That Weight On Your Shoulder

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Summary:

The police job can be fucking brutal, which both Carl Morck and Paul Harris have learned the hard way. This time it's Carl who offers a helping hand to his friend. This continues the saga of my pre-canon universe where the professional lives of a younger Carl Morck and his friend and mentor Paul Harris intersect.

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', 'Just Three Miles' and 'From Behind The Bitter Ache'. 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 and eventually join the police force. Paul becomes somewhat of a mentor to Carl and they end up as close friends who stay in each other's lives over the years.

This story takes place some time in the early 2010s after Carl has joined CID in Devon, worked for a year or two in Serious Crimes and then changed to Homicide where he's currently partnered with DCI Louise Parker.

Title inspired by Rob Thomas – Breathe Out

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The call comes in just after six on a Friday night. Carl is just driving him and Parker back from a witness interview. Carl immediately recognises Paul's voice, reporting an officer found deceased, requesting CID assistance.

Parker looks at Carl. "Harris. That's your friend, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Carl says. "Mind if we take this one?"

Parker takes the radio and tells them that they're en route.

When they arrive at the scene, it's the usual controlled chaos. Blue flashing lights are illuminating the scene at the quay, police officers are milling about with tense, pent-up energy. An empty ambulance stands to the side. Carl's eyes roam the scene, searching for Paul, but before he can locate him, he is being led away to inspect the actual crime scene.

A young woman, maybe Carl's own age, in a black police uniform lies in a pool of blood on the asphalt, likely from the very visible head wound at the back of her head. Carl and Parker are briefed that this is PS Milena Barkovic – the name sounds vaguely familiar to Carl.

They go through the motions, examine the scene, speak to people, try to determine what might have happened, where there might be clues. It takes over half an hour, and Carl has yet to find Paul. When he finally gets a minute to himself, he asks around until someone points Carl to the side of the building around the corner.

What he sees there instantly makes his heart drop. Paul is sitting on the ground, his back against the concrete wall of the building, his forearms dangling on his drawn-up knees, his head hanging low. His expression is grim. Dejected. Sad.

"Paul?" Carl says in a low voice.

Paul barely acknowledges him, so Carl sits down right next to him. Paul doesn't say anything so Carl eventually prompts him, "Was she one of yours?"

"Yeah," he says just above a whisper. "I was her training officer. She was on my team."

"Shit. I'm so sorry."

Paul nods slowly, then asks, "You on this case?"

"Me and Parker, yeah. Would you, uh… Would you rather someone else took it?"

"No," Paul says immediately. "Just promise me you'll find whoever did this."

"You know I can't make that promise but I'll do whatever is in my power. That's something I can definitely fucking promise."

Paul lets out a cynical chuckle. "Today of all days."

Carl frowns. "What do you mean?"

“Would have been Klarissa’s 40th.”

Klarissa – Paul’s sister who died of a heroin overdose many years ago. Carl doesn’t know the full story, but he knows it hit Paul hard, that he tried for years to get her away from it and it ultimately killed her. He leans a little closer so that their knees touch and places his hand on Paul’s back. “I’m really sorry. If there’s anything I can do…”

Paul sluggishly shakes his head. His voice is thick with emotion when he says, “You know what scares me? Thinking that one day it’s you we find and it’ll be my fault.”

“Your fault? The hell do you mean?”

“You’re here because of me. This job, it kills people.”

Oh wow. That’s some heavy fucking shit. Carl presses his hand a little tighter against Paul’s back. “I’m still right here. *Alive*.”

“Yeah, well, Milena wasn’t quite so lucky.”

“Yeah,” Carl sighs, not sure what else to say. What *is* there to say? It’s a fucking tragedy and it’s going to hurt for a while.

Paul once told him that this is part of the job, too. That tragedies like this are bound to happen, but he clearly remembers that he hated being told that at the time, that it was fucking callous and not what he needed to hear. So Carl stays quiet.

Paul finally sharply inhales, then scrubs both hands across his face. “I’m gonna have to tell her husband.”

“Parker and I can do that.”

“No,” Paul objects. “It should be me.”

“Okay, then we’ll do it together. You and me.”

It prompts Paul to look up at Carl, and he sees all the sorrow there. The pain and the hardship and the memories of lives lost that no one has any control over.

“Yeah, okay.”

“You need another minute?”

“No,” Paul sighs, then heaves himself up. “Time waits for no one, right?”

“You resorting to fucking platitudes now?” Carl also gets up.

Paul shoots him a look that spells *‘not in the mood for jovial banter, okay?’* Sure. He gets that.

Together they walk back to the crime scene and Carl says, “Let me check with Parker, yeah? Give me a minute.”

He finds his partner talking to the medical examiner, checks with her if he can partner up with Paul for the next of kin notification. She doesn't object, so Carl goes back to find Paul, asks him to give him the keys to his patrol car.

The drive to the outskirts of the city is heavy and quiet. They both know how these calls go. Surprise, shock, disbelief, turmoil, tears. They've all been trained on how to handle it, but it's different when it's someone you know, someone you care about.

Paul puts up a brave face as they speak to Barkovic's husband—admirably so. But when they are back in the car and Paul has closed the passenger side door, that's when it hits. "Fuck!" he yells, thumping his fist against the plastic door trim panel. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!!"

There are tears in his eyes when he looks up but his jaw is set and his teeth are clenched.

Carl isn't sure what to do because this is new territory they've never trodden before. When he doesn't move, Paul barks at him, "What are you waiting for?! Fucking drive!"

Carl raises his eyebrows, starts the car and takes them to Paul's flat.

When he finds a parking spot in the street, Paul is out of the car before Carl can say anything. Carl also gets out of the car, but Paul won't have it. "No," he coldly tells Carl. "Just go home."

Carl hesitates a moment, because no, he doesn't wanna do that. "Paul, wait."

He swings around. "No. Not today, alright?" he says sharply.

Carl isn't so easily deterred, just walks with him to his door. Paul's gaze on him is frigid and harsh as he unlocks the front door. "Which part of 'go the fuck home' did you not understand?"

"The part that thinks you might hit the bottle if I do. The one that says you wouldn't let me be alone either."

"Fuck you, Carl."

Carl has never seen Paul stone-cold angry. Not like this. This feels fucking wrong because Paul is always the one who keeps it together, who has the patience of a fucking saint. Carl squeezes past him, blocks his way. "I'm gonna fucking stay with you because that's what you'd do, too."

Paul's expression darkens, his mouth a grim line.

In a gentler tone, Carl says, "Let me be here for you, Skip."

That shifts something, makes Paul's forehead furrow with something pained and yielding, then he pushes open the front door. It might as well be a reluctant invite. Carl follows him inside.

Inside his flat, Paul yanks his jacket onto the coat hook in the hall, then goes straight to the kitchen where he gets a glass that he takes to the living room. Carl tentatively follows him,

watches warily from the door how Paul pulls a bottle of amber coloured liquor out of one of the cupboards and pours himself a glass that he downs in one swift motion.

He then turns around and shoots Carl a sharp look. His tone is acerbic when he says, “Don’t get your knickers in a twist. I can have a glass of fucking bourbon without getting fucking sloshed.”

“Sure,” Carl simply says, hanging back in the doorway.

Paul walks to the window, stands there to look out into the street with his back turned towards Carl. He doesn’t move for a long time and Carl still doesn’t know what to do. He’s not great at this, never knows what to say because clichés aren’t his fucking thing.

But before he can do anything, Paul lets out an angry shout, turns around and hurls the glass he’s holding across the room. Not at Carl. Just the wall a few feet away, where the glass hits and explodes in a scatter of small pieces with a bright, splintering pop.

And that, Carl understands. He’s been there. He knows what that feels like except that he’s never had anyone there to see it. Anyone who was on his side, at least, who would help pick up the pieces.

Carl rubs his forehead, then wordlessly turns and goes to find the broom and dustpan in Paul’s larder. When he gets back to the living room, Paul is sitting in his recliner, his elbows on his knees, the heels of his hands pressed to his temples.

Carl starts sweeping up the shards of glass on the floor. He discards everything in the rubbish bin in the kitchen, then joins Paul back in the living room, sits down on the couch for lack of knowing what else to do.

The silence hangs there for a while, pregnant and heavy, until Paul lifts his gaze and says, “You not gonna scold me or something? Give me some kind of spiel about how I shouldn’t throw inanimate objects across the room because that’s not a healthy way to deal with shit?”

Carl shakes his head. “No. Cause I get it. All of this, it fucking sucks.”

“Yeah,” Paul sighs. “Makes me fucking furious. Because I could have prevented this. I could have kept a closer eye, I could have—”

“No,” Carl interrupts him. “Paul. This isn’t your fault.”

“But it is. I was her fucking supervisor. It’s always my fault when it’s someone on my team in the line of duty. That’s how it goes.”

“Did you send her there?”

“No. But it came up, she ran it by me. I dismissed it.”

“You made a judgement call. We do that all the time. You’ve told me this before, so now I’m gonna say it to you: We’re human. And sometimes that means we make the wrong fucking call. Doesn’t mean it’s your fault. Someone killed her. If you need someone to blame, that’s who.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t fucking help. Because she’s still fucking dead and we don’t have a fucking clue who did it.”

Carl draws in a heavy breath, because Paul is right and nothing he can say will make this hurt any less. Paul leans back in the chair, deflates against the backrest. “This is the worst fucking part of our job.”

Carl can’t argue with that. He, too, has seen too many people killed. Good people. Those who didn’t deserve it, who had a long life ahead of them that was taken away way too soon. “Look. I won’t argue.”

“Yeah, you’re a real fucking ray of sunshine on this glory day.”

Carl bristles. “What do you want me to say? I don’t do the platitudes or the pick-me-ups. That what you want right now? Someone to tell you it’ll be alright? Because it fucking won’t. It’ll just… fade. A little at a time. Which you know. It’s not like you haven’t been there.”

Paul’s gaze wanders over to his shelf, lands on the photo of his sister and stays there. “Days like this, I just wanna fucking quit.”

“Yeah, but what if tomorrow you could go out there and save someone’s life? Someone who gets locked up for no reason, someone who needs a guy like you to be there and do the right thing.”

It prompts Paul to look at Carl. His mouth twitches and he presses his lips together as he releases a shaky exhale.

Carl gets up from the couch and goes to fetch two glasses from the kitchen, then pours both of them a glass of the bourbon. Paul accepts the glass from him with a grave look.

After he sits down on the couch again, Carl lifts his glass. “To Barkovic. And to finding the fucking bastard who killed her.”

Paul raises his own glass. “To Milena. One of the best I’ve worked with.”

They sip the strong alcohol in silence. Carl isn’t much of a bourbon fan, but the way it burns as it goes down and hangs there as a tangible reminder is something he can appreciate.

He finally puts his empty glass on the coffee table, thinks about what Paul had said to him earlier. “You said you’re afraid one day it’ll be me. Is that really on your mind?”

Paul looks up, meets his gaze. “Yeah. Sometimes.”

“You’ve told me before that I’m too reckless. But that’s not… I haven’t done anything like that in a long time.”

A small smile briefly flits across Paul’s face. “That’s good to know.”

“And yeah, this job kills people. But it could be you, too. Any of us. At any time. You really gonna go to work with that fear hanging over you?”

Paul exhales heavily. “No, it’s not like that. It’s just… We’ve both lost people. Shit like this happens, your mind just goes there, you know.”

Carl’s voice is low when he says, “You know that I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you, right?”

“I’d like to think you’d have got out of that construction job just fine without me.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I’m not sure I’d be alive.”

Paul stays quiet, just looks at the empty glass in his hands, then says, “Yeah, that was kind of the point.”

“I couldn’t ever thank you enough.”

“This.” Paul points vaguely at the space between them. “You being here. What do you think that is?”

Carl shrugs. “Being there for a friend.”

Paul lets out an almost cynical chuckle. “Carl. No one shows up for me like this.”

“You do it for me.”

“Yeah. That’s always been our thing. But please don’t ever think you’re not doing enough. Because you’re right. If you weren’t here with me right now, I’d have that bottle of bourbon in me, and you know how that goes.”

“Yeah. Aspirin and regrets, and not a damn thing that’s changed the next day except that massive fucking hangover you drag around.”

“Thanks. For keeping me steady tonight.”

Carl smiles a small smile. “That was kind of the point.”

Paul returns the smile but then sobers, his expression back to grim. He closes his eyes for a long moment, then looks at Carl. “Look. Could I ask you to leave?”

Before Carl can say anything, he adds, “I promise I’m not gonna get drunk. I just… wanna be alone for a while.”

Carl gives him a long look, but then gets up from the couch. “Of course.”

Paul is up from the armchair as well, and then he's right there, drawing Carl into an unexpected hug. They pat each other's backs, then Paul accompanies him to the door. Before Carl leaves, he tells him, "Call me if you need anything, yeah?"

Paul nods. "Yeah."

Then Carl steps out and the door closes behind him. As he trudges down the stairs, he vows to keep yet another promise for Paul – to do what's in his power to find Barkovic's killer. Because at the very least, he owes him that.

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It takes twenty days until they apprehend the guy. Twenty long, arduous days of Carl combing through evidence, chasing every lead until they all go nowhere, of him skipping meals, hardly getting any sleep, Parker telling him to go home and Carl ignoring it anyway.

In the end, it was a person of interest Carl had dug up who pointed them to a new location they hadn't yet been aware of, and then it all came together when they reviewed the CCTV footage.

Finally, after all the repeated calls of Paul asking if they had anything new, Carl could tell him they found Milena's killer.

Their suspect is named Felix Barrow, and the puzzle pieces they've put together form a picture that isn't new or innovative. He's a long-time offender with prior arrests for burglary, assault and handling stolen goods. He's the shifty kind who doesn't trust anyone, so he was operating out of a quiet niche at the docks – stealing high-value items from moored boats, siphoning fuel at night and occasionally fencing equipment.

Milena had been patrolling the area more frequently recently, had seen things that seemed suspicious. She'd run it by Paul and he'd dismissed it. When Carl looked more closely during the murder investigation, he found that several minor thefts were reported in the area but no one had connected the dots. Or maybe Milena had and started asking uncomfortable questions.

And Barrow had felt threatened, needed to get rid of a small problem that he figured would become a bigger problem. From what Carl can tell, he's the type who doesn't care about anyone other than himself, who will callously dispose of a human life it means it disposes of a thorn in his side, who thrives on exerting control and protecting what is his at all cost – even at the cost of killing someone.

And now they're here, in the small adjacent room that has microphones and a large one-way mirror overlooking the interview room where Barrow is sitting at the sole table, sipping smugly from a plastic cup of water.

Barrow has no reason to be smug, though. Carl and Parker just extracted a confession from him. The two of them are exchanging last thoughts about the interview they just concluded when the door opens.

Carl turns around, notices the familiar face of his friend. “Paul.”

Paul goes up to the mirror, his jaw set. “That him?”

Carl simply says, “Yeah.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“Paul…”

He turns towards Carl, fierce determination in his eyes. “Let me fucking talk to him,” he scowls.

“Sorry,” Carl tells him assertively, “but I can’t let you in there.”

Paul’s expression is stone-cold. “The hell you can’t!”

Carl plants himself in Paul’s way, Parker taking a step to the side to watch this play out from the sidelines. “And then what? You gonna jump the cunt and punch him in the fucking face?”

Paul clenches his jaw and balls his fists before he snarls, “I’d really fucking like to.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I need you to stay out of this.”

Paul’s eyes are hard with anger and resentment. “Seriously? You’re cutting me out?”

“Yeah, because you’re still angry as hell. Whatever you’re gonna do in there, it won’t help. You gotta trust me—*us*—to get the fucker convicted. Properly. Without use of excessive force jeopardising the whole thing.”

He pauses, watches Paul, then adds, “Let me and Parker handle it, yeah?”

Paul stays right there, keeps staring at Barrow through the one-way mirror, then turns to Carl. There’s something else in his expression now. Betrayal. Maybe disappointment. “You asking me to fucking leave?”

Carl nods slowly. “Yeah.”

“I don’t believe this,” he mutters under his breath.

Parker pipes up from somewhere behind Carl, “He’s right, Harris. And I think you know that. It won’t bring Barkovic back, but it’s the next best thing.”

“Yeah,” Paul says, and it’s cutting and bitter. He turns on his heel and walks out.

Carl throws Parker a pointed look and she raises her eyebrows. Carl says, “This has to go by the book. We can’t fuck this up.”

Parker gives him a wan smile. “Yeah, I know. And we won’t.” She nods towards the door. “We’re done here for now. Go find Harris, I’ll have Barrow processed.”

“Yeah,” Carl replies and goes.

He strides through the CID department, not sure where Paul went because he doesn’t see him when he looks around.

As he hurries down the flight of stairs to the lobby, he wonders where this went wrong. He hadn’t expected for Paul to turn up out of the blue, let alone have him demand to speak to Barrow face-to-face.

Down in the lobby, he sees Paul just leaving through the front door, so Carl goes after him, calls his name just outside the front door. “Paul!”

Paul keeps walking but Carl jogs closer to catch up. “Paul, wait.”

Paul turns around, his expression still hardened. Inscrutable. “What? So you can give me another lecture about fucking police procedure?”

Carl simply says, “No.”

Paul shakes his head. “Carl… Just leave it alone.”

Carl is still taken aback. He doesn’t really understand why this spiralled so quickly. “I don’t get it. What the hell happened in there?”

Paul is staring daggers at Carl. “What the hell happened? Christ, Carl. When’d you get so high-and-mighty, huh? CID has really gone to your fucking head. Fucking hell.”

Wait, what? Carl feels completely blindsided. “High-and-mighty? What the fuck? What are you even talking about?”

“You didn’t get that this was condescending as fuck?” he shoots at Carl. “Disrespectful too, while we’re at it. And then Parker put the fucking cherry on top.”

“You’re pissed because we asked you to leave?”

“Yes,” Paul hisses at him. “Yes, I’m fucking pissed! I wanted a minute alone with the guy. Just a fucking minute. Look him in the eyes. See his fucking face. Remind him about all the lives he’s ruined.”

Carl lifts his arms in a vaguely placatory gesture. “Okay, I get that. But Christ, Paul. Look at you. How do you think it would have ended if we’d let you in there?”

Paul’s face darkens as he incredulously shakes his head. “Really? I’ve been a fucking police officer for over twenty years. You really think so little of me that I can’t keep a lid on it for a

fucking minute? That I have zero self-control not to punch the fucking guy in the fucking face? That I wouldn't realise that that would compromise the whole fucking case?"

"Look. Can you blame me? You stormed in there, spoiling for a fight, demanding we let you talk to him. What was I supposed to think?"

Paul's eyes narrow dangerously. "You're supposed to fucking trust me!"

And that hits hard, right in the gut in a way that Carl goes rigid and has to swallow.

But Paul isn't done. He takes a step closer to Carl, barges right into his personal space. "See, this is your problem. Because this is what *you* would have done. You'd have gone in there and gone ballistic. You'd have punched the living daylights out of the bastard if you were in my shoes. But I'm not you, Carl. Because unlike you, I have actual impulse control and I have a handle on my fucking emotions!"

Now Carl's temper flares, too. "Fucking hell, Paul. I worked myself to the bone for this. I've barely fucking slept in the last three weeks! We caught the guy, got a clean confession, he's going away for a long time. And this is what you're hung up on? That you couldn't be in the same room with a stone-cold killer?

"And what do you think that would have accomplished? Because I can tell you that that arsehole doesn't give a fuck. Not about Milena, not about her husband or whatever life they could have had. Cunts like him, they don't feel remorse."

Paul's jaw works, and something in his expression shifts. He goes quiet, closes his eyes for a long moment, then looks down. His voice is low when he says, "She was pregnant."

Fuck, Carl thinks. He swallows again, stays silent for a beat, then meets Paul's eyes. "Did you know?"

There are tears swimming in them now. "No. It was early days."

Carl scrubs a hand down his face, takes a step back. "Shit," he exhales.

"Yeah," Paul says, bitterness still leaking into his voice.

"Look. I'm sorry. Because you're right. I should have trusted you. I fucked up, okay?"

Paul's eyes flit to Carl's for a brief moment before he looks away again.

Carl adds, "You still wanna talk to Barrow?"

Paul closes his eyes, draws in a breath. "No. Cause maybe you have a point. He won't give a flying fuck. Just lock the bastard up so that we're fucking done with him and we can all move on."

"Yeah. He'll go away for a long time, you can count on that."

Paul shakes his head. “But you know what? Arseholes like him, they know how to manipulate the system. Get out on good behaviour after, what? Ten years? Fifteen? It’s fucking pointless.”

“He’s got previous convictions. Don’t think he’ll get off that easy.”

The fire is now gone from Paul’s demeanour. He rubs the back of his neck, then closes his eyes and lets his head roll back before he looks back down at the ground. “They finally released the body. Funeral’s next week.”

“I’d like to come.”

Paul nods. “Yeah. Sure.”

Carl studies him for a long moment with only the birds and a passerby on his mobile phone interrupting the silence. “Paul? Are we okay?”

He lifts his gaze and looks at Carl. “Yeah, we’re okay. I just… I just need some time, alright?”

Carl nods. “Sure. But you know I’m here if you wanna talk, yeah?”

“Yeah.” He meets Carl’s eyes. “And I know. I know how hard you worked on this.”

“I made you a promise.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Carl waits, then points at the front door of the police station. “I better get back in there, there’s still work to be done.”

Paul nods slowly. When Carl is about to go, Paul calls after him. “Carl? Please get some rest.”

Carl’s mouth curves into a small smile because that’s Paul. Even when things get touchy, he still cares.

As Carl walks back into the station, he muses that there aren’t many things in his life that he knows with absolute certainty, but this is one of them: He couldn’t wish for a better friend than Paul Harris. He hopes he’ll never lose him.

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End Note:

Help! I’ve become a victim of my own headcanon obsession and I can’t stop writing Paul Harris stories. I blame John Simm because at some stage I had to cast someone in the role of Paul, and then I randomly googled ‘blond British actors in their 40’s’, and when John Simm came up, I was like, YES! 👉 This! This is Paul Harris!

And then I figured, okay, I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen anything with John Simm, so let’s see what he’s been in. And now I’ve watched a bunch of stuff he’s done because the guy is a

great actor, and I can't stop thinking about this headcanon universe because younger Carl deserves a friend like that in his life that has otherwise probably been really shitty.

So stay tuned for more, because I have future fics in the works. And yes, it'll eventually feature Carl's ex Victoria, in case you were wondering.