Hold My Breath In Tight

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

Summary: *Some days it's just too much, but it's easier when you have a safe port of call to steer towards.*

Author's Note: Just a self-indulgent angsty but also fluffy Carl and Rachel piece because I'm an angst and h/c monster and this is my catnip. Title inspired by the Vertical Horizon song 'Underwater'. Thanks to gettingbyi for the beta!

Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

+-+-+-+-+

This was Edinburgh's November at its finest, Rachel thought as she looked out the front room window.

Strings of rain bathed the asphalt in a wet sheen, raindrops flickering beneath the yellowy streetlights outside. Dusk had long fallen, and the steady tap of water drops against her window had a soothing quality. Just the right kind of night to curl up on the couch with a mug of tea, a blanket and that book she'd wanted to read for a while.

Something made her look up. Movement out in the street, then the sound of the metal gate outside her front door. She frowned, waited, thinking maybe she'd imagined it. But then her doorbell rang – a little too shrill in the silence that almost made her jump.

She put the book aside and peeled herself off the couch, wondering who'd just drop by her house unannounced. Carl usually texted or called when he came over.

Hesitantly, she opened the front door. The figure that stood outside was familiar. Carl—all lanky frame and messy hair now plastered to his head, soaking wet with drops of rain dripping from his face and clothes. The slump of his shoulder and his forlorn expression told her all she needed to know.

"Carl," she said. "Has something happened?"

He gave her a noncommittal grunt that could mean anything, really. The hall was small and she had to step aside to let him pass. He muttered a quick, "Sorry." The kind that was half sigh, half platitude and full of bone-deep exhaustion.

He stood there, limp, like he was unsure what to do or why he was even here. She closed the door. "Gosh, you're soaked."

"Yeah. Felt like walking," he muttered.

"In this weather? Christ, come here, you must be freezing."

She helped peel him out of the drenched fleece jacket, wondering why he wasn't wearing rain gear. He'd lived here long enough to know better.

She guided him to the kitchen, motioned for him to sit down at the table while she went into the bathroom to hang his wet jacket and fetch a towel. One of the thick, soft ones she liked.

When she came back, he was filling the electric kettle with water, two mugs on the counter. She sidled up to him, held the towel out to him. "Here, let me."

He sat back down in the chair, half-heartedly towelling off his hair as Rachel poured the hot water into the mugs. Steam rose from the hot liquid in grey wisps when she put the tea in front of him. He took a tentative sip, the towel now hanging loosely over one shoulder.

She wasn't sure what this was, felt a little out of her depth. His silence was uncharacteristic even for Carl's broody tendencies. Something must have rattled him. Or jarred him. Because this was different from just a bad day at work. Whatever it was, something inside of her was glad that he'd found his way here.

She abandoned her own tea and stood by his side, taking the towel from his shoulder. In gentle motions, she worked the soft fabric over his hair, massaging gently as he sat still. It was subtle, but some of his rigidity ebbed away under her touch, his exhale a little steadier now.

She had a thought, hoping it wasn't that. "Is Jasper alright?"

He stiffened a little again. "What? Yeah. He's fine."

She wanted to ask, 'Then what is it?' but didn't. Instead she took the now damp towel in one hand and let her other hand drop to his shoulder. The fabric of his woollen jumper was wet to the touch.

He closed his eyes, drew in a long, audible breath, then released it. Maybe it was her touch, maybe he was just tired, but he leaned sideways into her so that his head was against her torso. She gently pulled him closer, her other hand going into his damp hair to curl her fingers into it.

A shiver ran through him, she could feel it under her touch. "Grem, let's get you out of those wet clothes."

"It's not... It's not the cold."

She stayed quiet, waited. He pushed away from her, wrapped his hands around the mug in front of him as if to stop them from trembling.

He breathed in unsteadily. "I ran into a vehicle collision tonight on the way home. Young boy. Barely older than Jasper. I did CPR until the ambulance arrived." Carl's voice broke. "He didn't make it."

"Oh, Grem. That's why you walked."

He let out a stuttering sigh. "Yeah. Couldn't drive. Not after that."

“Why didn’t you call? I’d have come.”

“I… I don’t know.”

He leaned forward, pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes sockets. “I felt his ribs crack.”

She stood behind him, placed both her hands on his shoulders, hoping she could help ground him a little. “I’m sorry.”

He jerked backwards, his voice suddenly more forceful. “What for? It wasn’t your fucking fault.”

“It wasn’t yours either.”

“No,” he croaked. “It wasn’t anybody’s fault. Still a fucking tragedy.”

She stayed quiet, didn’t know what to say. There was very little she *could* say that would make any difference. He lifted the mug and took another sip of the hot beverage, the tremor still there when you looked closely.

“Carl. Why don’t you go and change into something dry?”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. It took him a few, long seconds to get up and shuffle out of the room.

He took a few minutes while she cleaned up the kitchen, then she heard him go to the front room. When she joined him, he was in a sweatshirt and a pair of dark blue tracksuit bottoms that had found its way here, now that they were dividing their time between their respective flats. He was squished into the corner of her couch, leaning against the corner of the back- and armrest. It struck her how much smaller and more vulnerable he looked than his usually more demanding presence.

He’d mellowed quite a bit since she got to know him, but he could still be prickly—often outspoken, passionate and opinionated. There was none of that tonight and there was a pang of something in her stomach that made her sit down next to him, leaning her head on his collarbone, putting her hand on his chest. His hand lightly came around her shoulder and they stayed like that for a while.

Finally, she said against his chest, “Grem?”

He just gave her one of his deep, rumbly grunts.

“Have you noticed that Jasper has been home a lot less after school?”

He shifted his position slightly under her touch. “Can’t say I have.”

She smiled, had expected something along those lines. He added, “That something I should be worried about?”

“No. But I think maybe you should talk to him about it.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I already know how *that’s* gonna go.”

“Oh, I think actually Jasper might surprise you there.”

He shifted again, leaned forward so that their connection was severed. Rachel straightened up next to him. He turned his head, looked at her. “What is it that I’m missing here?”

“Have you talked to him about what he wants to do after he finishes school?”

He frowned. “No... But it sounds like you have...?”

“I hope you’re not mad about it.”

He looked away, stared at the coffee table in front of him. “So he doesn’t trust me...”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. He doesn’t want you to hate his choices.”

That prompted him to look at her again. “So you’re saying I’m gonna hate his choices?”

“No, I’m saying he thinks you will, and he’s afraid to hear you say it.”

“Does he want to join the police force?”

She smiled a small smile. “No.”

“Okay. So what exactly does he think I’m going to hate?”

“He’s been taking first aid courses, and he’s volunteering a bit after school with St. Andrew’s First Aid.”

Carl frowned. “To do what?”

“I think he’s considering to train as a paramedic.”

Carl’s voice got louder, a displeased edge to it. “Paramedic?”

“So you *do* hate it?”

“No. I haven’t thought about it enough to hate it.”

She let out a quick chuckle. “Well, maybe you should. And come up with a few reasons why you don’t actually hate it.”

“Paramedic...” Carl said under his breath, as if trying to convince himself that it was a good thing. “How did he figure that?”

“Do you really not see it?”

He met her eyes. “See what?”

“That he looks up to you.”

He shook his head, let out a disbelieving chuckle. “It’s funny. Vic said the same thing, that he idolises me.”

“And that surprises you?”

“Have you seen me? I’m hardly a role model.”

“You’re smart, driven, committed, caring, honest and one of the most passionate and loyal people I know. Funny too, in your own, quirky way.”

She could see he immediately wanted to deny and deflect. Carl Morck was severely allergic to compliments. “Maybe you wanna add irritable, abrasive, short-fused, ill-tempered and unreliable to that list.”

“Unreliable? I don’t think you’re that.”

“I wasn’t there for him a lot of the time when I should have been.”

“But I bet you were there when it mattered.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“From what I’ve seen, I don’t think his choice is surprising at all. He’s a lot smarter and more perceptive than you think. He cares a lot. Not just about you. And he wants to do something to help people. Something that will make a real difference.” She lightly touched Carl’s thigh, placed her palm there. “You know, like you.”

He closed his eyes, shook his head imperceptibly. “It’s a tough fucking job. The kind you take home with you.”

“And maybe that’s something you two could talk about.”

“Because I’m so well equipped in that area,” he said sarcastically.

“Because you know what it’s like.”

He leaned back against the backrest. “You do, too.”

“Yes, every now and then. Had a young man commit suicide once. Kept me up most nights for a month, thinking did I say the wrong thing? Could I have done more?” She inhaled. “It’s not easy.”

“Yeah,” he said, making it sound like a sigh. “And sometimes it still goes wrong, even if we do everything right. Fucking irony of life.”

“Doesn’t mean we should stop trying.”

“Didn’t say I was going to.”

She shifted her position to stretch out her legs to the other end of the couch and put the back of her head on his thigh. “Why’d you join the police?”

He moved a hand and started playing with the hair on her forehead, staring straight ahead. For a long moment she thought he’d avoid the question, but then he said, “I wasn’t in a good place

when I was younger. Hung out with the wrong crowd. Got arrested once. It was pretty messy. One of the arresting officers helped me out and he— I don't know. He saw something in me, told me I could do better. Guess it struck a nerve.

"I got my shit together. Got my A-Levels, with his help. Got out of the shitty job I had. I owe him a lot."

He pressed his lips together, drew in a long breath through his nose. Rachel waited until Carl continued. "A friend of mine was stabbed to death. His killer was never found, mostly because they didn't really try. You know, junkie out looking for drugs… No one cared enough. But I wanted to care. I wanted to do better."

When he stayed silent, she asked, "What's his name?"

"Cody," Carl said. "Smart as shit, made his money busking. Started taking blow, then graduated to heroin. I saved his life once—the night we got arrested."

"I meant your police friend."

"Oh. Paul. Harris. He passed away a few years ago. Pancreatic cancer. Went really quickly, apparently. Fucking shame, he was a good man."

"So this was in England?"

"Yeah. God, that's such a long fucking time ago." He looked down at her face. "You? What's your story?"

She shrugged lightly. "I guess not quite as tragic as yours. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do after school. My father had a law firm, wanted me to follow in his footsteps. I tried, but I really hated law. Can't believe I stuck with it as long as I did."

"For how long?"

"Three years. And I was really fucking miserable the whole time."

"Was this when you stopped eating?"

"Yeah. Got depressed, too. It really wasn't a good time. It took me a long time to get out of that."

"And then you became a psychiatrist…"

"You make it sound so easy, but it's actually a really long process. Medical school first, then specialised psychiatry training. Took almost ten years. And I think my father still resents me for it."

A smile tugged at his lips. "So we've both got daddy issues."

"What did yours think of your career choice?"

He made a face. “No idea. Never talked to him much after I got out of that shithole. My sister kept defending him all these years. Fucked up our relationship, too.”

“You have a sister?”

“Yeah, Judith. Still lives down there, I think. You have a brother, right?”

“He’s five years younger than me. He was always the family favourite. Of course he was given free rein to choose his profession. He worked in politics for a while. Now he’s got a consultancy firm for renewable energy. Made a small fortune. He’s even more of a golden child now.”

“What’s his name?”

“Luke.”

Carl let out a short laugh. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

His fingers graduated to the hair near her ear. “Did you ever want to have children?”

She felt a little taken aback by the sudden change of topic. “Would you hate me if I said no?”

He met her eyes. “Oh, hell no. I never wanted kids. Then I got stuck with one.”

“But you ended up liking him all the same.”

He shrugged. “Not like I had much of a choice.”

“Come on, Carl. When you told me you only took custody of Jasper because you hated his grandmother, who were you kidding? Certainly not me.”

“Yeah, you already had me figured out right there and then, huh?”

She reached up to caress his beard. “Really wasn’t all that hard.”

His hand came round her wrist and he guided her fingers to his lips to kiss them. It made her smile. She did have him figured out early on, but not quite so much that she saw how tender and loving he would be when he allowed himself to let his guard down.

It was sweet and it made her want to kiss him back, so she pushed herself up and scooted close to lean in. Her lips met his and he kissed her back, affectionate and unhurried. There was no hunger or urgency, just a quiet and reverent love and appreciation.

When he broke the kiss, she pulled back and whispered, “I’ll be right back.”

If she wanted to cuddle with him for the rest of the night, which it felt like it was the exact kind of night for after the day he’d had, she’d have to take care of certain bodily necessities first.

When she came back to the front room, she stopped short for a moment. Carl had stretched his lanky frame out on the couch, a pillow under his head. He had his eyes closed, his face was

relaxed and his breathing was even. She smiled, and thought he had certainly earned it. She'd let him rest for a bit, maybe coax him to come to bed with her later.

For now, she took the soft, mint green fleece blanket that was lying crumpled at the end of the couch and draped it over him, then smoothed out a strand of unruly hair on his forehead.

The book that had kept her company before Carl had turned up on her doorstep was still lying on the coffee table, so she took it and made herself comfortable in her armchair.

The November rain was still softly drumming on the windowpanes. As she took in the sleeping figure of Carl on the couch not three feet away, she thought that this was exactly where she wanted to be tonight.