Cautious Optimism

Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Summary: Carl could drive Rachel mad on the best of days, but his constant disregard of boundaries really isn't acceptable. Rachel draws the line and Carl doesn't take it very well.

Author's Note: This is a somewhat rougher version from an early draft of what eventually became my "Milestone One" fanfic. When I was reading through that draft, I felt it was too harsh for the tone of the fic, so I discarded it. But at the same time, I also liked it because it explores some of the criticism you tend to read online that questions the fact that Carl didn't respect Rachel's boundaries and basically started stalking her.

I kept the draft and started exploring it as more of a standalone piece with a nice side serving of angst and friction and then expanded it from there to build a somewhat different basis for Carl and Rachel's relationship.

I've tried to figure out where to insert this in canon, and it'll have to be somewhere between 1x08 and 1x09, but the trouble is that it doesn't quite fit with the timeline they are giving on the show. I'm normally very much a canon girl, but ultimately chose to make this an AU by putting a different spin on the tennis ball scene in Carl's flat in 1x09. No regrets, because now I kinda wish it had gone more like my version on the actual show (but totally see why it didn't).

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Carl Morck. The man would be the death of her. Rachel knew this, because despite being a total fucking prick dragging emotional baggage the size of China behind him, he was also the kind of ruggedly handsome that she knew was her weak spot.

And here he was, on her couch, cradling a mug of tea. Again. Despite their professional relationship having been severed, despite not having any appointment, despite her having made the boundaries clear. The boundaries he kept ploughing through, which wasn't just unprofessional, it was also fucking annoying.

"Why are you here, Carl?"

"Do I have to have a reason to be here?"

"Yes, you do. Seeing how your therapist is now Dr. Sonnenberg. Who is not me, and who does not practice in this exact location, in case there was any confusion on your part."

"I much prefer talking to you."

"Be that as it may, but this is highly unprofessional and I have absolutely no obligation to talk to you."

“Oh, come on now. You make it sound like such a chore. Indulge me?”

She sighed. He seemed unusually chipper. Could she refuse an actually good-humoured Carl Morck? She might as well enjoy it while it lasted. “All right, you have 10 minutes.”

He produced a notebook from his jacket pocket. “I had another dream.”

She wanted to roll her eyes. Not this again.

“Look, Carl, I’m not a dream interpreter.”

“I was driving a sports car. Lamborghini. Or maybe a Ferrari. First it was a normal road and then it became this… kind of bridge that was going right through a large body of water with barely any road markings and level with the water. I was driving a little too fast, then I lost control and went off the road, plunging right into the water, going down in the sinking car.”

He paused and Rachel said, “Okay. Then what?”

“Then I panicked and woke up.”

“Okay.”

“So what does it mean?”

She raised her arms in an impatient gesture. “I don’t know. Sometimes dreams are just dreams.”

“And sometimes they’re our subconscious trying to tell us something.”

“Look, Carl, we can’t keep doing this. I don’t know how many more times I need to say this, but I’m not your therapist anymore.”

“Do you have to be my therapist for us to have a deep and meaningful conversation?”

Rachel sighed. “No, but this feels a lot more like a therapy session than a deep and meaningful conversation between friends.”

Carl pointed a finger at her. “A-ha, there. You just called us friends.”

“No. In fact, I said the exact opposite.”

He had a mischievous expression in his eyes and a slight smile on his lips as he said, “And yet, you sought out my boss to tell her you were worried about me, you invited me into your home twice, offered me a cup of tea and unloaded your own sordid past on me.

“So I think maybe that’s a sign that you actually like me. Plus judging by the guy you dated in that quaint little daytime café, there is no way I’m not your type.”

“You know, for the fact that you’re unusually perceptive, it’s surprising that you seem to be missing the most glaringly obvious clues when it comes to your own personal life.”

“Oh yeah, and what would those be?”

“Okay. Let’s start with your teenage stepson, who you obviously seem to care about very much but are *so* determined to resent and push away at any possible turn. Or the fact that you got shot in the face—”

“It was the neck,” Carl interrupted.

Rachel continued unperturbed, “In the neck and suffered a major trauma that you try to just ignore and think you can carry on with your life as if nothing has changed. Or the fact that you have built up these walls around you that you assume are impenetrable because you’re Carl Morck and you’re the best at anything and everything but will absolutely crumble under the weight of the rubble when those walls actually do come down. And believe me, if you carry on like this, at some point, they will. And it will not be pretty.”

That stunned Carl into silence – which was somewhat unheard of. It was rare that he didn’t have a quick-fire sarcastic retort at the tip of his tongue.

Carl leaned back, suddenly deflated. “Wow,” he said in a low voice.

Rachel looked at him intently. “Yeah, wow.”

Her expression softened. She knew the outburst had been a bit harsh, and she hadn’t quite expected it to come out this callously. “I’m sorry, that was probably uncalled for. Although I do think that it’s something that you needed to hear.”

Carl’s eyes narrowed and he stayed silent for a long moment before he said, “I have no idea what to do with that.”

“And that’s okay. Dr. Sonnenberg will figure that out with you.”

He let out a derisive chuckle. “Dr. Sonnenberg. Yeah. She instils the wish in me that I’d rather take a fork to my eyeball than sit through another of her therapy sessions.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“Have you known me as someone who gives a fuck?”

“Are you done with your mandatory therapy sessions, then?”

“Let’s call this conversation one and Moira can mark it off the list.”

“So I guess that’s a no.”

Carl’s demeanour softened a little and his voice was unusually honest. “No, seriously. This is more helpful than Dr. Sonnenberg could ever be.”

This gave Rachel pause. While he’d had split-second moments with her where he’d been honest with her, where the walls made out of cynicism and snark were penetrable, but this was probably the most vulnerable and genuine thing he’d ever said to her.

And it confused the hell out of her. If she was not his therapist, then what was she? She knew Carl was a walking conflict, that he was desperately looking for a connection, for someone he could trust who might actually be able to break down his walls. She knew his walls were actually a safeguard to weed out the people in his life who wouldn't be tenacious and caring enough to *want* to break them down, and be there for the aftermath.

And he had, in some weird way, latched on to her because she was probably the one person in his life right now he was willing to trust to be able to do it.

But was she willing to be there for that? For the rejection and the battles and the constant pushback before he'd finally open up? To pick up the pieces afterwards, even?

This was such a weird place to be in, because this wasn't a work relationship anymore. The professional boundaries were no longer there, the right to withdraw and extract herself if those boundaries were crossed.

What if she didn't want that kind of commitment and complication in her life? What if she said no and ignored that it would have him stack more layers on top of the wall if she chose to break the trust he was putting in her?

Deep down, she already knew she wasn't ready to abandon Carl Morck. This profession, she hadn't just chosen it to make a living. She genuinely wanted to help people.

Which was another tricky question she didn't know how to answer. Was she only indulging Carl because of some sort of helper syndrome? Or misguided guilt. Pity?

He *was* a rather complex human being who had been through probably more trauma than was in his file that had shaped the man he was today—gruff demeanour, flaws, baggage and all. And she wasn't sure he was fixable, nor whether he even wanted to be fixed. Or should be fixed. That was probably the most important question of all.

His voice pulled her back to reality. "Devil got your tongue?"

She harrumphed. "No. That was a very beautiful thing to say."

"Beautiful, huh?"

"The moments where the true Carl Morck pokes through the crabbit exterior seem to be rather rare, but I like it."

"Yeah, well, don't get used to it."

She sat up a little straighter, made her voice a little more assertive. "Carl, in all seriousness, what are we doing?"

"We're having a deep and meaningful conversation between friends."

"I don't think I can do that."

He frowned, his face darkening. “Do what? Have a conversation with me?”

“Yes. No. This.” She pointed her finger back and forth between the two of them. “This half-arsed therapy slash friend talk. It has to be either or. Because I can’t be your private therapist whenever you feel like you have a brain fart or want to dump your emotional shit on someone.

“Now that I’m actually *not* your therapist anymore, maybe we can be friends. But I can’t be the kind of friend you only use and abuse whenever you need something. It has to go both ways. And we have to set certain boundaries.”

“Boundaries…?”

“Yes, like you can’t just turn up at my flat on a whim and expect me to drop everything and problem-solve with you. You have my phone number and you can call or text like any normal human being to make arrangements. And you need to understand that no means no, so if I say, ‘*No, I can’t see you right now,*’ you can’t turn up at my house anyway, or my work or wherever my phone pings. And honestly? I don’t know if I can see it.”

“See what? Me respecting boundaries?”

“Yes. Because everything I’ve seen from you so far was that you’ve pretty much ignored every boundary that’s in your way. Because you’re Carl ‘Superior’ Morck and the rules don’t apply to you.”

She looked at him, studied his face, and was surprised to see genuine disappointment there. Had she hurt him? His right eye twitched for two seconds. He ran the fingers of one hand through his shaggy hair, then he got up without a word and left.

She called after him, “Carl. Please don’t leave like that.”

Of course, in true Carl Morck fashion, he ignored it.

This time Rachel was determined not to let him dictate the outcome of the situation, so she jumped up from her seat and ran after him out into the street. “Carl!”

He just kept walking, so she jogged to catch up with him, placed herself in his way. “Don’t fucking walk away,” she said assertively.

To her surprise, he actually stopped. “And why would I not? Seeing how you have such low expectations of me and absolutely zero confidence that I am capable of treating you like a human being.”

She shook her head. “Don’t put words in my mouth. That is not what I said.”

“It is what you meant.”

“No, it is not.”

He stepped around her and started walking again, but this time Rachel caught up to him. “So what is this, then? Because it very much feels like you’re running away.”

“I am cutting my losses.”

“You are being a coward.”

And that seemed to actually upset him because he stopped. The tone of his voice was acerbic and cutting and there was something ugly and dark in his eyes that she had never seen before.

His voice sounded like a growl. “Do not *ever* call me a coward.”

Huh, Rachel thought, there was clearly something there. A button she had inadvertently pushed and now didn’t have the faintest idea how to unpush.

And Carl could feel it too, because he was nothing if not perceptive. He fastened his steps and Rachel, momentarily powerless and defeated, let him walk away.

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It nagged at her all day, to the point where she felt a knot in her stomach when she thought about it. She’d fucked this one up. And she knew she couldn’t let that stand.

Unsure what to do, Carl of course ignoring her calls, she did the only thing she could think of: She took a page out of his book and looked up his home address.

She was silently relieved when it wasn’t Carl himself who answered the door but instead a man of Indian or Pakistani heritage who looked like a Woodstock enthusiast born 50 years too late. “You must be Martin,” she greeted him. “I’m Rachel.”

She waited for his reaction, had no idea if her name would ring a bell. Apparently, it didn’t. She added, “Carl’s—” Should she say therapist? “Friend.”

“Carl has friends? That’s a bit of a surprise.”

“Is he in?” she asked tentatively.

“Nope. Still out, doing… whatever he’s doing. His timetable is very erratic.”

It wasn’t exactly a surprise to her. “Okay, I see.”

“Do you want to come in?” Martin gestured towards the inside of the flat.

“I probably shouldn’t.”

“I’ll be honest and say that a beautiful woman who claims to be an actual friend of Carl’s is intriguing enough to want to hear more.”

“Yeah, see, I met with Carl earlier today and might have said something that really upset him.”

“Ah,” Martin said, now enlightened. “And you were hoping you could apologise.”

She smiled a small smile. “Firstly I was hoping he wouldn’t close the door in my face. Secondly, that he wouldn’t yell at me right here in the staircase. Thirdly, I don’t know, that he’d at least hear me out…? That’s as far as I got.”

“And that sounds like a very realistic expectation where Carl is concerned.”

“Yeah,” she sighed.

Just then, the front door downstairs was opening, footsteps coming up the stairs. Rachel shot a somewhat panicked look at Martin, who just shrugged.

And lo and behold, there was Carl Morck trudging up the stairs. Rachel suddenly wanted to vanish into a puff of smoke, wished she had actually thought this through. But then it was already too late, because Carl stopped dead in his tracks as he laid eyes on her.

“Oh no,” he said as he walked up the last few stairs to the flat door. “We’re not doing this.”

To Rachel’s surprise, it was actually Martin who planted himself right in the doorway so that Carl couldn’t pass. Which Carl clearly didn’t like, but Martin was a good deal bulkier than Carl.

“Move,” he gave Martin the simple order, but Martin stood his ground.

Carl said more insistently, “I said *move*.”

“The least you can do is listen to her apology,” Martin told him.

Carl let out a disdainful huff. “The least you can do is step aside or else you can spend the rest of the evening in A&E where they reset your broken nose.”

That made Martin actually step aside and Carl wasted no time vanishing inside the flat. Martin shot Rachel a knowing look and lifted a finger to indicate he would be back.

The door fell into its lock behind Martin and Rachel waited. It didn’t take long until she heard muffled, raised voices. She could only imagine the exchange. It took a lot longer than she expected. Just as she was debating sitting down on the floor, the door opened again.

Martin looked somewhat more frazzled than he had before. “Sorry, that took a while.”

“It’s okay. I should probably leave.”

“After I just got him to agree to peace talks?”

She gave him a genuine smile. “Martin, you’re an angel.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure neither Jasper nor Carl see it that way, but I’ll take the compliment.”

Rachel tentatively neared the kitchen that Martin indicated to her before he vanished in the room next to it. She was surprised how orderly and, well, classy it looked. She had half expected some kind of mancave, full of haphazardly discarded items waiting to be tidied up and

a kitchen with unwashed dishes piling up in the sink. Then again, Carl was a minimalist with control issues, so maybe this was actually on par.

He was leaning against the counter, facing the door. She knew he was sizing her up. She also knew he wasn't sitting down because he wanted the option to easily leave.

She chose not to get too close and kept a respectful distance by the fridge. "Hello, Carl."

He didn't say anything but kept his gaze unnervingly on her, so she continued, "Is it okay if I come in? I can leave if you like."

He let out an impatient breath through his nose. "Well, you're already here, so I'll let you say whatever you came to say and then maybe we can all carry on with our lives."

She came right out with the most important statement. "I am very sorry."

His eyes narrowed. "For which part? The one where you said I didn't have the mental capacity to understand the basic concept of boundaries or the part where you called me a fucking coward?"

"Both. And the other things I said that weren't fair."

His voice was laced with the usual Morck sarcasm. "That's very gracious of you."

"I didn't mean to upset you and I don't think you're a coward. Perhaps I should have phrased that better."

"There's a better way to call someone a coward?"

"Yes."

When she didn't add anything else, he said, "Care to elaborate?"

"I'm not sure I should because I don't want to upset you more than I already have." She unclenched her hands in front of her, suddenly aware of how tense she was. "I'll make this short because you're right that we should get on with our lives.

"And I want to be honest with you, so I'll say it how it is. I think you're a good person and a very skilled police officer, but you've also been through a massive amount of trauma that I don't think you are coping with very well. And I think you know that too, but you're not necessarily willing to admit to it or work on it. And that's your choice."

She could see him wanting to cut in, but she raised her hand to silence him. "No, please hear me out.

"Carl, I want to help you, but you have to be ready for me to help you. This relationship we have right now is not conducive to either your or my mental health, so if you value our connection and would like to keep it going, you need to make that choice.

“And it’s okay if you don’t want to do that right now. You have my number, and you can call me if you want to talk. But if you turn up at my doorstep again unannounced, I will not indulge you. Can we mutually agree on that?”

His look on her was still intent and a little too piercing. “It doesn’t exactly sound like I get any say in the matter, so I’m not sure where the ‘mutual agreement’ part comes in.”

“Do you *want* a say in the matter?”

He looked like maybe for a second he might say something honest and meaningful, but the moment passed and he resorted to his usual cynicism. “Nah. I’ll just happily carry on with my life with my superiority complex and my massive ego to keep me company. They’re much easier to get along with anyway.”

Rachel drew in a long, weary breath. “Okay.”

She waited a moment but Carl didn’t seem to have anything else to say, so she half-turned towards the door. “I’ll see myself out, then. Have a good evening.”

She went to go as Carl’s voice called after her, “Have a nice life, Rachel.”

She had to resist the urge to stop and hesitate but she kept going. Carl wasn’t following, nor did she think he would. She drew the flat door closed behind her.

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Carl heard the door click into its lock from where he still leaned against the kitchen counter and immediately wanted to kick himself.

What the fuck was wrong with him? She was beautiful, she was one of the few people who seemed to care enough to do more than just tolerate his presence, she was smart and witty, she was someone he could maybe—*maybe*—trust enough to get close, and he’d just ejected her from his life.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath.

And as if on cue, Martin appeared in the kitchen, adding insult to injury with a dry, “Well done, Carl.”

He shot him a scathing look. “Not another word.”

“As much as I try, I don’t get you. You’ve got this lovely woman here who seems to genuinely care about you, not that I understand why, and what do you do?”

Carl’s temper flared. “I fucking *know*, okay?!”

“Then why did you kick her out?”

He rubbed one side of his face with one hand. “I don’t fucking know.”

Martin gave him an incredulous look. “How can you not? She nicely outlined all the points *for* you.”

“And of course you had to listen in, you nosy little shit.”

Martin made a *tsk tsk* noise as he went to fetch the kettle to put water on. “I hope you’re proud of yourself. Really, I do.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Carl hissed, then went to the fridge and picked up a can of beer with which he listlessly plopped down on the couch in the living room.

The cold, fizzy drink was bitter on his tongue—and he liked it just that way. For a moment he wished it he’d picked something stronger that would let him forget the rest of the night. But he’d also seen first-hand the havoc alcohol addiction could wreak on people’s lives, and he knew it wasn’t for him. He stayed away from the hard liquor.

Carl switched on the telly but for the life of him couldn’t concentrate on whatever was showing. The conversation with Rachel wouldn’t leave his mind. And as much as he felt vindicated for telling her to fuck off, there was a bitter tang of bile that swilled through him. Like he’d fucked up another thing in his life that he shouldn’t have.

But she’d called him a coward. No one called Carl Morck a coward. He had stood up for total strangers, had taken abuse, had taken punches, even bullets for people. People he didn’t know or care about, people who needed protecting – as simple as that.

He had shown up at Hardy’s bedside almost every day for months on end, even when both of them were knee-deep in depression and anger. He had taken on the responsibility of caring for a teenager he was not actually related to and faced the consequences of it every single day.

Carl Morck was *not* a coward.

The worst part of it was, Rachel had apologised. Had known she’d crossed a line and said sorry. And what had he done? He’d slapped the apology in her face and then shut and locked the door behind her.

He wasn’t a coward, but he was a fuck-up and everything around him was falling to pieces. He took another sip of his beer, then put the can on the table and sank into the couch, wanting to just fall unconscious and wake up somewhere else where every day wasn’t a massive fucking struggle.

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Carl didn’t usually dwell on things. But it had been four days now, and he was still thinking about Rachel Irving. And he fucking hated it, every time it happened.

He’d thought about texting her. A number of times. More than he’d like to admit. He’d even written a text and then deleted it before sending it. Twice.

Fuck.

Carl Morck didn't get sentimental like this. Carl Morck wasn't a fucking coward.

This morning he'd snapped and yelled at Jasper for no reason. It had ended in a shouting match, like it usually did. Jasper had yelled insults at him. Like he usually did. Carl regretted it afterwards. Like he *didn't* usually do, so that was new, too.

Martin had walked in on him in the kitchen, sulking with his phone in hand.

"Just text her already," he'd said.

"Fuck you," was Carl's response.

"The only one fucking anyone is you fucking yourself if you don't tuck your tail between your legs and grow a fucking backbone. God knows, she doesn't deserve you, but who am I to judge?"

The worst part was, Martin was right. He needed to grow a fucking backbone. And Rachel didn't deserve him. So he didn't text. He just did what he always did, he ignored the problem.

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The problem didn't want to be ignored, however. The problem stood right in his basement just three days later.

He heard the unfamiliar footsteps before he saw her. Swivelled around in his chair and was hit like a gut punch when Rachel walked right into Department Q where he had nowhere to run.

He was on his feet before he'd given his body the command to get up. "What are you doing here?"

She gave him a forced smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Not everything is always about you, Carl."

Ouch. That hurt.

He watched helplessly as Rachel ignored him and walked right up to Rose's desk. He wanted to eavesdrop but at the last minute decided not to. He wasn't even sure where that decision came from.

The conversation was brief and Rachel ignored him on the way out, too. Carl could practically see the loaded looks that Rose and Akram were exchanging across the room. Her footsteps echoed on the stairs behind him, and before Carl knew what he was doing, he went into a jog to go after her. "Rachel."

She stopped on the platform near the elevator. "Come to give me a lecture about not being allowed to intrude on your sacred sanctum?"

"No," he said, hoping it sounded as genuine as he meant it to. "Nothing like that."

She folded her arms across her chest, her eyes staring daggers. The message here was clear. ‘Fuck off, Carl, and leave me the fuck alone.’

He rubbed one eyebrow with his right index finger. “I shouldn’t have thrown you out the other night.”

Her tone was detached. “It’s fine. You didn’t throw me out. I left.”

“Same difference. I was a prick.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like that’s something new.”

He took a tentative step closer, which she counteracted by taking a step back.

“Rachel. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Her glare at him was no less upset. Fuck. He was fucking this up. He needed to grow a fucking backbone. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, but her voice was still wary. “I don’t know what you want me to do with that or what you want to accomplish here.”

“I don’t want this… to be awkward between us.”

She let out a dismissive huff. “Awkward? I think we’re way past the awkward stage.”

“No, I meant… This. I don’t want it to be like this between us.”

“Us? There is no us, Carl. There’s only you. Just like you want it.”

Holy fuck, she was seriously pissed off at him. More than he’d anticipated. He sighed. “I don’t want that.”

“Oh no? Now you want company? Or my attention? My help? Well, guess what. It takes two to tango.”

She turned to go, and he stupidly blurted, “I’ve been thinking about you. A lot.”

She shook her head but she stopped, not quite turning around yet.

He went on, “I don’t know why. Or maybe I do. It’s… I don’t fucking know what it is. All I know is I don’t want you to walk away.”

That made her turn around, made her quietly size him up. She had a hold on him that he couldn’t explain. He told her, “I’ll try. I will try to be a better friend. God, I’ll fucking try.” He lifted his arms with his palms up. “That’s the best I can give you.”

She blinked, like she was trying to decide what to do with that.

“Carl.” It sounded like the lead-in to the final blow that would knock him clean off his feet. “I want to believe you.”

“But you can’t,” he finished for her.

“No, I can. But I don’t know if I have the patience for what comes after.”

Patience. Vic ultimately hadn’t had enough of it. Conversely, the people that still were in his life seemed to have an endless amount of it. Sometimes he couldn’t figure out why. He was a fucking piece of work and Martin’s words were still fresh in his mind. Rachel deserved better than a fucking mental case who needed all the patience in the world to be around.

He took a step back. “You know what? It’s fine. Let’s leave it at this, yeah? I’ll accept your apology and we’ll keep it courteous and professional from now on.”

She gave him a slow nod. “Okay, I can work with that.”

It might have been meant as a gentle letdown, but it didn’t hurt any less than the full-on sucker punch that it actually was.

“Alright,” Carl gave her. He wanted it to sound noncommittal but somehow it came out more bitter than he wanted.

“Alright then,” she echoed.

He watched her walk towards the elevator and lingered a moment as she waited there, only turned around when he heard the familiar ding.

He wished he could just vanish, knowing full well that Rose and Akram would have questions. Sarcastic comments at the least. He wasn’t sure he was ready for them.

He walked back to his desk with angry strides, lifting his arms warningly. “Not a fucking word, okay?”

Akram just gave him a curt nod, Rose a crestfallen look but stayed quiet.

And Carl? Carl stewed for the rest of the day, unsure what to do with himself, which he was terrible at but had got used to enough by now to convincingly pretend not to care.

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Rachel couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation with Carl by the elevator. The whole way home, she replayed it in her mind. Should she have said something else? Could it have gone differently? *Should* it have gone differently?

She had to admit that he’d knocked her off-balance with the unexpected candour.

“I’ve been thinking about you. A lot.”

And so had she. Maybe not exactly the same way, but she was still thinking about him. The look on his face when he’d retreated had been kind of a gut punch. She knew that look. Disappointment. Defeat. Dejection.

And that was where the problem lay. Carl Morck had barricaded himself behind so many barbed wire fenced walls that his armour seemed impenetrable. But something had happened between them that had blown a cannonball right though them, and she'd seen him bleed. Just a little, and he'd immediately covered it up like a hunted animal terrified to admit weakness, but he was hurt all the same.

The worst part of it was, she had absolutely no idea what to do about it. Carl was unpredictable on the best of days. The cornered and wounded animal version of him might be even more unstable. And that worried her. She hoped he wouldn't do anything totally reckless and stupid.

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Carl's whole body ached as he got out of the passenger seat of the police jeep. The adrenaline high from finding Merritt Lingard had long dissipated and his injured shoulder was now making itself known. He rubbed his right eye, looking forward to just letting the exhaustion win by collapsing on his bed and not emerging from his bedroom again until the next day.

The light in the kitchen was still on despite it being well past 10 pm. Extracting all the tiny fucking pellets from his shoulder had taken ages and then there had also been the long trip back from Oban to Edinburgh.

Carl heard Jasper's voice first when he entered the hall. "It's like once you start, you just can't stop."

Martin supplied, "Like crack. Or dry-roasted peanuts."

The first thing Carl laid eyes on as he entered the kitchen was… Rachel.

"Ah, Jesus." He couldn't deal with that right now. Just couldn't. He closed his eyes, hoping she would be gone when he opened them again.

Jasper innocently greeted him with, "Hey, Carl."

"Hey," he said wearily and walked right past the three of them. He dropped his keys onto the coffee table in passing and went straight to his bedroom. It was Rachel who called after him, "Carl? What happened to your arm?"

Jasper echoed, "Arm? What do you mean?"

He could hear Rachel say, "He's got a sling," before Carl kicked the bedroom door so that it fell into its lock behind him.

He had barely toed off his shoes when there was a knock on the door. Despite Carl's gruff, "Go away," it opened. Jasper peered his head in as Carl sat down on the side of the bed with an exhausted thud.

Jasper pointed at the sling. "What the fuck happened to your arm?"

Carl shrugged it off. "It's buckshot. I'll be fine."

“You got shot again?” There was a sharp look of concern on Jasper’s face.

“Don’t make a fuss, yeah? It’s not a big deal. Didn’t even need stitches.”

“Buckshot? What the fuck happened that you were shot at with a shotgun?”

Carl started to get the sling off of him, wincing hard as the movements jostled his injured shoulder. “Can we do this tomorrow? We’ll have a lovely deep and meaningful, I promise. All the gory details, yeah?”

And then there was Rachel behind Jasper as he wrestled with the zipper of the borrowed fleece jacket, the now discarded sling landing on the floor where he’d thrown it. She quietly told Jasper, “Give us a minute.”

Rachel closed the door behind her, coming to Carl’s aid who had managed to get the zipper open but was struggling with getting his arms out of the sleeves. “Here, let me help.”

Everything inside of him wanted to send her away, but everything inside of him also wanted her to stay and help. Because fucking hell, he needed it.

She gently helped him peel his arm out of the jacket sleeve, sucked in a quick breath as she saw that they had cut away parts of his blood-soaked shirt to get to the injury.

“Carl, what happened?”

He repeated what he had told Jasper. “It’s buckshot. It’s not a big deal.”

“Maybe not to you. Does it hurt?”

He closed his eyes. “Feels like being stung by a hundred bees in the same place.”

She didn’t laugh. “It’s not funny, Carl.”

“Wasn’t meant to be.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I was a policeman today.” His voice was low. “First time in a long time.”

She crouched down in front of him, her palms placed gently on his knees. The warmth felt nice. Reassuring. Grounding.

“What do you mean by that?”

He closed his eyes. “We saved Merritt Lingard.”

“She’s alive?”

“Yeah. Barely. I hope she makes it.”

“That’s how you got shot?”

“Yeah. Little psycho fucker had a shotgun.”

“Did anyone else get hurt?” she asked, concern in her voice, too.

“Nope. Just lucky ol’ me.”

Carl was starting to try and get out of the long-sleeved shirt, which was even more difficult than the jacket. He muttered more than one, “Fuck,” through all of it. By the time they had accomplished that particular feat together, Rachel stood next to him with the blood-stained shirt in her hand.

He couldn’t help but smile. “Not exactly how I imagined you seeing me shirtless for the first time. In my own bedroom, no less.”

It elicited a small smile from her as well. “Not exactly how I imagined this night to end, either.”

“If it featured hot sex with the ratty English fella, I’m not sure I’m up for it tonight,” he said with a half smile, half groan.

She decided to ignore the quip and asked, “What do you need?”

With his right arm, he pointed at his wardrobe. “Pair of joggers and a clean shirt would be nice.”

She rummaged around the compartments until she found what she was looking for and handed the two items to him. “Anything else?”

“Some privacy? Unless you’re keen on getting a peek at my undies, too.”

She gave him a grin. “As tempting as it sounds, I think I’ll pass. Let me help you with the shirt first, though.”

Putting a new shirt on was somehow easier than getting the old one off, and he watched Rachel leave the bedroom before he went to work on changing his trousers. Definitely not how he had imagined this night to end either—neither regarding the Lingard case nor meeting Rachel Irving again.

And yet, somehow, it might have been a blessing in disguise because it had put a different spin on things. Like the most fucked up icebreaker if there ever was one.

When Carl emerged from the bedroom in fresh clothes, he felt marginally more human. He frowned when Rachel went into his bedroom. She emerged with the sling in hand.

“I know your manly pride doesn’t want you to wear this, but trust me that they gave it to you for a reason, and one of them is that it will hurt less and another that it will heal faster.”

He didn’t have the energy to protest. “If you say so, Dr. Irving.”

She helped him into the sling and he let her, under the watchful eyes of Jasper who seemed more concerned with the fact that Carl was injured than that there was a strange woman in their home who was handling his stepfather’s cantankerous personality like a pro.

Just as Carl had settled in on the couch, Rachel stood by the threshold to the kitchen. “Now that you’re taken care of, I should let you get some rest.”

“Wait,” Carl said, and he hated how feeble and desperate it sounded. “You haven’t even explained yet why the fuck you’re here.”

She smiled. “I think that’s another conversation for another day.”

“And here I was, thinking that I had finally got the hang of that thing about accepting help and all that.”

“I think you’ve got all the help that you need for now.”

“These two? Pfff, they’ll tell me to fuck off as soon as you leave through the door.”

“Don’t push it, Carl. I was going to let you off the hook for tonight because of extenuating circumstances.”

He made a theatrical facial expression. “You wound me, Dr. Irving.”

“Good night, Carl.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled.

When the door clicked into its lock behind her, Martin gave Carl the double raised eyebrows. “That’s a step up from ‘Have a nice life, Rachel’.”

Jasper frowned at him. “You said that to her?”

Carl gave him a noncommittal look. “Maybe.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Carl.”

Martin went into the kitchen and came back with a tennis ball tube that had a red bow on it and two balls left on the inside. “She brought these.”

Carl shook his head incredulously. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Care to explain?” Martin asked.

“You squeeze them. It’s supposed to have a calming effect.”

“Yes, that part has already been explained. So who is this woman and why is she giving you tennis balls as a relaxation tool? She your therapist or something?”

“She was,” Carl told him.

Jasper interjected, suddenly very curious, “You’re seeing a therapist?”

“I was. Don’t get excited, it was work-mandated. Didn’t really go anywhere and I fucking hated it.”

Martin supplied, “Clearly, you didn’t hate *her*.”

“Only reason I kept going, to be honest.”

Jasper gestured at the tennis balls. “So this is….?”

Carl didn’t know how to answer that. “I’m not sure. It’s a little complicated.”

“And this… buckshot? How did that happen?”

Carl sighed. “You can read all about it in tomorrow’s papers.”

“I’d rather hear it from you. Now.”

“The case we were working on. Saved a woman’s life today. Unfortunately my shoulder got in the way of a shotgun in the process.” He narrowed his eyes at Jasper. “Please don’t give me the disapproving looks today, yeah? Save it for tomorrow. Or better yet, eternity.” He shifted his position with a groan. “Tonight I just want a cold beer and eight blissfully uninterrupted hours of sleep.”

“I think that sling might get in the way of the latter.”

“Way to ruin the fucking illusion, Martin.”

“Painkillers are your friend. I hope they gave you something potent.”

“They said to take some ibuprofen.”

Martin shrugged. “Ah yes, that’s the NHS for you. I think we still have some in the bathroom. Though I’m not sure about the expiry date.”

Jasper got up from the other end of the couch and came back a minute later, putting a medication package onto the couch table. “You can have those.”

“You’re dealing ibuprofen now?”

“Not dealing. I get headaches sometimes.”

“Like after a night of excessive alcohol or weed consumption?”

Jasper just shrugged and Carl hissed, “Jesus Christ, Jasper.”

“It’s not that often. Just… after a party sometimes.”

Carl decided to let it go. He was almost 18. When it came down to it, he hoped that Jasper was smart enough not to let things get out of hand, but maybe this was a conversation they needed to have at a later time.

Carl leaned his head back against the headrest. “Just… can we maybe not talk for the foreseeable future? I’m fucking tired.”

He woke up three hours later, a blanket draped over him and a dull throb in his shoulder. Carl groaned, trying to figure out how he could get into bed without having to move. He eyed the

package of ibuprofen on the table. It was tempting, but it would require to move as well. Not quite as much but enough to be a deterrent.

In the hazy light from the lamp in the corner, he now saw the glass of water on the table. Next to it was a piece of paper and three tablets on it. With another groan, Carl pushed himself upright, looking at the note. It was Jasper's handwriting. "Says not to exceed 600 mg. Don't be a fucking hero and take these."

A small smile flitted across Carl's face. He put the three pills in his palm and threw them into his mouth, downing them with the water. Maybe they'd kick in by the time he'd brushed his teeth and crawled into bed. He fucking hoped they would.

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When Carl finally got out of the case debriefing the next day, his phone showed a missed call and a text message from Rachel. It read, "How's the shoulder?"

He texted back. "Fine."

Her response was almost immediate. "Liar."

"Not lying. Basking in the benefits of ibuprofen."

"Want some company later?"

He wanted to respond *Fuck yes*, but knew he shouldn't sound too eager. He opted for a neutral, "Company sounds nice."

"Who is this and what have you done with the real Carl Morck?"

He sent back a middle finger emoji, and she responded, "There he is. I was getting a wee bit worried. 6 pm sound alright?"

He replied with a thumbs up.

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Carl's doorbell rang ten minutes past six. He opened the door for her, and what greeted him was the smell of Asian takeaway that dangled from a plastic bag by her side.

"I hope you're hungry."

"Ravenous." He gestured for her to come in.

She smiled. "Perfect. Though I hope you also like Thai."

"I do. Unless it has squid in it."

"Nope. No squid."

Five minutes later, they were sitting at the table, Asian stir-fry and deep-fried meat piled on their plates and Carl clumsily trying to handle the chopsticks while Rachel seemed a seasoned expert.

When he was nicely filled, he leaned back in the chair, giving her a scrutinising look. She noticed it and returned his gaze. “If you’re asking if this is a pity visit, then no.”

“Okay. And yesterday was…?”

“Not a pity visit either.”

“Obviously.”

“I didn’t like how we left things at the station. Thought I’d try a peace offering.”

“You were lucky that you caught me at a weak moment.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’d have given me the boot otherwise?”

“You should know by now that I’m not exactly Mr. Congeniality.”

“I know by now that there’s an actual human being in there.” She pointed in the general direction of his chest. “I was hoping I could appeal to it.”

“It only comes out randomly when it’s being offered the right kind of lure.”

“If the lure is Thai food, then that shouldn’t be so hard.”

“Thai food is not always guaranteed to work.”

She leaned forward, her expression a little more no-nonsense. “But seriously, Carl. We should talk about the other day.”

“About how you didn’t think you had the patience to deal with me?”

“I know that’s what I said, but it’s a little more complicated than that, isn’t it?”

“I’d like to fucking think so.”

“Look. I know this got messy. And I don’t know where it’s going to lead. So let’s just take it one step at a time, okay?”

Carl studied here for a short moment, then said, “Yeah, alright.”

“Not exactly the enthusiastic endorsement I was hoping for.”

He let a faint, crooked smile slip. “Enthusiasm’s not exactly my strong suit. How about we settle for cautious optimism”

She laughed softly and some of the tension in the room ebbed away. “Cautious optimism it is, then.”

He nodded. That's what she was. Cautious optimism that he hadn't had in his life for a very long time. Cautious optimism that made everything seem a little lighter, a little easier to bear.

Cautious optimism it would be.