Get My Feet Back On The Ground

a Dept. Q fan fiction by TeeJay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Summary

This is what happens when Carl Morck gets a sore throat and thinks it's nothing. It's just a head cold. Until it's not.

Author's Note

This is the result of pitching self-indulgent whump ideas and then getting egged on by fellow fans. Those who know me are well aware that I love whumping my blorbos. And Carl is an easy target to be whumped. So here we are. No regrets.

Thirdbird has also written her own version of Carl coming down with a case of EBV after I talked about the idea on Discord. I'm all for variety, we can never have enough Carl whump! I didn't actually read her version until I finished writing my own, so these two stories were written entirely independently and in parallel.

Massive thanks (again) to M, pixiehood and BlueAndPink for the beta! You guys are the best! Some of this is your fault. No, scratch that, *most* of this is your fault. Be proud!

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Chapter 1 – Best Laid Plans

It started with a harmless sore throat. Or so Carl thought.

He told himself it was just a cold, it'd pass. After all, that was how a head cold usually announced itself for him. A day or two of throat ache, then the runny nose for a few more days, then congestion, and then it'd be gone again.

It dawned on him that maybe this wasn't just a simple head cold three days in. The fatigue was becoming hard to ignore, and even *he* could tell this was more than just the usual sleep deprivation. There was also the low-grade fever that fucked with everything, that made days grating and nights more restless than they already were.

Both Rose and Akram had tried to encourage him to go home and take a few days off.

> *"Carl, you look like shite," Rose had said.*
>
> *He'd just given her a grunt and regretted it because it aggravated his sore throat.*
>
> *"Seriously, you should probably be in bed right now."*
>
> *"Fuck off, Rose."*
>
> *"You're being a workplace hazard. What if you pass whatever lurgy you have on to us?"*

"Then you can go home and stay in fucking bed."

"Seriously, Carl, you're not doing anyone any favours. Can you go home? Please?"

By day four, he finally capitulated. His throat was killing him, the fever was now undeniable, and the fatigue was like a seventeen-tonne weight that dragged him down wherever he went. He called in sick that morning and crawled back into bed.

His first human contact that day was at an indeterminate time, maybe afternoon because he'd dozed away most of the day, when there was a knock on his door. "Carl?" It was Jasper.

The teenager opened the door unbidden. "Are you ill?"

Carl wanted to roll his eyes, but a hammering headache had now found itself there so he chose to move as little as possible. "What's it look like?" he grunted.

"So, like, the flu or something?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

Jasper took a tentative step inside the room. Like it was some holy sanctum he wasn't allowed to enter. "What is it that you have?"

"Jasper, leave me alone."

But Jasper didn't. "You've been ill this whole week. Are you running a fever? Is it COVID?"

Carl closed his eyes. "It's not fucking COVID. Just gotta sleep it off, alright?"

Best laid plans, which of course didn't quite work out that way. Carl's night was restless, his fever spiking, alternating between sweating profusely and waking up from chills that made his body shake worse than a blancmange in an earthquake.

It also wasn't just the fever. His throat was now full-on agony. Swallowing felt like raw skin on sandpaper, he was sure there was swelling somewhere in there, made worse by the lingering effects of the scar tissue and nerve damage from the bullet going clean through his neck.

By the time morning rolled around, he just wanted to lie still, not ever move again, and die.

At some point, sheer thirst pulled Carl out of bed, but even the way to the kitchen was a lot more laborious than it should be. By the time he sank down in one of the chairs and took a few gulps from the tap water that hurt as hell as they went past his tonsils, his head was killing him and he felt spent and tired like he'd never felt before. Whatever this was, it was a fucking belter.

He wasn't sure how long he'd sat there, not finding the energy to even make it to the couch when Jasper appeared in the kitchen.

"Morning," Jasper mumbled.

Carl didn't say anything, knowing it would aggravate his throat.

"You feeling any better?" Jasper asked.

Carl wanted to grunt, but the sound that came out was a pitiful excuse for it.

“Carl?”

“Not really,” he muttered. His voice sounded coated and hoarse even to himself.

“Wow, you sound like total shite. Shouldn’t you see a doctor for this?”

Yeah, Jasper was fooling himself if he thought Carl would ever voluntarily see a GP.

“Why are you not in bed?” Jasper pressed on.

“Jasper, leave me the fuck alone.”

Jasper’s brow creased, then he went away. Carl thought about going back to bed, but the kitchen chair seemed just fine. Yeah, he could keep sitting here. Maybe fold his arms onto the table and just sleep there. That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

Only Jasper came back two minutes later, a small, elongated object in hand. He extracted the thermometer from the plastic storage case. He held it out to Carl. “Here.”

Carl waved it away, but his movements were clumsy at best. “Fuck off.”

But from the years of Carl’s bullshit he’d witnessed, Jasper wasn’t so easily intimidated. “You actually look worse than death warmed over. I wanna know your temperature. And no, I’m not gonna fuck off.”

He put the thermometer on the table in front of Carl.

Carl let out a long-suffering breath, then took the damn thing, switched it on and put it under his armpit. Jasper glared at him, part worry, part frustration. The thermometer eventually beeped, and Carl himself was surprised at the number he saw.

Jasper took it from him. “39.4. That’s… kinda high. You really should see a doctor for this.”

“I’m not gonna see a fucking doctor.”

Jasper’s glare intensified. “For fuck’s sake, Carl. This could be something actually serious.”

“I’m gonna go back to bed.”

He didn’t really feel like wanting to do that, but he also wanted to get away from Jasper’s annoying scrutiny. He took the half-full glass of water with him, the fatigue still making his feet drag like they weighed ten times more than they should.

He was out of breath by the time he crawled back into his bed.

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Jasper watched Carl shuffle into his bedroom, the nagging feeling of worry ever rising.

Carl was… well, Carl was Carl. And Carl tended to be prickly and stubborn on the best of days, but this was concerning.

The carelessly discarded thermometer on the kitchen table mocked Jasper, like that warning sign that was easily ignored but in hindsight actually a really smart fucking thing to heed.

He stared at Carl’s closed bedroom door, thinking he’d never seen his stepfather this lifeless. Not even after he got out of the hospital after the shooting. And he knew that Carl would not see a doctor unless there was something actually life-threatening going on.

So what was he supposed to do?

He went to Martin's door, hesitated a moment before he knocked.

Martin opened a few moments later, still in his pyjamas, a strand of black hair sticking out at an odd angle. There was an impatient edge to his voice. "Jasper." He cocked his head. "Something wrong?"

"Carl's ill."

"Okay."

"No, I mean, like, *really* ill."

"Really ill, as in…?"

"He's running a fever and he's, like… he looks like total shite. I dunno, like he's barely able to stay upright."

"So what do you want *me* to do?"

Jasper shrugged. "I don't know. I think he should see a doctor."

"And I'm guessing you've told him that and he's thrown a selection of choice words at you and then ignored it."

Jasper's shoulders sagged. "Yeah."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to accomplish in this situation. It's not like he ever listens to *me*."

"Can't you at least try?"

Martin sighed. "Not sure I'm ready for that at 7:30 in the morning, but fine. I shall try my very best."

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Carl was having the worst time ever. When he pulled the duvet up, he felt too hot and sweaty. When he pushed it off, he felt too cold and started shivering. He'd never experienced this kind of exhaustion, the kind that didn't go away when you slept and sucked away any last shred of energy. His throat felt like it was entirely made of gravelly sand and his head pounded like the bass at an overcrowded rave. Whatever the fuck infection this was, it was worse than anything he could remember coming down with. COVID had seemed like a walk in the park compared to this.

Getting out of bed was not something he even wanted to attempt. The most he'd been able to do was fish for painkillers in his nightstand drawer, only to find that the blister was empty. Just his fucking luck.

He was just about to drift off to an uneasy slumber, when there was another knock on his door. He wanted to grumble, "For fuck's sake," but his throat stopped him short.

Expecting Jasper again, he groaned inwardly when it was Martin.

His lodger stood in the doorway. "Jasper said you're ill."

“Boy’s pretty good at stating the obvious,” Carl mumbled.

“Don’t you think it’s time you saw a doctor for this?”

“Not you too, traitor.”

“You’ve been dragging this around for, what? A week? As much as I’m a fan of not throwing prescription drugs at a mild flu, it might not be the worst idea to look into whether antibiotics will actually help you get over this.”

Carl closed his eyes, hoping that Martin would just go away. Which of course he didn’t.

“Carl, seriously. See a bloody doctor.”

“Fuck off, Martin.”

“Okay, suit yourself.”

Carl thought it would be the last he’d see of Martin for the day, but a few minutes later, he was back with a mug that he put on Carl’s bedside table. Martin pointed at the beverage. “Try to drink that, at least. Anything else I can do?”

Carl was touched, he really was, but of course he couldn’t tell Martin that, so he swallowed, and instantly regretted it. “Some pain meds.”

“Ibuprofen? Paracetamol? Lemsip?”

“Paracetamol will do.”

“I know you’ll loathe me for it, but Jasper and I will find ways to drag you to a GP tomorrow if this doesn’t improve. You have the rest of the day to prepare yourself for that scenario.”

“Just leave me the fuck alone.”

“Bit of a shame that your charming personality doesn’t improve when you could actually use the help, but I’ve learned not to take it personally.”

Martin came back a minute later and placed a medication blister on Carl’s nightstand. “That’s the last we have. At the risk of repeating myself, it would be better if you saw someone who could prescribe something more potent. In the meantime, I need to know what your symptoms are.”

“What, so you can fucking internet-diagnose me?”

“No, so that we can make a judgement call on how serious this is.”

“If you call an ambulance on me, you’ll find yourself looking for a new place faster than you can pack up all your shit.”

Martin sighed, then brought out his no-nonsense tone. “Carl. Jasper is actually worried. And quite frankly, so am I.”

“Yeah, well, get over it.”

Martin stood his ground. “Your symptoms.”

Carl sighed. He wasn't going to get out of this because Martin could be a stubborn prick in his own right, and he'd acquired an uncanny ability to absorb Carl's caustic bullshit and waste-compact it. "Sore throat, fever, headache, joint pain, tired as fuck. You happy now?"

"That sounds very unpleasant."

"Yeah, Martin, it really is. Now, will you leave me the *fuck* alone?"

Martin stood there for another moment, shook his head, but finally relented and left the room. Carl let out a frustrated breath. His plan was to fall asleep for a few blissful hours and wake up rested enough to pass as halfway human so that he could get these two idiots off his back. That's what he was gonna fucking try.

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Jasper stood in the kitchen, a clear feeling of unease roiling in his gut. Why did he always have to deal with these shitty situations when Carl should be the actual fucking adult in this household?

He'd been here once before, when Carl had almost died, then spent weeks in the hospital. Jasper hated having to stay with his gran until Carl got back home, and those weeks with Carl suddenly there all day, short-fused, unapproachable and irritable hadn't been fun either. He'd tried to keep his head down as best as he could, had eventually decided that whatever he did, Carl would be mad at him anyway, so what did it matter?

The thing was, though, it *did* matter. Because Carl hadn't always been like this – not this hard-edged and openly hostile. Jasper wanted the old Carl back, didn't know if that would ever happen, but if that Carl didn't exist anymore, then having this version of him was still better than nothing.

And now something was wrong with Carl again, and Jasper didn't know how bad it was. He didn't want Carl to end up back in the hospital, didn't want to have to live here one day and relocate to his grandmother's the next.

Jasper saw Carl's bedroom door opening, Martin exiting and taking a package of paracetamol out of the kitchen drawer. Jasper tentatively followed him as the latter went back into Carl's room. He stayed just outside the door to listen to the conversation.

And of course there was Carl's usual abrasive crap. "Now, will you leave me the *fuck* alone?"

Jasper stepped aside as Martin came back out and closed the door behind him. Jasper looked at him and Martin gave him a shrug as he went back to the kitchen. "Well. He's his usual unregenerate self."

"So he's still refusing to see a doctor."

Martin made another helpless shrugging gesture. "I said I'd try. For all the good it did."

"So what do I do?"

"Jasper, he's a grown man."

"He's also really irresponsible when it comes to his own health."

"Is there anyone else you can call? Someone he listens to more than you and me?"

Jasper thought about it. “Hardy, maybe?”

“Might be worth a try.”

Jasper brought up Hardy’s number in his phone. He’d had this conversation with Carl once, when he was 13 or 14. Well, not a conversation, really. Carl had been unceremonious about it, had given him a note with Hardy’s number. ‘For emergencies,’ he’d said and left it at that. Was this an emergency?

Hardy answered after three rings. “Hullo?”

“Hardy?”

“Aye. Jasper? That you?”

“Yes. I need your help.”

“With what?”

“Carl’s ill. Like, really ill. I mean, not *really* really ill, but—”

“Do I need to call an ambulance?”

“No. He’s just… He’s got a pretty high fever, he says he’s got a sore throat, headache, joint ache and now he’s taking painkillers. He looks really terrible, and I don’t think it’s getting any better. Martin and I tried to talk him into seeing a doctor but… You know Carl.”

There was a sigh at the other end that Jasper could feel. “Aye, I know Carl.”

“How do we get him to see a doctor?”

“How do you ever get Carl to do anything he doesn’t want to do?”

“I don’t know. Can you come, maybe? Try to talk to him?”

“I’m not sure I can tackle all those stairs myself. But I’ll see what I can do, alright?”

“Yeah,” Jasper said. “Thanks.”

“Hang in there. I’ll send the cavalry.”

The cavalry, it turned out, was a dark-haired man with a moustache who looked like an 8th grade geography teacher. When Jasper opened the door to him half an hour later, he introduced himself as DI Salim, adding, “Akram,” as he held out his hand. “I work with your stepfather.”

Jasper shook the hand. “Yes, he’s mentioned you.”

Akram raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment further. “Where is he?”

Jasper wasn’t sure what to do. This was a stranger in their home whom Jasper had no idea how Carl would react if he knew he was here. He went into the kitchen, then pointed at Carl’s bedroom door. “He might be sleeping. I dunno if you should go in there. He doesn’t usually…”

Akram ignored the warning, went right into Carl’s room. Jasper tentatively followed but stayed back, close enough to watch and listen.

“Carl,” Akram said assertively.

Carl lifted his head, then let out an exasperated groan. “The fuck are *you* doing here?” His voice was raspy as hell.

“Your stepson asked.”

“How the fuck does he have your number?”

“He does not. He called Hardy.”

“And he sent you…”

Akram nodded. “As you know, your tenement has a lot of stairs.”

“Yeah, and you can fuck right off down all of them because I’m fine.”

“You are *not* fine. You are running a very high fever, and you look like you are very miserable.”

“For fuck’s sake, I don’t need a personal nursing service, yeah? I just need everyone to fucking let me sleep this off.”

Akram gave Jasper a pointed look and Jasper somehow immediately felt intimidated but also strangely reassured at the same time. It seemed like this guy with the vaguely Middle Eastern accent could actually make a difference.

Jasper gave him a pointed look back and Akram told Carl, “I think you know you are beyond the point where you can sleep this off. If you don’t see your GP, this will turn into something that will require you to go to A&E. I don’t think that this is something you are very keen on.”

“You’re fucking right I’m not keen.”

“So you need to see your GP.”

Carl sighed, pulled himself up into half a sitting position, grimacing as he did so. His voice was gravelly and rough. “You’ve been here long enough to know the NHS doesn’t just let you walk into a GP’s office on a whim.”

Akram pulled out his phone. “No, the NHS has a phone number where you can make short notice appointments in situations like this.”

Akram dialled a number, then held the phone out to Carl. Jasper was still intrigued by Akram’s intense glare, and that it actually seemed to work on Carl because he took the phone and dutifully went through the motions of making an ad hoc appointment.

When he was done, he held the phone back out to Akram. “Alright, Judas. Tomorrow, 8:30. Provided I live through the night.”

If Jasper didn’t know better, he’d have said Akram was rolling his eyes. “You are very dramatic.”

Jasper couldn’t help but smirk.

Carl added, “Could use a chauffeur.”

“I will see what we can do.”

“Don’t send Rose. She drives worse than a fucking granny.”

“You said you do not like my driving style, either.”

Carl scoffed. “I don’t, but I’d pick yours over hers.”

“That is very good to know. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. Get the fuck out of here.”

“Okay.” Akram turned to go, then turned back around to face Carl. “Sage tea with honey may help with the sore throat. I hope you will feel better soon.”

Carl didn’t grace it with a response.

Jasper breathed a small sigh of relief. Finally they were making some headway, good thing he had called Hardy. Back in the kitchen, Akram looked at Jasper. “His personality does not improve when he is ill.”

“What did you expect?”

Akram’s mouth formed a small smile. “Fair point. Ask him to take paracetamol or ibuprofen to keep the fever down. If it rises above 40°C, I recommend you call an ambulance. He should not take more than two tablets every four to six hours if it is the normal dosage. If you have sage tea, try to have him drink it. Lozenges might also help with the throat ache. Rose or I will be here tomorrow morning to take him to the appointment.”

Akram handed Jasper a business card. “I will leave my phone on during the night. Call me if it is urgent.”

Jasper took it. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“You are welcome. I wish you luck.”

Jasper’s mouth formed a half smile. “Thanks. I’ll need it.”

Akram nodded before he left. As soon as the door had closed behind Akram, Jasper heard Carl’s voice from the bedroom. It was certainly angry, if also hoarse and raspy. “Jasper!!”

Jasper opened the door, stayed tentatively in the doorway. Carl snarled, “Why the fuck did you call Hardy?!”

“Because I’m worried.”

“I told you I’m *fine*,” he said between clenched teeth.

“And I don’t believe you. Akram is right, you are *not* fine. And you’re a stupid fucking dobber who never listens to *me*, so I had to get help, alright? If only you could be fucking grateful for once. It’s like you think it makes you less of a man or some shit.”

Jasper sucked in a breath, tried to calm his temper. He pointed at the medication blister on the nightstand. “Take two of those every four to six hours. Oh, and I’ll be checking your temperature. And no, you don’t get to say fuck off, because I won’t. Please don’t be a massive idiot about this.”

Jasper hated how that came out like a plea, hated how he felt his eyes tearing up. But Carl had seen it too, and it seemed to rattle something loose in him.

“Okay,” Carl said in a resigned voice.

Jasper nodded. “Okay,” he echoed. “I’ll get you sage tea and lozenges.”

Carl closed his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

Jasper quietly closed the door behind him.

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Chapter 2 – Do What You Must

Carl somehow made it through the night. Jasper kept fussing, asked him to take his temperature several times, made him take the meds. It was annoying but he had to admit that somewhere in there, he was also grateful. The painkillers helped and the lozenges downgraded his throat from screaming agony to almost bearable. The sage tea tasted fucking disgusting and he wasn’t sure if it was doing anything, but he drank it anyway – if only to get Jasper off his case.

Somewhere around 7 am, Jasper reminded him to get dressed. Jasper was never up this early. Had he set an alarm just for this? Jesus fucking Christ. Carl wasn’t a fucking toddler who needed babysitting. He almost told Jasper that but bit his tongue at the last moment.

He contemplated taking a shower but abandoned the idea when he was already spent and dizzy from the few yards traversing to the bathroom. He felt sticky and disgusting but the last thing he wanted was for Jasper or Martin to have to extract him naked from the shower because his body had randomly given out.

Everything took an agonisingly long time. His muscles ached and felt like rubber. It took way too long to close the button of his jeans and fasten the belt. Jasper was waiting with a mug of tea and a slice of buttered toast in the kitchen that he set in front of Carl as he shuffled out of the bathroom and sank down exhaustedly into one of the chairs.

He drank the tea and tried a small bite of the toast. It grated against his aching throat in a way that made him instantly abandon the rest of the thing. The tea felt good, at least. Maybe he could get used to sage. Maybe.

“I could make you porridge,” Jasper said.

Carl contemplated it for a moment, somewhat confused that it took a long time to compute what Jasper was saying.

Porridge.

Right.

Food.

The hollow feeling in his stomach said yes, the sandpapery pain in his throat said fuck no.

“No,” he said, his voice raspy as hell.

Jasper gave him a nod, but Carl could see the worry written all over his face. He wasn't sure what to do with it, so he drank his tea, popped another lozenge, and tried to figure out how to get through the day.

Their doorbell rang an indeterminate amount of time later. He groaned inwardly when he heard the always too cheerful voice of Rose by the door as Jasper let her in.

She stepped into view in the kitchen door. "Good morning, Carl."

He just gave her a disdainful look, wanting to speak as little as possible.

She added, "Your personal pick-up service is here, even though you requested a different driver. Akram has to take his wee girls to school, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"Yay me," he muttered.

Rose raised her eyebrows and looked at Jasper. "I reckon he's even grumpier in this state?"

Jasper gave her a smirk. "Pretty much."

She turned back to Carl. "I hope you know that I will be immune to yer crankiness, so ye might as well keep it to yerself."

"Fuck off, Rose."

"I will, once you get your gangly bum in my car."

Jasper looked at Rose. "Does he always talk to you like that?"

She smiled, then shrugged her shoulders. "When he's annoyed. But it's fine, we know he doesn't really mean it."

"I'm right here," Carl grumbled.

"Aye," Rose said, then looked at her watch. "Come on, we have an appointment to get to, in case you've forgotten."

No, he hadn't forgotten. He was trying to work up the energy to get up from the chair. Maybe she saw it because she said, "Do you need any help?"

"No, for fuck's sake, Rose."

She lifted her arms in defence. "Okay. Just offering. Meant no offence."

Carl manoeuvred himself up, pushed past the dizziness and the fucking fatigue and made his way to the hall at something resembling a snail's pace. It was ridiculous that something as simple as putting on shoes suddenly seemed like a major undertaking.

In the door to the kitchen, Rose asked Jasper if he was coming with them, but he said he had to go to school. Rose finally chirped to Jasper, "Well, then. It was nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too," Jasper said.

Carl wanted to roll his eyes.

After getting down the second flight of stairs, Carl realised with rising dread that he had underestimated this. What the fuck was wrong with his body? He was winded like he'd just sprinted his way through a 5k, his feet felt like lead that was getting heavier with every step

and his knees ached as if someone had injected expanding foam into them. At the bottom of the next flight of stairs, he grabbed onto the handrail to try and keep the dizziness in check enough to stay upright.

Rose stopped as well. “Carl? Jesus.”

She was by his side in an instant, her hand on his arm. He wanted to protest, held up one hand and feebly said, “Just a little lightheaded.”

“Nonsense, you’re more than that. Here, let me help you.” As she took his arm, she said, “Crivvens, you’re burning up. Good thing we’re taking you to the doctor.”

Carl wanted to give her a growl but decided not to. His throat was still fucking agony and the lozenge from earlier had done fuck-all.

By the time they reached the main door, Carl wanted to sit down somewhere and never move again.

“Christ, Carl, you’re white as a sheet.”

“Not helping, Rose.”

“Yeah, I know. Wait here, I’ll get the car. Had to park a wee bit down the road.”

She left and he sank down on the one stone step in front of their door right where he stood. His heart was hammering in his chest as if he’d just run a marathon, and he wasn’t sure he could ever get up again of his own volition.

He let his head sink into his hands and waited, feeling the fever burning behind his eyes.

It felt like a long time but it probably wasn’t until he heard Rose say his name. “Carl.”

She stood there in front of him, extending a hand. Her grip was strong when she pulled him up, and then her hands were on his waist when he swayed from the dizziness.

“Careful now,” she said.

The trek to the car wasn’t that long, but it was longer than Carl thought he could walk on his own. By the end of it, he was leaning more on Rose than he would ever admit. She thankfully stayed quiet about it.

He must have dozed off on the drive, because when he came to, they were parked in a small car park behind a cinnamon-coloured brick building. Rose looked at him. “Well, here we are.”

Carl let out something that was half sigh, half groan. “Fantastic.”

When he didn’t move, she said, “Carl, you’ll have to get out of the car if you want to be seen by a doctor.”

“I don’t want to be seen by a doctor.”

“Yes, I know, but we’re here and you have an appointment. Would be very daft to go back now.”

Rose exited the car, came round to his side and opened the passenger side door. Her hand was there again for him to take. He sighed, then unfastened the seat belt and resigned to his fate.

Everything about the whole ordeal was as annoying and frustrating as Carl had expected. Forms of paper to complete with a brain that was only barely working. Talking to people, then talking to more people. Questions about his symptoms, poking and prodding, a wooden tongue depressor stuck in his mouth so deeply that he could barely suppress the gagging reflex.

And then gloved hands reached out to palpate his throat. Carl flinched hard.

"I'm sorry," the young doctor said, apparently only now noticing and then scrutinising his exit wound scar. "Is this from a gunshot wound?"

"Yeah," Carl rasped.

The doctor turned away and typed something into a tablet computer, then read intently for a minute. He turned Carl's neck to look near his right ear where the entry wound was.

"I see in your file you have some lasting damage from your injury."

Yeah, thanks for stating the fucking obvious, Carl thought.

"I realise it may cause some discomfort, but I have to palpate that area to determine swelling of your tonsils and lymph nodes."

Carl closed his eyes, let out a breath through his nose.

"Mr. Morck?"

He sighed. "Do what you must."

Carl had to try hard not to slap the doctor's hand away as he pushed into the tissue of his neck and throat this and that way. The area around the scar was sensitive on the best of days, fucky on the bad ones, but this was a whole new level of uncomfortable. He released the breath he'd been holding when the physician was finally done.

The doctor swivelled the rolling chair around to look at Carl. "I can see clear signs of a throat infection and your fever is a little high at 39.1. There's also swelling of your tonsils and lymph nodes. What I'll do first is a rapid detection test for strep throat, I'll have to swab your throat for that. The results should take about ten to fifteen minutes. Give me one sec."

He came back with a long swab in sterile packaging that he unwrapped. "This should be quick but might feel uncomfortable, perhaps make you gag. Please try to hold still if you can."

And boy, did it make Carl gag. It also made him anxious and antsy. Having things near his neck was absolute no-go territory, and by the time the doctor was done, he wanted to punch him in the fucking face. He might have actually toppled over in the weakened state he was in, but he was still ready to try.

Carl was sent back to the waiting room where Rose peppered him with questions. He tried to answer a few, eventually snarled, "Rose, keep your fucking mouth shut for the next ten

minutes, yeah?" He didn't care that it earned him several disdainful glances from the strangers around them.

He was called back in after fifteen minutes of blissful silence from Rose, although by the end of it, Carl wanted to strangle the crying toddler two chairs over whose visibly ill mother was in no shape to cope with. The doctor told him the strep test was negative, and they'd follow up with a test for glandular fever. Thankfully it required finger prick blood and not another fucking throat swab. It was more waiting after that until he was finally told the test for Eppstein Barr virus had come back positive.

Blood was drawn from his vein, which sent him right into another visceral reminder of IV cannulas and the weeks of poking and prodding he'd had to undergo when he was hospitalised.

He was trapped in the nine circles of hell and must have made it into at least the fifth by the time they sent him home with a glandular fever leaflet and the less than encouraging information that, since this was a viral infection, antibiotics would not be helpful. Apparently, there was nothing much that could be done other than riding it out with over-the-counter painkillers and lots of fluids and rest. He was told to take paracetamol for the pain and switch to ibuprofen if that wasn't potent enough, then given a prescription for some kind of gastric protector that was recommended in tandem with the ibuprofen.

Fucking fantastic. He could have done all that without this healthcare related ordeal.

He went back into the waiting room and told Rose, "Let's go."

"So?"

"So this was a giant fucking waste of time."

"How so?"

He handed her the leaflet. "Paracetamol, fluids and rest. And guess what. I was already doing that. But oh no, you lot had to drag me through this whole fucking nightmare just to be told to keep doing what I'd already been doing. I hope you're happy now."

"It could have been something really serious."

"Could've. But it wasn't. Drive me the fuck home, preferably in silence."

She pressed her lips together but blissfully stayed quiet the whole way.

What Carl wasn't looking forward to was his tenement's staircase. Going up those flights of stairs would be even more laborious than the way down. Fuck. Could he maybe stay in the car for a while? Maybe for the rest of the day? Surely Rose wouldn't mind, would she?

She stopped the car by his building in front of the row of wheelie bins and put on the hazard lights. "You up for this?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Well, we can't stay here forever."

"Yeah. I know."

Carl clenched his jaw, thinking this was fucking ridiculous. He could walk up a few flights of fucking stairs on his own. Except by the time he reached the first floor, he was willing to rescind that statement.

How could a fucking throat infection reduce a healthy man to damn near an invalid in just a week?

He was more grateful than he'd ever admit that he had Rose to help him get up to his flat. By the time they reached his door, he was half-leaning on her with his arm slung around her shoulder. This was ridiculous. He hoped she would never speak of it to anyone but trusted her to be smart enough to read the fucking room.

Trying to catch his breath, he unlocked the door, stumbled into the living room. Fumbling with his shoelaces and getting off his shoes took way too long, and by the time Carl was done with them, he was exhausted in a way that he couldn't remember ever feeling before. He lifelessly sagged against the backrest of the couch, closing his eyes.

He couldn't tell how long, probably just a minute or so later, Rose's voice cut through the silence. "Carl."

He didn't answer.

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah," he said in a strained whisper.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No."

"You look really terrible. I don't think you should be alone right now."

"You have to go to work," he said, not moving, his eyes still closed.

"Not if my boss says I can work from home."

"This isn't your home."

"No, but it's *a* home."

He considered the offer, didn't want to like it as much as he actually did. She was right. He was totally useless. Having someone here wouldn't be the worst idea, even if it was Rose. Fucking hell, if he was ready to admit that, this had to be bad.

"Okay," he finally said exhaustedly.

"Let me park the car and get my laptop. Where are your keys?"

"Kitchen table. Or jacket pocket. Can't fucking remember."

"I'll be right back."

He didn't recall much of that morning after that.

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Rose unlocked the door to Carl's apartment, her bag over her shoulder. She put it on one of the kitchen chairs, then checked the living room.

Carl was still sitting there how she'd left him, his chest rising with even breaths. She stood there for a moment, unsure what to do, then went up to him and lightly tapped him on the shoulder.

He let out a soft moan, and she said, "Carl. Lie down."

She had to actually drag his legs up onto the couch, thinking how ridiculous this was, but did it anyway because Carl seemed to be completely zoned out. There was a light grey throw with stripes on the armrest of the couch. She unfolded it, noticing grey bobbles on the hem that didn't seem like Carl's style at all, and draped it over him. There. That was much better.

She went into the kitchen, unpacked her laptop, then realised that she would need Carl's WiFi password. She dug out her phone and dialled Hardy's number.

"Rose," he greeted her. "How did it go?"

"As expected. Or maybe worse than that. He has…" She dug out the leaflet. "…glandular fever. Nothing much to be done other than painkillers and rest. He's super out of it right now, zonked out on the couch. I'll stay for a while, I don't think he should be alone right now."

"You're a real angel," Hardy told her.

"Yeah, maybe tell Carl that."

"Did he curse you out?"

"A bit. Earlier. I think he was too knackered by the end, just said I could stay. Look, I need his WiFi password. Do you know what it is or where he keeps it?"

"I don't, but I'll check with Jasper."

"That's fine, I'll use the mobile hotspot until then."

"The what?"

She chuckled. "Never mind. Text me the password."

"I will. Tatty-bye."

"Bye."

Hardy's text came twenty minutes later. 'Jasper says it's at the bottom of the router, under the TV unit.' Rose found it and snapped a photo with her mobile phone, then connected her laptop. Yep, that worked.

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Disorientation was the first thing Carl felt when he came to. Where was he? The pain didn't take long to hit full force after that. It was dull, somehow everywhere but much sharper in his head and throat. He moaned.

Couch. He was on his couch. In his street clothes. There was a blanket draped over him.

He opened his eyes, regretting it immediately, dragging his arm across them to shield out the light. He moaned again.

A female voice said his name. Rose. Maybe.

He moved his arm, looked. Yes. Rose. What was she doing here?

“Carl?”

He gathered the little energy he had left to pull himself more upright. “Rose?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like fucking shit.”

She smiled at him. “And for a moment I was worried.”

His memory was hazy, but it slowly started to come back to him. There’d been a doctor’s visit earlier. “What time is it?”

She looked at her watch. “Half one.”

“PM?”

“Well, it’s daylight, isn’t it?”

What did that have to do with anyth— Oh. He looked out the window. God, his brain was fucked. “I’ve slept for four hours?”

“Apparently yes.”

“Why are you still here?”

“I’ve been working.”

“Here?”

“Yes. We *do* have a remote connection to the Police Caledonia server, you know.”

He’d stopped paying attention after the word ‘remote’. “What time is it?”

Rose frowned. “You already asked me that. *Now* I’m getting worried. Hold still.” There was suddenly a hand on his forehead, then it was gone again. “You’re still running a fever. Are you hallucinating?”

“What? Fuck no. My brain’s sluggish as fuck.”

“Okay. Where’s your paracetamol? Do you remember that?”

“Bedroom.” He pointed at the door.

She went in there, came out again, holding a medication blister and his water glass. “How many are you taking?”

“Two.”

She pressed them out of the blister, then handed them to him, together with the water. He winced as they went down his throat. He probably should have taken them one at a time. God, his head was killing him. “Could you… could you close the curtains?”

She looked at the window. “Sure.”

The beige drapes that Vic had chosen and he'd always hated didn't do that much, and he thought it fucking figured.

"You must be hungry," she said.

He wasn't. Not really. Or perhaps he was, but the thought of solid food passing through his throat instantly killed any residual appetite there might have been. Rose was already in the kitchen, checking the fridge, opening drawers and cupboards.

"I'm not hungry," he told her.

She triumphantly produced two packets of Supernoodles and held them up. "This should do the trick. Have to admit, I'm not much of a cook. But these, I could actually—"

She stopped short when a key turned in the lock and the flat door opened. "Are you expecting someone, Carl?"

Carl said off-handedly, "Probably Martin."

"Who's Martin?"

Martin appeared in the kitchen door and said, "His lodger. Who are you?"

"Oh. Rose." She held out her hand. "Dickson."

Martin shook it.

"I work with Carl." She turned to Carl. "You have a lodger?"

"Yeah," Carl rasped.

She turned her attention back to Martin. "You live with him? Voluntarily?"

Martin sighed theatrically. "Didn't know what I was getting into when I signed the lease agreement. Could be worse, though. The kitchen is fully functional and well equipped, which I couldn't say about a lot of other places I looked at, although there is a curious absence of a dishwasher."

Martin took a few steps into the living room, addressing Carl. "I see reports of your demise have been greatly exaggerated."

"No thanks to Rose here dragging me to the fucking GP for no fucking reason."

Martin raised his eyebrows at her appreciatively. "Your bravery has to be admired. Did they at least give him any potent drugs that will save us from the vicarious misery he'll impart on all of us as he's suffering through this?"

Carl piped in, "No, Martin, you shall not be so lucky."

Rose held the leaflet out to Martin that was still lying on the kitchen table, and Martin studied the front cover. "Glandular fever? Crikey, that's no walk in the park. Where the hell'd you get *that*?"

"You, for all I know."

"No. I've never had it." He then laid eyes on the two packets of Supernoodles in Rose's hands. "Were you planning on making those?"

Rose shrugged. “Aye. They’re just about what I can handle.”

“Well, lucky for you, my cooking skills are well honed. And having guests here is a nice change. Let’s see what I could whip up for us.”

Rose vaguely pointed in Carl’s direction. “Something that’s not too spicy and easy to swallow, maybe?”

“Oh, aye. I’ll, uh…” Martin looked in the fridge, then opened one of the overhead cupboards. “Khichdi seems like a good choice.”

Carl had no idea what that was, couldn’t say he gave much of a fuck. More urgent was his bladder making itself known. He groaned, then pushed himself up into a standing position, immediately hit by a wave of dizziness.

A set of hands steadied him by one arm. Rose. Jesus. How was he so screwed up that he couldn’t even stand without fucking help?

He stepped away from her. “Gonna take a piss. Don’t follow me to the toilet, alright?”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

When he was done, he shuffled into the kitchen, sat down opposite Rose, facing the matte grey lid of her open laptop while Martin was prepping food. Finally, the painkillers were starting to kick in. “Anything new turn up?” he asked tiredly.

“Nothing much. It’s been a bit dreich with all the phone records we have to comb through. I also started taking the new Code of Conduct training, and help ma boab, it’s over an hour long.”

She looked up at him, a smile suddenly on her face.

He frowned. “What?”

She pointed at the side of Carl’s head. “You have, uhm…”

His hand came up into his hair, feeling a set of unruly curls sticking out that he tried to smooth down with his hand until Rose nodded appreciatively. He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Akram and Hardy?”

“I dunno. I haven’t spoken to them since this morning.”

“We should…” He dug around in his brain, tried to remember where they stood with their latest case. A young girl gone missing three years ago under suspicious circumstances. “We should look into the… uh…” He waved his hand in a circular motion.

“Carl. You’re ill. You should be conked out on the couch right now, frying your brain with… daytime sitcoms or whatever it is you watch for fun.”

Martin stopped what he was doing, said over his shoulder, “He doesn’t watch anything for fun.”

“Says the man who is obsessed with the *Great British Railway Journeys*.”

“I find it very calming. Which I know you don’t know much about, but I’ve given up on trying to teach you the ways of relaxation.”

“Yeah, thank fuck for that.”

Half an hour later, they were sitting around the table, eating the rich and creamy lentil porridge and soft rice, although Carl was listlessly poking his spoon into it more than actually eating it. His throat was still protesting despite the paracetamol, and he ate as much as he thought he needed in order to stay upright for another day.

It didn’t surprise him that Rose and Martin were quickly engaged in easy conversation. Both of them were the chatty, affable types that Carl tended to hate with a passion. So he kept pretending he was interested in his food and zoned out for a large part of their meaningless banter.

At some stage, Carl propped both elbow up on the table and dropped his head into his hands. There was more talking, more clanking of cutlery against porcelain, more inconsequential small talk.

At some point he heard Martin say, “You know, if you want to go back to the station, I’m happy to take it from here.”

Carl raised his head. “I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

Rose ignored the statement and told Martin, “Aye. And thanks for the lovely lunch. It was very delicious.”

“My pleasure.”

She turned to Carl. “And as for you sorry sod, I do hope you get better soon. And don’t you dare to come back in before you’re fully recovered because we’ll drag your wee arse right back home. Or straight to the GP if you resist too much, seeing how you liked it there so much this morning.”

“*Please*,” he said sarcastically, “Don’t tempt me.”

“Seriously, Carl. Get some rest.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved her off.

She gave him a last smile before she packed up her bag and left. Carl let his head sink back into his hands. Martin started doing the dishes, said to Carl after a few minutes, “Go and lie down before the heaviness of your sighs crushes the table.”

“Shut up, Martin.”

“No, I mean it. I wouldn’t normally say this but use and abuse me if you must. You really look like total shite and apparently I have a soft spot for helping grumpy arseholes in need. Tea, water, hot chocolate, meds, more of the Khichdi, just say the word.” Martin lightly kicked the leg of the chair Carl was sitting on. “Come on, up with ye.”

Carl gave another bone-weary sigh, heaving his sorry arse out of the chair to relocate to the couch where, as Rose had suggested, he’d try to numb his half-functional brain with perhaps a documentary or two.

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Chapter 3 – All The Landmarks

Carl wasn't quite sure when or how he'd relocated to his bed that night, but he woke up in the morning, feeling pretty much the same kind of horrible he'd lived through over the last two days. He wondered when this would start to improve and how long he'd be able to sustain this awful routine by downing painkillers every four hours.

Which reminded him of something. He shuffled to Jasper's room and knocked, waited for Jasper to open the door. Jasper was in his school uniform, shirt untucked, tie in hand.

Carl leaned one palm flat against the doorframe. For good measure. Or for support. Mostly for support. "Could you pick up this prescription they gave me?"

Jasper nodded. "Sure. Where?"

Carl gave him the name of the pharmacy, told him where it was.

"Do I need some kind of… paper or something?"

"How the fuck should I know? They, uh… I think they said something about some kind of barcode in the app."

"Send me a screenshot."

"Screenshot? How the fuck do I do that?"

"Like this." Jasper fetched his phone, unlocked it and swiped three fingers down the screen. "Do you need it before this afternoon? I could skip first period."

"No. Afternoon's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, it's to prevent the pain meds from fucking up your stomach or some shit."

"Okay. Yeah. I'll do it after school."

Carl nodded and scuffled back to the couch. His head still felt like it was packed with wool, his brain foggy as hell. Swallowing still felt like gravel going down.

A mug of tea appeared before him at some point, Jasper mentioning he was off to school now. Carl spent the morning trying to pay attention to a streaming show that sounded mildly interesting, failing halfway through, dozing off for a good portion of it.

Around lunchtime, he woke from the noise of his phone vibrating on the coffee table. He sluggishly groped for it, saw Rachel's name as the caller ID. "Rachel?"

"Hey. Just calling to check where you are."

"I'm at home," he said groggily.

"You didn't forget our lunch meeting, did you?"

Lunch meeting. Oh yeah. They met for lunch most Fridays. Was it Friday? "Is that today?"

"Carl? Are you alright?"

"No," he said, "Came down with something. I'll have to sit this one out. Sorry."

“Did you catch the flu that’s going around?”

“No. Glandular fever.”

“Glandular fever? Christ. That’s a pretty hefty thing. How are you feeling?”

“Like shit…?”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised, EBV can really knock you for six. How about I come by, keep you company for a bit?”

He considered if he wanted her here right now. For a while he hadn’t been sure what this arrangement between them was. She’d made it pretty clear that his early advances hadn’t been all that welcome. And then she’d come round to the flat that one night, and he’d realised that she was one of the few people he actually liked spending time with, liked it so much that he didn’t want to ruin it by adding the complexities of a romantic entanglement.

That’s how they’d kept it – just lunch meetings and conversations. Did he want her to see the total mess that he currently was? “I’m not exactly presentable.”

She chuckled. “Since when do you care about being presentable?”

He smiled. “Touché.”

She told him she’d be there in twenty minutes and he didn’t protest.

Carl used the time to try and at least half-heartedly freshen up, hoped she could overlook that his hair looked on the wrong side of greasy and his track suit bottoms were all years old, well-worn and fitted a little too loosely.

There was a smile mixed with mild concern on her face when he opened the door for her. He stepped aside, let her walk in. She’d been here once before, knew the way to the kitchen.

Carl grabbed the electric kettle, started making tea, his hands a lot clumsier than they should be. In a moment of inattention, the lid of the tea bag tin slipped from his ham-handed fingers and clattered on the laminated floor. She brushed his arm as they both reached for it to pick it up.

He had to grab on to the kitchen counter’s edge when he straightened up, balance still so off-kilter that it sent him swaying. Rachel stood next to him, her hand reassuringly on his arm, her voice gentle. “Carl. You’ve got a fever. Go and sit down. I’ll make us tea.”

Normally he’d have refused just out of sheer spite, but there was something in her voice, the way her tone was more concern than command, that made him listen.

A few minutes later, she put the two steaming mugs in front of them, together with an opened milk bottle from the fridge. Carl’s tea changed to a creamy beige as he put a good dash of milk into it, Rachel did the same.

She looked at him after taking a small sip. “You feeling any less shitty than earlier?”

His mouth curved into a small smile. “Not really.”

“So it’s hit you with all the landmarks of EBV? Throat pain, fever, fatigue, joint pain, swollen lymph nodes? Am I forgetting anything?”

“Raging headache,” he added.

“That must be really awful. Especially with the throat ache. For you…”

He instinctively touched the exit wound site. “Yeah, it’s not been a lot of fun.”

“Did you see a doctor?”

He sighed. “Rose dragged me to the GP yesterday. They did a throat swab and some kind of rapid blood test. Came back positive.”

“Are they giving you anything for it?”

“Not much that can be done, apparently. Just analgesics and something for the stomach.”

“Yeah, a proton pump inhibitor. I’d take it for as long as you’re using ibuprofen. You won’t need it if you stick to paracetamol.”

“The pain meds are keeping me functional right now. Barely.”

“They’ll help with the fever, too.”

“Yeah, not enough.”

Her expression changed. Maybe something akin to pity, but not the condescending kind. Empathy, maybe. “Gosh, I wish there was something I could do.”

He briefly met her eyes. “You’re here. Distraction helps.”

“Science has come so far, yet we’re still amazingly helpless when it comes to something as simple as herpes.”

“This is herpes?”

“Not the one you’re thinking of, but it’s from the same virus family.”

“Wonderful,” he said sarcastically.

“Yeah. I’m sure they’ve already told you this but try to drink lots of fluids.”

He gave her a smile. “Okay, can we dispose of Dr. Irving, MD, please?”

She lifted her hands. “Sorry. Sometimes I go into problem-solving mode.”

“Sounds more like mother-henning mode.”

“Can you blame me? You don’t exactly have a great track record when it comes to taking care of yourself.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Are you forgetting I had access to all your medical records?”

Ah geez. Yes. He wondered what all was in there that she never mentioned. How far back did it go? “And I’m sure it was a riveting read.”

He saw that her eyes wandered over to the side of the table where a book with a black cover with the word ‘GENOME’ lay. “Yours?” she asked.

“No, Martin’s.”

“I’ve read that one.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yes, quite a lot. But as you know, I’m a woman of science. May not be everyone’s cup of tea. What are you reading right now?”

He gave her a cynical chuckle. “Wish I could. My brain’s foggy as hell right now. Can’t concentrate on anything. Last thing I read was *Flowers for Algernon*. Fucking sad. But good food for thought. Makes you wonder…”

“Wonder what?”

“Have you read it?”

“Aye,” she confirmed. “A few years ago, but I also really liked it.”

“Yeah. All that talk about curing disabilities. I mean, should they be cured in the first place? Do people *want* to be cured? Shouldn’t we accept them as they are? Maybe things happen for a reason, who are we to fuck with that?”

“It’s not just that, though. It’s also a question of acceptance in today’s social climate. Sadly, we see less and less of that, especially on social media.”

“Yeah, I try to stay away from that shit.”

“What about Jasper?”

“What *about* Jasper?”

“Have you never had conversations with him regarding social media? You know, how to use it responsibly?”

Carl frowned. Had he? Maybe. A million years ago, when he was much younger and got his first smartphone. They’d tried to limit his screen time, but it was an uphill battle that he and Victoria had eventually lost.

“I don’t know. Probably. I bet he nodded his way through it and then slagged me off to his mates about being a fucking embarrassment of a stepfather. Never was very good at the whole thing.”

“That’s every parent, Carl. Weren’t you embarrassed of your parents when you were a teenager?”

He was immediately transported back to his life in England. They weren’t pleasant memories – and that was an understatement. “Embarrassed? No. It was all resentment. My childhood fucking sucked.”

They’d never talked about it, and he wasn’t particularly keen on going into detail. Her voice was low and gentle when she probed, “Do you want to talk about it?”

He didn’t have to think about the answer. “No.” He inhaled audibly through his nose, tried to push those memories away. “I hope yours was better than mine.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, probably. But not perfect. There was always underlying rivalry with my younger brother. It soured a lot of things that got in the way of me enjoying my formative years. Even still today. I don’t talk to them very much. Family gatherings are always awkward as bloody shite.”

“Hey, welcome to the club. Not that I go to those anymore.”

“Do you ever go back to England?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing there for me. Burnt those bridges a long time ago.”

“And now you’ve found a new home in Scotland…”

He looked around at the flat and its interior décor. “Not exactly mine.”

“You said it looked like your ex-wife.”

“Yeah, most of it.”

“Including the colour scheme?”

He smiled. “No, I got to pick that one, actually. I mean, I can’t take all of the credit, but I *was* given the option to choose.”

She looked around. “I actually like it.”

“Oh, what a relief.”

“Do you mind my asking when you separated?”

“Why? So you can shrink me some more?”

Shit. He hadn’t meant to let that come out so cynical. She met his eyes, and there was something sharper there now. “Is that what you think we’re doing?”

He shook his head, looked down at his half empty tea mug. “No. Sorry. Old habits.”

“It’s okay. Not exactly the right conversation for a cheer-up visit. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

He was ready to dispose with the topic, bury it like he usually did with the things that hit close to home, but her eyes were fixed on him, attentive and curious with a tenderness that he didn’t get from most people. Maybe she was someone he could share this with.

“Almost two years ago. The divorce came through last July, but things hadn’t been going great for a while before that. Partly my fault, until Victoria cheated. That sealed the whole fucking deal.”

“You feel strongly about being faithful in a relationship?”

He met her eyes. “Oh, fuck yeah. Don’t you?”

“I do, but I also know it’s not always that black and white.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s really fucking simple. Either you’re with someone, or you’re not. Didn’t you say the guy you married, or *almost* married, already had a family elsewhere? How is that not black and white?”

“Oh, that one very much was.”

“Hopefully enough that you kicked him straight out the door.”

She smiled. “I did. Was never even in question.”

He nodded appreciatively. “No one else since?”

She shrugged. “A few ex-boyfriends, occasional dates with a few guys. Nothing that stuck. You?”

“No dates with guys that stuck for me either,” he deadpanned. “Are we really not going to talk about the bloke who looked like my spitting image in that quaint little café by the Meadows…?”

She smiled a little sheepishly. “You’re astoundingly perceptive.”

“Yeah, guess that’s my occupational hazard. He not dating material, then?”

“Not by a long chalk. Too charming. A little too bland.”

“So you like your men colourful and abrasive…”

“No. Jesus.” She shot him a pointed look. “Carl. We’re not flirting. This isn’t flirting. Is it?”

He lifted his hands defensively. “I’m currently fever-addled, dishevelled and a little disgusting. Far be it from me to want to flirt with anyone in this state.”

“Okay, good we got that clarified.”

Carl took a sip from the tea that was now going on lukewarm. He shifted his weight on the wooden chair, felt the heaviness in his bones return and his fever flaring up again. He rubbed both hands down his face.

Rachel saw it too. “Maybe I should let you get some rest.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “Sorry. Wish I was better company.”

“Oh no, you’ve been fine company. Let me know if you want me to come round again, keep you distracted some more. I don’t have any plans for Sunday.”

“Okay. I’ll text you.”

She got up and stepped next to him, briefly touched his shoulder. “I’ll see myself out. Hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“Bye, Carl.”

“Yeah. Bye, Rachel.”

He watched her go into the hall, listened to the door closing behind her, wondering about what she’d said. When did a little verbal sparring become flirting? Did he have to tread more carefully? Had he overdone it? His brain was so fucked right now, he couldn’t even tell.

What he *could* tell, however, was that if he stayed sitting here, he wouldn’t be able to get up any time soon, except his bladder was giving him clear signals. He sighed, pushed himself up, this time paying attention that he didn’t do it too quickly.

After addressing his bodily needs, he crawled back into bed. In the absence of any distraction, everything hit a hundred times harder. He'd talked a lot, and he was now going to pay for it. A feverish tremor pulsed in tandem with his pounding head. Maybe it was time to switch the paracetamol for ibuprofen, see if that would make a difference, except those were in the bathroom and he couldn't be arsed to make that effort.

He fumbled for the lozenges on the nightstand, popped one into his mouth and closed his eyes. When would this start getting better? How long was he supposed to be dealing with this fucking shit? He bit on the lozenge until it splintered into smaller pieces, pulled the duvet up and hoped for sleep to bring some relief.

What eventually roused Carl from his sleep was his phone buzzing on the nightstand. Groggy as fucking hell, he groped for it, saw the caller ID before he answered it.

"Jasper?" His voice was barely a rasp.

"Yeah, I'm at the pharmacy. Your middle name is Henry, right?"

Carl had to think for a long few seconds to grasp what Jasper was asking. Long enough for Jasper to follow up with, "Carl?"

"Yeah. Henry."

"What year were you born?"

"1978."

"Okay, thanks."

"Pick me up some extra ibuprofen. Do you need money?"

"No, I'm good. We'll sort it out later."

"Okay, bye."

"Bye," Jasper signed off.

Carl looked at his phone. 3:34 pm. How long had he slept? He felt fucking exhausted. But Jasper would be home soon, and he'd fuss and ask questions and want answers and then fuss some more. Carl already hated everything about it.

He lay there, tried to tap into the meagre energy reserves he had left. It took him two more minutes before he managed to push himself out of bed and relocate to the couch. This whole fucking thing could go to fucking hell and burn there like his charm and patience.

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Chapter 4 – Stuck With This Shit

Another day down, another night of enduring fever mixed with painkillers and fucking agony. Carl woke up on Saturday morning, feeling barely rested. He tried to determine if he felt better than the day before. If anything, it was marginal.

He downed the omeprazole, knowing he had to wait until he chased it up with light food and ibuprofen. Maybe he'd finally take Jasper up on that offer of porridge. Which, he figured, was perhaps a sign he was starting to improve. One could only hope.

He passed the morning on the couch, half watching something Jasper had put on. It almost felt like the old days when they'd spend family time together, watching some silly thing on the telly, Jasper creeping closer to cuddle. Those days were long over, and Carl couldn't feel further from wanting to cuddle anyone right now.

Around lunchtime, Jasper announced he wanted to meet with friends, asked for permission that was half concern, half courtesy with a hidden 'Can I leave you alone?' in there. Carl told him to get the fuck out of there, but made it sound playful rather than acerbic. Or at least he hoped he did.

What he didn't expect was for the doorbell to ring half an hour later, least of all the person who was hobbling up the stairs. The clicks of Hardy's crutches told Carl who it was long before he came into view.

"You need help?" Carl asked him, already knowing Hardy would say no.

"Nah," Hardy said between winded breaths.

Carl left the door ajar and went back to the couch. Hardy would find him.

It took another few minutes before the door was kicked into its lock and Hardy made his way into the living room. He dropped the crutches on the floor next to the armchair along with the rucksack he'd carried before he plopped down with a heavy sigh.

Carl watched warily as Hardy dragged the back of his hand across his forehead with a *hoo* sound. "You didn't have to come."

Hardy raised his eyebrows. "Ye dragged yer sorry arse to see me in the hospital every fucking day. You think I'm not going to return the favour?"

"I'm not in the hospital."

"No, but judging by the state of you, this isn't that far off."

"I didn't have to walk up however many flights of stairs on fucking crutches."

Hardy grinned at him, then shrugged. "The Dark Angel's been on my case for not practicing stairs enough. Perfect opportunity."

Carl chose not to respond, and Hardy gave him a long look. "So this thing's really knocked ye off yer arse, eh?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"So who'd you kiss?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't they call it kissing disease?"

"I don't fucking care what they call it."

"You still meeting with that therapist of yours?"

"She's not my therapist anymore, and we're not kissing."

"But you fancy her, don't ye?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not like that. We talk.”

“So, like therapy…”

“No, not like therapy. It’s… We’re friends, okay? I’m capable of having friends. Female friends. *Platonic* female friends.”

Hardy gave him an appreciative look. “Look at that. Personal growth. Who’d have thought.”

“You make it sound like I’ve shagged every attractive woman who’s crossed my path. Believe it or not, I’m actually not a big fan of cheating.”

“Believe it or not, that’s actually really fucking obvious.”

“Oh yeah, how so?”

“You laid into Liam Taylor pretty fucking hard for cheating with Merritt. Gave *me* a pretty telling comment when I was flirting with a nurse. Not to mention how things ended with your ex. Despite what you may think, you’re not that hard to read.”

“That a bad thing?”

“It’s not one of your worst qualities. Can’t say that about the hundred other things that make you super fucking infuriating to be around.”

Carl gave him a grin. “Could say the same thing about you.”

“Good, then we have another thing in common.”

Hardy bent down to zip open the backpack, dug around in it, then extracted a Tupperware container from it that had something that looked like soup sloshing around in it. “Almost forgot. Donna gave me this for ye. Maybe she figures you’ll starve or something.” Hardy gave him a long, scrutinising look. “Looking at you, she may have got the right idea. You really look terrible, mate.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said sarcastically.

Hardy pulled a canvas bag with shoulder straps out of his rucksack and put the Tupperware container into it. Then he pushed himself to the edge of his seat, picked up his crutches and got up with a groan. The bag slung over his shoulder, he made his way to the kitchen, the metallic clicks of his crutches echoing through the room.

Carl pushed the blanket off of him, but Hardy called out to him, “Keep your scrawny arse where it is. I’ve got this.”

It wasn’t like Carl regretted not having to get up. It was also a matter of pride. He knew Hardy was working hard to get some of his independence back. Carl wasn’t going to fuck with that.

He listened to the noises of clanking dishes and the whirring of the microwave that were comforting in their own right. With closed eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose as his arms broke out in goosebumps. The ibuprofen was wearing off again, and he could feel the dull headache prodding just underneath the surface. He leaned back and tried to relax.

At some point, Hardy called over, “Alright, mate, move your wee bum over here.”

Carl heaved himself off the couch, felt immediately cold when he emerged from under the blanket. Hardy had heated up what looked like chicken soup, two bowls now standing on the table with Hardy already sitting with his back towards the sink. Next to Carl's bowl was also a slice of white bread.

He sat down and tried to decide whether he wanted to tackle ingesting food, but Donna had made it and Hardy had gone through all this effort, so the least fucking thing he could do was try his best.

The soup actually tasted nice. Better than nice. It wasn't too hot or too spicy. But his throat was still giving him hell, and swallowing was still a struggle. They'd eaten in silence for a while, until Hardy looked at him, long and intense. "This is really fucking with your throat, isn't it?"

Carl closed his eyes, let out a long breath, swallowing against the pain, feeling the discomfort from the scar tissue and nerve damage more than ever. Having Hardy here, hearing his voice, it did something strange with his fever-addled brain.

Suddenly there he was again, in Leith Park, the two of them arguing over football, then standing over a dead body. The stench of decay mingled with that of the chicken broth. His breath fastened, there was an anxious flutter in his gut.

He was standing next to blood-covered Archie Allen, slumped in an armchair with a knife sticking out of his head, Anderson in his neon yellow police issue parka to the side, making unnecessary commentary. The fingers of Carl's right hand clenched around the grip of his spoon as he squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in a stuttering breath through his mouth. The loud pop of the gun. Once, twice, three times. He flinched.

And then, unexpectedly, there was a warm hand on his fist. "Carl." Hardy's voice was gentle. Worried. "Hey, it's alright. I'm here. We both are. In your kitchen. Remember?"

Carl opened his eyes, tried to ground himself back to reality. There was a bowl with soup in front of him, a half-eaten slice of bread. He made a conscious effort to relax his hands, put the spoon down, then dropped his forehead into the heel of one hand.

He took a moment to compose himself, muttering, "Sorry."

"No. Don't ever apologise. Happens to me, too. Sucks every time."

That surprised Carl and he looked up. "You get flashbacks?"

"Don't know if you can call them that. Just… I dunno. These images. Don't know if they are memories or just my mind fucking with me. The meds they gave me helped. Didn't want the fucking therapy. Sometimes I wonder if I should've given it a shot. Got a lot better now, hardly have them anymore."

"You're taking antidepressants?"

"How exactly does that surprise you? Aren't you?"

He sighed. "Yeah."

"You still on them?"

"Barely. Low dose. Not sure it's doing much. Should probably stop."

Hardy gave him a look. “With this still going on? Don’t be daft.”

“Used to be a lot worse. Just this—” Carl gestured to his throat, “—isn’t helping.”

“Aye, it sounds fucking horrible. Is it at least getting better?”

“A little. They said it’ll take a while. Lucky me to get stuck with this shit.”

Hardy stayed quiet, seemed to contemplate something. His voice was low when he said, “The time after. You’ve never talked about it.”

Carl looked away, stared at the kitchen counter by the hob without really looking at it. “Yeah, because there’s nothing to tell.”

“I think there is. Can’t have been easy. You were there for me. Who was there for you?”

Carl intensified his stare at the hob, yet not the hob. A sterile hospital room, white ceiling panels with tiny holes in them in vaguely circular patterns. IVs and wound dressings and pain. “Jasper,” he croaked. “Martin. Your wife. Moira came by a few times.”

“I would have been there.”

“I know. But you couldn’t.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

Carl turned his head again, briefly met Hardy’s eyes, surprised to see a faint shimmer of tears there. “Fucked us both up pretty good, didn’t it? Worst case of wrong place, wrong time if there ever was one. And they still don’t fucking know who did it.”

He looked at Carl and their eyes met again. “You know that we may never find out, right?”

Carl thumped his clenched fist on the table. “Why’d Moira have to put fucking Bruce on the case?”

“Look, I know you don’t like the bloke, but he’s not actually as incompetent as he seems.”

“Oh yeah? Then why has nothing turned up after almost a year of them working the case?”

“Because for the fact that the flat was a bloody shithole, it was surprisingly clean where actual evidence was concerned. The leads you’ve seen, that’s all there is. Not a lot to go on.”

“They’ve missed some vital fucking clues.”

“You mean the non-existent daughter and the guy at the McDonald’s?”

“Yeah. If that’s not fucking incompetence, I don’t know what is.”

“Perhaps so, but unconscious bias exists. Bruce was on the scene. He saw the whole aftermath, might have even rendered first aid. That kind of thing can fuck with you. And Anderson was one of us. If he was involved, people don’t want to hear that. I’m not saying it’s right, but it happens.”

“So put someone more impartial on it. The more I think about it, the more it feels like this whole thing is rotting from the head.”

Hardy’s gaze lingered on Carl for a long moment. “Catching the shooter won’t change what happened. Don’t you think maybe you should let it go?”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from *you*.”

“Is it?”

“You saying I’m too obsessed with the case?”

“No, not obsessed. But it’s been messing with your head in a big fucking way, and I don’t think it’s very healthy.”

“For fuck’s sake, now you sound like a fucking shrink.”

“Carl…”

Carl pushed his chair back, anger coalescing in his gut now. When he got up, he realised that was a mistake as dizziness washed over him, making him sway. Hardy’s voice cut through the sudden roaring in his head. “Whoa, easy, mate.”

Carl braced himself, leaning forward with his palms on the table. He breathed in a long breath through his nose, waiting for the moment to pass and his blood pressure to even out again. When he felt a little steadier on his feet, he said, “Going to the bog.”

There was a smirk on Hardy’s face. “I hope you don’t need my help with that.”

Carl ignored the jibe and made his way to the bathroom. He was still fucking irritated at what Hardy had said. How could his friend not want to see the case solved, the killer found? Hardy, of all people. Who had taken two bullets, one that saved Carl’s fucking life, and pretty much crippled him in the process.

When he was done, he went straight to his bedroom, circumventing the kitchen. He closed the bedroom door behind him, took two more of the ibuprofen and crawled back into bed. He wasn’t actually tired, and was massively sick of lying around all day, bored out of his mind but hampered by a brain too fucking slow to absorb anything beyond basic life functions.

A few minutes later, he heard Hardy’s crutches approaching, the door opening, Hardy clumsily hobbling in. He peeled the canvas bag off his shoulder and threw it onto Carl’s bed where it landed with a thump by Carl’s feet.

Carl was still too irritated to be interested in it. Hardy said, “Been told you need to stay fucking hydrated. Would’hae brought you some beers, but that’s probably not a great idea right now.” He pointed at Carl’s legs with one crutch. “Now scoot over.”

Carl sighed but complied, making room for Hardy to sit down. They both stayed quiet until Hardy said, “Didn’t mean to…”

“It’s alright,” Carl said.

“Wasn’t the right time to bring it up. I’m not very good at this.”

A small smile played at Carl’s lips. “And yet you once said you were always better at everything.”

“When did I say that?”

“When we were discussing the Lingard case. Something about Rose wanting to impress me.”

“How do you even remember that?”

“I don’t know. I just do.”

“This is why you’re a hell of a detective. And maybe why you’re actually better at it than me.”

“And why I’m Detective *Chief* Inspector.”

“No, that’s because, for whatever reason I can’t fathom, you’re somehow still in Moira’s good graces despite all the shite you’ve pulled over the years.”

Hardy reached over to the bag and pulled the water bottle out of it, holding it out to Carl. Carl took it, put it on his nightstand.

Hardy looked at him. “Anything else I can get ye?”

Carl shook his head. “Not that the offer isn’t appreciated, but even in this state, I think I’m better equipped to get me whatever the fuck I need.”

“I’ll come back in a week with those beers, though.”

“Get in your stairs practice, yeah?”

“Aye. You gonna be okay for the rest of the day?”

Carl nodded. “Yeah. No doubt Jasper’s gonna come fuss when he gets back.”

“Let him fuss. It’s as much for *his* benefit as yours. Maybe be less of a cunt about it.”

“How would *you* know?”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

Carl sighed. “You’re not wrong. But sure, I can try.”

“There you go. Give me or Donna a ring if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Hardy gave him a nod. “Alright, mate. I’ll see myself out. I’ll see ye later.”

Carl lifted a hand to bid his friend goodbye. He listened for the flat door to pull closed behind Hardy, then lay back against the pillow, realising once more how valuable it was to have some distraction. And good friends who’d offer them, no questions asked.

He spent the rest of the day much like the previous ones – biding his time between the couch and bed, trying to watch TV, doing his best not to antagonise Martin and Jasper too much when they tried to coax fluids and food into him. Thankfully, Jasper was fussing a little less now, having seen that Carl was trying to be sensible with the meds and getting rest, not that he had much of a choice with how fucked his body really was.

Lying in bed that night, it was the first time that he thought maybe things were actually improving. His throat was still giving him hell, the fever was still going up and down and the fatigue still dragged him down, but in hindsight, maybe this day had been marginally less bad than the previous ones.

He waited for sleep to claim him, hoping things would finally look up and he could get out of this grinding cycle.

Next thing Carl knew, he was in unfamiliar surroundings. He was chasing someone – a shadowy figure in a maze of mirrors. A black streak of movement to his right. He whipped around, turned his head. There it was again, black shadows in another mirror to his left. He swung around again.

Something else caught his eye. He saw Hardy in one of the mirrors, laughing at him, then a bullet pierced his chest, red blood spray shooting from the wound. It spattered out in uncontrolled blood spray, clung to the surface of the mirrors all around him.

He pivoted, looked at another mirror. Hardy again, his gaze piercing, sharp, accusing. His name in Hardy's voice reverberated through the space.

"Carl."

It echoed hollowly.

"Carl, Carl, Carl, Carl."

And then he saw something in the centre of the room. A cage with walls entirely made of glass, slowly filling with water.

There was someone inside.

Jasper.

His arms were stretched out to either side, palms on the windowpanes, panic written all over his face. His mouth formed something. Carl's name in a silent scream that had no sound whatsoever.

"Jasper!" Carl yelled. "Jasper!!"

The boy looked at him, eyes wide, full of fear. Carl wanted to sprint there, wanted to do something, but his feet were rooted to the spot, and no matter how hard he pulled, they wouldn't budge. "Jasper!!"

And then there was something else cutting through the room. Another voice. Urgent, but not as panicked.

"Carl."

Confusion mixed into the panic, a strange sense of discordance and unease. Something shifted, but he couldn't tell what. The voice was still there.

"Carl, wake up!"

The sensations didn't make sense. Soft light. His bedroom.

Fuck.

A dream. Just a fucking dream. And Jasper's hand was clamped around his arm.

Carl jerked away. "Jasper."

Jasper let go, took a small step back. "Sorry."

Carl tried to calm his jagged breathing, his heart still hammering in his chest, sweat all over him.

He slowly pulled himself more upright against the headboard, raising his hands. “I’m okay.”

Jasper deflated, a worried furrow etched deep into his brow. “You just yelled my name so loud I woke up from it. You’re a long fucking way from okay.”

“Yeah,” Carl exhaled. “Had a nightmare.”

Jasper tentatively sat down at the edge of Carl’s bed. “You really scared me.”

“Sorry,” Carl muttered again.

Jasper pressed his lips together and stayed quiet. Carl didn’t know what to say, either. This was all fucked up – them picking up the broken pieces of a relationship flying through the air at breakneck speed that had shattered into even smaller pieces on impact.

It was Jasper who finally broke the silence. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

This answer was a no-brainer. “No.”

“But it was about me?”

“Jasper…”

“You yelled my name, like I was about to die, or something.”

Carl tried to push the image from his mind, not quite succeeding. “You were.”

“And you couldn’t do anything.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s super scary.”

In spite of himself, Carl smiled. “Yeah, no shit.”

“It wasn’t real. I’m here. I’m not dying.”

“Yeah, tell that to my fried and fucked up brain.”

“Is it because you’re ill?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Have you had these before?”

“What is this, Twenty Questions?”

“I just wanna know, okay?”

“And I’m not gonna tell you.”

But Jasper wasn’t going to let it go so easily. “So you’ve *had* these before?”

Carl sighed. “Jasper, it’s the middle of the fucking night. I’m fucking miserable and you should go back to sleep.”

“So should you. But I know you won’t because now you’re wide awake.” He looked down at his hands, then back up at Carl. “Let’s watch something.”

“Jasper, I’m really not—”

“Hold on,” Jasper said, then got up and left.

Carl picked up the phone from his nightstand, sighed when he saw it was 2:51 am. Jasper came back with his laptop in hand and two pillows from the couch under his arm. He gave one to Carl, then used the other and the spare pillow on Carl’s bed to prop himself up against the headrest before he booted up his laptop.

“There’s this show I think you might like.”

Carl groaned. “Please not another one of those stupid Japanese animes.”

“No, it’s where aliens find our planet, and everything starts going mental—like physics stops working and people start dying, and there’s this group of people who need to figure out what’s happening, and…” He looked at Carl. “Okay, I’m making it sound kinda terrible, but I really think you’ll like it.”

Carl quirked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah, how so?”

“You know, it’s kinda brainy…”

“Brainy…?”

Jasper was already pulling it up on the screen, then put the laptop in between them so they could both see. Carl knew he had no choice now but was secretly grateful for the company and the distraction.

He adjusted the pillows behind his head and looked at the screen. A white caption on black said, “Beijing, Tsingua University, 1966.” He hoped this was going to be the kind of brainy his fever-added brain could digest.

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Chapter 5 – Sport Of Choice

When Carl woke up the next morning, he felt groggy and disoriented. He couldn’t remember when he’d fallen back asleep, but the other side of the bed was empty save for the rust coloured sofa cushion that still lay there.

A look at his phone told him it was well past 9 am. Somehow there was a lingering feeling of unease nagging at the back of his mind, like a pulled muscle you’d forget if you sat still that would make itself known every time you moved. That fucking nightmare still sat deep in his bones.

His life had devolved into this strange routine. Meds, liquids, pain, naps, exhaustion. And being cooped up in these 900 square feet of blue and yellow was getting to him more than he’d want to admit. He was more than ready for the ordeal to end, couldn’t wait for it to be over.

When Jasper emerged from his room and found Carl in the kitchen, he shot him a pointed look. “Alright?” he asked casually, like last night hadn’t happened.

“Hey,” Carl said back just as casually.

Jasper poured himself some of the coffee from the French press that Martin had made earlier, diluting it with a good dash of milk from the fridge, then microwaved it. He threw Carl a look. “You fell asleep after 10 minutes.”

“Yeah, no fucking surprise there. Should have protested when you said brainy. My brain’s not really working right now.”

Jasper’s mouth curved into a half smile. “We can always rewatch it when you’re feeling better.”

“Did you not finish it on your own?”

“Nah. I can wait until your brain unfries.”

Carl could read between the lines. Jasper was trying to reconnect. There was something touching and earnest about it, and Carl would be damned if he didn’t take the hand that was extended. “Sure.”

Jasper nodded and vanished in his room with his coffee.

Rachel texted after 10, asking if Carl was up for a meeting. He’d tested the waters over breakfast, tried the omelette that Martin had made and found that the experience wasn’t as horrible as food ingestion had generally been in the last few days. For the first time in days, the thermometer showed a value under 38 °C.

He texted back, “Up for a walk?”

“Yes, sounds lovely,” she replied.

“Outside my place at 12?”

She put a thumbs up emoji on the message and replied, “12 pm works. See you then.”

For the first time in days, Carl felt confident he could take a shower without imminent danger of collapsing right in the middle of it. Even though it took a lot longer than his usual routine, he felt like an actual human being afterwards. Or at least enough of one that he was motivated to go the extra mile and make himself look presentable.

After a minute or two, he admitted defeat because his unruly curls had a mind of their own and his arms started to feel like they were made of overcooked pasta. Rachel had seen him in a much worse state, so he thought ‘fuck it’. Freshly showered and properly dressed in clean clothes would have to do.

He gave himself extra time to get down the stairs, remembering the disaster from the trip to the GP. The fatigue didn’t feel quite as crippling today, but it was still more of an ordeal than it should be, and he was winded when got to the front door.

When he stepped outside for the first time in a good number of days, he couldn’t even really recall how many by this point, he wanted to weep with gratitude. Edinburgh’s August was actually kind this year, the sun peeking through the clouds and a light breeze on his face that felt refreshing.

He had put on a light fleece jacket that he took off and tied around his waist, not quite having expected temperatures in the mid-twenties. He was early now and sat down on the small

stone ledge at the bottom of the metal fence of the building next to his. The sun felt nice and warm on the bare skin of his face and arms.

Rachel arrived ten minutes later, and Carl couldn't help but notice that the casual emerald green t-shirt and skinny jeans suited her well. She smiled at him as she walked up to him. He pulled himself up with the help of the iron railing.

"Hey," she greeted him.

"Hey," he returned the greeting.

"Feeling any better?"

"Getting there." He pointed up to where his flat was. "Was going stir-crazy, cooped up in there."

"You certainly picked a lovely day for it."

He pointed at the Leith Links greenery on the opposite side of the road. "Thought maybe I could try to tackle the park. Not sure I'm up for it, but, you know…"

"We'll take it slow. See how it goes."

"Yeah."

They crossed the road, went to where the footpath started. Carl was well aware his pace was slow, but Rachel was happy to match it. She stopped to look at the John Rattray monument—a man with a golf club, about to tee off.

Carl chose to add commentary of what he knew about its history. "This used to be a golf course."

"Leith Links, right?"

"Yeah. Story goes that the first rules of golf were drawn up here in the 18th century."

She smiled. "Wouldn't have pegged you for a golf afficionado."

"I'm not. You pick up stuff."

"Yeah, I'm with you. I had a boyfriend once who played. He tried to get me into it, but I thought it was boring as fuck."

He chuckled. "So what's your sport of choice?"

"I'm predictable. Yoga and, occasionally, the gym."

"And yoga is not boring as hell?"

"Depends on the style. If you think it's just sitting around, breathing and meditating, I'd love to take you to a vinyasa class and see how you fare. You know, when you're fit enough again."

"No thanks."

"You're just afraid you'll fail miserably."

"Seeing Martin do his weird ballet is enough to know I'll hate it with a passion."

"Fair enough. So what's your idea to keep fit?"

“Used to run. Then I got shot.”

“Have you considered taking it back up again?”

“Yeah. Just haven’t gotten round to it. There’s always something. You know, like this fucking thing. I don’t see me running any 5ks any time soon.”

She looked at him, gave him a bit of a once-over. “You’d have to put some meat on those bones first.”

“That hardly sounds like a compliment.”

“I just meant you look like you’ve lost a bit of weight.”

“Yeah, you try ingesting solid food when it feels like your throat is made of low grit sandpaper.”

“Okay, I get your point. But you’re feeling a bit better now?”

“Yeah, slowly but steadily, it seems. And don’t worry, everyone’s done their best to try and keep me fed. I’m still standing, aren’t I?”

She smiled, then slung her arm through his. He stiffened at first, not expecting the physical contact, but then decided to go with it. Maybe it was for his benefit more than it was for hers.

She told him, “I know you try very hard not to like the mother-henning. Won’t stop us from doing it, though.”

“And you’re all oh-so good at it. Lucky me.”

“What would you do without us?”

“Starve, I suppose.”

She chuckled again, then pointed at a wooden bench that was standing alongside the path. “Up for a break?”

They hadn’t even walked 200 yards yet, but he already felt spent. He wasn’t gonna say no and happily steered towards it with her. He stretched out his legs in front of him, slung one over the other and leaned against the backrest. With his eyes closed, he enjoyed the relative quiet – a gentle rustle of leaves in the trees, children playing somewhere in the distance, birds chirping in the background.

The breeze picked up, and a light shudder ran through him, he could feel the goosebumps on his arms. Fucking body temperature was still doing its ups and downs. It didn’t go past Rachel, and she lightly said, “Do you want to go back?”

He breathed a long breath in and out again. “No. This is nice.”

“You’re cold.”

He opened his eyes. “No, it’s just my body temperature fucking around.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“You’re mother-henning again. I’m fine.”

“You’re still in the middle of getting through a hefty viral infection.”

“More like the tail end of it.”

“Didn’t they tell you that it usually takes several weeks to fully recover from glandular fever?”

“Way to ruin a man’s blissful illusion, Rachel.”

“Carl, I’m serious. At least put on your fleece.”

“Or what? I’ll get the flu?”

She gave him a no-nonsense look. “Okay, I give up, the stubborn bastard that you are.”

He sighed and unslung the fleece jacket from his waist to put it on, having to admit that it might not have been the worst idea. He looked at her and once more realised how grateful he was that he had a handful of good people in his life who had decided to stick around despite his best efforts to keep them at arm’s length.

Rachel in particular was an unexpected surprise. Maybe it was because of the way they’d met, that they’d been forced to forego that awkward small talk stage that Carl could never be bothered with, but they’d slid so easily into a place that was comfortable, that felt genuine.

She also had an uncanny way of navigating his moods. She could be supportive and empathetic when he shared something personal, pull back when she hit a sore spot. Other times, when he was being his usual contrary self, she’d just throw his own crap back at him, seldom missing the mark. There weren’t many people he was ready to open doors into his private space for and leave them ajar.

He wasn’t sure where it was coming from, but he heard himself say, “I had a nightmare last night.”

Her brow furrowed, the concern in her eyes suddenly sharper. “How bad was it?”

“Bad enough that it woke up Jasper. He… he really shouldn’t have to deal with my crap.”

“You know, there are other ways to see it.”

“Other ways? As in…”

“As in instead of seeing this as something that’s happening to you, something that’s out of your control, think of it as something that’s part of you and that you can learn to do something about.”

“Is this where you tell me I should see a therapist?”

“You just told me you hate what it’s doing to Jasper. And I’m sure you also hate what it’s doing to you. But you don’t have to just surrender to it. There *are* things you can do about it, other than taking antidepressants. But you have to want to take that step. I’m not saying it has to be now. Just know that you’re not alone with it, and there are people and resources that can help you. When you’re ready.”

His mouth twitched, because he knew she was right. It was just… That ladder was high and steep and he didn’t know if he could reach far enough to get to that next rung.

She reached for her handbag next to her, pulled something out from it. It was a small, flat item the size of a credit card, wrapped in gift wrap. She held it out to him. “Almost forgot.”

He took it. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

He did, fumbling with the Sellotape more than he should have until he finally pulled it free. “An Audible gift card?”

She looked at him expectantly. “Figured it might help with the boredom and the brain fog. Wasn’t sure if you had an account, but you can always make one.”

His brow suddenly furrowed with unbidden emotion, he wasn’t even sure where it was coming from. He wasn’t used to this, wasn’t used to people just extending kindness and thoughtful gifts out of nowhere. “Not sure what I did to deserve this.”

She gave him a long look. “Carl. Not everything is always transactional. I don’t know what happened in your past that you think of people that way – and your line of work probably has to do with it – but there are people in this world who don’t approach life that way.”

He looked away, intently studied the shoelaces of his walking shoes, tried to sort out the emotional turmoil her words were causing. It was true, he didn’t think of kindness first when dealing with people. That was very much at the bottom of his list. But he should know better, shouldn’t he? He had a few people in his life who were kind, who hadn’t attached strings or didn’t expect the ones that were attached to be pulled.

He held the plastic gift card between both thumbs and index fingers, then flipped it upward with one hand to indicate it to her. “Thank you,” he said, hoping it sounded as sincere as he wanted it to.

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

He shifted his position, leaned forward. “Let’s get going.”

She got up and held out a hand to him. “Shall we go back to your place?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Somehow, his steps felt lighter as they made their way back to his home.

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Over the next few days, Carl finally saw tangible improvement. The fever was becoming easier to handle, his throat wasn’t agony 24/7 anymore and solid food was no longer a mortal enemy. He’d even started gradually lowering the doses of ibuprofen.

On Wednesday, he got a text from Akram that made him frown. “Will you be at home tomorrow at 5:15pm?”

That seemed oddly specific. He texted back, “Where else would I fucking be?”

“I will be in the area, would you mind if I visited?”

Carl’s frown deepened. “What the fuck for?”

“You are ill.”

“I don’t need any more babysitting.”

“But you are home?”

Carl sighed, then typed, “Yes. Visit if you must.”

When Thursday afternoon rolled around, Carl’s doorbell rang at precisely 5:16. As Akram came up the stairs, wearing the same retro-conservative clothes he always did, minus the tie, Carl greeted him with, “You’re one minute late.”

Akram gave him a mild smile. “I apologise. The bus was late.”

“You came here by bus?”

“Yes. I don’t have a car. If I recall, you did not have a car either until they gave you the… ‘impounded piece of shit’ as you have called it on many occasions.”

“Touché.” He gestured to the kitchen. “Feel right at home.”

Akram went to the kitchen and put a beige canvas bag on the counter. Carl noticed it had a rather crude painting on one side that looked like it might have come from one of his daughters at kindergarten age. Akram extracted a Tupperware container from it.

“I have brought you Shorbat Adas.”

Carl wanted to roll his eyes. Why was everyone bringing him food? “Let me guess, homemade by you.”

“Yes,” Akram said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “James…” He corrected himself. “Hardy said you were having trouble swallowing solid foods. This is lentil soup with pureed potatoes, carrots. Not very spicy. I hope you like it.”

Carl growled and it made Akram give him a pointed look. “Would you prefer if I left?”

“Well, you’re here, so you might as well stay. Which brings me to the question: Why exactly are you here? I doubt you traversed across half the city, just to bring me food.”

“No. Mina, my youngest, takes guitar lessons not very far from here. Every Thursday. I thought this would be a good opportunity to pass the time until I can pick her up again.”

“Fantastic,” Carl said. “I’m a social layover. How convenient.”

“I see you are feeling better.”

“Oh, how did you deduce that?”

“You are a lot more cynical and energetic than the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, well, the last time you saw me, I was running a fever as blazing as fucking hellfire.”

“This is what I said. Would you like me to heat up some of the soup for you?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Akram, sit down. I can heat up my own soup.”

“I did not come here to be antagonised.”

Carl sucked in a long breath and released it, not even sure why he was annoyed. Akram was doing a nice thing. Carl was being a cunt for no reason. “You’re right, I’m sorry. Thank you for the soup. Very kind of you.”

Akram's look as he pulled back the chair and sat down seemed to question whether Carl was still being sarcastic. He hadn't meant to be. He pointed vaguely at the kitchen counter. "I can make us some tea."

Akram smiled. "That would be very nice."

Carl got up and put on the kettle, got two mugs and the tea bags. As he casually leaned against the counter, waiting for the water to boil, he said, "So your daughter's learning to play the guitar…"

"Yes. I'm not sure she will do it for very long. She took Highland dance lessons for six months but then she wanted to stop."

"Jasper took drum lessons once when he was 12. Didn't even last six months."

"Is he still playing any instrument?"

"Not unless you count making sweet music together."

"Is that a euphemism for sexual intercourse?"

"Yes, that's a euphemism for sexual intercourse," Carl echoed sarcastically.

"Does that bother you? He is seventeen."

"Yes, it fucking bothers me."

"When did you first have sex?"

"Jesus, Akram. Way to get into my fucking knickers drawer."

Akram raised his eyebrows and shot him one of his *'I am not intimidated by your antagonism'* looks. Carl took the now boiling kettle and poured the water. "I was fifteen."

"See?"

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen as well."

"Is that considered acceptable in Syria?"

"It is not considered illegal."

"That's not what I asked."

"It depends on what cultural circles you are raised in."

"Okay, I get it. Yet another thing you don't wanna talk about."

Carl put the mug in front of Akram, not bothering to remove the tea bag. He took the milk out of the fridge and put it on the table.

Akram did not take any. "Do you have sugar?"

"You drink your tea with sugar?"

"Yes, that is how I prefer it."

“You didn’t at Claire Marsh’s house.”

“I did not want to inconvenience her.”

“Oh, but you can inconvenience me?”

“Yes. You are not being interrogated in a missing person’s case.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“So you don’t have any sugar?”

“Yes, of course we have sugar. I share this flat with a mid-40s philosophy student who has a weird penchant for *The Great British Bake-Off*. We probably have at least four different kinds of sugar if I cared to check.”

“Regular granulated sugar will be fine.”

Carl got up and put the sugar bowl and a teaspoon on the table, out of which Arkam heaped two teaspoons into his mug, stirring the liquid with vigour. It made a rhythmic clanking noise.

Akram stirred for a few more seconds, then lifted the teaspoon out of the mug, put it on the table and looked up at Carl. “Carl. I would like to thank you. Being given the rank of Detective Inspector is an unexpected honour.”

That took Carl off-guard. “Don’t know what you mean. I’m not the one handing out police ranks.”

“No, but it would not have happened without you.”

Oh, okay, so Akram was speaking about Department Q as a whole. “Moira’s the one you need to thank for that. She gave me the department, I needed an assistant, she sent you.”

Akram’s look on Carl intensified. Those brown eyes could be very piercing. “That is not what I meant.”

Huh. So, he *did* know… Or did he guess? Carl had not told anyone about his conversation with Burns. For good reason. “Then what *do* you mean?”

Akram sighed that sigh that spoke of quiet exasperation. The kind that said, *‘Come on, you know exactly what I mean’*. “I don’t know who you applied pressure to, and if I had to guess I would say the Lord Advocate, but it is very obvious that this did not happen without external influence. You are the only person who would be invested, not to mention there has recently been a significant amount of budget for the department and a new car. Please tell me I am wrong.”

“You’re wrong.”

Akram gave him a knowing smile. “You are not a very good liar.”

“The many perps I got to confess would beg to differ.”

“When people know you, they can tell.”

“So you know me?”

“Well enough to know that you are loyal to a fault to the people you care about.”

“Oh, so I care about you?”

“You stepped in front of a bullet for me.”

“It wasn’t a bullet. It was buckshot.”

“Which you didn’t know at the time.” Akram’s gaze became even more intense, if that was even possible. “You may have saved my life.”

“Bullshit. They dug a few pellets out of my shoulder. It wouldn’t have killed you.”

“Again, you didn’t know that at the time. There was a gun, and you made a quick decision.”

Carl gave a shrug. “Police instinct.”

“I owe you for it and now also an official police rank with a much larger salary. It will give my daughters a better life, and I am very thankful for that.”

Carl looked down at his mug, wasn’t sure what to say. It was ironic that Rachel had told him just a few days ago that he should stop thinking of life as a quid pro quo. He had done those things for Akram and not expected anything in return. Exactly the reason why he didn’t want Akram to know in the first place.

“Didn’t do it to be owed.”

“Yes, I know. And we don’t have to speak of it again, but I want you to know that I’m grateful. It has made a big difference.”

“And that’s all I need to know.”

Akram looked at him again. “Despite what many people will say about you, you are a good person. What is that saying you have? Your heart is in the right place?”

“Yeah, enough of the sappy bullshit.” Carl took a sip from his tea that had now gone a little too lukewarm and too bitter.

He got up with his mug, fished the tea bag out of it and dumped it into the sink where it dropped with a wet *thwap*. Akram handed him a teaspoon with his tea bag on it and Carl discarded it as well.

Carl sat back down. “Just don’t fuck it up.”

“I do not intend to.”

“Moira mentioned to me that she was not very impressed with your… interrogation methods.”

“And she is more impressed with yours?”

He looked Akram in the eyes. “Moira and me, we go back. Hardy would say she has a soft spot for me. Don’t know why, but I suppose there’s some truth to it. That gives me more leeway. Would probably good if you were a little more careful, now that you no longer have the ‘not official police’ loophole to hide behind.”

“Yes, I am aware. I will be more careful.”

“Good.”

“When are you coming back to work?”

Carl gave him a grin. “Miss me already?”

“The work is more organised when you are there.”

“Organised? You’re fucking kidding.”

“You have a very good way of making people focus on what matters. It’s what makes you an excellent detective.”

“Are you trying to butter me up?”

“No, I am merely stating facts.”

Carl shrugged. “But yeah, I don’t know. I can barely get up and down the stairs without feeling like I’m about to keel over.”

“Yes, glandular fever can take several weeks for a person to fully recover. I hope you take the time you need.”

“Thanks, Dr. Salim. I will take your expert medical advice,” Carl said sarcastically.

Akram looked at his watch. “Well. I have to leave now. Thank you for the tea.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“If you like the soup, I will be in the area again next Thursday.”

Carl couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, thank you, Mother.”

It elicited a smile from Akram as he got up from his chair. “Take care.”

“Yeah, you too.”

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Chapter 6 – A Perfectly Normal Thing

The invite came a few days later. A call from Hardy, telling Carl that Donna would love to have him round for family BBQ the coming Saturday, if he felt up for it. Carl thanked him and said he’d love to.

As he went down to the Links for his daily walk that he was trying to widen every day, his eyes fell on the Audible gift card that he’d pinned to the side of their fridge, and then that got him thinking… As much as he hated to admit it, the last two weeks would have been so much harder without everyone coming together and rallying around him. He wanted to make it up to these people.

He reached out to Donna and asked if they could expand the invitee list. Of course Donna didn’t say no. Carl sent out messages that mentioned *Bring & Share*, and to his amazement, everyone easily said yes with the exception of Martin who mentioned something about a pre-arranged yoga retreat or whatever the fuck it was.

Carl almost regretted the whole thing a day later when Rose opened a group chat and started posting food lists, making Carl's phone explode with messages. Then he figured out how to mute the chat, and the world was restored to its natural chaos.

On Saturday afternoon, he arrived at the Hardy house with an arm full of pitta bread, alongside beer and meat that Jasper was grudgingly carrying inside the house. Yet Carl knew he wanted to be here, otherwise he would have found an excuse not to come.

Donna enveloped Carl in her usual welcome hug, which always made Carl smile. Donna gave the best hugs he knew.

Carl still was a ways away from his normal self. The fatigue was still a constant companion, his throat still made itself known and physical exertion was still a thing, but he was getting there. He'd dispensed with the painkillers entirely a few days ago, and he was thinking about finally returning to work, starting to get antsy, now that he was being fed details about the case here and there by his team.

He did his best to try and help Donna with the preparations, but she eventually shooed him away and told him to spend time with James. Jasper was already engrossed in a game of table football with their eldest, so Carl went out to the back garden where Hardy was manning the barbecue, half sitting on a barstool.

"Hey, mate," he greeted Carl who slid into one of the padded garden chairs.

Carl gave him a small wave of a hand.

When Hardy was happy with how the barbecue equipment was coming along, he turned his attention to Carl. "Yer going soft in your auld years."

"Fuck off, I've never been soft in my life. Certainly not planning on it now."

"The Carl Morck I know doesn't invite a large group of people to social gatherings."

Carl flashed him a side-eye. "Let's call it a one-off and never speak of it again."

"No, but seriously. It's a nice touch. Almost suits you. This new version of you."

"Shut up. This is a perfectly normal thing, inviting people for barbecue."

"This is why everyone is coming, because you are not known for doing normal things."

Carl made an eye-rolling gesture. Hardy pointed the barbecue tongs at him. "Glad to see ye up and about, though."

"Yeah, about time. Was getting real sick of being cooped up in one place. I don't know how you fucking did it."

"Not like I had a choice."

Just then Rose joined them. She went over to Hardy and gave him a good-natured pat on the shoulder. She took a step closer to Carl, then stopped. "Would offer to give you a hug but I don't know if you're still infectious."

"A hug? We are not nearly in hugging territory. Nor do I think we will ever be."

She grinned. "Well then, how about this?"

She held out a fist towards him, which Carl figured was for a fist bump. He waved his hand in a 'no' gesture. "Nope, not doing that either."

Rose retracted her hand. "Fine. Be yer old, grumpy self."

Over the course of the next fifteen minutes, everyone started piling in. Akram, who had brought Mina, apologising that his oldest was at a sleepover. The girl, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and somehow a spitting image of her father, stayed by Akram's side first but eventually went with Hardy's youngest when he mentioned a Nintendo Switch. Rachel was the last to arrive.

There was food for at least twenty people, and after an initial warming up period with introductions and small talk, the group quickly found their groove as they all sat squeezed around the patio table, being supplied with grilled goods by self-appointed barbecue chef Hardy. There were plenty of anecdotes being shared, plenty of teasing and plenty of laughter.

Donna eventually wrangled the kids and parked them in front of the television with an age-suitable movie they could all agree on. She casually draped Carl's fleece jacket she'd gotten from inside around his shoulders as if it was the most normal thing in the world. It was Carl's first instinct to protest, but he caught himself at the last minute and decided to quietly lean into it. Wasn't that what this was all about?

When Carl came back from a bathroom break, he stopped in the living room, surveying the scene from where he stood. Everyone was still engaged in conversation, Hardy had one of his sly grins on his face. Akram made a flamboyant gesture with his hand which made everyone laugh out loud.

Carl allowed himself a smile. Maybe Hardy was right. Maybe he was becoming soft. But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, because he quite liked what he was seeing.

Standing there, relishing the moment, his body was now sending clear signals that he was still far from peak capacity. The familiar weariness of his bones was creeping in, his muscles starting to protest, his body starting to feel heavy. Maybe if he laid down for a few minutes to refuel his energy reserves…

He toed off his shoes, stretched out on one of the brown leather couches and adjusted one of the pillows behind his head. Snippets of conversation from the open door to the patio mingled with the gentle sounds of the movie from the other room.

Carl closed his eyes and thought this wasn't so bad – having people around you who stayed even when you didn't always give them a reason to. Life could certainly be so much worse.

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