Journey

by Signe-chan

Summary

Clint has his guitar, a collection of old greyhound tickets and a journal which he uses to write notes to his ex. What more does he need? Fate washes him up in New York though he’s done his best to avoid it. No big deal, he’ll do the usual. Do some busking, write one song and then leave. Simple.

Then he walks into Phil Coulson’s coffee shop and maybe this won’t be so simple at all.

Notes

This fic was inspired by the music of Jason Manns and all the songs Clint sings are Jason Manns songs. If anyone is interested in finding out more about his music visit his website here. I have embedded the relevant songs at the relevant places in the fic if you're reading this on the website instead of downloading them. You don't NEED to listen to them but they're quite nice. If you're having trouble with the embedded music, all the songs are included in the mix put together by Kultiras.

Artwork and fanmix by Kultiras can be found here.

My eternal thanks to Trojie for beta reading, cheer leading and all that good stuff and to jmathieson for beta reading and trying her best to stop me sounding unbearably British.
Clint stood outside SHIELD Coffee and made himself take some deep calming breaths. This place was the last coffee shop in the village, his last chance for finding an indoor spot to play through the day. He really didn’t want to end up on a New York street corner. He’d probably get ignored, or trampled, or both.

He’d known getting on the bus to New York was a mistake but it was either New York or back the way he came and his rule was to never go back. He didn’t have many rules but he stuck by the ones he did have. Don’t go back. Write one song per city. Leave when he’d finished the song. So it was New York or break the rules and he wasn’t going to break the rules.

Lots of people he talked to who had, like, houses and things tended to presume that New York would be the dream for a singer-songwriter living out of a bag but whenever he met up with someone who actually lived the kind of life he did they’d warn him off. Tell him it was a cold place, the kind of place people would beat you just to hurt you. That was enough to keep anyone away.

There was more to it than that, of course. There were always other reasons. Natasha had wanted to come to New York city. They’d talked about it. Taking the train one day. Her leaving her job and running with him. Of course, she hadn’t. She’d never really considered it. And he’d avoided this place until now.

So he didn’t want to be out on the street. Last time he’d played on a street corner he’d gotten mugged and some dick had tried to break his arm. He’d have been fucked if they’d managed it. No way to make money, he’d have had to beg and he’d never gotten that low yet, at least. He preferred to play inside. He knew if he waited for the evening clubs would open up, more traditional venues for his kind of thing, but, honestly, he was getting too old to be playing a different club every night in the hopes of some spare change. He’d probably still hit up a few places while he was here but a coffee shop to play through the day...

That was how he came, in the middle of a Monday morning after a night in a doorway, to be standing outside what felt like the last coffee shop in the village. The rest had turned him away sceptically, he didn't expect anything different from SHIELD Coffee but, well, he had to try. Anything was better than a street corner.

He decided, when he got in the place, that he liked it. It was pretty quiet now but it was a big enough place that it wouldn't be ridiculous for him to play here. There were plenty of tables and even a neglected looking potted plant. The place was painted in a soothing kind of brown, lots of wood. A big counter up front too with a beast of a coffee machine on it. It looked lived in. A working space. He liked it.

The girl behind the counter gave him a skeptical look when he came up and, yeah, he kind of got that. He'd tried to wash up in the bus station bathroom but there was only so much he could do. He should probably stay at his next stop long enough to earn enough for a new set of clothes at least. He just needed to get out of New York first.

"Hey," he said, leaning on the counter. "Can I talk to the manager?"

The girl turned and glanced behind the giant coffee machine. A man who'd apparently been crouched down there straightened up and they did this weird communicating by wiggling their eyebrows at each other thing until she stepped back and he came to the counter.
"Hey," the man said, reaching across to offer Clint his hand. "I'm Phil."

"Hi," Clint said, taking the hand and shaking it. He was glad to receive a firm handshake in reply. Phil was a pretty good looking guy, especially for someone a little bit older. He looked like he took care of himself. He had a warm smile too which he gave to Clint. He looked like a good person. Clint wondered if he was the kind who'd let Clint sleep in his bed in exchange for sex. He wouldn't mind that at all. "I'm Clint."

"Can I get you a coffee?" Phil asked, gesturing at the machine. Clint shook his head quickly. He didn't have the money to be buying fancy coffee right now.

"Nah, I'm good thanks," he said, shifting a little. "I kind of wanted to talk to you about...let's call it a business opportunity."

He gave an apologetic little shrug because, yeah, he knew that sounded dodgy as fuck but he couldn't bring himself to come into places and start talking about art and music and if he did they generally wouldn't let him put a jar down for money since he was meant to be doing it for the joy of the art. This way seemed to get him thrown out of more places but at least it was honest.

"We definitely need coffee to discuss business," Phil said with a bemused smile. "I was about to get one myself so let me get you one and we can talk."

"I guess," Clint said, glancing at the machine. It would be nice to have a drink and, well, if Phil turned him down at least he'd get a warm drink out of it. Phil gestured him to a table and as Clint went to sit and wait he heard the man calling to the cashier, who was apparently called Skye, to get them some cookies too. He definitely wasn't complaining about that. If he lined his stomach with cookies he wouldn't have to buy lunch and the next bus ride would be that bit closer.

It didn't take long for Phil to come around the counter with a tray. There were two big cups of coffee on there and an entire range of cookies. Must be a perk of running the place. He waited until Phil offered the coffee to grab it at least but as soon as the way was clear he picked it up, taking a deep drink though it was still so hot it almost burnt his mouth.

The coffee was good. Not the best he'd ever tasted in the world but the best he'd had today. The cookies were soft and warm and perfect. Those he could have eaten all day.

"They're good, right," Phil said, taking a bite of his own cookie. "The baker is one of my oldest friends."

"They're awesome," Clint agreed, leaning on the table. "I guess I'd better tell you why I'm here?"

"Ball's in your court," Phil agreed, sitting back in his chair.

"Thing is," Clint said, suddenly nervous. He still got embarrassed about admitting to this like he had back when he first started in the circus and the other circus brats would laugh at him for thinking he could do something. "I'm kind of a singer/songwriter. I travel around the country and write music. I'm not going to be in town for long but I thought, while I was, maybe you'd let me play here. It'll be good for you, creates a good atmosphere, and maybe I can put down a hat if people feel like giving me some money?"

"I've gotta hear you play before I say anything else," Phil said with a knowing smile like he'd expected this. Hell, he probably had. Clint did have a guitar case on his back. He took it off now and opened it, taking out his trusty acoustic. He'd won her in a bet with some thugs the year before he left the circus and they'd never been separated since. She played sweeter for him than she ever
had done for that dick anyway. He checked her tuning then fished in his duffle for his notebook.

This notebook was new. Shiny. He'd picked it up on sale before he'd come here and copied out his lyrics on the Greyhound. The last book was already in the post to Natasha, just like every book since he'd left her behind in Washington. At first he did it because some day he'd be done. He'd have written the songs he needed to write and he'd go home to her. Now he wasn't so sure. He always seemed one more song away from the perfect set, one more bus stop away from the life they could have had. That had always been his problem when it came to relationships.

He flipped through the book to the most recent song. He looked over the lyrics then picked up his guitar and started to play.

He didn't dare look up until he was done. Phil sat there with a smile that was small but, somehow, genuine and a misty look in his eye. Clint couldn't help but blush a little. The guy had liked his music. He knew, intelligently, that people liked his music but seeing it was a different thing.

"You can play here all you want," Phil said. "That was amazing."

"Thanks," Clint said, ducking his head. "Is it okay if I set up before your lunch rush?"

"Of course it is," Phil said, his smile broadening again. "Let me find you a spot. We might have to move some things around. Here, finish your coffee and the cookies while I go talk to Skye, okay?"

"Sure," Clint said, and settled back down to finishing the plate of cookies. It'd be rude to refuse, after all.

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Once Clint was pretty sure the lunch rush was over and they were down to a reasonable number of people he put his guitar down and bent to counting his takings. The shitty thing about playing in a student neighbourhood was that most of them didn't throw anything in at all and the ones who did only gave a few bucks. Still, he wasn't too hot or too cold and nobody had thrown anything at him so he'd take this over a street corner in a richer area of town.

He emptied out the bowl Phil had lent him to keep cash in and counted it out. Just over 20 bucks. Not great takings but not bad either. After he bought himself some food it'd go down a little but it wasn't like he had to pay rent. He'd be out of town in a week tops. As soon as he wrote a song.
"Hey."

He looked up from his counting to find the girl from the counter leaning over him with a mug in her hand. She'd been joined soon after Clint had arrived by a guy and between them and Phil the three of them had managed the lunch rush. Seemed like her shift was over now, though, since she had her jacket slung across her arm.

"Can I help you?" he asked, giving her a lazy smile. She smiled back and set the mug down beside him. It turned out to contain soup and smelt kind of like heaven.

"Yep," she said, gesturing at it. "We only had this much soup left. It's not enough to fill a bowl so I thought instead of throwing it out you might want it. Kind of a thank you for the music. It was really chilled out. I like the love song."

"Crazy love?" Clint asked. Most of his songs were about love but that one did feature the line 'she gives me love, love, love, love, crazy love' so was probably the one Skye was thinking of.

"Yeah," Skye said with a grin. "I liked it. Do you have a CD or anything?"

"Nah," Clint said, "I'm still writing. Can't record until I've got the perfect set list."

"How long have you been working on it?" Skye asked, looking suspiciously down at his book. He turned it so she could see the lyrics to Vagabond Blues. He didn't have anything to hide and she'd just spent a few hours listening to him sing it anyway.

"Pretty much all my adult life," Clint admitted. "Every time I think I'm close something changes and I end up trashing songs or starting again."

"So the album won't be appearing any time soon, then?"

"I wouldn't bet on it," Clint agreed.

"Pity," Skye said with a sigh. "At least you're going to be sticking around for a while, right? You can't get your song stuck in my head then disappear before I've had a chance to learn the lyrics."

"Sure," Clint said, though he wasn't sure how long he meant by a while given he wanted to get out of town pretty quickly. "If your boss'll let my stay around anyway."

"Oh, Phil will," Skye said, waving her hand dismissively. "He's a complete soft touch, which is kind of strange as he's also weirdly badass. This guy tried to rob us last year and Phil just took him down without even breaking a sweat. Or so I hear, anyway. I've not been here all that long but Jemma's been working here since she started college and she swears it's true."

"I believe you," Clint said with a laugh. He wasn't sure he did believe her but she seemed right about Phil being a pushover. Clint hadn't noticed before but he had one of those 'buy an extra coffee and we'll pass it on' systems and he seemed to give out more free coffee then he got extras paid in. Clint wasn't going to complain though if it gave him a place to play.

"Anyway. I'd better go," Skye said, shifting her bag. "Classes and all. Guy behind the counter's Grant. He'd a bit...well, you have to get to know him but he's a nice guy under all the grumpy. And Phil's in the back if you need anything."

"I should be good, but thanks," Clint said, reaching over to take his mug of soup. Maybe he wouldn't have to buy dinner tonight after all. "I'll see you tomorrow?"
"I don't work again until Wednesday," Skye said. "You'll still be here?"

"Count on it," Clint said, giving her a lazy salute. She laughed and turned to leave and he settled back into drinking his soup. This might not be that bad of a gig after all.

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Dusk was starting to fall on the streets outside when Phil emerged from behind the counter again. Clint was taking a well earned rest. The money in his pocket had gone up by another fifteen or so, if he wanted he could get a bus right now but it'd wipe him out and he had promised Skye he'd still be here on Wednesday.

Phil took a few seconds to swing by the door, lock it and turn the sign to closed before coming over to Clint. He had a mug of coffee in his hand and Clint was kind of surprised that, when Phil got close enough, he offered the mug. Clint took it happily. His throat was kind of hurting from singing, like it didn't get enough exercise. The coffee was still good and got better when, after he'd taken a long sip and lowered the mug, Phil passed him a handful of change.

"What's this for?" he asked, eying it suspiciously.

"Your share of the days tips," Phil said, nodding at the counter where the tip jar stood empty. "Shop rules. I split it at the end of every day equally between anyone who's working. You've been working as hard as anyone. You get a share of the tips."

"I'm not going to say no," Clint said cautiously, closing his hands around the coins. "But is it going to upset your actual employees. I mean, I'd like to come back here tomorrow. If you want me back here."

"You can come back," Phil said. "And they won't mind. There was actually more money in the pot than there's been in a long time so I doubt you're going to hear any complaints and Leo was out today so it's really not that big of a change from what they would expect."

"Okay," Clint said, pocketing the cash. It wasn't much, again, but it'd see him through the night. Maybe he could even sleep somewhere that wasn't a doorway tonight, since he was going to be staying a few days after all. He'd seen a hostel not too far off this morning. Might be nice to have a shower and a shave and a real mattress.

"I don't know if the early morning rush will be any use to you," Phil said, leaning back against the table Clint had been sat at. "They normally start coming through at 8-ish. Then you saw the rest of the day. Week days are all much of the same."

"I did okay," Clint said, patting his pocket.

"Okay. Well, I'll let you finish your coffee," Phil said, standing up. He gave a mighty yawn stretching his arms above his head, and Clint couldn't help but appreciate the stretch of muscles across Phil's stomach. He was a very nice sight. "Have you got somewhere to sleep tonight?"

"Yeah," Clint lied. "I'll be back in the morning though. If I'm awake in time. Gotta give that morning crowd a try."

"I'll look forward to seeing you," Phil said with an easy grin, then he turned and walked away and left Clint to his coffee and his guitar.
When Clint rolled up to the coffee shop a little before 7am the lights were on but the sign on the door still said closed. He tried the door but it wasn’t opening and he couldn’t see anyone moving inside. Still, Phil had said he was welcome so, after a second’s hesitation, he raised his fist to knock.

A woman emerged from the back room. She was Asian, looked a little like she’d like to kick him in the face, and was currently half covered in flour. The fact that the being covered in flour part didn’t do anything to detract from the part that looked like she might kill him for fun was pretty surprising but he could deal with surprises. He stood back while she unlocked the door then stuck his hand out for her to shake.

“Hey,” he said, “I’m Clint. I don’t know if Phil said anything about you to me but I’m going to be playing here for a few days.”

“Melinda,” the woman said. She didn’t take the offered hand but she did back up enough to let him into the shop. She then locked the door again behind him. “Phil did say something about you.”

“Cool,” Clint said, quickly dumping his things where he’d been playing yesterday. “Is Phil in?”

“He’s run out to the store,” Melinda said, watching Clint intently like she expected him to grab the coffee machine and run out the door laughing or something. Fuck that. He turned away from her, ignoring her as he took out his guitar. He sat down to tune the thing and after a few minutes she moved away and went back to her own work. He was pretty glad, she was all kinds of scary.

It was easy to get lost in the familiarity of tuning the guitar. Once he was sure it was right he strummed a few bars, humming to himself as he did. He only looked up when someone behind him coughed.

“Oh, hey,” he said, turning. Thankfully the person who was interrupting him was Phil and not Melinda. And he was looking amused and holding out a steaming mug of coffee. Clint made grabby hands for the cup without even registering and Phil laughed and handed it over. The coffee in the hostel had been watered down piss. Anything would be better than that.

“I’m glad to see you’re back,” Phil said, settling down in a chair next to where Clint was setting up. “I worried that we scared you off yesterday. Grant can be kind of intense…”

“I don’t think he even spoke to me,” Clint said with a shrug. “Though your morning help is a little scary.”

“Melinda,” Phil said, and there was a note of understanding in his voice. “She can be a little intimidating until you get to know her. And, honestly, can still be a little intimidating when you know her well. She’s good people, though. Been a friend since before this place started and she’s the one who does all the cooking.”

“Seriously?” Clint asked, mind drifting back to the cookies he’d had the day before. “I’ve gotta tell you that kind of clashes with her badass image.”

“I think she makes it work,” Phil said with a shrug. “Either way, we worked together before and then when I told her I was opening this place she just turned up one morning, reminded me I can’t cook to save my life, put on an apron and she’s never really left. She’s still got another afternoon job but you’ll find her here every morning.”
“That’s pretty awesome,” Clint said. He’d maybe never had a friend in his life who’d stick with him like that but he could appreciate that having one might be a good thing.

“Yeah, I’m one of the lucky ones,” Phil agreed. “Okay, I’ve gotta go open up. Are you ready for the rush?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Clint said. As Phil moved to the door he set his coffee on the table, grabbed his guitar and kicked the case out in front of him. There was already a handful of small change in there, helped to get the ball rolling. Clint watched as Phil moved back from the door to the counter. He was walking kind of stiff today. Kind of slow. For a second Clint thought about asking about it but they definitely didn’t have that kind of relationship yet. A personal, friendly one. It was kind of worrying to him how much he wanted that kind of relationship.

Though that was definitely something to think about later. Or never. But not now. For now he was going to play his heart out and raise some bus money.

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The morning rush didn’t turn out to be as profitable as he’d hoped but, given that the other option was basically hanging around the hostel waiting to be thrown out, he’d take this. Melinda had stayed to help with the rush then disappeared with a last glare back at Clint that had left him shaking in his seat. The woman meant business.

Phil had spent plenty of time serving behind the counter and Clint had spent longer than he should watching him. Phil had the same kind of open smile and acceptance for anyone who stumbled through his door from the most stoned teenager trying to make an early morning lecture to the incredibly professional professor types. Clint was getting way too fond of that smile.

The thing was, Clint knew he fell fast and hard and he didn’t want to do that now. It wasn’t that long since Natasha. Okay, eight months, but that was hardly long enough to fall out of love. It had taken him years to get over Bobbi.

With both Natasha and Bobbi he’d known when he saw them that he was going to love them. He didn’t get the same feeling from Phil so maybe he’d be okay. Maybe he could stick with the plan of fucking him if he got an offer and then moving on. He thought he’d like that.

He’d bet anything that Phil was amazing in bed. Very focused on his partner's pleasure. Clint could get behind something like that.

These were the kind of thoughts he didn’t want to be having in the middle of a coffee shop so he spent some of the morning when he wasn’t focusing on playing distracting himself by focusing on Phil’s other barista. As well as Melinda he had another girl in today. Clint hadn’t caught her name when she’d come spilling in the door but she was pretty in a kind of flustered way, spoke with a British accent and seemed to treat coffee making like a science. She was also impossible young - or she seemed it. Like Skye. Maybe he was just getting old. Maybe he should stop hanging around student areas.

Some time after Melinda left the place quietened down. Not late enough yet for early lunches or for people who didn’t have to be out of bed to be hanging around but too late for the people who had an early class they desperately needed to be at. He decided he could use a drink and set his guitar down, storing the money he’d made carefully then heading up to the counter.

The girl did a nervous little shift when she noticed he was coming and gave him a strange, wooden smile. He grinned easily back at her and she relaxed a fraction.
“Hey,” he said, leaning on the counter. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. I’m Clint.”

“Jemma,” the girl said, nervously offering her hand. He reached out to shake it and was surprised to find that she actually had quite a firm grip. Not as unsure of herself as she seemed, then.

“Phil’s letting me play here for a while,” he said, knowing it was redundant. She’d been watching him play out of the corner of her eye all morning. Still, it never hurt to remind people that the boss had let him be there. She didn’t seem the kind to make trouble but he didn’t want to find out. “Was wondering if I could just get a glass of water.”

“Oh, of course you can,” Jemma said, her eyes widening. She darted off into the back of the shop and emerged a moment later with a glass of water with ice and everything. It looked beautiful after he’d been singing and he couldn’t help but take a long drink of it as soon as she put it into his hands.

“Skye texted me about you last night,” Jemma said as he set the glass down. “She told me your music was wonderful and I really have to agree with her. You’re very talented.”

“Thank you,” Clint said, blushing a little. “I travel a lot, write songs all over the country. Sounds like you travel a little yourself.”

“Oh, yes,” Jemma said, smiling. “I’m here to study. Or, rather, my family moved over here a couple of years ago so I’m attending an American university. Since I’m over here. I’d always thought I’d end up in Oxbridge like Mum but it seemed like such a waste to fly home and I’d always wanted to see New York.”

“It’s an okay city,” Clint said, nodding. It hadn’t been too bad for him yet, after all, despite his fears. “What are you studying?”

“Molecular biology,” Jemma said, her eyes lighting up even more. “It’s really quite fascinating. I’m in the final year of my degree so I’m doing some quite interesting work, you know. Though, I suppose, you don’t want to hear about that.”

“No, it’s okay, tell me,” Clint encouraged. “Though I’ve gotta tell you I might not get a lot of it.”

“Well, if you insist,” Jemma said, tentatively, and then she began to talk.

Clint honestly didn’t understand most of it. There were a lot of words used that went straight over his head which was to be expected as he was kind of a high school drop out, not that he’d tell her that, but her entire face lit up as she talked and the weird awkwardness she’d had before vanished to make her fluid and graceful and he could see the passion in her. Something in the way she talked let him know she was going to make it big one day - she sure as hell wasn’t going to be working in a coffee shop forever.

They got interrupted a couple of times by people wanting coffee and the odd stiffness came back when she was dealing with them, then she’d come back to him and be away again into whatever she was talking about.

Clint sipped at his water and made encouraging noises until she was done and then smiled and told her it sounded really interesting. She beamed at him.

“Oh, but look,” she said, apparently realising how long they’d been taking. “I’d kept you here far too long. You should have told me to stop!”

“It’s okay,” Clint reassured her. “I liked listening to you talk and it’s good to take breaks anyway.
You’re really into this stuff, I’m surprised you can drag yourself away to work here.”

“Oh, it’s a chore,” Jemma said with a musical little laugh. “The truth is, my parents don’t approve of my going to school here and it’s so expensive! I have some money from my grandmother’s estate so that’s paying for most things but I don’t want to use my entire inheritance if I don’t have to and having a little income makes life much more comfortable so, really, it’s no hardship.”

“That’s fair,” Clint agreed. He’d never had an inheritance to worry about but he knew something about keeping food on the table. He doubted Jemma really did, there was a shine about her that spoke of wealth and privilege but he didn’t begrudge her that. There were too many kids raised in poverty already and it wasn’t like she could help it.

“This place is kind of like a family, too,” Jemma admitted. “I mean, when I first came to New York I didn’t have anyone but Phil’s been ever so kind to us all and Skye and Leo are both amazing friends. I really don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“I’m getting that impression about this place,” Clint said with a grin. He’d noticed Phil tended to talk to his younger staff like an indulgent uncle, not an employer.

Jemma blushed again but then a group of customers entered and Clint took the chance to slip back to his guitar and start up again. Phil seemed to be surrounded by good people. Maybe he would stay here a little while after all.

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Grant arrived soon after Clint’s chat with Jemma and Clint didn’t feel much like approaching the counter again after that. Grant didn’t even acknowledge he was still there though he smiled at Jemma at least so he couldn’t be all bad. He seemed to want to treat her like a little sister - ruffling her hair and joking about with her. A very different dynamic from the one he had with Skye.

Just before the lunch rush another employee appeared. Clint could only presume this was Leo, the only employee so far whose name had been thrown around but Clint hadn’t met. Clint wouldn’t have noticed him much except, well, he spent every moment he wasn’t rushing off his feet standing there glaring at Clint as he played. It was kind of off-putting.

Every time Jemma caught him doing it she slapped his arm and sent him off to work again. Clint was glad she seemed to be an ally at least. In fact, part way through the lunch rush she slipped out and brought him another glass of water. Leo stared at him even harder for that.

“You’re friend not like music?” he asked after taking a quick sip of the icy water. It felt wonderful on his throat.

“Oh, Leo just hates change,” Jemma said with a dismissive wave. “Just...well, ignore him if you can. He’ll get used to you.”

“I might not be around long enough for him to get used to me,” Clint cautioned. Jemma just laughed.

“Oh, that’s okay,” she said with a hand wave. “Just don’t let him drive you away. I promise he’s lovely once you get to know him. Just...be gentle with him?”

“I’ll do my best,” Clint promised, picking up his guitar again. She smiled and rushed off back to the counter and he went back to playing, trying harder this time to ignore the man staring at him.

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Phil came out from the counter just as Clint was coming to the end of Journey. He was carrying a tray with drinks and food and Clint didn’t like to presume but he headed towards Clint’s table so instead of starting a new song Clint set the guitar down and moved his notebook. Phil grinned and sat down, slumping into the chair almost as soon as he touched it.

“Rough day?” Clint asked, grabbing the glass of water Jemma had brought for him hours ago. The ice was long ago melted and Jemma herself had left with a cheerful smile a little after she’d talked to him, leaving only Grant and Leo to stare at him until Phil had emerged and they’d gotten too busy to glare at anyone.

“A little,” Phil said, watching Clint sip at the water. “I think I need another employee. Or to change around the shift schedules again but it’s hard when the kids have classes. This is for you, by the way.” He picked up a sandwich and put it down in front of Clint, following it with a cup of coffee and a fresh glass of water. He had a sandwich and a glass of water for himself too, Clint was glad to see.

“You don’t need to keep feeding me,” Clint said, though he undermined that right away by picking up the sandwich and biting into it. It was good. Shit like this was what was going to make it hard to leave.

“I know,” Phil said, waving his hand. “But why not? And this way I take an actual break since I have someone to take it with. I’m kind of snowed under with paperwork at the moment. I’m normally around more but this has all kind of crept up on me and it needs to be dealt with.”

“Running a business must be hard work,” Clint agreed. He’d never stayed in one place long enough to even contemplate it but he guessed it must be true. It seemed to be wearing Phil out anyway.

“How did you end up with this place?”

“Needed something to do after I left the army,” Phil said with a shrug, and Clint had to pause at that since he couldn’t see Phil as ex-military. He was built, sure, but he was also kind of small and unassuming and not the kind of person Clint thought of as a veteran at all. Though maybe that was because the kind of veteran he normally met were the ones who came back unable to cope with life and ended up sleeping under bridges and waking all the other drifters with their damn nightmares. Clint was pretty glad Phil wasn’t that kind of guy.

“You were in the army?” he prompted.

“I don’t talk about it,” Phil said with a little shrug. Modestly, maybe. Or special ops. Clint wasn’t going to find out anyway if Phil didn’t want to tell him.

“Okay,” Clint agreed. He knew a thing or two about not asking questions. “So, why a coffee shop?”

“Why not?” Phil asked. “I wanted to do something to be part of a community. I thought about setting up a security agency but that didn’t appeal. Here, I get to meet lots of interesting people. I have a great bunch of people working for me. Also, I like coffee. It’s a pretty good life.”

“Seems it,” Clint agreed. He had to admit it did. It wasn’t like he’d ever have the money of inclination to settle down but if he did working in a place like a coffee shop didn’t seem so bad. Sure, there was the rush when nobody could stop to think but other than that…

Though maybe it was just the people here. They were a good bunch of kids. Watching them joke around was almost enough to make Clint want to stay.
“All your workers students?” Clint asked, eying Ward who was topping up the pastry cabinet. “I mean, other than Melinda of course?”

“Ward isn’t, if that’s what you’re asking,” Phil said, glancing over his shoulder. “I, well, I take it you’ve worked this out by now but I have a horrible habit of picking up strays. Melinda gets kind of upset with me about it. I set out to hire someone and somehow end up with what she calls charity cases. I mean, the students are obvious. All students need some extra money to get by but all three of mine have extenuating circumstances. Ward...he’s like me. Ex-army. I know he’s kind of prickly but, well, I was too when I first got out and you wouldn’t believe how far he’s come.”

“He looks more ex-military than you,” Clint joked, kicking Phil’s foot lightly under the table.

“Probably. It’s been less time for him,” Phil grinned. “When he first came through the door he looked like he was going to pass out where he stood. He was still wearing army boots and I don’t think he had a penny to his name. I had to give him a job.”

“Kind of like you let me play?” Clint asked, meeting Phil’s eye. Phil just shrugged.

“Pretty much. Though I stand by it being a good idea business-wise. You play well, a few people have commented to me that they like the music and I’ve let students set up here and play from time to time so you’re not unprecedented. But, yes, if you speak to Melinda she’ll refer to you as one of my charity cases.”

Clint couldn’t help but thinking he might like being a charity case if he could be one of Phil’s charity cases. Maybe Phil could keep him like a lost kitten. Until he left, of course.

“Well, I don’t mind,” Clint said with a laugh. “I mean, I’m getting something pretty awesome out of it,” he gestured at the now empty plates between them, meaning not just the free meal but everything above and beyond that Phil was providing him with. “And you’re pretty awesome too. It’s no hardship to stick around.”

“I’m glad,” Phil said, and there was something soft and hopeful in his smile. Something Clint wanted to distill and keep and write a million songs about. Before he could get too lost in it the door of the coffee shop opened and a crowd spilled in. A lecture must have just let out. Phil gave a long suffering sigh and stood, grabbing their used plates.

“Manager’s work is never done?” Clint asked with a cheeky grin.

“Never,” Phil agreed. “Neither’s yours. Better get playing or I’ll throw you out.” The smile on his face made it a joke so Clint laughed as though nobody had ever said that to him and meant it, then began to play again. He did still have some money to make after all.

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The place was empty by 5:45 so Phil let Grant head out early though they didn’t close until 6. Clint packed up, counted his money again and then headed over to the counter where Phil was wiping down some machinery. Phil saw him coming and tossed him a cloth and some spray.

“Mind wiping down the tables for me?” he asked, not looking up from the part of the machine he was cleaning. “You don’t have to but I’d help.”

Clint had been fed for free, had a dry place to be all day and everyone had been nice to him. He hadn’t had it this good in a while so the least he could do was wipe down some tables. He took the cloth and set to work, humming to himself as he did. He glanced over a couple of times to find Phil looking. The other man always turned away quickly when Clint caught him but he’d still looked in
the first place. Probably checking out Clint’s ass. Clint didn’t blame him. He wasn’t being cocky or anything but when you got by like he did it helped to know every selling point you had and his ass was fantastic.

He wasn’t going to do anything about Phil staring at his ass. He might have yesterday when he thought this was going to be a quick town but the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to stay here for a few days. The more he wanted to write a song. And Clint was the kind of idiot who, if he started sleeping with Phil, and he stayed here in Phil’s bed for a few days, might just fall in love.

He really hated falling in love.

So no sex. But he could let Phil look. He’d done his share of looking after all. He might be in love with Nat but he still had eyes.

When he’d finished the tables he wandered back over to Phil who was counting out the tips. He leant over the counter and dropped the cleaning supplies.

“I’m going to head out,” he said, gesturing at the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Give me a second,” Phil said with an eye roll. “I’m still splitting the tips.”

“You don’t have to…”

“I’m not having this conversation every night,” Phil interrupted. “I know you’re not stopping but for however long you’re here you’re one of us so that means you get a share of the tips. Now stand still while I finish counting.”

“Yes sir,” Clint said with a grin, sagging against the counter. “You normally do this every night?”

“I normally do it at the end of the week,” Phil said, not slowing down in his work as he talked to Clint. “But I don’t know how long you’re staying so it makes sense to do it this way.”

“I don’t know how long I’m staying either,” Clint admitted. “I thought this’d be a quick in and out but now I’m thinking I’m going to write a song. I’ll be at least until the end of the week if I’m writing a song, I think. Besides, I wouldn’t go without saying goodbye. You don’t have to do this every night just for me.”

“I really don’t mind,” Phil said, apparently finished. He dropped some money on the counter in front of Clint. “Besides, I’m guessing you don’t have much in your back pocket to see you through the night. This is the least I can do.”

“Thanks,” Clint said, pocketing the money. “I WILL see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll count on it,” Phil said with that soft little private smile and Clint got his ass out of there before he got himself into trouble.
“You are a sight for sore eyes,” Clint said, setting his guitar down. Skye laughed, flipping her hair and offering him a cup of coffee. After spending a morning being glared at by Melinda and Leo and then Grant, she was about the best thing he’d ever seen. Phil had been around for a little while but he’d seemed even more distracted and headed off quickly and Clint didn’t like it.

It worried him how quickly he’d come to rely on Phil smiling at him in the morning. The day just wasn’t as awesome without it. There was still time for Phil to appear and eat lunch with him though. He could hope.

For now he took the cup of coffee from Skye and grinned at her as he sipped it. There was some kind of syrup in this one, different from the cappuccino they normally brought him and, if he was honest, a little too sweet but, as had often been pointed out to him, he was literally a beggar so he didn’t actually get a choice.

“Is it good?” Skye asked, watching him carefully.

“Yeah,” he assured her, taking another sip. She relaxed a little as he drank.

“Thanks,” she said, pushing her hair behind her ear. “It’s kind of my own recipe. The syrups, I mean. Phil does a special sometimes and I thought I might try to contribute.”

“It’s good,” Clint insists, and it is. Just because it isn’t to his taste doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate that it’s a nice drink. It’s also sweet that Skye would want to make a contribution to the shop instead of just hanging out here. He knew a lot of the time that students looked on their jobs as just...things to do. Nothing to invest in but Phil’s people were different. They were good people.

“Hey,” Skye said, looking at him and biting her lip. “You’re new to town, I feel like I should be showing you the highlights of New York, you know. I mean, I’ve travelled around a lot in my life. Seen some cities. It’s always more fun if you have someone who knows the place to show you around.”

“You offering to show me the sights?” he asked.

“I’m going out tonight, actually,” Skye said with a little shrug. “Wondered if maybe you wanted to tag along. I mean, you don’t have to.”

“Out sounds good,” Clint said with a nod. “Though, so we’re absolutely clear, this between us is friends hanging out and not anything else.” He made it a statement because, ten years ago, yeah. Skye was an attractive girl and there was something about her. A spark. He wanted to get to know her but, honestly, she was kind of young for him now. He felt vaguely perverted to even consider it.

She laughed at him anyway, which was a dent on his ego but at least it meant he wouldn’t have to find a way to let her down gently.

“No offense,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re not my type at all. I mean, I like the music but I’m kind of involved with someone. Nothing serious but...”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Clint said with a grin. “I’m not looking. I just...sometimes people think things because you live on the street and drift. Things like you’ll go with anyone. Not that you’re anyone, you’re a very attractive young woman. And it’s not like I don’t do one night stands. But you’re maybe just a little too young for me? You’re a good kid, I’d like to get to know you better but
that’s all.”

With that said he put his tongue against the bottom of his mouth so he’d stop tripping over it and took another drink of his coffee. Skye was laughing at him but she had the decency to hide her face in her hands so he didn’t have to watch her laugh. It was a good thing he didn’t want to sleep with her, he clearly sucked at talking to her.

“You done?” she asked eventually, managing to control her giggling.

“I’m done,” he agreed.

“Good. So, party friends?”

“Party friends,” Clint agreed. “And let’s never mention this conversation again.”

“I’ll agree to that,” she said, reaching over to ruffle his hair and it was a weirdly fond gesture but it made him grin. She was a good kid. He was going to enjoy getting to know her better. Seemed like she had some stories to tell.

“Want me to meet you there?”

“I’ll pick you up here after work,” Skye said, looking back over at the counter. “I’d better go before Grant comes to find me. See you tonight?”

“Yes, see you then,” Clint said, throwing her a quick salute and then grabbing his guitar again. It’d be good to get out. Absorb a little of the city. Meet some people. Maybe, if he was lucky, there’d be some people more around his own age. People it was more appropriate to hit on. A warm bed for the night. He knew he’d just claimed to not be the kind of person but, well, he’d just rather Skye not know about it. He liked the way she looked at him like he was worth something. Didn’t want to lose that.

He strummed his guitar and started in on Crazy Love. Today was looking good.

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Skye seemed to be working the short lunch only shift today and when she swished out of the door he gave up hope of lunch. It wasn’t too big of a deal, really. He was used to only getting one meal a day if he was lucky and it certainly wasn’t worth going up and dealing with Ward’s bitch face for. Still, Phil’s food was great and he did miss it.

Apparently Wednesday was a good day to be a student as the coffee shop rush didn’t die down much after lunch. Still, Phil didn’t appear. Grant was more than capable of handling things by himself but that didn’t mean he should be left to it. Clint got the impression Phil wouldn’t have liked to leave him there.

Honestly, Clint nearly got up and helped himself. He’d worked a coffee machine before. Never this one, of course, but knowledge transferred. He couldn’t always make enough with just the music. If it had been anyone else behind the counter, even Melinda, he’d have tried but Grant…

He kept the music going. He had a little crowd around him at one point. A few girls requesting covers. A few guys challenging him. He got one girl who wanted to sit almost in his lap and giggle at him. He let her flirt, gave her some smiles. It didn’t mean anything really. Just some fun.

They cleared out just before four, clearly heading for a class, and Clint let himself slump back in his chair. It had been kind of fun but they’d hardly thrown any money at him and they’d blocked
other customers from getting by. He kind of wished he’d been rude to them now but that wouldn’t
do Phil any favours.

It was a little annoying how much he wanted to do Phil some favours.

It wasn’t long after the crowd cleared that Phil himself finally made an appearance, coming in from
the back of the shop and saying something to Grant then going again. He didn’t look sick, at least,
so that was something. Though you never could really tell. Clint hoped he wasn’t sick.

He picked up his guitar and strummed a few chords, running through his songs in his head. Before
he could decide on one to start with, though, Phil appeared at the table with a tray and something
that smelt almost sinfully good.

“It’s from a jar, I’m afraid,” Phil said, setting the plates down on the table. It was all Clint could do
not to grab the bowl of pasta that had been put in front of him and wolf it down without so much as
a by your leave. It looked amazing. “I just realised I hadn’t had any lunch and figured you hadn’t
eaten anything either so…”

“You’re amazing,” Clint said, grabbing the bowl. It might have come from a jar but it smelt damn
good so Clint couldn’t say he cared. He was hardly an expert on fine dining.

“So,” Phil said, picking up his own bowl. “We talked about me yesterday. I thought maybe you
could tell me something about you today?”

“So, Clint said. He thought for a few minutes as he shoveled food into his mouth and then
launched into the story of how he’d met a guy in a bar in Las Vegas once who’d sold him a beaten
up old car. It was the only car he’d ever owned, a complete rust bucket and a waste of money from
the start. He’d wanted to head to the coast but about a hundred km out the entire car started
stinking of gas. He’d found a farmer who’d helped him work out what was wrong and in the end
they’d decided the best solution was to just chop the top off the car so that’s what they’d done.
The car had finally died about half way through the journey and Clint had been forced to abandon
it next to the road. He hitched the rest of the way though he didn’t tell Phil too many details about
that. Glossing over the long hours of walking in the sun because everyone was afraid to give a guy
a lift these days and how a couple of the rides he did get were less than savoury. He focused
instead of the good people he met and Phil smiled through the entire story, laughing in all the right
places. He stopped Clint to ask questions too, seemed genuinely interested. It had been a while
since someone had been really interested.

It didn’t hurt that at some point his legs had kicked up against Phil’s and stopped and he told the
story with his leg pressed against Phil’s under the table. Like it was some kind of date and not pity
pasta.

He was going to be in trouble if he let this carry on. Good thing he was going to some party tonight
so he could find a girl to fuck it out of his system with and get back to loving Natasha.

“So,” Phil said, shifting so his leg rubbed against Clint’s and that HAD to be intentional. “How did
you get started with the music?”

“Oh, I’m not going into that one,” Clint said, sitting up with an uncomfortable laugh. He might
enjoy it here but that didn’t mean he was ready to air his dirty laundry. “You need to bring me
something more alcoholic if you want to hear about that.”

“Okay,” Phil said, holding up his hands in surrender. “I get it. I’m not going to push.”
“Thanks,” Clint said, gently placing his now empty bowl on the tray Phil had brought them on. “Thanks for the pasta, though. I didn’t mean for it to get weird…”

“Don’t worry,” Phil said, standing. Clint barely had time to miss the press of Phil’s leg before Phil was laying a hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “I’ll still make you lunch tomorrow.”

“Aweome, I’m going to hold you to that,” Clint said, resisting the temptation to bring his hand up and curl his fingers through Phil’s. It was a good job he was going out tonight, this was getting out of hand.

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Clint was not having a good time. Apparently he and Skye had drastically different definitions of what constituted a party. Either that or he was getting old and that wasn’t possible. The club she’d brought him to was so packed that in the end he’d backed up against a wall just to stop himself being shoved. Not that he was opposed or crowds or some organised shoving. He moshed. This wasn’t organised shoving though. This was just rude kids shoving their way around the crowd and, yeah, maybe he was too old.

The music was pounding. The drinks were cheap but he didn’t want to get too drunk tonight and everyone was so very, very young. He’d seen a few other people round his age but they were few and far between and he was starting to think the best plan would be just to slip out and leave.

The only consolation was that he’d left his stuff at the coffee shop so he wasn’t in this crush with a bag and a guitar case. He was kind of wishing he’d stayed there with his stuff. He was pretty sure that Phil would let him now. Or if he wouldn’t then he was some kind of horrible tease as he’d been dropping hints.

And yeah, there was something wrong that he’d take a night curled up with an aging ex-soldier over the press of a party full of young, beautiful people but he really, really would. Especially now he was here. He bet Phil would be sweet. He’d probably like kissing. Probably be really sensual, focused. He was probably a bit of a secret badass too. Clint managed to lose himself in what kind of kinks Phil might be hiding under that pleasant exterior when Skye stumbled back over, clearly a few drinks more than him into the night.

“Clint,” she cried out, throwing her arms around his neck and he caught her more by instinct than anything else. “Are you having a good time?”

“Sure,” he lied, having to yell into her ear to make sure he was heard over the pounding music. “You come to these kind of things often?”

“Oh, I am,” Skye said, leaning into him. “It’s just...I can just let it all go, you know. Don’t have to worry about anything but the beat.”
“You normally have a lot of worries?” Clint couldn’t help but ask. Skye seemed quite a chilled out person as far as he could see, not the kind of be dancing her worries away. Though what did he know? Maybe she was failing all her courses. Maybe she hated her parents. People who seemed fine often had plenty of reasons to need to lose themselves.

“Some,” Skye said, slumping against him so they were pressed together in a way he’d be worried about if they hadn’t have a conversation about this already. “I’ve got secrets,” she explained, cheek pressed to Clint’s cheek. “I mean, lots of them but you know the weirdest one? I think Phil’s my dad.”

“You sure you want to be telling me this?” he asked, glancing around the club. People had a weird habit of telling him their life stories, must be something about his face, so he wasn’t exactly unused to whispered confessions but he had to see Skye in the morning.

“Sure,” Skye said. “You seem like a good guy and you’re not going to stay long. Just don’t tell anyone at the coffee shop, okay?”

“Your business is your business,” Clint agreed. He sure as hell didn’t want to get embroiled in whatever was going on here.

“Good,” Skye said, nodding against his cheek. “See, I grew up without any family, you know.” And Clint did know what that was like. Far too well. He wasn’t going to tell her that though. “I always thought that if I could find my family I’d be okay but everything was tied up in red tape and in the end I did some hacking and found my birth certificate and my mom’s name was blacked out but it said my dad was Philip Coulson and that’s kind of a weird name so I looked them up and there are, like, six people in the entire US with this name. So I went on a road trip. The first one I went right up to and he told me to fuck off. The second one I was all subtle trying to talk to but he was young and then the next one was too old and then I found Phil and he’s just the right age to be my dad and he’s awesome. So I meant to tell him but he got chatting and he offered me the job and I thought I’d be better to get to know him first and now…”

“Now it’s weird,” Clint finished for her. “Now you can’t tell him.”

“Exactly,” Skye nodded against his cheek again. And Clint felt for the kid, he really did. He’d had it shitty growing up and he knew what it was like to long for a parent who cared to come and take you away, but he couldn’t help but wish she hadn’t told him. He was going to end up thinking about it too much now. This was why he traveled, didn’t want to get involved.

“God, I’m being weird aren’t I?” Skye asked, pulling away a little. “You can just tell me to get lost.”

“No,” Clint lied. “I don’t mind you telling me things. Not if you’ve got to get them off your chest.” And maybe it wasn’t so much a lie. He didn’t want to know but he liked Skye and he didn’t want her to dwell on it either.

“I just can’t talk to anyone at work,” Skye said with a little shrug. “And I don’t know anyone else. So, thanks.”

“It’s okay,” he said, smiling for her.

“Hey, I’m going to go dance again,” she said, looking over her shoulder at the heaving floor. He wasn’t sure how anyone would manage to dance in that but he guessed if anyone could it’d be Skye. “Want to come?”
“Nah, I’m just going to hang here,” he said. She shrugged and seconds later she was slipping off into the crowd and leaving him with his messy thoughts. Not that he could think in here anyway. He looked over to see that Skye was safe and then headed for the exits. He’d hang around outside in case she needed something but he needed some air.

He really, really hated carrying around other people’s secrets. It wasn’t a mean thing, he just struggled to put them back in their box. They stuck with him until they turned into his own secrets and he’d end up writing songs about them to get them out. He supposed he’d have to put Skye’s secret down. He could maybe write it in his notebook and send it on to Nat. She’d keep it safe. He wished he had the notebook here now but it was back in the shop with his other stuff.

The thing was that from now on he was going to have to lie to Phil. He really didn’t want to lie to Phil. The man had been good to him, he didn’t want to repay that with lies.

This was why he avoided getting involved with people. It just ended up with him in a difficult situation.

He found a doorway across from the club and slumped down in it. It was dark enough that the bouncers across the street didn’t pay him much attention. At least he still had his money in his pocket so hopefully he wouldn’t have to sleep here. The hostel he’d been staying in was a bit of a dive but at least it had a bed.

He really should have stayed with Phil. He was sure he was reading it right, sure he’d be welcomed. And, yeah, he was making a real mess of not getting too emotionally attached but once he was out of here he’d probably forget Phil. Probably go back to being desperately and hopelessly in love with Natasha.

He sure hoped he would anyway. Being in love was a mess.

He watched some people drift in and out of the club. No sign of Skye yet, though he did see the guy who’d been approaching her, the one he’d glared down, leave. That was kind of a weight off his mind. Some men were assholes, he didn’t want them around Skye.

Yes, he knew he had no place thinking that kind of thing about her and that she could probably take care of herself but he liked the kid and he didn’t want to see her hurt. He wasn’t going to apologize for that.

It didn’t take long for him to get bored sitting in the doorway. Just because he was used to camping out like that didn’t mean he liked it and he normally had his bag to lean on and the ratty blanket inside it to cover himself with. It wasn’t much but it was what he’d gotten used to. It didn’t take long for him to pry himself off the floor and go for a walk. Maybe he’d even get lucky and find someone to go home with.

He didn’t get lucky.

What had he ever gotten lucky?

Turned out Skye’s admirer hadn’t so much left as gone to lurk menacingly in the streets with a group of thugs. Unfortunately, Clint hadn’t been paying attention so they first thing he knew about it was a heavy blow across the back of the shoulders.

Life had prepared Clint for a lot of shit and giving and taking a beating was something he knew intimately. The first blow took him by surprise but he braced for the next one and then rolled and punched the guy who’d been hitting him in the nose.
If it had been a fair fight, one on one, Clint would have won. His opponents were drunk off their asses and hardly experienced fighters. They should have been easy to take down. The problem was there were too many of them. Clint lost track of the fight quickly. He knew he punched the ass who he suspected had started it all right in the mouth but he also knew pretty quickly he was going to lose and from there out it was damage control. Roll with the punches, don’t hit back, stay down and low and hope they got bored while he still had all his teeth.

When they finished up he was bruised and shaking but he didn’t think anything was broken. Just damn sore. His nose was bleeding like a bitch and he was pretty sure he was going to have a black eye but no cracked ribs or anything. Still, he didn’t have anything left in him to fight them when one of them grabbed the roll of money from his pocket. He tried, tried to push himself up again to fight for what was his but there was a kick to his gut and he decided it was better to go down. No amount of money was worth a cracked rib.

When they’d gone he dragged himself over to the nearest doorway and curled up in a ball cursing his life. It didn’t take him long to pass out.
Waking up in a doorway covered in bruises wasn’t something Clint enjoyed. Sadly it was something that he was used to but it never got any easier. He’d never woken up in a doorway covered in bruises and thought it was worth it. That was especially true today.

He drifted out of sleep slowly, one ache at a time. He felt like his entire body was one big bruise and, yeah, that was probably accurate. He rolled slowly onto his side as he woke up, testing his body. Achy and a little bit the worse for wear from sleeping in a doorway but, as he’d originally thought, nothing broken at least. He was going to take his victories where he could.

It took him a few moment to regain his feet. Again, everything sore but nothing broken. He reached a hand up to rub at his face, sighing as crusts of dried blood fell away. Fucking nose bleeds. Great.

He knew, really, he should get cleaned up but he had no idea what time it was and it wasn’t like he had any money to pay for bathroom facilities. If he knew where there was a public washroom he’d stumble in that direction but the sun was only just coming up so they’re probably be locked. Instead he swallowed his pride and headed to the coffee shop. Sure, Phil would probably take one look at him and throw him back onto the street but he was going to have to go there eventually anyway to get his guitar. Made sense to just get it over with.

Whatever time it was, it was early enough that the streets were basically deserted. He passed a couple of kids stumbling home but they were both too caught up in their own lives to look at him. That worked just fine as far as he was concerned.

Of course, when he got to the shop the door was locked. He sighed and rested his head against the door. He could probably try to pick the lock but Phil would get upset about that and he didn’t make a habit of things like picking locks any more. He could also sit here on the floor and wait for Phil to open up but it probably wouldn’t do Phil’s reputation any good if he had blood splattered hobos hanging around outside his shop. He could go, but he didn’t know where and he’d only have to come back later for his stuff…

That left the back door. He sighed and set off down the block, wiping at his face again to try and get some more of the blood off. It took him longer than he’d like to circle around but when he did he was glad he’d taken the effort. The coffee shop was easily identified by the smells drifting from it. Melinda must be in early baking and he never thought he’d be glad to see that woman but he was willing to take that thought back right now.

He had to jump the gate to get into the paved area behind the shop and knock. It was a bit of a trail when he ached so much but he managed it. When he knocked on the door everything went quiet for a minute and then it was opened, slowly, by Melinda who was wielding a pretty lethal looking knife. The gip she had on the thing showed she probably knew how to use it, too. He backed up a couple of steps quickly and raised his hands in surrender.

“Hey,” he said, trying for casual. “Is Phil in yet?”

Melinda looked him up and down, her hand tensing around the knife, and then finally she turned and headed back into the shop. She didn’t say anything to Clint but she yelled for Phil as she went so he took that as an invitation and slipped into the warm back room.

It was as organised back there as you might expect from a couple of people who were ex-military. He was almost afraid to touch anything, definitely too afraid to touch any of the pristine surfaces
where Melinda was currently making a batch of brownies with the kind of intense concentration he was sure most people only brought out for life changing decisions. Luckily, before he had to make the decisions between leaning against the counter and risking making a mess or standing there looking like a lost puppy in the middle of the room Phil appeared.

Phil was wearing loose pj pants, a rumpled t-shirt, and bare feet and it looked like he'd just crawled out of bed and Clint...Clint felt like someone had pulled the bottom out of his stomach. Phil looked so good, so homey. All Clint wanted to do was drag him back wherever he'd been and crawl into bed behind him and never get out.

Phil took one good look at Clint and his expression went from sleepily confused to concerned. Clint liked that expression a lot less but, well, when it was directed at him it did have a certain charm. Still, he reached up to wipe at his nose again.

"Hi," he said, shuffling. "I didn't...Can I just grab my stuff and then I'll get out of your way until opening time."

"What happened to you?" Phil asked, stepping forward.

"Kind of got beat up," Clint said with a shrug. "It's not so bad. Probably looks worse than it is."

"I'll judge that," Phil said, all traces of tiredness gone now. "Come on, follow me."

He turned and walked back through the door he’d come from so Clint didn't have much choice but to follow him. He didn't look over to see if Melinda was watching. He doubted she'd like the idea of him following Phil into his private space. He wasn't sure he blamed her.

The door Phil went through was at the side of the room and lead to a flight of stairs. Phil was already gone but it wasn't hard to guess where so Clint plodded up behind him. Turned out climbing the stairs was a little harder than he'd thought. His left leg was aching and his ribs weren't too happy either.

The top of the stairs opened into a tidy little sitting room. A couch, a chair, a coffee table. A large framed Captain America poster hung on the stair wall, a flat screen TV was mounted on the one opposite. The wall at the back of the room had one of those big windows you could push right open and climb out of. There were two doors leading out of the room and a couple of bookcases stood around full of books and DVDS. Clint resisted the urge to poke through them for now. He also avoided sitting. He wasn't sure how much crap was on his clothing.

Phil appeared in a door across the room and gestured him through. Clint followed him into a small, neat kitchen. It was all kind of comfortable. Kind of like home. It took a lot more willpower than it should have to not just tell Phil that.

"Sit down," Phil said, pulling a chair out from the table. "Let me take a look at you."

"It's seriously not that bad," Clint insisted, though he did take the chair. "I mean, I'm aching but I slept in a doorway so who knows what that's from. Nothing's broken at least."

"Have you had a lot of broken bones?" Phil asked, approaching Clint with a cloth. Clint knew he should wipe his own damn face but it was kind of nice to let Phil do it. Just this once.

"I've lived on the street," Clint said. "Broken bones are a thing that happens. People see you sleeping in a doorway and think that if they beat the shit out of you no one will care and most of the time they're right. Never had any money to pay for medical care or anything, you get by how you can when you're homeless."
"That what happened last night?" Phil asked, his jaw tight. "Someone beat you up for sleeping in a doorway?"

"No, not last night," Clint said with a sigh. "You know I went out with Skye?" Phil nodded so Clint continued. "Some guy was looking at her in a way I didn't like. I scared him off and he decided he'd rather I didn't do that. She didn't see, he followed me out of the place and beat me up there. I got in a few blows of my own, though. He wasn't the only one who got some blood on him."

Phil hummed as though he disapproved but there was a pleased little smile on his lips. Clint pretended not to see it but filed it away. Phil cared about Skye more than he let on.

"You're right about this not being as bad as it looked," Phil said, moving the bloodied cloth back. "You're going to have a black eye but nothing else on your face. Take off your shirt now, I need to see your chest."

"You really don't," Clint said, crossing his arms. He didn't doubt for a second that it was a mess and he felt vaguely vulnerable in showing it to Phil. Apparently Phil didn't care about his protests as he just reached out and tugged at the hem of Clint's shirt. Clint tried to push him of but ended up wincing at the movement. Phil gave him a significant look and, with a sigh, he let Phil take the shirt.

He knew when he was beaten.

Phil checked his ribs as best he could and Clint let him. At least Phil didn't seem shocked by the mess which made sense, really. He'd been a soldier. His hands on Clint's body were firm and sure and Clint might have been inclined to think about other ways Phil could touch him if he weren't in pain.

"I don't think they're cracked," Phil admitted after a minute. "We should probably still wrap them anyway, just to be safe."

"Sure," Clint agreed as, well, it couldn't hurt. Phil produced some bandages from the kit and Clint stood as still as he could as Phil wrapped him. He did it with some skill so it must be something he'd done before.

"Much easier to do this here than in the field," Phil commented, as though he could read Clint's mind. "Anything else I need to look at?"

"Gonna have a massive bruise on my leg," Clint admitted. "But if it was anything serious I wouldn't have been able to walk here."

"Good," Phil said, sitting back on his heels. "Now, I'm going to get dressed and go about opening up. I think you need to sleep."

"I slept," Clint protested but Phil was giving him a long-suffering look.

"Passing out in a doorway isn't sleeping. You're a mess of bruises, you need to sleep so your body can heal. I have a spare bed, you're crashing there."

Clint was a little disappointed that he was being offered the spare room and not Phil's own bed, not that he was in any state to do anything about it if he did have Phil's bed (preferably with Phil in it). He could see Phil's point, though. He needed to work to make the financial ground he'd lost but Phil didn't seem to be throwing him out and he did feel like shit. Maybe a little sleep was just what he needed.
"Okay, you win," he said, and when Phil gave him one of those secret smiles he felt like he'd won something special.

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Clint woke up to the sound of the door creaking open. It anything his body felt worse for having been laid out on the soft mattress than it had before he'd gone to lie down. He rolled onto his back with a grunt to find Phil loitering in the door.

"I'm sorry," Phil said. "It's nearly eleven, I thought you might want something to eat."

Clint thought about that for a second because, yeah, he kind of did want to eat but he also wanted to curl back up under Phil's covers and never come out again. That hadn't been presented as an option though so, in the circumstances, he'd probably better get up.

"Thanks," he managed, swinging his legs out of bed. He'd stripped down to his underwear to sleep so he could see the giant bruise forming on his leg. That was going to be a pain. By the time he looked up Phil had moved away from the doorway so he took some time to drag his jeans on, at least. His t-shirt was still blood-stained and in Phil's kitchen.

He made his way into the tiny bathroom to wash up quickly. There wasn't much he could do without his bag but he ran his fingers through his hair and took his time to take a good look at the bruises. They were just as bad as he'd thought they would be. It was no wonder Phil looked at him like he was afraid Clint was going to snap in half. Great. He'd almost definitely ruined any chance he had there now.

When he finally stumbled back out of the bathroom he could smell coffee and damn but he needed that right now. He went into the living room to find someone had carried his bags up so he stopped to slip into a t-shirt before stumbling through to the kitchen and coffee and Phil.

"I hope you don't mind that I woke you up," Phil said, going for humorous but coming of as worried. "I just...I didn't think you'd thank me if I let you miss an entire day in the shop. This way we have time to eat and still get down there before the lunch rush."

"That's an awesome plan," Clint said, making grabby hands at the cup of coffee Phil had brought up for him. Phil huffed a laugh and slid the coffee cup over. Clint wasn't normally the type who needed coffee to wake up, he hated his body being dependent like that, but it was very welcome today.

Phil, as it turned out, was making pancakes. That made him about the best person in the world by Clint's estimation. They kept the conversation light while they ate, nice and easy and away from the part where Clint got the shit beaten out of him and slept on the street last night.

"Hey," Clint said when his belly was full and he was finally feeling awake. "I've gotta thank you for doing all this for me. I'm...people don't normally do shit like this for me."

"I figured as much," Phil said with a tired smile. "You don't seem like the kind of person who's used to being looked after. For the record, I don't mind. I like taking care of people. You got beaten up for protecting someone I care about. The least I can do, as far as I can see, is let you clean up and give you a place to sleep. Besides, it's not like your company's taxing for me."

"I like you too," Clint said with an eye roll. "Go on downstairs, I'll wash the dishes."

"If you do you'll miss the lunch rush," Phil said, standing. "Come downstairs for now. You can head back up here and clean them when you're done playing."
"Thanks," Clint said with a shrug. He wasn't going to argue when Phil had a good point. He headed back out into the living room to claim his guitar case and the notebook from his bag. True, he probably didn't need the notebook to play but he liked it. It was comforting and he didn't have many points of comfort in his life. Better without them.

Yeah, he knew it was contradictory that he thought life was better without points of comfort but clung to the few he had. He'd never claimed to make sense.

The coffee shop was already pretty busy. A few people who'd seen him before whispered behind their hands when he emerged. Probably noting the state of his face. Screw them, he'd won these bruises. His normal seat had been kept empty with a reserved sign and he claimed it quickly, unpacking his guitar and playing. Losing himself in the music was probably the best thing he could do right now.

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When the hubbub was dying down Skye emerged from behind the coffee machine. She looked as tired as he felt so he guessed they made quite a pair, though hers was probably more self-inflicted.

"Hey," she said, sliding into a seat next to him and offering him a cup of iced water. He took and it took a long drink with a sigh. It was damn good on his sore throat. "Phil tells me you got beaten up last night because of me."

"No," Clint corrected. "I got beaten up last night because of me. You had nothing to do with it."

"He said that creepy guy who'd been following me around did it because you tried to warn him off." Clint nodded because, yeah, that was a fair summary. Also, it was good to know he wasn't the only one who'd thought that guy was creepy.

"I did, but it was my choice to try and warn him off. I'm sure you could have handled your own business but I decided to get involved so what happened to me after that was my fault and not yours."

"I could have handled him," Skye agreed. "But that doesn't mean I'm not grateful to you so, thanks."

"I graciously accept your thanks," Clint said with a grin. "I just think I won't be going out with you again. I hate to admit it but I'm way too old for that kind of thing."

"Nobody's too old to dance," Skye insisted with a laugh. "Though, yeah, I could see you weren't into it. Maybe somewhere with a live band next time?"

"I could get behind that," Clint agreed.

"You know," Skye said, suddenly leaning in. "The stuff I said last night. I know I shouldn't have put that on you."

"It's okay," Clint assured her quickly. He'd been trying not to think about what she'd said. About how Phil might well be her dad. Phil would make an awesome dad but he didn't really want to think about that given some of the other ways he enjoyed thinking about Phil.

"You can't tell him," Skye said, gripping at Clint's arm. "I just...I'll tell him but not just now. I'll tell him when the time's right."

"Okay," Clint said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's not my secret to share, it's yours. I get that.
But if you want my advice, Skye. Don't leave it too long. He deserves to know."

"I know," Skye said, flushing. "I just...if I'm wrong I'm going to have to go and I've got so much going for myself here. I used to be like you, travelling around, and it's okay for a holiday but I missed people. Family. I have a family here, and I don't just mean Phil. I don't want to go."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Clint insisted. "Phil's the most decent guy I've met. He's not going to throw you out if you're wrong."

"I hope not," Skye said, and then she was standing again and walking away, leaving him with his guitar, his half-finished glass of ice water and his thoughts.

***

When the lunch rush died down a little Phil disappeared off again and Clint traipsed up to his apartment to do the dishes. Anything was better than playing downstairs with Grant staring at him like he murdered kittens for a living. He'd already made it clear with a raised eyebrow that he didn't think the bruises Clint was wearing were fairly won. He should probably get together with Melinda. They'd make quite a pair.

Phil had some paperwork out but he moved it to the side to let Clint work and Clint washed the dishes quickly and silently, not wanting to intrude. Well, he did want to intrude. He'd kind of been hoping to get a chance to snoop around a little. See what kind of books and DVDs Phil kept on his shelf. Find out what Phil's bedroom looked like. He knew it was invasive but...

Okay, he didn't have an excuse. He was just a creep and wanted to know.

Either way, Phil was there and he didn't get to look so instead he washed the dishes, said a quiet goodbye and headed back down to play. When he came back into the front of the shop there were only two tables occupied, both by lone students with textbooks out. There wasn't going to be any point in playing right now. Great.

"Hey."

Clint froze then turned slowly to check that, yes, it had been Grant Ward speaking to him. Grant rolled his eyes at Clint's display but he didn't look amused by it. He looked like he thought Clint was about the worst kind of human being on the planet. Still, Clint had met guys like that before. You could win them over with some kindness.

"Hey, Grant," he said, smiling. "It's kind of quiet in here right now. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I heard you were out with Skye last night," he said, eyes narrowing. Clint shrugged both at the loss of his attempt to be friendly and because, well, yes. There was no point in denying it.

"Yeah," he said, slowly. "Got beaten up by a bunch of thugs because I didn't like how they looked at her. You got a problem?"

"Aren't you a little old to be hanging around Skye?" Ah, the over-protective big brother routine. He knew how to cope with that.

"It wasn't anything like that," he said calmly, raising his hands. "She asked me out to dance and I haven't seen much of New York since I got there but, you're right, she's way too young for me so we talked about it and we were both happy to just be going out dancing as friends."
Ward grunted as though he didn't quite want to believe it but he had no reason not to believe it. That was good, it meant it probably tallied with whatever Skye had been saying. Which it should have since it was the truth but he'd learnt to never expect other people to tell the truth.

"Well, I'm glad you were there for her," Grant said in a tone that implied the opposite. "You know where you're going to be moving on to after this?"

Ah, a dismissal. Clint knew that too.

"Not yet. I'll have to work it out soon, though. Don't want to overstay my welcome."

"You do that," Grant agreed, turning back to the counter. Clint retrieved his guitar and slunk back to his chair. He'd had a bad morning with money as well as in all the other ways. If he wasn't so damn broke he'd possibly consider taking Grant's advice tonight. First bus to anywhere but here.

It wasn't that he didn't like Phil. The problem was he kind of liked Phil too much and it always ended in a mess. Phil was going to end up being a mess and not the kind of mess that Natasha was. Natasha was as beautiful as she was terrible. He'd never caught which letter-agency she worked for but whatever she'd done had been deadly. She'd have dried blood under her fingers and death in her smile and he'd known as he fell that it'd be bright and beautiful and he'd love her forever but never really have her.

Phil was different. He was still dangerous but in a solid, dependable way. His strength was like a rock. You could build your life on it and it'd protect you. Natasha was the sea, unpredictable and deadly. He'd always known he could never stay with Natasha and she'd never go with him - she'd not have allowed either option but he got the impression that Phil would. He got the impression that if he was careful Phil would let him in and let him stay and he could have roots here. Get involved with people here. He could already feel it with Skye's secrets tying him down. He hated being involved with people. He always made a mess of things.

So, Grant was right, he needed to go. Just as soon as he had the bus money.

***

The entire afternoon was quiet, as though in deference to Clint's mood. No more money made its way into his case and eventually Phil appeared, letting Grant leave early. Clint too his time packing away his guitar, counting his money. Looked like another night in a shop door for him. Maybe he could busk a little. Maybe he could make a little like that.

While Phil was dealing with one of the last customers he slipped upstairs and retrieved his bag. It wasn't in the sitting room and, irritated, he had to search a little to find it. His heart lurched when he saw it sitting on the guest bed. Inviting him to stay. And god but the temptation was so strong to go over there and curl up under the covers and never come out again and he even had a kind of permission now but he couldn't.

He travelled. It was in his blood. The last time he'd had a place he'd been a baby and it had been a place of fear. And then he'd run. He was still running. Alone, now. Barney had run to the army when running to the circus hadn't worked for him. Clint had found a cheap guitar and played a new life for himself.

He had a life. He had adventure. He kept moving. He never got too involved.

He grabbed his duffel bag and headed downstairs. He put it besides his guitar case and didn't meet Phil's eye. Phil didn't comment, just got the tip jar down and started on splitting them. Clint let
him, watching his hands work and god but he wanted to reach out and touch those hands. He wanted those hands on him. Wanted to throw out the few stragglers and slam the door and drag Phil upstairs with him. He wondered if Phil would let him. He wondered if Phil would kiss back and how. He wondered what he'd feel like to lie there in Phil's space with Phil's weight pressing down on him.

He blinked out of his daydream when Phil placed a stack of money in front of him. Not much today. Today sucked. He grabbed it and dropped it in his pocket anyway.

"Thanks," he said, throat dry. Phil reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him. He looked up to find Phil's eyes on the duffle, his jaw tight like he was searching for the thing to say. He turned to Clint and for a moment Clint thought this was going to be it. He thought Phil was going to lean in and kiss him or something. Then Phil shook his head to clear it.

"Just stay safe out there tonight," he said, squeezing Clint's arm then letting go. Clint nodded, trying not to feel the loss too keenly.

"I will," he said, and then gathered his things and went out of the door.

***

Clint had already decided that what he hated most about New York was the rain. It was ridiculous. The stuff falling now was that fine stuff that permeated any clothing you happened to be wearing. He was wet and soaked and miserable and he wanted more than anything to be with Phil.

He hated that feeling. When he'd got the feeling like he wanted to be somewhere else he always thought of Nat. Now he was thinking about Phil. Phil who was safe and accessible and Clint could have him but he was still out here in the cold and it was all such a damn mess.

He shifted a little, pulling his jacket closer around himself. He'd had a really good coat in the winter. Thick and warm. He'd torn it pretty badly in the spring and in the end he'd had to throw it out. He'd told himself it was for the best. He wouldn't have to carry the weight all summer and he'd find another coat the next winter but right now he really, really missed that coat.

Not even any chance of playing for extra money in this rain. Nobody was out anyway.

As soon as he had that thought he was proven wrong by footsteps coming down the road. He kept his head down and his jacket collar up. He knew the bruises made him look like a target and he didn't need to be beaten up two night in a row. Still, the feet stopped beside him and, slowly, he forced himself to look up.

It was Phil. Of course it was Phil, standing there in the rain clutching his umbrella and looking angry.

"Come on," Phil said, reaching out for him. "Get your things. Let's go inside."

"I'm fine here," Clint insisted, curling up smaller.

"No, you're not," Phil said, bypassing him completely and grabbing the guitar case. That sealed it. If Phil was taking his guitar then he'd HAVE to go too. "I don't know what your problem is and you don't have to tell me but I have a warm house. I have an empty bed and you're a good person. There's no need for you to be freezing your ass off out here when all that's true."

Clint wanted to yell at him. Wanted to tell Phil all the reasons he was wrong - all the reasons he should just leave Clint here in the rain but he was starting to think none of that was going to make a
bit of difference. Instead he just gathered his bag and climbed to his feet.

"Here," Phil said, holding out the guitar case, and when Clint took it he grabbed Clint's arm like he was afraid Clint was going to run and started walking.

He hadn't gone far from the shop today. Hadn't been able to make himself when everything still ached inside and out. It wasn't long until they were in the shop's clean and organised kitchen, shaking themselves out. Phil took his jacket and his guitar case and left them by the door and then took his arm again to lead him up to the apartment.

Once they were up the stairs Phil took his bag and disappeared, coming back quickly with a blanket that he draped around Clint's shoulders.

"I don't need this," Clint protested. "I'm just a little wet."

"I don't trust you to judge what you need and what you don't," Phil said harshly, adjusting the blanket. "You stay here and get dry. I'm going to make a warm drink."

With that Phil bustled away and Clint, well, he'd been given basic permission to snoop so he headed to the book cases.

It didn't take him long to work out that Phil was a bit of a geek. Sure, there were books that Clint knew were pretty highbrow and some movies too but there was also the entire Captain America cartoon run there in DVD form. He remembered that from when he was a kid. And the comics, too. Collector's bound editions. There were fantasy novels and superhero movies and all kinds of geeky things and Clint found himself smiling as he ran his fingers along the shelves.

"Do you want to watch something?"

Clint looked up to see Phil had come back into the room, a tray in hand with cups of what smelt like hot chocolate on it. It was in Clint to say no but, well, when was he ever going to get a chance to curl up and watch a DVD with someone he cared about while they drank hot chocolate again?

He pulled out the tv series and held it up. Phil grinned.

As it turned out, Phil was something of an expert on Captain America. They put the DVD in and curled up with their drinks and as it played Phil started talking. He talked about the events the shows were based on and how accurate they were. Clint had to lean closer to hear, it was only polite. It was only politeness that ended with him curled into Phil's side like he belonged there, Phil's arm draped possessively around his shoulder as Phil told him about wanting to be a hero and about joining the army and how being a superhero wasn't about what you could do but who you were.

Clint was sure for a million other people it would be boring and mundane, just cuddling on the couch with a DVD, but to him it was new and exciting and he just felt...he felt safe. He felt proud that Phil was telling him about his life. He felt at home. He never wanted the DVD to end.

Inevitably, though, it did. When the credits rolled they stayed curled together for a few more minutes, apparently both reluctant to move, and then Phil yawned.

"I guess we need to sleep," he said, glancing at his watch. "Work tomorrow and all that."

"Yeah," Clint agreed, though he made no effort to move. He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay curled up in Phil's arms forever. More than that, though, he couldn't imagine going from this to sleeping alone. It wasn't even like he wanted sex or anything. He just didn't ever want this warm
feeling to end. Maybe, just for tonight, he could let himself have what he wanted so badly. Just for tonight.

"You know," Clint said, "I think I'm still cold. Any chance I can sleep in your bed tonight?"

"That's a terrible line," Phil said, wriggling his way out from under Clint. "You should be ashamed."

"Okay," Clint agreed, because it had been a pretty shitty line. "But I still want in your bed."

"Clint..."

"Not to do anything," Clint added quickly. "You're tired as hell and frankly I am too and also it still kind of hurts to move but...but I'd like to be near you for a little longer."

The words felt torn out of him. It was the most honest thing he'd said in a while and for a second there was this terrible silence like Phil might say no. Like Phil might look at the hole Clint had ripped in himself to let that truth fall out and throw him right back out.

Phil didn't throw him right back out. Phil leant in and kissed him, quickly and tenderly, and then pulled back and nodded.

"I kind of want to stay close to you too. Come on."

They took turns in the bathroom and Clint retrieved his bag from the guest room. He changed out of his jeans for the worn track pants he usually slept in and climbed into Phil's bed. Lost himself in Phil's covers. Phil came into the room soon after and slid into the bed beside him. They whispered goodnight into each other's lips and turned the light out. Clint might have thought it would have been hard to sleep with Phil lying so close next to him but, in truth, he was out like a light.
Clint woke to the sound of raindrops with Phil pressed against his back. It was the best way he'd woken up in a very long time. Phil was deceptively well built under the clothes he wore to work - Clint would bet anything he'd look pretty damn impressive in a suit. He was also sporting some pretty nice morning wood that was pressing just so into Clint's ass and Clint maybe had a little problem himself.

The sound of rain intensified and Clint realised it was an alarm at about the same time Phil woke up, strong arms tightening around Clint and, yes, Clint could so get used to this. Dangerously used to this.

"Hey," Phil murmured into his neck and Clint smiled.

"Hey yourself," he said. "Feeling good this morning?" Phil chuckled against him and Clint grinned. He liked feeling Phil so close. Like the feeling of Phil's laugh when it was felt through his entire body.

"I am," Phil admitted, like there was any point denying it. "I think maybe we should talk about this."

"Later," Clint groaned, swatting at him. "I don't talk about shit until I've been awake for at least an hour. We'll talk after work."

"Okay," Phil said, squeezing Clint again. Clint considered for a second and then rolled over, capturing Phil's lips in a quick kiss. Phil hummed against his lips and brought one lazy hand up to the dip of Clint's back and if Clint moved just a little he'd be able to brush his cock against Phil's hip and damn that was tempting. He got the impression it wouldn't be difficult to convince Phil to stay here in bed with him a little longer but they'd probably both regret it if he did. Things to do.

Instead he pulled away, leaving Phil to fiddle with his phone and get the alarm turned off and went to wash up.

He used Phil's soap not because he had to but because this way he'd smell a little like Phil all day. He liked that idea. A kind of subtle belonging. He knew when he was thinking things like that he was in trouble but he did.

When he stumbled out of the bathroom in a new t-shirt and the same old jeans Phil was already making breakfast. Something with bacon if the smell was anything to go by.

"Hey," he said, stopping in the door and leaning on the frame. Phil hadn't bothered getting fully dressed and was just wearing a pair of low slung sweat pants. He was studying the pan of bacon intently and he looked so...the man looked fucking cute. Clint knew he shouldn't be thinking that about a grown man with muscles like Phil had but he did.

"I'm making breakfast," Phil said, like it wasn't obvious. "Hope you like bacon."

"I love bacon," Clint assured him. "I love it so much you should let me look after it while you go clean up." As he said it he walked across the room so he was able to end the sentence by giving Phil a quick kiss on his cheek and take the pan. Phil blinked at him for a second and then smiled and headed out of the room. While he was gone Clint took the time to flip on the coffee maker for Phil. Clearly he needed it.
He tried not to dwell on how weirdly domestic the entire thing was. That way was madness and he didn't need any more of that in his life. It was just...a holiday. That’s what this was. It wasn't real life, it was a brief break to hang back and spend time playing house and then he'd get back on with real life.

Phil came back in having properly dressed himself for the day and apparently woken up a little. He still accepted his pot of coffee and his bacon happily, leaning in to give Clint another little kiss. Clint had never been on holiday, never had a holiday before this, but if they involved so many stolen little kisses and sleepy crinkles around eyes and hands laid on his knee under the breakfast table he thought he could stand to take a few more.

"Hey," he said, squeezing Phil's hand where it was resting on his knee. "You mind if I use your washing machine today?"

"Knock yourself out," Phil said with a shrug. "I was going to offer anyway but I thought you might take offense at the implication you're smelly or something."

"Nope," Clint said with a grin. "I literally beg, not going to turn down luxuries like a washing machine when they're offered up to me. I'd better be careful, though. I think the dirt's all that's holding these jeans together."

"They are a little ripe," Phil admitted with a blush. "I'm guessing you don't have another pair to change into?"

"Not so much."

"Well, you can borrow some sweats?" Phil offered. "Or wait until Sunday and spend the day in your underwear."

Those were both actually really tempting but, on balance, Clint went and helped himself to a pair of Phil's sweats before loading up the washing machine. Vacations were nice but he knew he'd have to go 'home' after, probably sooner than he'd like, so better to take no chances. There was also something weirdly intimate about wearing someone else's clothes. He helped himself to a t-shirt too so he could wash everything he owned. It was a little tight but it'd do. If the way Phil eyed him when he came back though was anything to go by it'd more than just do.

While he was loading the washing machine Phil disappeared downstairs. Clint finished up and then headed down after him.

When he came through into the kitchen Phil had already gone, presumably to set up the front of the shop, but Melinda was there. Melinda was also looking decidedly threatening and she made eye contact with him so he figured he was in trouble.

"Clint," she said, her tone low and dangerous. Yeah, big trouble. He hoped she wasn't secretly in love with Phil or something. He didn't want her to try to kill him to protect Phil's honour.

"Good morning," he said. She made a head gesture for him to follow and then headed towards the back of the room. He waited for a second and then went after her. A weaker man would have run to Phil to delay the inevitable but he knew it was better to just get it over with.

"Look," he said, coming to stand beside her. "I know you have a problem with me and I get it but I'm not going to be around for long. Can't we just be at peace until then?"

"The fact that you're not intending to be around for long is precisely what worries me," Melinda said, meeting his eye. "Look, I know I can't tell you to stop what you're doing, Phil would hate for
me to even try, but you need to know some things about Phil. Mostly, you need to know that Phil is an idiot. Phil is precisely the kind of idiot that would take in a wandering guitarist and then fall in love with him. That would be you. Phil is the kind of man who trusts at first sight even when he shouldn't. He's quick to withdraw if people hurt him and generally he has brilliant instincts but he has been hurt before. Every employee in this shop was hired the first time they came in here because Phil saw something in them and he'd be heartbroken if they left. You see what I'm saying."

"I can't stay," he said. "Moving about, that's who I am. Phil knows that. I'll make sure he knows it before we do anything."

"Isn't it too late for that?"

"We just slept," Clint said with a roll of his eyes. "Phil found me outside in the rain and brought me in. It's...it's something but it's not all that yet. He could still walk away."

"He can't," Melinda said with a sigh. "Though I suppose at least you're intending to talk to him. Look, just remember that when you go some of us will still be here dealing with the fall out."

Clint didn't know what to say to that and Melinda was apparently done. He'd thought of how it was going to upset him to go but, selfish shit he was, he hadn't been thinking about Phil. Maybe Melinda had a point and he should go upstairs, grab his things and go now before he got in too deep.

But...damnit but that idea hurt. He didn't want to go, he wanted to stay and see what they could be. Phil Coulson was an adult and he was perfectly capable of making his own decisions. If Melinda couldn't see that then it wasn't on him.

Apparently she was a mind reader now because she rolled her eyes, pushing off the counter and heading back to work. Clint went to find his guitar and set up for the day. Maybe Melinda had a point but he hadn't got where he was in life by being cautious and, more than anything, he wanted to see what he and Phil could be together. He got the impression it would be awesome.

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Friday was apparently a busy day in a coffee shop. People needed that extra boost in the morning or something. Clint played through the morning rush and did better than he had in any morning rush so far. He'd watched Phil through a disturbing amount of it as Phil made coffee. He was wonderfully competent and Clint now apparently found that sexy. He wasn't sure what that said about him but there it was.

He played right through to lunch time, taking a few requests and doing a few covers. The doe-eyed girl from a few days ago was back and he was nice and polite to her, but distant. After all, he wouldn't have been interested anyway but he had something better lined up.

He'd probably have gone on playing right through lunch but his throat was hurting and apparently Jemma was psychic now as, as soon as Skye came in for her lunch shift, she separated off and came over to him with a glass of ice water and damn but he liked playing here when they took such good care of him.

"Thanks for this," he said, taking the glass from Jemma. "Really need it today."

"Fridays are always busy," she said, grabbing a seat next to him. "If you're here for any length of time you'll get used to it." Clint wasn't planning on being there for any length of time but he didn't want to let Jemma know that. She seemed better equipped to cope with instability than some of the
people who worked here but still...

"Is Skye okay?" he asked, watching her behind the counter. She'd seemed fine yesterday but she wouldn't exactly tell him if she wasn't good.

"Why do you ask?" Jemma asked, nervous. She glanced over her shoulder at Skye and, yeah, something wasn't exactly right.

"We went out the other night," he said, that much was common knowledge. The rest...but he couldn't necessarily help Skye and maybe Jemma would be in a better position so he was better telling her. "She maybe got a bit emotional, told me something. Just wanted to make sure she was okay. Figured you'd know since you're here friend."

"Yes," Jemma said, suddenly a little flustered and Clint wondered what that was about. "I mean, we're good friends. She didn't mention anything though. I just...did she tell you she's not a student?"

"She's not?" Clint asked, shocked. He glanced past Jemma to see her then away again quickly so she didn't get suspicious. He ran through their conversation in his head and suddenly, yeah, it made sense where it hadn't before. She'd talked about touring - looking for her dad. She'd never mentioned getting into school. Damn, he wondered if Phil knew about that.

"We don't think she is, anyway," Jemma said, biting her lip. "It's just...for a while we had a study group and she always blew that off and Fitz looked for her in the university system and he couldn't find her and she's really cagy about having people back to her place and she never tells anyone her major unless they pester her and it's just suspicious, that's all," Jemma admitted, her voice dropping low. "We worry about her."

"I can see why you worry," Clint said, nice and neutral. Neither confirm or deny. "That's not what she told me. I'm not going to break her confidence anyway, I just wanted to know if she seemed okay to you."

"Skye always seems okay," Jemma said, turning to watch Skye. There was something in her posture, a lean forward or a tilt of the head, that spoke to him of something going on under the surface. Made him think what Jemma was saying wasn't all of what was happening. "It's what's going on under her smile that we can never seem to get a hold of."

"Yeah," Clint said with a sigh. "I mean, I can try and talk to her for you guys but honestly you probably don't want to rush her. Give her space and, when she's ready, she'll come to you."

"I hope so," Jemma said with a distant little sigh and, yes, definitely some emotions going on there. Not that Clint was going to get involved. He didn't do involved.

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The lunch rush was dying down enough that Clint fully expected Phil to appear any minute with some food for them. He'd be worried about the falling into a routine thing but, honestly, he was kind of over it. Something in him seemed to have settled without him noticing and accepted that, yes, he was going to sleep with Phil Coulson. No use fighting it now, might as well just sit back and accept it.

He was singing Crazy Love and watching people. A lot of the time when he sang he liked to focus in to make sure he didn't mess up but this song he knew so well. Natasha's song. Every song he wrote belonged to someone. He didn't always remember the names but he remembered the faces and the feelings.
Behind the counter Skye was dancing to his playing. She was trying desperately to get Grant to dance with her but he didn't seem interested. Jemma joined in instead and he couldn't help but grin at the two of them.

He knew Skye had some shit in her life. He knew she had her share of problems but, right then, dancing like that she was all soul.

That was when he knew he was going to write a song about her.

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"Shop's locked up," Clint said, slipping through into the kitchen. Phil was sat at the table with the books spread out in front of him which was where he'd been most of the day, honestly. Clint knew running a business was tough but he couldn't help but hate anything that gave Phil worry lines. That meant the books were clearly evil as Phil looked to be in the middle of nursing a migraine or something. He was stressed enough about whatever it was to hand his keys over to Clint without a thought to lock up and, sure, Clint wouldn't abuse that trust but...

"I'm just going to be a while longer," Phil said with a sigh, leaning back in his chair. Clint moved around behind him and lay his hands on Phil's shoulders, gently rubbing the tension out. He was doing a good job of it if the way Phil sighed and slumped into him was anything to go by. "You can go ahead and eat if you want."

"Not without you," Clint said. Letting Phil keep him was bad enough, he wasn't going to eat Phil's food alone while Phil sat there working. "In fact, let me make us something. I always take an age to cook anything so you'll probably be done by the time I make something edible."

"That's not a bad plan," Phil admitted, bringing his left hand up to hold Clint's where it lay on his shoulder. "You should sort your washing out first, though. The tumble dryer’s broken. If you push the sitting room window open there's a flat roof with a clothesline. It goes out there."

"Awesome," Clint said, leaning in to kiss Phil lightly on the forehead. "I'll do that."

He gathered his things as Phil went back to work, dumping every item of clothing he owned from the washing machine to a basket and hauling it out. The window did indeed slide up and open onto a flat roof area. It wasn't a giant space but it was big enough. Phil had obviously used it as a social space at one point as there were a couple of deck chairs and a fold out table stacked gathering dust
in a corner but other than the dead plants hanging around there was no other indication this was once a good place to spend time and, well, the washing line hanging across the space kind of killed it.

He hung his clothes quickly, looked around with a sigh and headed back in. It was a pity, it could be a good space.

Clint wandered back into the kitchen contemplating his options. He knew how to make exactly three dishes. Never having had a kitchen, that had always been enough. He could make a mean mac and cheese courtesy of the circus. There was a girl in Arizona who'd taken him in for a week and taught him to make chicken pot pie and then there was the Spanish exchange student in Washington who'd been homesick and had taught him to make a decent Spanish Tortilla - a kind of potato omelette. The weather was kind of oppressive today, somehow hotter in the wake of yesterday's rain. He didn't want the pasta or the pie, that left Tortilla. He could make a little one and some salad, something not too heavy.

It didn't take him long pottering around Phil's kitchen to realise the other man didn't own eggs. Not a problem, he had money in his pocket and if he was going to write a song about Skye he was going to be here for another week or so anyway.

"Hey, Phil," he asked, checking on the other things they'd need. "You're not allergic to eggs or anything?"

"No?" Phil said. Clint glanced over to see Phil watching him with a raised eyebrow. "You're making eggs?"

"I'm going to blow your egg eating mind. Then maybe something else later." Phil blushed at that and Clint laughed, leaning in for a quick kiss and then dodging out of the kitchen, grabbing the door key from the table as he went. Phil didn't shout after him so he presumed he was fine.

There was a convenience store just down the street so Clint ducked in there. It didn't take his long to find the things he needed - tortilla was pretty easy if you knew what you were doing. Which he was like 90% sure he did.

Then he spotted a sale sign and, working on what was more or less instinct, he headed over. He lived a lot of the time from things like this. Food just on the dangerous edge of its sell by date. Packages that were crushed and unattractive. Torn multipacks. He scanned quickly and picked up some not entirely suspicious looking tomatoes and a pack of doritos because he might snack. He didn't know. And then he stopped.

There were fucking Christmas lights. They kind that went on a tree. The kind that he'd never had as a kid. They were wedged at the back of the bottom shelf but he pulled them out. A couple of burst up boxes held together with tape. Blue. Blue fucking Christmas lights.

When he was a kid he'd loved these things. Everything seemed that little bit more magical when they were out. They used to hang them all over the place in the circus during the performances around Christmas and he'd feel like the entire shabby old big top had transformed into some kind of fairy tent. He used to dance around in the things pretending he was a magical kid on a magical adventure and nobody could hurt him.

At least he had done that until Barney, fucking Barney, had laughed at him. Told him he looked like a queer which Clint didn't understand then but knew it was an insult. Then he'd stopped dancing.
Well, fuck that. Fuck Barney and fuck the circus. He was a grown-ass man and he pretty much planned on fucking or being fucked by another grown-ass man tonight and they were here and they were broken and abandoned so they HAD to be for him. They had to. He sat down on the floor and pulled the money out of his pocket. He counted it out quickly. Food he needed first, then the Christmas lights. There was just enough, though he had to put his other discount finds back. He did it without pause. The Christmas lights were more important.

He knew he was being vaguely ridiculous but, somehow, it felt important.

The woman on the counter didn't even look surprised when he rang up his mish-mash of purchases. She just took his money, turning her nose up a little at the change, and let him leave.

He'd done it. It was stupid and ridiculous but he'd done it. He knew what he was going to do with them too. When he got back to the apartment he slipped out on the roof and started his plan. The clothesline was held up by a prop in the middle and by manipulating it a bit he moved it out so his clothes hung along the wall, making a curtain. Then it was easy to wind the Christmas lights out and string them along the line. The second strand went the other way from the window, wound into a trellis on the back wall. He moved the dead potted plants behind the washing and did his best to clear the floor without getting a broom to let Phil know he was up to something. He pulled out the table and chairs then flicked the switch to turn the lights on.

It was perfect.

He killed the lights again and headed back inside. Phil was still neck deep in paperwork so Clint worked quietly, chopping and frying until the tortilla had nothing left to do but cook and then he threw together a salad for them.

"That smells damn good," Phil said finally when Clint was nearly done, laying aside his papers. "Need me to clear the table?"

"Actually," Clint said, glancing at the door. "I've got something to show you."

As he said it he felt the same prick of nerves he always got before he played a song for the first time. They sensation of not knowing how this was going to work out. It was too late to back down now though. Phil was watching him and Clint wasn't a coward. He reached out and took Phil's hand, leading him through to the window. It was pretty dark out now and Phil looked confused until Clint flipped the switch and lead him out.

It wasn't much but it was closed in, private, and all lit up like christmas. A place for just the two of them, maybe. He scanned the space before he dared to look at Phil again, the soft smile on Phil's face saying he got it.

"You know," Phil said, softly, like this was a place you spoke quietly. "I've got a bunch of old cushions an aunt sent me in the spare room cupboard. I think they'd look great out here."

"Yeah, they would," Clint said, squeezing Phil's hand. Phil looked at him and there was something in his expression, something soft and vulnerable. Clint couldn't NOT kiss him when he looked like that. It'd be stupid to even try.

The cushions turned out to be overstuffed monstrosities that somehow seemed perfect outside in their little rooftop hideaway. Clint went back to get the food and by the time he got out again Phil had managed to drape a cloth on the table and spread a blanket on the floor, hiding the hard concrete.
"That smells delicious," Phil said, reaching for the plates. Clint handed Phil's over and took a second to arrange himself at the table.

"It's looking pretty good out here now," he commented, sitting himself down.

"All down to you," Phil said with a laugh. "When I first got this place Melinda and I used to eat lunch out here but, well, she got another job and I got busy. It's good to be out here again. It's a place with good memories."

"I'm sure we can managed to make some more if you want," Clint said with a laugh. Phil just rolled his eyes this time but he was smiling.

Sitting there with only the glow of the Christmas lights and the diffuse light from the living room leaking through the window it was strangely easy to talk. He talked about travelling, mostly. Nothing too deep, nothing too emotional. He'd been over most of the US though and Phil smiled at him and laughed at his jokes. In return, Phil told him some army stories. Clint was pretty sure they were select and sanitised but he still told them, tangling their fingers together there in the dark.

After a while they moved to sit on the cushions instead. Clint dragged his guitar out and played a few of the songs that he didn't play so much any more. He didn't have them written down, they'd been sealed away in notebooks of old, but he still knew them. He never really forgot a song.

He didn't know how late it was when Phil finally leaned in and kissed him properly but he was slow and sensual and it felt more like an acknowledgement of something they'd both known than any kind of confession.

Clint knew he should talk to Phil about the things he'd promised Melinda he'd say. They should have a conversation about how he was going to leave sooner rather than later. They should consider how they were going to feel in the morning. He didn't want to, though. He wanted to lay right here with Phil and pretend that real life didn't exist.

The kissing quickly turned into making out like a couple of teenagers who had only just found out what to do with themselves. It was slow and sensual and an end in itself, not a means to an end. Clint worked his hands inside Phil's shirt to stroke his back and Phil gripped his ass as the kissed deeper and deeper, losing themselves in each other's mouths.

Eventually, as things tend to, it became more. They didn't speak, didn't make a sound, but one of Phil's hands moved to pull down Clint's pants and Clint managed to peel Phil's shirt off entirely, exposing some interesting scarring he'd ask about later, maybe. Or maybe he'd leave it until Phil was ready to tell him.

Phil lost his own pants and Clint wrapped his hand around both of them while Phil's hands went back to his ass. He'd always loved people grabbing his ass. Their kisses became wetter. Less finesse, more abandon as Clint jerked them slowly. He eventually let go and they rutted against each other like teenagers in the soft blue light. Phil came first, Clint soon after. They kissed all the way through, not even stopping in the afterglow.

After that it seemed almost sacrilege to break the quiet that had settled on them. They both stripped and, without a word, headed in. Phil took the plates, Clint turned off the lights. They both used the bathroom as quietly as they could and met again at the bedroom door.

Without talking or turning the lights on they went together to the bed and slid naked under the covers. After a little rearranging Clint ended with his head pillowed on Phil's shoulder, Phil's arm slung around his shoulder and his arm over Phil, keeping him close and safe.
It was the best he'd felt in years.
Saturday was apparently quiet day at the coffee shop. Clint had honestly forgotten that weekends were a thing until he realised the normal morning rush wasn't coming by. He didn't mind. It worked pretty well for him actually since he was honestly still a little mind blown by the weird way that now seemed to be coming together between him and Phil, and some time to process was nice.

It also meant that the shop was a lot less busy than normal so by midmorning when it became obvious that he wasn't going to make much money he gave up and went to lean against the counter and watch Skye make coffee.

"Hey," she said when she noticed him watching. "You becoming a stalker now or something?"

"Definitely not," Clint said with a laugh. "Is it always this dead in here on a Saturday?"

"Pretty much," Skye said with a shrug. "I'm not sure why Phil keeps us open, honestly. I mean, it's probably more for us. Me, Leo and Jemma make up some hours on a Saturday. We probably make enough to cover that but not a lot more."

"Phil taking care of you?"

"As always. It's probably a bit of a waste for you though. I'd say you should go do something more interesting but I suspect Phil's busy. Oh, also, about that..."

"I already got a shovel talk from Melinda," Clint interrupted. "No offense but she's scarier than you."

"That's okay, I was only going to threaten you with her anyway. You're right, she is scary."

"Very." Clint agreed. "So, since Phil's busy and we're not, I vote we exchange increasingly outlandish travel stories."

"Oh hell yes," Skye said with a grin. And so they did. It turned out that Skye had either had some pretty awesome adventures or was a very good liar. Either way she was a good story teller so he didn't mind. In return for her stories he shared a few of his own including the story of his short lived marriage. It felt fair to give her a secret of his since he had one of hers. Not that Bobbi was really a secret, just something he'd prefer not to talk about.

Their conversation also made it pretty clear to him that there was at least some basis to Jemma and Leo's fear that she wasn't a student. She didn't talk about, well, anything educational. No high school break dropped in as a background to a story. No hot boy she sat next to in Chemistry as a side character. He was beginning to suspect they might have had more in common than he first thought.

If only there was a polite way to ask someone if they were a high school dropout.

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"So," Jemma said, sliding into the chair across the table from him and immediately folding her hands in front of her in an overly formal way. Clint looked up for on his guitar but kept strumming. Had been playing with some melodies for Skye's song. Normally he'd stop playing if someone came over to talk to him but Jemma looked nervous enough already without him risking making
her more self conscious. "I just want to talk to you about something and I'd appreciate it not getting back to, well, anyone. Since you didn't tell me whatever it was Skye told you the other night you're probably trustworthy but you can tell me to leave if I'm being invasive."

"Okay," Clint said, strumming along quietly. "Talk to me."

"Okay," Jemma said, taking a deep breath. "I think I might be a little bit gay."

"Okay," Clint said, raising an eyebrow. "You want me to tell you that these guys aren't going to care and will care about you anyway because I think you know that already."

"Yes," Jemma said with a flush. "It's more that, well, I don't know how to deal with it. I'm honestly not sure what I'm expecting you to say to me but the whole thing seems so strange. I think half the world thinks I'm going to marry Leo and, please don't misunderstand, I love Leo but I love him like a brother. But, well, I'd feel vaguely ridiculous telling people I'm bisexual if I'm not even dating a girl and they'll probably all still just think I'm going to marry Leo so why bother but...it's all just a mess..."

"Hey, Clint said, leaning forward to lay a hand on her shoulder. "It's not ridiculous. It's a part of you, it's natural that you'd want people to know about it."

"I suppose I just feel ridiculous," she said in with a sigh. "Like, how do I even start the conversation? Hello, nice weather today and also I feel as attracted to women as men."

"If that's what you want to do," Clint said with a shrug. "I've gotta tell you, Jemma, my life didn't lead to pretty coming out stories so I don't have a lot to share with you. I mean, if I meet a man I like I hit on him and if I don't then the people in my life at that time will probably never know and I'm always on the move..."

"Never let anyone close enough that it matters if you lose them?"

"There's some of that in there," Clint admitted. "I guess the only real coming out story I have is my brother and I wouldn't suggest you copy that. He walked in on me in a...compromising position." He'd had another man's cock ball-deep in his ass but he thought Jemma might faint if he used that language so he didn't.

"That must have been terribly embarrassing," Jemma said, a look of genuine shock on her face. He had to laugh because, yeah. Barney had kicked the guy he's been fucking's ass then kicked Clint's ass and he hadn't calmed down enough for Clint to actually talk to him for days.

"Yeah," he said. "So just keep in mind that whatever happens with you, it won't be as bad as that."

"I'll remember that," Jemma said with a little smile.

"Any time," Clint replied, surprised to find that he meant it.

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That afternoon, Clint watched Leo with Jemma and he could see pretty quickly why, exactly, everyone seemed to think they were going to end up together. He wasn't going to be the one to break it to either of them, though. Leo watched her like a love-sick puppy when he thought nobody was watching. It would have been almost sweet if Clint didn't know she was categorically uninterested.

At least Leo didn't seem like the type who'd suddenly become entitled when he did find out -
though you never knew. Clint had known some pretty decent seeming guys who'd turned nasty when they were turned down. Particularly the kind who were into quietly pining after the object of their desire from afar.

Fuck but he was going to have to say something about it. This was why he hated ended up staying too long. He hated being involved in people's problems but he just couldn't stay out of them.

Luckily, once Leo was behind the counter and working Jemma didn't stick around for long. She slipped out leaving Clint with Leo and a mostly empty coffee shop. If he was going to say something it was now or never.

Leo looked nervous when he stopped playing and went to approach the counter, shifting in place and pointedly not looking over. Great. Clint could already see this was going to go brilliantly. Of course he'd end up having to have this talk with a guy who already didn't like him.

"Hey," he said, leaning on the counter. "Would you mind getting me a glass of ice water."

"Oh, of course not," Leo said, scrambling quickly for the glass. Clint waited quietly as he filled it and dumped some ice in. He took a long sip while Leo fussed with a cloth on the counter. He kept trying to think of a less hurtful way to say this but, in the end, there was no less hurtful way to say this.

"Look," he said, setting the cup down and leaning over the counter. "I've just spoken to Jemma. Or, well, I spoke to her earlier. And I was kind of watching the two of you after and it looked a little like you had feelings for her, you know..." He wanted to kick himself in the face because, as conversation openers went, it was a mess. Apparently, though, Leo got what he meant as he sighed and put his cloth down, turning to look at Clint properly for the first time.

"Am I that obvious?" he asked, eyes big and forlorn. "I mean, I know I'm not subtle but if even a stranger can tell..."

"I only noticed when I started looking," Clint assured him. "I just...You know she's not interested?"

"Yeah, I know," Leo said with a tense nod. "I mean, I have for a while. She was always way above my league. A pipe dream. But we talked a couple of months ago. Or she talked, anyway. She apparently thinks the entire idea is ridiculous and I'm not even a bit her type, which I can kind of see but...she didn't mean it meanly. I think she thought I agreed..."

"Still sucks," Clint said, trying to hide his relief. If Leo already knew then maybe he wouldn't be a dick about the entire thing.

"Yeah, it does," Leo agreed. "But what can I do if she doesn't love me? Anyway, it doesn't matter. We were friends first and I'll still be her friend. Not in like a creepy stalker way but...I can't help pining for a little, but it'll get better."

"It will," Clint agreed. "Love's a bitch. You can feel so damn overwhelmed by it that you think you're never going to escape but suddenly everything changes and...well...you will get over her in time. I'd say you're taking it pretty well."

"Thanks," Leo said, even daring to give Clint a little closed mouth smile. "You're not going to tell her, are you?"

"Not a word," Clint promised.
"You know," Clint said, leaning back against the door frame. "I'm going to start getting jealous of those books soon."

"Sorry," Phil said without looking up. "It's just that I need to get this in order. I swear I'm not normally so boring. I normally have hobbies and spend time actually running my shop and things. At the moment it's just..."

"Hey, I still think you're pretty interesting," Clint said, coming into the room. He glanced down at the books. Accounts again. Great. Clint's ego would hurt from getting blown off for accounts so much but he had a way of fixing this. After all, he needed to get Phil away from those books or he was going to have to cook again and it would all end in tragedy.

When he got in range Phil reached out and took his hand, pulling it up to his lips and kissing it. Clint let him before leaning in to claim a proper, deep kiss on the lips. Phil opened for him with a kind of desperation that Clint associated with not having done this in a while. Clint really didn't want to know how much that was true. He couldn't imagine how anyone wouldn't want Phil.

"I've got a plan," Clint said, kneeling quickly between Phil's knees. He leant forward before Phil could protest, mouthing at Phil's cock through the soft cotton of his slacks. How could Clint not fall for a man who'd wear slacks just to do accounts in his own kitchen all day. Phil was soft but Clint knew he could change that quickly enough. He reached up and unfastened the slacks, sliding them down and then reaching into Phil's underwear to pull him out.

Clint hadn't had a chance to look at Phil last night. Not really. Not this close, anyway. He had a nice cock. Cut, long enough without being too long. Not of excessive width. Average, maybe. A lot about Phil looked averager on the surface though and Clint had already found out there was more underneath.

He reached forward and took Phil's soft cock in his mouth. Phil gasped and started to grow harder right away which, well, biological reaction but Clint still couldn't help but feel a little proud. He gave an experimental suck and bobbed his head a little, moving his hand down to cradle Phil's balls. He had a million things he wanted to do to this man but he loved sucking cock and right now he wanted to choke on Phil. Wanted it so badly.

He kept it simple for now, bobbing his head and keeping a gentle suction, stopping now and then to run his tongue over everything he could reach. Nothing fancy but it seemed to be more than enough for Phil who was gasping above him like he'd never had his cock sucked before. Clint was growing hard in his own worn jeans but that would wait until he'd taken care of Phil.

He didn't get far, though, before Phil went gently pulling him off. He went because, well, it's impolite to keep sucking a man's dick when they've asked you to stop, but he didn't want to. He really didn't want to. He sprawled back on the floor and looked up at Phil. Phil had his eyes shut and his head rolled back and was apparently struggling for some kind of control. When he opened his eyes his pupils were wide and it was the hottest thing Clint had ever seen.

"Not that I wasn't enjoying that," Phil said, finally. His voice was thick. "I just...I'm not young, Clint. If I come now then that's it for tonight and that's not what I want for us. I'm not an idiot, I know you won't be here much longer and before you go I want to take you to bed properly so..."

"Hey," Clint said, reaching up to lay a hand on Phil's knee. "I'm not going tomorrow. I'm not going on Monday. Other than anything else I don't have the money yet but, even if I did, I'm not ready yet. We've got some time, at least. We don't need to rush."

"Are you saying you don't want to go to bed with me?" Phil asked, giving the little half smile he
"Want that so much," Clint admitted. "I want to suck your cock too, though..."

"How about that," Phil said, reaching down to lay his hand on top of Clint's. It was somehow an intimate gesture, making them conspirators. "Tomorrow, I don't work. The shop isn't open, I'll put the books away and, for one day, we'll hide. Just you and me. You can suck my cock, I can suck yours. We'll take our time. But tonight...I just feel like if I don't we'll regret it."

"You really want to fuck me that bad?"

"Or for you to fuck me," Phil said with a shrug and damn but why hadn't Clint thought of that. He should have but, honestly, he was normally the partner who took it when he was with a guy. But the thought of slowly taking Phil to pieces...

"How's this," Clint said, trying to sound reasonable. "Tonight, you can do what you want to me. Fuck me however you want. Tomorrow I get to do whatever I want to you."

"Within reason," Phil said, raising an eyebrow. Clint rolled his eyes because, yes, of course, within reason.

"I'll always stop if you ask me too," he said, for clarity's sake. "And I expect the same, of course. I just meant that tonight is for fucking me and tomorrow is for fucking you."

"Nice schedule," Phil said, squeezing his hand. "I like it. Now move. I need to finish this and we need to eat before we do anything else."

"Spoiling my fun," Clint grumbled peeling himself off the floor. He was still hard but, with a sigh, he tucked himself back in. It'd go away and it'd be worth the wait if Phil fucked him later. "I've gotta warn you, I kind of exhausted my culinary skills last night."

"There's a pizza place on the corner," Phil said, grabbing his wallet and throwing it over. "I like any vegetables but no meat. Get whatever you want for you."

"Can do," Clint said, pocketing the wallet and heading out into the street.

It didn't take long to find food and get back and, like Phil had promised, by the time he got back work was gone and Phil'd headed back out onto the roof, setting it up for them to eat out there. It felt a little less intimate without their laundry hanging all around but he could cope with that. There was still something intimate about sitting there together on the battered garden furniture, legs pressed together, talking quietly as they ate.

And then the pizza was finished, or as good as, and Phil took his hand. Clint felt something in him relax he hadn't known was tense. Phil was serious about this.

They grabbed the pizza boxes, threw them away, and Phil lead him quietly to the bedroom.

It quickly became evident that Phil really did intend to do this right. Clint was used to it being quick and hard with guys but Phil didn't want that for tonight, that was obvious. He laid Clint out on the bed and kissed him like he had all the time in the world. Like they had nothing better to do for the next ten years but lay there and kiss.

It didn't take long for Clint to relax into the mattress, his limbs soft and loose, the tension that came with rough sex bleeding out of him. Phil was soft and tender and thorough. He peeled Clint's clothes away and it felt like he really did kiss every inch of skin. Clint had met people who said...
they wanted to do that to him before but never anyone who actually did it. He was almost ready to come before Phil was even half finished with him but somehow he held on.

Phil stripped them both, covered Clint with kisses, with his body. He rolled Clint on to his side and opened him slowly while whispering about how beautiful Clint was like this and about how much he'd wanted him from the first moment he'd seen him. How he wanted to just shut the door and forget the world and keep them both here forever. It was the kind of talk Clint's higher brain function would assure him was dangerous but his higher brain had stopped working a while ago.

When Phil finally pushed into him he was so open and so ready it was easy. Easy and wonderful and it had never felt like this with a guy before. He'd never felt so damn taken care of but every time he'd tried to help Phil had gently moved Clint's hands away and reminded him this was his turn and Clint had never felt so...so loved.

That was the only word for it. Loved.

It didn't take long once Phil was rocking inside him. Clint came with a sob and a gasp and Phil gently fucked him right through it until he came too and then they lay there in each other's arms quietly, too exhausted to digest what had just happened.

Clint fell asleep like that - safe and warm and happy and loved - for the first time in a very long time.
"Phil, I know you're in there. Open your damn door!"

"Why is she so loud?" Clint grumbled, trying to hide his face in Phil's armpit. It wasn't exactly a great place to hide it but worth it for the way Phil huffed in amusement.

"It must be lunch time, Phil said, trying to slide away to get out of the bed. Clint had foiled every attempt so far but the clatter of stones against glass told him he'd better let Phil win this time or they'd be dealing with some broken windows.

"You always have employees over for lunch on Sunday?" he grumbled as Phil pulled away. Apparently Phil was feeling sadistic as he took the sheets with him, leaving Clint naked and cold on the bed.

"Only Skye," Phil said. He trailed over to the window with his blankets wrapped around him like a cape and made a rude gesture at her. "Don't ask me why. I just...I worry about her, I guess. She was really thin when I met her and now she's still too thin so I don't feel as much of an urge to feed her up but I'm stuck with it.

"There are worse things to be stuck with," Clint admitted, prying himself off the mattress. "You gonna go let her in?"

"Once I'm dressed," Phil said, immediately foiling his own plan by stopping to give Clint another kiss. Clint would have happily lured him back to bed but he didn't want to mess up Phil's routines as much as anything. Would be easier for Phil when Clint was gone if he still had his routines.

"Hurry up then," Clint grumbled, pushing Phil away and climbing out of bed. "I guess I should get dressed too. I can head out for a couple of hours and when I get back..."

"Wait, why are you heading out now?" Phil asked, frowning. Clint rolled his eyes.

"To give you two space?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Phil said. "It's only a lunch."

Clint doubted Skye saw it as only a lunch but he couldn't tell Phil that without giving her away and he wasn't going to do that. Instead he just went about quietly getting the things he'd need to leave in a hurry when Skye gave him an excuse.

He came through to the living room just as Skye was coming up the stairs with Phil. Any thought he'd had that he might be able to escape was quickly put to bed when Skye beamed at him and headed over, throwing her arms around his neck. He gave in to the hug with what he thought of as grace. It wasn't like he really wanted to escape anyway.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Skye said in a tone that clearly implied that was exactly what she'd expected.

"Yeah, yeah," Clint said, rolling his eyes. "What's for lunch? Do you at least make lunch since you're interrupting?"

"I can go," she said with a strange kind of nonchalance that was meant to hide the fact she was upset. Clint rolled his eyes and reached over to ruffle her hair.
"Don't be an idiot," he said. "You know I don't mean it. Come on, Phil can cook for us both."

"Oh, thank you," Phil said but he had a fond smile so Clint took it that he wasn't in trouble. "Do pancakes work?"

"Pancakes always work," Clint said.

The weirdest thing about the entire meal was that it wasn't weird. It was easy. He knew he was the interloper here and he should have felt it but the truth was he didn't. He felt at home. Maybe he didn't know much about these people really but he knew parts of them and they knew parts of him and what more could you ask?

He was also quite enjoying learning more about them. He got the idea that for all Phil gave the impression of being a bit of an open book there were as many secrets in his smile as there were in Skye's. As there were in his. Clint wished he had time to chase them all down.

"You know," Phil said when their plates were empty and their bellies full. "We should show her the roof."

Clint paused for a second because in his mind the roof was their space. A place where they could go to get away from all these stresses if only for a short time. An oasis. This was Skye, though. Not a stranger. There was no problem sharing it with Skye.

"Sure. Follow me, my lady."

Skye stood with a roll of her eyes and then they were out on the roof. In the light of day it seemed a little shabby. The cushions were faded and the christmas lights childish. Skye looked around and smiled in approval anyway tough Clint felt almost embarrassed to be showing her this space without the magic.

"It looks better at night," Phil said, the discomfort in his tone making it clear he was seeing much the same thing Clint was.

"It's nice," Skye insisted. "Cosy. You know, you should get some plants out here. That'd make it feel nicer."

"That's not a bad idea," Clint admitted. A little greenery could only help.

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"Okay, maybe buying plants was a little more involved than I'd anticipated," Clint said, moving the pink potted flower a little to the left again. It was possible they'd got a little carried away at the gardening centre. The thing was, as it turned out, none of them had ever been plant shopping before and learning together had been kind of addictive, if expensive and time consuming. The roof was now a riot of color and it did look much better than it had before.

"Me too," Phil said, looking around a little sheepishly. "This is a bit overboard isn't it?"

"Not if you like it," Clint assured him. "It's your roof after all."

"I like it," Phil said. "I can use this space again. I've kind of got to admit, though, that once Skye was out here it seemed strange. I'm not sure I like sharing this space when you made it for us. Feels like it should just be ours."

"It's your roof," Clint said again, trying not to grin in pleasure at Phil agreeing with him. Of course
he wanted Phil to enjoy this space with other people but only after Clint has moved on. Maybe he just wanted something of himself left here. Wanted Phil to walk out here months from now and remember Clint with a smile.

He knew it was fundamentally selfish to want to go but also to stay but, well, sometimes he was selfish.

“It’s our roof,” Phil said with a roll of his eyes. “And yes, I know you might not be here to enjoy it as long as I will but can we not get into that now, please? For now, this makes me happy. It made Skye happy.”

“Yeah,” Clint agreed with a grin, letting it go. Skye had been very happy to go shopping with them. Honestly, half of the plants on the roof had been purchased not because Phil or Clint had wanted them but because Skye had thought they’d be cool. Clint was okay with that. “You’re close with her?”

“Yeah,” Phil said with a casual shrug that wasn’t followed through in the tightness around his eyes. “She’s...I don’t know. There’s something about that kid.”

“I know,” Clint said with a grin. “She kind of gets under your skin, doesn’t she? I think it’s the kind of quiet optimism. Like, she’s not in your face about it but she thinks everything’s going to come out good.”

“Yeah,” Phil said. “Though I’m not too sure where she gets that from. It doesn’t seem to have been true for her in the past.”

“No,” Clint agreed. “I mean, when we went out that night drinking and I got punched in the face for her we talked a little. Kid’s had it hard. Doesn’t know a lot about her family, I guess she’s a bit like me that way.” He sat down on the cushions with a sigh. Phil followed him, leaning quietly against Clint and giving him space to go on if he wanted to. Clint knew that if he let it drop, Phil would too. He didn’t want to let it drop.

“I was an orphan,” he said, instead. “I mean, shit, you probably worked that out. Guys who live hand to mouth don’t normally come from stable families and I’m really just a glorified hobo.”

“You’re not,” Phil protested. Clint grabbed the other man’s hand, holding it tight as though he could pass this story through skin and not words.

“I am,” he said. “If I was an artist like I make out I’d be playing in clubs, trying to find a record deal. I’m happy riding the buses and playing my guitar until my voice cuts out.”

“Your songs are beautiful,” Phil said, sounding a little hopeless. Sounding like he’d lose something it he let this go but Clint couldn’t let him win this one. He’d thought maybe he was an artist when he started out but he’d learnt pretty quickly that he was just a guy with a talent that sometimes made him a little money but often didn’t.

“My family were shit even before they died,” Clint said. “I mean, my dad was an abusive asshole. He hated us all and I could never get it through my thick skull to stop standing up to him to protect my mom. She was...I don’t know. As a kid I thought she was the prettiest woman in the world and she hung the moon and stars. I could never understand how she’d let him do that. She used to bandage me up and tell me not to draw attention to myself. To be more like my big brother. To stay quiet and out of the way. Could never manage that. Always been an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Phil protested and Clint couldn’t help but laugh.
“Just...wait to hear my whole damn abbreviated life story before you laugh at me, okay?”

“Sure,” Phil agreed, but he reclaimed his hand and looped it around Clint’s shoulders, pulling him in closer. Clint resisted for half a second before giving in and leaning properly against Phil, laying his head on Phil’s chest and closing his eyes. It was easier to say if he didn’t have to look, anyway.

“So, my dad was an asshole, my mom wouldn’t leave, my brother was always the smart one. Mom and dad died in a car accident. We got shunted from foster home to foster home for a bit and then Barney, he came up with this fucking stupid idea of joining the circus. I mean, we were kids. We thought that was what you did when you run away and a circus came through. Nobody was looking after us too closely - it was a joke to slip away.

“The circus, fuck knows why they didn’t just throw us out when they found in stowing away. I don’t know what Barney said to Carson but they took us in. Let us work. Taught us some things. We had to hide when anyone not from the circus came around or they’d start asking questions. We kind of raised ourselves. Barney got taken on by the guy who did all the knife throwing and trick shooting and stuff. That stuff was cool but I was too young. Inherited a guitar from someone who came and didn’t stay and taught myself to play.

“It wasn’t...I mean, it wasn’t the worst childhood. We didn’t starve though I can’t say I never went to bed hungry but I normally had a bed even if it was a corner of floor. Nobody hit us, mostly. It wasn’t a bad life. Then my brother and his mentor started getting into some illegal shit. They asked me to play lookout. I agreed like an idiot. Set up playing guitar on a street corner. The police got them. And me. Figured out I didn’t have anything to do with it and let me go eventually but the circus was gone by then and, well, I’ve been on the streets since. Nowhere to go if you’re 20 and your only home just left without you. Couldn't get a job or an apartment but I’ve always had my guitar.”

“How old are you?” Phil asked, running a hand up and down his back. It was nice. People were generally drawing away by this part of the story where they realised he was circus trash with no prospects.

“Thirty-two,” he said. “Doesn’t matter how long I’ve been doing this though. My point is I know what it’s like to come from shit and have shit. I don’t want that kid to end up with a life like I have. She deserves better than that. She deserves a family.”

That sat there for a second between them. Clint let his thoughts wander. He wondered how he’d have turned out if he’d had someone to look after him instead of being allowed to drift. It someone, anyone, had looked at him and seen something worth saving. Wasn’t worth thinking about, didn’t happen.

“Sk ye thinks I’m her dad, doesn’t she?”

Clint started, surprised, and nodded before he was even thinking. Phil let out a frustrated little sigh and shook his head.

“You sure you’re not? She’s a good kid.”

“I know she’s a good kid,” Phil said. “I’d be proud of her if she was mine. Hell, I am proud of her. She’s not, though. I’ve never had sex with a woman.”

“What, never?” Clint asked, wrinkling his nose. “Damn but woman are awesome.”

“I happen to think men are pretty awesome,” Phil said, amused. Clint just rolled his eyes.
“Yeah, but women. I mean, I’m glad I like both. Doesn’t limit me. I tend to go for women more but some guys...I mean, I’m not telling you I’m a straight dude who’s sleeping with you for the bed. I know you’d take me in anyway but there’s something about you. You’re a pretty awesome guy.”

“Thanks,” Phil said, dropping a kiss on his hair. “You’re pretty awesome too. I’ve just...women have never appealed. I thought about it a few times, thought about having a family, but it seems like life’s too short to lie to yourself. I mean, I spent years in the army lying to everyone else - myself was the only person I could be true to.”

“I guess,” Clint said with a shrug. “So, no secret illegitimate children?”

“Nope,” Phil said, popping the p. “Guess I’m going to have to talk to her about it and stop avoiding the topic now.”

“Probably,” Clint agreed. “I mean, it’ll suck for her to know but it’ll suck for her to be strung along too.”

“Yeah,” Phil said, quietly. “Anyway, I should tell you a story about me since we’re sharing.”

“You don’t need to,” Clint said. “It wasn’t...I wasn’t trying to make you. I just wanted you to understand.”

“I know. But you gave me a gift and I want to give one back. Mine isn’t as long and interesting but maybe you’ll like it anyway.”

“I’m sure I will,” Clint said, settling down. He hadn’t rolled his entire life story out often, quickly learnt it didn’t get him anywhere good when he did. He’d never had the favour returned before but, if Phil wanted to, he wasn’t going to complain.

“So, I grew up in the midwest in the suburbs. My family were pretty unremarkable. We weren’t a close family. All kind of introverted. My mother crocheted those lace doily things. She used to cover the house with them. My dad was a fisherman by passion if not trade. He used to take me with him and we’d sit for hours watching our rods stay still and not talking.

“My dad died when I was 16. It was...somewhat formative. I’d been going to go to college, I ended up messing up my GPA and deciding the join the army in his honor. They almost didn’t take me but I got in.

“Spent a lot of years trying to be the perfect little soldier. Trying to fit in. Trying to be a man like my dad was. Then, well, there was this kid. Little girl, nine, maybe. I didn’t ever know her name but she was missing two front teeth and always waved when we went past. In the end there wasn’t enough of her to put in a body bag. I had some thoughts, then. Got lost in myself a bit but the conclusion I came to in the end was that life was too short. I stopped trying to be my dad and started trying to find me.

“The army’s about as good a place as you’d expect for self-discovery. I didn’t kiss anyone until I was 26. But I got to travel a lot. Saw a lot of beautiful places even if it was in less than ideal circumstances. Met Melinda, made some friends. I’d just come to the conclusion that I was going to have to leave the army, that maybe I shouldn’t have joined, when I got shot in the leg.

“It was a mess, at the time. Mostly healed now, though there’s still a scar and it sometimes bothers me in the cold. I didn’t want to go back to my mom’s to recover so Melinda ended up quitting to stay with me. She’s kind of like a sister. I got the idea for this place when I was convalescing. A place where I could support myself and help others. Everyone here’s here for a reason. Melinda’s
the only family I care for. Grant’s ex-army and needs my help. Fitz and Simmons are both far away from anyone and everyone who might help them and Skye...Skye’s lost. She needed someone and, well, I wish I was her dad…”

“Maybe that’s enough,” Clint said, pulling back to look Phil in the eyes. “You should talk to her.”

“I will,” Phil promised. “Though not now. Give me a few days to gather my nerve?”

“I think that’s fair,” Clint said, leaning in for a quick kiss. “So, if we’re all here for a reason then why am I here?”

“I could tell you it’s because I wanted to help you,” Phil said, reaching up to cup Clint’s face. “But I know you’re not going to let yourself rest here for long so I won’t waste my time lying to you. Maybe that was an element of it but the rest was selfish. I wanted you right away. Not just because you’re good to look at, though you are, but because you looked like a man with stories. I wanted to know you.”

“And now you know me?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever know you entirely,” Phil said, leaning in for another kiss. “There’s too much of you, I’m only skating the edges. I feel like I could spend a lifetime filling you in.”

Clint blushed a little because, really, what kind of person said that? But Phil seemed sincere. Phil always seemed achingly sincere and when he turned for another kiss Clint found he didn’t want to refuse.

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Clint strummed a chord and hummed to himself, running through the words in his head. He wasn’t ready to sing them out loud yet, not while the window was open and Phil was just inside finishing dinner, but they might be ready soon. He reached over and substituted a word then strummed again. Better flow.

“You okay?”

Clint looked up to see Phil lounging in the window, a giant bowl of pasta in his hands. The table was already set for the two of them and he looked delicious in his low slung sweatpants and without his shirt. If it wasn’t so soon after they’d last gone he’d be pulling Phil down to start another round and the pasta would have been wasted. As it was he just set his guitar down and went over to sit at the table.

“It smells good,” he said, making grabby motions at the bowl. Phil rolled his eyes and set it in the middle of the table then served them both from it. Clint would have been happy just eating from the big bowl but…

It tasted as good as it smelt. Rich and creamy. He wondered if he could get Phil to teach him to cook this then he could add it to his repertoire.

“So, what were you playing?” Phil asked, tearing a chunk of the garlic bread. “Also, do you object to garlic breath?”

“Doesn’t count if I have it too,” Clint said, reaching to help himself. “I’m writing something new.”

“Your New York song?” Phil asked, tilting his head.
“Yeah,” Clint agreed. “It’s, well, it’s about Skye. I just...she’s kind of all full of life. I wanted to write about that.”

“She’s a special kid,” Phil agreed. “Do I get to hear it?”

“When it’s done,” Clint said with a laugh. “I can play some other things for you, though. You must be getting kind of tired of my songs on repeat.”

“Never.” Clint looked at Phil as he said that and, well, Phil looked warm and happy and content and not like it was a lie or a pressure or an unhappiness. It wasn’t a plea for Clint to stay or a lie and he didn’t know what to make of that.

“Well, your customers might be. I could do some covers. I could play ‘Dock of the Bay’, that’s a good one. Or I’ve got a version of ‘Man in the Mirror’ I could work in. The covers are easy to remember. I used to play them a lot when I played in clubs before I gave up on that.”

“Whatever you want to play,” Phil said with a pleased little smile. “You want to play it, I listen.”

“Not sure you should be enabling me,” Clint grumbled, but he slid his hand over the table and took Phil’s. Phil just smiled at him, squeezing Clint’s hand. It was nice. Warm. Peaceful.

It felt a little bit like home.
Monday morning was a good morning. Clint knew most people didn’t agree with that kind of thinking, knew Phil hadn’t agreed with it when they’d climbed out of bed to start the week, but he liked Mondays. When you were on the street Sundays were kind of hard as places shut early. It wasn’t as bad in the evening as Saturday with its drunks but…

Monday was the start of a new week. Everyone was a little bit bleary, a little bit more likely to drop a few coins in his cup. A little more likely to need a little coffee just to get going so there were plenty of people through the door. Which, okay, that might have contributed to Phil not being in a great mood but it was good for Clint.

He sang his way through the morning with extra energy, throwing in a few covers and getting through his entire playlist more than once. He attracted a little gathering and noticed Skye smiling and humming along behind the bar. Phil even stopped by for a kiss before disappearing upstairs to do whatever paperwork it was he was doing. Life was good.

Once the rush died down a little he let himself grab his notebook and flip through, scribbling down another couple of lines for Skye’s song that had come to him as he watched her serve. That was good, too. Writing music had two basic ways of working. There were the songs that seemed to almost spring fully formed from his head. All he had to do was strum his guitar a few times and they come together, almost. And then there were songs that had to be pulled out one note at a time and took forever to write. The last few years had mostly been the second kind of song. The song that required he stayed where he was until it was done. Skye’s song, though, was different. It was flying out of him and that was brilliant and terrible.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to go and finishing the song would mean it was time. But the song wasn’t finished yet. For now, he could stay.

Skye must be psychic or something because when he looked up she was watching him like she knew he was thinking about her. He gave her a little wave and she held up a glass and shrugged. He nodded, a drink would be good right now. He waited while she brought him the iced water, tucking the notebook away. Wouldn’t do for her to see it too soon. He didn’t normally let the people he wrote about hear their songs at all but he got the feeling Skye was going to be the exception.

“Hey,” she said, handing him the water. “I’m sorry if I crashed your lazy Sunday yesterday. I didn’t think you’d still be there. You don’t seem like the staying type.”

“I don’t stay long,” Clint said, grabbing the glass. “I can manage a few nights, though. Beats the street.”

“I hope it’s not just that,” Skye said, frowning, and Clint rolled his eyes at her. She was a good kid but she was not subtle.

“It’s not just a bed,” he promised. “It’s something more. I mean, not love or anything…” It was so love. Maybe not all consuming love but enough love that leaving was going to be a problem. But he’d left Natasha, he could leave Phil. He had to.

“I get it,” Skye said, sliding in to sit next to him. “Got to keep yourself separate, right?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, glad she understood.
"And, on the topic of keeping true to ourselves, can I convince you to come out dancing tonight?"

Clint blinked for a second and then laughed. After last time he would honestly have never expected Skye to ask him to go anywhere with her again. He'd hardly fit in there.

"I know," Skye said, blushing a little. "I get that you didn't exactly have the time of your life last time but this time will be different. It's a house party so smaller. I'm going with some friends and not everyone there's going to be drinking their first legal drink. Plus, there's gonna be live music and the guy who's house it is, well, he's meant to be pretty chill. He'll probably let you play."

For a minute Clint actually considered the idea. It wasn't a terrible idea. Much more his scene than the last thing she'd come to him with. He liked playing for an evening crowd. Generally much more relaxed than a coffee shop crowd and the alcohol seemed to make their wallets easier to open. But then, well, he considered the alternative. Phil and the roof and trying to finish Skye's song and curling up under the sheets together and dammit by that sounded a whole lot better.

"You're thinking about having sex with Phil, aren't you?" Skye asked, wrinkling her nose. "Don't worry, I withdraw my offer. I don't want that mental image when I look at you all night."

"Hey," Clint protested. "I'll have you know that me and Phil together are a thing of beauty."

"He might be my dad," Skye protested. "I do not want to be thinking about that."

Clint froze. Somehow he'd managed to put the thought out of his head but of course there it was just waiting to come back and haunt him. He knew Phil wasn't and it was his fault that Phil knew and this was why he hated secrets and getting involved in people's lives.

Something must have shown in his expression because Skye's face fell. For a second he considered lying but that wouldn't help her or him.

"He guessed, Skye," he said. "So I couldn't lie to him and...I'm sorry kid."

"Sorry because you gave away my secret or sorry because of what you found out?"

"Both," Clint admitted.

He'd expected Skye to blow up at him but she just stood there for a few minutes clenching and unclenching her fists and then turned sharply on her heel and walked back to the counter. Her shoulders were tight and Clint wanted to hit his own damn self for her. If he wasn't such an idiot she wouldn't be hurting right now.

He stood to follow her. He was going to talk to her or push her into hitting him or, hell, he didn't know. Whatever she needed. Before he could do more than stand up from his seat though a group of students came spilling in and she met them with a brittle smile. Now wasn't the time so he sat back down with his guitar and tried to play but his rhythm was gone and Skye wasn't quietly dancing along any more.

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Clint grabbed the page and pulled it, tearing it unevenly from the binding of the book. The tearing noise wasn't half as satisfying as he'd hoped it would be so he screwed the page up into a ball and threw it violently to the ground. That didn't really help either so he dropped the book on the floor and grabbed the page again. A second later it was sailing over the wall and off the roof. He leant over and watched as the wind caught it and carried it out of sight.
"Feel better?" Phil asked from behind him. Clint grunted because not really. He'd clearly cursed himself when he thought it was going well. It wasn't going well. He had a decent chorus but everything else was terrible. "You want to tell me what the problem is?"

"Just can't seem to get anything right," Clint grumbled, kicking at his notebook. "Maybe writing a song about Skye was a bad idea? I just can't do it when she's so mad at me."

"Why's she mad at you?" Phil asked, coming over to stand next to Clint and gently lay a hand on his shoulder. Clint wanted to lean over and bury his face in Phil's neck but that was just the self pity and wouldn't help him write. Talking just might.

"I had to admit I told you about her thinking you're her dad. I can't really say we talked about it because she walked away and then it got busy and then she ran at the end of her shift and I know I should have made more of an effort but..."

"It's not your problem," Phil said, leaning in to kiss Clint on the forehead. "I've been meaning to talk to her about it for weeks. The only reason you've ended up in the middle of it is that I keep finding excuses instead of facing up to what I need to do. I'll talk to her."

"I still shouldn't have stuck my nose in," Clint grumbled, but he did give in and lean into Phil's side. Phil brought his arms up, pulling them together. He gave the most awesome hugs. Big powerful things that made Clint feel like, if he stayed long enough, Phil could hug all the sadness out of him. Pity he wasn't going to stay long enough.

"Stop trying to write tonight," Phil said, stroking Clint's back. "It's not going to come together while you're obsessing that she's angry with you. Let me tempt you away."

"You can try," Clint said, leaning in against Phil. "I am very temptable."

"I know you are," Phil said, pulling back far enough to kiss Clint lightly on the cheek. "Now, come up into the kitchen and I'll teach you to make pasta sauce."

"Seriously?" Clint asked as Phil drew away. "That's your master plan? Pasta sauce?"

"Don't laugh, you haven't tasted this sauce yet. I'll tempt you into bed later but first I want to cook for you. It's a family recipe. If I give it to you maybe years from now you'll make it for someone else on their roof and remember me."

There wasn't any sadness in Phil's tone and that may be hurt as much as anything. Just a weird kind of resignation. Like he was perfectly sincere in wanting to give this to Clint so Clint would remember him some day. Like Clint could forget him.

"You should give it to Skye, not me," he said, stepping in to press a soft kiss to the back of Phil's neck. "Kid needs a family more than anyone I've ever known."

"I can give this to you both," Phil said, turning to kiss Clint again. "There's no limit to the number of people I can care about. Just let me have this."

Clint couldn't argue with that.

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It took Clint an embarrassingly long time to realise that the noise was a phone ringing and not an alarm. In his defense, they did sound remarkably similar. By the time he was sat up and blinking sleep from his eyes Phil was already awake and alert, legs swung over the edge of the bed and the
phone in his hand. It spoke of years of military training and was, actually, weirdly attractive which Clint could admit to himself as it was far too early for his filters to have kicked in.

As Phil answered the phone he checked the clock on the bedside table. Half past two in the morning. Not a reasonable time to be awake, then. He groaned and collapsed back onto the mattress. When had to get so old?

“Here,” Phil said. When Clint looked over the other man was frowning and holding the phone out to him. Clint took it reluctantly. He glanced at the screen to see that, yeah, the call was still connected and it was Skye. Damn.

“Hey,” he said, lifting the phone to his ear.

“Clint?”

He sat up again like a shot, coming awake quickly. There were tears in Skye’s voice, a little tremble that told him things were definitely not all good with her. He glanced over at Phil to see the worried look on the other man’s face.

“I’m here,” he said, shifting to swing his legs off the bed. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I think I messed up,” Skye said, and there was a slight slur to her voice that he didn’t like. Too much drink? Or something worse.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he said, looking around for his trousers. Phil caught the motion and started to get dressed himself. “Just tell me what’s happened.”

“I’m at a party,” Skye said. “And it’s not...something’s not right here, Clint.”

“What kind of not right?” Clint asked, keeping his voice low and calm.

“There are more drugs than I thought,” she said. “And, I mean, normally that’s not an issue but there are only a couple of other girls here and one of them’s a dancer and she was stripping and people kept trying to give me drinks and got really offended when I said no. And I feel...I feel weird. Like, more drunk than I should be?”

“Okay, where’s this party?” Clint asked, looking around. Phil was already there with a paper and pen and he took them quickly.

“You don’t have to...”

“We’re going to come and get you,” Clint said, tapping his pen impatiently on the paper. “It’s really not a problem. Where are you now?”

“In the bathroom,” Skye admitted. “I’m just...yeah, please come and get me.”

“We will,” he promised. “Give me the address.”

She did, then, and he scribbled it down and handed it to Phil. Phil looked it it quickly and nodded.

“I think there’s someone outside the bathroom,” Skye said, a note of panic in her voice. “What do I do?”

“You stay where you are,” Clint said sharply. “Here’s talk to Phil for a second.”

She said something that might have been a protest but he was already shoving the phone in to
Phil’s hands and pulling on his jeans. He grabbed the first shirt he found (one of Phil’s but neither of them cared) and went and got his shoes on and then took the phone back while Phil found his shoes.

Turned out the place she was at was only about a twenty minute walk. Phil obviously wasn’t as used to being out on the streets at night as Clint was, he kept glancing around as though he expected a murderer to leap from the trash can any minute, but that was okay. They were in the quiet hours. The streets mostly deserted.

They kept Skye on the line the entire time. They put her on speakerphone after a while and kept up a string of light banter as they walked along in the dark, shoulders brushing. Clint wished he’d had time to grab the knife he kept in his bag. He didn’t think this was going to turn nasty but he liked to be prepared.

Once they hit the right street it wasn’t hard to pick out the right house. It was the one lit up like Christmas with the blaring music. He was honestly surprised that nobody in the other houses had called the cops or something. Maybe they had, maybe bigger shit was going on.

A couple of guys were passed out drunk on the front lawn but nobody tried to stop them when they just opened the door and went in. The place was obviously built as some kind of illicit night club. The walls were black and most of the walls were knocked out leaving a giant room crammed with bodies. Skye was right, there were only a handful of women in the room, one of who was currently naked and gyrating on a makeshift stage.

Nobody questioned their right to be there. They were probably all just too high, a variety of substances were visible around the room. They got a few funny looks but nobody seemed willing to move to talk to them so they quickly found the stairs and let themselves up into the upper floor.

“Okay,” Phil said into the phone which he now had pressed against his ear. “We’re here.”

It took all of a second for one of the doors to open and for Skye to come spilling out. Her eyes were blotchy from the crying, her skirt was riding up and she looked dazed but also glad to see them. She tripped forward and Phil caught her. Clint watched for a second as they clung to each other, Phil’s jaw relaxing a little now they had her safe.

“Come on,” he said, sliding an arm around her back. “Let’s all get out of here.”

She didn’t argue as they guided her down the stairs, Phil going first and Clint bringing up the rear. They almost got out of the door before someone decided to start something.

Clint had known it would be harder to get out with Skye than it had been to get in. Getting in might mean they were bringing something, leaving with one of the few girls was much more objectionable so he wasn’t surprised when one of the stoners pushed his way to his feet and came over to them. A few others paid attention to what was going on.

“Hey, bro,” the guy said, ambling closer. “Where you going with that girl? She don’t wanna go.”


“The girl’s stoned, bro,” Clint said, slumping a little to match the other guy’s posture. First step to dealing with guys like this was to make them think you were one of them. Made them less likely to throw punches. Behind him Phil continued to navigate Skye out of the house and he slumped forward to distract their guy. “Gotta take her home.”

“Nah, she can stay here,” the guy said with a surprising lack of menace. “We got beds, bro.”
“Nice,” Clint lied. “Can’t, though. That guy’s her dad. He’s kind of pissed at her, you know.”

“Oh, didn’t know she was that young, bro,” the guy said, giving the door that Skye had just disappeared through a speculative look.

“Yeah,” Clint said. Some guys didn’t object if their partners were on the young side but they one seemed to have some scruples at least. When dealing with another guy, anyway. He doubted he’d have accepted such an easy talk-down from Skye. Coming from Clint, though, he just shrugged, offered a smoke which Clint took to cement good feelings and then sloped off back to the corner he’d come from. The others were still watching him and he decided to get out while the getting was good.

Outside Phil and Skye had moved out of the yard back into the street and he rushed to join them. Skye was wearing Phil’s jacket and Phil had a protective arm around her shoulder and for a second he felt like an intruder until Skye looked up and saw him and then reached for him with a watery smile.

“Come on,” he said, stepping in quickly and hugging her on her free side. “Let’s get out of here before any of them move enough to come investigate.”

“I was probably overreacting,” Skye said, letting them guide her down the street. She was wearing some truly ridiculous heels but she seemed to be managing to balance on them. “I just…”

“You felt unsafe and you called for help,” Phil interrupted. “That’s the smart thing to do. You did the right thing.”

“Thanks,” Skye said, wobbling and little and letting her head fall on Phil’s shoulder. Clint glanced back to see someone stood in the door and subtly hurried their pace. He didn’t want to have to have another fight over Skye. At least he’d have some backup this time so hopefully he wouldn’t be pounded into the pavement.

They walked in silence until the house was lost from view and then a little while more until Clint was sure they weren’t being followed and then Clint finally let himself ask the question he’d been working on for a while.

“So, I thought you were out with someone else?”

“I was,” Skye said, blushing. “A few people, actually. At a different party. This isn’t the one I told you about. But then this one friend wanted to come over here and it wasn’t fair to make them go alone so I came along…”

“And they left you,” Phil finished, doing that thing where he jaw tightened like he was getting ready to punch someone.

“Yeah,” Skye agreed. “Though I don’t think they realised someone had put something in my drink. I mean, I was drinking but I know my limits.”

“You still remember the entire night, though?”

“Yeah,” Skye said, squeezing him like he was the one who needed taking care of. “I do. And now you’re gonna walk me home and everything is going to be okay.”

“Of course,” Phil agreed, squeezing Skye a little too tight again, like he was daring the world to even try to prove them wrong. Phil would make someone an awesome dad, it was a pity Skye was wrong.
As they walked Skye went quiet again between then, just occasionally giving directions to her place. Clint tired to keep up a little chatter but it didn’t feel necessary now like it had earlier. They were all here and together and safe, they didn’t need words to confirm it.

Finally Skye drew it a stop in a side street.

“Okay,” he said, wiggling free of them. “This is me. You can go home now.”

“I’d rather see you to your door,” Phil said with a frown. “We don’t know what’s in your system. I don’t want to leave you out here.”

“But this is my door,” Skye said, and it took Clint a second to realise she wasn’t just making hand gestures but pointing at the van they were stood next to. He watched with a vague sense of rising horror as she produced a set of keys and unlocked the thing and then stumbled unsteadily in.

He couldn’t resist sticking his head inside. For a van, it was pretty nice. But it wasn’t a home and it sure as hell wasn’t a safe place to stay. He withdrew from the van as Skye was kicking her ridiculous shoes off and turned to find Phil meeting his eye, the same worry echoed there. There was no way they were leaving Skye here.

“Skye,” he said, sticking his head into the van again. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said, flopping down on a roll out mattress in the corner. It looked clean, at least, but that wasn’t much of an indication of anything. He climbed into the van and waited for Phil to get in behind him and shut the door. It was surprisingly cozy inside when it was shut up. He’d slept in a lot worse places but there was what was okay for him and what was okay for Skye and even he shouldn’t have been sleeping in a place like this at her age.

“How long have you been living here?” Phil asked, looking around.

“A few years,” Skye said with a lazy shrug, like she hadn’t quite caught on to the fact that the two of them were quietly panicking. “I won the van in a bet and if you’re going to travel, right?”

“But, you’ve been here months,” Phil said, looking around. “There’s no bathroom in here, Skye. Have you been living in a van with no bathroom the entire time I’ve known you?”

“It’s not so bad,” she said, a little caution in her tone now. “I mean, yeah, it’d be nice to have a house but that costs money and there are public toilets. There’s one a few blocks down that has showers or I sneak into the gym and use theirs…”

She trailed off at the look of distress on Phil’s face. Clint could understand why. Phil looked like he didn’t know if he wanted to punch life for being so cruel to Skye or give the damn kid a hug.

“It’s really not so bad,” she said, leaning over and turning on another battery powered light in addition to the ones she’d already turned on when she got in. “I have a little generator so I can run my laptop. I’ve been in worse places. I bet Clint’s been in worse places.”

“Yeah,” Clint admitted. “But only in really shitty times. It’s not...how I live my life sure as hell isn’t a model for how anyone else should live theirs.”

“If you can’t afford a room…” Phil said slowly, looking around. “How do you afford school? You don’t, do you?”

For a second Clint thought Skye was just going to try and make a run for it but, instead, she slumped back against the wall and shook her head. It was a heartbreaking little gesture and Phil
finally gave in to the impulse to go over there and hug her. Skye lent into the hug easily, resting her head on Phil’s shoulder.

“You just presumed I was,” she said. “And you gave me a student job and I didn’t want to let you know. I thought you’d throw me out. It’s easier to lie.”

“I don’t want you to lie to me,” Phil said, squeezing her. “But, you do understand we can’t leave you here, right?”

“It’s not so bad,” Skye said, but she didn’t sound like her heart was in it. Clint couldn't blame her. Phil was implying the offer of a home, however temporary. He hadn’t been able to turn that away either.

“I have a spare room,” Phil insisted. “We can come back for the van tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” Skye asked, looking around. “I mean, I don’t want to impose…”

“Come on,” Clint said, standing and opening the door again. “We’re going in circles. Let’s go home.”

This time, when the alarm actually went off, Clint was not even vaguely ready for it. He must have made that pretty clear with the way he groaned and rolled over as Phil chuckled at him. He had no idea how Phil always managed to be so perky when the alarm went off but if he were to identify one thing about Phil that was less than ideal - that right there was it. He needed to cling to these small imperfections about Phil as he’d need them pretty soon.

“I hate you,” he grumbled, reaching out to swat at Phil. Phil laughed and caught his hand, pressing a kiss to the knuckles. Okay, yeah, there were perks to Phil being more awake than him in the mornings. Phil started to move like he was going to get up and Clint rolled over, throwing an arm around Phil and pressing him back into the bed.

“Oh no,” Phil grumbled, poking at Clint. “Morning. We’ve got to get up.”

“Not you, today,” Clint said, tugging at Phil again. Phil obligingly flopped back into the sheets with a sigh that let Clint know exactly how tired the other man actually was. Not exactly used to dealing with sleep deprivation any more.

“I’ve gotta open up,” Phil said, reaching a hand up to lay on Clint’s shoulder. “And, you know, work.”

“Nope,” Clint said. He thought for a second and then pulled himself over, laying down on Phil’s chest. Phil huffed a laugh but let Clint lean in and press kisses to his lips so it was probably a win. “Today, you’re not getting out of bed until you’re properly rested. And then you’re going to have a real conversation with Skye. A good, long conversation. You’re going to work out all these feelings that you feel.”

“We can talk after work...”

“Or tomorrow or next week?” Clint asked, raising an eyebrow.

“So you’re telling me to close the shop for the day to talk to Skye?”

“Well, if you had to it’d be worth it,” Clint said with a shrug. “But, no. I’m telling you I’m going to be looking after the shop today. You are going to have a long conversation with Skye.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Phil said with a frown.

“Not asking. I’m telling you. And honestly, Phil, it’s not that big of a deal. I’ve worked in a coffee shop before and I kind of know your morning routine. Enough that I’ll stumble through it anyway. I’m not going to say the day’s going to go without incident but you’ve got good staff, they’ll help me out, and you need this.”

“You know, I think we do need this,” Phil agreed with a sigh. “Okay, you win.”

“I always win,” Clint agreed. “So you go back to sleep and I’ll go be you.”

“You can try,” Phil grumbled, but he kissed Clint again and Clint chose to take that as a thank you. He dressed quickly after that and slipped out of the bedroom. He could still hear Skye snoring lightly through the guest room door. Good, it’d give Phil some time to think. He doubted the other man was going to go back to sleep but he could, at least, have some room to think.
Clint hadn’t slept much last night after they’d got back. He’d been surprised when Phil had slept so easily. He couldn’t stop thinking about Skye living in a damn van for years. It wasn’t right. Reminded him a little too much of himself and where he’d come from. She was too good of a kid to deserve that.

He just hoped he didn’t have too many other things in common with Skye. The less like each other they were the better in his eyes.

He grabbed a slice of bread and headed down to the shop, eating it as he went. He didn’t want to risk making any additional noise. He unlocked the back door with Phil’s key and headed through into the shop.

And, okay, maybe this was going to be a little harder than he’d thought. He didn’t exactly get up and spend the morning memorising every part of Phil’s routine. He just kind of hung around and drank coffee. And he’d worked in a coffee shop, sure, but he’d never been trusted with opening up or shutting the place down but, well, how hard could it be?

He went through into the back again to the tiny makeshift office Phil kept at the back of the kitchen. Clint knew he kept the cash drawer here somewhere and finding that was probably the minimum he needed to start opening up properly.

“What are you doing?”

He nearly jumped out of his goddamn skin, yelping in a kind of undignified manner and accidentally smacking his hand on the drawer he’d been looking in. He spun around, cradling his hand to his chest, to find Melinda May watching him calmly, her gun drawn.

“Okay, this looks bad,” he said, raising his uninjured hand as a peace offering. “But I can totally explain what’s going on here.”

“Then explain,” Melinda said, not moving the gun an inch. Clint was kind of glad he hadn’t found the cash box now. She’d probably have shot him on sight.

“Skye got into some trouble last night at a party, maybe got her drink drugged. Me and Phil went out to rescue her and, well, kind of worked out that she’s not a student and she’s been living out of a van for the past few years.” Melinda didn’t do anything as crass as swear at that news but there was a tightening of her jaw like she wanted to. “She’s upstairs in the guest room now. I think she and Phil have got some things to work out so I offered to come open the shop.”

“And Phil let you?” Melinda asked, her tone flat but her expression somehow making the question incredulous.

“Yeah,” Clint replied with a shrug. “I mean, I think he really wants to have this conversation with Skye. They both need it. And I know you don’t trust me but Phil does for whatever reason. Not a lot of people have trusted me in my life, I’m not intending to give him any reason to regret it.”

Melinda watched him for a second longer then, with a sigh, lowered her gun. He let his arm drop down but didn’t break eye contact until she did.

“I don’t suppose you actually know anything about opening a coffee shop?” she asked, looking around the still closed shop.

“I can work it out?” Clint said, a little annoyed that it came out as a question. Melinda quirked her lip then like she was honestly amused at him which was novel.
“Come on,” she said, putting the gun away and walking towards the desk. “Your intentions are noble at least. I’ll help you out.”

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“So,” Jemma said, wiping down the counter, “What is going on exactly? I mean, clearly something’s happening because you’re in the shop and Phil isn’t but…”

Clint had survived the morning rush by the skin of his teeth. Which was to say that while he had worked in a coffee shop before, he really had, it might possibly have been longer ago than he’d thought. He’d needed Jemma to run him through a few things but he was a quick study. He swore Tuesday hadn’t been this busy last week but apparently it was making up for it this week.

He also didn’t remember people having such weird coffee orders last time. Maybe it was just students or maybe it was New York but he seemed to be adding a weird mixture of syrups to every other cup and, well, he’d needed Jemma’s help to interpret some of the orders.

She’d been very patient with him so the least he owed her was politely answering her questions. He was just back to the same problem again. How much of someone else’s secret could he give away here. He didn’t want to betray Skye again but he really owed Jemma something.

“Phil’s dealing with some personal stuff today,” he settled on. “I know I’m not the ideal replacement but I promised to watch the shop for him.”

“Nobody’s dead, are they?” Jemma asked, her eyes widening. Clint shook his head quickly, dispelling that idea.

“No, don’t worry. It’s nothing as severe as that. He’s just…” and, dammit, there was no way to explain this without either bringing Skye in or cutting Jemma off. Neither option was great but… “He’s talking to Skye.”

“Skye?” Jemma asked, instantly turning to face him. Her eyes were wide and her attention focused and, oh, yeah, that made sense now. The weird talk she’d had with him about being gay, the way she hung around. There were feelings going on here.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “I can’t really tell you anything else, it’s not my business, but she’s fine. Or she will be fine. They just need to talk some things out.”

Jemma nodded but she wasn't looking at him, she was looking past him to the back room as though she expected Skye to come down and explain herself any minute. He wished he could just tell the kid but he'd shared Skye's stories with too many people already. He was done with other people's secrets.

"You know," Jemma said, edging backwards. "I think I'm just going to..."

She trailed off as she took a couple of quick, nervous steps towards the back room. She might just be going to stare at the staircase, waiting for it to give up its secrets, but Clint knew it was far more likely that she was going to go in there and head up. Stick her head in with a friendly hello, try to find out what was happening.

He knew he should stop her but, honestly, he didn't want to. He couldn't tell her but if she found out for herself? Not his problem. Plus, Skye probably needed all the friends she could get right now. He was quickly distracted from even having to make a pretense of stopping her by some customers coming in. Making the coffees was a little more difficult without Jemma to direct him but luckily they weren't hurrying and he managed to serve them without incident.
When he turned around again Jemma was gone and Phil was leaning in the doorway, watching him and smiling. Clint smiled back though he wasn't sure why Phil looked so happy. Still, he didn't argue when Phil pushed off from the doorway and came over for a quick kiss.

"I take it you're the one who sent Jemma up?"

"No, I just didn't stop her," Clint said, not meeting Phil's eye as he knew that distinction didn't mean much. "She was worried."

"It's okay," Phil said, squeezing his shoulders. "She's a good kid. I think we've had too many lies and secrets around this coffee shop for too long. You know, back when I left the army an old friend of mine asked me to go work for him in the intelligence business. Real secrets, like I'm not even sure I'm supposed to tell you this place exists secrets. I turned him down because I couldn't cope with the lies any more. If you did that, you'd either have to accept that you'd never have a life outside your job or that you'd lie to everyone outside all the time. I couldn't cope with that so I went into coffee instead."

"Kind of a big difference in career," Clint said. He could see Phil's point, though. Lying for a living didn't tend to lead to happy, settled people. Making coffee was probably the better choice.

"Yeah," Phil agreed. "I don't regret it, though. I always wanted family."

"Like a daughter?" Clint asked, looking pointedly at the ceiling.

"Yeah," Phil admitted. "Like a daughter. I think...I think maybe this is going to work out. Are you going to be okay running the shop by yourself for a few more hours?"

"It will be my pleasure," Clint said with a grin.

"I'll help you out until Jemma comes back down, they have some things to work through too," Phil said, moving to stand behind the cash register. "I'm glad you're here."

Clint was too, though he couldn't quite manage to say it. Normally he came into a place, lived like a shadow and left. Sometimes people would remember him, he hoped, but normally only as that guy at the side. There were exceptions, of course. Natasha was an exception. Most of his exceptions ended up like her. Disasters. But maybe this time, maybe this once, even if he'd done it by messing up he'd managed to do something good. He wasn't going to regret that.

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"Hey."

Clint jerked forward and away from the bony finger that was digging into his back. He turned to glare at Skye and she laughed at him so, well, at least someone had gotten some joy today. She looked better than she had last night which wasn't saying much but there it was. She was also smiling and when he turned she leaned in quickly to hug him.

"You're totally forgiven for telling people my secrets, by the way," she said. "I've been informed that I wasn't fooling anyone and that in the future I should just tell the truth."

"I can't vouch for always telling the truth," Clint said with a shrug. "But telling the truth with these people seems to be working. You've got good people here."

"I know," Skye said with a laugh, hugging him quickly again. "Me and Phil are going to go pick up my van. You think you can survive here with just Grant?"
"I'll cope somehow," Clint said with a roll of his eyes. Jemma had retreated some time ago leaving him with Grant. Grant hadn't seemed eager to help Clint learn how to make drinks or to, you know, have a friendly conversation or anything so they'd mostly been working in a kind of awkward silence. He'd had worse days. "You go get your things. That mean you're staying here now?"

"For now," Skye agreed with a nod. "But, don't worry, I won't be in your way."

"Don't even worry about that," Clint said, ruffling her hair. "Go on, get out of here."

She grinned at him and then did, ducking out the back. Clint saw Phil follow her a few seconds after. He looked content. It was a good look on him.

For all it had been a busy morning it was a slow afternoon. Grant was cleaning tables and nobody was waiting to be served. There were only two tables with occupants, it'd probably be okay if he ducked out for a few minutes.

"Hey, Grant," he called, waving at the other guy. "I'm just going to go get some food."

Grant nodded and looked away quickly like he thought looking at Clint for too long might give him some kind of mind disease. Clint didn't have the energy in him to be upset, instead he just shrugged and headed upstairs. If Grant wanted to be like that he wasn't going to break his back trying to gain the other man's trust.

In the kitchen he quickly threw together a sandwich and ate it over the sink. Skye and Phil had obviously had a nice lunch, there were plates drying on the draining board. For a second he kind of wished they'd come downstairs to get him but, then, why should they? He wasn't a member of the family they were trying to build here. He was just passing through. It was better that they found each other without him then, when he went, they'd still be there for each other.

Finishing his sandwich, Clint grabbed a glass and filled it with water, taking a good long drink. As he swallowed his eyes landed on the cupboard Phil kept his work papers in.

Temptation hit immediately. He hadn't meant to snoop, it hadn't even occurred to him until he saw the cupboard sitting right there but once he'd looked at it, it was like he couldn't look away. Something was going on here other than the Skye stuff and Clint knew enough from staff gossip to know that was unusual.

The cupboard wasn't locked. It was easy. Easy to select the folders from the top and begin flipping through. Clint had been through when Phil was working on them so he knew which ones to head for. It didn't take him long to see that they were the accounts. Not something he'd dealt with before but Phil had laid them out clearly enough. Outgoing. Sales. Projected profit. Money actually in the cash register.

It didn't take a genius to spot the problem Phil had found which was great as Clint certainly wasn't a genius. Phil wasn't making as much money as he should be - not by quite a large gap.

Clint flipped through the rest of the folder and it became obvious pretty quickly that Phil was trying to trace the money. He'd checked everything over and over but he still kept coming up short. Clint checked a few of the figures himself quickly and Phil's math seemed fine. It wasn't a problem with the books.

That meant it was an actual problem. Someone was actually, physically taking money from the register.
It almost hurt to think about. These people...they seemed like family. A weird, semi-dysfunctional sort of family but still family. Who'd steal from them? Who'd steal from Phil? He'd given all of them a chance. There wasn't a person here who he hadn't gone out on a limb for.

Clint very carefully, very calmly, put the book back and closed the cupboard and then punched the floor as hard as he could. Hard enough for pain to spark all the way up his arm so he had to grit his teeth to stop it escaping as a yell. How could someone do this? Why would someone do this? They had to know that all they had to do was ask if they were desperate.

But what if they weren't desperate. This obviously wasn't a single act, after all. It was a series of small acts over time. No big sum, that would be noticed. It was only when Phil had added it all up that it'd become obvious.

He didn't even want to think about this now. He couldn't. He'd talk to Phil later but for now he wasn't going to think about it. For now he was going to go down and make coffee and pretend everything was okay.

He didn't know how Phil had been carrying on for the last however long knowing all this. He had better control than Clint, that was for sure. The only good thing was it probably wasn't Skye. You didn't steal money and live out of a van. Unless you did. She had come from a background of nothing, he knew as well as anyone that when you had nothing the temptation to take what you could was strong.

He hoped to hell it wasn't Skye.

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"Hey," Clint said, coming up from behind Phil and wrapping his arms around him. Just being near Phil was oddly calming and Clint had been soaking it up all afternoon. He hadn't put the books away for long when Skye and Phil had returned, successful in their quest. They'd been so excited that Clint had struggled to stay mad. Instead he'd left Grant in charge and helped them haul the stuff from the van upstairs. There wasn't much of it but by the time it was spread around Phil's spare room and a couple of the plants had been carried in from the roof to brighten up it was starting to look like a home.

"Hey," Phil replied, bringing his hands up to lace his fingers through Clint's. Clint nuzzled into the back of Phil's neck. The place was almost deserted and they were all students anyway. They could cope with the floor show. "You feeling good?"

"Yep," Clint said, leaning in. It was almost true. Leaning against Phil he could almost forget about what he'd learned that afternoon. Now wasn't the time to bring it up, anyway. Not tonight. Tonight was about Phil and Skye and family. "How about you? Feeling better for your talk."

"Much," Phil said, and from this angle Clint could only see the corner of the little contented smile Phil was making but it was still enough. "Thanks for letting us talk it out."

"It was my pleasure," Clint said, pressing a kiss to the back of Phil's neck. There was a little thrill associated with this kind of intimacy. It wasn't something he usually allowed himself so getting to touch like this felt almost illicit. Or sacred. He wasn't sure which.

"Speaking of," Phil said, stepping forward a little. Clint followed him quickly, keeping his chest pressed to Phil's back. He didn't want to lose the contact. He watched a Phil opened the till and counted one some money and then tried to put it into Clint's hand. Clint took it automatically and they stepped back to look at it.
"What is this?" he asked, holding it out to Phil. Phil didn't take it back, just smiled at him.

"That's your pay. You worked all day for it."

"No," Clint said, laying the money on the counter. "I worked all day for you and Skye, not for pay. I'll just split the tips like usual and that'll be fine."

"Don't be ridiculous," Phil said, picking up the money and trying to hand it to Clint again. Clint refused to take it. "Clint, you need this more than I do and you've earned it. Just take it."

And Clint...in that moment all he wanted to do was step forward and hold on to Phil and never let go. Here was this kind, intelligent man who was facing financial difficulty and hard choices and he was trying to hand money to Clint because even though he needed it he thought Clint needed it more and Phil was always going to be the support guy, the one who cared for others and it was wonderful and Clint loved him and he never wanted to leave.

He loved him.

He'd known he was in trouble but...

"Put it away," he said, reaching forward and taking Phil's hand, closing his fingers around the bills. "I don't need it. Just...you're feeding me and everything. Just make me some food."

"If you're sure," Phil said, waiting until Clint nodded again before finally putting the bills back into the drawer. "You know, Skye's cooking tonight. I'm not sure when the last time she actually cooked was, you might end up wishing you'd taken the money over the food."

"I'm sure she'll be good," Clint said, grinning. "I mean, I can cook and if I can do it anyone can."

"That's not quite true," Phil said, bringing a hand up to stroke down Clint's cheek. "But head on up. I'm going to lock up. Maybe you can stop her burning anything."

"Sure," Clint said, leaning in for one last kiss before he headed up to the apartment.

It didn't smell of burning which was a good thing. Skye was quietly humming to herself by the stove and he went over to join her, watching whatever it was she was cooking boil for a few seconds until she bumped their shoulders together.

"You okay?" she asked, stirring one of the pots. "You're looking a bit shell shocked." He felt a bit shell shocked but he managed to pull out a smile for her. She grinned back and his chorus came back to him. Maybe he'd find some time to write tonight. It might come easier now.

"I'm good," he said, raising an arm and slinging it over her shoulder. "Are you good? Not moving on now you know this Phil Coulson isn't the one you've been looking for?"

"No," Skye said. "I mean, I thought about it. I started this entire thing to find my dad but Phil is the first decent guy I've found. He's not...I mean, we talked. I know there's no way he's the Phil Coulson on my birth certificate but I'm starting to think that doesn't matter. I always imagined I'd meet my real parents and they'd be, I don't know, movie stars or billionaires or adventurers. I stopped having that dream a long time ago. Then I thought maybe they'd just be regular, good people. That's all I want. I could go on and try to find the Phil Coulson who gave me half of myself but if I found him he'd probably be just, well, just a guy. Just a regular guy living a regular life and if that's all I'm going to get then why not stick with the Phil Coulson I've got?"

"Did you just call Phil regular and boring?" Clint teased, getting a swift elbow in his ribs for his
"You know what I mean, asshole. Phil's good people. I want to be his daughter and, well, family isn't just about biology. It's about the people you chose to spend your life with. He's chosen to be my dad and I've chosen to be his daughter and that's enough."

"I'm glad for you," Clint said, hugging her quickly.

"Yeah," he too," he agreed, squeezing him back. "Besides, I can't leave him too. It's going to be hard enough for Phil when you leave, someone has to stay here with him."

Clint didn't have an answer to that.
"So, I think we need to talk," Clint said, leaning back against the kitchen table. He had his morning proceeds in his back pocket and he'd much rather still be downstairs playing to the coffee shop crown but last night the weight of what he'd seen had kept pressing on him. It was a really good thing he wasn't a secret agent. He could probably have done the shooting people part if he'd ended up growing up with a gun in his hands instead of a guitar but he'd never have managed the espionage.

"What about?" Phil asked, looking up sharply. The lines around his eyes were creased and his forehead wrinkled and Clint couldn't help but reach down and gently run his thumb over Phil's crow's feet. Damn it all but that only made him look more attractive. What was his life?

"Got a tiny confession," Clint said, forcing himself to think about something other than how attractive Phil was. "I maybe looked at your accounts yesterday when you were picking up Skye's things. I honestly didn't mean to but they were right there so, yeah, I know you're in trouble."

Phil sat still for a second and then laughed a honest laugh, reaching forward to put an arm around Clint's middle and pull him forward. Clint went, watching Phil lay his head on Clint's stomach and laugh and, yeah, this wasn't the expected reaction.

"You know, I wasn't expecting this," Clint said, reaching down to rub at Phil's shoulders. "You okay?"

"Yes," Phil said breathily, squeezing him tighter. "I thought you were going to tell me you were leaving."

"Oh," Clint said, blushing a little. He hadn't thought of that as an interpretation. He hadn't finished his song yet, though he'd made some progress last night. There was no way he was leaving yet. "Yeah, no. I'm not going today. I mean, unless you come to your senses and throw me out."

"I'm never going to throw you out," Phil said with a shake of his head. "But, okay, the books. You looked at the books."

"I did," Clint confirmed, stepping back a little. Phil let him go reluctantly, the smile fading from his face. "I mean, I didn't get to go in depth but, yeah, I could see the problem. You know who's responsible?"

"I have suspicions," Phil said, with a sigh, turning back to the paperwork spread out on the table. "I've been trying to go back and work out which days money's been going missing. It's just impossible, though. I didn't keep records that detailed though I will in the future. I wanted it to be something else...anything else."

"I know," Clint said, leaning on Phil's shoulder. "But this is the reality of it. You've got to talk to them, Phil. You can't let it keep going on."

"I know," Phil said with a sigh that let Clint know he'd much rather just ignore it. "I just...I'm going to lose one of them, aren't I? One of them's going to have been letting me down after I trusted them and I hate that. And what if they have a good reason. What if they need medication or have a dying pet or..."

"Then they should have talked to you," Clint said, trying to keep his voice calm. "I've known you for, what, a little over a week. I already know that if I had some kind of medical emergency or
something I'd just have to come to you and you'd do everything you could. You'd find a solution - that's what you do. They all know that. If they're stealing, it's not because they need to."

"And someone's stealing," Phil concluded. "You're right, again. It's a good thing you're here. I've been trying to get around to all this for weeks but...I'll text them all. We'll have a meeting tonight after work."

"Good plan," Clint said, leaning down to kiss Phil on the forehead. "And then, since you're not going to be poring over books all afternoon, I thought I might go take a lie down. Care to join me?"

"It would take my mind off work," Phil said, tilting his head up for a kiss. Clint kissed him, deep and firm like he was trying to let Phil know with a kiss that he might not be there for long but while he was there he'd be behind Phil 100%. He wasn't sure that the message came across but Phil sent the text anyway and then followed him through to the bedroom.

***

"So, what's this about?" Leo asked, fidgeting in his seat. "I mean, what are we here for? We've never had a meeting like this before."

"Oh, do calm down Leo," Jemma said, patting his knee. He gave her a glare and she just shrugged, turning to talk to Skye who was sitting on the other side of her on the sofa. The three of them just about fit on there, Phil's furniture wasn't really set up for having more than two people up here. They'd dragged in the chairs from the kitchen and were sitting around on them. Phil sat across from the couch like he was chairing the meeting with Melinda on his right and Grant on his left. For his part, Clint had sat back a little. He'd pulled one of the chairs from the roof and was sitting behind Skye, watching them all.

It was weird the things you noticed in a group that you didn't when you only saw one or two at a time. He'd probably have picked up on Jemma having feelings for Skye if he'd had them here to compare them. Leo was obviously the little brother of the group and they had a habit of treating him that way and there were strange looks passing between Melinda and Grant. He hadn't even known those two really knew each other.

Phil just sat in the middle of it all with a peaceful smile on his face like he hadn't a care in the world. If only that were true.

"Okay," Melinda said eventually, calling them to order. "Let's get this over with."

"Thank you," Phil said, smiling calmly at her. If Clint had only met him today he'd think Phil was entirely relaxed but now he knew Phil's tells. He shoulders were too far forward. His smile too fixed. He wanted to look relaxed but he wasn't which, well, it made a lot of sense under the circumstances. Clint had done what he could to give Phil a peaceful afternoon but now was the hard part and it was going to be stressful.

"I'm sorry to have to call you all here on short notice," Phil said, standing slowly. "I know you have better things to be doing but I needed to talk to all of you and I thought it was better if we do this all at once. Like ripping off a bandage. It's not a good thing that I need to talk to you about."

"We're all fired?" Leo said, throwing his hands up in the air. "You're going out of business. I knew it. I knew this was too good to be true."

"Shush," Jemma whispered, and Clint didn't think he'd ever actually heard anyone say shush as a word before. It was pretty cute. "Let Phil talk."
"I'm not going out of business," Phil said, quickly averting that panic attack. "At least, not yet. I, well, you've probably noticed I've not been around the shop much over the last few weeks. I've been going over the accounts. I decided to check them on a whim but it's a good thing I did since I've got a problem.

"Someone, I don't know who, has been taking money. I wish there was another explanation but I can't see one. I've checked everything several times now and, I'm sorry, but I need to know who's doing this."

Silence fell. There was a subtle shifting of bodies as people looked from one to the other. They all had a motive, of course. The entire point of their working here was that they all needed money. Tension built as nobody spoke. Phil just stood there, quietly, looking from one face to the other. They all made eye contact with him and nobody spoke.

"Hey," Leo said, finally breaking the silence. "What about him?"

A finger was pointed accusingly at Clint. "He's homeless. He could be stealing."

"The problem's been going on since before he got here." Phil said, shaking his head. "I can't trace the exact days but this has been going on for some time. Never a big sum but just coming up a little short again and again. I really don't want to think that any of you could do this but someone has."

"Well, you know it isn't me," Skye interrupted. "You helped me move yesterday, you've seen everything I own."

"Yes," Phil agreed. "I don't think it's you or Clint. I don't think it's Melinda, either. She's basically a volunteer here."

"Someone got to keep an eye on you," she said with a small smile. Phil noded at her and she noded back.

"So one of us three," Grant said, gesturing between himself, Leo and Jemma.

"Are you sure there's not been a mistake with the books?" Jemma asked, shoulders tight. "I mean, just a small mistake..."

"I'm sorry," Phil said. "I really have checked everything."

"Fine," Leo said, throwing his hands up. "I did it." There was a second of silence before Jemma laughed, reaching over to ruffle his hair.

"Don't be ridiculous, Leo. You didn't."

"I did too," Leo grumbled, leaning away from her. "I did it because...I needed the money. For running shoes."

"For running shoes?" Phil asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Leo said, sitting up a little straighter. "I run. And I'm sick of you all treating me like a child. I'm a capable adult."

"You didn't steal, though," Jemma said, restraining herself to a pat on the arm this time. "I know you, Leo. We found a wallet with fifty dollars in last month and you insisted on tracking down the owner and giving it back and then turned down a reward. You didn't steal the money."
"Well," Leo said, blushing. He slumped a little, the fight draining out of him. "I just...if someone's going to get fired over this is should be me. Jemma really needs the money to live so she can't lose her job. I mean, I can't really either but my mum might be able to find a little more to send me and if I just eat noodles..."

"It's a kind thought," Phil assured him. "But I'm not looking for someone to fall on their sword. I want to know who did it."

Slowly, all eyes in the room turned towards Grant. He sat there, unconcerned, and met each of their eyes. It was pretty clear by now that it had to be him but he looked so damn innocent. He looked up at Phil, face open, and shrugged as if he didn't understand what was happening and Clint...Clint wanted to believe the fucker. Wanted to believe he was some socially inept veteran who needed a hand up and hadn't been playing them all for fools.

"Do you have anything to say, Grant?" Phil asked.

Apparently, he didn't. Or, either way, he'd decided to talk with his fists. He stood and pushed Phil back, hands in the middle of his chest, and moved to the top of the stairs. Skye and Melinda were already coming out of their chairs to intercept but Clint got there first, stepping in front of him and holding his hands up.

"Look, calm down," he said, trying to keep his tone reasonable. "We just need to talk about this."

Grant punched him in the face. Someone screamed and Clint's fist flew on instinct, catching Grant in the side of the head as he dodged. Grant moved quickly, trying to slip around him but Melinda was already moving to block the door.

"Let him go," Phil said, his voice firm. Without even thinking Clint stepped back but Melinda didn't move. "He's making a choice, Mel. He can stay here and work it out or he can go, that's his choice."

Grant just nodded, still not saying a word, and took another step forward. Melinda stepped to the side, obviously hating it at he went past her. They listened until they heard the door slam downstairs. Slowly he turned back to face the room and Skye gasped. It took him a second to realise that, yeah, hit in the nose meant blood. He reached his fingers up and, yeah, red. Quite a bit of it, really, though his nose didn't hurt enough to be broken. He hoped. It'd been broken a few times before and it didn't feel that bad.

"Here, sit down." When he looked up from his own fingers Phil was there, a gently hand on his arm guiding him to the couch that had been vacated.

"It's fine," he said, letting himself be pushed onto the seat. "It's not broken."

"No, probably not," Phil agreed. "But you're bleeding and it's freaking out the kids."

"Damn," Clint sighed, fighting the urge to wipe his nose. The blood was dripping now onto his jeans he'd only just washed them.

"Come on," Melinda said, appearing at his other side. "Let's get him to the bathroom."

It was easier to go along with it than fight so he let them lead him into the bathroom where he could bleed peacefully into the sink. Phil stayed with him, talking gently and rubbing his back as Clint pinched his nose to get the blood stopped. It took a while, Grant must have hit him harder than he thought.
Finally the flow dried up and he let Phil gently wipe the remaining blood from his face before going to get him a t-shirt. He let Phil help him into it, careful not to start the bleeding again.

Back out in the living room the others were still there. They'd apparently been cleaning as there was a damp patch where he'd been bleeding and Skye offered him a bag of frozen peas which he took with a laugh, plopping them on the bridge of his nose.

"It's not broken, is it?" Jemma asked, her voice soft like she was afraid it might scare him.

"No," Clint promised. "Just a bleed. Let's sit down?"

"Good plan," Phil said, quickly claiming a place on the sofa. Clint sat next to him and if the new arrangements let him rest his head on Phil's shoulder then that was only a good thing. The others took chairs around them, all clearly nervous.

"So, what happens now?" Skye asked, the first to break the strange quiet.

"Now we phone the police. In the morning. Or I talk to my lawyer. Maybe I'll do that first. There are legal ways of dealing with this."

"Unless he drops off the Earth," Leo said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

"You should have let us stop him," Melinda said. "You should have phoned the police."

"It wasn't worth people getting punched over," Phil said calmly, tightening an arm around Clint.

"Totally worth it," Clint protested. "That bastard shoved you. He got what was coming."

"Yes, you bravely defended me by getting punched in the face," Phil said dryly. "My hero." Though he followed the comments up with a kiss to the forehead so he couldn't have disapproved that much.

"We're better off without him anyway," Skye said, shifting awkwardly. "We kind of went out a few times. The other night, when you had to come get me, he was the one who left me at that party."

"The ass," Phil growled, tightening his arm a bit more around Clint. "You should have said something earlier."

"I didn't know where he went," Skye said with a shrug. "And, honestly, a lot of things that night are just a blur. I'm glad I didn't sleep with him now, though. I mean, I was going to but..."

"I did," Melinda interrupted. "We've been kind of on and off since Christmas."

The silence came back, even more oppressive. Clint looked around the room, taking in each of them remembering the things Grant had done for or to them. Clint didn't want to speculate what kind of game the other man had thought he was playing. Probably wanted to avoid suspicion by being close to them. Or just wanted to mess them all up. Either way he was an ass.

"Oh, fuck this," Skye said, and when he looked over there were tears in her eyes and he wanted to punch Grant all over again. "Come on, we're all here, let's put a movie on or something. Phil, you've gotta have some comedies in here, right?"

"Yes," Phil agreed with a smile. "It's a good idea. Distract ourselves."

"I agree," Jemma said, rising quickly. "Do you have any popcorn, Phil?"
"The stuff you have to pop yourself..." Phil said, moving to get up.

"Oh, no," Leo said, holding his hands up. "Jemma and I have this. We used to make popcorn all the time. Come on, Jemma."

"I'll keep an eye on them," Melinda said, eyeing their retreating backs. Clint looked up to see Phil smiling. They were going to get through this together. They were going to be okay.

***

It was different on the roof that night. He could hear Skye in her room listening to music, for one thing. They were going to have to be quiet in bed from now on, apparently the place wasn't built with sound-proofing. They were also kind of quiet themselves, sat on the cushions watching the sky. A lot of think about, maybe.

"You know," Phil whispered into his ear. "You didn't have to stand up to Grant for me. He wouldn't have really hurt me."

"He shoved you," Clint said. When he others had gone he'd insisted on checking Phil's chest for bruises though he knew he was being stupid. There was nothing there of course. Just the usual scars. "Also, you didn't think he'd steal from you."

"That's true," Phil admitted. "Still, I don't think he'd hurt me. I just...I wish I understood why."

"There might not be a why," Clint cautioned. "Sometimes people are just idiots. Hell, I know you think of these kids like family but sometimes family fucks you over worst of all and it's worse because them fucking you over doesn't stop you loving them."

"It's still worth having family, though," Phil said, slowly, like he was aware of the minefield he was treading on. "It's still worth having people around you who care."

"I guess," Clint said, staring at the sky. "I just figure that something always goes wrong. I mean, I know I haven't been here long but look how much has gone wrong. Skye's living in a van and not studying, Grant's stealing from you. You can't say it's been a good time."

"You've caught us on an off-week," Phil admitted. "But we've also spent time together, enjoying each other's company. Skye made us buy plants for the roof. I think Jemma's closer to admitting how she feels out loud."

"You knew about that?"

"I know about that," Phil confirmed. "Though only from observation. I've had a good week, even without all that. There's this incredibly attractive man who's moved into my apartment and he's made the entire week a lot better."

"Oh man," Clint groaned. "You should have told me, I'd have gotten out of your way." The joke earned him a brief huff of laughter and a tightening of the arms around him.

"I'm just saying that, yeah, bad things have happened while you were here. Bad things would happen anyway. You didn't make Grant steal or Skye live in a van and lie to us all about it. But there have been good things too. I've been glad to have you here."

"You know I'll have to go soon, right," Clint said after a few minutes of silence. "You know I can't stay. I just..."
"Don't try and explain it," Phil said, kissing his cheek. "Just...just come to bed for tonight. For now. We'll worry about tomorrow tomorrow. Just be here with me today."

"I can do that," Clint said, turning for a kiss. He could try, anyway.
"Good morning, sunshine," Skye said, grinning like some kind of maniac. Clint grunted and shuffled past her, heading for the coffee pot. Beautiful, warm coffee. She laughed at him but he ignored it in favour of pouring a mug of coffee. It was far too early to be dealing with happy people yet. He'd even managed to sleep in, drifting back off after Phil had slipped out of bed to go open up. Somehow that seemed to have only made him more tired.

"You're really cute when you're grumpy," Skye supplied and he grunted at her, dumping some sugar in his coffee. Maybe it'd help to wake him up a little. He lifted it cautiously but he could already tell from the warmth of the mug in his hands that he'd have to let it cool.

"Ah, coffee," he grumbled, staring down at the cup as he wandered over to the table. "Why you gotta be hot?"

"You wouldn't want it cold," Skye pointed out but he just grunted at her and she carried on with what she was doing. He kept staring at the coffee until he caught the unmistakable smell of bacon frying. He looked up to see Skye at the stove.

"You making enough for me?" he asked, blearily.

"Yes," Skye said, the roll of her eyes obvious even when he couldn't see her face. "Of course I am. You like bacon pancakes, right?"

"Yes," Clint said decisively, going back to staring at his mug. He managed to take a sip and it was good. Maybe still a bit too warm but he wasn't going to burn his mouth at least so he took a longer drink, savouring the bitterness. Not as good as what they made in the shop downstairs of course but he'd get Phil to make him a real cup of coffee later.

By the time Skye put the pancakes down in front of him he was on his second cup and almost coherent. He didn't normally need coffee to wake up, never had the luxury of growing dependent, but today he seemed to. Maybe he was becoming a little dependent after all.

"Anything special you're making pancakes for?" Clint asked before tucking in. The pancakes were sweet and spongy and perfect.

"Just...I don't know, it's a nice day," Skye said with a gesture at the kitchen window. "I mean, things have been kind of bad for a long time but today it feels like they're looking up. Today feels like a good day, you know."

"Yeah," Clint agreed. "I guess there are some things that got taken care of."

"Right," Skye said with a nod. "And now we can start moving on. It's been a long time since I had a chance at normal but, for now, I've got a roof over my head and someone who gives a shit about me and I'm not going to let Grant drag me down. I'm going to pick up his shifts instead and we're going to prove just how much we don't need him."

"That's a pretty good attitude," Clint said, grinning at her. She blushed a little but still held her head high, quietly pleased with herself. She had a right to be. She'd gone through some shit and she'd come out strong. Clint felt like it was a hell of a long time since he'd come out of something stronger than he'd gone in. Everything seemed to diminish him somehow these days. The thing with Nat, for example. He'd loved her, and love was meant to make you stronger but it hadn't. In the end she'd just broken his heart, or he'd broken his own heart, and then he'd clung to his pining
like a fool.

Maybe that was his problem. He didn't want to change. Skye was obviously ready to change.

"You know," she said, leaning forward onto the table. "As Phil Coulson's official maybe daughter I'm now allowed to lecture you about breaking his heart."

"Like that stopped you before," Clint said with a laugh. "I'm not going to break his heart. He knows the deal. We've talked about it."

"Yeah, and he does a pretty good unaffected face," Skye said. "But he's still going to hurt when you go. If you go."

"Skye..."

"I know, it's not my place," she said, shoving her plate away. "It's just...things are getting good. Don't ruin this for us, Clint."

"I won't," he grumbled. He wouldn't ruin it, it was true. He didn't have that power. That was the entire point of the moving and the letting everyone know he'd go. Well, one of the points. He couldn't stay long enough to ruin anything.

"Whatever," Skye said with a sigh. "It's a lovely day, I'm not thinking about it. You're not going today, are you?"

"No," Clint said. "I'll tell you when I'm going to go."

"Fine. I'm going to go see if Phil needs a hand. You can do the washing."

She was gone before Clint could protest, leaving him with a sink full of plates and his thoughts.

***

A plate of food dropped unceremoniously into Clint's line of sight. A sandwich, but a damn fine looking one. He trailed it as it was lowered gently to the table then looked up at Phil and beamed. Phil smiled down at him like Clint was the best thing he'd seen in forever and then leant down to kiss him. It was wonderful.

"You doing okay?" Phil asked when the kiss broke, moving to sit across from him.

"Great," Clint said, sweeping the money he'd been counting from the table into a bag. His mornings takings and it put him nicely in the range to buy a last minute bus ticket and not immediately starve when he got to where he was going. He was good to go. Not that Phil needed to know that. He wasn't going NOW after all. "How about you? You get in touch with the police?"

"Yeah," Phil said with a sigh. "I hadn't wanted it to come to this. Once I start all of this it's out of my hands. It Grant had only talked to us..."

"But he didn't want to talk," Clint reminded him. "He wanted to punch."

"And that wasn't acceptable," Phil agreed, reaching out to gently brush Clint's cheek. He had, thankfully, avoided too much bruising and the bleeding hadn't come back so Clint wasn't too stressed about the punching but, well, he knew Phil was.

"So," he said, hoping to divert the conversation. "You managing without him on staff today. I noticed Skye's putting some more hours in."
"She says it's the least she can do since I'm letting her live here," Phil said with a shrug that showed just what he thought of that. "I don't...I don't think she quite believes yet that just having her here is enough payment for me. She'll learn."

"She will," Clint agreed, though he knew she might not. He still had trouble with the idea of his company being enough payment for anything. Sex, yes. Just his face around the place and his conversation. Not so much. "Gotta give her time."

"I will," Phil said, reaching over and squeezing Clint's hand. "So, are you going to be around at the weekend? I thought we could have everyone over for a barbeque or something? Make up for the mess that was last night?"

"I can't promise anything," Clint said, the weight of the money in his pocket sitting at the back of his mind. That was his rule. Get enough money, finish the song, then go. The money was there and the song, well, it was a little closer to being done than he honestly might like. It wasn't like he wanted to leave. It was just how things were. How they'd always been.

"No, I shouldn't have asked," Phil said with a sad little frown. "We'll do it tonight. I mean, you'll be here tonight."

"I will," Clint agreed. He would. No way he was going to be done with the song by the end of tonight.

***

Clint placed his guitar on Phil's bed and sighed. It was done. Damnit, he hadn't meant for it to be but it was done. He'd meant to play a few chords, dally over it, but he kept thinking about Skye's smile that morning and the way she always bounced back from everything and how much Phil cared about her and how lucky she was and it was like the entire thing had fallen together though he hadn't wanted it to. He'd considered deliberately sabotaging it but he couldn't do that. If he didn't get it down now he knew it'd never fit together in the same way ever again.

Damn but he hadn't wanted to finish that song.

When he'd divorced Bobbi, it seemed like forever ago now, he'd made three rules for himself. Three simple rules to keep life manageable. Write a song in each place and leave when it's done. Make just enough money to get by but don't think about building a future. Don't fall in love.

The last one, he knew, hadn't lasted long. There was Natasha, beautiful and passionate Natasha. And Phil, now, with his kindness and his smiles and the damn good sex. There had been others, there probably would be others. He wasn't a man built for not falling in love but as long as he kept to rules one and two he was safe.

The problem with Bobbi had been that he'd tried to stay. It wasn't the loving her that hurt, it was the trying to be normal. Trying to find a job and a house and some kind of stability. Trying to provide. They'd fallen in love too quickly, got married before they knew each other. She wanted a future, he barely had a present.

Anyone could have told them it was doomed. Bobbi's family did often. They hadn't wanted to listen. They were in love, what could hurt them?

He couldn't break the rules. Sure, he loved Phil. Who wouldn't love Phil? And he'd miss Phil like a limb. He'd miss waking up with him. Miss their lunches. Miss the roof - the safe place they'd made together. If he stayed, though, how long would it take Phil to work out he wasn't of any value? Not
long.

So, yeah, he was going to miss it but he missed a lot of things in his life. He'd miss getting
terrorised by Melinda. He'd miss seeing Jemma bloom out of her shell. He'd miss seeing Leo
become an adult in more than name. He'd miss seeing who they brought into their family and why
they trusted that person. Most of all he'd miss Skye. If she hadn't found the family she wanted here
he'd almost be tempted to suggest they carry on together. She was a good kid, she'd be a stunning
woman one day. He wished he was going to be here to help her with it.

The problem was he couldn't be.

He just couldn't be.

***

Phil wearing an apron to work a barbeque was possibly the most adorable thing Clint had ever seen
in his life. Phil apparently took his grilled meats very seriously. There was, apparently, protocol.
Clint had thought they'd just have to haul in the washing and maybe sweep a little but Phil had
checked the wind direction and spent a good fifteen minutes setting the thing going and watching it
burn. He measured the temperature carefully to decide when it was best to begin cooking. He'd
prepared everything before-hand. This was no sausage and burger affair. There was chicken in
different marinades and a variety of vegetables. His apron had Captain America's shield on.

It was the geekiest, weirdest thing Clint had seen in a long time and he was so in love he felt like
his chest was going to burst.

"You know," Melinda said, looking out over his shoulder. "He would let you stay."

"I can't," Clint said. He'd been saying the words over and over to himself for hours but they didn't
seem to be going in.

"I used to think I'd be in the military forever," Melinda said. Clint didn't dare turn to look at her.
They hadn't really spoken since he got here. The only person he hadn't felt he'd connected with
even a little and now he felt that, to look at her when she was telling him something that was
obviously personal, she'd somehow disappear or it'd all turn out to be an illusion.

"I used to think that all I was good for was killing. I am very good at killing. I couldn't see a way
away from that for myself. Then Phil was injured. Back then we were soldiers together. Siblings in
arms. The others were all afraid of me, or looked down on me. Phil never did. He's the most calm,
competent man I know and I'd have followed him to hell. Turned out he didn't want to go to hell.
He wanted a normal life and somehow I ended up following him here too. He showed me that there
could be another side of me. He found skills in me that nobody else had ever valued.

"Don't think you know him, Clint. You've been here a little over a week, you've barely even begun
to scrape the surface. Phil is one of the best men I know. He's calm and strong and takes everyone
as he finds them. When you go he'll accept it, he'll go on, but a part of him will always be looking
for you. Just remember that."

When he turned around she was already moving towards the kitchen where Skye and Jemma were
talking. He looked back out of the window. Back at Phil. No, his going wouldn't break Phil. Phil
was...he knew there was so much more there. He wished he had a lifetime to spend finding out.

Stupid rules.

He retreated back to his room and brought his guitar. Nobody bothered him while he was playing
so he moved onto the roof and provided the soundtrack. Phil smiled at him, a soft little smile and
carried on grilling. Clint watched through the window. It was like watching life on TV. Leo arrived
and Jemma and Skye hugged him. Melinda presided over them all like pack mother. They made a
salad, chatted. Skye and Jemma leaned into each other's personal space a little too much. Skye
danced to his music and eventually encouraged Jemma to join in.

This was why he made music. He was a mess but music, music was pure.

"Hey," Phil said, and he looked up from his strumming to find the other man smiling at him softly
and holding out a plate of food. "You want to tell the others we're ready to eat?"

"Sure," Clint said, setting down his guitar. He stopped to kiss Phil, putting his hands on Phil's face
and feeling him. He felt real, solid, alive.

Clint wanted to say forever.

Eventually he pulled away and went to round up the others. They ate sitting on the roof, arranged
on blankets and cushions. Skye threw her legs over Jemma's. Phil sat slumped against the wall and
against Clint, tucked in under Clint's arm. Leo lounged, took up as much space as he wanted.
Melinda took the only chair at the table, the other still inside from yesterday.

They all talked around him, about work and lives. He didn't know Jemma played the violin. He
didn't know Skye's real passion was computer coding. He didn't know Melinda's mother used to
work in secret services.

He had known about Phil's love for Captain America, which was apparently a teasing point
between him and Melinda. What he didn't know, what Phil was embarrassed into telling, was that
he loved it because of the idea of protecting people. Because Steve Rogers had been nothing - a
tiny little person - and he'd ended up as the world's first superhero.

Clint could see why someone might find that inspiring.

When he'd finished eating he reluctantly extracted himself from Phil and got his guitar again. He
strummed a few chords then tapped it until they were all looking at him.

"Okay," he said, shifting a little. "I've written a new song and I was wondering if you guys wanted
to hear it first."

"Of course," Skye said, rolling her eyes. He grinned, knew she'd be up for it. He looked over at
Phil and there was something wooden in his look but he nodded. Clint had his book right there and
he flipped it to the new song. Skye's song, though he wasn't going to tell them all that. He'd tell
Skye later when it was just the two of them.

"Okay," he said, "This one's called Soul."
He didn't look up from his music as he played. Didn't want to see the faces of the people around him, see their reactions. The worst part of any piece was playing it for the first time for an audience. Sometimes the thing that worked for you just didn't work when you played it for someone else.

He had to admit, he was kind of hoping that would be the case this time. Kind of hoping he'd be able to tear the page out of his notebook and start again. The problem was that everything just worked. It fit. The notes came together without him trying. The harmony and the melody and the lyrics all worked and, damn, but it was good. He didn't want it to be good.

He finished and set the guitar down, daring to look up. They were all smiling. Even Melinda had cracked a little smile for him and when he looked up they burst into enthusiastic applause. Phil's arm was around him again and Skye was laughing and they liked it.

It was good.

It was time to go.

***

Clint dumped the last of the washing into the sink as he heard Phil coming back up the stairs. He knew he should really do it. He should really, really do it as he was going to leave tomorrow but he didn't want to. He wanted to go curl up around Phil in bed and never leave.

"Hey."

He looked up to find Phil leaning in the door, watching him. "Come with me for a minute."

"Sure," Clint said, happily abandoning the washing. He reached out and took Phil's hand and then let Phil lead him through the living room and out onto the roof. It was mostly clean now, though a little different somehow for not being just their place any more. Still, it was good. When he was gone Phil would still have this.

Not that he needed to worry about Phil. Phil would be fine. He already knew he should be worrying about himself. When he'd left Natasha he'd started mailing her his journals. He couldn't
keep them all and it seemed like a good thing to do. Maybe he'd do that with Phil now. Just a little nod to say he was still alive. He'd have to write to Nat. Explain to her that while a part of his heart would always love her, she wasn't his most recent and most painful scar any more.

Phil turned the Christmas lights on and then came to stand with him, studying his face. Clint took the moment to study Phil right back. He was a good looking man. Firm.

Damn but Clint wanted to stay.

"You finished your song," Phil said, finally, reaching up to cup Clint's cheek.

"Yeah," Clint confirmed. He didn't want to say it but it seemed like Phil remembered so there was no point in hiding it. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'm gonna..."

"I know," Phil interrupted, his hand dropping to grip Clint's shoulder. "I know. You don't need to say it. Just...we have tonight."

"Yeah," Clint said, leaning in. Phil was right there, meeting his lips with a kiss that was more fierce and claiming than any he'd given before. So much so that Clint felt like he was going to lose himself in it. Felt like he didn't even care. He couldn't give Phil forever but he could give him this.

When Phil was done kissing his lips he moved on to Clint's neck. Holding him still as he sucked bruises onto Clint's skin like a horny teenager. Marking. Claiming. Clint might be going but he was going to walk out of here belonging to Phil Coulson, like he didn't already in all the ways that were important.

"Phil," he whispered, sliding his hands up Phil's back.

"Don't talk," Phil said, his breath hot on Clint's neck. "Not tonight. Just...just be with me."

"Okay," Clint said, though there was still a lot to say. He'd never even told Phil he loved him, he didn't want the first time the sentiment passed from him to Phil to be in a journal entry but at the same time he understood. Phil knew he was going. He knew he was going. If he said those words now it would only cheapen them. They wouldn't sound like the truth they were, they'd sound like something he was just saying. He didn't want that.

"Come to bed?" he said instead, tugging at Phil's shirt.

"I want you out here," Phil replied, pulling his shirt off quickly. He looked magnificent. Muscles and scars and a life story and Clint thought about all the things he didn't know, all the things he'd never know, and he wanted to cry. "Just like our first night."

"Just like our first night," Clint agreed. He could appreciate the symbolism of it. Back where they started.

After that he didn't talk. He stripped quickly and then helped Phil out of his pants. They hadn't stripped on that first night but they'd come a way since then. Phil kissed him again as they sank down to lay in the cushions. On the lips first, just as claiming as before, and then down across his chest. He sucked another bruise over Clint's heart and then carried on down to his hips where he left a trail of them along his hip bone. He might as well have written Phil Coulson was here with marker but Clint didn't mind a bit. He felt safe and home and owned.

When Phil was done with the hips he kissed the inside of Clint's thigh. He kissed right down to the knee and back up again, like he wanted to sample every part of Clint before he left. Every time Clint tried to reciprocate he just found himself pushed gently back down into the cushions as Phil
worked.

Phil pulled right back to kiss the soles of his feet and then kissed his way back up again all the way to Clint's mouth where he kissed him like he was sealing a deal. Maybe he was. Maybe this was a ritual and Clint now belonged to Phil forever. He wouldn't be surprised. He was pretty sure that was true anyway. This was different from any other love. There was a sense of permanence about it. But, hell, maybe all love felt like this at first and it just faded in time.

He hoped this never faded.

Phil went back to his pants and came back with condoms and lube. They hadn't been doing this long enough to establish a pattern about who topped yet but it seemed pretty clear who would be tonight. Clint was already loose from the last two days so it didn't take Phil long to open him up again though he took his time anyway. He rimmed Clint first which made him squirm and gasp, struggling to stay quiet. He was very aware of the window behind them and Phil had drawn the curtains but he didn't want Skye seeing this.

And then Phil had apparently decided he was ready and he was right there, inside Clint and over Clint and all around him and Clint couldn't catch his breath. It was too much, he felt like he was losing himself in Phil and he didn't even care. Phil stayed still, hard inside him, stroking Clint's cheeks and kissing him until he centered himself again. And then Phil began to move.

When they'd had sex before it had always been slow and careful. Phil wasn't slow and careful tonight. Phil fucked like he wanted Clint to feel it for weeks. Maybe he did. Clint wanted to feel it for weeks. He wanted to be sitting, a week from now, in some diner and feel the twinge of Phil fucking him. Of Phil owning him. He wanted to feel it a year from now. Ten years from now. He wanted the feeling to embed itself in his skin so he could carry it with him always.

He came far too fast, gasping and, okay, maybe there was a little tear there too. It took Phil a little while longer to come but Clint just lay there, quietly, waiting for him. Letting Phil use his body.

He wanted to stay.

When Phil was finished he collapsed on top of Clint, pressing him down and back into the cushions. Clint let him. He brought a hand up to stroke along Phils' back, letting him lounge. It took them a long time before they were ready to let each other go and head to bed.
Clint woke to a finger stroking his cheek. It was gentle, obviously not meant to wake him, but it did all the same. His eyes opened before he could stop them, denying him the pleasure of staying for a few more seconds in that strange, dark world where everything was okay. Where he didn't have to face reality.

Phil was watching him and, for just a fraction of a second, he looked devastated. And then the look was gone and he was leaning in, pressing Clint back onto the bed like he could imprint Clint into the sheets and kissing him like the world was ending and this was going to be their last triumphant yell before the blackness took them. Deep and long and passionate and world changing and goodbye.

And then suddenly it was over. Phil drew back entirely and by the time Clint forced his eyes open again the bedroom door was shutting. Phil was gone and Clint knew he'd never see him again.

He wanted to curl up under the sheets and refuse to move. He wanted to cry. He wanted to go downstairs and grab Phil and ask him why he wasn't fighting for them. All of those things would be unfair. This was his choice. He was choosing to go, it wasn't right to punish Phil for it.

Still, he couldn't manage to motivate himself out of bed. He lay there until he heard Skye's door open. He listened to the faint sound of her shower and then to her clattering in the kitchen. He listened as she whistled her way downstairs. He could hear faint sounds of the morning rush from down there.

Once he was sure he was alone he forced himself out from under the covers. He had travelling to do today, didn't pay to be lazy. Phil, wonderful Phil, had already stacked his clothes for him. He noticed that one of his t-shirts was gone but one of Phil's had replaced it and that was okay. That was better than okay. He dressed and then dared to dart to the bathroom. The rest of the apartment felt unfriendly. Like the walls were closing in, and he slipped back into the bedroom.

He took out his notebook then, opening it to the next new page. He'd thought, well, he'd wanted to leave something for Phil. A note or a promise. But what was there to say? He was going and he wasn't coming back. In the end he just shut the book again and put it back in his bag.

His guitar was still on the roof and he went out to get it. It still looked like their place. His Christmas lights hung all around. For a second he wanted to rip them down. To push the plants off the wall and tear up the pillows. This place was theirs. He'd made it for Phil and it wasn't fair that Phil would get to come out here and sit and remember them. To look at the place where they first and last made love when Clint would have nothing.

He couldn't, though. It was his choice to leave, it wouldn't be fair.

Finally, everything was ready and together. He thought about delaying. He thought about making a sandwich and taking it to Phil. He thought about stealing one last kiss. About having one last conversation with Skye. About, well, about not going. It wouldn't be fair, though. Phil had said his goodbye and it had obviously hurt him and Clint's job, now, was to leave as quickly and as quietly as he could.

So, grabbing his guitar and his bag, that was what he did.

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"You some kind of musician or something?"

The bus was sweltering and unusually full of bodies. He'd thought heading to Philadelphia would mean it wouldn't be too bad but he'd been so very, very wrong. Some kid a few rows back had thrown up so the entire bus reeked anyway but somehow the smell of pot coming off young, white and stupid next to him seemed to be overwhelming even that.

It was getting really, really hard to remember he'd chosen to be here. He could be back in New York right now writing songs and stealing kisses and having a home. Hard to remember that this was better.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," the idiot next to him said, jostling Clint's arm. Clint didn't know why he'd picked now, halfway through the journey, to start making trouble but he had. Clint wanted to ignore him but he also didn't want the kid to try starting something so it was easier to just reply.

"Yeah, I play the guitar," Clint said, patting the guitar case between his legs.

"Sweet," the guy said, apparently satisfied with that. "You write your own stuff?"

"A little," Clint said with a shrug. "I mean, a few songs here and there."

"Like, love songs to pull in the ladies?"

"Kind of," Clint said with a grin as, yeah, he'd done some of that in his time.

"I wanted to write my girl a song," the guy said, gazing off into the distance. "I mean, I tried. I'm not a damn musician though. Kept doing it wrong. Kept getting what I wanted to say confused with what sounded good, you know? Ended up writing something that wasn't about her at all, not even a bit like what I'd wanted to write when I set out. She dumped me anyway, bitch."

"Sucks," Clint said, glad when the guy lapsed back into silence. Still, his words kept rattling round in Clint's head which was ridiculous. Clint had heard his share of wisdom from pot-heads before and it was never so much wisdom as rambling. But something about what that guy said...

He'd written the songs he wanted to write. Always. But had he written the songs he needed to write? He hadn't even told Skye that the song was for her, in the end. They hadn't had a moment alone and it had seemed a weird thing to say to someone. Hey, that song was for you. Or about you.

The thing was, writing about Skye had been easy. He was allowed to write about Skye. She was the kind of person everyone liked. She made a good heroine for the three verse play he'd written. He'd enjoyed writing about her but, when he thought about it, was that what he should have written? When he sat and thought back to New York in years to come he wasn't naive enough to think he'd remember Skye's name. Or Jemma's or Leo's or Melinda's. Things about them, yes, but not everything. He'd known them for a week. They were good kids but they weren't...

They weren't Phil.

In years he was going to look back and think about Phil. New York hadn't been about Skye, she'd been a nice distraction. New York had been about Phil and about falling in love and he'd written entirely the wrong song.

He'd always known he was a fuck up but this...

He shifted around, managing to reach the bag under the seat and extract his notebook and pencil.
He'd done it wrong but it wasn't too late to put it right. He could almost feel the lyrics forming in his head already. He could do this. He could write a song for Phil and for them and then maybe he could let go.

***

Clint wrote their song.

He wrote it on the bus, the lyrics flying out of him like they'd just been waiting for him to turn and look at them. It was easy and it was hard and he filled pages and then had to cross things out because there was too much. There was too much of him and Phil to fit in a single song. He wanted to write Phil all the songs. A million of them at least. He wanted to spend the rest of his life writing love songs for Phil Coulson.

As soon as they hit Philadelphia he get himself off the bus and found the nearest park. He quickly found a bench like the hobo he was and had his guitar out. The melody came as easily as the words had. The entire thing just seemed to slot together and no song had ever been this easy. No song had ever come from the heart like this. Normally this process took days of trying things and going back and trying other things and crossing things out but this time it was easy. He just thought about Phil last night in the low light of the roof. He thought about the marks Phil had left all over his body. He thought about Phil, working so damn hard for everyone else and never taking a second for himself.

He finished the song as the crowds of children and mothers retired to make way for the evening crowd. He played it through all the way once more and it was good. Right. Maybe not the perfect song but he was never going to write the perfect song. The point was that it said when he needed it to say.

Now he just needed to say it.

He never went back. He never stayed. Those were the rules. That was how you avoided having your heart broken. But he didn't want to follow the rules any more. He was just done, so done. He wanted to play his song to Phil and curl up in Phil's arms and stay forever.

Maybe, at the end of it all, that was the point of falling in love. Falling in love wasn't quiet and comfortable and easy to walk away from. It was the kind of thing that shook you down to your very core, that made you change yourself overnight.

Clint had been running for years but he'd been shaken to pieces and he didn't want to run any more. Didn't want to hide. He'd had all the adventures the road had to offer and maybe, now, it was time for a new adventure. An adventure made up of putting down roots and letting people in and of learning to live together instead of living apart.

Sure he'd messed this up in the past but that didn't mean he couldn't get it right this time. He had to try. Phil was worth the effort it would take to try.

He was going to go home.

***

"Hey, man," Clint said, sliding up to the bus driver. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," the man said, suspicion on his face. He took another drag of his cigarette as Clint looked around to see if there were any cameras. He was good.
"So, thing is, I really desperately need to get to New York tonight but I can't afford the ticket."

"Sorry," the bus driver said, his eyes already drifting away. "Nothing I can do about that."

"You've gotta listen to me," Clint said, and he knew there was some desperation in his voice there but he needed this guy to listen. He'd tried to sweet-talk the lady at the ticket desk and that hadn't done any good. After this his only option was going to be to stow away. He'd done that once before and it was hell but he HAD to get back to Phil tonight. Somehow it felt like tomorrow would be too late.

"Look," he said, glancing up at the windows. "This your last run of the day? It's not full. I'll give you all the money I have in the world. It's not much but all yours, none to the bus company. You've just gotta let me slip on."

"It's my job if they find you," the driver said with a careless shrug. "Nothing doing."

"Okay, I get that," Clint said. He really didn't want to have to hide in the suitcase compartment again. "I just...I swear if an inspector gets on I'll say I snuck on when you were on your bathroom break. Hell, I can. You go to the can now and I'll sneak on. It's just gotta be tonight is all."

"What's the hurry?" the guy asked, looking Clint over. "You in some kind of trouble?"

"No," Clint said. "Not like you're thinking. Look, I'll tell you my damn sob story, okay. I'm an idiot. I woke up this morning in New York with the best man in the world. He'd...damn but he's wonderful. Smart and kind and I don't know what the hell a guy like him was doing with a guy like me but I didn't question it. The thing is, I've always moved around. Never stayed in one place too long and this morning that seemed more important than staying. Which was stupid. I wanted to stay. It was all I wanted but for some reason I thought that when I moved it'd be easier. It isn't. It's worse. I've gotta get home to him, you see. If I don't he's gonna think I'm gone forever and there isn't going to be a home left for me to go back to. I've never had a home in my life before."

"How you going to convince this guy to take you back?" the bus driver asked, skeptically. "I mean, if he's as awesome as you say..."

"I wrote him a song," Clint said, lifting the guitar case a little. "I got off the bus and I wrote him a song and I realised I need to go back and play it for him. If I play it and he doesn't want me then I'll go quietly but I've gotta try."

"My boyfriend's an idiot too," the bus driver said, looking down at the lit cigarette between his fingers. "Does stupid impulsive shit then comes crawling back."

Clint held his breath. He didn't know if this comparison was going to help him or not. Didn't want to risk spoiling everything. He could see the bus driver's face turning, though. This guy obviously cared about his idiot boyfriend as much as Clint hoped Phil cared about him.

"How much money you got?" the driver asked. Clint reached into his pocket and pulled out the last of his cash. It'd see him turning up in New York with no money but worse things had happened. The driver reached out and took the money, slipping it into his pocket.

"Once a trucker drove my boyfriend home when he realised he was stuck. I'm going for a bathroom break. Guess I won't see if you get onto the bus or not."

"Guess you won't," Clint agreed. "Thank you."

The driver just nodded, heading across the lot. Clint slipped around and into the bus. He quickly
claimed a seat near the back and settled in. He was going home. Now he just needed to work out what to say.

***

In Clint's head it was all really simple. He let himself in and Phil was just there in the living room. He smiled at Clint like there was nothing wrong and made them coffee and they went out onto the balcony and it was all very normal and he didn't have to explain himself. It just happened.

Reality, he knew, was never going to measure up. How did you go back when you'd left forever?

By the time he walked from the bus station it was closing on midnight. He came down the back street but all the lights were out. They were probably already both asleep, he'd probably missed his window. A day gone had never felt so long before. What if, once he was gone, Phil had realised things were better without him? What if Phil realised he was a waste of space and they'd drunk to him being gone? What if Phil hadn't missed him at all?

He knew he was being an overly dramatic mess but he couldn't help it. He'd never gone back before. He needed this to work.

He did, briefly, consider slinking away into the night. He considered curling up on the doorstep to sleep. He'd come this far, though. He wasn't going to back down, even if he did have to wake Phil up. He pushed the doorbell.

Phil's bedroom light came on almost right away. Like Phil had been lying there in the dark waiting for him. It wasn't long before Phil was opening the door, wearing pjamas for the first time since Clint had got here. Their eyes met and there was something like shock or maybe hope in Phil's before he looked away.

"What are you doing here?" Phil said and, okay, maybe that wasn't the best opening.

"Can I come in?" Clint asked, glancing around Phil. Skye hadn't appeared yet. Good. He couldn't deal with them both at the same time. Phil hesitated then nodded, stepping aside and letting Clint in. It felt oddly like being there the first time. Like he was a guest again and he guessed he was. He sure as hell didn't live here anymore. Not yet. He let Phil lead him back up into the living room.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," Phil said once they were up there. He looked a little lost, like he wasn't sure how to deal with this now.

"I needed to talk to you," Clint admitted. "Can we go out onto the roof?"

"Yeah..." Phil said, heading to the window. As he opened it Clint flicked on the Christmas lights and followed him out. It was just as he'd left it, right down to the weird placement of cushions from where they'd sprawled in them the night before. Like Phil hadn't been able to bring himself to come out here or to move anything. "I'm going to be honest," Phil said, taking the chair. "I didn't expect to see you again. Not that...I'm saying this wrong. It's good to see you but why are you here?"

"A few reasons," Clint said, setting his bag down. He opened his guitar case and took the instrument out as Phil watched and waited. "I...I need to say some things. I've been kind of an idiot but I guess you know that already. I guess it's obvious to everyone but me that I'm an idiot. I was talking to this guy on the bus about music and about meaning. He said something about writing the song that's easy, not the one you mean. The song I wrote here was easy. It wasn't about me at all really, it was about Skye and I was just an observer to it. It wasn't my feelings. It wasn't what I should have written. I...I wrote another song. I wrote it and then I knew I had to play it so I came
"Are you going to leave again right after?" Phil asked, something in his face hardening.

"No," Clint said, quickly. "I mean, I hope not. Just let me play it, please?"

Phil nodded so Clint lifted the guitar, took a breath, and began to play.

Rooftop Rendezvous by Jason Manns on Grooveshark

He couldn't help but watch Phil as he played. Couldn't help but see the way Phil smiled, the way he nodded along to the music. Apparently Clint had done okay. It made it easier to finish. Easier to lay this one little piece of his soul out there for Phil to see. He could see now how it wasn't perfect, how he could have made a better song with more time but he wasn't sad to be here now playing it as it was.

When he finished he set the guitar down on the ground gently and moved around to kneel on the floor next to where Phil was sitting. It felt weird, too dramatic, but he hadn't wanted to stand and loom. Phil gave him a smile like he understood something and when Clint reached for his hands Phil reached back, lacing their fingers together.

"I'm an idiot," Clint started. "I mess everything up. I fall in love too quickly and too easily and I seem to attract trouble like a magnet. I make ridiculous decisions but I hope so much that this isn't one of them. I love you. I want...god, I want to find out everything about you. I want to find all the things that make you so damn wonderful and keep them safe and love them and I was an idiot to go. I was scared, maybe. I don't even know. But I don't want to run away anymore. I want to stay."

"You're sure?" Phil asked. "You can't do this to me and then turn around tomorrow and say you didn't mean it."

"It's all I've wanted for days," Clint said, willing Phil to understand how unusual that was for him. "I don't want this thing to have an end date on it. I don't want to wake up and look at your face and count down the number of days until I never get to see it again. I mean, I can't guarantee forever. The last time I tried that the person I was with got sick of me after a few months and threw me out, but I want to stay here and try."

"I want you to stay," Phil said, and there was a longing in his voice. "I want to wake up every morning and have you there. I want you to help me talk Skye into going to college and I want to make love to you on this roof every night and I want you to work with me in the shop and to have stability and home and I just...I just want you here. You don't want to do any of that other stuff..."

"I want that other stuff," Clint interrupted. "I want a life here with you. Want it so badly."

"And you're not going to leave again?"

"Not unless you force me out," Clint said, but Phil's hands were already there, pulling him up to straddle Phil's lap and as they settled together he wanted to cry or scream but instead he just leant in and kissed Phil. Kissed Phil like he was dying and only this would save him and then, again, much more slowly, like this had all the the time in the world because now, for the first time in a long time, they did.
Clint didn't know how he'd ended up tending bar, as it were, but he wasn't complaining. The coffee shop was crowded with excited people and someone needed to be the mature, responsible one. He could hardly ask Skye to do that on her graduation day and Phil was busy playing at being the adorably dorky dad so it was the least Clint could do. Not that it was really playing now for Phil since the adoption papers had gone through. Not that it had ever been playing, really. Phil didn't play with people.

"Hey." He looked up at Melinda slid behind the counter. For today the door was locked and they were stocked with alcohol. He watched as she grabbed a bottle of vodka and poured a quick measure. "Are you hiding behind here."

"No," Clint scoffed. "Just taking care of things."

"You're being an idiot," she said, throwing an affectionate arm around his shoulder. He returned the one-armed hug quickly, smiling a little. Things like this, graduation day, it made him think back. There was a time when he'd have never believed it was possible for Melinda May to actually like him. Now he couldn't imagine not having her around.

Went to show how things change when you let them. When you let yourself change.

"Go out there," she said giving him a gentle shove. "They'll all want to see you."

"No, they all want to get drunk and reminisce," Clint grumbled. "You going to watch the alcohol?"

"I will stand guard," Melinda said, flashing him one of her half-smiles. "Go talk to your family."

He rolled his eyes but he did slide out from behind the counter. The party had been Phil's idea but Skye had run with it. He'd envisioned a small thing with just the regulars. He was sure it would degrade to that at some point as the crowd drifted of to other parties but for now it was them and everyone Skye had ever met, apparently. They'd pushed all the tables back for the day and the floor was full of young faces celebrating their graduations.

Skye, for once, wasn't in the middle of it. Instead she was sat over at the side with Phil and Jemma and he made his way over there. He couldn't help but grin when he saw Jemma's fingers were laced with Skye's. They'd taken their time but they were getting there. Turned out not everyone threw themselves head first into love like he did.

"Oh, there you are," Skye said as he came over. "Come on, hurry up. I want a family picture."

"You want me to take it?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. Skye just rolled her eyes at him.

"Oh please, you're as much a part of this mess of a family as I am. Jemma's going to take it. Then I want a big one with everyone who works here."

"Sure," Clint said, trying to hide the fact he was actually surprised. He'd known Skye thought of him as family but he'd thought, in her personal family tree, he ranked on about the same level as Jemma. Like, close but not REAL family. He was hardly a dad like Phil was though he supposed he'd done his share of late-night coffee making and proof-reading and listening to her throw ideas about in order to get her through this degree so he deserved to be in the picture.

Jemma took the camera and moved back and he took her place, Phil and himself bracketing Skye
like they were actually her dads and, hell, maybe he was. Maybe it was okay for him to think like
that. It wasn't like there were any other daughters waiting for him out there and Skye, he sure as
hell loved her like she was his.

His daughter. Family. He liked it.

Jemma took the photo and hurried away to round up Leo and Trip. Phil excused himself to fetch
Melinda and he found himself alone with Skye. She leant against his shoulder and he hugged her
quickly.

"Thank you," she said, grinning at him. "This, all of this, I couldn't have done any of it without
you.

"Whatever," Clint said with a roll of his eyes. "You did this yourself. Don't pawn it off on me, be
proud of your own achievement."

"Oh, I am," Skye said with a laugh. "I've worked damn hard for this. But...I love Phil a lot and he's
my dad and everything but there are some things he doesn't get that you do. I don't...I know you're
the kind of idiot who likes to pretend he isn't important but you are important to me. Some days I've
just wanted to quit and let myself be a failure and you've been there with a cup of coffee and you've
let me rant and what I'm trying to say is thanks for that. I'm glad you came back."

"I'm glad I came back too," Clint said, hugging Skye tightly. "I know Phil's the one on the
paperwork but, you know, I'm pretty proud to be your family too."

"I'm glad," Skye said, hugging him back. And then the masses were descending on them and Phil
was organising them all so one of Skye's friends could fit them all in shot. He found himself stood
with an arm around Skye and Phil pressed against his back and everyone he gave a shit about there
and he probably looked like an idiot because he couldn't stop grinning but who cared. He was just
so damn proud of Skye and so damn happy he was here.

It could have all turned out so differently but if he could do it again he'd pick this every time.

Once the picture was done Jemma dragged Skye over to where a makeshift dance floor was
forming and the others drifted away. He noted happily that Melinda went back to dispensing
alcohol. He trusted her a lot more than he trusted these kids.

That left just him and Phil. Phil who had gotten through the day looking like this was the happiest
day of his life. It was a good look on him.

"You want to dance, too?" Phil asked, arms sliding around Clint and Clint just laughed, turning
around to put his arms around Phil's neck. They were both terrible dancers but they could manage a
passable swaying on the spot while the music played. He rested his forehead against Phil's and let
the happiness sink in. He'd had so much damn happiness since he decided to stay that he kept
waiting for the other shoe to drop but he was starting to believe that might never happen.

"I love you," Phil said, smiling contentedly at him. "I keep thinking. I don't know if it's just that
Skye's graduating and moving out or what but...I love you. I'm glad you're here."

"People keep saying that to me," Clint said with a small laugh. "I never got far. You were too good
for me to really risk losing."

"Still," Phil said, rubbing a hand up over Clint's back. "It's just a good day."

"It is," Clint agreed. "Everyone together."
And it was. He was exactly where he was meant to be and he knew it and looking at the content smile on Phil's face he just fell in love all over again. That was the best thing about Phil, he fell in love with the other man at least twice a day. He'd been waiting for it to stop or get old but it never did. He still wrote Phil love songs and Phil still taught him new recipes and he was still as in love as he'd ever been and he just wanted the entire damn world to know it. Wanted Phil to know it.

"Come with me," he said, tugging gently as Phil's arm. Phil raised an eyebrow but he let himself be led. Clint knew he should probably wait to do this but nobody else had to know he'd done it today. It just seemed like the right day. They were all looking back at where they'd been and looking forward to where they were going and it just felt right.

He took Phil out into the roof. It was still pretty much the same as when Clint had first set it up. Over the years they'd replaced various things but the general layout was the same. Their place. Their world away from the world.

"I might be picking a bad day to do this," Clint warned. "I'm not trying to steal Skye's applause. I just couldn't wait any more."

"You're not leaving?" Phil asked, brow wrinkling and Clint had to laugh at that idea.

"Like I could even if I wanted to. I'm not leaving, I'm staying right here. As long as you'll have me. That's kind of it, actually."

"You wanted to tell me you're not leaving. I know that."

"Yes, but more. I...I want to get married. To you. I mean, you've basically agreed to keep me and whatever craziness made you do that hadn't faded over the last few years so I thought maybe we could make it legal."

"You make it sound so romantic," Phil said, with a little laugh, looping an arm around him. "You want to try that again or you want me to do mine?"

"Wait, you have a speech prepared?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow.

"For a while now," Phil confirmed. "I just didn't want to spook you. You want to hear it?"

"Yes," Clint said with a grin. Phil had been planning to propose to him. This was awesome. He supposed it meant they were getting married for sure now.

"So, Clint Barton," Phil said, trying to make his expression serious but it just came out fond. "I love you far too much. You are a wonderful adventure and I feel like every day I spend with you is new and exciting. I love the things I know about you. I love that you won't admit how much you need coffee in the morning. I love that you still write me love songs. I love the thing you do with your nose when you're upset. I don't love that you squeeze the toothpaste tube in the middle but nobody's perfect. The one day you left was terrible and I never want to do that again. I need you so I would be honoured if you'd consent to being my husband."

"You're right," Clint said, "That was a lot more romantic. And I'm not sure how we got turned around to you being the one doing the proposing but, in case I wasn't clear enough, yes. I'll marry you. I love you so much I think it's going to drive me crazy."

"I'm glad," Phil said, pulling him in close. "You drive me crazy too." And then they were kissing and Clint let himself just enjoy it. He had family. He had a home. He had Phil in every way. Life had never been better.
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