The Sound Of Breaking

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Of course it had to be fucking 3:10 a.m.

A sharp clap of thunder woke Carl from a slumber that had been uneasy to begin with. Heavy rain was whipping against the windowpanes in a cacophony of muted thuds, lightning flashing in quick, pointed bursts across the white and light blue walls of his bedroom.

Another loud and sudden burst of thunder roared outside, making a feeling of irrational anxiousness rise in Carl that made his heartbeat just a little too fast, his brain already overshooting the adrenaline threshold to a point where it was pointless to try and go back to sleep, despite his eyes burning from lack of sleep and his body screaming bloody exhaustion.

He lay back against the pillow for another minute, then got impatient and heaved himself out of bed. There was no point. He'd just be tossing and turning.

He opened his bedroom door, padded into the kitchen. Other than the rain and the thunder, a veil of quiet lay over the house that you'd only ever get in the middle of the night. Carl was familiar with it, felt strangely at home with it.

He fetched a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water from the tap. As he took a gulp from it that went past the familiar tug of knotted scar tissue in his throat, another white burst of light lit up the room.

The crack of thunder that followed was razor-edged and crisp—like a gunshot exploding out of a gun barrel not three feet away. It was loud and jarring and so sudden that Carl jumped and lost his grip on the glass he was holding. It slid from his hand and tumbled onto the edge of the kitchen counter, then to the floor where it broke into pieces.

Carl had no time to prepare, no time to process, no time to brace himself for the sudden onslaught of visceral memory that transported him right back there—to the run-down flat that stank of stale cigarettes, mildew and death. The moment a sharp pop of three gunshots rang out and ripped straight through Anderson, then Hardy, then him.

He stumbled a few feet to his right, felt his knees buckle, tried to futilely grab a hold of the kitchen counter's edge that somehow wasn't where he thought it would be, sending him awkwardly sliding to the floor, his side against the kitchen cupboard.

Another flash of lightning, another clap of thunder so deep that it rumbled in Carl's stomach. His heart was hammering uncontrollably in his chest now, his breaths ragged and gasping, cold sweat at the back of his neck and on his brow. His ribcage felt unbearably tight, everything else around him drowned out by the impossible urge to suck more air into his lungs or else he would suffocate.

The metallic taste of blood was in mouth, mingling with the smell of beginning decay and decades of neglect. He squeezed his eyes shut, struggled for air like he'd struggled to cling on to dear life, bleeding out on the grimy carpet at Leith Park.

Not a heart attack, not a heart attack, not a heart attack.

"Carl."

It was faint, the sound hazy and impossibly far away. It grew more urgent.

"Carl!"

Jasper was there, crouching in front of him, his voice as panicked as what was twisting through Carl.

Fingers were curling around his upper arm and Carl tried to focus on that, tried to pull every last ounce of willpower he had to home in on the gently reassuring grip of Jasper's hand.

His breath came in ragged, uneven bursts—raspy and shallow. He tried to slow them down, tried to divert all his attention to inhaling and exhaling. Impossibly and excruciatingly slowly, it bore fruit.

He was vaguely aware of Jasper next to him—silent, scared, watching like a hawk. Carl lifted one hand, telling him he needed a minute. Jasper's grip slackened but his hand remained where it was.

Carl concentrated on his breathing until it became more controlled, the tight band around his chest loosening fraction by fraction, the panic subsiding ever so slowly.

Jasper's hand eventually vanished from his arm, leaving behind a feeling of a strange absence of reassurance, a feeling of bleakness that came out of nowhere. Carl drew in a shaky breath, exhaled it just as shakily, let his head sink against the cupboard door with a low thud of his temple meeting painted wood.

It took five more breaths before he dared lift his head.

Jasper was half crouching, half kneeling next to him with one palm on the floor, his eyes wide and filled with a worry that looked too mature on a 17-year-old boy.

"Jasper," Carl eked out.

"Are you having a panic attack?"

Carl didn't know what to say, didn't want to put that on Jasper, because then he'd worry more, he'd know just how fucked up things were, how much Carl was struggling to hold it together. But Jasper also deserved to know, deserved to get the fucking truth.

"Yeah," he said in a low voice.

Jasper's shoulders sagged, like another weight was added there. Carl hated it with every fibre of his being. "I'm sorry," he added.

"For what? It's not like this is your fault."

Wasn't it, though? Carl wanted to say it but didn't know how, didn't want to dredge up things that he desperately wanted to keep as far away from Jasper as he possibly could. So instead silence settled, heavy and awkward, broken only by the afterthought of the low rumble of the thunderstorm moving away.

Jasper's next question landed bull's eye on the target that had been painted unsolicited on his back. "Do you have these often?"

"No," he said. It wasn't a lie, was it? What was often, anyway?

"But it wasn't the first time."

"No," Carl said again.

"How often?"

Jesus Christ. This... This was exactly why Carl didn't want Jasper to know, wished he didn't have to see it.

"It's not important."

And there it was, the instant disappointment that settled in Jasper's features and told Carl he was a fucking failure at being a parent, at being the person that Jasper had somehow put on a pedestal he'd never belonged.

Carl shifted, by now fairly certain his legs would actually hold him upright if he tried. But Jasper was faster. He got up, stood in front of Carl and reached out his hand.

Carl took it, let Jasper pull him up. What Carl didn't expect was that Jasper held on to his hand, pulled it further until Carl felt himself in a hug. It wasn't long and felt strangely bizarre in a way that Carl couldn't explain. They hadn't had that kind of physical contact in years, and now it was alien and weird, as much as he appreciated the sentiment.

Jasper looked slightly sheepish when they separated, like maybe he'd done the wrong thing. He stared at his feet, but then seemed to steel himself when he looked at Carl. "You said I can come to you when I want to talk about stuff. That can go both ways."

Carl wanted to laugh, because the idea of talking to Jasper about his state of mind seemed absolutely fucking absurd, but there was just something pure and raw about it that it struck a chord.

Carl took a step back, put some more space between them. "This... whole thing is complicated. You get that, right?"

Jasper nodded. "Yeah. But maybe it's not as complicated as you think. You seem to have this idea that you're the only one who... who struggles with shite like this, but I don't think you are. There must be better ways to deal with it." He nodded to the space where they'd both sat on the floor just a minute ago. "Better than this."

Carl closed his eyes, nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said, and it came out like a sigh. "Just..."

Jasper briefly met his eyes, then looked away. "I get it."

How could Jasper possibly get any of this?

Jasper averted his eyes, then he turned and went into the hallway, carefully circumnavigating the shards of broken glass.

Carl stood there, rooted to the spot, thankful that Jasper didn't have to deal with the shit he was facing every day, that he hadn't had to go through what Carl had been through when he'd grown up.

Jasper came back with a dustpan and brush. He crouched down to clean up the mess on the floor.

"Jasper, you don't have to—"

There was a sharp edge to Jasper's voice. "Carl. I've got it." Like he wanted to say *let me fucking do this one thing for you.*

Carl took a step back, leaned against the kitchen counter, scrubbing a weary hand down his face, then rubbed it along his beard around his mouth.

After the shards of glass were disposed of, Jasper straightened up, giving Carl a long look. "Can we have a meeting about this? Tomorrow."

"Jasper..."

"I think you should talk about it."

"Jasper, this isn't your..."

"Bullshit," Jasper snapped. "If you think this isn't any of my business, it is now. Because now it's not just you anymore. You're always so adamant about not bringing the job home, but this? This is you spilling the job all over our fucking kitchen."

It stunned Carl into silence, his brow furrowing with something unpleasant.

Jasper pressed on, “Look, I know that shooting did a real number on you, and I’m probably not the right person either, but who are you gonna talk to about it, Carl? So, yeah, I don’t know. Maybe… Maybe it should be me.”

Carl’s fingers curled deeper into his beard, then he slid his hand down his chin and let it rest on his thigh, tapping his fingers there. “I can’t,” he said simply.

“Why not?”

“Because it isn’t something I want you involved in.”

Jasper lifted his arms in frustration. “Then what? You just going to ignore it?”

Carl sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah. Great. That’s really gonna help this situation.”

“Jasper, you’re just a—”

“A kid? That what you’re gonna say? I’m old enough to see that this isn’t fucking healthy. That it’s a bloody nightmare for you. You think it feels great to see your stepfather losing grip right on the fucking kitchen floor in the middle of the night?”

Carl’s facial muscles constricted with sudden emotion he hadn’t expected, he wasn’t prepared for. He looked down, hoped that Jasper hadn’t seen it.

“You keep saying I’m just a kid, but I don’t see you being an actual fucking adult about it.”

“You’re right.” Carl said in a low voice. He looked up, met Jasper’s gaze. “But it’s not as easy as that.”

Jasper’s look was steely. “It’s not impossible either.”

“No,” Carl said just above a whisper. “It’s not.”

Silence settled between them, fraught with all the words crowding the room that were left unsaid. Carl was the one to break it. “You should go back to bed.”

Jasper gave him a look that clearly spelled the opposite of wanting to do that. He nudged his head in the direction of the living room. “Let’s watch something.”

“It’s three in the fucking morning.”

“So what?”

“You have school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, fuck school.”

"Jasper..."

"No, I meant we don't have to stay up all night. I'll go to school."

Carl understood what he was saying. This was for the benefit of Carl coming off that adrenaline high, of winding down enough and not be alone with it. Jasper was already on the way to the armchair and flopped down in it, fishing on the coffee table for the remote control.

Carl sighed, pushed himself away from the kitchen counter and joined Jasper on the couch. Maybe it wasn't the worst idea. And maybe at three in the fucking middle of the night with a thunderstorm raging outside, it was okay to allow himself this small piece of comfort.

He let Jasper pick something that didn't sound overly terrible. Some kind of comic superhero show that Carl wasn't all that invested in but watched it anyway, steeling a glance at Jasper's face in the dim half-light, wondering when it had happened that he'd grown up so much.

Carl awoke the next morning from noises in the kitchen. He was stretched out on the couch, a blanket draped over him. He rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers, then got up with a sigh.

Martin was in the kitchen, preparing coffee in the French press. "Sorry, didn't realise you were sleeping on the couch. Again."

"Yeah," Carl said, raking his fingers through his hair. He remembered the night before, then pointed at the floor. "You should probably watch your feet. Broke a glass last night."

Martin gave him a look. "I heard." Then he shrugged. "It's your kitchenware."

"Technically, it's Vic's kitchenware." Carl pointed towards the hallway. "Jasper still sleeping?"

Martin shook his head. "Nope. Left early, quiet as a mouse. Didn't even leave his usual mess in the bathroom. Wonders never cease."

Carl had half expected Jasper to sleep in and skip school, and he wouldn't even have blamed him. It wasn't the first time Jasper was making an effort and it wasn't the first time that Carl had noticed it.

If Jasper was being a fucking adult about this, Carl could be, too. Jasper had asked for a meeting, and the least Carl could do was to honour that. Not to talk about Carl's panic attacks but about why it was important to him that Jasper's world had as little overlap as possible with the daily horrors of Carl's job.

Maybe they could start there.

And then see where that would take them.