



Third Time Lucky

Author: *Aurora Crane*

Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Trust didn't always go both ways, and Grady Donehue had learned that the hard way. He hadn't learned better after the first betrayal, but he wasn't going to make the same mistake a third time. Striking up a strange friendship with the equally strange—and straight—soldier, Lake, who had sunshine in his eyes? Grady could do that. He could even handle helping Lake figure out he might not be so straight after all, in a very hands-on way. But falling in love? No, thanks.

Lake McKenna has spent his whole life absolutely confident in who he is and what he wants. Even when the picture-perfect future he'd always envisioned seemed further away than ever, none of his plans had included another man. But the more time Lake spends with his new friend—grumpy and sneaky-sexy detective, Grady—the more he thinks that maybe what he really needs is something different than what he had always imagined.

Neither man was prepared for the other, but Lake is nothing if not flexible. Doubt isn't part of his makeup. He knows how much more incredible they could be together if only Grady could see it too. But Grady has to decide if Lake is worth risking his heart again, and whether he's brave enough to see if it really is third time lucky.

Total Pages (Source): 87

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

GradyDonehuefuckinghatedparties, and New Year's Eve parties were the worst of them all. Each year seemed shorter than the last, and it wasn't like the new year was actually going to bring anything "new." Just more of the same old shit.

The only thing that usually saved them was the amount of alcohol that was available at said parties. He hadn't originally meant to drink; he'd driven in the hopes he could leave as soon as humanly possible. But the amount of socialising he'd been forced to get through meant that alcohol was the only solution. As it was, he was only halfway to being plastered, but it was only—he rolled up the sleeve of his light-blue button-down shirt as he twisted his wrist and checked his black watch—twenty to twelve; he had plenty of time left.

Being newly single and putting himself in a situation where he was surrounded by couples hadn't been one of his finer ideas. He could read a room, and his bitter thoughts about what relationships turned a person into wouldn't be well received. He should have declined when his work partner, Quinn Hughes, had invited him. Grady wasn't good company right now, stewing in his anger and his hurt and all the other emotions that he wasn't interested in reviewing that were churning in his gut. He should have said no, stayed home, and drank there. He had better alcohol anyway.

"You look like you'd prefer to be walking to the gallows than here," a voice to his left said. He turned to find a man he'd been introduced to earlier in the night. Lake McKenna. A friend of a friend of a friend. Unfortunately for Grady, his work as a New South Wales police detective meant that he never forgot a name or a face. Even ones that were connected to insignificant people he would never see again. It was a curse.

“Why? Did you see one on the way in?” Grady asked sarcastically.

Lake smiled, flashing dimples that were way too cute to be legal. He was a good-looking guy, and Grady had looked his fill when he’d met him because he was only human. He had nice hazel-brown eyes and short, dark hair that was swept to the side, his ears sticking out a little more than was probably considered “attractive,” though Grady liked them. The three-quarter sleeved navy-and-white baseball tee he wore was tight against his flat stomach, and the distressed denim jeans gave him a frat-boy look that shouldn’t have been as sexy as it was. The beaded and leather bracelets on his left wrist and the thin chain necklace Grady could see poking out of his shirt completed the look. Grady didn’t want to hit that, but window shopping was an acceptable pastime.

“I think they were outlawed a while ago, sorry.” Lake genuinely looked sorry, which was just... bizarre. Grady was waiting for the punchline. “But I could buy you a drink?”

Not a very inventive punchline. Grady raised his eyebrow. “Is that supposed to be the same thing? Because I hate to break it to you, but one is not like the other.”

“It’s more like a consolation prize.”

“I can get my own consolation prize.” It wasn’t like they were at a bar. They were at someone’s home—another friend of a friend, and honestly, Grady was sick of learning people’s names—and he could just go to the kitchen and get what he wanted. There was enough alcohol in the house to sink a ship.

“It’s like food,” Lake said brightly. “Always tastes better when someone else makes it.”

Grady doubted that was true. “And what qualifications do you have?”

“Well, I’m an Army pilot,” Lake said. He stood up straighter. “A major to be exact. Got my wings at nineteen; I’m well versed in all manner of vehicles—ground and air—but I specialise with the S70 Black Hawk, the ARH Tiger, the CH-47F Chinook and the MRH90 Taipan. I prefer the Hawk personally; they’re smoother. I know first aid, Morse code, aerodynamics, and even some meteorology. But basically, if it has an engine, I can drive or fly it.”

Grady blinked. Uh. “I meant for making me a drink.”

“Oh. Well, that probably makes more sense. I did wonder why I was suddenly in a job interview.” Lake grinned without a hint of embarrassment. “I only have home experience in drink making, but I am good at taking direction, and I enjoy learning new skills.”

Was he for real? Grady looked around in case Quinn—or more likely one of his lovers, definitely Sebastian Devlin, the asshole lawyer—was watching from a corner and laughing at him. He would not put it past Sebastian to have found a puppy and pointed him in Grady’s direction with instructions: “Go and drive him nuts, and I’ll give you a hundred bucks.”

He did find Sebastian when he looked, but the guy was whispering something in Quinn’s ear, and Quinn was smiling at the ground. Disgusting. Grady wished he were anywhere but there. Not that he wasn’t happy for Quinn, because he was... as much as he could be when one of the three men Quinn was now involved with was Sebastian, but being around happy couples was hard for him right then.

Lake was waiting patiently when he looked back, that smile still plastered on his face like he was a Dutch Golden Age painting or maybe the next Eros in the *Amor Vincit Omnia* because it was a little mischievous, like he was waiting for Grady to say something cheeky. He’d be disappointed because Grady wasn’t going to.

“Well, lead the way. Or is there a waiting period for this drink?”

“Bossy,” Lake said as he headed towards the kitchen. He turned back and winked. “I like bossy.”

Jesus Christ. This is why Grady didn’t like going places. He always found the weird ones.

Weird, yes, but at least this one had a phenomenal ass. A perfect bubble butt, just asking to be caressed and worshipped. Grady was an ass man, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen one quite so beautifully round. Not on someone who wasn’t an ice hockey or professional tennis player anyway. Even then, this one was right up there.

“Ten more minutes!” someone shouted behind them from the living room they had just left. They were probably on the couch, watching the countdown on the TV. Grady had blocked the noise out over an hour ago.

Good. Once it was midnight, Grady no longer had an obligation to stay. He had a bed calling his name. And an Uber if he could find one this time of night. Fuck, he hoped so. Plenty of people were out at bars and stuff, weren’t they? Prime night for bringing home a solid pay cheque.

“Okay,” Lake said loudly, slapping his hands on the counter with a loud smack that sounded like it hurt. “What’s your poison of choice?”

“Alcohol,” Grady deadpanned.

Lake shook his head with a mournful sigh. “Bzzz. Not specific enough. Next.”

“You’re the bartender today,” Grady said. “Bartender’s choice.”

“Do you trust me?” Lake tilted his head.

No. “I just met you.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake waved his hand dismissively and focused on the array of alcohol on the counter. “Never mind. If it kills you, it will be totally worth it.”

Grady blinked. Well. That wasn’t worrying at all.

Lake lined up four different bottles of rum, a bottle of Cointreau, some pineapple and lime juice, some kind of syrup, and an ice tray from the freezer. Grady wasn’t sure what he was most concerned about: that all these ingredients were even in the house or that Lake was clearly going to mix them all together and then make Grady drink it.

“What is it?”

“Well, there should be some bitters, so it might not work, but it’s called the ‘Zombie,’ and it’s guaranteed to fuck you up.” Lake smiled again—Grady wished he wouldn’t, smiling this much couldn’t be natural—and then said, “That’s what we’re after, right? Fucking up? It’s not as fun as the naked kind, but it’ll do in a pinch.”

“Are you propositioning me?” Grady asked, squinting. He honestly couldn’t tell, which was worrisome. Normally, he was pretty good at working out if he was being seriously flirted with or not. And hell, if this guy wanted to fuck in a spare room, Grady wasn’t about to say no.

“I’m not gay,” Lake said easily. “But hey, take it how you want.” Another wink.

Grady sighed and rolled his eyes. At least that answered that question, he supposed. Alcohol was a good runner-up for sex.

Lake stirred his abomination with a spoon and then handed it over with a beaming smile. “Bon appétit.”

“That’s for food.” Grady took the glass warily.

Lake tapped a finger against his heart-shaped lips. “Bottoms up?”

Grady shouldn’t have said anything. He took a tentative sip, waiting for the horrid taste to hit his tongue. He hoped it was a quick and painless death. A refreshing hit of pineapple hit first, followed by just a hint of grapefruit before the alcohol exploded across his taste buds. It was actually not bad. It wasn’t like the whiskey he had at home, but it wasn’t anything to sneeze at. He could work with it. There was enough alcohol in there; he wouldn’t need to drink much anyway.

“You’re not much of a partier, are you?” Lake asked, watching as Grady took another sip, a longer one this time. He was getting used to the “kick you in the balls” flavour.

“What gave me away?” Grady asked. He hadn’t been trying to hide it. It shouldn’t have taken that long to work it out. Lucky Lake was pretty, he supposed.

“You’ve got the whole”—he gestured at all of Grady—“broody thing going on. Glower, check. Drinking excessively, check—”

Grady scowled. “That’s not a characteristic for broodiness—”

“Scruffy beard, check. Dark-olive eyes, check.” Lake kept making tick marks in the air as he went, his leather-beaded bracelet jingling against his wrist.

Grady contemplated throwing his drink over Lake. A waste of perfectly good alcohol, but sometimes sacrifices had to be made. There was plenty more where it came from. It was like the witch’s house in Hansel and Gretel, except that instead of candy,

everything was made of spirits.

“How is the colour of my eyes a factor?” Grady asked reluctantly. The entire conversation was ridiculous, but he also needed to know where these criteria had come from, or if Lake had pulled them out of his ass.

Lake continued as though Grady hadn’t said anything. “Bed hair, check. Dangerous vibe, check.”

At least that one was reasonable. “Are you done?”

“Not yet,” Lake said, fishing out his phone. “Let me Google it.”

“I’d love to know what you’re going to put in your search,” Grady said, sipping at his drink again.

“How can you tell,” Lake said out loud as he typed on his phone, “if a guy is broody?” He paused. “Oh. Whoops. There are a lot of baby websites here. They think I mean broody, like ‘ready for kids.’ Google needs a context bar.”

“Please put the phone away,” Grady said, making a pained face. He took another long drink because he really needed this stuff to hit his system, preferably before Lake had started talking.

“Probably for the best,” Lake agreed, nodding as he slid it back into his pocket.

There was no “probably” about it.

“One minute!” Another shout came from the living room. Grady drained the rest of his drink and pulled out his phone so he could organise an Uber. Maybe they’d be waiting before he even got outside, and it could be a smooth transition home. He

could feel the drink doing its job finally, fuzziness gradually invading his mind and making his limbs feel relaxed.

“Shit,” Lake said, frowning. He moved to the doorway that led to the living room, craning his neck as he searched the room, one hand curled around the doorframe.

“Are you all right?” Grady asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Ten!”

“Yeah,” Lake answered absently. “I forgot what the time was, and I haven’t found anyone.”

“Found anyone for what?”

“Eight!”

“Midnight.” He made it sound like Grady should know what he was talking about, but Grady had no fucking clue.

“Why do you need someone for midnight?” Grady asked. What the fuck was Lake talking about now?

“Six!”

Lake bit his lip and returned to stand in front of Grady. He had a speculative look in his pretty eyes that Grady wasn’t sure he liked. Nothing good ever came from a look like that.

“Four!”

“It’s tradition,” Lake said. “You have to participate.”

“Participate in what?” Grady asked. He’d participated more than enough just by being there. Had there been some kind of fine print he’d missed on the invitation? No

one had told him he'd have to do anything. He hadn't even planned to shout "hooray" when the new year showed its face. He came, he saw, and now he just wanted to go home.

"Two!"

"Ah, fuck it," Lake said with a shrug.

Grady didn't get a chance to ask what the fuck that meant before Lake was fisting his collar and yanking him down into an open-mouthed kiss. The momentary shock was enough for Lake to flick his tongue across Grady's, sending a spark of electricity running through him. Wrapping an arm around Lake's waist and playing with his tongue was pure instinct. Lake moaned, and then hands were running through Grady's hair. Grady grabbed the bottom of Lake's shirt in his hand, twisting it as he thoroughly mapped out Lake's mouth. Damn, he felt good. Solid muscle and just the right height that Grady didn't have to bend too far.

"Happy New Year!"

That should have been the end of the kiss. Grady had worked out why Lake had initiated it, what he'd needed to "find someone" for. Grady hadn't volunteered, but he couldn't say he was upset about it. Except now it was over, Grady couldn't seem to make himself let go. Lake seemed to have the same problem if the way he was clinging to Grady's hair was any indication.

When Lake did eventually pull away, his pupils were dilated, his lips swollen and slick with their combined spit. He looked thoroughly debauched, and it made Grady thicken in his pants. Lake was a good-looking guy already but like this? He was stunning, like he'd been made just to be wrecked so beautifully.

"Well..." Lake cleared his throat, stepping away. His eyes were still locked on

Grady's. "That was better than I was expecting."

What? Grady frowned. "I shudder to think." He didn't want to know. He didn't want to— "What were you expecting?"

Lake shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets as he gave a lopsided grin. "Dunno. Never thought about it." He pulled one hand back out and slapped Grady on the chest. "I like your tongue; you know what to do with it."

Grady had no idea how to respond to that, so he didn't, because what the hell was he supposed to say? Thanks? So do you, for a straight guy? He didn't have to, anyway, since Lake continued without his input.

"Great way to start the year!" Lake winked as he stepped backwards, turning as he went. "Better go find my boys. See you 'round!"

Grady hoped not. Though watching him walk away was a nice experience because fuckinghell, he wasn't sure he would ever see a rounder ass than that for the rest of his life. What a waste.

LakeMcKennahummedtohimself as he swung his key ring around one finger and let himself out of his best friends' house. Zach and Felix always threw a great New Year's Eve party, and normally he would spend the night passed out somewhere, uncomfortable after drinking more than his weight.

This year he hadn't had a drop of alcohol. It was Zach and Felix's first yearwithhis brother, Avery, and he wanted to give them some privacy to do whatever couples did to bring in the new year—he definitely wasn't going to think too hard about that one.

He stopped short on the front steps as he spied someone standing at the end of the driveway. He recognised the broad shoulders stretching that light-blue button-down

shirt: Grady Donehue, the detective he'd kissed at midnight. Another guy wouldn't have been Lake's first choice, because it did nothing for him personally, but kissing someone during the countdown was a rule. Lake couldn't have his whole year start off by breaking a cardinal rule like that.

He'd somehow hit the jackpot for a New Year's Eve kiss anyway, guy or not, because damn did Grady know how to kiss. It might not have gotten Lake's motor going, so to speak, but he'd enjoyed it for what it had been. Anyone who got to kiss that mouth was a lucky guy.

"Hey," Lake said, approaching the big guy. "What are you doing?" He was sure he'd seen him leave at least fifteen, maybe even twenty minutes ago. Why was he just standing outside?

Grady held up the phone in his hand, a scowl darkening his face. "Twenty-minute wait for an Uber that just got extended by another ten minutes."

"Damn," Lake whistled lowly. He'd never waited more than ten or fifteen minutes. "They must be busy tonight."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“I think it’s just me,” Grady muttered.

Lake shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “What’s just you?”

“Back-seat driving gets you a negative rating, apparently,” Grady said. He jammed his phone into his pocket and scanned the street. “It’s not my fault they didn’t know how to drive, and my plans were to get to my destination, not die on the way there.”

“Reasonable.” He’d only met Grady that night, and he was sure that his back-seat driving had been blunt, to the point, and had definitely hurt someone’s feelings. He didn’t seem like the kind of person to pull his punches. “C’mon, let me give you a lift.”

Grady turned to squint at him. “What?”

“A lift.” Lake pretended to steer a steering wheel in front of him. “Car goes vroom. Mine is just down there,” he said, pointing to a metallic-black Toyota RAV4 parked two cars down. “She’s still new, so there’s probably even a lingering new-car smell to help break up the dirty-sock smell.”

“You’re really selling this,” Grady said, the corner of his mouth lifting. Weird to think Lake knew what that mouth tasted like.

“Yeah, I’m a fantastic salesperson,” Lake said. “I couldn’t go into car sales, otherwise the world would have gone broke because I would have convinced everyone to buy one.”

“So you’re shady and your car smells?” Grady looked like he was fighting back a proper smile.

“Yeah.” Lake grinned. “But I can drive.”

“Anything with an engine,” Grady said. “I remember.”

Which Lake was glad for because back-seat driving was annoying. Lake could understand the Uber driver’s stance there even if maybe he’d asked for it by being a bad driver.

“You coming?” he asked.

“How much have you had to drink?” Grady asked suspiciously, not moving.

“Nothing.” Lake paused. “Well, no, I had a Coke and a lemonade. I think the juice I had was mango, but it could have been orange.”

“How do you mix up mango and orange juice?”

“Skill,” Lake said seriously.

Grady crossed his arms over his chest, unconvinced. In Lake’s defence, the juice had been one with multiple flavours, which could confuse anyone’s taste buds. Mango and orange.

“Do I need to do a sobriety test?” Grady asked eventually.

“Depends which one,” Lake said. It didn’t matter, he was going to ace it. “Straight line? Alphabet backwards?” He began walking towards his car, and Grady followed, so Lake assumed that was a “yes.” “Maybe touching my nose with my tongue?”

“Please tell me an officer didn’t ask you to touch your nose with your tongue.” Grady sounded like the idea was physically hurting him.

It hadn’t happened, but Lake wished it had. That would have been fun. “I’ll have you know, I have never been pulled over for drunk driving, and all of my knowledge comes from RBT.”

“That’s not as comforting as you seem to think.”

“I thought it was pretty comforting. I’ve never even gotten a demerit point. I am the ultimate driving citizen.”

“Modest too,” Grady said dryly.

Lake unlocked his car and opened the passenger door for Grady. He could be a gentleman. “Do you need to see my licence and registration?”

Grady looked like he was contemplating it but then shook his head and slid into the seat.

“Please keep your arms and legs in the vehicle at all times,” Lake said jovially before he closed the door and slapped the roof.

“So,” Lake said as he clambered into the driver’s side and pressed the button to start the car. “Where am I going?”

“Chester Hill. Once you get there, I can direct you.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Hey, that’s near me!” Lake said. “Well. About twenty minutes away.”

“Guess I have to move now,” Grady said.

Lake laughed. “Ouch. You’re brutal.” He put the car into gear and then checked the road before indicating and smoothly driving onto the quiet road. He shot Grady a smirk. “I like that.”

Grady leaned back against the seat. “Of course you do.”

WHEN LAKE PULLED INTO the driveway that Grady had directed him to, he stared in surprise at the cute, quaint house.

“Huh.”

Grady paused with one foot out of the car. “What?” he asked, twisting his head back.

“Oh, nothing. I was just expecting something, you know... darker? More sinister. No.” Lake clicked his fingers with an “aha.” He had it. “Broody.”

“And what does a broody house look like?”

“Not like this.” The house was small, probably only two bedrooms if Lake were to take a guess. But it was covered with warm-blue slats with white edging, a plain white door, and an honestly adorable lantern light beside it that was turned on.

“I’ll take your word for it.” Grady shook his head as he got out of the car. “It’s a

rental, though, so that's probably why," he said, before closing the door.

Lake followed him out, and it took until Grady had one step on the front porch before he turned and said, "Why are you following me?"

Lake smiled broadly. Grady was a cranky guy, but Lake wasn't put off by it. Maybe it was the beard that made him seem friendlier? Lake didn't know if that was how it worked, but Grady had a pleasant face even with the dark broodiness of it—because broody was the only accurate word to describe the entirety of Grady—and the neat beard was only an enhancement.

"I'm just making sure you don't keel over and die before you get inside the house." Grady was walking pretty steady but— "You fell asleep for some of the ride home."

"I did not."

"You did." He definitely had. "But once you're inside, it's not my problem anymore."

"How generous of you," Grady drawled.

Lake slapped him on the shoulder, causing him to stumble forward. "Oops, sorry," Lake said apologetically.

Grady didn't seem offended as he steadied himself and then unlocked the front door. He turned back, and Lake widened his smile, hoping he looked friendly and not creepy. It was a fine line.

Grady sighed as he pushed the door open. "Do you want to come inside for a drink?"

Lake mulled the words over. "Is that a trick question? If I say yes, will you give me

finger guns and yell ‘psych!’?” It was a legitimate question, no matter how judgemental Grady looked.

“I have never used finger guns in my entire life.” Lake believed that too. Probably.

“Are you luring me inside to kill me?” If anyone could get away with it, Lake guessed, it would be a detective who’d likely dealt with homicides. “I wish I’d worn different underwear.”

Grady paused on the threshold, looking at Lake like he’d just admitted to having a second head tucked into his shirt. “What kind of underwear are you wearing?” He braced one hand on the doorframe as he stared at him with a facial expression that Lake was used to seeing on most people: utter confusion.

“They’re cheesy Road Runner ones with ‘meep meep’ written right over my dick,” Lake told him.

Grady blinked. “Seriously?”

“Cartoons are man’s best friend.” These were Lake’s favourite pair of underwear. He had a whole series of Looney Tunes character ones.

“I thought that was a dog?”

“Potato, potahto,” Lake said dismissively. “I’ve never had a dog—it’s on my list—so this is the next best thing.”

“The next best thing from a dog is... character underwear?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake grinned. Grady was getting it. “Precisely.”

Grady just shook his head and then went inside. He left the door open, so Lake figured that meant “come in.”

“What kind of drink are we talking?” he asked as he followed Grady inside. “I can’t have coffee this late, or I’ll never sleep. Hot chocolate?”

“I was thinking more whiskey,” Grady said. “But I probably have hot chocolate in here somewhere.”

Whiskey would mean that Lake couldn’t drive home, but hey, he was used to waking up in weird places on New Year’s Day.

Lake eyed the four moving boxes that were stacked neatly by the door. “Spring cleaning?” he asked. It was still summer, but spring cleaning was an all-year-round activity for some.

“No,” Grady said shortly.

There was a story there, Lake could tell. It piqued his curiosity. “Old clothes for the op shop?” he asked as he toed off his shoes and put them beside where Grady had left his own on a rack near the small table by the door. It did not surprise him one iota that Grady seemed to be a neat freak.

“No.”

He whistled as Grady led him through a small lounge. The dark navy-blue walls should have made it feel even smaller and claustrophobic, but mixed with the furniture, it just looked cosy and inviting. There was a soft-grey L-shaped couch, a standing lamp with the same-coloured cover beside it, and tasteful décor scattered around: cushions on the couch that didn't look like they were deformed, a black-stained coffee table with books—books, not magazines—and coasters. There was even a fern that looked like it was healthy and not in danger of dying—magic or a fake, obviously.

He whistled again, appreciatively this time, at the big TV mounted to the wall. There was a sweet surround-sound setup hooked up to it. Lake glanced around and spotted the speakers at the top of every corner of the room. Nice.

When they got to it, the kitchen was even nicer. The walls were a cream colour, but the cupboards were all the same dark navy as the walls in the other rooms. The bench-top was a bright marble, accentuating the sheer size of the island bench in the middle of the space. It was neat—holding another plant, and Lake needed to ask him his secret because who actually kept their indoor plants alive?—with a sick-looking knife block beside the double sink. Lake had never seen the sink on the island bench before; it was pretty cool and overlooked the rest of the room. It meant being able to socialise while washing dishes instead of having your back to the room. Two low-hanging ceiling lights with more navy-blue colours were placed perfectly apart above the island bench.

Lake thought maybe it was time to look at some renovations for his house because his standards had just been lifted a hundredfold. He loved his house, but this place was a whole other beast. It was fucking brilliant.

“Don't want to talk about it, huh?” he asked as he pulled out one of the two high-back bar stools—navy blue with a nice rich wooden structure, of course—and sat down. The island bench had been separated into two; the first half was a full block, probably

with lots of cupboard space Lake would see if he went around to the other side, and then the second half was hollow underneath with room for the stools to be pushed into. It was cosy as fuck. He wondered what the bedrooms—bedroom?—looked like.

“What gave me away?” Grady asked sarcastically as he got two scotch glasses from a high cupboard. Lake’s attention drifted to Grady’s arms, where his sleeves were rolled to his elbows. His arm hair was dark and thick, and Lake briefly wondered what it would feel like under his fingertips.

“Do you want another list?” Lake asked, forcing himself to look away from Grady’s forearms.

Grady stared at him for a second as though trying to work out if Lake was a figment of his imagination before shaking his head and moving away. He disappeared into what must be a pantry—or an escape route, who knew?—before coming out with a bottle of whiskey. It had a samurai-looking guy riding a horse on the front, with writing in a different language that Lake couldn’t read because he’d fallen asleep in most of his language classes, including English, dreaming instead about flying through the air like a bird.

“That looks hardcore. What is it?” Lake asked. Once Grady had finished pouring and put the lid back on, Lake stretched forward to snag it so he could read it properly. “Shinobu Koshi-No,” he sounded out. “Japanese whiskey? Look at you, all cultured and shit.” It looked like the fancy stuff they put on the top shelf at bars and kept behind the counter or in the cabinets at bottle shops.

“Only the finest,” Grady deadpanned. He held up his glass in a mock toast. “Just try it.”

“Bottoms up,” Lake said as he lightly touched his glass to Grady’s before swallowing half the glass in one go. He wheezed and coughed as he put it down. His lungs

wereburning.“Holyshit.”

“Might want to drink it slowly,” Grady said, taking a sip of his own.

“Yeah, thanks for the warning.” He blew out a breath and shook his head. Then finished the second half the same way because he kind of liked the way his head exploded when he did it. It was strong but went down smooth, with hints of pear and roasted nuts once the burn faded. There was probably so much left in the bottle because it didn’t take much to getfuckedwith it. “This is good shit. How many am I allowed to have before I’m cut off?”

“Do I look like a bartender to you?” Grady asked, pouring another when Lake handed over the glass. “You can have as many as it takes for you to pass out.”

“Where am I passing out?” Lake asked, smirking. Logistics were important and better discussed before he had gotten so hammered that he couldn’t think straight.

“I don’t have a spare room,” Grady said, “but you can take the couch.”

“Is it comfy?” Comfort was key, and couches could be hit and miss.

“No.”

Lake bet that was Grady’s first word. “Can I bunk in with you? If you want to touch butts while we sleep, I’m okay with that.”

Grady raised an eyebrow, and the level of judgement in his eyes as he took another sip was impressive. “We can see how drunk you get. At some point, even the couch will feel like a bed of soft feathers.”

“I like the way you think.” Lake let out another loud wheeze as he drank his next

glass like a shot. A terrible way to drink it, Lake was sure. But he liked the way it burned going down, and no one had ever accused him of having manners.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“What are my chances of some kind of food?” Lake asked, looking around the kitchen. His eyes weren’t watering, it was just raining in there.

“Now you want me to feed you?”

“Well, yeah. I’m easy, man. You got like a packet of chips? An apple? Those Fruit Roll-Ups?” Red was absolutely a flavour, and it was Lake’s favourite.

“Fruit Roll-Ups?” Grady asked. He went to the fridge, though, so Lake decided he was staying on his good list. He didn’t have a shit list, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t time, or room, to create one.

“Yeah, you know, the ones that used to get put in school lunch boxes?” Lake’s mum had bought them by the box. “They got stuck in your teeth, and you had to spend the whole next period picking them out with your nails. I blame a lot of tantrums I had in third grade on the feat of strength that required. That I didn’t have, obviously. And cavities that, luckily, the military paid to get filled.”

Grady dumped a packet of mozzarella cheese and a carton of sour cream on the island bench. “I got carrot sticks and celery in mine,” he said, his voice fading a little as he disappeared into the pantry again.

Lake had to take a second to process that. Child-Grady needed the biggest fucking hug. Maybe some therapy. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Grady returned with a packet of family-sized Doritos and two jars: spicy salsa and what looked like roasted capsicums. “I had to help scrape body pieces off a four-car

pileup once. Multiple times, in fact.”

“Uh...” Well, that was even more depressing. Maybe adult-Grady needed a hug too. Lake grimaced. “I guess that puts it into context? You’re a very morbid person.”

“Comes with the territory.” Grady shrugged.

“No way. I’ve met Quinn, remember? He doesn’t have your whole”—Lake wriggled his fingers at Grady—“deep and mysterious vibe going on.”

“Quinn is the exception,” Grady said. He bent to rustle in a cupboard beneath them and came out with an oven tray, which he then covered in baking paper.

“I highly doubt that.” Lake studied all the ingredients Grady had gathered. “Are you making nachos?”

“Cheat nachos, yeah. I don’t have any meat or beans to go with them. But it should make do for a couple of drunks.”

“Oh my God.” Lake was already salivating. “Will you marry me?”

“That depends,” Grady said as he emptied the Doritos onto the tray.

“On what?” Lake leaned forward and snagged a few in his hand, crunching loudly on them. Fuck yes. Cheese Supreme was the superior flavour and would make nachos even better.

“Where are you taking me for our honeymoon?”

Lake sat up straighter, beaming. “Oh, I already know that one! Maldives.”

Grady poured them another drink before he drizzled the salsa over the chips and grabbed the bag of cheese. “You’ll have to explain that one to me.”

“Okay, so for like half the year at night, on Vaadhoo Island in Maldives, there are bioluminescent sea plankton that light up the sea,” Lake said, gesturing wildly. His hand hit his glass, and it tipped towards him, splashing across his shirt and instantly soaking through.

Lake stared down in surprise before bursting into laughter. “Whoops?” He righted his glass and took the paper towels that Grady handed over to him.

“Can’t take you anywhere,” Grady commented.

“It’s what my mum says,” Lake said with a sheepish smile.

“C’mon, I’ll get you something to change into.”

“Yeah?” Lake leaped off his stool and dropped the wet paper towels in the bin before following behind Grady.

He’d been right about the bedroom. It was similar to the lounge: navy walls, dark wooden furniture. The bed was huge, easily a king, and had bedding that matched the walls. Another instance where it didn’t shrink the room but instead gave it a warm, homey feel. Definitely not what he’d been expecting.

Grady slid open a built-in wardrobe to reveal a rack of hanging clothes. Most of them were suits, which did not surprise Lake in the least.

“It’ll be a bit big,” Grady said, tugging a white shirt from the middle, “but better than stinking like a brewery. Do you want to shower?”

“Nah. Just a quick wipe, maybe with a face washer?” Taking all his clothes off just because he’d spilled his drink sounded like a lot of effort. And the whiskey was already kicking in, so he couldn’t say with one hundred percent accuracy that he wouldn’t face-plant in the shower. Also, nachos were waiting for him, so passing out was on his to-do list for later.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake pulled his T-shirt up and over his head, making sure to hold it away from himself as he picked up the clean one Grady had put on the bed for him. Lake caught the tail end of Grady's stare, his gaze jerking up from Lake's chest.

"What?" Grady blurted.

"It's okay; I don't mind if you look."

"I wasn't looking," Grady protested.

"Lying is a sin." He had definitely been looking. As long as Grady knew that looking was the only option available to him, Lake was okay with it. He kind of liked it. More than kind of if he was totally honest. Having a guy that looked like Grady look at him like a meal? Yeah, it was a nice ego stroke.

Grady looked skyward and then said, "Bathroom's this way. Face washers are under the sink."

"Do you want to watch me clean myself?" Lake asked cheekily.

His response was the bathroom door closing and Grady's receding footsteps. Lake chuckled as he glanced around the small room. No bath, just a shower with a glass wall and no door. The sink was clean, with nothing but a holder for a toothbrush and toothpaste on it. The mirror protruded from the wall, so it must have a cupboard behind it. Lake was tempted to look, but he didn't, because he wasn't totally rude.

He grabbed out a navy face washer—he was beginning to suspect it was Grady's

favourite colour—and made quick work of cleaning his chest and then drying it. He rinsed his shirt under the tap and left it hanging in the shower.

He only had one arm in the sleeve of Grady's shirt when he ventured back out into the kitchen, and Grady totally looked again. Lake only preened a little. He shrugged the shirt the rest of the way on and then buttoned it up. He had to roll the sleeves up so that he could use his hands. He hadn't thought that Grady was that much bigger than him, but the shirt didn't lie.

"You're right," Lake said with an open-mouth smile. "It's a little big."

"It's basically swimming on you."

"I feel like I should be in a rom-com movie after a night of hot sex with my boss." Everything but the sour cream had been put away, and Lake hoped that meant something was cooking. The oven was on. Yes. Suddenly, he was starving.

"What kind of movies are you watching?" Grady asked.

"The ones with hot sex, obviously." He slid back onto his stool and beamed. "Can I have another drink, or have I been cut off?"

"I should cut you off." But he made Lake another drink regardless.

Lake took a smaller, more measured sip of the whiskey this time.

"The nachos should be ready in a second. You were saying before about Vaadhoo Island?" Grady asked.

"What? Oh! Right, so it's like this gorgeous fucking bright blue that just spans the beaches. It's like the sea is made of magic. Pure beauty. I've always wanted to go and

see.” It had been on his destination list since he’d been a kid and learned about it in science class.

“So why haven’t you?” Grady asked. He put a large square wooden chopping board on the bench and then transferred the steaming-hot nachos from the oven onto it.

Lake reached forward for a chip, and Grady caught his hand in his, swallowing it. Lake hadn’t noticed, but Grady had big hands.

“Careful,” Grady said, “let them cool down for a minute first.”

Lake pouted. He wanted to eat them. “What was the question?” he asked, trying to remember what they were talking about. “Why haven’t I? I dunno. Time, maybe? Just haven’t.”

Grady scooped out some sour cream into an almost flat bowl. “You know, I’ve been a cop a long time, and I’ve seen a lot of things. The best piece of advice I can give a person, that I’ve learned after working so many cases involving death, is don’t wait. You don’t know what will happen tomorrow. If you want to do it? Just fucking do it.”

Lake smiled, glad that he’d met Grady that night. “You’re a good guy.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Would anyone believe me?” Lake wondered aloud. What kind of person did someone like this guy call friend? He wanted to check the criteria and see which boxes he could tick. It didn’t sound like Grady had a lot of fun in his life, and Lake was pretty good at the whole fun thing.

Grady woke feeling like something had died in his mouth. He ran his tongue across his teeth and grimaced. He needed to brush.

He turned and stopped abruptly when he realised that there was an unexpected warmth next to him. Had he taken someone home the night before? Surely no—oh.Lake.Right. The stray puppy with the incredible ass that had kissed him at midnight and then given him a lift home. Normally that would have resulted in getting laid, except that Lake wasstraightand had just drunk his liquor, eaten his food, and then passed out in his bed. Wearing Grady's shirt.

Grady blindly reached out, and his hand hit warm, smooth skin. A hard chest and a soft stomach. Where was his shirt?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Damn, Grady, buy a guy a drink first,” Lake said, his voice raspy and thick. Grady knew it was from the excessive alcohol and from sleeping—and snoring because memories of snoring were coming back to him—but it sounded like he’d been thoroughly face fucked, and that made Grady’s morning wood that much more prominent.

He told it to calm the fuck down as he blinked a few times, trying to get his brain to wake up. “I did buy you a drink first,” he said, his voice a little hoarse from sleep. “Several, in fact.”

Looking over at Lake didn’t help his predicament any. Grady’s shirt had twisted up in the night somehow and was pushed up his chest, all that smooth skin just begging Grady to put his mouth on it.

“Do the ones at your place count?” Lake asked, blinking up at him. There was a line from the pillow across his cheek, his hair was sticking in a hundred different directions, and there was crusting drool at the corner of his mouth. None of that should have been attractive. Except for the part where he looked damn fucking good on Grady’s sheets, stretched out with way too much skin on display.

Grady snatched his hand away, realising that he was still touching Lake’s soft skin. “Since I paid for the bottle, I think so.” He groaned and sat up. He had a headache, but it wasn’t as bad as he’d thought it would be, considering how much of the Shinobu Koshi-No they’d drunk. At least he didn’t feel like he wanted to throw up, although that could change when he tried to stand up. He’d been burned by that before.

He snatched up his phone and checked the time. His alarm wasn't set to go off for another half hour, so at least he hadn't slept in. He turned it off and dropped it back on the nightstand before turning off the alarm.

"Why do you even have an alarm set on Sunday?" Lake asked.

"I was planning to go into work today and finish some stuff."

"A broody workaholic. You could start a new trend. I bet people would follow you just for that beard."

"What's wrong with my beard?" Grady asked. He frowned as he ran his fingers through it. It wasn't too long; it was thick, but he kept it neat and tidy.

"Nothing. That's not what I said? It's a great beard, hence the following. Are you hungover?"

"No."

Lake was apparently not so lucky, since a moment later he mumbled, "I think I'm gonna be sick," and sprang from the bed, bolting out the bedroom door.

Grady rubbed his eyes before carefully standing, watching out for any lingering nausea. He needed to get some food and coffee in so he could try to function like a normal human. A human anyway. Normal was overrated.

He made his way slowly down the small hallway that led to his bedroom, his home office, and his bathroom. He was serenaded by the awful sound of Lake retching. Grady might have thought about holding his hair back, but his thick hair wasn't long enough to get in his face. He did detour into the bathroom, though. He scratched the hair on his chest as he bypassed Lake, hunched over the toilet, and grabbed out a

towel, face washer, and spare toothbrush from the cupboard.

“For when you’re ready,” he said quietly to Lake, putting the items on the side of the sink. Lake nodded, moaning miserably.

“You need some help?” Grady found himself asking. Grady rolled his eyes at himself as he stepped closer. He wasn’t the guy’s boyfriend or mother. He was a grown man, and he could handle a hangover just fine by himself.

“If you wanna throw up for me, be my guest,” Lake said huskily.

“Bodies don’t work like that. What normally works for you?”

“Uh—juice? Mango. And a big juicy fucking Quarter Pounder from Maccas. No, aDoubleQuarter Pounder.”

“Those aren’t good for you.” Grady was hard pressed to think of anything that was unhealthier than one of those burgers. Even just frying up some bacon and eggs was healthier than that shit.

“Neither is alcohol poisoning,” Lake muttered. “I already have one, so why not the other?”

“Do you feel like you have alcohol poisoning?” Grady asked. “Should I take you to the hospital?”

“No; I’m just being dramatic.”

Grady could believe that. “Feel free to take a shower. Take as long as you like; there’s plenty of hot water.”

“Thanks.”

Grady grabbed his phone off his nightstand and scrolled through to his Uber Eats app, placing an order quickly before he made his way back out into the kitchen.

The food had been delivered, and Grady was on his second coffee and halfway through a bowl of freshly chopped fruit, when Lake emerged from the shower. His face had more colour, though the queasiness was definitely still there.

He had opted to put Grady’s shirt back on... but no pants. Grady swallowed as his gaze flicked down without his permission. Lake had nice solid legs, with muscle definition that spoke of a regular exercise regime. That made sense, since the guy was a soldier. Grady was a sucker for a guy with skills, and an army pilot meant skills. Even his driving last night had been basically flawless. Enough that Grady’s back-seat driving was silent.

Lake stopped and stared at the food waiting on the bench for him, and Grady could have sworn there were tears forming in his eyes. He really hoped not, because he didn’t do well with tears. On the job, if someone burst into tears, it was an unspoken rule that Quinn dealt with them.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Is that for me?” Lake asked with wide, hopeful eyes. He had big eyes, like a doe.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead eating that crap,” Grady replied. He wasn’t a big fan of fast food. If he wanted a nice juicy burger, he knew some great places, and he could make a delicious one at home. With nice thick beer-battered chips and a decent salad. Or vegetables, depending on the time of year and what the weather was doing.

“You bought me Maccas,” Lake said in wonder.

“You said it helped you,” Grady said defensively. It wasn’t as big a deal as the guy was making it out to be. It had taken barely two minutes to put the order in.

“I’m willing to negotiate where we take our honeymoon.” Lake practically fell on the food, hastily unwrapping the burger and taking a giant bite, moaning loudly. The sound was obscene and went straight to Grady’s groin.

“Thoughtful of you.” Grady had no idea what it said about him that Lake, looking like death warmed over, with bulging cheeks from the sheer amount of food he’d shoved in his mouth, still didn’t make Grady think he was any less attractive.

He really needed to get laid. Mal hadn’t been interested in sex in the last few months of their relationship. That should have been a warning sign for him, he guessed. But after three years, Grady had thought that was normal; didn’t it peter out after a while? The honeymoon period couldn’t last forever. And Grady had been busy at work on the case that had almost gotten Quinn’s boyfriends killed last year. Mal had always been so understanding of his job... until he hadn’t been.

“I need to take you back to get your car, but can we maybe wait an hour or two? I try not to vomit in my car.”

“Sure.” Grady understood that. It was a bitch of a smell to get out.

Somehow, they ended up spending the next few hours curled up on the couch watching reruns of a nineties sitcom. Grady made them a steak burger for lunch that Lake loudly decided—with a mouth full of said burger—he would replace with every other food group in the world. Luckily, he put pants on after that, saving at least some of Grady’s sanity, and then took Grady back to his car.

THREE MEN CAME OUT of the large two-storey house as soon as Grady and Lake had stepped out of Lake’s car. Grady recognised two of them as the hosts from last night: Felix Hawkins and Zach Walsh. The third was Lake’s younger brother, and—if Grady was remembering from the insane amount of inane chatter he’d been subjected to last night—their new boyfriend.

“Big night?” Zach asked, his dark brown eyes sweeping over them critically. His brown hair was tussled, and his clothes were askew. Grady would have bet that he and Lake had interrupted something that involved a lack of clothing.

“Grady shared his whiskey with me,” Lake said, smiling broadly as he slapped Grady’s shoulder. “And now I am delivering him back to his car. What the hell are you three doing?”

“Well—” Felix put a hand over Avery’s mouth, stopping the sentence. It didn’t matter. They were all adults; they all knew what those three had been getting up to. Lake’s question had definitely been rhetorical.

“I hope you treated my brother right,” Avery said, glaring at Grady. Grady couldn’t see the family resemblance. They had the same-coloured eyes and hair, and that was

about it. Lake was taller. Bigger. And... friendlier.

“That’s cute,” Lake said. “But I’m the big brother, and he’s the wrong gender. Go inside and finish getting ravished by my besties.”

A red blush crept across Avery’s face. “Really?”

“I’m sorry; are we all pretending you three weren’t just in there having sex? You don’t have to come out here to check on me. I am literally just giving Grady a lift to his car.”

“Is that your shirt?” Avery asked suddenly, squinting at Lake’s outfit. “It looks a little big on you.”

The three men turned to look at Grady, and Grady refused to fidget under their stare or look guilty. It looked bad, but he hadn’t done anything wrong, and nothing had happened. He was the one that intimidated people, not the other way around. He’d been in an interrogation across from harder criminals than these men.

“I spilled stuff on mine.” Lake paused. “Oh. I forgot to grab it!”

“You know where I live; you can come and get it later,” Grady said. “Not now, though; I’m heading into the station after this.”

“So you two didn’t”—Zach flicked a finger between them—“do the horizontal tango.”

Lake laughed. “No! We did not bump uglies, but I appreciate your concern over my welfare.”

“It isn’t your welfare he’s concerned about,” Avery said dryly.

Grady could not believe that he thought a man who said bump uglies had a sexy mouth.

“His virtue is safe,” he said flatly. “Can I leave now, or do you need to run a background check on me?”

“Aren’t you a detective?” Felix asked. “You’re Quinn’s partner, right?”

“Would you prefer my resume instead, then?” Grady asked. He checked his watch, not even hiding the fact that he wanted to get out of there. He’d meant to go into the station hours before.

“Do you have one handy?” Zach asked with a broad grin.

“No.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re going into work on a Sunday,” Lake muttered. “And on the first day of the year.”

“I have work to do,” Grady said. He realised that Lake didn’t have his bracelets on, which meant they were somewhere at Grady’s place too.

“Don’t you have holidays or something?” Lake asked.

“Some of us do.” It was a rotating thing each year who had what holidays off. Most of his fellow detectives would be back on the third. None of the detectives he worked with had taken any extra days this year, with their workload the way it was. “Holidays” didn’t work the same way for them as they did for everyone else. And Grady had nothing else to do, now that he’d been left by his boyfriend like mouldy old bread on the side of the road. Work helped keep his mind occupied.

Grady grunted. “Okay.” He had filled his personal socialisation quota a thousandfold already for the year, and he hadn’t even closed out the first day yet. “Nice to see you again,” he said gruffly to the trio still watching them from the front steps. “Be careful on the drive home,” he told Lake.

Lake was still watching him as he turned the corner and drove out of sight.

Lakeshookhisheadand flicked the engine of the Black Hawk off, waiting for the rotors to slow to a stop and the noise to die down before he turned to Zach, who was in the co-pilot seat. “It’s still got that weird vibration,” he said once they could hear

themselves think. “I don’t know what’s doing it. Could be the main rotor?”

“They took the bird out yesterday and didn’t mention anything,” Zach replied, moving out of the cockpit. “I think you’re imagining it.”

“I’m not,” Lake said confidently. He knew when his baby was in good shape, and this wasn’t it. He knew something was wrong with it, knew it in his gut.

Zach let out a breath as he stepped off the helicopter and then turned, lifting one arm up to brace himself on the metal above the open cabin doors, his muscles flexing. “All right. I’ll check the alignment, see if there’s any erosion? Could just need a few parts replaced from wear and tear.” He tapped his fingers on the metal. “Do you need to take it in the air today?”

“No, it was only scheduled for the systems check.” Lake climbed out of the cockpit and jumped down beside Zach. He stretched, his camo top lifting. He’d already been in the air four hours that day and then another two dealing with the Hawk that was quickly becoming a pain in his ass.

Zach slapped the metal. “All right. I’ll check her out tomorrow morning. So,” Zach continued as they walked back towards the hangar, moving around other pilots and engineers hurrying to their next task. “That cop...”

“Oh, here we go.”

“What? You go home with a total stranger, spend the night in his bed—emphasis on his bed, man—and you expect none of us to be curious about it?”

Lake knew he shouldn’t have mentioned the fact that Grady’s place only had one bed, and they’d shared. It wasn’t that fucking unusual. Because they were both guys, they couldn’t just share a bed without it meaning something? “I already got this

interrogation. I'm not looking for a repeat." Thankfully, the hours spent on Grady's couch had meant that his headache had been almost non-existent while Avery, Felix, and Zach had asked him a million questions. Eventually they'd realised that nothing had, in fact, happened, and whatever gossip they were looking for wasn't anywhere to be found. But Jesus Christ. Anyone would think they didn't have an interesting enough life already.

"You gonna see him again?"

Lake was, actually. He had to give Grady his shirt back, and his own shirt and his bracelets were still at Grady's place. Since he knew that the guy worked with Quinn, finding what precinct he worked at had been relatively easy, since of the men that Quinn was dating was a former soldier and friend of Lake's. At least Peyton was better at not asking questions than Zach was.

"You know," he said, instead of answering Zach's question, "I don't think you guys understand the whole 'I didn't sleep with him' part. He has bits I'm not interested in." The thought of another guy's dick, in a sexual context, was weird. He liked Grady, and they'd had fun—and damn, he knew how to cook nachos—but he wasn't bi-curious or whatever the fuck they called it.

"All right, touchy."

"I'm not touchy." Was it a crime to have friends now? Grady wasn't his first male friend—could they be called friends now? They'd bonded, right? And he'd never wanted to sleep with Felix or Zach. Or any of the other soldiers that he'd made friends with over the years. "I never wanted to see your naked ass. His isn't any different." It was probably a good thing he hadn't told anyone about the midnight kiss. None of them would understand that it hadn't been a sexual thing either.

"I still think you peeked at our year-nine camp."

“You ran naked through the dining hall,” Lake said with a snort. “Everyone looked, man. Someone should have told you that your scrawny fourteen-year-old ass wasn’t impressive.”

Zach grinned. “Felix thought it was impressive.”

“He’s always had terrible judgement.”

“He picked me and Avery; I think his taste is impeccable.”

“You keep thinking that.” He absently tugged at the thin chain necklace around his neck as they stopped at the entrance to the meeting rooms that were connected to the hangar. He was supposed to have left it in his locker because it wasn’t part of the uniform. As long as he kept it hidden and stashed it later it would be fine. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time he’d been caught wearing it. “I have a meeting about the training exercise we’re doing in July. The search-and-rescue op in Wollemi. You in that?”

“Thankfully, no. But have fun.”

“Thanks,” Lake said dryly.

The military sure loved its fucking meetings. No one had warned him about that. Being in the air as a pilot was the most exhilarating thing he’d ever experienced, and he loved every moment of it, had worked hard to rise through the ranks to get to where he was. No one had told him that to get there, he had to sit through meeting after meeting after meeting.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

His job for this op was just to circle the area and find the signal they were going to set up ahead of time with a ground team. The key was not to tell him what the signal was but for him to find it. So why he had to sit in hours-long meetings to discuss logistics was beyond him.

THREE HOURS LATER, HIS brain had exploded, his eyes were gritty and tired, and he had an urge to dunk his head in a bucket of water to cool off. Felix, who was the combat medic for the spec-ops group they were working with on the op, looked less frazzled than Lake felt, but there was a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. Aidan Border, the team leader for the spec-ops group, looked like he'd gone three rounds with a bear... and lost. Half his uniform was out of place, and he'd run his hands through his sweaty hair so many times it was sticking on end.

“Think we could just kidnap the brass, dump them in the middle of Wollemi, and leave them there?” Aidan questioned as they headed back across the barracks towards their building. The January summer sun was at their backs, heating them uncomfortably in their thick uniforms. Lake just wanted to get the fuck back inside where the air conditioning was.

“Don't tempt me,” Tyler Walsh, Zach's older brother and one of the snipers in the two-man team on their unit said, falling in step beside them. “We could set a trap for them so they fall down a mine shaft. There's probably some hidden in there somewhere.”

“We can dig one,” Danny Sinclair, the other sniper, said behind them. “With the right equipment, we could have it done by July.”

“I know a guy,” Aidan said.

“You always know a guy,” Danny said. Lake couldn’t see him, but he could hear the eye roll in his tone of voice. Aidan had that effect on people.

“I’m friendly; that ain’t a crime.”

“In some states, it probably is,” Tyler said. “New South Wales, for example.”

“That’s our state,” Aidan said, affronted.

“Precisely.”

“Don’t make me put you in the hole too.”

“It puts the lotion on the skin,” Danny said in a fake-pitched voice.

Lake raised his eyebrows at them. “You guys freak me out,” he said. Special forces guys were always fucking weird, but this particular group needed their own specialised warning label. Having Felix with them didn’t make them any less scary. In a way, it made it worse. Felix was a great guy, but he was also a scary motherfucker if someone pissed him off. The fact that his fuse was longer than most people didn’t make it any less lethal. Felix was his best friend—they’d known each other since they’d been in grade one in primary school—and that only meant that Lake knew just how dangerous he was and just how much a person didn’t want to be on Felix’s bad side. He didn’t seem to fit in with the ragtag team he was part of, but Lake knew that he absolutely did.

Lake checked his watch. It was only just before five in the afternoon. Perfect. “All right, I gotta go see a man about a shirt. We good here?” Lake was taking a risk this late, but he had a feeling that if Grady were willing to work on Sunday, then working

later into the night wasn't that farfetched.

"Yeah, just don't forget how to fly when we go," Aidan said, cackling. "I don't want to die on home soil, you know? If I'm going down, I want it to be somewhere cool."

"Like where? A strip club?" Danny asked.

"It would be a more interesting story to tell at my funeral."

"I'll see what I can do," Lake said with a laugh before he broke off from the group to head towards his car.

If he listened to Christmas carols on his way to the precinct in Chatswood, that was his business. It was a good almost hour drive in traffic from Holsworthy; he would keep himself entertained however he wanted to.

The window was down, and maybe he got a few judgemental looks from people, but if he cared about what people thought of him, he'd have gone mad years ago. Mad-der anyway. He just made funny faces at them, and that, coupled with his military uniform, made them look away. No one wanted to deal with a crazy soldier.

Besides, it was still January. Only the fifth of January, in fact. Four days since he'd seen his detective. There was a leeway period after Christmas where carols were allowed, and it was still within societal bounds. If he were doing it in like... March, or July, then maybe he'd understand better what the problem was.

Finding a park near the Chatswood Police Station was harder than Lake had anticipated, considering it was almost six in the evening. Weren't people at home getting ready for dinner or something? He finally found a park a block over and was forced to walk. At least the air had started to cool off in the hour he'd been driving and wasn't trying to melt his uniform into his skin anymore.

The rush of air-conditioning as he stepped into the station's foyer was a welcome reprieve, and he took a second to soak it in.

All right, time to find his new detective friend. Hopefully, he was there. Otherwise, he'd have to make a trip to his friend's home.

Grady stared at the two melting white pieces of fluff in his coffee. It had to have been Gideon Clark, another detective in the station, because no one else was stupid enough to touch his drink. "I left for two fucking seconds!" he growled, turning to glare at the brunet cackling in his chair.

Next time, he was taking it with him to the toilet. He didn't give a fuck how unsanitary it was. Anything was better than these floating atrocities. If Gideon put one more fucking marshmallow anywhere near Grady's hot drinks, he was going to lose his shit. Permanently.

"Don't deny you love that gooey goodness," Gideon said.

"I'm going to pour it over your head," Grady promised.

"Don't be a sourpuss."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Angela Thomas, Gideon's partner, looked up from her desk and then sighed when she saw Grady's face. "If he punches you, I'm not gonna do a damn thing to stop him," she told Gideon.

"You're supposed to be on my side," Gideon sputtered.

"Not when you're deliberately antagonising the station grump."

"Why do I get that title?" Grady grumbled. "Greer is way more of an asshole than me."

"I said grump, not asshole. And he's never here, so how could he earn that title?" Angela said. She leaned back in her chair and linked her fingers behind her head. She gave Grady a smile he could only describe as predatory because she was terrifying. "He's the office ghost. You're the office grump. Gideon is the office idiot—"

"Hey!"

"I shouldn't ask, because this entire conversation is ridiculous, but what am I?" Quinn wanted to know.

"You're the office sweetheart."

"You're a terrible liar."

"Really?" Angela said, feigning ignorance. "I've been told it's my best feature."

“Who told you that?” Grady said, scowling. He shoved his mug away with disgust—what a waste of a perfectly good coffee—and went back to the reports and autopsy findings he was reading over.

“Grady!”

Grady’s head jerked up in surprise at Lake’s voice. He was walking towards Grady with a bounce to his step that should have been illegal this time of the day. His hair looked wet from sweat, swept to the side, and his face was red, probably from the heat outside, but it could be sunburned. Despite that, he still looked like he was ready for another whole day of work. Just thinking about it made Grady exhausted.

The uniform, though...fuck.He filled it out... far too well for Grady’s peace of mind. The green camo jacket had “McKenna” written on a tag across his chest, above his heart, and stretched tight enough to show some definition without being obscene. The pants were similar, though a tad tighter fit, ending with solid-black combat boots with intricate laces.Fuck.For a ridiculous human being, he looked fucking incredible. Grady silently urged Lake to turn just a little so he could see that round ass shaped by the camo.

This was so fucking stupid. Lusting after straight boys was never on Grady’s agenda.Ever.Even gay men made him wary at the moment. He’d been burned twice now and wasn’t planning to sign up for that again in this lifetime. Who needed relationships anyway? They were nothing but trouble. Fake bliss that was just setting you up to have your heart ripped out and stood on. Thanks, but no thanks.

“How did you get in here?” Grady asked. The officer at the front desk shouldn’t have just let someone come waltzing in by themselves. Especially not this deep into the station.

“It’s the uniform,” Lake said, beaming at him. “It makes me seem trustworthy.”

Grady bet they were too busy looking at his ass, more like. And he had a feeling that Lake could charm the fur off a lion. He had that easy-going friendliness that put people at ease.

Lake lifted the clean and ironed shirt that had been tucked over his arm, and Grady recognised it as his own.

“I came to bring your shirt back,” Lake said. “Thanks for letting me wear it, big guy.”

Grady made sure to keep his gaze on Lake and not on the eerily quiet room around him. He just knew all pairs of eyes were on them. Lake didn’t need help to draw attention to himself.

“You could have just dropped it at my house.” In hindsight, that statement probably made this entire situation sound worse. He was fairly certain that Quinn had just made a choking noise.

“I did think about keeping it to sleep in, since it’s so cosy, but I figured it was probably best to return it.”

Jesus Christ. Did Lake even hear himself talking? Was he doing this on purpose? He had to be. Straight or not, the innuendos were clear for anyone to hear.

“Ooh, marshmallow!” Lake said excitedly, his eyes lighting up as he spotted Grady’s drink. “In your coffee? I didn’t know we were allowed to do that!”

“We’re not. It’s illegal.” It had to be somewhere. It was an affront to nature.

“Well, get your cuffs out because I’m gonna be breaking the law later tonight,” Lake said, rubbing his hands together.

That had definitely been Quinn choking. He didn't even have a drink.

Grady leaned back in his chair and wished he were anywhere but there. He gestured at his mug. "Have at it. If you do it now, it will save us the trouble of chasing you down."

"Efficiency. I approve." Lake draped Grady's shirt over Grady's shoulder and then picked the mug up with two hands, inhaling deeply. "That smells good." He sounded surprised. "I thought cop coffee was disgusting."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“There are so many bald-faced lies said about us,” Gideon said. Grady turned and immediately wished he hadn’t. Thegleeon Gideon’s face made Grady want to kill something. “Who’s your ‘friend,’ Grady?”

“I’m Lake!” Lake said happily, still enamoured by his coffee, like a kid in a candy shop. Not attractive. Not attractive.

“You should make sure that you have marshmallows at your place, so next time you make me a coffee you can add these,” Lake said as he sipped. Some of the melted marshmallow clung to his top lip, and he licked it off. Grady wished he wasn’t so mesmerised by the move, but he couldn’t look away.

Quinn chuckled. “Grady isn’t a marshmallow fan,” he advised. “Or anything that is sweet, or cuddly, or could even vaguely be construed as cute. Sometimes he smiles, but if it’s too wide, his lips crack.”

“Fuck off,” was all Grady said in response.

“You can get lip balm for that,” Lake said, his own smile wide. He put the mug down. “Shirt delivered. Walk me back to my car? It’s a block away, and I’m worried about getting mugged,” he said innocently.

Grady knew it was bullshit, and yet he still stood. He shrugged out of his jacket because he knew it was hot outside and draped it, along with the shirt Lake had brought him, on his chair. He rolled up his sleeves as he gestured for Lake to go ahead, back the way he had come.

“Why do you always do that?” Lake asked, twisting and pointing at his forearms.

“Do what?” Grady asked, confused.

“Roll your sleeves up like that.”

“Because it’s hot,” Grady said. Why else would he do it? Wearing a T-shirt would be easier, but that wasn’t work wear.

“I have heard that it’s a pretty hot move,” Lake said, nodding sagely.

“What?” The fuck did that mea—Oh. “No, I mean the weather is hot, and the long sleeves make it worse.”

“You can’t deny that the rolled-sleeves-suit look is like catnip to most people with a pulse, though. I haven’t tried it personally; suits are hard. But I’ve heard.”

Grady waited for Lake to go through the automatic doors at the front of the precinct and then followed him out. “You don’t own any?” he asked. He couldn’t say that he was surprised. Lake didn’t seem like a suit person.

“I don’t need to wear them,” Lake said. “I don’t go to a lot of formal events, and the ones I have to go to for work, I have to wear my mess dress so…” He shrugged.

“Mess dress?”

“Oh, my dress uniform. The black slacks with the red stripe, black sash, red jacket? Hold on. I think I have a picture.”

When they stopped at a set of lights, Lake pulled his phone out of his pocket, and after a few minutes, flipped it around to show Grady. “This.”

Grady almost tripped over a crack on the sidewalk. Holy shit. Damn. Fuck, he looked incredible. Lake had a nice body, all lean muscle, and he looked mouth-watering in the formal dress. Because Grady wasn't going to have enough issues with the image of Lake in his camo uniform; he needed more to haunt him. "Which way is your car?" Grady asked, trying to erase the image from his mind. He put it in the "do not touch" section of his brain and told it to stay there.

"Three o'clock," Lake said and turned in that direction. Grady fell into step easily beside him. "Do you like sport?" Lake asked as they walked.

"Sport?" Why was Lake asking him about sport?

"Yeah. Hockey, football, soccer, tennis, MMA... you know, sport."

"I know what sport is."

"And... do you like it? Do you watch it?"

"I don't get a lot of time for TV," Grady said. And what little time he had was generally spent watching shows he would never admit to. "I'll occasionally watch a good football match?"

"What makes it a good match?"

"Two teams in the top four? I don't know."

"What about basketball?"

"What about it?" What was with all the weird questions?

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake smiled wryly when they got to his car. He leaned his shoulder against the closed driver's-side door. "Talking to you isn't all that easy, you know?"

"I've heard," Grady said. If it was that bad, why was Lake still talking to him? No one had forced him to be there. Grady could have picked up his shirt another time.

"I'm gonna watch the match tonight, NBL; Wildcats vs JackJumpers."

"Those aren't real names." Or if they were, the PR department needed to be fired.

"Yeah," Lake said, his smile widening. "They are. More precisely, the Perth Wildcats and the Tasmania JackJumpers, but that's a mouthful. Neither is my team, of course, so I'll let fate decide which one I'm going for—the winner, of course."

"I'm afraid to ask what your team is."

"The Sydney Kings, obviously. I'm not a traitor."

Grady could sense a story behind that statement. At least their name was relatively normal. "Okay. Have fun?" He had no idea why Lake was even bringing it up. Maybe the guy just talked to fill up space. Grady had met people like that before and usually steered clear of them. Lake didn't grate on his nerves the same way, but there were a whole host of other reasons he didn't think it was a good idea to stay in his close vicinity. Namely, how much Grady was enjoying it, even just after one night.

"Match starts at nine. Bring the whiskey?" Lake asked.

Grady blinked. “You’re asking me to watch it with you?” Well, the conversation detour made more sense now.

“Yeah. Usually, I watch it with my buddies Zach and Felix; you met them yesterday.”

“I remember.”

Lake tapped his fingers on the roof of his car. “But they’re busy playing house. The thing with my brother, Avery, is new, and so they’re, you know, spending a lot of time together. Which is fine. Fine-tuning and all that.”

It didn’t sound fine, and Grady almost opened his mouth to ask about it. He caught himself at the last second.

“So?” Lake asked hopefully.

Those fuckingpuppy dogeyes.

Grady should say no. He really should. Starting a friendship with this man, especially considering that Grady was still thinking about what he looked like half naked, was one of the worst ideas he’d ever considered. If nottheworst. He was just coming off one of the worst breakups he’d ever experienced, which was saying something, considering that he’d been left at the altar at twenty-one. To begin a friendship with someone he wouldn’t kick out of bed was just asking for trouble. Though Lake was straight, so there was no risk of feelings getting involved, was there? “Just the whiskey?” he asked, squinting.

“I’ll supply the food,” Lake assured him. “Real food, even.”

“Real food?” Grady wasn’t sure that their definition of “real food” matched. Though maybe only his hangover food choices were atrocious. Judging him based on one day

wasn't fair—he could give it a few days, and then he would start judging.

“Sausages in bread?” Lake asked, tongue in cheek. “I’ll even throw in some cooked onion, cheese, and mustard.”

Fuck it. It wasn't like Grady had anything else planned for the evening. Scrounge up leftovers, watch an episode of *Iron Chef* on Netflix. All exciting things. “Sure.”

“Cool!” Lake said, his eyes lighting up. He did that a lot. Grady should tell him to get that looked at. “We should exchange numbers! And I should give you my address.”

“That would help, yeah.” Grady checked the time on his phone as he got it from his pocket. “I have to finish up what I’m doing, which will be about half an hour. Then I have to go home—”

“Why?”

“To get the whiskey?” Grady said slowly. “And I’ll grab your shirt and jewellery while I’m there.” He’d even washed, ironed, and hung the shirt up too.

“Oh. Yes. Okay, good. Yes, carry on.”

Grady still couldn't tell if Lake was really fucking annoying or endearing. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. “Your number?”

He tapped it in as Lake rattled it off, and his address, and saved it under *LM* in case someone got hold of his phone that shouldn't. Namely, Gideon or Sebastian because now that Sebastian, the asshole lawyer that Grady wanted to drown, was dating Quinn, he was showing up way too often for Grady's sanity. He would not put it past the dick to fuck with his phone if he saw it. Better to be safe than sorry.

Grady sent Lake a text message. The noise that came from Lake's pocket was... unexpected. "What the fuck was that?"

"You don't recognise Squirtle?"

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Squir-what?” What the fuck was a Squirtle?

“Squirtle,” Lake said slowly. “Pokémon?”

“The kids show?” The name was familiar, but Grady wouldn’t have been able to tell anyone an individual name if his life had depended on it. He supposed he now knew one. Pikachu was another, though, wasn’t it? There had been a movie about it plastered everywhere a few years back.

“It’s not just for kids,” Lake said. “But yes.”

He shouldn’t ask but— “Is your ringtone Pokémon as well?” Who even had ringtones for their messages? Grady had to keep his off silent at all times because of his job, but he just had the generic ding that alerted him, not something specific.

“Nah.” Grady thought maybe he was in the clear and Lake kept it on silent or vibrate like normal people, but then he said, “It’s the Mario theme song. The old style, from the Super Mario World game on the Super Nintendo. It came out in 1990.”

Well, that amount of knowledge was scary. “Right. Okay. Anyway. Now you have my number.” That realisation almost felt like a nail being driven into his coffin. He could not believe he was going along with this madness. Grady didn’t hang out with people and especially not people like Lake. What were they doing? Being friends? The fuck was that?

“It’s a fifty-minute drive to where you are,” Grady said, mentally calculating the best route in his head from there to Canley Heights. “And I’ll be half an hour behind. That

work for you?”

Lake shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Works for me!” he confirmed. He looked so goddamned happy about their plans that Grady had no idea what to say or think about it. It had been a long time since someone had just genuinely enjoyed being around him. Mal had stopped wanting to, hence the cheating and dumping, he guessed. Mal hadn’t really stopped to explain anything to him, though Grady pretty much knew the reason behind it.

Quinn, maybe, but they’d been partners for so many years now that Quinn was used to who Grady was as a person.

Lake waved at him through the window as he merged into traffic and took off with that same easy confidence that Grady was trying so hard to ignore. It wasn’t his fault that competence was so sexy.

Fucking Christ. What was he doing?

Lake could admit that he wasn’t the world’s best cook in the world. Facts were facts, and more of his budget went towards ordering in with Uber Eats than his financial planner would be comfortable with. Not that he had a financial planner, but if he did, he was sure they would give him the same disapproving look that his mum did. Except at least his mum dropped a lot of food off for him along with the disapproving look. She had the innocent “I was just in the neighbourhood” look perfected. He didn’t think that was a service that financial planners provided. Or maybe they did. He hadn’t really thought much about what the day-to-day tasks of a financial planner were.

The point was that he wasn’t the greatest cook, and he relied too much on other people for his sustenance. But sausages weren’t that hard. Stick them on the barbecue, and Bob was your uncle. Turn them after a few minutes, give them another few, and

then take them off. Easy. They practically cooked themselves. Lake had done it before, in fact. More than once. Sausages in bread were basically an Aussie staple. His onions had cooked just fine this time, like every other time. The sausages... well...

Lake stared at the crispy charcoal and couldn't decide where he'd gone wrong. Turned too early or late? Had he had it up too high? He didn't think he'd gotten distracted. He'd been outside the whole time, and he hadn't even had a swim during. The cover was on the pool as proof that he hadn't gone for a swim and forgotten about whatever it was that he'd been attempting to cook.

He entertained people all the fucking time, and it only just now occurred to him that he'd gotten some form of help or catering for all of those times. Even dinners at his place were usually some kind of potluck, and he always managed to find a way out of bringing anything but dessert, which usually came out of a cardboard box from the frozen section of the supermarket.

Fuck.

There went his chance to impress his new friend. Grady was gonna laugh himself sick and leave. He seemed like the kind of guy that appreciated a well-done barbecue. This was not one of those.

Lake needed a fucking beer. He put the plate of charcoal on the kitchen bench and then pulled off his shirt and threw it in the direction of the dining table, uncaring if it landed or slid to the floor. He was hot, and he didn't want to wear it. Maybe it would look like he'd had hot sex. He missed hot sex. His last girlfriend hadn't been that hot. She'd been attractive, and a lovely person, but they hadn't heated up the sheets together. Neither had the one before her. The one before that had been smoking hot sex that had left him winded. But more misses than hits lately. He was not envious of his best friend or his brother, because that would be fucking weird. So, he wasn't. The

end.

He was halfway through his beer and still glaring at the monstrosity he'd turned dinner into when his doorbell rang. Maybe some of Grady's awesome whiskey would save this mess. If they got drunk enough, they wouldn't even notice that the sausages just tasted like burned toast. Charcoal was good for you anyway.

Lake flung the front door open and couldn't help but stare at the picture that Grady presented. He was in jeans and a T-shirt. The T-shirt was a deep burgundy, with a low collar and three-quarter-length sleeves. He had a black band around his left wrist just above his thick watch. His sneakers were scuffed and worn and looked comfortable. Based on the fresh smell of soap and shampoo, he must have showered too. He smelled nice.

"Relaxed Grady," was interesting. Like a whole other persona from "suit Grady." Even his beard looked different, which couldn't be true, because how could a beard look different? Maybe he'd brushed it. It looked long enough to brush. Not like biker length; it wasn't really something someone could grabhold of exactly, but it was long enough that it looked like it could possibly get unruly.

Grady glanced down at Lake's naked chest. "You don't own another shirt? I could have brought mine back."

Lake laughed. "Clothes are so restricting," he said. He opened the door wider to let Grady through. "You should get a necklace," he said, the thought falling out of his mouth before his brain had even finished thinking it.

Grady frowned. "Why?" he asked gruffly.

"Aves wears them, and Zach and Felix seem to like that," Lake said, shrugging. "Likewise," he stage-whispered.

“If you’re trying to give me sex tips, just don’t,” Grady said. “I have no problem in that department, thanks. Shoes?”

“Just kick ’em anywhere,” Lake said, still stuck on the sex tips comment. Grady was a big guy, with a lot of muscle and bulk. He bet that guys liked that. Women liked it, so it made sense that men did too, right? Despite the fact that his brother and both his best friends were gay—all for each other—Lake probably should know more about being gay than he did.

He had to ask because he couldn’t stop staring and wondering. “Do you brush it?”

“Excuse me?” Grady asked, glancing up at him as he moved his shoes out of the way. Probably a good call. Lake could trip over nothing; he didn’t need help.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Your beard. Do you brush it? Do you have a little brush for it? Like a mini brush.” He let out a laugh as he imagined Grady brushing it with a doll’s brush.

“Sometimes I want to know what goes through your head, and then I decide that it’s not a good idea to spread that around.”

“My thoughts are incredible, I’ll have you know. And you didn’t answer the question.”

“I brush it with a normal-sized brush, and I put beard oil in it so it doesn’t feel like bristles scratching my face. Anything else you want to know?”

“Not right now, but if I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“You’ve never grown a beard?” Grady asked, glancing down to Lake’s lips.

“I can’t,” Lake said.

“You physically can’t?”

It was a fair question; some guys couldn’t. Lake had been in the military since he was seventeen years old, so he... wasn’t actually sure if he could grow a nice one like Grady’s. But probably not. It wasn’t long, but there was a lot of coverage, and it was nice and thick. “No, like, it’s against regulations, and I’m not allowed to grow a beard.” It was only allowed for very specific reasons, and Lake didn’t tick any of those boxes, so no beard for him. A real shame. He couldn’t grow his hair out much longer than it was for the same reason. It was probably a touch too long, but no one

had sent him to the barber yet, so he would continue straddling the line until they did. As an officer, he got away with a little more than he probably should have. “Guys like the beard burn, right?”

“I’m stopping this conversation right here. Where’s your kitchen?”

“This way. So...” Lake said as he led Grady through his lounge. It wasn’t as fancy as Grady’s rental, but the couch was comfortable, the TV was big, and he even had a coffee table—it was scuffed and probably needed a good sand and repaint, but it was functional. “About dinner...” He trailed off, unsure how to say, “I fucked it up, and I don’t know what you want instead; should we eat out?”

“Forgot how to cook sausages?” Grady asked mildly.

“Funny you say that.” He hadn’t forgotten how; he’d just somehow managed to fuck it up colossally. That was all. There was no need to rehash it.

Grady raised his eyebrows at the charred mess that was supposed to be their food. “That’s impressive,” he said.

“Just expanding your culinary experience.”

“I can see that.”

“We can just order some takeout,” Lake said flippantly. That’s why delivery existed, to save poor schmucks like him who sometimes destroyed dinner. “You like Thai?”

“How often do you get takeout?” Grady questioned, looking him up and down. It wasn’t suggestive, but Lake flushed anyway. And also if he was insinuating that Lake couldn’t possibly have a great body while eating so badly, he was absolutely correct. But mostly other people fed him, and he worked out a lot at work. And flying

helicopters wasn't exactly an office job; it was hard work.

"I have the right to remain silent," Lake said, smiling impishly. He wasn't going to actually answer that question and incriminate himself. He wasn't an idiot.

Grady sighed and fished his keys out of his pocket. "What time does the basketball start?"

"Not until nine." The why in his question was implied.

"We're going to the supermarket," Grady said. "There's one just two blocks from here. We'll be back with plenty of time to eat and watch your game."

"The supermarket?" Lake asked incredulously as he followed Grady back through his house to the front door. He snagged his T-shirt on the way and tugged it over his head, pulling it down into place and smoothing his hands down his chest.

"If you tell me that you've never been in one, I might actually believe you." Grady grabbed his shoes and tugged them on before bending to tie the laces.

His ass was pretty impressive for a guy. Not round like Lake's—he knew what his ass looked like. He wasn't ignorant of the term bubble butt; he watched sports—but it was still nice. Lake blinked at it, realised he was staring, and turned away to find his own shoes. He'd left them around somewhere.

"I go in them," Lake said, remembering their conversation. He gave Grady an "excuse me" look. "Last week even... I think." He did all his shopping online, so sue him. Lots of people had their groceries delivered. Some weeks he didn't have a lot of downtime, and he spent upwards of ten hours in the air; the last thing he wanted to do was go shopping, even for sustenance.

“I won’t let anyone bite you,” Grady assured him as he opened the front door and gestured for Lake to go ahead.

“My knight in shining armour,” Lake teased. Then his brain caught up. “Am I at risk of being bitten? That seems like a hazard they should warn people about.”

Grady just chuckled as he followed Lake down the steps.

The shopping trip itself was fairly uneventful and relatively pain free. No one even attempted to bite him. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or offended. He was plenty biteable.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

The only hiccup was when he hadn't read the labels and picked up a cucumber instead of a zucchini. They looked the same, and he would not be held responsible for that mistake. It had no bearing on his cooking skills whatsoever.

Grady ended up buying two steaks, ingredients for a marinade—because Lake couldn't say with complete certainty exactly what was in his pantry—some thick beer-battered chips, and broccolini. Lake was already hungry, thinking about it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a steak at home. The last time might have been at Zach and Felix's or a restaurant. He'd tried himself a few times, but he was too easily distracted and always ended up overcooking it. Steaks were fickle creatures, and it only took a second to look away and bam, overcooked.

Grady was his new best friend. Move over Zach and Felix; there was a new man in town.

Except that when he went to slide onto a stool to watch the magic happen, which is exactly what he did when Zach cooked for him, Grady gave him a look and said, "What are you doing?"

"Getting out of the way?" Lake said slowly. What did it look like he was doing?

"I don't think so," Grady said, snorting. "Get the fuck over here. Do I look like your goddamned butler?"

"You're quickly losing best-friend status." It was important that Grady understood how tenuous the title was and how easily it could be swapped around.

“I’m not dignifying that with a response.”

Lake made a sliding-down motion with his hand. “Slipping further downnnnn, man.”

“I’ll survive. I’m not cooking this by myself.”

Lake grinned and hopped up enthusiastically. “Should we sign a waiver before I start? Any injuries inflicted are your own fault for asking me to help, and you can’t sue me for hospital fees?”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“I don’t think I talk in my sleep?” He couldn’t recall a girlfriend saying anything. Sadie hadn’t, but a lot of them got sick of him before the end of the day and didn’t stay the night. Their loss. He was a great snuggler.

“I’m not sure I believe that. Maybe you’ve only been in bed with deep sleepers. You talk underwater too, I bet.”

“Don’t tell anyone; it’s a secret.”

Grady shuffled around in the drawer below his cutlery drawer and came out with a meat tenderiser. “Someone cooks in this house,” he mused.

“People that come here cook in this house.” Mostly his parents, Avery, and Zach. He and Felix were good helpers, though.

“How old are you?”

“Is that like a sarcastic question?”

“No.”

Lake didn't know why he'd asked. Grady seemed like he was always serious. He was surprised that he didn't have wrinkles. Maybe he did. Maybe that's what the beard was for. “I'm thirty-one. Thirty-two in July.”

Grady looked surprised at that. “How did you make it to your thirties?”

“I think the bigger question is,” Lake said with a grin because he wasn't offended, “how did I get to adulthood in general?”

“A good question. You're older than me.”

“Yeah?” That felt more surprising than it should have been. Age was just a number and maturity wasn't always a factor.

“By a year, don't get excited.”

Lake grinned. “Cool.” He pretended to roll up his sleeves, even though he was wearing a T-shirt, and he didn't need to. “Okay. I'm ready. I'm great at taking direction, so this should be a cinch.”

Grady was silent for a long moment. Lake contemplated poking him.

“A lot of people underestimate you, don't they?” Grady said. It sounded like a statement, not a question, even though it was said like a question.

“Uh...” Lake had no fucking idea what to say to that. It wasn't how he would have worded it. People had certain expectations of him, and maybe that bar wasn't that high, but he wouldn't have said underestimated. He was just a casual, easy guy, and that's what people saw when they looked at him?

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Luckily, Grady didn't seem to want an actual thought-out answer, because he kept going without waiting for one, showing Lake how to tenderise the meat and mix up a marinade that smelled like barbecue and deliciousness that he just wanted to drink. Grady told him not to drink it, which was unfair.

The steaks were put in the fridge for a few minutes while Lake spread the chips out on a tray, and Grady laid out the broccolini next to them before sprinkling rock salt over the top and lightly drizzling them with olive oil.

"I prefer homemade chips in the air fryer, but this will do."

"Where'd you learn to cook?" Lake asked, making sure all the fries were lying flat. Homemade chips sounded like a lot of work. Peeling and then slicing the potatoes? Where did they find the really big ones for the chips that were super long?

"My dad," Grady said shortly.

Lake knew he probably shouldn't pry, because Grady's voice had a definite "back off" vibe to it, but curiosity was one of his worst personality traits. "He's..." he trailed off, waiting for Grady to fill in the blank.

"He's not around anymore."

Well, shit. Lake was great at putting his foot in it as well, clearly. It was generally what happened when his nosiness reared its ugly head. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

“And... your mum?” Because foot-in-mouth syndrome didn’t have a cure. Not for him anyway. Other people probably found a way to rid themselves of it.

Grady shrugged. “I have no idea. Those ready to go in?”

“Yeah,” Lake said quietly, pushing it over towards him. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Where are your glasses?” Grady interrupted.

Lake pointed up to where they were stored. There were hooks underneath that had mugs on them, but whiskey was not a mug drink. He didn’t think. Maybe it could be? Anything could be a mug drink, really. Just pour it in and bam, mug drink. Now he wanted to ask Grady to pour it into a mug just so he could find out if it tasted different. Maybe another time. Grady didn’t seem like a “whiskey in a mug” kind of guy, and Lake was already poking the bear.

“Do you have any siblings?” Lake couldn’t help but ask when Grady had retrieved the glasses and placed them beside the whiskey.

“Lake,” Grady said, an edge of frustration to his tone. He braced his hands on the counter and leaned forward. “Cues aren’t your forte, are they?”

“I was just asking!” Lake said defensively. Grady was also correct, but Lake wasn’t going to say that. “You ask friends about family; it’s a thing.” It was a thing. It was also a dating “getting to know you” thing, but friends also did it. How was he supposed to find out about Grady if he didn’t ask?

Grady sighed. “No siblings. It was just me and my dad.”

“Like... the whole time?” That sounded lonely. Lake might have sent a letter or two to the stork village—his mum had even given him an address; he still couldn’t decide

if that had been cruel or genius—to take back his baby brother, but he'd been grateful he hadn't been alone growing up. He loved Felix and Zach like brothers, and his bond with them wasn't less than the one he had with Avery; it was just different.

“Yeah. My egg donor took off when I was two. That's all she is to me. I have a name on a birth certificate. My father raised me.” Grady poured the whiskey and slid one across the bench to Lake. “Anything else you want to know?”

Lake tapped the edge of his glass, wriggling his mouth while he tried to think of a question that wouldn't be offensive but would feed his curiosity. “How'd you learn to share?” was what came out. It was a valid question, though.

“How did I learn to... share?”

“Well,” Lake said, jumping up to sit on his dining table. The whiskey sloshed over his hand. “Whoops,” he said sheepishly. He licked it up with his tongue because he couldn't be bothered getting back off the table to go clean up. It was going in his mouth anyway. “So, like,” he continued, “people that are only children are more prone to being selfish because they never had to share.”

“I think that's a gross generalisation.” Grady ducked out of sight for a second and then came back up with a washcloth and a tea towel. “Did you read that in a magazine?” he asked as he approached Lake.

“Yeah, it was an article in *Girlfriend*.”

Lake jerked in surprise as Grady took the glass from his hand and wiped his sticky hand with the washcloth, making sure to get between his fingers. That felt nice. He should spill stuff on his hand more often.

“Should I be surprised you used to read *Girlfriend*?”

“I don’t know,” Lake drawled, “should I be surprised you know what it is?”

“Touché.”

Grady dried Lake’s hand with the tea towel and then wiped down the glass before handing it back. “It goes in your mouth.”

“Knew I was doing something wrong.”

“Keep trying. One day you might manage it.”

“One day,” Lake sang.

Grady started opening and closing cupboards, and Lake didn’t bother asking what he was doing. Whatever he was looking for, he would eventually find it, or he wouldn’t. Lake wasn’t going out again if he didn’t have some weird, obscure cooking utensil. They were having steak and chips; surely he didn’t need something that wasn’t already a kitchen staple.

Lake shuffled backwards on the table—careful not to spill his drink—and crossed his legs, resting his elbows on his bent knees.

Grady pulled a fry pan from the cupboard, set it on the stove, and turned the temperature on.

“Don’t you need oil in that?” Lake asked, pointing.

“Once the pan heats,” Grady said absently, now in search of something else.

“I’d offer you a blueprint of my kitchen, but... I don’t have one,” Lake said, grinning. Was it possible to get blueprints of your own house? Lake would love to frame one just because.

“Plates, Lake. I’m looking for plates.” He sounded both exasperated and amused, and

Lake smiled automatically in response.

“Top shelf over there.”

“I would almost have not been surprised if you didn’t have any and instead had a hoard of paper plates.”

“I ran out last month,” Lake said. “Had to give in and buy some real ones. It was pure torture, let me tell you. Avery had to come and hold my hand.”

“Your brother, right?” Grady glanced at him as he went where directed. “So, what about your family?”

“What about them?” Lake asked.

“You asked me about mine. Fair’s fair.”

Oh. Lake hadn’t really expected Grady to ask him. He seemed allergic to small talk. “My mum’s name is Gayle; she’s a librarian at um... I forgot the name, the big one in the city? She likes to dress up like a stern headmistress—tight bun, glasses, you know, scary looking?—but she’s actually really nice.”

“I can’t imagine someone who produced you not being nice,” Grady said, pouring oil he must have found somewhere into the frying pan. Lake’s pantry was like a lucky dip. Who knew what was in there? Lake didn’t know.

Lake licked his lips. “I’ve decided I’m taking that as a compliment. Though she also produced Avery, and he’s a menace, so...” Lake shrugged, still grinning. “Genes are weird. My dad, Dave, he’s a painter. Buildings and stuff, not crazy murals like Avery, who is an artist and owns an art store. It’s just the two of us siblings. He’s five years younger than me and now basically engaged to my two best friends.”

“How do you feel about that?”

No one had asked him that before. It stumped him for a second because he didn't have a pre-prepared answer. “I don't have a problem with it,” he said eventually, which was the truth. “Felix and Zach have been in love with Aves for a stupid long time, and they waited a long time to tell him, which is dumb, and it almost blew up in their faces, but it all came together on Christmas Eve like some kind of beautiful fairy tale. It was very romantic. And now they're playing house. Well... I don't think Aves has moved in, but it'll happen.”

“And you're okay with”—Grady waved his hand in the air—“all that?”

“Why wouldn't I be? They'll look after him, and that's all I've ever wanted for Avery. He's prickly, but he deserves love.”

They settled into less serious conversation after that, ranging from movie preferences to which animal would win in a fight—a bear would totally trounce a lion,c'mon—as they finished making dinner together, drinking more of Grady's whiskey that Lake absolutely needed to buy.

They ended up in the lounge with their plates on their laps as they watched the basketball match. The JackJumpers ended up winning by three points. Lake smacked Grady on the cheek with a broccolini, but he maintained it wasn't his fault because he'd slipped when cutting his steak, and the impressive jump the green made had been all on its own enthusiasm and drive. That broccolini had obviously lived by the “go big or go home” philosophy. Lake applauded the effort. As a reward, he ate it.

Lake had only known Grady for a few days, but it felt like he'd known him a lifetime. He felt comfortable, and content, and happy all at once. He fell asleep on the couch next to Grady with a smile on his face. He woke at some point to find himself in his bed and Grady's sleeping form beside him, moonlight casting shadows across his

handsome face.

He settled back into his pillow, facing Grady, and went back to sleep.

Making new friends was nice.

Grady had never had his phone on his desk and face up as much as he had lately. He felt like a school kid with a crush, waiting for the next ding from his phone telling him he had an incoming message. He hadn't seen Lake since Monday night, but the guy had been sending him random text messages throughout the day all week. Sometimes they were random questions, random thoughts—it was an exact replica of him in person, where Grady was sure he just wrote what he thought without thinking about it, just blurted it out and it made Grady feel like he was right there with him—and pictures with captions that made Grady snort coffee up his nose.

He glared at his phone and flipped it so the screen was faced away. This was ridiculous. He hadn't even been this bad when he and Mal had first started dating. He wasn't even dating Lake! It wasn't even a precursor to dating, because Lake wasn't into men. And after he'd found Mal in bed with another guy—another friend of theirs, even—Grady wasn't in any hurry to put himself back out there. Especially not with a guy who couldn't return his affections. It was Gay 101: don't fall for the straight guy. Even Grady knew that.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Okay,” Quinn said, dropping his phone back in its cradle. “We have two witnesses coming in this afternoon to—” He stopped abruptly, and Grady looked up, about to ask what was wrong, when he noticed the newcomer walking through the bullpen towards them.

Grady groaned. This was not what his day needed. Ever, really, even on good days. “Are you even allowed to be here?” he asked the lawyer, who wore his suit like a second skin. Grady could have spent hours in front of the mirror that morning and still not look as impeccable as this asshole. He’d turned it into an art form, and it made Grady want to act like a five-year-old and throw fistfuls of spaghetti on the navy-and-white ensemble. Sebastian Devlin had been a thorn in his and Quinn’s side for years as the best and worst defence lawyer in Sydney. Best because his track record was stupid good, and worst because facing him in court was a goddamn fucking nightmare.

Unfortunately, Quinn’s history with Devlin had been one of the romantic variety. One that had come back to bite them in the ass, and now Quinn was living all domesticated and shit with him and two other men. Grady didn’t think they were living together—yet—but the principle was the same. They were nauseating, basically. It didn’t help that Grady thought romance could fuck right off back where it had come from. He wanted to be left out of anything that risked getting his heart crushed and left bleeding out on the ground.

“They let me in, so I’m gonna go with yes,” Devlin said, smirking.

Grady wanted to punch him. It wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling for him. “This is enemy territory.” Whoever had let him in should be fired. They could have at least escorted

him through. It didn't matter that gossip travelled fast and everyone knew that Quinn and Devlin were fucking; protocol should still be followed.

"Stop it," Quinn said mildly. The smile he bestowed upon Devlin made Grady want to gag. He could already feel the bile rising at the back of his throat. Giving love a chance was difficult to begin with, but to do it again with someone who had once broken your heart? Grady had no idea why Quinn had thought it was a good idea. Devlin would fuck up again, and they'd be back to square one.

"You don't let me have any fun anymore." Fucking hell, Grady hated today. Fridays were supposed to be celebratory days. Seeing Devlin was not a cause for celebration.

"When did I ever let you have any fun?" Quinn asked. Devlin leaned down for a kiss, and Grady rolled his eyes with exaggeration. He swivelled in his chair so he didn't have to watch. He stabbed his index finger into the Enter key as he went back to the report he'd been working on. The start of a new year always seemed to have masses of paperwork, more than any other time of the year. Grady still hadn't been able to work out why.

His phone pinged, and he hoped it was Lake because he needed something to make him laugh.

It wasn't Lake. Grady scowled, his heart dropping.

Mal: Hey, so I was hoping I could come round to get the last of my stuff.

Grady: I put it in boxes. I'll leave it at the front door.

Mal: There's no need to be like that.

What the fuck? Was Grady somehow out of line?

Grady:Like what? I don't fucking owe you anything. Either pick it up or don't. I don't care.

If he'd thrown it in the trash, he would have been well within his rights. Mal was fucking lucky that Grady had taken the time to pack it up at all.

Mal:Fine.

It was passive-aggressive bullshit, and Grady wasn't in the fucking mood for it. He and Mal had been together for three years, had moved in together a year ago, and Grady had been thinking forever while Mal had been sticking his dick in any available ass. If he'd had a problem with the fact Grady wouldn't bottom for him, then he should have fucking said something, and they could have worked it out. He hadn't deserved what Mal had done to him, and he was allowed to be pissed off about it. Hurt as well, but it was easier to be angry than acknowledge what other emotions it had brought forth. Anger was always easier.

Another text came through, and this time it was from Lake. Grady breathed a sigh of relief as he flicked it open, a small smile erupting on his face as he read it.

LM:Does this look broken to you?

What? The question didn't make sense until a picture loaded in underneath it. It looked like a pedal of some kind—Grady had to assume for a helicopter, since that was Lake's job—and it was split clean in half.

Grady:I'd chuck it, but I won't tell you how to do your job.

LM:Duct tape and WD-40. She'll be fine.

Grady:How did that even happen?

Lake sent a string of messages, one after the other, like he was trying to play a song with Grady's message notification.

LM: You know, I'm not sure. My professional opinion thinks it was a sword. It's a beautifully clean cut, right?

LM: But Zach says they don't have swords on base. Enquiring minds want to know how he knows that.

LM: Did he check?

LM: And if he did, why didn't he bring his best friend along for the search effort? I feel left out.

Grady: They need to re-evaluate how much they're paying you.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

LM: You are so right. It's not nearly enough. I'll tell my CO you said so.

Grady: Just don't tell him where I live.

LM: *She* and I totally will. She doesn't yell a lot, but she *is* scary.

That was comforting. Grady needed to ask Lake whether the officers yelled like they did in the movies, or if that was for dramatic effect. Lake was an officer. Did he yell like that? Grady had a sudden urge to watch a military movie with him and see whether the inaccuracies brought forth some snide comments. Grady enjoyed snide comments. Maybe he could find a copy of *Black Hawk Down* at Big W before he went home tonight.

"New boyfriend?"

"Are you still here?" Grady asked, scowling up at Devlin.

"We went and had a quickie in a storage room, but we're back now," Devlin said with a devilish smirk.

"Fuck off."

They better not have. Grady hadn't been on the phone that long, and if he had to wander around the precinct and worry about walking in on Quinn balls deep in Devlin, Grady was going to chuck the biggest fucking hissy fit the world had ever seen. It was bad enough that he had to watch Quinn go all gaga with three guys, but to have to watch out in case he found any combination of them fucking? No, thanks.

“Didn’t you just hear what I said? We already did that.”

Grady wanted to tell him what he could do in that storage room, and it wouldn’t be a pleasant experience for him. “Shoulda let those assholes shoot you last year,” he muttered. Would have saved him so much fucking trouble. Quinn’s sad eyes would have faded eventually. Grady would have bought a box of tissues, said the right thing, and they both could have moved on.

“Hindsight isn’t your strong point.” Devlin traced a finger across the curve of Quinn’s hip. “Will said I had to kidnap you for lunch.”

“Kidnapping is a felony,” Grady said. “But do it so I can arrest you.”

“So was what we did last night,” Devlin murmured, kissing Quinn again.

Jesus fucking Christ. Did he really have to sit here and deal with this? “Can’t you guys be disgusting and in love somewhere else?” Grady muttered. He’d hated it even when he’d been in a long-term relationship; he hated it even more now. It could all die in a fire and leave him out of it. He pushed away from his desk and stood. “Rules need to be established,” he said firmly. “PDA at a minimum. And by minimum, I mean this is grade school: keep all your hands to yourself. Got it?”

“You might need to write it down for me,” Devlin replied.

“I fucking hate both of you right now,” Grady muttered to himself as he headed for the break room. He needed a fucking coffee. With a triple shot. And some whiskey. He bet Gideon had some stashed in here. Or Greer—another detective that worked out of the precinct—because if anyone was going to drink on the job, it would be that waste of space.

As if the thought had conjured him, Grady almost ran right into Greer, who was

coming in from the back of the precinct.

“Oh, look who it is,” Grady drawled. “I forgot you worked here.” First Devlin, and now Greer. What had he done today to deserve that? He hadn’t even gotten out and arrested the man who had walked right in front of his car on the way to work, forcing Grady to slam on his brakes. The man had even flipped him off as he’d gone by, and Grady still hadn’t gotten out and flashed a badge. He deserved a fucking medal, not to have to deal with these two assholes.

“I wish I could say the same, but you’re always here,” Greer sneered in response. “Forget how to do legwork?”

“That’s rich, coming from you.” Grady looked behind Greer. “Where’s your partner?”

“Do I look like his keeper?”

His typical response. What their boss, Riley Sinclair, thought he was doing when he assigned their rookie, Henry Campbell, to Greer, was beyond him. Greer might have been the one without a partner, but they could have shuffled around so that someone who could handle Greer was paired with him. “You’re a fucking waste of a good detective, Greer. Get out of my way.”

Greer stepped to the side and waved his arm with a flourish. “Be my guest.”

Just another person on Grady’s list to fucking punch. Was it Asshole Day? Grady was sure somewhere in the world that was a themed day. There were fifty million different themed days. It would be like Pancake Day, but worse. He hated pancakes. Fluffy pieces of bullshit. Waffles were where it was at.

He dropped his phone on the counter and opened it up to Lake’s texts while he made

his coffee. The dork had sent through two more pictures—one Grady thought was supposed to be a selfie but was blurred, and it looked like Lake had antlers but was probably the blur... maybe—Grady wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been walking around the base wearing antlers, to be honest—and a string of haiku poems.

Grady: Did you google those?

LM: Why? You don't think I could be a budding poet?

Grady: ...

LM: Okay, you caught me. Keegs sent them to me last night. Guard duty is the worst part of the Army. They say it's the rations, but they're lying. Have you ever had to stand for eight hours and stare at nothing while your rifle gets progressively heavier every hour?

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Grady couldn't say he had. It did sound boring as fuck, like watching paint dry, but he had no comparison, so he just sent back, "Don't you have work to do?" instead of responding to the question that had to be rhetorical.

LM:Probably. We're going out for a flight in about an hour. Better go do some systems checks. Pray for me!

Jesus Christ. Someone let him fly a million-dollar piece of machinery? Grady hoped the helmet was made out of titanium. Or adamantium.

Grady:It was nice knowing you.

Lake sent back a string of heart-eyes emojis.

If anyone tried to tell him that he was smiling when he went out into the bullpen—that was thankfully empty of lawyers or dickhead detectives—he would vehemently deny it.

Lake sang loudly as he vacuumed his living room, swinging his hips as he tried not to trip over the cord and mangling the words to songs he hadn't listened to for years. He could have actually put some music on, but where was the fun in that? He was way off-key, and he felt bad for his neighbours if they could hear him—hopefully not since there was a little distance between his house and the fence line—but chores were hard, and he had to do what he could to get through them.

His ears took a second to adjust when he flicked the vacuum off, and the loud sucking disappeared. He leaned it against the couch and then flopped back onto the soft

cushions.

He was bored. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and flicked across to the group chat with Zach and Felix. They hadn't added Avery to it, and Lake had felt a bit bad at first, but they'd all agreed it was important that their friendship didn't hinge on their new relationship with Avery. They'd all been friends first, and what they had was a separate entity and still important.

Lake typed out a random, meaningless message, his thumb hovering over the Send arrow.

He let out a sigh and then deleted it, dropping his phone on his stomach as he stared at the ceiling. He was trying to give them all some space while they navigated their new normal, but he missed his friends. And he missed his brother.

The ceiling fan had a layer of dust that he probably needed to take care of. He reached his hand up, pretending to pinch one of the blades between his fingers. That was a new low even for him.

He groaned and turned over, lying sideways. He stared at his TV, wondering if he could make it magically turn on with his mind so he didn't have to get up and find the remote. If there was ever a time to learn he had Jedi powers, this was it. He squinted, but nothing happened. Bummer.

A night of TV and some kind of takeaway dinner had always been satisfying for him before because they were few and far between. He had friends, people he hung out with. He had plans. Lately, he'd been on his own a lot, and he didn't really know why. It wasn't like Felix and Zach were the only people he hung out with. There were a lot of people he'd made friends with during his enlisted years. Not all of them lived in Sydney since people moved around a lot. Enough of them did, though. So why he didn't want to call any of them up and be all, "Let's hang out, douchebag," like he

normally would was beyond him.

Maybe he could pop into his parents' house and demand to be fed. His mum would sit him down and stuff him full of everything in her pantry.

Lake huffed at himself and then awkwardly rolled himself off the couch and onto his knees. He groaned as he pushed himself to his feet. This was ridiculous. He needed todosomething.

He smiled as a thought occurred to him. He'd made a new friend, so maybe he could go and see said friend. That sounded like the best idea he'd had all day, and he'd suggested taping a huge water balloon full of glitter to the helicopter's rotor and turning it on. No one had appreciated his genius, but it was fine; he was going to find a way to do it by himself. The punishment would fit the crime, and it would be worth it.

Traffic was on Lake's side, and he managed to get to Grady's in a record fifteen minutes. He should write that down. If he carried around a pen and paper, he might have. He pulled out his phone and texted the time to Grady. He didn't respond, but that was okay; he was right there.

Lake hummed to himself as he made his way to Grady's front door. The noise faltered as he noticed the second car in the driveway. That wasn't Grady's car. Obviously, since Grady's car was parked in front of it.

Damn. He had guests already. Lake bit his lip as he got to the front door, wondering if he should leave or not. He shrugged after a second. If Grady wanted him to leave, Lake was sure that the detective would let him know. He wasn't backwards in coming forward and didn't seem like the kind of guy to keep quiet to save someone's feelings. Maybe that was a characteristic some wouldn't like, but Lake appreciated it; it meant he would always know where he stood. Straight to the point was something

he was used to after over a decade in the military.

On a whim, he tried the door instead of knocking. He blinked in surprise when it swung open, unlocked. Lake grinned as he stepped inside. Bad detective; Lake was totally going to call him out on that. What kind of cop leaves their front door unlocked?

His grin faltered as angry voices registered. What the hell?

Some of the words filtered through before Lake entered the kitchen, and he didn't like what he heard.

"I said I was sorry; there's no reason for you to be such an asshole about it," an unfamiliar voice growled. "Why don't you pull that stick out of your ass and think about someone else for once in your life?"

"You're fucking kidding me, right?" Grady shot back. "I should think about someone other than myself?"

Lake found Grady leaning back against the kitchen counter, with his arms folded, tension lining every part of him, a dark scowl on his face. A man Lake had never seen before was standing opposite in a similar position. If Lake were anywhere else—a mess hall or somewhere on a military base, specifically—he would have been bracing himself to break up a fight.

"Lake?" Grady said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"The door was unlocked," Lake said slowly. He circled around so that he was on Grady's side of the bench, keeping the unknown man in his sights. If Grady was acting like he wasn't welcome, then so would Lake. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," he said to Grady.

“Who the hell is this?” the man scoffed. “You have some nerve being upset at me when it took you point five seconds to replace me with some little bottom slut.”

Lake didn't understand some of that, but he was also well aware that he had just been insulted. “You want to repeat that?” he asked dangerously.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Grady put a hand on Lake's arm and squeezed gently, pulling him back slightly so their hips bumped against each other. "This is none of your business, Mal," Grady said. "You came over to get your boxes, and now you can leave."

"You're not even willing to work through this," Mal said flatly. "Are we not worth more than that?"

"No, we're not," Grady replied, and Lake could feel the way he was bristling. He wanted to pull him into a hug, wanted to smooth the edges with his hands, work them out with soothing massages. "You decided that when you fucked some random in our bed when you thought I was working!"

"Eww," Lake said. "I hope you changed the sheets before I slept in it." It sounded like a jab, but he was also serious, because gross. He liked clean sheets, not ones that cheating scum had fucked on. Though it was Grady. He'd probably burnt the bedding instead of washing it.

Mal's face darkened, anger flashing in his eyes. "How long did it take you to find someone so pathetic to bend over for you?"

"He didn't have to find me," Lake said smartly. "I found him. He's a hot commodity, and you're an idiot. Now, I believe he asked you to leave. I came here to get bent over, remember? Or do you need a map to find the door?"

"Shut the fuck up," Mal said. "What right do you have to speak to me, you little—"

"Consider your next words very carefully," Lake said, his voice going quiet as he

moved away from Grady and closer to the man who had no fucking idea who he was dealing with. Lake had swept the floor with more rookies that thought they were hot shit than he could count, newly graduated from RMC or the ADF academy. He was a major, and he could throw a man three times his size over his shoulder and then make him cry from the dressing down. “You can leave on your own, or a paramedic can wheel you out. You choose.”

“Are you seriously going to let him talk to me like that?” Mal sputtered.

“He’s not the one that isn’t welcome here,” Grady said, a slight husk to his voice that Lake had never heard before. He wanted to turn and see Grady’s face but turning his back right then would have been an amateur move that Lake hadn’t made since he’d made his way through the Royal Military College himself. “It’s time for you to leave. You have all of your things; we have no reason to drag this out anymore.”

“This isn’t over,” Mal said, pointing at Grady. “I’m not leaving until—”

“Get out,” Lake barked, his officer training kicking in without his permission. It was a habit to put a discussion down before it could get out of hand, and this had already gotten way out of hand.

A muscle in Mal’s jaw twitched, but he wisely turned and left the room. The front door slamming was loud, vibrating through the walls of the small house.

“That the voice you use to make people wet themselves while you’re in uniform?” Grady asked, amusement lacing his tone. And something else that Lake couldn’t pinpoint.

“Yeah, might want to check your pants,” Lake said absently. He tried to keep his voice light, but he was still tense, his body coiled and ready. Even his weakest soldiers put up more of a fight than that limp noodle had. If only to save face in front

of their friends and colleagues.

“Them being wet isn’t the problem,” Grady replied.

Lake moved to the window, opening the blind just enough that he could peek out, making sure that Mal had actually left. And hadn’t clipped Lake’s car, because then Lake really would hunt him down.

He let it fall and stared at it for a second. “This is why you were upset New Year’s Eve,” he said. “Because of that guy.” Lake didn’t even want to say his name, didn’t want to hear his lips form the word or taste it on his tongue.

“I caught him with someone else a few days after Christmas,” Grady said shortly.

Lake wanted to drag the guy back by his hair and force him to grovel at Grady’s feet and then kick him out. With a boot up the ass. While Lake was wearing his combat boots, of course. No sneaker or slipper treatment for the dirtbag. Steel-capped boots, baby.

“Anyway, it’s water under the bridge,” Grady said dismissively, turning his back to Lake and opening the fridge door. Lake wasn’t sure if he was pretending to look for something or if he actually was. Maybe he was hot? Lake had stuck his head in the freezer once when his aircon had been on the fritz and he’d been melting into the floor.

“It hasn’t even been a month,” Lake said, his face twisting into a frown. How was that water under the bridge? “How long were you together?”

“Three years.”

Three years? Lake circled the counter and put a hand on Grady’s upper arm. Grady

tensed, still not turning. “Grady, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Grady asked gruffly.

“For him being a dick. For having to go through that. And if I overstepped; I should have let you handle it.”

“You were fine,” Grady said, a weird hitch to his voice.

“Are you looking for Narnia in there?” Lake asked, wondering why Grady still wouldn’t turn and look at him.

“Yeah, Mr Tumnus is waiting for me,” Grady muttered.

“Who?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Have you even read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*?”

“I tried Turkish delight because of the movie, and that’s all I remember. It was not as delicious as Edmund made it out to be, let me tell you. Not nearly enough to throw siblings under the bus for the White Witch to do her nasty bullshit. Avery can be a pain in my butt sometimes, but I guess he’s worth more than Turkish delight.”

Grady huffed out a laugh. “Read the book, Lake.”

“All right.” He could do that. They probably had a copy at home. He’d ask his mum.

“Are you hungry? There’re leftovers.”

Lake wanted to ask more about Mal and what had happened, but Grady wasn’t being subtle in trying to change the subject. “Sure, I could eat.” As though he’d ever turn down food.

Grady pulled a container from the fridge and turned, shoving it into Lake’s stomach. “Go heat it up in the microwave.”

“What microwave?” Lake asked, glancing around. Unless something was in disguise or could transform like a Transformer, there was definitely no microwave.

“In the pantry.”

Lake shrugged and popped the corner of the lid as he walked. “It smells good. What is it?”

“It’s a meatball and wild mushroom ragout.”

“I have no idea what a ragout is, but I love meatballs and mushroom,” Lake said. He left the food spinning in circles in the appliance and slid onto a stool at the island counter so that he could lean his elbows on it and peer at Grady. His cheeks had a tinge of red, and Lake felt angry all over again. Cheating was unforgivable in any circumstance, and maybe he hadn’t known Grady all that long, but he knew people, and he knew that he wouldn’t have deserved it, no matter what.

“What happened?” Lake asked.

“Lake...”

“Sometimes it’s good to talk about these things!” he protested. Letting things fester was one of the worst responses to any kind of trauma. If there was anything Lake had learned during his time in the military, it was that people that tried to push things down inevitably broke, and the results were dire.

“How do you know I haven’t already talked to someone?” Grady asked. He placed two glasses on the counter and raised a challenging brow at Lake.

Lake mimicked his expression. “Well, have you?”

The look Lake got in response told him that Grady definitely hadn’t talked to anyone about it. Lake spread his arms wide. “I am a vault. Or this is Fight Club. Pick whichever works best for you.”

“Do you think about what comes out of your mouth, or do you just let it fly out?”

“I let it fly out. It’s more interesting for me and anyone else around.”

Grady sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t let him explain, because I already know.”

“Bit presumptuous.”

“After three years, I’d like to think that I knew him.”

“Okay, that’s probably fair,” Lake said. “I’ve never been with anyone that long, but one woman—Sadie—was close. Just over two years.” Sometimes he missed her, but he knew it was just having someone close, having a connection with someone that had been his alone that he missed. Not her. Which said a lot about their relationship, really.

“Yeah? And what happened?”

Lake shrugged. “Not really sure. I’d thought maybe I’d found that fairy tale elusive ‘one,’ and that she’d be part of the plan I had for my future. But she got a job in Perth and decided that was more important. I can’t just pack up and leave, and she knew that.”

“Plan for the future?” Grady asked, the corner of his mouth tipping up in total judgement.

“Don’t laugh.”

“I’m already laughing. On the inside.”

That made Lake laugh, and he playfully gave Grady the finger. “The idea of a family always appealed to me. A house filled with children, a wife, a dog, a white picket fence.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“You watch Hallmark Christmas movies, don’t you?”

“Joke’s on you; I totally do, and I love them.”

“Explains your big house for one person,” Grady mused. “How many kids do you want? Twelve?”

“The house isn’t that big,” Lake said. “Unless we jam like four kids in each room, I guess? I’d like three or four, though. It was just me and Avery growing up, and I always wanted more siblings. The idea of a whole big family has always appealed to me.”

Grady tilted his head thoughtfully. “You’d be a good dad.”

“Thanks! I think so too.” Lake grinned, sticking his tongue out the side of his mouth.

Grady shook his head ruefully. “Well, I’m sure one day your prince will come.” He poured mango juice into the glasses and pushed one across to Lake.

Lake laughed harder, pointing a finger at Grady. “You watch them too! I know you do!”

Grady didn’t answer, but Lake had him already, he knew. If he could quote a Disney princess, he absolutely watched Hallmark Christmas movies.

Grady handed him a steaming bowl of the ragout. Lake made a mental note to Google what it was. He shovelled a bunch of pasta, a meatball, and some mushrooms into his

mouth. It practically melted in his mouth, and his eyes slid closed as he groaned. “Oh my God. I’ll do whatever you want; just don’t stop feeding me this.”

Grady chuckled, and Lake’s stomach flipped at the low sound. He frowned as he swallowed the food in his mouth. That had felt awfully like butterflies, which couldn’t be right.

His mouth dropped open with his fork halfway there when a realisation kicked in. “Hey, you distracted me!”

“What?”

“Sneaky trick, detective.”

Grady speared a mushroom and slowly chewed. Lake waited patiently. Being patient wasn’t his natural state, but he’d had plenty of practice, and he’d wait Grady out as long as he needed to.

“What was I distracting you from?” Grady asked, arching an eyebrow.

“From telling me what happened between you and... that guy, and how you already knew why he was a dickwad and cheated on you?” Lake wrinkled his nose. Even saying the words sounded dirty.

“I don’t know anything about what kind of relationship your friends and your brother have,” Grady said, “but sometimes people have preferences about their role during sex.”

“I’m... not sure I’m following,” Lake said. “Like role-playing?” That was kinkier than he’d expected from this uptight guy. And what did that have to do with his breakup?

“No,” Grady said, the twinkle in his eyes telling Lake that he was more amused by the question than anything. “Like I don’t bottom.”

Don’t bottom.Lake’s mind blanked out for a second.

“Like... ever?”

“No.”

“And your ex... he also didn’t?” Lake speared a meatball and bit it in half. There was some kind of spice in it. A little hot, but also delicious. He’d have to remember to ask what it was later.

“He did,” Grady said. He pushed his half-eaten bowl away. “Otherwise, we would never have had sex.”

“Some relationships don’t have sex.” Intimacy wasn’t always based on sex, and Lake had had a few relationships where it hadn’t been a factor at all. And Lake wasn’t always into having sex with people, especially if he didn’t feel much of a connection with them. What was the point of getting naked with a person if you didn’t feel anything for them? The act of sex for the sake of it made him feel dirty and uncomfortable.

“They don’t,” Grady agreed. “Ours did, and we had exclusive roles.”

“And he... didn’t like that?” Lake asked. That didn’t track for Lake. Grady was a bit gruff, but Lake couldn’t see him deliberately being uncaring about a person’s feelings, especially not with someone he was dating.

“I had no reason to think he didn’t like it. He never spoke about it, and he was a willing participant in our sex life and enjoyed what we did together. But since he was

the one topping when I found him with the other guy...” Grady trailed off, but he didn’t need to finish. Lake understood what he meant.

“That’s kind of a shitty reason to cheat on a person. I mean, any reason is shitty, but that one is particularly bad. Especially if he never even talked to you about it.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake's brain had kind of stuck on "I don't bottom" and was playing it on repeat like a strangely enticing merry-go-round. Lake could see how men would find Grady being a top appealing. Which he was not going to think overmuch about.

"Sorry I went off on him," Lake said again. Bringing his "officer" persona home was something he tried hard not to do, having heard too many horror stories about people that couldn't leave it at work. But the idea of someone treating Grady like that, speaking to him like that, had made him see red.

"You don't have to apologise. I'm not feeling very warmly towards him right now. Maybe I'll be willing to hear him out one day, but not today. Or any time soon."

"You wouldn't take him back, would you?" Lake asked, frowning. Was that not a "do not pass GO" move for a relationship? Lake didn't think he could forgive a person for betraying him like that.

"No," Grady said. "But maybe for closure. We'll see. Do you want some more?"

"I love how you ask that as if you don't already know the answer."

"Right. My bad." Grady pulled Lake's bowl towards himself and scraped more of the meal from the Tupperware container into it.

"What are you even doing here?"

"I was bored."

“Second string. Nice.”

“Excuse me. I bypassed a perfectly good night of channel surfing and gooey popcorn for you.”

“I beat popcorn?”

“Any chance you have any popcorn?”

Grady threw his head back and laughed, a loud sound full of mirth. Lake couldn't have stopped the answering curl of his lips if he'd wanted to. And if he stared a little too hard at the way Grady's Adam's apple was very... noticeable, that was his own business.

Lake had a numbering system for his dates. In his head, anyway. An 8 was when the date was going so well Lake knew that they were going to get naked before the end of the night. Those were his second favourite kind and the rarest. It wasn't often he immediately wanted to sleep with a person. His favourite were the 10s, where the date was just nice. Like getting a warm hug or being surprised with his favourite flavour of ice cream. The intimacy of it appealed to him more than a hot roll in the hay, even though those were fun.

This date was currently a 1.

Possibly a negative 1. Negative 10, even. He would need to compile all the data in his mind. He grimaced internally. He'd turned into Zach. His friend would laugh himself silly.

“Excuse me,” Marlie said, standing. “I need to use the genie room. I won't be long. If the food gets delivered before I get back, don't start eating without me. We wouldn't want to be rude, would we?”

Lake just shook his head “no” and let out a sigh of relief as she turned her back and walked away. He wasn’t even going to ask about the name. He didn’t want to know why the fuck she called the ladies’ room the “genie” room. Did she think her parts would grant wishes if rubbed right?

Lake didn’t have the world’s biggest sex drive, but he liked to have a good time when it reared its head. He didn’t want to take this woman home at all. There would be no rubbing of anything.

Maybe when he scrubbed himself clean in the shower when he got home, but she wouldn’t be the one he was thinking of while he did it. Where had Zach even found this woman? If this was a prank, he was getting punched. Twice. Maybe even three times if Lake’s knuckles didn’t hurt too much after the first two.

He quickly got his phone out of his pocket and dialled a number that had become increasingly familiar to him over the last four weeks. And one that always made him smile. He had a tune he hummed when he tapped it out, using the numbers to create his own sound.

What he loved the most was that Grady always answered. Lake was sure it was a detective thing; nine times out of ten when someone called him it was probably a call about a crime. But Lake liked to think it was because he saw Lake’s number, too. Surely he screened his calls for the same reason.

“Detective Donehue,” Grady answered gruffly. The sounds of people talking and low music were in the background, but Lake could hear him clear as day. His voice had a rumbling tone to it that always stood out. Lake had a feeling he’d always be able to pick Grady’s voice out of a crowd even after knowing the man only a short time.

Also, he always sounded so grumpy, like a wet cat waiting for the next water spray and getting ready to hiss and snarl and make swiping motions at the attacker. Lake

snorted out a laugh at the imagery.

“It’s me,” he said once the chuckles had subsided.

“I figured, after the evil laugh.”

“It wasn’t an evil laugh,” Lake protested. One did not laugh evilly at grumpy cats and expect to make it out alive or unscratched. He had more sense than that.

“They could use you as a Disney villain,” Grady said.

“It gets me hot when you talk about cartoons.” Lake was positive that Grady watched rom-coms, children’s movies, and weird game shows when no one was looking. He was going to find out. No one would believe him, but he wanted to know anyway, out of pure curiosity.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“A completely normal reaction, I’m sure,” Grady said. Lake wondered if he was imagining the slight husk in his voice. “Why are you calling me? I thought you said you were on a date tonight?”

Lake looked around to make sure Marlie wasn’t on her way back yet. She’d made him put his phone away earlier because she wanted the focus on her, which he didn’t have a problem with because he thought the same—what was the point of a date if you weren’t there to spend time with the person? It was common courtesy—but the delivery could have used some work. And the bossiness could have stopped there. Instead, she ordered for him because she didn’t like the smell of certain foods, told him what drinks he was allowed to drink and what he couldn’t because she didn’t like the taste, and sneered at the server when they’d ordered because he’d almost fumbled the water. So many red flags and Lake wanted to leave now. Only standing up and walking away seemed like an impossible task—what would he do if she made a scene? He could handle that kind of attitude at work and shut it down quickly, but this was different—and sneaking out while she was in the bathroom would make him the dick.

“You have to come save me.”

“I have to what? Hold on, I can’t hear you properly.” There was some shuffling and a sliding door, and then the background noise was gone. “Did you just say I have to come save you?”

“I’m on a date with a 1,” Lake said.

“I wasn’t expecting you to make a judgement on a person based on looks,” Grady

said shortly. The tinge of disappointment made a tendril of shame curl around Lake's heart like a vine, even though he absolutely hadn't been basing any of his opinions on how she looked.

"I'm not," he insisted, needing Grady to know that he didn't judge based on looks. "She's very pretty. I like her red hair. It's her personality that makes her a 1." Looks were not his priority. But asking for a person who was a decent human being was not too much of an ask. "Please, please get me out of this. I don't care how you do it." He spied her pretty red hair moving through the restaurant at a rapid pace. "Shit, she's coming!"

"I need to know where you are if you want some kind of rescue. And Quinn lives half an hour out of town, so I might be a while."

Lake managed to spit out the address and hang up just as she got back to the table. She frowned at the phone.

"I thought I told you to put that away."

"Sorry, it was just my mum," Lake lied. He made a show of putting it back in his pocket and sent out a silent prayer and a telepathic distress call to Grady, hoping he heard it and would hurry.

LAKE'S SENSE OF RELIEF when he saw Grady walk through the glass front doors of the restaurant would have made him need to grab hold of something if he'd been standing. He'd barely been able to stomach his food as he listened to the woman telling him all the things he would be expected to do, and not do, while they were dating. It was their first date. A horrific first date. Why did she think there would be more? Zach was definitely getting punched.

Their eyes locked, and Lake swallowed hard. Grady looked like he always did, a

frown on his face surrounded by his thick beard. Something inside Lake jumped as he watched Grady purposefully stride across the dining hall. He was wearing a suit, which meant he'd gone to Quinn's straight after he'd finished work. The tie was twisted, and every time he had to move around a table, his jacket shifted to reveal his holster and gun.

It only just occurred to Lake, as he watched him come closer, that Grady was a really attractive guy. After knowing him for over a month, Lake probably should have worked that out before that moment, but it wasn't like he had actively looked. But Grady was built like a line-backer, had a smile that—while given sparingly—was enough to put you on your ass, and had a sexy broody thing going on when he wasn't smiling. Lake could see why men would want him. He was a great kisser too, which Lake could confirm based on their New Year's Eve midnight kiss. He hadn't thought about it since then, but watching Grady walk towards him, suddenly he was thinking about it, the feel of his lips and the way his tongue had expertly stroked Lake's.

A server stopped Grady halfway, giving Lake time to compose himself and wonder what the fuck was wrong with him. The kiss hadn't meant anything. It was a rule that he'd needed to abide by, and Grady had been the closest victim.

Grady flashed the badge on his hip and said a few clipped words. The man's eyes widened before nodding and moving out of his way.

"Lake McKenna?" Grady said as he stopped at their table. He was looking at Lake like he'd never met him before in his life, and Lake blinked in confusion.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me," Marlie said rudely. "We're having a private dinner; can't you see you're interrupting us?"

Grady lifted his jacket to show his badge again—and okay, the movies had it right, and that move was definitely sexy. Lake wished he had a badge that he could flash.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Grady Donehue,” Grady said. “I’m going to have to ask you to come with me, sir.”

“Um...” Lake felt a little tongue-tied, and he wasn’t sure why.

“Let’s not make this difficult,” Grady said. “I’m sure we don’t want to cause a scene.” His face was completely impassive, total detective mode, and it was doing something to Lake’s insides. It was like a mask, hiding the real Grady underneath. He wasn’t Lake’s Grady; he was cop Grady.

Lake slid to his feet, and Grady took hold of his elbow.

“Are you in trouble with the law?” Marlie said in disgust, wrinkling her nose. Lake had a feeling she wouldn’t be calling him. She couldn’t anyway since he definitely hadn’t given her his number, but even if he had, she definitely wouldn’t be calling. Which worked for him.

“This way,” Grady said, squeezing lightly as he steered him.

Lake just shrugged apologetically as Grady walked him away. He was just glad that he’d paid when they’d ordered because even though she was terrible, he would have felt even worse if he’d left her with the bill.

Once they were outside, Grady let go of him.

“Car’s this way,” Grady said, heading down the sidewalk to their left.

“Are you allowed to touch people like that?” Lake asked curiously.

“No.”

Lake wasn't sure what to say to that. The first question that popped into his head was “So why are you doing it?”—but he wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer. Or what the answer would mean. “Have you done that before?” he asked instead.

“Pretended to arrest someone?” Grady asked, shooting him an amused look. “Absolutely not. Don't tell my boss.”

“Mum's the word.” Lake put his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels as they waited for the crosswalk man to go green. “Thanks for back there.” He had no idea how he'd been planning to extricate himself from that situation at the end of the night. Maybe a hasty “have a nice life” before he got the fuck out of the area as soon as possible. This was a way better option. Grady had been amazing.

“Was it that bad?” Grady asked. The crosswalk man turned green, and Grady put a steady hand on the small of Lake's back as they headed across. Lake felt like it was searing a handprint into his skin, and he didn't want to do anything to disrupt it or make Grady pull away, even if that meant walking twice as fast to keep up with Grady's pace.

“I don't even want to talk about it, it was that bad.” Considering how much Lake liked to talk—which he was sure Grady had noticed—the fact he didn't want to talk about it should have been answer enough.

Grady nodded and didn't ask any more questions. Lake was glad.

“You’re a good guy,” Lake said, waiting for Grady to unlock his car and trying to mask his disappointment when Grady dropped his hand.

“You’d be the first person to say so,” Grady said, sliding into the driver’s seat.

Lake clipped his seatbelt on and smiled at him. “Maybe the first person to say it to your face, but I bet I’m not the first person to think it.” Grady acted like a stereotypical gruff detective, but Lake could see the heart beneath, and it made him want to keep digging to unearth it. He had a feeling it was something special.

“Sure, let’s go with that.” Grady started the ignition and leaned back in his seat. “So, where to? The barbecue is still going on at Quinn’s if you want to head back there?”

“If it’s okay, I’d rather not,” Lake said quietly. He didn’t feel like socialising anymore that night. Normally, he loved a good party, especially one that involved a lot of people. “Can we just... go to your place?” he asked. Right then, he just wanted to go to Grady’s house, watch something, and fall asleep listening to Grady growl about whoever was doing something stupid on whatever show they’d picked.

Grady glanced at him, something unreadable in his dark-olive eyes. “Sure.”

Grady woke to the sight of Lake sprawled beside him for the third time. He’d thought after that first night that it had just been a once-off. Apparently not. Lake slept like an unruly toddler that needed to have all the space. Lake was sleeping peacefully, his eyes closed, with his head resting on the pillow and facing Grady. His hair had flopped onto his forehead, and his lips were parted slightly, drool drying at the corner of his mouth. His hand was stretched towards Grady, almost touching his shoulder.

Lake mumbled something and then twisted, turning over. His foot must have caught on the sheet because it pulled it down, revealing his ample ass. Covered in bright-yellow SpongeBob briefs—which should have reduced the sexy factor but

unfortunately didn't—they were tight enough that it didn't matter; nothing was left to the imagination. Lake had the most incredible ass, with a perfect roundness that would fit beautifully in Grady's hands.

Grady groaned and made himself look away. You don't ogle your friends, Donehue. Get a fucking grip. And that was the only category that Lake could fit into. Lake was straight, and Grady wasn't in the market for anything. He was still dealing with the bullshit fallout of his last train wreck of a relationship.

He forced himself to get out of the bed and slip on a pair of soft, worn black sweatpants before padding barefooted out into the kitchen.

Lake had to know this wasn't a normal friendship. Normal friends didn't text constantly, like they couldn't stand to not be in contact for more than an hour break at a time. And they didn't share a bed. It also hadn't even been two months since they'd met. Grady had been friends with Quinn for years, and there had been one occasion where they'd passed out drinking on Quinn's couch after a horrific case that had left them both shaken. Otherwise, any time they'd needed to stay at each other's houses for whatever reason, they'd used the couch or a spare bed. Not once had they considered sharing a bed. Maybe Grady's couch wasn't the comfiest in the world, but it wasn't as though Lake were staying for a prolonged period of time. One night wouldn't hurt him.

Maybe it was just a Lake thing. He was far friendlier than anyone Grady had ever met, including one of Quinn's boyfriends, Will, who was a fucking six-foot-six puppy with a gun.

Grady found ingredients to make a half-decent porridge for breakfast. Lake was still asleep by the time he'd finished eating, and he needed to go into work for a few hours to square away some paperwork on a few of the million cases he and Quinn were trying to wade through.

He left Lake a note and put the pot of porridge in the oven to keep warm.

Quinn was already at the station when he got there, along with Henry and—surprisingly—Greer.

“The fuck is he doing here?” Grady asked as he sat heavily at his desk. Quinn glanced up from what he was reading, his steaming mug cradled in his hands. Damn, Grady knew he’d forgotten to grab something before he sat down. He stared longingly at the doorway that led to the staff room. The effort required to get up and go make something seemed insurmountable.

“He works here?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Quinn asked, and Grady could see the laughter in his eyes. The fucker was laughing at him.

“I’m working,” Grady said indignantly.

“Then maybe so is he?”

Right. Grady wondered if Greer had ever worked a day in his fucking life. Logically, he had to have: Riley wouldn’t keep dead weight around, and maybe there were a few cases he’d solved. Grady wasn’t interested in adding logic to his argument. The guy was an asshole and a disgrace to the force. “What are you doing here? Trouble in paradise already?”

Something flickered in Quinn’s eyes. “No, I just need to get some stuff done.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“If I had three warm bodies in my bed, I don’t think I could leave.” It wasn’t just about having someone warm to curl into, it was the logistics of the matter. If you were in the middle, how the fuck did you get out without putting a knee or elbow somewhere uncomfortable? Though one of them was Sebastian Devlin, so Grady would probably do it on purpose.

“We aren’t together every night, Grady,” Quinn said with amusement.

While spending time apart was perfectly normal at the start of a relationship—and barely six months would definitely be considered the “start”—Grady sensed there was a story there. He didn’t know whether to ask or not. If Quinn wanted to talk to him, he would.

“It was just me last night; no warm bodies,” Quinn continued.

Grady deliberately tried not to think about the fact that he’d had a warm body that he’d had to leave in bed. It sounded way less innocent when he said it aloud, so the only solution, clearly, was just not to. The end.

“Persephone not allowed on the bed anymore?” Grady asked to distract his brain, referring to Quinn’s beagle. They’d found her locked in a room at a victim’s apartment a few months back, and Quinn had been in charge of looking after her since Mal was allergic to dogs, and at the time Grady hadn’t realised what a sleazebag asshole he’d been living with, or he might have taken her home on purpose. Quinn had ended up keeping her, and she was spoiled rotten.

“Okay, I take it back. Only one warm body. She wasn’t happy when she had to get up

for her morning walk. I imagine she's asleep on the couch right now."

"Who needs dog beds?" Grady said with a chuckle.

"Not dogs that think they're children," Quinn said wryly.

"Would you two shut the fuck up? Some of us are here to work," Greer growled from the corner where he belonged.

"It's not our fault you slack off so fucking much you have to come in on weekends to get your shit done," Grady drawled.

"Irony coming from the knob that's also sitting in the station on"—Greer made a show of looking at his watch—"the weekend. Did you forget what day it was? I'm not surprised. It's Sunday. That's the last day of the week. A day of rest if you're religious. Or one for—"

"Look at you, being all helpful and shit. Kiss my ass, you fucking wanker," Grady growled.

"Not interested."

"Cut it out, both of you," Quinn said mildly, eyeing Grady over the rim of his mug.

Grady rolled his eyes. It wasn't like anyone would miss Greer if Grady shot him. If Quinn was worried about being an accessory, he could go out for a coffee or some shit. Grady would be finished by the time he got back. They'd never even find the body. "I'm going to get a coffee," he muttered. It was going to be a long fucking day.

GRADY HADN'T BEEN WRONG. It was almost ten at night before he managed to drag himself home. He'd shoved Quinn out the precinct doors around eight, with an

order to go and fuck one of his men—or all of them, Grady didn't care, he just didn't want details—and then he had tried to finish up more of the paperwork that had been plaguing both of their desks for far too long. Riley would need to find something new to gripe at them about. Grady would feel satisfied about that if he wasn't so fucking tired.

He'd had to stop himself three fucking times from messaging Lake to see what he was doing. They weren't fucking dating, and Grady didn't need to ask him what his Sunday-night plans were in the hopes of them involving Grady in some way. It didn't matter what Lake was doing, or what he'd planned. They didn't need to spend every free day together even if they'd spent more time together in the evenings in the last month than Grady thought he'd ever spent with a friend. It didn't matter. Lake went on dates, had his own friends, and did his own shit. Less than two months ago, Grady hadn't even known the guy existed.

So the fact that Grady had even wanted to ask, that he'd actually had to force himself to put his phone down and not message like a fucking schoolgirl with a crush, told Grady that he needed to cut this off before it got worse.

Before he and Mal had moved in together, they hadn't spent every second texting, and he'd never obsessed over what Mal was doing. They hung out when they had time, and wanted to, and occasionally Mal would send a weird meme. But they didn't spend every moment together that they weren't working. They didn't text through the day. And Grady did not have wet dreams about him. And they had actually been dating.

He definitely needed to nip this in the bud before he did something stupid like get feelings for a straight man. Grady was a lot of things, but a moron wasn't one of them. It spelled disaster, and he had enough of those right now. Mal cheating, when he'd known about Grady's past, had showed Grady that trust was a precious commodity, and finding it wasn't worth the effort or heartache.

He would be careful about how often he responded to Lake and how often they hung out. And there would be no more sleepovers. And no more date rescues.

Grady nodded to himself as he unlocked his front door. It was a solid plan, and he felt better about having made it even if his chest ached a little at the thought of seeing Lake less often.

He froze, registering there was noise coming from the lounge. He unclipped the flap on his gun holster and curled his fingers around the grip as he slowly made his way through. The door had been locked and hadn't been tampered with. His backyard was secure, and someone would have to be keen as fuck to find a way over the fence. If someone were that eager, they wouldn't stick around, and they definitely wouldn't have turned the TV on. Amateurs would have picked an easier target.

He deflated when he noticed the familiar head resting on a pillow. "Lake?" How had he even gotten inside?

When Lake didn't respond, Grady moved closer, clipping his gun back into place. The smaller man was curled up on his side, mouth open, with one arm under the cushion and the other hanging over the side. The TV was on low, some late-night movie playing in black and white. Noodle Box takeout boxes were littered across the coffee table, only one open and half empty. The Shinobu Koshi-No whiskey that Lake was a fan of was next to it, with two glasses. It looked like both glasses had been used, which made Grady's mouth quirk up.

He crouched in front of Lake and couldn't resist brushing his hair from his forehead. It wasn't long enough to get in his eyes, so it didn't need moving, but Grady did it anyway. "Lake, buddy, you gotta wake up. Time to go home." Not ten minutes ago, he'd told himself that he was going to put distance between them. Another sleepover was not what he'd had in mind.

Lake's forehead wrinkled, and he made a noise as he curled further into the cushion, still sound asleep. The level of trust that would take, especially considering that Lake was first and foremost a soldier, made Grady's heart skip a beat. How had Lake gotten under his ribs so easily, so quickly? He had to stop it now.

Something in Grady's heart clenched as he watched the soft rise and fall of Lake's chest. "Jesus Christ," he breathed out. There went all his good intentions, in the blink of an eye. What the hell was this man doing to him?

Grady should have shaken him, forced him to wake up. Packed him into an Uber and on his way home. He assumed that's how he'd gotten there since his car wasn't out front. Hell, he should have just driven the guy home himself. Anything to get him out of his house so he could find a way to un-bury him from under his ribcage. This was the last thing he needed. It wouldn't even be a potential heartbreak; it was guaranteed. Lake could never look at him the way he looked at Lake, and he needed to put an end to it.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Instead of all the things he knew he should do, what he needed to do, he carefully slid his arms under Lake's back and his legs and lifted him into his arms. Lake wasn't a lightweight—he wasn't as big as Grady, but he wasn't a small guy, and he was solid muscle—and Grady had to shift to get him into a comfortable position that wasn't going to fuck his back or risk dropping him.

Lake murmured something under his breath but still didn't wake as Grady carried him into his bedroom. He was glad that making the bed first thing in the morning wasn't one of the things that he did, and that Lake hadn't done it himself when he'd left, so it was easy to slip Lake under the sheets since half of them were kicked to one side.

He managed to strip Lake down to his briefs. Lake woke for a fraction of a second, smiled sleepily at Grady, and then went straight back to sleep, and Grady wasn't going to think about what that did to his heart. This was bad enough as it was.

Grady took his time cleaning up the mess in the living room and drinking a glass of water at his kitchen counter. He wanted a stiff drink, but alcohol wouldn't do anything but make this so much worse.

What was the fuck was he doing?

Three times now he had woken to Lake in his bed. Four if he counted that night in Lake's bed. Grady wondered if counting was healthy or not. This time Lake had a firm hold on him, and there was no way he was getting out of bed without waking him. Part of him didn't want to move anyway—the deep part of himself that was a flame he was constantly trying to snuff out. Lake had curled down and had his cheek

resting on Grady's stomach, turned away from Grady. One hand was resting below his chin, and the other was settled on Grady's thigh. Both hands were way too close to his morning wood.

He willed it to go down—a futile effort at the best of times—and tried to slowly inch his way out from under the snuggle monster. Lake shifted, and the hand on Grady's thigh tightened, and Grady had to swallow back the noise that was attempting to make its way up his throat.

He was saved from having to work out how the fuck to get out of this with his dignity intact when his alarm went off, and Lake jerked up into a sitting position with half-lidded eyes and messy hair. “Hu-what?”

Grady licked his lips at the sight that Lake presented him with. Bed hair, slick lips from where he'd been drooling—which shouldn't have been attractive, but Grady was beginning to resign himself to the fact that basically anything Lake did was attractive to him—and lines on his cheek from Grady's shirt. The thin chain necklace he wore most days was resting just below his collarbone. Sometimes Lake would start fiddling with it when they were watching TV, before he put it in his mouth to suck on. Grady'd had to excuse himself a few times to calm down in the kitchen and distract himself by putting some kind of food together before he could rejoin him.

“My alarm,” Grady explained.

Lake deflated and then scratched his chest absently. “Damn. What time is it?”

“Five.”

Lake raised a fist to his mouth as he yawned. “You're crazy, you know that?” At least that's what Grady thought he'd said since half of it had been a garbled mess.

“I’ve been told something like that,” Grady said with a grin.

Lake flopped onto his back with a groan. “It’s too early.”

“If you have a problem with what time I get up, you could try sleeping in your own bed.”

Lake snorted and turned on his side, smiling broadly at Grady as he braced his cheek on the back of one hand. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“How did you even get inside last night?” Grady asked.

Lake blinked a few times before saying, “Oh. Key was taped to your front door with a note from your ex. I wanted to ram it down his throat because what a dick move, seriously, but I figured using it to open the door was probably more appropriate.”

“I appreciate your restraint,” Grady murmured, trying to breathe through the strange lump in his throat. Lake had a particular bee in his bonnet about Mal, which Grady tried not to think too hard about. Just remembering the way that Lake had stood up to Mal made his already hard dick twitch. He subtly sat up, curling in a little to try and hide it as he turned his back on Lake and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “You can keep the key,” he found himself saying.

“Yeah?” Lake asked brightly.

Grady didn’t bother responding to that. If he hadn’t meant it, he wouldn’t have said it, even though he shouldn’t have said it in the first place. At some point, he was sure this entire thing was going to blow up in his face. But he figured, how much worse could it get, really?

“Don’t break anything while I shower,” he muttered, grabbing some underwear from

a drawer before leaving the room.

“No promises!” Lake called out. “Are you going to feed me if I behave?”

Grady wasn't answering that either. As if Grady hadn't been feeding him almost every time they hung out. He must work out a lot during the day to work off the kind of food he devoured. And that was something that Grady wasn't going to spend anytime thinking about. He closed the door on it in his mind at the same time he closed the bathroom door.

Lake scratched his light stubble as he flipped through the paperwork on the clipboard. It all looked pretty good, and despite the niggling in the back of his mind that said something was still wrong with it, he didn't have any reason to say no. If he was called in front of his CO and asked why he'd said no, he wouldn't be able to give a concrete answer. He hated when that happened, especially because he knew his instincts were on point and had gotten him far in his military career.

He looked up at where his aircrewman was waiting expectantly. He sighed and handed the clipboard over. “Looks in order; you can put it back in rotation.” He held up a hand before his soldier could duck away. “Uh, let's keep it for short flights for now, okay? Anything three hours or under. For two weeks, and then we'll check her over again.”

“You got it. Thank you, sir.”

He'd only taken two steps into the hangar when Zach appeared out of nowhere, blocking his path.

“Hello,” Lake said, trying to go around him. Zach moved with him, not allowing him to pass.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Don’t ‘hello’ me,” Zach said, scowling at him.

Lake blinked. It was only just after midday, and he didn’t think he’d done anything—today, at least—to warrant that. “... Un-hello?”

“Today is Friday.”

That was not what Lake had expected him to say. He hadn’t had expectations, but that also hadn’t been one of them. “It is. Thanks?” He moved around Zach, heading towards the carpark. He needed some food and hadn’t brought anything from home, so canteen it was. “I could have checked on my phone, but I appreciate the reminder.” He didn’t think that deserved the dark look he was getting, but Zach could be moody, so Lake figured he was just grumpy about something random someone did to him, or a piece of machinery that wouldn’t work, or a spanner that had looked at him wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“Yesterday was Thursday.”

Lake grinned. “Are you sure? I don’t think Thursday is before Friday. You’re thinking of Tuesday.” He slapped Zach on the chest. “Good to know your education hasn’t been a total waste.”

He detoured into the small side room that held all the keys to the cars that were assigned to the building, stacks of paperwork that Lake knew weren’t supposed to be there, some chocolate bars for last-minute snacks—he slipped one in his pocket—and a chair that was gathering cobwebs.

“We have dinner together on Thursdays.”

Ah. The scowl made more sense now. “I was busy,” Lake said defensively as he grabbed the keys for one of the Rovers. His hackles were rising because he already knew where this was going, and he already knew that he was in the wrong, and so Zach could just fuck off. “I messaged and told you I couldn’t make it.”

“What were you doing that was so important?”

Damn. “Hanging out with my new friend and having weird thoughts about a New Year’s Eve kiss” was probably not the right answer. “I was just...” He trailed off. Then sighed. There was no use trying to dance around it since he’d been cornered now. He’d been trying to be subtle about it, but Zach wasn’t great at subtle. Okay, and maybe Lake wasn’t all that great at it either. At least he’d been trying. “I’m trying to give you space.”

“Give who space?” Zach asked.

When Lake climbed into the Rover, Zach was right there beside him, giving him that look that Lake knew meant he was not getting off the hook. Which was rude because his explanation had been perfectly understandable, and there was no need for follow-up questions. Just for that, he was making Zach buy lunch.

“Who, Lake?”

Lake started the Rover and reversed one-handed, his other hand on the gear. “You, Felix, and Avery. But you already knew that, so I don’t know why you asked. Anyway, it’s so, you know, you can do your whole domestic thing.”

“Domestic thing,” Zach said flatly. “What does that have to do with our Thursday dinner? That’s without mentioning all the invites you’ve said no to with flimsy

excuses that a light breeze would knock over for the last almost three months, Lake. Felix said we should give you time, but I spent years waiting for Avery, and I'm not doing it with this too."

"I'm not interested in sleeping with you, man, sorry." Lake tried to laugh it off and grin, but Zach wasn't having a bar of it.

"Why don't you want to hang out with us anymore? Did you get a girlfriend?"

Lake snorted as he switched gears. "You already know I didn't, since you set me up with that she-tiger."

"I already apologised for that. I told you that she was a friend of a friend, and I'd never met her before."

"Which begs the question why you would set her up with me if you didn't even know her?"

"She came highly recommended."

"It sounds like you're referring me to a specialist," Lake said. "I don't need help to find dates."

"You were lonely, so I figured she could help cheer you up." Zach made a jerking motion with his hand, and Lake flipped him off.

"She was a nightmare, Zach. I have never been so turned off in my life." Lake had been on plenty of lovely dates with funny, friendly women that he had a great time with. Sometimes they even ended up at one of their places afterwards, and sometimes they spent weeks just enjoying each other's company, with or without sex. Marlie had been none of those things, and if he never saw her again, it would be too soon.

“Stop changing the subject. I said I was sorry, we moved on. You got rescued by your cop anyway.”

“That’s not the point at all.” Warmth spread across Lake as he remembered how confident Grady had looked striding across the restaurant and how quickly he’d steered the conversation and gotten him out of the situation.

“You could have called us, like you normally would have. We would have rescued you,” Zach said.

“I appreciate that.”

Zach sighed. “Lake, why are you avoiding us?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“I talk to you every day?” If he was trying to avoid them, he would have been a bit sneakier than that. There were plenty of places to hide on base if he’d wanted to play hide-and-go-seek with them.

“You talk to us about work and about that fucking bird that’s got a bee up your bonnet and that I’m fuckingsick of looking at.”

“There’s something wrong with it.” Lake was still sure of it, and he was frustrated as fuck that no one could find anything. They’d had six engineers look at it, including Zach... a few times. A few more times than a few times.

There wasn’t anything there, and Lake needed to move on. Especially since he was pretty sure the engineers had put his face on a dartboard and were using it to practice on. If he asked again, they might think about using his actual face, and he happened to like his face.

“Lake.”

The tone was severe, and Lake kept his gaze ahead, not turning to look at the face he knew Zach was making at him.

“Stop deflecting.”

Lake pulled into the closest park to the canteen. He turned off the Rover but didn’t get out. “You’ve wanted this for a really long time, and I didn’t want to get in the way.”

“That’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard you say, and I still remember the time in eighth grade, when you told the teacher that it was the war with the apes that wiped out the dinosaurs. And argued with her for a whole hour because you’d seen it in a movie. Which, by the way, was not even the movie; you’d fallen asleep halfway through and dreamed up the rest of it.”

“You needed to bond and whatever,” Lake said adamantly. There was no evidence to say his theory was wrong. Maybe a little bit, but not enough that there wasn’t some wiggle room. And she was the one who’d gotten so riled up that she’d spent the entire period trying to convince him that he was wrong. She should have known better, after having him in class all year.

“We’ve been doing plenty of bonding, trust me.”

“Eww.” If they were moving into sex territory, Lake wasn’t going to participate, because one third of his triad was Lake’s brother, and just no. It was one thing to accidentally walk in on your two best friends getting it on because they were horndogs who couldn’t keep it in their pants—sometimes on purpose if he wanted something and they were taking too long—but it was another entirely for it to be his brother in the mix. Nope. Not a thought he was ever going anywhere near. Whatever they did behind closed doors was not his business, and he did not want to know about it.

“That’s separate from our friendship, Lake. We’ve been friends for way too fucking long for you to pull this bullshit. You’re important to me and to Felix. And to Avery, I guess, if you like your siblings. Weird, but you do you.”

“I’m telling Tyler you don’t like him,” Lake said, mentioning Zach’s older brother and fellow soldier. Scary fellow soldier.

“His husband likes me, so I’m safe.”

Tyler, said scary fellow soldier, had married Peyton and Danny's brother, Lucas, a sunshine firefighter, which sounded strange until the two of them were in the same room, and then it made complete sense.

"One day that won't work for you," Lake warned him.

"You and Felix will protect me," Zach said cheekily. Then his face turned serious. "I don't know why you thought you had to put distance between us, or why you thought we needed to be left alone—okay, when we're getting naked, I get that—but we miss you, man."

"All right, I'm sorry. Can we do Thursday night tonight?" Lake asked hopefully.

"If Tuesday is actually before Friday, and Thursday is after Monday, then what day are we actually re-doing?"

"Don't hurt my brain like that, nerd. Go break that code on your own time," Lake said, shoving him playfully.

Zach wrapped an arm around Lake's shoulders and squeezed. "I'll bring in a chart tomorrow."

God, he probably would. Lake knew better than to give him fuel to geek out.

"Tonight?" Lake asked, pushing open the canteen door and moving into the lovely air-conditioned room.

"Sounds good to me. You can bring the food since it was your fault that we missed it."

That was both a fair and unfair statement. Getting takeout on a Friday night was a

nightmare because everyone was lazy on a Friday. Cooking would be a disaster for everyone involved even if maybe he'd gained some basic-ish skills from Grady, who refused to allow him to just sit and watch and instead forced him to actively participate in the making of all the food they ate.

“So, what have you been doing? You're not good on your own.”

Lake fell into step beside the soldiers in line and scowled at Zach. “You don't have to say it like that.” He shrugged, tugging on the hem of his camo jacket. “I've been hanging out with Grady.”

Zach smirked. “The cop that rescued you from the date from hell? Is that the same guy you spent the night with on New Year's Eve?”

“You made that sound dirty on purpose.”

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“I didn’t need to make it sound dirty; it did that all by itself. You shared a bed, didn’t you?”

“You and I have shared a bed too; don’t get excited,” Lake said. The fact that sharing a bed with Grady was somehow completely different and comforting in an entirely new way wasn’t something he wanted to discuss. Or the fact he’d done it more since then.

Zach laughed. “I’ll try to contain myself. You’re still hanging out with him, though? He seemed a little grumpy for you.”

“I’m friends with you, aren’t I?”

“I am a ray of sunshine, Lake. There’s no need to bring dirty lies into this conversation.”

“He’s actually...” A great listener, an incredible cook. He had a surprisingly witty sense of humour, and when he got “grumpy” at something, it was for a genuine reason and usually involved not appreciating when the small people got stepped on. Or when they were watching reality TV shows, which Grady was surprisingly into. Lake had never been into them before, but Grady’s response to everything was so on point he made the entire experience the best thing ever. Lake had never met anyone quite like him. Hardened and yet soft.

“Lake?”

Lake turned to Zach, who was looking at him weirdly. “What?”

“You’re making a... face. Are you—do you...” Zach trailed off and tilted his head curiously. “Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked.

“... No?” Like what? What face had he been making? “I made a new friend. He makes me food.”

Zach laughed so loud some of the other soldiers glanced at him. Once they noticed who it was, they went back to whatever they were doing. “That explains a lot.”

“I would resent that remark if it weren’t true. But also, he’s just a really great guy.” Why was Zach making it sound weird that he’d made a new friend? He made friends all the time. He was good at making adult friends!

“And there’s nothing else you want to tell me?”

Lake mimicked Zach’s “the fuck” face because the fuck? “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said honestly.

They both ordered chicken schnitzel burgers and a side salad before finding a spare place in the bustling room. He snapped a quick picture and sent it to Grady with the message, “Better than yours. Check yes or no.”

Grady didn’t always reply straight away if he was busy or at a crime scene—which was kind of cool to think about—so Lake wasn’t expecting a response. When it came through only a few seconds later, he couldn’t help the way his insides lit up, and he smiled as he flicked his screen on.

There was no text, just a picture of a mug that most likely had coffee in it, a pink-iced donut with sprinkles, and a plain white takeout box filled with some kind of noodles. In the corner of the picture was the edge of someone standing at a counter and a fridge that had sticky notes all over it. Lake had to assume it was the break room at

the station.

Lake: They look good, but nothing beats a good burger.

Grady: We can agree to disagree.

Lake: I'm going to Zach and Felix's for dinner, but can we make burgers for dinner tomorrow night?

Grady: What if I want noodles?

Lake: I'll fight you for it.

He sent a GIF with sumo wrestlers in it.

Grady: My sumo suit is at the dry cleaners, which is a real shame. Burgers it is.

Lake: I'll bring some fresh buns!

"That your cop?" Zach asked.

Zach's face was speculative again, and Lake frowned. "Yes, why?"

"No reason. You'll figure it out."

Lake had no idea what Zach was talking about, so he didn't bother asking. Zach didn't have a lot of patience; if it was important, he'd blurt it out. He just picked up his burger and took a bite out of it, smiling as he thought about the next night's dinner plans.

Grady wished he knew how to swear in more than one language. He'd check out some

apps later because it was clearly an oversight on his part. Maybe Lake knew another language.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Considering that it was Valentine's Day, and his love life had been in the fucking toilet since he'd caught his boyfriend in bed with another man, his day had already been bad from the moment he'd opened his eyes. It was mid-afternoon now, and he could say with some accuracy that it was only getting worse. Grady was so fucking over the entire day and wanted it to be the end of his workday already so he could go home, drink his weight in whiskey, and pass out on his couch. He wished he could have just skipped the whole day altogether.

Quinn, who was safe and out of the way of the fuckingsludge on the clean grass embankment, was staring with blatant amusement. Of course he was amused. He wasn't down here in the fuckingriverthat should have been called a swamp. It was the last month of summer, and the heat was still heavy, so it wasn't as full as it should have been, which was probably why the idiot perp thought he could get across. Grady was now up to his fucking calves in mud, the water a murky brown. There was also a weird smell, and Grady wasn't interested in knowing what it was. The less he knew right then, the better, because he was already fuckingpissed. He wasn't even going to try to wash these slacks. They were going straight into the fucking trash when he got home. Not even in the inside one. Straight to the wheelie bin. Wrapped in black trash bags. Three or four of them.

"What the fuck did you think you were going to do, jumping in here?" Grady growled at his perp as he shoved him up the embankment. The fuckingteenagerhad been caught red-handed shoplifting because Grady had the worst fucking luck, and the servo they'd stopped at to fuel their car and grab a quick bite to eat just happened to be where the teenager had decided would be a good place to rob. The idiot had had no idea that a fucking cop had been standing in sight of him when he'd tried to discreetly shovel some packets of chips, pre-made sandwiches, chocolate hearts, and a whole

bouquet of flowers into his ratty backpack. He wasn't half as subtle as he thought he was. And a Mars bar had slipped out of a hole at the bottom.

Quinn was ready at the top of the incline with cuffs, and once he was secure, they sat the surly teenager on a nearby bench. "What were you doing?" Quinn asked him.

"The fuck did it look like I was doing?" the kid snarled. "These are too tight."

"They're fine," Grady said. He might have believed that if he'd put the cuffs on the kid, but since it had been Quinn, there was no way they were done up too tight. He was a soft touch, especially in comparison to Grady. "It looked to me like you were asking to go to juvie. Know what happens to kids that go to juvie?" Grady asked.

"If you're trying to scare me, you can fuck off," was the eloquent response.

"The surprise is that it's not even about juvie," Grady continued, ignoring the rude remark. "It's about what happens when you get out. Suddenly, you're a pariah. People that used to smile at you will look at you like you stepped in dog shit. Your school might have to accept you back, but it won't be the same. Your social life is basically gone. Oh, well, you'll make some new acquaintances." Grady crouched in front of him. "I'd be careful about calling them friends. Because one day, you'll be lying in a ditch somewhere." Grady touched the corner of his mouth. "Bit of frothing at the mouth. Dead."

If anything, the teenager's scowl deepened, something dark, angry, and somehow sad flashing in his brown eyes. "Joke's on you, pig. I don't have any friends or family. If I die in a ditch, they'll roll me into an unmarked grave and say good riddance. So I don't give a fuck what you do to me."

Grady turned to Quinn because being soft and caring wasn't part of Grady's makeup. It was Quinn's turn now. Especially because somewhere in that speech had been a lie;

Grady just couldn't work out which part. Most of it was self-deprecating bullshit.

"What's your name?" Quinn asked, his brows drawn together as he studied the young teen.

"It's 'bite me.'"

"Not very inventive. Your parents couldn't Google 'baby names'?" Grady asked. He wanted to ask where the kids' parents were and what he meant by having no family. It could be a teenager being dramatic, but instinct told Grady that wasn't the case here. And if he was right, then this needed to be handed off to people more qualified to deal with this kind of thing than them. Was the kid homeless, in foster care, something else?

"They couldn't be bothered wasting the effort," the teen sneered.

Grady resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He didn't have the patience needed to deal with teenage theatrics. "It's up to us whether you get charged or not, and since you can't even give us the courtesy of a name..." He trailed off, giving a shrug. "How about we read you your rights and go from there?"

"No, wait," the kid said, something like wariness finally appearing in his eyes. "It's Riley."

"What's Riley?" Quinn asked, frowning.

Grady shared a look with his partner. Was the kid talking about their boss? How the fuck would he even know him?

"My name, idiot."

Grady shared another look with Quinn. At this point in their career and how long they'd been partnered, they didn't need speech to communicate. Grady could clearly read Quinn's every expression. "And your last name?" he asked Riley.

Riley took a deep sigh, like he was in pain. "It doesn't matter what it is. You can't call my parents. I already told you I don't have any fucking family."

"Language," Quinn admonished quietly.

"Why don't you give us a little background?" Grady suggested. "Where are your parents?"

"I just said I don't fucking have any, moron."

"Unlike Quinn, most people are born from two parents, not picked out of a cabbage patch. Try again."

"They're dead, okay? I get shuffled around foster homes. Idiot foster parents don't care where I am. A joke even calling them that."

Jesus Christ. It was like they were looking at what their boss Riley could have become if he hadn't been adopted by the Sinclairs. Grady rubbed his forehead, wondering what the fuck they were going to do with the kid. The little shit had called his bluff. They wouldn't arrest and charge someone for such a petty crime, not at his age—he couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen, though it was hard to tell sometimes—unless he was a repeat offender. They'd check his records, but Grady doubted they would have much in them. Riley had the eyes of someone dealt a shit hand and who was angry at the world, not someone born cruel.

"And why were you shoplifting? Are they not feeding you enough?"

Riley shrugged, and Grady knew if his hands weren't cuffed behind his back that he'd be stuffing them in his pockets. "I don't like being there, so I don't stay there. Simple."

"Where do you stay?"

“None of your fucking business.”

“You still haven’t told us why you were shoplifting,” Grady said. “For fun? Get your rocks off like that? Looking to venture into a life of crime? Just so you know, it’s not as lucrative as you’d think.”

Riley glared. “It was for my boyfriend,” he said through gritted teeth. The defiance in his gaze told Grady exactly how Riley thought they would respond to that. At least it explained why he’d lied about no-one caring about him; he’d been trying to protect someone.

And the flowers made more sense now, too. Romantic, Grady supposed, if incredibly misguided.

Quinn sighed. He gestured with his head for them to talk privately.

Grady scowled at the kid. “Don’t move.” Not that he was going anywhere until they uncuffed him.

“Yes, sir,” Riley said sarcastically.

“What do you think?” Quinn asked when they were out of earshot.

“I think he has a smart mouth.” Grady shrugged, shoving one hand in the pocket of his slacks. “But he’s obviously had some negative reactions to his sexuality, and it makes me want to punch someone in the mouth. I also don’t think arresting him is going to do anything but turn that cynicism into real anger. And then we have a real

criminal on our hands instead of a harmless delinquent. I think we have enough of those in the city.”

“And you just want to send him back to foster parents that don’t even know he’s not in school and trying to shoplift at a servo?” Quinn asked. He looked like he’d prefer to arrest the foster parents more than the kid. Grady understood. Negligence was unacceptable, regardless of the role a person plays in a child’s life. Adults were supposed to protect them, always.

“He said he doesn’t spend a lot of time there,” Grady pointed out. “Maybe he stays at his boyfriend’s a lot? I’d like to get some details about who that is. If someone is preying on the kid, then maybe I’ll get to arrest someone today.”

“You can fill your quota another time,” Quinn said with a small smirk. “We’ll take him back to the station, get some more details about his foster parents, his boyfriend, and his school, and then go from there.”

“All right, sounds good to me.” It wasn’t like he had anything better to do. His whiskey could wait another few hours. It wasn’t going anywhere.

Riley was glaring sullenly when Grady returned to him. The glare didn’t disappear, but it did lessen when Grady uncuffed him.

“You’re taking a trip with us,” Grady told him, keeping a firm grip on his arm. If he had to engage in a chase with the twerp again, he was going to be in an even worse mood. No one wanted that.

“I’m under arrest,” Riley said snidely, his eyes going flat.

“No,” Quinn said. “You can use the showers at the precinct to clean up, and then we just want to have a chat with you.”

“About what?”

“One thing at a time,” Quinn said wryly.

“And—” Grady cut off when his phone rang in his pocket. He frowned when he saw Gideon’s name flash up on the screen. “It’s Gid. Give me a second.”

He walked far enough away from them so he couldn’t be overheard and answered it with a barked out, “What?”

“Chill, Grady, you’re gonna hurt yourself.”

“Gideon, I’m kind of in the middle of something, so if this isn’t—”

“I’m on the scene of a car accident,” Gideon began.

“So deal with it?” Grady snapped. “Quinn and I have our own shit right now.” He fuckingstankof whatever the fuck had been in that dirty water. He wanted a shower and to sort out what the fuck they were going to do with the surly teenager.

“Look, it’s bad, but no one was hurt, and the ambulance has been and gone. Now we’re just dealing with the usual bullshit and waiting for a tow truck. But I need you to get down here.”

Grady glanced at where Quinn was quietly talking to Riley, who was still looking surly, but at least not like he wanted to bolt anymore. He didn’t have that twitchy look in his eyes that warned of an impending runner.

“Why?”

“The guy that came in with your shirt just after New Year’s? What was his name?”

River? Ocean?”

Grady froze, his heart jumping into his throat. “Lake?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“How do you getOceanfromLake?” Grady asked. “That’s not even a name!” He shook himself. If he got caught up in semantics with Gideon, he could be there for a while. “What about him, Gid?”

“He’s fine,” Gideon said hastily. “Like I said. Just extremely fucking lucky. You have no idea. But there isn’t a scratch on him. I asked him if he had someone to come and get him, or if he wanted me to call him a taxi, and he said he wanted you.”

“Why didn’t he call me himself?”

“His phone was in the passenger seat, and it got crushed.”

Crushed.Grady gripped his phone tighter. Gideon had said Lake hadn’t been hurt, but using the wordcrushedwas not making Grady feel better.

Gideon gave him an address that was only roughly fifteen minutes from them, thank fuck. He didn’t ask why Lake was asking for him and not someone else, because it didn’t matter. “I’m on my way.”

Quinn tilted his head in question as Grady approached. “Everything okay?”

“I need to go. Lake was in an accident. I’ll drop you off at the station on my way”—luckily it was on the way, otherwise he would have been asking Quinn to call someone to come get him—“and then I’ll go.”

“Of course. Is he okay?”

“Gideon says he is.”

“Can I just go, then? You guys look busy,” Riley said hopefully.

“Don’t even think about it,” Grady said. “Get in the car, keep your head down, and shut up.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a bossy motherfucker?”

“Watch your language,” Quinn said.

Grady snorted as he opened the passenger door and gestured for Riley to get in.

“You’re driving in style today, kid.”

“Right.” He didn’t look like he believed a word of that. Grady might have been offended if he’d cared enough. He was a great driver. It was a good thing he didn’t care about other people’s opinions.

“Seatbelt,” Quinn threw to the backseat as he did his own up.

“Yes, mum,” Riley said sarcastically. “I know how cars work.”

“Are you still talking to Lake?” Quinn asked as Grady guided them back onto the road.

“So?”

“It was just a question; no need to get snippy. I thought he was—”

“He is. We’re just friends,” Grady said. He hadn’t had a lot of “normal” friends, so he had no idea if what they were doing was a regular kind of friendship. Constant texting, seeing each other more nights than not, and Lake taking up half his bed on those nights, but he wasn’t going to ask Quinn about it. And especially not in front of the punk in the back seat.

Quinn turned in his seat to better face Riley. “What school do you go to?”

“Bite me high.”

“Matches your name,” Grady said lightly, glancing in the rear-view mirror.

Riley crossed his arms over his chest with a huff and stared out the window, a tightness to his jaw that Grady knew Quinn interpreted the same way he did: they weren’t getting anything else out of him for the car ride.

The car doors had barely closed behind Quinn and Riley before Grady was on the road again, calculating the quickest route to Lake’s location.

Lake tapped his toe impatiently and gripped the bottom of his camo top to stop his hands from curling into fists and planting one in the asshole that was trying to get in his face. The guy that had fucking T-boned his car was pretty mouthy for someone who was in the wrong and had almost killed someone.

“You think that uniform means you get to drive however you want?” the guy spat at him.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Detective Senior Constable Angela Thomas, one of the two detectives that had arrived at the scene and that Lake recognised from that day weeks ago when he had gone to the station that Grady worked at, gave the guy a stern look. “Mr Dixon, if you can’t calm down, I will be forced to cuff you.”

Dixon pointed aggressively at Lake. “They get away with whatever they want!”

“You ran into me!” Lake protested. What the fuck? Lake wasn’t generally someone to brag, because he believed that actions spoke louder than words, but he was one of, if not the best drivers that he knew. If it had an engine, he could drive it and with skill. He hadn’t done anything wrong, and the asshole had come out of nowhere. If anyone needed a lesson on proper road etiquette, it wasn’t Lake.

Detective Senior Constable Gideon Clark, the second detective and the one that had been calling Grady for Lake, came back from where he’d been standing by his car. “He’s on his way,” he told Lake. “Everyone playing nice?”

“Soldiers don’t play nice,” Dixon spat.

Lake resisted the urge to roll his eyes. It’s not like it was the first time he’d had someone come at him because of the uniform, but he’d just narrowly survived being crushed because the wanker couldn’t drive properly. He had no desire to stand around and listen to this bullshit. He hoped that Grady was close by.

Lake tuned the guy’s growling out and twisted to give Detective Clark a wry smile. “Just out of curiosity, if you witnessed someone getting assaulted—punched in their loud mouth, just for an example—what kind of sentence are we talking about? Five to

life? A couple of nights in the drunk tank? Community service?” He could clean up a few parks in exchange for the satisfaction.

Detective Clark’s answering grin was infectious. He leaned forward conspiratorially. “If someone gets punched,” he said, his eyes glancing towards where Detective Thomas was barking at the guy to sit the fuck down, “I didn’t see anything. Did you?”

“Not a thing,” Lake said.

The tow truck arrived before Grady did. It at least occupied Dixon enough while he told the truck driver off for being reckless with how he was loading his car. Someone needed to take a chill pill, but it wasn’t being directed at Lake anymore, which he was grateful for.

Lake picked at his cuticles as he waited, no idea what to do with his hands. He wasn’t good at idle, and he didn’t have his phone to fiddle with while he waited. He’d have to get another one, which was a pain in the ass. He’d need to get his number transferred because he wasn’t going to spend the next eight years remembering a new one or having to remember to give it out to everyone he had ever met throughout his entire life.

A sleek black Toyota Camry pulled up behind the metallic sky-blue Kia Sorento that Detective Clark and Detective Thomas had arrived in. Lake didn’t recognise it, but he certainly recognised the man that stepped out of it.

Lake’s heart skipped a beat as he watched Grady stride confidently towards him. He was wearing a black-suit-on-a-white-shirt ensemble, a thick black belt around his waist, the metal buckle gleaming in the sun. He was a bigger guy, not muscle-junkie level, but solid, and the suit really worked for him, tight in all the right places. His long, thick legs closed the space between them quickly.

Grady stopped just short of him, ignoring everyone around them as his eyes darted over Lake's frame in a way that made Lake feel warm all over. Safe, protected.

"Are you all right?" Grady asked, his voice low and throaty.

It was only when he was staring into Grady's warm olive-green gaze that the reality of what had just happened really hit him. Half his car was a crumpled mess. If he'd been in the car with someone else, if Avery had been in the car with him, Avery wouldn't have made it. He'd been upset his phone hadn't made it, but that was nothing in comparison to the life of a person he cared about. His brother, his best friends, his brothers-in-arms. He dealt with that reality at work, especially during messy deployments, but not at home. Not like this.

He surged forward, barrelling into Grady's chest. Grady's arms circled him immediately, enclosing him like a cocoon, one large hand splayed across his back and the other wrapped around his nape, supporting it as Lake rested his cheek against Grady's beating heart. He didn't know if it was running fast, or if Lake was projecting his own heartbeat.

If his hands trembled a little as his fingers curled around Grady's belt, Grady didn't mention it, and Lake was grateful for that.

Grady's hand slid up from his nape to curl into his hair, and Lake could have sworn lips pressed against the top of his head, but he couldn't be sure. He was too focused on the warmth holding him up.

"I'm okay," he said, his voice muffled against Grady's chest. He wasn't sure if he was saying it to himself or to Grady. Maybe both of them.

"What happened?"

“Some asshole ran a red light, came out of fucking nowhere.” He swallowed down his anger. Careless drivers caused so many unnecessary accidents on the road. There hadn’t been any casualties this time, but more often than not there were. Innocent people who never made it home because someone thought they were more important than the road rules.

A growl rumbled up from Grady’s chest, and Lake felt it against his cheek. He didn’t know why it calmed him, made him feel better.

And then the smell hit his nose.

He blinked, wrinkled his nose, and then pulled back enough to look up at Grady. “Why do you smell like you’ve been swimming in sewerage?” he asked. He’d been so one minded, so intent on taking what comfort he could from the big man in front of him, that his brain hadn’t caught up with that god-awful stench.

“I probably have,” Grady said gruffly.

“And you let me touch you?” Lake asked incredulously. He gave Grady a once-over, and the dirt marks on the bottom half of his pants suddenly stood out in a way they hadn’t when he’d been walking toward Lake. “You ruined your suit.” Which was a shame because he filled it out so well.

“You touched me,” Grady pointed out.

They were still touching, and despite the smell, Lake wasn’t inclined to move. He didn’t know if Grady knew that he was massaging his fingers into the back of Lake’s head, but he wasn’t going to bring it up in case it stopped, which would have been a sadness Lake wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“You’re in the Army,” Grady continued. “You’ve never waded in muck?” He was

definitely laughing at Lake now, the curve of his mouth strangely distracting.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Okay, while that might be true, it does not absolve you of this heinous crime. What were you even doing?” Lake asked, grimacing for effect. It wasn’t that bad, really. Lake had definitely found himself in places that smelled far worse. It didn’t make it better.

“Fishing a child out of a river.”

“Well, that was more heroic than I was expecting.”

“It wasn’t heroic at all. A shoplifting young teenager decided that crossing a river that was more sludge than water would help him get away. We didn’t formally arrest him, but Quinn is with him at the station now, and hopefully by the time he leaves, he’ll have learned his lesson.”

“You lead an interesting life, Grady Donehue,” Lake said, smiling broadly. Lake wasn’t easily upset, but when he was, it was hard sometimes for him to pull himself out of that. Grady made it so effortless for him. Like he knew that when his detective was near, nothing was going to hurt him, nothing could sneak up behind him and catch him unawares.

“Grady,” Detective Clark said loudly, joining them and slapping Grady on the back. “Glad you could make it!” His upper lip curled. “You smell like a toilet,” he said with a laugh.

“Fuck off,” Grady said automatically. “Do you need Lake for anything more?”

“Nah, we got his statement. And he’ll get us his number when he gets a new

one”—Lake nodded in agreement to the statement, though he wasn’t planning on getting a new number if he could help it, just a new phone—“Unless you want to stick around and—”

“No,” Grady interrupted abruptly. He squinted at something in the distance. “What is Ange doing?”

Detective Clark turned and then grinned at where Detective Thomas had her cuffs dangling menacingly in her hand as she spoke to Dixon. “He’s a mouthy knob,” Gideon said. “She’s just teaching him manners.”

“Did he say something to you?” Grady asked Lake.

“Nothing of any value,” Lake replied. He wondered what Grady would have done if he’d said yes. He was tempted to say it, just to find out. Would he go white knight? Lake would have been lying if he said he didn’t want to see that. Grady would have been the most valiant of knights if he’d been born in medieval times.

Grady looked like he didn’t believe Lake but didn’t comment, instead asking, “Do you have everything you need out of your car?”

Lake nodded mutely. He already had his wallet and house keys. The car keys were still in the ignition, but he didn’t need them. And his phone was unsalvageable, so there was no point. The sim wouldn’t have made it; there was no way. He wouldn’t be able to recover all the numbers he’d had on there, but he could at least get the important ones and slowly start to get the rest over time. It sucked that all his high scores on his apps were gone, but it was a small price to pay. At least it had been his phone and not another person.

“Okay, let’s go. Call me if you need to get a hold of him,” Grady said to Detective Clark.

Detective Clark had a glint in his eye that Lake was curious about as he said, “Will do.”

Lake didn’t get a chance to ask, though, as Grady dragged him away with a firm hand around his elbow.

Grady had left his car on, with the air conditioning running, and it was a nice cool blast to Lake’s face as he slipped into the passenger seat. Even the smell of whatever the fuck Grady had been wading through couldn’t detract from it.

“Could I call my brother?” Lake asked as he strapped himself in and Grady did a U-turn back into traffic that had Lake glancing at the hair on his forearms as the muscles flexed.

Grady pointed to the glovebox. “Phone is in there. Code is 2-4-5-8.”

“That’s next-level trust, Grady. Are you asking me to go steady?” Lake teased.

“If that’s how they do it in your neck of the woods, I can see why you’ve been having such bad luck with dates,” Grady drawled. “Besides, I can change it later.” He cracked open their windows a quarter of the way down as they sped down the road. The fresh air was a balm to the smell that Grady was trying to inflict on them both.

Lake chuckled as he typed in Avery’s number, pressed Send, and then flicked it to Speaker. His brother would be at his shop, but he kept his phone on him, and if he wasn’t busy, he would answer. It was early afternoon, and Lake was pretty sure there was always a lull in there somewhere.

“Hello?” Avery answered tentatively. “If you’re a telemarketer, let me tell you right now you can shove whatever you’re trying to sell right up your—”

Lake barked out a laugh, and Avery cut off. “Damn. I bet you make them cry.”

“They prey on innocent people and try to scam them. I hope I fucking make them cry.” Avery paused. “Why are you calling me on a blocked number? Did you lose your phone again? I’m not coming with you to buy a new one.”

“That’s kind of rude,” Lake said with a grin. “What if I need emotional support?”

“You spent two hours contemplating which one you wanted and then another twenty fucking minutes deciding between colours. You can take your emotional support and stick it the same place the telemarketer could stick whatever they were trying to sell.”

“No one was trying to sell anything,” Lake said, another laugh slipping out. His brother was fun. “It was me, remember? What’s going on? You seem more ornery than usual,” he remarked.

“Did you know?” Avery answered. “That I am the biggest asshole in the entire world because I won’t return something that has been opened, used, and they don’t have a receipt for.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Some people were just born villains,” Lake said. “I told Mum the second you were born that there was something wrong with you. Your face was so wrinkly, and you cried so much it was like watching the episode of *This Is Us* when Jack dies on repeat. What does a baby have to cry about?”

“And you were a perfect baby,” Avery said sharply. Lake could practically hear the eye roll.

“Obviously,” Lake retorted. He’d been the most perfect baby, and why his parents had decided to have another child was beyond him. Why keep going when the pinnacle had been reached?

Grady snorted as he slowed at a set of red lights. Lake stuck his tongue out at him, and Grady raised an eyebrow. Lake glanced down at the way the corner of Grady’s lips curled as he judged the fuck out of Lake.

“Who was that?” Avery asked suspiciously.

“You remember my good friend, Grady,” Lake said.

“The cop,” Avery said. “Guess it explains the blocked phone number. Did you get yourself arrested?”

“That is a rude and unfair question.”

“Are you eloping?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“I’m going down my list of options.”

“And eloping was second?” Lake squawked.

“Have you met yourself?”

“Yes, and I would never elope. Could you imagine? Mum would find me because she’s scarier than a federal agent, with more contacts to boot. Grady and I will have a quaint wedding in the park, thank you very much. The one with the nice pond and those ducks that tried to kill you when you were a kid? They’re my favourite. We’re thinking the first of March.”

“That’s not far away,” Avery mused.

“Sometimes you just know when they’re the one,” Lake replied.

“Did you even send out the invites?”

“Yeah, look for it in the mail.”

“Do I get a say in this?” Grady asked dryly as he tapped the wheel impatiently, waiting for the red light to turn green.

“No,” Lake and Avery said in unison.

“Anyway,” Lake said before they could get any more off topic, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m fine, and that you can’t contact me on my number because I need to get a new phone.”

“So you did lose it.”

“Not... exactly?” He glanced at Grady, but his focus was back on the road as he navigated the busy Sydney streets with ease.

“Why are you saying it like that?” Avery asked sharply.

“A car hit me?” Lake said, his voice elevating a fraction at the end. There wasn’t really any other way to say it except to just say it. Rip that Band-Aid off. Luckily, he was fine, so at least Avery wasn’t getting a call from the hospital or something. Well, it would be from their mum since she was Lake’s emergency contact, but it was all relative. Either way, it wouldn’t have been a fun conversation. Lake was glad they didn’t have to have it.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Avery sounded angry, but Lake knew from experience that it wasn’t directed at Lake.

“You can decide,” Lake said helpfully.

There was a pregnant pause, and then Avery said with pained surprise, “Wait, you were actually in a car accident?”

“Despite the fact that I am clearly the best driver in the whole world, accidents happen. Besides, this one wasn’t my fault.”

“Did you get hurt? Are you at the hospital? Do I need to come and get you?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“No, no, and no,” Lake said, inserting fake cheer into his voice. There was no reason to make Avery worry any more than was needed or to reveal just how shaky he felt about it. He spent hundreds of hours a year thirteen thousand feet in the air doing some death-defying shit, and he’d never once had to crash land or even come close. He’d also never been in a boating accident, or a car accident before today, or any other kind of accident.

He’d prepared for it, of course—emergency training at work was no joke, and they’d replicated crashes so that he was properly instructed on what he needed to do—but this had been different. This had been real. He might have been in uniform, but he hadn’t been thinking with his officer cap. He’d just been him. And the relief he’d felt on seeing Grady coming to rescue him once more had been all Lake.

Avery didn’t need to know that his hands were still shaking slightly, or that all he wanted to do was lean over and grip Grady’s thigh so he could feel the warmth under his palm.

“Lake...”

“I was just calling about the number,” Lake said, trying to convey that he didn’t want to talk about it without actually coming out and saying it. Sibling bonds had to be good for something, right? “You just stay and enjoy your night with Zach and Felix.” He knew that Zach had planned something special for the three of them, and considering it was their first Valentine’s Day together, Lake really didn’t want to fuck it up. Even if he was a little annoyed at Avery because he was a fucking hypocrite.

“Fine,” Avery bit out, though Lake knew that he wasn’t finished with what he wanted

to say. The next time they saw each other, he would have something else unflattering to add.

“Fine,” Lake repeated because he was mature like that.

“Zach wants you to come over for dinner on Friday.”

Lake bit his lip. He tried to temper himself, but the, “Well, then Zach can ask me,” came out snippier than he’d wanted it to. But not snippier than he’d meant, because why the fuck was that message coming through his brother?

Grady glanced at him, and Lake looked away.

“Touchy.”

“I’m not touchy,” Lake said even if he totally was.

“There’s a customer, so I have to go. See you on Friday!”

He was gone before Lake could respond. He stared at the blank phone for a long moment. Grady had a boring wallpaper, some kind of forest landscape that was probably a generic one that came with the phone.

“Lake...” Grady trailed off.

Lake winced. Fuck, he must look pathetic. “Don’t. Please.”

“All right.”

The silence went on for a block before Lake couldn’t take it anymore. He’d never been a fan of silence.

“So,” he said suggestively, wanting to get them back on an even keel. “Your place or mine?”

Grady chuckled as he glanced at Lake. “You don’t have plans for tonight? It is the ‘day of love,’ after all,” he said, sarcasm slipping into his tone.

Lake snorted. He hadn’t ever had a date on Valentine’s Day, even when he’d been dating someone, and he didn’t plan on starting now, unlike some people. Besides that... “I’m taking a hiatus from dating at the moment. I’m still dealing with the trauma from the last one.” He hesitated, not sure he wanted to know, but feeling like he should probably ask anyway. “Do... you have plans? You can just drop me off if you do. It’s no biggie.” It was, but Lake didn’t know why, so he kept that part to himself. “Unless it’s with your ex, in which case I’m not letting you out of this car because friends don’t let friends make bad decisions.”

“I definitely don’t have plans,” Grady said. “Unless getting blind drunk is a plan?”

“It’s my favourite kind,” Lake said with a grin.

“We need to go to mine first. I need to shower and get into clean clothes. I stink, remember?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Lake said impishly. He could also still smell it because his nose, unfortunately, was still working. And the stop-start routine of the busy traffic meant that the wind wasn’t picking up enough to waft it out properly. “What do you mean by ‘first’? Are we going somewhere else?”

“I thought we could go to your place,” Grady said. He flicked his indicator on before turning the corner. And then they stopped again at a pedestrian crossing.

“Oh,” Lake said, unable to hide his disappointment.

“Is there a reason you don’t like your house?” Grady asked.

It was a fair question since they hadn’t spent a lot of time in the last few months at Lake’s, even though they’d spent so many evenings together.

Lake didn’t answer at first, staring out at the dozens of people milling about like ants with a purpose. “It’s empty,” he said quietly. “I bought it when my grandpa died about ten years ago, from my half of the inheritance. There was a lot of space for a family, and a pool, and a big yard for a dog. I fixed it up using money I got from a really long deployment.” He stared down at his hands. “I guess I thought it would be filled by now.” He couldn’t quite smother the feeling of failure when he thought about all the personal accomplishments that he hadn’t ticked off yet. As though his life was nothing more than a checklist that he had to work his way down. He knew that wasn’t right, but it slithered in there anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“It’s okay to not have found the person you want to make a family with yet,” Grady said softly. “Sometimes it takes longer than we’d like, but when it’s right, you’ll know.”

“I would never have pegged you for such a romantic.”

“Don’t tell anyone. And stop trying to dodge.”

Lake sighed. He knew, logically, that Grady was right. And he had dated a few people over those years that he’d thought maybe, but nothing had ever panned out. “It just feels big when I’m there by myself. Even with the TV on, the silence gets to me. I like your house.” He shrugged. “It’s small, and cosy, and it has you in it.” He didn’t know if that admission was allowed or what it even meant, when it felt like so much more than he could find the words for.

“Lake...”

“I know we haven’t known each other long, but friendships are like that sometimes, aren’t they? I like being around you.”

Grady didn’t respond, and Lake awkwardly fiddled with the beaded and leather bracelets around his wrist.

“Do you have food at your house?” Grady asked eventually. That hadn’t been what Lake had expected him to say. He’d been bracing himself for rejection. Lake had gotten too clingy, wanted to spend too much time with him, and it was time to part ways. Lake would have understood. He knew that he was a lot to handle, and

sometimes he figured the only reason Felix and Zach had stuck around so long was that they'd had so long to get used to it.

"I guess it depends on what you mean by food?" Lake replied. "Why?"

"Because I like your house, Lake," Grady said patiently. "And you shouldn't have to feel like you can't be there."

"I—what? You like my house?"

"Well, yeah. It's big, and it's inviting, and it has you in it." He paused and then turned to Lake with a grin that had Lake's mouth going dry. "And it has more than one bed. Just in case."

"All of my spare beds are being fumigated," Lake said, hoping he didn't sound as desperate as he felt. He didn't give a fuck if it was weird; he liked waking up next to Grady, liked how big Grady was and how much space he took up on the mattress, the heat that radiated off him in waves. There was no mistaking he wasn't alone when Grady was with him.

Grady just smirked as he shook his head. But he didn't protest, so Lake took it as a win.

Lake idly swung his legs in the water as he sat on the edge of his pool. He took a big bite out of the burger that he'd helped Grady put together—buttering the buns and putting in the tomato and lettuce was helping and safer for everyone involved.

He smiled at Grady as the big guy carefully lowered himself beside Lake, cradling his burger on a napkin as he slipped his calves into the water, his pants rolled to his knees.

“Best Valentine’s ever,” Lake said, nudging Grady lightly in the shoulder.

“Getting in a car accident is your best Valentine’s?” Grady asked. He took a careful bite, way more dignified than the way Lake had just shovelled his into his mouth. It was too good to not get a good mouthful. If his cheeks weren’t bulging, he was doing it wrong. “You either have a really low bar or terrible luck.”

“Probably a bit of both?” Lake said with a shrug.

“You’ve got...” Grady trailed off as he pointed at the corner of his own mouth.

“Got what?”

“Some sauce. Here.” Grady shifted his burger to his other hand and then used his napkin to wipe gently at Lake’s mouth. Lake’s eyes met Grady’s dark-olive gaze, and they stayed in a strange standoff as Lake’s heart rate went haywire.

Grady cleared his throat and pulled away. “Do you need a bib?”

Lake bit his lower lip as he studied Grady’s profile. He wondered if Grady ever thought about their New Year’s Eve kiss. If he replayed it in his mind the way Lake sometimes did when he found himself daydreaming at work. “Got one handy?” he asked, bringing himself back to the conversation and trying to sound casual and not at all like everything inside him was shifting.

“No, I left mine inside,” Grady deadpanned.

“I guess both of us dropped the ball,” Lake said lightly.

“I guess so.”

Lake's swinging slowed, and his ankle rested against Grady's. He didn't move away, and neither did Grady as they finished their food in silence. Some birds in a nearby tree were having their late afternoon meeting, serenading them as they ate.

"It sounds like things are going well with your brother and your friends," Grady said as he sucked his thumb into his mouth.

Lake felt captivated watching it. Grady had big hands, bigger than Lake's. He was bigger than Lake overall, so it made sense. "What? Oh. Yeah, it's fine, I guess? They're doing something tonight." Something romantic, he was sure, and that would end in all of them naked. Which he was not going to think about because noon so many levels.

“You don’t seem happy about that.”

Lake absently rubbed his foot against Grady’s. The water rippled around their legs as he tried to think of a way to explain without sounding like a petulant child. “Avery and I always spent Valentine’s Day together,” he said eventually.

“With your brother?” Grady asked, and Lake could hear the laughter in his voice.

“Don’t be dirty. It was like... even if we were dating someone, we wouldn’t do anything for it on principle, you know? Because Valentine’s Day is a commercial trap that was made for the sole purpose of taking the hard-earned money from poor schmucks in love. And now...” he trailed off.

“Now he’s spending it with someone. Two someone’s,” Grady corrected.

“Right.”

“Who happen to be your best friends.”

Lake ran his fingers across the surface of the water. “It’s not like that. Felix and Zach are the best guys I know. I couldn’t think of anyone better for my baby brother.” He cleared his throat. Hewashappy for them. It just felt like everything was changing so much more quickly than he’d thought it would. “I just feel a little left out,” Lake admitted quietly. “That’s not their fault.”

“Have you told them that?”

“Not... in so many words.” Not at all. What was he supposed to say? I’m jealous you’re spending so much time with your boyfriend? It sounded stupid in his head. It would sound worse out loud. And most of it was his fault.

“Don’t you think maybe you should, then?” Grady asked.

Lake fiddled with a loose strand of thread on his shorts. “I don’t want them to think that I don’t want them to have what they want.”

“That’s a lot of ‘don’ts’ and ‘wants.’ I happen to be an expert on what happens when one party doesn’t tell the other party how they’re really feeling.”

Lake winced. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think of that. But it’s also not really the same thing. I just want them to be happy.”

“They wouldn’t want you to sacrifice your own for theirs,” Grady remarked. “If you’re upset by something, you need to tell them. It’s not fair to you or them if you keep it bottled up. You’ll end up resenting them, and then things will be a lot worse off than they are now.”

Lake didn’t respond as he stared at the clear water of his pool. He’d imagined Saturday afternoons with children running around screaming and giggling and swimming in the water. Of barbecues and family get-togethers. His kids playing with Felix and Zach’s, cousins in all but blood.

None of those things had happened. His life had just passed by without him even noticing. And here he was, at thirty-one years old, with nothing but a big empty house to keep him warm.

“Thanks,” he said to Grady.

Grady pulled his legs out of the water and stood, holding up a hand to help Lake stand as well. “For what?”

“Not running screaming in the other direction?”

Grady chuckled as he grabbed the towels that they’d left on the outside dining setting. He threw one to Lake, and they dried their legs before heading inside.

“Give it time, I may yet,” Grady said.

“Well, I had fun while it lasted,” Lake said with a lopsided grin. “You wanna watch a movie?”

“Do you have appropriate movie snacks?”

“I can’t believe you just asked me that,” Lake said, only half faking offence. His house was practically made of junk food. Not have movie appropriate snacks? Come on!

Grady smiled wryly. “You’re right. My mistake.”

They ended up with a bag of M&M’s that had been left over from Lake’s Christmas Eve party last year—he’d basically bought the entire supermarket out, and there had been so many left afterwards that Lake was still making his way slowly through them—and a large bowl of butter-and-salt popcorn.

Lake stopped as he browsed through his DVD collection. “Wait a second,” he said, turning to give Grady an incredulous look. “You haven’t seen Jurassic Park since you were a kid?”

“I don’t have a lot of time for movies.”

“That’s because you spend all your free time watching reality TV shows and reading weird books.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“They aren’t weird—wait, excuse me, you’ve been watching them with me!” Grady glared at him, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back on the couch. “Who ranted for twenty minutes after we finished watching *Married at First Sight*?”

“Because sometimes I think they deliberately match people wrong! It’s supposed to be a show about love, and they’re sabotaging them!”

Grady chuckled. “Well, yeah, I think that’s the point? It makes for better entertainment.”

“People’s hearts should not be fodder for ‘entertainment.’”

“So you just want it to be a show about... people falling in love?”

“Yes!” Lake said in frustration. “What’s wrong with that? Why can’t it just be anything?”

“I don’t know why you’re growling at me; I didn’t direct the show,” Grady said, but his smile belied his words.

Lake rolled his eyes and went back to browsing. When he found *Jurassic Park*, he grabbed it out. “Okay, we’re watching this.”

“Are you going to rant about something?” Grady asked curiously.

“Yes,” Lake said indignantly. *Jurassic Park* was a classic, but there were plenty of rantable moments. More so in the newer *World* versions, but this had some good ones.

He put the disc in the player and then settled beside Grady, hooking one leg up under himself. Their thighs were pressed together, and Lake had a bizarre thought that he wished he could get even closer. Meld them together like the blob monster in that weird 50s horror movie that he and Avery had watched as kids without their parents knowing. It had caused weeks of nightmares and sharing a bed because Lake had been twelve and Avery had been seven, and they werenotsupposed to be watching those kinds of movies. Their parents had decided the trauma had been punishment enough.

Lake didn't end up ranting about anything because he was too hyper-focused on Grady beside him to be able to concentrate properly. He'd spent hours upon hours sitting next to Grady in the last few months, and while all of those times had made him feel warm and happy, none of them had ever quite distracted him so thoroughly.

Over the course of the next hour, they finished the popcorn, and Lake slowly slipped down the couch until his head was resting against Grady's shoulder.

Lake's throat thickened as Grady shifted, lifting his arm so that Lake could snuggle against his chest. Grady's arm settled on Lake's shoulders, his fingers curling around Lake's upper arm. The weight was heavy, warm, and comforting.

If someone had asked what was happening on the TV, he wouldn't have been able to give an accurate answer. All he could think about was Grady's arm on him, the rise and fall of his chest, and the steady thrum of his heartbeat against Lake's cheek.

He lifted his head and looked up at Grady, tracing Grady's face with his eyes. His thick, full beard covered half his face and was always so well-groomed. Lake knew from the few times he'd stayed the night with Grady that he spent solid time in the bathroom in the morning to keep it looking good. Lake appreciated that because it was nice to look at. Grady had a sharp jaw, but the beard only enhanced it instead of hiding it. The stubble just under his chin was what had grown during the day, and

Grady would shave it in the morning.

Grady looked down at him with a question in his eyes. “Are you all right?” he asked.

On a whim, Lake leaned up and pressed his lips to Grady’s. Grady’s breath hitched, and they stayed perfectly still, their breath mingling as Lake re-learned the feel of them. They were soft and they fit perfectly against him. He shifted a little, slanting his mouth to fit more comfortably.

When he pulled back, Grady’s eyes were open, staring at him.

“I just wanted to see,” Lake whispered, not sure how to explain even to himself.

“See what?” The hoarseness of Grady’s voice made Lake’s heart skip a beat, and a shiver run through him.

“If it was how I remember.” If the reality was like his memories, or if he’d made up how good it had been.

Grady’s nostrils flared. “And?” he said, almost hesitantly.

“Yeah,” Lake said. He lowered his head, resting his cheek on Grady’s chest as he turned his attention back to the movie. “Yeah,” he repeated, mostly to himself.

Grady’s hand tightened on his upper arm but didn’t move. Lake’s eyes drifted closed, and he was asleep before the movie had finished.

He woke the next morning in his bed, no sign of Grady in the house.

If Quinn kept looking at him like that, Grady was going to say something unpleasant to his partner. They’d stopped to have lunch at a café near where they’d been

canvassing an area about a hit-and-run, and Quinn was about to be another victim.

“Just fucking spit it out, Quinn,” Grady growled, unable to take more staring.

“Spit what out?” Quinn asked innocently.

“What you want to say?” Grady pushed away his empty plate and picked up his coffee, cradling it in his hands. “You think I don’t know that you’re just chomping at the bit to say something? We’ve known each other too long, friend.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Quinn stirred the spoon in his coffee, ignoring the crispy-chicken salad in front of him. “How is Lake?”

“He’s fine, he wasn’t hurt.” Despite knowing that fact, he’d stayed a little closer to Lake all night, and when Lake had curled into him on the couch while they watched a movie, he hadn’t said anything about it, just took the opportunity to have him close. The idea that the phone call could have been a different kind coming from Gideon... he didn’t want to think about it.

The kiss that Lake had laid on him was... something Grady was trying not to think too hard about. Lake was straight. Grady had no idea what Lake had been thinking when he’d made that move. Grady couldn’t work out why he’d done it, and Lake hadn’t really explained.

I just wanted to see.

Grady shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“That’s good.”

“You’re still looking at me like that,” Grady pointed out, wanting to know how to make it stop.

“I’m not looking at you like anything; you’re being paranoid.”

Grady drained his coffee and slammed the mug down. “Quinn.”

Quinn just gave him a small smile. “Did you spend the night with him?”

“We’re just friends,” Grady said defensively, refusing to answer the question. Quinn already knew the answer anyway; it was why he was being such a smug asshole.

“Are you sure?”

“I think I would know if we were more than friends,” Grady said irritably. Maybe Grady had run away like a thief in the night when he’d woken up that morning before Lake, but Lake was the one being confusing, not him.

“Okay.”

“I would,” Grady insisted.

“I said okay,” Quinn said.

“And yet you’re still looking at me like that.” With that tiny smirk and the twinkle in his eye like he had a secret that no one else did. It made Grady want to punch something.

“You’re protesting a lot for someone who’s sure about it. You either know you’re lying, or you have a guilty conscience.”

“Partners don’t interrogate each other,” Grady grumbled.

“Something you need to get off your chest, Grady?”

Grady sighed and tipped his head back. “He kissed me,” he admitted. It didn’t feel much like a weight had lifted, which is supposedly what confessions were supposed to do.

“Lake?”

“Why are you acting like you’re surprised?” Grady asked, glowering at his partner. “You’re the one that was convinced something was going on.”

“I was convinced you were repressing something, not that something had happened, or that Lake had been the one to make the first move.”

“He didn’t. It’s complicated.” Grady had no idea what it meant, or what he even wanted it to mean. Of course he found Lake attractive, and maybe there had been a dream or two where Lake had a starring role, but that’s all it was. Fantasy in his subconscious that he couldn’t control.

I just wanted to see.

What the fuck did Lake want with him?

“You don’t think it’s too soon after the whole Mal debacle?” Quinn asked curiously.

Debacle. A tame word for the clusterfuck his relationship had turned into. Though he wasn’t sure it could be called that either. Grady hadn’t heard a word from Mal since he’d taped his key to their door. Grady hadn’t bothered messaging him about it, because nothing he had to say was fit for polite conversation. Mal was on the lease, but Grady was already in the process of getting him removed, and they were near the end of it anyway. He would have to make a decision on whether to keep the place himself—which he wasn’t sure was a valid option since rent was expensive as fuck—or find somewhere more appropriate. A problem for another time.

“Too soon for what?” Grady asked, wishing this conversation was over. “I literally just said we’re only friends. Besides, I think you’re forgetting one important detail.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Lake is into women, not men.” It was the most important detail as far as Grady was concerned. He couldn’t have a romance with a person that couldn’t be attracted to him. That was clear logic.

“You said he kissed you.”

“He did. I don’t know what that was.” Confusing as fuck is what it was.

“Did you ask him?”

“Would you just hurry up and finish eating so we can head back? We have shit to do.” And none of those things included interrogating him about his friendship—weird as it fucking was—with Lake.

Quinn hummed and then dug into his salad. Grady ate his own food, hoping to God that it was the end of the conversation.

THE SECOND THEY RETURNED to the station, Riley called them into his office.

Grady glanced at Quinn. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Quinn said with amusement. “It’s far more likely that you’ve done something.”

“I’d know if I’d done something.”

“Just like you’d know if you were dating Lake?”

Grady’s mouth dropped open in shock, but he wasn’t able to respond to Quinn’s unfair quip before they’d reached Riley’s office.

“I want a new partner,” Grady said as soon as Quinn closed the door behind them.

“Denied.” Riley pointed at the paperwork in front of him. “What is this?”

Grady picked it up and glanced over it, though he already knew what it was. It was the request that Quinn had started yesterday and they’d finished together that morning.

“Well,” Grady drawled, “it looks like—”

“Are you seriously requesting a shoplifter do work experience in a police station? What makes you think I’m about to approve that?”

“He’s not about to steal something surrounded by thirty cops,” Quinn pointed out. Grady nodded in agreement. Quinn had talked to him about it as soon as he’d come in, and Grady had agreed it was the best decision they could come up with. Community service would just make him sullen, locking him up would only harden him, and letting him go back to the life he was currently living without doing anything had seemed wrong.

“We could have locked him up,” Grady said, “sent him to juvie, or even just sent him back to his foster parents with a slap on the wrist, and let him offend again, and then throw him into juvie. If that appeals to you more?”

Riley scowled and leaned back in his chair. “You think this is a good idea?”

“Yeah.”

“It gives him an opportunity he might not otherwise have,” Quinn said. “The kid was combative but not an asshole for the sake of it. I think he has a real chance to turn his life around if we can get through to him now.”

Riley sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “He’s your responsibility. One fuck up, and he’s gone, understand?”

“You got it.”

“Get out of my office.”

Grady silently pointed at Quinn and mouthed, “Yours,” as they walked out. Quinn’s smile was wry.

Lake jumped when he heard Grady come through his front door, even though he hadn’t done anything wrong. Grady had given him a key. Therefore, drop-in visits while he wasn’t home were implied.

He drummed his fingers on the counter as he listened to the sounds of Grady dropping his keys in the bowl by the door, hanging up his shoulder holster, putting his gun into the safe that was tucked away under the table by the door. He had a routine when he got home. Lake felt privileged to have been let in enough that he’d learned it.

Grady stopped short in the doorway to the kitchen. “Lake,” he said in surprise.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake had parked out front in his mum's car that he was borrowing while the insurance dealt with his. He would need to look at buying a new one soon. But it explained why Grady hadn't realised he was there: he hadn't parked in the driveway and it was an unfamiliar car.

"Your situational awareness isn't very good," Lake teased.

"I wasn't expecting anyone."

"People that plan on robbing your house don't generally call ahead."

"Are you planning to rob me?"

"You do have really nice cutlery," Lake said, grinning. "I could probably pawn it for a hefty profit."

"My... cutlery?" Grady shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it over the back of a dining chair. He rolled his sleeves to his elbows, the same way he did every time he took his suit jacket off. This time Lake's body flushed as he stared at Grady's strong forearms.

"Yeah," Lake said distractedly, "cause they're—" He cut himself off. "It doesn't matter. I wanted to talk to you."

"You have my number."

"You didn't answer any of my texts today, so I had to use my last resort. Be thankful

I didn't confront you at the station."

Something that looked awfully like guilt flashed in Grady's eyes, and Lake felt a brush of satisfaction. He should feel guilty. They were both adults here, and ghosting was childish behaviour that was beneath them.

"We have nothing to talk about," Grady said. He filled the kettle with water and then flicked it on before leaving the room.

If he thought he was going to deter Lake that easily, he had another thing coming. Lake followed him into the lounge, away from the noise of the kettle.

"I want to kiss you again," Lake blurted out. He'd intended to go in more carefully than that, but he guessed it all boiled down to the same thing.

Grady froze, his back tensing. He didn't turn as he said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

He turned then, and his eyes were hard. "Why do you want to kiss me again, Lake? What is this?"

"Why does it have to be more than that?" Lake couldn't even explain it to himself, so he had no hope of being able to articulate it for anyone else. Why did he have to justify a want? Why couldn't he just want it?

"I'm not interested in being your gay experiment," Grady said flatly.

"I'm not asking you to be," Lake sputtered. "What the fuck, Grady? That's an insult to both of us."

“Then what do you want?” Grady asked. “Because I’m having a hard time figuring that out, Lake. You’re confusing the fuck out of me.”

“You,” Lake replied, rendering Grady silent. “I just want you. Don’t ask me what that means, because I don’t know.”

“You don’t like men.”

“So? I like you.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m all male, and I have no interest in changing that.”

“I’ve noticed.” He’d definitely noticed. He’d thought about their kiss more times than he could count over the last few months, but he’d also spent a lot of the day thinking about it more in-depth because of their kiss the night before. And the only conclusion he could come up with was that it didn’t matter. It wasn’t about what gender Grady was. It was Grady, and that changed everything for him.

“No, Lake,” Grady said, shaking his head. “We can’t do this.”

“Why not?” He knew that Grady thought he was attractive. He’d seen Grady look at him with intent, and all it had done was make him preen and feel good about himself. Why was Grady denying them both if they both wanted it?

“I’ve been burned by this before, and I value our friendship far too much to have you turn around and realise that you made a mistake.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“When I was twenty-one, I was engaged,” Grady said. He sat down on his couch and ran a hand down his face. “To my... what do you call it? My high school sweetheart?”

“Yeah,” Lake said numbly. “Zach and Felix were high school sweethearts.”

“It was just a commitment ceremony, of course,” Grady continued, as though Lake hadn’t spoken a word. “Back then, it wasn’t legal for us to get married. I was standing under one of those stupid arches with fucking red roses twined in it. It had cost a goddamn small fortune. But he was fancy like that, and he liked things to pop and make a scene.”

The fact that Grady remembered it so vividly wasn’t a good sign.

Lake tentatively sat beside him. “What happened?” he asked quietly.

“He didn’t show up,” Grady said, looking down at his hands.

It took Lake’s brain a few moments to catch up to that. “He didn’t... show up?” He’d known something bad had happened, but for some reason being left at the altar hadn’t occurred to him. It was the biggest bullshit move in the history of bullshit moves, and he hadn’t even realised people did it for real and not just for dramatic effect in movies.

“I got left standing at the end of the aisle like a fucking idiot,” Grady said flatly. “He decided that he didn’t want to marry me and didn’t bother to tell me.”

Jesus Christ. “What the fuck?” How could anyone do that? And to Grady? Lake wasn’t generally a violent person, but if he saw the person walking across the street, he wouldn’t slow down. He was an incredible driver, so everyone would know he’d done it on purpose, and he wouldn’t have a leg to stand on, and he didn’t care. How could someone do that to a person they were supposed to love? Someone they’d agreed to marry?

“I learned later, after I had to tell everyone that it had been called off and sort out the food, guests, and bookings, and so many other things that I’m sure I forgot to do something, that he’d been cheating on me with a friend of ours—a female friend—and she was pregnant.”

Lake hadn’t thought it could get worse. “I... I’m so sorry,” he breathed out. What an asshole. And then Mal had gone and cheated on him as well. No fucking wonder Grady was so twitchy. Lake’s heart hurt for him, for the beautiful soul that he was that hadn’t deserved any of that.

“I heard they had a shotgun wedding just before the baby was born and are still together now, living in Melbourne with three more kids.” Grady shrugged with his mouth. “It sucked at the time, and I don’t wish him well, because I’m not that gracious, but I don’t spend any time thinking about it.”

Lake could believe that. Grady was good at pushing away things that he didn’t think were worth his time. But he could still hear the underlying hurt in Grady’s voice. It had left a mark that likely still hadn’t healed.

“He didn’t even like women. And then suddenly he did.”

Lake pursed his lips, trying to parse everything in his mind. The point of telling him the story had been why they couldn’t try something together, but it hadn’t changed Lake’s stance. “Okay, I get it, I think,” he said because he did understand why even if

he didn't agree. "But unless he went back to men afterwards, my situation isn't his situation. And I would never do that to you."

"I didn't think he would either," Grady said bitterly.

Lake wished he could make any of the lingering pain go away, soothe the hurt, apply balm to the wounds. It had chipped away at Grady's heart, and all Lake wanted to do was bandage what was left and care for it the way it should have been cared for all along.

He cupped Grady's cheek and turned his head so that he could look into his gorgeous eyes. "I'm not him," he said firmly, his fingers curling in Grady's beard. "I'm not either of them. And I want you so badly I ache for you."

Lake didn't know who moved first. All he knew was that one second, he was looking at Grady's handsome face, and the next they were kissing desperately.

Grady hauled Lake up and into his lap as his tongue invaded Lake's very soul. Lake groaned, wrapping his arms around Grady's neck, his hands threading through his thick hair.

Holy shit. This was better than ice cream. It was everything he'd remembered from New Year's Eve but so much better because there was intent in this kiss. Because Lake was in it now, in a way that he hadn't been then. Because Grady had sunk deep inside him, and Lake wanted to explore everything with him.

Grady wrapped one arm around Lake's back, securing him more firmly against his chest. This close, pressed so tight, it felt wider than it looked from afar. What would his chest hair feel like if they were naked?

Lake needed to know.

He tugged at Grady's clothes, pulling his shirt out from where it was tucked into his pants. He moaned into Grady's mouth when he felt the rough fur on his chest. Why was that hot? He'd seen Grady shirtless after so many nights and mornings spent together, but he'd never been able to touch it before.

Grady's hands slipped up under Lake's shirt, his fingers skimming Lake's lower back. His skin was on fire, and he wanted Grady's hands everywhere. He tugged his top up and over his head before discarding it on the floor behind him. "Touch me," he begged. He wanted to feel it, needed to feel it.

Grady splayed his hand over Lake's collarbone. "You aren't wearing your chain," he rasped.

"Forgot to put it on," Lake said absently. He didn't always wear it. He couldn't wear it while he was in uniform, and he must have left it in his locker. Why were they talking about this?

And then Grady's hands were skimming down Lake's chest, sending ripples of intensity across him, and he forgot all about it. How were Grady's hands so hot? It was like they were covered in flames.

"It's like being dropped in a pot of boiling water. I'm a lobster but without the dying part."

Grady barked out a laugh. "What?"

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Your hands are hot,” Lake explained. “Keep up.”

Grady smirked. “Right. Sorry.”

Lake rocked his hips, and Grady’s dick pushed against his ass. His lips parted as he shuddered. Jesus. Grady was hard and thick, and Lake was sitting on top of a hard dick for the first time in his life. He stared down at Grady, tracing his face with his eyes. His cheeks were flushed, his olive-green eyes a shade darker than normal—fuck, that was hot—and his lips were shining from their kiss. He looked thoroughly debauched. Because of Lake. It was pressing buttons inside Lake that he didn’t even know he had.

Lake undid Grady’s button-down shirt, shoving the fabric aside, needing to see the chest beneath. He was greedy. He wanted to touch and see. He raked his fingers through the hair, fascinated by the way it felt. Not soft, not coarse. He trailed his fingers around Grady’s belly button, playfully tugging at the waistband of his slacks. Grady’s hard dick was under that. He swallowed hard and licked his lips at the thought of seeing it. He’d never once looked at any man and thought, “I really want to see your dick and touch it and find out what it tastes like,” and yet when he put Grady into the thought, it didn’t feel weird at all.

Meeting Grady had changed everything. Shifted something inside Lake he didn’t even know could be shifted.

Lake didn’t know how such a fundamental part of a person could change so drastically, but he knew, looking back up at Grady’s face, that he could never turn back now. Didn’t want to.

He kissed Grady again, wanting to taste him more, tempting Grady's tongue to come out and play. Grady groaned, threading his hands through Lake's hair, tugging on it just enough to send tingles of pleasure down his spine.

Grady lifted up suddenly, and Lake's breath hitched in surprise as he was tipped and then laid back against the couch cushions. Grady kneeled over him, looking intensely at him. He looked like he wanted to devour Lake.

Lake licked his lips in response because fuck yes. Grady was an intense kind of guy, and to have that attention solely on him and in such a fucking sexy way? Lake had no clue what he was doing or even why; all he knew was that he didn't want to stop.

"Are you sure?" Grady asked.

"Yeah. One hundred percent. One hundred and ten? Is one hundred and fifty too eager?"

"You're exactly the same," Grady said, shaking his head with a smile. "I don't know why I'm surprised."

"What did you think would happen? You're not giving me a lobotomy. Now, are you going to get me naked or not?"

Grady's smile turned wicked, and he raised an eyebrow at Lake as he hooked his fingers into Lake's waistband and then slowly pulled his pants down. Lake lifted his hips to help, and then he was naked. And the way Grady was looking down at him made him feel like a god. It wasn't that he didn't know he had a good body—being a pilot in the military meant that he had to be in peak physical shape—but knowing and seeing that heat in Grady's eyes were two very different things. It wasn't subtle like Grady had been previously when he'd been checking Lake out. Now he was looking. Lake's dick twitched, wanting to be physically touched by that look.

It wasn't just that Grady thought he was attractive. Plenty of people thought that Lake was attractive. He knew he was. But Grady knew him as well, liked him as the disaster of a person that he was beneath it all. Grady was his friend, had seen him with bed hair and drool dried on his face—because excuse him, everyone drooled in their sleep—and Grady still looked at him like this anyway.

His eyes locked on to Grady's as Grady wrapped his fingers around Lake's dick and stroked slowly. His hand was bigger than any woman's that had touched him, and the callouses scraped pleasantly. There was no mistaking that a man was touching him. That Grady was touching him. Just the thought had him leaking pre-cum. Grady paused with his hand at the top, and he thumbed the sticky substance, spreading it over his head. He leaned forward and lapped it up with a flick of his tongue. Lake cried out, scrambling to find something to hold onto, his fingers digging into the couch.

Grady's grin was pure sin and sent a shiver up Lake's spine. That was a look he could get used to. And then Lake's dick was disappearing into his mouth. Lake couldn't look away as Grady's lips stretched around him, and wet heat engulfed him.

Oh God. "So hot," he gasped. "How is your mouth so hot?" Grady's eyes slid closed as he slowly lifted his head and then lowered again. He used his fist to pump up and down where his mouth didn't reach, moving both in sync. The pressure was just enough to make Lake feel like he was on cloud nine.

"Did you eat something spicy?" Lake mumbled to himself. He tangled his fingers in Grady's hair as his knees lifted of their own volition and bracketed Grady's head, squirming. "You should eat it every day and then suck me off afterwards. Shouldn't let it go to waste."

Grady chuckled, and Lake shuddered as he felt it vibrate across his dick.

“They should bottle your mouth and sell it.” Grady flattened his tongue on the underside of Lake’s dick as he bobbed up and down, and Lake’s fingers tightened as his toes curled. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “At least like seventy-five per bottle.”

Grady lifted off him and raised an eyebrow. “Only seventy-five?”

“If you want it to be worth more, then show me,” Lake replied, giving him a cheeky grin. He was only teasing, of course. Grady’s mouth was priceless.

Grady sucked his head, his cheeks hollowing out. Then he pushed his tongue into Lake’s slit, and Lake almost jumped off the couch. Holy fucking shit. “Hundred and seventy-five,” he amended on a strangled gasp. Definitely worth more. “Plus... plus GST... how much is that?” Fucking hell, math was hard when he was getting his brain sucked out through his cock. “Closer to—” His breath hitched when Grady massaged his balls in one of his big hands while he sucked. “Closer to two hundred? It would be like... somewhere around fifteen, twenty bucks? Ahh!” Grady took him all the way in and then swallowed, and Lake was so close to blowing his load. He’d never been this close to coming so quickly in his entire life. Grady’s mouth was worth so much more than two hundred bucks.

Grady pulled off him, replacing his mouth with his hand, slowly sliding it up and down, using his own spit as lubricant. Why did that make his dick twitch?

“Does that mouth ever stop?”

“Hasn’t yet,” Lake said. “Don’t stop.” He tried to push Grady’s head back down, but Grady just turned his head and kissed Lake’s palm, causing his heart rate to spike dangerously.

The hand that was massaging his balls slid down, pressing against that soft spot between his ass and his dick. It sent a jolt of pleasure racing through him, and his

mouth opened on a silent gasp.

“Do you have a manual?” Lake asked as he struggled to pull air into his lungs.

“For what?” Grady asked as he kissed his way up Lake’s stomach, leaving tingles of pleasure in each spot he touched, like a magic pathway made from his lips.

“Me. You know all the spots.”

Grady smirked. “You’re extremely sensitive, Lake. All of you is a spot.”

“That is not true,” Lake said, frowning. Was that true?

Grady nipped the skin just below his rib cage, and Lake shivered, his breath hitching.

“You should try it again, in the same spot, and then on the other side,” Lake said.
“For research purposes.”

“Well, if it’s for research.”

Grady licked the place he’d nipped and then moved across Lake’s stomach, leaving behind him a trail of light kisses that made Lake shudder. He nipped the same spot on the other side, and Lake bit his lip to stop from crying out.

He’d never noticed he was this sensitive before. He wasn’t sure he’d ever played like this before with someone else. Sex meant something to him because he always needed to feel a connection with a person before he was interested in it, but it had still never been like this.

Sex.

Fuck, he hoped... “Are we going to have sex now?” he asked hopefully.

“No.”

Lake deflated. That hadn't been the answer he'd thought he would get. Didn't Grady want this as much as Lake did? "Why not?" he asked.

"Have you ever done anything with a guy before today?"

"We've kissed twice," Lake said. "Forgotten already, old man?"

"You're older than me."

"By barely a year. And my memory is obviously superior."

Grady kissed him again, coaxing his mouth slowly open before sliding his tongue inside. He lowered his body over Lake's, the hard dick in his pants sliding against Lake's.

By the time he let go, Lake was a squirming mess. Who knew a single kiss could cause such a visceral reaction? He ached so badly he was shaking with need.

"I want you to show me," Lake gasped.

"I think you need to think about this," Grady said rationally. Far too rationally, considering the mess that Lake currently was. How was Grady even thinking right now?

"I think you need to get me off and then fuck me," Lake said bluntly. He wasn't a child, and he knew what he wanted. And what he wanted was to know what it felt like to have Grady inside him. Maybe he hadn't thought about it before Grady, and maybe he'd only thought about it in terms of sex not ten minutes ago, but so what? He was allowed to change his mind, and he was allowed to want it.

Grady searched his face even as his fingers dug into Lake's side. Lake could see that

hewantedtoo, so why wasn't he getting on with it?

"Please?" Lake asked, sucking his lower lip into his mouth and nibbling on it. He could see his own need reflected in Grady's eyes. He hoped so fucking badly that Grady would give them both what they so desperately wanted.

That seemed to be all it took. Grady hauled him off the couch and led him to his bedroom. "Sit down," he ordered as he shuffled around in his nightstand.

Lake perched on the edge of the bed and gave himself a slow stroke, not wanting to jerk too fast and blow his load too soon. When Grady pulled lube and a condom from the top drawer, Lake's ass clenched, anticipation already making him dizzy with lust. He'd never even played with his ass before, and no one he had ever slept with had been into ass play, so his experience with any of this was basically zero, unless he counted porn—which he didn't, because realism wasn't a thing in those videos. He was nervous, but thewantovershadowed all of it. Grady was close to becoming his best friend if he wasn't already, and the idea of having part of him inside Lake was thrilling. He wanted every part of Grady, including this part.

Grady crowded him, dropping the lube and condom beside Lake's hip, before lifting Lake's chin with his hand. He leaned down to kiss him slowly, pulling moans from deep in his chest. Damn, Grady knew how to kiss. The way he rolled his tongue, the hard heavy strokes, the way he so thoroughly destroyed him from the inside.

Lake was trembling when Grady let go and took a step back. His heart skipped a beat as Grady began to undo his belt buckle.

"Let me help." He wouldn't be a passive observer in this. He wanted to experienceall of it.Including helping Grady get undressed. His fingers were shaking as he unhooked the leather and slid it out of the buckle slowly. He let it hang as he popped the top button. He stared for a moment, saliva pooling in his mouth, before he lowered the

zipper, the sound loud in his ears as his breathing picked up speed. He bent his head and rested his forehead against the soft trail of hair that led below his waistband and breathed in Grady's musky scent. He was so fucking turned on he didn't even know what to do with himself.

Grady carded his fingers through Lake's hair before he gently took a step back and pushed his pants and underwear down, kicking them away. His dick was rock hard, leaking at the top of his swollen mushroomed head. The vein running on the underside was prominent, just begging to be licked and played with. Grady was big, and thick, and in perfect proportion to the rest of him. How would that fit inside him? His ass clenched, like his body knew what it wanted. How much he wanted it. He knew it would fit because that's how it worked. Guys with big dicks didn't just not have sex. And he knew that if it was too much, if he couldn't handle it, that Grady would stop, no questions asked.

He trusted Grady and trusted that no matter what happened, he would make sure that Lake was comfortable and enjoying it.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Lake, we don’t have to do this.”

Lake looked up at Grady’s face in surprise, his mouth open. What? Oh. “Shut up,” Lake said. “I’m hungry, not scared.”

A muscle in Grady’s jaw twitched as his eyes flared, and then Lake was being kissed again. Kiss was too tame a word. He gasped into Grady’s mouth as he was ravaged. Grady wasn’t gentle when he pushed Lake onto his back, not breaking the kiss.

Lake couldn’t get enough. He’d never been with someone so much fucking bigger and stronger than he was—he wasn’t exactly a lightweight himself; he was five foot ten of solid muscle. Grady moved him like he weighed nothing, like he was just a rag doll for Grady’s pleasure. And Lake was so there for all of it.

Lake threw his head back on a loud gasp as Grady kissed down his neck, stopping every so often to nip and suck at his flesh. He worked his way down Lake’s chest and stomach and then down to swallow him again. Lake tightly fisted the sheets on either side of himself and tried not to squirm too much and choke Grady.

When a finger pressed lightly against his hole, all bets were off. His hips arched as he let out a low whine. He lifted his legs and rested his heels on Grady’s back, trying to urge him deeper. He wanted it in him. Wanted to know what it felt like.

Grady’s finger circled his rim, massaging without pushing in. “Are you sure, Lake? This isn’t something to just jump into.”

“What part of any of this has told you I don’t want it?” Lake said. “I want you to fuck

me, Grady. So get on with it.” He needed that finger in him, right fucking now.

“Very romantic.”

“Are we looking for romantic?” Lake asked. He tried to make his face look sultry, even though he was sure he was failing spectacularly. “Make love to me, Grady,” he said in a low voice.

Grady laughed. “Don’t do that again.”

“I won’t have to if you put that big dick of yours to good use.”

Grady hesitated, even now, and Lake had a terrible thought. “Do you not want this?” he asked. “Because we definitely don’t have to do—”

“Trust me, sweetheart, I want this.”

“So what’s the problem?” Why were they talking when they could be fucking? Grady’s finger was still pressed against his hole. All he had to do was slide it in. Lake wriggled his hips to see if he could do it himself, to no avail. It did send pleasant tingles up and down his legs, though. “Do you actually need a manual? Because I could try to recite one for you while you fuck me?”

Grady nipped his inner thigh, and Lake half yelped, half laughed. “Would you be more comfortable topping?”

“You mean like me fucking you?” The idea was... not as appealing as it probably should be. Wait a second... “I thought you said you were an exclusive top.”

“I am,” Grady said.

“But you’d bottom... for me?” Lake didn’t know what to think about that. It made his heart explode. That Grady would do that for him meant everything. Even if, ultimately, it wasn’t what he wanted. “I’m not uncomfortable, Grady, I promise. And I want you to fuck me. Is that okay?”

“Is that okay?” Grady asked in disbelief.

“You’re the one halting things, not me,” Lake pointed out. He wanted to be fucked already.

Grady removed his finger from Lake’s rim, and disappointment sat heavy in Lake’s chest. Were they done now? What had he done wrong?

Grady only grabbed the lube and coated his fingers in it, though, before he spread Lake’s legs wide, exposing him. His eyes locked on to Lake’s as he slid one into Lake’s ass.

Lake knew the feeling should have been weird. There was something pushing inside him. But all he felt was incredible warmth. He bit his lip as Grady moved in and out of him. Fucking hell, it was so good, but it wasn’t enough.

“More. Another one.”

“Demanding,” Grady teased. Lake let the comment go because Grady added another finger, and he was too busy trying to suck air into his lungs as he was stretched. He felt so fucking full. His legs were weak, shivering as he spread them even more, giving Grady as much room as he needed. God, it was incredible. So fucking incredible. There was no discomfort, only toe-curling pleasure.

“More, please,” Lake begged. “I want more. All of it. More fingers. Your dick. I don’t care. Just fill me up, please.” He didn’t care how pathetic he sounded.

He needed more, so much fucking more. How did this feel so good? Why had he never done it before?

From the heated look that Grady gave him, he didn't think Lake was pathetic. That was good because he didn't want this to stop before they could get to the best parts.

Even the third finger didn't detract from the pleasure. The slight burn that pulsed outward from his hole was more electrifying than painful. He liked it. Liked seemed such an inadequate word. He loved it. Loved all of it.

Grady took Lake's dick down the back of his throat again, and Lake yelled out, unable to hold back his sudden explosive orgasm. He shook as his entire body burst open in bolts of lightning, nothing but white-hot pleasure racing through him. Grady swallowed all of his release as he continued to finger fuck him with long, hard strokes. Lake's legs twitched as Grady kept sucking him. His hips jerked as aftershocks continued to pulse over him. Holy fucking shit. He'd never come so fucking hard in his entire life.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Grady pulled off him, and Lake whined low in his throat when his fingers pulled out. He felt empty.

Anticipation made his throat close up as he watched Grady roll a condom on and lube himself up. Fuck, yes.

“Time for the main portion of the show?” Lake asked hoarsely.

“You mean your orgasm wasn’t it?”

“You sure know how to give a guy a good time,” Lake said, smiling playfully. “But I have a feeling the best is yet to come.”

Grady let out a huff of laughter as he crawled over Lake’s body, settling his weight comfortably over Lake’s frame. When he kissed him, Lake could taste himself. It was the strangest part of the night, but far from unpleasant. He moaned and leaned into it, his tongue searching Grady’s mouth for every last drop of it. He couldn’t wait until he could return the favour and share Grady’s taste between them.

The head of Grady’s cock circled Lake’s hole before pushing against it just enough to be a slight pressure but not enough to gain entry.

Lake moaned, his body flushing just from knowing he was so close to having Grady inside him.

He clutched at Grady’s shoulders as Grady gently pushed, the head of his cock slipping through his tight muscles. “Oh, fuck,” he gasped. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He

couldn't stop repeating the word as Grady filled him. Fuck. It hurt—he was being stretched impossibly wide—but it was good. It was too much but not enough. His nerves were on fire, and his brain had turned into a puddle. He lifted his head, burying it in the curve of Grady's neck as his nails dug into Grady's shoulders, hard enough he knew that he was breaking skin.

Grady didn't protest or tell him to stop. He kissed the side of Lake's head and murmured, "Easy. Push down, relax. It'll get better, I promise."

Better? How could it be better? It was already fucking perfect. "It's good," Lake gasped. "You feel so—" His breath hitched. "I can't even... just don't... please don't pull out. Don't... don't let me go." The words felt like they'd been dragged from the very depths of his soul.

Grady tugged Lake's head back with a grip on his hair and then kissed him hungrily, swallowing all the sounds that Lake couldn't control.

He stopped moving when he was all the way in, and Lake whined.

"No," Lake said, his head falling backwards. "No. Move. Look, if you need that manual—" He cut off with a choked gasp as Grady pulled out and then pushed back in with one hard thrust that rattled his bones.

"Yes. Fuck, yes. Just like that," Lake said. His body hadn't adjusted to having something Grady's size inside it, and the pain still mingled in with everything else, but he didn't care. He didn't care. He couldn't explain how much he needed it, how much the pain was irrelevant.

Grady gentled his thrusts, rocking himself into Lake. Every slide had Lake gasping for breath as pleasure sparked his insides, settling over his skin in a layer of ecstasy like he'd never experienced before. He'd been missing out. This was so much better

than being on top. He wanted to be under Grady forever, be fucked like this all the time. He never wanted it to end.

“Harder,” he begged. “Please. Please.”

“That’s not what you need your first time,” Grady said, his voice strained. A vein was pulsing in his neck, and he had a delectable sheen of sweat over his skin, like holding himself back was causing him physical pain. He buried himself to the hilt again and stopped, looking down at Lake. “I want this to be good for you.”

“You can’t tell how good this is for me?” Lake asked, laughing. “If it was any better, I might die, and I don’t think either of us are into that.”

“Jesus,” Grady breathed out, shaking his head with a wry smile. “Why do I find you so attractive?”

“No idea.” But he did know that he didn’t want Grady to hold back. Lake ran his hands across Grady’s shoulders, up to his hair, then down again, moving under his arms to grip his side. “I want it hard, Grady. Or are you worried you can’t keep up?”

The challenging tone didn’t go unnoticed. Grady took hold of his hair once more, pulling back sharply. The tingles of pain were bringing Lake’s dick back to life. At thirty-one, his refractory period wasn’t as impressive as it used to be, but damn if Grady wasn’t making him feel like he was twenty years old again.

Grady’s next thrust was hard, and Lake cried out as the intensity of it rocked through him. His eyes rolled into the back of his head. “Yes,” he groaned.

Grady buried his face into Lake’s neck and latched on, the sharp bite making Lake moan loudly. “You’re so fucking tight,” he gritted out into Lake’s neck.

“Yeah?” Lake arched, wrapping his legs around Grady’s waist, wanting to be closer to him, not wanting even a single inch of space between them. “You like that?”

Grady didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. He hammered into Lake, keeping his hold on Lake’s hair to keep him in place. The contrast of pain and pleasure only made everything in Lake stand up and take notice.

“Worth so much more than your mouth,” Lake slurred, drunk with pleasure. “Your dick is worth thousands. Millions.” Grady changed his angle, and something inside Lake fuckingexploded.Lake knew what it was. He wasn’t such a noob that he didn’t know what a prostate was. He even knew it was supposed to feel good.

This was so much more than he’d ever imagined. It was like someone had injected pure bliss inside him and then increased the intensity a thousandfold. His nails dug into Grady’s back, scraping across it as he tried to hang on while Grady turned him inside out. His dick was hard again, leaking all over his stomach while Grady continued to piston in out and of him. Every hard thrust was a direct link to it. It was begging for attention, but Lake couldn’t make himself let go of Grady long enough to give it what it wanted. He doubted it would matter. He wouldn’t be surprised if he came without touching himself. He was lit up like an inferno, every part of him oversensitive and begging.

“It’s mine,” he continued, still sounding incredibly drunk. “My dick. For me.”

“For you, baby,” Grady breathed out, soothing the bites he’d made on Lake’s neck with his tongue. “Just like your ass is mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Never had another dick,” Lake gasped. Grady was fucking him so hard, punching out his breath on every thrust. Lake had never felt anything like it. He was on fire, his sweat mingling with Grady’s as they clung to each other. “Don’t want another one.”

He turned his head, and Grady’s lips met his in a bruising kiss. It was harsh and full of panting and teeth and tongue. Grady fucked even harder into him, erratic and heavy. Lake knew what it meant. He was close.

“Come in me,” Lake groaned. He wished Grady wasn’t wearing a condom. Wanted to feel his cum dripping out of him. Maybe next time. He’d never slept with another man, and he was sure that Grady was careful. He couldn’t imagine him any other way.

The thought of Grady coming inside him with nothing between them was what pushed Lake over the edge again. He squeezed his eyes shut, curling even further into Grady’s embrace as he screamed Grady’s name and came untouched.

He was sure his soul escaped his body for a few seconds as he coated their stomachs. Grady groaned deeply, a rumbling sound from deep inside him as his next two thrusts were so brutal that Lake was sure they’d both bruised something, and then Grady stilled on another long, drawn-out moan, his hips jerking as he came in Lake’s ass.

Their mouths pressed against each other as they came down from their high. Not quite kissing, but another kind of intimacy that Lake had never experienced before.

Grady pulled back just enough that they could look at each other. “Okay?”

Lake smiled lazily. “Better than okay.” He had no idea how anyone after this could ever live up to it. They couldn’t. He guessed he just needed to keep Grady so he didn’t have to worry about it.

Something flickered in Grady’s gaze, but before Lake could even attempt to decipher it, he was leaning down and kissing him softly, a caress that made butterflies dance in his stomach.

They probably should have gotten up, cleaned up, had a shower or something. Maybe eaten something. But Lake was warm and comfortable, and he could already feel himself drifting off to sleep. He could deal with the mess later.

Grady ended up coaxing him out of the bed anyway, and washing him in the shower, taking his time as they kissed and petted each other. Lake had his third orgasm in the shower, trembling as Grady jerked him off while he kissed him. He wanted to return the favour, or have a taste of Grady’s dick, but Grady got him out of the shower, dried him, and bundled him back into the bed before he could say a word.

He was asleep before Grady had even gotten in beside him, a contented smile on his face.

Grady tried to shift so that he could smack his phone and turn his alarm off but found himself trapped. Lake was curled up against his side, naked, with the smell of sex surrounding them.

Everything came back to him in a burst of memory that made his morning wood pulse.

He’d had sex with Lake last night.

He’d had sex with Lake last night.

He was fucked. In the metaphorical sense, not just the physical sense. He was so goddamned fucked.

He had no idea how he'd let this happen. It was like every time Lake looked at him and gave him those eyes, he was Lake's willing slave, ready to do whatever he wanted.

What the fuck was he going to do now?

He managed to get himself out of the bed without waking Lake, even though it took twice as long as normal and involved him sliding a pillow into Lake's arms. For a soldier, he was a deep sleeper, but maybe it was only when he felt safe. Either way, Grady was glad for it; he needed a moment to himself.

Even after a cold shower he was still feeling like he'd been hit by a two-by-four. He'd slept with Lake. Lake, who was straight. Lake, who was his friend. Lake, who had fucking loved it and begged him like a seasoned pro.

Just remembering the beautiful way he'd taken everything and pleaded for more was making Grady hard again. He told his dick to shut the fuck up and went about making coffee. Lake was a zombie in the morning before he had his first cup. Grady idly wondered how he went on deployments. Did someone give him a weapon while he was still in zombie form? A weird image raced across his mind, of Lake holding a rifle and walking in a daze after someone who was holding a takeout coffee cup on a string like leading a horse with a carrot on a stick.

He blinked at the mug in front of him and wondered if he'd finally gone off the deep end.

Grady left a steaming coffee mug on the corner of the bench as he went about making some breakfast. Lake didn't linger in bed long after Grady got up. Grady wished he didn't know that. He'd been thinking about buying a futon or something to set up in

his office, so that guests—specifically, Lake—had somewhere to sleep. He guessed that ship had well and truly sailed. Lake wasn't just a friend staying over anymore. Grady had no idea what he was now. Had no fucking idea what either of them were doing.

The croissants were cut in half and toasting under the grill when Lake emerged from the bedroom, wearing nothing but his briefs and with serious bed hair. He wore the marks Grady had given him like a goddamned medal, and Grady had to look away before he did something stupid like bend him over the bench and fuck him again. Even if he wanted to, even if they both did, Lake would be too sore for anything.

Instead of going for the coffee like he normally would have, Lake bypassed it completely before stopping directly in front of Grady and dropping his forehead to Grady's chest. Grady slid one hand into his hair and the other curled around the nape of his neck. He squeezed lightly as he pressed a kiss to the top of Lake's head. "Are you hungry?" he murmured.

Lake made a noise that Grady couldn't interpret but decided was a yes since Lake was always hungry. Grady shuffled them across the floor until he could reach the coffee he'd left. He coaxed Lake's hands around the mug and then helped him take the first sip.

While Lake was busy getting his morning caffeine in as quickly as humanly possible, Grady got out cream cheese and lemon curd from the fridge. He buttered one of the croissants with the cream cheese and handed it to Lake, who swapped him for his now empty mug.

"You're not getting another one," Grady told him, rinsing the mug for effect before he put it in the sink.

Lake glared momentarily and then got promptly distracted by his food. "These are so

good,” he moaned around his mouthful.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Grady wasn't sure they were good enough to cause that kind of moan, but his dick seemed to recognise the sound. He cleared his throat. "Lake, what happened last night..."

"Was between two consenting adults," Lake answered. He reached forward and hooked his fingers in the handle of Grady's mug and then pulled it toward himself. He took a sip and closed his eyes. "I love getting up and not having to make my own stuff."

"Glad to be of service," Grady said dryly.

"Do we have to do the freak-out thing?" Lake asked, opening one eye.

"The 'freak-out thing'?"

"Yeah. You know? This shouldn't have happened. You're not even gay. Blah blah blah."

"Ignoring the fact that you're trying to make light of it, both of those things are still true. Did you suddenly turn gay when I wasn't looking?" He stole his coffee back and frowned when he realised it was empty. He retrieved Lake's mug from the sink and made two more cups.

Lake nudged Grady's hip as he filled the cups with creamer and then took a tentative sip. "Does your coffee have something laced in it? Something from the evidence lockers, perhaps?"

Grady took a bite from the lemon curd croissant and swallowed before saying, “Are you asking me if I take drugs from the station and put them in my coffee?”

Lake’s grin was cheeky, and Grady didn’t know what it said about him that all he wanted to do was kiss him. “It sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“Was there a better way for it to sound?”

“I notice you haven’t actually answered the question.”

Grady just arched a single eyebrow as he picked up his coffee. “Stop deflecting.”

Lake sighed and leaned back against the edge of the counter. “Why do we have to analyse it? I had fun, and you had fun, what’s the big deal?”

“Fun” wasn’t the word that Grady would have used, but it wasn’t worth distracting Lake. “Sex changes things.” Grady had already been way over his head, even before they added intimacy. It wasn’t that this changed everything, because he knew himself enough to know that Lake had already gotten in too deep, that Lake had snuck in somewhere under his ribs where he hadn’t even known he had space, but it added a new dimension to the entire situation. Grady had no idea how he could get out of this situation without destroying himself. He hadn’t learned his lesson from Kyle or Mal, apparently.

“So? Didn’t you like having sex with me?”

“That’s not at all the point I’m trying to make here.”

Lake put his mug down and approached Grady with a twinkle in his eye that made Grady wary. “I have to get ready for work; can we argue about this later?”

“Sure,” Grady said dumbly as Lake reached up and laced his fingers around the back of Grady’s neck.

“I’m having dinner with Zach, Felix, and Avery tonight, but we could do something tomorrow?”

“Okay.” Grady had no idea what he was agreeing to. All he could focus on was the way that Lake’s fingers were gently caressing his skin and tickling the hair at the base of his skull.

Every part of this was a bad idea. He shouldn’t be letting Lake continue to touch him, shouldn’t be encouraging the continuation of whatever the fuck they were doing. What happened when Lake got over this? When he decided it had been fun, but he was ready to go back to women?

He should remove Lake from around him, take a step back, and put them back on some kind of normal path.

And yet, when Lake tugged him down for a kiss, he couldn’t but lean into it and take everything, even knowing that in the end it was Lake that would take everything, and Grady would end up broken again.

The first thing that Lake noticed was different when he walked into Zach and Felix’s house was the sound of barking and claws scratching. “The fuck...” A wet and dripping white ball of fluff came charging at him, barrelling right into his legs. “Hello there,” he said to the malamute puppy that was soaking his jeans and flinging water all over the floorboards with their wagging tail.

“Ares!” Avery yelled out, careening around the corner at breakneck speed. He gave the dog an exasperated look as he reached them. “He’s supposed to be having a bath, the slippery little bastard. He rolled in something out the back and reeks.” He picked

up the yapping puppy, who promptly turned in his arms and enthusiastically licked his cheek. “Thanks,” he said, looking ruefully at the squirming puppy. He didn’t sound thankful.

“I thought you said you weren’t getting a dog,” Lake said, grinning. He remembered quite clearly Avery griping about it all of Christmas Day because their mum had mentioned to Zach that they knew a lady whose dog had puppies.

“Ididn’t,” Avery said wryly. “Zach did. That man needs a leash too.”

“Kinky.” Lake sniffed the air and sighed happily. They were having roast pork. Fuck, yes.

“Who’s kinky?” Zach asked, coming out of the kitchen eating an apple. “If it was me, I absolutely agree.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“Speaking of kinky,” Lake said. If that wasn’t a great segue, he didn’t know what was. “If you’re not gay but have sex with a man, what would you call it?”

Zach choked on a bite of apple. Avery absently patted him on the back as he stared in shock at Lake.

“You had sex with a guy?” Zach asked hoarsely, like he still had apple stuck in his throat. “When? What the fuck, Lake?”

Lake probably should have waited for Felix for this conversation. He was the most level-headed of all of them, which made sense since he was a special forces combat medic. It came with the territory. Not that he needed advice or anything. He’d loved having sex with Grady, and he had plans to continue doing it for the foreseeable future, regardless of what anyone thought. He just wanted to talk about it with his best friends. He missed them, and he wanted to share this with them because it meant so much more to him than just a roll in the hay with a friend. Grady meant something to him.

Lake had been ghosting his best friends too much lately, and maybe he felt a bit guilty about that, but he’d been doing it for a good reason. He wanted them to be happy and have the best chance at making it work. And him getting underfoot and maybe getting a little jealous because they’d found something that Lake still found elusive wasn’t conducive to that.

Ares yipped and wriggled until Avery was forced to put him down. The second their paws hit the floor they were off again, barking madly as they left a trail of water behind themselves.

“No, wait!” Avery cried out. “Ares, get back here!” He bolted off in search of his wayward charge.

“Not gonna help him?” Lake asked.

“Nope,” Zach said. “I love it when he gets all hot and indignant. Makes for rougher sex, which is my kryptonite.”

Lake scrunched his face up. “That sounds so much fucking weirder when my brother is involved,” he said. He already knew what was probably way too much about his friends’ sex lives, but adding his brother just made it weird, not funny. It made everything different. Lake loved the idea of them together and knew that they would all make each other crazy happy, but he was still trying to work out where he fit with them all now.

“So... a guy, huh?”

Lake smirked at his oldest friend and wandered through the house instead of answering. He found Felix in the kitchen, piping meringue onto small tarts that smelled lemony.

“Someone let you bake?” Lake asked, sliding into a stool.

“Funny,” Felix said. “I didn’t do the baking. But I am in charge of piping.” He held out the piping bag, and Lake dutifully gave his finger so that Felix could make a small swirl of meringue onto it.

Lake sucked it into his mouth and hummed.

“Don’t ignore me,” Zach said loudly, joining them. “Do you really expect me to ignore that you just said you slept with a dude?”

Felix slipped and piped meringue across the counter. He stared at it for a second and then up at Lake's face. "Really?"

"Yes," Lake said, sounding way more confident than he felt. Not that it was a lie. Grady had fucked the life out of him. And he'd wanted to tell them; that had been the whole point of bringing it up. But maybe saying it in front of two people who were so important to him was more daunting than he'd realised. "I plan on doing it again," he said, not wanting there to be any kind of misunderstanding.

"With the same guy or different?" Avery asked curiously as he returned to the room with the puppy firmly wrapped in a towel. All except for a tail hanging out the end that was vigorously wagging.

"Same guy." Another guy? Lake tried to picture it. Going to a club and picking up some buff dude to rail him. He wrinkled his nose. No, wasn't doing anything for him. Putting Grady in the same place? A shiver ran down his spine. He wondered if Grady would be up for that; going to a club together, pretending not to know one another, and then fucking in the bathroom.

He'd have to suggest it because his dick was more than onboard with that plan.

"Wow," Avery said. "That's... not how I thought tonight would go. Why?"

"Why what?" Lake asked, confused.

"Bro, I don't know if you noticed, but you're not gay? You've had more girlfriends than I can count on one hand, one of which I thought for sure you were going to settle down with. You've never even glanced at a guy?"

"I know that," Lake said defensively. "So what?" Was he not allowed to change his mind? Try something new? Why did he have to stay in one box just because he'd

started there? He could switch boxes if he wanted. He could even switch back. Why were thererules?

“I was just asking. No need to be defensive about it, asshat.”

“You’re an asshat.”

“Children,” Felix said mildly.

Avery glared at him. “Excuse me—” He cut off as Zach wrapped arms around his waist from behind and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Why this guy?” Felix asked.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Lake bit his lip as he thought about his answer. “He makes me feel safe.” He didn’t know how else to explain the warmth he got even just thinking about Grady.

Felix stopped wiping up the mess he’d made. “Is this the cop you’ve been hanging out with so much lately?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Lake tried to sneak a tart, even though he knew they still needed to go in the oven—he wasn’t that picky about what he ate.

“You fucked a cop?” Avery asked, his eyebrows raising.

“Why does his occupation matter?” Lake asked. If that were the case, people Grady knew could do the same thing with “you fucked a soldier”? It sounded ridiculous no matter which direction it came from.

“Peyton’s boyfriend’s detective partner?” Zach asked. He bit his lip as he thought. “Peyton always likes to make his life complicated. What was the guy’s name? We met him at our New Year’s Eve party, right? And you stayed the night at his place. And made ‘I’m in love’ faces at lunch. Grady?”

Lake was ignoring the comment about the faces. “Yeah, him.”

“I fucking knew it was more than friendship!” Zach said loudly, pointing a finger at Lake.

“It wasn’t until last night,” Lake said, refusing to give Zach the satisfaction of having been right. “We really were just friends.” Until they hadn’t been.

“Did he force you?” Zach asked dangerously, his brown eyes darkening.

“No!” Fuck no. “I wanted it, trust me.” Just thinking about it now made him want it again. He felt empty, physically and emotionally. Was that normal? He had no idea.

“And... what now?” Avery asked. He used one hand to take the lid off a jar shaped like a giant bone. He came out with a bone-shaped cookie treat that had Ares wriggling anew in his arms. Avery put him down and he flopped around as he kicked and got himself out of the towel. Avery handed him the treat and patted his head while he happily crunched on it.

“You’re supposed to get him to sit,” Felix said mildly.

“Oops?” Avery said innocently. Felix’s smile was pure indulgence, and Avery melted onto the floor.

Lake fake gagged. “You guys are sickening. You need a puke bucket in here.”

“It’s called the bin,” Zach suggested with a wide grin, all teeth.

“Don’t you dare throw up in our bin,” Felix warned.

Lake waggled his eyebrows, and Felix threw a stray piece of pastry at him. Lake ate it, because wasting food was a crime.

“Anyway, now I have no idea?” Lake said, picking the conversation back up. “Do I have to have a plan?” He’d left Grady’s that morning with plans to see each other tomorrow, and they’d been texting all day like normal. Nothing had changed except that the feel in the pit of his stomach had swirls of lust accompanying it now. Because when he saw Grady next, he could kiss him, and that thought had kept Lake company all day like an old friend.

“You’re really going to do it again?” Zach asked.

“Oh, yeah.” Once hadn’t been anywhere near enough. Lake wasn’t finished with Grady, far from it. Not to mention, since he considered Grady a close friend now, even if he didn’t want to sleep with him again—which he definitely did—it wasn’t like he would never see him again.

“That good?”

“Please don’t ask him that,” Avery groaned.

“Why not?”

“Because... I don’t know!” Avery sighed. “Please leave and go talk about my brother having sex in another room while I set the table and dish up tea.”

Lake ended up sitting cross-legged on the comfortable dog bed beside the couch, with Ares snuggled around him. Ares’ tail was wagging as he closed his eyes, enjoying the head scratches that Lake was giving him. Lake wondered if the tail ever stopped, or if it was just constantly turned on. He grinned at the image of a sleeping dog with a wagging tail.

“Did you bottom?” Zach asked as soon as he’d flopped onto the couch, spreading his legs and draping his arms across the back. “Because it sounds like...”

“Do you bottom?” Lake retorted.

“Hell yeah, I do.”

“Is it just a sex thing?” Felix asked, settling beside Zach.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you interested in pursuing a relationship with him, or are you just wanting to have sex with him? It’s really important in this situation to be clear up front about what you’re looking for. To avoid hurting either of you.”

“I...” Lake hadn’t really thought about that. Did he want to date Grady? His immediate reaction was a resounding yes, no hesitation. That would mean he was allowed to kiss and touch and have sex with him whenever he wanted, right? And no one else could. Grady would be for him alone, with no one else allowed to touch. And they could go places together. And it would be a given that they would have plans together. And he could sleep at Grady’s house any night he wanted. And text him all the time.

His heart skipped a beat.

They had been doing all of those things already.

“I think we’re... already dating?” That sounded... nice. Better than nice. It didn’t cause panic in him; it made him feel warm inside, and he couldn’t control the smile that brightened his face.

Zach snorted. “I’m not even surprised. You’re not really a casual sex kind of guy.”

“I could be!” Lake protested. If he wanted to have only a physical relationship with someone, he totally could. If he wanted. It was just that he didn’t, that was all.

Felix shook his head, his lips curled in fake mourning. “Sorry, Lake, but no. You always need a connection with a person before you’re interested in sleeping with them.”

“I’ve slept with people on the first date.”

“When you’ve had a connection with the person. Sometimes that connection doesn’t take six years to develop, genius,” Zach said. “Sociological studies show that—”

“No,” Lake said. “Shut up. Don’t want statistics. I deal with them at work enough as it is.”

Zach huffed but said, “Look, since he’s a guy, it probably took your body a bit longer to realise that you wanted to bone him.”

“Maybe,” Lake murmured. Is that what had happened? His mind had known he had a connection from the start, but it had taken his body a bit longer to catch up?

It seemed plausible, he guessed. The gender thing might have tripped him for a millisecond.

“Does he know you want to date him? Or are already dating?” Felix amended.

“Doubt it.” Lake hadn’t given him any reason to think that. Even the sex thing wouldn’t be a giant neon sign that said, “Wine and dine me, lover,” because sometimes sex was just sex. Maybe not with him—which he kind of knew about himself, though he’d never really thought about it much in depth—but lots of people had casual sex that didn’t go anywhere. Was that what Grady thought this would be? Lake wasn’t sure he liked that idea.

“Dinner’s ready!” Avery called out.

Lake scrambled off the dog bed, Ares hot on his heels. He'd been smelling that roast pork since he'd entered the house, and he was ready to eat.

The topics turned to more generic ones as they ate; Avery's shop and the fact he was still finding glitter hearts from his Valentine's Day decorations, even though he'd cleaned the place from top to bottom that day; the Black Hawk that Lake was still adamant had an issue that no one could see—it was not just in his head—and trying to convince Lake that he wanted one of the malamute puppies. It wasn't that he didn't want a dog. He did. It was just that it belonged with the whole marriage-and-kids vision he had of the future, not the right now. And he didn't know what the whole Grady thing meant for his vision either.

Lake let out a loud sigh and leaned back, patting the bulge in his stomach. "Food baby, acquired." The look Avery gave him was full of judgement, but Lake was too satiated to care. He wondered what Grady had for dinner. He should text him. He pulled out his phone and sent him a text.

"Stop feeding your peas to the dog," Zach said to Avery dryly.

"Did you see me do it?" Avery asked innocently.

"... No. But I know—"

"If you didn't see it, did it really happen?"

"Felix!" Zach sputtered.

"Don't drag me into this," was all Felix said.

Lake just chuckled as Ares moved under the table and nudged his wet nose against Lake's side. Lake scratched his head. "Sorry, buddy, I'm a good boy, and I eat all my

dinner.”

“Excuse me!” Avery said, his mouth dropping open. “That isn’t true.”

“Do you see any food left on my plate?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

“You’re a gutsnow, but you weren’t always.”

Lake just laughed. He ran his hands across Ares’ soft ears and bopped his nose. “Why Ares?” he asked curiously. He didn’t think that any of them were all that into Greek mythology.

“Quinn, one of Peyton’s boyfriends, has a beagle named Persephone,” Felix said. “And we liked it so... Ares.”

“God of war,” Lake murmured, patting the enthusiastic puppy’s head. “Fitting, probably, when he eats all your shoes, shits on the carpet, destroys a cushion, and then falls asleep in the wreckage.”

“Exactly!” Zach said brightly.

They spent the next few hours talking shit, sort of trying to watch a movie that consisted of popcorn throwing and random trivia questions that Zach wasn’t allowed to answer. Lake felt content and happy. It had been too long since he’d had a night with them, just being themselves. He’d missed them. Having Avery there only made it better; his brother and his best friends were happy, and Lake was happy for them, and having them all in the same room without all of the ugly tension they used to have was nice.

It was roughly eleven thirty when he finally called it a night and left.

He checked his phone before he started his car. Grady hadn’t responded to his text. What did that mean? Had he just not seen it?

Why did Lake care?

He started the car and pulled out of the drive, waving at where Felix was waiting for him to go. He bit his lip as he made his way home. Why did it matter if Grady hadn't answered his text? He'd been answering them all day, so it wasn't like they'd been incommunicado. Maybe he was working late, or doing his own thing, or had to go to bed early or—Lake sighed.

He wanted to see Grady. That's all there was to it. He'd only seen him that morning, but he needed to see him. To look at his gruff face and touch him and feel his heart beating. He didn't care what that meant. Lake just wanted to be near him.

He switched the indicator from left to right and headed for Grady's house instead of home. It was almost midnight, and he was probably asleep, but Lake ached for him, and he hoped that maybe some part of Grady did for him too.

He knocked instead of using his key. He'd used his key before, so he didn't know why it felt weird now. Maybe because he was so uncertain about what they were? What everything meant. How Grady felt.

Grady met him at the door with bed hair, wearing a pair of silk boxers and looking half asleep. They were kissing before the front door had even closed properly. Grady ended up fucking him against the door before taking him to bed and doing it again, making Lake scream so loud he was surprised Grady's neighbours didn't call the police. He fell asleep tucked against Grady's warm chest, with his hair tickling Lake's cheek and the soothing rise and fall lulling him into dreamland.

Grady poured the waffle batter into the maker and closed it, leaving it to sizzle while he grabbed out all the condiments. He stared blankly at the bench of items lined up as he tried not to panic.

He'd asked himself numerous times over the last three days what the fuck he was doing, and he still didn't have an answer. Lake had shown up Thursday night and then again Friday night and then... hadn't left. They couldn't keep their hands off each other now that they'd opened that gate. It was like they'd both been possessed. He took one look at Lake, and he had to touch him, fuck him, leave his scent on him.

Grady needed to stop it now before it went too far. He needed to travel back in time and stop it before Lake had kissed him, before they'd begun whatever the fuck this was. Hell, before they'd even met on New Year's Eve because that's really where it had all begun. They'd collided like two stars in the night sky and merged as one from that point, like a stellar collision.

"Morning," Lake mumbled behind him. A warm forehead pressed against his back, hands trailing down his sides. That was all it took to light Grady up. It wasn't just about his sex appeal; Lake made him bright on the inside, in too many ways. In all ways.

"Are you hungry?" Grady asked. He turned and pulled Lake into his arms. He ran a hand through his mussed hair and kissed his temple.

"Mmm," was all Lake said in response.

Grady ran kisses down Lake's cheek, across his jaw, and found his way to Lake's lips. Lake whimpered and melted against him as their tongues said good morning.

Grady gently nipped Lake's bottom lip as he let go. "Go sit down," he said, nudging Lake towards the kitchen table. "Are waffles okay for breakfast?"

Lake groaned as he all but collapsed into a chair. "Waffles sound like heaven." He turned, his hazel-brown eyes wide and endearing as he said, "And coffee?"

Grady should be immune to eyes like that. Not because he was exposed to them often—he didn't know anyone who had them or had used them against him, at least—but because he was a cop who had seen the most angelic of faces do the most horrific of things. A simple look shouldn't make him cave like this. He was supposed to be better than this.

But he still took Lake a coffee and a glass of juice, gave him another lingering kiss that had him aching in all his sensitive places, and made sure his soldier had enough to eat.

They were halfway through eating when Lake stopped chewing long enough to say, "I want to get a butt plug."

Grady spat his juice out over the table, having made the wrong decision to take a sip right before Lake opened his mouth. He should have known better by now. "Excuse me?" He grabbed some napkins from the middle of the table and wiped up the mess, glad he'd already finished eating.

"Think about it," Lake said eagerly, leaning forward. Grady had to quickly move Lake's plate of food out of the way before he put his chest in it.

"Think about what?" Grady asked. Lake wearing a butt plug? He was definitely thinking about it, now.

"I could wear it all day, and so when I got home all you'd have to do is pull it out and then fuck me. No prep required."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:36 am

Jesus Christ. If there was a world record for how quickly someone got a boner, Grady was sure that he'd just broken it. He shoved his plate out of the way, uncaring if it fell and broke, and hauled Lake up onto the table by his shirt, slanting their mouths desperately. He kissed Lake hungrily as he tugged him forward until his legs were spread either side of Grady's hips. He pulled at Lake's clothes until Lake was naked, splayed out on the table for him.

He spread Lake's thighs and then slid his arms under Lake's knees, pulling his ass into the air. Lake gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles going white as his chest heaved. His ass was fucking magnificent. The kind that bubble butts could only dream of. Round, squeezable, biteable. Grady had a hard time looking away from it whenever Lake turned around. Knowing that he could touch now was mouth-watering.

Their eyes locked for a fraction of a second that felt like a lifetime. What this man did to Grady transcended everything. He would be nothing but broken pieces floating in space when Lake decided his experimentation was over.

And he couldn't make himself stop, even knowing what waited for him at the end of the tunnel.

Grady squeezed his fingers in Lake's ample flesh and spread the cheeks before he leaned in and buried his face between Lake's plump, round cheeks like a man starving. He licked around Lake's hole, massaging the muscles with his tongue before he suctioned his lips around it.

"Oh, fuck!" Lake cried out. His legs curled around Grady's arms, and he arched,

pushing his ass up. “God, that tongue. How many people have you broken with that tongue?”

It didn't seem like he wanted an answer since he continued to talk; some of it in English, some in a language Grady was sure didn't exist. Grady ignored all of it as he licked and sucked, swirling his tongue around Lake's rim before pushing in. He inhaled the musky scent of him and kept a tight hold on his legs to minimise the squirming as he ate him out. He tasted so fucking good, and Grady could have done it forever. Except he desperately needed to get his dick inside him as well. Craved it on a level that should have scared him. Did, if he was honest.

“Why is this so good?” Lake asked hoarsely. “It's so dirty.”

Grady licked up Lake's perineum and sucked lightly on his balls. Lake bucked up with another cry, straining against Grady's hold. It made Grady ache deep in his groin, his dick pushing against his zipper and demanding to be let out to play. All of the sounds that Lake made—even the ridiculous sentences that came out of his mouth—turned him on even more. He'd never been so desperate to get his hands all over someone.

He lowered Lake to the table so he could get a finger against his hole, spreading his spit around. He pressed just the tip in, teasing him. “Is this what you want?”

“Your fingers are pretty talented,” Lake said, smiling up at him even as he tried to push down and take more of Grady's finger in, “but it's your dick I like best.”

Grady couldn't remember being with anyone who was so eager for it. And especially not a formerly straight male who was so badly gagging for it. It shouldn't have given him as much male satisfaction as it did. But seeing Lake spread out like this, with flushed cheeks, a leaking dick, waiting for Grady to fuck him? If there was a better sight in the world, he hadn't seen it.

“Fuck,” Grady cursed. “I don’t have lube and a condom out here. Stay there, I’ll go get some.”

“No. I have... in my pocket,” Lake gasped. “I put some... in my pocket.”

Grady paused. “Why?”

“Is this really the time to ask questions?”

Okay, good point. Grady reached down and searched Lake’s pocket, coming out with a small tube of slick, two condoms, and a small fun-size bag of M&M’s. He lifted the chocolates in silent question, one eyebrow raised.

“It’s good to be prepared. And they’re my favourite.”

Grady ripped the packet open with his teeth and then carefully spilled them out onto Lake’s flat stomach. He picked up a green one and placed it on top of Lake’s lips. “Don’t eat it.”

Heat flared in Lake’s eyes. Grady popped a red one into his mouth and loudly crunched as he lubed up two fingers. “If any of them fall onto the table, then I stop. Understand?”

Lake’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and he nodded slightly, careful not to let the M&M on his lips fall.

Grady circled Lake’s rim, pushing lightly against the muscles. He pushed just the tip of his thumb in and then out, teasing him.

Lake moaned deeply, and Grady glanced up at his face. “Is it too tender?” They’d spent most of yesterday in bed, and Grady knew he’d used Lake far more than he

should have. “Tap once if it is, twice if it isn’t. There are other things we can do if you are, I promise.”

He waited for Lake to do two taps in quick succession before he pushed the fingers into Lake’s greedy hole without preamble.

The chocolates wobbled on Lake’s stomach but didn’t fall.

Grady leaned down and licked around them, making circles on Lake’s skin. He sucked one into his mouth and let it rest under his tongue, melting. Careful not to jostle the rest, he coaxed Lake’s mouth open, the green chocolate falling inside. They shared the taste between them as the casing disintegrated and the heated chocolate spread.

He slowly pumped his fingers in and out of Lake as he kissed him. When he slipped in a third, Lake gasped into his mouth, and he heard the telltale ping from M&M’s hitting the wooden table. Lake cried out as Grady found his sweet spot and stroked it on every thrust as he stretched Lake’s abused hole. There were more ping ping sounds until Grady was sure there couldn’t be any more chocolates left on Lake’s stomach.

Grady lifted his head and clicked his tongue. “Uh-oh.”

Lake’s head fell back against the table with a thud. “Fuck. Shit.” Grady slid his fingers out of Lake’s hole, and Lake whined. “No. Don’t stop, please.”

Grady kissed his hip, nipping gently and making Lake squirm underneath him. He picked up a nearby chocolate and pressed it against Lake’s lips, pushing it into his mouth. Lake licked his lips, watching Grady carefully.

“Are you ready for me?”

Lake bit his lip and spread his legs even wider. “I’m always ready for you.”

Goddamn. Grady quickly sheathed his cock before haphazardly spreading lube over it. He hadn’t prepped Lake nearly enough for this not to be at least a little painful, not to mention tender, but none of that stopped him from pressing his head against Lake’s muscles and pushing in.

Lake clutched his shoulders and lifted his legs to Grady’s shoulders, urging him on as he worked himself into Lake’s tight heat. Fucking hell. It was almost too hot, burning like a sauna and wrapping around him like a vice.

He worked his way in with shallow thrusts, at least trying to be gentle. He looked down at where Lake was so beautifully taking him in. Watching Lake’s hole stretch around his cock every time he slid in was mesmerising. The way he took Grady in so eagerly.

“Faster,” Lake demanded breathlessly.

“Don’t rush me, I’m looking.”

Lake’s ass clenched tight around him. Grady ran a hand over Lake’s hip and fisted Lake’s leaking cock, stroking it in time with his slow thrusts.

Lake gripped Grady’s forearms, his fingers digging in. “Is this sex or torture?”

“You tell me.” Grady sped up just a little, still watching his dick move in and out.

“Harder,” Lake begged, lifting his legs and wrapping them around Grady’s waist, trying to urge him on.

“Not every time has to be rough,” Grady said. He slowed down again, feeling every inch of Lake in excruciating detail as he pulled out until just his head was inside and then back in to bottom out. He did it over and over again until Lake was cursing his name and creating half-crescent-nail shaped bruises in his skin.

Grady kept up his steady pace, jerking Lake with the same speed until Lake cried out and spilled all over his stomach and Grady’s hand. Grady followed him quickly, unable to stop his own orgasm from hitting, hard.

Lake’s hands slipped from his forearms, and his legs dropped to dangle over the side of the table as he slumped back against it, dragging in ragged breaths.

Grady couldn’t help but stare. Lake made a pretty picture, flushed and fucked into pliancy. He was stunning, and something deep inside Grady’s heart ached watching him.

Fuck. Every time Grady told himself to pull back and put some distance between them, Grady seemed to do something to make it worse, not better.

“Lake, we need to talk.”

“The worst four words in history. Are you breaking up with me?” Lake teased.

Breaking up with him? Jesus fucking Christ. “We have to be dating for us to break up,” he said. He couldn’t allow it to go that far. That sounded like the worst decision in a string of bad decisions he’d been making lately.

Lake winced as he pulled out. Grady tried to be gentle, but he would be too sore for anything near his ass not to hurt.

“Are you breaking up with me, though?” Lake asked, his voice sounding small. He sat up on the table, making no move to get off or cover himself. Grady swallowed as he stared down at the cum spattered across his chest, at the stickiness drying on his hand. He wanted to lick it off and then kiss Lake, share the taste of it.

Grady made himself take a step back. And tuck himself back into his pants before zipping himself up. It was wet and uncomfortable, and he needed to have a shower and change said pants, but that could wait.

“Lake,” he said, trying to sound rational because it sounded like Lake wasn’t going to be. “There’s nothing to break up. We’re not... this isn’t...” He couldn’t even finish the sentence, which was a fucking terrible sign.

Lake shrugged, folding his hands in his lap awkwardly. “I can only speak for myself, of course, but for me? Yeah, I think there’s something that can be broken here. This isn’t just about sex for me. I love having sex with you, don’t get me wrong. More than love it. I would sit on your dick all day if I could get away with it,”—Grady really needed him not to say things like that if he was going to keep his head—“but I really like the other stuff too. I like being around you and seeing you every day and going to sleep with you at night. Waking up with you in the morning. Sharing a morning kiss, having coffee together while my brain cells try to resurrect.” His smile was shaky. “I like being able to text you during the day and getting your snarky responses. They make me smile and make my day brighter.”

Holyfuckingshit. Had Grady gotten himself a boyfriend?

How did that happen without him noticing? How had this happened?

Grady ran a hand through his hair, grimacing as he remembered too late about the dried cum and lube on it. Definitely needed a shower now. “We can’t date.”

Lake blinked at him, and he didn't look adorable. “Why not?”

The question sounded innocuous, naïve even, but it was loaded with so many complications. “The first thing that springs to mind is the fact that up until less than a week ago, you were straight?” Grady suggested. Were they really having “the talk” while Grady had lube in his hair, and Lake was naked? Of course they were. Grady didn't even know why he was surprised.

“So?” Lake grabbed his underwear and pants and tugged them on so at least Grady could concentrate better. “That means I’m not allowed to try? Did I get locked out with my straightness?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“You’re making it sound far simpler than it really is,” Grady said quietly. “Dating isn’t something you just walk into because it feels good.”

“Isn’t that kind of the whole point?” Lake asked, giving Grady an incredulous look. “People wouldn’t do it if it didn’t feel good!”

Grady moved away from Lake because he needed distance and a clearer head. He grabbed a washcloth and rinsed it before handing it to Lake.

“Let me get this straight—” Lake cut off with a laugh, borderline hysterical as he wiped his chest down with agitated strokes. “Sorry, bad choice of words. As long as we were justfucking,you were okay with it, but the second that I add the word ‘dating,’ there’s suddenly a problem?”

“That shouldn’t have happened.”

“Which time?” Lake asked. “The first night where you took my ‘gay’ virginity? Or Thursday night when you fucked metwiceand made me see stars both times? Or yesterday when you spent hours driving me insane? Or just then when you fucked my ass with yourtongue? Let’s be specific here.”

“None of this should have happened,” Grady said, scowling. “A few rolls in the hay and suddenly you’re ready to date a man?”

“Don’t youdarerreduce it to that!” Lake spat. “What thefuck?”

Guilt was creeping up Grady’s throat at the pain in Lake’s eyes, but he refused to

allow it to take hold. He wasn't wrong in his stance, and he wouldn't back down. "You haven't had enough experimentation yet? You wanna really deep dive into it, get the full experience before you decide it's not for you?"

"You asshole!" Lake shoved him, and Grady was so surprised he stumbled back a few steps. "You really think so little of me that you think I would do that? That I would just jump in without care for either of our feelings?"

"You don't exactly have a filter, Lake. You make decisions based on the moment."

"So fucking what? That means I don't know what I want? I'm not them, and you can't keep painting me with the same brush!"

"You can't guarantee that you won't change your mind." The crux of the problem, really.

"No one can give that, no matter what their sexuality. People break up all the time, for a lot of reasons. Does that mean we shouldn't bother to try?"

"Dating and sex are not the same thing, no matter how you're trying to rationalise it." Grady didn't care how Lake was looking at him, he was in the right here. Having sex a few times and then saying "nah, not for me," would hurt a hell of a lot less than if they pretended feelings were involved.

"Grady, I like you and not in a 'hey, we're friends' way, okay? You're so fucking dense! Stop focusing on what I am."

"I'm not interested in dating. Not with you or anyone," Grady lied, feeling his heart sink into his stomach. He couldn't let this happen. Whatever Lake thought he was feeling, he was wrong. It was just the euphoria speaking. He was having fun now, but the reality of not just dating another man, but dating him, would soon give him second

thoughts that Grady didn't think he could recover from. Not if he didn't stop this now. He'd been engaged to be married to someone he'd thought loved him just as he was, and his heart had been ripped out. He'd been taken in by a sweet smile and dimples when he'd met Mal and thought that Kyle had been an anomaly, and maybe he wasn't so unlovable after all. He'd been wrong. He wasn't going to stand around and wait until Lake came to the same conclusion.

Lake deflated, clutching the front of his shirt and twisting it between his fists. "I thought we were friends."

"We are friends," Grady said. He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. "And that's where it should have stayed. There should have been boundaries, and I'm sorry that I wasn't firmer with them."

Lake pursed his lips, his eyes looking impossibly big. "Right. Friends. Okay. We can..." He shrugged. "Just be friends again. Easy, right? It was great when it was just friends."

It was going to be far from easy, but Grady knew it was the right decision even if his hands itched to trace Lake's face, even if his lips ached to kiss him just once more. Once more before he let go.

Lake let out a breath. "I should go; I told Mum I'd go see her today to help her with some stuff." He hesitated. "Tomorrow afternoon, we're having a friendly basketball match with friends and family on base. Uh, since we're friends and everything, did you... did you want to..."

Grady clenched his hands into fists at his side to stop from reaching out and comforting Lake. All he wanted to do was wrap him in his arms, apologise, and tell him that he could have whatever he wanted as long as he stopped looking at him like that.

“Yeah, I can come. Text me the details?”

“Sure. Okay. Um. Maybe I’ll text you later?”

Grady nodded, and then Lake was gone. He flinched when the front door closed with a quiet snick.

Usually spending time in the air soothed Lake. His favourite parts of the day were when he was flying a bird—and giving shit to his poor co-pilot and any unsuspecting passengers who thought they were in the air with a sane pilot.

He’d spent almost six hours in the air that day, and the agitation deep in his gut was still there. Normally it was enough to soothe any anxiety he might have been feeling, but today it had been nowhere near enough.

Lake sat himself in the passenger doorway, his legs hanging over the edge and his boots flat on the concrete as he filled out the flight report, waiting for the bird to cool down so he could get someone to look at it.

The strokes of his pen were harder than necessary, and the paper on the flimsy clipboard suffered for it. He was adamant this Hawk had something wrong with it. He didn’t fucking care how many times they’d looked it over.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Zach approached cautiously and leaned an arm up above the opening, hovering over Lake. “You look like someone kicked your cat.”

“I don’t have a cat,” Lake mumbled. Does maintenance need to do a check of the aircraft? Yes. Fucking triple yes. Check it a-goddamn-gain. He underlined his words four times and then drew an arrow pointing to it.

“You should stop flying this thing if you hate it so much. Seriously, man, there’s nothing wrong with it. I’ve checked it myself, fivetimes now. If someone in engineering sees that, they’re going to stick something uncomfortable up your ass. I know you’re into that now, but I don’t think they’re gonna make it as pleasant for you as your friend did.”

Lake glared up at one of his oldest friends. “Do you have something constructive to tell me? If not, kindly fuck off somewhere else.”

Zach’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “What’s going on with you? Combative isn’t your style.”

“Nothing,” Lake muttered, going back to his report. The pen went through the paper, and he sighed before angrily dropping the clipboard next to himself. He’d need to grab a fresh set from inside.

Zach settled next to him and nudged his shoulder. “Talk to me.”

“He doesn’t want to date,” Lake burst out.

Zach looked confused for a second. Understanding dawned. “Oh. Your guy? Grady?”

“No, Franklin from admin,” Lake said dryly.

“All right, no need to bite my head off. I didn’t know you were interested in Franklin. I could have gotten you his number.” Lake didn’t laugh, and Zach sighed. He rubbed the nape of Lake’s neck, gently massaging. “What do you mean, he doesn’t want to date?”

“So we spent Saturday together, and I stayed the night, and we had so much sex you can’t even imagine. But then on Sunday morning—after another round of sex—he—”

“How’s your ass feeling today?” Zach asked, shocked.

“Sore. That’s not the point, Zachary.” He was feeling tender every time he sat down, or shifted, and it had been a strange kind of hell. It sent pleasure tingling up his spine every time he felt it, both because it was strangely pleasant, and also because it reminded him of how he’d gotten that sore to begin with. But then he remembered that Grady wasn’t going to help keep the soreness from going away. That once it faded, that would be it. The idea of finding someone else to sleep with that wasn’t Grady felt all kinds of wrong to him. “The point is that I thought the natural progression was that we should date because I don’t just want him for sex. I like him, like him. I ticked yes, you know?”

“Okay, I think I’m following.”

“But he just wants to be friends.”

“That’s his choice, isn’t it?”

“It’s mine too,” Lake said irritably. “I don’t think it’s fair for him to use the fact that

I've only ever dated women before him against me."

"You said his last boyfriend cheated on him, right? And the boyfriend before that, who he was engaged to—which is a big deal, Lake—cheated on him as well, except with a woman?"

"So what? I'm not either of those shitbags, and I thought we knew each other well enough by now that he would know I'm not like that." It wasn't that Lake didn't understand why Grady had reservations. But Lake had been nothing but honest about his feelings, and didn't Grady trust him enough to know that Lake would never cheat or try to hurt him? Lake was pretty sure he was half in love with the guy. Cheating was the last thing on his mind. He just wanted to see where it could go. Was the idea of dating Lake so horrifying that Grady didn't even want to try?

"Sometimes fears are hard to let go of," Zach said.

"Yeah, but it's me." Grady should already know that Lake wouldn't do that.

"Maybe he just needs time?"

"Maybe I'm just good for a fuck but not for a relationship," Lake said, trying not to let the bitterness leak into his tone.

"Whoa, hey. That's not fair. To you or him. He let you stick around like a leech for months before this. If he didn't like you as a person, I doubt he would have kept letting you sleep in his bed, drink all his liquor, and eat all his food."

"Because we're friends. And that's all he wants to be."

"Well, you're my friend, and I don't let you sleep in my bed, so at least you guys have something unique going on?"

“I have slept in your bed,” Lake mumbled. “You just weren’t in it. It’s hard to fuck with Felix like rabbits with a third. Oh, wait...” Lake gave him a sly smile.

“Do you really want me to start waxing poetic about Avery’s ass and tongue?”

Lake scowled, hating that his bluff had been called. Then he huffed and deflated. He hopped off the bird and picked up the clipboard. Hewasgoing to fill out another form because fuck engineering to the depths of hell.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Zach stood as well and put his arm around Lake's shoulders, pulling him close as they walked. "Sorry, man. But at least you didn't lose your friendship with him?"

"I guess," Lake mumbled. But what did that even mean now, though? Had they ruined it by adding sex? Lake didn't want to think like that, because it had been phenomenal sex, and even now, with the lingering soreness and echoes of Grady's fingerprints on his skin, he only wanted more. Wanted to feel Grady's marks on him always. He loved the friendship they'd created, the closeness they had that Lake didn't have with anyone else, but he'd also enjoyed getting railed.

So where did that leave him? Why couldn't they have both? What was so wrong with dating your best friend? Zach and Felix did it, and it had worked out for them in so many ways.

"He's coming to basketball tonight, right?" Zach said. "Avery said he was?"

"As my friend," Lake said. It was a friendly get-together on base they did once a month where they played a few rounds of basketball—with no rules—and then went out for dinner at a random place selected on the fly. Usually the winners got to pick.

Partners and friends came. Lake might have wanted Grady to fit into the former, but at least he still fit into the latter? He hoped that Grady didn't pull out because, no matter what, Lake wanted to see him.

FELIX HAD BEEN THE one to go and pick up their invites at the front gates of the military base, but Lake would have been lying if he'd said he hadn't been tense from the moment that Felix had left to get them.

Knowing that he was so close to seeing Grady again. The anticipation was all wrong for just seeing a friend. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and his ass clenched, telling him exactly what it wanted.

Friends. We're friends, he chanted to himself. That's all Grady wanted, and Lake had to respect that.

He almost tripped over his own feet when Zach shifted around him and stole the basketball he'd been absently dribbling.

"Pay attention, or we're going to get owned," Zach said, slapping his exposed chest with a loud snap from the sweat already covering it.

Lake scowled, rubbing the spot. "You're supposed to beat up your opponents, not your teammates," he grumbled.

"It's my motivational speech."

"Is that why they never promote you?"

Zach winked and then did a perfect three-point shot at the line. "At least I still have my skills. What do you have left?"

"A great ass," Lake said.

Zach snorted and threw the ball at him. "I'd prefer if you could shoot. Do you know how much bragging I had to listen to last time Felix won one of these?"

"Felix doesn't brag."

"No, but it was in his eyes."

“You’re so full of shit.” If anyone bragged it was Zach, on the rare occasion they actually managed to win against the spec-ops team.

Lake froze as the Rover Felix had left in turned the corner and came closer. His gaze zeroed in on Grady the moment he stepped out of the car. He’d worn a loose-fitting grey top and comfortable-looking black shorts. Fuck, he was big, and Lake wanted to climb him like a tree. Wanted to wrap his legs around his waist and have him buried deep inside him. He knew just how powerful Grady’s legs were, how well those arms could hold him down while he fucked him.

Grady looked Lake up and down in a blatantly obvious way, and Lake had no idea if he was unaware, or if he didn’t care if anyone saw. He lingered on Lake’s bare chest and then moved up to his face. Lake swallowed, his body turning to at the heated look in Grady’s eyes. Whatever Grady’s mouth said, his eyes said something very different. He looked like he wanted to take Lake around the side of the hangar and fuck him against the hot metal.

Lake wouldn’t have said no. In fact, if he spoke right now, he knew that all that would come out of his mouth was a whimpering plea to please, please, do it.

Jesus. Lake looked away. Friends. They were just friends. If he kept repeating it to himself enough, maybe he could convince himself. Eventually, if he said it enough, it had to be true. Right? That’s what they said anyway. Anyone could convince themselves of a reality just through repetition and the power of the mind.

“Is this a shirts and skins?” Avery asked. His once-over of Zach was even more obvious than Grady’s, and Lake fake gagged, looking away. The corner of Grady’s mouth quirked, his olive eyes shining a little brighter in the afternoon sun.

“It is not,” Zach said, tugging Avery forward and landing a hard kiss on his mouth. “It’s let’s just remember who our teammates are. Think you can handle that?”

“You might need to repeat it for me,” Avery said.

“I can repeat it for you,” Zach said in a low voice. Lake wished he weren’t close enough to still hear. “I can even give positive reinforcement if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“I could be into it.”

Lake rolled his eyes and sidestepped around where his brother and his best friend were making a spectacle of themselves. Felix was watching them with heat in his eyes, so Lake avoided him too.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“The honeymoon period is nauseating,” he said to Grady, trying to smile at him like nothing had changed, when the reality of it was everything had changed. But he would make this work. He would bury it all down so far, he wouldn’t be able to see it anymore, just to be able to keep this friendship.

“It can be,” Grady said, glancing down at Lake’s lips in a way that made Lake’s stomach clench. Did friends look at each other like that?

“Hi,” Lake said awkwardly. “Uh...” Why was this so fucking awkward? “Are friends allowed to hug?” he asked, trying desperately not to inhale so he could take in Grady’s scent. He just needed to touch. One touch, that was all. One touch and then he would be fine.

Grady hesitated and then nodded.

Lake had meant for it to be a quick hug. A cursory pat on the back and then remove himself from Grady’s space. The second he had his arms around Grady, everything shifted. He clung to Grady’s back as Grady slid one arm around his waist and threaded a hand through his hair. He buried his face in the crook of Grady’s shoulder and breathed in deeply.

He could have sworn Grady whispered “fuck” in his ear. It heated Lake from the inside. He didn’t care if he’d imagined it. The idea that Grady was struggling as hard with this as he was, was gratifying.

When he pulled back to look up at Grady, their lips were almost touching.

“You’re not wearing dog tags,” Grady murmured.

“They’re only for deployments and field exercises,” Lake said. “Identification purposes, not everyday wear. Pop culture has a lot to answer for.”

“A shame.”

Lake could feel Grady’s breath against his lips. All he had to do was lean forward. He wanted to, so badly, his pulse ratcheting up as he glanced down. It would barely take—

A clearing throat nearby had Lake jerking away. Some of the other guys on the court were looking at him with questions in their eyes. Zach’s look was particularly speculative.

Lake pulled out of Grady’s arms and hoped his smile wasn’t as wobbly as it felt. “Ready to get your asses kicked?”

Felix put an arm around Grady’s shoulders and smiled. “Only one team is getting their asses kicked.”

“Yeah, yours.”

“Bring it on, big brother,” Avery said.

It was on.

In the end, they tried to split everyone evenly, with partners on opposite sides as well as friends. They had uneven team numbers, but an extra was given to Lake and Zach’s team because the spec-ops guys had an advantage anyway, just by being who they were.

Lake ended up being a defensive point guard, with Grady as the offensive. As they got into position, with Grady at his back, Lake couldn't help but push back a little, his ass brushing Grady's front. Grady's hands gripped his hips for a hot second, squeezing before letting go. A rapid hot flash ran through Lake.

The second that the match started, Lake was off, glancing behind him with a wicked grin as he moved into the best position for Zach to get the ball to him or through him to Lucas Walsh—Tyler's husband and Zach's brother-in-law—who was playing power forward. Grady kept up with him, surprisingly fast for a guy his size. Lake didn't know if the constant touching and finger grazes were deliberate, but he really fucking hoped so. Grady was driving him insane, and his body was on fire.

Zach twisted around Felix, landing a cheeky kiss on his shoulder as he passed and threw to Lake, who caught it and jerked around to get past Danny, Keegan Erickson backing him up as scoring guard. Grady crowded behind him, and the graze of fingers against his ass was definitely deliberate and enough to distract Lake and allow Tyler to slip past with the ball in his thieving hands.

"Interference," Lake hissed at Grady.

"Prove it," Grady said, blowing him an air kiss.

Oh. Grady was going down. Insanely turned on or not, that was a challenge that Lake couldn't just let go.

The next time they were close together, Lake turned just enough to press his hip against Grady's groin, feeling the semi-hardness waiting there for him. He hovered his cheek against Grady's chest and whispered, "You want my ass? All you have to do is ask, Grady, and I'll bend over for you."

Grady tripped over his own feet, and Lake used the advantage to snatch the ball from

Felix and throw to Keegan, who was open. He got it to Lucas, and they scored. Lucas used the opportunity to rag on his husband, who watched with amusement. Well... Lake thought it was amusement. It was hard to tell with Tyler. The guy was a rock. He did seem to love Lucas, though.

In the end, the spec-ops guys completely owned them, but they'd held pretty steady and got enough points in the game that they could be proud of the fight they'd put up. Lake knew by the end he'd been utterly useless, his only focus on Grady and how often they found a reason to be touching. Lake didn't know what Grady was feeling, but since neither of them could say they'd contributed to any of the points, he would say they were in the same position.

Why was Grady so adamant that they could only be friends when he clearly wanted more? When they both did? Lake couldn't accept that it all ended here.

He couldn't.

Well, that had been the most excruciating few hours of Grady's life. If Lake had told Grady when he'd invited him that he was going to be parading around half naked for this, sweaty and with his ass being shoved into Grady's hip every two seconds because he didn't understand that basketball was supposed to be a non-contact sport, he would have found some reason to say no. Any reason, no matter how implausible it was. Anything to have avoided the entire thing.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Lake had been lovely to look at before, especially that ass. But now that Grady knew how it felt, how it tasted, knew what sounds Lake made as Grady played with him? Lake was like a glass of ice-cold water in a desert. And Grady was thirsty.

He tipped his head back in the communal showers, being very careful to turn away from where Lake was showering in his own cubicle not that far away. He stayed under for a long time, long after everyone else had left with plans to meet at their chosen restaurant in half an hour. He needed a few minutes to get himself together, find his balance again.

Footsteps sounded near him, but he ignored them, figuring they were coming in to shower. They were on a busy military base, after all. Lake or Felix would be waiting outside for him, to escort him to the visitors' car park where his car was.

His eyes flew open when the footsteps stopped too close to him. All his blood rushed south in an instant as he raked his gaze over Lake's naked body.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He was proud of the way his voice stayed steady when he felt anything but. Lake was already hard, his cock jutting up like a delicious invitation.

Lake didn't say a word—which was disconcerting all on its own because it was Lake—and simply dropped to his knees in front of Grady.

"Careful," Grady said hoarsely, his heart skipping a beat. Tiles were unforgiving on joints.

Lake didn't respond to that either. Instead, he ran his fingers up Grady's legs before resting them on his thighs. He was staring at Grady's dick like a man starving.

Grady gripped Lake's hair and pulled his head back, forcing him to look up. "What are you doing?" he repeated.

Lake licked his lips, his cheeks flushed, drops of water running down them and then further, down his neck and his hard chest. He looked far too tempting on his knees.

"I want to," Lake whispered, his fingers digging into Grady's flesh with a pleasant sting. "Teach me."

"We shouldn't. We said friends only, Lake." And yet, Grady couldn't let go of his hair, didn't step away. Couldn't have even if his life depended on it.

"What, friends don't suck each other's dicks?" Lake asked cheekily.

"You know they don't." Not in either of their friend spheres, and they knew it.

Lake licked his bottom lip, and Grady knew he'd done it deliberately. Lake knew exactly what that move would do to Grady. And if he hadn't, the way that Grady was thickening right in front of his face was a good indicator of just what it was doing to him.

He should have said no. Stuck to his guns. They'd agreed to be friends only. Friends didn't suck each other's cocks, no matter what that smart mouth said. No matter how much he wanted to slide into that wet heat and be the only dick to have ever gone there.

Instead he removed one of Lake's hands from his thigh and guided it to his hard length, encouraging him to wrap his fingers around it. He squeezed to show Lake the

pressure he liked.

“Spit,” he ordered, his voice nothing but gravel.

Lake spat on the end of Grady’s dick, and Grady moved Lake’s hand up to spread it around. He kept his hand over Lake’s and pumped slowly up and down.

He lifted his hand, and Lake kept going, twisting his wrist on every upward stroke, applying more pressure at the base and then easing as he moved up, mimicking the motions that Grady had shown him. He was far from perfect, but Grady didn’t care. Lake had his hand on Grady’s dick, and that was all that mattered to him.

“Yeah, just like that,” Grady praised. He put his free hand in Lake’s hair and cradled his head, looking into Lake’s beautiful hazel-brown eyes. He shifted his hand and ran a thumb over Lake’s bottom lip. He wanted them wrapped around him.

“Lick the head. Don’t take it into your mouth yet,” Grady said.

Lake obeyed instantly and swirled his tongue over Grady’s head, pushing into the slit the same way Grady had the first time he’d sucked Lake’s dick. Grady slapped his free hand against the tiling beside him to stop from falling. Fuck, the idea that he was the only man that got to experience this? To be the first cock in that gorgeous, plump mouth? Whatever they’d agreed to, Grady didn’t care, because he needed to be the first. He wouldn’t give anyone else the opportunity to have this. It belonged to him.

“If at any point it’s too much, if you need me to slow down or stop, tap my thigh, understand?”

Lake nodded, not taking his eyes off Grady’s dick.

Grady added a little pressure to Lake’s head, urging him forward. Lake took the hint,

relaxing under his touch and allowing Grady to move him as he opened his mouth. Seeing those lips stretch around him was going to play on repeat in his brain for a long time.

Lake tried to take him all the way down in one quick slide and made himself choke.

“Careful,” Grady said, easing Lake back with the hold on his hair. “You don’t have to take it all. Use your hand at the base for what you can’t reach.”

“Is that an ‘I’m a mouthful’ joke?” Lake asked, grinning lazily.

“It’s a ‘you’re a beginner, and I don’t have a small dick.’ It’s also your first dick, Lake; take your time. It’s about more than just deep throating.” Grady caressed his thumb over Lake’s throat. “Take your time; you have to enjoy it too.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“You don’t think I’m enjoying it?”

Grady slid the head of his cock across Lake’s mouth, leaving a smear of pre-cum.
“Show me how much you like it.”

Lake seemed to take that as a personal challenge. He closed his eyes and descended on Grady like a man starving, licking and sucking him down enthusiastically.

“Look at you,” Grady murmured softly, stroking Lake’s hair as he watched as his dick slid in and out of Lake’s mouth. He wished they had a mirror so Lake could see himself on his knees like this. It was an experience that Grady would never forget.

Lake moaned as he opened his eyes and looked up, locking onto Grady. He slowed down as their gazes held, sliding his tongue on the underside of Grady’s cock as he lifted his head and then lowered it again. Grady almost came right then.

Lake continued to work him over, using his hand to jerk him at the base as he bobbed up and down. His technique was sloppy but enthusiastic, and he kept trying to take too much, tears forming at the corner of his eyes. It wasn’t the most skilled blowjob that Grady had ever received, but it was still number one. Because the man on his knees with his dick in his mouth was Lake, and that changed everything. Made it clearer, sharper, twisting his insides until the only thing he could feel was Lake, nestled deep and there to stay.

“Grady, you still in here?” Zach called out, his head popping through the door that led to the locker room.

Grady looked up in surprise, trying to mask the way he'd jolted in fright. He'd completely forgotten where they were and that someone could walk in on them at any point. His fingers tightened in Lake's hair. "Yes?"

Zach looked around the room. "Have you seen Lake?"

Lake pulled off and licked his way down Grady's length, then down to his balls, rolling them around with his tongue.

"No," Grady said, keeping his voice steady. "He left already." He was very careful not to even glance down, even though he wanted to give Lake a stern look, because what the hell did he think he was doing? The point was not to get caught.

"Weird. I didn't see him. All right. Thanks. If you see him, can you let him know that we've gone to check on Ares, and then we'll be at the restaurant?"

"Will—" His breath hitched as Lake suckled the head of his dick in his mouth, suctioning. Fuck, what did he look like doing that? Were his cheeks hollowed out? Grady desperately wanted to look down, had to tighten his fingers further in Lake's hair to stop himself. It had to have hurt, but Lake only sucked harder. "Will do," Grady said to Zach, though he had a feeling his hiccup hadn't gone unnoticed.

Zach tilted his head, gave a sly smile, and then left.

Shit. They'd absolutely been busted.

Grady glared at Lake, who was staring innocently up at him. It might have worked if he didn't have a dick in his mouth and was still twirling his tongue around it.

Grady eased his grip on Lake's hair and threaded his fingers through the thick strands, soothing his scalp. "He knows you were on your knees in here, sucking my

dick,” he said, his voice thick. He began thrusting lightly, feeling his balls tighten. “I bet he knows just how much you like it, how much you’re fucking gagging for it right now.”

Lake’s eyes slid shut as he moaned and sucked harder.

Grady couldn’t look away as he felt his orgasm building. “You need to pull off,” he groaned, using Lake’s hair to try to tug him back. Lake fought against him, speeding up, his head rapidly rising and lowering as he pumped his fist faster in sync.

Fuck.Fuck.“Lake, if you don’t pull off, I’m going to come in your mouth.”

If anything, Lake sped up further, a determined tilt to his chin.

Fucking hell.He wanted Grady to come in his mouth.

Grady cupped Lake’s cheeks as he thrust, trying not to choke him. Lake was as eager for it as he was when Grady was in his ass, moans vibrating around Grady’s length and making small noises as he sucked. Grady’s hold tightened as his body seized. He grunted as he spilled into Lake’s mouth, trying not to make too much noise because there was enough of it echoing in the tiled room.

Lake tried to swallow and take it all, but some dribbled out of the side of his mouth. He licked Grady’s dick as he lifted his head, then spent the next few moments lapping at his head, cleaning all the release off Grady’s dick. Grady swiped the cum on his chin and fed it to him, swallowing hard as Lake sucked lightly on Grady’s thumb as he flicked his tongue across it.

“Are you going to take me home?” Lake asked, rising to his feet as he licked his lips clean, his tongue darting out the side to try and get anything that Grady might have missed. Grady hadn’t missed anything. He’d wanted to watch Lake eat all of it.

“Yes,” Grady growled, pulling him into a bruising kiss, tasting himself on Lake’s tongue. God fucking help him, but yes. It had only been that morning that he’d had Lake under him, less than twenty-four hours, but it had felt so much longer. They’d agreed it was the last time, but Grady was kidding himself if he thought he was done with this. If either of them was.

They were far from over.

Lake flopped his arms across Grady’s bed, utterly spent. He tried to suck in breaths as he stared up at the ceiling. Grady bent his head, resting his forehead on Lake’s chest, puffs of hot breath sending tingles across Lake’s skin.

“You know,” Lake said breathlessly, “I think... you have a... magic dick.”

Grady laughed. “What?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Every time I get it, I need more of it. It’s like a drug.”

Grady settled beside him, stretching his long body against Lake’s, his head resting on the same pillow as Lake. It felt intimate and filled Lake’s heart with warmth and happiness.

“Is it?” Grady asked, amusement in his voice. “You’re a pro at taking it.”

It was Lake’s turn to laugh. He twisted onto his side and propped himself up on an elbow. “I don’t think we’re very good at this friend thing,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

“Not anymore,” Grady agreed.

Lake couldn’t disagree with that. They’d managed to keep their hands off each other for months. But now that they had, it was like neither of them could turn it off again.

“I don’t want to stop doing this,” Lake said honestly. Honesty was important here. He needed Grady to know where he stood, wanted him to know that he would be honest with Grady, and that he wouldn’t lie or cheat or hurt him. “Either of the things. Sex or friendship. If you want to... keep it separate, then that’s okay.” Even if they only remained friends, those things were just as important.

Maybe Grady didn’t want to date him, but Grady still liked him, and he definitely didn’t seem to have a problem having sex with him. He valued Grady’s friendship more than he had words for, but he also loved being fucked by him. If that wasn’t a romantic relationship, he didn’t know what was. But he didn’t want to spook Grady

again. He didn't want to risk losing Grady altogether.

Grady sighed and turned his head. "Lake, it's not that I don't want to. I just think that we need to take this slow and tread carefully. I'm more than happy to give you an introduction course in the joys of gay sex, but when feelings get involved, things get messy." He stroked Lake's cheek and then down his neck before loosely holding on to Lake's chain necklace, his fingers curling underneath. "While you're figuring things out, keeping it casual is the best idea for both of us."

"What if I've already figured it out?" Lake asked stubbornly. That just sounded like a whole lot of dancing around and vague bullshit to him. "If you aren't interested, just say it. But don't use me as an excuse."

"I'm only one man," Grady said patiently. He stroked Lake's cheek, and Lake's eyes fluttered as he enjoyed the gentle touch. "What if you want to experiment? See how it is with other guys?" The words sounded like they hurt, and Lake hoped they did because they were hurting him.

"Do you want me to go and sleep with other guys?" Lake asked, unable to mask the way his voice thickened in pain at the idea. "Or do you want to?" Because Lake didn't want to. The thought had barely crossed his mind—the one time he'd tried to think about it, it had done nothing for him at all—and even now, when he knew that having a dick up his ass was his new favourite pastime, the idea of experiencing it with someone else wasn't appealing at all to him. He didn't want other men. He wanted Grady. Why was that so hard to understand?

"No, of course not."

"Why 'of course not'?" Lake asked mockingly. "Is that what it is? That you just don't want to be tied down to me?" The thought of Grady sleeping with other people while he slept with Lake was... unpleasant, to put it mildly. The idea didn't just hurt, it cut

into him like the blades of a thousand knives, digging deep and nicking arteries so that he bled out from the inside.

“I’m trying not to tie you down, Lake.” He sounded reasonable, and Lake felt anything but.

“And if I want to be?”

“What happened to your dream of marriage, kids, a dog?”

“Men can’t have those things with other men?” Lake sighed. “I’m not going to lie and say that those things aren’t still important to me, because they are. Wanting to try something with you doesn’t mean they suddenly don’t mean anything. It also doesn’t mean that I can’t have them.” I think that I want them with you went unsaid because he knew that even daring to utter that would make Grady bolt in the other direction.

Lake leaned forward, his chain necklace resting on Grady’s chest as he trailed his fingers through Grady’s chest hair. “You know what I really want right now?” he whispered, giving him a tender, slow kiss that made his toes curl.

Grady made a questioning noise, trying to follow his lips as he pulled away.

“Food,” Lake said. “I’m hungry.”

Grady huffed out a laugh. He groaned as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. “All right, let’s see what I can scrounge up.”

Grady’s idea of “scrounging up” something was vastly different than the rest of the world, Lake was sure. Definitely different from what Lake would have done. Once he’d grabbed out a whole tub of sliced cheese and just sat on the couch and made his way through each piece one by one.

Grady ended up making caramel popcorn from scratch, with warm cider.

They settled on the couch and absently flicked through Netflix.

“We should watch *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*,” Lake said, pulling off a few pieces of the gooey popcorn. “Since we watched the first one last time.” That was the night that Lake had kissed Grady again, had realised he wanted so much more from Grady than what they’d been doing. He’d wanted it all. In a way, he’d gotten it. He was greedy, he supposed. Wanted everything and not just parts.

“That’s not on Netflix,” Grady answered, intent as he scrolled through to find a movie.

“Where is it, then?”

“I have no idea. I don’t think it’s on a streaming service.”

Lake deflated. He’d geared himself up for dinosaurs. “We should have gone to my place. Okay, what else is there?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Grady sighed and hauled himself off the couch. “If you want murder and mayhem, they have the Alien movies on Disney+, I think?”

“Do you have that?” Lake asked eagerly. “Because I had a crush on Sigourney Weaver when I was a kid, and I’m gonna be honest, it hasn’t ever gone away.”

“No,” Grady said. He pressed a few buttons, and the Disney icon came on the screen. “But it won’t take long to get.”

“Is this our first joint account together?” Lake asked, fluttering his eyelashes dramatically at Grady. “Should we mark the occasion?”

Grady snorted. “How?”

“A good blowjob never goes astray,” Lake said slyly.

“Do you want your dick sucked?” Grady asked as he input his information to sign up to the streaming service. “All you have to do is ask.”

Lake contemplated it for a moment because he loved having Grady’s wet mouth around him. The guy knew how to suck dick. But he equally liked the idea of snuggling. “Rain check?”

Grady smiled indulgently as he logged in. “I’ll pencil you in.”

“I appreciate that.”

Grady settled back on the couch, and Lake twisted and curled his knees up as he snuggled into Grady's side. Grady lifted an arm so Lake could settle against his chest properly.

"This feels familiar," Lake murmured. "Will you keep me safe if I get scared?"

Grady kissed the top of his head. "I'll even hold your hand."

Lake placed his hand on Grady's chest, next to his own head. Grady placed his own over Lake's and laced their fingers together, squeezing gently.

"Do friends do this?" Lake asked quietly.

Grady was silent for so long that Lake wasn't sure he was going to answer. Which was fine. Lake didn't really need one. He was more than content wrapped in Grady's arms, watching one of his favourite movies and eating the best-tasting popcorn he'd ever had. And having Grady's fingers around his own, like he really cared about Lake the way that Lake cared about him.

"We do this," Grady said eventually.

Lake smiled and shifted, snuggling in deeper. He could work with that.

Grady decided that this was a first for him. Neither Kyle nor Mal had been interested in cooking with him and definitely not in learning how to cook with him. Having Lake's brother in the kitchen helping while they cooked was also strange. Grady wasn't used to family. It had been so long since he'd had one. Quinn was his closest friend, and he'd thought that Mal had been family, but he'd been more wrong about that than he could have ever imagined. He'd lost his father so long ago that it was harder to remember a time when he was there than when he wasn't. He tried to keep the memories alive, but time did to them what it did with everything: made them fade.

Family was an elusive concept for him now. Something other people had, but not him.

“Your chopped peppers look mangled,” Avery said, leaning over his side of the counter to squint at what Lake was doing.

“Um, fuck off? I did a great job,” Lake said. “Let’s see yours.”

Avery made a flourishing motion with his hand to show his chopped onion, garlic, and tomatoes. Avery fluffed around less than his brother and had accomplished more in the last twenty minutes than Lake had all night.

Lake scowled. “You had them pre-prepared.”

Avery snorted. “You’re the one that bought them, idiot. What’s next?”

“The pan should be hot enough,” Grady said. “Drop them in and sauté them.”

“Sauté,” Lake whispered with a mocking smile.

Grady tweaked his nose and then kissed the tip of it. “Shred the chicken for me?”

Lake popped a piece in his mouth first and then went to work. Grady just shook his head. He’d cooked with Lake enough to know by now that he always needed to prepare more than he needed for the meal because Lake constantly grazed.

“Guys, stop being cute and focus,” Avery said.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“We can do both,” Lake said, flipping him off. “You didn’t have to come over early to help cook. I had plans to get Grady to fuck me over the bench before anyone got here.”

Avery wrinkled his nose and deliberately moved his hands off the counter.

“We didn’t yet!” Lake said, laughing.

The “yet” part of that sentence worried Grady. “I wouldn’t do that with your brother watching us,” he said dryly. He had limits. Not many, but that was definitely one of them.

“Societal rules and constructs are restricting,” Lake complained.

“You joined the military,” Avery said, turning his back to them as he stirred the ingredients in the fry pan. “Your entire life is based around rules and social constructs.”

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

“I think we need to make a list of topics that are off-limits. Sex is one of them,” Avery said, turning and pointing between them with his spatula. “It’s great that you’re all happy in your domestic bliss or whatever, but keep your hands where I can see them, all right?”

“As if I don’t have to see ‘domestic bliss’ every time you, Felix, and Zach are in a room.”

“Do as I say, not as I do,” Avery said.

“Since I’m the oldest, that’s my line,” Lake retorted.

Grady sighed. There were times when he’d thought about what it would be like to have a brother, and sometimes he even felt a pang of sadness that he didn’t have one. This was not one of those times.

He kissed Lake’s cheek on instinct when he took the bowl of shredded chicken from him. “You can add this now,” he said to Avery.

Avery gave him a speculative look, and Grady made sure to hold his gaze. Somehow, being analysed and assessed by Lake’s brother was more daunting than any professional evaluation he’d ever had at work. And Riley was his boss.

“Thanks,” Avery said, taking the bowl.

“You can add the other ingredients now: the salt, honey, green onions, and coriander.”

“I think you made that last one up,” Lake said. “Let me see the recipe.” He made an exaggerated grab for Grady’s phone that was on the end of the counter.

Grady put his hand over Lake’s face and stopped his forward momentum, grinning as Lake grabbed at it to try and pull it off. There was no recipe, and since he’d been with Grady since they’d started cooking it, he knew that.

“It’s an herb, you dildo,” Avery said, laughing so hard that Grady was worried he was going to pull something. It seemed like a bad omen if the first “family” dinner ended with someone in the ER.

“Oh my God,” Avery wheezed. “I’m telling Mum how much of a disaster you are in the kitchen!”

“Joke’s on you; she already knows.”

“We knew you were bad, but this is bad.”

“I know what coriander is,” Lake said, making a face at Avery. “But putting it in things should be illegal, and therefore, Grady is making it up.”

“Less smack talk, more cooking,” Grady said. It was like herding rabbits. He was surprised nothing was burned yet. If they were lucky, they might even be able to eat by midnight. He doubted it would be ready by the time Felix and Zach showed up, in—he checked his watch—roughly five minutes or so.

By some miracle, they had the chicken filling cooked and ready for the tortillas when Felix and Zach came through into the kitchen. It seemed everyone had a key to Lake’s house. Grady wasn’t surprised. Privacy didn’t seem to be a high priority for these four.

“Something smells good,” Felix said as he greeted them.

“Don’t say it like that,” Lake said. “Like you’re surprised.”

“We’re all surprised,” Zach drawled. “Grady is a good influence on you. I expect some three-course meals soon.”

“You want it in your hair or down the back of your shirt?” Lake asked innocently. He pulled the jug of water out of the fridge and poured five glasses.

Grady nudged his hip gently as ran his fingers across the back of Lake’s neck, taking

hold of his chain necklace for a moment before letting go. The small smile that Lake gave in return sent a flush through Grady.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Grady turned to grab the tortillas out of the oven, where they'd been keeping warm, and locked eyes with Felix, who was watching him carefully. Grady didn't know what to make of Felix. He seemed mild mannered and friendly, but there was something behind his eyes that had Grady on edge. Maybe it was just his job; Grady had gotten the same feeling from every single one of the special forces guys that he'd met at the basketball game. Peyton didn't have it, but Grady wasn't sure if it was just because he knew Peyton in a different setting, or possibly he was better at hiding it now that he no longer put on the uniform.

Felix's smile was knowing before he returned his focus to Avery, who was stirring the mixture in a bowl. He moved it to the middle of the table, and Lake set up plates and the glasses. Grady put the warm tortillas beside the mixture and then slid into a seat beside Lake.

"Guess who ate my shoe yesterday," Avery said grumpily as Zach seated him between himself and Felix.

"Felix, I've told you before that you need to house-train Zach," Lake said cheekily.

Avery glared at him, and Lake smiled wider, his eyes brightening. His entire face transformed when he smiled, and he was devastating. Grady couldn't look away.

"I take him to a class, but a week later he's back at it again," Felix said, shrugging. He spread his arm across the back of Avery's chair, and Zach laced their fingers together, resting them on Avery's shoulder.

"This is your fault," Avery told Lake.

“Why are you blaming me for the fact that Zach got a dog?” Lake protested. He tilted his head at the large chunk of filling he’d put in his tortilla. Then he shrugged and kept going.

Grady sighed and shifted his chair closer. He put an arm around Lake’s shoulders and took hold of the spoon Lake was using. “Don’t need so much,” he murmured. He scooped some of the mixture and put it back in the bowl. Lake turned and grinned at him, and Grady couldn’t resist leaning down for a short kiss. Well, it was supposed to have been a short kiss. All thought fled when Lake leaned into it, opening his mouth just a fraction, enough for their lips to slide together and their breath to mingle. It was intimate and warm, and Grady had no desire to deepen it, only to enjoy the sense of closeness the way it was.

“You two are stupidly adorable, and I think I might throw up,” Avery interrupted. “Don’t forget the rules about hands.”

“What rules?” Zach asked, smirking.

“And,” Avery continued, ignoring Zach, “it’s your fault because you should have told Mum not to even mention it. You knew there were puppies, and you let her just spout off about them willy-nilly.”

Grady wondered if they were always like this because he had a feeling he was going to be exhausted by the end of the night. How were they always on? They needed locks for their mouths.

“Keeping secrets is uncalled for,” Zach said, pouting.

Avery pointed at him with a wrapped tortilla. “Not when there are cute, fluffy things involved. In that case, it is more than called for.”

Zach cupped Avery's cheek and winked at him. "I think you're a cute, fluffy thing."

It was Avery that gagged at that, not Lake. Lake turned and grinned at Grady. "Ready to run yet?"

"Baby, I was ready to run the first night I met you," Grady drawled.

Lake didn't seem to take offense at the words if the kiss he laid on Grady was anything to go by. He tasted of chicken and vegetables and something just him. Something Grady chased after even as Lake pulled away.

"We should tell them to leave so we can have sex," Lake said. Grady didn't know whether he'd meant for that to be a whisper between them, or if the octave of his voice had been on purpose.

"At least let us eat first," Felix said in amusement.

"How fast can you eat?" Lake asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Grady slid his hand around Lake's nape and squeezed. "Behave." He kept it there as he ate. Having his hands on Lake always gave him a sense of calm, a contentedness deep in his belly. "Do you have the dog enrolled in puppy school?"

"Yeah, he has his first session next weekend," Felix said. "It's actually specialised training with the guy that trains our military canines, so hopefully"—he gave Avery a wry smile—"he gets out of the habit of eating footwear."

That seemed a little like overkill to Grady, but what did he know? The only dog he knew was Persephone, and she'd been full-grown when he and Quinn had found her.

"She's a menace," Avery grumbled.

“Don’t even,” Lake said as he placed his hand on Grady’s thigh, too close to his dick for comfort. “You love Ares.”

Grady put a hand on Lake’s, stopping the way his fingers were inching higher. He did not need to get a boner—more of one, anyway—while he was at a table with Lake’s brother and his two best friends. It was bad enough that Zach knew that Lake had sucked him off in the public showers.

“Apparently there’s one more that the woman can’t sell,” Felix mused, tapping his chin. Zach switched their plates so his empty one was in front of Felix and picked up the uneaten half of Felix’s tortilla.

“Why not? Malamutes are highly sought after,” Lake said. “Aren’t they show dogs or something? Worth like a gazillion dollars.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Not quite that much,” Grady said with a chuckle. “Plus, I don’t think that’s a real figure.”

“I said it, so obviously it is.”

“Okay,” Grady said, leaning in to kiss Lake’s temple.

“This puppy is the runt, so he’s smaller than he should be, and he only has three legs,” Felix said. “We would have taken him, but one is more than enough for us to handle right now. It wouldn’t be fair when we go on deployments to leave anyone with that kind of responsibility.”

“What happened to the fourth leg?” Grady asked. He put together another tortilla and handed it over to Lake, who beamed at him.

“Born without it. Some kind of defect, I guess?” Avery said, shrugging. “I dunno, I didn’t ask.”

“And so no one wants it?” Lake squawked.

“Apparently. The owner thinks she’ll have to keep it, though it doesn’t sound like she wants to.”

Lake frowned but didn’t say anything.

Grady squeezed his thigh. “Have you had enough?” he asked, his lips pressed against Lake’s cheek, close to his ear.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He turned, and their eyes locked for a moment that felt like a lifetime. Lake showed everything in his eyes. He hid nothing, and all Grady could see was the purest of souls underneath.

Felix got up with Grady and helped him clear the table and fill up the dishwasher. Grady kept glancing at Lake, who had pulled a knee to his chest and was gesturing animatedly as he spoke to Avery and Zach.

“I hope things are going well,” Felix said. He crouched under the sink and got out a dishwasher tablet, handing it to Grady.

Grady put the tablet in place and clicked the dishwasher shut before turning it on. “We’re taking it each day,” Grady said, unsure how else to answer. He wasn’t about to say, “We’re just having sex, that’s all.” He didn’t think Felix would appreciate that, not with the predatory way he was watching Grady.

“He has a big heart,” Felix said.

“He does.”

Grady braced himself for the “talk,” but Felix only smiled at him and said, “I’m glad you’re taking care of it,” before joining his partners and Lake.

What the fuck had that meant?

He didn’t get a chance to find out, because Felix herded his men out the door a few minutes later, with promises to see Lake the next day. Zach said something about a Black Hawk that had Lake seething and Felix laughing.

Lake closed the front door, and then they were alone.

He smiled slyly at Grady as he approached, and Grady felt a thrill go through him as Lake rose up and twined his arms around Grady's neck, splaying his hands across the back of Grady's head. Lake lined their bodies up as he kissed Grady's chin and then across his jaw.

He moved back down and then across to the other side of his jaw, leaving heat in his wake. He kissed below Grady's ear. "What are we going to do now?" he whispered breathlessly.

A shiver ran down Grady's spine, and he turned his head, fusing their mouths together. Lake moaned hungrily, leaning into it.

Grady ran his hands down Lake's side and then tugged Lake's top up and over his head, dropping it to the floor. He slid his hands around to his ass, squeezing the plump globes he'd been admiring all night. He used his hold on them to lift Lake into his arms, urging Lake to wrap his legs around his waist. Lake was a solid weight in his arms, and Grady shifted so he was comfortably settled against him. He moved them through the house like a drunk at a party, hitting walls and doorways, so focused on Lake's mouth and drawing moans from its sweet depths. He'd been to Lake's house plenty of times even before they'd started sleeping together, and he knew where the bedroom was, so theoretically, it shouldn't have been that hard to navigate. But Lake was distracting.

"Fuck me," Lake gasped, tipping his head back. "Get your dick in me, Grady. I need it."

So did Grady. He latched on to Lake's Adam's apple, biting and then soothing with his tongue as they hit a nearby wall. He trailed wet kisses across his throat and then down to a nipple, latching on and rolling the pebbled nub between his teeth.

Lake cradled the back of his head, arching into the touch. Grady soothed the nipple

with his tongue and then moved back up to take control of his mouth once more.

Eventually, they managed to get to his bedroom. “Where do you keep your supplies?” Grady asked against Lake’s mouth as he lowered him to the bed.

Lake just flung his hand out in the direction of the nightstand. Grady took the hint and rummaged through it. It was boring, all things considered. A book light, a book—some military helicopter flight tactics; Grady wasn’t even surprised—lube, condoms, and two random batteries. And a paperclip. What the hell was the paperclip for? He probably didn’t want to know.

Grady grabbed out a few condoms and the lube, slamming it shut. He quickly discarded his own clothes, throwing them over the end of the bed. Lake wriggled out of his pants and spread his legs invitingly as he stroked his dick.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Grady dropped the supplies on the bed as he crawled up Lake's body, leaning in to kiss him until they were both panting. He took his time getting Lake ready for him, fucking him with his fingers until Lake was begging and pleading and squirming in his arms.

Grady sat back on his knees, admiring what he had reduced Lake to. He was fucking beautiful, a red flush across him, his entire body vibrating. The need inside him was palpable, like a physical aura around him.

"What are you waiting for?" Lake asked, his hazel-brown eyes like liquid heat as he stared at Grady. "If the aim is to kill me before you fuck me, the plan is worki—" He cut off with a strangled cry as Grady lifted Lake's hips and pushed inside him in one easy slide. He was so open and ready for Grady that there was no resistance, Lake's hot body taking him in greedily.

Grady didn't give Lake a chance to adjust and took up a fast pace, hammering into him so hard that the bed banged against the wall. He wasn't going to last long; he'd been ready to blow before Lake had even taken his clothes off. He was always on the edge of being ready when Lake was anywhere near him. One heated look was all it took to get him going. Lake had a direct line to his dick and to other parts he wasn't ready to acknowledge yet. He buried those thoughts deep where he couldn't see them.

"God." Lake moaned, a blissed-out look on his face that stroked Grady's ego and made him fuck into Lake harder, causing another longer moan to fall from his gorgeous lips.

"It's so good," Lake mumbled. "Why is it so good? I can't get enough. I want it all

the time. I dream about sitting on your cock while I'm flying a Hawk."

Fuck. That imagery shouldn't have been hot, but it made Grady's body flush. He pushed Lake's legs up, almost bending him in half as he thrust harder, with long pounding strokes.

Lake cried out, gripping onto Grady's shoulder as Grady angled his hips to hit his sweet spot, over and over.

"I want to cut it off and carry it around with me," Lake said, his mouth open on a silent gasp. "Make a butt plug out of it. Have it inside me every second."

Grady kissed him to make him stop talking. He didn't know what it said about him that a sentence mentioning cutting off his dick wasn't deterring him or turning him off in any way. It was best not to dwell on it and how much Lake made nothing else matter.

Lake made small sounds into Grady's mouth, like he was still trying to make words while Grady wrecked him. His nails scored down Grady's back, a pleasant sting that made him fuck into Lake harder as his dick leaked like a faucet in the condom.

Grady lifted himself on to his knees, taking Lake with him.

Lake arched his back, reaching behind himself to grip the headboard tightly as Grady grasped his hips and lifted him up and down on his dick.

"Oh God. Yes. Fuck. Don't stop," Lake gasped. "I can't stand it when you stop. I want you to fuck me, just like this, all the time."

Grady couldn't find a way to get him to shut up from this angle, but it felt too good to stop.

“Touch yourself,” Grady growled. He wanted Lake to come before he did. Wanted to see Lake’s face twist with pleasure. He knew that would be all he needed to find his own release.

Lake immediately obeyed, wrapping a hand around his cock, rapidly fisting himself. Their eyes locked, and then he was moaning Grady’s name like a prayer as he came all over his hand, splashes of it against his chest.

Hearing his name like that, in Lake’s husky voice, went straight to Grady’s dick. He followed Lake in seconds, emptying himself into the condom as he gripped Lake’s hips so hard that he knew he was going to leave bruises. Lake seemed to like the bruises that Grady left. He poked at them and then got horny, which resulted in Grady bending him over the nearest available surface and doing it all over again. He’d never met someone so eager to get fucked all the time. He couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t an ego stroke.

Lake shifted on Grady’s lap, lifting himself against Grady’s chest, his legs twined around his waist. Grady was still inside him, and he knew he needed to pull out, but he couldn’t let go of Lake.

Lake held up his cum-covered hand and gave it an experimental lick.

Jesus. Grady’s dick made a valiant effort to wake back up, but even with Lake looking like that, his refractory period wasn’t that good.

Lake hummed and then shrugged, lapping it up until his hand was clean. Grady gripped his nape and crushed their lips together. Lake moaned and melted against him. Grady squeezed one of his ass cheeks and rocked Lake’s hips into him. Lake’s fingers dug into his back as Grady took him down to the bed, lying him back on it and covering him.

“I want to go to sleep with your dick inside me,” Lake murmured against his mouth. “It’s like we’re one person, and I love that. Love being so close to you. Want to be this close to you always.”

Grady took hold of Lake’s hair tightly, staring down at his warm hazel eyes. They were wide and unblinking, with his mouth open. Grady growled low as he bent. Lake’s lips clung to his, desperate sounds erupting from his throat. Grady ravaged him, something inside him clawing to get out. He wanted to consume Lake, wanted to wrap around his soul and own it.

He pulled out of Lake, careful not to hurt him, and pulled off the condom, tying it and tossing it onto the floor to clean up later. He kissed and licked his way down Lake’s chest, cleaning off the spots of cum spread across it. By the time he got down to Lake’s dick, it was beginning to harden again. He slid a hand between Lake’s legs, sliding two fingers inside him, making Lake groan and arch into the touch. He licked and sucked Lake’s cock as it came to life in his mouth and hands, fucking him gently with his fingers at the same time. By the time Lake was on the edge, moaning about how close he was and begging Grady to fuck him again, Grady’s dick was ready for round two.

It took him mere seconds to roll another condom on, lube himself, and slide back into Lake’s ass. Lake welcomed him, spreading his legs wide as Grady took his time, getting Lake to the edge multiple times before he finally let him come again.

Afterwards, he curled behind Lake, arms wrapped securely around him, with his dick still inside Lake as they fell asleep.

Grady rubbed his temples, already feeling a headache coming on. Mini-Riley, as the kid had been dubbed after his first work-experience day—a moniker that neither Mini-Riley nor Big-Riley had appreciated and that therefore would continue—was currently debating with Gideon. Which might have been fine, if they didn’t insist on

doing it in the fucking middle of the bullpen, and if the debate wasn't about the pros and cons of which cars to steal in Grand Theft Auto. Grady was ready to shoot both of them. Or lock them in the overnight cells. Anything to get some peace and quiet.

“The turning circle for that is subpar, at best,” Gideon was arguing.

“Okay, but—”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Shut the fuck up,” Grady growled, interrupting them. If he had to hear any more of this, he was going to do a Harley Quinn on all of them. He pointed his pen at Gideon. “Do you really think that talking to the kid that was caught stealing about which cars are best to steal is the best idea you could come up with for keeping him entertained?”

“We’re on a break,” Gideon said, rolling his eyes. “And we’re talking about a game.”

“I don’t care,” Grady said. “Either shut up, or take it elsewhere.”

“What’s got your bee in a bonnet?”

“He’s having withdrawals,” Quinn said from his desk, not even looking up at them, totally engrossed in whatever paperwork he was reading through. That’s what Grady had been trying to do since the paperwork on his desk seemed to be multiplying like Gremlins in water right now, and he was so fucking sick of it.

“From what?” Ange asked. She threw a pen at Gideon, hitting him square in the forehead. Gideon fake gasped and threw one back. She caught it with one hand and then twirled it expertly between her fingers, raising an eyebrow at him.

“His boyfriend isn’t messaging him because he’s doing a training op,” Quinn answered. “So instead of facing his feelings of abandonment, he’s taking it out on you.”

“Partners are supposed to back up partners, not throw them under the bus,” Grady said snappishly. Not to mention, the statement was untrue. Not the training-op part but definitely the withdrawal part. It wasn’t the first time Lake had gone hours

without messaging him. Grady was in a bad mood because he'd been listening to Mini-Riley and Gideon chirp at each other all morning. Everyone had a breaking point, and Grady was getting to his. He thought he should get a medal for lasting this long. "Don't you two have work to do? We didn't sign you up to stand around with your thumb up your ass."

Mini-Riley glared, but he'd been getting better at biting his tongue when Grady—or Big-Riley, or basically anyone else at the precinct—baited him. He was a good kid, but they were learning he was too smart for his own good and needed to be constantly challenged, or he became a menace.

"When did you get a boyfriend?" Gideon asked. "Oh, are you talking about Lake? How's he doing? Wait, you've kept him around this long?"

Grady wished he had an off switch. "I do not have a boyfriend. If neither of you have anything to do, I have some—"

"I've got a report to write up," Gideon said, suddenly looking extremely busy as he stared at his monitor. He even typed on the keyboard, looking like he wasn't just mashing it, even though Grady would have bet his life savings there was nothing on the screen. Or if there was, it would read like a cat walking across the keyboard.

Ange snorted. "You mean the one Big-Riley has been asking for, for almost a week?"

"You can't rush perfection." Gideon sniffed.

"Big-Riley will rake you over the coals, and this time, I have a 'get out of jail free' card," she replied.

"That's unfair; we're partners."

“I’m hanging you out to dry this time.”

“I thought you loved me.”

Quinn snorted.

“You could talk out your ass underwater,” Grady muttered. And give everyone in the precinct a headache at the same time. Ange also needed a medal, except hers would be for having put up with Gideon as a partner for so many years. Grady knew it was just because Ange got along with his ex-wife like a house on fire. Some friendships were worth putting up with anything for.

“Big-Ri—Riley,” Mini-Riley said, catching himself. “Calling us mini and big is degrading,” he said, his voice flat.

“Is he bigger than you?” Grady asked. He leaned back in his chair and fiddled with his pen, resisting the urge to throw it at Gideon as well.

“Well, yes, but—”

“Did he give you a task?” Grady asked. He’d already made his point; no need to drive it home. But he also couldn’t let the kid hang around Gideon all day. The point of work experience was to work. And Gideon had a pile of papers on his desk almost as high as Grady’s.

“He wanted me to work with Greer,” Mini-Riley said. “But he’s not here.”

Grady was hardly surprised. Greer was never around when you needed him. He was like a fucking ghost in the night, and why Riley put up with his bullshit, Grady had no idea. At least this time the rookie wasn’t around either, and Grady just hoped that meant that Greer had actually taken him with him and, you know, mentored him like

he was supposed to.

“This time,” Gideon said, “I actually know where he is.”

Grady twisted his chair around. “Wait, really?” he asked. Why the hell did Gideon know where Greer was? Half the time, Riley didn’t even know where they were.

“A truck carrying doves for a wedding crashed on the highway,” Gideon said, trying and failing to keep a straight face, “and they called for backup”—he burst out laughing—“to catch the birds,” he wheezed. “And Big-Riley sent Greer and Henry.”

Grady couldn’t tell if he was taking the piss or not.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Ange sighed and threw down her pen before standing and pulling her suit jacket off the back of her chair. “Gideon, finish that report before I finish it for you. Be warned: if I do it, you’re likely to get suspended for harsh language. Kid, come with me. I’ll take you to Greer and Henry.”

Mini-Riley blinked. “To catch the birds?” His eyebrows rose. “You really do shit like that? Why can’t I help like arrest someone or something?”

“That’s Grady’s job,” Quinn murmured. Grady would have flipped him off, but Quinn was still buried in his paperwork.

“Now, Mini-Riley.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, deceptively calm as she stared at him with an impassive face, “did you have something better to do?”

Mini-Riley turned his wide eyes to first Grady and then Quinn and wisely kept his mouth closed when he realised that he would have no backup. He shook his head mutely.

“Good, then let’s go.”

Grady laughed as they left. He would have paid good money just to see Greer’s face. He would have sold his car to see it.

“Hey, so Will and I are going on a date to the zoo this weekend. Do you want to join us?” Quinn asked.

Grady paused with one hand poised to write. “Why, you can’t handle your boyfriend on your own? Take one of the other ones. Isn’t that why you have so many? You can just trade them in and out like Poké Balls.” Grady could not believe he’d just said that. Lake had been playing something on a small handheld device the night before, with his head in Grady’s lap, and had tried to explain Pokémon to Grady like he was a third-grade child, and he still didn’t get it. He wondered if he’d used the reference right—no. Nope. He was not going to ask Lake, because that would be admitting he’d used it in the first place.

Grady made sure to keep a straight face and appear completely confident in the ridiculous sentence he’d just uttered. Quinn didn’t need to know anything beyond that.

Quinn blinked. “Yes, Grady. That is exactly why I have three.”

“Okay, so...”

“So, I was thinking that you could bring Lake.”

Oh.

“That deer-in-headlights look is good on you,” Quinn remarked.

“You’re an asshole.”

“You don’t want to go on a double date with us?” The question was innocent, but Quinn’s face was anything but.

“What are you, twelve? No, I don’t fucking want to go on a double date with you, and especially not with the boyfriend who can’t sit still.” Honestly, the only acceptable one was Peyton, and Quinn had been playing with fire even going there, considering he was the youngest brother of their boss, Big-Riley.

“Hence the walking around nature of a zoo,” Quinn drawled.

It was probably a smart choice, but Grady wasn’t going to tell him that. “The use of the word ‘date’ implies that Lake and I are dating, which we aren’t.”

Quinn didn’t respond to that, just arched an eyebrow. Grady was about to go all Ange on him and throw a pen.

“How long are you planning to tell yourself that?”

“Do I walk into your house and shit on the floor? No? Then fuck off, Quinn.”

“Touchy.”

Grady leaned back, glaring. “Why are we partners?”

“Someone was punishing me,” Quinn said. “It was a whole thing.”

“I hate you.”

“I guess that’s a no on the date, then.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Are you guys going on a date?” Gideon asked, having walked past at just the wrong time. “I know some great places that are very private if you want to play footsies.”

“Keep walking, Gid,” Grady growled.

Gideon cackled as he disappeared through to the copier room. Grady was sure curses, not laughing, would be coming from there soon.

“Are you really trying to put through papers to have Mini-Riley stay with you?” Grady asked, trying to change the subject before he committed homicide in a police station.

Quinn’s look indicated that he knew exactly what Grady was doing, but he seemed to allow it since he answered with, “Yes. Why?”

Grady shrugged. “Just asking. He seems like a handful.”

“He needs someone to give a shit about him,” Quinn said. He flipped his file shut, shoved it on top of a teetering pile, and grabbed one from a different stack.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean it has to be you,” Grady pointed out. “Have you spoken to your guys about it?”

Quinn hesitated. “Does it matter? We don’t live together; it’s not going to affect them.”

Grady pursed his lips as he stared at the way Quinn was so obviously trying to be

nonchalant about it, but Grady wasn't fooled. "You're scared of telling them."

"Until I know for sure I can even do it, there's no point in bringing it up. End of discussion."

"You didn't even start a discussion. How are you gonna end it?" Grady said, chuckling.

"End of this discussion."

Grady had known what he'd meant, but watching that vein start to throb in Quinn's temple was fun. It was a rare occurrence, and Grady loved that he had so much fuel to use now.

Grady's phone vibrated in his pocket at the same time Quinn's landline rang. Quinn made a face at Grady as he answered it, and Grady made one right back before he flicked his phone screen on.

Lake: Have to work late. Emergency with one of the helicopters that I've been telling them had issues for *weeks*

There was a string of eye-rolling emojis after the word and a GIF of chickens running in circles.

Grady frowned. Emergency? He was calling Lake's number before he could talk himself out of it. It couldn't be that much of an emergency if he was just sending a text, but Grady's mind was still jumping straight to worst-case scenarios.

"Hey," Lake answered happily. "I don't think the message deserved a call, but that's okay. I like hearing your voice."

Lake had lowered his, obviously going for some kind of sultry—which was a waste, really, because Lake’s voice in general turned Grady’s crank—but Grady ignored it because he was still running on adrenalin from the word “emergency.”

“Are you okay?”

“What?” There was a pregnant pause that had Grady’s heart leaping into his throat. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine. We had to make an emergency landing, and Zach owes me so much fucking cake as an apology, but we’re fine. I didn’t even get a bruise for a souvenir.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s plenty funny,” Lake assured him. “It’s not my first rocky landing. Remind me to tell you about my second deployment to Afghanistan sometime.”

Grady wasn’t sure that he wanted to know.

“I was thinking, there’s this great noodle place at the shops near my place, and I could put in an order? If you wanted to swing by on your way through, and I’m hoping that I will be out of here by eight at the latest. We have some diagnostics we have to run through and then write about a million reports.”

“I can do that,” Grady said. “Why don’t you message me when you’re about ready to leave? I have plenty to keep me occupied here, and I’ll head over to pick up our order then?”

“Perfect. I can’t wait to see you.”

Grady swallowed. They’d seen each other just that morning, and yet... “Me either,” he answered truthfully. “Uh, listen...” Grady trailed off, wondering if he was about to

make the worst decision he'd ever made in his life. Quinn had offered, and Grady had declined because they weren't dating and going on double dates definitely gave the wrong impression. "Quinn invited us to go to the zoo with him and Will if you wanted to go..." he found himself saying anyway.

Quinn was focused on his own conversation and yet still had the audacity to give him another look. Grady wanted to wipe it off his face. With his fist. So what if he'd decided to invite Lake? Quinn was the one who had brought it up to begin with!

“Like a double date?”

“Do you want to go or not?” Grady asked, not wanting to incriminate himself. “You know Will.”

“I do,” Lake said brightly. Considering how long Lake had known Peyton and Will, at this stage, he probably knew more about them than even Quinn did.

“So... that’s a yes?”

“Yes.” Lake paused. “Shit. I’m being summoned. We can talk details tonight?”

“All right. See you then.”

Grady bit his lip as he stared down at his phone. He should have been used to having plans with Lake most nights of the week, but it still felt like he was living a fantasy that didn’t belong to him. At some point, the real hero would show up, and Grady would be left out in the cold.

“Grady?”

Grady jerked his head up to Quinn standing over him, one eyebrow raised. He hadn’t even noticed him finish his call and get up. “What?”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said irritably.

Quinn didn't look like he believed a word of that, and Grady didn't particularly care. He'd started this bullshit in the first place.

"We got the warrant for the ATM videos," Quinn said. "You good to go?"

"Yeah."

He shook off the weird thoughts as he grabbed his jacket and followed Quinn out of the room.

"So, I'm guessing I can tell Will to expect you and Lake with us?"

"Smug is an unattractive trait." He kept his head down as he slid into the passenger seat so he didn't have to see Quinn's expression.

"Not your boyfriend, huh?" Quinn asked as he started the engine.

"Shut the fuck up and drive," Grady muttered. He'd told Lake why they couldn't date, and just because they got along, had great sex, and Grady loved everything about him didn't mean—

Fuck.

No.

No.

He couldn't be in love with Lake, because Grady had made more than one questionable decision in his life, and he could not be making another one. He'd already had his heart broken twice in his life. Was he trying to go for some kind of record and make it a third time?

Lake tilted his head, squinting at the map. "I think the seals are this way?" he said, pointing in a random direction.

"They are not," Will argued, snatching the map from him. They both peered at the scrap of paper, but Lake didn't miss the look that Grady shared with Quinn. It should have annoyed him because the expressions were extremely judgemental, but all it did was warm him, making his heart burst with happiness. He was on a date with Grady. Not just a date, but a date with someone that Grady was close to. So it had to mean something to Grady. It meant everything to Lake.

"We just passed the gorillas and there are the elephants," Will said, pointing to the exhibit. "So the seals have to be this way?"

"I think you're reading it upside down," Lake said. They turned it around together, accidentally ripping a little bit of the side. It didn't matter, that was just where the blue bit and something about selfies was. He and Will were pros at selfies, and he was surprised their phones weren't already full from all the pictures they'd taken.

"No," Will said, biting his lip. "I think it was the right way up."

They turned it again.

"We're going to be late for the presentation if you two stay in charge of the map," Grady said, taking it from them. "I thought soldiers were good at navigation?"

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“I’m not a soldier,” Will said. He smiled up at Quinn as Quinn wrapped his arms around Will’s waist from behind.

“He’s not a soldier,” Lake parroted.

“Yeah, we work for a living,” Will drawled.

“Oh, shots fired, youass. I’m telling Peyton you said that.”

“That threat stopped working years ago, dork.”

“Yeah? Then why do you behave after I say it?”

Will just stuck his tongue out at Lake, and Lake laughed. Peyton had been in the middle of them for years; he was used to it. Lake was still sending him a text message later to make fun of him, though. He’d let Peyton cut off communication for too long; it was time to get pushy on his ass. Besides, he hadn’t yet had a chance to tell him “I told you so,” and it was a missed opportunity. He’d always known that the two of them were more than just fuck buddies. It made his heart flutter that he’d been right, and they were getting their happily ever after together. Not only that, but they’d found two other men to share it with. Lake didn’t see any problem with that. The heart was a big organ, and the fact that both Peyton and Will had found so many people to love them could only ever be considered a good thing.

“Besides,” Lake said, returning to the conversation. “I usually have a view from above.” And navigating in the bush or unfamiliar terrain was different than a zoo full of screaming children, frazzled parents, and teenagers that were trying to find new

and exciting ways to fall into enclosures while they looked for the best selfie angle. He and Will knew better than to put themselves in danger to get a good shot. Whatamateurs. Lake hadn't been to the zoo since he'd been a teenager himself, and it had grown exponentially. They'd been walking for hours, and they weren't even halfway around it yet.

Part of that was Grady and Quinn's fault. They were not "check it out and move on" zoo-goers. They stopped at each enclosure, actually read the information they put out the front, took painstaking pictures, and then Googled obscure facts about the animal. Lake now knew more about all the animals than he had ever thought he would. Will and Lake kept themselves entertained by taking less glamorous pictures. They'd made a bet to see who could get a picture of an animal in the weirdest position. The one Will had taken with the monkey looking at him upside down and picking its nose had been good, but Lake still thought his picture of the alpaca posing for him was the real winner. Quinn had said something about asserting dominance and scaring away potential challengers for his place in the herd, but Lake was certain that he'd wanted Lake to take a picture for his Grindr profile.

"How did we get lost?" Quinn asked with amusement. "Don't tell Sebastian."

"Or Gideon," Grady muttered. "Besides, we're not lost," Grady said. "It's that way." He pointed left. He folded the map and refused to give it back to Lake or Will, which was rude. They were good navigators and had gotten them that far.

"Have you ever been in the air?" Lake asked as they walked towards the elephant enclosure.

"I've been on a commercial plane," Grady said. "Short flights to Melbourne for police conferences sometimes."

"If we're going to Canberra," Quinn said, picking up where Grady had left off, "we

just drive.”

“Who gets to drive?” Will asked curiously. Quinn took his hand as they walked, and Lake looked on enviously.

Would Grady let him if he wanted to hold hands? Lake glanced at him, but he was busy looking around, likely making sure they were actually going the right way.

“Me,” they said in unison.

Quinn chuckled. “We take it in turns.”

“You guys been partners long?” Lake asked, wanting to know everything about Grady.

Grady glanced at Quinn, both of them with questions in their eyes. “About five or six years now?” Grady said.

“Yeah, something like that.”

That was roughly the same length of time that Peyton had been enlisted. Strong bonds formed over that length of time. Lake was glad that Grady had someone who cared about him watching his back. He knew that Grady had a dangerous job. Different kind of danger than what Lake dealt with on deployments, or even what Will dealt with every day, but it was dangerous nonetheless.

“Well, if you ever want to know what it’s like to ride in a helicopter, I know a guy,” Lake said as he moved around a mum and her double-wide pram as they headed for the seals enclosure where they’d booked to see a presentation. Grady crowded against his side, his chest warm against Lake’s arm. Lake ran a hand down Grady’s back, settling it above the slight curve of his ass. He inhaled deeply, loving the way that

Grady smelled.

“Are you allowed to do that?” Grady asked. He went to keep walking, and Lake stopped him for a second, lacing their fingers together, giving Grady a small smile and hoping that Grady wouldn’t pull away from him.

Grady glanced down but didn’t say anything as they continued on. Lake’s heart burst with happiness, and he couldn’t have stopped smiling if his life depended on it.

“We bring family and friends on base all the time,” Lake said, waving him off with his free hand. Grady hadn’t let go of his hand, and Lake was acutely aware of where their fingers were tangled together. The intimacy of it was even more profound than when they were naked and sweaty together. They were in public here, in front of someone that Grady considered family, with other people that could see them, knew exactly what them holding hands meant.

“Peyton and his guys have taken me up a time or two,” Will said. “It’s fun. And scary.”

The corner of Quinn’s mouth quirked up. “William, you travel in helicopters all the time for your day job.”

“Yeah, but not military helicopters.”

“Is there a difference?” Grady wanted to know.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“The pilots are crazier, for one.”

Lake nodded knowingly. Military pilots were a special breed. Lake was honoured to be among their numbers.

“And they use Bells, whereas I specialise in the Hawk mostly but also—”

“The ARH Tiger, the CH-47F Chinook, and the MRH90 Taipan,” Grady said. “I remember.”

“You have a good memory,” Lake said, beaming. Was it weird to be proud of that? It wasn’t like he’d had anything to do with it.

“It’s a curse,” Grady said dryly.

There was a line of people going into the stands where the presentation for the seals was being held. Quinn had the tickets because he’d booked them, which Lake thought was probably the safest call anyway.

“What’s your favourite animal?” Lake asked curiously, as they got into line.

“Tiger,” Grady said immediately, squeezing Lake’s hand.

“You didn’t even think about it,” Lake accused.

“Because I already knew what it was? Why would I have to think about it?”

Lake shrugged because that was a fair point. “Mine is a panda.”

“A panda?” Grady asked. He slid an arm around Lake’s shoulders, and Lake melted into him. If he’d been a cat, he was sure he would have purred. “Why?”

“Yeah. They’re beautiful, you know? And the lengths they’ll go to for food is awe-inspiring.”

“Ooh, me too,” Will said. “Food is life. Did you know Aubrey cut me off the other night?” He sounded extremely put out.

Lake would have been put out too. No one should come between a man and his food. “Your brother is such a killjoy.”

“For a bartender, he’s not very friendly,” Will agreed. “I was paying for it; it’s not like I was just mooching.”

“Will, you put away enough food to feedtengrown men,” Quinn said dryly. “Even Peyton was getting queasy.”

“That’s not an easy feat,” Lake said in awe. “I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Please don’t,” Grady said. He tugged Lake back so that he was resting against Grady’s chest. Lake tipped his head up, and Grady pressed their lips together. “Feeding you is already a full-time job,” he murmured.

“I pay you in sexual favours,” Lake said cheekily.

Will laughed. “Damn, why didn’t I think of that?”

“You want to pay your brother in sexual favours for food?” Quinn asked, amusement

dripping from his voice.

“Would it work?”

“If you ask him, make sure I’m there,” Lake said gleefully. He could picture Aubrey’s face. He’d feed Will just to make him shut up, which meant either way, it would be a success for Will.

Will pushed him, and Lake grinned broadly. “Peyton might be susceptible,” Lake said. “I don’t know Sebastian very well, but most guys will go for it, right?”

Will’s face turned speculative.

Quinn smiled and ran his hand through Will’s hair, using the hold to pull him down for a kiss. “You can ask them about sexual-favour exchanges tonight.”

“Are you susceptible?”

“You won’t know unless you try.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Lake snuggled deeper into Grady's chest as they slowly shuffled their way down the line as it moved. He couldn't remember ever feeling so content with another person before.

He wanted to keep Grady forever. The idea that Grady didn't want that with him hurt. Lake gripped the part of Grady's shirt covering his stomach, twisting it.

Grady looked down at him questioningly.

Lake smiled and tugged on his shirt. Grady took the hint and gave him a lingering kiss. Lake pushed away his doubts because they had no place there. Grady had asked him there, had held his hand, kissed him in public.

If that wasn't a relationship, what was? Grady could see that... right?

Lake patted the dirt around the beetroot seeds he'd just buried in the pot. "Like that?" he asked Avery.

"You put it in the soil, right?"

"Yes," Lake said slowly. Maybe he hadn't ever really gardened before, but that part was pretty self-explanatory. It even said on the packet how far down. "Why? What did you do with yours?"

Avery's expression said that Lake definitely didn't want verbal confirmation of what he thought about that question. Lake shrugged and proudly moved the pot to the row of pots they'd bought from Bunnings earlier.

“Why are we planting them in pots and not in the garden?” Lake asked, realising that he should have asked that before they’d started potting. He looked over to where Ares was happily digging a hole near the garden shed—considering that neither Zach nor Felix were particularly green thumbed, he’d always wondered why they even had a garden shed, but it was filled with a lot of weird shit and a lawn mower they didn’t use because they hired someone. Now it had an assortment of outside dog stuff. Maybe Ares knew it was in there and was trying to get it. “Ares could help us dig.”

“Don’t encourage him. I don’t know why we have to put them in pots. That’s just what the directions I found online said to do.”

“It’s like the blind leading the blind,” Lake muttered. He squinted at the sun and tried not to wonder about what Grady was doing. Even odds he was either at home plodding around and watching weird TV shows, or he’d gone to work like the workaholic he was.

“Zach is going to help me build a few raised garden beds next weekend,” Avery said. “We’re going to put them in the middle of the yard, so they get plenty of sun.”

Lake nodded. He had no idea whether that was right or not, but Felix had probably spent a lot of time Googling and researching after Avery had told them he wanted to try to grow a vegetable garden. It made sense to do it here since Avery lived in a studio apartment and didn’t have a backyard, and Zach and Felix had a substantial one.

“And,” Avery continued, “the instructions said to pot them first and then transplant them, so it all works out.”

Since Felix was away for the weekend for a training operation with his team, and Zach was doing overtime—fuck that bird to the nine hells—it made sense they weren’t doing anything until next weekend.

“Awfully domestic for a guy that doesn’t want to move in with his partners,” Lake drawled. At this point, Lake bet that Avery was here at Felix and Zach’s more than he was at his own studio apartment.

Avery rolled his eyes. “It’s been like... three months, Lake. I think moving in is a bit extreme.”

“You’ve known them since you were a baby,” Lake pointed out. Lake had met Felix and Zach in kindergarten, and they’d been inseparable ever since, even now, almost thirty years later. Avery had followed them around like a lost lamb for years until he’d moved into his teenage years, and then he’d tried to avoid Zach and Felix like the plague. If only they’d all realised their pining was mutual, they could have gotten their shit together years ago.

“That’s not the point at all,” Avery huffed. “We’ve only been in a relationship for a short period of time. I don’t think that those other years count.”

“All right.” Lake wasn’t going to push. He’d helped out when they’d all almost completely fucked it up in December—because he loved Felix and Zach, but sometimes their decisions made zero sense—and this bit was up to them. They’d work it out. Though he didn’t know why there were always so many rules about timelines. Every relationship was different. Who cared if the steps were quicker for some and slower for others?

“Why don’t we talk about your domestic bliss? I think you’re closer to moving in with your guy than I am. That happened quick.”

Lake shrugged. “So?” It had taken them a little bit to get to the physical stuff, but Lake had fallen for Grady, probably from the moment they’d met. He was fun, and kind, and looked at Lake like he meant something, not like he was the comedic relief in someone else’s story.

They weren't closer to moving in together, though, because Grady wouldn't even acknowledge they were in a relationship.

Ares came over to them, his paws covered in dirt. He sniffed some of the pots and then Lake's fingers before flopping in front of him on his back, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth and his tail wagging vigorously. Lake gave him a belly scratch.

"You are already playing house, though."

"I am not."

"Where did you stay last night?"

"This line of questioning is unethical."

Avery hummed as he dug a little hole in his next pot. Ares jumped up and sniffed it. He pawed the side and tried to jump in. Avery caught him mid jump and rubbed their noses together. Ares gave a little bark and licked Avery's nose.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Cheeky monkey.” Avery put him down and grabbed a nearby tennis ball, throwing it for him. Ares chased after it, tripping every so often over his big feet. It didn’t stop him for long.

“I want more from him than he’s willing to give,” Lake said, shrugging. He put aside the beetroot seeds, figuring they had enough, and picked up the red capsicum seed packet. Ares dropped the ball at his knees, and he threw it again. They’d been doing it all morning, and Lake wondered if there was going to be a point where he got tired and went to sleep? How much energy did he have?

“There’s something he won’t give you?” Avery asked dryly. He held out a hand, and Lake poured some of the seeds into it. “I’m not sure I believe you. You’ve seen the way he looks at you, right?”

Yes, Lake had seen it. But somehow it didn’t seem to matter, because they were still stuck in this weird impasse. “We’re doing all the things that dating people do,” Lake said, picking clumps of dirt from under his fingernails, “but the second that some kind of label for it comes up, he clams up.”

“If you’re getting all the things a boyfriend does, why does it need a label? Are you bothered by it not having one?” Avery asked. He picked up his garden shovel and moved the soil over the hole he had put some of the seeds into.

“No?” Lake absently pushed the seeds around his palm. “Yes. Is that stupid?”

“Wanting to define something isn’t stupid.” Avery sat back on his heels and studied their assortment of pots. “It seems weird that he’s doing everythingbutgiving you the

label?”

“I want to introduce him as my boyfriend. Is that juvenile?” It felt juvenile when he said it, but that didn’t change the fact that it was what he wanted. He was in love with the guy, he knew he was, and all he wanted to do was show him off to the world with a giant neon sign that said, “Back off, he’s mine.”

“No?” Though Avery didn’t look sure either, which did not help Lake.

“How do you introduce Zach and Felix?” he asked curiously.

“I... don’t?” Avery blinked, staring down at the plant in his hands in confusion. “I don’t,” he repeated, almost to himself. Ares nudged him, and he absently patted his head. “We haven’t... done anything where I’ve had to introduce them?”

Lake raised an eyebrow. “This is supposed to be my realisation conversation, not yours.”

Avery shook himself. “Right. Sorry. Okay. Labels.” He shrugged helplessly. “I am probably the worst person to come to for relationship advice. If you want something, then tell him?” He stood and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Let’s get the dog pool out for Ares. At this point, I’d give him one of my shoes just to tire him out.”

“Okay,” Lake said, standing and following his brother. “And I did that,” Lake pointed out. He and Grady had agreed to be friends and then reneged on the exact same day. Not exactly a raging success. Well, it was a success, because hell yes, sex with Grady, but not a success in terms of sticking to their “just friends” plan.

“You can’t force someone to want something that they don’t want,” Avery said. He opened the shed door and grabbed out the half-seashell pool that Lake knew was for young kids too but worked just as well for dogs. “But it sounds like he does want all of

that? I mean, he's doing all the boyfriend things? You guys went on a double date, right? How did that go?"

"It was great." Lake had enjoyed seeing Will again because he hadn't seen nearly enough of him, or Peyton, in the last year since Peyton had left the military. And holding hands with Grady in public had been... an experience. Maybe holding hands wasn't that big a deal, but it had felt like a big deal to Lake. He loved any experience that involved having his hands anywhere near Grady and vice versa.

"But then turning around and saying he doesn't want it? Sounds confusing." Avery placed the seashell pool under the tap and turned it on. Ares dove into the pool and then sat under the tap, the water hitting his back. Lake could have sworn he was smiling at them.

"I get parts of it," Lake said. "The only two serious relationships he's ever had both cheated on him. One he was engaged to, and they cheated on him with a woman, and they got that woman pregnant. The other one was last December and cheated on him with another guy."

Avery grimaced. "Ouch. Okay, yeah, I can see where the problem is."

"Yes, so can I," Lake said, frustrated. He didn't understand. Hits like that would be devastating, and both of those men needed to be run over with a semi. He ran a hand through his hair and then scowled when he remembered his hands were covered in dirt and dog slobber. "But what am I supposed to do about it? I've told him that I'm not them, and just because he's the first guy that I've been with, that doesn't mean I'm not serious. But he's only hearing what he wants to hear."

"Trust is hard. Getting betrayed like that would make it even harder. Especially if he was engaged to one of them. That's supposed to have the promise of forever."

“I know that! We might only have been sleeping together a few weeks, but I thought we were friends. He should be able to trust me. And if he doesn’t trust me, then what are we even doing?”

“Are you in love with him?” Avery asked. He turned the tap off, and since Ares was already scraping around and rolling in the water, he just left it where it was.

Lake didn’t even hesitate, didn’t know where the words came from, but he knew that with absolute certainty they were true. “Yes.”

Avery’s frown was sad. “Then I guess all you can do is keep trying?”

“Don’t look at me like that. It makes me feel pathetic.”

“You’re not pathetic. Love is a good look on you.”

“Funny.”

Avery flicked his wet hands at Lake, spraying water on him. “Just tell him how you feel. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Gee, I don’t know? He could freak the fuck out and leave me?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Well, if he’s not willing to call you his boyfriend, do you really have him in the first place?”

Lake’s mouth opened and then closed when he realised that he had no idea what to say to that. Was Avery right?

Did he really even have Grady?

It took Grady a few seconds to work out what had woken him. He squinted at the time as he fumbled to pick up his phone. His alarm clock said it was just before one in the morning. The fuck?

“Detective Donehue,” he answered, figuring that it had to be work related. He pressed the heel of his palm against an eye, trying to wake himself up.

“We should use handcuffs in bed,” came the slurred response.

Grady frowned, sitting up in bed. “Lake?”

“We could play bad cop,” Lake continued, “and you could use your detective voice to interrogate me while you rail me.”

Grady ignored the way his dick twitched at the idea. “Are you drunk?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Why?” It was a Monday morning, which meant a workday. Lake was going to hate

himself when he had to get up for his alarm in fewer than six hours.

“I miss you.”

It had been Lake’s decision not to see each other the previous night, so Grady didn’t even know what to say to that statement. He had messaged Lake, asking whether he wanted to come over for dinner, and Lake had said he wanted to spend a quiet night at home by himself. It had seemed strange to Grady because it wasn’t something that Lake had ever wanted before—the opposite, in fact—but Grady wasn’t about to tell him he couldn’t have that if he wanted it.

He shoved the blankets off and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Are you okay, Lake?”

“I don’t want anyone else. I only want you.”

Grady ran his hand through his beard, tugging gently at the strands. “Lake, what’s going on?”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Lake sounded like he was talking to himself more than Grady, ignoring Grady’s questions.

“I’m not doing anything to you.”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?” Lake said bitterly.

Grady heard something that sounded suspiciously like Lake taking another swig of whatever he’d been drinking.

“Lake, baby, you aren’t making any sense. Are you at home?”

“When you aren’t with me, all I can think about is you. And when you are with me, all I want to do is touch you. Being near you feels like I can breathe, like I’m alive and here and real.”

Grady hopped into his pants one-handed. He didn’t know what to do with all the words that Lake was saying. Nothing. Because Lake was drunk. People said a lot of things they didn’t mean when they were drunk. Taking anything that Lake said seriously while he was this drunk was just asking for trouble. It didn’t matter that the words were settling inside his heart, that he wanted them to be real.

By the time he managed to get through to Lake and confirm that yes, he was at home, Grady was at the door with his shoes on, grabbing his keys from the hanger beside it.

“I’ll be there soon, okay?” This late, traffic shouldn’t be too heinous. He could get there in record time.

“Okay. Are you—” Lake made a surprised sound, glass smashed nearby, and then the phone cut off abruptly.

Grady frowned and pulled his phone from his ear. When he tried to call back, no one answered. Fuck.

GRADY DIDN'T HAVE TO use his key to get into Lake’s house since the front door swung open the second his foot hit the porch. He had an armful of Lake a moment later, sloppy lips against his own. They were cold and tasted like blackcurrant and vodka.

Grady clasped the back of Lake’s head and took over, tracing the inside of Lake’s mouth with his tongue with sure strokes. He fisted the side of Lake’s shirt and dragged him even closer until there was no space between them.

Grady bit the underside of Lake's jaw, sucking hard enough to leave a mark that he wouldn't be able to hide. He dragged his lips back to Lake's, unable to stay away for long. He cradled Lake's face as he kissed him until he was at risk of pulling off his clothes and fucking him right there and giving his neighbours a show.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

He kissed Lake harder, and there was a second of worry that he was being too rough, hurting him too much, but Lake only moaned and pressed closer, his erection rubbing against Grady's thigh.

"Take me inside and fuck me," Lake whispered against his mouth.

Grady wouldn't do that, because Lake was far too impaired for Grady to feel like he wasn't taking advantage, regardless of how much Lake said he wanted it. He didn't think he could ever stop himself from kissing Lake's beautiful lips but having sex with him while he was this plastered was a line Grady wouldn't cross.

Lake stumbled on nothing as they headed inside and leaned heavily on Grady as Grady closed the front door behind them.

"How much did you have to drink?" Grady asked dryly.

"Not sure," Lake said, beaming up at him. "Vodka with blackcurrant juice tastes great."

Not being able to give a number was answer enough, really. "Come on," Grady cajoled gently. "Time for some water and bed."

"I think there's whiskey in the cupboard!" Lake said loudly. He spun and tripped and only Grady's quick reflexes stopped him from face planting. Lake laughed and twisted, flinging himself into Grady's arms. "Hi."

"Hi. No more alcohol."

Lake frowned. Then brightened. “It’s not as good as yours anyway.”

Grady stopped Lake from going any further when he saw the broken glass all over the kitchen floor. That must have been the sound he’d heard.

“Sit here,” Grady said, depositing Lake on one of the dining chairs. He was only wearing a pair of loose light-grey sweatpants and no shoes or socks. He crouched in front of Lake and checked his feet just in case he’d walked through it and cut himself and not realised it.

They were undamaged, and Lake laughed, his feet twitching as Grady’s fingers ran across the underside.

“Tickles.”

Grady kissed Lake’s ankle and then stood. He got Lake a bottle of water from the fridge, careful when stepping over and around the glass—at least he was wearing thick shoes that glass wouldn’t get through—and made sure Lake was drinking it before he started cleaning up.

It took a while to get everything in order, and for Lake to drink the bottle, because the little chit kept stopping every few sips to say something—half of which Grady couldn’t make sense of—and fling his arms around. Grady had to stop and encourage him to keep drinking before going back to sweeping and cleaning the floor. A lot of the water seemed to find its way onto the wooden floor as well, but Grady was satisfied with the amount that Lake had actually managed to drink by the time everything was clean, and he was ready to get Lake into bed.

Getting Lake undressed and into bed turned out to be a whole other beast.

“I like you,” Lake said to him as Grady pulled back the covers. He didn’t seem to

understand what Grady was trying to do, because he grabbed at the hem of his sweatpants to keep them there while Grady was trying to get them off.

“If you liked me, you’d be helping me,” Grady muttered.

Lake lifted a leg suddenly, almost kneeing Grady in the face.

“Jesus,” Grady cursed, grabbing Lake’s leg to stop it from moving. “What are you doing?”

“Helping. Here. My foot,” he said, wriggling his foot in circular motions in front of Grady’s face.

Grady smiled, amusement rather than irritation pricking at him. “I don’t need your feet, sweetheart. I need you to take your pants off.”

“Oh.” Lake beamed. “Are we going to have sex now?”

“No.”

Lake finally cooperated, and he was only in his black briefs when Grady managed to convince him that, yes, getting into the bed was the best idea.

Finally, Lake was in place, and Grady slid into the bed beside him, stretching out on his side, one hand on Lake’s belly. Lake twisted to face him, clasping Grady’s hand in his, his head on the pillow. His hazel-brown eyes were glassy and bright.

“Did you know,” Lake said, his voice barely above a whisper, “that you can’t touch your nose with your tongue?”

“I did not know that,” Grady replied, no idea why he was whispering too. He

remembered Lake mentioning it in regards to being pulled over by the police. He was doubly glad that an officer hadn't asked him to do it, if it wasn't even possible to do sober.

Lake stuck out his tongue, and his eyes went cross-eyed as he stretched it up towards his nose.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Grady had no idea why he found this man as attractive as he did. Why even now, he had to stop himself from leaning forward to kiss him. Why he was all Grady could think about. Why Grady needed him in a way that he didn't want to acknowledge. Needing someone only led to heartbreak because eventually everyone left. His mother, even his father, though it hadn't been his fault. Kyle. Mal. Grady gave out his heart, and no one ever kept it.

"See?" Lake said, smiling drunkenly at him.

"Mhmm."

Lake stroked his fingers through Grady's beard and then down to his chest, settling there. "You smell nice."

His voice was still quiet, and Grady liked the way it sounded, with the silence of the night surrounding them. It was like a secret they were sharing.

"I showered today," Grady said, chuckling. "It helps."

"No," Lake said, shaking his head lightly. "You smell like you, not soap." He lazily caressed Grady's chest with the tips of his fingers, not moving his hand. "Deep underneath. Where you hide."

Grady took Lake's hand and kissed his palm, resting his lips there for a long moment. He kept hold of it as he drifted asleep.

Lake absently stirred his coffee with a spoon, the dull throb at the back of his head

letting him know what an idiot he'd been the night before. Drinking that heavily on a Sunday night when he had work in the morning hadn't been one of his brightest moves. He would have to tell his CO why he couldn't fly that day and probably spend the rest of it knee-deep in paperwork because there was nothing else that he could do that wouldn't just exacerbate the headache.

It wasn't the first time he'd gone to work hungover, but it hadn't happened since his early twenties, when he could bounce back a hell of a lot fucking easier. No one told him that he'd be old at thirty-one.

"Good morning," Grady murmured behind him. He kissed Lake on the cheek on his way past to get his own coffee.

Lake just grunted in response. His heart was in turmoil, and staring into his mug hadn't held the answers he'd sought. Avery had been right; Lake needed to be upfront about how he felt because otherwise they were going to keep going on like this, and how could he expect Grady to give him what he needed if he didn't ask for it?

Grady watched him over the rim of his mug as he took his first careful sip. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I drank a lot of vodka last night," Lake said wryly. "You didn't have to come over. I'm sorry I called you."

Grady didn't respond straightaway. He put his mug down and circled the bench, tugging Lake into his arms. "You can always call me, and I'll always come."

Lake swallowed hard. He wished those words meant how they sounded. Did Grady even realise how he sounded?

Lake sighed as he pulled away. He needed a clear head for this, and whenever Grady

was close to him, a clear anything was the last thing he had.

Grady frowned as Lake put distance between them. "What's wrong?"

"What does that mean?" Lake asked.

"What does what mean?" Grady braced himself with one hand on the bench. The movement stretched his T-shirt across his broad chest. Lake knew he would need to go home to get changed into a suit for work. He loved Grady in a suit, but somehow this version was better. The laid-back, relaxed version of him where he was just himself.

Lake forced himself to look up into Grady's face. As if looking at his sexy-as-sin beard and those soulful olive eyes was any better for his train of thought.

"You say things like that, and you make me want so many things with you."

Grady hesitated, the same haunted look in his eyes that always appeared whenever Lake brought anything up that had to do with feelings. "Lake..."

"I hate that they hurt you, and I hate that they made you so wary of love. If you would just trust me, I would take care of it, Grady."

Grady closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't think that I'm being vague here. I want everything from you. I want to be able to introduce you to people as my boyfriend. I want to take you home and introduce you to my parents."

Grady blanched. "C'mon Lake, be serious."

“I am being serious!” He wasn’t going to let Grady keep ignoring what was right in front of both of them. If Grady was going to treat him like a boyfriend, the least he could do was use the title. Acknowledge the depth of what they had. Those men had hurt Grady, but Lake had never given him a reason not to trust him. And he planned on never giving him a reason.

“Lake, up until a few weeks ago, you didn’t even know you liked men. I’m flattered, but—”

“I love you.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

Grady's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah." Lake pursed his lips and gave a helpless shrug. "I'm in love with you, you grumpy bastard. The marriage, and house, and dog that I dreamed of having? I want them with you." He bit his bottom lip, nostrils flaring as tears pricked at his eyes. "You don't get to decide whether or not I'm 'gay' enough to want those things. Even though we both know that I'm a huge fan of your dick, what matters to me is who you are inside, not what's between your legs."

Grady didn't respond, and Lake's heart broke. Why wouldn't this beautiful man just let Lake love him? It was clear how much he needed to be loved. How much he deserved it. Lake wanted to shower him with affection and love and everything else that he'd been missing.

"We're already dating, Grady. The only part that's missing is the label. Why are you the only one that can't see that?"

"If you think we're already dating, why do we need the label?"

"Why are you so afraid to give it one?" Lake countered.

"Once something is given, it can be taken from you," Grady ground out.

Lake shook his head. "I'm not either of them. I would never do to you what they did. I wish you would trust that. I wish you would trust me." He licked his lips, his chest already aching and pained. He'd known deep down that revealing what he wanted would make Grady tuck tail and run, and yet even deeper down had been the hope

that maybe, just maybe, that wouldn't be the outcome. For the first time in his life, he hated being right. "I can't do this anymore," he said, his voice cracking.

"What does that mean?" Grady's voice sounded thick too, like it had been dredged from his throat with forced effort.

"I want the label, Grady. I want every part of you, not just the parts you decide to give. And if you..." Lake took a deep breath. This was important because Lake deserved better than this. They both did. "If you can't, then I don't think we can be friends."

"What?"

"I can't be your friend. I can't pretend that you don't mean as much to me as you do. I can't go out in public and introduce you as my 'friend' when I know in my heart that you'll always be more than that."

"I can't give you what you're looking for."

"What happens to us if I start dating someone else? If you do?" Even just saying the words hurt. Now that he knew what this kind of love felt like, why would he ever want anything else? How could he ever look at someone else the way he looked at Grady? The simple answer was that he couldn't.

"I don't want anyone else," Grady said numbly.

"And neither do I," Lake said. "So I don't understand why you're pushing so hard against this!"

"Because you'll just leave!" Grady roared. He turned away and lifted a hand to his face. "What you want is a fairy tale, and I'm not built for that."

Lake approached slowly. Grady tensed when Lake placed his hands on his lower back. He slid his hands up Grady's back, reaching his shoulders and then up his neck. He moved them back down and then twined them around Grady's waist. He rested his forehead against the middle of Grady's back, feeling the muscles bunch beneath him.

"I don't want the fairy tale, Grady. I'm a handful, and I don't pretend to think that I'm perfect." He squeezed gently. "I don't think that everything will be perfect once you say yes, or that things will be smooth sailing all the time. I just want you, whatever that means. We can take it slow. Hell, we can take it glacial if you want. I'm not asking you to move in with me and marry me right this second. I'm not even asking you to say you love me back. I just want us to try. I want to be able to call you mine, to be guaranteed that Friday night date. To be able to tell anyone that flirts with you that you're taken, and they can go dunk their head in a toilet."

Grady let out a huffed laugh. "I don't get flirted with."

"You get flirted with way more than you think you do." Lake was going to have to practise his death stare in the mirror so he could use it on any of the idiots who thought Grady was ripe for the picking. "That's not the point."

"What if I say yes, and it all falls apart?"

"If you're asking me to guarantee that it won't, I can't. Life doesn't work that way. But I can promise you that I would never lie or cheat." Lake kissed Grady's back lovingly. Hope was flaring in his stomach like butterflies dancing, and this time he let them free. If he was asking for trust, he had to give trust in return. He knew Grady, loved Grady. And Grady would never try to hurt him, not if he could help it. Grady had only ever tried to protect himself, and that was something that Lake could understand. If Grady wanted to push him away, he would have already done it. "If something is wrong or something doesn't work for me, I'll talk to you about it. I

won't go behind your back and ever do anything that I know will hurt you, not deliberately."

Grady twisted in Lake's arms and cupped his cheeks. "Lake, you are an extremely attractive man, inside and out. Realising that you're bisexual opens up an entirely new pool for you, for dating or just casual relationships. Why would you want to tie yourself down?"

"I think we already covered the whole 'I don't want anyone else' thing, so why would I care that other people are out there? I don't want other people."

"And what if you decide later that you do?" Grady asked, his eyes imploring. While his words said one thing, the sadness beneath the surface said that he was worried about the answer. Lake wanted to heal all of that hurt, show Grady that he was worth everything to him.

But Lake knew it wasn't that simple. He knew that this was the crux of the matter. The betrayals Grady had experienced at the hands of two men who had likely promised exactly what Lake was trying to promise would have dug down and gotten their claws deep inside him. Lake didn't know what else he could say to reassure Grady. All he could do was keep repeating it until Grady believed it. Lake was willing to do that for however long it took. Grady just had to let him in so he could do it.

"The only one that thinks that will happen is you," Lake said softly. "I don't know if you've noticed, but you're a pretty great catch yourself. Those guys were idiots, and sometimes you just can't account for taste. Their loss is my gain. I know myself, and I know that I'm never going to think otherwise."

Lake leaned forward and kissed Grady's soft lips. He'd meant for it to be quick, but he couldn't resist the lure and allowed Grady to slip his tongue in and have a taste

before he pulled away. Lake stroked Grady's cheek, running his fingers through his soft beard. Fuck, he loved Grady's beard. "For the first time in my life, I can see the path of the future that I want because I've found the person that I want to walk it with."

Grady kissed him hungrily, pulling soft moans from deep inside Lake. Lake was helpless to do anything but open for him. There would never be a time in his life that he wouldn't want to kiss Grady. He wrapped his arms around Grady's neck and arched up, pressing their chests together.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Is that a yes?” Lake asked breathlessly. Grady hadn’t actually given an answer, and that part of the equation was pretty important.

“Yes,” Grady said, nipping at his jaw. There was a deep rumble to his voice that sent a shiver of pleasure racing across Lake’s spine and down to his dick and ass. It had been two whole days since they’d had sex, and that was just way too long for Lake to go without. Deployments were going to be a whole other kind of nightmare. Maybe he’d talk to Grady about sex toys, and they could start working on their phone-sex game in preparation.

“Yes?”

“I’m not perfect either, Lake.” He sucked at a particularly sensitive section of Lake’s neck, and Lake gasped as his dick filled in his pants, begging to be touched.

“Oh, don’t worry. I know,” Lake said. He wasn’t ignorant of Grady’s faults. But they didn’t make Lake love him less. If anything, they made Lake love him more. Because perfection was overrated, and flaws meant that Lake didn’t have to be perfect either. They could be imperfect together. “You snore. And you don’t like pancakes. And you watch weird TV shows. And you’re so judge-y when other people are driving. And—”

“Lake,” Grady interrupted abruptly.

“What?”

Grady pulled at Lake’s military jacket. Lake had a second to be thankful that Grady

draped it carefully over a chair instead of putting it on the floor where he would have to clean and iron it again, before Grady's mouth was on his again.

"You talk too much," Grady said against his lips. "Shut up."

"Okay."

Lake thought briefly about the fact that he was going to be late for work, and then all he thought about was Grady's hands all over him.

He suddenly found himself in Grady's arms, and Grady's mouth was on his with deep, bruising kisses. Lake moaned, wrapping his arms and legs around Grady.

"Fuck me," Lake gasped. "Please—need you inside me. I always need it." He needed it every second of every day. Not just Grady's dick, but Grady himself. The man had sunk inside him, and Lake loved everything about him. Just being near him, or texting him, or hearing his voice made everything in Lake fill with happiness.

Grady dropped Lake to the bed with little finesse and hastily tugged his boots, socks, and pants off. Lake helped by taking his shirt off and throwing it somewhere. He'd gotten well beyond the point of caring what was ironed or not.

Heat burst across Lake as he watched Grady undress. When he crawled onto the bed with supplies in hand, Lake shoved him to his back and straddled him, crawling until his ass rested on Grady's dick. He ground down, feeling Grady's silky skin rub against his hole. Fuck, it felt good. It would feel even better once it was inside him. "Happy to see me?"

"Baby, I'm always happy to see you."

Lake let those words filter into his heart and warm him from the inside. Grady had

agreed to be his boyfriend, and every word he said only made that feeling better.

Grady bit his lip as he rolled on the condom and stroked himself while Lake got himself ready, fucking into himself with two fingers. It was a little awkward and didn't feel half as good as Grady's dick was going to. But it slicked him enough that when he slowly eased down on Grady, the burn from the stretch wasn't as bad as it could have been. By now Lake was used to the feeling anyway. Used to it and loved it.

He groaned as he bottomed out, feeling impossibly full. From this angle, Grady's dick felt so fucking big. He braced himself on Grady's chest with his palms, the skin beneath burning hot. "Did you get dick-enhancing surgery in the last week?" he asked on a breathless moan.

Grady gripped Lake's hips hard enough that Lake knew he would have bruises there. Fuck, Lake hoped he did. He loved it when Grady bruised him, showed them off proudly in the showers where he got shit from his fellow officers. He didn't care. They were just jealous they didn't have someone like Grady wrecking them every night.

"I think you did."

Grady surged up and wrapped a hand around the back of Lake's neck as he kissed him fiercely. Lake moaned loudly as he settled into the new position, wrapped his arms around Grady's shoulders as he rocked against him. He was so fucking deep that Lake was surprised he couldn't feel him in his chest, in his throat.

"Did you feel yourself?" Lake gasped out as Grady let his lips go. His finger dug into Grady's back as Grady pushed up.

"What?"

“Your dick went up the back of my throat. Did you feel it?”

Grady stared at him for a second before bursting into laughter. “I can’t tell what’s more terrifying: that I’m not sure if you’re being serious, or the fact that I’m still hard.”

“You can be both.” Lake lifted himself up and down, small shallow thrusts as he got used to Grady’s size. “Don’t stop fucking me,” he said breathlessly.

Grady fell onto his back again, dragging Lake with him. He kissed Lake deeply, with hot wet slides of his tongue. He slid his hands down to cup Lake’s ass and squeezed as he thrust up into Lake. He didn’t pick up speed, but every thrust was hard, pushing deep and rattling Lake’s bones.

Lake loved everything about it. He loved being filled by Grady’s big dick, of being so thoroughly manhandled that he had no choice but to take it. He’d never experienced anything like it, and he couldn’t get enough. Now he could have it whenever he wanted, without the fear that there was some kind of time limit to how long he could have it.

Lake took hold of Grady’s hair as he hung on, pushing his hips down on every one of Grady’s thrusts. The slapping of their flesh together was obscenely loud and fucking incredible.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

“Do you think they make dildos your size?” Lake asked against Grady’s lips. If they did, he wanted one. He wanted two. Four. Maybe four was excessive. Two would be fine. “Is four too many?” His breath hitched on a particularly hard thrust that hit his prostate. “Fuck, right there. Angled just—Yes.Fuck.Do you—” He gasped again. “Do you think your dildo dick could do that?”

“Lake,” Grady groaned.

“What?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I’m just asking,” Lake said, grinning down at him.

The smile that Grady gave him in return did something funny to Lake’s heart. Made it soar, flipping over itself as it danced.

“Are we having sex or participating in trivia night?” Grady asked. Lake noticed he didn’t stop fucking into him despite the question.

“Both. Definitely both.” Lake pushed himself into a sitting position and rolled his hips, causing Grady to groan. It was so fucking good, sending sparks of pleasure racing across his skin, like he’d been electrocuted by the wires of a Black Hawk.

Lake fucked himself on Grady’s dick like a man starved, rising and then dropping down, tendrils of pain mixing in with the pleasure. “Let’s just... stay here... forever and fuck until... we die.”

“Don’t think it will take long,” Grady said, his voice throaty and deep.

Lake suddenly found himself on his back, his head spinning. Jesus. The pure strength in Grady’s big body was so fucking sexy, Lake didn’t know what to do with it.

Grady’s thrusts slowed as he bent and kissed Lake with lazy strokes of his tongue. He slid in and out of Lake at a leisurely pace, and Lake could feel every inch of him as he moved. His toes curled as he leaned into his kiss, cupping Grady’s cheeks in his hands.

Grady took his time, slowly driving him insane as his orgasm built. When he came, it was less of an explosion and more of a warm slide of pleasure that invaded every tiny corner of his body, no area left untouched.

It occurred to Lake as they lay there that Grady hadn’t fucked him. He’d made love to him.

Lake sighed happily, snuggling into the sheets and embracing Grady’s warmth. Damn. He was so in love with this man, he didn’t know how his body could contain it.

“I’m so late for work.” Lake snickered into the quiet.

Grady groaned as he buried his face in Lake’s neck. “Fuck. Me too.”

Grady had never suffered such a betrayal. It was traitorous behaviour of the worst kind.

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the not-quite-a-puppy currently peeing all over his and Lake’s kitchen floor.

“I took you out two minutes ago,” he hissed at Hades. In the almost three months since

he and Lake had gotten him, he'd definitely lived up to his name, threefold. He only had three legs, but each leg was filled with enough mischief to keep them occupied for a lifetime. "Lake is going to be home any minute now, and I have plans, and now I have to clean up your leakage because you can't control yourself!"

The dog barked happily and wagged his tail as he finished and then ran a million miles an hour at Grady, slamming into his legs so hard they almost both went ass over kettle. Grady was the only one he did it to, and honestly, Grady didn't know if it was a good thing or not. Lake called it his "happy to see you tackle," but Grady called it "trying to break your kneecaps."

"Ares and Persephone are way more well-behaved than you," Grady muttered. He picked up the roughly twenty-kilo malamute and deposited him out the back door, closing it so that he couldn't get back in. He closed the blinds when that face looked at him, pleading silently to return inside.

No. He had plans, and the dog could entertain himself for twenty minutes. He couldn't get in the pool because the fence was secure, and shortly after they'd gotten him, they'd added "cat netting" to the top of the fence, at an angle, so that he couldn't get a foothold to get over it. It had turned out to be a good call because Hades was obsessed with the water. And there were more toys out there than any one dog could use in a lifetime. He'd be fine.

He quickly cleaned up the mess—gross—and finished setting up. He checked his watch and noted he had about five minutes before Lake was due to walk in the door. They had moved in together roughly two months ago, a month after they'd gotten Hades and made the decision to have him stay with Lake because he had a bigger yard, and he owned his house. When Grady's lease had run out, and he'd been trying to decide what to do, Lake had given him the number for a mover, with the beaming smile that he always wore. Grady could have said no; there were hundreds of reasons why moving in together so soon was a bad idea, and Lake hadn't pressured him about

it, just let him know that it was an option. Grady hadn't even thought about saying no. He'd barely spent any time at his own place since they'd become "official." The outcome had been inevitable, and Grady had been strangely okay with it.

Just like he was more than okay with what he was about to do. Nervous—terrified, actually, but he would never admit that, even under torture—but he was pretty sure of Lake's answer. And how much he himself wanted it. He'd never been able to hold himself back from Lake, even when he'd tried to.

He didn't want to anymore. He wanted this.

Grady quickly changed out of his suit and into something more casual: old worn jeans and a plain black button-down shirt. It seemed a weird choice to get out of something formal considering his plan, but Lake was quite partial to him in casual wear, and Grady needed all the help he could get. At the last second, he clipped his badge to his belt, moving his shirt around it so it was in full view. He ran his hand through his hair and smoothed out his beard as he headed down the hallway and through to the lounge. Picking up all the rose petals afterwards was going to be a pain in the ass, but he was at least trying to be romantic, and all the websites said that it was a great addition. And safe for dogs to eat, which was good because Hades had already tried to munch more than a few when Grady had been scattering them and making a trail from the front door.

It wasn't like he was going to ask Gideon how he had done it, and he didn't know anyone else who had. There hadn't been an actual "asking" for Grady his first time around. That had been as much of a fuckup as the rest of it had been. Grady didn't want to bring any part of that experience into this one, because this one meant something. So, he'd asked Quinn instead, and they'd spent a lot of energy researching it and had ended with this plan. They'd carefully deleted their search history afterwards.

Grady rolled his sleeves up to his elbows and perched himself on the edge of the couch as he waited. He fiddled with the small felt box in one hand and flipped his phone in a circular motion as he waited. He could feel his palms starting to sweat.

The second that he heard the lock turn in the front door, his heart began to pound.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 3:37 am

He dropped his phone on the couch and wiped his palms on his jeans as he slid to one knee in the centre of the petals. He'd thought about candles but had decided they were overkill, and a fire hazard, especially considering the not-quite-puppy that would have made even trying to light them a horrifying disaster. Lake was also a fire hazard without the candles, so it had just seemed safer all around to avoid them.

"Grady?" Lake called out hesitantly. "Hades?"

Just hearing his voice calmed Grady. Everything was going to be fine because it was Lake. Even if he said no, it would still be fine because Grady knew that they could weather any storm.

"Ooh, petals! That's exciting." The distinct thud of Lake taking off his boots sounded on the tiles, and then his heavy footsteps came closer. "Are we celebrating something?"

Grady swallowed down the lump in his throat. He rested an elbow on his one bent knee and opened the small box.

"Did the box of sex toys we ordered arrive? Because I am so rea..." Lake's voice trailed off as he appeared in the archway leading to the lounge and spotted Grady. "Uh..." His gaze flitted from Grady to the box in his hand. "You know, if this had been a surprise party, we would have had some really mortified guests," he said absently.

Grady smirked. "We would have," he agreed. "Good thing it's just me." Though Grady didn't think they'd be surprised if it were a room filled with people who knew

Lake. When he'd met Lake's parents, it hadn't taken long to work out where Lake had gotten his personality from. His father, Dave, was like sunshine as well, and his mother, Gayle, had been a weird mix of Lake and Avery, equal parts salt and sunshine. They'd been sickeningly in love and had given Grady hope that maybe he and Lake weren't so doomed after all.

"Where's Hades?"

"Outside." Grady patiently waited for Lake to move closer, knowing that his soldier's brain was trying to process the situation.

Lake visibly swallowed and stopped right in front of Grady. "Are they earrings?" he asked, his voice rising a little.

"You don't have your ears pierced." And the box was open. Lake could see what was in it.

Lake's eyes went watery, and he glanced between the box and Grady again. "Are you—are you proposing?"

"Yes," Grady said simply. He could have made a joke about it, said something funny to lighten the situation. But he didn't want to. This was important to him, and he needed Lake to know that he was more than serious about it. "Lake, before you, I thought that I knew what love was, and I was wrong. Because being with you? It's been unlike anything that I could describe. I love you, my ridiculous, impossible, loud man. More than I thought I could love anyone."

Lake's lips parted in shock, a single tear falling from his eye. "You love me?"

Grady hadn't said it yet. He'd wanted to be sure before he let the last shield fall. He didn't want to say it lightly and not mean it. Lake deserved better than that. He deserved sincerity, love, and all the things that Grady wanted to give him.

“You gave me back something that I didn’t even realise I’d lost along the way.”

“Sorry to tell you, but that cynicism is still firmly entrenched,” Lake mumbled. He looked down to where Grady’s badge was on his hip, and his nostrils flared.

Grady hooked a finger in one of the many pockets on Lake’s camo pants and tugged him closer, beside his knee.

Lake braced himself with one hand on Grady’s shoulder. He touched one finger to the platinum band. Then snatched his hand away. “Oh. I think you have to ask first.”

“Do I?” Grady asked wryly.

Lake grinned. “Treat me right, Grady,” he teased, running the back of his hand across Grady’s cheek.

“Always,” Grady murmured, turning his head to kiss Lake’s palm. He cupped Lake’s ass, because it was a tragedy whenever he didn’t have his hands on it.

He’d had a speech prepared and having Lake this close, so much of it was lost. He’d even written it down, the paper burning a hole in his pocket. He’d memorised it, but his memory was failing him. He tried to remember the important bits.

“Lake, we brought in the new year together when I didn’t know who you were. You landed a kiss on me that haunted me for weeks. Now that I know you, I want to spend every New Year’s together for the rest of our lives. The start of them, the end of them, and the messy parts in between.” He lifted the box a little higher and looked right into Lake’s hazel-brown eyes. He would never tire of looking at them. He wanted them to be the last thing he saw when he left the earth. “Will you marry me?”

Lake’s eyes misted over again as he looked at the ring. He stared for so long Grady wondered if he’d gone to sleep standing up.

“Lake?”

Lake jolted. “Oh. Right. I should answer now?”

“I would appreciate it, yeah,” Grady said, smiling indulgently at the man that held every part of his heart. Why he’d thought that anything involving Lake would go by the book, he had no idea.

Lake barrelled into him, and they fell backwards onto the carpet. “Yes,” he declared brightly before landing a devastating kiss on Grady.

It was minutes later before they had their bearings enough to get the ring out and slip it on Lake’s finger. Grady had recruited the help of Avery and Gayle to make sure that the size he’d ordered was the right fit. Gayle had cried, and Avery had finally given him the “if you hurt him” speech. It had given Grady a sense of relief instead of terrifying him like Avery probably thought it should. It was then that he knew this was it. Lake was his person, and he would never want anyone else.

Lake bit his lip as he stared at it on his finger. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You should wear one too.”

Grady kissed him, sliding his hand around the back of his neck. “If you want, we can get one ordered for me.”

“I want that.”

Lake could have anything he wanted.