The Better Part Of Me

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Summary

Carl's old friend Paul and his boyfriend Doug are finally tying the knot, and of course Paul asked Carl to be his Best Man. This prompts a trip for Carl to his old home in the south of England where he also has some things to think about regarding his own life. (Pre-canon and follow-up to previous stories in my Paul Harris universe.)

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', 'From Behind The Bitter Ache', 'That Weight On Your Shoulder' and 'Can You Show Me Something Else'. 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.

Carl had a brief stint with an undercover assignment that resulted in some complications, then joined CID, worked for a year or two in Serious Crimes and ultimately changed to Homicide. This story takes place some time in the mid-2010s.

As for Paul Harris, now that Carl is somewhat out of reach, our lovely Chief Inspector Paul Harris needs someone by his side to keep him company. I just want him to be happy because he deserves all the happiness in the world. So the guy I put by his side is a sweet man, who you can imagine as whoever you like, but in my mind I've cast the lovely John Finnemore in this role whose audio drama Cabin Pressure will always hold a special place in my heart because it got me through a rough time in my life. I've met John twice in person, and he's a wonderful human being who gave me a hug when I told him that story. So now he's my Douglas Tucker. (No yellow cars were harmed—or spotted—while writing this story. Unless the DHL van counts.)

Huge thanks to M for the beta!

Title inspired by Matchbox Twenty – Cold

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Chapter 1 – You're Ready To Fly

"Carl?"

Victoria comes out of the bedroom, adjusting the knot on the scarf that matches her flight attendant uniform. "Don't forget to pick Jasper up at my mum's tonight."

Carl frowns, downing the last of his morning coffee. "I'm taking the overnight train to London, remember?"

"Oh shit, that's today?"

"Yeah," he says impatiently. "That's today. Did you miss how I was packing my suitcase last night?"

She sighs. "Sorry, things have been so hectic lately. I thought that was next week."

"So Jasper doesn't have a place to stay tonight? I told you last week that you'll have to arrange something for him for the rest of the week. Did you not speak with Ross?"

"Carl. I forgot."

"Christ." He lifts his arms and lets them fall by his sides. "So now what? I can't take him with me. You clearly can't take him with you. Can he stay with your mother?"

"Why do you have to go to that bloody wedding?"

Wow. Because… *really?!* She's gonna berate him for a trip he's planned for months, a trip that means the world to him?

"Fucking hell, Vic!" he says in a raised voice. "*That bloody wedding* is my oldest friend. I'm his fucking Best Man. You *know* that this is really fucking important to me. I can't believe you're even saying this!"

She spins around to face him. "If this is so important, maybe you should have communicated it a little more clearly."

Communicated?! What the fuck? He had. Multiple times.

Now he's really getting riled up. He can feel his temper is flaring, his voice well on the way to shouting, "Oh, for fuck's sake, how many more times did I have to say it?! It's not my fucking fault that you're barely here! And that when you are, you don't actually fucking listen to what I'm saying!"

Her voice is sharp now, too. "Oh, so this is on *me* now? How many times have you left me and Jasper hanging because you had to work late, or there was an overnight stake-out or you got called out for something in the middle of the fucking night?"

Carl bristles, the sarcasm thick in his voice now. “Yeah, it really fucking sucks that Scotland’s criminals don’t subscribe to your personal fucking work schedule, doesn’t it?!”

She lets out a frustrated sound. “Look. I’ll call my mum on the way to the airport. Can you at least pick him up from school? Mum’s got a doctor’s appointment at three.”

“Fuck’s sake, Vic. I have to work. It was hard enough to get time off, Moira’s already up my arse about my work hours. He is *your* fucking son. It’s your mess to deal with.”

She hastily looks at her watch, then mutters, “Fuck,” under her breath as she rushes into the bathroom.

Carl angrily dumps his empty mug in the kitchen sink with a loud clank. Unbelievable! He’d mentioned this trip several times. He spent an hour last night, packing his shit while Vic was on the bloody phone with one of her girlfriends. He’d even put it in their fucking weekly planner.

He hears the door of Jasper’s room opening, footsteps padding into the kitchen. The eleven-year-old throws Carl a guarded look, then averts his eyes. Yeah, their verbal sparring match wasn’t exactly discreet.

Carl draws in a long breath through his nose, then tries to get a grip on his temper. He turns to Jasper. “Morning,” he says in what he hopes is a neutral tone.

Jasper doesn’t say anything, just gets a glass from the dish rack and fills it with cold milk from the fridge.

“You want Wheetabix?” Carl asks him.

“No,” Jasper mumbles.

“Then what? Toast? Cornflakes?”

Jasper drinks the milk and doesn’t say anything else, so Carl tries to soften his voice. “Look, I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have yelled.”

Blue eyes meet his for a split second before Jasper’s gaze flits away again. “I don’t wanna stay with gran,” he says in a small voice.

Fuck. Not Jasper, too. “Yeah, but you’ll have to. Or maybe with your dad. I’m gonna be away for a few days. Your mum’s away with work.”

“She’s always away,” he says in a half whining, half accusing tone.

“Yeah, but that’s part of her job. I know it’s not great, but it is what it is. I’ll be back on Friday, yeah?”

“Can I not come with you?”

Carl raises his eyebrows. That's new. Jasper has never asked to go anywhere with just him. Now he wonders if maybe he should have thought of that, should have asked Jasper if he wanted to come. Then again, this isn't quite the right gig for an eleven-year-old, is it? Not with Vic not there and Carl being Best Man.

"Sorry, fella, but I can't. Maybe next time, yeah? We can plan a trip together for a weekend when I'm back. Just the two of us. How about that?"

Jasper draws up his shoulders in a slow shrug. "I guess."

Carl moves over to where he's sitting and puts a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, okay, Jasper?"

"Why do you have to go away?"

"A really good friend is getting married in the south of England. He's asked me to be his Best Man."

"What does that mean—Best Man?"

"Means I help on the wedding day. Kinda like a number-one teammate for the wedding."

"How come we've never met your friend?"

Carl's brow creases. "You have. Paul. He was here a few years ago with his boyfriend. Blond hair, brown eyes. Brought you a LEGO set. That police one, I think. He was also at our wedding. You don't remember him?"

Jasper slowly shakes his head. Oh well. That visit was only a weekend thing and it was almost two years ago. And then, at the wedding, there were a lot of people that would have been strangers to Jasper. Carl can't even really blame him.

The bathroom door opens and Vic comes back out, hurries into the kitchen.

"Mum?" Jasper looks at her. "I don't wanna stay with gran tonight."

She draws in a breath, sighs, then walks over to Jasper to gently ruffle his hair. "Yeah, I know. But I'm afraid you'll have to because Carl and I are both going to be away for the night. Do you want me to call your father?"

"No," Jasper says immediately.

"Okay. Well, we'll figure it out, okay?"

Carl wants to roll his eyes. Vic should have figured this out last fucking week. Jasper's life is unstable enough as it is. This is extra complication he doesn't need in his life.

But it's not like there's much to be done now. And like he told Vic earlier, it isn't even really his problem. He wonders if it should become that, though. They had talked about Carl applying for

shared custody of Jasper, but he hasn't made up his mind yet. Maybe it's time to give that some more thought.

Vic goes into the bedroom and comes back, wheeling out her carry-on. She shoots Carl a look. "You'll be back Friday, you said."

"Yeah, Friday morning."

"And you're working Friday."

"Yes, I'm fucking working Friday. I told you that, too." He points at the planner on the side of the fridge. "It's there, black on white. Why do we even have that thing if you're not gonna use it?"

"Yeah, sorry. I gotta go. Shit, I'm already late." She takes a step closer to him, then says, "See you Friday."

"See you," he greets back, and then she's in the hall and out the door.

Carl just stands there, annoyance and disappointment roiling in his gut. No goodbye kiss, not even a 'Have fun' or 'Safe travels'. What the fuck?

Jasper drinks the last of his milk and puts the glass on the table. Carl sighs. "Go and get ready, we don't wanna be late for school. I'll make you some toast real quick, yeah? Can't have you go on an empty stomach."

Jasper is already up from the chair and halfway to his room. "Okay," he says.

Carl sighs again, grabs the empty milk glass and fishes the bread from the cupboard. Wonderful. What a great way to start the day.

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Chapter 2 – There Will Be No Doubt

The trip to the south is uneventful. The train arrives with a slight delay, but the connection from London is also late, so it works out in his favour. He checks into the hotel, grabs something to eat, then makes his way to meet with Doug's best man Tom and his wife. There's still some last minute stuff to figure out for the wedding gig tomorrow.

The plan was to meet up with Paul later that afternoon, but he gets a text that he'll have to cancel short notice because apparently there's a hiccup with the party venue that he'll have to sort out. Carl asks if he can help, but Paul says no and he'll see him tomorrow.

Okay, then. An impromptu afternoon to spend in the city.

Some of it is spent in the hotel room, exchanging texts with Vic. She apologises to him, he texts back. Eventually they call each other when she's settled into her own hotel room in Athens.

This is their pattern. They fight, sometimes about stupid, menial stuff. It gets heated, but they always make up. And there's usually glorious make-up sex. Well, if she's home, that is. This time, of course, they aren't in close proximity, so a phone conversation will have to do. And finally she asks him how the trip went and tells him to enjoy the next few days – their rather frigid goodbye now reconciled.

He lies down on the hotel bed with his arms folded behind his head. Vic told him she managed to sort it out with Jasper's overnight accommodation. He's going to sleep at her mum's place and Ross, Jasper's father, is going help with the school duty. Fantastic, Carl thinks. Jasper's probably going to hate all of it and will be a menace when he comes home on Friday.

And that brings him back to the whole shared custody thing. When Vic had first asked him, he didn't think he was remotely equipped to fill that role. He had zero experience with being a father, was only just getting used to being thrust into a life that involved caring for a child who was practically a stranger.

But now it's different. He's part of their lives, he makes decisions with them. *For* them. For Jasper. Hell, most weeks he spends more time with Jasper than his mother and certainly more than fucking Ross.

And that goes both ways, too. In the beginning, Jasper had been defiant, sometimes outright adversarial with Carl. He'd even thrown it in his face that he wasn't his father when Carl had asked something of him that he didn't want to do. But ultimately, they'd settled into their own rhythm and Jasper had reluctantly accepted Carl as an authority figure, especially after he and Vic got married.

Carl had a feeling it had to do with an underlying worry that Carl wasn't going to stay. And that was something that Carl could understand. It was hard to trust sometimes that people were going to stick around.

Carl is certainly committed to stick around, to stick with this new life he's built around Vic and Jasper. He might as well put it black on white and give him some actual authority regarding the boy.

He closes his eyes and smiles. There. Decision made. He'll tell Vic when he gets home, maybe they can talk about it with Jasper on the weekend.

Until then he's going to enjoy his time here and revel in the fact that his best friend is finally tying the knot with a fantastic partner that Carl is happy he found and has by his side.

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The next morning is a bustle of activity. The drive out to the wedding ceremony venue—a lighthouse on the south coast—is somewhat chaotic with trying to distribute the small group of people across the three cars they have. Carl ends up with Tom and his wife, which isn't exactly what he'd hoped because he'd been looking forward to catching up with Paul during the drive.

He tries to make the best of it, and funnily enough enjoys the animated discussion they have about Brexit and international politics.

When they arrive, the weather isn't the best, which Carl knows is a bit of a disappointment. Who doesn't hope for sunshine on their wedding day, but this is Britain, after all. In Carl's mind, as long as it's not raining, they'll be okay.

Half an hour later, Paul is pacing in front of the window of the small keeper's room next to the lighthouse. Carl can't help but smirk a little, because Paul is definitely flustered and definitely nervous.

He also looks dapper as hell in his dark grey suit, subtly pink shirt and dark blue, silky tie that goes well with the single white rose as his boutonnière. Carl thinks Doug is lucky as hell to get married to this man today.

"Shit," Paul says, pausing his pacing and looking at Carl. "Am I doing the right thing?"

Carl chuckles. "Little late to ask that."

"I'm serious, Carl."

"Do you love Doug?"

"Yes," he says without even thinking about it. "Like crazy."

"Then you're doing the right thing."

Paul doesn't exactly look convinced and Carl says, "Skip. Relax. It's going to be great. The man you love like crazy and who loves *you* like crazy is ready to tie the knot, everyone's here, it's not raining. What could go wrong?"

"You have the rings?"

Carl wants to roll his eyes. "Yes, I have the fucking rings. You've already asked me that twice."

Paul resumes his pacing. "Sorry."

"Christ," Carl mutters. "I've never seen you this bloody nervous."

"Well, I've never got married before."

Carl pats his chest pocket but finds it empty. "Would offer you a cigarette but looks like I left them at the hotel."

"Better that than the rings."

Just then, there's a knock on the door and Tom pokes his head in. "Carl? You have a minute?"

He throws Paul a quick look. "Sure."

He is being ushered to the entryway of the lighthouse where one of the officials tells him that there could be a bit of a hiccup. Weather reports are indicating there might be some fog coming in, and if that happens, the lighthouse will have to sound the foghorn at a considerable volume every two minutes. He tells him there's no need to panic just yet, and the ceremony can go ahead in any case, but they should be aware of the potential auditory interruptions.

"Okay," Carl says, not sure what to do with that information. "So you'll let us know if that happens, yeah?"

"Yes, of course."

Carl goes up the stairs and finds Doug to tell him about the possible complication. Doug being Doug, he just chuckles. "And here I was, dreading I'd have the most mundane, unremarkable wedding. Bring it on, it'll make a great memory for the ages."

Carl smiles. "I have a feeling Paul won't be quite as chill about it."

"He still nervous?"

"As fucking shit."

Doug chuckles again. "That's Paul for you."

"Don't worry, I'll talk him down."

Doug nods. "You do that. Best of luck, my man."

Carl smiles. He likes Doug. Paul was right that he's witty and funny as hell, with the most endearing laugh. He's the type who wins you over without even trying, and Carl can easily see why Paul fell for him. He'd never said yes so fast when Paul asked him if he would be his Best Man.

Carl is a little out of breath when he gets back to the keeper's room. Paul and Doug decided to go with the traditional arrangement of the married couple not seeing each other before the ceremony, and now they're waiting for everything to be ready. Paul is still wearing grooves into the floor with his pacing.

"So," Carl says after he's closed the door behind him, "small problem. Potential problem."

"Oh no, please don't say that."

"The lighthouse has a foghorn. And there's a chance of fog rolling in, and then they might have to sound the bloody thing every two minutes."

Paul stares at him. "That's it?"

"Yeah. It's loud. Apparently."

"Okay. That's not a catastrophe. Is it?"

“Wow, you’re a lot calmer about this than I thought.”

“Well, I expected you to say my future husband had a change of heart. Or, I don’t know, the registrar couldn’t make it.”

“No, your future husband is still committed, last I checked. Says you worry too fucking much.”

“I very much doubt he said that.”

“Well, not in those exact words.”

Carl looks out the window, sees the small group of wedding guests waiting in front of the lighthouse entrance. He turns back to Paul. “You have your vows down, yeah?”

Paul sighs. “Don’t fucking remind me.”

“I bet you agonised over it for weeks.”

Paul throws him a look. “No, I didn’t.”

Carl doesn’t believe him for a second. He walks over to Paul and gives him a good-natured pat on the shoulder. “Come on. Enjoy the day. Think of all the glorious marital sex afterwards.”

“Fuck’s sake, Carl.”

Carl flashes him a grin. “Should have brought some bourbon to loosen you up.”

Paul sucks in a nervous breath. “Why is this so hard?”

“It’s not. You’re the one who’s making it hard.”

“You’re a terrible Best Man, do you know that?”

Carl chuckles. “Isn’t that why you asked me?”

There’s some movement outside the window, another knock on the door. Tom is there to tell them, “Okay. We’re ready.”

Paul looks absolutely terrified and Carl’s mouth curves into a grin. He gives him a clap on the back. “Come on, Skip. Let’s do this.”

Paul lets out an audible breath through pursed lips. “Okay, let’s do this.”

An official is waiting for them by the closed door to the ceremony room behind which the rest of the small wedding congregation is waiting. Carl doesn’t think he’s smiled this much in a long time – some of that possibly his best attempt at trying to counteract Paul’s nervous energy. He turns his head towards Paul. “Hey. Breathe.”

“Shut up,” Paul tells him good-naturedly.

And then the door opens and Paul stiffens next to him for a moment.

Despite the bleak, grey skies outside not exactly adding to the festive spirit, Doug at the other end of the room in front of the registrar's desk looks absolutely stunning, even to Carl. The charcoal grey suit that matches Paul's in colour accentuates Doug's body in just the right places, the pastel-teal, elegant shirt complementing the same dark blue tie that Paul is wearing.

Doug's eyes light up at the sight of Paul, crow's feet crinkling endearingly as his face softens and his slightly crooked smile widens in quiet reverence. Carl hears Paul's breath hitch just a little next to him, and he nudges him forward so they can walk towards Paul's husband-to-be.

When they reach the desk and Carl takes a few steps away to stand off to the side, he hears Doug whisper, "You look incredible."

Paul swallows. "So do you."

The registrar clears her throat gently, almost reluctant to break the moment. "Shall we begin?"

Paul and Doug don't look away from each other as they nod.

The registrar stands, her voice gentle but carrying just enough to settle the small audience of their closest friends and family. "A warm welcome, everyone. I am very happy to say that we are gathered here today in this beautiful place to witness and celebrate the marriage of Paul and Doug.

"They chose this lighthouse as the location to cement their bond, which holds a special meaning because the lighthouse has stood on this shore for generations, guiding people safely through changing tides and uncertain weather. It feels only fitting that we are here to honour a partnership built on the same strength, the same steadfastness, the same light."

That stupid smile is back on Carl's face, now accompanied by something warm and affectionate spreading through his chest as the registrar opens a leather folder in front of her. "The two of you stand here today surrounded by the people dear to you who have supported and loved you along the way. With them to stand witness to your union, we now move to the formal part of the ceremony."

She looks at Doug. "If you are ready, Douglas, please repeat after me: I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Douglas Timothy Tucker, may not be joined in matrimony to Paul Bartholomew Harris."

Doug repeats it, and the registrar asks the same of Paul, who starts, "I solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Paul Bartholomew Harris—" He stalls, throws a helpless look at Carl. "Shit, how did the rest go?"

There are a few snickers in the room and the registrar's mouth curves into a smile as she says, "Why I, Paul Bartholomew Harris may not be joined in matrimony to Douglas Timothy Tucker."

Paul's face has gone a shade redder and he hastily repeats, "Why I, Paul Bartholomew Harris may not be joined in matrimony to Douglas Timothy Tucker."

The registrar is still smiling as she turns back to Doug. "Do you, Douglas Timothy Tucker, take Paul Bartholomew Harris to be your lawful wedded husband?"

Doug looks at Paul, the warmth and love right there in his hazel eyes. "I very much do."

The registrar turns to Paul. "Do you, Paul Bartholomew Harris, take Douglas Timothy Tucker to be your lawful wedded husband?"

Paul grins and says, "This part I remember." Carl has to suppress a chuckle and watches as Paul turns his head to look at Doug, then assertively says, "I do."

The registrar puts the folder down on the desk. "I believe you have both prepared vows."

They look at each other and Paul says, "Okay, before I botch this up too, let me go first," which elicits a little chuckle from the room.

He harrumphs, then turns all his attention to his husband-to-be. "I've spent a long time trying to find the right words for today." He looks over at Carl. "Carl may have said I agonised over it, and maybe that's not that far off.

"Doug. When I met you, I had already given up on trying to find someone that I'd want to spend the rest of my life with. And then you came along and my whole world changed. You suddenly made my life make sense.

"You're the person who helps keep me straight and the thing I can rely on is that you always—*always*—make me smile, which is one of the things I treasure most about you. What I want to promise to you is that I will be someone you can also rely on. Not just when things are easy, but when they're messy or harsh or complicated. I promise to listen, to always be honest with you and to try and make you smile just as much in return.

"I love you from the bottom of my heart and there is nothing I want more than spending the rest of my life with you."

"Boy," Doug says as he somewhat bashfully wipes at his cheek. "Make it horribly sappy, why don't you?"

There are a few chuckles from the guests.

Doug shifts his weight slightly to face Paul. "Well, mine isn't quite so sappy and I certainly didn't agonise over it, at least not for more than twenty minutes. So consider this my best attempt at sounding like a grown man who planned ahead."

He turns to fully face Paul and look straight at him. "Paul. Before you, my life was… you know… fine. Functional. Like a perfectly acceptable beige IKEA couch. And then you turned up and

suddenly there was this big, soft, colourful sofa suite in my living room that livens up the place, that you want to sink onto and just… relax and be comfortable.

“So now when I come home, there’s this wonderful person who welcomes me, who listens to my incessant ramblings, who admittedly can be annoying as hell but who also makes the boring bits interesting. Like arguing over who pushes the shopping trolley or which way round the toilet roll goes…

“Paul,” he takes a long look at his partner. “There is no one I’d rather come home to every night. No one I’d rather have by my side, even when we’re both being ridiculous. Or maybe especially then.

“You’re the guy who makes my heart beat faster when I set eyes on you. Even after two years. And I’m genuinely excited—and slightly terrified—to spend the rest of my life figuring things out with you.”

He pauses, then looks at the people sitting behind them and adds, “Okay, that’s all I have. How’d I do?”

There are more laughs from the audience.

“Horribly, ”Paul says with a mischievous chuckle.

The registrar speaks up again. “Very well. I think it’s time for the rings.”

Carl takes a second, fishes the small box out of his suit jacket and hands the simple, rounded golden rings over. The registrar takes them and instructs the couple to place them on their fingers.

When they’re done with the exchange, big, happy smiles on their faces, the registrar concludes, “Paul and Doug, you have declared your vows and exchanged rings. It is my great pleasure to pronounce you husband and husband.” She beams at them. “You may now kiss the groom.”

It’s like the room stands still for a moment. Carl has his eyes on Paul, sees how his shoulders rise just a fraction, like he’s shouldering the significance of it all. This is Paul in his quiet awareness, the way he knows how to read a room and own the moment. It’s what makes him such a damn fine police officer.

What Carl also sees is Doug’s face softening in a way that is just reserved for Paul, for the person he loves with all his heart. There’s that tiny, crooked smile again that tries to hide just how emotional this all is, but failing miserably at it.

When they step toward each other, it’s like it all comes together, like there’s an invisible pull in the room. Paul’s hand comes up to cup Doug’s jaw, thumb brushing just under his ear, and Doug leans in. Carl’s chest tightens—not because it’s intimate but because it’s Paul.

And then they kiss.

It's not the big cinematic moment that has the room erupt in applause. It's steady with a quiet certainty that does something weird to Carl's throat. That stupid grin is back on his face, he can't help it. There may have been a subdued sniff in the audience, a soft, happy laugh from someone else.

Carl steals a glance at the guests, all of them smiling in a soft, loving way, and he thinks that it couldn't be more perfect that these two loving idiots found each other and have now finally made it official.

When the freshly married couple finally pulls apart, Carl feels something settle in his chest. It must be pride, or maybe affection or admiration—or all of it tangled together. He clears his throat in a vain attempt not to get overly emotional, but it may already be too late for that.

Then it's just the formality of signing the schedule, Carl being asked to attest as a witness, which he gladly does. As they wait for the paperwork to be sorted, Carl leans in to whisper to Paul. "Bartholomew?"

Paul grins. "Grandfather on my father's side. Dare I ask about yours?"

"No."

"Come on. Is it just as terrible? Worse?"

"No."

"So what? Cuthbert? Barnaby? Fitzherbert?"

"Fucking hell," Carl gently laughs. "Before you start any nasty rumours, it's Henry."

"Henry. That's not too bad as middle names go."

"Don't you dare tell Jasper. He'd tease me about it for bloody eternity."

Paul makes a key-in-lock gesture near his mouth. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me, Henry."

Carl smiles as he sees some movement from the corner of his eye, someone near the door making a hand sign. The registrar sees it too and addresses the small gathering.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you might have already heard about the weather situation we are having. Since it seems that the Devon weather has decided to grace us with some unexpected fog today, we will now have to start sounding the foghorn on top of the lighthouse every two minutes, so please don't be alarmed at the sound."

The news is being taken in stride as Paul and Doug's friends and family start to come forward and congratulate the married couple. Paul's mother envelops him in a proud, motherly hug. Carl knows that Paul's father has already passed away and he doesn't have any other siblings. Doug has both his parents and a brother and a sister there.

The timing is impeccable, because the first time that they hear the foghorn's deep, rumbling sound is the exact moment that Paul and Doug hold each other's hands as they're ready to leave the room. They look at each other and start laughing.

What a perfect way to ring in a new era.

What waits for them outside is a vintage green Mini that's decorated with rainbow ribbons and a colourful 'Just Married' sign in the back, although the couple is first whisked away by the wedding photographer to take some photos around the lighthouse. Fairly heavy fog has now started to waft in and is giving the whole scene an eerie, mystical air. Not exactly what they'd hoped for, but he thinks perhaps Paul's penchant for fantasy settings might appreciate the irony.

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Chapter 3 – The Spaces In Between

A few hours after the wedding ceremony, they are all gathered back in the city in the converted boat house with the full entourage of wedding guests and the party in full swing. The strings of fairy lights all around give the room a soft glow despite the dull weather outside. White roses are tastefully interspersed. A makeshift DJ booth is set up in the corner with 80's and 90's music playing low enough to still hold conversations.

Carl tries his utmost to cater to his Best Man duties, even though he's really not the type to play host and usher. So far, everything's pretty much gone to plan, mostly thanks to Tom and his wife's excellent project management skills that Carl very definitely lacks. But somehow they seem to be complementing each other pretty well, and that's great, too.

Canapés and welcome drinks have been served, the buffet has long been declared open and people have already had the main course. There are content faces all around, there's laughter and joy in the air, and Tom walks over to where Doug is standing, chatting with a small group of guests to nod towards the side of the room.

Carl watches him go up to Paul and then it's time for cutting the cake. Yeah, the cake. This had been a long and arduous journey until they had finally settled on a three-tier arrangement with different flavours per tier. Carl, quite frankly, didn't give much of a fuck. Cake was cake. It's not like anyone would complain about a particular variety as long as it tasted good.

The cake has now been set up on a table to the side – a glorious work of art with smooth, white, pastel orange and pastel yellow icing and a rainbow flag on top among marzipan wildflowers.

As Doug takes hold of the large knife, Tom lifts a glass and clanks a spoon on it until people catch on and the noise in the room dies down. He announces, "You might have all been waiting for dessert, so we're going to get to it. Quite honestly, this may have been the most difficult part of organising this wedding, because Paul was adamant about lemon drizzle, Doug insisted

on carrot cake, and, well, my vote was on chocolate sponge. So now we've got the best of all worlds and you can all choose your personal poison."

He turns to Doug and says, "Do your worst, pal."

The DJ plays the sound of a drumroll as Doug makes sure that Paul also has his hand on the knife handle and they cut the cake together. The room cheers when the deed is done and then both Doug and Paul eat a forkful of the first cut of the lemon drizzle that was piled onto a plate.

Doug intones, "Yeah, I still prefer the carrot cake."

Paul chides him with, "Philistine," and Doug unabashedly laughs at him.

The party keeps going and eventually everyone has filed over to the cake table where other creamy desserts in small glasses are also set up to take something back to their table. It doesn't take long until both Paul and Doug get up. Paul clinks a fork against his glass until the hubbub around them slowly dies down.

So this is speech time. Carl dreads it a little because he really isn't the type to want to be in the limelight and hold public speeches. He knows perhaps some day he might have to speak at a press conference or two, but he's happy that he hasn't quite had the questionable honour yet.

Paul clears his throat, then addresses the room. "Thank you all for being here with us today. We're sorry we couldn't all cram you into the lighthouse, but there was only room for nine, and this is... well... more than nine people, so...

"You can be thankful that most of you didn't get to hear us stumbling through our vows, so we won't be repeating any of that—"

Doug interrupts Paul, "Speak for yourself."

Paul chuckles softly. "Well, *I* won't be repeating any of that, particularly since I was accused of it being overly sappy. You all know that I love Doug from the bottom of my heart and that I couldn't be happier that we're now legally married."

Tom throws in a, "Hear, hear," from the side, which elicits a few chuckles.

"And as for you," he nods towards Tom, then looks over at Carl, "I would like to not only thank all of you for coming, a big thanks also goes out to our Best Men, Tom and Carl." He gestures to the two of them to get up, which Carl reluctantly does. Tom gives a little bow.

"I can't ever thank them enough for their dedication, their hard work and especially their tireless patience. Especially with the cake choice."

There are more chuckles from the audience.

"Personally, what I want to say is that Carl really came through for me today, because more often than not, he's the one who's wobbling a little, and it's kind of my job to keep him steady,

but today," Paul keeps his eyes on Carl, "you were my solid rock, and I can't ever thank you enough. Not just for today, but for the countless times we picked each other up and held ourselves together, for your tenacity to never give up, for your straightforwardness that keeps me in line, for making me proud by rising above, and most of all, for always showing up."

Paul stops there, and Christ. Carl can feel his eyes watering. He hadn't quite expected that and has no idea what to say. A smile creeps onto Paul's face as he says, "Well, it's not very often that I manage to make Carl speechless, but it seems I just succeeded.

"Anyway, I shall hand over to my lawful wedded husband now, for him to bumble his way through his part, so… enjoy."

The room laughs again and then Doug takes over. He also thanks the guests for being there, speaks highly and emotionally about Paul and about Tom, makes a few eyes tear up in the audience with his heartfelt and much more comedic speech.

By the end of it, he has the whole room laughing and smiling, and that's just who Doug is. Always a bit chaotic, a bit clueless with a touch of frazzled professor, but ultimately the most endearing person in the room you can't help but love.

Tom's speech is just as heartfelt but you can tell he is much more used to speaking publicly. He has a certain commanding presence that has the audience captivated in the best possible way, and Carl learns a few things about Doug that he didn't quite know before.

And then it's Carl's turn to speak, and he instantly feels nervous and would rather vanish somewhere and hide. But he knows Paul would never let him live it down if he didn't at least say a few words. So here he is.

He gets up and harrumphs awkwardly. "Okay, well, I'm possibly the least equipped in this room to deliver a speech, which is a bloody understatement, so bear with me." His eyes nervously roam the audience before he continues. "I've known Paul for many years now, and he's honestly been a blessing from the moment he threw me into a fucking jail cell."

There are a few chuckles from the audience and Paul protests, "Come on, it wasn't quite like that."

Carl looks at him. "No, you're right, it wasn't. Truth be told, Paul made sure I *wasn't* actually locked up in a fucking jail cell. And from that moment on, for some reason I still can't fathom, he attached to me like a dried out burr."

"Christ," Paul interrupts again. "Could you be any more poetic?"

Carl ignores him and goes on, "For as long as I've known him, he's always been incredibly kind and incredibly generous. Loyal to a fault. Dedicated as hell. Never would say no if you asked for anything. Picked me up 20 miles outside of the city once after I got dumped by my girlfriend, no questions asked. I mean, who does that, right?"

Paul looks almost apologetic now. He's definitely touched.

"You couldn't ever wish for a better friend, for a better person to have in your corner. And then I moved up to Scotland, and just when I was starting to worry that those barbed bristles would be useless without someone he could stay attached to, he met Doug.

"And, you know, I couldn't have been more chuffed. Paul's face would light up whenever he talked about Doug, and I've never seen him this happy. So when he broke the news that they were getting married, my first reaction was, 'about fucking time'!"

It elicits a few laughs from the room.

Carl lifts his champagne flute that's almost empty. "So here's to two wonderful husbands who I hope will live a wonderful life together.

"And Douglas. Mate. Consider yourself incredibly fucking lucky that you scored this gem of a burr that's now attached to you forever."

Carl looks around at the crowd. "And to spare you more of my horrible waffling, let me end this on…" He holds up his glass. "To the groom and groom."

There are murmurs and clinking glasses all around as Carl drinks the last of his champagne. Paul gets up to stand next to Carl and leans in. "Burr? Really?"

Carl grins. "Yeah, well, I didn't exactly agonise over it for weeks."

"No, it seems like you didn't 'agonise' over it at all."

"Just trying to live up to the reputation of terrible Best Man." Carl sobers a little. "No, but seriously. What you said earlier. I, uh…"

Paul smiles at him. It's the kind that says he knows Carl won't say it but understands anyway. "Yeah," he says. "I meant all of that."

"So did I."

Paul pulls him into a hug, and Carl thinks he might tear up again. Christ. He's never this emotional. He doesn't cry at weddings. What is this hold that Paul has over him – Paul and Doug both?

Paul mutters in his ear, "You crying yet, Sprog?"

"Shut up," Carl retorts, but it's just a little too thick with emotion, not exactly helped by the fact that Paul pulls him a little closer and gently pats his back.

"You did good," Paul adds.

"So did you." Carl pulls out of the hug. "You two are so fucking perfect for each other, it's rotting my teeth."

Paul places a hand on his shoulder and gently guides him away from the main action so they can sit a little off to the side for a moment. “We haven’t really talked since you came down. How are things going up north?”

“Yeah, they’re good.”

Paul raises his eyebrows. “Good?”

Carl quickly corrects himself. “No, they’re great. Job’s going well, Hardy’s a good partner. You know, still getting to know each other. Still not a huge fan of the city, but, you know… It has its charm.”

“Married life treating you well?”

“Yeah. You know, Vic’s still away a lot. But we make it work. She finally finished redecorating the flat. A dream come true in blue. New kitchen setup, the works. Jasper’s settling in with the new school. His father’s still a dick. Not sure what’s gonna happen with that.”

Paul frowns. “What do you mean?”

“He was never much interested in the boy. You know, the kind who buys attention with gifts but then puts him in front of the telly the whole weekend while he goes and does his own thing. Jasper’s always a pain to deal with when he gets back from those visits. Really not fucking healthy for a boy that age.”

“So this whole stepfather thing is really working out for you, yeah?”

Carl shrugs. “Not exactly what I envisioned, but have to admit he’s grown on me. Been thinking about whether to pull the trigger on shared custody.”

Paul gives him a pointed look. “Custody? That’s a big step.”

“Is it? I’m practically raising the kid already. It’s more like a formality at this stage.”

“And Jasper’s okay with that?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t really talked it over with him yet. But he asked me if he could come with me to the wedding.”

“Oh? So why’s he not here?”

“Because that was yesterday morning. Had a bit of a row with Vic. We, uh… Well, she fucked up and didn’t organise Jasper’s overnight stays this week. I think Jasper hates his grandmother almost as much as I do, so he asked if he could come with me instead. Little late for that, though.”

Paul gives him a long, scrutinising look. “Things still okay with you and Vic?”

“Yeah,” Carl nods. “I mean, we fight occasionally. But, you know, just normal stuff. Nothing big.”

Paul’s brow knits, and Carl narrows his eyes. “What?”

Paul shakes his head. “Nothing. Forget I asked.”

Just then, a female couple comes up to Paul whom Carl hasn’t been introduced to yet. One of them says, “There he is, man of the hour. Been looking for you.”

“Fiona,” Paul greets her, getting up from his chair.

She steps closer and puts her arm around Paul’s shoulder. “Have to ask you about that trip you and Doug took to Rome last summer. Marie and I have been thinking about it for so long.”

Paul throws Carl an apologetic look, and Carl indicates to him that it’s fine, so Paul gets steered away by Fiona and Marie to talk about holiday destinations. Carl looks around, his eyes settling on a group of his old colleagues. He ambles over and joins their conversation. He hopes he can catch up some more with Paul the next day before he’s back off to Scotland.

The party lasts well into the wee hours and Carl and Tom and his wife, together with Paul and Doug, are the last to leave. Carl knows he has a nice alcohol buzz going but he’s still sober enough to survey the scene and find that it’s in a state they can leave it in until the next day.

The four of them minus Tom’s wife reconvene the next day for the clean-up to ensure that the venue can be handed back to the owners in decent condition. A few glasses met their demise as well as a plate. Carl makes sure that the shards are all swept up and disposed of. Paul is putting away the last of the place cards and wedding favours that weren’t taken home when Carl finds him.

“All good?” Carl asks.

Paul gives him a genuine smile. “Yeah. You know, could do without the hangover, but I guess you only get married once. Or, well, that’s the plan, anyway.”

“Was a really great party.”

“It was.”

“And?” Carl gives Paul a sly grin. “Marital sex any different?”

“You tell me.” Paul’s expression is a little sheepish. “I’ll have to report back later. We went down like rocks.”

“Not getting any younger, eh?”

Paul gives him a good-natured clap on the shoulder. “Let’s talk in fifteen years. You going back tonight, yeah?”

“Yeah, gotta work tomorrow.”

They both sit down in chairs at one of the tables. “How’s that going?”

“Yeah, good. I told you about Hardy, right? My new partner? Scottish bloke through and through, born and bred. Can’t stop talking about football, thinks the Scottish national team are the fucking shit. They’ve never even won the championships bloody once.”

Paul gives him a look. “We haven’t since ‘66 either.”

“Oh, shut up.”

They both chuckle and Paul asks, “So what happened with your previous partner? That not work out?”

“Promotion. She’s my boss now.”

Paul raises his eyebrows. “And? That a good thing?”

“Yeah. She can be tough but she’s fair. Better than the previous guy. He was one of those paper pushers who’s more interested in his own career than the job. Fucking hated him.”

“You’re still in Homicide, right?”

“Yeah. Not much different, to be honest. You know, different place, same murdering bastards. Just more fucking rain.”

Paul chuckles again. “I really should come up there again to visit. Always wanted to go to the Highlands. Maybe we can do that together some time.”

“Yeah, sure. We went out there for a week last autumn. Was a really nice trip. If you wanna bring Doug, I’ll have to make sure you don’t run into The Dragon, though.”

“The Dragon?”

“Vic’s bitch of a mother. Avid Tory supporter. You know, the kind who isn’t on board with immigration and the whole… queer thing.”

“Ah,” Paul says knowingly. “One of those. I’m sure the two of you have become fast friends.”

“Yeah,” Carl sighs. “She hates my fucking guts. But not like it isn’t mutual.”

“Speaking of… Things with Vic still okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know. You said you fought before you came down here.”

“Oh, that was just stupid stuff. She’s been stressed at work lately. Shit like that gets in the way.”

“She ever consider changing to a position that requires less travel?”

Carl shrugs. “I don’t know, it never came up. Not like I’m gonna dictate how she lives her life, you know.”

“Yeah, but now it’s also *your* life. And Jasper’s life. If you’re thinking about shared custody, that’s extra commitment. She’ll have to want to make that work, too. Not like I really know, but I have a feeling you’re already pulling more weight there than you should.”

“Than I *should*? The hell do you mean by that?”

“Not in a negative way. Just… you’re there a lot more than she is, yeah? Watching the kid, making sure he gets to school, keeping him fed, putting him to bed, homework…”

“You think I shouldn’t be doing that because he’s not my actual kid? Fuck’s sake, Paul.”

“No. Christ, Carl. Of course you should. I’m just asking if she’s also pulling her weight when she’s his mother.”

“So you think she’s using me?”

“No. I don’t know her well enough to make that judgement. I’m just asking questions.”

Carl lifts his hands. “You know what? Maybe stay out of my life decisions.”

Paul draws in a long breath. “Look. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to question your decisions. I just wanna know that you’re—”

“Making the ones you approve of?” Carl interrupts.

“That you’re happy,” Paul corrects.

“I am,” Carl quickly asserts.

Paul studies him wordlessly for a long moment, like he needs more proof to actually believe that. But then his eyes soften and he puts a hand on Carl’s arm. “Hey, you’re right. It’s not my place to question you. Jasper seems like a great kid. He’s lucky to have you as a stepdad. And I’m sure you’re doing great with him.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that, but I’m doing my best.”

Paul’s hand squeezes Carl’s arm a little before he takes his hand away. “You’ve always doubted yourself a little too much, Sprog.”

Carl wants to ask, ‘Have I?’ but before he can, Doug walks up and says, “Sorry to break up you two lovebirds, but I need to borrow my husband for a moment.”

Carl nods when Paul gives him an apologetic look, then gets up to carry the cardboard box with the wedding leftovers to the car outside. They can catch up some more later that afternoon, hopefully.

When evening rolls around and he boards the overnight train up to Edinburgh, Carl has come to terms with the fact that they never actually did manage to catch up beyond that conversation. Paul had to cancel their afternoon meeting last minute when his mother had a medical emergency. Thankfully, it turned out to be just a mild fall with some bruising and not the femoral neck fracture they had initially suspected, but by the time it's all sorted, Carl is already on the train to London.

With the short night and way too little sleep after the party, Carl makes himself comfortable on the train and sleeps most of the trip, feeling halfway refreshed to make it into work that Friday where he's welcomed by Hardy's wily grin and the news that they have a new lead on their latest case.

Not the worst welcome back to Edinburgh.

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Chapter 4 – I'm Ready To Crash

It's the next morning when Carl wakes up that he knows the weekend isn't going according to plan. It appears he's brought home some kind of fucking bug – a story told by a throat that feels like dry sandpaper and tonsils that seem to be twice their size. His immune system is already working overtime and he thinks he might be running a mild fever.

He drags his arm over his eyes, fretting at the fact that the bed next to him is cold and empty and there's an eleven-year-old boy across the hall who will want to be fed and entertained. At least Vic will be home later today, so until then he'll just have to toughen it out.

With a groan, he heaves himself out of bed, already at war with the hammering headache behind his forehead sinuses. Wonderful. Just what he needs.

It takes him twice as long to get breakfast ready and Jasper's door opens halfway through with him immediately going into an animated story of the latest LEGO scenario he's thought up in his head.

Carl puts a plate with a sandwich and a glass of milk on the table in front of him, then sinks into the chair opposite, pinching the bridge of his nose with thumb and index finger.

"Hey, Jasper?" he says wearily. "I've got the flu. Do you think you can try to keep it down today?"

The boy looks at him with large blue eyes. "You're ill?"

Carl sighs. "Yeah. Must have caught it at the wedding. Or on the train. I'm really not feeling so great, okay?"

"Okay," Jasper readily agrees, though Carl isn't so sure how much or how long he'll retain that information.

Carl himself forces down a piece of toast with butter and half a mug of tea before he capitulates. He isn't exactly nauseous but eating seems like too much effort, plus his throat isn't cooperative. He downs a paracetamol he unearths from the bathroom, hoping it'll keep him functional until Vic gets home.

Carl knows there's still his suitcase to unpack and laundry to be done, and that Vic will be on his case if he doesn't get that out of the way, but even though his mind is willing, his body says no, so he relocates to the couch where he collapses with a groan.

Jasper joins him twenty minutes later with the simple question if they can watch *Power Rangers*. Normally Carl would say no. They have a strict TV time regimen for Jasper, which he knows frequently gets broken anyway when he stays with his father, probably also his grandmother.

But today Carl doesn't have the strength to argue, so he says okay, if Jasper stays quiet. Jasper sometimes has a penchant for getting chatty when he watches something, which Carl honestly thinks is endearing but he doesn't have the patience for it today.

He puts the programme on that Jasper wants, then leans back and closes his eyes. Maybe he can rest for a few minutes.

Carl jerks to wakefulness an undetermined time later and finds that there's a blanket haphazardly draped across his legs. He frowns. Is Vic already back? The television is off, Jasper is nowhere in sight, and Carl starts with a pang of worry.

"Jasper?" he calls out towards the hall. His voice sounds rough and scratchy.

The boy dutifully comes padding into the room a minute later. "Yes?"

"Hey," Carl says with some relief. "Just wanted to know where you are."

"I was in my room. Are you still ill?"

"Yeah," Carl sighs. "It'll take a few days. Your mum's not home yet, is she?"

Jasper shrugs. "No. Why?"

Carl scrubs a hand down his face. The paracetamol must be wearing off. He feels chilly and achy. "What time is it? Are you hungry?"

Jasper shrugs again, goes to the kitchen, then comes back and says, "Twenty past eleven."

Carl sighs. "Yeah, okay, a little too early for lunch. You wanna go back to your room?"

Jasper shifts his weight to the other foot. "Can I watch *Pokémon*?"

This time Carl shakes his head. "I already let you watch the other thing earlier. Not now, okay?"

Jasper's expression turns into something definitely sulky. "But Seb's parents always let him watch *Pokémon*."

"Yeah, well, tough luck, fella, because I'm not Seb's parents. We can watch a movie together tonight, okay?"

"*Transformers*?"

Carl doesn't have to think about that one for very long. "No. How about *Wall-E*?"

"*Wall-E* is okay." Jasper reluctantly agrees. Carl leaves it at that, they can renegotiate later. Vic probably has her own ideas, and she usually gets the last word anyway.

He checks his phone while Jasper vanishes back in his room. A message from Vic that she's expected to land around 12:30, can he pick her up at the airport? There's also a message from Paul, asking if he made it back to Edinburgh in one piece.

He texts Vic back first that he caught the flu and feels rotten, can she not take the tram? Then he responds to Paul that, yes, he made it back alright but has come down with a bloody cold.

Paul texts back almost immediately. 'Better now than at the wedding. You okay?'

'Yeah,' Carl replies. 'Just a cold. I'll be fine'

'I'd come by with a hot toddy but you know... :) Feel better'

Carl sends back a simple, 'Ta'

Carl gets the novel he was reading from the bedroom, tries to get into it but gives up after three pages. His brain's foggy and he has a definite headache now. He's not feeling it. Of course he also can't watch TV because he told Jasper no. Shit. Now what?

He picks up his mobile and pulls up one of the games on it. It's stupid and mindless, but at least it kills some time without using too much brainpower. Halfway through one of the levels, his phone rings and he jumps from the sudden interruption. It's Vic, of course.

"Carl," she greets him, a tad of annoyance in her tone. "Are you on the way?"

"No," he croaks. "Didn't you get my text?"

"I did, but I hoped you'd changed your mind. It's pouring down rain."

"I feel like shit. Can't you take the tram?"

"That takes a bloody hour and it's another seven quid."

He can feel his temper flaring. "Jesus Christ. If it's about the fucking money, I'll bloody pay for it. Besides, if I leave now, it'll take just as fucking long."

He waits but only hears a muffled airport announcement in the background, so he asks, "You still want me to come? I'd have to get ready first. I'm not exactly presentable."

In a snippy voice she says. “No, it’s fine. I’ll take the bloody tram.”

“Alright,” he says. “See ya in a bit.”

“Yeah,” she just says, then hangs up before he can ask if she can bring something for them to eat.

Great. He’d been looking forward to coming home and spending the weekend with Vic and Jasper, but now he’s feeling miserable and his wife will be in a mood when she gets home. It doesn’t bode well for the next few days ahead.

Carl goes back to his game for a little while. Jasper eventually complains that he’s hungry and Carl starts negotiating food options. He roams around in the freezer compartment and unearths two frozen pizza subs that he holds up to Jasper. “How about these?”

Jasper nods halfway enthusiastically and Carl heats up the oven. Okay. At least that’s sorted.

It’s half an hour later, Jasper just having scoffed the last of the pizza subs, that the door to the flat opens and Vic comes stomping in. Carl can already hear that she’s making a fuss of hanging her coat and banging the suitcase against the wall.

Vic likes to be theatrical, especially if she’s upset. Oftentimes Carl finds it endearing, today he is already annoyed before she even comes into sight.

Her shoes clack on the floorboards and then she stands in the kitchen doorway. “Bugger me, it was really pelting down,” she grouses. “I’m bloody soaked.”

Carl puts Jasper’s plate next to the sink. “And hello to you, too.”

She gives him a quick look, her expression softening a little. “Sorry. My day’s been a bit shite.”

“Yeah, mine too.”

She steps closer, but then stops. “You said you have the lurgy…”

He looks at her apologetically. “I do. You might wanna stay away.”

“Aye,” she says, then goes over to Jasper to plant a quick kiss on his head. “Hey chickpea.”

Jasper squirms away and groans. “Don’t call me that.”

Vic lifts her hands defensively. “Alright. Someone’s in a mood…”

“Carl wouldn’t let me watch *Pokémon*.”

She looks at Carl, who shrugs. She looks back at Jasper. “You know what we agreed about telly time.”

“But it’s the weekend,” he protests.

“Aye, it’s the weekend, and we have rules for that, too.”

Carl lets out an inaudible breath. At least she's backing him up on that. He watches her go into the bedroom. Jasper gets up from the table and shuffles back into his room, closing the door behind him, which leaves Carl standing by the sink.

He draws in a breath and suddenly feels deflated. He wanted a warm homecoming, wanted to feel her arms slung around him, her lips planting a soft kiss on his to welcome him home. Instead, he got a lukewarm reception and not even a single touch.

A feverish shiver runs through him and he feels the goosebumps on his arms and first signs of illness-induced exhaustion burning behind his eyelids.

Fuck. This weekend is gonna be warmed up shit, and then some.

What he didn't quite anticipate is that he can't even get in a proper bed nap like he hoped because Vic has plans. One of her friends is picking out wedding attire and she promised weeks ago that she'd come.

To be fair, yes, she had mentioned that to Carl before Paul's wedding and he had conveniently forgotten about it. And normally it wouldn't be a big issue, but with him feeling sore, peaky and frayed at the edges, all he wants to do is crawl into bed, sip from a mug of hot tea that miraculously appears on his nightstand and forget that the outside world exists for a few hours.

Instead, he's stuck with fending for himself and more Jasper watching duty. Just his fucking luck.

Vic takes a shower, changes into more casual clothes and bids him goodbye an hour later, and Carl just folds. He wants to sleep under a warm blanket. So he weighs the thought for a minute or two, but then thinks, fuck this and goes into Jasper's room.

"Hey, Jasper? I need to lie down for a bit. How about you play with your Nintendo?"

Jasper's eyes light up. "Can I?"

"Maybe don't tell Mum, yeah?"

"Okay," he easily agrees.

"Listen. No going outside. No using the hob, oven or microwave. Or any of the kitchen appliances, really. Eat a banana or cereal if you get hungry. If something happens or you need me, you wake me. That clear?"

"Aye," Jasper confirms.

"Please keep the noise down, I'd really like to sleep."

"Okay, Carl."

He nods. "Alright, fella," but Jasper is already booting up the Nintendo.

Carl sighs a sigh of relief and crawls under the covers after he leaves the bedroom door ajar. He's still shivering, his throat is still sore and now he can also feel his sinuses starting to clog up.

He curls up on his side, draws the duvet closer around him and closes his eyes. Exhausted sleep claims him within the next few minutes.

He doesn't know how long he's slept when he wakes up again. There are noises from the living room.

Groggily he looks at his phone and takes stock. It's past six pm and he doesn't feel all that much better. His t-shirt is damp and clings to his back. He knows he's running a temperature, can feel it in how hot his ears are and how his head is stuffed with wool that's painfully expanding and contracting in tandem with his heartbeat. His tongue feels coated, his mouth too dry. The throat ache is maybe a fraction less intense, but his sinuses are now blocked so that he has to breathe through his mouth.

He sighs, knowing the next two or three days are going to be all dripping nose, crumpled tissues and misery. Moira won't be happy if he calls in sick on Monday. Hardy will complain to him afterwards too, but he won't mean it. Hardy also likes to be theatrical, but it's always with a tongue-in-cheek smile, and his Scottish accent makes it all the more charming.

The bedroom looks untouched. No tea has miraculously appeared on his nightstand, not even a glass of water. Which he longs for right about now, he feels suddenly parched. When was the last time he drank something?

He pushes himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, immediately feeling chilly when the duvet slips off him. His barely touched suitcase is mocking him from the corner of the room.

Carl's phone vibrates on his nightstand and he checks it. It's a text from Paul. 'Hey Sprog, how you feeling?'

He smiles but slips the phone into the pocket of his joggers. He'll answer it later.

He finds Vic in the living room, folding laundry with an unhappy expression. When she lays eyes on him, she says, "Oh, sleeping beauty is awake."

He runs a hand down his face, feeling the three day stubble there. "Yeah," he just says tiredly as he makes his way to the kitchen sink to gulp down a glass of water, then another half of one.

"You didn't do the laundry," she says with an accusing undertone.

"Yeah, I've been ill."

"Didn't that only start this morning?"

In hindsight, it actually didn't. He'd been exhausted with a headache when he got home from work the day before. Jasper had been difficult and he'd been impatient, short-fused and frustrated to the point where Carl yelled at him. Now he knows that was the first harbinger of this bloody cold he's dragging around.

He sighs. "Already didn't feel great last night."

The laundry basket is still half full and she nods at it. "Can you help me with this?"

Really? Carl thinks. His joints ache, his head pounds and he just wants to lie on the couch with a TV series he can binge-watch and not move for the foreseeable future. "Vic. I feel like shit."

She gives him an inscrutable look, then sighs theatrically. Carl eyes the couch that holds several piles of folded laundry so that he can't even sit down on it, knowing that if he moves stuff around, she'll scold him again.

He ventures into the bathroom, digs for another paracetamol that he swallows right there. He's hungry but he doesn't want to eat. Everything feels like extra effort, but the tiles feel nice and cool beneath his feet. He fights the urge to sink down and feel more of the cold surface on his skin.

Instead, he sits down on the rim of the bathtub, the headache relentlessly knocking against his sinuses and fishes the phone out of his pocket to bring up the message from Paul.

He isn't sure how to answer it because he doesn't want to come across as weak and whiny, so he types, 'Just a cold, I'll live'

As an afterthought, he adds another message. 'Stop worrying'

His phone indicates to Carl that Paul is typing a response, so Carl waits until the message comes in. 'Too late. Don't be a hero and let the wife mother you.'

Yeah, about that… Because Carl thinks that's not even gonna happen. Vic isn't that type of person.

And suddenly, that hits harder than he thought. Because if he was still in England, Paul would call and ask if he needed anything, maybe even knock on his door to check in, to bring him tea and make sure he eats something, even when he doesn't have an appetite. He'd just be there and know and help, even when he isn't being asked.

But Vic… She won't be doing that. She'll say he's being a wimp, it's just a cold and he should toughen up, give him an example of how she's powered through worse. She'll scold him that he isn't helping with the chores enough or being lazy, taking a nap. She's never been the motherly type, not even with her own son.

He doesn't even know where it's coming from, but there's suddenly an intense longing in his chest for something he's lost when he moved away, when he made a choice to relocate to

Scotland, intensified by the memories of the last few days. He didn't even realise it then, but seeing Paul again, talking to him, having his hand steadily resting on his back or his arm around his shoulder as they laugh about something – he fucking misses him.

His eyes fill with unbidden tears, and he hates it. Hates himself for being weak, for wanting something that he can't have anymore, for it being his own fault that he chose a new life in Edinburgh, half a country away.

"Fuck," he mutters, then pulls himself together, rubs both hands across his eyes.

It can't be helped. And like he said to Paul, it's just a fucking cold. He should man up and get over it. It's not like he's dying.

"Carl?" he hears Vic's voice from the hall.

Then she's opening the door that he left ajar. Carl is staring at the phone in his hands.

Her voice dips, now a lot softer. "What's wrong?"

He quickly looks up. "Nothing."

She steps closer, her brow furrowing. And then she's there in front of him, a hand resting on his shoulder, the back of her other hand against his forehead for a brief moment. "You've got a fever."

"Yeah, I've told you I feel like shit."

She pulls him gently towards her and he leans against her torso. "I'll order us some food, how about that?"

Carl mutters into her blouse. "I promised Jasper we'd watch a movie together."

She pushes Carl away so she can see his face. "Found him playing Nintendo when I came home."

Carl sighs. "Don't be cross with him. I just needed to sleep. Told him it was fine."

Her thumb strokes his shoulder. "Extenuating circumstances, I suppose. You wanna go back to bed?"

"No. Supper sounds good."

"Thai?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

Carl gets up, suppressing a groan as he does so. "Ask Jasper first. Last time he didn't like the red curry, refused to eat it. Said it tasted soapy. Whatever the fuck that means."

“I think it’s the cilantro.”

The rest of the evening is a lot mellower than Carl thought it would be. They have supper together, Vic offers to do the dishes, commandeering Jasper to dry them. They settle on the couch to watch a movie afterwards – *Ferdinand* – certainly not the worst choice.

Carl relocates to bed afterwards and Vic comes with him to unpack her suitcase. She eyes Carl’s that’s still standing largely untouched in the corner. “Want me to do that for you?”

“Would you?”

“You want it all in the laundry?”

“The suit should go to dry-cleaning.”

“How *was* the wedding?”

That’s when it hits Carl that it’s the first time she’s actually asking about it. Sure, they’d talked briefly on the phone when he was in England and he’d given her some first impressions, but is this really how little interest she has in his life, in his friends?

“It was great,” he says noncommittally.

“Great? That’s it?”

“Yeah, you know. Ceremony was lovely. Party was fun. Talked to people. Talked to Paul. Danced a little. Food was good. Everyone was happy.”

He could tell her the foghorn story. Or how the SatNav wasn’t programmed right and they drove around the lighthouse in circles before they found the right turn-off. Or how Paul and Doug are the most perfect couple and he couldn’t be more thrilled that his best friend has a loving partner by his side whom he’s now happily married to.

But he doesn’t. Partly because his brain feels sluggish and foggy, partly also because he isn’t sure she actually cares. And maybe that’s just as well, because next thing he knows, she is yammering away about her friend’s wedding dress and something about shoes and matching handbags.

He closes his eyes and tunes it out as best as he can until he hears her query him with a, “Carl?”

“Yeah,” he mutters tiredly. “Sorry, did you ask something?”

She smiles. “No. I just said I’ll be in the living room to let you get some rest.”

“Okay,” he says.

There’s still no tea on his nightstand. The glass of water he put there earlier is almost empty. He wishes he’d thought of grabbing the paracetamol along with it.

He never thinks about it very much, but now he wonders if this is what married life is supposed to be like. How you start taking things for granted, how the rosy glasses fade to grey and the excitement and enthusiasm turns to mundanity, how it becomes normal that you live in parallel with each other.

He tries to recall if it was like that with Heather before they fell apart but can't quite remember. It was different, certainly. And there was no kid in the equation, or a job that required being away overnight a lot. Had it been better? He can't even say.

He shivers under the duvet, his body rebelling again. He turns to lie on his side, draws the covers closer around himself and lets out a weary sigh. He just wants the next four or five days to pass quickly and get over this fucking cold. Because he fucking hates feeling like this.

If he just closes his eyes long enough, he can imagine he's back in England and Paul is nearby in the kitchen, brewing a mug of tea that'll be just right that he'll find next to his bed when he wakes up.

It's that comforting thought that accompanies him as he drifts off to sleep.