Starting With The Marshmallows

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Rachel had asked herself many times whether pursuing a relationship with Carl Morck was a good idea, and almost every time the only answer she could come up with was no. But yet… here she was. In his car on a drive to an undisclosed location that he'd picked her up for 45 minutes ago with a request to wear outdoorsy clothes.

She looked out the passenger side window of the brand new, sleek, grey BMW that was at least eight steps up from the rickety burgundy Ford. She knew they were going east, with rows of fields lining the flat landscape on both sides underneath overcast skies, but he'd been tight-lipped about their destination.

"I suppose you're still no closer to telling me where we're actually going?"

He pressed his lips together but there was something mischievous in his expression. "Nope."

She let out a theatrical sigh. "Alright. Fine."

"I promise you'll like it."

"I mean, for all you know, I might hate the outdoors."

"If you hated the outdoors, there wouldn't be photo collages on your walls where you're hiking up mountains with your friends. And you wouldn't be sitting here in stylish North Face hiking gear."

"This is Scotland. Rainproof clothing is part of our standard."

"Fair enough," he admitted. "But my point about the hiking photos still stands."

"You are way too perceptive for your own good."

"Occupational hazard. What can I say?"

Tracy Chapman's husky voice was wafting through the car—an old album from the 80s or 90s she vaguely recognised. She hadn't pegged him to be the soul type, but Carl was an enigma on the best of days, and she figured that this was part of the lure that had drawn her to him.

He turned onto a single-track road parallel to the coast, a stretch of beach to their left. After a few more minutes, he parked the car on a small car park at the end of a cul-de-sac and shut off the motor. His expression was as mysterious as it was unreadable. “Well, here we are.”

“And ‘here’ is...?”

He looked at her and instead of giving her an answer, he opened the driver’s side door. “Come on.”

He had never taken her anywhere like this. Or taken her anywhere, really, with the exception of a Lebanese restaurant he had said was a recommendation from Akram. Him taking her on an impromptu coastal trip had an undercurrent of significance, like he was opening a door that he hadn’t shown anyone through for a long time.

These past few months had taught her more than ever that, with Carl, it was often a strategic waiting game that required patience as much as gentle pressure at the right time. Their relationship was still in its defining phase, like they were both still trying to find out what this actually was and if it could work long-term.

The somewhat awkward dating phase had been more or less skipped because of how they’d met. And then, once their professional relationship had ended, they had progressed to semi-regular meetings with increasing frequency. In public places at first, then their mutual flats. It had been Rachel who had reached out for their first kiss, one night, on his couch after watching a movie. And while he’d been eager, he’d also been guarded.

She had long wondered what kind of person he’d be in bed, expected him to be the ravenous, urgent type, but he’d surprised her there, too. That side of him was practically the polar opposite of the man whose caustic, aggressive wit could slice people apart with fierce precision. And yet, she knew there was always something tentative there, as if he fully expected her to ditch him, like that impulsive one-night-stand that both parties wanted to erase from existence the next morning.

Their conversations had been sincerer, too. He was opening up more and more, letting her in one inch at a time, and she’d given him room to make the choices at his pace.

The grassy coastal path they were on was small and she walked behind him, trying to keep up with his energetic strides. She wondered if he’d object to walking hand-in-hand if the path was wider. He was awkward about physical contact sometimes, like it was something he had to allow himself to enjoy. His layers were manifold and not all of them were readily peelable.

They walked in silence for a while until he left the path and climbed down towards the beach. His destination seemed to be where the sand met a stretch of blackened rocks, where he easily clambered up the rocky terrain. She had trouble following him, had to choose her footing carefully not to slip and get instant road rash from the barnacle-covered rocks.

When she finally got to where he was already perched on a large rock with a flat surface, she was a little winded, coming to a stop behind him. Trying to catch her breath, she surveyed the scenery around them.

A large rocky structure protruded from the sea half a mile out with a small white lighthouse hidden beneath the shoreside cliffs. To their left and right was a mix of sandy beach and lichen-covered rocks forking into the sea. The sharp squawks of seagulls interrupted the gentle lapping of sea water on the shore.

This was very different from the quiet bustle of the city, the sometimes oppressive, narrow grey streets that were washed out by the Scottish drizzle.

"This is really beautiful," she finally said into the silence.

He turned his head, his gaze searching for her. "See, I promised you'd like it."

"So why here?"

The question was simple, and she thought it was innocuous enough, but he stayed quiet. Despite his lanky frame, he looked small. There was suddenly something heavier in the silence and the slump of his shoulders. Something between the lines that he was holding hostage. Something she'd have to let him decide where and when to share it.

She stepped behind him and gently placed her hands on his shoulders. He stiffened for a second, but then relaxed into the touch when she gave him the smallest of squeezes. She kept her hands rested there, like beacons of reassurance. *I'm here if you want to share.*

His voice was laced with a rare genuineness and vulnerability. The kind he rarely let anyone see. "I haven't been here since..."

He let that hang in the air, and she felt him swallow. She gave his shoulders another gentle squeeze as she finished the sentence for him. "The shooting."

"No." His voice was gravelly. "The divorce."

Oh shit.

He went on. "We used to come here. Vic, Jasper and I. Jasper loved turning over stones, looking for crabs. He was so proud when he'd catch one. Got bitten once and cried the whole way home." The memory elicited a dry chuckle.

"I probably yelled at him to shut up. Never was very good at the stepfather thing."

She let one arm glide down the side of his bony shoulder. "And I think that's where you're wrong."

He shook his head. “Why do you think Vic left me?”

She countered his question with her own. “Why do you think your wife insisted that you get full custody of Jasper?”

“She’s a flight attendant. She’s never home for more three days at a time. It made sense.”

“You said that she could have just as easily have had her mother raise Jasper. But she chose you.”

“Yeah,” he huffed. “And I fucked it up.”

Rachel let go of his shoulders and sat down next to him on the large rock he’d chosen. “You’re being harder on yourself than you deserve.”

“Oh yeah?” And there was the sarcasm. His ever-present defensive shield. “And how the fuck would *you* know?”

“I know because I’ve seen the look of concern on Jasper’s face when you came home with your shoulder in a sling. I know because you had all the opportunity in the world to just fuck off wherever you wanted after the divorce, but you didn’t. You stayed. You *made* that choice, Carl. And that says a lot.”

“Jasper deserves better.”

“What does ‘better’ even mean?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Someone who isn’t absent most days and a lot of nights. Someone who knows how to suppress the impulse to yell at him every time he does something stupid. Someone who knows how to give him what he needs.”

“And how do you know you’re not that person?”

Carl let out a cynical breath through his nose. “Have you looked at me lately? I’m a total fucking mess.”

“No, Carl, you’ve been through—”

“Trauma,” he interrupted. “Yeah. Thanks for the reminder. It’s not like you don’t say it every fucking time we have a conversation.”

“Hey,” she said gently, reaching for his hand, hoping he would let her. “Remember what we talked about?”

He didn’t pull back when she cupped his hand with hers but he didn’t reciprocate the gesture either. “Which part of the three million things you think you can fix about me?”

She smiled. “The part where you need to try to be kinder to yourself.”

He sighed. “I wish it wasn’t so fucking exhausting.”

“No one said it’d be easy. But what also helps is looking back at all the progress you’ve already made. Yes, it’s an uphill climb, but you’ve already passed the first leg.”

“Only the first?”

“Maybe more than the first.”

Another seagull screeched in the distance. The wind was now picking up and the waves carried foamy froth, white spray of water shooting up where they met the rocks that protruded into the sea. Dark clouds hung low in the sky and a gust of wind tousled Carl’s hair.

His hand shifted beneath hers, facing his palm upwards. His fingers interwove with hers. His voice was quiet, gravelly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you took me.”

He pointed towards the darkening sky. “Looks like the weather isn’t.”

She shrugged. “It’s Scotland, what do you expect?”

“At least one day of sunshine would be nice. You know, every once in a while.”

“I take it there’s more sunshine in Banbury?”

He turned his head and frowned at her. “Banbury?”

“I thought that’s where you’re from.”

He let out a quick chuckle. “Oh no. That’s where I lived when I met Vic. Was kind of a temporary thing.”

“Where *did* you grow up, then?”

His face darkened visibly. “You don’t wanna know.”

“I meant the area, not the circumstances.”

“Exeter. Fucking hated it. Got out of there as quickly as I could.”

“Your parents still live there?”

He gave a noncommittal shrug. “Don’t know. Haven’t talked to them in decades. Can’t say I give much of a fuck.”

Okay. Another piece of the complicated puzzle that was Carl Morck. And another sore spot, it seemed. She decided to change the subject. “So why the police?”

He stared absently into the distance for a long moment. “Seemed like the right thing to do.”

“The right thing for what?”

“I was a lot more idealistic then.”

She smiled. “That’s hard to imagine.”

“Yeah, it got beaten out of me pretty quickly.”

“But you stuck with it.”

“Well, it’s not like I had much of a choice.”

“We always have a choice.”

He let go of her hand and pulled back. “That’s what privileged people with money tend to say. Me? Not so much.”

She stayed quiet and waited if he would elaborate, but he didn’t. She didn’t want to push, knowing he was on the edge of something that could quickly backfire and ruin the moment if he slipped. Or the whole day.

He rubbed his palms down his thighs, then stood up. Pointing a finger in the general direction of the dark grey clouds, he told her, “We better go unless you wanna get soaking wet.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” she replied, also getting up.

“I know a place. Follow me.”

They walked along the beach for about a mile, the wind picking up as their footprints traced a path across the wet sand, bringing with it the unmistakable chill of rapidly approaching autumn. It started raining just as they reached the end of the beach and walked onto the concrete road that led into town.

He took her hand and they jogged the last few yards to the door of the cozy restaurant that overlooked the shore. They fled inside just as the rain picked up, their jackets now thoroughly wet. A stray piece of dried grass had blown into Carl’s hair, and she reached up to extricate it from there.

He looked at her, mischievous and playful, those blue eyes both piercing and longing. His hand was suddenly cupping her jaw and she felt herself drawn into a passionate kiss.

It was both hungry and sensual – the kind where you tended to forget your surroundings and melted into the other person. There were unfamiliar butterflies in her belly, and the absurd thought of wanting to find the nearest bathroom so that they could go the whole way right here, right now.

He drew her closer, his lips still on her mouth, and she was about to make that very suggestion when a female voice harrumphed a few feet away. The accent was vaguely eastern European. "I'd suggest booking you a room but we don't offer accommodation."

Carl pulled away from the kiss and sheepishly grinned at the young woman with nose, eyebrow and lip piercings and a prominent tattoo snaking up her wrist. "That's a fucking shame."

She ignored the remark and asked, "Table for two?"

"Yes," Rachel quickly confirmed.

"Over there," the woman said, pointing at a table with four chairs in the corner of the conservatory part of the restaurant. "Unless you'd rather sit inside."

"No," Rachel told her. "This is perfect."

They made themselves comfortable at the table, hanging their wet raincoats over the backrests of the unoccupied chairs next to them. Carl was still looking through the menu when Rachel closed hers and put it on the table.

She looked out the window, then looked back at Carl. "So is this the *'I'll take Rachel to all the landmarks of my failed marriage'* tour?"

He looked up. "Oh, fuck no. Victoria never wanted to go to this place. Said it was too pagan."

"No offense, but she sounds way too posh for you."

He grinned at her. "Hence the reason we are now divorced. Do you like fish? This seems kinda fish-heavy."

"Yeah, this is about the worst place you could have taken me to. I fucking hate fish."

His face dropped and she had to hold back an actual laugh. "Relax. I was taking the mick. I like a good piece of fresh fish."

He breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank fuck."

"How about the Hot Starter Sharing Platter?"

"How about I get the hot starter across from me *without* sharing it?"

She shook her head incredulously. “Jesus, Carl. Rein in the horny for a minute. We’re not seventeen anymore.”

“Right about now I fucking wish I was.”

“Really? Demanding school work, raging hormones, existential crises on a daily basis with no idea what to do with your life, parents breathing down your neck that you need to this or that when you’d rather be doing your own thing…”

“I think you may be projecting.”

“Yeah, well, I like the 40s a lot better.”

“Two failed marriages and as many, if not more, actual existential crises between us. How is this better?”

“You seriously wanna be seventeen again?”

He looked out the window for a moment. “You know what? No, I don’t.”

“So is that a no about the starter platter?”

He turned back to the first page of the menu. “No, that sounds pretty good except I fucking loathe squid.”

She gave him a good-natured smile. “That’s fine. More for me, then.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You know what, I think I may have to change my mind about this thing.” He pointed his finger back and forth between them. “I’m not sure I can be with a woman who enjoys squid.”

“Too slippery for you?”

“More like too clingy.”

Huh. Was this just innocuous banter? Or was there more to it between the lines? She tried to think back to their past few months together. Had there been instances where she might have come across as clingy, too suffocating?

But Carl was nothing if not perceptive. The aforementioned occupational hazard. He met her gaze. “Okay, that might have come out wrong. I just meant… the suction thingies. On their legs. You know?”

“Carl, if I’m being too… demanding… or clingy, please tell me.”

He quickly backpedalled. “No, that’s not— Fuck. That’s not what I meant.” He looked away again as if there was something incredibly interesting outside when there wasn’t really anything but the rain. “Fuck. I’m really bad at this. And, you know, sometimes it’s hard to switch off.”

“It’s okay.”

He shook his head, still not looking at her. “No, I should be better at this. We’ve talked about it.”

“Carl. It’s okay. It’s hard to break old habits.”

He let out a cynical huff. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

She reached out with one hand and took his that was lying on the table. “Hey. This is progress too, you know. A few months ago, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“A few months ago, I sat across from you, making inappropriate advances on my work-mandated therapist and then walked out on the latter. Not exactly my brightest moment.”

Her mouth curved into a smile. “I would have to agree, but if you hadn’t, we wouldn’t be sitting here either.”

“So you’re saying it’s a good thing that I was a totally unprofessional prick?”

“I think the jury’s still out on that one.”

“I think I may need a better lawyer.”

“You certainly know enough of them.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “And they’re all stuck-up fucking arseholes with way too much attitude and money.”

Just then, the waitress came to take their orders. Carl ordered them the starter platter and an extra helping of chips. Rachel went with a latte and was surprised when Carl asked for a hot chocolate with marshmallows.

When the waitress walked away, Rachel looked at him. “Hot chocolate with marshmallows? Really?”

“What?” he defended himself. “Is a hot chocolate not manly enough for you?”

“You don’t strike me as the marshmallow type.”

“Well, I’m glad I can still surprise you, seeing how you basically know my complete file.”

“You, Carl Morck,” she playfully pointed at him, “are a walking, talking surprise. Starting with the marshmallows.”

He grinned at her. “I aim to please.”

She smiled back and took in the change of the man sitting in front of her. A genuine smile was still rare but becoming more frequent. She liked how it lit up his face and crinkled the lines around his eyes. It made him look younger, more carefree. Like maybe one day he could be a person who didn’t constantly look like the weight of the world was pressing down on his shoulders.

His index finger lightly tapped her hand. “You psychoanalysing me in your head again?”

“No. Just happy to be here.”

He didn’t come back with a witty retort. He just stayed quiet and gave her a small smile.

And that was enough for Rachel to know that it was all worth it, that pursuing a relationship with Carl Morck wasn’t such a bad idea after all.