

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Absolutely You
By Stephanie Vaughan

“So, listen, I was wondering... are you two thinking at all about getting married?”

Aaron sputtered and swallowed, sucked an ice chip down his throat and then spent the next couple of minutes coughing as the ice burned its way down before lodging somewhere between his throat and his chest.

Speech was beyond him.

“You okay?” His friend Candice peered at him closely before pounding on his back with the heel of her hand, hard, right between his shoulder blades.

“Can’, whoa. Stop!” Holding up one hand in a plea for mercy, Aaron took another sip from the glass of iced tea that had caused the problem in the first place, hoping the ice would somehow work its way down into his stomach. It finally did, but the burning sensation hung around and, when Aaron set the glass down, he continued to rub at his chest. “Jesus, warn me next time, would you?”

“You’re okay?” Not waiting for an answer, she pressed on. “So answer the question. Are you and Danny at least talking about getting married?”

Aaron stared, still unable to formulate an answer. He glanced across the table to Deb, the third at their little gathering, who had remained silent up ‘til now.

Deb raised her hands for an instant, but it was merely a detour on the way to reaching for another piece of garlic bread. “Don’t look at me. This is all her.”

Turning back to Candice, Aaron leaned back in his chair. “Married? Are you kidding? Where the hell did you get that idea? We’re just barely, thinking about -- *maybe* -- moving in together.”

“Really? You’re sure?” The problem was Candice had an effective pout and she knew it. Really world class. Never afraid to use it, she directed it at Aaron now. “Oh, come on. I *so* want to go to a gay wedding. You could be my first. Don’t you want to be somebody’s first?”

“Gee, let me think. Um... no? You’re disturbed, you know that? Deb, pass me the spaghetti, please.”

The other problem was that they knew each other so well. Friends since high school, they’d all attended the same local university and had even settled in neighboring communities afterward. Since graduation they tended not to see as much of each other, though, so once a month or so one of them would plan a dinner and put out the call to the others.

Tonight’s gathering had been Aaron’s idea, so he’d been tagged to host. Still several days away from payday, he’d opted for the always popular spaghetti dinner, splurging on his own version of gourmet meatballs: ground meat spiced up with breadcrumbs and a package of meatloaf mix.

“Buzzkill. Where’s your sense of adventure? Don’t you get it that we’re at a historical crossroads here?” Candice’s eyes lit up with enthusiasm as she gestured with her fork. “You’re gay -- and you can finally legally marry the person you love. That’s *huge*.”

So, clearly his attempt at distraction hadn’t been as successful as he’d hoped. “Yeah. I, uh, think I read something about that somewhere.”

“You’re determined to thwart me, aren’t you? I’d even help you plan it. Hey, I could be your event planner. No extra charge. Please?” Her big cheesy grin and comically raised eyebrows turned the mood around and Aaron couldn’t help laughing.

“Dude, do you always have to be such a cheerleader? Just a little self-restraint’s all I’m asking.”

Deb chose a piece of bread from the basket before setting it back at the center of the table. “Can’, I know it goes against everything you stand for, but some people like to keep that sort of thing private, you know? Maybe you should let Aaron and Danny work that out.”

“Or not.” Aaron picked up his fork and applied himself to his food.

Candice and Deb were his two closest friends, but he still couldn’t bring himself to bare his innermost hopes and dreams when it came to Danny. It was just too painful. He knew they did their best to put themselves in his shoes, but they couldn’t. Not really.

Dinner continued and Deb helped him keep the conversation steered toward more neutral subjects, like religion and politics. Their backgrounds were similar without being identical, so although Aaron realized that, while someone who didn’t know them listening in might be tempted to light candles for their souls, they didn’t offend each other and that was the important thing.

His friends’ manners were too good to leave without helping him clean up after dinner, so by the time they finally left there weren’t even any dishes to wash. Normally it was so effortless to hang out with Deb and Can. They’d known each other a long time and collectively been through a lot; there wasn’t much he couldn’t say to either of them.

Dissecting his relationship was apparently one of them, though. Aaron had even stopped going to them for advice, because what if they told him that he’d be better off without Danny? Candice had already come right out and said as much to him once.

Aaron couldn’t do it, though.

Couldn’t even think about it.

It was easier to think about losing a limb or one of his senses or... or... Aaron spent a few seconds trying to imagine the unimaginable before giving it up as pointless.

‘In love’ seemed so inadequate when it came to describing how he felt about Danny. His feelings for Danny were as much a part of him as his need to breathe or the way his heart beat effortlessly in his chest. They never stopped.

Danny shifted the plastic grocery bags he was carrying, trying to relieve the ache where the handles dug into his wrists as he walked. Feeling guilty about how much time he’d been

spending at Aaron's lately, eating Aaron's food and using his utilities, Danny had stopped at the grocery store on the way over. He'd picked up a few of his own favorite items to add to the cupboard, but mostly he'd tried to remember what all he'd been scarfing down of Aaron's and bought more.

Which was how he'd come to be carrying what felt like about a hundred pounds of food in ugly plastic bags, walking the one-and-a-half blocks to Aaron's place from where he'd been forced to leave his car, because he could never find a parking spot closer than that in freaking Naples.

When he got to Aaron's place and could finally set them down, Danny rang the bell, rubbing at his wrists while he waited.

The door eventually opened and Aaron stood, shirtless, scratching his shoulder and blinking sleepily. His hair was all mussed on one side, sticking straight up on the other, and he couldn't seem to open his eyes all the way. Squinting, Aaron rubbed at them before passing a hand through his hair. "Hey. Why didn't you call?"

"I dunno. I--" *God*. How sexy could Aaron get? "So I guess you were sleeping?"

"That's okay. I need to get up and work on my project, anyway. What time is it?" Standing back, Aaron made room for Danny to pass. "What's all this?"

"Just some food and stuff. I've been eating all yours and I figured I ought to pay you back." Danny headed for the kitchen, while Aaron closed the door before following.

"You didn't have to do that. No big deal."

"No, I did. And it's, like, about seven, I think."

"Thanks. You really didn't have to, but I appreciate it." Danny focused on putting away the perishables, stashing the milk and Aaron's favorite extra-sharp cheddar cheese in the fridge, all the while stealing looks at Aaron out of the corner of his eye.

Aaron was attractive, no question, but it was more of a quiet kind of good-looking, the kind that snuck up on you. So why suddenly this overwhelming lust?

Screw it.

The rest of the stuff could wait. He couldn't.

He took the three steps to where Aaron stood propped against the counter and lifted a hand. Stroking lightly down Aaron's bare chest, Danny drank in the scent of him, drowning in need. Those lips, so pink and soft, were calling to him. Slipping both arms around Aaron's waist, Danny lowered his head.

Aaron's lips parted for him while Aaron looped his arms around Danny's neck, making happy little noises in his throat as he kissed Danny back. Part of the attraction was Aaron's receptive nature. It got Danny hot -- made him want to get more aggressive -- when Aaron responded to him so readily. He grabbed Aaron's hips and yanked their bodies together, rubbing their cocks together as he palmed Aaron's ass with both hands.

Drawing away for a second, Danny wanted another look at Aaron's face.

Eyes closed, Aaron's lips were parted and wet from Danny's kiss; Aaron panted. Danny let his gaze travel down Aaron's body, loving the smooth lines of his chest, his tiny nipples, the narrow waist, the high curve of his ass.

That butt.

Danny loved Aaron's ass. Loved the way it rose under his hands, so firm and warm, flanks clenching as Aaron thrust back against Danny. So hot. So delicious. So uniquely Aaron.

Aaron's fingers combed through the hair at Danny's nape, stroking his scalp and sending sparks of electricity shooting down Danny's spine. Arching into him, the ridge of Aaron's hard-on was impossible to miss.

"Mmm, Danny, *yeah*." The smile on Aaron's face matched the look in his eyes: drowsily welcoming and warm.

Aaron arched his neck, exposing his throat, and Danny was happy to take him up on the implied invitation. Letting his lips slide along Aaron's throat, Danny kissed up to Aaron's jaw. "Let's go to your room. When's Gary gonna be back?"

"Probably not 'til tomorrow. Usually he's home by now if he's sleeping here. Oh, that's nice."

Danny was using his grip on Aaron's butt to rub their bodies together, loving the slide of dick against dick. "Yeah? Can we fuck out here, then?"

"Um, sure?" The mischievous lilt in Aaron's voice made Danny smile. Aaron was up for anything. "Let me just lock the door. You know where the lube is, right?"

"Yeah." He hated to let go, even long enough to go get the stuff, but it couldn't be helped. Maybe if he started carrying sample sizes in his wallet? Danny kissed Aaron again briefly before dashing for Aaron's bedroom and the stash of supplies in the nightstand drawer.

By the time he got back, Aaron was standing in the opening between the living room and the kitchen, his pants unbuttoned and his fist jammed down inside. "Where do you want to do it?"

Danny looked around. "In front of the fireplace?"

"I should have known. You're so predictable sometimes, Valdez." Aaron was laughing at him, but heading toward the living room and the fireplace.

"What are you talking about?"

"*Blonds Do It Best*?" Aaron was skinning out of his pants, flashing bits of surprisingly long thigh, momentarily distracting Danny.

"Huh?"

"*Huh?*" Aaron was mocking him now. "That porno you liked so much. During the whole living room fireplace scene -- you didn't blink once. I counted."

"Oh, yeah. That's right." Danny was stripping off his own clothes now, moving in on Aaron as he grabbed a pillow off the nearby sofa. He tossed the pillow on the floor for Aaron's knees.

"You've gotta admit, though, that was hot."

"Should I bleach my hair and try to look seventeen?"

"I wish I'd known you when you were seventeen. I'll bet you were smokin'..."

Aaron was down on his knees, biting his lower lip as he shot teasing glances in Danny's direction. "I was even skinnier than I am now, but *such* a sweet face. I was doing the football team's star receiver."

"No kidding? What was that like? Did he receive for you?"

"Not hardly. I used to suck him off in the showers at school, though. They had these little semi-private stalls and there was one in the back that was pretty secluded. It was our regular meet-up place."

"Yeah?" Danny had had his share of fantasies about the football players he'd known in school. The funny thing was that he could totally see Aaron doing something like that. "Tell me."

"Come here and I'll show you."

Danny moved within reach, and Aaron gazed up at him with an expression of such anticipation that it stopped his breath. "You are so hot; you'd look great in a letterman's jacket. Don't happen to have one, do you?"

"Nah. Pretend I just took it off."

"Okay. You keep an eye out for the coach -- or anyone else, got it?"

“Got it, *oh!*” Without warning Aaron swallowed him down, plunging Danny instantly into a whirlwind of hot, moist suction. Pulling his head back, Aaron sucked hard and Danny’s head was reeling.

“Are you watching? I thought I heard something!” The urgency in Aaron’s voice had Danny checking over his shoulder for an instant before he remembered it was a game.

“It’s... it’s okay. Keep going.”

“Don’t worry, Jared. Have I ever not come through?” *Jared?* That must have been-- Aaron’s mouth was back on him again and anything beyond how freaking good it felt was lost. “I’ll bet your girlfriend doesn’t do *this* for you.”

A slippery finger nudged at his hole, applying steady pressure until it breached the first line of resistance. While Aaron stroked him internally with one finger, Aaron was licking at Danny’s cock, nuzzling around it, letting the mixture of juices paint his cheeks and chin with slick trails of pre-come, before taking Danny into his mouth again.

“Oh, God, baby.” Aaron’s head bobbed as he sucked Danny’s cock, and Danny thrust a little, caught up in how good it felt, how hot Aaron looked. Fisting a hand in Aaron’s hair, Danny held on while he fucked Aaron’s mouth.

Aaron relaxed into it. Instead of reaching around, Aaron’s hands regrouped to Danny’s thighs, while his neck arched to take more of Danny’s cock. He looked so happy, eyes closed in contentment as he sucked Danny.

Or was it some football player named Jared he was thinking of, pretending it was someone else besides Danny whose cock he was lavishing with so much love and attention?

Opening his eyes, Aaron gazed up at Danny and, for an instant Danny *was* Jared. Was some nameless guy fucking sweet little Aaron’s mouth, using him like a living sex doll before he took off to be with someone else.

It should have been so wrong, but the look in Aaron’s eyes connected with something deep inside Danny, and Danny came hard, shooting into Aaron’s mouth while Aaron steadied himself with a hand around Danny’s cock as he swallowed.

Aaron pushed back from his computer and rubbed his eyes. He needed to get his school project done and, at the rate he was going, he was on track to have it wrapped up roughly two weeks after the class was over.

He shouldn’t have let Danny distract him, but he’d never been very good at saying no to Danny. So here he was, up after midnight, trying to get it at least close to done, when he had to be up

early in the morning for a production meeting. Just to make things more interesting, the two graphics programs he was using weren't playing nicely with each other.

A lot of people he knew worked and went to school at the same time -- Candice and Deb both did.

Aaron's problem was that he'd gotten spoiled; during his first four years of college his parents had basically supported him while he'd gone to school. Sure, he'd worked part-time the last two years, but he'd been lucky enough not to have to work to pay the bills and that made all the difference. He'd always been able to cut back on his work hours when crunch time for tests or big projects had rolled around.

It had been his decision to accept a full-time job after graduation with a local graphic arts company. It was a smallish-sized company, so Aaron had to be a jack of all trades and his current workload kept him busy: swamped, actually. He only had a couple of more days to get his final project for his current class completed, though, and getting any part of it done at work had turned out to be hopeless.

Sometimes being a grown-up sucked, no question. He liked eating kids' cereal for dinner if he felt like it or occasionally seeing how long he could go without doing his laundry. But doing something he hated, like cutting his sleep short because a big project was due -- and not because someone was nagging him, but because he needed to -- blew.

Aaron stretched and yawned, reaching high over his head, arching his back and giving his muscles a break. He'd take one more run at the car company ad that was the centerpiece of his marketing proposal final project before giving it up in favor of salvaging a few hours' sleep.

He hadn't been back at it long when a very naked Danny came in and peered over his shoulder. "That's really good. Hey, what's up with Gary's room?"

"What about it?" Focused on getting the lettering the way he saw it in his head, Aaron kept going with what he was doing.

"It's way too neat, and we both know Gary's just not that tidy. What's up? Relatives coming to visit? Wait, I know -- does it involve a girl?"

"Sort of. He hasn't given notice or anything, but I think he's probably going to move in with Allyson."

"That's the girlfriend?" Danny's hands, already resting on Aaron's shoulders, began kneading at the muscles there. His strong fingers and thumbs dug in, doing wonderful things for Aaron's stiff neck and back.

"Yeah. He spends so much time there already, I guess it makes sense. Oh, that's nice. Can you scratch my back a little, right under the shoulder blade? Yeah, yeah, right there."

Aaron leaned forward in the chair, and Danny took care of the itch that had developed there. The man really did have amazing hands, among other things.

“How’s that?”

“It’s great.”

“When are you coming back to bed?” Danny stroked his fingers up Aaron’s chest, over his pecs and on up his throat, nudging Aaron’s head back until it rested on the chair back and Aaron was gazing up into Danny’s gorgeous chocolate brown eyes.

“Pretty soon. I just have to get this text right. If I get that far, then I’ll feel good about getting it done on time. I need it for my final grade.”

Danny’s head drifted closer as his hands made their way back to Aaron’s chest, found Aaron’s nipples and pinched one lightly. “Can’t you finish it tomorrow? Come back to bed and I’ll take good care of you. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

Lips flirting with Aaron’s, Danny was at his most persuasive, and the upside-down nature of the kiss took nothing away from its effectiveness.

Aaron’s hand left the mouse and rose up to thread through Danny’s soft black hair, pulling him closer and for several seconds Aaron gloried in Danny’s sweet seductiveness. It wasn’t until he reached behind him with his other hand for Danny’s thigh that Aaron realized what he was doing and pulled away. “Danny, cut it out. I have to get this finished. I’ll come to bed in a minute.”

When Danny took Aaron’s hand and drew it to Danny’s hard-on, whispering, “Come now. I’ve got something for you.” Aaron lost it.

“Knock it off, Danny.” Turning in his chair, Aaron pushed back until the edge of the desk pressed uncomfortably into his back. “Look, I’ve *got* to get this done. I already lost enough time fooling around with you tonight, so would you let me work, please?”

Staring open-mouthed, Danny looked stunned. “Yeah. Sure. Sorry I bothered you.”

Walking out, Danny’s body language was stiffer than Aaron had ever seen it.

Aaron sighed and rubbed a hand over his mouth.

Crap.

Did that count as a fight? Probably. Aaron hated conflict and he usually did what he could to avoid it, but Danny had to get it that it couldn’t always be play time, didn’t he? Danny had a job, too, and he didn’t see Aaron coming around and keeping him from getting *his* work done.

Aaron shook his head and tried to refocus on his project. He wasn't shutting things down until he got the lettering right, damn it.

When Aaron's alarm went off in the morning, Danny wasn't in bed. He wondered if Danny had left for work without saying anything, until noises in the kitchen reassured him. When he wandered out with a determinedly casual air, Danny was standing at the sink, eating a bowl of cereal and waiting for the coffee to finish dripping into the pot.

Danny nodded his head by way of greeting.

"Thanks for making coffee."

Danny mumbled a, "No problem," through his mouthful of cereal and kept eating. Aaron didn't think it was all in his imagination that Danny wouldn't look at him or make eye contact.

Pulling a mug down out of the cabinet, Aaron poured himself a cup of the not-quite-finished-brewing coffee. Testing the temperature, he took a small sip. "Are we fighting?"

"Nah." But Danny's noncommittal shrug and down-turned mouth belied his answer.

It was a knee-jerk response to apologize, but instead Aaron closed his eyes and thought about what he wanted to say.

"Listen, Danny. I'm sorry about last night, but I really needed to get that thing done and... I don't do very well on short sleep."

"It's no big deal." Danny gave another shrug from those broad shoulders. "Believe it or not, it wasn't the first time in my life I got shot down."

"Come on, that's not fair."

"Whatever. Maybe we need to..." Danny's voice trailed off and Aaron's already nervous stomach turned over. "Maybe I ought to give you your space and start spending more time at my own place."

Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no.

Aaron bit his lip to keep from saying something stupid. Stuffed down what he was dying to say and tried to play it smart for once.

What he wanted to do was throw his arms around Danny and keep him from leaving -- ever. Except Danny had always seemed to have one foot half-way out the door anyway, and a move like that was only guaranteed to drive him away that much faster.

Lifting another spoonful of cereal from the bowl, Danny got as far as opening his mouth before making a face and dumping the rest of the contents in the sink. He rinsed the bowl and put it and

the spoon he'd been using in the dishwasher, moving around Aaron on his way out of the little kitchen.

Aaron put out a hand. "Danny, don't go."

"I have to go to work. Remember work?" Echoes of last night were strong and Danny's gaze finally met Aaron's, exposing the hurt lurking in Danny's deep brown eyes.

"It was just a stupid fight. Come on, Danny. Hang in there with me?"

Danny bit the side of his cheek. Made a face. Aaron's hopes, already fading, sunk a little further.

"I don't know, Aaron. I'm not sure we're good for each other."

"Oh." Aaron winced. His attempt at a mature conversation wasn't going so well. "Because I really like you. A lot. And, and I thought we were doing okay, y'know? But you have to be happy, too. If it's not working for you, then... I don't know what. You tell me."

"Listen, I really need to get to work. Can we talk about this later?" Shoving his hands in his pockets, Danny glanced repeatedly at the door -- three times, by Aaron's count.

Oh, fuck. That couldn't be good.

"Sure, Danny. Some other time." The prickle of tears looming ominously behind his eyes, Aaron stepped back and let Danny complete his escape.

Aaron stood by as Danny grabbed his backpack and headed out the door, holding himself together for as long as it took to get in the shower, before the water finally turned the key in some internal lock, giving the tears permission to fall. The water pounded down on his skull, mixing with his tears and, when he finally made it into his own job, Aaron was thankful no one commented on his puffy eyes or his curious unwillingness to talk.

Somehow, though, he made it through the day. One of the firm's biggest clients was nearing the end of its fiscal year and trying to spend down its advertising budget for the year. Consequently, Germaine and Associates had more jobs than its pared down staff could possibly produce and, along with the rest of the crew, Aaron was working as fast as he could to crank out the jobs while still producing professional-looking results.

The blessing of being up to his ears in work was that it made the time go by quickly, and it wasn't until he was on his way home that the letdown hit him.

Aaron had begun bicycling to work when the cost of gasoline had gone through the roof -- good for his pocketbook and overall fitness -- but it left him totally vulnerable to the aromas of the eating places he passed. Already feeling the slump, Aaron gave in to temptation and picked up a small box of fried chicken, riding the rest of the way home with it strapped to the back of his road bike.

When he reached his place he poured himself a giant glass of root beer to drink with it and wallowed in the decadent enjoyment of every greasy, forbidden bite. On top of it, he hadn't even drawn the line at the chicken like he should have; what was his favorite fried chicken without mashed potatoes and gravy, biscuits and honey?

The euphoria brought on by Aaron's favorite guilty pleasure meal didn't last, though. He'd known it wouldn't and he was still licking the last of the honey off his fingers when Danny's ghost began to creep back in around the edges. The couch held memories of cuddling under a blanket with Danny, watching TV. He couldn't look at the kitchen without thinking of Danny -- picturing Danny moving around it, cooking soup at the little stove.

And the bed...

Since that first time when Danny had come and taken care of him when he'd been sick and they'd ended up in bed, the two of them had messed up the sheets plenty of times. *Every* time with Danny was special -- the simple fact of his presence enough to make the most routine activities exciting. Moves that would have made Aaron roll his eyes at the cliché if anyone else had tried them had Aaron trembling when they came from Danny.

Bypassing the bedroom, Aaron shook his computer awake and sat down to work on his project. Without Danny's distracting presence he should be able to get things polished up and completed with a minimum of fuss.

Except, instead of working on the final presentation, Aaron found himself opening up a file of pictures of Danny. One especially caught Aaron's imagination.

Taken with his phone and not the greatest quality, it somehow captured Danny's indefinable beauty. The lower half of his face was obscured by the crook of his arm, but the smooth expanse of one naked shoulder and his luminous dark eyes gazing up at Aaron were there. In the picture Danny's hair was growing back after the buzz job he'd given it last year, and the curls begged mutely for Aaron's fingers to comb through them.

Aaron had thought several times about touching up the quality in a photo editing program and blowing the picture up to portrait size. He'd love to have a copy of it at his desk at work or on his dresser in the bedroom.

But that would only underscore that Aaron was the only one laying his heart on the line in this relationship.

He spent another couple of minutes gazing at the picture, wishing Danny were there so he could run his fingers down the straight nose or smooth a thumb over the broad brow. Eventually, though, he forced himself to close the file and finish up work on his presentation. When he shut down his computer later that night, his project was completed and loaded on a travel drive, ready for school the next evening.

Crawling into bed at last, Aaron closed his eyes and hugged his pillow, searching for even a little bit of Danny's scent to soothe himself with. It was no use. Nothing would take the place of Danny himself.

Danny fiddled with his plastic cup, swirling what was left of the now mostly melted ice around the bottom, the soggy lemon wedge providing ballast against the watered-down tea. His lunch break was about over and then he'd be faced with another three-and-a-half hours of boredom punctuated by a steady stream of tedious, non-creative job tickets.

He liked his job as a techie for a small non-profit, but business was slow right now. His supervisor had told Danny and Alvin, the business analyst, that it was okay to enjoy the break now, because it would pick up again soon and things would go back to more work than they could do in a day.

Danny had been taking the opportunity to make sure he was caught up on all of his routine tasks and had even positioned himself to be in better shape once business did pick up again, redesigning some work flows to make better use of his time and resources.

But now that he was caught up, Danny had nothing to do but brood about Aaron.

Why wasn't he better at this sort of stuff? Why couldn't he just relax and let things happen, instead of always second-guessing himself? Distrusting his instincts and screwing things up, when he should have been enjoying an exceptional time with a really good guy?

It was close to a year now since he and Aaron had first hooked up. It hadn't seemed like much at first, mainly because he hadn't let it. He'd been emotionally frozen. Too messed up and traumatized by what had gone down with Gabe.

Gabe.

Shit. How long had it been since he'd even thought about the man? There'd been a time when Danny had thought he would never be over Gabe. At the time he'd been so sure Gabe was the love of his life, but here it was weeks since he'd even thought of the guy, and he had Aaron to thank for the fact.

He had a damn fine way of showing his appreciation, too, didn't he? Fuck. Danny tossed the remains of his lunch in the trash and walked back to his desk, musing on the last time he'd seen Aaron.

He was hopeless. Aaron was a good guy, and he deserved better than Danny freaking out and giving him shit every time Aaron hit a nerve. Because that's what had happened. Aaron was way more open about... about everything, compared to Danny. It had caught Danny off guard, the casual way Aaron had talked about giving some football stud head every afternoon in the locker room.

Danny had no idea how he was supposed to handle that.

It turned him on, kind of, to think about, but it also kind of turned his stomach.

He thought something significant had happened back around Christmas, when he'd decided he wanted to be there for Aaron. He'd taken care of Aaron when Aaron had been sick, and he'd liked the feeling.

But here he was, doing it again, treating Aaron like shit instead of the way Aaron deserved to be treated.

Okay, so, situation recognized. Now what was he supposed to do about it? Show up with flowers? Call first? Take Aaron out to dinner?

"Still here?" Danny's supervisor, Joel, appeared out of nowhere in the door to Danny's cubicle.

Danny didn't bother to try looking busy, just set his cup on his desk and leaned back in his chair. Joel was hot, but stuck firmly in the bats-for-the-other-team camp. He'd butched it up lately, though, and leaned against Danny's desk, effortlessly exuding straight guy charm. "Yeah. Shouldn't I be?"

"You know." Joel shrugged. "Long holiday weekend. Mehrdad sent out the email to all the managers, saying they could let everyone go home at three. It's three, so, go home."

"Yeah? Excellent. Very cool. See you Monday." Shutting down his computer, Danny grabbed his phone and left before the big boss, Mehrdad, could change his mind.

He was a little embarrassed about how fast he got out of there, but having already decided he needed to make things up to Aaron, Danny didn't wait to be told twice. The universe was obviously giving him a big thumbs-up, so Danny didn't hesitate.

Danny punched Aaron's number on his speed dial. After several rings, Aaron picked up. "Hey."

"Hey." God, it was good to hear his voice. Just a one word greeting and Danny was smiling already.

"So... you finally called to talk?"

"Talk about... Oh. Sh-- Um, yeah." He was an ass. A hopeless ass.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Aaron's voice flattened, his disappointment coming through loud and clear.

“Aaron. Could I take you out to dinner? I’d really... I want to make things up to you. I’ve been an asshole, and you deserve better. So, please, can I?” Aaron’s silence was the total opposite of what Danny had hoped for. “Aaron?”

“Danny, I... I don’t know.”

In the parking lot now, standing next to his car, Danny ran a hand through his hair. “You’ve got plans?”

“Look, I’m just going to say it straight out, Danny -- don’t jerk me around, ‘cause I can’t take it. If you’re really here, be here. Don’t drop into my life to play boyfriend for a few days or weeks or whatever and then take off when you can’t handle it. Be here or don’t be here, but choose, because I can’t take this in-between stuff any more.”

Like a punch to the gut, Aaron’s words knocked Danny back. He slumped against his car, thinking hard.

“Aaron--”

“Yeah, I know. You didn’t mean to. You weren’t trying to hurt me; that’s just how things turned out. I get it. I get that. All I’m saying’s just... don’t come around any more if you don’t mean it.”

“Aaron, wait.” What could he say? Aaron was right, but it didn’t make it any easier for Danny to hear. Standing on the brink of losing everything he had with Aaron, it took Danny several seconds to realize he was talking to dead air.

Aaron had hung up.

Danny stood staring at the blank screen for a few more seconds, before closing his cell and stuffing it in his pocket.

His instinct was to jump in the car and drive over to Aaron’s place, but it took all of two heartbeats to figure out that Danny had no idea where Aaron was.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Hold on. Danny realized he had a resource he hadn’t tapped yet: Candice. Better than G.P.S., Candice knew what was happening almost before it happened. She would know where Aaron was.

He dug out his phone again and called her.

“Hey, Danny. What’s up?”

He came straight to the point. “Have you seen Aaron?”

“Not today.”

“Know where he is?”

“Maybe, yeah.” That made -- what? -- her third response that was less than helpful, combined with a serious lack of give-a-shit in her voice. Something was up.

“How about giving me a clue. I need to see him, Can’.”

“Danny, you’re a good guy and I like you a lot. But I *love* Aaron. I would stand in front of a train for him -- and I’d take you with me, if need be. So tell me what’s so important that you *need* to see him. Huh?”

Whoa.

He should have known. Aaron was tight with Candice and Deb -- of course they’d be protective. At this point, Danny didn’t have much choice except to fall on his sword. Come clean and beg for their help.

He’d need it.

Aaron’s backpack shifted against his back as he walked, the nylon straps sliding easily against the curl of his fingers, hooked through them as he made his way down Second Street. There were a lot of places he would avoid on the Friday of a big holiday, but Second Street wasn’t one of them. It always had a bit of a party feel to it -- people holding hands, walking with their arms draped across shoulders, on their way to parties and other gatherings.

The little bistros would all be full of friends enjoying each other’s company, kicking off the long weekend with a celebratory adult beverage. The chic specialty stores that lined the street would be busy with people browsing, searching for that special little something that they might not really need, strictly speaking, but that once seen couldn’t be resisted.

Candice had been the one to call them ‘everything you didn’t know you couldn’t live without’ stores, and now Aaron thought of them that way, too. The *ne plus ultra* of its kind in his opinion was Cargo West. He loved the eclectic mix of hundred-dollar martini glasses and inexpensive kids’ toys, high end stationery, Mardi Gras masks, ethnic jewelry and framed original photography. All with a retro vibe that made him feel like a kid again.

Turning in to his favorite store, Aaron stepped through the door and paused for a second, orienting himself amongst the frequently-changed displays, taking a moment to breathe in the atmosphere and mentally change gears. A speaker tucked discreetly behind a life-sized cardboard

cut-out of the robot from “The Day The Earth Stood Still” piped in world music that immediately set a subtly festive mood that Aaron realized he’d been counting on.

He left his backpack with the cashier and wandered aimlessly at first, stopping at anything that caught his interest, picking up a colorful blown glass starfish, only to set it back down with an audible gasp when he saw the price.

Aaron moved on to the black and white photographs hung attractively on wall beneath the stairway to the second floor. The store featured local photographers and pictures of the surrounding neighborhoods -- artsy, original, and unmistakably taken locally. Someday he wouldn’t mind owning one or two, but currently the prices were out of his reach and he didn’t see that changing in the near future.

Turning to the stairs, Aaron began the climb to the upper level, recognizing with his first step that he’d been putting this moment off, anticipating. He’d put in his time looking at the stuff he might be able to afford someday and now he got to play.

Since he seemed to have the place to himself for now, Aaron made a beeline for the toys. New this time was a bin full of colorful wooden animals, and Aaron amused himself by seeing how many different shapes he could find, pressing his thumb into the round wooden bases, relaxing the elastic strings holding them upright. One by one, the pig, the sheep, the cow all collapsed into his hand, snapping up to attention again when he moved his thumb and let the strings pull them to attention again.

The blue donkey and the sheep were going home with him, no question. Whoever had painted them had given the little figures smiling, cheerful faces and Aaron decided he could use some of that about now. He took them with him when moved on to his very favorite part of the store: the clearance table.

Rounding the corner of the L-shaped room, Aaron’s heart registered the knowledge before all the synapses fired and his brain finally made the connection. The dark hair and amazing ass of the guy flipping through matted photography prints at the end of the room could belong only to Danny, and Aaron’s heart picked up speed.

He must have made a noise, because Danny turned, recognition in his eyes, a cautious smile on his face. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Aaron ran his gaze over Danny’s body, feasting on the sight of the broad chest discernable beneath a brightly colored T-shirt and the mocha-colored legs with their dark, crinkly hair, partially covered by khaki cargo shorts.

“Candice told me you’d probably come here. I took a chance.”

“Oh.”

“I needed to see you.” Danny set aside the picture he’d been holding and took a step toward Aaron. “Can we talk?”

“Sure.”

“That’s all I get?” Danny smiled, and Aaron’s heart turned over. “One syllable?”

“Maybe.” Aaron didn’t want to cave immediately. His pride needed him to put up at least a token resistance, but when Danny reached out his hand, Aaron took it, reveling in the smooth warm skin against his palm.

Danny’s smile finally spread to his eyes, and he led Aaron over to a small, two person wooden bench, tugging Aaron down. He took Aaron’s face in his hands. “I missed you.”

And then Danny’s mouth was on him, kissing him, and Aaron was drowning. Drowning in the rush of feelings triggered by just the touch of Danny’s hands, by one simple kiss. Aaron’s eyes had drifted closed as Danny kissed him, but he anchored himself against the tide of emotion rushing up to him.

Hooking his thumbs in Danny’s belt loops, thrilling to the feel of Danny’s hips under his hands, Aaron let himself enjoy the ride for the space of one kiss. Then another. When Danny angled his head for more, though, Aaron pulled back.

“Are we talking yet?” He opened his eyes as Danny did the same, licking his lips and breathing in deeply.

“Sorry. I can’t help it. You’re just... No. I mean... yeah. We’re talking. See?” Danny pulled himself together, letting his hands fall from Aaron’s face, sliding down to take Aaron’s hands in his. “Shit. I can’t...”

“What?”

“I know what I want to say, but...”

“Yeah?” Aaron knew what he wanted to hear, but he was afraid to even hope. What if Danny was on a completely different page? Aaron could be seconds away from an emotional train wreck and not know it.

“...but I’m afraid. Candice told me if I screwed this up she’d hunt me down and nail my balls to the door.”

Aaron narrowed his gaze. “You talked to Candice about this?”

“Just a little. I had to find you, and I knew she’d know where you were.”

“Did she really say that? Nail your balls to the door?”

“Your door, actually. As a warning to others.”

“She does have a tendency to mother hen.”

“A tendency to Sweeny Todd, more like.” Danny was mumbling, looking disturbed enough that he might actually believe Candice would follow through on her threat. Which, come to think of it, she might, possibly.

Holding Aaron’s hands, Danny rubbed his thumbs restlessly across the backs, staring at the points where their flesh touched.

“Danny?”

He glanced up. “Huh?”

“You were saying...”

“So I was thinking we should move in together. You want to?” Danny blurted it all out in one breath, running the words together so that it took Aaron a couple of extra seconds to decipher them.

“What’s up? You get kicked out of your place or something?”

“What? No. Why?” Danny looked genuinely puzzled.

Aaron cocked his head, trying to read what was going on behind Danny’s eyes, because something was obviously up. “No reason. It’s just kind of random. Don’t you think?”

“No, it’s not. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. You mean you haven’t?”

Danny had such beautiful eyes -- a dark, liquid brown that melted Aaron every time. He’d fallen in love with those eyes, and the man behind them, months ago. Almost right from the start. But a one-sided relationship didn’t interest him and no way was he going to settle for a part-time boyfriend. “Sure. I’ve thought about it. But I know how I feel. What I don’t know is how you feel, or why suddenly you’re interested in moving in. Dude, you just told me you weren’t sure we were good for each other. What was that all about?”

Looking up at the ceiling for a moment, Danny took Aaron’s hands in a tighter grip before gazing intently into his eyes. “You scare me, sometimes.”

“*What?*” Aaron’s jaw dropped.

“You’re so fearless and... and... dude, you were blowing the captain of the football team in the locker room every afternoon? How am I supposed to compete with that?”

“Danny, it was just sex. It was... What you and I do is way different. Way different. And, for the record, he wasn’t the captain.”

“Oh, good. I feel so much better now.”

Aaron shrugged. “I know what I want, and I'm not going to settle.”

“Yeah? What do you want?”

It was finally here -- do or die time. This might be the final straw that pushed Danny the rest of the way out the door. Heart pounding, Aaron took a deep breath and waded in.

“I want a boyfriend who's hot for me. Who's crazy about me. Who not only knows it, but who has the balls to own it. And he has to be there for me. Not all the time, but most of it, anyway. Not just when it's convenient or when he's looking to get laid.”

“Perfect. 'Cause that's me.” Hooking an arm around Aaron’s neck, Danny kissed him.

Aaron groaned. “Danny, no. You can't just say what you think I want to hear. It's got to be real.”

To his credit, Danny didn’t flinch. Hanging his head for a moment, Danny looked up through the curly fringe of his bangs, and Aaron gulped. He just wasn’t capable of saying no to Danny, not when those soul-melting eyes were pinned on him. What would Danny want from him? “I probably deserve that. I haven't been the most... reliable.”

Aaron bit down hard on the urge to reassure, to say that everything had been just fine. Because if he was really honest with himself, it hadn't been. He'd been living this whole time with the fear that Danny would leave him and that was no way to live.

So what exactly did he want, then? Was Candice right? Did he want something like -- it was hard to get his mind to even form the word -- like marriage, to make him feel secure?

He wasn't a kid, for sure, but on the rare occasions he'd even considered the possibility, Aaron had imagined he'd be much older. Thirty, at least.

“What do *you* want, Danny?”

“Closing in ten minutes.” A feminine voice, tinged with embarrassment, called out from across the room.

They glanced up, startled, as the last glimpse of peasant skirt disappeared back down the stairs. When their gazes met again, Aaron knew that the exact same amusement he read on Danny’s face was mirrored on his own and burst out laughing.

It was too perfect.

Danny was laughing right along with him. “What? She’s never seen two gay guys having an intense conversation in her loft before? Dude, this is Belmont Shore. What the fuck?”

When had he fallen into Danny’s arms? Aaron had no idea, but one minute they were laughing together and the next he found himself nose to nose with Danny, arms around Danny’s neck, their lips scant inches apart. Heart pounding, he could barely draw a breath and the look in Danny’s eyes was beyond intense. “Danny.” His voice came out a husky whisper.

“Let’s get out of here.” Danny stood. “C’mon.”

Aaron nodded and followed, down the stairs, clutching Danny’s hand like a penitent soul who’d just been handed a road map to the hereafter. Two steps from the door, Aaron stopped dead. “Wait. My backpack.”

He’d never know how he managed to remember, but he turned back to find the embarrassed sales clerk holding out his bag. He thanked her and practically sprinted to the door where Danny stood waiting. After cramming his bike into the back of Danny’s car, they drove the rest of the way to Aaron’s place without saying a word.

Aaron knew why he was keeping quiet: Danny was back, and he didn’t want to break the spell. Maybe this time Danny was back for good.

In the abstract, all of his talk about not wanting to settle was absolutely true. But in the real world it was just that: a bunch of talk.

When they turned the corner onto Aaron’s street -- miracle of miracles -- they found a spot practically on Aaron’s doorstep and made it inside in seconds flat. Danny tugged at his hand and Aaron couldn’t find it in him to even care when his bike went down with a thump.

Because Danny was kissing him and he was kissing Danny back, arms wrapped tight around Danny’s neck, Danny crushing Aaron to him.

Danny walked him backward a few steps and finally just picked him up and manhandled him over to the bed, tumbling them both down. Aaron ended up on his back, and Danny was holding Aaron’s hands above his head while Danny kissed him silly.

Rules were stupid.

Cramming a relationship into predefined roles was archaic.

What was a bunch of old school ideas about how things were supposed to go compared to *this*? He had the most amazing, funniest, most sexy man in the whole world in his bed, loving him.

Aaron spread his legs while Danny pressed down onto him, grinding their cocks together. Amazing, incredible, delicious. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

Jerking his head up, Danny stared down at Aaron, eyes at first all passionate and shocked, gradually softening. Dark, deep, warm brown eyes, filled with the tenderest expression Aaron had ever seen.

“Aaron.” Danny kissed him and Aaron returned the kiss. “I mean it -- I am that man. I *swear* to you. Crazy about you, hot for you, I want to be there for you. Please. Let me? Let me stay?”

Panting, Aaron could only stare, speechless. He couldn’t catch his breath. Every time he tried, the look in Danny’s eyes stole it away again.

God, please, *please* don’t let this be a dream.

The slow smile that came to Danny’s face brought an answering smile from Aaron, who only gradually realized he was nodding. Gazing up into Danny’s eyes, his body wordlessly signaled what was already in his heart. Had been for who knew how long?

“I love you.”

“I love you so much.”

Like magic, their clothing was gone, and Danny was rocking into him, filling Aaron’s body the way he filled Aaron’s heart. Mouths couldn’t stop kissing; hands touched, stroked, caressed. Aaron’s whole body quivered, attuned to Danny’s smallest move and, likewise, Danny seemed to know exactly where to touch, how to touch Aaron.

It was so good, so amazingly good, Aaron almost couldn’t stand it. Almost. His heart was filled to bursting and Danny was touching him, filling him, loving him. His entire being vibrated, hummed, his heart beating in time with Danny’s.

Then he was coming, maybe harder than he ever had in his life, jerking helplessly as hot come splashed his stomach and then Danny was coming, arching into Aaron as his hips slowed, still pounding slowly, before eventually slowing down completely and stopping.

Aaron lay curled against Danny, their legs entwined, arms wrapped around each other as though the world would end if anything more substantial than a bit of air came between them.

Who knew?

Maybe it would.

His heart was filled to bursting with love for this man. He couldn’t quite get his eyes to open, but Aaron didn’t really need them to find Danny’s face and place another soft kiss there.

In the morning, Aaron woke to the smell of coffee as Danny sat down, the bed moving under him as he set the cup on the headboard. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Huh? What?” Aaron shoved himself up with his arms, studying Danny’s face for clues. Leaning on one elbow, Aaron rolled to his side.

“I got you this.” Extending his hand, Danny uncurled his fingers to reveal... a ring?

A ring.

Whoa.

“Danny?” Aaron finally pried his gaze away from Danny’s open hand and dragged it up to Danny’s eyes, to find them staring fixedly at the ring. “What... ?” He couldn’t finish, couldn’t force the words past his uncooperative lips.

“It’s for you. To wear.”

“Does this mean we’re going steady?” Aaron touched it gingerly, again trying to get Danny to meet his gaze.

Danny moved quickly, shoving him backward. “Jesus, Preston. I’m trying for a moment here. Could you help me out just a little bit?”

They both laughed, and Aaron pushed himself back up again, but the tension lingered.

“Danny, I... What’s it mean?”

“It’s, like, a promise. It’s my promise to you, to be here. For you. For us.”

“Huh. Okay. I like that. But what about you? Is there one for you, too?”

Aaron could swear that was a tinge of red staining Danny’s ears and cheeks as Danny shrugged and looked away. “I figured, you know, you could pick one out for me. Maybe. If you want.”

“I like that idea.” Reaching out a finger, Aaron stroked Danny’s knee. “You realize Candice will insist this means we’re engaged, don’t you? She’ll have the whole wedding planned and the church booked before you can say ‘honeymoon in Palm Springs.’”

Danny drew a deep breath and took Aaron’s hand in his, sliding the ring over Aaron’s finger. “How about ‘engaged to be engaged’?”

“Deal.”

Absolutely You

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