess, especially now that there’d been paperwork filed.

Coulson wasn’t really listening to him anyway. “I put in the paperwork to get you assigned to a new handler,” all of the air left Clint’s lungs, but Coulson plowed on, still ignoring him, “but that’ll take time, you’ve got a reputation, Fury gave me a compromise, there’s a long term undercover assignment coming up, a white supremacist group that looks like they’re about to break into international arms smuggling,” he paused and gave Clint a dark look, "I trust that's the kind of hate you disagree with, right? So there shouldn’t be any problems this time?"

The look Coulson gave him said that Clint should feel right at home anyway. Clint might just be sick all over Coulson’s shoes.

“I’ll leave the flash drive with you to peruse at your pleasure,” Coulson dropped a small stick onto his coffee table, “your suspension will be over in a week, at which point you’ll receive your final briefing, a fully back stopped legend and you’ll be sent on your way to the insertion point. They’re paranoid so it will take a while to even be accepted into their ranks, just be yourself, I’m sure it’ll happen in no time.”
That one was meant to hurt, Clint winced and Coulson straighted just a little at the direct score. His entire life was burning down around him, what the hell was he waiting for? It wasn’t like it could get any worse. “Wait,” he called hoarsely just as Coulson seemed to be gathering up the momentum to leave, “I need to talk to you, please?”

Coulson gave him a hard look. “I haven’t let assholes like you rule my life in over 20 years, I’m not going to start now. I’ll see you in a week.”

His door slammed closed hard enough that a few things rattled in his kitchen. Christ he hated himself right now.

He spent two days alternating between sick with worry and trying to find some way to stop this terrible train wreck before it got started. By the end of it he had nothing, no ideas, no appetite, no one to talk to. Natasha was incommunicado and he doubted Coulson would do him any favors at the moment, let alone getting him a line of communication. Then he read the file on the flash drive.

The problem was, the more Clint read, the more he wanted to take these assholes down. Stateside hate groups weren’t usually on SHIELD’s radar, they generally left them to the FBI, ATF and DEA, occasionally someone in charge of one of these groups would be exceptionally well organized and the homegrown organization would make the leap to international terror cell. That was usually when SHIELD was asked to help. The main goal of the op was to find the international connection that reached out and that would hopefully lead SHIELD, MI6, Interpol, etc to the European hub, but usually it was more efficient to take down the local group at the same time. It was something that usually boosted morale at the debrief since achieving the main goal of the operation usually didn’t feel like winning. Completion of the main goal only meant that information got moved up the chain and it only opened up a larger nest of terrible human beings. So taking down a group at the same time was usually good for everyone’s bottom line. It gave a clear win to the rank and file.

Maybe, Clint thought, maybe if he did this, Coulson would stop being mad at him for long enough that Clint could spit out the right words. Maybe. He took the next three days to learn every nook and cranny of the file, to write down questions, scenarios, possibilities, to ask about dead drops, extractions, handler protocol. Everything the file left to question Clint diligently made note of. He sent a politely worded, but extensive email to Coulson from his work address and hoped that his professionalism would allow him to read Clint’s email before trashing it.

He was shocked to receive supplemental reading 12 hours later, from Coulson. In it was all the data he asked for, along with search terms, online websites and any bit of miscellaneous data he might ever think to ask for. Coulson was trying to out professional him and it was almost laughable because that would never be a contest Clint could ever hope to even place in. He was still assimilating all of the new stuff when 12 hours after that his new identity came in. His papers would be given to him at the briefing, but he had in electronic form every possible document Calvin Buchanan, and Jesus he bet Coulson saddled him with that on purpose, would ever have had. His background was actually disturbingly similar, except instead of running away from an orphanage Calvin got shuffled around from house to house until he was old enough to be shuffled around from group home to group home. He left when he turned 18 in the middle of the school year and never looked back.

Clint wondered briefly if Coulson had a hand in that too, as a way of saying to him, ‘See how alike you are? Are you proud of that?’ and before a few days ago Clint would have laughed that idea off, that Coulson would be that vengeful, but now, he wasn’t sure. Coulson had never used his background against him, as a reason to dislike him or be unsure of his skills, of his ability or usefulness. It was like it had never occurred to him to question that a guy who got his GED at 25 wasn’t as capable as everyone else.
It was part of what made Clint fall in love in the first place. His eyes pricked at the thought. He’d fucked it all up so badly.

His last day was spent writing Tasha a note. They did that sometimes, when they weren’t going to see each other for months at a time, a sort of passing shoulder tap in words. This one was harder than most.

_Tash,

Make sure he doesn’t overwork himself? I’ll miss you.

—Clint

As he signed it and hit send, Clint felt the very real possibility that he might not come back. He wasn’t sure if he could face life in SHIELD with Coulson as far away as he was a week ago. At least this time there was some money saved up, all work and no play made SHIELD agents pretty wealthy and he’d be paid during his undercover time as well, complete with bonus for dangerous work. It’d be enough to settle himself anywhere and malinger for a little while feeling sorry for himself.

He reported for work fifteen minutes early the next day, the briefing room was only half full and the agents there looked absolutely shocked to see him that early. Coulson was up front, shuffling a few papers into order, next to him were three legend boxes, dark blue for deep cover. Inside it would be a driver’s license and other useful papers and anything else that was considering important to the character that was built for him. Possibly a belt buckle or a watch. Coulson’s eyes scanned over him in an absent manner but he didn’t nod a greeting or acknowledge him in any way.

The briefing was as efficient as ever, made smoother by Clint’s diligent work over his suspension. In the room was his team. Since he was moving into a small town, another agent would be moving into the next town over, they shared a Super Walmart and few other large stores between them so there was plenty of ways to arrange meets. If they could swing it, he and Agent Craig should form a relationship of some sort so that she could have the excuse to be at his place regularly. Eventually her brother, Agent Smith would join her, having been laid off in his small town job a few hours away and then acquire a local job at one of the stores giving him a third point of contact. His entrance was still being organized, since he wouldn’t be inserted for a few months yet, the details were still being laid down, they wanted to tailor his legend to the best job possible when he entered the scene.

That Coulson was still his ultimate handler surprised him, even if most of the information would be passed through Craig and Smith, it meant that in emergencies they would be in direct contact and even that much looked like it nauseated Coulson, though only Clint seemed to be able to tell. When the briefing ended, Clint stayed back, asking for a moment of Coulson’s time in front of witnesses to make sure he’d get it. When the room was empty Coulson’s eyes hardened. “What?”

“I didn’t think you’d be my handler?” Clint said, not sure where to start.

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you,” Coulson said coldly, “is there something you needed?”

“I just,” Clint clamped down on anything outside of the mission parameters, Coulson wasn’t going to listen anyway, “you’re my emergency contact, I just wanted to make sure you’d actually pick up.”

Coulson looked like he’d been physically slapped. “Barton, whatever you may think of me, I’m gay, not a terrible human being. If I’m your emergency exit strategy then I’ll _be_ your emergency exit strategy.”
Holy crap had he screwed up, no wonder Coulson was so pissed, if he thought— fuck. He must have stood there with his jaw flapping for too long because Coulson stood up with enough force to slam his chair back. “If there’s nothing else?” Clint shook his head. “Then I’ll—” Coulson stopped himself, if it was a mission they were both a part of but that Coulson was staying behind at HQ for, he usually saw him off at the tarmac. He obviously wasn’t going to do that this time, “be off.” Coulson finished sourly and walked out of the room in a handful of long and fast strides.

Clint slumped on the nearest table. “Fuck.”

It took him two months just to stop getting suspicious looks when he walked down the town’s dusty but surviving main street. That the main street still had stores, actual family owned stores with variety and nuance still available was an amazing thing until Clint realized that it was the white supremacists behind the ‘Helping Starts At Home’ movement that encouraged local business. Then it was sort of a bitter irony every time he walked into the local hardware store where he now worked. From what he could tell, the business owners were pretty torn about it as well, about half of them hated the ideals of Chris Gardener and his group, but they also liked putting food on their tables and paying their electric bill. There were almost no mortgages in town, no one had that kind of money, but the rent wasn’t too terrible.

It took another two months for anyone important enough from the Gardener clan to be close enough for Clint to use the right language near the right ears. Unfortunately that didn’t mean could avoid it before then, no, he had a reputation to build, even if every day he woke up hating himself just a little more. By the time he got the invite to the compound, five months had passed since he had become Calvin and it was only by the pure luck of the group he was infiltrating that he was able to use target practice as a means of stress relief and a tool unto itself. He just had to remember to miss occasionally with the bow, too perfect at anything would be suspicious. By then Anna, Agent Craig, and he had been dating on and off for a few weeks. It was nice to have contact with another human being he felt safe with. That he was a fan of monogamy actually made Chris Gardener like him more, something about going back to the base American values or some other bullshit. Still it kept the come ons from the females in his group to a minimum.

At night, as he tried to wind down, he’d miss Coulson like a physical ache, day after day he’d roll around in bed, feeling that terrible pain spread and knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

He didn’t mean to get the flu, it wasn’t ever an issue before. SHIELD pumped him full of vaccines regularly and even with a full schedule of missions he ate well and slept fairly regularly. Now, stuck in the flatlands of America, months away from the SHIELD doctors, he was poor and making do. No money for the flu shot, barely any money to keep his diet from approaching a long courtship with scurvy, and enough self loathing to keep him lean and mean, it was more than enough to attract the bug. He was going to call Anna, he was, but maybe he could use the miserable experience to speed things up. It would be okay as long as his fever didn’t get so high he started hallucinating and even then he could take back most of it and blame fever dreams if needed.

He called the Gardener clan and asked for help.

When Chris Gardener himself knocked on his door, cowboy boots, jeans, tucked in shirt and all, hands full of bags and eyes worried, Clint could have been knocked over with a feather and not just because the flu really, really sucked. He was shuffled into his bedroom by strong deceptively strong hands attached to a whicpcord lean body and then his crappy TV was shuffled in too and meanwhile he was told to swallow some pills and sip some soup. A doctor appeared at one point but the conversation was muffled and far away. He woke up fully about three days later, still feeling like steam rollered crap, but also like he might be able to make it to and from the bathroom without help, but only just. There was no suspicious guard nearby, no gun peaking out from under a coat, so Clint
assumed that he’d been too tired and too asleep to say much of anything.

There was a knock on the door, very quiet, like whoever it was knew he’d be waking up soon but wasn’t quite sure when. “Come in,” he croaked and was surprised to find that it was Anna.

“They called me,” she smiled, “told me you were sick but that you hadn’t wanted to bother me, because I needed the work,” she gave him a quirked eyebrow, “they thought it was sweet and they wanted to assure me that someone would be here when I couldn’t.”

Clint remembered something like that, vaguely. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he said anyway, it wasn’t nice to make a move like that without informing your undercover partner about it.

“It’s fine,” she said, “and you looked like absolutely crap, still do really but comparatively, it’s an improvement. I’ve gotta run in a bit but Chris said someone would be over before then. Okay?” She said carefully.

Clint nodded. There had been strangers in and out of his apartment now, with no supervision, no nothing, the only places they could talk with privacy assurances would be her place, someplace public or if they started faking taking showers together and that just got messy very quickly. Chris came himself that day, and Clint wondered how often that had happened while he was semi comatose, but he was too fucking tired to work it out or care that much and after Chris brought him some soup, some pills and some juice he was asleep before the tray was even taken away.

It took a few days for it to sink in, what he’d done. He’d traded his small square of peace, of comfort and security, for a step in the door. He felt boxed in now, his own home, such as it was, was now part of the battlefield. At least he was having long talks with Chris, who seemed to have relaxed around him, something about calling for him at his weakest moment showed them who he really trusted. Coulson’s face popped into his head and his stomach twisted violently, having nothing at all to do with the flu.

It took three weeks for the coughing to taper off and for the act of making a meal not to tire Clint completely out. By the time he was well enough to make it back into regular clothes, he’d lost enough weight that his belt tightened another notch. His appetite was so meager that the mothers of Chris’s group made it a pact to fatten him up, but no matter what they did, and they hungered for any story he had about food, almost immediately finding a recipe with it to try for him, he just couldn’t choke down more than the minimal requirements.

He’d found that his job had been held for him, courtesy of the Gardeners, who had arranged a series of local high schoolers and farmer’s kids, all over 18, to take at least the brunt of the grunt work he wasn’t doing. The terrible truth was, he liked these people, they were nice to him, terribly nice and it wasn’t until there was talk of a race war, or certain key phrases, more polite for mixed company, but still terrible key phrases, would come up that Clint would remember what these people were.

He was so alone sometimes it ached and he could see Anna watching him, knowing something was wrong. She had probably even added something to her reports about it. At one point, Chris cornered him at the local bar, bought him a beer and looked at him carefully. “You don’t love her, do you?”

Clint was so shocked he nearly choked on his sip. “What?”

“Anna,” Chris said gently, “you don’t love her. Oh sure, you like her well enough, think she’s sweet, do nice things for her, but you don’t love her.”

Shit. Was his cover blown? He took a slow pull of his beer to buy time.
“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing,” Chris told him, “to have a casual relationship with someone, just, does she know?”

Clint swallowed his sip and then nodded, he could work with that. “Yeah, we met over drinks, I was trying to drown a memory, so was she. We’re friends more than anything.”

Chris nodded, satisfied, “Nothing wrong with a little companionship, but stringing a girl along just ain’t right.” He clinked bottles with Clint and he breathed easier until Chris asked his next question. “So what happened? If you want to talk about it?”

The thing was, he really did want to talk about it. This terrible thing that festered deep inside him for almost seven months and he’d yet to talk to anyone about it. Just, Chris wasn’t exactly someone he could be out and proud with. Still though. “There was someone and I fucked it up. Bad. Ph—Fiona, never forgave me.”

Chris leaned back in his chair, crosses his cowboy booted feet and sighed. “I hear that, was it something forgivable?”

“Maybe,” Clint shrugged, he wasn’t sure if how it happened wasn’t something that should be forgivable, “no, yes. It was a misunderstanding that just spiraled and I just didn’t know how to fix it and then before I could even try, she shoved me out of her life. Hard.”

Chris nodded seriously. “Did you push back? Try to explain?”

“A bit,” Clint shrugged, “but the timing just made everything impossible, there were other things going on and,” he swallowed, trying to find a way to cut the story off or Chris might try and convince him to go on some sort of road trip of forgiveness, “and I feel that if a woman makes it very clear she doesn’t want you around, you should not be around.”

The amount of respect Chris leveled at him was shocking. Clint kept getting taken by surprise by the level of moral fortitude the Gardner clan sometimes had. “So I moved on,” Clint finished.

“Fair enough,” Chris nodded, “I can understand that.”

The subject was dropped, but the story must have spread because he started getting doe eyed looks from female population again and he cursed his inattention. Maybe he and Anna could do a relationship end run and figure out they were actually meant to be? Then again, Clint wasn’t sure he could pull it off himself, no reason to poison that well. He could stick to his monogamy sh*tick and they’d leave well enough alone. He hoped. When he’d explained it to Anna on their next date, she had smiled quietly and said she was going to bring it up soon if he wasn’t.

“We got thrown together,” she said, tucking a tuft of dark blond hair behind her ear, “they didn’t worry because we were supposed to meet while on assignment, so not knowing each other wasn’t a big detriment, unlike those ‘going undercover as married’ deals, god, can you imagine the level of trust that—”

Clint’s face must have said something because she dropped it quickly. “It’s okay, you treat me right and they won’t care.”

Their date nights were half stress relief, being around someone who knew and Anna was now integrating into the clan as well, so it was good for her too, and half report dictating. Clint wondered sometimes, if Coulson was the one listening on the other end, when the microburst finally made it to his desk. Some nights, the thought made the ache a little better, others it just intensified all of it to the nth degree.
“Oh hey,” Clint stopped before opening her door, “wasn’t your brother supposed to visit?”

Agent Smith had suffered from acute appendicitis a few days before he was supposed to visit Anna and check out the local job market. They hadn’t made it into the surgery before it burst and then there had been complications with the anesthetic, basically a domino of bad things. There had been a brief message about working out a substitute because the closer they came to the end of the operation, the more people SHIELD wanted on the ground that blended in. They’d hoped to simply incorporate it into the story, about how his job had dropped him and left him with huge medical bills he couldn’t pay. Only Smith’s recovery was plotted in months, not weeks, so SHIELD was looking for a replacement.

Anna brightened, obviously relieved that there’d be some backup close at hand. “Yes, his worker’s comp case fell through, some PI caught him using the stairs without his cane, the photos did not show him barely making it down, but they don’t care about that. He’s coming down here because he needs someplace without stairs and maybe some rent to share.” They continue to plan out the new agent’s arrival via casual conversation, just in case. Clint offered his couch because siblings shouldn’t live together much later than their early twenties. In reality it was so that Anna didn’t have to deal with a strange man in her place. It wasn’t that Clint and Anna didn’t trust SHIELD agents, it was just more awkward playing opposite sex siblings while living in each other’s pockets if you’d never met the man before. Besides, living with Clint gave the agent a better chance at getting involved with the Gardeners.

They sorted the details out, the brother, Peter, was arriving in a week and Clint spent some time cleaning up his living room and arranging a second hand futon to replace his ratty couch. If Peter was a worker’s comp case, then Calvin wouldn’t let him sleep anywhere but on the real mattress. So it was the futon for him. Chris was around the afternoon Peter was set to arrive, ostensibly to help with any heavy lifting, but probably also checking out the new guy in his friend’s life. Clint was very close to joining the inner circle and that apparently brought out a protective urge in Chris.

Still, when he opened the door to greet Anna and her brother, the world stopped for a few brief seconds when Phil Coulson stood there in worn jeans, a faded t-shirt and battered leather jacket, leaning heavily on a cane.

“You must be Calvin,” Coulson smiled amiably, “Anna’s told me only good things and I really appreciate the help.”

“Yeah,” Clint choked, “I mean, yes, it’s no problem, I understand bad luck.” He moved away and waved them both in and then introduced them to Chris who looked genuinely curious and then outraged at Coulson’s cover story. Clint just concentrated on breathing and not focusing on the little crinkles in the corner of Coulson’s eyes or his hand and the way it curved easily over the handle of his cane or how just being in the room with him made his chest lighter.

Clint and Chris make quick work of ‘Peter’s’ stuff, two bags, two boxes, the rest supposedly sharing some storage space with a friend’s stuff until he sorted something more permanent. As the minutes ticked by and Chris left to take care of some stuff at home and Anna waved goodbye and got into her car, Clint felt his body slowly getting tense until finally, when the door closed and they were left alone, he felt like he was going to be sick.

Coulson walked slowly to where Clint was backed against the wall, arms folded defensively across his chest, mostly so he wouldn’t accidentally reach out. Coulson’s fingers did something complicated to the cane handle and it flipped open to reveal a few buttons and a couple of LED lights. A button was pressed and then a red light and Coulson slumped defeated, shaking his head.

Oh, it was a bug detector, his place was being surveilled after all, Clint felt a little better having
worked so hard to keep up the charade.

“You think we could take a walk? Show me around the complex?” Coulson asked. “I spent too much time driving, I need to work out some leg cramps, or I’ll never sleep tonight.”

“Sure,” Clint nodded, apparently they were doing this tonight after all.

As cheaply made as some parts of his apartment complex were, almost anywhere else it would be a single building, but the town had miles and miles of land to spare and whoever had designed this particular set up had taken advantage and kept everything to two stories and L shaped buildings that came together in a large rectangle. In the center was a decently kept play area for kids during the day and a well lit park for the darker hours. Most of the local adults were too tired at the end of the day for a stroll though, so it stayed pretty deserted.

They stopped in the center and Clint automatically helped shield Coulson as he opened the handle again, this time pressing a different button and getting a green light. “No directional mics,” Coulson whispered, “but we should keep walking just in case.”

The problem with using his body as a shield was that it put him really close to Coulson and fuck, if he had missed everything about him, right down to his soap. It made it hard to concentrate so Clint was a few steps behind Coulson’s artificial loping gate, when he caught up, Coulson looked far away.

“I don’t know what you said to her,” Coulson started, not looking at him, “but Natasha nearly killed me before letting me get a word in edgewise.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Clint whispered quickly, “I just left my usual goodbye note.”

Coulson chuckled. “Not according to her.”

“Damnit,” Clint sighed, he didn’t want to be blamed for anything else, it was already going to be a real bitch to get through this.

“No,” Coulson said softly, turning to look at him, “it’s okay, she uh, sat me down. Made me explain what happened and I realized that I’d been a real ass.”

Clint nearly tripped over his own two feet, “What?”

Coulson looked away again, his throat moving in the moonlight, swallowing, but Clint was distracted by the glow it cast. “You so obviously wanted to say something,” Coulson told him, still looking away, “and I just… I spent so long talking around it with my dad. Love the sinner, hate the sin,” he snorted derisively, “it’s a toxic relationship that way, no one will tell you that part, but it’s toxic, because all they want to do is fix you. Every conversation I could see hope die a little more inside of him when any woman’s name I mentioned wasn’t followed by relationship, or even date.”

Clint’s chest hurt and his throat seemed to make a clicking noise without him being aware.

“I couldn’t do that with you,” Coulson was looking at him now, eyes large and sad, “I just couldn’t so I… cut you off before it could happen and that wasn’t fair.”

It cramped his arms, not to reach out and touch him, to hug him, to whisper to him it wasn’t that at all, never that. “Coulson,” he said unsteadily, “it was never that,” he took a shaky breath, “it was a knee jerk reaction, I was protecting myself from—” Coulson was staring at him, eyes still impossibly wide, the moon casting a hazy blue glow over him, making him ethereal and wispy, “I didn’t think I could have that and then… not.”
It was Coulson’s turn to swallow back a pained sound. “Clint,” he whispered unsteadily, “I—” Coulson sat down hard on the nearest bench and looked absolutely wrecked.

Clint sat next to him, taking a minute to be thankful they were in the darkest corner of the park and feeling a little dizzy himself. When Coulson’s hand clamped around his, something tense and scared whooshed out of his mouth and he clamped his own hand down right back. It was all they could do out in the open like this, sit casually next to each other while their hands, mostly hidden from view, held each other so tightly Clint’s fingers might have lost some feeling. He didn’t care because Coulson was there and that horrible misunderstanding was gone and miracle of miracles they were on the same page. Though, because Clint’s brain could never leave well enough alone, on his third deep breath in and out, slowly getting steadier and steadier, he whispered, “I think I love you, a lot.”

“Oh thank god,” Coulson whispered fervently, “that was about to get awkward.” He flashed Clint a blindingly happy smile.

A laugh bubbled up from inside his chest and Clint felt like it was the first real one in a long time. “I really need this op to be over soon,” Clint looked down at their entwined hands, “because I really want to kiss you.”

Coulson’s hand squeezed just a bit harder, briefly. “Jesus Clint, you can’t say things like that,” but he didn’t sound upset, mostly shocky and maybe a touch of wonder.

“Sorry, sorry,” Clint said roughly, only half meaning it, “I just can’t live with that happening again, me not saying things and you thinking I hate you.”

Coulson let out another wordless sound, squeezing his hand again. “That won’t happen again, I promise. I’m so sorry, really.” His voice was going ragged with emotion.

“Me too,” Clint murmured, forcing his head to stay staring straight ahead, if he turned, if they looked at each other in that moment, it would done, lost, probably in each other.

They sat there for a few precious minutes, basking in each others presence and slowly Clint felt months of tension unwind inside of him until that spot of pain between his shoulders finally eased. “We should get back soon,” Clint said, voice still so low, but it felt loud and intrusive into their private bubble.

“Yeah,” Coulson said, giving Clint’s hand one final squeeze before he let go, “it’s really good to see you Clint,” he said, daring to meet Clint’s eye, “even if you look too thin.”

Clint’s cheeks hurt holding back his smile to a dull roar but Coulson seemed to understand. “I got sick,” Clint said, “and I haven’t had much of an appetite in a while.”

Coulson flinched a little and his eyes dimmed. “Clint,” he whispered, voice trembling.

“It’s fine,” he retook Coulson’s hand and squeezed it gently, “it’s more than fine. It’s amazing.”

They stared at each other for a long minute before Coulson seemed satisfied. With a nod he released their hands again and hauled himself upright using the cane. Clint stood up and began to follow Coulson’s slow gate back to the apartment. “Do you think,” Clint said carefully, watching Coulson’s shoulders rise and fall with avid interest, deliberately not looking down, “your injury might benefit from a regular walk?”

Coulson paused, considering, “Probably?” he looked back at Clint with a familiar gleam in his eyes, “But I wouldn’t want to go alone, just in case,” he tapped his cane against his ‘bum’ leg, “it can act up from time to time.”
“I would be a terrible friend and roommate,” Clint said seriously, “if I let you take that risk.”

“And Anna has assured me that you are in fact, a good guy,” Coulson smiled at him, a genuine smile, not Peter’s thankful smile, but Coulson’s crooked little smile that reached his eyes and beamed happiness at the mere idea of Clint walking by his side for a few minutes every day.

“I had my doubts about that,” Clint said, “for a little while,” returning the smile briefly, but fully and completely.

It should have been difficult, all things considered, to return to Clint’s cheaply put together apartment as relative strangers and to not fall prey to the magnetic pull they felt for each other. Somehow, though, it wasn’t. Maybe it was the knowledge that the waiting was temporary and that as soon as they had the international connection then they could call in the big guns and take the operation down and then there would be time and space and above all, privacy. Precious, precious privacy.

The strange thing about living with Coulson was that his apartment no longer felt like a lost landmark of freedom, stifling Clint even as he was alone, because there was no way to be free, to stop being undercover for even thirty seconds. Because there were bugs in the place, they were forced to go through the getting to know you talks, which were actually quite pleasant because Clint and Coulson actually did get along and so Peter and Calvin found many things in common, even if some of them were modified to be character specific. They laughed at the same things and enjoyed the same moments of quiet and solitude.

Hilariously, his fifteen or so minutes in the shower had become both a haven and terrible, terrible torture. Being the only door with a lock, Clint had already been preparing for a time when his only true privacy were his morning and evening routines for when the mysterious SHIELD agent playing Anna’s brother had shown up. Now that it was Coulson, that time was a double edged sword. With the shower running, he could relax minutely and be Clint again, the trouble was that Clint was in love with the man on the other side of the door and he was so frustrated that he had to add five whole minutes to his morning routine to deal with it and then put himself back together again before facing Coulson. The shower being the only secure place to speak without bugs picking up on you meant that Clint was tempted to say things and his fantasies often strayed into shared shower territory, and he sometimes spent hours trying to find an inconspicuous way to lock both of them in the bathroom with the water running for just ten minutes. Truthfully, Clint doubted that they’d last nearly that long the first time, but he thought the afterglow would be pretty spectacular too.

What was worse, was the switch off, where Clint would slink out, more relaxed, barely, but a little shamefaced and Coulson would slip past him, fingers often skimming down an arm or across his stomach by purposeful accident, a blush high in his cheeks and sometimes it was almost enough to get him going again. He’d come out again, nearly a half hour later, which Clint knew for a fact Coulson didn’t need that long if pressed and originally he thought maybe Coulson was adding time because of the fake injury but now he thought maybe he just needed the time gather himself back together after coming his brains out and shaking with the need to just stop already and grab Clint to him and hold him close.

Or, you know, something like that.

Still, they’d had the occasional long few seconds when their eyes met after one of them emerged from a humid bathroom still damp and flushed.

Their nightly walks were a different form of torture, that was, if torture could be that soothing and calming. Having Coulson there, by his side, humming quietly to himself as they swayed in an ambling path to the darkest corner of the park where they sat, side by side, clutching hands like chaste teenagers in a nick at night rerun, was as close to perfection as Clint could get given the
limitations of their situations. Each night, as they sat down, a tiny cocoon of joyful silence would descend and then Coulson’s fingers would run along his, stroking, learning, feeling and Clint’s chest would hitch, but he’d stay still and relaxed and waited his turn until Coulson’s hand went slack in his, offering up as much of himself as he could give at that moment.

Two weeks in and Clint was sure he knew every whorl and mark Coulson’s hand possessed.

“Can I get a ride into town?” Coulson asked from the kitchen one morning. “I’ve got an appointment at the library slash police department? They need a clerk and it’s just about the only job I can get where I can sit down through most of it.”

“Sure,” Clint shrugged, “we’re supposed to meet Anna at the steak house near her place tonight to catch up, I can just swing by after my shift to pick you up? If you get the job that is, otherwise come down to the store and I’ll drop you here during lunch.”

Coulson got the job, there wasn’t much doubt, new people rarely come to stay and it had been open for a while, plus a place like this liked helping those in need. Coulson told them how accommodating the entire office had been over dinner. Anna looked amused and glad, hugging her big brother on her doorstep, brave woman, most agents would have needed some prep work to hug Agent Coulson, even undercover. Clint liked working with her, she picked up cues without effort and took unexpected things on the chin.

The situation, after dropping Anna off and making the turn onto the main drag that would lead them back to the interstate for their measly two exits back to Clint and Coulson’s home base, seemed pretty innocuous. Until, up ahead, the rail road crossing started to flash and shit, it wasn’t just starting, it had been going for a good half minute but the bend in the road had hid it from view. Crap, they weren’t going to make it and the train that ran at this time of night was one of those slow, lumbering, freight trains. There were ways around it, but they would all take just as long, if not longer, than simply waiting for the never ending parade of old and battered cars to pass by. Clint sighed and let the car slide to a halt and then put it into park, he just hoped it wasn’t a garbage freight, that would just add insult to injury.

“Might as well get comfy,” Clint said sulkily, “this is a good thirty minutes of torture. The first time I got caught behind it I didn’t even have a book. It was terrible.” He turned to smile wryly at Coulson, to say that at least this time he had company but he got stuck between one thought and the next when he caught sight of his companion, skin gleaming in the dark night, occasionally lit by patches of light the slow train and the signal itself emitted, eyes staring at him hungrily, hands clenched so tightly around his cane that Clint knew, just knew without a doubt that he was holding himself in check, but just barely.

Clint’s breathing went rough and reedy instantly and he reached out to the handle of Coulson’s cane, after two weeks of watching him manipulate it, of staring at his hands, his fingers, his knuckles, Clint knew exactly what to do. He flipped it open and hit the testing button and held his breath. The green light immediately eased some tension inside of him. Until he looked back up into Coulson’s eyes.

A hand, shaky and elegant, reached out and touched Clint’s face, just the fingertips on skin, but it was hot, electric and intense. Coulson spent long seconds just feeling until finally he reached Clint’s lips where they stayed, pressing gently, sometimes moving incrementally back and forth, memorizing. Clint’s mouth opened, panting, his dick perking up and taking notice easily and then it was nothing, everything, to suck one of those, amazing, beguiling, mesmerizing and memorized thanks to their walks, fingers inside of his mouth.

The noise Coulson made went straight to his stomach and then down until he twitched inside of his pants, so fucking turned on it was a little ridiculous. Eventually Coulson pulled his finger away, but
only long enough to get his whole hand around the back of Clint’s neck to pull him close enough to let their foreheads touch. “Clint,” Coulson rasped, “can I?”

“Yes,” Clint said, “yes, yes, please Coulson, yes,” his body was already tightening in anticipation and he had no idea what exactly was being asked, just that if it had to do with Coulson, himself and their tiny, but unexpected, bubble of opportunity, then he would say yes, always.

“Phil,” Coulson said quietly, not quite moving yet.

At first Clint thought he meant something else, something dirtier and so hot Clint’s entire body throbbed a little but he was confused as to the logistics of doing it inside his tiny, battered, old Saturn.

“Call me Phil, please,” Coulson said again and the remainder of Clint’s blood flushed to his face, realizing his mistake.

“Phil,” Clint said carefully, rolling around each sound in his mouth, “Phil,” his eyes fluttered closed as he took a deep breath, nose full of Coul—Phil’s scent, rich and heady and full of promise. There was no specific move to kiss, just a drift of their mouths, closer and closer until Clint could feel each gust of breath as Phil made them and the tension went so tight one of them whimpered until finally their lips grazed briefly and then again and again and again. For all the boiling passion under his skin, Clint couldn’t help but make his kisses soft, gentle, careful. Loving. Phil returned them in kind, filling Clint with the warmth of hope and joy. Their hands eventually roved, long sweeps up and down backs and hips, squeezing carefully at firm muscles, inching under the hems of shirts for a brief feel of skin, warm and tempting under their fingers.

The kisses eventually grew longer and sweeter, the dip of a tongue here, the scrape of teeth there until Clint was out of his mind with arousal and Phil was making cut off sounds into his mouth with each press of lips. It reached a point where they either had to do something, or stop and calm down. When Phil pulled away, reluctantly and with great effort, Clint was worried he was going to have to finish the drive back to their apartment so aroused his jeans might actually kill him, especially because the driver’s seat was already as far back as it would go and his erection was already pressing against the bottom curve of the wheel now and then.

“Hold on,” Phil said, feeling around between his seat and his door until he found what he was looking for and smiled grandly, “been a while since I’ve tried this but I’ve gotten a little more experience at strategic planning since then,” his arm shifted, as if pulling and—oh. Yes. The back of the passenger seat spring loose and Phil braced his feet on the floorboard and pushed down with his back until he was 80% reclined.

Clint was momentarily blinded by the vision of a younger Phil, brash and panting in the back seat of someone’s car and his brain went offline for a second. When he came back, Phil’s hands were carefully stowed in the back, Phil’s cane was carefully being stowed in the back, Phil’s hands stretched up to reach behind the reclined front seat, giving Clint a good look at the lines of stomach as he arched just a little bit, in his pants his cock twitched happily and the desperation ratcheted up another notch. Then Phil’s hands were on his, tugging gently, a small smile on his lips and his eyes all pupil and happiness. “Climb over the gear shift, there should be just enough room.”

Oh. Okay yes, that seemed like a really good idea and Clint had to slow himself down from simply throwing himself over to Phil’s side of the car because he might not be the tallest person in the world but this car was still pretty compact and the driver’s seat wasn’t meant to be climbed out of that way. He quickly tipped the steering wheel up to give his knees enough room to maneuver, well maybe not enough, but at least there was more. Phil helped him by taking the brunt of his weight with only a muted grunt, that still sent a thrill down Clint’s spine which god he was so fucking turned on if that did it for him, while he twisted to get both of his knees out from under the dashboard.
Eventually he was facing the back window, with one knee pressing into the seat between Phil’s thighs and Clint could definitely feel the warm line of Phil’s cock eagerly pressing into him, with a final swing, his right knee made it over the gear shift and he planted the foot into the foot well, giving him excellent leverage with which to push into Phil’s warm body. God the feel of him, pressed fully chest to chest, legs twined together intimately, body heat searing through their layers of clothing like they were nothing.

They spent another frantic few minutes scrabbling for places to hold onto one another while their bodies moved together and they kissed wetly, panting with restrained emotion. Eventually a rhythm emerged, Phil’s hand pressing hotly against Clint’s ass, helping him rock against Phil in slow, even rolls of pleasured agony as they whimpered into each other’s mouths, afraid to do much more because, god, it was amazing, too amazing, to have Phil like this, under him, breathing hard, panting really and Clint wanted it to go on forever. Eventually though, the ache in his balls grew and his rolls became something shorter, sharper and Phil’s body trembled tightly in his hold.

“Hold on,” Phil eventually said, unable to take his lips too far away from Clint’s, “I’m so close and I want—” Clint sucked on the closest patch of skin because he wanted to hear what Phil had to say, but he couldn’t stop himself from pressing his lips down onto any part of Phil they could get, “oh god,” Phil’s voice went high for a second, “I really want to see you come, I really need to come but not in my pants, that’s a little too much verisimilitude for my tastes.”

Clint made a high pitched noise, first at the idea of coming, oh god he wanted to come so badly, then at watching Phil do the same and then at the idea that Phil could be half out of his mind with need and still use words like verisimilitude. He flailed a bit because his brain was too fogged with pleasure to come up with a solution until he remembered that he kept a roll of paper towels in the car because he’d had to dig under the hood one too many times before eating a meal with no place to wash up in between. In fact there might still be some wetnaps or something in the glove compartment. Awesome.

In the time it took for Clint to figure that out, Phil was apparently way ahead of him because at the idea of coming, oh god he wanted to come so badly, then at watching Phil do the same and then at the idea that Phil could be half out of his mind with need and still use words like verisimilitude. He flailed a bit because his brain was too fogged with pleasure to come up with a solution until he remembered that he kept a roll of paper towels in the car because he’d had to dig under the hood one too many times before eating a meal with no place to wash up in between. In fact there might still be some wetnaps or something in the glove compartment. Awesome.

In the time it took for Clint to figure that out, Phil was apparently way ahead of him because suddenly his pants were undone and Phil’s hands were reaching inside and holy crap, wrapping around his cock and giving him an affectionate squeeze that he felt all the way to his toes. He made some sort of sound, a cross between a choke and a groan and Phil’s laugh, his dirty, dirty, laugh hit his ears and suddenly he needed to be inside Phil’s pants too. Phil obliged him by breathing faster as his hands hit the buttons and doing nothing more than holding Clint carefully, occasionally lettings his fingers rub delicious circles in the hot skin on his cock.

When Clint finally got his hand around Phil’s cock, carefully pulling it from its home inside of Phil’s soft gray underwear, giving it a tentative little pull, Phil’s hands started to shake a little. Their eyes caught each other again, thick with tension and want, Clint kissed him, desperate and messy until they found themselves rocking into each other’s grips, soft little huffs of pleasure surrounding them.

“Wait,” Phil pulled away again, smiling fondly when Clint made a grumpy sound, “I want to feel you,” he shifted them, hands sliding into Clint’s underwear, indecently warm and good, pushing his pants down and under the curve of his ass. Then he wiggled a little, lifting up and incidentally into Clint’s aching erection and oh that felt good maybe if they— oh, Phil was pushing his pants out of the way as well and then pushing his shirt up into his armpits and Clint could see exactly where this was going and he was on board, totally on board, any more on board and it would be all over.

Quickly, Clint resettled, his own shirt taken completely off and tossed into the driver’s seat for easy reach later, it took a few adjustments but eventually they were skin to skin, erections nestled together, hot brands sitting perfectly against sweaty skin. Phil reeled him in for a kiss, this time setting their hips into motion with the same push/pull their tongues were making and it was so amazing Clint
whimpered into it, sucking on Phil’s tongue hard, his hands skirting up and down Phil’s torso as their hips took off on their own steam. He wanted to slow it down again, savor it because he knew their chances of having this again any time soon were slim to none but each drag of skin against the underside of his erection was a spark of electric pleasure down his spine.

Fairly quickly they no longer had the coordination to kiss and roll their hips at the same time and Phil just cupped his jaw and brought them close together, touching his forehead gently with Clint’s and panted, open mouthed as they raced towards orgasm. Phil’s hand fumbled between them, enfolding both of their cocks in his grip, tightening nearly imperceptibly until Clint had the absolutely most perfect place to thrust into, hot and wet with precome and just tight enough to— his vision blacked out for a minute as he came so hard his muscles clenched and never really released until it was done and he was shaking with aftershocks. Under him Phil made a noise, a delicious noise that sent another shock through him as Phil shook and came apart.

Their breathing took long seconds to even out. Eventually Phil, voice rough with exhaustion, asked, “How much time do we have left?”

Clint squinted at his watch, catching the time between one burst of light and the next, “Ten minutes, maybe more.”

Phil nodded, relaxing, letting his hands stroke at the nearest piece of skin, Clint did the same. “I love you,” Phil said, “I don’t think I said it yet,” he kissed Clint’s temple, letting his lips linger.

Clint pushed himself up enough to look Phil dopily in the eyes, “No, I thought you had car sex with just anyone,” he brushed a kiss against Phil’s lips and smiled serenely, “I love you too.”

They shared a giddy laugh and spent five precious minutes just being with each other until finally and with great reluctance, Clint reached under the reclined back of the seat to find the paper towels. Clint couldn’t fully sit up while perched on Phil’s lap, even with the seat reclined fully, but he could hollow out enough space between them to get a majority of the mess cleaned off. Phil spent a few seconds carefully tucking Clint back into his underwear, pulling his pants up and buttoning them and Clint returned the favor even if Phil’s position made it a little trickier.

They shared one last, lingering kiss, so packed with feeling Clint’s chest ached a little when they parted. For some reason, twisting back into the driver’s seat felt too easy, even as he knocked his knee into the console. He fished his shirt out from under him and tugged it on while next to him, Phil put his seat back into the upright position. By the time the last car finished trundling past them and the lights stopped flashing into the darkness they had returned to their starting position, with one exception. As soon as Clint moved the car from park to drive and no longer truly needed that hand, Phil took it back and weaved their fingers together tightly, not letting go until Clint was pulling into his parking spot in front of their building.
Phil and Clint, like every other night, took their bathroom turns only now there were brief seconds where the sun came out and Phil would blush or Clint would smile and they would both have to turn away. There was a bitter-sweetness to going to bed, because in the end all there was of being together was a shared goodnight and a warm but yearning smile across a handful of feet in the living room to the bedroom door. Still, those thirty minutes inside a cramped and humid car had released so much pent up energy and feeling his limbs still felt sated and the heavy and tired feeling crept in the moment he settled into his futon. Sleep came quickly and it was deep and heavy and peaceful.

In the morning Clint felt lighter and more hopeful, they still shared that one awkward moment at the bathroom door, only it wasn’t awkward anymore, that half second of ‘accidental touching’ was peace and maybe this time they both pushed a little further, brushed a little harder, but that was fine, it was all they needed.

The op seemed to be coming along nicely as well, Chris had invited Calvin to a meeting, one where actual planning seemed to take place, for the most part he stayed silent but occasionally offered a bit of advice, nothing huge, but still useful. Mostly some wilderness tip or a way to manage better coverage of an area with less people. Nothing that made him sound like a pro, just innocent questions that pointed out holes in their defense. Clint had spent a long time cultivating a ‘he’s a natural’ persona, starting with a snowball fight between the kids one snowy winter afternoon months ago. Slowly Chris opened up about future plans, nothing big, just ideas, concepts and Clint would nod along merrily, sometimes asking questions, sometimes not.

Clint and Phil, during one of their quiet walks into the night, had a half conversation about that night at the rail road stop, and agreed that as tempting as it was, as amazing as it had been, it wasn’t a good idea to try for it again. Surprisingly Clint was okay with that, something about having finally connected like that, as themselves, instead of half in and half out of their characters had been both freeing and soothing. So he easily agreed, with one exception. “No promises if we’re still stuck here six months from now.”

Phil’s chuckle was low and deep. “Fair enough.”

Clint shivered. “Make it four.” His hand was squeezed companionably and he knew Phil agreed whole heartedly. Clint was learning to like chaste, because he’d suddenly found a whole new language to talk in and it was secretive and delicate and Phil was always there with the same look or smile but honestly, he was only so strong.

For a few weeks things seemed to stand still, Chris was working on something big but he was reluctant to let Calvin in on it just yet and Clint was starting to go a little crazy because there was literally nothing left he could do but be patient. Until finally, one day over lunch at the small but well run family diner, Chris casually asked about Peter.

“He’s a good guy,” Clint said easily, idly chewing on the most amazing home made french fries he’d ever had, those he was going to miss, “we like the same sports teams and he’s not a terrible roommate, likes doing the dishes, if you can imagine?” Mentally he frowned, was that what it was, he’d let a new person into his space and now they were waiting for ‘Peter’ to check out too? If so this might go on for months longer than anticipated.

Chris leaned in a little, elbow resting easily on the old varnished table top, voice going low, “He think like us?”
Clint raised an eyebrow but made a show of considering it. “Well, he had some choice words to say about the judge who denied his worker’s comp case.” Which Chris knew because he and Phil had made sure to have that conversation a couple of times.

“Would he cause trouble?” Chris asked carefully. “If you got another job, at the compound?”

Clint blinked shook his head. “As long as I paid my half of the rent, probably not, though I’m sure he’d be curious what I was doing, not in a suspicious way, he’s my friend.”

“I’ve got something I could use your help with and normally I’d offer you a place to stay on the compound but I know that Peter only works part time and probably couldn’t afford your place on his own,” Chris said eventually, twirling his straw idly, the sympathy in his voice very clear. “I’d offer him a place too but he hasn’t been around long and the rest of the group wouldn’t agree to it without a lot of elbow grease.”

Making an effort to look torn, Clint pursed his lips and sighed. “Truthfully, I wouldn’t want to have him living alone,” he said slowly, working to sound concerned, Clint could do his job without moving to the compound, but the idea of separating them made his heart beat too fast and if he had to move in, he was going to work hard to bring ‘Peter’ with him. “He doesn’t like to say it, but there are days his leg makes doing even the simple things really hard. We talked about it, his plan for getting his feet under him and while he might like to move to something with a little more space but he said he felt more comfortable with a roommate around.”

Chris made understanding noises. “Yeah and I bet he’s too stubborn to say outright why, too.”

“You’re not wrong,” Clint said amiably, waiting for the final verdict.

“Stay where you are,” Chris finally said, “I’m not gonna put a hard working, good man, out on his ass just because it’s convenient.”

Clint’s smile wasn’t even faked and so with that Calvin Buchanan cut his hours at the hardware store and took on construction work on the Gardener compound. It wasn’t that far off from the truth. Most of the time he was pouring foundations, putting rebar into place, pounding in drywall. The entire compound was renovating, something like a large chunk of the living areas sorely needed it. Though it did make Clint wonder where the money was coming from, well no, he knew, but now he wanted to know more. On Phil and Clint’s next weekly dinner with Anna they sent in their reports before the appetizers and received the return instructions just after desert.

Phil pushed the small SD card into the hidden slot on his phone and hit the PGP icon that came up. Normally the card lived in his older, but well taken care of camera, Peter’s one treat to himself before the medical bills stacked up too high. If someone turned the camera on and looked at the card data, they’d find a series of images, mostly still life, mostly taken since he’d moved, all actually snapped by Phil. He had a decent artistic hand on occasion.

“I can’t do it while you’re around,” Phil had admitted to him during their bench time, “I’d be too tempted to focus on you.”

Clint had felt his entire face warm at the admission, but he also smiled shyly, secretly pleased. “Maybe later,” he’d said and Phil had made that noise, cut off and aching, that made Clint’s insides turn to warm liquid.

However, once the SD card was inside his phone, it would decrypt the latest MP3 download. If asked, Peter was humoring his sister who always came to dinner with a song suggestion. “SHIELD says the money coincides with what they’re seeing on their end and it’s helped narrow down the
suspect pool of possible targets. Anna you’ll be getting a few amazon.com packages, they’ll contain
the earwigs and a few other extras, bring it with you next week, it’s close enough to Peter’s birthday
to make it a gift.”

The extra time they spent discussing their next moves and then the directions from SHIELD left Phil
and Clint once again caught behind the blinking red light of a closed rail road crossing. Clint
swallowed a noise that tried to escape his mouth but was unsuccessful and next to him Phil was
struggling with his cane, flipping the handle open with clumsy hands and waiting impatiently for the
scan to finish. At the first flash of green Clint was leaning over the center console and pulling Phil to
him and fisting his lips over Phil’s eager ones, kissing him hotly, so absolutely eager to just touch
him again, truly touch him.

He got hard so fast it was a little painful and not just because he was stuck in jeans again but even as
he ached to come, soon please oh oh god Phil’s mouth was amazing, he wanted to just curl up next
to Phil nearly as much. Then Phil’s hand, hot and perfect, curled around his aching cock inside his
pants, stroking at the denim just firmly enough that Clint could feel it and yeah, the urge to come
won the debate. Phil kept kissing him, swallowing his words, licking into his mouth, sucking on his
tongue and the whole time stroking him maddeningly slowly.

Soon, maybe too soon, maybe not soon enough, Phil eased away from him and Clint got a good look
at his face, flushed, even in darkness, licking his lips carefully. “What do you want?” Phil asked in a
tight voice, “Is there something you want?”

“Just you,” Clint said raggedly, “just, please, I want to touch you and maybe hold you a little.”

Phil’s entire body twitched and he nodded. “How about blowjobs and then holding?” He asked,
instantly knowing the problems with the issue. Holding during sex was complicated and it would
only urge them into activities that required more time and space than they had, but after maybe, in
afterglow, yeah that sounded really nice.

Clint nodded frantically. “Yes, yes, please—oh,” Phil had gotten Clint’s pants open and he was
already ducking down to lick, gently and then with more urgency and it was just, hot and agile and
his cock throbbed hard and then Phil sucked gently on the sensitive head and Clint had to work not
to just thrust his hips up and up. Then Phil’s cheeks hollowed and Clint’s toes curled and holy god
he was going to come in about thirty seconds. His left hand gripped the steering while while his right
found its way to Phil’s shoulder, squeezing it in approval with each slow lowering and raising of
Phil’s head.

“Jesus, Phil, I’m so fucking close, god.” His balls were tight against his body and sweat had broken
out across his back. He was so close and Phil’s mouth was a warm, wet heaven that he never wanted
to leave. “Can I?” Clint gasped, “Can I?” Phil instead of attempting to interpret his question or
answer it, which was good because even Clint wasn’t sure what he was asking, just grabbed the
hand Clint had on the wheel, pried it off and then threaded their fingers together and squeezed. He
came so hard his body bent over Phil’s head, who was still sucking gently, pulling him through all of
the shudders. Eventually Clint relaxed and Phil sat up, lips bruised but proud looking and Clint just
had to kiss that look because it was perfect and sweet and god his entire body was tingly.

Phil, apparently a master at multitasking, carefully tucked Clint back into has pants and zipped him
up, without breaking their kiss. When he caught his breath, Clint glanced at the clock on the dash in
shock, only five minutes had passed. This sex once every couple of months thing really accelerated
the program. Next to him Phil wasn’t saying anything, but Clint could feel his tension under his
hands and immediately he went to undo Phil’s fly, happily and eagerly.

“I’m,” Phil said, voice all cock roughened and beautiful, “I’m really— oh god,” he twitched as Clint
reached inside and drew him out, all hot and angry looking. “So close,” whimpered as Clint took an experimental stroke.

“Shh,” Clint said, pushing his shirt out of the way and pressing a careful kiss onto Phil’s Stomach, “I was five minutes start to finish, I’m not gonna judge,” and then he sucked Phil into his mouth as carefully as possible, it had been a long time since he’d tried this but he really wanted it to be good for Phil, he really, really did. Too soon Phil’s hands were on his shoulders, squeezing out a warning but Clint wasn’t ready to stop yet. The feel of Phil’s cock on his tongue was still too new and the girth of him filling Clint’s mouth wasn’t burned into his mind yet, but next to his cheek, Phil stomach quivered and under his hands, Phil’s thighs tensed and the cock in his mouth went just a bit firmer. So Clint started swallowing, creating as much suction as he could until above him Phil went rigid and made a low keening noise that vibrated through Clint as he sucked Phil dry.

Eventually Phil’s shaking hands pulled him up and Clint went easily enough. They shared another series of careful kisses, this time Clint gently putting Phil’s dick back in his pants.

“Time?” Phil whispered in between kisses.

Clint looked. “Twenty minutes.”

Phil nodded quickly and then reached back for the lever, only letting go of Clint when he needed his full body weight to push the seat back down. This time, Clint had a recent memory of climbing over the center console to work from and it took far less time before he was situated on top of Phil holding him close, Phil returning the favor.

“Comfortable?” Clint asked, nuzzling the thin, delicate skin, of Phil’s neck.

“Incredibly,” Phil murmured, slipping his hands under Clint’s t-shirt to roam the plains of his back.

Fifteen minutes later they carefully untangled themselves, allowed a few more careful kisses and then separated into their own seats, their entwined hands the only point of connection left.

The point of of having the brother, whoever played him, was to tailor him to exactly what they needed him to be. The clerk’s job was absolutely perfect, so Phil came in injured and needing a certain type of job, all of it was to make getting him that clerk’s position in the single government building in town easier. It meant that whoever was playing the brother would be in an excellent place to obtain all sorts of information, the idea was to make him invaluable.

Unfortunately Phil came in months later than originally planned so it was a tough time trying to find a way to work him into the conversation while making him sound valuable and reliable but without sounding suspicious, or worse, lovestruck. That second one was a real possibility, especially since the Gardner Clan only supported homosexuality in the ‘inferior species’ as a way to help ‘naturally’ curtail their population growth. Clint hated to be the person who tried to explain to them that their math just wasn’t going to work on that count, but whatever, it still meant that Peter could only be Calvin’s good friend.

The incredibly gruesome and unfortunate near lynching two towns over of an interracial couple just passing through came at exactly the right time. Clint could see Phil absolutely hating making any sort of hay out of that kind of thing, but deadlines were approaching and they both wanted Clint to have backup nearby and not just hovering a couple miles away waiting on the go order when the operation heated up. So when the opportunity to naturally include ‘Peter’ into the planning came, because there was some information they needed, Clint finally relaxed.

The local interstate was often used as a shipping supply line, it was a direct route between several
major cities and majority of it didn’t go through towns larger than a postage stamp. Ideal for shipping unfavorable items, or large stores of evidence being moved to a federal facility down the line. That was the kind of thing that local law enforcement tended to get heads up on, but usually not more than 12 hours or so in order to keep the security as tight as possible. “Peter can do it,” Clint said casually.

Chris looked speculative, everyone else in the room shifted uncomfortably and the guy on the speaker phone, the international link, fucking finally, waited patiently.

“Are you sure?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said, “especially if you pay him a little something, not a lot, but the guy could use some breathing room and considering why, he’ll be more than happy to make some back at their expense.”

They’d specifically emptied a majority of Peter’s accounts with the debtor being a medical conglomerate that handled billing. They made it look like a lump sum was demanded and Peter was the kind of guy who’d rather go hungry for a few days than risk killing his credit score even more. Truthfully the ‘they’ in the theoretical people Peter would be getting back at was a little bit of a stretch to connect them to Peter’s debtors, but these guys tended to lump it all into one large group.

Clint got to hang around while Chris brought them dinner, homemade from the girls back on the compound, and ate it at their small little table. When it was all done, Chris seamlessly and with a decent amount of skill turned the conversation over to Phil, asking careful questions that would get out his money troubles without ‘Peter’ having to actually say it. Saving face was a big thing with Chris.

Phil let it go for a little bit, making a face at not screwing the cops, but at simply doing wrong by his job and that more than anything got Chris to relax about Peter. Still, in the end, Phil said yes and Chris said they’d talk about payment later. Clint had the feeling that Chris might try and shove a little more than ‘Peter’ would think was necessary at him and just wanted it to be a surprise attack. Clint really hated how much he liked these guys sometimes.

By then, it was weeks after Anna had gifted her brother with the amazon.com package, officially holding some decent camera gear, unofficially a few useful goodies for Clint and Phil. Unfortunately they couldn’t wait for their next dinner, Clint had only just found out about the plans and since if they left it to Phil to figure out they could have as little as a couple hours warning. So on their daily walk Phil put together a careful text and hit send. Their talk was strained, waiting for the return message, for all they knew it was going to go down in hours and there wouldn’t be time for anything for a long few days, possibly long weeks.

If their hand clasp was a little desperate, a little more clingy, then it was because they were approaching the absolutely most dangerous part of any undercover operation, the ending. The longer the phone remained silent the more the tension mounted and the harder Clint’s heart beat.

“It occurs to me,” Phil said eventually, voice quiet in the night, “that we’ve been living together for months.”

Clint chuckled. “Yeah, it’s been fun,” and it had been, terrible, horrible, nearly debilitating, undercover pressure aside, it had been fun, easy even.

“I was thinking that maybe,” Phil trailed off for a second, eyes off in the distance, palm sweaty in Clint’s, “we should, keep doing that. When this is over.”

Clint blinked, confused, they should continue to have fun? He should think so, but Clint was really
ready to dump his slowly pealing apartment, seriously *everything* had started to peel, the paint, the linoleum, *everything*, and get back to his— oh. “You mean as Clint and Phil.”

“Yes,” Phil nodded.

“Oh,” Clint blinked a lot and thought about it. The very notion made him feel warm inside, happy.

“Maybe I shouldn’—

“Yes,” Clint said over Phil’s imminent retraction, “yes. Absolutely. In fact, we’re going to take the full four weeks offered to long term undercovers and we’re going to spend half of that figuring out which bed we like better and the other half will determine which apartment’s floor has better traction.”

Next to him, Phil had a full body shudder and his grip on his cane tightened to the point of white knuckles, but he did finally look at Clint, even if it was to glare. Clint smirked widely and began whistling and honestly, it was totally worth it just to hear Phil mutter, “Christ I cannot wait to fuck your brains out.” Clint had never laughed so hard with an erection in his life.

SHIELD’s reply sobered them both pretty instantly and then they relaxed. They had four days before the shipment was scheduled and it was a night move which meant Phil had plenty of time to find it during the day without looking too good at his job. It also meant the team on SHIELD’s side had time to plan without having send resources out on the fly and hope they got the mixture of skills and equipment right.

Their days seemed to accelerate, Clint spent hours with Chris and his crew and the nameless guy on the speaker phone putting together the heist, as one of the more annoying ones liked to call it. Speaker Phone was due in town soon though he was apparently less than six hours away if the news came in unexpectedly. Clint figured he had a home base in the nearest large city. He got the idea that Speaker Phone thought their little town barely had running water.

Their walks at night took on a strange air, each of them holding back more and more, but it wasn’t as if they were doing less, they still walked quietly, looked out into the darkness and closed their hands around one another in desperation. They just wanted to do more than idly talk about future plans, which they found they mostly couldn’t, it was too difficult to contemplate, and hold hands. There were no more rail road crossing opportunities and this week Anna had been invited to their place as Phil had been playing up his injury and said that he wanted to spend as little time in the car as possible.

In truth, they planned their evening for the night of robbery so that there would be nearby backup just in case. Dinner that night was tense and when Clint was called away on a fake emergency at the compound he gave both of his dinner companions a nod and slapped Phil on the shoulder like the ‘manly’ friends at the compound often did, it was his last chance and no matter how well planned, shit could always happen in situations like this and Clint was not going to pass up one last chance at touching Phil.

As he pulled out of the lot, Clint had to work hard on reminding himself that Anna’s trunk had kevlar, guns and all sorts of other goodies delivered by SHIELD when they’d made it into the area. In a few minutes Peter would invite Anna out on his nightly stroll and they’d circle back to her car and head out the rally point. The tricky part of this whole operation was that they wanted both Speaker Phone dude, the goods on the trucks and most of Chris Gardener’s gang. So Clint had to play his part until Speaker Phone was caught red handed so SHIELD had something nice and heavy to hit him with to make him roll over.
Clint had worked hard to ensure the hijacking would have the minimal number of casualties possible, just in case SHIELD hadn’t been able to replace the drivers and guards with their own people. Still, as Clint got into his assigned truck, battered but well maintained, he still felt a little ridiculous driving it up along side what had to be a couple of state of the art sedans and their shiny black trucks. Speaker Phone was in his own car, keeping pace fifty feet or so back. Still Clint didn’t breath easy until they had the trucks on the side of the road and the last of the guards were being tied up.

Then Speaker Phone arrived and Clint hung back, cases like this SHIELD liked to actually follow the law of the land, so Clint was attempting to avoid being in any part of the transaction so that no one could cry entrapment later in case the lawyers and the court system ever got involved. Which they probably would for the Gardeners, SHIELD considered them small timers.

Seconds ago, his earwig remotely activated, that meant SHIELD had now moved in and Clint could start to breath easier.

“Easy does it, Barton,” Phil’s voice filled his ear, “as soon as they exchange happens the teams will come in.”

Clint’s chest filled with air and it was a challenge to keep his relief off his face. Up ahead Chris was talking to Speaker Phone when his name was called.

“Calvin,” Chris called, “come up here, our benefactor would like to meet you.”

Shit, okay, this wasn’t bad, he could work with this, he just had to stay well away from the deal. Clint moved his way to the front and he had approximately half a second to realize it was going go south before Speaker Phone, better known as Frank Grafiki, the reason Budapest went kablooie.

“You?” Frank sputtered, his gun raising before his spittle finished hitting Clint’s chest, his body guards only a half second or so behind him. Frank was dressed, as always, to perfection, he was probably worried that his shiny shoes would get shit on them if he stood around here too long.

“Woah, woah,” Clint said carefully raising his hands, “what’s going on here? I thought this party was over?”

“Shit,” Phil uncharacteristically cursed in his ear, “emergency code acknowledged Hawkeye, hold on tight.”

Chris was looking between the two of them frantically. “Hey, hey, no shooting my people!”

“He’s not your people!” Frank yelled, and shit that was the safety being taken off, “He is a son of a bitch SHIELD agent that fucked my last organization six ways from Sunday!”

The look on Chris’s face made Clint’s heart sink, it was a begging look, a plea for it not to be betrayal. ‘I’m not! I swear! I have no idea what this guy is talking about!”

Frank just looked more and more steamed and Clint wasn’t sure he wasn’t getting out of this without a few more holes. “Look buddy,” he tried, “I dunno who the hell you think I am but I’d really appreciate if you put the fucking gun down. This is how people get hurt for no reason.”

“Did he use a bow?” Frank asked Chris, not moving his stance a single inch.

“Yes,” Chris answered automatically, “we all do. We hunt for at least half of our meat and crossbows don’t scare the herds a half mile away the way a .22 does.”

“Did he ever miss?” Frank asked, anticipating the answer with the tightening of his finger.
Clint prepared to lunge forward, if he took Frank by surprise then he had a decent chance.

“Of course he did,” Chris said, “no one’s perfect.”

Frank only relaxed minutely. “When I hadn’t heard your damn name in months I checked around, no one’d seen Hawkeye, or as the people in my business like to refer to him, that pain in the ass with the bow, in almost a year. I thought maybe god had smiled on me and someone killed the little fucker but now… I’m not sure.” He turned to Chris, “How long he been hanging about?”

Chris turned to him and stared hard and for what seemed like a very long time, Clint had no idea what was going to happen. “Two years,” Christ said finally and Clint was absolutely flummoxed, “he moved in about two years ago.”

Finally, Frank put the gun down and Clint’s shoulders eased into a more relaxed position as he let his own hands drop. In his ear, Phil made a noisy breath, “We’re in place, but let’s see if we can get the transaction done.”

“So,” Clint said, “can we get this shit done? My sister’s waiting for me to get back from this ‘emergency’.” In the corner of his eye, he saw Chris’s head drop slightly and Clint knew he knew, Chris may be be a bigot, but he wasn’t an idiot.

“Come on,” Chris said slowly, “let’s just get this done.”

Frank nodded and pulled out a two duffel bags.

Chris took them wearily and then stepped back. “It’s all yours.”

Frank got as far as smiling when the SHIELD team busted in, then he was flat on the ground and cursing. It filled Clint with absolute delight to watch it happen. Behind him he could hear Chris telling his people to stand down, not to fight, it wasn’t worth it.

Phil swooped in with the second wave, somewhere along the way he’d changed into one of his suits and he looked sleek and polished and absolutely like something Clint wanted to take some time to mess up properly. He smiled widely at Phil who nodded and smiled as widely as he ever did while on duty back. Clint made his way to Chris, who was sitting quietly on the ground, his dark clothing smudged with mud, head in his hands. Clint sat down next to him.

“What’s your real name?” Chris asked, without looking up.

“Clint,” he said, while not protocol, Frank had been free with the Hawkeyes so Clint figured, whatever. “So, wanna tell me what happened there?”

Chris shrugged. “Whatever I may think of you, of what you did here, I couldn’t bear to see you killed, to have that responsibility on my head. That’s what he was going for anyway, that kind of life.”

“For what it’s worth,” Clint said carefully and sincerely, “thank you.”

“In that moment, I realized that I’d moved into a world I didn’t like very much,” Chris said to him, scratching his nose absently, “I want to change the world, but not like that.”

Clint nodded, he’d gotten that feeling as the time came closer and Chris had gotten tenser and tenser. He believed in some things, some terrible, misguided things, but he wasn’t violent. Clint had learned that their first hunting trip together. They’d taken some of the younger kids, to teach them some survival tips and Chris had been very careful to explain the best kills, the quickest, the least painful.
There’d been a blistering lecture about disrespecting the wildlife, about letting an animal suffer. Without Chris and his inner circle, the town might flounder pretty quickly, hopefully he’d taught a thing or two, other than racism, to some of the others on the compound.

“Look,” he said eventually, “that you covered for me, it’s gonna mean something, that you realized this was a dumb idea and instead of bolting, you went ahead knowing that at least that asshole would get nailed along with you, it’s gonna mean something. That you try your hardest to help your town, to do nice things, that means something too,” he said carefully, “just…”

Chris laughed bitterly, “Just what?”

“The guy,” Clint sighed, “who will ultimately make the decision, he’ll read our reports, especially Phil — Peter’s,” he nodded over in Phil’s direction, where he was absolutely fucking in charge and it was beautiful, “but the thing is, he’s black and he’s got no tolerance for bullshit.”

Chris stared at him and then fell backwards, laughing uproariously. Clint just patted his knee and waited for him to calm down. Phil sent him a questioning glance but Clint waved him off, it was fine. “Okay there?” he asked, looking down.

“Nope,” Chris said between guffaws.

Clint nodded, he completely understood.

The last Clint saw of Phil for a while was in the back of a SHIELD transport truck, they sat next to each other, thighs pressed hotly together, but that was the extent of their contact. Phil was stuck on comms directing post op traffic and Clint was bent over his tablet, trying to get a head start on his AAR forms. They separated at the local base, Clint was the fly back first, he had the longest debrief, Anna coming in a close second and they wanted to get his going as soon as possible. Phil was stuck hanging around a little longer, finishing the cleanup and herding local, state and federal, law enforcement into the right lines.

It was a grueling twelve hours, during which Clint spoke to no less than six different people. Took a handful of ten minute breaks, worked through a meal called lunch only because of the time of day and not because it was his second meal since waking up, though someone had managed to get his favorites which was a nice touch, and finally had to nurse his voice along with warm tea. Eventually everyone was satisfied enough for round one. He’d be called in for clarification once everyone had been debriefed. He was just about to be let out for the night when Fury walked in. AD Hill nodded at him and slipped out, closing the door behind her.

Clint was pretty damn tired by the this time. He’d been up through most of the night and into the next day. He was pushing close to 40 hours of awake time but in general he knew how important it was to get long term assets debriefed as quickly and as fully as possible. Still, Fury’s appearance only caused mild interest and not annoyance. He sat down in the free chair opposite Clint and leaned in tiredly.

“Tell me,” Fury said slowly, “about Chris Gardener.”

Ah, so it was that. Slowly, Clint talked about all of the times he forgot to hate Chris Gardener. Through it all, Fury remained stone faced and silent. “I think he would have shut it down sooner if Frank hadn’t stayed away, over the phone he can be pretty charming, but I think in person, Chris would have realized what he was walking into and as much as you might hate him, he’s not actually looking to become the leader of a domestic terror cell.”

Fury nodded. “He’s still a racist fuckhead.”
“He is,” Clint agreed, “but as much as that sucks, personal feelings, even racist ones, aren’t illegal. You could probably nail him on dozens of lesser charges,” he offered. Clint actually had no idea what the best thing to do was, he was too tired and too mired in the community. He didn’t envy Fury’s choice at all.

Fury sighed and actually looked tired for a brief few seconds before nodding to him. “You’ve got three to five days before they call you back in. Keep your phone on.”

As Clint wandered his way through the hallways of SHIELD’s main headquarters in New York City and Clint never thought he’d miss this dreary maze of bland colors and government carpeting as much as he did, he tried to figure out what he was supposed to do next. He could just crash in one of the private rooms on base for a couple of hours before trying to sort it all out. What he actually wanted, was to find Phil, maybe work out where they were staying, and that still made him a bit giddy, and then crawl into the bed most likely to eventually house Phil as well and pass out for a long time.

He literally ran into Natasha while rounding a corner. She looked different, her hair was longer and she had a bit of a tan. “Hey Nat!” He swung arms around her, his exhausted body letting gravity do most of the work. She allowed him to hug her for longer than he expected before shoving him off.

“Barton, I see you made it back in one piece,” she squeezed his shoulders and then leaned in to whisper in his ear, “did Coulson apologize?”

He pulled back and then briefly, ever so quickly, he let out a genuine, happy smile. “Yeah, he did,” Clint said, going sincere and dopey, “thank you.”

Natasha eyed him critically, “How long since you’ve had sleep?”

“No fucking long,” Clint said mournfully, he was easing into punch drunk, any minute now. “I think I’m gonna bunk here for a few hours before attempting public transportation, or you know, walking.”

Natasha, treasure that she was, led him through a series of corridors until he was face to door with a room that he had been led to believe held a bed. It took the absolute last of his concentration to make it inside, remove his shoes and pants and make it under the covers before passing out, hard.

Sometime later, soft noises worked their way into his brain, but it took a while to focus on anything other than how fucking awesome sleep was. There was a soft clinking and then a quiet shuffle and Clint figured it must be someone he knew or he’d be wide awake by now, still, a stretch seemed like a good idea. He pushed his limbs outward until his toes pointed and his fingers flexed. “Hmmm,” he mumbled into his pillow, still feeling utterly relaxed.

The shuffling sound came closer and the bed dipped about halfway up his body. Clint pushed a single eyelid open enough to see who was there.

“Hey sweetheart,” Phil said quietly, brushing a hand through Clint’s unruly hair. He looked amazing and Clint took his fill, enjoying not needing to check his reactions for the first time in forever. Phil also looked ungodly tired, dark circles only highlighted his overly pale skin and unshaven cheeks. His suit still looked mostly fresh, but his top button was undone and his tie was loosened.

“Sweetheart?” Clint asked, taking the time to stretch again it had felt so good.

Phil ducked his head, blushing, “Sorry.”

“Hey, no,” Clint nudged at Phil with a blanket clad leg, “I like it.”
Phil’s entire face brightened beautifully. “How’re you feeling?” he asked, hand still sliding through Clint’s hair, occasionally scratching idly.

“Better,” Clint sighed, leaning into the touch. “Like maybe I could walk a straight line for an entire couple of minutes now.” He gave Phil a longer once over, frowning as more and more signs of Phil’s utter exhaustion became clear to him. “What about you?”

“It’s possible,” Phil said quietly, tracing Clint’s ear with his fingertip, “I may actually have overdosed on coffee.”

Clint chuckled, reaching for Phil’s wandering hand and twining their fingers together before bringing it to his lips to kiss, the feeling of freedom running thick and electric through his veins. “You look exhausted.”

“Yeah,” Phil said, “I was just dropping off a set of keys to my place, it seemed important to get that done before I moved onto my next task.”

Frowning, Clint pushed his brain a little more awake. He was a little disappointed in himself that he hadn’t realized that Phil had remained, or returned to at least, the main point man for the case along side being under deep cover for several months. He easily had three times the responsibilities Clint had when they’d returned to base. No wonder he looked dead on his feet. “Have you had any breaks at all?”

When it took Phil having to stop and think about it before answering, Clint started to worry. A lot.

“There was food?” Phil said eventually, “at least twice?”

“Okay,” Clint said, pushing himself up with the hand not entangled in Phil’s, “will the world still be standing if you take a two hour nap?” He didn’t wait for the answer before easing Phil’s tie out of its knot.

“I’m honestly not sure,” Phil said, a yawn cracking through his lips, “which probably means it doesn’t matter, the nap is more important.” He offered the wrist with his watch up to Clint who undid the clasp easily and slid it off Phil’s hand and put it on the side table while Phil undid his belt buckle and slid that out of the loops as well. After pushing his shoes off he gently tugged for his captured hand, which Clint released with great reluctance. “No more than two hours,” Phil said to him, standing so he could remove his jacket, “Any more and I won’t move for half a day and there are still things I really do need to take care of.”

“Fine,” Clint said, setting his phone alarm and then scooting to the side so Phil could slide under the covers with him. It wasn’t until Phil was there with him, horizontal and curling up at his side, face buried in Clint’s shoulder, one hand clasped in his, a leg thrown carelessly over Clint’s, that he realized how big this moment was. “Phil?” he asked, lips close to Phil’s ear, his voice low and soothing.

“Hmm?” Phil said, body already relaxed, eyelids heavy with fatigue.

“I’m really looking forward to waking up with you next to me,” Clint said before kissing Phil’s temple. It wasn’t even sexual and Clint’s level of anticipation for that event had only grown since that first time in the car, but they were both too wrung out and exhausted to even think about it. There was also a good chance that when Clint’s alarm went off Phil would just hug him and slip back out to get back to work and Clint was okay with that because Phil had stopped his busy schedule just to drop off his keys.
“Me too,” Phil slurred, already seconds from sleep. Clint followed him down easily, the whole time savoring Phil’s body pressed into his, trying to memorize it and slipping into sleep between one thought and the next.

It was a testament to Phil’s absolute exhaustion that Clint was the one that had to fumble for the alarm and that was after it spent long seconds working its way into Clint’s subconscious. Next to him, Phil had barely moved and in the darkness the shadows didn’t look an better but while Phil sometimes had problems delegating, he didn’t actually invent work to do, nor did he play martyr unless he was bantering with Clint about how much paperwork he created often by just walking down the street.

“Phil,” Clint ran his hand down Phil’s back, trying to nudge him awake without jarring him into reality, “Hey, sweetheart,” the endearment slipped out and Clint smiled at himself, feeling goofy, “come on, time to be a big bad spy again.” He nudged at Phil’s head with his nose, breathing in the day old scent of Phil Coulson and even that made Clint smile widely. Holy crap he was so gone on the man. Phil began moving, rubbing his nose into Clint’s chest and stretching his legs. “That’s it, come on, I’m sure there’s some delightful paperwork waiting just for you.”

“That’s not actually helping,” Phil rasped, their hands had separated in sleep and he ran his now free hand down Clint’s flank, stopping it low on his hip. “I like this,” he said fluttering his eyes open, “being in the dark, with you,” he kissed Clint’s chin, “because we want to be, not because we have to be.”

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, turning his face to catch Phil’s lips softly. “Now think of what we can do behind a locked door without clothes.

Phil chuckled and gave Clint a soft kiss in return. “And that will fuel me through the rest of the paperwork.” He untangled their limbs an rolled onto his back. “Thanks for making me rest, I really needed it.” He rubbed his eyes and then sat up.

Clint joined him, sitting up, and then reached to the side to turn on the bedside lamp. He was thankful it was one of those multi wattage deals, the first click only let out a soft, diffuse illumination that didn’t even hurt Clint’s eyes with its sudden appearance. Next to him, Phil sighed and rolled his neck and then began stretching his back muscles by pulling an arm across his chest. To Clint, he still looked too pale, too tired, but he was at least looking a little less completely dead on his feet.

“You’ll be okay?” Clint asked as Phil pushed himself unsteadily up to his feet.

“Yeah,” Phil slipped his jacket on but rolled his belt and shoved it into one pocket and then rolled his tie and shoved it into the other, “I’ve got a spare suit in the office.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clint said pointedly.

Phil turned to look at him, sheepish grin on his face. “Sorry, yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ve only got a handful of hours left before I can head home.” He paused, face going absolutely shy, “I thought maybe, you’d like to meet me there?”

His insides melted a little and that warm and squishy feeling must have made it to Clint’s face because Phil’s went softer. “Yeah,” Clint said, “that’d be really nice.”

“Agent Services should have restocked the kitchen by now,” Phil told him, “the cable’s back on and I think they probably even replaced the batteries in the smoke detector.”
Clint laughed, “I’m not really sure what you think I do in my free time but—” he paused, sighed and gave in, “yeah okay, the battery thing is actually pretty applicable.”

Phil chuckled warmly and leaned for a kiss, “Remember who does most of your insurance paperwork,” he leaned in again, lingering a little, stroking an idle hand across Clint’s cheek. “I’ll see you later?”

Clint tugged on Phil’s jacket before he got too far away and kissed him again, “Yes, definitely,” another kiss because god damn it he was enjoying being able to do that, “I’m bringing a suitcase with me,” one more kiss, “I’m taking over a drawer, two drawers,” a fourth kiss which lingered a little, “I might even rearrange your closet.”

“Yes,” Phil said nodding a little frantically, “all of that, yes,” he kissed Clint a little longer, with a hint of tongue, “well no, don’t touch my suits, there are some things even love can’t fix,” again, a kiss, this one ending a nibble and a bit off sound, “no, you know what? I don’t care, go ahead, just make sure I can find everything in the morning.”

By that point, Clint was on his knees, legs spread wide to brace on the squishiness of the mattress, hands holding Phil close, because holy crap, permission to touch the suits and Clint had to restrain himself from making plans to roll naked in them for Phil to find when he made it home. When they finally separated, Clint’s hands were spread wide on Phil’s back, under his jack and Phil’s hands had worked their way under his shirt.

“I really need to go,” Phil said into the skin of Clint’s neck, nuzzling it gently, his unshaven chin an excellent counterpoint in sensation to Phil’s lips.

“Yes,” Clint nodded slowly pulling his hands away, smoothing Phil’s shirt with his palms as they went.

Phil pressed another firm kiss into Clint’s skin, then his lips. “Buy condoms and lube,” he said and punctuated it with one final kiss. “I’m not fooling myself into thinking we’ll need them the first… or even the third time,” he gave Clint a blistering look, “but we’re not leaving my apartment unless absolutely necessary.”

Clint whimpered, as tired as he still was, he’d slept enough for the thrum of arousal to wind its way through his veins and for his dick to start to stand up and take notice. “What about my call backs?” He asked absently, hauling Phil back by his lapels for a last kiss that was almost entirely all tongue and teeth and left them panting.

“I rearranged the schedule, unless there’s an emergency, they’ve got more than enough information to spend a week sorting through it,” he peeled Clint’s hands off his jacket, kissed his knuckles and then deliberately took a step back, “and that’s exactly what they’re going to do.”

“Right,” Clint nodded, “excellent.” He watched Phil take a few more steps away. “I love you.”

Phil’s eyes went from sharply aroused to soft in an instant. “I love you too.” Then he turned on his heel and walked out. Probably for the best, they were pretty close to throwing caution to the wind and not giving a flying fuck about anything else.

Clint took a full minute, just for himself, where he may or may not have hugged the pillow Phil had slept on to his face and breathed deep. Then, with a wide smile, Clint got up and started sorting through his things. There were important errands to run, first it was to his place for as much clothing as he could stuff into his largest duffel, then a drug store, maybe two, so he could buy as much as he wanted to without having to deal with judgmental or disbelieving cashiers.
On the desk across the room was the contents of Clint’s pockets, including his personal stuff like apartment keys and wallet with his own ID, they’d been returned to him at some point during the debriefing. Next to the pile was a single key, the Agent Services tag still hanging off of it, Phil must have taken it directly from their hands to Clint’s. He picked the key up and smiled, holding it close to his chest, working very hard to not kiss it.

A few minutes later, he slipped out of the anonymous bedroom, hitting the button for reset so it could be cleaned and used by another agent too tired to make it home, whistling obnoxiously as he trotted down the hall. Life was good and Clint was more than ready start enjoying it.

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