



Paws, Claws, and More (Foggy Basin)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Moving to a new town is stressful for Alex, but he loves working as a veterinarian. Living in Foggy Basin seems perfect...until he's asked to participate in the annual date auction. Revealing he's gay to the whole town seems unwise, but it's a good cause, and what could it hurt?

After being a jerk to Alex, Ryan decides to make it up to him by bidding on his date at the auction. The event is for charity and means nothing...or does it?

Ryan doesn't expect the emotions and desire, and Alex is surprised by Ryan's interest. Can they become more than friends, or should they step away from desire and ignore the pull between them?

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Mission: Don't bail on auction. We really need you.

Alex stared at the text, wondering why he'd agreed to the auction. He'd been at a weak point, thinking no one in this town knew him, when Indigo, the owner of the dress shop next door, stopped by asking for help. The charity wasn't for animals—that he would do without hesitation—but still he'd agreed to help Indigo out by signing up as a bachelor offering a date for the auction.

This was what he got for trying to be neighborly and outgoing. Alex clicked reply on the text, telling Indigo he would be there on Saturday. Great, he had only a few days to mentally prepare himself for the event. He should have pulled out last week, but guilt had overruled his good senses.

Another text came through, this one from Mrs. Bannif, an elderly lady in town who owned an older cat. Jorts, the cat, kept sleeping the days away, and Mrs. Bannif thought the extra naps meant he had a myriad of problems. Alex had explained that the cat was slowing down, but that didn't stop Mrs. Bannif from being concerned. He didn't want to tell her Jorts might just outlive her because he thought it would be rude, but the cat was very healthy, just aging.

After telling Mrs. Bannif it was normal for Jorts to sleep in the afternoon, he stepped out into the hallway, thinking about getting another cup of coffee. He probably shouldn't. Sleeping was becoming a thing now, and he wanted more than just a few hours of rest tonight.

"Dr. Engle, looks like we have an emergency visit coming in," Gina called out from the reception area.

The fact that she yelled out to him instead of sending a message bothered him. She was a good employee, but she was a little rough around the edges.

He waited for Gina to say what the problem was, but she stayed silent. Since coming to Foggy Basin, he'd learned that some people, mainly Gina, expected him to read minds. Trying to stay positive, he stepped out to the reception area and saw that Gina was currently reading a book while she ate a muffin and sipped a latte.

"So, who is bringing their pet in?" Alex asked.

Gina turned and narrowed her gaze. "It's not a pet. Mr. Edgecliff hit a deer."

Words formed on his tongue, but he held them in. Most people who hit a deer didn't bring the animal into the vet clinic. They usually wanted the meat and took them home to dress or to a butcher.

"Oh, okay. That's a new one."

Gina shrugged and went back to her book. He eyed her coffee, which didn't help his craving one bit.

Sadly, by the time Mr. Edgecliff arrived, the deer wasn't alive. He broke the news as gently as he could because the man's five-year-old son was on the edge of losing it. Having the kid in the car explained why Mr. Edgecliff brought the deer to him instead of taking it home or to the butcher.

Right after the deer incident, a man with a Golden Retriever came in. The Golden's name was Pockets, and he was incredibly excited to see everyone. Alex worked his fingers through Pocket's thick fur, inspecting the tender skin beneath. Pockets gave him another lick before looking up at his owner.

Alex chuckled. "I know, Pockets, it feels good."

He met the owners gaze and smiled. It was easy to remember the dogs' names, but the people stumped him. He glanced at the paperwork to see the guy's name was Roy.

"Looks like Pockets will be chasing squirrels again in no time," Alex said as he ruffled the dog's fur. "The rash is almost gone, but he needs a few more days in the cone of shame. He can go without it in five days."

"Oh no, Pockets. More cone of shame," Roy said before hugging his dog. "Thank you, Doctor. So I heard you were part of the auction. Lots of single ladies in the audience. You should have no trouble raising money."

A nervous laugh escaped Alex. What would this guy think if he admitted he was gay and didn't want a date with a woman?

"Oh, yeah. Should be fun."

"It's one of the better attended charity events of the year. They tried doing a dance, but no one wanted to do that. The auction gives the town plenty to gossip about."

"Oh." Alex wanted to pull out now more than ever. He wanted to be known, but not gossiped about. But this was a small town, and he guessed gossip should be expected.

He finished up with Pockets and said goodbye to the dog and Roy, wishing he had the courage to tell this stranger he only dated guys.

Once back in his office, he checked his schedule and saw he was done for the day. Tonight, he should stay late and do paperwork. He wanted to stop by the bar and maybe find someone to chat with. It would be nice to meet a few more people in

town. Maybe he should join a book club or something.

The clinic door chimed, and he glanced up, seeing Mrs. Bannif shuffle in, her arms cradling a bundle of sable fur. Worry lines etched deep in her face as she peered over the top of her glasses at Alex.

“Dr. Engle,” she began, her voice quivering like leaves in a gentle breeze, “it’s Jorts. He’s just not himself.”

Jorts blinked languidly from his owner’s embrace, as oblivious to her concern as he was to the sterile environment that surrounded him.

“Come on back,” Alex said. He washed his hands, before he turned to look at Jorts.

“Let’s have a look at him, shall we?” Alex said, as he patted Jorts. “Still eating well?” Alex asked, his fingers probing with practiced care along Jorts’ abdomen, feeling for anything out of the ordinary.

“Like a horse,” Mrs. Bannif replied, her hand fluttering to her chest. “But he’s been sleeping so much, and I thought...”

He barely kept from rolling his eyes. She’d texted him earlier that day, and yet here she was in his office. Somehow, he would have to find a way to convince Mrs. Bannif that her cat was fine. “Sometimes they just need a little more rest,” Alex interjected smoothly, meeting her gaze with a calm stare that he hoped reassured her. “Especially at his age. Animals age, and they need more sleep.”

He continued his examination as he sought to reassure not only the feline under his care but also the woman who loved Jorts so much. Mrs. Bannif watched him, the tension easing from her shoulders as Alex smiled and talked to the cat. There was nothing wrong with this cat, but he was getting the feeling Mrs. Bannif would never

see that.

“He’s going to be sleeping a lot more. I know you’re worried about him, but he really is doing fine. He’s a very healthy senior cat. And that is the key, he is getting older. Jorts is no longer a kitten.”

Mrs. Bannif exhaled heavily, and he swore there were tears in her eyes as she wrung her hands. “Thank you, Dr. Engle. After losing Mitzi, I just can’t take another loss.”

He tilted his head to the side. He didn’t think Mrs. Bannif had another pet. “Mitzi? I don’t think I know a Mitzi.”

Mrs. Bannif shook her head. “No, she went to high school with my older sister. She was ninety-five. She passed a few weeks ago, and she was so young. I just can’t lose Jorts.” She gathered Jorts back into her arms and sniffed against his neck. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said as she turned to leave.

The worry now made sense. Maybe he should find some support group for Mrs. Bannif. Not that he knew of any here in Foggy Basin, but maybe someone did. He could ask around.

“Anytime, Mrs. Bannif.” Alex walked her out and watched as she loaded the cat into her car, thinking she must be lonely.

“Dr. Engle,” Indigo called to him as she stepped out from her shop and waved, her dress full of lively colors that made her look like she was going to the tropics, and not living in Foggy Basin.

His lips spread into a broad smile as she approached. “Hey, how are you?” he asked as he shook her hand.

“Do you have any plans tonight?” Her eyes sparkled with mischief, a clear prelude to the favor she was about to ask.

“Um, just some paperwork,” Alex admitted, feeling the weight of the evening ahead, filled with numbers and notes instead of laughter and company.

“Perfect! You can do paperwork any night. How about you join me at the bar across the street to drum up excitement for the auction? We need plenty of people at this auction, and if we can get some social media shots to go viral—well, as viral as this town can get—we’ll have more people attending.

“I don’t know. I’m not?—”

“Please,” Indigo said with a smile. “Just one drink, a little dancing, and some fun to entice people to come to the auction.”

Alex blew out a breath, knowing his protests were weak against her resolve. Plus he didn’t really want to spend the night doing paperwork.

“Come on, Alex. It’s for the kids,” she coaxed as she stepped closer, her presence filling the space. “We need someone like you. Someone new, someone fresh. The people will love it. Also, it could get you some business because there will be a write up in the paper.”

It was a conundrum. No question, he had to get out to make more friends in this town, but he also didn’t want to be the center of attention. It was the usual argument that happened inside his head. Being included meant people had to know he wanted to be included. If only he could balance his need for community with his need for alone time.

Indigo’s smile flashed broader. “You’re perfect for this.”

He hesitated, caught in the crossfire of Indigo's enthusiasm and his own trepidations. Then there was the other issue. His desire to contribute warred with the fear of exposure, of standing on display to be judged.

"Fine. I'll be there tonight." Should he tell her that he was gay? His stomach churned at the idea of having her advertise to the whole town that he dated guys. He didn't mind some people knowing but telling the town after only moving here a few months ago seemed a little weird.

"Fantastic!" Indigo beamed as if she had never doubted the outcome. "You won't regret it. Be there at seven. That's when the ball will get rolling."

She skipped her way back to her shop, laughter trailing behind her. Regret twisted through his belly. The paperwork could wait until next week, but going out and getting involved took so much energy. It was true he wanted to get to know people, but that meant he would have to interact with them. It was the usual argument he had with himself. He craved consistency in his routine, but he also wanted fun and excitement. Balancing the two was difficult. He usually ended up with some weird guilt and desire mix that left him wanting to go out, but anxious about the event or outing as it approached, leaving him unable to enjoy the occasion.

Alex entered the clinic and saw Gina gathering her things. He checked his phone, seeing it was time for her to leave.

"I'm out, boss man." Gina waved as she headed out to the parking lot.

"Have a good evening," he called after her.

His gaze landed on the parking lot for the bar across the street. Few cars sat in the lot, and it didn't look like many people were there. He wished they were over there now doing the fun photos, but they needed more people in the space so it looked like they

really were having fun.

One advantage to waiting was he had time to start on some of the paperwork. Silence settled in the clinic as he made his way back to the office, glad he'd made this move to Foggy Basin. Escaping his last bad relationship had been hard. His ex had his number and used manipulation to control him. He'd been blamed for so many things he really thought they all were his fault.

Was he setting himself up again? It had been almost a year since he'd ended it with his ex. Was he ready to date? Maybe he shouldn't do the auction. But this wouldn't be a real date, just a community event to raise money. The desire to text Indigo and tell her he couldn't make it hit hard, but he stuffed the feelings down. This wasn't the same at all. He didn't have to be afraid of retribution for trying to get out there and make a life for himself.

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Alarm: DON'T FORGET THE BAR

Ryan Harrington just wanted a quiet night alone at home, but since taking over the sporting goods store after his parents' death, he'd found himself being forced out to meet with people way too often. A little more than a month had passed since the crash that caused their deaths, and he wasn't done grieving. But someone had to run the store, so he would go to the bar tonight for this meeting even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Tonight, he was meeting the school's superintendent, Mr. Brinkley. The man wanted to make sure Ryan could handle the orders next year. Of course, he could. He'd been doing most of the inventory and ordering for years. His father was a figurehead, that was all. Brinkley had said some stuff in his email that had made Ryan's hackles rise, but he didn't want to go in all angry and insulted. They needed the orders from the school district because that paid the bills.

When he arrived at the bar, the place was packed, which didn't help his mood. Usually, this bar wasn't so crowded, but for some reason, there were about twenty extra people who seemed to want to dance and party. This wasn't that type of bar. Honestly, none of the bars here in Foggy Basin were party bars. At least, he didn't think they were. It had been years since his party days had ended. Not that he wasn't up for a good time, but partying like he was in his early twenties wasn't his idea of fun anymore.

He spied Indigo in the crowd and groaned. She'd tried to get him to participate in her auction. The excuse of his parents dying had been enough to get her to stop asking. He hated using them as an excuse, but the last thing he wanted was to put himself out

there in the dating pool again.

The superintendent stepped into the bar at eight sharp, and his nose curled up like he found the place lacking. Ryan wished he'd been filming because he would get some laughs at the face the man had made.

"Harrington, I didn't think it would be this loud."

Ryan nodded, leaning in so Brinkley could hear him. "It's a bit much. I don't think we can really have a conversation here." For a moment, Ryan thought he'd lost the guy's attention, but Brinkley shook his head and waved for him to go outside.

Once outside, Brinkley turned to him. "Sorry, that was just too loud. I need to make sure you can handle this coming year. It's special. We think we'll go all the way to state."

Ryan nodded, unsure why this year would be any different, even if they did make it to the playoffs. The equipment and uniform orders were always filled on time. "Yes, sir. I've been working with my father for over a decade. Before he passed, he'd already handed all operations over to me." Ryan kept the smile on his face, trying not to tell Brinkley to fuck off. He wasn't some amateur running the stores. Dealing with the funeral, and now clearing out his parents' house to get it ready to sell had pinched his time, but he could handle the orders—he was handing the orders.

Brinkley slapped him on the shoulder. "Sounds good. I guess you're wise beyond your years. I was going to buy you a drink, but I don't think either one of us wants to go back in there."

Ryan shook his head, not really wanting to spend more time with the condescending jerk. He wasn't a teenager or a kid. He was an adult who knew how to run a business. He kept that all inside, though, as he forced a smile. "No, sir. I don't think so. It was

very loud in there. And we have the orders covered.”

Brinkley grunted then shook his hand and said goodbye. Ryan watched the man for a moment before heading out to his car, ready to go home. As he approached his vehicle, he saw it leaning a little to the left. It hadn't been leaning when he'd left his car, but it was now. He moved closer and noticed the front tire was flatter than a pancake.

“Fuck.” Anger twisted through him as he fought to maintain control. He glanced around, worried that someone had heard him. Now, with his father gone, he was the face of the company, and with that came responsibilities. His parents had drilled into him that their family was the face of the business, so he never could get caught cursing in public. The rules surrounding their public image was one reason his older brother, Brett, had left town. Not that Brett liked to run around cursing. No, Brett had other things his parents found objectionable, which Ryan thought was ridiculous. Now that they were gone, he hoped Brett came home, but he hadn't even shown up for the funeral.

Ryan let go a heavy sigh. So much was fucked up in his life, but even with the messed-up parts, he was doing a good job running the business. He grumbled under his breath as he pulled the spare from the back, angry that he was having to do this now. A part of him wished he was the type of man who called some car helpline and let them send someone out, but his father had drilled in directives about taking care of his car, his house, his life, and everyone else around him.

When would someone take care of him? He had been doing it all for so long that he wasn't sure if he could keep it up. Add to it the general disrespect he faced now that his father was gone, and he wanted to scream.

With the tire out from the back and the jack in place, he began the task of changing the tire as anger rose. Nothing in the last six months had gone the way he wanted. His

long-time fiancée decided that fucking an Instagram model was cool. Of course, he found out when photos were posted on the model's social media page. That's when his friends called to tell him about it, or maybe rub his face into it. He didn't know which. Then, the roof of the back part of his house developed a leak. After fixing the roof, he had to tear out the drywall and replace it, then paint the room, all while running the company his father no longer seemed interested in running. The last straw had been them dying in a car wreck. At least the wreck hadn't been their fault, so he didn't have to deal with that.

Of course, Brett, his older brother, could come home to help, but he didn't want to. Ryan didn't blame Brett. He'd gotten out of Foggy Basin and built a life on the East Coast. Their parents never understood Brett leaving, but Ryan did. He would never leave this town, but Brett didn't want the same things out of life as he did.

Someone in the bar opened the door, and noise spilled out, increasing Ryan's anger. Irrational as it may be, he was angry those people were having so much fun. He spun off the last lug nut just as someone walked between the cars, coming so close that Ryan thought he was about to get stepped on.

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Reminder: Leave the bar at 7:30

Alex had stayed too long, way past when he'd set the reminder on his phone. He should have left thirty-five minutes ago, but Indigo had wanted one more photo, then another. They'd gotten enough shots, and he finally begged off, saying he had to take care of something at the clinic before going home. The little lie made him cringe, but he just wanted to go home and be alone. He'd spent too much time in the bar around other people and needed to recharge.

Indigo was great, but there'd been a little too much time with people today. He needed some silence so he could relax before tomorrow. The auction was making him nervous. There was no way he could plan a date that would be good enough for whatever amount was paid. Well, if anyone bid on him.

The lot was dark, and he frowned, debating turning on the flashlight on his phone. The cracked pavement had little holes that were filled with water, and he realized he should have just parked in front of his clinic instead of over here, but rain had threatened, and he didn't want to run across the street in the rain.

He found his car and stepped between the vehicles, realizing too late that someone was down on the ground doing something between the cars. He might have let out a small scream as he reached out and grabbed the car to keep from falling over the guy.

"What the absolute fuck? What are you doing?" the man on the ground yelled.

"I-I'm sorry."

The guy stood, towering over Alex. Worry and fear pumped through him as the man seemed to loom over him. His gaze flicked down the man's body, taking in the trim waist and the tire iron the man was holding. Alex's nostrils flared as his gaze shot up to the guy's face as panic and fear whirled through him. Light from a car turning into the lot flashed over them, and he swore the man had a chiseled jaw. Though it was dark, he could tell the guy was fit and hot.

"I didn't see you."

"Well, watch where you're going, you idiot."

Alex stepped back, anger rising. His mouth opened, and he almost told the guy to go to hell, but he hated reacting out of anger. Instead of blowing it, he blew out a breath as he counted to ten. His ex had issues with anger and had goaded terrible responses from Alex too many times. It was one more thing to be ashamed about.

He glanced down and saw the flat tire and the spare. Getting a flat always wrecked his day. And getting a flat in the dark was worse.

"Can I help you get that changed?"

The man's nostril's flared as he clenched his fists. "Do you think I'm such an idiot that I can't change my own tire?"

Alex raised both hands, wishing even more that he would have parked across the street. "No, that's not what I meant. You just seem angry, and I can help if you like."

"I don't like. Just leave me the hell alone."

Alex pressed his lips together. Maybe he should stick around, but he didn't want to create more problems. This man wasn't open to help. He wondered what had gone

wrong in the dude's life to make him so prickly. It wasn't Alex's problem, so he got into his car, shaking his head.

It felt wrong driving away, but he couldn't find a way to make the situation better. As he pulled out of the lot, he saw the man picking up the flat tire and putting it into the trunk. He should have stayed, but the guy had been ready to fight. Nothing good could have been accomplished by forcing his help onto that man. Besides, he wasn't in the best mood either, and if the guy had gone off again, Alex might have just lost it on him.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Note: You ran out of coffee. Pick up coffee at the grocery store and don't go to Books, Beans, and Buns!

The note left on the front of his refrigerator this morning made him laugh. He should have headed to the grocery store, but he was at his favorite coffee shop in town. The bell above the door jingled as Alex pushed into Books, Beans, and Buns, his senses immediately engulfed by the scent of dark roast mixed with the subtle tang of aged paper. He inhaled deeply, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. The warmth enveloped him, a stark contrast to the brisk autumn air that nipped at his cheeks outside.

"Hey, Alex!" Brock's voice cut through the symphony of espresso machines and rustling pages. The owner waved him over as he began working on another order for the customer ahead of him.

"Morning, Brock." Alex approached the counter, realizing he had his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans as he tried to hide from reality. Being yelled at the night before had put him in a mood. He wasn't sure who the guy was who'd been changing his tire, but he didn't want to run into him again.

"The clinic treating you well?" Brock's eyebrows arched high as he finished steaming the milk.

"It's keeping me on my toes." Alex pulled his hands from his pockets, trying to act relaxed.

"Bet it does," Brock said, chuckling as he slid a steaming cup across the counter to

the waiting customer who had her nose buried in a book. “Here you go, miss.”

The woman looked up and flashed a smile. “Thank you, and thanks for the recommendation of the book. It’s good.”

Brock smiled wider. “Nothing like a good book and a hot cup of coffee. Enjoy!”

“Sure will.”

“What will you have?” Brock asked. “Let me guess, just coffee?”

“Yes. Just coffee.”

Brock grabbed a paper cup and lifted it. “Paper?”

Alex nodded. “I need to head over to the office.”

“Sure. I hope all the people are treating you well. I know the animals are for sure.”

Alex chuckled. “Definitely. It’s a good town. Not at all like the last place I lived before.”

“Big cities take it out of you. They’re unforgiving.” Brock set the coffee on the counter, and Alex paid.

“Thanks, Brock,” Alex said as he picked up his coffee, ready to leave.

“Have a great day.”

“You, too.”

Alex turned and almost collided with a tall man but saved himself at the last minute. He hadn't known anyone else had stepped in and surely didn't know the guy was standing so close.

"Watch it!" The voice, sharp and irritated, yanked Alex's attention upward.

The man's lips pressed into a thin line, and his forehead crinkled. His eyes narrowed as annoyance flashed in his sky-blue eyes. He was tall, his shoulders wide and his waist narrow. He had muscles and a tan that indicated he spent a lot of time outdoors. The shadow of his whiskers showed that he hadn't shaved this morning, and Alex wondered if that was on purpose or if he'd been running late.

"Sorry," Alex mumbled, heat creeping up his neck as he wondered if all the hot guys were assholes here. The man last night had a nice body but a shitty attitude. His grip tightened on the cup as he sidestepped, putting distance between himself and the man whose jaw tightened and his nostrils flared. A muscle ticked in the guy's cheek, betraying the effort it took to swallow further anger.

"Jesus, be more careful," the guy snapped under his breath, but still loud enough for Alex to hear.

Alex needed to get away before he said something. He glanced back and something sparked as recognition. Was it the same guy he'd almost run over the night before—the man changing the tire? No, it couldn't be. That would be too much of a coincidence. But both of them were very hot. Great, just great. He was ogling a jerk.

Alex's hand trembled as he clutched his coffee cup, the warmth against his palm doing nothing to soothe the sudden chill that had washed over him. For just the briefest of seconds he caught the man's gaze, noticing the irritation still etched in the fine lines around those piercing blue eyes. First last night, now this morning. This guy seemed to be having a shit time of it. Normally, Alex would flee the

confrontation, but something told him a kind word would go a long way to helping the man feel better.

“Look, I’m really sorry about that.” Alex held his breath for a second while the man straightened his shoulders. Then, after a few seconds, the guy let out a slow breath, apologies shining in his eyes.

“No, I’m the one who should apologize for snapping.”

Alex nodded as a group of teenagers rushed in, filling the space with noise. Brock called up the next customer, which happened to be the man he’d almost run into. There was no reason for him to stick around, so he headed out. He had a long day of work ahead, and he needed to focus. The auction was starting to stress him, which was the last thing he needed.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Note to self: Don't be a dick today.

Failure. He'd not even made it to work, and he'd failed on the one thing he wanted to do today. He'd left the sticky note on his steering wheel, and still, he'd come in to get coffee and showed his ass instead of being a decent person. Shit, he was screwing everything up. His gaze stayed on the man he'd just run off, realizing he didn't recognize him.

"Hey, Ryan, I'll take your order," Brock said.

With the subtlest shake of his head, he turned away from the door, his attention shifting to Brock. "I'll have a coffee."

"Sure thing. How is the world of retail doing?"

Ryan glanced around, noticing the place was too full to tell the truth. "Good. I'm looking forward to this next year."

"That's good to hear. I always enjoy seeing the decorations you guys come up with for the winter holidays."

Ryan nodded and smiled. He'd forgotten about the decorations. His mom usually handled that. She was gone and he had to figure out what they would put up. If he ended the decorating thing people would be angry. Too many townsfolk stopped by to see the window. Heck, some people didn't even live here and drove miles to see it. If he didn't decorate...he didn't want to think about what would happen.

“It’s going to be interesting.” Ryan hoped his smile was convincing. He had no clue what to do this year. His mom usually went over the top.

“I bet. So you’re going to the charity auction, right?”

Ryan hadn’t planned on it, but he guessed he needed to. As a business owner in town, he had to show up at the events. His father had that part handled when he’d been alive. It was the one thing Ryan hadn’t wanted to take over. All the glad-handing and going to events wasn’t his thing.

“Sure, I’ll be there.” It was just one more thing taking his focus. He could do it. His heart just needed to start matching his actions.

He turned to leave, but he needed information, and since no one was in line behind him, he decided to ask Brock. He moved back to the counter, stepping close so he didn’t have to shout for Brock to hear him.

“Everything okay?” Brock asked.

“Yeah. Who was that guy in here before I ordered?”

“Oh, Doc Engle. He’s the new dog doctor over at the animal clinic. I guess he does more than dogs. He’s a great guy. Have you met him yet?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, I haven’t met him.” The door dinged behind him, which was his cue to leave.

“Oh, Ryan, when are you starting on the window?”

He recognized the woman but didn’t have a name for her. “Um, I’m still thinking it over.”

“Well, I used to help your mother. I’ll stop by later.”

“Sure, that would be great.”

Now, he needed to figure out who the woman was who helped his mom do the window decorations for the holidays. He needed a lot of help. His parents had done the extra stuff which was turning out to be more than he could handle along with running the main part of the business, cleaning out their old house, and taking care of filing paperwork with banks and other institutions who needed to know his parents had passed.

Maybe he needed to hire someone. If things kept going the way they were, he would absolutely have to bring on one or two more people just to free him up to do the glad-handing and extra decorating. He needed a break, but he didn’t think he would get one anytime soon.

Close to four that afternoon, once Jenna arrived and took over, he headed over to his parents’ house, sadness filling him. He was about to step inside when his phone vibrated against his thigh. He answered, unsure why the store would be calling him. Jenna should have everything under control.

“Hey, boss man, Mrs. Iden is here about the window.”

“Crap, I totally forgot. Could you get her information and ask her when a good time is to meet? Then put it on my schedule so I see it.”

“Sure thing. I’ll set it up. And Ryan, you know I used to help with the window, too. I can work with Mrs. Iden to create something special this year.”

His lips thinned. He hated putting pressure on his employees, but Jenna had volunteered to work on the decorations.

Frustration filled him, and he blew out a breath, knowing he couldn't do it all. "Yeah, you're right. I need help."

"Cool. I'm excited. I love doing the window. We'll work up a plan and then schedule a meeting for you to approve."

"Gosh, is that too much?"

"No, I'm totally looking forward to doing this. Thank you."

The call ended, and he shook his head. He was thrilled Jenna was excited about working on the window decorations because he'd been dreading having to come up with something that would match his mother's creativity. No way would he have done the window crowd proud.

He keyed open the door and stepped inside, closing the door with a solid click. Sadness and panic twisted in his belly. No way would he move into this house. There were too many reminders, some good, but also the bad. Plus, he needed to split the proceeds with Brett. They both could use the extra cash and if he kept the house, it wouldn't be fair to Brett.

The clatter of dishes filled the kitchen as Ryan stacked the dishes on the counter. He needed to take them to the local resale store and see what he could get for them. Neither he nor Brett wanted them, which he knew would kill his mom.

"Need a hand?" The voice came from behind him, warm and tinged with concern.

Ryan turned to find Hugh, his parents' neighbor, leaning against the doorway. "You're a brave soul offering to help me. The place is a mess, not because of them, just decades of accumulated stuff."

Hugh chuckled. “Thought I’d stop by, see how you’re holding up,” Hugh admitted as he began boxing up pots and pans. “You know, the local shelter could use some of this stuff.”

Ryan shook his head. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Well, it’s something that can help others, even in the midst of a tragedy.”

Pain circled his heart. He didn’t like thinking too much about his parents’ wreck. Too many things had been left unsaid, mostly to Brett, but still it weighed on Ryan. His relationship with his father had been strained after he ended the engagement. His dad blamed him and said some awful things that made Ryan realize that his dad never unconditionally loved or supported him. His mom tried to cover for his dad, but the harsh words had left Ryan with a very unflattering memory of his father.

“You know, parents can be...complicated,” Hugh said as he packed away more pots. “But in their own way, they did love you.”

A plate slipped from Ryan’s fingers, shattering against the tile. His chest tightened, anger flaring hot beneath his ribs. “Love shouldn’t leave you broken,” he spat out, the words tasting bitter on his tongue.

Hugh paused and held still. The room filled with the sound of the ticking tick-tock clock he always hated. Ryan’s gaze dropped to the fragmented porcelain, its sharp edges catching the light.

“Sorry,” Ryan murmured after a moment, the fire in his chest simmering down to embers. “I didn’t mean to—it’s just...” He trailed off, unsure how to articulate the storm within.

“Ryan, it’s okay to be angry.” Hugh set the box to the side. “I know your father was

harsh when your engagement ended. He came to me and asked me if I thought you were like Brett.”

Ryan hadn’t known. “What?”

Hugh blew out a breath, sympathy shining in his eyes. “I know your dad didn’t handle that correctly. I talked to him, trying to get him to see it didn’t matter.”

“Ugh, I don’t even know what to think. I’m sad he’s gone, but with everything that happened, I’m still angry.”

“He had issues.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “You think?”

Hugh chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, he had some shitty ideas. I remember talking to him about that and telling him he would regret cutting Brett off.”

“I’m glad you got him to simmer down. Jesus, first Brett, then he wanted to cut me out, too. I’m so angry at him.”

“You handled so many things well. I know not having Brett at the funeral was difficult.”

“I don’t blame him for not coming back. My dad was harsh on him.”

“I supported Brett’s decision. I called him up and told him so. I know he may not ever come back for a visit, but I hope he comes to see you at some point.”

Ryan shook his head. “Yeah, he might. I don’t know.” He glanced around, taking in all the stuff that still needed to be sent somewhere. “God, this mess needs to be

cleaned out. I need to be finished coming over here.”

Hugh chuckled. “You’ve made a good dent. Are you going to the charity event this weekend?”

Ryan shrugged. “I hadn’t planned to attend, not really.”

“I ran into Alex, you know, the new veterinarian in town. He’s one of the bachelors involved with the auction.” Hugh raised both eyebrows.

Ryan’s face heated. Alex, the man he’d been so shitty to, was going to be participating. He hadn’t planned on staying at the event. He thought he could go and be seen, then slip out. Maybe he would stay.

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do.”

“Just saying…” Hugh’s eyebrows shot up. “You know, there will be loads of people there, lots of opportunities to meet people.

Ryan shrugged, embarrassed that he thought Hugh was taking about him purchasing Alex’s date.

“You could meet that new doctor guy. I’m sure you two have a lot in common being around the same age. Maybe he’s someone you could double date with.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, there’s no way. I was a jerk to him recently.”

“Really?” Hugh asked.

Ryan blew out a breath. “I was rude when I was getting coffee, and I was also rude when I was changing a tire. I’ve been a jerk as far as he’s concerned.”

“Well, maybe you could win his date and make it up to him.”

“How would that work?”

Hugh shrugged. “You know, making stuff up to people doesn’t have to be difficult. Sometimes, just being there to support them is enough. Then if you win, you could tell him you were sorry for behaving like an ass.”

Ryan blew out a breath. He didn’t know, but Hugh was right about one thing, he had to let go of the anger. Going through his parents’ stuff churned up memories he wasn’t sure he wanted to look at again. Maybe he should attend the charity function. It would do him good to get out.

The idea of bidding on Alex in the auction hit, and he brushed it off. But the thought stayed in the back of his mind. What if he went out with a guy? What would people think?

Hugh said goodbye, and Ryan decided he was done for the evening. He could clean out more on Sunday. Soon, the house would be up for sale, and he wouldn’t have to deal with this stuff anymore. He could focus on other things, like the hot new doctor working at the animal clinic.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Alarm: Leave on Time!

Alex flicked through his closet with a frown on his face, the hangers clinking as they banged into each other echoing in the small space. One shirt after another, he tried on only to peel them off with increasing frustration. Nothing seemed to fit right. The fabric either swallowed his lean frame or it was too tight.

Why had he said yes to this? It was for charity, sure, but the worry gnawing at his insides suggested he might pay more in frayed nerves than he'd help raise in funds.

He finally settled on a simple blue button-up and a pair of dark jeans that struck a balance between casual and presentable. This was Foggy Basin, not New York, and a tuxedo would probably be overkill.

The community center buzzed with anticipation, laughter and music mingling like a heady perfume in the air. Alex's hands were clutched, his palms damp as he wound his way through clusters of attendees. He spotted Indigo across the room, her dress a vibrant pink and orange that somehow matched the orange curls piled on her head. She had to be wearing a wig.

"Indigo." He waved as he approached.

The other people participating in the auction were dressed a little nicer than he was, other than one guy who was wearing shorts.

"Are you excited?" Indigo asked.

He shook his head. "I shouldn't have signed up for this."

Her smile didn't waver, but she reached out and squeezed his arm. "It'll be okay," she assured him, her confidence way brighter than his.

Alex managed a nod, though his throat tightened. He couldn't find the words to tell her about the knot of fear that centered not on the auction but on who might place a bid. His truth wasn't a secret, per se, but it also wasn't advertised in bold letters on the auction flyer. No stipulation had been made for bids from men, and that omission sat heavy in his chest. He didn't want to lead anyone on, but he felt he would be if a woman bid for him.

Backstage, Alex was a bundle of nerves. He thought about leaving as the echo of applause for the previous participant reverberated through the room. He swallowed hard when the sound of his name sliced through the buzz of noise.

He cleared his throat and stepped out from behind the curtain, the stage beneath his feet seeming to shift, but he knew it wasn't moving. Each step was an act of defiance against the quiver in his knees, a rebellion of muscles that screamed for him to flee. He felt more nervous than a dog who hated visiting the doctor. Instead of running, he stood tall, the lights harsh above him, washing out reality for a moment since he could only see what was the few feet in front of him.

The runway stretched before him, a narrow path flanked by expectant faces. As he stepped forward, the glare of the lights decreased and he saw a sea of faces, all of them staring right up at him. His stomach pitched, threatening to rebel. Luckily, he hadn't eaten much. Couldn't stomach anything.

"Alex Engle is our next bachelor. He moved to Foggy Basin a few months ago and took over at the animal clinic. I'm sure all of your puppies and kitties love him!" A cheer erupted from a group on the right, their enthusiasm infectious enough to coax a

wave from him.

Laughter and clinking glasses underscored the murmurs of the crowd, a cacophony that couldn't drown out the whisper in his mind questioning his place on this stage. The fear, sharp and insidious, taunted him with visions of silence as paddles were left resting on laps because people refused to bid on him and his special date. He pushed away the painful imaginations as he reached the end of the runway and turned back toward Indigo.

“Alex plans on taking his date bowling, on a picnic with gourmet foods, and dancing under the stars. Alex's favorite friend is a cute boxer, but he also likes cats, too. If you fancy a date with an animal lover, you can bid on Alex starting now.”

The food and idea had come from Indigo, which he was thankful for. He'd heard a few of the other date ideas, one a trip to the local fish fry, and was thankful Indigo had helped him come up with something fun. A paddle soared into the air, the black number emblazoned boldly against the white background. Alex's gaze snapped to the person, heat filling him. The woman was someone he'd met at the clinic, he thought. If he was correct, she'd brought in her aging Labrador.

Another paddle was raised, increasing the bid which was still low. He didn't want to be a total washout, but he also didn't want the person to bid too much for him.

“Thank you, bidder number twelve,” Indigo beamed, scanning the room for another challenger.

The sea of faces blurred in Alex's vision, his pulse quickening. Another paddle lifted, this time a few rows back.

“Ah, and number twenty-seven joins the fray!” Indigo yelled excitedly. “Come on, folks! Who will give me more for this brave young man who got up here for charity?”

His bid was still low compared to other people. He was late in the night. Only one person still had a date package offered up.

“Number thirty-three, thank you!” Indigo cheered.

Alex couldn't see who had placed the bid. It didn't really matter. That was a lie, it mattered. He would have to spend hours with the person. Talk about pressure. He did well with dogs and cats, even birds were cool with him, but humans were another matter. Again, he wondered why he'd agreed to do this.

The price kept climbing as more and more people bid. No longer was his bid the lowest. He thought the winning bid was going to be a woman who owned an orange cat who'd come to his office twice, but then someone, he couldn't see who, placed a huge bid. That shut out everyone else.

“Going once!” The words rang out, echoing across the room. Indigo shot him a wide smile, and Alex tried for a smile through the panic. “Going twice.”

Alex looked out over the crowd, trying to make out who had placed the winning bid. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. He could end up making a new friend. Dating was out of the question. For one thing, he was busy. And he was gay.

“Sold to number thirty-three for an incredible amount!” Indigo called out as she slammed the gavel down on the desk they'd given her to stand behind.

A spotlight swung to shine on the winner of the auction, number thirty-three. Shock filled Alex and he stood frozen, the world blurring around the edges. The man who had lit into him not once but twice had placed a high bid on him. What in the world was going on?

Alex tried to keep smiling as he left the stage. Why had this man bid on him? They'd

not had any good interactions. This had to be a mistake.

He grabbed a bottle of water and took a swig, choking as the man who'd bid on him entered the backstage area.

Concern shown in the man's eyes as he approached and moved to pat Alex on the back. "Are you okay?"

Alex nodded as he tried to gain control. Some days, he wondered how he survived. "Um, yeah, I'm good."

The guy stuck out his hand. "I'm Ryan Harrington. Sorry about earlier today. I wanted to make it up to you and bid."

"Oh, um, yeah, thank you." A weird sensation slid through him, and he wanted to shake it off, but stood frozen as he took in the way too good looking man who had no idea what he was getting into. Would he be angry to find out later that Alex was gay?

Out front, the last bid of the night was happening. He knew they'd raised a lot of money for the charity, and he guessed that was good, but since the person who bid on him was a man, he felt like the town would look at him differently.

Concern shown on Ryan's face. "I hope you don't mind me bidding on a date with you."

He barked out a laugh that was more nervous than real laughter. "Oh gosh, no. I mean, I usually date men. Actually, except for seventh grade, when my parents set me up with Alina down the street because her parents thought she was gay—spoiler alert; she was, and her going out with me did nothing to stop that. But yeah, no, I don't mind. And I'm talking way too much. I do that when I'm nervous."

Ryan chuckled. “There’s no reason to be nervous.”

Alex snorted, like actually snorted. He wanted to crawl under a rock. “You’re probably regretting bidding on the date with me barely being able to speak and then I snort like a pig.”

Laughter from Ryan made butterflies erupt in his belly. When Ryan reached out and squeezed his shoulder, he almost dropped to the ground.

“Not at all. I think we’ll have fun.”

“Yeah. I hope so. I’ve written everything in the card. If the dates don’t fit, we can reschedule. My number is in here. And thank you again for supporting the charity. I really appreciate it, and I know Indigo appreciates it.”

Ryan nodded, his gaze so intense Alex wanted to shrink a little. But he held his head high and shook Ryan’s hand before saying goodbye as the last bachelor entered the backstage area.

The auction was done, and now he could relax, kind of. Except now he had to think about the date and make sure everything went off without a hitch.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Note to self: Don't be a dork.

Alex's heart raced with a cocktail of anticipation and anxiousness as he stood before the mirror, scrutinizing his reflection. The blue shirt he initially donned now lay discarded on the bed, a casualty of second thoughts. In its place, a shirt one shade darker and decidedly less casual. He was being ridiculous. This was Ryan being nice, apologizing for being such a dick two times in a row and not a real date. Though Ryan was the hottest guy he'd gone on a date with in ages. His ex had been cute, but not hot like Ryan. His stomach clenched. Could he do this?

He paused in the doorway of the kitchen, his gaze landing on the picnic basket perched on the kitchen counter. Inside the basket's cool compartment were gourmet cheeses, fruit, a few meats, and wine. In the regular compartment was bread, some crackers, and a few treats for after they ate. He also had a hot container with lobster mac and cheese. He grabbed the basket and stored it in the back of his car, hoping Ryan would be satisfied with his food choices.

Ryan was meeting him at the bowling alley instead of him picking the man up. It felt better this way. Somehow picking Ryan up and driving him to their date felt way too formal and serious. This was just a man who wanted to give to the charity and apologize for being a jerk. Nothing more.

The crashing of balls and pins wafted out into the parking lot. Maybe this wasn't a great place. But they weren't having an intimate get-to-know-you date. They were meeting as friends. He needed to keep that in mind. Friends only.

He was surprised Ryan hadn't withdrawn his bid after the way Alex had babbled

backstage, stating that he was gay. Goodness, Ryan probably regretted placing the bid. His nervousness was on high vibration as he made his way inside.

His gaze swept over the busy lanes, wondering how many people showed up here in the evenings. It was packed with teams and family groups.

Alex drew in a slow breath and squeezed his fists. Then he spied Ryan striding toward him, and heat washed over him. If he'd thought Ryan was hot before, the man looked absolutely amazing tonight. Alex's heart skittered with excitement.

The space between them shrank, and Alex's arm shot forward, his palm ready for a handshake. But Ryan, with a grin that could melt glaciers, stepped in for an embrace, his arms wrapping around Alex in a warm hug. Molten lava filled his veins, and he couldn't breathe. He froze for a second, unsure if he could withstand the excitement of hugging this man.

"It's good to see you," Ryan said as he stepped back.

"Yes. It's good to see you. I have everything arranged. We just need to get shoes."

"Sure."

Together, they navigated to the counter, exchanging their shoes for a pair of well-worn bowling shoes. The clerk pointed them to the far end, away from the squeals and cheers of youthful bowlers, granting them a reprieve of semi-privacy. Ryan led the way, fingers trailing across the selection of colorful balls until one met his approval—a glossy red that somehow fit Ryan. Alex picked a teal ball that wasn't exciting at all.

They entered their information on the screen, and Alex watched as Ryan took position to roll his ball down the lane. The man took three graceful steps and let go of

the ball so smoothly that there was no plop or bang. Seconds later, all the pins seemed to explode in a dance of defeat. A strike. Alex felt his stomach do a flip-flop, his own hands suddenly clammy as he picked up the less impressive, teal ball.

His turn came and went, a mere scattering of pins conceding to his effort. Ryan said nothing about his lackluster ability.

Ryan lined up another shot, which hit the pins for another strike.

“Wow, you’re good,” Alex said.

Ryan shot him a grin that made his insides wiggle. “I’m good with all kinds of balls.”

The words spun through his mind and shot straight to his balls. He was sure his face was red as he picked up his unexciting teal ball and flubbed it down the lane, rolling it straight into the gutter.

“Ouch,” he muttered before he turned. But Ryan was there, shaking his head.

“Looks like you need help with balls. I could show you how to hold them just right to make it flow well.”

The words brought laughter so hard that Alex had to sit down. His stomach cramped, and tears streamed down his face. He wasn’t trying to misbehave, but Ryan’s words had pushed him too far.

Ryan bowled another strike and came over, sitting in the chair next to Alex, putting his arm over the back of the chair. His lips were ticked up in a sexy smile and his knee brushed against Alex’s leg.

“Did you see that?”

Alex burst out laughing again as he shook his head. “Another strike.”

“See, I’m good with balls.” Ryan put his hand on his own inner thigh and leaned in, his lips at Alex’s ear. “I can help with your balls if you need.”

Alex sucked in air through his nose, having to rethink everything he’d assumed about this date. “Oh God, you’re so bad.” Alex stood and went to retrieve his ball.

The game continued, and Ryan didn’t say much more about balls because a family had been placed close by. They’d moved from an awkward start to enjoying their time together, though Alex was still awkward because that was just him.

After the game, they returned the bowling shoes, and were about to head out when a jagged bolt of lightning zipped through the sky, branching off in at least six splits.

They both jumped, then laughed, but Alex sobered fast. “Oh no, the picnic, it’s ruined.”

“Guess Mother Nature has her own ideas for tonight,” Ryan quipped as he pushed the door open. Alex followed him outside, not wanting the night to end.

Wind whipped through the lot, and the scent of rain filled the air. They’d made a connection, and if they delayed, he feared they wouldn’t feel the same.

Ryan stopped and turned to face him. “I have an idea.”

Hope filled Alex as he met Ryan’s gaze. Maybe they could salvage the night.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Mental Note: You've been waiting for something like this for a long time.

Ryan pulled into the lot for the warehouse, and the headlights from Alex's car splashed across his vehicle and then the building as he parked beside him. Something had happened while bowling, and he wasn't sure what to think. Maybe whatever he felt was a lie. Had Alex felt it, too?

The rain came down hard as he stepped out of his truck. Alex had moved the picnic basket into the front seat of his car but was having trouble getting it out. Ryan grabbed the heavy basket, and they raced for the cover of the building. It took him only a few seconds to open the door and then they were inside, the pounding rain echoing on the metal roof above. Not really romantic, but at least they'd stay dry.

He locked the door so no one else could get in and paused before turning to face the appealing man he was on a date with. Brett wouldn't believe it, or maybe he would.

This could mean nothing, or it might be the start of something he'd been avoiding his whole life. Excitement buzzed through him.

When he turned, he noticed rivulets of water running down Alex's face from his totally soaked hair. Laughter filled the space between them. And he knew whatever he'd felt at the bowling alley still flowed between them.

"We need a towel."

Alex smiled. "We are a little damp."

Ryan chuckled as he shook his head. “That’s an understatement.” The weight of the last few months seemed to be so much less with Alex by his side. The smile on his lips wasn’t fake, and the laughter wasn’t a lie. He really was enjoying himself. Something inside seemed to pop.

When Alex reached out and pushed Ryan’s hair off his forehead, heat exploded. They both froze, their gazes locked, communicating something dark and dangerous that could get him into real trouble or release him from a prison he’d not even known about.

Thunder crashed, and they both jumped and then laughed nervously. He took a step back and then lifted the basket.

“What all did you pack?”

Alex shrugged and smiled. “Just a little food and some wine.”

“Cool. It might take me a moment to set this up.”

“I can help.”

“Follow me.”

Ryan led them down the main aisle, which was flanked on both sides by storage shelves. About a quarter of the way down, they came to an area with benches and chairs and a water cooler for the workers to take a break. It was surrounded by photos of mountains and the ocean. When he’d seen how hard the men and women worked, he’d told his dad about the idea. It had taken some convincing on his part but finally his dad conceded.

Alex paused, taking in the area. “That’s interesting. Like, I didn’t think warehouses

had areas like this.”

Ryan paused and smiled, a touch of pride firing within. “It’s just a warehouse, but yeah, most warehouses don’t have areas like this.”

“The place is very clean. And these photos...” Alex said, pointing at the large landscape shots flanking the area. “They make it feel less...confined?”

“Workers like it,” Ryan admitted, not saying that had been his idea, too.

“Who came up with the idea?” Alex asked, then turned to Ryan, narrowing his eyes. “It was you. You were the one who had this idea.”

Ryan shrugged, not wanting to brag. “Yeah. When I started working after college, I realized we needed more to make workers stay. Dad thought it would make the workers lazy. But it helped increase productivity by giving them a place to take a quick break if they were tired.”

“I bet your parents are proud of you.”

“Eh, it was touch and go. My dad was a hard man to deal with, but I didn’t want to abandon the family business.”

“That’s cool. Do you like working with them?”

Grief twisted through him. “Well, they passed away last month. It was a traffic accident.” The raw truth slipping out made his chest feel hollow.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s weird. I’ve woken up a few times and forgotten but then I remember. Just feels

weird.”

“I bet. That would be hard to deal with.”

Ryan shrugged. “I’ve been okay. Work keeps me busy.”

“Death is stressful.”

Ryan blew out a heavy breath, trying not to get into the weeds of it all. “I’m starving. Let’s find a place to eat this picnic.”

Walking through the warehouse didn’t bring up as many memories of his parents as it had even two weeks ago. Maybe having Alex by his side helped. He led them deeper into the warehouse to an open area near the back wall, which also supported large nature photos. He set down the basket and glanced around.

“What can I help you do?” Alex asked.

“Let’s set up a tent.”

“A tent?”

“Sure, it will be like we’re camping.”

Alex’s smile spread slowly, making him look very sexy. “Sure, that sounds great.”

It only took a few minutes for them to get the tent out and set it up. It helped that there wasn’t any wind or other natural elements, making setup difficult. Next, Ryan grabbed pillows and two mattresses, placing them inside the tent. He’d grabbed two battery-operated lanterns but decided they only needed one turned on at the lowest setting.

Alex entered the tent with the basket and paused. He seemed enchanted by the setup.

“This is nice,” Alex said.

“Not quite as good as under the stars, but still good.”

“I don’t know, maybe this is better than under the stars. At least we know there won’t be any ants.”

Ryan chuckled as heat spread from his belly. Everything about this tent and the pillows, along with the lighting, screamed intimacy. Would Alex be insulted he’d set the tent up like this? He didn’t seem upset and wasn’t doing all the posturing most guys would do in a situation like this. Maybe the signals he’d wanted to see really were happening.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Note: Don't forget the desserts.

Alex started unpacking the food. He laid out the meats and cheeses along with the fruits, thinking it all looked good. He grabbed the bottle of wine and met Ryan's gaze.

"Do you like wine?"

"I sure do. I can open it while you do the food."

"Sounds great."

He handed Ryan the bottle, liking the zing that shot up his arm when their fingers touched. Was Ryan gay? He hadn't said anything about a girlfriend, but he also hadn't mentioned anything about a boyfriend, either.

The jokes about balls could have been just jokes, but based on the looks that had passed between them, he was beginning to suspect that Ryan might have been interested in something more than just winning the food basket.

Once it was all unpacked, Ryan's smile widened. "Wow, this all looks amazing."

Heat crept up Alex's neck. "I hope you like it."

"I do. I think this is the nicest picnic I've been on."

Thunder rumbled above, and they both laughed. "The tent inside is different. I'm glad

you came up with this idea. It's cozy, which I never thought of a warehouse as cozy before."

"Well, I'm a master at staging things. It comes from working at the store for years. Back when I was in high school, I set up a lot of the displays. At first, my father thought I was a jerk when I set up a tennis display with the mannequins that seemed to be stumbling, but everyone who came in thought it was funny."

Alex put some cheese and meats on a plate, along with some crackers, and passed it to Ryan, who flashed a smile of thanks.

"That sounds like you are very creative."

"I'm stuck right now, though."

"How so?"

Ryan's lips thinned. "My mom always does a holiday display and people come from all over to see it. She was good, like real good. I'm bogged down with the business side, and I don't have time to dedicate myself to it. Also, since I'm responsible for the store being a success, I think my creative side is just taking a hit. And maybe a bit guilty because my dad didn't like my creative side."

"Really? Why didn't he like your creative side?" Alex asked between bites of food.

Ryan's lips screwed up to the side. "Well, my older brother had just come out as gay, and my dad was pissed. He said some stuff and then other stuff happened. It's a mixed up story."

Alex froze, worry filling him. "Oh."

“Yeah, he tried to keep it quiet—my dad, that is. Said Brett being gay wouldn’t be good for business.”

“Ouch.”

Ryan nodded. “My mom and I kept in touch with Brett. He didn’t come home for the funeral, since he’s still angry. I’m trying to get him to come back to see me, but it’s a long shot. He and his husband are getting settled in a new house on the East Coast, so getting them to fly out here might be a bit much.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“No reason for you to be sorry. It is what it is.”

Alex set his plate down, unsure if he should say anything. “So you stayed here, working with your dad. You didn’t branch out and leave.”

Ryan nodded. “Brett took it hard. My dad’s anger and stuff, but I saw it differently, plus I love the store. I’m not saying I’m stronger than Brett. Actually, I’m weaker. I kind of fell into being who they wanted me to be, but I never let him say negative things about Brett. I pushed and pushed, letting him know Brett wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“That was brave of you.”

Ryan ate another bite of food and shrugged. “I don’t know if it was brave or not. I didn’t want to leave town. And like I said, I gave in on some stuff.”

“Like what?”

Ryan picked up his glass of wine and took a long drink. Their gazes held as Ryan set

the glass down. “Um, well, though I was engaged to a woman last year, I was more like Brett than I even admitted to myself.”

Alex’s hand hung in midair as shock pulsed through him. Was Ryan saying what he thought he was? “More like Brett?”

Ryan ate another cracker and nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t act on it, but...”

Alex didn’t know if he should finish the sentence or not, but something about being in the tent in a locked-up warehouse had him speaking out when he normally wouldn’t. “You wanted to date guys?”

Ryan bit his lower lip and then nodded. “I have a gay brother, and he is unabashedly gay. He does drag, sings in a cabaret, and does all the marches and pride parades. He is out there. And I’m not. I feel like a fraud when I think about it. Like he’s really gay, and I’m just me over here liking women and men.”

“Being bisexual isn’t being a fraud.”

Ryan shrugged. “My dad wouldn’t hear it. He told me it was just a phase, and I dropped it, believing that maybe he was right. Maybe I was a fraud for never acting on it.”

Alex picked at the blanket below him, staring at the grapes and cheese. His heart picked up speed as he contemplated saying something.

“Maybe me bidding on your date was a mistake, but I?—”

Alex’s head whipped up, and he met Ryan’s gaze. “No, it wasn’t a mistake.”

Ryan let go a heavy sigh and smiled as he picked up some cheese then popped it in

his mouth and chewed then froze, his eyes going wide. “Wait, are you dating someone?”

His stomach cramped as he shook his head. “No, not now. I was in a relationship. It wasn’t good.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.”

“He used anger and gaslighting to control me.”

“Oh fuck, and the first two times you met me, I was angry and rude. I’m sorry. I was being an ass.”

Alex thought about staying quiet, as he would have with his ex. But he wanted to know what made Ryan tick. “So what was up that night you were changing your tire?”

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Note to self: Don't tell him everything.

Ryan blew out a breath and shook his head, not sure how Alex would take the beans he was about to spill. He should hold back. Alex didn't need to know everything. "God, this is going to sound petty."

Alex shrugged one shoulder. "Better sounding petty than mean."

"Ouch, I deserved that." Ryan sipped more of the wine, giving himself a moment to decide if he was going to tell the truth. Might as well. "I was angry because though I'm an adult and went to college for business, people who knew my dad and mom—you know, people who have been around for a long time—they treat me like a child. They act as if I can't run the store that I've been running for years. I mean, I'm under stress now, but that's more stress from people treating me like I'm stupid or a child, and the stress of doing all the extra stuff."

Ryan blew out a breath and shook his head. It was petty of him to be complaining about all of this.

"Losing people is hard."

Ryan's lips twisted up to one side. "I let my anger get to me, but the superintendent of schools had set up a meeting to question if I was capable of running the store and not screwing up everything when the school ordered next year's equipment and uniforms. It pissed me off, and I was dealing with some other stuff, and I let my anger fly."

“That was rude of him.”

“Yeah. Then I came out, and my tire was flat. I was pissed, and I took it out on you. It was wrong, and I’m sorry. Then, right before I walked into the coffee shop, I had an email from the superintendent asking if I needed to hire someone to run the business. I guess I was still smarting and acted like an ass toward you.”

Alex nodded but didn’t say anything. Ryan worried that he might have messed everything up with his anger.

“I’m really not like that. I know you have no reason to believe me. I guess the pressure of my parents dying and taking over everything, in addition to dealing with Brett’s anger and everything else, just made me act out.”

Alex reached out, and his hand landed on Ryan’s knee. Warmth spread as thoughts began to grow in his mind. Though he’d been interested, he’d never kissed a guy or held hands, or done anything really. But with Alex, he wanted it. He wanted to hold onto Alex and do things with him he’d only done with women.

“It’s understandable. Grief makes you do weird things. I know it’s not the same, but when people lose pets, they get angry and can lash out. With a parent, it’s worse.”

Ryan nodded as he leaned in. The rain on the roof had slowed, but the roll of thunder still sounded in the distance. The lighting was just right, and no one else was around. It was the perfect atmosphere for something to happen.

He swore Alex leaned in as well. They were closer and he was about to scoot closer when the moment was shattered by the shrill ring of a phone. Alex flinched, and Ryan jerked back.

“Sorry,” Alex murmured. “That’s the emergency line.” Alex fumbled with his phone

before he answered on speaker. “Hello.”

“Dr. Engle, I have Mrs. Bannif on the line.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Yes, put her through.” The line clicked, and Ryan could hear an older woman speaking. At first Alex was shaking his head, then his eyes went wide as the woman described that a neighbor’s dog had been hit. “Mrs. Bannif, can you bring the dog into the clinic?”

“He’s in the car with me now. I’m on my way.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Oh, thank you, Dr. Engle. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Alex ended the call, apologies shining in his eyes. “I’m so sorry. I need to go.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“But the tent...”

Ryan waved him off. “I can clean it up in the morning.” He sprang into action, packing up the remnants of their picnic and exiting the tent before Alex even had his shoes on.

“Thank you,” Alex said as he patted his pockets, tapping his phone.

Ryan pulled his keys from his pockets. “I can drive.”

“Are you sure?” Alex asked.

“Yes. I have the truck tonight. If we run across any standing water, the truck will handle it better.”

“Sure.”

Alex followed him outside and Ryan opened the truck door, shoving the basket into the back seat before hopping in and starting the engine. The windshield wipers cleaned the lingering droplets that blurred the world outside. It was like how he felt about telling Alex he was bi. The declaration had cleared a lot up for him, and he didn't want to go back to the hazy way he'd been living before.

Ryan gave the road his attention, getting them to the clinic quickly and safely. Mrs. Bannif's car was in the lot, and Alex jumped out, heading over to check on the dog.

“Hey, Alex, give me your keys, and I'll unlock the door.”

“Sure.” Alex handed him the keys, and he went in front of him, unlocking the entrance.

The alarm started beeping, and Alex moved close to Ryan, whispering the numbers to enter and turn off the alarm. Then Ryan helped Mrs. Bannif inside. He sat beside the older woman as they listened to Alex in the back.

“Maybe I should go back and check on him.”

Mrs. Bannif patted his hand. “He's a good man.”

Ryan nodded absently. He didn't know Alex well, but he wanted to know him better. He didn't want this to be the only time they got together. Could he actually ask Alex out on a real date?

“What do you think he’s doing back there?” Mrs. Bannif clenched her hands together as she stood and walked over to the reception desk.

He followed and tried for a smile. “I’m not sure, but he’s probably trying to stabilize the dog. How about I get you a cup of tea?”

“That would be nice, dear. Thank you.”

Ryan helped her back to her seat before he turned to head to the back. Mrs. Bannif was worried, but she seemed okay enough for him to leave her alone for a few minutes. He made his way around the receptionist’s desk and paused, looking back to see Mrs. Bannif dabbing her eyes with a tissue. She was older than his mother had been when she passed. Seeing this woman made him realize he would never watch his mother grow older and age to the point her skin looked paper thin, and the spots on her hands and arms stood out. He drew in a shaky breath and pushed the sadness away before stepping into the small area with a fax machine and some other office stuff.

Before he moved deeper into the building, he looked through the window, making sure the area was empty. Alex nor the injured dog were visible. He stepped in, looking for something that looked like an employee lounge or kitchen.

A noise sounded to his right, and he glanced over, spying Alex through a narrow window on the door. He stood over a table, his concentration on the dog in front of him. Ryan watched for a moment as Alex worked on the animal.

His heart rate increased as he watched, worry for the dog and Alex growing. Ryan tugged his attention away from Alex and kept going, finding a room with a refrigerator, a coffee maker, and an electric water kettle. He looked in a drawer and found some tea bags. He’d assumed there would be tea because why wouldn’t there be? But he could have been wrong. He was glad this place had tea.

He put water in the kettle and turned it on, his mind going from the time he'd spent with Alex, to his parents, and then the dog Alex was currently trying to save. So much of his life had been lived in the confines of what his parents thought was acceptable. Even if he supported Brett, he had to admit he'd failed his brother. Brett had been hurt by their parents, and Ryan hadn't done enough to help him. Fear of being ostracized had played a part in his actions. He hadn't wanted to be disinherited from the family business, but he should have spoken up sooner. If he had, maybe he could have started living his truth earlier.

The water heated, and he poured it up. Steam curled from the cup as he carried it to the front. Alex was still bent over the dog, an intense look on his face as he worked.

Mrs. Bannif glanced up at him with a shaky smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sure Alex will be out here in a bit and tell us how it's going."

He had no idea how Alex worked or how good he was at his job, but the look he'd seen when Alex found out the dog was injured made Ryan think he really cared about animals. Though he'd been engaged, he knew his ex hadn't really cared about him. It was one of the reasons they'd broken up, that and his heart hadn't been into it. His next relationship he wanted to be with someone he really cared deeply about. Was that even a possibility?

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Note in Chart: Don't give up on lost causes.

Alex stood back from the table, his lips thinned as he went over what he'd done, wondering if there was more he could do. Sometimes when people brought dogs in, they heard how much it would cost, and they didn't want to pay, so he had to put the dog down. Tonight, when Mrs. Bannif had called, he hadn't even thought of the cost or whether the owner wanted the dog saved.

Maybe the owner would be angry, but he hoped not. The money was another thing. He didn't plan on charging since he considered this a favor to Mrs. Bannif. The older woman had been in his office so much that he almost considered her a friend—not a friend, but maybe more like an aunt. This town was different from the big city. The people here saw him at the grocery store, bars, restaurants, and around town. In New York, none of his clients ever saw him out at the park or at one of the stores around town. In Foggy Basin, he was in the situation where he actually saw people around town. Maybe he could count Mrs. Bannif as kind of a friend.

The dog was out and would be for another thirty minutes or so. Alex cleaned up and made sure he didn't have blood on his shirt before stepping out to the reception area. He was thankful Ryan had stayed with Mrs. Bannif. Both of them gazed up at him, expectation shining in their eyes.

"Is he going to be okay?" the words tumbled from Mrs. Bannif in a rush.

Alex nodded. "Most likely. I need to keep an eye on him."

"That's wonderful!" Mrs. Bannif exclaimed.

Alex tried for a smile as exhaustion worked through him. He stretched his neck to one side and then to the other. He noticed Ryan's eyes narrowing as he stared.

"Oh, thank goodness. When do you think he'll be able to go home?"

"Not for a few days."

The bell above the clinic door jangled harshly, and they all glanced over to see a man stumbling in, worry etched in the lines of his face.

"Daniel." Mrs. Bannif's voice cut through the silence.

Daniel's gaze flew to Mrs. Bannif. "Albert, my dog."

Alex stepped forward and held out his hand for a shake. "I'm Alex Engle. Albert is in the back."

"Oh God, is he dead?"

"No, sir. I had to do a procedure on him and need to keep him for observation."

"Oh, thank God. Albert is my life after my wife died. I don't know what I'd do if something happened. I don't know how he got out, either. I wasn't home. Can I see him?"

Alex nodded. "Sure, but he needs to stay calm, so it would be best if you left before he really wakes up."

Daniel nodded and looked like he was about to cry. Alex understood the man's emotions. His last pet had passed away almost a year ago, and he hadn't gotten another dog. Honestly, he was waiting to adopt an animal no one wanted. It was hard

to look after senior dogs who had issues, but as a veterinarian, he could afford the medical cost, and that usually was the problem with older dogs once they started needing more frequent care.

He led Daniel back to the operating room. Tears poured down the man's face, and he stepped out, leaving the door open so Daniel could cry over his injured dog.

Ryan stepped into the back area, and Alex met his gaze and held it. They weren't alone, but it felt like they were based on the meaningful look Ryan shot his way.

"Um, Mrs. Bannif took off. She said she would call you tomorrow."

Alex chuckled. Of course, she would. She called almost every day now. He needed to find a group for her to get involved with. She needed someone or something to distract her.

"Are you thinking of leaving?"

"Not until you do."

Alex shook his head. "I need to stay the night. You don't have to."

"Where will you sleep?" Ryan asked.

"Excuse me," Daniel called out from the other room.

Alex turned and headed into the room, hoping nothing terrible had happened in the last few minutes. "Yes."

"He's starting to wake up more. I don't want to upset him." The man swiped at his eyes, sadness evident in his expression.

“Ah, yes. Let me see.”

Alex moved to the dog, checking out his handy work. Albert was waking up, but he was still in that hazy, confused state.

“I’ll stay all night. You can call in the morning and check-in. He might be able to go home tomorrow evening. I just need to keep an eye on him for a bit of time.”

Daniel sniffled. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad I was able to save him.”

Daniel nodded, then took down information before leaving. Alex expected Ryan to leave, but instead, after moving Albert to a low cage where he would be safe, he found Ryan in the lobby with the picnic basket.

“You’re still here.”

“I’m staying,” Ryan said.

“You really don’t have to.”

“Sometimes it’s not about needing to be there but wanting to be there.”

Alex really looked at Ryan. They hadn’t spent much time together, but from what they had spent, he could see Ryan meant what he said. If Ryan wanted to stay, he wasn’t going to tell him no. “I’d like it if you stayed. But it will be uncomfortable sleeping here. The couches aren’t the best.”

Ryan shrugged and took a step closer. “I can at least keep you company, and I’ve slept on worse.”

Alex's stomach twisted with emotions and hunger. He glanced at the basket. "I am hungry. Though I shouldn't have more wine."

"Agreed. I've capped the wine, and we can save it for later."

Did Ryan mean later on another date, or just in general? He wanted to see Ryan again, but how did they go from a very arranged meet-up to actually dating?

The rain picked up outside, but this time, there was no lightning. Ryan stepped closer, closing the gap. The tension in Alex's body seemed to unwind the closer Ryan got.

"Let me grab some stuff from the basket."

Alex nodded, wishing Ryan had kissed him. "Sure." Alex felt like he was lost in a haze as he followed Ryan over to the couches. Ryan opened the basket and Alex pulled out cheese and meats, along with the crackers. They'd already consumed all of the mac and cheese.

"How bad was the dog?" Ryan asked.

"He wouldn't have lived if Mrs. Bannif hadn't found him."

"Oh, that's bad. Yeah, some dogs are runners and have no idea what they've done once they've escaped. They don't watch for cars or anything. It's sad."

"I've never had a pet."

Shock pulsed through Alex. "Ever?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, my parents didn't want the responsibility."

“Dang, that’s wild.”

“Yeah. How about you?”

“I don’t have a dog right now or a cat. Usually, I take in animals that people don’t have the money to care for. Not all of them, but if I’m without a pet and someone brings in a dog or cat and they can’t keep up with the bills, the pet becomes mine. They are usually older, but most of them have had at least one good year with me. Some of them it’s weeks or months, but they get some good time at the end of their life, and they are happy.”

“Wow, you are a good person.”

Alex snorted. “I don’t know. I try but I’m mostly good to animals.”

“I think you’re good.”

Ryan’s compliment made him heat. They were just getting to know each other but he really wanted to spend more time with Ryan. They ate a little more and he started yawning a lot.

“We should sleep,” Ryan said.

“Yeah. I haven’t had to sleep here in this clinic, but I’ve done it at other places. I’ll be up and down with the dog, so if I’m moving around too much and you want to leave, just tell me.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone tonight.”

Alex nodded and glanced away, not sure he could keep the desire off his face, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to be that transparent. “Thank you.”

“Sure.”

They both stretched out, Alex wondering what it would be like to sleep with Ryan. This was intimate in its own way, but they hadn't even kissed. Silence settled inside. The rain provided a hum of noise that made it feel like they were cocooned, separate from the world. The sound of Ryan's breathing made his stomach tingle. It had been a while since he'd slept in the same room with anyone other than his ex, and toward the end of their relationship, that hadn't happened often.

He had to concentrate on something other than the excitement of a possible new relationship. They weren't together, not yet. They weren't even friends, just two people sleeping in the same room after an abbreviated date then him saving a dog. It would certainly be a story to tell if more came from this night. Their relationship may amount to nothing, though. He didn't want to get his hopes up too high and be disappointed.

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Calendar Entry: Clean up evidence of Date!

The morning sun hadn't even made a show though the sky outside was lighter when Ryan's internal alarm clock nudged him awake. He opened his eyes, glancing around, and then the memory of the night before hit. He was still at the animal clinic, but Alex wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Ryan found the bathroom, and miraculously, a toothbrush and toothpaste sat on the edge of the sink. Was Alex really this prepared?

After the bathroom, he sniffed out coffee, leaning against the counter as he took the first sip. Something made a noise, and he tried to focus on where the sound was coming from. It took him a moment, but he realized the sound came from the room where Alex had operated on the dog.

As he walked through the main room, he realized the dog wasn't in the cage. He moved to the door and looked in, seeing Alex standing over the animal. Was he sewing up the dog?

Alex glanced up and waved him in. Ryan pushed open the door but didn't step in. "Hey."

"I had to do a quick little fix this morning."

"Oh, how long have you been up?"

"A couple of hours."

“I can’t believe I slept.”

“Yeah, you weren’t moving.”

“I’ve not been sleeping well since my parents.”

“Understandable.” Alex sighed as he seemed to finish his work, then lifted his hands over his head as he stretched his back and rolled his head. “Done.”

“Do you need any help moving him?”

Alex shook his head. “Not yet. I’ll wait until he wakes up a little before I put him back in the cage. Could you stand right there while I clean up and then get a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” Ryan only moved out of the way for Alex to pass, but then Alex stopped. Ryan turned and sucked in a breath as Alex reached out, putting his hand on Ryan’s shoulder.

“Thank you for being here.”

Ryan didn’t know if he should or not, but he leaned in and brushed a kiss on Alex’s cheek. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Alex didn’t move for a long moment as he stood there, examining Ryan. Then Alex took Ryan’s hand and lifted it to his lips, brushing a kiss over his knuckles. The gesture made something primal stir deep in his belly, and his cock grew hard as his balls pulled up. He didn’t think he’d ever had anyone look at him like that, and he certainly had never had anyone kiss his knuckles. It was such an innocent move, but it spoke of something dirty.

Alex's lips quirked up like he knew exactly what he was doing. Ryan watched Alex walk away before turning his attention back to the dog on the table. The sight made his stomach cramp. He hated seeing animals in pain. He didn't want to think about what the dog would have to go through to heal.

After a moment, Alex came back in, coffee in hand. "The dog looks good. I know it's weird seeing them like this, but he's okay."

"How do you know?"

"Well, for one, he's hooked up to the monitor still, and the beep indicates that his heartbeat is steady. I'm hopeful he'll heal enough to go home tomorrow."

Panic washed over Ryan. "Will you have to stay up here tonight?"

A small smile played at the corners of Alex's lips, and he shrugged. "Maybe. I don't mind it if it means the dog survives."

"Why are you smiling?"

Alex looked at him over his coffee mug. "Because it sounded like you cared."

Ryan cupped the back of Alex's neck. "I do care."

"So, dating men. Are you open to another date?"

The question hit Ryan hard. He wanted to answer with a quick yes, but fear twisted through him. "I'm not ready to announce it to the world."

Alex laughed. "But you bid on me at the charity auction."

Ryan shrugged. "But I was bidding as an apology."

Alex's lips tipped up in a sexy smile that made Ryan want to kiss him. His dark eyes looked tired, but also like he wanted to take Ryan to bed.

"But people didn't know that, so yeah, you kind of already announced it to the city."

Ryan bit his lower lip. "I didn't think of that." He shrugged. "Oh well, if someone has an issue with me dating you, they can pound sand."

Alex moved closer and casually slung his arm around Ryan's waist. Only inches separated them. A shiver snaked through Ryan, and heat blasted right after. They were going to kiss. He could see it in Alex's eyes.

"If you don't want this, step back now."

Instead of stepping away, Ryan leaned in and pressed his lips against Alex's mouth. It was a tame kiss, nothing special, until Alex licked at his lips, and he opened for him. Alex's tongue twisted with his, taking charge like he was a professional at kissing. Maybe he was because Ryan had never swooned, but he swore he might as Alex ended the kiss.

"Was that okay?" Alex asked.

Ryan nodded. "Oh yeah, that was great."

"I saw a flyer about the opening of a new art gallery next weekend. Would you like to go together?"

"Art gallery?" Ryan arched an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth lifting. "You into that scene?"

“Maybe,” Alex admitted, allowing himself a small grin. “Could be fun.”

“It sounds exciting as long as it’s with you. Count me in.”

Alex smiled, and Ryan thought he was going to get another kiss, but the dog took that moment to whimper, and Alex stepped away. The dog needed someone to look after him, and Ryan needed to head home to shower before work.

After Alex carried the dog to the cage and got him comfortable, he turned to Ryan. Sadness seemed to settle between them. They both knew they had things to do.

“I need to go home and shower.”

Alex nodded. “Sure. I will see you on Saturday.”

“How about one, and we can eat lunch before we go to the gallery?”

“I’d like that.”

“Awesome.”

Ryan should have walked out, but he moved to Alex and gave him a quick kiss. He liked the feel of Alex’s lips on his mouth, and he wanted to explore more, but they didn’t have time. Later, he would spend extra time on Alex. For now, he would be satisfied with the quick kiss.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Text from Indigo: How was the date? Did you kiss him?

Alex smiled to himself as he watched Ryan get in his truck and pull out of the lot. Maybe he shouldn't get involved with the man. The first time and the second time he'd met Ryan hadn't been good, but he honestly didn't think that was how Ryan really was.

The memory of their lips meeting stayed in his mind as he cleaned up and put away the pillows they'd used the night before. He glanced out the front of the clinic, noticing Indigo's car was in the lot. Had she seen him?

The text that came in seconds later made him realize she had seen them. He wouldn't live this down. Seconds later, Indigo was at the clinic's door beckoning him to open.

"Good morning," Indigo said with a huge smile. "Good date?"

He rolled his eyes. "I had an emergency patient last night, and Ryan stayed because he's a good person."

Laughter bubbled up from Indigo, and she shook her head. "Most guys wouldn't stick around for that. So, are you going out again?"

The smile on his lips probably told her the truth, but he shrugged. "Maybe."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. "Oh, you so are going out again."

The thought of kissing Ryan made his smile widen. "He's cute, but I don't know. The

first time I met him, he wasn't nice. Is he nice?"

Indigo shrugged. "He and his family don't necessarily hang out in my circles."

Alex leaned against the front reception counter. "What does that mean?"

Indigo shrugged. "Queer woman here and his family wasn't very accepting. You know, his brother was run off."

"He mentioned that."

"Well, you gotta ask how much internalized shit that boy has going on if he is dating you, and his dad was such an ass that he ran the older one off."

Alex nodded. "Yeah. He actually talked about that. About how he thought about leaving but stuck around because he thought he could influence his dad."

"That's interesting. I mean, Ryan has never been nasty to me, and he knows I've dated all types while I've been in Foggy Basin."

"I want to get to know him better."

"That sounds like a good idea. Get to know him before you make a determination. Some people around here are great, and others aren't. But wait, wasn't he engaged to a girl?"

"You know some people are bi."

She shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that could be the case. Just watch him. Don't fall for him when you don't know for sure if he's safe."

“I’ll be careful.”

“Cool.” Indigo’s phone buzzed. “I need to get back to the shop. We are doing inventory today. Yeah, so much fun.”

Alex chuckled and locked up behind Indigo. He headed back into the clinic, checking on his patient, who seemed to be doing well. With improvement, the dog would be able to go home in the morning. Now he just had to make it through the week of work so he could see Ryan again.

On Thursday, Hugh Collins came in with his scruffy terrier mix. “Morning, Alex!”

“Morning, Hugh.” Alex stepped into the exam room, happy the terrier seemed to be excited to see him as he wagged his tail furiously and sniffed at Alex’s shoes. “How’s Blue doing today?”

“Good. Just a check-up and some shots.”

“That’s easy. How about we get Blue up here on the table?”

Hugh picked up his feisty dog and placed him on the table. Blue took the small treat Alex offered before doing the initial exam.

“I heard you had a good evening with Ryan last weekend.”

Alex paused, a little shocked that someone brought up his date. “Oh, you know Ryan?”

Hugh nodded. “Yeah, his family lived next door for years. He was always a good kid. I know his brother left, and for a good reason. Ryan sticking around isn’t what makes him good. He really is just a good guy. Never took any shit from his dad, and I heard

a lot of it when Brett moved out. His dad would say something derogatory about Brett, and Ryan, who was still a kid really, would tell the man that what he was saying wasn't true."

Alex nodded and continued with the examination. "Moving to a town like this is weird. I don't know the people, but everyone seems to know everyone else."

"First impressions ain't always the best."

Alex raised his eyebrows. "Did you hear about something?"

"He may have said something about being rude to you."

"So you're saying I shouldn't judge him on that?"

Hugh shrugged. "Sometimes, people need a second chance to show they aren't what they seem to be. Just think about it."

Alex nodded, wondering if he'd been too harsh in judging Ryan from the first time they met. Certainly the date had gone well. He still wasn't sure how to think about the man. Maybe they could form a relationship. But did he really want that?

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Message: I'll see you at one.

Excitement filled Alex as he dressed to meet with Ryan. They had texted a few times but hadn't seen each other since Ryan left the clinic early in the morning after their date. They planned to meet a few blocks away at the diner. Excitement and a bit of trepidation wound through him. Would nice Ryan show up, the man other people seemed to think he was, or would it be the guy Alex had met when Ryan's tire had been flat?

With butterflies of anticipation, he stepped into the diner and glanced around, seeing Ryan in one of the back booths. Ryan stood as Alex strode over, taking in the tight t-shirt and blue jeans that looked hot on Ryan.

The clink of metal against ceramic told him no one was paying attention, but would they all turn to stare if Alex pulled Ryan into a kiss? He didn't chance the kiss. Instead, he settled for a quick hug before he sat across the table from Ryan.

"Hey, you look rested," Ryan said.

Alex chuckled. "Thankfully, we haven't had any more emergencies. And yes, the dog is doing well."

"That's great."

The waitress came over and they ordered burgers and sodas. He liked how easy everything seemed with Ryan. There was no one telling him what to eat, or demanding he eat more or less than he felt like eating.

Alex picked up the napkin his fork and knife had been on and set it on his lap, his excitement growing from being with Ryan. “How was your week?”

“Good. I got more stuff cleaned out of my parents’ house. I think I can sell the things I don’t want and get the house put up on the market.”

“That’s good. So you don’t want to live there?”

Ryan frowned before he shook his head. “No. Besides, I need to split the money from the sale with Brett. He deserves to have something, even if he does give the money to an LGBT group.”

“Oh, do you think he would do that?”

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe. He really doesn’t want anything to do with our parents. I get it. He had it rough. They were horrible. I’ve told him more than once he was right to do what he did. He still doesn’t understand why I didn’t leave and why I’m taking over the business.”

“Will that be a problem with splitting it?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, Dad was very specific with Brett, saying that he was leaving me the business because I’ve been working there for years, and if Brett wanted any part of the business, he had to work there, too. Brett only worked one day in the store when he was a teenager. Brett did write a letter that he had notarized, stating he wanted no part of the business and never to leave him any part of it.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of anger.”

Ryan nodded. “It is. But I am almost done with all the extra stuff I have to do. Now, I can concentrate on the business and maybe build a personal life. The stress has been

getting to me, as you witnessed, not only when I had a flat tire but also the next morning. I'm still so sorry about that."

No reply came to Alex as he stared at Ryan, a little shocked that he was the one who brought up his bad behavior. He'd expected the subject to not be mentioned at all.

"Let me guess, you didn't expect me to talk about how I made a complete ass out of myself."

"Nope, I really didn't."

"Well, I was wrong. I didn't behave right, and I can make all the excuses in the world, but the truth was I was being an ass."

"You were, but having an understanding of the situation makes me see it through your eyes. And especially since you're apologizing again, I get it. You had some stress and were a jerk. I've been there, and I really do appreciate that you're apologizing."

"And I hope I can show you that I'm not a jerk. And I'm really interested in you."

The food came out, and they started eating. Everything tasted great, and he was enjoying his time with Ryan. It seemed like the date would be perfect, but he needed to know something about Ryan first.

"Have you ever dated a guy before?"

Ryan shook his head, and Alex wondered if he was expecting too much from Ryan. Could he keep up with the relationship if the pressure got too much? What if people stopped going to the store and his business died?

“Are you sure you’re ready for the consequences?”

Ryan shrugged. “How bad could it be? I’ve lost my family, and I don’t want to lose my life or sanity because I refuse to admit that I’m attracted to guys.”

Alex paused, his gaze on Ryan. “Is that a possibility?”

Ryan shook his head. “Not in a bad way. I mean losing myself. Like I’d abandon everything that was me. I don’t want to wake up in ten or twenty years thinking I didn’t do enough to have happiness when I had the chance.”

Alex’s eyebrows shot up. “Do you think being in a relationship with me would bring you happiness?”

Ryan set his drink down before wiping his mouth and sitting back. “I don’t know. I’ve enjoyed the small amount of time we’ve spent together. I can see us spending more time together. I want to get to know you better.”

Alex nodded. “Yeah, I’d like to get to know you better, too.”

Ryan’s lips spread into a wide smile. “That’s awesome.”

Alex chuckled. “So, the art gallery. You know this town, it’s not too far from here, right?”

Ryan shook his head as he took another bite of food. After he finished chewing, he answered. “No, it’s close enough we can walk.”

“Cool.” Alex ate more of his burger. They were having a good time together. He felt a little less awkward than the previous date, but that made sense. They’d not even known each other when they’d done bowling and then had the picnic.

“So if you like, we could try for the picnic again. This time, it would probably be better since it’s not supposed to rain next weekend.”

Ryan chuckled. “I think doing a picnic under the stars would be nice, but you don’t have to do it because of the auction thing.”

Alex shrugged. “I just want another excuse to see you again.”

Ryan held his gaze. “You don’t need any excuse. I want to see you.”

Excitement twisted through Alex. They really were doing this. He was looking forward to the fun of a new relationship as they learned more about each other. Maybe this time, he had actually found a good man.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:22 pm

Note to self – Don't get so excited you mess up!

Ryan let his gaze linger, studying the subtle expressions that flitted across Alex's face. Dating a guy wasn't that much different from dating a woman, though it was totally different. The expectation of marriage and then having a baby was gone. They weren't trying to create a family to fulfill some generational expectations. They were doing this to have a life together, not make their great-grandfather's dream of domination come true. Dating Alex would be about them being friends and lovers. It was about them moving forward with life together.

They finished at the diner then headed over to the art gallery. The show was for four local artists. It was a mix of paintings, drawings, and a few mixed-media pieces. There were a lot of landscapes and nature paintings on the walls.

Ryan stopped in front of one of the paintings of mountains that were situated not too far away. The artists seemed to like Ryan's favorite trail because he'd been there and had photos from that location.

"You like?" Alex asked.

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, it's amazing."

Alex nodded. "Do you think it's from around here?"

Ryan chuckled. "I know it is." He pulled out his phone and opened the photo application, finding one of the photos from that spot quickly. "I love that trail."

Alex took the phone, looking from the photo to the painting. “Wow, this is amazing.” Alex glanced at him, his eyes narrowed. “Did you paint this?”

Ryan chuckled. “Heck no, I’m not that talented. I can paint a wall or a building, but I can’t do that. I took the photo, but that was just a snap-and-click. Anyone could take that photo.”

“It’s amazing. Beautiful.”

“It’s a good trail that has a lot of great views and scenic outlooks.”

Alex handed Ryan back his phone. “Maybe you could show me the trail sometime.”

Ryan was happy they were finding reasons to get together. “That would be great. Since my parents passed, I haven’t gone out hiking. I’d love to go with you before the weather turns.”

“Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Yeah, the weather in the mountains can be unpredictable. You have to pay close attention to what forecasters are saying and what is coming up. This time of year, it is touch and go.”

“After the storm last week, I totally get that the weather can change fast around here.”

“That was a wicked storm.”

They moved to stand in front of another painting, this one of a ship in a storm. It looked wicked. Ryan rubbed his chin as he stared at the painting.

“Do you like this one?” Alex asked.

Ryan shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s beautiful and raw, but it also makes me sad. I think it’s one of those pieces of art that makes you think.”

“What is it making you think?”

Ryan glanced over at Alex and decided he might as well say it to show Alex some of his internal thoughts. “Like I said, it’s beautiful and raw. I see anger and hate, but it also makes me sad. It’s like we’re all the boat, getting swallowed up by the churning swirl of demands on our lives that makes us wonder if we’re going to make it. Life is pulling us all down, trying to drown us in an ocean of pain, and we’re barely keeping our heads above water. I don’t know if I want to be reminded of that every day.”

Alex moved a step closer and stared at the painting over Ryan’s shoulder, his breath warm on Ryan’s neck. That warmth spread lower, down his chest to his cock. He wanted to turn and press his body against Alex and see what happened. But there were a lot of people milling about.

“I can see all of that. I don’t know if I could have voiced it.”

“Maybe I’m overthinking it.”

Alex put his hand on Ryan’s shoulder and squeezed. “No, you’re not. It’s raw and full of emotions. I think you nailed it.”

Ryan thought about turning and making a joke about Alex nailing him, but there were too many people around. He moved on to the next painting. This time Alex stood closer and he kind of leaned back against Alex as they discussed the piece of art. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember anything he said or what the painting was. All he could think about was the warmth coming off Alex.

Somehow, they made it through the rest of the gallery without him pushing Alex up

against the back wall and kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

The sun wasn't so low that it would set soon, but they might have had two hours of sunlight left, which was not enough to go for a hike. However, he didn't want Alex to leave.

"Would you like to come over and we can..." He couldn't think of anything.

Alex's lips tilted up. "I'd love to."

"Follow me. I'm in the truck."

Alex nodded and squeezed Ryan's hand before heading to his car. The drive out to his place took about fifteen minutes. Maybe it was a mistake to invite Alex back here, but he didn't want the date to end.

He stepped from his truck and waited for Alex to stop in the gravel drive next to him. He'd opted to move to the outskirts of town where he had privacy. The house wasn't much, but the land was nice.

"This is cool," Alex said as he stepped from his car.

"The house is small."

"I'm still renting. I don't know where I want to live."

"I'm planning on building. Come this way." Ryan waved him over, and they started moving to a clearing that had been marked off for the foundation.

"Wow, when are you going to put the foundation down?"

“In the next few weeks. Honestly, the death of my parents delayed everything, but this is where I want the house. The back deck will face west so I can watch the sunset.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I think so. Though I hadn’t planned on being the person running the whole business. I’m starting to fall behind as people want to get back to their normal lives and stop taking all the slack. I need to hire more people, but I don’t have time to interview people. Work is seriously taking everything I have.”

“I feel guilty for taking your whole day.”

Ryan turned to Alex and reached up, running his fingers over Alex’s stubble. “I needed this. It has been too long since I’ve been real.”

“So if I leaned in and kissed you, would that be real?”

Butterflies took over Ryan’s stomach, and he nodded. Time seemed to slow as Alex stepped closer and cupped Ryan’s face. His dark eyes seemed intent on learning everything about Ryan. Then Alex closed the distance and his eyes slid closed. Sparks flew as their lips brushed together. They both moaned and took the kiss deeper. Ryan opened for Alex as he shuffled closer.

Their chests were pressed together, their bodies plastered close as Alex slid his hands from Ryan’s face down his shoulders and draped them on Ryan’s hips. A shiver ran down his back, and his heart rate picked up. He tilted his head, opening more, ready for anything, as his phone buzzed.

They both froze for a moment as the phone continued to vibrate in Ryan’s pocket. Reluctantly, he stepped back, sadness filling him. “Just a second,” Ryan answered the

call, his gaze staying on Alex. “Hello.”

“Ryan, it’s Denise. I was driving by the store, and someone threw a brick through the window. I’m here with the sheriff now, but you need to come.”

Pain sliced through Ryan. Why would someone toss a brick through his windows at the store? Crap, he had to deal with this. “I’ll be there.”

Alex put his hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “I overheard. I’ll drive you.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, that’s not necessary.”

“Of course it is. I’m going with you and helping you deal with it. You stayed with me last week in the clinic, and I’m standing by your side for this.”

Ryan couldn’t hold back and wrapped Alex in a hug. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Let’s go. We can take my car.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, I might need the bed of the truck so I can get some sheets of plywood.”

“Makes sense. I’ll drive your truck.”

Ryan chuckled. “I’m really okay to drive, but it would be nice to have you there.”

“I’ll be there for you.”

The transition from the warmth of potential romance to the chill of reality was stark as they approached the sporting goods store. A breeze played with the police tape that cordoned off the scene, mocking their arrival. Ryan’s breath caught at the sight of

glass glittering like ice on the pavement.

“Damn it.” The words were just a whisper torn away by the wind, but they carried the weight of Ryan’s disappointment and anger. Why had someone done this? Was it random, or had someone targeted him? Their dad had warned that if anyone saw Brett being gay in town, they would face retribution, but Ryan didn’t want to believe someone would attack just because he’d gone out on a date with Alex. Could his relationship really hurt the business? He didn’t want to lose the store, but he didn’t want to lose Alex, either.

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Note to self, not everything is as bad as it first seems.

Alex stood close, anger and fear mixing together. Had someone done this because he was dating Ryan? He hoped not. Worry for the clinic hit and he almost wanted to go drive past and find out if something happened there.

“Look at this mess.” Ryan shook his head as his lips turned down.

Alex glanced into the store, seeing that some stuff had been stolen. Maybe this wasn’t about them dating. “I’m so sorry. This looks awful.”

Ryan sucked in a deep breath and then squared his shoulders. “At least it’s not raining. I need to get some plywood put up.”

His phone buzzed and he checked his messages, praying it wasn’t someone telling him his clinic had been vandalized. The note from Indigo was reassuring. Nothing was amiss at the clinic.

“Everything okay?” Ryan asked.

Alex nodded. “It was Indigo saying she heard about this mess and was sorry. She also said she checked on the clinic and it was okay.”

“That’s good. Makes me think this wasn’t about hate, instead it was about something else.”

The sheriff, Clay West, came over shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Harrington. It

looks like it was a robbery, but they must have gotten spooked and run off.”

“Yeah. I don’t know how much they took. I guess I’d better get photos to document.”

Clay nodded. “I’ll make sure you get the report so you can file it with your insurance.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, and I called some guys from the fire department. They’re stopping by in a few to help you with the plywood.”

“Thanks. You didn’t have to.”

Alex was amazed at how fast this city came together to help each other. The place he used to live, there was no way anyone would have helped in a situation like this. Of course, his ex would have been angry if anyone had paid this much attention to him. He liked that other people cared about Ryan.

After Clay finished documenting everything, the cleanup started. Alex had on gloves and bent to gather the larger pieces of glass as the firemen arrived. The seemingly impossible task of getting everything squared away was taken care of in what seemed like minutes.

The guys from the fire station all seemed to know Ryan. They offered support and spoke about how this was such a horrible act of violence. They seemed to feel dismayed at the crime, wondering aloud if stores would need to install metal gates around the front of the buildings to keep people from breaking in.

They were done cleaning inside and out about thirty minutes after the guys showed up to help. After saying their goodbyes, the firemen and the police all drove away,

leaving him and Ryan standing outside the store.

“What do you want to do?” Alex asked.

Ryan turned to him, sadness filling his face. “Honestly, I want to take you back to my place and hold you all night. Not sex. I just want to be with you.”

Heat flashed through Alex. “I’d like that.”

Ryan took his hand and led him over to the truck. The engine roared to life, and Ryan popped the vehicle into gear. Maybe sleeping in the same bed with Ryan was asking for trouble, but he could hold back.

The engine’s hum turned silent as Ryan parked in front of his small house. The moon above illuminated their path as they exited the vehicle. Ryan stopped midway up the walk and looked up. Alex took Ryan’s hand as he tilted his head back and stared up at the swath of stars dotting the sky like diamonds poured on black velvet.

“It’s beautiful.”

Ryan nodded beside him. “Yeah. I know the city is coming this way and soon enough there will be houses and streetlights, and cars driving past, but I have enough land it won’t be too bad.”

“So the area behind the house you’re building, the hill, and all of that space, can they build on that?”

Ryan chuckled. “You noticed how steep it is. No, they can’t build because the runoff of the hill goes directly into the flow for drinking water, and the grade is too steep. Since that area won’t be getting city sewage services and they’ll have to do underground septic system, it will always be empty of homes.”

“Oh wow. That’s really great for you.”

“Yeah, it’s why I bought this property. I mean, it could change, but to run sewage pipes to that bit of land would be very difficult.” Ryan turned to face Alex. His palm landed on Alex’s chest as he stepped closer.

Desire pumped through Alex. If he knew Ryan better, he would tug up Ryan’s shirt and then learn his body. But they weren’t that close yet.

“I’m feeling things.” Ryan’s voice was thick and raspy.

Alex swallowed over the lump in his throat. Being with Ryan had him half hard, but being out here alone with the man was making it impossible to keep his cock from turning to wood.

“What are you feeling?” Alex asked, his voice so husky Ryan had to notice.

Ryan placed his other hand on Alex’s waist, which sent a shiver through him. There was no way he could keep his dick under control with Ryan touching him like this.

“I feel like I need to touch you,” Ryan whispered.

“I like touching.”

Ryan licked his lips. “I want to touch you with my lips.”

Alex couldn’t stop the wide smile that broke out. “I like the idea of you touching me with your lips.”

“I feel like us being naked would be good.”

“How about we both shower? Then we can slip into your bed and see what happens.”

Ryan sucked in a quick breath. “I’m not ready?—”

“Penetration isn’t necessary.”

“What?” Confusion shown in Ryan’s eyes.

Alex cupped Ryan’s face and leaned his forehead against Ryan’s. “This isn’t sex for procreation. I know plenty of gay guys who don’t do penetrative sex. They don’t like the idea of anal or the feel of it. There are so many things we can do together that isn’t anal sex.”

“Oh, I never thought of that.”

“Let’s shower, and I can show you how much fun we can have together.”

Ryan put his hand on Alex’s chest, stopping him. “I’m not just feeling physical things. I’m feeling emotions that aren’t simple. It’s complex and deep.”

Alex smiled and leaned in, brushing a sweet kiss over Ryan’s cheek. “I’m feeling that, too. Would it be too fast to say I’m falling for you?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, not too fast, because I’m falling for you, too.”

Alex kissed Ryan, his tongue swiping deep, their bodies pressed together as they clung to each other. After a long moment, the kiss ended and Ryan fumbled with his keys, a soft chuckle escaping his lips as he worked the door open. “I can’t believe I’m this excited about sex. I don’t know that I’ll last long.”

Alex followed Ryan in and resisted the urge to push him up against the wall. “We’ll

go as long as we can.”

Ryan chuckled. “As long as we can.”

“Honestly, if I see a guy come, I’m right there.”

“Jesus, just thinking of you coming is making me harder.”

“Let’s get into the shower.”

They hurried inside and stripped off their clothes as they went, laughing as they got naked. Ryan’s hands grasped and roved over Alex’s body, trailing down his spine and over his butt cheeks. When Alex turned and his cock brushed up against Ryan’s, he thought the man was going to lose it.

Ryan closed his eyes and stepped back. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

“Let’s get in the shower and wash.”

“If you touch me, I’m going to blow.”

“We can jerk off in the shower, then go lie down. If we sleep, we sleep, but later, we can do more.”

“Fuck, sex with you is so easy.”

“It may be easy, but I promise it will be good.”

Alex liked Ryan as a person. That more than Ryan’s good body attracted him, but Ryan’s trim waist and broad shoulders added to the allure. He wanted to get on his knees and worship his cock, but he knew that would make Ryan come fast, and he

wanted to stretch this out as long as possible.

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Note: Some things are better than the anticipation leading up to the act.

Ryan wasn't sure if he was dreaming or if this was real. Alex had soaped up his hand, then wrapped it around Ryan's cock and was pumping him, sliding his palm over the tip and then back down to the base like he knew exactly what Ryan would like. Of course, he did because he'd done it with his own dick probably thousands of times.

"Feels so good," Ryan groaned as Alex palmed his balls.

"Glad you like it."

When Alex slid one finger along Ryan's taint, it was all he could do to stay standing. He couldn't stop the orgasm that rocked through his body. He slammed his eyes closed and hung onto Alex, praying he stayed upright.

"Oh fuck," Alex said as he wrapped his arms around Ryan and pumped his hips against Ryan's body twice before stilling.

After a moment, Ryan glanced down, seeing Alex's cum on his belly. He couldn't believe he was in the shower with another guy and that they'd both cum. He glanced up and met Alex's gaze.

"That was amazing," Ryan said.

Alex leaned in and brushed a kiss over his lips. "It was very good."

"Let me finish cleaning, and then we can get out."

“Sure,” Alex said as he grabbed the shampoo and started in on his hair. They were done in the shower in minutes. After drying, he took Alex’s hand and led him to his bed.

Heat coursed through Ryan as he pulled back the covers, and Alex slid into bed, staring up at him. A shiver snaked down Ryan’s spine, his breath catching as he stared at Alex’s cock growing harder.

“You’re getting it up again.”

Alex glanced down and then shrugged. “I probably won’t get really hard without some sort of stimulation.”

Ryan felt his cock tighten, and he chuckled. “I guess I’m going to get hard, too.”

Alex opened his arms. “Come lay with me. We don’t have to do anything more. Relax, and later, we can see what comes to mind.”

Ryan stretched out beside Alex and was pleased when Alex pulled him close and held him. The day had been great until he found out about the break-in. Then that had been absolute crap, but they’d resurrected it all. He sighed, and Alex wrapped his arms tighter.

“I had a good day with you, well, everything except the break-in.”

Ryan nodded. “I don’t know if it was targeted because I’m with you and someone got mad at seeing us together or if it really was totally random.”

“It sucks. I hope it wasn’t targeted because I don’t want that for you. If it was random, it probably won’t happen again.”

Ryan spun to face Alex. “So that didn’t scare you away.”

Alex shook his head. “No, it will take a lot more to push me away.”

Ryan snuggled closer, and their cocks brushed together. He gasped as it felt like electricity zipped through his body. “Wow. That feels good.”

Alex’s fingers traced over Ryan’s jaw and down to his chest as he slowly pumped his hips, causing their dicks to brush together again.

Ryan’s hips jerked fast, and he had to force them to be still, or he might just push Alex to the mattress and get on top of him to grind. “So freaking good.”

Alex chuckled. “It does feel good. Amazing. Like I could come again.”

“Heck, yes.” Ryan panted as his eyes rolled closed. “Alex—” Ryan said through gritted teeth as he reached for a tissue and brought it around just before he came, gasping as he emptied his balls again.

Alex moved so he was straddling Ryan and grabbed a tissue. Ryan watched Alex as he stroked his cock, his gaze staying on Ryan. It only took him a few pumps before he came. He decided that he liked watching Alex as he came and wanted to see more.

It would have to wait because both of them were done for the night. He woke as the sun was coming up, hard and ready for more action.

Alex kissed his way down Ryan’s body and was about to suck his cock. “Is this okay?” Alex asked.

Heat filled Ryan as he nodded. “More than okay,” Ryan said, his voice catching on the edge of desire.

Alex slid his tongue out and licked from the base of Ryan's cock to the tip.

“God, Alex—” Ryan gasped as molten desire slid through him.

Alex chuckled and licked some more, making Ryan squirm. He needed more but wasn't sure what to say.

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Mental Note: Don't underestimate the power of good people.

Alex smiled to himself as Ryan bucked underneath him. He liked when guys were enthusiastic about blowjobs. It made him feel like he'd really done something special.

"Please," Ryan breathed out as his fingers clutched at Alex's hair.

Alex sucked down on Ryan, taking him deep. He liked how Ryan jerked and then froze before his balls emptied deep into the back of Alex's throat. After swallowing Ryan's cum, Alex sat up and stared down at the sexy man he'd shared the bed with.

Ryan blinked up at him as he caught his breath. "That was so freaking amazing. Best blowjob ever."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I want to do that for you, but I've never..." Ryan's voice trailed off as he glanced down at Alex's hard cock.

"It's okay. We can take it slow. Let me jerk off, then we can get up and head to the store."

"Ugh, I forgot for a moment," Ryan said as he sat up. Instead of letting Alex jack off, Ryan bent low and licked the tip of Alex's cock. The licks were tentative at first, then he sucked down on Alex's cock before he pulled back fast, coughing a little.

"Sorry. I went too deep."

Alex cupped his jaw. “You’ll pick up technique fast. Let me finish, and we can go.”

Ryan nodded as he sat back, watching. Alex liked being watched and came fast. They rinsed off quickly before dressing. Ryan thankfully let him borrow a shirt so he wasn’t wearing exactly what he had on the night before.

They took both cars and parked out front of the store. Alex could see sadness on Ryan’s face. He’d been through so much and now this was just another bad thing that had happened to the guy.

“What time is the glass repair guy getting here?” Alex asked.

Ryan glanced at his phone. “In twenty minutes.”

“I’m going to head over and pick up some breakfast. I’ll be back fast, and then after the guy finishes with the window, I can help you restock and make the store look presentable.”

Ryan drew in a fast breath and then slapped his forehead. “Crap, Mrs. Iden and Jenna are coming today to do the window. This window that was broken out. I don’t know if they can decorate it.”

Alex didn’t really know what Ryan was talking about, but he could tell it was upsetting him. “Hey, what do they do with the window?”

“It’s the holiday decorations. They paint some of the windows with a cute holiday theme and then set up a display. It draws a lot of people to the store. My mom was the one who used to do it and she made it special. This will ruin it.”

Alex grabbed Ryan’s shoulders and met his gaze. “It can be figured out. Don’t worry. I’m sure both women know it’s not something under your control and they’ll be

willing to do the window when everything is fixed.”

Ryan let go a heavy sigh. “I just feel like everything is falling apart, and I don’t like that feeling.”

Alex nodded. “Yeah, when life falls apart, it’s hard to move on because it feels like you’re going in reverse.”

Ryan’s lips thinned. “You’ve said some wise stuff about everything falling apart before. What happened?”

Alex blew out a breath. It was time to tell Ryan if he wanted their relationship to last. “My ex was abusive, and I put up with it for too long. He treated me like crap. After I finished my degree, I got a job that was great. But my ex didn’t like that I was successful. He put me down every chance he got. Eventually, I started believing him. He changed me, and not in a good way. I left him about a year ago, but he kept coming back into my life. It was rough. I finally found this job out here and moved.”

Ryan took his hand. “What about him—the ex? Is he still out there to cause problems?”

Alex shook his head. “He ended up breaking into the place I was working and broke some equipment. If he had stopped at that, it would have maybe gotten him probation, but he attacked the receptionist when she came in that morning. She’s okay, well, physically. I’m sure she’ll live with that memory forever. But he’s in prison and won’t be out for more than twenty years.”

“Damn. That’s awful. And you still went out with me though I was an ass.”

“You were just an ass in general, and you had a reason. He was a jerk to me for no reason other than jealousy. He didn’t like people praising me.”

Ryan pulled him close, and the hug felt amazing. He liked that Ryan cared. Maybe it was crazy that he liked everything about Ryan. They just seemed to fit together.

A car pulled into the lot and Ryan didn't let go immediately or jerk away, instead he looked up and brushed a quick kiss over Alex's lips. That made Alex feel even better. Ryan didn't care if people saw them together.

"That's Jenna, a long-time employee here at the store."

"Oh, does she know you're going out with me?"

Ryan shrugged. "I guess she does now."

The occupant of the car stepped out. It was a middle-aged woman who looked very upset. "Oh, Ryan, I can't believe this happened. The window."

"The glass guy is almost here. It will get fixed."

"That's great." Jenna turned to Alex. "I'm Jenna."

"Alex."

"It's so nice to meet you."

"It's great to meet you, too."

"Hopefully, we'll be seeing more of you. Oh, Ryan, we have the plans drawn up for the window. I just need your final approval. We were planning on doing the painting today, but we can put together the display in the back room and then bring it out this week."

“Thank you. It means so much to have you help me with this. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, hon, it isn’t the first time plans have been interrupted. We’ll make sure it shines this year.”

Another car pulled up into the lot. Ryan took Alex’s hand and tugged him over. “This is Mrs. Iden. She helped my mom do the window in past years. Mrs. Iden, this is Alex.”

“Well, hello.” The woman smiled and shook their hands. “I’m so pleased to meet you. You’re the new veterinarian. My friends have great things to say about you. I hope this little incident doesn’t turn you off our town.”

Alex took her arm and walked her over to the store. “No, it doesn’t turn me off. I think this thing happens everywhere. I was impressed so many people have come to help. Last night, the firemen showed up and helped clean the place then board up the window.”

“Oh my,” Mrs. Iden fanned herself. “Those men are hot. I never dated a fireman in my day, but I think they are the best.”

Jenna was laughing and shaking her head. “Mrs. Iden, maybe we should call them out to help us.”

The women laughed as they headed into the store. Ryan was shaking his head, and it looked like he was about to say something when a truck pulled into the lot. This was obviously the window guy.

The man stepped from his truck and came over to shake their hands. “My name is Ian. I hope you two are doing well. I’m going to get started. I came out earlier and measured. I should have the window installed in a couple of hours. My buddy will be

here in about twenty minutes to help, but for now, I need to get the plywood off.”

“Sure,” Ryan said. “Let me help you get that off and put up.”

“It sucks this happened. Hopefully, they’ll stay away. I ran into West this morning. Said they had some video from down the block. Maybe they’ll catch whoever did it.”

Ryan nodded. “I hope so. I don’t want this happening again.”

Alex took off to get them breakfast, and the other window guy was there, helping the first man. He and Ryan ate while watching the window being installed. After eating, they headed into the back to help Mrs. Iden and Jenna.

By lunchtime, the new windows were installed, and Jenna and Mrs. Iden had set up the display and were starting to paint one of the far windows. Alex needed to do some paperwork but hated the idea of not seeing Ryan until next weekend.

“Hey, why the long face?” Ryan asked.

“I need to get some stuff done, but I don’t want to leave.”

“You know, you could come out to my place again tonight.”

Alex took Ryan’s hand, holding it loosely. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Ryan shook his head. “I like the idea of waking up with you.”

“I like it, too.”

“It’s settled then. Text me before you drive out.”

Alex nodded before quickly brushing a kiss over Ryan's lips. He liked that Ryan wasn't afraid to be with him. Maybe he should be more cautious, but he really liked Ryan and wanted a good relationship with him.

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Alex was amazed that he and Ryan were already at this point in their relationship. He felt things for the man he couldn't describe. With Ryan, he felt like they belonged together.

It didn't take him long to do everything he needed to do at the clinic, and he was ready to leave by six. He texted Ryan, finding out he was still at the store.

Alex drove over and saw multiple cars in the lot. He headed inside and heard Ryan laughing with someone. Alex paused for a second then continued on. As he entered the back area he was surprised to see Ryan with three other guys.

"Hey," Ryan said, though his gaze darted from Alex back to the other guys, then away. The man looked nervous. Was this the first sign that Ryan didn't really understand the implications of being with him?

"Hello," Alex said.

"Who are you?" one of the men asked.

Ryan said nothing, so Alex moved to shake his hand and introduce himself. "I'm Alex."

The guy lifted his chin. "Ben. How do you know Ryan?"

The man sounded very possessive as if he had exclusive rights to Ryan. Alex didn't take offense, but he felt the need to watch his back.

“We’re friends,” Alex said.

The man snorted. “I hope you aren’t turning into a fairy like your brother.”

Alex’s stomach turned. He wanted to get out of there, but he’d just stepped in and didn’t have an excuse to leave. Ryan said nothing, which disappointed Alex. Why was he hanging out with these jerks? What in the world was Ryan thinking?

The jerks made some other joke, and Alex was done. He turned, ready to walk out. Ryan wasn’t standing up for himself or Alex, and it was too much. He couldn’t start a relationship with a guy who wouldn’t stand up for them.

“Wait,” Ryan called out.

Alex paused but didn’t look back.

“What is this, some kind of lover’s spat?” one of the guys asked.

“Shut up,” Ryan said. “You know what, I’m tired of you all saying shit like that about Brett. My brother is the bravest man I’ve ever known. He’s ten times better than any of you.”

“What are you saying?” one of the guys asked.

“That you’re all a bunch of jerks. None of you came over here to help with the store. You just want to see the carnage and find out what happened so you can gossip with your buddies. I’ll tell you what happened, I’m dating Alex, and he was here last night when the window was smashed. He actually helped me.”

Alex turned and met Ryan’s gaze. If he’d made it out of the building, Ryan’s words may have come too late, but he was so proud of Ryan standing up for himself.

“I should have called you all out earlier for saying what you did about Brett, but I’m doing that now. Shut up about gay people. They aren’t doing anything to you. Stop being so jealous of them and get on with your own life. Maybe if you could keep a woman happy, you wouldn’t be so fascinated with gay men. I’m with Alex and happy about that. You can go off and tell anyone you want at your gossip sessions. I don’t care. People aren’t as immature as you three are. Grow up. I’m not kicking you out of my life, but if you want to be friends, you’re going to have to welcome Alex in as my partner and be nice to him.”

“Wait, what?” one of the guys asked. “Partner, like you two are living together? When did that happen?”

“Does it matter, Kent? I’m with Alex, and he’s with me. I know you all have animals, and Alex is the only veterinarian in town. You had best think about what you say, and maybe he’ll be kind enough to accept your pets as patients. Honestly, I wouldn’t blame him if he bans you from his place of business.”

All three of the guys hung their heads. They weren’t getting mad. Instead, they looked ashamed.

Kent looked up at Ryan first, then Alex. “I’m sorry. I guess I was just talking. I don’t want to lose you as a friend, Ryan. I mean, you’re the one who was nice to me when everyone else called me stupid.”

“Kent, I’m not going to stop being your friend, but you need to do better.”

Alex was surprised by Ryan’s ability to forgive. No way would he forgive so easily, but then again, he was jaded. Not everyone deserved forgiveness, but if Ryan could turn these guys from being homophobic jerks into allies, he guessed it was good.

The three men stood and shook Alex’s hand, apologizing before leaving. Alex watched them go, then turned back to face Ryan.

“Do you think they are good with us being together?”

Ryan shrugged as he moved closer. “I don’t know. I should have told them to cut out that kind of talk a while back. There is no excuse. I guess because, at the time, it wasn’t affecting me directly, I let it slide. I need to do better with stuff like that. I can see why my brother still stays away.”

Alex put his hands on Ryan’s shoulders and held his gaze. “Hey, you don’t have to be perfect on this. Just keep pushing forward.”

Ryan nodded. “I’m trying.”

“Good. Now, how about we head home?”

“Sure. I have to be up here early in the morning.”

Alex chuckled. “Ugh, early mornings. I don’t know how we’ll navigate being together and work, but we’ll figure something out.”

“We’ll make it work.”

Ryan took his hand as they walked out to their cars. How had he fallen for this guy so fast? Maybe it was crazy to think that he’d found something special after so few days together, but he felt this in his soul like he’d never felt anything before.

After dinner, they sat outside on the small deck at Ryan’s tiny home, staring up at the stars. Satisfaction filled him. He felt like he’d come a long way in the little time they’d known each other. Whatever forces had brought them together, Alex was thankful for.

“Never thought I’d be here,” Ryan admitted.

Alex glanced over. “I know you don’t mean this physical place.”

“No, here with a man, thinking about the future. I mean, it’s crazy that we’ve known each other for such a short amount of time, but I care more about you and for you than I have for anyone else.”

“I feel like my soul connected with you.”

“That’s a perfect way to describe what I feel. Like we were meant to be from the start, but it took years to find you.”

Alex leaned over, brushing their lips together. Ryan surprised him by standing up, but then he held out his hand and pulled Alex up to stand with him. Desire sparked between them. They had time, and he knew he shouldn’t rush everything, but there was no reason to hold back. They were in love, and nothing was going to keep them apart. Together, they would build something special out here where the stars sparkled like diamonds, and their love had space to grow.