Brave New Fucking World

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Summary: *Carl gets that phone call that no parent ever wants to get, and he rushes straight to the hospital. From there, it's a winding road.*

Author's Note: This story is kind of a rewrite of my previous fic 'Battlefield After The Rainfall', which was supposed to be this little standalone Carl emotional whump fest, but then I started getting attached to the whole scenario and started building an actual narrative around it. So this is an expanded and slightly edited version of that fic that tells the story of Carl dealing with more emotional trauma. Because, you know, getting majorly traumatised by a near fatal shooting isn't quite enough already...

Although not strictly a het or pairing fic, this is also kind of slow burn build-up to a Carl and Rachel romance. If that's not your thing, then perhaps this fic isn't for you.

The story is set a few months after solving the Merritt Lingard case, I would imagine maybe a month or two after the end of season 1.

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Chapter 1 – Critical Care

"Carl Morck?"

The voice at the other end of the phone was unfamiliar. Female.

"Yes, who are you?"

"My name's Katarzyna Nowak at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. I understand you're the legal guardian of Jasper Stewart?"

Carl's stomach bottomed out, his throat suddenly bone dry. "Yes. He's my stepson."

"I'm afraid to inform you he's been in an accident. It would be good if you could come to A&E right away."

"Tell me what happened."

"He was in a motor vehicle accident, he is currently unconscious and undergoing evaluation. Are you able to come to the hospital?"

Carl was already on his feet, grabbing his jacket off of his desk chair, rushing out of the room. "Yes, I'm on my way."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck! He'd never run to his car and driven anywhere as fast as this, increasing panic writhing through his insides, scenarios chasing themselves through his head – one worse than the other. The drive took forever because there were too many fucking idiots on the roads. Carl yelled at all of them.

He parked the car in the first place he could find, well aware it wasn't allowed. He didn't give a fuck, ran to where A&E was signposted.

At the front desk, he gave Jasper's name between panting breaths.

A stout woman with a hijab and black-rimmed glasses came to find him after what felt like an eternity fed by more horror scenarios and a heart hammering anxiously in his chest. "Mr. Morck?"

He jumped up from his seat. "Yes."

She guided him to an empty room that felt like a hospital mausoleum. The place where you take relatives to tell them their loved one had just passed away. Fuck. No. This couldn't be how—

The woman's hand was on his arm, she guided him to a chair where he deflated. "Is he alive?" he eked out.

"Yes, Jasper is alive. I understand he's your stepson."

Carl just nodded, momentary relief flooding through him. The woman continued. "I'm Dr. Karimi, one of the trauma coordinators here. Your stepson was brought in after a road traffic collision. We haven't fully determined all his injuries yet, but there appears to be trauma to the chest and a head injury. The head injury is our primary concern at the moment since he hasn't regained consciousness yet."

Carl swallowed against his still dry throat. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Dr. Karimi seemed unfazed by his flowery language. "It could mean any number of things. He is currently undergoing a CT scan, which should tell us more."

"Can I see him?"

"Not yet, but if you wait here, someone will come and get you as soon as possible."

Carl nodded absently, giving her a hoarse, "Okay."

All sound around him suddenly became muffled. Everything seemed slower. Muted. Unreal. He vaguely heard his name.

"Mr. Morck?"

His head shot up. "What?"

Dr. Karimi was still there. “Is there someone else we can call? Jasper’s mother? Other family members?”

“No,” he said. “His mother’s out of the country.”

Truth be told, Carl didn’t actually know that for certain. But it was more likely than not. He’d call her later. He looked at the doctor. “I will give her a call.”

She gave him a curt nod and said, “We are doing everything we can, Jasper is in good hands.” Then she left the room.

Carl let out a long, shaky breath. Head injury. Unconscious. Fuck. It sounded bad.

His phone vibrated. He wanted to ignore it but looked anyway. Akram. His thumb hovered over the decline button, but he answered it after all.

“Carl?” The voice was calm. His Syrian lilt was somehow always reassuring. “Has something happened?”

“Jasper’s in the hospital,” he rasped. “Head injury. Some kind of vehicle collision. They don’t know anything yet.”

There was a brief moment of silence, then, “I am very sorry to hear that. Would you like me to come?”

“No,” Carl told him, then repeated, “No.”

“Okay. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No. I don’t know. Fuck.” Everything was surreal. He didn’t know what Akram wanted from him.

“Where are you?”

“Royal Infirmary.”

“I will be there as soon as I can.”

Carl wanted to protest, but the line was already dead. “Fuck,” he muttered again.

The wait seemed endless. Time became meaningless. It could have been 20 minutes, it could have been two hours, but eventually the door of the family room opened. Carl’s head shot up, expecting medical staff.

It was Akram.

“Carl,” he said in that quietly comforting tone of his, sitting down next to him. “Is there any news?”

Carl shook his head. “No.”

Akram leaned back and stayed quiet. Both men sat without a word spoken, and Carl appreciated it more than he could ever say. Not just that Akram was here but that he wasn't pestering him with useless questions or empty fucking platitudes.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Dr. Karimi came back. Carl shot to his feet. She acknowledged Akram who had also got up but addressed Carl. "Would you like us to speak in private?"

"No," Carl said. "Just give it to me straight."

"We have some more clarity, the CT scans show some brain swelling, which accounts for the loss of consciousness. This can happen after serious head trauma. Jasper also sustained two broken ribs which will likely not need any intervention. The brain swelling is still our main concern.

"We have brought in a neurosurgery consultant and we agree that the best course of action is a more conservative approach where we would keep Jasper in an induced coma so that the swelling can reduce and the brain can recover."

"Okay," Carl said, trying to parse the information. Brain swelling. Coma. Recovery. It sounded optimistic enough. Was it optimistic? He had no fucking clue.

"How long until… until he recovers?"

"We don't know that yet. Brain injuries can be difficult to predict."

Fuck. That didn't sound optimistic. "What are you saying?"

"While Jasper is stable for now, brain injuries like this can worsen or require more aggressive intervention. If that became the case, we could of course let you know. For now, we will administer medication that will keep him under sedation. He will be very closely monitored in Critical Care."

"Okay," Carl acknowledged again.

"If you wish, you can see him now. He's being transferred to Critical Care as we speak."

"Yeah, okay."

Carl got up, stepped out into the hallway, a sensation of dread washing over him. This was all too familiar. He'd been in this very fucking hospital. He'd been treated here for his gunshot wound, and resentment for these hallways was possibly higher than his resentment for humanity.

He vaguely registered that Akram was still there, moving alongside him, then taking the lead. He pointed to a hallway on their left. "This way."

Carl looked at him. "How do you know?"

“I was here before.”

The statement barely registered with Carl. Not enough to follow up on it. He was just glad that Akram took charge, guided him where he needed to go until they came to a closed door. They both stopped and Akram pushed an intercom button on the wall next to the sliding door. “This is as far as I go. It is family members only from here.”

What was that comment he’d made before? Akram’s knowledge seemed oddly specific. Carl didn’t have any time to dwell on it because the intercom came on. “Critical Care, how can I help you?”

Akram took charge again. “Hello. We are here for Jasper…” He looked questioningly at Carl.

“Stewart,” Carl supplied. “They said in A&E he was taken here.”

“One moment, please.”

Not even a minute later, the sliding door slid open and it hit Carl like a fucking punch in the face. He’d been here. As a patient. This same fucking ward, after the shooting.

There was a nurse in blue scrubs on the other side of the door, pulling him back to reality. “Is this your first time visiting?”

“Yes,” Carl said, swallowing against a suddenly parched throat. He followed the nurse inside, leaving Akram outside without another word.

“Okay. You need to hang your coat here.” The nurse indicated a set of pegs on the wall, then gestured to a hand sanitiser dispenser. “Please always disinfect your hands on your way in and out. We ask that you put your mobile phone on silent. If you need to wait outside Critical Care at any time, please don’t stand in the main corridors to the wards. Fire safety rules.”

When Carl had done everything as instructed, the nurse said, “Follow me.”

Stepping into Jasper’s room was another fucking gut punch. Too familiar. The layout, the IVs, the machines, the harsh white lights, the smell of antiseptic and starch. He drew in a sharp breath, which made the nurse stop and look at him. “Are you alright? Do you need a minute?”

Carl pushed through it. “No.”

His eyes fixed on Jasper. He lay against the stark white sheets, eyes closed, looking very small. Red scrapes and bruises marred the left side of his face. Carl closed his eyes for a long moment, then exhaled.

The nurse indicated a chair next to the bed. “You can sit there if you like. Your son is currently under deep sedation, so he won’t be responding to external stimuli, but it’s possible that he may be able to hear you. If you wish to touch him, please make sure not to disturb any of the medical equipment.

“We allow up to two visitors at a time, normal visiting times are 12 noon to 8 p.m. If any of our staff give you any instructions, we ask that you follow them. Do you have any questions?”

“No,” Carl said hollowly.

“Anything else, please ask at the reception.”

Carl nodded absently, and then the nurse was gone and he was left standing at the foot of the bed. Just him, Jasper—she had said ‘son’—and the quiet, steady beeps and a rhythmic hissing of the ventilator Jasper was hooked up to.

Carl took a few steps, collapsed into the chair and scraped it across the floor a bit closer to the bed. “Jesus, Jasper,” he whispered.

He didn’t know what else to say, what to do. So he just sat and stared, his eyes catching on the breathing tube protruding from Jasper’s mouth. Something visceral hit him all at once, the feeling of a foreign body in his throat, nerves in his neck firing, sending a sharp stinging sensation into the left side of his throat.

His hand instinctively went to his exit wound scar, the discordance of touch versus skin tangible beneath his fingertips from all the nerves that had been fucked up from the bullet slicing through his neck. He inhaled a long breath, tried to push the sensation away.

He should call Victoria. With shaky hands, he fished his phone out of his pocket, leaned forward in the chair and dialled Victoria’s number, not surprised that he only got her voicemail.

“Hey, it’s me. Jasper’s in the hospital. He was in a car accident, they’re talking about brain swelling and… Fuck. He’s unconscious. In Critical Care now, they put him in some kind of induced coma. I’m with him and…” He felt his eyes tearing up, didn’t know what else to say. “Just call me back.” He hung up.

He collapsed against the backrest of the chair again, closing his eyes, concentrating on the sounds around him. He jumped when the phone in his pocket vibrated. Victoria. He answered it.

“Carl, talk to me.”

He got up from the chair and walked over to the corner of the room, away from Jasper. He gave her all the information he had, knowing she had more questions than he had answers to.

“When can you be here?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I can try to rearrange my schedule. I’m in Barcelona. There’s no flights to Edinburgh until tomorrow. Maybe I could fly into Manchester or Newcastle. Or London if need be. God, I don’t know, Carl.”

“Just fucking be here for once.”

“Christ, Carl. Really? We have to do this now?”

He gritted his teeth, tried to quell the anger. “Vic, I’m looking at him right now, and he’s… He needs his fucking mother.”

“Look, I said I’ll be there, okay? I’ll take the first flight out I can get. Just… hold it together until then.”

He let out a cynical laugh. “Hold it together? Jesus fucking Christ. *I’m* the one who’s been holding this fucking family together for the past two fucking years. What’s left of it, anyway.”

“Carl,” she said in that annoyingly condescending tone of hers. “If you’re in his room, maybe you shouldn’t be cursing up a storm.”

He inhaled sharply, knowing that she was right. “Just be here,” he said into the microphone, then hung up.

He started pacing, then got annoyed that there was so little room here to do even that properly. “Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, not sure what to do with the anger and frustration.

He was still pacing when a nurse appeared in the doorway. “Mr. Morck? There’s someone outside who’s asking to see you.”

Carl frowned. Was Akram still here?

He followed the nurse back to the ward door, surprised to see Hardy and Donna waiting outside. Hardy stood awkwardly on his crutches, a stricken look on his face laced with concern for his friend that defied words. Donna stepped right up to Carl and drew him into a hug.

He wanted to sink right into it, wanted to let his knees buckle. Maybe Donna could tell because she squeezed him a little extra, muttering near his ear, “We came as soon as we heard.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice gravelly, suspecting Akram had told Hardy.

She guided him over to the waiting area on the side, Hardy hobbling over as well. They sat in the chairs on either side of Carl.

Hardy was the one to ask first. “How is he?”

Carl gave them the meagre update he had. Hardy didn’t say much. When it came to the important things, he’d never been a man of big words.

Donna chimed in, “Is there anything we can do? Does Victoria know? I could call her for you, if you like.”

Carl sighed. “No, I already spoke to her. Of course she’s in fucking Spain.”

Hardy asked the pertinent question. “Is she coming?”

“Yeah, she’s coming. God knows when. Probably tomorrow.”

Donna got up from her chair. “You two lads stay right here. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Hardy’s hand came to rest on Carl’s shoulder as Donna walked away. “I’m really sorry, mate. This is all kinds of fucked up.”

“Yeah. I thought I was done with fucking hospitals.”

They shared a quiet moment of mutual understanding before Hardy said, “He’ll make it. He’s a strong lad.”

Carl’s head whipped around. “Fucking platitudes? That’s the best you have?”

Hardy didn’t seem offended. “Yeah. That’s the best I have. But if there’s anything you need, and I mean *anything*, I’ll fucking do it.”

“Yeah, how about fucking kill me, because this is hell.”

Carl hated himself as soon as he’d said it, because it wasn’t fair to lay that on Hardy.

“Yeah,” Hardy said in a low voice. “Maybe except that.”

Carl got up from his seat, turned away from his best friend. “Fuck. I shouldn’t have said that.”

There was no resentment in Hardy’s voice. “It’s alright, mate. Wasn’t my grandest moment. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you didn’t listen.”

Carl turned back to face him. Their eyes met, a bond forged of years together on the job – an unbreakable relationship that had endured their mutual rock bottoms. There was nothing that could replace that.

Carl scrubbed a weary hand down his face. He had to hold it together. Hardy spoke again. “Listen, if you want to take a few days off, we’ll hold down the fort.”

Work. Yeah. He hadn’t thought about that at all. “Does Moira know?”

“Aye. Akram told her.”

That was good. One thing off his own fucking to-do list.

“We have some news on the case,” Hardy said off-handedly. “You wanna hear about it?”

Did he? Maybe the distraction would help. “Yeah. Hit me.”

“The results from the lab just came in. The DNA that was found connects the case to a proper shifty bloke up in Aberdeen. We’re looking at him now, but he’s already got a few priors. Could be a dead cert, that one, if we can actually tie it to Alistair.”

That was good. Promising. Carl grunted in approval. Just then, Donna came back, a cardboard tray with three lidded paper cups. She gave Hardy the tray to hold and went over to Carl to hand him one of the cups.

He accepted it wordlessly and took a sip. Hospital coffee never seemed to quite cut it.

There was a slight rustle of plastic, and then Donna held out something packaged to him – a flapjack.

He waved it off. “I’m not hungry.”

Hardy piped in, “I’ll have it if he doesn’t.”

Donna chided him, “Oh, for God’s sake, James.”

She kept holding it in Carl’s direction. “Just take it for later.”

He doubted he would want to eat anything any time soon, but he still took it and stuffed it in his jeans pocket. They sipped their coffees in silence for a while, eventually Donna and Hardy talking about arrangements they had to make for Ethan, their eldest, with some kind of school thing.

Carl only listened half-heartedly, getting more antsy by the minute. Why was he standing out here, sipping mediocre coffee?

He eventually put the half-empty cup on a side table and said, “I should get back in there.”

“Aye,” Hardy acknowledged.

Donna said, “Of course. Come here.”

She got up and gave him another hug, then let her hand linger on one arm as she said, “Call us if you need anything, alright? Day or night.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

Carl steeled himself for what was to come. More waiting in bleak and depressing hospital rooms. It would be a long day.

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Chapter 2 – Stuck There

The next morning, Carl somehow managed to drag himself into work. He’d barely slept, and the few hours he’d got were restless and filled with incoherent dreams he only remembered fragments of.

He was early, the first to enter the basement and the first thing he did was open up his laptop and log into the list of RTC reports from the day prior. He found the one that was related to Jasper.

Nothing much that was helpful. A hit-and-run, driver unknown. Photos showed remains of a crashed moped, plastic and glass scattered around the scene. One other person was listed as having been taken to hospital with more minor injuries. The name didn't seem familiar to Carl. Witness statements were useless. No CCTV, possible they were still analysing it. Case status: Open.

Carl figured they'd want to eventually interview Jasper about the accident but they'd probably been told by hospital staff that Jasper wouldn't be conscious for several days.

He looked up the lead traffic officer, memorised the name, then slapped the lid of the computer closed to leave the basement.

He went straight to the Operational Support Division, asking around for PC Bainbridge, surprised to actually find him at his desk. Carl went straight into it, asking about the case, the CCTV, license plate, witnesses. Bainbridge only had haphazard information and vague excuses. Carl concluded he was a fucking idiot. Green behind the ears, sloppy, clearly not invested. The kind he'd fire immediately if he had the authority.

Carl got loud, then got louder, at one point grabbed Bainbridge by the lapels to lift him out of his chair for a few inches. The man went pale and quiet after that.

When Carl realised there was nothing to be gained from this, he threw a few threats at the guy if he didn't do his fucking job right, let out a frustrated grunt and left. Fucking idiots, the lot of them!

His adrenaline was still sky high when he got back to Basement Q. Rose and Akram were there now, both throwing him looks that were fraught with questions and concern, but Carl chose to ignore them.

"Any news?" Rose asked.

"No," Carl just replied gruffly.

Thankful that his team knew to give him some space, he tried to busy himself with work, exchanged glances with Hardy when he came in half an hour later. At some point, a mug with coffee and milk foam appeared on Carl's desk, put there wordlessly by Akram. He took a sip. The perfect mix of double-shot espresso and milk – the kind from the fancy bean-to-cup machine Carl sometimes made the trip upstairs for. Akram was nothing if not perceptive, he had to give him that.

Two hours later, his stomach growled so loudly that Akram threw Rose a knowing look that didn't go past Carl. Rose left, then came back fifteen minutes later with a larger selection of baked goods from the bakery around the corner.

She placed the whole thing on Carl's desk. "Not up for discussion," she told him. "And if you refuse, we'll eventually have to force-feed you. And trust me, I've seen what Akram can do when he has his mind set to it, and you really don't want to be at the short end of that stick."

He glared at her, but there was a slight smile on her face. In a softer voice she said, "Please, Carl. Ye can't live on caffeine alone."

Carl turned his head to direct his glare at Akram, who returned the gaze, his brown doe eyes equal amounts of innocent and annoyingly determined. "She is right."

"Fucking traitors," Carl muttered, then picked the sausage roll and bit into it. Akram was probably taking mental notes of his first pick out of the selection.

There was something to be said for blood sugar equilibrium, because Carl felt a lot better afterwards, to the point where he followed it up with the maple and pecan plait. Rose looked properly self-satisfied when Carl put the remaining food on Hardy's desk.

"Knock yourselves out."

Hardy dug right into the chocolate croissant. "Gladly."

Akram added, "Next time, I will bring Ma'amoul."

"Whatever the fuck that is," Carl said.

"Trust me," Rose said, walking over to Hardy's desk, reaching for the lemon and cheesecake muffin. "They're amazing."

Carl turned towards the whiteboard. "So where are we with the suspect from Aberdeen?"

Hardy swivelled his chair around. "He's currently serving a 15-year sentence for molesting his son and sexually abusing his wife."

"So how does he tie into Alistair McGowan?"

"His DNA is a partial match to DNA found at the scene of the abduction."

"Partial match," Carl echoed. "That good enough to hold up in court? We still don't have a body. If there even *is* a body."

"Indeed," Akram confirmed. "But we are working on that."

"How?"

"The DNA at the scene of the abduction was very degraded. We are trying to get a better specimen."

“Okay,” Carl confirmed. “What else?”

Rose supplied, “I am looking into Ian Wolfe’s phone and financial records around the time of the abduction.”

“Wolfe?” Carl asked.

“The perp from Aberdeen.”

“And?”

“Nothing’s turned up so far but I only started this morning.”

“Well, keep digging.”

“Aye, boss.”

Carl shot her a look, which Rose ignored.

Carl looked at Hardy and Akram. “And you lot?”

Akram said, “I am reviewing the case files of Wolfe’s previous crimes.”

Hardy added, “I may have found another lead but nothing tangible so far. Ask me again in a few hours.”

“So what’s left for me to do?”

The other three exchanged pertinent glances. It was Hardy who spoke up. “You should be with Jasper.”

He looked at his watch. Yes, maybe he should.

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Walking through the Royal Infirmary hallways brought back more unpleasant memories. Days and weeks of pain and discomfort. A breathing tube down his throat, inability to swallow or speak, even after that had been removed. Wounds that were fucking painful, every time they were cleaned, his whole neck feeling like it was on fire from the inside out. The secondary tooth infection a week into it had topped it all off.

And then there were Jasper and Isla’s visits that Carl hated because Victoria’s mother would never shut up about anything and insisted she knew everything better. Doctors that were refusing to give him updates on Hardy until Donna would come in every now and then, her eyes sad and red-rimmed, her mouth a grim line, occasionally with Ethan and Jude in tow, who never knew what to say to Carl, intimidated by his broken voice that wouldn’t work half the time.

The whole thing had been such a fucking nightmare.

He tried to shake the memory as he neared the Critical Care ward, not fully succeeding. Some things would never quite fade, and all it took was one fucking match to light the fire.

When Carl neared Jasper's room, there was a figure sitting by his bed. Victoria. Well, at least that was something.

He ambled into the room. "Vic," he said.

She turned around, her face inscrutable. "Carl."

"Any news?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so. He's still sedated."

Carl studied Jasper, looking for… He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. The ugly red scrapes and bruises were still there, the myriad of machinery and IVs the same as the day before. The ventilator was still pumping air into Jasper's lungs.

He closed his eyes, drew in a long breath. "I'll be right back."

He went to the reception desk, asked if someone could give him an update. He was told that a doctor would come to speak to him as soon as possible.

Back in Jasper's room, Victoria was on the phone. He listened, got the gist of the conversation. When she hung up, he couldn't help but snap, "So this is just another brief stopover, yeah?"

"I have to be back out tomorrow."

"Really? You're fucking right back off to your next destination? He's your fucking *son*!"

"Believe me, Carl, I tried. We're understaffed as it is, and as much as they sympathise with my situation, they said no because the alternative was to cancel those flights."

"Right. Your '*situation*'," Carl echoed sarcastically. "Unbelievable."

"We're trying to rearrange my schedule so that I can be here more. That's the best they said they could do."

"Yeah, that's awesome. So you'll be in Edinburgh, what? Once a week for six hours?"

"What do you want me to do? Quit my job?"

He raised his arms. "Well, *there's* a thought."

She turned to face him, her glare on him like steel. "Did *you* quit your job when Jasper needed you?"

Carl bristled. "Don't you fucking turn this around on me. I've done everything I could to make this fucking work."

“Yes, clearly you made it work so well that he’s riding around town like he’s invincible, and look where that got him.”

Carl was starting to seethe and it took everything he had not to explode right there. Through clenched teeth, he said, “You are not fucking pinning this on me. You don’t get to—”

Just then an Asian looking woman in blue scrubs entered the room, a stethoscope around her neck. “Mr. and Mrs. Stewart?”

“Morck,” Carl snarled.

“My apologies. I’m Dr. Wang, one of the physicians looking after your son. You requested an update?”

“Yes,” Carl told her, not bothering to correct her on her wrong assumption.

What Dr. Wang told them wasn’t much of an update. Jasper was still stable. The swelling hadn’t reduced but it also hadn’t worsened. They were trying to adjust the doses of his medications, hoping to see more progress over the coming days.

It wasn’t what Carl had wanted to hear. He was assured that this was not unusual and that injuries like this would take time. It did absolutely fucking nothing to reassure him. The doctor excused herself and Carl stood there at the foot of the bed, his fingers nervously drumming into the metal rail.

Vic got up from the chair. “I’m sorry, I have to go. I’ll be back when I can.”

Carl sneered at her. “Yeah. And don’t worry,” he said sarcastically. “I’ll be here to pick up the pieces when he asks where you are. *If* he ever wakes up.”

“Carl, please don’t do this. Not right now.”

He disdainfully turned away from her and walked a few feet away, listened as she left the room without another word.

Fuck. What was it with Victoria that they couldn’t be in the same room without exploding into an argument the minute they opened their mouths? How had he been married to this woman?

He moved over to the chair, sat down, elbows on his knees, this mouth resting on his folded hands. Nothing had changed. The waiting was the worst. And now Victoria’s cutting remarks hung in the room like streak marks from a whip made with careful precision.

He heard noise behind him, a middle-aged woman came into view, walking to the other side of Jasper’s bed to do something with one of the perfusors. He ignored her until she said, “Carl Morck?”

He looked up at her, frowning. Had they met before?

She seemed to realise that he had trouble recognising her. “You might not remember me, I’m Hannah Boyd. I was one of your nurses when you were a patient here.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. He had absolutely no good memories of this place. None.

She indicated Jasper. “Is this your son?”

“Stepson,” Carl corrected her.

“He’s in good hands. The team here is excellent. And I know it probably doesn’t mean much to you right now, but I’m really glad to see you.”

Carl wanted to punch something. More fucking clichés. From strangers, of all things. He didn’t respond.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Hannah said before she left.

And somehow the room felt even emptier and heavier.

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The next two days passed in slow motion. Carl did his best to distract himself with work, and it worked – to a degree. Hardy’s lead had panned out, Akram’s thoroughness had paid off, and eventually they were able to prove that the semen found at the crime scene was Wolfe’s.

Carl had insisted to go interview Wolfe together with Akram. Akram had, in turn, insisted that he lead the interview, and Carl hadn’t had the energy to argue. It took a good amount of well-applied pressure and Akram’s masterful manipulation, but eventually Wolfe confessed to the murder, even gave up where he had buried the body.

The next day, they dug up the remains and confirmed Alistair McGowan’s ID. Carl had stood there and watched, expression stony, betraying the cold rage he felt inside. Child molestation and murder of an innocent human being who had had so much promise, so much life still left to live. He wanted to fucking strangle that creep, feel his windpipe crush under his thumbs.

Akram tried his best to dissuade him from being the one to tell the family, but that wasn’t who Carl was. He had to see it through. At least give the parents closure.

Even though he’d done this countless times, even though he knew how it would go down, it still smarted like a fucking serrated knife being dragged through his gut and then twisted for good measure. Carl had to watch helplessly as the parents broke down when the news was delivered. There was nothing worse than crushing a parent’s hope for positive news they’d kept alive for years.

They’d driven back to Basement Q in silence after that, sat in their respective chairs without a word spoken while Rose took down the photos and notes from the whiteboard.

Hardy was the one who left first, then Rose. Akram was still there, hovering, eventually muttering something about having to pick up his daughters. Carl ignored it.

And then, when complete silence finally settled, the elevator doors pinged and hasty steps came clacking down the stairs. Moira. Carl could tell.

She walked right up to stand in front of his desk. “What the hell, Carl!?”

He didn’t want to face her, but Moira flew right off the handle. OSD had filed a complaint against him and she was fucking furious.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Carl! You can’t just go to another department and insult the officers there! Physically manhandle them, even! For fuck’s sake, what were you thinking?! Oh, wait, you *weren’t* thinking. Because this is your fucking problem. You’re never thinking! Give me one reason why I shouldn’t suspend you on the spot!?”

He didn’t even try to defend himself. He didn’t have the energy.

She glared at him, then softened when he remained silent. “Why are you even working? You should be with Jasper right now.” Her eyes on him never wavered and after another moment of silence, she said, “Why don’t you take a few days?”

“I need the distraction,” he said, and he hated how desperate it sounded.

Her voice was gentle now, laced with true concern. “Carl. I don’t want to say it, but right now you’re a walking liability. I can’t have you running around, doing whatever the hell you want. If something like this happens again, suspension will be the least of your worries.”

“Yeah,” he said just above a whisper. “I know.”

Her gaze lingered on him for another long moment. “Please go home. Take it easy for the next few days.” Then she added, “And good work on the McGowan case, even if it wasn’t the outcome we might have held out hope for.”

Carl had no more words to give her, so Moira gave him a last look and left. The metallic rattle of the elevator doors closing behind her accentuated the oppressive silence that seemed to want to crush everything.

Carl pushed the heels of his hands against the edge of the desk, then grabbed his lanyard off the table, the car keys and his raincoat from the back of his chair. Something on the floor on the way to the stairs caught his eye. A photograph lying there, a corner tucked under one of the metal file cabinets to his right.

He crouched down to pick it up. It was the face of 11-year-old Alistair McGowan. Blond, curly hair, blue eyes, a carefree laugh on his face. They’d stared at it for several weeks, up there on the whiteboard, and Carl had never realised how stark the resemblance to a younger version of Jasper was.

Memories washed over him – of a time that was a lot happier, a lot more innocent, when life had felt full of promise. He sank down with his back against the metal filing cabinet right there, holding the photo in his hand.

There was that trip to Euro-Disney in Paris, Jasper and Carl riding rollercoasters while Victoria waited for them, taking blurry photos with her mobile phone. Jasper awkwardly grabbing Carl's hand on the haunted house ride, and Carl holding on as steadily as he could. The three of them out to supper, Jasper absolutely relishing the fast food they otherwise wouldn't let him have.

He looked at Alistair's photo again, wondering if this was what his life had in store for him, if he'd soon be that parent who was mourning their child. Before he met Victoria, he'd never spent much thought on becoming a father and it had taken a while before he even felt remotely comfortable in that role.

Over the years, Jasper had become a steady presence in his life, they'd been close when Jasper was younger. As Jasper grew older, he'd withdrawn more, rebelled more, pushed for more independence. And then Victoria had moved out and filed for divorce, and everything had become a hundred times more complicated. When Carl was shot, it had made the delicate balance of their relationship go really fucking pear-shaped, and Carl felt like whatever he tried, nothing was working and all they ever did was yell at each other.

And now… Now there was a tangible possibility that he could lose Jasper forever, and it hit harder than he ever thought it could. Something in his gut twisted, left an ugly, hollow space there that was filling up with dread. He felt his pulse quicken, something squeezing in his chest. He pressed his knuckles into his eyes, his elbows on his drawn up knees. The physical pain was barely enough of a distraction.

Another image flashed in front of his mind's eye, way too vivid to ignore. Jasper lying in that fucking hospital bed, and Carl just sitting there, waiting, hoping, waiting. Vague possibilities from the doctors, fed by cautious optimism. Breathing tubes and heart monitors and fucking despair all rolled into one, and him just watching on the sidelines, with absolutely nothing he could do. It was the worst feeling in the world.

Something turned in his stomach, he tried to ignore it. Hunger? Nausea? He couldn't even tell anymore. It was kind of a miracle Carl had held it together this long. He'd made through these last 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, chased by anguish and anger. They culminated in a tightness in his chest, a weighty pressure 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. Someone next to him. A warm hand lightly touching his leg.

“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 hadn’t seen her in a while, but now that she was here, he knew 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 leg, 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 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 sat like that, just riding it out. 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.

Rachel 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 scrubbed his palms down his face, not daring to speak because he didn’t trust his voice to work.

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.”

Her voice was low and gentle. “Wanna tell me what happened?”

Did he? Could he? “Jasper’s in the hospital,” he divulged, his voice raw and raspy.

“Yes, I heard.”

“He’s in a coma.”

“I’m really sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

Wasn’t she 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. “Let me take you home.”

“No,” he protested, not even sure why. Maybe the fact that the flat 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.

She took a step closer to him, looked up at him. “Would it be strange if I gave you a hug? Because I really think you need it.”

He almost wanted to laugh because it was so absurd. “Can’t say I’d stop you.”

And then she was there in front of him, her arms enveloping him, her warm body against his. The physical touch was unfamiliar but comforting. 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 squeezed 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, and Rachel said, “Please let me 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 streetlights 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 drive me home, and now we’re in my car.”

“So?”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ve lived here most of my life. How do you think I get around the city?”

“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. An open packet of butter he hadn’t put back in the fridge.

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, she asked, “Why don’t you go and change into something more 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,” he told her.

“I know.”

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.”

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. He had to admit he had stolen a long glance at her in his clothes, thinking how bizarre the whole thing was but how natural she made it feel.

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.

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?”

“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 was suddenly hyperaware of her, her steady breaths, her presence in his bed. He turned from facing away from her to lie on his back.

“I don’t think this is helping.”

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

“Overthinking is my fucking middle name.”

“And that’s why you have trouble sleeping.”

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

“Those 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 relaxing.”

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 one.”

“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 saltwater 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 tiredly. “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 fucking 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. Besides, visiting times start at noon.”

“Then I’ll go with you later.”

“Rachel… Please 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.”

“That’s fucking 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 really pissed off yesterday. Said I was a fucking liability.” He paused. “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 the people on your team 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 fucking sucks.”

“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 you 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. He had to get fucking out of here. He grabbed the phone and keys off the table.

But Rachel wasn’t easily intimidated. She was standing right there in the kitchen doorway, blocking his way, 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.

“It’s okay to be fucking angry, Carl. But taking it out on the people around you will only make you end up angrier and alone.”

He stood, clenched his jaw and curled his finger around the edge of the open kitchen door, drummed his fingers so that they made a dull tapping sound on the wood.

“There are healthier ways to deal with all that anger.”

“You mean like a fucking punching bag? Yeah, that’s not my style. Or, hey, how about therapy? Because,” he indicated a hand towards her, “I’ve tried that and it didn’t get me fucking anywhere.”

She studied him intently. “Do you like being like this?”

He bristled, gave her a sardonic huff. “Yeah, sure, I love being a fucking trainwreck. Who wouldn’t?”

“Then why do you insist on wanting to be stuck there?”

And that was the million dollar question, wasn’t it? He didn’t have an answer. Or maybe he did, but it wasn’t one that he liked.

Rachel could read him like an open fucking book, because she said, “I’ll tell you why. Because it’s easy, because it’s become second nature by now. But in order for things to change, you’ll have to make an effort. And I know right now isn’t the best time for that, but when you’re ready, there are people who will help you getting out of that rut you’re stuck in. You just need to let them.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, stayed quiet, let his gaze wander to the photo of a younger Jasper that was stuck there under a magnet.

If he’d learned anything over these past five decades, it was that people didn’t extend kindness without a reason. There was always a catch, always a point where they wanted something in return. Everyone had expectations, and if they weren’t met, they’d get fed up and leave him to pick up the pieces on his own.

Rachel shifted away from the doorstep. “Are you going into work?”

He shifted his weight, drew in a long and sharp breath through his nose. “Yeah. Why?”

“Can you drop me off at home on the way?”

And there it was. Her ‘that’s us for today.’ “Sure,” he said, trying to keep his voice neutral.

He pushed past her to put on his shoes and grab his jacket. Something told him he’d be a fucking fool if he kept trying to push her out of his life. But like she’d aptly said, in the end, it’d be easier.

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Chapter 3 – Verge Of The Road

The days started blurring together. Carl fell into a strange routine that had an odd familiarity to it. The old habit of visiting Hardy in the hospital was replaced with visiting Jasper, sitting in the visitor’s chair, having conversations that weren’t reciprocated, dividing the rest of the time

between working, eating and sleeping. Or what constituted for sleeping in Carl's life, which was often restless, disruptive nights on the couch.

The doctors were starting to see minor improvements in Jasper's status, which gave Carl a little room to breathe.

He would never admit it, but Rose, Akram and Hardy were invaluable in keeping him sane. And fed. Akram had started sneaking homemade snacks onto Carl's desk, Rose would make sure he was eating at least one halfway decent meal during working hours.

There would be unsolicited cups of coffee or tea appearing at regular intervals. Hardy would sneak him the occasional caramel macchiato that Carl would grumble about but secretly enjoy, not only because Hardy would have that smug grin on his face every time Carl complained about it but drank it anyway.

A new investigation was underway, an unsolved series of fatal stabbings in the late 2000s and early 2010s that had appeared to be seemingly random at the time. Somehow Akram had pulled three files out of the boxes and connected them, voicing suspicions as to why this correlation had not been uncovered sooner.

When Carl got to the hospital that evening, he heard a voice from behind him just as he was about to enter the Critical Care ward.

"You're Carl, right?"

Carl stopped, turned around. A teenage girl with long, curly hair and heavy make-up was standing there, a mobile phone in hand. Gemma.

"Yes," he told her. "You're Jasper's girlfriend."

"We, uh, broke up."

Carl raised his eyebrows.

She pointed at the door to the ward. "They won't let me see him."

"Didn't you just say you broke up?"

She gave a half shrug. "Yeah but doesn't mean I don't still like him." She hesitated. "Do you think I could…" She trailed off.

"… see him?"

"Yeah."

He considered his answer, wondered how long she'd been waiting here, and couldn't come up with any reason why the hell he shouldn't let her. "Come with me," he told her.

He figured he should at least give her the basics of what to expect, told her Jasper was unconscious and wouldn't respond if she talked to him. She just nodded and went with Carl into the room.

He pointed at the visitor's chair, mumbling, "I'll leave you to it."

"Can I touch him?"

Huh. He hadn't expected that. "Yeah, just don't mess with the equipment."

"Yeah, totally."

Carl left the ward again, remembering being told not to stand in the way. He ambled to the waiting area, sat down in one of the chairs. He suddenly realised just how little he knew about Jasper. Did he have close friends? A best mate? What did he do outside of school and video gaming? They never really had those conversations anymore, and Carl knew most of that was his fault. Life had just been such a shitshow lately.

Gemma came out of the ward several minutes later, looking a lot more stricken than before. She stopped near Carl. "Thanks. For letting me in there."

He gave her a curt nod. "Sure."

She shifted her weight to one foot. "He'll get better, right?"

That was the number one question, wasn't it? "Sure as fuck hope so. Were you there?"

"At the accident? No. Just him and Rowan. Rowan broke his wrist. He wants to see J, too, but we didn't have your number and J's phone's been dead."

Carl didn't have any business cards. He hated those things. Always thought they were for pompous pricks who took themselves too seriously. He took out his phone and unlocked it. "What's your phone number?"

She frowned at him but then gave it to him. He put it in his phone and called her. "Now you have my number. Jasper have a lot of friends?"

Gemma did that half shrug again. "I dunno. He mostly hangs out with Rowan, Sam and Bartek."

"If they wanna visit him, I'll make it happen."

She gave him a somewhat quizzical look. "J said you're kind of a prick, but I think you're alright."

Carl narrowed his eyes at her. "Kind of a prick, yeah?"

"Yeah, I mean, *our* first meeting wasn't exactly stellar first impression."

Yes. Carl remembered it vividly. "You were shagging my stepson. Whole house could hear it."

Her phone buzzed and she looked at it. “I gotta go.”

Carl made a hand gesture that said *I’m not gonna stop you* and she gave him a last look before she walked away.

When he went inside, Jasper’s treating physician asked to speak with him, explained that they were getting ready to lower the dosages of the sedatives to start bringing Jasper out of the coma. He was given warnings that the process could be slow and unpredictable.

Jasper would be in a minimally conscious state at first, be aware of things, maybe follow simple instructions. There could be confusion or disorientation, possibly memory loss that could last for a while. She explained that some people might get agitated or aggressive and that it wouldn’t be a linear process, that he’d have good days and bad days and that random emotional outbursts wouldn’t be unexpected.

It sounded fucking scary—all of it—and Carl tried to steel himself for the harrowing days or weeks to follow, not sure if he’d be ready for it.

For the past few days, Carl had started taking a book with him, had started reading to Jasper, even if he didn’t know whether he was actually registering any of it. It made him feel less useless, made the whole experience a little less depressing.

He sank down in the chair next to Jasper’s bed, watched him for a long moment, the quiet whooshing of the ventilator almost comforting by now, and opened the book.

“A woman in a rain slicker, holding the hand of a child, was walking on the verge of the road. As Quoyle’s station wagon came abreast she stared at the wet car. The stranger. He lifted his head a few inches but she had already dropped her gaze. The child’s flat face. Red boots. And he was past.”

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The doorbell rang, and Carl heaved himself off the couch to answer it. He knew it was Rachel. She had texted earlier, had asked if he wanted company.

The whole thing had puzzled him after how they’d left things the last time. Where were they going with this? Was he a pity case? He’d been inclined to tell her no. But then there was this voice that said *don’t be a fucking fool, give her a chance.* And despite his better judgement, he decided he would.

“Hey,” she greeted him as she came into view. She was carrying two pizza cartons.

“Hey,” he greeted back.

“I hope you’re hungry,” she called to him on her way to the kitchen as he closed the door.

He just let out a hum. He wasn’t hungry. He was tired.

And Rachel could see it too. “You look knackered.”

He gave her a smile, the sarcasm audible in his voice. “Thanks.”

“How’s Jasper?”

Carl sighed, then sat down at the kitchen table, rubbing both hands down his face. “Pretty much the same. They wanna start bringing him out of the coma, so I guess that’s good news.”

“I’d say that’s very good news,” she confirmed.

“Yeah. There’s all this… stuff they explained about agitation and confusion and memory loss and all that. Honestly, it sounds pretty fucking scary.”

“Yes, it can be a bit of a harrowing process. You’ll need to be patient. With Jasper but also with yourself.”

He drew a face. “Yeah, patience isn’t my strong suit.”

She pointed at the pizza cartons. “Salami or mushroom?”

Choices. He was tired of choices. This one wasn’t too difficult. “Salami.”

She pulled the bottom one from the pile and handed it to him. Carl ignored the plate and folded over the lid, then ate right out of the cardboard box.

Their conversation between bites was light. Easy banter. Shallow work stuff. How was Hardy? How was Rose? What was Akram up to? He knew she danced around the actual subject, the one she was most interested in but didn’t dare ask. How was *he*?

Rachel gave up on her pizza halfway through. Carl surprised himself by eating the whole thing. Maybe he *had* been hungry.

Her eyes were on him, always inquisitive. Sometimes a little too much so. “Have you been getting any sleep?”

He let out a cynical chuckle. “Are you gonna give me more fucking platitudes about getting some rest and all that?”

Her mouth curved into a half-smile. “Don’t need to if you already know what I was going to say.” The smile vanished, now replaced with something sharper. Worry, maybe. “You *do* look tired. More than normal.”

He sighed. “Yeah. Sue me.”

“I hope you’re not burning the candle at both ends.”

He didn’t even know what that meant anymore. There was always something going on in his life that demanded more energy than he had to give. He couldn’t recall a time when it hadn’t been that way.

“Candle’s long gone.”

Shit. He shouldn’t have said that. Sometimes he hated how she made conversations feel… normal. How things just slipped out of his mouth that he wouldn’t normally say.

She placed the remains of her pizza back in the carton and got up to put her plate in the sink. “Carl. I know you think you can do it all, but you need to take care of yourself too if you want to keep taking care of others. Believe me, I’ve learned this the hard way.”

He wondered what she was referring to. What had she learned the hard way? Did it have to do with her eating disorder she had divulged to him once. Her failed marriage? He realised he didn’t actually know much about her beyond the haphazard bits and pieces she had shared with him that he’d just let hang there without follow-up.

Self-absorption. It was one of his major flaws. Vic had accused him of it often enough. Rachel deserved better.

“I said no fucking platitudes.”

“Wasn’t a platitude. It was genuine concern, knowing how self-destructive you are.”

“Ah, there she is – Rachel, the therapist. Can’t say I’ve missed her.”

“Please don’t do this. It’s not helpful.”

His voice was acerbic now. “Oh, I know. But no one’s asked you to be helpful.”

She started washing up her plate. “And that’s where you’re wrong.”

Carl narrowed his eyes. “Did Martin put you up to this? Moira? Is that what this is? Checking up on me?”

She sighed. “No, Carl. I know you can’t see it, but all of this,” he could hear that she stopped what she was doing, “is a giant cry for help.”

He got up from the chair, walked into the living room to separate himself from this conversation. “I think this is where I say thank you for tea, you can see yourself out.”

She turned around to face him, looked him square in the eyes, and there was that annoying level of defiance that he already knew too well. “And this is where I would normally say fuck you for being a thankless prick but I’m not buying your self-deprecating bullshit, so you might as well cut it out.”

He turned away from her and plopped down on the couch, out of her view. He fucking hated being psychoanalysed by her, didn’t have the strength to deal with it right now. Maybe if he just ignored her, she’d go away.

He lay down on his side, adjusted one of the pillows under his head and closed his eyes, hoping he'd wake up with her gone.

Next thing he remembered was a staircase. Long and narrow and stretching upward endlessly. Something was at the top, something important. Jasper. He was up there, held hostage by some creep with a proclivity for vengeance. He had to get to Jasper before it was too late.

He tried to move, tried to run up the stairs, but his feet were heavy. Like they were encased in molasses. He fought, lifted one foot. It moved. The other. Slowly. Endlessly. The stairs wouldn't end.

"I'm coming," he called upwards. "Hold on!"

Another flight. And another. The ascent was laborious, too slow. The stairs were getting narrower, wobbling beneath his feet like they were swaying in an invisible storm.

He looked down. There was no railing. An endless void beneath. If he lost his balance, he wouldn't survive it, he'd never been more sure of anything. And then Jasper would be alone.

He couldn't let that happen.

"Almost there!" he called out into the nothingness.

And then the concrete started crumbling beneath his feet. He lost his grip. Groped for something that wasn't there, felt himself slipping—

"Carl."

Whose voice was this?

"Carl!"

More urgently. He jerked. His eyes snapped open, his heart jackhammering in his chest. All that came out of his dry throat was a moan.

"You were having a nightmare."

Yeah, no fucking shit. He blinked, aware of his ragged, fast breaths and the cold sweat at the back of his neck. "Rachel?" His voice was raspy.

She was crouching by the side of the couch near his legs. He realised he was lying under a blanket that she must have draped over him. He sat up, scrubbing his hands tiredly down his face, trying to get his breath back to a normal rhythm.

She shifted her position so that she could perch on the couch where his legs were. He moved them so that she had a bit more room. He inhaled a long breath, then let it out shakily through his mouth. "Fuck."

"It's okay," she said in a low voice. "Do you want to talk about it?"

“No,” he said immediately, hating how raw his voice was.

She watched him warily, and he hated how it made him feel. Like a fucking failure who was losing grip, a sum of broken parts haphazardly strapped together, struggling on the last percentages of battery life.

“Carl, I’m sorry,” she said.

That was the last thing he’d expected her to say. “For what?”

“For not doing my job.”

His brow furrowed. “Your job?”

“When we met, I should have helped you. And I didn’t. That was a mistake I made.”

He shifted his position, pushed himself a little more upright. “But you did help me.”

“Not the way I should have.”

“You’re gonna have to elaborate on that.”

She sighed. “You came to me as someone I was asked to evaluate in a professional capacity, someone who’d been through a traumatic experience and who wasn’t dealing with it very well. But, you know, I was frustrated and not in the right headspace and I acted… unprofessionally.”

Ah yes, their therapy sessions. He made his tone sound jovial. “I mean, this whole thing could have been so easy. Just put a check mark on the diagnosis in my file, mark off the mandatory sessions and save everyone the trouble.”

Yet, the joke fell flat when she said, “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Yeah,” he said. It came out like a sigh.

“Some of the things I said were… not helpful to your situation. Probably actually the opposite.”

He looked at his hands in his lap. “Like what?”

“Like directly talking to you about the shooting. Or your survivor’s guilt.”

And just like that, she’d homed in on his biggest fucking weakness to start peeling it free from the protective layers. He lifted his head and met her gaze. “And instead you should have done what?”

She lightly shrugged. “Worked with you to reframe your resistance to being in therapy. Build a rapport, trust. I didn’t do that very well now, did I?”

His mouth curved into an actual smile. “And yet, you are sitting on my couch, waking me up from nightmares.”

“I knew you were struggling. You still are. There are techniques that can help with that, to help you deal with stressful situations. That’s where I would have started. Eventually. When you were ready.”

His fingers found a crease of the blanket in his lap, he started fiddling with it. “Do you think I’m ready now?”

She looked at him. “I don’t know, you tell me.”

He looked up at the ceiling as if trying to find some guidance from somewhere. “Martin once said ‘ready’ isn’t a feeling, it’s a decision. The man is annoying but sometimes he’s actually surprisingly insightful.”

She smiled. “He texted me earlier, said you weren’t answering his messages. He’s worried about you. And Jasper.”

Carl let out a dismissive huff. “Yeah, right.”

“Come on, you know that he cares about you. Both of you. You should answer his texts.”

“I’d rather hear about those techniques you mentioned.”

Now it was Rachel’s turn to frown. She looked surprised but then sobered. “I’d probably start with a grounding exercise.”

“Grounding exercise, yeah?”

“It can help ground you in the present when you’re stressed or overwhelmed. You start with naming five things you can see. If you want to take it further, you name four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Very simple but often very effective.”

Yeah, that shit. He knew he wasn’t made out for it. “So I start talking to myself while I fucking lose it. Wicked.”

“You don’t have to say them out loud.”

He just grunted in response.

Rachel added, “You know, the more often you do it, the more natural it becomes.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

“Could have come in handy just now, when you woke up panicking.”

“I wasn’t panicking,” he quickly denied, but he knew they could both see through the white lie.

She shifted her position, put her hand near his leg just shy of a touch. “How about you try to get some real sleep? You know, in bed.”

He tried to look at his watch but it was too dark to see. “What time is it?”

She reached over to pick up her phone. “It’s only half nine.”

“And I just slept, what? An hour? Two?”

“Aye, sounds about right.”

“I doubt I could go back to sleep right now. You should go home.”

“So you’re not going to invite me to sleep in your bed again?”

Was that an actual Rachel deadpan? His mouth twitched, then formed a smile. “If I remember correctly, you invited yourself. Do you *want* to sleep in my bed again? Because I’m not gonna say no, it’s the soundest fucking sleep I’ve had in months.”

“I was kidding.”

“Shame.”

“Carl…”

And there it was again, the letdown that was supposed to be gentle but actually wasn’t. “Yeah, I know. I’m a—”

“Don’t say fucking mess.”

“But I am.”

“What you’re going through right now would be tough on anyone. I think you should give yourself a bit more credit.”

“For what, for holding it together as long as I have?”

“No, for being as strong and loyal as you are.”

It had been a long time that anyone had said anything as poignant as that to him, and he didn’t know what to do with the compliment. He wasn’t good with them, never had been. Most of his life he’d been told what a fucking failure he was.

She gave him a smile that he could only interpret as encouraging and got up from the couch. “I’ll go home. Please call me if you need anything or if you want me to come by again. And please answer Martin’s texts.”

He rearranged the mask, grinned faintly and made a fake military salute. “Aye aye, Dr. Irving.”

She sighed. “You’re insufferable.”

“Just living up to my good name.”

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The next morning, Carl found a note in the kitchen. He picked it up, recognising Rachel's neat handwriting. When had she left this?

5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise. And box breathing. Google it.

He smiled and pocketed the note to do just that later.

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Chapter 4 – Fixing Pipes

Jasper's hospital room was still the same, his unconscious figure kept alive by machines was the same, Carl doing his best to make the time to be there was the same.

He stood at the foot of his bed, his gaze fixed on the pale figure lying motionless. A doctor he'd spoken to several times before entered quietly—Dr. Monroe—clipboard in hand, her expression calm but alert.

"Mr. Morck?"

"Call me Carl."

"Okay. Carl." She glanced at the chart, then at Carl. "Looks like Jasper's ready for the next step."

"Next step?"

"We've now started to reduce the sedatives and will gradually keep doing so over the next few days. If his body responds well, we'll extubate—remove the breathing tube—so he can breathe on his own. Vital signs will be monitored continuously. Just so you know what to expect, the first signs of recovery are usually purposeful movement. We'll ask him to squeeze a hand, follow a finger with his eyes, maybe speak."

Carl nodded once, eyes still fixed on Jasper. "And if he doesn't?"

"Then we wait, make some adjustments to the medication," Monroe said. "His voice will likely be hoarse from the tube. He's on painkillers, so the broken ribs shouldn't be too bad at first. He might get frustrated with the pain or the medical equipment."

She paused, then added, "With the ventilator gone, there's a risk of pneumonia if he doesn't breathe deeply enough. Coughing and breathing exercises help, but with the broken ribs, they'll hurt. It's not always easy to watch."

Carl glanced at the IV line. "What about food?"

"We'll start with fluids. Then soft, digestible foods—apple sauce, soup, that sort of thing. He'll need to drink as much as possible so we can remove the IV."

Carl grunted. He still remembered that whole routine. Nine circles of hell. He didn't envy Jasper in the least.

"If all goes well, he will be transferred to the neurology ward in a few days, his consultant there would decide on further course of action. Another thing you should know is that the brain swelling was around his frontal lobe region. That can affect concentration, planning, judgment, emotional expression. He may not quite be himself for a while."

Carl's eyes didn't leave the bed. "But that passes?"

"Yes, in the vast majority of cases, it does, especially in young patients like Jasper. The rest is up to him but we have reason to be optimistic."

Carl didn't respond. He just stood there, watching the rise and fall of the chest beneath the sheets, wondering what was ahead for both of them, hoping that it would all go well.

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"Carl," Donna greeted him as she opened the door for him.

He found himself wrapped in a quick embrace before he could even take his coat off.

"Donna," he greeted her.

When he walked into the living room, Hardy was sitting on the couch next to Jude, their youngest. Both were holding a video game controller, engaged in a game that looked chaotic and fast-paced. Something with animated characters running around a kitchen.

"Dad!" Jude said exasperatedly. "You're cheating again."

Hardy threw Carl a quick glance before looking back at the screen. "Hey, mate."

"Hey," Carl greeted back. This was a sight for sore eyes, seeing Hardy's enthusiasm and liveliness coming back.

Donna intercepted Carl before he could plop down on the couch, giving him a knowing look. "Help me in the kitchen for a wee bit, will ye?"

Carl got the hint and followed her. It looked like she was preparing supper. Lasagna, by the looks of it. She handed him a few carrots to cut into smaller pieces. "Let the boys finish off their game. Jude has pestered James about it for a while, they finally got around to it today."

He gave her a smile. "Sure."

They worked for half a minute in silence before she asked, "How's Jasper?"

He gave her the pertinent updates and she was happy to hear that there was finally some progress. And then there was the inevitable question. "And you?"

He knew she wouldn't be satisfied with his usual, 'I'm fine.' He shrugged. "You know. One day at a time."

"Only thing we can do, right?"

He looked at her, knew these past few months hadn't been easy on her. They were both victims of circumstance, forced to clamour their way through the mire to try and come out the other side.

She stepped around him to grab the minced meat package that lay on the counter. "It's probably not my place to say, but I don't think we've ever thanked you."

His brow creased and she elaborated, "For all that you've done for us—for James. It's been a tough few months, and I don't think he'd be where he is without you."

There was a sudden lump in his throat, because Donna would never know just how much truth there was to that statement. He tried to quickly clear his throat. "He'd have done the same for me."

"Maybe so, but we're still grateful. You're a really good friend, Carl."

His face contorted with unfamiliar emotion for a brief moment. "Thanks," he said just above a whisper.

"You'll let us know if there's ever anything we can do for you, will ye?"

"Yeah."

She smiled at him. Donna's smile could light up a room. "I mean it."

"Yes, I know."

"Did Victoria ever turn up?"

His face darkened. "Yeah. On and off. You know how she is. She's never been anything even close to fucking dependable."

Donna sidled up to him, briefly squeezed his arm. "Jasper's lucky to have you."

"I'm not sure he would see it that way."

"He's a teenage boy. He'd never tell you in so many words but you've always been there when he needed you."

"Wish that were true."

"Carl. You're always so hard on yourself."

Just then, Ethan came into the kitchen. "Carl!" he greeted him enthusiastically.

"Hey, buddy," Carl said playfully.

“When’s supper ready? I’m hungry.”

“Not yet,” Donna said. “At least another half hour.”

“Is Da still playing *Overcooked* with Jude?”

“Why don’t you go check?”

Ethan grumbled and left the kitchen, and Donna gave Carl a knowing look that seemed to say, ‘See? Teenagers…’

Donna was now starting to mix the sauce. “You know, it’s really good to see James back at work.”

“You like having him out of the house, yeah?”

She rolled her eyes. “As much as I love him, he becomes pretty insufferable when he’s bored. And he loves working with you.”

Carl leaned in closer to Donna, “Likewise, but don’t tell him that, it’ll go straight to his head.”

She chuckled. “Never.”

Just then, Hardy’s voice boomed over from the living room. “Donna?!”

She gave Carl a telltale look, then she went to check. “Yes, Luv?”

“When’s supper ready?”

Carl had to smile. Like father, like son. He’d really missed this.

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Despite the explanations he’d been given regarding Jasper’s recovery process, Carl really didn’t know what to expect. Hannah, the nurse he’d talked to before, had given him a quick update that Jasper had shown some first signs of consciousness in the morning for brief periods of time. She said it was a very good sign.

Now Carl sat on the side of the bed, reading aloud from his book, like he’d done the previous few days. It felt less strange now, almost like a regular thing between them. Every now and then, he’d stop reading, would watch Jasper chest whether it still rose and fell. He’d been extubated in the morning, an oxygen cannula strapped to his face now.

Carl went back to reading out loud, but then, a low sound—barely audible—escaped Jasper. A hand twitched, reaching for something that wasn’t there.

Carl leaned forward. “Jasper?”

Jasper let out another hum, his eyelids fluttering open. The right eye was bloodshot, it took Carl by surprise. “Hey, Jasper, can you hear me?”

“C-Carl,” Jasper croaked, voice raw and broken.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m here.”

His eyes roamed the room, unfocused. Carl kept his voice calm. “Hey. You’re in the hospital. You were in an accident. Do you remember?”

Jasper hummed again, confused, and started pulling against his IV.

Carl got up from the chair, stepped forward, his voice low and steady. “Hey, Jasper. Look at me.”

Jasper’s gaze settled on Carl for a moment, then drifted away again.

Behind Carl, a doctor entered with Hannah. Carl stepped back, letting them work. They ran through the standard checks—commands, reflexes, eye movement. Carl watched in silence, his arms folded. They didn’t seem alarmed, which Carl took as a good sign.

Jasper was already fading again when the two of them left. Carl stayed behind, sat in the chair again, watching the rise and fall of Jasper’s chest, letting the relief take hold.

Progress. Finally.

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Somehow, Basement Q didn’t seem quite as depressing the next morning, Carl thought. The full team was there when Carl walked in, dumping the box with doughnuts on Hardy’s desk where it landed with a thunk.

Hardy pointed at it. “What’s this?”

“What’s it look like?” Carl said.

“It looks like I wanna ask who you are and what you’ve done with DCI Morck.”

Carl feigned exasperation. “This is the thanks I get for feeding you lot?”

Akram came walking over, opened the lid of the box. “This looks very delicious.”

“Thank you,” Carl said pointedly in his direction. “At least one fucking person here has some manners.”

Rose was now also there, pointing at a sugar-coated doughnut. “Does that one have strawberry jam in it?”

“How the fuck should I know? It’s not like I hand-picked them.”

Hardy eyed the box suspiciously. “Wait. There might be one with mustard hidden in there.”

Akram looked at him quizzically. “With mustard? Is that a Scottish specialty?”

“Fuck no,” Hardy said. “It’s a fucking setup. You know, the kind of shite they pull on April Fool’s.”

Carl grabbed a chocolate covered doughnut and went to his desk where he unceremoniously plopped down on his chair, put his feet up and heartily bit into the thing, giving Hardy his best Cheshire cat grin while he was at it.

Hardy glared back at him. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“You bet.”

Hardy fished a doughnut with sprinkles out of the box and broke it in two. Apparently there was no mustard, and he took a bite.

Rose was also happy with her strawberry jam doughnut, licking the sugar off her fingers at her desk. She looked over to Carl. “Thank you. This is really nice.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Carl grumbled.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I know you’ve got a reputation of most crabbit detective in the building to uphold.”

Akram was still standing by the doughnut box, staring holes into it. “Something wrong with my doughnuts?” Carl asked.

Akram looked at him. “I do not know which one to try. They all look very similar.”

“Wait,” Hardy cut in. “You’ve never had doughnuts?”

“They are not very popular in Syria.”

“Haven’t you lived here for a while?”

“Eight years.”

“And you’ve never had a single doughnut in your eight years in this bonnie wee country?”

“I have not.”

Rose supplied, “Can’t really go wrong with simple glazed.”

“Which one is that?” Akram asked.

Hardy pointed at the one in the top right corner and Akram took it and tried a small bite. “Ah. They are similar to Awameh.”

Carl said, “I hope that’s a good thing.”

“Yes, that is a good thing.”

“Alright.” Carl planted his feet back on the floor and clapped his hands together. “Now that we’ve all done wonders for our blood sugar levels, where are we with the case?”

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He didn’t want to admit it, but every trip to the hospital became a little less jarring, the resurfacing memories a little less unsettling every time he went back here. There was something to be said for this strange routine that he wouldn’t wish on anyone.

Someone was sitting with Jasper as he entered Critical Care. The familiar sight of a shock of poorly dyed black hair that she wore like a badly executed disguise of her true age. Isla, Victoria’s bitch of a mother.

Carl scrubbed a hand down his face. He didn’t have the patience to deal with her, yet would have to face if he wanted to see Jasper. He sighed before he entered Jasper’s room.

Isla sized him up as he entered. “Oh. Carl. I didn’t know you were coming.”

Shut the fuck up, bitch, he wanted to tell her. She didn’t know the first thing about him. Or rather she only knew the twisted truth that her daughter would have told her. “I’m here every fucking day, Isla,” he told her. *Unlike you or his fucking mother,* he wanted to add.

“Language, Carl. I’m sure he can hear you,” she said in that patronising tone of hers that always bestowed the wish onto Carl to catapult her right out of the room.

He walked around the bed to stand on the other side of where she was sitting. “Has he woken up?”

“No. He’s been like this since I arrived. The nurse said he might come to if I wait a little.”

Carl just grunted, inwardly glad that Jasper hadn’t had to deal with waking up to what would be Isla’s incessant fussing without anyone there to do damage control.

Her always a little too shrill voice broke the silence. “Such a terrible thing. He shouldn’t be riding around on a moped unsupervised. With how terrible traffic is these days, it’s way too dangerous. He’s not even eighteen.”

Carl felt familiar anger welling up inside, but just then, Jasper stirred. Carl snapped to attention, all anger forgotten, as Jasper moaned softly, his hand fumbling for the oxygen cannula at his nose.

Carl moved a step closer to the bed. “Easy, fella. You gotta leave that alone.”

Jasper’s eyes tried to focus, landing on Carl’s face for a moment. His voice was hoarse. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital. You were in an accident.”

Jasper let out a sound—half confusion, half frustration.

“Are you in pain, Honey?” Isla asked him.

Jasper turned his head slowly toward her, eyes squeezed shut. “I don’t know.” He lifted his left arm, staring at the IV line. “What’s this?”

Carl explained, “You were injured. Do you remember any of it?”

“I don’t know.”

Jasper stirred again, started moving more. Carl leaned in. “Careful. You’ve got broken ribs.”

Jasper blinked slowly, processing. “Okay.”

“I want to go home,” Jasper murmured.

“I know,” Carl said. “But you need to recover first. You just came out of an induced coma.”

Jasper tugged at the oxygen cannula again, more urgently. “I want to go home.”

Carl reached out, gently took his hand and guided it away to keep him from messing with the equipment. “It’s okay. You’re safe. You’ll go home when you’re ready. I’m sorry, but you have to stay here until then. I’ll stay for a while if you want.”

He licked his lips, swallowed. “I’m thirsty.”

“We’ll get you some ice chips.” He threw Isla a pertinent look, who got the hint and got up to fetch some.

Jasper finally seemed to settle, his breathing slowing. Carl adjusted the oxygen line, suppressed the urge to smooth a stray lock of hair from Jasper’s forehead.

“I’m here. Get some rest,” he said quietly.

Jasper’s eyes closed again, his body surrendering to sleep.

Isla came back with a plastic cup in her hand, giving Carl a sharp look as if to say *great, you’ve robbed me of my five minutes with my grandson*. He had to suppress the urge to punch her in the face.

She put the cup on the nightstand with a dissatisfied sound. “We need to talk about Jasper’s care.”

He glared at her. “What about his care?”

“Where he’s going after he’s discharged. I hope you’re not suggesting he goes back to live with you.”

Carl bristled. “Where else would he be going?”

“He will need close care that I don’t think you’ll be able to give him.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting he stays with you instead.”

“I can be with him every day, provide what he needs. He’ll need time to recuperate, he will need a lot of help.”

“For fuck’s sake, Isla.” He raised his voice, had to rein himself in not to outright yell at her. “You’re making a lot of fucking assumptions here that you know absolutely fucking nothing about.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Let’s call a spade a spade. You’ve never been a good father, Carl. Nor a good husband.”

“Careful,” Carl snarled through a clenched jaw, “I’m sure he can hear you.”

She grabbed her designer handbag off the floor, put it on her arm. “We’ll have that conversation later.”

“Can’t fucking wait,” Carl said, his teeth still clenched.

He watched her leave, balled his fists by his sides as he sucked in a sharp breath. He wanted to punch something really fucking hard. “Fuck,” he muttered, throwing one last glance at Jasper’s unmoving form before he left the room in quick strides.

He didn’t trust himself not to fly off the handle right here, and he knew that it couldn’t be in this room. He needed to get out of here. Now.

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That night, Victoria dropped by Carl’s flat with her usual short notice announcement that she expected to be honoured without question.

They quickly disposed with the forced pleasantries, and then Victoria got right to the point, seamlessly continuing where the conversation with Isla had left off. She, too, insisted that Jasper should stay with her mother because of Carl’s lack of competency and time to devote to Jasper’s care.

It quickly escalated to a shouting match, like it usually did when they started arguing about something they fundamentally disagreed on. Old arguments and accusations were dredged up, tempers flared, insults flew like sea spray on cragged rocks.

It ended with Victoria throwing cold, cutting denunciations at him, and then stomping out on high-heeled shoes whose clacks on the hardwood floor underlined both their anger and frustration.

Carl was barely able to contain his rage. He turned his back to the kitchen door, leaning onto his arms, digging the heels of his hands into the edge of the kitchen counter. How dare she

accuse him of not being there for Jasper, not willing to put the work in, not willing to do whatever it took?

She was such a fucking hypocrite! She wasn't the one who was there without question, who witnessed the whole fucking ordeal every fucking day. She wasn't the one who had to step over demons dancing on thin ice in thawing conditions every time he set foot in that place.

He felt his breath quickening, felt himself going into the spiral, felt the rush of anger threatening to overwhelm.

No. He wouldn't let her win. Not this time.

He inhaled, held his breath for four seconds, slowly exhaled, held his breath for four seconds. One, two, three, four, inhale. One, two, three, four, hold. One, two, three, four, exhale. One, two, three, four, hold.

Suddenly, there was a sound behind him. He whipped around.

"Rachel." His voice sounded gravelly.

"Hi," she simply said.

Something was different in her demeanour, he looked more closely. There was a glint of tears in her eyes. It made everything shift, the anger immediately replaced with something else. "What's the matter?"

And then, to his confusion, her mouth formed a smile. "Nothing."

He relaxed somewhat against the counter, his eyes narrowing. "People don't generally get all teary-eyed for nothing."

She chuckled. "No, they don't. You just caught me off-guard."

"By doing what? Yelling at my ex-wife?"

She stepped closer, stood by the kitchen table and lightly touched the backrest of one of the chairs. "You looked up box breathing."

He looked down, suddenly embarrassed. "So what if I did?"

"That's a really good thing, Carl."

"Yeah," he sighed. "Hate to admit it, but it does help."

Rachel turned towards the hall and vaguely gestured in the direction. "So that was your ex-wife I just met."

Carl's face darkened again, his jaw clenching. "Victoria. In all her fucking glory."

"I heard you fighting."

He paced a few steps away, towards the living room. “Yeah, no fucking surprise there. We disagree on Jasper’s recovery plan. She thinks it’ll be better for him to stay with his grandmother because I’m not a—” he put it in air quotes, “—stable and reliable presence and can’t give him what he needs. Fucking ironic, seeing how *she’s* the one who’s out of the country eighty percent of the time.”

Rachel frowned. “And you’d rather have him stay here?”

“Yeah.” He met her eyes. “Please don’t tell me that’s a terrible idea.”

“No,” she said quickly. “It’s not a terrible idea. But it’s a big commitment. He’s going to need a lot of help, especially in the beginning. Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

He lifted his hands, then let them drop frustratedly to his sides. “No, of course I’m not ready for that. Who is ever fucking ready to have to wipe their kid’s arse because he can’t do it by himself anymore? But I’m willing.”

“Isn’t he going into neuro rehabilitation after the hospital stay?”

He had looked into it earlier, had made a few phone calls. “Well, it’s the NHS, so no big fucking surprise that there are no beds available anywhere. They suggested a supported self-management kind of thing. Honestly, it sounds pretty fucking terrifying, but what’s the alternative?”

“Do you want me to make a few calls, see what I can do?”

He lifted his head to look her straight in the eye. “Would you?”

“Of course. I’ll do it first thing tomorrow morning.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Thank you.”

“What is Jasper saying about all this?”

He shrugged. “He’s barely lucid right now. And, you know, he’s still a kid.”

“He’s almost 18. He should get a say.”

“Yeah, well, I sure fucking hope he doesn’t want to stay with Victoria’s bitch of a mother. No sane person would.”

“Again, maybe Jasper should make that choice.”

He sighed. “Stop being so fucking rational. It’s annoying.”

Rachel smiled. “Occupational hazard.”

“I’ll ask him when he’s more with it.” He walked over to the fridge, unfastened a leaflet that hung there, holding it up to Rachel. “You hungry?”

“Mexican?”

“You hate Mexican?”

“I don’t hate it, it just tends to not sit with me very well.”

He carelessly threw the menu onto the table. “Okay then. Suggest something else.”

“There’s a Croatian place down the road.”

He drew a face. “Does it require for me to actually go there?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I don’t think they do take-out delivery. But their pierogi is supposed to be very good.”

“I thought that was a Polish dish.”

“No. More like generally Eastern European.”

He waved a hand. “Whatever.”

“You’d rather stay home.” It wasn’t a question.

He hesitated, then said, “No, it’s fine.”

Rachel pulled out her phone. “You know what. How about I give them a call and see if they can prepare some to pick up?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

Rachel phoned the place and made the arrangements. Carl started making tea, figured he’d repay the favour she’d extended when he had come to her place unannounced. Well, this wasn’t exactly unannounced. She *had* texted earlier. But still.

He looked through the overhead cupboard, shifted a few items from left to right. He fished out a packet of fig rolls that he put on the kitchen table where she was already sitting.

Apologetically, he said, “Best I can do. Can’t promise they’re not expired.”

She drew a face. “Will you hate me if I tell you that I don’t actually like fig rolls?”

He grinned. “I don’t either.”

She picked up the packet and looked for the Best Before date. “Might explain why they expired over a year ago.”

She asked about Jasper and Carl brought her up to speed. She eventually looked at her phone and excused herself to pick up the food.

Carl relocated to the couch, thinking he'd just sit back and relax for a few minutes. Of course that backfired hard, with him waking up half an hour later to Rachel sitting at the kitchen table, scrolling through her phone.

He got up and stood sheepishly in the doorway to the kitchen, combing a hand through his hair. "Sorry, guess I dozed off."

"It's alright."

Two take-out boxes were stacked neatly on the kitchen table. He pointed at them. "I hope you didn't wait for me."

"You have a microwave, don't you?"

He indicated it over in the corner, not as if she hadn't already seen it so many times.

The pierogi were quickly warmed up and Carl actually found that he quite enjoyed the dish, favouring the cabbage ones over those with spinach and ricotta. He also found that he enjoyed Rachel's company more and more. She was pretty good with reading the room (another occupational hazard, he guessed) and knew when to push and not to push.

He didn't feel like talking quite as much tonight, and Rachel seemed comfortable with stretches of silence between them. Granted, their road up to this point had been a little rocky, and in hindsight he was surprised that she hadn't bailed on him a long time ago. He'd done some dodgy shit, like the phone pinging and the home address lookup that should have sent any decent woman running right there and then.

Yet, she was still here, and he had absolutely no idea why.

He put his spoon down and lifted his head to look at her. "I don't think I've ever thanked you."

Her brow furrowed for a brief moment. "Thanked me? For what?"

"For sticking around."

Her mouth curved into a small smile. "Not something you're used to, I'm guessing."

He looked down at the soup plate in front of him. "You know I don't always make it easy."

"Maybe not, but there are people where it's all the more rewarding if you make the effort."

He looked up again. "Remember when you said you were my plumber? And here you are, still fixing pipes that others don't even notice are leaking."

She smiled again. "I'd like to think of it more like me handing you the gaffer tape so you can make the dysfunctional parts functional again on your own."

His fingers found the handle of the spoon and he started fiddling with it. "What if something's beyond repair?"

“Then we get help, maybe find a better plumber. One with the right specialty or better tools.” She leaned forward in her chair. “What are you saying, Carl?”

He shrugged, sagging back in his chair. “I don’t know. I’m just… tired.”

“Of what? Of you struggling?”

He rubbed his face with one hand. “Yeah. Maybe. Some days are fucking hard.”

“Do you want me to help you find someone who will work with you on that?”

He looked up, looked at her, sought out her soft, brown eyes. “I’d rather it’d be you.”

She nodded slowly. “I understand that, but I’m not sure we can go back to where we started. A relationship like that, there have to be boundaries. We’ve long crossed those.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “And now I don’t know anymore if that’s a good or a bad thing.”

“Carl, if you don’t think I should be here, I can leave.”

“No,” he said immediately. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave, either.”

He looked down at the spoon in his hand, noticed a large scratch that was on it. “So where does that leave us?”

“With a starting point. Something to build from. If we both want that.”

His voice was low. “I do. But I don’t know if I can ever be what you want me to be.”

“I don’t want you to be anything. I want you to be you.”

He gestured at himself. “But this current version of me isn’t exactly relationship material.”

“And maybe it doesn’t have to be. We can take it one day at a time. Self-awareness and acknowledgement is big step. I think you don’t necessarily realise, but you’ve come a long way from when we first met. And there will be stretches along that road that will be smoother, easier to navigate. Until you don’t need a driving instructor or L plate anymore.”

His mouth curved into a mischievous smile. “Look at how effortlessly we moved from dishwashers to driving school.”

She laughed lightly. “Does that mean I graduated from plumber to driving instructor?”

“That was *your* metaphor, not mine. Did you ever get that dishwasher of yours fixed?”

“I did. Works like a charm now.”

“I guess that means all that’s left to fix now is your driving style.”

She shot him a look. “Seriously? You don’t like my driving style?”

“I barely know your driving style.”

“Yes, that is true. Yours is atrocious, by the way.”

“You should drive with Rose, it’ll really make you appreciate mine.”

“Women are statistically better drivers than men.”

“Says who?”

“Statistics,” she deadpanned.

He laughed gently. “Yeah, I call fucking bullshit.”

“Behind the wheel, men are more skilful but also more dangerous. Women are a lot better at managing risks and avoiding accidents. There’s actual papers on it.” She lifted her hands, palms toward him. “I don’t make the rules, it’s science.”

“I still call bullshit.” He took a sip from his glass of water. “The pierogi were delicious, by the way.”

“Perhaps that means women are also better at making food choices.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no. The spicy queso from the Mexican place is fucking awesome. Even Martin loves it. And that says a lot.”

“Did you reply to him?”

“Yes, *Mother*.”

She stayed quiet, seemed pensive. “Come on,” he said jovially. “That was a joke.”

She quickly smiled. “Oh, I know.”

“He says he might be back next week. Or the week after.”

“Blessing or curse?”

He tilted his head at her. “Both?”

“Come on, you secretly love him.”

“I love how he cleans the bathroom and does the laundry. Don’t love the unsolicited philosophy lectures or the opera at full blast.”

“You should love that he’s also one of those people who stick around.”

Carl chuckled dryly. “Well, it’s not like he has much of a choice, seeing how he pays me to actually live here.”

“Oh, but I’m sure he could have found a more convenient living situation by now if he really wanted to.”

“Yeah, well, there’s something to be said for complacency.”

“Ah yes, Carl Morck, the champion at warding off any compliment that comes flying his way.”

“Compliments are overrated.”

“Self-destructive bullshit is overrated.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Ouch. Shots fired, Dr. Irving.”

“You do need the wake-up call sometimes, DCI Morck.”

He moved the spoon on his plate where it made a slight clanking sound. “I do, don’t I?”

She just looked at him, and he felt an overwhelming urge to get up, pull her up from the chair and kiss her right there. He quickly averted his eyes and the moment passed. Unsure what to do, he got up and put both their plates in the sink.

She also got up from her chair and asked, “Need a hand with the washing up?”

He stepped away from the sink, putting another foot of distance between them because he didn’t trust himself. And because he *really* didn’t want to fuck this up. “Nah, I’ll do it later. Want me to drive you home?”

She looked at her phone and typed something into an app. “It’s alright, there’s a bus coming in thirteen minutes.”

“At least let me accompany you to the bus stop.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

“I am a policeman, after all.”

She laughed gently. “Alright then, DCI Morck. I’ll accept the offer.”

He made a mock bow, then gestured towards the hallway. “Lead the way, Milady.”

“Oh, shut up.”

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Chapter 5 – You’re Here

Being alone in the flat was still a strange dichotomy for Carl to get used to. Very often, with Jasper and Martin around, he wished for solitude, for people to leave him the fuck alone. Now that solitude was all he had, it felt too oppressive and too silent.

The occasional drip from the kitchen sink flow heater would make his head perk up, he’d jump when the neighbours’ kids upstairs would trample across the floor as they were playing, and everything was just… too quiet.

Saturday breakfast would be a silent affair, so he skipped it altogether. He'd grab something on the way to the hospital later. The cafeteria there wasn't half bad.

By the time 12 p.m. rolled around, Carl was already antsy from not knowing what to do with himself. He half considered dusting off his running shoes, but he knew he'd have to start from the very beginning to steadily get back in the game and slowly work his way up to even be able to do a full 5k. He didn't think he'd have the resilience to stick with that right now.

Instead he got into the car and drove out to the Royal Infirmary. When he got there, he was surprised to see Victoria sitting with Jasper. For a split second, he fought the urge to turn right around and leave, but then he figured it was ridiculous. He was here for Jasper. He could fucking suck it up for half an hour and deal with his ex's passive-aggressiveness. For Jasper.

She looked up at him when he entered the room. "Carl," she said, as if she hadn't expected him to be here. And maybe that was just as well. Him not being there got him into this mess, got him stuck with an end result that was served to him in the form of divorce papers.

"Victoria," he greeted her neutrally.

He stood by the foot of the bed, watched Jasper who lay still, breathing evenly. Carl looked at her. "Has he woken up?"

"Not in the last five minutes."

Five minutes. Yeah. Another quick stopover for her, no doubt. She asked, "Have you spoken with him?"

He gave a small shrug. "Woke up for a minute yesterday. Barely recognised me. But, you know, at least it's something."

"So what—"

Just then, there was a sound from Jasper—low, strained. He stirred beneath the sheets, letting out a hum, but this one carried a note of distress.

Carl's eyes were immediately locked on him. "Jasper?"

"No," Jasper muttered, his eyes fluttering open.

Carl went to the side of the bed. "Hey. You're in the hospital. Do you remember?"

"No," Jasper repeated, more forcefully this time. His body began to shift, restless and erratic.

"Jasper," Carl said, stepping closer, voice steady but firm. "You need to stop moving. You've got injuries."

"It hurts."

"Yeah," Carl replied. "You've got broken ribs. It's going to hurt."

He threw Victoria a quick look. She looked stricken. Helplessly, she said, “Babe, it’s alright. Do you need us to call the doctor?”

Jasper’s hand fumbled toward the IV line, tugging at it awkwardly. Instinctively, Carl reached out to stop him, but Jasper recoiled violently.

“No! Don’t touch me!”

Carl flinched, pulled back. His voice hardened. “Jasper. Leave that alone, there’s a needle in your arm.”

“I don’t want it,” Jasper said again, his voice rising.

He managed to yank at the IV until it tore free. Blood welled at the site, a thin red line trailing down his arm and soaking into the white sheets.

Carl tried again, more cautiously this time. “Jasper, stop. You’re hurting yourself.”

“You’re full of shit!” Jasper spat. “I can never trust you!”

Carl froze. Coldly, he told Victoria, “Go get someone.”

She obliged, left the room as Carl watched a clearly agitated Jasper, his hand now clawing at the oxygen cannula with Carl standing there, paralysed. He didn’t know what to do, didn’t want to make it worse. He felt gutted and powerless.

Within half a minute, a nurse and a registrar were heading toward Jasper’s room and took over. Carl stepped away, lingered by the door, arms limp at his sides. There was blood on his hands.

Jasper was still confused, delirious, thrashing. Blood on the sheets. The cannula half off his face. His voice loud, panicked. Carl felt a knot the size of a melon in his gut.

They had warned him this might happen. That agitation was common. That it wasn’t anyone’s fault. But watching it unfold was something else entirely. It was brutal.

“It would be better if you left,” the nurse said gently.

It took a few seconds until he could move. Then, wordlessly, he walked out into the hallway. Victoria was nowhere to be seen. She’d bailed when things got tough. As usual. He left the ward.

She was standing by the waiting area to the side, typing something into her phone. He walked closer, feeling the adrenaline still pulsing through his veins. He shoved his hands in his pockets, not trusting them to be steady.

She looked up at him. “Is he okay?”

“No, of course he’s not fucking okay!”

“Was he like this yesterday?”

Carl let out a frustrated exhale. “No. They said this could happen. Agitation, confusion. Apparently it’s normal.”

“You still think you’re equipped to handle this when he gets home?” Her voice was cold and sharp—the pointed tip of a rapier ready to slice.

“He won’t be like that when he gets home.”

“Oh yeah, and you know that, how?”

He raised his voice. “Because the doctors have said so. Which you’d fucking know if you’d been here to have even one of those conversations.”

“So what, you’ll just put him in his room and ignore him, like you usually do?”

Carl bristled. “No, I’m not gonna put him in his room. Jesus fucking Christ. I mean, I know you have a low opinion of my parenting skills, but it amazes me that you think I’m *that* incompetent. Yes, I may be a bit of a prick sometimes, but for fuck’s sake, this is *Jasper*. Tell me, if you thought I was that much of a screw-up, why did you insist he stay with me in the first place?”

She glared at him. “It was what he wanted. And you were… different… then.”

“Different. Uh huh. Yeah.”

She briefly met his eyes, then looked away. “Come on, Carl. Even you have to see that—” she made a vague gesture with her hand “—getting shot thing has done a real number on you. And I don’t know if you’re getting help with that, but knowing you, you’ll just ignore it until it blows up in your face, because that’s what you normally do. And as much as you think I don’t care about my son, I’d rather not have him be there to watch all of that first-hand.”

He laughed dryly. “Oh, now I’m a screw-up *and* a fucking headcase.”

She shook her head. “Well, you’re making my point.”

He turned away from her. “I was seeing a therapist.”

That seemed to have piqued her interest. “Voluntarily?” It was what Martin had asked as well. Apparently he was that transparent.

“No. But I’m working on it.”

“Oh, you’re *working* on it. I’m sure that’s going well.”

“You’re unbelievable.” He turned back around to face her. “And you know what? This isn’t even up for discussion anymore. You signed Jasper over to me, which, by the way, means I have sole custody, so I’ve decided that he’ll stay with me. Conversation over.”

“Oh yes, wonderful that you’re also working on your raging egotism.”

Carl sucked in a breath to try and keep the rage in check that was rising like a thermometer over an open flame. “Okay. You know what. Let’s ask Jasper what he wants. How about that?”

“I think that’s the smartest thing you’ve said all day.”

“Well, I’m glad we finally agree on something. I’ll ask him when he’s a bit more with it. Do you want me to record it so that we have proof? Or have your overbearing mother here as a witness?”

“Jesus,” she muttered under her breath. “Just ask him.”

“Yeah.” He deflated, now devoid of all energy. “I will.”

“Well,” she adjusted her handbag on her arm. “I’ll be off. Let me know what you decide.”

Carl just nodded, crossed his arms and watched her leave.

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By Monday, Carl felt somewhat more relaxed. He’d spent more time with Jasper on Sunday, they’d had a few actual, albeit short conversations. He was more lucid now, and it felt like a big weight had been lifted off of Carl’s shoulders.

Sitting at his desk, he was looking through something that Rose had e-mailed him, not quite understanding what it was supposed to tell him. “Where’s Rose?” he asked into the room.

Hardy pointed his finger upwards. “Upstairs. Sorting something out with the boss. Her words.”

The boss. Yeah, he should speak to Moira about the fucking ramp for Hardy that had yet to be installed.

He grabbed his police badge lanyard and put it over his head to make his way up.

Moira’s office was empty when he exited the elevator and walked along the rows of desks. Ready to turn back around, a flash of magenta caught his eye. Rose in one of her colourful blouses was standing to the side with DCI Bruce, engaged in conversation. Carl could never resist the chance to antagonise the man.

As he approached, he couldn’t help but overhear Rose. “Carl doesn’t seem to think so.”

Carl’s curiosity was piqued and he decided to hide behind the concrete pillar right behind them.

“Morck’s a bloody lunatic,” Bruce said.

“He is *not* a bloody lunatic!” Rose said assertively.

“There’s plenty of evidence to the contrary.”

“Oh yeah? What kind of evidence?”

“Absolutely zero regard for any of his colleagues, ignores every rule in the book, curses out everyone he comes across, meddles in cases he has no business meddling in—”

“It’s his own shooting, for Christ’s sake!” Rose cut in.

“All the more reason he shouldn’t be involved in it.”

“I want to see *you* get shot in front of your partner and best friend and then come back here after four months with the investigation having gone absolutely bloody nowhere.”

Bruce bristled at the comment. “We did get somewhere.”

“Did ye? Well, I don’t see anyone locked up for shooting three police officers on the job. Seriously, Logan, this case would already be solved if they’d let Carl work on it.”

“Oh yeah, that’s another thing on that list. His absolutely massive bloody ego that towers over us all.”

“It’s not a massive ego if he actually *is* better than you, though. Oh, and unlike some people here,” she gave him a pointed look, “he’s a really good mentor.”

Bruce huffed in disdain. “Mentor? Morck? Hell would have to freeze over before I’d ever call him that.”

Rose shook her head disgustedly. “It’s really sad that none of you has the balls to try and get to know him.”

“No thanks. I prefer my working day free of insults and bullying.”

“Carl is not a bully.”

“Oh, I think many people here would beg to differ. And if I remember correctly, your first time working with him wasn’t exactly sunshine and rainbows either.”

“That wasn’t on Carl.”

“I’m sure his warm-hearted and charming personality didn’t help.”

“Jesus, Logan, you’re such an arse.”

Just then, Carl chose to come out of hiding and stepped right in, commenting, “I’d say you’re a fucking cunt, but apparently I’m not allowed to say that anymore, so I guess I won’t. Oops.”

Carl shot Rose a sideways glance and the triumphant smirk on her face had definitely been worth it.

“Christ, Carl.” Bruce looked at Rose. “I hope you can see that he is making my exact bloody point.”

Carl gave him a mischievous look. “Rose is right about one thing. I *am* better than you.”

“Piss off,” Bruce told him. “Go back to your basement and be a bloody nuisance somewhere else.”

Carl gave a mock courteous nod. “Gladly, but I’ll need to pry Rose from your grabby little hands. Who, you know, actually voluntarily asked to be on my team and whom I’m actually *mentoring*.”

Rose was still grinning. She followed him when he gave a nod towards the elevator.

After the elevator door closed behind them, Carl looked at Rose. She had a sheepish look on her face. Carl said dryly, “That was pretty ballsy of you.”

She sighed. “Logan’s an incompetent little prick. Seriously, I don’t know what Moira sees in him.”

“Oh, no objections from me. But I didn’t know you loved me this much.”

She gave him a look. “Of course you do. You just don’t want to admit it.”

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Before Carl got out, he leaned closer to Rose and whispered, “Thank you.”

He could feel her self-satisfied smile burning into the back of his neck without even looking, but then he waited for her to catch up with him. “Are you getting involved in Bruce’s case now?”

She looked at him. “You mean your shooting?”

“Yes, I mean my fucking shooting.”

“No, why would I get involved in that case? Our conversation was about something else.”

“Should I be worried that you’re cosying up to Bruce?”

“Carl. Seriously. You’re worried that I’m absconding? Did you miss the part where I told him you’re a really good mentor and he can shove it up his behind?”

That made Hardy perk up. “You’ve told Bruce to shove it up his thrawn arse?”

Rose gave him a pointed look. “Aye, I did.”

Hardy flashed her a grin. “Atta girl.”

But Carl wasn’t quite satisfied. “Why did my shooting come up?”

Hardy piped in jokingly, “Hey, it was *my* shooting, too.”

Carl gave Hardy a sharp look that Hardy absolutely ignored. Rose sighed. “Carl. We all know that Bruce hasn’t exactly done a bang-up job on this. You’re back now and Hardy is, too.

Moira's had three detectives on the case for months now and they've got bugger all. People talk."

"You know something I don't?"

"No. I don't. I just meant… you know… generally."

"So what do people talk about? Generally…"

Rose was getting irritated now, throwing her hands up in the air. "I don't know. That it should have been solved by now. That Bruce is looking more and more ridiculous. That the case deserves more attention. That kind of thing."

"Yeah, can't say I disagree with you there."

"And I stand by what I said. If you were looking at it, it'd be solved by now."

Carl grunted in frustration. "Except Moira doesn't fucking think so."

Now Akram joined the conversation. "And she is right. The victim of a crime should not be investigating their own case. It introduces significant bias."

Carl turned to face his desk. "Yes, thank you, Akram. Did anyone ask for your fucking opinion?"

Akram wisely didn't reply and Carl walked into the room to stand amidst their desks. "It's a fucking joke that *I* had to be the one to tell Wilson and Clark that the guy at the McDonald's was probably the driver and not the shooter, that Anderson was putting his fucking prints all over the place on purpose. Or that Archie Allen doesn't actually have a fucking daughter. Why the fuck did no one think to look into that? It is not that fucking hard!"

Hardy perked up at that. "Wait. When did *that* happen?"

A dry laugh escaped Carl's throat. "Hm, let me think. Ah yes. It was right around the time when I found out you were keeping from me that you could fucking walk again."

"You're still mad about that?"

"Yes, I'm still fucking mad about that! And you know what also happened while you were being wooed by Dr. Loo? They asked me to come in for a fucking line-up. Which of course turned out to be just as fucking useless. It's been how many months since then and they still have fuck-all." He lifted his arms. "God, this is such a fucking shitshow."

Carl spun on his heel, wished he had the tennis ball in his hand to squeeze right now. In the absence of it, he balled his right fist and opened and closed it a few times, then rubbed the back of his head with his fingers in his hair.

Heavy silence settled over the room until Hardy said, “You know that Moira is right, though. You can’t work on the case.”

“Yeah,” he said by way of a sigh. “Still fucking frustrates me.”

“We’re still looking at it.”

That made Carl spin around to look at Hardy. “*We*?”

He waved his hand. “Yeah, you know, the department.”

Carl narrowed his eyes. “Did you look at the case?”

Hardy shrugged. “About as much as you, probably.”

“So you knew all this?”

“Well, it’s not exactly a prime secret around here.”

“Great,” Carl said sarcastically. “So I’m literally the last to know. Fucking awesome.”

He walked over to his desk, retrieved his police badge lanyard from his drawer and grabbed his jacket. He left the basement without another word.

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Just like when Hardy had been in the hospital, the bleak, light blue hallways were starting to feel familiar to Carl. Too familiar.

At least Jasper had now been transferred to the Neurology ward. Different hallways, same smell, same harsh light, same sterile environment. He was now sharing a room with another patient – a man roughly Carl’s age with encephalitis or something of the sort.

The other man acknowledged Carl as he entered and Carl gave him a cursory greeting with one hand. The man went back to reading a magazine.

Jasper had his eyes closed and Carl plopped down in the chair next to the bed, letting out a sigh.

Jasper stirred, blinked a few times.

“Carl.” Jasper’s forehead had creased into a frown, like he was still trying to figure out where he was and what was going on. “You’re here.”

Carl sat up a little straighter. “Of course I’m here.”

Jasper swallowed, now clearly dealing with physical discomfort. An uncomfortable knot formed in Carl’s gut. “You in pain?”

Jasper shook his head almost imperceptibly. “No, just… my mouth is really dry.”

Carl grabbed the plastic cup with the straw from the bedside table. “Here.”

Jasper reached out a hand, but Carl could see it was weak and shaky, so he held the cup up for Jasper to find the straw. He drank a few sips. Carl waited. “Alright?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Carl put the cup back on the table. “How you feeling?”

Jasper shrugged. “I don’t know. Weird. My chest hurts. My head’s kinda… fuzzy.”

“Yeah, broken ribs and a head injury will do that to you.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasper said in a small voice.

Carl looked at him. “For what?”

“For this.”

“Jasper. This isn’t your fault. It was an accident.”

“Yeah, but now everything’s kinda fucked up and you have to—”

“No,” Carl interjected. “Don’t do that. None of this is your fault. And yeah, this sucks, but we’ll figure it out.”

“Mum was here yesterday.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s been to see you a few times. We talked the other day.”

Jasper’s brow furrowed for a brief moment. “Did you fight?”

Carl sighed. Shit. It had to be bad if even Jasper knew that fighting was their communication standard these days. He left the question unanswered. “Did she talk to you about what happens after you get out of here?”

Jasper shook his head. “No.”

“She wants you to stay with your nan for a while.”

Something unpleasant immediately flitted across Jasper’s face, and Carl had his answer right there. He still asked. “Is that what you want?”

Jasper’s answer was a little more guarded than Carl had hoped. “I don’t know. Is that the only option?”

“No. You can come home, stay with me.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“I can take some leave. I’ll figure something out.”

Jasper bit his lower lip. “Mum doesn’t want that, does she?”

Carl sucked in a long breath. “No. She thinks your grandma will be better suited for the job.”

Jasper fiddled with the pulse ox clip that was attached to one index finger. “So what do *you* want?”

“What I want isn’t important.”

“It is to me.”

Carl nodded slowly. “I don’t know. I want you to come home, but I think we both know I’m not that great at the whole caretaker thing. But I’m willing to give it my best shot if that’s what you want.”

Jasper’s eyes were still fixated on the hands in his lap. “Yeah. I want that.”

Carl gave him a small smile. “Rachel’s made a few phone calls, we’re trying to find a place where you can stay first to help you get back on your feet.”

Now Jasper looked at Carl, alarmed. “I thought you said I could come home.”

“And you can, but this will make it easier. For both of us. You’ll need physio and all kinds of shit that I can’t give you at home. You know, for a little while. I’ll come and visit as much as I can. I promise.”

“Okay,” Jasper tentatively said.

“Hey,” Carl told him. “I promise this isn’t me chickening out. It’s what I think is best for you to get back on your feet. It’s just a little tricky right now to find a place that has beds available.”

“When can I get out of here?”

Carl looked at the ECG monitor Jasper was still hooked up to. “I don’t know. Another week, maybe? I’ll have to speak to the doctors again. But the main thing is that you’re getting better.”

Jasper’s next question surprised Carl and it hit him straight in the gut. “Were you scared? You know, when they phoned you?”

Carl drew in a shaky breath. “Yeah. No one wants to get that phone call.”

Jasper was looking at his lap again. “Yeah,” he said just above a whisper. “I hated it, too. You know, when you were…”

Unbridled emotion washed over Carl, making his brow furrow and the muscles in his face constrict. He tried to hide it as best as he could. Fucking trauma was now binding them together. Awesome. No family ever needed that fucking shit, yet here they were, and Carl was at a total loss for words. He finally said, “That was pretty scary, huh?”

Jasper nodded. “You were in surgery when we got to the hospital. It took so long. Felt like forever.”

“Your mum said you stayed in the hospital the whole time. Why did you never tell me that?”

Jasper shrugged, then grimaced when it aggravated his broken ribs. “I don’t know. It just never… came up, I guess.”

“I want us to be able to talk about stuff like that. You know that you can come to me with those things, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jasper said in a low voice.

Carl could see he was getting tired, his eyes starting to droop a little. “Okay. I’ll let you get some rest. Is there anything you need? Something you want me to bring from home?”

“No, I’m okay for now. Thanks for the new phone.”

Carl had bought him a new one after the old one had shuffled off its mortal coil in the accident. “Sure thing.”

Jasper looked at him, and there was youthful, unguarded insecurity there that Carl didn’t see all that often anymore. “Can you stay for a while?” There it was, the *fuck you tuck me in*.

Something in Carl wanted to reach out for Jasper’s hand and squeeze it, but he just nodded. “Of course.”

He kept sitting in the chair long after Jasper had fallen asleep.

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Chapter 6 – 5-4-3-2-1

It hit out of the blue. Like it usually did.

One moment, Carl was sitting at his desk, the next his mind started going into overdrive with no brakes to speak of. Images flashed in front of his eyes. Jasper in the hospital bed, Jasper yelling at him in a delirious state after waking up from the coma, Jasper humming unintelligible words, barely conscious. Jasper’s face contorting in pain, machines beeping.

It didn’t help that his neck had been especially bothersome today. Most days he’d learned to ignore the lingering discomfort from the nerve damage and the occasional tug of the internal muscle scarring. Today, it had been jarring and ever-present.

And now, like a fist punch coming out of nowhere, there was a knot in Carl’s gut the size of a grapefruit, a sharp tinnitus in his ears, something constricting his chest like an iron band that was ever tightening.

Suddenly, he was ringing for air, his vision blurring, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it. With his last shred of conscious thought, he clung on to one thing.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Five things he could see.

He pressed his palms flat against the cool surface of the table in front of him. “Desk,” he eked out, trying to concentrate against his fast, ragged breaths. “Pen.”

Cold sweat was forming on his neck and brow. His breaths were still quickening. Fuck. “Mug.”

“What else do you see?”

Rose’s voice. He’d momentarily forgotten she was still here.

“Come on, Carl, tell me what you see.”

“Lamp.”

“Good. That’s good. One more.”

“Computer.”

“Okay, now what do you feel? Name four things.”

Carl tried to concentrate. This was impossible. He tried to slow his breath, still panting way too hard. “Floor… Chair.”

“Okay, two more.”

“Desk,” he croaked again.

“Number four, Carl.”

“Fuck.”

“That’s not a thing, but I’ll let it count. What do you hear?”

“You.”

“Okay, one more.”

Now there was annoyance in his gut. He held on to that. “Fuck off, Rose.”

“Oh, come on, Carl, you can do better than that.”

He tried to breathe more consciously, managed to regain a shred of composure. He looked up, shot Rose a glance that he hoped conveyed what he menacingly snarled between breaths. “Leave.”

But Rose was Rose. “I’m not gonna do that, Carl.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. He severed the connection of his palms with his desk and leaned back in his chair, feeling absolutely drained. He dragged both hands down his face.

A minute of silence, only Carl’s increasingly more steady breaths breaking it, and Rose hovering right there, three feet away.

He finally dared look up, prepared for pity or humiliation or a derogatory quip. But there was none of it. Just someone who understood. Her gaze was on him, her voice quiet and calm. “What do you need?”

What did he need? Fuck if he knew. Less drama in his life. A brain that wasn’t intent on fucking him over. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice raw.

“Do you still have that tennis ball?”

It wasn’t a half bad idea. He opened his desk drawer, the sound of the metal rail way too loud in his ears. He grabbed the well-worn ball, relished the familiar feeling in his hand.

Rose quietly retreated to her desk, then came back with a water bottle that she held out to him. He took it wordlessly, gulped down a few mouthfuls. Rose half sat on the edge of his desk.

Carl’s temper flared out of nowhere. “Don’t hover over me like I’m some wounded fucking animal, yeah?”

She got up and started walking over to her desk, but Carl called after her. “Wait. Sorry.” He squeezed the tennis ball, trying to distract himself with something tangible. “I’m just…”

“It’s alright, Carl. I get it.”

“Can you keep this—”

“Yes,” she immediately said. “Please don’t worry, I’m not gonna tell anyone.”

“Thank you.” It was genuine.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but are you on any medications for this?”

He sighed. Did he want to bare his soul to fucking Rose? “Took some antidepressants for a while.”

“But not anymore?”

“No.”

“I hope you didn’t quit them cold turkey.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Why?”

“Because you’re supposed to taper them. Jesus, Carl, I’d have pegged you smart enough to actually read a patient information leaflet.”

“Does anyone ever read those?”

“Everyone except you, apparently.”

“They’re full of fucking side effects. Fucking scares me.”

“They exist for a reason.”

“Yeah, to intimidate people into not fucking taking the fucking drugs.”

“No, it’s to inform you about actual benefits and risks. And not all side effects happen to every patient. In fact, they come with expected probabilities.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How do you know so much about that shit?”

She shrugged. “One of my friends works in pharma.”

“Yeah, greedy fuckers.”

“They’re actually not. Did you know that a clinical tri—”

“Not interested,” he cut that conversation short.

Rose softened and stayed quiet as she arranged some items on her desk, then slung her bag over her shoulder. She hesitated a moment as she walked past Carl. “Will you be alright?”

He looked up at her. “Alright might be pushing it, but yeah. Go home.”

She turned to go, then turned back to him. “You know, if you ever need anything, you can give me a call. Or send me a text.”

Rose was probably the last person he’d reach out to, but he appreciated the sentiment all the same. Yet, all that came out was a non-committal grunt.

She nodded and gave him a little wave. “Good night, Carl.”

He wordlessly jerked his head towards the elevator to indicate she should go. Listening to her steps walking up the stairs, the knot in his stomach made way for something a little lighter.

Gratefulness. Working down here, with a group of people he’d assembled, or rather who had assembled themselves around him wasn’t so bad. No, that wasn’t true. It wasn’t bad at all. Quite the opposite.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He looked at the screen, then answered it with, “Rachel.”

“Where are you?”

He frowned. “The basement.”

“At work?”

“Yeah. What other basement would I be at?”

“So you forgot.”

The accusation in her voice was clear. Shit. He tried to rummage around in his head but it was all empty spaces and white fog tonight. “Yeah. Probably.”

“Probably? Carl, we had tickets.”

Shit. Tickets. Yes. There had been that. One of Rachel’s best friends was part of an amateur theatre group and she’d asked if he would go to the premiere with her. It wasn’t something he’d gone to see if she hadn’t asked, but it sounded nice enough. He’d said yes. And then forgotten like the fucking idiot that he was.

“Fuck,” he muttered. His mind had been elsewhere. “I’m sorry,” he tried. He knew it sounded feeble. “You could have reminded me.”

“Or I could have trusted that you know how calendars and phone reminders work.”

He could hear she was clearly upset. “I can leave now, be there in thirty minutes.”

“You know what, don’t bother. It’s about to start now. Bye, Carl.”

She had hung up before he could say anything, and he slammed the phone down on the desk more forcefully than he should. “Fuck,” he said again.

He considered for a moment whether to drive there anyway, but he was dressed in his usual slovenly jeans, hoodie and walking shoes. Not exactly theatre material, although he suspected it was more of a casual affair. Still. He had wanted to make an effort and this clearly wasn’t it.

What also grated on him was the thought of socialising. Too many people, too much small talk, fake smiles, trying to twist himself into a person he wasn’t. For her, because after all she’d done for him, she at least deserved that.

So what he did instead was drive to the nearest grocery shop to get a bottle of nice rosé. Not that he knew the first thing about wine, but he’d caught a glimpse of an empty bottle in her recycling and thought he remembered what the label looked like. Somewhat miraculously, he even found that same one, or at least one that he thought looked like it. He hoped he wasn’t fucking this up, too.

When he got home, he put the wine in the fridge, took a shower, and gave it his best shot not to look like he’d just literally got out of bed.

He waited another hour before he got back into the car. The wine wasn’t quite fully chilled when he took it out of the fridge, but it’d have to do.

Rachel wasn’t home yet when he arrived. Or she didn’t want to open the door, but Carl decided to opt for optimism, plus he didn’t see any lights on. He went back to his car, which was conveniently parked so that he could overlook the street leading up to her front door.

This was familiar. Surveillance. He'd done this countless times. Which also made it feel… wrong. Rachel wasn't a suspect. She'd already accused him of stalking her once.

When she came into view ten minutes later, walking up the street in the dim illumination of the streetlights, he pulled out his phone and dialled her number, hoping she'd answer.

He saw her fumbling for her phone, then heard her voice, the exasperation still clearly present. "Carl."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but I'm currently watching you."

She stopped walking and looked around. She was probably too far away to make out his car in the darkness. He added, "I know it's slightly creepy, and I promise I'll leave if you want, but I was really hoping you wouldn't." He waited a beat. "Even brought a peace offering."

"Where are you?"

"Down the road, in my car."

She resumed walking and he waited. When she didn't say anything, he probed. "So…?"

"So I'm trying to decide."

He closed his eyes for two seconds, ready to take the rebuttal on the chin. She finally said, "What's the peace offering?"

"A bottle of rosé."

"For a moment I thought you were going to say a tube with tennis balls."

He couldn't help a short, genuine laugh. "Yeah, you really need to get those anger management issues of yours under control. Wish I had thought of that instead of bribing you with the alcoholic beverage of your choice."

She was now one house over from her door. "Which of course you know because you spied on me."

"You can hardly call it spying when the evidence is so clearly laid out for me. So is that a yes?"

She sighed. "It's not a no."

He opened his car door and got out to approach from the other direction. He gave her a little sheepish wave as he neared her and came into view. She waited for him to catch up by the gate to the front steps.

He stopped three feet away from her, holding up the bottle of wine, wishing he'd thought of a gift bow. She raised her eyebrows. "Wow. Even my favourite."

He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, thanking his passive perception skills. "I'm glad I at least got *one* thing right today. Because I definitely fucked up the theatre thing."

She pressed her lips together. “Yes, you did.”

He held out the wine to her. “Olive branch?”

She didn’t take it and instead opened the metal gate. He waited and then she turned back to him, gesturing towards her door. “Well, come on, then. You weren’t so shy before.”

He didn’t need her to say it twice.

Having been to her flat before, he made his way to the kitchen, put the bottle on the counter. She joined him a minute later. Gesturing at the bottle, he said, “It’s probably not as chilled as it should be, but I’d like to think it’s drinkable.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you even like wine?”

“Not especially, but I’ll drink it.”

“You’ll drink it,” she echoed. “You’re barely here for half a minute and already you’re insulting the poor Mirabeau.”

“I don’t suppose you have any beer.”

She shook her head. “There might be a bottle of Bulmer’s in the fridge.”

“I’ll take that, unless it’s that berry and lime shit.”

“Don’t you have to drive?”

He shrugged. “There’s always public transport.”

“You don’t strike me as the bus riding type.”

He chuckled. “You’d be surprised. Have to say, your couch doesn’t look all that uncomfortable either.”

“Just to make it clear,” she said as she walked over to open a drawer and take out a corkscrew. “This is not an invite for a sleepover.”

He lifted his hands in defence. “Understood.”

She got him a pint glass out of a cupboard as Carl retrieved the bottle of cider from the fridge, then she opened the rosé and poured herself a glass.

In the living room, he plopped down on the couch as she sat down in the armchair. This time, he chose to take her lead and put the glass and the bottle on the coasters she placed on the coffee table for him.

“How was the play?” he asked.

She glared at him. “Really? You’re going to lead with that?”

He sighed. “Look, I already apologised.”

“This was important to me. I’d been looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, alright. I’m a self-absorbed little shit. There, are you happy now?”

She shook her head incredulously. “No, I’m not happy now. Was there at least a good reason you were working late?”

He turned his face away from her, suddenly sucked back into the memory of his momentary breakdown. It still felt too visceral.

Something laced with more concern now swung in Rachel’s voice. “Carl?”

“I had a panic attack,” he said bluntly.

He turned his face to look at her, met her eyes for a brief moment. All annoyance was now gone from her tone. “How bad was it?”

He let out a huffy breath through his nose. “Wasn’t great. But I did that,” he vaguely waved a hand in front of him, “five things thing you mentioned. Rose knew it too, helped me through it. Could have been worse.”

“Do you know what triggered it?”

He shrugged. “Who the fuck knows.”

“Was it the shooting again?”

“No. Jasper.”

Now there was new concern on her face. “Did something happen with Jasper?”

“No. Just… I don’t know. General stuff. Hospitals. Whatever. Fucking hate them. Especially this one.”

“That’s understandable.”

He took another sip of the cider, relished the cool and bitter taste on his tongue. “Wasn’t just that, though. I did forget about the theatre play. Compelling evidence that I’m not relationship material. Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Sounds more like a convenient excuse to me.”

“I don’t know that it’s convenient, seeing how I actually wish it didn’t happen.”

Quiet filled the flat for a long moment, then Rachel said. “The play was really good. Nice mix of comedy and drama. I think you might have enjoyed it, too.”

He met her eyes. “Maybe next time?”

It was the first time she smiled at him tonight. “Yeah, maybe next time.”

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Carl was sitting at his desk, staring at the laptop screen, trying not to get annoyed with the useless junk he kept finding in his inbox. Police force end of summer party. Delete. Forensics conference. Delete. New standard operating procedure. Delete.

He heard the familiar clicking of Hardy’s crutches behind him. They stopped near his desk. A brown paper folder was dropped next to Carl’s computer.

He looked up into Hardy’s face. “The fuck is this?”

Hardy gave him an inscrutable look. “You can thank me later.”

Carl took the folder, opened it. It had a two-page police report in it. *RTC Involving Private Vehicle and Moped,* the title read.

Carl looked up at Hardy who was still standing there. “Moira having you clean up my mess again?”

Hardy just shrugged and made his way to his desk. “Unlike you, she knows you’re more likely to catch flies with honey rather than vinegar.”

Carl skimmed the report, his eyes landing on the status. Closed.

He read over the pertinent text. They’d caught the driver. An elderly lady with impaired eyesight whose husband had passed away recently. Her statement said she admitted to causing the collision with an explanation that her husband was no longer there to drive her to the doctor’s office. It had been deemed accidental without malicious intent, her driving license now revoked.

Carl ran a hand over his face, then lifted his head to lock eyes with Hardy. He didn’t need words to convey his gratitude.

Hardy nudged his head up a little. “You gonnae do anything with it?”

Carl considered it for a moment. What could he do that would result in anything helpful at this stage? He slowly shook his head.

Closing the folder, he opened one of his desk drawers and threw it in there. He had more important things now to focus on.

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A week later Jasper was finally discharged into an inpatient rehab facility that Rachel had organised and that Carl would forever be thankful for.

Carl was positively surprised that Jasper was being so agreeable about it. He seemed more upbeat every day, was putting the work in, making progress despite the broken ribs. Carl knew some of Jasper's mates were also coming by regularly now, he'd seen them sit out in the garden behind the building once, laughing, having normal teenage conversations. He'd allowed himself a smile at the sight.

And now the day had come that Jasper was coming home.

Martin had helped Carl getting Jasper's room in shape. They'd tidied it up and cleaned it, put new bedlinens on the bed. Rachel had offered to go with Carl to pick Jasper up, and Carl had easily agreed.

Carl stopped the car in front of their house, saying awkwardly, "Well, here we are."

Jasper deadpanned, "Yeah, I still recognise it, thank you very much."

Carl smiled. "Then get the fuck out so I can find a parking spot."

Jasper matched his smile and opened the door, not quite able to suppress the moan from heaving himself out of the passenger seat. Rachel was there to help him, then got Jasper's bag out of the boot.

It took Carl a while to find a parking spot, then he made his way up to the flat.

Martin was not so clandestinely fussing with Jasper, and Carl wanted to roll his eyes. He met Rachel's gaze who just gave him a *just roll with it* look. After some initial conversation, Jasper told them he wanted some time alone and shuffled slowly into his room.

Martin excused himself shortly thereafter, leaving Carl alone with Rachel.

He sat at the kitchen table, his steepled hands pressed against his mouth. She came up behind him, placed one hand on his shoulder. "You alright?"

"Yeah. I am now."

Her hand gently rubbed along his shoulder blade. He moved so that he sat sideways on the chair, gestured for her to sit on the one next to him so he could face her.

Her eyes were expectant on his and he said, "Can you help me find someone to talk to?"

"You mean a therapist?"

"Yeah."

Her mouth curved into a smile. "Yes, I can."

His hand twitched, and before he knew it, it was reaching out towards her. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, she took it and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you," he said just above a whisper.

What he saw in her eyes told him she understood that he meant a lot more than just the question he'd just posed.

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When Carl checked in on Jasper later, after Rachel had left, Jasper was sitting on his bed, his notebook in his lap. Carl lingered by the door. "Hey," he said.

Jasper looked up at him. "Hey."

Carl didn't quite know what prompted him, but he walked in, sat down on Jasper's bed next to his legs. "You alright?"

Jasper nodded. "Yeah. I mean, the broken ribs suck."

"Yeah, that's gonna take a while."

"I know."

Carl's eyes fixed on the incentive spirometer that was standing on Jasper's desk – a plastic device with a mouthpiece and two chambers with small floating balls. He pointed at it. "You gonna use that thing?"

Jasper shrugged one shoulder. "It's a total pain in the arse."

"Yeah, no fucking kidding. It'll be worse if you catch pneumonia, though."

"Yeah, I know."

"You want me to help you with it?"

Jasper grinned. "With what, catching pneumonia?"

"Yeah, that. Fun for the whole family. Can't wait."

Jasper sobered. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks, though."

"Anything else you need? You hungry?"

Jasper shook his head. "No. I'm okay."

"Okay," Carl said, getting up from the bed. As his hand found the door handle, Jasper's voice stopped him, made him turn around. "Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. You know, for…" Jasper made a vague hand gesture and left the sentence there.

"Don't mention it."

"No, I mean, I know this wasn't—"

“Jasper,” Carl interrupted him, his voice low and sincere. “You’re my stepson.”

To Carl’s surprise there were tears swimming in Jasper’s eyes.

Carl gave him a fond look before he retreated and quietly closed the door behind him, blinking against the sudden wetness in his own eyes.

Fucking hell, he didn’t usually get sentimental like this. What a brave new fucking world.

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The first inkling Carl got that something wasn’t quite right was when he woke up at 4 a.m., his stomach angry with something that didn’t want to belong there. They’d gone out for tea the night before, celebrating Jasper’s first month home, and this was the thanks he got?

Carl tried to push through whatever was rebelling in his stomach, but the nausea finally drove him into the bathroom where he upended last night’s supper into the toilet bowl.

It was gross and ghastly and Carl felt like he’s just run a 10k without any of the dopamine boost and all of the exhaustion. He rinsed his mouth, spat out the water and gripped the sink with both hands until the next bout of nausea had passed.

As he walked back into the hallway, Jasper’s door opened. His hair was messy, sticking out in odd places. “Are you sick or something?” he asked Carl tiredly.

Carl tried to put on a brave face, was fairly sure it wasn’t working but gave it his best shot anyway. “I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

Jasper retreated as instructed and Carl went back to bed, trying to ignore his roiling stomach, hoping for at least another few hours of sleep.

The next time he woke up, he bolted right to the bathroom, barely made it to the toilet bowl before he expelled the little that was left in his stomach, following it up with a good portion of dry heaving.

He felt spent and disgusting when he crawled back into his bed, closed his eyes, waited for slow death to find him. He vaguely registered noises from the kitchen. Martin making breakfast, no doubt. The guy seemed to like a good omelette in the morning. He felt nauseous just thinking about food, swallowed hard to try and keep that from happening.

Carl startled from a half-slumber when he heard a soft knock on his door a few minutes later. Jasper was standing there, lingering on the doorstep.

“You’re not fine. I heard you retching into the toilet.”

Carl tried dry humour. “Yeah. Guilty as charged.”

“You look like shite.”

“Gee, thanks. Gotta say I feel like it, too.”

“So you’re not going to work today?”

“Doubt I’d even make it to the car right now.”

Jasper just nodded and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Carl thought that would have been the last he’d see of Jasper for a while, but then, not five minutes later, Jasper was back, a mug in hand. He put it on Carl’s nightstand.

“What’s this?”

Jasper shrugged lightly. “What’s it look like?”

Carl eyed it suspiciously, trying to read the paper tag. “Like one of Martin’s detestable herbal teas.”

“Chamomile’s supposed to help with an upset stomach.”

Carl gave him a dismayed hum.

Jasper just stood there, like there was some kind of task he hadn’t quite finished yet. He vaguely pointed at the tea. “Are you going to drink it?”

“What, you my mother now?”

“No.” Jasper surprised him by sitting down on Carl’s bed. “You’ve been taking care of me for the past few weeks. You think I can’t repay the favour?”

“Jasper, it’s just a little food poisoning.”

“You just said you feel like shite.”

“Yeah, and I’ll ride it out and I’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“It sucks a little less when you’re not alone.”

It prompted Carl to look at Jasper, and there was something there that he hadn’t really noticed before. A certain kind of determination and sincerity. Something that had replaced the youthful naiveté with clarity and maturity. Like he’d grown out of the teenager and passed the threshold into adulthood.

It wasn’t a bad look on him, but Carl wished he hadn’t had to pay the price of going through a traumatic experience for it.

Carl sighed. “Yeah, I suppose it does.”

Silence settled for a moment, then Jasper asked, “Did you ever finish reading *The Shipping News*?”

Oh wow. That certainly transported Carl right back there. He closed his eyes. “I’m surprised you actually remember that.”

“I kinda don’t. Just bits and pieces. But I looked it up.”

“You looked it up, yeah?”

“There’s not that many books where the main guy is called Quoyle.”

Carl had to chuckle, then sobered. “I didn’t finish it.”

“You want to?”

He opened his eyes and looked at Jasper. “You’re not gonna read it to me, are you?”

“I could.”

“You’re actually serious about this.”

Something flitted across Jasper’s face. Disappointment, maybe. Carl sighed inwardly. Trust it to him to fuck a good thing up again. He pulled himself up into a sitting position with a groan, trying to ignore the headache that was beginning to rage war with his forehead.

He reached over to the bedside table, took the mug and sipped from it. He wasn’t much of a fan of chamomile, but had to admit the warm liquid felt good going down. He prayed his stomach would agree, once it settled there.

He pointed at the book that was lying on the bedside table. “Knock yourself out.”

A brief smile crept into Jasper’s features, then he got up and grabbed the book, making himself comfortable on the empty side of the bed. “You might have to give me a rundown of the first few chapters. My brain wasn’t exactly working right at the time.”

“You know, I think maybe mine wasn’t either.”

“Should we start from the beginning, then?”

Carl shrugged. “Not the worst idea.”

Jasper shifted his position, adjusted the pillow behind his back, then started reading out loud.

1. Quoyle. Quoyle: A coil of rope. A Flemish flake is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck so that it may be walked on if necessary. The Ashley Book of Knots.

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