

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

# POETRY & ENGINEERING

**A.R. Noble**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## POETRY & ENGINEERING

By A.R. Noble

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

An adorable young man shyly hides his mouth behind his hand. His dark, spiky hair and three days' beard growth contrast with his amazing green-gray eyes. Maybe he's flirting, maybe he's considering his next move.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*He arrived this morning. With his gentle smile, his soothingly low, confident voice, and a sort of feline grace and nonchalance, he calmly won everyone over, very quickly. Me? Can't say I'm a people person. So unlike the new guy there, I don't do crowds, or friendly chit chat. I was even told once "you're lucky you're cute" (oh boohoo, like I cared what they thought. Only my friends get to know the real me). Still, couldn't he at least notice me???*

*Wait... that came out wrong. I'm not into men. I just haven't found the right woman yet, that's all. I'm not looking at his dishevelled hair, or at his strong arms that could so easily pin me against the wall and... WHOA! I did not just think that. And I'm not still looking at him, like a mor—He's staring right back at me. Blatantly.*

*And with his gaze now burning with both amusement and lustful hunger, he looks like a cat who found his prey. Except I'm no defenceless mouse. He may be stirring all kinds of scary feelings in me, I'm never ever going to act on them. He'll give up long before I do.*

*So Dear Author, how does this feisty mouse get caught?*

Can I please have plenty of sexy tension, slow build from lust to HEA love, and a long wait for a wild sex scene not in a bed.

No supernatural, instalove, non con, or hardcore BDSM.

*Thank you!!!*

*Caroline*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** construction workers, civil engineers, slow burn, men with pets, gay for you

**Word Count:** 11,663

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To the ever-patient and long-suffering DRitC team, thank you. And my amazing beta readers Karen Ceeder and E. A. Westfall, can't work without you. Also to the extremely generous Arnel Nacimiento for his deets on a pilot's life; and to Thaddeus J, for intel on life as a Marine family and explanation of Marine careers. And Secretxxangel for her prompt. All of you rock!



# POETRY & ENGINEERING

By A.R. Noble

*Thom*

Glass-paneled Wardrobe

Ugly metal hangers covered in fuzzy stuff.  
Eight extra-trim shirts, fresh from the cleaner.

Two pairs of work boots.  
Mud from three jobs comingled.

Four company-issued, reptilian-green polo shirts.  
Ready to slip on at the last possible moment.

Six pairs of slim-fit construction pants, side by side.  
Three pairs of office pants in khaki, aubergine, and  
eucalyptus.

One pair of jeans last worn at a failed club night.  
Its fellows still in the suitcase next to the crooked ironing  
board.

The real me dresses from the dresser,  
but it's too homely for a poem.

The first time I saw *him*, I was gobsmacked, literally, not in a faux anglophile kind of way. I was in the equipment yard at GyEarth, marveling at the way such a prime location in one of the most expensive parts of San Diego county—yes we're engineers, but it's construction, still—was essentially a heavy equipment parking lot, waiting for Luís to finish checking the MMB 3000's output chute. Then *he* entered the yard, tan, long blond-brown hair piled up in a bun on his neck—seriously? Did he think he was a movie star? His smooth, muscly arms glowed below the sleeve of the company-issued polo shirt. And his ass! Wow. My fingers were already measuring the heft, the tautness, when the chute shot a big gob of 10002 right onto my face. Ugh. I was so stupefied I forgot to bitch at Luís.

Who laughed, damn him. “Dude doesn’t play for your team,” he said, handing me some wipes, and then tightened the bolts, as he should have already done. “Well, nobody is sure,” Luís added. “He has a girlfriend, but his roommate is supposed to be freaky-deaky.”

“Who him?” I mopped up my mug in time to see him swing up into a vehicle I didn’t know the name of, but the view provided a great shot of his luscious butt.

“Nah,” said Luís. He made cartoon-kissing noises—*smuh, smuh*. I whacked him with one of the wipes. “Rumor is his roommate will date anything. Alec, I’ve only seen him with girls.”

A straight man, terrific. The first guy who makes my dick pulse and my chest throb in California is unavailable as in never.

After that, I ran into him from time to time around the office. We were in a few meetings together. I’d try not to stare, while wondering why some days he braided his hair, and other days he had the bun.

That damn bun gave me ideas! I wanted to sink my hands into it and plow his mouth and throat. Or kiss his pillowy lips into pink cumulus puffs. And I knew he’d look at me. Bewildered, what-the-fuck looks. So much for gaydar.

\*\*\*\*

*Alec*

After a craptastic week and an unimaginably bad weekend, Alec looked forward to peace and routine. “Thanks for letting me crash last night,” he told Nate, as they both stood in Nate’s foyer.

“I owe you a million favors, man, and you’re always welcome, but make sure the kitten doesn’t stay, okay? Hitchcock can’t bear it,” Nate said with a sigh.

The kitten. Alec had woken up in the night, wondering if the strange snuffling sound was Julia. But no, Julia dumped him last week. Instead, he was in Nate’s spare bedroom, the nameless feline licking his hair reminding him where he was and why.

“No worries, man. If Nessie won’t take her, I’ll call my mama. It’s just until Tina gets out.”

Nate was shaking his head. He’d always had a cowlick that looked like a question mark over his head unless he shellacked it down with gel, post shower. “You didn’t watch the news, did you?”

*Uh, oh.* “No. Running through the gauntlet of emergency vehicles and begging to get into my own home, was enough news for me.”

Nate picked up the TV remote and pushed “play” on the DVR. Alec watched himself, hair loose because he’d been playing with his nieces and nephew, wild-eyed and bewildered pushing his way up the front walkway. Red and blue emergency lights played across his face. Nate fast-forwarded to this morning’s news. “An Oceanside woman is facing charges of murder for killing her husband with a shotgun. Our Wade Scott is live at the scene.”

The video cut to an earnest-looking reporter standing in front of the home of Alec’s across the street neighbor, Mrs. Tupai. “That’s right, Susan. Neighbors here say the Moreno’s relationship was tumultuous, that Oceanside PD were called to the home numerous times for domestic violence. But Mrs. Moreno never cooperated with officers.” The camera panned across Alec’s duplex, focusing on the Moreno’s side. “Police say Mr. Moreno was using the ‘facilities’ when Tina Moreno shot him seventeen times, killing him. Her shots also blew through to the bathroom next door, causing water to fill the second half of this duplex—”

Nate shut off the television. “So, yeah, I don’t think your neighbor will be relieving you of the cat, and no, you can’t use your place tonight.”

“Fuck.” Alec started to thrust his fingers through his hair before remembering he was going to work. He relaxed his hands. “Okay, I’ll call my landlord, see if he knows when they’ll let me back in. Maybe I can stay at my folks a few days, give them a chance to fall for the cat.”

Nate shrugged. “Fuck. I know it’s tough with Jer moving on, and all. You can both stay; my place is closer to your job. But Hitchcock, you know...”

Hitchcock, Nate’s cat, named after the director, growled at the sofa the kitten was scaling. That was the real issue. Alec knew how much having his own home with his own stuff meant to Nate. “What do you want me to do with her for today?” he asked, as he disengaged her claws.

“I’ll lock her in the bathroom with her water and litter box, after my shower. And take the toilet paper out, too.”

“Why?” asked Alec.

“Kittens and TP,” replied Nate, “not a good combo.”

*Thom*

## Man of Gold

Electrum eyes, serious,  
 Long, braided, old-gold hair,  
 Sun-loved skin darker at wetsuit's edges.

Half my ancestors hoarded gold for safety  
 in times of persecution.

The other half hoarded gold to honor  
 what they believed.

Both faced massacre for their gold.

I would forgo all gold, for my man of gold.

\*\*\*\*

*Alec*

Alec was almost at work when he remembered all the calls he needed to make. He scored the last spot not under the bougainvillea, a good sign, although he didn't have his board to worry about today.

First, he texted his sister.

*Hey lil sis, need a favor, pls*

Next was a text from Jerimeé, his former roommate, and co-tenant.

*Check renters ins, and mk sure no one steals my belts*

Alec replied

*K. U coming by?*

Next was a voicemail for Maui Dave, his landlord. "Dave, this is Alec Toqueville. As soon as the police are done, I, no, *we* expect a plumber in to fix the damage. And someone to come and clean up. Call me."

He took a deep breath and called his mother.

"Alec, honey, I's just fixing to call you." Twenty years of living in southern California would never erase the Alabama from her mouth or her kitchen. "Why do I see your house on Channel Nine? Why didn't you call us? Why—"

Alec spoke rapidly; it was the only way to get words out when Mama was on a tear. "Mama, I'm at work, I'm fine, I stayed the night at Nate's, and the police made me take her cat and I—"

"The police!" she began, but then Alec's dad, the Major, took over.

“Alec,” said the Major.

“Hey, Pop.”

“Are you all right, son? Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine, Pop, just got to work. I stayed at Nate’s last night, might stay there again, he’s closer to my job and all.”

“Well, you know we’d be happy to have you here. Your mama will even clear all that scrapbooking stuff from your old room.”

Ugh, no. Sleep on his childhood bed with all of those creepy doll creatures Mama was crafting? No. Way. Sunday, with the whole family fussing over him like he’d break because Jerimeé had moved on, had been bad enough. It wasn’t as if Alec was ten and refusing to speak again. At almost thirty, he could handle his best friend getting married and moving to the next county. As a pilot, Jer was only home about eight days a month, anyway. “That’s okay, Pop. Just wanted you two to know I’m okay.”

“Alec.” Mama must’ve wrested the phone from Pop. “Do you think you could come by this Sunday?”

“I don’t know, Mama, everything but work is up in the air right now.” *Odds are, she’s setting me up to meet someone’s daughter or wants me to plant something, or both.*

“Everett’s were havin’ a sale on Australian desert lime trees—”

“Ah, Mama—”

“So I bought two and I figure if you could dig up the acanthus by the back fence—you know which one I mean—we could plant one and I’ll—”

“Mama.”

“Alec, I’ve tried forty’leven gardeners, none of them has your touch—”

“Mama—”

“Most of them are so clumsy they trample my portulacas and trip over their cellphone—”

“Mama, I’ll let you know, okay? I’ve got to get to work. Love you both, bye.”

Damnit, he forgot to ask about the cat. He grabbed his water bottle and went inside.

Stacey was coming out as Alec went in the employee side entrance. “Good morning,” she said.

“Morning. What’s up?”

“You are.” The morning marine layer hadn’t lifted enough for her sunglasses to be necessary. “The new guy, it’s your turn to go out with him. So far I’m the only one—” Her voice dropped to a deep growl. “—who has lived to walk away.”

In three short weeks, the new guy, Thom, had racked up a reputation for disaster.

Alec smiled. Stacey was just his type—slim, athletic, the opposite of boobalicious—yet they’d never dated. While he hadn’t served in the armed forces like his brothers, his father’s strictures against fraternization held firm. “I’ll do my best to return safe and sound, too.”

Stacey smirked. “He’s all right and such a hottie, too. What a shame he’s gay.”

Oh. Well *that* explained almost everything.

Stacey trundled off, and Alec went inside. He looped around the building via the side hallway, ducked into his workspace, logged in, and rummaged for tea in his desk. Empty drawers. Nate had only had some pink herbal stuff at his place. Alec had sniffed it and declined.

He set off for the break room; he used to have a box of Earl Grey in there. No one else drank tea in the office; it was likely behind someone’s Cup O’ Noodles. But when he got to the break room, the new guy was there, drinking a cup of Alec’s tea.

Alec didn’t know what it was that bugged him about Thom. He looked like one of those models or bit actors, hired to pitch salad dressing or alcohol in commercials on the Lifetime channel. The ones where the guy looks like he only shaves twice a month, with a team of hairdressers to make his disheveled hair just so. Usually these guys were inexplicably shirtless, too. Alec hadn’t stared; he hadn’t, but from what he’d glimpsed a time or two in the locker room, Thom could give any of those guys a run for their money.

Whenever their paths crossed, Alec’s eyes seem to have a will of their own, locking onto Thom as soon as he was near. He always seemed to have his sleeves rolled up, showing off his arm hair. Why Alec noticed this, he couldn’t have said. But Thom never spoke to Alec, no smile like he had for all the women, no quiet words or gentle joking like he had for some of the other guys.

Not that Alec was Mr. Social; he had a few, good, close friends whom he'd held onto for a long time and that didn't include anyone at work. He'd never needed to be Mr. Popular or SuperJock like his older brothers. People usually liked him, despite his standoffish reputation. New guy, however, was not on that program.

"Morning," said Alec and filled his mug with hot water. Thom nodded, saying nothing. He lounged against the counter. Gemma, their boss, came in.

"I'm glad I found the two of you together." They chorused good morning to her, which she brushed off with a wave of the hand that wasn't carrying her iPad. "As you know"—her voice rose—"Thom, a recent spike in accidents has left us short handed."

Alec was on the company safety committee, a reluctant assignment. He knew, though, all of those accidents had one thing in common: Thom. Every one of the injuries was due to negligence on the part of the other engineer or technician. Actually, the second thing they had in common was that all three of those injured men were some of the biggest, rudest, pains-in-the-asses in the office. But locker room scuttlebutt had guys mumbling under their breath.

Gemma continued, "I'm sure I can count on you two having a safe and productive week, right?"

Alec looked at Thom, who quirked an eyebrow. Back at Gemma. "Yes, ma'am."

She didn't wait for Thom to answer. "Good. I've moved some of these site evals and soil analysis requests around. Nothing is hot, but all of it needs to be done this week."

This time, they both chorused, "Yes ma'am."

She began to leave, then paused. "Alec, I saw the news, do you need anything?"

He flushed. "No, I'm working on a place to stay, and I was planning to move anyway."

"All right, I'd rather no one took time off, but if you need to, give me a holler and we'll work something out." She left.

Alec added honey to his tea and nervously fidgeted with the stirrer. He cleared his throat. "Coast or hills?"

Thom looked blank for a moment. "Oh, you mean work schedule?"

Alec nodded. "Do you have a preference on where to start?"

"Let's head for the hills, okay?" Thom smiled.

All at once, Alec felt blood thumping in his temple, and his chest felt damp. "Uh, I'm going to change my shoes and meet you out back, okay?"

Thom glanced down at his own work boots, more upscale than most people in the firm wore, although, officially, they weren't supposed to wear work boots in the office. "Sure."

\*\*\*\*

*Thom*

Trucks filled with strawberries drove down a dirt road from the farm across the canyons as I waited for Alec by one of the drill rigs. Vineyards dotted the adjoining hillsides, their form taking shape as the fog lifted, like short, green, abased soldiers paying homage to the sun.

I wanted to be a poet. Sue me; I'm not flowery enough so I became an engineer.

Alec and one of the techs, I thought her name was Jamie, walked up. They both held keys in their hands. "Hey, what kind of license do you have?"

At first, I thought this was a comment on whether or not I had my P.E., the Professional Engineer's license. But then I saw he meant operator's licenses. "Oh," I said brightly. "I have my class C, so I can drive most of the trucks, but not my operator's license, yet."

"Okay." Alec traded keys with Jamie. She admonished me to be careful with him.

"What does that mean?"

Alec sighed, "Look, I normally don't bring my personal business to work, but my life rose to beyond crazy yesterday. Do you mind driving this morning?"

Mind? I was delighted. None of the others ever wanted to trust me to drive right off the bat. "No problem," I told him.

"I-I've got a lot of calls to make." His face was pink. "Do you need help with the, ah, GPS?" He looked even more embarrassed.

"We're probably good," I joked. "If we get lost, you're buying lunch," I added with a smile. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but he became even pinker.



We got in and as soon as I'd entered the address and turned the ignition, his phone rang. He grimaced pasted a phony smile, and answered, "Hey Nessa!"

I gritted my teeth, figuring it was his girlfriend, but it became clear she was his sister.

"Ah, come on, Nessie," he begged. "She's one little tiny baby kitten. She'll be great company for you while John is away."

The woman on the other end raised her decibel level; the words "crazy, sap, and doormat" came through loud and clear.

"Ness," he pleaded, and then more sternly, "Okay Nessa, that's enough, I'm hanging up now."

More loud female noise came through. "Good-bye, baby sis," he told her, then he disconnected and flung himself against the seatback.

"Whew," I said, just making conversation. "Glad my sisters aren't old enough to talk to me like that."

He shook his head, and then his phone rang. His hand transfixed me, the light, golden hairs barely glittering across his knuckles, like fancy cookies topped in spun sugar. Caramelize.

*Beep!* Oh, shit the light had changed.

The GPS instructed me to make a U-turn. Alec was speaking coldly into the phone.

"No. I'm fine, Julia"—he stopped and tapped my arm—"Dude, we need to turn right here!"

It was just a tap, but it felt like he'd lit me up from my crotch to my brain and back. Traffic was heavy; I couldn't get out of the left turn lane in time to go right.

"It's okay." Alec screwed his eyes up for a moment. "Get into the right lane and hang the second right, 'kay?"

I nodded, but he wasn't looking at me anymore. I followed his instructions and childishly cheered inside as he finished his call with chilling finality.

It was a beautiful day. We were only about three miles from the office, but the fog had already lifted. Lovely orderly fields of palms, and plants I didn't know emerged, interspersed with mansions and simpler homes, as well as the occasional *taquería* or liquor store. The hills above were mostly brown; rabbits skittered through lemon chiffon brush along the roadway. As we went farther

east, ghosts of avocado groves lurked around the bends; Luís had explained that, to weather the drought, farmers stumped the trees, hoping El Niño brought rain in the fall.

Alec made and received a few more calls and sent some texts. The GPS got confused and sputtered “turn around when possible” for a bit, but Alec shook his head and motioned for me to drive forward.

Finally, we turned off onto a steep, dirt road. He tossed his phone aside, then picked it up and put it in his bag, pulling out his iPad. “Slow down,” he commanded.

I eased off the gas and the truck crawled. He scanned the iPad. “That mesquite tree,” he said, pointing across the road. “Turn left there.”

Granite boulders loomed above us, disappearing from time to time as we climbed. “So,” I began, because the silence was gnawing at me. “Why do you have a kitten you don’t want and no place to live?”

He grimaced, then shrugged, and explained. Holy crap, and I thought I was drowning in a cesspool when my boyfriend turned out to be seeing my T.A. on the side. In our bed.

“How did you get stuck with the cat?” I was looking for the stakes. Alec frowned and my heart wibbled.

“The cops wouldn’t let me into my side of the house, and when I said I needed my clothes and shit so I could go to work, a couple of the officers went in and brought out some of my stuff. Then another officer came out of the other side with the cat and her stuff. Tina started shrieking, and...” He swallowed hard. “God, the blood all over her. Tina I mean, not the cat.” Alec turned to me, a lost look on his face. “I just, agreed, somehow, I—”

With relief, I spotted plastic orange ribbons. “Hey, there’s the stakes!” I was desperate for the interruption. I felt like crap for putting that expression on his face.

“Yeah, pull in over by that live oak and we’ll get started.”

\*\*\*\*\*

*Alec*

They worked well with each other, no arguments, no wasted effort; it was as if they’d been doing this together, forever. Alec forgot about his house, the kitten, and Julia. Even the loss of Jerimeé, didn’t hurt as much as it did this morning.

Alec logged some data into the iPad, then noticed the time with surprise. Thom was switching out an auger rod.

“Hey,” Alec called out.

“Yeah?”

“We’re almost an hour ahead. We can finish up here, grab lunch on the way, do the next job, and get back by three thirty. Is that cool with you?”

Thom looked up, surprised, and maybe intrigued. “Sure, what’s the rush?”

“I’ve got to make some calls, see if I can find a place to stay tonight. Somewhere I can sneak the kitten in to.”

Thom shrugged. “Sure, thought you were getting sick of me already.”

It was a shade odd. Thom, always so cool and aloof before, seemed disappointed.

“Naw, I just, don’t want to be living in my car, want to get settled. It’s going to be a few days before the damage can be repaired and I can go back.” Alec replaced some rods in the case. “What do you like?”

Thom’s head whipped back around so fast he whacked the sample tray with his knee. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“For lunch?”

A crazy panoply of expressions played across Thom’s face. “Oh, ah... I don’t eat pork or most seafood.”

“Okay, how about carné asada? Just steak, some veggies, and tortillas?”

The smile Thom sent Alec’s way felt warm and dizzying. Alec gave him a thumbs up back and returned to work.

\*\*\*\*

*Thom*

Lunch was one of the most erotically frustrating moments of my life.

After checking with me, Alec ordered in flawless Spanish. Or so it sounded to me. The college-aged girl behind the counter giggled and batted her eyes at him. We sat outside on the patio along Broadway in Escondido. I enjoy people watching and would normally be gazing at the early lunchtime crowd, but Alec captured all my attention.

When he peeled the wrapper off of his straw and looked up at me through thick, lion-tan lashes and asked me a question I was dumbstruck.

“Huh, er, what?”

“I said, ‘How do you like California?’” He wore a nervous look now. Usually he was either intense or politely easygoing around the office. All morning we’d had an easy rhythm, no veiled insults or insinuations like some of the others. “You don’t have to answer if you—”

I wanted his smile back, so I resorted to babbling. “I love it, best place I’ve ever lived.” Then I grinned like an idiot.

He looked doubtful, licked some adobo sauce off his finger, and asked, “Is that sarcasm?”

*Oh, to be that finger.*

“No, not at all,” I rushed. “It’s a great location for what we do, terrific weather, lots of things to do... What’s not to like?”

He shook his head and read a text on his phone, then replied to it and sighed. “Wonder if one of the admin’s can help me find a hotel room.”

An idea was popping through the lust bubbles in my brain, and I spoke without thinking it over. “Hey, this might sound weird but hear me out. My hotel room has two beds. Housekeeping only comes through once a week, on Fridays. You and the cat can stay until you can get back into your own place?” I nodded at my own brilliance.”

“Really? You’re sure?” I nodded and his face lit up. “Oh, dude, thanks so much! It’s going to be about that long if I’m lucky before the water is back on. Thanks!”

“No problem,” I told him, though my dick was already wondering about surviving the experience.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Alec*

After lunch, Alec drove them to the next job site. A rod broke and they cursed almost in unison during the extraction and replacement process. Back at the office, Thom took care of submitting the samples to the lab, and Alec made the entries in the system. Thom offered to take care of the write-ups so Alec could take off for the kitten and fresh clothes.

He went home first. It smelled funky and bits of police tape clung to his bathroom door. He did not open it; as much as he hated shopping he could deal with buying new toiletries.

Nate texted him that he should use his spare key and went in to collect the kitten.

He couldn't find her so he texted Nate back.

*Are you sure you locked her in?*

*Yes. Wasn't the door still closed?*

There was a rustle then a bumping noise from under the sink. Alec opened the cabinet door and saw shiny eyes peering out behind the giant bottle of hair conditioner.

“Here, c'mon kitty.”

She backed up, knocking over something that went *thunk*.

“Cat. Kitty, kitty. Here, *tchsuch tchsuch*.”

Bump. Hitchcock's paw slid under the door.

Alec reached in to grab her, and she hissed then leapt over his arm, narrowly missing the pipe. He saw she was aiming for a small crack near the cabinet door, backed up and then grabbed her, nearly overbalancing himself in the process.

“You are a lot of trouble.” Her answering reply was muffled by putting her in the sports bag the police stuffed her in initially. Just like last night, he drove with her piteous mewling. Alec swung by the pet supermarket that was in between work and the hotel.

In the shopping cart, with the bag partially unzipped, the kitten popped her head up, quiet at last. She looked around, possibly bracing herself for escape.

“*Tocino!*” exclaimed a woman in the store uniform. “I wondered what happened to you.”

Of all the odd things that had happened to Alec lately, having strange women yell bacon in Spanish, seemed almost normal.

She reached into the cart and pulled the kitten out of the sports bag. “Oh you poor, poor baby,” she cooed. “How's your, brave, brave mommy?”

Okay, enough was enough. Another employee approached Alec, asking if she could help him.

“Yeah, first,” he reached over to the woman holding the kitten. “I need the cat back.”

She reluctantly handed the kitten over. “That’s *Tocino*, Mrs. Moreno brought her in last week for the kitten health package.”

Alec took the kitten. She didn’t look like bacon at all, but who knew how a woman who couldn’t leave her husband but could kill him, thought? Purring, she scampered up his arm, to his shoulder, nestling finally under his chin.

God, he really did have a cat.

Addressing the second, nongrabby employee, he said, “I need a real case for her, and one of those cat tree things.”

What a surprise—not! More cat litter, kitten food, a bed, toys, a harness, and a leash. Nearly two hundred dollars later, he told the cat as they went back to his car, kitten safely in her new case, “At least you’re still cheaper than my last girlfriend.”

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*Thom*

When I got back to the hotel, I was in a fey mood. My feet wanted to dance a foxtrot or break out tap dancing, as if I were in one of those old movies Bubbe loves. Instead I took a shower and changed into a soft T-shirt and shorts. We’d discussed having dinner, but nothing was set. We could walk to one of the many, mostly chain restaurants nearby. Or should I order in? Indecision was unfamiliar.

Last night, I’d walked to a sandwich place with a big box hardware store in the same shopping center. I wandered in, appreciating the air conditioning after my hike. One year in flat Texas provided no preparation for the hills of San Diego. The store had flameless candles on sale that looked like regular candles except LEDs were used for the light. I bought a set of three, but hadn’t tried them out yet. The pictures on the box made them seem a touch romantic.

Who was I kidding? Straight man means not interested. Yet, I had noticed he was oblivious to all the women who tried flirting with him today. There was that moment, when I stretched my arm across the bin to help pull a rod out that was giving him trouble. Our eyes met. Then he shook the moment off, and I pretended nothing happened.

*Keep it real, McMahon. He’s straight, you’re gay.*

Still, it didn’t hurt to hope, or fantasize, right?

*Confine yourself to poetry. He’d be a good friend, nothing more.*

Maybe try the candles out another night.

A thumping sounded at the door. I checked the peep hole and Alec was there laden with shopping bags and an overly large, very pink purse.

“Let me take one of those,” I said, as I opened the door.

“No, no, I’ve got it. Just let me put these down, and I’ll go out for the rest.”

He set his bags near the bed I’d been using and went out with the key card I’d left on the table.

*Mew, mew, chirrup.* The sounds repeated and were coming from the Schiaparelli pink bag. I picked it up and a tiny, white, orange, and black kitten looked back at me from tourmaline eyes. After fumbling with the Velcro closure, I opened the case and took her out. She had a black diamond shape covering most of her nose, long whiskers, and a tortoiseshell, long-haired coat. I petted her and she began to purr. She moved on to chewing my fingers with her razor teeth.

“Ouch, you beast, hope you’ve had shots,” I yelled, just as Alec came back carrying a backpack and a sports bag.

“She’s had most of them. I see you two have met.”

“Working on it,” I replied. “What’s her name?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Her previous owner named her Tocino.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It means bacon in Spanish.”

“Ugh. Bacon is not kosher,” I told her. “How about ‘Blintz’?” I mused as Alec scooped her up.

With a side glance of stubborn he muttered, “Not naming my cat after food.”

*So now she was his cat.* Maybe all it takes is persistence and exposure to hang about in his life.

Alec set the cat down. “You ready to go now or do I have time for a shower?”

“Please, help yourself. I even got extra towels.”

He smiled the shy, truly happy smile. I wanted to break into a victory dance every time I made that happen. I vowed to do whatever it took to keep that smile coming back.

Alec

They walked to a nearby brewery pizza joint. The laughter and talk gave Alec the nerve to tease Thom about his word choices in one of his reports.

“You read that?” Thom asked, incredulous.

“I wanted to know what you’re like.” Alec rubbed his suddenly sweaty hands inside his shorts pockets. “People talk about you, but you’re, you know, not how they make you sound.” He could feel his face blending in with the sunset.

But Thom was thrilled, going by his reaction. “No kidding, people talk about me? What do they say?”

“Oh, you know, the usual: ‘Office Klutz,’ ‘Dirt Devil,’ Lord of the Rock.”

“What! No, you’re making that up, aren’t you?”

When they reached the microbrewery, Alec went in first still laughing, Thom behind him, still protesting. They agreed on two pizzas and two platters of wings at one counter and two half pitchers of the house specials at another. Beyond the bar, large viewing windows allowed patrons to see the equipment and tanks where the beer was brewed. The crowd was loud and happy, even for a nonfootball Monday.

Upstairs, it was quieter, so they grabbed a table there. A waitress brought them more beer while they waited for the pizza and wings.

“Tell me about yourself without thinking,” said Thom.

“Like what?”

“Where are you from?”

“Originally Florida. My dad was in the Marines. Then we transferred here, well, San Diego, and except for college in Pomona, I’ve lived here all my life. What about you?”

Thom took a healthy swallow of his lager. “I’ve moved around a bit more. My parents never married, well, each other. My mom is a hotshot lawyer for a corporate raider type. She moves around a lot. My dad’s been married three times and lives near Philadelphia. Mostly I lived with my *bobeshi*, my grandmother, in Yonkers, New York.” He drank some more beer. “Then I went to MIT, first job in Maryland, second in Florida, third in Texas, and now I’m here.”

“You get to see your family much?”



“No, but I saw my mom and her new beau in L.A. last week. You?”

“My mom comes up with a ‘do-list’ for me every weekend. She drives the Major nuts all week, then gets me to do stuff he said no to. Then Pop rewards me in barbecue.”

The buzzer vibrated, alerting them to pick up their order. The conversation resumed when they got back upstairs and each had wolfed down a few slices.

“So, if your dad’s a Marine, is your hair a rebellion?”

Alec paused, then shrugged. “In the beginning. I turned eighteen, and started college and let it grow. I went home, and at first my parents didn’t bug me. Then my dad was ‘Alec isn’t it time you got a haircut?’” He ate another bite. “Let it grow until New Year’s, then cut it. Funny thing, when I went back to Cal Poly, people treated me as if I’d gotten dumb over the break. Professors, guys in the Civil Engineering club. My best friend, Jerimeè convinced me to grow it out again, and people treated me as if I was smarter. And weirder still, I felt smarter.”

“I tried growing my hair once.”

“Yeah?”

“Pathetic afro attempt. Never tried again. Hey! What do you do for fun?”

“I surf. And until, maybe a year ago, I was in an Ultimate league.”

“Oh?” Thom reached across the table for the peppers, lightly grazing Alec’s wrist. “Do you mean those Frisbee games where people tackle each other?”

Alec laughed. “It’s supposed to be noncontact, but yeah, some people go overboard.”

Thom asked, “Always wanted to try surfing, but I’m afraid to look like a dork.”

“Nah, can you swim?”

Thom nodded, his mouth full at the moment.

“Surfing’s easy, if you’ve got someone to show you where to go, how not to get suckered into buying useless crap. Surfers see the awesomeness of this planet, the way everything works despite all that people do to try and screw it all up. Even when the surf is lousy, you can kick back and zone out, just... be, a human in the world.” Alec picked up his beer. “Ever been on a really fast and high roller coaster?”

Thom nodded.

“That thrill, the high, the rush, that’s why I surf.”

“I’ve never felt that passionate about anything except poetry, will you teach me?”

“Sure.” Spending more time with Thom sounded like a brilliant idea, especially the way he looked at Alec right now, as if he were someone special. “Whenever you want to go, we’ll do it. You’d only have to rent a wetsuit, I don’t think I have any that will be long enough. How about your poetry, share one instead of forcing alliterations in your reports.” He laughed.

“Very funny,” retorted Thom. “Engineering is too dry on paper. It’s cool and fun when you’re doing, but not so much when you’re writing it up. I just liven things up.”

“Do you have your P.E., yet?” asked Alec.

Thom smiled. “Got it last September.” Alec raised his mug and knocked Thom’s. Unwittingly, his fingers touched Thom’s palm. Awareness zigzagged from Alec’s wrist straight to his dick.

*What is going on with me?*

Thom deflected his attention back to the conversation by talking about his sisters, then Alec told him about his siblings and being an uncle, and before he noticed, they were walking back to the hotel.

It was nice, no better than nice, hanging out with someone he didn’t have to explain anything about his work. Nate was an environmental architect and Jerimeè had a degree in aeronautical engineering, but neither of them could talk shop like Thom could.

When Thom unlocked the door, the kitten was asleep in her new bed. Alec knelt beside her and rubbed her ears. “Guess I’ve got to name her. Got any ideas?”

“What, am I co-daddy, now?” Thom thought for a bit. “She’s got gem-like eyes, how about ‘Jewel’?”

It was on the tip of Alec’s tongue to say “Your eyes are like polished agates.” *Shit, that would have been very weird. What was the matter with me?*

Thom was still looking at him for a response.

“Um, how about ‘Gem’?”

Thom shook his head no. “People will think she’s named after our boss.”

*Oh.* “Maybe, okay. We’ll see if she comes when we call her.”

Thom looked at him oddly, then mumbled something about going to get ready for bed.

Alec moved around, straightening up, fixing his clothes for the morning and found a T-shirt and shorts to change into. When Thom came out of the bathroom, the scent of toothpaste preceding him, Alec tried not to stare at his taut and perfectly haired chest, neither too hairy nor sparse like Alec's.

*What the fuck? I had too many beers at dinner, that's all.*

He nodded and slipped into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, changed into his night clothes. Thom was already in his bed when he came out. Alec slipped into his own.

“Night.”

A pause, then, “Good night.”

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Alec dreamt of Roxie, his college girlfriend. Roxie had looked like a Barbie doll come to life but she was brilliant. She worked as a physicist for NASA, now. In his dream, they were having sex, Rox on top, which was good because she had great muscle control, and also bad, because she had the biggest boobs on campus. When he was on top he could somewhat ignore them. With her on top, she expected some attention there. But if Roxie was riding fast and hard, he didn't have to and that was how the dream began. Faster and tighter, and then, it wasn't Roxie, but Thom riding him. Then his cock exploded gallons, like it hadn't done anything in years.

After cleaning up, he lay there, listening to Thom, and realizing he was beating off got Alec hard again. So he quietly stroked himself off again, then fell back asleep.

*Crash! Clang! Ding!*

Both of them woke up, bleary and startled. It was Thom who figured out Jewel had knocked down the telephone, and then entangled herself in the cord. After righting the phone, Alec fed her, and cleaned the litter box.

It was only two forty, too early to get up. Thom appeared to have gone right back to sleep. When the kitten was done, he picked her up and took her back with him. She purred and licked his fingers before going back to sleep.

It took Alec a little longer to go back to sleep. Not since middle school had he experienced a wet dream—about a guy. Girls, he'd dreamed about girls, sure. Back then, he put it down to the excitement of reuniting with Jerimeè.

After all, he loved the guy more than he loved either of his brothers. Still, he'd never *wanted* sex with Jer.

Thom was fun and smart, and well, sexy. Also, disturbingly, he smelled terrific. Even after a day in the field under the hot sun. Eventually, Alec fell back asleep, no less confused than before.

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*Thom*

The first time the alarm went off, I clobbered it as if it were the advance guard from the Venusian army. Nine hundred degrees on Venus, they probably aren't very tall, you know. I muddled back to dreamland, but the alarm on my phone went off. Alec and I looked at each other and groaned.

"You first," I told him. He grunted and disappeared. Jewel tried to scamper after him, but he put up a foot blocking her while he shut the door. I tried to catch her, but she caught sight of herself in the mirrored closet door. She had all the kitten moves—jumping straight up, crab-walking sideways, hissing and growling at her reflection. I turned to get my clothes together for the day, and the next thing I knew, she climbed up my bare leg.

I grabbed her, "You are a fiend. That should be your name."

*Chirruup!*

Oh hell, she was very cute. Even when she batted my nose. I wondered if Alec picked up any toys for her, but didn't want to look in the bags. Instead, I crumbled a word list from a poem and threw it. She batted it around till Alec came out.

It was weird, yet exciting, having someone else in the room. All the way back last night, we laughed, and lights from the cars on Palomar Airport Road would catch his face. The wind and the movement on the street blew his hair—he'd left it down!—around. My heart and my dick went *zing!* But my head, muzzy from beer, knew it wasn't the time to take that strong chin and sink into those lips.

But oh, did I want to. And to explore and map those muscles, that divot in his abdominals—Damn, I had a raging hard-on.

"Hey," I said. "What do you think about skipping the office today, just stay out in the field, and then write everything up tonight? We could grab breakfast along the way, and—" *I could keep you to myself without appearing to be a stalker.*

“Sounds good to me,” said Alec.

Whew, no more babbling without tea. I took my turn in the bathroom, listening to Alec and Jewel through the door.

“You’re going to have to be adaptable for the next few weeks, okay?”

*Chirruup!*

“Yeah, well, no more telephone wrestling. And stop having a party in your litter box. Let’s see about those toys we picked up yesterday.”

Beauty, brains, brawn, and kind to animals. I was a goner.

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*Alec*

After barricading Jewel with plenty of food and water, they rode in Alec’s Volvo wagon to the yard. There, they switched vehicles and drove to Encinitas for breakfast and tea. It was a typical late spring day on the coast, chilly and a little damp. The morning mist was thick in the air and wet on the pavement. A group of people, mainly surfers by the looks of their bare feet, stood in line outside a restaurant. To Thom’s uncertain look, Alec said, “The food is great. Prices are better. On the weekends, the line goes down the block. It’s worth it.”

With breakfast boxed up and a tall, hot cup of tea for each of them, Thom drove to the job site, an erosion job. Following breakfast, they set up. The property owner met them with a check. They worked together even better than the day before. Every time he made a suggestion and Thom agreed without arguing, was a thrill in a half. In no time, it seemed the job was done and they were ready for the next one, near the fairgrounds.

He watched Thom’s hands as he did a change out. Strong, firm, assured, what would it be like to... *Where did that thought come from?*

On the way back north, Alec asked Thom if he wanted to see one of his favorite places, the Meditation Garden at the Self-Realization Center in Encinitas. Thom agreed, so he drove to K Street, extraordinary luck rewarding him with an ideal parking spot on the crowded street. From here, it looked like an average beach neighborhood, with a mishmash of architectural quaint small houses and the encroaching monster rental houses intended for tourists. They talked shop a little on the way, and then there it was, a little gaudy with its bulbous finials and gilt paint, the temple and hermitage. Alec led Thom up the path to the garden, depositing a donation along the way.

No matter how many times he came here, Alec always felt it was new. While the atmosphere of peace and tranquility had eased him more than a few times, some days, the giant carp and lush greenery brought instant happiness.

Or at least that was how he tried to explain it to Thom. “I know it’s corny, but if the surf is lousy or I don’t have my board, just coming out here makes me feel good and, well, whole.”

The Center overlooked the beach but in between was the eroded cliff. “In the twenties,” whispered Alec, “a swami came over from India and built the original temple. Yet the cliff eroded so they rebuilt farther inland. Over here, you can see the only bit left, the swimming pool.”

The leftover bits of tile, gilt, and statuary made it easy to imagine a time when Hollywood types drove south for spiritual renewal.

Alec watched Thom look around appreciatively and felt warm and happy. None of the girlfriends he’d shared this place with had enjoyed it. That had always been disappointing. Thom smiled and nodded, like he got it.

They shared a light dinner, neither of them drinking that night. Alec realized how quickly he’d gotten used to this routine and the scent of Thom, rather like the mock orange bushes in his parent’s backyard. Or a hot fresh cup of Earl Grey.

Back at the hotel, they watched some television, played with Jewel, and then got ready for their separate beds. Everything was more *comfortable and... normal* than any other time in Alec’s adult life. He wanted to think about that, what it meant, but fell fast asleep.

In the morning, after Thom went into the bathroom, Alec found himself considering Thom’s underwear. Tight calendula-yellow boxer briefs with the fly and waistband outlined in black—*why?* As if she knew his thoughts, Jewel paused her breakfast to look at him, quizzically.

“Yeah, I don’t get it either,” he told her.

*That you’re thinking about yellow underwear or that you’re thinking about Thom in his underwear?*

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*Thom*

Alec said, “Since we’ve got to do slope analysis and soil samples for a wine cellar in Borrego, let’s pick up sandwich stuff before we head out. There’s nowhere to eat near this house and I’m getting tired of eating out, aren’t you?”

Since my usual idea of eating in was either Bubbe's *kreplach*, which she sent me twice a month wherever I happened to be or Capt'n Crunch, I was intrigued. "Does that mean you cook?"

"Sure, can't you?"

All of a sudden I felt, well, *inferior*. "Um, no. I can tend bar and braid hair. That and laundry and vacuuming are the extent of my domestic skills."

"Yeah?" He was smiling and then his face turned pink.

We drove in, snagged a rig, then headed to the grocery store across the street. Then another long drive through hills, valleys, and desert. I told him stories about my sisters, and he told me about his exploits with his best friend Jer.

I was heartedly sick of Jeremy-with-an-ay. They were great stories, but the affection and love Alec had for him was eating away at me. Even though they were only friends and the pilot had moved out, I was tired of him. Silly, I knew that.

After work that night, he introduced me to his friend Nate, who was also gay and Jewish. They went for a bike ride and I hung out with the cat. When they came back, the three of us went out for Chinese food. It was clear Nate was like a younger brother to Alec.

He had slots for people, how did I get in? Wait, I don't want in, I want all of him. Although in him would be great, which was ridiculous.

A few times, when Alec laughed at one of my lame jokes, I caught Nate looking back and forth between us, like he knew how I felt. It made me edgy, horny, and worse, I couldn't get interested in Nate who was a nice guy and available.

How was this supposed to work?

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*Alec*

Thursday, they were on a job in Harbison Canyon, and nothing was going right. The truck stalled twice on the way, the right bore wasn't where it should be, and then Alec's landlord called to let him know the water was back on.

He felt bereft as he told Thom, who shrugged off the news and asked if he had visitation rights with Jewel. This pissed Alec off, and because he knew that was unreasonable, he shut down.

They rode back in silence.

Alec collected his things and Jewel, said thanks, and Thom... just nodded.

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### *Thom*

I watched him go and I felt like a ridiculous idiot. I missed them both immediately.

In the hotel weight room, I worked myself dizzy, then I pushed myself to do more. I ached for the sound of his breathing that night. I missed Jewel nibbling on my toes or sticking her face into places it didn't belong.

At work on Friday, we both had reports to write up, analyses to complete. Gemma announced a new schedule; Alec would be working with Adnan and I drew Stacey, again.

Between now and next week, was the weekend. I'd thought about things we could do together; now all I thought about was how to move forward.

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### *Alec*

Alec retrieved a few more items from his bathroom, then informed Jewel it was hers. Maui Dave probably did the hideous patch job himself, but at least the water was back on.

Using Jerimeè's old bathroom made Alec miss him fiercely. He didn't know what to do about Thom; he just froze, then nothing. They'd been civil with each other at work; no reason not to be. This sudden... coldness confused him.

He played with Jewel until she tired out. After putting her into the basket, he took out his iPad and searched for homes allowing cats. They were more expensive than he wanted to spend. On his own, anyway. He'd known Jerimeè since kindergarten; they'd gotten along well through high school and college, roommates for almost ten years. But when Jer was around, he could get hyper, irritating even. Thom hadn't been annoying since they'd begun to hang out.

They both needed a place to live. Maybe...

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Saturday morning, Alec got up early, put the harness and leash on Jewel and tried walking her. She'd been mopey since leaving the hotel, and she wasn't eager to do this. After returning Jewel, he drove to Thom's hotel. His heart was



stuck somewhere between his tonsils and gullet. He pounded on the door until Thom finally answered it.

Thom looked like crap. “Why are you making so much noise?”

He changed tack. It was deceitful, but surely this was a case where the end justified the means.

“Dude, the results came back on the Rainbow job. Gemma needs us to run a secondary analysis with new samples.”

“Fuck, really?” Thom sounded rough and looked worse. Probably play right into Alec’s hands.

“Yeah, so hop to it.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

“Let me talk to her, I think we shouldn’t work together anymore.”

*What?* “Dude, where I live, is where I live. You didn’t think we could remain cramped in here?”

“Alec,” said Thom, with great patience, “I like you, beyond words. I want you so much.” He clawed his fingers through his unkempt hair. “Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, I do.”

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### *Thom*

After Alec left, I stuck my hungover head in the shower, then washed the night before away. Memories of dancing and kissing a man, who marginally resembled Alec, returned. So lonely, so horny.

Thankfully, my brain overruled my dick. I called a cab back to the hotel. And behaved like an ass with Alec this morning.

I logged into work. There was no secondary eval request.

Suddenly, I knew only two things: Alec was the best friend I’d had in a long while, and I was an idiot.

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### *Alec*

When he got home, Alec picked up Jewel and took her into his brown backyard. The lawn had been dead when they moved in five years ago, about as long as the current drought. He sprawled in one of the chairs Jer left behind and called him.

“Bro! Good timing, I have about five minutes before I need to go through TSA screening.”

“I’m not sure if that’s long enough,” said Alec.

“Hang on a sec.” Alec heard Jerimeè tell someone else to go on, he’d catch up. “Okay, I’m back. Is it the house? Because the insurance policy—”

“No, it’s not the house Jer.”

After a very long pause, “Then what is it? Something’s wrong.”

Alec clenched his left hand, hard. “I-um, do you, do you think I could be gay?”

“Whoa! That’s a loaded question, not one I’m qualified to answer.”

“You know me better than almost anyone. I know you don’t believe in labels, but... I’m—”

“You’re what?”

“Nothing, never mind.”

“Bullshit. Alec Tocqueville, tell me right now, or I’ll tell all of O’Hare Airport what your middle name is.”

“Stryker is silly but not exactly embarrassing, anymore. People will think you have a problem.”

“Alec.” Alec pictured Jer in his captain’s uniform, jaunty cap and roll-away bag.

“I think about him all the time. I dreamt of kissing him, and then we-we were—”

“Doing the nasty?” A sigh. “Alec, let’s go over the usual questions. Is he nice to you? Or does he do mean shit like flirt with other guys in front of you?”

“He’s good people. When the water was shut off, he let me stay in the hotel room, even with the cat.”

“Does he use bullshit tricks to get you to spend money?”

“No, Jer, it’s nothing like that. We have fun. He’s smart. My body goes haywire, and my brain looks for ways to make him happy. I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

“Does he manipulate you, make you feel like shit?”

“No and no.”

“Then, go for him. Give it a shot. Try something new. If he makes you happy and you’re miserable without him, go get him. You don’t have to stick a label on yourself unless you want to. Dude, I’ve got to go. Love ya, bro.”

“Bye.”

Alec stared at the phone for a while, finally noticing that the noise he heard was coming from his front door. He scooped up Jewel and opened the door.

Thom.

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*Thom*

“Hey, you caught me at a bad moment this morning. Let’s go get those samples!” I smiled my brightest smile and snatched Jewel from his hands. “Hello, baby girl, did you miss me? I sure missed you.”

I raised my sunglasses. “May I come in?”

“Yeah, sure.” He moved back, and I walked in.

It was an unprepossessing place, lots of indentions in the carpet, darkened spots on the walls signs of the ex-roommate. It smelled like mold and sadness. A stack of moving boxes lay on the kitchen table, a garnet-colored tape gun nearby. “Did you find a place, yet?”

“No and yes.” I turned to him, encouraging.

“It’s more complicated with her.” He nodded toward Jewel who was rubbing her head on my face. “I don’t want to hide her, which means only looking at places that allow pets, and not only are there fewer of them, they want more money.”

“Huh.” I rubbed her ears for a moment, then set her down. “I have an idea, but first, let’s get these tests out of the way.”

“Hey, Thom, about that. I... was surprised, you know. And I missed you, so I kinda made all that up, so there’d be a reason to be around you, so...”

*Oh, honesty.* “I know. And if you’re willing to risk being so naked and brave, then so am I. That doesn’t mean we can’t go back out, I’ve got the rig blocking your driveway. Let’s go!”

Alec looked like he was going to refuse. “Look,” I told him as I checked out his refrigerator. Well stocked. “We communicate on the job very well. So let’s take a ride and talk.”

“We can’t take a company vehicle out for no reason.”

“There’s a reason, the previous samples were lost.”

He regarded me for a moment, expression incredulous. Then he walked to the open sliding door, closed and locked it. Keys and sunglasses in hand, he said, “Let’s go.”

This had seemed fairly simple, back at the hotel. We walked outside and he shook his head at the rig.

I drove and tried to spit out what I wanted to say.

“I was an ass before. It’s just that I like you very much, maybe more than like, I want to be around you, what do you think about getting a place together?”

His sunglasses looked back at me, and his mouth curved a little.

“You, the cat, and me, right? And if we want more, or less, I guess, but I’m hoping for more, I’m good with that. Please don’t let me being an idiot, or gay and hot for you—”

“Stop here.”

“What?”

“Stop right here and pull over.”

“Alec, please, I—”

“I just remembered, you don’t have an operator’s license. Take the next right, follow it to the staging area for horse people.”

He was right about that, I’d been meaning to take the exam. After all, I’d had a license in Texas. I just hadn’t found the time yet.

I also wasn’t sure where we were. We’d passed I-15, but I thought the “jobsite” was farther away.

Alec got out, so I did, too, leaving the keys in the ignition. He came around and took them out. “Come on,” he said, “It’s my turn.”

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*Alec*

His heart was pounding so much, his shirt moved, even when he held his breath. Inhaling and exhaling smoothly, he finally was ready. “I don’t know what we have, but I’m willing to find out. I like having you in my life, and if-if it’s not too much, I want a kiss.”

“You, you, what?”

“Your lips and mine?” Now he was sweating and starting to lose his resolve.

“Oh, hell, yes.” Thom threaded his fingers through Alec’s hair. “Every day I’ve wanted to do this.” Then, he grasped Alec’s chin and kissed him with all the longing and frustration four weeks had built up.

Alec burned, one hand clung to Thom’s shoulder and the other slid down his back. Thom’s hand moved from his face, down his back, to his ass, and back up. Fires of need and want lit him up until he realized he needed to breathe and had forgotten how.

“How was that?” Thom was smiling.

“Once more, so I can be sure of a thorough evaluation.”

Thom laughed and this time Alec touched his face, with all of that prickly soft beard growth, with wonder. He hadn’t touched a man’s face since childhood.

Thom kissed him again, soft, sweet little duels of lips and then tongue. Their groins pressed hard against each other, and Alec wanted *more*. Dimly, Alec registered a crinkle sound coming from the lumpy whatever in Thom’s shirt pocket.

“Come on,” said Thom. “Let’s get out of the main traffic area.” They walked up the trail for a bit, shoulders bumping, knuckles grazing.

This was silly, this charade. “We should—”

“What’s that?” Thom’s voice reached a higher register than Alec had ever heard from him before.

“What do you mean?”

“There.” Thom pointed behind Alec.

Alec turned and saw the cougar. About six, perhaps seven yards away from them, it watched.

*Shit!* “Okay, stay close together and make noise, wave your arms, try to look big and not like food.”

Thom threw his arms up and yelled, “Alec, no kinky sex parties with animals!”

Alec paused his own arm waving, then shouted, “Thom, we need to go up the trail then backtrack to the rig. Don’t take your eyes off her!”

“Okay.”

They continued to shout and wave while inching their way toward the truck. The mountain lion followed, slowly.

“Shit, shit, shit. Usually they sit and watch or they go away.”

Thom slapped a bug on his upper arm, the crinkle noise came out again.

“What is that?” asked Alec. But maybe it’d be something they could use to distract the puma.

“Oh, a toy, I bought for Jewel. A catnip mouse, all natural, organic catnip.”

Alec thought for a moment. “Throw it at the cougar.”

“Really?”

“Yes, take the wrapper off and throw it at the big cat.”

The cougar watched them, but hadn’t come any closer. Thom unwrapped the toy, stuffed the wrapper in his jeans pocket, and then threw the toy at the big cat as hard as he could. The cougar yawned, then strode forth. It sniffed the toy, then picked it up. And rolled over, rubbing the toy on its face.

Alec and Thom didn’t stay to see what else it did. They ran to the drill rig and drove fast for about a mile. Then Alec pulled over near a dormant orchard and got out.

“What now?” asked Thom as he followed.

Alec was shaking, with adrenaline and laughter. “You—” gasp “—threw it, and—” gasp “—it—”

“Nobody will ever believe it. Look—” He held out his hands in front of him. “—my hands are still shaking, and my knees are knocking!” He joined Alec in laughter. Alec leaned against him.

Then Thom pushed Alec up against the rig and kissed him harder than before. Their upper bodies pressed hard together. With a swivel he thrust his hips against Alec’s, grinding their cocks against each other.

Their mouths came up for air but not their bodies. Thom’s eyes were closed, shuttering those beautiful eyes. Then Alec’s closed too as Thom thrust against Alec harder, and Alec pushed just as hard back. And then, with explosions of white on black and striations of all the colors, he came.

They breathed hard together until gradually the sound of nearby traffic filtered through their consciousness.

“Wow.” Inadequate, but Alec didn’t know what to say.

“Yeah, you okay?”

“Better than okay, except for being glued to my clothes.” He tried pulling his jeans away from his balls, but there was too much spunk.

“Come on,” said Thom, putting an arm over Alec’s shoulder. “We take the rig back and shower, and go check out those houses. And eat. Yeah, shower, eat, house.”

“That’s not very poetic.”

“No, that’s concise and to the point, like an engineer.” He laid two fingers against Alec’s cheek. “One of these days I’ll tell you I love you. I just don’t want you to freak out.”

Alec smiled shyly. “I think you just did and I didn’t.”

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## *Epilogue*

### *Thom*

I’m still not much of a poet, but I’m a happy poet. We spent another week until we found a house in the Vista foothills. It’s older, but recently refurbished and we’ve been working on decorating it.

Before Alec and I got together, I was going to write a villanelle, you know, nineteen lines of unhealthy obsession disguised in meter. But I never finished it and now obsession isn’t relevant because he’s:

MINE

You had him, bitches  
He’s off the market now, so  
Look, but don’t touch.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*A.R. Noble writes for fun and very slowly. Clumsy and accident-prone, she lives with her chaotic family in Southern California and administers an aviation repair center.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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