Can You Show Me Something Else

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Author's Note

This story takes place in my Paul Harris universe and builds on the backstory I developed for Carl for this particular universe that still more or less fits within the realm of what we know in canon.

Previous stories in this universe are 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams', 'Just Three Miles' and 'From Behind The Bitter Ache'. The gist of it is that Carl had a pretty rough childhood and was leading a somewhat aimless life with a low-income job in construction in the south of England. He ends up being taken in by the police for a crime he didn't commit and meets a police officer called Paul Harris in the process. Paul understands that Carl is innocent and also sees his potential, so he helps him turn his life around and eventually join the police force. Paul becomes somewhat of a mentor to Carl and they end up as close friends who stay in each other's lives over the years.

This story takes place in 2015 and into 2016 after Carl has joined CID in Devon, worked for a year or two in Serious Crimes and then changed to Homicide. He had a brief stint with an undercover assignment that didn't quite go as planned and that got him hooked on oxy. Paul pulled him through detox, which is referenced several times in this fic.

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Title inspired by Rob Thomas - Lonely No More.

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Summary: *What if I was good to you? What if you were good to me? What if Carl finally found someone he loves and who loves him and they're ready to start a life together in a whole new part of the country? (Pre-canon and follow-up to 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams', 'Just Three Miles' and 'From Behind The Bitter Ache'.)*

Chapter 1 – Words Are Only Words

There are only few things in life that Carl hates more than flying. As he sits in the aisle seat of the crowded plane, he growls with disdain while the last few boarding passengers stow their luggage in the overhead compartments.

He tries to ignore the anxious flutter in his stomach that's starting to build there. This is ridiculous. It's just a short commercial flight on an aircraft that's as safe as they get. He's in his mid-thirties. He should be able to handle a fucking 90-minute flight without a nervous breakdown. Why'd they have to fly him to fucking Northern Ireland for this stupid training workshop anyway? He should have protested more vehemently.

A female voice comes on over the speakers. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We're just about ready to finish boarding. If you're standing in the aisle, please take your seat so we can make room for the last few passengers. Go ahead and place any larger bags in the overhead bins and keep smaller items under the seat in front of you. Once everyone is settled, we'll be on our way to Belfast. Thank you for your cooperation."

Carl leans his head against the headrest, closes his eyes and inhales sharp and long. The anxious flutter in his gut intensifies. Fuck.

His reverie is broken by a voice right next to him. "Sir, if you could please fasten your seatbelt."

His eyes snap open to look at a flight attendant roughly his age with auburn hair, a square jaw and large, brown eyes. There's something there that has him look twice before he quickly gropes for the ends of the seat belt. "Sure," he mutters.

She's already turned her attention away to a passenger two rows in front of him and Carl can't help but let his gaze flit to her bum. She definitely has nicely toned buttocks beneath that dark blue pencil skirt. Maybe that can be his distraction for the flight. He hopes she will be handing out the snacks later.

Ten minutes later, Carl's stomach is all acid and butterflies as the plane starts taxiing to the runway and the jet engines start howling louder. He grips the armrests with white knuckles as his body is pressed against the seat during take-off, his breaths coming faster than he'd like them to be.

He relaxes only marginally when the plane reaches cruising altitude and the fasten seatbelt signs are switched off. It doesn't help that the pilot just announced there's a bit of rough weather on the way and they might expect some turbulence.

It doesn't take long for the plane to start shaking, and Carl's stomach is now an empty pit that does unpleasant things to the rest of his body. He's back to gripping the armrests, his breathing becoming increasingly uncontrolled. Fuck. Last thing he needs is an anxiety attack with hundreds of spectators in close proximity.

He tries to inhale again, tries to—

"Sir?"

He looks up. It's the flight attendant. The attractive one. "Are you having trouble with the turbulence?" She has a Scottish accent.

He unclenches his jaw. Isn't it fucking obvious? "Yes," he says before his brain can make the conscious decision to flat-out deny it, which is what he really should have done.

"Do you need any assistance?"

Assistance? He wants to laugh. What assistance can she offer? The plane shudders again and his hand involuntarily fastens the grip on the armrest. "I'm okay," he says feebly.

The flight attendant gives him a smile that clearly says, *'You're doing a poor job of trying to fool me.'* To Carl, she says, "Give me a minute, I'll be right back."

He tries to distract himself again by watching her, sees her going to the front of the plane, vanish behind the curtain there. She comes back a minute or so later and steers right towards his seat with practiced precision. "I checked if we have a seat available closer to the wing where it's a little quieter, but I'm afraid we're almost fully booked today."

Carl swallows. He catches a glimpse of her name badge, it says Victoria S. in black letters against a gold background. "That's okay." He hates how dry and scratchy his voice sounds.

"Would you like me to get you some water or something else to drink?"

"Yeah. Coke would be great."

"A caffeinated drink might not be in your best interest right now. I can get you apple, orange or tomato juice, lemonade, ginger ale or still or sparkling water instead."

Carl swallows again. "Ginger ale, then."

She nods. "Certainly. I'll be right back with your drink, sir."

Sir? Bloody hell. He's not fucking sixty, is he?

She brings him a tiny can of ginger ale and a thin plastic cup. As Carl is about to fold down the tray table, she says apologetically, “I’m afraid the trays will have to stay up at the moment. Here, let me help with this.”

She takes the can and opens it and pours it into the cup. Carl takes a sip—it tastes strange. Different than he remembers it should. Must be the pressure or the altitude.

To his surprise, she lingers by his seat, starts talking about the turbulence. Some kind of elaborate explanation of why they are happening, and Carl interrupts her after a sentence or two. “No offence, but this isn’t fucking helping.”

She raises her eyebrows slightly, then quickly replaces the surprise with the professional service provider mask. “My apologies. Some people find it reassuring to know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, I’m not some people.”

“I could suggest a few grounding techniques that can help with the anxiety.”

Fucking hell, as if he’s not humiliated enough! “No,” he presses out between clenched teeth.

“What are you flying out to Belfast for? Business or pleasure?”

He inhales. Small talk. Fucking great. Now she’s babying him. “Business.”

“Have you been before?”

“No.”

“Well, I hope you have some time for a bit of exploration. Most people wouldn’t necessarily think of Belfast as a tourist destination, but the city has some interesting history.”

“Riots and gun violence, yeah?” he says cynically.

She gives him an amused smile. “That’s part of it, but there’s also some interesting architecture if you’re into that.”

“You got some kind of tour guide gig on the side, or something?”

She smiles again. “I can see you’re a hard nut to crack. I’ve been there quite a few times.”

“You fly this route often?”

“Every once in a while.”

“Any good pubs you can recommend?”

Her smile feels less fake and more genuine now. “I just might. What are you looking for?”

He raises his eyebrows. “A good beer and decent food?”

She chuckles. “Okay, perhaps not such a hard nut to crack. In that case, *Kelly's Cellars* if you’d like a good Irish stew. *The Garrick* if you want something a little more traditionally Victorian.”

“Any chance I could catch you in any of them in the next day or two?”

Shit. He meant that to come out more playful than desperate. His flirting game is definitely off, and he realises that flirting with a flight attendant is one of the stupidest ideas ever since they’re probably hit on *all* the time. She’s not wearing a ring, though. He checked.

He waits for the rebuttal, but she just gives him a somewhat sheepish smile. “Sounds tempting, but I’m afraid I’m out on an Amsterdam flight later today.”

“Shame. You like the constant change of scenery?”

“Aye, it keeps things interesting.”

“Interesting, as in having to talk total strangers off a ledge?” He gives her a little grin.

“Sometimes. Did it work?”

He takes stock and is pleasantly surprised that the nervous flutter in his gut has receded to a bearable level and his hands are no longer gripping the armrest like it’s his last lifeline. “Are you going to leave me to my own devices if I say yes?”

Her mouth twitches with an amused smile. “While I would love to keep you company, I unfortunately have around 150 other passengers to attend to. Will you be alright?”

He gives her what he thinks is a reassuring look. “Yeah. Name’s Carl, by the way.”

She gives him a curt nod. “Well then, Carl. I’m just a call button away if you need my assistance again.”

“Careful what you wish for.”

She just smiles and then walks away, leaving Carl feeling somewhat accomplished. Maybe his flirting game isn’t that far off, even though the elderly man in the middle seat next to him gives him a bit of a disdainful look. Carl decides to ignore it. The old dude can go and screw himself as far as he’s concerned. Chances are he’s never gonna meet him again anyway.

Thanks to the lovely Victoria, Carl is now relaxed enough that he can actually get the novel out of his bag and get a bit of reading in, at least until she comes by his seat again half an hour later to collect his rubbish and tell him to fold the tray table up.

Before she leaves again, she asks him, “Will you be alright for the landing?”

Carl shrugs. “We’ll see.”

“Start saying things in your mind that you can see or feel if it gets worse.” Then she hands him a piece of paper. “The names of the pubs,” she says before she’s off to continue her tray table round.

He looks at the note, hopes that maybe she also added her phone number, but it seems he didn’t get quite so lucky. It’s just the pub names.

Carl stuffs the note in his pocket. It might come in handy later.

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Chapter 2 – What You Do To Me

It’s half a year later that Carl thinks this must be one hell of a coincidence. He’s having a pint with Paul at their usual table when he spots a vaguely familiar face at the bar. He narrows his eyes, tries to remember why the brunette seems familiar until he remembers. It’s that flight attendant. What was her name again? Gloria? Veronica? No, wait. Victoria.

He watches her for a while as she orders a cider and goes to a table in the corner to toast with a small group of people. Paul eventually turns around and searches for what has Carl’s attention captured, then looks back at Carl with a sly grin on his face. “The brunette?” he asks.

“Guilty as charged,” Carl admits sheepishly.

“Go on,” Paul nudges him. “Make a move.”

Carl takes a sip from his beer. “I’ve met her before.”

“Oh? Tell me more.”

“You’ll laugh, but she was a flight attendant on that flight I took out to Belfast.”

Paul raises his eyebrows. “Flight attendant, huh? And you just happen to remember her?”

“Yeah, you know, we talked.”

“Talked, eh?” Paul is grinning again.

“Not what you think. I was, uh…”

“Relax, Sprog. You already told me about your fear of flying, remember?”

Heh. Has he? He doesn’t even remember that. He sighs. “Yeah. There was turbulence. It sucked. She helped me get through it.”

“Good on her. You check her out then, too?”

Carl has to smile. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Paul nudges his head in her direction. “Well, then that’s as good an opener as any.”

“Yeah, I don’t know…”

“Really, Carl? *Now* you’re shy?”

What the hell, Carl thinks. Maybe Paul is right. He downs the last of his ale and gets up. “Okay, I’ll give it a shot. Don’t fucking snoop.”

Paul chuckles. “I would never.”

“Of course you would.”

It’s like perfect choreography because as it so happens, Victoria walks over the bar for another round of orders just as Carl does. He stands next to her, casually says, “Funny coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

She looks at him and her eyes narrowed. There isn’t immediate recognition there, so he adds, “Carl. Flight to Belfast about half a year ago.”

That seems to ring a bell for her because she says, “Ah yes, flight anxiety. Hope your flight back was less rough.”

He shrugs. “Not really. Can never get used to it.”

The bartender finally turns his attention to them and Victoria places her order, as does Carl. He tries to engage her in more conversation as the bartender draws the beer from the tap. “You live here?”

She shakes her head. “No, I live up in Edinburgh. Just here for a short trip. How about you?”

“Yeah, born and bred. This is practically my home turf.”

“That *is* a funny coincidence, then. And you just happened to be here tonight?”

He grins. “No, I stalked you from the airport like any good old detective would.”

Her response is a genuine chuckle. “Detective, eh?”

“Yep.”

“You here by yourself?”

“No.” He points to the table where Paul is still sitting. “Here with a friend.”

She points at the table with her friends. “So am I.”

The bartender now puts the beer glasses in front of Victoria and she pays for them, so Carl knows he'll have to make some sort of move. God, he's not great at this. He doesn't wanna fuck it up. "Victoria, right? Any chance you're staying for a few days and we can do this again?"

Her expression is somewhat bemused. She takes two of the glasses and gives Carl a look. "You know what? Let me think about it."

He watches her go as he waits for his own beer to be served, not sure if that was a genuine answer or she was just letting him down gently. He eventually takes his ale and goes back to their table where Paul looks at him expectantly. Carl slides into his seat, takes a sip and sighs.

"No dice, huh?" Paul asks.

"She says she'll think about it."

"That's not a no."

"It might as well be."

As he and Paul keep drinking their beers, Carl keeps stealing glances at Victoria's table. She must have mentioned their encounter because her friends are also looking at him now. He suppresses the urge to give them a little wave.

It's maybe half an hour later that he sees movement from the corner of his eye and looks up. Victoria is walking up to him, dressed in her coat, clearly about to leave. She stops next to his table and hands him a business card. "I'm here for another two days. If you wanna do this again."

And then she's gone and Carl is left holding an airline business card with a handwritten mobile number written below the professional information. Paul gives him a low whistle. "Looks like you got game after all, Sprog."

"Shut up," Carl tells him as he pockets the business card, but secretly he thinks, yes, fucking score!

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That evening, Carl tries to figure out whether to call or text Victoria. Does so for an agonisingly long time, in fact, until he finally thinks, *fuck it, she gave you her number*, and just calls her.

She answers quickly with a, "Hello?" which has her familiar, soft Scottish lilt.

"Yeah, hi, it's Carl."

"Oh, Carl. Decided to make the best of the limited time, I see." He can practically hear her smiling at the other end, and gosh, did she have a beautiful smile.

"Guilty as charged."

“Well, I’ll be all yours for tomorrow night, if you’re still up for it.”

Holy shit, she comes on strong. But it’s not that he doesn’t like that – quite the opposite. “That sounds great.”

“Where and when?”

Shit. He should have thought about this before he called. “Uh, actually, good question. How about we meet at the Hour Glass again? Eight pm? Or seven?”

“Not the adventurous type, are ye?”

Crap. Had she expected some kind of meaningful gesture? A fancy restaurant? Something more exciting? “Uhm. There’s an adventure park 20 minutes away but I think that closes at five or six.”

She laughs gently. “Easy, there, Carl. The pub sounds just fine. I’ll be there at eight.”

“Grand,” he tells her. “See you then.”

“See you then,” she echoes before she hangs up.

He has the biggest stupid smile on his face for the whole rest of the night and can’t believe this is actually happening. He really hopes this will pan out, because she was fucking gorgeous, and from what he can tell, charming and intelligent on top. He’d be a lucky man.

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When the next evening rolls around, Carl starts thinking this is ridiculous. He has three different outfits lying on his bed and feels incredibly stupid. This is stuff that women do. He shouldn’t be feeling self-conscious about his attire. And it’s not like this is a blind date. Victoria has already met him. Twice.

Yet, he wants to make a good impression. Maintain a good impression. Whatever. He just wants her to fucking like him.

He briefly considers calling Paul, but then that seems ridiculous, too. He sighs and finally decides on his newest pair of blue jeans and the nice-looking burgundy V-neck jumper over a light grey button-down. Not his usual style, really, and Paul would probably make a comment about him looking way too debonair, which makes Carl smile. Yeah, this’ll do.

He’s actually at the pub early, orders a pint just to have something to keep his hands busy with. The barkeep greets him with a nod – he knows the regulars.

Victoria saunters through the door a few minutes past eight, and fucking hell, does she look fine! She wears her hair loose and it flows down around her shoulders. She’s in a pair of tight-fitting

jeans with a lavender coloured satiny blouse that looks stunning on her. She's wearing make-up but not too much of it to make her look overly fake.

Carl is smitten to the moon and back, almost wants to succumb to that movie cliché where he crosses the room to sweep her up and kiss her right there.

What he does instead, however, is give her a smile and a little wave, but of course she's noticed him already. Her gaze on him is an actual once-over, and there's that eyebrow-lift that says, *'You clean up nice.'* He hopes that's a good thing.

"Hey," he casually says as she makes his way over to him by the bar.

"Hello, Carl," she says a little more formally. God, her Scottish accent is hot as hell.

He takes a sip from his beer and tries to rein in how turned on he is by focusing on the cool, bitter fizziness on his tongue rather than her looks.

Before she can order, Carl points towards the door. "We can still go somewhere else. There's a decent Italian place round the corner. Or Indian, if you fancy that."

She quickly scans the crowd. "This is fine. Unless you're keen on proper food."

"Nah. I'm good."

She nods, then orders a cider – the pear variety, he notes. Carl nudges his head to one of the tables and she follows him there.

Her gaze on him is a little more inquisitive than he's comfortable with when she asks, "So, you said you're a detective."

He nods. "I am."

"What kind?"

"The kinds that detects…"

She laughs. "Hadn't really pegged you as that."

"Oh? What *did* you have me pegged as?"

She lets out a *hm* sound, then says, "I don't know. Researcher of some kind, I think."

"*Researcher*?" he asks incredulously. "For what?"

"I don't know… Maybe historian?"

He raises his eyebrows. "Wow. Haven't got *that* one before."

“What would you have *me* pegged as?”

“Flight attendant,” he deadpans.

“Oh, come on now, that’s cheating.”

He smiles. “Fair point. Suits you, though.”

“Does it now?”

“You were very good at talking me off the brink.”

“Did you check out any of the Belfast pubs I recommended?”

“Oh, so you *do* remember… Sadly, I did not. Damn event had everything already organised. Got stuck with some bloody pre-booked dinner thing that I positively hated. Really hated the whole thing, actually.”

“So what was *‘the whole thing’* that took you to Belfast?”

“Crisis communication training. Basically a masterclass in stating the fucking obvious, stretched into a two-day workshop. You know,” he waves his hand around, “the whole dog-and-pony show with exercises and roleplaying and all that shit. Hated every fucking minute of it.”

“Ah yes, I’m beginning to see why.”

Fuck, Carl thinks. He’s being too blunt. Is he already ruining this? Should he dial the flowery language back? He looks at her. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Being nice to a plane full of morons.”

She chuckles. “Most aren’t. The few we do encounter are a nice exercise in conflict management. Can be really interesting when you start seeing it that way.”

“Okay. Psychology. I can appreciate that.”

She gives him a pointed look. “Maybe a page you could take out of that book. Might make your job easier, too.”

He gives her a smile. “Maybe.”

“You still haven’t told me what it is you actually do.”

“Homicide detective. Trust me, not something that makes for casual conversation over drinks.”

“No, I assume it wouldn’t. Tough job, I imagine.”

Carl tries not to think about it. “Yeah, can be.”

“And you like it?”

He nods. “I do. I like being able to make a difference.”

“Perhaps that’s something we have in common. Made a real difference on your flight, didn’t I?”

He grins. “You certainly did.”

They keep talking for over an hour, and Carl is surprised how effortless it actually is to chat with her. They seem to have plenty of topics to discuss, ranging from current national politics to the controversies of modern art to their favourite authors. Football is where they diverge because of lack of interest or knowledge from Victoria’s side, but he can give her a pass for that.

Victoria is obviously well-travelled, as opposed to Carl who can count on one hand how often he’s left the British Isles, but it’s not like he doesn’t have an interest and he’s no stranger to geographical education. He’s actually curious to hear more about her foreign country adventures, of which she must have many.

She eventually excuses herself to need the loo, and it’s sheer impulse that Carl says he also needs to go. They don’t even make it to the WCs because in the half-dark of the hall leading to the toilets, she pulls him close for a passionate kiss.

He doesn’t need to think about it, returns the kiss with the same kind of fervour, their noses awkwardly colliding at first as his hands are all over her jaw and the nape of her neck. Hers are on his back, lightly clawing into it, and at some point he has to come up for air.

“How far is your hotel?” he asks a little breathlessly.

“Not far,” she says, then draws him into another fiery kiss.

“Let’s go,” he mumbles into her mouth.

She lets go of him, leans back and gives him a quick look, then laughs. “I do still need the toilet.”

He joins the laugh. “So do I.”

A few minutes later, Carl almost takes her right by the passenger side door of his battered Peugeot. She playfully pushes him away with her palm flat on his chest. “Hold your horses, cowboy.” Fuck, he needs to have her right now!

They squeeze into Carl’s car and he books it out of there, screw the speed limits. It’s just a few minutes to her hotel, and they are both giggling like drunken teenagers when she unlocks her hotel room door and they stumble into the room.

Their clothes come away quickly and Carl drinks up what he can see of her naked body. She's filled out in all the right places, her skin lightly tanned. Her buttocks feel firm under his grip as he pulls her towards him to feel her lips on his.

Both of them are all over each other as they scramble to get the throw off the bed that housekeeping neatly arranged there. It eventually slides ungracefully to the floor as Carl and Victoria tumble onto the bed.

She rolls over and he straddles her and admires her breasts, reaches out to touch them. She lets out a low sound as his fingers make contact with her skin that tells him she likes what he's doing, but before he can explore further, she stiffens slightly under his touch.

"Carl. Wait."

She gently pushes him to the side, reaches over and opens the drawer of the nightstand. He sees her holding out a condom wrapper to him.

One less problem to consider, he thinks. He takes it and puts it on the mattress next to them for the right moment, then lets her eyes beckon him back to explore her body. Carl finds out very quickly that she's confident and assertive in her desires as she guides his hands and lips where she wants them to be when he gets a little too eager.

She's also a bit of a tease. She kneels astride him and trails her fingertips lightly over his chest and belly, then withdraws them when she hears him suck in a heated breath, following it up with a playful smile while she bites her lower lip before she bends down and traces kisses along his collarbone.

He's at her mercy but in the best way possible, and the sex is the best he's had in years. Not that he's had a great many opportunities.

Twenty minutes later, they lie next to each other, sweat drying on their bodies and Carl can't seem to wipe the stupid grin off his face.

She turns her head and looks at him a little mischievously. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

"I certainly hope you did, too."

"Aye," she says with a smile. "You're not half bad."

He throws her a pointed look. "Not *half bad?*"

She chuckles. "Relax, I was kidding. I did very much enjoyed that, Detective Carl…" She pauses. "I don't actually know your last name."

“Morck,” he tells her.

“Morck?” She rolls it around in her mouth. “It a little… blunt. Suits you.”

“What’s yours, then?”

“Stewart.”

“Also very apropos.”

“Oh? How so?”

“You know, stewardess and all.”

She chuckles. “I like your sense of humour.”

“Just my sense of humour?”

“Well, maybe also the rest of you, but I’ll have to reserve judgement for when I know you better.”

“Is that an invite?”

Her look on him is as surreptitious as he’d hoped. “Maybe,” she teases.

Carl doesn’t need to hear more than that. He rolls over and moves closer to her so that his knee touches her thigh. He lets his hand glide to her stomach for his finger to gently trace along the skin there. This time he might just be able to tease *her* a little. She certainly seems game, and they are definitely both enjoying it the second time around, too.

Carl ends up staying the night, not in the mood for the drive home after their nightly activities, and it has the added bonus of a round of morning sex. Even with her hair tousled and a pillow crease on her cheek, she still looks sexy as hell, and Carl thinks this is as good as it gets. Or, well, as good as he can have it right in this moment.

“How about breakfast?” she asks him after.

He looks at his phone, then slips on his undies and jeans. “Much as I’d like to have overpriced eggs on toast with you, I gotta go.”

She makes a pouty face at him. “Shame.”

“Yeah,” he sighs, then grabs the rest of his clothes and vanishes in the bathroom.

After doing the bare minimum of freshening up without an actual shower or a toothbrush (he can still do it at home if he gets out of here within the next ten minutes), he finds her standing in front of the mirrored wardrobe door in knickers and a loose-fitting t-shirt as she’s tying her hair up into a ponytail.

He lingers for a moment, waits for her to look at him. “I would love to see you again.”

Her smile seems genuine when she turns to him and says, “So would I, but how would that work, with you being down here and me being all over the place?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m actually relocating to London next month. Aren’t you flying through there pretty frequently? And, you know, it’s not like I can’t come to Edinburgh for a weekend here and there.”

“You hate flying.”

“Isn’t there an overnight train?”

“There is, but that sounds like a real hassle just for a weekend trip.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“No.” She walks over to her suitcase and pulls fresh underwear from it. “Just… Can’t say it’s ideal.”

“Can’t say I fucking care.” He stands across from her, looks at her. “I really wanna see you again.”

She stays quiet for a long moment, and Carl thinks there’s a hint of a frown on her forehead. “Carl… There’s something you should know.”

Shit. Is she married? In a relationship? Did he just make her cheat? She’s not wearing a ring, he looked for that.

She looks at him. “I have a son.”

Oh. Huh. He didn’t expect that.

She adds, “From a previous relationship. I have sole custody.”

“How old?”

“Almost seven. His name is Jasper. He’s with my mum up in Edinburgh right now.”

Well. He takes a step to the side. That certainly complicates things. He isn’t sure what to think of that, but it doesn’t change the fact that he wants to explore this further, that he realises he’s already fallen for her.

“That doesn’t have to stand in the way. Unless you think it does.”

“I don’t know,” she says. “It makes it complicated. My job is already demanding on us as a family.”

Okay. That’s the rebuttal, then. Fuck. For a moment, he thought there would be a future for them. Or at least a chance for one.

She seems to have read his disappointment. “Carl. I’m not saying no. I just… I don’t want this to be disruptive for Jasper.”

“Would it have to be? We can leave him out of it for now, if that’s easier. It’s not like you have to introduce me the second I arrive.”

“It’s not as simple as that. I don’t have enough time for him as it is.”

“So then what?”

She sighs. “I *would* love to see you again. How about you call me when you’ve settled in in London? Maybe we can figure something out.”

He lets out a long breath. “Yeah. Okay.”

She gives him a smile. “Carl. I like you. Maybe we can make this work. Or at least try. I mean, I barely know you.”

She’s right, of course, but he still feels like she’s already swept him off his feet. He checks his phone again. “Look, I really have to go. I’ll be in touch. Or you’ll be in touch. Or we both will.”

“Okay.”

He shifts his weight awkwardly. Should he kiss her? Hug her? Just leave?

She makes the decision for him when she leans in to plant a kiss on his cheek and then pushes him in the direction of the door. “Goodbye, Detective Morck.”

He gives her a smile. “Goodbye, Miss Victoria S.”

The last thing he hears before the door falls into the lock behind him is, “Call me Vic.”

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The next Saturday morning, Carl’s doorbell rings and he buzzes Paul in to come up to his flat.

The place already looks like it’s not home anymore. Carl’s started packing up a few things in boxes for the move to London, but it’s all half done tasks that were abandoned midway.

Paul gives the place a once-over. “Making headway, I see.”

“Don’t be generous. It’s a fucking mess.”

“Wasn’t the plan to drive up there today and take the first few boxes?”

Yeah. He asked Paul if he could use his estate and Paul had offered to come with him. Carl has mixed feelings about the whole thing. The offer for the temporary assignment with the Met was

too good to pass up, but he's also not sure he likes the idea of living in London. It's not that he has a lot of emotional attachment to his hometown, but every time he's been to London, it always seemed huge. Busy. Daunting. Tourists everywhere all the time.

Yet, he knows it can't be helped if he really wants this and he's actually looking forward to the new challenge and the learning opportunities. So he'd said yes and gone and found himself a small furnished flat out in Lewisham that would hopefully serve him for the duration of his stint out in the Big L.

"Okay," Paul says, "So where can I help?"

Carl sighs, looks around. He gives Paul an empty box and sends him to the kitchen. "Pack up whatever you think I'll need but leave some essentials."

"Are you sure you don't wanna do this yourself?"

"I don't fucking care about matching kitchenware. I just need it to be functional."

"Alright," Paul says and does as instructed while Carl starts packing up some clothes.

It's well after lunchtime by the time they finish loading up the boxes into Paul's car and make the drive up to the capital. After turning onto the A30, Paul briefly turns to Carl, then asks, "Did you end up going on a date with that brunette?"

There's that stupid grin that seems to automatically appear on Carl's face whenever he thinks about Vic and he says, "Yeah. On Wednesday."

"And?"

"And… we hit it off."

"As in actual shagging?"

Carl bristles. "Christ, Paul."

He lifts one hand off the steering wheel in apology. "Hey, can't blame a guy for being curious. She *did* look pretty lush."

"Not sure that counts, coming from you…"

"I may be gay, but I'm not blind, you know? And I saw how *you* looked at her."

Carl sighs. "Yes, there was actual shagging. Stayed the night, too."

Paul nods in approval. "Good for you, Sprog. You gonna see her again?"

“I’d like to, but it’s a little complicated. Flight attendant, you know. Lives in Edinburgh. Single mother, has a son.”

“Heh, yeah. Sounds a bit involved. You sure you wanna chase her?”

“She’s fucking gorgeous, Paul. Smart as hell, too. Really easy to talk to.”

Paul gives him a knowing grin. “You, my boy, sound like you’re already in love.”

Carl sighs again. Yeah. He’s certainly on the way there, if not right in it already.

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Chapter 3 – What If You Were Good To Me

Weeks turn in months as things change and evolve for Carl. The move to London goes relatively smoothly, the new job is demanding but also interesting. He realises how much he *doesn’t* know yet, pays attention, tries his best to fit in.

Lewisham starts feeling like a home rather than just a temporary arrangement despite the fact that it’s all rented furniture while his life in the south is on hold. He misses Paul, misses their regular pub chats, but they do talk on the phone every now and then. Paul came up for a weekend once and they explored some of the touristy landmarks.

And then there’s his budding relationship with Vic. They kept in touch, kept texting and talking. They meet whenever she has a layover in London. It’s not just the sex that’s great, he also finds her more and more appealing on an intellectual level. The sharpness of her wit can easily match Carl’s, which he finds attractive in a way that he doesn’t often get from people.

After three months, she invites him up to Edinburgh and he takes the Caledonian Sleeper, which isn’t such a bad experience. He definitely prefers it to taking a plane. Jasper’s with his father that weekend and he and Vic just spend time together. She shows him the city, and for it being Scotland’s capital, it’s… quaint. Almost overly picturesque but, like London, too many tourists. Plus, the weather is shit the whole time.

Two months later, during another one of Vic’s layovers, they sit on Carl’s small couch with a glass of wine she brought, and Vic looks at him before she says, “How about next time you come up, you meet Jasper?”

He smiles a small smile. “So you’ve told him about me?”

“Aye, I have.”

“And how’d he react?”

She shrugs. “Not particularly enthusiastic, but I think that’s to be expected.”

“You think he’ll hate me?”

“I don’t know. The whole thing’s a bit complicated when you’re that age.”

“You think he’ll be jealous?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Just… don’t expect him to love you right away, you know.”

“Has he been introduced to other…” He trails off, looks for the right word.

“Lovers?”

“Yeah.”

“Just one, about two years ago. Didn’t go that well.”

It makes sense that she’s leery, that she wants to be sure before she foists that on her kid. He nods. “Yeah, I get it. And yes, I’d like to meet him.”

Carl considers whether that’s a truly honest statement. He’s not really a kid person. But he’s seen plenty of pictures and some videos of the lad. He’s a blond little rascal with piercing blue eyes and boyish curls. He’d even go as far as describing him as cute, which he can’t say for a lot of other kids. And he seems to like football, which is something that Carl thinks he may be able to connect with. He’ll have to see how that goes.

They make plans for Carl to come up next month for another weekend – one where Jasper isn’t staying with his father. He has to admit he feels a little uneasy when he gets there and then takes the bus to her place out in Abbeyhill.

There are unfamiliar jitters in his stomach when he rings her doorbell. He’s been here before a few times, but this is uncharted territory. He has zero idea what to expect.

She greets him by the door with a smile and gives her a quick peck on the mouth before she lets him in. “He’s in his room,” she tells him in a conspiratorial whisper.

Carl deposits his stuff in the bedroom and Jasper is still nowhere to be seen when he rejoins Vic in the kitchen where she’s making some coffee. Carl doesn’t question the process, he’s just happy to be here, and this isn’t really his show, but he thinks maybe they’re both a bit nervous.

It’s like there’s something intangible that hinges on this. It has all the earmarks of being introduced to your partner’s parents. Not that he’s ever had the “pleasure” with his own parents. He’d rather keep his partners the fuck away from them if he can help it.

It's even more apparent to Carl now that her wanting him to meet Jasper and wanting it to go well is kind of a big thing. It means they're getting really serious. His throat is suddenly a little drier.

When they're both halfway through their first cup of coffee and have disposed with the most important life updates, Vic gets up and knocks on Jasper's door. "Jasper?

She opens the door, then says, "There's someone I'd like you to meet. Come join us for a bit."

The boy Carl has seen in pictures is suddenly standing in the doorway, slowly edging closer. He stops uncertainly near the table.

Carl puts on what he hopes is his friendliest smile and says, "Hi."

"Hi," Jasper shyly says back. There's a Scottish accent there too, as far as Carl can tell.

"I'm Carl."

Jasper just stares at him for another long moment, then says, "Okay."

Yeah. This is awkward as fuck and Carl has absolutely no idea what to say or do from here on out, so he helplessly looks at Victoria. He suddenly realises the mistake he's made. He should have brought something for the boy. A toy, maybe. Or a book or a game. Bribes worked on kids like a charm. Why didn't he think of this?

Vic goes to Jasper and places her hands on his shoulders. "You wanna show Carl the LEGO city you've set up?"

Jasper just says, "No," and turns around to go back to his room.

Vic gives Carl an apologetic shrug.

Carl ruefully admits, "I should have brought a gift or something."

"Might be better that you didn't. I don't want him to think you're buying his affection."

"Is he old enough to understand that?"

"You'd be surprised what kids pick up on."

They relocate to the living room and just talk to catch up. Carl tells her about the latest greatest at work, carefully circumventing the actual crimes and the grime and gore.

As usual, Vic has many travel stories to tell. It never gets boring with her, and the amount of behind-the-scenes gossip in airline work is amazingly complex. Not that Carl's the type who enjoys gossiping, but he has to admit that, second-hand, some of it is riveting stuff.

When lunchtime comes around, Vic asks Carl if he would mind a kid's meal, and of course he doesn't mind. He doesn't need gourmet food. Oven-baked fries, fish fingers and peas are fine in his book. Although he finds out that Jasper isn't a fan of peas but Vic tries to get him to eat them anyway.

Jasper warms to Carl's presence a little more when Carl tries to engage him in conversation around space travel – a topic that comes up as one of Jasper's special interests. Then Jasper switches to dragons and other fantastical beasts and something called Ninjago that Carl has never heard of.

When Jasper has been appeased with a bit of ice cream for dessert and vanishes back in his room, Carl turns to Vic. "Looks like I need to brush up on my mystical creatures."

She smiles at him. "Ninjago is a LEGO theme. Incredibly popular right now. He'll tell you all the backstories if you ask."

He gives her a grin. "Not sure I want to."

She chuckles, "Yeah, not exactly captivating material. On the other hand, *How To Train Your Dragon* is something we can easily get you up to speed on."

"That animated movie?"

"Aye. It's actually really cute. You might like it."

"I'm willing to give it a try."

"Let's put that on the agenda for tonight, then."

Things go pretty well that evening. Carl enjoys the film, even though Jasper interrupts at multiple time points to add commentary or veer into long-winded explanations of things still to come in the story. Carl doesn't really mind, tries to ask some questions afterwards to engage Jasper in conversation. Or as much conversation as you can have with a seven-year-old.

By the time Vic accompanies him to the train station the next day and walks him to the platform with Jasper holding her hand, she tells him in a low voice, "I think that went pretty well."

He gives her an encouraging smile. "I'm glad."

"I'd like us to do this more often. You know, if you can."

"Yeah, I'll make it happen. And, you know, there's always my place when you're in London again."

"Of course."

She hugs him and gives him a kiss before he gets on the overnight train back to London. He waves to Jasper, who seems unimpressed, but Carl can't blame him. They'll just need more time to get used to each other. Both of them.

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Chapter 4 – I Could Never Stand For This

Over the next three months, Carl gets to know the Caledonian Sleeper better than he ever wanted, but he also gets more used to actually catching sleep during the train ride. The problem, though, is that it's starting to eat into his budget in a way that he doesn't think he can sustain in the long run.

His temporary assignment in London is also coming to an end. He had hoped it could turn into something more permanent, but that didn't pan out, so now his future is in limbo.

He's back in Edinburgh for another weekend, and that night, when the three of them are watching *Brave* for the umpteenth time, it's the first time that Jasper climbs up onto the couch and snuggles against Carl's side to settle in there. Something unexpected and warm floods through Carl's chest, so he puts an arm around Jasper and looks at Vic who has the sweetest of smiles on her face.

That night, when he and Vic lie in bed after they've had sex, he turns to face her. "I heard from the Met this week. They're not extending my secondment," he says.

She shifts her position so that she can also look at him. "Why don't you move up here with us?"

Huh. That's not something he had expected. Or really thought about. Edinburgh doesn't feel like a place he'd naturally gravitate towards or would imagine as a permanent home. "You mean move in with you? This place is kind of small."

"We can look for a bigger flat. Or a small house."

"I'd have to see if there are any open positions here. Not sure how easy that will be. Police Caledonia is a separate entity. May not be as easy as a personnel transfer."

"May not be impossible, either. It'd be so much easier if you were here."

"Yeah. Let me look into it."

The thing stays with Carl the whole rest of the weekend, and admittedly, he's a bit preoccupied with it. He doesn't sleep much on the train ride home because he just keeps thinking about it.

Moving to Scotland – it seems very permanent. But he knows he loves Victoria, and Jasper is definitely growing on him now, too. It's just that… he can't really imagine living there. Edinburgh

seems like a tourist destination. A storybook city you visit and then leave again. It's hard to imagine making it a forever-home.

As he alights onto the platform, bleary-eyed and exhausted, his phone pings in the pocket and he fishes it out. A message from Paul. "You happen to be around by any chance?"

Carl frowns, puts his bag on the ground off to the side and calls him. Paul's voice sounds tired and scratchy when he picks up.

"Hey," Carl says, "What's up?"

What greets him is a bout of coughing before Paul's strained voice says, "You in London?"

"Yeah, just got in, actually. Spent the weekend at Vic's place. You ill?"

"Yeah," he rasps.

"Are you at home? Do you need anything?"

"It's fine," Paul tries to brush him off, but Carl isn't so easily dismissed.

"What I just heard didn't sound fine. Why'd you text?"

He coughs again, and it sounds even worse this time. "Just need someone to pick up a few things for me. It's fine, I'll ask around."

"No," Carl says, picking up his bags, already on the way out of the station. "I'll come down."

"Carl. You're four hours away. Don't you have to—" He goes into another bout of coughing before he finishes with, "go to work?"

"I can take a personal day or two. You sound horrendous. I'll be there this afternoon. You okay until then?"

"Yeah," Paul says tiredly. "But seriously, you don't need to come."

"I'm fucking coming, so shut up, yeah?"

"Okay," he finally agrees.

"Okay," Carl repeats, then signs off with a, "See you later."

Christ. Not what he had planned, but there is absolutely no question that he's making that trip. He hopes he can get the time off authorized on such short notice, but his boss is one of the more amiable ones, and he's actually mentioned Paul a number of times, so he hopes the Met will be sympathetic to helping a fellow officer in a time of need.

Carl is approved, showered, packed and in his car in under two hours. As he turns onto the M25, he's now not just preoccupied with his impending life choices but also worried about his friend. Not exactly how he'd planned to start the week.

He hits a bit of traffic on the way, swears vociferously at idiot drivers around him. When he finally rings Paul's doorbell, he's ready to strangle the next person who stands in his way but tries to rein in the frustration before he's being buzzed in.

The door to the flat is ajar when he gets up there and he calls, "Paul?" as he enters and drops his stuff in the hall.

Paul's voice is muffled and a little too feeble, coming from the living room. There's more coughing along with it.

Carl finds him sitting on the couch in his pyjamas, his face ashen and miserable, sporting several days of stubble, his hair a little too messy. Carl stands in front of him. "Wow, you look like dogshit."

"Gee, thanks," Paul says, then launches into the kind of deeply rattling coughing fit that Carl already heard on the phone. It sounds even worse in person, and he pants for air by the time he's done.

Carl crouches down next to him, puts his hand on his thigh to sense if he's running a fever, which Carl is pretty sure he is. "Christ, Paul. How'd this get so bad?"

He looks at Carl with tired eyes. "It's just a bit of bronchitis."

"Yeah, this sounds a lot closer to pneumonia."

"Don't be overly dramat—" He doesn't even get to finish the sentence before he has to cough again, holding his chest with one arm as he does so.

Carl straightens up. "Okay, that does it. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No," Paul protests. "You're not."

"Then at least a GP. Because this isn't just bronchitis, and I don't fucking care what you say. You can barely get out two sentences without hacking up a lung."

"Carl…"

"For fuck's sake, Paul. You'd be dragging me to the nearest A&E, and don't you fucking deny it. This is not negotiable."

Carl doesn't wait and goes into Paul's bedroom. It's ironic that Paul has done this with Carl—and not just once. Not something Carl thought he'd ever have to do as he looks for suitable clothes in Paul's wardrobe, but here they are.

He takes the stack of clothes and hands them out to Paul who shoots him a look that clearly says, *'Traitor.'* Carl can't say he gives a shit.

A&E is, of course, busy as hell. Paul collapses into one of the chairs, panting like a runner after an Olympic Games sprint and then the tedious waiting begins. Carl thinks Paul might have dozed off at some point and Carl keeps watching his chest to make sure he's still breathing.

He goes to the reception at least three times to ask what's taking so long, to the point that the lady there gets really fed up with him. He hisses a few choice words at her, which makes her even unhappier. He later regrets it, because clearly that can't be helping their case.

It takes way too long until Paul is finally seen, which means more waiting for Carl, but at least now something's happening. He sits down and fishes out his phone, starts typing up a text to Vic to tell her what's happening. He doesn't think he'll get a reply because she said she was out on a Tallinn flight later that day.

Carl starts pacing, leaves the building for a short while to stretch his legs, goes back to sit in the chairs, tries to distract himself with a battered newspaper from two days ago that someone left behind. He asks for a pen and gets a death glare from the receptionist together with the pen, then he starts working on the crossword puzzle in the paper.

He's about three quarters done with it when Paul comes shuffling towards him. He only looks marginally less the worse for wear. "So?" Carl asks.

Paul holds up a piece of paper that looks like a prescription. "Hate to say it but you were right. Antibiotics and bedrest. Gave me some IV fluids. Should come back if it gets worse."

"You didn't self-discharge, did you?"

Paul throws him a look. "No." Then he points towards the reception desk. "Go and ask if you don't believe me."

Nah. Carl is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Paul holds a leaflet out to Carl. "Here's some—" He doesn't get further than that when another bout of coughing hits.

Carl takes it from his hand and guides Paul back to the car when he's stopped coughing.

Back in Paul's flat, he helps getting Paul to the bathroom and then into bed, fetches a few sofa cushions so that Paul's propped up and can breathe more easily.

Carl lingers by his bedside for a moment, then says, "Tell me what you need."

"Just get me the meds and a few necessities, then you can head back to London."

Carl gives Paul his best no-nonsense look. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

"Yes," he answers, then proves the point Carl was going to make by going into another coughing fit.

"Fucking hell, Paul. Would you leave me on my own like this?"

He gives Carl a pointed look, then says, "Probably not."

"*Definitely* fucking not. Let me get some stuff I'll need and your groceries and then I'm gonna camp out in your spare room for as long as you need me. And no, I'm not taking no for an answer, so don't even try."

It doesn't take more than that to convince Paul, because he nods, then succumbs to another coughing spell.

Carl can only stand by and watch helplessly. He'll have to take a look at that leaflet, but for now maybe some tea and a glass of water.

After he's made a mug of tea for Paul, Carl goes to the kitchen to read over the leaflet again, then pulls up the browser on his phone to look for more information on pneumonia. There are some helpful tips on a few NHS hospital websites that he takes note of before he takes stock of Paul's supplies and then runs the necessary errands.

He knows he's not really made for the job of caretaker – not like Paul. He doesn't know how people do it, but figures it's basically showing up, being there and checking in at regular intervals. That's what Paul did when Carl needed it. He will damn well return the favour, that's not even in question.

When Carl gets back to the flat, he checks in with Paul who seems to be asleep. Even with his eyes closed, he looks fucking exhausted. Carl warily watches his chest but sees it rising and falling regularly, so he figures it's best to let him get some rest. Carl quietly closes the door to the bedroom before he goes to the kitchen to put away the groceries and other necessities.

By the time that he hears more coughing from the bedroom, Carl has read all the instructions, has laid out the hot water bottle, has prepared some tinned soup that he just has to heat up and has

read all the patient information and medication instructions. He feels like he knows more about pneumonia than he ever wanted or needed to know. And honestly? It sounds fucking awful.

He knocks on the door and enters with an armful of things that he puts on Paul's nightstand. Paul eyes him with a look that's halfway between wary and curious. "What's all this?"

Carl goes through it by holding it up, one by one. "Antibiotics. Three times per day, you need to take the full course, even when you start feeling better. Pick your poison: paracetamol or ibuprofen for the pain. Water. Isotonic drink. Wasn't sure what you liked but I remembered the lemon one wasn't so bad. Last but not least, rub-on painkillers for the muscle pain."

Paul gives him a wan smile. "Shit, Sprog, you went all out."

"More like totally floundered because I have no fucking clue what I'm doing."

Paul chuckles, but that of course devolves into another hearty cough. "This," Paul finally points at the assortment on his nightstand, "is the opposite of floundering."

"Yeah, I might have looked some shit up. You hungry?"

"Let me guess, you also got chicken soup."

"Bad idea?"

Paul smiles. "No. Chicken soup sounds good."

"Okay, coming right up. Take the meds in the meantime."

"Yes, Dr. Sprog."

Carl turns to him. "Shut up."

The timer on the microwave needs some figuring out so Carl has to heat up the soup three times before it is what Carl deems the appropriate temperature. He rummages around in the cupboards until he finds a cutting board to put the soup bowl on. At least he knows where the spoons are.

Paul's eyes are drooping to the point of closed when Carl comes in, balancing the soup on the wooden board. "Paul?" he says gently.

He opens his eyes, looks at Carl like it takes him several seconds to figure out what's going on. Carl carefully puts the soup on Paul's thighs when he's shifted into a more upright position.

Carl watches him for a long moment. "You, uh... need help with that?"

"No," Paul says, reaching for the spoon. "Think I'm alright."

He probably isn't quite as alright as he makes it out to be, but Carl decides to give him the dignity and not start spoon-feeding him, though he knows he'd fucking do it if it came to that. Paul falters about halfway through, but Carl figures half a bowl of soup is better than nothing, and he's read that it's normal that you lose your appetite, which alleviates some of his worry.

Carl unscrews the bottle of water and holds it out to Paul. "Hydration. You remember this, yeah?"

Paul gives him a look. "Yeah," he croaks.

"I'll be up your arse, too."

Paul takes a swig with shaky hands. "You learned from the best."

"What else do you need? I can get you a hot water bottle for the chest pain. It's supposed to help with the inflammation. This one website said you can hold a pillow to your chest when you cough. Don't know how much that'll help, but… It also said—"

"Carl," Paul interrupts him. "I just wanna get some sleep, okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

Paul gives him a small smile. "It's okay. It's actually kinda sweet."

"Sweet…?"

"Yeah, you're—" And then it's back to coughing, and Carl quickly tries to snatch the soup bowl from Paul's lap so he doesn't spill it all over the bloody duvet. He manages just in time.

Having deposited the bowl in the kitchen, he goes back to the bedroom where Paul has put the cutting board on the floor next to the bed and has slid back into a more comfortable position. Carl pulls down the window blind and stays for another long minute before he leaves the room again.

He knows it's going to be a long night full of interruptions. But that's just as well. Paul did it, no questions asked, when Carl was going through detox. Carl is a hundred percent committed to doing the same for Paul.

Paul drifts in and out of sleep over the next few hours in between bouts of heavy coughing. By 9 pm, Carl is in the living room, texting back and forth with Vic who finally got back to him, when he hears noises from the bedroom. There's more of the coughing but also something else, so Carl goes to investigate.

Paul is half out of the bed, leaning one arm on the nightstand with a pained grimace on his face, some of the items Carl had put there earlier strewn across the floor. Carl is by his side in a few, swift steps. "Christ, Paul, why didn't you say something?"

“Need the toilet,” he says exhaustedly.

“Yeah, come on, I’ll help.”

He can tell that Paul hates it but has little choice, so they slowly make their way to Paul’s bathroom. Paul is winded by the time they get there, which has Carl more than worried, but that’s probably par for the course until the antibiotics start doing their thing.

“I’ll be outside,” Carl tells him. “Call if you need help.”

“Yeah,” Paul says between breaths.

After Carl hears the water tap going, he pushes the door open a bit. “You done?”

“Yeah.”

Paul hangs on Carl’s shoulder like a wet rag by the time they get back to the bedroom. Carl puts the items that tumbled to the floor back onto the nightstand, then reaches for the isotonic drink that he opens and holds out to Paul. “You know the drill.”

Paul holds up a hand. “Not now.”

“You need to stay hydrated.”

Paul makes a grimace. “Just a little nauseous. Give me a minute.”

That’s not normal, Carl thinks. He didn’t read anything about nausea.

“Hey,” Paul says. “It’s just the exertion. I get that sometimes. It’ll pass.”

Carl raises his eyebrows. “Okay.”

“Sprog. Stop worrying. Doesn’t suit you.”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “You need a puke bucket?”

Paul holds up one hand. “No. It’s not that bad.”

Still. Maybe it’s time for more remedies, so Carl goes back to the kitchen and puts the electric kettle on that he then fills the hot water bottle with. He goes back and holds it out to Paul when it’s ready to go. “Humour me.”

Paul takes it with a grateful expression and presses it to his stomach. “Thanks.”

“Anything else I can do?”

He shakes his head. “You’re already doing it.”

“Okay,” Carl says quietly. “I’ll let you get some rest.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Carl nods and leaves the room again, eats some of the leftover chicken soup. The night is only just starting, and he wonders what he’ll do. There’s the sofa bed in the spare room, of course. The one he’s a little too familiar with. But even though Carl’s a pretty light sleeper, being in a room across the hall, he’s afraid he might not hear when he’s needed.

For now, Carl changes into a pair of joggers and a hoodie. In the living room, he picks up his phone again that he left on the coffee table and answers the last messages from Vic that have come in in the meantime. There’s an IKEA recliner with wooden armrests in the corner of the room that Carl’s gaze lands on, and maybe that’s his solution.

He puts the last two remaining sofa cushions and one of the throw blankets on there and carries it into the hall as quietly as possible. When he checks on Paul, he seems to be asleep, so Carl pushes open the door and puts the chair next to Paul’s bed. It’s a bit of a tight squeeze, but it’ll do. If he puts his feet up on the edge of Paul’s bed, he’ll be fine.

Carl must have fallen asleep in the chair eventually because he is suddenly jolted to wakefulness when Paul starts violently coughing next to him. It’s a bad one, so Carl is out of the chair quickly. He places his hand on Paul’s back as he doubles over and the coughs rack his body.

“Easy,” Carl tries to soothe him, although he thinks that’s doing exactly fucking nothing.

Paul starts gasping for air. Desperate, fast breaths that he drags in and forces out between coughs. Carl is on the brink of panicking when the coughs finally ebb away and Paul just keeps sucking in breath after breath in quick succession, his body fighting to get oxygen back into his bloodstream.

Carl keeps his hand on Paul’s back the whole time and he can feel Paul’s elevated temperature through the damp fabric of his pyjama top. Fuck. The fever must be spiking. Definitely time for another dose of painkillers and antibiotics that he’ll have to coax into the man somehow.

It takes an agonisingly long time until Paul’s breaths even out, and for a solid half minute Carl debates whether they should go back to A&E. Paul’s eyes eventually land on Carl’s and he rasps in a low, pleading voice, “Please don’t take me back to the hospital.”

“Fuck, Paul,” Carl exhales. “That scared the hell out of me.”

“I know. Just gotta make it through the night.”

“What if you don’t?”

“Carl…”

“No, I’m serious.”

Paul grimaces, then pushes himself more upright. “Just gotta sit up for a bit.” He inhales. Exhales. “Can’t breathe so well,” another inhale, “when I’m lying down.”

Carl helps arrange the pillows behind his back, then gets the medication out of the blisters and holds the pills out to Paul together with the bottle of the sports drink. “Here.”

Paul takes them and swallows them, barely gets them down when he has to cough again. This one’s not quite as bad as the fit before, but bad enough that Carl’s worry metre is still way up there.

He remembers some of what he’s read, so he tells Paul, “I think I have something that might help. Give me a few minutes.”

He heats up more water, pours it into the sizeable plastic bowl he found under the sink, then takes that and a bath towel to where Paul is sitting up in bed. They arrange the bowl of hot water on the cutting board in Paul’s lap and Carl unfolds the towel and holds it out to Paul. “Put that over your head, breathe in the steam.”

It’s a bit of a haphazard construct, but it works well enough. With Paul under the towel, Carl can’t see quite how much he hates it, or whether he hates it at all, but Carl figures it’s actually helping because Paul doesn’t emerge from it for several blissful, cough-free minutes.

When he finally pulls the towel back, his face is flushed. Carl isn’t sure if from the fever or the heat of the water bath, but probably both.

“You good?” Carl asks.

“Yeah,” Paul says, dragging the towel away and holding it out to Carl.

Carl helps take the stuff away, then goes to find a new pair of undies and pyjamas from the wardrobe that he puts next to Paul on the bed. “Figure you might wanna change.”

Paul definitely looks humiliated now. “Sorry you have to deal with me being gross and sweaty.”

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t deal with *me* being gross and sweaty. You mopped up my puke too, remember?”

“Yeah, Sprog, I remember.”

Carl nudges his head at the pyjamas. “You need help with that?”

“Love to say no but I might.”

Carl ambles towards the door. “See how it goes and call me if you do.”

Turns out Paul doesn't need his help and somehow manages to change on his own. Carl takes away the sweaty pyjamas and puts them in the bathtub for now. He'll sort that out later. He also goes to reheat the hot water bottle because he figures that can't hurt.

Paul is still sitting up when he returns with the hot water bottle, the humiliation still there underneath the exhaustion and the frustration. He has his eyes closed, but he nudges his head vaguely towards the recliner.

"You should go lie down, get some proper sleep. I'll be alright."

Carl sits down in the chair. "You're feverish and not in a position to make judgement calls."

"I'm serious, Carl. You must be tired."

"I'm okay."

"No," Paul says in a low voice that sounds like he might fall back asleep any second. "You're not."

"Yeah," Carl sighs under his breath. More audibly, he says, "I'll be fine. Get some rest."

Paul draws in a breath, winces, and pulls the hot water bottle a little closer to his chest. There's a knot of worry somewhere in Carl's gut that he doesn't know what to do with, that's been there the whole time but is getting more pronounced now.

He shifts in the chair, keeps his eyes on Paul's chest to make sure that his ribcage is still moving. There's something soothing about the regular motion, but there is also that lingering worry that Paul's battered lungs might just randomly give up working or that the next coughing fit might send him into hypoxia.

And that thought is scary as fuck. He can't imagine losing him. Paul is the one steady presence he's had in his life, who's been there, no matter what, even despite all of Carl's bullshit. The person who stuck around and made everything better and was there when Carl needed it the most.

Of course now he has Vic, and she's there for Carl in a different manner. In many regards, their relationship is still a little tentative, they're still getting to know each other. She's integrated into Carl's life in another way – one that's more about choosing what to share, rather than Paul who never gave a fuck and just barged in there to stay when he was needed.

Paul shifts slightly in his sleep and Carl's eyes involuntarily seek him out in the dim light of the solitary nightstand lamp, but it was just a small movement, maybe a subconscious response to the constant discomfort. He stays still save for the subtle movement of his ribcage rising and falling.

Carl relaxes a tiny fraction, then pulls his phone from his pocket. It's only quarter to midnight. It feels like it should at least be 2 am. There are two texts from Vic, checking in how it's going and he answers them. He'll try to call her tomorrow, maybe.

He plays around with his phone for a bit, actually starts checking prices for flats and houses up in Edinburgh out of curiosity, even checks if Police Caledonia have open CID positions. He can't see anything in the public spaces but he'll have to speak to a few colleagues. Sometimes these things happen behind closed doors and he knows a few people by now that could potentially pull some strings.

Eventually, he can feel his own exhaustion catching up with him, so he puts the phone away, leans back and closes his eyes.

Carl wakes up a while later when Paul says his name.

"Carl?"

He blinks blearily, his eyelids feeling a little too sandpapery. His voice still thick with sleep, he says, "Yeah, I'm here."

Paul shifts in his bed, coughs a few times, repeats Carl's name.

Carl scoots to the edge of the seat, a little more alert now. "Paul, I'm here."

"Where are we?"

Crap. Is he hallucinating? Is it the fever? "You're at home. In your bed."

He hums noncommittally. "Thought we were at the station."

"No. You've got pneumonia, remember? We're in your flat."

"Didn't hear you come in," he says tiredly, then coughs again, deep and dry, just to prove a point.

"I've been here the whole time. You were asleep."

Carl tentatively reaches out to touch Paul's forehead but stops short, not knowing how he'll react in this state. "Don't startle, I'll switch on the light, okay?"

Paul hums again, then squints at the sudden brightness. His hair is damp from sweat. He looks beat as hell.

"Can you give me your hand?"

Paul frowns. "Why?"

"I wanna see how high your fever is."

He swallows, his forehead constricting in discomfort. “I have a thermometer for that.”

Okay, Carl thinks, so he’s not totally delusional, but the thermometer is actually one of the things that Carl hadn’t really considered until now. “Where?” he asks.

Paul blinks, rubs an eye with his hand. “I don’t know. Bathroom. Somewhere. I’m… I can’t…”

“Hey,” Carl says, “It’s okay. I’ll find it.”

What Carl does find, is surprisingly a relatively modern thermometer. The digital kind you put in the ear for an instant read. He takes that to the bedroom and holds it up to Paul. “This one, yeah?”

He nods and Carl takes his temperature. It’s 39.1. Not alarmingly high but also higher than Carl wants it to be.

This is when another coughing fit hits – sudden, deep, dragging. Carl sits down on the edge of Paul’s bed and steadies him, one hand behind his back, the other lightly resting near his collarbone. When it finally eases, Paul sags forward, exhausted, coming to lightly rest against Carl’s side.

Carl hates this part because he feels so helpless. He can’t think of anything that he hasn’t already tried. He knows Paul must be fucking exhausted and fed up with all of this. Carl vaguely remembers how this felt when he was in that position, when he was tired beyond belief but his body wouldn’t let him rest, and it had been the actual fucking worst. But he also remembers that it helped to have someone there who was trying to share the load.

He keeps his hand on Paul’s back and they just sit there for a long moment until Carl says. “Think you can take some more of the ibuprofen? It’ll help with the fever.”

“Yeah,” Paul says weakly against Carl’s shoulder.

Carl sighs. “I wish I could do more.”

“I know, Sprog.”

Paul finally leans back and gives Carl a glum look. “Hate to say it, but I need the bathroom.”

“Alright,” Carl says. “Up we go, then.”

It’s another laborious and slow affair but he gets Paul back to bed safely, where the latter collapses, breathless and beat, sweat on his forehead, shivering from fever chills. Carl manages to coax some more water into him, at least.

They continue this routine until the next morning, when Paul's regular coughing fits rip them both from their slumber every hour or so. Paul is never alert for long, so it almost becomes a silent song and dance until finally daylight shines through the gaps around the window blinds.

Carl feels absolutely knackered but knows there is nothing to be done about it. He'll just have to push through with copious amounts of caffeine. They've done this before and they'll get through this, too.

He makes them both tea and cooks some porridge, but when he presents it to Paul, who seems to be held upright solely by the mound of pillows behind his back, he gives Carl a displeased grimace. "Carl. I fucking hate porridge."

Carl's face falls. "Shit, you should have told me."

"I would have, if you'd mentioned this was on the menu." Paul gives him an apologetic smile. "It's okay. I'll eat it."

"No. I can make you something else."

Paul's already dipping the spoon into the bowl and giving it a go. He chews slowly. "It's not that bad."

"You think I can't tell that's a giant lie?"

Paul grimaces again and Carl takes the bowl from him. "Yeah, fuck the porridge. Don't want you puking all over the place."

"You buy eggs, by any chance?"

"I did. You want scrambled eggs?"

"Yeah, let's try that."

"Don't expect a culinary experience, I'm a horrible cook."

Paul gives him a grin. "Can't wait."

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Over the course of the day, Carl keeps sitting with Paul, makes sure he's drinking and eating in small increments. The coughing fits ebb and flow, now there's phlegm involved too. It's gross but Carl ignores that because it can't be helped and it's not like it's Paul's fault.

Paul oscillates between exhausted, out of it and irritated. As patient as Paul usually is, that feeling of frustration eventually comes creeping in and Carl gets it, he really does. It's exasperating as hell if you want to push through it on your own but your stupid fucking body won't let you.

Carl's own temper flares when at some stage he's in the kitchen to prepare another steam breathing treatment and he hears thudding and clanking noises from the hall. In quick steps he goes to check what's going on, and he sees Paul near the bathroom door in an awkward position on the floor next to his overturned key bowl with keys and loose coins on the floor around it.

"What the fuck, Paul?" he barks at him out of sheer impulse but immediately crouches down and asks in a gentler voice, "You hurt?"

"No," he says. "Just lost my footing."

"Why didn't you ask me for help?"

Paul's expression is now all frustration and humiliation. "Because I should be able to—" A cough racks his body and he rides it out before he breathlessly finishes, "—go to the fucking… toilet… on my own."

Carl shakes his head in exasperation. "Paul. You have fucking pneumonia."

Paul tries to push himself up, and Carl reaches out to help, but Paul stubbornly waves off the assistance. Carl is stumped and for a moment at a loss what to do with it, can only watch helplessly as Paul tightens his jaw and plants a hand against the wall and tries to lever himself upright.

Carl wants to reach out again but stops himself. Pride is a fragile thing and maybe Paul deserves the dignity, except that his weakened body isn't in any shape to help him out with anything even halfway resembling poise. His energy reserves have long been consumed by the coughing and the fever and the infection, so his grip slips and he sinks back down and awkwardly sags sideways.

Carl can catch him at the last moment, and a small sound escapes Paul. It's barely audible but Carl hears the thin, helpless exhale that hits harder than any fall could.

"Jesus, Skip," Carl says in a low voice.

Paul's breath catches, breaks, and then he just sinks against Carl like even the very last shred of energy has been sucked out of him.

With Paul's feverish heat radiating into Carl, he feels something in his own chest twist, something that's sharp and protective and that hurts in a way that's unfamiliar. This man is always such an unwavering rock in turbulent waters, and now he's here, on the floor—small, tenuous—at the end of his rope, about to unravel.

Carl gently places his palm at the nape of Paul's neck and says in a low voice, "Hey. It's okay. Let me help, yeah?"

He can feel Paul's breath shudder and hitch against Carl's collarbone. He's not sobbing—this is something quieter and more desperate—the desolation of being powerless and so completely drained that hope has receded into places that have been swallowed up by exhaustion and defeat.

Carl lets him ride it out, sits with him for a few, long minutes until Paul stirs. Carl lets his hand slip away from the back of his neck.

"I can't…" Paul mumbles with a despair that hits Carl's straight in the gut. "I can't do this."

"Of course you can. I'm right here, remember?"

Paul sighs, closes his eyes. "It hurts every time I fucking breathe. I can't sleep or think straight. I can't even get up off the fucking floor on my own. The coughing…" He inhales, exhales, then says heavily, "I'm so bloody tired, Carl."

"I know." And he really fucking does. He remembers how hard it was when he was right there, with Paul holding him up when he didn't think he could do it anymore. "It'll get better in a day or two when the antibiotics kick in."

Paul pushes himself away from Carl and leans against the wall beside him, closing his eyes. "I'll just keep sitting here until then."

Carl has to smile. "Yeah, do that. I'll bring you some tea and toast while we're at it."

Paul returns the smile, as weak and fragile as it is. "Room service. Sounds great."

Carl reaches out a hand. "Come on. I'm not cleaning your pee out of your rug."

This time, Paul lets himself be hoisted into a standing position, supported by Carl when he starts to sway a little.

"Baby steps, yeah?" Carl tries to encourage him.

Paul throws him a contemptuous look. "Don't try to be cute. That's not your style."

"Fuck off," he says with a teasing undertone, and that makes Paul grin.

"That's more like it."

They make it into the bathroom and Carl deposits him on the edge of the bathtub. "Do your thing, call when you're done. No heroics, you hear me?"

Paul still looks slightly humiliated but also a little less forlorn. Carl has hopes that he'll come out the other end just fine, given enough rest and time. And Carl will do what's in his power to make that happen.

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It's nearing 2 am, and if Carl's being honest, he's about ready to collapse.

They're still on Paul's endless cycle of dozing off for an hour or two and being violently woken by coughing or chills or discomfort. Carl can't bring himself to not be right there, has to make sure that Paul gets through the moments of fighting for air, that he takes meds and fluids, that he has the pillows in all the right places, that he has someone to ground him through the spells of feverish disorientation.

Of course Carl also hasn't slept more than two hours at a time despite Paul trying to insist a number of times that he get some rest, but Carl always refused.

He stands by the kitchen sink, wants to put the empty mug from Paul's nightstand there to wash it in the morning, but it slips from his grip and tumbles into the metal sink with a loud clatter that pierces the silence of the wee hours.

"Fuck!" Carl mutters. He's probably woken Paul up now when he just slipped back into an uneasy slumber.

He straightens his back and strains to listen for the inevitable coughing that seems to accompany Paul's waking hours, but miraculously it stays quiet.

Carl's shoulders sag and he suddenly feels incredibly tired. He sinks down in one of the kitchen chairs and drops his head into his hands. His eyes are burning from lack of sleep, he hasn't showered in two days, he hasn't had a decent meal for however long and his muscles feel like lead. He just wants to collapse somewhere and ignore the real world for the next few hours.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and after a long moment and a bone-weary sigh, he pulls it out. It's a promotional text message from his network provider, but he also sees that Vic has texted while he was on caretaker duty.

She's asking for status updates, asks how he's holding up, and even though that's the most normal and mundane thing, it does something strange with him. It makes his stomach constrict, makes something work its way up his chest that coalesces in a shaky, hitched inhale as tears are filling his eyes.

He wants to call her, wants to hear her voice, wants to just think of something other than the constant vigilance and the underlying worry for his friend. He doesn't normally do this, but he finds himself using the voice message button and recording a message to her. It's rambly and probably incoherent and eventually his voice just breaks mid-sentence.

Fuck. He can't crumble now. He has to pull himself the fuck together.

The message has already sent, so he composes another one. “Sorry. Ignore that previous message. I’m just tired as hell. It’s two in the fucking morning.” He pauses briefly. “I’m alright. I just need to get some sleep. I love you.”

He lifts his thumb from the button and the message transmits.

Wait. Did he just say that? Has he told her he loves her before? Way to drop that into a casual message in the middle of the night that isn’t even a real-time conversation. He considers deleting the message again before she can listen to it, but then thinks, fuck it. She can hear that. He does love her.

He scrubs both his hands down his face, then pushes himself up to inspect the mug in the sink. It seems to be intact, so he sets it upright in the corner. He’ll do the washing up tomorrow.

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When Carl wakes up the next morning, something feels different. Paul is still sleeping, and for a brief, panicked moment, Carl’s eyes go to his chest, but it’s rising and falling steadily.

Carl checks his phone. It’s half seven and it’s been over four hours since Paul last woke up—at least that Carl is aware of. Maybe he’s finally breaking that horrible cycle, they’re finally seeing some improvement. Carl lets out a long sigh. One that is more relief than weighty worry.

He gets up out of the chair, lifts his arms into the air and stretches his body. The exhaustion is still lingering in his body, but it doesn’t feel quite as hefty as before.

Paul stirs in the bed, blearily opens his eyes. “Morning,” he croaks. “What time is it?”

“Half seven,” Carl tells him, clocking how Paul actually managed to get words out without coughing first.

That doesn’t last very long and the coughs are right there, but now shorter, less brutal and definitely a lot less dry. Something’s finally happening with the infection. When he’s done, he’s holding his arm across his ribcage, his forehead drawn into a pained frown.

“God,” he says. “Can this just be over?”

“At least now we’re getting somewhere.”

“About fucking time.”

“Speaking of which…”

Paul interrupts him. “Antibiotics. Fluids. I know the drill.”

Carl’s already fumbling with the medication packages. “You want painkillers?”

Paul shakes his head. “I’m okay for now. Maybe later.”

“How’s the fever?”

He shrugs. “Still there. Maybe not as bad.”

Carl gets the thermometer. It reads 38.4. “Yeah, going down.”

Paul nods tiredly, then looks at Carl. “You gonna feed me?”

Carl chuckles. “You actually hungry?”

“No. But I know you’ll want me to eat something, so…”

“Damn right I do.”

“What have *you* eaten?”

He waves it off. “Oh, don’t worry about me.”

“Too late, Sprog.”

“Paul. I’m fine. I ate the fucking porridge.”

Paul frowns. “Wasn’t that yesterday morning?”

It probably was and Carl is about to tell him it wasn’t just that, but Paul launches into another coughing fit that sounds like certainly there’s more mucus coming loose now. Carl remembers reading something about breathing exercises to help with that. He’ll have to run that by Paul at some point.

Carl holds the glass with water out to Paul who now has the antibiotics in his palm, then watches him swallow it down. Paul gives him a somewhat chiding look. “You don’t have to stand guard.”

“Yeah, I beg to differ.”

“Carl. You’ve been here the whole time. You look like shit. You need some rest.”

“I literally just slept.”

“Maybe, but you still look fucking knackered. I might have been out of it a lot, but don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’ve been glued to that chair.”

“You were barely functional.”

“And you’re still human.”

“I’d like to think that’s up for debate.”

“Carl. It’s not gonna help either of us if you burn yourself out. You also have work you need to go back to.”

“Not until next week.”

“You took a whole week off for this?”

“Not exactly rocket science that pneumonia doesn’t go away overnight.”

“Christ, Carl. You should be spending your personal days with Vic and Jasper, up in Scotland.”

Yeah, about that… Carl needs to have that conversation with Paul. Later, when he’s a little less brain-foggy. He deflects by asking, “You need me for a toilet run?”

Paul pushes himself more upright against the pillows. “Yeah.”

Carl ends up walking with him to the bathroom door, but Paul is steadier on his feet today, although still winded from the short trip. But that, too, is improvement. Thank fuck for antibiotics.

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Carl finally capitulates the next evening when Paul vehemently insists that Carl sleep on the sofa bed in the spare room because, really, the coughing fits are a lot less violent, a little less frequent and Paul doesn’t quite feel as miserable anymore, plus he can now make it to the bathroom on his own – slowly but unassisted.

Carl crawls under the duvet, exhausted but also relieved and calls Vic.

“Hey, love,” she greets him.

“Hey,” he says tiredly.

“You sound exhausted.”

He sighs. “I am. It’s been a long few days.”

“Are you getting any rest?”

“Yeah. Things are finally looking up. I’m gonna try and catch some sleep tonight.”

“You mean you haven’t slept all this time?”

“Not that much. A few hours at a time.”

“Crikey, love. You need to take care of yourself.”

“I know. But Paul needed me. He’s been having a hell of a time.”

Vic pauses for a beat. “You’re such a good man, Carl.”

He smiles. “The jury may still be out on that.”

“No, you *are*. Not many people will do that for a friend.”

“He pulled me through some tough fucking shit. I owe him.” Carl turns to lie on his side. “And he would do it for me in a heartbeat.”

“Tough shit? Like what?”

Carl exhales audibly. That’s not the conversation he wants to have tonight. “I’ll tell you some other time, yeah?”

“Aye. Have you thought about what we talked about?”

“A bit.”

“And?”

“I don’t know, Vic. It’s a big decision. I need some time.”

“Alright,” she says. “I understand. But I’d love to have you here.”

“I know. I’ll think about it. Promise.” He scrubs a hand along his unshaven chin, the stubble catching on his fingers. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Aw.”

“Where are you right now?”

“A hotel in Oslo.”

“Is it nice?”

“The hotel?”

He chuckles. “No, the city.”

“Couldn’t even tell you. We’re often in and out, you know. Got in really late today, some trouble with the ground crew. Took forever to get to the gate.”

His eyes are already drooping. Sleepily, he says, “Maybe we can go together some time.”

“Not sure I’d pick Oslo for that. As Scandinavian destinations go, Copenhagen would be my first pick.”

“Okay. Copenhagen, then.”

“You sound like you’re already half asleep.”

“Yeah,” he mumbles into the phone.

“Get some rest, babe.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Night, love.”

He tiredly hangs up and puts the phone away, vaguely thinks about how Vic never addressed his declaration of love he sent via text, but he hasn’t really been in the right headspace to put much thought into that. And now he’s too fucking knackered. Sleep claims him quickly after he closes his eyes.

Blissfully, Carl makes it through the night undisturbed, only waking up after nine the next morning. He finds Paul in the kitchen, putting on a kettle with two mugs standing on the counter. Carl blearily glares at him from the kitchen door. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like?”

“I can do that.”

“Carl. I’ve been cooped up in my fucking bedroom for three days straight.”

Yeah. Okay. There is that. “So you feeling better?”

“Yeah, getting there. Slowly.”

“You know that it’ll take a few weeks, right?”

“Yeah, Dr. Sprog, I can read the fucking leaflet, too.”

Carl rubs a hand down his face. “You mind if I take a shower?”

Paul tells him no, and five minutes later, Carl thinks it’s absolute bliss when the hot water runs down his body and he emerges nice and clean. This is what it means to finally feel human again.

Afterwards, Paul wants to attempt the same thing and Carl tells him to leave the door open, just in case. They’ve done this with roles reversed before. Paul takes a long time, and Carl would be more worried if it wasn’t for the regular coughs that tell him that Paul is still alive and hopefully upright.

Both of them are a lot less worse for wear when they finally sit at the kitchen table, sipping fresh tea, although Paul’s cheeks are still flushed and he looks like a shadow of his usual self.

“So, uh…” Carl starts. “Vic asked me if I want to move to Edinburgh.”

Paul raises his head in surprise. “Oh wow.”

“I know, right?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like it doesn’t make sense. All those trips of yours up there, that’s a long fucking way every time… What did you say?”

“That I was gonna think about it… The Met also finally made up their mind. Secondment is being terminated next month. Some kind of administrative bullshit about a fixed number of approved positions.”

“Well, that’s certainly convenient timing…”

“Is it? Bit short notice to find something up there.”

“That something you’d even consider?”

Carl shrugs. “I mean, yeah. Maybe. Weather’s shit, city’s full of tourists, but otherwise…”

Paul smiles. “If you’re trying to sell it to me, you’re doing a pretty shit job of it.”

Carl doesn’t respond to the playful jibe and sighs. “I wanna be with them more.”

“Yeah, from that angle, it makes perfect sense.”

Carl frowns. “That doesn’t sound like unbridled enthusiasm either.”

Paul eyes him carefully. “I just wanna know that you’ve thought this through. Because that’s a pretty big fucking step. Can you be sure it’s gonna work, moving up there, living together?”

“Of course I can’t be fucking sure. But me and Vic, we’re going solid. What makes you think it wouldn’t work long-term?”

“With that job of hers, she’s gonna be away a lot, and there’s a kid in the equation. Your job isn’t exactly nine to five either. Have you talked about that? Is she expecting you to step up? That’s a pretty big commitment, Carl.”

“Her mother’s helping out and the father is also around. Jasper’s in school during the week. She’s made it work before and I’ll pitch in where I can.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t just spending time with someone’s kid in short doses. You’ve seen him, what? Some weekends here and there. It’s different when you’re suddenly there every day, raising a kid who’s not your own.”

Irritation starts to swirl in Carl’s gut now. “So what? You saying I’m not stepfather material?”

“No.” Paul’s expression shifts to something a little softer. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. Jasper would be lucky to have you in his corner. I’m just saying it could be more complicated than you think, with a child in the mix.”

“Yeah. But I love her, and I’m willing to step up.” Carl looks away, suddenly deflated. The disappointment clearly audible in his voice, he says, “Kills me that you don’t have my back on this.”

“Carl,” Paul says with clear offence in his tone. “When have I ever not had your back?”

“I dunno, you don’t exactly seem supportive of the whole idea.”

Paul takes another sip from his tea, then puts his mug down. “It’s not that I’m not supportive. I just wanna make sure you’re not, you know…”

“Dumped by the side of the road again?”

Paul gives him a pointed look. “Yeah. Cause as much as I love dropping everything to rescue you, I’m not driving up to fucking Scotland for that.”

Carl can’t help but let his mouth curve into a small smile. “You’ve always been such a fucking saint.”

Paul laughs gently, which turns into a cough and Carl warily watches him ride that out for half a minute. Paul’s still short of breath afterwards. When he can speak again, he lets his gaze linger on Carl for a long moment, like their previous conversation is not quite finished. “Carl. I want you to be happy.”

“I am,” Carl simply says.

Paul gives him a curt nod, like that’s all he needs to know. And that’s good in Carl’s book, too.

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Things gradually improve over the next two days. Both of them are getting more sleep, Paul’s coughs become more manageable, the infection is starting to clear fraction by fraction and he’s becoming a little more mobile, although being up on his feet for extended periods of time is still a struggle.

Carl’s been going over the breathing exercises with him, and it does seem to help, although Paul insists he needs to do that shit on his own. Carl can’t really blame him. What he’s hacking up sounds pretty horrible.

On Friday morning over breakfast, Paul tells Carl, “You should head back to London.”

“I should do no such thing. They don’t need me back until Monday, remember?”

Paul gives Carl his best reproving glare, which isn't doing all that much because he still looks like fucking shit. "Carl. I'm over the worst of it. I can do the rest on my own. Katherine is gonna check in on Sunday. I'll be okay."

Katherine is a friend, Carl has met her a handful of times. The kind you like having round for tea or help you out with a favour but wouldn't necessarily want to drag you up from rock bottom.

"You crashed pretty hard yesterday afternoon. You're still fucking wiped all the time. You're still—"

"Recovering," Paul cut in gently. "Which I can do on my own."

"You don't have to."

"I know. But you can't stay here forever, nor do I want you to. I'm past the worst of it. The antibiotics are working. I can manage the rest."

"I don't mind staying another few days."

"I know, Sprog. But you've been at this nonstop for days now. You must be more exhausted than I am."

"Very much doubt that."

Paul studies the pattern of the toast crumbs on the plate in front of him. "Carl. You've gone above and beyond. More than I could have asked for."

"Bollocks. I've done what you would've done. What you fucking *have* done."

"Yeah, maybe."

Carl's voice is now raised. "No, not fucking *maybe*. You did this for me, remember? All those years ago? Probably saved my fucking life, which I've probably also never given you a bloody thank you for."

Paul looks up and gives him a small smile, says in a low voice. "You have. In more ways than one."

Carl looks away. He's not proud of that time, doesn't really wanna dredge it all up.

Paul tells him, "Look. I know you worry. And I appreciate that, and it's actually kind of sweet. But I'm up on my feet, I'm doing the breathing exercises, getting all that crud out of my lungs. Just fill up the fridge and I can fend for myself from here. You need some rest before you go back to work. Proper rest. Not the kind you get on my beat-up sofa bed."

Carl can't even really argue. The sofa bed is old and less than ideal if you really want a good night's sleep. He eyes Paul. "Are you sure?"

He nods. “Yes, very sure.”

“Okay,” Carl says. “But I don’t love the idea.”

“I know. You’ve got my number. You can check in.”

“You bet I fucking will.”

“Wouldn’t want it any other way.” Paul takes a sip from his tea. “Have you given any more thought to the Scotland thing?”

He has. He’s talked to Vic about it as well. Not just that, also her thoughts on his role in Jasper’s life. She wants to take it slow, see how things develop. Which is just fine with Carl, so he tells Paul, “Yeah. I’m gonna put out some feelers for CID jobs up there.”

“Want me to poke a few people?”

Carl considers it for a moment. “Probably can’t hurt. Maybe give it a few days, though. At least until you can hold an actual conversation without coughing up a lung.”

“Yeah, I’ll work on that.”

“Thanks,” Carl says.

“What if that doesn’t pan out so quickly?”

He shrugs. “I’ll come back down here, I guess. That was always the deal that I’d have a spot reserved here. I sure fucking hope that’s still the case.”

“Yeah, don’t see why not. Check in with Parker on Monday, maybe.”

“Yeah, I will.”

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Chapter 5 – What If It Was Paradise

Three weeks later, Carl is amazed how quickly it all fell into place. Strings were pulled, conversations were had and he is invited to an impromptu job interview with the local homicide division.

For that, he gets his shit together enough to board a plane up to Edinburgh. He’s still anxious as hell when the plane gets off the ground but thoughts of Vic and Jasper help – and the fact that this might be his best chance to build a new life and have a family.

It’s a small miracle that Vic’s schedule worked in a way that she’s actually around, so afterwards he meets up with Vic and Jasper at the chocolate café that Jasper loves. As Jasper stuffs an ice cream

and toffee sauce waffle into his mouth, Carl asks him, “Jasper? What do you think about me moving up here to live in Edinburgh?”

Jasper looks at him. He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Would you like that?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

Hm. Well. Carl had hoped for a more enthusiastic response, seeing how he and Jasper had got on fairly well over the last few weekends that he’d spent with them. Vic had even left Jasper with him for a few hours when she had to get on a plane before Vic’s mother came to pick him up.

Victoria’s mother, as Carl had to find out, is a bit of an acquired taste, and Carl can’t say that he really hit it off with her, the two times he’s met her. She seems judgemental and opinionated to the core, with all the wrong ideas about family, upbringing, politics and overall approach to life. She certainly made it clear that she didn’t approve of his choice of profession. He’s pretty sure he isn’t going to get on very well with her, but he’ll have to figure that out along the way.

Jasper takes a sip from his hot cocoa and Carl looks at Vic. She looks back at him with a noncommittal expression. The kind that says, ‘You’re on your own, this is between you and Jasper.’

He tries again. “I had a job interview here today. If that pans out, I could spend a lot more time with you and your mum.”

“You mean move in with us?”

He nods. “Yeah, maybe. Would that be a problem?”

“Can I keep my room?”

Carl chuckles. “Yeah, of course. Maybe we can even find a bigger flat that has more room for all of us.”

Jasper shrugs again. “Yeah, sounds alright.”

Carl throws Vic another look and she has a small smile on her lips. This is probably as good as it’ll get in terms of Jasper’s approval.

Carl gets the call a week later that Police Caledonia would love to have him. After he gets the written confirmation, it’s all suddenly very real and it’s a bit of a frenzy to get everything arranged for the move and the transfer.

Now he's packed up all his shit, he's got the rented transit all loaded and ready to go with the few belongings he chose to take up to Edinburgh. Paul offered to let him stay at his place the night before he's off to Scotland, so Carl is back on the worn-out sofa bed for the night.

The whole thing is somehow bittersweet, but it's also good to see that Paul has shaken all the aftereffects of the pneumonia and is back to his normal, spry self. For once, it's great that the spare room isn't a sickbed or caretaker accommodation.

Breakfast is a relatively taciturn affair, not just because it's kind of early with Carl wanting to get a head start on the day, it's also the harbinger of a goodbye none of them wants to acknowledge or speak out loud but that's undoubtedly going to have to be said.

Afterwards, Carl stuffs the last of his stuff in his duffel bag, then goes to the kitchen where he stands in the doorway, watching Paul's back who is drying the last of the dishes. Carl leans against the doorframe. "Hey, uh… Can we… Can we go somewhere?"

Paul dries his hands on the tea towel and turns to him. "You mean on holiday?"

Carl chuckles. "No. Now. I don't wanna do this here."

Paul frowns. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll see. Can we take your car?"

Paul goes to the key bowl and fishes out the car keys. Carl says, "Mind if I drive?"

Paul's frown deepens. "Uh. Sure."

Maybe it eventually dawns on Paul where they are going when Carl parks the car in the somewhat run down area of the city. It hasn't much improved since those days, and the old youth park is still derelict and abandoned, but the ping pong table is still where it used to be, so Carl makes a beeline for it and slips onto it, letting his legs dangle over the edge.

Paul does the same next to him, stating, "This is where it all started."

Carl nods slowly. "Fucking ironic, don't you think?"

"Ironic?"

"You arrested me. Now we're here, both working for the Old Bill."

"A bit, yeah. Rather fitting full circle if you wanted to be poetic about it."

Carl grins. "I've never had a poetic fucking bone in my body."

They sit for a moment in silence before Paul asks, "You looking forward to it?"

“The north? Yeah, I guess. I mean, the job sounds good. Can’t wait to be with Vic and Jasper. The weekend trips have been such a fucking drag. And now they’re both excited that I’m coming up there.”

Paul smiles. “That’s good. I’m happy for you.”

Carl looks at him, tries to gauge whether that’s a genuine statement. Paul has never been particularly enthusiastic about Vic, and sometimes Carl wonders if he is jealous – in an actual romantic sort of way. Carl has never really had the feeling that Paul was coming on to him or that there was sexual attraction there, but Paul might have just known it was going to be unrequited and hidden it well.

It’s not like Carl doesn’t get it, were that the case. Stuff like that can get messy, and he knows Paul genuinely cares about him. As he does about Paul. It’d be the worst fucking thing if that was being complicated by messy shit like a one-sided romantic pursuit. So he doesn’t think he’s ever going to go there. Some things are better left unsaid.

Paul speaks again. “You know, I’ve been meaning to tell you. I also met someone.”

That piques Carl’s interest. “You did?”

“Yeah. His name’s Doug. We first met two months ago. Wasn’t sure if it was gonna go anywhere, but we’re going pretty steady now. He’s a really sweet guy.”

“You got a photo?”

Paul pulls up his phone and scrolls through a few images, then shows him one. The man Carl is looking at is not exactly attractive in the conventional sense. A round face, brown beard and hair that’s starting to grey a little, the beginnings of a double chin, perhaps a bit overweight.

Paul comments, “He’s funny and smart as hell, has the most infectious laugh and I just… I think I love him, you know.”

“That’s fantastic. I’m really glad you met someone.”

And he is. It’s comforting to know Paul can have someone else in his life who will be there for him. He really hopes it’ll work out for the both of them, because if anyone deserves true happiness and love in his life, it’s Paul.

It’s not that Carl ever truly worried about Paul in that sense. He’s the type who is easily approachable and he has a decent size circle of friends. But Carl also knows he doesn’t let anyone else get really close, that he could unconditionally lean on like the both of them do. He suspects maybe that has to do with his sister.

Carl thinks back to all they've been through, the one and a half decades they've now known each other. They've sure had ups and downs and they weren't always this tight, but Paul has been such a steady presence in his life over the years that he isn't sure how to imagine a life without him around.

Paul was always so ready to give, to be there when he was needed, and somehow Carl always felt like maybe he didn't give back enough. But even so, Paul seldom asked for anything. He'd just show up and stick with you.

Carl knows he's not the easiest person to be around or the easiest person to trust. It's taken him a long fucking time to figure this out, and he hasn't the faintest idea where Paul takes the patience from to just wait for him to get these things through his head, but Carl knows he still owes him something. Something that Paul always waited for and Carl never thought he could talk about because he was afraid it would change Paul's perception of him, that it would change their dynamic in a way that Carl wasn't prepared for.

But he knows he has to do this now, that there's never going to be a better time, so Carl's voice is low, his gaze glued to his fidgeting hands in his lap when he speaks. "I said I'd tell you some day."

He isn't sure how exactly to say this, how to even start, but maybe he should just tell it like it is. "My father was a piece of shit. Always has been, for as long as I remember. Was an arsehole when he was sober, but when he wasn't…"

And then the whole thing spills out of him. All the ugly truth of a childhood that was governed by fear and anger and resentment, the violence, the unpredictability, the abuse he had to witness and then tried to combat with the little power that he had.

Paul listens quietly, at some point puts his palm against Carl's rounded back that grounds him in a way that it gives him strength to get all the words out and share what he's never shared with anyone before.

When he's done, it hangs there, long and heavy, stretching into a silence that's broken only by passing cars and the sharp, aggressive bark of a dog in the distance. Paul takes his hand away, and it suddenly feels like there's a void, like he lost something important.

When the silence becomes uncomfortable, Carl lifts his head and looks up. "Say something."

Paul briefly meets his gaze, something deep and intense there, a hardness around his mouth that Carl hasn't quite seen before. His voice is just above a whisper. "I always knew there was something… That you've been through some heavy shit. But this… Shit, Carl."

“Yeah,” Carl says, sharply sniffing his nose. “I know you’ve always wondered. But you never asked. And I appreciate that.”

Paul stays quiet for a long moment, then says. “I needed you to be ready. And, Carl… I know. I know this wasn’t easy to talk about. Thank you. Thank you for trusting me. It really means a lot.”

Carl lifts his head, looks Paul in the eyes, afraid of what he’s gonna see there. He doesn’t— “Look. I don’t want pity,” he says in a low voice.

Paul slowly shakes his head. “No, I know. And it’s never been pity. What you lived through is unimaginable. No child should grow up in an environment like that. But you know what that tells me? It takes a special kind of person to live through that and turn that around to help other people.

“Cause you know what I see when I look at you? All that strength and all that passion, and a whole lot of fucking resilience. And most importantly, you’ve got your heart in the right place. And I know you think you’re not ready, but if you’re still worried about being a good stepdad to Jasper, let me tell you, you don’t need to be.”

He *is* worried. Because if what he just told Paul conveyed anything, it’s that he is probably the least equipped person to raise a kid.

Maybe Paul saw it on his face, because he gently nudges Carl. “Hey. Trust me. You’ll be fine. I mean, will you make mistakes along the way? Oh yeah, for sure. We all do, because that’s what makes us fucking human. But let me tell you, I couldn’t be prouder to have you as a friend. And your new family will be so lucky to have you.

“And hell, I’ll miss you like fucking shit, but I want you to go up there and have an amazing life, yeah? Don’t be a stranger, though. I wanna hear all about your Scottish adventures and the miserable sods up there.”

It makes Carl chuckle, but it’s wet and there are tears in his eyes. “Yeah,” he says softly. “I’ll miss you, too. More than you can imagine.”

Paul’s eyes are also brimming with tears when he looks at Carl. He gets up off the table and stands before Carl, then reaches out and pulls him towards him. It’s the most natural thing for Carl to slide off the table, lean into the embrace and press his hand against Paul’s back to draw him close.

They hold each other for a few, long moments, taking comfort in each other’s presence. It’s a strange thing, and there are more tears shooting into Carl’s eyes because this is years of mutual friendship, unwavering support and the kind of trust that he’s never dared extend to anyone

before. It's hard to imagine he won't see as much of Paul anymore. He doesn't wanna think about it.

Paul finally pulls back, and Carl reaches up to wipe at his tears. "Shit," he mutters. "I don't normally do this."

Paul pats him lightly on the shoulder blade. "It's okay, Sprog. Maybe no one's told you this before, but you're allowed to have feelings."

Carl wipes some more at his eyes because they just won't stop watering. "No one's ever done for me what you have."

Paul gives him a little smile. "I know. And maybe that's why."

"Why what?"

"Why I chose you."

Carl looks away, his gaze following the mother pushing a pram along the pavement. "And I'm glad you did."

Paul gently touches his upper arm. "So am I. Come on. You've got a long drive ahead of you. You need to get going."

"Yeah," he sighs.

It's the end of an era. But also the start of one. A strange dichotomy he doesn't know how to reconcile. But maybe what's most important is that he gets to write a new chapter that he's determined to fill with good people and stories worth retelling.

He lightly places his hand on Paul's back and together they walk back towards his car and on to new adventures.