Battlefield After The Rainfall

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Summary: *Just when Carl thought things couldn't get any worse, they do. Trying to keep it together has become an exercise in futility, and Carl just… breaks. Thankfully, he's got someone in his corner to lend a much needed helping hand.*

Author's Note. *Hoo boy. This started out as an experiment to indulge the angst monster in me, and wasn't really meant to become more than that first scene full of emotional anguish. But man, the Carl/Rachel pairing just pushes all my buttons like nothing else, and I know I'm starting to rewrite myself, but it's like a bad habit I can't shake. Maybe someone else digs the angsty h/c. If you do, this one's for you as much as it was for me.* 😊

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Carl couldn't do this. Just couldn't. It was too much.

He'd made it to the basement somehow. Mostly on autopilot. Away from the noise, the accusations, the glares of everyone Carl didn't think he cared about.

Moira had just given him one of her lectures. She'd held back, he could tell, with everything that was going on, but she'd been fucking pissed. He'd made an offhand comment to the press, some greedy little arsehole reporter had picked up the wrong fucking statement, and now the department was being publicly ridiculed. It wasn't really his fault that people were fucking stupid, was it?

She had glared at him. "Carl, I don't want to say it, but you're a walking liability in this state. Why are you even working? You should be with Jasper right now." He didn't know why. Distraction, probably.

The metal of the filing cabinet he was leaning against was as cold against his back as the floor was underneath him. He pressed his knuckles into his eyes, his elbows on his drawn up knees. The physical pain didn't distract him enough.

Something turned in his stomach, he tried to ignore it. Was he hungry? Nauseous? He couldn't even tell anymore. When had he last eaten?

He remembered a banana he'd had at the hospital out of sheer desperation to give himself something to do. God, the fucking hospital. He never wanted to set foot in one again – after the shooting, after Hardy, after Isla. Isla, Victoria's mother. Jasper got Vic's call a month ago. She'd fallen, broken her hip. Undiagnosed osteoporosis. Then she'd caught an infection. MRSA. The fucking superbug.

She'd never made it out of the hospital. She'd fought for two weeks before her body gave out, and Jasper… He put up a brave front but even Carl could see he was grieving. Carl didn't know how to handle it. He'd made half-arsed attempts at getting him to talk, but Jasper had been brash and dismissive. "Leave me alone," was the ever-present mantra, and it wasn't like Carl didn't understand. He'd fucking role-modelled it for years.

Their last case had also left its mark. The Alistair McGowan case. A young boy gone missing seven years ago, the trail gone cold long ago – or so they had thought. New DNA evidence had surfaced, and they'd finally found a body. Carl had to watch helplessly as the parents broke down when he and Akram had delivered the news. There was nothing worse than crushing a parent's hope for positive news they'd kept alive for years.

And as if that wasn't disastrous enough, they'd called Carl three days ago. Moped vs. car, Jasper had been rushed to the hospital. Carl had dropped everything, driven there as fast as he could.

It wasn't good. Brain swelling and two broken ribs. Medically induced coma. Waiting, hoping, more waiting. Vague promises fed by cautious optimism. Breathing tubes and heart monitors and fucking despair all rolled into one. He'd fled from the hospital earlier, feeling totally useless. There was absolutely nothing he could do. It was the worst feeling in the world.

It was kind of a miracle Carl had held it together this long. He'd made through the days on basic functions only. Sleep, eat, distract, repeat. But now… Now he was fucking spent and he had nothing left to give.

He leaned his head back, banged it against the metal of the cabinet drawer. It made a dull, hollow sound. Once, twice, three times. Yeah, that wasn't helping either.

Something coiled in his gut. Anxiety, anger, anguish. The feeling of nausea was still there, amplified by the tightness in his chest that made it harder to breathe. He clenched his jaw, balled his fists, pressing them harder into his eye sockets.

A faint sound tugged at the edges of his subconscious, drowned out by the rushing in his ears.

Was someone saying his name?

"Carl."

There was movement. A warm hand lightly touching his shoulder.

"Carl." It was more urgent.

He exhaled a shuddering breath. Keep it together, Morck.

It was Rachel. "Carl, look at me."

He couldn't. He'd fucking fall apart if he did.

He sucked in a breath through his nose, choppy and unsteady. One of her hands was still resting on his shoulder, her thumb gently stroking up and down, and his exhale turned into a sob before he could rein it in.

His shoulders hunched, taut and tense. His eyes burned with tears and he sucked in another breath, tried to work through the next sob that was now unstoppable.

It spilled out of him, ugly and inevitable, sobs racking his body between hasty breaths, Rachel's soft voice from somewhere near him. He couldn't hear what she was saying, but it didn't matter.

He tried to hold on to the sound like a lifeline, tried to find her touch as a grounding beacon. The stress and grief and anxiety of the last days and weeks hit him like a sledgehammer and his body was finally protesting, pouring it all out in an ugly purge he had no more control over.

He couldn't tell how long he cried. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the sobbing turned into hitched breaths. His face was wet as he finally lifted his head.

He wanted to say something, but all that came out was a raspy moan. He inhaled again, exhaled shakily. Fuck. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Hey," her gentle voice said. "It's okay, Carl."

No, it wasn't okay. Nothing was fucking okay.

She shifted, changed positions so that she sat next to him, her shoulder touching his. Warmth. It felt nice. Like maybe he could— Maybe he could make it through this day after all.

He rubbed his palms down his face, and her hand sought out his. On instinct, he curled his fingers around her palm and let his hand sink down by his side. He'd had this once. With Vic. He'd forgotten what it felt like.

They sat like that for a while, Carl trying to regain control, trying to figure out how to rediscover a modicum of dignity. Finally, he drew in a long breath that was steady enough. He exhaled it in a long, "Fuck."

Rachel's hand squeezed his. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

Did he? Could he? "Jasper's in the hospital," he divulged, his voice raw and raspy.

"Yes, I heard."

"It's not looking good."

"I'm really sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

She was already doing it. "No. There's nothing anyone can do. It's just…" He exhaled wearily. "Waiting."

Fuck. His eyes were tearing up again. With a start, he shifted his weight forward and got up. Not the best idea, he felt immediately lightheaded and reached out with one arm to brace himself against the file cabinet. “Fuck,” he muttered again.

Rachel stood next to him. “Easy.”

She reached down for her handbag, extracted something from it that she held out to him. A plastic bottle with water. He opened it, hated how shaky his hands still were, but the cool liquid felt good.

“Thank you,” he said just above a whisper.

“Let me take you home,” Rachel offered.

“No,” he protested, not even sure why. Maybe the fact that it was full of reminders. Reminders of how wrecked his life was, of how Jasper was not there, of how it would just be him and his demons playing catch.

Maybe she could read him too well. “I’ll go with you.”

It was tempting, but he wasn’t hers to take care of. “It’s alright. I’ll stay here for a while.”

“Carl.” There was the no-nonsense tone he knew so well. “When’s the last time you slept?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. Do I ever?”

“You need to take care of yourself. You’ll be no good to Jasper, or anyone, if you don’t get some rest.”

Rationally, he knew she was right. But he also knew that he and sleep were mortal enemies that battled each other daily. Today wouldn’t be any different.

“Look,” she said. “There’s two things I’m going to do, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

She took a step closer to him and said, “I know it’s weird, but please let me give you a hug. I really think you need it.”

He almost wanted to laugh because it was so absurd, but then she was there in front of him, her arms enveloping him, her warm body against his. He tensed for a moment but then gave in. Something inside of him shifted, the tension in his shoulders loosening a fraction. There was that knot in his gut and another sob that got stuck in his throat.

One hand gently rubbed his back and he closed his eyes, let his arms come around her and welcomed the comfort. It felt good. Better than he would ever admit. And fucking hell, did he need it.

He eventually pulled back, asking, “What’s number two?”

“I’m going to drive you home. I’d offer up my place, but I really think you need sleep, and my couch isn’t the best place for that.”

He was too tired to fight her. “Alright,” he reluctantly agreed.

The drive to his place was quiet. He’d expected her to insist that she should drive, but apparently steering a vehicle was something she still trusted him to do safely. Or maybe she knew there were limits to how far she could push.

Dusk was now settling over the city, the street lights flickering on as they neared his home. When he stopped the car in a parking space a few yards down the street, he was about to dismiss her, but then what would she do? Take a bus home? Fuck, he hadn’t thought this through.

“I should drop you off at home.”

“Did you forget what I said earlier?”

“No, but what you said earlier was that you’d take me home, and now we’re in my car.”

“So?”

“How will you get home?”

“Let *me* be the one to worry about that.”

“That’s fucking stupid, I’ll—”

“Carl,” she said sharply. “We are going to your house. End of discussion.”

He raised his hands off the steering wheel. “If you say so, Dr. Irving. Jesus.”

Carl’s feet were heavy as they trudged up the stairs, Rachel following behind him. The flat’s familiar smell and sight hit him right in the pit of his stomach, but then there was Rachel’s hand on his arm, and it helped.

“Martin not here?” she asked as they passed his door.

“He’s visiting his parents up in Helmsdale. Something about his father and prostate cancer.” Yeah, that was another thing that had gone sideways on top of everything else.

Carl wished he had remembered how fucking messy the kitchen was. Dishes from the past several days were piling up in and around the sink, undiscarded food wrappers and remnants of spilled tea on the counter. He just hadn’t had the energy.

Rachel clocked but ignored it. Carl dropped his keys and phone on the table where they landed with a clank. Before he could decide what to do with the situation, she told him, “Go, change into something comfortable.”

In any other situation, he'd have found it annoyingly condescending, would have given a snide retort. But she'd seen the state he was in and he couldn't argue with the sentiment.

When he came back to the kitchen, all the rubbish had been cleared away, her back turned to him by the window. Dishwashing water was gently splashing in the sink. He sidled up to her, grabbed the tea towel on the way.

"You didn't have to do this."

"I know," she told him.

He took one of the mugs and started drying it. Silence settled other than the quiet household sounds. She once brushed his elbow as she put another dish on the drying rack and it made the corners of his mouth curve up ever so slightly.

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Can you stay?"

She stopped what she was doing. "Carl, I don't think we should—"

"No," he interrupted. "Not… that." Shit, he said the wrong thing. He quickly backtracked. "Forget it, I shouldn't have asked. It's fine."

She looked up at him, met his eyes. "You don't want to be alone."

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "No, not pathetic. It's human. And yes, I can stay."

"Are you sure?"

She gave him an encouraging smile. "Yes, I'm sure."

The last thing that Carl would have expected was that Rachel Irving would be sleeping on his couch that night. Like it was the most normal thing in the world, she borrowed a pair of pyjama trousers and a t-shirt that fit her surprisingly well and made herself comfortable there with a blanket.

Despite the bone-deep exhaustion, Carl, now lying in his bed, kept tossing and turning. His mind was giving him the run-around and no matter how long he closed his eyes, images kept playing in his mind like a rerun on double speed and sleep kept eluding him.

Eventually, he got up for a trip to the bathroom. Her voice stopped him on the way back through the living room. "You're still up."

He sighed. "Told you I don't sleep."

"Do you think company would help?"

He lifted his right hand to indicate her on the couch. "Apparently not."

She sat up, the blanket creasing in her lap. "No, I meant… in your room."

“What, you mean my bed?” The surprise was evident in his voice.

“No, I mean the floor, since clearly that’s more comfortable than the couch.”

He chuckled. “You were the one who said we shouldn’t…”

“And that still applies and that’s not what I meant.”

He rubbed his left eye with his left hand, feeling the burning exhaustion behind his eyelids. “Wouldn’t be the first weird thing we’ve done today.”

“So I take it as a yes.”

He indicated his bedroom door with one hand. “Be my guest. But be warned, Victoria always complained that I’m a duvet hogger.”

Rachel gathered up the blanket from the couch. “Good thing that there’s already a solution for that.”

After the first five minutes they lay next to each other, Carl was sure this had been an absolutely terrible idea. Rachel not two feet away from him made him the opposite of more relaxed. He turned from facing away from her to lie on his back.

“I don’t think this is helping.”

She shifted her position to also lie on her back. “That’s because you’re overthinking it.”

“Overthinking is my fucking middle name.”

“And that’s why you don’t sleep.”

He sighed. “Yeah. Wicked. We know the problem. Now give me the solution. And don’t say sleeping pills.”

“They are *one* solution.”

“And the other?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Let me guess: Meditation.”

“Or progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness exercises, breathing exercises…”

“Yeah, that sounds like fucking treehugger bullshit.”

“You know, Carl, sometimes you’re your own worst enemy. And this… This isn’t helping.”

“This what?”

“Getting pissed off at someone genuinely trying to help you when you’re supposed to be falling asleep.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m not going to meditate or breathe myself to sleep.”

“Okay, then let’s try something else. What’s your favourite place?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have a favourite place.”

“Everyone has a favourite place. Or a place they like where they feel good or safe.”

“Yeah, well, my world isn’t exactly full of those places. In fact, it’s pretty much devoid of those places.”

“You’ve never been on holiday to a place you really loved that you’d like to visit again? Some place you went to as a kid?”

“No. My childhood fucking sucked.”

“Is that why you became a police officer?”

That wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have right now, so he dodged the question. “Okay. Let’s say I’m willing to indulge you. I’ll think of a… I don’t know… sandy beach or something if that makes you happy.”

“This isn’t about making me happy. It’s about getting you to take your mind off things. Do you like beaches?”

“Doesn’t everyone like beaches?”

“No. Some people hate the sand that gets everywhere. They don’t like the heat or how the sun cream or salt water feels on their skin.”

“Some people, or Rachel Irving?”

“No, not me. I like the beach.”

“Any beaches in particular?”

“Peniche, Costa Vicentina…”

“Portugal, huh?”

“I’m surprised you know those places.”

“What, you figured I’m a parochial little numpty who’s never left the island?”

“No, but you don’t strike me as the beach holiday type.”

“Yeah, I’m not. My ex-wife is a flight attendant, remember?”

“I don’t think you ever mentioned that.”

“So that’s not in my file?”

She chuckled softly. “No, Carl, your ex-wife is not in your file.”

“Phew, thank fuck.”

“With a job like that, it makes sense that she suggested you get custody of Jasper.”

Fuck. Jasper. Now Carl was seeing him lying in that fucking hospital bed again, machines breathing for him, IVs everywhere, bandages, heart monitors and pulse ox clips. And what was Carl doing? Lying here, talking about fucking beach holidays, making meaningless conversation with—

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said in a low voice next to him. “I shouldn’t have mentioned Jasper.”

Carl stayed quiet, inhaled a long breath.

“Do you want to talk about him?”

Carl closed his eyes and lightly shook his head. “No. I just want him to get through this, to be okay again.”

“He’s young and strong. And he has you in his corner.”

“In what corner? I’m in no one’s fucking corner. I’m a fucking cannonball whose best honed skill is wrecking lives.”

“Come on, you know that’s not true. Merritt Lingard is alive because of you.”

He let out a sardonic huff. “Merritt Lingard is alive because of Akram. He was the one who pulled her file out of the pile, kept harping on about how it spoke to him that she wasn’t dead.”

“Be that as it may, but you were the one who drove the investigation, who dug and kept digging.”

“I played a marginal part.”

“You took buckshot to the shoulder for her.”

“Yeah, story of my life.”

“Did you ever see her again? You know, after?”

“She came to the police station. We briefly crossed paths, but she didn’t recognise me.”

“You didn’t speak to her?” Rachel’s voice sounded surprised.

“It would have been awkward. She’d have said ‘thank you for saving my life’ bla bla bla. I’m not in it for the fame or the gratitude. She’s alive and reunited with her brother, that’s all I need to know.”

“That’s a very noble thing to say.”

“Yeah, that’s me, Mr. Nobility.”

“I really wish you would learn to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Deflecting every time someone gives you a compliment.”

“It’s my superpower.”

She stayed quiet for a long moment, then asked, “What superpower would you want to have if you could pick one?”

“Hm,” he hummed. “Telepathy. You?”

“Good question. I think maybe manipulating time. Being able to redo the things that didn’t go right. Averting disasters, helping people. Just imagine all the things you could do with that…”

That was the last thing he remembered before he awoke. He blinked, realising that proper daylight was kept at bay by the curtains. For once, it wasn’t the middle of the night. He turned his head, remembering the night before. The other side of the bed was empty.

Sudden anxiety rushed in with a vengeance and he grabbed his phone on the nightstand. No missed calls or messages from the hospital. That had to be a good thing.

He sat up with a small groan, rubbed his face. It was half seven. He must have been out like a rock.

When he shuffled into the living room, Rachel was in the kitchen, already dressed, putting on the kettle. She turned around at the noise. “Good morning.”

He just grunted at her.

“Not a morning person, are we?”

“Fuck off.”

She just chuckled as he made his way to the bathroom.

When he sat down wordlessly at the kitchen table afterwards, she put a mug of strong tea with milk in front of him. It was a simple gesture, and yet like something he had missed without even knowing he was missing it.

She pulled the chair opposite him back and sat down, cradling her own mug of tea. “Looks like you actually got some sleep last night.”

He gave her a small smile. “Wonders never cease.”

“I can come with you to the hospital before work if you like.”

He raised his head from his mug of tea. “No, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I want to. I’ve already cancelled my 9 am.”

“Rachel…”

“Please don’t say no, Carl.”

He sighed. “Okay. Just don’t do the… *poor Carl needs tender love and care* pity thing because I fucking hate it.”

She sighed in response. “And here I was hoping for once you could let yourself be a human being.”

“It’s overrated.”

“There’s no shame in admitting you need help. Or accepting it. It’s what gets most people through the day. Especially the bad ones.”

“Yeah, well, as days go, this one’s not off to the worst start, so here’s to hoping it stays that way.” He lifted his mug for good measure.

“Have you considered taking a few days off?”

He looked down at his mug again. “I need the distraction.”

She nodded. “Understandable.”

“Moira was pissed off yesterday. Said I was a fucking liability in ‘this state’.” He put it in air quotes. “She’s probably right.”

“So take it easy. Do paperwork.”

He chuckled. “Paperwork? Seriously? If anything grates on my nerves like fucking sandpaper, it’s paperwork.”

“Look, I know you have low expectations of everyone around you, but people aren’t stupid. They’ll understand if you want to take a backseat for a few days.”

He rubbed his eye with two fingers. “Yeah, maybe.”

She stood up and put her now empty mug in the sink. “Carl. Let someone else shoulder the weight of the world for a day or two.”

He let out a dry chuckle. “Is that the best pep talk you have? Because I can tell you, it’s a load of bollocks.”

“Sometimes I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“What, say it like it is?”

“Doing your hardest to push everyone away who’s had the patience to actually stick around.”

“Is it working?”

“No, it’s not.”

He let out a noncommittal hum.

Her voice was low when she asked, “Why do you try so hard to do it all alone?”

He shrugged. “It’s easier.”

“But is it *really*?”

Christ. Fucking this again. “Why do you keep insisting that I need to change?”

She now leaned against the kitchen counter so that she could face him. “Because no matter how hard you try to tell yourself that it’s fine, this isn’t working, is it?”

Carl could feel the familiar resentment growing in his stomach, hated how everyone always wanted to press him into some mould he would never fit. His voice was sharp when she responded, “For fuck’s sake, can just fucking stop project managing me for one fucking minute?”

He pushed the chair back so that it make a scraping sound on the floor and strode into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. He grabbed the next best set of clothes he could find and threw it on, then went back to the kitchen to grab the phone and keys off the table.

But Rachel wasn’t easily intimidated. She was standing right there in the kitchen doorway, a determined look in her eyes. “Carl, this isn’t going to help you *or* Jasper.”

“Move,” he snarled, taking a step closer.

She didn’t, and he didn’t know what to do with that.

He stared at her, expected her to eventually move, then deflated when she didn’t budge, bracing himself against the doorframe with one arm. His gaze fell upon some of the papers stuck to the fridge door. He picked it up – a parent-teacher invitation letter. “Fuck,” he whispered.

Rachel’s warm hand reached out for his that hung by his side. “Come on, let’s go see Jasper.”

He had absolutely no idea why she was still here, why she kept trying. But now she was slowly seeping through the cracks in his façade, and maybe it wasn’t so bad that the cold draft from the storms he was constantly trying to keep at bay wasn’t quite so chilly anymore.

He left the letter on top of the fridge and followed her out the door.

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