

## **Guns Don't Kill People. Gun Shows Kill People** By `tera_gram`

**Rating:** PG

**Pairings:** Shawn/Lassiter.

**Warning:** Shassie Slash. Spoilers for High Top fade Out, Let's Get Hairy, and Shawn Takes A Shot In The Dark.

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**Summary:** Lassiter investigated a murder at the gun show. But will his fledgling relationship with Shawn also be a casualty? Sequel to Out of the Frying pan and into the Firehouse, part of my Heterosexual Freakout Series.

**Note:** The Santa Barbara Historical Arms and Blade Show is a real event that takes place at the Earl Warren Showgrounds every July. None of my research indicated that anyone has ever been murdered there.

The noonday sun was slanting through the blinds in Chief Vick's office, throwing streaks of light across the desk and making the warm ochre paint look as if it were glowing. But Carlton Lassiter didn't notice. He had been back at work for two weeks now, but had been limited to light duty, which involved filing, writing reports, and fielding telephone calls—the least favourite parts of his job.

*It's as if I'm being punished for getting shot,* Lassiter grumbled to himself. He didn't blame Chief Vick for benching him. If only he hadn't answered the door without his gun. *Well,* he assured himself, *I'll never make that mistake again.* Since the incident at his apartment he'd kept his gun within arms reach every moment. And light duty or no, he was certainly going to wear it to work. He didn't want to look any more useless than he felt.

A surprising number of his light duty hours had been spent fielding calls from city counsellors and the mayor, and reading cards sent by a group of grade four school children who had taken him on as some sort of class project. The sympathy was starting to grate on him, but it had got him thinking—about his job, about his future, and about Shawn.

He looked at Chief Vick who was just finishing a telephone call. When John Fenich had retired Lassiter had hoped to be considered to replace him. Now it seemed as if that dream would have to be shelved. Unless Vick moved on to a better offer, the Chief's position was hers for the foreseeable future. If he was going to map out his own career advancement Lassiter realized that he needed to explore his options. One of those options, an application to City Council, was sitting in the left hand drawer of his desk.

Vick hung up the phone, looked up at him and spoke, her voice clipped. "Carlton, I understand that you feel ready to return to full duty."

"Yes, I do." He noticed that one of the three requests he'd made to that effect was sitting on her desk. He hoped she wasn't going to subject him to a series of visits with Dr. Erlich, the SBPD psychologist, first. The last thing he wanted to do talk to some shrink about how it felt to get shot. He steeled his nerve. If that was what needed to be done before he could get back on active duty, then so be it. Of course he wouldn't mention the real reason Shawn has been visiting him that fateful night. He didn't want his occasional homosexuality going down in some shrink's notes.

"Good to hear," Vick said, "because I need you to drop whatever you're doing and get down to the gun show."

Carlton didn't respond right away. He understood the words, but in his frame of mind they seemed to have no meaning.

"Is this a joke?" He barely dared to hope it would be this easy.

"I beg your pardon?" Chief Vick's voice took on a slight shrillness, her eyes narrowed and the lines in her forehead deepened. She didn't look like she was joking. But being assigned to a case at the gun show still seemed too good to be true.

*It could be a pity assignment, he thought. Maybe she wants me to do crowd control.*

"Did O'Hara put you up to this?" he asked hesitantly. She knew how much he hated having his duties curtailed.

"Not unless she shot a man at the Earl Warren Showgrounds." Vick handed him a sheet of paper with the particulars. "I need you down there and I need this cleared up ASAP." Vick studied him, as if looking for a sign that he wasn't ready to accept the assignment. As Lassiter scanned the paper the dark cloud seemed to lift from his mind and he noticed the sun for the first time that morning. He was back on active duty and he was going to the gun show.

"Sweet!" He restrained his grin, not very successfully. "I mean...I'm happy to. Thanks, Chief." He turned and walked confidently to his desk and snatched up his suit jacket, ignoring his stack of unfinished paperwork.

"Grab your gear, O'Hara. We've got a 187 at the gun show."

"Really?" her eyes seemed to light up and Lassiter basked in the joy that comes from sharing a love of firearms with your partner.

"Oh yeah."

“What about your reports?” O’Hara asked, hesitantly.

“Have they murdered anyone?” Lassiter asked lightly. Without waiting for an answer he went on, “Then I think the gun show is more important.”

Lassiter couldn’t stop smiling as he pulled out of the parking lot and headed for Highway 101 and Las Positas.

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Gus, seated at his desk in the Psych office, shook his head. “I’m not going to the gun show with you, Shawn.” Gus was using his ‘laying down the law’ voice, and he meant what he said. He had earmarked that Saturday to deal with the ominous letter they had received from the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services, discussing their private investigator’s permit, or lack thereof.

“Come on. It’ll be fun.” Shawn, leaning back in his chair, feet resting on his desk, extended his arms to represent the large amount of fun Gus would be missing.

“What part of a gun show sounds fun to you?” Gus set the letter on his desk, face down. The last thing he wanted was for Shawn to see it. Although they were business partners, Shawn didn’t take the administrative side of things very seriously. As the letter indicated, Shawn had neglected some vital paperwork. Gus, on the other hand, had obtained a permit for the lemonade stand he’d run when he was nine. While the cost of such a permit had put his small business into the red, at least he hadn’t had to worry about being arrested. Shawn was not like Gus. He’d never done the proper paperwork for that dog-walking business he’d started as a kid, or for the lawn-cutting, and Gus didn’t even want to think about the casino Shawn had tried to start in the basement of their grade school. Trying to discuss permits with him was a lost cause.

“Where’s your love of history, Gus?” Shawn asked. “The gun show is filled with historical weaponry, cool gadgets and beef jerky. Tell me you don’t love a good piece of jerky.”

“It’s going to be a bunch of fanatics buying guns,” Gus said, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “There could be a lot of shady characters there—gang members, cult leaders, white supremacists. And you know my rule about Earl Warren Showgrounds. That place is cursed for me.”

Shawn pulled a piece of candy from the Red Vines package on his desk and waved the raspberry flavoured licorice at his friend. “Is it because the exhibit building looks like a tabernacle dedicated to egg yolk? Or is it because the floorplan is shaped like the box from Hellraiser?”

“That design is meant to resemble a daisy,” Gus said, seriously. “And yes, the egg yolk

thing does kind of freak me out. But the curse is real.” Gus smoothed his tie and lowered his voice. “It made me step in horse droppings when I tried to ask Melinda Castleberg to senior prom.”

Shawn sighed and bit off the end of the Red Vine. “I’m sure she didn’t turn you down because of that,” he said between chews. “It was probably because of those weird sweater vests.”

“A sweater vest is a perfectly respectable piece of casual wear,” Gus said, getting defensive.

“Sure, if you’re a cast member of Happy Days.”

“Why do you want to go to the gun show anyway?” Gus asked. “You’re not even into guns.”

“But Lassie is. And I want to get him something for his birthday.”

Gus gave Shawn a confused look. “Lassiter’s birthday was four months ago.”

Shawn shrugged. “Obtaining the perfect gift has been more difficult than I expected. But I’ve been emailing a guy and he’ll be at the gun show this weekend with a certain...item.”

Gus put on his best James Earl Jones voice and asked, “Do you have the item?”

Shawn grinned, and not bothering to even attempt a Redford impression asked, “Can you guarantee my safety?”

Gus smiled, but shook his head sadly at Shawn’s lack of organization. He’d already started planning for Juliet’s birthday. “After being shot in the chest,” he said, “I’m surprised Lassiter’s still interested in guns.”

“No, dude, it makes total sense,” Shawn said. “I nearly choked to death on a peanut M&M once, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still love them. Except for the yellow ones. I suspect them of plotting against me.”

“My cousin got the hiccups after drinking a can of Coke,” Gus replied. “He had them for two weeks straight, and hasn’t had a carbonated beverage since then. Frankly, I think his decision makes more sense. You know what they say: fool me once, shame on you....”

“Fool me twice you’re David Blain. I get it. So you really don’t want to come to the gun show?” Shawn’s voice was wistful.

“No. I’m pretty sure that a gun show is going to be whiter than a Celine Dion concert and about as entertaining.” Gus paused. “Although I’m sure you and Lassiter will have a great

time,” he added without conviction.

Shawn shrugged, and planted his feet on the floor. “Listen, I know I shouldn’t mention that letter you’re so obviously trying to hide from me, but I couldn’t help noticing the city crest on the envelope and that anxious look on your face. If you’ve got tickets or the city’s being all 1984 on you, go see Henry. He’s like the Godfather when it comes to fixing red tape.”

“You mean he’ll make them an offer they can’t refuse?” Gus asked.

“I was thinking more like James Brown, the Godfather of Soul. Papa don’t take no mess, but he does have a brand new bag.”

“Thanks, buddy.” Gus smiled. “I might actually take you up on that suggestion.”

“No problemo amigo.” Shawn headed out the door.

## Chapter 2

The Earl Warren Showgrounds was a collection of buildings, parking lots, stables and equestrian tracks, nestled between the municipal golf course and Adams Elementary School. The gun show was being held in the exhibit building, originally built to house the Santa Barbara National Flower Show. As far as Lassiter was concerned, guns smelled sweeter and were more beautiful. While he loved gun shows in general, this one was especially interesting, even apart from the homicide. The Santa Barbara Historical Arms and Blade Show specialized in antique and historically significant weaponry. Every gun was at least fifty years old. Beneath the forty-three foot ceiling, rows of tables stretched the length of auditorium. Despite the early hour, the venue was bustling with people.

*This is going to be great, Lassiter thought, trying to control his smile. Yes, there is a murder to solve, but if I get it done fast enough I might have time to look around.*

He and O'Hara were approached by a short man in a light grey suit, looking panicked. He introduced himself as Bret Thompson, event manager, and led them to the stage at the far end of the room. Thompson gave the nod to a security guard who stepped aside to allow them access through the door. They followed Thompson into the low-lit space that doubled as backstage and storage room.

"I do rounds when there's an event on," Thompson explained. He pulled a curtain back, revealing a man's body lying on the floor. "He wasn't here when I came through at 7:00 a.m., but he was at 8:45 a.m., just before the doors opened at 9."

"Let me get this straight," Lassiter said. "You found a dead body and immediately let half of Santa Barbara walk into the crime scene?"

"I had to open the doors." Thompson picked anxiously at his fingernails. "People were waiting, and there were some anti-gun activists outside protesting. It was getting ugly."

O'Hara sighed. There was no point crying over spilled milk. "Has anyone disturbed this backstage area?" she asked, looking around.

"No. I put a guard on the door as soon as I found him." I'd like to keep this whole situation as quiet as possible." He gestured toward the showroom. "The public mustn't know."

"I doubt the people who come to a gun show are going to be freaked out by a shooting," Lassiter muttered, thinking of his own situation. If being shot in the chest hadn't put him off guns, not much was likely to.

O'Hara spotted a fire exit. "What about that door?" she asked.

Thompson shook his head. "It's an emergency door. It only opens out."

“Well,” O’Hara said, trying to focus on the positive, “at least we can narrow down the suspects to the people who were inside before the doors opened.” She pulled out her phone, and arranged to post uniformed officers outside both doors.

“I’ll get you a list of vendors,” Thompson assured them.

“We’ll also need a list of your employees,” Lassiter added. “Whoever killed this guy must have been pretty familiar with the venue.” He crouched down near the victim. “Do you recognize him?” he asked Thompson.

Thompson made a face as if he were in pain. “No. Maybe. I don’t know.” He bit his lip. “There’ve been so many people here this morning. Vendors setting up, people preparing food. It’s a big day for us.”

Lassiter examined the body, careful not to disturb it. The man was wearing a black Harley Davidson t-shirt, blue jeans, and combat boots. There was a small hole in his abdomen and a larger hole on his back, where the bullet had exited just above the left kidney.

“This guy’s been shot,” Lassiter said. “Looks like a through-and-through.” He scanned the area around the body. “But I don’t see a bullet.” If the killer had taken the bullet with him they were probably dealing with someone who had knowledge of ballistics. Of course given where they were that didn’t exactly help narrow their suspects down.

“Woody’s on his way,” O’Hara assured him. “If there’s a bullet in our vic he’ll find it.”

“He was probably shot elsewhere and dumped here. The gun that shot him might even be sold by now.” Lassiter’s heart sank as he imagined some innocent citizen walking off with the murder weapon. Even if they did find it on one of the display tables, a dozen people might have handled it by now. Fingerprints would be next to useless.

Lassiter headed out of the stage area into the brightly lit showroom. His eyes hadn’t even adjusted before he heard someone calling his name. Well, sort of calling his name.

“Lassie! Funny meeting you here.” Shawn Spencer strolled over.

Lassiter tried not to smile. Since his release from hospital, he and Shawn had been eating dinner together three times a week, critiquing episodes of CSI, and having mind-blowing sex. Of course if he decided to complete the application in his desk whatever it was he had with Shawn would have to end. Running for office was a nasty business and he couldn’t have any sexual skeletons coming out of the closet. And he planned to tell Shawn that, too. As soon as the thought of doing so stopped making him sick with fear. *Certainly I’ll have broached the subject by the time the city councillor application deadline arrives, he thought. Or definitely soon after.*

“If you’re looking for the cat fancier’s convention,” Shawn said, “that’s not until next

week.”

“I’m not allowed to work the cat show anymore,” Lassiter said sourly, thinking of how Chief Vick had over-reacted to his discharging his weapon at a previous event.

“Then you’re shopping? Fantastic! We can be like the girls from Sex and The City, only with guns instead of shoes. Do you want to be Samantha, Miranda, or Charlotte? Because I get to be Carrie.”

“I’m here on police business, Shawn.” Lassiter glanced quickly to see if anyone was watching, then leaned in, as close as he dared. Shawn’s hair smelled like baby shampoo, so he’d showered at his place. “And if you’re not busy…” He let the sentence hang. He wanted to solve the case quickly, showing Vick that he deserved to be back on active duty. Yet given the circumstances, Shawn’s strange leaps of insight might be exactly what they needed.

“Of course I’ll help, Lassie,” Shawn said, running his fingers down Lassiter’s arm. “You don’t even have to ask. Which, of course you didn’t.” Lassiter knew he was standing too close to Shawn, and he knew it would look suspicious. But it was taking almost all his willpower not to constantly touch him. He scanned the crowd, looking for anyone who might be observing them.

“Where’s Guster?” he asked.

“Gus hates these things.” Shawn rolled his eyes. “Something about how guns kill people.”

“Guns don’t kill people,” Lassiter said firmly. “Criminals kill people.”

“Right,” Shawn agreed. “Criminals with guns.”

Lassiter pulled a pen from his pocket and held it in front of Shawn. “I know six ways to kill you with this pen. Should pens be illegal?”

“Only six?” Shawn slapped a hand on Lassiter’s shoulder and left it there. “You’re not even trying, are you?”

O’Hara and Thompson emerged from the backstage door.

“Shawn, thank God you’re here,” O’Hara said. She looked up at Lassiter, who quickly stepped back from Shawn, shrugging out from under the hand on his shoulder. O’Hara’s smile flashed briefly before she continued. “We’ve got a situation. Mr. Thompson found a body backstage. The victim must have been dumped there between 7 and 8:45, which leaves the public in the clear.”

“But means that every vendor and employee is a suspect,” Shawn finished.

Lassiter smiled. One of the things he liked about Shawn was the way he didn't need every little thing explained to him. He turned to Thompson who was looking panicked that a new person was being told about the body.

"Don't you have lists to get?" Lassiter asked him. Thompson nodded and hurried away.

"It's pretty overwhelming," O'Hara admitted. She smiled at Shawn. "But maybe you could help, Shawn. Couldn't you read people for guilt or something?"

Shawn noticed that neither Lassiter nor O'Hara was holding an evidence bag. He touched two fingers lightly to his temple. "I sense that the murder weapon is missing."

"Yes!" O'Hara was looking relieved already.

"Great," Shawn said, sounding enthused. "So all we have to do is figure out which of these thousands of people with guns shot the guy? Oh, and where he was killed. Have you questioned Colonel Mustard and checked him for a revolver?"

"Cute." Lassiter said wryly. "So if you could just fire up your mental GPS, and point us to a weapon or a suspect, that'd be great."

Shawn motioned to the rows of tables and the milling crowds. "Dude, there are enough guns here to stock Charleton Heston's hunting lodge. All this metal is blocking my powers."

Lassiter wrapped an arm around Shawn's shoulders. "Well thanks for stopping by anyway." He began to guide him firmly toward the door. If he was going to have to solve it on his own he'd rather do it without Shawn's distracting presence.

"Wait!" Shawn shouted, putting a hand to Lassiter's chest. "I sense that there are clues on the body." He turned and walked purposely toward the door to the stage with Lassiter and O'Hara following.

Shawn flicked a switch and looked at the dead man, now bathed in the brightness of a spotlight. He had a close-shaved head and a short goatee. Shawn spotted the scuff marks on the victim's heels indicating he'd been dragged there.

"He wasn't killed in this spot. His body was dragged here."

"I could have gotten that from the drag marks on his heels," Lassiter grumbled. "Tell me something I don't know."

Shawn's eyes roved over the body, searching for some clue to his identity. He looked pretty much like any other muscled tattooed thug, until he spotted the belt. It was black leather with wear patterns he recognized—where the handcuffs, holster, baton, and other

equipment attached. Henry had one just like it.

“The victim was a cop,” Shawn announced. Judging by his appearance, he was probably undercover. Lassiter didn't recognize him, so he wasn't SBPD. Shawn thought about their location and took a risk. “I'm seeing alcohol, tobasco and fireworks.”

“Do you mean Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms?” Lassiter asked, his voice tight with tension.

“Yes. I think this man might have been undercover.”

O'Hara snapped some headshots of the victim with her phone. “I'll get on to the ATF and see if they recognize him.” She hurried out of the small room.

Lassiter stared down at the body. The department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms hadn't bothered telling the SBPD that they had an agent in their jurisdiction, which bothered him enormously. As soon as they identified the body ATF would be swarming all over the place. He looked over at Shawn, who was watching him with those disconcertingly alert eyes.

“Listen,” he said, trying not to sound as desperate as he felt. “If ATF is really involved here, we're only going to be on the case until they arrive. We might only have hours. And I'd like nothing more than to have the whole thing wrapped up by the time they show. If you can help make that happen I'd be very grateful.”

“How grateful?”

Lassiter ignored the obvious sexual innuendo in Shawn's voice. “I'd make sure that Chief Vick cut you a cheque, obviously.”

“Come on, Lassie, I know you can do better than that.” Shawn moved in closer, watching Lassiter's expression. He planted a light kiss on Lassiter's lips and the detective felt his professional resolve begin to melt. “Wouldn't you like to show me how grateful you are? Maybe behind the backdrops for the Pirates of Penzance?”

Lassiter sighed. “There's a dead body not two feet away,” he pointed out.

“If you're suggesting a threesome I'm going to have to put my foot down,” Shawn said. “That's on my list of the five sexual things I won't do.”

“Threesomes?” Lassiter asked, surprised. He'd always assumed that Shawn was a pretty much anything-goes kind of guy.

“No, dead things. You, however, are very much alive.” Shawn ran a hand up Lassiter's leg, and nestled it against the bulge at his fly.

Lassiter pulled back and glanced apprehensively at the door. He wasn't willing to risk getting caught engaging in a lewd act in public, let alone during work hours. That would really sink any political career he might have. "You know I can't have sex with you here," he said. "What do you really want?"

"Let me cook you a birthday dinner."

Lassiter's forehead creased in confusion. "My birthday was four months ago," he said.

"I wish people would stop fixating on that," Shawn muttered.

"Fine. Birthday dinner." Lassiter imagined the fetid state of Shawn's current kitchen and added, "You can cook it at my place."

"Sweet," Shawn said. "Now let's get this murder solved and make ATF sorry they ever kept you out of the loop."

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Henry Spencer applied his putty knife industriously to the side of his house, scraping off the patches where the paint had bubbled and cracked from age and exposure. At the sound of Gus' footsteps on the walkway he turned and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Perfect timing, Gus." Henry said. "Although I should have known it would be you instead of Shawn."

"Come again?" Gus asked. When he'd first heard it, Shawn's advice to visit Henry had made total sense. Henry knew every legal code in California, and usually a few loopholes as well. Plus, his years as a cop had left him with a string of useful contacts in the city administration. Now, however, Gus suspected that Shawn's suggestion had been some kind of payback for refusing to go to the gun show.

Henry gestured to the wooden slats covering the bungalow. "Shawn promised he'd help me prep and paint the house this weekend." Henry sighed, a sound born of long frustration at Shawn's lack of responsibility. "But I guess I should have known better. Still, at least he sent you." Henry looked critically at Gus' suit. "But you can't very well work in that suit. Check Shawn's room. He's got some old clothes in there that should fit you just fine."

Gus hadn't intended to do anything of the kind, but if he were going to get on Henry's good side enough to elicit help on the letter situation, some paint scraping wouldn't hurt.

"I'll be right back," Gus said, trying to keep the resignation he felt from seeping into his voice. He went inside and mounted the stairs to Shawn's room, regretting that he'd ever loaned Shawn his copy of the Cliffs Notes for Tom Sawyer. He considered leaving out the back way, and asking Juliet for help instead. She might have some contacts inside city

hall. But running to his girlfriend sent rather the wrong message. He wanted to be seen as the kind of man who got things done, not the kind of man who brought his friend's mess to his girlfriend to fix. Four minutes later Gus, resplendent in a pair of black track pants and a Bananarama concert t-shirt, joined Henry on the porch and began scraping the exterior.

Three hours of back-breaking and messy work later, Henry declared a time-out and brought them both cold beers. They sat on the porch and let their tired limbs rest. It occurred to Gus that the majority of the word paint was made up of the word pain. In his exhausted condition this seemed highly significant.

"So Gus," Henry said. "I know you didn't come here just to scrape paint. What's on your mind?"

"Well," Gus pulled the letter from the pocket of the sweatpants. "We have a situation. Psych does, I mean."

Henry glanced over the letter and passed it back. "So what's the big deal? You sign the forms, you pay the \$175 and you forget about it."

"They do a criminal background check," Gus pointed out. "My record is spotless, but Shawn's..." He let the sentence hang and took a deep drink of beer.

"I know, I know," Henry grimaced. "Shawn's got a record."

"If we can't get an investigator's licence we'll have to close Psych. I thought with your connections you might be able to help us out."

"Shawn's old enough to take care of himself," Henry argued. "You should let him work it out for himself. It's the only way he'll learn."

"I'm a partner, so that makes it my business," Gus said. "Literally my actual business." He paused, considering his words before throwing caution to the wind. "And, this situation could be seen as kind of your fault. You arrested him."

"Because he stole a car!" Henry raised his voice defensively.

"Borrowed without permission," Gus corrected.

"Stole." Henry's tone made it clear that there was no wiggle room on the issue. "Regardless, it's time Shawn learned that some of his actions actually have consequences."

"Okay." Gus nodded his head and set the paint scraper on the porch. "Thanks anyway. I guess I'll ask Detective Lassiter."

“Lassiter?” Henry made a sound that was half laugh, half snort. “Good luck getting him to be any help.”

Gus quashed a smirk. “Oh, I think he might.”

“Why? Because he bailed out Shawn’s motorcycle? That’s a far cry from quashing a felony or cashing in a favour at city hall.”

“I should really go change,” Gus said. “I have some appointments to keep.” The last thing he wanted to do right now, apart from scrape any more paint, was spill the beans about Shawn’s secret relationship.

“Talk to me, Gus,” Henry caught him in a steely gaze. It was like a bear trap made entirely of guilt. “Why would Lassiter be willing to help?”

Gus shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not allowed to say.” He bit his lip. He wasn’t even sure that he was allowed to say that he wasn’t allowed to say.

“What’s going on with Lassiter?” Henry demanded. “Does Shawn have something on him?”

Gus shook his head. “I can’t discuss it. I’ve already said too much. You should really take this up with Shawn.” He made a dash for the Echo. He could always come back for the suit another time.

## Chapter 3

Shawn looked around the showroom, trying to see it through the eyes of a killer.

*If I were going to shoot someone, he thought, I'd want some privacy. The stage area would be ideal, actually. So why hadn't their vic been shot there? And if not there, then where?*

He noticed a table where two women were selling baked goods, tea and coffee. Even without Gus' supersniffer abilities, he could tell they were deliciously fresh. That meant there was a kitchen somewhere nearby. He spotted a door in the far wall.

"I'm having a vision." He gripped Lassiter's arm and threw a hand to his head. "I see Steven Segal fighting Gary Busey."

"Under Seige?" Lassiter asked, his voice tinged with enthusiasm. "The soup scene?" They'd watched it only recently, sandwiched between Above The Law and Steven Segal: Lawman. All in all, Shawn preferred Above The Law. How many movie heroes were cops, akido experts, in the CIA, and related to the Mafia?

"Yes," Shawn said, smiling. "I'm sensing we need to find a kitchen."

"There's a kitchen on the far side of the venue." Lassiter led the way through the maze of tables.

"Great," Shawn said, "but stay away from the Soy lent Green salad. I hear it's people."

Shawn scanned the kitchen. At a glance, it looked recently cleaned. There was a bank of stainless steel appliances shining in the fluorescent lighting—a large refrigerator, a gas stove and range hood, a grill, dishwasher, and an enormous double sink. He walked over to the stove and put a hand tentatively on the oven door. It was slightly warm. And he caught the scent of recently cooked bacon coming off the grill. The place smelled like breakfast. And cookies.

"I don't know," Lassiter said pessimistically. "This place looks clean enough to perform surgery." He sounded discouraged to Shawn, and that just wouldn't do.

Shawn put an arm around Lassiter and rubbed him through his grey suit.

"Maybe...maybe not."

"Thanks, Shawn." Lassiter wrapped his arms around him and hugged him close. *When he knows no one is watching*, Shawn thought, *Lassie can be quite affectionate*. It was what had first clued him in to Lassiter's relationship with Lucinda berry, when they'd first met, and resulted in the rules about inter-departmental dating that they were now breaking. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

His keen eyesight spotted tiny shards of lettuce and two tomato seeds on the counter where someone had been cutting vegetables recently. Then he saw a set of fingerprints on the fridge where someone with small hands, probably a woman, had recently opened it. Here were a few coffee grounds and particles of sugar near an outlet, probably where the women outside had made their coffee and tea. He saw an industrial-sized garbage pail with eggs and an empty flour bag inside. And then, in the far corner, he saw a cloudy smudge on the linoleum.

Shawn pulled Lassiter to him and held him tightly, enjoying the feel of his chest rising with each breath. "I'm sensing violence," he said, whispering into Lassiter's ear. "The spirits say someone opened the door, got on the floor and then they walked the dinosaur. Or got shot. They're fuzzy on that point."

O'Hara entered the kitchen, breathless. "Has Shawn found something?" she asked.

Lassiter let go of Shawn as if he'd been stung, and Shawn stepped casually one step away from the detective. Juliet just rolled her eyes, although whether at Lassiter's sad attempts to be discreet, or from Shawn's tolerance of it, he wasn't sure.

"Wait for iiiiiiit," Shawn said, squinting at the crime scene. Someone had mopped up, but there was still a dirty red film on the floor, visible only from certain angles. His gaze travelled up the wall until he spotted the cracked tile where a bullet had lodged. It looked as if it were barely holding together.

"And..." he gestured enthusiastically, "There's our bullet." He bowed slightly, as if expecting applause.

"Great," Lassiter said. "I'll get that section of wall removed and sent down to the lab for extraction."

"Or, we could just do it Fonzie-style." Shawn slammed his foot against the wall and shards of fragmented tile together with the slug fell to the floor with a clatter.

While Lassiter crouched, donned a blue Nitrile glove, and began to examine the bloodied projectile on the floor, O'Hara spoke. "Shawn, we do have to write things like that in our reports you know."

"Really?" Shawn smiled. "Try to make it sound as cool on paper as it looks in person."

She frowned and her eyebrows came together. "It can make for awkward questions in court."

"If you like," Shawn offered, "I'll come to court and demonstrate it. Juries love me. Although I do charge extra for court work. It falls under my psychic legal consulting fee scale, a little higher than my detecting scale."

Juliet rolled her eyes but smiled wearily. "I'll keep that in mind. " She nodded toward the bullet, now being examined by Lassiter. "We'll run the slug through NIBIN and see if they get a ballistics match."

Lassiter rolled the tiny piece of metal between his fingers and noted the slightly greasy film. "I can tell you exactly what kind of gun shot this bullet," he said.

"Are you psychic now?" Shawn asked put a hand to his lips briefly and then looked at his fingers as if expecting to see something. "What am I, contagious?"

Lassiter held up the bullet, which glinted in the light. "This is a round from a 44 calibre cap and ball pistol." "It was probably fired by an 1860 Colt Army pistol or an 1858 Remington New Model." He dropped the bullet into an evidence bag, passed it to O'Hara and pulled off the glove.

Shawn was impressed and more than a little turned on by Lassiter's ballistics knowledge. "Remington?" he said, moving in close to look at the bullet, and inhale Lassiter's scent. "I've got one of those," he said. "It shaves as close as a blade or I get my money back."

Lassiter reached out and ran his fingers along Shawn's bristly jawline before dropping his hand again. "You should ask for the money."

"Nice work partner," Juliet said to Lassiter, who smiled and allowed his chest to swell. "So now we just have to find out which vendors here carry those makes of weapon."

"Shawn and I'll take the right half of the room," Lassiter said. "You take the left. I'd like to get this done before that gun gets sold, if it hasn't been already." Shawn spent a few moments savouring the way Lassiter had used their names together so causally. Then he followed him to the first row of tables, where Lassiter flashed his badge to the vendor.

"I'm looking for an 1860 Colt Army or a Remington New Model," Lassiter said, a steely edge to his voice. "Got anything like that?"

The man behind the table said he didn't, but pointed out two sellers who might. Lassiter strode toward the closest table and Shawn ran ahead and intercepted him.

"Lassie, how about keeping the badge in your pants and let me do the talking? If these guys are involved, they just going to clam up if you get all Dirty Harry on them. This situation calls for more of a Dirty Tom, maybe a Tricky Dick."

"That, Spencer, is why God made police stations with interrogation rooms," Lassiter said, his mouth set in a grim line. As much as Shawn loved Lassiter's determined face, he knew that kind of approach wouldn't get them what they needed.

"Fine," Shawn raised his hands in surrender. "But how about letting me try first? Instead

of good cop/bad cop we can play non-cop/bad cop? Sound fair?"

"Very well," Lassiter buttoned his suit jacket, concealing his badge. "But if it doesn't get results I'm bundling these guys into a paddy wagon and introducing them to a psychological interrogation technique I like to call The Sledgehammer."

"Fine. As long as you don't introduce them to your Steam Train or your Big Dipper." Shawn shrugged. "We can negotiate your climbing Salisbury Hill with them. But first..."

He walked over to the cookie table, where the devoted members of the Ladies Auxiliary or whoever they were, were plying their wares. If he was going to narrow down the time of death he needed to find out when they'd left the kitchen that morning.

"Hi there," he said, flashing his most charming smile. "I'm Santa Barbara's famous psychic, Shawn Spencer. Perhaps you've heard of me?" He looked at the two women expectantly, but received only blank stares.

"Wow, look at this spread," Shawn said, quickly changing gears. He rubbed his hands together, admiring the array of cookies and sandwiches. "You ladies must have been here pretty darn early."

"We were. They're all baked fresh this morning," the redheaded woman with the large glasses assured him.

Shawn put his fingers to his head. "I'm seeing the two of you here in the kitchen this morning. I'm seeing 7 a.m." Neither woman responded. He glanced at their hands. The fingerprints on the fridge were definitely not the brunette's sausage-like digits. "No, wait," he pointed to the redhead. "It's just you, and it's closer to 8:00 a.m."

"Yes," the redhead nodded enthusiastically. "It's true." She smiled, amazed at his accuracy. "I was baking here at eight."

Shawn noticed the sandwiches. "And you," he pointed to the brunette. "I'm seeing you making the BLTs," but later in the day."

"I didn't get here until 8:30," she admitted. "I had to pick up the vegetables at the farmer's market. You're pretty good."

"And I suppose the kitchen was clean and ready to go?" Shawn chuckled. "You didn't, for example have to mop up any blood or move a dead body?"

"The kitchen was very clean," she assured him. "We were both here late last night cleaning and setting up for the baking this morning. So you don't have to worry about e. coli or anything like that." She laughed pleasantly.

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“Do you have any idea what the odds are of us finding the murder weapon at this point?” Lassiter asked, his voice heavy with pessimism. Despite the rush of being surrounded by guns, the enormity of the task before him was beginning to weigh heavily.

“Fifty-fifty.” Shawn bit the head off a gingerbread man from the cookie table then bounced on the balls of his feet and looked around as he chewed, anxious to get started.

Lassiter looked at him quizzically. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“We either will or we won't,” Shawn said. “All odds are fifty-fifty. Trust me. It's the new math.”

The man behind the table was sporting a blonde mullet and a sleeveless shirt. He smiled at them as they approached.

“Hello my good man,” Shawn greeted the vendor and examined the array of guns on the table. Their triggers were all locked with zip ties, as required by law. “I see you like to bear arms.” When the man didn't respond Shawn laughed. “Just a little gun humour there. Because of the shirt. Bare arms? No?” The man's smile was slowly turning into a frown and a confused stare. Shawn switched tactics. “Okay. My friend and I are looking for a Colt 45 and a New Model Army,” Shawn said.

“That's an 1860 Colt Army or a Remington New Model,” Lassiter cut in.

“Those are terrific guns,” the man said, his enthusiasm returning. “I've got a Colt Navy gun which is very similar.” He pointed to a dark silver revolver on the table. “It's a very historic model. This type of gun was carried by Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday and General Robert E. Lee.”

“I suppose they had to take turns,” Shawn said, gazing hopefully at Lassiter, who had picked up the gun and was examining it. He sniffed tentatively at the gun and shook his head, satisfied that the gun wasn't the one they were looking for.

Lassiter pulled his badge. “I'm head detective Carlton Lassiter, SBPD, and I need to see your sales records.”

“Then I need to see your warrant, detective.” The man raised his chin and looked at them suspiciously.

Lassiter almost smiled. “Are you refusing to cooperate with a homicide investigation?”

“Are you challenging my second amendment rights?” The man crossed his arms.

“Would you like to hear about your Miranda rights?” Lassiter asked, menacingly.

“Whoa!” Shawn stepped in and waved his arms, calling for time out. Lassiter was clearly

frustrated with their lack of progress and just itching for the chance to blow off some of his aggression. "I think we got off on the wrong foot here," he said to the vendor. "We love the second amendment, Don't we Lassie?" Shawn leaned toward the vendor and jabbed a thumb toward Lassiter. "This guy loves guns. The last thing he wants is to have to fight crime with a red jacket, a polite voice and a husky dog. Am I right?"

Lassiter acknowledged Shawn's statement with a twitch of his lips and a raise of an eyebrow.

"We like guns. You like guns," Shawn continued, smiling at the vendor. "It's a big old gun Woodstock here." He could see the vendor's willingness to reconcile overcome his hurt pride. The poor guy had no idea how close he'd come to spending the day in an interrogation room.

"More like Altamont," Lassiter muttered. "A man is dead."

"Can we agree that you both dislike hippies and love The Flying Burrito Brothers?" Shawn asked, conciliatory.

"Look, you shouldn't be harassing me," the man argued. "If someone's been hurt, you should be talking to those anti-gun nuts outside."

Shawn laughed. "You're suggesting the anti-gun people shot a guy?"

The man shrugged. "Nothing those people do would surprise me. That snooty blonde out there threatened me."

"Did she now?" Lassiter didn't look as if he believed him.

Shawn looked behind the table at the items stacked on the floor. Despite their small size, his gun cases had wheels, and leaning against the stack of them was a forearm crutch.

"Thank-you for your time," Shawn said and pulled Lassiter away.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't put my cuffs on that man right now?" Lassiter growled, unbuttoning his jacket for easier access to his badge and gun.

Shawn ran a hand reassuringly down Lassiter's tie. "First off," he said, "I'd get jealous. Second of all, we don't have time for your Mr. Kinky shenanigans right now. And third, he's not our guy. He's got some kind of muscle problem. The dude uses a crutch...arm...thingie. Whatever they're called. He couldn't have lugged a dead body from the kitchen into the stage area.

"He could have used some kind of vehicle," Lassiter suggested. Like a wheelchair."

"Maybe. But I doubt it. I bet he couldn't even lift the guy into it." Shawn spotted Juliet on the other side of the room, looking dejected. Clearly she wasn't having any luck

either.

"Maybe Mr. Grouchy back there was right," Shawn suggested. "Maybe we should talk to the protestors outside."

"Fine," Lassiter said, no trace of enthusiasm in his voice. "Let's talk to the hippies."

The spokeswoman for Women Against Guns didn't look like a hippie to Shawn. She was tall, with expensively cut blonde hair and designer clothes. She was in mid-speech when Shawn and Lassiter approached.

"It's a safety issue," She said firmly to a couple with a dog. "Guns aren't safe. You might buy a gun for protection, but nine out of ten people shot in the home are killed with their own guns."

Lassiter flashed his badge and stepped in. "Excuse me, miss, I need to have a word with you."

"I have a legal right to express myself, officer," she said. "That's the first amendment."

"So help me," Lassiter complained, "if I hear one more person reference The Constitution today, I am going to arrest them."

The woman's eyes dropped to Lassiter's holster. "I see you're on the side of the gun fanatics."

"I'm a cop," Lassiter said. "We all carry guns."

"Well," she added quickly, "did you know that 25% of police officers killed on duty are shot with their own guns?"

"Listen lady," Lassiter said, trying not to get upset, "if I'm ever killed by my own gun, the scumbag will have to beat me to death with it because by the time he gets that close the clip will be empty."

"What about the children?" she asked, with no trace of irony in her voice. "Two American teenagers a day commit suicide with a gun. And 90% of suicide attempts involving a gun are fatal."

"Only 90%?" Lassiter made a gun shape with his hand and practiced aiming it at various parts of his head and torso. "That's a disturbing figure," he said finally, oblivious to the woman's horror at his gestures. "Anyone should be able to hit a target at that range."

"How long have you been out here?" Shawn asked the woman who was looking at Lassiter with revulsion.

“Since just before 9:00 a.m.” She turned her gaze to Shawn.

“We have a vendor who claims you threatened him,” Lassiter said. “Care to explain that?”

“Threatened him?” the woman looked confused. “Oh, that guy.” She rolled her eyes. “He bumped into me and spilled my coffee, all down my dress.” She pointed to a barely noticeable stain. “The brute refused to apologize and started ranting about gun rights. I may have said something about suing him for personal injury.”

“Great,” Lassiter’s face fell as he realized this was another dead end. Shawn reached out and briefly touched his arm.

“And I might have said something about shoving my foot up his ass,” she added quickly. “But that was a metaphor. I’d never do such a thing.”

“Not in those shoes anyway,” Shawn added, noticing her Manolo Blahniks.

O’Hara emerged from the building, talking on her cell. She ended the call and turned to face them. “That was the station. ATF confirms they had an undercover agent here. They say he was investigating a Federal Firearms Licensee who was selling weapons without a background check.”

“Nice that they see fit to share that now,” Lassiter grumbled.

“So our perp is likely a licensee,” O’Hara said. “That might help narrow it down.” She passed them a sheet of paper. “Bret Thompson gave us his vendors list. The highlighted ones are licensees.”

“Thanks, O’Hara.” Lassiter studied the list.

Shawn turned to her. “You carry highlighters with you?”

“What?” She said defensively. “They come in handy.”

“Do you have any stickers on you? Maybe those cute puffy ones with the googly eyes?”

“I’m not five, Shawn.” O’Hara said.

“Okay,” Lassiter looked at the paper, getting his second wind. “Let’s go talk to these guys.” He turned to Shawn. “And look, the first name on the list is that guy you said couldn’t have done it. Muscular degeneration my ass. What do you want to bet I find out he had access to a dolly or a forklift? Maybe some kind of helium balloon contraption.”

“Is his name hot pink?” Shawn asked, already knowing it wasn’t. “No, it isn’t, because he’s not a licensee. We should go to the next guy on the list,” Shawn pointed to the paper. “The guy that Dog The Bounty Hunter-looking dude suggested we see.”

The second vendor's name was Munroe Watkins. His grey hair was pulled back into a short ponytail and he had copious amounts of tattoos covering his forearms. Shawn was pretty sure he recognized a few of them from a book of jail tattoos at the station. Either that, or an episode of Sons of Anarchy. Shawn's gaze roved over the table and the area surrounding it. Watkins had a large wheeled case for transporting rifles. It was certainly big enough to stuff a body inside. And there was a cut plastic zip tie in his garbage bin, indicating that he'd recently removed it from the trigger of a gun, something vendors and customers weren't supposed to do until they'd left the fairgrounds.

Shawn stepped aside as Lassiter began questioning Watkins, pulled out his iphone and dialled the station.

"Hey Buzz," he greeted the friendly cop, speaking as low as he could and still be heard on the other end. "I'm down at the gun show with Jules and Lassie. I need you to run a name for me. Munroe James Watkins. We need to know if he has a criminal record." Shawn waited while Buzz ran the name through his computer system.

"Sorry Shawn, I haven't got anything on a Munroe James Watkins. I've got a Mason James Watkins with two convictions for assault."

Shawn's heart leaped. "Got a description?"

"I've got a photo," Buzz countered. "He's 6', grey hair worn long, clean shaven. He's, uh, kind of scary looking."

"Send it to my phone," Shawn said. Moments later, he was looking into the angry mug shot of the man calling himself Munroe Watkins.

Shawn smiled. It was show time. Shawn loved show time.

## Chapter 4

Shawn nudged O'Hara. "What's the name of the dead ATF agent?" he asked.

Lassiter felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Shawn's questions were usually long, meandering, and filled with references to movies and television shows that Lassiter only vaguely remembered or hadn't seen. When Shawn dropped the act, it was usually because his brain had become engaged. He knew something. How he knew it, Lassiter had no idea, but he was pretty sure it didn't have anything to do with the supernatural.

"Clark," O'Hara answered Shawn, then noticing his excited demeanour, she added, "Why? Did you had a vision? Do you know who the killer is?"

"All in good time," Shawn said, and Lassiter could see a gleam in his eye. "A good reveal is like making cookies in an Easy-Bake Oven," he said. "It takes twelve minutes and if you try to rush it you just get warm dough." O'Hara's brow creased at the simile, and Lassiter rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "I'm going to go up there," Shawn smiled broadly and pointed to the stage, "and do my thing."

"Forget the stage," Lassiter said, frustrated at Shawn's childish desire to turn every arrest they made into an episode of *Murder She Wrote* performed by the cast of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* "Just tell us what you have."

"Don't be so Noel Cowardly." Shawn ushered him away from the stage. "Stand next to Watkins and get your cuffs ready." He launched himself onto the stage, turned on the microphone and tapped it loudly, sending heavy booms throughout the room.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the pistol packing persuasion, may I have your attention please." A sea of faces turned toward the stage. "My name is Shawn Spencer. And I'm a psychic detective." He noted several faces turn back to the gun tables. "With the Santa Barbra Police Department," he added, gaining the attention of only a few more shoppers and vendors. "And," he paused dramatically, made a gun with his left hand and pretended to steady and aim it with his right, "I can put a dozen shots in the X-ring from 25 yards." Heads looked up and a few people clapped.

"Is that true?" Juliet asked Lassiter. They had posted uniforms at every exit and then stationed themselves close to Watkins.

Lassiter smiled and nodded proudly. He had discovered this by accident one day when he'd dragged Shawn to the gun range, trying to include him in more of his weekly activities. Shawn's shooting had been spectacular. Lassiter had never been so turned on. He pulled at his collar, which suddenly felt constrictive. Shawn probably wouldn't want to go to the range with him once they broke up.

He wished there were some way to split his life into two—one part where he spent his

time with Shawn, doing things that were, if not stereotypically gay, certainly homosexual—and one where he was the Carlton Lassiter whose professional reputation he'd spent over ten years building. The Carlton Lassiter who had been married, to a woman, and who actually had a shot at being elected by the citizens of Santa Barbara. Still, he regretted having to nip this relationship in the bud. Being with Shawn made Lassiter feel smart, brave, and hot. And while he'd felt smart or brave before, feeling hot was a new experience—one he was rather enjoying. In fact, all other things being equal, he would have preferred to maintain the status quo. But realistically, he knew that Shawn would tire of him eventually. It wasn't personal; it was just what he did. It was better that Lassiter spare him the bother of having to break it off with him.

“But my impressive marksmanship aside,” Shawn was saying, “I'm here today to talk about muurder,” He drew the word out dramatically. “Someone among you has sullied the innocent joy of the gun show...with violence.” He put a hand to his head. “I'm seeing the murder now. I see a man in a black Harley Davidson t-shirt and jeans. He's an ATF agent looking for a lawbreaker.” Several faces in the crowd looked nervous. “A lawbreaking gun vendor,” Shawn added.

“I'm having a vision of a cartoon cow, a grouchy cartoonist, and his daughter's gay friend.” Shawn opened his eyes to see only uncomprehending stares from the crowd. “Ted Knight and Jim J. Bullock?” Shawn offered. When few faces showed recognition he added, “Am I the only one who watched Too Close For Comfort?”

O'Hara and Lassiter nodded.

“He was on to you,” Shawn said, pointing to Watkins, who looked alarmed. “He knew you were selling guns without a background check. But he checked into your background, and couldn't find any record for you at all. Because Monroe isn't your real name.”

Shawn jerked his body around, as if in pain. “I see a man...living under a false name,” he said, doing what Lassiter recognized as a very bad James Mason impression.

“Is that Clint Eastwood?” A man near the stage asked. “Are you channelling him?”

“That doesn't make sense,” the man's wife said. “Ain't Eastwood still alive?”

“Fine!” Shawn sighed. “I see preserves,” he shouted. “Jars of preserves. And college kids who can't afford proper drinking glasses and have an underdeveloped sense of irony. I see...Mason jars.” Shawn pointed at Watkins again, who was now sandwiched between Lassiter and O'Hara. “Your real name is Mason Watkins. But you couldn't use it because you'd never get a Federal Firearms License with two assault convictions on your record. So when Agent Clark of the ATF came around asking questions about your sloppy background checks, you knew you had to kill him. You were facing your third strike, and a long prison term, so you lured Agent Clark into the kitchen and you shot him.” He pointed dramatically to the rear of the room and closed his eyes. “I can see him, up

against the tiled wall.”

Every eye in the room was on Shawn now. Lassiter sighed. Shawn loved the spotlight. Keeping a secret must be hard for someone like him. Lassiter told himself that Shawn's difficulty—and maybe inevitable failure—at keeping their relationship secret just confirmed that he needed to end things, but part of him also appreciated the effort Shawn must be making.

“But then you realized that the kitchen was set up for baking that morning,” Shawn added. “You panicked. You knew that people would be there any minute, baking sweet, sweet gingerbread cookies.” He winked at the two women at the snack table, then turned back to Watkins. “So you dumped his body into your massive gun case, and wheeled him into the stage area.” Shawn pointed offstage to where the body had been.

“Is that what you were doing back there?” the vendor with the blond mullet asked, turning to Watkins. “I saw him go in there with his gun case around 7:30 this morning.”

Lassiter felt a rush of triumph. They could swab the gun case for blood, and maybe even match it to the victim, but having a witness clinched it. Juries loved witnesses. He could take Watkins for murder, and the ATF could kiss his...arrest warrant. He glanced up at Shawn, feeling grateful, impressed, and something else—something disturbingly reminiscent of how he felt after sex. If they hadn't been in a showroom filled with people he'd have hugged him.

“Mason James Watkins,” Lassiter said, taking satisfaction in the familiarity of the wording, and the security of a solid case, “You're under arrest for murder.” He clamped the cuffs on him, enjoying their metallic clicks. “And for violations of the Brady Act.”

“Never cared for the Brady Bunch,” Shawn said, still speaking into the mic, “Except for Sunshine Day. That's just too cute to hate. Am I right?”

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Lassiter returned to the station to discover that the paperwork he'd left behind had been re-assigned by Chief Vick, a sign that he was definitely off light duty. Relief coursed through his body and he felt light as a feather. He danced a few happy tap moves as he pulled out his chair and seated himself. Things were finally turning around and going his way. He'd made a solid arrest, he'd had the pleasure of calling the ATF office to let them know they could turn their black Ford Explorers right around, because the case was solved. Finally, he'd bought a Smith & Wesson 629 with rosewood grips and a nickel finish before leaving the gun show, to replace the one that Goochberg had destroyed. He pulled open the left-hand drawer of his desk, took out the city councillor application, and smiled at it.

*Maybe I could run for office and still date Shawn,* he thought, riding high on a cloud of optimism.

The plan came almost unbidden into his mind, and he realized that some part of him must have been working on it all along.

*I could hire Shawn privately, he realized, as a consultant, so I'd have an excuse for seeing him.*

*And no one will find that suspicious? His rational mind shot back. Shawn's already staying over three nights a week. The two of you are practically living together.*

*We'd be discreet, he argued. Lots of couples do it. We'd just be careful.*

*Right! Because Shawn is the height of discretion.*

*It's workable. If we can make it through a few decades like that then we could retire and be as out as we want.*

*A few decades? Are you nuts? Shawn's having trouble making it through every week.*

Lassiter frowned. His rational brain was right. Shawn could never keep a secret this significant for that long. He'd have to choose between love and work. As usual.

"Can we talk?"

Lassiter looked up to see Burton Guster standing in front of his desk. He sighed under his breath and put the city councillor application back into his desk drawer. "Sure. What's up, Guster?" Wordlessly, Gus handed over the letter from the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services. Lassiter scanned it quickly, but the meaning was immediately clear.

"I see," Lassiter said. Shawn's business was finished if he didn't get this licence. And if he was sure about any aspect of Shawn's feelings, he knew that he loved running Psych. For whatever reason, after the dozens of odd jobs his short attention span had grown tired of, psychic detective had stuck. Hard. Lassiter sat up straight as his duty became clear. Here, at least was a way to show how much his time with Shawn had meant to him. He could save Psych. Lassiter nodded and gave Gus a brief smile.

"Don't worry about this, Guster. I'll take care of it. It's the least I can do."

"I appreciate you seeing it that way," Gus said, the relief evident in his voice. "I know you haven't always been such a fan of Psych."

"Psych is ridiculous," Lassiter admitted. "But Shawn...is not. Not entirely, anyway." He handed the letter back to Gus. "Just apply for the license. I'll handle the rest."

Their relationship might not be going anywhere, but he could assure that Shawn's

career—if it could be called that—had a future. He rooted through his desk for a small black book and looked up a number he rarely had occasion to use.

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Shawn arrived at the Psych office to find Gus in a cheerful mood.

“Let me guess,” Shawn said. “You’ve found your true calling as an exterior house painter.”

“No,” Gus said, smiling his I’m-mad-at-you-but-my folks-taught-me-to-always-be civil-smile. “But I did save our business from being shut down by the government while you were off shopping for deadly weapons.” He paused. “You’re welcome.”

“Dealing with paperwork is your gift,” Shawn said. “You’re Gus the Application Slayer. It could be worse. You could be in Tru Calling, running errands for dead people in a kind of Groundhog Day meets Dead Like Me. What’s with Eliza Dushku, anyway? Every show she headlines gets axed. It’s like she’s cursed.”

“I thought Dollhouse was underappreciated,” Gus said. “But I’ll take that as a thank-you,” he added reluctantly.

Shawn leaned back across his desk and fiddled absently with his magic eight ball. “I’m thinking of telling Lassie the truth,” he said.

“The truth about what?”

“You know. About me.” Shawn flailed his arms wide. “About all this.”

Gus shook his head slowly. “That’s a bad plan, Shawn. You’re riding high on love hormones and making poor decisions. Remember when you got all hopped up on bunny love and confessed to your dad that the smell in the guest room was the decaying vitamins you’d been tossing into the air vent?”

Shawn smiled. “That was half Henry's fault. Those vitamins looked like candy but they tasted like chocolate feet. This is different. I think Lassie and me are really bonding. I mean, this could be something serious. And I’m starting to feel bad about lying.”

“Really?” Gus’ forehead wrinkled. “Couldn’t you at least wait until our license clears before you make your leap of faith?”

“Leap Of Faith,” Shawn mused. “One of my least favourite Steve Martin movies. But it did have a great cast,” Shawn said. “Debra Winger, Liam Neeson, Philip Seymour Hoffman... and Meatloaf.”

“I’ve never cared for dramedy,” Gus said.

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Dinner, take-out from In-N-Out Burger, had been satisfying. Shawn, who had stayed behind at the gun show after the arrest had recounted the clash he'd witnessed between the activist from Women Against Guns and the redheaded cookie lady, which had involved brief nudity, threats of civil action, and stern words from Bret Thompson, the event manager.

"It got me thinking," Shawn said, leaning back on the couch, "there might be a sideline in psychic conflict mediation."

Lassiter grimaced. "It sounds like a cross between Jerry Springer and Miss Cleo."

Shawn laughed. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Lassiter weighed his options. Shawn was in a good mood. He'd solved the case, and seemed to have enjoyed the gun show. This might be the perfect time to tell him about the City Council job. But still, he thought, a little extra groundwork never hurt.

"Speaking of Psych," he said, "I took care of that licensing problem for you."

Shawn smiled. "Yeah, Gus told me. What'd you do?" he asked. "Twist some arms? Pull some strings with City Hall? Do you have dirt on that guy with the glasses and the John Waters moustache who handles all the paperwork down there? I always suspected he was a superfreak. Please tell me you have photos? A video we could upload to Youtube?"

"No, but I do have a thorough knowledge of the law." Lassiter smiled. "Penal Code section 1203.4 allows people convicted of a crime to petition the court to re-open the case, and change a guilty verdict to a dismissal. I talked to Judge Horace Leland. It's all taken care of. He says 'hi' by the way, and wanted you to know that his kidney stone problem is all cleared up."

"My Grand Theft Auto charge?" Shawn moaned theatrically. "But it was so cool! And, it was a total babe magnet. I should sue you for the loss of all that future sex I won't be getting." He leaned forward and ran a hand along Lassiter's thigh. "Or at least, hold you responsible for damages."

"Be serious, Shawn. This conviction would have sunk your business." As much as he would have loved to have sex instead of uncomfortable conversation, Lassiter knew there wouldn't be a better time, and the deadline was fast approaching.

Shawn sighed and leaned back again, his face serious and determined. "You're right. I do appreciate it. And to show you how much, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you too,” Lassiter said. He stood, went to the kitchen, and poured himself a drink. He wanted Shawn to know about the council job, but the thought of actually telling him made his throat close up.

“Is it that you’re pregnant?” Shawn asked, “Because I swear, I’ve been careful.” He noticed the serious expression on Lassiter’s face. “Fine,” he acquiesced. “You go first. Mine’s more of a build-up-to-it reveal anyway, and I’d rather tell you once you’ve finished your drink. In fact, have several.”

Lassiter gulped the scotch and set the glass on the island. Then, standing rigidly, he forced himself to speak the words he’d been putting off for so long. “Councilman Frank Mutti just got elected to the State Assembly,” he said. “And City Council is looking for someone to replace him for the remainder of his term.” He took a deep breath. “I’m thinking of applying.”

“Really?” Shawn’s smiled lasciviously. “So you’d be councilman Carlton Lassiter? That’s kinda hot. Is this a Tommy Carcetti scenario, where councilman is just the first step on the road to governor? Will there be back room deals and cut-throat political shenanigans? Can I play Wilson, your trusted advisor?”

“I’m serious about this, Shawn.” Lassiter bit his lip. “Being on City Council would mean life in the public eye.” He took a deep breath and spoke, his words falling over one another. “It would mean that you...that is, that you and I...that we couldn’t do this any more.”

For a few moments Shawn didn’t respond. Then all the expression drained from his face and Lassiter felt slightly sick. He knew the conversation wouldn’t be easy, but he hadn’t expected Shawn to look so hurt. It wasn’t as if they had thought this relationship was permanent. It was a fling, a brief sexual detour, not something with a future. But Shawn looked as if he’d just been served with divorce papers.

“Oh, I get it,” Shawn said, his voice deadpan. “You helping out with our licence is a dumping-me present. I totally get it. Thanks.”

“No, it’s not.” Lassiter fumbled for words that would make the situation less disastrous. “It’s just a present to show how grateful I am. For the case today, and the last few months, and...” Lassiter thought back to the shooting, and to how Shawn’s first aid had stabilized his punctured lung. “...and for saving my life.”

Shawn huffed and stood, gathering his things. “I wondered if you remembered that or not,” he said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

“Of course I remember.” Lassiter reached out to touch Shawn’s arm but Shawn pulled away.

“Come, on Shawn,” Lassiter pleaded. “This isn’t my fault. We both knew this didn’t have

a chance.”

Shawn nodded, and glared at him with angry wet eyes. “You’re right,” he said. “The only difference was, I was willing to give us one anyway.”

## Chapter 5

When Gus entered the Psych office the lights were off, but with the sun coming through the blinds he could see the outline of Shawn, lying on the sofa. He crossed to his desk and turned on his laptop. Something was evidently wrong, but their long friendship had taught him that Shawn would talk when he was ready to. In the dim light he could hear the tell-tale crinkle of a chip bag followed by heavy crunching. Shawn was on a Doritos binge.

*Things must have gone wrong with Lassiter*, he thought. Given Shawn's relationship history, he supposed he should have known better, but he had thought things with Lassiter might be different. Shawn had always had it easy with women, which was why Gus figured he got bored so quickly. Lassiter was anything but easy. And unlike many of the women he dated, Shawn actually had things in common with Lassiter. True, most of those things were strange, like their shared interest in guns, their love of high speed pursuits, or their desire to watch Cops, but it was a step forward. Gus was sorry to see it end with Doritos in the dark.

"So," Shawn said after a few minutes, "did you hear that Lassie's going to apply for City Council?"

Gus opened an electronic article from the *British Medical Journal* on new uses for antihistamines. When Shawn was down like this, he only wanted as much attention as he asked for. Push him too hard and he'd wind up on his motorcycle, headed for Alaska or Maine.

"No, I didn't," Gus said. "Is he hoping to take Frank Mutti's seat?"

"Why does everybody know these people?" Shawn asked, exasperated. Gus heard the crunch of the bag as Shawn rolled onto his side.

Gus chuckled. "Uh, maybe because we live in Santa Barbara and have a reading level above the third grade? More to the point, how do you *not* know these people?"

"I don't pay attention to politics," Shawn said. "I'm busy solving crime and getting my heart crushed into powder."

"Do you even know our mayor's name?" Gus asked, genuinely curious how someone with Shawn's observation skills could go through life ignoring so much.

"Is it Mayor Lenny Hizzoner?" Shawn asked.

Gus frowned, searching his memory for the name. Finally it came to him. "Is that the mayor from Ghostbusters?"

“Ghostbusters the novel, actually,” Shawn said. “See, I read.”

They sat in silence, broken only by the crunching of chips. Gus reflected that he rarely saw Shawn this depressed, and never over a relationship. Shawn usually got over a break-up in a day or two, with the help of a fruit smoothie and a re-watching of High Fidelity.

*Perhaps, Gus thought, Shawn's depression is a good thing. Maybe it's a sign that he's emotionally invested. Could this chip binge actually be a sign of increasing maturity?*

Finally Shawn spoke. “Lassie dumped me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gus said. Although he’d said several times that their romance was doomed, he really hoped that he would be proven wrong. When the relationship had lasted into the third month he’d even started to think ahead to what he would do if called upon to be best man at their wedding. It was early days yet, but one could never be too prepared when it came to Shawn.

Shawn hugged the bag tightly, crushing the chips. “It was sudden and unexpected. Like Sam Jackson getting eaten by that shark in Deep Blue Sea.”

“That wasn’t unexpected,” Gus argued. “They always kill the black man.”

“LL Cool J lived,” Shawn objected.

“True that.” Gus closed his laptop and turned to face Shawn. “Do you want to talk about it? The break-up, I mean?”

Shawn had curled his body around the Doritos, like a baby. “I’m a liability,” he said, his voice raw. “Lassiter’s gone all political, like that scary bald dude from Midnight Oil.”

“City Council is Municipal government, not Federal,” Gus pointed out. “Peter Garrett has been in the Australian House of Representatives since 2004. That’s the equivalent to our Congress. City Council is like, one level up from the school board.”

“Great!” Shawn said. “He’s dumped me for a job that’s not even worthy of an episode of Schoolhouse Rock.”

“I get that it hurts,” Gus conceded, “but is a chip binge really the way to go?”

“Doritos understand my needs,” Shawn said. “And they’ve never let me down. Except for that brief period in the 80s when they discontinued their sour cream and onion flavour. It took me a week to get over that.”

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Lassiter arrived at work, tired from a fitful night’s sleep. Most of his restless night had been spent trying to convince himself that he’d made the right decision. His lack of rest

had left him sore and grouchy and he lashed out at Menendez for taking the last of the coffee, snapped at a UPS man delivering office supplies, and accused McNab of hogging the photocopier.

"I don't know what's wrong with you this morning, Carlton," O'Hara said, warningly, "but put a lid on it. You are being a complete..." she paused, leaving Lassiter to complete the line himself with a variety of adjectives.

"I'm sorry if my less than perfect disposition offends you," he muttered sarcastically. "But we weren't all born with sunshine and unicorn horn up our..." he left her to fill in the blanks.

O'Hara let out an angry huff. "Honestly, Carlton, sometimes I don't know how Shawn puts up with you!"

"He doesn't," Lassiter said flatly, sitting at his desk and slapping open a report cover. "Not anymore."

O'Hara looked around furtively and then moved closer. "What's that supposed to mean? Did you two break up?"

"Yep." Lassiter stared at report, too upset to read, but wanting the familiarity of routine. He was pretty sure it was something about illegal refuse dumping.

"Oh Carlton," O'Hara said, all trace of annoyance gone from her tone now, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know." She patted his shoulder. "You know, you can call me, if you need to talk. We are partners, after all."

"Maybe not for long." He gave up on the report and leaned back in his chair, considering taking an hour to slip down to the gun range. He was in the mood to shoot things.

"What's that supposed to mean?" O'Hara asked.

Lassiter took a deep breath. *She has to find out some time, he reasoned. Better that it come from me.*

"It means, I've filled out that City Council application I've had sitting in my desk for months," he said. "It means I might actually start doing something with my life again."

O'Hara's expression was no longer one of compassion. "You're quitting your job? What is this, some kind of midlife crisis?"

"Look, I don't want to get into another argument about this," Lassiter said. "If I'm going to be in politics, I can't have any..." He paused, wondering how to describe Shawn, "...secrets."

“Oh my god!” O’Hara looked at him sharply. “You dumped Shawn so you could run for city council?”

“It had to be done.” Or that was what he was telling himself, anyway.

“You listen to me,” O’Hara hissed, leaning over Lassiter’s desk and pointing a manicured finger at him. “Maybe I haven’t been a cop as long as you have, but I know a few things. Being a detective isn’t just what I *do*, it’s who I *am*. And I thought it was who you were too.” She waved an arm. “But if you want to just dump everybody so you can go play politics, be my guest. I hope you at least vote for a descent police budget so those of us still here can do our jobs properly.” She spun on her heel and stalked back to her desk, where she pointedly ignored him.

Lassiter sat, pondering her words. He imagined removing the cold case board from his apartment. He imagined reading about a crime in the morning paper and not looking through the report that afternoon. He imagined no more stakeouts with O’Hara or her incessant perky optimism and time-passing word games. And he imagined never working with Shawn again.

Lassiter weighed his badge in the palm of his hand. He pulled his gun from its holster and set it on his desk, then picked up the City Council application. He looked from the paper in his hand to the badge and gun on his desk, the back again. The City Council job was everything he’d wanted for himself: respect, authority, a strong sense of purpose, and the knowledge that every day he was working to make the world a better place. Of course being Head Detective came with those things too. And if O’Hara was right (and that had been known to happen) then maybe he had something better than a career. Maybe he had a calling. Maybe being a detective was just in his blood. And what if he only realized that after a few weeks of council meetings and bureaucracy, when it was too late to change his mind?

*And then I'd be all alone*, he thought.

Lassiter hated to admit it, but dating Shawn had expanded his ambition beyond the horizon of his employment. Shawn had made him want to have a personal life again. After one particularly perfect morning he’d even measured his apartment’s square footage to see if it could possibly house two, or two and a half additional people on a full-time basis. And he hadn’t thought about that kind of a future since.... Lassiter’s eyes widened and he swallowed hard. He hadn’t thought about that kind of a future since he’d been married. He gripped the application in both hands, took a deep breath, and then swiftly tore it in half. He tore the halves in two a second time before letting the papers slide into his recycling bin.

If he wanted to improve his life he may as well start with preserving the things that actually made him happy.

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The light from Shawn's phone shone in the dim light of the Psych office as it played his post-breakup Lassiter ringtone, Tainted Love. Shawn grabbed it and glanced at the caller ID, then dropped the Doritos bag. He looked at Gus with a panicked expression.

"It's Lassie. What do I do?"

"Do you want to answer it?" Gus asked.

Shawn stared at the phone. He knew he didn't always make good decisions. He'd known that since he'd read *By Balloon to The Sahara* and wound up being eaten by sharks. If *Choose Your Own Adventure* had taught him anything, it was that sometimes following your gut got you hurt. But Henry had always said that sometimes you have to play through the pain. And as much as he hated to admit it, sometimes Henry was right.

He answered the call. "Hello, you have reached the empty shell of a man formerly known as Shawn Spencer. To ridicule his emotional pain, please press one. To apologize and beg forgiveness, please press two. If you are calling to reclaim belonging left at the Psych office, please stay on the line and an operator will assist you."

He heard sighs and mutterings on Lassiter's end, followed by an electronic tone.

"Was that a one or a two you just pressed?" Shawn asked.

Lassiter's voice came through the connection, low and contrite. "That was a two." He said nervously. "I want us to get back together." Shawn could hear the hum of the stations' ancient fridge and he knew Lassiter was calling from the break room.

"What if I'm not available anymore?" Shawn asked, ignoring Gus's serious expression and frantic head shaking.

Lassiter didn't respond for a moment and Shawn listened to him breathe. Finally he said, "Then I guess I'd have to wait until you were available."

"You'd have to go to the back of the line," Shawn said. "Behind Gina Repach, the cast of the *Vagina Monologues* Gus's first year of college, and that girl from *Summerland* with the lazy eye."

"*Are you seeing anyone?*" Lassiter asked hesitantly.

"Dude, we broke up less than 24 hours ago. What kind of a guy do you take me for?" Shawn shot back. "Although if I did have messy rebound sex, I would have been well within my rights."

"But you didn't?" Shawn could hear something like fear in his voice.

"I barely had time," Shawn complained. "Although I did have a pretty intense makeout session with a bag of Nacho Cheese." He could hear Lassiter's sigh of relief through the phone. "So," he added quickly, "You and me. This is a thing?"

"Yes, this is a thing." Lassiter pulled the phone away and cleared his throat then spoke low, but clearly. "I'm pretty sure it's a loving-you kind of thing."

"Of course you love me, Lassie," Shawn said, his smile audible. "Who wouldn't?"

Gus turned back to his antihistamine article, grateful that he and Juliet had a very different relationship style.

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Moments after hanging up with Shawn, Lassiter's phone rang again. It was Henry Spencer.

"Lassiter." Henry said his name as if it tasted slightly sour. "I need you to stop by the house tonight. Please. If you would."

"What's this about?" Lassiter asked, anxiety creeping into his voice. *Has Shawn told Henry about us*, he wondered.

"I'd rather not get into it on the telephone," Henry said meaningfully. "But it's important."

Lassiter looked at his watch. It was nearly five, and Shawn would expect him by six for that extremely belated birthday dinner he'd talked him into. It was their first post-break-up date, and he wanted it to go well. But he couldn't very well say 'no' to Henry Spencer. For one thing, Lassiter needed to know how much he knew.

"Okay. I'll stop in as soon as I'm done here."

"Fine," Henry said, sounding resigned. "See you then."

Lassiter pulled his Crown Vic up to Henry's walk and parked illegally. He strode up to the porch where Henry was sitting, surrounded by paint flakes.

"Lassiter," Henry said, his voice even and strong. "Glad you could make it. Shawn promised me you'd help scrape and repaint the house."

"He did?" Lassiter sighed. Was this some kind of payback for their break-up?

"There's some old clothes in Shawn's room," Henry said. He kept his eyes locked on Lassiter, and seemed to be measuring him up. Lassiter went upstairs to change, anxious

to get away from Henry's watchful gaze. He unbuttoned his dress shirt, folded it, and set it on the bed, then started flipping through Shawn's closet. He briefly considered Tears For Fears's "Seeds of Love" World Tour before settling on a Robert Palmer shirt.

*Is this a homophobia thing?* He wondered. *Had Henry invited him here to start something? Was he defending Shawn's honour?* He removed his dress pants and pulled on a pair of Shawn's cut-off sweat pants, slightly too short on his longer legs. Had he not been so preoccupied, he might have wondered what Gus's abandoned suit was doing on Shawn's dresser.

Lassiter straightened his back and clenched his jaw. He walked down stairs, feeling ridiculous, but ready to defend his relationship, physically if necessary.

Henry passed him a paint scraper and they worked in silence for five or ten minutes. Finally Henry spoke.

"Listen, Lassiter," he said, "I know what's going on between you and Shawn."

"You do?" Lassiter froze and glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. I do," Henry said heavily. "And I don't like it."

"You don't." *Of course*, Lassiter thought bitterly. *I should have known Henry would object.* Henry was an old school cop, and they were not exactly known for their open-mindedness on sexual matters.

"I mean, I know Shawn was probably going to pull something like this eventually," Henry said. "But to be honest, I didn't think you were the kind of man who'd let himself be taken advantage of that way."

"What?" Lassiter's mind dwelt on the term 'taken advantage of.'

"But since it's happened, Henry went on, "I want you to know that I'm on your side. What Shawn did is inexcusable, and if you want to press charges I'll back you up."

Lassiter felt his stomach plummet. Henry thought Shawn had taken advantage of him... sexually? Lassiter didn't know if he was more offended on his own behalf or on Shawn's. What kind of father was Henry, to be so wrong about Shawn? Lassiter went from being worried that Henry might want to sock him to thinking that he might like to take a swing at the old man himself.

"You think Shawn has been ..." Lassiter couldn't bring himself to say the words. "That is, you think this is a section 261." He dropped his voice to a whisper and used the California Penal Code reference to sexual assault.

"What?" Henry's face flushed red. "What the hell made you think I was going there?" he

asked. "I'm talking about section 518, the obtaining of an official act of a public officer, induced by a wrongful use of force or fear. I know Shawn's got something on you, and he's using it to strongarm you into helping him. Hell, I barely had to mention his name and it got you scraping paint."

It took a few seconds for all the pieces to fall into place, but when they did, Lassiter laughed. "Shawn hasn't been blackmailing me, Henry. We've been...dating."

"Dating? Dating-dating?" Henry squinted angrily at Lassiter. "Since when?"

"Since the Maxwell case," Lassiter thought back to their first date at Natalino's, and couldn't help but smile.

"The Maxwell case? Jesus, Lassiter that was even before you got shot."

Lassiter wanted to tell Henry how Shawn had saved his life and how he'd impressed him by arresting the shooter, Clare Sarano, instead of shooting her in the chest. He wanted to say how much he'd appreciated that Shawn hadn't tried to make him talk about the shooting, and had understood when he'd refused to take off this holster for a while. But all he managed to say was "Yes. It was."

"Is it serious?" Henry asked.

Lassiter swallowed. His throat felt dry and scratchy. "I just gave up my plans to run for City Council, so yeah, I think it's pretty serious."

"I see." Henry pulled out a bandana and wiped his forehead. "Well then. That's different." He extended a hand and offered him a metal tool.

"Grab the scraper, Carlton, if you're dating Shawn that makes you family. And family pitches in."

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It was eight-thirty when Lassiter, feeling grungy and sore, but wearing his own clothes again, let himself into his apartment. When he ate alone, he usually microwaved a frozen dinner, and when he and Shawn ate together they got take-out. Having dinner prepared for him was an experience he hadn't had since before his separation, and one which he was looking forward to. Yet the smell that greeted him as he entered the apartment had a distinctly charred odour.

Shawn leaped from the couch and rushed toward him.

"Dude! Where have you been?" he gestured at Lassiter's television, where Moon Over Parador was playing. "I've watched like, a third of Richard Dreyfus' 80s work. At least you got here before I had to see Always."

Lassiter threw his jacket onto a chair and scowled. "I've been scraping paint. Henry said you told him I'd help prep the house." He wrinkled his nose and opened a window. "What is that smell?"

Shawn laughed. "I can't believe you fell for that paint scraping line. Henry's lies are less convincing than Emilio Estavez's moustache in Stakeout."

"How could I refuse?" Lassiter stretched and rubbed his lower back. "I've been scraping paint while wearing your old Robert Palmer t-shirt."

"Aw, say you didn't," Shawn rolled his head dejectedly. "That shirt is never supposed to be worn outside of my room. That's my t-shirt for wearing when I'm alone and enjoying the guilty pleasure of Simply Irresistible."

Lassiter walked into the kitchen where a blackened chicken lay smouldering in the sink.

"Dinner?" he asked, tentatively.

"Burned," Shawn said, and sighed heavily. "Cooking is quite different when it doesn't involve a lightbulb."

Lassiter donned an oven mitt, picked up the smoking pan, carried it to the compost bin, and dumped it inside. He turned to Shawn.

"Natalinos?" he offered.

"I thought you'd never ask," Shawn said. "You're buying."

"It's my birthday," Lassiter objected.

"Your birthday was months ago," Shawn teased.

The Maitre d' at Natalino's greeted Lassiter with a wide smile and asked in he would like his usual table. Shawn asked for something more private, and they were led to a plush leather booth in a low lit corner. They ordered roast chicken, which arrived perfectly cooked, with no off-putting charcoal odour. As the waiter cleared their dishes away, Shawn surprised him by presenting a credit card (his own, Lassiter hoped) and paying for dinner.

"I thought you said I was paying," Lassiter teased.

"As if!" Shawn scoffed. "Happy birthday. Now open your present." Shawn presented him with a wooden box, joints delicately dovetailed, darkly stained.

"You didn't have to get me a present," Lassiter objected. "Dinner was more than enough."

“Don't be such a Glock tease,” Shawn said. “Open it.”

Lassiter looked suspiciously at the box, glanced up at Shawn, and then at the box again. He opened it slowly, as if expecting springy snakes to fly out. The content surprised him far more. Inside, nestled against a grey velvet interior was an antique gun.

Lassiter lifted it from the case and examined it closely. It was a .44 calibre French pinfire revolver with a six and ¼ inch barrel and a lanyard ring on the butt of the wooden handle. Its metal had a dark brown patina and evidence of light pitting. He took out his magnifying glass and read the manufacturer's mark, C Lefauchaux Brevete. But it was the second engraving that made his breath stop. The engraving was lighter and cruder than the maker's mark, probably done with a knife. The text read, “William Clark Quantrill.”

“Is this real?” Lassiter asked, despite knowing by sight and touch alone that it would be.

“No, I painstakingly forged it with my gunsmithing skills,” Shawn said. “Of course it's real. At least, that's what the guy who sold it to me said.”

Lassiter looked at the tiny engraving affixed to the inside top of the box: Taken from the body of Colonel William Clark Quadrille on his death, June 6, 1865. Quadrille, who had instigated the Lawrence Massacre in 1863, killing 180 men and boys before burning the city to the ground. Quadrille, who had been shot by Jenny Winslow at the Battle at Piper's Cove—a battle in which the Union side had been led by Lassiter's great-great grandfather, Muscum T. Lassiter.

“How much did you pay for this?” Lassiter suddenly wondered how long he had been staring, transfixed by the gun.

“Ah ah ah,” Shawn chided. “That would be telling.”

Lassiter shook his head and reluctantly placed the gun back into its box. “I can't accept this. It's too expensive.” He looked pleadingly up at Shawn. “Let me buy it from you. Please.”

“Don't sweat it, Lassie.” Shawn waved a hand. “Let's just say that clearing a guy of the suspicion of murder comes with a great discount.”

Lassiter pulled the box back toward him, not wanting to let it go, yet hesitant to accept it. There was no denying, it was a piece of American crime history. Frank and Jesse James had formed part of Quantrill's raiders. And given his personal connection, it would be a great heirloom; something he could pass on to his nephew Peter someday. Or, depending on how things went with Shawn, maybe to his own kids. And if this gun were any indication, things with Shawn could get pretty good. He couldn't think of a time when someone he was dating had gotten him a more appropriate present. It certainly made the

golf clubs his wife had gotten him when he turned thirty pale in comparison.

Lassiter's mind pulled itself from his reverie. "Wait a minute," he said, "how did you buy a gun? I hadn't even called Judge Leland when you bought this. The background check should have rejected you." Lassiter's mind immediately went over a dozen possible scenarios, from Shawn stealing the gun, to his buying it from from the trunk of a car from some crack dealer.

Shawn blushed and ran a hand across the back of his neck. "Yeah. See, those background check rules only apply to vendors with federal licenses. An unlicensed dealer doesn't have to do a background check at all."

Lassiter glared at him. *Trust Shawn to know that loophole.*

"Relax," Shawn said. "I'm trustworthy. I haven't even used the cache of semi-automatic weapons I bought yesterday."

"I take it you're joking," Lassiter said.

"Maybe." Shawn's voice was light and playful. "Do you want to search the Psych office for a secret underground lair?"

Lassiter wouldn't put it past him to have a secret lair under the Psych office. *Of course, knowing Shawn, he thought, it's probably filled with video games and candy. Or, given what he sometimes wanted to do with my handcuffs, it could be some kind of kinky dungeon.*

The waiter came with dessert. Shawn had ordered a slice of chocolate truffle cake and Lassiter had ordered apple pie.

"You could still run for Council, you know," Shawn said, digging into his cake. "I'd help you. I'd hand out flyers and buttons and signs. I'd make a great first lady. But I refuse to wear pearls."

"If anyone knew about us," Lassiter said, "I've have no chance of getting picked, and even if by some miracle I *did* get picked, I'd never get elected once my term ended." He cut his pie with his fork, creating a tiny shower of flaky pasty onto his plate.

"Oh please!" Shawn leaned back against the leather booth and licked the chocolate from his fork lasciviously. "Gay people run for office all the time."

"Really?" Lassiter asked around a mouthful of pie. "Who?" He didn't even stop to remark that Shawn had just casually referred to him as gay.

Shawn rolled his eyes. "Uh hello? Ever hear of a guy named Harvey Milk?"

Lassiter swallowed. "Of course I have." His face took on a grim expression. "They shot him dead you know."

*Of course if I'd been the first openly gay man elected to public office, Lassiter thought, I'd have had a conceal carry permit and have been armed to the teeth.*

Shawn looked confused. "Really? The trailer made the movie look so happy." He took another bite of cake. "What about Santa Barbara County? You'd make a great Sheriff."

"You think so?" Lassiter smiled. He'd always imagined himself as a sheriff, ever since his youthful days at Old Sonora.

"Sure," Shawn said. "You'd be like Matt Dillon. Gunsmoke Matt Dillon, not the Matt Dillon whose heavy-browed acting is showcased in Rumblefish and There's Something About Mary."

"Sheriff could be...interesting." Lassiter mulled it over and took another bite of pie. At the very least it as a career path that wouldn't require him to abandon two of his primary interests--guns and crime.

"And I could be Miss Kitty, the lovable whorehouse madam." Shawn tilted his head and fluttered his eyelashes at him playfully.

"Miss Kitty wasn't a prostitute," Lassiter said. "She ran the saloon."

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that."

"It might be a little dull," Lassiter suggested. Somehow he couldn't picture Shawn living happily in some remote area, where he couldn't get a slurpy at two in the morning.

"Interesting things happen all the time on Gunsmoke," Shawn objected. "Come on, hands up everyone who cried during the episode where Festus learned to read." He raised his hand and looked expectantly at Lassiter.

"I don't actually remember any episodes," Lassiter admitted. "I didn't see a lot of television as a kid. My mother was a big believer in the value of fresh air." His mother had been a big believer in a lot of things Lassiter hadn't particularly enjoyed, such as Catholic school.

*Maybe I'll wait until we've had an anniversary, he thought. Or two.*

"Well what about Deadwood?" Shawn asked. "Lots of stuff happened on that show."

Lassiter shook his head. "Never saw it."

“Seriously?” Shawn shook his head, reached out, speared a forkful of Lassiter’s apple pie, and popped it into his mouth. “Damn, Lassie,” he said finally. “We have got some serious HBO to catch you up on.”

Lassiter gazed at Shawn across the candlelit table and watched him eat his cake. It was unexpectedly arousing. Lassiter mentally kicked himself for thinking he could give this feeling up for a job in politics. He flagged the waiter and asked to take the remainder of their dessert to go. Television wasn't the only thing he needed to catch up on.