

Out of the Frying Pan and into the Firehouse By tera_gram

Rating: NC-17 for sexual situations, violence.

Pairing: Shawn/Lassiter

Warnings: Shassie. Hurt/comfort. Spoilers for "Earth, Wind, and ... Wait For It" and "Lassie Did A Bad Bad Thing." Fatphobic Monologue from Breakfast Club.

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Summary: Shawn and Lassiter attempt to make one another jealous, with disastrous results.

Note: Sequel to Out of The Closet and into The Frying Pan. My fireman is named Keith in honour of Keith Maidment, a gay man who works for Toronto Fire Services. Unlike my character, the real Keith isn't single, but is legally married to a smokin' hot lawyer.

The acrid smell of smoke filled Lassiter's nostrils as he stood near the wet shell of a burned-out building on East Haley Street. Smoke hung in the air and he could detect the scent of chemicals, and the stench of melted plastic, and beneath it all, something more sinister, and vaguely sweet.

Great! Lassiter thought, sniffing his lapel suspiciously, *I just had this suit cleaned.* He pulled his notebook from his jacket pocket and began to jot down the particulars of the felony arson case he'd been assigned. Lassiter disliked cases that involved fire. They were filthy and there was always some fire department rep trying to tell him how to do his job.

"Are you SBPD?" a warm voice asked. Lassiter looked up to see a man in filthy yellow fire gear, dripping black water onto the sidewalk. Lassiter hoped that his suit and badge might have been enough to go on, but he over-rode his instinct to be sarcastic.

"Yes. Head Detective Carlton Lassiter." Lassiter stepped forward, careful to avoid walking through the rivulets of water trickling out from the burn site.

The fireman pulled off his protective gloves and grasped Lassiter's hand in a firm shake.

"Lieutenant Keith McLaughlin, SBFDF arson investigator." He smiled, and removed his helmet, revealing chiselled features under a dark mop of thick black hair.

Typical, Lassiter thought bitterly. *This is probably the sort of guy who posed in those ridiculous calendars.*

Lassiter gestured toward the building. “What can you tell me?”

“We got the call around 4:30 p.m. The building was engulfed when we got here. The victim is female, found at the rear of the structure.”

“And it looks like arson?” Lassiter thought Lieutenant Mclaughlin seemed to be smiling a lot for someone who’d just walked out of a burning building containing a dead woman.

“Oh it’s definitely arson. There’s evidence of accelerant and multiple points of origin. It’s pretty sloppy, actually.”

“Any leads on the vic’s ID?”

“Not yet. The building was derelict. Used to be a clothing store. Our victim was found on a mattress. She’s likely homeless. Any more will have to wait for the coroner. We’re still putting out hot spots in there, but once it’s cold I’ll go through for evidence.”

“Well if you find anything in the debris that might give us a lead on identity or a suspect let me know.”

Keith opened his coat, reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a small card and a pen. He rested his boot on the back of the firetruck and quickly jotted something down on the back of the card. “Here’s my contact information. My home number’s on the back. Call me anytime.” He passed the card to Lassiter.

“Why would I need to call you at home?” The words were out of Lassiter’s mouth before the reason occurred to him. He looked up and the two of them locked eyes for a second before Keith looked down at his boots and smiled.

Lassiter paused, and felt a flush of heat pass over his face. *Sweet liberty*, he thought, *This guy is flirting with me.*

“Uh, thanks.” He kept his eyes glued to the card, lest Lieutenant Mclaughlin think his interest was returned. The incident with Spencer had been an anomaly, not the start of a new direction for his personal life. Not that Mclaughlin was unattractive. Despite his sweaty hair and his grimy exterior, he had nice features. It was difficult to judge a man’s build in the shapeless fire gear they wore, but he seemed fit. Not that it made a difference, he assured himself. Mclaughlin was just a fellow public servant who would help him solve his homicide case. He’d never had that sexual obsession with firefighters that some people seemed to. Although he had found Steve McQueen attractive in *The Towering Inferno*.

Feeling slightly dazed, Lassiter walked toward his car. He paused and glanced back at Lieutenant Mclaughlin, who was still standing there, watching him leave. Lassiter noticed a blonde in a black trenchcoat glaring at them with a sour look on her face.

Well this is just perfect, Lassiter griped. One blowjob and suddenly I'm setting off gaydar all over town and getting dirty looks from the citizenry.

Shawn and Gus were dressed head-to-toe in green camouflage, goggles, helmets and protective padding. They each held a paintball gun in their hands that vaguely resembled an M-16. Yellow armbands wrapped their biceps, declaring their allegiance to Team Wolverine.

"I'm surprised you didn't invite Lassiter to this," Gus said. "I'd have thought he'd be all over this sort of thing."

"No, It's just you and me, buddy," Shawn said, slapping Gus on the back. "We're like Childs and MacReady at the end of *The Thing*. Only without the paranoia and impending death." The truth was, Lassiter hadn't been 'all over' much of anything since their encounter at the Psych office. In fact, he seemed more distant than ever. To Shawn, who was used to setting the pace of his relationships, the disinterest was alarming.

The two men crept out into the woods, crouched low, keeping a wary eye out for the red armbands of Team Viper. They took cover in a bunker of decaying moss-covered wood. Shawn peered through the cut out window at the dense foliage of the forest, alert for any suspicious movement.

Gus looked anxiously over Shawn's shoulder. Being caught in a bunker by the opposing team and overshoot into humiliated pain-covered misery was his third greatest paintball-related fear, after being accidentally blinded, and developing deep vein thrombosis as a result of a hard hit from a pellet.

"So are you going to see Lassiter again?" Gus felt that keeping abreast of Shawn's relationship—and he used the term very loosely—was the only way to know if he needed to suddenly move to another city, search for a new job, and perhaps live under an assumed name, like Xavier Quinn.

"Of course we'll see each other again," Shawn said, his words doing nothing to hide his uncertainty. "Just not right now. Today is about you and me, bonding as men. And making people taste my pain." Shawn led the way out of the bunker and along the crest of a gully, with Gus following close behind.

"I take it from your tone that things aren't working out?" Gus asked. As much as he didn't want to hear the gritty details, it was clear that Shawn was hurting. And talking it out was what best friends did.

Shawn sighed. "No, it's not." He took a few shots at a tree whose limbs had swayed unexpectedly and frightened a squirrel up into the higher branches where it trilled a loud chastisement at him. "And could you please try to sound surprised? Just a little?"

“Let’s see,” Gus said, “things not working out between you and Lassiter? I’d put that at a two on the surprise-o-meter, somewhere between Ricky Martin’s coming out announcement and discovering that Nicole Richie’s novel sucked.”

“Well I was surprised, so I guess that makes me an idiot.” Shawn had expected that once Lassiter had crossed the line into actually doing something sexual that a romantic relationship would naturally ensue. It was how things had worked with some of the women he’d dated. Of course, now that he thought about it, none of those relationships had lasted either.

They stalked further into the game zone, and Gus’s keen eye spotted a red-banded Viper trying to climb to a sniper platform erected between some pines. Noiselessly, Gus pointed him out to Shawn who took aim, hitting him twice in the torso. They bumped fists and moved on, certain they were now entering Viper territory.

“So, what’s the problem, exactly?” Gus asked, as they shuffled along with their backs to a steep rock face. He hoped the answer didn’t include images that would haunt him.

“He didn’t call.” Shawn’s voice carried more hurt and disappointment than Gus was used to hearing when he discussed his love life. It suddenly occurred to him that Shawn might actually like Lassiter.

“Did you call him?” Gus asked, hoping that Shawn wasn’t filling Lassiter’s voicemail with increasingly desperate messages.

“Of course not. I don’t want to sound needy and clingy.” Shawn snapped his head around a corner in the rock face then led a quick dash across a grassy field. “The whole situation kind of weirds me out,” he said once they’d taken cover behind a stand of evergreens.

“You mean like the fact that he a dude?” Gus asked. “That would weird me out.”

“No. That’s not it. I’m good with that. I think.” Shawn paused, remembering their evening at the Psych office. Having his bisexuality become more than theoretical hadn’t been entirely easy. He’d remained at the office for three hours after Lassiter left, sprawled on the loveseat in the dark and thinking. Though not without its awkwardness, the sex had been intense. And his interest in the detective hadn’t waned. He still harboured fantasies, some of which, like his desire to make his lunch or watch episodes of *Kojack* together, were of a romantic rather than sexual nature.

“It’s the dynamics that are messing with my head. It’s like that classic Disney love story of the Fox and the Hound. Fox chases hound. But he’s not chasing.” Shawn shook his head. “I don’t get it. I’m his friend, I’m fun, and I’m fine.”

“First off,” Gus said, “don’t ever quote the Pussycat Dolls at me again.”

“Okay,” Shawn agreed. “Point taken.”

“Second, *The Fox and The Hound* wasn’t a love story. You must be thinking of *Lady and the Tramp*. Possibly the *Aristocats*. Definitely not *Fox and the Hound*.”

“Was *Lady and The Tramp* the one with dogs eating spaghetti?”

“Yes.”

“Ah...yes, then you’re right. Still, there must be some male couples in the Disneyverse. What about *Bambi and Thumper*? Or *Captain Hook and Smee*?”

“*Bambi and Thumper* were just good friends.” Gus paused. “But I’ll give you *Hook and Smee*.”

“Thanks buddy.”

“Thirdly,” Gus continued, “you’re not *Lassiter’s* friend. You jumped right from enemies into casual sex, and then back to enemies again.”

“We’re not enemies,” Shawn laughed. “We’re colleagues, teammates, *Pal-O-Mines*. Sure I tease him and he insults me, but that’s our way. At worst we’re... frenemies.”

Seeing movement ahead they moved up behind a fallen tree whose bare roots stretched out eerily into the air. Shawn lay flat, but Gus crouched, concerned that the decaying leaves could contain dangerous spiders, insects or toxic mold.

“But enough about me,” Shawn said. “What’s up with you and Jules?”

“Hard to say,” Gus admitted. “I’ve laid the groundwork, and we’ve gone to some events together.” He peered through the dead root system trying to spot the *Vipers* he knew were out there. “I’m not sure if she likes me as more than a friend, and I’d hate to make an assumption and spoil our working relationship.” He looked at Shawn and although the helmet obscured his face, Shawn could feel the glare in his words. “Some of us actually think about that sort of thing.”

“Oh, please!” Shawn scoffed. “Of course Jules likes you as more than a friend. You’re hotter than *The Old Spice Guy*.” He paused, “Although he does have a horse, and right now you kinda resemble *Boba Fett*.”

“Don’t be hating on the *Fett*.” Gus held up two fingers and then pointed forward, to where two players with red armbands were encamped behind a low wooden bunker. Shawn nodded his understanding.

“What I’d really like is if Jules and *Lassiter* would just—“ Shawn stood up to peer over the tree and immediately took two shots to the sternum, red paint spreading out across his chest like the *Nickelodeon* logo.

“Great! I’m dead!” Shawn threw up his hands in frustration. “I suck at this sport. There goes my dream of being a professional paintballer.” He pointed a finger at Gus. “This is your fault.”

“How is your getting killed my fault?” Gus asked, peering around the log and returning fire to the hedgerow that housed Shawn’s assailants. “I gave you the signal. Two Vipers, dead ahead.”

Shawn mimicked Gus’ hand signal. “I thought that was the signal that the two of us should go forward,” Shawn hissed through his helmet. “Plus, you distracted me with all this relationship angst.” Shawn sat and slammed a gloved fist into the dirt in frustration.

“I think it was your blatant disregard for cover that got you killed.” Gus’s frown wasn’t visible, but his tone communicated it clearly enough. “I can’t believe you got killed so quickly. What happened to our plan of re-enacting the end scene from Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid? Now I have to finish this game all by myself. And I was going to let you be Redford.”

“Aw, buddy,” Shawn said. “I wouldn’t make you finish the game alone.”

“You can’t keep playing, Shawn. Those are the rules. Wiping is cheating.”

“I’m not going to wipe,” Shawn said. He raised his gun and shot Gus twice in the chest.

“Ow!” Gus howled. He punched Shawn hard on the shoulder. “You can’t shoot your own men, Shawn.”

“Sure I can. It’s friendly fire.”

“And you’ve disregarded the minimum shooting range.” He rubbed his chest. “If I have a stroke because of you I’m suing you for medical expenses and rehab.”

“Fair enough.” Shawn slapped Gus on the back. “Let’s go to the clubhouse.”

“Technically,” Gus said, “we’re supposed to hang out in the dead zone and wait for the next game to begin.”

“Nah,” Shawn said. “I’ve lost my lust for paint. Besides, hanging out in the dead zone sounds like a euphemism for something sexual involving Martin Sheen and Christopher Walken.” He stood and began to retrace his steps and Gus followed behind.

“You know,” Gus said finally, “I think there’s a lesson to be learned here.”

“Is it don’t stand up?” Shawn asked.

“No,” Gus responded. “Well, yes, that too. But I was thinking the lesson is that any one of us could take a pellet to the chest in the big paintball game of life. I need to make my move before my chance slips away. Carpe Diem.”

“Carpy deem. Sounds good. Especially if that carp is battered and fried. You’re buying.”

“It means ‘seize the day.’ I need to tell Juliet how I feel. I suggest you follow my example.”

“The direct approach might work for you, buddy, but I think I need something more subtle. A method that has gotten people together throughout the centuries.”

“Having your parents arrange your marriage?”

“No. I’m going to make Lassie jealous.” Gus could hear the smile in his friend’s voice.

“Fine,” Gus said, “but we’ll see who ends up with their detective and who ends up with a heavily armed frenemy.”

Chapter 2

Lassiter walked up the stairs from the holding cells and into the bullpen. Spencer and Guster were there, hovering around O'Hara like bees around a flower. Spencer's hair had that tousled look that made Lassiter want to touch it. Lassiter clenched his jaw and tried not to make eye contact with him as he walked toward his desk. He hated it that Spencer still showed up at the station whenever he felt like it. It made it harder not to keep reliving the incident at the Psych office. It had taken all of Lassiter's self-control to avoid calling him afterwards. He'd cleaned and oiled all his guns, detailed and waxed his car, reviewed seven cold cases, and put all the newspaper clipping in his scrapbook into chronological order. These distractions hadn't helped. Even now, seeing Spencer leaning indecently across O'Hara's desk, Lassiter found himself entertaining fantasies of dragging him into the bathroom, locking the door, and...No. He would not let his mind wander there again. It was doing it so often lately it was going to wear a groove. Besides, if Spencer was interested, he'd have called. And he hadn't.

"Don't you two have anywhere better to be?" He grumbled, staring at the file on his arson case, and steadfastly refusing to look over at Shawn.

"Aw Lassie. Where else would we rather be?" Shawn smiled. "O'Hara is more badass than T.J. Hooker, and you're hotter than Heather Locklear and Adrian Zmed rolled into one. Although it does raise the question, when will you have to go undercover to break up a prostitution ring? Hell, Charlie's Angels got to do that a few times and they weren't even cops anymore."

"Sorry to disappoint you Spencer, but real life isn't like Charlie's Angels." Lassiter took a sip of his too-cold coffee and looked glumly at the file before him. He didn't like his odds of solving a random arson case with an unidentified victim. He much rather be busting a sex trafficking ring. If he had to go undercover, so much the better. He was confident that he could be convincing as a pimp if he threw on a garish shirt, some flashy jewellery and a soul patch.

"Listen, Carlton," O'Hara said. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Shoot." Lassiter looked up to see three sets of eyes staring at him expectantly.

"What?" He hoped he didn't sound as defensive as he felt. *So help me*, he thought, *if Spencer's told O'Hara what we did I will bury him up to his neck in an ant bed, sugar his hair, and leave him for dead.*

"As you know," O'Hara said to Lassiter, "Gus and I have had some dates,"

Lassiter's forehead creased. "You and Guster have been dating? I had no idea."

"How could you not know?" O'Hara asked incredulously. "He's picked me up from work six times now."

“Who am I, your mother?” Lassiter asked. “I don’t keep tabs on what you do.”

“Fine, Carlton. You know now. “She glanced at Gus and then back to Lassiter, smiling again. “And we talked last night and we’ve decided to see each other exclusively from now on. The three of us are going out to dinner to celebrate, and we wanted to invite you.”

“Fine,” Lassiter said, begrudgingly. “Where and when?”

O’Hara clapped her hands together and barely repressed a bounce. “Tomorrow night at Tom Blair’s Pub. We wanted something nice, but not too fancy. It’s not an anniversary after all, it’s—”

“Can I bring a date?” Shawn cut in.

“Sure, if you like.” O’Hara looked surprised. “I didn’t realize you were seeing anybody.”

“A man with my winning smile and high cheekbones doesn’t stay single for long, Jules,” Shawn replied to her, but his eyes didn’t leave Lassiter’s face, studying him for a reaction.

Lassiter felt his stomach drop. Shawn was bringing a date. That was a pretty clear message. Any of the fantasies he’d been entertaining, sexual or domestic, were just time-wasting daydreams. Shawn had obviously never thought of him as anything more than a hook-up. Maybe the whole thing had been some kind of experiment. The sooner they both moved on the better. If only Spencer didn’t still look at him with those heavy eyes and have those soft lips that never quite closed all the way.

“If Spencer’s bringing a date then I’m bringing somebody too,” Lassiter stuck his chin out and glared back at Shawn. Already he could feel his disappointment converting into anger. Being angry at Spencer felt comfortable—more than wanting to bed him had, anyway. It was the way things had been in the beginning, when Spencer had first conned his way into their cases. It felt right, even if it also hurt.

“Fine.” O’Hara rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in surrender. “You can all bring dates.”

“I guess I’ll see you there,” Shawn said to Lassiter. “With your date.” He smiled, as if the situation were some grand joke, probably at Lassiter’s expense. The overheads reflected off his eyes, and Lassiter thought he’d never seen them look so green before.

“I guess you will.”

The next evening Lassiter walked into Tom Blair's Pub and spotted O'Hara, Guster, Spencer, and a woman he didn't recognize at a large semi-circular booth in the corner, sharing a pitcher of beer. Lassiter's date was Dr. Sylvia Wyman, a woman he'd met at a criminology conference in Denver the year before. She was smart and beautiful, with great legs, big brown eyes, and a cascade of chestnut hair. Realistically, he could never imagine a future with a woman who was in favour of eliminating the three strikes law, but for tonight's task she was perfect.

"Lassie!" Shawn called. "Glad you could make it." The group made space for Lassiter and Sylvia in the booth. Lassiter flagged down a waitress and ordered a second pitcher of beer and a couple of menus.

Shawn was wearing a dark blue dress shirt, unbuttoned enough that Lassiter could just make out the top of his chest scar. Most people would have noticed his necklace, but now that Lassiter knew the scar was there, it was all he could see. It made him feel protective, but it also reminded him how little he actually knew about Spencer. His remark about having his feelings removed had obviously been a way to side-step having to share personal details. Looking back, Lassiter thought that probably should have been a warning sign.

Shawn turned to a woman sitting next to him, wearing a clingy green top. "This is Monique, my date. She's a yoga instructor at the Athletic Association." He looked at Lassiter as if he'd just raised the stakes in a poker game. Lassiter looked at her critically. She was certainly toned.

Fine, Lassiter thought. *If that's how he wants to play it.* He smiled and gestured to Sylvia, who looked very professional in a black blazer and soft grey dress. "This is Dr. Sylvia Wyman, she's a professor at UC Santa Barbara." *Ha!* Lassiter thought. *My professor beats your yoga instructor.*

"Nice to meet you, Sylvia," Shawn said. "What do you teach?"

"She's a criminology expert," Lassiter said. *Beautiful, professor, plus criminology—that's practically a full house. Top that, Spencer.* He smiled smugly. The waitress brought their pitcher of beer and Lassiter began to fill glasses for them.

"He asked me the question, Carlton." Sylvia looked at him sharply. "They don't have a criminology department at UC Santa Barbara," She explained to Shawn, "but several of us in the sociology department take an interest in corrections and social deviance."

"Lassie can probably give you a real mouthful about deviance," Shawn deadpanned.

Lassiter spilled beer onto the table and quickly apologized, waving over a waitress who mopped up the spill with a bar towel. O'Hara, Guster, and the two women were looking at him, but none of them seemed to have guessed what Shawn was hinting at.

Great, Lassiter thought. Now Spencer's making sexual innuendos that only he and I get. Had this been his motive? Had the whole seduction been a honey trap designed to give him something embarrassing to hold over me from now on?

Shawn put an arm around Monique's shoulders and looked at her with his best bedroom eyes. "You guys should try a hot yoga class. I've been working off my Buddha belly and switching from Red Vines to eye candy. Now all I need is a dog named Stinky and the ghost of a dead Native American houseguest who gives me advice."

"I don't need to twist myself into a pretzel to work out," Lassiter said. "I prefer a good cardio boxing class." He watched Spencer's eyes linger hungrily on Monique's curves and felt both defensive and disappointed. Trust Spencer to make the dating criteria sexual. He gulped his beer and looked half-heartedly at the menu.

"I take it you don't have any issues with the commercialization of Indian religion then?" Sylvia asked Shawn.

"Since their samosas and chicken masala helped raise my BMI I think it's only fair that they help me work it off," Shawn said. "Besides, yoga's totally mainstream now. Even Ginger Spice has her own yoga video."

"Yoga's more than exercise," Monique interjected. "There's a spiritual dimension as well. Yoga's over five thousand years old. In the Vedas—"

"Veda? I seem to remember playing him in Street Fighter II. Wasn't he that Spanish dude with the Wolverine claws?"

"That was Vega," Gus interjected. "And he wasn't a playable character until the Champion Edition."

"Veda, vega, whatever." Shawn smiled, unaware of the lines creasing Monique's forehead and mouth. "Although the first time I heard about yoni, the female sexual essence, I thought they were talking about Yanni, the singer. Surprisingly, there's no relation. He's not even from India."

"I've taken yoga before," O'Hara offered. "It was a lot harder than it looked."

"I just started," Shawn said. "I'm not nearly as flexible as Monique is. You should see her downward dog. It's sizzling. It's the Sizzler Trio platter kind of sizzling."

Lassiter sighed and took a deep drink of his beer. The situation was ridiculous. He couldn't compete with every nymphette Shawn picked up. All he had to offer was a stable career, loyalty, and an honest character. And those traits hadn't exactly been drawing women like flies, so it was no mystery that they weren't working on Shawn.

"Oh yeah?" Lassiter countered. "Well Sylvia has a PhD. When was the last time you

went out with someone who had a career?" He turned to Sylvia. "You make like, what? Sixty grand a year?"

"Lassie, Lassie, Lassie." Shawn chided. "That's the kind of thinking that leads to voting and wearing ties. You need to loosen up a bit. You need to learn to live in the moment."

"And you need to consider having a grown-up relationship," Lassiter said. "Or at least one that extends above your beltline." He did not notice that both Monique and Sylvia were staring at him with narrowed eyes, their mouths grim lines of disapproval.

"And maybe you should learn to follow your gut, wherever it leads," Shawn said.

"I don't think it's your gut that's been leading you around, Spencer."

"At least I don't make every decision based on what other people think."

"It must be great to live in such a consequence-free world," Lassiter retorted. "Maybe you should pay more attention to what other people think of you."

Shawn stared at Lassiter, oblivious to the tension their argument was creating around the table. "I may be a slacker without a career and a mortgage and a Y2K plan—"

"401K plan," Gus corrected him.

"Whatever. I'm not Mr. Responsible. I get it. But at least I'm not repressed."

"I'm not repressed." Lassiter's voice rose angrily.

"Not repressed? As if! You're a wacky sidekick away from accidentally running a prostitution ring out of the morgue."

During Shawn and Lassiter's argument, O'Hara and Gus had been whispering between themselves while pretending to look at their menus. Finally, O'Hara spoke.

"I'm going to the ladies room," she announced, loudly. She turned to Sylvia and Monique. "Why don't you come with me?" The women grabbed their purses, shuffled out of the booth and followed her through the warren of tables to the washroom.

Gus turned on Shawn and Lassiter. "Okay, what the hell, you two?"

"What?" Lassiter asked, his expression showing nothing save for injured innocence.

"You're ruining my first date with Juliet as an official couple. I expect this kind of thing from Shawn..." Shawn uttered a cry of protest, but Gus continued. "...but I thought you were more mature, Lassiter." He pointed a warning finger at them each in turn. "I don't care about what's going on between you two, but if it ruins my chances with Juliet, so

help me, you will regret it.”

“Are you threatening me Guster?” Lassiter wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed or impressed.

“Let’s just say that a man doesn’t watch every Jim Brown movie since The Dirty Dozen without picking up a few tricks.”

“Dude, you haven’t seen Rio Conchos?” Shawn asked.

“Please,” Gus said sternly, “you know how I feel about its portrayal of Native Americans.”

O’Hara returned to the table. She was alone.

“Where’s Sylvia?” Lassiter asked. “and...” he searched his memory but failed to remember the name of Shawn’s date, “...the other one?”

“Sylvia and Monique left,” O’Hara said. “She looked at Shawn, a crease on her forehead revealing her anger. “You creeped them out.” She turned to Lassiter. “And you pissed them off. What is this, some kind of contest? Whoever alienates all the women at the table wins? I’m surprised nobody got called sugar tits.”

“Sylvia’s probably just upset,” Lassiter said. “I should call her.”

O’Hara put a hand over Lassiter’s phone, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Her slow voice and serious tone told him all he needed to know.

“Thanks a lot, Spencer. You completely torpedoed my chances with Sylvia,” Lassiter accused him.

“Oh please!” Shawn scoffed. “You haven’t had a steady girlfriend since Detective Berry, and that was what, four years ago? Don’t tell me you’re getting all serious about this stranger you dragged here.”

“You wouldn’t know serious if it ran you over with its car,” Lassiter said. “You’re incapable of having a romantic connection with anyone but yourself.”

“Ow. That’s harsh, Lassie.” Shawn put a hand to his heart as if fatally wounded by his remarks. “And untrue. I wouldn’t want a romantic connection with me. I’m not my type. Although with those yoga classes I was getting closer to being able to have a sexual connection with myself. But I think that would have been more of a friends with benefits situation.”

“I sincerely hope you’re joking,” Gus said. “Otherwise I’m instituting a new ‘no yoga’ rule for the office.”

“Of course he’s not joking,” Lassiter said. “That’s just the kind of twisted thing he would get off on.”

“I just can’t win with you, can I?” Shawn asked, and for a moment Lassiter thought he saw real hurt in his eyes. “If you get any more critical you’ll turn into Henry.” The side of his mouth curled into a near-smile. “And that would give me a nervous breakdown.”

“Your nineteenth I suppose?” Lassiter said.

Shawn and Gus looked at one another, then at O’Hara, then back to Lassiter

“My nineteenth?” Shawn laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a Rolling Stones song. Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown.”

“Yeah, but why are you bringing it up?” Shawn asked.

“It’s a pop culture reference. You and Guster make them all the time.”

Shawn laughed and shook his head. “Lassie, rule number one about pop culture references is that they must be popular. It’s kind of the idea. Work with me here.”

“The Rolling Stones are a popular band,” Lassiter said. “Everyone knows them.” He turned to O’Hara. “Back me up on this.”

“I don’t know the song,” She shrugged and shook her head. “Sorry.”

“It’s obscure,” Shawn assured him.

“Pretty obscure,” Gus agreed.

Lassiter threw his napkin on the table. “You know what? Screw you guys.” He stormed over to the cashier, paid his cheque without looking back and was gone.

Chapter 3

Lassiter spent a fitful night, dwelling on his argument with Shawn. Bringing Sylvia to Tom Blair's Pub had been a mistake. But Spencer had started it. And that woman he'd brought—Lassiter couldn't stop picturing her and Shawn together in increasingly more contorted sexual positions. It evoked a sour feeling in his chest. He'd been jealous often enough to recognize it when he felt it, but it usually reared its head in competitive work environments, not personal relationships. And while he'd been jealous *of* men before, he'd never been jealous *over* a man before. It felt unfamiliar, yet disturbingly real.

As he brushed his teeth and stared at himself in the bathroom mirror, it occurred to him that Shawn was right. He hadn't had a steady relationship in years. The truth was, he hadn't made it a priority. If his divorce was anything to judge by, relationships weren't exactly his strong suit. But that didn't stop him from wanting one. And if his daydreams lately were anything to go by, he wanted a relationship with Shawn Spencer.

His furtive online research had told him that lots of straight men had had some same-sex experiences. So what he'd done with Spencer didn't necessarily mean he had to march in a parade or develop an appreciation for musical theatre. But dating another guy was...different. And even if—and it was a big if—that was something he wanted, it didn't mean it was a good idea. Pursuing Spencer would cut the legs off his career and make him the target of station house jokes for years to come. He could hear the puns on 'head detective' already. And if word got around town it was only a matter of time before it reached his mother. And that was *not* a conversation he was looking forward to having. Hell, she'd had a conniption when she found out that he and Victoria had separated. Even putting all that aside, there was the emotional risk to consider.

Spencer's too flighty to risk going out on a limb for, he reasoned.

But how risky was it? As he replayed the argument with Shawn over in his mind he became convinced that Shawn's words held some hidden meaning. He'd said, "you should learn to follow your gut, wherever it leads," and "don't make every decision based on what other people think." Was he hinting that they should have a relationship, no matter what people might think?

The problem was, he didn't have enough facts to base a decision on. Before he even considered putting himself and his career on the line, he needed to be sure. He'd had too much disappointment in his love life to risk having his heart stomped on again. Experience had proved that he couldn't rely on people like Spud to get information. He'd have to do it himself. But he never could get a clear answer out of Spencer, and asking direct questions just made it worse. He'd have to trick him into making his intentions clear.

He stared at the card that Lieutenant Mclaughlin had given him. If Shawn had used that yoga instructor to make him jealous, there wasn't really anything wrong with a little revenge, was there? He did need to get together with Keith to discuss the homicide case.

He'd just need to make sure their meeting looked like a date. Taking him to Natalino's ought to do it. Lassiter pulled out his phone and paused. He felt guilty about using Lieutenant Mclaughlin in this way, but it was different for men like Mclaughlin—guys with perfect features, romantic jobs, and easy, sociable personalities. They could have anyone they wanted. Guys like Lassiter needed to take their advantages where they could find them. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in Keith's home number.

Keith Mclaughlin, wearing his light blue uniform shirt, navy pants, and Lieutenant's badge, walked into the station and stopped at the information desk where Officer Allen was chatting to a friend on the phone.

"I'll have to call you back," Allen said abruptly, and hung up. "And what can I do for you?" She straightened her posture and offered Keith a friendly smile. Although Madame Yolanda's daily horoscope hadn't mentioned romance, her Chinese horoscope had said there might be new relationship possibilities opening up this month.

"I'm looking for Detective Lassiter," Keith said.

"Are you sure?" Officer Allen asked, not bothering to hide her disappointment.

"Keith!" Lassiter spotted him and waved him toward his desk.

"I brought that report." Lieutenant Mclaughlin held up a manila file folder.

"Great," Lassiter said, glancing over at Shawn. It had taken some manoeuvring to make sure that both men were in the station at the same time. First, he'd reminded Chief Vick to cut a cheque for Spencer's help on the Maxwell case. Then he'd suggested that O'Hara should call Spencer to let him know the cheque was ready. She'd taken the opportunity to arrange lunch with him and Guster. Finally he'd invited Keith to come with his preliminary report on the fire debris by for a working lunch.

Lassiter felt a surge of triumph. Keith cleaned up well. And if the badge clipped to his belt right at crotch level made Lassiter feel like he had a dirty mind it would certainly draw Spencer's attention. He pulled a chair up to his desk and invited the Lieutenant to sit. Keith opened the folder and began to walk Lassiter through the possible leads they'd found. He produced a photo of the floor of the burned out structure. Lassiter squinted at the image of a grimy concrete surface.

"What am I looking at here?" he asked.

"It's a shoe print." Keith traced the outline of the print with his finger. "The arsonist stepped in the gasoline, tracked it, and when the place went up the footprints were preserved."

“How do you know this print wasn’t left by one of your guys?” Lassiter asked.

“These tracks could only have been made before the fire was lit. Chromatography shows it was gasoline. Gasoline burns quickly. This footprint was seared into the floor paint almost as soon as the fire was lit.”

Lassiter smiled. Here, at least was something to go on. “It’s not very distinct,” he complained.

“If you don’t like that one, try these.” Keith pulled a series of close-ups from the folder. “Notice anything?” Lassiter leaned in close to examine a photo of the footprint framed by an L-square.

“Our arsonist has a pretty small foot,” Lassiter said. He glanced across at O’Hara’s desk. Shawn looked like a child being told there was no Santa. The plan was working better than he’d hoped.

“Exactly,” Keith said enthusiastically, “It’s a woman.” He smiled. Lassiter noted that although Keith’s teeth were white, one of his lower incisors had grown in behind the others. Maybe he was human after all.

“This is great,” Lassiter said. “I’ll run down some female suspects with previous arson convictions and I should have the autopsy report by this evening.” He lowered his voice in what he hoped wasn’t too furtive a manner. “You’re still up for tonight?”

“Of course. Dinner and autopsy reports sound very appetising.” Keith laughed. “I’ll see you then.” He slapped a friendly hand on Lassiter’s shoulder and headed for the door.

“Who was that?” O’Hara asked, when Keith had left. “He’s hot.” She looked at Gus and quickly added, “If you like that sort of thing, I mean.”

“Well I do,” said Officer Allen, smiling widely. “He’s total calendar material.”

“It’s okay,” Gus assured O’Hara. “He is a nice looking man.” He caught a curious look from Shawn and added, “If you like that sort of thing.”

“His name’s Keith Mclaughlin,” Lassiter said. “He’s helping out on my homicide case.”

“I thought you didn’t like arson investigators,” Shawn said, all trace of jollity gone from his voice. “What was it you said? They always think it’s arson because it keeps their jobs viable?”

“This case is definitely arson.” Lassiter watched Shawn from under hooded eyes, holding his smile in check. “Plus, it’s a pleasure to work with someone who’s professional and diligent and doesn’t need to go into obscene contortions every five minutes.”

“I’d like to see that fireman go into some—” Officer Allen cut off her sentence as she noticed a blonde woman at the reception desk, her arms crossed and an irritated expression on her face. “Find out if he’s single,” she begged O’Hara, before hurrying back to her post.

“Actually,” Lassiter said, “He just started seeing someone. But if it doesn’t work out I’ll let you know.” He enjoyed the look of shock on Shawn’s face as he walked past them and into the break room. He didn’t actually need anything in the break room, but it had felt like such a perfect exit line that he couldn’t resist. He helped himself to some ginger cookies he found in the cupboard.

“So, Lassie,” Shawn asked when he returned to the bullpen a few minutes later, “We’re going for Chinese food. Want to tag along?”

“No thanks,” Lassiter said. “I’ve got too much to do here.” He sat at his desk and pretended to sort his case files, but inside he was bursting with joy. Shawn was touching the back of his chair and standing close enough that Lassiter could smell whatever scent he was wearing. It smelled clean and citrusy.

“That arson homicide case sounds tough.” Shawn said, perching on the edge of the desk as if he owned it. “Have you thought that a fireman might have done it?”

“Based on what?” Lassiter asked. “The fact that the only other arson case you worked ended with us arresting Army Johnson?” Shawn’s leg was so close he could have reached out and touched it. He gripped his pen tightly as if to prevent his hand from stroking Shawn’s leg of its own accord.

“That,” said Shawn, “and on the fact that I recently saw Backdraft. You know the ride makes a lot more sense once you’ve seen the movie.”

“Well we don’t base police work on rides at Disneyland,” Lassiter said. “Otherwise we’d have arrested Johnny Depp long ago.” Attractive or not, the man had glorified piracy to a generation of impressionable youth.

“Actually,” Gus pointed out, “Backdraft is a Universal Studios Hollywood ride.”

“I’ve heard it both ways,” Lassiter and Shawn both muttered.

“So you’re working late then?” Shawn asked, running his hand suggestively across Lassiter’s desk. The move made Lassiter imagine Shawn stopping by late, when it was almost dead at the station and they could be alone. He forced himself to overcome his desire to grab Shawn by the hand. He opened a drawer of his desk and took out a paper bag.

“Not tonight. I have a date.” He tried not to smile too widely, lest his expression reveal how much he loved seeing Shawn getting a taste of his own medicine.

“With Sylvia?” Shawn licked his lips and lowered his eyelids. “I’m surprised she’s still talking to you.”

“No, someone new.” Lassiter removed the can of Dr. Pepper he’d purchased for this very moment, leaned back in his chair and popped the tab. “We just met, but we’ve really hit it off.” He looked up at Shawn and for a moment the desire to confess that the dinner was strictly work was almost overwhelming. He took a sip of the soda. “You know, I have to thank you for introducing me to this flavour of soda. I’m really enjoying it.” He could actually see the man thinking, trying to puzzle out what Lassiter was doing.

“I’m so glad you’ve met someone,” O’Hara said, breaking the spell between them. “It’s nice to see you putting yourself out there. Where are you going?”

“Natalino’s on the boardwalk,” Lassiter said between sips of Dr. Pepper. “It’s quite nice.”

“Natalino’s is romantic.” O’Hara smiled approvingly. “I’m sure she’ll love it.”

“I’m sure we will,” Lassiter said.

That afternoon Gus entered the Psych office and noticed that the screen of his laptop featured a topless man in low-slung fireman’s pants covered in glistening beads of sweat or water. Shawn walked in from the next room eating a pudding cup and Gus pointed accusingly at the laptop.

“Tell me you’re not surfing for gay porn at work, on my computer,” Gus said sternly.

“Of course not,” Shawn said, waving his spoon dismissively. “I’m Google-stalking Lassiter’s new boyfriend.” He pointed his spoon at the image. “That’s his SBF calendar picture from two years ago.” He pressed a few keys and brought up a new photo. “And here’s a picture of him rescuing a kitten from an apartment fire. Actually rescuing a kitten, Gus. It’s obscene.”

“I hate to say I told you so,” Gus said, “but I did predict this would end badly.”

“You thought that we’d have a bad breakup and Lassiter would go all Harry Callaghan on me. Neither of us could have foreseen this. It’s like being cold-cocked by Betty White at an Emmy Awards dinner. It’s unpredictable.” Shawn made the motion of throwing a punch, pulled something slightly in his arm and spent a few seconds grimacing as he worked out the kink.

“True,” Gus said, giving him a look that suggested he found Shawn’s physical fitness level sad indeed. “Lassiter is the last guy I’d have expected to jump feet-first into gay dating.” He looked suspiciously at Shawn. “Whatever you did to him, I never want to

hear about it.”

Shawn glared at the laptop. “This guy is gorgeous. And he’s dating my detective. It’s wrong. Yet hot. Like masturbating to a Ke\$ha video.” Shawn ran a hand through his hair and sighed heavily.. “I have to put a stop to this.”

“He’s a grown man, Shawn. He can date whomever he wants.”

“No. I can’t stand by and just let this happen. Come on, Gus!” Shawn pleaded. “Who knows how far Lassie might go?”

“It’s not how far Lassiter might go that worries me,” Gus said. “Besides, I know a bit about Keith from my volunteer work down there. He’s a nice guy. You should leave him be.

“I don’t care if he’s a nice guy, Gus. He’s moving in on my detective. “ Shawn put on a high voice, “And he best come correct, or step.”

Gus looked at him with a disapproving stare. “That wouldn’t be a Wayans brother you were trying to imitate just then, would it? Because we have had this conversation before. You do not refer to the Wayans clan, however obliquely, without reverence. Now answer my question. Was that supposed to be a Wayans brother?”

“Yes, it was,” Shawn nodded and looked abashedly at the floor, contrite.

Gus, no longer mad, asked. “Was it Shawn Wayans?”

“Yeah it was.” Shawn nodded his head.

“I thought it was Shawn.” Gus nodded his head, too.

“I don’t mean to sound all Single White Female here,” Shawn said, his voice once again revealing his frustration, “but that should be *my* date with Lassie. It should be *me* going to Natalino’s.” He frowned and smacked the office chair so that it spun in a circle.

“It sounds more Fatal Attraction than Single White Female,” Gus warned. “But may I remind you that neither of those movies ended well for their antagonist, Shawn.”

It took a lot of begging on Shawn’s part to make Gus accompany him to Natalino’s that evening. Finally Gus agreed that they could walk down to the restaurant as long as Shawn didn’t go inside. Shawn’s plan to spy on Lassiter has included a phone call in which he pretended to be Lassiter confirming his reservation time, and the promise to buy Gus all-he-could-eat sushi at a place on the boardwalk. Gus was regretting agreeing to even this much when Shawn, his hands cupped around his eyes, peered through the window into

Natalino's.

"Holy uniform fetish!" Shawn said loudly, "That fireman's stealing my police officer!" A woman studying the menu in a glass case by the door turned and stared at Shawn. Gus grabbed him by the arm and pulled him further along the bank of windows.

"If you're going to do this," Gus advised, "don't be so damn obvious. Show some cool." He plastered his back against the wall of the restaurant and then peered quickly and furtively into the window. He turned back to Shawn. "I can just make out Lassiter and Keith McLaughlin."

Shawn shook his head. "Don't say their names that way."

"What way?" Gus shook his head and wrinkled his forehead in confusion.

"Like they belong together. Like they're McMillan and Wife. Like you're announcing them at their big gay Canadian wedding. Say either Keith McLaughlin and Lassiter," he made quick chopping motions with his hands, "or Lassiter and Lieutenant Manstealer."

"Fine." Gus pointed a finger at him. "But when this fiasco is over, you still have to buy me sushi."

"Deal." Shawn nodded and the two bumped fists. Shawn imitated Gus' spy moves and lay flat against the wall and peered around the window into the intimate restaurant. "This totally bites," he said, frustration evident in his tone, "This is *my* date."

"Shawn," Gus said in a concerned tone, "What did I say about you getting all Glenn Close on me?"

"No—this!" Shawn broke his cover and gestured to the restaurant in general and to the two men at the table in particular. "This...this is my date. I took Lassiter here. We ate at that table. This was our first date! I bet he's even having garlic penne." His voice sounded almost wistful.

"And now it's his first date with someone else." Gus clapped a hand onto Shawn's shoulder. "I hate to say I told you so, but I think there's a lesson in this."

Chapter 4

The maitre d' of Natalino's greeted Lassiter and Keith and led them through the dim restaurant to their table. Keith noted the hanging gossamer drapery and the candles, and raised an eyebrow at Lassiter.

"This is a very intimate restaurant," he said as he seated himself.

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Lassiter pulled at his shirt collar, which suddenly felt constrictive. He looked around at the other tables, where couples gazed loving at one another or engaged in public displays of affection. "I often come here for work dinners," he lied. "I recommend the garlic penne." He arranged the white linen napkin on his lap and smoothed down his tie—anything but look at Keith and his knowing smile.

Their waiter arrived, poured ice water for them, and presented them with menus.

"I'll take your word for it, Carlton." Keith looked at the menu. "Wow. This is upscale."

"Don't worry about the prices," Lassiter said firmly. "I'll pay." Given that he was using Keith as a decoy to lure Shawn into the open, paying for the man's food was the least he could do. He looked at the prices again and thought about his credit card bill. Since they would be discussing a case, maybe the department would consider it a work expense. Or maybe he could claim it on his taxes.

"They say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Keith said. He ran a hand through his black hair and leaned back in his chair. "Stuff me with pasta and parmesan and I'm all yours."

Lassiter felt a pang of guilt twist in his gut. Keith was a colleague, even if he worked for another department, and Lassiter was lying to him to further his own sexual agenda. He pulled the case folder from his briefcase and glared at the sparse contents, trying to focus on something less personal. Something that didn't make him feel deprived.

"I don't like our odds on this homicide," he said grimly. "The fire burned all the evidence."

Keith shook his head. "You're looking at it all wrong, Carlton. The burn *is* the evidence."

"It doesn't make much sense from a criminal point of view," Lassiter complained. "I've talked to the building owners. They're waiting for a permit so they can begin construction on a condominium. The fire doesn't move their schedule ahead any, and it may even delay them. They haven't insured the building since they were planning to knock it down, so they aren't collecting any money." Lassiter sighed. He prided himself on his profiling abilities, but arson was outside of his area of expertise, even if he had watched Firestarter more than a few times. "I think we're looking at some crazy firebug, and that's really your territory."

"I'm happy to give you whatever you need," Keith said. Something in his tone made Lassiter think he was referring to more than just the case.

"What can you tell me about our perp?" Lassiter asked, looking at the photo of the woman's footprint. "Other than that she finds fire sexy and probably wet the bed as a kid?" He glared at the crime scene photos. He'd arrested some cowardly criminals in his time, but using fire to kill someone was pretty low.

Keith laughed. "You're thinking of Freud's definition of pyromania. I'm afraid that theory's about 150 years out of date. Pyromaniacs have a whole ritual they go through, and their fires are usually pretty sophisticated. And research hasn't established any connection with bed-wetting. Animal torture, yes, bedwetting no."

"Given a choice, I'd prefer bedwetting over animal torture," Lassiter said. He glanced up to see their waiter trying not to look horrified by the snippet of conversation he'd just overheard. The waiter took their order, collected the menus, and then fled to the kitchen.

"Besides," Keith went on, "This fire isn't sophisticated; quite the opposite. The woman we're looking for is an amateur. It's more likely we're dealing with someone who's had a recent crisis and lacks other coping skills. The fire is a cry for help."

Lassiter clenched his jaw. "Well she can get all the help she needs in prison after we've arrested her for murder."

"Most fires are set by people under eighteen," Keith said. "Chances are good our perp is looking at probation and counselling. Maybe juvenile detention."

"So we're looking for a teenager?" Lassiter paused, thinking. "How about an immature adult?"

"That could be, too," Keith acknowledged. "They usually show a lack of appropriate remorse and they'll likely deny they did it or try to claim it happened by accident."

Lassiter frowned. "That's pretty much anyone I've ever arrested." In his experience, all criminals were liars. Of course sometimes detectives lied too.

"So, where's that gruesome autopsy report you promised me?" Keith asked.

"There's no need to put you off your food." *Especially considering how expensive it is*, he thought. Lassiter tapped the folder thoughtfully. "Our victim died of smoke inhalation. She was likely sleeping at the time and never knew what hit her. Woody thinks she was homeless. He's provided basic details as to height, weight, age, and probable appearance and we're running them through missing persons."

"Don't you have someone who can model her face in clay based on her skull?" Keith

asked.

“This isn’t an episode of *Bones*,” Lassiter growled. “The department’s not going to pay for anything that won’t get us closer to catching the killer.” He knew that if O’Hara had been there she’d have argued that giving the victim’s family piece of mind justified the expense, and he didn’t disagree in principle. But when people ended up living in abandoned buildings it wasn’t likely that they had a loving family looking for them.

The waiter arrived with their food. Lassiter had ordered steak and whipped potatoes. Keith had taken Lassiter’s advice and ordered the pasta. The rich aroma of the food reminded Lassiter of how hungry he was. His stomach, which had been clenched in anticipation all day, suddenly protested loudly and demanded feeding.

“You didn’t lie,” Keith said. “This garlic penne is delicious. I can see why you come here.” He smiled and Lassiter felt his internal alarm bells go off at the unasked questions he read in Keith’s expression. He couldn’t blame Keith for misunderstanding his intentions. Given the location, it looked like they were on a date. It was supposed to. That was The Plan. But it was also starting to feel like a date, and he didn’t feel good about that. Apart from any sense of loyalty he might feel to Shawn—and he wasn’t sure that he did or should—he didn’t like misleading Keith. He was going to have to set the record straight, so to speak, no matter how awkward it was.

“Are there really enough arsons to keep you working all year?” Lassiter asked as he cut his steak. The meat was a beautiful medium well, with a slight trace of pink, and it just fell apart under his knife. He watched Keith dig into his garlic pasta and searched his mind for an easy way to communicate his intentions—preferably something more subtle than blurting out ‘this isn’t a date.’

Keith swallowed. “There were over sixty last year. The worst year was 2004, when we had close to a hundred.”

As Keith described the various patterns in arsons over the years Lassiter spotted Shawn, leaning against the front window, peering into the restaurant. Seeing Shawn released the tension that had been knotting his back and shoulders and filled him with a sense of triumph. The Plan had worked. Shawn had been curious enough to come see the situation for himself.

That has to mean something, doesn’t it? Lassiter mused.

“Someone you know?” Keith asked, nodding toward the window.

“Just my stalker,” Lassiter joked, turning back to Keith. “Pay no attention. It just encourages him.” Lassiter sighed with relief and seemed to taste his food for the first time. The dinner had served its purpose. Now he just had to make things right with Keith. “Listen...” He stared into his plate, unable to look the other man in the eye. “I have a confession to make.”

“Are you talking to me or to your whipped potatoes?” Keith asked.

Lassiter faced Keith. He swallowed, straightened his spine and determined to get this admission over with as quickly as possible. “There’s something I haven’t been entirely honest about,” he said. “I had an ulterior motive in asking you here.”

“I thought you might have,” Keith held his gaze, which made Lassiter look at his potatoes again.

“It’s an unusual situation,” he said. “My divorce just became final not that long ago, and uh...” he grasped for some way to describe his situation without using terms like ‘midlife crisis’ or ‘turning gay.’ Finally he said, “You’re out at work, right? I mean, the guys at the station...they all know?”

“Oh yeah. I’m the SBF’s gay poster boy. I ride a pump truck in the parade every year, spraying people with a supersoaker.”

“And the guys at the station don’t give you a hard time about it?”

“They joke about it sometimes, but it’s not mean-spirited. Those guys have saved my life.” Keith looked up at him with sympathy in his dark brown eyes. “You must know what I mean, Carlton.”

“What about career advancement?” Lassiter asked. “Aren’t you worried about your future?”

Keith shrugged. “I’m happy where I am,” he said. “Why, are you aiming to be head of Homeland Security someday?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Lassiter muttered. Although he’d be glad to settle for Police Chief. “I’m not in the same situation you are. I mean, I’m not...” Lassiter trailed off as his mind grappled with the anxiety of describing his situation aloud, to another person.

“Let me guess,” Keith said, “this is the part where you assure me that you’re not gay, which is code for we can sleep together but I can’t expect you to be seen with me.” He smiled sadly.

Lassiter cringed at hearing it put that bluntly. What Keith was describing sounded self-centred, and underhanded. *But isn’t that exactly the kind of scenario I’ve been trying to manoeuvre Spencer into?* He wondered. For the first time since he’d overheard it, Shawn’s description of him as smart, brave and hot seemed to mock rather than flatter. If this was the kind of relationship he was offering Shawn then he wasn’t any of those things. But as seedy as the offer Keith described sounded, Lassiter was unable to imagine an alternative that didn’t result in career suicide.

“That doesn’t sound very honourable,” he said at last.

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” Keith asked.

“No!” Lassiter said forcefully. “Not the way you mean.” He set his fork and knife down, with a loud clatter. The steak and potato felt like a lead weight in his churning stomach. He ran a hand down his face and let out a frustrated groan as the last of his self-control broke under the tension. “I’m seeing someone. Sort of. And this whole dinner thing was…” he lowered his voice and muttered, barely audible, “was designed to make him jealous. Just so he’d tell me where I stood.”

Keith looked at him with an amused expression. “It isn’t that psychic, is it?”

Lassiter nodded.

“I should have guessed,” Keith said. “Straight guys get all the good men.” He looked off across the restaurant and then softly swore. Lassiter followed Keith’s gaze. There was a woman at the window, dressed like Carmen Sandiego, in a trench coat and hat pulled low.

“Who’s that?” Lassiter asked.

“Oh, that’s my stalker.” Keith laughed, but there wasn’t any humour in it. “She’s a volunteer at the station. She’s got a crush on me. I feel bad for her, but it’s getting a little creepy.”

“Has she threatened you or made you fear for your safety?” Lassiter asked, concerned. “I can have her locked up in county for a year if you like.”

Keith shook his head. “She wouldn’t hurt me. She’s going through some tough times and I was nice to her and she just got overly attached.” He added wistfully, “I’ve had the whole ‘I’m gay’ conversation with her, but she doesn’t get it. It’s kind of sad.”

Lassiter raised an eyebrow and gestured to the table with his open palm. “How about if you just say her name and I do a quick door-to-door to inform the citizens in her area about the state’s strict anti-stalking laws?” He smiled, as if this were a task he would enjoy, and be glad to do.

“No thanks, Carlton.” Keith shook his head. “The California arson investigators’ code of ethics says it’s more important to protect the innocent than to convict the guilty. I think I’ll just leave Claire protected for now.”

“What kind of bleeding-heart liberal crap is that?” Lassiter asked, not bothering to hide his outrage. *Keith might be a criminal investigator, with a great body and a sharp mind, Lassiter thought, but I could never date a guy who was soft on crime.*

Lassiter fumbled with his apartment keys as he approached his front door. He and Keith had said their goodbyes at the restaurant. Lassiter felt glad that they were at least parting as colleagues, if not exactly as friends. Now, alone, he had expected to feel elated that The Plan had worked, but instead he found himself second-guessing it.

Shawn showed up at the restaurant, he told himself. That has to mean something.

That could mean anything. He could have been curious, or nosy, or hungry.

Or it could mean that he feels...something. Lassiter's gut told him that something more than curiosity had caused Shawn to peer through the window at Natalino's. Of course here Lassiter had to admit that his ideas got pretty vague. What exactly was this something Shawn felt? Attraction? Lust? Jealousy? Heartbreak? He wasn't sure, and he felt slightly guilty for hoping it was heartbreak. Despite being unsure how much he was willing to risk himself, he still liked the idea that Spencer liked him, wanted him.

Of course, he thought, I'd sleep a lot better if I knew the particulars.

Lassiter unlocked his door and stepped into the foyer of his apartment. He needed a glass of scotch and the mental escape of watching The First 48.

"So...the good night kiss," a voice called out from the dark livingroom, "tongue or no tongue? I'm just curious."

Lassiter's heart leaped and he had his gun halfway out of its holster before he recognized Shawn's voice. He relaxed, turned on the light, and dropped his keys into a dish by the door.

"What are you doing here, Spencer?" He tried to sound angry, but the warm flush moving over his skin and the hitch in his breathing undercut the force of his words.

Shawn ignored his question, staring at him from the sofa with heavy eyes. "How'd your date go?" he asked. "Are the two of you taking it slow or did you just blow him in the car?"

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," Lassiter said. He walked into the kitchen and poured himself two fingers of Johnny Walker Black. He stepped out, leaned back against the tiled kitchen island and sipped at the whisky. The warm burn was a reassuring sensation, and he wished his pounding heart would take the hint.

"Why'd you do it?" Shawn asked. "The same restaurant, the same table..."

"Why do you think?" Lassiter stared down at Shawn.

“Oh, I know why you did it,” Shawn said, toying absently with the edge of a lampshade. “I just wanted to see if you knew.”

“What is it you think you know?” Lassiter asked. He stood straight, trying to look aloof, but all he could think about was that Shawn was here, alone with him in his house, only a few feet from the bedroom. His mind might not know what he could offer Shawn in terms of a relationship, but his body definitely had ideas.

“The spirits finally explained why I was going all Kaci Battaglia on you.” Shawn leaped energetically from the sofa and closed the distance between them. “Well, actually, they reminded me of an Ally McBeal episode where Ling hired an escort for Ally to make Greg jealous.” Shawn leaned in close, as if he were going to kiss him, then pulled back again, leaving Lassiter’s lips feeling the absence. “You’ve been trying to make me jealous.”

“Have I?” Lassiter asked. He swallowed, but his mouth was dry as sand. Shawn’s eyes looked green in the lighting from the kitchen. He wanted to grab him by the hair and pull him into a kiss, but he wasn’t sure where that would end, sexually or emotionally.

“Yep.” Shawn ran his tongue across his lower lip, leaving it glistening. “It worked. I’m totally jealous. I wish I could be all Mary Stuart Masterson in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, and drive the two of you around in a limo, but I just can’t. In fact, if you keep seeing him, I’m seriously considering planting drugs in his car.”

Lassiter laughed. “Where would you get drugs?” He placed the empty whiskey glass on the island, where it clinked loudly against the tile.

Shawn threw his arms wide. “Dude, it’s one of the perks of having a best friend who works at a pharmaceutical company.”

“Guster would never help you do that,” Lassiter said. His hands, now free, hovered inches away from embracing Shawn’s body.

“You think I’d tell Gus?” Shawn scoffed. “Please! I’d replace half his sample case with Skittles and Good & Plenty.”

“If that did happen, Spencer, you know you’d be my first suspect. Guster’s too.” Shawn was standing so close now that Lassiter could smell whatever citrus product it was Shawn had put in his hair.

“Speaking of suspects,” Shawn asked, “how’s that arson case going? Have you eliminated The Human Torch? How about Sailor Mars or Liz Sherman? Or that little girl from Firestarter?”

“Her name was Charlie McGee,” Lassiter muttered.

“See? I love it that you know that,” Shawn said. He leaned his head against Lassiter’s chest and ran a hand across Lassiter’s belt and around to the small of his back.

“Shawn...” Lassiter’s voice had an undertone of warning, but he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be warning Shawn about. *Be careful or we might have sex? It’s a bit late for that*, Lassiter thought. *And since the harm’s already done, what would it matter if we did it again? Maybe even a few times?*

Regardless of the warning tone, Shawn leaned into Lassiter’s neck and tentatively kissed along his jugular, then ran his warm tongue along the skin. The move sent shivers down Lassiter’s spine and he gripped the edge of the island, feeling the cold tile under his thumbs, trying to resist the instinct to wrap his arms around Shawn and crush him possessively against him. Shawn dragged his mouth up to Lassiter’s and kissed the colourless mole on the right side of his lower lip.

“Truce?” he asked, speaking the word into Lassiter’s mouth. “No more Keith?”

“Truce,” Lassiter murmured before pulling Shawn forward into the kiss his body had been wanting all day. Shawn tasted like a ripe mango.

When they finally pulled away, Shawn spoke, almost whispering. “This...thing between us. It confused me, I admit it. I’m talking Rip Torn robbing a bank kind of confused. My God, Lassie, courting you is more stressful than a season finale of *Breaking Bad*.”

“Then why bother?” Lassiter asked.

“Because I like you. There. I said it. I like you. You’re classy. You’re Lena Horne singing *Stormy Weather*. You look like Dick Dastardly and you dress like a character from *Mad Men*. I like that. Plus, you’re smart, brave...”

“—and hot. I remember,” Lassiter said.

“And with your hotness and my hotness, and your smartness and my...psychic smartness—bordering on genius, really—it’s pointless to resist. More pointless than the last *Resident Evil* movie.”

Lassiter noticed that Shawn had avoided describing himself as brave. On the one hand, he had to agree. He usually found Shawn’s actions more foolhardy than brave. On the other hand, he had made the first (and possibly second and third) move when it came to this attraction between them without fearing the consequences. *Of course maybe that’s just another example of his complete lack of foresight*, Lassiter thought.

“Well, if you’re sure it’s pointless...” Lassiter ran his hand across Shawn’s back, marvelling at the feel of his muscles through the t-shirt he wore.

“Totally pointless,” Shawn assured him. “The spirits assure me that you and me getting

together is as inevitable as sequels to *Saw*, but less likely to put me off my popcorn and Twizzlers. And I'd hate to go against the spirits on this." He rubbed his palm against the front of Lassiter's trousers. Lassiter exhaled heavily and leaned his head back, pushing his hips forward. He could feel the hardness of Shawn's erection pressing against his hip.

"I wouldn't want you to risk your job," Lassiter barely got the words out before he leaned in and invaded Shawn's mouth with a deep kiss, his tongue running desperately against Shawn's. He could feel the butt of his glock between them and when they broke for air he quickly slipped out of his holster and heard it drop heavily onto the island at his back.

Shawn unzipped Lassiter's pants and slid his hand into his briefs, gripped Lassiter's warm erection firmly and stroked down, then up again.

"I don't know how you prepared for your date tonight," Shawn whispered, "but I brought condoms just in case."

"Oh God," the moan erupted from his throat as much for the physical sensation of Shawn's hand on his cock as for the rush that came with the realization that they were really going to do this. If some part of Lassiter's mind still held reservations about getting sexual with Spencer it had long since been drowned out by the demands of his body and by his gut instincts. All that mattered at the moment was Shawn's hand. His strong grip and the feel of his fingers sliding over the head of his cock were quickly ramping Lassiter up, beyond the point of logical thought.

In the middle of this tormenting bliss, the doorbell rang, followed immediately by a loud knocking.

"Ignore it," Lassiter whispered, pleading for Shawn's hand motions to resume. "Don't stop."

"Maybe it's Keith," Shawn said, his pumping slowed to a torturously slow pace. "You should get it. I can wait."

"I'll get rid of whoever it is," Lassiter said, his voice low and desperate. He quickly tucked his straining and erection away and zipped up his pants.

Lassiter pulled the door open and turned to look at the young blonde woman standing on the stoop. She was wearing a trench coat and her face was so pale that she almost shone in the darkness. She was breathing fast and shaking slightly. She raised her right arm and Lassiter leaned forward, thinking she was about to fall. By the time he noticed the gun in her hand he was already hearing the shots and feeling their impact against his chest.

Chapter 5

In his time as a detective Lassiter had read plenty of cases of people who hadn't realized they'd been shot. Given how intense the pain in his chest was, he assumed those people must have been out of their mind on drugs or adrenaline.

Moments after the impact Lassiter had reached for his gun to return fire, but his hand encountered nothing but shirt. He swore, and vowed he would never be unarmed again if only he could live to keep the promise. His nails dug into the wood of the doorframe as he tried to remain upright. His assailant turned and walked quickly out of sight. He knew he should try to follow her, to get a licence plate, but his knees buckled beneath him and he collapsed to the floor. Blackness crept in from the side of his vision. He fought against it, blinking in and out of consciousness, waves of panic being replaced by periods of oblivion. He was vaguely aware that Shawn was pulling at his clothes and rummaging around in the kitchen.

"Lassie! Where's your first aid kit?" Shawn must have been shouting, but his voice seemed to come from a long way away.

"Lower right cabinet." Lassiter yelled it, but the effort sent a stabbing pain through the right side of his chest and started a coughing fit which sprayed a fine bloody mist into the air. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. He tilted his head up and looked at his chest. Blood bubbled up through the holes in his shirt.

That's not good, he thought, and the understatement of it made him laugh, sending him into another pain-wracked coughing fit. *Great*, he thought, *I'm becoming delirious*.

He tried to focus his mind on details. He'd been struck by something low calibre, probably a .22 or a .32. If his lung was hit he might drown in his own blood. Or his blood pressure might plummet and he could die of shock. He was already feeling weak and dizzy. He needed to be in the hospital within the golden hour, while he might still live. He struggled to reach his cell phone, but his fingers felt weak and clumsy.

Shawn returned from the kitchen with the first aid kit, a box of plastic wrap and a roll of duct tape. He dropped down beside Lassiter, carefully removed the bloody shirt, and examined the bullet wounds. He noticed Lassiter fumbling with his pocket.

"What are you trying to do?" Shawn asked.

"Call this in," Lassiter said through gritted teeth. Moving hurt, but not as much as trying to breathe did.

"Relax Lassie," Shawn said. "I've already called Jules. A bus is on the way. Hang in there."

Lassiter let his arm and head rest back against the floor. Shawn was here. Shawn liked him. Shawn wouldn't let him die.

The psychic's hands were a flurry, cutting up pieces of plastic wrap, placing them over the bullet holes, and securing them on three of their four sides with duct tape.

"What's all this?" Lassiter looked down at the bloody squares of plastic. They looked ridiculous, but there was no denying that it was now easier to breathe.

"Flutter valves," Shawn said. "You've got a punctured lung."

Shit, Lassiter thought. *A busted lung is bad*. He wondered briefly how Shawn had learned to make flutter valves. *He was probably a noted thoracic surgeon for two weeks*, he thought absently. *Before he got bored and moved on to selling ice-cream or saving the whales*. But even with the best first aid, a shot in the chest was deadly serious. Lassiter thought about all the police funerals he'd attended over the years and he wondered if they'd be presenting the flag from his casket to Victoria, or if she'd even attend. He wondered if Shawn would buy a black suit, and how long it would be before he made out with a man again.

Lassiter remembered that Theodore Roosevelt once gave a speech immediately after being shot in the chest. Of course in Roosevelt's case the bullet had been slowed by the steel case for his eyeglasses and the fifty pages of speech he'd had doubled up in his breast pocket. In his own case the only resistance the bullet had encountered was his shirt.

But if Roosevelt could deliver an entire speech, he thought, *surely I can stay conscious long enough to report on my own murder*.

Lassiter grabbed Shawn's hand and held it in a firm grip. When he spoke his voice was shallow and strained. "Write this down, Spencer. Our perp is female, 5'9", early 20s, blonde, wearing a black trench coat." His brow creased and he frowned as it suddenly occurred to him where he'd seen her before. She had been staring at him disapprovingly while he talked to Keith. "Oh for the love of Pete! She was at the fire. She's probably our arsonist."

At least I won't die with an open case on my desk, he thought grimly.

Shawn's memory flashed back to the blonde who'd been at the station when Keith McLaughlin had arrived for his meeting with Lassiter. The description was a perfect match. She'd been there again at Natalino's, reading the menu. He wondered if she had been stalking Lassiter, or Keith McLaughlin.

"She was at the restaurant today too," Shawn said, "pretending to read the menu."

Lassiter thought for a moment. "Her name might be Claire. Keith knows her."

In the distance the approaching sound of an ambulance siren could be heard.

“Give me my holster,” Lassiter said, looking up toward the kitchen island.

“Lassie, the ambulance is almost here. You’re going to the hospital.”

Lassiter wanted to ask if Shawn knew how many people had been shot in hospitals in California in the past five years. He wanted to explain that if the assailant heard that he’d been taken to the hospital instead of to the morgue that she might come back for a second try. But he didn’t have the energy or the air to argue any of his points. Instead he just uttered, “Shawn. Holster. Now.”

Shawn sprang up and returned with the holster. He looped one strap over Lassiter’s shoulder, furthest from the bullet wounds, and then held his hand again, afraid to let go. The high pitched shriek of the ambulance was getting very close now.

“Listen, Lassie,” Shawn said. “I know this is going to sound weird, but I need to ask you something before these guys burst in here like Randolph Mantooth and go all Emergency on you.”

“I’m not dying.” Lassiter felt exactly like he might be dying, but there was no reason to panic Shawn.

“Is this a thing?” Shawn looked down at their joined hands and then back to Lassiter’s face. “Do you and I...do we have a thing?”

“Yeah. This was a thing.” He couldn’t help putting it in the past tense.

“I thought so too,” Shawn said as he watched the paramedics running up the walk toward them.

The paramedics had strapped Lassiter in the back of the ambulance and were moving toward Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. Shawn had assured Lassiter that he would be following right behind, but that had been a lie. All Shawn could think about was catching the woman who had shot Lassie. The moment the ambulance was gone he plunged his hand into the bowl of peanuts on Lassiter’s counter, and pulled the Colt Mustang from its hiding place. He shoved the snub-nosed silver gun into his shirt and grabbed the keys to Lassiter’s car from their dish on his way out the door.

One of the first things he’d learned during his Google-stalking of Keith McLaughlin was that the fireman lived in a detached bungalow on Laguna street. According to Google street view, the house had a lovely lilac bush on the front lawn. Shawn drove Lassiter’s car to Laguna and parked two houses down. He pulled the gun and crouching low, did a

quick check of the perimeter of the house. All the lights were off and the building was silent. There was no sign of Keith's car, a grey Toyota Prius for which Shawn had been disappointed to learn he had no outstanding tickets. Abandoning all attempt at concealment, Shawn peered into windows, desperately hoping to see Keith or the blonde assailant. When he saw no sign of movement he knocked loudly on the door.

"Are you looking for Keith?" the high voice came from a tiny white-haired woman on the porch of the neighbouring house. "He's at work tonight."

"At the fire station?" Shawn asked, tucking the gun into the rear waistband of his pants and pulling his shirt down over it.

The elderly woman nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. He got called in just as we were settling down to watch the Law and Order SVU. He could be gone for hours."

Shawn thanked her and turned to leave.

"Are you a boyfriend, dearie?" the woman asked.

"Me? No. I'm just a friend."

"Oh. Well that's too bad." The lady waved goodbye to him as he ran back to Lassiter's car.

Shawn called Gus on his iphone and launched into a breathless recap of events as soon as he heard his friend's calm voice say, "Burton Guster."

"Dude, you were right about this being Fatal Attraction, only I'm not Glenn Close. That blonde from the restaurant is. She shot Lassie and he's on his way to the hospital."

"Is Lassiter okay?" Shawn could hear the concern in Gus' voice and knew that at least some of that was sympathy for Shawn.

"I don't know, Gus." Shawn bit his lip and tried to focus on the task ahead. "I need you to meet me at the fire station on North Ontare with Jules and backup. I think Lassie's shooter is going after Keith Mclaughlin."

"Why Keith?"

"He's her Michael Douglas. Lassie was just the pet bunny to her."

"Maybe you should leave this to the police, Shawn. You're too close to the situation. You might do something you'll regret."

"Oh right! And the police are notorious for their even-tempered treatment of people who shoot cops."

“I’m just saying. You should be at the hospital with Lassiter, not running around town after some lunatic.”

“I’m going to the fire station to save Keith and arrest the woman who ruined me losing my manginity. If you want to join me with backup, that’s up to you.”

“Manginity? Please tell me you just made that up.”

“It’s a term. It’s all over the internet, Gus. If you did more online than read The Huffington Post and play Farmville you’d know that.”

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

Shawn approached the Spanish colonial firehouse where Keith worked and parked Lassiter’s car on the street. Now that his first adrenaline rush was wearing off his fear and anxieties were welling up like a geyser, threatening to burst. He tried not to think about Lassiter—to wonder if he was in surgery now, or if he was dying frightened and surrounded by strangers. Shawn ran silently up the curving staircase that led to the offices, crouched low, and gun in hand, slowly opened the door. Four men sat inside playing cards. They all turned to look at him. Shawn stood up and smiled.

“Hey there!” He slipped the gun back into his waistband. I’m Shawn Spencer. I work with the Santa Barbara Police. Is Keith around?” he asked, trying not to sound panicked.

“He’s down in the garage,” A heavy-set man with short grey hair told him.

“Thanks. Is there a way there from inside?”

The big man jabbed a thumb toward a door. “Through there, second left, back stairs.”

“Thanks big guy.” Shawn leaned in close and spoke quickly in a hushed tone. “The dude with the glasses over there is bluffing. You can totally take him. The guy with the Magnum ‘stache is holding, but it’s likely a pair of tens. The guy with the sandwich has no idea what his cards mean. He’s just happy he’s being included. Good luck.” Shawn slapped an arm on the man’s shoulder and headed through the door.

He followed the directions and soon found the garage. Through a thin window he could make out Claire and Keith standing near one of the pumper trucks. Keith looked anxious and Claire looked like she was about to cry. Or about to shoot someone, and then cry. It was hard to tell. Shawn crouched low, turned the handle, and opened the door as silently as he could.

“Who’s there?” Claire yelled, panic in her voice.

Shawn used the truck as cover and got Claire in his sights.

“Step away from her, Keith” Shawn shouted, his throat feeling raw. “She shot Lassie and she’s probably going to shoot you.”

“I didn’t!” Claire lied, gripping Keith firmly by the arm. “You can’t prove I shot anybody.” Shawn could see that she still had the gun, which was now pointed at Keith’s ribs.

“I’m not a cop,” Shawn said. “I don’t have to prove anything. I’m a psychic. I know you shot Detective Lassiter and I know you started the fire in the warehouse that killed that woman.”

“Claire wouldn’t hurt anyone on purpose and she’s not going to hurt me.” Keith turned his brown eyes on his assailant. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“I always wanted us to be,” Claire said.

Shawn spotted a framed picture of a 1950s fire prevention poster on the wall.

“Oh!” he shouted. “I’ve getting a vision. The spirit of Smokey the Bear. He says only you can prevent forest fires, and only you started the fire at the warehouse. He says you didn’t mean to kill that homeless woman. That was an accident. Is that right?” Shawn asked. Claire nodded. He thought back to the case file he’d seen on Lassiter’s desk. “I see it all. You meant to burn the building down. It was abandoned, and the company that owned it didn’t even care enough to insure it.”

“Right,” Claire affirmed. “They didn’t want it. And Keith said the number of arsons was down this year. I was worried he might lose his job, so I burned the warehouse.”

“I can see it all,” Shawn said. “The gas burned quicker than you expected. By the time you realized someone was there, it was too late.” Claire was nodding, her face wet with tears, but her hand still gripped the gun. Shawn’s sharp eyes spotted that the safety was off, and it was pushed firmly against Keith’s ribs. The firefighter looked scared, but he watched Shawn, waiting for a signal of some kind.

“It was just an accident.” Claire pulled Keith further in front of her, like a shield. “You can’t blame me for an accident.”

“Of course not. You did it for Keith. To make sure he kept his job.” Shawn wasn’t sure that playing good cop was working with Claire. Through the window in the far door he could make out Gus’s anxious face, peering through the glass. In a few minutes SWAT was probably going to shut off the power, toss in a smoke grenade and rush in like angry bees after the Honeycomb bear. Shawn tried a different tactic.

“But you were wasting your time, Claire. Forget about Keith. Keith doesn’t like you.” He saw the look of panic flash across Keith’s face. “That’s not his fault,” Shawn added

quickly. "How could he like you? Even your name is terrible."

"What's wrong with my name?" Claire asked, anger quickly displacing her tears.

"Uh, it's a fat girl's name." Shawn said.

"I'm not fat." Claire turned and pointed the gun toward him. Shawn almost smiled. At least now Keith wasn't directly in the line of fire.

Gus, seeing that Shawn was in danger, opened the door and crept inside, crouching behind a stack of sandbags in the corner.

"Well not at present, but I can see you really pushing maximum density," Shawn continued, speaking loudly, to cover any sound Gus might be making. "See I'm not sure if you know this, but there are two kinds of fat people. There's fat people that were born to be fat, and there's fat people that were once thin but became fat..."

Gus grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and slowly advanced toward Claire. Shawn wasn't sure if he intended to spray her with foam or smack her in the head. At this point he felt good about either plan.

"...so when you look at them you can sorta see that thin person inside." Shawn wasn't sure what he would do when he got to the end of Bender's lines. He wondered if he should switch to the poisoned wine monologue from Princess Bride, but wasn't sure how to introduce it.

Claire's eyes looked like they were trying to burn holes through Shawn's head. "Stop saying that!" She shouted, shaking the gun at him.

Gus pulled the pin on the extinguisher, which must have made a noise, because suddenly Claire swivelled and swung the gun toward Gus. Keith dropped to the floor in anticipation of gunfire. Without even taking a breath Shawn squeezed the trigger on the Colt Mustang. Claire dropped her gun and doubled over, clutching her shoulder with both hands as blood soaked through her coat. At almost the same time, Gus sprayed her with fire retardant foam. Then the door behind Gus opened and Juliet O'Hara and Buzz McNabb hurried in, Glocks at the ready.

"You jerk!" Claire shouted at Shawn as she was handcuffed, clumps of foam sliding off her hair and clothing to the floor around her. "You shot me. That's not fair."

"Tell that to Detective Lassiter," Shawn said. He turned to Gus. "Dude! That was awesome the way you came at her with the fire extinguisher." He mimicked Gus's attack. "You were like the fourth Ghostbuster fighting that Pat Benatar chick on the roof. We should see if Jules can get us a copy of Claire's mugshot for the office."

"You're thinking of Winston Zeddmore fighting Gozer the Gozerian," Gus said,

breathing heavily as he tried to relax. “But I was thinking more about the Chinese janitor who rescued the school children by attacking a knife-wielding assailant with a fire extinguisher.” Shawn raised his eyebrows and Gus added, “If you read the Huffington Post you’d learn these things.”

Keith stood and looked at Shawn with recognition in his eyes. “You’re Shawn Spencer, the Santa Barbara Police Psychic, aren’t you? Carlton talked about you.”

“He did?” Shawn smiled. “What’d he say?”

“I don’t think I want to know,” Gus said.

Juliet O’Hara took Lassiter’s gun from Shawn and slipped it into an evidence bag. She pointed an accusatory finger at Gus.

“You,” she said, “should never have put yourself in harm’s way. You should have left this to us.” She looked at Shawn and smiled sympathetically. “But I get why you didn’t.”

Shawn tilted his head at her. “Do I need to have a talk with Gus about letting people into the Vault of Secrets?”

“Oh please, Shawn. I am a detective. Carlton’s been mooning around the station all week. He changed the subject every time I mentioned your name. And when you’re there he looks at you like you’re a pepper turkey sandwich. Then there was that weird fake date at the pub and that transparent thing with Keith. There’s no way Carlton would have hooked up with anyone that fast.” She turned to Keith. “No offense meant, of course.”

“None taken,” Keith said.

Shawn headed for Lassiter’s Crown Vic. Gus fell into step beside him.

“This...relationship with Lassiter,” Gus asked. “Is it serious?”

Shawn thought over all the problems that dating Lassiter would entail. They’d have to keep it secret from everyone at the station. Everyone other than Juliet, that is. That would mean no hand-holding, kissing or anniversary parties. Of course he’d have to tell Henry, who would freak out about the gay thing and the breaking SBPD policy thing. It was a teetering Jenga tower of a relationship that would inevitably come crashing down on top of them, possibly taking their jobs with it. And he still wanted to do it. Either he was serious about Lassiter or he’d discovered his masochistic side and it was seriously self-destructive.

“As serious as rear-ending Danny Trejo’s convertible,” Shawn said.

Gus raised his eyebrows. “That’s pretty serious.”

“Yeah. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to go to the hospital and see if I’ve still got a relationship.”

Lassiter wiggled the batteries in the remote control and then pointed it at the television hanging from the ceiling in the corner of his pale green hospital room. The channels changed, but each station seemed more boring than the last.

The surgeon had removed two bullets from his chest cavity. Now he lay in bed attached to a ventilator, a suction machine and an IV drip. Despite the constant visits from doctors and nurses, he felt abandoned. Shawn had not been right behind the ambulance as he’d promised he would be. In fact, Lassiter had been awake for an hour now, wondering if Shawn was going to show at all. The most obvious answer was that seeing what dating a police officer might entail had sent him running for the hills. It was certainly been too much for his wife, so he didn’t see why it would be any different with a boyfriend. If Shawn had ever been his boyfriend.

He has just decided to suffer through an episode of Undercover Boss when Shawn entered, looking even more disheveled than usual. Shawn set a stack of magazines on a table and looked down at him with anxiety in his hazel eyes. Lassiter tried to rein in his happiness at seeing Shawn again. A late visit was better than no visit, but a late visit probably wasn’t a good sign.

“If you’re here to let me down easy then let’s just get it over with,” Lassiter said, trying to keep his voice steady. “My insurance doesn’t cover having my heart stomped into the linoleum.”

“Sorry I’m late, Lassie. I had to save your man Keith and give your assailant a taste of her own medicine. So to speak. You may need a new gun for your peanuts. Jules took your Colt Mustang as evidence.”

“You shot her?” Lassiter wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or horrified. When Shawn hadn’t shown he’d imagined him hunched over a Playstation or flirting with yoga instructors. He hadn’t pictured him chasing down the suspect.

“She’ll live. Although it may be a while before she can do a descent backhand swing without wincing. Do they play tennis in women’s prison? I don’t remember that in Caged Heat. Or in Chained Heat for that matter. Any of the heat movies, really.”

“I’m just glad you got her.” Lassiter had been arguing with the head nurse over getting access to a phone so he could track Claire down on his own, but she had refused and handed him the television remote instead. Lying in bed, unable to even follow the investigation into his own attempted murder had been driving him crazy. Given that he was still wearing a holster and firearm, he’d have expected more cooperation.

Shawn looked down at Lassiter’s long frame in the hospital bed. “I really hate this whole

you-being-shot thing,” he said. “Especially just when things were getting so interesting. It’s like my feelings are an American tourist who gets drugged on vacation and wakes up strapped to a chair by a man wearing a leather apron. This so isn’t where I was hoping our evening would end.”

“I thought you didn’t have feelings anymore. You said you had them removed. remember?” Lassiter savoured the memory of running his hands over Shawn’s bare chest and wondered if that would ever happen again.

“Oh that,” Shawn looked at the floor. “Let’s just say that I’m the reason they don’t let you use cell phone or microwaves in the hospital. Coincidentally, I’m also the reason hairdryers have that ‘do not use while sleeping’ warning. But that’s a longer story.”

Shawn leaned forward and kissed Lassiter on the forehead, over the points of his eyebrows. Lassiter felt his hopes plummet. That wasn’t a sexual kiss.

“I brought you some magazines.” Shawn grabbed the stack from the table.

Lassiter sighed. “What is it about being shot in the chest that makes people think I want to read about which reality show celebrity is getting back with her loser boyfriend?” Shawn spotted a few pristine copies of US Weekly and People on Lassiter’s bedside table.

“These aren’t those kind of magazines,” Shawn passed over the stack. Lassiter accepted it hesitantly, wondering if Shawn had brought him gay porn. His face lit up when he saw copies of Guns & Weapons, Law Enforcement Technology and Police Magazine.

“Sweet!” he exclaimed. “Thanks, Spencer.”

“Given where your mouth has been, it better start calling me Shawn.”

"Thanks, Shawn."

" No problem. Now hurry up and get better so you can go home and I can live out my fantasy of nursing you back to health. It’ll be like Arnold Schwarzenegger and that FBI dude at the end of Raw Deal. I’ll teach you how to walk again and you’ll shag me out of gratitude.”

Lassiter ignored the fact that he didn’t need to learn to walk again or that Shawn’s recollection of the ending of Raw Deal has a lot more sex in it than the film had. He was just relieved that Shawn didn’t appear to be scared off or dumping him.

“You fantasized about that?” he asked. "Seriously?"

“More times than Ewan McGregor’s played gay.”

Lassiter's doctor entered, picked up the chart at the end of the bed and smiled at them.

"You're coming along nicely, Detective," he said. "The chest tube comes out in a couple of days, and as soon as you don't need the ventilator you'll be sitting up." He turned to Shawn. "Sitting helps prevent pneumonia and other complications. He'll have some deep breathing exercises to help that lung stay inflated and heal more readily." He smiled at Lassiter. "You should be out of here in a week or so."

"At which point I can go back on duty?" Lassiter asked it as a question, but it sounded like a decision.

"At which point I recommend you go home and stay there for a couple of weeks. Then you can do desk duty on a part time basis for a few weeks." The doctor chuckled. "You'll be back running down criminals in about four months."

"And what if I'm already sick of being here and I sign myself out?" Lassiter asked, ignoring the looks of disapproval directed at him.

"In that case we'd give you a script for antibiotics and pain meds and have you see your usual doctor every few days for the first week or so."

"And then I can go back to work?"

"Or die peacefully at home, which seems to be your plan." The doctor pulled a business card from the pocket of his white labcoat. "I spoke with a Chief Karen Vick and she told me to call if I had any problems with you." He put the card back into his pocket and looked down at Lassiter. "I'm not going to have to call Chief Vick, am I?" Lassiter shook his head, defeated, and the doctor left to continue his rounds.

"Relax, Lassie," Shawn said. "I'll bring all your paperwork here. You can do it in between watching episodes of Homicide: Life On The Street."

"That show hasn't been on the air in over a decade."

"Really?" Shawn tilted his head thoughtfully. "Then what have I been watching?"

"I suppose I could read copies of the Courier and you could just tell me who did it," Lassiter muttered.

"That sounds fun too," Shawn said. "Dibs on the Sudoku." Lassiter thought back to the newspapers he'd found in Shawn's desk. Could it be that his discomfort with Shawn's psychic shenanigans was actually rooted in something else—namely the fact that he found Shawn's solve rate kind of hot? Lassiter sighed his frustration.

"Damn, it, Spencer. Why couldn't you have just been a cop?"

“I’m a Lieutenant in the Dream Police, if that helps.” Shawn sat heavily into the chair beside the bed and grabbed Lassiter’s untouched copy of People. “Oooh! Bathing suit photos of celebrities. Let’s see who got all lumpy in their off season.”