

The Case of The Friendly Indians

By tera_gram

Rating: NC-17 for M/M oral, anal, violence.

Pairings: Shawn/Lassiter. Established relationship. Sequel to Carlton's Worst Inhibitions.

Warning: Shassie Slash. Some fluff. Homophobic and biphobic slurs and violence.

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Summary: Shawn and Lassiter visit a friend from Lassiter's police academy days.

Note: The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe are a real group who are fighting to regain their federal recognition after having been erroneously declared extinct. They are indeed claiming Oakland Army Base land. There is no Stephen J. Bader. Their legal battle is being underwritten by Alan Ginsburg, a real estate developer who lives happily murder-free with his family in Orlando. And although I have Shawn joke about it, voodoo is as legitimate a religion as any other.

"We don't have to go," Lassiter said, examining the letter inviting them to visit Russell Santos and his husband, Eric Carpenter, for the weekend.

"Of course we do," Shawn said. "They're your friends, Lassie-face. Plus, they're responsible for us getting together." He wrapped his arms around Lassiter's waist and looked up at him.

"Hmmm," Lassiter mumbled noncommittally.

"I think it's the least we can do," Shawn said.

Actually, the least we could do is call and say we're too busy with work.

Lassiter had gone to the academy with Russell Santos. He had admired Russell's guts for coming out as gay in their first term, but they hadn't been friends. Competitors was more accurate. During his academy days Lassiter had been a mix of ambition and anxiety. Part of that had been due to hanging out with guys like Russell, who were always trying to challenge one another for the role of alpha male. Of course the academy had been a long time ago.

Russell was now on the burglary unit of the San Francisco Police Department. Lassiter had been sending him a card at Christmas for years, but they weren't close. Yet when he'd first found himself attracted to Shawn, it was Russell he'd turned to for assurance

that he wasn't, as he put it, "turning gay." The trip to San Francisco hadn't been as reassuring as he'd hoped, but it had certainly answered his questions.

Lassiter looked at the letter again. *There's no way Russell is inviting us to visit out of the goodness of his heart. This trip has to have an ulterior motive.*

"It's a six hour drive," he pointed out, finally returning the hug. "There and back."

"They say we can stay for the weekend," Shawn said. "They've got a guest room."

"Sounds like fun," Lassiter said. But in the back of his mind he was thinking of those letters that criminals with outstanding warrants receive, inviting them to isolated locations claiming they'd won a trip or a boat. This invitation felt like a trap.

Eric was watching anxiously from the window while Russell was busy in the kitchen.

"I see them! They're here!" Eric called from his vantage point in the living room. "Carlton and his man. They're coming up the street."

"I give it six months—a year max," Russell said, walking out from the kitchen drying his hands on a tea towel. "This time next year he'll probably be born-again and married to an ex-lesbian."

"Oh, you're just grouchy about losing that bet," Eric said. During Lassiter's gay panic Russell had promised to give him fifty dollars if he so much as kissed a man. Lassiter had been dating Shawn for almost three months before he'd called to collect.

"Nonsense," Russell said gruffly. "Best fifty bucks I ever spent. Now I have something to tease him about for the rest of his life."

The bell rang and Eric went to answer the door.

"My bags are heavy, and my calves are dying," Shawn complained as they carried their luggage up Douglass St. toward the Victorian duplex where Eric and Russell lived. "I forgot how steep this street was."

Lassiter turned and gave Shawn a suspicious look.

"When were you ever here?" he asked.

"I forget," Shawn added quickly. "Unless you really need to know. Then you forfeit the right to get mad at me when I tell you. It's like those Void If Removed stickers."

Lassiter sighed. Shawn had trailed him on his previous trip to San Francisco; he'd probably followed him to Russell and Eric's as well. If he'd known at the time he would have been furious, but now it seemed almost reasonable. He'd tailed Shawn more than a few times. Although to be fair it was back in the days when he'd suspected him of engaging in a criminal conspiracy to defraud the SBPD.

"Fine, you don't remember." Lassiter shifted his heavy suitcase to the other arm and reminded himself for the third time to get one with wheels.

"I can't believe you have gay friends," Shawn said.

"I can't believe you talked me into letting you meet them. Speaking of which," Lassiter lowered his suitcase to the sidewalk, looked around the deserted residential street, then stepped in close, placed his palm against the small of Shawn's back and pressed him forward.

"What?" Shawn looked curiously up to where Lassiter's eyes were obscured by sunglasses.

"I think we should get all the kissing out of our system now, before we go in," he said. "I refuse to act like a lovesick emo kid in front of Russell and Eric."

"Aw, Lassie." Shawn said, "that's...almost sweet." He dropped his bags to the sidewalk, grabbed Lassiter by the tie and surged forward. Lassiter's kiss was needy, a combination of aggressive tongue and eager lips. The intimacy blocked out everything around them. After several minutes, Lassiter was the first to pull back. He looked around again, wondering if there was a secluded spot nearby where they could get more out of their system than kissing.

"More?" Shawn asked breathlessly.

Lassiter licked his lips, tasting the salt of Shawn's skin. "They're expecting us," he said, not sure if he was trying to convince himself or Shawn.

"You're right," Shawn sighed and ran his fingers artfully through his hair. "Do I look like someone who's just been ravaged?"

"Only from the waist down," Lassiter replied. He adjusted his own pants, now slightly tighter in the crotch area, then picked up his suitcase and mounted the steps to the Santos/Carpenter residence. He set his bag down on the landing, rang the bell and straightened his tie.

Shawn remained where he was standing for a moment, focusing his mind on naming all the cast members of Glee, while his heartbeat and blood flow returned to normal. Then he muttered "Walk it off," to himself and followed Lassiter up the stairs.

The door was opened by a man in his late thirties with short grey hair and glasses.

“Carlton! We’re so glad you came. And you must be Shawn. We’ve been looking forward to meeting you. I’m Eric.” He took their bags and led them inside.

The Santos/Carpenter residence had the small proportions of a Victorian house, and was furnished mission style. To the left a narrow set of stairs led up to the bedrooms. Straight ahead was the kitchen, and to the right was the diningroom and livingroom. Shawn spotted a picture of Lassiter’s Police Academy graduating class on the diningroom wall. He had excellent eyesight, and with everyone’s fresh police haircuts Lassiter’s ears were hard to miss.

“Carlton. Good to see you again.” Russell tucked the tea towel under his arm and the two men shook hands.

Shawn smiled and gave him a quick once-over. He looked to be in his early forties. He was tall and tanned and built like a baseball player, with dark wavy hair that was greying at the sides. Shawn was glad that Lassiter hadn’t explored his gay side during his academy years. He’d hate to have to compete with Russell Santos.

Russell looked appraisingly at Shawn. “This is your...fellow.” Like many things Russell Santos said, Lassiter was never sure whether he meant them as a statement or a question.

“Yes, this is my boyfriend, Shawn.” All the way to San Francisco Shawn and Lassiter had discussed what term he would use to introduce him. They’d been going with boyfriend mostly, but on this occasion Shawn had pushed hard for lover, fuck-buddy or studmuffin. Lassiter had no intention of using any of those terms, ever, but it had certainly helped pass the time on the drive.

“You guys must be tired,” Eric said. “Let me show you up to your room. Food will be ready in an hour.” He led the way upstairs and left Shawn and Lassiter to unpack.

Twenty minutes later the four men sat in the livingroom, drinking coffee.

“So,” Shawn said, looking from Lassiter to Russell, “you guys went to the academy together. What was Lassie like during his formative years? He strikes me as more of a Tackleberry than a Mahoney. Am I right?”

“He was serious,” Russell said. “Always studying. And competitive.”

“I was competitive?” Lassiter said incredulously. “You blew a gasket when I outscored you on the final exam in our Criminal Justice course.”

“I was robbed,” Russell grumbled. He turned to Shawn. “Professor McNeill docked me points because I used the word scumbag.”

“And because of your penmanship,” Lassiter added.

“Do you keep in touch with that guy who could make all the sounds?” Shawn asked.

“Police academy wasn’t anything like the movie,” Lassiter assured him.

“Parts of my academy years were spent in a bar that was kind of like The Blue Oyster,” Russell admitted. “But nobody tangoed.”

Just before dinner the doorbell rang.

“That’ll be Mary Mejias,” Russell said, as Eric went to the door. “She’ll be joining us for dinner.” Lassiter was suddenly overcome by the idea that Russell had invited some seductive temptress to dinner to bait him into confirming his heterosexuality. He reached out and grabbed Shawn’s hand for support. Shawn looked at him inquisitively, but didn’t pull away.

Lassiter’s suspicion that Russell was laying a honey trap dissipated once he got a look at Mary Mejias. She was a tall attractive woman with dark skin and flashing black eyes, but she was also clearly a lesbian. She wore a slightly mannish suit and her dark hair was pulled back into a marine-style bun. The ring finger on her left hand sported what looked like a wedding band set with rainbow stones. She and Eric hugged briefly.

“This is Detective Mary Mejias,” Russell said. “She’s with Homicide. Mary, this is Carlton Lassiter and his boyfriend, Shawn Spencer, up from Santa Barbara for the weekend.”

Lassiter thought he saw a look pass between Russell and Mejias, but he couldn’t be sure what it meant. Shawn and Lassiter shook hands with the newcomer and the three of them went to the table while Eric and Russell brought out the food.

“So,” Detective Mejias asked, “How long have the two of you been together?”

This is it, Lassiter thought. The grilling has begun. Although I didn’t think Russell was the sort to pass an interrogation off to someone else. Maybe they’re going to take turns. He smiled grimly. He had taken a one-day refresher workshop on interrogation at a policing conference in Los Angeles last year. He was as ready as he could be.

“We started dating the last time we were here in San Francisco.” Lassiter he told her. “It’d been about half a year, I think.”

“It’s been 176 days,” Shawn said. Then, noticing the curious looks he was receiving from everyone, he added, “Give or take a day.”

“We’re coming up on six months,” Lassiter argued. *Was Shawn really counting the*

days? It makes our relationship sound like a prison sentence. The image of Shawn in a cell, scratching lines into the wall was hard to shake.

“I’m pretty sure Lassie’s just seeing me for the money,” Shawn said. “He expects Russell to give him a fifty every time we kiss.”

“That was one time,” Lassiter told Mejias. “It was a bet.”

“And you’re satisfied?” Russell asked pointedly, carrying in a large heaping dish of paella. “Not missing women or anything?”

This is more like it, Lassiter thought. *Russell’s never been afraid to get his hands dirty.*

“We have a threesome with a hooker twice a week,” Shawn said, smiling. “That takes care of our latent hetero tendencies.”

“He’s kidding,” Lassiter said quickly, dishing rice and shrimp onto his plate and wishing he could somehow jump through time and miss this conversation.

“Women are great,” Shawn said, taking the bowl from Lassiter. “But we haven’t had much time to miss them. I’m seven years younger than Lassie, but he is a maniac, maniac on the floor. And on the couch, in the bed, against the kitchen island. You get the idea.”

“Have you considered marriage?” Eric asked Lassiter, setting a bowlful of empanadas down in front of him. Lassiter inhaled some of his coffee, choked, and swallowed painfully.

“Marriage?” He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Eric’s question had hit a little too close to home. Approaching the six-month marker had caused him to reflect on where his relationship with Shawn was going. With Victoria, things had been easier. There was a clear path for dating between men and women, and it led to the altar at Saint Raphael Catholic Church on Hollister Street. Somehow, he didn’t think Father Rojas would be as supportive of his current relationship.

But since some states had legalized same-sex marriage, it had been something he’d wondered about. He accepted that he was in love with Shawn, and had been for months. As it stood now, they were practically living together. Given more time, he didn’t think marriage was an unreasonable expectation. But he wasn’t sure if Shawn was the marrying type, and he sure as hell didn’t want to scare him off.

In his more curious moments, Lassiter had looked up section 9.135 of the Municipal Code, dealing with registering domestic partnerships, but he had found sub-section a (5) slightly daunting: “The two parties are each other’s sole domestic partner and intend to remain so indefinitely and are responsible for their common welfare.” He’d seen Shawn’s resume. Commitment wasn’t his strong suit. Asking him to sign on to their relationship indefinitely might not go over well. And if Shawn was indeed counting the days, maybe

it's because their days were numbered.

"It's a little early for that," Lassiter said finally. He glanced at Russell and Eric, who had settled themselves at the table and begun to eat. *Is this their plan? Is this whole weekend about talking me into having a big gay wedding?*

"Totally early," Shawn agreed. "I haven't met his family yet. What if there's insanity in it? I wouldn't want our kids to come out all crazy."

"Besides, I've been married," Lassiter said grimly. "You may remember that it didn't work out so well." Before the divorce, Lassiter had been a believer in One True Love and Happily Ever After. Now he knew better. His marriage had failed for the same reason his career hadn't; he'd gotten out what he had put in. But he wasn't sure where that left him when it came to Shawn. Were they doomed to be perpetually dating? Would he wake up every morning and wonder if today was the day Shawn finally got bored and left?

"What about you Shawn? Been married before?" Russell asked.

"No. I rarely make it to a second date," he said. "Although I do have a drunken memory of a woman in a white dress on a beach in Louisiana. A marriage isn't legally binding if the officiant is a voodoo priest, right?"

"Stop teasing them, Shawn," Lassiter warned. "They won't know you're not serious." Lassiter was 85% sure that Shawn was joking. He assumed that this sense of playing the odds when it came to Shawn was how Burton Guster had been feeling most of his life.

"Who's not serious?" Shawn asked. "I'd get a divorce but I think I need her hair and nail clippings to make the spell work properly." He looked at Russell and Eric. "I take it that you guys are married."

"Hell yes," Russell said. "We did it as soon as it was legal here. It was the right move, politically. The only way to keep our rights is to exercise them, and do so in large numbers."

"It was more romantic than Russ makes it sound," Eric said. "We rented tuxedos and got married at City Hall, right after two men in wedding gown drag. I've got pictures here somewhere. I think I like the pictures I took of their wedding more than I like the ones of ours. They had the most gorgeous tiaras!"

"How about you?" Shawn asked Meijas. "Married?"

"Oh yeah." She raised her left hand and wiggled the rainbow ring. "My wife and I tied the knot up in Canada back in '05." She glanced at Lassiter, then back to Shawn. "Do you think you'll ever want to get married?"

Lassiter held his breath. The interrogation wasn't so bad now that Russell and Meijas had

turned their sights on Shawn. If he was lucky, they might ask the questions that he didn't dare ask Shawn himself.

"My buddy, Gus, would love it." Shawn laughed. "He'd take over the whole thing. Forget Bridezilla, he'd be Best Manzilla." He paused and moved his food around with his fork. "But for me, I'm not so sure. Trying to be exactly like everyone else takes a lot of the fun out of being queer."

Lassiter exhaled heavily and hoped the whole table hadn't heard the sigh. *That could have been a lot worse*, he thought. *Shawn could have said "What? Marry him? God no!" Or said that his patience for monogamy tapped out at the six month mark.*

"Why do you use that word?" Russell asked sharply his forkful of rice frozen midway to his mouth.

"What word? Queer?" Shawn smiled innocently back at Russell.

Shawn has no idea what he's in for, Lassiter thought. He briefly wondered if he should swap shop talk with Detective Mejias, but he was hesitant to leave Shawn to his own devices against Russell.

"Yeah," Russell said. "It's demeaning. There's nothing queer about me."

Lassiter looked at his boyfriend. By the traditional meaning of queer--odd, eccentric or unusual, Shawn was definitely queer. Queer could also be a verb, in terms of thwart or prevent, as when Shawn sometimes queered his morning routine by refusing to allow him to leave the bed in a timely fashion. Lassiter even sometimes thought Shawn was queer in the more negative sense of being 'not quite right.' Like when he insisted that pineapple was an appropriate pizza topping.

"I like queer," Shawn said. "It covers a lot of ground, and it confuses the straight people." He popped an empanada in his mouth and chewed happily.

After dinner had finished Russell and Mejias exchanged meaningful glances again.

"Listen, Shawn," Russell began, "I have a confession to make. We had an ulterior motive in inviting you here."

"Please say this is the prelude to an all-cop orgy," Shawn said.

"I've got a case," Mejias said. "It's politically tricky. And Russell mentioned you were visiting and we'd read about your work with the SBPD."

"We were hoping you could listen to the problem" Russell said, "and psychically read it

or something.”

“He’s not a party trick,” Lassiter said, his voice edged with annoyance.

“I don’t mind, Lassie. Really.” Shawn looked at Mejias. “Put your twenty-five cents on the gasoline can and I’ll do my best.”

“I’ve got a suspicious death,” Mejias began, “and I absolutely cannot be wrong about whether or not it’s murder.”

“Isn’t that something the M.E. could help you out with?” Lassiter asked.

“The M.E. can only say he died of heart failure,” Mejias explained. “I need to know if someone helped that to happen.”

“Why is it politically tricky?” Shawn asked.

“How much do you know about Indians?” she asked.

“I know they’ll refuse an Oscar for you and they hate littering,” Shawn said.

“He knows nothing,” Lassiter said to Mejias. Then, glancing at Shawn he added, “Maybe less than that.”

“Okay. The Muwekma Ohlone is an Indian tribe in the San Francisco area,” Mejias began. “They’re seeking a land grant on the former Oakland Army Base.”

“The Presidio?” Lassiter asked, surprised.

“The Presidio,” Shawn chimed in. “Great film. Mark Harmon is yummy, even if his hair is a little Three’s Company. I prefer his coiff on NCIS.”

“The Presidio’s been closed as a military base since 1989,” Mejias said. “Now it belongs to the National Parks Service.”

“Is the Parks Service having trouble with cartoon bears stealing their pic-i-nic baskets?” Shawn asked. “I think I saw something on television about that. Were the perps wearing neckties?”

“Why do they want the Presidio?” Lassiter asked.

“Money.” Russell said.

“Exactly,” Mejias said. “If they could open a casino there it could be a great source of revenue.” She took a sip of her coffee and glanced quickly at Russell. “But there’s a hitch. Only federally recognized tribes can get land grants. And officially, we don’t exist.”

In 1925 an anthropologist named Alfred Kroeber wrote that our tribe was extinct, and the government dropped us from the federal list.

“We?” Lassiter asked, picking up on the shift in language.

“Yeah,” Mejias said. “I’m Muwekma myself. It’s one of the reasons they gave me the case. This way, if I say it was natural causes, they won’t have a tribe of angry Indians on their doorstep accusing them of a cover-up.”

“They’ve been fighting to regain recognition,” Eric said, “but the whole process has been a pain in the ass. It’s already cost them over two million dollars.”

“Excuse my asking a stupid question,” Lassiter said, looking at Mejias, “but if you have two million dollars why not just buy land? You could put a casino anywhere. People go to Vegas and there’s nothing there but sand and gambling.”

“If you build it, they will come,” Shawn agreed.

“It’s not our two million.” Mejias sighed. “The legal bills are being paid by a land developer named Stephen J. Bader. He specializes in commercial developments, especially casinos. Unfortunately, he’s dead.”

“And he’s your suspicious death,” Lassiter said.

“Exactly,” Mejias said. “He was visiting the tribal leader when it happened. She says he had a kind of seizure and fainted. She called an ambulance but he died within minutes.”

“What can I do to help?” Shawn asked.

“If you’re willing to take the case,” Mejias said, “we can go to the site, and you can talk to the spirits. See if it was natural causes or not.”

“I’ll do it,” Shawn said. “Take me to your leader.”

Chapter 2

Russell cornered Lassiter on his way back from the bathroom.

“Carlton. Step into my office for a minute, will you? We need to talk.” Russell's office was a dark room done in wood panelling, filled with bookshelves and filing cabinets. A large computer desk occupied the far corner and two armchairs sat by the bookshelves. It was a good room. Lassiter took a seat in one of the chairs and noticed that several of the books on the shelf next to him were on ornithology.

“You’re into birds?” he asked Russell.

“What?” Russell sat in the chair opposite him and glanced at the bookshelf then back to Lassiter. “Oh yeah. You know, all the years I spent on stakeouts, I needed something to occupy myself. So I learned to identify birds.” Russell looked at Lassiter with a serious expression. “Listen, I have to ask. What do you think you're doing with Shawn?”

“I’m sorry?” Lassiter frowned, unsure where Russell was going with this.

“I mean, neither one of you is really gay.”

“What are you, the gay police?”

“I figured you'd come here with some boy toy--someone it was obvious you were just getting your rocks off with. But I like Shawn. He's funny, he seems bright, and he holds his ground under fire. I just don't see a future for the two of you.”

“Thanks, Russ. That's really nice.” Lassiter started to rise from the chair and Russell grabbed his arm.

“Sit. I'm not done. I need to know where your mind is at on this. Are you gay now or what?”

“Shawn and I are bisexual, if you must know.” Lassiter hated feeling like he needed a label, but if he had to pick one he'd go for accuracy over social acceptance.

Russell made a sharp intake of air whistle through his teeth.

“Carlton, I say this as a friend. Don't do this to yourself. Bisexuals make terrible long-term partners. They're tourists. With both of you calling yourselves bisexual... it's just... doomed.”

Lassiter narrowed his eyes at Russell. “Eric's bisexual, and you’ve been together for what, ten years now?”

"Don't say that." Russell shook his head. "Eric is *not* bisexual. He just dated some women. In the past."

Lassiter leaned back and laced his fingers together, contemplating Russell's discomfort. He began to wonder if this argument was about him and Shawn at all.

"I seem to remember him saying that he'd lived with a woman," Lassiter went on. "And I'm pretty sure that he still finds women attractive in the present. That's bisexual."

"Eric might be *technically* bisexual," Russell had trouble spitting the word out, "But culturally and politically, he's as gay as I am."

"Have it your way, Russ. But don't pretend you can predict where my love life is headed. I can only handle one psychic at a time."

"There's no future for the kind of a relationship you're talking about," Russell said. "And I think you know that. I mean, you haven't even introduced him to your family. You can sense it's a short-term thing. Some kind of mid-life crisis."

"Sweet Justice, Russ. I gave up on being police chief so I could be with Shawn. How much more do you want? Do I have to give my Catholic mother a heart attack? Do I have to make it so I never see my nephew again? Is that what it takes?"

"All I'm saying is that one of you is bound to get hurt, and frankly, now that I've seen Shawn, I'm afraid that person is going to be you."

"You want to shut up now, Russell." Lassiter clenched his jaw and sat on his hands to he wouldn't curl them into fists. Russell was way out of line, but socking his host would bring a swift and shameful end to their weekend visit. Plus Shawn had promised to help Mejias on that Indian case and would be disappointed if he couldn't follow through.

"Don't get me wrong," Russell said. "Shawn's a nice guy. But the man's a player. He said it himself, he doesn't usually make it to a second date. Even by gay standards, that's not normal. And I know you, Carlton. You're like a blue jay. You mate for life. Shawn's a tomcat. And he's going to toy with you for a while and then he's going to tear you apart."

Lassiter stood. "Russell, you're a good cop and I respect you. But you are seriously pissing me off. Now are you going to let this go or do Shawn and I go check into a hotel? It's your choice."

"Of course you stay here," Russell said. "Jesus, Carlton, I'm not trying to drive you out. I think of you as a friend."

"You've got a funny way of showing it."

Lassiter usually considered it disrespectful to have sex in someone else's house, but after his argument with Russell he didn't feel much like keeping to that rule. In fact, given what Russell had said he felt like he needed to be close to Shawn if only to reassure himself that Russell was wrong.

When he entered their bedroom Shawn was already undressed.

"Hey Lassie," Shawn said. "I assume you want to keep the same side of the---" the rest of his question was lost as Lassiter claimed his mouth in a desperate kiss, opening his lips and surging forward with his tongue. Shawn moaned in surprise and then in interest and began to unbutton Lassiter's shirt. Lassiter moved his mouth to Shawn's neck so he could see better to undress him. His shirt fell to the floor, followed quickly by his pants.

"Bed," Lassiter whispered into Shawn's ear.

Shawn looked at him from under half-lowered lids. "What happened to your rule about no sex in Russell's house?" he asked, teasingly.

Lassiter doffed the remainder of his clothing and resumed the kissing, working his way across Shawn's chest then down his stomach and along his hip. "Screw Russell's house," he mumbled in between kisses. "Russell's an asshole."

"I assume there's a backstory to this that I'll hear all about tomorrow," Shawn said. "But for now I'm just glad you changed your mind." He bounced energetically off the bed, flung open his suitcase, and pulled a condom and two tiny packs of lube from an inside pocket. "I was a boy scout. We like to be prepared."

"Somehow I don't think this is what Robert Baden-Powell had in mind," Lassiter said.

"I wouldn't be so sure. He---" Whatever Shawn might have added was lost in a sharp intake of breath as Lassiter wrapped his lips around his hardened cock. "Oooh Lassie," he moaned, tangling his fingers into Lassiter's hair.

Lassiter raised his head just long enough to add, "But let's keep the noise level down anyway." Lassiter returned his mouth to Shawn's cock and soon had him gripping the sheets. After 176 days of blow jobs (give or take a day), Lassiter had gotten to know what Shawn liked. But as much as he enjoyed it, this wasn't what he needed tonight. He pulled away and Shawn made a subdued whimper of protest. The whimper was quickly replaced by a low gasp as Lassiter smoothed the lube along Shawn's cock and then down to his ass.

His mouth descended upon Shawn's lips again, partly because he wasn't sure that Shawn would remember to be quiet, and partly because what he needed tonight wasn't just sex. He needed to surrender himself to the idea that he and Shawn were more than a mid-life

crisis or a fling or some kind of experiment. He needed to believe that what he felt with Shawn was, if not One True Love, then at least something real and lasting.

Shawn stifled a moan as Lassiter entered him, and then wrapped his legs around his hips, meeting him at every thrust. Lassiter wrapped his lube-slick hand around Shawn's cock and pumped it as best he could in the tight space between their bodies. Denied the outlet of speech, Shawn resorted to communicating with his lips, tongue, and hands, kissing, licking, and biting Lassiter's neck and raking his nails along every accessible inch of his skin. Although he wasn't saying the outrageously obscene things he usually did, Shawn's arousal was clear in the panting gasps and groans he tried to muffle against Lassiter's neck. Lassiter pumped his fist faster, and felt the muscles respond beneath his fingers.

Shawn latched his lips onto Lassiter's neck and sucked hard as he came, spraying between their two stomachs. Slowing his thrusts until the sensation held him on the edge of his own orgasm, Lassiter ran a finger along Shawn's cheek, enjoying the roughness of his stubble.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," Shawn said, not bothering to whisper. "Which is why I know you'll forgive me for this." He grabbed Lassiter's nipples tightly between his thumb and forefingers and pulled and twisted them, hard. The combination of the heat, the friction, and the intense, almost painful, sensation in his nipples was too much for Lassiter. He swore, louder than he'd intended to, and drove his hips forward as his orgasm overtook him.

Lassiter often had trouble adjusting to sleeping in a strange bed, and this night was no exception. Long after Shawn had dropped into a guileless slumber Lassiter lay staring at the ceiling and thinking.

By the six-month point with Victoria he'd been picking out the ring. Why were things different with Shawn? To be fair, he wasn't a love-struck twenty-something anymore. With a failed marriage under his belt he was more cautious. But was he approaching things with Shawn differently because he'd lost his illusions about love, or did he see his relationship with Shawn as temporary? Maybe as some kind of mid-life crisis he'd eventually outgrow? Was Russell right? Is that why he wasn't making long-term plans?

As long as they were just dating he didn't feel the need to tell his family about Shawn.

But if they were contemplating marriage, or even a civil union or domestic partnership, then he'd have to make some uncomfortable telephone calls. For that kind of a step, his mother and sister, at the very least, deserved to be told. Were his concerns about scaring Shawn off just an excuse for his own cowardice?

He stretched and yawned. What he had with Shawn felt real. If he was honest with himself, it felt just as real as the first six months with Victoria had. But he was a cop, and a cop needed to trust his gut feelings. While his gut told him that he was in love, it also warned him that Shawn might not feel the same way. He turned on his side and watched

Shawn's chest rise and fall as he slept. He hated the uncertainty, but if he pushed for too much too fast he suspected that Shawn would panic and bolt. And at the moment he'd rather live with uncertainty than live without him.

He closed his eyes and drifted into a restless sleep.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Lassiter and Shawn sat in the back of Detective Mejias's SUV, heading to the trailer on the outside of the city where the leader of the Muwekma Ohlone lived. Shawn would take a look around the crime scene—if it was a crime scene—and read the vibrations or whatever he decided to call it. Lassiter had the case file spread across his lap, looking it over on the way.

"So," Shawn said, his voice pitched low so Mejias wouldn't hear, "Are you going to spill about what went down with you and Russell in the time between your going to brush your teeth and your pillaging me with the mute button on? Because the suspense could seriously block my crime-solving skills. Information is like the Metamusal of detection."

"Later," Lassiter whispered. "I'll tell you all about it later."

Shawn waited a few seconds then asked, "Is it later yet?"

"No," Lassiter said. "Try to focus on the case."

"Don't make me use my psychic powers on you," Shawn warned him. "It's been known to cause nosebleeds and cluster headaches. And I think I once blew up Louis Del Grande's head."

"I'll keep that in mind." Lassiter turned to look out the window at the passing cityscape. He'd tried to convince himself that his reticence was for Shawn's benefit. *But who am I kidding?* He thought. *It would take more than some harsh words to make Shawn feel like an unwelcome guest. It would probably take villagers with torches and pitchforks.* The real reason he didn't want to tell Shawn about their talk was that he didn't want to initiate the 'where is this relationship going' discussion.

Shawn pulled a photograph from the folder Mejias had given them. It showed Stephen J. Bader cutting the ribbon on a shopping development in Reno. He immediately spotted the distinctively shaped jewellery on his right wrist—a Medic Alert bracelet.

"I sense he had a medical condition." Shawn shouted up to Detective Mejias.

"Yeah," Mejias called back. "He had cardiac arrhythmia. You're amazing."

Since Shawn had confessed to Lassiter that his psychic powers were really just sharp observation it all seemed so obvious. Of course he had spent several years having no idea how Shawn knew the things he did, so he couldn't be too hard on Mejias for buying it.

"There you go then," Lassiter said. "Guy with a heart problem dies of a heart problem. Big surprise. It's probably not foul play. Case clo-oh!" His voice raised sharply as

Shawn's hand slipped under the open folder and into his lap. "Ix-nay on the ondling-fay," he whispered to Shawn through gritted teeth, and tried to move so he was less accessible.

"He was taking medication for it," Shawn replied to Mejias, his voice giving no indication that he was slowly unzipping Lassiter's trousers. Lassiter slapped ineffectually at Shawn's hand, which kept darting away and then back again.

"Yeah, he took Inderol," Mejias said. "But we talked to his valet and the guy's been taking it at the same time every morning with breakfast.

"I get it that his death is inconvenient," Lassiter said, squirming to prevent Shawn's hand from exploring further. "But couldn't the heart attack just be a heart attack?"

"Sure it could," Mejias said. "In fact, I hope it is. But I need to know that I turned over every stone there was to turn before I sign on to that theory."

"How unpopular was this guy?" Shawn asked. "I'm sensing some serious conflicts."

Lassiter swiped at Shawn's hand, Shawn swiped back, and the two of them engaged in a brief silent slap fight across the back seat.

Catching the flurry of movement in her rear view mirror, Mejias asked, "Are you two okay back there?"

"We're fine," Lassiter said, swatting at the air. "There...was a fly." He relinquished the case file to Shawn, hoping the lack of cover would remove the temptation, and zipped up his pants.

"Bader had his share of enemies," Mejias acknowledged. "There's another group of Indians competing for the Oakland property. They already have federal recognition and a history of successful casino running. Rumour has it they were trying to get Bader to throw in with them instead."

"I doubt they did it," Shawn said. "I worked at an Indian casino once, and they were pretty nice guys. It's not like vegas, where the mob runs everything."

"The mob doesn't run Vegas," Lassiter said. *At least, not anymore.*

"I beg to differ, my tall milky friend," Shawn said. "The evidence is against you."

"What evidence?"

Shawn began to count off on his fingers, "Casino. Godfather 2, Bugsy, Diamonds Are Forever--"

"Movies aren't *evidence*," Lassiter cut in. "And the casino in Diamonds Are Forever wasn't run by the mob. It was a front for Blofeld."

"Who is the head of a vast criminal conspiracy," Shawn said. "Same difference. You're just biased because he has a British accent. You should get help for your rampant anti-Italian attitudes."

"I'm not anti-Italian." Lassiter frowned and turned back to the case file.

"There's also an anti-gambling group based in San Francisco," Mejias said. "They don't want a casino so close to the city. There was an incident with Bader at one of their protests. He got pushed around a bit and hit in the leg with a sign."

"Maybe spies did it," Shawn whispered to Lassiter. "You know, the old poked-with-the-umbrella routine where the guy dies of a heart attack a few hours later."

"It wasn't spies," Lassiter said firmly. He was 98% sure it wasn't spies.

Mejias pulled the SUV on to a dirt road and stopped in front of a shiny metal trailer. "Plus, with this amount of money in the estate, we always like to take a close look at the family. You never know, right?"

"That's for sure," Lassiter said, thinking unkind thoughts about some of his own relatives.

The leader of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was a woman in her fifties named Brenda Meadows. She invited them inside and made tea.

"Yes, I'm definitely sensing something," Shawn moved slowly around inside the homey trailer. "I'm picking up the traces of Mr. Bader's spirit. I sense an evil, menacing presence. The spirit...of murder!"

"Oh for Pete's sake," Lassiter muttered at Shawn's overblown sense of drama.

Mrs. Meadows held Shawn's hands and looked into his eyes. "Our people tell stories about Coyote, the trickster, who is clever, but greedy and untrustworthy. You are like Hummingbird, who outwits Coyote despite his small size."

"You don't have to put on the act for them, Brenda," Detective Mejias said. "They're not tourists. They're here to help me out."

"It's okay," Shawn said. "She's absolutely right. I am like a hummingbird." He turned back to Meadows. "Unless of course you meant it as a sexual innuendo, in which case I'm shocked and offended."

"Goodness no," Meadows said, blushing and relinquishing Shawn's hands. "I just meant

that I'm sure you'll solve this thing."

"How did Bader seem when he was here?" Lassiter asked.

"He said things were good," Meadows began, picking up her mug of tea. "He'd lost some weight and finally gotten some dental work done that he'd been avoiding. But I was sure something was bothering him."

"How so?" Lassiter asked.

Meadows wrinkled her forehead in thought. "We weren't friends, you understand. I don't think he had close friends he could talk to. But we'd been working together on this federal recognition thing a long time, and I liked Mr. Bader. Sometimes it seemed like he wanted to share more than he did. When I asked how the casino business was going he said something about addiction being a terrible thing. At the time I thought he was talking about himself. He had some food issues, and he was a workaholic. But now I'm not so sure."

"What do you know about the family?" Lassiter asked Detective Mejias.

"His wife's a shopaholic," she said. "That could be the addiction he was talking about."

"The wife's not our killer," Shawn said. "She's crazy about him." The family pictures in the file had been very revealing. The wife's body was always turned toward the husband and the two of them were touching in every photo.

"The daughter's some kind of animal rights activist," Mejias added. She looked in her notebook. "Says here she's vegan, whatever that is."

Shawn thought back to the photo. The daughter was all defensive body language, but leaned in toward her father, so it was unlikely that her animosity was directed toward him. She was more likely to try to kill The Burger King, or Ronald McDonald.

Shawn put a hand to his temple and shook his head. "No. I don't sense the daughter's psychic fingerprints here."

"The son hardly ever leaves his room," Mejias said, "but he runs an online poker business."

"Not the son." Shawn shook his head. Bader's son was mirroring his father's gestures. He probably saw himself as taking his father's casino empire to the next level. "I'm sensing a malevolent figure though." He went over the photos in his mind again. One man stood out like a glow stick at a funeral. Every captured gesture radiated animosity and tension. "I'm seeing a man with dark hair, and a smile like the Cheshire Cat."

"There's a step-son," Mejias said. "Dr. Warren Purcell, from Bader's wife's first

marriage. He's a dentist. Runs a practice in Pacific Heights. Bader was at his office earlier that morning to get a damaged crown replaced."

Shawn mentally arranged the pictures in chronological order, based on the age of the teenage daughter. In the early photo the step-son sported some expensive looking jewellery, but as time went on pieces began to disappear from subsequent photos. In the latest photos the step-son's suit, though expensive, was slightly out of fashion.

"You want to take a close look at the step-son," Shawn said. "His aura's all hinkey. I see anger. Anger and money problems."

"That's very helpful," Mejias said. "How would you feel about coming with me when I interview him?"

"We'd love to," Lassiter said. "Let's go. I call shotgun."

"You two go ahead," Mejias said. "I'll catch up with you in a minute."

Shawn and Lassiter said their goodbyes to Ms. Meadows and stepped outside.

"This bites!" Shawn protested. "If she's driving, and you're riding shotgun, then that makes me like Joe Pesci, cracking wise from the back seat. Don't make me be Pesci."

"Suck it up, Buttercup," Lassiter said as he climbed into the passenger seat of the SUV. At least this way Shawn wouldn't be trying to molest him all the way back into the city.

Shawn leaned forward in the SUV and tugged repeatedly on the sleeve of Lassiter's suit jacket.

"It's later," Shawn pointed out.

"Is it?" Lassiter asked.

Shawn leaned further into the front cabin. "Come on, you Caspar-skinned devil. Spill the details on your chat with Russell. You know you want to. And the longer you put it off the worse I'll imagine it was."

Lassiter sighed. "Fine. Russell thinks we're doomed. Something about I'm having a mid-life crisis and you're just a player. I'm going to come out of my phase or you're going to get bored and leave me. I forget which comes first."

"Ow. That's harsh." Shawn laughed, obviously not bothered by the accusations.

Lassiter smiled. "You should have heard his blue jay metaphor."

"But you straightend him out, right?" Shawn asked.

"I told him he was pissing me off."

Shawn tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at Lassiter. "So you didn't straighten him out then. That's curious. What's up, Lassie?"

"Nothing's up. I just don't want to--" he stopped mid-sentence as Mejias got into the vehicle.

Lassiter smiled as they threaded their way through traffic to the dentist's office. He didn't usually enjoy his vacations, unless he went fishing. What most people called relaxing just felt like wasting time to him. But arresting criminals in a different city—this was fun. He was surprised that Russell thought he had to cloak his request for help in the guise of a friendly visit. But then, Russell didn't have a board filled with criminal cases in the middle of his living room.

The office of Stephen J. Bader's step-son was in Pacific Heights, a wealthy area of the city. Detective Mejias led them through the plush, cream coloured waiting room and showed her badge to the receptionist, who equivocated about interrupting Dr. Purcell, but finally agreed to ask if he was free.

Dr. Purcell passed his patient to an assistant and led them down a corridor to his office, a relaxing green room filled with pieces of West Coast Native art.

"This is about my step-father, I presume," he began, "although I don't see why you have to interrupt me at work."

"I'm following up on information received," Mejias explained. "I've just got some questions about your relationship with your step-father and about your financial circumstances."

Lassiter and Shawn watched Purcell squirm and smiled. Lassiter was smiling because he liked the idea that Shawn's 'vision' counted as information received. It was a delightfully vague term. He'd have to remember to use it more often. Shawn was smiling because of two things he'd spotted in Purcell's office and because he'd just realized which piece of the puzzle he needed to solve the case.

Shawn stood up. "Washroom?" Purcell peered at him uncomprehendingly. "I've got to run to the washroom."

"Of course." Purcell launched into a complex set of instructions for locating the washroom, that Shawn didn't bother to listen to, since he wasn't heading for the washroom anyway.

"Thanks," Shawn said. "Talk amongst yourselves 'til I get back. Topic: The American Revolution was neither American, nor a Revolution. Discuss."

As soon as he was outside he sprinted down the hall, opened a door marked Storage, stepped inside, and called Gus.

"What's Inderol?" Shawn asked as soon as Gus picked up.

"Hello to you too." Gus said. "It's a beta-blocker used to treat hypertension. Its generic name is Propranolol. Why?"

"How do you kill someone who's taking it?" Shawn began to root around the room, looking for clues. The first box he opened contained bulk candy suckers and he stuffed a handful into his pocket.

"It's not recommended that you stop taking it suddenly," Gus said. "So denying them their dosage could do it, if their condition were severe enough. How did this even come up? I thought you were visiting Lassiter's friends."

"We are. But there's a murder case at the bottom of our Crackerjacks. What about drug interactions?"

"It's contraindicated with certain other cardio drugs," Gus said.

"Speak English, dude," Shawn said. "Dumb it down. Talk to me like I'm five."

"If a drug makes your heart go vroom-vroom," Gus said, "two of them together could make your heart go boom. Simple enough?"

"Would a dentist have anything that could do that?"

"Sure. Lidocaine. But they're pretty well versed in how much to administer. Nowadays dentists take a comprehensive medical history and they definitely ask about any current medication. You'd know that if you went to your dentist regularly."

Shawn spotted the box, sitting on a metal shelf by the door.

"Thanks, buddy. I've gotta go now. It's time to be brilliantly psychic."

Shawn stepped back into Dr. Purcell's office, thrust his chest out and put his fingers to his temples. He uttered a shocked gasp and then flung himself against the wall.

"Is he okay?" Purcell asked, looking with alarm at where Shawn was now writhing.

"He's fine," Lassiter said.

"He's psychic," Mejias explained to Purcell. "He must be having a vision."

"I see tiny little people," Shawn said. "Dressed in colourful costumes."

"The Wizard of Oz?" Lassiter asked, deadpan. He understood that Shawn needed to make the psychic bit convincing, but he always felt he went overboard.

"Children?" Mejias offered.

"No," Shawn said. "I see little people and horses. And slips of paper that convey bad news to many, and good news to few." He glanced again at the racing forms sitting in Purcell's recycling bin. He was willing to bet that their suspect knew exactly where he was going with this vision by now.

"The racetrack!" Mejias shouted out.

"I'm too busy to sit here watching you people play charades with this charlatan," Purcell said, his face slightly paler than before. He stood, as if to leave.

"You can't use 'charades' and 'charlatan' in the same sentence," Shawn objected, his trance forgotten. "The alliteration makes you sound like Dr. Seuss. I would have gone with something like 'fraud' or 'wingnut'."

"I've had just about enough of this," Purcell moved for the door.

Shawn stepped into his path and put an arm on his shoulder. "I see this man," Shawn said, his eyes closed as if in concentration, "bleeding money like that elevator from *The Shining*." He opened his eyes and looked up at Purcell, who now looked alarmed. "Tell us about the gambling addiction, Warren."

Two hours later Shawn, Lassiter and Detective Mejias sat in Russell Santos's living room, recounting the day's events to him.

"Purcell denied it initially," Lassiter said.

"They always deny it," Russell said. "Just once I'd love to have a perp admit it, maybe even apologize."

"He would have clammed up and asked for a lawyer," Mejias said, "But Shawn freaked him out when he walked him through how he did it, step by step."

"The ghost of Doc Holliday explained it all to me," Shawn said, disclaiming any credit. "He saw the whole thing."

“Interesting feat, considering Doc Holliday never set foot in San Francisco,” Lassiter said.

“You’d be amazed how the spirit world gets around.”

“When we threatened to get a court order to check his Lidocane stock he confessed to the whole thing.” Mejias thanked Shawn for his help, and then said her goodnights to Russell and Eric. Lassiter and Russell walked her to the door.

"If you're ever back this way again, let me know," She said to Lassiter. "I know a great paintball range. Russell tells me you were a great shot back in the day. Plus, I'd love to go up against a psychic."

"You wouldn't consider it an unfair advantage?" Lassiter asked, wryly.

"Not when you're as good as I am." Mejias winked at Lassiter as she left.

After locking the door Russell turned to Lassiter. “I think I understand what you see in Shawn now.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Lassiter said.

"No, I mean it. The guy solves crimes. I respect that."

"Shawn's got an amazing gift," Lassiter said, "and I love it that he chooses to use it to help the department. But what I see in him...the reason I'm *with* him...it's got nothing to do with solving crimes."

"I find that hard to believe," Russell said.

"Are you with Eric for the free book keeping?" Lassiter crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

"I wouldn't have said it's his best feature," Russell said, "but come tax season, it sure doesn't hurt." He gave Lassiter a friendly slap on the shoulder and led the way back to the livingroom, toward the sound of Shawn and Eric laughing together.

Chapter 4

Lassiter watched Shawn eating mushroom fusilli and chatting with Russell and Eric. He'd tuned out their conversation, which was about some television show Lassiter had never even heard of. Instead he found himself wondering about the assumptions he'd made about his relationship with Shawn.

Thus far, he felt like he was barely batting .100. He'd assumed they were just going to be a one-night experiment, and he'd been wrong. He'd assumed they were just going to have sex until they worked the erotic tension out of their work dynamic, and he had been wrong. He'd assumed that Shawn had slept with enough men to populate an Atlantis Cruise ship, and he'd been *really* wrong about that. So why did he feel so sure that Shawn wouldn't be interested in marriage or having a family?

As he chewed his pasta, Lassiter reflected that he'd been making the same mistake with Shawn that he'd made with Victoria. He'd never enjoyed having serious discussions.

They led to hurt feelings, crying wives, and evening jaunts to the gun range. So he'd gone through much of his marriage assuming that they were on the same page unless he was told otherwise. As his separation and divorce proved, this system was not working.

How much could have been salvaged if we'd only talked sooner? he wondered.

He took a sip of Shiraz and looked at Russell. Here, at least, was proof that not every cop's love life was a mess. He and Eric had been together for years. They were clearly crazy about each other. Eric, at least, had to be crazy about Russell to put up with some of his personality traits. They each had a job they loved, and they'd built a life and a home together.

Lassiter had always found work easier than relationships. He'd never been afraid to question a suspect, or to follow the evidence, no matter what direction it led him. He needed to take the same approach with Shawn. As he watched him laughing at something Eric had said, he decided that awkward as it would be, they needed to talk about their future if they were going to have one.

That evening Lassiter sat on a chair in the guest bedroom, wearing his blue pajamas and his most serious expression. He wiped the sweat from his hands as Shawn came in from the hall and began to undress.

"Bathroom's free," Shawn said. He sprawled himself on the bedspread and stared at him in a way that removed any interest Lassiter might have had in leaving the room.

"Thanks." *Think of it like an interrogation, he reminded himself. Just a few questions, and then we'll know everything we need to know.* He cleared his throat and took a deep

breath. "Shawn, we need to talk."

"Is this about the holes in that hideous shirt you packed? Because those were made by moths, I swear." Shawn raised his hands in a gesture of innocence.

"No, it's not about the shirt." *There are holes in my vacation shirt?* "I just want to make sure we're on the same page. Relationship-wise."

"I get it," Shawn sat up and leaned against the pillows. "This is about The Book of Luuuve. I don't know who wrote it, but I have had it out of the library several times. I've paid serious fines on the Book of Love."

Lassiter stood, put his hands on his hips and stared down at Shawn. "What's your view on monogamy?"

"It's my second favourite hardwood after teak and my third favourite Billy Dee Williams movie. Why?"

"It's a serious question." Lassiter frowned. *What if Shawn had itchy feet, or cold feet or whatever it was called. What if he was resentful that he hadn't gotten to sow his queer oats? Oh God. What if Shawn wanted an open relationship?*

"Seriously?" Shawn asked.

Lassiter nodded solemnly.

"You know that expression 'I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating crackers?'" Shawn asked.

"I know it," Lassiter said. He held his breath, awaiting Shawn's response. Despite the heavy pasta they'd eaten earlier, his gut ached as if it were empty.

"Well I wouldn't kick you out of bed for eating *anybody*," Shawn said. "Sexually speaking." He waved a hand. "If you became a brain-eating zombie, of course I'd have to take you out. I think you'd want it that way. But sex-wise, just don't come home bragging about it. And I don't want to meet any of your dates."

Lassiter sighed heavily. "Not *me*. I meant how do you feel about it for *you*. For us?"

"I'm fine with it." Shawn spread his arms out across the pillows. He looked very inviting, but Lassiter knew he had to push ahead if he was going to come out of this conversation with the answers he needed.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he said hesitantly.

A lascivious look passed across Shawn's face. "Come closer and I'll demonstrate some

enthusiasm."

"So you don't want an open relationship?" Lassiter asked.

"I was just kidding about the hookers and the all-cop orgies," Shawn said. "Unless you want that, in which case I'm not kidding at all." He made an obscene gesture with his mouth. "I'll need a uniform, though. With a big nightstick."

First hurdle down, now on to the second question. Lassiter wished he'd brought his notebook along. It would have helped to have made some reference notes.

"Do you see this as a long-term relationship?" He swallowed anxiously.

"Yes." Shawn smiled. "These questions are getting easier. I can't wait for Final Jeopardy."

"How do you define long-term?" Lassiter paced back and forth across the room, his bare feet feeling every fibre of the carpet. Part of him feared that Shawn's idea of a long-term relationship was buying a large box of Corn Pops.

"About the length of time it takes to go through a crate of Kangaroo Paste," Shawn said. He was smiling, which suggested he saw this as good news.

Lassiter furrowed his brow. "How long is that?" *And what the hell is Kangaroo Paste?*

"Years and years," Shawn said, "during which my hair will be deliciously ginger scented."

Lassiter wasn't sure how he felt about being measured in units of hair product, but at least the answer seemed promising.

Time to bring out the big guns.

He stopped pacing and leaned with his back against the bureau, facing Shawn. The ache in his stomach moved higher, into his chest.

"What's your view on marriage?" he asked. "And so help me, if you mention voodoo I'll...." He made vague threatening gestures with his hands.

"Are we talking church wedding, civil union, Canadian vacation, or game show hooking me up with a millionaire?"

"Any of them," Lassiter said. "Except the last one."

Shawn shrugged. "I'd never planned that far in the future. Although to be fair, my plans for the future usually included Doc Brown and a flying Delorean."

"But you don't have any objections to marriage as an institution?" Lassiter asked.

"Given how my parents marriage worked out, I can see why you're concerned," Shawn said. "But Gus' parents have been married for years, and they seem happy. So no, I'm not soured on the concept, if that's what you mean."

Lassiter ran his fingers pensively across his lips. *Time to show all the cards in my hand.*

"Children?"

Shawn laughed. "If you're worried about one of us getting accidentally knocked up, my recollection of high school biology class assures me that isn't possible."

"You know what I mean," Lassiter's voice took on a sharper tone.

Shawn laughed, completely unintimidated. "Children are messy, immature and illogical. They've got no sense of responsibility or respect for other people's property. I always thought we'd get along well."

"So you'd consider being a parent?" Looking at Shawn now, Lassiter had to admit that raising a family was pretty far from his mind, but at least this way he'd know what he was committing himself to.

"I'm not ready to sign a lease on one right *now*," Shawn said. "But if you're thinking about adoption down the road, I'd be willing to flip through some catalogues with you. Just to see what's available."

"What about other options?"

"Are we talking surrogacy, like in Baby Mama?" Shawn asked. "If so, I want to cross Jules with Gus so I can have my own Gules." Shawn smiled. "I'd name him Julius."

"There's no way in Hell I am asking O'Hara to carry Guster's baby for you," Lassiter said. "You can forget it."

"Well *I'm* not going to carry it," Shawn said emphatically. "Arnold Schwarzenegger might bounce back from something like that, but he's got a personal trainer and his own chef." Shawn ran a hand down his abdomen and then looked up at him with hooded eyes. "I'd hate to ruin my figure."

"So to be clear then," Lassiter said, counting off on his fingers to be sure he'd covered everything, "you're fine with monogamy, long-term relationships, and open to marriage and children."

"I'd also be up for a Multiplicity scenario where we clone you and I spend the rest of my

days with a harem of tall pasty-skinned detectives," Shawn said. "Although if we go that route I may have to cut back on my crime-solving to avoid exhaustion."

Lassiter rolled his eyes and picked up his toothbrush and towel. "I'm glad we talked," he said, the relief evident in his voice. Shawn's use of the words "the rest of my days" felt especially reassuring.

"You know," Shawn said. "We should probably try making a baby the regular way for a few years first. My biology teacher could be wrong."

On their last full day in San Francisco, Lassiter and Shawn decided to spend some time taking in the sites. They were walking along 24th Street, toward Castro, when Lassiter spotted a jewellery store nestled between a place selling t-shirts and a computer outlet store.

"I've got an errand to run," he said to Shawn. "It shouldn't take more than fifteen or twenty minutes." He nodded toward a nearby sports bar. "Why don't you go have a drink and I'll meet up with you when I'm done?"

"That sounds suspicious," Shawn said. He looked Lassiter in the eye for a few moments, studying him. Lassiter tried not to look as guilty as he felt.

"You're getting me a present, aren't you?"

"No. Maybe." Lassiter's poker face crumbled under Shawn's gaze. "Okay, yes. Yes. Happy now? Can you please kill some time so I can shop?"

"You go look at whatever it is you're going to look at," Shawn said, "but just FYI, I wear a men's small and I'm partial to 100% cotton or a cotton spandex blend." He jabbed a thumb toward a convenience store called Sal's Grab N' Go. "I'll get my souvenirs for Gus and meet you in the bar."

"What kind of souvenirs are you going to get at a corner store?" Lassiter asked.

"Duh! Rice-A-Roni. The San Francisco treat."

Lassiter frowned. "They sell that in Santa Barbara."

"Yes," Shawn said, his voice pitched as if he were speaking to a child, "but then it wouldn't be a souvenir of San Francisco. It would just be regular Rice-A-Roni."

Lassiter pinched the bridge of his nose, shut his eyes to block out the nonsense, then sighed out his frustration. There was no changing Shawn. "Fine. I'll only be a few minutes."

Shawn was emerging from Sal's when two men stepped out of the sportsbar and collided roughly with him. Boxes of Rice-A-Roni flew across the sidewalk.

"Ow! Dude," Shawn rubbed his bruised arm and glared at them. "Three minutes for roughing." He began to gather his scattered boxes.

"Did you say something, fag boy?" Shawn looked up to see the two men looming over him with drunken aggression stamped on their faces. They were both broad, and smelled strongly of beer. Shawn dropped the boxes, stood as tall as his spine enabled him, and smiled a friendly greeting at the loudmouths.

"Actually, Fag Boy is my crime-fighting name," he said. "When I'm in my civies I go by Mr. Spencer. It's a secret identity thing. I'm sure you understand."

Shawn quickly took in their appearance, from the mouthy one's bushy sideburns to the quieter one's receding hairline, in case he ended up describing them to a police officer from a hospital bed. Then he began to scan the street wondering how long Lassiter's errand would take him.

Lassiter walked into the jewellery store and began to browse through the items beneath the glass countertops.

"Can I help you find something?" the clerk asked. He resembled a cross between John Waters and Evil Spock.

"I'm interested in rings," Lassiter said. "Something for," he paused, "my boyfriend."

"We've got an assortment of masculine rings," the clerk said, not missing a beat. "Anniversary rings, engagement rings, wedding bands, pride rings." He pulled a black ring with a rainbow strip from under the counter. "This is a popular model. It's our pride series in black titanium."

"I'm looking for something less..." Lassiter searched for a word that wouldn't make him come across as the gayest homophobe ever. "...less rainbow."

"Engagement?" The clerk asked, indicating a row of heavy diamond rings. Seeing Lassiter's hesitation, he added, "All our diamonds are ethical and conflict-free."

"Less...Dynasty," Lassiter said. Shawn was enough of a diva now. He didn't want to reinforce it by presenting him with a big sparkly rock. Besides, diamonds always seemed feminine to Lassiter, and he didn't want Shawn to think that he saw him as a wife substitute.

“Tell me about the occasion and the recipient,” the clerk prodded. “I’m sure we have something suitable.”

“It’s complicated,” Lassiter said. “We’ve only been dating for six months. I want something that says ‘I take this seriously,’ without frightening him into getting on his motorcycle and leaving town.”

“Motorcycle...” The clerk put a finger to his lip, thinking. “You know, there are lots of pieces that don’t bring up images of marriage but that communicate belonging and commitment.” He pulled a tray from beneath the counter. “These are surgical steel, and available in a number of gauges. We have a piercing specialist who comes in by appointment.”

“Are these earrings?” Lassiter picked up one of the heavy metal fittings. They reminded him of lugnuts.

“They *could* be worn there,” the clerk said. “But some people prefer to wear them in a more... intimate area.”

“Oh.” Lassiter suddenly realized what the clerk was hinting at and dropped the ring back onto its velvet tray. “Oh! No. That’s not...” He swallowed. “I want something traditional.” *More traditional than a ring through my cock, at any rate*, he thought. “Something that says boyfriend, but doesn’t quite say husband.”

The clerk smiled. “You’re looking for a promise ring.” He brought out a tray of solid bands. “This is our commitment series. They’re available in white or yellow gold, titanium, stainless steel, and tungsten.”

“Yes,” Lassiter said, relaxing. He removed a silver titanium ring with a black band around it. “This is nice.”

“I love that one,” the clerk agreed. “It’s sleek and sexy. It’s 8mm wide. Do you know the ring size you need?”

“I don’t,” Lassiter said. *Was that something people were supposed to know? He’d always been terrible at remembering birthdays and anniversaries. Were ring sizes on the list as well now?*

“Not a problem,” the clerk assured him. “There’s a thirty day warranty. You can bring it back for a different size in the same style. And once it’s fitted we can do custom engraving if you like.”

“Sounds good,” Lassiter said, pulling out his wallet. “I’ll take two.” If Shawn’s didn’t fit, they could swing by the store on their way home tomorrow. Providing, of course, he got up the nerve to give it to him.

Lassiter stepped out of the jewellery store to see Shawn being held against a wall by two men in their late twenties. One was about 5'11 and 190 lbs, had brown hair with unkempt sideburns and was wearing a varsity jacket with jeans and a dark shirt. His friend was an inch shorter, ten pounds heavier, balding, and red-faced with alcohol. He was wearing cammo cargo pants and some kind of band-related shirt under a black leather jacket.

“Lassie!” Shawn called to him, “You’re just in time. This is Sideburns McPushy and his friend, Drinky. They’re offering free nosejobs.”

“What’s going on here, Shawn?” Lassiter asked, slipping the box with their rings into his pants pocket.

“Who’s this, your boyfriend?” Sideburns asked.

“Yeah, I am,” Lassiter said sharply. “What’s it to you?” The drunken man took one look at Lassiter’s lanky frame and grinned confidently. “This fag smacked into me,” he said, jabbing a thumb toward Shawn. “Someone disrespects me like that and I break his face. But for fifty bucks I’d be willing to look the other way.”

“So if I understand you correctly,” Lassiter said, his voice even and calm, “you’re threatening us with violence, but if we give you fifty dollars you’ll let us go?” He turned to Drinky. “How about you? Are you in on this?”

“Yeah.” The heavy-set man licked his lips. “Make it a hundred.” The young men were smug and self-assured, but Lassiter’s voice had an edge to it that Shawn had only heard him use at work. If they hadn’t been so drunk they might have sensed that Lassiter wasn’t frightened or compliant.

“Let me get my wallet,” Lassiter said. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his badge. “I’m detective Carlton Lassiter with the Santa Barbara Police and you are under arrest for violation of the California penal code, section 518.” He grabbed Sideburns, twisted his arm, and pressed him against the wall of the bar. The perp tried to push away and Lassiter used the man’s arm to lever him back, hard, then pulled a pair of handcuffs from the back of his pants.

“Dude, why do you even *have* handcuffs today?” Shawn asked him.

“What?” Lassiter shrugged. “They go with the belt and the holster.” He pulled out a second set of cuffs and turned to the other perp. The true nature of his situation finally dawning, Drinky turned and attempted to flee the scene, but misjudged his manoeuvrability and ricocheted off a lamppost, tripped over a fire hydrant, then took a header into the sidewalk. Shawn held up his iphone.

“Awesome! I got that whole thing he just did. This is so going up on Youtube!” He

turned to Lassiter. “It’s not brutality if he did that to himself, right?” Lassiter pulled the drunken man to his feet, handcuffed his arms behind his back, then seated him on the sidewalk beside his friend. Drinky’s face had some road rash, but overall he was less injured than Lassiter felt he deserved.

“I am charging you both with extortion,” he continued, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at government expense.” He turned to Shawn, who was reviewing the video of his would-be attacker doing a concrete nosedive.

“I just emailed it to Gus,” Shawn explained. “He’s going to make it into a screensaver for me.”

“Call Russell,” Lassiter said. “I have to report a non-jurisdictional arrest right away and I have no idea where the station is around here.”

Russell arrived in a squad car and helped smooth the transfer of custody to the SFPD officer.

“You’re sure you want to charge them?” Russell asked. “It means you’ll have to drive back to San Francisco for the court case.”

“I’m glad to,” Lassiter said. Testifying in court was just part of the job.

“You’re aware that you’d have to testify about *why* these guys were harassing you.”

“I’m not ashamed of being with Shawn,” Lassiter said. “These guys deserve to go to jail and I’m happy to help put them there.”

“You always were a little justice-happy,” Russell said. “Hell, you made more arrests today than I did.”

“I’m not trying to show you up here, Russ.,” Lassiter said. He paused, then added, “It was just...the way Shawn looked. I had to do something.”

“How’s that?” Russell looked at Lassiter with a measured gaze.

“He looked scared,” Lassiter said. “He shouldn’t have to look scared.”

Russell laughed. “I hate to break it to you Carlton, but given what the two of you do for a living, he’s going to look scared lots of times.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Lassiter said.

After lunch Russell led Lassiter into his home office. His face wore a serious expression and Lassiter steeled himself for another lecture on how doomed his relationship was.

"So, Carlton," Russell asked, leaning forward in his armchair, "You're out at work?"

"Yeah," Lassiter replied, thinking of the nightmare that had erupted around the time of the Drimmer trial. "You could say that." *If being outed and then nearly killed by a crazy person counts.*

"Well you are or you aren't. Which is it?"

"I am. My Chief knows, my partner knows, some of the guys on the gang unit know. I don't come into work wearing a rainbow sash and a tiara, but I have Shawn's picture on my desk." He squared his shoulders and looked Russell in the eye. "I'm not hiding anything if that's what you're getting at. Why?"

Was Russell going to turn this into a contest too? he wondered. If so, it wasn't a fair contest. He hadn't even been attracted to men until Shawn. Russell had him beat by decades already.

"You should join the Golden State Peace Officer's Association," Russell said. "It's for gay cops."

"I don't really join groups." Lassiter lied. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"You do civil war re-enactments," Shawn said, entering the office with two mugs of coffee. "They're a group." He handed a mug to Lassiter, perched on the wide upholstered arm of the chair, and draped an arm across Lassiter's shoulders.

"We've got over four hundred members," Russell said.

"Then you don't really need me, do you?" Lassiter pointed out. He sipped at the coffee and wondered where Russell was going with this. The last time he'd checked, Russell didn't count him as really gay. For that matter, he wasn't entirely sure he counted himself as gay. He rested a hand on Shawn's leg, acknowledging that what they did together almost every night was pretty gay.

"We need everyone." Russell's voice took on a serious tone. "We've got to promote policing as a viable career for gay men. Even here, where we make up over twenty percent of the city, we've only got twenty-five gay men on the force. That's barely over one percent."

"Oh Russ, are you making your numbers speech again?" Eric asked, entering with coffee for the two of them. He turned to Lassiter. "He'd make a terrible bookkeeper. His numbers are artificially low. He's only counting the *out* gay men. And he's

completely ignoring the lesbians. They're actually over-represented in the department.”

“The lesbians don’t count,” Russell said gruffly.

“I’m sure they appreciate your support,” Eric said sarcastically.

“I mean I pretty much assume *all* the female cops are lesbians,” Russell said. “What straight woman wants to become a cop?”

“They made a police officer Barbie,” Shawn said. “She didn’t have gun or handcuffs but she came with a gold lamé princess dress to wear while accepting her awards for bravery.” Noticing the odd looks he was receiving from Russell and Lassiter, he added, “What? Barbie’s a role model.”

“Relax, Russ,” Eric said, sitting on a nearby ottoman. “It takes time to get the numbers up.”

“We’ve had out officers for over thirty years,” Russell complained. “How long are we supposed to wait?”

“Thirty years?” Lassiter was surprised.

“Sure,” Russell said. “Rudi Cox was an openly gay Sheriff’s Deputy in 1976.”

“Rudi Cox?” Shawn laughed. “Sounds like a porno name. He lowered his voice. “Sheriff Rudy Cox, laying down the law.”

“You’re talking about a cultural hero,” Russell warned him.

“All the more reason that he should be able to get busy with the townfolk,” Shawn said.

“So will you join?” Russell asked. “I can email you the application forms.”

“I’ll think about it,” Lassiter said. Even if he didn’t join—and he didn’t think he would—he appreciated the offer. Russell wouldn’t have asked if he still viewed his relationship with Shawn as a phase. Lassiter sighed and ran a hand through his hair. If Russell could acknowledge that what he and Shawn had was real, maybe he could too.

Shawn excused himself and returned with two wrapped packages.

“I got you something,” Shawn said to Russell. “It’s a thank-you for putting us up all weekend.”

Russell untied the bow and opened the small red box. Nestled inside was a vintage brass call box key and police whistle.

“Thanks, Shawn,” Russell said, gazing at them in wonder. “These are really nice.”

“Those *are* nice,” Lassiter said. “You know, I’d like something like that.”

“Then you’ll have to wait for our anniversary,” Shawn said. “And this one’s for you,” he passed the second box to Eric, who unwrapped it deftly. Russell leaned over and looked into the box.

“It’s a rock.” Russell looked confused.

“It’s not a rock,” Eric said, offended. “It’s a Sumerian cuneiform accounting tablet.” He drew in a gasp of breath and gazed lovingly at the rock. “Oh! It’s an entry for 29 gur of barley from 2200 BCE. It’s an example of one of the first double entry bookkeeping systems in the world.”

“Since when do you read cuneiform?” Russell asked.

“I don’t,” Eric held up a tiny piece of cardboard. “I’m reading the card that comes with it.”

“Where did you get that?” Lassiter asked Shawn.

“A guy in Iraq sold it to me on ebay.”

Lassiter closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Please tell me you aren’t buying looted treasure from Iraq.”

“What? No. It’s a replica, dude!” Shawn threw his arms wide. “I can’t afford to buy real looted treasure. On my salary? Please!”

“That was really nice of you,” Lassiter said as they were undressing for bed.

“They’re awesome guys,” Shawn said. “And before we got all interrupted by drunken yahoos earlier today, I think you were going to give *me* a present.” He closed his eyes and put his hands out.

Lassiter pulled the case from the drawer where he’d hidden it earlier that evening. “I did get you something,” he said. “We can exchange it if it doesn’t fit.” *Your finger. Or your plans for this relationship.*

He removed his own ring from the box and handed it over. Shawn opened the case and stared into it, his expression thoughtful.

“Do you like it?” Lassiter asked.

“What is it?” Shawn was looking at him with an expression Lassiter had usually only seen him use when they were on a case. It was the way he looked when he was thinking really carefully, weighing all the evidence his eidetic memory had collected for him.

“They called it a promise ring,” Lassiter said. “I got one for me too. I think it, uh, says we’re together.”

Shawn smiled. “That sounds adorably high school. I feel like I’m in a John Hughes movie.” Shawn removed the ring from the box and tried it on. “You’re definitely one of the hot richies. Our love is forbidden by social custom, which just makes it that much hotter.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Lassiter said. “So you’ll wear it?”

Shawn held his hand out and scrutinized the ring, which fit him surprisingly well. “I like it,” he said. “It’s like a wedding ring with training wheels.”

“That’s one way to view it,” Lassiter said.

“Put yours on,” Shawn said. “I want to see it on your hand.”

Lassiter did so and Shawn held their hands together, comparing the rings. The image was more arresting than Lassiter had expected. It brought up a strange mix of affection and loyalty and desire and, if he were honest about it, a bit of possession. He liked the idea of people seeing his ring on Shawn’s hand. It was like Shawn’s picture on his desk—unapologetically clear.

“This is awesome,” Shawn said. “I feel like one of the Wonder Twins.” He ran his hand down Lassiter’s chest, and looked up from beneath heavy lids. “Now how about seeing if I can turn you into an animal? A really loud animal.”

“We discussed this already,” Lassiter said. “It’s disrespectful to do that in someone’s house.”

“Come on,” Shawn begged. “We’ve got your reputation to think about. Make it so loud that I blush when we walk down the hall to breakfast tomorrow.”

Lassiter wet his lips. “I don’t know if sex could ever be loud enough to make you blush,” he said. “You’re shameless, Spencer.”

“Fine.” Shawn sighed. “How about desperately quiet sex then? But if we make visiting Russ and Eric a regular thing we’ll have to invest in a ballgag. I think I swallowed half my pillow last night.” Shawn slipped a hand inside the waistband of Lassiter’s pajamas, “Because the things you do make me want to--”

"I get it," Lassiter cut in. He removed his pajamas, wondering why he still bothered buying the damn things, given how often his nights ended this way.

They were in bed only a few moments when they heard the unmistakable sounds of sexual activity filtering through the wall. Shawn looked at him with "I told you so" written all over his face.

It suddenly occurred to Lassiter that Russell was doing this to show him up. This loud sex was clearly an attempt to establish himself as some sort of gay alpha male. *Fine*, he thought, *If that's how he's going to be. I'll be damned if he's going to win this one.*

"That sounds like a challenge, Lassie," Shawn said, his shining eyes reflecting back the blue of the bedspread. "Do you still feel the same about loud sex in the guest room?"

Lassiter sat up in the bed, and pulled Shawn roughly toward him. "What do you think?"

Shawn straddled him and then his mouth was on his neck kissing and biting him. Lassiter groaned, not bothering to stifle the sound, and arched his hips forward. He leaned forward, running his lips lightly across Shawn's mouth, while his hands coursed over his thighs. He loved feeling the muscles move in Shawn's back and abdomen as he kneeled over him, slowly grinding his ass against Lassiter's erection.

"That feels amazing," Lassiter said, "*You* feel amazing." Through the wall came a wavering cry of pleasure.

"Oh, you just wait, Lassie." Shawn tilted sideways, almost over the side of the bed, rummaged around in his discarded jeans, and came back up with lube and a condom. Not for the first time, Lassiter found himself amazed at how flexible Shawn was. He tore open the condom and rolled it quickly onto Lassiter's cock. Shawn continued stroking with one hand while he used his free hand and his teeth to open the package of lube. He spread the thick liquid down Lassiter's erection and then shifted his hand to his own body, stretching himself with his fingers. From the next room could be heard the sounds of panting, interspersed with swearing.

Lassiter grasped Shawn's hard-on in his fist and pumped it slowly, enjoying the feel of the tight flesh against his palm. "Take your time," he said, "It's not a race."

"You obviously missed the part where our hosts just challenged us to a gay swordfight," Shawn said. "It's round one of the Great San Francisco Fuck-Off." He paused. "Wait, that sounded so much better in my head."

Lassiter let out a low moan. "If you keep grinding against me like that," he said, "We're going to lose this one by default."

Lassiter swore as he entered Shawn, the position making him feel tighter than usual. Shawn lowered himself onto Lassiter and didn't hold back the sounds of his

pleasure at the sensation of being stretched and full. Lassiter began to push his hips forward, tentatively. Taking the cue, Shawn moved up and down, setting a faster pace than Lassiter had expected.

The squeal of metal and the thump of a headboard against plaster began to join the moans filtering through the wall as their hosts' activity became more spirited.

"Don't hold back, Lassie," Shawn said in between panting breaths. "You heard that challenge as clearly as I did." Never one who had trouble vocalizing, Shawn launched himself into a raucous torrent of obscenities and endearments.

"Shawn," Lassiter gasped. As much as he wanted to keep up his end of the contest, Shawn's movements were pushing him beyond the capacity for speech. Shawn clenched, and swiveled his hips and Lassiter felt his body surrendering to the rush of orgasm. His muscles locked and spasmed and he let out a groan that seemed to have begun in his toes and encompassed his every limb. He caught only snippets of what Shawn was shouting, but could have sworn he heard "Iceman," and something that sounded suspiciously like "buzz the tower."

When he opened his eyes again Shawn was coming into his fist and across his chest. Shawn collapsed against him, sweaty and exhausted.

"That was disturbingly close to that all-cop orgy I was talking about," he said, his voice slightly hoarse.

Lassiter laughed. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, because tomorrow morning is going to be one of the most embarrassing moments of my life."

"Really?" Shawn held up his left hand and wiggled his ringed finger. "Even now that you've practically made an honest man out of me?"

"*Honest* is not one of the words I usually associate with you, Spencer." Lassiter slid a hand along his jaw and kissed him, hard and deep. He pulled back and glanced at the ring again. "But I'm willing to work on that."