The Only John Wayne Left in This Town

by gyzym

Summary

Clint's got a secret love, and it's spelled b-a-n-j-o.

Notes

Okay, first of all, this story comes with a mix; that file contains every song mentioned in this story, plus a bonus Luke Bryan song, because this fic was called "Gonna Watch You Make Me Fall In Love" until the last minute.

Secondly, ridiculous thanks to fuck-it-fire-everything, marielikestodraw, siriaeve and postcardmystery for reading this and reassuring me I was not completely out of my mind, and of course to angelgazing, for whom I wrote it in the first place. You guys are the best <3

The chair, Clint knows, isn't metal; it's plastic, because it looked plastic when he sat down on it, and it feels plastic under his curled fingers. It's plastic like the cup of shitty coffee that's been placed just out of his reach, like the frozen faces of this panel of SHIELD agents he's been hauled in front of. At the center of the table, Nick Fury glowers at him with one unforgiving eye, and Clint forcibly resists the urge to shift in his chair. It's not metal; there's definitely no chance they're going to electrocute him.

With the chair, anyway.

"I assume you know what this is about, Agent Barton," Fury says, and Clint winces, because yeah, he knows what this is about; even if he didn’t, no one calls him 'Agent Barton' anymore unless he's in the deep shit. He's Hawkeye or Clint or Barton or, in the very specific case of Thor and Thor alone, Clinton--he lets Darcy call him Dixie, sometimes, but only when he's feeling crazy and charitable.
"Yes, sir," he says, and then, figuring he might as well try, "sorry, sir."

Fury sighs, and it sounds like it's coming from the depths of his soul. Next to him, Coulson pulls something out of his briefcase; Clint hears the rustle of thick paper, sees a flash of glossy back, and reminds himself again about the chair.

"Superhero or Superstar?" says the cover of Rolling Stone. "Get the in-depth scoop on country sensation Clint Barton."

"Explain," says Fury, and Clint sighs. He can do that--it's just that he really, really doesn't want to.

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When Clint is six years old, he falls in love. Her name is Bertha, and she's beautiful; Clint can't help but stare at her as she makes her rounds through the tents on show nights, always upstaging whoever she's with. She's got this long neck that Clint just itches to run his fingers across, and her voice is....oh, it's just something else. Big Joe, the ringmaster (not to be confused with Big Joseph, the lion wrangler, or Little Jo, the bearded lady) tells Clint he's not old enough for her, that she'll still be here when Clint's older, that he'll make sure everyone's gentle with her and keeps her in good condition for him and changes her strings when they break.

Now is probably a good time to mention that Bertha's a banjo.

Clint's eight before they let him touch her, and even then it's only because he's figured out his way around a bow and arrow, is making the circus ridiculous money by looking two years younger than he is and shooting like a professional. He hits his targets during the day, his tendons aching almost pleasurably from the strain while his legs chafe against the damn Cupid costume, and at night... well. At night, when he's lucky, when Big Joe's in a good mood and nothing's on fire, he's allowed to curl his fingers over Bertha's strings and learn to pick a tune.

By his tenth birthday, Clint's hands are more callous than finger. He's the best shot anyone has ever seen, and the best banjo player in the state. Two roads diverge on an Iowa highway overpass, and Clint, being a stubborn little fuck, takes both.

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Clint's teenage years will be blurred in his memory later; it's a lot of late nights in a lot of small towns, school when he can talk someone into remembering to take him, the days blending together into a haze of twitch and twang. He doesn't stop shooting, because he can't, and he doesn't stop playing, because the idea is abhorrent. At any given moment, Clint's a wild tangle of nerves, jumping at little sounds and keeping his eyes on the horizon--the banjo is one thing, and the bow is another, but at the end of the day, it's all singing strings.

He's thirteen the first time he plays the song Bertha was named for, a howling-fast version of it to a sold out big-top audience, his voice breaking rough with a combination of stage fright and ill-timed puberty. It's just the one song ("Taking a chance on you here, kid," Big Joe said, "a county fair is one thing, but the big top is another.") and he knows it well enough to simply close his eyes and sink. By the time he hit that last line, the audience is singing along with him, off-key warbles of "Bertha, don't you come around here anymore," ringing in his ears; when he opens his eyes, the crowd's on their feet, screaming for more.

Big Joe's grinning at him from the wings, nodding his head, toothpick dangling from the side of his mouth. Clint grins, and then he laughs, and then he plays Great Balls of Fire, because he can't see any reason not to.
Thirteen years old, and he brings the goddamn house down.

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He plays Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson, Lyle Lovett and Pure Prairie League, Hank Williams and Charlie Daniels. He plays Dolly Parton and Linda Ronstadt, Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline, Emmylou Harris and June Carter Cash. He plays Creedence and the Dead, who aren't country, but aren't anything else; he plays Skynard and the Doobie Brothers, and on his fifteenth birthday, he cranks out a twelve-minute version of *Jessica* that leaves his fingers bleeding and his heart on fire. Sharpshooting is one thing, a rough-and-tumble kind of joy to it, the rush of a talent he never really needed to train for, but the music is something else entirely. Some nights Clint walks offstage and feels like he's been used by it, like he was acting as a conduit for some higher plane of sound, and he's never been so glad to be anyone's puppet.

It's Little Jo's idea to replace a peg with reinforced steel, to conceal a bowstring on the instrument so Clint can close his act with a few trick shots. Clint loves the idea, but refuses to allow anyone near Bertha, who's long since been his; he buys a guitar instead, teaches himself to play it, and then reworks the mechanics of it himself. After an extended period of deliberation, he paints Amie between the third and fourth fret, then restrings the whole thing and goes out to the shooting range to test it.

She plays like a dream and shoots like a spitfire. Bertha's always going to be his best girl, but Clint'll be damned doesn't love his new lady just as well.

"Why Amie?" Big Joe asks around a mouthful of dip one night, eyes on that painted fret, and Clint snorts, picks out a few notes.

"I can see why you think you belong to me," he croons, letting his pick brush purposefully against Amie's trick string. It *screeches*, and Clint grins wildly as Big Joe rolls his eyes.

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It's not all fun and games, because of course it's not. Life in a circus has few upsides, and Clint's lonely more than he isn't, nervous more than he's lonely. There's always the looming threat of going out of business, big-ticket acts or no; there's always the looming threat of violence, too, no matter how hard Clint tries not to think about it. These people have come to be something like family in the years since he was left with them, dropped like loose change and never picked up again, but there's no question that some of them are crazy, and some of them are killers, and some of them are both. The ring draws all kinds. Clint learns to sleep with one eye open years before the army.

He figures, as he creeps closer and closer to his eighteenth birthday, as he frantically tries to get the paperwork sent off for a GED he hasn't quite managed to earn, that he's going to have to come up with a backup plan eventually. The last thing he wants to do is follow the circus all his life--he loves the music, and he loves the shooting, and he loves Big Joe, but everything else he could kind of do without.

In the end, the decision is made for him. Three weeks after his eighteenth birthday, the circus goes under at last; Clint's out of a job, out of a home, and still waiting on the GED that would give him some options. He's in top physical condition, he's a trained marksman, he's got no family to speak of, and all he really wants to do is get out of Dodge.

He puts Bertha and Amie in a storage locker, the temperature-controlled kind he really can't afford, and enlists. There's no music for awhile.
He goes through Basic and keeps his mouth shut about the sharpshooting; he can tell his drill sergeant, a harsh man with a vicious overbite, isn't the kind of guy who wants to work with special skills. The training is backbreaking, but then again, it isn't really. Clint likes being pushed to his limit, and he's not above taking orders--by the end of the second week, he's outclassed the rest of his squad to such a degree that he gets pulled aside for a talking-to.

"Anything you want to tell me, Private?" Staff Sergeant Wilkinson asks, eyes narrowed, a file open on his desk. "Secret talents the United States Army might be interested in? Shit you maybe want to share with the class?"

Clint looks at the file; peeking out from underneath a sheet of paper, he can see the corner of a flyer he recognizes, one that's resplendent with a photo of him, costume on and arrow cocked. He grins.

"Might be easier to show you, sir," he says. "You got an archery range around here somewhere?"

Wilkinson takes him to the archery range. After two minutes, he has the field's attention. After ten minutes, he has an audience. After half an hour, he has complete silence, hardened military men staring with their mouths wide open, a yard littered with the remains of clay pigeons, twelve targets torn in half at the bulls-eye.

After an hour, he's been reclassified.

Clint spends four years in Iraq. He dangles from helicopters with a crossbow at his hip, and he pitches himself out of the tops of Humvees and fires incendiary arrows, and he forces everyone in his squad to listen to country music whenever they've got the luxury of internet radio. Every few months a guy called Rhodes shows up, looks him up and down, and hands him new shit to fire with. It's all got Stark Industries written on it somewhere, which makes Clint grin--everyone's been talking about Stark technology since he was old enough to listen, but it's not like it was the kind of shit he could afford.

He misses Bertha, which is stupid and fucked up and ri-goddamn-diculous, but he keeps it under wraps well enough. Some mornings he uses his four-minute shower to belt out whatever he's heard playing lately; it's a lot of Toby Keith and Garth Brooks, and his fingers itch for banjo strings. The guys give him shit about it at first, and then seem to decide as a group that they like his voice; there are a few drunken nights that Clint barely remembers except for what he was singing, Friends in Low Places bleeding to Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy, that one terrible night where he stripped down to his boxers and belted Redneck Woman like his life depended on it. His squad takes to calling him Honky Tonk (or, when they're feeling particularly like pissing him off, Honky Tonk Badonkadonk), and Clint spends a lot of time flipping folks the finger and hiding a smile behind his hand.

Four years, and he's planning on doing it for the rest of his life. Four years, and he's not happy, but he's happier than he's ever been off-stage. Four years and he's got a purpose and a team and a talent, a sense of self pushing him to do better, a place to put that wild tangle of nerves he just can't help but be--

--and then he's sent home, no ceremony about it, no explanation offered, no room to argue.

"Hello," says the man who greets him when his plane lands. Clint's not sure where they are--when
he asked where they were going, he was told it was classified. "Specialist Clint Barton, I presume?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out," Clint says, on autopilot, trying to identify the airport. He's not really having much luck. "You wanna tell me who you are? Or what I'm doing here?"

The man smiles, but there's no humor in it. "My name is Phillip Coulson, though, as I will be your superior for the foreseeable future, I suggest you forget my first name entirely. You have been tapped for participation in the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division."

"Sorry," says Clint, "the what now?"

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S.H.I.E.L.D is...interesting. They put Clint through an intensive round of training, which he's fine with; then they put him in a skin-tight leather catsuit, which he's less than fine with.

"You have to at least axe the sleeves, how the hell am I supposed to shoot in this thing?" he says finally, throwing his hands as far in the air as the damned suit will allow. Coulson seems to take his point, because the uniform he's issued the following day is sleeveless, fitted, and less leather than its predecessor.

It's also quite a bit more purple than Clint would like, but whatever. It's certainly no worse than some of the get-ups he was forced into for the circus, and it allows for plenty of mobility. Also, it comes with the single most gorgeous crossbow Clint's ever laid eyes on, and he breaks his own rule (name instruments, not weapons) to christen it Jolene.

He spends three months in that S.H.I.E.L.D. building, still not sure where exactly they are. When he's finally done with training, they give him a week off and let him go outside, and it takes him approximately twelve seconds to realize he's in Des Moines, Iowa.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," Clint says under his breath, and heads off to rent a car.

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Bertha needs new strings, and Amie's in a bad way, warped and creaking, clearly over-taxed by the weight of her trick string. Clint should've taken that off before he left her, but he'd been preoccupied; now he feels guilty, but then again, he's grateful for the chance to do some hands-on repair. He loads them both into his rented Camry and lets the navigation system direct him to the nearest music store, which is in and of itself a novelty. Clint had bought Amie for twenty dollars off a traveling salesman, had inherited Bertha, and Big Joe had always been the one to pick up anything else he needed--new strings, new picks, a replacement for that broken peg, the list went on--whenever he made a supply run.

Clint spends six hours in the store, Bertha in his hands, Amie being tended to at the counter. He plays every song that he can think of, and then a couple he can't, and ignores everyone who tries to flirt with him. This is a reunion, after all, and requires his full attention. Whatever else she might be, Bertha remains his first and truest love.

He takes them both back to Des Moines, returns the rental car, walks the three miles back to the S.H.I.E.L.D. base with a case in each hand. When he gets there, he's grinning like a maniac, and he knows it, doesn't care. They say home is where the heart is, and Clint's heart has long since been tangled up in chord changes and callouses, layered over with a little bit of twang.
"You're not due back for five days," Coulson says, when Clint lets himself in.

"Yeah, well, call me early, then," Clint says. "Or send me somewhere, what do I care?"

Coulson eyes him, a look on his face that can only be called wary, and then he sighs. "Right. Go back to your room, then, we'll find you something."

Clint walks down four flights of stairs, around three corners, and through one long hallway. His fingers are already itching, and when he's got the door of his room shut behind him, he pulls Bertha out of her case and plays whatever the fuck he feels like, reveling in it until, eventually, he passes out.

For the next three years, Clint mostly does what he is told.

He kills fifteen people in the line of duty and injures too many to count; he's used to the comedown from that, the jagged edges of what have I done that no amount of rationalization can ever quite shake, but it drags him somewhere unpleasant and aching anyway. For the first time, he finds himself writing his own music, stringing together harmonies to avoid thinking about anything else—he's surprised by what a release it is, how much he likes doing it. Eventually, it becomes a condition of any mission he's sent on; he'll go anywhere S.H.I.E.L.D. asks him to, provided he can bring Bertha or Amie with him. Coulson, in particular, finds this condition ridiculous, but Clint's a good agent and a better shot, so it's allowed.

Jolene never leaves his side, of course, but then again, she wouldn't. She's aptly named, takes a lot of good men just because she can, and Clint is stupid proud of her for all she's steeped in blood.

After the first year, he finds his lot thrown in with Agent Romanov's more often than not. Natasha is very pretty, very deadly, and very, very gay; that last bit's a shame, because Clint's always had a thing for women who don't hesitate to boss him around, but he's just as glad to have her friendship. She's a fantastic asset in the field, never wastes words or time, and she's got a wicked sense of humor underneath her cool exterior, can drink him under the table without batting an eyelash. Clint likes her, which is kind of a new thing for him—he's lived a lot of life, known a lot of people, but he's never had much of what you might call friendship.

He offers to teach her to play guitar three times before she finally takes him up on it, and then promptly hits him in the shoulder when he suggests they start with the Indigo Girls. Still, three weeks later she can pick out a passable version of Yield, Clint's told her things he's never told anyone, and, provided a little bit of alcohol, they can harmonize. It's smooth sailing after that, all easy banter and late nights watching shitty disaster movies, and Clint figures that maybe this is what having a sister would've felt like. He's always wondered.

Towards the end of the third year, she gets tasked to evaluate Tony Stark for a top-secret initiative Clint's pretty sure they've both been tapped for. Natasha knows what it is, of course, but no one's telling Clint shit, and he can't be fucked to obsess over it. He doesn't even have time to obsess about it, because three days after she leaves he gets a message from Coulson, just a set of coordinates and a time.

Clint looks up the coordinates, and finds himself smiling. New Mexico; yeah, he can work with that. He packs his bags, and gets Bertha ready for travel.
He is in New Mexico for a *stupidly* long time.

The real drama with Thor and the hammer is over and done with in about a week, of course--Clint has long since come to terms with the fact that working for S.H.I.E.L.D. is a combination of brief bouts of blinding exertion and long, boring stretches of surveillance and recon and staying crouched in sniper position all day for nothing. He gets assigned to what is, essentially, guard duty for Jane and her team while she works frantically to figure out the Bifrost; without really meaning to, he finds himself flirting with Darcy, who is way too young for him even if she did taser a Norse god without batting an eyelash.

"Have you ever noticed that you have the unfortunate tendency to talk yourself out of things before you give them a chance?" Natasha asks him over the phone one night. She sounds smug, and Clint sighs.

"If you're getting laid, Nat, you don't have to rub it in my face."

"I'm not getting laid," Natasha says, but the smugness has ramped up a few notches. "I'm…laying some groundwork, is all."

"Well, you do that. *I'm* going to resist the urge to seduce college students, Jesus, I feel creepy just saying that out loud."

"She's flirting back," Natasha points out. "And she's only a few years younger, and Barton, honestly, the fact that you think you're in charge--of, like, anything--is really kind of sad."

"I regret letting your filthy, obnoxious fingers anywhere near my guitar," Clint tells her, and Natasha snorts.

"Right, dating a college student would be creepy, but your relationship with your instruments? Totally not creepy. Obviously. My bad."

"Ugh, go harass someone else," Clint mutters, and Natasha's still laughing at him when he hangs up on her.

She turns out to kind of have a point, though, about him not being in charge. Darcy is funny and clever and utterly unimpressed by him, calls him Robin Hood instead of Hawkeye, brings him sweet potato fries while he's on what are supposed to be secret stakeouts and then shamelessly eats half of them. She doesn't carry herself like a twenty-two year old, and she certainly doesn't treat Clint like the age difference lends him any kind of authority. More often than not, she's laughing at him.

Clint likes her more than he should. A lot more than he should. Enough that he's reminded forcibly of being six years old, of staring at a banjo and seeing something unspeakably, exquisitely gorgeous waiting for him. He tries to ignore it, and when he finds that he can't, he goes down to the local bar and leans his crossbow casually against the counter.

"I'm going to play a show here on Friday," he tells the manager, who is looking from Jolene to Clint with the air of a man who has seen his life flash before his eyes. "Mostly country covers, some of my own stuff. Me and a banjo, maybe a guitar, that stage up there will do nicely, I'll just need a sound hookup. You don't need to pay me."

"Um," says the manager, and then Clint lets one hand drift down to caress Jolene's safety, and he quickly says, "yes, right, of course, that's great, sounds perfect, see you Friday!"

Clint leaves the bar grinning. He gets halfway back to his post before he thinks of something, dips
into a store and buys himself the first pair of cowboy boots he's owned since the circus fell apart. They're crafted from a deep black leather, come about halfway up his leg, and the seam work is done in a red so dark it looks almost purple (it's possible his uniform has grown on him a little).

Friday, then. His first real show in seven years. That should take his mind off the Darcy problem nicely.

When he gets to the bar on Friday night, he's got Bertha slung over one shoulder, his new boots on his feet, and a borrowed guitar in his left hand. It's not Amie, but it'll do, and he hadn't wanted to commit to a show with nothing but the banjo--sometimes the crowd doesn't swing that way, and there are certain songs that just call for a different sound. The guy at the local music store had been all too happy to lend it to him, which is probably because Clint's spent more than a few hours dickering around in there, and at least lending him the thing would get him off-premises.

He's looking forward to blowing off some steam, to thinking about the music and not gorgeous, sarcastic co-eds who he definitely should not sleep with, so it's kind of a mood-killer when he walks through the door to find Darcy waiting for him. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and her mouth's quirked up in the hint of a smile, and her eyes go directly to the cowboy boots.

"Howdy, Dixie," she says, staring at him, her smile mutating into an out-and-out grin. "Who knew you were a man of hidden talents?"

"I'm from Iowa," Clint says, which is just...stupid. "And what are you doing here?"

"There's one bar in town, dude, I don't know where you thought I drank," Darcy says, rolling her eyes. "Plus, my good friend Ted told me last night that some guy came in here and threatened him with a crossbow to get stage space; didn't figure that could've been anyone but you. Are you seriously wearing cowboy boots right now?"

"You've got eyeballs," says Clint. "I don't feel like I really need to answer that one."

"Fair enough. Save the banter for the stage, right? Except, I'm just saying, those are some serious cowboy boots, that's like Cowboy Boots 401: Advance Boot Studies. I'm not sure you're ready for that jelly. You better be prepared to impress me."

And suddenly Clint can't bring himself to remember all the reasons this is a bad idea, can't dwell on the fact that she's too young and he's too transient, that he's not really ready to deal with whatever it is he's feeling here. She's smiling at him, and it's a mocking smile, but not entirely; he grins back, shit-eating, and slings Bertha over his chest defiantly.

"I don't aim to impress," he says. "I aim to amaze."

"Okay, I wasn't afraid, fries should not be made from cactus, what the hell," Clint says automatically, and then, lowering his voice, "and hey, say what you want about me, but my aim? Is legendary."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Darcy says, but her eyes are warm, and she reaches out to squeeze his arm, lets her smile go soft. "Good luck out there."

"Don't need it," Clint says, "but thanks anyway," and he winks at her before he saunters towards the stage, body already thrumming with music.
He opens the show with a bastardized version of *These Boots are Made for Walking*, and he can hear Darcy's laugh from the back of the bar. He feeds that into *Brown Eyed Women*, just to make a point, and then sinks into his own stuff for awhile; when he comes out of that he plays *Boondocks*, *Beer for My Horses*, and a George Thorogood tune for the crowd. He doesn't really care if he sounds good or not--he's mostly playing to play--but he must be doing alright. News travels fast in a small town like this, and his audience has quadrupled by the time he closes the show with *Black Water* to a standing ovation.

"So," Clint says, when he's got a celebratory beer in his hand and a layer of sweat staining his shirt, the long-forgotten release of performing running hot in his veins, "what'd you think? Did I earn my boots or what?"

"Or what," Darcy says, eyes wide and hungry, and maybe Natasha's right--maybe he is too quick to talk himself out of things. "Definitely or what."

The night ends with a release of a different kind, with Clint's hands on Darcy's breasts, with the soft sound of a condom wrapper hitting the ground and Darcy's laughter low in his ear. As first dates go--intentional or not--Clint's pretty sure this one's set the bar.

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"You're really talented, you know," Darcy says a few weeks later, sprawled across her bed with a joint caught between her lips, naked and unconcerned about it. It's Saturday night, and Clint'd had every intention of taking her out to dinner, but things had kind of…devolved, when he got to the door. Not that he's complaining. Definitely not complaining. His is a complaint-free zone.

That being said...

"Is this a set-up for something?" he says, eyes narrowed. "Am I walking into a trap here? Because making me position myself for a zinger is so not cool, and I will totally eat all the sausage off your pizza if you do it again."

"I can't believe you were worried about our age difference," Darcy says, "you're about as mature as a fourth grader--and no, actually. Dead serious. The music thing, you could get some real traction out of that."

"I have a job, thanks."

"Yeah, I know, top secret agent in charge of shooting things, I got that memo," Darcy says. "This wouldn't have to be like that--you'd lay down a couple tracks and then I'd make you an internet sensation."

"Seriously?" Clint means that to come out sarcastically, and he just ends up sounding hopeful. He coughs, hoping to hide it, and Darcy rolls her eyes at him, not buying it at all.

"Yes, seriously. We wouldn't even need to show your face; I've got a friend who does animation and shit, you could be like the country version of Gorillaz!"

Clint blinks at her. "Who?"

"Ugh, your selective musical blindness is such an unattractive quality," Darcy says, but there's no sting behind it. "But, look, I want to do this if you're cool with it. We can even change your name if you want, I don't care, it'd just be something to do that isn't, uh, watching Jane tear her hair out for reasons of tortured love."
"Yeah, sure," Clint says, "why not? So long as you don't name me something ridiculous."

A month later Thor's back, and Clint's been retasked to the Avengers Initiative in New York, moved into Tony Stark's crazy mansion, and been told in no uncertain terms that his name is now, for all things performance related, Dirk Hawksley. He'd be bothered, but his video has half a million hits on Youtube, his girlfriend is hot and willing to try long-distance on for size, and, oh, yeah, he's a superhero. Things, he figures, could definitely be worse.

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Loki shows up. Things get worse.

For six months, Clint barely has time to breathe, let alone think about the whole secret side-career as a country singer thing. He'd recorded nearly two full albums's worth of music when he and Darcy were in New Mexico, the songs he's been writing for years and some covers, too, so she's certainly got material if she wants to use it. When they see each other, they don't talk about it--Loki's terrorizing New York, and terrorizing the rest of the world when he gets bored, and they mostly spend their limited time together having a lot of sex and trying not to acknowledge how many times Clint's almost died in recent memory.

So it's kind of a surprise, when Loki finally gets dealt with, for Clint to do a little research and discover that he is a huge fucking deal.

"What," he says, when Darcy answers the phone. "What, what, I have a website, I'm selling albums--"

"Oh, yeah," Darcy says, "been meaning to tell you, I've got about thirty grand in a bank account for you."

"What?!" Clint would like to imagine that he doesn't shriek that, but is sadly incapable of that level of self-delusion. "Darce, Jesus Christ."

"I told you that you were talented," she says, and he can hear the smugness, the pen she's twirling between her fingers absentely. "Shame we can't put your face on the whole thing, have you do some live shows--you'd blow up."

"Or get blown up," Clint points out. "Or, y'know, fired. Superhero, remember?"

"I know," says Darcy. "What a drag."

The whole thing descends into phone sex after that, a plan for Darcy to come visit because "We have thirty grand just sitting around, apparently, and someone should use it," and a promise from Clint to start working on more music. He picks up Bertha the next night and settles himself in the second floor living room, realizing it's been ages since he had the time to let himself do this, to pick his way into something beyond himself, and he doesn't notice he's got an audience until he's been at it for hours.

"Um," he says, when he realizes his entire team is crowded around the doorway staring at him, "you guys know you're creepy, right?"

"You can sing," says Steve, blinking rapidly at him. "And...play an instrument."

"A couple of them, actually," Natasha says, and everyone turns to glare at her for a second before they go back to gaping at Clint. "What? We've been friends for years! He taught me to play guitar."

"Thanks, I think," Clint says, rolling his eyes. Everyone's still blinking at him, except for Tony, who's got his eyes narrowed and his head cocked. He's looking at Clint with something far more evaluative in his gaze than Clint's really comfortable with; after a second, he bristles under the stare, snaps, "What?"

"I, uh," Tony says, and stops. His hands flex at his sides, fingers fanning out, like they're itching to work on something; Clint's not sure what that's about. "I…didn't know that about you, is all. You're really good. A…natural, right? I'm guessing here, but you, yeah. You looked like a natural."

"...sure," Clint says, allowing him this, because Steve's looking at Tony all weird now and Clint doesn't pretend to understand what goes on in that guy's head. "If you want."

"Right," Tony says, "well, okay, great, you should've said, that's good to know, let me know if you want like…amps or, recording space or something, I'll be in the workshop," and he vanishes without another word.

"The hell?" says Clint, and it's Thor that shakes his head and smiles.

"I believe Tony has a rather unique perspective for recognizing talent in others, Clinton," he says. "I imagine that was rather unsettling for him."

"Why?"

"Because we've been standing here for like an hour, jackass," Natasha says, but fondly. "If you're going to go all country-Mozart on us, you could throw us a heads-up."

"Or do it somewhere where we can all hear you without having to stand in doorways," Bruce adds. "Because, seriously. Really good."

Clint plays in the first floor living room after that, Bertha and Amie both. The rest of the Avengers drift in and out as he does it, start making requests after awhile, get used to seeing him with an instrument in his hands. He and Natasha pick up their guitar lessons again, and it turns out she's sleeping with Pepper, which is hilarious, but not all that surprising; Tony corners him sometimes and asks him weird shit about style and stage fright and whether he's ever signed any contracts with anyone, but other than that, it's fine. It's good. Clint's always liked an audience, and he writes another album in three months, gets it recorded and into Darcy's hands on one of his long weekends in New Mexico.

People are still trying to blow up the city, but they're mostly failing at it, and Clint begins to feel settled in a way he never really has before. Darcy's talking about moving to New York after graduation, and the team fits together better than Clint had dared expect it to, and he finds himself playing mostly upbeat stuff, drifting into comfort on it, leading the Avengers in a screaming rendition of *Sin Wagon* one night because he can't see any reason not to.

"It is good to see you happy, my friend," Thor says, and Clint opens his mouth the answer, finds he can't. He is happy. Huh. That's a new development; he'll have to keep an eye on it, hope it lasts.

--

The first time Clint hears himself on the radio, it's a Monday morning in April, and he's just trying to buy some normal fucking stamps like a normal fucking American citizen, because he'd promised Darcy he'd send her a postcard with porn on the front when she didn't believe him about those
being allowed to go through the mail. He's mobbed on his way into the post office--he'd never thought he'd get sick of "Thanks for being a hero!" but boy howdy, is he sick of it--and then he's mobbed in the post office, and then when he's trying to work the stamp machine he hears his fucking voice coming out of the fucking ceiling and just about has a panic attack.

"What the hell is playing in here?" he demands of the girl behind the counter, who gives him an extremely unimpressed look.

"The radio?" she says.

"This is the new Dirk Hawksley song," a woman behind him confides, sounding thrilled and just about giving him a heart attack. "It's called--"

"I know what it's called!" Clint snaps, and then, when the machine he's been poking at for ten minutes gives him yet another error signal, adds, "Oh, you know what, fuck the stamps!"

He storms outside, pulls out his phone, and calls Darcy. She is, if possible, even less impressed with him than the girl behind the counter was.

"I can't believe this is the first time you've heard yourself on the radio," she says. "I can't believe you're surprised your on the radio, your single is like number three on iTunes right now."

"What?"

"Please don't tell me that you're frightened of fame, Avenger Hawkeye," Darcy says, dry, and Clint doesn't exactly have a response to that. It's not that he's afraid of fame--he's famous now whether he likes it or not--but this is different. This is something he's never let himself dream about, not even when he was a scared kid with nothing but a banjo and a bow to call his own, and now he's got it, but he doesn't have it at all. It belongs to Dirk Hawksley, the selfish animated bastard, and for the first time Clint understands why Tony'd outed himself as Iron Man.

"I'm not afraid of fame, Darce," he says, and sighs. "It's…kind of the opposite problem."

"You could just tell people," Darcy says, after a pause. "I mean, the fansites are nuts with speculation about what you look like anyway."

"Fansites?"

"Yeah, sorry, probably shouldn't have said that," Darcy says quietly. "But still, I mean, look, there's no question you've got a career here if you want it. You could retire from the superhero business and like, professionally be a singing sensation. Drop the whole Hannah Montana act."

"Please don't compare me to Hannah Montana."

"Hey, if the cowboy boot fits," Darcy says, but then she sighs. "Look, babe, I just want you to do what makes you happy, okay? Unless what makes you happy is like, moving down here, because I already accepted at Columbia and I am so not doing the long-distance thing anymore."

"You are New Mexico's only redeeming feature," Clint promises. "Not moving down to that hellhole for love or cactus fries, don't worry."

"New Mexico is not a hellhole."

"Having an existential crisis here, cut me some slack."
"Yeah, I know. What do you think you're gonna do?"

And that, of course, is the million dollar question; that's the question Clint can't even begin to answer. He can't imagine giving up being an Avenger, can't imagine retiring Jolene and the uniform that's never stopped growing on him, can't imagine turning over his S.H.I.E.L.D. identification and security clearance…but he can't imagine continuing to hide behind Dirk Hawksley, either. He wishes he could do both, a dumb kid shooting arrows off Amie's trick string all over again, except he'd never want to go back to that life and, anyway, it's impossible. He can't be a superhero and a country superstar; it's too much, and it'll never be allowed, and he shouldn't even be letting himself think about it.

"I have no fucking idea," he says, and Darcy makes a soft, sad noise, doesn't push.

--

Two months go by, and Clint Barton saves Manhattan with his bow while Dirk Hawksley saves country music with his banjo. That's not even Clint's phrasing, the bit about saving country music--he hears it on television, some feature spot on one of those channels Tony gets that the rest of the world doesn't even know about, and he stays up all night playing Nickel Creek and feeling sorry for himself. Which is just…it's so stupid, it's unspeakably stupid, somewhere in the back of his mind his fifteen year old self is screaming at him about how stupid he is, about not taking things for granted, about that summer when he nearly starved and that other summer when he nearly died of scarlet fever, but. But it's hard to draw the line, to know that he's getting credit for the thing he doesn't love, and nothing for the thing he does.

Because that's the crux of it, really. Clint likes being an Avenger, likes working for S.H.I.E.L.D, but he doesn't love it. He's never loved it, if he's honest; the part where he's shooting, where he's taking deep, clear breaths and hitting a target, when Jolene's like a long, deadly extension of his arm…that part he loves. The rest of it is paperwork and crouching in silence and nearly dying and feeling responsible for lives of people he's never met and being constantly, constantly surrounded by teammates who are naturally, innately better than him at it. And he loves them, of course, it's impossible not to--Clint's always been the type to find family where other people might see a sideshow act--but that doesn't make it better, that Steve's a super-soldier and Bruce is a Hulk and Tony's a genius and Natasha's a medical miracle and Thor's a god and Clint's just a guy with a bow.

But then, is it better to be a guy with a banjo? Really? Really? Does he honestly think for a second that he's going to do more good singing songs than he is fighting crime? Because that's sincerely fucking crazy, that's deluded and psychotic and so irresponsible and--

"Maybe it's not about where you're going to do more good," Darcy says, tracing her finger over his bare chest, her voice cracking on a yawn. "I mean, you've done all kinds of good either way, so maybe it's about….where you feel more good, right? Or, uh, better, where you feel better, sorry, I'm tired."

"Christ," Clint says, realizing what time it is. "I'm sorry I woke you up, I know this is--"

"No, don't, bored of that," Darcy says, and raises her eyebrows when Clint frowns at her. "Yeah, Dixie, I know about your self-punishing streak. Concealment: not your strong suit."

"Don't call me Dixie."

"Would you prefer Circus Freak?" Darcy says, grinning at him. "Or perhaps the full version of Dixie, which is, for the record, Dixie Chicken? I've been saving that for a special occasion, like your birthday or the next time you freak out in a horror movie."
"You are a terrible, soul-crushing person," Clint says, but he feels his mood lifting anyway. Moving her up to New York was an experience he doesn't ever care to repeat--how one person could amass that many DVDs, for one thing, is still something he's afraid to consider--but god, god, was it worth it. "And I didn't freak out, okay, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You think I can't tell when you do the sniper-freeze, that's adorable."

"Paranormal Activity is a scary fucking movie, alright?" Clint says, too tired to keep it up. "You don't get to talk anyway, you cried when Tony showed us those home videos."

"Those were tears of laughter, asshole," Darcy says, but she's laughing on it. "He was wearing a Captain America shirt."

"Yeah, don't think he realized that before he showed us," Clint says.

"He did turn a very interesting shade of purple," Darcy agrees contemplatively. "On the other hand, he probably got laid for it, so, I mean, power to him and his grape-jelly facial contortion."

"Yeah," Clint says, not really listening anymore, and goes quiet. He's thinking about Tony's home videos and his purple face, the way that Steve quietly obsesses about everyone's injuries, Thor's uncomfortable insight's and Bruce's hilarious, over-the-top apologies for the Hulk's messes, Natasha's fingers plucking out Patsy Cline on Clint's guitar. The truth--the real, honest truth, the truth he never wants to look in the face--is that he would trade being a superhero tomorrow, no problem. But he can't bring himself to trade working with his team; he can't even really bring himself to consider it.

"Oh my god," Darcy says, sitting bolt upright in bed. She stares at Clint with her mouth open for half a second, and then she hits him, hard, in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Clint snaps. "Darce, what the hell?"

"You complete idiot," Darcy says, "you think they won't like you anymore if you quit, don't you? The team? You think they're going to stop being your friends, oh my god, you jackass."

"No I don't!" Clint snaps, and then, "And even if I did, why would that make me a jackass?"

"Because that's not how it works," Darcy says, exasperated and, underneath it, a little fond. "That's not…ugh, the fact that you think that is just like, so…Clint! These people love you! They don't love Hawkeye, because I know for a fact Hawkeye is not all that lovable--"

"Hey!"

"--bad puns all the time and always pissing off the super villains--"

"They deserve it!"

"--plus, I mean, he's always walking around in that slinky little purple number--"

"Oh, no, you better back up off the uniform--"

"--which, while very attractive, is kind of intense on highlighting the junk in his trunk," Darcy finishes, grinning. "I mean, not gonna lie, I'm a little jealous of that ass, and I tap it on the regular. Hawkeye is totally not the dude to be seen with--Clint Barton, though? I get the impression that people around here like him a whole lot."
"And Dirk Hawksley?" Clint says, because he just honestly cannot help himself, because Bertha's always going to be his first love, but Darcy's his last one, the safest, most solid place he's ever know, something real when everything else is a roaming circus, and he trusts her to answer him honestly.

Darcy rolls her eyes and settles back down on the pillow next to him, pulls the covers up over them both. "Dirk Hawksley's just you with a banjo, Dixie. Can we go to sleep now?"

Clint thinks about it, about the choice he's going to have to make at some point, about the woman next to him, about the cadre of super-heros sleeping in the other rooms of this ridiculous house. She's probably right; it's not like he likes Steve for being Captain America, or Tony for being Iron Man. It's just Thor that's like that, and that's because Thor is constantly, inarguably, perpetually Thor, and if he's honest, Clint can't see any one of them dropping him for retiring.

"Yeah," he says, and kisses her shoulder, smiles a little at the soft noise she makes before he closes his eyes.

The next weekend, everyone goes to Flushing for the latest attempt at the Stark Expo. Tony's manic and weird the whole way there, insisting that they drive together and obsessively checking and rechecking all the security footage. Clint, who knows from this particular brand of crazy, is aware that this whole thing is about presenting a united front and making sure everyone's on hand if someone tries to blow the whole thing up again; he doesn't comment on it, just jokes around with Bruce and lets Darcy goad him into arm wrestling with Thor.

He loses spectacularly, of course, but it lightens Tony's mood, and by the time they stumble out of the limo, everyone's cheerful enough. It's a gorgeous day, the easy heat of early summer thick in the air, and Clint always likes getting away from the city; New Mexico might be a ridiculous place full of misappropriated cacti, but he'd kind of liked his weekends there, the chance to breathe air that's honestly fresh.

Maybe I'll take Darcy home to Iowa, he finds himself thinking, before he remembers that any "home" he had there has long since been packed away or sold piecemeal. Still, they could do a road-trip, a quick tour of all the places Clint had lived, maybe drop in to see Big Joe; last Clint talked to him, he was living in Cedar Rapids selling fake Rolexes, but it usually isn't too hard to track him down. It might be nice, and they could pop up to Wisconsin, too, say hi to Darcy's folks. Maybe Clint would even be able to win over Darcy's father, who had, at their first and thus far only meeting, looked Clint up and down, turned to his daughter, and said "You couldn't have picked the billionaire, baby?"

There'd been a screaming fight after that, Darcy and her father going at it while Clint tried and failed to make small talk with her mom. Maybe they'd skip Wisconsin, then. It's not like he'll ever have time to do it, anyway, it's just a nice thought; it feels almost normal, with clear air in his lungs and no one shooting at him, his teammates chatting easily about nothing of consequence. He finds his fingers itching and wishes he could pull Bertha out of thin air, sprawl out across a park bench picking tunes, let this rare but welcome calm wash over him until he felt it in his toes.

He takes Darcy's hand instead, leads her away from the group, and they wander from pavilion to pavilion quietly mocking the various booths. The Expo's got a lighthearted feel to it this time around, technology all over the place but food options, too, live music scheduled for every night of the opening ceremonies. After half an hour, Clint finds an enterprising college student who has procured a booth to demonstrate what he's calling Batter Conversation Technology; it's funnel cakes he's making, and Clint laughs and buys one for him and Darcy to split. She gets powdered
sugar down her shirt and blames his terrible, county-fair induced taste in food, so he tosses her his most shit-eating grin and starts humming Ladies Love Country Boys, doesn't stop until she reels him in by the t-shirt and kisses him silent.

It's stupid, and it's maybe a little crazy, and it doesn't make sense, but that calm seeps down to his toes anyway, with his hands on Darcy's waist and the taste of powdered sugar on his tongue. He can feel her smiling into his mouth, and he knows they're making a little bit of a scene, but he doesn't care. He slips an arm around her waist when they break apart and she lets him keep it there for the rest of the afternoon, her hand in his back pocket.

It's the best day Clint's had in a long time, so he's pretty bummed when he sees Tony racing toward him, arms windmilling, distress on his face.

"Ugh, what," Clint says, "who's trying to kill us now, just tell me, rip the Band-Aid off."

"Not that," Tony says, "so not that, it's Toby fucking Keith--this is Pepper's fault, I told her Toby Keith was a stupid plan, but it was 'Listen to me, Tony' and 'Accessibility, Tony,' and 'Middle America, Tony,' and look what it gets me--"

"Wait, Toby Keith is playing?" Clint says, blinking. "Here? Today? Can you like introduce me or something, because, seriously--"

"No I can't introduce you, he's not here," Tony snaps, all in one breath, sounding like he's about half an inch from some kind of apoplectic stress breakdown. "He's just fucking no-showed, there's this whole crowd of people and Pepper's all...Peppery, and I have to fix it, so I sent Thor home for your shit. You're on in fifteen."

Clint feels his mouth go very, very dry. "I--what? What the hell? Tony, I can't just--"

"Yes you fucking can!!" Tony says. His crazy eyes are even crazier than usual, and Clint can't help but wince, because that's seriously not a good look for him. "This thing has to go off without a hitch, alright, because of--of professional embarrassment and last time the whole thing exploded, like actually fucking exploded, okay? And you're like a country music savant, good, fine, lucky you, so you are going to nut up and go appease Middle America with your twang or whatever because otherwise I'm going to be on the news tomorrow for sucking, again, and it won't even be my fault this time!"

"Dude, how much coffee have you had today?" Darcy says, eyeing him.

Tony narrows his eyes but doesn't look at her. "A lot. Barton, come on, what do you want from me here, do you want me to beg? Because I will, this one time, I will totally beg, just come on already, you're going to do it, right? You're going to help me out here? Please? Please?"

Clint opens his mouth, shuts it again, and tries to think. He slants a look at Darcy, and she smiles at him as she shrugs one shoulder; somehow, this manages to convey Your call, Dixie, but I think you should go for it.

"Yeah," Clint hears himself say, "sure, why not?"

Everything descends into a panicked haze of running and changing and submitting to a slapdash attempt at hair and makeup; Thor, because he is possessed of Higher Powers and Arcane Deity Knowledge, grabbed Clint's cowboy boots and a plain black button-down when he went back to the house to pick up Bertha and Amie. The whole stage is set up for a Toby Keith show, and Clint,
having seen one or two of those, makes the lighting and sound people promise to let Darcy be in charge of what's up on the screen behind him, trusting that she'll axe all the crazy Americana graphics. He's barely got time to freak the fuck out before someone's jamming a black cowboy hat onto his head and pushing him towards the stage, and he stumbles into the arena, blinking when he realizes just how many fucking people are in here.

He can see himself on the huge Jumbotron screens, which is just...ugh, which is just tragic, really. He doesn't look like a country singer, doesn't even look like a superhero; he looks like a freaked out guy in boots he can't pull off, and the audience is already muttering their discontent, probably confused to see an Avenger in that getup and pissed that he isn't Toby Keith. Dirk Hawksley could calm them down, maybe, but of all the people Clint doesn't look like, his rising star alter ego is pretty much top of the list.

*Dirk Hawksley is just you with a banjo, Dixie,* he thinks, Darcy's voice calm and clear in his head. He looks away from the Jumbotron, pulls his gaze down to Bertha, and the hell if she isn't still the most beautiful goddamn thing he's ever seen. He runs his fingers along her neck, and suddenly it doesn't matter what name he's using this week; he knows who he is, and he knows what he's good at, and he knows just what he's going to do.

"Right," he says, leaning towards the microphone, "so, I know y'all weren't expecting me to be up here, and I'll be honest with you, folks, I wasn't expecting me to be up here either. Gonna play this set fast and loose, see how it goes. Thought I'd start with a tune you might know; I hear it's being called the love song of the year, and it's definitely a love song, but I wrote it for this pretty lady right here in my hands."

The audience laughs tentatively, having apparently landed more firmly in the confused camp then the pissed one. Clint takes a deep breath, focuses his eyes on a point far in the distance, and punches right into Dirk Hawksley's number one single.

There is a long moment, and then the audience begins to scream with realization. It's like a wave, starting low from somewhere in the back and then picking up mania and pitch, and Clint can't focus on it; he closes his eyes, thirteen all over again, and sinks into the music, forgets about everything else.

He plays for almost four hours. It's his own music, the bigger songs and a couple new ones, too; it's *Dixie Chicken* for Darcy and *Sin Wagon* for his team, *Honky-Tonk Badonkadonk* for his boys in the service, a slow, mournful version of *Bertha* that's just for himself. He slings Amie across his chest and lets the audience shout out requests, *International Harvester* and *T-R-O-U-B-L-E*, a twanged-out version of *Rolling in the Deep* that he figures out on the fly. He closes the show with *Paranoia in B Flat Major*, closes it again with *Me and Bobby McGee* when they start screaming for an encore before he's even off the stage, and when he finally risks looking up at the Jumbotron again, he nearly forgets his next line. Screw looking like a country singer--he looks like an honest-to-god country star, an easy slouch to his stance, his hat cocked just so, wearing boots that he is very much pulling off.

It's...incandescent. It's brilliant. It's the happiest he's ever been in his life.

Darcy's hurtling towards him the minute he gets backstage, throwing her arms around his neck despite the layer of sweat he's coated with, letting him spin her around. "I am so fucking proud of you," she says in his ear, and Clint kisses her until she's as breathless as he is, until he's got it at least marginally together.

Tony's leaning against the wall when Clint and Darcy break apart, arms folded over his chest. He looks a lot less crazed than the last time Clint saw him; hell, he's *smirking*, and Clint puts it
together, points an accusing finger at him.

"You knew," he says, and Tony laughs.

"'Course I knew, Barton," he says. "Second I saw you rocking out in my living room I asked Jarvis to look into it. Who do you think's been acting as your record label for the last six months?"

"What?" Darcy says, when Clint turns to her and raises his eyebrows. "You didn't really think you went from internet sensation to full-out phenomenon without a little funding, did you?"

"Speaking of which, I have some royalty money for you," Tony says. "Like, a lot of it. Maybe build your own mansion, get the hell up outta mine? We can even be neighbors, I'll throw some superhero houses guests into the package--"

"You are such an asshole," Clint says, and then he reaches out and hugs the stupid bastard, ignoring his squawked protests about his shirt getting ruined. "Thank you for being such an asshole."

"I aim to please," Tony says easily. "You know S.H.I.E.L.D's probably gonna murder you, right?"

"Yeah," Clint says, and his heart sinks a little, but not enough to dim his joy. "Worth it, though, don't you think?"

"Totally," Darcy says, and then adds, "though if you leave me for a groupie, I will taser your ass without hesitation," and Clint has to laugh, kiss her again, before he goes to find the rest of the team.

--

So this is how Clint finds himself in a S.H.I.E.L.D interrogation room, a copy of *Rolling Stone* with his face on it resting on a table, trying to explain to Nick Fury and Agent Coulson and a review panel how, exactly, he found himself balancing secret agent, superhero, and country star. It's slow going, especially because Fury seems loathe to acknowledge the depth to which the bond between a man and his banjo can sink; when Clint's finished talking, Fury just stares at him for an agonizing minute before he sighs.

"So what you are telling me, Agent Barton," he says, finally, "is that you're picking country music over saving the world. Is that what you're telling me? Really? You're gonna quit the Avengers to play the banjo?"

"Yes, sir," Clint says, "or, I mean--no, sir, of course not, I'd never quit. I just didn't figure you'd let me do both, and it doesn't seem fair to make you fire me."

"What the fuck do I care what you're doing with your free time?" Fury demands. "If you were still of any use on undercover missions, that'd be one thing, but there isn't an American citizen left who doesn't recognize your face on sight. You nutcases are already celebrities; you wanna pile on, you go ahead. Your touring schedule can be Rogers' problem."

Clint feels something in his chest release, something that's layered over with Iraq and Iowa, something with Jolene's shape and heft, twice her fire power. "I…wait, what? Really?"

"Son, you're a good shot and everything, but you're kind of stupid," Fury says, flat. "I am not in the business of giving a fuck about your personal life, even if your personal life is being a goddamn singing sensation."
"Oh," Clint says, and blinks. Then he thinks of something, and adds, "Wait. Why'd you call me in here, then?"

Coulson sighs heavily. "For press training, Agent Barton. You've mostly avoided one-on-one press interaction with the Avengers, and we thought it might be wise to run you through our more intensive course."

"Oh," Clint says again, still blinking.

"Also, we wanted to make your squirm a little," Coulson adds, grinning now. "And my daughter wants your autograph."

"Actually, mine too," says an agent Clint's never laid eyes on, and then everyone's passing over their copies of the magazine, and someone's handing Clint a pen.

So: not fired, not even reprimanded, and apparently a teen heartthrob. Clint grins, and starts scrawling his name on whatever's passed to him; distantly, he registers the feeling of a weight drifting up and off his shoulders.

Epilogue

The CMAs would be worth it just for the dress Darcy's wearing, this midnight-blue number that makes her tits look even more fantastic than usual. She'd had to talk Clint out of skipping the whole thing--his performance included--to have sex in the limo instead. He'd been regretful at the time, but now, with the sound of the his last number still ringing in his ears and three shiny awards tucked away under his seat, he's glad they didn't blow it off.

"You've got this," Darcy whispers to him, as they call Tony to present Entertainer of the Year. Clint's still amazed that Tony's managed to build himself into a name in this industry so quickly, but then again, he guesses it's not all that surprising; on top of his crazy money and business savvy, Tony's got Jarvis, who can find the up-and-coming talents before they're on anyone else's radar screen. Stark Records could branch out past country music, and probably will the next time Tony gets bored--for now, he seems content to ride this new wave of success, smirking as he walks out onto the stage.

"Don't jinx me," Clint whispers back, and Darcy rolls her eyes and takes his hand, squeezes hard as Tony accepts the envelope that Clint really, really hopes has his name written inside.

"Right, so, I could do a whole song-and-dance number here," Tony says, "but since I'd be way outclassed, and you all already know who I'm pulling for anyway, I think we should just get right to the main event, don't you guys?"

The audience cheers, and Tony grins at them as he reaches for the envelope…

…and then freezes and reaches for his phone, which is making the same low-pitched, carefully designed siren sound that Clint's is in his own jacket.

"Well, crap," Tony says cheerfully, glancing at the phone and putting it back in his pocket, ripping the envelope open. "Duty calls, the hero business waits for no awards ceremony and all that--and, yep, that's what I thought this would say. Clint, buddy, you think we can take this trophy to go?"

The audience bursts out in a round of applause, and Clint's grinning like he's never going to stop as he leans over to press a quick kiss to Darcy's lips.
"You mind if I go save the world real quick?" he says, and she smacks him on the arm, grinning just as big as he is.

"I'll manage somehow," she says. "Go on, lives on the line and all that. You think Jason Aldean's looking for a plus-one?"

"You're hilarious," Clint says, and Darcy's eyebrows go up, playful. "I'll be home in time to take that dress off you; if I've gotta fight Jason Aldean for the privilege, so be it. What's the point in being a superhero otherwise, right?"

"Holding you to that," Darcy says. "Now get lost."

Clint drops one last kiss on her and goes, down the aisle and out the back door, up the stairs and onto the roof. The Quinjet's waiting for him, Tony already strapping himself into the pilot's seat; he tosses Clint his award and starts fiddling with the controls, sinking into work mode without a word.

"What've we got?" Clint says, kicking off his boots and reaching into the cargo hold for his uniform. "Circus of Crime in town again? I love those guys, gets me all nostalgic for the good old days."

"Skrulls," Steve says, Captain America to the hilt, his eyes focused on the projection of the affected areas Jarvis has thrown up. "More of them than usual, and twice as mad. The Fantastic Four are already on scene; apparently, they're trying to blow up the Empire State building this time."

"Fire on the mountain," Natasha says at Clint's side, low and amused, and Clint can't help but laugh as she passes Jolene over.

"Run, boys, run," he says, and they're off.

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