Dept. Q - Another Time

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"Christ, Rachel," Carl sighs when he realises the state she's in.

He'd reluctantly agreed to accompany her to that Burns Night do that she'd been excited about all month, rolling his eyes at the mention of the 'smart' dress code. He's not worn anything "smart" in at least a year and he's never quite enjoyed that sort of thing.

The haggis had been decent, the overpriced whisky less so, so he'd not had a lot of it. Rachel, on the other hand, seemed to be a bit of a lightweight and had a little too much of the red wine. Well, more than a little.

As he helps her into her winter coat, she sways, unsteady on her feet, then giggles in a way that he'd definitely put in the 'drunk' category. He isn't quite sure how he had envisioned the night to end, but it's definitely not escorting her home with the objective of ensuring she doesn't drowsily miss her stop or stumble into strangers' doorways to puke up tonight's dinner.

As he guides her out of the building, she stumbles on the doorstep with a chortled, "Whoopsie," and he quickly grabs her by the upper arms to steady her.

"Come on," he says, facing her in the direction of the nearest bus stop. "That way."

"Sorry," she says amusedly, her voice slurring slightly. "I've had a little too wuch mine."

"Yes," he sighs, "you certainly have."

She clutches his arm like she needs him to stay upright, which may possibly actually be the case, and he gently leads her to the bus stop.

When they're halfway there, she says, "Carl?"

"Yes."

“You’re…”

That’s all she says, but now he’s curious. “I’m what?”

“You’re really nice.”

Oh. Well. That’s not even really a compliment. Or is it? He’d hoped for something more meaningful than… ‘nice’.

“Thanks, I suppose…?”

“Where are we going?”

He sighs. “Home. You’re sloshed.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you fucking are.”

“I’ve changed my mind. You’re not nice anymore.”

“Okay, now I’m actually offended.”

She points at the bus stop that they’ve now reached. “This isn’t my bus.”

“It’s not?”

“No, there’s no bus.”

He has to suppress the urge to sigh again. “No, it’s coming in…” He checks the electronic display. “Six minutes, apparently.”

“Okay,” she agrees. He’s not sure that she knows what she’s agreeing to.

By the time that the bus arrives, she’s explained to him twice that Arthur’s Seat is an extinct volcano, which he didn’t know before but wants to verify later that that’s an actual fact and not something her drunken brain has randomly conjured up.

On the bus, he finds them a seat towards the back. Rachel manoeuvres herself into the window seat and he sits down next to her. She keeps babbling on for another two minutes about a yarn shop in Abbeyhill she’s been meaning to go to and he just hums in acknowledgement at regular intervals. She seems to be happy with that until she falls silent and he feels a weight against his side when she leans into him.

Her head comes to rest against the upturned collar of his coat like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and he mutters, “Fucking hell,” but stays still for her benefit.

Edinburgh’s night, interrupted by illuminated windows and street lights, zips past as the bus winds itself through the narrow streets. When their stop gets announced, Carl moves a little, then gently touches Rachel and says her name.

She stirs, blearily opens her eyes. “Carl?”

“Yeah. Come on, we need to get off.”

She struggles a little to sit up straight. “Where are we?”

“New Town. This is your stop.”

“Oh,” she says, like it’s a true revelation that she hadn’t expected.

He gets up, holds out his hand when the bus slows down. “Alright. On your feet.”

She takes his hand, and he’s glad that she isn’t quite as unsteady as before. It’s only been a ten minute nap, but it seems to have done something already.

He helps Rachel get off the bus, and the consideration whether he should let her walk home on her own only lasts a split second. No. Of course he’s going to accompany her there. To her door, at the very least.

The walk isn’t very long and she seems a lot less jaunty now. She’s still clutching his arm but there’s none of the bubbly chatter from before. She holds on and they walk in silence, which suits Carl just fine. Inebriated, one-sided conversations aren’t really his thing. Well, maybe if he’s the person who’s drunk, but he’s also been told he’s not a good conversationalist when he’s intoxicated, which is a fair point.

When they get to her door, he needs to prompt her that they’ve arrived and she starts rummaging through her handbag for a long longer than Carl has the patience for. She drops the keys and they almost tumble through the metal fence and over edge down to the space to the basement.

“For fuck’s sake, Rachel,” it escapes his mouth and he bends down to pick up the keys and does the honours himself.

“Sorry,” she says apologetically, her voice still slightly slurry.

Inside the staircase, he also unlocks her flat door for her. It opens and Carl considers what to do. Should he leave her to her own devices from here? He made sure she got home safely, his job is done. Surely, she can navigate her flat on her own. But then Rachel turns around and grabs his lapels to gently pull him inside so that he finds himself in her hall.

“Rachel,” he protests, but she just lets out a little laugh and rises onto her tiptoes. Before she can do what he thinks she’s going to do, he takes her by the upper arms and gently pushes her an arm’s length away from him. “Not like this, yeah?”

Her face pulls into a pout that’s actually kind of cute. “You’re no fun, Carl.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He turns back towards the door that’s still standing open. “Okay, I’ve taken you home, I’m sure you can take it from here.”

She goes around him and pushes the door closed while he's still inside. "You can stay."

He has to smile despite himself. *Now* she wants him here? "I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not exactly thinking straight right now."

"It was just a wee bit of wine."

"More than a wee bit, I'm afraid." He gestures with one hand down the stairs to where he assumes her bedroom is. "Go and get some rest. I'll see myself out."

"Nooo," she says in a tone between dismayed and whiny. "I want you to stay."

"Rachel…"

She looks him right in the eyes. "I really like you."

"Yeah, but you're drunk and I'm sure you'll feel differently tomorrow."

"I will still like you tomorrow."

"You're gonna be hungover as fuck tomorrow."

She then steps right into his space, and before he can stop her, she loops her arms around his waist, enveloping him in a somewhat clumsy hug, mumbling into his coat, "I've always wanted to do that."

Fucking hell. He drags in an audible inhale and for lack of convenient options, he lets his arms come around her to then awkwardly pat her back. When she doesn't move for a few, long moments, he shifts his weight and tells her, "Okay, Rachel. Enough with the limpet act."

"No," she says, her voice still muffled with her face against his waist. "You need more hugs."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"You're very huggable." She squeezes him a bit more tightly.

"Yeah, I beg to differ."

"Please come to bed with me."

He lets out a long-suffering sigh, then extricates himself from her tentacle arms. "Look. Maybe we can revisit this when you're sober. As much as I'd like to, I'm not coming to bed with you tonight."

She has that pouty look on her face again. "You were very eager before."

"Christ, Rachel. That's another conversation for another time, yeah? You need to sleep this off. I'm gonna leave."

Before she can trap him again in some other way, he flees to her flat door and quickly opens it.

He hears her muffled voice saying, “Goodnight, Carl,” after he’s closed it behind him, and he can’t help but smile. One-sided drunken sex is not something he’d very much enjoy, particularly not with Rachel, but now he knows that there’s a chance for something more with her.

He pulls the front door closed behind him and think, yes, we’ll certainly revisit this. Another time.