Motion Practice
by the_wordbutler

Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

Notes

The following story is a work of fiction, but it is inspired in part by my own work in an office not unlike the one I’ve created. At the time of this writing, I am a law student and work as a legal intern in my jurisdiction. The idea of writing Motion Practice came about because of the work I was doing every day.

That said, any similarity in this story to real people, places, events, or cases is entirely accidental. Nothing in this story is based directly off my experience. Rather, the setting was informed by my “nine-to-five” life; the rest of the story came entirely from my imagination. At no time have I lifted real cases, scenarios, or people from my work life and deposited them into this fic, and I won’t be doing so. Ever.

Along those lines, too, please keep in mind: this is fiction. Although some of the law featured in this story is based on the real law of my jurisdiction, I have done no additional research and do not intend to. Legal concepts may be oversimplified, under-nuanced, or simply wrong for the purpose of the narrative. I wrote this not as a true-to-life legal drama,
but as an alternate universe where the characters happened to work somewhere I know quite well: the district attorney’s office. And hopefully, I won’t muddle fake-law with real-law and fail the bar exam.

That said, I hope you enjoy this as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. It’s a labor of love, and a universe I’m dying to explore. Right now, I have more ideas than I could realistically ever use, but that’s the wonderful thing about writing. It surprises you.
The First Day

Ten, fifteen, twenty years from now, when he’s got an office that overlooks the park instead of the parking lot, Assistant District Attorney Clint Barton will remember the following things about his very first day of work:

Thing 1

“You do realize you are speaking to the Chief Assistant District Attorney, don’t you?” Maria Hill demands. Her hands are on her hips, crinkling her navy suit. When the guy doesn’t respond—a guy who’d been waiting in the lobby when Clint got there, a guy who’s decided a pair of sagging jeans with a ripped white wife-beater is a good outfit for coming to the district attorney’s office—she leans forward. She’s tall and he’s slouching, so she looms over him.

The guy smacks his lips. “So?”

“So? So? You do realize that whoever you’re here to speak to answers to me, yes?” The guy rolls his eyes. Either he doesn’t realize Hill’s about to tear him to pieces, or he doesn’t care. “So, whoever you sit down with and start to talk to about your probation, or your suspended sentence, or your immunity—”

The guy’s face, that mask of perfect asshole confidence, it slips at that.

“—they have to get my approval.” Her expression darkens. “And I can say no.”

The guy swallows. Clint knows he’s an asshole, but he kinda curls his own fingers around the strap of his bag, just out of—respect, maybe. Whether it’s respect for Hill’s speech or the fear he feels in his belly on behalf of this jerk, he’s not sure.

“Do we have an understanding?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Hill straightens up, smooths the sides of her skirt, and turns around. When she smiles at Clint, it’s like she hasn’t just cornered a guy enough that he’s slunk down in his chair like a scolded puppy. It’s not a friendly smile, not all the way, but it’s a hell of a lot more cordial than what’d just happened. “Sorry about that, Mr. Barton,” she says.

Clint, he—tries to force a little smile, too. “No problem.”

Thing 2

“We’re really happy to have you on board, Barton,” Steve Rogers says. He’s shaking Clint’s hand, and he’s got one of the strongest grips Clint’s ever come up against. He almost wants to cringe, just from the sheer force of it. “District Attorney Fury passed your writing sample around. Really proves we picked the right man for the job.”

“Steve,” Hill explains, flipping through a file somebody handed her in the hallway, “is our charging attorney.”
“And the occasional misdemeanor, if everyone else is tapped out.” Rogers rests his hands on his hips. He’s wearing one of those horrible blue-and-white checked shirts that grandparents usually wear, along with a bright red tie and a pair of beige pants. Clint really hopes his wife leaves before him in the morning, because otherwise . . . “You need anything, you let me know.”

“Thanks,” Clint says. Steve’s office is small—not as small as his, but still small enough that the desk’s the focal point of the room. Or, at least, it should be. Problem is, the whole thing’s plastered with taped-up crayon, marker, and finger paint scribbles. So is the file cabinet and, from the looks of it, the wall behind the coat rack. “Your—kid?” he guesses.

Behind him, Hill mutters something that sounds a lot like here we go.

Rogers beams. “Dorothea, but we call her Dot,” he says. He reaches to turn the computer monitor toward the door. The background’s a picture of a little girl who’s just coming out of her toddler years. She’s sitting on the top of a slide, and god, she’s her daddy’s daughter, alright. You can see the Rogers in her for a mile. “Actually, Tony should be sending out the invitations for her party pretty soon. Everybody comes.”

Clint doesn’t know who Tony is. “Okay.”


Hill flips another page in the file. “Never comes to anybody else’s parties,” she grumbles.

Rogers ignores her. “Seriously. It’s a chance to meet everybody without the suits.” He pauses, though, and frowns. “Well, except Tony. He might still wear a suit. It’s—complicated.”

The phone rings, then, and Rogers apologizes before he takes the call. Halfway down the hallway to their next stop, Hill comments, “You should actually come. If nothing else, you’ll like Bucky.”

“Bucky?”

“Steve’s husband,” she replies—and Clint nearly bowls over a file clerk.

**Thing 3**

“Pepper! Pepper!”

Clint’s pretty sure that Tony Stark’s suit, which is gray with just the faintest lavender pinstripe, cost more than his first car. It’s a color combination almost no man alive could pull off, especially not since his tie is shiny, but on Stark, it looks—

Natural.

The way he’s cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting, not so much.

Hill sighs and finishes typing an e-mail on her Blackberry. “You can’t keep this up for—”

“Pepper!”

“—ever.”

“Excuse me,” someone else says, and Clint’s lightly nudged out of the doorway by a very pretty redhead in a crisp black dress. Her hair’s pulled back into one of those fancy twists, too, and he
almost wants to admire her. Almost, though, because then she’s dropping a stack of files on Stark’s
desk and saying, “We have phones for a reason.”

“We have a system for a reason,” Stark retorts. Pepper puts something in front of him, and he
scribbles his signature across it. “What’s the rule?”

“Tony—”

“What,” he repeats, “is the rule?”

Clint definitely admires Pepper when she, without even a moment of hesitation, heaves a long-
suffering sigh and rolls her eyes. “Maria isn’t allowed within ten feet of your office without
warning,” she recites. It’s pretty clear she’s said this a hundred times before.

“Right. And where—” Stark waves a hand. “—is Maria standing right now?”

As if to prove a point, Hill stretches against Stark’s office door. Clint presses his lips together to
hide a smirk.

Pepper takes both the paper and the pen out of Stark’s grip. “Did you check your e-mail?”

“No, but I—”

“Voicemail?”

“No, b—”

“Texts?”

He frowns, shifts, and starts patting himself down. He’s checking his suit jacket for the second
time when Pepper moves a file, revealing an iPhone in a ridiculous red-and-gold case. She holds it
up and, when Stark doesn’t notice immediately, wiggles it.

He snatches it out of her grip. “You did that on purpose,” he accuses.

Pepper shrugs, and Hill bites back a laugh a half-second too late.

But then Stark’s unlocking the phone, glancing at the display—and frowning. His eyes dart up at
Pepper, over at Hill, and then back at the phone. Three times he does it, until his eyes are going
around in circles like a cartoon cat after he’s chased a mouse too long.

“Noted,” he says simply, and Pepper nods before she strides out.

Stark stands up immediately after she leaves, leaning over his desk to offer a hand. “Tony Stark,
appellate attorney.” He pauses. “Undefeated appellate attorney,” he adds.

“Only at oral argument,” Hill mutters.

Stark’s halfway to shaking Clint’s hand, but he stops to glare at Hill. No, really, it’s an actual glare.
It’s an if looks could kill kind of glare. “One limp-wristed per curiam decision based only on briefs
alone does not a defeat make.”

“Did they affirm?”

“Listen, it was more—”
“Did they,” Hill repeats, “affirm?”

She looks up from her phone. Stark’s expression is made of ice. Clint’s pretty sure neither of them is even blinking.

Or at least, until Stark shouts, “PEPPER!”

**Thing 4**

“Hill!”

Clint glances up from the paperwork he’s filling out in Hill’s office—a massive stack of tax forms, contact information, and promises to uphold the state constitution—just in time to see a man barreling through the doorway. He doesn’t walk in, not like a normal person. He somehow leads simultaneously with his shoulders and hips, and barges right in.

His hair sways like something out of a L’oreal commercial.


“You must inform Mr. Barnes that I do not intend to reply to his ridiculous motion!” Thor sweeps his hand from one side of the office to the other. The gesture’s only six inches above Clint’s head. It ruffles his hair. “I have reviewed his argument. It is frivolous and unnecessary. I refuse to dignify it with—”

“You know I’m not the person to talk to about that, right?” she asks. Her eyes never lift from the computer screen. “You go to Phil, or you go to Steve.”

“I do not wish to—”

“Phil or Steve, Thor.”

“But after what happened with Mr. Coulson last time, I do not—”

“Phil,” she says, and glances up, “or Steve.”

Sitting there, filling out the form that requires his last three addresses (background check, what else?), Clint swears he can see Thor’s wheels turning. He stills, frowns, tips his head a few inches, and frowns harder.

Hill doesn’t blink. “Phil or Steve,” she repeats. Again.

Thor huffs. “I will remember this the next time you wish for—‘pull’ with Miss Rowan.”

“You do that.” She turns back to the computer. The law degree hanging over her file cabinet rattles when Thor stomps out. Clint doesn’t try to write another letter until he’s sure the miniature earthquake is over.

“Don’t forget line 36A,” Hill remarks. She’s typing again, faster than anyone Clint’s ever met.

He glances down, finds the line he’d skipped (maternal grandmother’s maiden name—how the hell is he supposed to know that?), and fills it in. “Is his name really Thor?” he asks, dotting the last I on Millville, which he’s only half-sure is right.
Hill snorts, and the corners of her lips tip into the world’s smallest grin. “Thor Odinson,” she explains. “They’re—Swedish? Norwegian? A little strange. His dad owns a horse farm in Wisconsin or something.” She shakes her head. “He’s probably the best juvenile prosecutor in the state, but a little . . . high-strung.”

Clint manages to turn his laugh into a breath. “That’s one way of putting it.”

The half-laugh that bursts out of her surprises him enough that he looks up. Hill barely wipes the grin off her face. “47C,” she instructs, and Clint glances down. Sure enough, he’s missed the blank for the color of his car.

But he’s kind of grinning, too.

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**Thing 5**

“Yeah, no, no, I’m still here. Where else would I be, I told you I wasn’t getting off until—yeah, okay, I’ll hold. Again.” The man in the world’s most rumpled beige suit tips the phone away from his ear and cups his hand around the mouthpiece. “I’m sorry, Maria,” he apologizes. “Do you need something?”

Bruce Banner—or at least, the person who Clint assumes is Bruce Banner, thanks to the name on the door—peers between them with these big, half-lost eyes. His office kinda reminds Clint of a cartoon crater, debris everywhere, with stacks of paper layered on top of other stacks until there’s no floor or desk to be seen. There’s three statute books, all open, balanced on the corner closest to the door. He’s afraid to breathe too hard, in case they topple.

“Just wanted to introduce you to our fresh meat,” Hill comments. She steps over a case file so Clint has enough room to come into the office. “Clint, meet Bruce, our resident abuse and neglect expert.”

“So you’re the new guy, huh?” Bruce asks. He cradles the phone against his shoulder and half-stands, straining to reach Clint’s hand. Their fingers brush, but then—“No, I’m still here,” he says into the phone, and drops back into his chair. “I need the status on—Edgerton? No, Edelmann. Those names don’t even sound alike, how did you— I’m sorry, let me get the case number again . . .”

Clint waits for a couple seconds before he drops his hand, but Bruce is off in his own world, sliding his mouse over an open file while he rambles into the phone about secure care and social workers. “Bruce specializes in the cases of child abuse, neglect, endangerment, and all of that,” Hill explains, hands on her hips. “You remember two years ago, when the governor went on record about social services accountability and revamping the system from the inside out?”

“It was on the news for, what, three weeks straight?”

“Right.” She nods at the guy who’s taking off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Bruce headed that committee.”

Clint frowns. “Didn’t every social service agency in the state wanna come after those guys with pitchforks and torches?”

“I didn’t say it was a good thing.”

“Okay, you know what?” Bruce says, suddenly, and it’s loud enough that Clint blinks away from
Hill. “I’ve got a fourteen-year-old kid who won’t stay in one place long enough for them to unpack her toothbrush, and you won’t even take the ten minutes to tell me whether you’ve got her mental health records? No, you listen to me, now.” He swings around in his chair, away from the computer and toward the window. “You have an hour to get back to me—one hour, just one—and if I don’t hear from you—no, whether you have the files or not, I don’t care if you have the files, I care that you actually do something useful right now—I’m going to call the department of children’s services. And they’re going to start calling, and—right, yeah, call me back. Good idea.”

He slams down the phone hard, hard enough that Clint flinches. Hill just cringes. “Fourteen years old,” he says, and rubs the crumpled muscle between his eyebrows. “Fourteen, running off every chance she gets, and they can’t even walk down to the file room and look up—”

“Bruce,” Hill interrupts.

He blinks. “Oh. I’m sorry.” His voice is—quieter, now. He rubs his palms on his pants, stands up, and offers his hand again. “The new guy, right? Traffic and DUIs?”

“Right.” Bruce’s got a soft grip.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” Clint says. But then the phone rings again, and Bruce apologizes while answering it.

**Thing 6**

“I won’t get you coffee, I won’t hunt down your files to put them back in the file room, and I won’t staple things for you when you forget to set up automatic stapling on the copier.” Darcy Lewis’s hair bounces as she strides down the hall. Hill keeps up, eyes focused on the file she’s been carrying around, but Clint’s having a hard time following her. She’s in offices, out of offices, picking up papers from one only to put them in another, and all while her long hair streams behind her. “If Sif’s on defense,” she continues, exchanging a file with a brunette she passes in the hall, “give Jane a ten-minute warning that she’s coming up here. If the toilet breaks again, Peggy’s putting in the work order, not me.”

“Okay . . .”

“I don’t answer e-mail from home,” she continues, leading Clint past his own office (which he’s barely seen, at this point) and over to the gray-walled cubicle he’d mostly-ignored on the first loop around the floor. Darcy throws herself into the desk chair, leans back, and tucks her feet up against the edge of the desk. She’s wearing Chuck Taylors with her black slacks and distressed-looking gray t-shirt. She rocks the chair back and forth, face twisted in thought. “You share me with Steve, fifty-fifty. Means I probably won’t go out and pick up your lunch. Or your dry cleaning. Or your cat. Or—”

“I get it,” he promises, holding up a hand.

She squints at him for a half-second and then cranes her neck around the mouth of the cubicle. “Maria?”

“He gets it,” she says without looking up.

Darcy nods, drops her feet onto the floor, and smiles. “Well then, Mr. Barton, welcome to the team!”
“Uh, thanks,” he replies . . . to his own assistant.

**Thing 7**

“You’ll get used to that.”

*That,* or so Clint assumes, is Maria Hill standing in her office, half-shouting at somebody on the other end of her phone. Her anger reminded Clint of one of those storms that came outta nowhere: one second, they were walking down the hallway, Hill reviewing that file, and the next, she was hollering for someone named Peggy to get someone named Laufeyson on the phone.

The woman who says it, she’s—well, saying she’s pretty is like saying the Grand Canyon’s kinda cool. Neither adjective really does its subject justice. She’s curvy, red-haired, and wears a black suit that looks like it’s been spray-painted onto her skin. Clint’s first reaction is to *look* at her for a couple seconds, and his second is to figure she could kick his ass.

Really. Probably while still wearing the four-inch heels.

“Which part?” he decides to ask, once he’s done *looking.*

“The way things change in an instant.” She shrugs, a little, and crosses her arms over her chest.

“You did—research, right? Before you turned up here.”

He blinks. Nobody’s said anything about his résumé all day. The stupid writing sample, sure, but not his actual qualifications. He was starting to wonder if he’d been the only applicant or something. “Yeah,” he says.

“Nice work if you can get it, but pretty static, right?” She watches him until he nods. “Doesn’t work like that around here, though. Like Bruce—glasses, messy office, you met him?”

“Yeah.”

“He works on an accelerated schedule because once a kid’s removed from somewhere, he either has to act or let the kid go back to whatever home was making his life hell. Thor’s in and out of meetings with kids and their hot-mess parents, trying to convince them that a jury trial for throwing a brick through somebody’s window isn’t worth anybody’s time. Steve’s been working Saturdays for the last month because everyone who normally covers for him’s had Monday trials. Fury’s running for reelection, so we’ll be lucky if we see him for the next couple months. And Phil and Maria are always up to their eyebrows in work, or press, or managing everybody else.”

He nods again, glancing back at Hill. She’s pacing around her desk, and her voice *almost* shrills when she repeats the word, “Sanctions?” He flinches and looks back to the redhead. “What about Stark?”

She rolls her eyes. “Avoid Stark,” she says. “At all costs.”

He snorts a half-laugh and watches the corners of her lips twitch. “Okay,” he replies, “then what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.” He counts off people on his fingers. “Steve handles charges and misdemeanors, Hill and—Phil?”
“Coulson,” she supplies.

“Coulson, they do major felonies, Stark catches the appeals. Thor does juvenile offenders, Bruce takes care of abuse and neglect.”

She smiles. “Sounds like you’ve figured it out.”

“But it doesn’t explain you.”

“Maybe I don’t need explaining.”

There’s something—cat-like in the little smile that slides across her face. Their eyes meet, and Clint can’t help but let a smile stumble onto his lips, too. He’d learned a long time ago to trust his instincts with people. To fight, flee, buck, or settle, depending on the circumstance.

Right now, he thinks settling might be—okay.

At least, until, “Miss Romanoff?”

The young woman behind them’s got long, light brown hair, and there’s something about her that radiates a kind of ruthless efficiency. Clint noticed her before, talking to Darcy, but now she’s holding a clipboard and a file under her arm and waiting. Almost impatiently, like she might be the only person who knows it’s important.

Miss Romanoff, the redhead, arches an eyebrow at her.

“Your victim’s in the conference room, and she—uh.”

“Jane?” Romanoff prompts.

“She wants to drop the charges.”

By the time Clint processes that the words coming out of Romanoff’s mouth aren’t English—angry, spat-out syllables that sound a little bit like fire, sure, but also definitely not English—she’s already snatched the clipboard out of Jane’s grip and taken off down the hallway at a run. An actual run, in her four-inch heels, and Clint—

He’s not ashamed to say he watches that. He’s pretty sure all the men in the office, no matter how much Romanoff isn’t their type, would watch that.

Jane sighs. “I told her two weeks ago that this would happen,” she informs Clint, shaking her head. “The first time, they never want to file. It’s only the repeats who stick around.”

“Repeats?” he asks, glancing at her.

Something a lot like disdain crawls over her expression. “Victims of domestic violence. Natasha prosecutes domestic abuse and restraining or—”

“You should have him skinned!” Romanoff’s voice shouts, and somewhere down the hallway, a door slams.

“—ders,” Jane finishes. She walks away just as Hill’s voice reaches a fever pitch on the phone. Romanoff’s probably right, Clint thinks, about how he needs to get used to—that.
**Thing 8**

After the tours, the introductions, the paperwork, and the promises to uphold the state constitution, Clint closes the door to his office and—stands there. The carpet’s newly-cleaned, the desk’s empty except for two stacks of files, the bookshelf’s full of brand-new statute books with unbroken spines, and then, there’s him.

Him, standing in his new office in one of the three suits he owns—the gray one that probably cost as much as Stark’s tie—his fingers curled around the strap on his bag. He strips it off, lays it across an empty chair—not a nice chair, just a cheap plastic one that faces the desk and probably gives people cramps after ten minutes—and walks to the window.

He’s on the opposite side of the floor from people like Tony Stark and Maria Hill, and his office overlooks the parking lot. There’s a wide window ledge, enough that you could probably take one of those cushions made for Target-brand porch swings and turn it into a window seat, and he rests his knees against it. They’re six floors up, far enough that you can see the clock tower on the public library and the steeple of some old church from here.

The sun’s streaming in. It’s warm and bright, and it reminds Clint of being outside. When he did legislative research, he moved back and forth between the closet his boss called a law library and the closet his boss called his office. He never got to see the sun.

He closes his eyes and feels it on his face for a few seconds before there’s a knock at the door. “Come in,” he says, but it’s already opening by the time he gets to the m.

“Fury wants to see you,” Darcy reports. She leaves the door open when she walks away.

“Of course he does,” Clint murmurs, but not to Darcy. No, he says it to his reflection in the window, to the clock tower and the steeple, before he leaves again.

**Thing 9**

“I only hire one kind of attorney here,” District Attorney Fury says. “The extraordinary kind.”

Fury’s office, like Hill’s and Stark’s, overlooks a park. From six floors up, the view’s all about the trees, playground, band shell, and fountain. There’re kids climbing all over the jungle gym, shirtless frat boys playing ultimate Frisbee, and a string quartet rehearsing for what Clint guesses is some open-air spring concert. The view’s more impressive than Fury’s enormous wrap-around desk or the leather couch against the far wall. Hell, it’s more impressive than the massive TV with the conference-call camera on top of it.

Fury’s assistant, a nervous-looking guy who’d been playing a space game on his computer when Clint’d walked up, practically shoves a cup of coffee into Clint’s hand. He hadn’t asked for it, but he thanks him anyway. The kid’s already shuffling off, though, eyes on the floor like somebody’d beaten him for pissing on the carpet.

The coffee’s rich and dark. Clint likes that.

Next to him, Fury’s watching the park too, his good eye tracking the movements of the kids through the grass. All Fury wears is black—black slacks, black shirt, black eye-patch that doesn’t quite cover all the scarring. Clint’s pretty sure that, wherever his tie and suit coat are, they’re
black, too.

Clint cups the coffee mug between his palms. “I’m not sure how extraordinary I am, sir.”

Fury raises his eyebrows. “Is that so?” he asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then tell me this: can you keep a kid in juvenile court and charge her with a DUI?”

Clint pauses, mug halfway to his mouth. “I—what?”

“Fifteen-year-old girl, drunk off her ass, takes daddy’s car down the block after she’s done raiding the liquor cabinet at a slumber party. Gets pulled over. You don’t wanna waive her up to an adult ‘cause it’ll stick on her record. Can you charge her with a DUI?”

“No.”

Fury’s head twitches a half-inch in Clint’s direction. “No?”

“The juvenile code leaves traffic offenses to be charged under the traffic code, which is meant for adults.” He shrugs a little and tries to chase away the dry feeling in his throat with a sip of coffee. It doesn’t work. “Traffic code just says any court of competent jurisdiction can handle a DUI, which you’d think would mean juvenile court, but case law says that if it’s left out of the juvenile code, it can’t be prosecuted under the juvenile code. If you’re fifteen and you drive drunk, the only option’s charging you with an adult misdemeanor. And,” he adds, “if you screw around and end up hurting somebody, you can bet you’ll be tried as an adult so the DUI shows up in your lesser included crimes.”

There’s a pause, a long one, when Clint finishes up. He takes another sip of the coffee, like all that caffeine’ll settle his nerves, and watches Fury’s face. It’s neutral for a long time, not a hint of how Clint did with the question, but then Fury, he—nods. “That’s why I hired you,” he says, finally turning away from the window. He meets Clint’s eyes. “I asked that question in half the interviews we did for this job, and every one of those bozos got it wrong. Half of them said sure, why not, sounded good to them, and the other half? Argued that if you aren’t sixteen, you can’t be tried for a traffic offense, period.” He shakes his head. “Goddamn rookie bullshit, that’s what that is.”

Clint frowns. “But you didn’t ask that in my interview.”

“Because I read your term paper on DUIs and implied consent, and knew as soon as I did that I wouldn’t have to.” He puts his hands on his hips. “The people here,” he continues, “are good. Good at their jobs, good at seeking out justice, good at looking out for each other. Between that writing sample and ten minutes of your interview, I knew you’d fit right in.”

“Even with—Thor, was it?”

Fury laughs. “Especially with Thor. Just watch out for him in the softball league. He’s KO-ed more catchers coming into home than in the history of the major leagues.” Clint snorts a little, but it’s—better, he thinks, to have this twisted Fury-brand smile than complete neutrality. “He and Natasha—Romanoff, our domestic specialist—covered the traffic docket while we were a man down. You’ll have notes on your cases, and Judge English cleared this Friday so you won’t have to show up in court until next week. Hopefully by then, you’ll have your bearings. And,” he adds, “enough of an idea of how this place works that you won’t get blindsided.”

Clint purses his lips. “Blindsided, sir?”
“She won’t admit this, and I’ll deny knowing about it, but when Romanoff was new? She walked into a hearing against the slickest bastard north of the equator and got railroaded because nobody wanted to tell her she was up against the goddamn lord of legal mischief.” He shakes his head. “Took six weeks before she’d say much—unless you wanna count all of that Russian swearing she was doing.”

Clint turns the mug around in his hands. “Besides getting all the gossip, is there anything else I should know? Any—words for the wise?”

“Words for the wise?”

“Yes, sir.”

There’s a half-second pause before Fury looks at Clint. Not a glance, but a long, searching look, like he’s considering skinning Clint alive and wearing his pelt as a jogging suit. “One,” he decides, after a few uncomfortable seconds.

“Which is?”

“Stop calling me ‘sir.’”

**Thing 10**

Clint leaves at six-thirty.

He reads every case file on his desk, at least the basic facts, and scribbles some notes to himself on one of the crisp new legal pads he finds in a drawer. They’ve stocked him up with the basics—pads, pens, post-its, those little shiny tabs for marking where you wanna come back to—but nothing’s exactly what he likes. He switches out the pen for a pencil from his own bag after the first half-hour, and rips up post-its so he’s got tabs he can write on.

He’s got a long way to go, but around six, his eyes start crossing, and at six-thirty, he’s too hungry to keep working.

The hall’s pretty quiet when he comes out of his office. Darcy’s gone, her bubble screensaver dancing around, and both Banner and Romanoff’s doors are closed. He wanders through the gray-on-gray hallway, reading the names on the doors and trying to take everything in. Steve Rogers has a kid named Dot, he reminds himself. Pepper—whose cubicle is immaculate, not a hint of clutter—is Tony Stark’s assistant. Thor Odinson is—

“The rule around here’s that I’m the only one allowed to stay past about six-fifteen,” someone says from behind him, and Clint almost trips into the wall when he twists around. He hadn’t heard anything—no steps, no breathing, nothing—and he doesn’t like being snuck up on.

His bag smacks the wall, audibly, before he settles again, and the guy behind him holds up his hands. He’s in your typical black business suit and tie, his office ID badge dangling from the pocket—and the second Clint’s facing him, he looks simultaneously apologetic and guilty. Clint knows, immediately, that he’s glaring or scowling. Something to make this guy pull a face and surrender.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

“I figured you heard me,” the guy says, and Clint—he kind of likes that it’s not an immediate
apology. He pulls the door over while Clint reads the nameplate next to it: 

*Phil Coulson, Chief Assistant District Attorney.* “I was at jury selection all afternoon. We didn’t meet, but I’ve heard a lot about you. Barton, right?”

“You’re Coulson,” Clint says, and Coulson smiles. It’s easy, like he spends a lot of his time slipping into little smiles. His hand is strong when Clint shakes it. “Hill figured I wouldn’t see you till tomorrow.”

“If you’d left with everyone else, you probably wouldn’t have. We just finished up half an hour ago. I think at least three of them want to acquit just based on selection running late.” He gestures down the hallway. “Can I walk you out?”

“Yeah, sure,” Clint replies, shrugging. They meander down the hall, but Coulson doesn’t really say anything else. Hill spent all her time in the hallway reading files, typing on her Blackberry, or explaining how the coffee pot worked, but Coulson just—walks. The silence is new, but not in a bad way. After the day he’s had, it’s more welcome than anything else.

In the elevator, Coulson asks, “What do you think?”

“What?”

“Your first day.” Clint only figures out he’s frowning when Coulson chuckles a little. “That bad?”

“Just—a lot to take in.”

“Professional hazard around here: nothing ever really stops.” The elevator doors open and Coulson waits for Clint to step out before he follows. “I read your résumé. You spent a lot of time in litigation internships and research positions. That’s pretty solitary work.”

He nods, a little. “I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do,” he—well, it’s not a lie when you mean part of it, right? He shoves his hands in his pockets. Outside, the sun’s starting to go down, and you can almost feel the heat dissipating. “It wasn’t bad work.”

“No,” Coulson agrees, “but it’s a lot different from this.” When Clint glances over, that easy smile’s tumbling across Coulson’s face again. “You were easily the top candidate. At least, I thought so. Even on paper, you had the most advocacy training, the best handle on criminal procedure. And solid grades.”

He rolls his eyes. “Middle-third grades.”

“Maybe in contract law and second semester civil procedure. You had—what, one A-minus in your criminal law classes? A B-plus in appellate advocacy? For what we look for, you were the best man for the job.”

There’s something painfully honest about the way Coulson says it, like he believes every word right down to his shoelaces, and Clint has a hard time arguing with that. He follows as the guy trail over to a black sedan. He’s about to say something, some kind of *thanks, have a good one,* when Coulson starts talking again. “If you need anything, you can always ask. Me, Hill, Steve Rogers—we’re all here to help you make this transition. And Darcy’s a little . . . quirky . . . but she’s one of the sharpest assistants we’ve got.”

Clint snorts. “‘Quirky’ is kinda an understatement.”

“You think she’s bad now, wait ‘till the next time there’s a *West Wing* marathon on ABC Family.” He pulls the back door to the car open, and Clint watches him strip out of his suit coat. It’s funny,
but in a way, it’s the friendliest thing that’s happened all day, someone willing to—be human in front of him. Everything else’s been show-and-tell, with cheesy smiles and playing up for the new guy.

Coulson just is.

“Every workplace,” he says, finally, “has a learning curve. You’ll figure ours out pretty soon. You just have to be willing to hit the wall a couple times, first.”

Clint nods, a little, and tries to smile. It’s been a long day, though. Even Coulson seems to notice, and he falls silent as he packs his jacket and briefcase into his back seat. Clint figures that’s the end of the conversation, so he shoves his hands in his pockets and wanders toward where he’s parked, near the back of the lot.

At least, until Coulson says, “Clint?”

When he turns around, Coulson’s leaning an arm on top of the open door. Their eyes meet, and then he smiles in this—genuine way that Clint doesn’t see coming. It’s distracting, for a second, the way it finds lines around his eyes. He forgets everything he’d been thinking about his long day, and just—smiles back.

There’s warmth in Coulson’s voice when he says, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And for the first time all day, Clint thinks he might really like this place.
The Learning Curve

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad . . . week.

“The court calls case 11-1075C for a preliminary hearing,” Judge English says, and Clint drums his fingertips on the edge of his file.

The summer before he started law school, six years back, he’d worked as a process server in a different county, running subpoenas and pleadings out to people who really didn’t wanna come to court. Most the time, he was out throwing Milkbones to pitbulls and convincing meth addicts not to shoot him in the face, but in the last half-hour or hour of a slow day, he’d slip into the back of whatever courtroom had something going on. He’d seen his first-ever trial that way, watched a jury get selected and, a week later, come back with a verdict, and decided what kind of lawyer he wanted to be—all while he was supposed to be knocking on windows to serve anti-government anarchists with civil complaints for not paying their Visa bills.

Almost made the two years after law school he spent working as a glorified research drone worth it.

Almost.

“Appearances?” Judge English asks. She’s an older lady, with short-cropped gray hair and a lot of teeth. Clint thinks he might like her, but all he’s done in front of her so far’s get some pleas entered. Not all that impressive.

“May it please the court,” he says, fingers still drumming, “state appears by Clinton Barton, assistant district attorney.”

“And may it—shit.” The defense attorney almost tips outta his chair to pick up his pen—the pen Clint leant him at the plea hearing, ‘cause the guy hadn’t brought his own. He’s tall and slender, built like Rogers with a little less shoulder, but his suit is rumpled and the grays of his blazer and pants don’t actually match.

They don’t come close.

“Sorry, it’s just—Wade Wilson,” he says.

Judge English raises her eyebrows. “Your client, Mr. Wilson?”

“Oh. Yeah. He’s here too.” Wilson waves to his client, who stands up in this weird little shuffle. Clint almost feels sorry for the guy: he’s pled not guilty to charges he pretty obviously did, and now he’s dealing with a nutcase for an attorney. “Mr. Thompson, I mean, appears in person. And with me. Wade Wilson.”
“Yes, Mr. Wilson, I certainly have your name,” the judge says.

“Right.” Wilson gestures for his client to sit back down again. The chair creaks and groans as he settles. “Anyway, ma’am—your honor, ma’am—we’re ready for today’s preliminary hearing if the state is.”

“We are, your honor,” Clint says. At least, he thinks, this’ll go fast. Wilson’s a little on the unhinged side, but the pleas all went according to plan and—

“You are?” the judge asks, and he blinks back to attention. “Where are your witnesses, Mr. Barton?”

“My—what?”

“Witnesses. For today’s preliminary hearing. Mr. Wilson indicated three weeks ago that his client wanted a full evidentiary hearing, which is his right under law.”

“I—” Clint stumbles, and his stomach sinks like a stone. He flips open the file and starts rifling through the mass of notes from his predecessor—someone he’s never met, a guy by the name of Pym who went off to practice patent law (according to the office gossip)—but he can’t find the case notes. The file’s a mess, ‘cause Thor never hands anything off to an assistant that he thinks he can do himself, and—

“Mr. Barton?”

“I—I’m sorry, your honor, I don’t know—”

“Oh, you’re the new guy!” Wilson interrupts, and Clint stops sorting through the Thompson file to look over. He’s got his phone in his hand, and even though the volume’s turned almost all the way down, Clint can hear the Angry Birds song. It’s muffled by Wilson’s palm, but definitely there. “The way it works,” he starts explaining, “is that a defendant can have a full evidentiary hearing at the prelim, or he can waive it. If he waives it, it’s basically a hearing just to say he’s waived it. If not, you have to show all the evidence that—”

“I know what an evidentiary hearing is,” Clint interrupts. He knows he’s scowling. He spent the whole first week trying not to scowl, not to play too much of his hand through his expression, but it’s hard right now. It’s hard because he’s just found Thor’s notes, and he’s pretty sure the scribbles are some kind of half-hearted witness list. “I just didn’t know this was one.”

Judge English sighs. She’d sighed at Wilson twice, before, but this is the first time she’s sighed at Clint. “I take it,” she says dryly, “that the state is not, in fact, prepared for today’s hearing?”

“It’s definitely a witness list. Clint sees it now, sees the name of the reporting officer and the nurse at the hospital, plus the guy the defendant ran off the road and— “Something must’ve gotten crossed,” he finally says, glancing up at Judge English. “I’d like to request a continuance, just for a week, so I can get the witnesses in here and—”

“It’s cool,” Wilson interrupts. He doesn’t glance up from Angry Birds. “He’s the new guy. And he leant me a pretty badass pen.”

The judge lets out another, longer sigh. “One week, Mr. Barton,” she says, “or I will dismiss the case. With prejudice.”

“Thank you,” Clint murmurs, but really, he’s wondering if there’re any good hiding places in the judicial complex. At legal services, where he’d done legislative research, he’d holed up in the little
storage room with all the old statute books. He’s pretty sure the only hiding place here is the back stairwell.

And he’ll need to hide if this case gets dismissed. It’s a combination DUI, suspended license, and criminal damage to property case that Hill let him keep. She’d split most the other open, complicated cases between Rogers, Romanoff, and Thor, just to make sure Clint didn’t get “overwhelmed.”

He’s pretty sure this is his first test, and look. Nearly blew it.

“Thanks, new guy,” Wilson says on his way out, and leaves the pen on the corner of counsel table.

Back on the sixth floor, Clint half-closes his office door and spends a second just looking out the window. The parking lot’s crowded with cars, and he stares into the glare of sun off windshields. He wonders if he’d get extra “new guy” leeway if he happened to go blind this afternoon.

There’s a thump on his door, and he turns around to see Thor striding in. He’s got a thin white shirt on, sleeves rolled up and tie loose, and there’s no missing how much guy he is. Clint wonders how the hell he fits into a suit coat, ’cause he has a hard enough time getting things taken out for himself. Thor’s broader from throat to belly-button.

“I have the last two files I covered prior to your hiring,” he announces. Thor announces everything. Clint’s pretty sure the guy doesn’t have a volume control. “As I said in my e-mail, Thomasson will waive the evidentiary hearing next week Tuesday and will likely plea. As for Mister Morrison, he —”

“Wait, what?” Clint asks, and turns all the way around from the window. Thor goes still, folder dangling from his fingers.

“I said that Mister Morrison will be—”

“No. Before that.”

“Thomasson?” Thor frowns. “Mister Thomasson is set for preliminary hearing next week. But as I stated in the e-mail, I spoke to his attorney, and it has been agreed that—”

“Thomasson isn’t an evidentiary hearing,” Clint repeats.

“No. Thomasson has agreed he will give up the full hearing, move on to—”

“Thomasson.”

“Yes.” Thor’s face crumples like a cartoon character’s. “Barton, are you certain you’re—”

“Sorry,” he interrupts, and shakes his head. “I just—had a rough day. Thomasson’s no evidence, and you were saying about Morrison?”

It’s funny, really, how Thor can go from scowling to this amused little twinkle of a smile. Like someone pops a switch, easy as that. “Allow me to tell you some about Mister Morrison,” he says. Clint watches him pull up a chair.

Watches him and thinks about how, one week in, he’d just mixed up Thompson and Thomasson.

Yeah. Hill was gonna kill him.
“Two weeks from today. My place. Bathing suits, grilled meats, lots of beer. And a princess cake, but don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone it’s for you.”

Clint barely knows Tony Stark—not that it discourages Tony Stark from walking up, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb, and just . . . talking. It’s Wednesday morning, and Clint’s got two motions to argue on Friday. One’s technical enough that he’s perched himself on the wide, bare window ledge at the back of his office and started scribbling down notes.

At least, he’s trying to. But now, Stark’s leaning against his doorjamb.

“Princess cake?” he repeats.

“Two-tiered. Pink, mostly, but I’m throwing in some stars and stripes. Gotta keep daddy happy, you know?” Clint raises an eyebrow, which only makes Stark’s whole face darken. “You got the evite, didn’t you?”

“Evite?”

“For Dot’s— God, okay, first order of business after tomorrow’s staff meeting is to redo your e-mail spam filter, because you didn’t get my evite.” He sighs, and it takes a lot for Clint not to roll his eyes. He goes back to reading the motion he’s spent the last—has it really been an hour already?—combing through. “Steve’s kid, she’s turning four. And I’m throwing the party.”

Clint glances up. He’d almost made it through an entire sentence. “You’re throwing somebody else’s kid a birthday party?”

Stark puffs out his chest. “I’m the fairy godfather.” Clint snorts and looks down again. “Look, there’s no need for presents, nothing fancy, just you, your swimsuit, and a singing voice that doesn’t make your ears bleed. Hint, don’t take a lesson from Banner.”

“I heard that,” Bruce comments, walking by.

“Yeah, wasn’t trying to keep it a secret,” Stark calls after him.

Clint exhales and puts down his pen. He’d stayed ‘till six the night before, sorting out subpoenas for the hearing he’d screwed up, and now he’s buried in motions he didn’t write, trying to find the argument in—god, what did this Pym guy smoke? “Stark,” he says after a couple seconds, “I’ve really gotta finish this up. Print me out the invitation or something, okay?”

“I spent hours trying to find the right Pinky Pie clipart for—”

“Okay?”

There’s a half-second, maybe two, where Stark only thinks about it. Clint’s not sure he likes the fact that he’s only thinking, ’cause that means there’s a version of the world where Stark’s about to keep talking.

But then, finally, the guy shrugs. “Sure,” he says. He sips his coffee, and Clint finally figures it’s safe to go back to his reading.

At least, until Stark asks, “You find that case law I asked you for?”
Clint’s head pops up. “Case law?”

“Yeah. For that appeal. I asked you about it last Friday, when we all went out to lu—”

“Wait.” And Clint, maybe because of a lack of sleep or the fact he’s got more files in his inbox than he has hours in a day, he has to hold up a hand and stop Stark from bulldozing right over him. “You mean the thing where you offered to pay me in—male strippers and whipped cream?”

“Male models,” Stark corrects, holding up a finger. “I like to keep it classy.”

He frowns. “You—were serious?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m talking to our new go-to guy. You know, the one who wrote a term paper on implied consent as it applies and should apply to DUI cases? Which, by the way,” he adds, gesturing with the mug, “was brilliant. Coulson wept.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “I should’ve submitted the term paper about mediation in domestic violence cases.”

“And that would’ve gotten you into Tasha’s pants, but not this job.” Stark sips his coffee again. “So. You get the case law?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I— I thought you were just messing around.” That’s about the worst defense on the planet, though, and Clint knows it. Stark’s face crumples into this look that’s equal parts annoyance and disappointment. So much, Clint thinks, for being the new go-to guy. He glances at the clock on the wall. “Gimme a couple hours, I can maybe find some of what you—”

“Yeah, see, brief’s due in—Pepper!”

Clint frowns. “You know her desk’s on the other side of the floor, right?”

“She likes to check up on me,” Stark replies, shrugging. “She’s like one of those green things in Minecraft, the ones that lurk around until they explode in your—”

And suddenly, just like predicted, Pepper’s there. She’s holding a stack of response briefs with yellow cover sheets, but she’s as calm as ever. “End of business tomorrow,” she informs Tony, and offers him the stack.

“You know I don’t like being handed things.”

“I need to go down to the mailroom and pick up—”

“Hands are full,” Stark retorts, and cups both his palms around his coffee cup.

Pepper rolls her eyes, and Clint flashes her a little smile. “Put them on my desk,” he says. “He’ll come back for them eventually.”

“She’ll come back for them eventually,” Stark replies, and Pepper’s glance borders on murderous. She thanks Clint, lifts her chin in defiance, and strides off. “Like I said,” he continues, “brief’s due at end of business tomorrow. I figured you’d have everything written up, ready for me to cut and paste.”
Clint rubs a palm over his face. “You offered me male strippers.”

“You offered male strippers?”

“Whatever. Who offers payment in male anything when they’re serious?”

“Excuse me,” Stark scoffs. He looks downright offended. “I only offer models for my most serious tasks. Do you know how much a good male model costs? Never mind two or three of them, and then the whipped cream and the liability insurance, plus—”

“Stark,” Clint says, slowly.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t have your case law.”

“Right.” He pauses for a few seconds, sips his coffee, and shrugs. “I’ll go finish that, then,” he decides. Clint doesn’t mention that in the time it took to yell at Pepper and discuss the failings of models as a payment plan, Stark probably could’ve started on his missing research.

He drops his eyes back to the motion, but he can’t remember exactly where he was. He pages back, skimming his own highlighting, trying to figure out what he’d been reading when—

“But you’ll come?”

Stark’s leaning around the doorjamb, coffee mug still in hand, whole brow crinkled with curiosity.

Clint sighs. “What?”

“To Dot’s party.”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, sure.”

And hard as it was to work when Stark was talking, it’s not much easier to work when he’s hooting in victory, instead. No, really. Trust Clint on this one.

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“You can’t pull my hearings!” Clint announces, and he doesn’t realize that he’s shouting until Hill’s assistant pauses in the doorway, turns around, and walks back the way she came.

The staff meeting’s in fifteen minutes, and Clint—Clint should’ve known this was coming. You don’t snag somebody right before a meeting unless you want an automatic end to the conversation. Especially not when it’s 8:15 a.m. and the coffee pot’s not even dripping yet.

Hill sighs. She’s at her desk, her suit jacket over the back of her chair, and she looks exasperated. Clint doesn’t really blame her. He’d come early for the meeting and found her and Coulson bent over a file, discussing something in hushed tones. He’s pretty sure she’s in and working before
dawn, most days. “It’s nothing personal,” she says. She presses her palms against the desktop. “It’s just—”

“I know I blew the Thompson hearing,” he interrupts. He doesn’t mean to, but he’d worked late again the night before, sorting his way through the arguments from the defense. He’s got counters for all of their points, even the ones they’re probably right about. He’s plugged every one of Pym’s holes. “Thor put all the names in alphabetical order and I got the two of them reversed. English gave me a continuance, it’s going on Tuesday, so I don’t—”

“Wait. You blew a hearing?”

Fuck. “I thought you knew.”

“No.” Her frown creases the corners of her mouth. Clint gets the feeling she frowns a lot. “But it makes me wonder what else Thor’s not telling me.” She sighs, again, and closes her eyes long enough that Clint knows it’s not a blink. “You had a full docket Tuesday, and you have a pre-trial status hearing for McLaughlin on Friday,” she explains. “Steve’s charging at least three DUIs this afternoon, one of which isn’t eligible for diversion, and from the sounds of it, we’re getting an eluding law enforcement case in today, too.” Hill meets his eyes. “I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I won’t be overwhelmed,” he says.

“Really? What’s White’s basis for the motion to suppress?”

Clint opens his mouth, but the answer, it’s—gone. Like he’s never heard of White or his motion, even though he spent an entire work day digging through the arguments. He presses his lips together. “Insufficiency of Miranda,” he says, eventually. He remembers reading it, just not whether it was the main argument or some side point.

Hill smiles, but it’s not friendly. Actually, the longer he looks at it, the less it’s a smile. “White was the motion to dismiss the ‘failure to submit to a breathalyzer’ charge, not the motion to suppress.”

She stands and snags her jacket off the back of her chair. “I want you to be successful, but you’re overwhelmed. You have to walk before you can run.” She pauses. “And don’t listen when Stark tells you otherwise. I’ll see you in the meeting.”

Clint steps out of the doorway, and Hill strides past him. He stands there in her office, dumb and speechless, until Thor pops his head in and reminds him about the meeting.

Afterwards, Clint sits at his desk and discovers that the motions and their corresponding case files are gone, whisked away at some point when he was elsewhere. He sighs, rips up the notes he’d written for the hearings, and shoves them in the garbage can. He decides five minutes later that he hates staring at them, though, and walks the whole can to the nearest shredder bin.

An hour later, as he’s reading photocopies of tickets that might be contested, Stark taps on his door. “Run,” he says.

Clint blinks. “Run?”

“Run. Before you crawl.”

“I think she said walk,” Clint corrects, but he isn’t sure how Stark even knows about that conversation.

Stark shrugs and steps away from the door. “Walking, crawling, it’s all the same,” he says. “You’ll never get there, either way. That’s why you run.”
All Clint wants is some coffee.

The afternoons are usually quiet on the sixth floor, thanks to everybody’s various court responsibilities. Rogers’s off arranging bond, Thor’s in the middle of a trial, and Romanoff’s got at least six restraining orders she’s moving for in the next hour or so. Last he saw Stark, he was holed up in his office with Banner, working on an appeal from one of Banner’s child abuse cases. And Hill—

He doesn’t care where Hill is. Not right now.

Right now, he’s not sure he wants to look at Hill.

He, though, has files to review and some Friday afternoon pleas to prep for, and all he wants is some coffee. A big mug of the stuff, steaming-hot and dark, but the coffee pot’s got other ideas.

The coffee pot that’s overflowing hot water onto the counter and hissing the whole damn time, that is.

How does this happen to him? Clint can’t help wondering it as he digs through drawers in the break room, trying to find a towel instead of some single-ply paper napkins that’ll just ensure he gets scalded. How is it that a dozen people use this pot every day but he’s the moron who can’t get it to—

“Here,” someone says, and Clint twists to see Coulson standing next to him, holding a dishtowel. It’s got Easter eggs on it, but it’s thick enough that he can use it to start sopping up the water. Coulson reaches around him and pulls the plug on the damn pot before he can add electrocution to the list of things that’ve gone wrong today.

The water runs off the counter and onto the floor. Clint’s shoes squeak in it. “Thanks,” he says. He catches some of the drips with the towel.

“There used to be a sign,” Coulson comments. Clint glances over and watches him pull another towel from the drawer under the microwave. “If you over-fill it, it splatters everywhere. Peggy made a sign, but I’ve got a feeling the last overflow did it in.”

“Sign would’ve been nice,” Clint admits. He turns to wring the towel out over the sink, and when he glances back, Coulson’s crouching, wiping the water off the floor. “You, uh, don’t have to help. It’s my mess.”

“My first week here, I didn’t know how to use the microwave. It was a cheap one with a dial, instead of a digital display, and some of the numbers’d worn off.” Coulson glances up at him. “I put a freezer meal in for ten minutes.”

Clint cringes. “Ouch.”

“Less ‘ouch,’ more ‘flames.’” He stands up and moves toward the sink. Clint tries to get out of the way, but it’s a small space. Their arms brush, and Clint realizes this is only the second time he’s
seen Coulson without the suit jacket. He’d either been in trial or holed up in his office since that first evening when they’d walked out together. “Good news was, we got a new microwave out of it.”

His little smile is so amused that Clint can’t help but chuckle while he wipes up the rest of the water. “You’re telling me this isn’t the worst that could’ve happened?”

“Actually, given how Thor feels about his coffee, this is probably the worst that could’ve happened. But you looked like you needed something to laugh at. I don’t mind it being me.”

“No offense, but I’m pretty sure your ten worst stories still wouldn’t be enough to keep me laughing.”

Clint says it without thinking, a complete accident, and squeezes his eyes shut when Coulson asks, “That bad?” There’s a rule about this, or at least there should be, complaining to your work superior about how bad your day’s going. People get fired for less, he thinks.

He tips the coffee maker up so he can wipe under it. “There’s a lot to do,” he lies.

“Like tomorrow’s hearings?” He glances over at Coulson. His eyebrows are raised, and he’s leaning back against the lip of the sink. “Maria told me that she pulled them.”

Clint shrugs. “It was the right call.”

“I don’t know if I agree with that.”

“I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“And you know as well as I do that the best way for an attorney to learn is to dive in the deep end.” Clint watches him cross his arms over his chest and shrug. “Maria means well,” he says, “and she’s not going to change her mind. Trust me, if I thought there was a way to convince her, you would’ve had your hearings back ten minutes after she took them. We have different ways of—mentoring, I guess you could say.”

“Mentoring?” he repeats, snorting lightly.

Coulson doesn’t shift, and Clint has to reach around him to drop the towel in the sink. “That’s what she’s doing, you know. Think of it like a . . . first-time golfer. You take them to the driving range, so if they hit the ball off-center, it doesn’t go through anyone’s windshield.”

Clint can’t bite back his grin. Well, maybe he can; he doesn’t actually try. “I should’ve guessed you’re a golfer.”

“Me? Oh no. The last time I went with Steve and his husband, I was demoted to ‘glorified caddy’ by the second hole.” There is something almost painfully warm about Coulson’s smile. Clint has a hard time looking away from it. “You’re doing fine.”

Clint glances past Coulson for a half-second, checking the hallway. There’s no one around, not even the perpetually-drifting Darcy. Once he’s sure they’re alone, he admits, “Hard to feel that way.”

“Nobody feels that way. Not their first week, or their first month, or normally their first year.” He leans around Clint to plug in the coffee pot. This time, it sparks to life without the added death-hiss. “That doesn’t mean you’re not doing fine.”
Their eyes meet for a lot longer than Clint’s prepared for, almost—lingering, and he tries to come up with something to say. He’s not sure why Coulson’s so disarming or why Clint feels like he can just—say things to him. Hill only ever carries herself like she’s in a courtroom, Stark ricochets around the building like a ping-pong ball, and Clint’s only spoken to the others in passing. But Coulson, he’s . . . calm and collected.

Hard to believe he’s one of the two people trusted to do the major felonies. He more looks like he should do Banner’s job, work on protecting kids. Something—softer.

He almost says exactly that when one of the investigators, a guy in glasses and a suit without a tie, pops his head into the breakroom. “Rhodes just called,” he says, halfway-breathless. “He found that motherfucker we were trying to serve. He’s parked outside the McDonalds waiting for the bastard, I just need your okay.”

“Thanks, Jasper,” Coulson says, and then the investigator’s gone again. He pulls himself away from the sink and sort of—straightens himself out. Clint’s never seen someone go from relaxed to professional in a literal blink of an eye. “Less water next time,” he reminds Clint.

There’s this tiny smile pressing at the corners of his lips. Clint smiles back, softly. “Less water,” he promises.

He spends just a little too much time watching Coulson walk off.

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Judge English sighs.

Clint knows that sigh. It might be the Friday that marks the end of his second week, but it doesn’t matter—he knows that sigh like he knows the powered creamer in the break room’s the cheap stuff or that most the pens in the supply closet are actually dead, ‘cause Stark puts the empties back in there when he’s done. He knows it enough that he glances up from where he’s shuffling his papers around.

He hates afternoon docket. His docket goes throughout the day on Tuesdays but only in the afternoon on Fridays, and that means Judge English’s just survived a whole morning filled with divorces, eviction actions, and domestic abusers. And since Natasha’d come tearing into the office after she finished up with this week’s round of domestic battery pleas and sworn so long and hard in Russian that Bruce’d stopped to stare at her a couple seconds . . .

Yeah.

Yeah, this wasn’t gonna end well. Not for Clint.

“Are you both ready?” Judge English asks.

She’s got this nasal, clipped voice Clint tries really hard not to hate. “Ready.”

The defense attorney leans over so far, he practically falls into his client’s lap. He’s new. Well, new to Clint, at least. The whole first week, the judge’d cleared the calendar and let him get his sea legs. Tuesday, all he’d really done was quick traffic ticket contests and a couple DUI pleas, baby steps.
Well, unless you counted the Thompson hearing. Clint’s trying to put that one behind him.

This defense attorney, though, he’s young and put-together. Clint’s only met two others, one who was old enough to be his grandfather and the other—well, the other was Wilson. This one has a decent suit, combed hair, and kind of *smells* like competence. It’s enough to make Clint—

Not nervous, really. Just enough to give him early jitters, let’s say.

“Counselor?” the judge asks, again.

“Sorry, your honor,” the defense attorney apologizes. He’s got a clean-cut boy face. Young, Clint thinks. Younger than anybody in their office, even baby-face Steve Rogers. “We’re ready.”

“In that case, the court calls case 11-540C for a pre-trial status hearing. Appearances, please?”

There’s this tiny bump in adrenaline, just one, when Clint stands up. His fingers are still on the sides of his file, still—holding on. For the first five seconds of every appearance, he feels like it’s his first-year law school oral arguments again. He feels like he’s gonna trip over his tongue.

“May it please the court, the state appears by Clinton Barton, assistant district attorney.”

The defense attorney’s on his feet before Clint can even steady the chair to sit back down. “Your honor, the defendant, Ronald McLaughlin, appears in person and with counsel, James Buchanan Barnes. And if I may, the defense has a preliminary matter that just came to our attention that we feel should be brought before the court.”

Judge English blinks. “Mr. Barton?” she asks, but Clint’s already out of his chair. “Does the state have any objection to hearing this matter?”

Yeah, Clint thinks, the state has about a hundred objections. Especially since there’s something shitty about Barnes’s face the second the judge’s attention is off him. Stark gets that look when he sneaks out to lunch without telling Pepper. “Your honor,” he manages, catching his surprise and standing on it, “the state wasn’t aware of any—preliminary matter.”

“This information just came to light this morning,” Barnes explains. He sounds *almost* apologetic, but Clint’s not sure he trusts *almost*. “I would’ve submitted a written motion if I had time.”

“A motion?” Clint demands, and—okay, that one sticks in his throat and sounds more pissed off than it should. “Your honor, this hearing is meant to set the trial date, and Mr. Barnes never told the state he wanted to present additional material.”

“Actually,” Barnes replies smoothly, “I informed Mr. Odinson that I might have a motion to present at this hearing, and I was assured he would relay the information to you.”

“Mr. Odinson informed me that the only one of my cases with any active motions was—”

“That’s enough, counselors,” Judge English interrupts, and holds up a hand. Clint snaps his mouth shut, but he can feel how tight his face is. His professors’d always pointed out how pissed-off even his most neutral expression looked, but he’s never figured out how to break it. Right now, he can feel the pinched muscles around the bridge of his nose. “In light of the confusion with your cases moving over from Mr. Odinson and Ms. Romanoff’s control,” the judge continues, “I’m going to assume something was lost in the shuffle. But it seems inefficient, since we’re all here, to resort to three weeks of motion practice.”

Clint scowls. “But—”
“If you’ll let me finish, Mr. Barton,” and there’s no choice but to let her finish, when her voice sounds like that, “I’d like to propose a compromise. Mr. Barnes can present the matter to the court verbally, and you can reply in kind. If there are still unanswered questions, we’ll move to written motions.”

“The defense is comfortable with that, your honor,” Barnes says. Clint doesn’t even have his mouth open, yet, and Barnes is nodding and sorting through his papers.

Clint wonders whether tripping the guy down the stairs would get him charged for battery. “That’s fine,” he agrees. Sitting back in his chair feels like admitting defeat.

Judge English smiles. At least, that’s what Clint thinks her lips are doing. “Go ahead, then, Mr. Barnes.”

“Thank you, your honor.” Barnes fishes something out of his packet of papers and brings it to the podium. They’re in one of the smaller courtrooms—no use putting traffic court and the DUI docket in one of the fancy ones with the wood paneling and the murals—and standing at the podium is just . . . awkward. Clint doesn’t do it unless he has to, not in here, but Barnes grabs the sides of it like he’s about to start preaching.

Clint thinks maybe he needs to give the guy a fairer shake—and then the guy opens his mouth.

“This morning, I received a verified affidavit from Doctor Reed Richards at the Suffolk County crime lab. In it, he indicates that secondary tests on the beer bottles that were collected from my client’s truck on the evening of March 16 indicated that Mr. McLaughlin’s DNA was not present.”

Oh, he had to be fucking— “Your honor,” Clint objects, chair rattling as he pushes to his feet, “the state hasn’t received this affidavit. I can’t respond to—”

“As you may recall from the preliminary hearing with Mr. Odinson,” Barnes continues, “the basis for the search of Mr. McLaughlin’s car—and, indeed, the basis for forcing Mr. McLaughlin to take both a field sobriety and breathalyzer test—was the existence of the bottles in the passenger-side seat. Officer Feldman even went so far as to testify that Mr. McLaughlin appeared drowsy but otherwise alert, and did not . . . What was it?” He reaches for another sheet in his stack of papers. “Here we go: ‘did not smell of alcohol, drive erratically, act inappropriately, or present any other outward indication of driving while under the influence.’”

Clint launches to his feet. “The officer pulled him over for a reason,” he argues.

“Which, if you’ve read the report, was a broken taillight.”

“He fell out of the car!”

“After the officer forced him to step out so he could conduct a field sobriety test. A test which the officer wouldn’t have given him if it weren’t for the bottles—someone else’s bottles—in plain sight the passenger seat.”

“The fact that there were bottles at all was enough for reasonable suspicion under the circumstances. You’re not really—your honor.” Clint looks Judge English, and—oh god. Oh god, she’s frowning. His stomach twists in a knot. He should’ve just tripped Barnes when he had a
chance. “Mr. Barnes is saying, right now, that when cops see open, empty beer bottles in a car, they should try and figure out who they belong to. In the middle of a traffic stop, at—” He checks his file. “—three in the morning, when the suspect’s already committed an actual traffic violation.”

Barnes snorts, but quiet enough that the judge won’t hear it. “If you want to call a broken taillight an actual—”

“Thank you, Mr. Barnes,” Judge English says, holding up her hands. “I think I’ve heard enough.” Clint doesn’t like the sound of her voice, he decides. She sounds like she’s thinking a lot harder about Barnes’s ridiculous argument than she should. And the last thing Clint wants to do in the middle of his Friday afternoon is go beg Stark for an appeal over some beer bottles that—

“While I am bothered that it’s taken almost three months to ascertain the importance—or non-importance—of these bottles to the case, I’m inclined to agree with Mr. Barton.” Clint sighs hard enough you can hear it, and Judge English frowns at him. He pushes his lips together and glances down at the file, guilty as a ten-year-old who got caught peeping in the girls’ room. “However, this is a novel situation. Mr. McLaughlin, to Mr. Barnes’s point, did not appear drunk. From all indications, he would have been allowed to continue driving were it not for the bottles in the passenger’s seat. For that reason, I’d still like written motions on this matter—”

Clint can’t help himself. “Your honor!”

“—if only to better preserve the issue for appeal.” And dammit if Barnes isn’t smiling at that. “I’d like defendant’s motion by this time next week, and then we’ll have a week for the state’s reply. Otherwise, we’ll set the trial over for—four weeks?”

“Five, if we could,” Barnes says. Of course he does.

They set the trial date—jury trial (of course), probably a complete battery of witnesses (of course), defense maybe designating an expert (of course)—all while Clint thinks about lighting Barnes’s crisp navy suit on fire. Clint knows he’s got a point about the novel issue—but here it is, three-thirty on a Friday afternoon, and instead of spending the weekend on his couch with a beer, he’s gonna spend it researching case law about sober-looking DUI defendants and empty bottles. There’s not gonna be anything out there on the topic, either. He knows already.

When Judge English disappears back into chambers, Barnes wanders over to where Clint’s shoving things into his bag. “No hard feelings, right?” he asks with a little smile.

“Sure,” Clint says. He doesn’t look up. He can’t be held responsible for his actions, not if he looks at that smug boy-face right about now. “If you finish that motion early, would you mind filing it? I’m still getting my bearings, and I figure I should talk to—”

“This motion?” His head snaps up, ‘cause he doesn’t fucking wanna believe it. But there it is, dangling between two of Barnes’s fingers: Motion to Suppress. The file stamp’s already on it. “I made sure the judge was in with Tasha before I filed it. No way she’d get it before the hearing.” Barnes is still smiling. “I figured you’d want a jump on it.”

Clint knows—really, he does, he knows—that it’s unprofessional to snatch the motion out of Barnes’s fingers like he hopes to give him a paper cut . . . but that’s how he grabs it. He grabs it, flips through the pages, and— “Ever heard of professional courtesy?” he demands.

“Uh, pretty sure this is professional courtesy,” Barnes replies.

“Really? Getting the jump on the new guy? Blindsiding me with some—bullshit affidavit and
matching motion?”

“I figured Thor was keeping you updated on what was going on. He knew that the bottles were an issue for me, that—”

“Well, he didn’t pass it along. And instead of grabbing me for ten seconds before the hearing, you drop this ‘preliminary matter’ on my lap and just bulldoze the shit out of me.” Clint shoves the motion into his bag. “I’ll have your response on Monday.”

“Listen, Barton, I—”

And Barnes is still talking, ‘cause Clint can hear noises that kinda sound like words, but he’s already shoving out of the courtroom and into the hall.

It’s unfair to be this pissed off at Barnes, he thinks, but he can’t fucking help it. He uses his ID to get into the emergency stairwell and walks the six floors up, just so he doesn’t have to see people. It’s not Barnes’s fault that he’s got the new-guy blues. It’s not Barnes’s fault that Thor—Thor, whose only volume is shout and who’s been in a juvie jury trial since Wednesday—is impossible to approach without feeling like you need to chest-bump. It’s not his fault that Romanoff wrote all her case notes in tiny print that Clint can’t read without squinting until his eyes hurt. It’s not his fault that Hill expects instant competence, that Fury was so damn impressed with his (stupid) term paper that he’d hired him, that he’d been blindsided by some—

Wait. No. That last part, the blindsided part, that was all on Barnes. The little—

“Shit!” he announces, and shoves the door to the sixth floor open hard enough that it bangs. Stark, Rogers, and Coulson are all standing in the hallway, but they freeze when they see him. No surprise why: the main hall’s all tile and cinderblock, the stuff echoes are made of, and Clint’s just slammed a metal door open hard enough that it hit the wall.

He forces something that he hopes looks like a smile. “Sorry,” he says, but it’s drowned out by Stark’s, “Whoa, there, tiger. Fury takes structural damage right outta our paychecks whether we did it or not.”

“Because you have a lot of experience in not-doing it?” Rogers asks him.

“Hey, I’m comforting the newbie. Be nice or the kid’s getting a big-screen in her bedroom for her birthday.” Rogers rolls his eyes, and Stark opens his arms. Gesturing Clint over, but Clint mostly wants to go lock himself in his office and not come out until Barnes’s motion is in actual shreds all over his floor. “Come tell Uncle Tony what’s got you down.”

“Uncle Tony?” Coulson asks.

“Don’t you have a—book club or a knitting circle to get to?” Stark demands, turning on him. “Weekly meeting of the Single Forever Cat Fanciers Society? Jodi Picoult crying club?”

“You used ‘club’ twice,” Rogers points out, and Coulson laughs. He says a couple quick goodbyes—and Clint tries not to read anything into the extra couple seconds of eye-contact, or the little finger-wave—and heads for the elevator.

Clint shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’ve got a motion response to write,” he says dumbly.

Tony rolls his eyes. “On Friday night? You know English is a judge, not a high school teacher, right? She can’t give you detention.”
“Tony,” Rogers warns.

“No, it’s okay,” Clint replies, shrugging. “It’s not even Judge English, it’s the little—weasel defense attorney from my last hearing.”

“Preach it,” Stark says.

“He came in with some—B.S. ‘preliminary matter.’ Which,” he adds, “wasn’t a preliminary matter, but a verbal motion. Verbal, because, you know, the information was brand-new despite the fact he told me afterwards that the whole thing’d been bothering him for a while.”

Rogers laughs, but it’s not the laugh he pulls out for Darcy’s stupid jokes about penguins. There’s something half-empty about it. “Which case is this?”

“McLaughlin,” Clint responds. “DUI, guy was trashed but the officer kept saying he didn’t see it—which is a whole other issue.” He shakes his head. “Defense tried to argue that there wasn’t reasonable suspicion to make the guy take a sobriety test because they relied on the bottles instead of—Hang on, I caught a line when I was flipping through the damn thing, lemme—”

“He had the motion written?” Stark asks.

“Yeah, he gave it to me after. Even though the information was ‘brand new’ this morn—”

“Maybe you just got beat,” says Rogers.

Clint frowns. “What?”

“I know it’s frustrating taking your caseload back from Thor and Natasha,” he says, and there’s something—weird about him. Tight, caught, like one of those wind-up toys just before the spring breaks. Rogers meets his eyes, but for the first time in the last two weeks, his gaze is hard. Clint was starting to think Rogers couldn’t do hard. “It must feel like you’re always two or three steps behind, right now. But good lawyering is good lawyering. The guy could’ve just dropped a motion on your desk, delayed your trial for a week or two, but he didn’t. He put you on notice today, gave you way to argue it and maybe even win without getting buried in a sea of paper. And now you’re complaining because the judge wants it written.”

“I—”

“We get beat, sometimes, in this office,” Rogers continues. His voice is steady, but cold, too. “You’d better get used to it.”

Clint opens his mouth, tries to think of—something besides his default of just staring after the guy, but then Rogers’s stepping into the elevator and gone.

As soon as he is, Stark lets out this long whistle. “Barnes?”

“What?”

“The other attorney, he Barnes? James whatever-whatever Barnes?”

“Yeah. How did you—”

“Steve’s Bucky is Bucky Barnes.” When Clint keeps frowning, Stark rolls his eyes. “Steve is Mrs. James Barnes. James ‘Bucky’ Barnes. I swear, if I need to draw you a family tree, I—”

“Wait,” Clint says, and just—puts his hand up. Puts his hand up, braces himself from any more
hiccup in his week, and takes one breath. “Steve’s Bucky—”

“Right.”

“—is that dickhole of a defense attorney—”

“Probably wouldn’t call him a dickhole where Steve can hear you.”

“—I just dealt with?” Stark nods and Clint closes his eyes. The backs of his eyelids are about as black as his mood, but those, he can deal with. “Jesus.”

“I mean, on the positive side,” Stark says, “he makes a mean hot wing. Homemade sauce that’s just a little sweet, shoved on the grill so they get those char marks, and then this dressing—”

“Stark?” Clint interrupts.

“Yeah?”

“Have a good weekend.”

When Clint opens his eyes, Stark’s watching him, eyebrows raised. “You know,” he comments after a few seconds, “you take everything around here this personally, it’s actually gonna start getting to you.”

“Thanks,” he replies, “but I’m good.”

“For now.”

He lets himself spend one beat wondering whether he could sleep on the window ledge in his office. “Goodnight, Stark.”

“‘Night, Barton.”

==

“First rule, new guy: nobody but Coulson’s allowed to sleep in the office.”

Clint groans and stretches his knee until it makes this horrible popping sound. His entire body, he decides, is one giant cramp. His neck hurts, his shoulders hurt, his hips hurt, and—

And Natasha Romanoff is standing his doorway, wearing her suit slacks and a camisole. Clint’s not sure he expected her shoulders to be that smooth and white, and it’s distracting for about one half-second. “Was I snoring?” he asks, and tries to twist the crick out of his neck. He can’t remember falling asleep.

“No, but it’s hard to do my nightly rounds when every time I come by, you’re drooling on your legal pad.” She crosses her arms under her breasts. Too bad Stark’s not here, witnessing this; he’d probably count it among the best days of his life. “You okay?”

He rubs a hand over his face. “Just working.”

“That wasn’t my question.”
Clint lets out a long breath. He feels muddled, like he’s trying to swim through jello. Stretching, somehow, only makes him feel more exhausted. That, and it reminds his body that he’s spent the last hour or two cuddling his legal pad.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asks.

“For starters, because you got spanked by Bucky.”

He grunts a little in the back of his throat and rubs his face again. Maybe if he presses hard enough, he’ll find out this is all a nightmare and he actually got one of the other jobs he applied for. “News travels fast,” he mutters.

“Stark texted me because he knew I’d still be here. Said—” Natasha lifts her hip and slides her phone out of her pocket in one perfect, smooth movement. “‘Buck made new guy cry. Make sure he’s not floating in a bottle. That’s my job and probably my bottle.’” She tips the display in his direction. “I figured you weren’t crying because you figured out Steve’s married.”

He snorts. “No.”

“So. Bucky spanked you, now you’re still in at ten p.m. on a Friday?”

“Hey, you’re here at ten on a Friday.”

“Because I’m on-call this weekend and we’ve got three first appearances tomorrow. What’s your excuse?”

Clint shakes his head, but doesn’t say anything. Natasha tucks her phone away and then crosses her arms again. “Coulson give you the learning curve speech yet?”

“Yeah, the first night.”

“And you haven’t committed it to memory?” When he glances in some other direction, she pulls herself away from the door. She’s barefoot and moves like a ghost, absolutely silent. He figures she’ll sink into one of the chairs in front of his desk, but she doesn’t. Instead, she comes all the way around and settles on the window ledge. “Fury told you about when I argued against Laufeyson, right?”

Clint frowns. “Who?”

“He’s a defense attorney. Probably the sneakiest bastard in the county, always finding some backdoor into getting what he wants.” She waits until Clint spins the desk chair around so they’re facing each other. His tie’s in his lap—he doesn’t know why—and he tosses it vaguely in the direction of his bag. “It was a high-profile case,” she explains. “Aggravated battery. Guy’d beat his wife with a rolling pin. But he was rich, he could afford the best, and Laufeyson smeared me all over that courtroom.” She shakes her head, and then runs fingers through her wavy hair. “He called press. My first hearing, fresh out of law school, and not only is he launching this—crazy story about how his client was being harassed by the police, but he’s got reporters crowding the gallery. Somewhere in the middle of his third cross, the judge decided my witnesses were too shaky and tossed the case.”

Clint wants to say something, but he—doesn’t actually know what comes next. He doesn’t know how to fill in the silence. There’s something quiet on Natasha’s face, and he watches it for a long time. “Guy sounds like a dick,” he decides after a couple seconds.

She snorts. “Careful who you say that around,” she warns.
“What, he married to Stark?”

Natasha laughs, just for a few seconds. “Everybody has that hearing,” she says, and Clint doesn’t miss that she hasn’t answered the question. “Early on, they—bomb something. And if they don’t, it just means they find some way to fall harder, later on.” She pushes herself to her feet, hands on her hips. “Be glad it was Bucky sneaking up on you. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“Ask Stark, sometime. Just make sure he has a couple drinks in him, first.” Clint watches her stride back toward the door on feet that still don’t make a sound. He wonders about her, not because of the dark pants and the tight camisole, but because of the confidence. You’d think she was born a lawyer, just from the way she moves.

She pauses, a hand on the jamb. “And Clint?”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re still here the next time I wander by, I’m putting on Russian opera.”

Clint laughs. “Sure.”

Ten minutes later, he finds out she wasn’t kidding.
Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint finally finds his footing, puts his foot in his mouth, makes a friend . . . and learns that with every ascent comes a fall.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a motion hearing regarding evidence of a rape victim's behavior, and whether the victim's behavior prior to the assault can be admitted into evidence during trial. There are no graphic descriptions of rape or sexual violence, however; I tried to ensure it wouldn't be uncomfortable or triggering for anyone.

“You have to understand, Mr. Barton, I’ve been working with him for five years,” Sif Rowan says, reaching up to take the coffee mug from Clint’s grip. She thanks him, settles it on the corner of his desk, and rips open a sugar packet. “I have seen him grow from a sad boy who was breaking windows into a man.”

“A man who did forty-five in a school zone,” Clint points out, sinking into his chair.

Sif bristles. “I said he’s grown, not that he’s perfect.”

Clint smiles while she rips into sugar packet number two. When Darcy’d seen Sif Rowan, 10 a.m. on his Outlook calendar, she’d sworn, crossed herself, sworn again, and ran off to find Jane. He’d seen them huddled together in the corner by the women’s bathroom, whispering, all of five minutes later. It scared him, a little, you know? Made him brace himself for whatever fresh hell was gonna come walking through that door a half-hour later.

What walked through the door wore khakis with a shiny silver-gray blouse. What walked through had a ponytail and asked for sugar with her coffee.

Clint was starting to think Darcy was actually a little nuts.

“I don’t wanna get him for reckless driving,” he says after a couple seconds, and Sif stops stirring. She doesn’t glance up from her mug, just—stops, plastic stick dangling from her fingers. “I know it’s his second, and I know you don’t want him doing a month in jail ‘cause he was late to work.”

“No,” she replies tightly.

“But I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do. Even the maximum fine doesn’t take into account that the guy drove like a bat out of hell ten minutes before the first bell, when there were kids
around and—"

"Thor said you were reasonable."

Sif doesn’t say it as much as she spits it. It’s the fire from the dragon’s mouth, and Clint blinks when her head comes up. Her eyes are narrowed and razor-sharp. "What?"

"He said," she repeats, "that you were a reasonable man. That if I approached you with a reasonable proposition—"

"Twenty-five over in a school zone’s reasonable?"

"—you would at least consider the situation." She stands up fast enough and with enough force that the plastic chair teeters. "My client has worked his way from a—a common delinquent, and you’d rather see him rot in county jail than—"

"Okay, wait," Clint says, and pushes his own chair back, too. He feels like he’s in an episode of Punk’d, maybe one hosted by Stark. Sif’s shoving her case file into her bag hard enough that the desk shakes, and all while he’s trying to figure out where he went wrong. "The judge has the option of a downward departure if we actually talk to her, I just meant—"

Her head snaps up, and her look’s so dark that he’d rather be a social worker who screwed up one of Bruce’s cases than himself on the wrong end of her rage. "Judge English will see a nineteen-year-old who sped—never mind that he was late because he was taking his grandmother to the doctor, or that he used to run with a gang before he got his life together, or that his previous reckless driving citation was a plea bargain in a case we could have won, but he was too scared to listen to my advice. No."

She snaps her bag shut and swings it off the desk. The mug crashes to the floor, cracking, and Clint thinks she maybe did it on purpose.

"Thor," she decides, "was wrong about you."

"Thor barely knows me!" Clint shouts after her, because it’s—something to say, but Sif’s already gone. She slams past an intern, nearly knocks Pepper into the wall, and then retreats around the corner, leaving a wake of people staring after her.

He’s still standing behind his desk, dazed about what just happened, when Darcy walks in with a roll of paper towels. "She’s the devil," she announces.

She tosses the roll to Clint, and he nearly doesn’t catch it. "What even—"

"Happened?" she asks. She flips her hair over her shoulder. "Sif’s like Thor. Weird sense of right and wrong, kind of black-and-white about justice and injustice and who should get what deals from who and when." She shrugs. "Plus, I think they went out for a while."

He opens his mouth, thinks about it, and closes it again. Actually, he can—kind of see that.

"Give her . . . what day’s it today? Wednesday? Give her ‘till next Monday. She’ll come back, ask for the downward departure, probably bring you a new coffee cup." She glances at Clint and raises her eyebrows. "You better get started."

"On?"

"Cleaning up that coffee. Fury’ll have a shitfit if it stains the carpet."
Clint almost asks if Darcy’s serious, but when his lips start moving, she raises a single eyebrow before walking away.

Later that day, when he’s digging through the fridge to find the leftover pizza he’d brought for lunch, Thor thumps him on the shoulder.

“We cannot all have Sif’s nobility,” he says, solemnly.

“Uh, yeah, I don’t——”

“Or,” he adds, and Clint swears he’s smiling, just a little, “her stubbornness.”

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“I know fifty dollars is a little expensive,” Bruce says, rolling his glasses between his fingers. Clint’s seen him do it before in staff meetings, a tiny nervous twitch. Except this isn’t a staff meeting, this is Bruce standing in his doorway and—swaying, a little, while he talks about—Clint’s not really sure what he’s talking about.

“Last year, it was forty, but—there was an incident. Champagne-related. It was . . . ” Bruce shakes his head. “This year, it’s fifty. Ninety if you bring a guest. Almost everybody comes. I mean,” he clarifies, glancing over at Clint, “Phil didn’t come last year. He had a conflict. Something about a friend in Albuquerque. But everyone else . . . ” He shrugs. “You can even pay later, if you want, I just—”

“Bruce,” he finally interrupts.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t actually know what you’re . . . selling.”

Bruce blinks. For a guy who shouts down his phone a lot, he does genuine surprise pretty well. “Tony didn’t—talk to you, already?”

“Talk to me about what?”

He sighs, and Clint resists the urge to sigh, too. It’s been a slow week, if you ignore the—incident with Sif and the repeat hearing against Wade Wilson (which, by the way, was now set over for trial, a tiny victory), but there’s still plenty to do. Like reviewing Friday’s files, or starting preparations for a bench trial in a week and a half, or sorting out the details with Steve about this weekend’s—

“Urban Ascent,” Bruce says, and Clint’s head jerks up.

It’s the end of a sentence that Clint’d missed the start of, thanks to an indecipherable post-it on the corner of his desk, but his stomach still drops when he hears it. “What?”

“It’s a fundraiser, a silent auction and dinner,” Bruce repeats, vaguely waving his glasses. “For a summer program I’m involved with, Urban Ascent.”

Clint reaches for his half-cold coffee and helps himself to a greedy swallow. “Isn’t that some
corporate feel-good program?” he asks. “Rich guys in big offices throw some needy kids in a college dorm for 10 weeks, pretend they might make it in business?”

He feels bad about the way Bruce frowns. He’s a pretty placid guy, most the time, and he doesn’t deserve the clenched jaw or the trenches along his brow. Clint sips his coffee again. It tastes about as good as you’d expect half-cold break room coffee to taste. “Seventy-three businesses, state-wide, participate,” he explains, and Clint can hear how tightly he’s gripping his disgust at Clint’s response. “The county employs at least ten kids, every year. Laboratories, the newspaper, private-run clinics and law firms, they all take in kids who’d be on the streets all summer. They make sure they have something to do, that they can explore a career path. We give out scholarships to—”

“Everybody? Because it’s not helping if only five of the five hundred get the cash to go to college, right?”

It’s such an asshole question. He tries not to flinch at the sound of his own voice when he asks it, or at the way Bruce’s fingers twitch.

“Do you know who started Urban Ascent?” Bruce asks. It’s just the right side of unkind, and Clint pulls in a breath. Yelling, he can take that. At least, right now, he thinks he can take it. “Do you know who built it up from one business, with one or two kids bunking on cots at the CEO’s house, and turned it into—”

He’s gesturing with his glasses, amping up, the muscles in his arms working as he builds momentum. Yeah, Clint’s pretty sure he’s gonna yell.

At least, until a hand comes out of nowhere and grips Bruce’s arm.

“I don’t care what you’re doing, who you’re doing it with, or whose pants are coming off first.” Stark’s head, along with his arm and most of a shoulder, pops around the edge of the door. “You have to come see this. Now.”

“Tony,” Bruce murmurs, half-heartedly attempting to shake him off.

“Two words,” Stark says, but then he pauses. “Okay, no. Three. Three words. Three words, and Bruce, if you don’t—wet yourself with delight, I will keep you in ginseng chewing gum for the next year. Nay, I will buy the ginseng chewing gum factory and rebuild it the yard of that sad little rental you call a home.”

Clint suspects everyone in the office speaks some sort of secret language he’s still learning. Bruce, however, just sighs.

Or, at least, he’s halfway through a sigh. But then Stark says, “Hill. Versus. Laufeyson.”, every word its own sentence, and the sigh stops.

“I thought she got it tossed.”

“Tried to. Brassels wants to hear it. C’mon.” Stark gives Bruce a tug, and when Bruce reluctantly starts moving, he glances over at Clint. “You too, new guy.”

“I—”

“Nothing on your desk is worth missing this.” There is an absolute, unshakeable seriousness in Stark’s expression, like whatever Hill’s about to undertake is a matter of life and death. Clint hesitates, and Stark repeats, “Nothing.”
He pulls on Bruce’s arm again, disappearing back around the door, and Bruce shakes him off before he follows. Clint sits for a few seconds longer, lingering, but he’s gotta admit, he’s—Okay, no way around it, he’s nosy as hell. He hasn’t forgotten the night with Natasha, or the thing about Laufeyson smearing her around the courtroom. He’s watched her argue for a no-contact order in one of her cases, and trust him: nobody smears assistant district attorney Romanoff anywhere and then lives to tell the tale.

He snags his suit coat off the back of the door and heads out down the hall. The courtroom Hill’s motion is being argued in—the courtroom Hill’s in most the time, ‘cause she handles the major felonies—is massive. It’s the courtroom for the televised verdicts, the one advertised all over the judicial website. There’s dark wood paneling, a wide, tall bench that raises the judge up so far that he might as well be God, and all the upholstery’s dark red. It’s that velveteen stuff, too, the kind where it’s soft one way and scratchy the other, more for old theaters than courtrooms. There’s a big mural above the jury box of a bunch of white guys hovering over a piece of paper. He’s pretty sure it’s something about signing the state constitution.

Right now, though, the mural’s not that impressive. No, what’s impressive is that pretty much the whole D.A.’s office is crowded into the first row of the gallery, right behind Hill’s counsel table. Hill’s leaning over the bar, murmuring something to Coulson—and Clint’s kinda surprised that Coulson’s there with the rest of them—but her face . . . “Rage” isn’t a good enough word for what’s on her face. Disgust, maybe, does it. “Raw, unfettered anger the likes of which has never been seen” maybe beats it out.

He comes up the center aisle and slips into the second-last seat. Natasha barely glances up from her case file. “The over-under’s that Brassel gives him five minutes.”

“Laufeyson?”

“Who else?”

Clint’s ready to ask about that one—who the guy is, if he’s even coming, what the motion’s about—when the courtroom doors swing open. He twists around to look, but he’s the only one. Everybody else, he figures, knows what he’s about to see.

Laufeyson, he . . . He looks like a defense attorney. Maybe that’s a shitty thing to think about a guy, but if life was even halfway like Law & Order, he’d be cast as a recurring character. He’s wearing a dark suit with a waistcoat—who the hell wears a waistcoat to anything short of a wedding?—in this green pattern that reminds Clint a little of snakeskin. His dark hair’s slicked back, and he’s got some kind of walking stick that he carries a couple inches above the ground. For show, kinda like that guy in Harry Potter. You know, the jerk kid’s dad.

There’re two associates trailing behind him, one carrying a banker’s box and the other carrying a briefcase, and Laufeyson almost smacks them with the swinging gate as they come past the bar. “Hey,” Clint says, and leans over to Natasha. “You ever seen the Harry Potter movies?”

Natasha’s head comes up, but she’s frowning. Not exactly what he’d expected, and it kills the half-grin that’d been crawling across his face. Know your audience, he thinks.

“Lucius.” He twists in the velveteen seat to watch Coulson slide into the last empty chair. Their knees bump for a second, and Clint’s too busy staring at him to think about moving his leg. Coulson moves, instead. “Lucius Malfoy. Draco’s father.”

Natasha grunts some kind of annoyed noise next to him, but Clint—he can’t really help the half-
grin coming back. “Right?” he asks, and Coulson shares one of those easy smiles with him.

At least, ’till the bailiff pushes through the doors and calls, “All rise!”

Judge Brassels is an older guy who’s going bald and definitely fills out his robes. He takes his sweet time getting settled before he asks them all to sit, and then spends another couple minutes fiddling with the computer on the bench. Hill’s sitting up stark-straight, like somebody’s coated her spine in iron, but Laufeyson’s leaned back in his chair, hands folded over his stomach.

Just from that, Clint’s not sure he likes the guy.

Brassels clears his throat. “We’re here on a—” he starts, but then he pauses, pats himself down, and shifts around in his chair. He finds a pair of glasses in some pocket and slips them on. “Defendant’s Rule 50-12 Motion, is that correct?”

“Yes, your honor,” Hill supplies.

“Mmm.” The judge leans back in his chair. “State the appearances, then.”

“The state appears by Maria Hill, chief assistant district attorney.” Clint’s pretty sure Hill’s voice is tighter than he’s ever heard it.

Brassels makes a little approving noise while Laufeyson—He doesn’t just stand. He more slides out of his chair and onto his feet. Clint’s seen rougher oil slicks than this guy. “Your honor,” he says, and every syllable stretches, “the defendant appears not in person but by and through his counsel, Loki Laufeyson.”

“The defendant couldn’t be bothered to come?” the judge asks, raising his eyebrows.

“The defendant, your honor, was unable to obtain a transport order from the jail due to Ms. Hill’s . . . reluctance to hold today’s motion hearing.”

From behind, Clint can see Hill’s entire body bristle. Somewhere down the row of observers, Stark lets out a breath that might be a swallowed laugh. “Your honor,” Hill says, “I think that’s a mischaracterization of—”

“That’s all right, Ms. Hill.” Brassels waves his hand. “If I need the defendant, I’ll hold an in camera review. Go ahead, Mr. Laufeyson.”

Laufeyson smiles, but it’s—snide. Not tight, like most of Hill’s smiles, not forced, just downright snotty. Clint watches him glide from counsel table to the podium. “As you are well aware, your honor, my client’s defense to this heinous crime—”

“Raping a club hostess,” Natasha mutters under her breath.

“—is that Ms. Cavanaughs consented to having intercourse with him. And as we argued at our motion to dismiss—”

“And lost.” This time, Coulson hushes Natasha.

“—Ms. Cavanaugh delayed several days before reporting my client’s alleged misconduct to the police. Clearly, there is something amiss in this scenario beyond the remarkably poor decision of my client to choose Ms. Cavanaugh as his dalliance for the—”

“Your honor!” Hill objects. Her hands slam the table as she rises, and her chair rolls back into the
“If Mr. Laufeyson came here today to slander the victim on behalf of his client, the state—”

Brassels holds up a hand. “Quite right, Ms. Hill,” he agrees, nodding. “Mr. Laufeyson, let’s discuss the content of your motion rather than your theory of the case.”

“Of course, your honor,” and that smile crawls across his face again. “Our state rules of evidence bar the admission of a victim’s sexual history during trial except in a very narrow set of circumstances. But unlike Ms. Hill would argue, Rule 50-12 is not a complete bar on this type of evidence. Like the federal rule of evidence it is fashioned after, it allows evidence of specific instances of the victim’s past sexual behavior when those instances would tend to prove that the victim consented.”

Hill shifts and starts drumming her pen, audibly, against her legal pad. Natasha grumbles something in Russian that Clint’s pretty sure isn’t well-wishes for the Laufeyson family. When Brassels nods, Coulson’s toe taps against the tile floor.

“The defense has no fewer than three witnesses, not including the defendant himself, who will testify that Ms. Cavanaugh made it a habit of sleeping with individuals visiting the club, and that, in fact, she had a standing ‘date’ with my client. In fact, according to one individual, she promised to—” Laufeyson glances down at his file, and Clint can’t help leaning forward, bracing for it. “Ah, yes, of course. ‘Remind him exactly how far her legs can bend.’”

He never makes finger quotes, but Clint can hear them. Instead, Laufeyson curls his long fingers around the sides of the podium.

“At the hearing on our prior motion,” he presses, “the court heard the testimony of other hostesses who believed Ms. Cavanaugh was sexually interested in my client. The court heard testimony that Ms. Cavanaugh went willingly into the back room, she never protested, and she in fact kissed my client goodbye before he left. And the defense presented witnesses who saw Ms. Cavanaugh climbing onto my client’s lap for the purposes of feeding him alcoholic gelatin from her fingers, offering him so-called ‘special discounts’ for customer loyalty, and ensuring him upon his arrival at her . . . establishment that he would be ‘well taken care of’ before he left for the evening.” He lifts his hands, then sets them down again. “Surely, the circumstantial evidence supports that my client had every reason to believe that Ms. Cavanaugh consented to sex with him.”

Something nearby crunches as Laufeyson picks up his file, and Clint glances over to see that Natasha’s balled up the top sheet of her legal pad. She squeezes it until her knuckles are white. When he touches her arm, she jerks and knocks her pen onto the floor. Hill’s moving to the podium and Brassels’s watching her, not the gallery, which is good. Especially since Natasha’s pulling her arm out of Clint’s reach like she’s been singed.

“Your honor,” Hill begins, and Clint refocuses his attention, “from the time charges were filed in this case, it has been the position of Mr. Laufeyson and his client that Ms. Cavanaugh consented to sexual contact with the defendant. But the state would like to remind the court that the charges in this case include aggravated sexual assault, aggravated battery, and criminal sodomy. Ms. Cavanaugh reports being choked, pinned, and forced into several different sexual positions by the defendant—and that the defendant threatened to kill her if she came forward.”

Hill straightens out her notes, pauses, and then lifts her head. Clint can only see the side of her face, but it’s flinty. She and Bruce could teach a seminar on barely-controlled anger.

“Rule 50-12 is meant to protect against characterizing the victims of sexual crimes as
promiscuous,” she continues. “Although it does allow for admission of evidence that tends to prove consent, the court still has to weigh that evidence to decide whether the risk of prejudice substantially outweighs its value to the case.” She raises a hand. “The defendant has already paraded half the wait-staff of the Lusty Cowboy through here in an attempt to blind the court into thinking this is some—hybrid between Coyote Ugly and Girls Gone Wild. Mr. Laufeyson’s witness list includes the club’s regular patrons, its manager, and the promoter of its ‘Jell-o Shot Feeding Frenzy Friday.’ And already, the court has ruled that none of these things are prejudicial because they serve as ‘context.’”

Unlike Laufeyson, Hill does use finger quotes. Out of the corner of his eye, Clint can see Coulson’s momentary cringe. Halfway down the row, he’s pretty sure Stark’s trying to cover some inappropriate noise by clearing his throat.

“In an ordinary situation, if this wasn’t a case involving the violent sexual assault of a twenty-three-year-old woman, I’d encourage Mr. Laufeyson to put on this—freak show so the state could tear down the credibility of every one of his ridiculous witnesses.” Clint expects Laufeyson to object, but he—doesn’t. No, he leans back in his chair, and that slow, snide smile slides across his face. “But I refuse to turn this from a trial on the merits to judicially-sanctioned slut-shaming because the same woman who was brutally raped happens to also be employed somewhere that requires cowboy boots and hot pants as part of its uniform!” She raises a hand, glances at it, and then slaps it on the edge of the podium. The sound echoes through the mostly-empty courtroom. “Because Rule 50-12? It’s meant to protect against exactly this kind of scenario, and Mr. Laufeyson is committing a fraud on the court for claiming anything different.”

Hill tosses her file down on counsel table hard enough that the down-draft sends a paperclip skittering onto the floor. She pulls her chair back, sits down roughly, and crosses her arms across her chest. Next to Clint, Coulson exhales slowly. Laufeyson twists in his chair to glance at Hill, but he’s still smiling.

The only person in the courtroom who isn’t moving is Brassels, at least not at first. He’s stark still until his entire body nods, the chair rocking with him. Slowly, he sits all the way up and places his folded hands on the bench.

“Based on the motions alone, I was predisposed today to rule for Mr. Laufeyson and the defendant,” he says. His voice is drawling and languid, enough that both Hill and Laufeyson sit forward as they wait for the noises to turn into words. “This case is highly circumstantial, and I continue to think it would be inappropriate to divorce the context from the alleged offense.”

It’s official, in that moment: Clint really does not like Laufeyson’s smile.

“But,” Brassels continues, “I can, as Ms. Hill seems to forget, recognize when we have crossed the Rubicon. This, I think, is such a scenario. I will not have this turning into a trial about Ms. Cavanaugh’s occupation rather than her alleged rape. Defendant’s motion is denied. We’re adjourned.”

The bailiff calls for them to rise, but Laufeyson’s already on his feet. Clint can see him vibrating in anger while Hill sorts through her notes and papers. Sorts—and smirks, Clint notices. He has to bite back his own smile.

As soon as the judge is out of the courtroom, though, Laufeyson and his cronies are charging down the aisle and out the doors without a second glance at Hill. Clint wonders if they’d noticed the relief on her face. Probably not, actually, given that it only really escapes once Coulson taps her arm, tells her, “Good work,” and wanders out.
Halfway down the row, Stark’s handing Bruce what looks to be a twenty-dollar bill, and Rogers’s reaching to shake Hill’s hand before he, too, leaves the courtroom. Clint lingers, though he’s not sure why. He’s still kinda ticked off at Hill for lifting his motions the week before, but—

“Told you to go off script,” Natasha comments, and Hill smiles. Clint steps out of the way to let Natasha into the aisle and then follows behind her. It’s either that or listen to Stark and Bruce argue about whether Brassels made the right call.

“Most impressive!” Thor announces. Even though he’s still in the gallery, Clint can hear him as though they’re standing face-to-face. “I have always said, you and Loki are well-matched! This will be a glorious trial to watch. I am looking forward to it—mostly because I suspect you will win.”

Hill chuckles. “Won’t that make Thanksgiving a little awkward back on the farm?”

“No worse than any other Thanksgiving. My brother has never been one for holidays.”

Natasha laughs when Clint’s so busy staring back at Thor that he gets smacked in the nose by the door.

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“New guy! Hey, new guy! Badass pen new guy!”

The cafeteria in the judicial complex’s basement is—Well, Clint’s not gonna lie. It’s pretty bad. Most days, the options are limited to soggy sandwiches, lukewarm meatloaf, and a lot of sad-looking pre-packaged salads. But he slept through his alarm, and it’s raining too hard out to consider walking down the street for something. It’s either stealing somebody else’s lunch outta the fridge, or—this.

Browsing day-old egg salad, chicken salad, tuna salad, and . . .

You know what? If that’s roast beef, he’s becoming a vegetarian.

He’s starting to consider a bowl of watery chicken noodle soup as the least-offensive option when he hears the shouts from over by the hot food line and looks up. Wade Wilson’s not wearing his suit coat, but his too-short brown pants are wrinkled to hell and he—

“Is that Superman tie?” Clint asks.

Wilson grins. “You like it? I got it, Green Lantern, and—what’s the guy with the little ears?” Clint raises his eyebrows. “You know! Gravelly voice, cape, dead parents.”

“Batman?”

“Yeah! Him.” He waves a hand. “I got the three of them all at once. Two bucks at Goodwill.”

Clint probably should’ve guessed that. He snags a tuna salad sandwich that he thinks he might be able to eat, and Wilson nearly drops his tray as he jogs up to join him. The tacos and beans look like they came out of a Purina six-pack, but Wilson doesn’t seem to care. He stretches to grab a twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew. “You eating down here?” he asks. “There’s a table right by
“Uh, no,” Clint replies, shaking his head. “I’ve got a lot to do, upstairs.”

“Like you need to. You owned me the other day.” When he frowns, Wilson pulls a hand off the tray to gesture with it. Problem is, the tray’s pretty heavy, and he sloshes soupy black beans all along the plastic and onto the floor. Clint’s pretty sure he doesn’t notice this. “Thompson, remember? The reset of the prelim you forgot? You owned me. Like, straight-up moot court try-outs owned me.”

“Thanks?”

“No thanks necessary. I think my client’ll plea—next week? What day is it?”

Clint resists the urge to sigh as they head toward the cashier. “Thursday.”

“Yeah, okay. Next week. I’m meeting with him tomorrow, but he’s the kind of person who stops, and thinks, and then has to think some more, and—I got this, thanks.”

The “thanks” is to the cashier, a woman in a hairnet who’s about to run Clint’s credit card. She blinks, Clint blinks, and Wilson leans in to hand her a couple crumpled-up fives. They look kinda—damp, and the cashier frowns when she takes them. Clint decides not to ask. “I probably shouldn’t let you buy me lunch,” he points out. “You’re a defense attorney and we have open, adverse—”

“Then I didn’t buy you lunch,” he replies, and grins when the cashier hands over his change. “You forgot your wallet, I covered your sandwich, you’ll owe me. And the fact that I’m impressed by how badass the new guy is, that’s just ancillary—Ancillary?”

“Ancillary?”

“Does that mean a side note?”

“Not really.”

“Well, whatever.” Wilson shrugs. There’s black bean—juice, if you wanna call it that, on the side of his hand. He notices after he shoves the change in his pocket, stares at it for a couple seconds, and then licks it off. “It’s a side-thing.”

“Right,” Clint replies, and smiles a little at the cashier. He grabs a couple napkins, ready to take off back to the elevators, but Wilson catches him by the back of his shirt. Everything on the tray clatters, knife and fork sliding off, and Wilson swears before he half-sets, half-drops the thing on a nearby table. “I have to—”

“Work, I know, just—hang on, lemme . . . ” Clint watches him pick up the silverware and put them back on the tray, and tries not to think too much about whether they’ll be used. Nah, instead he watches Wilson sort of—straighten himself out, fix his shirt and his Superman tie, run fingers through his mess of hair. He looks like he slept in his work clothes.

Clint’s—kinda starting to wonder about that.

“We can’t fraternize or whatever,” Wilson says, and Clint frowns. “You know, because you’re an ADA and I’m a defense attorney. The only reason Bucky’s allowed to do it is because he and Steve were married a really long time ago, and they never face each other in court, and I think they have, like, at-home rules about talking about things. Bucky started to explain them to me, once, but I
kind of stopped listening because then Romanoff went by and she—"

“Wilson.”

He blinks, big-eyed, and takes in a breath. “Yeah?”

“What’re you—getting at?”

“Oh. Yeah. Right. Fraternizing.” He shifts a little. “We can’t do that, but we can—hang out.”

“Hang out?” Clint repeats.

“Yeah. Like, you know, go for a beer. Or to a movie. Or to a baseball game. Or, oh, even better, have you heard of that movie theater that serves you beer during the movie? I think they have food, too. Good food, not stale popcorn and—”

Clint swears he’s getting a headache, just trying to follow him. “I— Are you—” And the question’s there, on the tip of his tongue, but he doesn’t know how to ask it. It’s not like asking about which is the right printer or where the court trustee’s office is. This—

He has to work with this guy, at least in the sense of seeing him in court, and—

“Are you . . . asking me out?”

Problem is, he’s waited just long enough that Wilson’s face has shifted. Before, he’d looked like a lanky puppy, all nervous and hopeful. Clint’d half-expected his ass to wiggle in delight when he’d opened his mouth. But now, his whole face is contorting and twisting.

He squeaks, “Oh god, not like a date or something!” no more than a second after Clint’s question. Clint blinks, and Wilson puts up his hands. “Oh god, no. No, see, I’m going to marry Natasha Romanoff and we’re going to have redheaded babies with Russian names. Sergei and Sergeietta. No, I—hanging out. Just hanging out. I swear.”

It’s hard, in a weird way, to keep standing there. There’s something so—earnest about Wilson, just then, the way he holds himself and stares at Clint like he’s afraid Clint’s gonna step on him and grind him out with the heel of his shoe. He’s not a bad guy. Sure, he plays Angry Birds and Cut the Rope between hearings, and his clothes never match, but he’s kinda—okay.

And Clint, he’s kinda not in the mood to crush dreams. Not today, not a couple hours after watching Hill destroy Laufeyson (and after snickering about Lucius Malfoy with Coulson).

“Maybe sometime,” he gives in, shrugging.

Wilson lights up like a Christmas tree. “Really?”

“It’s not a promise,” Clint stresses. “I’m just saying, maybe if we’re both bored some Friday after work, we can grab a dr—”

Wade Wilson smells like mothballs and aftershave. Clint only finds this out ‘cause there’re arms around his neck, squeezing him hard enough that he feels like his ribs are gonna crack. “We are going to have so much fun!”

“Wilson—”

“We can go to the titty bar! Have you ever been to the titty bar? It’s amazing, they have these girls, and they take off their shirts, and—”
Clint’s sure there’s some more . . . colorful description of Wilson’s favorite bar on its way, but he’s distracted by a loud *snikit*. It reminds him of the sound a cell phone makes when you take a picture, and—

No. *Oh* no.

He shoves Wilson away, hands against chest, hard enough that he stumbles, but it’s too late. Darcy and the two other trial assistants, Jane and Peggy, are standing all of five feet away, and Darcy’s snapping another picture. “I am so putting this on my tumblr,” Darcy announces, her tongue caught between her teeth while she laughs.

Peggy bites back a grin, but Jane— You know, bless Jane Foster for trying to look just a little neutral. “Leave him alone,” she says, and nudges Darcy’s phone arm.

Darcy twists away. “I’m just going to ask for wedding theme suggestions, I swear!”

“Oooh!” Wilson announces, and abandons Clint—warm-necked Clint, Clint who wants to snatch Darcy’s phone and put it through the industrial dishwasher back behind the kitchen, Clint who Peggy keeps resisting the urge to *giggle* at—to rush over to Darcy’s side. He leans over the phone, squinting. “I like that one. He’s cuter in that one. Can you say we’ve already got the comic book theme? Because he’d do a really good Green Lantern . . .”

The only consolation is that, when Darcy starts leaving *Modern Bride Magazine* on Clint’s desk later that week, it’s still got the newsstand price on it. He likes knowing she’s paying more to tease him than she is on her morning mocha-whatever.

And still, he’d—kinda rather have a mocha-whatever of his own.

(At least when Coulson sees him slipping the damn thing into the shredder bin, he doesn’t ask.)

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“The thing you have to remember about charging people,” Steve Rogers explains, leaning back in the chair at counsel table, “is that everybody has a story. Sometimes, the story’s just a bunch of lines to try and make you feel bad and hand out breaks to a guy who doesn’t deserve it. But other times, the story’s legitimate, and we need to hear it out in the interest of justice.”

Clint likes Rogers. Don’t get him wrong, the guy’s pretty much a saint. He’s seen him comfort a crying sixteen-year-old on her first ticket three minutes after convincing a hardened criminal that, yeah, actually, taking the probation violation’s a better deal than trying to fight the charge. Three or four times, guys’ve *thanked* him after they were done discussing exactly how much time they were gonna do if they pled out. Thanked him, like Rogers’d made their lives better by dealing it down to six months in jail.

But all those virtues aside, Clint’s starting to suspect Rogers’s got a “justice” tramp-stamp, ‘cause he uses the word that damn much.

It’s Saturday morning, a Saturday when Clint’d usually be at the gym, but he fidgets in the leather chair and listens to Rogers drone on about his personal theory of justice. State law requires that arrestees see a judge no more than forty-eight hours after getting picked up, which means everybody from about three p.m. on Friday ‘till 9 a.m. Saturday morning gets a special weekend
date with Judge Dunbar. Some Saturdays, there’s nobody, but on days like today, there’re five drunk frat boys who got into a bar fight and all spent the night in lock-up.

Rogers slides over the sheet with bond amounts printed on it, and Clint leans forward like he’s paying attention. All the attorneys who handle the “lighter” load—so him, Thor, Natasha, and Bruce—are on a weekend rotation so Steve isn’t required to ditch Saturday morning pancakes with his family every week. Problem is, Rogers is here now, lecturing him like he’s a first-year law student.

Clint thinks it’s got less to do about justice and more about the Bucky thing.

He doesn’t say that to Rogers, though.

“Any questions?” Rogers asks, and Clint raises his eyes like he’s actually been listening. “This can be tricky when you’re not used to it,” he explains, leaning an elbow on the table. He’s wearing an awful green tweed blazer. “Judges are—quirky about bond. You can have two guys who did the same crime but based on their attitude when they walk in the door, Dunbar’ll tweak it. And that’s right, but you’ve gotta be able to think on your feet to explain why they should both get the same, or whatever the situation is.”

“Like sentencing,” Clint replies, nodding. “I took an intercession course on criminal sentencing, I know—”

“It’s a lot mushier than sentencing,” Rogers interrupts. “Sentencing’s pretty strict. The grid locks in the judge, limits what he can do. Bond’s got ranges that can vary just based on what the defendant’s wearing. You have to be careful what you ask for.”

“I know.”

“You sure—”

“Totally sure,” he assures Rogers, but—maybe too fast. Maybe fast enough that he sounds wound up more than anything else. He could’ve done this alone, he thinks the courtroom doors creek open. He could’ve handled a parade of frat boys and—

“The unreasonable Mr. Barton!” a voice greets, and Clint’s momentary certainty tips into his shoes. When he twists around in the chair, Sif Rowan is sliding into a row of gallery seats to let the defendants parade past. They’re surfer-boy chic in baggy jeans and Ed Hardy t-shirts, and every one of them has an attorney. One’s slender and blond with a ridiculous goatee, one’s—“round” kinda seems unfair, but he’s broad and heavy and has a ridiculous beard, one’s Asian, and one’s a tall black drink of water in a pinstripe suit. Clint tries not to look at him any longer than the other three. Sif’s out of the khakis and into a fitted suit, but she’s leaning over the back of a chair and leering at him. “I’m surprised Rogers expects you to charge people fairly.”

“Barton does just fine,” Rogers replies. He’s leaning back in his chair, totally calm. Clint wonders how much of this is Sif’s standard operating procedure.

“He probably didn’t tell you about our plea breakdown, the other day.”

“He doesn’t need to. I trust him.”

“Your mistake.” She flicks her ponytail over her shoulder and smiles at Clint. “I’m looking forward to this.”

Clint shrugs. He leaves the nervous shifting to the frat boys in their handcuffs. Oh, he still wants to,
but he knows that Sif’ll see it as a sign of weakness.

She doesn’t seem to like weakness very much.

“We’ll see about that,” he returns, and she laughs before she joins the others at counsel table.

He watches her lean over and murmur to her client, easily the broadest (and most-bruised) of the group, and he’s so busy wondering what the kid’s smirking about that he doesn’t realize how close Rogers is until he touches his arm. He starts, a little, and turns to look at him. “I mean it,” Rogers says. It’s dripping with earnestness. “I trust you to handle this.”

Clint opens his mouth, ready to respond, but then Judge Dunbar comes in and the appearances get started.

Five defendants means five of everything: five readings of the charges, five pleas, five requests for bond. Because they’ve all got separate attorneys, Clint has to do each one independently. The first four attorneys—Heimdall, Volstagg, Hogun, and Fandral, all of whom sound like something out of a Norwegian rock band—don’t argue with the thousand-dollar bond. Their clients all plead not guilty, but they stare at the floor when they say it, and Clint’s pretty sure they’ll be pleading down to misdemeanor battery the second Hill opens the office on Monday.

Sif, though, interrupts Clint halfway through, “We’d also request a thousand dollars for Mr. Kurtis.”

“Your honor,” she says, and her ponytail flops over her shoulder when she leans on counsel table. “My client is clearly the most injured of the five. He was found sitting on the curb, bewildered and bleeding. And unlike his co-defendants, his record is clean. He’s never even been cited for underaged drinking!”

One of the other boys mutters something, but Volstagg (or maybe it’s Fandral) shuts him up in record time. Judge Dunbar, who’s probably Fury’s age but who wears it a lot better, looks up from the charging documents. “Is that so, Mr. Barton?”

“That his record’s clean and that he was found on the curb, absolutely,” Clint replies, pressing his fingertips into the tabletop. “But the fact Mr. Kurtis is the most injured of the five suggests he was the most involved in the fight.”

Sif huffs. “That’s ridiculous!”

But Dunbar holds up a hand. “How do you figure, counselor?”

“You ever been in a fistfight?” Clint asks, and Sif tosses her head when she rolls her eyes. “You sucker-punch somebody or somebody sucker-punches you, somebody’s going down. You might get a shiner or bloody knuckles, but you don’t end up looking like Mr. Kurtis.” He gestures to the defendant. His face looks like somebody took a meat cleaver to it, and that’s not counting his torn t-shirt and the raw scabs on his knuckles. “Record or not, Mr. Kurtis has been in some pretty rough mutual combat, and it probably lasted more than a couple blows. I should really be asking for two or three thousand, not just the one.”

The judge nods momentarily and then glances back at Sif. Out of the corner of his eye, Clint swears Rogers is smiling. “Ms. Rowan?”

Sif pulls in a breath, but then she lifts her hands from the tabletop. Her shoulders square, tense, and then release. “One thousand dollars bond is fine, your honor.”
“Then I suspect the clerk will be seeing a number of checks early Monday morning. We’re adjourned.”

The defendants shuffle out of the courtroom, a row of defeated, dirty kids who’re probably regretting getting shit-faced after SportsCenter. Clint’s watching them all go, the one still muttering to Volstagg-or-Fandral, when Rogers puts a hand on his shoulder. “Smart,” he says, and he smiles.

Clint smiles back. “Thanks. And listen, about last week and the McLaughlin case, I—”

Rogers shakes his head for a couple seconds, and then meets Clint’s eyes. His gaze isn’t cold, not like it was in the hallway that afternoon. If anything, it’s—warmer than it’s ever been. “Consider it forgotten. From me and from Buck,” he adds, squeezing Clint’s shoulder. “We’re looking forward to having you at the party.”

“Stark’s starting to freak me out with the whole ‘Little Pony’ theme,” he admits, and Rogers laughs.

They’re sorting through the folders, getting the files in order for Hill to look at on Monday, when a hand lands in the middle of Mr. Kurtis’s paperwork. Clint doesn’t have to glance up to know who those red fingernails belong to. “Did it live up to your expectations?”

Sif’s eyes are even, steady, but they’re not—angry. If anything, they’re perfectly placid. She watches him for a few seconds and, when Clint watches her back.

The smile that creeps across her face is small, but it’s naughty. It’s a kid-in-the-cookie-jar smile. “You,” she says, “are more trouble than I’d thought you would be.”

“I get that a lot,” he replies. Next to him, Rogers barely bites back a laugh.

It only makes Sif’s smile grow. “Oh, don’t worry,” she replies, “I enjoy a challenge.” She drums her fingernails across the papers and, then, winks. Clint purses his lips together to keep from laughing. “Have a good Saturday, counselor.”

“You too, Ms. Rowan,” he responds, and twists to watch her wave over her shoulder on her way out the door.

Rogers shakes his head, chuckling. “You know what? Tony was right about you.”

“How so?”

“You’re gonna fit in here just fine.”

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“According to the docket sheet, you’ve got a bench trial tomorrow. If you were anybody else, I might be hovering.”

Clint doesn’t need to glance up from his legal pad to recognize Coulson’s voice. It’s early on Monday, early enough that the window in Clint’s office is still cool. He knows because he’s got his sleeves rolled up, and his wrist brushes against the glass when he writes. He finishes his
thought, crosses a T, and raises his head. Coulson’s standing in the doorway with a cup of tea—it’s got the little tail dangling out of it—and watching him.

“Morning, boss,” Clint greets. He stretches his legs along the window ledge.

“You know, if you’re going to sit there, you might as well get a cushion.”

“I like the industrial barrack look, myself.”

“Clearly.” Coulson’s smile is slow, but—not a bad way to start a Monday. Clint watches him cross the room to throw out his teabag. He’s in the full suit and his tie’s got tiny silver stripes running in a diagonal. He moves like he was born into professional dress, and it’s kinda hard to look away. “The charges are speeding and eluding law enforcement, right?”

Clint nods. “Already lined up the trooper, so we’re not gonna have a situation where she gets off ‘cause there’s no witnesses.” He leans down to pick up his coffee cup. There’s nowhere on the ledge to keep it, but a couple statute books make a pretty okay side-table. “We’ll talk today, make sure there’s nothing to her story.”

Coulson leans against one of his file cabinets. “You think there is?”

“No, but I think if the trooper’s shaky, her story could sound good.”

“What’s she claiming?”

“According to her, she’d been passed a minute or two before by a sports car going a whole lot faster than she was.” Clint sips his coffee while he shrugs. He loves the first cup of the morning, before all that’s left in the pot’s the burned-tasting dregs. “Law enforcement did a time-distance test instead of using radar but were going ten over just to keep up with her. They lit up, but she claimed she didn’t notice.”

Coulson raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t notice a trooper on her tail?”

“You know how it is,” Clint replies. He can’t help grinning a little. He knows he shouldn’t, that he should be nicer to confused twenty-somethings who really don’t wanna pay the fine from two pretty hefty tickets, but the argument’s just the wrong side of ridiculous. “She had the radio on, was taking on her cell to a friend, and finishing up her French toast strips from Burger King.”

“And driving?” Coulson demands, his brow furrowing. Clint laughs. “I can barely listen to the weather report without getting distracted.”

“So I’m never gonna catch you car-dancing on your way out of the parking lot?”

“Maybe in the parking lot, but never on the way out.”

He keeps his voice so even, so matter-of-fact, that Clint almost snorts coffee. They share a smile, and he cannot for the life of him figure out why he likes Coulson’s smile so much. It’s warm, sure, and a little charming, but it’s gotta be something else. Something bigger, ‘cause Rogers’s smile could charm the pants off a mafia boss, but it doesn’t overtake him the way Coulson’s does.

Coulson sips his tea and then holds onto the mug, two-handed. Clint doesn’t realize that he’s watching the squared ends of those fingers until Coulson asks, “Anything I can do?”

He blinks. “Huh?”
“To help.” Coulson lifts his shoulders in the world’s least-committed shrug. “I know it’s just a bench trial, but it’s your first. I didn’t know whether you might want to go over arguments, or parse out what you want to ask the trooper.” Clint raises an eyebrow, and he smiles softly. “You can take a thousand trial advocacy classes. It doesn’t change how the first trial feels. Even if it is some—dental hygienist trying to wriggle out of a couple tickets.”

“Pastry chef.”

“What?”

“The defendant’s a pastry chef.”

“And she was eating fast-food French toast?”

Clint laughs, and after a couple seconds, Coulson joins in. He—likes this, not that he’d ever admit it to anybody. Nobody else really checks in just to see how it’s going. Well, okay, Natasha does, but usually after he’s screwed something up and she’s afraid he’s stolen Stark’s scotch out of his bottom drawer. He’s glad he’s got at least one person who swings by regardless of how badly he’s tripping over himself.

But when the laughter fades, Coulson pushes himself away from the file cabinet. “I’ll let you work, then,” he says, and Clint—he kinda wants to ask him for help, just so he sticks around a couple minutes longer. He doesn’t say it, though. “Watch out for the pulpit-pounding with Judge English,” he adds, gesturing with his mug a little. “She’ll put up with it from defense counsel, but not from the state. Thinks it’s beneath us or something.”

“Guess I better take out the pop-culture references, then,” Clint replies, and Coulson chuckles softly. He shakes his head when he does it. Clint wishes he knew what thought went with the head-shake. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies, and heads toward the door. Clint’s picking up his pen to add to his argument when Coulson remarks, “By the way, I think you’d suit the off-the-shoulder look.”

He’s got his hand on the doorjamb, but he’s looking over his shoulder. Clint frowns.

“What?”

“I know strapless is all the rage in summer weddings, but you’re broad enough that I think off-the-shoulder’d help minimize all that . . . width.” He gestures vaguely in Clint’s direction, and Clint—he opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Not when he catches Coulson’s playful smile, or the way the corners of his eyes crease. “And ivory. Did you see the cover story? Ivory’s the new white.”

Clint, finally, can’t help it, and he snorts a stupid little laugh. “Get outta here before I change my mind about not needing help,” he grumbles, and Coulson laughs.

But he swears that Coulson lingers, just a little, before he actually ducks into the hall.

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All things considered, Tuesday is a good day.
Outside, the sun’s bright enough that it’s starting to feel a little like summer, and inside, Thor’s made an extra-rich pot of coffee to get him through a day of juvenile probation revocations. Clint spends a long time looking out the window while he drinks his coffee, mentally running through the arguments for his bench trial. He negotiates a misdemeanor charge down to an infraction, dismisses a couple “no proof of insurance” tickets for kids who got the insurance thing sorted out, and convinces Hill to let him keep the complicated felony DUI case that lands on his desk right before noon.

At lunch, he splits a pizza with Bruce and Steve, the three of them packed into hastily-cleared chairs in Bruce’s office and trying not to drip sauce onto open case-files. Somewhere in the middle of his second slice, Clint finally thinks to ask, “Stark have oral argument today?”

Steve makes a sound like a kicked puppy, and Bruce wipes his mouth on a crumpled napkin. “Never,” he warns, “ask that question.”

“Why?”

“It’s like Beatlejuice,” Steve explains once he swallows. “You’ll summon him.”

“Oh, it’s much worse than Beatlejuice,” Bruce retorts. “Beatlejuice, he probably lets you get work done, once in a while.”

They all laugh together, and Clint, he—kinda enjoys the quiet in the office, the fact that Stark’s not running around harassing people and shouting for Pepper. Then again, he enjoys the pizza and lazy conversation even better.

In the hallway after lunch, Coulson stops him and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Good luck with the trial,” he says with a smile.

Clint smiles back, thanks him . . . and an two hours later, walks out of the courtroom with a conviction.

Yeah. Tuesday’s a good day.

It’s coming up on four when he sees Coulson again, mostly because the guy appears in his doorway. He smiles, says, “Hey,” and finishes updating his case notes before he looks up. Which is probably for the best, ‘cause once he does, he kinda wishes he’d picked a better greeting.

Coulson looks—harried. Rushed, like somebody’s dragging him around by the cuff and he’s not really able to keep up. “We need everybody in the conference room,” he says. Quick, efficient—and definitely ten different kinds of not relaxed.

Clint frowns. “I’ve got a plea negotiation in ten—”

“Darcy’s cancelling it right now. Fury needs all of us in the conference room, no later than four.” But then Coulson’s gone, pushing himself away from the door and back into the hallway. Clint snags his coffee mug and legal pad, and he follows.

There’s chaos outside his office. Darcy’s on the phone, Jane’s looming over her while holding a literal stack of appointment books, and the file clerk that passes looks up at Clint like the dogs of hell are on her heels. The further down the hallway he goes, the worse it gets: Hill’s standing over Peggy’s desk and sniping at her, the interns look spooked, and Natasha’s trying to maneuver a wide-eyed witness out the door.

When Bruce comes around a corner and nearly bowls him over, Clint asks, “What’s going on?”
Bruce shakes his head. Clint’s pretty sure that’s not a good sign, and the signs turn from bad to worse when he snags Pepper the second she comes out of Stark’s office. She jumps a little, he lowers his voice, and then they’re off and talking before Clint can even register what’s happening.

He assumes that the conference room’ll be calmer, a little less—hectic, maybe, is the right word, except it’s not. It’s already half-jammed with people, everyone from the administrative staff to Fury himself, standing at the head of the table. Standing for a few seconds, at least, because then he paces over to one of the investigators and murmurs something. The investigator—Rones? Rhodes? Something like that, at least—nods a little but doesn’t say anything. Fury goes right back to pacing, and Clint finds an empty chair close to the door.

It takes maybe four or five minutes for the rest of the stragglers to come flowing in. The other assistant D.A.s, minus Stark, shove themselves into chairs, the interns gather in a corner, and Darcy snaps her gum so loud that Thor breaks a pencil in his fist. Coulson slides in, nearly last, and presses himself against the wall behind Clint. Clint glances over his shoulder, but the guy’s too busy looking at his watch to pay any attention.

“Any minute,” he says, seemingly to no one, but it makes Fury nod.

“What’s happening?” Hill asks from across the table. She’s frowning, but not the way she frowns at errant file clerks and conveniently-forgetful witnesses. This is the kind of frown that takes over her face and finds creases Clint’s never seen before. Laufeyson didn’t even earn that kind of frown.

Clint’s about to call it worried, at least in his head, when Pepper Potts appears in the doorway. “Stark back?” Fury asks immediately, and Pepper nods. Then she’s gone again, back out of the conference room. In the next chair over, Natasha frowns. Natasha’s good at neutral expressions. Natasha very rarely frowns. Then Fury frowns, too, and Clint—

Clint’s no idiot.

Clint’s sure that something’s gone very, very wrong.

Stark bursts into the room less than a minute later, exhaling a rushed, “Sorry,” that Clint’s pretty sure he doesn’t mean. He’s dressed in another expensive suit and tie, but his hair’s slicked back neatly. He looks—glossier than usual, Clint thinks. Like he’s put in a lot more effort than on an ordinary day. He tosses himself into the chair next to Bruce, and Clint can see a sort of flesh-colored smear of something on his collar. It—almost looks like makeup.

Why would Stark be wearing makeup?

In the front of the room, Fury asks, “That everyone?” and Pepper nods as she pulls the door shut and stands in front of it. Fury tips his head toward her, a momentary acknowledgment, and then straightens his spine. He draws himself together like a solider, pulls in a breath, and then exhales.

“At 4:30 this afternoon, acting CEO of Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane, will issue a press statement that he recorded earlier this afternoon.” His voice is even, almost perfectly steady, but Clint can hear something—off, about it. “In it, he is going to announce that there was a teenage boy found murdered in the woods this morning, and that the boy is a member of the Urban Ascent program. A program which, I don’t have to remind you, Stark Industries started however-many years ago.”

“Thirty-two,” Stark says, quietly. Bruce leans in to murmur something to him, but he shakes his head. “Thirty-three, technically, but Dad didn’t like counting that first year. Said you couldn’t
count the accident that starts the ball rolling, only the push.”

Clint misses Fury’s next sentence or two because he’s caught up in Stark. Stark Industries’d been a mainstay in the county—in the state—since almost the beginning of time, but it’d never occurred to him to put the business and Tony Stark, appellate attorney, together. He stares at Stark for—well, for a lot longer than he technically needs to. He only stops when a hand on the back of his chair distracts him.

He twists to see Coulson leaning over him. “He’s the majority shareholder,” he murmurs, almost under his breath. “He doesn’t participate in the rest of it.”

Clint kinda—nods, not sure what other reaction to have, but Fury’s still talking. “Aside from the obvious heat this office’ll take from Stark being employed here,” he’s saying, “this case is gonna rise to the top of our priority list real quick. Rich guys bringing poor kids into our community and those kids turning up dead? That’s the kind of thing that can make the world’s most competent prosecutors look like a bunch of clumsy assholes. I won’t have it happening to us on my watch.”

“Are there any suspects?” Hill asks, glancing between Fury and Stark.

“No,” they both answer, almost at the same time. Fury raises an eyebrow and Stark just shakes his head. “Right now,” Fury continues, “they’re trying to identify which business the kid belonged to. He seems to’ve been moved around a little, and law enforcement is trying to track down his placement to figure out who was responsible for him. They’ve contacted his family, though, and I have a feeling we’re gonna be getting a lot of flak from that side of the tracks until somebody’s charged.”

Steve purses his lips together for a few seconds, nodding. “If it’s Urban Ascent,” he says slowly, “we’ll be getting it from both sides.”

“Flak from a bunch of corporate suits, we can handle,” Fury responds, and it’s hard to miss how Stark’s face twists when he phrases it that way. “But you all know how these things go. Poor kid from a poor community means everybody from the first responder this morning to the juror who looks bored during the trial is gonna get ridden ’till this is over. And I am not,” he stresses, raising a hand, “gonna listen to accusations that we only give a damn when it’s rich kids with rich parents.”

Down near the other end of the table, Bruce—lets out this little sound, almost like a sigh. “He was one of mine, when he was younger,” he says. “We released him back with his mom when his dad—at least, the guy who claimed to be his dad—landed a ten-year sentence. I thought . . . ” He shakes his head, trailing off.

Fury shakes his head, too, but his face is still stern. “The most we can do right now,” he informs everyone, “is to keep doing what we do best and avoid the hell out of the media. Even if your last name’s Stark and you think you can handle a couple reporters. We need to—”

“Sir,” Coulson interrupts, and Clint twists in time to see him nod at the clock. Fury glances up and exhales pretty hard. Clint’s never seen him—worried, before. He never would’ve thought that the guy who quizzed him on juvenile DUIs his first day could get so . . . wrapped up.

But he turns away from all of them to switch on the TV that’s mounted on the conference room wall. Murmurs start popping up in every corner of the room; the interns stare at Stark like they’ve never seen him before, Jane slides her chair over to take Thor’s broken pencil from between his clenched fingers, Hill drums her fingertips against the tabletop. A couple people down, the word “Tony” is audible, followed by a “no” and the sound of a chair hitting the wall. Clint turns in time
to see Stark heading for the door. He bickers with Pepper for a few seconds, just quiet enough that it doesn’t really carry, and rushes past her the second she steps out of the way.

“Ms. Potts,” Coulson says, but it overlaps with Bruce saying, “I’ll—go,” and then he’s slipping past Pepper too. The room quiets when Pepper pulls the door shut again, this awful, tense silence that crawls along the back of Clint’s neck.

He’s not sure why it feels like there’re cold fingertips creeping down his spine, but he doesn’t like it.

On the TV, a newscaster finishes her muted introduction of the official Stark Industries statement, and the picture changes. Obadiah Stane’s probably in his sixties, but he’s tall, broad, and impeccably dressed. Behind him, lined up against a Stark Industries backdrop, are a half-dozen suits. Stark’s one of the six, his hands folded in front of him like he’s about to face a firing squad. He looks—different, somehow. Somber, instead of—

Well, instead of like Tony Stark.

There’re flashbulbs going off, and when Stane raises his hands to stop them, Fury unmutes the television.

“Approximately an hour ago, at three-thirty p.m. local time,” he begins, with a flawless ease that Clint knows can only come from a lot of rehearsal. “I received some disturbing and tragic news. As many of you are aware, Howard Stark created a program for underprivileged youth. That program, Urban Ascent, has been one of Mr. Stark’s proudest legacies, and is a program that everyone at Stark Industries has supported since Howard let a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks sleep on a cot in his study and come to work with him every afternoon.”

Behind Stane, Stark shifts. Stane doesn’t notice, he just leans forward. “In the last thirty-two years,” he continues, “this program has grown and matured the same way its first participants did. We have seen some of the brightest young men and women of this state pass through Urban Ascent, and we are proud of every one of them.

“This morning, however, one of those brilliant young minds was taken from us much too soon.” Stane shakes his head, and Clint suspects he rehearsed that, too. “This morning, the body of a teenage boy was found in Colier Woods. Through no fault of law enforcement, he was identified several hours later. We only received his name a short time ago.”

There are murmurs all through the crowd on the television, and murmurs all through the conference room. If Stark’s been gone all day, Clint thinks, somebody’s been sitting on this information. Which is maybe kinda cynical, but—

“His family has been contacted,” Stane says, “and we are now prepared to confirm that this young man, Jordan Silva-Ribiero, was a member of the Urban Ascent program.”

And those— Somehow, those are the last words Clint hears.

He sits there, in the soft chair in the conference room, and tries to focus on the rest of Stane’s little speech, but he feels like he’s at the wrong end of a tunnel. Stane’s voice is suddenly far away, echoy and only vaguely recognizable, and he can’t piece the individual syllables together. They’re just noises, reverberating through the conference room. Buzzing, all—droning static and endless—

“Clint,” a far-away voice says, and then, “Clint,” again, closer.
Clint blinks and realizes that Natasha’s staring at him. Her chair’s turned in his direction, away from the screen, and he’s the whole focus of her attention.

He wets his lips. He can’t remember when they first felt dry. “Yeah?”

“I think your phone’s vibrating.”

He blinks again, just—*confused* for a second, and then realizes that the buzzing isn’t the television or Stane’s speech, it’s his cell phone. He feels his stomach twist and pushes himself out of his chair. He thinks maybe he mutters something—sorry, excuse me, I gotta take this, *something*—before he maneuvers behind the chairs of people who’re too engrossed by Stane to notice him.

Pepper frowns when he slides through the door, but he ignores her. Ignores her and starts digging through his pockets the second he’s in the hallway. He knows what name’s going to be on the display, but *knowing* isn’t the same as *seeing*, and—

Behind him, he hears someone, but he doesn’t take it in until there’s a hand on his shoulder. He jerks, glancing up from his phone, to see Natasha standing next to him. She’s frowning, but not like she was in the conference room. It’s—softer, more *real*.

He shakes his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from the corners of his brain. “Sorry, what?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. I, uh—” His phone stops buzzing, still in his palm, and he watches it until the display goes dark. “I was waiting on a call from my landlord,” he explains, shrugging a little. “The shower’s all screwed up, we’ve been playing phone tag, and I—thought it was him.”

“Was it?”

“Huh?”

“Was it your landlord?”

“Oh. No.”

Clint knows as soon as he says it that it’s the wrong answer, the—step too far that turns a plausible lie *implausible*. Natasha watches him for the longest few seconds of his life, one perfect eyebrow raised, her lips pressed together. Her eyes are sharp, he thinks. She could slice through him if she wanted.

“Okay,” she says, finally.

“Okay.”

But even after he says it, the tension doesn’t break. He watches her walk away, long strides over the carpet, and only breathes again after she closes her office door behind her. The silence in the hallway, it’s—comforting. Private.

But even then, he waits until he’s in his own office, the door closed and his back pressed against it, to reactivate the phone’s display. Just in case, he tells himself. Just in case the caller ID says something different and you laugh like a fool.

The problem is, the caller ID says exactly what Clint’d been expecting since he’d heard Obadiah Stane say that kid’s name:
Missed call: Barney Barton.
Avoidance, Bargaining, and Other Tactics

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUls at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint tries to avoid, advert, and otherwise prevent disaster. But sometimes, avoiding and courting disaster look a little bit the same.

“I need a favor.”

“I don’t do favors.”

Darcy’s playing Words with Friends on her cell phone, feet kicked up onto the corner of her desk and her whole body stretched out almost vertical in her desk chair. Her computer background’s of some science-fiction character in a fez and bowtie, but it’s half-hidden by her open Facebook page—which, by the way, is supposed to be blocked by the network’s filter.

“Darcy,” Clint presses. She holds up a single finger, twitches it back and forth like a nanny correcting a naughty kid, and reaches for her drink. It’s a blended mocha-something-something from Starbucks, and there’s condensation sliding down the sides.

She puts it down on one of Clint’s case files, and he reaches to move it. She slaps his hand away.

“I also definitely do not share,” she informs him, but at least she moves the cup.

Clint sighs. It’s early right now, a whole half-hour earlier than he normally gets in—and he’s already been there an hour, today. An entire hour, his office door open and his ass tucked into the far corner of the window ledge while he waited for Darcy. Not that he’d called it that. No, he’d told Hill he was getting a jump on things, told Pepper he’d wanted to clean up his office so it didn’t end up looking like Bruce’s, and smiled, just a little, when Coulson wandered by.

But all he’d really been doing was finishing up his correspondence course in Clock Watching 101. That, and drinking a little too much break room coffee.

“Darcy,” he repeats, and she shuffles her tiles for the fifth time in as many seconds. He resists the urge to snatch the phone out of her hand. “Darcy.”

“Busy.”

“Quieter.”

She frowns, her nose crinkling, and looks up at him. “What?”

“Quieter,” he says, and gestures vaguely toward the phone. “E in ‘egotist’ as your second E. Double-letter on the Q.”

Her head drops back to the display, and, after another shuffle of the tiles, she plays the word Clint suggested. The little chiming sound is drowned out by her hoot in pleasure when she sees the score.
Clint thinks maybe he’s in the clear, maybe he’s earned some assistance from his, you know, assistant . . . until Darcy leans over to pick up her drink again. “Still no favors.”

He groans audibly. He thinks, for a few seconds, about firing her outright, but he knows he doesn’t have the authority. Plus, even if he did, Steve thinks Darcy’s “invaluable.” Clint’s not sure where “invaluable” came from, but Steve’s mentioned it often enough that he suspects there are nail and hair care tips involved.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He presses his hand against it, waits for it to stop, and then ignores it.

“It’s not really a favor,” he tells Darcy. She’s leaning over to scroll through her Facebook feed. “It’s more—running interference.”

*That* brings her head up. “Interference?”

“Yeah.”

“Interference between you and who?”

“My . . .” This, Clint suddenly thinks, is a bad idea. A very bad idea. “My brother.”

“You have a brother?” Darcy squints at him and takes a long, considering slurp of her mocha-something. Her eyes travel, drift over the whole of his face, but Clint holds his expression neutral. At least, he tries to. He’s still thinking, quietly, about firing her.

“You don’t look like the brother type,” she decides.

Clint rolls his eyes. “Does Thor?”

“Oh yeah. Thor’s totally that overprotective big brother who, like, vetted all the girls Loki brought home to make sure they had pure intentions.”

“That’s—weirdly specific.”

She shrugs. “Blame Jane,” she replies, then takes another sip of her drink. Her thumb dimples the domed lid, then releases. “Did your brother vet your boyfriends?”

He definitely wants to fire her, now. “Are you going to help me or not?”

“Then you’re not denying—”

“Okay, you know what?” Clint tosses up his hands. Whether it’s at Darcy or his own *stupidity*, he doesn’t know. “I’m done. I’m sorry I asked, I thought you’d—”

“Wait, wait, don’t get all butthurt.” He’s almost out of her cubicle, almost free of her particular brand of insanity, but he turns around anyway. She drops her feet off the edge of the desk and pushes her chair over to him. She’s craning her neck, still squinting, but she’s not saying *no*, either. “Interference with your brother I can do. But not forever. And eventually, I’m gonna want the scoop on what’s going on with you and him.” She peers at him over the rims of her glasses. “In detail.”

“Fine.” For what kinda feels like the first time all morning, Clint exhales. His chest doesn’t feel tight, anymore, and his nerves settle—at least for a few seconds. The relief doesn’t last, maybe because he knows this is a hollow victory. “His name’s Barney,” he tells her, “and all you have to
do is make up an excuse if he calls.”

Darcy looks up from the post-it note she’s scribbling, one that might say Barney—or just be a giant squiggle. “Any excuse?” she asks, frowning.

He tries to nod, but his phone buzzes again. He doesn’t press his palm to his pocket, this time. “Switch them up as much as you need to, but make sure I’m never available. Not for him.”

“But—”

“Any excuse, Darcy,” he stresses, and whether it’s his voice, his expression, or both, it keeps her from asking anything else.

Three steps outside the cubicle, he fishes his phone out of his pocket. He has a half-dozen texts from Barney, plus a few from local numbers he doesn’t recognize. He’d cleared all messages in the parking lot that morning without replying, but it seems like nobody got the hint.

He doesn’t read any of the texts before deleting them, and once they’re gone, he turns off his phone entirely.

He’s tucking it back in his pocket when Darcy calls after him. “You know I only said yes because of the pants, right?”

Clint turns around, frowning. “The—pants?”

She nods, curls bouncing. There’s something—evil, somehow, in her gaze, and the way she bites her lower lip. He sighs. This, he decides, is going to be a long day.

Especially since, when he turns to walk into his office, Darcy wolf-whistles behind him.

Yeah. It’s gonna be a very long day.

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Turns out that it’s just a long week.

The murder of Jordan Silva-Ribiero gets top billing on every news station Wednesday and Thursday, and the newspaper doesn’t drop the headline to below the crease until Friday morning. Editorials ramble on about liberal guilt and self-congratulatory corporate charity, and the more headlines he sees, the more Clint feels bad for busting Bruce’s chops over Urban Ascent. He tries not to read the articles, but they follow him everywhere: someone leaves a newspaper in the break room Wednesday after lunch, Pepper sends a link to an article on the program’s history all through the office, and Bruce shouts at an intern for pinning up an editorial cartoon of an evil-looking Stane looming over the dead kid and saying It’s all going according to plan. Clint’s not even sure what the cartoon’s supposed to mean, but when somebody sticks an article called False Charity, False Hope to the bulletin board outside the bathroom, he takes it down and shoves it into the shred bin.

Fury spends more time out of the office than in, looming at the police station and meeting with the mayor. At lunch on Thursday, Steve shares a rumor about Fury being called in by the governor. No one confirms it, but—Well, it’s not great news. “Especially,” Steve stresses, “in an election year.”

Stark locks himself in his office, churning out rapid-fire appellate briefs. Twice, Clint sees Bruce slip in to see him . . . but nobody else. No one dares wake that sleeping giant, not now.
Barney texts Clint at least ten times a day even when the messages from strange local numbers stop coming. He deletes every one without reading or replying. Barney tries to call the office, too, but Darcy’s as good as her word, spinning lies about trials, judicial subcommittee meetings, and, “Oh, he got some bad Mexican for lunch. You don’t want the details.”

For the first time, he’s—gad to have her. Well. Somewhat glad.

Friday, then, is at least welcome. It’s warm, the first spike in what the weather report promises will be a week-long heat wave. Walking through the parking lot in a full suit is uncomfortable, so Clint tucks his jacket over his bag before he wanders up the sidewalk. He’s not sure he wants to be there, not after such a scattered week, but it’s his job.

Plus, Stark’d sent out a two-line e-mail to the entire office the night before:

*Dot’s party is still on so you better all show up or else. Bring extra beer.*

Clint’s in no hurry to find out what or else entails.

He’s all of four feet from his car when a young woman asks, “Excuse me?” She’s pretty and blonde, wearing a flowery summer dress that’s just short enough to make Clint look. He’s human, and he likes legs no matter who they belong to. “I don’t know if I’m in the right place, but you look like you work here. You got a second?”

“Sure,” he answers. He tries to force a smile, but it’s—not really been a smiling week. “What do you need?”

“I have to report for some court thing,” she explains, and starts digging through her bag. “I got this—paper, a while ago, to come today, but I can’t—dammit, where is it, I don’t—”

“It’s okay,” Clint assures her, putting out a hand. “If it’s court, it’ll be somewhere on the second or third floor. The security guards’ll check you in and make sure you get to the right place. Just have the paper for them, yeah?”

Her head jerks up, and she nods. “Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Mister—”

“Barton,” he replies. This time, he can manage an actual smile. “And you’re welcome.”

The woman’s cell phone rings, just then, and she apologizes before taking the call. He leaves her on the sidewalk, chattering with someone she calls baby an awful lot, and spends the better part of his morning pleased with his one good deed. Thor’s radio is turned to some talk-show where nasal-voiced “commentators” discuss current events, and the Silva-Ribiero murder turns into the argument of the day. It’s loud enough to hear all the way down the hall. Clint tries to block it out, forcing himself to think about how the world can’t be all bad if strangers still trust one another for directions.

An hour before lunch, as Clint’s coming back from the file room, he witnesses Bruce walk into Thor’s office, pick up the radio, and walk out with it. He lets the cord drag along the carpet behind him.

When Clint goes down for afternoon docket, then, he doesn’t have to ask why there are bits of plastic, wire, and metal strewn throughout the back stairwell. No, he definitely knows why.

All he has for the afternoon are two sentencing hearings—both pursuant to pleas, so quick and dirty that he could do them in his sleep—and the probation revocation of a woman who’d gotten picked
up for driving on a suspended license three weeks after pleading out on a DUI. Clint tries not to think how stupid a move that is—

When the woman from the parking lot walks into the courtroom.

She stops in the doorway and frowns. Clint frowns, too.

No good deed goes—

“You’re the motherfucking lawyer on this shit?!” she demands. It’s so—angry and out of character from the person he’d met on the sidewalk that he blinks instead of responding. His jaw opens, but he can’t actually formulate sounds. He stands there, instead, limp-shouldered and—

And the woman throws up her hands. “I shoulda known it. I shoulda known it! No asshole in a suit’s actually a good guy. Always an undercover pig or a fucking lawyer.”

“I’m—sorry?” he asks, kind of—half-blankly.

He’s pretty sure the woman—Kelly Gambino, according to the file in front of him—doesn’t hear. Or, if she does, she just doesn’t care. She stomps up to the defense counsel table, slams her summons and ticket down hard enough that it makes the microphone stand shake, and immediately turns on him. “I knew I shoulda hired a lawyer!” she announces, throwing up her hands. “Johnny kept telling me that I don’t need a lawyer for this shit, that I can just appeal to the judge and the guy prosecutin’ it to cut me some slack, but I can tell you’re not that kind of a guy!”

“Because I—you know directions?”

“Because you’re just another suited-up asshole lawyer!” Her heels clomp across the carpet and she slams both her palms on Clint’s table. They pin down her file, plus the two others for the afternoon. “You wanna make me a deal?”

He tightens his jaw. “Not if you don’t calm down,” he admits. “I can’t really reason with you if you’re—” Flying off the fucking handle comes to mind, but he decides against saying that. He kinda gestures towards her, instead.

She blinks a couple times, like she’s just now realizing that she’s spent the last minute and a half shouting at him, and straightens up. She smooths her dress all the way down her sides and hips. She’s pretty. Clint wonders if pretty worked on Pym before he went to practice patent law. “Sorry,” she apologizes, puffing out a breath. “I just get so worked up at this kinda stuff.”

“Obviously.”

“It’s just—look, okay?” When she puts her hands on her hips, everything . . . bounces. “I work two jobs, ’cause my loser boyfriend’s just out on parole and is having an awful time finding work. The nail place kept threatening to fire me ’cause I was late, but Johnny wasn’t home in time to drive me there.”

Clint tries not to frown. He focuses on the files, because the less he looks at her, the less likely he is to make a face that’ll send her back into the world of the irrational. “Where was he?”

“Where was who?”

“Johnny. You said he doesn’t have a job, so why wasn’t he home to drive you?”

“He was out with his—” She pauses halfway through the sentence. Clint watches her roll her full
lips together. “He was out dropping off some job applications.”

Yeah, over beers at the nearest bar. He forces a little smile. “Any luck?”

“Not yet. But anyway—” She waves a hand at him. “I had to get to work, you know? And then after work, I had to—”

“You didn’t apply for work release?”

“What?”

“Work release.” Clint flips open her file. “First-time DUI offenders are eligible for work release when they’re on their six-month suspension. It’s a limited-use lift on the suspension that lets you drive to work, from work, and on work-related errands.” He turns the file toward her, and Kelly bends to peer at it. Sure enough, on the plea sheet she signed when she agreed to probation, it says, *Defendant is eligible for work release and will apply for approval before driving.*

Defendant—Kelly—scowls. “I didn’t get a chance.”

“In three weeks?”

“Listen, I’m a busy woman, I work *two jobs* to support—”

“Your loser boyfriend.” Her eyes narrow, and Clint holds up his hand. “Quoting you,” he says, but he grins a little at the file as she huffs and tosses her hair.

“And anyway,” she presses, crossing her arms over her chest, “work release wouldn’t’ve mattered. Not for what happened.”

Clint’s read the police report and verified affidavits, and he’s watched the video from the patrol car’s onboard camera. But he still looks up and asks, “Why’s that?”

“Because I wasn’t *at* work when I got pulled over. That is, I wasn’t going there or coming back. See, my cousin Natalie, she’s getting married next weekend. And I’m helping our nana bake the cake.”

“Okay . . .”

“So I went out to pick up a bunch of what my nana needs to bake it. ‘Cause she’s got a busted hip and can’t do it herself. So, see?” She looks over at Clint, big-eyed, but it’s not big-eyed in a generous, hopeful way. It’s big-eyed in the way of those crummy Japanese animation shows. It’s the sparkly doe eyes the heroine flashes right before she throws a hissy fit.

He presses his lips together. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” he says, finally. “You knew your license was suspended, but didn’t apply for work release in the three weeks since you got put on probation.”

“‘Cause I’m busy.”

“Boyfriend, yeah, right.” Kelly nods urgently. “You drive to work because he’s not home to take you, work a full shift or whatever, then leave and, instead of going straight home, stop at the store.”

“Two stores,” she corrects.

Clint pulls in a breath. “Two stores.” He wonders whether his eyebrow twitches, or if he’s just
imagining it. “So, you did all this—”

“Right.”

“—and you want me to cut you some slack?”

“Well, yeah,” she says. She’s a little slack-jawed, like she can’t wrap her head around the question. “I told you everything that happened! I told you how messed up a situation it is.” She flicks her hair over her shoulder. “You’re supposed to take pity on me ‘cause it’s extenuating circumstances.”

“Extenuating.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” Clint shakes his head and turns back to the file. “Before I decide whether I cut you some slack, I’ve got another question.”

There’s that big-eyed look, again. Like some Disney-animated deer, Clint thinks. Then again, everybody knows what happens to Disney-animated deer. “Anything.”

“Where’s the part of the story where you called Officer Jones a—” He glances down at the affidavit in his file, squinting at the words. “—‘doughnut-eating fatass waste of space who deserves to have himself pepper sprayed for even looking at me funny’?”

Kelly’s mouth opens. She sputters, her whole body quaking in what Clint’s pretty sure is rage. “You—you motherfucking asshole lawyer, I am gonna make you so sorry we ever met, I am gonna —”

“No deal,” Clint replies, and then Judge English’s bailiff comes in and tells them to rise.

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Clint’s shout of “Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding!” when he leaves work that night, it—

chooses. Even with the parking lot empty, there’s the sheer wall of building behind him and plenty of space for his voice to carry. A couple birds stop picking at a sandwich wrapper and flutter away. A squirrel skitters up a tree.

His voice carries even further when he adds, “God fucking dammit!” to the equation, and throws his bag onto the sidewalk.

In his defense, his tires are flat.

All four of them, absolutely pancake-flat. Mostly because they’ve been thoroughly slashed.

Kelly Gambino’s spending the next five days and nights in county jail thanks to her Fast and Furious driving and threats to Officer Jones, but Clint still immediately suspects her. Her, in her tiny silky sundress and high heels, with all that ficky blonde Jersey Shore hair and the bad attitude. Or if not her, Johnny-the-loser-boyfriend. Maybe a whole group of them, maybe a posse like in a bad gang movie, hovering around the parking lot until they got the signal to go for the blue two-door in the back of the lot, maybe—
“Fuck!” he says, again, because it’s more satisfying than standing there like an asshole. He kicks the bumper, hard enough to make his foot ache. Good. Good, the ache’s nice. Maybe he’ll kick it again, just for shits and—

“Clint?” someone asks, and Clint closes his eyes.

He recognizes that voice. He just—doesn’t want that voice, not when his primary urge is to inflict bodily harm on his traffic defendant and her asshole parolee boyfriend.

The problem is, he knows he doesn’t have a choice, either. He exhales and opens his eyes just as Coulson comes around the back of his car. Clint watches as Coulson cycles through ten expressions in as many seconds: shock, confusion, concern, frustration, plus a handful Clint can’t catalogue. He’s not sure he’s quite earned quiet anger yet, but he sees that on Coulson’s face, too.

“Do you know who it is?” he asks, attention shifting from the tires and up toward Clint.

Clint shrugs. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Defendant?”

“Yeah. She—wanted a deal she didn’t get.”

“Obviously.” There’s something so dry about it, so matter-of-fact, that Clint snorts a noise that’s almost a laugh. He looks up at the sky, pushes out a hard breath, and shakes his head. “I don’t suppose you’ve got some kinda ‘coworker coverage’ AAA plan,” he jokes.

“No, just the regular one.” And like that, Coulson swings his briefcase onto the trunk of Clint’s car and starts digging out his wallet. “Tow’s free as long as you go with the nearest place.”

“No, boss, I didn’t mean—”

Coulson pauses. The card’s already halfway out of his wallet. “Do you want to leave your car in the lot all night?”

“I can just call a regular tow truck, I don’t need—”

“Clint,” and Coulson’s so good at doing this—infinite patience thing with his voice that it distracts Clint immediately. Their eyes meet, and Coulson’s are soft and . . . kind. They haven’t made it to worried, not yet, but they’re close. It’s hard to argue with those eyes. “I spend a hundred bucks a year for the privilege of keeping this thing in my wallet. If I have two catastrophic car disasters before it expires in October, then we can talk. Right now, I’m calling you a tow truck. Okay?”

“Okay,” Clint agrees, and picks up his bag from the sidewalk.

The girl at the AAA call center estimates a half-hour to an hour before the truck’ll be there. Once the reservation’s confirmed, Coulson takes his briefcase off the trunk and wordlessly holds out a hand in Clint’s direction. Clint pulls himself away from the side of the car, frowning.

“Your bag,” Coulson says simply.

“I don’t—”

“You’re not going to walk home from the repair shop, Clint.” His fingers wiggle. “If you were Stark, I might consider this an imposition. You’re not. Give me your bag.”

He manages a little grin. “You wouldn’t do this for Stark?”
“No, I would,” Coulson replies with a smile that’s just the right side of smug. “But he’d owe me.”

Clint laughs and hands over his bag. He leans against the trunk of his poor, abused car and watches Coulson track back across the parking lot in the fading light. He’s the only motion in the whole place, save a bird or two, and Clint ends up just—focusing in on him. He sheds his suit jacket and hangs it in the backseat of his sedan, and there’s just enough sunlight left in the day that Clint can study his shoulders through the thin white of his shirt. With his coat on, he looks like some stock *Law & Order* lawyer, not worth the second glance. But when he sheds the coat and rolls up his sleeves, there’s a lot to admire.

The view when he bends over his trunk isn’t too bad, either.

When Coulson wanders back over, he’s carrying two bottles of water. “Be glad I went to Costco and was too lazy to carry in the case,” he says, offering one to Clint.

Clint grins. “The secret life of Coulson: AAA membership he doesn’t use, stashes of water in his trunk.”

“It’s water or bodies. Depends on what kind of mood I’m in.”

“Is that why you wear so much black? Hide the blood?”

“No. I wear black because it’s slimming. Learned it from Fury.”

“Well, one of you needs it.”

“I can still cancel the tow truck, you know.”

Clint laughs, then, at the biting sarcasm that Coulson doesn’t even attempt to hide, and his reward’s this perfect little grin. It finds the wrinkles around Coulson’s eyes, wrinkles that do weird things to Clint’s belly. He twists off the cap to the water and takes a couple big gulps to drown those particular thoughts. Doesn’t work, but it’s worth a try.

He watches Coulson out of the corner of his eye. He’s not fidgeting, not playing with his phone or his watch, or even the water bottle. He’s just—leaning there against the trunk of the car, settled next to him like they’ve done this a thousand times. It’s the most familiar, most companionable silence Clint’s had since he started his job.

“Don’t you have something better to do with your Friday night?” Clint asks, finally. Coulson twists to look at him. “Stark’s always talking about your knitting circle or whatever.”

Coulson rolls his eyes. “I went to a craft show with Steve once, and now Stark thinks I’m Susie Homemaker.”

“Your wife must be proud.”

“I’m sure if I was interested in one, she would be.” He shrugs when he says it, dismissing his own words like a throw-away, and it’s not ’till Clint opens his mouth for the next joke that he realizes what Coulson’s said. He spends so long regrouping that he misses watching Coulson’s throat when he swallows a sip of water. “What about you?” he asks.

Clint blinks. “Me—what?”

“You must have better things to do on a Friday night.” He twists the cap back onto his bottle. “You’re, what, two years out of law school? You should be going to bars with your old friends,
complaining about your boss.”

Clint snorts. “Yeah, I never really—fit in with the rest of them.”

“No?”

“Nah.” He moves to set his water bottle down somewhere behind him on the trunk, and their elbows bump pretty hard. He turns to apologize, but there’s something—distracting about the way Coulson looks at him. It’s honest curiosity, nothing demanding or nosy, and Clint . . .

Clint’s not used to those kinds of looks.

“I got started late, with college,” he explains, shrugging. “I mean, I went straight from undergrad to law school, but the problem was the five years before undergrad. I was too old to fit in with the other people who went straight through, but I didn’t have the whole ‘first career’ thing to fit in with the non-traditional students.” He glances at Coulson. “I kinda got—stuck in the middle.”

Coulson smiles, softly, and shakes his head a little. “You can still be on the fringes even if you go straight through.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Clint’s pretty sure there’s more to the story, the way Coulson wets his lips and draws in this caught little breath, but then there’s the telltale rattling of a truck coming into the parking lot. The conversation dies, and the next half-hour’s spent signing paperwork and convincing the driver that no, really, it’s not worth it to file a police report, trust him. The driver shoots some funny looks between the two of them, looks Clint’s not sure that he likes, but then his car’s strapped in and ready to go.

“We’ll call you Monday,” the driver says after he tosses his clipboard into the cab.

“Monday?” Clint demands. “I don’t have another car, I can’t wait ‘till—”

“You got two options,” the driver informs him. He’s a jowly guy, probably a couple years older than Coulson, and he smacks his lips when he speaks. “First one is we take it to the nearest shop. They don’t open ‘till Monday, so you don’t get your car ‘till Monday. And the second is we take it to one of the shops that’re open on Saturday, and you pay for all the mileage and everything.”

Between student loans and car payments for a car that he can’t currently use, Clint’s not sure how he’s gonna pay for the new tires. Coulson glances at him, all soft-eyed again, and Clint . . . Clint shakes his head. “Monday’s fine,” he—well, he kinda grumps his way through it, if he’s honest.

“Hey, you be glad your boyfriend’s willin’ to put you on his membership,” the driver chides while he climbs into his seat. He closes the door harder than he maybe needs to. “Imagine how much you’d be paying without him.”

Clint’s too busy trying not to swear to correct the guy. He leaves it to Coulson to thank him, mostly because he’s walking down the middle aisle of the parking row and resting his urge to kick something.

The truck rolls away, blasting exhaust and groaning as it turns out of the parking lot, and Clint doesn’t realize Coulson’s said his name until a firm, wide palm lands on his shoulder.
It’s just Coulson’s hand, just touch, but Clint feels like somebody’s just jabbed a pin into the balloon of his anger. He exhales, long and hard, because—what else can he do? His tires are slashed, his brother’s an asshole, Kelly-the-nail-stylist couldn’t follow the terms of her damn probation, and—

And then, there’s Phil Coulson.

Kind-eyed Phil Coulson, watching him when he turns around.

“Sorry,” he says, half-heartedly.

“Don’t be,” Coulson replies, shrugging a little. “I’m already driving you home tonight. I might as well pick you up tomorrow, and then again on Monday. And if you need groceries or something, we can—”

“Tomorrow?” Clint repeats.

“Dot’s birthday party.” He smiles a little at Clint’s full-body groan. That smile is the only thing that Clint from dropping to the pavement like a two-year-old and crying about life not being fair. And trust him, he’s still tempted. “If it doesn’t cheer you up,” Coulson encourages, “I’ll—buy you a beer.”

“A whole day with Stark,” Clint retorts, “I’ll need more than a beer.”

“Two, then.” Coulson’s smile finds those crinkles, and for another few seconds, Clint forgets how to breathe. He only remembers when Coulson adds, “And an appetizer. At the seedy college bar of your choice.”

It disarms him—and that’s Coulson’s secret, Clint suspects, disarming people when they’re at their worst—and he laughs a little as he shakes his head. “I’m fresh out of seedy bars,” he says as they start wandering toward Coulson’s car, “but I’m sure you can pick one for me.”

“How can I choose?” Coulson wonders aloud, and Clint can’t ignore the way their laughter echoes through the parking lot, too.

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“Coulson.”

“Yes?”

“Remember how you said Stark was rich?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know you meant this.”

Coulson laughs around a sip of his beer—good beer from a pretty exclusive microbrewery, and there’s not a thirty-six pack of Bud Light in sight—but Clint’s not actually laughing. ‘Cause even though he’s here, standing on Stark’s back patio and drinking Stark’s good beer, he can’t believe it.

He can’t believe that Tony Stark lives in a fucking mansion.
It’s not even one of those trendy places you hear about on the news, where thirty-something trendsetters come in, bulldoze a split-level, and build a three-story eyesore with marble *everything* in its place. No, this is a massive old brick behemoth of a home, the kind with white trim around the windows and one of those—turret-looking rooms built onto one of the corners. When they’d turned onto the street, he’d asked Coulson if they were lost, ’cause son of Howard Stark or *not*, he’d figured Tony Stark for a “modern townhouse” kind of guy.

Instead, they’d wandered through a living room with a vaulted ceilings, greeted Peggy and Bucky—“Food duty,” Stark’d reported—in the kitchen, and emerged onto an enormous, dark-stained deck. A deck which, by the way, led down to a cobbled patio and an enormous in-ground pool.

And that’s without mentioning the massive spread of snacks, the leaning tower of birthday presents for Dot, and the two greyhounds lounging in the shade of perfectly-manicured trees.

“Dummy and Butterfingers,” Stark’d reported, and one of the dogs’d rolled over and glanced at them upside-down. “Dummy’s got a crotch thing. Lemme know if he does the crotch thing.”

But then Bruce’d finished a phone call, Stark’d thrown an arm around him and dragged him over to the massive bowl of sangria, and that’d been that.

Coulson’s still laughing, a little, and Clint—tries not to look at him for too long. He’s been staring, off and on, since Coulson showed up at his building, dressed in a black button-down that shows way too much skin (arms, wrists, throat, collarbone, please god let that be chest hair) and a pair of jeans that—

There are jeans in the world that fit like a second skin, and jeans in the world that are so well-worn and loved that you spend an hour wondering if they’ll be soft against your fingertips. And then, there are Phil Coulson’s jeans, which combine those two qualities while also hugging his ass and thighs in a way that should be illegal.

Clint takes a *long* pull from his beer and forces himself to stop looking. “Should’ve clarified what kinda rich you meant,” he says, simply.

Coulson grins, and it finds those crinkles around his eyes. Is there anything about this guy that *isn’t* distracting as hell? “The best part about bringing in somebody new is introducing them to Stark’s place,” he replies. “After his welcome party, Thor spent three weeks thinking this wasn’t really Tony’s house, and that we were just hazing him.” He pauses, beer halfway to his lips. “Well. We might’ve helped his theory along, a little.”

He glances out of the corner of his eye, just to *see* whether Clint laughs, and Clint—gives in. He rolls his eyes, a little, and takes another deep swig, but yeah, he’s laughing. He’d laughed in the car, too, at Coulson’s couple stories about Stark’s other parties, and at how Coulson’d mouthed the words to some pop song when they’d stopped talking. The little clump of nerves about the party, they’d almost gone away, and—

And then, Coulson’s phone rings. He frowns, sets his beer on the corner of the snack table, and pulls it out of his pocket. “Fury,” he says, and he can’t even fake a smile at Clint’s little grimace.

“I’ll guard your beer,” Clint promises, but then he’s off, taking the call.

Clint hangs around the snack table for a couple minutes, just—watching everybody else. Most the office’s already there—Thor and Jane’re running late, according to Darcy, and the way she wiggled her eyebrows filled in several blanks Clint would’ve happily left empty—but it’s pretty . . . subdued. Steve and Hill are both sitting on the edge of the pool, legs dangling in, chatting while
Steve’s kid bobs around in one of those bathing suits that are also kiddie life-jackets. She’s cute, with these ridiculous blonde braids down either side of her head and her dad’s grin, and keeps interrupting Steve’s conversation with something. Steve’s wearing star-spangled swim trunks and a white t-shirt that leaves pretty much nothing to the imagination. Clint lets himself imagine for a couple seconds, anyway, and then feels kinda creepy, given that the guy’s husband is one screen door away.

Creeper, though, is the fact that Hill’s wearing cut-offs and a tank top that shows off a strip of tanned midriff. It’s like when you’re six and run into your teacher at the grocery store, you know? She’s Hill, she lives in suits and heels, not—tank tops and damp curls.

Pepper’s wandering around in cut-offs and a t-shirt, but she at least looks like she belongs in that. The same way Darcy belongs in the slouchy jeans, strappy tank, and ridiculous oversized hat she’s wearing. Clint—he keeps trying to figure out that hat, whether it’s knit or cotton or meant to flop around like it keeps—

“I’m not sure what team you bat for, but I’m pretty sure it’s not even the same sport as Darcy.”

There’s something—elastic about Natasha’s voice, the way it stretches slowly from one syllable to another. Clint smiles at her around the mouth of his beer. “What sport do you play?”

Natasha raises both eyebrows in this perfect fluid movement, and raises her glass. She’s drinking sangria, but not the ridiculous strawberry kind that Stark claims he spent three days perfecting. No, she’s drinking the peach flavor from the little pitcher, the one with the PEPPER’S ONLY BECAUSE OF HER PSYCHOSOMATIC STRAWBERRY THING label on it.

She’s also wearing a tiny bathing suit with a pretty flimsy, flowy, white cover-up. There’s no way not to look. Clint thinks maybe she doesn’t care who’s looking as long as she’s happy with it.

“I’m pretty sure that, same sport or not, we’re not in the same league,” she answers.

“I’m surprisingly athletic.”

“You’d be surprised how many people think that about themselves until they meet me.”

Clint barely manages to bite back his smile. He’s not sure why he likes Natasha—he’s had fewer conversations with her than with almost anyone else, save maybe Thor—but there’s something . . . addictive about her. “Then maybe we have to find time to—”

There’s a yelp, a crash, and then a torrent of laughter, and Clint twists just in time to watch Stark and Bruce roll around, a heap of limbs sprawling on the grass. “We’re fine!” Stark announces, laughing, while the dogs bark and start racing around the yard in manic circles. Bruce shoves Stark, but there’s this—brightness in his whole expression when he does. He’s a pretty serious guy, and Clint’s not sure he’s ever seen him smile like that before.

Stark scrabbles to catch Bruce’s hands, but Bruce is somehow faster. Clint watches as he pulls his shirt out of his waistband, shakes it a few times, and tosses the ice cubes that’ve been trapped between cotton and skin into the pool.

Steve laughs. “I told you it never works!” he calls out to Stark.

“Correction: it always works, just not on Bruce.” Bruce shoves Stark again, a little harder, and Stark has to catch himself on his elbow to keep from sprawling out over the grass. His t-shirt rides up, revealing a lot of stomach and waist, and Clint—
Maybe Clint’s losing his mind, between Coulson’s jeans and Natasha’s bathing suit, but he swears he catches Bruce looking at all that skin and the trail of dark hair that under Stark’s navel.

At least, he looks until Stark picks an ice cube out of his glass, shoves it down the front of Bruce’s shirt—he’s as bad as Coulson, with the open buttons, so it’s not that difficult—and then jumps up and runs away.

Steve laughs, Hill rolls her eyes and declares she needs more alcohol to deal with this, and Darcy whips out her phone to take a video. Clint grins. “Thor and Jane, I get,” he admits, glancing over at Natasha, “and even Steve and Bucky.”

“You mean Steve’s husband Bucky? The one you’re still avoiding?” Natasha raises her glass in a mocking toast.

Clint ignores her. “My point is,” he retorts, “I never really expected Stark and Banner.”

Natasha pauses, her glass against her lips, and for a half-second, she just—watches him. She’s a master at non-reactions, Clint thinks. She can hold the world’s straightest face.

Most the time, anyway. Not this time, because as soon as Clint thinks it, her eyes start dancing. The longer she looks at him, the more they twinkle. Her hand shakes just enough to rattle the ice cubes in her glass, and when her lips twitch?

When her lips twitch, Clint knows he’s in trouble.

Her laughter’s loud enough that it echoes through Stark’s backyard. One of the dogs stops sniffing at the platter of pigs-in-a-blanket and howls at her. Dot stops splashing, Bruce pauses where he’s tucking his shirt back into his pants, and Thor—who’s coming out onto the deck—freezes so suddenly that Jane runs into his back and nearly bowls both of them over.

“No,” Natasha says. She’s wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, and the words are hardly recognizable around her laughter. “No. That is just—no.”

She chuckles as she walks over to Pepper, and when she murmurs something into Pepper’s ear, Pepper bursts out laughing, too. Clint frowns at her back, and frowns again when, a couple minutes later, Tony drapes himself over Bruce’s shoulders while regaling them about the time he went skinny dipping in Lake Erie.

It’s another five or ten minutes before Coulson wanders back from his phone call. “The cops pulled in somebody who looked good for the Silva-Riberio case,” he says, tucking his phone back in his pocket. “Fury wanted at least one of us on notice.”

Clint’s pretty sure he could’ve stood just one day without mention of the murder. He picks up Coulson’s abandoned beer, holding it out to him. “But?” he asks.

“But P.D. beeped in while I was on the line with him, and it turns out the guy has a rock-solid alibi.” His fingers are warm against Clint’s palm when he takes the beer. “CSI’s ruined us. Everybody thinks a murder gets solved in all of ten minutes, instead of—”

Coulson’s last couple words are lost behind the sound of an enormous splash. The waves in the pool are high enough that Dot, who’s holding onto Steve’s legs, almost gets swept away, but she’s laughing. The laughter turns into squeals when, seconds later, Stark breaks the surface, spraying her with water.

“Mature,” Hill grumbles, and Stark shakes his head of wet hair hard enough that it sprinkles Hill,
“Six-point-five,” Bruce intervenes before Hill can start threatening damage to the really important parts of Stark’s anatomy. “Sloppy form, lots of back splash.”

Tony spits water at him, and seconds later, Dot does the same thing to Steve. He makes an offended noise and gives her a little shove, sending her spiraling into the wet blue yonder of the pool’s shallow end. Stark splashes Bruce again before shouting to her, “Wait up for Uncle Tony!”

Clint shakes his head a little, but when he glances at Coulson, Coulson’s smiling.

“Six months,” he says.

“What?”

“Stark and Banner.” In the black shirt, even his shrugs are distracting. “Guarantee you, it’ll take six months.”

“Less than that,” Clint replies, but he’s—not really thinking about Stark and Bruce. Not right now. Not when he can watch Coulson’s throat when he swallows and wonder, very quietly, how long it could take him.

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“Ten bucks says Tony throws the first punch,” Bucky Barnes remarks, and Clint nearly chokes on a Dorito.

He’s watching Stark and Steve argue, mostly because everybody else is watching Stark and Steve argue. Well, okay, not really everybody. Natasha is, but then, Natasha’s sitting on the pool steps in her distractingly tiny swimsuit, nursing what Clint’s pretty sure is her fifth or sixth glass of sangria. She’d been in the middle of chatting with Pepper—who’s only damp to her knees, and who’s mostly-sharing Natasha’s drink—but it’s pretty clear the fight’s more exciting than whatever they were talking about. Darcy, Jane, Thor, and Bruce are watching a little, too, in between rounds of the saddest game of bocce ball Clint’s ever seen. Peggy, Hill, and Coulson are too busy talking about politics to notice a little arguing—mostly because they’re arguing, themselves.

Clint’d been in a conversation, too, talking about baseball with Steve (not that he liked baseball all that much, but the other option was flawed tax reform, and he believed pretty firmly in choosing the lesser of two evils). But then, Stark’d walked up, handed Dot an iPad with a pink bow, and walked away while whistling the chorus to “Fat-Bottomed Girls.”

Dot’s still dancing around with the iPad, squealing over “pony shows” and “the bird game”, and Stark and Steve are arguing.

Loudly.

Clint glances over at Bucky. In court, he’d been this—clean-cut, baby-faced guy in a crisp suit, about as “defense lawyer” as you could get. Here, at home, he’s in jean shorts and a t-shirt from some charity 5K. He raises his eyebrows, wiggles them once, and takes a pull from his beer.
If they’d met like this—shorts, t-shirts, chips, beer—Clint’s pretty sure they would’ve gotten along just fine.

“I can’t imagine Steve punching anybody,” he admits, shrugging. “Isn’t he a ‘more flies with honey’ kinda guy?”

Bucky snorts and shakes his head. “Steve’s got a pretty specific skill set when it comes to pissing people off,” he responds. He leans against the snack table. “He won’t throw the first punch, he usually won’t even shove somebody. No, what he’ll do is, he’ll rile them up until they make the first move.” He smirks, but it’s—amused. Warm, Clint thinks, not shitty. “Back in high school, there was this guy. Total bully asshole. He’d mess with you just to show he could. Steve was still scrawny back then, but he wasn’t afraid of the guy. He’d walk up to him in the hallway and just—tell him off. Y’know, the usual ‘you can’t talk to people like that’, ‘pick on somebody your own size’ kind of stuff. Even though he was still maybe five-eight and about a buck forty soaking wet.”

Clint swallows his next chip so hard, it hurts. “You’re—kidding,” he stammers, and looks over at Steve. Steve Rogers, who’s gotta be at least six feet tall. Steve Rogers, who’s almost as broad as Thor, who’s made entirely of angles, abs, and hip-bones. Steve Rogers, who ditched his t-shirt for the pool and who is the perfect combination between pale and tan to star in a high-budget porno. Just—

No.

“You’re hazing me,” he decides.

“I swear to god,” Bucky replies. He raises a hand like he’s taking the Boy Scout oath. “Half the time, I’m not sure I believe it. I went away to boot camp, came home, and my skinny boyfriend looked like that.” He tips his beer in Steve’s direction and shakes his head. “Anyway,” he continues, “he kept finding some way to mouth off to this asshole football player every damn day. And every damn day, the asshole shoved him out of the way and kept on walking. And you, me, most people, we’d figure we’re not making an impression and give up. Tell a teacher or something. But not Steve. Steve kept on going for—months, probably.”

Across the yard, Stark starts laughing. Clint’s pretty sure there’s steam coming out of Steve’s ears. “And?” he asks.

“And one day, the asshole swung at him. Halfway through Steve’s lecture, he just hauled off and sucker-punched him.” Bucky shrugs. “I laid him out, of course, ‘cause there was no way Steve was gonna win that one. But since the asshole threw the first punch, he got suspended for, like, two weeks. Missed some important playoff game and everything.”

“You think he did it on purpose?”

“Are you kidding? He admitted it to me the second we were alone in the nurse’s office! ‘At least if he punched me, I could fight back,’ he said.” Bucky’s smile pushes at the corners of his lips and finds a ridiculous dimple. Clint can see how he could’ve charmed a teenaged Steve Rogers—and can kinda imagine the reverse, too, now that he thinks about it. Bucky shakes his head. “What he really meant was that I’d fight back for him, but he’d never admit to that one.”

Clint laughs, a little, and picks up his own glass. He’s not sure how he ended up with the world’s strongest strawberry sangria instead of beer, but he seems to remember Darcy wandering by with the pitcher two—or three—times. “It still like that?”

“Worse.” When Bucky grins, Clint laughs again. “Listen,” he says, after he drains the last of his
beer and drops the bottle in a garbage can, “I know I blind-sided you with that motion. I thought Thor was keeping you updated, he didn’t, and that was on me. Steve came home and spent a good half-hour running through the ‘It’s hard to work with these people when my husband’s an ass to them’ rant. Which, y’know, I’ll probably hear again the next time I piss Tasha off.”

Clint snorts and kinda shakes his head. “Yeah, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, you were probably right,” Bucky interrupts. “I just get sick of defendants getting bulldozed. I mean, even if they did it, they still deserve basic rights.” He shrugs a little. “Without the bottles, they would’ve let him keep driving.”

“He fell out of the car,” Clint notes, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, yeah. No, I’m not arguing with that. I’m just saying: without the bottles, there was no case, and my job’s to—”

Something rattles, then, and both Clint and Bucky turn just in time to see Stark regaining his balance after—Well, there’s no way around it. He’s been shoved. Just a little, just enough that he knocked into a patio chair, but it’s stopped the political debate and the game of bocce. One of the dogs comes running up and puts himself between Stark and Steve.

Stark puts his hands up. “But you gotta admit,” he says, his ass resting against the chair he’d almost knocked over, “she’s kinda in love with it.”

She is, apparently, Dot, who’s sitting cross-legged on the patio in her swimsuit and robe, watching what Clint can only assume is the pony show.

Steve sighs. “She’s four, Tony.”

“No better time to learn the technology of tomorrow,” Stark retorts, jabbing a finger into the air. “And, again, kinda in love with Uncle Tony’s special present of godfatherly love.”

They stare at each other for a couple seconds, separated mostly by Steve’s human decency . . . and the huge dog. Then, Steve throws up his hands and storms off toward the house.

Stark grins. “Pepper, fetch the sangria!”

Pepper rolls her eyes. “It’s Saturday,” she points out, and Natasha grins into her glass. “I’m off-duty on Saturday.”

“I don’t care. Sangria for everyone!”

When Clint glances over at Bucky, the dazzling dimple is back. “You owe me ten bucks,” he points out after Steve’s slammed the back door.

“I’ll win it back next time,” Bucky promises, and opens another beer.

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“You sure you don’t mind? ‘Cause I can get a rental if it screws with your schedule.”

“What schedule?” Coulson asks, and slides out of the car.
It’s pretty dark and—pretty late, actually, by the time they get back to Clint’s building. No, not they. They implies that they both belong there, but Clint’s the only one staying, the only one who lives in the old brown building in the quiet neighborhood. Coulson’s just dropping him off.

The problem is, Coulson’s sitting in the idling car, foot on the brake while he waits for Clint to climb out. As soon as they arrived, Coulson found a parking spot and killed the engine, and now, he’s standing on the sidewalk with Clint, still in those jeans and the button-down that shows too much skin. Clint scrubs his face with a palm. The last glass of sangria was a mistake, he decides. It was one glass too many, and now, he’s muddling through this warm-bellied, unbalanced kinda feeling, the kinda feeling that usually ends in some pretty bad choices.

“You okay?” Coulson asks. They’re literally toe-to-toe on the sidewalk.

“Yeah,” he replies, and squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them, Coulson’s still there. Clint spends a few seconds studying the hollow of his throat. “You come in earlier than me,” he points out, once he’s forced himself to start walking.

“I can come in later.”

“You don’t live on this side of town.”

“I get good gas mileage.”

“Yeah, but I mean—”

“Clint.” There’s something hard edging Coulson’s voice. They’re on the steps, all of ten feet from the freedom of “goodnight” and Clint’s front door, but Clint turns around anyway. Once he does, though, all he can see is Coulson. He’s half-illuminated from the security light over the door, and there’re shadows that find all his fine lines. He looks softer, in that light. He reminds Clint of a charcoal drawing, not a man.

He needs to go inside, he thinks. He needs to put on a pot of coffee, watch some bad after-midnight TV, and sober up. Because right now, in the dim security light and the haze of Stark’s sangria, he’s thinking about grabbing Coulson by the shirt collar and kissing him ‘till neither of them can breathe.

Coulson’s his boss, and he’s the new guy.

Coulson’s a fucking brilliant lawyer, the chief assistant district attorney, Fury’s go-to guy, and Clint’s—

“Clint,” Coulson says, again. It’s a murmur, something caught in his throat. “It’s not a problem.”

“Yeah,” Clint forces out, but it’s—breathless. All the coffee in the world won’t fix the way his head’s swimming. He presses his palm to the metal handrail, clutches onto it like he’s trying to keep from drowning.

But Coulson’s hand is on the rail, too, and Clint doesn’t realize how close they are until their hands brush.

Bump, he corrects, because it starts out a bump. Accidental contact, but then it builds into a brush, deliberate and gentle, and all while Coulson’s eyes are trained perfectly on Clint’s face.

The sides of their hands press together, and Clint feels goose flesh rise along his arm.
“I—want to,” Coulson says, but not in his usual tone. It’s deeper, and Clint wonders exactly what he wants.

Coulson’s his boss, he reminds himself again. He’s three weeks into the job, they hardly know one another, and—

And he can smell Coulson’s cologne, a bite of spice, in the night air.

He jerks back, trying to step onto the concrete porch, but he misjudges the distance. His bare heel catches against the rough stone, scraping off a layer of skin, and he hisses in pain. He somehow manages to keep his sandal and catch himself from falling.

He’s leaning on the rail and half-panting, but at least it’s another foot of air between them. Breathing room, he labels it. Thinking room.

But instead of breathing or thinking, he immediately looks back down at Coulson.

Lawyers learn, early on, how to be neutral. They learn how to keep their expressions steady, even when they want to scream. Coulson’s one of the best lawyers in the office, one of the best lawyers Clint knows—but right now, his face isn’t neutral. There’s something—caught, right then, captured by the light.

“I need to— Coffee,” he stammers. It’s not even a sentence.

Coulson nods. “I’ll pick you up,” he says. It’s quieter than Clint expected, but it’s not—cold. It’s still kind, still familiar.

Cold would’ve been easier, right now.

“Yes, thanks.” Neither of them moves, and Clint suddenly realizes that he doesn’t wanna run off. He doesn’t wanna lock himself in his apartment like a coward, leave Coulson standing on the steps with that—soft, searching look on his face. He swallows and adds, “I’ll see you Monday.

Coulson nods, and Clint watches his arm work when he grips his keys. “Goodnight, Clint.”

“Night, boss.”

He says it normally, says it the same way as he does any day of the week, and even manages a little smile—but it doesn’t matter. ’Cause as soon as the words tumble out of his mouth, something in Coulson’s face twists. It’s subtle, almost too small to notice, but Clint spends a lot of time looking at that face.

And now, he knows how those lines wear disappointed.

He stays there, on the concrete porch, until he hears Coulson’s car pull out of the lot and onto the street. Then he stays longer, long enough that the security light thinks he’s gone and switches off. He can see stars, in the dark, and he starts up at them while he listens to the rustle of the wind in the trees.

When he finally goes inside, he sends Barney a text message that reads stop sending me messages, you know the answer. Then, he turns off his phone and shoves it into the bedside drawer with the expired condoms and forgotten magazines. He slams the drawer hard enough that the whole nightstand rattles, and he listens to it settle in the darkness of his bedroom.

He thinks that’ll help, that the silence will fix something. It doesn’t.
He lies awake, staring at the ceiling, and spends too much time thinking about the stairs, the near-dark, and Coulson.

Natasha picks him up Monday morning, instead.
To See, To Say

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint discovers that sulking is simultaneously productive and lonely, and decides that one of those conditions is unacceptable.

Chapter Notes

In jury selection, a "challenge for cause" is a tool an attorney uses to dismiss a juror for a sound legal reason (i.e., that juror is too biased to decide the case impartially). In most jurisdictions, the challenging attorney must present his reasoning to the court and allow opposing counsel to respond. Attorneys generally have an unlimited number of challenges for cause. A "peremptory challenge", on the other hand, is one in which the attorney does not have to explain his reasoning. These challenges are usually limited in number and, as long as the attorney isn't doing something improper with them (i.e. using them to eliminate all the women on the panel), the court and opposing counsel do not interfere.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You’re sulking,” Stark says on Tuesday.

Clint counts himself lucky that he’s made it more than twenty-four hours without Stark bothering him. He’d avoided the enthusiastic Monday morning greetings—complete with a brief rendition of one of the songs from Dorothea’s “little pony” show—by closing himself in his office. He replies to a motion, sketches out some questions for trooper interviews, and reviews some contested tickets . . . and doesn’t speak to another human being. He tries to avoid going out to the file room or down to the clerk’s office, just ‘cause he wants to avoid people.

No. Not people.

Coulson.

Natasha comes in at lunch, closes the door behind her, and drops the pad thai he’d ordered in the middle of his desk. He’s sitting on the window ledge, instead of in his chair, and barely glances at her. “Thanks,” he says.

“No.” Her hands are on her hips when he looks up. She frowns at him. “You’re hiding.”

“I’m working,” he replies.

“Doing what, exactly? Reviewing tickets? Writing motions you can’t file because you won’t even
He forgets how to spell *alphabet* halfway through the word. He scratches through it and writes *ABC test* instead. “I have a preliminary hearing tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not hiding,” she counters.

“We don’t really know each other well enough for you to start questioning my emotional maturity, Natasha.”

“I’m not questioning your emotional maturity. I’m questioning the fact that, this morning, you slunk past Coulson’s office like a dog who peed on the carpet.”

Clint puts his pencil down *hard* on his legal pad and stares her down. She’s in a black suit, her black blazer buttoned under her breasts, but the top she’s wearing underneath is blood red. She reminds him of one of those butterflies that look subdued until they open their wings. Her eyes, though, don’t waver. They hardly blink.

He sighs and tips his head back against the wall. “I’m not hiding,” he repeats, but he doesn’t sound particularly convincing. “I’m refocusing.”

“And lying. Not just to me,” she adds when he starts to respond, “but to yourself.”

She storms out, leaving him with his pad thai and none of his change, and Steve drives him to pick up his car after work.

Then, Tuesday, he’s not hiding anymore, he’s—

“Sulking?” he repeats, picking up the appellate brief Stark’s tossed on his desk.

“Right. Sulking. Like you were having fun-fun-fun and then Daddy took your T-bird away.” Clint snorts and watches Stark drop into one of the plastic chairs across from his desk. Drop, frown, wriggle, and— “These are horrible. Where did you get these? Auschwitz Depot?”

“Usual new guy treatment,” Clint replies. He flips through the first few pages of the brief, skimming the authorities and— “Is he seriously arguing that he needed his *Miranda* rights read for a speeding ticket?”

“Failure to signal, too. To be fair, there were three training officers on the scene, so it was— Okay, seriously. These chairs are a crime against asses everywhere.” Clint rolls his eyes, but then Stark’s standing, wandering across the office. “I figured you’re the traffic guy, you could whip something out while I’m upstate, arguing brilliantly in front of the Appellate Division.”

“I can probably have something by Monday.”

“Monday’s good. Hell, Tuesday’s good, I’ve got another two weeks on this thing. I just want it off my desk and decided, the sooner the better.” Clint glances over his shoulder in time to watch Stark drop onto the window ledge. He kicks his feet up and crosses them at the ankle. “So.”

“So?”

“Why’re you sulking? Daddy actually take your T-bird away?”

Clint reaches for his highlighter instead of meeting his eyes. “I’m not sulking.”

“You are. And it kinda works,” Stark notes, “gives you that dark-and-broody look, but sulking’s
bad. Sulking’s not productive.”

“Good thing I’m not sulking, then,” he says without looking up from the brief.

“Guess so,” Stark replies, and he sits there a long time before he actually leaves.

Sulking, hiding, whatever you call it, Clint— He functions, you know? He works on the brief between hearings, scribbling out notes in the margins and ducking into Bruce’s office to borrow his well-worn but constantly-updated case reporters. He burrows himself in his work and just . . . doesn’t come out. And even though everything goes well, all week long—the preliminary hearing sets the case over for trial, he pleads out a couple more of Sif’s formerly-wayward youth, he argues against a motion to suppress and wins the damn thing—it kinda starts to feel weird when, on Wednesday, he still hasn’t spoken to Coulson.

It’s not Coulson’s fault, he reminds himself, that Stark’s sangria was more liquor than flavor and that he’d stood on that step and wanted to kiss the breath outta his boss. It’s not Coulson’s fault that competence and decency are—pretty sexy. It’s not his fault that he wore those jeans like they’d been tailored just for his ass and thighs, that his collarbone is perfect, and that Clint still spends half the night awake and wondering about his chest hair.

He likes the other people he works with, but they’re not Coulson.

He spends all of Wednesday afternoon in Bruce’s office, sharing the window ledge with Bruce’s potted plants and reading through case law.

“It gets better,” Bruce says as he’s packing up, and Clint glances over at him. He takes off his glasses and tucks them in his pocket. “It—alternates,” he explains, “between being really inclusive, and really isolating. But it gets better. You just have to find your rhythm.”

“It’s not a problem with rhythm,” Clint admits after a few seconds. He sets the pencil in the crease of the book and stretches his arms over his head. He wants Bruce to think he’s winding down, even though he plans on staying in the office until everybody else’s gone for the night.

“No?”

“Nah.”

“Oh.” Bruce packs an over-stuffed brown case file in his bag and then looks up again. “Then you’ll balance out whatever’s not right,” he decides.

Clint smiles, but it’s brief and—pretty tight. “Who says something’s not right?”

“You’re spending four hours a day in my office, using my books so you don’t have to print to the shared printer or talk to anybody else.” There’s something knowing in his eyes when he looks over at Clint. “I . . . think that’s the definition of ‘not right.’”

That night at home, after another stop texting message to Barney and a beer, Clint goes out onto his balcony with his laptop and browses Westlaw for another couple hours. When his eyes start to cross from reading twenty-some cases that all say the same thing, he closes the lid and just—sits.

The only thing worse than being the new guy who kisses his boss, he decides, is being the new guy who runs away from his boss because he wants to kiss him. That, he thinks, and being the new guy who’s convinced himself that his boss wants to kiss him back when, really, he’s got no proof of that.
Thursday, he drinks coffee in the break room, prints the rough draft of Stark’s brief to the shared printer, and brings Darcy a Kit-Kat bar.

“Is it poisoned?” she asks. Clint assures her it’s not, but she makes Peggy take the first bite just in case.

He’s wandering out of his office around noon like a mature adult, thinking he might even ask Coulson and a couple other people to go to lunch, when Thor comes down the hall. “Have you seen Hill?” he asks.

“No. Why?”

Thor heaves a sigh. “One of the defendants in the juvenile case I am prosecuting is the brother of a young man I represented when I worked for the public defender’s office,” he says, and—Clint’s never met someone who’s less of a public defender than Thor. “We have a hearing tomorrow and I must remove myself because of this conflict.”

“Doesn’t Coulson usually handle conflicts?”

Laughing, he claps Clint on the back. “He cannot very well handle this conflict while he’s away at the conference in Chicago, can he?” He squeezes Clint’s shoulder hard enough that it hurts, and Clint wrenches himself away. “I am sure he will be the one handling it once he returns tomorrow,” Thor continues, “but in the meantime, I must have Hill either take the case or assign it to someone else. Perhaps Natasha.”

Thor keeps talking—about conflicts, about Natasha prosecuting juveniles (“But then, she is very unforgiving.”), about his case—but Clint stops listening.

He walks down the street, buys a sandwich and a smoothie, and eats his lunch alone in the park behind the judicial complex.

Friday afternoon, he drops the brief on Stark’s desk while Stark’s working his way through a dish of—

“Is that cantaloupe?”

Stark licks juice off his fingers. “And honeydew. And maybe some pineapple in the bottom, I’m not there yet.” He wipes his hand on his pants and pushes the dish across the desk. Clint squints into it. Sure enough, it’s a casserole dish filled with balls of melon. He helps himself to a chunk of honeydew while Stark flips through the brief.

Somewhere after his summary of the case, Stark decides, “You know what? Sulking’s good. I like sulking. Sulking gets results.”

Just for that, Clint digs through all the fruit to find the biggest chunk of pineapple in the bunch. “Your undefeated-except-for-once record’ll stay intact,” he says. “I’ve got a sentencing in twenty minutes, so if you don’t need anything else—”

“You don’t want to talk about the sulking?” Stark asks, looking up.

Clint pauses mid-chew. “I’m not sulking,” he replies. There’s pineapple juice running onto his palm. “I just had a light week, and—”

“Yeah, see, no.” Stark leans back in his chair and rocks himself. “I staffed this with Pepper in the car upstate.”
“Staffed?”

“The way she sees it—and she would know, she’s, like, ultra-competent and ultra-good-with-people and ultra-balanced in everything she does, including who she does—you’re sulking about one of three things. Possibility one: you hate your job.”

Clint makes a point of checking the clock. It’s a massive modern-art thing where no two numbers are the same style or size. “Did you miss the part about the sentencing?”

“But that seems unlikely, because you’re pretty much batting a hundred. Possibility two: you’ve got some deep, dark personal issues that nobody here knows about and you’re trying to keep them at bay. Very,” he notes, twirling a finger, “Jekyll and Hyde.”

“That must be it,” Clint deadpans, and starts picking through the dish again.

“Or,” Stark presses, “possibility number three: you suffer from the very common disease known as lovesick-puppydog-itis.” Clint rolls his eyes and pops another chunk of pineapple into his mouth. “I don’t know over who,” Stark admits, “and I don’t know whether they’re here or elsewhere, married or dead, hot or not, but I suspect you’ve got it bad. Like, Barry White, break out the good lube bad.”

Clint walks out without dignifying Stark’s—insanity with an answer. He tells Darcy to hold his calls while he’s in court, he takes the stairs down for the breathing room, and he’s forgotten Stark’s pineapple and comment about lube by the time he sits down at counsel table. It’s an open sentencing from a DUI jury trial Natasha’d handled before Clint got the job, and Bucky’s opposing counsel. There’s something kinda fun about it, arguing house arrest and commuted sentences, and the judge splits it right down the middle: ten days in jail, twenty days house arrest, one year suspended license with work release.

After, Bucky stops Clint in the hallway. “You’ve got to see this,” he stresses, and pulls out his iPhone. They spend the next ten minutes laughing at Steve and Dot playing My Little Pony on the living room floor.

“And he knows all the words!” Bucky announces halfway through Steve’s off-key rendition of the theme song.

It’s as cute as it is funny, and it puts Clint in a good mood for the first time in days.

He’s up- and downstairs for the rest of the afternoon, helping Natasha wrangle witnesses for a couple restraining order cases she’s working on and meeting with Wilson for a plea negotiation. He runs through two closed sentencings and covers a bond revocation for Steve. It’s busy, but right about now, he likes busy.

He doesn’t even think about Coulson.

At least, not until he walks into his office at four-thirty and finds an enormous pillow on his window ledge.

It’s obviously a throw pillow, the kind you’d see on a California king bed in Better Homes and Gardens, but it’s overstuffed and looks . . . soft. The fabric reminds him of a checkerboard, black and a kind of bluish-purple color, until Clint gets close. Then, he sees that the fabric’s actually a solid black, and that the “checks” are individual squares that aren’t attached, a sort of geometric shag.

The material’s soft against his fingertips. He picks it up and squeezes it between his hands. It’s
warm from the sun.

“Volstagg called,” Darcy says behind him, coming into the office without knocking. Clint doesn’t turn around to look at her; he’s running his palm over the pillow. “He wants to move your two o’clock on Monday ‘till three. And that flaky trooper’s still not returning my calls, I think I’m gonna have Sitwell deliver the subpoena instead of—” She stops. “Are you just now seeing that?”

He twists to glance over his shoulder at her. “What?”

“God, you’re slow sometimes. Has anybody ever told you that?” She drops the message slips onto Clint’s desk—not in the tray labeled inbox, just in the middle of his desk—and crosses her arms. “He dropped that off an hour ago.”

“He?”

“Coulson. Who else?” She rolls her eyes. “You’ve gotta be the worst boyfriend ever.”

“We’re not—” Clint starts, but Darcy turns on her heel and walks out, just like that.

Which is fine for Clint, because he—stands there for a while, holding onto the pillow.

When he checks his e-mail before he leaves for the day, there’s a one-line message waiting for him.

*The “industrial barrack” look went out last season. This’ll help. – Phil*

==

“My way? I am not judging.” Wade Wilson balances one beer stein on top of the other, and Clint grimaces. “If anybody gets it, I get it. I mean, I wanna have Natasha Romanoff’s redheaded babies. Who am I to tell you that it’s weird you wanna have this guy’s redheaded babies?”

Clint rolls his eyes and takes the basket of mozzarella sticks away from Wilson before he breaks something. He’s already carrying the beers, the wings, and the “Chinese wonton towers,” whatever the hell those are. “That’s not what I said,” he points out.

“But I’m right. Right?”

Clint watches him rest his chin on the top beer stein. “That one’s yours,” he announces.

“Right,” Wilson says, and Clint suspects he’s not talking about the beer.

The bar—There’s no dressing it up, the bar’s a dive. The bar’s a nightmare of a dive, clouded with cigarette smoke, bodies in denim, leather, or some combination of the two, people missing teeth, and pool tables. Wilson greets half the other patrons by name before claiming a table in the back. It’s a high-top, and Clint’s stool is uneven. Luckily, the food smells good enough that he doesn’t care.

He’s not entirely sure why he—still in his shirt and slacks, even if his tie’s in the car and his sleeves’re rolled up—agreed to grab a beer with Wade Wilson. They’d run into one another in the parking lot, though, and Clint . . .
"Well, he’s here, isn’t he?"

"Listen,” Wilson says, and Clint’s pretty sure that what he’s doing to that boneless hot wing is illegal in some jurisdictions. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. "You like this work guy who you’re not naming because you think I’m gonna Facebook it to Darcy, right?"

Clint rolls his eyes. “I’m regretting telling you it was a personal problem,” he points out, reaching for a mozzarella stick.

“You’re the badass new guy. It wasn’t a job problem. Anyway, here’s the way I see it.” He downs a couple mouthfuls of beer, sighs in contentment, and sets down his glass. “Yolo.”

“Yolo?”

“Yolo. You only live once.” He leans his elbows on the table. “And you can live by being afraid of things, or you can live by doing things. I mean, unless it’s Thor and his scary tree-trunk arms, what’s the worst that can happen?”

Clint frowns. “If it was Thor?” he asks.

“Then I’d be afraid of getting squished. You’ve seen his arms, right? They’re like this.” Wilson holds his hands a good eighteen inches apart, and Clint laughs. “No way. At least Natasha Romanoff can only strangle me with her thighs.”

Grimacing, Clint reaches for his beer. “Too much.”

“Yeah?”

“Way too much.” He manages a couple swallows before he has to put the things down and just breathe. “It’s . . . complicated,” he says, shrugging. “There’s stuff in my life that I’m not sure I need anybody to know, let alone the people I work with.”

“How bad’s the stuff?” Wilson asks, eyebrows raised.

“Bad enough.”

“C’mon, you have to do better than that. Drugs? Alcohol? Killed a man in Reno just to watch him die?” Clint rolls his eyes and grabs another mozzarella stick. “Listen,” Wilson stresses, “I know what it’s like. I’ve only got one ball.”

Clint chokes. “What?!”

“I got ball cancer when I was twenty.” Wilson snags a wonton tower—more like a glorified egg roll, really—from the basket. He crunches into it, wipes his mouth on his hand, and leaves a smear of buffalo sauce on his cheek. “Went in for my lacrosse physical, and bam! Six months later, I had a mono-ball. But that doesn’t keep me from wanting to give Natasha Romanoff redheaded babies.”

“I think you’re kinda missing the point.” Clint’s beer glass is a third empty, already, and he only remembers about a sip and a half. He sets it down and forces his fingers to unclench from the handle. “The point is—”

“That you’ve got some personal thing that’s scary and screwing with your brain, right?” Wilson wags his half-eaten wonton tower at Clint. “It’s all—rattling around in there, making you second-guess the stuff you do. Did I file that motion? Did I ask for the right bond?”
“Steve does bond, I don’t—”

“Oh god I just imagined Judge English in a bikini again and now I can’t think straight.” He pops the rest of the wonton in his mouth. “I’ve been there. And then, you know what I thought one day?”

Clint sighs and picks up his beer again. “No.”

“I thought, ‘Wade Winston Danger Wilson—’”

“There’s no way that’s your actual middle name.”

“—you can forever be a guy who only has the one ball, or you can live the bold life of a man who still has two!”

One of the pool players, a stringy-haired guy with more tattoos than teeth, stops in the middle of lining up his shot. He glances over at their table, and Clint decides that all this? This was a bad idea. He could’ve had a beer on his couch, instead of . . . this.

“Preach it, man,” the pool player says, raising a fist.

Wilson pops a whole boneless wing in his mouth and grins around it. “You know, brother!”

Clint sighs. “Wilson.”

“Yeah?”

“How the hell are your—adventures in ballessness supposed to help me, again?”

“It’s like I said. Yolo.” Wilson wipes his face on a napkin and leans, hard, on his elbows. The table’s almost as unbalanced as Clint’s stool. The steins shift, the baskets slide, and Clint catches the cup of marinara before it falls off the edge. “You’re not telling me much on purpose,” he says after a couple seconds. “That means it’s probably, like, Stark or Coulson or Fury.”

“Fury?” he asks, snorting.

“Are you kidding? Guy can dress like he’s going to my funeral any day of the week.” Wilson snaps his fingers, and Clint’s gotta admit, he kinda laughs at that. “But if it’s somebody who matters, then it’s somebody that’s risky. It’s somebody who it’s easier to run screaming from than it is to, you know, do anything else about. And like I said. I get that.”

He presses his palms together, then each of his fingers in succession. When Clint frowns, Wilson pops him in the nose with his index fingers. “But you shouldn’t close off just because it’s risky. Risky sucks, but so does radio silence. And,” he adds, “even if you don’t sleep with him, you can be his friend.”

There’s something honest on Wilson’s face, the longer they look at each other, and it takes Clint a minute before he thinks maybe the “mono-ball” thing isn’t common knowledge. Maybe this is Wilson’s way of—opening up. Even if Clint’s still not sure he needed to imagine . . . all that.

“Besides,” Wilson says. He straightens up, grabs his beer, and grins. “If you’re really desperate, you can always sleep with me!”

Clint chokes on the thanks he’d been working up to, but not in shock. No, he chokes because—

“You don’t have to laugh that hard!” Wilson pouts, and Clint buys the next round to make up for
“I need you,” Coulson says, and Clint spills coffee on his hand.

It’s barely 8:30 a.m. on Monday morning, and almost nobody’s in. Clint’d logged into his e-mail and glanced at the office calendar: Fury’s in another meeting with law enforcement (probably over the Silva-Riberio case, since some dumbass local advocacy group just offered a ten thousand dollar reward for information), Natasha is away at a conference, Stark’s back in oral arguments upstate, and Thor’s in trial. He’s supposed to be prepping for his own trial—the jury trial against Bucky’s bottle-transporting defendant’s a week away—but not without coffee.

Coffee that’s all over the counter, and dripping onto the floor, and—

“You know, if we keep meeting like this, people’ll talk,” Coulson remarks. He’s crouching down to sop up the coffee, and Clint— Clint spends a little too long looking at the outline of his thighs in his slacks. “Unless this is some primitive mating call I’ve never heard of before.”

He glances up, and Clint swallows. “Just a Monday,” he promises. He ignores the way their fingers brush when Coulson hands over the towel.

“He’s supposed to be prepping for his own trial—the jury trial against Bucky’s bottle-transporting defendant—a week away—but not without coffee.

“Listen, about last week—”

“Stark’s world is a nice place to visit as long as you come back to the rest of us.” Coulson drums his knuckles on the counter once, nods to himself, and— “I do need you.”

The steel in Coulson’s expression, the chill, releases then, Clint can finally exhale. “Last time somebody said that, I ended up harvesting Darcy’s Farmville crops while she was at lunch,” he jokes. “She’s into asparagus and pig-milking.”

“Pig—milking?”

“Yeah, I don’t know why it’s not bacon. Or maybe footballs.”

“Well, luckily, I picked all my digital peaches before I came into work this morning.” He leans a hip against the counter. “Your law school transcript said you did an intensive voir dire class in the summer intercession before you graduated.”

Coulson stands slowly, but he doesn’t look away. It reminds Clint of being twelve and playing chicken on the bike trail behind the junior high. You raced up to speed and then saw who’d flinch away into the grass first. Coulson’s whole face is steady, almost steely, and Clint forgets how to breathe. He thinks of the way Coulson looked in the half-light outside his apartment, how soft he’d suddenly seemed. They’re standing even closer now, in the break room, but it’s—different.

He’s not sure he likes different.

He wets his lips before he answers, “Yeah. I helped Stark out with a crazy appeal. Kept me pretty swamped.”

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“Well, luckily, I picked all my digital peaches before I came into work this morning.” He leans a hip against the counter. “Your law school transcript said you did an intensive voir dire class in the summer intercession before you graduated.”
“You got top paper and a glowing recommendation from your professor. I wasn’t going to forget your application packet.” He feels Coulson watching him as he fills his coffee cup and sets the pot back on the burner. “The jury pool for my trial’s downstairs, being admonished as we speak.” And, like he’s proving a point, Coulson checks his watch. “It’s attempted armed robbery and weapons possession. Genius modified his handgun into an automatic. He’s lucky the 7-11 clerk had a black belt in karate and some anger management issues.”

It feels like the first sip of coffee buzzes straight to Clint’s brain. He swallows. “Should’ve just let the clerk have him for an afternoon instead of dragging him all the way down here.”

“We can try that as a new diversion program later. Right now, I need a second chair for jury selection, and you’re the expert.”

Clint doesn’t taste the second sip. “Me?”

“Hill usually sits in with me,” Coulson explains, “but she has three back-to-back evidentiary hearings this morning and Judge Nguyen has about a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to stalling jurors. And I’d do it alone,” he continues, his gaze drifting over Clint’s face, “but it’s a pretty serious charge. I like having a second set of eyes to gauge reactions.”

“I’m not sure you know my eyes well enough to trust them,” Clint says. His voice is—quieter, kinda, than he means it to be.

Coulson’s lips tip into a tiny smile. “You’re not the one who has to be sure.” He taps his knuckles against the counter, again, and then pushes away. “Courtroom Four in ten minutes?” he asks.

Clint nods, dumbly, and watches Coulson’s smile grow into something real and—warm, before he walks away. He tries to just stand there, neutrally sipping his coffee, but nothing about it feels neutral. No, it feels tense, like there’s a string pulled taut between himself and Coulson. Like he’s waiting on something to snap.

The problem is that Wilson—Wade fucking Wilson, which is also not his middle name—is right. He’s right, and Clint knows it:

The only thing worse than risk is the feeling when he doesn’t see Coulson for a week. He’d rather spend every day reminding himself that he’s the new guy and Coulson’s his boss than not see Coulson at all.

He leaves his coffee cup on the counter.

“Hold my calls,” he tells Darcy when he walks out of his office five minutes later, suit jacket on and legal pad under his arm.

Darcy frowns. “You don’t have court today,” she points out.

“No, but I’m covering a voir dire with Coulson.”

==
“Some of these questions are going to feel invasive,” Coulson says, leaning an elbow on the podium. He’s standing sideways to it, his empty notepad forgotten. The potential jurors are crowded into the jury box and then lined up in front of it, and Clint watches those careful eyes scanning all the unfamiliar faces. “One or two might, to you, feel downright rude. This isn’t because we’re trying to offend you,” he stresses, raising a hand, “or because we want to know every little secret in your life. This is because the defendant, Roland Clark, is entitled to a jury of twelve impartial peers, and it’s the job of myself, my co-counsel Mr. Barton, and Mr. Heimdall to make sure Mr. Clark gets that impartial jury.”

_Bullshit_, Clint thinks, but then, he’s thought that every time he’s ever seen a jury selection. The questions aren’t about finding an impartial jury—at least, not for the state. No, the questions are about tossing out the people who’ve already made a decision based on Coulson saying good morning, who’re gonna struggle to stay awake the whole time, and who’re too damn eager to be there.

Like the girl in the front row. She’s maybe nineteen, her badge number’s 31, and she’s grinning like she just won the lottery.

Clint crosses her off his little cheat-sheet, and then goes back to scanning the crowd of them.

The defendant’s this skinny little guy in a cheap white button-down and a pair of jeans, and he looks like somebody’s naughty ten-year-old sitting next to his attorney. Heimdall’s a tall, broad guy made broader by the pinstripes he’s wearing, and Clint swears he’s registering every _flinch_ in the jury pool. Number 17 coughs and Heimdall’s attention is _there_. Number 6 shifts, and bang—Heimdall’s swung his attention two rows back.

He’s good, Clint catches himself thinking.

The problem is, Clint’s better.

His professor, the one who taught the jury selection class he stumbled into top paper on, had this saying: _Your instincts are all you have_. Sure, what a potential juror says is great, but it’s all in the _way_ it’s said. How he sits, the tone of her voice, whether he shifts around or not, whether she’s given too much information. Even if the answer’s perfect, you have to trust that voice in your gut, the one that tells you something beyond the words are wrong.

Like Number 22, who’s checked his watch five times in the last two minutes. Clint crosses him off, too.

Coulson meanders through the rote opening. All jury selections start the same: here’s a little about the case, let’s find out if you know anybody in the courtroom. Heimdall’s former neighbor is dismissed—“I could probably be impartial, but I don’t wanna risk it,” she says—and so is a former sheriff’s deputy that arrested the defendant’s brother. Alternates fill in from the gallery. Heimdall writes down probably two-thirds of everything that’s said or done, but Clint . . . doesn’t.

He just watches.

He watches Coulson, too, when there’re lulls in the action. He keeps leaning against the podium, casual, like they’re having a conversation. There’s no tension anywhere on his body—not in the line of his back, the slope of his shoulders, the tilt of his hips—and Clint wonders if he’s like this at home. No suit, no co-workers, just . . . him.

Number 3’s cell phone chimes, and he has to be reminded to turn it off. Two minutes later, it chimes again.
Clint puts a line through his name.

“Now,” Coulson says after a good hour of the preliminary stuff, “we’re going to spend a little time
talking about this case. I’ve already said that it’s a robbery charge, and that Mr. Clark is accused of
attempting to rob a convenience store. What I haven’t talked to you about, yet, is the manner in
which he allegedly attempted the robbery.”

That grabs some people’s attentions. Eager Number 31 practically vibrates off her chair, and the
clump of middle-aged women with numbers in the mid-twenties (all of whom belong to the same
card club) exchange nervous little glances. One crosses herself none-too-subtly, and Clint draws a
little crucifix next to her name.

“The weapon recovered from the scene, and allegedly possessed by Mr. Clark, is a handgun. The
state intends to prove that this handgun was altered illegally.” Coulson’s voice is smooth and
practiced, like he’s done a thousand cases exactly like this one. “I’m not telling you this to color
your impressions,” he assures them, “but to explain the nature of the charge, which is called
‘criminal possession of a firearm.’ The ‘criminal’ element is the alteration to the weapon.”

In the back corner, Number 9 shifts. It’s the smallest movement, subtle enough that Clint nearly
misses it, but it’s there. He leans forward a few inches and rests his arms against his thighs. Not
eager, Clint thinks, but—curious. Listening.

Clint presses his lips together.

“This is not,” Coulson continues, “a trial about Mr. Clark’s right to possess a firearm, or about the
legality of firearms in general. This is a trial about whether Mr. Clark possessed this firearm, and
whether that firearm was criminally altered.”

Number 12 raises her hand, and Coulson nods to her.

“So, it’s not criminal if it wasn’t altered?”

Clint crosses her off, but lightly. He’s still watching Number 9. He’s got an unruly red goatee, but
he’s frowning under it.

“In this case, that’s precisely right.” Clint’s pretty sure that smile’s means Coulson’s crossing her
off his mental list. In the back, Number 9 taps his fingers together. “So,” he continues, “I have to
ask: does anyone here feel uncomfortable considering a firearms charge? Maybe you’ve had a bad
experience with a gun, something like that?”

A couple hands go up, and Coulson takes the answers—nothing mind-blowing, mostly just general
I only think cops should have guns bullshit that’ll keep Heimdall busy when it’s his turn. Clint,
though, is still watching Number 9. His expression’s neutral, but there’s something off about it,
like maybe he’s working to keep it that way. He slowly settles back in his chair, but not
comfortably. More the kinda settling you do in a waiting room when the doctor’s about to come
out with your test results.

His attention’s too trained on Coulson, Clint decides. He’s invested in a way he hadn’t been before.
Clint—doesn’t like it. It’s not obvious, but the guy’s decided something about the case.

Clint’s not sure what, is all.

It’s another solid half-hour before Coulson runs through the rest of his first-round questions and
thanks the jury. They’re antsy, Clint notices—and so does Judge Nguyen. “Let’s take a fifteen-
minute recess to stretch our legs,” she suggests. There’s some audible thank gods in the jury pool.
“I’ll see you all back here then. Please remember where you’re sitting, and that you aren’t
permitted to discuss anything you’ve heard about the case.”

She announces the recess officially, everybody stands, and two-thirds of the jurors rush out of the courtroom so quickly, Clint expects a *Lion King*-style stampede. *He snorts when he sees Number 31 pull out her cell phone—tweeting about her amazing adventure as a potential juror, maybe—and stretches.*

He’s considering a trip to the bathroom when there’s a hand on his arm.

“Any red flags?” Coulson asks. Even the innocuous question makes Clint forget to breathe for a second. He nods, but he doesn’t say anything at first. No, he twists at the waist instead, popping his back while he looks to see who all’s still around.

Heimdall’s murmuring to his client, their heads tilted together. Number 22, the watch-checker, is standing more or less in the corner, frantically muttering something into his cell phone. There’re other jurors still lurking around, too, but most of them are reading magazines or texting. Not one of them gives a damn about what he and Coulson might be talking about.

“One red flag,” he murmurs. Coulson leans in, reaching to tilt Clint’s cheat-sheet to an angle he can actually read—and then doesn’t move away. Clint can smell his cologne or aftershave, something warm and dark, and he swallows. “3 and 22 are pretty preoccupied, I think 12’s gonna struggle with big words—”

Coulson chuckles. “I think she’s already confused.”

“—and something’s up with Number 9.”

“Up?” Coulson repeats. His eyebrows raise, just enough to count as a quirk, and his head tips. “Up how?”

“I don’t know,” Clint admits, shrugging. “His body language doesn’t . . . gel, you know?” Coulson frowns, and he presses his lips together. Explaining some obscure legal concept is one thing, but translating a *feeling* you get from looking at a guy, that’s a whole other ballgame. “He started out pretty open, but when you started talking about the gun, something—switched on. Like he was interested, but didn’t want anybody to see it.”

“Interested in a way that’ll help us?”

“I don’t know.” Clint reaches down to point at a couple numbers on the sheet. They’ve all got basic information associated with them—name, age, occupation, spouses—but none of it matters as much as those numbers, and the little notes Clint’s been scribbling in the margins. “You’re not gonna grab him for cause,” he says after a couple seconds. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Coulson nod. “But honestly, I’d rather have a bored juror than this guy. Something’s just—not right.”

When he glances over, Coulson’s eyes are trained on him. They’re close enough that he can hear Coulson breathing, see the softness in the corners of his eyes. “You sure about this?” he asks, quietly.

Clint nods. “Positive.”

“Okay,” Coulson replies, and, when he sits down, he crosses Number 9 off his master list.

Heimdall spends a good hour questioning the pool. A bunch of jurors—including air-brained Number 12—get tossed for their answers. Three have family members that’ve been victims of gun
crime and admit, flat-out, that they can’t be impartial, one makes a pretty racist comment about why the defendant’s unemployed, and the others fall into perfectly-worded questioning traps that toss them just on the wrong side of biased.

Number 9, in the back, he—stays pretty neutral. Coulson’s watching him too, and Clint wonders, quietly, whether he notices any extra little shifts and tics. Heimdall spends a good twenty minutes on the gun thing, but Number 9 doesn’t really flinch.

Nice boost to Clint’s ego, there, the fact that the guy settles as soon as he warns Coulson about him.

By the end of Heimdall’s questions, Coulson’s got a list of about twenty of the pool he could live with. Eager Number 31’s not on there, but Number 3 and his unsilenced cell phone (which went off again during Heimdall’s question) is. So’s the woman who crossed herself, two twenty-somethings that’d both admitted they worry about how safe the city is, sometimes, and a couple people who’d had really honest, comfortable answers to the questions. Clint’s pretty pleased with the list—most of them are the ones left on his cheat-sheet, if he’s honest—but he’s still not sure about Number 9.

The guy’s leaning back in his chair, watching.

Judge Nguyen leans forward. “Mr. Coulson, your first peremptory challenge, if you would.”

And that’s when Clint starts holding his breath.

Peremptory challenges, they’re the hard ones. Clint remembers hating picking them out back in his voir dire class, ‘cause even though you don’t need a reason, you’ve gotta be strategic. You can’t just pick out the jurors with the five ugliest shirts, but five people who you think won’t vote your way.

From questions about their hobbies and whether they know anybody who’s been arrested.

Coulson strikes Number 31 straight off the bat, and Heimdall counters with one of the girls who’re worried about the safety of the city. Coulson’s next couple are just generic, but Heimdall strikes the woman who crossed herself and Number 3 with the cell phone.

The fourth round knocks off two other generic jurors that Clint barely noticed . . . and then, Coulson’s on his last challenge. Clint watches him as he glances at his own sheet, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. He puts two fingers to Clint’s cheat-sheet and slides it over.

“Mr. Coulson?” Judge Nguyen asks.

“One moment,” he answers, and then he glances over at Clint. Their eyes meet, but he doesn’t say anything. Clint knows what number his fingers are resting on.

Clint nods.

“Your honor,” he says, raising his head, “the state strikes juror Number 9.”

Judge Nguyen nods. “Number 9 is struck,” she confirms, crossing something out on her sheet. “The court thanks you for your time, Mr. Ellison.”

And Clint—

Maybe he shouldn’t, but he likes the little buzz of satisfaction that rushes into his belly when Coulson glances over at him and smiles.
Three days later, after Coulson’s jury’s come back with a conviction, Hill bursts into Steve’s office while they’re having lunch with Steve and Bruce. “We need you in Fury’s office,” she says, halfway breathless.

When Coulson starts to put his burrito down on the corner of Steve’s desk, she holds up a hand. “Not you,” she corrects, and turns to look at—

“Me?” Steve asks, nacho halfway to his mouth.

“We’re charging six guys with firearms trafficking.” A chunk of chicken falls off Steve’s nacho and lands in his lap. Bruce stops slurping his soda, and Coulson shifts hard enough in his chair that he slams his knee into Clint’s. He doesn’t apologize, and their knees stay pressed together. “The feds’ll probably want jurisdiction, but Fury wants to hold onto them. We need airtight charges and pretty impossible bond.”

While Steve rockets out of his chair and starts fumbling around for a legal pad that’s not being used like a tray table, Bruce frowns. “Gun trafficking in Suffolk County?” he asks. “That seems a little . . . impossible.”

“Looks like there’s been a home-grown militia movement building up in the more rural part of the county,” Hill explains. She shakes her head. “The ringleader, guy named Ellison, has a file at least an inch thick. Protests, criminal damage to property, a bunch of—”

“Ellison?” Coulson says it first, but only ’cause Clint’s trying to remember how to chew. There’s extra-hot salsa burning a hole in his tongue, but as much as it hurts, his jaw’s not working. He watches the side of Coulson’s face, instead.

Watches it while Hill blinks and says, “Yeah. He’s got a whole website devoted to the virtues of the Second Amendment, never mind—”

There’s probably a lot more to Hill’s point, but she’s interrupted when Coulson turns in his chair for the express purpose of meeting Clint’s eyes.

“Next time I need to select a jury,” he vows, “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

And even though Hill tosses a balled-up post-it note at his head for it, Clint laughs.

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“You know you don’t earn overtime when you’re a salaried employee, right?”

It’s a sweltering, sun-soaked Saturday, one with enough heat radiating in from outside that Clint’s opened his button-down and rolled up his sleeves in order to make sitting on the window ledge bearable. He’s pretty sure the shirt and his undershirt’s gonna end up glued to his skin once he
stands up, but he can’t help it: with the addition of the pillow, there’s not many places he’d rather be. There’d only been one charge to enter that morning, a stupid thirty-something banker who decided beating up on his ex-wife’s new boyfriend was a good idea, and Clint’d stuck around afterwards to work. The trial with the beer bottles and Officer I would’ve let him keep driving is coming up fast, and it’s hard to concentrate at home. No, see, at home, he has ESPN and the book he’s been trying to finish.

Here, he has—

Clint swallows.

“I should probably say the same to you, boss,” he tells Coulson, and watches as Coulson leans an arm against the doorjamb.

Coulson, who’s in those jeans again, plus a t-shirt that reminds him loud and clear that the man has some shoulders he keeps hidden under his suit jackets. There’s sunglasses hanging from the neck of the t-shirt, and—

Clint’s pretty sure that Wilson handed out some bullshit advice, ‘cause there’s no way to look at Coulson dressed like that without flipping the dial from friend to goddamnit.

“I left the charger for my phone,” Coulson replies. He dangles the cord between two fingers. “I thought you would’ve headed out by now, but then I saw your door open.”

Clint shrugs. “I figured I might as well prep where I can get my hands on the paper files.”

“The DUI trial against Bucky’s client?”

“Yeah.”

“From what I can tell, there’s not much prepping to do.” Clint laughs, a little, and it sparks this—quirky smile on Coulson’s face. He likes that smile. He likes it more than he probably should, the same way he likes how Coulson’s hips tip when he leans a little heavier against the doorframe. “Plus, you’re the jury whisperer.”

He rolls his eyes. “The guy had shitty body language,” he retorts, leaning to toss his pad on the desk. His shirt opens further, and even though he’s got the thin white undershirt on with it, he feels—half-naked. “I lucked out.”

“If your ‘lucking out’ gets the gun-nut off my jury, I don’t know what happens when you use your skills.”

There’s an edge to that word, the way it rolls off Coulson’s tongue, and Clint—Clint doesn’t realize he’s wet his lips until his breath feels cool against them. He can’t help himself, can’t stop from thinking about what skills he could show his boss, and—

Coulson shifts again, a shift that’s at least two-thirds hips, and Clint watches every twitch.

Dammit.

“You know,” Coulson says after a few seconds, shrugging a little, “there’s this great little café a couple blocks from here. Sandwiches on crumbly bread, homemade soups, breakfast served all day.”

“Yeah?”
“You wanna grab lunch?” He says it with this—perfect casualness, like they’ve had this conversation a hundred times before. He shrugs again, after a couple seconds. “If you’re not too busy prepping for your slam-dunk case, of course.”

“I could eat,” Clint answers, ’cause he has to. He can’t just sit there, staring at Coulson like he’s speaking in tongues. He stretches out his legs, wincing a little when his one knee pops. He needs to spend less time at the office and more time working out. “Besides,” he adds, “don’t you owe me a beer?”

“A beer?”

“You said if Dot’s birthday party didn’t cheer me up, you’d buy me a beer.” He swings his legs off the window ledge. “Lucky for you, pancakes are an okay substitute.”

“Wait.” Coulson picks his hand up off the doorjamb and holds it out. “Dot’s party didn’t cheer you up?”

“Not to beer levels.”

Clint says it with a shrug, just a throw-away, and reaches down to start buttoning up his shirt. They’re fiddly little shit buttons, the kind that you avoid undoing until you absolutely have to ’cause they’re so fucking stubborn. His fingernail catches on the same one, twice, without buttoning it, and he swears under his breath.

It’s when he swears the second time that he realizes Coulson hasn’t responded to the last thing he’s said. No, Coulson’s perfectly quiet, no return jab about the beer.

Clint lifts his head—and totally forgets he’s working on the buttons.

Coulson’s look . . . He’s seen a lot of Coulson’s different looks over the last couple weeks. He’s seen placid, friendly, determined, and harried. He’s seen smiles, laughter, shitty little grins, and quirked eyebrows. He’s seen softness in the little lines around his eyes, and steel in his jaw.

But the way Coulson’s looking across the office now, that’s—new. It’s new, and gathers in Clint’s belly before Clint can figure out how to shove it away. ‘Cause his thin undershirt doesn’t hide anything, and he knows how much chest he’s showing with his shirt open like that. Chest, stomach, plus his forearms, bare from his rolled-up sleeves.

And Coulson’s . . . watching, maybe, is the best word for it. No, actually, it’s not. Cataloguing. Documenting. He’s memorizing Clint’s body, right in that second, his eyes slowly climbing from where Clint’s fumbling and up. Clint thinks about saying something, but then Coulson kinda—purses his lips in this way that looks like how sex feels, and the words die in the back of his throat.

You only look at somebody like that, Clint thinks, when you wanna be able to remember later.

He stands there, holding onto the button that won’t behave, and—waits. He watches Coulson’s Adam’s apple bob, watches him wet his lips with this maddeningly pink sliver of tongue, and then—

Then, Coulson’s gaze flicks up the last foot or so. He catches Clint’s eyes, and Clint assumes there’s gonna be an awkward moment. That Coulson’ll flush, or shift, or—dance away from the subject, somehow.

He doesn’t.
Instead, he says, “I was already planning on paying today, thank you for the jury-whispering.” Clint snorts and drops his eyes back down to his buttons. Now, of course, they’re cooperating. “The beer’ll have to wait.”

“Careful. I might start charging you interest. An extra beer for each week you stall.”

“An extra beer, or an extra night out for the beer?”

Coulson leans enough into the question that Clint can’t help but look up. He’s halfway done with his buttons, and he decides to leave it like that, shirt partially open.

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Maybe lunch’s the test run,” he offers. “First-round moot court tryouts.”

Coulson smiles, and all those little lines bunch up. “I made moot court on the first round, back in law school.”

“Then, see? Already the expert.”

And Clint, he tries really hard not to think about how their shoulders brush when they’re walking down the hallway, or the fact that tryout sounds like it could be another word for date.

But the problem with trying is that, sometimes, you fail.

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“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Clint interrupts, and he smacks his hand on the table. Coulson’s laughing, his whole face lit up and warm with it, and his breath keeps catching. It’s addictive, the way he laughs, and Clint soaks it in as he reaches across the table for the syrup. “You’re telling me that somewhere in that massive shit storm of a textbook—”

“Hey, I wouldn’t up it to ‘shit storm’!” Coulson protests.

“—is an article you wrote. You. My boss.” Clint shakes his head. “Nope. Not believing it.”

“Technically, I’m not your boss, just your co-worker.”

“If we’re being really technical, right now, you’re my pancake-pusher,” he rebuts, and Coulson’s laugh in response is like the world’s best sugar rush.

They’re two of about ten people in the café, and their conversation’s dominating the relative quiet of the place. There’s a family with three kids all under about six crowded into the booth by the window, a middle-aged guy nursing a cup of coffee and reading a newspaper, and what Clint’s pretty sure is either two widowed best friends or a seventy-something lesbian couple. The white-haired ladies are at the table closest to theirs, and as the laughter relaxes, Clint catches one smiling over at them.

Yeah, definitely a couple.

Clint smiles back and hands Coulson the syrup. “Seriously, though,” he says, trying not to watch the way Coulson wipes the tears of laughter away from the corners of his eyes. “If I’d known you were in that trainwreck of a textbook, I probably would’ve actually read it.”
“I’m not sure the way to impress your not-boss pancake-pusher is to admit you never read your legal ethics textbook,” Coulson points out. He drizzles on a little more syrup, and Clint’s gotta admit, it’s hard to focus on anything else when he can watch Coulson’s fingers, and arms, and mouth . . . “You did pass the ethics exam, didn’t you?”

“Flying colors,” Clint promises.

“Good. Because that—” And Coulson jabs the air with his fork, perfect punctuation. “—is one conversation I’m not having with Fury.”

“You wouldn’t cover for me?”

“Not on your life, Barton.”

Clint laughs, again, and shakes his head. He’s got more pancakes left than he knows what to do with, never mind a link of breakfast sausage and an enormous cup of coffee, but he keeps getting—distracted. Because even when he’s not watching Coulson, he’s listening to the way he talks or apologizing when their legs bump under the too-small table.

Finally, somewhere between bites, he asks, “You only write the one?”

“One what?”

“Article. On ethics.” Coulson stares at him blankly, and Clint rolls his eyes. “If you made it into a textbook, you’ve gotta have more out there, right? They don’t just grab some guy’s law review note from when he was in school and call it a day.”

“No,” Coulson admits, smiling. He reaches for his coffee cup, though, and Clint’s no idiot. He recognizes a stall when he sees it. But rather than change the subject, he keeps cutting into his pancakes like everything’s perfectly fine.

Even if Coulson’s smile is tighter, once he puts the mug back down.

“I worked for the state ethics commission when I first got out of law school,” he says after a few more seconds. His fingers drum along the mug. “I— I don’t think I really knew what I wanted to do with my career, yet. I’d worked in firms both summers and couldn’t stand the thought of going back into that environment long-term.”

Clint frowns, a little. “If you had the kind of grades to work at a firm over the summer,” he points out, “you probably could’ve moved up the ranks pretty fast. It’s not like you would’ve spent the rest of your life—tabbing depositions or something.”

“It wasn’t that,” Coulson replies, shaking his head. “It was just the . . . mentality. The focus on money and keeping the clients happy instead of making the world better. And I know,” he adds, raising a finger from his mug, “how idealistic that sounds. I don’t necessarily mean Steve’s kind of bettering the world, the kind that comes with . . . apple pie and extra American flags on everything. I just wanted to do something meaningful.”

He watches his mug, instead of Clint.

“But it turns out, all I did at the ethics commission was help build cases against lawyers who’d broken the rules of professional responsibility. I investigated people who’d embezzled from clients, hid or destroyed exculpatory evidence, who actively suborned perjury, and then watched the commission either decline to prosecute the cases or hand out half-hearted private reprimands.” He snorts and reaches for the carafe of coffee. Clint knows his mug’s still half-full, but he’s guessing
Coulson needs something to do with his hands. “I started writing articles because I—wanted to see the system get better.”

“And wanted to bitch about work?”

“Well, that too.” This time, when Coulson smiles, it reaches his eyes. “I thought it’d slow down once I started at the D.A.’s office,” he admits, “but funnily enough, people keep doing unethical things and getting away with it.”

Clint grins. “So, how many, then?”

“How many what?”

“Articles. That you’ve written.”

Coulson rolls his eyes. “I haven’t counted,” he insists, and picks up his fork.

“Really?” Clint asks, and the way Coulson avoids his eyes is an answer all its own. He nudges his leg under the table, harder than he maybe needs to. Coulson nearly misses his mouth, and ends up with syrup on the corner of his lips. “You seem like a guy who counts.”

“Counts?”

“Or measures, depending on the situation.”

Clint manages to keep his voice even when he says it, but Coulson chuckles in this way that’s—maddening and sexy, all at once. The sound almost drowns out a muffled ringtone, but then he’s apologizing and digging into his pocket. He’s still got syrup on the corner of his mouth, and Clint watches that sticky little spot like he plans on being the one to wipe it away.

There’s no way he’ll be able to call this a professional lunch. At least, not with a straight face, he won’t.

He listens to Coulson answer the phone as he cuts into his stack of pancakes, and doesn’t look up again until he’s chewing.

As soon as he does, though, he stops chewing.

Coulson’s face is—blank. All the laughter, the brightness, it’s all drained away, and he looks . . . empty, that’s a good word. He looks empty. He says “uh-huh” a couple times, glances down at his watch, and then says, “Ten minutes.”

He doesn’t look at Clint after he hangs up. Instead, he reaches behind him, pulls out his wallet, and starts peeling out bills enough to pay for lunch.

“What’s going on?” Clint asks.

Coulson drops the bills into the center of the table. There’s something hunted in his expression, and Clint’s breath catches. Whatever’s wrong, it’s—bad. It’s worse than anything he’s seen since he started at the D.A.’s office, just by virtue of the look on Coulson’s face.

“They’ve pulled someone in for the Silva-Riberio murder.” Coulson’s already sliding out of the booth when he says it, but his eyes catch Clint’s. “I’m sorry I can’t stay. Fury wants Hill and I at the police station to make sure we have enough to charge him on Monday, and I can’t—”

“He needs both of you?”
Clint doesn’t really think about the words, he just—says them. They’re meant to sound confused, to ask why Fury would need both of his chief assistant district attorneys to stare down the asshole who’d killed a kid. But instead, it sounds like he wants Coulson to stay.

It sounds like he wants the lunch to linger, and—there’s no taking that back.

For a half-second, Coulson’s eyes soften. He stands there, next to the booth, his fingertips on the tabletop, and Clint forgets about the murder because of the quiet look on Coulson’s face.

Problem is, it’s only a half-second.

“This is no ordinary suspect,” he says, finally, and taps the tabletop with his fingers. “It’s gotta be air-tight.”

Clint nods, dumbly. He watches the way Coulson nods to himself, the way his fingertips leave the table. He pulls himself back together, no more laughter or jokes about—measurements.

He’s two steps away before Clint thinks to ask, “Who’s the guy?”

Coulson twists to look over his shoulder.

“The business owner the kid was placed with through Urban Ascent,” he answers. “Zebediah Killgrave.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: "to see, to say" is a rough translation of voir dire. I thought it was cool.
When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint is reminded that everyone comes from somewhere--and that everyone has secrets they don't want to broadcast.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains mention of a sexual assault against a minor, as well as mention of domestic violence against a woman. These references are not graphic and are relatively minor mentions, but I wanted to warn anyone who may be triggered or upset by the content.

When Clint wakes up Monday morning, Stark is on the news.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re going to ask me to explain this?” he demands, and Clint nails his hip into the corner of the kitchen counter when he hears Stark’s voice coming from his television. He forgets about turning on his coffee pot, forgets that the shower’s already running, and turns the volume up. On screen, Stark’s standing on the steps outside the judicial complex in a pretty flashy suit. He’s wearing sunglasses, and behind him, Pepper’s holding onto his briefcase. Clint can tell she’s trying not to cringe. “Because I can explain it, and the explanation goes like this: somebody did a bad, bad thing. Somebody did a bad thing, and a kid’s dead, and instead of focusing on that, we're focusing on Killgrave’s pedigree.”

Clint does the cringing for Pepper. Coulson’d called Sunday afternoon and warned him about the media frenzy they’d be seeing on Monday. They’re going to want the story, he’d stressed, and Clint remembers how tired Coulson’d sounded. They’re going to want every juicy detail they can wrap their fingers around.

And? Clint’d asked.

And I’d really prefer you not be the one who gives it to them.

The way he said it, it’d been—honest enough, real enough, that Clint’d ended up snorting and making some half-assed comment about taking the back entrance until the excitement died down. He’d considered mentioning something about Coulson owing him the second half of that lunch, too, but then Hill’d beeped in on Coulson’s call-waiting and he’d hung up. The whole rest of the night, Clint’d flipped through the news stations, waiting for some kind of press conference about the arrest.

He should’ve known Stark’d feed the media sharks first.
“I’m not saying it’s Killgrave,” Stark says on screen. He takes off his sunglasses. It always impresses Clint how a guy who bullshits as loud and proud as Stark does can have such honest eyes. “I won’t say it’s Killgrave ‘till a jury of his peers votes to lock him in a cell and throw away the key. What I am saying is that Jordan Silva-Riberio was fifteen and alive, now he’s fifteen and dead, and you all should care a lot more about him than a guy who is, by the way, innocent until proven guilty.”

The crowd of journalists erupts in noise, but Stark slips through them, Pepper hot on his trail. The picture cuts back to the cute little blonde in the studio. “That was Anthony Stark, the son of Howard Stark, remarking on the arrest of Zebediah Killgrave. Killgrave, the founder and CEO of P.M.R. Advertising, will be charged this afternoon with the murder of an at-risk teenager who had a summer internship with his company—”

Clint switches off the TV.

The newscast and Stark’s comments muddle in his head as he showers, shaves, and dresses for work. There’re a half-dozen missed calls on his cell phone when he turns it on, and five are from Barney. The sixth—

“Come in the back door when you get here,” Natasha says. She sounds breathless, and her voice echoes.

Clint stops buttering his toast. “Are you in a wind tunnel?” he asks.

“I’m going up the back stairs because the building’s flooded with reporters.” She heaves a sigh. “Stark talked to a couple of the assholes.”

“I saw.”

“How bad?”

“What kind of scale do you want me to use?” He cradles the phone against his shoulder so he can grab his coffee cup. “One to ten? Percentages? Letter grades?”

“One of those assholes followed me from my car, Clint,” she growls, and he tries not to grin around his bite of toast. “And given that, unlike you, I have to appear in court today, now’s really not the time to test my patience.”

There’s something flinty in her voice. He decides maybe he should save teasing her for when she’s not climbing six flights of stairs. “He did okay,” he says, shrugging a little. “Fury’s not gonna be happy, Hill’ll swear for a while, but nothing too bad.”

“But nothing the rest of us would’ve said?” she presses.

“Well.” The toast is kinda scratchy, going down. “The rest of us aren’t Stark.”

The string of Russian curses that comes outta Natasha’s mouth is enough to make Clint uncomfortable, and he doesn’t even speak Russian. She hangs up when she gets to their floor, and Clint’s sure it’s because the hallway’s crammed with nosy reporters hoping to run into one of the other A.D.A.s. He can’t imagine how Steve’s gonna deal with the pressure; the man’s got a heart of gold and a need to please just about everybody.

He listens to talk radio on the way into work, trying to wrap his head around this Killgrave guy. He’s rich, sure, and famous, but it’s only when he flips channels a third time that he finds out why. Zebediah Killgrave came over from Croatia as a teenager, spent a good ten years working menial
jobs, and then, when he had just enough capital to get a business loan, started an advertising firm
that turned into an empire. The monotone-voiced radio host spends five minutes listing off
businesses, political campaigns, and non-for-profits that keep P.M.R. Advertising on their payroll,
and Clint’s gotta admit it’s a pretty impressive list.

Once the story on Killgrave switches to the weather report, Clint turns the radio off. He tries to
remember fifteen-plus years ago, when he was in high school. Would he’ve trusted a guy like
Killgrave? Well, no, probably not, but then, he’d never been taken under the wing of somebody
like that. There’d never been a suit with a couple million dollars and a serious pedigree offering to
show him the ropes. He’d dragged himself through his diploma, the dozens of jobs he’d worked to
get himself through undergrad, and then again through law school. He’d never had anybody
helping him “ascend.”

Maybe that’s the difference, he thinks as he pulls into his parking spot. Maybe that’s why a kid like
Jordan Silva-Riberio, a kid who’d probably grown up with a healthy sense of skepticism about
everybody, ended up dead in Colier Woods.

There’re reporters all over the back of the building. They’re sitting on the steps, pacing the
sidewalk while on the phone, or snapping pictures of the judicial center. One of the news vans is
parked out there too, antenna stretched up into the sky.

Great.

Clint slides out of his car slowly, casually as he’s able. Like it’s just an ordinary day at the office,
instead of—this reporter-laden nightmare. His phone chimes in his pocket, and he checks it only
long enough to see Barney’s name on the display. Even better.

He leaves his suit jacket in the car and shoves the couple files he’d taken home after his lunch with
Coulson into his bag.

The reporters let him make it all the way to the sidewalk before they talk to him. Oh, Clint’s not an
idiot, he sees them watching while he approaches, but they at least have the decency not to shout
across the parking lot at him. He forces a little smile at the guy who calls out to him.

He’s maybe twenty-three, with a mess of brown hair and a truly unfortunate plaid shirt. Steve probably wears
shirts like that.

“Sir, do you have a moment?” the kid asks, scrambling up off the steps. “My name’s Peter Parker
with the Daily Bugle, and I—”

“Whoa,” Clint says, and puts up his hand before the kid climbs into his personal space. He looks
like he’d scale the building if it means getting something to write down on that little pad of his. He
forces a tight smile. “I’m just a file clerk, you don’t want me saying anything.”

“A—file clerk? You’re pretty well-dressed for a file clerk.”

Clint glances down at himself. He’s wearing navy slacks, a white shirt, and a striped tie, nothing
special. Then again, the kid’s wearing a shirt that looks like a television test pattern. “That’s the
dress code, not me.”

The Parker kid spends a couple more seconds looking at him, but finally sighs and says, “Okay.”
Clint feels guilty about it for a couple seconds, but he’s . . . just not the person who should be
talking to reporters about this.

Not today, not tomorrow, not for the rest of his life if he can avoid it.
He takes the stairs in twos all the way to the sixth floor.

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“Okay, so,” Darcy says, breathlessly, and puts both her hands on Clint’s desk. “Your brother has called, like, ten times, and I am running out of lies. Pretty soon, I’m going to tell him you’re having sex with Coulson in the bathroom or something.”

“Darcy.”

She doesn’t even stop to take a breath. “Hill wants to see you, Bruce wants to see you, and Tony’s getting yelled at by Fury but then I think he wants to see you.” He watches her fingers start to curl against the wood grain. Her fingernails are sparkly black and diamond-hard. He suspects she could leave gouges if she wanted to. “Bucky called to ask about rescheduling voir dire to Thursday, Sif’s got a client who wants to plead out, and I think Vandral or Volkswagen or one of them wants a sit-down, too.”

He frowns. “Darcy.”

“Also, I can’t find the Donaldson file and—”

“Darcy!”

Darcy’s lips snap shut, immediately, and she blinks at him. Her eyes are big and brown. Usually, they’re—focused, about as sharp as any two eyes on the planet can get, but right now, they look half-haunted. Clint wonders if a ghost’s passed by his office recently—or whether maybe she, too, got trailed into the building by some eager journalist.

Her fingernails scratch against the desktop.

“Breathe,” he says.

And she deflates.

He watches it happen, watches her shoulders slouch and her head dip a few inches. She steps back and then bodily drops into one of the chairs in front of his desk. Her limbs sprawl everywhere. “What the hell’s happening to this place?” she wonders aloud.

“You mean this morning?”

“I mean— Do you know how long I’ve worked here?” She stares at him over the rims of her glasses, and when he shrugs, rolls her eyes. “Steve said he told you. I should’ve known he didn’t.”

“Does it matter?” he asks.

“Six years. Summer before my junior year of undergrad, and Jane trots up. ‘They need an assistant where I work,’ she said. ‘You can get internship credit,’ she said. ‘Aren’t you pre-law?’ she said.”

“You were pre-law?”

“And I’ve been here,” Darcy continues, ignoring him, “for all six of those years. Part-time until I graduated, full-time afterwards. I’ve seen murders, rapes, arsons, a really weird horse abuse case
—” Clint watches as she starts ticking instances of human depravity off on her fingers. “—about seven millions burglaries, that bank robbery three years ago—”

“There’s a point here, right?”

“And not once has it been crazy like this.” She throws up her hands. “The place is crawling with reporters. They played footage of Thor getting off his motorcycle on the news.”

Clint decides now is not the time to ask about Thor’s motorcycle—or the weird horse abuse. “Stark’s celebrity status had to come into play sometime,” he points out. Darcy rolls her head against the back of the chair, then shifts around until she’s looking at him. He shrugs. “Stark Industries has gotten caught up pretty nasty civil stuff over the years. This isn’t even the worst press they could’ve gotten.”

“Everybody loves the program, Clint.” He frowns, and not just because Darcy invoked his name. He’s not sure she’s used it before, not in casual conversation, but he’s frowning more at her—tone. There’s something quiet caught in the back of it. “I know you told Bruce you thought it was a waste of time—”

“That’s not really what I said,” he points out.

“—but Urban Ascent . . . It’s the one good thing Stark Industries does. It’s the one thing Tony keeps his hand in. And Bruce, and Steve, and— Even your boyfriend. He brought his ex, the cellist, to the benefit thing last year.”

“He’s not—” Clint starts, but then he’s caught by his ex, the cellist and kinda forgets why he interrupted her in the first place.

Not that Darcy pauses any longer than to take a breath. “If the program blows up because of this—not just because of the murder, either, but because of Tony saying stupid stuff to the press or whatever—it could . . . suck.”

She rolls her head against the back of the chair again, and stares up at the ceiling. He watches her press her lips together. She worries them, he realizes. He’s noticed the same expression a few other times, like when she’s playing Words With Friends or arranging meetings with difficult attorneys (so, really, with Sif), but he’s never realized how often she does it. He wonders if all the lip gloss hides the scrapes from her teeth.

“Darcy,” he says, and she lifts her head to look at him. “I don’t want the program to go up in flames, either.”

“You said—”

“Yeah,” he interrupts, nodding, “and that’s a long story I’m not gonna get into with you.” When she opens her mouth, he holds up a hand. “But people, they’ve got the attention span of . . . goldfish. The press coverage’ll die down in a couple days, people from Stark Industries’ll shine up the crap Tony said this morning, and Fury’ll keep him away from the press from here on out. The dust’ll settle, and it’ll go back to normal.”

Her face twists. Clint’s pretty sure that’s a scowl, right there. “You have experience in crazy cases involving dead teenagers and billion-dollar companies?” she challenges.

“No, but I have experience with people. I—know how they work.” Her eyes are focused again, perfectly trained on him. He forces a little smile at her. “I swear, it’ll go back to normal.”
“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Darcy’s still watching him, brows pulled together and lips creased into this puzzled little frown, when Bruce walks into the room. He says nothing, just—steps between the two chairs, sets something down on Clint’s desk, and starts to walk away.

It’s Clint’s turn to frown. “Is that a—”

“Cactus? Yes.” Clint leans forward and catches the little terra cotta pot between two fingers, turning it around on the edge of the desk. It’s a tiny cactus, maybe as big as his palm, in a sandy little planter. Its tiny little needles are almost kinda—cute. “It’s some kind of flowering desert cactus, according to the internet.”

“You Googled your cactus?” Darcy asks.

“Not my cactus. Tony’s cactus.” Bruce looks directly at Clint. He narrows his eyes, and suddenly, Clint understands why social workers wait until he’s out of the office to submit sloppy reports. That look could wither a whole garden of cactuses—cacti?—at twenty paces. “Tony gave me a cactus.”

Clint—still isn’t following. He’s not sure he’s meant to follow, like maybe this is a psychological test of some kind. A mind game. “That’s—nice of him?”

“He gave me the cactus because ‘if Barton can have a pillow, you can have this.’” He opens his hands. “I don’t want a cactus.”

“I—”

“I don’t,” Bruce repeats, “want a cactus.” And before Clint can ask for clarification, or—try to piece together what exactly just happened in the course of that conversation, he turns on his heel and walks out.

“See?” Darcy demands, throwing up her hands again. “I don’t know what is happening to this place!”

“Yeah,” Clint agrees, kinda—half-dumbly.

Darcy ends up taking custody of the cactus.

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The first time Clint stops all day is when he sits down in the back stairwell to read through some case files.

The day’s been—weird, he thinks, but then, that’s really not a good enough word. Darcy’s outburst and the cactus, that was all weird. No, this whole day, it’s just been—surreal.

He’d spent an hour on the phone with a whole bunch of defense attorneys, mostly rescheduling meetings and hearings to keep them out of the courthouse and away from the media. Between calls, he’d checked out the local news sites, skimming the same information over and over again.
Killgrave to be charged at 2 p.m., one headline’d read, or maybe State to charge Killgrave in Ascent Killing. The name’d made Clint cringe soon as he saw it. It sounded like something out of a cult, like they’d encountered some organization called Ascent that was going around and offing teenagers, but by the time he’d finished his last phone call, three outta four sites were using it.

About a half-hour later, Stark’d screamed down the hallway, “Why didn’t they give it a fucking jingle, as long as they’re coming up with slogans?!” At least, Clint figured, they had some office solidarity in hating the goddamn name.

He sighs and flips to the next file in the massive stack. They’re not his files, but Hill’s, shoved at him in the hallway when he’d just wanted a refill on his coffee. I don’t have time for my status conferences, she’d said, breathless enough that Clint’d leaned in to make sure he heard her right. They’re all pre-trial. Just get them done. He’d tried to protest, tried to point out how impossible it’d be to read six files he’s never seen before in the circus of their office, but Hill’d just . . . walked away.

Walked away and left him to slink out to the stairwell and sit a couple steps down from the sixth-floor landing. Left him to squint in the dim glow of an emergency light and enjoy the first stretch of quiet all day.

The files are all major felonies—a gun crime, two burglaries, and an arson, to name a few—with complicated charges and convoluted fact-patterns. Clint knows that the conferences are just to set up dates and times for trial, but he doesn’t wanna fuck it up, either. Not today. No, today, the last thing Hill needs is him sticking his damn foot in his mouth.

So he perches on the step, and he works.

He’s on the last in the pile, the arson of a former Borders bookstore, when the sixth-floor emergency door opens behind him. He glances up from the file, prepared to catch the interns sneaking out for a smoke break, and—

And instead, he has to roll his lips together to hide a little smile.

It’s Coulson who comes out through the door. Coulson, who’s reading through a paperback copy of this year’s criminal statutes—and who’s so caught up in it that he doesn’t notice Clint sitting there, even as he starts down the stairs.

Clint waits ‘till he gets to the step right above him before he touches Coulson’s shin. It’s that, or let the guy step on him.

“Jesus!” Coulson shouts, bodily jerking away from the touch. The stairwell fills with his voice, a rebounding echo that covers up the indignity of him trying to recover his balance. Clint, he—likes the sound of Coulson all around him, likes the way the gasp comes from just about every direction.

“There needs to be a rule about skulking in dark stairwells,” he says after he rights himself. Clint grins up at him, as innocent as he can manage—a little who, me? to make up for the fact that the day feels like it’s spiraling out of control—and watches as Coulson closes the book. He comes down a few more steps and then sits next to Clint. They’re narrow stairs, only really meant for emergencies, and their thighs bump.

“Back attcha, not-boss,” he retorts. He tries to ignore how much heat he can feel through Coulson’s slacks. “Shouldn’t you and Hill be prepping for Killgrave’s first appearance right about now?”

“We’re working on it,” Coulson admits. When he shrugs, their arms whisper against each other.
“We’re trying to figure out what we can definitely charge him with today, and what we should amend in, later.”

Clint—frowns. “You have that many charges to choose from?” he asks. He’s skipped most of the news articles on the murder for the last couple weeks, just to avoid the venom from the idiots writing them. “Last I heard, the kid was stabbed.”

“That . . . only really scratches the surface.” He watches Coulson run his thumb along the pages of the statute book. It’s a nervous tic, he thinks. It’s an attempt to buy a little time. “Fury and Hill’ve been wanting to keep everything else under wraps. The longer we keep it in the office, the less we have to worry about the press clawing down the doors.”

“But?”

“But he was—assaulted.” There’s something quiet in his voice when he says it. His chin comes up, and when their eyes meet— If it’d been Bruce or Steve, Clint might’ve asked for clarification about what assaulted’s supposed to mean. But here, looking into those eyes, he doesn’t have to. “We’re still waiting for some follow-up test results, but—it looks like it was ongoing. And—severe.”

Clint swallows. “How severe?”

“Severe,” Coulson says, again. And call it instinct, but Clint knows better than to ask anything else.

They sit there for a couple more seconds, the statute book pressed between Coulson’s hands and that last case file still open across Clint’s lap, but nothing’s—said. Instead, it’s the kind of silence that’s been missing from the office all morning, warm and . . . calm. His leg’s settled against Coulson’s, their arms are still brushing, and it’s hard not to just study him in the dim stairwell light. Clint tries to focus on Hill’s precise, all-caps handwriting, but his eyes keep drifting back, and he finds himself memorizing the shape of Coulson’s knuckles.

Finally, Coulson tips his head a few inches. He catches Clint’s eyes, then holds them, and Clint swears the guy swallows. “Listen,” he says, and the quiet way it trips in the back of his throat does something to Clint’s belly that he can’t really explain. “Lunch the other day, it— I had a good time.”

Clint lets out his breath. He didn’t even realize he was holding it, but it rushes out in a way that—kinda sounds like a half-laugh. “‘Till you got called away like a secret agent, sure.”

“What can I say? They considered a Phil-signal, but then Stark blew up the break room microwave.” Clint laughs, shaking his head, but when he looks over, there’s still that quiet look on Coulson’s face. “What I mean,” he presses, once Clint’s swallowed his last laugh, “is that it’s something I’d like to consider doing again at some point. Maybe this weekend, if things aren’t too busy.”

Coulson shifts, right then, maybe just to—get a better look at Clint next to him, but they’re sitting on a narrow stair. So narrow that legs press up against each other, and Clint sucks in a breath that’s rougher and louder than he means it to be. It echoes in the stupid stairwell, echoes ‘cause he can feel the strength in Coulson’s thigh and—

And his brain goes right to how that thigh’d feel under his palm.

He swallows that noisy breath, then another, and he swears to Christ that Coulson, he’s moving closer.
“I—” he starts to say, but the words are all muddled together, caught on the way they’re settled against each other, in the way—

There’s a great metallic crash before Clint can pick out the rest of his words, and both he and Coulson twist to look up the two steps onto the landing. The urgent pressure to say something—well, to either say something or palm Coulson’s thigh while making out like teenagers—immediately dissipates.

‘Cause standing on the landing is Tony Stark. A wild-eyed Tony Stark, with sleeves rolled up and his hair practically standing on end.

“He hired Laufeyson,” he says, breathless, and catches the door before it swings shut.

Those three words bring Coulson rocketing to his feet. “Does Hill know?” he demands.

“That motherfucker hired Laufeyson!” Stark’s voice booms down the stairwell. “Of all the slime ball sleazebucket defense attorneys in the state, he picks the one—the one—who lacks even a—a sliver of—No, no, you know what? An ounce. The one who lacks even an ounce of—”

“Tony.” There’s an sharpness in Coulson’s voice, a honed, steely edge that Clint’s never heard before. Stark abandons his tirade and stares down the couple steps to where Coulson’s standing. It’s this—strange battle of wits, for a second, this moment where you can watch Stark trying to decide whether he should keep going.

Coulson’s jaw is perfectly squared.

“Notice of appearance just came up from the clerk’s office,” Stark says after a few seconds. “You’ve got about a minute and a half before the news hits her desk. Maybe.”

Coulson nods, one curt jerk of his chin, and starts up the stairs like a man on a mission. Clint forces a little smile, some hint of the “see you later” there’s not time for, and drops his eyes back to the file. It’s easily the biggest and most complicated of the bunch, and he’s got another ten minutes before he’s gotta go down and get settled in Judge Brassel’s courtroom.

He’s only half-listening to the sound of the door creaking on the landing when he hears Coulson say, “This weekend.”

When Clint looks up, Coulson’s standing in the doorway. Those knuckles that Clint’s memorized, they’re perfectly curled. His fingers look blunt and wide against the gray metal door.

“Maybe this time, you’ll stay ‘till dessert,” he replies, and watches the smile hit Coulson’s eyes.

Clint aces all six of Hill’s status conferences.

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“The court calls case 12-0947C—State versus Zebediah Killgrave—for first appearance,” says Judge Dunbar, and Clint swears the whole courtroom’s holding its breath.

Clint hadn’t planned on watching Killgrave’s first appearance in court with the rest of the press and rubberneckers that’d been crowding the building all day. No, Clint’d wanted to sit up in his
office, close the door, and work for a while. He’s got plea deals, preliminary hearings, and then the voir dire for the DUI trial scheduled all week long. He really doesn’t have time to sit in the back of the courtroom between Stark and Natasha for a half-hour.

But Darcy’d caught him by the arm as he headed into his office. He’d tugged, trying to free himself from her grip, but she dug her heels in. “Either you stop,” she’d grunted when he pulled again, “or you slam me into the wall to stop me.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he’d countered. She, on the other hand, hadn’t even blinked.

The courtroom’s church-silent, maybe even graveyard-silent, while they wait for the deputies to bring Killgrave through the secure door. Clint tries not to focus on the quiet, or the way he can see the tension mounting in Hill’s shoulders. He studies the mural on the wall and, when that gets boring, watches Coulson fidget with the pen on the counsel table.

He’s never seen Coulson sit second chair. Actually, come to think of it, he’s never seen anybody sit second chair to Hill. He’d started to think maybe Hill didn’t believe in having backup, that maybe she had the same kind of pride in her prosecutorial skill that Stark has in his oral argument.

But then again, this is no ordinary case.

Judge Dunbar coughs, just the once, and Laufeyson shifts to sit up perfectly straight. He’s wearing another expensive suit with a waistcoat. Clint suspects his tie’s actually a cravat. “My client is on his way, your honor.”

The judge nods, but the secure door to the courtroom opens before he says anything.

Zebediah Killgrave is a—mountain of a man. Clint kinda pulls in a breath when he sets eyes on the guy, not on purpose, but because there’s so much of him. He’s as broad as Thor but taller, dressed in the most impeccable black suit Clint’s ever seen. The dress shirt he’s wearing is a shiny royal purple color, and his tie’s as silver as his slicked-back, wavy hair. It takes Clint a couple seconds to realize the guy’s even wearing handcuffs, ‘cause he carries himself perfectly. His shoulders are back, his chin’s held high, and there’s not a hint of nerves coming off him.

In front of him, Darcy fake-coughs, “Dickhead!” Thor elbows her, and Jane spends a good five seconds glaring.

Laufeyson slithers from his seat like molten lava and stands next to Killgrave. He looks like a beanpole next to such an imposing figure, but he’s just as composed. No wonder Killgrave hired the guy, Clint thinks. They’re like some illustration in Highlights for Children, a creepy version of Goofus and Gallant.

“State your appearances,” Judge Dunbar says, but Killgrave’s leaning over to Laufeyson and whispering, already.

Hill bounds out of her chair like she’s on a tension spring. “The state appears by Maria Hill and Phillip Coulson, chief assistant district attorneys.”

Killgrave’s still whispering. Twice, mid-sentence, Laufeyson glances over at Hill, watches the way she’s standing with her hands on the table, and Clint wonders whether the whispering’s totally necessary. “Mr. Laufeyson?” the judge asks after a few seconds.

“My apologies, your honor,” Laufeyson replies. His smile is slow and stops precisely before it reaches his eyes. “Mr. Zebediah Killgrave appears in person and with his counsel, Loki Laufeyson. And if I may, sir, he pleads not guilty to every one of the state’s ridiculous charges.”
Hill’s hands ball into fists on the counsel table. “Let’s let the state charge your client before he pleads not guilty, shall we?” Judge Dunbar asks.

“Thank you,” Hill says, but it sounds as though she’s forcing the words out through gritted teeth. “Your honor, Mr. Killgrave is charged with second-degree murder, aggravated indecent liberties with a minor, and criminal sodomy.”

“Based solely on a handful of lab reports from Assistant District Attorney Anthony Stark’s old college roommate,” Laufeyson responds. Hill sputters, but he waves a hand like he’s dismissing her. “Your honor, these charges have their basis in fiction, not reality. Whatever this unfortunate young man was doing in his spare time has nothing to do with my client’s—”

“Doing in his spare time?” Hill demands, turning on Laufeyson. Clint’s pretty sure she’s forgotten that they’re in a courtroom, because she slaps the table with her palm. “He was fifteen years old! It doesn’t matter who did the autopsy and the reports, what matters is that he was repeatedly raped—”

“Or having perfectly consensual sex,” Laufeyson interrupts.

“—before he was killed, in the woods, by your—”

“Enough, Ms. Hill.” Dunbar raises both of his hands, and Hill’s lips snap shut. She turns away from Laufeyson, her eyes trained on the table. From the back of the courtroom, Clint’s sure he sees Coulson murmur something, but she just shakes her head. “For the time being, Mr. Laufeyson, the state’s charges stand. If you’d like to file motions for dismissal, those can be directed to Judge Brassel. Does your client waive a formal reading?”

“He does, your honor.”

“Alright. And he pleads?”

Killgrave raises his chin. His broad shoulders settle, perfectly even. “Not guilty,” he states, deep-voiced. It’s tinged with an accent, and it takes Clint a few seconds to remember he’s an immigrant.


She nods, but it’s tight. All the tension in the courtroom’s crawled into Hill’s every movement. It’s—half-robotic, like her joints need oiling before she can move smoothly again. “The state requests Mr. Killgrave remain in custody, your honor.”

“Ridiculous!” Laufeyson scoffs. The judge levels a stony glance in his direction, and he presses his lips shut.

“Mr. Killgrave is a man of considerable wealth and international prestige,” Hill continues. She’s not looking at Laufeyson, but her white-knuckled fists are pressed hard against the table. “He has homes in multiple other jurisdictions—some of which have limited extradition—and no end of friends both here and abroad.”

“And he is willing to surrender his passport as a condition of his reasonable bond, your honor.” Laufeyson spreads out his hands. He reminds Clint of the pastor of the church he went to as a kid, the one who delivered sermons about damnation in soft, murmurling tones. “Grave though these allegations are, they are still simply allegations. Meanwhile, my client is a pillar of the community. Not only did he take this poor, unfortunate young man under his wing, but dozens of local businesses and politicians have come to his defense during this trying time. To lock him up like a
common criminal is—unthinkable.”

“But he is a common criminal!” Hill retorts. She twists to look up at Judge Dunbar. “Your honor, we’re not talking about some civil penalty, here. We’re talking about the cold-blooded murder of a defenseless teenage boy.”

Laufeyson snorts. “Defenseless?” he returns, raising his dark eyebrows. “I don’t suppose you’ve looked at young Mister Silva-Riberio’s criminal history, or those of his parents. Because, if you had—”

“I think I’ve heard enough, counselors,” Judge Dunbar interrupts. Clint’s impressed, in a way, at how level and calm his voice is after all the sniping, ‘cause his own heart is in his throat. It feels like the whole row of them are waiting to take their next breath. Stark’s literally on the edge of his seat, and next to him, Natasha’s worrying her hands together. Clint swallows and watches as Dunbar steeps his fingers. “This is a difficult case,” he finally says, leaning his weight heavily on the bench. “On the one hand, the state’s allegations are—serious, to say the least. Having read the charges in chambers before Mr. Killgrave’s first appearance, I can’t really underscore the seriousness enough.”

Hill’s shoulders relax, but only just.

“On the other hand,” the judge continues, “Mr. Killgrave has, for many years, been an important part of this community, and I’m not sure I’m willing to believe that just because he could possibly run, he will. Especially since he’s willing to surrender his passport.”

“Your honor,” Hill presses, but Judge Dunbar holds up a hand.

“Bond is set at three hundred thousand. If and when Mr. Killgrave posts bond, he will surrender his passport to the court and agree to electronic monitoring. And Mr. Killgrave, the slightest blip on my radar will see you back in state accommodations. Do you understand?”

“Of course, your honor,” Laufeyson answers.

Dunbar narrows his eyes. “From your client, please, Mr. Laufeyson.”

Killgrave raises his head. Clint can’t see his whole face, just the one side, but his expression’s—hard. There’s nothing redeeming or open, not in those dark eyes or the line of his jaw. He looks like he’s been chiseled from stone. “Yes, sir,” he answers.

His voice is like ice.

“Very well. We’re dismissed.”

The bailiff calls for them all to rise, and Clint moves to his feet automatically along with all the other attorneys in his row. Natasha immediately leaves the courtroom and Pepper follows nearly on her heels. Stark swears, audibly, and fishes an already-buzzing phone out of his pocket. The press are chattering, snapping pictures as Laufeyson claps Killgrave on the shoulder and murmurs something, but Clint’s only paying half-attention.

The rest of his mind’s caught on Jordan Silva-Riberio, the “unfortunate young man” with the extensive criminal history that Killgrave was trying to help . . . and who’d also, according to Laufeyson, been up to all kinds of rough sex while he was supposed to be learning.

He knows the law allows for inconsistent stories—to say in one breath that the kid needed all the help he could get, and in the other breath that he couldn’t be saved—but that doesn’t mean he has
to like it.

He spends the rest of the afternoon in his office with the door closed.

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“Barton? No fuckin’ way, Barton, that you?”

The next day, Tuesday, promises to be a bastard of a day. Clint’s tried to organize the damn thing so there’s room to breathe—he’s got three evidentiary hearings and two that’ll probably end up being deals, a witness interview for the upcoming DUI trial, and a half-dozen plea readings cluttering up the docket after lunch—but, really, there’s not a lot of space to let his brain settle. The hallways are still clogged with press, every one of the vultures hoping to overhear some snippet of a conversation with the word Killgrave embedded in it. Twice, he’s run into skinny little Peter Parker, all hipster-glasses and hopeful grins.

He wishes lawyers were able to use the same back hallways the judges have access to.

Either way, the voice assaults him between evidentiary hearings number two and three. He’s washing his hands in the men’s room, his portfolio and case file caught between his knees, when the whole damn place fills up with his name. He glances up and—

And when his knees part, everything hits the floor.

The guy in the doorway grins and pumps his fists in the air. “I knew it was you! Holy fuckin’ shit, of all the places to—look at you, man! God, you’re a regular fuckin’ suit now, aren’t you?”

The guy’s just about what you’d expect on a day full of plea-bargains and pretrial hearings, and Clint has to force himself to fake a half-hearted little smile. The guy’s got stringy brown hair that needs a wash and yellowed teeth that’ve survived a whole lot of chain-smoking. His jeans are clean, but pretty ripped and beat-up, and the button-down shirt’s still got the creases from where it came outta the packaging. He pushes the hair off his face while Clint shakes the water from his hands.

“C’mon, you gonna say something or what?” the guy demands. He reaches out and shoves a fist, hard, into Clint’s shoulder. Clint nearly trips trying not to step on his case file. “You too good for us? Big B keeps sayin’ you’re too good for us.”

Clint forces the next smile a little harder. “Sorry, I was just caught up in how ugly your mug still is, Trey,” he replies, and Trey—Derek Tracy, called Trey ‘cause who the hell wanted to go by a girly last name?—grins and shoves him again. “I can’t believe you still look like you got in a fight with a hammer and lost.”

“And I still get more pussy than you ever did!” Trey retorts. He’s missing a bottom tooth, front and center, and the closer he gets, the more Clint wonders if cigarettes are the only thing he’s smoking regularly.

Clint bends to pick up his file while Trey opens his jeans. “What the hell’re you doing here? I thought the Tracy boys had a strict ‘stay the hell away from the law’ policy.”

“My fuckin’ girlfriend, man,” Trey laments, shaking his head. When he leans his head back to stare
at the ceiling, Clint checks his watch. He’s got ten minutes ‘till Judge English’s courtroom opens up for his next hearing, and nowhere to hide. “She banged me up on this stupid domestic battery bullshit.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean— Well, you probably wouldn’t know. Did you ever get laid back in high school?”

He glances over, grinning, and Clint works to turn his cringe into a smile. “Between you, your brothers, and Barney, were there any girls left?”

“We would’ve shared!”

“Now that’s bullshit.”

Clint knows there’s an edge to his voice, something—not quite friendly, but Trey just laughs while he shakes off and tucks himself back in his pants. “Lemme educate you, then,” he says, and Clint rolls his eyes. “Bitch got mouthy. Bitches are real good at gettin’ mouthy. So I taught her a lesson.”

It takes every damn ounce of the self-control Clint’s spent his life working on to keep his voice steady. His fingers curl hard around his portfolio. “And you got dragged into court for it?”

“Now you get it,” Trey says, snapping his fingers. “Anyway, good news is, bitch prosecutor, Romanoff or whatever, she is hot. We are talkin’ grade-A fuckable fox. Mmm.” Clint watches him brush his hands off on his jeans, ’cause it’s that or punching him in the face. “Lemme tell you, that bitch could get mouthy with me all she wanted as long as she was on her knees. You know what I mean?”

Then again, he thinks, Natasha deserves the honor of punching Trey. Especially since she’d aim a lot lower than the face. Clint swallows around his anger and forces his lips into a grimace that maybe, if you’re oblivious, looks like a smile. His teeth hurt from gritting them. “Great,” he says, and there’s no infliction behind it. “Well, listen, nice catching up, but I’ve gotta be some—”

The second his foot lifts from the floor, Trey steps in front of him. “Hey, wait,” he says. His big hand lands on Clint’s shoulder. His fingernails are chipped and filthy, and Clint resists the urge to shove him off. “Big B says he’s been trying to get in touch with you but you keep ignoring him. You heard about Jordan, right?”

“Jordan?” he asks, blankly.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me, you haven’t—” Trey shakes his head. “Listen, I know you’re busy with whatever school shit you’re still doing. B only talks about it all the damn time, how you’re gonna be some kinda hotshot somethin’. But you can’t flip the switch, y’know?”

Clint raises his free hand and pats Trey’s wrist. It earns him this really earnest, really—decent smile. Clint actually kinda likes that smile on Trey. It reminds him of being a teenager again, and the games of pickup soccer they used to play in the empty lot at the end of the road.

But that was a whole lifetime ago.

“I’m not flipping a switch,” he lies.

Trey levels a skeptical look right at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”
They stand there for a couple more seconds, Trey holding onto his shoulder and Clint gripping his wrist, but then there’s a knock at the bathroom door. “Mr. Tracy, there are no windows in the men’s room,” Natasha says. Her voice is flinty, and Clint presses his lips together to keep from laughing. “So either you come out now, voluntarily, and I keep my plea offer open—or you hide in there until A.D.A. Rogers is out of court, and he comes in after you.”

Trey grins. “See what I mean?” he asks Clint in a whisper. “Rwar.”

“Get the hell outta here before she kicks your ass,” Clint retorts, shoving Trey backwards. He staggers, laughs, and then marches out of the bathroom. Clint rolls his eyes and waits for the door to swing shut.

There’s nobody else around, nobody lurking in stalls or bursting in after Trey, and Clint turns the water on. He waits until it’s steaming and then bends down to splash his face. It’s almost too-hot, but he likes the way it burns against his skin.

When he looks at himself in the mirror, he’s red-skinned and dripping. He looks older than the guy who knew Derek Tracy back in high school, but then again, that was high school. That was—

Well, like he’d said. A lifetime ago.

The hallway’s crawling with defendants, lawyers, and lost-looking press when Clint comes out of the bathroom, but there’s no sign of either Trey or Natasha.

He exhales for the first time since Trey walked into the bathroom, dries his damp hands on his pants, and heads for Judge English’s courtroom.

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When Natasha leans against his doorjamb just after five, she opens with, “My defendant today told me something very interesting.”

All Clint wants to do, really, is review the notes from his witness interview that afternoon. They’re scattered, a mess of scribbles that came mostly out of being distracted. He’d stumbled and repeated himself so much, the state trooper’d raised two eyebrows and asked if, maybe, they’d needed a coffee break or something.

As it stands, he’s pretty sure he skipped a question or two he’d wanted to go over. He swears under his breath, rubs the side of his face with a hand, and looks up at Natasha.

Her hip’s cocked. She’s wearing a fitted skirt that hugs her curves from the waist on down. Clint can see where the grade-A fuckable fox comment came from, especially when she crosses her arms under her breasts.

She’s waiting on him, he thinks.

He shrugs and swings his legs down off the window ledge. “He say he did it?”

“No.”

“Then he—say he didn’t do it?”
She rolls her eyes. “He’s a criminal defendant in a domestic battery who was ‘teaching his girlfriend a lesson.’ When’s the last time any of them did it?” He snorts a little laugh, but as soon as his eyes wander back in her direction, he realizes she’s still watching him.

He purses his lips together. “Unusually good reason for doing it?” he attempts.

“Barton.” And that voice, the steady one with a flinty edge, that’s the voice A.D.A. Romanoff uses on asshole defendants who try to give her the run-around.

Clint sighs and leans his head back against the glass. It’s warm from a day of summer sun, a warmth he can feel through his hair and right down into his scalp, and he closes his eyes as it overtakes him. Closing his eyes means he doesn’t have to meet Natasha’s gaze. It’s half-accusatory, the way she’s peering across the office at him. He can almost hear her next sentence forming when she exhales.

So he says, “He told you?”

“Big day for him, what with the suspended sentence and seeing his old buddy Barton.” Clint opens his eyes and watches as Natasha steps away from the doorway. A nudge from her shoe—well, it’s more a maneuver, what with the spike heel she’s wearing and the ankle-flick gymnasts probably envy—and the door slides shut.

She slips into one of the chairs in front of the desk before she says, “He asked if I’d heard of you.”

Clint nods. His mouth feels dry, but wetting his lips doesn’t help. “And?”

“And I told him the name was vaguely familiar. That maybe you worked for the clerk’s office, but I wasn’t sure.” He blinks, and he feels his mouth kinda—come open, just a few centimeters. He’d expected a lot of responses from Natasha—super-competent, super-self-possessed, super-no-nonsense Natasha—but not . . . this one. He’s still staring at her, a little fish-faced, while she shrugs. “Everyone has parts of their lives they don’t want broadcast around the courthouse,” she adds, crossing her legs. “I figured this was yours.”

“I don’t—” he starts to say, but he stumbles around the words. He shakes his head, like clearing cobwebs, but the problem is that they don’t clear. He’s left with this vaguely fuzzy feeling, one that’s been following him around for weeks now, and no amount of shaking his head eliminates the fog. “Thanks,” he says, finally.

“You’d do the same for me—and probably everyone else,” she replies. “Even Stark.”

He laughs, a little, and lets his face relax into something that’s almost a smile. “Pretty sure Stark broadcasts his secrets.”

“Or the things he wants us to think are his secrets.” Natasha leans back in the chair and crosses her arms again. “So who is he?”

“Who, Stark?”

“No. Derek Tracy.”

The name hangs in the air as soon as she says it, and Clint—It’s not that Clint’s stupid enough to think he can dodge the conversation, not really, but he’d enjoyed the few seconds where he thought they’d changed the subject. He presses his shoulders against the window, almost rolls them against the glass, before he takes a breath. “We—knew each other.”
“Funny how I figured that one out on my own.”

“I don’t—” He sighs and drags a hand over his face. Scrubbing away the unpleasantness of the conversation doesn’t change that they’re having it—or that Natasha’s watching him with sharp eyes again. “Trey—Derek, but he went by Trey when we were kids—was a year ahead of me in high school. Three years older than me, but he got held back. And me and my brother, he and his brothers, we all kinda . . . hung out together, back when we were kids.”

“When you were kids?” Natasha repeats. It’s careful, almost overly-precise, but Clint knows why. He’s heard it a thousand times before, in job interviews and admissions meetings when he applied to college. One look at the name of his high school, the address where he grew up, and he spent the whole time trying to . . .

He nods, slowly, and meets her eyes. “Trey, Barney, all them, they still live over on that side of town,” he explains. His stomach feels like it’s churning gravel, but he doesn’t dare look away. “I think they still hang out together, for the most part. But I’m not part of that.”

She holds his eyes for longer than’s probably strictly necessary, her red lips pressed into a perfect, tight line. Clint’s not sure what else he can say to—overcome the burden of knowing somebody like Derek Tracy. ‘Cause it’s one thing to be a guy who started into law late, who had a whole lot of odd jobs before he got there, you name it . . . and another to come all the way from the wrong side of the tracks.

Finally, Natasha nods, too. “Okay,” she says. She presses her palms against the arm rests on the chair and rises.

“Okay?” Clint echoes.

“You were once friends with a guy who’s turned out to be an asshole.” She rests her hands on her hips and looks directly at him. “You lived in a part of town that maybe you’re not proud of. It happens. Unless you’re not checking your defendants to make sure you don’t know them—”

“I always check.”

“—then I’m pretty sure it doesn’t interfere with your ability to practice law.” She shrugs. “Like I said: we all have parts of ourselves we don’t want to broadcast to the world.”

Clint doesn’t mean to, but he can’t entirely help the little smile that starts to trip across his mouth. “What’s yours?”

There’s something—brilliant, somehow, in the way Natasha’s face lights up when she laughs. It brings sparks to her eyes and color to her cheeks. Clint wonders who, exactly, gets to see that laugh all the time. He knows someone does—he’s seen Natasha check her phone and hide little smiles a few times, and they’re a special kind of smile—but he hasn’t figured out who, yet.

“You do realize you’ll have to try better than that, yes?” she asks once she’s stopped laughing.

“Hey, it was worth a try.”

“We’ll have to work on your definition of ‘try,’ then,” and the coolness of her retort makes Clint laugh.

The only problem is, the laughter doesn’t last past when she leaves his office.
That night, after he switches off the lamp on his bedside table, Clint reaches for his phone.

*call off your dogs*, he types.

The glow from the display is too-bright in the darkness. He closes his eyes to fight against the glare, but the response comes seconds later. He squints to make out the words.

*dont got dogs*

*i have a trial this week. i don’t have time for this.*

*so ur not even gonna sho ur face around here? too gud 4 us that it?*

Clint rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling. The phone display dims, then shuts off, and still he watches the dark that hovers above him until he can make out details: the unpatterned ceiling texture, the place where he chipped the paint trying to kill a wasp with a rolled-up magazine, the curled hook meant to hang a potted plant. The phone buzzes against his palm but he ignores it until his night vision’s enough that he can count the individual rises and dips of the ceiling texture.

When he reactivates the screen, the most recent text message is from somebody new.

**Phil Coulson:** *If you don’t mind, I’d like to come to your trial next week.*

Clint’s thumb is unlocking the display and typing a response before he even fully processes the message. *course i don’t mind, he types, but WHY?*

He taps the back button to return to the list of conversations, but before he can open the other series of messages, Coulson’s reply comes through. *Maybe I enjoy watching you work.*

*flattery won’t get you anywhere, you know.*

*That’s because I’m not trying to get anywhere with it. Yet.*

He snorts a stupid laugh, the kind reserved for love-drunk teenagers who’re trying not to blush, and goes right back to typing. *hey, you don’t even need flattery. you already got me to agree to lunch.*

*Twice.*

*you know what they say about the third time, don’t you?*

*Oh, I’m looking forward to it.* Clint’s still laughing, grinning in the dark and actually laughing, when a second text from Coulson comes through. *Goodnight, Clint.*

*night, boss.*

He waits a long time, longer than he needs to, in case Coulson decides to reply again. The phone display goes dark, he reactivates it, and then, it goes dark a second time. But there’re no more messages, no more imagining the playful smile crinkling Coulson’s laugh lines while he types, and Clint’s forced to return to the other conversation.

The last message hasn’t changed in the last ten minutes. **Barney Barton:** *so ur not even gonna sho ur face around here? too gud 4 us that it?*
Clint pulls in a breath and lets it out, again, all in the dark and quiet of his apartment.

one week from today, he types. six pm at the old ball field where we used to smoke. don’t bring anybody else.

He’s just about to put down the phone when it vibrates against his hand. He tips it just enough so he can squint and read the display.

not me u gotta worry bout showing up bro. its u.
Firsts and Seconds

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint learns that there is a first time for everything, including trials, splinters, trust, and Phil.

“Imagine a back road,” Clint says, spreading his hands in front of him. “It’s dark and quiet, on this back road, and there’s only two people out there: Officer Feldman of the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Department, and the defendant, Mr. McLaughlin.” He gestures, vaguely, to the defense table. McLaughlin’s dressed up for the occasion in a blazer and tie, and somebody’s trimmed his scruffy beard. He almost looks—good, Clint thinks. But then again, the jury expects a glossy kind of defendant.

Right?

He scans the jurors’ faces. They’re either watching him, the defense table, or Judge English. “You’re going to hear two different versions of what happened on that dark, quiet night last November,” he continues, resting his hands on the podium. “You’re going to hear about how Mr. McLaughlin’s tail light was broken, and how Officer Feldman, following his duties as an officer and the traffic laws of our state, pulled him over. You’re going to hear about what Officer Feldman saw while talking to Mr. McLaughlin—and what Officer Feldman saw inside Mr. McLaughlin’s car during that conversation. Because this isn’t like on your ‘don’t drink and drive’ commercials, where the driver’s swerving all over the road. Nobody ended up in a ditch, nobody got wrapped around a tree, none of that.”

His eyes move down the jury box, indexing each of those twelve faces. Number Four looks bored already, and Number Seven’s put trenches in her pencil from biting it, but they’re a solid jury. Bucky’d spent most of voir dire trying to play Clint, trying to kick the people he suspected Clint wanted. He’d watched Clint’s expression as much as he’d watched the potential jurors.

Clint thinks he got the better end of the bargain.

“No,” he emphasizes, and spreads his fingers along the edge of the podium, “this is a case about a very smart officer sensing something was off and acting on his instincts—and then, being right. And through the testimony of Officer Feldman, and his backup Officer Starr, the state will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr. McLaughlin did, that night, operate a motor vehicle while his blood alcohol level was above the legal limit. And so, as you listen to these stories, I want you to remember this: even if nobody went into the ditch, or nobody got in an accident, Mr. McLaughlin was drunk, he was driving, and you should, if you’re convinced of those facts, find him guilty.”

The jurors, all twelve of them, look right at him.

He pretends, for a half-second, that those twelve glances don’t rush into his belly.
Then he nods, thanks them, and grips his legal pad a little too hard as he walks back to counsel table.

In the back row of the gallery, Coulson glances up from the file he’s reviewing and shares a tiny, three-second smile.

Clint smiles back before he sits down.

“Mr. Barton is right in one—and only one—respect,” Bucky begins, stepping up to the podium. He’s in a sharp navy suit that’s ironed within an inch of its life. He sets down his legal pad, then his pen—punctuation. “He’s right in that you will hear two different stories about that November night. And one of them will be about an officer who thought something strange was going on and decided to investigate. The other, though, is the story of an officer who would’ve let Mr. McLaughlin go if his car’d only been a little cleaner.”

He rolls into his opening argument, this perfect flow of story-telling that feels completely natural, and Clint leans back in his chair to take it all in. In Judge English’s courtroom, with the doors closed and the jury totally caught up in Bucky’s opening statement, it’s kinda easy to forget that there’s still press prowling the hallways, pressing their ears against bathroom stalls or whatever other creepy things reporters do when they’re in search of a story. Skinny little Parker, in his hipster jeans and plaid shirt, is tucked up in the back corner of the gallery even as Bucky delivers his opening. Last Clint’d checked, his head’d been lulled back far enough that he’d wondered if the kid was asleep.

Glad his first jury trial’s so exciting.

Clint does his best to focus in on Bucky’s opening, but his mind keeps sort of—wandering away from him. Getting here, to the actual trial, it’s . . . felt a little like climbing uphill. They’d pushed back voir dire twice—one to keep jurors out of the building during the height of Killgrave-mania, then again when, yesterday morning, Judge English canceled everything before noon ‘cause she’d broken a tooth. She’d slurred her way through jury selection later that afternoon, which’d been pretty funny until one of the potential jurors’d asked if she was drunk.

Clint thought for sure Bucky’d get charged with contempt, he’d snickered so hard.

Bucky thunks the podium with his fist, just then, and Clint flinches up. He’s really selling the argument about the beer bottles—“The defense promises to show that the bottles the officer relied on did not even belong to my client!”—and Number Seven’s stopped chewing her pencil. Good, Clint thinks, reaching for his legal pad. The more Bucky leans on his whole argument about the bottles, the more dramatic it’ll be when they get to the part about McLaughlin falling out of his car.

Clint flips a page on his pad so he can review his first couple questions for Officer Feldman—and pauses.

‘Cause in the upper margin, carefully lettered in blue pen, is:

*I’d wish you luck if you needed any. - Phil*

And as much as he knows Bucky’s winding down, knows that it’s time to sort out his questions for his first witness, he rotates in his chair just enough that he can look into the gallery.

Enough that, out of the corner of his eye, he can where Coulson’s head is bowed.

Coulson’s reviewing a file, eyes on the page in front of him. But from where he’s sitting, Clint
swears those lips are pursed into this knowing little smile. And that smile does things to his stomach that an army of jurors can’t.

“Mr. Barton?” Judge English asks. Clint swivels his chair around in time to watch her fold her hands atop the bench. Their eyes meet, and he’s pretty sure he’s all of two seconds away from her most withering, pissed-off death-look. “Is the state ready to proceed?”

He pushes out of his seat. “It is, your honor.”

“Then call your first witness, please.”

Clint nods. He tells himself he’s looking over his shoulder for Feldman’s sake, to encourage the guy—younger, a little clumsy, never testified at a jury trial before—to come forward. Except Feldman’s not who he looks at.

No, for a split-second, all his focus is on Coulson.

But then, he forces the little feeling in the pit of his stomach out of the way. He takes a deep breath, neutralizes his expression, and scans the gallery. It’s not hard to pick nervous-looking Feldman out of the handful of people in the cheap felt chairs. When he nods, Feldman springs to his feet fast enough that the chair clatters.

Clint swallows and says, “The State calls Officer Brent Feldman to the stand.”

And then, the trial really begins.

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About six questions into Bucky’s cross-examination of Feldman—“What, exactly, did you observe about my client, then?” Bucky’s asking, his tone tight and his lips pursed into the most pissed-off frown Clint’s ever seen—the door to the courtroom opens. Clint hears it, almost like a sixth sense, but most the jurors don’t even flinch. No, they’re caught up in Feldman’s admission that McLaughlin didn’t look or act drunk.

It means Clint’s the only one who swivels on his chair, or bothers looking over his shoulder.

Peggy Carter catches the door seconds before it closes and sets it against the jamb. She’s a consummate professional, he thinks, ‘cause she’s never once crashed into a courtroom (like Darcy), dumped a load of files with a thump (like Darcy), or worn sneakers (like Darcy). She scans the gallery, steps over a court clerk who’s frantically text-messaging, and slides into the seat next to Coulson.

Coulson glances up and smiles, but Peggy presses her lips together and shakes her head. When that warm little smile slips away, a fist that feels kinda like doubt curls itself around Clint’s stomach. He swallows.

“How long have you been working for the sheriff’s department?”

“Four years,” the officer responds. Clint knows he should be focused in on the testimony—watching Feldman’s face, the way he fidgets, the non-verbal nervous-tic bullshit he tried to
condition out of the guy—but he can’t. ‘Cause Feldman’s answer is perfectly timed to whatever Peggy’s murmuring to Coulson, and Clint can’t look away. They’re leaning close, voices less than a whisper in the back of the gallery. He can’t hear them, but he can see Coulson’s fingers tighten around the file in his lap.

“And how often, roughly, do you pull drunk drivers over?”

It’s a shitty question, shitty enough that Clint could maybe object to it if he felt like bickering with Bucky for a couple minutes, but it’s asked just as Coulson stands. Well, really, Coulson does a lot more than just stand. It’s a quick movement, almost hyper-efficient, with the file tucked under his arm and his eyes focused on the shortest route between his seat and the door. Next to him, Peggy’s red lips are pursed into a tight line.

They shuffle down the mostly-empty row and half-trip over the clerk’s legs on the way to the door. Bucky keeps questioning Feldman, grilling him about how McLaughlin differed from the typical DUI suspect—“Did you smell alcohol on him? Was his speech slurred? Were his eyes bloodshot?”—but Clint’s watching Coulson’s face.

There’s something pale, something half-stricken, in Coulson’s expression. It’s dark enough and consuming enough that even after the door closes with a whispered little thud, Clint can see Coulson’s half-lost look on the backs of his eyelids.

He’s not sure what that look means.

All he’s sure of is that whatever’s happened isn’t good.

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At lunch, the D.A.’s office is like a ghost town.

The hallway’s abandoned, free of file clerks and interns, and Clint—Well, once Clint rounds the second corner and runs into nobody, he starts to feel a little like a tumbleweed in one of those really old black-and-white Westerns. Add in the chink of spurs and Thor’s promise that This office, it is not large enough for both you and I!, and he’s pretty much set. He snorts a little at that mental picture—and then the one of Natasha dressed up like a saloon-girl—but when he passes yet another empty cubicle, his face settles into something that’s less a laugh and more a frown.

It’s not that he’s particularly looking for anybody in the office, but lunch is usually—“Loud” is pretty much the best word for it. There’s usually people running around, delivery guys bringing in sandwiches or pizza, and the announcement of that morning’s phone messages. Quiet, it... doesn’t really suit the office.

Thor’s office, on the corner, is closed up tight.

The cubicle in front of Clint’s office is empty, too, and Darcy’s nowhere to be seen. Her Facebook’s open on her computer, though, blinking chat box and all, and her giant mocha-whatever is sweating condensation all over a pile of subpoenas. Clint groans in the back of his throat. Sitwell needs to serve those subpoenas this week, and he’s not in a hurry to sign a second set. He steps into the cubicle, just to move the damn thing—

—and a hand closes around his wrist
He jumps, a whole-body flinch that sends him spinning on his heel. He misses knocking over Darcy’s drink by inches, but that doesn’t stop him from taking out an entire stack of case files. They crash to the floor, unsorted papers flying in seventeen different directions.

Behind him, hand still wrapped around his wrist, Darcy moans. “You’re so picking that up, later,” she tells him—then tugs on his arm.

“Darcy—” he starts to say, but she tugs again, harder. When he doesn’t budge, she jerks her whole body like she’s trying to ram through a closed door, and Clint stumbles half a step. Her flip-flops slip on the thin carpet. “What’re you—”

“God, do you not get subtle?” she demands. She releases his wrist and drops her hands to her hips, instead. The glare she levels at him is almost murderous. “I’m trying to get you to come with me —”

“Really.”

“—without being all . . . ” She raises a hand and sort of—wiggles it, vaguely, in front of Clint’s chest. She’s wearing a bunch of plastic jelly bracelets that jump up and down her arm the longer she waves at him. “Well, without being all you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I—have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, would you just—” And Clint’s not sure whether it’s because he’s still staring at her in confusion, or because her patience really is that thin today (as though she’s a saint every other day), but whatever her reason, Darcy grabs his wrist again. She throws her full body weight into the next tug, and even though Clint doesn’t budge, he swears his shoulder strains in its socket.

“Okay, okay, don’t dislocate my arm!” he announces, and Darcy’s fingernails dig into his skin when she shushes him. She drags him down the hallway, checking around corners and poking her head into every empty office. Bruce’s gone, and so are Natasha and Steve, which is all kinda . . . unnerving, in a way. When they get to the closed conference room door, she raises her free hand and rests her knuckles against the door.

“What—” Clint starts to say, but Darcy purses her lips together and sends him the world’s iciest look. He closes his mouth and watches as she taps her knuckles against the door. Once, then twice, then a whole, complicated rhythm, perfectly timed and creepily close to— “Is that the ‘Star-Spangled Banner’?”

“Peggy picked it,” Darcy replies with a shrug, like that’s an actual explanation. The lock clicks, and then, the door slides inward. Clint thinks he catches a glimpse of Jane behind it, or at least her hair, but then Darcy’s dragging him inside and—

“T ook you long enough!” Stark announces, spreading out his arms and flicking fried rice across the table. There’re cartons of Chinese food all over the place—Clint spots lo mien, three kinds of rice, beef with broccoli, chicken smothered in some kind of sticky sauce, and an entire tray of eggrolls—plus paper plates, napkins, and silverware. “I was going to send out a search party, maybe activate my GPS to hunt you down—”

“You know, it’s a little creepy when you imply you’ve . . . planted GPS on people,” Bruce points out.

“—put in a missing persons report with Sitwell or somebody.” He frowns, brow crumpling, and glances over at Pepper. “He can do that, right?”
Pepper doesn’t look up from her plate. “No.”

“Somebody else, then. Maybe Rhodey. Rhodey’d do it if I asked nice.” He nods to himself, satisfied, and then gestures to the table. “Sit down, have some free lunch. Peggy’s just about to tell us a story.”

Us, Clint realizes after a few seconds, is . . . just about everyone from the office. Jane and Thor are sharing a plate of lo mien, Natasha’s reviewing case files and glaring at Stark every time rice gets flicked in her direction, and Pepper’s breaking into an enormous egg roll. Bruce has his fork in one hand and a statute book in the other, his eyes tipped down and reading. Darcy bends over the table for a plate and a fork, then asks Pepper to pass the steamed rice, and—

“The smoke and mirrors was over lunch?” Clint demands. Stark glances up, blinking, and Clint throws up his hands. “I’m in trial this afternoon! I don’t have time to be—dragged around like in a spy movie, I need to—”

“Actually,” Stark interrupts, “you’re here for a story. Which, I’ll admit, doesn’t sound as exciting as, I don’t know, reading over scribbled notes that all point to the fact that you’re going to win and Bucky’s going to lose, but bear with me.” He shifts around in his chair, pointing his fork at Clint. “You’ll want to hear this story.”

At the end of the table, there’s a quiet sigh. Clint looks over just in time to watch Peggy cross her arms over her blouse. “I didn’t agree to this,” she says, and even though it’s the first Clint’s heard her say it, it sounds like a reminder.

Stark’s ignores her, his attention completely focused on Clint. “Second-biggest news of the month. You can run, but you can’t hide. Especially since they’ve been in there for—” He glances up at the clock. “—two hours, now. Two hours means they’re charging it.”

“Or that they ordered lunch,” Natasha says. She takes the second half of Pepper’s eggroll off her plate. “Not everything has to be a conspiracy.”

Pepper flinches at the obvious bait—and rightfully so, ‘cause as soon as Natasha bites into the eggroll, Stark launches into the opening of what Clint’s pretty sure’ll be a long, long argument about— Well, about whatever the hell’s going on behind Stark’s crazy “man behind the conference room door” act. He rolls his eyes and reaches to nab an eggroll—a snack, he tells himself, for the walk back to his office (where he does have to review his notes, regardless of who the jury’s siding with at this point)—when he finally notices that they’re missing people.

Not just Hill and Coulson, who normally miss out on the group lunches, but Steve. Steve, who’s only ever skipped out on lunch when he’s had plans with his husband or last-minute charges to file. Steve, who’s still a fifteen-year-old boy at heart, the way his face lights up for free food. Steve, who once got into a twenty-minute argument with Stark ‘cause he’d wanted to order Chinese and Stark was sick of the stuff.

Clint presses his hand against the tabletop. He thinks, initially, he’s just set it there, casually, but all the plastic silverware clatter together and the loose grains of rice jump. Stark’s lips stop moving, Natasha stops chewing, Bruce looks up from the statutes he’s reviewing, and Thor stabs Jane’s hand instead of a piece of chicken.

“Ow!” she squeaks, elbowing Thor.

Maybe Darcy’s right, Clint thinks. Maybe he doesn’t do “subtle.”
He wets his lips. “Nothing—happened with the Killgrave case, did it?” he asks. He tries to keep his voice neutral, as steady as he can, but—

“Oh, no,” Bruce replies, but Stark says, “Depends on your definition of ‘happened,’” in the same breath. Bruce’s eyes dart over, a half-chiding little look, but Stark just snaps his fingers. “Peggy?”

Peggy’s arms are still crossed over her chest. She rolls her lips together, worrying them into a tight line. “You know how Maria feels about sharing anything before it’s official,” she says tightly.

“She has a point,” Jane offers.

“And you—all of you—know how Tony is until he gets his way,” Pepper points out. The last bite of eggroll crunches between her teeth.

Jane frowns, but, after a few seconds, nods solemnly. Her eyes lift to Peggy, and almost every other eye in the room follows suit.

Peggy tightens her arms. “I really—”

“It will not leave this room,” Thor promises. His tone reminds Clint of a soldier promising to take care of his wounded friend’s wife, or something. He raises his fork in his fist and claps it to his chest. “You have our word.”

Stark points across the table. “See?” he demands. “His word, Peg.”

“Somehow,” she retorts, “I’m not particularly reassured.” She sits there for a moment, her jaw tight and her eyes trained directly on Stark. It’s a little like a playground staring contest, Clint thinks, except here, it’s not over somebody’s double-chocolate pudding.

He’s trying to take Bruce’s oh, no to heart while he waits for one of them to crack. He has to, because anything else assumes something’s gone wrong with the Killgrave case and that it’s not going ahead. But then Coulson’s stricken expression in the courtroom floods his belly all over again, and he can’t help but think—

Peggy, finally, sighs. “Ballistics from a convenience store robbery last Tuesday came back this morning,” she says. Her voice is flat but quiet, like something’s caught in the back of it. It barely carries across the conference room. “It’s the gun from Community Mutual.”

Stark hoots and pumps a fist in the air. Bruce grumbles, lifts his ass off the seat of his chair, and pulls out his wallet.

Pepper, across the table from them, frowns. “They’re sure?”

“Absolutely sure,” Peggy replies, nodding. “And even though Raynor still won’t cooperate, Christensen picked him out of a photo array last night. Maria and Phil have been reviewing the video and trying to figure out if they have enough evidence to charge him with everything. But he was out of the way of so many cameras . . .” She shrugs.

Darcy swallows mouthful that Clint’s pretty sure she didn’t chew. “Wow,” she whispers.

Bruce slaps a ten-dollar bill into Stark’s palm, earning the world’s smuggest smile in return, but Clint . . . The only word Clint can find, the only word in his entire vocabulary he can—summon to the surface and force out of his mouth, is:

“What?”
Everyone glances up at him where he’s still standing half-bent over the table, his palm pressed against the wood and his eyes roaming the room. Except they’re not glances, not really. No, they’re stares, wide-eyed and opened-lipped, like he’s absolutely insane for asking the question. Stares like haven’t been . . . speaking in tongues about people and banks (at least, he assumes Community Mutual is a bank, but for all he knows it could be the official name of some local YMCA) he’s never heard of.

Yeah.

‘Cause in this situation, right now, he’s the crazy one, and the rest of them are just—

“Oooh,” Darcy drawls, the vowels stretching as wide as her eyes. “You don’t remember the Community Mutual robbery, do you?”

“Should I?”

“It—was a pretty big case, when it happened,” Bruce explains, tucking his wallet away. He leans back in his chair, but his eyes are on Clint’s face. “About—three years ago?”

“Three and a half,” Peggy replies, and reaches for the carton of fried rice.

“Right.” Bruce nods to himself, like he’s reassembling the story in his head. “A group of masked robbers hit three locations of Community Mutual Bank in a week. Two of them—”

“Raynor and Christensen,” Stark offers.

“—were . . . pretty unsophisticated about the whole thing.” Bruce almost smiles. “They looked right at the cameras, they used Raynor’s car, they didn’t clean up after themselves. The third, he was sort of the . . . ringleader, I guess you could say. And he got away.”

“He’d hired the other two,” Natasha says. She breaks an eggroll of her own in half, but hands part of it to Pepper without looking. “Christensen got cold feet in interrogation and admitted to the whole thing. Said the ringleader picked them, paid them—and then left them to take the fall.”

“Pretty brilliant,” Stark assesses.

“Pretty selfish,” Bruce replies. Stark gapes, sputters, and then immediately launches into a hand-wavingly passionate speech about crime and selfishness. There’re probably another hundred topics on the agenda, too, from the wildness in Stark’s eyes.

Bruce stabs a piece of sticky-sauced chicken with his fork and, without any fanfare, shoves it into Stark’s open mouth.

Stark coughs, freezes—and then starts chewing, instead.

Clint’s still frowning. Actually, he’s not sure he ever stopped. He can feel where his forehead is tight, his brow pinching into deep creases. “What . . . does this have to do with the Killgrave case?”

“Nothing, really,” Peggy replies. Her blouse flutters when she shrugs. “The only problem is that the Community Mutual case is Maria’s. She handled everything, start-to-finish, when we first prosecuted Raynor and Christensen. If they’re charging someone as the third man, she’ll be taking it over.”

Jane glances up from her plate, and Clint watches her face turn—soft. Well, more like kind, really, because Jane is this weird sort of perpetually kind. She’s trained and re-trained file clerks and
Clint figures the infinite patience comes outta dating Thor. “It means,” she explains, “that Maria probably won’t stay on the Killgrave case. Loki’s already filed a speedy trial motion—”

“Of course he has,” Stark mutters, and Thor’s eyes narrow in his direction.

“—and they’re both pretty high-impact. They’re not the kind of cases you can balance against each other.”

“And so,” Stark says, tipping his chair back on two legs, “the second half of your bad bromance is caught in quite a pickle.”

“We’re not in a—” Clint starts to retort, but then he stops. He feels his face tip into a completely involuntary frown. “Why would Coulson be in a—pickle?” he asks, instead. “Everybody here handles cases solo all the time. I’m in trial today, Natasha’s in trial on Monday, it’s not like—”

“Loki . . . isn’t your average defense attorney,” Bruce interrupts gently. The words sort of tip-toes into the middle of Clint’s sentence, but Bruce only ever interrupts if something’s important. “He’s—challenging. And if you combine that with the amount of press this case is getting, and the resources the defense team’s going to have at their disposal—”

“Pretty much unlimited resources,” Stark points out, holding up a finger. “Killgrave’s almost as rich as me. Just, you know, not as classy.”

Bruce purses his lips, but Clint can see the smile nudging at the corners of his mouth. “The point is,” he finishes, “Coulson’s going to need a second chair.”

“Which means Steve,” Stark adds, shrugging. “Coulson’s got, like, a—competence boner for him or something. Trust me. It’ll be Steve.”

Clint nods, kinda—dumbly, really, and finally leans in to take an eggroll. There’s a thousand things he wants to ask, things about the Killgrave case and this bank robbery of Maria’s, about Laufeyson’s methods as a defense attorney and what’ll actually happen when they’re up against a rich defense team and a richer client, about the “bromance” comment and why Darcy can’t just leave well-enough alone . . . But his thoughts are all—muddled together. They sit in a clump in the back of his brain, and no matter how hard he tries, they don’t surface.

He can’t do this now, he realizes. He’s in trial, for god’s sake. He should be reviewing testimony and planning the direct on his next witness, not—

Not this.

He mutters something that’s halfway to “thanks” and leaves the conference room, eggroll between his fingers. Back in his office, he drops onto the window ledge, adjusts the throw pillow, and finally—mercifully—climbs into his work. There’s no worrying about the Killgrave case, not in his notes about Feldman’s testimony. There’s no questions about whether Barney’s going to text him again before Wednesday, whether he’ll run into Derek Tracy or another member of Tracy family in the hallway, nothing. He’s good at this, at his trial and the questions he’s written for it, and the rest of the world fades into white noise as he flips through his legal pad.

Twenty minutes later, Darcy lets herself into his office. “Not now,” he tells her, but that doesn’t stop the smacking of her flip-flops against the carpet. He heaves a sigh as he looks up, ready to snap—

But then, his shoulders slump.
She holds out a half-empty carton of lo mien. There’s a fork sticking out of it. “It’s clean,” she promises.

Clint feels the cold fingers of guilt grip onto something in his chest. “Thanks.”

She nods, her soft curls bouncing, but doesn’t . . . move. She just stands there, hovering, while he wraps the noodles around the fork and takes his first bite. They’re lukewarm, but still tasty.

He’s on the third mouthful when he finally asks, “What?”

“Well—” she starts, but then she hesitates. Her shoulders lift and fall in a half-hearted shrug. “I don’t know what’s going on with you,” she finally says, “with your brother and with Coulson and everything, but . . . It matters that it’s happening, okay?”

He swallows a clump of noodles. They feel like a stone sinking slowly down into his stomach. “Nothing’s ‘going on,’” he assures her. He watches her purse her lips. “Really.”

She watches him for a second, frowning and silent. He rolls his eyes in annoyance and looks back down at his legal pad, but it’s hard to focus. And not just because Darcy’s staring a hole in the side of his head, either.

No, it’s hard to focus because he’s starting to realize—

Darcy throws up her hands. “You are such an awful liar,” she decides.

—transparent he can be.

He flinches when she slams the door behind her.

And he leaves the unfinished lo mien on the corner of his desk when he heads back down to the courtroom a half-hour later.

==

That afternoon, Jacob Allen Walker is charged with three counts of aggravated robbery in connection with Community Mutual bank case.

Clint hears about it in the hallway after his trial lets out for the day. Peter Parker and a handful of other reporters are clumped together in front of a courtroom, practically vibrating over the “breaking news.” He grips his folder a little harder than he needs to when he walks past them, his jaw set in a tight line.

A three-year-old bank robbery isn’t breaking news, he catches himself thinking while he waits for the elevator. His foot taps against the tile, and when he realizes how much annoyance is coursing through him, he knocks the toe of his shoe against the wall to still it. But Killgrave’s not being paraded around the courthouse in shackles, today, and Stark’s been chewed out one too many times to make any more indelicate comments on the judicial complex’s front steps.

There are two court clerk employees—young women, younger than even Darcy or Jane—on the elevator when Clint gets on. They’re both texting and laughing quietly to themselves at first, but as the car starts to rise, Clint feels them stealing glances at him. The blonde murmurs something to
her friend as they step off at the fourth floor.

Clint pushes the “door close” button a little too hard, and the friend looks suddenly disappointed.

It’s not their fault, he reminds himself, or the resporters’. And it’s not Bucky’s fault that there was a traffic accident on the interstate and Reed Richards, the lab guy, was a half-hour late to testify. It’s not Judge English’s fault that half the jurors had families to get home to and couldn’t stay late for closing arguments. He can’t control the way things sometimes fragment without his permission. It’s just—the way life works, you know?

When he steps off the elevator, Stark and Bruce are pushing through the office’s wide double doors. Bruce smiles and raises his hand in a sort of half-hearted finger wave, but Stark doesn’t notice.

No, Stark’s spreading out his arms like he’s trying to take flight.

“Six months, my friend! Six months, and either there will be a bouncing bundle of baby—what’re the muscles in your upper arms called, again?”

Bruce shrugs, but Clint offers, “Biceps?”

Stark whirls around on his heel, blinks at him for a half second, and then snaps his fingers. “See? Barton knows what I’m talking about.”

“Clint accidentally walked into a conversation and answered one of your rhetorical questions,” Bruce replies, hiking his bag up on his shoulder. “That’s a . . . little different from agreeing.”

“But he agrees! Right?”

Clint opens his mouth, searching for an answer, but—nothing really comes out. He glances over at Bruce, who raises his eyebrows and purses his lips into this tiny, almost incorrigible grin. Clint’s pretty sure that, in elementary school, Bruce’s grin encouraged a lot of other boys into very bad behavior.

But then, he dips his head and shoves his hands in his pockets.

“I don’t actually know what you’re talking about,” Clint finally says, “but I’ll cut my losses and side with Bruce.”

The corners of Bruce’s eyes crinkle, but Stark just scoffs. “See, no. No,” he says, again, and points a finger at Bruce. At Bruce, then at Clint, and then back at Bruce. “You can bet on all the losing horses you want, but you gotta know what you’re up against here. ‘Cause this one, your little—partner in crime—” His finger dances in a circle, and Clint’s gotta admit, it’s the first time he’s actually grinned all day. “—thinks there’s no way Thor and Jane’ll make a little mini-Thor until they’re, like, married or something.”

“No ‘or something,’ just married,” Bruce corrects. Stark jabs him in the chest once, then a second time. Bruce catches his hand on his attempt at a third. “Tony thinks that the office is more . . . exciting, I guess you could say—”

“I do say,” Stark chimes in.

“—if we participate in some—friendly wagers.”

“Nothing high-stakes, mind you,” Stark clarifies. He shakes off Bruce’s grip to put up both hands.
“Just, you know, small things. When will the coffee machine finally break, when will Peggy slap the intern who keeps watching her ass when she walks by, when will Pepper finally admit that she’s sleeping with Natasha?” Clint’s mouth drops open in surprise, and Bruce—Still standing next to and totally ignored by Stark, Bruce nods solemnly. “Current wagers include Darcy’s next wardrobe malfunction, Maria wearing her hair down, and you finally hooking up with Coulson.”

Clint stares for a second, wide-eyed and—blank-faced, mostly, but Bruce just puts up a hand. “Don’t,” he says, shaking his head. He grabs Stark by the cuff of his expensive shirt and starts dragging him toward the elevators. “You start down the rabbit hole, you’ll never come up again, and you’ve got closing arguments on Monday.”

“Coulson and I aren’t—” Clint tries to say. Problem is, the words catch in the back of his throat and destroy almost all his credibility. Because instead of focusing all his energy on the trial, he’s spent his day wondering whether he’d run into Coulson, and whether they’d get a chance to set up that promised third lunch. No man in his thirties, he thinks, gets—caught up like this, or obsesses like a teenage girl.

Except, of course, for him.

He’s just doing it . . . quietly.

“By the way,” Stark says suddenly, and Clint realizes with a blink that he’s been talking the whole time. He swings as Stark’s disappearing behind the closing elevator doors. Except then, he sticks his (expensive Italian leather) briefcase out in front of him. The doors sandwich it, stutter, and slide open again. “Tomorrow night, my place, snack-to-share Rock Band party. Bring your A-game.”


“Uh, because we caught a psycho-killer and we need to celebrate?” Stark retorts, spreading his hands in front of him. “Because my fridge is empty and my site-to-home delivery doesn’t come until Sunday? Because you haven’t lived until you’ve heard Bruce sing ‘Hit Me With Your Best Shot’?” Bruce rolls his eyes. “You in?”

“I have closing arguments on Monday,” Clint points out. It’s a limp excuse, but he’s not entirely sure he’s up to another of Stark’s booze-laden parties. Especially not when he’s waiting to hear from Barney, or from—

“C’mon,” Stark whines, shoving his bag between the doors again. Clint watches them slide back open but doesn’t say anything. “Bucky’s making wings, Pepper promised to do something from the 80s, I think Thor’ll do a couple songs in Swedish—”

“Phil’s coming,” Bruce notes casually.

Clint presses his lips together, but his chin rises. Stark rattles off another half-dozen features of Rock Band night, but he’s not listening. No, he’s meeting Bruce’s eyes. Bruce smiles, this tiny—chameleon of an expression, and nods slowly.

“Sure,” Clint says after a couple seconds. Stark’s mouth snaps shut in the middle of a word, and he—stares. He’s still staring when the elevator doors start closing again. “Why not? I’m in.”

And even though the doors do close, this time, Clint swears he can hear Stark’s hoot of victory through them.
The next night, Clint remarks, “You could just talk to him, you know.”

The Rock Band party, it’s—not bad, all things considered. The surround-sound in Stark’s living room is nearly deafening, even from the far side of the island in the kitchen, but it’s that pleasant kind of “too loud.” There’re snacks everywhere: Bucky’s hot wings (even though Bucky’s not there—“Dot’s got a cold,” Steve’d explained, “and the only parent she wants when she’s sick is Buck.”), a massive plate of tortilla roll-ups, fresh fruit and veggies (but no strawberries), cheese cubes and crackers, a bowl of olives, and a two-tiered platter of brownies.

“Jane’s,” Thor’d announced when he set them on the counter . . . and took two of the biggest ones right off the plate. “I must test them to make sure they’re acceptable.”

Jane’d smacked him and reminded him that he’d licked the bowl.

Clint’s gotta admit, there’s—something cute, about those two.

Almost everyone from the office is there, aside from Peggy—“Had a date!” Darcy reported gleefully—Hill . . . and Coulson. Bruce’d delivered the news with a little frown, swirling ranch dressing around on his plate with a carrot. “There were a lot of Saturday charges, this week,” he’d explained, not looking up. “And I guess Loki’s filed a motion to disqualify Judge Hammersmith that he’s in a rush to reply to by Monday.”

Clint’d nodded, swigging his beer, and shrugged it off. He’d watched Darcy bounce her way through “Pretty Fly For a White Guy” and forced himself to ground his heel into his disappointment—when Stark’d started bickering with Bruce.

Bickering that’d ended in Stark smearing ranch dressing on Bruce’s lower lip (and chin) with his thumb, and Bruce smacking his hand before he stormed off in a way that—wasn’t all that stormy.

Which is why, with a shrug, Clint suggested that Stark actually talk to the man.

Stark’s whole body jerks, the second he hears Clint’s voice, and Clint watches him twist away from the bowl of ranch like somebody’d just shoved a gun in his back. Clint smiles and tips his beer bottle a few inches, pointing toward Bruce’s retreating back. “You can’t just pull his hair forever,” he points out. “Cause either he hauls off and punches you, or he runs for it.”

Stark doesn’t move, not right away. He stands there and frowns, instead, his eyes just narrowed enough that Clint knows he’s tip-toeing on the edge of a massive Stark-brand rant. “Talk to him,” he repeats.

“Yeah. Maybe end it in wanna get dinner?”

“Mmm.” Stark walks around Clint and snags a handful of olives from the bowl. “What do we do about the log in your eye, then?”

“I— What?”

“Two guys,” Stark says, popping an olive into his mouth. “First guy says to the second guy, ‘Hey, listen, you’ve got a splinter in your eye. Looks pretty bad, lemme pull it out for you.’ And the second guy, splinter guy, he looks back and says, ‘You know, I get that you wanna help me out with my splinter, but it’s gonna be pretty hard to do when you’ve got a whole log stuck in yours.’”
Clint pauses, beer bottle halfway to his lips. “Did you just—quote scripture at me?”

“Godspell, actually.” Stark tosses an olive a couple feet into the air, catches it, and then looks back at Clint. He can kinda guess, right then, why Stark’s undefeated at oral argument. The way he stares Clint down, the way his eyes never waver, that has to scare the shit outta judges. “So. What’re you gonna do about your log?”

“I don’t have a log.”

Stark rolls his eyes. “Please. You think nobody’s noticed how you trail around after Coulson with those great big puppy-dog eyes and that kiss me pout? Think we missed how sad you looked when Bruce told you Coulson’d cancelled?” Clint feels warmth in his cheeks, the kind he can’t blame on beer and Bucky’s hot wings. He lowers his eyes and clears his throat, trying to push it away. “The over-under on you actually doing something about it’s getting kind of ridiculous. I think Natasha could finance a new car on her Barton pussies out and never says a damn thing winnings.”

Clint throws back a swallow of beer, straightens his spine, and looks over at Stark. “I thought we were talking about you and Bruce.”

“No, see, not so much. Because the natural extension about talking about me, Bruce, and our not-something is talking about you, Coulson, and your not-something. And the difference between our not-somethings is that mine’ll actually become a something. Yours, I’m not so sure.”

“So I should start—leaving him post-its on the ceiling?” Clint retorts. He’s trying not to grip his beer bottle with white-knuckled fingers, but he knows it’s not working. “Steal his lunch outta the break room? Give him a catcus?”

“If I thought any of those would work, I’d personally run interference for you.” Stark stretches to grab a few more olives. Clint’s pretty sure he’s the only person who eats the olives. “But you and I both know that Coulson isn’t Bruce. And what you need to do to get into those pressed-within-an-inch-of-their-life slacks is a lot different than what I need to do.”

Clint raises an eyebrow. “You really think poking Bruce like kid on the playground’s gonna win him over?” he asks.

Stark grins. “Watch and learn.”

Before Clint can ask exactly what it is he’s learning, Stark chucks an olive from the kitchen and into the living room. He almost protests, ‘cause it’s heading towards Natasha and that’d only end in tears, but then the olive pings someone in the back of the head.

Bruce, actually.

The olive pings Bruce in the back of the head.

Bruce turns, and Clint braces himself for one of the explosions that he sometimes hears echo down the hall, the ones where Bruce loses his temper to the point of burning everything down and starting again. Except then, Bruce sees Stark, and Stark’s stupid grin, and his expression softens down to—something. Clint’s not sure what it is, but it’s almost . . . amused. It presses at the corners of Bruce’s lips before he turns back to where he’s debating the next song selection with Natasha and Steve.

When Clint looks back at Stark, he’s holding an olive between his teeth. He grins, lets it drop into his mouth, and says, “See? I don’t even need help with my splinter.”
Clint smiles a little and drops his eyes. He watches his beer bottle. “Guess not.”

“Right. So.” And Stark waits, waits in the way only an attorney can, until Clint glances up again. “What’re we gonna do about your log?”

He opens his mouth, ready to respond, but the first two chords from the speakers reveal the next song to be “Don’t Stop Believing.” “Sorry, hold that thought,” Stark says, and vaults over where Butterfinger’s sleeping on the kitchen floor to get in front of the TV. Bruce laughs and dangles the microphone out of Stark’s reach, but a hip-bumping scuffle later, the story of a small-town girl living in a lonely world is being belted through the house.

Steve head-bangs while he plays the drums, too.

Clint climbs over the back of the couch to watch and ends up settling there, beer in one hand and Dummy under the other, head on Clint’s lap. He lets Stark’s voice fill the room, then Jane’s, and then Pepper’s . . . but all he’s really thinking about is the conversation about the log and the splinter. He takes out his phone, checks it, and leaves it balanced on his thigh. He doesn’t do anything with it, of course, just stares it down for a—Well. For longer than anybody should.

At least, until he texts, you missed a good party somewhere in the middle of “Here It Goes Again.”

It’s less than a minute later when the phone vibrates in his hand. He jumps, and Dummy raises his eyebrows disapprovingly before he settles back against Clint’s leg. Saturday charges went long and I’m finishing a response motion to file on Monday, Coulson replies. I’m sorry I missed you.

Clint smiles, a little, and drums his fingers against the side of his phone. A sip of his beer later, and all he can think to type is, there’s always next time.

Or tomorrow. Lunch and a walk? It’s only supposed to be 85.

He snorts. only, he texts back. The song ends, and Thor hoots in victory at the score. Everyone else laughs while they pass around the plastic instruments around, and—

“Your turn,” Natasha decides. When Clint looks up, the microphone’s dangling all of two feet away from his nose. He feels his phone buzz on his thigh, but then Natasha tosses the mic the rest of the way. He’s forced to either catch it or let it nail the dog in the head.

He chooses the first option. “You can’t just watch all night,” she chides, hands on her hips.

“I—don’t really sing,” he says dumbly.

“Then play guitar or something,” she retorts. “But play.” But then Pepper’s wanders past, en route to the snack table. She snags Natasha by a belt loop and drags her along, leaving Clint with the microphone.

Across the living room, Stark raises two knowing eyebrows in Clint’s direction. Clint laughs, silently, and shakes his head.

When he activates the display on his phone, the message waiting says, That’s not an answer.

“‘Ballroom Blitz’ or ‘Black Hole Sun’?” Thor asks, glancing over at him.

“In a second,” Clint answers, and thumbs the screen to reply.

you already knew the answer, he texts back. i’ll meet you at the pancake café at noon.
Later that night, after they’ve exhausted what feels like all the downloadable content for the game, and Bruce’s throat is raw from “Hit Me With Your Best Shot” and a half-dozen other ‘80s songs, Clint picks his phone up off the coffee table.

There’s a message waiting.

*That doesn’t mean I don’t also like hearing it*, it reads, and Clint swears he can hear Coulson in his head. *I’ll see you at noon.*

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“Don’t get me wrong,” Coulson says, putting up a hand. “They were quality bootlegs. The Chinese subtitles were almost accurate. But as wise purchasing decisions go . . . ”

He shrugs, and Clint laughs. Coulson frowns, then elbows him, and it just cracks Clint up even more. “Sorry,” he apologizes, but it’s hard to sound sincere when you’re still laughing. He shakes his head. “I’m just—imagining your face when you came back from Turkey, bag filled with your dirt-cheap VHS tapes—”

“I’m not sure I like your tone, Mr. Barton,” Coulson grouses.

“—and realized you’d just pirated your way through your law school semester abroad.”

Sunday’s this gorgeous day, warm and breezy, and the sunlight catches the smile lines around Coulson’s eyes. Clint’s pretty sure he should feel too-full from the blueberry pancakes and extra side of bacon, that he should want an afternoon nap instead of a walk around the park behind the judicial complex, but he . . . doesn’t. Not when, every time he glances over, there’s Phil Coulson in his jeans and a faded gray-blue t-shirt. Not when, every time a bicyclist zips by down the sidewalk, they step together and their bare arms brush.

He’d woken up early, scribbling notes for his closing statement tomorrow, but he’s not sure he remembers any of the words he’d spent all morning perfecting. He’s too busy soaking in the sun, the summer heat, and—

“When do I get to hear a story about you?” Coulson asks, and Clint blinks. Coulson’s shoulders lift under his t-shirt. “You know my dirty little secret,” he jokes, smiling, “and my secret former life at the ethics committee.”

“Funnier now that I know you’re a pirate,” he points out, and Coulson’s elbow finds its way into the soft part of his side. His tiny squirm brings an irresistible light to Coulson’s eyes.

“I think it’s about time you shared.”

The way he says it, says the word *share*, it—kinda catches Clint off guard. He shoves his hands in his back pockets and tips his head up. The sun’s bright, but it’s shaded by the branches above, full of green leaves. The park’ll be a nice place to visit in the fall. “You know pretty much everything about me,” he points out. He doesn’t really glance back at Coulson. “I mean, you’re the guy who memorized my résumé.”

“I didn’t memorize it.”
“Sure about that?”

“Yes, but don’t start asking me specific questions. Just in case I remember the answers.”

Clint glances over in time to catch the grin, and— He tries to keep his expression neutral, just this once, but the grin does something to the pit of his belly. He can’t help but grin right back. He nudges Coulson’s arm, just like they’ve been doing for the last ten minutes, and Coulson counters by stroking fingers along his elbow.

It’s a whisper of touch, but Clint almost forgets how to walk.

He pulls in a breath, holds it, then lets it out. “What do you want to know?” he asks, glancing over.

“Whatever you’re ready to tell me,” Coulson replies. He shrugs, but there’s—something tight caught up inside it. It’s the shrug of somebody who cares a lot more than he’s willing to let on. It’s . . . It’s the one shrug Clint’d never expected, not from Phil Coulson, and it makes his chest feel tight.

He nods, a little, and watches the sidewalk. His thoughts stumble together, tripping into one another. For the first time, he’s—uncomfortable, kinda, around Coulson. He’s uncomfortable in the silence, ‘cause there’s this element of waiting behind it. There’re a thousand things he could say, a thousand stories he could tell, but—

It’s like poker, kind of. Your bets get too high too fast, you might as well just flash your hand at the table and get it over with.

The sidewalk meanders, curving around a tree, and when Clint glances up again the full majesty of the judicial complex’s looming over them. It’s a massive building, wider at the top than at the bottom. He wonders if, with enough tipping his head back, he can pick Fury’s office out of the gleaming silver windows.

“I never thought I’d be a lawyer.”

He doesn’t even realize he’s said it—that the words are real, instead of in his head—till he feels Coulson’s eyes on him. He stops right there, in the middle of the sidewalk, and tries to re-collect his thoughts. They feel pretty scattered, all out of arms’ reach, and he looks away from the building.

The problem is, looking back at Coulson means that Coulson’s eyes are waiting for him. They’re soft eyes, fully present, and Clint—

He’s not used to this feeling, the anxious, greedy, heady feeling, that’s climbing up his throat.

He swallows around it.

“My folks died when I was in grade school,” he says. He considers glancing away, staring at the sidewalk or a tree or—anything else. The problem is, he can’t. Not when he has Coulson’s full attention. Not when, for a few seconds, he feels like he’s at the center of some . . . tiny world that belongs just to them. “My brother and I, we lived in a— I dunno, Bruce’d call it a group home, but they called it an orphanage. Whatever it was, we lived there ‘till one of my mom’s cousins got his act together enough to take us in.”

He leaves out the part where he’s not sure whether “Cousin Trick” was really related to them—or how a guy who’d lived a long way from the right side of town’d convinced Iowa social services to
let him take in the two fucked-up kids who’d lost their parents.

Coulson’s lips part, just by a couple centimeters, but he doesn’t say anything. He pulls in a little breath, instead, and Clint—Clint just shrugs, shaking his head. “Anyway, I— I was a kid, and I sure as hell didn’t know what I wanted to be. But sometimes, when Trick—our cousin—was working night shift and I couldn’t sleep, I’d watch old episodes of Perry Mason. Or, a couple times, 12 Angry Men. The old one, not the one with the guy from Stand and Deliver.”

And god, is he glad to see that quiet look on Coulson’s face break and turn into a smile. And not some quiet, lost little pity-smile, either, but a real one, one that finds Coulson’s eyes. Clint knows, mostly from practice, how to crawl his way back up from a lot of expressions. He knows how to recover from surprise, fear, disappointment, and even disgust. But pity?

He’s not sure he’d ever find his footing again, after pity. Not with Phil Coulson.

He wets his lips, forces himself to swallow. “It’s just— I mean, I’m a long way from the orphanage in Iowa now, y’know?”

It’s a rhetorical question, one he—sends into the air like a balloon he’s lost hold of; but Coulson answers, “Yeah, you are.” It’s soft, soft enough that Clint kinda thinks the words belong only to him, and he forces himself to breathe around the sudden tightness in his chest and belly. There’s a thousand more parts to the story, parts he wants to stumble through and share, but he can’t.

Half because they’re caught in the back of his throat—

And half because Coulson puts a hand on his side.

It’s an inch, maybe two, above where his t-shirt meets his jeans, far enough north that it’s more his waist than his hip, and his breath catches at the feel of it. At the size and weight of Coulson’s palm pressing against him.

He tips his head down and watches, for an instant, just to—check. To make sure he’s not hallucinating actual touch, not ‘cause he’s some kind of blushing virgin waiting for his wedding night or whatever cliché you want to use, but because . . .

‘Cause they’re standing in the middle of the park.

‘Cause it’s him, and it’s Coulson, and ‘cause he’s spent the last two months compiling very long lists about why they should never touch like this.

He only realizes that he’s moved when his hand presses against the warmth of Coulson’s bare arm. He stares at his own fingers, feeling a little like they’ve betrayed him. They’re not supposed to be touching, except—

Except he swears his whole body’s thumming, just from the touch. He raises his chin and finds that Coulson—He’s closer, now, than Clint remembers him being. His heart hammers against his ribs, and he finds out when he tries that it’s almost impossible to swallow.

“Boss,” he starts to say, almost automatically.

Coulson rolls his eyes. “The ‘boss’ thing’s going to get a little creepy in about ten seconds,” he counters. There’s a tiny smile nudging at the corners of his mouth, playful and a little—wicked. Clint wants to kiss those corners, erase them with tiny sweeps of his tongue. “You should probably try something else.”
“I like ‘boss,’” Clint returns. He’s still watching the corners of Coulson’s mouth—At least, until he’s watching the whole of his mouth, and memorizing the perfect curve of his bottom lip.

“And I like thinking about how it’d sound if you actually said my name.”

It’s a challenge, Clint knows. He knows even while his fingers spread along Coulson’s arm. Spread, then slide, feeling the shape of his forearm and the curve of his elbow. When they still, curled around Coulson’s bicep, Coulson lets out a soft, open-lipped sigh.

Clint swallows around the lump in his throat again. His stomach’s jumping with his heartbeat, only inches from Coulson’s.

His eyes drift away from Coulson’s mouth and meet his gaze, instead. They look at one another for what feels like a century.

At least, until Clint murmurs the word, “Phil”—and Phil kisses him.

It’s like the kiss is the punctuation to his name, like it’s the period on the end of the one-word sentence, and Clint’s fingers grip his arm. His other hand gropes for purchase, and his fingertips skim against Phil’s stomach and side before they find his hip. It’s not the contact he wanted—he’s not sure what contact he wanted, just that his hip doesn’t feel like it’s enough—but it’s the best he can do. ‘Cause Phil’s pulling at his t-shirt, fingers buried in the fabric, and forcing their bodies together. ‘Cause as soon as the distance between them disappears, Clint forgets about Phil’s hip and focuses on kissing him like the universe is going to shove a crowbar between them any second and force them apart.

It’s the kiss that he wanted the night after Stark’s party, greedy and hungry, punctuated by sighs and a noise in the back of Phil’s throat that drops straight into the front of Clint’s jeans.

It’s the kiss he’s thought about every night since Stark’s party, one that’s kept him up at night, one that he’s spent hours picturing while he laid awake in bed and—

And Phil groans, a sound like sex, when he opens his mouth for Clint’s tongue.

No, Clint decides. No, this is better than any of those other kisses.

And that’s when Clint’s palm starts vibrating.

It takes him a second, maybe more than that, to notice. No, his focus is on Phil’s heat and Phil’s mouth, and he’s pretty sure they’re the ones vibrating. At least, he is, pulsing with the need to keep—feeling Phil.

But the vibration in his palm’s too regular, too mechanical, to be a side-effect of want.

When he pulls back, Phil follows, trying to catch his lips again. For a split-second, Clint’s sure that Phil Coulson’s the sexiest man he’s ever seen.

He forces himself to pull in a breath, but he can’t stop watching Phil’s mouth. “Your phone,” he says, half-stupid. His thumb traces the shape of Phil’s pocket, and Phil presses his hip into the touch.

“I’m pretty sure the world won’t end if I skip answering my phone today,” Phil replies. His lips are parted and look almost kiss-bruised. The way he breathes borders on panting. Clint tries not to think of all the other ways he could make Phil pant.
Phil presses closer to him, close enough that Clint’s sure he feels his—heat, and more than that, against his thigh. Clint manages, “Last time we were out, you answered your phone and booked a murderer.”

“And if Fury’d called ten minutes later, I would’ve hopefully been otherwise occupied.”

There’s this little twist in Phil’s voice when he says it, and Clint— It’s like lightning, he decides, running through his body. It rushes through him, forces all his synapses alight, and he tangles his fingers in the lip of Phil’s pocket to reel him in again.

But the phone goes off again.

Phil groans, and this time, it’s frustrated, almost angry. Clint lets out a breath, this—half-laugh in the back of his throat, and pretends not to watch the way Phil’s hips shift when he reaches to fish out his phone.

He accepts the call and shoves it, almost too roughly, against his ear. “Yeah?” he answers.

He’s trying to sound rushed, Clint thinks.

Instead, he just sounds—breathless.

“Your car’s in the parking lot.” There’s no mistaking Hill’s voice on the other end of the line. Clint’s close enough to hear it—and then to recognize that it’s clipped, tight with annoyance. “Are you in the office?”

Clint grits his teeth to keep from grumbling at the urgency of Maria’s question, but Phil just raises his eyebrows. “I’m on a walk,” he answers. His thumb brushes along Clint’s side. It raises goose bumps all along his arm. He pulls in a breath to keep from pressing his body flush against Phil’s. “Why? Forget your keycard again?”

“Funny,” Hill snipes. Phil works to hide his grin, but the lines on his face still crinkle. “I need to talk to you about Killgrave.”

The sneaky little grin slips away. “Now?”

“I wouldn’t call you on a weekend if I didn’t need you.”

“And here, I thought you missed me.”

A group of teenagers rush by on skateboards, swearing at each other, and they catch Clint’s attention just long enough that he misses Hill’s reply. All he knows is, when he turns back, Phil’s face is serious. His thumb stills, no more lazy strokes.

Clint starts counting the seconds until Phil lets him go.

Except he doesn’t. Instead, he says, “I’ll be there in ten,” and hangs up the phone before Hill can reply. His eyes drift along the length of Clint’s body, along his thin black t-shirt, his shoulders, his neck, and his mouth.

When their eyes finally meet, Phil’s are—soft. “I swear, it isn’t always like this,” he says. He tries to smile, but Clint knows it’s forced. “We charged a couple guys in this old case, and—”


“From Stark?”
“Who else?”

That smile catches Phil’s eyes, at least for a second. He wets his lips, moves his jaw like he’s going to say something, but he—doesn’t. His fingers spread along Clint’s side, and they—watch each other like they’re . . . suspended in time, somehow.

“If I’m late,” he says, finally, “I won’t hear the end of it.”

Clint nods. “Yeah,” he breathes, but—he doesn’t quite let go, either. He should, he knows. He should uncurl his fingers from that warm arm and sharp hip. But even when he loosens his grip, he can’t quite—disengage.

Phil doesn’t move, either, so Clint adds, “I should finish my closing.”

“The jury’s eating from your hand,” Phil replies, smiling.

“How would you know? You missed all the testimony.”

“Trust me. I know.”

It’s supposed to be a throwaway comment, a half-jab, but Clint . . . Clint hears trust me the way most people hear explosions or sirens. The words fill his ears like they’re the only sounds in the universe, and for a second, he can’t focus on anything else. His fingers tighten on Phil’s arm all over again.

Trust is—another one of those things he’s not used to.

He holds on for a few extra seconds, holds on like letting Phil out of his grip right then . . . means something. He holds on like an admission, like his fingers are saying what his voice can’t quite force out: that he absolutely trusts Phil Coulson.

But then, slowly, he lets go.

“I’ll see you at work,” he says, moving to step away—but Phil catches him. His fingers are warm and sure, curled around his wrist, and Clint stops. He’s caught halfway in and halfway out of Phil’s personal space, and he’s not entirely sure what comes next.

He wants kiss Phil again. Are you kidding? He wants to grab Phil by the hips and kiss him until they’re both out of breath. But he’s—not sure this is the right time, for that.

He wonders if there’ll be another “right time.”

“I’m not gonna head for the hills, boss,” he says after a couple seconds. Phil’s still holding on, but silently, and Clint—needs to break the tension, somehow. “I mean, can’t let McLaughlin back on the streets tomorrow, right?”

And that, somehow, it . . . convinces Phil to grin, a little. Clint really likes that grin. “Saving the world, one DUI at a time?”

“Gotta start somewhere,” Clint retorts—and tries to hold only his own tiny grin when Phil finally lets go of his wrist.

He stays there, on the sidewalk, the whole time Phil walks away, his eyes trained his retreating back until there’re too many trees in the way to see him clearly. He doesn’t stay to watch his ass or his thighs in those jeans—though at some point, Clint’s going to suggest those jeans win some kind
of well-deserved award—as much as it is to . . . watch him.

To watch Coulson—Phil—and remind himself that whatever just happened was real.

He forgets what Phil’s hand felt like on his side by the time he’s made it back to his car.

He doesn’t forget the kiss.

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“Mr. Barnes is right,” Clint says the next morning, his fingertips on the lip of the podium. The jurors look fresh-faced and awake, thanks to a weekend off and the industrial-strength coffee Judge English’s assistant brews on trial days. There’s a half-full Styrofoam cup of the stuff sitting on counsel table, waiting for Clint to return. “There’re a lot of funny little inconsistencies in this case, y’know? There’s the one about how his client, Mr. McLaughlin, didn’t look all that drunk. There’s the one about the bottles, which—like Mr. Richards from the crime lab said—Mr. McLaughlin never drank out of. There’s the broken tail-light, the only basis for asking the defendant to step outta his car. But the thing is, none of that actually matters.”

He takes a breath, but not ‘cause he needs it. No, he’s giving the jury a chance to take in that statement, to let it settle in the middle of everything they’ve heard so far. His closing’d started at nine-fifteen, a good ten minutes before the coffee actually started to kick in, and then Bucky’d stood up and picked apart all his arguments, piece by piece. They’d liked Bucky’s closing, liked his story-telling style—hell, Clint’d liked it, too—and now, he’s got his last six minutes to pull Bucky’s story apart.

He’s about to launch into his next sentence when the courtroom door whispers open. His eyes are drawn to it, ‘cause with the podium facing the jury box, the door’s right in the corner of his gaze. A couple jurors track his look, and they all see what he says: a man in a suit who steps in, catches the door, and closes it slowly behind him.

Well, the jurors’ll just think it’s a man. They don’t know Phil Coulson from the pizza guy, after all.

Phil nods, a little, and Clint clears his throat. He spends an extra three seconds shoving thoughts of walks, kisses, and radio-silent Sunday nights out of his mind, and then focuses back in on the jury.

“Here’s what you have to remember,” he says, and he taps the podium with his fingers. “You have to remember that Mr. McLaughlin got pulled over in the middle of the night, and that the officer who pulled him over—a guy with a lot of experience, a guy who’s seen his fair share of drunk drivers, remember—took in the situation and thought, ‘Yeah, this guy might’ve been drinking.’ And maybe he based that on the wrong clues, had the wrong reasons for thinking it. But right reasons or wrong reasons, Mr. McLaughlin fell onto the ground when he got outta the car for a field sobriety test because he was too drunk to stand.”

One of the jurors nods to herself. Good, Clint thinks, and spreads his hands along the sides of the podium.

“Mr. McLaughlin, when asked by Officer Feldman, said that he’d been drinking. Or, sorry, he said: ‘You expect me to be sober? It’s a holiday, I’m not gonna be sober.’” There’s a shifting sound, a body moving against the cheap faux-leather of the counsel chairs, and Clint bites back his
smile. Good. “And Mr. McLaughlin failed that field sobriety test, then took a breath test—where he was over the limit.”

 Twelve pairs of eyes are focused on him, razor-sharp. Well, twelve pairs in the jury box, two pairs at the defense table—and then Phil.

 He forces himself not to think too much about Phil’s eyes.

 “That’s all that you have to remember, ladies and gentlemen, not—bottles and first impressions. You have to remember that the defendant was driving, that the defendant was drunk, and that, beyond a reasonable doubt, the defendant should be found guilty.”

 He pulls in a breath, then lets it out.

 “Thank you,” he concludes, and walks back to counsel table.

 Judge English spends an extra five minutes reading the final jury instructions and explaining the verdict form, and in those five minutes, Clint’s leg can’t stop jumping. He’s acutely aware, suddenly, of every movement in the room: Judge English’s expressions, Bucky’s murmur to his client, the jurors’ coughs and shuffles, and his own impatience. After the jury’s led off to deliberate and the trial assistant has both Clint and Bucky’s cell phone numbers—“I’ll call as soon as the jury’s back,” she promises—court’s in recess.

 Clint comes out of his chair like there’s a spring coiled under it, and Bucky chuckles at him. “Don’t worry,” he says, leaning back in his seat. “You build up an immunity to ‘deliberation nerves.’ It just takes a while.”

 There’s a kindness in Bucky’s eyes, and for a second, his smile’s as warm and half-indulgent as Steve’s. “And I thought it couldn’t be worse than when I was on trial team in law school,” Clint replies, and Bucky laughs. He abandons his file on the prosecution’s table to walk over and offer a hand. “Good trial,” he says, after a few seconds. “No matter how it turns out.”

 Bucky blinks, glances over at his client, and then shrugs. “Good trial,” he replies, and grips Clint’s hand. When he adds, “For a newbie,” Clint grins and rolls his eyes

 He gathers up his file and leaves Bucky to his client, and he’s not really surprised when Phil’s standing in the back of the courtroom, waiting for him. He’s in his normal black suit and white shirt, a far cry from the guy in the soft t-shirt and jeans the day before. Clint likes that version of Phil, he thinks to himself. He likes the guy he can imagine lounging on a couch, mocking bad Saturday afternoon TV.

 “Hey,” he greets, once he’s in the gallery.

 Phil watches him for a few seconds, and then nods. “I made the right choice,” he decides, stepping in front of Clint.

 He pushes the door open, holding it, but Clint frowns. “About what?” he asks.

 “About not texting you last night. I thought I should let you write a killer closing. Turns out, I was right.”

 His grin is—tiny and smug, twisting right up to his eyes, and Clint only just avoids laughing as he walks through the door. He waits for Phil to follow, and once he does, they fall into step on their way down the hall.
It’s not like the park, but it’s still . . . comfortable, in its own way.

There’re defendants, witnesses, cops, and lawyers crowding the hallway, waiting on the dozens of hearings scheduled that morning. Clint jerks his head in the direction of the back stairwell, and Phil agrees with a nod. It’s quieter, through the emergency doors and on up, just their breathing and footfalls echoing off cinderblock and cement.

On the landing between the fourth and fifth floors, Phil says, “I have to ask you something. Well, two things, technically.”

As comments go, it’s—casual, almost a shrug, but Clint stops anyway, one foot on the next step. When he twists back to look at Phil, he’s standing in the middle of the landing. His fingers are curled around the bannister, and Clint thinks back to the moment on the steps outside his apartment building, the first almost-kiss.

He knows now it was an almost-kiss.

He steps back down onto the landing. “The chances of a conversation starting like that turning out good are pretty low, you know,” he says.

Phil snorts and purses his lips together, hiding a perfect little smile. “I don’t know. I’ve heard I do well in the ‘ominous conversation’ department.”

“Maybe they’re just telling you what you wanna hear.”

“And you won’t?”

“Never,” Clint promises, and makes the sign of the cross over his heart. Phil laughs, this bubble of sound that fills the stairwell, and it lifts the serious expression from his face.

At least, until he says, “I want you to sit second chair on the Killgrave case.”

There’s a second, and then a lot of seconds, more than Clint can count, where he just—stares at Phil. The lighting in the stairwell leaves a lot to be desired, and the yellow tint to the bulb above them turns everything this weird amber-brown. Phil’s not smiling or frowning, his eyes aren’t wavering, and Clint—

Clint opens his mouth, ready to say something semi-intelligent, but just ends up asking, “What?”

“Maria’s on the Walker case,” Phil explains. It’s immediate and so smooth that Clint wonders whether he prepared for this, whether he knew Clint’d ask the question. “It’s not going to be easy. She’s working with three-year-old evidence, three-year-old memories, and a defendant who’s been pretty wily up to this point. She needs all the help she can get, and is pulling Steve in as a second.”

“Steve’s got a pretty big case load,” Clint replies, kinda—nodding. He’s not even sure why he’s nodding. He shoves his hands in his pockets. “He can’t second for both of you.”

“And he doesn’t have the eyes you do.” Phil shifts his weight, tightening his grip on the bannister. Clint watches, silent. “Aside from everything else, you— I could ask any of the others to do this, and they would. But none of them have your instincts. And that’s what I need, for this case.”

He nods, again, and—swallows. “I—” He tries, but words fail him and he ends up clearing his throat. Twice, actually, because Phil’s still watching him, and he’s not sure how long he can handle the intensity of his gaze. He already feels like someone’s holding his head under water. “After yesterday—”
“I was ready to ask you Friday,” Phil interrupts. Clint’s head jerks up, and Phil’s mouth curves into an almost imperceptible smile. “But Hill thought you might be a better fit on her case. She decided over the weekend to use Steve.”

“So it’s not—”

“Me trying to get into your pants? No.” His crow’s feet crinkle, and Clint snorts at himself, looking away. He hadn’t meant it—like that, like this was some obscene attempt at a sexual quid-pro-quo, just— “And if this means that—yesterday needs to not happen again, then—”

“I don’t want to stop it from happening again.”

He’s surprised at how fast he says it, or how his murmur manages to drown out every other sound in the stairwell. But the words linger between them, and when Clint looks up, Phil’s watching him.

His face is soft, and his lips— Clint works very hard not to think about those lips, right then.

“I— I’ll second you on the case,” he says, curling his fingers into fists in his pockets. His stomach feels like it’s trying to gnaw a stone into submission, but he ignores the nauseated feeling. “But I don’t— What happens, it happens, and we shouldn’t . . . ”

He can’t find the words, so he shakes his head. Phil smiles, a little. “Agreed,” he replies lightly. When he moves forward on the landing, towards the stairs up, he brushes against Clint’s side. Clint leans into him as he passes, turning the contact into an armless, wordless, half-second hug.

It’s not what he wants, not entirely, but it’s—something.

They’re almost to the sixth floor when Clint remembers, “Two things.”

“Hmm?” Phil asks, glancing over.

“You said you had two things to ask me. What’s the second one?”

“Did I?” he wonders, frowning a little, but Clint can see the spark in his eyes, a playful light that jumps around when he looks over. When they get to their floor, he puts his hand against the door but doesn’t actually open it. Instead, they just stand there, separated by a couple feet on the concrete landing, and—watch each other.

Clint fights back the smile that desperately wants to climb onto his face and . . . waits.

“Well, since I forgot what I originally wanted,” he says in a tone that suggest he hasn’t forgotten anything, “I guess I’ll just have to ask you to come over and discuss the case with me. Wednesday night. Over dinner.”

And Clint— God, he kinda feels like an asshole for doing it, but Clint busts out laughing. He reaches for the door and pushes Phil’s hand out of the way so he can open it for the both of them. “What was your plan if I’d said no to the second chair?” he demands over his shoulder.

Phil grins. “I knew you’d say yes.”

“Bullshit.”

“Maybe, but you can’t prove it, can you?”

Clint laughs again, his voice filling up the hallway outside the D.A.’s office. Phil laughs just a second later, and the sound’s warm enough that Clint’s belly jumps with it. They’re still chuckling
at each other, red-cheeked, when they split up in front of Phil’s office.

And when Phil brushes the back of his hand with his fingers before he disappears through the door.

Clint feels a little like he’s dreaming once Phil’s gone, and weaves half-dazed through a mix of file clerks and interns on his way back to his office. He grins at Jane over her bin of folders, claps a passing Bruce on the shoulder (and surprises him enough that he nearly drops his tea), and gets shoved for winking at Natasha. Even after he closes the door, hangs up his suit jacket, and stares out at the parking lot, he’s—waiting for the other shoe to drop.

There’s not another shoe.

There’s just him, his—churning brain, the second chair on the Killgrave case, and Phil Coulson.

Forty-five minutes later, his jury comes back with a guilty verdict.
When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint discovers that it's sometimes less about running away, and more what you build when you bother sticking around.

“Y’know, for a guy who’s been avoidin’ me, you sure wanted to bump this meeting up to Monday pretty bad.”

The old ball field back behind the trailer park was never actually meant for playing ball, at least not in Clint’s lifetime. He sits on the least-rotted of the wood risers that’ve been there as long as he’s lived in Suffolk County and toes the plank below without looking up. There’re lifetimes of stories carved into that plank, initials and phone numbers of kids who’re now adults, and who probably don’t live in the park anymore. The wood’s soft and flaking, and the harder he toes it, the more ants scurry out of the gash.

“I’ve gotta work tomorrow night,” he explains, shrugging.

“You always gotta work,” replies Barney.

Something clangs against the rusty chain-link backstop, the one that Ed Tracy—Derek’s older brother—climbed one time after smoking some cheap meth, and Clint looks up in time to watch another rock ping against it. His eyes follow its trajectory, then the path of another, and when the pebbles stop working off chips of rust, he lets his gaze wander to what, years ago, was a pitcher’s mound. It’s still a little higher than the rest of the ground, the wheaty tops of its uncut grass standing taller than in the rest of the field.

Barney straightens up, his hands full of fresh pebbles. He’s lost weight, Clint thinks, but he doesn’t say it. His brown hair’s stringy but clean, in need of a cut more than anything else, and he pushes it outta his face before he throws another rock. There’s a joint tucked behind his ear, a rip in the back of his t-shirt, and his jeans are hanging low. Not ‘cause he wants them to hang low as much as he can’t afford new ones.

“What’s it this time?” he asks, the question punctuated by a pebble.

“What’s—what?”

“The work shit.” He twists on his heel and faces the risers. His dark eyes look sunken, but they’re clear. The last time Clint came around, they hadn’t been. “You on somethin’ important?”

Clint wets his lips. “Kinda,” he admits. He sits up, and the wood creaks under him. He’s not gonna be able to wear these slacks again before he takes them to the cleaners, not with the grime from the bench. The sun’s still beating down, fighting against a late summer sunset, and he’s starting to sweat in his shirt.
He should’ve changed, but he’d been meeting with Thor, splitting up some of his caseload. Prepping for the Killgrave case, but that’s not something he can tell Barney.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Barney points out. He drops the pebbles, brushes his hands on his jeans, and wanders over. “You’d do better bullshittin’ me.”

“I don’t bullshut you,” he lies.

“See? Bullshit,” Barney retorts. The risers creak when he climbs them, and the whole unit shakes from the way he drops down next to Clint. He pulls the joint from behind his ear. “Still smoke?”

Clint watches the way the joint hangs between his lips, and the long drags he takes while he’s lighting it. “I could get disciplined for hanging out with you while you do,” he says, but Barney just laughs. A hazy finger of smoke curls into the air. When Barney exhales, he does it directly at Clint, who coughs and waves a hand to dissipate the rest of it.

“You wanted me here,” he snaps. Barney’s laughing again. He’s got lines around his eyes and lips, but they’re tanned and weathered from years of odd jobs and toking up at an abandoned ball field. “You just want to share a joint, or what?”

“Nah. You’re too damn uptight for that.” Barney flicks the end of Clint’s tie and then leans back, elbows on the riser behind. Clint forces himself to watch his face and eyes, instead of looking for fresh track marks or—worse. He’s not even sure what worse is, these days, but he knows Barney’s tried it. Barney’s tried almost everything. “Assistant District Attorney. Fuck me.”

“Thanks, but no.”

“You’d like it, probably.” Barney knocks their knees together. Clint kicks his leg away. “You gettin’ laid?”

He narrows his eyes. “Did you really send me a hundred fucking text messages to find out whether I’m seeing somebody?”

Barney quirks an eyebrow, and Clint cringes. He knows that look, the one that screws Barney’s whole face up. It’s the one he pulls when Clint’s said a little too much. “Didn’t say anything about seein’ somebody,” he returns. “Just wanted to know if you’re gettin’ your rocks off.”

“I do fine,” Clint returns. He looks out at the ball field, instead of Barney, and Barney chuckles. It’s this dark sound in the back of his throat, one that reminds him of the well, well, well Trick used to greet them with after shit days at school.

“Fuck,” he exhales, shaking his head. Clint watches out of the corner of his eye, watches Barney take another long drag off the joint, inhale, and close his eyes. He remembers the burn of the smoke in his lungs, but he doesn’t mention it. That Clint isn’t the guy sitting here, now, in his suit and shirt from work. “Figures, y’know? Workin’ for the Dick-strict Attorney—”

“Hilarious.”

“—runnin’ around with some boyfriend, the whole fuckin’ nine yards.” He shakes his head again. “You used to be my kid brother.”

Clint frowns, glancing over. “I’m still your brother.”

“You’re somebody, but you ain’t Little B.” Clint can’t remember the last time he’s heard that nickname. He presses his lips together, but he doesn’t—say anything about it. Barney looks down
at the joint. “You came around when Trick died.”

“Five years ago.”

“Yeah, but you came around. You gave a shit.” Barney snorts before he takes another hit. “You remember when Jordan was born? Skinny-ass Anissa holdin’ that fat-ass baby?”

Clint bites back a half-laugh. “It was fucking freezing,” he recalls, and Barney grins around a mouthful of smoke. “You’d never known someone who personally had a baby, before, so you dragged me and the Tracy brothers and Horace—”

“And Horace was pissed, too.”

“—up to Suffolk Memorial. And we stood around for an hour, waiting for Ricky to come out with news about the baby.” Clint drops his eyes to his hands. He’s not sure when he gripped onto the bench, but his fingers are curled around the lip of it, nails digging into the rotten underside. He can’t unclench them, so he stares at them, instead. “I didn’t forget,” he says quietly.

Barney lets out a breath that Clint knows, from the sound, isn’t full of smoke. “You act like it.”

“It’s not that I don’t give a fuck, Barn, it’s—” He wets his lips, fighting for the right words, but finally gives up. He lifts his hands, empty and grasping at nothing, and turns to Barney. “You act like everything’s supposed to be exactly the same as it was when we were kids. Like I’m still ten and you’re still twelve and we’re still just coming to live with Trick. But we’re not kids anymore. We’re adults, and you act like—like you want me to come back and—”

He stops himself, pulls back, but it’s too late.

“Come back and what? C’mon, go ahead and fuckin’ say it!” Barney stubs the joint out on the bench and hops to his feet. The whole unit wobbles, uneven on rusted metal supports, but it holds even when Barney spreads his arms out. Clint can see how thin he’s gotten through his baggy white t-shirt. “Slum it back here with your brother? With your family? I don’t fuckin’ care that you grew up. I don’t even fuckin’ care that you’re a lawyer. But I sure as shit care that you try and forget where you came from every time somethin’ happens to somebody you used to love.”

He kicks the bench below them, hard, and it cracks down the middle. A dirty limerick that one of the Tracy brothers carved with a penknife splits right in the middle of a word. Clint stares at the break, silent, and Barney kicks it again. “You can hate Ricky, you can hate Trey and Ed, you can hate Horace and everybody else, but you’re still one of us. You still did everythin’ we did, and you liked it just as much as we did, so don’t you even pretend that—”

“But I fucking left it!”

Clint’s voice cracks when he pushes to his feet, but then he’s standing, too. The rickety risers tremble when he steps forward, and the tremble grows when he shoves Barney. He’s not sure whether it’s the weed, the force, or both, but Barney stumbles. He catches himself on a higher bench, but only just.

“You all stay here at the park,” Clint presses, his hands balling to fists, “same as when we were kids, and act like anybody who grows up is a traitor ‘cause they don’t wanna sit around and get high with the rest of you.” He sticks an arm out, gesturing vaguely to the road. It’s dusty and the concrete’s cracked, and it winds through the trees and, eventually, out to the individual trailer lots. “That’s half of what this shit’s about, isn’t it? I don’t feel enough guilt for you—but not about Jordan. Nah, you’re pissed that I don’t feel guilty about leaving this shithole that’s still your
fucking life!

It’s louder, harsher than he meant it to be, and Clint knows the second his voice starts echoing into the distance that it’s one step too far. ‘Cause Barney’s staring at him, wide-eyed and perfectly silent, and—

“Barn,” he says, quietly, but Barney shakes his head.

“Nah, see, I get it now.” He holds up his hands in some kinda—surrender, two white flags that Clint stares at. He’s dropped the joint, probably when he tripped, but he’s not looking for it, either. “I thought maybe, somewhere in there, you weren’t an asshole. Turns out, I was wrong.”

He shakes his head, mostly to himself, and turns to walk off the risers. They shake with every step of his. The shaking turns to an earthquake when Clint follows. “For the love of god, just stop and—”

“Me stop?” Barney demands. He’s balanced on the edge of the risers, almost-teetering, and hops down. He’s taller than Clint by a good four inches, but standing in the too-long grass, he looks—Small, Clint thinks. Thin and weak and—not like the big brother he used to follow around. “I’ve stopped a hundred fuckin’ times, little bro, and you’ve never given a shit. No, see, I’m done stoppin’. Even,” he adds, jabbing a finger in the air between them, “for you.”

He snorts and turns on his heel in the grass. It whispers against his ratty sneakers, against his stark-white socks and his shins. He reaches down to smack a mosquito and then snorts to himself. “Hope you like your big, shiny new life,” he says as he stands up. “Hope it was worth givin’ up this one.”

“Barney,” Clint says, almost pleading, to the air. Barney raises a hand in a half-empty wave. Clint watches him walk away, wandering through the grass and then the trees. Somewhere, over at the trailer park, there’s music playing. The bass line carries like a heartbeat, and for a couple seconds, Clint can’t hear anything else.

He stands on the risers for a long time before it occurs to him that, south of the field and the trailer park, just across the highway, is the place where Jordan Silva-Riberio died.

Clint decides he doesn’t want to follow that thought any further, and climbs off the risers to go home.

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The whole next day, Clint feels like his mind’s in a different place.

His schedule for the day’s jam-packed with plea meetings, a couple probation revocations, three sentencings, and a motion to suppress hearing that he’s pretty sure is just Sif trying to prove a point. He comes in early, ready to run through his calendar and make sure he’s ready for everything, but the office is empty and quiet. Too quiet, ‘cause instead of prepping, he stands in front of the window and watches as the parking lot fills up with cars.

Bruce, he finds out, drives a Prius in that weird, pale pea-green color. He’s not sure what Steve’s sedan is, but he’s pretty sure the safety rating’s about as high as you can get. Stark squeals his tires sliding into a spot in the shade.
When he sees Phil’s black sedan pull around the corner, he turns away from the window. Work, he tells himself, and he attacks the case files on his desk. He stacks them in order, realizes he’s left three of them sitting on top of the file cabinet, and starts all over again.

But every time he opens a folder and tries to review his notes, it’s like he’s never seen his own handwriting before. The words swim, and he ends up with his elbows digging into the desktop and his palms pressed against his eyes.

It’s bullshit, Clint thinks, that Barney’s crawled under his skin like this. That it’s his brother, not Phil or Killgrave, who’s curled his fingers around his brain and squeezed every rational thought right out of his head.

Except all he can think about is how angry Barney was. How— hurt Barney was.

He pushes out of his chair and walks out of his office for coffee. This morning, it’s over-brewed and weak—Jane’s doing, if Clint had to guess. He dumps in cream ‘till it’s drinkable and slips out of the break room before Stark comes around the corner.

He’s nearly to his office, nearly safe, when Darcy’s head pops up over the top of her cubicle. She’s wide-eyed and a little wild-haired like some kind of deranged prairie dog. “Hey, Hogun just called, he’s— Whoa.”

She disappears like something out of a cartoon, and Clint sighs. When he turns to step into his office, he almost runs into her. She’s wearing brown slacks, a brown cardigan . . . and a striped top in colors so florescent that he thinks his contacts might dry out and adhere to his eyes. He blinks at her, trying to clear the pink-and-orange test pattern from his vision. Darcy doesn’t seem to notice, though; she’s too busy looking him up and down.

“Did you—go to some kind of heavy metal concert last night?” she finally asks. Clint rolls his eyes and tries to step around her, but she mirrors his movement. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” he says. He waits for her to move, but she just puts her hands on her hips. She’s still standing there after he takes a sip of his coffee, too. “What’d you say about Hogun?”

“Did somebody die?” she presses.

“Darcy—”

“Seriously, you look like you’ve been chewed-up and spit out.” Clint grits his teeth around the frustrated noise that’s bubbling in the back of his throat. He can’t do this, he thinks, and his fingers curl hard against the warm ceramic of his official Suffolk County mug. He can’t survive Darcy, not today, not when he’s got a million-item to-do list, cases to hand off to Thor and Natasha, the meeting with Phil tomorrow, and—

“Clint?” A hand touches his arm, and when he jerks back into the present, the fingers are tipped with bright yellow polish that can only belong to Darcy. She’s staring at him, wide-eyed, and he immediately realizes that she’s been talking this whole time.

He lets out a breath. “Sorry,” he says, and carefully slips his arm out of her grip. Her fingers twitch in the air before she drops her hand to her side. “Listen, I’ve got a full day today, so if you’re not—”

“He’s going out of town next week,” Darcy interrupts. Her tone’s dull and even, like someone’s sucked the life out of it. Clint holds onto his mug a little tighter. “He wanted to know if he can reschedule that probation revocation for when he’s back, since the guy’s not going to make bond.”
Clint nods. “Sure,” he replies. Darcy nods back, this brief bob of her head, and turns on her heel. Her hair whirls behind her, bounces, and then disappears around the corner with the rest of her. He considers saying something, but he can’t come up with the words.

Back in his office, he drinks his over-brewed, over-creamed coffee and reviews the notes for that morning’s preliminary hearings. One’s a leaving-the-scene with property damage to a fence, one’s a first-time DUI with a defendant who he suspects’ll plead out once he finds out it’s for-sure going to trial, and the third’s for four kids who drag-raced down the interstate in broad daylight. He scribbles some fresh notes, then stacks up the files and his portfolio on the corner of his desk.

When he stands to put on his suit coat, he catches his reflection in the window. He can’t see himself clearly—it’s more this ghostly version of himself, whiter and more washed-out than usual—but he knows what’s there: dark circles under his eyes, messy hair, worry lines. He scrubs a hand over his face, pats down the parts of his hair that are sticking up the worst, and then buttons up his jacket. He’s an adult, he reminds himself, and a lawyer, not the kid who used to sit in the back bedroom and cry ‘cause Barney’d punched him in the head for something.

The problem is, he’s still kinda that kid, too.

“Get it together, Barton,” he mutters to his reflection.

Behind the gray wall of her cubicle, Darcy’s typing up a storm. Clint hears it as he passes and stops, listening. She only types like that—pounding the keyboard into submission with fingers of fury—when she’s angry. It’s just that, usually, the anger’s either directed at Sif, a file clerk, or the guy from the sandwich shop who always forgets her pickle.

Clint sighs and, for one half-second, closes his eyes.

“Listen,” he says, leaning around the edge of her cubicle. Her fingers pause momentarily, and he watches her lips press into a tight red line before she starts typing again. She’s working one of the cheat sheets he’d assigned her the day before, little “beginner’s guides” to the cases he’s handing over while he seconds Phil on the Killgrave case.

She’s also refusing to look at him.

He waits a few seconds. She glances down at the file, frowns, and lifts a hand to turn the page. For a blissful second, there’s silence.

“My brother’s not gonna call anymore,” Clint says.

Darcy’s hand slips on the corner of the page, and she swears under her breath. “ Fucking paper cuts,” she curses, pressing her index finger between her lips. But she looks up at Clint, soft-eyed, and just—watches him for a moment.

He nods, a little. “I’ve got a couple hearings, so—”

“You sure?”

The question’s quiet, almost a whisper around her index finger, but Clint— He can’t move any further, once she says it. His fingers are curled around the lip of her cubicle, his body half-turned away, but he knows he owes her an answer. He owes her something after four-plus weeks of creative lying.

Darcy’s still not typing.

“I’m sure,” Clint replies, and lets go.

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“And then, Nate and I had sex,” Wade Wilson says.

He says it loudly, loud enough that it carries through the tiny seating area of the equally-tiny pizza place down the block from the judicial complex, and Clint chokes on a piece of half-chewed pepperoni. Two booths down, a woman in her thirties with a drooling baby glares daggers at the both of them. Clint forces a smile around the edges of a cough, but Wilson grins and finger-waves.

The baby smacks the tray table on his stroller with a chubby hand and grins.

“You what?” Clint finally manages after a half-dozen more coughs and three big gulps of his soda. He’s halfway through his single slice of the pepperoni-and-pineapple pizza Wilson ordered—or at least, he was before he tried to breathe it. “I thought you wanted to have Natasha’s red-headed babies.”

“Well, okay, first,” Wilson corrects, holding up a finger, “I want Natasha Romanoff to have my red-headed babies. Because m-preg—”

“Em-what?” Clint asks.

“—is not a real thing and I’d never lose the baby weight.” He grins and reaches for another piece of pizza. His paper plate—’cause that’s the high-class establishment they’re squatting in, paper plates and booths with ripped vinyl cushions—is littered with crusts. “But mostly, I just figured that if you weren’t going to listen to me, I’d at least make the story something fun.”

Clint sighs, fingers turning his paper cup around in a slow circle. He should’ve skipped lunch, he thinks, instead of coming out with Wilson. Wilson, who’s humming the theme from The Love Boat while he chews. But Wilson’d trotted up behind him in the hallway, slung an arm around his shoulder, and promised, I’m going to buy you the pizza of the gods, today!

Turns out, the pizza of the gods is greasy, over-sauced, and sits like a stone in the bottom of Clint’s belly. But the pizza shop’s quiet, and Wilson—He’s not bad company, all things considered.

Better company than Clint himself is, at least.

They’re onto the Bewitched theme when he finally asks, “Having sex with Nate is fun?”

Wilson shrugs. “I don’t know for sure,” he says around a mouthful of pizza, “but I know this: he’s big, he’s broad, he’s got really awesome hands—”

“You look at his hands?”

“And I bet he cuddles afterwards.” He swallows, then grins. “I mean, sex is awesome, but cuddling? I’ll go fifty-fifty on the sex-cuddle split. Maybe forty-sixty, depending on how far you want me to bend when I—”

Clint holds up a hand. “Too much,” he interrupts, and Wilson’s mouth snaps shut. They look at
each other across the table for a couple seconds, like they’re each waiting for the other to do something.

But then Wilson shrugs and picks up where he left off with the pizza and the song.

Clint sighs, a little, and picks pineapple pieces out of the little grease-ponds atop his slice. He should be fine right now, planning his plea meetings and reviewing his arguments for his hearing with Sif this afternoon, but instead . . . Instead, he feels a little like the pineapple pieces, like he’s floating in a sea and his toes can’t even brush the sand at the bottom.

A little voice in the back of his head reminds him, quietly, that this was why he’d been avoiding Barney.

He hates that voice. It sounds too much like the version of himself from high school, the kid brother of “Big B” Barton who followed him everywhere and—

“You wanna talk about it?”

Clint’s head jerks up and immediately catches Wilson’s eyes. He tosses the end of his slice into the pizza-crust graveyard without looking, his attention focused completely on Clint. There’s something soft in his expression, almost—gentle, and Clint—

He’s never gonna figure Wade Wilson out. Not when he counters fictional sex stories with big, concerned doe-eyes.

“I mean, it’s cool if you don’t,” he says, reaching for his paper cup. “But if you wanna, I’m here. Body, mind, spirit, soul, maybe even, like, my aura. All of them here, to listen, if you wanna talk.”

Clint squeezes the piece of pineapple he’s holding between his thumb and index finger. “About what?” he asks, totally casual. At least, he hopes it sounds totally casual. He’s not sure.

Wilson raises an eyebrow. “About whatever’s turned you to Dr. Silent of the Grumptown Crew.” He tips his cup in Clint’s direction. “I’m onto you. I’m onto how all your—deep, dark inner turmoily stuff works.”

He gestures with his cup so the straw kinda—draws a circle in the air between them, and Clint snorts a little. He dips his eyes down to the mess on his plate, the half-eaten pizza and the pile of pineapple, and he ends up shaking his head. Maybe it’s at Wilson, maybe it’s at his lunch, maybe it’s at the situation. He’s not sure. He just knows that there’s greasy pineapple juice running onto his palm.

He drops the cube onto his plate and reaches for his napkin. “Thanks,” he says, finally, “but no.”

“Okay,” Wilson says, nodding. He taps Clint’s paper cup with his own, downs the rest of his soda, and then grabs the last slice of pizza from the tray. And that’s how they sit for the rest of lunch, Wilson bobbing along to the music in his head, and Clint lost in his thoughts.

All things considered, it’s the best lunch he could’ve hoped for.
After work, Clint drops his bag inside the front door of his apartment, changes into shorts and a black sleeveless t-shirt, and spends all of five minutes stretching before he goes for a run. No iPod, no pedometer, no water bottle, just his shoes on the sidewalk and the rush of his own breath and blood in his ears.

He runs without thinking. There’re no trials or motions, no laws or regulations, no chief assistant district attorneys who you kissed but aren’t technically “seeing.” There’re no dead kids named Jordan or asshole advertising savants who maybe killed them. There’re no brothers who protected you in the orphanage back in Iowa, who defended you against Trick Chisholm when he got drunk off his ass, who taught you how to run ‘cause, hey, nobody can catch you if you’re fast enough—

Nope.

None of that.

He runs ‘till his lungs burn, ‘till his legs ache, ‘till the sun starts to go down and the breeze turns from dry to sticky. He runs ‘till the red palm at a stop light tells him he has to stop, and then, he sees how far he’s come. He’s miles from his apartment building, out close to the interstate. He only recognizes the place ‘cause what’s now a QuikTrip used to be the shitty little independent gas station with the owner who never carded anybody. He’d bought his first six-pack at that station on a sticky-hot summer night like this one.

Clint runs fingers through his hair, then shakes his head. He feels the sweat slide down the side of his face.

He buys a bottle of water at the QuikTrip and sits on the bench outside, draining it while twenty-somethings duck in for beer, smokes, and really bad sandwiches. Part of him kinda thinks he’ll see some—ghost of his old life, lurking around in the parking lot, bumming ten bucks off his brother for some stupid teenage rite of passage.

The rest of him knows better, though.

He tosses the bottle empty bottle in the trash and then, runs back home.

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The next morning, Clint’s entire body aches. It’s a battle to climb out of bed, to strip out of his boxers, to force himself into the hot spray of the shower, and then to shove himself into his slacks. He’s not sure what he expected, running ‘till every muscle in his legs felt like it was double-knotted, but he . . . kinda feels better, anyway.

Like maybe he’d needed physical pain, instead of the dark cloud of guilt lurking in the corners of his vision.

Halfway to work, his phone chimes in the seat next to him. He waits ‘till he’s at a stoplight to activate the display.

**Phil Coulson:** *Don’t get cocky about this, but I’m working from home today. I’ll still see you at six for dinner?*

Clint lets a tiny smile push at the corners of his mouth. It feels like the first time he’s smiled all
week—or at least, since he met with his brother. *working for the da, or working on cleaning up for me coming over?*

*Are they mutually exclusive?* Phil replies, and Clint’s too busy laughing to notice the light turn green.

At the judicial complex, he decides he’s too sore for the stairs and rides the elevator up to the sixth floor. It’s relaxing, in a way, listening to a light-keraoke version of some 90s song he doesn’t really remember. He smiles at the interns who’re lurking in the hallway (there’s no use in starting until the dot of nine, in their world) and greets Jane when they pass each other outside the break room. He fills his mug, snags a powdered-sugar doughnut from the box somebody brought in, and heads to his office.

He arranges his files for the day, sorts through the cover sheets Darcy’s finished for the cases he plans to hand off to Thor and Natasha, stacks and restacks folders that need filed, shredded, or annotated. When there’s nothing left to organize, he skips over his notes for the handful of hearings on Friday to check his e-mail. There’s nothing new, so he starts organizing those, sorting them into folders and archiving what isn’t important.

He’s not going to spend another day . . . sulking, he tells himself while he labels a folder exclusively for the Killgrave case. He’s not going to detach himself from the world again. He’s second chair to Phil on a murder trial, he’s having dinner at Phil’s tonight, he’s not willing to—fall into this pile of guilt over—

There’s a faint, tapping knock on his office door. Clint jerks hard enough that he knocks his wireless mouse onto the floor.

In the doorway, Bruce flinches on his behalf. He finger-waves, a lost little motion, and stumbles through, “I—uh. Hi.” Clint tries to smile, but he can count on one hand the number of times Bruce’s come to his office. ‘Cause usually he’s in Bruce’s, splitting mediocre Indian food with a bunch of them or borrowing old case reporters.

“Hey,” he says, and bends to pick up his mouse.

“I’m not interrupting?”

“Nah, c’mon in.”

When Clint fishes the damn thing out from under his desk, Bruce is standing between the two plastic chairs that Stark hates so much—and the office door is closed behind him. He frowns, his brow tightening, but Bruce just . . . stands there. He’s wearing dreary-looking brown houndstooth pants and a wrinkled navy shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His collar’s crooked, and Clint wonders if he ever wears a tie out of court.

“You—need something?” he asks, finally.

“I—” Bruce starts, but then stops. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. His hip nudges one of the chairs. “Are you . . . okay?”

The question, it’s—Well, it’s not what Clint expected, that’s for sure. He expected a legal question, maybe something related to Stark. He watches Bruce for a second, waiting for some kind of punchline, but then there—isn’t one.

He picks up his coffee mug. The ceramic’s cool against his palm, and the coffee’s almost undrinkably lukewarm. He forces himself to swallow it, then coughs a little.
“Why wouldn’t I be?” he responds. He tries not to smack his lips at the ashen taste in the back of his mouth.

“You just seem— Look, I’m not really all that good at, uh, this.” Bruce waves his hands vaguely, drawing invisible circles within circles, and then just sort of— Touches his fingertips together.

“Steve’s really the counselor in the group, and I know Natasha, you and she— talk.” He shrugs, a little, and dips his head. Clint thinks he’s avoiding eye contact, but after a quick survey of his desk, they’re fully focused on him, again. “But you’ve seemed a little lost, I guess, and like I tell my students, I’d rather make an idiot out of myself now by asking than . . . not ask and lose a good lawyer.”

“Your students?”

“I teach. Night classes at State, just one a semester.” Bruce shrugs again, the rumpled shirt whispering against his skin, and then steps forward. His fingertips dance along the edge of Clint’s desk. He doesn’t keep personal items on display, except for the purple pillow. All Bruce really has to play with are a couple pens and a stack of post-it notes. “Darcy took my class last year, actually,” he comments. “She’s a lot smarter than she gives herself credit for.”

“Darcy’s in law school?” Clint sputters. He— blinks and stares at Bruce. This, he thinks, has to be a joke.

Bruce nods. “She’s a second-year. Part-time, though, so it’ll be a while before she finishes.” He turns the post-it pad in a circle and then glances up. His eyes are a balance of colors, brown but with some green and gray in there. Stark probably writes odes to those eyes. “You didn’t answer.”

Clint wonders how convincing his blink and head-tip are. “Answer what?”

He stops wondering when Bruce narrows his eyes. “I’m not stupid,” he says, resting his fingertips on the edge of the desk. “And I’m— I’m not Tony. You can be honest, with me. I won’t go—” He gestures vaguely toward the door. “—be him.”

Clint shakes his head. “I’m fine,” he says. He leans forward to put the too-cold coffee back down on his desk, but he can’t really look at Bruce. It’s not like talking to Phil, where he can deflect with a joke and be rewarded with one of those warm smiles, but it’s not Natasha’s half-obtrusive pressure to talk, either. It’s— quiet, the way Bruce just stands in wait, and Clint—

He’s not a patient man. Not when compared to Bruce Banner.

“It’s a long story,” he finally murmurs, and glances up. Bruce’s eyes are still on him, intently focused but . . . soft. Like Stark, Clint realizes, but without the immediate demands to fill in the blanks. “I just— had a stupid fight with my brother.”

“Your brother?” Bruce repeats quietly.

“Yeah.” Clint picks up a pen he has no use for and twists the cap around in a circle. Clockwise, then counter-clockwise, and all without really looking at Bruce. “You close to your family?” he asks somewhere on the tenth twist.

Bruce shakes his head. “No. Not— really. I mean, I have a cousin I Skype with, occasionally, but—” When Clint glances up, the soft eyes are focused on the corner of his desk. “No,” he says, again.

Clint snorts, an almost-laugh that pushes at the corners of his mouth—but ruefully, not like a real laugh would. “That kinda sums up me and Barney,” he admits. He tosses the pen down on his desk
and spins his chair. The parking lot’s full of cars, and the sun glints off windshields when it peaks around the clouds. “We were close when we were kids,” he continues, and he’s—not sure why the words are coming out. He’s not sure why these things, the half-secrets he’s kept from Natasha, Darcy, Wilson, and Phil, sort of—trip from his mouth because Bruce Banner’s in the room. He thinks maybe it’s Bruce’s quiet non-pressure, his patience.

Or maybe it’s just that they’re words he needs to—say.

“But he— Barney’s the guy who would’ve died in the town where we were born and never complained.” He presses his toe against the carpet, moves his chair back and forth while he stares at the sunlight shining off the cars below. “He’s happy where he’s at. And I tried to be like that, too, and fit into that life. I just couldn’t. I couldn’t—spend every Saturday night drunk off my ass, sleep with girls I didn’t care about to prove a point, break windows in an empty trailer ‘cause, hey, that’s what people do.”

That’d been the big selling point, the last time he’d visited. Barney’d loaded his truck up with pot, cheap beer, and one of Trick’s old hunting crossbows. We’re gonna go shoot out windows in the abandoned warehouse, he’d said, grinning.

It’d been the same week he’d had the interview at the district attorney’s office. Clint’d smiled, handed him twenty bucks to pick up more beer, and told him to have fun.

“I—know what it’s like, trying to . . . leave what you came from.” Bruce’s voice is quiet, half-caught in the space between them. Clint twists in his chair to watch those soft, blunt fingers play with the stack of post-it notes. He runs his thumb along the edge, and the pad makes that quiet zipping sound like a kid’s flip-book. “I don’t have a brother, but— My family, they . . . had their own problems. It took me a long time to reconcile what I wanted out of life with—what they offered me.”

When Clint spins his chair back around to face Bruce, their eyes meet. “But I realized, when I got a little older, that—you really only get two options in life.” His fingers still against the post-it pad. “You can get . . . caught up in the distance between the life you’re maybe supposed to have, the life your family gave you, or you can—start building a new life.”

Clint nods, a little. “Yeah.”

Bruce rolls his lips together into a soft smile, and dips his head. Clint realizes after a few seconds of watching his jaw move that he’s choosing his next words. Carefully, he thinks, because the corners of his eyes are crinkling, softening, and crinkling again. “You have—good things to build from, you know,” he finally remarks, looking back up. “Tony, he’s a good friend to have, and the rest of us—me, and Natasha, and Steve, we all really like you, here.” He pauses. “And you have Phil, too.”

“Phil,” Clint repeats, and the stupid little smile that crawls onto his mouth, it betrays him. He tries to force it away, tries to swallow it, but— “I’m not sure what I’m building with Phil,” he admits.

When he glances up from shaking his head, Bruce is watching him. Clint wonders how often he watches Stark like that, and whether Stark notices how—intense it is.

Then again, Stark seems to notice everything about the people he doesn’t want to sleep with. He probably knows Bruce inside and out.

“Most people don’t know what they’re building until it’s built,” Bruce says after a few seconds. “That’s—why they build it.”
“And if it falls down?” Clint asks.

He’s not really asking Bruce as much as he’s asking the universe. Funny thing is, though, that it makes Bruce smile. “Then, just like anything else, you get some fresh mortar, and you start again.”

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“I had grand cleaning plans,” Phil says when he answers the door, “but then Laufeyson started filing motions on the Killgrave case. I figured a few dust bunnies wouldn’t scare you off.”

It’s weird, Clint thinks, to be standing on Phil Coulson’s front porch, the heels of his shoes digging into the bristles of his hemp-brown WELCOME mat. It’s weird to be in his shirt and slacks but not his tie, weird that he doesn’t have his bag or his portfolio, weird that he’s holding onto bottle of wine he brought with white-knuckled fingers. It’s weird like a first at-home date, the kind you know can turn into—

Well.

Clint lets himself think about it for just a half-second, then squirrels it away in the back of his mind.

Phil’s in jeans and a plain black t-shirt that hugs his shoulders and chest in a way that’s halfway obscene. His feet are bare, toes curling against the hardwood floor, and there’s a smear of something on his thigh from where he’s brushed his hands off. When he smiles, the crinkles touch the corners of his eyes.

It all feels—new, Clint decides after he pulls in a breath. He can smell whatever Phil’s cooking, something warm and lightly spiced, and it makes his mouth water. This is new and a little—terrifying, like he’s starting to nail planks together before the foundation’s dry.

He swallows. “How big are the dust bunnies?” he asks.

Phil’s grin is blistering. “Enormous,” he promises, and lets Clint in.

It’s a smaller house, but not in the cluttered way you’d expect from, like, long-time bachelors and crazy cat ladies. The foyer opens up into the living room, where the walls are sort of a warm latte-colored brown. The blinds on the enormous windows are open, throwing stripes of shade along the patterned rug, the couch, and the coffee table. There’s an entertainment center that Clint can only really see the side of, a solid-built wood thing, but he can see the bookshelves.

A half-wall of bookshelves, and all of them crammed with books.

“Like I said, dust bunnies,” Phil warns. He’s standing next to Clint on the rug, their shoulders touching—actual contact, this time, instead of the usual brush-and-rub game they play when they walk down the hallway. Clint leans into the contact, a little, and watches the corners of Phil’s lips curl.

He could bask in Phil’s grins for hours, but it’s the tiny smiles that pinch somewhere in the pit of his stomach. “I’m more in awe of your bookcases than your piss-poor dusting.”

“You think those are bad? Wait ‘till you see the office.” Phil’s eyes spark, his smile growing, but
then something in the kitchen beeps—loudly. “Either I get that, or we end up ordering pizza,” he says abruptly. “You make yourself at home, and watch out for cobweb tumblewebs. I’ll—pour us a drink and meet you in the living room?”

He holds out his hand for the bottle—the bottle that Clint realizes he’s still clutching like a shield, the bottle he brought ‘cause that’s what you do on dates, right, you bring something?—and Clint looks at him for a couple beats too long before he hands it over. “If I’m more than ten minutes,” Phil offers, “you can come in after me, guns blazing.”

“And if I miss you before the ten minutes is up?”

It’s meant to be a joke, a little twisted-grinned tease, but it comes out kinda . . . earnest. Kinda nervous, too, but then Phil’s fingers twitch a little against the bottle. Maybe he’s not the only one who’s caught up in this bolt of nervous energy, this weird balance between wanting to be close and wanting to run away.

“Then come in after me anyway,” Phil replies quietly. His knuckles brush Clint’s skin on the inside of his wrist, that—soft place saved mostly for the people you care about, and then he walks away.

Clint watches him all the way until he disappears into the kitchen. The timer beeps again, and the way Phil swears at it makes Clint laugh a little.

He toes off his shoes—’cause it’s rude to wear shoes in somebody else’s house, his mom at least taught him that much before she died—and wanders into the living room, socks slipping a little on the hardwood floor. The TV’s what you’d expect from Phil, nothing showy and no bells and whistles. But Clint doesn’t really care about the TV. Nah, what he’s focused on are those stuffed-full bookshelves, the ones that stretch most the length of a wall.

He means to just look at the spines, you know? Get an idea of the kind of reading Phil does on his days off, figure out if he can piece together parts of the man from how tattered his paperbacks are. (For example, he’s got a whole row of battered-to-hell John Grishams that make Clint snort.) But the shelves aren’t just crowded with books; there’re pictures, knick-knacks, postcards, and souvenirs displayed there, too.

They’ve all got pride of place, on display in the living room like that. A little like the pillow that never leaves Clint’s office window ledge. People show off what’s important.

He skims his fingers over a rough fist-sized sandstone rock, then weighs a Niagara Falls snow globe in his palm. He strokes a faded corgi beanie baby with still-soft fur and nudges a precariously-balanced Fury for District Attorney bumper sticker that’s leaning against a row of hardback World War II histories. He leaves fingerprints in the thin layer of dust when he picks up a framed photograph of a gap-toothed boy, open-mouthed in misery as three little girls group-hug him.

“They haven’t grown out of that,” Phil comments from the doorway, and Clint—He pretends like he didn’t almost drop the picture. He sets it back onto the bookshelf, immediately guilty. He swears his ears are burning—and if they’re not, he figures they should be. Phil’s wanders across the living room, feet almost-silent on the bare floor, and offers Clint a wine glass. Their fingers brush, then their arms and shoulders. “First rule of sisters: little brothers are always fair game.”

Clint snorts the tiniest laugh and raises his eyebrows. “You’re the youngest?”

“Unfortunately. I think it took me until I was fifteen to realize I wasn’t getting a baby brother any
more than Amy was getting a pony.” Phil balances his glass on the edge of one of the lower shelves and leans in. “Amy’s the oldest,” he explains, and taps the girl in the same long, blonde braids that Dot Rogers wears, “then Jenny and Samantha.” His grin is crooked as he points to the skinny girl in ripped overalls. “Sam, when you meet her. Unless you like having your toes stomped when you least expect it.”

Clint fumbles, for a moment, groping for a comeback. He wants to ask about when, the—certainty Phil’s injected into the conversation, but Phil’s too close. He’s close enough that Clint can smell kitchen spices and lemon soap on his skin. He curls his fingers a little too hard around the stem of his glass. He doesn’t need the wine, he thinks. No, Phil’s scent and warmth, that’s intoxicating enough.

“Did you see this one?” Phil asks after a few seconds. He abandons the first picture to bend down and remove one from a lower shelf. Clint gulps down a mouthful of wine, half because he feels like he can’t breathe—and half because Phil’s t-shirt rides up to reveal a perfect stripe of bare skin. He’s wondering whether spontaneous human combustion is a real thing when Phil straightens up again.

This frame is larger and smooth wood instead of plastic. Phil wipes dust off the glass and then hands it to Clint. “Sisters and their broods,” he explains. He picks up his glass off the edge of the shelf and sips, gingerly, while Clint surveys the photo. It’s a family picnic, or something like it, and you can tell, somehow, that everyone in the photograph is a Coulson. The sisters share Phil’s eye-crinkles and the warmth in their faces when they smile.

Clint counts the heads of the Coulson broods—and then blinks and counts again. “Eleven of them between three sisters?” he asks, glancing at Phil.

Phil grins. “Technically, eight. These three—” He gestures to a group of “too-cool-for-this” teenagers who’re rolling their eyes at the end of the line. “—are Jenny’s step-kids. Except, of course, at Christmastime, when she’s ‘Mom’ and ‘Uncle Phil’ is their favorite relative.”

Clint laughs. “Course he is. Lives the daring life of the Chief Assistant District Attorney, sentencing first-time felons to the statutory maximum.”

“Boldly convincing Sif Rowan to stop arguing for downward departures.”

“Luring Stark out of the bathroom because you know he’s just fixing his hair.”

“Or because I have better uses for it.”

Phil says it as he raises his glass to his lips, completely deadpan, and Clint— When Clint looks up from the family photo, all he can do is watch Phil swallow. Watch the way his throat moves, the way he puffs out a breath as he lowers the glass, the way his lips are tinged red-purple from the wine.

Clint swallows, too. “I bet you tell that to all the boys,” he replies. He tries to hitch it, to force a little turn into the words, but—

But he’s still watching Phil’s lips.

Phil’s voice is quiet, almost—private, when he says, “Not all of them.”

Clint opens his mouth, but he’s not sure what kind of response is on his tongue. He’s not sure what to say, really, not when the only thoughts in his head involve wanting to taste Phil’s wine-soaked mouth. He lifts his own glass, instead, helps himself to a greedy swallow—
And then, the timer in the kitchen goes off, again.

It’s as loud and intrusive as an air-raid siren, and Phil—Phil dips his head when it goes off. It’s shy, somehow, or at least that’s how it looks from where Clint’s standing.

Clint drops his eyes to the picture he’s still holding, the military line of smiling Coulsons. Phil’s alone in the picture, he realizes. The sisters have husbands and children—some still pretty little, some already teenagers—but Phil’s standing near the middle, on his own.

Fingers brush his elbow, and he jerks his head up. “Hungry?” Phil asks, gently.

“Starving.” Clint responds. He forces a little smile, one that Phil returns.

And while he watches Phil retreat into the kitchen, he thinks about adding how the thing he’s hungry for . . . isn’t really dinner.

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“Okay, new rule,” Clint says, flopping lazily back against the couch cushions. Phil’s grinning at him, laugh lines all bunched up. He tops off his wine glass, and—even though Clint raises a hand like he’s going to smack him away—Clint’s, too. “From now on, we talk law before you stuff me full of pasta primavera and wine.”

“Homemade pasta primavera,” Phil reminds him for probably the sixth time. “And it’s your wine.”

“The half you didn’t drink is, maybe,” Clint retorts, and Phil laughs.

The once-clear coffee table is covered with police reports, lab results, case notes, and motions from the Killgrave file. Actually covered, almost literally, ‘cause aside from the coasters for the wine glasses and Phil’s iPad, it’s entirely paperwork.

_We’re tracing the last of Jordan Silva-Riberio’s life, _Clint’d remarked after dinner, scanning a summary of the police’s first interview with Killgrave the day after the murder. _It’s like . . . working backwards from where we are now to who he was._

Phil’d stopped sorting through one of Laufeyson’s motions and looked up. _Say that again, _he’d demanded, and reached for a legal pad.

Even from where he’s leaning back into the couch cushions, Clint can see Phil’s looping scrawl on the yellow paper. It’s half a transcript of Clint’s commentary and half his own ideas, merged into an imperfect paragraph.

_You can’t use that in an opening, _Clint’d argued, reaching across Phil for his wine.

Phil’d caught him by the wrist, plucked the glass from his hand, and helped himself to a swallow. _Try to stop me_, he’d said, and then, he’d handed it over.

The wine tasted better, Clint’d thought, after Phil stole it.

The wine’s still swimming around in Clint’s belly, and even after the pasta, he’s teetering a little on the edge of _buzzed_. Pleasant-buzzed, though, instead of stupid, the kind of buzzed where he can watch the crinkled corners of Phil’s eyes and the way he raises his glass to his lips. Clint watches
him drink, watches his long fingers with the blunt ends settle his glass down on the bare corner of the coffee table, watches him sit forward. He studies Phil better than he’s studied any of the dozens of police reports and affidavits they’ve gone through, just ‘cause—

“Okay, what is it?”

Phil says it kinda out of nowhere, and Clint blinks as he forces himself to sit forward, too. There’s this funny little look on the guy’s face, almost a frown, and Clint frowns with him. “What’s what?”

“You keep—looking at me,” Phil replies. He rests elbows on his thighs, but his whole body sorta cants itself in Clint’s direction. It’s the subtlest lean in the world, but Clint catches it. Their shoulders brush, just once. “Is there something in my teeth?”

He tries to force a laugh, but it comes out in a stupid puff of breath that sounds—nervous. Edgy, like when he slunk into Phil’s house. He feels like he’s in the way, again, and he dips his head to look at the rug. It’s got a nice geometric pattern on it. He memorizes the intersections, the tan and brown and crimson circles-in-circles.

He doesn’t notice that his fingers are dancing against his own knee ‘till he stills them. When he glances up, Phil’s watching him. He wets his lips. “Maybe I just like to look at you.”

Phil snorts, a little, and dips his head. “That’s not fair,” he says after a few seconds.

Clint frowns and watches the half of Phil’s face he can see. All the lines are smoothed out. He looks like a photo, taken from just the right angle to capture everything but the imperfections. Problem is, the imperfections are Clint’s favorite part of him. “Why?”

“Because if you use my own brand of drive-by flattery against me, I’m out of tricks.”

“Hey.” Clint’s not sure why that’s the sound that comes outta his mouth, but he says it while his fingers twitch forward. They nudge Phil’s knee, then the back of his wrist, and Phil’s eyes come up. They’re soft, and Clint just kinda wants to—tip himself into them, but he doesn’t. No, he just watches him, his fingers still sliding along the back of his wrist.

Phil’s eyes don’t wander, even in the silence. Clint wonders if this is maybe what drowning feels like—quiet, warm, and breathless.

After what feels like a long, long time, Phil murmurs, “People generally follow up ‘hey’ with some kind of substance, you know.”

Clint smiles and, for a second, dips his head. Dips it, swallows, and pretends that he knows how to work his lungs. “Sorry,” he says, quietly. Their eyes meet again, almost like he’d never looked down. “Just got caught up in looking, again.”

Phil smiles, then, this—genuine, perfect fucking smile. It lights up his whole face, and Clint . . . Clint’s not sure whether it’s the red from the wine that tints his lips or the crinkles around his eyes that does it, but the next thing he knows, he’s reeling Phil in by the wrist and kissing him.

It’s not like the kiss in the park. It’s not—pent-up and uncontrolled, like a balloon bursting. No, this is slow, like spinning yarn from wool. Clint’s fingers slide up Phil’s arm and spread against his shoulder to feel him. Phil opens his mouth for a breath that’s almost a gasp, and it propels Clint forward. Not just with needy, wine-stained lips but with a brush of teeth against Phil’s lower lip that coaxes a groan from the back of his throat. With a soft sweep of tongue that quickly isn’t soft, anymore.
Phil’s hand is splayed over his hip, but it’s not enough contact. It’s not enough heat, enough closeness. Clint wants to climb all over Phil, wants to straddle him on his too-narrow couch and push his head into the cushions. He wants to taste every inch of his mouth ‘till he can’t breathe for moaning.

So he breaks the kiss to pin Phil against the back of the couch, and swings a leg over both of his. With knees on either side of his hips, he’s taller than Phil, looming over him and looking down.

His lips are parted, his eyes half-hooded, and when Clint slides his hand from Phil’s shoulder to his neck, he’s sure Phil lifts his hips.

It’s absolutely filthy.

Clint replies by leaning forward and kissing the breath out of him.

They make out like greedy teenagers for long enough that Clint stops being able to judge time. No, what he can judge is the strength in Phil’s fingers, the way his hands wander, and a hundred dirty thoughts about how rough his palms’ll feel when they find bare skin. He can measure every inch that Phil handles—and it’s most his body, from his sides to his back, his spine to his hips, the curve of his ass (which brings his own hips forward) and the flat of his stomach—and just how hard Phil’s tugging to pull his shirttails out of his slacks. He breaks the kiss with a gasp when Phil’s too-warm hands snake under his shirt and find his bare sides. It’s almost a whole-body quake, a shiver that brings goose pimples rising along his arms, and he’s forced to tip his face against Phil’s shoulder.

It’s that, or forget how to breathe and maybe—make a mess like a fifteen-year-old on his first movie-and-a-grope date.

“You could—kill a guy,” Clint manages, forced words against Phil’s shoulder.

Phil’s dark little chuckle is pure sex, and Clint can’t help himself: he leans in and nips Phil’s jaw line. The noise that follows, half-surprise and half-need, drops straight into the front of Clint’s slacks. When his teeth graze Phil’s jaw a second time, Phil mutters something like, “I could say the same about you.”

But then, he twists his head, nudges Clint’s cheek with his nose, and they’re kissing again, open-mouthed and hungry. They’re kissing and almost rocking, together, almost—finding a rhythm as they tip into one another. Phil’s hands spread on his sides, grip him, and when he pulls back for a breath, he tugs Clint’s lower lip between his teeth. Clint’s fingers are balled in Phil’s shirt, his hands curled into fists because he doesn’t completely trust them, and he swears Phil shudders when he spreads them against the thin cotton of his t-shirt.

Clint watches, right then, as Phil’s eyes wander down his flushed neck and his heaving chest, all the way to where his shirt is still tucked halfway into his waistband. To where the front of his slacks are tented, to where—

“Fuck,” he gasps, except it isn’t really a word. It’s more a sound, an uncontrolled tremble of a breath, and all ‘cause Phil’s fingers are brushing against the outside of his fly. It’s almost a tease, almost feather-light, but Clint presses his hips forward like he’s gonna rub himself against Phil’s palm.

At least, if he can get anywhere near Phil’s palm. Right now, it’s fingertips, and—

It’d be so fuckin’ easy, he thinks, to reach down and open his slacks. To fumble himself outta his
pants, then Phil outta his jeans, and palm both of them together. To make a mess of Phil’s narrow couch, his black t-shirt and Clint’s own rumbled button-down, to—

Phil’s fingers disappear, find his hip again, and Clint groans. “You either gotta—tell me what you want,” he manages, his head still tipped back and his eyes closed, “or—”

“I want . . . time.”

It’s this—breath, somehow, the way Phil says it, this quiet little something that comes outta his mouth, and Clint— Clint can’t help thinkin’ about it like a bomb somebody’s dropped. His eyes jump open, and he’s stuck staring at the white ceiling for a couple empty seconds.

When he pieces his thoughts together and remembers how to breathe, he dips his head to see Phil watching him. It’s another soft-eyed look, but it’s filled with a kinda—lingering warmth that crawls into Clint’s belly. His shoulders drop, a little, but he spreads his fingers against Phil’s shoulders.

Like—saying he’s still there without bothering with words.

“I don’t want to have to—kick you out after,” Phil says finally. The corners of his lips twitch into something that’s almost a smile, except for the fact it doesn’t go anywhere. “I don’t want you to run home in the morning for a fresh shirt or . . . whatever else.”

The way he says whatever else, it sinks into the pit of Clint’s stomach like a rock. Not because it’s stupid, but because—

‘Cause he’s been dodging Phil for a long time. ‘Cause he’s run, holed up in his office or his own head, more than once.

He wets his lips and pulls in a long breath. Pulls it in, holds it, and then exhales soft and slow. But he never looks away from Phil. He owes him that much, he thinks. He owes him this honest look, to make up for all the dodging.

“I’ll bring a shirt,” he says. He tries to make it lift, make it dance, but it—sounds like a promise, more than anything else. It sounds like a vow, something he’s etching in stone. Hell, maybe he is. “Next time, time after, whatever. Ironed shirt, clean underwear, fresh socks, my toothbrush.” He watches Phil’s mouth move, the almost-curve of something he hopes’ll turn into a smile. When he shifts his thumb, it rubs against the collar of Phil’s t-shirt and the flushed-pink skin underneath it. “And when I do, I’ll stick around.”

They’re the softest words in the whole conversation, an almost-murmur, but they linger, somehow, too.

Phil’s jaw moves when he swallows. “Yeah?” he asks, softly.

Clint nods. “Yeah.”

And he swears—to himself, to any kinda higher power, to the part of his belly that jumps every time their eyes meet—that one day, he will take a picture of this Phil Coulson smile, the one that fills his face with warmth and overtakes every one of his fine lines. And he’ll carry the picture around with him, in his bag or his wallet, just so he never forgets what Phil looks like when he smiles.

He could fall in love with that smile, he thinks.
That, and the way Phil says, “You stick around, you can use my toothbrush,” before he kisses him again.

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The next morning, somewhere in the middle of his first cup of coffee, there’s a light knock at Clint’s office door. The Killgrave file—the one he took from Phil’s house the night before, the one he almost left on the porch ’cause their “goodnight kiss” was ten minutes of lazy making out in the doorway—is spread all over his desk, and he’s squinting at one of Maria’s scribbled notes.

He doesn’t need to look up at the knock. He knows who it is. He knows it like breathing, like sense memory. He knows it like he knew who’d texted ten minutes after he arrived home the night before, and who’d put a plush black cushion on his window ledge before he got in this morning.

But need and want are two different things.

“Two motions to dismiss,” Phil reports. He wanders into Clint’s office with this casual ease and sets his coffee cup on the corner of the desk. He looks—good, Clint thinks. Like a sight for sore eyes, even after, what, ten hours? “The one’s pretty straight-forward, but he cites a laundry-list of obscure case law in the second. And this,” he adds, waving the thick packet of papers he’s carrying, “doesn’t even factor in the second round of motions he’s docketed.”

Clint snorts and shakes his head. “Laufeyson wants us busy.”

“Not busy. Distracted. Smoke, mirrors, misdirection.” Phil looks up from the motions, and for a minute, he’s—still. Silent and purse-lipped, like he’s waiting for something to happen.

Clint wants to kiss him until he can’t be silent anymore.

“Ready to get to work?” Phil finally asks.

And ‘cause Clint can’t kiss him—not in his open-doored office, not when there’re a stack of motions piling up, not when they’re on the case—he smiles. “Always,” he says, and Phil smiles back.
Reparations

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint discovers that the case and his life are both moving along—but that sometimes, as things move forward, you can't fix what you've left behind.

Chapter Notes

As many of you probably know, criminal cases can take many months to be resolved. For the sake of the story—and to avoid having entire chapters which, in Twilight style, are nothing but blank pages indicating that all Phil and Clint did was work—I am altering the speed and procedure of the criminal justice system a wee bit. Please keep in mind that this is not how it works in “real life,” but that this is my artistic license at work.

A Brady motion is one in which the defense in a criminal case requests all potentially exculpatory evidence that the prosecution holds be turned over. A “motion to suppress” asks that the court not consider given piece of evidence (or multiple pieces of evidence) due to some sort of violation or irregularity. A “motion in limine” asks that the court forbid certain information from being mentioned or discussed by witnesses at trial.

“I’ve reviewed your—collection of motions, Mr. Laufeyson, and I have a question.”

Judge Ilrsa Smithe takes off her glasses and settles them on the pile of motions atop her desk. It’s not every motion that Laufeyson’s filled in the Killgrave case, Clint knows. The motion to remove Judge Hammersmith probably isn’t there now that Hammersmith’s recused himself the from the case, and Clint’s pretty sure that Loki dropped off his Brady motion to the district attorney’s office before he officially filed it with the court clerk.

From where he’s sitting on one of the plush brocade-patterned chairs in Judge Smithe’s chambers, Clint can see Phil worry his lips into a line. It’s a tight expression, humorless and severe, and it’s the same expression he’s worn for the last twenty-four hours. Clint’d watched it bloom the previous afternoon while they hashed out a response for one of the motions to dismiss in Phil’s office. Phil’d answered the phone . . . and then all the light’d drained from his face.

That was Judge Smithe, he’d reported a few minutes later, hanging up.

Clint’d stopped writing. He’d been in the middle of a sentence—a solid sentence—but word choice kinda took a back seat when Phil frowned like he’d seen a ghost. Judge who?
Smithe. Phil’d repeated. His eyes had stayed unfocused, like he was trying to put together a whole lot of information in his own head. She mostly handles juvenile felony cases and divorces.

So she—called? Clint’d asked. He’d felt himself frowning as he said it. It’d mirrored Phil’s pursed lips and the way his forehead bunched when he’d nodded. Why’s the juvenile judge calling you?

Because Judge Hammersmith recused himself from our case. He’d been surprised how smoothly Phil could deliver the news, how stoic and even he could hold his voice even as Clint gripped his pencil hard enough that the wood creaked. Nguyen had a conflict, so it was passed to Smithe.

And that’s bad?

After the way Phil’d looked at Clint across the desk—his eyes hard-edged, the corners of his lips creased with worry—Clint really hadn’t needed an answer.

But he’d gotten one anyway when Phil’d said, We have a conference with her in her chambers at 4 p.m. tomorrow afternoon. She wants to discuss the defense’s motions.

You mean the motions to dismiss? Clint’d responded. He’d swallowed around the question, not so much ‘cause it was hard to ask—

But ‘cause it was hard to process the seriousness of Phil’s nod, and the tightness in his voice when he’d said, I think so.

Now, Phil’s standing in Judge Smithe’s chambers, the Killgrave file—and all of Laufeyson’s motions—cluttering up the seat the chair meant for him. Clint watches as his fingers flex against the upholstery. He’s digging his fingertips into the plush fabric just hard enough to make tiny divots. Clint knows he’s holding onto the edges of his patience.

Patience, not temper, ‘cause what he’s waiting for is for Laufeyson to say something. He’s sprawled all over the third chair, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles like he’s been pulled from taffy. Like that old green Claymation character, Clint thinks, and works not to snort at himself. The guy’s in green today, too—green waistcoat, green scarf (and it’s a scarf this time, worse than the near-cravats he usually wears)—and there’s a shiny green lining in his suit jacket. The jacket he deposited on the back of his chair when he walked in, a flourish of confidence.

Or smugness. Clint’s starting to suspect that smugness is Laufeyson’s default.

Laufeyson knits his fingers together over his stomach. “Yes, your honor?” he asks. His voice is smooth and slick like an oil spill.

Judge Smithe raises her eyebrows at him. “Do you really think I’m going to entertain your ego for the whole of this case?”

Clint starts sucking in a breath but chokes on it, instead. When he twists to look at Phil, Phil’s mouth is—hanging open. There’s a word, or a sound, balanced on the edge of his lips, but nothing comes out. He just stands, shell-shocked and about ready to sputter.

Ready to, but not actually sputtering. No, sputtering belongs to Laufeyson. He rockets outta his flopped-back position, almost jumping out of his seat, and Clint presses his lips together to keep from laughing. “Your honor,” he strains. His fingers claw at the arms of the chair. “My client has a Constitutional right to launch an active defense. And with the prosecution’s baseless charges against him, and the absolutely outrageous—”

“Motion to dismiss the murder charge,” Judge Smithe interrupts. She picks the first motion up off
the pile and then drops it onto an empty corner of her desk. “Motion to dismiss the aggravated indecent liberties and criminal sodomy charges—nice to see, by the way, that you took the time to consolidate those.” The next motion lands on top of the first. “Motion to suppress the DNA evidence taken by Dr. Richards of the Suffolk County crime lab.” Another thump on the pile. “Motion to suppress the blood evidence found at the dormitory where the victim was staying.” And another. “And then, we have your motion to remove Judge Hammersmith, which is now moot, your motion for speedy trial, and your four motions in limine—which, by the way, I haven’t even had time to review.”

“We have a Brady motion filed with our office,” Phil offers. Laufeyson’s eyes turn to ice when he glares over his shoulder, but Phil’s face stays absolutely neutral. “As long as you’re counting.”

“This is absolutely ludicrous,” Laufeyson insists. His ass comes off the chair for a second, but then Smithe catches his eyes. He stops himself, his whole body tensing, and lowers back down. Clint really wants to grin, but he holds back.

“What is ridiculous, Mr. Laufeyson, is your attempt to drown the prosecution in a sea of paperwork until they abandon their case.” The judge leans forward, her elbows on her desk. “I don’t know how it usually works with my colleagues, but I don’t believe in frivolous motion practice. I’m not going to let you weigh down the prosecution with—allegations that Dr. Richards fudged the results just because he and Mr. Stark were friends, once.”

“Roommates,” Laufeyson corrects, and Smithe narrows her eyes at him. “I apologize, your honor,” he presses, spreading his hands out like he’s about to make some kind of peace offering, “but the possibility of bias is severe in this case. My client is a lauded member of the community—”

“Who’s accused of rape and murder,” Phil reminds him.

“—and we have to be cognizant of the number of people who bear him ill-will. As I’m sure the district attorney’s Mr. Stark knows from his own experience and . . . notoriety, an imagined slight from a rich man to a rich man can build into—”

“Are you accusing a member of my office of something?” Phil interrupts. His hands come off the back of the chair, and the look he levels at Laufeyson—Clint decides, right then, that he never wants to be on the receiving end of a look like that. “Because I can assure you, Mr. Stark is one of the best attorneys I know, and—”

“Oh, of course he is,” Laufeyson retorts. The oil-slick voice is back, and he glides through every syllable. “Despite the fact that his ample wealth is what keeps the charity that placed this—juvenile delinquent in my client’s care alive.”

“Delinquent?” Phil repeats, anger curling at the edges of his tone. “Is victim-blaming the only defense you—”

Judge Smithe raises her hands. “Thank you, counselors, but let’s save it for the courtroom.” Her voice is even, almost placid, but Clint can see the way she looks at Laufeyson when he settles back into his chair. Her eyes don’t hide her frustration, and Clint can’t decide what exactly she’s frustrated at: the argument between he and Phil, or the pile of motions on her desk. She places her hands on top of the stack. “For the sake of judicial efficiency and to keep the docket from being jammed up from here until Labor Day,” she finally says, “I’m consolidating the defense’s motions. Mr. Laufeyson, you have until the end of the day on Monday to file anything new. If—” And when Laufeyson opens his mouth to protest, she holds up a finger. “—new evidence comes to light after that date that requires you file another motion, so be it. But if I even so much as catch a whiff of
you attempting to ‘play’ this system, I will file an ethical complaint with the bar association and encourage Mr. Coulson to do the same. Do you understand me?”

Laufeyson presses his lips together. His eyes dart around the judge’s chambers like a caged animal looking for a way out. For a couple seconds, Clint—actually feels bad for the guy. Not ‘cause any of his motions have merit, but ‘cause—

Well, if you only really know how to hit a curveball and the pitcher on the other team just keeps throwing them straight down the middle, it’s probably a pretty shitty feeling.

The difference here is that Laufeyson kinda deserves it.

“Yes, your honor,” he finally says. Grudgingly, Clint thinks.

The judge nods and looks up at Phil. “Does three weeks for the state to respond sound reasonable?” she asks.

Phil’s eyes dip to the file that’s spread all over the seat of his chair. Clint can make out a couple of the individual stapled packets from where he’s sitting—just the ones on top, ‘cause the rest are obscured by the file folder itself—and he knows the calculations Phil’s doing. Both of them working ‘round-the-clock could probably tackle the pile, but Clint’s still handling half his own caseload, and Phil’s got other pending cases of his own.

But when he looks up from the pile, Phil’s watching him. His tongue darts out, wets his lips, and then he rolls them together.

Somehow, Clint’s sure that little expression’s a question.

He nods.

“There three weeks from next Monday will be fine, your honor,” Phil says.

“Good.”

Laufeyson storms out of Judge Smithe’s chambers in a swirl of green-lined suit jacket and bouncing hair, and the two associates waiting for him out in the lobby practically fall out of their chairs as they scrabble after him. Clint laughs—quietly, just in case—as one trips over his own shiny shoes trying to catch his boss. “If he’s got a hit list,” he points out to Phil, “we’re on it now.”

“We already were,” Phil assures him, and hands him half of the case file to carry back to the office. The hall’s mostly empty—Friday afternoons are pretty calm, and it’s probably pushing five at this point—and it sort of feels like they’re the only people in the place. He pushes the elevator button, and when he steps back, Phil’s close enough that their shoulders brush.

It still makes Clint’s stomach jump, a little.

He doesn’t say that aloud, though.

“Do me a favor,” Phil says as they step onto the elevator, “and don’t tell Stark what I said about him being one of the best attorneys I know.”

Clint frowns and glances over at him. “I— Why?” Phil’s eye-crinkles bunch, but he doesn’t really look over. “He’s really good at his job.”

“Oh, I know.”
“And you guys get along okay, right?”

“Mostly.”

“So then—

The elevator doors chime open on the sixth floor, and Phil steps out first. “Because I have a reputation to maintain,” he says over his shoulder, “and I’m still planning payback for the subscriptions to Cat Fancy and Ladies’ Home Journal.”

Clint almost drops his half the case file laughing.

At least, ‘till they walk through the secure doors at the district attorney’s office and are immediately accosted by Darcy.

“How’d it go?” she demands, falling into step with them.

Phil raises an eyebrow as she sweeps in and takes the stack of motions right out of Clint’s grip—and honestly, Clint’s not far behind him with the staring. He frowns at her, and the smile she returns is about three-quarters kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar. She’s playing the part, he thinks, and probably for Phil’s benefit. Behaving when the real boss is around.

He wonders for a couple seconds if maybe Steve’s the only person in the office who thinks Darcy’s irreplaceable.

She opens an arm for Phil’s half the file, too. Phil doesn’t hand it over.

“You know it’s after five, right?” Clint asks.

“So?”

“Nothing. I just figured you turned back into a pumpkin if you were here past 4:59.”

Darcy curls the stack of motions into a horseshoe and batters him in the arm hard. So hard that he actually swears under his breath. When he glances over, he catches Phil swallowing a grin. Figures. “Everybody’s been waiting for you guys to come back,” Darcy presses as Phil finally hands over the rest of the file. “I think Maria’s chewed her fingertips off thinking that the case got dismissed.”

“It didn’t,” Phil assures her, but Clint thinks maybe his heart’s not in it.

“Then what happened?”

He sighs and casts Clint a sidelong glance. It’s kinda long-suffering, like he’s the one who deals with Darcy’s special brand of crazy every damn day. The problem is that Clint can see everything that’s under the quick glance, too. Phil’s face isn’t calm and warm, like usual, but pretty—drawn. Exhausted, Clint thinks, with the start of dark circles under his eyes and these spidery little lines creasing the soft parts of his face. And no wonder, you know? The last twenty-four hours’ve been plagued with worry about the Killgrave case: worry that the judge’d dismiss it as soon as they walked into the meeting, worry that Laufeyson’d just keep filing motions till their heads exploded, worry that they were gonna lose in the court of public opinion before they ever made it to trial.

And the jury for that last one’s still out—at least, according to all the editorials Clint’s still trying not to read.

He flashes Phil a little smile when he looks over, warm as he can muster, but it hardly lifts the lines
on Phil’s face. The guy looks about ready to down a bottle of aspirin and crash into bed. Clint’s right there with him. (Figuratively, at least. They’re not there literally. Yet.)

“Well’s really not the time,” Phil finally tells her.

And then, out of nowhere, Darcy fumbles the file. It’s a butterfingers move, and a couple motions start to come lose. She catches one by the coversheet and swings it back into the pile, but Clint—Clint’s pretty sure Darcy could juggle case files while balanced on a highwire. He’s watched her carry a box of files, an extra-large coffee, and the incoming mail . . . while texting.

He narrows his eyes at her.

“I’m—pretty sure now’s kind of the only time,” she says after a couple seconds. Guiltily says, like she knows she’s done something wrong.

Phil frowns. “Why’s that?”

But the problem with the question—or maybe, the problem with the constant nosing around that caused the question—is all in the timing. ‘Cause Darcy grimaces when he asks, grimaces worse when they round the corner, and then it’s suddenly crystal clear why this is the so-called “only time.”

Because crowded in front of them—hovering, really, in the hallway, all of them empty-handed and about half of them guilty-looking—are Natasha, Thor, Bruce, and—

“Please—pretty please, actually, pretty please with, I don’t know, sugar and cherries and chocolate sauce and edible undies on top—tell me you screwed that slippery bastard ‘till he couldn’t see straight.” Stark slaps his palms together, right there in the middle of the hall, and for a second, Clint thinks he’s gonna drop to his knees to beg. “Figuratively, I mean. Unless you and Barton are into the other kind—no judgment.”

He laces his fingers together, and when Phil rolls his eyes, he starts shaking his conjoined fists at Phil. It’s less begging and more prayer, Clint thinks, ‘cause Stark’s big-eyed and helpless. He looks kinda like the little kids in those paintings of Jesus, the ones that stare up at him hopefully, and Clint has to press his lips together to keep from laughing.

He wonders how Phil’d feel about being Stark’s personal Jesus.

Clint doesn’t ask, though, because Phil sighs. It’s a long sigh, the kind where it’s more deflating than sighing. Stark shakes his hands harder, and his watch rattles. Clint’s not focused on that as much as he is on Phil’s face, though, and now the lines are deep enough that Clint kinda wonders whether Phil’s past needing the bottle of aspirin and straight into needing a bottle of scotch.

“Careful your words, Tony,” Thor says, and Clint’s gotta admit, he kinda blinks at the tightness in his voice. Thor’s face is serious, his lips set into a frown and his eyes narrowed into something that’s almost a glare. No, actually, it is a glare—or at least, it turns into one once Stark rolls his eyes. Clint’s seen the guy look annoyed, even frustrated, but this is his first hint at Thor being angry. The expression holds when he adds, “Loki can be unreasonable, but he was first in his class at Wisconsin, and is still my brother.”

Clint raises his eyebrows. “He’s filed ten motions in five days.”

The hallway hushes, but not without effort. ‘Cause even focused in on Thor, Clint can see the way Natasha dips her head to hide one hell of a smirk. Next to her, Bruce focuses studiously on the nameplate outside of Maria’s office so he doesn’t have to make eye contact with Stark—mostly
because Stark’s inches from laughing.

Thor opens his mouth, halfway to a response, but reconsiders when Phil raises an eyebrow. They all stand there, still and silent, before Thor limply adds, “He is adopted.”

To her credit, Natasha makes it seven whole seconds before she bursts out laughing.

Her laughter kinda—disperses them all. Stark claps Phil on the back and mutters something that sounds a little like good work, Thor slinks off like he’s just been spanked, and Bruce manages to hide his shitty little grin until he’s on his way down the hall. Darcy links an arm in Natasha’s and trots off, file in hand. It leaves Phil and Clint alone in the middle of the hallway, no noise except for their breathing and the steady tick of the wall clock.

“Three weeks isn’t a lot of time,” Clint says stupidly. At least, that’s how it sounds in his own head, like a stumbling kid trying to arrange a second date.

But dumb or not, the smile that nudges at the corners of Phil’s lips is the first genuine one Clint’s seen all day. “Think we can’t handle it?”

“Think it’ll be a lot of work.” He catches himself shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and forces his whole body to still. “I’ll start reviewing a couple tomorrow,” he offers after Phil’s quiet for what feels like too long. “I’m doing first appearances in the morning, but then I’ll have the rest of the day. Maybe start taking some notes, and we can triage what we’ve got to do on M —”

The word’s supposed to be Monday, but it dies on his lips when Phil touches his arm. His whole body feels like it jumps from the touch, ’cause this isn’t some accidental shoulder-brush in the hallway. This is intentional, meant, and his fingers spread along Clint’s forearm. Clint can’t really feel the heat—he’s wearing his jacket and shirt, too much fabric to really memorize the touch—but he remembers what those fingers felt like against bare skin.

He remembers, and he wets his lips.

“I’ll call you this weekend,” Phil murmurs. It’s soft, private even though they’re in the middle of the hallway—and to Clint, it sounds more like a promise than anything else.

He wets his lips. “You know I’m gonna hold you to that, right?”

“I’d certainly hope so.” Their eyes meet, there in the hallway, and Clint— Clint’s gotta admit, if he was just a little less professional, he’d probably push Phil up against the wall and kiss him ‘till they started rutting like teenagers.

Instead, he just stands there and lets Phil’s thumb trace a nonsense pattern on his arm.

“Maybe I’ll even get to bring that shirt,” he says, finally, and Phil laughs as his fingers slide away.

“Maybe.” And even though his voice is light, almost half-joking, Clint—

Clint thinks he hears something else in it, too.

Or maybe, he just hopes so.
There’s close to a dozen first appearances on Saturday, thanks to a bunch of idiot teenagers playing a rousing game of “throw beer bottles at cars on Main Street” during a college keg party the night before. Clint argues with Fandral a couple times about bond amounts, snipes with Sif over whether the girl should be charged the same as the half-dozen boys—“She is a Girl Scout, your honor!” Sif insists, and Clint grits his teeth to keep from groaning aloud. “She works at a non-profit in her spare time!”—and ends up in a conference room with no fewer than ten concerned parents and just as many diversion forms. He knows Steve’ll reject a couple of them outright—one of the guys has a couple tickets for underage drinking already, the other is one of Thor’s frequent flyers in the juvenile division—but it keeps everybody happy. He lingers in the hallway after, stack of files balanced on one of the benches, and watches the merry band of idiots file into the elevators.

He wonders how many of the kids’ll be chewed out in the car on the way home. He’s pretty sure the answer’s none of them.

Back in his office, he spreads the pile of motions out on his desk and just—stares at them for a while. He knows he’s gotta read all of them—if only so he knows what Phil’s talking about when they start tearing the things apart on Monday—but it’s like a sea of fucking paper. A layer of snow on top of the wood, he thinks to himself, but without a snowblower to fix it. He ends up snatching the two motions to dismiss off the edge of his desk, fluffing his window ledge pillows, and getting to work.

He’s halfway through the one to dismiss the murder charge when his phone chimes in his bag. He grumbles at it, highlighter caught between his teeth as he riddles through what’s easily the world’s most convoluted lack-of-intent argument, but finishes scribbling his notes in the margin, anyway.

It chimes a second time as he swings his legs off the ledge.

Phil’s first text reads, How’d first appearances go?, and Clint can’t help the stupid smile that crawls across his face as soon as he realizes who it’s from. The second, though, says, Unless you’re still in first appearances right now. Which, if that’s the case, means we have to talk a little about your efficiency. and makes him laugh.

He texts back, working on the killgrave motions. you’ve heard of working, right?

Vaguely. That’s where you come over for breakfast tomorrow, and afterwards, I try to focus on drafting responses instead of on how good you look in a t-shirt, right?

Clint can hear Phil’s voice in his head, the teasing little edge he saves for when he means what he’s saying. It drops into his belly, twists it a little, and Clint likes the feeling. He likes how his heart kind of catches, like Phil’s standing in the same room and watching him.

There’s no substitute for the way Phil looks at him.

that an invitation? he types back after a few seconds.

Only if you’ll come.

And somehow, Clint knows it’s not meant as a double entendre. course i’ll come, he replies immediately. just lemme know how long you want me so i can bring something for lunch or whatever.

It takes a little while—long enough that Clint’s screen dims—before Phil texts back, Do you mean that generally or specifically?
what?

How long I want you.

Clint frowns. I still don’t know what you’re asking, boss.

Well, generally, I want you for as long as I can convince you to stick around, Phil replies, and it takes long enough that Clint wonders whether he’s fiddled with what he’s saying, tried to get it . . . right. Specifically, tomorrow, I want you to stay long enough that you need to bring that extra shirt we talked about.

It’s just part of a text, just a string of words together on his phone display, but Clint— He spends a lot of time just watching it. Not ‘cause he thinks it’s a mistake, not really, but ‘cause—

‘Cause he wasn’t sure what needing “time” meant, not to Phil.

‘Cause he wasn’t sure whether Phil’d take him up on his offer—if you could even call it that—any time soon.

He wets his lips and swallows. underwear, socks, and toothbrush, too, he reminds him.

No toothbrush, remember? Phil replies, and Clint grins like an idiot at his phone. He dips his head to start a response, but then Phil adds, Come by at ten. I’ll have breakfast on the table, an outlet for your laptop, and we can actually get somewhere on Laufeyson’s verbal diarrhea.

Clint laughs. just don’t call it that at the breakfast table. He thinks about adding “or in the bedroom,” but deletes it two words in.

He can imagine the laugh lines crinkling Phil’s eyes when Phil texts back with, All part of my plan to horde coffee cake.

it’s less of a secret evil plan if i know about it ahead of time.

No one said it was a secret. I’ll see you in the morning.

Or in a couple different mornings, Clint thinks, but he—doesn’t say that. Instead, he says, i’ll come hungry and leaves it at that.

It’s hard to concentrate, though, after the whole—exchange. Clint tries, but he catches his mind wandering. Instead of legal arguments and future research, he focuses on the memory of Phil’s skin under his fingertips, the scent of his aftershave or deodorant or whatever he wears, and the way every damn kiss lingers. He endures about twenty minutes of distraction before he shoves the motions in his bag and decides to call it a day.

He’s walking down the back steps outside the employee-only entrance when a voice behind him shouts, “Hey, hey wait, I like looking at your badass booty but wait!”

Clint—sighs.

“It’s Saturday, Wilson,” he points out, but it’s too late. Wade Wilson’s landing—mostly-cleanly, with just a little arm-windmilling and a couple grunts—from what Clint can only assume’s a slide down the banister. He’s in track pants and the rattiest Batman t-shirt Clint’s ever seen, and his hair’s sticking up in about twelve directions. He looks like he just rolled out of bed. “I’m going home.”
“But you’re here now,” Wilson retorts, holding up a finger. “And I’m here. And since we’re both here, we should go eat food. Or catch fish. Or—hey, do you like to run?”

Clint blinks a couple times, ‘cause that’s what it takes to string all the thoughts together in proper sequence. It’s hot out, the kind of summer hot where you mostly want to go back into the air conditioning and forget that it’s July. In front of him, Wilson rocks back onto his heels. He’s wearing Birkenstock sandals with white socks. “Why are you here?” he asks after a couple seconds. “You weren’t in Saturday court.”

“I couldn’t find my phone.” And in case Clint doesn’t believe him, he pulls it out of his pocket. It’s a smartphone with a screen so scratched, Clint’s surprised he can use it. “But hey, somebody turned into the lost and found, so—”

“We have a lost and found?”

“Oh, yeah!” He grins. “You know that room on the fifth floor, across from the clerk’s office? There’s computers in there, and books, and usually some magazines, plus, like, pens and pencils that you can just take if you want—”

“You mean the law library?” Clint interrupts. The fifth floor’s mostly administrative offices—the clerk of the court, a couple county officials, plus IT, processing, and the court reporting staff—and the only room up there that vaguely matches Wilson’s description is the law library. Well, if you can call a set of statute books, a set of case reporters, a dictionary, and two ancient Dell computers a “library.” “With the couple tables and the beat up chairs?”

“Yeah!” Wilson’s grin drops. “That’s—not a lost and found?”

“No,” Clint assures him.

“But there’re those pens in there—”

“That say ‘Property of the Suffolk County Judicial Complex.’”

“Oh.” And there’s this glorious second where Clint thinks maybe—maybe—Wilson’ll figure out the error of his ways.

At least, until he shrugs and says, “Well, got my phone back! Wanna go running?” like the rest of the conversation’d never happened. When Clint rolls his eyes, Wilson bounces in his Birkenstocks. “C’mon. I go every day, I bet you go every day—”

He thinks for a moment about the night he ran out to the gas station, but decides not to dwell on it. “Not every day,” he answers.

—and if we go to the lake, there’s shade. And,” Wilson adds, sticking a finger up so fast that his phone flies outta his hand and hits the steps hard, “the world’s most awesome hotdog and sno-cone cart.”

Clint frowns. “You eat hotdogs on a run?”

“Hotdogs are like margaritas: there’s never a wrong time for them!” Wilson swoops down, picks up his phone—and then reaches over to throw an arm around Clint’s shoulders. It’s friendly, don’t get him wrong, but it’s insistent, too. He squeezes and sorta tugs Clint along with him down the stairs whether he wants to go that way or not. “I’ll buy your hotdog.”

“I don’t—really like hotdogs.”
“Then I’ll buy your sno-cone.” They hit the sidewalk, the one that loops the building, and Clint sighs. There’re all of three cars in the parking lot, and he’s willing to bet that Wilson’s is the beat-up teal-green Geo Metro that’s parked sort of in the middle of nowhere.

He glances over at Wilson, who grins. “Please?” he asks, and there’s something—stupidly hopeful in that smile.

An hour and a half later, Clint’s huffing his way through their third loop of the lake trying to keep up with Wilson. The guy’s like a cross between a border collie and the Energizer Bunny, ‘cause he runs without pacing and doesn’t seem to lose any energy. There’s a dewy breeze coming off the lake and rustling through the trees, though, and Clint’s pretty sure he’s had worse afternoons. Especially since, every once in a while, Wilson slows down enough to point out cute women (and men, dogs, and squirrels) in between singing tunelessly along with his iPod.

(The latest: “Did you just gonna stand there and watch me burn see that guy but that’s all right because I like the way it hurts on the rollerblades?”)

They finally stop near the picnic enclosure, all of a hundred feet from the food cart. The sun’s beating down between the trees, and when they’re still, it’s a lot harder to feel the breeze. Clint wonders about jumping into the lake fully-clothed, just to cool down.

Wilson, on the other hand, flops onto the grass. He’s still in the ratty t-shirt, but his running shorts are short and—

“You don’t gotta prove you only have the one,” Clint informs him, putting a hand up.

Wilson blinks, looks down to how he’s spread-eagled on the ground, and laughs. “Okay, okay. I get it,” he returns when Clint sticks his hand out further. He crosses his legs at the ankles. Clint shakes his head at him, but he’s trying not to laugh. He’s walking a loop on the running path to keep his legs from locking up when Wilson says, “You’re better.”

Clint stops in the middle of dragging his arm across his forehead. “What?”

“You.” Wilson raises a hand, points a finger at him, and waves it around. It looks kinda erratic, the way he does it, but Clint figures out a couple seconds in that Wilson’s actually tracing him. Badly. “You were all grumpy. Black-cloud sun.”

“You mean ‘Black Hole Sun’?”

“And now, you’re all—frown upside down.” He demonstrates by pushing fingers against the corners of his mouth and shoving his own lips up into a smile. Clint snorts and rolls his eyes. The only thing that keeps him from laughing is bending to stretch—and then hiding his grin somewhere around his knees. “It’s a better look on you.”

“Thanks?” Clint asks.

“No, don’t—actually, yeah. Yeah, wait, I like the sound of that.” Wilson pushes up enough to catch himself on his elbows. “Thank me. Thank me and my tao of the yolo—”

“Really?”

“—for fixing your boy problem.”

Clint snorts and shifts into a lunge. A couple teenage girls who’re out jogging slow to an almost-walk as they pass. He rolls his eyes, but Wilson waves. “We’re not in high school,” he comments
once they’re out of earshot. “It’s not a ‘boy problem.’”

“You liked a boy, you didn’t know whether you should get with the boy, you got with the boy. Boy problem: solved.” Wilson sighs like something outta a bad Lifetime movie. “And now you’re going to live happily ever after.”

Clint switches to the other leg, but he can’t help the stupid half-laugh that kind of forces itself out. “And make redheaded babies?”

Wilson frowns. “No,” he replies. He drags out the syllable, his brow crumpling a little more with every half-second. A woman who’s walking her dog stops to stare at him. Though, it could be ‘cause he’s halfway to spread-eagled again. “You and Phillip the Terrifying’d make strawberry-blond babies. Or—ooh! Maybe sandy-blond. You know, the kind that gets really light in the summer and looks all cute poking out from under a baseball cap? Yeah, those are Barton-Coulson babies.”

The eavesdropper walks away fast enough that she loses her footing on some loose gravel, and Clint gives into laughing.

Warm and . . . not entirely subtle laughing.

It makes Wilson grin like he’s just won the lottery. “I am so buying your sno-cone,” he promises, and Clint lets him.

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“Okay, hang—see, this is more of the food coma talking, ‘cause now I can’t find the statute I was just talking about.”

Phil’s home office is a fucking pig sty.

Clint’ll apologize if he ever says it aloud, he swears, but when he leans over to find the post-it he scribbled his notes on, he tips over a stack of printed-out case law and sends it sliding along the hardwood floor. He’s pretty sure it’s not usually like this—the bookcases, which’re just as stuffed as the ones in the living room, are pristine and dust-less, there’s a file cabinet with a couple organizers on top of it, and the pen cup’s just the right proportion of full—but Laufeyson’s “verbal diarrhea” has kinda taken the whole place over. The day before, Phil’d pulled and printed a bunch of the cases cited in the motions and labeled them with little post-its so they could match each mass of research with each ridiculous claim. There’s a law dictionary balanced on the corner of a chair, cords for their laptops and Phil’s iPad trailing all over the floor, and now—this.

Clint catches the avalanche before it bumps into the closet door and sloppily stacks it back up.

Phil rubs his forehead, runs his hand over his hair, and then nudges his glasses back up on his nose.

There’re about a thousand dirty things Clint wants to do, thanks to the man’s glasses.

Instead, he says, “Lemme pull it up in my search history real quick,” and forces himself to look back at the computer.

The problem with trying to work with a guy who you wanna climb all over is the fact that, in the end, you actually end up doing work. ‘Cause from the time they finished Phil’s quiche and coffee
cake—“Don’t worry,” Phil’d assured him, holding up his hands. “I bought them at Sam’s Club, I didn’t cook for you again.”—and enough coffee and orange juice to float an aircraft carrier, they’d been actually digging into the Killgrave case.

*I know we’ve got this weekend plus the three weeks,* Phil’d said after Clint’d growled at Laufeyson’s . . . “creative interpretation” of a statute and tossed the motion to suppress into the nearest trash can, *but I think we can throw him off his game if we get done earlier. If nothing else, he’ll try to run out the clock on us and make us violate the speedy trial rules.*

*He can do that?* Clint’d asked, reaching for the remnants of his orange juice.

Phil’d smirked. *He can try,* he’d responded, and his eyes’d glinted in a way that made Clint swallow without tasting.

But that’s how they’d spent the whole day, not counting breaks for lunch (sandwiches) and dinner (extra-spicy thai food ordered from a place a couple blocks away that they’d walked, together, to go pick up): working. Digging through cited cases, through affidavits, through the actual *law,* and all of it on the floor of Phil’s pig-sty office.

But Phil’s worn jeans and a thin white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the collar a little too open all day. He’s wandered around barefoot and hasn’t stopped himself from putting a hand on Clint’s back to steer him, or stroking fingers along his arm while they’re bent over a case together.

Plus, the glasses.

It’s—made all the work bearable.

“We can’t file a response that just says *nope,* can we?” Phil asks while Clint’s still fighting with his computer, and Clint looks up. It’s after nine, and Phil—Looks a little like he’s sagging. It’s not like a normal weekend where you laze around, watch the game for a while, and then *maybe* get some work done. It’s been grueling as fuck, and every inch of him shows it. His shoulders slouch a little, but when their eyes meet, he smiles. It’s this funny kind of warm, completely unlike the dozens of other smiles all day, and Clint forgets what statute he’s looking for.

“Think that’s against the rules,” he replies, but he’s still—watching Phil.

“You sure?”

“Depends. You still got those motion guidelines open on your iPad? ‘Cause I can check really quick if you just—”

Clint abandons his laptop to lean across the sea of papers and try to snatch the iPad from Phil, and Phil laughs. It’s soft, but *meant,* you know? It’s *real.* Real enough that Clint lunges a little further, his arm outstretched, and grins when Phil catches him by the wrist.

He knows from the way Phil tugs him that the endgame doesn’t include Clint grabbing the iPad.

He catches himself on his free hand and meets the kiss halfway.

It’s not like last time on the couch, bogged down with wine and hands that try to feel everything at once. No, this is—softer. Not lazy so much as *gentle,* like Phil’s put off doing this all day. His hand finds Clint’s neck and rests there, his thumb stroking along Clint’s jaw, and Clint thinks for a second that maybe he *has* waited. Maybe working, trying to concentrate, that’s all been a distraction from—want.
He’s not sure how to wrap his head around that. ‘Cause he’s used to a lot of things, but somebody like Phil wanting him like that, it’s a little—

It’s a kind of heady that doesn’t require wine.

He presses into the kiss, then into Phil, and Phil leans back against the side of his desk. It thumps against the wall a little, shakes the perfectly-filled pencil cup, but it lets him pull Clint closer. Reel him in, ‘till Clint’s pushing up onto his knees and following. The iPad’s forgotten, and so’s research, reading, and all those fucking R-words that Laufeyson’s bullshit requires, because Phil’s tongue is soft and sure.

Clint can’t help the little moan in the back of his throat. Then again, he doesn’t try.

No, instead, he slides his hand up Phil’s side and practically pins him against the desk. Phil’s got broad enough shoulders to fill out his jackets, but he’s still not as broad as Clint. Clint thinks for a second about whether he could man-handle him, pin him to a flat surface ‘till he moans, and— Yeah, that’s a dangerous thought to have right now. ‘Cause it makes him catch Phil’s lower lip between his teeth and tug, makes him kiss deeper when he comes back, and—

And the hand that he’s been dragging up Phil’s side, spread-fingered and grasping, shifts against his chest. Phil lets out this murmur of approval, and Clint abandons any semblance of time he’d promised to thumb Phil’s nipple through the fabric

Phil breaks the kiss to gasp. He looks wide-eyed, debauched even, and—

“Time?” Clint asks, but he’s—panting. His chest is heaving and his heart feels like it’s gonna burst, but Phil just stares at him. Big-eyed and lost, like they’ve woken up on a desert island and found out they’re the last two people on earth.

He fans his fingers along Phil’s shirt. His thumb comes close to rolling against his nipple again, and he swears that Phil arches for it. Touch, Clint thinks, is his weakness. Touch turns him into a cat who’ll rub itself on your ankles just for ten seconds of petting.

Clint wants a whole lot more than ten seconds of petting.

But then, Phil wets his lips and—shakes his head.

“Bed,” he says instead, and Clint’s pretty sure that’s his new favorite noun in the universe.

It’s like being fifteen again, the way they stumble to their feet like idiot kids about to get caught by their parents. A pile of printed-out cases collapses when it connects with Clint’s heel, Phil trips on the runner in the hallway, but they’re all hands, fingers, lips, and teeth as they grope along. Figuratively and otherwise, ‘cause a half-dozen of Phil’s buttons are open by the time the back of Clint’s knees run into the mattress. Clint’s shirt’s still on, but his belt’s open thanks to fumbling fingers.

“I—” Clint starts to say when they pause for breath, but then, he catches sight of Phil’s chest. Of the breadth of it, sure, but also the hair, and— Jesus, you know? Jesus, and a couple of the apostles or whatever . . . But then he’s running his fingers over that hair, and feeling the warmth of the skin underneath.

Phil lets out this shaky laugh of a breath. Clint raises his eyes to catch the world’s most delicious flush crawling up his neck and throat. “What?” he asks, but he hears his own voice. It’s—lifted, almost unbearably light, and he feels the smile creeping across his face.
“I wouldn’t’ve guessed your . . . type,” he says after a couple seconds. His fingers find Clint’s belt loops and drag him closer. Close enough that the bulge pressing against his zipper nudges Phil’s hip. He sucks in a breath to keep from moaning—or from pushing closer. “I figured young and pretty.”

Clint snorts. “Figured the same for you,” he retorts, but his fingers, they’re still feeling him. They drag down until they can’t anymore, thanks to the closed buttons—and he hardly feels bad when one pops off, that’s how badly he wants more. “Clean-cut all American boy.”

“Kind of what I got.” And even though Phil says it with a shrug, with this—casualness, it brings Clint’s head up. Their eyes meet, and he can’t really put words together into a reply. Nah, they end up just dancing around on the edge of his tongue, too loose and intangible to turn into a whole sentence.

Phil’s thumb slides under his t-shirt and traces the waistband of his jeans, and Clint, he . . . swallows. “I’m pretty far from all that, boss,” he attempts, but it doesn’t sound like a tease.

It sounds like the day on the footpath in the park. It sounds like he means it.

The thumb on his skin stills, and Clint realizes he’s been watching Phil’s shoulder instead of his face. When he glances up, Phil’s eyes are soft and steady. Patient, he thinks. All of Phil’s looks, all those heavy pauses between them, they’ve—always been patient.

He feels like every inch of his body is pulsing with want. Not ‘cause of the kissing, or the skin, or Phil’s enormous bed. Because of the way Phil Coulson looks at him.

“You’re a lot more than you give yourself credit for,” Phil says finally. Softly, with hands that drift from Clint’s belt loops and start pushing his t-shirt up his sides.

“Keep saying that,” he murmurs, “and I might believe it.”

And somewhere in the middle of their next kiss—after Clint’s t-shirt is on the floor and the button on his fly is open, after Phil’s shirt is rumpled on the corner of the bed and Clint’s fighting with his belt—Phil whispers, “I sure as hell hope so.”

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The next morning, Clint swears he can still feel the whisper of Phil’s sheets against his skin, the pressure of Phil’s fingers digging into his hip while Clint palmed both of them together, the heat from Phil’s almost-scalding shower, and the rasp of rough morning stubble before either of them got a chance to shave.

They spend Monday drifting between one another’s offices, exchanging research, ideas, and half-drafted phrases. When they’re not wandering, Darcy’s doing the leg-work for them, swapping one annotated motion for another while complaining about how they’re both lazy. Clint almost misses a sentencing in Judge English’s courtroom ‘cause he’s too busy leaning over Phil’s desk, groaning at a Laufeyson argument that rides entirely on the placement of the comma in a statute.

But when he’s not working—when he’s taking the back stairs in twos on his way back from the sentencing, when he stops for coffee or ducks into the bathroom, or when Bruce drags him, Stark, and Steve to a truly horrifying food cart for lunch—he’s thinking about the night before, the heat
of Phil against him and the weight of Phil in his palm.

He wonders, in those quiet moments, when—or if—they’ll get to do it again.

Except that afternoon, he gets an e-mail that just reads: Dinner?

And he knows.

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“They let Captain Fancy outta the building, did they?”

It’s an overcast hellish Wednesday that sees Clint coming up the sidewalk in front of the judicial complex at double speed, his eyes squinting up at the sky in hopes that it doesn’t rain. All day Tuesday, the weather report’d promised a storm of biblical proportions, and today, it kinda looks like the prediction’ll come true. The group of them that usually grabs lunch together—Bruce, Stark, Steve, plus the add-on of Thor (“Jane has been under much stress and failed to pack my lunch,” he’d said, and Stark’d gone out of his way to make a gagging sound)—had played a rock-paper-scissors round-robin choose who got stuck walking down the block to pick up their sandwiches.

Turns out, Stark and Steve’re, like, rock-paper-scissors savants.

Clint, not so much.

The bag’s heavy, stuffed to the gills with subs, some terrifying club that’s more meat than anything else, six individual bags of chips, and three—count them, three—double-chocolate brownies for Thor. It’s awkward enough to carry without Clint’s head snapping around at the sound of that voice.

His head, first, and then his whole body. Bruce’s SunChips go flying and land on the sidewalk with a crunch.

In front of the building, Barney flicks the ash off the end of his cigarette—or at least, what Clint hopes is just a cigarette. “Thought you were gonna breeze past me,” he says, and there’s this shitty twist at the end of it, a little challenge. It kinda sets Clint’s nerves on edge.

He feels himself square his shoulders. Barney raises his eyebrows, and the corners of his lips tweaks into something that’s almost a smirk. “What’re you doing here?” Clint—Well, he wants to think he asks it, but he hears the sharpness in his voice.

“Meeting with my probation officer,” Barney replies with a shrug. He flicks the ash again, and Clint watches the pre-storm breeze catch it and whisk it off. “He’s got some court bullshit with one of your little D.A. buddies. Dragged me down here to meet in the fuckin’ cafeteria. Worst tuna salad I’ve ever had, but the scenery of your little lawyer buddies, that wasn’t too bad.”

His eyes narrow in on Clint, and Clint knows this game. They played it all the way through high school, plus the couple years before Clint got enough money together to start college: Barney dangling the bait, and Clint trying not to snap at it like a hungry dog. Psychological warfare, he thinks, and tightens his grip on the over-full paper bag.
Barney’s little smirk grows, and his eyes dance. His clothes are clean, even if they are just jeans and a “I taught your girlfriend that thing you like” t-shirt. And he’s sober, Clint thinks—but probably ‘cause he knew that if he came in looking high, he’d have to take a piss test. He’ll swap the cigarette for a joint as soon as he steps off the city bus.

“I think I saw that hot-ass redhead Trey was telling me about,” Barney continues. Clint drags in a breath through his nose. He stopped playing this game, he reminds himself. He stopped falling for Barney’s bullshit a long damn time ago. “Curves out to next fuckin’ month, right? Curls? Gotta wonder if the carpet matches the drapes.”

“Great,” Clint deadpans. His teeth grit together hard enough that it kinda hurts.

“‘Course, bet the other one could tell me. Dark hair, taller, little less in the tit department. Probably still lays like you’re payin’ for it, but—”

“Do you have a fucking point?” Clint demands. His voice echoes off the face of the building, caught on all the stone and reverberating upwards. Barney snorts a shitty laugh, his snarky little victory, and Clint dips to pick up Bruce’s damn chips. He’s not sure who he’s pissed at: Barney, Barney’s idiot P.O. who couldn’t just reschedule his appointment, or himself.

But Natasha and Maria, they’re his—colleagues, they’re his friends, and he’s not just gonna let Barney—

“I know you didn’t talk to them,” he says as he shoves the chips back into the bag. He can’t bring himself to look at Barney, so he glares at one of Thor’s fucking brownies. “You’re not that big of an asshole.”

“Since when?”

He rolls his eyes. “If you’d stuck around, I would’ve apologized, but you—”

“I what? I called you on your bullshit? ‘Cause that’s all you’re spewin’, bullshit, and even when you’re not sayin’ you’re better than us, all I hear is—”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” a voice demands, and Clint feels himself grimace faster than he can help it. Because the voice is attached to none other than Darcy Lewis, and is accompanied by her flying out of the building’s double doors at break-neck speed. Her hair bounces, her scarf (since when is it cold enough for a scarf, anyway?) bounces, her oversized owl necklace bounces. And when she shoves her hands out in front of her, her breasts bounce under her t-shirt, too.

Barney watches with all the subtlety of one of those cartoon dogs with the rolled-out tongue.

Clint seriously considers punching the smug look right off his face.

But Darcy hardly even notices there’s another person out there, never mind one that’s gaping at the tightest part of her Vote “No” On Daleks t-shirt. “Tony looked out the window, saw you coming, and is practically ready to stage a coup! He’s calling for your head, talking about how the right to rule belongs to the people and not the controller of the sandwiches, and that—”

She’s talking with her hands, fingers flying and everything still bouncing. The problem isn’t how she talks, though, but how she pauses for breath. ‘Cause when she does, her eyes wander, and she sees Barney.

Sees him, stops, and—kinda stares.
Barney takes a long drag off his cigarette. The smoke curls out of his mouth when he says, “Hey, baby.”

Darcy bristles in one sharp full-body shudder. Her jaw tightens, and Clint watches her eyes descend from Barney’s stringy hair down to his ratty sneakers, and then climb up again. She rolls her lips together, and Barney grins.

“Like what you see?”

“Maybe if I just ingested rat poison and didn’t have anything else to make me throw up,” she retorts. She sweeps forward, pulls the bag out of Clint’s grip, and tosses her hair over her shoulder. Clint swallows the laugh that’s building in the back of his throat. “You good?”

He nods. “Don’t let Thor eat my sandwich.”

“I think they’re doing a whole Les Miserables thing up there. I make no promises.”

Barney smirks at Darcy as she struts past him, outright laughing when she flips him off. The embers of his cigarette glow as he takes another drag. Clint focuses on the soft-glowing red . . . and tries to ignore the way Barney’s eyes follow Darcy’s ass until she steps back into the building.

The big doors slam shut behind her.

“You can’t be here,” Clint finally says.

Barney snorts. “Accordin’ to you, I can’t be anywhere you are.”

“Barney—”

“How long’s it gonna take to come up with your cover story for Miss Thing?” He drops the cigarette onto the sidewalk and stomps on it. Clint watches his heel grind it into the concrete, ‘cause it’s that or meeting his eyes. “Ten minutes? Twenty? You gonna go sit in the bathroom stall like when you liked that kid your senior year, come up with a story? What was the one back then? That you didn’t know me? That it was Trey’s idea to kick the shit outta that little q—”

“Don’t.” And his voice is tight enough, razor-sharp enough, that it shuts Barney up. His heel stops grinding the cigarette. Clint forces himself to swallow, and then, to unball his fists. Without the bag, without something to hold onto, he can feel his nerves fraying.

And if he can feel it, Barney can see it.

“Guess I should pretend I don’t fuckin’ know you,” he says after a couple seconds, and that— For some dumbass fucking reason, that brings Clint’s head up. He meets Barney’s eyes. They’re clear, the eyes that Clint remembers from when they were kids. He misses those eyes, mostly ‘cause he doesn’t see them much anymore.

He hasn’t really seen them since they moved in with Trick, he thinks. ‘Cause this Barney, this “Big B” Barton, he isn’t the brother who used to tell him Grimm’s tales at the orphanage. He isn’t the guy who drew him little comics to make him laugh, or who stuck up for him when he got his ass beat all those years ago. That Barney, he’s—long gone.

Clint makes himself remember that this man is “Big B” Barton, and not the skinny kid who used to read out the story about the fucked-up red dancing shoes.

But it’s too late. ‘Cause the memory, it’s come and gone, and when it goes, it kinda—steals the
words right out of the back of his throat. It squirrels them away, hides them somewhere, and he can’t speak. The silence lasts, stretches out between them, and Barney snorts.

“Yeah,” Barney says, “that’s what I thought.”

And even though he wants to stop him, even though he wants to say something, Clint lets Barney walk away into the first heavy drops of rain.
The Way We See Ourselves

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint is reminded that the way others see us is not necessarily the way we see ourselves, and he attempts to place a little more faith in the person he's become.

Chapter Notes

Extradition is the process by which an individual who is charged with a crime can be returned to the country in which he committed the crime. Every country treats extradition differently, and most have set circumstances in which they will return the person in question.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You could’ve just told me he’s a hot mess.”

It’s late when Darcy says it, late enough that the parking lot’s halfway to empty and most the office’s abandoned. At lunch, Clint’d avoided the jabs from Stark’s letter-opener swordfight, grabbed his sandwich and chips . . . and then’d holed up in his office all afternoon. He’d pretended he was working, even told Phil that much when he wandered by, but he’d mostly just sat and watched the rain bead against his window. The world’d looked greener the more rain that fell, but it hadn’t really helped his mood.

Around four-thirty, an e-mail’d popped up on his computer. Dinner? it’d read in Phil’s usual navy-blue font.

Promised Thor I’d look over a motion for one of the cases I tossed him, he’d typed back. He’d deleted every third word, then re-wrote it just to delete it again, trying to sound casual instead of . . . preoccupied. He and Sif have some weird alma mater rivalry thing going on. I don’t wanna feed him to the wolves.

He’d loomed next to his desk, fingers drumming on the edge while he waited for a reply. He’d hoped to christ Phil wouldn’t wander by and come ask him in person.

As long as you’re not sick of me and my left-over Thai food, Phil’d finally responded.

Clint’d snorted at it and kinda—half-smiled, even if it was just to himself. Promise, he’d typed back, and then locked his computer before he got tempted to say anything else.

From his spot on the window ledge, he’d watched Phil drive outta the parking lot, followed by Bruce and a half-dozen other people. Now, it’s Darcy who’s still around, leaning against his
doorjamb like she’s always there ‘till six on a weeknight. Her bag’s across her chest, her arms folded over the strap, and she’s wearing another one of her floppy hats.

Between that and the scarf, she looks like she wants it to be Christmas, not July.

Clint rubs a hand over his face. Thor’s motion’s written like he speaks, and it’s starting to hurt his head. “Darcy—”

“I get not wanting to advertise that kind of thing,” she presses, and Clint leans his head against the wall to watch her. She shrugs a little, pushing her shoulder away from the doorway. He’s never seen her hesitate like this before, and it’s . . . Well, it sure as hell isn’t Darcy. “Families are weird.”

He snorts a little. “‘Weird’ hardly scratches the surface with Barney,” he says after a couple seconds.

“Okay, then they’re— What word do you want? Hard? Crazy?” He shakes his head, but it only inspires this annoyed little noise outta Darcy. “Look, my uncle? He’s, like, a super-alkie. Like, he could drink three of Thor under the table and just keep on going.” She unfolds her arms and skims one palm against the other, like some kinda high-speed collision. “For a long time—I mean years, here—my family pretended that everything was totally normal. Because, you know, normal family parties end with your uncle puking into the peony bush, or blacking out half-naked on your patio.”

There’s something in her face that’s not wild, not the normal kamikaze-flight that Clint thinks of when he thinks about Darcy. Her hands settle against the strap of her bag and hold on a little too tight.

“But,” she continues, lifting her shoulders, “admitting things were bad meant that they were. It was easier to clean up the puke.” Her dark eyes settle on his. “Or lie.”

He presses his lips together and nods, a kinda—dumb bob of his head that doesn’t really mean anything. “It’s complicated.”

“And whether or not it’s intentional on her part, Clint finally gives in and grins. “How bad?”

“Oh, I totally told them that Peter Parker from the Bugle stopped to ask you for your phone number.” When he gapes in something that sure as hell feels like horror, Darcy laughs. “He’s got a thing. Haven’t you noticed he’s got a thing?”

“You need to go home now,” he retorts, and she hops away from the balled-up sheet of paper he tries to throw at her. She twists out the door, this dance-move to music he’s pretty sure only she can hear. Except—

“Hey, Darcy?”

She stops, one foot off the ground, and leans all the way into the doorway. She loses her balance a little, catching herself on the doorjamb at the last second before she falls over. “Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in law school?”

There’re a couple seconds, long ones, where Darcy just—watches him. Her eyes are careful, her lips are pursed, and he feels for a second like the guy who tripped on the curtain and brought the
whole show down. Her hair’s hanging halfway into her face, so she raises a hand and tucks it behind her ear. It doesn’t stay.

“Because I don’t want that to be the person people see when they look at me,” she finally replies. Her shrug’s tiny, and mostly unconvincing. “If it’s not who I see, why should it be who they do?”

Clint, he—doesn’t have an answer for that. He nods again, but it’s enough to coax a little smile from her. She finger waves, pushes herself away from the door, and disappears. A couple minutes later, he sees her ridiculous little Smart zip out of the parking lot.

He spends the rest of his night thinking less about the person he sees in himself, and more about the person everyone else does.

Problem is, somewhere around his second beer and the third re-run of The Office on TBS, “everyone else” morphs into “Phil.”

He likes the way Phil sees him.

He decides to put some tiny measure of faith in that.

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“Darcy said there used to be a cellist,” he says, and Phil groans.

It’s Saturday afternoon, and they should be working on the Killgrave motions. Clint knows this, Phil knows this, and he’s pretty sure somewhere in the universe, Fury’s standing with his hands on his hips and thinking the exact same thing. But Phil’s air-conditioner keeps the house at the perfect temperature, Phil’s bed has the world’s softest sheets, and Phil’s thighs—

Clint presses his face against the soft, bare skin high on Phil’s thigh, and Phil’s little sigh turns into a half-gasp when the tiny kiss turns into something with teeth. His fingers find Clint’s hair, curling against Clint’s scalp, and give this half-hearted tug. “You can’t turn me on and talk about the cellist,” he says, tipping his head to look down at Clint.

He rests his chin against Phil’s skin. “Why’s that?”

“Because it’d be like watching porn on your laptop while you share the couch with your grandmother.”

And goddammit, Phil laughs when Clint shudders. Clint shoves him a little, which just doubles the laughing, and kisses Phil’s thigh again before he crawls up the bed. But crawling up the bed means crawling up Phil, the whispers of skin against skin as hands drift and legs tangle. Phil traces the shape of Clint’s spine almost all the way to the curve of his ass, and Clint— Clint counts himself lucky that the air conditioner’s running, ‘cause otherwise, he’d have to admit that he’s shivering just from Phil’s touch.

He presses his face against the place where Phil’s shoulder becomes Phil’s chest, and for a couple seconds, just drinks in the warmth. Phil’s always warm—warmer than you’d expect, Clint’s learning—and Clint’s gotta admit, he loves the feel of Phil’s chest hair against his skin.

Or just the feel of Phil against his skin.
He just—usually doesn’t say that last part out loud.

They’d spent all Friday night working. No, really, all of it, locked up in Phil’s office like a World War I bunker, ripping through research in an attempt to get something finalized. The motions to dismiss, the ones that’d called all the charges bullshit (in highfalutin language that Clint swears Laufeyson got straight outta the Microsoft Word thesaurus)— Those were pretty well hammered-out. We just need a proof-read from Darcy, Phil’d announced as he printed out the second one sometime around midnight.

Clint’d pushed his glasses up to scrub a hand over his face. They’d brewed a couple fresh cups of coffee in Phil’s ridiculously-expensive Keurig thing—Clint’s still not totally sold on it, honestly—but by that point, it’d kinda felt like there wasn’t enough coffee left in the damn world. You’re gonna trust Darcy with proofing this? he’d asked.

Have you ever asked her to proof for you? Phil’d replied, eyebrow quirked. They’d been lounging around in crap clothes that might as well’ve been pajamas, with bare feet and glasses instead of contacts. He’d watched Phil reach for the printer to check which page it was on, and he’d thought —

Well, he’d thought a lot of things, some of them about the way Phil’s t-shirt rode up and a couple others about how his worn-out sweatpants showed off his ass when he tipped over. But most of his thoughts’d been about how . . . good it felt to be sprawled on the floor of Phil’s office again, research all over the place and their legs brushing when either of them stretched.

But he’d said, No, in response to the question, and Phil’d rolled his eyes.

Then your credibility’s shot, he’d retorted.

Yeah? Clint’d returned. And what’s the punishment for ruined credibility?

You make breakfast in the morning.

Thing was, Clint liked to keep his word. And Phil, he—liked to thank Clint for breakfast. At least, that’s what he’d called tugging Clint back into the bedroom by the waistband of his sweatpants—and letting his lips wander a lot further south than Clint’s mouth.

(And, for the record, Clint always returns the favor.)

“You didn’t answer my question,” he says after a couple seconds, his voice muffled against Phil’s skin.

“Mmmm,” and Clint loves the little sounds he can coax out of Phil when they’re alone. This one rumbles through his chest while Clint snakes an arm around him, and Clint swears it vibrates right through both their bodies. He’s about to mention that, too, when Phil follows it up with, “You waited too long. Now, I’m dozing off from heat and sex and can’t possibly talk about ex-boyfriends.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you sound so out of it.”

“Exhausted.”

“I believe you.” At least, Clint would, maybe, if sliding his hand along Phil’s side and over his hip didn’t earn him this helpless little sigh. That, and if tracing the place where Phil’s ass met the sheets didn’t cause his breath to hitch. His hips lift like he wants Clint to go ahead and take a handful.
“Didn’t we just go over the thing about turning me on while I tell this story?” Phil asks. When Clint forces his face away from his almost-nuzzle and lifts his head, Phil’s watching him. Not in that intense, twist-your-stomach way of his, either. Nah, he’s more watching like a nanny who’s about to slap your fingers away from the cookie jar.

Clint grins. He’s trying for innocent, but he knows from the way Phil’s eyebrow quirks that it’s as wolfish and incorrigible as one of Stark’s. He’s started indexing all of Phil’s little expressions, one-by-one. He’s memorized the way his lips press before he smiles, the way his eyes wander before they kiss—and this, the wary look that only comes out when they’re tumbling through this half-flirting, half-teasing thing they do.

He balances on the high-wire of that look for a couple whole seconds, letting Phil stare him down, before he says, “Then tell me, already.”

Phil exhales in a way that’s almost exasperated and rolls his eyes. He settles his head back on the pillow, but his eyes end up on the ceiling. It’s an off-white color—eggshell or pearl or whatever ridiculous names they give paint colors—that carries over onto the trim. The rest of the room’s like Phil, in a way, a sort of steely gray-blue color that seems like it’d be cold ‘till you get used to it. It’s grown on Clint.

“It’s not much of a story,” Phil says, his shoulders lifting a little. “Chris and I met at a charity something that Stark’d put together. Like the one for Urban Ascent, but for, I don’t know, building tunnels through mountains in Mongolia.” He lifts a hand just enough to wave it slightly. “Chris was in the quartet they’d hired, and we started talking during the intermission. I ended up with his number, and after the required two-to-five days, I called him.”

It’s casual, the way he explains it. Except the whole time, even through the “mountains in Mongolia” joke, he never once looks at Clint. “It wasn’t a thing?” he presses. It’s about as gentle as he knows how to be.

Phil shifts enough that he can glance down at Clint without lifting his head off the pillow. “A thing?”

“Y’know. A—” And he wants to say something along the lines of a thing like this, a thing like what we’re doing, but they’ve never . . . called it anything. He wets his lips for a second and then kinda shrugs. “A relationship.”

Phil chuckles. “Oh, it was a relationship. I don’t think you can yell that much at a person without it being a relationship.” He presses his hand against Clint’s back, pulls him a little closer, and Clint presses against him. He settles his cheek against Phil’s skin and listens to him breathe. “I dated a . . . normal amount, I guess, before I got promoted to Chief Assistant District Attorney,” he explains, his fingers wandering the bare length of Clint’s back. “Nothing all that serious, only a couple ‘things,’ but I did okay. Chris was the first person I really saw after my promotion, but . . .”

He shrugs again.

“But?” Clint asks.

“But it’s— I think if you date, or marry, someone who’s never loved what they do, it’s hard to end up on equal footing.” Phil pulls in a breath and shakes his head. “Chris travelled some for work—around the state, mostly, but a few times to other cities or back to Portland, where he’s from—and he always wanted me to drop everything and come with him. Find a substitute for court, have
Maria handle a case without a second, all of that.” He shifts, and when Clint looks up, his head’s tipped in Clint’s direction again. “He didn’t understand my devotion. Or at least, my devotion to the job. He thought it should all be devotion to him.”

Clint snorts what’s almost a laugh and watches Phil’s throat. Right now, it’s easier to focus on the way his Adam’s apple bobs when he swallows than to meet his eyes. Especially since, instead of thinking about some vague jerk musician ex-boyfriend, he thinks of Barney.

He forces himself to chase away those thoughts and meet Phil’s eyes. “You mean we’re supposed to skip out on court for back-stair makeout sessions?” he asks.

“No, that I’d do.” Phil’s voice is warm as he spreads his fingers against Clint’s back, and Clint’s pretty sure he’d roll his eyes if Phil’s touch didn’t feel so damn good. “Lasted about a year, all told. Not exactly the grand star-crossed love Darcy made it out to be.”

“Nah, Darcy didn’t say too much about it,” Clint replies. When he looks up again, Phil’s got an eyebrow raised and that funny little frown on his face. “What?”

“But you were still curious?”

He feels guilty for a half-second, like maybe he’s poked his fingers into some kinda fresh wound, but Phil’s just—watching him. Neutral, not pissed or anything, so Clint shrugs. “Maybe I just wanted to see how I measured up.”

Phil chuckles, an actual laugh that carries through his chest. Clint loves his damn laugh. He loves it enough that he can’t keep his fingers from sliding along Phil’s skin, this—tactile reward for a sound he wishes he heard every day. “Don’t worry,” he assures him, shaking his head. “You’re a better cook, you don’t perpetually smell like patchouli—”

Clint narrows his eyes. “Really?”

Phil nods. “Really. And, on top of all that, you know the job.” He pauses for a couple seconds, his fingers still on Clint’s skin. “Overall, I’d say you’re . . . better.”

He rolls his lips together before he says it, like there’s a lot more to “better” than two syllables at the end of a sentence. Clint frowns, repeating the word—“Better?”—while he watches Phil’s face. Phil raises both his eyebrows in this liquid-smooth motion and then, very slowly, west his lips. It’s a tease, Clint thinks, and his laugh-lines all crinkle when he mouths better instead of saying anything. It’s sly, and—kinda seductive.

Enough that Clint can’t help himself ad bursts out laughing.

The look on Phil’s face is instantly offended, like the laugh’s an official declaration that he’s not sexy or something. Clint buries his face in Phil’s shoulder, but all it really does is muffle the sound. “Thanks,” Phil half-sneers. When Clint looks up, he catches him rolling his eyes, and it only makes the laugh worse.

“Sorry, I just— Jesus, you know?” He wheezes it more than anything, and then has to shake his head to clear out the rest of his laughter. All that’s left is a massive grin. “Is that the kinda shit you’re gonna say about me after we break up? Don’t worry, honey, you’re ‘better’?”

It’s meant to be a joke, a stupid throwaway that doesn’t matter, but the hand on his back that’d started wandering again, it—stills. Phil stills, his whole body kinda caught for a half-second, and Clint realizes all of a sudden how much is packed into that one stupid question. ‘Cause it’s not
totally a joke, not with how much it—implies.

Like how what they're doing, it isn't just—screwing around, making out, eating dinners, and panting against each other’s skin. Like how he’s just defined whatever this is as something that’ll end in a break-up.

Like how Clint, he—sometimes thinks a little too hard about when and if it’ll all end.

He wants to look away and kinda dodge the whole thing, but Phil’s still watching him. It’s one of those steady looks, halfway-lingering and completely even. There’s no hint of humor, no crinkles to memorize. It’s like Phil’s been chiseled outta stone. “That assumes a lot,” he says after a couple seconds that feel like hours.

“Like what?”

“Like that I plan on us breaking up.”

His voice is as even as his eyes, and Clint— Clint wets his lips. Not the way Phil did just a couple minutes ago, not a slow-and-sexy sweep, but ‘cause his mouth and throat suddenly feel dry. He swallows, trying to pin down the words he wants to use, but he can’t really find them.

But then again, he kinda thinks he doesn’t need to. ‘Cause Phil’s watching him, his eyes as gentle as they are even, and it’s this—open, honest look. There’s trust behind that look, and Clint—

“You just want me for my eggs-over-easy,” he decides, and leans to press his lips against Phil’s shoulder.

Phil laughs. His hand finally starts sweeping against Clint’s skin again. “You’ve caught me.”

“Read you like a book, boss.”

“Sure you do.” And there’s laughter behind Phil’s voice, warmth too, as his fingers slide between Clint’s shoulderblades. He thinks they’re gonna settle there, but then they wander further, into the hair at the back of his neck. He shivers a little while Phil asks, “What about you?”

“About me?”

“Past relationships.” Clint glances up, half-surprised, but Phil’s got one of those funny little smiles on his face. “You can’t grill me about the cellist and expect the conversation to end there. You at least owe—”

There’s probably an end to that sentence, but Phil’s breath catches when Clint shifts and presses his face against his neck instead of his shoulder. Phil’s got this whole jaw-and-neck thing, this constant want for lips, teeth, and even stubble against that sensitive skin, and Clint—

Hey. You find a weakness, you take advantage of it.

Especially when it gets you outta unpleasant conversations.

Phil’s fingers slide into his hair, and for a second, Clint figures Phil’s gonna hold him there, stubble against his bare skin and his hitched breaths begging for lips. But instead, there’s a tug like when Clint was still between his legs.

“Turnabout is fair play,” Phil warns, but his voice’s half-caught.

“Busy,” Clint retorts.
“Nice try.” And when Clint tries to nip at his neck, Phil tugs his hair a little harder.

He snorts, the breathy half-laugh of a surrender, and slips slowly away from Phil. Not just from his neck, either, but all the way: first shoulder, then chest, ‘till he’s more lying on his side next to Phil than sprawled out on him. It’s weird, in a way, to’ve gone from messy making out on the couch after too much wine to . . . this, lounging in Phil’s bed on a lazy Saturday. Then again, he’s spent almost as many nights at Phil’s as at home in the last couple weeks. Hell, he’s pretty sure the one pillow’s starting to mold to his head.

But the novelty isn’t gone, yet. He’s still surprised, every once in a while, that he’s here. That Phil wants him here.

Their eyes meet, and for a long time, Clint just—watches the guy on the other half of the bed.

At least, ‘till Phil prompts, “Well?”

“There’s . . . not much of a story,” Clint admits. He shrugs, this sorta non-committal thing, and shakes his head a little. “The way I grew up, with my brother and everything, I— You kinda had expectations, you know? Like, find a girl, sleep with the girl, maybe get the girl pregnant, then settle down with her—or somebody else.” Like Trey and the girlfriend he beat up, he thinks, but he’s not sure Phil needs to know all that. Or maybe less like Trey and more like Ricky and Anissa, who’d talked about getting married right up ‘till Ricky’s last sentencing. “My brother, I think he . . . Figured out I wasn’t going that way, you could say. I mean, even before I decided I wanted to go to college, I think he—knew. Not sure he approved of it, but that’s a whole other story.”

He’s not really looking at Phil—he’s watching his shoulder, his chest, the way he breathes, but not his face—when Phil asks, “And?” But it’s soft, a—tip-toe of a question, and Clint kinda snorts while he shakes his head.

Snorts, and then starts, ‘cause Phil’s fingers are on his arm all of a sudden. He looks at them, watches them wander, but he . . . can’t quite make himself look up, either.

“I kept most of it to myself ‘till I got outta there,” he continues, shrugging again. “And I dated around a little, in undergrad and law school, but I— It’s kinda like you said about the job. I wanted to get to where I was going more than I wanted to end up with somebody. It never really—took.”

He means to leave it there, you know, sort of a flimsy divider between the person he used to be and the guy he is now, but the problem is, Phil’s fingers are still wandering. They slide down the length of his arm, over his wrist, and then find his own fingers. Clint’s usually the guy with the dancing fingers—playing with pens or his coffee mug, twisting paperclips into weird little spirals during a hearing—but this time, it’s Phil whose hand doesn’t still.

At least, not ‘till he sort of tangles their fingers together against the sheets.

“What about now?” he asks.

“Now?” Even though Clint knows what he’s gonna see, he pulls in a breath right before he looks up. Pulls it in, lets it fill and then burn in his lungs, and meets Phil’s eyes like that. Like he’s drowning a little in the way Phil looks at him, intent and gentle at the same time.

Jane sometimes kinda looks at Thor like that, he realizes. And he’s caught Bruce looking at Stark like that, too, when Bruce thinks nobody else is really paying attention to him.

Clint wants to bottle that look, wants to keep it close to his chest for good, ‘cause he knows for a fact nobody else watches him the way Phil Coulson does.
“Now, I’m kinda at where I was going,” he decides, and his thumb brushes Phil’s. “In a couple different ways.”

There’s a suspended second between them, just one, before Phil pulls at his hand. It’s hard enough to roll him over, and before Clint can even really catch himself, Phil’s sliding his other hand into his hair and tugging him down for a kiss. The air conditioner shuts somewhere around the time he sighs against Phil’s mouth, and the only excuse for the gooseflesh rising all along Clint’s arms and back this time is the burn of Phil’s stubble against his own, the brush of Phil’s chest hair against his nipples, and the way Phil’s hand slides down his body. Down his back, down his side, down over his hip and ass. It finds the back of his thigh and then starts wandering up again, and Clint—

Clint’s not proud.

Clint presses his groin against Phil’s thigh and half-grinds into him.

Phil chuckles against his mouth, but he . . . kinda takes the hint, too. Or at least, his hand does, ‘cause his fingers grip Clint’s ass and leave Clint with no choice but to break the kiss and moan against Phil’s neck.

And for the record, gripping isn’t the only talent those fingers have, either.

Afterward, when Clint’s sprawled on his back and slowly starting to remember why breathing’s so important, Phil asks, “What’s the real reason?”

His voice is breathy and a little distant, like maybe Clint’s not the only one who’s still ten kinds of breathless. He rolls his head against the pillow, his sweat-damp hair clinging to the fabric, and shifts just enough to look over at Phil. He wonders if he feels as rumpled and rough-handled as he feels—or as Phil looks, his chest still flushed.

“Reason for what?”

“Asking about Chris.”

They’re all of a foot or two apart, their fingers brushing against each other atop the sheets, but Clint — For a half-second, Clint feels like he’s been thrown against the far wall of the room. He swallows around the lump in his throat, and he’s not sure whether the jump in his belly’s from his still-racing heart or the question. He traces the side of Phil’s hand with his pinky. “I guess I— wanted to figure out if he was the reason you wanted time,” he answers.

Phil smiles and kinda—shakes his head. It’s the sort of head-shake you’d expect when somebody’s distracted or trying to clear cobwebs, not the kind for, well, now.

“I wanted time,” he says softly, “because of you.”

Clint blinks. “Me?”

“You kept—looking spooked.” Phil rolls onto his side, sorta half-propped-up by his elbow. A couple seconds ago, Clint would’ve sworn the guy looked sex-drowsy and ready for a nap. Now, his legs tangled in the sheets, he’s alert like after a couple cups of coffee. “You were like a horse that wanted to bolt. I thought going too fast would make you run.”

He frowns. “You’re . . . comparing me to a horse?”

“Sam’s husband comes from a long line of farmers. I’ve got a barnyard animal for everyone. Stark’s an alpaca.” Clint snorts a laugh, but when he looks over again, Phil’s still holding his eyes.
It’s that drowning expression, the one that feels like rocks on Clint’s chest, and he kinda can’t help himself. He shifts, a little, and opens an arm.

Phil’s the perfect amount of warm in an air conditioned room. Clint’s not sure he could sleep in his own apartment tonight, not when he’s gotten used to so much skin.

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t run,” Phil says once he’s settled. His voice is quiet, and it whispers against Clint’s skin. “I figured that if you and I were going to do this, it should . . . last. Or at least, have a shot at lasting.”

There’s at least a thousand things Clint could say to that, but the one that slips outta his mouth, the one that comes without any permission, is, “You think this’s got that shot?”

For one breathless second, Phil just—looks at him, a perfect, silent, even look.

Then, he says, “Absolutely,” and kisses Clint’s shoulder before he closes his eyes.

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“How long have you and Phil been sleeping together?” Natasha asks Tuesday morning.

Clint swears as he sloshes coffee onto his hand and shoots Natasha the dirtiest look he can manage for, you know, nine-thirty on a Tuesday morning. He hadn’t even noticed her come up behind him on his way back from the break room, but there she is: body-hugging black pants, blood-red camisole, and the world’s most knowing look on her damn face. Clint wonders if tripping her’d wipe away the smugness, but then he remembers that he’s seen her run in heels.

He’s on his last clean shirt. He doesn’t want to end up wearing his coffee.

So he says, “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” while he shakes his hand dry.

“Right,” Natasha replies, following him around the corner. There’re file clerks and interns running around the hallway, and Clint—Well, Clint hopes to whatever deity you wanna believe in that she just keeps her mouth shut ‘till they pass. It’s not that he really cares what a couple eight-bucks-an-hour law students think about his relationship with Phil, but he . . . kinda wants to wait a little longer before he’s that guy.

You know, the sleeping with the boss guy.

‘Cause while Natasha’ll understand, he’s pretty sure Barry-the-intern won’t.

He studiously ignores her as they pass by Darcy’s cubicle and keeps ignoring her when she trails him into his office. He sets the coffee mug down on the corner of his desk and makes a point of gathering up a handful of files off the top of the file cabinet. Proof, he thinks, that he’s just not going to engage Natasha in gossip.

Except when he sits down, he sees that she’s closed the door.

And that she’s helped herself to one of the empty chairs in front of his desk.

He raises his eyebrows, and she crosses her arms over her camisole. She holds his eyes for five whole seconds before her gaze narrows.
She should be a police interrogator, he thinks.

But what he says is, “Will you believe me if I say we’re not?”

“No.”

She shakes her head, her curls bouncing a little, and Clint gives up and exhales. There are people in the world you can lie to, he knows, but Natasha Romanoff isn’t one of them. No, he’s pretty sure she can see right through just about anyone.

“Did I text you from the wrong phone or something?” he asks instead of straight-up answering.

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Give me a little credit,” she returns. She untucks one hand to gesture, vaguely, in Clint’s direction. Her fingernails are as red as her camisole. “Same suit four days in a row, just with a different shirt? Never mind the fact you keep slinking from his office like somebody’s going to catch you with a hickey.” Clint chokes on his first mouthful of coffee. “You’re not even subtle.”

“You pay way too much attention to my clothes,” he says once he can breathe again.

“You should’ve started your slumber parties on a day you were wearing one of the gray ones. You’ve only got the one navy.” She points at him, and Clint has to admit that, yeah. He’s got one navy suit, and the slacks are pretty wrinkled at this point.

That’s what he gets, he thinks, for spending Friday through Tuesday at Phil’s.

Natasha watches him through two more swallows of coffee and doesn’t look away when he lowers the mug. He tries to watch her, too, to maintain eye contact with that same narrow precision, but he can’t. He ends up looking down into the mug instead.

“It’s not just sleeping together,” he says.

“I know.” When he glances up, her full lips are pursed into this amused little smile. He stares at it for a couple seconds, like maybe he’s missed something, but somehow, that makes her smile even more. “I started here all of three months after him, you know,” Natasha remarks, leaning back in the chair. “Phil, he—plays a good game, you could say. Cool, smart, put-together, all of those things. But you spend a little time getting to know him, cracking the surface, and you find out that actually, he’s as soft as Stark on the inside.”

It’s a good thing he’s not drinking, ‘cause he’d probably choke again. “Stark? Soft?”

“Stark’s a fucking marshmallow. Ask him about the dead baby appeal, sometime. From zero to weeping in ten seconds.”

He snorts half a laugh, and shakes his head while he takes another sip of his coffee. Natasha watches him the whole time, her eyes perfectly even. She’s still just on the right side of smiling.

“You suit each other,” she decides, nodding to herself. “I mean, I don’t get me wrong, I didn’t mind the viola player—”

“Cellist,” he corrects.

“—but I think you . . . understand each other.” Her shoulders lift slightly. “It takes a secretive, introverted overachiever to woo a secretive, introverted overachiever, you know?”

And Clint’s pretty sure it’s the wrong response, but he kinda grins at her. “Am I supposed to take
that as a compliment? 'Cause it sounds a little like a compliment, but the face you made when you said it . . .”

Natasha’s laugh is bubbly and warm, not at all what you’d expect from her, and it’s still filling up the office when Darcy bursts through the door. She’s wearing a black pencil skirt that hugs hips Clint’s pretty sure he didn’t know she had—and an oversized knit poncho that hangs lower than the skirt. He wants to find and shake her personal shopper. “Okay, so, uh, warning,” she says. She’s only a couple too-fast breaths away from panting. “Your boyfriend is totally on the warpath and it’s not pretty.” She pauses. “Maybe a little sexy, but not pretty.”

“He’s not—” Clint starts to say, but then he—stops. Not just ‘cause he’s pretty sure He’s not my boyfriend is now officially a lie, but ‘cause— “Warpath?”

“Yeah.” Darcy’s practically hanging from the doorjamb. “I don’t know what Loki did, but I was talking to Jane about some lady-stuff—”

“Too much information,” he interrupts. Natasha smirks.

“—and he came in from the hallway all guns-blazing and rumpled and almost-hot. Last I checked, he was in with Peggy.”

“Thanks,” Clint says as she and her poncho half-twirl out of the doorway. His brain’s still turning, trying to figure out what Laufeyson’s latest dick move is (’cause dick move’s the only kind of move Laufeyson knows), when he hears this weirdly dark little chuckle. He thinks for a second maybe Stark’s snuck in with some new plan to torture Bruce—the latest was a possessed-looking Furby that Bruce ran over with his car—but not so much.

Instead, it’s Natasha.

Natasha, who stands up to put her hands on her hips, and who grins kinda like the evil queen outta some kind of animated Disney fairy tale. Her eyes spark, and Clint wonders if this is how butterflies feel right before they get pinned to the display board.

“Have fun with that,” she offers.

He presses his lips together. He’s trying just for a frown, but when she chuckles again, he knows how damn apprehensive he looks. Not because Phil’s on the warpath—he can probably deal with Phil on the warpath (at least, he hopes)—but because she chuckles again. “It’s just more of the same,” he tells her, shrugging. “A new twist on the same Laufeyson bullshit.”

“With Laufeyson, it’s never ‘more of the same,’” she retorts. Her fingernails curl against the fabric of her shirt. Yeah, Clink thinks. He’s definitely the butterfly on the display paper. “The sooner you learn that, the better.”

She ducks out as she says it, this smooth slip-slide out of the doorway, and it’s perfectly fucking timed. ‘Cause Clint’s hardly able to push his chair away from the desk before Phil appears, his suit coat open and flying almost like a cape.

His face is— Well. Clint’s never seen that face from him before. It’s kinda wild-eyed and outta control, but Phil Coulson’s never outta control. Except for maybe when Clint’s got him naked and is working his way down—

“I am seriously considering murder, right now,” Phil announces. He holds up a packet of papers and kinda waves it around, but he’s waving it too fast for Clint to really get a good look at the damn thing. There’s a case caption on the top, but that’s about it. “Actually, killing him might be
too kind. Do you think they’d repeal the Geneva Convention if I introduced them to Laufeyson? Because the way I see it—”

“I know you probably know Darcy warned me you were coming,” Clint interrupts, holding up his hands. It stops Phil, right in the middle of his sentence, but he’s still got that wild, disheveled look on his face. He spends a half-second considering that Darcy was right about it being hot. Then, he wets his lips and continues, “But I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Laufeyson,” Phil says.

“Well, okay, I know that much.”

“It’s a new motion.” Phil drops the packet of paper onto the corner of the desk hard enough that Clint’s pencil cup jumps. There’re already highlighting all over the front of it, and Clint can see scribbled notes in one of the margins. A couple neon-colored sticky tabs poke out of the side.

He frowns. This, he thinks, isn’t Laufeyson’s ordinary level of asshole bullshit. Not if Phil’s rumpled and fuming, not if he’s scribbled all over the damn thing already. No. This is a bad sign.

“A motion for what?” he asks, leaning across the desk to nab it.

“A motion to reconsider Killgrave’s bond and return his passport.” And Clint can’t even focus his brain enough to read the first couple words ’cause of the venom in Phil’s voice. His mouth opens and he tries to come up with some response, but nothing really—comes out. After a couple seconds of blank-faced half-gaping, he manages to tear his eyes off the first page of the motion (and the scribble that just reads SERIOUSLY?) and look up at Phil.

Phil jerks his head in a completely humorless nod. “His great aunt twice removed or someone passed away this past week. Killgrave wants the opportunity to attend her funeral.”

“In a country with limited extradition laws,” and Clint’s gotta admit, he can’t believe that he’s hearing the words he’s saying, it’s all so fucking ridiculous.

“Well, some extradition laws are better than none, according to Mr. Laufeyson.”

“And conveniently around the time that all the motions are due and he could possibly find himself in a courtroom, in front of a jury, facing our charges.”

“Right.”

Phil says it so dryly, so completely empty of any of his usual Phil qualities (the qualities Clint pretty much wakes up in the morning looking forward to) that he kinda just wants to throw the motion in the shredder. He wants to call down to Smithe’s assistant and ask her to lose the damn thing, or maybe buy Laufeyson a one-way ticket to somewhere nice, like Fiji. He wants it all to go away, all this bullshit, especially since he’s still working on his response to all the other motions.

He flips through a couple pages of the new motion and then throws it onto his desk. “I gotta know: does Laufeyson get paid by on some kinda sliding scale of stupid?” He glances up at Phil, who just raises his eyebrows. “Like, does he get a bonus if he makes Judge Smithe laugh? Or maybe it’s just that he hopes we get so fed up with this that we jump off the damn roof.”

Phil snorts a little, but then, he smiles. It doesn’t reach his eyes, doesn’t touch his laugh lines, but it’s... something. It warms the room a couple degrees, and Clint watches his fingers settle on the corner of the desk. “Argument on the motion’s set for Friday,” he says, shaking his head a little. “Judge Smithe doesn’t want a written response. He’s laid out most of the relevant law. I figure if I
Clint jerks his eyes up. He’d glanced back into the monster stack of paper—never before has give him back his passport taken ten entire pages—but Phil’s voice . . . It’s warm and confident, and Clint’s never quite sure what he’s supposed to do with that. “Me?” he asks. “You’re the first chair, boss. You do this kinda thing all the time. Me, I’m just—”

“A strong lawyer who’s better on his feet than half this office?” Phil retorts. For a second, he glances away from Clint, looks down at the carpet, but then he kinda—shrugs. “I didn’t ask you to be my second chair so I could—keep being reminded about how I’ve lucked out in certain areas of my life,” he says quietly. Clint watches him pull in a breath before he looks back up. “You’re good at what you do. I knew it the day you walked into this office. You could argue this motion in your sleep.” He pauses. “Though I’d prefer you be awake.”

And as much as he wants to resist it, Clint—kinda can’t help the little half-laugh that jumps into the back of his throat. He runs his thumb along the edge of motion, but his eyes . . . His eyes keep wandering back to Phil. There’s something soft in his expression, something gentle and private, and for a second they’re not just coworkers who get along okay. For a second, when their eyes meet, they’re the Clint and the Phil that sprawl all over Phil’s bed, and who spent Monday night wandering around downtown after dinner ‘cause they just . . . could.

They’re more than the sum of their parts, he thinks. They’re something—bigger.

“He’s gonna lean all his weight on the fact Killgrave’s technically a Yugoslavian national,” he says after a couple seconds, ‘cause he can’t just sit there and watch Phil all day long. Phil frowns. When he leans over the desk, Clint’s already turned the motion around and has his finger on the important paragraph. “Case law’s on our side, and so’s the common sense argument, but Killgrave was born long enough ago that his part of Croatia was actually Yugoslavia.”

“I saw that,” Phil says, nodding. “So—”

“So, I looked it up when you guys did his first appearance.” Clint drums his fingertips against his desk. He feels fidgety, all of a sudden, like he’s in front of the judge instead of just in front of Phil. “Croatia won’t extradite its nationals, but Killgrave’s not technically a Croatian national. If he’s not a national, he can be extradited.” He looks up at Phil. “That’s gotta be Laufeyson’s angle.”

He’s expecting some kinda swearing, some kind of edge to Phil’s expression, but instead, Phil just kinda . . . smiles. It’s a slow-burn thing, one that starts out small and then nudges its way all the way into his eyes. It finds the corners of his mouth, finds his laugh lines, and when he laughs, Clint thinks it’s the best sound he’s heard all day.

“Maybe he’s not,” he says, turning the motion back around to face Clint, “but somehow, I don’t think Croatia is going to be as particular as the rest of us.”

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“Your honor,” Laufeyson says, “Mr. Barton fails to note that my client is actually a Yugoslavian national.”

“And with all due respect,” Clint replies, his fingers curling around the edge of the podium, “I
don’t think Croatia’s gonna be that specific when the defendant shows up.”

Judge Smithe’s courtroom is one of the smaller ones, located all the way down at the end of the third floor corridor. It’s sorta nestled back out of the way, by the juvenile clerk and a bunch of conference rooms used for Bruce’s truancy hearings and Thor’s occasional “every kid in the damn school was part of this fight” group threats, and up ‘till this morning, Clint’d never walked through the doors. He’d rehearsed his arguments in his pajamas, pacing back and forth through his own living room while Phil was on speakerphone. He’d just never stood here, at this podium, ‘till about three minutes before Judge Smithe walked into the courtroom.

And now, standing at that podium, he wonders a little how it must feel for Laufeyson and Killgrave, both of them in their best-pressed suits and nestled in the squeaky vinyl chairs at defense counsel table. He doesn’t wonder it ‘cause they’re underdressed—with Laufeyson’s damn forest green waistcoat and Killgrave’s pale purple cravat, they look like a fucking GQ cover story—or ‘cause Laufeyson’s not doing his job.

No.

It’s because of the mural.

It stretches all across the one wall above the jury box, a larger-than-life representation of blind lady justice holding onto her scales. She’s got angel’s wings, and there’re white doves flying around her. The background’s a landscape of hills and valleys like something outta an illustrated Bible. Two of the doves hold onto a banner in their beaks, and it stretches with liberty and justice for all across the bright blue sky.

Underneath, embossed on this fancy gold-plated placard, are the words Designed and Completed by Students of Rhapsody Art Works, Summer 2005. Clint knew the name as soon as he saw it, ‘cause a couple of his friends back in school’d participated in Rhapsody. It’s a summer art program for underprivileged kids.

And, Clint knows from listening to Bruce and Stark, a feeder program for Urban Ascent.

He wonders if Killgrave knows that. Actually, he’s pretty sure Killgrave knows—most everybody in that upper-crust world where you throw cash at good causes for no other reason than it’s a day that ends in Y probably knows that—and so the question’s more whether he feels anything about it. But every time he glances over at Killgrave, the guy’s face is blank. Stony, like he was born without an expression.

Clint’s pretty sure feelings don’t factor into it.

“And even if he’s not technically Croatian,” Clint presses once Laufeyson sits back down, “the fact is, Croatia doesn’t have to send him back unless they want to.” He listens to Laufeyson start drumming the eraser-end of his pencil against the desktop. Good, he thinks. He already had to sit for twenty minutes and listen to Laufeyson rattle off extradition laws of most the Eastern bloc. It’s about time the guy got nervous. “Let’s say he counts as a Yugoslavian national. Let’s say that he overstay for grief or some other reason—”

“Your honor!” Laufeyson spits, leaping out of his chair. His hands slap the table hard enough that it covers Phil’s little half-amused cough at counsel table.

Clint bites back a smile. “I withdraw that, your honor,” he replies, and he swears for a second that the corners of Smithe’s lips are twisting up into a little smile. “But the fact is, if he decides to overstay for grief or some other reason—” Laufeyson’s chair squeaks, but he doesn’t stand. “—we
immediately have to jump through a couple hundred hoops. We’ll need affidavits providing that we’ve got enough evidence to convict him. Not just try him, but **convict** him. We have to prove that there’s a Croatian law on the books for each of the laws we’re saying he’s broken. And, by the way, he has to be in custody just for us to begin this process.”

Judge Smithe holds up a hand. “In—Croatian custody?” she asks, reaching for her glasses.

“Exactly. And, sure, he can surrender himself over to the authorities, but that probably wouldn’t happen if he’s on the run.” He glances down to his legal pad and flips a page. He’s not sure how he got through a whole page of notes already, but he can feel the adrenaline thrumming through his veins. He *wants* to win this argument, and not just to keep Killgrave in the country.

No, he wants to win it ‘cause, in the back stairwell on their way down, Phil’d pressed his hand to the small of his back and said, *You can do this.*

Clint wants to *prove* it.

“And that’s not counting the other countries around there—in the Middle East, in Northern Africa, or even just Russia—that don’t have extradition treaties with the United States. Countries that are a train ride away where the defendant can just disappear.” Laufeyson’s chair creaks, but Clint holds up a hand. “I know that’s assuming he’ll run,” he says, and out of the corner of his eye, he sees Laufeyson ease himself back down into his seat. “I know that I’m basically saying we can’t trust the guy. He’s supposed to be innocent until proven guilty, and we haven’t gotten there yet.”

Judge Smithe takes off her glasses. “But?”

“But I’m also assuming that Zebediah Killgrave is a person. And that if we let him go off to Croatia for this funeral, he might do what anybody facing these kinds of charges would do. He might get itchy feet and decide that twelve people off the streets are a lot scarier than starting life over again in Russia, or Iran, or the U.A.E. He wouldn’t be the first person.” Clint flips another page on his pad. He knows the last one’s blank, he knows there’re no more scribbles, but it feels—authoritative, somehow, to snap the page over again. “This isn’t some non-person burglary where maybe the state’ll be out money if he disappears off the map,” he says. “This is a kid—who was abused a lot while he was alive and then turned up dead—who deserves some justice. And ‘till a jury finds the defendant innocent or guilty, it’s our job to make sure Jordan Silva-Ribiero gets that.”

The “thank you” he murmurs is kinda cut out by Laufeyson popping out of his seat again like a deranged jack-in-the-box, but Clint’s not sure he needs it right then. No, what he needs is the half-second glimpse he gets of Phil at counsel table. There’s a tiny smile pressing against his mouth, the kind that means Phil knows he *shouldn’t* smile but wants to, and when their eyes meet, it’s just for him.

It fills Clint’s belly with an inescapable jolt of warmth.

The way their knees bump under the table makes it even warmer.

“Your honor,” Laufeyson begins, his voice tight with what Clint’s pretty sure is barely-contained anger, “Mr. Barton’s argument assumes that—”

“Mr. Laufeyson?” the judge interrupts.

“Yes, your honor?”

“Did I request your comments?”
“No, I—”

“And did you reserve time for additional comments?”

“No, but—”

“Then please sit down.”

Clint tries to be subtle about his surprise, he does, but he’s mid-twist with his pen cap and his fingers pull hard enough that the damn thing flies off. It pings the side of the podium with a plastic-on-wood *chink* sound, and Phil, damn him, hides his smile with another fake cough.

Laufeyson’s knuckles turn white on the edges of the podium. “Your honor—”

“I told you before, and I’ll tell you again: I am not going to entertain frivolous motions in this case.” Judge Smithe’s eyes are sharp from atop the bench, and she watches Laufeyson as he gathers up his pad and moves back to counsel table. “I am genuinely sorry for Mr. Killgrave’s loss, and I hope his family recovers from the death of his aunt. But the state’s argument that there are serious policy issues at work here is compelling—and that’s without factoring in the complicated procedure in international extradition law.”

“But that assumes my client is going to run!” Laufeyson announces.

The words echo through the courtroom, louder than even he seems to realize, and Clint presses his lips together when the judge narrows her eyes into what can only be called a glare. “No, Mr. Laufeyson, it does not,” she replies coolly. “This is a safeguard. It assumes only what Mr. Barton pointed out: that Mr. Killgrave is human, that any human being would consider alternate options at this part of the proceeding, and that we need to be able to protect the victim and this process by keeping Mr. Killgrave in a place where we still have authority over him.” She leans forward, elbows on the bench. “Your client is very lucky that he has his liberty right now. I think a lot of judges wouldn’t’ve considered any kind of bond in a situation like this. I would suggest that you and Mr. Killgrave have a long discussion over whether jeopardizing bond is in his best interests right now.” She straightens back up. “Motion for reconsideration of bond and return of Mr. Killgrave’s passport is denied. We’re adjourned.”

One of the bailiffs asks them to rise, but Laufeyson’s already on his feet. He and Killgrave hiss to each other at the defense table, furious whispers that leave Laufeyson red-cheeked. Clint tries to keep his face neutral as he cleans up his papers, but he knows he’s smiling a little. Phil is, too, and their arms bump as they put the file back together.

A couple different times, Clint swears he sees Killgrave watching him. But then again, he’s pretty sure that, if the roles were reversed, he’d watch the guy who spanked his lawyer in open court, too.

“I told you,” Phil says as they walk down the hallway together, file under his arm. The place is pretty deserted—it’s Friday afternoon, not exactly the time of the week where you want to be hanging around the judicial complex—and the couple press that stuck around for the bond hearing just look . . . well, bored.

Their shoulders brush when Clint turns to look at him. “I should just trust you whenever you say it’s gonna be good, now?”

“Might make the relationship easier on you,” he replies, shrugging. “I mean, we can do it the hard way, but that’ll take longer, and there’ll be more yelling . . .”
Clint laughs as the elevator doors slide open, and kinda—keeps laughing even as they step in. It’s heady, half from post-hearing relief and half from the way Phil’s grinning at him, and he misses the sixth floor button ‘cause he’s too busy trying not to lose that expression of Phil’s. He wants to hold onto the warmth, now that he has it.

Except he shouldn’t be too worried about losing it, ‘cause the second the elevator starts moving, Phil pins him against the wall and *kisses* him.

It’s the first time they’ve kissed—*really* kissed, at least, ‘cause there’d been a couple quick pecks in the back stairwell since all this started—at work, and soon as it happens, all Clint’s switches are flipped to *on*. He drops his pen to grab at Phil’s suit jacket, and their bodies collide. Phil’s firm and warm against him, and Clint practically growls as Phil forces his head to tip back against the rough fabric on the elevator wall.

But he opens his mouth anyway, ‘cause Phil—

‘Cause he’d do pretty much anything Phil asked, right about now.

The elevator bell chimes, warns them that they’re at the sixth floor seconds before the doors start to peel open, and it’s the best Clint can do to shove Phil outta his space before they’re staring out into the hall . . . and right at Stark and Bruce. The four of them all kinda look at one another, Stark’s eyebrows raised and Bruce doing that eye-dip thing like he’s shy (even though everybody knows he’s *not*), and Clint—

Clint drags a hand through his hair. “Headed out?” he asks.

“Y’know,” Stark drawls, tapping his fingers against the handle of his briefcase, “I was gonna take Bruce out for some sushi—”

“This is . . . news to me,” Bruce says.

“—but now, I think maybe we’ll stick around here. Dinner *and* a show. Sort of . . . *Law & Order* meets *Magic Mike*, don’t you think?”

Clint grinds his teeth together to keep from groaning. Next to him, Phil straightens his tie and tucks the file back under his arm. Clint hadn’t even realized it was slipping out ‘till, well, right then. “Goodnight, Stark,” he says, stepping out of the elevator. He and Bruce exchange little nods.

“Hey, I could’ve made a *Debbie Does Dallas* joke, but I thought, I should be tasteful for once, so —”

“Sushi,” Bruce decides right then, and physically pushes Stark into the elevator. There’s a lot of exaggerated pratfall tripping as Clint slips past the two of them, but he lets a little puff of release find its way out from between his lips. When he catches Bruce’s eyes, Bruce just smiles. “Have a good night,” he says.

“There’re Lysol wipes if you need to sanitize after!” Stark calls out as the doors close.

Clint just—shakes his head.

The office’s pretty quiet when he wanders through, though, shedding his jacket in the middle of the hallway ‘cause he can. A lot of doors are closed for the weekend, and Steve’s has a new drawing on the door that Clint’s pretty sure says *Daddy’s Office* in crayon hieroglyphics. There’s a light shining under Natasha’s door, but otherwise, it’s—quiet.
Clint doesn’t think about how quiet until he steps into his office.

Or rather, ‘till he steps into his office, only to have Phil grab and pin him to the wall next to the door.

There’s nobody around, the light’s off, and Clint— He can’t help himself. He can’t help his need to grab at Phil’s shirt, to reel him in ‘till neither of them can breathe from kissing, or to open his mouth like how he’d been doing when the elevator stopped. Phil moans for him, this rough sound in his chest that reminds Clint how much he fucking loves having his hands all over Phil’s chest, and he starts pushing Phil’s jacket off. It hits the floor with this whispered fabric sound, and Phil’s stupid fucking tie (seriously, he lives in ties at work, he must have a hundred of them) joins it in seconds. He fumbles with buttons while they kiss, clumsy lips to go with clumsier fingers, and Phil finally pushes him away to do it.

“Pretty sure we’re gonna get in trouble,” he says, breathlessly, while he watches Phil work.

Phil raises his eyebrows. “Pretty sure you don’t care right now,” he retorts, and when he rolls his hip against the front of Clint’s pants, Clint’s gotta admit he’s right. Not that he says that, ‘cause suddenly Phil’s mouth is on his again and words kinda stop mattering.

He’s not sure which one of them shoves the door shut, or who fumbles with the lock. He just knows that it happens around the time that Phil’s shirt gets shoved open, and he groans for Clint’s hands over his chest like Clint’s mouthing all that bare skin. Bare skin, chest hair, and nipples that turn hard the second Clint rubs his thumbs over them. The noises Phil makes, they’re better than winning a hundred oral arguments, and the only thing that keeps him from telling Phil that is the way Phil handles him.

Hands on his ass, holding their bodies together like he thinks Clint’s gonna get away. At least, ‘till he lets go long enough to open Clint’s pants and start shoving them down. It’s clumsy, and Clint starts to lose his balance around the time they drop to his knees. He grips onto Phil’s hip, and they kinda half-stumble into the file cabinet.

Clint didn’t even realize how close they were to the file cabinet. And he wants to wonder about it, wants to care about how they got from one point to the other, but Phil’s hand dips into his boxer-briefs and—

“Phil,” he gasps, his face against that warm shoulder. His whole body kinda shudders at the touch, and he wants to rock himself completely into Phil’s grip. He doesn’t, somehow. He resists the urge to rut like a teenager or beg like a virgin.

At least, ‘till Phil traces the curve of his side, hip, and ass with his fingertips. Until he takes another handful of his ass and Clint thinks this isn’t just a coincidence, this possessive need all of a sudden.

He’s spent a lot of time sitting in his desk chair, wondering whether everything between them was gonna keep—dimming every time they walked into the office. Whether their nine-to-five relationship was gonna be limited to bumped shoulders and pecks in a stairwell.

And he’s spent a lot of time in his own bed, on the nights he’s slept on his own, thinking about—

Well.

Needing Stark’s Lysol wipes. But now’s not really the time to think about Stark.

“There’s gotta be—better places for this,” he manages in this half-gasped, half-whispered voice that’s rasping because Phil’s hands are everywhere. They’re all over him, and he’s torn between
whether this is a good idea or a bad one.

‘Cause he wants this, he wants Phil to crawl all over him, he wants them to find the nearest flat surface, but—

It’s his office, too, you know?

When he pulls his head up, Phil’s watching him. His eyes are dark but wide. Hungry and wild, and Clint—Clint’s imagined that look more than a few times, on the nights he’s been alone.

“Probably,” Phil says. They’re tiny puffs of words, hardly audible, and he breaks them up by palming Clint in a way that makes his hips roll. He shudders, fingers digging into the fabric of Phil’s slacks. Phil’s pushed against the file cabinet. If he wasn’t, Clint’s pretty sure he’d shove a hand down his pants, too. Instead, he’s forced to bite his own lip to keep himself from rubbing against Phil like an animal in heat. “But can you make it home like this?”

“Can you?” he tries to ask, but before the words are all the way out, Phil turns them and presses him against the nearest wall. His diplomas rattle against the plaster as Phil’s lips take over, again, and Clint’s left moaning against his mouth. Hands and fingers disappear, and Clint feels the loss enough that he’s tempted to palm himself—‘till he realizes that Phil’s opening his own belt. He hears the zip of his fly and the last threads of control snap, all at once.

He wants this, in his office, right now. Even if Natasha hears, even if Stark and Bruce come back up and get their dinner and a show, he wants—

Phil pulls away enough to toss something onto Clint’s desk. After the first couple seconds of panting, he follows Phil’s eyes. He stares down the couple little packets while Phil steps outta his pants, and—

His head thumps lightly against the wall. “You planned this,” he says.

“Eagle Scout,” Phil replies, and he’s still got a foot in his slacks when he reaches up for the back of Clint’s head. He pulls their lips together again, presses them into the kinda kiss that Clint wants to cling to. Clint moans for it, open-mouthed, while Phil turns the whole thing into words: “Loyal, kind, courteous, and always prepared. “Only you could sex-up the Boy Scout pledge.”

“Don’t tell my den leader,” and Clint thinks for a second there’re more words to that, a lot more Phil wants to say. Problem is, it happens at the same time that Phil’s hands—they never stop, those hands, steady and calm but always moving against him—shove Clint’s boxer briefs outta the way.

Clint forgets he knows English, right about then.

He remembers how to speak later, after a whole stretch of time that pulls out like taffy between them, and he curls his fingers against the glass of the window when he does. Phil pants, hot breath against Clint’s shoulder, and lulls his head back against the windowpane. He’s fucking beautiful, Clint thinks for a second, debauched and mussed like this. He looks like a whole different man, the one that’s Clint’s alone, and Clint loves it.

Phil grips his thighs when Clint rolls his hips. “You planned this,” he says again, and Phil laughs.

“I started thinking about this your—third day here,” Phil admits. The purple pillow rolls off the window ledge when he presses his hips up. Clint tips back far enough that he almost loses his balance, but then Phil’s there, holding onto him. Phil’s there, he thinks, holding him up. “So, yeah.
Yeah, I planned it.”

And when his lips and teeth find Clint’s nipple, Clint rides all the feelings with an open mouth and closed eyes.

It’s the first time he thinks, simultaneously, that he can be a lawyer and part of Phil, that all these pieces fit together to something bigger than the sum of its parts.

But then Phil’s fist wraps around him, and he kinda leaves that thought alone.

That, and the one that comes after, the crystal-clear relationship that he never wants this to end.

==

That night, while Phil’s in the shower back at Clint’s place, the phone rings.

It’s Phil’s first time at the apartment, and Clint’s so busy picking up the random shit that’s lying around that he almost doesn’t hear the phone. He’s groggy and heavy-limbed like he just ran a marathon, and his thighs hurt from balancing on the damn window ledge. Phil’d laughed when he’d complained about it in the car—and then laughed again when he’d wandered into Clint’s place and seen the old movie posters hung up in his living room.

It’s classy, he’d argued. Phil’d kissed him before asking to use the shower.

The pipes are old and clunk their way through every second of hot water. Maybe that’s why Clint misses the first four rings of his cell phone, instead of the cleaning. ‘Cause’s he’s in the living room with it when it goes off, wiping at dust and cobwebs with a tissue, and he doesn’t hear it.

At least, ‘till the last ring.

It’s almost-dark outside, the kinda late-summer dusk that’s more purple than black, and when he turns toward the end table where he left his phone, he sees the lit-up display. It’s like a flash in the dim, and he turns on a lamp before he reaches for it.

He figures it’s Natasha, calling to gloat about his closed office door. Or maybe it’s Stark, informing him that he’d sat in the parking lot and watched the whole thing play out. Hell, it could even be Darcy, demanding that Clint bring in bagels Monday morning.

But when he picks it up, the display reads Barney Barton.

Clint stares at it ‘till the ringing ends. The phone vibrates once even after the ringtone’s stopped, then stills.

Somewhere in the apartment, the pipes stop clunking, and he swears he hears Phil whistling in the bathroom.

Except he can’t smile at the off-pitch non-song that’s echoing down the hallway. No, all he can do is stare at the phone, quiet against his palm, ‘till the display goes back.

He stares at it for a couple seconds after, too . . . just in case.

And then, he turns it off before he walks outta the room.
This fic is nearly 100,000 words long now, and I just want to take a moment and thank everyone who is reading, leaving kudos, and commenting on this. It's the first big story I've written in about four years, and I'm incredibly touched and encouraged that people love it so much. I know I don't reply to comments with any kind of regularity, but they always make my day. (I sometimes share my favorites with friends of mine—even when they're not fannish friends!) Thank you again so, so much.
Lies of Omission

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint labors to finish the responses to all of Laufeyson's motions and discovers that, in a way, the motions were the calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

This has been asked several times, and I thought I would clarify: prosecutors are not obligated to remove themselves from cases when they know the victim of the crime they are prosecuting. Although they are still guided by the rules surrounding attorney conflicts of interest, it is generally a question of personal discretion whether a prosecutor continues on a case where he or she knows the victim. Of course, some offices or states may have stricter rules or policies regarding this, but it is not a requirement.

Additionally, I am hosting "ask a question about Motion Practice" day over at my tumblr. If you are interested in participating, you are more than welcome to come on over.

This and all subsequent chapters betaed by the lovely Jen, who was more than happy to check for typos after what happened last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“But, like Bucky keeps saying, it’s a process.” Steve reaches over and claps Clint on the shoulder. Clint’s head jerks up, and he blinks just in time to hear Steve say, “You’re lucky you’re not one of Dot’s favorites yet, or you’d be part of all this, too.”

And as hard as he tries, the only response Clint can come up with right then is, “Sorry, what?”

It’s Tuesday at the lunch hour, and Stark’s office smells like some cozy little Italian bistro—mostly ‘cause he’d picked up a whole bunch of pasta, breadsticks, and salad from the Olive Garden and turned his desk into a miniature buffet. There’s lasagna, alfredo, and some kind of wine sauce with capers, and Clint’d wonder about how much it all cost if he were just a little more awake. But he’s not, and he scrubs a hand over his face as Steve tilts his head, eyes narrowed.

“You okay?” he asks, and Stark laughs. He frowns. “What?”
“I know you might not remember the part of the relationship Barton’s at, being as you’ve been Mrs. Barnes since when dinosaurs roamed the earth—” And Steve at least rolls his eyes while he soaks up sauce with a breadstick. “—but Barton right now is dozing the midday doze of the regularly ridden and put away wet.”

From his seat at the corner of Stark’s desk, Bruce sighs. “I have fantasies about conversations in which you don’t immediately invoke other people’s . . . personal lives,” he says.

“You have fantasies about me?”

He smacks Stark’s hand before the guy can grab one of his croutons. “Don’t flatter yourself,” he warns, but Stark grins like the cat who caught the canary.

But Clint, he—sighs. His lunch’s halfway to uneaten, and honestly, he’s not really hungry. “It’s not that,” he informs all of them after Stark waggles his eyebrows like some kinda cartoon character. “The motion responses for the Killgrave case are due on Monday. We’re scrambling to finish them up.”

Steve starts to make a sympathetic noise, but Stark jabs a breadstick in Clint’s direction. “Because of all the sex you’re having,” he declares.

“Or ‘cause there’s ten motions for that, and Wilson filed a motion to reconsider on a suppression issue from months ago.” He’d called Sunday night and apologized beforehand, too, which’d been — Okay, in truth, it’d been a little weird.

*I’m really sorry, but I just had to do it, and I know you’re going to think I didn’t have to do it. And actually, depending on our definition of, like, necessity, maybe I didn’t have to, but there’s that whole “zealous representation” thing, and—*

*Wade,* Clint’d said. It’d been clipped, but mostly ‘cause Clint’d been in the middle of a thought when the phone’d rung.

*Yeah?*

*I don’t know what you’re talking about.*

And then, once Wilson’d explained, it’d been a whole new level of “clipped.” ‘Cause Clint’d hung up the phone, stared at it for a couple seconds, and started swearing.

“So you need someone to cover that?” Bruce asks.

Clint blinks. “What?”

“The motion to reconsider. From Wilson.” He watches the bridge of Bruce’s nose wrinkle, a tiny pinch that only comes out when he’s worried. Clint’s noticed it before when they’ve talked about some of Bruce’s tougher cases. The guy rolls his lips together. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, it’s just—” Clint kinda shakes his head, but he knows he can’t escape the question. All three of them, his whole lunch group, they’re watching with cautious eyes. He’s never been the center of their worry before, and he’s not entirely sure he*likes* it. “I’m just kinda overwhelmed, is all.”

“Overwhelmed?” Stark repeats, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh, of course you’re overwhelmed,” Steve replies warmly. He reaches over and puts a hand on
Clint’s shoulder. Clint suspects the touching comforts Steve more than anybody else. Maybe it’s a dad thing. “You’re on your first major case, against Loki of all people—”

“Crazier than a bag of cats,” Bruce mutters.

“—and with all the time pressure, there’s no wonder that you’re—”

“Whoa, okay.” Stark interrupts, holding up his hands, “before we break out the hammer dulcimers and start singing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ let’s stop ignoring the slightly-balding elephant in the room.”

Bruce frowns. “What?”

“Hammer dulcimers?” Clint repeats.

“They’re a thing, look them up.” Stark bites off the end of his breadstick and starts chewing. Not normal chewing, either, but meaningful chewing. Clint’s watched him do this before, building up the tension by making everyone wait for him. He chases his swallow with a sip of Dr. Pepper. “You have a boyfriend,” he says, pointing the bottle at Clint. “You have a brand new boyfriend who kind of thinks you’re the hottest thing on two legs. Which, by the way, I can overlook, even if you’re not even the hottest thing in this room.”

Steve rolls his eyes, and Clint swears the tips of Bruce’s ears go red.

“But you’re not overwhelmed because you have ten motions and this big case and all the other bullshit coming from the Steve Rogers Hour of Inspiration over there,” he presses. Steve nearly chokes on air. “You’re overwhelmed because you think if you screw any of this up, your little lovefest’ll be over and Coulson’ll move onto greener pastures.”

“Wait,” Steve half-sputters around a mouthful of soda. “Clint’s not dating P— Are you dating Phil?”

Come to think of it, Clint didn’t mind being the center of their worry. ‘Cause at least worry didn’t bring Steve’s eyebrows all the way up to his hairline, or stop Bruce from chewing.

He shrugs, a little, and pushes an olive around with his fork. “It’s a—thing,” he offers.

And even though it’s not an answer, his half-glance at Steve reveals that he’s—grinning? No, Steve’s grinning all right. It’s this ear-to-ear thing that pretty much splits his face and warms up the entire damn room.

“Oh god,” Stark says, but it’s too late.

“That’s great!” Steve declares. He puts down his Pepsi like he plans on hugging Clint, but then kind of looks at his hands. Clint’s not sure what he’s supposed to do, exactly, ‘cause Steve looks a little like he wants to vibrate out of his seat. “I worried about him, after the whole thing with Chris.”

“Chris?” Stark asks.

“The cellist,” Bruce replies.

“He’s not exactly somebody who puts himself out there,” Steve continues, barely breaking his stride to shoot Stark a dirty look. “I thought maybe there was—something, but I didn’t want to ask, and—”
“And he’s incapable of telling the difference between genuine attraction and BFF status,” Stark interrupts. He gestures toward the door with his soda. “He still thinks Pepper and Rhodey’d make a good couple.”

Steve frowns. “They would.”

“Ask Natasha what she thinks about that,” Bruce says, and Clint’s gotta admit that he loves Bruce’s sly little side-smile.

“Okay, okay, we get it: figuring out the sexual proclivities of gingers is very hard. We’ll have Bucky draw you a diagram.” Stark licks a spot of marinara off his wrist. “And there once was a clarinetist named Chris.”

“Cellist,” Bruce corrects.

“Whatever.” He picks up a fresh breadstick and uses it to point at Clint. “The point of this conversation is Barton’s wide variety of Coulson-related feelings.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “Do you even know what a ‘feeling’ is?” he asks. He dumps his half-empty plate into the trash.

“I think he’s probably heard of them,” Steve muses, “but I’m not sure he’s ever—”

“I will buy your toddler a pony, Rogers,” Stark interjects. The breadstick, now saucy at one end, is jabbed in Steve’s direction. Marinara splatters the desktop. “An expensive, high-maintenance pony. And I will name her Rainbow Dash, just for shits and giggles.”

Clint expects an argument—he counts on an argument, really—but instead, Steve smiles. It’s almost-angelic, with these gently-curved lips and warm eyes, and Clint—

He doesn’t like that expression.

‘Cause the smile lands on him, not Stark. It lands, and it comes with the one question Clint’s kinda tried to avoid actually answering since it came up in conversation:

“So you really are dating Phil?”

The problem with Steve, though, is the way he asks it. Stark pries, Natasha lays everything out like the elements of a crime, and Bruce tip-toes, but Steve . . . Steve just asks. Like an old friend you run into at the grocery store who isn’t in it for himself or anybody else, but who just wants to know. He’s genuinely curious, and Clint—

He can fault Stark for being a nosy bastard, but he can’t fault Steve for being happy for him.

He picks his soda bottle up off the floor to have something in his hands. Steve watches as he twists the cap off, as he walks it across his knuckles (a stupid little game Trick taught him and Barney when they were kids), and as he puts it back on the bottle. “Mostly,” he admits. “We haven’t really — It’s not the label we’ve used, or anything, but . . . ”

He shrugs, feeling a lot like the kid who just got picked last for gym class or something, and he stares at his hands until Steve puts a hand on his shoulder. It’s this big, warm gesture, and when he squeezes, Clint feels it all the way through his arm. “That’s a good thing,” he encourages, and Clint forces himself to kinda—smile. “Right? Because I figure you’re the kind of guy who wouldn’t date someone you don’t actually like.”
“We leave that to Bruce,” Tony says with a wave of his breadstick. Bruce frowns, his forehead wrinkling, but doesn’t actually say anything about it.

“No, it is,” Clint confirms, nodding a little. Bruce lifts his head when he says it, and suddenly all sets of eyes are on him all over again. He tightens the cap on the bottle of soda before he puts it down on the edge of Tony’s desk. He knows they’re all tracing his every move. “I just— You ever get that feeling that as good as something is, there’s another shoe that’s gonna drop?”

Bruce and Steve both nod while Stark says, “Nope, never.” He pops the butt of his breadstick in his mouth before leaning back in his chair. “But go on.”

Clint snorts. “I think I’m just . . . not used to good things coming my way,” he admits. Steve squeezes his shoulder again, and Clint tries to force himself to smile. “It takes a little while to stop looking back over my shoulder.”

“Life is a game of averages.” Bruce’s voice is quiet when he says it, his eyes trained on his plate instead of on the rest of them, but it’s—meant. You can feel it in the tone of his voice, how steady he holds every word. Clint’s never understood how, even at its softest, his voice never trembles. “People like to think it . . . picks a direction and heads that way, steadily up or steadily down, but it doesn’t. It’s like the rollercoaster at the county fair: as much as it goes up or down, it always ends somewhere level.”

“You hate the rollercoaster at the county fair,” Stark says. Except as flippant as it is—which is as flippant as anything Tony Stark says, really—his head’s cocked and his eyes are soft, watching Bruce.

Bruce snorts softly and looks up. He meets Stark’s eyes slowly, and Clint watches him survey the guy’s face before he smiles. “I hate going on the rollercoaster with you,” he corrects. “Or did you forget about the cotton candy incident?”

Stark tosses up his hands. “Listen to him!” he declares, and his voice carries. “You lose your lunch one time—one time—and it’s like a crime against humanity! The unforgivable sin of a weak stomach, I tell you—”

“I loved that shirt, Tony!”

“I bought you a new one!”

The bickering amps up, loud as anything and filling the whole office, and Clint just kinda—shakes his head. He’s used to this, and he’s pretty sure it’s how Stark and Bruce flirt, most the time, but he’s tired. He’s been working long hours, balancing a whole lot of motions with a whole lot of other responsibilities, and—

Yeah.

Maybe he worries, a little, about how the Killgrave case’ll effect his relationship with Phil. But then again, wouldn’t anyone?

Stark’s gestures are wild enough that he knocks the back of his hand into his computer monitor and starts swearing . . . when Steve reaches over again. He puts a hand on Clint’s arm and leans in a couple inches. Clint worries again over whether Steve’s gonna hug him.

But instead, he just asks, “Are you happy?”

It’s the one question, Clint thinks, that nobody else—not Stark, not Natasha, not Bruce, and not
even Wade Wilson—would bother asking.

He smiles, a little, and lets himself nod. “Yeah,” he admits. “I mean, it’s maybe not perfect, but—”

“Nothing’s ever perfect,” Steve replies. “Bucky and I have been together for almost fourteen years. I’d be worried if it suddenly turned perfect.”

“But?”

“But he makes me happy. And I take it on pretty good authority that I make him happy, too.” He squeezes Clint’s arm with this perfect little smile. “Hold onto that. Because shoes’ll drop and things’ll go wrong, but the way you feel about him? You can count on that.”

Clint smiles back and shakes his head . . . at least ‘till Bruce hits Stark square in the eye with a chunk of breadstick and all of them, Stark included, burst out laughing.

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“Please reassure me that neither of you idiots talked to the press,” Nick Fury demands, tossing the Wednesday morning edition of *The Daily Bugle* onto Phil’s desk. “And if you did, do me a favor and lie about it so I don’t have to fire your ass.”

Nick Fury, Clint decides in that instant, is a terrifying human being. Not because of the newspaper—no, Phil’s extracting that from the collection of motions that they’re doing their final read-throughs on and flipping to the page marked by a hot-pink post-it note—but because of his . . . aura. He’s wearing all black—a black suit with a black shirt and no tie to speak off—and stands there with his hands on his hips, waiting.

Clint doesn’t know what he’s waiting for, but a glance at Phil’s face proves it’s not good. Not the way Phil’s brow is furrowing, or the way he’s frowning. “I . . . don’t know what this is, sir,” he says, glancing up.

“I didn’t think so.” Fury’s eyes follow the newspaper as Phil passes it across the desk. “Barton?” he asks.

“The only reporter I’ve even noticed around here is—” Clint starts to reply, but the words that *Parker kid* die on his lips the second his eyes land on the headline.

*The District Attorney’s Nightmare Team* is blazed across the middle of the editorial page in enormous font, big and bold enough that it kinda makes the political cartoon look like a kid’s notebook-margin doodle. The byline just reads *The Bugle Editorial Staff*, but the rest of it—

Clint rolls his lips together and skims the article. Specifically, the lines in the article that are underlined in blue ink, ‘cause he’s pretty sure those are the important parts.

*Ethics elitist Phillip Coulson*, one line reads, *spent years dirtying up the names of other zealous attorneys at the state ethics commission before slumming it at the D.A.’s office.*

A few paragraphs down, after a mention of Urban Ascent, the article accuses, *But who’s to say this isn’t a ploy by Tony Stark to further distance himself from his father’s legacy? Or is this actually a bid to dirty the name of the company that keeps him in Armani suits and expensive sports cars?*
Fury clears his throat, and Clint glances up. “Second-to-last paragraph,” he says, nodding to the paper. Clint frowns and drops his eyes back to the three columns of—garbage, really, until he comes to the part Fury mentioned.

His mouth goes dry.

And then there’s Assistant District Attorney Clinton Barton, the newest acquisition to the land of misfit toys. Only the first couple words are underlined, more like a reminder to keep reading than an actual attention-grabber, but that doesn’t stop Clint. A non-traditional student when he wandered into law, his resume reads like an Applebee’s sampler platter of failed careers. Sources reveal an average academic record and a forgettable personality. But people say that about all sorts of undesirables, don’t they?

When Clint finishes reading, his lips part, but no sound comes out. There’re no words, no syllables he can string together to describe the feeling in his stomach. It twists and turns, equal parts disbelief and rage. It takes Phil leaning across his desk and touching his fist to pull him back into reality . . . and by then, Clint realizes that it is a fist.

The paper’s ripped from how hard he’s gripped it.

“You get a name?” Phil asks. His fingers stroke along Clint’s knuckles for a beat too long before he actually takes the paper away.

Fury shakes his head. “I called Jameson as soon as I read it, but you know how he gets about his ‘confidential source’ bullshit. They’re locked up tighter than Fort Knox over there.” He gestures vaguely towards the slightly-misshapen newspaper. “County Commissioner wants me to do a press conference.”

Phil looks up from where he’s reviewing the article. “And?”

“And what? I don’t say something, I’m hiding our supposed incompetence in some room under the staircase. I say something, I’m opening the door to some other hipster with a fucking press pass asking whether Banner turned in all his Physics 100 labs on time.” He lets out a breath. “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t.”

“I don’t . . . understand,” Clint manages, finally. The words are clumsy, sort of half-falling from his lips, and when he stops staring at the damn newspaper, both Fury and Phil are looking at him. “What’s the point of this—rant? It’s like when a kid gets on Facebook for the first time and uses it to bitch about how his parents grounded him unfairly. It’s—half-true bullshit twisted around to make us look like a bunch of assholes, and—”

“The election’s in November,” Phil interrupts, and Clint’s mouth pulls shut. Their eyes meet, and Phil sort of—shakes his head. “This case, the Killgrave case, it’s—probably the last high-profile anything this office is going to see before Fury’s name is back on the ballot.”

“Never mind the fact that Killgrave’s got all sorts of friends in high places pulling for him in this damn trial,” Fury adds. His fingers curl against his hips. Clint wonders, momentarily, how much self-control it takes not to punch something in anger right now. “Laufeyson’s like one of those Ocean’s Eleven thieves, and right now, he’s playing the long con. Convince the public that we’re the assholes while they hear about the poor little immigrant boy who can’t go see his dead grandma.”

“Great aunt,” Phil notes.
“Whatever.” Fury snorts and rolls his head back to look at the ceiling. “Point is, shit like this is only gonna get worse before we go to trial. This is the preemptive strike.” He pauses. “Well, the second preemptive strike. How’s the parade of motion responses?”

“Almost done, sir.” And Clint likes, in that moment, the way Phil-the-lawyer just—switches on. He picks up their checklist, the one they’ve been working from all week, and launches into their progress like the last couple minutes never happened. It leaves Clint to pick up the newspaper and properly read the article.

Everyone in the office gets a mention, he realizes. There’s commentary about Natasha’s immigrant parents and her past as a foster kid, two facts Clint didn’t know but that kinda punch him in the stomach. Bruce, according to the article, has a PhD in physics that he’s never used to go with his “suspiciously high” rating on a “rank my professor” website. Steve tried to sign up for the Army three different times but got rejected for health problems, Thor was asked to leave his law school trial team after an “aggressive personality conflict,” and, apparently, Maria is divorced. A whole laundry list of character traits that wouldn’t be a problem except for how aggressively they’re presented.

“Clint?” Phil asks as he’s rereading the snide Assistant District Attorney Clinton Barton paragraph for probably the fifth time. He glances up and realizes with a blink that Fury’s gone. The office door is closed, and it’s just the two of them.

“Sorry,” he says. He balls up the newspaper and tosses it at the trash can. It bounces off the edge and rolls against Phil’s file cabinet. “I got—”

“Distracted by the fact that some asshole used his press credentials to dig into our personal lives instead of Killgrave’s?” Phil asks, raising his eyebrows. When Clint snorts a little, he shrugs. “My first year here, Jan—Thor’s predecessor—prosecuted a case in which a fifteen-year-old boy brutally murdered his mother with a baseball bat. The boy’s uncle paid for Erik Lensherr to represent him.”

“Of Lensherr and Hammer?” he asks, blinking. “The firm Laufeyson works for?”

“Exactly.” Phil leans his elbows on the desk. “She offered a plea that was fair, but not exactly what Lensherr or the uncle wanted. Three days before the status conference—where the kid was either going to accept the plea or be scheduled for trial—Jan got a call from the New Jersey board of bar examiners, informing her someone had requested her disciplinary file.”

Clint frowns. “She had a disciplinary file?”

Phil nods. “And even though no one could ever prove it was Lensherr snooping around, it spooked Jan. Not because she’d done anything wrong in New Jersey,” he adds, holding up a hand, “but because any hint of impropriety in a high-profile case turns into a media feeding frenzy.” Clint watches as he sighs, slowly, a long trail of breath. “She lowered the plea offer, and the case settled.”

Clint presses his lips together, nodding. It seems kind of like a leap of . . . well, not faith, exactly, but a leap of logic to assume that just ‘cause Laufeyson works for an asshole, he’d be one too. But the stack of motions on the desk, Hammersmith recusing himself from the case, it all seems—right up that same alley.

It’s not illegal, what Laufeyson’s done so far. It’s not an ethical violation. There’s nothing, technically, wrong with it.
Phil’s watching him, soft-eyed, when he asks, “So you think this is Laufeyson?”

“No. I know it’s Laufeyson. And I know that Fury’s right: this is only one of about a hundred tricks he has up his sleeve.” His eyes don’t lift from Clint’s when he says it. He wonders what it means, exactly, that Laufeyson’s only scratched the surface of his smoke and mirrors. ‘Cause there’re a lot of things out there that don’t need touched. You know? There’re things, he thinks, that Laufeyson just needs to leave—

“Clint?”

Phil’s voice is soft, when he says it, and Clint jerks his head up to meet his eyes. He didn’t realize that he’d dropped his chin to stare at the gray carpet, or that Phil’d said anything to him at all. He tries to smile, a little crease of his lips, but he doesn’t exactly feel like his heart’s in it.

“Sorry, I was—what’d you say?” he asks, shaking his head.

“I asked whether you were ready to get back to work.”

Clint hears the concern in it, the edge that creeps into the words, but he forces himself to ignore it. “Thought you’d never ask,” he replies, and reaches for the motion they’d been flipping through when Fury walked in. Phil smiles enough that it finds his eyes, and it’s enough to tip them back into working.

Except, for the rest of the day, Clint finds himself continually looking over at the balled-up newspaper next to Phil’s file cabinet—at least, ‘till he grabs it, sticks it in his bag, and takes it home with him.

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“Oh, Clint, it really is you!”

The woman who grabs Clint in the middle of the hallway moves so fast and smooth, she’s more a swirl of black hair and blacker skirt than an actual person. Clint blinks and raises his arms, trying to stop her, but he kind of—catches her, instead. They twirl, the force of her rushing hug nearly causing him to trip into the wall, and then sway together.

For a couple seconds.

‘Cause then, recognition rushes up on Clint like a white-capped ocean wave. He grips her arms and steps back to look at her, but he already knows what he’s gonna see.

And even though she’s smiling, even though her big brown eyes are sparkling and she looks elated to see him—hell, she’s fucking beaming, her whole face alight with it—the words fall from his mouth.

Three heartless, expressionless syllables that slip between them.

“Anissa.”

Anissa laughs and reaches up to hug him again, but Clint— Clint feels like the fucking rug’s been pulled out from under him. It’s the end of the day Friday after the world’s most sleepless
Wednesday and Thursday nights, and he feels like his fucking brain’s made out of cotton. He and Phil’d skipped out on sleep, meals, and sex to get the Killgrave motions all written, formatted, and filed, and he’s personally just finished a twenty-minute argument with the clerk. ‘Cause, apparently, when you’re the ten-buck-an-hour file-stamp monkey, being asked to do your damn job’s too much.

That, and Clint’s too tired to deal with lip.

Lip, or the way Anissa’s holding him, clinging around his neck while she gushes. “Barney and Trey both told me you were working up here, but I didn’t really believe it! Then, Mr. Coulson mentioned you and I knew that it had to be true.”

Clint forces a smile as Anissa steps away, her arms unlocking from around his neck. Her hands drift down along him—shoulders, upper arms, elbows, forearms, wrists—and her eyes follow. “Look at you!” she exclaims, shaking her head. “God, you aren’t Barney’s skinny baby brother anymore. I hope you’ve got a girlfriend who treats you right and doesn’t just keep you around to lift heavy things.”

She squeezes his hands and laughs at her own joke, and he—kinda tries to join her. “When’s the last time I saw you, huh?” he asks, pulling his fingers out of her grip. Her hands feel bony, like a skeleton’s. “It had to be before I finished school.”

“At least. Ricky was out, so it was . . . ” He watches her bite her lip in thought. “Six, seven years ago.” She shakes her head, and her long hair flows like a waterfall. “A long time.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, but he’s thinking about those six or seven years ago. Anissa’d been young and pretty, then, with short-sheared hair she wore curly and the shortest cut-off shorts money could buy. It’d been some summer cookout, and Clint remembered suffering in the humidity with a beer while Anissa sat on Ricky’s lap and shared his cigarette. At least, ’till Ricky switched to pot.

But Ricky’s locked up now, Clint remembers, on a twenty-five-year stint for attempting to kill a clerk at a store he and a friend were robbing. And Anissa’s in a tasteful black skirt and a drape-necked top, her hair long and straight. Her makeup’s smudged and her face looks drawn, like she hasn’t slept in a long time. The longer he looks at her, the more he sees her smile start to slip. After enough time, she drops her eyes to the carpet instead of to him.

“I’m—sorry,” he says, quietly. It’s in the back of his throat, and it’s . . . not really words. “About Jordan. I hadn’t seen him in a while, but I know he—”

“Barney kept telling him about you,” she murmurs. She’s staring at the carpet, but Clint watches her throat bob as she swallows. “He— I knew you got offered one of those programs when you were his age, back when Trick was around, and that Trick talked you out of going. And I wanted to make sure he could do something with his life, ‘cause he was smart—he was so smart, Clint, you should’ve seen him, he had this brain that didn’t come from me or from Ricky, and I . . . ” She shakes her head. When she looks up, her eyes are wet, and Clint—

Clint doesn’t know exactly what he’s supposed to do with his hands. ‘Cause they’re in the doorway of the conference room, ‘cause people are sliding past them to leave the office for the day, and ‘cause—

‘Cause he’s not Barney Barton’s skinny kid brother, anymore. He’s Clint Barton. He’s an assistant district attorney, now.

But he puts a hand on her shoulder. “I know,” he half-whispers. It feels empty, but he’s not sure
what else he’s supposed to say.

She smiles, a little, and touches his arm. “I sent him to Barney,” she continues, her voice shaky but her eyes a warm kinda bright, “and Barney . . . He’s so proud of you that he just kept saying to Jordan, ‘You have to do this. You have to be like Clint. You have to use your brain so you can do big things and not be stuck here all the time.’” She blinks, just once, and tips her head back to look at the ceiling tiles. “I wish you could’ve seen him, Clint. You would’ve thought it was so good, the way he was turning out, the way he wasn’t like Ricky, you would’ve . . .”

Her voice cracks, like dropping a sheet of plate glass, and Clint pulls her forward. He feels like he shouldn’t hug her, like it’s breaking some ethical rule he doesn’t remember reading, but she’s trembling and breathless, and he’s no monster. She dissolves against his shoulder, her face hidden against his shirt. He settles his hand in the middle of her back and lies by telling her it’s gonna be okay.

And then, he looks up.

He’s not sure why, of all the times in the world, he brought his chin up right then. He thinks it should be elsewhere—resting on all that dark hair, maybe, or dipped as he fights with the lump in his own throat—but it’s . . . not. No, instead, it’s level enough that he can see into the doorway of the conference room.

Where Phil’s standing.

He’s holding onto the Killgrave file, those blunt fingers looking a little white-knuckled as he stares at Clint. His face is—blank, no hint of emotion, and it makes Clint’s heart drop into his stomach. He watches Clint without blinking, without moving, and Clint—

Clint looks away.

He drops his eyes to the carpet and presses his lips together. There aren’t any words, not really, to combat that look. He lets it roll over in his belly, lets himself feel it, and stays quiet.

At least, ‘till Phil asks, “Everything filed?”

It’s not cold, exactly, but it’s not Phil’s voice, either. Phil’s voice, the one that’s been greeting him behind closed doors both in and outside of the office, it’s warm. It’s this full sound, rounded and comforting, and Clint falls a little more in love with that voice every time he hears it.

This voice is all business and all . . . Coulson.

He swallows. “Yeah,” he answers, and nods at the carpet.

“Good,” Phil replies. There’s a shifting sound, and when Clint looks up, Phil’s walking away down the hall.

He feels like he’s trying to digest a stone when Anissa pulls her face away from his shoulder. She wipes at the damp under her eyes. It’s pretty clear she’s already cried most the mascara off. “Did I get you in trouble?” she asks. There’s worry covering her whole expression, and Clint realizes that she’s looking between him and Phil’s retreating back.

Clint watches Phil close his office door behind him. “No,” he replies, but he’s—not sure whether he’s lying. He shakes his head a little. “I think Ph—Mr. Coulson’s just . . . busy. We’ve got a full caseload, and he’s one of the chief A.D.A.’s, so he’s got a lot of responsibility.”
Except when he glances back at Anissa, she’s raising her eyebrows at him. “Really?”

“You’ve never been a very good liar, Clint.” He frowns at her, but she shakes her head in response. “Mr. Coulson’s been kind to me,” she says quietly. “The local police who came by after we found out, they . . . Well, they saw the name Riberio and couldn’t be decent people for five whole minutes. The reporters got ahold of Jordan’s record, somehow, and they were even worse, talking about how he was some horrible kid who probably got caught up in a drug deal or—”

Her voice catches, again, and Clint puts his hand on her shoulder. “Anissa,” he murmurs.

“No, it’s— Mr. Coulson’s the only person who’s gone out of his way to care. Ever since that—man, that Killgrave, was arrested, Mr. Coulson’s worked to treat me like a human being.” Her eyes glimmer with tears. It pulls at Clint’s stomach like someone’s trying to empty him out by the fistful. “He’s a good man.”

Clint swallows around the feeling in the pit of his stomach. “I know,” he says. He wishes it sounded like a throw-away, like a shrug, but he knows it doesn’t. He knows it sounds like it matters.

Because it does.

Anissa reaches up and squeezes the hand that’s resting on her shoulder. He wets his lips. “Are you—okay, otherwise?” he asks quietly. Her eyes land on his face, and he forces a smile. “I know you’re still at the ‘park, but without Ricky, I . . .”

He shrugs, and somehow, that coaxes a smile out of her. “Are you offering me money, Mr. Barton?”

“No, not— I’ve just been away a long time, and I thought—”

“Relax, I’m teasing.” The warmth in her voice reminds Clint of the Anissa in tiny shorts and curly hair, and her smile actually finds her eyes. “I’ve got a good job up at the hospital, and my mom helps out when she can. I’m a survivor.” Something in her voice catches, though, when she says it, and her eyes drop. “I got through when they took Jordan away, and through all the times Ricky got locked up. This isn’t any different.”

“Except in the million ways it is,” Clint points out.

She raises her eyes and snorts in a way that’s either a laugh, or the prelude to tears. “Except those,” she replies, and squeezes his hand again.

In the end, he walks Anissa down to the elevator, and accepts her warm little kiss on the cheek when she leans forward. Her bony hand holds onto his face for a few seconds too long, and they almost lose the elevator car. She presses the door open button when she steps in, watching him.

“You’re as good a man as Mr. Coulson,” she decides.

Clint shakes his head. “Not sure I agree with you.”

“You won’t. Not until you see it yourself.” She smiles as she lets go of the button. “I hope it’s soon.”

He spends a lot longer than he wants to admit staring at his reflection in the shiny chrome elevator.
doors.

The office is mostly-silent when he lets himself back through the secure entrance, offices dark and closed up for the weekend. Phil’s computer is off and his chair empty, and Clint knows without checking that his car’ll be gone from the parking lot. He wanders down the hall with his hands in his pockets.

He can’t explain this, he thinks, and his heart seizes with the realization. Because there’re things you don’t tell the people you care about, and then there are omissions so big, they’re pretty much lies.

His office light’s still on—he never shut it off, not when he went down for what he thought’d be a five-minute trip to the clerk’s office—and the bubbles on his screen saver bounce merrily around his monitor. He steps around the desk, ready to shut the damned thing off and be done for the weekend, when he notices the legal pad in the middle of his desk.

He’d recognize Phil’s handwriting anywhere, at this point, and seeing it looped across the center of the page makes him forget his computer.

_Come over tonight_, it reads, and Clint’s mouth goes dry. _I’ll wait for you, no matter how late._

There’s no signature, no squiggle that might be a _P_ or a slipped hand, and Clint—

Clint knows that, this time, he can’t not-lie his way into avoidance. But then again, he’s not sure he wants to try it, either.

Not—

Not with Phil.

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“I—didn’t know how to tell you,” he admits on about the eighth street corner.

Phil’s neighborhood is quiet in the evenings, full of twenty-somethings walking their dogs and kids riding their bikes in the almost-cool of the early August evening. They’re due some rain, and it _should_ be cloudy and close, but there’s something about this night that’s all balmy breeze and open sky. The moon’s near-full, and it peeks out over the tops of distant trees.

When Clint’d pulled into Phil’s driveway, he’d been sitting on the steps up to his front porch, reading that morning’s paper. Clint’d stayed in the car for a couple minutes, watching him. Waiting, maybe, for Phil to look up and wave.

But Phil didn’t look up. He _didn’t_ wave.

And when Clint’d finally climbed out of the car, he’d folded up his newspaper and simply said, “Let’s take a walk.”

It’s gorgeous weather, but Clint’s pretty sure that’s not the point of this. He wanders along next to Phil, hands in his pockets, and struggles with his words. Which is why, more or less, he doesn’t say anything until they’re at the eighth or ninth street corner.
A man and woman jog past, and after they all exchange polite nods, Clint steps off the curb to cross the street. He glances over his shoulder for a second, expecting that Phil’ll follow—but he doesn’t. He stays there, still in his work slacks and his blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and watches Clint.

“I’m going to need a little more than that,” he says.

Clint nods, a little, and steps back onto the curb. He’s tried to count all of this—the walk, the normal silence between them, Phil’s long looks—as a good sign, but now, he’s not so sure. Especially not since Tony Stark’s voice is in the back of his head, nagging about how he doesn’t want to screw this up.

He wets his lips. “I— When the case first dropped,” he says, balling his hands in his pockets, “I never thought I’d work on it. I didn’t know anything about Killgrave, I didn’t know that Jordan was in Urban Ascent, I didn’t—” The words escape him, and he shakes his head. He tries to look at Phil, but he ends up staring at his jaw, or his ear—anywhere except his eyes. “This didn’t all happen like I expected it to,” he finishes dumbly.

“And you didn’t know how to tell me,” Phil repeats.

“Right.”

“You didn’t consider something along the lines of, ‘Hey, Phil, by the way, I know Jordan Silva-Riberio’s mom’?”

There’s a bite in the back of it, an annoyance that seizes Clint by something between his throat and his belly, and he pulls in a breath. When he meets Phil’s eyes, he doesn’t look pissed, exactly. He looks—

Disappointed, he thinks. Maybe even a little hurt. Like he’s realizing how many layers there are to this—thing, this non-lie Clint never actually told.

Except thinking shit like that—shit about non-lies and not-telling—sounds a whole lot like trying to justify his bullshit.

He pulls a hand out of his pocket and runs it through his hair. “Parents,” he says.

“What?”

“I don’t just know Jordan’s mom. I know both of his parents.”

For a perfect, silent second, Phil stares at him. It’s the same blank-faced expression from the doorway of the conference room, and Clint’s gotta admit, it takes every ounce of his willpower not to drop his eyes and just avoid the whole ordeal. He owes Phil this honesty, though, so he doesn’t dodge the stare.

Or the snort of a laugh that Phil swallows before he starts walking down the sidewalk again. It’s quick enough that Clint kinda trips over himself trying to catch up.

“Both of them,” Phil echoes, shaking his head. “You— This entire time we’ve been working the case, going over every detail of this kid’s life together, reviewing the affidavits and the police reports and the child neglect file, and you didn’t think to mention that you—” He turns on his heel, suddenly, and blinks at Clint. “She’s not the cousin.”

“The—what?” he asks.
“The cousin. The one you came to live with, after your parents died, she’s not—”

“What? No!” Clint throws out his hands and—waves them in a way that reminds him mostly of Stark, all wide gestures. Like he’s trying to push the idea of he and Anissa being related out of the air between them. “No. Anissa and Enrique, they’re the same age as my brother, more or less. They all met when Barney was in high school. I didn’t have a lot of friends, so I kinda—hung around them.”

Phil’s shoulders loosen, a little, and Clint watches as some of the fight sort of—drains out of him. They’re in front of a two-story with a minivan in the driveway, and out of the corner of his eye, Clint can see the family watching TV in the front room. It’s about a thousand miles from the way he grew up, and it makes him suck in a breath. “They’re part of what I left when I started making something out of my life.”

Phil nods, glancing away for a couple seconds. Across the street, there’s a couple wandering along the sidewalk with a stroller. “You could’ve told me,” he says quietly, and Clint feels every word of it in his stomach.

“Phil, I—”

“No.” And the edge to the word’s accompanied with Phil’s head snapping in Clint’s direction. His chin is raised, his jaw tight, and when their eyes meet, Clint feels about three inches tall. “You could have—should have—told me. You should’ve said, ‘I know the victim’s parents, we grew up together.’ And as part of that, you should’ve trusted that I would’ve understood.”

Clint’s jaw works, but not to form sounds. He drops his eyes to the pavement and sort of shakes his head. He feels like he’s opened a gulf between them, a gulf made up mostly of his stupid fears. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to bridge it.

Except he isn’t sure he needs to, either, because Phil reaches forward.

His fingers are warm and sure against Clint’s wrist, and when Clint shifts, they’re sure around his whole hand.

“I would’ve understood,” he says. It’s in that soft voice that only belongs to Clint, and when Clint looks up, he’s close enough to memorize every line on Phil’s face. “I’m not going to head for the hills whenever there’s a hint of unpleasantness in your past. That’s not how this works. But you need to trust me.”

Clint swallows. “I do,” he replies, and it surprises him how much he means it.

There’s something in the way Phil nods, though, that makes him think Phil isn’t totally convinced. “Then I need you to tell me, honestly: is there anything else I need to know about you and this case?”

The answer, Clint thinks, should be yes. It should be an immediate, whole-hearted yes, followed by a complete retelling of his life story. About the trouble the Tracy brothers and Barney used to get into with Ricky. About how Anissa’d set him up on dates with every one of her three-dozen cousins. About how he’d held Jordan when he was a baby, about how Barney’d encouraged Jordan into Urban Ascent because Clint’d almost done Urban Ascent, about the world he’s come from and left behind.

But that’s not really about the case, he realizes. It’s about him, Clint Barton, the guy standing on the sidewalk. It’s about all the pieces of his life between when his parents died and today.
Between losing his old life, and being terrified of losing his new one.

“No,” he says, his thumb brushing against Phil’s. “Nothing else, not about Jordan.”

Phil watches him for a few very long seconds before he nods. “Okay,” he responds. When they start walking again, he doesn’t bother letting go of Clint’s hand.

But that night, in the dark of Phil’s bedroom, Clint lies with his cheek against Phil’s skin and wishes there’d been a third answer on the sidewalk: there’s nothing about Jordan but there’s still everything else.

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“I’ve spent the last five days reviewing motions and motion responses,” Judge Smithe says, her hands folded atop the bench. “I’ve read and re-read the court file, the arguments, and the law. You could even go as far as to say it’s been a very long week. But I am prepared to make my rulings.”

Clint hadn’t been surprised when, Monday morning, Phil’d appeared in his office doorway. He’d been reviewing his response to Wilson’s damned motion to reconsider, and when he’d glanced up somewhere in the middle of the page, Phil’d just . . . been there. Leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb, coffee in his hand, watching.

What? Clint’d asked, and Phil’d smiled a little as he shook his head.

Judge Smithe’s assistant scheduled us for a one-hour hearing on Wednesday, he’d reported. For the motions.

An hour for all of them?

He’d nodded. She’s not hearing argument. Which, actually, could be either very good—

Or very bad, Clint’d finished for him. Phil’s smile’d slipped into something a lot more cautious as he nodded a second time. They’d stayed like that for longer than was maybe necessary, just kinda —looking at one another.

Like the last glances before the executioner, Clint’d thought. He just hadn’t said it.

Now that it’s Wednesday, though, Judge English’s courtroom is packed. The whole office, more or less, is crammed into the first couple rows of chairs. When he glances over his shoulder, he can see all of them lined up there: Stark furiously texting, Steve flashing a grin and a thumbs-up, Bruce trying to convince Stark to put the phone away. Pepper murmurs something to Natasha, who smiles the sort of smile Clint knows isn’t for the rest of them. Thor’s there, too, along with all the assistants and interns.

An army, almost, against Laufeyson. No, he reminds himself, not Laufeyson. Killgrave.

There’re reporters there, too: skinny Peter Parker in his ridiculous jeans and plaid shirt, plus a half-dozen or so other press hounds that Clint’s seen roaming the hallway like a pack of hungry hyenas. The one who’s got a laptop is typing idly, but the rest mostly look bored.

They’re waiting, he thinks. All of them are waiting.
Phil’s knee nudges his under the table, and he blinks away his distraction to look back at Judge Smithe.

“There are a few places within these motions that I believe the defense makes interesting and not entirely baseless arguments as to the construction and treatment of some of our statutes,” she says, her voice very even and very smooth. At counsel table, Laufeyson smirks and leans back in his chair. The vinyl creaks loudly, but he doesn’t seem to care. “In other places, concerns about bias and prejudice are raised, and I can’t say the concerns are . . . wholly unfounded. More defense attorneys should raise those issues pretrial, instead of setting all their hopes on an appeal.”

“That they’ll lose,” Stark mutters behind them. Phil clears his throat pointedly, but doesn’t turn around. No, his face is drawn and tight, the kind of expression that lets Clint know he’s worried. Clint, he—doesn’t feel the worry. Not yet. Not while the judge is doing a little dance around the actual point.

Laufeyson crosses his legs and folds his hands over his knee, waiting.

And that’s when Judge Smithe says, “But.”

It’s a single word, but it’s percussive. It fills the courtroom with a snap of sound and pulls everybody to attention. Phil’s shoulders square, and Laufeyson unfolds his hands. Clint spends a half-second pretending his heart isn’t jumping.

“The fact is, as valid and even compelling as some of these issues are, they don’t rise to the level of dismissal, or exclusion, or requiring an order in limine.” The judge shakes her head, her long braid slipping off her shoulder. “It isn’t my place, as a county judge, to rewrite law because of ill-placed commas. And it certainly isn’t my place, with no real proof to the contrary, to start excluding evidence and barring witnesses because Mr. Stark or another attorney might have spoken to them once on a street corner. I can appreciate the zealous representation, even praise it in a few instances, but nothing presented by the defense prejudices the case enough to require that I grant these motions.”

Voices pipe up around the courtroom, whispered mutterings that kinda sound delighted (at least, the ones behind Clint do), and the reporter with the computer starts typing at a speed that makes Darcy look slow. But a single stolen glance at the defense counsel table reveals that Laufeyson’s just— He’s just sitting there.

No hopping to his feet to declare error.

No demanding a motion to reconsider.

No requests to formally reserve the issue for appeal.

Nothing.

Instead, he’s still leaned back in his seat, legs still crossed . . . and he’s watching Clint.

He thinks for a second that it’s Phil who’s on the receiving end of those razor-sharp snake’s eyes that usually dart all over the place, but no. ‘Cause Phil’s lips are tipped into this cautiously optimistic little smile while Clint’s stomach is sort of—twisting. He feels like he’s trying to swallow a lead weight, and when his eyes meet Laufeyson’s—

Laufeyson smiles.
It’s a Cheshire cat smile, a taffy-stretch smile, and Clint . . .

Clint feels sick.

“Defense’s motions to dismiss, motions to suppress, and motions in limine are denied,” Judge Smithe says. Her hand thumps, a little, on the pile of motions, almost like a gavel. “Any motions to reconsider are due no later than the end of the day on Monday. And hopefully,” she adds, looking between Phil and Laufeyson, “the next time I see any of you in this courtroom, it will be for our pre-trial conference.”

“Absolutely, your honor,” Phil says. The smile, the one that used to be cautiously optimistic, it finds his eyes. When he glances over at Clint, it’s like this warm shot to the middle of his chest.

The problem is, Laufeyson’s still watching.

Clint feels a little like he’s on edge, from that, and he’s not sure when he’s gonna come down.

“Well, with that,” the judge says, starting to rise, “we are ad—”

“Your honor!” Laufeyson interrupts. He comes out of his seat like he’s spring-loaded or something, and Clint— The part of Clint that’s not clenched and twisting has to fight off the urge to groan. It’s an urge that’s shared by Stark, apparently, ‘cause there’s a noise from the gallery that sounds like a baby seal dying. Laufeyson ignores it to spread out his arms. It’s a circus ringleader move, drawing the crowd’s attention between events. “I am in the process of composing a written motion for this court, but given that everyone is present, I’d move to present it orally.”

As soon as he says it, and the words are in the air, Clint swears that Laufeyson looks right at him again. He swears the sweep of those sharp eyes isn’t for counsel table, Phil, or where Stark’s whispering booooooo behind them, but just for Clint.

When their eyes meet, something in Clint’s belly jumps.

But then it’s broken, quick as anything, ‘cause Phil’s pushing up out of his chair. “Your honor, the state had no notice that—”

“The defense’s motion is based on information that came to light only in the last few days,” Laufeyson replies in that smooth, simpering voice he always uses in front of the court, an oil slick spreading across calm water. “I only gathered the last certified court documents I required yesterday. There was no time to put the state on notice.”

Phil’s look at the guy’s a glare that most people save up for Tony Stark. It creases all the soft parts of his face, and Clint wonders if Phil’s ever punched somebody as hard as he probably wants to punch Laufeyson right now. On the bench, Judge Smithe pinches the bridge of her nose. Clint’s pretty sure the sound that slips out from between her lips is actually a sigh. “In the interest of time,” she replies, “I’ll allow Mr. Laufeyson to present his motion. If I require a response—written or otherwise—the state will have an opportunity to weigh in.”

Laufeyson smiles like a horror movie villain, slow and sly. “Thank you. And allow me to assure you, this will be a very brief motion.” He glances over at Clint again, and Clint—

Clint can name the feeling, this time, when their eyes meet across the courtroom. ‘Cause this time, when his stomach clenches and turns over, it feels like he’s in some kind of Halloween film and watching Laufeyson dig his grave. Shovelful by shovelful, the pit deepening and widening while he sits and waits to be thrown into it.
But graves are only, what, six or seven feet deep?

The way Laufeyson’s eyes dance, Clint feels like this grave’s bottomless. Like he’s just sitting there and waiting for Laufeyson to grab him and push him down in. Like he’s about to suffer a long fall with a hard stop.

When Laufeyson looks back at Judge Smithe, he’s still smiling. “Your honor,” he drawls, stretching every syllable as long and lean as the man himself, “I move to disqualify Assistant District Attorney Clinton Barton.”

Clint, he’s—pretty sure, somehow, that he hears the words and the uproar that follows them. He’s sure that Phil rockets to his feet, that Stark yells something that sounds a hell of a lot like you asshole!, and that the chorus of the voices in the gallery all rise up to meet him. He’s sure he hears every one of his colleagues—Bruce, Natasha, Thor, Steve, Darcy, Jane, Pepper—shouting words of defense. And he wants to glance over his shoulder, see their faces, prove that this second in his life is real, but he—

He can’t.

It’s like an out-of-body experience, like he’s watching the scene through somebody else’s eyes. ‘Cause even though he wants to turn around, he . . . can’t. He can’t move, he can’t look at anyone, he can’t force his jaw to work. Even when he feels Laufeyson’s smile land squarely on his shoulders, even when he feels those eyes sweeping over him again—

His body is frozen like he’s been dropped in ice. All he can do, really, is sit there.

He stares at the state seal above the bench while Judge Smithe demands, “Order! Order, or I will hold every one of you in contempt!” Her voice is fraying, though. Clint can hear it clearly, and he’s pretty sure he’s not alone in that. ‘Cause when one voice rings out in the world’s loudest grumble of fucking ridiculous, she jabs a pen towards the gallery. “That goes double for you, Mr. Stark!”

Clint knows that the clatter behind him is Stark being dragged back into his chair. He tries to force a little smile, to make the corners of his lips move, but—

But he’d learned a long time ago how to swallow all his feelings of . . . rage and helplessness and terror behind the world’s most neutral face. He’d survived Trick Chisholm with a neutral face, survived jobs and classes and life by—holding onto what he felt, keeping it private.

He forces that Clint, the scared kid staring at the ceiling in the back bedroom of Trick’s double-wide, to stay on the surface.

“I am sorry, your honor, but this is ridiculous!” Phil declares, throwing up his hands. “Mr. Laufeyson can’t just baselessly disqualify an attorney because of—personal distaste or the fact that he’s losing!” Every gesture is wide, wider than Phil’s movements ever get, and Clint—Neutral expression or not, he can’t help raising his chin to watch. There’s this controlled fire under Phil’s skin, a burning rage that’s licking at the edges of his patience. He’s never seen Phil like this before, never seen this kind of justified anger take him over. But then again, Phil’s never had to defend Clint.

For a second, all Clint can think about is how much he feels for Phil. The only thought in his head, the only emotion, is how—deep and wide his feelings are. How badly he wants to cling to Phil and never—literally never—let go.

But his feelings, however strong they are, can’t stop what happens next.
“I’m inclined to agree with Mr. Coulson,” Judge Smithe says, her voice tight with frustration. Her eyes narrow in on Laufeyson, and for a second, they’re as sharp as his. “Remember what I said in our conference, Mr. Laufeyson. If this is a groundless attempt to stall the state while you play games, I—”

“Oh, I remember, your honor,” Laufeyson replies smoothly, “and I assure you that this motion is not, as the state would suggest, based solely on distaste, or the fact that I am ‘losing.’”

Phil, thank fuck, has the common decency to roll his eyes at the finger-quotes Laufeyson puts around losing. “What grounds could you possibly have to disqualify Mr. Barton?”

“That Mr. Barton failed to disclose a quite substantial juvenile criminal history to the board of bar examiners.” Laufeyson’s words glide through the courtroom, smooth as fresh ice. “He is thusly not qualified to practice law in this state.”

Intellectually, in that same out-of-body way as before, Clint knows there’s another uproar in the courtroom. He knows there’s shouting from his colleagues, that there’re noises from the reporters, and that Laufeyson lets out this—stupid gloating half-laugh. He knows that Judge Smithe is shouting for order, and that nobody’s really listening to her.

But as much as he knows it, as much as he can feel the chaos thrumming around him, that’s not what he cares about.

No. What he cares about in this second, teetering on the edge of the bottomless grave that Laufeyson’s dug for him, are Phil’s eyes. ‘Cause Phil—

Phil turns to look down at him.

Phil’s eyes are wide and soft, Clint thinks. They’re kind eyes, eyes he could spend a lifetime losing himself in. They’re eyes that’ve never hidden from him, eyes that, with a glance, can fix the shit that shatters around them.

He watches those eyes for what feels like hours. He watches them through a silent conversation, through blinks and breaths that are the only quiet in the eruption of voices through the courtroom.

But then, Clint— He nods. He nods, and Phil wrenches his eyes away. He wets his lips and swallows, but he doesn’t turn back toward Clint. He forces his attention forward, on Judge Smithe and the bailiff as they try to call the courtroom to order.

And Clint wonders, quietly, if this is how falling into a bottomless pit is supposed to feel: slow and steady, but with no end in sight.

Chapter End Notes

Each state sets down minimum requirements for admission to the bar of that state. One requirement that is held by all states is that the potential attorney be of proper character and fitness to practice law. Depending on the state, the “character and fitness” portion of bar admission can include investigation into one’s financial history, criminal history, juvenile criminal history, behavior during law school and college, and other such personal information. Many of these things must also be declared on a future attorney’s law school application, as well.
Failure to honestly self-report on bar application questions can result in disciplinary action by the state bar, including reprimand, suspension, or disbarment.

Also, the next update of Motion Practice will be one week from today instead of the usual two weeks. Because although I am mean, I am not that mean.
Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint's past rushes up to meet him, and he is reminded that actions--affirmative and otherwise--have consequences.

Chapter Notes

Expungement is a method by which an individual attempts to get their criminal history completely dismissed. Depending on the jurisdiction, criminal history can decay (meaning become automatically expunged after a certain number of years, provided that there are no further acts committed by the individual), or the person with the criminal history can request the record be expunged. This is different from a sealed record, in that, if the court allows expungement, the criminal record ceases to exist.

Additionally, although juvenile records are often sealed, application for a professional license (such as one to practice medical or law) can require that the person with the record allow that record to be open for the purposes of licensing. Additionally, some jurisdictions do limit the availability of expungement records. For the purposes of our story, please assume that the state which houses Suffolk County does not.

A *nolo contendre* plea—or, in non-Laufeyson terms, a “no contest” plea—is one in which you do not contest the state’s charges, and the state’s factual basis for the charges are assumed true.

This and all subsequent chapters betaed by the lovely Jen.

The sound of a *slap* echoes across the courtroom, so loud and harsh against the ears that every damn voice hushes within seconds. It’s sharp enough that even Clint can’t help but drag his eyes away from Phil and toward the front of the room.

Because Judge Smithe is looming over the bench, her hands flat against the wood. There’s something wild in her eyes, something—uncontrolled, and Clint wonders for a second whether it’s her anger at the situation . . . or the pain from slapping the bench as hard as she did.

“My chambers,” she commands, and her voice is flint and steel. When nobody moves, her eyes narrow into the kind of red-hot slits you’d expect to glow in the dark. “Now.”

A handful of people rise with her when she storms down the steps from the bench and through the
doorway that leads into her chambers, but everybody else kind of—falters. Caught up in the rising tide of whatever the fuck this is, and Clint, he rides it right along with the rest of them. Laufeyson snaps his fingers at an associate in an expensive suit. The kid hands him a briefcase and then they’re both trailing after Smithe, the confused bailiff trying to decide whether they should go through the secure door to chambers or not. Next to him, Phil collects his legal pad and the Killgrave file before he pushes his chair back from the table and stands.

It’s robotic, the way he moves, like somebody needs to oil his joints. Behind them, Clint can vaguely hear Stark asking questions and Bruce telling him to shut up, but he’s not really focused on that.

He’s focused on the way Phil’s frozen next to him. His jaw’s tight when he says, “You need to come, too.”

“Right,” Clint says, but his legs don’t really work. He feels like he’s free-falling without any kind of parachute. His chest feels tight and over-full at the same time, his head feels detached, and when he stands, he’s not really aware of his feet. But the vertigo feeling you get when you’re in one of those high-speed elevators? He has that.

“Coulson—” Stark calls out from behind them.

“Not now,” Phil snaps. His head jerks around to glare at Stark when the guy starts to protest, and Clint . . . It’s the first chance he’s gotten to see Phil’s face since he turned away.

It’s the first chance he’s gotten to see the contained rage lapping at the corners of Phil’s control.

He swallows. Behind them, Stark says, “Yeah, okay, go.” Clint imagines he’s waving his hand along with it, but he doesn’t get a chance to see. No, he’s following Phil through the courtroom and then, through the door.

In her chambers, Judge Smithe throws her robe vaguely in the direction of a coat rack. A sleeve catches on one of the hooks and then slips, the whole thing landing on the floor. “Mr. Laufeyson, you need to give me one good reason why I shouldn’t hold you in contempt for turning my courtroom into a three-ring circus!” she announces. She turns on him, broad shoulders squared under her blouse. Laufeyson opens his mouth, ready to respond, but the judge points a finger at him. “And do not for a second,” she spits, her entire expression tightening, “tell me that this couldn’t’ve waited for a written motion.”

“Of course it could have, your honor,” Laufeyson replies. He spreads his hands out like a missionary preaching to the people. Clint hates that fucking expression. Hates it more than he knows, apparently, because when he looks down, he’s clutching at the back of one of those brocade chairs the way Phil did on their first meeting in Judge Smithe’s chambers. “But you yourself are the one who said that I should endeavor to stop delaying the prosecution, and this information only just came to my attention.”

“Information on Mr. Barton’s criminal history,” Judge Smithe says. It’s clearly not a question, completely matter-of-fact, but Clint’s stomach turns.

“Undisclosed criminal history.” He snaps his long fingers, and the associate—maybe just an assistant, Clint thinks, but the suit’s pretty damn expensive for a trial assistant—fumbles into the briefcase. He pulls out a stack of papers. Clint’s close enough that he gets a good look at it, and . . .

And he can feel the color drain out of his face. He grips the chair hard enough that his knuckles turn white and his wrists shake.
“This,” Laufeyson explains, handing the papers to Judge Smithe, “is a copy of Mr. Barton’s application to the bar. As you can clearly see on the third page—” And the fucker waits for her to flip, too. “—Mr. Barton answers the question about any past or current criminal charges—including juvenile charges—in the negative. Simply put, he denies that he has a criminal record.”

Clint watches the judge press her lips into a tight line.

“But a simple search into Mr. Barton’s history reveals that he has a significant—and deeply troubling—juvenile record.”

“And juvenile records in this state are sealed!” Phil’s voice cracks through the office for the first time since the bailiff’s shut the door behind them. It’s like a thunderclap, but Clint can hear the way the edges are fraying. He stares at his hands, afraid to see what Phil’s face looks like. “Your honor, regardless of Mr. Barton’s criminal history and what lies he may or may not have told on his bar application, Mr. Laufeyson does not have the authority to access sealed files. He can’t accuse Cl—Mr. Barton of side-stepping his legal obligations when he’s breaking the law!”

“Oh, I don’t deny that’s the case, Mr. Coulson,” Laufeyson replies. Clint can hear the slow smile creeping across his face. “And if I had accessed Mr. Barton’s juvenile files outright, I certainly would be afoul of the law.” He snaps his fingers again, and the associate starts digging into the briefcase. “But while juvenile records are sealed in our jurisdiction, expungement records are not.”

The rustle of paper is loud—too loud, really—in the tiny room, and Clint... Clint closes his eyes. He knows what the associate’s about to whip out, what’s about to move from Laufeyson’s fingers to Judge Smithe’s. He doesn’t need to see it to believe it.

“This is a certified copy of the Clarion County records in Mr. Barton’s expungement—well, attempted expungement hearing,” Laufeyson explains. His voice is greasy. “As you can see, Mr. Barton petitioned the court to expunge his nolo contendre convictions to two counts of felonious assault, a count of attempted robbery with a deadly weapon, and a count of criminal damage to property.” He pauses, and Clint listens to the sound of the judge flipping through the records. “The court, in its infinite wisdom, denied the request due to the fact that Mr. Barton was in such close proximity to the age of majority at the time of the offense—and, of course, his close family relationship to one of the co-defendants in the corresponding adult criminal proceeding.”

“Your honor,” Phil says. It’s clipped, strained, and Clint—Clint feels like he’s going to throw up. It’s a wave that comes over him, nausea that shakes through his body. He just can’t decide whether it comes from the conversation happening around him, Judge Smithe’s silence, or the quiver in the back of Phil’s voice.

He needs the quiver to go. He needs Phil to be as calm as smooth as Laufeyson, right now.

“Mr. Coulson?” Judge Smithe asks. She sounds—distracted.

“We have absolutely no way of knowing whether Mr. Barton committed these alleged acts. If he plead no contest and the state provided the factual basis, there could be circumstances which—”

“Mr. Barton’s own brother, Bernard, will testify under oath to Mr. Barton’s involvement in those crimes.” Clint’s eyes snap open. Spring-loaded, but not for anything other than Barney’s name. His hands grip the back of the chair ‘till they’re almost white-knuckled, but as much as he wants to survey the whole room, the only person he can actually focus in on is Laufeyson. Laufeyson’s bent halfway over, elbows on the back of one of the other chairs, and as Clint watches, he gestures lazily around the room. “I spoke with Mr. Bernard Barton personally. He assured me that his brother did participate in the robbery—and never reported it to the board of bar examiners.”
Clint sets his jaw and forces himself to look away from Laufeyson, if only so he doesn’t elect to reach out and slug the guy. The problem is, though, that his eyes land on Judge Smithe. She’s not reading the records or asking questions, she’s just—watching him. Her lips are worried together, the lines on her face drawn, and Clint—

Clint feels like there’s a lead weight sitting in the middle of his chest.

“Mr. Barton?” she asks. There’s something kind about her voice, but Clint still thinks he feels every bone in his ribcage splinter and crack. He tries to look down at the backs of his hands, but they—blur, somehow, in his vision.

He’s aware of everything, in those couple seconds. It’s like a sixth sense, all of a sudden, ‘cause he swears he can hear Laufeyson’s breathing and the whisper of the associate’s suit as he shifts his weight from one foot to another. He can feel the waves of anger—anger at either him or Laufeyson, but Clint’s not sure which—rolling off Phil, and he hears the scratch of Phil’s blunt fingers against the papery surface of his legal pad. But more than anything, right then, he’s aware of himself: the way his whole body feels like it’s about to either burn up or implode, the way his knees and elbows feel like they’re going to buckle, the way that he flips between anger and . . . something a lot darker.

This is his fault, he realizes. The bed he’s made, the—hole he’s dug, and he can’t—

“Actually, I think I’d like to speak to Mr. Barton. Alone.”

Judge Smithe’s voice is absolutely calm, almost—surreally so, after everything that’s just happened, and Clint’s head snaps up. He blinks to clear his vision, and he sees that she’s dumped the pile of papers onto her desk. Her hands are on her wide hips, her lips still pressed together, and she’s focused entirely on him.

He swallows, an attempt to wet his dry throat, but no sound comes out.

Across the office, Laufeyson snaps straight up, like he’s suddenly forgotten how to be the draped spaghetti man. “Your honor, and with all due respect—” And those words sound almost snide, this time around. “—Mr. Barton is an employee of the state. You and he cannot communicate ex parte regarding my client without—”

“Then file a motion,” Judge Smithe snaps. The look she levels at Laufeyson is a knife-blade, and out of the corner of his eye, Clint’s pretty sure he sees Laufeyson cringe. “I’ll draft an order when I decide what to do about all of this. In the meantime, I suggest you start preparing for your client’s trial instead of new ways to harass the state.”

There’s a second where Clint’s sure Laufeyson’s gonna protest somehow, threaten to file a complaint against Smithe or ask for her recusal, but he—doesn’t. He snaps his fingers and the associate jumps against his side, gathering up the briefcase. Clint watches him do up the latches and change the numbers on the lock, mostly because it’s the safest thing to look at.

He hears Phil next to him, but he can’t lift his head. Lifting his head means seeing Phil and—reading the thousand things in his face. He knows Phil’s expressions now, keeps them lined up and documented in his head. If he looks, he’ll . . . know.

He’ll know whether Phil’s angry, disappointed, or something else.

He’ll know if he just broke everything.

So he stares at the briefcase, and then the empty chair where it used to sit, and listens to Laufeyson
and Phil walk out. He imagines for a second that someone touches his back, brushes fingers against the fabric of his jacket, but he knows it’s wistful thinking more than reality.

From where he’s standing, still staring at nothing, he’s pretty sure he hears Laufeyson sneer, “How does it feel to know your boyfriend is hardly a lawyer at all?” It carries down the hall and into chambers, and it—kinda makes Clint’s stomach twist all over again.

Enough that even hearing Phil retort, “Don’t make me taze you,” doesn’t help to settle him.

But then, Judge Smithe closes the door. Clint listens to it settle into the doorjamb, and then all that’s left in the room once it does is silence. He tries to lift his eyes from the chair but finds out real quick that he can’t. He’s frozen, stuck, and nothing really . . . works.

The judge is quiet for a long time before she points out, “You haven’t said anything yet.”

He snorts and shakes his head. For a split-second, he feels like he’s in one of those fucking demolition derbies, and his car’s out of control. Except it’s not a car, it’s his life, and there’s no way to steer into the skid. “I don’t think I can fix this with a bunch of words.”

“That’s probably right.” There’s a whisper of fabric, and Clint finally looks up to watch Judge Smithe coming toward him. She’s a short woman, maybe around Jane’s height, and the sway of her hips makes her skirt sweep against her ankles. She sits down in one of the brocade-pattern chairs and gestures for Clint to slide into the other. He’s not sure he trusts his legs for the couple steps it takes to move around the chair. But even without the robe, the judge is still a judge, and he figures he’d better still do what she asks.

When he finally settles, she folds her hands in her lap. “Do you know why I chose to be the juvenile judge?”

He frowns, a little, and then shakes his head.

“It’s because I believe we’re not all just the sums of our circumstances.” She watches him for a second, her eyes absolutely steady. “I believe that individual people are more than their last name, or the house—or apartment, or trailer, or RV—they were born in. I don’t think anyone can be reduced to criminal histories or failed expungements.”

He watches her sweep one of her hands toward the papers on her desk. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” he admits. He can feel his face tipping into something dark, a frown that he can’t really force into any other expression.

“I want to hear your story.”

“Will that really change anything?”

There’s a pause, just for a second, where Judge Smithe presses her lips together. Her shoulders rise and fall, the world’s smallest shrug. “I don’t know.”

It’s not some empty reassurance, the way she says it. There’re no rainbows and glitter, no magic fixes to the tension that’s still radiating up from the middle of Clint’s stomach, but—he likes that. He likes that it’s not some stupid promise to throw Laufeyson in lock-up on a contempt charge and rescue Clint from the hole he’s dug himself.

Even if it means that he’s standing in the hole when he pulls in a breath. He lets it out, slow and steady, and then sort of—shakes his head. “I was a stupid kid,” he says quietly. The judge nods a little, some kind of silent encouragement, and he ends up dropping his eyes into his lap. “My
brother, he ran around with some guys who he probably shouldn’t’ve spent that much time around,
and I . . . I didn’t have a lot of friends of my own, y’know? I ran around with them, ‘cause at least
with them, I wasn’t sitting around at home, watching Trick drink himself stupid.”

Or worse, he thinks, but he doesn’t say it.

He picks at his thumbnail, trying to sort of—shove the words together in his head. Judge Smithe
stays quiet and still, and when he glances over at her, she’s just watching him. Calm, he thinks.
Calm and waiting for him to trip his way through the story.

“One night, a couple months before I turned eighteen, him and his buddies . . . ” His voice catches,
a little, and he shakes his head at himself. It’s stupid, he thinks, to have the memory living in his
head like a fucking movie, but not be able to say it. Then again, he’s never been able to retell any
of it, not even at the expungement hearing. “They figured, after about two a.m., the 7-11’d be
pretty empty. And it was, just the guy behind the counter and some stoner. Except the clerk
couldn’t get into the safe, and it all kinda—”

He shakes his head again, trying to clear the cobwebs that’ve been there for the last, what, fifteen
years now? Something like that. “You pled out,” she says, another one of her non-questions.

“Barney—my brother—and I took deals. Barney told them I was just kinda along for the ride, I
told them the same thing, and they let me off with a couple weeks in juvenile detention and
finishing up senior year in their day school, instead of with everybody else.” He shifts a little, but
he can’t stop looking at his hands. “When I applied to law school six years ago,” he says, and he’s
surprised at how close his voice is to a murmur, “I applied for the expungement. Enough time’d
gone by, I hadn’t done anything else, I’d gone through undergrad, so I figured they’d wipe it.”

“But?” the judge asks.

Clint kinda snorts at that. “But none of my co-defendants managed to keep themselves outta
trouble, even when I did,” he replies, looking up at her. He remembers the judge from Clarion
County, a big man with mean eyes and a jaw that looked like it was carved outta rock. He’d
scowled the whole time Clint—who’d just started law school and couldn’t afford lawyer, but
who’d researched about a thousand different things on expungement hearings—pled his case. He
hadn’t spared him even a half-second of kindness.

Totally different, he thinks, from Judge Smithe.

“I was almost eighteen when it happened,” he continues, forcing himself through it. “My brother’s
record— Well, you can guess what that looked like. And before undergrad, I jumped around
between jobs, moved all over the place, and so I just—”

“Weren’t the kind of steady, reformed citizen we look for,” Judge Smithe supplies. She’s never
looked away from him, not this whole time. She’s totally focused, her lips settled together and her
face neutral. Clint wishes, for a second, that the 7-11’d been in Suffolk County, instead of Clarion.
“You didn’t admit to your record on your law school application, then?”

“No,” he admits. He rubs his hands along the thighs of his pants, just—needing to move. “I
thought it’d be expunged. And once you don’t declare something on your application—”

“It makes the bar examiners twice as suspicious if it shows up on your bar application,” she says.
She nods, seemingly to herself, and leans back in the brocade chair. For the first time since they sat
down together, she breaks her gaze away from Clint. He watches the way she sweeps her office
with her eyes, and settles on looking out the window. “Mr. Laufeyson is probably going to move for Mr. Coulson’s disqualification next,” she remarks, almost like she’s thinking aloud, “given that —”

“Phil didn’t know.” The words, they kind of—leap out of Clint’s mouth, and he only realizes after Judge Smithe’s eyes land on him that he’s sitting up on the edge of his seat. He tries to settle back again, but he’s holding onto his knees too hard. Instead, he just shakes his head. “Nobody at the office knows,” he clarifies. He can feel the warmth creeping up his neck. “Not the district attorney, not Mr. Coulson, nobody.”

The judge nods slightly to herself. “Okay,” she says. Clint can’t really make himself relax, at that. He tries to uncurl his fingers, but—

But he can’t stop thinking about his stupidity coming back to hurt Phil. He can forgive himself a lot of things—maybe even, after long enough, losing his job and being disbarred—but Phil—

He won’t be able to forgive himself if this comes back on Phil.

The judge, however, leans back in her chair again, her eyes sliding towards the window. She’s comfortable, Clint thinks, and that at least coaxes him to stop wrinkling his slacks with his fingers.

“I’m not going to disqualify you from this case,” she says finally, her voice even as she glances over at Clint. “You haven’t committed any affirmative acts that suggest you’re incapable of serving as counsel for the state. Really, I don’t think you’ve committed any acts that call into question your character and fitness for the bar itself, but that’s not a decision I can make.” She slowly rises from the chair, and as much as he wants to, Clint can’t drag his eyes away from her. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re competent for the purposes of this trial.”

She stands in the middle of the office as she says it, her hands on her hips, and Clint—Clint feels the tension in the silence, feels the breadth of the pause between them. He pulls in a breath. “But?”

“But.” When Judge Smithe snorts softly, it almost sounds like a laugh. Clint only knows from experience that it’s not. “You lied on your bar application. I can’t promise that Mr. Laufeyson won’t report you for that, if he hasn’t already.”

He wets his lips, but he’s nodding, too. The shock of nausea is back, chewing at his stomach, and he suddenly wants to be anywhere but here. Outside in the fresh air, maybe. Barbados. Siberia. Anywhere but staring up at the soft look on Judge Smithe’s face.

“And when it happens,” she continues, the corners of her mouth tipping into a frown, “and no matter how I feel about the matter, I won’t be able to prevent the bar from acting.”

“I know,” Clint responds. His voice sounds distant to his own ears.

Judge Smithe meets his eyes. “Do you?”

“Yeah,” he says.

He just leaves out the part about how knowing and being prepared for are two totally different things.

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“You missed it!” Stark announces as Clint walks back into the district attorney’s office. “The most unexpected, impossible, and unprecedentedly awesome thing to ever happen in the history of the entire universe, and you missed it!”

“To be fair,” Bruce adds quietly, “he says that when pumpkin scones come back to Starbucks, too.”

Clint’s head hurts. It’s a new ache, one that’s replaced the twisting nerves and nausea in his belly, and as soon as Stark’s voice booms down the hallway, he wants to find a quiet room to lie down in. The office is one subwoofer short of a rave, loud and crowded with people, and he can’t take it. He wants to slink back into the quiet cool of the stairwell, sit down on a step, and wait for this to pass. As it stands, there’s no passing the throng of people in the hallway. They’re crowded into a clot right outside Jane’s cubicle. Every voice is rising and falling at its own pace—Darcy’s laugh breaks over the noise, followed by Natasha commenting about Thor’s disciplinary file, and Clint—

“No attempt to defend yourself?” Stark demands. Clint blinks. He’d forgotten, ‘till right now, that anyone was talking to him.

“I was—trying to keep from being tossed off the case?” he attempts. It’s weak, almost limp-wristed, and he knows it—half because he can hear himself, and half because Stark rolls his eyes and grabs him. It’s a loose grip, a hand that covers his shoulder and then tugs. Clint debates about breaking it, and then realizes that it won’t matter.

Stark’ll just hunt him down again and drag him back into . . .

“What’s going on?” he asks as the crowd parts to let them through.

In the middle of the sea of attorneys, interns, assistants, and clerks is Thor. He’s sitting on Jane’s desk chair in the opening of Jane’s cubicle, and hissing out swears in something that sure as hell isn’t English. It’s a sound like something possessed or something out of Harry Potter, Clint thinks for a second—until he sees the back of Thor’s hand. There’s sticky, half-dried blood covering his skin from the backs of his knuckles all the way to his wrist. It’s matting the hair, there, and his knuckles—split knuckles, Clint realizes with a blink—are still oozing.

“He punched him!” Stark half-cheers. He slaps Clint hard enough on the back of the shoulder that he almost trips forward onto Thor. He turns to gape at Stark, but the guy’s about as manic as ever, grinning from ear-to-ear. Then again, everybody around him looks just as amused. “Coulson and Laufeyson came outta chambers without you, Laufeyson stopped just long enough to inform everybody that he’d have the case dismissed for Judge Smithe talking to you alone, and Thor hauled off and slugged him!” He claps Clint on the shoulder again, harder than the first time, and Clint steps sideways before it turns into a third. “Went down like a ton of bricks! Or like those sacks of flour they used to use in theaters to make the curtain rise and fall, you know? Bam!” With Clint out of the way, he smacks the side of the cubicle hard enough that the whole thing shakes. Hill shoots him a dirty look. “It was the best,” he sighs happily.

“It was—pretty impressive,” Bruce admits with a tiny shrug.

Clint nods, a little, but it’s almost like he’s not really hearing the words. In front of him, Jane presses some kinda damp compress to the back of Thor’s hand, and the guy goes from hissing out half-swears to booming curses in what Clint’s pretty sure is some Scandinavian language. He
stomps the foot that’s furthest from Jane. She crouches down next to him, one hand on his knee while the other holds onto the compress, and rolls her eyes. “This from the man who calls football games ‘glorious battles.’”

“There is no glory in having my skin burned off by—by this—”

“Rubbing alcohol,” Natasha supplies.

“That!” he announces, and then goes right back to cursing.

“This is so going on Facebook,” Darcy says. She pulls out her phone and starts snapping pictures of Thor’s cartoony grimaces, but Clint—

Clint’s still not sure he totally understands.

He watches Jane fold what he’s now pretty sure is a paper towel doused in rubbing alcohol in half and start working on individual knuckles. “You—punched your brother?” he asks carefully.

Thor nods. His hair’s loose, today, and it moves with his head. Clint sometimes wonders if there is any gesture that doesn’t overtake Thor’s entire body. “He deserved it.”

“He’s your brother.”

“And he insulted a colleague.” Thor’s eyes are incredibly blue when they lift to meet Clint’s. They’re kind eyes, wide and soft like some kind of sweet wild animal. Clint realizes all at once that he’s never noticed that about Thor, before. He’s never noticed that Thor’s goodness is as loud as his voice . . . possibly ‘cause the voice kind of overtakes everything. He watches the guy toss his head as Jane cleans the worst of his knuckles, and he suddenly feels guilty. He’s never taken the time to get to know Thor the way he knows Bruce, Natasha, and even Stark, and—

Thor kinda deserves that.

The swearing tapers off, and Thor catches his eyes a second time. “Since the time we were children together,” he continues, “my brother has believed he has something to prove. He tries to find some measure of worth in the cleverness of his actions, instead of finding it somewhere inside himself. And though I have tried to show him that he does not have to set fire to the world in order to belong to it, he—” He bites his lip and sucks in a breath as Jane switches knuckles. The way he grimaces makes Clint’s hand hurt. “—does not trust me. Or himself.”

“’Cause he’s a selfish little prick,” Stark supplies. From where she’s leaning against the cubicle, Natasha shoots him a murderous look.

“Because he is frightened of what is left for him if he strips his trickery away,” Thor corrects. There’s a softness in the back of his voice. He shakes his head. “But he insulted my colleague—and my friend,” he continues, his eyes settling on Clint again. “I could not allow for that to stand.”

“And decked him,” Stark reminds the group of them. As though it’s possible to forget while Jane’s wiping half-dried blood off Thor’s hand.

“I reminded him he could not bully those I care about.”

“By turning into a twelve-year-old boy,” Jane chides, but there’s no heat in it. No, instead, it’s warm and gentle. Clint watches the way she squeezes Thor’s leg, and how gentle her fingers are against his hand when she leans up to kiss him. It’s meant to be on the cheek, he thinks, but Thor turns to catch her mouth. They smile at each other, and Clint drops his eyes.
It’s not that they’re having a private moment, really—he’s watched Thor sweep Jane off chairs just to make her laugh, after all—but that the sinking feeling’s suddenly crawling back into his stomach. “Thanks,” he says.

A hand grips his arm, and when he jerks his head up, Thor’s grinning at him. “You are a fine lawyer, Clinton Barton,” he declares. Despite himself, it—kinda makes Clint smile. Not ‘cause he believes it, right now, but ‘cause Thor’s too warm and earnest to ignore. “Nothing that my brother or anyone else says will convince me otherwise.”

Clint’s not sure what it is—the warmth of Thor’s hand and grin, the sincerity in his voice, the press of people around him, or just his own head sort of . . . escaping from him—but he can’t sustain his little smile. He tries, but the corners of his lips dip. He shakes his head and lets his eyes land on the carpet. Thor squeezes his arm and then lets go, leaving him to stand there.

“Thanks,” he says again, but his own voice feels empty. The chatter around them sort of starts to die down. He doesn’t want to be there, he realizes. His stomach drops again. He doesn’t want to be surrounded by a dozen people who aren’t yet asking the questions he knows they’re thinking. He doesn’t want to still be standing in the middle of them when the demands start.

He takes a step back, practically running into a file clerk. He wants to apologize, but instead, the words that fall out of his mouth are, “I should go.”

His voice catches enough that it kinda kills the last fragmented conversations around him. The only sound that’s left is Thor grunting at the gauze that Jane’s wrapping around his still-bloodied knuckles.

“Go?” someone asks softly. When he looks up, it’s Bruce who’s watching him. There’s this uncanny calm radiating through him. Clint’s jealous of his zen-like composure, because right now, he feels like he’s about to rattle apart.

He swallows around the start of that full-body tremor. Pushing his lips together doesn’t necessarily form a smile, but it forms—something. He presses against that something and just hopes it reaches his eyes. “Back to my office,” he replies, but he’s pretty sure that’s not true. The thought of being closed into those four walls is like the thought of being caged. His skin itches at the thought. “To do—work.”

Natasha raises a slender eyebrow. “Work,” she repeats. She leans into the syllable, biting off the \textit{k} sound with a crack. There’s so much skepticism and \textit{doubt} built into that one sound that Clint can’t actually look at her.

“Work,” he replies with a quick nod. A glance reveals that she’s starting to part her lips again, but Clint— He can’t stay to hear it. He can’t contain his \textit{urge} to move away from all of them, to bump into an intern, mutter an apology, and then turn around. Peggy and Pepper move out of his way, but he feels their eyes on him, staring him down as he slips out of the crowd.

The hallway’s quiet, compared to the cluster around Jane’s cubicle, but it does nothing for the feeling in the pit of Clint’s stomach. It’s not his head that aches as much as his entire body, and every time he stops focusing on the ache or the nausea, he starts focusing on what’s just happened. On Laufeyson asking for his disqualification, on Judge Smithe’s anger in her chambers, on his bar application and expungement records, on the way Phil’s voice had wavered.

He thinks of Phil’s silence, and his stomach twists.

He thinks of standing on the sidewalk, holding onto Phil’s hand, thinks of the thousand things he
should have said—and he can’t really breathe.

His office door is cracked, and he shoves it open with enough force that it bangs against the wall. He wants to throw something, wants to sweep the ream of paper that constitutes all the Killgrave research off his desk, wants to kick over the chairs that Stark hates, wants to scream away the thoughts that won’t stop running through his head. He wants to break something, burn something, find something that’ll help shut off his brain—but he can’t.

Not because there’s nothing in his office to kick, or throw, or burn.

But because Phil’s sitting on the window ledge.

He’s not doing anything, he’s just—sitting there, his tie undone and the first button of his collar undone. The Killgrave file’s sitting next to him, the yellow of his legal pad brighter in the afternoon sun, but Clint can tell he hasn’t even flipped through it. No, his hands are folded between his legs and his head is tipped up just enough to—

To watch the door, he realizes.

To wait for Clint.

“Clint,” he says, his voice soft and too-warm. He starts to stand up, and Clint can feel his eyes. He can feel Phil searching him with a look, trying to catch his gaze, and—

“No.” His voice shakes, and he almost runs into one of those stupid plastic chairs as he steps forward. His bag’s leaning against the side of the desk, and he grabs it roughly. Too roughly, ‘cause the book he’s been reading and a pen fall out onto the floor, but it doesn’t matter. He shoves it over his shoulder without having to look at Phil.

Part of him wants to. Part of him lives for these moments, the times when they’re alone and don’t have to worry about other people questioning their eye contact. Part of him wants to make sure there’s no hate, no anger, no pity waiting for him there.

But the rest of him—

The rest of him can’t stop thinking that the next look could be the last look.

And he can’t deal with that.

“Clint—” Phil starts, again, but Clint shakes his head.

“I— I can’t,” he stumbles. His voice jumps, refuses to stay steady, and he feels his heart climb into his throat. “Right now, I— I need to—” And he can’t stop himself from shaking his head, this constant left-right sweep of his chin. He forces himself to turn on his heel, to face anything but the window. The door’s half-closed, the white-gray wall of the hallway behind it, and he stares until his eyes burn. He commands his legs to work, tries to urge them forward. But for that first second, they won’t.

Not until he reminds himself that he can’t look at Phil, not right now. If he looks at Phil, if he meets his eyes, he’ll know. He’ll know what Phil’s thinking, he’ll know whether he’s failed him, he’ll know how he’s torn apart what’s between them, and—

He’s not sure what the other half of that possibility is, exactly. He’s not sure what’ll happen after he catches a glimpse of Phil’s face.
No, the only thing he’s certain of is the fact that he’s not ready to find out. Not right now. Maybe—never.

Somehow, when his legs start moving, he manages to walk away without looking back.

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He drives.

It’s a sticky-hot August afternoon, even with the windows rolled down, but it doesn’t fucking matter: Clint just drives. He pulls onto the interstate at the nearest exit and races down the road, his engine thundering. He passes trucks and minivans, sedans and station wagons, and when someone honks at him for cutting too close, he flips them off out the window. He drives until all he can hear is the rush of the wind in his ears and the pounding of his heart against his ribcage.

He doesn’t realize that he’s looped most of the city until he’s pulling off at the exit closest to Colier Woods, the one he took to come home from undergrad all those years ago. He slows down to the speed limit—well, around the speed limit, ’cause he knows the cops that patrol around the trailer park are more interested in dope dealers and repeat offenders than a guy going five-over in a blue hatchback—and passes the entrance to the park. He’s gonna drive home, back to his apartment and what he’s pretty sure is his ruined career, but something stops him. He pulls a U-turn the first chance he gets and digs his cell phone outta his bag.

It’s been on silent all day, and the display shows a half-dozen missed calls and even more texts. Most are from Phil, but there’s a bunch of other names cluttering up the list, too: Darcy, Bruce, Natasha, even Stark. He clears all of them with a swipe of his finger. His wheels kick up dust as he turns off the asphalt and onto the gravel road that snakes through the park.

you home, he texts to Barney. It’s clumsy, and when he can’t find the question mark, he leaves it off.

y?

ball field asap, he replies. He tosses his phone into the back seat and half-turns, half-drifts his way around the corner.

The field’s empty when he pulls up, just like he expected. Nobody’s ever around before dark, mostly ’cause cops know that folks smoke (and worse) back here. It’s a lot easier to run and hide when nobody can see your face. But that’s not what Clint cares about. He kills the engine and steps outta his car, but he doesn’t bother closing the door.

He’s pacing—from the back of the field to the pitcher’s mound and then back again—when Barney appears. He’s in these ratty-ass jeans and a sleeveless undershirt that’s seen better days. His hair’s all over the place. He kinda looks like he’s just woken up, and Clint spends a half second processing that before his fingers ball into fists at his sides.

“You have about half a second before I beat the shit out of you,” he spits, and he’s surprised, somehow, at how—angry it is. How sharp the edges of his voice are, how unrestrained. His hands shake, and he pushes his fingernails into the skin to keep from flying out at Barney.

Barney stares at him. He’s a good thirty, forty feet away, still. He’s far enough that Clint can’t just
grab him and throw him against the nearest flat surface. “The fuck are you talking about?” he asks. Tired as he looks, his voice is clear.

“Laufeyson. I’m talking about— You know what? Fuck you. Fuck you if you think I’m just going to—explain this to you like you didn’t do it on purpose.” Clint takes a half-step forward, like he wants to close the distance between them, but—something stops him. It grabs him by the shoulders, some invisible force he can’t shake, so he turns around. He kicks at the ground, at the drying clumps of dirt from the last rain and the fucking grass that nobody cuts, and just—throws up his hands. “You wanna hate my guts, you hate my guts. I got over that a long time ago. But you wanna screw up my whole life, that’s a whole different—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Barney interrupts. His voice’s this demand, cutting through the field. When Clint twists back towards him, he’s closed half the distance and standing there, palms out.

Like asking for peace, he thinks for a second.

Problem is, there’s no room left for peace.

“You told opposing counsel about the robbery!” he snaps. Four steps later, he’s standing in front of Barney, close enough to put a hand against his shoulder and shove. Barney stumbles, but he doesn’t fall. “You told the one guy who’ll use it to get me fucking disbarred about it after swearing you’d never fucking mention it!”

For a second, Barney just—stares at him. Stares, big-eyed and blank-faced, and silence stretches between them. Real silence, too, broken only by their ragged breathing and the repeating door chime from Clint’s car.

The silence breaks when Barney laughs. It’s dark and derisive, almost hateful, and Clint’s blood chills as soon as he hears it.

“How the fuck was I supposed to know?”

His voice is cold, almost cruel, and he takes the couple steps forward ‘till they’re standing face-to-face. Barney’s taller by a couple inches, but their eyes still meet. When he doesn’t say anything, Barney snorts. “Huh? How the fuck was I supposed to know? ‘Cause this guy called me, Clint, and he said he was a lawyer. Said he was working with you and needed to help you out.” He jabs a finger into the center of Clint’s chest, hard, and then pushes away. He paces like a wild animal, like something in a cage, and Clint—He can’t fucking put the words together. “And when you didn’t pick up the phone after I called you, I figured it was ‘cause there was something actually wrong.” He shakes his head. From behind, Clint watches him throw up his hands. “No, see, this is your fault.”

“My fault?!” Clint demands, the anger flashing through him like a bolt of lightning. His fists tremble with his need to—punch something, but he swallows the urge. “I could lose everything over this, just ‘cause you weren’t smart enough to—”

“This has nothing to do with fuckin’ smart!” Barney roars. He turns on him, stalking back through the too-long grass. Both his hands impact Clint’s chest in something that’s more a punch than a shove. There’s not enough time to brace himself, not really, but he catches himself on his back foot. Barney tosses his head and spits into the dirt. “You don’t get it, do you? All this shit is ‘cause you never tell me anything. You never did. No, ‘cause you were smart and you knew how to get outta here, and the second you put all that together, you stopped sayin’ shit to your big brother!” He snorts out this sound that’s almost a laugh, but that’s—darker, somehow, too. “You didn’t tell me
you were leaving town,” he presses, every word a razor, “you didn’t tell me you were into guys, you didn’t tell me anything. Even after I saved your ass that night!”

Clint barks out a laugh. It echoes across the field and into the dusk. “You saved my ass?” he retorts. “That’s what you took away from all that bullshit, that you saved my—”

“I took that fucking deal for you!” Barney’s voice cracks, and Clint— He has to take a step back, has to force distance between the two of them. Not just ‘cause of Barney’s anger, either, but ‘cause of how uncontrolled and wild his eyes are. “Ricky, Ed, they would’ve thrown you right under the bus! They would’ve watched you fuckin’ rot and bragged about it later, how they got my kid brother to take the rap. But me? I knew if I pled out, I could tell ‘em the truth about you getting dragged into all this. I could keep you out of bein’ tried as an adult and getting locked up with the rest of us!”

His voice carries, a shot in the growing dark, but then he just shakes his head. “But after that—after all of that,” he says, something soft pushing at the corners of his voice, “you don’t even bother telling me that you’re on Jordan’s case. You don’t bother pickin’ up the phone. No, it takes some asshole trickin’ it out of me for you to talk to me. Like I’m the fuckin’ bad guy here.”

When their eyes meet, there’s a second where Clint can’t breathe. There’s a second where the distance between them, the quiet of the field, it all empties out his lungs. His chest is tight again, and he can’t really put his thoughts together enough to move.

At least, not ‘till Barney says, “I’m not the bad guy here, Clint. You are.”

‘Cause Barney says it with this disappointment, this disgust, that’s so harsh in Clint’s ears that he can’t help himself. It’s like an out-of-body experience, like being a whole other person, ‘cause one second he’s standing in the grass, and the next, he’s on Barney. He catches him by the neck of his undershirt and then they’re on the ground, skidding through the grass and dirt.

His first punch catches Barney in the face, but Barney moves outta the way of the second. Clint’s momentum carries his fist into the ground, and he shouts in pain and anger when his knuckle splits on a rock. Barney uses it to roll them over, to pin Clint by the hips and swing at him. But he’s not as strong as he used to be, and Clint catches his fist.

They grapple like that ‘till Clint’s able to grab a handful of Barney’s shirt in his free hand and shove him back onto the ground. The next punch forces an explosion of blood out of Barney’s nose, and the third cuts his lip. Clint can’t stop himself, can’t control all the anger that’s rushing up to meet him, and he pulls back for a fourth.

And somebody grabs his arm.

“Clint!” a voice yells, and he realizes suddenly that the voice’s been yelling his name for the last couple seconds. He recognizes the crack in his voice, the urgency, but he shakes the hands off him. It overbalances him, and within seconds, Barney’s reaching up and grabbing him by the tie to pull him back down into the dirt.

The arm that grabbed him appears again, between him and Barney, and Barney catches a handful of suit jacket. He pulls, hard, and Clint’s distracted for a half-second by the sound of stitches ripping. The half-second’s enough, though, ‘cause the arm between them grips him by the back of his shirt and drags him off Barney. He pushes the hands away, rage-blind and stumbling to his feet —

And finds himself staring at Phil Coulson.
His chest is heaving, but then, so’s Clint’s. It burns with—something, some rage he can’t name, and he just—stares. Phil’s eyes are wide, worried, and a quick once-over reveals that the arm of his suit jacket’s hanging at weird angle. There’s a huge rip at the shoulder, one that it’ll take a tailor to fix, and—

“You called your fuckin’ boyfriend on me?” Barney shouts. He’s on his feet, blood pouring down his chin and onto his shirt. When he spits, he spits blood.

“I didn’t call him!” Clint yells back, his voice louder than he expects. He looks at Phil for a second—those big eyes, the parted lips—and then forces himself to look away. He walks to the pitcher’s mound, twists around like he’s gonna come back—and ends up just stopped, staring at the both of them. “He fucking—you fucking followed me?”

The urge to punch something, to burn the world down and start it all over again, it’s still there. Barney paces like a wild animal, dragging blood over his face with an attempt to wipe it away. Clint wants to feel victory, but he just feels—

Empty.

Phil stands between them, ripped jacket and all, his arms spread out like he thinks they’re gonna fly at each other again. When their eyes meet, his are absolutely calm. Eerily calm, and the last thing Clint wants to see right now.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” he says simply, and Clint—Clint turns away. He stalks further across the field, all the way to the stupid rusted backstop, and he kicks it. The rattle of the links sounds like thunder. It’s comforting, somehow, so he kicks it again, harder. “I thought you might—”

“Might what?” Clint demands, turning on him.

Phil meets his eyes. “Might do something stupid,” he replies evenly, and Clint punches the backstop instead of responding.

His knuckles are already split and bleeding, but the pain, it’s—right, somehow. He deserves it, he thinks, and raises his other hand. He batters the damn thing, every punch like the thunderclap before the downpour. When he closes his eyes to the sound, that’s all there is: no Barney, no Phil, no Laufeyson, no bar examiners, only aching knuckles covered with flakes of rust.

Except he can’t keep it up forever, and he knows it.

The hand that touches his upper arm is gentle, almost—coaxing, and Clint can’t fight it. He can’t fight the warmth of those fingers through his shirt, or the way they tug him gently away from the backstop. The anger flows out of him like somebody’s pulled out the stopper, and he turns into the touch.

Phil’s eyes are a thousand things. They’re kind and worried, they’re soft and helpless, they’re maybe even a little scared. Clint catches them, holds them, and his breath trips.

“I—” he starts to say, but his voice is a thousand miles away. He wets his lips to try again, but Phil shakes his head.

“Not right now,” he murmurs, and Clint’s—surprised, somehow, when Phil’s free hand touches his side. Touches, then settles there, and—

He’d never understood exactly how it felt to deflate, before, but he does now. ’Cause as soon as
Phil’s fingers spider against his side, he fucking loses his ability to hold it together. He grabs Phil, *clutches* him in a way that he’s never done before even when they’re alone, and *clings on*.

His whole body trembles, and he hates himself for it. He hates himself for the way his breath catches when Phil presses his mouth against his neck, the way he balls his fingers in Phil’s coat and refuses to let go, the way he wants their bodies to mold together.

They stand like that for a long time, clutching one another in an abandoned ball field where Clint used to get high. Neither of them says anything, though, not even when the setting sun’s dim enough that the still-on headlights on Phil’s sedan look bright. They just—stay, still and warm and together.

Clint knows there’re words. He knows *something* needs to fill the silence. He knows that this moment of panic that’s landed them together, it doesn’t change what happened at the courthouse a couple hours ago.

Phil’s breath is warm against the shell of his ear when he says, “Let me take you home.”

The offer’s soft and soothing, almost like a band-aid for all the shit that’s happened today, and Clint—Clint *wants* to say yes. He wants to press a hand to Phil’s face and kiss him, wants to crawl into his warmth and skin and not come out. He wants, suddenly, to tell the whole story from the beginning, and ensure that everything Phil knows is the honest-to-god gospel truth.

But when he pulls his face away from Phil’s shoulder and forces himself to breathe, he realizes that they’re standing in the near-dark of the empty ball field. There’s no sign of Barney or anyone else. No, the only signs of life are Phil’s arms around him, Phil’s breath close to his ear, and the yellow-white glow of the headlights from Phil’s car.

He presses his lips together and, slowly, shakes his head. “I need time to . . . think,” he tells Phil. He spends a few seconds with his eyes focused on the ripped seam of Phil’s suit jacket, ‘cause it’s easier than looking at him. When he raises his chin, Phil’s watching him. His expression is a practiced kind of neutral, the one that makes Clint think of him as Coulson instead of Phil. “Today was—pretty shitty, and I’ve gotta sort it out. Y’know?”

“I don’t have to stay,” he offers quietly. Clint thinks there’s something back behind those words, catching the edges of them, but he can’t put a name to what it is.

“Yeah, I know. I just . . . ” He shakes his head, instead of answering, and Phil kinda nods. There’s not much confidence in it—it’s more a blind little head-bob than anything else—but Clint . . . Clint holds onto it.

They walk back to the cars side-by-side, their hands brushing more accidentally than in the practiced way they’d perfected in the halls of the judicial complex. The door chime of Clint’s car is still going, a steady *ding* that feels more like a racing pulse than anything else. He plants his hand against the top of the door so he can drop into the seat, but Phil catches him by the arm. He stops, suspended, and their eyes meet.

There’re a thousand words between them, in the silence of the field and the darkness of their eyes. He’s just not sure whether they’re promises, accusations, or something in between.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Phil finally says. They’re heavy words, words that *mean* something.

Clint nods. “Yeah.”
“Okay.”

There’s not much finality in it, not much certainty, and still, neither of them moves. Twice, Clint thinks Phil’s gonna let go of him and step away, and twice, Phil’s fingers twitch without really going anywhere. When they finally start to slip away, he stops with fingertips on Clint’s wrist and leans forward.

It’s a short kiss, but it’s—warm. It catches the corner of his mouth and lingers there. Phil only pulls away when Clint doesn’t turn his head. When he doesn’t catch his lips and deepen it.

Even in the dark, Clint can see Phil’s throat move.

“Clint,” he says, softly, the start to a sentence.

But Clint’s not ready for any more sentences, not right now. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he replies, and slips away from Phil’s touch. He drops into the driver’s seat and sits there, waiting, ‘till Phil steps out of the way. He closes the door without looking at him again, and starts the car.

Phil stays there a while, frozen. Clint can see his shadow outside the closed window, but he doesn’t bother rolling it down. Instead, he just waits ‘till Phil steps away and climbs into his own car, and listens to the sedan roar to life over the sound of his own engine.

Phil pulls away slowly, like he’s waiting on Clint. But the only thing Clint does, in the end, is reverse his car into the grass, pull back onto the gravel road that winds through the trailer park, and drive himself home.

==

Thursday morning, Clint calls in sick to work.

He hacks and coughs his way through a conversation with the receptionist at the front desk, apologizing for the completely fictional chest-cold thing he’s come down with and promising he’ll be in on Friday.

Except Friday morning, he’s fake-moaning his way through another conversation and swearing that he’ll get checked out for walking pneumonia, ‘cause somebody’s second-cousin died from that one time.

He spends all Thursday in bed, staring at the texture of his ceiling and ignoring the text messages and calls that make his phone vibrate its way across the nightstand. He thinks he dozes off a couple times, but it’s not the restful kinda dozing you want when you feel like your life’s been flipped wrong-side up on you. Eventually, when the sunlight outside his window turns to the glow of the street lights and he can hear his neighbors coming home from summer-evening walks and grocery-shopping, he forces himself from between the sheets and wanders around his apartment in his boxer-briefs and not much else.

There’re eight missed calls, five from the office and three from cell phones, and he’s not really surprised that the brunt of them are from Phil. He clears the call list while his stomach twists and deletes the voice mails without listening past the Hey, it’s me on each one. There’re closer to twenty texts, still mostly Phil’s, and he marks them all as read before he tosses the phone onto the couch.
He orders a pizza, but really only eats the pepperoni off the top. He watches a marathon of old CSI episodes and three different late shows before he turns the television off and sits there in the quiet and the dark.

Friday, halfway through a soap opera he’s not really watching and the cold, grease-caked remnants of yesterday’s pizza, his phone chimes with a text message. It’s his first of the day—Phil’s tried to call twice, followed by Darcy, Bruce, and Steve each trying once—and he tips the display up toward him.

**Natasha Romanoff:** Glad to see you’re dealing with this like a mature adult.

Clint snorts and rolls his eyes. He focuses back on the TV, where some bimbo named Nicole is revealing that she slept with her husband’s father so she’d make it into the will (which is kinda disturbing, actually, bimbo-Nicole), but his attention keeps drifting back to the phone.

It’s the first time he’s really stopped to think about it since the ball field. It’s the first time his mind’s switched back to Laufeyson and everything else.

He wipes his greasy fingers on his leg and picks up the phone. *i’m sick.*

**Bullshit. I saw the pizza guy outside your place last night.**

Clint blinks at the phone and—*you came by my place?!!*

*I came to make sure you hadn’t offed yourself. You didn’t pick up when I called. I figured the pizza was the next-best sign.*

*maybe i just need some time off.*

**Then at least talk to someone.** The text comes through fast, almost too fast, and Clint rolls his lips together when he reads it. His fingers drum the side of his phone, trying to work out a response that Natasha’ll understand, but a second text comes through before he figures out just what he wants to say. **People are worried about you. Bruce, Darcy, Stark, Steve, and that’s not even mentioning Phil.**

He snorts. *he’s only worried cause he hasn’t figured out the best way to fire me. yet.*

**Do you even stop to listen to yourself?** her reply demands, and he’s not surprised when another message comes through immediately. **There’s not a person in this office who wouldn’t defend you tooth and nail, Phil most of all.**

On the TV, bimbo-Nicole starts shrilling at her sister-in-law (at least, that’s who Clint thinks the other blonde is), and he raises his eyes to watch a couple seconds of it. A lamp gets thrown, the music crescendos into some horror-movie minor chord, and then the dramatic still-frame of Nicole’s face cuts to a Swiffer commercial. He thumbs the power button on the remote and stares at his reflection in the screen.

*you don’t know that,* he finally texts back to Natasha.

It’s a full minute before she texts him back, the message popping up on his dimmed screen. **You’re the only one who doesn’t know it,** she replies, and he swears for a second he can hear her voice in his ear. **And instead of coming in here and trying to find that out firsthand, you’re hiding.**

*better than finding out that you’re wrong.*
About which part?

all of it, and he wonders if Natasha’ll count the part about Phil—Phil worrying, Phil defending him, Phil not hating him after the end of all this—as part of the all.

But Natasha doesn’t respond right away. The display dims, then darkens, and Clint’s left staring at his dead phone. He wonders if maybe this is Natasha’s way of admitting he’s right, and that there’s really no way outta this mess.

He tries to imagine it, these people he’s only known for a couple months all flocking to defend him. But his mind keeps placing him in an empty room, just him and the disciplinary committee while Laufeyson stands and laughs.

He jumps when his phone chimes. Natasha’s reply simply reads, And even if that’s true, you can’t hide forever.

Clint snorts a little at the display and shakes his head. watch me, he texts back, and he swears he can hear Laufeyson laughing when he turns his phone off.
Unbroken Things

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint tries—with varying degrees of success—to repair the things he's battered, broken, and bruised.

Chapter Notes

This and all subsequent chapters betaed by the lovely Jen.

“Bruce, remind me to tell my decorator that, next time I redo the living room, I wanna go with ‘college hobo chic.’ We’ll use pictures of Barton’s apartment on the inspiration board.”

Stark drops his keys onto the table next to the door and toes off his shoes, completely oblivious to the fact that Clint’s standing in front of him, half-staring. Still mostly in the hallway, Bruce mouths sorry and shakes off his umbrella. The Monday morning torrential downpour is pounding against the windows, and if he listens carefully, Clint can hear the front door to his building rattling.

Without another word, Stark slips past him, his shoulder brushing against Clint’s and the guy clearly not caring. He’s wearing his full suit and these ridiculous round sunglasses that, thanks to the rain, make him look like he’s dodging paparazzi. “Seriously. Are you still secretly in undergrad?” he asks, gesturing around. The paper bag in his one hand swings. “Do those movie posters glow under a black light?”

“Tony,” Bruce says. He leans into the syllable.

“He has an IKEA coffee table, Bruce. I get to judge.”

He drops the bag in the middle of the aforementioned coffee table, abandoning it to head for the bookcase. Clint sighs and shakes his head. He should’ve known from the pounding on his door that he couldn’t chase Stark away, today. He’s ignored a half-dozen knocks since Friday and twice turned off the lights in the living room to avoid Darcy (who’d squatted in the parking lot for most of Sunday, blaring the complete works of Maroon 5 on her car stereo) and whoever else might come by to pry.

That’s what he gets, he thinks, for switching his phone off and keeping it that way. He doesn’t say that, though. No, instead, he steps outta the way to let Bruce in.

“Sorry,” Bruce says, aloud this time, and it’s sincere. In the living room, Stark’s flipping through one of Clint’s old law school textbooks. He sets his jaw to keep from walking over there and snapping it out of his hands. “He told me he was taking me out for breakfast, not—”
“I brought breakfast!” Stark announces. He gestures to the bag on the coffee table, but his eyes are trained down on the book. “All we need is coffee. And, since I’m pretty sure no college dorm is complete without a ready source of caffeine, Barton can make the coffee.”

“Barton,” Clint replies, closing the door, “doesn’t want to make coffee.”

“Fine.” Stark waves a hand. “Bruce can make the coffee.”

“I, uh, don’t know if it’s my place to just go in and—” Bruce stammers. He holds up his hands, like a kid caught dipping into the cookie jar, and Clint realizes that he’s come around to the bookcase, too. There’s a second where he almost finds it funny, the fact that Bruce is secretly as nosy as Stark, but then Stark looks up from his reading.

He raises both eyebrows like his whole face’s made of water. “You don’t want me trying to use your coffee maker,” he says.

“That’s . . . probably true,” Bruce offers with a tiny smile.

Part of Clint wants to refuse, to shout at them to get out and then slam the door behind them, but the rest of Clint knows better. ‘Cause even with the book in his hand, Stark’s still watching him, these careful eyes peering from behind his purple-tinted sunglasses. The longer Clint stands there, the further his one eyebrow quirks.

Kicking them out will only make matters worse, he thinks. Or, worse, it’ll bring Darcy back—this time with the collected works of Ben Folds.

He sighs.

“You’re not staying,” he informs both of them, and his feet slap against the floor as he half-walks, half-storms into the kitchen.

“Of course not,” Stark replies. Clint glances over his shoulder in time to watch the guy shove the textbook at Bruce. He trails along practically on Clint’s heels. “Coffee, doughnuts, an explanation for why you’re acting as though you’re in some kind of polio quarantine—”

“Tony,” Bruce groans.

“—and then we’ll be out of your hair.” Clint narrows his eyes, but Stark just raises his hands. “Honest,” he promises. Clint suspects the next wild gesture is an attempt to cross his heart. “Hope to die, needle-to-eye, whatever.”

The kitchen’s this boxy little room with little counter space and even less room to maneuver, but Stark follows him in, anyway. Clint elbows Stark when he pulls the pot off the burner to fill it with water, and then steps on his toes in an attempt to get the coffee can off the top of the refrigerator. A completely vindictive voice in the back of his head cheers both times.

The rest of him, though, focuses on the task of making coffee. He fishes a filter out of the cabinet, he measures every heaping teaspoon like he’s a scientist curing cancer, and he keeps his head down. The last couple days, he’s perfected the art of making a simple task the center of his universe. This isn’t too different.

He’s shaking the filter to even out the grounds when he says, “Didn’t know there was a rule against taking time off.”

Even without looking at Stark, he can feel the eye roll. “That’s right,” he mocks, and Clint focuses
the whole of his attention on filling up the reservoir with water. “This isn’t about you going crazy incommunicado like you’re on some sort of top-secret black-op thing out of Call of Duty. This is about your allotted number of sick days.”

“I answered the door for you,” he points out.

“After I pounded for two minutes, sure. And with the knowledge that my last name doesn’t rhyme with Bowlson.”

Clint swallows and forces himself to set his jaw into a tight line. Stark needles, he knows. He pokes and prods until he either wakes the sleeping giant or finds out there isn’t one.

He flips on the coffee maker and turns to put the can back on top of the fridge—but when he does, Stark slips in front of him. He’s a half-step from sandwiching Clint between his body and the countertop, and Clint’s about ninety-eight percent sure it’s on purpose.

The certainty rises when Stark reaches up and pulls off his sunglasses. “We’re worried about you,” he says.

Clint snorts a little and shakes his head. “Nothing to worry about here.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” he replies, but he reaches back to leave the coffee can on the counter and . . . slip away.

The living room feels like a sprawling cathedral compared to the kitchen, and Clint pulls in too-big a breath once he’s out there. Bruce’s standing in front of the window, watching the rain and picking apart a chocolate doughnut. He doesn’t look over, and for a second, Clint’s grateful for that.

Until he realizes that, with how dark it is outside, Bruce can see him in the reflection off the glass. He can see the wildness in his eyes, the way he’s breathing a little too hard for ten seconds in the kitchen with Stark—and the fact he swallows around the lump in his throat as he straightens his back.

He’s kept his phone off all weekend because of this, he thinks as he fights away the tightness in his chest. He’s avoided his friends, his colleagues, and Phil all because of this feeling.

This walls-closing-in helplessness of his past creeping up to meet him.

“You keep acting like none of us get this,” Stark says. When Clint looks over his shoulder, the guy’s hanging out in the doorway to the kitchen, his shoulder against the doorjamb. He shrugs, but that’s all he does: he doesn’t come closer, he doesn’t cross his arms, he doesn’t mock. “It’s like you think we’re all gonna judge you. But the thing is, we won’t.” He pauses. “Well, okay. I won’t. Bruce won’t. Natasha probably won’t, but I can’t be sure. She’s got that creepy Russian impossible-to-read thing going on.”

He twirls a hand like it explains what the hell a ‘creepy Russian impossible to read thing’ is, and Clint kinda—snorts. He’s not sure whether it’s in amusement or something else. He turns away to discover that Bruce’s facing into the living room, now, and watching him.

“He’s—right, you know,” Bruce offers quietly. His fingertips touch together, one thumb picking at a hangnail on the other one. “I think everyone in the office . . . understands, in some way. Everyone has something private in their past.”
“Yeah, see?” Stark demands. He snaps his fingers and trails into the room. Clint’s seen this before, Stark’s sudden need for movement, and he pings across the living room like a snapped rubber band. He stops at the bag of doughnuts, picks out one with sprinkles, and then paces to a stop at the far end of the room. “Bruce, he hit the nail on the head, ’cause he’s right: we all have secrets.”

Bruce nods, and Clint thinks there’s maybe the start of a smile pressing at the corners of his lips.

“And some of our secrets have secrets,” Stark continues, biting off a chunk of his doughnut. He smears chocolate frosting on the corner of his mouth. “Hell, some of our secrets’ secrets have—”

“What I think he means,” Bruce interrupts, and Clint’s sure about the smile now, “is that we all have—layers, I think, of things we’re . . . not entirely proud of.”

“That’s what I said!” Stark protests, scowling at Bruce. “Tell him that’s what I said!”

“Says who?” Stark demands. “Says the guy who lied on his bar application. Or did you miss that part of the story?”

“You, what, knocked over a liquor store or something?” He kinda wants to ask how the hell Stark figured that one out already—’cause at this point, Clint’s not even told Phil about where his record came from—but across the living room, the guy’s shrugging like it doesn’t matter. “That’s, like, a nice Saturday afternoon for half the defense attorneys in this country. You want juicy pasts, look at somebody else. Like Bruce!”

Bruce sighs. “Not like Bruce,” he complains, but he doesn’t sound all that annoyed.

“Bruce used to be a doctor. Not,” Stark notes, holding up a finger, “a needle-in-the-butt-cheek doctor, but a thermonuclear something-something physics doctor.” He elbows Bruce in the soft part of his side, and Bruce jerks a little. Clint swears he’s smiling. “Now, he saves children and makes social workers cry on the stand.”

“Still happened.”

Stark flashes Bruce one of those shark-smiles of his, all teeth and laugh-lines, and Bruce just spends a second kinda—rolling his eyes. “You still have chocolate on your face,” he points out, and the grin crumbles as Stark goes right back to thumbing at his mouth. “And as long as we’re on
the subject,” he adds, “Tony used to work at Cramer and March before he started writing wordy briefs that mock the appellant.”

“I am not wordy,” Stark insists, but Clint—

Clint blinks at the two of them. “Cramer and March?” he asks. Stark rubs off the last bit of chocolate while Bruce nods. “The big-name corporate defense firm?”

“Unless there’s another Cramer and March I don’t know about,” Stark returns. He shrugs and tosses the last bite of doughnut into his mouth. “First job outta law school, stayed there for a while, then made the switch.”

“From Cramer and March to the district attorney’s office.” And Clint can’t help how skeptical he sounds, saying it. ‘Cause moving from a firm like that to a middle-tier government job’s a little like leaving your position as a sous chef at a real restaurant to flip burgers at Wendy’s.

(Hey, he’s kinda into those Top Chef shows, okay?)

Stark nods, but it’s not his usual maniacal head-bobbing where you wonder if he’s gonna get whiplash from it. No, it’s softer, like he’s really thinking about what comes next. His eyes settle on Clint for a couple seconds, and he swallows the last bit of doughnut. “Like I said,” he finally replies, “everybody’s got a past they’re not in a hurry to share.”

“Working for Cramer and March isn’t much of a past.”

Stark shrugs. “You’d be surprised,” he replies, and heads over to the coffee table for another doughnut.

For a second, Clint can’t do much else but watch as Stark fishes another sprinkle-coated nightmare of a doughnut outta the bag. He’s pretty sure the soft line of his shoulders and the kinda slump to his posture isn’t intentional, but Clint— He can see it. And he’s pretty sure Bruce can see it too, ‘cause he’s rolling his lips together and looking out the window again like the whole conversation up ‘till now just didn’t happen.

But then, the coffee maker’s sad little electronic beep injects itself into the silence.

“Finally!” Stark announces. He throws up his hands hard enough that sprinkles fly off the doughnut and land on Clint’s rug. “You’re getting a Keurig for Christmas. And not just ‘cause I know it’ll make your boyfriend happy, but because it’ll make me happy.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “You’re assuming a lot right there,” he points out.

He abandons Bruce’s concerned-face and Stark’s—Stark-ness to walk into the kitchen and pour a couple mugs of coffee. His coffee maker’s old and definitely not as fancy as Phil’s, and he ends up thinking more about that than actually filling mugs. ‘Cause this is the longest he’s gone without speaking to Phil since he started at the office, and unlike the other times, this silence feels—big.

Like a chasm instead of just a pause.

After all, Darcy’s camped out in the parking lot, and Natasha’s driven by at least twice. He’s pretty sure that, Sunday afternoon, somebody stopped outside his door for a while but didn’t knock. But none of those people’ve been Phil.

And none of those people’d looked him in the eye on a street corner, asked him for the rest of the truth . . . and gotten lied to.
When he twists to grab the milk outta the fridge (‘cause Bruce always takes milk in his coffee, even when he looks exhausted), Stark’s standing in the doorway. Clint starts a little, almost drops the jug, and shoots the guy a dirty look. “My service too slow?”

“You service does kinda suck, now that you mention it,” he replies, and Clint wonders if it’d add to the shittiness of the whole situation if he punched Stark in the face. He kicks the fridge shut, instead. “But I’m more wondering about the whole ‘running to hide the second I mentioned your boyfriend’ thing.”

“You mention Phil when I pass you in the hallway,” Clint retorts. He watches Bruce’s coffee turn to beige and tries not to think about how tight he’s gripping the carton. “You might as well accuse me of having to pee after you mention him.”

“Like you really use the bathroom for its given purpose after you have Coulson-related private time,” Stark snaps back. Clint puts the milk jug down so hard that the mugs kinda rattle. He stares at the ripples in the coffee as he tries to set his jaw. “No, see, this all goes back to the conversation from Italian Day.”

He caps up the milk and moves to put it away, all without looking at Stark. “Do you index the days you harass people?”

“I screw up, Steve screws up, anybody else screws up, and it’s a bad day at the office. Fury maybe yells once or twice. But, you— It’s different.” Stark’s hand reaches out and catches the door of the fridge as Clint tries to close it. He’s stronger than he looks, and the harder Clint pushes, the more he resists. When Clint finally looks up in anger, ready to glare and shout, Stark’s watching him. It’s even and dark, the practiced look of the heir to a whole lot of money.

For that second, he’s not Assistant District Attorney Tony Stark, but billionaire genius Howard Stark’s son.

Clint lets go of the fridge door. He grabs two of the mugs, one of them Bruce’s, and then slides past Stark. He hears something rattle in the kitchen and knows without looking that Stark’s on his heels.

He hands Bruce his cup without looking back.

“You screw up,” Stark presses, and Clint curls his fingers around his coffee mug, “and Coulson might make a break for it. ‘Cause, of course, relationships are all tied up in what you do at the office and not who you are. The longer you hide out, the more you can avoid that inevitable second where Coulson figures out you’re not hot and competent, just hot, and dumps you so fast that—”

“Do you have a fucking point?” Clint demands. He doesn’t realize he’s turned on Stark until the coffee that sloshes out of his mug burns the side of his hand. He leaves the cup on the edge of the TV stand to stalk over, and—

He realizes as soon as he’s face-to-face with Stark that he actually doesn’t have a plan for what happens next, and he’s pretty sure Stark realizes it, too. ‘Cause the guy raises his cup of coffee and takes the world’s calmest sip.

For the first time, Clint actually wants to punch him.

“My point,” he says with a little shrug, “is that there is a guy who works in our office who actually cares about you. A lot. And instead of admitting that you’ve thoroughly fucked up and fixing this while you still can, you’ve locked yourself in your apartment like somebody who’s just found out
they’ve got the *Walking Dead* zombie virus and doesn’t—”

From his place in front of the window, Bruce says, “Tony,” in a way that’s mostly a sigh.

Stark glances over at him, his lips rolled together in what Clint’s pretty sure is thought. The pause is long enough that he thinks maybe the whole lecture’s *over*, but then he realizes that Stark and Bruce are having some kinda silent conversation.

‘Cause Bruce raises his eyebrows, Stark cocks his head, and they both sort of—nod at each other.

“My point,” Stark says again, leaning to put down the coffee mug, “is that relationships are a lot more than just whether you’re good at your job. They’re more than whether you lied or fucked up or fucked somebody else or whatever sin anybody commits.” He opens his hands. “And the way you’re going to break this one, with the guy who’s so stupid-worried about you that he sent Darcy over here to play ninja-stalker, is by letting a fuck-up turn into a deal-breaker.”

It’s hard, in a way, to ignore *this* version of Tony Stark. There’s no wild hand gestures, no low-level insanity that makes you wonder whether he’s stopped taking whatever medication he *should* be on, and he’s suddenly a—person. He holds Clint’s eyes evenly and intently, and it’s enough to make Clint feel small. Small and shrinking, because when he raises an eyebrow, Clint’s reminded of the couple times he’s watched Steve scold Dot.

But Tony Stark isn’t Phil, he thinks. And he’s not the one who saw Phil’s eyes after Laufeyson paraded his past through Judge Smithe’s chambers.

He can’t say any of that, though, ‘cause the words all catch in the back of his throat. Instead, he rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Lemme guess: you know all this ‘cause Phil came begging you to make it better, right?”

“Oh, for the love of— You know what, Barton? I’m not playing your sorry-sack game today.” Stark closes the distance between them and pokes Clint in the chest. It’s hard enough that it’s almost a one-fingered shove, and it surprises the hell outta him. He takes a step back, his fingers curling into what kinda wants to be a fist, but Stark barely notices. “There is a man in our office who is so fucking in love with you that I swear sometimes he’s had a personality transplant,” he presses. Clint looks away. “And instead of taking advantage of that—which, by the way, is a lot more than a *lot* of us get to have in our lives, in case you missed that memo—you’re hiding in here and hoping that somebody else’ll make the call for you. And I don’t know which call you’re waiting for—Fury firing you, Coulson calling it quits, whatever screwed-up scenario is in your head—but no matter how it turns out, the only person you’re gonna have to blame is *you*.”

He jabs Clint again, and Clint, he—doesn’t move.

“And,” he adds, raising the finger and waving it between them, “when I’m the one showing up to tell you that you’re being an emotionally-stunted asshole?” Clint swears those brown eyes burn when he narrows them. “That’s when you know you have a problem.”

Clint thinks there’s maybe more, another couple lines to the rant, but Stark just—shakes his head. His upper lip is still half-sneering when he steps away. He grabs the bag of doughnuts off the coffee table roughly enough that the paper rips, turns on his heel, and stalks outta the living room. The slam of the door is enough to set your teeth on edge, but all Clint can do is stare at the floor. There’s a yellow sprinkle embedded in the shag of the rug, and somehow, that—turns into the only thing Clint can see.

At least, until a hand touches his shoulder. His throat feels thick, the kinda half-closed that even a
thousand swallows doesn’t fix. He tries anyway, and then raises his chin to meet Bruce’s eyes.

They’re soft, and for a couple seconds, he lets Bruce just—search his face. He rolls his chapped lips together, tips his head a couple centimeters, but he doesn’t say anything. It’s just them and their eye contact in the white-noise rainstorm.

“Tony’s . . . right,” Bruce finally says, and Clint drops his eyes back to that stupid fucking sprinkle. “He, uh, maybe didn’t present it the way I would have, but he—” There’s a pause, and he can hear Bruce pull in a breath. “Everyone we work with cares about you, but Phil . . . I’m not sure any amount of a past would chase him away, Clint.”

“But you don’t know,” Clint retorts. His head comes up without him really meaning it to, and when it does, Bruce is still watching him with those searching eyes. “You don’t know whether this could end my career, or the—rest of it.”

The corners of his lips nudge into what’s gotta be the world’s most rueful smile. “Maybe not,” he replies, shrugging slightly, “but I do know that, if it were me, it’d—take a lot more than a broken past convince me to give up. Be it someone else’s broken past or my own.”

They stand together for longer than Clint thinks maybe either of them means to, Bruce’s hand on his shoulder the first kind contact he’s had since Phil’s hug at the ball field back on Wednesday and Bruce’s nearness . . . comforting, somehow. The rain keeps pouring, the wind rattles the door like it wants to burst in with the rest of the unwelcome guests, and it’s only when someone lays on a horn in the parking lot that Bruce finally says his goodbye. Clint trails to the window just in time to watch the Acura peel out of visitor’s parking at his complex.

It leaves him feeling a lot more alone.

He dumps out the cold coffee in the sink, vacuums the rug until it’s free of loose sprinkles, and then, throws on clothes. His hair’s dripping wet when he ducks into the sad little dry cleaners in the strip mall, and he apologizes a half-dozen times for leaving his suits there for so long. They hang in the back of his car while he’s at the grocery store and Walgreens, and only end up the smallest bit damp as he runs them back into his apartment building that afternoon.

He spends a long time staring at them in his closet and thinking about deal-breakers.

But the next morning, he stops in the middle of straightening out his tie to pull out his phone and text two words:

thanks, tony.

==

Phil’s stock-still and stoic across the conference room table, his shoulders tight and his pen constantly moving, and Clint can’t stop watching him.

The room’s packed with all the detectives who’d investigated Jordan Silva-Riberio’s murder, every one of them sipping coffee out of cheap paper cups that Darcy’d fished out of a break room cabinet. “This is your fault,” she’d complained that morning, thrusting a two-foot long cylinder of the damn things into Clint’s arms and following it up with a packet of napkins.
“’Cause you forgot to order the supplies for the witness meeting?” he’d demanded.

“Because you’re a lying liar who lies, and I’m picking up all your slack,” she’d retorted. When she tossed the plastic bag of stir sticks at him, it’d nearly smacked him in the face. For the first time in recorded history—or at least, in the time Clint’s known her—she’d dressed conservatively in a button-down shirt that only *just* gaps in the front. He knows it gaps ‘cause she’d crossed her arms under her breasts, and everything’d kinda—lifted. Someday, he’d thought, she’ll kill somebody with her curves. “You lied about being sick.”

“Darcy—”

“And about not having piles of dirty sex with Coulson.”

And Clint’d worked for the eye roll, because it’d been that or giving into the sinking feeling in his stomach for the sixth time that morning. “You worry way too much about my sex life.”

“You still lied,” she’d retorted. Her lips—blood red, ‘cause apparently that’s what goes with pale purple shirts—had rolled together into a tight line. “I don’t like liars.”

He’d shifted the crap in his arms around so he could really look at her. Deep down, under her complaining and throwing things, she’d actually seemed . . . hurt. Like maybe the lying’d stung more than she really wanted to admit. “I’m sorry,” he’d said, finally.

“Yeah, well,” she’d replied, shifting her weight from one high-heeled foot to another (and seriously, Darcy in heels should be illegal in pretty much every jurisdiction). She’d reached forward, took the napkins outta his grip, and kinda—patted his hand. “Just don’t do it anymore, okay?”

“Are you my assistant, or my mom?” he’d asked, and she’d battered him in the arm on the way to the conference room.

A lot’s happened in the last couple work days, he thinks as he watches Phil take notes. There’re witness interviews and meetings scheduled pretty much every day for the next two weeks, for one, the calendar cluttered up with names he’s only ever seen on witness affidavits. Like Detective Howlett, who’s scratching his fingers through stubble that’s almost a beard and telling the story of his first interview with Killgrave. Clint’s read Howlett’s reports and affidavits a dozen times, never mind watching the DVD of the three-hour interview. He’s pretty sure he could pick up where Howlett leaves off to take a sip of coffee, but he doesn’t.

He just watches Phil’s pen stop, watches the set of Phil’s jaw when he starts to look up—and how hard the muscles in Phil’s neck work to keep from turning in Clint’s direction.

He’d spent the first hour of the work day in his office, reviewing e-mails and sorting through the thick stack of pink message slips from Darcy, most of which were marked “urgent” and include Wade Wilson’s phone number. He’d gotten a couple e-mails from Wade, too, ones he mostly deletes, but he did answer *yes* to a bold, underlined, italicized *ARE YOU ALIVE* in alternating red and black font.

Then, he’d glanced at his calendar and noticed the witness meetings.

Cue Darcy, the break room, the paper cups, and the apology.

Howlett sets his cup down hard and jumps right back into the story, and Clint presses his lips together as Phil’s pen starts moving again. He’s not talked to Phil all morning, unless you count when they almost ran into each other in the conference room doorway, Phil loaded down with the
Killgrave file and Clint with the carafe of coffee for their visitors. There’d been a suspended moment, right then, their eyes meeting but the whole world stopped, and Clint’d caught the surprise on Phil’s face the second before he’d managed to swallow it away.

‘Cause clearly, Phil hadn’t expected him to be there.

Phil—hadn’t planned on him showing up at all.

Then Phil’d said, “Good morning,” and slipped outta the way, one of the detectives’d offered to help Clint set up the coffee station (selfishly, Clint’d suspected), and they’d fallen into this holding pattern.

Clint watching Phil across the table, and Phil watching everybody else.

Howlett shrugs his shoulders and leans back in his chair ‘till the wood creaks. He’s a short, broad man with a lot of messy dark hair and a tight jaw, and the way he shakes his head radiates disapproval. “Guy’s an asshole,” he offers, and Clint realizes it sounds more like a conclusion than part of the story.

“Howlett opens that door, Phil jokes, and a bunch of the detectives laugh. Howlett’s face twists in something that Clint suspects is his version of a smile. “Unless Laufeyson opens the door, that is.”

“Laufeyson opens that door, I’m bustin’ through it,” Howlett retorts, and Clint hates that Phil’s smile touches the corners of his eyes. It’s the first Phil smile he’s seen since before the motion hearing, and Clint wishes like an idiot that it belonged to him. Howlett rattles his watch, and Clint irrationally hates the sound. “We get a lunch break before we jump into the next line of bullshit?”

Phil casts his eyes in Clint’s direction for a second, and Clint’s stomach jumps—until he realizes Phil’s glancing at the wall clock. He twists around to follow his glance and, sure enough, it’s already after noon. Now that he stops to think about it, they’ve gotten through a lot—the body getting reported, the initial investigation at the scene, chasing down where Jordan was staying—in just a couple hours, and all that’s left of the plate of scones Peggy’d set out are a pile of crumbs.

When he looks back from the clock, Phil’s watching him. It’s careful, with those soft eyes that Clint remembers from the ball field. It only lasts a split second, though, ‘cause then Phil’s capping his pen. “One-thirty okay for everyone?” he asks. “I figure we’ve only got another hour or two before I can let you head out.”

“You say that like you’re awful company,” one of the other detectives jokes, and Clint isn’t sure whether he’s happy or annoyed that Phil laughs at that.

Everybody files outta the conference room in pretty short order, Clint shaking hands and trying to memorize which face goes with which familiar name. He can’t really concentrate the way he wants to, though, ‘cause he keeps looking at Phil. The guy’s gathering up paper cups and tossing them into the garbage, then brushing crumbs into a napkin, and Clint—

Clint’s stomach and chest both hurt, just looking at him.

The last detective slides out and the door drifts sorta half-closed behind him in a way that’s—almost private. The conference room’s in the middle of the office and there’re a lot of people who drift past it, but the in use placard’s on display and Clint thinks, maybe, he can do something.

He’s just not sure what something is.
He swallows and shifts his weight, standing in the doorway and feeling like he’s fifteen again, but Phil’s not looking at him. He’s pretty sure Phil’s purposely not looking at him, actually; he dumps the crumbs off the scone plate, opens the carafe of coffee to see if there’s any left, even shakes the sugar dispenser to even out the level, but he never lifts his head.

So Clint clears his throat. “You wanna—get lunch?” he asks. It’s uneven and clumsy, like his lips and his brain aren’t quite attached.

Phil stops in the middle of twisting the lid back onto the carafe. His shoulders are a tight line under his suit jacket, and Clint can’t help his split-second thought that he’s not actually Phil at all, but Coulson.

And then, Phil says, “No.”

Clint’s not sure what he expected, exactly, but the one syllable, it feels more like a gunshot than a word. His mouth dries out, and swallowing around the lump that’s rising in his throat only makes him feel like choking. He pulls in a breath, but it’s shallow and panicked. “No?” he repeats.

It catches in the back of his throat.

“No,” Phil says, again. It’s simple, like the answer to a kid’s math problem or a question about the time, but then he’s moving. He flows almost like water, leaving the carafe alone to sweep back to the table and pick up the Killgrave file. He holds it in front of him, instead of under his arm, and moves for the door.

Something in Clint’s instincts shove him, and he steps in front of the half-opened door to cut off Phil’s escape route. Phil stops in front of him, his head coming up from where he’d been staring at the carpet. There’s something hard in his eyes that Clint doesn’t like.

“Phil—”

“I need you to move,” he interrupts. His jaw is tight.

Clint forces himself to swallow. “C’mon,” he presses. Phil’s eyes don’t soften. “I just want to—”

“We’re a little past that point, right now.”

It’s sharp and sudden, the way Phil says it, and Clint feels a little like a balloon that’s had its air all emptied out. His jaw works, but not to form words, and somehow that’s all the cue Phil needs. He slips into the space between Clint and the wall, nudges the door open the rest of the way, and steps into the hall.

There’s a second where Clint thinks about letting him go. He thinks maybe this is something he . . . deserves, some punishment he’s earned, like this is all a self-fulfilling prophecy. He lied, he fucked everything up, and this is what he gets.

But then, he thinks about what Tony said in his living room the day before. He thinks about the difference between screw-ups and deal-breakers.

Barry the intern slams into the shred bin in an attempt to get outta Clint’s way, ‘cause Clint flies down the hall after Phil. His shoulders aren’t as tight from behind, and Clint knows from the way he’s walking that he’s holding onto that file for dear life. He catches up to him just outside the guy’s office, and his hand lands firmly on Phil’s shoulder.

Phil jumps and practically whirls on his heel, but Clint’s bastard mouth is already moving.
“I need to talk to you,” he says. It rushes out, the words jumbling into one another. “I need to buy you lunch, and I need to talk to you so this isn’t—isn’t something that ruins what—”

“Ruins?” Phil interrupts, and Clint can see his pulse jump in his throat. “Present-tense?”

Clint forgets what else he was trying to say and just kinda . . . blinks at the guy. “I— What?”

“I’m just surprised that the last five days aren’t actually an enormous ‘fuck you.’”

The words are frigid, too frigid for even Coulson, and for a second, Clint forgets how exactly legs work. Phil shoves his office door open, the closest escape he has, but he doesn’t close the door. It hits the wall and then stutters and stays there, wide open.

Something in Clint’s belly wants to take the hint and run, but the rest of him just sees it as an invitation. “I came back,” he hears himself explaining, but his voice is distant. Like he’s listening to himself from the far end of a tunnel, the words echoing instead of tripping off his tongue. Phil’s circling to the far side of his desk, the bright midday sunlight causing these weird half-shadows on his face, and Clint can’t read his expression. “I needed a couple of days to get my head together, but now I’m here, and if you’ll gimme ten seconds to apologize, maybe we can—”

“You think coming to work and saying ‘sorry’ after almost a week of silence is a—a band-aid?” Phil demands. He slams the file onto his desk hard enough that the whole thing rattles, but that’s not the part Clint flinches at. No, he flinches at Phil’s voice, at the hard edge of anger that radiates through it. He’s heard Phil pissed off before—at Laufeyson, ‘cause who else was worth that kinda anger?—but—

But it’s never been aimed at him.

“You stood in front of me,” Phil continues, his gestures as wide and frantic as Clint’s ever seen, “and told me there was nothing else I needed to know. That there weren’t any other secrets lurking around the corner. And I believed you.”

Something in his voice sticks on the words believed you. Clint looks away, tries to focus on the edge of the desk, but his stomach feels like a stone. He’s not sure how he’s supposed to fight that feeling, right about now.

“But instead of you telling me the truth, instead of you being honest, it all comes out in open court. And not just that you knew Jordan Riberio’s second-cousin twice removed—” The bitterness in his voice is like acid that Clint can feel burning the back of his throat. “—but something that could actually jeopardize the case. That could jeopardize this whole office. Every one of your convictions, every case you’ve tried, because you skipped checking a damn box on—”

“So I was just supposed to come out and tell you?” Clint snaps. He can hear how frayed his voice is, how close the thin strands of control are from breaking, but he can’t help himself. He wants to scream at Phil. He wants to scream, then punch him, and announce all this isn’t worth it. Phil’s judgment, Phil’s anger, it’s all bullshit. He won’t put up with bullshit, he thinks. He’ll split Phil’s lip, and then he’ll walk out the door and properly leave, the way he should’ve when Phil started shouting.

But the problem is, he’s not pissed off at Phil.

He’s pissed off at himself.

“Jesus, what, is that the answer?” he presses, throwing his hands out. “Stand there on the street corner when you were already looking at me like I was a fucking disappointment and say, ‘Hey, by
the way, my bar application’s kinda missing some important information’? Just own up to everything I’ve fucked up and—"

“Yes!” Phil shouts, and it’s a shout. It echoes into the hall, and Clint thinks for a second that maybe they should’ve closed the door for this. “That’s exactly what you should’ve done!”

The thought about the door vanishes into a sneer. “Why’s that?”

“Because I am your boyfriend and I fucking asked!”

It’s the first time Phil’s ever said it like that, said the word boyfriend like they’re teenagers who neck in movie theaters, and Clint wants to sort of—hold onto it. He wants to catch it in his hand, ‘cause it’s a lot of what he’s been waiting for, this relationship to have a name. But he can’t, not now. No, his heart’s racing, and his hands keep balling into fists right now. He can’t calm himself down enough to appreciate that word, to appreciate that it’s in present tense.

What he can do is roll his eyes. “You’re also my boss,” he spits, and it comes out bitter instead of just angry. “Or did Chief Coulson forget that?”

“I am not your boss, Clint,” Phil returns. He points a finger right at Clint, hard enough that his whole arm shakes, but his voice’s lost some of its heat, this time around. It’s low and cold, the kinda voice you’d expect from a snake before it strikes, and it catches Clint in a place that’s half his gut and half his spine. “I have always treated you as an equal. I see you as an equal. And the fact that you use it as an excuse—”

“Cause trying to make good with your damn superior’s an excuse?”

“—for lying to me, it’s . . . It’s . . . ” The word catches in the back of Phil’s throat, and Clint watches him shake his head. It’s hard, almost a jerk more than a shake, and he swallows as soon as he’s finished. “You don’t tell me about your past,” he presses, but it’s a lot rougher-edged than just a second ago, “you don’t tell me about your relationship with Jordan, you don’t tell me the truth when I ask you to trust me—”

“That’s not fair,” Clint interrupts, trying to ignore the way that one sentence feels like a cold knife to his gut.

He can’t, though. Especially since, when Phil looks at him, he feels the knife twist. It digs even deeper when the guys asks, “Then you trust me?”

It’s a bare question, as raw as Phil gets, and Clint should know. Clint’s watched him shudder naked in bed, made him whine the one time he got extra handsy (and he’d loved the whine, don’t get him wrong, but the lazy sex-sated smile afterwards’d been even better), he’s seen Phil Coulson open up in more ways than one. But this is different. This is wide-eyed and waiting.

Clint rolls his lips together. “I . . . ” he starts. The word trips in the back of his throat, and the rest of them won’t follow.

“Do you,” Phil stresses, leaning on every damn word even as he grits them out despite the world’s tightest jaw, “trust me?”

The answer’s yes. Clint knows it is, knows it in the pit of his fucking stomach. It’s why he came back to the office after hiding out, it’s why he chased Phil down the hallway instead of letting him go, and it’s why he clung onto him in the dark of that fucking ball field. He’s not afraid of being stabbed in the back or being lied to.
He’s afraid of being abandoned.

And that’s a lot deeper than just—trust.

He swallows and drops his eyes to the edge of the desk. The sound that comes outta Phil wants to be a laugh, but it’s bitter. Bitter and empty, the kinda sound that hollows out your belly whether you want it to or not.

“And therein lies the problem,” he sneers, and it’s the flintiest fucking thing Clint’s ever heard Phil Coulson say. “Because I’m here, trying to give this three hundred percent of my attention, and you still don’t trust me.”

“It’s not that simple,” Clint retorts. His voice doesn’t sound like his own.

The shadow of Phil’s gesture, wide and angry, tracks across his desk. Clint can’t look at his face, but he can watch the black facsimile of his fingers spread and then contract. “It could be,” he announces, voice rising again, “if you would just give me the chance to prove it instead of—”

“That’s enough,” a steely voice interrupts. Clint jerks toward the doorway almost involuntarily, like he needs the visual. He doesn’t.

He’d know Maria Hill’s voice anywhere.

Hill’s hands are resting on her hips, fingernails digging into the fabric of her perfectly-pressed navy blue suit, and her entire face is tense. Not tight, exactly, and not like she’s gonna yell. No, she mostly looks like a ticked-off English teacher who’s about to smack your fingers with a ruler.

“This isn’t any of your business,” Phil informs her. His tone’s as cold as her expression.

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that,” she returns. “Because generally speaking, when two of my coworkers start screaming at each other so loudly that they can hear it out by the security door, it’s my business.”

Clint’s not sure whether he can stand the disapproval in her voice—’cause it’s there, all right, along with glaring brown eyes that don’t even blink—and ends up turning away. Except turning away means turning toward Phil. He’s still standing behind the desk, the summer sun still at his back. Clint can’t make out every detail of his face, thanks to the sun, but he can see enough.

He looks—tired. Haggard, a little, like he’s been dragged to hell and back.

Clint feels more than a little responsible for that one.

“I mean it’s a personal conversation,” Phil informs Hill once his jaw starts working again, and Clint drops his eyes to the desktop.

“Your definition of ‘conversation’ kind of worries me,” she replies evenly. “Because I’m pretty sure what I just overheard was a knock-down drag-out of a fight.”

He’s not entirely sure, but he thinks the sound that escapes Phil’s lips is a frustrated half-growl. If his stomach didn’t feel like it was eating its way through his body, he might smile. At least, up ‘till the point Phil says, “Barton and I have nothing to fight about.”

‘Cause that feels like another knife to the gut (and when he figures out where Phil’s hiding these
cruelly-cold one-liners, he’s gonna ask to have that part of the guy’s brain removed), enough to catch his next breath and hold it hostage.

But Hill just—laughs.

It’s warm and loud, filling the office like its own kind of shout. When Clint’s head jerks up, he catches actual surprise on Phil’s face. It wins out over the anger and frustration, at least for a second.

The old expression settles like a mask, but Clint thinks he can still see a little confusion creeping around the corners. “What?” he demands.

Hill snorts, and by the time Clint turns to look at her, she’s wiping actual tears out of the corners of her eyes. “Do you listen to yourself when you talk?” she asks. He’s pretty sure the noise behind him is Phil crossing his arms while he rolls his eyes. “Nothing to fight about’? God.” She shakes her head. “Welcome to being in a mature relationship with another consenting adult, Phil. You find shit to fight over, because fighting means the relationship matters.”

Clint’s always been a little afraid of Hill, if he’s honest—she’s that perfect blend of beautiful and terrifying that makes you think she’d shoot you at twenty paces and then whistle while she walks off—but right now, he kinda . . . likes her. He likes her easy half-smile and the honesty in what she’s saying. And it feels for a second like maybe there’s a lot less tension in the room, ‘cause of her.

When he glances back across the desk, Phil’s lips are pressed into a tight line. “Says the divorcée,” he points out, but it’s not actually angry.

“That stopped being an insult about four years ago,” Hill returns easily. Clint thinks he sees the hint of something kinda like amusement crawling its way onto Phil’s face. “Anyway, now that you’re done clawing at one another like teenage frenemies—”

“Darcy should’ve never leant you her copy of Mean Girls.”

“—Fury needs to see Clint.”

The words drop like bricks between them, and Clint— Clint’s got a lot of pride, he does, but he can’t stop his eyes from rising to meet Phil’s. The surprise is back on Phil’s face, but it’s not like when Hill laughed at them. It’s the sort of surprise that settles into worry. He watches the creases dig into Phil’s forehead and around his frown.

He wishes he could press his mouth to those creases and chase them away.

“I’ll send him in a minute,” Phil says evenly. The words are neutral, but in a practiced sort of way. Clint watches the shadows around his Adam’s apple jump and immediately knows how much effort he’s putting into keeping his voice that steady.

He’s not sure whether Hill nods before she leaves, but he hears her heels thud their way along the carpeting. He imagines her disappearing into her own office and shutting the door, because it’s easier than thinking about anything else.

Like the fact Fury wants to see him, a thought Clint—kinda can’t handle, right now.

Or like the fact that he and Phil, they’re alone again.

Phil’s eyes break from his, dipping to the Killgrave file, and Clint watches him press his fingertips
against the folder. He wants to say something, wants to fix the distance between them, but he—
can’t. He’s helpless, his own fingers pressing into his thigh to keep from reaching for Phil.

“Did you even—” Phil starts to say, but he stops. He snorts at himself, shakes his head in this tiny
jerk, and Clint . . .

Clint steps forward. He closes the gap between himself and the desk, between himself and Phil,
and waits. He’s rewarded for it, ‘cause Phil raises his head ‘till their eyes meet again. The anger’s
gone, now, dissipated like steam, and what he sees is just—Phil.

Phil’s eyes, the ones that linger and make him feel warm from his head to toe.

They stand like that for what feels like an hour, watching each other without words or even, Clint
thinks, expressions. There’s no head-shaking, no brow-furrowing, no frowning. It’s just his eyes
and Phil’s, a tunnel through all the bullshit Clint’s spent the last couple days throwing between
them.

Then Phil says, quietly, “I sent you—twenty, thirty text messages. You didn’t reply.”

Clint opens his mouth to retort, to defend himself against that sentence . . . but then he stops. Not
because he’d marked the texts as read but still has them, not because he’d turned off his phone in a
fit of frustration, but because of Phil. Because his face is soft and sad.

He’s sad, and that’s completely on Clint.

He presses his lips together before he swallows, “I know.”

It’s the wrong answer to something that’s not a question, though, and Clint knows it. He knows it
in the way Phil nods to himself, his jaw setting again. He flips the folder open with cold Coulson
efficiency, and for one, bare second, Clint legitimately hates himself.

“You should go meet with Fury,” he says.

Clint can’t decide whether he wants to scream or cry.

But since he doesn’t feel like either’s an option, he says, “Okay,” and forces himself to walk out
the doorway. And through willpower or self-punishment, whatever you wanna call it, he manages
to make it all the way down the hall without looking back once.

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“I should fire your sorry ass without a second thought. You realize that? Fire it right fucking now
and then write the damn disciplinary complaint myself.”

Fury’s giant office kinda reminds Clint of a museum, ‘cause nothing in it ever changes: same
folders on the desk, same art on the wall, same collection of white Suffolk County coffee mugs on
the little drink cart. Gary-the-assistant’d poured Clint a cup of the stuff, handed it to him, and then
rushed back off to—do whatever he does for Fury. But instead of tasting it, Clint just turns the mug
around in his hands.

“I know,” he says quietly, and Fury exhales.
Outside, everything’s extra-green, the gold summer sunlight deepening every color. He’d stood by the window the first time he met with his boss, too, surveying the kids in the park below; now, he kinda wonders whether it’ll be the last time. He thinks he could probably beg to keep his job, promise to drop off the case and make it all right, but he’s not sure what good it’d really do.

Besides, every time he opens his mouth to say something, he remembers the hurt on Phil’s face and in Phil’s voice, and he . . . can’t really fill the silence, after that.

In the glass, he can watch Fury’s blurry reflection shake his head. “You’re a damn good lawyer, Barton,” he says after a couple seconds. The honesty in his voice kinda catches Clint off-guard, and he raises his head. He can’t see Fury’s good eye, but he watches him stare out the window anyway. “The second you walked into that interview, you were my first choice for the job. And even once I knew where you came from, I still wanted you on this team.”

Clint blinks. “You—knew?”

“Not details, but enough.” Fury turns his head enough to look over at Clint. “A lot of people who grow up on that side of town don’t make it outta high school,” he continues, not that Clint really needs the reminder. “I figured that, however you got from there to here, it wasn’t an accident. It takes a lot of hard work and determination to get yourself through undergrad and law school when you come from the best of situations, never mind—”

“It wasn’t as bad as you’re making out.” Clint doesn’t even realize he’s interrupted ‘till he has, and the words kinda—startle him. Not even a full arm’s length away, Fury raises his eyebrows. Clint drops his eyes back to the coffee he’s not drinking. “Don’t get me wrong, it—sucked, out there,” he explains. It’s all quieter than he means it to be. “The school, the kids I ran around with once I figured out normal people didn’t wanna be friends with trailer trash like us, Trick. But it was . . . still enough of a life that I could get my shit together, y’know?”

It’s the first time he’s ever said it like that, like maybe he’s less come outta something and more used it to climb up to where he is, and when he looks up, Fury’s staring out the window again. Figures that the first time he defends his past, it’s to his boss. The boss who’s just threatened to fire him.

Maybe that’s why he never goes near this stuff, he thinks. ‘Cause if he starts talking about it, if he digs through all the pieces of his past and puts them on display, he’s stuck feeling ashamed of them. And he’s—not.

He’s not Thor with the evil-brilliant brother and the family farm back in Wisconsin, and he’s not Phil with the string of older sisters and their broods. He’s not happily married like Steve, or platonically-life-partnered with his assistant like Tony is with Pepper. But he . . .

He cares about Barney. He cared about Trick. And he will always, even when he’s dying, love his parents.

Clint only realizes he’s looked down at his coffee cup again when he pulls his eyes away from it . . . and finds out that Fury’s watching him. Fury’s a hard man, but right in that second, his expression’s soft. Not sympathetic, but—considerate.

Clint pulls in a breath. “If you wanna fire me, sir, you can fire me,” he says, and he tries to pretend like he can’t hear the catch in his own voice. “I deserve that. I just— You should know before you do that my life hasn’t been a disaster. Right now’s a disaster, and a couple places in the past, but not my whole life.”
Fury nods, a little, and presses his lips together. Clint braces himself, his heart crawling its way up his throat, ‘cause he thinks this is *it*. This is the moment he’d tried to avoid by staying in his apartment, this is the one thing almost as bad as Phil dumping him. This, right now, is when he gets fired.

And then, Fury says, “Lucky I said I *should* fire you, not that I was going to.”

There’s a split second, a *half* breath, where Clint thinks this is some kind of—lie. This is his punishment, a couple seconds of teasing before security comes rushing in and drags him outta the office. Fury’s face is calm, almost impossibly neutral, and he doesn’t say anything else. He just watches Clint’s face, his gaze as even as ever, and Clint—

Clint finally swallows around the ball of raw terror in the back of his throat. The only response he can manage stumbles out as, “*Really?*”

And Fury fucking *laughs*. “You think I’d drag you in here and pour you a cup of coffee if I was gonna can your ass? No, after the shit you pulled, I’d do it in the conference room in front of everybody. Teach them *all* a lesson about what happens when you lie.” He shakes his head, still chuckling, and Clint— Clint can’t *quite* force a smile, even when he tries. It’s not even Fury’s reaction that stands on it, either. No, it’s the fact that, job or not, he’s still fucked up everything else.

“You didn’t deserve to have your past paraded around in open court,” Fury’s saying, and Clint realizes after a couple seconds that he hasn’t actually stopped talking. “That was low, even for Laufeyson. And I can’t promise that this office’ll be able to save you from whatever shit he’s got up his sleeve.” Fury glances over at him again. This time, his expression’s harder. “But we’ll try.”

It’s—hard, momentarily, for Clint to come up with a response. He nods dumbly, nods hard enough that his whole body (and the coffee mug) move, but he doesn’t actually know what he wants to *say*. In a way, he’d braced himself for the conversation with Fury more than the conversation with Phil. He’d never expected to leave with his job intact.

He’s not sure what happens next.

But Fury’s still watching him, his eyes level and his face utterly neutral, so Clint swallows. “Thanks, sir,” he says. It sounds distant, but at least it’s a response.

Fury’s lips tighten. “Barton.”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself about calling me ‘sir.’”

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The interview with the detectives lasts another hour or so after lunch. Clint pours himself a cup of coffee, spreads out all his notes and photocopies from the file, and tries to keep up with the conversation, but he—can’t. ‘Cause every time he highlights a missed detail, or scribbles a follow-up question on his legal pad, he glances up.

And every time he glances up, he sees Phil.
Most the time, Phil’s focused. ‘Course he is. He’s the picture of a professional: open file, pile of notes, neat script in that black pen he always fucking uses. His shoulders are relaxed, his face open, and every time one of the detectives cracks a joke, he smiles.

But every once in a while, he glances over, and their eyes meet.

And every time he does, Clint watches his lips press together, his face slide into an expression that’s almost cold, and his head shake.

It happens six or seven times, and every time, Clint hates himself a little more.

He shakes a lotta hands after the meeting, forcing grins and handing out business cards, but then he gets the hell outta there. He leaves the coffee carafes, the paper cups, the stir sticks, the napkins, *everything*, lets them be somebody else’s problem. ‘Cause the conference room feels claustrophobic when it’s just he and Phil, and the hallway, somehow, is even worse.

He thinks his office’ll be better and give him room to breathe, but it’s . . . not. It’s almost oppressively silent, and the emptiness feels like lead weights on his shoulders. He runs his fingers along the fuzzy black pillow on the window ledge, props it up in the corner where window turns to wall, and just—sits.

It takes a long time, maybe longer than he’s proud of, to fish his cell phone outta his pocket. He turns it over in his fingers, catching his reflection in the dark screen every time it flips back around, and tries not to think of the way Phil’d sounded when he brought up the text messages. He tries to imagine if the roles were reversed, how he’d feel if Phil went all radio-silent on him, but he . . . can’t. Not just because he doesn’t think Phil’d ever *do* that, but—

But because he can still see the quiet disappointment on Phil’s face. The hurt caught in the back of his voice.

There’re probably fifty text messages he’s skipped over the last few days, but Clint ignores all the other names on the messaging screen. Bruce, Tony, Darcy, and Natasha are all close to the top, obviously, but *Phil Coulson* is the only name he really sees. There’re entire screens of texts he’s never seen before, and his stomach drops when he realizes how many he actually ignored.

Most are just a couple words, quick-typed requests that he pick up the next call or listen to the messages. But some are longer, and curl into snakes of regret in the pit of Clint’s belly.

Messages like: *Look, I’m not angry or whatever else you think I am. I’m worried about you.*

Or: *Please, Clint, at least let me know you haven’t run away to Tijuana or something.*

And one, time-stamped at three-eighteen Sunday morning: *I miss you.*

He reads the messages once, then a second time, trying to just . . . take them all in. He can hear Phil’s voice in his head while he does—not the angry voice from that morning, but soft, smiling voice he’s used to. The voice he hears in the mornings after he stays over, and the one he hears at night as he crawls into Phil’s bed.

Well, not *hears*.

*Heard.*

He stares at the last message, the *I miss you*, until the screen dims and automatically locks. He stares at the phone even longer.
And when Darcy comes in, an hour after the interviews with the detectives ended, Clint’s . . . still sitting there, on the window ledge, phone in hand.

She’s wearing normal clothes, for once—brown pants, a loose-necked bronze top with a few too many sequins, and beaded flip-flops—and her hair bounces when she skids to a stop. For a couple seconds, she stares him down, her brow crumpling. When she presses her lips together, he thinks he’s in trouble.

He’s sure he’s in trouble when she reaches over and pulls the door shut.

“This isn’t really the day—” he starts to say, shaking his head.

But at the same time, Darcy blurts, “Jane’s pregnant.”

It all kinda happens at once, Darcy’s announcement and Clint’s complaint, and he feels his frown crease his face. She hesitates near the door, her fingers on the back of one of the cheap chairs in front of the desk.

She looks a little like she’s gonna bolt. Luckily, the wild look’s only just made it into her eyes before Clint asks, “What?”

“Jane’s pregnant,” she repeats. Her nails tap a pattern against the chair’s plastic trim.

“As in—gonna have a baby?”

“Yeah.” She nods almost distractedly and then pulls herself away from the chair. She trails through the office, fingertips touching everything—corner of the desk, corner of the file cabinet, Clint’s computer monitor, the wall next to the window ledge—before she comes and stands next to him. Their eyes meet for a couple seconds, Clint sitting there half-stupid while Darcy watches him with careful eyes. But then, he pulls his legs up to sit cross-legged, and she drops onto the ledge a couple inches from his knees. “She just told me,” she reports, playing with one of her jelly bracelets. “I guess she took a bunch of pregnancy tests at lunch.”

Clint opens his mouth, but he can’t think of the right response. He watches Darcy turn her bracelet in a slow circle. “Could be a false-positive,” he suggests.

“Oh.” Her lips roll together, her head vaguely nodding. Clint frowns. He’s seen a lot of Darcy’s moods—her states, really, ’cause her emotions are usually as loud as her clothes—but she’s never been so . . . quiet about something.

She moves onto a second bracelet before he thinks to ask, “Isn’t this an—okay thing?” She glances over at him without lifting her head. “I mean, her and Thor, they’re pretty good together. They’ve got a place, they’ve got good jobs, it’s not like they’re gonna be living out on the street or something.”

Darcy heaves a sigh. It moves her whole body, hair to flip-flops. “I know,” she replies, shrugging. “It’s just—weird. Jane’s been my best friend pretty much since we got paired together as freshmen roommates. We’ve always sort of—followed the same path.” She opens her palm and starts tracing lines with a long fingernail. “Undergrad, job here, she started grad school the term before I started law school—”

“She’s in grad school?” Clint asks, blinking. He wonders whether all the trial assistants have secret second lives. Maybe Peggy Carter’s a spy for the MI-5.
“Yeah. Some physic-astro-something.” Darcy shakes her head. “But we’ve always been working pretty much toward the same thing, you know? Now, she has a hunky boyfriend—”

“Not the word I’d use.”

—and they’re doing the baby thing, and I have . . . school.”

“School’s not the worst thing you could have,” Clint points out quietly. Not quiet ‘cause he’s afraid of stepping on her toes—even like this, half-lost like she is, he knows Darcy can hold her own. But he remembers her thing about how other people see her, and he respects that.

Especially now.

“Yeah, it’s not—that, either.” She waves a hand. It’s almost a flap, like she wants to slap whatever she’s feeling right outta the room. “It’s just weird,” she says again, decisively, and drops her hands into her lap.

“Yeah,” Clint agrees. He watches her for a couple minutes, studies the way she picks at her own fingernail polish but doesn’t say anything else. He wonders if she’s got other friends besides Jane —school friends, neighbors, family she spends lazy Saturdays with. He’s never really bothered to ask.

He’s been too busy hiding from his own damn reflection to worry about other people, he thinks. He shakes his head at himself. He’d worked so hard to be some other person, this—perfect version of Clint Barton who doesn’t fucking exist, that he’d never bothered scratching the surface with the people he cares about.

‘Cause he does care about Darcy. He cares about her and Jane, about Thor and Steve and the rest of the guys in the office, about Pepper and Natasha, about Hill and Fury. He wants to know these people, not just—float around between them.

He wants to actually be a person for them . . . since he’s kinda blown that with Phil.

‘Course, none of that really explains why, a couple minutes later, he shrugs and says, “If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure I’m done having ‘dirty sex’ with Coulson.”

He tries to say it lightly, like he’s already come out the other side of it, but Darcy’s head rockets up. She stares at him, open-lipped and searching his face. It’s almost like she thinks he’s joking.

When he doesn’t say anything, she asks, “Was that a break-up fight?”

He snorts. “Did everybody hear that?”

“They heard it in New Zealand,” she retorts. Her eyes keep searching his face, though, and he finds out too quick that he can’t stand the way she’s looking at him. He tips his head back against the wall. There’s a spider web in the upper-most corner of the window, and he practices staring that down.

When she says, “I’m sorry,” it’s—quiet, almost a whisper. Clint doesn’t really like the quiet—he’s used to loud, brash Darcy—but he forces a little smile, anyway. He’s thinking about either thanking her or changing the subject when she adds, “But, uh . . .”

He drops his eyes down from the ceiling. “But?”

“But if you just broke up, why’s he out leaning against your car?”
Clint jerks his head toward the window so hard, he almost overbalances himself on the ledge. He sticks out a hand, catches himself on his desk chair, and just—stares. ‘Cause six stories down, standing out in the parking lot, is Phil.

Phil, without his suit jacket, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to his elbows. Phil, with an open collar and his head tipped down. Clint can’t see his expression, not from this far up, but his whole body’s slumped and—sad.

Like a marionette with all his strings cut, or the sad part of Pinocchio where you think he’s gonna die instead of be a real boy.

(Shut up, it’s a good movie.)

That sight, though—Phil, in the parking lot, slumped against his car—it sorta lights a fire in Clint’s gut. He moves without even really thinking about it, tugging his suit jacket off the back of his chair as he swings his legs off the window ledge. Darcy’s watching him, this funny little half-smirk on her face. He almost tells her where she can put that smirk . . . ‘till he remembers why she came into his office in the first place.

He stops in the middle of grabbing his bag and jerks back around to face her. His bag swings a little harder than he expects and almost takes out his pencil cup. “Listen,” he says, and serious as he’s trying to sound, he still can’t stop himself from looking out the damn window for Phil. “I know you wanna talk about this Jane thing, but—”

“Are you kidding?” she demands. She hops to her feet and, the second Clint hesitates, starts shoving him around the corner of his desk. “If it’s this or having to make a ‘Clint got dumped’ Pandora station, I’m all for this.”

“Wait.” It takes a lot to dig his heels in enough to slip outta her grip. She punches him in the arm hard enough that he kinda winces, but then he focuses enough to stare her down. “Your Pandora stations are labeled for what’s going on with me?”

Darcy rolls her eyes. “Duh. Didn’t you notice that it’s only John Williams when you’re on the warpath?”

There’re probably a thousand responses Clint should have to all that—mature ones, offended ones, ones that end in him deleting her damn Pandora account altogether—but then she punches him again and says, “Go already!” She’s smiling in a way that actually reaches her eyes, and Clint—He wants to hug her, a little.

Except he knows Phil’s waiting.

He knows Phil’s waiting and that thought propels him down the hallway fast enough that he almost bowls Peggy over. The door to the back stairwell slams against the wall hard enough that it echoes against all the cinderblock, but he drowns it with his footsteps. He takes the stairs in twos or threes when he can, practically leaping onto the landings, ‘cause he doesn’t want to miss Phil.

He doesn’t want Phil thinking that he—didn’t notice. Or worse, that he noticed but didn’t come.

It’s blistering hot outside, a true August day right down to the beating afternoon sun, but Clint just keeps moving. Down the concrete steps, across the drive, and then half-jogging, half-surging across the parking lot.

At least, ‘till Phil looks up.
He raises his head quickly, like he hears Clint coming but isn’t sure what he’s expecting, and the second their eyes meet, Clint forgets how to move. He slows to what’s hardly a jog and then just kinda—stops, right there in the middle of the parking lot. Phil’s eyes are dark and even, and Clint . . . It’s like being pinned down, he thinks. Like being full-body forced to just—slow to a stop.

Phil presses his lips into a tight line. “I figured you’d come out eventually,” he says.

“Yeah,” Clint replies, nodding. Phil breaks his gaze and glances down at his feet, and as much as Clint wants those eyes back on him, it at least allows him to move again. He adjusts his bag on his shoulder and clutches his jacket a little too tight as he moves through the lot.

He wants to say a thousand things. Not just empty apologies that don’t mean anything, but—truth. Truth about how lonely he’s been without Phil, about how much he’s missed him, about the fact he doesn’t wanna break this. But as much as the words well up in his stomach and chest like they’re gonna choke him from within, he can’t say them. They turn to dust the second they get to his tongue.

He’s gonna ruin this by not being able to talk, he thinks. He’s gonna ruin this by wanting instead of acting.

He steps next to Phil and leans back against the car. It’s slow, but there’s enough force that the whole thing kinda rocks. Phil’s looking at the ground, and he’s absolutely still. Like a statue, Clint thinks while he wets his lips.

“I—never got good at this stuff,” he finally says. He keeps it low, steady as he knows how to, but the words still kind of crumble on the back of his tongue. Phil nods, a little, but otherwise doesn’t budge. “It’s like the person I think I’m being and the person I actually am aren’t always the same guy, and I . . . fuck it up that way.”

The tiny snort outta Phil almost gets eaten by the breeze. “God forbid you be you.”

Clint presses his lips together. “There’s a helluva lot wrong with being me,” he points out after a couple seconds.

“Not to me.”

Phil says it like the man Clint knows, in that private, kind voice that Clint’s used to walking up to, and Clint—Clint could love that voice. He could love that voice for the rest of his life, wake up to it every damn day without a single fucking regret.

He could love Phil that way, love him from the second he wakes up ‘till the second he falls asleep at night, and never look back.

It’s the first time he’s thought all that, together. It’s the first time he’s tilted his head to meet Phil’s eyes—Phil’s drowning-eyes, the eyes that Clint sinks into every time they’re alone—and known.

The rush of fear’s followed by a rush of warmth, and Clint . . .

Clint doesn’t know what to do with that.

“We have to talk, Clint,” Phil says quietly. His eyes drop back down to the asphalt. “We talk, or we don’t do this. Because I can’t be with you if I’m always wondering whether you trust me.”

Clint nods, a slow bob of his head that comes with a thousand damning thoughts: thoughts about taking Phil home, about kissing him, about morning coffee and how his face feels with stubble.
He doesn’t want to lose what he’s started to build. Not with Phil.

So he says, “Okay.”

He feels Phil’s eyes on him before he’s able to meet them, like he’s—building up the courage before he dives back in. But when they do look at each other, when he does meet Phil’s eyes, he feels like he’s been jump-started.

He almost misses Phil asking, “To which part?” Clint wants to blame it on the noise of birds or wind in the trees, but he kinda thinks it’s that he can’t stop looking at Phil Coulson.

But since he hears them, he swallows around the thickness in his throat. He pulls in a breath and waits just one second too long, until his lungs burn and he remembers he’s actually alive.

“To trust,” he replies, and he thinks, maybe, the twist at the corner of Phil’s mouth is the start of a smile.
Imperfections

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, there is work to be done, a wound to heal, and an imperfect--and impermanent--peace.

Chapter Notes

This and all subsequent chapters betaed by the lovely Jen.

“It was a Tuesday. Which, yeah, sounds fucking stupid, except the only nights Trick worked late were Saturdays and Tuesdays, and Saturdays were the night that Barney and Trey’s buddy let them sneak into the strip club.”

Phil’s back patio is this sad little clump of broken and chipped red bricks just outside his back door. There’s no cement between them, no uniformity, and Clint’s lawn chair rocks when he leans forward to rest his elbows on his legs. The beer between his fingers is cold, slick with condensation, but he’s not drinking outta it. Not drinking, not looking at Phil, not doing anything but—trying to sort the story in his head.

He’s not sure why they’re here, instead of at some kinda—neutral location. He’d suggested a bar or a pizza place, somewhere they could go their separate ways if it all got ugly. Phil, though, he’d just raised an eyebrow. A room full of strangers? he’d asked, and Clint—

Clint can admit when somebody else has a point. At least, sometimes.

He swings the bottle between his fingers and listens to the sounds of Phil’s little suburban neighborhood. There’s a dog nosing the chain link fence that separates Phil’s yard from the neighbor on the left, and the guy behind is either grilling dinner or sending up smoke signals. The sun’s starting to dim, but it’s not dusk yet; the only artificial light’s the blue-white glow of Phil’s bug zapper. The first time Clint saw it, he’d laughed ‘till his stomach hurt. Now, every time it sizzles, his heart jumps like he’s the one getting shocked.

Next to him, Phil’s lawn chair rocks, too. He wonders how they look to the neighbors, two guys in their slacks and shirts, sleeves rolled up and ties tossed onto the picnic table, each of them with a beer. He’s not sure whether the neighbors’ve ever noticed him before.

He’s sure he’s never thought about it before.

He presses his lips together.
“You gotta understand,” he stresses, still staring at his beer, “I kinda just—ran with Barney. He’s got this thing, you know, this—attitude about life that just sucks people in. He says the moon’s made outta cheese, you believe him. He says he’s got a good time planned? You believe that too.” He shakes his head and watches the shadow of the bottle swing back and forth across the bricks. “I was quieter in school, and I didn’t know how to charm my way outta the bullshit like Barney did, so I followed his lead.”

It’s the frustrating kind of painful, in a way, to think about that stupid, skinny kid he used to be, back then. Not just ‘cause of all this, the mess that’s rushed up to grab him and drag him back down, but ‘cause he doesn’t really think about himself like that anymore. No, Clint thinks he’s a lot stronger than the seventeen-year-old kid who couldn’t say no to his big brother, and who watched his supposed friends play “smear the queer” in the parking lot after school.

Except sometimes, he doesn’t feel much stronger than that kid, either.

Especially not when Phil says, “I can’t really imagine that version of you.”

‘Cause then, he’s gotta snort and shake his head, and try not to spend ten minutes reconciling how the hell Phil’s figured out both sides of him.

“So it’s a Tuesday,” he continues, trying not to lose his place. “And it’s me, Trey—Derek Tracy, Natasha pled him out for a domestic a while back—Trey’s brother Ed, and then Ricky.” He wets his lips. His throat feels like a fucking desert. “Enrique Riberio.”

“Jordan’s father,” Phil says. It’s not a question.

Clint nods. “Yeah.” He tips the beer back and forth with his fingers, sorta swinging it between his knees. When he steals a glance over at Phil, the guy’s just—watching him. His eyes are soft but even, almost—careful. Like he’s waiting for Clint to . . . What, exactly? Run for it? Flinch away? Chicken out and say he can’t do this?

He raises the beer to his lips, takes a long swig, and then lets it dangle between his fingers again. “Ricky and Trick, plus a bunch of other guys at the trailer park, they were—pretty mixed up in some bad shit.” Phil’s lips move like he’s gonna ask a question, but he doesn’t do anything except breathe. “I don’t know with who, or for how long, but we’re talking ‘organized crime’ kinda bad. Trick only ever stayed on the edges of it, Barney too, but Ricky was all the way in.”

Phil nods a little. “He’s on his last strike, isn’t he?” he asks, and it takes Clint a second to remember that Phil’s the chief assistant district attorney, the guy who prosecutes major felonies. He probably knew the kinda family Jordan came from just by his last name. He snorts a little to himself and looks back down at his bottle. “Mandatory twenty-five years for the third felony conviction.”

“Surprised he didn’t get there a lot sooner,” Clint mutters. He thinks maybe he hears the ghost of a laugh next to him, the sort of swallowed sound that means he’s not totally in Phil’s shitty graces. But for some reason, he can’t look up. “We were all out getting high, that night, and— God, I don’t remember who the fuck came up with the idea. Maybe Ricky, maybe Ed. Hell, could’ve been Barney, for all the shit he smoked back then.” He remembers that version of his brother, the first chink in Barney’s shiny silver armor. He’d slaved his ass off at school trying to make good grades in shit like calculus and advanced English composition and come home to a fucking haze of smoke in the trailer. Sometimes, it was just weed, and Clint’d go ahead and join in. Sometimes, he’d walk right back outta the house and spend the next seven hours at the public library, eating chips and peanuts from the vending machine ‘cause it was that or try to make dinner in a meth kitchen.
He feels Phil watching him in the silence, and kinda shakes his head. “They just wanted easy cash, y’know? And it started snowballing outta nowhere: if they had some cash, they could buy some weed. If they had a bunch of cash, they could buy some good weed. If it was really good weed, they could cut it with shit from the kitchen—like, home spices and shit—and sell it at some kinda profit.”

He’s gotta admit, his heart feels a little lighter when Phil asks, “How high were they?”, ‘cause there’s a grin behind it. It warms up every word, and Clint swears he hears a little laugh in the back of his throat, too.

The problem is, ridiculous as the whole thing is to an outsider, it’s not ridiculous to Clint. It’s reality—fucked up and ugly, all the way to its core—and he can’t really laugh about it. No, ‘cause he remembers sitting on those fucked up old bleachers, passing the joint back and forth with Trey, and watching Barney spread his arms like a fucking circus ringleader. He remembers Ricky announcing how they’d sell everything triple and be able to “get in with the guys”—whoever the hell “the guys” were. He can close his eyes, even now, and see Ed rolling up another joint with those fingers that never stopped shaking.

He wets his lips. He wants another drag outta the beer, but he doesn’t trust himself not to gulp the down the whole damn thing.

“Nobody had any cash,” he says. When he glances over at Phil, the tiny hints of the smile that are pushing at his mouth tip down. “And that’s when they decided we should go hit the 7-11.”

Somewhere out in the neighborhood, a car door slams, and the dog next door goes fucking crazy. He races along the fence line, barking loud enough that it echoes all the way down the street. Phil’s neighbor steps out onto his patio and hollers at the damn thing. He waves at Phil politely and then calls the dog inside.

Phil waits ‘till the door’s closed to ask, “They decided?”

Clint snorts. “Like I said, I mostly tagged along.”

“And you didn’t say no?”

It should be an asshole kinda question, one where Clint immediately rolls his eyes and demands whether Phil’s even listening to him, but it’s not. It’s honest, like he really wants to figure out where the Clint he knows now and the Clint that used to exist fifteenish years ago intersect. It’s easy to forget, Clint thinks, that Phil sees him different than everybody else. Or maybe not that Phil sees him different, but just that Phil sees through him.

“Losing my parents, it wasn’t like—Trick wasn’t like a new parent, you know?” He glances over at Phil, catches those too-even, too-honest eyes. “It wasn’t like the kids Bruce gushes about, who get adopted and have this whole second chance at life. We went and lived with him, sure, but Barney was all the family I really had.” He shakes his head. He thinks it’s a loose movement, just a little toss in the darkening evening, but then his chair rocks on the bricks and he realizes just how tense his whole body is. How much his body moves, instead of just his head. “I thought I had to hold onto him.”

“He didn’t understand,” Phil supplies in a tone that kinda suggests maybe he knows how that feels.

“Right.” Clint nods, just the once, and drops his eyes back to the beer bottle. “They figured, 2 a.m. or so, it’d be pretty empty. It was a seedy fucking place to begin with, just one clerk who usually was too busy looking at the dirty magazines to even card you for smokes, so—why not?”
And it’s funny, the shit you remember when you look back, ‘cause some of it’s missing outta Clint’s head. Like the drive over in Ed and Trey’s old pickup truck with the busted-out suspension. Like who decided Clint—Clint, who was still pretty stoned at that point, who practically fell outta the pickup instead of climbing down—should go in first, scope the place out. Like who’d smashed up the windows on their way outta the place.

But when he looks up at Phil again and their eyes meet, the rest of the details are like when you’re five and memorize your first Disney movie: every last one of ‘em comes rushing back.

“There was some older stoner we didn’t know in the place,” he says quietly, and as much as he kinda knows he should, he can’t really look away from Phil, right then. “Just him and the clerk. The floors were dirty and the shelves were cluttered, and it was like a train wreck soon as I got in. I was supposed to do a loop of the place, then come back out and let ‘em know what was going on, but . . . I don’t fucking know what happened. ‘Cause one second, I’m watching the stoner guy try to use the ATM that’s in there, and the next, they’re all just—bum-rushing the damn place.”

Yelling, he remembers, and his stomach kinda knots the more he thinks about it. Barney in first, his low voice booming through the damn place, and then the rest of them on his tail. He can still hear the slap of the stoner hitting the floor, and the jolt of nerves he felt that night, the one he’s never really shaken even after all this time, it grips him all over again. ‘Cause he’d watched Ed, Trey, and Barney rush the counter, all of ‘em broader and taller than the scrawny thirty-something clerk with the stringy ponytail, and demanded he fill a couple sacks full of money.

He’d thought, right then, they might actually beat the shit outta the guy. Trey’d hammered a fist on the counter ‘till everything rattled, and he’d suddenly been sure of it.

“But you know the rule about convenience stores after, like, ten p.m., right?” he asks.

Phil wets his lips, a distracting sliver of pink tongue Clint kinda hates him for. “It’s on pretty much every gas station door in America: no cash over twenty dollars, except in the safe.”

Clint nods. “Right,” he answers. His throat feels dry again, dry and tight, so he steals a couple greedy swallows from his beer bottle. The bug zapper sizzles, but he hardly notices . . . mostly ’cause he feels Phil watching him, eyes on his face and throat. A hard jolt of missing Phil runs through him, and he forces it and the last swallow of beer down into his belly. “The clerk tried to get the safe open, get the cash out,” he continues, trying to forget the panicked look on the guy’s half-sunken face, “but he didn’t have the key or whatever. And the longer it took, the more wound up everybody got. Ed started yelling, Barney kept threatening to beat his head in . . .”

The neck of the beer bottle feels slippery in his unsteady fingers, and he leans forward, setting it on one of the bricks. The smoke-screen from the grilling neighbor is drifting in their direction, thick and heavy with the smell of too-burnt charcoal. Clint swallows thickly and spends a couple seconds trying to chase the ghosts of that night away. But he can still hear the whimpers of the stoner on the floor, still remember how red Ed’s face got the louder he yelled . . .

He knows Phil’s studying his face, but the most he can do is stare out at the yard while he shakes his head.

“I didn’t know Ricky had a gun.”

But he remembers how it flashed silver in the flickering fluorescent lighting of the damn 7-11, and how just the sight of it shut Ed up. He remembers how Trey’d hooted in something that might’ve been fucking excitement—and how not even his voice’d drowned out the sickening metallic click of Ricky pulling the hammer back.
He’d never seen a handgun up close, ‘till that night. Rifles and shotguns, sure, those were all over the fucking trailer park. Hunting knives, switch blades, Trick’s couple hunting crossbows that only really worked ‘cause Clint and Barney took ‘em out and shot at birds, sometimes. But he’d never seen a pistol except on TV.

Ricky’d handled it like a TV criminal, too. A flick of his wrist, and the clerk’d stood up arrow-straight. His hands’d slid away from the safe and into the air, immediate surrender.

He remembers the way Barney’d looked at him across the 7-11, and the tiny jerk of his head toward the door. It’d taken six months before he’d figured out what Barney’d wanted.

‘Cause right then, he’d been frozen with fear.

But in the cold light of day, he’d realized Barney was telling him to get the fuck outta there.

He swallows that memory, tries to force it down to where the beer’s churning in his gut, but his mind ignores him. No, it’s focused in on Barney’s dark eyes and the way his lips’d pressed together, and the set of his jaw when Clint hadn’t moved. He can’t shake that second, that starburst of a moment between them, and—

When Phil touches his wrist, his whole body jerks. The lawn chair tips on the bricks, almost tossing him off his balance, and he kicks the beer bottle over trying to catch himself. It skitters across the patio and ends up in the grass, a wet half-spiral wake behind it.

“Sorry,” he says, dumbly, but Phil—

Phil doesn’t move his hand. His fingers stay there, gentle and cool from holding his own bottle. “You couldn’t have known,” he murmurs.

Clint knows he’s talking about the gun—Phil’s a man of many talents, don’t get him wrong, but he can’t read minds (at least, far as Clint’s aware)—but it’s kinda comforting, all the same. His fingers slide along the sensitive skin on the inside of his wrist, and end up on the heel of his hand, almost in his palm. Not holding on, exactly, but close. “I could’ve guessed,” he replies, his eyes caught on those fingers.

“You were a seventeen-year-old who looked up to his brother and wanted to hang out with the cool kids.” When Clint glances up, there’s a tiny smile touching the corners of Phil’s lips. “You probably would’ve believed he walked on water.”

He snorts. “Gimme a little credit.”

“No.”

It’s light, instead of cold, and Clint— In a weird way, he kinda wants to smile, too, even when he’s shaking his head. But his eyes drift back to Phil’s fingers, and the way he doesn’t retract them even when Clint’s thumb brushes the side of his hand. “I don’t know what happened up front, after that,” he admits quietly. “I don’t know if Ricky and the guys figured out they weren’t gonna get the cash or if something spooked them, but all of a sudden . . . ” He shakes his head, trying to clear the haze away from the edges of the memory. “He shot out one of the windows, then Trey threw a postcard rack through the other one, and we just kinda—ran for it.”

He’d felt sick, the stoner guy screaming while the emergency alarm, probably triggered by the stupid fucking broken window, shrieked through the air. The glass’d crunched under his sneakers as he’d raced out to the truck. Ed’d already started pulling away by the time he ran up, and Barney’d caught him by the arm and kinda half-swung him into the truck bed with him and Trey.
Ricky’d fired shots into the dark as they left, thunder claps of sound that’d hurt Clint’s head. He’d thrown up over the tailgate and blamed the weed, but he remembers how Barney’d looked at him after he was done.

“How long did it take?” Phil asks after a couple seconds. “For what?”

“To find you.”

Clint snorts half a laugh and kinda—rolls his eyes, but not ‘cause it’s funny. No, it’s a bitter fucking sound he hates himself for. “Maybe three hours,” he replies, and his shoulders lift in some kinda shrug. “What were we gonna do? I had school in the morning, the guys had work. We went back to the trailer Trey and Ed stayed in with their buddy and tried to sober up, but the cops knew where to find high kids from the ‘park.”

“And they arrested all of you.”

“Yeah,” he answers. He nods, a little, but the problem with getting picked up is that it’s another blurry half-memory in the back of his head, muddled from weed and time. Weed, time, and how fucking sick he’d felt even after he threw up, terrified and self-loathing ‘cause—

‘Cause when Barney and the guys’d kicked the shit outta people at school, he’d always kinda told ‘em to stop. When Barney figured out he kinda had a thing for a pretty dweeby kid in his calculus class, he’d shouted Barney down hard enough that Barney stopped coming around the high school just to fuck with him. He’d been like Jiminy Cricket, the voice of the kinda-sane in all the insanity, and—

And then he’d gone to the 7-11 with the four of them, and fucked up his whole life.

“I knew it then,” he says, and he kinda doesn’t realize the words are floating between him and Phil ‘till Phil’s fingers move against his hand. He blinks at them and then looks over, surprised by the little caught look on Phil’s face. It’s subtle, just raised eyebrows and pursed lips, but Clint knows that look. He’s seen it in court and in bed, and this—

It’s different, but it’s kinda the same, too.

He swallows. “That morning, before the cops came, I knew I’d fucked it up. I knew I’d blown my chance at getting out of the ‘park and being something bigger than the fucking nightmare I came from. The guys sat around drinking skunky instant coffee and I just kinda—sat there, the whole time, like I was waiting for the executioner."

“You didn’t get executed,” Phil points out, but it’s soft. Quiet, like that Phil-voice that only belongs to Clint. “You pled nolo contendre. Your sentences were pretty light.”

“‘Cause of Barney. I mean, I knew he took a deal, too, but . . .” He shakes his head. His thumb keeps drifting against the side of Phil’s hand, this stupid distracted motion. He can’t stop it ‘till Phil shifts like he’s gonna take his hand away . . . and then links their fingers. It’s loose, no desperate teenage hand-clutch, but it’s the most contact Clint’s had in days. He squeezes Phil’s hand like it’s a lifeline, and he’s a little surprised when Phil squeezes back. “Before you showed up the other night, he told me that he pled to—save my hide. He knew that I wouldn’t get off unless somebody backed me up, and he kinda . . . threw the guys under the bus to do it.” And he can’t shake the anger in Barney’s eyes that night—or the hurt that hid under it. “And, I mean, it’s good that the Tracy brothers have short damn memories and that Ricky and Anissa got pregnant pretty much as
soon as Ricky got out, ‘cause otherwise . . .”

Otherwise, he might not have a brother right now.

And pissed off as he still is at Barney, as much as he wants to punch his knuckles raw on Barney’s face even right now, he—doesn’t like the thought of a world without his brother, either.

“He did what an older brother’s supposed to do,” Phil says softly.

“He saved my life,” and it surprises Clint how much he believes that.

They sit like that for a long time, the sky turning from that weird sorta summer pink color to a dark purple-blue that settles over everything. The neighbor with the smoky grill wanders inside, the nosy dog trots back out for a pee, and Clint watches as fireflies start popping out from the grass. One lands on the tipped-over beer bottle. Clint thinks about standing the thing up and giving him a higher vantage point to flash from, but he’d have to let go of Phil’s hand.

He doesn’t wanna risk that. Not right now.

He’s still watching the firefly’s dim yellow-green glow when Phil says, “In the interest of full disclosure, that day in Judge Smithe’s chambers? It . . . wasn’t the first time I saw your expungement record.”

It’s quiet, almost cautious, and Clint can kinda see why. ‘Cause after the first half-second, after he recognizes the words coming out of Phil’s mouth, his whole body jerks to look at the guy. It rocks the lawn chair hard enough that he almost tugs both of them over.

He—wants to be pissed, he really does, he wants to scream about how Phil could’ve known and never said a fucking word, but his brain feels like it’s been greased. He can’t hold onto a single thought.

At least, not beyond, “You what?”

“I make it a habit to run the last names of our new hires through the state criminal database. Not,” he says, holding up a hand, “because I think everyone on staff has a record. I just—like to know about potential conflicts before they arise.” He shrugs slightly. “Your name came up along with your brother’s.”

It takes a while, somehow, to sort of—reassemble the words that’re rattling around in Clint’s head. Every time he opens his mouth, his breath catches, and he finds out the hard way that he can’t force out any sound.

Phil bends down, picks up his own beer bottle, and takes a sip. It’s precise, not thirsty. Like he wants to kill time.

Clint mirrors his swallow. “You knew.”

“Not the details,” Phil assures him, the bottle still dangling from his fingertips. “Just that you—had a history. And I never suspected that you hadn’t declared it on your bar application.” Clint watches him roll his lips together. “I thought you’d say something when you were ready to.”

Clint nods, a little, but then he can’t really look at Phil anymore. His gaze drifts out into the shadowed yard, and he studies the darkness. It’s quiet in that suburban, comfortable way, no loud music thrumming from someone’s weeknight house party, no distant noises that might be gunshots. Just this, Phil breathing in the chair next to him and the bug zapper sizzling occasionally.
He wonders what the teenaged version of himself would’ve thought about this. About sitting on a lawn chair, uneven bricks making him feel forever off-balance, with a guy he cared about close enough to touch.

The teenaged Clint wouldn’t’ve believed it was even possible. This Clint, he’s—still not always sure.

He’s still looking into the yard when he says, “You didn’t say anything.”

“No,” Phil admits, and Clint can’t help the way his head tips. He takes in every millimeter of Phil’s expression: the warmth in his face, the depth of the creases he’s memorized, the way his lips press together and then release.

The need to be close to him feels like a shock of electricity running through his whole body.

“What?”

“Because it didn’t change anything. Even after I started—” And there’s this pause when Phil’s eyes tip down to the bricks. He pulls in a breath and shakes his head, like chasing something away. Clint wonders how many times Phil’s watched him do the exact same thing. He thumbs the lip of the beer bottle, and his lips curl into a beautiful, private smile. “It never affected how I felt.”

Clint wonders, in that moment, whether falling in love is supposed to feel like this, a slow sinking until everything inside, outside, and around you is just—warmth. He’s not entirely sure it is.

But he’s not sure he ever wants to fall in love a different way.

He realizes after he says, “I’m sorry”—aloud and present, clear as a bell in the darkness—that he’s never meant two words more.

The lines around Phil’s eyes crinkle in a way that kinda takes Clint’s breath away. “I believe you,” he murmurs, and the only thing warmer than the welling-up in Clint’s belly is the way Phil kisses him in the dark.

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He wants to say a hundred things that night, words that are building up inside him like a rising tide every time he gasps against Phil’s mouth or rolls his hips, every time Phil presses hard and deep with one of those delicious little grunts in the back of his throat—but he doesn’t. He doesn’t know how to use those words. He’s never really figured them out, and he’s not sure tonight’s the night to start.

But he fists the sheets to keep from bruising Phil’s arms and moans in a way that’s almost crying out, and every time he forces his eyes away from Phil’s flushed chest and strong shoulders, Phil’s watching him.

Even and soft, steady and sure.

Clint doesn’t use any of the words, but he thinks Phil knows all of them, anyway.
They find a peace, after that night. Clint’s not sure where it comes from, if he’s honest; it’s not really there when he wakes up the next morning, face in the back of Phil’s neck and both of them still smelling like sweat and sex, but somewhere between the shower and hazelnut coffee outta the Keurig, it kinda starts to—materialize.

Natasha raises her eyebrows when Clint shows up to work in the same shirt as the day before. Tony walks into Clint’s office, raises his hand for a high-five, and then walks away. Bruce flashes him a half-dozen quiet smiles, Darcy voluntarily brings him fresh coffee, and—in the most disturbing moment of the year—Hill winks when they pass one another in the stairwell.

When Clint reports this to Phil over lunch, the guy laughs ‘till he’s almost crying.

Judge Smithe schedules the pre-trial status conference for the last week in August, but there’re a thousand things to do in the meantime. Clint spends hours a day talking to detectives and doctors, psychologists and social workers, and just about everybody in between, trying to piece together the last days and weeks of Jordan Silva-Riberio. The day Anissa calls for an update, he’s in Phil’s office, and they talk to her on speakerphone. She sounds worn-down and helpless, worse than on that day outside the conference room. The tiny phone speaker only amplifies all the fear and sadness in her voice, and it’s hard to hear. He sits quietly in Phil’s office for a long time afterward, listening to Phil type without really saying anything.

It’s tougher to swallow everything he feels about Anissa and Jordan, now that Phil knows the whole story.

That night, when the baseball game they’re half-watching switches to a commercial and Phil starts flipping through another page of case notes, Clint remarks, “I don’t think she’ll be able to handle a not-guilty verdict.”

Phil’s eyes flick up from his legal pad. There’s an edge of caution to them, almost like he’s weighing all the options before he speaks. “Anissa?” he asks. His head bobs along with Clint’s nod. “And what about you?”

“Me?”

“Can you handle a not-guilty verdict?”

If Clint didn’t know Phil’s voice, if he wasn’t used to the peaks and valleys of his inflection, he’d maybe think it was just another neutral question in Coulson’s damn arsenal of the things. But Clint hears the quiet worry twisting in the words, notices the way Phil presses his lips together a little tighter once the question’s asked.

He forces a little smile. “You don’t gotta worry about me,” he replies, shrugging. “I already know he’s gonna be guilty.”

He knows Phil’s still watching him when he looks back at the TV; he can feel the guy’s eyes searching his face and then surveying his body language. He taps his fingers against his knee like he’s waiting for the damn pitcher to throw something.

“That wasn’t an answer,” Phil points out somewhere around the second strike.

“I know,” Clint says, and he knows from Phil’s silence that it’s all the answer he needs.
It’s not an easy peace, he thinks the next day, not with the trial closing in fast and a thousand tasks laid out in front of them. It’s not quiet, unless you count the day that Darcy’s outta the office for “personal reasons” (taking a freaked-out Jane to the doctor, she explains later), it’s not perfect, but it’s theirs. And Clint, he’s—okay with that. Actually, he’s pretty sure he wouldn’t know what to do with perfect even if it walked up and bit him.

(When they all get together one sweltering August night for Peggy’s birthday party, Dot actually walks up and bites him while she’s pretending to be Rainbow Dash the pony dinosaur, and they all kinda laugh about it. Turns out that “Uncle Bruce” took her to the museum and taught her about how dinosaurs had feathers like birds—and Pegasus ponies. Bruce turns kinda pink at the “uncle” part, but Tony looks pleased as fuck. Later, he admits he’s spent the last month teaching Dot to call Bruce “uncle.”

Like Clint said: it’s peace, just . . . imperfect.)

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“This is your ‘congratulations on not sucking anymore and I’m glad we’re talking again’ pillow,” Wade Wilson announces on a sticky-humid Thursday.

Sticky-humid and exhausting, if you ask Clint. Clint, who’s been locked in his office since eight-thirty that morning, mainlining coffee and scribbling out questions for Detective Howlett’s direct examination. Clint, whose head’s swimming when he looks up, and who swears he can see his own chicken-scratch handwriting floating in his vision once he does. He really needs to cut back on the coffee.

He presses the butts of his hands to his eyes. “My what?” he asks, like maybe Wade’s a caffeine-induced hallucination.

Hallucination or not, the guy heaves a sigh that sounds like it rocks his whole damn body. “This is your ‘we’re awesome friends and I know you love me’ pillow,” he explains, and Clint pulls his hands away from his eyes. ‘Cause sure enough, Wade Wilson is standing in the doorway to his office, dressed in worn-out tweedy brown pants and a wrinkled white dress shirt. His tie and his jacket are clearly somewhere else, but he’s otherwise dressed for work, right down to the bare patches on the toes of his cheap loafers. But Wade’s awful choice in clothing isn’t what Clint’s staring at.

Nope.

Clint’s staring at the enormous, overstuffed throw-pillow Wade’s holding out in front of him.

Enormous, overstuffed, hot pink throw-pillow. With long pink fringe, all the way around.

He sighs and rubs his eyes again, but the damn pillow’s still there when he stops. “How’d you even get in here?” he asks. Right now, it’s the only safe question.

Wade jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “I texted Darce from the hallway.”

“Darce?”

“Yeah. Y’know. Darce. Darce-jeeling tea. The Darceinator.” Wade slouches, pillow and all, and Clint realizes that he looks—disappointed. Like something in whatever crazy scheme he’d cooked
up on his way over to the courthouse just went horribly wrong. He watches Wade worry his bottom lip for a second, almost like he’s considering something. Then, he asks, “Don’t you want my pillow?”

It’s—tentative, kinda, like he’s raised up on tip-toes and trying not to make a sound. They’ve texted a little since Clint came outta hiding—mostly about bad TV and worse music—and Wade’s sent him a couple e-mails filled with those captioned pictures of cats, but that’s been about it. Like normal, Clint’d thought . . . up ‘till right now.

Except he’d kinda dropped off the grid for a week, he remembers all of a sudden. And he never really explained why to anybody besides Phil.

He watches Wade for a couple extra seconds. He’s still hovering, sorta rocking back and forth on his heels like he’s waiting for something.

Clint leans back in his chair. “Thought it was my pillow,” he retorts. And it’s hard, in a way, to say it with a straight face, ‘cause he kinda wants to grin, instead.

He leaves the grin to Wade. ‘Cause it shoots across his face, all teeth and wild eyes, even if it only lasts a second. Wade knows the rules of this game, Clint’s pretty sure, knows how this whole friendship of theirs is set up. He forces his whole face into this tight, serious mask that Clint knows he can’t really hold. “It’s gonna be nobody’s pillow if you don’t admit that you missed me,” he says. He pulls the hot pink eyesore in against his chest. “And promise to have a beer with me. And officially accept Captain Jack Sparrow as your personal lord and savior.”

Clint can’t help the snort that bursts outta him. He tries to swallow it down, hold it in, but it just kinda—pops out. “You’re asking a lot,” he points out.


This time, Clint’s frown is genuine. He feels his brow tighten, and he sorta—stares at Wade. “My—what?” he asks, ‘cause he’s pretty sure he heard that wrong.

“Your nest. You know. Where you sit and do your thinky thinking.” Wade gestures kinda vaguely around the office, and it takes Clint a second to realize all the hand-flaps are focused on the window ledge behind him. There’re only the two pillows from Phil there, both of them sorta sloppily stacked in the corner. He’s pretty sure nobody on earth except Wade Wilson’d call it a nest. “And where you write brilliant arguments that could probably beat mine, which is why I’m glad that, right now, I’m only ever up against Thor and my future wife, Natasha Wilson-Romanoff.”

“Wilson-Romanoff?”

“It’s the twenty-first century. I’ll take her last name. Now quiet, you’re running my monologue.” He clears his throat like he’s in the middle of some big political speech, and Clint rolls his eyes. “And the nest is where you and Coulson had sweaty funky awesome office s—”

“Okay, no,” Clint interrupts, and snaps to sitting up so fast that his chair rattles. Wade’s mouth starts to move, so he holds up both his hands. “Do not finish that sentence.”

“I’m just saying. It looked hot.”

He definitely doesn’t like the way Wade snaps the t into a tiny explosion. It kinda makes the word sound three times dirtier than it should. The eyebrow-waggle doesn’t really help, either. “This is the sixth floor,” Clint reminds him tightly, ‘cause— Well, ‘cause who really wants to think about
Wade Wilson spying on private moments, okay? “You couldn’t’ve seen anything, hot or not.”

Wade’s face bursts into a huge fucking grin. “But it happened,” he returns.

There’s a whole lot of plausible deniability right at Clint’s fingertips, and he knows it. He knows Wade’s just trying to fuck with him, just—crawling under his skin with his nosy bullshit questions that don’t ever go anywhere. But the thing about Wade, the thing he likes about the guy, is that it’s all bullshit. ‘Cause Tony, Natasha, even Bruce, they’ll all pick and pry, peeling at the armor ‘till either they pull it off or Clint goes ahead and undoes it for them.

When Clint tells Wade to knock it off, Wade always does.

He leans back in his chair again. “Hey, like you told me a long time ago,” he replies, shrugging. “Yolo.”

There’s this suspended half-second between them where Clint swears to fuck that Wade’s surprised. His eyes widen, he blinks twice, and when he laughs—Well, it’s loud. Loud enough that Darcy’s head pops up over the top of her cubicle, just to check it out. Clint waves her off. “I don’t know who this new-and-improved badass new guy is,” Wade decides once all the noise’s been downgraded to maniacal grinning, “but I like him. A lot. Maybe enough to have his sandy-blonde haired—”

“No,” Clint interjects, ‘cause he knows the way that sentence ends.

Wade’s grin instantly crumples into what’s gotta be the world’s biggest puppy-dog pout. If he ever ends up with somebody (‘cause it sure as hell’s not gonna be Natasha), Clint’s pretty sure he’ll never lose an argument. Not with a pout like that.

His lip’s stuck out so far, it turns, “Not even one?” into a muddy mumble.

Clint shakes his head. “Not even one.”

The problem with Wade, though, is that he can’t hold onto the pout. Clint watches the corners of his lips start to tip up and some of the warmth return to his eyes, and he’s reminded all of a sudden that he likes Wade Wilson’s brand of crazy. He likes sno cones and wonton towers (even if he still doesn’t know what’s in them), he likes that the guy never takes himself too seriously, and he likes that Wade cares.

He feels a little like he needs to pay more attention to the people who care about him.

Wade’s still fighting off the grin when he says, “I missed you.”

It kinda surprises Clint how warm and real it is, in the middle of all the screwing around. He forces himself to hold the straight face, to keep playing the stern, serious assistant district attorney to Wade’s crazy.

He knows the warmth’s in his eyes and voice when he says, “The feeling’s maybe a little mutual.”

And after he finishes laughing at how hard Wade whips the stupid pink pillow at his head, he adds it to his pile.

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The pretrial status conference is held on a Tuesday so humid that walking up the back steps into the building leaves Clint feeling like he’s taken a sweat bath. The conference’s first thing in the morning, and even though he’s not technically late, he’s already annoyed: at traffic, at the woman who parked so crooked that she took up two spots out in the lot, at whatever bullshit Laufeyson’s planning for the conference. But when he makes it through the double doors of the employees-only entrance, he finds out that Phil’s waiting for him outside their back stairwell. Instead of a hello, he offers up an extra-large coffee from the cafeteria, and Clint can’t stop himself from kissing the man as he walks through the door. They end up standing in the cool almost-dark of the stairwell, surrounded by cinderblock and steel, splitting the coffee while they try to predict Laufeyson’s next evil plan.

Except Laufeyson’s normal bullshit is completely absent from the conference. Clint spends the whole time watching the guy, convinced he’s plotting something, but there’s—nothing, not even a snake-oil salesman smile from the guy. For the first time since he glided into Killgrave’s first appearance, Laufeyson agrees to everything: the trial date, the size of the jury pool, the number of witnesses, the due date for exhibit lists. Next to him, Killgrave’s stone silent and just as cold, but he never says a damn word.

At one point, Phil glances over at Clint and raises an eyebrow. When Clint lifts a shoulder, Phil mirrors the gesture. Whatever the hell’s going on, it’s a mystery to just about everybody.

Judge Smithe adjourns the court in a record half-hour . . . though not before throwing in a jab about, “Nice to see everyone getting along so well, today.” Clint stands up to start putting their file back together—they’d pulled out everything Laufeyson might bitch about, just in case—when he notices that Thor’s standing in the back of the gallery. He’s in his shirt and tie but no jacket, his hair pulled back into a ponytail, and his enormous arms are crossed over his broad chest. Clint almost dismisses it altogether ‘till he turns and realizes Laufeyson’s frozen at the defense table.

The brothers spend a long, tense couple seconds staring each other down, neither of them moving. One of Laufeyson’s associates mutters something to him, but the guy doesn’t respond. No, ‘cause responding’d mean abandoning whatever mind-game he’s playing with Thor. No way in hell that’s happening.

But then, outta nowhere, Thor . . . smiles. It’s not a smirk, it’s not shit-eating; it’s an actual, genuine smile, wide and warm and carrying through his whole face.

At the defense table, Laufeyson rolls his eyes. He tosses his head, shouts for the associate who’s still scrambling to reassemble his briefcase, and storms outta the courtroom in the usual swirl of jacket.

Later that afternoon, after Clint’s spent a long time wondering whether he’s not the only person who’s learned a couple lessons from all this, Thor kinda . . . appears in his doorway. Clint’s not sure where exactly he came from, ‘cause one second there’s nobody there, and then, the next, there’s a whole body filling up the space. Clint glances up from the notes he’s scribbling. “Natasha drew the long straw,” he says, holding up his hands. “The crazy ‘ran over a stop sign and won’t own to it’ case’s all you.”

Thor’s lips press together into a tight line. “I know not what you’re referring to,” he replies.

“The couple new cases, the ones set for the same week as the Killgrave trial?” Thor keeps staring at him blankly, meaning it’s Clint’s turn to frown. “I left a stack of folders on your desk.”
“I have not been to my desk since before lunch.”

“Oh.” And Clint can feel his brow tighten, ‘cause he’s not entirely sure what’s going on if Thor’s not here about—

“You did not deserve what Loki put you through,” he says after a couple seconds. It’s tight, tighter than Clint expects, like every word’s being forced out through gritted teeth. Thor’s eyes sweep across the office, but they never really settle. “After the events, those few weeks ago, I spoke to my brother. I wanted to assure you that he will no longer rely on underhanded trickery in this case.”

He says it solemnly, like he’s leading somebody to his death, and Clint— He can feel how hard Thor believes what he’s saying. He tries to imagine, for a couple seconds, how that conversation must’ve gone. They’re totally different people and don’t even have the usual “but we’re blood” fallback to rely on. Honestly, he can’t really imagine them at the same damn table for Thanksgiving dinner, let alone clawing their way through the kinda conversation Thor’s talking about.

And then, something occurs to him outta nowhere. His lips quirk into a funny little expression that might technically be a smirk. “You threatened to punch him again, didn’t you?”

Thor’s mouth nudges up into what just might be a microscopic smile. “Perhaps,” he replies, and Clint can’t help but grin right back.

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“You look happy, lately,” Natasha remarks later that same week.

Clint nearly jumps outta his skin when she says it. She’s right behind his shoulder, close enough that they’re almost touching, but he didn’t hear her come in. Then again, he’s up to his elbows in coffee-soaked paper towels. When he pauses to glance at her, a couple errant drops roll off the edge of the counter.

She raises an eyebrow.

“Not my fault,” he reports, and it’s not technically a lie. Yeah, okay, maybe the coffee pot slipped a little while he was filling his mug and that’s how the counter got covered. But, in his defense, Phil’d come into the break room.

Come in behind him, pressed hands to his hips, and breathed against the shell of his ear. There might’ve been words along with it, but Clint can’t quite remember. No, he’d been leeching heat and trying not to focus too hard about how Phil’s hands’d felt on his hips the night before, how Phil’s lips hadn’t left the back of his shoulders, how Phil sounded when—

“Clint,” Natasha says, and he blinks back into reality. Dammit, ten seconds of contact from Phil and his mind’s in a whole different zip code. Never mind the state of his slacks.

He runs a fresh paper towel along the edge of the counter. “Sorry,” he mutters, but he doesn’t really mean it. “Case keeps me distracted.”

“I’m pretty sure what’s keeping you distracted at least starts with a C,” she replies casually. Clint batters his hand on the wall on his way to throwing the used towels away, ‘cause he’s gaping at
her. The corners of her lips tilt into this shitty little smile as she reaches for the coffee pot. “But like I said,” she continues, “you look happy.”

“You own a shirt that isn’t red,” he replies. He drops the wad into the trash while she stops and frowns at him. “What? As long as we’re stating the obvious.”

Natasha rolls her eyes with expert disinterest and returns to pouring her coffee. Her shirt isn’t red today, but a kind of beige color that’s almost peach. She looks paler and fairer in the color, even if the severe black skirt and killer heels kinda run counter to it. “Next time I decide to compliment you, remind me not to.”

“Done.” He leans his hip against the counter and watches her settle the pot back on the burner. She’s shaking a sugar packet when he adds, “I am, you know.”

“Are?”

“Happy.” He tries to say it casually, with a shrug and everything, but Natasha freezes like somebody just dropped ice down the back of her shirt. Her fingernails grip the packet, ready to rip, but she doesn’t budge. “Happier,” he amends. She keeps staring. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” she returns, and kinda snaps her head back and forth like she’s trying to clear cobwebs. “I just wasn’t expecting you to admit it.”

“Then what were you expecting?”

“Just your usual existential angst.”

Clint figures he’s supposed to be better than blind sputtering, but he isn’t. At least, not right away. He stands there, staring at her back, and watches her dump the sugar into her mug. She doesn’t bother stirring it, just reaches for the canister of crusty powdered creamer that nobody else in the office touches. Seriously, Tony keeps them in actual half-and-half, and she’s shaking up the plastic thing like it’s the ashes of Jesus or something.

“One of these days,” he says after his voice comes back, “I’m gonna switch out that stuff for Metamucil, and then you’re really gonna be—”

“I wasn’t saying it to insult you, Clint,” she interrupts. She caps up the canister with a perfect little snap and then glances over her shoulder at him. There’s something kinda pin-up sexpot about it, even though Clint knows she doesn’t mean it. “Everybody who comes here, they have something inside that’s a little—broken. I’m not saying it’s a requirement, but the work we do, the people we interact with . . . We need to be more human than some first-year associate in a corner cubicle. We need to understand how people work.” She plucks a plastic spoon outta the container on the counter, but she never stops looking at him. “I think it’s what repairs our own brokenness.”

They watch each other for a couple more seconds before she breaks her gaze and turns to stir the coffee. Clint wets his lips. “Stark used to be the guy in the corner cubicle,” he points out.

Natasha snorts. “And now look at him. He’s— Well. I’m not sure he’s capable of actual human happiness, but he’s found whatever the Tony Stark equivalent of that is.”

“The one where he ends up with Bruce, you mean.”

“Keep dreaming.” She rolls her eyes with a kind of venom he doesn’t think anybody else could manage, and he grins. He swears in that second that she’s swallowing a smile. “My point is that you’re—better than you were when you got here,” she says, tapping her spoon on the edge of her
mug. “And that means you belong.”

When she turns in his direction, her hip quirked against the edge of the counter, he raises his eyebrows. “You’re not gonna do like Stark and everybody else and just assume it’s ‘cause I’m getting laid?”

“You were still unhappy when you started getting laid,” Natasha replies with a shrug. He snorts a laugh, but he’s gotta own the grin that’s still pushing at the edges of his lips. She drops her spoon in the sink and turns on her heel. “And there is no way,” she adds, almost in the hallway by the time she glides through the words, “that Coulson’s that good.”

(Later, when Clint jokingly brings up Natasha’s not-red shirt at lunch, Tony remarks, “I think I bought that shirt.” And after everybody stares at him for a couple long seconds, he adds, “No, no, I mean, I think I bought it for Pepper.”)

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Witness interviews clutter up the days that run up to trial, with Peggy calling in almost everybody who’s ever investigated any aspect of the Killgrave case. They call the lead detectives back in for one-on-one interviews, then move onto the crime scene investigators and the lab analysts who work fingerprints, DNA, toxicology, you name it. Coroners and pathologists parade in and out of the conference room, and when they’re done, it’s onto the other kinds of professionals: psychologists, teachers, administrative assistants, Killgrave’s second- and third-in-command from his business. Clint spends one of the slower afternoons in his office, charting out who they’ve spoken to and who they’re missing.

“It looks like a bingo card,” Phil remarks after he looks it over.

“Do diagonals count?” Clint retorts, and the laughter in Phil’s eyes makes it worth it.

After they finish with the professionals, they move onto the people who knew Jordan Silva-Riberio as a person: friends from school, extended family beyond the couple people Clint knows, neighbors, the college student who supervised behavior in the dorms. The handful of Urban Ascent kids who’d worked alongside Jordan at P.M.R. Advertising paint the picture of a kid who was fucking miserable; they call him “sad” and “quiet” over their cups of soda and bite-size Snickers bars.

One boy with a shock of white-blond hair and darting eyes hangs around in the conference room after the others all file out. He twists the rings he’s wearing while he talks. “They told him that he wouldn’t get moved again,” he says quietly, staring at the floor the whole time. “He either made it at P.M.R. or he went home.”

“He didn’t wanna go home?” Clint asks. He keeps it gentle, his voice low. He remembers the fear of authority that came with being sixteen, the discomfort around strangers in suits. ‘Cause back then, strangers in suits could fuck up his whole world.

The boy just shakes his head. “He loved his mom and everything,” he replies. It’s hesitant, and his eyes dart up just long enough to catch Clint’s. “I think he just really wanted to do good at the program so he could have a chance at . . . better.”

“Better?” Phil asks. He’s cleaning up the cups of soda.
“Than what all of us come from,” the kid finishes. “Hating life in the program’s better than being somewhere else, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Clint agrees, and squeezes the kid’s shoulder on his way out.

The next day, they pull in the half-dozen or so kids from Jordan’s failed first placement, a big-name publishing company down in the city. They run through the same interview over the same soda and candy, trying to assemble the pieces of Jordan’s last couple months. Except these kids tell the story of a boy on top of the world, and they laugh through stories of Jordan’s antics. “He screwed around, but then he got everything done,” a pretty Asian girl who chews a lot of pink bubble gum volunteers. “I think he really liked it.”

The Hispanic boy next to her snorts. “Liked somethin’,” he mutters, and the Asian girl slaps him hard enough on the arm that he swears in Spanish.

“What do you mean?” Phil asks. He keeps it neutral with the kids, Clint’s learning, like he’s conducting some kinda family meeting that could end in tears. He wonders sometimes if he uses that tone on his nieces and nephews when they start getting antsy.

Problem is, this time, neutral’s not enough. The kids all shift around in their chairs, exchanging guilty little glances. They’re the kinda glances you save for your damn co-conspirators, darting and nervous. Clint braces himself for some bullshit answer ‘till the Asian girl said, “He flirted a lot.”

“Flirted?” Clint asks, raising his eyebrows.

She nods, her ponytail bouncing. “Mr. Bishop—he’s the boss of the company—he’s got a daughter. She kinda hangs out with us sometimes. Jordan flirted with her like crazy, and it caused problems.”

“What kind of problems?” And Phil asks it in this perfectly even tone, no inflection or curiosity to set the kids off.

“I . . . think it was maybe why he was asked to leave,” a girl with a lot of mousy brown hair suggests. “Mr. Bishop got pretty sick of him, after all that.”

But the kids don’t wanna talk about Mr. Bishop’s daughter much, after that, and the interview ends within another twenty minutes or so. Phil smiles at each of them, shakes hands and thanks them for coming, and leaves Clint to walk them out of the building. It’s past five, no security on duty and next to nobody left in the building, and he can’t help but think that everything feels heavier for it.

Their footsteps echo down the empty hallways, and every murmur between the Asian girl and the Hispanic boy’s an echo ‘till they’re outside the double doors and into the late-afternoon sun.

“Hey, losers,” a voice greets, and suddenly the kids who were solemn all the way down the hallway are all chattering at once and reaching for a girl Clint’s never seen before. She’s about the same age, with long, dark hair held back by a headband. She’s wearing a private school uniform, and the wind almost whips her skirt up too far for comfort. The Hispanic boy whistles at it, and—no surprise—she smacks him hard in the arm, almost on top of where he’d been smacked a whole half-hour before.

“Are you even allowed to be here?” the mousy girl asks.

“I skipped out on my cello lesson,” the new girl replies, shrugging. “You can only play so many etudes before they all sound alike.

A bunch of voices all rise up at once—“you’re such a snob,” scoffs one boy; “your dad’s gonna kill
you,” the Asian girl chides—but Clint pretty much ignores them. No, he’s focused in on the dark-haired girl. She’s got expensive earrings, manicured nails, and speaks like somebody who’s had a whole lot of speech lessons in her life.

He realizes after a long couple seconds that she’s the girl who Jordan’d flirted with, the one that caused Mr. Bishop to sour on him. Bishop’s daughter.

The problem with the couple second delay, though, is that Bishop’s daughter has a chance to notice Clint. Their eyes meet, and as soon as they do, she raises her chin. It’s almost a challenge, and Clint — He kinda likes that.

“You guys hanging out with suits already?” Bishop’s daughter asks. “I swear, I leave you alone for an hour and you go lame on me.”

The Hispanic kid snorts. “That’s Barton,” he offers, shrugging the broad shoulders he hides under a too-big t-shirt. “He’s cool.”

“Glad I’ve got your vote,” Clint says, and he and the kid spend a stilted second exchanging the nod. The rest of them laugh, warm and kinda heady, like maybe being cooped up in the conference room sucked worse than they’re letting on. But Bishop’s daughter barely even cracks a smile, her dark eyes still focused in on Clint.

Then, she hikes her bag up on her shoulder. “Dolores has the van idling in the parking lot,” she tells them, breaking her gaze to survey the rest of the kids. “I’ll be there in a couple minutes.”

“You okay?” one of the other boys asks. He fiddles with one of his earrings, a sure sign that he’s nervous as hell.

“Me? I’m great. I just need a second.” When the kids don’t move, she rolls her eyes. “God, I want to talk to the lawyer. Okay? Can none of you do subtle?”

The sarcasm’s sharp enough that it gets everybody moving, sneakers and flip-flops shuffling down the sidewalk. The Asian girl glances back a dozen times, like she’s worried that Clint’s gonna toss Bishop’s daughter over his shoulder and run off with her. The Hispanic boy physically shoves her around the corner of the building and outta sight.

Once they’re gone, the girl presses her lips together into this tight line and sorta—gives Clint a once-over. It’s a slow, head-to-toe sweep of him in his gray suit and purple tie, her eyes narrowed and her jaw tight. Clint feels kinda uncomfortable, like he’s under scrutiny, and he shifts a little from one foot to another.

At least, ’till she says, “You’re pretty young for the guy prosecuting a huge murder.”

It’s so outta-the-blue that Clint can’t help snorting a laugh. He stares at her for a second, waiting for her to break into a grin, but the kid’s dead serious. “How do you know I’m not pushing fifty and just look good for my age?”

“Nobody that old wears pants that tight.”

“You’re looking at my—”

“When your dad publishes three different fashion magazines, you learn to notice,” she replies, shrugging lightly. Another gust of wind licks at the hem of her skirt, and she scowls while she tries to keep from flashing the whole front of the building. She’s just a kid, Clint thinks as he watches her dump herself onto one of the big stone benches. She plays a good game, but she’s just a kid like
She crosses her ankles and puts her bag on top her thighs, like a shield. “You’re the one, though, right?” she asks.

There’s something different about her voice, something younger, and Clint swallows for a second before he nods. “One of them, yeah,” he replies. He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Phil Coulson, one of the chief assistant district attorneys, is on the case with me. Or I’m on the case with him, I guess.”

She raises her head and meets his eyes. “And you’re both good at your jobs?”

“I don’t think they hire shitty lawyers around here,” he says. She laughs a little, this tiny sound that catches in the back of her throat, and Clint—

He’s not sure if it’s how young she suddenly is, or just the way she can’t hold his eyes much longer than a couple seconds, but he can’t stop watching her. He wets his lips, ready to do something about the silence stretching between them, but he realizes the silence isn’t the only barrier.

The stone bench shifts a little when he drops onto it, next to her. He rests his elbows on his thighs and leans forward. “You knew him, right?”

She doesn’t look over at him, but she nods hard enough that her whole body kinda moves with it. “You were friends?”

“Friends isn’t— He was just a kid, like the rest of them,” she says. She shrugs, but her fingers tighten around the edge of her bag. “The kids from the program, they’re real. That’s why I like to hang around them instead of going to cello lessons or fencing practice.” She snorts a little. “Which pisses my dad off, but that’s half the fun.”

Clint kinda smiles, but it doesn’t last. There’s something in the back of her voice, caught there, that he can’t really shake.

“Didn’t?” he repeats, frowning.

“Go to private school.” He starts to answer, but she shakes her head. “You spend enough time around people who grew up like me, you learn to tell the difference. Because they’re—plastic. Fake, you know?” And she waits, for a few seconds, ‘till Clint nods along with her. It’s a blind nod, half ‘cause he doesn’t know what she’s talking about . . . and half ‘cause a teenage girl just saw straight through him. “The kids at school worry about whether Daddy’s getting them an Audi or a Mercedes for their birthdays. They bitch about their layovers on the way to Paris. They’ve never even met someone like Jordan. They’d probably mace him instead of talking to him.” Her eyes drop to where her hands are pressed against the edge of her bag. “Jordan and the other kids in the program—they’re actually people.”

The wind picks up again, blows her hair into her face, and for a couple seconds, Clint can’t see Mr. Bishop’s rich daughter. No, what he sees is a girl with a lotta weight on her shoulders, a girl who just lost a friend. She raises a hand to push the hair away, to try and steel herself again, but the
damage’s been done.

Clint can see the damp clinging to her eyelids. He can see all the places her façade’s cracking away.

“All we did was flirt,” she says, and her voice’s almost lost to the wind. “He was cute, and I— It was so stupid.”

He wants to ask what part of it was stupid—the flirting, or the consequences—but the blast of a horn rings out from the parking lot. It blares in his ears, louder than the wind, and Bishop’s daughter springs to her feet. “Dolores is going to kill me,” she says, staring down at Clint. She looks spooked, like there’s a ghost on her heels. “I have to go.”

He nods a little, watching while she straightens her bag and brushes off her uniform, puts the pieces of her mask back together again. She runs fingers through her hair for a half-second and squares her shoulders before she starts down the sidewalk.

Clint only lets her get three or four steps before he asks, “You coming to the trial?”

She almost trips in her haste to whip back around. In the shadow of the building, he can’t see her face, just the dark hair that’s still being tossed by the wind. “I’ll try,” she says, but he can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

“Trying’s the best we can do, sometimes,” he replies, and waves at her back while she retreats.

That night, his microwavable macaroni and cheese going cold next to him, Clint starts and restarts the outline for their opening statement. He scribbles notes and half-thoughts all over the front of his legal pad, and wakes up at midnight with his head cradled on his arm and drool all over the pad.

In the morning, he brings Phil a brimming cup of coffee and a single, chicken-scratched opening line: *Jordan Silva-Riberio was a kid, just like everybody else.*

“That’s a start,” Phil says, and they start filling in the rest.

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Jane announces her pregnancy to the office on the last Thursday before the Killgrave trial, an overcast day almost three weeks after Darcy tells Clint about it. When Tony climbs onto a chair in the conference room—Bruce with one hand on the back of the thing and one on Tony’s hip, presumably in an attempt to keep him from falling—and announces he’s throwing a party in honor of the incoming Foster-Odinsson offspring, everybody cheers. They cheer louder when Thor declares that he and Jane are getting married, though the look on Jane’s face isn’t all that cheery.

(Later, Clint finds out from Darcy that Thor hadn’t actually proposed before that moment. Leave it to Thor!)

Apparently, the weather gets the memo about the party, ‘cause Saturday dawns as bright and sunny as any day all summer. The leaves are starting to change color, a reminder that they’ve slipped into September, and Clint pulls on his favorite jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt before he heads over to Phil’s for the morning. There’s a shit-ton to do in preparation for voir dire on Monday—
questions to plan, an opening statement to perfect, witness lists to visit and revisit—but it’s somehow easier to do it sitting on Phil’s couch, their knees bumping when they reach for pieces of the file.

And when they forget about the file altogether for a good half-hour, lazily making out until Clint ends up straddling one of Phil’s thighs and moaning into his mouth.

The whole day ends up feeling like that sunny September morning—warm and bright, not a cloud in the sky—and by the time they get to Tony’s, Clint’s gotta admit he’s in a pretty good mood. He helps Bucky baste his chicken wings—“I swear,” he says, basting brush clutched over his heart, “I’m going to start refusing to make these things, one day”—and plays Frisbee with one of the dogs while the rest of the party-goers trickle in. A couple times, he catches Phil stopping in the middle of his conversation with Natasha and Steve just to watch him. They exchange stupid smiles across the backyard, the kind that make Clint feel like he’s a teenager again.

But after the dogs are tuckered out and Maria’s joined in on the spirited debate over illegal immigration (and who but Phil and the rest of the office gets into a political debate at a party?), Clint ends up on Tony’s back porch in his bare feet, watching Darcy and Dot take turns going down the slide. The sun’s starting to set, bringing just a tiny fall chill into the air, but he likes it. He likes that he can still smell the charcoal from the grill when the breeze slips by, and that Bruce and Jane are debating physics while Thor tries desperately to keep up.

He’s thinking about how it all feels, to be part of this without his past threatening to sneak up on him, when somebody says, “Good job with your log, by the way.”

Clint snorts and rolls his eyes. “You’ve still got a splinter.”

“Working on it.” Tony knocks their elbows together as he comes up next to him, but when Clint looks over, the guy’s holding out a beer. He wiggles the bottle a couple times ‘till Clint finally takes it, and then taps the neck of their bottles together. “You know, despite your breathtaking stupidity, you could actually end up on top of this whole thing.”

He tries not to twitch a grin. “Thanks, I think.”

“I mean it,” Tony replies. He shrugs, completely nonchalant about it, and waves the hand holding the beer. “You’re gonna win the case, skirt the disciplinary charge, and end up with the guy. Pretty fairy-tale-perfect, if you ask me.” When Clint glances over, Tony’s dark eyes are calm and even. “Don’t blow it.”

“Which part?”

“Any part. ‘Cause like I said to you that day I came over, you’ve kinda already got what the rest of us are looking for.” He raises the beer bottle to his lips and takes a couple swallows, but the thing is, Clint can follow his eyes. ‘Cause all of a sudden, Tony’s not focused on him so much as he’s focused out on the yard.

Or, more specifically, on where Bruce is laughing with Jane while he lights one of the citronella torches that line the patio.

Clint’s pretty sure that the only way for the guy to be more transparent is wearing an I love you Bruce Banner t-shirt.

But then, Tony says, “I don’t wanna have to punch you.”

Clint blinks. “Punch me?”
“For fucking up your fairy tale.”

He bites down on the edges of his smile. There’s something warm in the back of Tony’s eyes, something he’s pretty sure Tony doesn’t even realize is there. He takes a long drink outta the beer bottle before he replies, “But you would.”

“Absolutely,” Tony assures him, nodding. “But I wouldn’t enjoy it.”

And Clint—

Clint thinks that, when Tony really smiles, he almost out-does Phil.

Almost.

He thinks a lot about Tony’s theory for the rest of the night, straight through driving him and Phil back to his apartment complex. The words slip back into his head time and again, little distractions while he and Phil kiss on the steps like they should’ve after Tony’s first party, or when his shirt ends up on the floor of his kitchen thanks to Phil’s demanding hands. He doesn’t think this is a fairy tale, doesn’t think it’s that kinda—sugary perfect like in a Disney movie, but he knows it’s not far off.

‘Cause when Phil’s muffled moan sounds like his name in the dark, when his callused palm makes Phil keen in want, he’s reminded how he has what a lotta people look for and never get. He’s reminded—with lips and teeth, with tongue and sweat—just how lucky he’s gotten.

And as he falls asleep, Phil’s breath on the back of his neck and Phil’s skin pressed against his, the last thought in he has is that maybe, just maybe, Tony Stark’s right.

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Except Tony Stark’s never right.

Voir dire starts promptly at nine-thirty Monday morning, the courtroom packed with jurors who, after half an hour of swearing-in, already look bored outta their minds. Clint watches every one of them like a hawk, trying to index every antsy twitch on his legal pad. Jury selection’s always important, but in a case with a defendant as powerful and well-known as Killgrave, it’s a whole new ballgame.

Like a balancing act on a high-wire, Clint thinks as Number 15 clears her throat for the twelfth time in as many minutes. Lean too hard one way or the other, and you’ll crash all the way to earth.

Laufeyson and Killgrave, both, are at their shiniest from the second they breeze into the courtroom, Laufeyson in another one of those green almost-scarves and carrying another damn walking-stick. His hair’s slicked back, his eyes are icy-sharp, and Clint knows he sees all the same nervous tics coming outta the jury panel. Behind him, one of the associates scribbles furious notes on a legal pad, snapping page over page like he’s got a whole forest to burn; at one point, Judge Smithe stops Phil’s questioning and asks him to calm it down a little.

The associate’s face blooms red. Laufeyson doesn’t even blink.

Killgrave, for his part, exudes this strange kinda calm that— Well, honestly, it unnerves Clint, a
little. He sits at counsel table, his hands folded and his eyes trained forward, and hardly blinks. He’s like a statue, something carved outta marble, and Clint allows himself a few little glances over in that direction as Phil starts into the questions about child abuse and child victims. But no matter how many jurors glance over at the guy, no matter how many legs are nervously crossed, uncrossed, and recrossed, Killgrave doesn’t even twitch.

Clint wants to believe that it’s clever training on Laufeyson’s part, this weird kinda emptiness from the guy. But wanting to believe and actually believing are two very different things.

During the coffee break after their first round of questions, he leans over to where Phil’s reviewing his notes on the jurors. “Ten bucks says he doesn’t blink the whole time Laufeyson’s introducing him,” he murmurs, low enough that only Phil’ll hear him.

Phil almost snorts coffee. “I don’t make bets I’m going to lose unless there’s something in it for me,” he replies once he’s finished coughing.

Clint presses his lips together to keep the smirk off his face. He can feel it in his eyes, though, and reflected in the way Phil quirks his eyebrows. “Got any requests?”

“Several,” Phil says quietly, his voice as dark as it is low. He presses his knee against Clint’s thigh, and Clint smiles his way through the rest of the break.

When the potential jurors are all back in their seats, full of coffee and cheap doughnut holes from the jury room, Laufeyson glides up to the podium. He reminds Clint a little of a cat in heat, swaying while he walks, his smile slow but not unfriendly. Like a car salesman, a little, but a good one, one who can make you upgrade to the heated seats without ever batting an eye at the cost.

Clint fucking hates him.

“Like Mr. Coulson from the district attorney’s office, I have a number of questions for you this morning,” he explains. His voice is perfectly even, almost light, and it kinda makes Clint’s stomach turn. “But before I embark on those—some of them which, yes, will feel personal and uncomfortable, just as Mr. Coulson informed you earlier—I want to introduce you to the man before you. Because this is, after all, not only a case about a dead child in the woods, but also a case about a man. An immigrant, a man who—”

Clint grits his teeth at the slickness of it, the almost poetic way Laufeyson loops his words together, but before it turns to bile in the back of his throat, Phil’s chair creaks. “Objection, your honor,” he interrupts, and Clint presses his lips together to hide a tiny smile. “He’s presenting an opening statement, not introducing the defendant for the purposes of voir dire.”

“Agreed,” Judge Smithe says with an almost imperceptible sigh. “Tone it down, Mr. Laufeyson.”

“Gladly, your honor,” he responds. He ducks his head in an almost apologetic nod, but then his eyes flick over to the state’s counsel table.

For a brief second, Clint wonders whether he didn’t plan the bombastic start just so Phil’d interrupt and look rude. When he glances over, there’s a frown creasing the corners of Phil’s mouth, too.

Great minds think alike, and all that.

Laufeyson manages to keep the gloss and charm on all the way up to the lunch break and after, but he’s hell on the jury. By the time the afternoon rolls around, the courtroom’s half-empty and the alternates are looking nervous, afraid they’re gonna be the next ones in the hot seat. A couple different jurors are moved to tears, at least a half-dozen admit they’ve got a problem with
immigrants—“That’s not even an issue,” Phil mutters under his breath—and Laufeyson successfully convinces the judge that two have been, quote, “So inundated with the prejudicial, overwrought media surrounding this case that they cannot possibly maintain impartiality.”

Clint knows that Judge Smithe’s trying to avoid the inevitable cries of “biased jury,” but Jesus, y’know?

The jury coordinator starts looking nervous when, after their afternoon break, the jury pool’s down to the twelve folks crowded in the box and a total of six potential alternates. Phil calls Sitwell down into the courtroom to warn him they might need to round up some random citizens off the street, if Laufeyson keeps it up.

By some miracle, they end up with a jury around five-fifteen in the afternoon. Clint’s not asked a single question—hell, he’s barely left his chair—but he’s bone-deep exhausted. He feels like they’ve gone ten rounds in a boxing ring . . . after fucking jury selection.

Laufeyson sweeps outta the courtroom like a runway model. He nearly closes the door on his briefcase-carrying associate, and Clint can’t help but snort. “If we don’t mop the floor with that asshole,” he grumbles, “I’m changing careers.”

It’s meant to be just a mutter to himself, a dark little reminder that Laufeyson deserves to lose this round, but it’s louder than he means it to be. Loud enough that he starts a little when Phil says, “You and me both.”

He jerks his head up from where he’s collecting his half of the file to find that Phil’s smiling at him. It’s soft, the kinda smile that catches the corners of his eyes, and Clint—

The warmth that bubbles in the pit of Clint’s stomach is almost unbearable. It’s almost more than he’s ready for, the full-body reaction to the crinkles around that man’s eyes. He pulls in a breath that’s sharper than it needs to be. “He blink?” he asks.

Phil’s head tips slightly, and the smile starts to slip. “What?”

“Killgrave. When Laufeyson introduced him.” And god, Phil’s lips twitch in the most delicious way when he realizes what Clint’s asking. He spends a full second thinking about all the different ways he could capture that twitch with his own mouth. “‘Cause, I mean, a bet’s a bet, and you don’t strike me as the kinda guy who’s gonna go back on his deal.”

“Oh, I can make good on it,” Phil retorts. He wets his lips in a way that’s almost casual, but Clint knows it’s a promise. There’re a thousand things they should do tonight—run through Phil’s opening, double-check their first direct examination, revisit some of their theories on what theories Laufeyson’s gonna rely on—but what he really wants to do is drag Phil into bed.

Just to work off the toil of this damn day. Just to—

“Clint!”

The doors bang against the wall, punctuation to the near-shout of his name, and both he and Phil twist around just in time to see Darcy half-running up the center aisle of the courtroom. There’s nobody left in the room except nosy reporter Peter Parker, and he’s too busy listening to his headphones in the back of the gallery to really give a damn what’s going on around him. Darcy’s floppy sweater—too heavy for the early-fall weather, but Clint’s pretty sure that’s not her main concern—bounces as she rushes past the rows of empty seats.

It takes Clint a couple seconds to realize that she’s holding an envelope in her hand. It’s creased,
her long fingernails biting into the paper.

“What’s going on?” Phil asks. It’s the same question on Clint’s lips, but he can’t quite force it out.

“This—” Darcy attempts, but then she shakes her head and leans forward. She’s breathless and panting, and Clint’s pretty sure he hears her wheeze out something about spending more time at the gym. She lifts the envelope, gesturing with it vaguely.

Phil pries it out of her fingers, halfway to rolling his eyes—and then, his whole expression changes.

It’s a slow shift, almost too subtle to notice, the way his lips start to tip and his eyes soften. Clint watches the line of his shoulders tighten, watches his jaw clench and his lips roll together. In a matter of two seconds, Phil’s gone, and Chief Assistant District Attorney Coulson slides into place.

“What?” Clint asks. He hears the tension in his voice, the desperate edge that’s caught in the back of his throat, but he can’t control it. He can’t shove it down, not when Phil’s face is turning to ice.

“What is it?”

“It just came today,” Darcy manages, finally straightening up. She pushes her messy hair out of her face. Clint watches her eyes dart from him to Phil and back again, like she’s not sure who to talk to.

“I was helping Thor out with a bunch of Clint’s stuff, I missed morning mail call, it must’ve been in the pile. I ran it down here as soon as I found it, I knew that you’d want to see it.”

“See what?” And Clint’s sure, in that second, that his sanity’s fraying, ’cause Darcy’s expression gets softer every time she glances over at him, her full lips pursing into something that’s almost sad, and—

“A letter,” Phil replies quietly. He glances at the envelope one last time and then, slowly, turns it in Clint’s direction. “From the bar disciplinary committee.”

The problem isn’t the words as much as it’s the timing.

’Cause those words tumble into the air at right as he recognizes the name on the envelope:

*Clinton Barton.*
Character and Fitness

Chapter Summary

When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint faces the cold reality that not everything can end up the way he wants it to, and finds out one thing already has.

Chapter Notes

In both this chapter and the next, I take some gentle liberties with the disciplinary hearing process. I’ve not attended a disciplinary hearing before, and I believe every jurisdiction handles such hearings quite a bit differently. Please forgive any egregious errors as ordinary creative license.

And for those who missed it: there is a lot of courtroom time in this chapter and the next.

This and both subsequent chapters beta-read by Jen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And to think, I thought I could have a cup of coffee before this all started,” Judge Smithe says the next morning.

She sits behind the desk in her chambers, glasses abandoned atop a file folder and fingers massaging her temple. Clint—can’t really blame her for that. Honestly, he feels about the same way, standing behind one of those awful brocade chairs. His fingers are braced against the upholstery, his fingernails digging into the fabric a little, and he can’t help but wonder if he could pick the whole thing threadbare.

He wants to. He’s jittery, filled to the brim with something like nervous energy, but it’s not that. No, nervous energy makes you feel like you could run a marathon or pace a hole in the floor, and Clint—

Clint feels like he’s gonna throw up, instead. He feels like the half a cup of orange juice he managed to force down in his kitchen that morning is about to force its way up his throat. He swallows thickly, almost like he can taste the bile that isn’t actually there, and presses his fingers a little harder into the back of the chair.

Settled in a third chair, Laufeyson smiles.

The letter from the disciplinary committee’d said everything you’d expect, words Clint’d spent the whole night reading and re-reading after he went back to his apartment. Willful failure to disclose
prior criminal history, it accused, the font rough-edged as though the thing’d been composed on a typewriter. Egregious enough to require a thorough examination of the attorney’s character and fitness for the practice of law.

He’d left the damn thing on his bedside table when he’d crawled between the sheets the night before, but the white paper’d looked brighter in the light reflected in from the street. After he’d shoved it in the drawer under a year-old copy of Sports Illustrated, he’d picked up his cell phone.

feels like i killed a guy just to watch him die, he’d typed. The glare from the screen’d almost hurt his eyes in the dark.

Phil’s response’d come quick and clear, proof positive that he wasn’t asleep either. Who could sleep, night before a trial? Should I be calling you Johnny Cash, now?

depends. i gotta start promising to walk the line?

I fell asleep during that movie.

two plus hours of joaquin phoenix and you fell asleep? i don’t know if i can talk to you anymore.

His lip is weird, Phil’d replied, and Clint’d laughed hard enough that he’s dropped his phone on the floor. He’d rode out his chuckles—caused half by Phil and half by the rising tide of anxiety crawling up his throat—’till the phone went off again. He’d leaned over and rescued it from the dirty sock it’d tried to vibrate under.

And then, he’d kinda—lost the ability to breathe.

It’ll be okay, Phil’s reply’d read, and even with the guy half a town away, Clint’d sworn he could hear his voice. It won’t be fun or easy, but you’re a talented lawyer. Other than with your bar application, you’ve never misrepresented yourself to this profession. It’ll turn out all right.

Clint’d stared at the words for a long time, fighting to swallow around the lump that rose in his throat. and if it doesn’t? he’d texted back.

Then I will fully support you in your future career as barista, bike messenger, or mechanic, Phil’d replied almost instantly.

After he’d finished laughing, Clint’d typed i love you three different times before he’d given up, locked his phone, and forced himself to sleep.

But the choppy sleep wasn’t restful, the drive over to the judicial complex’d involved about three hundred asshole drivers who Clint’d wanted to run off the damn road, and Judge Smithe’s assistant’d scowled at the three of them when they’d requested to meet with her before the start of the trial that morning.

Clint’d considered slugging the snotty look off her face, but Phil’d touched his elbow ‘till the tension wore outta him. Laufeyson, who’d trailed in after he and Phil and spent the whole time looking amused, just raised his eyebrows.

He’d promptly wanted to punch that asshole, instead.

“Your honor,” Phil says, his voice even and neutral as he leans forward in his chair, “we only scheduled three days for this trial in the first place. To interrupt one afternoon for Mr. Barton’s disciplinary hearing is hardly a burden on the defense.”
“Except my client and I have been preparing this trial for weeks,” Laufeyson replies. His voice is smooth as butter, but Clint kinda can’t shake the feeling that it’s butter that went bad three weeks ago. “We’ve already scheduled our witnesses to correspond with their availability. Transport from the jail has been ensured. To halt the entire trial on Thursday afternoon—”

“At three,” Phil cuts in tightly.

“—when Mr. Barton can easily attend his hearing and leave the trial to Mr. Coulson will be an absolute disadvantage to my client and our case.”

“And what about the disadvantage to the state?” Phil retorts. His face is tight, and Clint wonders how hard he’s fighting the urge to roll his eyes. “Nobody’s asked you to try this case without your associate.”

“No,” Laufeyson replies, with a roll of his shoulders that’s maybe supposed to be a shrug, “but I would be able to.”

There’s this snide little twist at the end of it, like a verbal knife between the ribs, and Judge Smithe lets out a breath that’s an obvious sigh. She lifts her fingers from her temples, and Clint tracks her eyes across the office; she glances at Phil, then over at Laufeyson, and then back at Phil. Phil shifts, pressing his hands together. His own version of nerves, Clint realizes, and he curls his fingernails into the chair even harder.

“Your honor,” he offers, swallowing the tight feeling that’s crawling up his chest, “three days for the trial was always just an estimate. If the defense’s subpoenaed witnesses, they’re on call ‘till they’re released. If the state’s evidence took six days instead of the three, the defense’s witnesses would still have to show up. And we don’t know how long the state’s evidence is gonna take, or whether we’re gonna need impeachment or rebuttal witnesses.” When he pauses for breath, he swears he can feel Laufeyson’s eyes narrowed in on him. It’s an itchy feeling, like when Trick’s trailer had fleas and he’d spent nights up, imagining bugs all over his skin. There’re no bugs now—actually, he’s pretty sure there weren’t any back then—but it makes breathing just a little harder. The judge watches him, even and expressionless, and it kinda pushes him forward. “Saying that a couple extra hours off for me to go take care of this is gonna disadvantage the defense suggests that any delay’d do the same thing. Even if, like, you broke a tooth tomorrow and we had to start after lunch.”

The corner of her mouth twitches. It’s almost imperceptible, but Clint’s not looking anywhere else. “Are you trying to curse me with a dental disaster?” she asks.

“Maybe if you plan it for around three on Thursday,” he suggests.

He knows that Judge Smithe’s actual smile, one that catches her eyes, it shouldn’t reassure him. But the problem is, it does, and he lets out the breath he’s spent three minutes trying to breathe around. “I agree with Mr. Barton. There’s no reason that adjourning early on Thursday afternoon will prejudice the defense. If anything, it’ll refresh the jurors for closing arguments.”

“Then I request permission to inform the jury of why we’re adjourning early,” Laufeyson half-demands, jerking upright hard enough that the chair jumps. He grips at his armrests like he’s gonna be thrown off the thing. This time, Phil lets the eye-roll win. “Their curiosity will, naturally, be raised by this mysterious other engagement that the state must attend. And given the number of irregularities in this case—”

“That you caused,” Phil mutters, not really under his breath.
“—I think it is only fair that—”

Clint swears he can hear Laufeyson’s jaw snap shut when the judge raises her hand. She keeps it there for a second, almost like she’s enjoying the silence, before her eyes settle on the guy. “Congratulations, Mr. Laufeyson,” she says in a way that’s just the wrong side of sincere. “You’ve found a new issue to take up on appeal.”

A scoffing noise kinda bursts out of Laufeyson’s mouth right then, and Clint— One glance at the guy, and Clint’s gotta bite his lip to keep from laughing at the half-engaged, half-shocked look on his face. He glances down at the ugly chair, then over at the judge, and Smithe quirks an eyebrow at him. Clearly, the grin’s settled in his eyes.

“I will not,” she continues, all the joy filtering right outta her voice, “taint the jury with something I’ve already ruled to be a non-issue. And if you attempt to even edge that door open, Mr. Laufeyson, you will be very, very sorry.” She catches Laufeyson’s eyes. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystalline, your honor,” Laufeyson replies, every syllable a knife.

Judge Smithe dismisses them a few minutes later with a promise to start the trial a half-hour late to make up for the half-hour office call. Predictably, Laufeyson storms out in a twirl of expensive suit coat and unnecessary walking stick. Phil thanks the judge on their way out, and Clint’s pretty sure she spends an extra half-second nodding at the two of them after the perfunctory you’re welcome.

But since the last thing he needs is a false sense of security, he doesn’t dwell on it.

The hallway outside the judge’s office is packed, filled almost to capacity with— Well, with just about everyone. Jurors knock elbows with reporters on their way to the assembly room, rubberneckers stand shoulder-to-shoulder with employees from Killgrave’s company, the first three witnesses for the state crowd around a bench not five feet from Anissa Silva herself, and a whole gaggle of kids from Urban Ascent gossip in a corner.

The second they step out into the fray, reporters flock to Phil, and Clint listens to the noise of a half-dozen voices demanding statements in near-unison. It rises up like some kinda ocean wave, swallowing up Phil’s polite repetition of no comment at this time. Within seconds, though, it’s white noise, and Clint slips away from the cluster of nosy press just in time to avoid Peter Parker’s elbow.

Across the congregation of bodies, Anissa raises one hand in a silent, subtle wave. Clint wants to wave back, even steal across the public relations nightmare to talk to her, but he can’t. He already feels like there’s a microscope watching his every damn move. He’s not adding fuel to the fire, not when he’s two days from his disciplinary hearing. The words twist in the pit of his stomach. Two days. He should’ve expected this kinda timing from Laufeyson.

He’s still focused on that—the creeping worry that crawls up from the softest part of his gut and threatens to choke him—when a hand touches his elbow. He jerks away, his heart jumping into the back of his mouth, only to see Phil standing in front of him. His expression’s a practiced Coulson neutral, absolutely calm in the sea of chaos, but he raises one eyebrow.

“Walk with me to get the file?” he asks.

There’s still press everywhere, scribbling into tiny notebooks or furiously typing on smartphones. Clint presses his fingers to his thigh instead of reaching for Phil. He’s not sure when touch became
their status quo, when the option to brush knuckles or bump shoulders became as important as breathing, but right now . . .

Right now, even surrounded by all these strangers, reporters, witnesses, and kids, Clint feels like he’s back in the overgrown ball field with Phil as his only human solace.

“Sure,” he answers, and hopes to hell his voice doesn’t shake.

He turns it’s just nerves into a private mantra while he and Phil walk down the hallway toward the back staircase, the words developing a rhythm not too far from his heartbeat. It’s nerves about the trial and nerves about Laufeyson. It’s nerves about whether a murderer’ll get off and whether Jordan’ll get justice. And it’s nerves about what happens Thursday, what the consequences for his actions are, whether all the work he’s put into the last couple years’ll vanish ‘cause of one stupid—

“Clint.”

Phil’s fingers are almost too soft against the back of his hand, and when he jerks his head up, he realizes they’re already in the stairwell. He twists just enough to see that the secure door’s closed and locked behind them. There’s no sound, really, other than the buzzing of the crappy yellow-white lights and their breathing, and he exhales a little harder than he means to when he realizes they’re alone.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, turning back to Phil. “My head’s kinda all over the place, and—”

And that’s when he runs outta words.

Phil stands in front of him, his eyes calm and steady, but that’s not what steals the breath from his lungs. No, what turns his tongue into lead and zaps his brain altogether is the rest of him, the body he’s spent the last several weeks trying to memorize. ‘Cause Phil’s wearing this tailored navy suit that’s gotta be Stark-expensive, one that looks soft to the touch. His fingers twitch, and he catches himself shoving his hands in his pockets to keep from grabbing at the man. But all the pockets in the world can’t stop his eyes and their slow descent down the length of the guy in front of him: from crisp white shirt and navy tie to the waistcoat, from waistcoat to the soft leather belt with a buckle as silver as his watch, from the belt to thighs that fill out those perfectly-pressed slacks.

It’s easily—obviously—the best suit Phil owns.

Clint swallows around the lump growing in his throat. The problem is, it’s not the only lump he has to worry about right now.

He shifts a little, one foot to the other, and clears his throat. “Sorry,” he manages again, but he can’t stop himself from trying to soak in every damn detail, from the number of buttons on the waistcoat to the line of Phil’s shoulders in that jacket, and—

“Come here,” Phil says. His hands lift a couple inches from his sides.

Clint swears his center of gravity tilts toward Phil, just from those two words. “Listen, boss,” he replies, kinda—shrugging his shoulders in a way that feels more like squaring them, like he’s fighting with inertia, “I’m not gonna be responsible for what happens next if you—”

Phil rolls his eyes. “Not that kind of ‘coming here,’” he returns, and catches Clint by one of his belt loops. He kinda half-stumbles forward, not sure that the belt loop’s the best place for Phil to grab him right about now. Except that’s not where Phil’s fingers stay.

No, Phil’s fingers move to Clint’s own waistcoat, instead. He’s proud of the fact he owns the one
suit with a waistcoat, even though he snagged it on clearance after saving up for months and even though it’s not his favorite shade of gray. Proud enough that, for a couple seconds, he ignores the stutter in his breath and focuses on the appreciative way Phil’s fingers slide across the fabric.

At least, ’till Phil says, “You missed your last couple buttons.”

Clint glances down, his face tipping a little closer to Phil’s than is maybe a good idea, and— Yeah, the last two buttons on the waistcoat are open, proudly displaying his belt and fly for the world to see.

“I—don’t really remember getting dressed this morning,” he admits, but he doesn’t lift his head. He can’t, really, ’cause Phil’s steady fingers are slipping across the fabric, tugging a little ‘till he can do up the first of the two stray buttons. There’s something—intimate about it, something so breathlessly personal that he loses a couple seconds just watching those blunt fingers and their near-perfect nails slip the button into its hole. Clint’s aware of everything, right in that moment: Phil’s nearness, the rush of his own pulse in his ears, the jump in his belly, the scent of their cologne and deodorant and coffee-breath in the airless stairwell. Phil looks softer and darker in the yellow light, the lines Clint’s a little in love with smoothed out, and he’s caught by a new kinda want he’s not sure how to control.

‘Cause it’s not what he felt back after Dot’s birthday party, where everything ended at the thought of kissing Coulson.

It’s what he felt the night before, lying in the dark with his phone in his hand, typing words he couldn’t actually send.

“My first murder trial,” Phil says quietly, the words almost a whisper in the half-dark, “I got into a fender-bender right outside the courthouse. I was on autopilot, my head everywhere but there, and I didn’t brake in time.” When he glances up, there’s something soft in his eyes that Clint can’t place. It’s lighter and warmer than anything he’s used to, even since he and Phil became—whatever they are. “I didn’t trust myself.”

Clint snorts, a little, and drops his eyes back to Phil’s hands. They’re perfectly steady as they work the second rogue button into its hole. It’s a whole different damn universe from the thrum of Clint’s heartbeat in the hollow of his throat and the way his own fingers keep tapping a rhythm on his pant leg. He feels half-strangled every time he tries to breathe. “It was probably easier to trust whoever you were up against than it is to trust Laufeyson,” he points out. He tries to keep it light, like a half-joke, but it catches in the back of his throat. “And easier to trust yourself, the guy who’d worked at the ethics commission, instead of—”

“Clint.” And those too-steady fingers pause, almost like they’re frozen. “There are twelve men and women in that courtroom who don’t know a thing about this case. They don’t know Jordan, or Killgrave, or Loki Laufeyson. And they certainly don’t know Clint Barton.” He flattens his fingertips to the softest part of Clint’s belly, over where Clint swears he can feel his heart pounding. “At least, they don’t know the Clint I know.”

Clint rolls his lips together. “Will they ever?”

“No. I’m not planning on sharing that Clint.” Phil’s fingers spider against the cheap, too-rough fabric, spreading before he flattens his palms there, too. They linger, warm and steady, and radiate over the uncontrollable jumping Clint feels through his whole body. When they slide away, it’s to feel his ribs, his sides, and then his hips. “But they can know parts of him. They can see some of what I see.” He tilts his head ‘till he catches Clint’s eyes, and Clint forgets how to breathe. One of these days, Phil Coulson’s gonna kill him with a look. “They can trust you, too.”
“And I’m supposed to just—make them?”

“You’re supposed to trust yourself.” Phil says it like it’s the simplest thing in the world, like it’s—basic math or some kinda universal truth about how red and yellow make orange, but Clint . . . He’s not sure if it’s the way Phil’s eyes rest on his a little too long, or how Phil holds onto his sides a little tighter, but he feels like he’s missed something. There’s something between them, not a wall but a thread, and it’s pulling them together.

He watches Phil wet his lips. “If you’re half the man I—know,” he says, and Clint doesn’t miss the strange little catch in the middle of the sentence, “they’ll trust you as soon as you trust yourself.”

And Clint, he thinks he should have an answer to that, a solution to the welling-up in the bottom of his stomach or the rush of blood in his ears, but he doesn’t. Not when he’s drowning in the way Phil looks at him . . . and not when he steals what feels like the last bit of air in the universe from Phil’s half-parted lips.

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The trial starts promptly twenty minutes later, after the stolen back-stairwell kisses are individual memories stacked in the quietest part of Clint’s brain. He leaves them there, along with his nerves and insecurities, and settles into his chair at counsel table with his head held as high as he can manage.

His stomach feels like it’s trapped in a vice that’s closing slowly, squeezing tighter every breath he takes, but he constantly swallows around it. Phil, on the other hand, is brilliant.

They’d written the opening statement together, crafting the quiet story of a boy who loved school, work, sports, and his mother . . . until Zebediah Killgrave stole every one of those things away. But words scribbled on a legal pad aren’t spoken words, aren’t the steady rise and fall of Phil’s voice filling up Judge Smithe’s courtroom. He isn’t dramatic, Clint realizes as he watches Phil lean against the podium. There’s no pulpit-pounding, no reenactments, no overwrought gestures. He’s a man conversing with twelve other people, laying out all the facts that prove Zebediah Killgrave murdered Jordan Silva-Riberio.

And there are a whole lotta facts.

The first witness for the state is Detective Howlett, a man who appears even broader and stronger his suit and tie than in his usual work clothes. Clint watches the way his jaw moves as he’s sworn in, as tight and solemn as at a funeral. He hopes the jury can see the seriousness in those dark eyes, and the way he deliberately straightens his suit when he settles into the witness box. ‘Cause if the detective radiates how serious all of this is, the rest of the witnesses are bound to follow.

Howlett’s a strong witness, strong enough that the nerves in Clint’s belly start to unwind after the first couple minutes. He directs Howlett smoothly, walking him through the standard questions meant to make the jury trust him: years on the force, number of cases worked, special training, any areas of expertise. He’s practiced at this, you can tell—he’s smart, he’s articulate, and other than the kinda wild sideburns, he’s a good clean-cut American boy (from Canada originally, but Clint lets that one slide)—and the more he talks, the more the jury nods along with him. He’s not showy
or wordy, and on the longer answers, his gaze sweeps across the jury box, catching the attention of all twelve of those strangers.

They transition easily into the first hours of the murder investigation, and Clint slowly extracts every detail of the crime Howlett has to give: the call from dispatch about the dog-walker who found the body in Colier Woods, the sunny spring weather that morning, the snap of all the dead twigs under Howlett’s boots as he trekked out to the scene, the state of the clearing where the body’d been dumped. “It was baked hot,” Howlett explains, his face serious. “The sun after the rain’s like an oven.”

“And the body that’d been reported, it was in this—oven?” Clint asks.

“Right.”

“Describe the body as you found it.”

“Sure,” Howlett replies with a nod, and Clint lightly ticks the question off on his legal pad. “Body belonged to Hispanic male teenager. When I arrived, he was lying face-up in a natural clearing. There were leaves around him, but he didn’t look covered.” He shifts his weight in the chair. “Far as I knew then, he was in a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. The shirt was dried and stiff with what looked like blood.”

“Was there an identifiable source for the blood?” Clint follows up. He twists his pen cap in his hand. One of the jurors, Number 9, catches her long necklace in her fingers and starts twisting the chain.

“Yeah.” Howlett answers. He moves forward in the chair, and Clint watches the guy’s attention slip from the question itself to the jurors. Number 2’s eyes rise to the wall directly above Howlett’s head and focus there; his lips are pale when he presses them into a line. “On his belly, there was a gash. Probably about so big—”

The detective spreads his wide hands roughly eight inches apart, and Clint sees three more jurors avert their eyes. “—and pretty deep. The t-shirt was torn wide open, and the way he was sliced, it looked like it’d been done strong, quick, and—”

“Objection,” Laufeyson interrupts. He glides to his feet like he’s built outta ice, and Clint watches him lean forward and press just the tips of his fingers to the top of his legal pad. He’s kinda the textbook picture of cool, to go with his icy-smoothness; his eyes are even, his lips are pursed into a soft line, and his shoulders are perfectly square. Like he’s been waiting for this objection, Clint thinks, but then he can see the rest of him: the tension in his arms and hands, the way his breaths look pretty shallow. It’s calm, but the controlled kind, and Clint wets his own lips to keep himself from smiling.

But that’s all he says for a whole lotta long seconds. Judge Smithe raises her eyebrows. “Your grounds?” she asks.

“Of course, your honor,” Laufeyson replies, and Clint hates the smile that nudges at the corners of the guy’s mouth. It’s a classic tactic, one all of Clint’s trial advocacy professors’d bitched about at some point, ’cause it’s basic stalling. You wanna slow the trial down? You object and wait on the judge to ask about the objection ’till the jury’s good and distracted. Easy to forget about eight-inch slashes and blood-soaked t-shirts when you’re waiting on a lawyer to explain himself.

“Detective Howlett is not a medical professional,” Laufeyson explains once the judge’s given him a go-ahead nod, dragging out every word like it’s made of cheap elastic. “He lacks the requisite experience to determine whether Mr. Silva-Riberio’s wound was made quickly, slowly, with great strength, or through sheer force of will.”
Clint’s pretty sure *sheer force of will* isn’t on the table. “Your honor,” he replies, “the detective already said that he’s been on the force for fifteen years and worked hundreds of cases from the time he finished the academy.” Outta the corner of his eye, barely in his peripheral vision, he swears he can see Phil nodding. The remainder of the worry that’s been crouched in his belly starts uncurling, just ‘cause of that nod. “He works in the violent crime division and specializes in these kinds of killings. He’s got enough experience to give an opinion about the wound.”

Judge Smithe nods. “Objection overruled.”

And it’s a testament to how good a witness Howlett really is that he nods along with the judge and then, slowly, leans forward. He’s on display, in a way, his shoulders broadening and his chin rising, and before Clint can refresh him on the question, he picks up right where he left off. “Strong, quick, and dirty,” he finishes, looking out at the jurors. “He’d been dropped in the clearing sometime the night before, ‘cause the mud from the rain we’d had over the weekend was still fresh. It was all over his arms, legs, the sides of his face, you name it.”

Clint lets the jury envision that for a couple seconds, a blood-soaked kid coated in mud, before he asks, “What identifying features were present?”

“Not a whole lot,” Howlett replies, shrugging slightly. “He didn’t have any identification on him, none of that, just the t-shirt. It had a logo on the front of it that I didn’t recognize, and it’d been gray before all the blood. Otherwise, it was pretty standard. One of the crime scene guys thought he recognized it, though, and I double-checked after his heads-up.”

After the trial, Clint’s gonna ask Phil whether he’s the one who taught Howlett exactly how to side-step a hearsay objection. He forces his face to stay neutral, though, ‘cause the next question’s too important to look like he’s smirking. “What’d your double-check reveal?”

“That the shirt was given to all the kids participating in this year’s Urban Ascent summer program.” Howlett looks directly at the jury. “And that, ‘cause of that, our victim was an Ascent kid.”

*Ascent kid* isn’t exactly what Clint was expecting outta Howlett—he’d figured he’d say something about the program in general, not the stripped-down, simple version of exactly who Jordan Silva-Riberio was—and it kinda . . . catches him off guard. He pauses for a couple seconds, watching as Howlett wets his lips and then looks away from the jury. He’s waiting for the next question, but Clint lets the words settle all around them.

After all, Phil’s opening’d been all about how Jordan’d been a kid like everybody else. *Ascent kid*’s a pretty good way to say all that.

He and Howlett wander through the rest of the direct examination, dozens of questions that all layer on top of one another and tell the story of the investigation. There’ll be medical professionals, crime scene investigators, and lab analysts on the stand throughout the next day and a half, but right now it’s a solo show, the prosecutor and his trusty detective. The state finishes up in time for a coffee break, and Howlett mutters something about needing to piss as he wanders outta the courtroom.

Without the jurors in the box, the courtroom feels—lighter. Clint breathes a little easier, and when he comes back to counsel table, Phil smiles at him. It’s a real smile, one that reaches his eyes, and Clint spends a second just focused in on *him*. There’s no evidence, no defendant the next table over, no upcoming cross-examination. The whole world, for a couple seconds, is Phil Coulson.
“The rate you’re going, you’ll render me obsolete,” Phil murmurs under his breath. It’s warm and private, the kinda murmur Clint associates with lazy mornings in Phil’s too-big bed. “I’ll come in one day to find you sitting behind my desk, feet up.”

“I can do that anyway,” Clint offers, and Phil snorts a little laugh. Their shoulders knock together, then settle, and they stand like that for most the coffee break, skimming over each other’s notes and just—enjoying the moment to breathe.

The breathing stops as soon as Laufeyson steps up to the podium.

For all his drawling, taffy-stretched mannerisms, Laufeyson’s cross-examination is focused, like he’d honed and refined the damn thing into a razor’s edge. Every question is pointed, almost sharp, as he treks through all the things that the detective himself never did: searched for footprints, collected samples of the leaves (and Clint grits his teeth not to roll his eyes at that one), studied the shape of Jordan’s body in the mud, interviewed the whole P.M.R. Advertising staff. They’re standard questions for what Clint’s professors’d always called the CSI defense, an attempt to prove that the police aren’t as glossy in real life as they are on TV.

Eventually, though, Laufeyson sets his pen on the podium with a loud clack and looks over at Howlett. There’s a coldness in the way he’s standing there, shoulders loose but expression tight, and the two of them spend a while just staring each other down. “Now, detective,” he finally says, drawing out each syllable as far as it’ll stretch, “you were aware at the time of your investigation that young Mr. Silva-Riberio’s father, Enrique Riberio, is incarcerated in state prison. Correct?”

Clint’s still shifting to stand when Phil jumps to his feet, and all before Howlett can even open his mouth to answer. “Objection!” he announces, and even though he’s not the one objecting, Clint can’t relax the line of his shoulders. He sits there, still and a little breathless, while Phil talks. “Mr. Riberio’s history and current location are irrelevant to his son’s murder.”

The judge presses her lips together. She suddenly looks very tired. “Mr. Laufeyson?”

“Your honor, if you would allow me a moment to question this witness, I believe the relevance of the issue will become abundantly clear.”

The creeping edges of exhaustion that’re clinging to Judge Smithe’s face are replaced rapidly with annoyance. Clint swallows down his smile. “Let’s have a Reader’s Digest version, counsel.”

Laufeyson raises his hands long enough to shrug. “It goes to the identity of Mr. Silva-Riberio’s killer.”

“It’s a narrow path, Mr. Laufeyson,” the judge warns, but then she leans back in her seat. “Proceed.”

Laufeyson nods and shuffles his papers, dragging the interruption out longer. A reminder to the jury that rude Mr. Coulson from the state just butted into his brilliant questioning, Clint suspects. “As I was saying,” he continues, and Clint resists the urge to roll his eyes, “you were aware of Mr. Riberio’s incarceration, yes?”

On the witness stand, Howlett shrugs. “Yeah, sure.”

“And you were aware that it is a rather lengthy sentence due to his extensive criminal background?”

“I knew Ricky Riberio’d been in some trouble, sure,” Howlett replies. Something grips the edges of his voice, tightens around it, and Clint’s not so sure that he likes where this is headed. He
glances at Phil just long enough to catch the frown creasing the corners of his mouth. Clint’s seen that frown before—the first time Judge Smithe called up to his office comes to mind, but so does the time that a bottle of orange juice leaked all over Phil’s fridge—and he doesn’t like it.

It’s a doomsday frown, a frown that means shit’s bad and getting worse.

Phil’s throat moves when he swallows. Clint forces himself to focus on Laufeyson.

“And you were aware,” the guy continues, gesturing in a way that kinda reminds Clint of Tony Stark’s dancing hands, “that the offense that earned Mr. Riberio that sentence was due in part to his connection with an organized criminal enterprise?”

Howlett’s face darkens. “Like I said, I know the family.”

“So you did,” Laufeyson replies. He nods, once, and marks something with his pen. Clint presses the toe of his shoe to the floor to keep his leg from jumping. Whatever “narrow path” Laufeyson’s headed down, it’s a dark place Clint knows they don’t wanna go. “Did you speak to Mr. Riberio?”

“When?” asks Howlett.

“During your investigation into the death of his son.”

The expressive, friendly face that the jury’s spent the last couple hours watching, the one with open, dark eyes and a smooth brow, it all crinkles when Howlett frowns. He looks five years older and about five times meaner, like he’s some kinda bad cop from a TV drama. He glances over at the jury for a second; Clint thinks he’s maybe collecting his thoughts.

The problem is, there’s no thoughts to collect. Howlett wets his lips before he says, “Can’t say I did.”

Laufeyson’s face is smooth, almost flawless, but Clint’s pretty sure something like triumph sparks in his beady snake’s eyes. “Did anyone on your investigative team speak to Mr. Riberio?”

“One of my officers drove upstate to the prison and met with him,” Howlett replies. He shifts in his seat like he’s suddenly uncomfortable. Clint grips his pen a little harder than he means to. “Let him know what happened to Jordan.”

“And?”

“And that’s it.”

“No one questioned Mr. Riberio about whether anyone would want to harm his son?” Laufeyson presses.

“No,” Howlett responds, the word edged with something Clint can’t quite place. The guy leans back in his seat and crosses his arms over his chest. He’s suddenly a whole lot broader and intimidating than he was about ten seconds ago, those huge arms resting over that wide chest, and Clint catches himself swallowing. It’s combative, and he’s pretty sure Howlett knows it. “He’s locked up, and we’ve got no reason to—”

“Or whether,” Laufeyson cuts in, his voice sharper this time, “anyone would want to harm him through his son?”

“He’s in a medium-security facility, it’s not like—”
“Or whether any of his former associates were familiar with his son?”

From where Clint’s sitting, he can clearly see Howlett roll his eyes. “Listen, bub,” he answers darkly, a far fucking cry from the agreeable guy who’d chatted up the jury for most of the morning, “I know you’ve got some idea of how this went down, but—”

“Your honor.” The words fall outta Laufeyson’s mouth with a sigh, like he’s all of a sudden exasperated by the whole line of questioning. Clint’s jaw hurts from clenching it, but he knows if he releases, he’s gonna say something he regrets. For what kind of feels like the first time, he realizes just how smart Laufeyson is, how expertly he can play this whole game. ‘Cause whatever soft part of this whole case he’s just pushed his fingers into, Howlett’s riled enough that the next thing Laufeyson says is, “The witness is being unresponsive.”

Howlett huffs out a breath that’s loud enough and rushed enough that the jury’s bound to hear it. A couple feet away, atop the bench, Judge Smithe’s whole face tightens. “Detective, you need to answer the question,” she says, sounding more like a teacher scolding some asshole kid than an actual judge.

Howlett rotates his jaw like he just got slapped. “It’s a fucking stupid—”

“It,” the judge cuts him off sharply, “is an order of the court.” There’s absolutely no humor in her voice. “Answer Mr. Laufeyson’s question.”

Clint watches as Howlett slumps back in his chair. His arms tighten over his chest, and the look he sends Laufeyson—Well, Clint now understands where the hell the whole “if looks could kill” thing came from. Far as he can tell, Laufeyson should be twitching on the floor from the sheer force of Howlett’s anger.

He half-spits the word, “No,” and Clint’s sure this time that the glint in Laufeyson’s eyes is a smile. “I didn’t ask him any of those things.”

“And did anyone on your team ask them?” Laufeyson follows-up, his eyebrows raised like he’s genuinely curious.

“Not that I know,” Howlett answers, and Laufeyson thanks him before he goes to sit down.

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“I’m sure it’s not as bad as it feels,” Steve says optimistically while Clint watches his frozen meal circle the microwave. There’s only an hour for lunch, not that he’s hungry. No, the faces of the jurors—pissed-off, distrustful faces that’d glared Howlett right off the witness stand—are burned into the back of his mind, a thousand times brighter than the dim microwave bulb. “Howlett’s a good cop. He might have a lot of . . . personality—”

“That’s one word for it,” Phil says as he sets the coffee pot back on the burner.

“—but jurors trust him.” The foil from his peanut butter sandwich bounces off the rim of the garbage can. One of these days, Clint’s gonna figure out how a guy who looks like an Olympic athlete has the coordination of a blind, aging horse. “You lost maybe, what, one juror? Easy to get back.”
“At least three,” Clint responds. The timer chimes, and he pops the door on the microwave. Instead of the steam rising off of barely-warmed fettuccine, though, he sees the faces of the jurors they’d lost; Number 9’d glared a hole in the back of Howlett’s head while he walked outta the courtroom, Number 12’d nodded along to Laufeyson’s next two cross-examinations, and the foreperson hadn’t even bothered to look at Phil the whole time he directed the crime scene investigator. He’s memorized other expressions, too, from shock to rage and everything in between. Jordan Silva-Riberio’s still just a faceless dead kid to about half the panel . . . and to just as many, Howlett’s a sloppy cop.

Steve shakes his head. “It’s never as bad as you think,” he replies.

“We lost at least three,” Phil says simply, and Clint watches him walk outta the break room.

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Wednesday feels like a fresh start, mostly, aside from the bitter-cold September wind that whips across the parking lot. The first loose leaves of the season, all of them tiny and yellow-gold, whirl and rush through the air, catching on Clint’s jacket and in his hair. He shakes them off in the employee-only foyer, littering the rug with the damn things.

When he walks into Phil’s office with their coffee, Phil smiles, leans over . . . and picks a stray leaf from his hair. “Happy September,” he says.

Clint loves the way his eyes dance. There’s joy seeping back into them, and it finds those crinkles Clint can never get outta his head. Their dinner in Phil’s office the night before’d been pretty bleak, full of note-reviews and question-restructuring. Clint’d worried, a little, that Laufeyson’s trial tactics’d started wearing on Phil.

Especially since, when they’d kissed goodnight, Phil’d hung on longer than usual, like maybe he’d needed Clint close. Like maybe his worries could be beaten down by Clint’s hand pressed to his side, and by the two of them sharing the same air.

Come home with me, Clint’d murmured where they were half-leaned against Phil’s black sedan, leeching body heat as much as strength from each other.

Phil’d laughed softly against his mouth. After a day like today, I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t sleep, he’d replied, and when Clint’d caught his eyes, he’d known Phil meant it.

“Ready for the day?” he asks now. Phil’s clutching his coffee cup like the stuff inside—stolen from the carafe Thor’s started hording at his desk, now that Jane’s pregnant and moody about it—is the nectar of gods. He breathes in the steam, and Clint—

Clint wants to kick his office door shut and spend ten minutes making out like teenagers.

Except then, Phil says, “Ready as I’ll ever be,” and the day actually starts.

It’s easy, in the adrenaline rush of the trial, to forget that it’s Wednesday morning. Clint questions the coroner, running through the PowerPoint of autopsy pictures and counting, again and again, how many jurors look absolutely outraged. They’re not graphic, but they back up everything the coroner’s explaining about wound depth, strength, and style. He points out places where the slash is rougher, explains the cuts and scrapes on Jordan’s hands—“Classic defensive wounds,” he
informs the jury—and describes exactly how devastating a gut wound can be.

“He would’ve bled out in a few hours,” he elaborates, and juror Number 7 turns pretty green. “Coupled with the cold in the woods that night, Jordan Silva-Riberio died an excruciating death.”

Then, they move onto the diagrams that describe Jordan’s other, more—explicit injuries, and Clint—

Clint spends as much time as the jurors trying not to think too hard about all that.

“I think we got back the couple we lost,” he admits to Bruce and Tony at lunch, watching as Tony picks cilantro (“The devil’s herb!”) off his taco. There’re fewer and fewer food carts out now that the weather’s cooling off, and he’s pretty sure Bruce plans on visiting every last one before they close up for winter. Clint’s hardly hungry—it’s hard to focus on food when you’re worried about rich murderers getting off—but he sucks adobo sauce off his thumb anyway. “The coroner today kinda reminded them why we’re all there, you know?”

“That,” Tony says, shrugging, “and it’s pretty hard to stay on the asshole’s side when some guy’s flashing you pictures of—Goddammit, how much cilantro can somebody put on a single taco?”

He flicks more cilantro onto the sidewalk with all the tossed-up leaves and debris. Clint snorts a laugh and rolls his eyes. “You could’ve said ‘no cilantro,’” he points out.

Tony scowls. “I am not,” he retorts, wiping his saucy fingers on the sleeve of Bruce’s windbreaker, “being the picky asshole in the group.”

“You’re paying for my dry cleaning, though,” Bruce says. Tony reaches for Bruce’s sleeve a second time and Bruce darts away, almost tripping on a sidewalk planter. The wind’s swept his hair into this wavy mess, and his cheeks turn pink when he laughs. Tony laughs, too, and for a second, Clint’s kinda caught in the fact that his life’s turned into this: lunch with friends on a cool fall day, all of them laughing together. He’s a long way from the loner he used to be in high school and college, and he—likes it.

He likes knowing that they’re here for him now, that Natasha and Darcy and a half-dozen others are back in the building, and that Phil’d texted him ten minutes earlier with From now on, I demand a lunch time-share.

He doesn’t really realize that Bruce’s still talking until Tony replies, “Yeah, okay, Rebecca Black.” He glances over in time to see Bruce’s face crumple into a frown. “Oh, come on,” Tony groans, throwing up the hand that’s not gripping his taco. “You’ve seen that video. Everybody has seen that video.”

“The ‘Friday’ video?” Clint asks.

Tony rolls his eyes so blatantly, Clint thinks it might’ve hurt. “Brucie over here—”

“Brucie?” Bruce repeats.

“—just found it necessary to point out that today is Wednesday and tomorrow is Thursday. And I—helpfully, if I may add—informed him that if he continued listing off the days of the week, he’d be Rebecca Black.”

“In what way was that helpful?” Bruce asks. When Tony heaves a sigh, Bruce reaches over and snags an onion outta Tony’s taco. He drops it in his mouth, sucks salsa from his index finger, and shrugs. Tony, Clint notices, watches every move like he’s never seen Bruce before. “I just meant
that . . . Well. Tomorrow’s Thursday.”

His eyes drift in Clint’s direction, this careful little glance, and Clint—Well, for one, Clint’s pretty sure he can’t eat any more of his taco. He stares at it as they walk down the street, the little leaves rushing around them, and tries to think about what he wants to say. Tony chews with all the subtlety of an entire herd of cattle, but Bruce’s . . . quiet. Thoughtful, Clint knows, ‘cause that’s kinda Bruce’s default.

He swallows around the lump in the back of his throat.

“Tomorrow’s Thursday,” he acknowledges. The words feel heavy, a nice match to his leaden shoulders. He tries to shrug them, but he knows it’s more of a slump than anything else. “I—don’t know what else I’m even supposed to say about it all, right now.”

“Nervous?” And for all his constant bluster, it’s Tony who asks the question. It’s low, almost gentle, a far cry from the guy who’d stood in his living room and bullied him into coming back to work. Tony’s dark eyes sweep his face for a second, but then Clint can’t hold the eye contact any longer. “Secrets have secrets,” Tony presses, but without the usual Stark brashness. “Who’re Bruce and I gonna tell?”

Clint wets his lips. “Yeah,” he admits. His head bobs like one of those weird weighted birds that act like they’re drinking out of a glass. It’s mechanical, almost automatic, but for some reason, he’s gotta keep moving. “I’m fucking terrified.”

“Good.” When he looks back up, Tony’s still staring him down, big-eyed and considerate. He reaches over and claps him on the shoulder—but then his hand kinda lingers. Not for long, and not like he does to Bruce after—’cause once he’s finished with Clint, he slings an arm around Bruce’s shoulders and leaves it there—but enough that Clint notices.

A lotta people’d notice Tony Stark’s kindness if they just took the time.

“Why’s it good?” Clint thinks to ask a couple minutes later, once Tony’s settled a little too close to Bruce and is letting Bruce pick another couple bits of onion out of his taco.

“Because being nervous means it matters,” Bruce answers, and Clint knows in his belly that the guy’s right.

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“Disciplinary Review Hearing Number 209 is called to order.”

The disciplinary hearing room is about as friendly as a jail cell and twice as bleak. Clint, like everybody else in the room, rises when the three committee members file in to sit behind an excessively-large desk. The whole thing, actually, feels like a study in large-versus-small; the table the rent-a-bailiff pointed him to feels like one of those kindergarten tables, too low for any adult, and the crappy office chair’s even worse. He’d tried, before the committee members arrived, to raise the damn thing, but fiddling with the stupid plastic handle just made the whole thing creak. He’s lucky he didn’t break it.

There’re no windows in the disciplinary hearing room, mostly ‘cause it’s in the basement of the judicial complex. The actual basement, where Clint’d always assumed files went to be organized
by zombie clerks who’d never seen daylight. It’s nestled between a couple unused offices and one of the file rooms, and all the bright white paint in the world can’t cheer the place up. The overhead lights remind Clint of the bright-white bulbs in old cop movies, used to “sweat” suspects. The room’s too small for the oversized state seal on the wall and the rows of church-style wooden benches that make up the gallery, but it’s also just a little too large for three bar committee members in pressed black suits.

Clint shifts his weight from foot to foot as he watches the three of them settle into their chairs.

It’s been a long day. Not really ‘cause of the Killgrave trial—no, that’s moving along at about the speed he and Phil expected it would, the state finishing up its parade of witnesses just before lunch—but ‘cause of the mounting fear in Clint’s belly. He’d fought against it all afternoon Wednesday, robotically walking through the fingerprint and DNA evidence with the witnesses and not really remembering much of what he was saying. Phil’d noticed and taken over from there, his tone actually moving to make up for the way every one of Clint’s questions came out stilted.

He’d hated himself for his lack of control and the way he refused to settle. But even after court’d adjourned for the day, and he and Phil’d taken off down the street to grab dinner at the pancake place, he couldn’t quite turn off his head.

After about ten minutes of pushing the pancakes around on his plate without eating, Phil’d noticed it, too. We can talk about it, he’d offered. Clint’d watched his hands instead of his face. He’d put down his silverware and folded fingers together, like some kinda boyfriend-shaped therapist. It’d taken a lot of Clint’s fraying restraint not to harass him for it. What to expect, the questions the board’ll ask, whether you should make a—

Could we . . . not? His voice’d sounded far-away, almost foreign. He’d forced his chin to lift, tracing the edges of Phil’s tie and his perfectly-pressed collar before meeting his eyes. It’d amazed him, somehow, that Phil’s whole face stayed so soft in the face of—this.

In the face of a failure sitting across from him, a guy who’d screwed up bad enough that he could lose pretty much everything.

Phil’s lips had pressed together, but not in a frown. If you’d rather, he’d said. It’d come out stiff, like maybe he’d wanted to say something else.

Please, Clint’d replied, almost . . . murmuring. Like some kinda secret. His hand’d moved without permission, starting to reach over, and then he’d stopped himself. Hesitated, mostly, his fingers outstretched in the middle of the table.

Phil’d known, though, ‘cause Phil somehow always knew. He’d unfolded his hands to offer up a palm, and they’d sat like that for a couple minutes. They’d held on, and Clint—

Clint’d pressed his face into Phil’s shoulder that night in Phil’s bed, surrounded by his scent and silence.

Silence for some people wasn’t reassuring. Silence for Clint, the night before, had meant everything.

But there’s no silence in a trial, and all Thursday morning, Clint’d sworn he heard every breath in the courtroom. Even after they finished questioning the last witness, a receptionist from P.M.R. Advertising who’d seen Jordan leave after-hours more times than she could count—“Almost every day,” she’d reported, wringing her hands, “and never with any of the other kids.”—Clint’d been almost hyper-aware of the noises around him. People cleared throats, shifted positions in their
seats, bit nails, tapped pencils, sighed, and huffed. They swallowed, scratched, scoffed, and Clint—

Clint’d felt like he’d been stuck in a jail cell and subjected to human-noise surround-sound.

Judge Smithe’d adjourned court around quarter ‘till, leaving Clint enough time to run up to the
office and dump the file, but he . . . hadn’t. Instead, he’d stood in the hallway while everybody else
filed out. I’ll be down in a few minutes, Phil’d assured him, and he’d forced himself to smile.

At least, ‘till Phil walked outta sight and he could go dry-heave in the bathroom.

He’d stared at himself in the mirror when he was done, his eyes teary and red from the force of the
heaves. He’d looked older, more drawn and weathered than the kid who’d knocked over a 7-11
with his brother and a bunch of neighborhood kids, and for a couple minutes, he’d been unable to
break his own gaze. Who was this guy, this new Clint Barton who’d snuck into his shoes when he
wasn’t looking? What happened to the twenty-something who’d clawed his way through
undergrad, convinced he’d be a great lawyer?

He’d bent to splash his face with water, but it hadn’t helped. Stupid, optimistic Clint Barton, he’d
been gone a long time. And Clint’d suddenly not been so sure whether he liked this new version,
the one who’d practically burned his life down with a lie.

When he stepped outta the bathroom the hallway’d been empty of everybody. He’d wandered the
abandoned hall with his hands in his pockets, trying to remember the last time the judicial
complex’d been so quiet. It’d left him with this weird kinda post-apocalyptic feeling, like when
Rick from The Walking Dead woke up to find the world silent and still. It made riding down in the
elevator, his face almost too-cool from the stop in the bathroom, feel like the loneliest act in the
damn world.

Except, when he’d stepped out of the elevator, everyone’d been waiting.

Not everyone in some overblown hyperbolic sense of the word, either. No, crowded in the hallway
and chattering anxiously was every last person who mattered: Tony, Bruce, Natasha, Thor, and
Steve; Pepper, Jane, Darcy, and Peggy; Wade Wilson, Bucky Barnes, Maria Hill, and Nick Fury;
and, in the middle of it all, his hands in the pockets of those navy slacks, Phil Coulson. Phil, who’d
raised his head and smiled at Clint in a way that’d almost chased the nerves away.

Clint’d forgotten how to breathe, standing in there in front of his friends. In front of the people who
mattered, the ones who’d welcomed him to the office and who believed in him.

The people who love him, and who he loves back.

“Be seated,” the committee says, and Clint sits.

“We’re here today on the disciplinary matter of Mr. Clinton Barton,” one of the committee
members says, and Clint rubs his hands on his slacks while he looks at her. She’s probably in her
fifties, with this mass of curly red hair that looks outta place against her pressed black suit. Every
move she makes is crazy-efficient; she flips open the file and places her pen on the cover to keep it
from flying up, sorts through the papers inside, and starts reading them. “Mr. Barton, a report was
made by Mr. Loki Laufeyson three weeks ago indicating some . . . fairly serious questions about
your ability to practice law in this state.” She glances up, her eyes stern and serious through her
glasses. “You are aware of this?”

Somewhere behind him, Clint’s pretty sure he hears Tony mutter asshole. He presses his lips
together to hold down the nervous smile. “Yes, ma’am,” he answers.
“Mr. Laufyeson’s complaint indicates that you failed to report your juvenile criminal history on your bar application.” The second member of the committee, an older guy with liver-spotted hands and a really bad white comb over, shakes his head. Clint swallows at the note of disappointment in his voice. “He further alleges that you failed to report this history on your law school application, as well.”

The guy pauses and looks right at Clint, his eyes watery and rimmed with wrinkles. He reminds Clint of an English bulldog. The silence builds ‘till he shifts his weight around and says, “Yeah.”

“Yes?” the second member repeats.

“Well, yeah,” Clint says, again. His fingers tap against his leg, and he suddenly wants something to fidget with: a pen, a paperclip, a bit of paper. He can’t remember the last time he felt like an animal in a zoo, but he sure as hell doesn’t like it. He presses his toes hard to the bottom of his shoe, ‘cause it’s that or start his foot tapping. “Mr. Laufeyson found those things out. I’m not surprised that’s what was in his complaint.”

The third member, a younger guy with this sort of auburn hair (Clint wonders if maybe red hair is a prerequisite for sitting on the disciplinary board) and Coke-bottle-thick glasses, nods slightly. Clint almost finds it reassuring ‘till he asks, “Then you’re also aware that Mr. Laufeyson’s complaint states the district attorney’s office knew about your history and did nothing?”

Clint’s mouth dries out. He tries to swallow, but finds out quick that he can’t. “No,” he answers. The guy frowns. “Then you weren’t a—”

“I mean, no, they didn’t.” He doesn’t realize he’s cut the guy off ‘till it’s too late, and the other two members kinda scowl at him. He shifts around in his chair, trying to sit up a little straighter, but his heart’s filling up his throat. The third guy, the younger one, he just kinda keeps watching Clint, so he drags in a breath.

*Gotta learn to love the deep end,* Barney used to say before he pushed Clint into the community pool with all his clothes on.

“I’m not denying the parts of the complaint about me,” he presses, and he swears he’s ten and feeling the water rush up to meet him. “I mean, I’m gonna answer all your questions about them, and I hope you’ll let me explain, but those things . . . They’re about me, and they’re on me.” He presses his palms to the table. “But the district attorney’s office, they didn’t know about it. Not my assistant, not my boss, none of them. Until Laufeyson paraded it out in front of the whole court, the only people who knew about it were me, my brother, and the other guys at the robbery that night. Nobody else.”

The woman presses her lips into this thin, kinda half-mean line. “And you never thought to tell them?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “What happened back when I was seventeen, it . . . ” The words escape, and he tries to swallow again. His throat feels parched, but there’s no water at the table. He’s left fighting with the prickling in the back of his throat and the thrum of his pulse behind his ears. “I never even thought of telling them.”

“But that aside,” the older man says, his voice low and shaky, “you didn’t report it on your application. That alone is a serious problem. You had to be aware that you were required to report.”

“Yeah, I know,” Clint admits.
“Then why didn’t you?”

“’Cause that guy, he—wasn’t me, any more, by the time I applied to law school.” He feels like an animal on display, like he’s seated behind glass instead of in a weirdly-proportioned room with all his friends behind him. He wets his lips, but it really doesn’t help. “And ’cause he wasn’t who I was gonna be.”

Outta the corner of his eye, Clint kinda thinks he sees the younger man nod to himself again, but then the room goes quiet. The three committee members all exchange glances. The woman keeps worrying her lips, smearing her too-red lipstick and getting a little on her teeth; the older guy clears his throat a couple times and swivels back and forth in his chair. They all spend a couple minutes sorting through their papers, squinting at the records in front of them. Clint’s not sure what they’ve got, exactly—maybe the expungement records, maybe his actual juvenile file, maybe something else—but they spend a lot of time combing through all of it.

Finally, the woman looks up. “I think we’re going to have to start at the beginning,” she says. She pulls off her glasses and sets them, upside down, atop the file. “Starting from when you robbed that store.”

“Okay,” Clint says, and—after he pulls in a breath that shakes a little—he . . . starts talking.

It’s different in a lotta ways, telling the disciplinary committee the same story he’d told Phil out on his crooked brick patio. There’s no bug zapper and no beer, no distracting dog or cloud of barbeque smoke, but Clint tries not to focus on those differences. He works on all the things he hadn’t been able to do back at Phil’s house; he keeps his voice steady and maintains as much eye contact as he can. When his chest starts to feel tight, he presses his fingertips against the table and forces himself to keep talking, to keep recounting the story of a stupid asshole kid and his big mistake.

The room narrows, the more he talks, and he starts to forget that there’s anybody there besides him, the curly-haired woman, the younger guy, and the English bulldog. He doesn’t let himself think about how Tony and Bruce’re sitting behind him, about how Darcy and Natasha are hearing this all the first time, about how the story must sound to Phil’s ears the second time around. No, it’s all about him and these three strangers, all about making them understand that the seventeen-year-old Clint Barton isn’t the Clint Barton with the law degree.

Every once in a while, they stop him with a question, and he tries to fill in all the gaps as best he knows how. He tells them the last time he smoked pot (freshman year of undergrad), whether he ever did anything stronger (not once in his life, thanks), and whether he’s broken any laws since (and he gets a chuckle when he asks, “Does speeding count?”). He admits to his halfway-shifty credit score (it’s not easy to put yourself through school, okay?), his kinda mad-cap collection of odd jobs, and the fact that, yeah, one of his professors in undergrad did accuse him of cheating on a term paper. He spreads out his whole life in front of the committee, and he doesn’t bitch when they leave no stone unturned.

He thinks, at one point, that he should. He thinks maybe he should stop, hold up his hands, and protest that everybody he cares about is in this room, hearing his life’s secrets.

But it—kinda doesn’t feel like a breach of trust, all of a sudden.

Instead, it feels like . . . peeling off a bandage and letting everybody around him see the fresh, pink scar.

“This has certainly been . . . enlightening,” the curly-haired woman says after Clint finishes listing
off all the volunteer work he did back in undergrad (which, really, was just coaching a high school archery team, if he’s honest). She glances down at the file again, her lips worried back into that tight line. “There are a few things my colleagues and I need to discuss this evening. I would like to reconvene tomorrow morning at 9 a.m., at which time you’ll have an opportunity to make any final remarks about what action we should take.”

Clint swallows the tightness that’s suddenly clamped down in the back of his throat. “And then you—decide?” he asks.

“Probably not,” the younger guy says. Clint thinks maybe the little twist of his lips is some measure of kindness. “We generally take a few days to make our official recommendations. But you’re allotted an opportunity to speak on your behalf before we set anything in stone.”

Clint nods. “Okay,” he says. It comes out thick-tongued and clumsy, like he doesn’t really know what’s left to say. He raises his chin enough to look at all three committee members. They don’t look any more human than they did at the start, but he kinda hopes he does. “For what it’s worth, thanks.”

The older guy looks startled, like he didn’t expect it, and the woman blinks. It’s only the young guy, the one with the glasses, who smiles. “You’re welcome,” he says, and Clint can tell he means it.

Everybody stands with the committee members, and they stay standing while the three of them walk out. It’s silent, the whole room heavy with the tension ’till the door shuts behind them. Clint holds his breath for a couple extra seconds afterwards, just in case.

At least, he holds it ’till Tony says, “You should’ve just offered to sleep with them.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Clint retorts, but the best part about looking out into the front of the room is that nobody can see his little grin.

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In the dark, Phil says, “It’s going to be okay.”

Clint isn’t sure how late it is, or how long they’ve been tangled together under the blankets in Clint’s bed. The whole evening after the disciplinary hearing is still a blur, even all these hours later; he remembers shaking a whole lot of hands and being victim to a couple pretty ridiculous Darcy Lewis bear-hugs, but that’s about it. No, the only thing he’s certain of is the same thing he’d been certain of when they stepped onto the elevator after the hearing:

Phil.

Phil’s murmur is as warm as it is soft, and for a couple seconds, Clint just sorta enjoys the silence that comes after. His face is pressed into the back of Phil’s neck, his nose and lips resting against skin that nobody but Clint ever gets to touch, and everything he feels for Phil blooms in his belly. It climbs up through his chest and into his throat, and he forgets how to speak. It’s like a vine, but fuller; as much as it chokes him, it kinda also makes it easier to breathe.

Back when he started at the district attorney’s office, all he’d really felt was want. He’d wanted to taste Phil’s mouth, feel those strong hands on his skin, push a guy he barely knew into the mattress.
Phil’d been a competent, sexy stranger in a well-cut suit, a guy who paid attention to Clint when everybody else’d kinda waited to see whether he failed, and it’d felt . . . new. Different, in a lotta ways, from being the good-looking quiet guy who you maybe hit on in a bar the one time.

But it’s not want anymore.

It’s bigger, now, warmer and rounder, and Clint presses his palm to the middle of Phil’s chest in the dark. Phil shifts, turning slowly in his grip ‘till they’re facing each other. For a couple seconds, Clint’s not sure which leg belongs to whom, ‘cause he’s watching Phil’s face in the dim light from the street lamps. His face’s half-shadowed, but that doesn’t matter: Clint recognizes every line, every freckle, every detail. He’s memorized them in the months since Phil kissed him in the park. Every meal, every walk, every long night of sweat-slick skin’s given him another chance to study that face. He’s memorized lips, eyelashes, laugh lines, and glances.

He wouldn’t trade that knowledge for anything. Not a guilty verdict in the Killgrave case, and not a pass from the disciplinary committee.

They watch each other in the almost-dark for a long time, fingers tracing meaningless patterns on skin. When Clint finally finds his voice, it cracks, a low, trembling sound he doesn’t really expect. “It might not be.”

“It went well,” Phil replies. His hand settles on Clint’s hip. He’d held on there before, too, fingers digging into Clint’s skin between hungry kisses. Even after they’d half-climbed, half-fallen onto Clint’s mattress, Phil’d kept his hand there. Like ownership, Clint’d thought, and kissed him harder for it. “You didn’t dodge any of their questions, and I think they liked you more for it. Tomorrow, you can say a few words and—”

“It might not be, Phil.” It’s a lost murmur, and Clint only realizes he’s been watching Phil’s mouth ‘cause of the effort it takes to meet his eyes. He sucks in a breath, trying to even out the tremor in the back of his throat, but he knows immediately it’s a failed effort. “This could—” He wets his lips. “I could get disbarred. I could throw the trial into jeopardy, throw my convictions into jeopardy, and that’s not even thinking about the P.R. nightmare. This could all end with me having a—useless degree and nothing else left.”

Phil shakes his head. “Not nothing,” he says, quietly. He pauses, the words hanging in the dark of the bedroom. Clint thinks for a second that’s all he’s gonna say, but then the steady hand on his hip lifts. Phil’s fingers are warm and gentle on Clint’s cheek, and Clint— He forgets, for a second, how he’s supposed to think or breathe. He watches the way Phil’s eyes trace his face—the way Phil watches him—and realizes Phil’s not finished.

He’s just . . . waiting.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow,” he admits, his voice almost a whisper. Clint kinda wants to joke about it, the great Phil Coulson not knowing something, but Phil’s fingers are still drifting against his skin. “I don’t know whether we’ll win the trial, or what the committee’ll decide. I just know that I’ll still be here.” His fingertips slip along Clint’s jaw and down to his neck, warm and sure. “No matter what the outcome, I’ll be here. And that’s the thing you have to understand, the one thing that—matters, from all this. I won’t go anywhere.”

When their eyes meet, Clint’s entire body jumps in rhythm with his pulse.

“Because I love you.”

It’s almost a whisper, like a secret that nobody else’ll ever hear, and Clint— Clint lays there for a
minute, just *looking* at Phil. Looking at the one thing he never really figured he’d get, even after he’d left the trailer park for good: a man who loves him for *all* of him. ‘Cause Phil, he knows every lump, every bruise, every secret . . . and he’s here.

He’s here, in front of Clint, holding his eyes.

He’s here, warm and *real*, and—

“I love you, too,” Clint says, clumsily, a rush in the middle of a breath. “I was gonna tell you the other day, but—”

There’s more to say, and a lot of it: about the trial and the hearing, about all the thousand reasons that he’s fallen in love with Phil Coulson, about how he feels a little like he’s waited for this for full *years*, about the years he wants to spend with Phil. But Phil’s kissing him before he can say any of it, and Clint promptly gives up on words.

In the morning, before the September sun’s risen all the way into what promises to be a bright blue sky, he watches Phil sleep. His eyelashes are dark on his cheeks, his lips are parted, and as much as Clint’s *anxious* about the day, he . . . kinda has faith in it, too.

The trial and the hearing, they might not end up the way he wants them to. He knows this, even if he’s not all the way ready for it.

But he also thinks that the most important part, the *Phil* part, has already turned out right.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed them, I posted two Christmas stories set in the Motion Practice universe earlier this week:

*I Saw Daddy Texting Santa Claus* (Steve/Bucky, Dot): Steve's American family Christmas includes one small snag.

*Not Calm, but Bright* (Phil/Clint, with cameos from much of the office): Phil believes in his family, but he also believes in Clint.

If you've not read them yet but choose to, I hope you enjoy!
When Clint Barton takes a job prosecuting traffic offenses and DUIs at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, he's pretty sure his life is finally going in the right direction. But the problem isn't the direction: it's where he ends up.

In this chapter, Clint reconciles the boy he was, the man he's become, the people he cares about, and the life he's assembled for himself.

Chapter Notes

Crediting a witness is the practice of making a witness believable and trustworthy to the court and jury.

CLE stands for “continuing legal education.” Almost all states require that attorneys attend a certain number of programs and seminars for CLE credit each year in order to keep their licenses current.

This and the subsequent chapter beta-read by Jen.

“I, uh, I don’t have a ton to say for myself.”

The funny room in the basement feels bigger, in the morning, and Clint fidgets with his pen as he stands behind the too-short table. They’re headed up to the trial as soon as the hearing’s over, and the Killgrave file’s half-spread in front of him; his legal pad’s open to a blank page, and there’re neon sticky-tabs all over his notes from yesterday afternoon. He stares at them for a couple seconds, trying to put his thoughts together.

It doesn’t work.

His heart’s in his throat, but his pulse’s in his belly. His chest feels tight, like he can’t really breathe, but he’s breathing too fast at the same time. His fingers twitch, but his feet feel glued to the floor. He’s not sure how that all works, really, or why his body’s kinda rebelling against him. He just knows that it—makes it hard to slow his mind down.

The wooden pew-benches are filled to capacity again with everybody who matters. They were already there when he came down, pressed together on the unpadded benches, and he’d stared at them from the doorway for a couple seconds. Yesterday, having everybody there’d spurred him on, like rocket fuel. He’d felt stronger for it. In the cold light of morning, though, it feels—different. They’re not those buttress things on old buildings, holding him up, today. Problem is, he’s not sure what else they are.

He’d stood under the spray of his shower while Phil’d made their coffee, rehearsing the words that
feel trapped in the back of his mind. Except he’s already told his story and bared all the ugly pieces of his past. He’s not sure what else there is to add.

‘Cause Phil’s right. No matter what happens, in the end, they’ll have each other. He’ll have his friends, his brain, and a college degree.

But he doesn’t wanna lose his job, either. He doesn’t wanna quit being a lawyer. He—

He wants to be like Judge Smithe said when she sat him down after Laufeyson’s big announcement. He wants to be more than just where he came from.

He presses his fingers to the tabletop and swallows. He feels like he’s downed three pots of coffee, but all he’s really had are a couple sips of the stuff with an orange juice chaser. His stomach’s churning like it wants to digest a stone. It makes him feel like he’s gonna throw up.

“You aren’t required to say anything in your defense,” the curly-haired comittee member points out. Clint’s head jerks up, almost involuntarily, and he meets her eyes. There’s something sympathetic in them. He just wonders how much of that’s pity instead of sympathy. “If you don’t have anything to say, you can sit down.”

“I know, it’s not—” Clint pulls in a breath and tries to square his shoulders, but it all kinda ends in a shake his head. He feels like his words are grains of sand, slipping through his fingers. He can’t stop them. They’re too small, too quick, and they all slip through the cracks.

So instead of holding on, he gives up trying.

“Look,” he says, setting his pen down on the table. “I screwed up. I know I did. I thought I’d get an expungement ‘cause of how young and stupid I was when I helped rob that store, and I didn’t.” He raises his hands a couple inches, then sets them back on the table. They don’t dance across the surface the way he expects them to. For once, his fingertips are—steady. “And after I didn’t, I skipped out on doing the right thing and just never told anyone. Not my law school, not the bar, not the people I worked with.” He twists just enough to glance over his shoulder. The rows of people are still there, watching him. Taking care of him, he thinks, ‘cause they’re his friends. They’re his world, this . . . thing he’s built without really meaning to. “I didn’t trust anybody with it,” he says, and his eyes meet Phil’s for a couple seconds. “That’s on me.

“But I grew up in a place where I never thought I’d even get here,” he continues, twisting back to the committee members. All three of them are watching him, even-eyed and serious. The stone in his belly shifts, and he swallows around it. “My boss, not too long ago, he said he figured that I had to have something ugly in my past ‘cause of where I came from. And I don’t think it’s as bad as that, but . . .” He wets his lips. “But at the same time, he’s kinda right. Guys who grow up where I did, they usually don’t get through high school. And me, I tried to make the choice to get away from that. To be something different. I just—didn’t do a great job, I guess.”

He thinks about the way Anissa gripped him outside the conference room, that day she came in to talk to Phil. He tries to imagine what it must’ve been like for Jordan, sitting around with the same kinds of assholes Clint used to sit with, hearing about the guy who’d gotten out.

Jordan, Clint thinks, could’ve been another him. Another kid who fought his way past where he’d grown up.

He’ll never get that chance, but he’s not the last kid out in the trailer park.

Clint swallows, again, around the heaviness in his chest. “The fact is, I—”
But right then, something creaks behind him. It’s loud enough to break his concentration, loud enough to carry through the room, and Clint’s whole body flinches as he twists around. He’s not sure what he expects, exactly—maybe Laufeyson slipping into the room with a whole new list of accusations or Fury storming out ‘cause Clint’s just recounted their conversation.

Except what he gets, it’s—way outside what he’s bracing himself for, and not just ‘cause everybody else’s turned to look at the door, either.

No, it’s ‘cause the person hovering in the doorway, his hand pressed to the knob to keep the damn thing from slamming, is Barney.

He’s dressed in a clean navy t-shirt and a pair of his better jeans, and Clint can tell even from where he’s standing that he’s showered, shaved, and put in a little effort. Whether he’s sober is a whole other story, but he closes the door quietly behind him. “Sorry,” he says in a low voice, and then slips onto the back-most bench.

Everybody else starts to turn back around—Darcy murmurs something to Jane, Tony nudges Bruce in the ribs, Hill raises an eyebrow—but Clint, he can’t stop staring.

He’d thought yesterday that everybody who he cared about’d shown up for his hearing. Now, with Barney there, he realizes how fucking wrong he’d been.

“No, now, it’s something . . . bigger.”

“What I did was wrong,” Clint finally says. He’s surprised at the way his voice doesn’t shake. When he raises his hands in some kinda surrender, his palms up like a prayer, they’re steady instead of trembling. “I broke rules we’re supposed to respect. And I know you’re thinking that it was for a dumb reason, but the only reason I’ve got is that I wanted this.”

He draws in a breath and holds it ‘till his chest burns.

“I wanted to be a lawyer,” he says, his hands landing back on the table. “I wanted to do something good with my life. I’m not gonna stop wanting that. Even if it means that, yeah, I sometimes screw it up.” He shrugs, a little, and kinda—shakes his head. “But here’s the thing, I think, about this job: it’s done as much good for me as I’m doing for it. ‘Cause ten or fifteen years ago, I would’ve thought I’d be locked up right now. Instead, I’m sitting second chair on an important trial. I’ve got two degrees.”

Clint glances back over his shoulder, at the people who’re there for him. At bossy Darcy and her thousand jelly bracelets. At Natasha, the queen of Russian opera and nasty little looks. At Thor, who’d punched his brother for airing Clint’s dirty laundry, and Jane, who Thor’s probably gonna marry. He looks at Steve and Bucky, who love each other and their kid almost as much as they...
love justice, and at Tony and Bruce, who’ll probably figure out the same thing one of these days. He looks at his unlikely friend Wade, at Peggy, Pepper, Hill, and Fury. He memorizes them like he’s never gonna see them again, but that’s not it.

No, it’s that this is his life, now. These are his people.

He looks at Barney, the brother who spent years locked up so Clint wouldn’t.

And he looks at Phil, the guy who loves him.

“I burned all kinds of bridges to start over,” Clint says quietly, and forces himself to turn back around. “I tried to bury the guy who grew up in the trailer park outside Colier Woods. But that guy, he’s still the one standing here today. He’s just a lawyer now. A good lawyer and a good guy, and he gets better every day.”

He wets his lips, and then swallows around the lump in his throat. He feels his whole body tremble, just once, head to toe.

Once, when they were kids, Barney’d said, The only way to stay alive’s to be the armor and the sword at the same fucking time. Clint’d carried that around for years, turned it into some kinda mantra.

Except now, he thinks maybe the best armor’s the kind you peel off and leave on the floor.

“If that’s not enough to lemme have another chance,” he says, raising his head to look at the committee, “then I’ll find another way to keep making something outta my life. But nothing’ll matter to me more than this. More than what I do now. And that’s all I can really say, I guess.”

He doesn’t realize how strong his voice is, how certain it all sounds, ‘till the last syllable fades into a whisper and he’s left standing there, fingertips pressed to the table and his whole body still. The committee members are still, too, almost statue-frozen. The adrenaline starts to wear off right then, and the longer Clint watches them, the more his stomach transforms back into stone.

In the gallery—if you can call it that—he hears Tony whisper, “Can we clap?” He’s pretty sure the shushing sound after comes from Bruce.

Finally, the curly-haired woman clears her throat. “Thank you, Mr. Barton,” she says stiffly. Her fingers clutch the edges of her file. Next to her, the English bulldog stares down at the top of their shared desk. Clint’s only sign of hope’s the way the younger guy shoots a tight look at the woman. “We will take your remarks under advisement. Expect to hear from us next week. Otherwise, we are adjourned.”

The committee rises, and Clint kinda straightens up when they do. He feels his chest start to burn right around the time the door closes behind them, and realizes only after he releases all the tension that he’d stopped breathing. The rows erupt with noise after that, and he’s swept up in the tide of it. In the aisle, everybody wants to shake his hand, clap him on the shoulder, or hug him. He feels like a ghost even when he’s gripping hands and grinning back, and he falls into a rhythm with it; he squeezes Jane lightly and accepts Tony’s two-handed grip of a handshake, he grins at Thor’s cheering praise and shares a stiff handshake with Hill, and then he ends up with Wade Wilson’s hands dangerously close to his ass in a hug that’s probably R-rated.

There’re other movements, too, balancing it all out: Darcy grabs the Killgrave stuff outta his hands and heads out the door, saying, “I’m going to trip Laufeyson so you have five minutes to breathe!”, Tony and Bruce wander out of the room while arguing about whether it’s premature to throw Clint
a victory party, Steve touches his elbow and sends him the world’s most heartfelt smile. Clint
soaks it in, almost like sunbeams on a cold day, but the sun doesn’t last forever. People start filing
out, the handshakes disappear, and eventually, he’s left sorta standing there with Phil.

Phil, who touches Clint in the middle of his back with a hand that’s not just friendly. Clint’s
tempted to lean into it, to flatten his body against Phil’s, but that’s kinda against whatever
unofficial rules they’ve set up around work. Instead, he lets his belly warm from Phil’s touch, his
smile, and the way he says, “You did good.”

“You’d say that if I froze,” Clint accuses, ‘cause it’s that or admit that his ears are kinda burning.

“Maybe,” Phil replies. Clint nudges him, his elbow pressing to the soft part of Phil’s side. It’s not
sharp, though, and it’s not meant to jab him. It’s just an excuse to touch. “But you can’t prove
that.”

“I’ll get it out of you.”

“I’m sure you’ll try.”

They stand like that for a couple seconds longer, the corners of Phil’s mouth twitching like he’s
either gonna make a joke or kiss Clint—Clint himself isn’t sure which—but then, the moment
fragments. Like all moments do, he thinks, but not in a bad way.

Phil’s hand slides down his back and then disappears, and the warmth fades from his arm. “Darcy’s not going to be able to stall the trial much longer,” Phil points out, and Clint nods.

“I should come—” Clint starts to say, half-blindly, but then Phil raises his eyebrows. He tilts his
head a couple centimeters to one side, and Clint follows the motion.

Follows it, then wets his lips.

Standing the back of the room, his hip against one of the pew-benches, is Barney. He’s staring at
the floor, right now, but Clint’s pretty sure that’s not where his attention’s been this whole time.

He glances at Phil. “I’ll be up in a minute,” he says, and Phil nods. He leaves Clint there, standing
in the middle of the aisle, and heads out. For a second, Clint imagines that Barney flicks his eyes up
at Phil, and that Phil nods. Except that’s fucking impossible, ‘cause it’s his brother and his—guy.

The door settles against the jamb, and they’re alone. The silence feels like a lead weight, dragging
them both down into some kinda darkness Clint’s not used to, but the only thing he can come up
with to say is, “You came.”

It’s dumb as hell, and Clint knows it as soon as he says it. It comes out quieter than he means it to,
like his tongue’s too thick for his mouth. He swallows around the thickness and shoves his hands
in his pockets. Down at the end of the room, Barney mirrors the motion. His jeans slip down on his
hips, and Clint’s reminded all of a sudden how far this man is from the broad big brother he grew
up with.

But then, Barney nods, and his hair flops around in a way that’s all Barney. He lifts his shoulders

“I—” The words rush up and smack Clint, though, and then he can’t really process what Barney’s
actually said. He blinks. “What?”
“Phil, he—said this thing today, it was important. Said I should show up.” When Barney lifts his head and looks over, Clint can see how clear and sharp his eyes are. They’re dark eyes, but certain, and remind him of some of Tony’s more determined looks. There’s no pot-induced haze there, today. Clint knows it won’t last forever—hell, he’s pretty sure it won’t last the rest of the day—but his heart jumps at it as hard as it jumps thinking about how Phil called his brother. He forgets that they’re even having a conversation, right then.

At least, ’till Barney says, “Turns out, your guy was right.”

Clint nods for a couple seconds, just collecting his thoughts. “Right about what part?”

“You think I don’t know that?” Clint interrupts. His feet move without permission, bringing him down the aisle ‘till he’s standing right in front of Barney. Before he can stop himself, he raises a hand and pushes his palm into his brother’s shoulder. It’s the lightest shove in history, barely moving him, but it’s . . . something. It’s the most contact they’ve had in months, unless you count when Clint’d tried to kick the shit outta him. “I was so scared of fucking up that I fucked everything up more, when really, I should’ve just . . . said something.”

Barney snorts. “Story of your life, B,” he returns, but Clint can see the way the corners of his mouth are twisting. When their eyes meet, that twist transforms into a full-out shit-eating grin. “Remember Bobbi, back in the ninth grade? You were so afraid of her, you spilled your milk all over her, what, three weeks in a fuckin’ row?”

The only way Clint knows to keep from laughing is to roll his eyes. Barney elbows him for it, but the way he breathes kinda sounds like a barely-contained laugh of his own. “You’re the only person on the planet who remembers that shit,” Clint accuses. “Me and the whole fuckin’ school!” Barney retorts. He shoves Clint again, but this time, Clint shoves him back. They rock into each other, both of them trying not to laugh, but Barney can’t stop his big damn mouth. “So terrified of a girl maybe liking you that you practically drowned her to get away. I’m surprised they let you keep eating school lunch, you went through so many milk cartons.” Their elbows crack together when Barney tries to jab him again, and the two-second swears of pain dissolve into laughter. Actual laughter, not some half-assed attempt at it, and the smile Barney flashes over at Clint is—real. Warm and full, one that finds his eyes.

Clint remembers the big brother who used to chase all the shadows away when he sees that smile. He wonders how long it’s been lurking under all the pot and anger, waiting to come out.

It sticks around, though, even when Barney says, “I should’ve been a better brother the whole damn time. Not just when we were kids. You know?”

It’s soft and warm, and Clint shrugs his way through it. Not ‘cause it doesn’t matter, but because shrugging’s the only way to hide how deep he feels it, and how full that feeling is. “You and me both,” he replies in something that’s kinda like a whisper, and they both just leave it at that.

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At one p.m., when the trial starts up again after lunch, Laufeyson rises to his full height and says, “The defense calls Mr. Zebediah Killgrave to the stand.”

The whole day’s been the defense’s case, a parade of P.M.R. Advertising employees that Clint’s pretty sure have no value except for making Killgrave look great and Jordan look like an asshole kid who didn’t deserve the breaks that, as one secretary put it, “fell into his lap.” They’re the dedicated employees, the ones that Clint figures get five-figure Christmas loyalty bonuses, and apparently, they’re the only people in the whole place who saw Jordan for the scum-ball he was. Slowly, they rip apart everything good about Jordan Silva-Riberio: his hours, his work ethic, his attitude, his behavior. It never quite rises to the level of full-out character evidence—no, Laufeyson’s sure to cushion every question about personality in relevant bullshit about his work hours or how the kid interacted with Killgrave—but it’s clear what the guy’s aiming for.

He wants to drag the victim through the mud ‘till he’s too dirty to count as a person. Clint suspects it’s the only strategy Laufeyson even knows.

So Clint suffers through the parade of dedicated employees; a secretary complains about how Jordan’d sneak food outta the break room fridge when he thought nobody was paying attention (“Well, I guess it’s something kids do,” the secretary admits to Phil on cross-examination), then a designer Jordan’d shadowed half-poetic about how the kid’d been “suspiciously quiet” all through work (and then tells Clint, “Yeah, all the kids are quiet, there’s not a lot of talking to do when you shadow”). Laufeyson leads them like biblical sheep to the biblical slaughter, or whatever analogy the fire-and-brimstone pastor at the orphanage used to spit all over the front row. He drags them through rambling questions that all end in one conclusion: Jordan Silva-Riberio was an asshole kid with no chance at a future.

After about the third witness, Clint can’t handle the bullshit anymore and settles back to watch the jury.

They’re pretty attentive, the twelve of them and the alternates, and a good half take notes. But he’s not as concerned about whether their pencils are moving as he is about the faces they make. The frowns, here and there. The nods of sympathy when a supervisor says Jordan made her “nervous.” The worried lips and the uncomfortable shifts in their seats.

At lunch, he leans his hip against the doorjamb of Steve’s office and says, “Four.”

Steve’s behind his desk, tucked into a homemade peanut butter and jelly and with vending machine Cheetos spread all over a napkin. He stops in the middle of opening his soda to look at Clint. “Which side?” he asks, and there’s a tightness to the question.

Trial of the year, of course there’s a tightness in there. Clint’s whole fucking body feels tight.

“Four flip-flops,” Clint predicts. The office’s bustling, clerks and interns rushing every which way in preparation for all the Friday afternoon hearings. It’s a good energy, a steady thrum that feels kinda like the building’s heartbeat, and Clint—Tight as Clint is, wound-up as he feels, he likes that energy. It’s warm, and it reassures him in a way he can’t describe. ‘Cause really, he should be thinking of it like nuclear energy—power to create, power to destroy, and all that—but at the same time, it feels . . . right. It feels like it’s where he belongs, like some sort of homecoming.

He ignores the twist in his belly that reminds him this home might not be permanent. It’s taken too long for it to feel like home to not enjoy it while he can.
He steps into the room to avoid certain death by file cart, and then flips the driver off when he recognizes the cackle as Darcy’s. He bites down his smile before he says, “I think we’ve got most of them. Laufeyson’s not doing himself any favors with the whole ‘the kid’s the fuck-up’ line of defense.”

“Careful,” Steve warns. He twists the lid off the soda bottle and then points a finger in Clint’s direction. The finger draws a circle, a big-time reminder that Steve and Stark are some kinda screwed up best friends. “That’s how Laufeyson catches you. He lulls people into a false sense of security, and then takes the kill-shot.”

“The kill-shot?” Clint repeats. He feels the skepticism on his face, complete with raised eyebrows and everything. “Like in *Halo*?”

“Like in all great FPS games,” Tony comments as he passes by. He’s toting an enormous carry-out bag from the Lebanese restaurant down the street. Clint opens his mouth, but Tony just holds up a hand. “Don’t ask about my penance,” he instructs, and keeps walking.

Clint glances back at Steve, and they make it about ten seconds before they both bust up laughing.

And then, after lunch, Laufeyson calls Killgrave to the stand.

He glides up to the witness box like he’s on ice skates, and Clint kinda can’t shake the skeezy feeling he gets just from *looking* at the guy. He’s like metal that’s been polished too hard or a screwed-up wall that’s been painted over; you can’t really see the dings and the damage, but you know it’s there, sorta half-hidden under the surface. He swears to tell the whole truth and everything, but it’s hard to trust him. He’s *too* polished, his smile *too* broad and *too* warm.

Like somebody on TV, Clint thinks.

Or like a used car salesman, a thought he scribbles down and tilts toward Phil so Phil’ll crack a smile.

Or, at least, the ghost of one.

‘Cause really, Phil’s not smiling. His whole body’s tight in the chair next to Clint, and Clint swears he clenches even more once Killgrave’s settled into the witness box and stating his name and occupation for the record. His fingers are curled tight around his pen, the all-caps KILLGRAVE at the top of the page triple-underlined, and Clint knows immediately that all the creases and clenching’s from nerves. Not the dizzying, nauseating kinda nerves, but the kind that only come when you know that it’s now or never. Do-or-die nerves, Clint thinks to himself as he turns his pad back around.

He watches Phil swallow, and it’s enough to make his own pulse catch.

And then, Laufeyson starts questioning his client.

Truth being everything it is, the guy spends his time and energy doing exactly what Clint’d do if the roles were reversed and credits the hell outta Killgrave. Suddenly, the man with the low, smooth voice isn’t on trial for murder, but just somebody off the street. A regular joe, if you ignore the way every word’s as flawless and silky as the dark purple shirt Killgrave’s wearing (and if he ruins that color for Clint, there’ll be hell to pay). His accent’s barely detectable, professional and polished. It’s the kind of Eastern-block lilt you expect from a spy movie, educated and chic instead of jarring.

The couple note-takers in the jury stop writing to *listen* to him.
Not, Clint thinks, the greatest sign.

Laufeyson builds his questions like he’s constructing a skyscraper, each point precisely layered onto the next. It’s subtle, but Clint’s gotta admit, perfectly done; the questions about Killgrave’s childhood in the country formerly known as Yugoslavia slips delicately into his “exodus to the promised land,” as he calls it; his tribulations as a legal immigrant in the U.S.—and yeah, Laufeyson spends a lot of time reiterating the whole “legal” part—transition right into his professional triumphs. While Clint and the rest of the courtroom watch, Killgrave builds his one-room shack of a print shop (“Brochures and also mailers,” he explains with an easy hand gesture, “all printed in-house”) into the nationally-known P.M.R. Advertising.

“We started all our work in a strip mall,” Killgrave says with a silken smile. “Now, we are in a twenty-story high-rise building that the company owns.”

“And how,” Laufeyson follows, his body so relaxed as he leans on the podium that Clint expects him to pool around the damn thing, “did you turn such a modest business into the success it is today?”

Killgrave’s chuckle is something outta the Saturday morning cartoons, low and not entirely warm. “I believe the saying in America is ‘blood, sweat, and tears,’” he supplies, and a couple jurors smile. “But in truth, it was much more. It was like birthing and raising a child. I saw the potential and I nurtured it—with help from others, of course—until it was better than it started. Better, I admit, than I anticipated. Like a . . . A new being, all its own.”

From the “rousing success” of P.M.R. Advertising (Laufeyson’s words, of course), the questions move onto Killgrave’s personal life. He’s unmarried and not looking—“Work is all I had time for as a young man. Now, I am not so young for a wife.”—his family in Croatia is either dead or too dirt poor to visit him, and he’s an only child.

When Laufeyson asks about children, Killgrave pauses. The breath he takes is fuller than it strictly needs to be, and Clint presses his lips together, bracing for the answer. “I was never such a lucky man as to have a child,” the defendant finally says, quieter than before. “I wished to, of course, but as I said, my business was my life. But I wanted to teach young people like my mother taught me in the old country. Young people, they need to learn their strengths. They need help understanding the value of hard work. Of how to build for themselves a better life.”

Laufeyson nods. When he sets his pen down on the podium, it’s an audible little sound. Clint knows the second he hears it what’s coming next. “Did you ever find an opportunity to teach young people these things?” he asks.

Killgrave nods. “Yes. I spent many years looking for the right program, but I finally found one.”

“What program is that?”

“Urban Ascent.”

And, of course, that’s the perfect transition into talking about Jordan Silva-Riberio.

Phil concentrates on the direct with pretty much all his attention, scribbling notes across his legal pad in the mess of homemade shorthand Clint’s gotten to know since they started working on the case. Except Clint can’t read it, just recognize the looping way it fills the pad. Phil’s face is a whole map of creases and lines, trails that move from his brow down to the corners of his lips and back again. It turns his whole face dark, darker than Clint’s seen the months he’s known him.
Clint’s filled up with this urge to touch him, kinda, or nudge their knees together for a half-second of contact. They haven’t had more than a couple seconds peace together all day—Phil’d been dragged into a lunch meeting with Fury and Hill, leaving no time for a quick back-stairwell conversation or stolen five-second kiss. The problem is, now’s not the time. It’s not the time to touch or want to touch, it’s not the time to swivel his chair ‘til their knees knock and Phil breaks into a smile. No, this is the couple breaths before what Steve called the “kill-shot.” This matters.

But after the fourth or fifth time Killgrave calls Jordan “troubled,” Clint realizes he’s the one who needs the touch. He’s the one who needs the distraction, the break from Laufeyson’s ugly “smear the victim” strategy. When he doesn’t get it, his fingers start tapping a nonsense pattern against the leg of his slacks.

So he leans back in his chair, presses his fingers to his thigh, and just—watches.

The thing about Killgrave, he thinks, is that he’s practiced. He’s glossy, polished up enough that the whole thing’s almost unnatural. The jury’s sucked into his story-telling, sure, but Clint’s spent enough of his life sitting back and observing people that he can see how fucking fake it is. Killgrave’s measured, and everything—his vocal inflection, his facial expression, every damn one of his hand gestures—comes off like he’s practiced it in front of a mirror. Everything natural’s been rehearsed right outta him, and the longer Clint watches it, the more his skin starts to crawl. It’s like looking at that fresco of Jesus that some housewife put the face back onto, ‘cause the result’s all unnatural and stunted.

But Clint’s not sure the jury sees it. No, they’re listening intently, nodding along for the most part. They’re part of a Law & Order world, he reminds himself, one where everybody’s just the wrong side of real. They forget that you’re supposed to be nervous when you sit on the witness stand. They forget that hand gestures are supposed to be Tony Stark furious or anxious twitches. They want their movie witness.

The longer the examination goes on, the smaller the courtroom feels. Phil’s pen scratches sound louder, Killgrave’s gestures turn more robotic, but Clint knows it’s all in his head and in the nerves that reach up to curl around his belly. He’s never really stopped to think about them losing this case, but the more Killgrave talks, the more it’s all he can think about.

‘Cause there’s the defendant, saying how he never spent that much time with Jordan Silva-Riberio. That he tried to only bring the best and brightest into his program. How Jordan, like so many kids, slipped through the wrong cracks.

And ‘cause there’s a part of Clint’s mind—the part that’s not a lawyer or a kid who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, the part that still kinda believes that the world isn’t full of assholes (hey, it’s a small part)—that kinda believes Killgrave, too.

“One final question,” Laufeyson says after what feels like a month. He puts down his pen again and rests his hands on the sides of the podium. For a couple seconds, he’s not an attorney but a preacher reining in his flock. “Did you commit any of the acts against Mr. Silva-Riberio for which you’ve been charged?”

Killgrave shakes his head. “No,” he says.

“Nothing further.”

Judge Smithe’s face is serious when she nods, allowing Laufeyson to step down. Her eyes flick to the state’s table, and for once, Clint can’t read her at all. “Any cross?” she asks.
Phil nods as he rises. “Yes, your honor,” he answers, but he takes his time. He straightens his legal pad and buttons his jacket. He switches out pens and flips through a couple pages of notes like he’s maybe missed something. Clint knows he’s trying to break the rhythm the jury’s gotten used to and distance Laufeyson’s practiced dog-and-pony show from where he’s about to take the whole thing. But the longer it drags on, the more Clint wonders if maybe he’s fighting the same fist of nerves that’s settled down in Clint’s belly.

Then, outta nowhere, Phil glances down at him. When their eyes meet, the corner of Phil’s lips twitch in what Clint knows is a Chief Assistant District Attorney Coulson smile.

He nods, a little, ‘cause he can’t smile back.

And Phil strides up to the podium. “Apologies, Mr. Killgrave,” he says as he approaches, and Killgrave kinda hesitates for a half-second before he forces a forgiving little smile. “I’m not going to waste your time or the jury’s time here, today. I want to talk about your relationship with Jordan.”

Killgrave shifts in his seat ‘till he’s sitting forward. He’s uncomfortable, Clint thinks, but it’s hard to tell whether this is all part of the act. He clears his throat lightly. “I would not term it a relationship, Mr. Coulson,” he replies tightly.

Phil nods. “Not a relationship, right,” he repeats, like he’s sorting something out in his head. It’s almost a distracted repetition, like the detective in that Columbo show, except Clint knows it’s calculated. Phil’s good at returning to the bits he wants the jury to care about, even if it sounds like circling back. Even an accidental-sounding repetition hits the jury’s ears an extra time or two. “You weren’t close to him.”

“That’s correct,” Killgrave replies, nodding along with his answer.

“You didn’t know him very well?” Phil presses.

“Not at all.”

“He was just one of a bunch of the kids in your program?”

“Yes.” And either Killgrave’s not as smart as he acts or he’s nervous on the stand, ‘cause he shifts again. He’s been in the courtroom for every one of Phil’s cross-examinations—enough that even the jurors’ve probably picked up on Phil’s style by now—but the longer Phil pauses between questions, the more Killgrave’s jaw moves like he wants to fill the silent spaces. “We had ten children in the program this summer,” he continues, ‘cause Phil’s still quiet. “Including Mr. Silva-Riberio, of course.”

“And either Killgrave’s not as smart as he acts or he’s nervous on the stand, ‘cause he shifts again. He’s been in the courtroom for every one of Phil’s cross-examinations—enough that even the jurors’ve probably picked up on Phil’s style by now—but the longer Phil pauses between questions, the more Killgrave’s jaw moves like he wants to fill the silent spaces. “We had ten children in the program this summer,” he continues, ‘cause Phil’s still quiet. “Including Mr. Silva-Riberio, of course.”

“Of course,” Phil echoes. He drops his eyes to the legal pad on the podium, but Clint knows like instinct he doesn’t need it. Phil’s best questions come when he doesn’t rely on his notes. “You talked to him—how often, roughly?”

“Well, that’s a difficult question.” Killgrave leans back in his seat, another shift. Clint wants to start checking off the number of times he moves around. He crosses his legs, and then folds his hand over his knee. “I tried to speak with each child once or twice during a week. Trying to keep track of them, you know.”

“Like your mother in the old country?” When Killgrave frowns, Phil smiles lightly. “You mentioned her during your conversation with Mr. Laufeyson.”

“Ah.” The frown doesn’t lift. “Then, yes. Something like that.”
Phil nods. “And Jordan was included in these once-a-week conversations?”

“He was . . . harder to meet with than the others.”

“Did the kids in your program have different schedules?”

“No, no,” Killgrave says. He uncrosses his legs and sits forward again. Clint thinks he sees him flick his eyes in Laufeyson’s direction to maybe grab some reassurances from his attorney, but Phil’s not the Chief Assistant District Attorney for nothing. No, he’s moved the podium *just* enough that Killgrave and Laufeyson can’t really see one another without tilting around and making it obvious. Apparently, Clint’s not the only one who noticed just how far Killgrave’s been coached.

The silence between questions drags on, and Killgrave clears his throat lightly. “It would be best to say that Mr. Silva-Riberio was . . . less available than the others.”

“Less available?” Phil repeats, eyebrows raised.

“Emotionally.” Killgrave lifts a hand and sort of—gestures weakly at the space in front of him. “Less open to our conversations.”

“But you met with him at night?” He’s kinda caught off-guard by Phil’s question, his whole face wearing the half-second of surprise. His brow creases, his lips purse, and Clint can see how hard he’s working to come up with a response. Especially since Phil follows it up with, “Unless you’re saying the people who saw him leaving your office late at night were mistaken.”

“Of course not,” Killgrave replies a little too quickly. He wets his lips and draws in a long breath. “We did meet at night, but only a few times. A few evenings.”

“In your office?”

“As I said, a few times, yes.”

“Alone?”

“A few times, Mr. Coulson, yes.” And for the first time in the whole stream of questions, Killgrave sounds kinda annoyed. Like he wants to sigh and roll his eyes, but like he also knows a lot better than to do either. Instead, he folds his hands in his lap and shrugs slightly. “I cannot keep track of every meeting I’ve had with each of the children, or when and where those meetings are. I’m a busy man.”

“No, of course you are,” Phil replies. It’s in the sort of tone you’d assume was an apology unless you knew Phil. He nods, ticks something off on the legal pad he’s not really using, and then looks back up at Killgrave. They spend a couple seconds just staring one another down. It’s a long enough time that Clint wonders what Phil sees, whether Phil’s noticed everything he’s caught: the shifting in his seat, the changes in his expression, the way a couple of the questions’ve caught him off guard.

Whatever Phil sees, he keeps it to himself. Instead, he asks, “But you noticed Jordan was withdrawn?”

Killgrave nods. “Yes.”

“Noticed that he was—quiet and detached, I believe you put it?”
“As I said before, yes.”

Phil murmurs something that sounds a little like approval and nods. There’s a second where Clint knows with certainty he’s the only person in the courtroom who expects what’s coming next. He’s the only person who knows Phil—not attorney Coulson in the suit and tie but the man underneath—well enough to know that this is how his wheels turn. The two seconds of quiet, the unfocused seriousness on his face, this is how he puts together his best thoughts.

After all, the least-focused comment in their big fight’d been the one that’d hollowed Clint’s belly out the worst.

But then, Phil pulls in a breath. “Let me make sure I understand,” he says in a way that’s almost forgettable in its blandness. “You didn’t meet with Jordan that often.”

“Correct,” Killgrave says. He leans forward again, his elbows almost on his thighs. He’s comfortable now, Clint realizes. He thinks he’s in the clear.

He doesn’t know Phil Coulson.

“He was—less emotionally available than the other children.”

“Yes.”

“Difficult to meet with.”

“Yes.”

“But you still had ample time to notice that he was quiet and withdrawn?”

Killgrave’s smile is like nails on a chalkboard. Not ‘cause there’s anything wrong with it, necessarily, but ‘cause of how far it comes from reaching his eyes. “It’s my job to notice, Mr. Coulson.”

“But not to notice when and where you’re meeting with him?”

“One small oversight. And one that would not matter,” Killgrave notes, holding up a hand, “if this unfortunate matter of his death hadn’t come to pass.”

Behind the podium, Phil pauses. It’s a tiny thing, almost too subtle to notice, but it’s there. Clint sees it ‘cause he can feel his own pause, the twist in his belly that makes him want to leap across the courtroom and punch Killgrave square in the face. But Clint shifts how he’s sitting—the only movement he allows himself—and Phil—

Phil puts down his pen. “Then you also knew about Jordan’s history, correct?”

The smug comfort that’d started overtaking Killgrave, spreading through his features like an oil slick, it kinda—lifts. There’s an edge to the question that wasn’t there before, harder and more accusatory, but Clint’s pretty sure the change in Killgrave’s come from more than that. No, it come outta the way Phil’s pressed his hands to the sides of the podium, the hard shift in topic.

Killgrave frowns and swallows, and Clint can’t help sitting forward a bit in his own seat. Not because he’s nervous, but ‘cause he thinks he likes where this is going.

“Which history?” Killgrave asks after a pause that’s just a little too long.

“His juvenile history,” Phil supplies.
“Ah. Well, vaguely, you could say.”

“Define ‘vaguely.’”

“Well, I certainly didn’t know every detail,” Killgrave replies, but it’s tight. His whole body’s a little tighter than he held it a couple minutes ago, like he’s nervous again. It’s not practiced nerves this time, either. No, the way he shifts, it’s clear he’s actively uncomfortable with this line of questioning. “His family’s past, for instance, that was unknown to me. The extent of his involvement in illegal and illicit activities. I knew generally of his troubles, but not its severity.”

“But if you planned on developing these children, shouldn’t you have inquired?” Phil’s voice is perfectly smooth. Controlled, like he already knows the answer to the question. There’s no way to know—Clint’s pretty sure Phil never prepared any questions for Killgrave, just in case Laufeyson decided not to call him—but then again, Killgrave’s kinda without a clear path, this time around. He doesn’t have a lot of options.

When he doesn’t answer right away, Phil adds, “That is, shouldn’t you have found out where Jordan came from?”

To that, Killgrave smiles another tight, joyless smile. “Mr. Coulson, all these children come from the same.”

“The same . . . what, exactly?”

“The same background.” He waves a hand in a vague, loose gesture. “Poverty, absent parents, inadequate education . . . They have so many struggles in common. I simply help to pick up the pieces and lend them an opportunity.”

Clint’s not sure whether the politician polish slips back into Killgrave’s voice on its own or if he’s forcing it, but either way, he’s gotta clench his hands into fists under the table. ‘Cause everything coming outta Killgrave’s mouth is the shit Clint’s always hated about programs like Urban Ascent, all the—rich-guy “support” that’s really just masked elitism. He wants to glance over at the jury, but he’s afraid he’ll see them nodding, buying into the bullshit. He can’t survive all that right now. He can’t deal with the collective pity, not when, fifteen years ago, he could’ve been Jordan.

Not when he’s still a little bit of the kid he was back then, the kid who could’ve spent his whole life in the trailer park.

Phil waits a lot longer than he has to before he asks, “But you didn’t look into the details?”

“No,” Killgrave says simply. “That’s not my job.”

Phil spends a lot more time questioning Killgrave, running back through pretty much every topic Laufeyson covered during the direct examination. They discuss his conversations with Jordan, the different meetings with him and the other kids, the last time he saw Jordan on the night he died. Killgrave holds tight to all his stories—no date wavers, no time shifts even ten or fifteen minutes, and he still remembers the score of the Croatian soccer game that he swears is his alibi—and starts to settle into the rhythm of Phil’s questioning. He grows comfortable again, really, and Clint hates him for it. He hates that the guy leans back and lies like a cheap rug ‘cause he knows the easiest way to get off is to stick to his guns.

The jury falls into a rhythm, too, nodding along with the questions without taking notes. A couple of them look bored—two of the flip-flops even come close to nodding off—but the rest just kinda keep up with the flow. And the longer it flows, the more the nervous energy starts to well up in the
bottom of Clint’s gut, ‘cause this—

This is the end of the trial, more or less.

This is when either they win everybody over, or they lose.

And if it ends with Killgrave walking outta the courtroom, then— Well, then maybe Phil was right all along. Maybe Clint won’t really be okay.

He tries not to think too long and hard about that.

After long enough, Clint can tell that Phil’s wrapping up, pulling into the end of his cross-examination. His questions are shorter and the pauses a lot longer, but not in a calculated kinda way. Clint knows he’s catching himself, running through all the possible conclusions and trying to pick the right one.

There’s no right one.

There’s no way Zebediah Killgrave’s gonna admit to murder. There’s no slam dunk.

Clint’s only half-listening to the end of some self-congratulatory answer about how Killgrave reacted to the call about Jordan’s death when he realizes Phil’s eyes are on him. There, standing in the well of the courtroom, his hands still rooted to the sides of the podium, Phil’s attention is caught on Clint. Clint raises his chin and tries to force a reassuring kind of half-smile, but he knows as soon as he tries that it’s more like a grimace.

Phil presses his lips together into something like a frown, like he’s making a decision. They watch each other for a long time, seconds slipping away. Clint isn’t sure what he needs to do, what Phil needs from him, so he just—nods.

Phil nods back.

Then, he asks, “You never asked why Jordan was distant?”

The question’s outta the blue, totally detached from the hundred other things Phil’s been asking about, and Killgrave can’t stand on his frown. It creases his whole face, a far cry from the calm-and-collected expression from seconds ago. He glances toward Judge Smithe like he’s expecting some kinda reprieve, but she just quirks an eyebrow.

Killgrave’s voice is kinda half-caught when he says, “Pardon?”

“You said Jordan was distant,” Phil supplies, his hands relaxing on the podium. He’s in control again, the captain of whatever ship they’re sailing on, and Clint watches as the tension in his shoulders unspools. It’s almost like after work, when they’re comfortably sprawled on the couch and splitting a cheap six-pack. “You never asked if anything was going on?”

Killgrave shakes his head. “No.”

“Why?” Phil asks. It’s immediate, almost too fast to track.

Clint watches as Killgrave straightens to his full height. His Adam’s apple bobs, his jaw tightens, and for a few seconds, Clint’s sure the guy’s gonna churn out a bullshit answer. Instead, he replies with a tight, “Why did I not ask?”

“Yes,” Phil returns, nodding. “Why didn’t you ask him?”
It’s the cardinal sin of cross-examination, the question that’ll earn you a big fat F on your trial advocacy report card: an open-ended question without a promised answer. ‘Cause Killgrave, he can say a hundred different things, and everybody in the courtroom knows it. Clint watches the guy shift around in his chair again, watches him try to glance around Phil to Laufeyson, but he can’t. Nothing he can do’ll let him out of this moment, the question that nobody but Zebediah Killgrave has the answer to.

‘Cause Phil might not know what Killgrave’s gonna say, but neither does Killgrave.

He clears his throat lightly, then wets his lips. “I did not think he was comfortable having such a conversation,” he says finally.

“But you were nurturing him?” Phil asks.

Killgrave shifts around again, but then he nods. It’s shallow, like he’s afraid to really get into the gesture. “Yes,” he answers.

“Caring for him?”

“That’s going a bit far, Mr.—”

“Filling the role,” Phil presses, a little harsher than in the last question, “of the absentee parents you talked about?”

Killgrave shifts again. He’s obviously antsy, ready for the questioning to be over. He’d probably assumed it’d be over by now, the way Phil was winding down. Clint straightens up, reaching for his pen. He needs something to play with, now, something to sorta take all the nervous energy he can’t really control.

“As I said before, Mr. Coulson,” Killgrave answers, his voice tense, “I try to better all the children who come into the program.” He glances at a spot just above Phil’s shoulder, the place where he’d be able to see Laufeyson if the guy was, like, ten feet tall, and rolls his lips together. Phil sees the uncertainty on his face—Clint’s pretty sure a blind guy could see the uncertainty on Killgrave’s face, right about now—and waits.

He’s got the patience of a saint, that man. Tick it down as another of the three thousand things Clint’s amazed by.

“But you must understand,” Killgrave continues with another empty half-gesture, “it’s not always as easy as you suggest. These children, the ones that come as part of this program, they have to want it. What is that American saying about leading horses to water? They must drink it on their own.” He shakes his head. “Jordan Silva-Riberio, I think, did not want my help.”

“But you didn’t ask,” Phil replies instantly.

“Mr. Coulson, you are not li—”

“That’s a yes-or-no question, Mr. Killgrave.” There’s ice in Phil’s tone, as well as in his eyes. It chills Clint’s stomach, so who knows what it does to Killgrave.

Killgrave pulls in a breath before shrugging his wide shoulders. “I suppose no, I did not ask.”

Phil nods. “Nothing further, your honor,” he tells Judge Smithe, but he’s not looking at the bench. No, instead, he spends one last moment looking at Killgrave in his silken shirt and expensive suit. Killgrave, who looks a little like his skin’s crawling.
A couple of the jurors scribble notes while Phil gathers up his legal pad and pen, and another joins them as Laufeyson walks up to redirect his client. Laufeyson’s movements are boxy, almost robotic, and Clint swears he can feel the waves of annoyance coming off the guy. Killgrave’s gonna get his ass chewed out at their next coffee break, Clint knows. Whatever script the two of them’d perfected over the last week’s just flown out the window.

But Clint’s not nearly as focused on all that as he is at the sound of Phil settling into his chair at counsel table. There’s something relaxed about him, something easy, and Clint watches the way he leans back in his seat. The pad’s balanced on the edge of the table, but he probably won’t need it. Laufeyson’s not gonna open up a new can of worms on redirect, not after how Phil’d handled cross.

Clint only realizes how carefully he’s watching Phil—or if not carefully, how intently—when Phil glances over. Their eyes meet and those laugh lines of his crinkle, warming his whole face. It’s a smile without a single lip-twitch, Clint knows, and it trails straight into the middle of his stomach.

“Pen’s dead,” Phil murmurs in a voice only Clint can hear, and reaches over. He tugs Clint’s pen right outta his hand, but it’s gentle. Gentle, lingering, and a lot more than just borrowing a pen.

It’s a touch that feels like the first bolt of hope they’ve had since Laufeyson’s witnesses took the stand.

Clint suppresses a smile ‘till court’s adjourned.

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It’s almost four when the defense rests. Laufeyson holds his whole body taut when he says it, like he’s about to lose a tooth through the old “string tied to a doorknob” method. Judge Smithe nods and watches him the whole time, her eyes a little too attentive. Attentive enough that Clint takes the “dead” pen from Phil and twists the cap in his fingers a couple times.

“Given how late it is,” the judge says, taking off her glasses and placing them on the bench, “I think the best course is to hold closing arguments until Monday. Because no one wants to keep the jury here after five—” And Clint’s gotta admit, he almost laughs at how hard a couple of the jurors nod at that one. “—and I’m uncomfortable allowing one party to argue today and the other on Monday. We’ll adjourn until then.”

For a couple seconds, Clint thinks maybe Laufeyson’s gonna protest—argue some kinda dumbass unfairness or “reversible error” (‘cause Tony’s spent the last two weeks bitching about how he can “already smell the Killgrave appeal”), but he doesn’t. No, he presses his palms to the table harder than he maybe needs to and rises like he’s been doused in starch, but he keeps his mouth shut. The associates of the day, two clean-cut guys who’re probably younger than Darcy, practically run down the aisle to keep up with him.

“Ten bucks says he’s scared,” Clint murmurs when Phil leans close. Their shoulders bump as they start reassembling the file.

“I try not to make bets I can’t win,” Phil replies, and god, the half-twist smile touching the corner of his mouth’s the best thing Clint’s seen all day.

They take their time cleaning up in the courtroom and even longer walking up the back stairwell,
their shoulders bumping and nudging most the way back to the office. A couple times, their fingers brush and half-tangle, a sort of—lazy comfort, but neither of them holds on too tight. Not ‘cause they don’t want to, Clint thinks, but—

But because there’s still some part of this that is private. Something that belongs to the two of them, not the rest of the world.

Clint waits ‘till they’re at the door for the sixth floor and Phil’s shifting the file around to open the damn thing to actually say, “Thanks.”

It stops him, his fingers still a couple inches from the handle. When he glances up, Clint kinda shrugs. He hadn’t really thought through the rest of what he wanted to say, ‘till right now, but Phil’s eyes are soft, and he can’t—

“Barney told me you called him.”

“I thought he should probably be there,” Phil returns, sorta . . . noncommittal about it. He shrugs, but Clint can see that some of the relaxation’s seeped outta him. He’s not so comfortable now, almost—cagey, and something in Clint’s belly kinda trips over itself.

He forgets, sometimes, just how hard other people care about him. And sometimes, like it or not, one of the people he forgets about is Phil.

Clint’s still holding half the file, plus his own legal pad and loose pages of notes, but that doesn’t stop him from raising his other hand. He spends a half-second trying to decide what the hell to do with it before he catches Phil’s wrist. It’s gentle, soft as those first couple times they touched, and he swears he can feel the guy’s pulse. “If you’d’ve asked me, I would’ve told you to go to hell,” he admits quietly. He feels like his voice’s caught in the back of his throat. “But I’m glad he was there.”

Phil’s smile—Clint’s pretty sure he’s never gonna be able to live without that smile. “That’s why I didn’t ask you,” he replies, and the only reason his laugh doesn’t fill the stairwell is ‘cause Clint beats him to it. They laugh together for a couple seconds, the tension of the day slowly falling away, and Clint’s not really surprised when they end up chest-to-chest in the sick yellow light. But still, Clint doesn’t really mean to bodily press himself into Phil’s warmth ‘till he does . . . and doesn’t really mean to kiss him, either. At least, not ‘till they are kissing, open-mouthed and eager, the whole rest of the world forgotten.

Forgotten enough that they don’t hear the door open, either, until—

“Oh, Jesus, really?” Darcy demands, her voice edging somewhere around shrill. She’s wearing her wooly fall jacket and a giant plaid scarf that Clint’s pretty sure somebody Jane’s size could use as a blanket. She flinches back as he and Phil break apart, Phil already halfway to laughing. “Is nothing sacred? First Clint’s office—which I have to go into when he’s not around, by the way—”

“You have to go into my office when I’m—” Clint starts to ask, but then his brain catches up to his mouth. He can feel his frown all the way in his forehead. “How’d you know about the office . . . uh, thing?”

“Like you’re subtle,” Darcy retorts, rolling her eyes. “But now, I can’t even—I mean— We all use these stairs!”

“Which is all we’re doing,” Phil offers, shrugging. The grin overtaking his face is almost evil, though—a Tony Stark smile, more-or-less—and it sends Darcy over the edge. She throws her hat
at Phil’s head, elbows Clint in the stomach as she storms past, and huffs her way through all their damn laughter.

She’s somewhere around the second floor when Clint grins at Phil. “Remind me to thank you for that, later,” he says, bumping Phil in the shoulder.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Phil replies, and nudges him back as they push through the door.

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“Are you going to the princess party?” Dot asks on Saturday.

It’s an unusually warm Saturday for September, though Clint’s not sure whether the warmth’s from nature or from the heat lamps that’re littered all over Tony’s backyard. Clint’s standing only a couple feet from one, watching as Dot twirls in circles on the patio. She’s wearing a ridiculously frilly blue dress that Clint’s thinks she maybe picked out for herself, plus a tiara and what Clint’s pretty sure are Halloween fairy wings. Clint’d tried to ask Steve about the outfit a couple times, but he’d just shaken his head and said, “Don’t ask.”

The plan, really, had been to spend Saturday like the damn thing was actually a Saturday, complete with bad TV, cheap beer, and some kind of takeout. Clint’d padded around Phil’s living room in his pajamas and socks, pawing through the DVDs and mocking all his shitty selections. “You have the complete extended edition Lord of the Rings?” he’d demanded through to the kitchen.

Phil’d laughed over the noise of filling the coffee maker with water. “You mean you don’t?” he’d retorted. “Don’t you have literally every Hitchcock movie ever made?”

“Do you dress up at conventions?” Clint’d tossed back. He tipped a couple movies—the early Batman flicks with Michael Keaton, the first (but not the second, thankfully) Ghostbusters movie—off the shelf as options. “Run around in Legolas’s tights?”

“I’ll leave that to you,” Phil’d called through, but Clint could still hear the laughter in his voice. He’d amassed a couple more movie options—Clue, a couple 1980s teen movies he was pretty sure Phil only bought for nostalgia, one of the old-school Star Treks—before Phil’d wandered through with their coffee—

And his phone.

“Oh god,” Clint’d groaned. He’d abandoned the movies to toss himself, resigned, on the couch. “What disaster now? Fury need you to save the world?”

Phil’d shook his head, but Clint could tell how hard the guy was trying not to smile. “Stark wants us to come to his house for a barbeque.”

“Another one?”

“Apparently, it’s a ‘Barton’s probably not going to get disbarred barbeque.’” Clint’d kinda opened his mouth and come up with—something to say to that, some kind of comeback, but the best he’d managed was a strangled protest noise. Phil’d shaken his head and set down the cups of coffee. “Coulson,” he’d read from his phone, “‘I am having a party because your boyfriend is probably not going to get disbarred. Your boyfriend is required to attend. You can come too if you want.’”
And try as he might not to, Clint’d bust out laughing at that one. He’d levered himself off the couch enough to snag his coffee, and then flopped back again. Phil’d kept scrolling through his phone, like maybe there’d been a whole conversation in the kitchen that Clint knew nothing about. “Are we going?” he’d asked, head lulled lazily against the back of the couch.

“According to this, you don’t have a choice,” Phil’d replied—and then, he’d ditched the phone for his coffee, the couch, and a marathon of those shitty early *Batman* movies.

Now, at Tony’s, there’s something grilling—Tony won’t tell anybody what it is, and twice has physically *shoved* Bruce away from the grill—and Dot’s dancing her way across the patio. She really only stops when Clint asks, “Princess party?”

“Yes,” she replies. Her hands land on her hips in a way that she *had to’ve* learned from Steve. “Daddy’s gonna be there and Uncle Tony and Uncle Bruce are gonna be there, and I’m going to get a pretty dress and shoes.” She twirls around again and then stops all of a sudden, leaning back on her heels to peer at Clint. “And Tasha and Pepper and gonna be there, and Phil said that you’re gonna be there, and Darcy’s gonna—”

“At the princess party,” Clint interrupts. He took three years of college Spanish, but he doesn’t speak a word of wound-up four-year-old.

Dot levels him a look so dark, it sure as hell doesn’t belong on a pretty little blonde girl. “Yeah,” she retorts. Her scowl’s enough to force Clint to raise his hands in surrender. “The big giant dancing princess party.”

Clint’s ready to ask for details—or plan an escape route, he’s not sure which—when somebody nearby *cracks* up laughing. He twists around to see Bucky standing next to him with two beers and the world’s biggest shit-eating grin. He shakes his head a couple times and then offers one of the bottles to Clint. “You should’ve seen your face,” he announces.

Clint tries to twist his face into a frown, but he’s pretty sure it doesn’t work. “Is everything a princess party when you’re four?” he asks. Dot starts twirling again. . . at least ‘till Bucky reaches for her like he’s gonna grab her and she runs off, giggling like a little maniac.

“Anything with dancing is,” Bucky returns. He shrugs and takes a sip of his beer. “She’s talking about the Urban Ascent dinner that’s coming up. Steve mentioned the dancing after dinner, and now that’s the only part she remembers.”

“Like Aurora at the end of *Sleeping Beauty*!” Dot announces around a mouthful of—Clint’s pretty sure they’re Cheetos. At least, he hopes they’re Cheetos. Either way, there’s orange all over Dot’s mouth and smeared onto her chipmunk cheeks. She grins at him. “Only no changing colors on the dresses. Daddy said.”

She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, then moves to wipe her hand on her dress—but Bucky catches her at the last second. “Nope,” he says. He hands Clint his beer long enough that he can wipe the Cheeto dust off her hand and face with his palm. He brushes his hand off on his jeans. “Go get a napkin from your dad, trouble.”

Clint laughs when Dot sticks an orange tongue out at him before running off. Bucky snags his beer back and necks it before Clint thinks to say, “I hope somebody’s told her I’m not going to the Urban Ascent thing.” Bucky raises an eyebrow, and Clint kinda—shrugs. “I never bought a ticket off Bruce. I—was kind of a dick to him about it.”

“First off, Bruce is, like, evangelical about the stupid dinner,” Bucky replies with a wave of his
bottle. “Everybody’s kind of a dick to him about it. But second, Phil already told everybody you were going with him.” He says it easily, like rattling off tomorrow’s weather or a baseball score, but Clint—Clint forgets, for a second, how his brain works. He presses his lips together into something that he hopes isn’t a frown. Problem is, Bucky blinks at him, which is a sure sign that he’s flat-out scowling. “Is that not a thing anymore?” he asks, frowning a little himself. “I mean, Steve said it was, but Steve’s still convinced that Pep and Rhodey could be a—”

“No, no, it’s . . . definitely a thing,” Clint interrupts, holding up his hands. He takes a long swallow outta the bottle, but he can feel Bucky’s eyes on him. The party’s all the usual suspects in all the usual clumps: Darcy, Jane, Thor, and Steve are all talking excitedly about something that probably includes baby names (Thor’s newest obsession, even though nobody knows what they’re even having, yet); Bruce, Peggy, and Pepper are hashing out their favorite books of the year (and Clint’d almost gotten smacked when he suggested *Twilight* land on the list); Tony’s swearing at the grill while Hill, Phil, and Natasha laugh their asses off at him. It’s his new family, Clint thinks, or the closest he has to that. It’s kinda the big, sprawling collection of extended almost-relatives that he’s always wanted but never actually had.

At least, ‘till now.

“We’re still figuring out how it all works,” he admits, glancing over at Bucky. The guy’s got this funny little smile on his face, like maybe he knows all the world’s secrets but is letting Clint grope along without the answers. “It kinda—wasn’t easy going.”

“Welcome to relationships,” Bucky returns. He tilts his beer bottle and clinks the neck against Clint’s. “You think this is bad, wait ‘till you’re married.”

Clint snorts and rolls his eyes. He tries to hold onto his grin and the laughter in his voice, but it’s kinda hard, sometimes. He and Phil are still a half-private thing, a relationship that he can’t even call a relationship half the time. Like he’s said to Bucky, they’re still figuring out too much for him to take the marriage joke as a full-on joke. Especially when the only response to that is, “Like you and Steve ever have to figure things out.”

“Seriously?” Bucky demands. He elbows Clint almost as hard as Darcy usually elbows him. “Don’t get me wrong, Steve and I’ve been together since pretty much the ice ages, but we’re still figuring out how it works. And trust me, no amount of Dot’s magic fairy dust can make that easy.”

He says it like a universal truth, like the damn thing should be in the start of an Austen novel instead of said over beers while Tony practically burns his own backyard down—“It’s fine! We’re fine! Everything’s fine and other synonyms for—Jesus Christ that is a lot of flame!” But before Clint can ask about it (or about getting Stark a fire extinguisher), Dot reappears in front of them. She’s gripping what looks like a dozen napkins in her tiny fist and dutifully offers them up to Bucky. “Daddy says to tell you it’s your clothes-watching week.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bucky replies. He shoves the napkins in his pocket. “And it’s washing.”

She frowns. “I said that,” she retorts. Her lower lip quivers in a way that kinda suggests waterworks. Clint decides it’s time to study the label on his beer bottle and side-step the tears.

Bucky beats him to it. “Hey,” he says. When Clint glances over, he’s scooped Dot up and settled her onto his hip like she’s a much smaller kid. She’s kinda petite for her age, Clint thinks, and monkey-clings like the best of them when she’s got the option. “Remember what I said we were gonna tell Clint when we saw him?”

“Tell me?” Clint asks, but the guy just grins at him. It’s a long way from Dot’s crumpled little
expression. Her brow furrows, her lips tilt into a scowl that could make your blood run cold that thirty paces, and she peers at Clint extra-hard.

At least, ’till she tilts her head at her dad. “That when Uncle Tony and Uncle Bruce gets married, I get to be the flower girl?” she asks.

Clint almost spits beer, he’s gotta work so hard to keep from laughing. Next to him, Bucky grins like the cat who caught the damn canary and bounces Dot on his hip a little. “No, that’s what we’re telling Tony later,” he corrects. Smugly, Clint thinks, but only ’cause he’s probably imagining the colors Tony’ll turn at that one. He dips Dot ’till she giggles. “Remember how I told you Clint did something really tough, and we were gonna tell him something about it?”

Clint wants to roll his eyes, he does, but then Dot does that shy-kid thing where she tips her face against Bucky’s shoulder for a half second and kinda peeks at Clint. “That he did a good job?” she asks in a half-whisper.

“How about you tell him. Don’t tell me, tell him.”

And that’s apparently all Dot needs to light up like a Christmas tree, ’cause she beams. Clint’s not entirely a kid person—not because he’s had a problem with kids so much as he’s just never really been around them and nobody he cares about’s ever had one for him to get close to—but there’s something putty-in-your-hands adorable about a little blonde girl grinning at you. “You did a good job!” she announces, throwing out her hands and almost knocking the beer right outta Bucky’s grip. He laughs at her and bounces her again before sliding her back down onto the patio. “Your thing was hard, and you did good!”

“Good,” Bucky tells her, and messes up her hair with a hand. She ducks out of the way and screws up her face at him. She’s suddenly a teenager, instead of four, and Clint bites back a laugh. “Go bug Uncle Bruce for a minute,” he encourages.

“Ask him about Twilight,” Clint offers, and Bucky laughs while she twirls off.

Clint’s still watching her twist in circles, her dress flipping up to reveal what he’s pretty sure are little pony underwear, when Bucky says, “She’s right, you know.” He glances over, but Bucky just lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “You were kinda up against the wall,” he says, easy as anything. “But you were honest, held your own, and didn’t cave. That takes a lot.”

“I just—did what anybody’d do,” Clint returns. He stares at his beer bottle, turning it around in his hands, a couple times. In the whole day-plus since the end of his hearing, he hasn’t really talked to anybody besides Phil about the damn thing, and even that conversation was mostly silence. It’s hard to bottle up all his feelings about it into actual sentences, and he’s not entirely sure he wants to. “I mean, I love my job and all,” he offers when Bucky’s quiet for a while, “but it’s more about me than being an A.D.A., you know?”

Bucky snorts softly, and outta the corner of his eye, Clint catches him nodding. “I hear you,” he echoes, and takes a long swig of his beer. “I started law school a couple months after Steve started at the office,” he says. When Clint raises his head to really watch him, he shrugs again. “He acts like doing justice is the only part of the law that really matters, like criminal law’s the sort of be-all, end-all of the whole thing, but I got into it because everybody’s on equal footing.” He holds his hand flat and draws a level line in front of him, like he’s smoothing out a bunch of invisible lumps. “It doesn’t matter where you come from, what you did: you start out innocent. The state still has to prove you did it. And you can work with people to get the fair outcome, instead of always having the book slammed in your face.” He drops his hand with this funny little smile. A half-sweet one, like he’s caught in some memory that Clint doesn’t know about. “Then again, I learned that a long
time before I became a lawyer.”

“From Steve?” Clint asks.

“Who else?” Bucky grins, all teeth, and necks his beer again. “Seriously, though, I’m glad I never applied for Pym’s position. You kinda round out this . . . What’d the article call it?”

Clint laughs. “The land of misfit toys?”

“Yeah, that!” Bucky laughs, too, and shakes his head a little. “Maybe when Thor decides to become some kind of creepy stay-at-home dad, I’ll join in.”

“Don’t even kid.” Clint retorts—but then Tony starts yelling about ordering pizza because the grill “is clearly broken, not my fault!”, and they’re too busy laughing at the way Hill’s handing Phil twenty bucks to finish the conversation.

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“This is not actually a case about who Jordan Silva-Riberio was,” Phil says during his rebuttal, his hands open in front of him like he’s leading communion. “This is about who Jordan Silva-Riberio could have been.”

He’s back in the navy suit from the first day of trial, a suit that Clint’s kinda obsessed with. He’d watched Phil slip into it that morning at his apartment, the bathroom still half-fogged from Clint’s shower. He’d dressed as carefully as he does just about everything else: every button perfectly fastened, shirt tucked in just the right amount, shoes almost brand-new shiny. But he’d still worn his glasses, and his hair’d been damp from showering, and Clint’d spent a long time just looking at him.

And then snapping a shitty cell phone picture while they drank coffee at the kitchen counter, ‘cause he could.

“You look like you walked outta GQ,” he’d said while Phil grinned at him, all those laugh lines warm and bunched.

“And you look like you came out of a whole different kind of magazine,” Phil’d retorted, and Clint’d snorted coffee before he finally went to put a shirt on.

It’s a black shirt, the one he owns, that he only ever wears with the black pinstripe suit. He feels conspicuous in the damn thing, like he’s stolen it from Tony Stark’s wardrobe, but a glance at it hanging in his closet’d turned Phil’s eyes dark that morning. He’d ironed the shirt special, just for that.

Compared to Laufeyson’s expensive suit and green brocade waistcoat and Killgrave’s silk shirt and tie, his conspicuous pinstripes might as well be the Sears two-for-one deal.

Laufeyson’s finished with his closing and reclined back at counsel table, the picture of easy confidence. He’d spent his whole forty-five minutes picking apart all the details of their case, busily highlighting supposed inconsistencies in their “version” of Jordan’s death. Killgrave watched the Croatian soccer game that night, he didn’t kill anyone. No one could say for certain that Killgrave and Jordan were alone, often, at night. Jordan stole, Jordan lied, Jordan behaved like
—and Clint wrote this shit down, just in case—a “common ruffian.” He was murdered by someone like him, someone “uncouth” (a quote) and “troubled” (still a quote).

Smearing the victim, his favorite tactic.

But now, it’s Phil’s rebuttal. Phil, who steps away from the podium with comfort and ease, even though he’s got a page of notes. Phil, who hadn’t written a thing during Laufeyson’s closing, but lifted Clint’s legal pad instead.

That’s a lot of trust, Clint thinks.

Except, roles reversed, he’d trust Phil with the same thing.

“Jordan Silva-Riberio lied, sometimes,” Phil says, his shoulders lifting in a soft shrug. “He stole food from the break room fridge. He skipped meetings, here and there. And yes, he had a juvenile record. Yes, his father is in prison. But you know who else lies, or swipes food, or skips out on meetings?”

He pauses, and Clint revels in the tiny half-twist of a smile touching the corners of his lips.

“Good kids. Straight-A students. Your son, your nephew, your neighbor who sells you that Boy Scout popcorn.” A couple jurors chuckle, and Clint catches himself moving to the edge of his seat. He tries biting down on his smile, swallowing around it, but fuck if all attempts don’t just make it bigger. “There are world-renowned doctors with parents in prison. There are talented lawyers with juvenile records.”

And Clint’s not sure whether he imagines the half-second glance in his direction. What he is sure about is the warmth that pools in his belly when he catches it.

“You’ve been asked to notice inconsistencies in the state’s case, details that might suggest that Zebediah Killgrave—a man who sat in that witness stand and told you that he wanted to nurture Jordan Silva-Riberio, that he wanted Jordan and the other kids in the Urban Ascent program to better their lives—didn’t commit these acts. That he didn’t violently abuse Jordan, and that he didn’t drive a knife into his stomach and kill him.” He drops his hand from where he’d gestured towards the stand. “But the only inconsistency is that the man who wanted Jordan Silva-Riberio to have more in his life is also the man who murdered him.”

The jury’s still, no legal pads in their laps or pens scratching out notes. They’ve gone over the jury instructions with the judge, and the verdict form—the list of charges and the options for guilt—has been passed around and explained. They’ll leave in a few minutes—seven, if Phil takes his full allotted time—and . . . decide.

The courtroom’s packed, but silent. Clint’d counted the familiar faces as they filed in that morning: the other attorneys from the office, Anissa Silva and her mother, the kids from Killgrave’s Urban Ascent program, and, in the way back, Mr. Bishop’s dark-haired daughter. She’d watched Clint for a couple seconds and nodded at him. It’d—kinda looked like approval.

He wonders whether she’s still approving right now.

“There’s nothing in the evidence that you haven’t already heard,” Phil says, opening his hands again. “No inference you can’t make in the jury room, no connecting the dots that you won’t be able to manage. You’ve heard people talk about seeing Mr. Killgrave and Jordan in the office together, late. You’ve heard them talk about the change in Jordan’s attitude and demeanor. You’ve heard, again and again, that Jordan changed at P.M.R. Advertising: changed while he was having
late-night meetings, receiving special treatment, and being separated from the rest of the kids in the program. And you’ve heard how this kid with potential—this kid, chosen from hundreds, to participate in the Urban Ascent summer program—was repeatedly abused . . . and killed.”

Phil shakes his head. “Jordan Silva-Riberio had a past, just like everyone in this room. Just like every teenager you know, he made bad choices and got into trouble. Mr. Killgrave knew this. At least, he knew parts of it. ‘Vaguely.’” Clint can almost hear the air quotes, but not because Phil’s tone is snide. No, Phil’s tone is earnest, meant, and fills the courtroom with its sincerity. “And that same man, Zebediah Killgrave, sat before you and told you he wanted kids like Jordan to have something better. That he wanted to nurture them like his mother nurtured him, not that he wanted them called ‘common ruffians,’ or to have their names dragged through the mud.”

He lowers his open hands and, just once, lifts his shoulders. It’s uncomfortable, in a way, almost—resigned. Helpless, Clint thinks, and he’s sure that’s not an act. He wonders how much Jordan reminds Phil of him, how much of Clint’s own past is magnified by Jordan’s story.

He decides not to think about that any more than he has to.

“Jordan Silva-Riberio isn’t here today,” Phil finally says, his voice quiet, “because the person who vowed to look after him abused and murdered him instead.” He reaches for the podium and places one hand on it, like he’s grounding himself. “The evidence supports a verdict of guilty, and that’s why we ask you to find him guilty. Thank you.”

Phil raps his knuckles on the podium before stepping away. Clint feels every inch of distance between them like a chasm, and every beat of silence while he’s waiting for Judge Smithe to read the final instruction to the jury stretches like an eternity. When Phil sits down, he turns his chair so their knees press together under the table and stays there. Clint’s pulse surges from that one point of contact, and he flexes his hand against the table to keep from sliding the whole of their legs together.

The whole courtroom rises for the jury, and Clint watches each of them file out. Number Five looks nervous, Number Eight is quietly making eyes at Number Eleven, and Number Nine stops to thank the bailiff for holding the door. They’re good people, he thinks, good jurors. He just hopes they’ve given him enough.

Judge Smithe waves them off a few minutes later. “I’ve had your cell phone numbers since this entire business started,” she reminds them, and Clint bites the inside of his lower lip to keep from smiling. “We’ll call when they’re back. Go breathe for a while, counselors.”

Both Phil and Clint smile and thank her, but at the defense table, Laufeyson is silent and still enough that Clint wonders whether he’s locked his knees and is seconds from keeling over.

Clint’s halfway through reassembling their file and listening to the white noise of the gallery emptying when he hears Phil’s familiar voice say, “Good trial.”

He lifts his head in time to see Phil standing in the space between the tables, his hand outstretched toward Laufeyson. The other guy stares at it like maybe he expects a cobra to climb outta Phil’s sleeve and dig its teeth into his wrist, but Phil just—smiles. Clint thinks for a second it’s an asshole move, a sorta understated confidence play, but Phil’s face is genuine.

‘Cause Phil’s nothing like Laufeyson, Clint realizes with a little smile of his own. Laufeyson’s a whole drum-and-bugle corps—sound and fury but not signifying much—and Phil . . .

Phil just is.
He is, and Clint loves the hell outta that man.

Laufeyson finally reaches over and grips Phil’s hand. “You too, Mr. Coulson,” he says. The usual oil slick isn’t quite there, and for a second, Laufeyson sounds . . . normal.

But then he starts barking out orders at his associates, and the spell’s broken.

Outside the courtroom, the hallway’s packed with so many people that Clint loses track of who’s clapping his shoulder or gripping him around the neck. He hugs a tear-drenched Anissa and shakes her mother’s hand, lets Darcy jostle him by the arm before she takes the file off him and thinks somebody—maybe Natasha, maybe Tony—kisses him on the cheek, but then Phil’s catching him by the sleeve and tugging him lightly down the hallway. They bypass a clump of press, including nosy Peter Parker and his hipster jeans, and then squeeze pass a bunch of folks who’re waiting for other hearings.

They hardly make it through the steel door to the back stairwell before Phil’s on him, but not like in the elevator after the bond hearing. No, the elevator’d been handsy greed and open mouths, but this—

This is like the backstop in the ball field, Clint realizes as he wraps his arms around Phil. This is tight and private, Phil’s grip strong and sure, and Clint pooling into it.

The stairwell’s dark and the yellow bulb’s flickering, but they’re pressed flush together. Clint smells his own soap and aftershave on Phil’s skin, along with Phil’s laundry detergent and deodorant, and there’s nowhere in the world he’d rather be.

“Okay?” he asks after a few seconds, his voice catching in the back of his throat. He feels Phil’s breath against his neck, warm and regular, and it makes gooseflesh rise along his arms.

Phil nods, once, and lifts his head. They’re inches apart, close enough that they’re almost sharing the same air, and that’s how they stand: looking at each other, eyes even, in the dim artificial light. He watches Phil wet his lips and tries not to be distracted by that sliver of pink tongue.

“We keep moving forward,” Phil says quietly, almost like the words are caught somewhere between his chest and his lips. “No matter what the jury says, and no matter what the disciplinary committee says. We keep going.”

Clint knows he should agree right away, no hesitation, no second thoughts. And he wants to. His whole body wants to, from the place where his heart’s thrumming like a hummingbird on speed to where his stomach’s churning like it’s on the agitation cycle, but he can’t. No, ‘cause instead of just replying, his mind’s caught up on Phil.

On the week they’ve had together, Clint in front of the disciplinary committee and the both of them up against Laufeyson.

On the weeks before this last one, trying to reassemble the pieces of something Clint’d almost totally crushed.

On their fight and Clint’s stupid secrets, on the story of the Chris-the-cellist and Barney’s interference, on the pasts they’re both stuck reconciling.

On the first time they kissed, standing in the park, and the first time they met, in the hallway.

He only realizes that his hands are balled in Phil’s suit jacket when he feels them fucking tremble. He opens his fingers, presses his palms flush to the fabric, and smiles.
He’ll deny ‘till he dies that there’s a prickle in his eyes to go with the warmth in his belly. He just knows that Phil won’t fucking believe him.

“You can’t get rid of me that easy,” he says, but the shake in his voice kinda betrays him.

But when Phil replies, “Well, I’d hope not,” Clint’s pretty sure knows what he means.

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At a little after two, Gary-the-assistant ducks into Clint’s office, says, “District Attorney Fury would like to see you,” and disappears again.

The jury’s still not back. Clint and Phil spent lunch staring at Phil’s cell phone, waiting for it to ring. They’d turned it into a game after the first twenty-five minutes, guessing what time it might vibrate its way across the desk. By the end of the lunch hour, almost everybody in the office was in on it.

Natasha won, ‘cause she’d rolled her eyes and said, “You won’t hear before three.”

Clint’s not completely reassured by her being right.

He wanders down the hallway with his hands in his pockets, just kinda—watching the life around him. Everybody’s bustling, prepping for the rest of the week, and the usual thrum of energy carries him along. Tony yells for Pepper, who yells right back at him; Thor slams down the phone and shouts in what Clint’s pretty sure is victory, Darcy and Jane split a bag of Twizzlers at Jane’s desk and wave when he passes by. The interns duck and look busy, the file clerks pull their carts outta the way so they don’t bowl him over, and even unflappable Hill spares him a smile as she slides past him in the hallway. He should be glad he’s here at his second home, here with his family, but the weight of the trial’s standing on his shoulders.

And standing on top of that weight is the weight of the disciplinary committee.

Every step feels like he’s walking the green mile down to the fucking executioner.

Gary practically trips in his scramble to beat Clint to Fury’s door. He swings it open hard enough that it hits the arm of the couch behind it and sorta shudders, but Fury doesn’t even flinch. He’s sitting at his desk, his eye trained on a pile of papers in front of him, and for the first time, the office doesn’t feel welcoming. There’s no fresh-brewed coffee, no invitation to come in, and instead of fussing, Gary’s pulling the door closed.

Clint swallows. His throat feels like ash, but when he tries to swallow a second time, it almost sounds like a gulp. He flounders for a second, his throat tight enough that he feels like he can’t breathe, and finally just—clears his throat.

Fury still doesn’t look up, but that kinda says enough.

“S— Fury?” he manages after another hard swallow.

“Tomorrow morning, one of the suits from the state commission on bar ethics or whatever the hell they call themselves is gonna ride the elevator up to this office,” Fury says evenly. His eye’s still focused on the page in front of him, unmoving, and Clint— Clint catches himself wetting his lips
with a tongue that feels like sandpaper. “And he’s gonna ask to see Assistant District Attorney Clinton Barton, and then he’s gonna hand that assistant district attorney a fancy-ass letter in a fancy-ass envelope.”

When Fury finally raises his head, his eye is clear and steady. It bores into Clint like a laser beam right into his belly. He thinks for a second it’s maybe gonna split him in half, gut him like some kind of fish and leave all his pink parts oozing. The problem is, he can’t formulate words. He tries —his lips part, then they close, and he swallows for what feels like the hundredth time—but there’s nothing there. He’s emptied-out, kinda like the fish.

“Question is: do you wanna see the contents of that letter now, or do you wanna wait ‘till tomorrow morning?”

“I—” Clint starts, but it comes out like a croak, caught somewhere in the back of his throat. His jaw works, groping for words, but he . . . He doesn’t have any. He wonders if this is what it’s like for a deer to step in front of a car, blinded ‘till the only option is to freeze. ‘Cause that’s all his body’s got for him, right now: locked muscles, useless mouth, and a brain that can’t keep up with reality.

Fury nods to himself and rises to his full height. He’s wearing his black jacket over the usual black everything else, and he looks suddenly like a mountain. He picks up the page he was reading, along with the manila folder under it, and rounds his desk. Clint’s pretty good at figuring out expressions, but Fury’s is a blank slate. Like first-freeze ice on a lake, he catches himself thinking. You know the ice’s there on the surface, sure, but there’s no way to tell how much more’s under it ‘till it starts cracking.

There’s probably a lotta other shit he should be thinking about besides Fury’s expression and ice on a lake, but somehow, right now, that’s all his brain’s got.

Fury covers the distance between them slowly and evenly, every step as smooth as the one right before it. He looms in front of Clint, a square-shouldered mass of a man. For the first time since he was sixteen or seventeen, Clint feels small. “Far as the disciplinary committee’s concerned, I’m in a meeting.” He meets Clint’s gaze. “And far as they’re concerned, I’m gonna be in that meeting ‘till the Killgrave jury comes back with a verdict, even if that verdict’s another six weeks from now. You understand what I’m saying?”

Clint’s head bobs almost automatically. “Yes, sir,” he answers. He wants to glance down at the folder in Fury’s grip, wants to see what he’s holding, but his neck’s locked in place. “And—after?”

“We’ll deal with ‘after’ when ‘after’ shows its ugly head.” Fury opens the folder, slides the page on top into it, and then hands the whole thing to Clint. The label reads BARTON in thick, heavy letters. Clint stares at it for longer than he really needs to before his hand lifts enough that he can grab it.

Fury nods again. “Good,” he says, and turns away. Clint watches him move back through the office to his enormous desk. “You two looked good in there, this last week,” he adds. He drops into his chair and swivels to face Clint. His gaze is even, trained perfectly on where Clint’s still standing with the folder in one limp hand. “Hopefully, we’ll get to see a lot more of it in the future.”

Something in Clint, some tiny, unfrozen part of him, it kinda—quirks, at that. There’s something lighter in Fury’s tone, something almost encouraging, and his fingers twitch a little harder against the folder than he means him to. He grits his teeth around his urge to look at it, and realizes once he does that he’s almost smiling.
“Thanks, s—” he starts, but Fury raises his eyebrows. The almost-smile tips, and he can tell it’s not an almost anymore. “Thanks,” he says, instead.

“I told you before: around here, I only hire extraordinary attorneys.” Clint’s not sure he’s ever seen Fury smile, but the way his lips purse are close enough. “That still includes you.”

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Clint spends most his afternoon staring at the folder.

At three-fifteen, Tony calls everybody into the conference room and reconvenes what he dubs “The Killgrave Jury Guesstravaganza.” He sticks sheets of post-it chart paper to the wall and offers up time slots—“Fifteen minute intervals by default, but you can be more precise if you want”—and potential verdicts—“G for ‘guilty,’ NG for ‘Coulson starts drinking his sorrows,’ and HJ for ‘god those jurors really hated each other’”—for two bucks a bet. Bruce collects the funds in a plastic Halloween pumpkin stolen from a break room cabinet, and by three-thirty, it’s a mess of crumpled singles and, weirdly, fives. There’re bets stretching from that afternoon—“Sorry, you already lose!” Tony shouts to Barry at three-thirty—until the end of business on Wednesday, and no fewer than five people’ve picked the “not guilty” or “hung jury” options.

Darcy shrugs when Clint asks her about it. “Hung juries happen all the time on big cases like this,” she defends. The fringe on her sweater sways. “Go harass Peggy, she’s the one who picked ‘not guilty.’”

But as distracting as the “guesstravaganza”—and Tony announcing losses while standing on a chair outside Pepper’s cubicle—is, it doesn’t replace the gnawing worry in Clint’s stomach, or the suspicious manila folder on his desk.

u worry like a worrying worryer worry-thing, Wade Wilson complains in an e-mail around four, after Clint’s reorganized his Outlook folders for the fifth time that hour. where is ur yolo? leave it in ur other pants? need a search party?

Please tell me you spellcheck your motions, Clint fires back.

ow. theirs the proof ur worried like a worrying worryer, u went straight to grammer snark.

I like low-hanging fruit, Clint replies, and, predictably, Wade turns the conversation into a series of dick jokes.

But worse than the folder is the Killgrave jury, which doesn’t come back. Not at four (Bruce’s bet), four-thirty (Jane’s), or five-fifteen (a bet shared by two interns who’d agreed on the time, but not the verdict). Nervous energy starts seeping into Tony’s voice when he announces the intervals, and eventually, Clint’s gotta abandon his desk for a loop of the office ‘cause he can’t fucking sit still anymore.

His fingers are drumming weird, uneven rhythms on the corner of Phil’s desk when Tony announces that the five-thirty time slot’s come and gone. Five minutes later, Phil’s office phone rings and brings both of them outta their chairs. It’s funny, Clint thinks as Phil gropes for the thing, how unbuttoned the guy’s calm can be. Every murmured response feels forced, urgent, and his eyes keep drifting.
When he says, “I understand,” into the phone, he shakes his head.

And Clint collapses back into his chair.

“That was Judge Smithe’s assistant,” Phil says once the phone’s in the cradle. He stands over it for a couple seconds, eyes trained down on the thing like it’s personally offended him. His hand rubs over his face, then over his forehead and hair. “The jury says they’re too deadlocked to decide any time today. They’ll start again tomorrow morning.”

Clint’s enough of an expert in Phil’s tone and expression to detect the disappointment, but he doesn’t focus on it. Focusing on it means acknowledging the tight curl of worry in his own belly. It means admitting that his fingers’ve been tapping patterns against his leg (or desk, or computer keyboard, or window ledge) all damn day.

He wonders whether Fury’ll be able to stay in his “meetings” even after Clint’s own copy of the letter arrives. And then, he thinks about the manila folder that’s sitting in the middle of his desk and has to force himself to stop thinking at all.

“That’s not necessarily a bad sign,” Steve offers after the news’s made its rounds. He stands in the doorway to Phil’s office, hands in his coat pockets, and shrugs. Clint realizes for the first time how bone-deep exhausted he looks, like he’s been dragged along a human-sized cheese grater ‘till his usual energy’s sloughed off. Clint’s not the only person in the office who’s been wearing an extra hat. “It means they’re taking it seriously. Really thinking about both sides.”

“Or,” Darcy suggests, popping her head around the doorjamb, “it means they’ll hang.” Steve glares at her in a way that’s not altogether friendly, but her wink in Clint’s direction kinda makes him smile. She disappears in a swirl of scarf and fur-trimmed hoodie.

Steve rolls his eyes. “Remind me she’s invaluable.”

Phil raises both eyebrows in the sorriest excuse for a who, me? expression that Clint’s ever seen. Clint himself throws up his hands. And whether it’s their little pantomimed slapstick routine or just the tension of the day, Steve breaks into a grin and a half-caught little laugh. “You guys actually get some rest tonight, okay?” he says, but his eyes land on Clint. Land, then linger, and Clint can’t help but smile.

“You too, Steve,” he replies, and watches the guy walk away.

A bunch other people walk past Phil’s office door, too, but he and Phil, they—don’t really move. They sit on their opposite sides of the desk, Clint in his shirt with the rolled-up sleeves and Phil in his loose tie and open collar, and watch the rest of the office wander by. They should be talking, Clint thinks a couple times, filling the silence with some kinda worry or prediction about the damn case. But every possible prediction’s scribbled down and tracked on Tony’s ridiculous chart paper, and the worry—

They don’t need to talk about the worry.

Clint’s studying the curl of Phil’s knuckles and the way he holds the computer mouse when Phil asks, “Dinner?” The office is quiet, all its usual life and energy reduced to a muted hum. Outside, the sun’s already halfway to set, a sure-fire reminder that summer’s actually over.

Clint shifts in his chair—the chair he sat in an hour ago after his loop of the floor, and a chair he hasn’t really moved from—and realizes suddenly how tired he is. Not from the trial itself, necessarily, but from everything else surrounding it, the weeks of preparation and endless work.
he’s dragged himself through. He’s drained, as empty as the hallway and the offices beyond it, and his knees pop when he finally stretches out the tightness in his legs.

Phil watches him through every second of the silence. He’s quiet, though, never asking why Clint’s not quicker to respond. Clint wonders whether Fury’s said anything about the disciplinary committee’s letter, or the folder it lurks inside.

“Can we just do, I dunno, shitty pizza and beer?” he offers when he finally settles. “I mean, pancakes or steaks or whatever you’re thinking, that’s good, but—”

“But you want to go home?” Phil finishes. It’s not complaining or judging, it’s just a—statement, and Clint spends a split second wanting to leap across the desk and kiss the hell outta Phil for knowing the answer. He nods too quickly, and Phil kinda rolls his eyes. *Kinda*, though, ‘cause there’s a smile creasing the corners of his mouth, and the usual warmth touching his face. “I’m going to end up in your ratty sweatpants again,” he mock-complains.

Clint grins at him. “Maybe I just like you in my ratty sweatpants.”

“Oh, I figured *that* out after the first time,” Phil retorts dryly. It’s so affected, so perfectly tight and deadpan, that Clint can’t stop himself from laughing. It’s the first real laugh all day, the first time the tension’s really unwound from his chest, and he’s got Phil to thank. Phil, who tugs off his tie and leaves it on his desk while he starts to pack up.

Phil, who stops to kiss Clint, lazy and slow, against the corner of his desk. Not for any reason besides the one where he fucking *can*.

They flop together in Phil’s boring sedan—boring, sure, but with a nice kick to it and Phil’s ridiculous iPod plugged into the stereo system—and take off outta the parking lot with their bags and suit coats just kinda haphazardly piled in the back. There’s something almost indecent about Phil in a waistcoat with no jacket, his collar open and his sleeves rolled up in the cool September night, and Clint spends huge portion of the drive focused on the guy’s neck. They pick up a double-pepperoni pizza from Wade Wilson’s favorite hole-in-the-wall joint and a six-pack of dark beer from the liquor store two blocks from Clint’s place, and the closer they get to home, the better Clint starts to feel.

’Cause yeah, there’re movie posters on the wall and shitty IKEA furniture, but this is the life he’s spent the last couple years building. This apartment, this threadbare floor-model couch he got on clearance, these bookshelves and tables and everything else that’s *his*.

The suit coats get slung over the backs of the kitchen chairs. Shoes end up all over the floor. Clint drops his bag in the kitchen, and Phil tosses his on the armchair Clint only really uses to collect dirty clothes. They land on the couch and stay there, listening to newscasters’ scripted banter and sopping grease off the pizza with what feels like a whole roll of paper towels.

“This is either your best idea yet, or your worst,” Phil volunteers, sucking pizza sauce off his thumb.

Clint laughs at him and steals his beer.

After they polish off way too much of the shitty pizza that *nobody* should eat—*i fucking hate you for introducing me to that place*, Clint texts Wade during a commercial—they watch a whole boatload of crappy TV. It’s the kinda truly fucked-up stuff that guys like Phil—educated guys, guys with juris doctorates they hang on their damn office walls, guys who’ve published articles in textbooks—shouldn’t like but that Phil’s totally addicted to. Clint can’t stand Honey Boo-Boo or the people who own that stupid cake shop—why’s that even a thing, anyway?—but he *can* stand the sight of Phil. He soaks in the man like he can’t quite get enough of him, like his whole life’s
narrowed to this moment of relaxation on his battered couch. He watches the way Phil’s lines crinkle when he laughs at something on the screen, the way his body slumps against the back of the couch, the way the tension seeps outta him like the cushions are sponges that pull the day’s misery right outta him.

He memorizes every detail of Phil’s body, just ‘cause he can: the way his toes stretch in his black socks when he shifts around to get comfortable, the patterns his thumb draws on the beer bottle condensation, the roll of his lips when he’s trying to decide whether that particular moment on the show’s funny or just sad. He traces those micro-expressions he knows so fucking well—smiles, half-frowns, quirked eyebrows, confused little lip-purses—while Phil traces his fingers down the line of Clint’s thigh. Every once in a while, during a stupid commercial or a grayed-over “last episode” flashback, Phil glances over and catches Clint’s eyes, and Clint can’t help smiling at him like he’s the only solid thing in a world of quicksand.

This, Clint finally thinks in the middle of a rerun of that “build a house for needy people” show that always makes him tear up, this thing they’re in right now, it—actually isn’t something they’re trying at. ‘Cause trying implies that they’re struggling through, that there’s nothing right about it, and that’s not what’s going on. This is bigger, like the two of them together are actually more than the sum of their parts. The part where they grope and maybe don’t figure it out, that’s mostly over.

Not all the way, of course. No, Clint knows Bucky’s right, that relationships don’t just have a magic wand moment that makes everything better. But figuring out the little things every day, that’s something Clint’ll do forever, if it means more shit TV and worse pizza.

The Ty guy with the crazy hair’s locking people outta the master bedroom when Clint reaches over and plants his hand on the back of Phil’s neck. Phil glances over, his face caught in a tiny beat of surprise, but the surprise doesn’t last ‘cause Clint’s kissing him. Kissing him and crawling over the couch to get closer, reeling the two of them together because lips alone aren’t really enough.

Phil tastes like dark beer and pizza sauce, like hops and garlic and everything Clint shouldn’t want playing over his tongue, but Clint never wants to taste anything else. He never wants to feel anything else, either, than Phil’s hands fisting his shirt and Phil’s breath playing along his skin when they steal half-breaths while they kiss. Phil’s warm, he’s familiar and right, and Clint never wants to be anywhere else.

Plus, he moans when Clint bites his lower lip, and fuck if that doesn’t go straight to the front of Clint’s pants.

“I thought you wanted me in ratty sweats,” Phil accuses when they finally break apart. Clint’s half-panting, almost overwhelmed by all the—the thoughts and emotions he can’t stop from swirling around in his head.

“I want you outta all pants,” he retorts, and god, he loves that Phil chuckles when he drags him off the couch and toward the bedroom.

But after Phil nods off, his face pressed to the pillow and his back bare and perfect in the dim light through the window, Clint can’t fucking sleep.

The dull, warm ache that only comes from good sex is there, tugging at the edges of his consciousness, but every time he closes his eyes, all he can think about is the letter in that damn folder. He’d stood in front of his desk after he’d packed up for the night and stared at the thing, willing himself to leave it where it sat. But every time he half-turned to meet Phil out in the foyer, something’d stopped him. Every time he almost ditched it, it’d pulled him back.
He can almost feel it in the apartment. Like a virus, he thinks, slowly feeding off everything about this night that should be good. He rolls onto one side, then the other, watches Phil sleep and watches the ceiling, but in the end—

Well.

In the end, there’s really only the one option.

The kitchen chair’s cold through his boxer briefs and t-shirt, and the tile under his feet feels like ice. The only light he bothers to turn on is the flickery one over the sink, and its high-pitched buzz is almost enough to make him throw in the towel and just go to bed. But the folder feels heavy in his hands when he sets it on the table, the black scrawl of BARTON darker and thicker than when he’d first looked at it in Fury’s office.

He wets his lips and tries to swallow around the sick feeling in the back of his throat. It doesn’t work.

So he opens the folder.

The letter from the disciplinary committee’s on top, still creased from whatever envelope it’d come from. Clint’s belly twists at the gold-embossed seal of the bar association that tops the letterhead, then at the list of names under it. He reads every one of them—Petersen to Winchel, Li to Carlucci, Gardiner to Summers—as a stall, a reason to not read the rest. He reads the date, he reads the address of the district attorney’s office, and he reads the greeting to Fury, all to keep himself from the body of the damn letter.

Until he’s there.

He reads through it once, too-quickly, and then a second time and a third, just making sure it sinks in. He reads the paragraphs out-of-order, mutters some of them aloud, ‘cause he’s not sure he believes all of it. His hands jump hard enough that he’s gotta press them to the table to keep them still and steady.

Due to the omission of his significant juvenile criminal history from his bar application, Mr. Barton’s license to practice law will be suspended for 60 days, he reads for what feels like the hundredth time that minute, just ‘cause he can’t stop staring at it. We are also requiring that he petition again for expungement, and we will be recommending to the Clarion County court that, this time, his expungement be approved.

Furthermore, it continues, and Clint feels like the font’s jumping, his heart’s racing so hard, this disciplinary committee recommends Mr. Barton be retained as an assistant district attorney. Although we realize this is outside our purview, we feel Mr. Barton is an asset to the Suffolk County legal community, and we do not want to see his talents wasted. Additionally, given that Mr. Barton’s actual record of practice is impeccable, we see no reason to question the validity of any of the results he has obtained as an assistant district attorney. We hope you will allow him to continue on with your office despite the suspension.

He knows he should read the closing, should learn the names of the three people who made this decision in the first place, but he can’t stop reading and rereading the actual meat of the letter.

Suspended for two months. Retained in the district attorney’s office. No reason to question the validity of his results. A second chance at expunging his record.

He stares at the words ‘till they blur, then blinks and stares at them again, his hands only steadying
‘cause the tightness in his belly and chest starts to unwind. He’s tired and worn enough that it takes a whole five minutes to recognize the feeling that’s creeping along his body.

It’s relief.

It’s relief, white-hot and overwhelming, and it forces him out of his chair. It carries him through the apartment, in a loop around the living room and down toward the bedroom and back again, ‘cause—

‘Cause he’s okay. ‘Cause he’ll keep his job, he’ll keep his license, he’ll keep the life that he’s started building, he’ll—

Like Phil said in the stairwell, he’ll keep moving forward.

He paces back into the living room and threads fingers through his hair. He wants to stand on the couch and hoot, but he’s not sure he should wake Phil up. But then, he wants to wake Phil up, wants to press him into the mattress and kiss him breathless. He wants to text everyone—the office, Darcy, Wade Wilson, even Barney—and buy them all beers.

But this is Fury’s copy of the letter, not Clint’s.

This is something Clint technically doesn’t know yet.

He drops his hands to his sides and wanders back to the table. He skims the letter one last time, checking again for the part that says he’s only being suspended, not fucking disbarred. He’s ready to close the folder and climb back into bed, too, when he catches a line near the end he doesn’t remember seeing the first time.

_Influential in our decision were the letters received from your office, as well as those from other attorneys familiar with Mr. Barton’s commitment to the ethical practice of law._

And that’s when Clint realizes there’s a lot more in the folder than just the letter from the bar committee. Because stacked under it are a bunch of other letters, all of them typed neatly on letterhead, and all of them signed with familiar names.

For instance, Maria Hill.

Natasha Romanoff.

Wade Winston Wilson, James Buchanan Barnes, Steven Rogers, Anthony Stark. Dr. Bruce Banner, Thor Odinson, Darcy Lewis. And last, at the bottom, Phillip J. Coulson.

Clint’s chest draws up tight again, his heart thrumming too-fast, but this time, it’s not the nerves that’re doing it. No, the nerves are background noise now, the buzzing from the light over the kitchen sink, something he’ll live with ‘till the Killgrave jury comes back and his life, as a whole, starts to settle. What’s choking him now brings a sharp stinging to his eyes and the tremble back to his hands, but it’s the tightness he feels every time he walks into the judicial center and starts up the stairs to the office.

It’s the too-warm feeling of knowing he’s—cared for.

He reads each one of the letters there in the almost-dark, trying to memorize every last word and sentence, every curl at the end of a signature. He reads where Hill calls him _ruthlessly competent_ and Steve calls him _a team player_. He reads the three paragraphs where Tony rants about how requiring bar applicants to disclose their juvenile records is an invasion of privacy, the three
sentences where Bruce insists he’s a brilliant young legal mind, and the place where Natasha writes, simply, He doesn’t deserve to be disbarred. Bucky compliments his ability to think on his feet even when, in all honesty, the other party’s being unfair, Thor insists he is talented and thoughtful beyond compare, and Darcy flat-out dubs him the best boss ever.

Wade Wilson’s letter starts with I know I’m not one to talk, because I’m kind of a mess as a lawyer, circles through a thousand non-sequiturs that Clint’s not entirely sure he understands, and ends with but I feel like he’s helping me get better.

And Phil’s—

“Maria bet me lunch that he wouldn’t give those to you,” Phil murmurs behind him, hands landing squarely on Clint’s shoulders. Clint twists to glance up at him, but Phil’s already leaning down to press his nose against Clint’s messy hair. He’s in the ratty sweatpants but no shirt, his whole body basked in shadow thanks to the crappy lighting, but in a lotta ways, he’s the best thing Clint’s ever seen.

His thumbs press into his shoulders, rubbing a circle that almost feels like a massage, and Clint closes his eyes when he exhales. “Go somewhere expensive,” he says, but he can’t quite let go of the letters. All of them are in his grip, ‘cause he kept adding the ones he finished to the back of the stack. All of them, against his fingers and palms, a reminder that there’s a whole bunch of people who care about him.

And yeah, they’re his friends, but they’re also his colleagues. They’re professionals, and right now, he feels like one, too.

“Okay?” Phil asks against his scalp, and Clint realizes that he’s still quiet. He nods a little and ducks his head enough that he can turn and really look at Phil. Not for the details, this time, but for the whole man, the person who started believing in him before anyone else did.

The guy he got lucky enough to fall in love with.

“I think so, yeah,” he says, smiling slightly.

Phil nods, barely a bob of his head, but Clint thinks he can still see the wheels in the back of his mind spinning. They turn in the same slow circles as the thumbs on his shoulders. Clint closes his eyes again, soaking up the touch, ‘till Phil asks, “Come back to bed?”

The end of the sentence hardly lifts, though, ‘cause it’s hardly a question.

Clint turns his face enough that he can press his nose and mouth against Phil’s hand. In the dark, this is all there is, really: the knowledge that his world isn’t crashing down on him, the warm curl in his belly that comes outta knowing how much is friends care about him, and Phil. Phil’s touch and closeness, the comfort that doesn’t let up even when he murmurs, “Yeah,” against the back of that familiar hand.

The hand drifts down Clint’s arm, all the way to his wrist, and Phil tugs him to his feet. When they collapse back into the rumpled sheets together, Clint burrows his face in Phil’s skin and finally, slowly, falls asleep.

It’s in the morning, when Phil’s humming to himself in the bathroom and Clint’s polishing off a second cup of coffee, that he remembers the last letter. He abandons the mug on the kitchen counter and wanders through. He’s half-dressed and might make them late, but he doesn’t care about that.
What he cares about is what Phil’s written.

*Clinton Barton,* the closing paragraph starts, so simple and straight-forward that Clint can almost hear Phil reading it, *is without a doubt one of the most talented lawyers I have ever had the privilege to know. If he is disbarred, the legal community will be worse for it. And, as the saying goes: everyone deserves a second chance.*

Phil smells like shampoo and tastes like mouthwash when he comes outta the bathroom. Clint knows ’cause he flattens him to the hallway wall and kisses him ’till Phil’s fingers are mussing up his hair and he’s pulled Phil’s shirt halfway outta his pants.

“What?” Phil asks, open-mouthed and half-panting.

“You,” Clint replies, and kisses him all over again.

**==**

Tony’s halfway through his announcement of the latest bet-loser—*“And Peggy Carter goes down in flames!”* he shouts down the hallway, balancing dangerously on Pepper’s wheeled desk chair—when Phil’s cell phone goes off in the middle of his desk.

Clint shouldn’t even be in Phil’s office, looming in the doorway with a cup of coffee between his palms. He’s devoted his whole damn morning to writing out express instructions to whoever ends up covering his caseload while he’s suspended from practice. There’re two DUI trials coming up next month, plus a dozen other potential trials that he could probably settle (at least, most of them; Sif’s the defense attorney on one of them, and he’s pretty sure she still hates his damn guts), and that still ignores the sentencings, motions, probation revocations, and god-knows-what-else that’s crowding up the docket from here ‘till late November.

Sixty days, Clint’d decided as he stuck a large-size post-it to another file folder, is a long time to be away from what you love.

He’d stood up around eleven to stretch his legs and grab a fresh cup of coffee, which’d kinda turned into a loop of the office. He’d wandered past all the open doors, peeking in at the usual suspects: Bruce argued on the phone with *somebody* about one of the kids in care; Thor laughed his way through a meeting with Heimdall; Tony typed fast enough his fingers turned to fleshy blurs on the keyboard; Natasha glanced up from taking notes just long enough to smile at him. He’d winked at Pepper as the timer went off for the next bet, ducked outta Jane’s way as she ran toward the ladies’ room for the second time that morning, helped Peggy pick up some dropped papers, and then pretended to trip Darcy just to make her laugh. He’d waved at Steve and Maria in Maria’s office, both of them bent over some document from the bank robbery trial, and ended up here.

Shoulder against Phil’s door, chatting about the piles of shit they’ve gotta do now that they’re not in trial.

And then, the phone rings.

They both jump at the noise like they’ve never heard a damn cell phone before, and Clint swears under his breath as hot coffee splashes onto his wrist. He almost drops his mug, too, but manages to step forward and half-set, half-*dump* it on the edge of Phil’s desk. Phil, on the other hand, is as still
as stone, staring at the display like he’s seen a ghost.

“It’s Judge Smithe’s chambers,” he says quietly. Clint wonders if saying it any louder somehow gives it a secret power.

But if the volume of Phil’s voice won’t change the outcome, he’s pretty sure avoiding the phone won’t either. They both kinda realize it at once, Clint’s eyes flicking up at Phil’s too-serious face and Phil staring right back. Phil practically bludgeons the side of his face with the damn thing.

“Yes,” he answers, and Clint— You read all the time in books about people holding their breath when they’re nervous. The anticipation builds up in the scene you’re reading, and there’s always that line about sucking in a breath and holding it too long. Like the character thinks depriving his brain of air’s gonna turn bad news into good.

But Clint stands there in the middle of Phil’s office, gaze never even blinking away from Phil, and he holds his fucking breath. He holds it ’till his lungs burn, holds it through every damn murmur and mutter outta Phil’s mouth. He swears to Christ he’s getting light-headed, but he still can’t work a single muscle in his chest or belly.

By the time Phil says the words, “We’ll be right down,” there’s an audience crowding in the hallway. Even without turning around, Clint can feel the attention beating down on his back. Phil’s the very picture of control—controlled voice, controlled posture, controlled hands when he hangs up the phone—but Clint—

Clint’s sure his knees are shaking.

Especially when the next words outta Phil’s mouth are the ones they’ve been waiting for over the last twenty-four hours:

“Jury’s back.”

And Clint exhales.

He exhales, and suddenly, the whole fucking office leaps into simultaneous motion. It’s like a switch’s been flicked, he thinks, ‘cause everything speeds up to three times normal: Stark yells down the hall that the verdict’s in, the group of people behind him scatter to relay the message, and Maria’s outta her office so fast that she slams the door behind her. Without thinking, Clint grabs Phil’s suit coat off the hook behind the door and tosses it to him; there’s a second’s pause after Phil catches it, a point where their eyes lock and all the nerves pool in the pit of Clint’s stomach, but then they’re moving again. Halfway to his own office, he shouts for Darcy to grab the Killgrave file. By the time he’s got his jacket on and his tie straightened, she’s holding it out in front of her like a football player with the handoff.

He grips it between palms he doesn’t trust, palms that’re shaking. She holds on for a beat too long. “Get ‘im,” she says, her eyes too big and too warm for the bundle of nerves in his belly to handle. He grabs her wrist, squeezes it once, and then takes off down the hallway.

Phil’s waiting for him outside the security doors, portfolio tucked under his arm. He nods, a stiff motion that can only belong to Chief Assistant District Attorney Coulson, and they fall into step next to each other.

The back stairwell’s a fucking cacophony of sound, footsteps echoing in every direction. It feels like half the building’s running down the stairs. Clint knows it’s not true—there’s a bunch of people from their office, sure, and maybe a couple folks who work for the clerk or other judges—
but the noise is almost deafening. Or maybe the noise isn’t footsteps, he thinks as they step off the last landing. Maybe the noise is the rushing of his heartbeat in his own chest and head.

He never gets the chance to figure out which it is.

The hallway outside the stairwell is packed with people. Members of the press immediately burst to life, shouting out questions that Clint can’t understand over the noise, let alone try to answer, but they’re mingled in between other members of the D.A.’s office, general observers, and everybody else who’s sat through the last week-plus of the trial. There’re kids from Urban Ascent there—kids, Clint thinks, who should probably be attending school instead of loitering around the courthouse—and members of Jordan’s family. There’re witnesses from every portion of the trial, and there’re rubbernecks who Clint’s never seen before.

He spots Mr. Bishop’s pretty daughter, skinny Peter Parker in his too-tight jeans, and a tear-streaked Anissa Silva.

It’s almost—almost—too much.

Clint’s swept up in the wave of people entering the courtroom, his body drifting on the damn whim of every elbow and shoulder that passes by. A couple times, somebody slips between him and Phil, but they always find each other again; their arms brush, their shoulders touch, and they’re back where they’re meant to be. Clint tries to focus on him—on proximity, on the heat of his arm, on the glances Phil throws his direction—but there’s just too fucking much around them.

At least, ‘till they cross the bar in the front of the courtroom.

Laufeyson and Killgrave are already seated at the defense table, both of them decked out in expensive suits, shirts, and ties. Laufeyson’s whole outfit, save for the lining of his jacket, is black, right down to the thin tie hanging against his shirt. He looks like the director of a high-end funeral parlor, not a defense attorney.

Then again, Clint’s in one of his off-the-rack gray suits, the kind he bought on clearance back before he’d finished law school. He looks like the assistant store manager of a T.J. Maxx, not an actual lawyer.

But right about now, appearances are the least of his worries.

Judge Smithe strides into the courtroom a minute later, and everybody rises along with her. The clatter of seats snapping back into place is loud enough that Clint glances over his shoulder, and then loses his ability to breathe all over again: the whole fucking courtroom is filled to capacity. Standing-room only, from the looks of it, complete with some reporter or another typing furiously on his cell phone despite the laptop bag slung across his chest.

Clint wets his lips and faces forward, but he’s not really surprised when Phil’s knuckles brush the back of his hand just the once.

The jury files in a few seconds later, every one of them straight-backed and stern-looking. Clint tries to remember their names, their occupations, their family situations, but he can’t. His brain’s in overdrive, only really able to trip over itself as he waits for them all to get situation. They’re blurs of features, hair color and shirt color bleeding together, and the more he looks at them, the more his fingers start to jump against the side of his leg.

He presses his palm flat to his thigh, but nothing helps. His heart’s jumping like he’s injected himself with a gallon of caffeine.
“Be seated,” Judge Smithe says, a good three or four seconds before Clint thinks his knees would’ve given out anyway.

If time sped up back in Phil’s office a few minutes before, it’s slowed down now, the whole world suddenly moving like molasses. Clint swears the judge asks, “Has the jury reached a verdict?” in slow motion, every syllable stretched out like taffy from one end of the courtroom to the other, and that the forewoman takes a whole ten minutes just to rise from her uncomfortable vinyl chair. He watches her fingers twitch as she unfolds the verdict form, watches her pink tongue wet her lips, watches her lashes dip and rise in a blink. Nervous, he realizes, ‘cause these aren’t just words in a vacuum.

There’s a whole courtroom of eyes on the pretty blonde with the twitching fingers.

Clint presses his hands against his legs. When Laufeyson and Killgrave rise for the verdict, Phil’s knee presses against Clint’s and stays there.

He swears they draw in a breath in unison. Then again, maybe the whole room is inhaling with them.

“On the first count, murder in the second degree,” the forewoman reads, “we find the defendant guilty.”

Clint knows, somewhere in the deepest parts of his brain, that a lot more happens after that one string of words. He knows the courtroom erupts in a thousand different sounds, he knows Laufeyson’s whole body locks up like he’s had a muscle spasm, and he knows Killgrave bends forward and presses his hands against the tabletop. He knows that, sooner or later, Judge Smithe’s gonna call for order in that commanding voice of hers, and he knows that the forewoman’s gonna read the rest of the charges.

But all Clint’s aware of, right then, is the rush of blood in his own ears and the sudden, almost eerie stillness of his hands where he’s pressed them against his thighs. His chest loosens, his heart crawls outta the back of his throat, and his stomach stills.

And over and over again, in his head, he hears that one fucking word: Guilty.

It takes him ‘till court’s adjourned to realize that all the stillness and uncoiling is what normal people just call relief.

==

“Alright, alright, settle down people, don’t make me regret letting Stark break into his— Are you fucking trying to poison our office?!”

The face Fury makes after his first sip of Tony’s “punch” reminds Clint of a pretzel, all twisted in on itself, and he can’t help the way that his damn belly jumps around when he laughs. The conference room’s crowded with pretty much everybody in the office, bodies sprawled in chairs, pressed against walls, or (in Darcy’s case) dropped into a half-sitting, half-laying position on the floor. In the middle of the table’s one of the big coffee carafes, filled with some kinda concoction Tony brewed up in his office. Clint’s not sure what’s in it, exactly, but it’s at least half booze—and
exactly what he needs, right about now.

He’s feeling warm and content, not drunk as much as happy. It’s enough that he can’t even scowl when Natasha puts her feet on the arm of his chair for the third time. Of course, that might be ‘cause the first two times he’d scowled at her and elbowed her feet outta his way, she’d reached into her cup for an ice cube and then pinged it off the side of his head.

Maybe.

She crosses her ankles, and he bites down on his smile when he rolls his eyes.

It’s only three in the afternoon, and every single one of them should be working. Clint’s got at least thirty more cases to sort through before Fury’s fictional “meeting” ends and his suspension goes into effect, Thor’s got a couple juvenile sentencings that afternoon, Tony’s off to oral arguments in the morning, and Clint’s pretty sure Maria and Steve have a hearing about that bank robbery case coming up in a couple days. But the whole office feels like Mardi Gras or the Fourth of July, full of relief and pride, and Clint knows he can’t focus on work. He can’t focus on anything, really, except the way he’s surrounded by the people who matter, the way Phil steals his last piece of hastily-ordered “celebration pizza” (another Stark invention), and the way he feels when he thinks about their three guilty verdicts.

Three.

Or as Judge Smithe’d summed it up: guilty on all counts.

Fury tips back the paper cup filled with Tony’s mystery punch, pulls a face like he’s just done a shot of really cheap vodka, and tosses the cup in the garbage while everybody’s laughing at him.

It’s a heady feeling, kinda like they’re all floating in a world that’s not real. Like before you wake up from a dream, Clint thinks, and everything’s too perfect to be reality.

At least, ‘till Fury clears his throat.

“I’ll make this quick, ‘cause I’m pretty sure once that shit hits my liver I’m gonna regret ever coming in here,” he says, and Tony beams like that’s the greatest damn compliment anybody’s ever given him. Clint wants to appreciate the weird kinda victory-pose the guy does, too, but he’s a little too focused on Fury. He’s in his full black ensemble, standing at the front of the conference room table like he’s a general about to lead his troops to battle, and his face is serious. Not tight, necessarily, but—stern.

Everybody else’s still laughing to themselves, but Clint feels his two cups of boozy punch twisting around in his stomach.

He’s pretty sure what’s gonna come next.

“I’ll start with the obvious,” Fury says, resting his fingertips on the edge of the table. “Coulson and Barton’ve spent the last couple months in hell on this case, and they made it look easy. And now, Killgrave’s going away for a long damn time. It maybe goes without saying, but they did good.”

He steps into the word good, leans on it with what feels like his whole weight, and Clint can’t help the weird warmth that flushes up his neck and face when the room bursts into applause. It’s fucking stupid, he knows—they’d clapped when he and Phil walked into the office, they’d clapped when the victory pizza’d shown up, and now they’re clapping again—but it . . . matters.

Anissa’s teary-eyed clinging hug, that’d mattered. Laufeyson’s head-nod that kinda, somehow, felt like quiet approval. The long look from Bishop’s daughter, the wink from Peter Parker (who, yeah,
probably does have a thing), the shouts of questions from reporters in the hallway—

It’s all the stuff he’d tried to explain to the disciplinary committee, just not in words.

He drops his eyes and kinda scratches at the back of his neck when the clapping doesn’t stop right away. But dropping his eyes means watching Phil’s knee knock against his under the table. It’s a tiny nudge, almost playful in a weird way, and when he glances up, Phil’s smiling at him.

In case he’s never made it clear, Clint loves that fucking smile.

“And I think we can agree,” Fury says once the clapping’s pretty much over, “that a lot’s happened around this office in the last six months or so. I’m not just talking about cases we’ve won or convictions that’ve gotten upheld on appeal—”

“Fifteen,” Tony offers, and Bruce elbows him.

“But the stuff we like to pretend doesn’t matter. The stuff that makes us people.” Across the table, Thor slings an arm around Jane’s shoulders and flashes a smile so huge and warm, Clint can’t help but grin at the two of them. Then, Natasha pokes him in the arm with his toe and jerks her head in Phil’s direction.

Phil might not be Thor, loud and demonstrative, but his long look at Clint still kinda says it all. His belly clenches all over again, but not about Fury. No, this is the belly-clench he knows he’ll be feeling for a long, long time.

Fury waits a couple seconds longer than he has to before he leans forward. His palms flatten to the tabletop, and his face turns almost—cold. Like he’s bracing for something, Clint thinks, but that just makes Clint brace, too. “There’s gonna be a couple other things happening around here in the next few months,” he says. His voice is lawyer-neutral, the kind that only comes from practice.

“For one, Rogers and I’ve been talking, and he convinced me that what we need around here is to hire another lawyer, somebody who exclusively handles misdemeanors and diversions. Something about how I can’t expect one guy to review all the police reports, charge all the suspects, second Hill on this big trial, and do a half-dozen pleas all in a single day.” A tiny smile touches the corners of Fury’s lips. “Me, I think he’s just not working hard enough.”

The laughter’s warm, but not as warm as the pink color Steve’s face turns. He drops his chin and eyes the table for a half-second, but it’s a coy kinda glance. Fake-embarrassed, like somebody’s caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. At least, ‘till Tony claps him on the shoulder and mutters something that makes his face light up in a grin, and he laughs.

Clint wonders for a second whether there’s a little of Tony’s conniving brilliance in everybody.

“But Rogers’s whining about all the different hats he wears isn’t the only reason I decided to open up a new position around here.” Fury rises to his full height, his shoulders squaring, and Clint swallows. His stomach feels like it’s made outta cement all of a sudden, and he can’t stop his fingers from digging into the sides of his plastic cup. “Not too long ago, the bar disciplinary committee contacted me, and we had a long discussion about what it means to be a lawyer. A good lawyer.”

He pauses for a second to breathe, and Clint swears the whole room breathes with him.

“Starting tomorrow, Barton’s law license is being suspended for sixty days.” Fury’s eye drifts across the room, and even though it traces over a whole bunch of people, it lands squarely on Clint.

“And every damn one of you’s expected to help pick up the slack, ’cause I don’t want him to have
to clean up a mess when he comes back on day sixty-one.”

For one second, one **heartbeat**, the room’s pin drop silent, like somebody’s muted the whole damn place.

And then, outta nowhere, somebody starts—clapping.

Clint should be sick of the clapping, he thinks, **through** with the fact that it’s everybody’s damned default today, but when he looks away from Fury, Hill’s the one starting it. Hill, who pulled his motions his first day of work, who never cracks him a smile if she can avoid it, she’s—clapping. But then it’s not just Hill, it’s Bruce and Steve, then Peggy, Jane, Pepper, and the interns, then . . . **everyone**. Tony lets out this whooping noise and throws up his hands, Thor tries to copy it but just ends up yelling, and everybody, together, they’re—beaming at him. Cheering him on, **congratulating** him, and all in—

In a way nobody’s ever done before, not in the whole of his damn life.

He opens his mouth, but no words come out. Nothing, not even a strangled sound of surprise, not right now. Natasha swings her legs down outta nowhere, but before Clint can ask, Darcy’s grabbing him around the neck and hugging him; then it’s not Darcy, but Thor, and there’s a hand on his arm that’s gotta be Bruce’s, and then he loses track of who’s grabbing him, or calling his name, or hollering out that Pepper owes him ten bucks.

(Well, no. He knows that last one’s Tony.)

He’s pretty sure he leaves his mouth open, lets it—catch flies or whatever else it’s gonna do, but there aren’t words. Nowhere in the English language are there words to describe the feeling in his stomach. It’s the welling-up of an emotion he hardly even knows, one that makes his eyes burn and his fingers clutch a little harder to the next hugger, and before he even knows what’s happening, he’s drowning in it.

Drowning, but—grateful for every single second of it, and every single **person** around him.

He hopes to hell that never changes.

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“You know,” Phil says later, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb, “I have a week of vacation time I have to use by the end of October.”

It’s late by the time he comes around to Clint’s office, the sky dark outside his window and the lights in the parking lot shining like weird artificial stars. For the first time in what feels like months, Clint’s desk is clean and clear of everything except his pencil cup, his post-its, and his stapler. All the case files for the next sixty days are sorted in the file cabinet, and labeled flagged for potential problems, and Darcy’s armed with a master list of upcoming hearings.

She’d hugged him on her way out, arms tight enough around his neck that Clint’d coughed and complained about choking to death. “I’m going to e-mail you with a million questions,” she’d promised.

“I’ll fake my own death,” he’d threatened. She’d smacked him in the arm before hugging him
again, and if he’d squeezed her a little harder than necessary, well, at least she didn’t complain.

But she’s gone now, along with the whole rest of the office.

Except for Phil.

Clint twists away from the window and looks at him over the empty desk and dark computer monitor. His arms are crossed loosely and his tie’s gone, which allows Clint a delicious glance at the start of his chest. He’s the same guy who’d welcomed Clint to the office, the same guy who’d checked up on him through his first couple cases, and the same guy he’ll fall asleep with tonight.

Trust him.

He knows.

“Really,” he says, and he watches Phil’s lips curve into a warm little smile.

“Really.”

Someday, Clint is going to count every one of Phil’s crinkles. For now, he counts every tiny motion in the way he shifts away from the doorway, his hips, arms, and shoulders all moving in a way so easy and elegant, you’d almost forget this guy’s just a Suffolk County prosecutor.

Except he’s Phil, which means he isn’t just anything.

“Let me take you home?” he asks as Clint grabs his bag, and Clint can’t stop himself from smiling. Or maybe he can stop himself, but just doesn’t bother. Hard to tell.

Either way, he keeps his mouth shut ‘till he’s come around his desk and is standing in front of Phil. Their eyes meet, and he spends one spare moment wondering what all Phil sees right now, months after he shared an elevator with the new guy.

But then, he shrugs.

“You don’t have to ask, you know,” he comments, and Phil laughs at him as he ducks outta the doorway. Clint switches off the light before he falls into step next to him like the last dozen times they’ve done this. His knuckles brush the back of Phil’s hand a couple times, but then Phil catches his fingers, and that’s how they walk: halfway to holding hands in the dark hallway of the judicial center and pretending they’re not smiling.

==

Two weeks later, Clint stops by the office to pick up his spare iPod charger.

this is your fault, he accuses, standing in the middle of his office with his phone in his hands. He’s supposed to be digging through a drawer for the damn cable—a cable he wouldn’t need if Phil hadn’t stolen his on his way out of Clint’s apartment that morning, thanks—but he’s standing in front of his desk instead.

Standing, and—staring.

I can assure you I don’t know what you’re talking about, Phil texts back. Phil’s at a CLE all day,
learning about recent trends in legal ethics. A CLE he’d shown up late for, but that’s not really Clint’s fault.

He’d stepped into Phil’s shower to conserve water, that’s all.

_id send you photographic evidence but you should really just come in here and see it yourself tomorrow_, Clint retorts, not that he needs to. No, he’s pretty sure Phil knows about the literal stack of pillows cluttering up his window ledge. They’re in every color of the rainbow—blues and teals, greens and grays, purples, reds, and even a bright orange one—and covered with pretty much every kind of fabric imaginable; two or three are satiny, a couple look to be suede, one’s a brocade that almost matches those chairs in Judge Smithe’s chambers, and _four_ include fringe. The note pinned to the middle one, which is silvery and shimmers in the sunlight, reads WELCOME BACK in Darcy’s ridiculous loopy handwriting.

Clint can’t decide whether he should groan or grin.

In his hand, his phone chimes, and he unlocks the screen to read Phil’s response. _Unlike my significant other, I am busily learning about ethics._

He decides on grinning. _right for the suspension jokes this morning?_

_You lost all potential goodwill when you made me late._

_just doing my part to prevent global warming._

_That is not going to be our new Stark-proof code word._

Clint laughs aloud, a little warmer than he maybe means it to be, and taps the message screen to reply. Problem is, as soon as he does, he hears Darcy’s voice carrying down the hallway. It’s pretty loud, and maybe more commanding than usual. Clint frowns for a second.

Not like Darcy to boss anybody but _him_ around, he thinks.

At least, ‘till he remembers what day it is.

“I don’t answer e-mail from home,” she’s explaining, and Clint can hear the noise of today’s ridiculous shoes pounding the carpeting as she walks toward her cubicle. “You share me with Steve and, once Clint’s back, Clint. Thirty-three percent each. Means I probably won’t go and pick up your lunch.”

“I—” her unsuspecting victim attempts.

Clint’s office door’s halfway closed, but Darcy steps in front of it anyway. She’s wearing black pants and an enormous wooly sweater that’s too warm for early October, not that Clint thinks she really cares. Her fingernails are Halloween orange, blurring into neon when she starts talking with her hands.

“Or your dry cleaning,” she continues, and Clint grins at the sight she makes. “Or your cat. Or your _kid_. And I don’t babysit, unless—”

“Darcy.” From where Clint’s standing, he can’t _see_ her victim, but he can sure as hell hear the little press of amusement in his voice. It’s an attempt to hold down a crooked smirk, Clint knows, ‘cause he’s seen that smirk before. Darcy’s hands freeze, suspended in midair, and her eyes narrow behind her glasses ‘till he adds, “I get it.”
“You’re not Clint,” she tells him.

“I know.”

“Good.” There’s a long, heavy pause between them. Clint can hear her draw in a breath and hold it. She’s considering her next move, he knows. He knows her pretty well, now that he thinks about it.

Then, she worries her lips together and sighs. “I totally babysit,” she admits, her shoulders kinda slumping, and Clint bites back a laugh. “I mean, she’s past the diaper thing, and she’s really cute, so I will totally babysit.”

“Oh, I know,” Bucky Barnes assures her. He’s clearly grinning just as hard as Clint is. “Steve already told me.”

“That bastard,” Darcy intones, “handing out all my secrets to the new guy, I tell you . . .”

And even though Clint’s standing silently in his office, even though all he’s doing is smiling at the half-closed door, Darcy waves at him before she leads the newest assistant district attorney somewhere else.

Chapter End Notes

January 18th will feature the final chapter (the epilogue, really) of "Motion Practice" and the first chapter of its sequel, "Permanency." I hope that you will stick around for "Permanency" if you've enjoyed "Motion Practice." And once again, I want to thank everyone for reading; this has been a whirlwind adventure of truly epic proportions, and I don't think I could've done it without all this encouragement.
Phil holds out his hand, and Clint kinda . . . stares at it.

The Urban Ascent fundraiser, according to Bruce, was supposed to consist of two parts: a big, giant, expensive dinner, and a silent auction with all kinds of fancy bullshit that rich people love to buy. Food, then impossible shopping, and then—if Clint played his cards right—falling into bed with a slightly-tipsy Phil and manhandling him ‘till they were both too spent to move.

(In Bruce’s defense, he’d not promised that part to Clint. Clint’d just expanded based on the information he had.)

Nobody except Dot Barnes’d warned Clint about the *dancing*.

He’d suspected that Dot might’ve been onto something when Phil’d skipped the parking lot at the banquet hall and pulled up in front of a tuxedo-wearing valet. A valet whose valet stand, by the way, advertised that all the valets were Urban Ascent graduates. The kid—and he was a *kid*, maybe nineteen at the oldest—introduced himself as he opened the door for Clint, and Clint’d felt suddenly conspicuous. He’d been a kid like John-the-valet, he’d thought as he stood there, skinny and stringy-haired, trying to figure out his life. He’d just never ended up attached to some program that’d wanted to get him out.

Back before he’d come to the district attorney’s office, he’d prided himself on the whole “I did this on my own” thing.

Thinking about Jordan, the dozen kids from Bishop and Killgrave’s programs, and now this valet, he hadn’t been too sure, anymore.

But then Phil’d come around the front of the car and smiled at him, and Clint’d kinda stood on the shitty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It’d taken all the way up to the Thursday before the fundraiser for Phil to just go ahead and *ask* Clint. Clint’d already known about the ticket—first from Dot and her fairy-dancing at Tony’s
barbeque, then from Bruce when he’d called Clint to ask whether he and Phil wanted to ride along in Tony’s limo—but Phil’d still taken his sweet damn time.

“I have a ticket to the Urban Ascent fundraiser Saturday night,” he’d finally said over a dinner of take-out Chinese food that night. The TV was playing a rerun of CSI that they’d both already seen, and they’d complained about the shitty science while Clint swiped bites of Phil’s sesame chicken.

Clint’d almost choked on a sesame seed. “I know,” he’d said, and Phil’s head’d whipped over so Phil could stare at him. He’d shrugged. “Back when Bruce tried to sell me a ticket, he told me how you always go.”

“I do,” Phil’d replied. Clint’d felt his eyes on him the whole time, even when he bent to snag his beer off the coffee table. “But I meant that I have a second ticket. To take someone else.”

And even though Clint’d known—well, suspected—it was coming, he’d broken into a grin. A big, shit-eating, trouble-making grin, the same grin that’d made Phil late to his CLE a couple days earlier. “You nervous about this one, boss?” he’d teased.

Phil’d rolled his eyes. “Excuse me for considering that you might not be excited to wear a tuxedo and shake a lot of hands.”

“This our coming-out party?” Clint could see how hard Phil was trying not to smile. “I get a rainbow bowtie? Should my corsage match your cumber-whatever?”

“Shut up,” Phil’d retorted, and elbowed Clint while Clint’d laughed his ass off.

But again, that’d been before the—dancing.

The banquet hall’s filled with hundreds of bodies, all of them crowding around the dance floor and banquet area, the casual chatter drowning out the music from the string quartet. Rich older people in tuxedos a lot more expensive than Clint’s—rented from a Men’s Wearhouse, thanks a lot, but at least he got a purple tie outta it—mill around the tables where all the different silent auction items are on display, adding their secret numbers and bids to the sheets. Clint’d browsed some of the stuff up for auction: there’s art, wine tasting weekends, gallery events, even a ride in a private jet to the destination of your choice, but every price tag’d already crested what Clint could possibly buy. Instead, he’d scribbled out a check and dropped it in the donation basket when nobody was looking.

Except Bruce’d started smiling at him ten minutes later, so maybe nobody was a lie.

The whole of the district attorney’s office is there—they’d all beaten him and Phil, thanks to the twenty minutes it’d took Clint to shine up his shoes from “scuffed up” to “acceptable”—and milling around, most of them either on or near the dance floor. Clint’d almost not recognized some of them; Bruce, for instance, cleans up ‘till he looks like a middle-aged movie star, and Thor actually looks like a damn human with his hair pulled back and an actual tie on. And that’s not even counting people like Pepper and Maria, who just look . . . stunning. No, seriously, they’re take-your-breath-away stunning, and Pepper’s dress is fucking backless.

Clint’s already caught Natasha eying her up and down like she’s a piece of meat. Both times, he’d cleared his throat ‘till Natasha—in a silky burgundy thing that clings to all her damn curves—glared at him and stalked off.

Right now, though, Natasha’s dancing with Bruce and laughing, her head back and her curls bobbing as they glide along the dance floor to some light music Clint doesn’t know the name of.
Pepper’s dancing too, swaying with Tony in a way that suggests he’s maybe stepping on her toes a little too often, one of his hands lifting from her hip to flap occasionally. At the tables that’re reserved for their office, Rhodey and Sitwell are bickering loudly about something while Peggy laughs at the both of them, and Jane’s sitting down. Resting her feet after about a thousand dances with Thor, who’d a couple times literally swept her off her feet. Clint’s not sure how those two work all the time, but they’re cute when they do.

Cute like Dot Barnes, who’s out “dancing” with Steve, monkey-clinging around him and resting her head on his shoulder. Bucky’s chatting with Hill from the sidelines, but he’s got his cell phone out in front of him, probably recording his husband and his kid.

Apparently, he’s only taken a week to find his footing with Hill.

Clint smiles. Good.

He smiles and then steps outta the way, ’cause Darcy comes crashing past him, her hair bouncing and her laugh carrying. Darcy, who’d dragged him out onto the dance floor for his one dance, as tipsy and gleeful as he’d ever seen her. She’s in a black party dress that’s got some kinda gold inlay in it, and it sparkles under the lights as she rushes past—

“Hey, Clint, holy crap, did you try the bacon-covered crunchy things?”

—with Wade Wilson trailing behind her. Wade Wilson, who waves at him with a fist full of bacon-wrapped water chestnuts and then’s forced to dance with Darcy, too.

She’s flushed and happy, Clint thinks to himself. Everybody is.

And then, Phil—Phil, who’s drifted around the room talking to people from their office and other places, Phil who looks amazing and almost-edible in a tuxedo—holds out his hand.

The string quartet’s playing something upbeat, the kinda music that no amount of social dance lessons in middle school gym could’ve ever taught Clint to dance to, and he stares. Phil’s head is down, his eyes focused on the floor, and for a second, Clint thinks this is a joke. A response to all the teasing when Phil first asked him, or Tony’s demand at dinner that they rent out the same banquet hall for their never-going-to-actually-happen wedding.

But then, Phil’s eyes lift and meet his.

“Uh,” Clint says, ‘cause he’s in a profession where he’s trained to think on his feet, sure, but this isn’t the kinda foot-thinking he’s used to.

Slowly, Phil smiles, warm and soft. It’s the greatest smile in the world, Phil’s smile. It overtakes his eyes and finds his laugh lines ‘till it covers his whole face. Clint swears he falls back in love with him every time he smiles—which is good for Phil, ‘cause since Clint stopped running away all the time, Phil smiles a lot.

“I believe there’s dancing at this party,” he says in this amused way, like something’s very funny.

“Yeah,” Clint agrees, and wishes his tongue’d stop feeling six sizes too big. At least, ‘till he swallows around whatever it is that’s stuck in the back of his throat and finally remembers how smiling works. “You gonna lead?”

The laughter in Phil’s voice makes Clint wanna kiss him, not dance with him. “Let’s find out,” he says, threading their fingers together and pulling Clint out onto the dance floor.
He’s aware of a whole lotta things when they move out onto the floor, but in that blurred way that already feels like a memory even when you’re living it. He knows Darcy and Wade stop dancing to fucking cheer at them, and that Bucky wolf-whistles before he trains the cell phone over on them. He catches Stark fishing his wallet outta his back pocket and peeling off what’s gotta be a hundred-dollar bill, and the grin on Natasha’s face when she accepts it. But more than all of those things, he’s aware of Phil: Phil’s hand on his side, Phil’s fingers against his, and Phil’s warm-as-the-sun smile.

Phil’s flushed and pink, but then again, so’s Clint.

“About damn time!” Sitwell yells, and everybody laughs.

Somewhere over the rush of his heart and the babbling of their friends—never mind the older couple next to them calling them adorable like they’re twelve or something—Clint jokes, “You doing this ‘cause the cellist’s your cellist, boss?”

“You’re lucky I love you,” Phil retorts, and Clint’s never been happier to laugh with him.

He’s passed around after that, and Phil is too, people cutting in left and right for no other reason than they’re there. Pepper’s complains that Clint’s fingers are cold and he turns it into a game of making her arms rise in gooseflesh; Natasha slips into his grip and smacks him without explaining exactly why. Darcy forces him to swing dance to something he’s pretty sure is Bach, and they laugh at how uncoordinated she gets when she’s tipsy, and Peggy glides into his arms and leads him through the next round. He tries to track Phil while they’re moving through the crowd, but he can’t; he disappears behind strangers and reemerges with new partners every time Clint turns around.

At one point, Clint catches his eyes while he’s leading Hill in some kinda twirl move that doesn’t belong to stuffy C.A.D.A. Coulson, and they grin at each other. It’s a warm feeling, the one that pools in Clint’s belly, and Clint doesn’t wanna let it go.

He dances with Dot Barnes in her sparkly pink princess dress, swooping her up onto his hip when she tramples his feet too hard for him to bear. After Steve steals her away, again, and Clint’s empty-handed during a slower piece, Tony catches his hands. “Not drunk,” he swears, and Clint tracks his eyes to where a red-cheeked Bruce is laughing at the two of them.

“Log,” he reminds Tony.

“Baby steps,” Tony retorts, and they dance for all of a minute before Tony lets him go.

Clint assumes he’s just finished, the dance proving a point more than anything else, but then Phil’s there again, in his grip. Phil’s there, and they press almost automatically together, like they’ve done this a hundred times. There’s something warm in Phil’s smile and eyes, warmer than his hands and the way they hold onto each other, and Clint can’t stop himself from smiling.

They fall into the dance together, in the middle of a sea of strangers. No, Clint realizes, not strangers. For every one gray-haired couple or young well-to-do with a date, there’s somebody he and Phil knows, somebody they love. There’s Darcy and Wade dancing with Dot so Steve and Bucky can have a moment to themselves, Thor cradling Jane like she’s the most precious thing in the universe, Sitwell nervously rubbing his palm on the side of his pants before he presses it to Hill’s hip. There’s Tony dancing with Natasha and Bruce with Pepper ‘till they knock into each other, an orchestrated accident that lands Pepper in Natasha’s grip and Bruce in Tony’s. Bruce turns red, Natasha rolls her eyes, but then they’re moving away from each other again. At least, ‘till Tony trades Bruce with Peggy, taking Rhodey off her hands.
They’re the people who matter, the family Clint kinda stumbled over. And in the middle of them is Phil, smiling in that way that only belongs to Clint.

Of all the places he’d thought he’d end up, this definitely isn’t one of them.

But for the first time, as he tightens his grip on Phil’s hand and moves with him, he catches himself thinking that it’s exactly where he should be.

Chapter End Notes

If you were following "Motion Practice" but not checking in with the series itself, you might've missed the following interlude fics that were set during this story:

+ "Chapter 6 Interlude: In Which Anthony Stark Goes For the Win", featuring the origin of Bruce's cactus.
+ "The Fairy Godfather and the Flu", in which Tony is worried about Dot and Bruce is worried about Tony.
+ "Equestria's Equality Rainbow (Or Whatever)", in which Tony and Dot discuss the marriage plans of certain ponies.

The sequel to "Motion Practice", called "Permanency", features Bruce as the focal character. The first chapter has launched and can be found [here](#).

The posting schedule for upcoming stories in the Motion Practice universe can be found [at my tumblr](#). There are always random Motion Practice tidbits up there, so if you are interested in joining the madness, please do!

Thank you again for reading, commenting, and loving this story. I plan on doing a much better job of replying to comments with the posting of "Permanency." I hope if you're interested in Assistant District Attorney Bruce Banner or his circle of friends (including Clint, Natasha, and of course Tony), you will join me there. I will even go as far as to say: you won't be disappointed if you do.

I'm grateful for everyone who's come on this wild ride with me. A year ago, if you'd asked me, I would've said participation in a fandom was a thing of the past. How wrong I was, and how glad I am of my wrongness.

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