Dept. Q – A Collection of Gap Fillers

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That's A Nice Kid You've Got There

"Move," Carl scowled at Jasper as she strode away from the scene.

He was still fucking seething, his pulse racing, his adrenaline sky high. Jasper's steps were behind him, trying to catch up. Carl was vaguely aware that he was being filmed by a mob of onlookers, but he didn't fucking care. They had threatened Jasper. And that couldn't go unpunished.

Carl yanked open the driver's side door of the Ford, Jasper wordlessly got into the passenger seat.

Carl planted his hands on the steering wheel. He was still too riled up to speak. Jasper was rummaging around in his rucksack, eventually pulled out a wrinkled napkin and a half empty PET bottle of water and held them out towards Carl.

Carl looked at them for a long moment, then took the proffered items. He folded down the sun visor and started wiping the blood stains off his face. God fucking dammit. This shouldn't have happened. On so many levels.

When he had got the worst of it off, he looked at Jasper. "Tell me what happened."

Jasper looked… Scared. Intimidated. Shocked. And so, so small. "He, uh…" Jasper swallowed, stopping there.

"Tell me!" Carl snarled sharply. Jasper flinched. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. "Sorry," Carl said in a marginally less sharp tone.

"He… grabbed my knee and said that he… that he knew people who would pay money to see me naked and—" He swallowed again, "Rape me."

Carl's jaw was working, his hands were clenching the steering wheel, his knuckles bone white.

Jasper spoke again. "And he wanted me to tell you that he had said all those things to me."

This was… It was unfathomable. How dare that fucking creep mess with Jasper, mess with any kid like that! Carl balled his fist and hit the steering wheel. Hard. "Fucking hell!"

“Carl,” Jasper said next to him. There was something desperate in his voice. Something that made Carl listen. He looked at Jasper, knowing full well the rage was still written all over his face.

Jasper said, “Don’t… freak out, okay?”

Carl let out the most cynical of chuckles. “Well, it’s a little too late for that now, isn’t it?”

“He knew my name. Knew you.”

“Yeah,” Carl said dryly. “He was paid to do this to get to me.”

“Why?”

Carl couldn’t answer that question, wouldn’t answer that question. “It doesn’t matter.”

Jasper narrowed his eyes. “It doesn't *matter*? What the fuck, Carl. Are you fucking serious right now?”

Carl’s voice matched Jasper’s tone. “Yes, I am very fucking serious right now. This can’t be… This won’t happen again.”

Jasper let out a huffy breath through his nose. “What, are you gonna put me in protective custody now?”

Carl shook his head, opening and closing his right hand. Now that the adrenaline was subsiding, it was really starting to fucking hurt from the punch. “Let’s just go home. We’ll talk about this later, yeah?”

Jasper stared straight ahead. “Yeah, whatever.”

The drive was quiet, fraught with all the unsaid things between them. When they got home, Carl’s first stop was the bathroom to wash the creep’s blood off his face and hands. He felt dirty. Sullied. The angry knot in his gut was still there, its tendrils writhing. Fuck.

When Carl got out of the bathroom, Jasper was nowhere to be seen. Carl hesitated in front of his door, then rapped on it. “Jasper?”

There was no response and Carl opened the door. Jasper was sitting at his desk, looking at his phone. Carl asked, “Can we talk?”

Jasper lifted his phone to make a point. “It’s gonna be all over social media.”

“Fucking fantastic,” Carl muttered.

“This is bad, right?”

“I don’t know. Yeah. Probably.” He sat down on Jasper’s bed. “Are you alright?”

Jasper hesitantly shrugged one shoulder. “I guess.”

“Did he hurt you in any way?”

“No. I mean, he squeezed my knee. But it’s fine now. Did you hurt your hand?”

Carl looked at it. It did hurt but not too badly. He didn’t think he’d broken anything. “It’s fine.” He waited a beat, then added, “I wanted you to come home, but not exactly like this.”

Jasper put his phone on his desk, then swivelled the chair around to face Carl. “Well, I’m here now.”

“Are you going to stay?”

He nodded. “Depends.”

“On…?”

“Whether you’re gonna be a fucking prick or not.”

“Jasper…”

“No, seriously. Because if Mum knew about this…”

That was an angle that Carl hadn’t considered yet. “Are you gonna tell her?”

Jasper shrugged. “I don’t know. She never answers the phone anyway.”

“Yeah,” Carl sighed. “Look, you can tell her about it if you want to.”

“Will they revoke custody from you if I do?”

Carl looked down at the hands in his lap. “I don’t know. Only if your Mum brings it up to the courts. Do you want that?”

“No,” Jasper said very quickly.

That was something. Jasper added, “But you do realise that this is—”

Just at that moment, Carl’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out, looked at it. It was Akram. Probably to tell him to get his sorry arse to the station so that Moira could give him the third degree. “Sorry, I have to take this.”

Jasper’s expression wasn’t exactly approval but Carl didn’t need his approval anyway. He got up and left Jasper’s room, speaking into his phone, “Akram?”

“Carl. We have found an interesting piece of new data.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“I think it would be best if you came to the station to discuss it.”

Carl frowned. No mention of Moira. Maybe news didn’t travel quite that fast. He considered it a blessing. “Okay, I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Okay. See you then.”

Carl hung up and poked his head into Jasper’s room. “I have to go. Will you be okay on your own?”

Jasper was already on his laptop. “Yeah, sure.”

“Okay, see ya later.”

It wasn’t ideal but they’d have to hash this out at a later time. Carl wasn’t looking forward to it, but maybe putting some distance between it wasn’t the worst thing to happen.

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And Now... Me And You

Carl put his feet up on the coffee table. “I am here. I’m listening. Promise.”

Silence ensued. Awkward, to a degree.

Awkwardness had been their normalcy lately, and Carl knew they were both tired of it but powerless to change it. Now Jasper had taken a first step and Carl had decided he’d fucking try to make an effort. A real one.

Jasper stole a glance at him. “I don’t know what to say.”

Carl’s mouth curved into a small smile. “Yeah, me neither.”

After another long moment of silence, Jasper opened with, “You said I was mad at you.”

“Aren’t you?”

Jasper shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Things have been really shite lately.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“You know, you’re...” Jasper stopped there. Carl waited, but nothing followed.

“I’m what?”

“You’re gonna hate me for saying this.”

“Say it anyway.”

“When you were home, recovering, you were always super impatient and really moody. And now you’re barely here anymore, and when you are, you’re either checked out or fucking pissed or yelling at everyone.”

Yeah. That was a fair assessment. The last few months had been really fucking shit. Carl rubbed one hand down his face, sighing. “Yeah, I know.”

“You’re pissed that Mum left, right?”

Carl drew in a heavy breath. He was, but it had been inevitable. They’d both seen the signs and neither of them had tried enough to do anything about it. In fact, Carl had pretty much done the opposite.

“It’s a little more complicated than that.”

Jasper let out an annoyed huff. “Yeah, that’s what people always say when they don’t wanna actually talk about it.”

Carl looked at Jasper. “Look, I know a lot of that is my fault. And I don’t know how to explain that except that there’s a lot of things that played into it.”

“Your job…”

“Yeah, my job is part of that.”

“Couldn’t you have…. found a different job?”

Carl wanted to chuckle. Teenage naiveté. But also maybe a valid question. “The job is all I’ve known for the last 20 years. That’s not something you just give up. Plus I’m actually really fucking good at it.”

“So the job is more important than me and Mum.” It wasn’t a question.

“No.” That was Carl’s immediate answer, but was it the truth? “It’s a different kind of important,” he added.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means…” Fuck. How could he explain this to a 17-year-old kid? “Look, it’s really difficult to explain. But what I do at work is important. Important for the people we save, we protect. You’re also important, but you’re like…”

“A different world,” Jasper completed the sentence.

“In a way, yeah. And I need you to know that, a hundred percent, you *are* important.”

“Then why did you say to Mum that you were better off without me?”

Carl sighed again. Yeah, why did he say that? “I don’t know. Things at work were really shit. And things here were really shit. Admittedly not my proudest moment.”

“Am I a nuisance to you?”

Carl shook his head. “No. Jasper. You’re not a nuisance. Unless you play your fucking music so loud that my fucking eardrums explode.”

Silence hung in the air for a while. Carl looked at his stepson who was playing with his fingers in his lap. God, he’d grown up so much in the last year or two—now a young man rather than the sweet kid he’d first met ten years ago, the kid he’d taken to football matches who’d smeared ice cream all over his face and gone down swimming pool flumes with him.

Jasper raised his head after a long moment. “It’s all over social media how you beat up that guy at the ice cream shop. Did that get you in trouble?”

Carl rubbed his fingers over his mouth. “A bit.”

“But they didn’t fire you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Is that normal?”

“What, that I beat up people in the street after having the fuck provoked out of me?”

“No, that they don’t fire policemen when they do that sort of thing in public?”

Carl shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably not. My boss is…” What? A saint? “One of the good ones. We go way back.”

“Do you think something like this will happen again?”

“What? That some creep is hired to scare the shit out of you to get to me? Fuck, I hope not!”

“Why did they even do that?”

“Jasper, I’m not going to talk to you about my work.”

There was a look of quiet defiance and resentment mixed with disappointment on Jasper’s face, but Carl had sworn that he’d never bring the job home, and there was no changing that. Ever.

Jasper said after a long moment, “So what happens now?”

“I don’t know. We both try to make this work. And you call a meeting when you want to talk and I’ll promise that I’ll try to listen. How’s that sound?”

“Yeah, that sounds pretty good.”

“Okay.”

Jasper leaned forward and grabbed the remote control. “Anything you wanna watch?” He was already navigating to the Netflix menu. “There’s a new season of Black Mirror.”

“Which one was that again?”

“It’s that show where they kinda mess with your head—like, about tech going too far and ruining people’s lives.”

“The one where the two astronauts use remote-controlled clones living on earth while they’re out in space?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, hit me.”

“Okay, cool.”

Jasper looked around in the different menus until he found it and the red N appeared on the screen, followed by the techy animated Black Mirror logo that Carl recognised. This had been such a fucking good show. He was glad Jasper had suggested it. Finally something that they could easily agree on.

A truce. More than a truce. Starting over, in a way. It gave him a sense of hope that he hadn’t felt in a long time.

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I Thought I Did, But Now I Don’t

Prompt from M on Discord:

I think either Carl's or Rachel's POV would be interesting after that scene where Carl shows up at Rachel's flat for his "appointment". When Carl starts rambling about stories of people having a bad reaction to sleeping pills, Rachel loses her patience and cuts him off to ask, not so gently, "why are you here, Carl"? He admits that he doesn't know why he came. That might be the first time he's being sincere with her. No deflection, no rambling. She tells him to come back when he figures it out, which I find intriguing, because at this point she's no longer his therapist, and they don't really have an established friendship quite yet. I'd be Carl, I'd be confused at the mixed signals. When she tells him "that's us for today", basically telling him to fuck off, he's mildly annoyed (which is just in-character for Carl), and he puts his mug down exactly where she told him not to. Childish, but again, very in-character for Carl, he would probably have behaved that way with anyone. Seeing that, Rachel shows exasperation with her body language. I think that's more out-of-character for her, meaning that it's significant. I think we don't see them interact after that, until the finale and the tennis balls scene. Which, btw, means that Rachel didn't wait for Carl to figure out anything before their next meeting.

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Rachel’s keys jingled as she unlocked her front door. She closed the door behind her and put the keys in the wooden bowl on the cabinet in the hall.

The date had been a total disaster, to the point she wished she’d pre-arranged a safe word with Tamsin to give her a fake call and rescue her.

Ben had seemed nice enough initially. Some meaningless small talk. He’d mentioned he worked freelance in IT consulting. In fact, he’d talked a lot and not really asked many questions about her.

He’d ordered chamomile tea and then complained that it reminded him of his ex-wife’s mother, which had segued into pointing out all of his ex’s flaws—and there were many. That had been the first red flag. More had followed. Mentioning “getting back into the dating game”, like it was some sort of obligation to find a romantic partner. The ex-wife came up several more times.

The last straw was how he had casually dropped his bowel movements into the conversation. By that point she wanted to ask for the bill and get the hell out of there, but unfortunately she’d only been halfway through her piece of mediocre carrot cake and had endured another thirty minutes of self-absorbed monologue that she’d only commented with hums and one-sentence answers.

She slipped into something more comfortable and then switched on her tablet to sit down in the armchair in her living room. She'd have to get back in the game, now that covering for Dr. Sonnenberg had come to an abrupt end.

There were a few e-mails that needed to be answered and she responded to a job offer from a charity organisation she had worked with before.

She put the tablet down on the coffee table where the jigsaw puzzle with the buttons she'd started a few days ago still lay unfinished. There was the faint half-moon from a tea stain on the pink button where Carl had put his tea mug. She sighed.

Carl.

She had to admit he was on her mind more than he should. He was maddeningly enigmatic, despite her having read his whole file and then some. Some would say he was the gift that kept on giving, but there was more to him than that.

The other day, he'd given her a glimpse at the softer inner core beneath the charred outside layers he always wrapped himself in. She'd asked him why he came to her flat, and he'd given her a long look and told her he didn't know.

She'd been too annoyed with his inappropriate impromptu visit to realise it at the time, but it might have been the first time he'd actually been honest with her. No deflection, no passive-aggressive cynicism, no defensive comeback. Just a genuine, "I don't know. I thought I did, but now I don't…"

And today… he'd come to see her again. At the most inopportune of times, of course. God, if only he'd come ten minutes later and rescued her from that horrible date. That would have actually been useful!

It was just… What was he doing? He was sending mixed signals, and it confused her. His early advances on her had been a lot less subtle, if not clumsy and no less inappropriate, while at the same time being all metal armour and shooting arrows like a cornered foe.

He was always so adamant that he thought talking about himself was fucking bullshit, but then he'd come to talk to her about himself out of his own volition. Twice. So what was that?

Thinking back to Ben-the-self-absorbed-IT-guy, she had absolutely no idea why she was even going on random online app dates when there was this ruggedly handsome man here who was clearly attracted to her and whom she could have if she only sent the right signals.

Actually, no. That wasn't true. As handsome and easily appealing as Carl was, he was also a steep and treacherous mountain to climb. His emotional baggage alone could weigh down a freighter, and that was even without the Leith Park shooting. There were things that came attached to Carl that would be difficult to navigate and require a massive amount of resilience and patience.

Then again, maybe that was also what attracted her to him. The layers that were underneath, that she wanted to read like they were pages to an ancient tome waiting to be opened with care and cotton gloves.

There was something else too, something she was almost embarrassed about now. When they'd met for the first time in Sonnenberg's office, during the lunch break she had cancelled to fit him in, and he'd told her how much he didn't want to be there, her reaction had been less than professional.

And because he was so maddeningly resistant and she hadn't exactly wanted the substitute job, she'd let him antagonise her and provoked him in a way that was against everything she'd been taught how to approach a client like Carl. Then Carl's boss had more or less fired her, coinciding with Dr. Sonnenberg returning to work. And what had she done? Just ignored him, assuming he wouldn't care one way or another if he never had to see her again.

But that hadn't quite played out the way she thought, had it? He'd turned up on her doorstep, actually upset that she'd "abandoned" him, as he'd phrased it. She didn't see it at the time, but it had been signal. A signal that he wanted to talk to her, that he actually valued her insights and her company.

The idea had come to her two days later when she went out to the Tesco Superstore. She'd made a detour to the sports section and bought a tube with tennis balls. At home she found a red pull bow that she tacked on to it. She'd leave them on his doorstep and see what he'd do, and then they could take it from there.

Maybe.

If he chose to take her up on the offer. Which she hoped he would, but Carl Morck was unpredictable at the best of times.

And now she stood at the front door of his house with a tube of tennis balls, feeling absolutely ridiculous. What was she even—

She startled when the door opened, as did the man of Indian or Pakistani descent on the other side. "Oh, sorry," he said with a Scottish lilt.

"It's alright," she easily responded.

He was holding a rubbish bag, eyeing her somewhat suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

She held up the tennis ball tube. "I was going to leave these here for someone."

The man looked at them. "I can take them inside if you tell me who they're for."

"Oh. Uhm, yes. Carl Morck."

There was a genuine look of surprise on the man's face now. "I didn't know Carl played tennis."

Something in her head clicked. “You’re not… Martin, by any chance, are you?”

“In the flesh, and now you’ve got me curious.”

“Well.” She held out the tube to Martin. “It would be lovely if you could give these to Carl.”

“Oh no,” Martin said, “Now I will have to invite you in for a cup of tea, because as much of a paradox as Carl is, we’ve never had anyone drop off mysterious presents at his doorstep. He’s not home yet, but I’m sure he’d prefer if you handed these to him in person.”

Rachel wavered. This hadn’t been the plan, but she had to admit that curiosity now got the better of her. Carl had mentioned Martin at several separate occasions, and she wanted to know who this man was. Surely, a cup of tea couldn’t hurt.

She nodded. “Alright, but only if it’s not an inconvenience.”

“Not at all.” Martin lifted the rubbish bag that he was still holding. “Give me two minutes, I’ll be right back.”

You Were Very Nice To Look At, So...

Prompt from M on Discord:

When Rose and Rachel meet in the basement, Rachel introduces herself and Rose tells her that she's heard Carl tell someone she (Rachel) was nice to look at. Rachel makes a face (I love the actress and her expressions). Who do you think that was? Carl has hardly any friends. Must have been Hardy, but somehow I'm not convinced. If it had been Hardy, I think Hardy would have use the fact that Carl is seeing a therapist to tease him.

5 Times Carl Mentioned Rachel's Looks and 1 Time He Didn't

Akram

Carl held on to the railing of the ferry, thankful that he'd actually remembered to bring a woolly hat. While Scotland in the winter could be beautiful—if the sun was actually shining—it was often also fucking cold, and with the windchill out here doubly so.

He looked out at the sea and the landscape of the Inner Hebrides passing by. What had brought Merritt out here, four years ago?

Another gust of wind blew up the hem of his sheepskin jacket and he smoothed it in place. Next to him, Akram bent down and picked something up from the floor that he held out to Carl.

"This fell out of your pocket."

Carl looked at it. A business card he didn't quite recognise. He took it and glanced at it. It said Dr. Sally Sonnenberg. Ah yes, Moira's not so subtle request when she'd first forced the mandatory appointments on him.

He realised that Akram was now scrutinising him. It made Carl feel uncomfortable. The man had this air around him, like his gaze wasn't missing the smallest of beats without him even really paying attention.

And sure enough, Akram's question didn't wait long. "You are seeing a therapist?"

Carl just grunted.

But Akram being Akram, he didn't just let it go. "You know, I think that is actually a good thing. I hope it is helping you."

"It's not," Carl snarled. "Fucking waste of time."

"So you are not seeing a therapist?"

"No, I am, but not voluntarily."

"Ah. So it is forced on you by the police department."

Carl shrugged. “At least she’s nice to look at.”

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Hardy

“Oi, mate, no beer today?” Hard grumbled as Carl came into his hospital room, conspicuously empty-handed.

“Sorry, got tangled up in this mandatory therapy bullshit. Fucking appointments are a nightmare to juggle.”

“Therapy?” Hardy asked incredulously. “You’re in *therapy*?”

“No,” Carl said poignantly. “I am *not*.”

Hardy raised his eyebrows. “So what is it, you’re either going to the appointments or you’re not.”

“Oh, I’m going. Because if I don’t, Moira’s gonna rain fucking hell down on me, and you know how she gets.”

Hardy smiled. “Aye, beware of the dragon. But let’s go back to that part where you mentioned therapy.”

“Fuck off,” Carl told him.

“No, seriously. That’s—”

Carl shot him a look and snarled, “Don’t.”

“I’m trying to picture you on a reclining chair, answering super personal questions, and I cannae wrap my head around it.”

“That’s because I don’t.” He gave Hardy a sideways glance. “Only upside is that she’s pretty nice to look at.”

“Oh, tell me more.”

“I’m not gonna feed your fucking wank fantasies, but what I *will* tell you more about is… Mhòr.”

Hardy just groaned.

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Moira

“Carl, a word.”

Carl sighed. Fucking Moira. Always with the orders and requests and just fucking annoying things that were making his life a lot harder than it should be.

He followed her into her office but purposefully remained standing. He wasn't planning on giving her any ideas about indulging her every whim.

"I hear you keep rescheduling your therapy appointments."

He gave her a long-suffering sigh. "Yeah, because they're a fucking waste of time and there is an *actual* fucking case that we're working on."

"Carl, you know that they are necessary."

"Yes, you've certainly reminded me of it often enough."

"If you're having any issues with the appointed therapist, maybe we can find you someone else to see."

"No," he said quickly. Maybe a bit too quickly. And yes, Moira had picked up on it. Of course she had.

Her look on him was laced with definite mischief. "Oh? What am I missing?"

Carl felt sheepish. "She's annoying but at least she's nice to look at."

"Jesus Christ, Carl. You can't say things like that."

"That's what she told me, too."

Moira shook her head. "Seriously? Most days I try to keep you out of trouble, but it seems like you're doing your very best to get your arse fired all by yourself. Don't come crawling to me afterwards, ye hear me?"

He lifted his arms in mock defence. "I won't tell if you don't."

Moira shook her head again. "Get outta here."

As he was well on the way to the door, she called after him, "And go to the fucking appointments!"

Carl just gave her a dismissive wave without turning around.

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Rose

Carl was frustrated. Actually, no, not frustrated. He was fucking annoyed. He paced behind his desk, giving the tennis ball a good kneading.

And then Rose, the only one still there with him, decided to add unsolicited commentary. "That thing's going to pop if you're not careful."

He stopped pacing and shot Rose a look that he hoped was properly conveying his 'Shut the fuck up'. For good measure, he added, "No one asked for your fucking opinion."

"What crawled up *your* arse and died?"

"People giving me their unwanted opinions."

"You were squeezing the sweet soul out of Sonnenberg's poor tennis ball even before I made that comment."

Carl narrowed his eyes at her. "Sonnenberg's?"

"That's who you're seeing, right?"

"Fuck no. How is it that *you* know who that is?"

"Had several sessions with her when, you know…" She trailed off and Carl tried to remember what she was even referring to.

Carl squeezed the tennis ball again and resumed his pacing. After a few moments, he asked, "So Sonnenberg… Is she as easy on the eyes as Dr. Irving?"

It seemed to confuse Rose. "Easy on the eyes?"

"Yeah, you know… nice to look at…?"

"Christ, Carl, could you be any more sexist?"

He flashed her a quick grin. "I could."

"No, seriously, Carl, that's incredibly inappropriate. There are actually workplace laws in place for that kind of thing." She sighed. "Which I know you don't care about."

"You got *that* right."

"Well, since I don't know Dr. Irving, I can't actually help you with that particular assessment. Also, really, Carl. You should dial back inappropriate shite like that if you want people to respect you."

He let out a cynical chuckle. "Respect? Oh, that's hilarious. I don't need anyone's respect."

"You do if you want people to actually work *with* you rather than *for* you. And please don't pretend that you don't care, because you're really not that hard to read."

Carl grumbled, "You better shut the fuck up if you don't want this fucking tennis ball to hit your head."

"Which is just another inappropriate thing to add to the list of what makes you a terrible person to work for."

He stopped and looked at her. "Work with."

She met his gaze. “Don’t push it.”

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Martin

“So this therapist you’re seeing,” Martin said off-handedly as he was stirring the chili on the stove, “how is she actually helping you?”

Carl looked up from the newspaper clippings he was scanning at the kitchen table. “She’s not.”

“So you’re just going there because you have to?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“And you’re sitting there the whole time, doing what? Staring into the void?”

“No, there are better things to stare at than the void.”

“Such as…?”

“She *is* very nice to look at.”

“Ah,” Martin said knowingly. “Pretty telling that you aspire dating your therapist, but why am I not surprised.”

“Fuck off,” Carl told him and went back to his articles.

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Jasper

“Jasper!” Carl yelled so loudly that the flat next door must also be hearing it.

The teenager appeared in the living room a minute later. “What?!”

Carl indicated the basked with laundry that sat on the armchair footrest by the television set. “Why is that still there?”

“Because I was doing homework,” Jasper explained.

“Oh yeah?” Carl made a beeline for Jasper’s room, pushing open the door. As suspected, Jasper’s computer screen was on, a video game screen showing. “Interesting homework you’ve got there.”

“Carl…”

But the fuse had already been lit minutes ago, too late to stop now. “Fucking hell, Jasper! What the fuck happened to doing your assignments? Or has your brain capacity shrunken to walnut size? Or better yet, moved all the way down to your fucking cock? Jesus fucking Christ, can you not do *one* fucking thing I’m asking you?!”

“I’m sorry,” Jasper feebly protested.

“I don’t need your fucking apologies, I need you to do the fucking laundry!”

“And I need you to be less of a fucking prick about it,” Jasper said, adding under his breath, “God, you’re such a fucking headcase.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” Carl snarled.

Jasper looked at him defiantly. “I said you’re a fucking headcase. Seriously, you should see a shrink or something. Do us all a favour.”

Carl’s jaw worked hard, then he said through clenched teeth, “Okay,” before he turned on his heel and went straight for the living room where the internet router stood, unplugged it and rolled up the power cable.

Jasper was watching him from a few feet away. “Seriously? That’s your answer?”

Carl then took the laundry basket and thrust it into Jasper’s arms. “Do the bloody fucking laundry. Then we’ll talk when you get that cable back.”

Jasper just shook his head, turned to go and mumbled something that Carl couldn’t make out but could vividly imagine.

Why the fuck had he ever agreed to looking after a 17-year-old teenager? He must have been out of his mind.

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Maybe He Needs To Hear That From You

“Carl and Donna totally hugged during the "please kill me" Hardy scene. You can't really see it because it's off screen, but they just separate in the shot where Carl stands by the foot of Hardy's bed. Makes me want to write a scene where Hardy makes an offhand comment to Donna about it after he's back home, and she totally hones in on it. And then, at some later stage, she pulls Carl aside when he visits to talk to him about his survivor's guilt.”

Well, this didn’t quite play out exactly like that, but I think it works. Also filing this under #WriteYourOwnPrompts. Sigh. And filing it under #CarlNeedsAHug.

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“James?” He was sitting on the couch with Donna, crutches lying on the floor, neither of them all that engrossed in the cooking show that was on the telly.

“Hm?” he grunted.

She reached over to put a hand on his thigh, which made him look at her. She would forever be grateful that he could feel this again. For a while—for too long—it hadn’t seemed like he would ever regain feeling in his legs.

“Luv, do you ever worry about Carl?”

James frowned. “Worry? What’dye mean?”

“He seems… I dunno. I little lost, maybe?”

“Lost?”

She sighed. James could be a bit daft about these things sometimes. “Haven’t you noticed how he’s always… a wee bit dishevelled? Like maybe he’s stopped caring about himself…?”

James frowned. “He’s Carl.”

“He wasn’t always like this. Not before…” she trailed off.

“The shooting. You can say it.”

“Yes, the shooting.”

“Yeah, well, the shooting fucked us both up pretty fucking good.”

“Oh, I know. And this hasn’t been easy for us either, but I’m a tad worried about him.”

James frowned again. “About Carl? Why?”

“You’ve got me and the boys. And your mother, even though she’s perhaps more annoying than helpful most of the time, but who does he have?”

“He’s got Jasper.”

“He’s a teenager. And don’t say he’s got Martin.”

“He’s got *me*.”

She gave him a no-nonsense look. “No offense, Luv, but you haven’t exactly been in a good place yourself these past few months.”

“So what are ye sayin’?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just worried that he might need to talk to someone.”

James let out a chuckle. “Carl? You’ve met the man. He’d rather cut off a hand before he’d talk about this feelings.”

“You boys with your emotional constipation. Have you *tried* talking to him?”

“Can’t say it’s come up.”

“Well, maybe you should. Because, for Christ’s sake, the man saw you getting shot right in front of him. Not to mention he got shot himself. And he still came to the hospital to visit you almost every day. Why do you think he did that?”

James made a grimace akin to a shrug. “Because we’re best mates and ex-partners.”

“I think it’s a bit more than that. I think he feels guilty. Maybe responsible.”

“Responsible? He’s not responsible for some fucker pulling out a gun and shooting people.”

She stayed quiet for a moment, then said, “Maybe he needs to hear that from you.”

“*Me*?”

“Yes, you.”

He exhaled a long-suffering breath. “Alright. I guess I’ll try to talk to him about it.”

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The opportunity that James had waited for presented itself two weeks later. He’d asked Carl to come round for the Europa League game on Saturday and they’d watched and commiserated together over mutual beers.

The TV was now playing the post-match analysis, and James turned down the volume, shifting his position on the couch so that he could see Carl a little better.

“Alright, mate, it’s time we have a wee heart-to-heart.”

Carl gave him a look that was half frown, half scowl. “The fuck you on about?”

“I think you know what I’m on about.”

Carl made it a point to turn his head away from James. “Yeah, that’s the *last* thing I wanna talk about.”

“Now, there’s a shocker.”

“Okay then,” Carl said sharply. “Conversation’s over.”

“Oh, you should know me well enough that I’m not gonnae let you off the hook *that* easily.”

And then Carl’s usual defensive anger was right there. “For fuck’s sake, Hardy.”

“Mate, what’s going on with you?”

Carl shot him a sideways glance. One that clearly said *leave it the fuck alone*. James was immune to these by now and he added, “I mean, look at the state of you.”

Carl dangerously narrowed his eyes. “The state of me? What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

“I mean, admittedly this trampy *‘I just got oot o’ bed’* look doesn’t look all that terrible on you, but it’s got Donna worried, and I can’t say I disagree.”

“Yeah, you can tell your wife to fuck off because it’s none of her fucking business.”

“Maybe so, but now it’s *my* fucking business, too.”

Carl sat up a little straighter. “What the fuck do you want from me, Hardy?”

“I want you to tell me what’s going on.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

James gave him a no-nonsense look. “That lie is so thin, a mere look could tear it apart. You feel guilty, don’t you?”

Carl looked away again, lips pressed together. He didn’t answer.

“Seriously. You feel guilty because some fucker took a gun and shot at us?”

“It wasn’t just ‘some fucker’ now, was it?”

“It was, as far as I’m concerned. So how is it that you think this is your fault?”

“Did you forget the part where I insisted that we respond to the call?”

James raised his eyebrows. “Come on, you know that’s how things happen in our line of work. How were you supposed to know there’d be some deranged arsehole with a gun hiding in the kitchen? That’s not on you, Carl.”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t fucking understand how you of all people can say that.”

“Me of all people? You mean because I was the one who ended up on fucking crutches?”

“Yeah.” It came out like a sigh.

“Christ, Carl. It’s the job. It happened. There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“It shouldn’t have happened.”

“Maybe not, but there’s not a fucking dram we can do about it now. And who the fuck knows what would have happened if we hadn’t answered that call. We could hae been run over by a drunk driver round the next corner and both got killed. Life’s a fucking gamble.”

“So your take-away here,” Carl pointed at James’s crutches, “is ‘life’s a bitch’?”

James flashed him a grin. “And then you die. But look. We didn’t. We should focus on that and not, I dunno, whose fault it may or may not have been or how we could have done it differently.”

Carl shook his head. “You’re a lot more fucking gracious about it than I am.”

“Look, mate. I need you to understand that I don’t blame you for any of this, alright?”

“Yeah, well, I fucking do. I got a police officer killed, for fuck’s sake.”

“Didn’t we just talk about this?”

“PC fucking Anderson would beg to differ. Or his fiancée and his newborn daughter.”

It wasn’t something that James liked to think about, but clearly it had been on Carl’s mind. Probably too much so. “Aye, that’s a right fucking scunner, that one. But Anderson also knew what he signed up for when he put on that uniform.”

“His fiancée didn’t.”

“No, but that’s still part of the job. Donna didn’t sign up for any of this shite either. But she’s still here, and we’re taking it one day at a time.”

“Oh, yeah, awesome. I’m sure *that* outlook’s gonna help Anderson’s fiancée and kid.” Carl scrubbed a tired hand down his face.

“Are you talking about this with anyone?”

Carl let out a cynical huff. “You’re fucking kidding me, right?”

James gave him an intent look. “No, mate, I’m not.”

Carl shot him a fleeting glance. “I’m talking about it with you, aren’t I?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Yeah, great, not you, too.”

James frowned. “What do you mean?”

Another sigh from Carl. “Moira foisted these mandatory therapy sessions on me.”

“You’ve been in *therapy*?”

“I’m not sure you can call it that.”

“No, seriously, are you seeing a therapist?”

“Not anymore.”

“But you did.”

“For as long as I had to, then I stopped going. Load of bullshit, fucking waste of time.”

“God forbid you ever admitted that you could use a bit of help.”

Carl’s anger flared up again. “For fuck’s sake, Hardy. If you’re gonna be harping on about this, you can watch your fucking football on your own next time.”

James knew they were nearing the breaking point of this conversation. Carl’s armour was often hard to get past. And then, at some stage, you’d hit a sore spot and he’d run off. “Look. I know you tend to bottle shite like this up. Can’t blame us for being worried.”

“You don’t have to be. I’m fine,” he said flatly.

James shook his head almost imperceptibly. “Just know that when you’re ready to stop telling yourself that, you can talk to me. Or Donna.”

Carl now looked dejectedly at the hands in his lap. “Yeah,” he said in a low voice. And they left it at that.

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Donna had to lie if she said she wasn’t trying to listen in to Carl’s and James’s conversation. It was going about as well as she had imagined. She’d known Carl for years now, and he’d never been the touchy-feely type.

He’d been a lot more approachable when he was still happily married. Or whatever constituted for ‘happily’ in his relationship with Victoria. Donna had never really liked the woman. She’d always had an air of arrogance and dominance about her, like she was sizing up everyone around her to see how she could assert superiority over them. She’d never understood what Carl saw in her, but then it wasn’t her place to judge.

Carl had always been a complex individual, even at the best of times. Mind as sharp as a katana, wit just as cutting as it was precise, strong opinions about everything, incredibly good at his job, fiercely loyal to the people he cared about, generally short fused but always going the extra mile with the boys, and very much a gentle soul underneath a shell as hard as platinum.

She could hear he was now pushing himself up from the couch with a subdued grunt, and Donna quickly retreated to the kitchen where she tried to make herself look busy, feeling somewhat sheepish. Carl came in a moment later, putting the ceramic bowl on the counter that she'd served them snacks in.

She stole another glance at him, took in the shaggy hair, the dark circles under his eyes, the way his clothes looked like they were wearing him rather than the other way round. The scar on his neck was hard to miss.

"Carl," she said in a gentle voice.

He looked up, unsure what to read into it.

"Thank you. For all you did."

He frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"For being there. For James. For us."

His brow furrowed deeper, something that spoke of pain and hardship flashing across his eyes. The flatly uttered platitude he responded with stood in stark contrast to it. "Any time."

She took a step closer to him. "No, Carl, you were there whenever you could. Through all of it. It means a lot. Really."

He stood there, rare raw emotion playing across his face. She didn't think she'd ever seen him tear up. She closed the gap and pulled him into a gentle embrace, could feel his initial resistance, but then, two seconds later, felt his hands on her back.

She gave him a gentle squeeze, held on for a few seconds before they separated again. She touched his lower left arm. "If you ever need anything, we're here for you."

He gave her a small smile. "I know. Thank you."

She thought about telling him to take care of himself, but it would probably be too much, get his defences up.

"I'll see myself out," he just said, and she nodded.

"See you around."

Donna put the bowl into the dishwasher and went into the living room where she sat down on the couch next to her husband. Reaching out to touch his cheek with one hand, she drew him into a kiss, then smiled at him. "You did well, Luv."

He grinned at her. "So you listened in, you cheeky bugger."

"Can you blame me?"

"For all the good it did."

She lightly touched his arm. “Like you said, he’s Carl. I think he needs a bit of time.”

He leaned over for another kiss before he said, “Thanks for the wee nudge. I do think maybe he needed to hear that.”

“Aye. Just keep an eye on him.”

“Oh, I will.”

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Dysfunctional

“Oi!” Jasper called out to the boy in the school hallway who had barged into him so hard that his rucksack slipped off his shoulder and dropped to the floor with a dull thud.

He didn’t even have time to wait for some half-hearted apology because suddenly Gemma was there next to him.

“What the hell, J?”

She held her phone screen up to him, and even over the din of the other students milling about, he could hear Carl’s voice. Shit. He’d been dreading this.

> *“Fucking cunt!!”*
>
> *Carl’s face was flecked with bloody spit, his eyes wide like someone consumed by raging bloodlust as he threw the creep in the suit down to the ground. And then his foot lifted, ready to kick down on the creep’s head until Jasper called out his name.*
>
> *“Move,” Carl said. The camera shakily followed Jasper and Carl as they walked away.*

Jasper wasn’t keen on seeing it again, didn’t want to go back there, but couldn’t look away either. He’d looked at it once, after it hit social media, then disgustedly closed the browser tab on his laptop, still feeling the creep’s beefy grip on his knee.

Gemma stopped the video, looked at Jasper. “That’s your stepfather, right?”

Jasper nodded. “Yeah.”

“Like, seriously, what the fuck?”

“It wasn’t…” Jasper stammered. “It probably isn’t what you think.”

“Oh yeah? Cuz you know what I’m thinking? He’s seriously fucking unhinged.”

“He’s not. Not like that. He’s—”

“J,” she interrupted him, touching his arm. “Are you safe there? Living with him…?”

He pulled his arm away. “What? No. Carl’s not… He’d never hurt me.”

“You said he really hates you, that he yells at you all the time. He shouted after you when I was there. Why are you defending him?”

He shook his head, turned away from her. “You don’t understand.”

“Oh no? Then explain to me why a grown up man—a fucking *police officer*—beats up a guy in the street in broad daylight to the point of kicking his head in, *while* being filmed, and you think this is perfectly normal, defendable behaviour.”

He looked down. “It’s not. It’s just…” He released a breath through his mouth. “It’s complicated.”

“Well, then uncomplicate it for me. Because this is fucking nuts and you shouldn’t be living with that guy.”

He bent down to pick up his rucksack. “Can we go somewhere? After school? I’ll tell you.”

She gave him a long look. “Okay.” She softened a little. “J, are you alright?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

Truth was, he still felt a little shaky. He hadn’t slept all that much last night, woken up early. He’d got ready for school way before it was time to go, sitting on his bed, still trying to figure out what had happened.

He’d been sure Carl no longer gave a flying fuck about him, especially after the divorce. His mother had washed her hands of the responsibility, neatly hiding it behind the excuse of her erratic flight attendant job, and Carl hadn’t jumped at the opportunity of taking full custody either.

Well, yeah. That was a ginormous understatement. Jasper knew they’d tried to hide it from him, but Carl wasn’t exactly known for his subtlety when it came to verbal fights between him and Mum.

And then came the day when Jasper was supposed to be fobbed off to his grandmother. He and Carl stopped in front of her house in one of the police cars Carl had probably misappropriated for the personal errand. Carl had nodded his head towards Nan’s house and said, “You don’t wanna live with her, do you?”

Jasper shook his head, and Carl said, “Yeah, fuck this.” Then he started the car again to drive both of them back home.

He’d stopped the car in front of their door, ushered Jasper out and told him he’d be back later. They hadn’t really said much else on the topic and things had gone back to their usual routine. A week later, Carl slid the signed custody papers across the table with the words, “There. It’s done.”

Jasper gave him a small smile, trying to read the inscrutable expression on Carl's face, unsure what to make of it.

Two months later, Carl was shot and things had spiralled from there. They were forever at each other's throats, Jasper could never do anything right in Carl's eyes, and at some point, Jasper had stopped caring like he knew Carl had as well.

Except… yesterday afternoon, he'd very much cared. Cared so much that he punched a guy's face bloody, ready to finish him off—off of *one* single look from Jasper. Jasper had not expected that. Like, at *all*.

He still wasn't sure how Carl knew. It was impossible he would have heard the conversation that happened before. Impossible that he knew all the deeply disturbing things that had been exchanged. And yet, Carl had taken one look at Jasper's face and gone into full protective mode. Like a parent would. A parent who cared about his kid, who didn't want to see them harmed.

How was that even possible, with the way Carl treated him, the way he was forever giving him shite for every single fucking thing?

Jasper knew Carl's life was complicated, he knew a lot had changed since the shooting. He knew Carl had issues. And now he knew that, beyond all that crap, he actually *did* still care.

So Jasper did what he could to honour that. He closed the toilet lid, cleaned the hair and shaving stubble out of the sink, put his dirty clothes in the laundry basket, and made his bed before he went to school. Which was where he'd been ambushed by Gemma.

He slung his rucksack over his shoulder and followed her to class.

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They ended up in the small cupcake place that Gemma liked where Jasper was listlessly picking at a chocolate chip cupcake that he'd only really bought as a distraction.

Gemma sat opposite him at one of the small, square tables, looking at him intently. "So?"

Jasper picked at a chocolate chip at the top of the muffin that broke off and fell onto the napkin underneath it. "So this was kind of a giant shitshow."

Gemma rolled her eyes. "Yeah, J, I was able to gather that."

He huffed, not in the mood for more passive-aggressive sarcasm. He already got enough of that from Carl at home. Gemma seemed to have realised, so she reached out across the table and touched his fingers. "Hey. Sorry. Please tell me what happened."

He retracted his hand and leaned back in his chair. Where should he even start?

"You know how I moved in with my Nan for a few days, yeah?"

She nodded. “Yeah, you said you were sick of Carl’s bullshit.”

“Carl left me a voice message to say we should talk. At the ice cream parlour. So I went. But then this guy turns up, starts saying all these… things.”

“What guy?” Gemma asked.

“I don’t know. Some beefy guy in a suit. He knew my name, knew I was Carl’s stepson. Started talking about…” He stalled there, didn’t want to relive all of that.

He looked up at Gemma, tried to find some reassurance in her eyes. “Look, he said some really nasty shite. Like, super creepy.”

“Creepy how?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. He kinda threatened me.”

“Threatened you? With what?”

“That he was…” He swallowed. “He would do things to me.”

Gemma suddenly looked stricken. “Do things? Jasper, you’re scaring me”

“Yeah, he, uh… touched my knee and said… Look, I don’t wanna repeat any of that. But trust me, it was pretty horrible. And then Carl finally got there, and he saw me and I guess— I guess he could see what was going on. So he followed the guy outside and then he… Well, you saw the rest.”

Gemma now frowned. “Your stepdad went radge on a guy just from looking at you?”

Jasper nodded. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Jasper, he almost fucking killed the guy.”

“Yeah, Carl isn’t… exactly the most stable person.”

She shook her head. “He’s fucking mental, if you ask me. And from what you’ve told me…”

“Look, it’s really not that bad. He’s just had a rough time.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I don’t get it. Why are you defending him after all this time you were mouthing off about what a total prick he is and how he treats like you like crap all the time?”

Jasper turned his attention back to his muffin, played with the paper it was baked in. “Because I didn’t think he cared.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I didn’t think he cared, but now I know that he does.”

“Him beating a guy to a bloody pulp tells you he cares?”

Well, when she put it like that… But Gemma still didn’t understand. “I know it’s kinda twisted, but yeah. That’s just… Carl. He never talks about stuff. It’s always more like what he does. Look, it’s… You don’t know him. He’s not… he’s not a bad person. He just… I don’t know, I think his work really fucked him up. And then he got shot. And that fucked him up even worse.

“It’s like—I dunno—like he’s angry all the time but doesn’t really mean to be, but maybe he doesn’t know how else to be. You know?”

Gemma was frowning again. “No, to be honest. He sounds like he should be in therapy.”

Jasper let out a cynical chuckle. “Yeah. But he won’t. Cause that’s also Carl. Stubborn as hell. Thinks he’s, like…. I don’t know…. superhuman. God forbid if he ever asked for help.”

“So what did *he* have to say about all this?”

“Like I said, he doesn’t talk about stuff.”

“He didn’t say *anything*? After all that?”

“He just said someone paid the guy. That they used me to get to him and that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“So this had to do with his job?”

Jasper shrugged. “Yeah. He wouldn’t tell me, even if I asked. He never talks about his work. Ever. Like it’s some unwritten rule or something.”

“Geez, J. That’s some heavy fucking shit he’s involved in.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So that was it?”

“Yeah, he had to leave after, I haven’t seen him since. Oh, and we talked about whether I should tell my mum about it.”

“And, have you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“To protect Carl?”

“I don’t know. I mean, she’s probably gonna find out anyway, right? It’s all over social media.”

“If she did, would she report him?”

“I don’t know if she cares enough.”

Gemma looked at him. “God, J, your family is super fucked up.”

“I know, right?”

“Do you need a place to crash?”

“Nah.”

“So you’re gonna move back in with Carl?”

“Yeah. Nan is a fucking nightmare to live with. Can’t believe I thought it’d be better there. Carl fucking hates her.”

“Doesn’t he hate everybody?”

“He might not hate *you*.”

Now it was Gemma’s turn to scoff. “Did you forget how we met?”

“He barely knows you.”

“And it sounds like maybe it would be better if it stayed that way.”

“Look, I’ll work on him, okay?”

“Work on him?”

Jasper flashed her a grin. “He’s not *totally* unreasonable. Not always. Sometimes you just have to pick the right moment.”

“Maybe we should go to our place next time.”

“With your nosy little sister around? Yeah, that’s gonna go super well. Might as well put it on the school noticeboard.”

Gemma downed the last of her mocha latte, pointing at Jasper’s muffin. “You gonna have that?”

He shook his head and held it out to her. “You want it?”

“Sure.” As she unpeeled it from the paper, she said, “Let’s get changed and meet later, yeah?”

“Okay. Greyfriars?”

“Yep, I’ll text you.”

He picked up his rucksack and got up. “Catch ye.”

She raised her hand in a goodbye gesture. “Later.”

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It was two days later that Jasper met up with Gemma again. That time at one of their usual hangouts in the gazebo opposite the kids' playground. Gemma had somehow gotten her hands on two cans of Kopparberg that they mutually sipped.

There had been some making out earlier and Jasper thought maybe he'd end up with a love bite that Carl might endlessly tease him about. Gemma was half leaning into him, her hair tickling slightly against his neck.

Jasper took another sip of cider. "Carl and I talked."

Gemma shifted, then pushed herself away so that she could look at him. "About what happened?"

"Yeah. I mean, no, not really, but kinda."

"Kinda?"

"Yeah, like I said, he doesn't talk about his work. Said he doesn't want me to know. Which, like, I kinda get... He sees a lot of horrible shite."

"You said he works on the murder squad?"

"Yeah. Or he used to. He's got this new department now that solves cold cases."

"He's got a whole department? Jesus fucking Christ, they really should have fired him after that stunt."

"It's just him and this other guy, I think. Like I said, he doesn't really talk about work."

"So what *did* you talk about?"

Jasper shrugged. "My mum leaving. And, I don't know.... us?"

"Us, as in...?"

"Me and him. How we can not be at each other's throats all the time. That he wants to listen if I wanna talk."

She frowned at him. "And he'll make good on that?"

"I hope. He seemed like he really wanted to try."

"Yeah, but you've said that before, and then things got all fucked up and you moved into your Nan's place."

"Yeah, but this was different. Like he genuinely wanted to try. As fucked up as the whole thing at the ice cream shop was, I think in a way it's helped. That's weird, right?"

She smiled. "Yeah, J, that's fucking weird."

He raised one shoulder in a half shrug. "I guess our family was always a bit weird."

“So he didn’t get fired over the whole thing?”

“I asked him that too. He said his boss was a saint. Probably a good thing, though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I think him being out of a job would be a real fucking disaster. The three months with him at home after he got out of the hospital were bad enough.”

Gemma gave him a long look, then leaned in and gave him a long and gentle kiss. “You’re a real saint, Jasper.”

He frowned. “Eh?”

“Dude doesn’t deserve you, and I will die on that hill.”

He chuckled. “You know, I wouldn’t even argue with that.”

She got up and held her hand out to him. “Come on, let’s go back to my place. We still have that Gang Beasts score to settle.”

He grinned. “Aye. I’ll roast you so bad.”

“Haha, you wish!” She started walking backwards, away from him, giving him a teasing grin.

He downed the last of the cider, left the empty can on the seat of the gazebo and jogged after his girlfriend.