

*A Sip...*



*A Torquere Press Short*

***A Sweet Gesture***  
***By Anah Crow***

*With thanks to V, whose own storytelling inspired this.*

Mark pulled the bandana from his head and used it to wipe sweat from his brow. The rows of fresh little tomato plants he'd just put in looked terrifically tidy at the moment, pleasingly organized. That wouldn't last, of course. The plants would get wild and unruly and then burst out with pale green globes that would swell and redden until they were juicy and sweet.

Mark plucked a rogue sprout of grass from between the feathery fronds of the carrots that were starting to flourish. The sun beat down on his broad, bare shoulders and he sighed, stretching and straightening to take the strain off of his lower back. It was time for some iced tea. It should be cold by now.

His bare feet crushed the resilient grass down as he padded across his backyard. It was just a square of green and a square of brick patio bordered by a high fence, but it was his to play in and it felt good to have the space to himself. Felix, his Maine Coon cat, was waiting just inside the patio door, rubbing against the glass as though he could convince it to open for him.

“You can come out once I get my tea,” Mark promised, tugging at the door handle. Felix needed watching until Mark was sure he was too fat to get his fuzzy butt up onto the top of the fence to go courting. Neutering Felix hadn’t slowed him down a bit. Oblivious, he went on with his romances.

Mark tugged at the door again with a grunt. The damn thing was stuck. He’d have to clean out the track or something. When the door didn’t yield again, Mark crouched down to see what was wrong. Inside the glass, Felix meowed curiously and sniffed at the track as though he were going to solve the problem.

It was only fair that Felix solve the problem, since he’d obviously caused it. The wretched animal had knocked the safety bar down across the bottom of the door in his attempts to find a way out.

“Felix!” Mark thumped his hand against the glass and Felix nuzzled the other side affectionately. “Damn cat.”

The wooden fence around the garden was almost six feet tall – Mark could just see over it – and he wasn’t sure it would hold his weight if he climbed it. Of course, the tall, matching gate to the front was locked, to keep the neighborhood kids out of the garden, and the key was hanging just inside the back door.

Maybe the gate would hold his weight better. Mark put his hands on the top, braced one foot against the strapping that held the thing together, and pushed off. The gate rattled and shook ominously under Mark’s weight and he winced. He was going to go over with the whole thing. Replacing it was going to be a bitch.

“Need help?” The voice was light and amused. Mark looked over to see his neighbor coming out of his own yard with a brown bag of grass clipping in his arms. The gate protested and Mark let himself drop back down. The guy was cute, too. Mark hardly saw him or he’d have introduced himself. He’d met the other occupant shortly after moving in two weeks ago, a decent-looking guy named Sandy who drove one of those ridiculously large pickups.

“The cat locked me out.” Mark thumped his forehead against the gate, and then stood on his toes to look over at his neighbor. “Think you could let me in? Front door key’s behind the condo number.”

It was nice that man was trying not to laugh. “Yeah. No problem.” He put the bag down and loped off to the front of Mark’s house.

Leggy, slim, graceful... definitely Mark’s type. But not available, Mark reminded himself. He went to the back door in time to see Felix go bounding off toward the front door. Felix loved company; he was the worst attack cat in the universe.

Mark waited, feeling like a complete moron, while the neighbor flipped the bar back up, clipped it in place, and slid the patio door open.

“Hey,” Mark said sheepishly. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” The neighbor offered him the front door key. “Nice to finally meet you. I’m Aaron.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Mark pocketed the key and then shook Aaron’s hand, hoping his wasn’t too grimy. “I’m an idiot.” He stepped into the house and Aaron slid the door shut before Felix could get out.

“You’re not,” Aaron assured him. “You just have a dangerous cat.” When Mark looked over, Aaron’s expression was completely solemn except for a little twitch at the corner of his pretty lips.

Definitely cute, from the soft blond hair falling in his green eyes to the freckled nose to the way he stood with his hands in the back pockets of his faded jeans and one hip out. If the Electronic Frontier Foundation t-shirt had been a little tighter, Mark was sure he’d be seeing a smooth chest and belly. Very nice, and Mark was staring, which was very wrong.

“Well, okay,” he said, grinning and forcing himself not to look further. “I’m Mark. But my middle name is actually Idiot. After my dad. You want some iced tea? I was coming in for some.”

That got him a laugh, a nice one. Aaron tilted his head like he was considering Mark’s offer. “Sure,” he said, after a moment. “Work can wait.”

Mark poured two large glasses, ignoring Felix who was running between him and the back door, attempting to get Mark to let him out. “Felix thinks we should take this outside,” Mark noted dryly. “I should have named him Idiot, too, the way he’s acting.”

“He’s ridiculously cute,” Aaron said approvingly. “Can he go outside?”

“Yep. I’m still keeping an eye on him to see if he can get up onto the top of the fence.” Mark followed Aaron and Felix outside. “He’s a bit of a lady’s man, so I want to be sure he’s not going to go wandering before I let him out on his own.” Felix romped, for some value of romping when performed by a fat ball of fur, over to the garden where Mark had planted the catnip. “Of course, he doesn’t do much at all when he’s high.”

Aaron laughed again and took the glass Mark offered him, and then followed Mark’s lead, sprawling in one of the Algonquin chairs in the sun. “Who does?” he asked, grinning as he watched Felix flop blissfully in the catnip patch. “At least his green stuff’s legal.”

Mark laughed at that. “Yeah, lucky bastard. Of course, he’s had his balls cut off, so I don’t envy him that much.”

“Ouch, no.” Aaron shook his head. “Still... he doesn’t seem to care.” Felix had all four paws in the air and was drooling happily into the crushed catnip. “Guess it all evens out.”

“When do you need to be at work?” Mark checked his watch. He didn’t want Aaron to run late on account of being polite.

“Oh, I work at home.” Aaron looked over at Mark and gave him a smile. “Programming and stuff. I’m usually sleeping right now, but I forgot to pull the shade and the sun lured me outside. Contrary to popular belief, it does not make me burst into flames. This a day off for you?”

“Well, yes.” Mark had taken the day off work to do a little gardening. “But I work from home as well. Freelance writing. I do some acting now and again, when I can be bothered to go to casting calls, but it’s more just to keep me from going stir-crazy and to give me an excuse to work out.

“I could use one of those.” Aaron’s eyes ran the length of Mark’s body and Mark was suddenly extremely aware that he was wearing nothing but a pair of old denim shorts.

“You could come with me,” Mark offered, before he could stop himself.

“Sandy’s always trying to get me to go,” Aaron said. Mark could hear the eye roll behind the words even though Aaron’s expression stayed neutral. “You’d think a dingy, little room full of half-dressed, sweaty, grunting men would be my thing, but it’s really not.”

“Somehow when you say it like that, it does sound unappealing,” Mark admitted. “Maybe it’s the dingy part. If you change your mind, you can always come with me to my gym. Switch out ‘dingy little’ for ‘airy and immaculate’ and it might be nicer.” He’d go out of his head if he had to work out somewhere that wasn’t clean and orderly.

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Aaron flashed Mark a smile that was so sweet that it made Mark grumble internally about whether or not Sandy deserved someone so cute.

Mark made himself settle back down into his chair and enjoy the look of his garden, in spite of the cat in the corner rumpling the catnip bed to his own liking. The air smelled hot and green and minty, the iced tea was perfect, and Mark had company until Aaron had to go back to work. There was nothing here that should put his temper off. The wind came up and teased his sweaty hair, cooling him down. Everything was good.

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The sun didn’t last more than a couple more days before it gave way to rain. As much as Mark disliked getting caught in the downpour on his motorcycle, he was glad for it, if only for the sake of the green things growing. He parked the bike in front of his car in his spot – there was just enough room for the two – and pulled the sodden notice that the parking lot was going to be repaved out from under one windshield wiper on the car. While he was trying to decipher the dates, Aaron’s little Volkswagen pulled in and the slender man got out to unload groceries from the trunk.

Mark shoved the notice in his jacket pocket, tucked his helmet under his arm and sloshed over. “Hey, need some help?”

Aaron startled and nearly dropped the two bags he had in his arms. “Oh, Mark. Hi. Sure.” The rain was turning his pale hair dark, tracing lines over his features, and clinging to his lashes. “There’s some heavy stuff in there. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Mark looked in to see two cases of beer and a bouquet of flowers on top of them still in the trunk. “Don’t worry.” He plunked his helmet down next to the flowers and lifted the lot out with a smooth movement. Somehow, and he was pleased as hell about it, he managed to shut the trunk with his elbow as well. “Expecting company?”

“No, not really.” Aaron led the way to his condo. There was a pause while he juggled the bags, got his key in the lock, and opened the door. “Just making sure Sandy has what he wants when he gets home from work.”

“And what he wants is flowers?” Mark teased. He wiped his boots on the mat and tagged along as Aaron took the groceries into the kitchen.

Aaron plunked the bags down on the counter and spun around. He stuck his tongue out at Mark and snatched the flowers away. “They’re mine,” he said, tossing his wet hair out of his eyes. “I’d get them for Sandy but he’s not really that kind of guy, and he’s not about to get them for me. If no one’s going to make sweet gestures for me, I’ll just make them for myself. I’m not bothered. If you’ll put the beer down, I’ll load the fridge up later.”

Laughing, Mark put the beer down by the fridge, then picked up his helmet. “Whatever makes you happy,” he said.

“Someone trained you well.” Aaron looked up from unwrapping the flowers and gave Mark a sweet smile.

“Nah, I just came this way.” Mark returned the smile, trying to ignore the way Aaron’s white cotton shirt clung to the lines of his shoulders and chest now that it was slightly damp. He’d been right; Aaron had a nice body for a guy who claimed not to work out. Yoga or pilates or something, probably. Mark now had to pull his mind away from the idea of Aaron’s body bent into interesting poses. “Need anything else?”

“I think I’m good, unless you know anything about databases. I’m behind schedule, as usual. If I need muscle during the day, I’ll come get you from now on,” Aaron promised.

“Databases are not my thing,” Mark admitted. “You can come and get me any time, though.” *For anything. Seriously.* Even while he was thinking it, he was hoping that it didn’t come through in his voice. He headed for the door. “I can let myself out.”

“Thanks, Mark,” Aaron called after him. Mark looked over one shoulder to see Aaron pondering the merits of two different vases while biting his lip. He was standing with that same little hip-tilt as before. If that wasn’t absolutely adorable, Mark didn’t know what was.

He closed the door behind him and sighed heavily. Not his.

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The rain didn’t manage to keep up beyond the weekend, of course. The moment the forecast was dry, the sun still hiding behind the trees early on Monday morning, Mark was outside armed with buckets of hot soapy water, a scrub brush, and a sponge. The rest of his car cleaning kit was spread out on the grass. After a moment’s consideration, he stripped off his shirt and picked up the scrub brush. The car and the bike were both a disgrace.

Mark was racing to beat the direct sun, trying to get car and bike done so they wouldn’t get spotty as they dried, when he realized that he was hearing cheery whistling and the jingle of keys. He looked over his shoulder to see Sandy standing on the walkway, watching him work. The guy was good looking in that rough way, the kind you hoped was strong and reliable. The way Sandy was looking at him, though, Mark suddenly had doubts about the reliable part and that pissed him off unreasonably.

“Don’t mind me,” Sandy said lightly. He had a heavy tool belt slung over his shoulder and was dressed for work on some job site. Mark could smell the fresh coffee from the cup in Sandy’s hand and it reminded him that he hadn’t had any yet. “Nice morning.”

Mark tried to shake the feeling that Sandy wasn't talking about the morning and straightened, wiping his hands off on a towel that was hanging out of his pocket. "Yeah. Finally dry, in time for the paving to start."

"Yeah, that's going to be a pain in the ass." Sandy continued on to his pickup next to Mark's car. "Where are you putting your car and bike?"

"No idea." Mark made a face; he hadn't thought about it yet and he should have. "Don't want to leave them just anywhere, have some kids key them up or anything."

Sandy slung his tool belt into the truck and leaned in to put his coffee down. "Well," he said, as he was getting in, "the guy who owns the car rental place at the intersection down at the lights is a friend of mine, said we could park there. They have lights and security. I could tell him to expect you, too." He slammed the door and rolled the window down to hear Mark's answer.

It would be damned convenient not to have to park more than a couple blocks away.

"That would be great." Maybe Sandy wasn't such a bad guy. It wasn't like Mark wasn't guilty of checking Aaron out. The thought made him feel like he was the dog here. "Thanks."

"No problem, man." Sandy gave Mark a breezy salute and a grin. "What are neighbors for? I'll let him know."

Maybe Sandy wasn't into flowers and such, but he seemed decent and thoughtful enough. Mark decided to change his mind about the man. He should have the couple over for dinner some time. That would be nice. Neighborly. He picked up the scrub brush again and attacked the motorcycle's back wheel. No sense wasting time on thinking the worst of someone who didn't deserve it.

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"Of course, they missed that spot when they paved." Mark held his coffee gingerly, trying not to slosh on things, as his friend Nate accidentally drove through the pothole at the entrance to the condo complex. People who didn't live here always drove right through it; people who did swung wide and nearly took the side mirror off of any car coming the other way.

"Of course." Nate pushed his sunglasses up and scowled. "Maybe they have a deal with an auto shop that puts in suspensions."

"This is what you get for driving me to my car." Mark settled back in the passenger seat of Nate's luxury sedan and tried not to make contented noises about the leather upholstery. It was enough to make him reconsider his responsible, little hybrid car.

“I was going to the gym anyway.” Nate reached over and hit Mark on the shoulder without looking. “It’s no trouble.”

“Ow. Fine.” Mark edged toward the door. “You hit hard for an accountant.”

“Funny, you’re always telling me different in the ring.” Nate laughed and reached for his own coffee while they idled at a crosswalk where the crossing guard was escorting kids across the street.

“Yeah, well, I’m not expecting to be assaulted before I’m caffienated,” Mark said, mock pouting. Nate just laughed at him. “Heartless bitch.”

“You love me.” Nate was pretty sure that everyone loved him, in the least annoying way possible. He made Mark feel like everyone loved him, too, and that the world ought to smarten up about it.

Mark made a non-committal noise, trying not to laugh, and drank his coffee. He was not nearly awake enough for Nate being a dork in the car and he needed to drink this coffee before he spilled it.

They made it into the lot at the car rental center without incident, not a drop of coffee spilled. When he got out, Mark waved at the girl on duty vacuuming out the cars. “I’ll be back later for the bike,” he promised. He noted that Sandy’s truck and Aaron’s car were both gone.

“Sure thing, man.” The girl shrugged and dove back into the car with the vacuum in hand.

Nate hit the horn lightly and waved at Mark. “See you at the gym.”

“Thanks.” Mark waved goodbye and headed for his car as Nate pulled away.

There was something under one wiper and Mark sighed. If the guy who ran this place was going to charge him, Mark was going to be annoyed. No, on closer observation, it was a note written on a napkin from a fast food joint. Mark tugged it out. Maybe from Aaron? The writing was a scrawl of capital letters.

*HEY MARK.*

*I CAN'T HELP BUT NOTICE HOW HOT YOU ARE – WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING, KEEP DOING IT – THE WAY YOU KEEP HANGING AROUND IN NOTHING BUT THOSE GREAT LITTLE SHORTS. YOU KNOW I WOULDN'T EVER HURT MY BOY, BUT IF YOU'RE EVER LONELY YOU COULD GIVE ME A CALL. IF YOU'RE NOT INTERESTED, JUST FORGET THIS. OTHERWISE, CALL ME. YOU WON'T BE SORRY.*

*S.*



There was a cell phone number at the bottom. Mark stared at the note, and read it again.

“What the fuck?” He said it out loud, loud enough that a man dropping his car off at the office looked over, alarmed. “Sorry, sorry...” Mark got his own car open and collapsed in the driver’s seat. He wanted yell at someone, or hit something. *I would so be sorry, because I’d be fucking around on a really sweet guy*, he thought. *And if I ever caught you doing it, I’d make you sorry, too.* Being right usually felt so much better than this.

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“A note.” Mark punched the bag and Nate, bracing it, grunted. “I can’t even fucking hit him.” He swung the other fist and Nate made a strangled noise, then peered around the bag at Mark. Nate’s short black curls were glossy with sweat and his dark cheeks were flushed with exertion.

“Okay, he’s a bastard. But can we stop hurting Nate even though there’s a seventy-pound bag in the way?” Nate asked. “Or can we go and you can hit the hundred-pound bag? Because I have to work today. Using my arms. And the rest of me.”

“Sorry.” Mark scrubbed at his face with one arm. “I just... what the fuck do I do, Nate? I have to tell Aaron, right?”

“I don’t know.” Nate pushed the bag aside and came over to slide his arm around Mark’s shoulders. “Wait until you’re not so full of all that righteous wrath. Maybe say something to Sandy instead. In the meantime, let’s hit the showers. Punching things isn’t making you less pissed off and I have a client in an hour.”

Mark leaned into Nate and sighed. “Considered batting for my team lately?”

“My wife would kill me, man,” Nate pointed out, laughing. “But if my little brother ever figures out where the closet door is, you’re the first guy I’ll call.”

Mark couldn’t help laughing at that. “That makes me feel marginally better.”

“I’ll take marginally better.” Nate bumped Mark away with his hip and then shoved him toward the showers. “Let’s go, neat freak. I know you’re already thinking about what setting you’re going to wash those new socks on.”

“I am not,” Mark protested as he shouldered past the door and into the locker room.

“You are feeling bad.” Nate was all sympathy. “I’ll buy you a new mop or something.”

“Shut up.” Mark couldn’t help laughing again, but under it, he really did feel like shit. Funny that he’d actually wanted this to be the truth before it happened. Knowing that made him feel even worse.

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Avoiding Aaron was harder than Mark had expected, what with Aaron being mostly nocturnal and Mark being out the door to hit the gym before sunrise most mornings. It was easier to avoid Sandy because Mark didn't care what the man thought. He just looked the other way and ignored the bastard. It kept Mark from punching Sandy's face in, so it was a decent strategy. None of it meant Mark was happy, though.

He pulled the back door open and looked out into the yard. "Felix?" Where the hell was the cat? "If you're eating tomato plants again..." Mark stomped out toward the garden. Felix had some kind of vendetta against the tomato plants and, once in a while, would embark on a campaign to oppress them all suitably. It made a mess in the garden and last time Mark had to shave Felix's bottom because of the havoc that eating tomato leaves wreaked on the cat's digestive tract.

Felix was not in the tomatoes or in the catnip, nor was he wallowing in the manure heap where Mark was starting pumpkins and watermelon. That was almost a relief since Mark was getting tired of bathing the little creep, except that there was no Felix. Maybe he'd forgotten about letting Felix in?

Felix wasn't on the main floor, not even wedged under the comfortable chair where he got stuck on occasion. He wasn't upstairs, he wasn't in his litter box, and he wasn't in Mark's bed or his own bed. Mark ran down to the basement, calling the cat's name.

Had he shut Felix in down there? He didn't remember going down there. Mark was on his knees, shining a flashlight under the water heater, when the doorbell rang.

"This had better be good." Mark stormed upstairs and wrenched the door open, flashlight still clenched in one fist.

Aaron stood there with a grubby, grassy Felix sprawled happily in his arms. The damn cat was purring like a small, fat motorcycle in a fur coat. "Hi," Aaron said tentatively. "I think he squeezed under the fence."

"How the hell did you manage to 'squeeze' anywhere?" Mark picked Felix up and held him at eye-level. "You can hardly get into your super-sized litter box with the extra wide opening." Felix yawned, showing off a perfectly healthy set of white fangs. It was cute, but it usually meant 'my pretty teeth are going to be in your eyeball when I'm done yawning, human scum'. Mark snuggled Felix against him the way he liked and made himself look at Aaron instead. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Aaron gave Mark that sweet smile and scratched Felix's head. "I'll see if I can't find out where he got in and block it on my side." Felix started purring again and looked smug.

"Yeah. I'll look on mine. Thanks again." Mark turned away, feeling vaguely ill.

“Mark.” Aaron’s voice was soft and, damn it, hurt.

“Yeah?” Mark turned around slowly. Felix took advantage of his distraction to twist loose, clawing Mark’s arm with a neat set of stripes, and landed on the floor with a thud. As soon as all four paws were down, Felix bolted for the stairs. “Stay off the bed, you little bastard,” Mark shouted after him, torn between chasing the cat down and staying to talk to Aaron. “Sorry,” he said, turning back to Aaron. “White bed cover, dirty cat.”

Aaron laughed a little, but his eyes stayed sad. “Did I say something wrong?” he asked quietly. He leaned in the doorway, hands in the back pockets of his jeans, standing at that crooked little angle that made Mark want to put his hands on those slim hips and pull Aaron in for a kiss.

“No,” Mark said. “I’ve just been really busy.” It was a terrible lie, and Mark was a lousy liar.

Aaron sighed and let his head fall back against the doorjamb, staring up blankly. “Damn it.” He inhaled and exhaled slowly, then looked at Mark again. “Did Sandy say something, do something?”

Mark couldn’t lie to those sad green eyes. It was the resignation in them that jerked at his heart so hard that he had trouble speaking. “He left me a note,” Mark admitted. “It was just a note, and I’m sure it was nothing.”

Aaron just gave him a look that said ‘bullshit’ louder than any words could and smiled, crooked and thin. “The rule is that he’s supposed to keep it where I can’t see it,” he said. “And you’re…” Aaron waved his hand to indicate the distance between their houses.

“I should have told you.” Mark rubbed at the scratches on his arm, wiping the blood away. “I’m sorry. I told you I was an idiot.”

“You’re only an idiot for rubbing dirt into cat scratches.” Aaron sighed and stepped inside, then pushed Mark toward the kitchen. “Go wash that off. Go on.”

“I’m sorry,” Mark said again. Aaron was right, though. His hands were dirty, so were Felix’s claws. At the kitchen sink, he ran hot water and lathered soap up to both elbows. “I was just trying to figure out how not to hurt your feelings.”

“Avoiding me wasn’t working,” Aaron said. He offered Mark a clean dish towel once Mark was done rinsing.

“Guess not.” Mark looked Aaron over, hating the tired slump of Aaron’s shoulders. Mark wanted to lean over and kiss Aaron and hold him and make it better.

“You’re my friend.” Aaron put his hands back in his pockets and shrugged. “The least he could do is not ruin that for me.”

“True.” Mark laughed a little. “I don’t think I could be interested in anyone who’d hurt you. Even if I’d been interested in them otherwise. No idea what it says about me that he’d ask.”

“I know what it says about me.” Aaron watched Mark blot blood off of his arm.

“Hey.” Mark tossed the towel aside so he could reach out and take Aaron by the shoulders. Aaron looked up at him, quiet and sad, waiting. “It doesn’t say shit about you. Maybe he had some idea that I was wishing one of you was single, but it wasn’t him I was thinking about.”

Aaron’s eyes widened and then he frowned. He wrinkled his nose a little when he was puzzled, and that was as sweet as the way he bit his lip when he was thinking and the way he stood that Mark found so adorable. “Me?” he asked, hesitating as though there were someone else Mark could be talking about.

“Yeah.” Mark let his hands slide over Aaron’s shoulders and down, pulling them away before he gave in to the urge to kiss Aaron’s soft mouth. “You. I’ve just spent the last two weeks trying to figure out how not to beat the shit out of him every time I see him, and how to make it all better for you.”

“You just did.” Aaron stepped forward and stood on his toes to kiss Mark on the cheek, his hand warm where he put it over Mark’s heart to keep his balance. “At least as much anyone but me can.”

The gesture and the quiet reassurance stunned Mark into immobility for a moment and then he realized that Aaron was leaving. “Aaron...”

“It’ll be fine.” Aaron stopped in the door to the hall to give Mark a smile. “You can stop avoiding me if you want. Okay?”

“Okay.” Mark realized that he had to let Aaron go or he’d do something stupid right now. “I’ll see you around.”

“You will,” Aaron promised. “And keep your damn cat out of my yard.” He winked at Mark and Mark laughed.

“I will. Don’t worry.” He followed Aaron a little way, then stopped and let him walk out the door. It hurt to do. He liked Aaron more all the time and at least they were friends. It wasn’t enough, but Mark didn’t want to make do without it.

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“Did you tell just him?” Nate asked the question low as he handed Mark half a dozen beers that he’d just pulled out of the fridge. “I thought you weren’t going to.”

“He kind of knew. And figured it out. Seems this isn’t anything new; Sandy’s just not supposed to do it in his own backyard.” Mark managed to get all the beer in his grasp. “There’s dip behind that jar of pickles.”

“You’re so damn domestic,” Nate said, getting the dip and the antipasto plate out. “So, it’s okay, then?”

“I work at home,” Mark said defensively. “I’m domestic by definition. And it’s okay between us. Otherwise, I don’t know.”

“That’s enough.” Nate nudged the fridge closed.

“Need help?” Tony came rolling in from the front hall, rubbing his hands together.

“Hey, I didn’t think you were going to make it!” Mark nodded toward the cupboard. “Get the chips out.”

“I traded shifts with Sally so she could go to some shower thing on the weekend,” Tony said. He knew where everything in Mark’s kitchen was, just like the rest of the poker-and-bikes group did. “Left my gun and my badge behind and got a ride over since I plan to drink all your beer. Can I get a lift back, Nate?”

“You got it, but only if you don’t take all my money,” Nate said as he headed into the dining room where the others – Frank, Melissa, and Jal – were waiting for them.

“It’s a natural thing,” Tony protested. “You can’t stop it!”

“Yeah, losing seems to come natural to you guys,” Melissa agreed. She took the beer Mark offered her and grinned at him. Unfortunately, she was right. Poker was just one thing Melissa worked at doing better than most of the men around her.

“We’ll see.” Mark made a face at her. He went to sit down, but Felix was already in his chair. “Nice try, Felix.”

“Maybe you should let him play,” Jal suggested. “Maybe he can beat Mel. Pussy versus...” He didn’t get to finish before Nate cuffed him in the head at the same time as two people kicked him under the table. “Hey!” Melissa was too busy not choking on her beer to retaliate.

“Poker now.” Mark threatened Felix with his beer, which Felix despised, and the cat fled the area. “Fighting later.” He couldn’t have known how right he was going to be.

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“My deal,” Nate said, reaching for the cards. He pushed his glasses up onto his head and started to shuffle.

“More beer?” Tony got up and started collecting bottles.

It was a perfect night. A sultry wind crept in at the windows and through the patio doors, bringing the green scent of summer with it. Junebugs courted the lamp at the back door with a staticky hum. Felix had abandoned his poker aspirations and was standing on his back feet, pawing at the screen.

“Please.” Mark got up to let the damn cat out before he clawed his way out. “Do you really think you’re going to catch anything?” Felix ignored him and bounced out as soon as Mark slid the screen back. “Gravity is not on your side.”

One poor bug had fallen to the ground, having stunned itself against the lamp, and Felix pounced on it with both front paws. Mark laughed and shook his head. “Maybe I was wrong.” He leaned in the doorway, enjoying the noises of the night until they were broken by the sound of shattering glass from next door. Raised voices followed immediately and Mark felt sick.

He scooped Felix up and hauled him inside, closing the screen. The minute Felix was down, he spat his bug out and, revived by its cat-spit bath, it began lurching about drunkenly. Mark couldn’t bring himself to care just now. He came back to the table, trying to decide what to do about it. Doing nothing wasn’t an option.

Tony was standing by the table, hands full of beers, head cocked to one side. “Sounds suspiciously like a domestic,” he said, putting the beer down carefully.

“I’ll go talk to them.” Mark was just going to talk. He wasn’t going to go around hitting anyone tonight.

“I think I’ll come with you.” There was the sound of Nate’s glasses hitting the table and his chair scraping back.

“I’ll have to put a call in anyway; that sounds nasty. Be careful,” Tony called after them. “I’ll be right over. I don’t want to have to explain anything, you two.”

“You won’t,” Mark promised.

Through the front door of Aaron and Sandy’s place, he could hear them clearly. It was Sandy doing most of the yelling, spewing ugliness and accusations. He sounded outright drunk. Mark pounded on the door and waited.

“You could probably break it in,” Nate said, helpfully.

“Just wait,” Mark snapped. Seconds later, Sandy yanked the door open and, for a moment, Mark thought the man was going to just keep coming at him. “Everything okay?” The calm that was spreading through him made it feel like everything was slower, clearer.

“Yeah. Not that it’s any of your fucking business.” Sandy tried to slam the door, but Mark put his hand out to stop it.

“I want to talk to Aaron,” he said quietly. “It’s my business when my friends, including a cop who has to call it in, can hear everything.”

“I’m okay.” Aaron came down the stairs and threw a bag into the hallway. “Sandy was just leaving.” He sounded unsettled; Mark couldn’t see him well from the doorway.

“Do you want to come over until he does?” Mark wanted to shove Sandy out of the way to get to Aaron, but the calm made him wait.

“He can stay here.” Sandy pushed away from the door and grabbed the bag. “I’ll be back in the morning,” he spat at Aaron. It sounded like a threat.

“You can get the rest of your things then.” Aaron stood on the stairs, arms crossed over his chest, looking furious. His face was pale except for an angry red splotch on one cheek.

Mark stepped back as Sandy lurched out. At least the man wasn’t stupid enough to pick a fight. He was, however, stupid enough to head straight for his truck. Tony came wandering across the lawn between the porches, watching curiously.

“I’d say that man’s drunk,” he noted blandly. He brought his cell phone back to his ear. “Jenny, that 10-16 is done, but one of the parties is getting into a red pickup and he definitely looks like he shouldn’t be driving. I’d grab him, but I’m three beers in already.” He rattled off Sandy’s license plate as Sandy flicked on the headlights and threw the truck in reverse. “Thanks, doll.”

Nate pointed to where he could see the flicker of red and blue lights through the trees by the corner. “Don’t think he’s getting far.”

“Nope.” Tony snapped his phone shut. “Thing of beauty, modern communications.”

“Maybe we should wrap up,” Nate said quietly. “Move the whole mess to my place or something.”

Mark was about to tell Nate they didn’t have to do that when he looked over and saw Aaron standing on the stairs, arms wrapped around himself like he was trying to hold himself together. “Thanks, Nate.”

“No troubles. You take care of yourself.” Nate squeezed Mark’s shoulder, then turned to go. “Hey, Tony, go grab some beer,” he called. “We’re moving the party to my place.”

“Anywhere’s good with me, as long as there’s beer.” Tony was watching the police lights that had stopped less than a block from the entrance to the condo. “I don’t think Buddy there is going to be back tonight.”

Mark hardly heard them. He stepped into Aaron’s house and glanced around. There was broken glass all over the living room floor, shattered china in the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” Aaron started to say, but he stopped apologizing when Mark started up the stairs.

“Did he hit you anywhere else?” Mark reached out and touched the hot mark on Aaron’s cheek.

“No.” Aaron’s shoulders sagged and he did that slow inhale and exhale he’d done before when he was trying to calm himself. “He never did before. It was just the last straw. Everything tonight was the last fucking straw.”

“Come over.” Mark wanted to pull Aaron into his arms as usual, but Aaron had probably had enough of being manhandled tonight. “I’ll help you clean up here. You can crash in my spare room. Just so you don’t have to be here tomorrow when he comes back.”

Aaron looked like he was about to refuse, but then he nodded slowly. “Thanks, Mark.”

“What are neighbors for?” Mark winced internally as he realized he was echoing something Sandy had said to him. Still, it was true. “I’ll get things cleaned up if you want to take a minute or two to get your things together,” he offered.

“Thanks.” Aaron tried for a smile and didn’t get far, but it was something. He turned and went upstairs, still hugging himself so hard that it had to hurt.

Mark watched until Aaron was gone, then made himself go downstairs to clean up. Outside, he could hear his friends getting into their cars and leaving. Of all the ways any of this could have turned out, this was not one he’d wanted. Mark found a broom and started sweeping up glass from a broken vase. At least, he thought, it had been empty.

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“Can I get you anything?”

Aaron stood forlornly in the front hall of Mark’s house, old Army surplus bag over one shoulder. He kicked off his sneakers at the door and crouched down to greet Felix. Felix rumbled happily and rubbed his face on Aaron’s hand. “Some tea would be good,” Aaron said, momentarily distracted by petting the cat.



“I’ll make us some. Guest room is up on your left.” Mark realized, belatedly, that the houses had the same layout, but he had no idea how Aaron and Sandy had lived. He made his way to the kitchen to make tea and listened as Felix escorted Aaron up the stairs. Aaron was going to be fine, Mark told himself. This was just a hard time. It would be for anyone. Mark put the kettle on, because it was all he had left to do.

Aaron came down when Mark was pouring the tea. “Hey,” he said.

Mark offered him a mug of tea. “You doing okay?”

“I’m too pissed to be upset,” Aaron said, and then laughed at himself. “God, that made no sense.” He sipped at his tea, ducking his head.

“Nah, made plenty of sense to me.” Mark leaned against the counter, letting Aaron decide where he wanted to go. Aaron stood in the middle of the kitchen, drinking his tea, then set the mug down on the café table where Mark did his bills. Felix usually sat in the other seat, trying to steal whatever pens he could while Mark worked.

“You were my friend,” Aaron said out of the blue, looking over at Mark. “*My* friend.” He gestured helplessly at the space between them. “I don’t have this very much. I don’t really know anyone here. He could have fucked around with anyone, but he picked you. He picked you because of me. Because he knew I liked you. Because I told him how much I liked you, how great it was to have you there to hang out with once in a while.” His voice got rough and rose with frustration, his cheeks flushing enough to blend with the mark that still lingered.

Mark hadn’t known that Aaron had liked being with him that much. He gave in to the impulse to put his tea down and cross the space between them. “I’m sorry,” he said. Carefully, he put his arms around Aaron and drew him in.

“It’s not your fault.” Aaron submitted to being hugged, but his slim body was still tense with anger.

“I’m still sorry.” Mark breathed in the smell of Aaron’s soft hair, mingled with sweat and tension and sadness. He kissed Aaron’s temple, feeling the soft skin under his lips. Slowly, Aaron relaxed against him and slid his arms around Mark’s waist. They stood there a long time, Mark stroking Aaron’s back and holding him while Aaron breathed those slow, deep breaths, like he was trying to breathe away his pain.

It felt so good to just stand here like this, and it felt even better when Aaron’s hands started moving, exploring the muscles of Mark’s back. He rubbed his cheek against Mark’s chest, nuzzling like the cat and pressing close. The way they fit together felt right and Mark was hard pressed not to do more.

“I don’t want anything to start like this.” Aaron pulled back enough to look up at Mark and Mark understood what he meant.

“It’s okay,” Mark said, stroking Aaron’s cheek where he’d been hit. “It doesn’t have to.” Still, he leaned in and kissed the discoloration gently, while he still could.

“I just want to forget about tonight,” Aaron said. His voice was unsteady now. “I just want to forget about everything.”

Mark looked down at Aaron, at his sad green eyes and his sweet mouth, and wished that he could make Aaron smile again. “Then forget about it,” he said. “Just forget about it. And start over tomorrow.” He leaned in to kiss Aaron, slowly so that Aaron could pull away if he wanted, but Aaron leaned in instead and met him half way.

Aaron’s mouth was as soft and sweet as it looked and he kissed Mark in a way that made Mark’s insides fill up with the damn butterflies that people always talked about. It was clichéd and embarrassing and perfect all at once. Mark kissed Aaron back and hoped it was just as good for him. When Aaron’s hands found their way into his hair and Aaron started making little noises that sent sparks through Mark’s blood, he figured it must be.

“Upstairs,” Mark managed to say once he realized that he was sliding his hands up under Aaron’s shirt. They couldn’t do anything right here in the kitchen. Aaron pulled away and took Mark by the hand. “My room,” Mark clarified.

Aaron led him there, Felix winding around their ankles as though he either wanted in on the action or he wanted it to stop all together. Mark almost tripped over him and Aaron laughed at them both. It was the best sound Mark had heard all night.

They stripped each other bare slowly, kissing and touching, exploring. Aaron’s hands were light and gentle on Mark’s skin; everything about Aaron was elegant. When Mark nudged Aaron back onto the bed, he got the chance to kiss over Aaron’s chest and belly to those slim hips that had caught his attention. He licked and sucked at the hollow of Aaron’s hipbone on one side and Aaron shivered, winding the fingers of one hand in Mark’s hair. Aaron had a beautiful cock, proportioned to the rest of him, and Mark kissed it once before moving up to kiss Aaron’s mouth again.

“Tell me what you want,” Mark said. Things were uncertain and Mark had no idea what Aaron needed right now.

“You,” Aaron said. He tugged Mark down by the hair and kissed him hungrily, almost aggressively, pushing his tongue into Mark’s mouth. “Fuck me,” Aaron whispered, once he was done exploring Mark’s mouth and tongue. For all that he was quiet and unassuming, Aaron knew exactly what he wanted and his self-assurance made him even more appealing.

“Anything you want,” Mark said. He was breathless and unsteady, wanting Aaron so much it was painful. It wasn’t just wanting Aaron that hurt. It was wanting to make everything better for him. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“You do,” Aaron said, his voice soft.

Mark looked down at him, just able to make out Aaron’s face by the light of the moon. Aaron’s eyes were wide and dark and shining as though they were full of tears. “Then you can have me,” Mark promised. He just wanted to make this better somehow and this was all he had to give at the moment, the shelter and comfort and pleasure of his body. Aaron could have anything he wanted tonight, and tomorrow they would start over again.

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“You sure you don’t want to come with me?” Mark had to make the offer one more time, though Aaron and Felix looked absolutely adorable curled up together in his bed. He put the cup of coffee he’d made Aaron on the bedside table. Felix sniffed the air to see whether or not it was something he liked, and then put his head back down with an aggrieved sigh.

“Thanks,” Aaron said. He smiled at Mark and scratched Felix’s belly to make up for the disappointment. “I brought my computer so I think I’ll just do some work until I know Sandy’s got his stuff out and then I’ll go back over. I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will.” Mark returned the smile; it felt like he’d won something just to see it. “I’ll see you later.” He picked up his gym bag and headed out, knowing Nate was going to demand a full recount of the night. The man was a complete pain that way.

Outside, Mark stopped on the porch. Sandy’s truck was backed up to the house he’d shared with Aaron, chewing up the lawn. The man was throwing his things haphazardly into the pickup’s bed, and Mark felt a surge of guilt. There wasn’t any reason for it, but Mark knew the man couldn’t be taking losing his partner lightly.

Mark tossed his bag in the back of his car and was opening up his door when Sandy stopped pitching things into the truck.

“Hey,” he said, his voice pitched to carry.

“Yeah?” Mark paused, suddenly tense. All the pleasure of last night and this morning drained out of him at once.

“He at your place?” Sandy looked rough; Mark was sure he’d had a crappy night.

“He’s staying out of your way so you can pack up,” Mark said. That was all Sandy needed to know.

“Fair enough.” Sandy disappeared back inside and Mark was frozen there a moment, wondering if he should stay and make sure Aaron was going to be all right.

Aaron could handle himself, Mark decided. He knew Sandy and knew the man was coming back. If he had been worried, he’d have asked Mark to stay. If he had to, he could call the cops. Besides, he had a fat-assed attack cat guarding him. Everything would be fine.

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“So what are you going to do now?” Nate asked when Mark was done sharing as much as he was willing to share. They were side-by-side on the treadmills – dripping sweat and running out of breath was helping Mark stop dwelling on how good last night had been.

“I don’t know.” Mark reached for his water bottle and took a drink before the training program jacked up the incline and the pace, making it impossible to get anything to his mouth.

“You’re going to do something, right?” Somehow, Nate managed to keep running and reach over and poke Mark in the ribs at the same time. Mark grabbed at the handrail, put his water bottle back in the holder, and scowled at Nate.

“Yes, I am going to do something. I just don’t know what.”

“Just nothing with the boom box and the song from that movie.” Mark leaned over, risking life and limb, and jammed the speed button on Nate’s treadmill. The machine beeped cheerfully and sped up while Nate tried to bat Mark’s hand away. “Hey, no, wait!” Nate hopped onto the rails of the treadmill, laughing too hard to keep up. “You are going to get us kicked out of the gym,” Nate hissed.

Mark relented, but only because the incline on his treadmill started to increase and he couldn’t breathe and hassle Nate at once. “I didn’t start it,” he said loftily.

“I’m gonna finish it if you keep that up, boy.” Nate grabbed his water bottle and threatened Mark with it. Mark just opened his mouth for some water and Nate, laughing, obliged by giving Mark a drink before running again.

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Mark got home late in the morning, after he’d gone grocery shopping. The sun was up and the day was verging on hot already. There were birds singing somewhere, and everything was green around him. It was a perfect day, and Mark was almost too anxious to enjoy any of it. He parked and left the groceries in the car, taking only one thing with him, an armful of flowers that seemed like they would make Aaron smile.

Mark rang Aaron's doorbell and tried to pretend that he was completely calm. It didn't work terribly well, but Mark was sure he was probably faking it enough. There was a long pause in which Mark wondered if he were standing at Aaron's door like an idiot while Aaron was over at his house, but then the door opened.

Aaron looked tired, but so good as far as Mark was concerned. He was wearing a faded 'caffeine' t-shirt and torn jeans and his feet were bare. His hair, due for a cut for weeks now, kept falling in his eyes and he shook it back. "Hey," he said, his face lighting up in a smile when he saw who it was.

"Hi," Mark said. He held his hand out to Aaron as though they were just meeting. "I'm Mark, your next door neighbor."

Aaron looked at Mark's hand, then at Mark, and then he laughed. He shook Mark's hand firmly. "Hi, I'm Aaron."

"I thought we could start fresh," Mark said, unwilling to let go of Aaron's hand. "As long as you're still starting over." He had no idea what had gone on since he'd left. Maybe Aaron and Sandy had patched things up. Maybe he was making a complete fool of himself.

"Yeah." Aaron didn't seem any more inclined to let go than Mark was. "I am. And that sounds really good."

"These are for you." Mark did finally have to let go to hand over the flowers and Aaron took them carefully. "I thought you might like something to brighten up the place."

Aaron peeked inside the wrapping and then gave Mark a brilliant smile. "I love flowers. Thanks."

Mark stepped back and put his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't pull Aaron in and kiss that beautiful smile. "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight? I'm pretty handy with the grill, and it gets a little boring cooking for one. I mean, you'd have to deal with my cat, but I think my cooking makes up for it."

Aaron laughed at that and nodded. "Dinner sounds great. I'll be done with work around seven. I'm sure I'll be fine with the cat."

"I'll see you then." Mark stepped back and turned to go. He was halfway down the steps when he looked back to see Aaron in the doorway, smiling at him. Now, the day was perfect.

-end-

A Sweet Gesture

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