From Behind The Bitter Ache

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Author's Note

This story takes place in my Paul Harris universe and builds on the backstory I developed for Carl for this particular universe that still more or less fits within the realm of what we know in canon.

Previous stories in this universe are 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams' and 'Just Three Miles'. The gist of it is that Carl had a pretty rough childhood and was leading a somewhat aimless life with a low-income job in construction in the south of England. He ends up being taken in by the police for a crime he didn't commit and meets a police officer called Paul Harris in the process. Paul understands that Carl is innocent and also sees his potential, so he helps him turn his life around, helps him get into the police and keeps accompanying Carl's further journey as a good friend and mentor.

Carl is in his late 20's in this particular story, still living in England, working for the Devon Police. It's one interpretation of what might have happened in Carl's past and mainly just a version of my headcanon. Oh, and if you need a visual for Paul Harris, I kinda imagine him like an mid-40's version of John Simm.

Please note that this story is very heavy on the whump and gets a little graphic in places. If you're not into that, might be best to skip this fic entirely.

Huge thanks to M, pixiehood and BlueAndPink for the brainstorming and the beta! Your love for Paul Harris has made this happen.

Title inspired by Matchbox Twenty – Angry.

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Summary: *Back in 2007, Carl gets drafted into a risky police assignment that goes sideways and he ends up paying a hefty price. Thankfully his old friend and mentor Paul is there to help him through it. (Pre-canon and follow-up to 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams' and 'Just Three Miles')*
Characters: *Carl Morck, Paul Harris (OMC)*
Trigger warnings: *Drug use (specifically opioids), opioid withdrawal, detox, mentions of suicidality, implied past abuse*
Tags: *Whump, angst, hurt/comfort, caretaking, backstory, pre-canon, young Carl Morck*
Word Count: *~16,000*
Specific terminology:

- *dosser = homeless person*
- *spook = undercover officer*
- *legend = undercover officer's identity and backstory*
- *sprog = child, RAF/Navy reference for a young recruit*
- *skip = short for skipper, Navy reference for commanding or senior officer or leader*

Run when you run

Today has been a bit of a shitshow of a shift for Inspector Paul Harris.

In the middle of all the menial tasks he's now stuck with, like approving time-off and planning assignment schedules, he witnessed his computer fan whirring to a stop and his computer screen click off from one second to the next.

Some kind of network-wide system hiccup had them end up staring at black screens for the better part of the morning and Paul had to spend an inordinate amount of time speaking to someone from IT, most of whose lingo he didn't fully understand. And when that got fixed, he'd been called out as incident commander to a serious traffic collision with multiple serious injuries and two deaths on scene.

The aftermath leaves its mark on his state of mind and the paperwork that follows has him wanting to stab pencils in his eyes. By the time he's ready to go home, the headache he's been nursing all day has gone from barely noticeable to annoyingly throbbing until he finally pops some painkillers.

The temperatures of South England's late summer are kind tonight as he walks along Queen Street for a quick errand on the way home, but gusts of warm wind whip through the streets that might or might not be a harbinger of an approaching shift in weather. As he hurries back to his car, something catches his eye. A familiar figure coming out of one of the nightclubs, together with two others whom he seems to be chummy with.

"Carl!" he calls out, but the young man ignores him.

He hasn't seen Carl in a while. Their relationship isn't really defined by routines. They have stretches where their lives get busy and they aren't in touch all that often, but when they meet, it's always good.

They should really catch up, so he jogs after him, calls his name again.

Carl stops and turns around. "Sorry, man. You must have the wrong guy." He starts walking again.

Paul is confused. He definitely didn't have the wrong guy. Now he's suspicious, this seems a little odd.

He hangs back a moment, then follows the trio at a safe distance. At the next street corner, the two men go in another direction. One of them says farewell to Carl with a jovial, "Oi, Jace. See ya tomorrow."

Paul keeps following Carl. Or not Carl. Apparently. What Paul also notices and what he finds somewhat disconcerting is that Carl's gait is a little unsteady, like he has trouble keeping his balance.

He finally catches up with him fifty or so yards later, calling out, "Hey, wait up."

Carl stops, then tells him in a hushed but urgent voice, "Fuck off, Paul, I can't be seen with you."

What Paul notices even in the dim light of the streetlights overhead is that Carl's pupils are strangely constricted. Small black pinpricks that look uncanny and tell a tale of some kind of drug intake. Paul's worry metre shoots up.

"Can't be seen with me? What the fuck you on about?"

Carl keeps walking but Paul isn't so easily fobbed off. "Carl, hold on."

He keeps walking. "Don't call me that."

He jogs a few steps again to close in on him. "Seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

Carl stops, drags Paul into the shadows of the recessed doorway of the building next to them, then looks nervously around as if to make sure they're not being watched. His voice is still urgent. "Look, it's nothing personal. Just leave me alone right now, yeah?"

Carl's voice is strangely slurred, he seems drowsy. There's sweat on his forehead.

"Carl, are you on something?"

"Paul, leave me the fuck alone, okay?"

"The hell I will. What *is* this?" Something dawns on him. "You involved in some kind of undercover operation?"

Carl doesn't answer, and that tells him enough. "Tell me what you're involved in."

"I can't."

Paul clamps a hand around Carl's bicep. "What the fucking hell, Carl. You're high as a kite and in no shape to be on the job like this. Whose operation is this?"

“I can’t tell you that either.”

“The fuck you can’t. If you won’t tell me, I’ll find out on my own.”

“Then do that.” Carl worms out of Paul’s grasp and says, “Don’t follow me.” Then he walks off.

Paul considers going after him but doesn’t think it’ll be of any use. Carl’s a stubborn little fucker, and if he’s under the influence right now, he’d be even less willing to have a rational conversation. He’ll have to do this another way.

Fucking hell. Just when the day couldn’t get any worse.

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The next morning, Paul’s first port of call is the Organised Crime Unit where he asks some uncomfortable questions until he’s finally being told to speak to one DCI Olivia Keane. She’s a petite but stern looking woman with obviously dyed auburn hair, no-nonsense and not happy about Paul’s enquiries.

He asks her about Carl and what he’s involved in, but she blows him off until Paul asks, “Are you aware that your spook is taking narcotics?”

That gets her attention. She sits Paul down in an interrogation room to have some privacy. Paul tells her about his encounter with Carl and her demeanour changes from cagey to suddenly highly interested.

“How do you know Morck?” she asks.

“He’s a friend.”

“You work with him?”

“No.”

“So a friend, as in…?”

“I got him off the streets. We go back.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “Wait, he used to be a dosser?”

“No, not exactly.” He sighs. Maybe she doesn’t need to know this, but he also needs her to trust him if he wants to get anywhere. “He just hung with the wrong crowd, got wrapped up in something unfortunate. I’m guessing this came up in his background check because that’s when he got taken in, but he didn’t do anything, actually just wanted to help. I made sure he was treated fairly, then helped him get his life together.”

She gives him a somewhat disdainful look. “Oh, so you’re one of those.”

“One of what?”

“The helper syndrome types.”

Jesus Christ. He already wants to punch her in the fucking face. “What’s it to you? You asked how I know Carl. That’s your answer.

“Listen. He’s a good kid. He shouldn’t be running around, doing police work when he’s fucking high as a kite. He’s a liability right now, and you damn well know that. That should be reason enough to pull him from whatever operation you’ve got going. He’s your responsibility, and if you don’t do something about it, I’m willing to go above your head.”

He sees her visibly bristle. “Look, Harris, this isn’t as easy as that. He’s been invaluable. He just got us an in to good intel. I can’t just pull him, we’re too far into it for that.”

“The hell you can’t. You’re watching with eyes wide open while a perfectly good police officer is getting addicted to drugs. Internal affairs would be all over this if they got wind of it.”

She leans back in her chair, then sighs. “Alright. I’ll look into it.”

“I hope you’re gonna do more than that. If you don’t have Carl out within the next week, I’m gonna take this up the ladder. And trust me, in the meantime I’ll be up your arse about this.”

“I hope you know that he’ll be angry as hell if we extract him now. He’s the passionate kind, and for the past ten months he’s busted his arse to get to where we are with the investigation. He’s not gonna take kindly to being pulled now.”

“I’d rather have him angry than dead.”

“Fine,” she concedes. “But it may take more than a week. We’ll have to get someone else on the inside instead.”

“Just fucking do it,” he tells her, then gets up. He puts his card on the table in front of her. “I wanna be there when you pull him out. I hope you do me the fucking courtesy.”

She picks up the card, then gives him a contemptuous look. “I’m not gonna make any promises.”

Paul is seething by the time he leaves there. He gets that undercover work can be fickle and that the rules are more bendable here, but this is going more than a little too far. He’s gonna get Carl out of there, whatever it takes.

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He *is* up Keane's arse over the next few days, and he can tell she is fucking pissed. But she's also a police officer and Carl's her responsibility, so a week later, she calls Paul and tells him that it's been arranged for in two days.

She gives him the time and location and he's gonna do everything in his power to be there. Carl's been at this for nearly a year, and it's pretty clear he's in way too deep – not just by the fact that it's got him hooked on drugs. And fucking hell, how did Paul not catch on that Carl had an undercover gig going on for all these months?

When the time comes, the whole thing is quick and meticulous. Paul speaks to Keane about what's going to happen, then hangs back and watches from one of the cars as they take Carl to an ambulance where he's being examined by paramedics.

Paul eventually gets out of the car and walks over. He isn't quite sure what he expected, but what he witnesses hits harder than he thought. He's seen this too many times. Shifty, anxious, paranoid, eyes forever roaming for the next danger, the next opportunity to score.

That it is Carl now hits hard. Because he thought Carl was one of the ones he could save. And for a while he thought he had. Now his heart sinks, hurts with a stab of pain that he didn't wish he'd have to feel again

Carl is sitting at the back of the ambulance, hands fidgeting in his lap, then a hand going to his head, rubbing nervously across his unruly hair, his gaze apprehensively searching for… something.

Paul edges closer, and when Carl recognises who it is, the look of contempt isn't lost on Paul. Paul wants to stop in his tracks, maybe turn back, but he can't. Some people he will not give up on.

When he's within earshot, Carl's voice is accusatory. Angry. "Did you do this? Did you have them pull the fucking plug?!"

Paul steels himself for this conversation. "Not just me, but yes."

He knows Carl needs the truth if they're gonna have a mutual path forward, even if it's going to be difficult to hear.

"Fuck you!" Carl spits in his face.

There it is, Keane had warned him, but Paul takes it on the chin. He knows it's not just Carl's innate anger, it's also the drugs speaking.

Carl jumps to his feet, the movement sharp and abrupt. He's suddenly in front of Paul, right in his face. "Why'd you do this? Huh?! You knew nothing about the operation! You took one look at me

and decided to poke your fucking nose into something that's none of your fucking business! I don't wanna see you right now."

His eyes are fiery in a way that Paul has never seen from Carl before as he spits, "Fuck off and get out of my fucking sight!!"

Paul stands his ground. "No, I'm not gonna do that."

Carl takes a step back, his fists balled by his side. Paul wonders if he's gonna use them, is fully prepared to take the hit. Carl inhales sharply, shakily, the anger still right there. He looks like he's gonna take a swing, his right arm ready, but then he doesn't. Maybe not all is lost, Paul thinks.

Carl's hands are suddenly at Paul's lapels, pulling him towards Carl. He snarls, "Get the fuck out of my face." He pushes Paul away so that he stumbles backwards a few steps.

Paul struggles to get his footing and wonders how long that anger has been sitting inside Carl, waiting to tear him up. He knows Carl's been through some rough shit, and maybe, when he was young, he'd been holding on to the idea that things might get better, that he'd get out of whatever bad situation he was trapped in. But one can only hold out hope for so long, and then, eventually, the anger tends to creep in.

Carl is back to sitting at the rear of the ambulance now, hunched forward, head in his hands, his thumbs rubbing up and down his forehead.

He knows arguing with Carl now is going to be futile, that rational arguments are going to do fuck all. Patience is key. So he sits down next to him, leaving enough distance not to crowd his space. What they need to talk about more urgently isn't Carl's state of mind, it's the path that lies ahead.

Paul lifts his head and looks at the man sitting two feet away. "So this is what's gonna happen next. They'll take you to the hospital where you'll be evaluated, then monitored. You'll probably have to stay overnight, maybe longer, depending on what it is you have in your system.

"They'll want you to detox, and that's gonna suck. Like, *really* fucking suck, even with the supportive medication. You don't wanna do this on your own, please trust me on that. I've seen it, and it's fucking harsh." He's pretty sure of the answer but has to ask anyway. "Do you have anyone who can be there with you through all of that?"

Carl is now knocking the knuckles of his thumb against his forehead, muttering unintelligible words under his breath.

Paul tries again. "I know I'm the last person you'll want to be there for it, and I know it doesn't make any sense to you right now, but I'll be that guy if you let me."

Carl rubs the underside of his nose with the back of his hand, sharply inhales with a wet sniff. There's sweat on his forehead, and Paul knows it's the early signs of withdrawal. He wonders when Carl last used, but it must have been hours ago by this point. The battle has already begun.

They're interrupted by one of the paramedics who addresses Carl. "Please get in, we'd like to take you to RD&E now."

Carl gets to his feet again. "Yeah, I'm not going."

Paul decides not to interfere for now. The paramedic's voice and demeanour is assertive. Clearly not his first rodeo. "I'm afraid it's procedure."

"Fuck procedure. I'll sign a fucking release form if that's what it takes."

"You are free to decline treatment, of course, but I would strongly advise against it. With the apparent drug use, I'm also not sure that you are at full capacity to make that decision. And I would have to inform your superior that you refused medical care."

"Yeah, go right ahead. I don't fucking care."

Paul gets up, steps closer. "Carl. Think about this. Do you really wanna throw away your career over a simple ambulance ride? At least let them take you to the hospital, make sure you're okay to be released."

"Why the fuck are you still here? I told you to fucking leave."

"You did, but I also told you I am not going to. Get in the ambulance, Carl, or I'll have someone make you. Because he's right. You're already in withdrawal and your brain's on fucking fire. Come on, you know how this works."

Carl makes a grimace, paces a few steps. "You can't do that."

Paul ignores the provocation and calmly but assertively says, "Carl. Get in the fucking ambulance."

Carl hesitates for a long moment, but then actually complies. The paramedic throws Paul a look that says *thank you*. He turns to the guy. "You want me in there for the ride?"

He shakes his head. "Nah, we've got it from here. Thanks."

"RD&E, yeah?"

"Yep."

Paul gives him a curt nod, then goes to his car to follow them there. In for a penny, in for a pound.

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So scream you

Not very much to Paul's surprise, Carl is being admitted to the Acute Medical Unit where he finds him an hour after he watched Carl reluctantly climb into the ambulance. He's in a hospital bed, an IV with fluids attached to his arm, a pulse-ox clip on his index finger and ECG leads snaking out from under the unflattering white and blue patterned hospital gown. A screen next to Carl's bed is flashing ever-changing numbers and vital signs.

Paul stands by the foot of the bed, trying to gauge the air in the room. There's that sense of dread and hopelessness that seems to cling to hospital rooms, along with the smell of antiseptic and crisply starched hospital sheets. It's not unfamiliar to him.

Carl seems a bit calmer now, although there's still that fiery resentment in his eyes that will probably take a while to make way for something a little less unforgiving. Paul tries a fairly neutral statement to see where it takes them.

"How're you feeling?"

Carl turns his head, looks away. "Fucking fantastic."

Paul takes the chair that stands to the side and drags it a little closer to Carl's bedside, sits down in it. "The muscle aches set in yet?"

Carl looks at him again, narrows his eyes. "Why the fuck are you here?"

"I already told you."

"You didn't tell me fucking shit."

Paul smiles wanly. "Or maybe you haven't been listening."

"Oh, I've been listening alright. Especially the part where you fucking ruined the whole fucking operation, where you fucked it all up and now we're left with nothing and it's ten fucking months down the drain. I was close, I was *so fucking close*."

"No, Carl, you were playing with fucking fire, and you left us no choice but to pull the plug if we wanted you to stay alive."

"So that's it? You ruined the whole thing just because you didn't trust me to finish the fucking job?"

"First of all, it's not actually ruined. Believe it or not, they put someone else on the inside. Second of all, no, it's not about trust. It's about your safety."

Carl's brow furrows underneath the sheen of sweat on it. His next question is simple, but it's also not. "Why do you even care?"

"Does it matter? I just fucking do. And so does Keane."

Carl stays silent and so does Paul. For a long moment at least before Paul asks, "Was it H?"

"Oxy."

"Pills?"

He shakes his head. "Lines."

"For how long?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. A month, give or take."

"Shit, Carl. That's gonna fucking suck to get out of your system. Anyone I can call?"

Carl makes a grimace that Paul can only interpret as negatory.

"Okay. Where are your keys? I'll go to your place and grab you some stuff you'll need."

Carl points to a plastic bag that's lying on the floor next to his bed. Paul picks it up and looks inside. Carl says, "Jacket. Inner pocket."

Paul locates them after a bit of fumbling around. "Anything specific you want me to get?"

"I don't know. Pyjamas, clean clothes. Toiletries."

"Which place?"

Carl seems surprised. "You know the legend address?"

"Actually, I don't. You need me to go there?"

Carl shakes his head. "No. My old place will do. Phone and charger would be good."

"Got it." Paul gets up from the chair. "I'll be back in a bit. Don't do anything stupid."

He doesn't expect a thank you and he doesn't get one either. He thinks maybe in time they'll get there. When Carl is past the worst of it, when he's got all that crap out of his system, when he can think clearly again. And even if he doesn't, knowing he's safe is gonna be good enough.

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Paul stays with Carl for a good while after he brings him some essentials, watches him as he listlessly forces down a few bites of the unimaginative meal they serve him. There is little conversation, but Paul doesn't expect anything else. The resentment's gonna be there for a while.

The next day, Paul has some of the more difficult conversations with the doctors. It takes a good amount of persuasion and a number of phone calls, but they finally agree to let Paul take Carl home with him for an outpatient arrangement with regular monitoring. It helps that Paul has guided someone close to him through this before, that he knows the process, the meds and the expectations.

The most difficult conversation has yet to be held and Paul hopes that it's not gonna be pushing another boulder up a hill.

Carl looks like shit when he goes to see him. The bloodshot eyes and dark bags under them tell the tale of a sleepless night. He's more skittish now, his hands all over the place. He moves gingerly, so yeah, Paul figures the muscle aches are making themselves known. Carl wipes the back of his hand across his nose several times.

Paul sits back down in the chair that's still standing there. He holds the clipboard with a few sheets of paper they gave him out to Carl.

"What's this?"

"Release papers. If you're ready."

"Ready? For fucking what?"

"Listen. I'd like to take you home with me and get you through this. I know, this sounds ludicrous to you, and you're asking yourself why am I doing this. Trust me, I have my reasons. And yeah, I've done this before. I hope you'll let me do this."

"Why? Give me one fucking reason." The question isn't unexpected.

"Because whatever alternative they'll offer you is gonna be a lot worse." He looks at Carl. "Or maybe I'm a sucker for lost causes, although I still have hopes for you."

Something plays across Carl's face, Paul isn't sure what. Then Carl half-heartedly skims through the paperwork before he looks at Paul again. "Yeah, I can't do this."

"Horseshit. Of course you can."

"What if I don't want to?"

"You don't wanna detox? Boy, that's a—"

“No. What if I don’t wanna do it with *you*?”

Paul shrugs. “Your choice. But like I said, whatever they’ll do here, it’ll be pretty dire. And a lot lonelier. Up to you, though. All I can do is offer.”

“Who was it? Before me.”

Yeah. He isn’t gonna talk about that. It isn’t gonna help this situation either. “No one you know.”

Carl’s gaze on him has an unfamiliar intensity. “Family?”

“Yeah.” That’s all he’s gonna say on the matter.

“Did they make it?”

Paul gets up from his seat. “You gonna sign it or not?”

Carl hesitates a moment, then takes the pen that sits under the clip. The ballpoint pen scratches across the paper, the lines angular and jagged as Carl puts his signature there.

Paul takes the clipboard when Carl holds it back out to him. “I’ll have them get you signed out but there’s some stuff I need to do first. I’ll be back to pick you up later.”

He sorts it out with the doctors, picks up the prescriptions they give him, drops by the hospital pharmacy for the more immediate meds they’ll need. Then he runs the necessary errands. Chemist’s, grocery store, supplies. It’s been a few years since he’s been through this song and dance but he still remembers the basics.

The spare room in his flat is a bit of a mess and he does what he can in the short time he has. It’s not great and he should be hoovering it, but it’ll do and Carl won’t care. Certainly not in the state he’s gonna be in. He makes up the sofa bed as best as he can. It’s not the most comfortable, he knows, but that, too, will have to do.

When he goes back to the hospital, Carl is dressed and ready to go, only just barely looking like a human being. He’s still sweating, a little too skittish, eyes watery and ever so fidgety.

Paul grabs Carl’s things, makes sure to stay close but not too close as they walk to the car park. It’s gonna be a bit of a dance and he hasn’t fully figured Carl out yet to know what’s safe and what isn’t. He realises this might be harder than he anticipated and hopes he didn’t bite off more than he can chew. At least with Klarissa, he knew what he was up against.

By the time they are sitting in Paul’s car, the hair at the nape of Carl’s neck is damp with sweat. His hands are shaking in his lap. Paul gives him a quick look. “Don’t worry. That’s normal. Let me know if you feel sick. Don’t want you puking all over the fucking car, okay?”

Carl looks white as a sheet and nods. “Okay.”

The drive isn’t long but they run into some traffic. The chills get worse, Paul can tell. When they arrive, Carl climbs out of the car, braces a hand against the edge of the car roof to steady himself. For a moment, Paul thinks he’s gonna vomit right there and then, but he inhales, clenches his jaw and follows Paul on unsteady legs.

Paul’s flat isn’t much but it has everything they need. He shows Carl the spare room, tells him to make himself comfortable. There’s a selection of joggers and hoodies for him to pick from, fresh underwear. He shows Carl the bathroom. He’s gonna see a lot of it in the next few days, then hands Carl a red plastic bucket with the words, “Get acquainted. You’ll be friends for a while.”

Carl still has a sense of humour, because he says, “Can’t wait. I hope room service is available.”

Paul flashes him a grin. “It is. Just not the kind you’ll want.”

He tells Carl to change into something comfortable and leaves him alone for a while, then knocks on the door with a mug of tea.

Carl is sitting on the sofa bed, knees drawn to his chest. He’s shivering. Paul hands him the tea that he tentatively sips.

So this is where it starts. Normalcy turns into ordeal from here on out, and life’s going to be lived in a claustrophobic bubble for the next week or so. Paul knows all this, but Carl doesn’t, so he sits down on the edge of the sofa bed to lay out the plan for the both of them.

“Okay, listen closely because here are the ground rules. They probably already told you this at the hospital, but the next week will be rough as hell. You’ll be anxious and restless. And you’ll feel like shit. Flu-like symptoms, chills, muscle and joint aches, runny nose, sweating. And the nausea and vomiting will kick in, abdominal cramps and diarrhoea if you’re really lucky. You probably won’t sleep much.

“In a day or two, you’ll also feel the cravings. That’s gonna be the worst. You know that I can’t give you any oxy, so we’ll see how that goes. We have some drugs that should help with that. Buprenorphine for the cravings, lofexidine to help with some of the symptoms. I’ll be checking that you actually take them. You won’t get more than the recommended dose. They’re locked away so it’ll be a futile endeavour to go and hunt for them, okay?

“I’ll take you to the clinic once a day so they can make sure that it’s not going sideways. I’ll also take your blood pressure a few times a day. I’ll do what I have to do to keep you safe, but I don’t wanna have to get physical if you get belligerent. So try not to fuck with me. And don’t lie to me. Ever. Got that?”

Carl gives him a shaky, “Yeah.”

“Okay, good. This is gonna be your home for the next few days. If you have to puke, use the bucket if you can’t make it to the toilet. Don’t fucking pee in it, though.”

Carl smiles at that.

Paul continues. “Put the clothes you’ve sweated through or soiled outside your door in the hall, I’ll take care of them. Tell me if you need extra blankets or bedsheets. Please stay out of my bedroom, otherwise you can move freely around the flat but you can’t leave without me. And yes, the front door will be locked. Don’t fucking run, because I swear, you’ll regret it.

“You can use the kitchen as you like, though probably you won’t want to eat anyway. Which brings me to another important matter: hydration.” Paul points to a PET bottle with water on the floor next to the sofa. “You’ll have to drink. I’ll be reminding you. Often. You’ll fucking hate me, not just for that, but it’s important. Otherwise you’ll be back in the hospital with an IV in your arm, and none of us wants that. And if you get any ideas, there is no alcohol in the house.”

“I don’t drink. Not the hard stuff,” Carl volunteers.

Paul gives him a curt nod, ignoring for now that he’s seen Carl bladdered on gin once before. “Yeah, but you might feel differently about that when the cravings set in. You can ask for anything but doesn’t mean I’ll give it to you. I know you’re not stupid, but your brain will fuck with you in the next few days. And I know that and will know not to take it personally. But don’t take advantage of me because I *will* take that personally.

“If you get bored, I’ll be around. Take a look at my bookshelf or my DVDs. My collection isn’t huge and not exactly eclectic, and I have no fucking clue what you like, but it’s there. If you need help with anything, don’t be daft and ask. Middle of the night, early morning, doesn’t matter. I’d rather you wake me than fuck something up.”

He looks at Carl, finishes with, “Those are the rules. Any questions?”

Carl shakes his head, his hands still shaking. His shoulders now, too. Paul gets up and gets the fleece blanket he bought earlier, hands it to Carl who unfolds it and wraps it around his shoulders, draws it close, still shivering.

“I’ll let you get some rest. We can have supper later, if you’re up for it.”

“Okay,” Carl agrees.

Paul leaves and quietly closes the door behind him, hoping he won’t regret this later.

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Need to get over

Paul hears Carl puking for the first time some time around 5 am the next morning. It's loud and ugly and he thinks about going to check on him while he's at it but decides to let him have a bit of dignity while it lasts. At least he still made it to the toilet.

He pukes twice more in the next two hours, although the second time it's mostly dry heaving.

When Paul checks on him around seven, Carl is lying curled up on the sofa bed, the duvet pulled up to his chin, his eyes tired, expression spelling misery.

Paul's heart goes out to him. "You hanging in there?"

Carl closes his eyes, giving him a meek, "Barely."

Paul nods towards the untouched water bottle. "Don't forget to drink, yeah?"

Carl doesn't grace it with a response.

By 9 am, Paul has managed to coax Carl into the kitchen. He's dressed in grey joggers and a blue hoodie that hangs a little too loosely on him. The piece of buttered toast on the plate before him gets stared at but barely a bite taken out of. The tea is nearly untouched, too.

Carl takes the blood pressure measuring with the grace of a kicked puppy. The numbers on the display are high but not alarmingly so, which is to be expected.

Lastly, Paul puts a glass of water in front of him. "Hate to be annoying, but you have to drink. I know you don't want to, but remember what I said last night?"

"Dehydration," Carl mutters, then yawns. "Hospital and IVs and all that."

"So you *did* listen."

"Must have been rule number nine or ten." Carl forces a small grin, then takes a sip of water. "I stopped counting right around five."

It's time for the meds now, so Paul gets up and goes to the bedroom, comes back and puts a pill on the table in front of Carl. "That's the buprenorphine, for the cravings. Don't swallow it. You put it under your tongue until it dissolves."

Carl dutifully does so. Paul doesn't think he needs to check, there's no reason to believe Carl would deceive him at this stage. He's smart enough to know it'll only help him. Paul puts another tablet on the table. "This one's swallowed, should help with the chills and the nausea and all that fun stuff. If you don't think you'll be able to keep it down for the next half hour or so, take it later. If you chuck it up, let me know."

Carl's fingers go for it, twirl it around a few times. He pops it in his mouth and swallows it with a gulp of water. It earns him an appreciative nod from Paul.

"How bad are the cravings?"

Carl shrugs. "On a scale from one to ten?"

"Sure."

"I dunno. Six? Seven? Hard to say when you've never done this."

"Yeah, I get that. Tell me if it gets bad. How's the muscle ache?"

"Annoying as fuck."

Paul chuckles. "I can give you paracetamol for that."

Carl shakes his head. "Maybe later." He's yawing again. That's also normal, another hallmark of withdrawal.

"You think you're up for a trip to the clinic?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"Then why even ask?"

"Fair point. Get movin', Sprog."

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This time, Carl doesn't quite make the drive without a puke stop. He unceremoniously retches into a planter by the side of the road that earns them a few scornful stares from passersby.

Afterwards, Carl forever flicks through the radio stations until they land back on Radio 1 that they started to begin with. With something halfway between a huff and a groan, Carl curls in on himself in the passenger seat, arms wrapped around his torso to the tune of *Welcome to the Black Parade*.

Things go as planned at the clinic and Carl gets a seal of approval to go home with Paul. One of many routines they'll have over the next few days. So far it's not going too badly. Carl's surprisingly pliable and reasonable. Paul hopes that won't change. Too much. But likely it will, they're only getting started.

Carl can't stop yawning on the drive back, but doesn't puke again. At least not until they're back in the flat. The sound of dry heaving wafts out into the hall as Paul locks the flat door behind them.

It's hard to get used to that sound and there's a knot in his stomach because it feels way too familiar.

When Carl comes shuffling out of the bathroom, his pupils are a little too dilated and his face is all shades of pale green.

"Don't forget to drink," Paul reminds him.

"Fuck you," Carl tells him, but it's not entirely hostile.

"I mean it," Paul calls after him. Carl vanishes in the spare room.

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It's around lunchtime that Carl emerges next. He finds Paul on his couch where he's engrossed in a fantasy novel. Carl is still shivering, sweat on his brow, the hoodie pulled up over his head. He reminds Paul of the lost, browbeaten lad he got out of a prison cell all those years ago.

Hovering near the door, Carl's voice is rough and exhausted. "I think I'd like that paracetamol now."

Paul puts the book down. "What're you dealing with right now? Joint pain? Sore muscles? Headache?"

"Yeah, all of that, pretty much."

He sounds beaten as hell, so Paul goes to get the meds, hands two white pills to Carl. "You drinking enough?"

Carl's stare on him is blank, like maybe he's miles away, and he takes a moment to answer. "Probably not."

Paul appreciates that he's not lying. "You gotta—"

"Try. I know." Carl closes his eyes, clearly already fed up with the whole ordeal when the worst is yet to come.

"You hungry?"

Carl shakes his head, folds his arms around his chest, his shoulders hunched. If he feels as wretched as he looks, he must be feeling pretty fucking miserable.

"Sit with me for a bit, yeah?"

Carl folds himself into the corner of the worn brown leather couch. Maybe he thinks that if he just makes himself small enough, he could vanish through a fold in the universe, be swallowed up to go somewhere nicer. Or maybe somewhere not quite as miserable.

They measure his blood pressure again. Not great, definitely tachycardic, and he's getting more jittery now, too. Hands ever moving, his legs twitching. He draws his knees up, taps his socked toes nervously on the seat of the couch, a sharp sniff of his nose. His hands come up to his face, into his hair, then find the knot at the end of the hoodie's drawstrings.

He's on edge. The cravings must be getting worse. "How bad do you want a line right now?"

Carl's head shoots up. "Pretty fucking bad."

"Yeah. No can do, though."

His legs are quivering. He slings his arms around his knees and holds on to both elbows in a futile attempt to keep the tremors in check. His fingernails dig into his skin. "I know."

"Tell me about the undercover op."

"I can't."

"Come on, Sprog. You've known me long enough to stop trusting me now. Keane's been pretty tight-lipped, but she's let some things slip. You've been pulled. There must be a few secrets that aren't worth keeping. Because whatever you say here won't leave this room. How'd you get wrapped up in this?"

Carl shifts again, folds his legs into a cross-legged position. His fingers are back to fumbling with the hoodie strings. "Got recruited by Keane. Don't know how she found me. Wasn't through you, was it?"

"What? Fuck no. I wouldn't have wanted you near that shit."

Carl's look on him is sharp. Accusing. "You don't think I was cut out for it?"

"No. Jesus. It's because of this." He points at Carl. "Because shit like this can happen, can mess people up. From what I hear, you're pretty fucking good at your job. Maybe a little too much so for your own good."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Means you tend to get in a little too deep sometimes. You gotta know where to draw the line. This time around, you crossed it and you were heading straight for the cliff."

“As opposed to what? Not giving enough of a fuck? I’d rather aim for the cliff than leave people like Cody hanging.”

Cody. Shit. He didn’t think about that. Really fucking should have. “You won’t be any good to people like Cody if you’re dead, son.”

“Yeah, I’m not your fucking son.”

There it is. He’s hit a sore spot. Carl has never told him about his family situation, but Paul has made educated guesses. He should steer away from that, goes back to where they started. “So Keane reached out to you. You couldn’t have come to me for advice?”

Carl’s eyes narrow. His hands slide down his thighs where he claws his fingers into his kneecaps. “And what would you have said?”

“That why you didn’t? Because you knew I’d try to talk you out of it?”

Carl shrugs. “Maybe.”

“So then what? They gave you a legend? What name did you go by?”

“Jason. J-Bug, mostly.”

Paul can’t help but laugh. “J-Bug? Geez, could it get any cornier?”

Carl now smiles as well. “Suppose not, but they bought it.”

“So what was this? A drug ring?”

“Human trafficking. They wanted the guy who pulls the strings. Fucker who goes by Nightcrawler, everyone just calls him Night. He mostly fishes for Eastern European women, sometimes South Asians and unaccompanied minors. Keeps them in substandard housing, rotates them between cities.

“Took a while to work my way up, got much closer when I got cosy with one of Night’s… you know… ‘ladies’. But, I dunno, she started suspecting, eventually confronted me.”

“Jesus, Carl. That alone should have been reason enough to get you out of there.”

“No, it was a fucking blessing. She wanted the fuck out, wanted me to help her. Said she’d do what it takes to take the fucker down.”

“What was your in?”

“They were looking for a driver, someone who’d do the job without asking questions. Took a while but I guess I eventually graduated to fixer when I started making myself useful. Started out

transporting victims, worked my way up to help with money laundering. You know, mid-tier operations. That's why I needed Alina. She had the access to Night that I didn't."

"You were having her play with fire. You know that, right?"

Now Carl actually looks offended. "I'm not fucking stupid, Paul."

"Could have fooled me. You know, snorting oxy. Not exactly a smart decision, that."

"Not like I had much of a choice. Peer pressure and all that."

"That's the line I was talking about earlier. You have sex with Alina?"

"What? Hell no."

"Well, at least that's something."

"Jesus fucking—" Carl's face suddenly draws into pained grimace.

He lets out a moan, leans forward, one arm pressed across his stomach, his breathing now quick and audible.

Paul sits up a little straighter. "Stomach cramp?"

Carl presses a pained, "Yeah," out through his lips.

There's something that can help with that, so Paul gets up and goes to the kitchen to put the kettle on. While the water's heating up, he goes to get the buscopan, then prepares a hot water bottle and takes both to the living room.

On the couch, Carl is hunched forward, arms clamped to his midriff. Paul sits beside him and lays a hand on his arm to draw his focus. With a faint look of gratitude, Carl accepts the hot water bottle, presses it against his abdomen, and mutters, "Thanks."

"Here." Paul also holds out the pill and a glass of water. "That should help, too."

Carl goes back into a hunched position after he's taken the medication, and Paul stays next to him, places a hand on his back. Carl flinches ever so slightly at the physical contact, but Paul keeps his hand there when he doesn't get any further sign of resistance. The occasional groan from Carl tells him the cramps aren't quite easing up yet, so every now and then he lets his thumb run up and down on Carl's back.

At some point, Carl gets up, drops the hot water bottle where he sat and hurries to the bathroom. Yeah. Diarrhoea is another hallmark of withdrawal, and that's not gonna be fun either. He knows there is very little he can do, so he picks up his novel again and goes back to reading.

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That evening, it takes a good amount of persuasive work, but Carl manages to get down half a bowl of chicken broth and a third of a banana. His pupils are enlarged again, and his hands are unsteady. Paul hopes he can catch at least a couple of hours of sleep, he must be fucking exhausted with his body in constant crisis mode.

He briefly checks on Carl some time later, and something has him alarmed right away. There's blood on his pillow, so Paul crosses the room in a few quick strides, shakes Carl awake.

Carl jerks under his touch, startled, his hand lashing out, almost catching Paul in the face. "Easy, Sprog, it's just me."

"Paul?" he asks sluggishly.

"Yeah. Where's all this blood come from?"

Carl blinks, takes in the sight. "I've had nosebleeds."

Oh yeah, the oxy. "So you've not been puking up blood?"

"No." He looks at the rather sizeable blood stain again. "Shit. Sorry."

"It's okay. Not your fault."

He takes the pillow – it's a problem fixed fairly quickly, though Paul has to get a little creative with a tea towel under a clean pillowcase. He'll have to sort this out properly later, maybe even get a new pillow if this one's not salvageable, but that's another problem for another time.

Carl sinks back onto the fresh pillow, dragging his arm across his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Just after ten."

"Fuck," he mutters.

"Try to get some more rest."

Carl just grunts and Paul leaves him be.

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The night is restless for both of them. Paul hears Carl puking into the bucket a few times, hears the toilet flush several times, too. Carl is also pacing up and down for a while, he can hear his steps outside his bedroom door. There are noises from the kitchen, some clattering. Paul wonders if he should check, but he's now also tired as fuck.

He finally does go to check when something clearly shatters on the kitchen floor. He finds Carl trying to pick up the pieces of a broken mug, but his grip is uncoordinated and shaky. There's a sheen of sweat on his forehead along with a grim expression etched into his face.

"Leave it," Paul tells him. "I'll clean it up."

"No," Carl says sharply. "It's my mess."

"Carl, you're in no shape. And it's three in the fucking morning."

Carl's voice is now raised. "Stop treating me like a fucking baby!"

Mood swings are par for the course. He's seen all of it. Paul keeps his voice calm. "That's not what this is."

"Oh no, then what is it? Huh? I'm your new charity case, yeah? Another soul to save so you can clear your fucking conscience. Congratulations." He spreads out his arms. "Here I am."

Paul doesn't want a fight, especially not in the wee hours of the night, so he doesn't say anything and goes to get the dustpan and brush.

Carl follows him, his voice taunting now. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

Paul sighs. "Carl. I'm not doing this. This is the withdrawal speaking. Go back to bed."

"No, I'm not going back to fucking bed. I'm not some… toddler you can order around. I'll do whatever the fuck I want, and right now I want you to open the fucking door."

Paul squeezes past Carl in the hall and goes back to the kitchen, then squats down and starts brushing the ceramic shards into the dustpan. "I told you that you can't leave."

Carl is suddenly in front of Paul when he's straightening up, ripping the dustpan from his hand to carelessly throw it a few feet away where it clatters to the floor, shards and all. Carl snarls a demanding, "Open. The. Fucking. Door."

Shit. He was afraid this was going to happen when the real cravings set in. Patience might only rile Carl up more, maybe he needs a more aggressive approach, so he steps right up to Carl. "And then what?"

"Then I'll leave."

"To go where? It's the middle of the fucking night. Where are you gonna find a score right now?"

Carl inches closer. "You forget I'm police, too."

“And you forget that my guys work this beat. Oxy’s not that easy to come by around here. Certainly not at 3 fucking am.”

There’s a sound from Carl’s throat that’s close to a growl, and it scares Paul just a little bit. Carl’s a beanstalk of a guy but he’s wiry and taller than Paul. And he’s right. He’s also a police officer, and he knows all the tricks. “I won’t say it again. Open the fucking door, Paul.”

And then, suddenly, Carl’s hands clamp around his upper arms, drag Paul to the flat door. He pushes him near the lock. “Open it. Now!”

Paul considers his options. He said he didn’t want to get physical. He still doesn’t, but maybe he’ll have to.

Carl suddenly shouts so loudly that it makes Paul jump. “Open the *fucking* door!!”

He shoves Paul towards the door so that his shoulder collides with the wood. It hurts and it’s probably gonna leave a bruise, but what it also does is that it makes Paul realise he’ll have to reciprocate to deescalate this. So he quickly whips around while he has the element of surprise. He grabs Carl’s wrists, yanks them to the back of his body, uses his legs to push Carl to his knees, then to the ground.

Carl struggles but Paul now has the upper hand, and Carl is not at peak physical capacity right now. He pins him to the ground with his knee, using only as much force as he needs to keep him down.

“Get off me!!” Carl shouts, wriggling to get away.

“Carl, please stop struggling. This isn’t gonna help.”

“Fuck you!” Carl spits at him angrily. “Get the fuck off me!”

“Carl. Stop.”

“Let go of me!”

“I will if you calm down.”

Carl squirms again but can probably now feel that it’s futile. His movements become more sluggish, less aggressive, his tone now leaning more towards begging. “Paul. Let me go.”

Paul loosens his grip a fraction, then more when Carl doesn’t immediately struggle against him. His voice is now laced with something more fragile. “You’re hurting me.”

That gets to him. He releases the hold, hopes he doesn’t have to regret it. Carl stays still now and Paul gets off him, sits back on his haunches. Carl pushes himself up enough to scramble

backwards into a sitting position in the corner of the hall. There's a desolate edge to his voice. "I need something."

It gets Paul right in the fucking gut. "I know," he says quietly. "But I can't let you."

"Please." It hangs there, quiet and desperate.

"I can't. You know that."

Carl now whimpers. "Please, Paul. I need it. I need it really fucking bad."

"Yes, I know. And I wish there was something I could fucking do to help you with that. I wish there was some magic bullet. But there isn't. So you gotta push through, Carl, okay? It'll get better in a day or two. I promise."

"I can't," he says just above a whisper, his head hanging low. "I can't do this."

"Yes, you can. You and me, we'll get through it together, okay?"

Carl lets out a cynical chuckle, a bitter tinge to his voice. "Don't. Don't pretend you know what this feels like."

Paul shakes his head. "I don't. But I can see what it does to you. And that fucking hurts, too."

Carl squeezes his eyes shut, the muscles of his whole face contracting. His hands come up to his head and he pushes the heels of his hand into his eye sockets, letting out a sound that lands somewhere between a moan and a whimper.

"Just make it stop."

The desperation in Carl's voice fills the space between them and makes something in Paul's gut clench. It's all he can do to scoot closer so that he's opposite Carl, curling his hand around the nape of Carl's neck. Carl leans forward so that his forehead rests against Paul's collarbone. Paul keeps his hand where it is, closes his eyes and just breathes with him for a few, long moments.

Maybe it's the physical touch, maybe it's the human connection, but it seems to do something. Maybe not much, but enough for Carl to eventually stir and push away. Before the embarrassment and the humiliation can set it, Paul pushes to his feet and holds a hand out to Carl.

He pulls him upright, points to the door of the living room, "Go and pick a movie. I'll join you in a moment."

Carl's voice is thick with exhaustion. "You wanna watch a movie *now*?"

"Yeah. We both need to wind down."

Carl lingers for a beat, then slowly complies. The mess in the kitchen needs to be made into less of a hazard, so Paul cleans up the bare minimum and discards the broken mug pieces in the rubbish.

In the living room, Carl is on the couch, a DVD in a hand that's still shaking a little. Paul recognises the cover as *Fargo* and nods appreciatively. "Good choice. Have you seen it?"

"Yeah, when it came out."

"Been a few years for me, too."

Paul switches on the telly and the DVD player, pops the disc into the tray and starts the movie.

Carl dozes off some time after the first ten minutes, slumped against the armrest of the couch. Paul quietly shuts off the movie and drapes a throw over Carl before he switches off the light to retreat to his own bed.

He hopes Carl can get at least an hour or two of uninterrupted sleep, but the rest of the night will probably not be all that restful. He dreads the next day, because it's likely gonna be the peak, and it'll be even harder. But at least then there should be light at the end of the tunnel.

He takes another look at him, notices how youthful and innocent he looks in the moment and tries to hold on to that for now.

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Paul wakes from noises around half past seven. Carl is just exiting the bathroom as Paul emerges from his bedroom, Carl's eyes glassy and red-rimmed. He's a mess.

"How you feeling?"

"Like fucking shit," he mutters.

Yeah, that tracks.

"Go on," Paul says and points to the kitchen. "Give me a minute."

They go through the routine that isn't yet one but will be for the next few days. Taking blood pressure, taking meds, getting Carl to eat and drink something.

Carl's nose is runny, he sniffles a lot until Paul puts a packet of tissues on the table in front of him. Carl crumples the used tissue up and puts it in the hoodie pocket.

It's apparent in his body language that he's easily irritable. His trembling fingers miss the mark on the milk he pours into his tea and Carl frustratedly thumps the milk carton onto the table so that milk spurts from the opening. His expression darkens and he hurls the carton across the room so that it lands in the sink with a wet thud.

Paul just watches, fishes the milk carton out of the sink and doesn't add any commentary. Scolding words won't help. They'll just have to get through this day.

In a quiet voice, he inquires, "What are your symptoms like right now?"

Carl sighs. "Misery served up fresh." He scrubs a hand down his face. "I'm fucking tired."

"I know it won't help much, but after you've made it through today, things should look up. It'll be a massive bloody shitter, no doubt. Only way is to grit your teeth and push through it. Can you do that for me?"

"Don't have a choice, do I?"

"Take a shower before we leave. Fresh towel's on the rack. The blue and teal one. Hot water's gonna feel good for the muscle pain but don't overdo it. Your body's still out of whack. Don't wanna have to scrape you off the bathroom floor, yeah? Don't lock the door, just in case."

"You make it sound so enticing."

"Come on, get going. Everything gonna be a hundred times harder today."

"Yeah, you already said that."

"Just managing expectations. But also know I'm here. Ask for help. That's the whole point of taking you here. Just remember that."

Carl heaves himself up from the table and shuffles out of the room. Paul hears the shower going five minutes later. At least that's something, but the relief isn't long-lived. Silence stretches on a little too long after the water stopped running, and Paul knocks on the door.

Carl is crouching on the floor, his arm drawn across his stomach. More cramps, he guesses. "You want more of the buscopan?"

"Will it help?" Carl ekes out.

"Did it help yesterday?"

"Not much."

"Up to you."

Carl holds up a hand that says no, so Paul hesitates another moment and then retreats. It takes another fifteen minutes before Carl emerges from the bathroom, hair still a little damp, dressed in a set of fresh comfort clothes, looking only marginally less worse for wear. He didn't bother shaving, not that Paul had expected he would.

Paul takes a handful of puke bags to the car, just in case. They don't find use this time around as they drive to the clinic. Small favours, Paul thinks. Carl has his temple pressed to the glass of the passenger side window the whole time, looking small and utterly miserable, hugging himself as tremors periodically run through him.

It doesn't help that they're letting them wait for almost an hour after they arrive. Carl gets restless, starts pacing, snaps at a young woman who accidentally bumps into him. He vanishes into the bathroom twice.

Finally, the staff apologise for the long wait, go through the motions. The doctors are, well, not exactly happy. Carl's a little too dehydrated, so they keep him until they can put some IV fluids and electrolytes into him. They're sent home with much of the same advice as before plus a warning about the fluid intake. Paul kicks himself that he forgot about the isotonic drinks until now. He'd bought them but then put them in the larder where they'd stood, forgotten.

Carl nods off on the drive back, makes a beeline for the toilet when they arrive, but it sounds like he just has to pee. The joys of IV fluids.

Paul tries to distract Carl with a few rounds of card games, but it only goes so far. Carl is restless and fidgety, loses his temper more than once, especially when Paul comes out the winner. It's not fun for either of them, but fun wasn't really the objective here. Maybe they can repeat this in a few days and make it a more pleasant experience.

After the third round, Carl throws down his hand in frustration. The cards slide across the table, a few drop to the floor. "Fuck this shit."

Paul nods. "Okay. You wanna do something else?"

"Yeah. Find some fucking oxy."

"That's the one thing we can't do."

"Oh, just *one*? Then how about some, I don't know… Booze. Weed. Cigarettes. Fucking *anything*." He balls his hands into fists, then brings them up to his head where he digs his fingernails into his hairline.

"None of that will help you right now."

"It'll take the fucking edge off."

"It'll be a stopgap at best."

"I'll fucking take it." His voice takes on a more desperate edge. "Come on, Paul. I *need* something."

“Yes, I know. And I know I sound like a broken record, but this I can’t give you. Paracetamol’s about the only thing I have to offer, but then you’ll have to power through the next four hours. You want it now?”

Carl nods immediately. That’s the addiction speaking and Paul considers whether to comply, but then again, he offered, and the least he can do is extend Carl the same fucking courtesy of not lying to him. So he gets him the pills and Carl swallows them with the fervour of a true junkie in desperate need of the next fix. It’s a little heartbreaking but it’s part of the process. Just another half day or so. Then things should look up. He can only hope.

Carl crashes half an hour later, zonked out on the sofa bed. The fatigue’s finally catching up with him, and Paul is glad for the probably short-lived respite. He himself goes to take a nap on the couch because he’s also fucking exhausted.

He wakes up from Carl violently dry heaving in the bathroom over two hours later, but when he listens more closely, there’s not just that. There’s also something else, something that sounds like he might be crying.

Paul carefully raps on the bathroom door, which is only ajar anyway. “Hey,” he says softly.

Carl barely acknowledges him, his fingers gripping the rim of the toilet bowl with white knuckles, his breath shaky. Paul can see the tears on his face. He looks utterly spent, like he’s just about to reach a breaking point.

Paul crouches next to him, gently places a hand on his back. Carl leans into it and the sob that escapes him is equal parts desolate and desperate. Paul moves his hand to Carl’s shoulder and tugs gently and Carl sags against him. Paul swallows, cradles Carl’s head under his chin, feeling the shivers that run through him against his side. He can only imagine how utterly like shit Carl must be feeling, how much this is wearing on him.

There’s something a little too familiar about this, pulling a warm body to his chest on the cool bathroom tiles, trying to offer something too small in a feeble attempt to quell an all-encompassing need.

They sit like that for minutes, Carl’s sobs eventually ebbing away until he pushes himself out of the awkward half-embrace, wiping his hands across his face. “Fuck,” he says with the tired despair of a man who’s already been through too much shit for the fact that he hasn’t even hit 30 yet.

His eyes are bloodshot and glassy, the week-old stubble darkening his jaw, his hair a tangled mess. He briefly meets Paul’s gaze. “Please tell me this is as bad as it gets.”

Paul gives him a careful shrug. “I wish I could.”

Carl scoots backwards, lifelessly slumps against the plastered bathroom wall behind him, draws his knees up and slings his arms around them. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Hey,” he says in a low voice. “You’ve made it this far. Should be the last leg, then it’ll get easier.”

Carl’s hands are trembling, he rakes his hand through his hair, rubs his head. “I want that next line. So fucking bad.”

Paul shifts closer, sits next to him. “I know. What can I do?”

Carl pokes his head up ever so slightly. “Haven’t you already done enough?”

“I don’t know. Have I?”

Carl exhales a shaky breath. “Who was she?”

The question catches him off-guard. He didn’t figure that Carl had even thought about that through all of this. Carl elaborates, “The photos on your shelf. That’s her, right?”

Paul nods slowly. “My sister. She battled with addiction most of her life. Heroin. She was shooting up by the time she was 21.”

“So you’ve done this before.”

“Yeah. Twice.”

Carl asks the inevitable question. “She still around?”

“No. Overdosed six years ago.”

Carl’s voice is barely above a whisper. Unsteady and laced with sadness. “I’m sorry.”

Paul presses his lips together before he says, “Yeah, me too.”

Carl lifts his head, looks Paul straight in the eyes. “Thank you.”

A smile tugs at Paul’s lips. “Yeah. How could I not?”

There are tears at the corners of Carl’s eyes again, but this time it’s something softer than despair.

He looks at Carl. “Can you do something for me?”

Carl sniffles, wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “Yeah.”

“Can you try to stay the fuck away from drugs?”

Carl nods slowly. “Yeah. I prom—”

“No,” Paul interrupts him. “Don’t fucking promise.”

Carl looks confused and Paul adds, “With drug addicts, promises are a fucking illusion.”

“I’m not—”

“An addict?” He chuckles dryly. “Sorry, Sprog, but you’ve now been down that rabbit hole. I know you didn’t mean to end up here, but no one ever does. I know you’re smart as hell, and I hope to fucking god you won’t make that mistake again, but whatever promise you’ll give me, in the end it won’t matter. Just…” He exhales heavily. “Just think back to this and do your best. That’s all I’m asking.”

“How about I promise to do my best.”

“Yeah, I’ll take that.”

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It still gets worse towards the evening. Carl can’t sit still, and when he does, it’s only for a few minutes before he jumps up again to nervously pace. It’s bringing Paul to a breaking point and he has to be careful not to snap at Carl to sit the fuck down.

Carl’s also talking a lot. His words come in fast strings, sometimes so fast that Paul can’t make them out, that what he’s saying is incoherent and erratic.

There are more trips to the bathroom at random intervals, more retching, other unpleasant bowel symptoms. Carl tries his best to drink but he has a hard time keeping things down and there may be more IVs in Carl’s future.

Around 8 pm, Carl sinks down on the couch with a weary sigh that holds the weight of the world. He buries his head in his hands and lets out a moan. “Make it stop. Please.”

Paul tries to keep his voice low and gentle. “I’m sorry, Carl. There’s little I can do.”

“No, not that. The pain. My bones are on fucking fire.”

Ah, geez. They switched to ibuprofen earlier and he had some not that long ago, but he may have puked them up before they could do what they were supposed to do, so he can bend the rules a little. He gets him 600 mg, hopes it’ll get him through the worst of it. Carl swallows them with a mix of urgency and contempt.

It isn’t long before Carl is on his feet again, pacing the living room. Paul looks up from his novel and sighs. “Pal, you’re driving me a little crazy here.”

Carl turns to him, sweat on his forehead. “Sorry,” he says, then again, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I know this is hard. Just—”

“I can’t. Like… It’s… I’m so fucking exhausted and I just wanna sleep but I— I can’t… I’m hot, then I’m fucking freezing, everything hurts, my brain’s on fucking overdrive. I just… It’s the fucking worst.” He throws Paul a glance and there’s desperation in it. “Can’t you give me something?”

He shakes his head. “I can sit with you. We can watch something. Talk. Play cards. Best I can offer.”

Carl turns away, paces again. “No, I… I shouldn’t keep you up.”

“Hey. I knew what I signed on for.”

“You’re too much of a fucking saint.”

Paul smiles. “Yeah. It’s my downfall.”

He tries to think what else he can suggest that might help with any of this. He has a thought, gets up to roam around in the chest of drawers by the window to produce a well-used cardboard box. He puts it on the coffee table. “How about that?”

Carl looks at it with disdain. “A fucking jigsaw puzzle?”

Paul gives him a half shrug. “Might take your mind off things.”

Carl looks at his hands that are still less than steady. “I’m fucking useless.”

“Suit yourself.”

Carl sighs, then sits down on the couch and pulls the box closer to open it. “Fuck it,” he mutters.

Miraculously, it keeps Carl busy for the next hour or so. It’s a 1000 piece puzzle in 2D illustration style of a scene in an overcrowded park. It’s not particularly inspired or enticing, but it gets the job done. Or so Paul thinks until Carl lets out a frustrated growl about halfway into it and wipes an arm across the table that sends the pieces flying.

Paul raises his eyebrows. “Shit, Carl.”

The latter gets back to his feet. “This is bollocks.” Then he stomps to the spare room and slams the door behind him. They’re back to the mood swings, the frustration, the depression, the inevitable that there is no solution for. Might as well be a good opportunity for Paul to try and catch some sleep.

Before he retreats for the night, he gets another set of bedlinens and knocks on Carl’s door. He’s curled up on the sofa bed. Dropping the linens by the door, he tells him, “You might need these tonight. Wake me if you need help.”

Carl just gives him a noncommittal grunt, and Paul leaves again, hoping that they’ve now crossed the peak.

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It's another restless night where Paul is woken up multiple times by the not entirely unexpected noises. There's nothing alarming this time, thankfully, nothing where he thinks he has to intervene.

He finally comes to full consciousness when bright daylight is peeking out from behind the dark blue roller blinds. He looks at his alarm clock – it's just past 9 am. Damn.

The flat is quiet and that might actually be alarming, so he rolls out of bed and rakes a hand through his hair before he goes out into the hall.

A feeling of relief washes over Paul when he sees the by now familiar figure of Carl stretched out on the couch in the living room, eyes closed, asleep. Paul smiles. Finally. His smile widens when he sees the jigsaw puzzle fully completed on the coffee table.

Paul goes through his morning routine. When he comes out of the bathroom, Carl is standing in the hall, one hand braced against the wall, the other rubbing his forehead with his thumb. There's weariness and exhaustion written all over his posture, but he doesn't look quite as ashen as he has in the past two days.

"How you feeling?"

Carl lifts his head. His voice is thick with exhaustion. "Yeah, getting there."

He inhales heavily and his face twitches with the gravity of the past few days—or maybe the past few months. Paul takes a step closer. "Hey. Come here."

He draws Carl into a hug. It's tentative at first, then stronger until Carl fully leans into it. It only lasts ten seconds at best, but maybe they both needed it. Maybe Carl has been silently screaming for a while without anyone noticing, out from behind the bitter ache he carries around with him.

When they separate, Carl trudges into the bathroom and silently closes the door behind him. Paul hears the shower going not long after that.

It's the first time in days that Carl voluntarily ingests food when they sit down in the kitchen for breakfast. He has a full mug of tea and a whole piece of buttered toast without that look on his face like someone's forcing something drenched in undiluted vinegar into him.

"Finally got some sleep, huh?" Paul asks him.

Carl nods. "Yeah. Still not enough."

"It'll get better." He gestures at the empty plate in front of Carl. "This is a good sign."

Carl nods. Paul gets another isotonic drink and puts the bottle with the bright orange liquid on the table. “If you drink this before we leave, you might dodge the IV today.”

Carl draws a face. “Tastes like melted orange sweets and the aftertaste makes me wanna gag.”

Paul gives him an apologetic gesture. “Yeah, sorry, didn’t actually know what you like.” He goes to check the larder, comes back with two other bottles. “Got lemon and tropical, if you wanna try those.”

“Here, give me the lemon.”

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You still want love

Things gradually improve over the next few days. Carl’s appetite comes back, the cravings get more manageable as well as the agitation. He’s stopped vomiting, although fatigue and insomnia will be a companion for a while. The doctors are happy with the progress, too.

On day five, they go outside for the first time beyond the clinic visits. There’s a cemetery not far from Paul’s place where they take a walk, sit down on a bench under a set of cypress trees. It rained earlier today but now the sun is peeking out behind the flock of clouds that still linger and the air is fresh and crisp.

Carl closes his eyes, inhales a long breath through his nose. They’ve both been cooped up way too long in that flat, and this is a welcome relief. For the first time in a long time, Carl is not forever fidgety, has his long legs stretched out in front of him, his arms draped along the top of the backrest.

Paul enjoys the moment along with him, but there are more difficult conversations to be had.

“We gotta talk about long-term plans.”

Carl exhales but keeps his eyes closed. “Can’t it wait?”

“It’ll have to be soon. You’ll have to make decisions where to go from here. I’ve helped you take this step, you’ll have to walk the rest on your own.”

He sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

“Mid-term, they’ll put you on naltrexone to prevent relapse. Usually for six months or so. There’s also counselling. They’ll probably recommend something at the clinic, I can help you find—”

Carl interrupts. “Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

“Carl.”

“It’s total bollocks.”

“It’s not bollocks. It’s part of helping you stay off that shit, helping you with recurring cravings. It’s important to have a support system, to—”

“I’m not doing it,” he repeats assertively.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want some toffee-nosed shrink fishing around in my head for all the fucked up shit they can pull out and throw at me to work through. I don’t believe in ‘facing your trauma’ or whatever you call that fucking crap.”

“That fucking crap is what drove you here.”

“Nah,” he says. “The job drove me here.”

“There are also group sessions if you don’t want a one-on-one approach.”

Carl huffs. “What, so we can circle-jerk about our fucked up childhoods and share the mutual sob stories that pushed us into illicit drug use?”

Paul knows all too well that there’s only so far he can push when there’s resistance like that. Maybe he’ll have to try to chip at it in smaller increments. Later. For now, he just says, “There’s groups that do it differently. Please keep an open mind.”

Carl sighs again, one of the weary sighs. “Okay, sure, I’ll keep an open mind.”

Paul knows it’s not sincere but decides to leave it at that for now. “Speaking of the job…”

Carl opens his eyes now. “Do I even still have a job?”

“More important question is whether you still *want* the job.”

“The undercover gig?”

“No, the police gig.”

He emits a cynical snort. “I’m not going back to fucking construction.”

“You ever think about becoming a detective?”

Carl shrugs. “Yeah. Not easy to get into.”

“But not impossible. That something you want?”

“More than plodding the beat for the rest of my days.”

“Okay, that’ll give us something to work towards.”

It prompts Carl to look at Paul. “Us?”

“What, you thought I’d kick you out and pull a disappearing act now?”

Carl shrugs. “It’s what people do.”

“Fuck, pal, you’ve been through some real rough fucking shit in your life, huh? I’m not people. You better get used to having me around.”

“Are you for real?”

Paul can’t help but laugh out loud and Carl flashes him a grin to add, “No, seriously, you must be some kind of fucking saint or something, because people like you don’t exist.”

“Pinch me, cause I’m fucking here.”

Carl sobers, his voice now thick with emotion. “I, uh… I’ve never been good at this…”

Paul pats his thigh. “It’s okay, Sprog. You’re welcome.”

“I couldn’t ever repay you.”

“And you don’t have to. Just remember what I said about staying away from drugs.”

“I intend to keep that promise.”

Paul nods. “Good. I’ll be up your fucking arse if you don’t. I’ll talk to Keane in the next few days, put out some feelers for opportunities, alright?”

“No,” Carl says. “I can handle my own shit.”

“Yeah, I have no doubt about that, and I know you’re not used to this, but there’s no shame in accepting a little help every now and then.”

Carl says nothing, and by now Paul has a pretty good inkling that this is how he operates. It’s the things that he doesn’t say more than the things he actually does say.

So they sit for a while, talk about classic movies and football, and that’s that.

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Paul makes good on that offer while he also checks in with Carl every day, now that he’s been back to his own flat that Paul helped him get sorted after not having lived there for over ten months.

Carl was, of course, adamant he didn't need the help, but Paul was just as adamant not to listen to him, so it became this unspoken arrangement that they'd both do this dance and then silently accept each other's company.

Now that Carl is back to full mental capacity, there are also debriefs, interviews and follow-ups. He shares it all with Paul, or as much as he is comfortable, given the nature of the operation. Keane is willing to do her part in getting Carl back into the game with some not so gentle pressure from Paul.

The one thing that Paul can never get Carl to do is professional counselling or joining a support group. He's tried a number of times but always hit walls and has to surrender eventually not to be shut out indefinitely. He would have pushed harder, but Carl seems stable and headstrong enough to cope on his own, so he decides not to fight this particular battle. He isn't sure what exactly the roadblock is here, but hopes that Carl will eventually trust him enough to tell him.

It's about a month after detox that they meet at the pub and Carl slides a letter across the table with an inscrutable look on his face. Paul folds it open, reads the first few lines.

> *Dear Mr. Morck,*
> *You have been successful in your application for the Initial Crime Investigators' Development Programme. Please report to South West Police Training Centre on October 23rd, 2007. Further details regarding your induction and portfolio requirements will follow.*

He flashes Carl a genuine smile. "Congratulations. That's fantastic."

Carl smiles back as he raises his pint. "Thanks, Skip."

They clink glasses. Paul says, "You did good, Sprog."

Carl averts his eyes for a moment. "Couldn't have done it without you."

"Not so sure about that, you're a tough little fucker."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

It's good to see Carl smile again. "So, you doin' okay?"

"Yeah. No drugs, if that's what you're asking. Don't think about it too much anymore, either."

Paul nods. That's a good sign. No, actually, it's a *great* sign. The best he could hope for. They switch to easy banter, like they do these days, and that's good, too.

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Paul doesn't hear from Carl for a good while. He'd usually call every now and then, but with the ICID Programme, he's busy and detective hours can be long and arduous. He's known Carl to be fiercely ambitious if he's set his mind to something, so he knows he's putting all he has into doing the job well and leaving a good impression.

Carl told him he was being paired with one DCI Louise Parker as a partner and mentor. Paul looked into her and she was generally regarded as amicable and fair. He hoped she could handle Carl's somewhat flowery language and cantankerous tendencies, but as a female DCI in the police, you'd have to have pretty thick skin and assertive social skills to make it that far. And Carl has a way of winning people over if you have the patience to indulge him and listen.

The next time he sees Carl is on a cold and damp December evening. Paul gets home to find a familiar figure sitting on the step in front of his house. Carl has got his lined parka wrapped around himself, a striped scarf around his neck. How long has he been waiting there?

Paul can see right away from his expression that something's happened, and his heart sinks. Fuck. He hopes this isn't a relapse.

"Carl?" he greets him tentatively.

Carl gets to his feet, his face grim.

Paul follows up with, "What happened?"

"Not here," he answers curtly.

Paul unlocks the front door and Carl follows him up the stairs.

They go to the kitchen where Carl drops into one of the chairs with a heavy thud. Drizzle clings to his hair and he looks chilled to the bone, so Paul puts the kettle on and gets him a towel from the bathroom. It feels a little too familiar.

As the water is heating up, Paul leans back against the counter. "Please tell me this isn't what I think it is."

Carl's face draws into a frown, then he says, "No. No, it's not that."

Paul releases a relieved breath. The water is boiling now and he fills up two mugs, the teabags in them bloating with hot air as they rise to the top. He knows exactly how Carl likes his tea, so he makes it just so and sits down opposite Carl as the latter gives his hair a quick rub with the towel, then slings it over one shoulder and takes a tentative sip.

He sets the mug down, staring into it as he says, "Alina's dead."

Alina. Who was that ag— Oh. His contact from the Nightcrawler operation.

“Shit,” Paul mutters.

“Yeah,” Carl says gloomily. “Landed on our desks, ironically enough.”

“You working homicides now?”

“No. Just… tied into an assault case. Handed over to Homicide eventually.”

“Did you tell them?”

“That I knew her?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I did. Parker took me off the case. Said I was too close.” He pauses. “She’s probably right.”

“How much do they know?”

He shrugs. “Enough to know that they can’t do a damn thing about it. Told them to talk to Keane.”

“So this was some orchestrated hit? How’d she die?”

“Shot clean through the forehead.” Carl makes a finger gun gesture and points it right between his eyes. “Probably one of Night’s goons. It’s in line with their MO. They used to be quick and clean.”

Carl draws in a heavy breath. “You told me I had her playing with fire. Looks like it went up in flames and she got caught in the fucking blaze.”

Paul thinks this isn’t all that unusual. Bad shit like this tended to happen in organised crime, as horrible as it was. Carl had to know that too. Sure, it’s different when you actually know the victim, when it’s someone decent who got caught up in a bad thing. And yet…

“Carl. You don’t think this is your fault, do you?”

His head shoots up, he meets Paul’s eyes for a brief moment before they flick away again. “How can it not be?”

“Carl, you are not responsible for what happened. You don’t even *know* what happened.”

“She knew too much and she wanted out. That’s what gets people killed.”

“Yeah, maybe so, but that’s not on you.”

His voice is quiet, laced with regret. “I told her I could get her out. But I didn’t. You had me fucking pulled before I could.”

“Jesus Christ, Carl. You can’t put that on you. Keane’s the one running this operation, and what she does there is a delicate balance. You *know* that. It’s not that easy, getting someone like that out without there being any fallout.”

Carl puts his forehead against the knuckles of his thumb and rubs them up and down. “She had a young son and a daughter, at home, in Bulgaria. Kept sending them money. Who’s gonna take care of them now?”

“Yeah, that’s… That’s a tragedy.”

Carl’s head shoots up, his gaze on Paul accusatory. “That’s what you’re gonna say? *‘That’s a tragedy’?*”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know!” He gets up, walks a few steps towards the door, then stops with his hand braced against the doorframe. “I don’t fucking know, okay?” His voice breaks on the last word.

Paul lets that hang there, takes a sip from his tea. He keeps his voice low. “Carl, why did you come here?”

He shakes his head, his voice now acerbic. “Yeah, why did I come here? Apparently to be told this is a fucking tragedy and that we can’t do a fucking thing about it, so I just need to go home and suck it up and continue about my day like nothing happened.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what you meant.”

“No. When shit like this happens, it’s always bad. And we should never ignore that and just go on. That’s how police officers get jaded and washed out. You’re not that kind of guy, and I hope you never will be.

“But there are also limits to what we can do. If you get this invested in every case, in every victim, it’s gonna eat you up from the inside. And I know that sounds callous and cold, and maybe you don’t wanna hear that right now, but it’s the reality of our job. And if you can’t come to grips with that, then we’ll need to have another conversation about whether you’re cut out for this.”

Carl’s fist thumps angrily against the doorframe. “Jesus fucking Christ, Paul! Slap that in my fucking face on top of it, yeah? You’re being a real big help.”

He pulls the towel off his shoulder that’s still hanging here and throws it in Paul’s direction. It hits the edge of the table, then slides off and falls to the floor.

Carl gives him one last disgusted look, then turns and leaves.

Paul considers whether to go after him, but he's not sure what good that will do. Then he thinks of why Carl was here the last time and knows he can't just let it stand like that. He wants to trust him, but he also knows there's always that little nagging voice swirling around in a former addict's head, the one that says there's an escape, something to ease the intensity of it all if he lets it.

He gets up, grabs his jacket and keys and hurries after Carl.

He needs to run a good number of yards to catch up with Carl who's already halfway down the street. "Carl, wait!"

Carl keeps walking and Paul eventually comes around him to block his way. "Carl."

"What the fuck do you want?"

"I want you to be safe."

Carl lets out the most cynical chuckle. "Safe, yeah? That's fucking hilarious."

"No, it's not. I'm worried about you."

"Worried? That I'm gonna do something stupid?"

"Frankly, yes."

"For fuck's sake. Really?"

"This is how it starts, how things go sideways."

"Oh, so you think I'm gonna run to the next dealer and snort a fucking line?"

"Is that so far-fetched?"

Carl's face hardens. "*Really*, Paul? Screw you."

"Look. Can we talk about this?"

"Talk? What is there to talk about? You made your point abundantly clear."

Paul asks him what should perhaps be the pertinent question. "What is it that you were hoping to hear from me?"

It catches Carl off-guard, because he probably doesn't know the answer to that, so Paul presses on. "Did you want me to say that I'm gonna go to Keane and tell her to arrest Nightcrawler on the spot? Without any tangible evidence, merely based on the word of one aspiring detective who

suspects that he is behind the shooting? Or that I would help you avenge a woman I've never even met, help you execute the head of a large-scale trafficking ring so you can feel less guilty?"

Shit. As soon as he's said it, he knows that hits below the belt, instantly wishes he hadn't. He waits for Carl's reaction.

The look in Carl's eyes is icier than the air in a morgue. "Fuck you, Paul." Then he walks away.

Carl's frigid delivery is the worst fucking gut punch. And with that, Paul knows he has to let Carl go. He watches him stride away in angry steps, a lingering knot in his gut that feels weighty and massive.

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Paul's sleep that night is restless, the whole situation weighing heavily on his mind. He isn't sure how they can resolve this, how he can find a way for Carl to want to talk to him again.

Are they at an impasse? Did their relationship go up in flames and he's now looking at the ashes that they leave behind? God, that would be the worst possible outcome after all they've been through.

No. He can't quit on Carl now, has to try and salvage what can be salvaged.

It's probably not the best idea but he doesn't want to corner Carl at home, so at work he logs onto the victims database and prints out two very specific photos.

After shift he goes to CID. He asks around until someone points in the vague direction of an open office space with several, mostly empty desks, one of which is occupied by Carl as he's typing something on the keyboard.

The latter looks up when Paul approaches, his face immediately darkening with the recognition. When he's within earshot, Carl spits at him, "I don't wanna talk to you."

"I know."

Paul has braced himself for this. And he gets it. He was angry for a while after Klarissa's death. Angry at the world, then bitter. But he'd eventually learned that that didn't help anything.

Calmly, he says, "Just a few minutes of your time, that's all I'm asking. If you don't wanna see me again after that, I'll be out of your hair."

Carl narrows his eyes and stays quiet, which Paul takes as silent endorsement. He half sits on the edge of Carl's desk and reaches into his jacket pocket, puts the two photos on the desk in front of Carl.

Both are photos that someone in the morgue would have taken. Unflattering shots of ashen, dead faces on a stainless steel pathology table. One is of Cody, the other Klarissa—Paul's sister.

Carl takes one look, his face hardening into a grim expression. He's upset, for sure, but it's not like that isn't what Paul has been going for.

The bitterness in Carl's voice is hard to miss. "That's a really low fucking blow, Paul."

"No. It's showing you your future if you keep going like this."

Carl bristles. "What, I'll end up as a junkie who couldn't get his act together and then died in some dark fucking corner? You really don't know me very well, do you?"

"I know you better than you think. Because I know you care. And you have a reckless streak. In a police officer, that combination can be a really dangerous thing to have."

"You know what else it does? It gets the fucking job done."

"Until you end up with a bullet between your eyes."

"Yeah, well, then at least my death will have meant something to someone."

That hits Paul right in the face. Because, Jesus fucking Christ, Carl. After all they've been through, all he's done for him, that's still how he feels? Paul swallows against an unbidden lump in his throat.

Carl is suddenly very quiet, slowly seems to realise that he's said something profound that hit harder than he expected.

Paul opens his mouth, wants to say something, but his throat has locked up. He swallows again and his voice is heavy with emotion.

"I kept you out of prison. I helped you get into the police. I pulled you through fucking detox. I mopped up your puke and washed your soiled clothes. I held you upright when you didn't think you could do it anymore. I kept you alive, Carl. How—" His voice breaks. "How can you even say that?"

There are tears in his eyes, and Carl sees it, too.

Paul draws in a breath. "I'm sorry for what I said yesterday. It was a shitty thing to say and I wish I hadn't said it. But you know *why* I said it? I care. I care whether you live or die. And if you die, I'm not sure I could take another fucking blow."

Carl looks like he was just stabbed in the back and the pain hasn't quite kicked in yet. It's both astonishing and incredibly sad that someone has to actually spell it out for him. Paul's voice

softens. “How long have we known each other? Going on ten years now, yeah? How’d that never enter your bloody mind?”

Carl looks down, stays silent, doesn’t dare meet Paul’s eyes. Maybe he’s ashamed. Maybe he’d fall apart if he did. What’s really fucking apparent to Paul is that he just wants something he’s probably never had in his life, something that’s pretty fucking simple. He wants love and affection—in all its ugly, smooth delicateness. He wishes to god that he’ll find it one day.

Paul collects the two case photos, then puts a hand on Carl’s shoulder and lets it linger there for a long moment. “Come find me when you’re ready to talk.”

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Paul’s doorbell rings the next evening. He buzzes Carl in, leaves the flat door ajar. He hears him wipe his shoes on the doormat before he comes in.

Carl stops in the doorway to the kitchen where Paul is waiting at the table. Carl shifts his weight to one leg, strokes a thumbnail along one eyebrow. The plastic bag he’s holding rustles slightly and his voice is low when he says, “I keep forgetting that there are people who give a shit.”

Paul gives him the smallest of smiles. That’s a big admission. “No shit, Sprog.” He gestures at the chair opposite him. “Come sit down.”

Carl folds himself into the chair, like maybe he’s not worthy to be here. Paul tells him, “Guess I’ll have to keep reminding you.”

“Guess you do.” Carl picks up one of the bleached out coasters with some tacky Italian coastline printed on it and runs his index finger along its edge. The silence stretches on and Paul waits, until… “I’m not suicidal, you know.”

Huh, so he has really thought about this, hasn’t he? But suicidality was never the issue here. “No,” Paul says, “but you can be self-destructive without being suicidal.”

“We’re police. Aren’t we supposed to protect people at all cost?”

“Protect at a cost, yes, if necessary. But self-preservation is an essential skill, one that comes naturally to most people.” Most people, but not Carl. It kinda slips out when he says just above a whisper, “What the hell happened to you, Carl?”

Carl’s chin twitches and Paul thinks that maybe he’ll finally talk about it, but he swallows and says in a low voice, “Maybe I’ll tell you. One day.”

Paul nods, takes a close look at him. “I’ll be here.”

Carl's eyes flick up to meet his for a brief moment. "Keep reminding me, yeah?"

"Oh, I will."

Carl puts the coaster down, shifts in the chair and reaches for the plastic bag. What he pulls from it is a small purple cardboard box with letters emblazoned that say *FLUXX*. Carl puts it on the table between them.

Now that Paul can see the cover a little more clearly, it reads, *'The card game with ever-changing rules!'*

Paul raises his eyebrows. "That your way of telling me you hate gin rummy?"

Carl shrugs. "Just thought we could try something new."

Start over? Is that it? It's one of those things about Carl. He's not the kind who resorts to grand gestures. It's the small things, and they'll speak volumes if you know how to read them.

So Paul picks up the box and opens it, takes out the two piles of cards to start shuffling them as he hands Carl the rules. "Okay. I'm game."

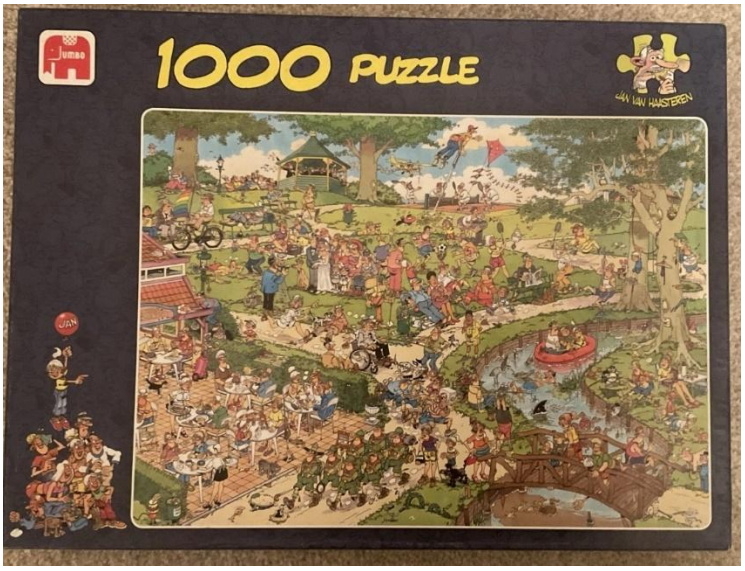
Carl grins at him. "Jesus, Skip, you really need to work on your puns."

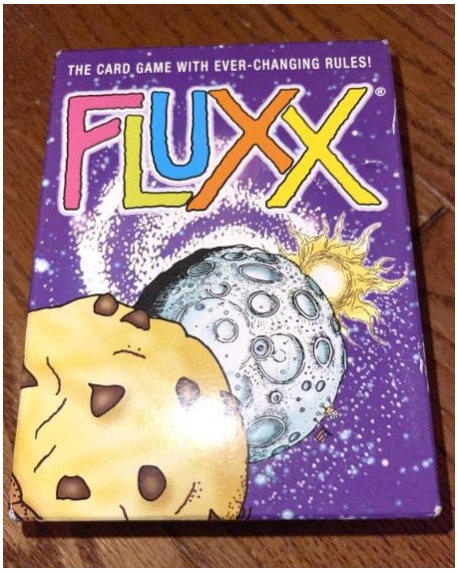
They both laugh, and that's exactly the gust of wind that Paul needed to blow away the ashes of whatever might have been charred between them.

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Jumbo
1000 PUZZLE
JAN VAN HAASTEREN


THE CARD GAME WITH EVER-CHANGING RULES!
FLUXX