In the Prison of His Days

by Xela

Summary

A job goes wrong and Shawn can't talk his way out of it. He gets captured and roughed up by a group of thugs, his usual tricks not enough to save him. In the aftermath, Shawn spirals out of control, searching for structure and guidance in his life. Carlton takes on the job to save Shawn from himself, and in the process they find out surprising things about one another.

Notes

This does deal with the ramifications of violence--including risky behavior and mild alcohol abuse. There are brief mentions of past abusive relationships by an OC, nothing graphic or very in depth.

Also, I do not pretend to know anything about SWAT procedures. Just go with it; dramatic license, as so often seen on the show we love so much. :)

See the end of the work for more notes
Intro & Newton's Third Law

Intro:

Lassiter burst through the precinct doors, temper barely in check. Cops scurried to get out of his way. Shawn trailed after him congratulating himself on a case well-solved and spouting off some 'psychic' advice as if he hadn't almost been shot minutes before.

Carlton tried his best to quell the lingering anger and fear, but Shawn's presence—and the way his shirt was wrinkled from the perp's grip—wasn't helping.

“You know, Lassy-face, you're awfully tense for just having solved a case,” Shawn mocked. Something about this case had Lassy extra-bugged, and Shawn was prepared to needle it out of the straight-laced Head Detective. He was completely unprepared for the sheer amount of fury Lassiter directed at him, far beyond the annoyed exasperation he usually elicited from the detective.

“You may think this is a game, Spencer,” Carlton growled, “but it's not, and you're a civilian. One day, you're going to get in over your head. You're irresponsible and a liability. You're going to get hurt, and no one will be able to stop it because it will be your own fault!” Carlton pushed past Spencer, leaving him blinking stupidly at Carlton's retreating back.

A cold trickle of foreboding crawled up Shawn's spine, but he shoved it aside. Lassy could be such a downer.

Part I: Newton's Third Law

“I was born to learn, to grow, to expand, to love, to create, to enjoy, to see the beauty in all things including myself... But I was NOT born to be perfect.”

“I would just like to restate that this? Is a bad idea.” Gus sank down behind the stack of boxes providing cover. This was beyond a bad idea. These weren't the run-of-the-mill mid-level criminals. These were mean people with big guns.

“Come on, Gus! Don't be a party pooper!” Shawn shot his mischief-making smile at Gus.

Gus scowled at Shawn. “These are bad guys, Shawn,” Gus warned. “I think we should wait right for Lassiter and O'Hara and the Chief.”

Shawn scoffed; if he left Guster on his own, the boy would never do anything fun. “And let them discount my brilliant psychic deductions?”

“You're not psychic, Shawn,” Gus grated out. Shawn was his best friend, but seriously. This was not a joking matter. Shawn just barreled on as if Gus hadn't spoken.

“Nah. We're going in.” Shawn glanced around. No guards in sight, trail of car oil on the ground.
Sloppy.

"I'm not going with you, Shawn."

"OK Gus. You just stay here and be Penny. I'm going to soften up the bad guys for Lassy-face and Jules." Shawn took off across the street.

"Please Shawn, I'd totally be Brain. Shawn. Shawn! Inspector Gadget is not a good role model!"

Shawn gave it five minutes before Gus came in after him.

Shawn crept into the warehouse as quietly as he could. It was all spooky with shadows everywhere and bad guys with guns lurking around somewhere. Murmured voices came from down the hall, and Shawn could detect the barest change of light by one of the doors.

He'd just started towards it when he caught the hint of movement from the corner of his eye.

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Juliet glanced at her partner's drawn face as he took another turn at breakneck speed. She kept hearing Gus's panicked phone call, barely understandable save for the tremulous 'They've got Shawn.' Dispatch had given them an address and Carlton had been in the car before the ink had dried.

"All units on route to Seaburn's Docks be advised, shots fired." Juliet paled and Carlton's knuckles tightened on the steering wheel. The car shifted into a higher gear as Carlton stepped on the gas.

Juliet composed herself and reached for the radio. "Charlie One to Dispatch, copy that." They swung into the maze of shipping warehouses, tires squealing. Lassiter didn't speak a word as they got out of the car and headed towards the staging area.

The SWAT commander nodded his acknowledgement of the two tense detectives before running down the final stages of the plan with his team. Carlton's grip tightened when an officer handed the SWAT commander a piece of paper.

"We have confirmation. One injured civilian, at least seven armed targets. Let's get him out."

The sting went down in a flash of gunfire, but all Carlton could see was Shawn slumped in a corner, face bloody. SWAT had the perps pinned on the other side of the room.

"Shawn!" Carlton yelled. A bullet shattered the cabinet over Shawn's head, and he pulled in on himself, trying to make his body as small a target as possible; Lassiter was glad to see he was still alive and conscious. A heavy hand landed on Carlton's shoulder.

"We have to get him out of there. We'll shield you, can you pull him to safety?" Automatic gunfire sent bits of plaster falling to the floor.

"We'll get him," Carlton said grimly, and O'Hara nodded grimly at his side.

"Alright, we're moving! Don't break formation, stay behind the shields." The SWAT team waited for go ahead with the rescue.

"We're ready, go in five...four...three...two...one go go go!" Carlton crouched as close to the ground as possible, aware of the bullets winging over the shield top and the quiet grunts of the shield bearers as bullets slammed into the ballistics barriers. The SWAT team fired back, gun rapport loud and deafening.

"We've got him!" Carlton grabbed Shawn's shoulder. He jerked, shaky hands coming up to protect
his head. Carlton paid it no heed; he had to get Shawn out before he could calm him down. O'Hara grabbed Shawn's other shoulder and they started dragging him back towards cover.

“You'd better not die, Spencer. I have first dibs on you,” Carlton muttered. When they got out of the line of fire, paramedics swooped in and Carlton was pushed to the side, though not before he caught Shawn's anguished, shaken gaze.

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The first days of Shawn's convalescence passed in a drugged-out blur. He was vaguely aware of people coming around, garbled voices and vaguely distinguishable shapes passing through his senses. His only 'clear' memory was of blue, the kind of color he saw on the National Geographic channel when they showed icebergs underwater, the sunlight from above lighting everything in shades of azure.

But when the drug-haze faded into stupor and Shawn regained some semblance of higher thought, he was tormented with the memories of what happened. Every detail played back to him in eidetic minutia.

So he let himself float on a cushion of drugs and apathy, only half aware of his visitors. It was easier to let the drugs take over, turn his brain off and not be. Or think. Until the doctors began to get concerned and took the drugs away.

After that, there was no respite from the memories, no way to get away from the knowledge that Larry (tall bad guy, in charge because he could beat everyone else up) had had an egg McMuffin for breakfast and Ben (Larry's punching bag) had had a haircut within two days of the...incident.

When his father showed up with a friend who was really a shrink, Shawn knew he had to snap out of it. So he pasted on a smile and cracked on Gus. He 'talked' about what had happened in glib phrases and incomprehensible allusions that made Vick roll her eyes and O'Hara give in to her patronizing amusement. He sometimes caught his father watching him, Henry's eyes sharp and probing. The only one who didn't try to assuage their guilt and wrest assurances from Shawn was Lassiter who, more often than not, hid behind his aviator glasses. His only concession to Shawn's condition was a distinct unwillingness to mock psychic detectives as a group.

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“'We'll be able to let you out in a couple of days, Mr. Spencer,’” the doctor said pleasantly. “But until then, just relax and heal.”

“Oh yeah. I'll do that,” Shawn agreed. When the doctor left Shawn collapsed against his pillow. He really hated hospitals. Almost as much as Gus hated dead bodies. But even knowing that Gus wouldn't help him break out. His skin itched. His jaw hurt. The pain meds made everything seem distant and unfocused, the white hospital room fading into darkness.

“Who sent you?” Guns always felt the same, pressed hard against his temple. Shawn ignored the cold press of steel against his head. The thug was missing his front tooth, and at least four others were false. He had tattoos all over his arms, gang symbols mixed with religious iconography. Oh, the irony.

“Ed McMahon—you've won a million dollars, we just like to make sure you're home first.” Shawn distantly registered the sickening sound of the gun connecting with his jaw. Blood filled his mouth and choked him before the pain swept everything else away. They didn't even ask him another question before the gun smashed into his temple.

Shawn pulled the bits of himself together until he had enough crazy-glued in place to pin a smile on his face. “Hey Lassy. Is that a gun in your holster or are you just happy to see me?” His voice was hoarse and lacked his usual insouciant charm. Shawn shuddered when Lassiter's weight rolled off of him; he felt cold and exposed. He managed to crack open an eye. Lassiter was hovering over him, concerned and worry reflected on his face. “Did you bring me a present?”

Carlton scowled and straightened his jacket. “I'm glad to see you're feeling better, Spencer.” Shawn cracked a real smile; only Lassiter could sound annoyed and gruff when delivering get well wishes. Whatever else might have been said was lost in the stream of people who spilled into the room at once. O'Hara, Gus, Chief Vick, Henry. Shawn was intensely grateful none of them had been there to see his freak out, and he didn't stop to ponder why he was OK with Lassiter knowing.

Shawn wanted to run away under the force of their scrutiny. He felt stretched thin and exhausted but he couldn't get them to leave. Keeping up the air of jocular affability was getting harder and harder. He let his guard down during a lull in the conversation where everyone was watching Gus and Henry argue about something from years ago. Everyone except Lassiter, whose gaze turned sharp when he met Shawn's eyes. Shawn had to look away, struggled to put the mask back where it belonged.

“Well I think we've been away from the office long enough,” Lassiter suddenly announced, interrupting the argument.

“Lassiter,” O'Hara hissed, scowling at him in a way that promised lectures about sensitivity and social niceties. Gus was sulking and Henry...his expression was nothing like Carlton had ever seen before. His eyes darted between his son and the head detective.

“Crime isn't going to wait because Spencer's not there to distract us,” Carlton said in his most stubborn tone. O'Hara made a strangled noise and Chief Vick had a frown on her face.

“Though solving it may have to wait until I'm out,” Shawn added quickly. He made shooing motions with his hands, grateful for the out. “Out out! Someone needs to get me a pineapple smoothie.” Predictably, they all rolled their eyes and filed out of his hospital room. Lassiter, the last one out, shot a final look at Shawn, who gave him a small smile of thanks.
Scenes from a Decomposing Life

If we don't change direction soon, we'll end up where we're going.
~Professor Irwin Corey

“Thanks for the ride, Dad,” Shawn said dutifully. He stared at the outside of his apartment building with a small frown on his face, as if he didn't quite recognize where they were.

“Shawn? You OK? Need me to come up?” Henry asked. Shawn had been listless and unresponsive since his release, and even in the hospital he'd seemed...artificial. “Shawn?”

Shawn shook his head, eyes focussing slowly on his father's face. “Yeah, Dad, no I'm fine. I'll talk to you later.” Henry frowned at the absent tone. He was willing to cut Shawn a little slack due to his condition, but Henry had a feeling whatever was happening in Shawn's contorted mind went far deeper than he was letting on.

Henry watched his son trudged home, for the first time truly worried about his only child.

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4:23 A.M. burned into his retinas. He blinked and saw the LCD numbers in neon green behind his lids. Shawn sighed and rolled over, staring at the ceiling, trying not to fall asleep.

“What if he's cops?” the nervous drug smuggler asked. Shawn's mind assessed and stored information about the man as quickly as possible. He had two cats, a nervous tick in his eye, and was a junkie. Probably heroine. Shawn could see needle marks down his arm, and a spot on his shirt where the needle-sore stained the material with leaking puss and fluid. He was 6'2”, had bad teeth and a cleft-palate scar. His eyes darted nervously from side to side, probably a combination of paranoia and withdrawal. On the hierarchy, he rated as a zeta-male. If he were a wild animal, he'd never find a mate. Which made him both malleable and very dangerous.

“Shut up, Ben.” That was the ringleader, a dangerous man who held his gun with intent. He had a gang tattoo spiraling down one arm; he was mid-level in the gang hierarchy, but in a place like Santa Barbara was probably close to the top. He had dogs—probably rottweilers or attack-trained german shepherds. His eyes gave nothing away; Shawn would have to fast-talk around him to get out of this one.

“But Larry, man—cops ain't nothin' to play around with!”

Larry studied Shawn, his flat eyes sending a shock of fear down Shawn's spine. He slunk towards his prisoner, gun glinting in the low light. “You cops, boy?”

Shawn bared his teeth in a nervous parody of his smile. “Well, seeing as there is only one of me, I'd have to go with no.”

Larry's expression didn't even change as he buried his fist in Shawn's solar plexus. Shawn doubled over a fought for breath. Larry's shoes were scuffed and covered in red-white mud. There were only a couple of places in Santa Barbara that had that kind of mud around. His pants were too long for him, parts of the hem eaten away from where it dragged on the ground—cheap Target-brand cloth that Larry didn't really care about. The brown stains could be old blood. Shawn could count every
Larry casually backhanded Shawn. “You cops?” Shawn panted on the floor, stared at the blood dripping onto the floor in stunned incomprehension. This...was different.

“How are you feeling?”

“Hey there, Shawn! Have you seen my grandmother recently, I’ve been feeling all cold for the past few days,” Desk Sergeant Patricia Idelette called as Shawn walked into the precinct.

“Hey Shawn! You look great!” Juliet was all bubbly energy and radiance. It grated against Shawn's nerves. “How are you feeling?”

“I'm just peachy with an extra side of keen here, Jules.” His words were sarcastic and dismissive. Juliet frowned; Shawn wasn't normally this curt.

“Spencer,” Lassiter growled in greeting, his face pinched. He glanced over Shawn with a detective's eye, noting new signs of fatigue and stress. And no Guster. He could count on his fingers the number of times Spencer had been around without Gus hovering on the periphery, in the flesh or in spirit.

“Lassiter. Nice tie.”

Carlton refrained from looking down. Instead he pinned a file into Shawn's chest. Small case—some petty larceny, but they were stumped and the Chief had decided it was the perfect excuse to get Shawn 'back in the swing of things.' Shawn opened the file; Carlton though he looked bored and
unimpressed, though he couldn't tell with most of Shawn's face hidden behind his glasses.

“The Chief wants you to look at that. Don't get into too much trouble,” Carlton said stiffly.

“It's the assistant manager,” Shawn told them, tossing the file on the nearest desk. No over-the-top theatrics, no 'psychic visions,' no excuses for Shawn to touch people inappropriately.

“Um...” O’Hara said, eloquent in her confusion.

“Though really, if this is the only thing that's got you stumped, you've made quite a few improvements since I got beat up.” Shawn's smile lacked anything resembling humor. The smile he had pasted on was obviously false and brittle. Juliet's expression fell into one of concern.

“Shawn,” O'Hara said, her voice maternal and comforting. Carlton saw Shawn recoil, his lips tightening around the edges and his body stiffening. He backed away from them both.

“Awesome, if that's all the slack you've got for today, I'm just gonna go. I've got the inside line on a De Lorean for cheap.”

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“Shawn.”

Shawn spun around and swayed on his feet. His dark glasses made it hard to see in the hall, but taking them off was an even worse idea. He distantly heard the sound of metal falling on wood.

“Shawn? Are you OK?”

“Gus! Hey! Didn't see you there.” Gus frowned and took a step towards his friend. The stench of stale beer and sex clung to him so thickly even someone who didn't have a Super Smeller would be able to tell. Shawn was probably coming back from a one night stand, though he wasn't usually a heavy drinker.

“Whoa, Shawn!” Gus caught his friend as he stumbled forward.

“Sorry man. The ground's playing tricks on me.”

“Are you still drunk?” Gus asked in disbelief. “How'd you get home?”

“Where are my keys?” Shawn asked, patting down his pockets. Gus caught sight of Shawn's wrists, red and chafed.

“You dropped them when I came up. What happened to your wrists?” Shawn frowned and raised his wrists to look at them. His expression clouded, turning dark and haunted, before he shrugged and tried to bend over to get his keys. This sent both of them stumbling into the wall. “I'll get your keys, Shawn. Just stay there.”

Gus let them into Shawn's apartment. It was a mess. There were blankets piled by the couch and dirty dishes in the sink. Magazines and newspapers littered every available table top. Shawn wasn't the neatest guy in the world, but this was moving into unsanitary filth.

While Gus stared at the devastation of his apartment, Shawn had wandered down the hall and plopped into bed. He'd only removed one shoe and his leather jacket. When Gus went in to check on his friend, he estimated the sheets hadn't been changed in several weeks, but was loath to wake Shawn. Instead, he carefully removed Shawn's clothes, trying to make him as comfortable as
possible.

And he got a good look at the marks on Shawn's wrists. He couldn't be sure, but they looked like rope burns.

Gus sighed and started cleaning up Shawn's apartment. He didn't know what else to do. Maybe Juliet would know.

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*BEEP*

Hey Shawn, it's Juliet. Lassiter would kill me if he knew I was calling but we've got this bank robbery/homicide case that would really benefit from a psychic vision or two. I tried the Psych office, but no one was there so...give me a call.

*BEEP*

Shawn? Shawn. I know you're there, Shawn. Shawn! If you don't pick up, I'm going to start singing Party All the Time, which I know you hate, and that's not going to be good for anyone. Shawn! Pick up the phone, Shawn.

Alright then, you asked for it:

Girl! I can't understand it why you want to hurt me / After all the things I've done for you.
I buy you champagne and roses and diamonds on your finger (Diamonds on your finger!)
Still you hang out all night / what am I to do?

My girl wants to party all the time / Party all the time / party all the time.
My girl wants to party all the time / party all the time...

*BEEP*

Spencer. Carlton Lassiter. O'Hara—

(Carlton!)

We were wondering if you were currently available to...help. With a case. It's not like we aren't doing alright by ourselves—

(CARLTON!)

—but we could use your special brand of theatrics.

*BEEP*

Shawn, it's Da...me. You coming over on Thursday?

*BEEP*

Shawn.

*BEEP*

Shawn? Where are you?
Hey Shawn, no one's seen you for a while...

Gus fidgeted with the pens on his desk. He'd finally managed to pry Shawn out of his apartment and into the office. Shawn couldn't really pull off the scruffy look, but Gus was keeping his personal grooming tips to himself. He was just happy Shawn was out in the world again. He was pale, dark circles under his eyes, and playing his gameboy like it was the most important thing in the world.

“Come on, Shawn. We have to strike while the iron's hot here. Chief Vick's got a job for us.” Shawn cheered as Kirby sucked up a special boomerang power. Gus sighed in irritation. Shawn was phasing him out. He'd seen it with other people—especially dates who thought Shawn's interest extended farther than it did. He'd never done it to Gus though.

Gus frowned at his best friend. Shawn seemed smaller than normal, taking up less space and commanding less attention. He wasn't eating, not even for the gourmet pineapple cake Gus had gone all the way across Santa Barbara for. Shawn was wasting away, and there was nothing he'd let Gus do about it.

And they hadn't taken a case in weeks.

“Shawn, are we going to talk about this?”

“Sure,” Shawn returned, still absorbed in his game.

“Shawn.” Gus heard Kirby win another life. “Shawn!” Kirby killed a level big bag. “SHAWN!” Gus snatched the gameboy away from his friend.

“Gus! I was just about to see the dancing Kirbies of victory!”

“So you're just going to sit around and play Kirby's Dreamland all day, Shawn?”

“Kirby's dreamland is a wonderful place filled with fluffy clouds and delicious villains you can spit back out and—”

“Stop playing dumb with me, Shawn.” Gus glared at Shawn, who glared right back. “What's going on with you?”

“I don't know what you're talking about, Gus. All I want to do is play as a pink fluffy marshmallow man in peace—”

“That's the problem. You only want to play your stupid gameboy. You don't go on cases. You don't call me up to drag me away from my vary important, well-paying job. We haven't been by the precinct to annoy Juliet and Lassiter for weeks—”

“Did you just call her Juliet?” Shawn asked.

“That's not the point, Shawn.”

“Really? Because you've been dating for almost three weeks and haven't told me, so...”
“Haven't told—you haven't been AROUND to tell, Shawn!”

“Have I turned into Patrick Swayze? I always thought I was Whoopi,” Shawn said, his normal good humor taking a caustic edge. Gus folded his arms across his chest and glared at Shawn, who gazed back at his inscrutable best.

“Then let me be your Demi Moore, Shawn, and—”

“Gus! Your coloring is all wrong and you couldn't possibly pull off the hair.”

Gus glared at Shawn. “Patrick Swayze broke the rules of life and death to talk to someone he cared greatly for. So yes, Shawn, if I have to I will be Demi Moore and listen to whatever you need to say or get off your chest. We don't need Whoopi.”

Shawn blinked. “You've irrevocably murdered the Ghost allusion and dragged its cold, stiff body through the mud.”

Gus huffed a sigh of annoyance. “Screw Ghost, Shawn.” He ignored Shawn's muttered “Kinky!” and pressed on. “You went through something traumatic. No one walks away from that perfectly OK. Not even you.” Gus pulled his chair right in front of Shawn and sat down. “So talk.”

Shawn picked up one of the many magazines laying about and flipped it open. Gus glared at his friend, determined to out-stubborn him. This was important and he was not going to let Shawn push him away. They’d pinky-promised back in middle school that they'd stick by one another and Gus didn't break his pinky promises.

Gus opened his mouth to speak when Shawn interrupted him.

“You gonna cheat on Jules like you did poor Natalie?” Shawn asked casually, eyes still glued to his magazine. He could picture the hurt look on Gus's face well enough without seeing it first hand. He also had a feeling that, sometime in the future, he may not want to be able to call up the actual imagine in all its detail.

“That was low, Shawn,” Gus said, his voice strained. His breakup with Natalie was one of the mistakes that haunted Gus, the result of a drunken college hook up that had decimated their relationship—Gus's first 'adult' relationship. Shawn was the only one who'd stuck by Gus's side on that one, even though he was half way across the country at the time.

“Yeah, well, it's a valid question don't you think? You mix some dancing with a little bit of alcohol and Juliet's pretty blue eyes are suddenly red-rimmed and framed by black, smudged mascara. Not rock star smudged but the runny, 'I've just been up all night crying because I'm a good, good person and my callous, cheating boyfriend slept with a nasty, nasty whore.' It's kind of pathetic.”

Gus clenched his jaw and gripped the arms of his chair. Shawn was suffering. He was going through something difficult and he was just lashing out. Gus could take it. He could take anything Shawn could dish out.

“Cheating's kind of a thing for you though, isn't it?” Shawn continued on with a flip of the page. “Oh, Charlize looks good in red.”

“I don't cheat, Shawn.”

“Natalie and Mrs. Bell's seventh grade science class would be to differ.”

“Everyone cheated in that class, Shawn! She didn't ask questions from the book! And that has
nothing to do with Juliet.”

“Maybe that's where you got the urge. They say high risk behavior becomes addictive.”

“This is ridiculous, Shawn. I'm not going defend my actions for seventh grade, especially when, once again, everyone--”

“I didn't.”

“What?” Shawn turned another page and Gus wanted to do nothing more than rip the stupid magazine out of Shawn's hands and make his stupid friend look at him.

“I didn't cheat.”

“I don't--”

“Seriously, Gus. You've known me how long, and you think it's called eidetic memory for fun? I remember everything.” The words came out as an angry snarl, and Gus jerked away from the unmasked vitriol. “I don't need you to tell me what butyraseous means. I don't even need you to spell it. I know what Hydrochlorothiazide is and what Nortriptyline is used for. I leafed through a medical dictionary.”

“So you're saying you're just using me,” Gus said in disbelief. Of all the things

“I try so hard to make you feel useful, Gus, and I'm tired of it. I don't want to pander to your ego or go out of my way to make you feel like the smart one as a means to validate our friendship anymore.”

“I'm not falling for your psychobabble, Shawn.”

“IT'S TRUE.”

Gus looked resolutely out of the window. Shawn didn't mean it, not the way he was saying it. Gus's inferiority complex was one of the things that remained unspoken between them. He was used to being the smart one, relied on his brains to separate himself from the masses, and Shawn liked using him as a beard. It worked well for them, and they let themselves play those roles for one another. Shawn would never, ever use it like this though.

“That's fine, Shawn. Enjoy your misery. I'm leaving, and I'm not coming back. When you're done being an asshole, you know where to find me.”

Shawn watched Gus storm out of the office, door slamming behind him. Shawn had a sinking suspicion Gus really wouldn't be back. Not for a long time.

The Gameboy shattered against the wall, breaking into a million pieces. Its metallic insides sparkled on the floor, and Shawn wondered what it would look like if he was smashed against the floor.

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Shawn stumbled into his apartment, bleary-eyed and reeking of cigarette smoke. He took a swig from the bottle—blech it tasted horrible, but it made his vision double and his brain fuzzy—and swayed towards the bedroom. If he drank enough his screaming wouldn't wake him up.

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Shawn let the bigger body pin him down, press him into the bed, restrict his movement. His shirt was
pulled off by thick hands, calloused and rough. His pants were shucked away, joining a larger pair on the floor. Teeth scraped along the back of Shawn's neck, sharp and harsh. He shuddered limply underneath the large man.

“You got some stuff?” Keith or Kyle or whoever asked. Shawn gestured at the bedside table and the man shifted to retrieve the lube and a condom. Shawn closed his eyes and tried to loose himself. Kurt wasn't doing his job, wasn't giving Shawn what he needed to get away.

A slick finger circled his hole, trying to tease and flirt. Shawn wasn't in the mood for teasing. He hitched his hips up and into the finger.

“Eager, aren't you?” Kip asked with a chuckle. Shawn laughed hollowly and thrust back. “OK, OK! Gonna call you hot to trot from now on.” Two fingers, quickly followed by three but it wasn't enough. Ken—right, that was his name, Shawn'd have to remember that—pulled away to lube his cock. He slipped a hand under Shawn's hips and encountered Shawn's less-than-enthusiastic response. “Uh...Shawn...”

Shawn growled and flipped them around so he was straddling Ken.

“Dude, it's OK, some guys get like that, I--”

“Shut up,” Shawn growled and attacked Ken's lips. Talking ruined the effect, didn't let him get where he needed to be. “Just fuck me.”

“You sure—” Shawn took the choice out of Ken's hands and sank down on the other man's dick. It hurt. He wasn't stretched enough, wasn't prepared, wasn't aroused. But he wanted this and Ken was going to give it to him. Ken looked concerned, was about to protest, but Shawn clenched down and shifted his hips. Ken's eyes rolled into the back of his head and his hands gripped Shawn's hips. He started to move, put Shawn on his back and rode him hard.

Shawn embraced the pain, let it light up the dark corners of his mind and chase away the shadows. For a few blissful minutes he was free.

Ken came with a grunt. Shawn came off his high a few minutes later. Ken was watching him uncertainly, eyes glancing down at Shawn's flaccid penis. “Um, I...”

“There's a fresh towel in the bathroom if you want a shower,” Shawn said dismissively. He was usually much more attentive with his one-night stands, but tonight...he just couldn't be bothered. Ken was a big boy. That's why Shawn had picked him, after all.

Shawn rolled onto his side and closed his eyes as Ken slipped out of bed and gathered his clothes. The front door shut a few minutes later, and Shawn was alone with his memories.

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Henry balanced his meringue in one arm and his phone against his shoulder.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Spencer? It's Gus.” Henry paused his whisking, a cold knot of dread settling in the pit of his stomach.

“Burton. What can I do for you?”

Gus was silent for a minute, and Henry found himself holding his breath.
“Have you talked to Shawn?” Gus finally ventured.

“Not in a couple of weeks or so,” Henry replied. He set his meringue down on the counter and braced himself. “What's going on, Burton?”

“Shawn and I had a fight.”

“You two always have fights.”

“Not like this.” Gus sounded crushed and abject.

“What happened, Burton.”

“He may have said a few things he didn't mean. Brought up some stuff from the past. I don't--”

“What kind of things?” Henry growled into the phone when Gus didn't answer. “Gus--”

“He didn't mean any of it.” Gus sounded like he was ten again, small and uncertain. Christ.

“Is this...is this like when Madeline left?” Gus's laugh was strained and bordered on hysterical.

“I really, really wish it was.” The hollowness in Gus's voice scared Henry. He'd heard Gus sound many ways—resigned, pissed, smug, irritated, lying, ecstatic, compromising, wheedling, needling—but hollow and beaten wasn't on that list. Henry would have much preferred to continue in ignorance.

And then there was the little voice shouting in the back of his mind, telling him this might be his fault. Henry pushed it aside, shoved it away.

“Give me his address, I'll swing by and see if I can talk to him.” Henry ignored the sharp flush of shame at having to ask Gus where Shawn lived. They were getting better, they really were. Talking and having dinner once a week these days.

“He doesn't answer his door and neither of his phones are connected any more. I don't know where he is, and if he won't talk to me, I doubt he'll talk to you.” Worry made Gus sharp and merciless, his words pointed barbs as sharp as any Shawn could throw.

Henry winced but had to concede Gus's point. Shawn hadn't spoken to him in weeks, and if he was going to cut and run Henry would be the first person left in the dust. Their relationship wasn't solid enough yet, not to where Shawn would trust him with whatever was going on in his head.

“Who would he talk to?”

“Well. There might be someone...”

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“Henry.”

“Carlton.”

Carlton enjoyed the cool morning air and silent streets of Santa Barbara. Most of the world was still asleep this early on a Saturday. He unspooled his fishing line, favorite lure already on. He cast out and all was right with his world. He reeled in and prepared to cast again, trying to lose himself in the rhythm of cast-reel-cast.
“Seen Shawn around the station?” Henry asked. Carlton's cast went short and he swore as he reeled it in.

“Not in a while.” Shawn hadn't been by to annoy anyone in almost a month and a half. Concern niggled at the back of Carlton's mind but he forced it away. Shawn wasn't his responsibility.

“Gus isn't speaking to him.”

Carlton's head swiveled to stare at Henry. “...what?”

“They had a falling out. That's all Gus will say about it. Shawn says even less the rare times I can get in touch with him, which hasn't been all that often since...” Henry sighed. “I've never seen them like this before.”

Carlton tested the tensile strength of his line, feeling for any wear. He cleared his throat, trying to figure out what advice he could give. “You should get him some help. Chief Vick said the department would cover it. If it gets bad enough...if it is bad enough, you could have him committed.”

The suggestion left a bitter taste in Carlton's mouth. Henry stared out at the water frowning. They let their problems settle in the stillness around them.

“I don't know if it would help. Shawn's mother is a shrink, did I ever tell you that? One of the best I've ever seen. Smart. Shawn's kind of smart. She had to take psych evaluations from time to time. She'd tell me exactly what she wanted them to say and sure enough, they'd come out just like she wanted them to. It was a game for her. Shawn too.”

Carlton looked out over the ocean. Knowing firsthand how good Spencer was at manipulating the people around him, it didn't surprise him that Shawn would be able to stonewall a shrink. Carlton couldn't think of anything to say.

“I don't know where Shawn is,” Henry admitted, thumbing the frayed label of his beer. He wasn't looking at anything, just staring at the torn sticker as if it held the answers to what was wrong with his son. Carlton blinked.

“You...how?”

“I've never been to his apartment. Never thought to ask where it was. Don't even know if Shawn would tell me if I did ask.” Henry sighed. “He's always showed up at my house with enough regularity that it wasn't necessary.”

Carlton digested this; he'd known Shawn and his father had issues. Henry was a little intense, and Shawn was annoying more often than not, so Carlton could understand there being some tension. He hadn't realized just how strained the relationship really was. Again, Carlton didn't know what to say.

“From what Gus said, Shawn's heading towards rock bottom.” Henry continued softly, as if to speak the words at full volume would make them more real than they already were. “I know him, he won't...he'll try to smile his way out of this, ignore it until it goes away or until it eats him up. He'll do something stupid, like run away to Mexico again. He'll be impossible to find if he doesn't want to be found.”

“I imagine Shawn would be difficult to pin down,” Carlton conceded with a wry smile.

“I always tell him his lifestyle isn't healthy. He needs structure right now, something to hold on to. He doesn't have anyone who could give it to him. Guster's out, and Shawn won't listen to me. If it could be done, it would take a very tough, disciplined person to do it,” Henry mused aloud. While Carlton agreed Shawn Spencer could stand for some discipline in his life, Henry's definition of
'tough' was not something Carlton envisioned working for Shawn.

“I don't think I can give him the kind of discipline he needs,” Henry concluded. His tone held a hint of suggestion to it, but his expression remained unchanged. Carlton frowned, trying to piece together what Henry wasn't saying to him, but the other man was done talking for the day. Carlton drank his beer and stared out at the gently rocking ocean, thinking everything over. Maybe he should pay Spencer a visit.
Matthew 15:14

“Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.”
~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Carlton took a moment to compose himself before knocking on Shawn's door. He was uncharacteristically nervous, sweat trickling down the back of his shirt. This was Shawn. Spencer. Not-psychic pain in his ass. Footsteps approached the door and Lassiter schooled himself into his usual facade of general irritation.

Except the person who opened the door wasn't Shawn.

“Can I help you?” The guy looked like a dead-beat surfer. And he smelled like marijuana.

Carlton scowled and pulled out his badge. “Head Detective Carlton Lassiter, SBPD.” The guy's eye got huge and he glanced behind him nervously.

“Look dude, I didn't do nothing.”

“I'm looking for Shawn,” Carlton growled, an air of barely restrained anger lacing his words.

“Who?”

“Shawn Spencer. He lives here.”

“I don't—oh. You mean the dude who used to live here. They kicked him out, man.”

Carlton stared at Surfer-Boy. “What do you mean.”

“Yeah, guy went crazy. Loud noises all night, screaming and yelling, didn't pay rent—landlady kicked him out couple of weeks ago.” The guy smiled ingratiatingly at Carlton, identifying him as a man who did not take kindly to loud noises at night.

Carlton growled and took a threatening step towards the punk talking so lightly about Shawn. “Do you know where he went?”

“How would I--”

“Do you know. Where. He went.” The punk was shaking in the face of Carlton's anger.

“I don't, I don't—wait! There was a letter. 'Supposed to be forwarded, but they sent it here. Hold on.” The guy rummaged around in a drawer near the door and came up with a letter, crinkled and worn. “Here. This is all I got.”

Carlton snatched the letter and frowned at the forwarding address.

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Carlton stared at the ramshackle apartment building. This place was...so not Shawn. It was dull and
dank and in a bad part of town, a place that catered to people whose spirits had been crush, dreams dashed on the floor. Shawn would go crazy living here. Carlton had to walk around two drug addicts passed out in the halls before he found apartment E-7.

The door swung open when he knocked.

The apartment was, roughly, the size of a sardine can. There were water stains and mold on the walls. Carlton could hear vermin crawling in the walls. There was a dingy couch on one side, a half-collapsed coffee table in the center of the room. An unholy stench wafted from the kitchen, stale beer and unwashed plates. Bottles and cans littered the area.

“Well this is a surprise, Lassy.” Carlton jerked up and stared at Spencer. Shawn. He looked horrible. He had deep circles under his eyes, skin pallid and wane. He'd lost weight too; Carlton could see how loosely Shawn's tee-shirt fit him now. He swayed on his feet, eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. “How'd you find me?”

“Psychic powers,” Carlton returned deadpan.

“Must be spreading.” Shawn said without a hint of amusement. They stared at one another, Shawn closed-off and defensive. None of his usual exuberance or vitality was evident; this was a pale version of the Shawn Spencer who'd turned the Santa Barbara PD on its head. Shawn turned away and Carlton caught the faintest shadow of a bruise on his chin.

“Shawn...” Carlton started.

“Well, if that's all, feel free to go back to your regularly scheduled life. I'll call you when the spirits speak,” Shawn said, his smile thin and hard. He held the door open for Carlton, who watched a whore take her latest John into the apartment across the hall.

“No.” The surprise was the most honest reaction he'd gotten from Shawn yet. “I'm not leaving you here.”

“Aw, shucks Lassy. I didn't know you cared.” Carlton kept his expression neutral even as he realized Shawn wasn’t kidding. Shawn started fidgeting, his mouth thinning into an unhappy line. “Look, mold doesn't grow unless you keep a very careful eye on it, so if you--”

“You're coming with me,” Carlton interrupted. “I'm not leaving you here.”

Shawn's face settled into a familiar stubbornness, but it was tinged with a certain amount of maliciousness that wasn't Shawn at all. “House feeling lonely now that Mrs. Lassy finally sent you the divorce papers?” Shawn also didn't use his skills—wherever they derived from—to hurt people.

Something was very wrong with Shawn and Carlton wasn't going to let him go slowly crazy in a dingy apartment. He walked up to Shawn, eyes glittering angrily. Shawn swallowed and sunk against the door.

“You are coming with me.” Shawn opened his mouth to protest, expression turning mulish again, but Carlton cut him off. “Shut up, Spencer. This is not up for debate. You will go pack up whatever belongings you have and we're going to walk downstairs, get in my car, and go home. You will not complain and you will not pull one of your tricks. Are we clear?”

Shawn found himself nodding. Lassiter was so close he could feel the heat from the other man's body. Smell the light aftershave he used. And everything in him wanted to do exactly what Lassiter said.
“Good.” That one word sent a wave of heat skittering over Shawn's skin. It was unexpected after being numb for so long. “You have fifteen minutes.” Lassiter stepped away and watched Shawn expectantly. Shawn took a moment to collect himself and then peeled himself off the front door. Packing up everything he owned wouldn't even take five minutes.

Carlton watched Shawn shuffle down the hall, not one peep out of him. That was far more disturbing than anything else he'd witnessed, Shawn balked against all types of authority whenever he could. When Shawn walked out of what was probably the bedroom with a small duffle, eyes on the floor, Carlton knew this went far beyond Shawn being shaken up by his brush with death. Shawn, as had many who faced having guns pointed at them by people with serious intent, had been forced to look at life differently. For someone like Shawn, who was used to living moment-to-moment without consequences...that could be an extremely difficult transition.

Shawn was silent the entire way out of the building, walking three steps behind Carlton, never looking at his surroundings. Carlton settled him into his car and went to inform the landlady that Shawn was moving out. The woman was more disgruntled at having her...whatever interrupted than loosing a tenant, and Carlton hated her. He glanced at Shawn out of the corner of his eye, unnaturally silent and still.

Carlton was going to help Shawn. Even if it meant signing up for a career's worth of psychic visions and annoyances.

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Lassiter was flying blind. He hadn't expected to be moving Shawn Spencer into his house today. Or ever, for that matter. But he wasn't going to sit idly by and let Spencer self destruct if he could help it.

He grabbed Shawn's bag out of the back. The man in question was hovering outside the car and staring at the night sky like he didn't remember what it was. He snapped out of it when Carlton opened the door.

Shawn glanced around the inner sanctum of Carlton Lassiter. It was sparsely decorated, though random flares of color caught the eye. The couches were deceptively expensive, well made and broken-in leather. It was all very Carlton, and Shawn had no doubt that when he moved Lassiter had removed all traces of his wife from his visible surroundings—even though Shawn was equally certain they were all packed away in a box in the attic.

“Alright, Spencer.” Lassiter dropped Shawn's duffle at his feet. Shawn was grateful for Lassiter's badass cop attitude. Everyone else was so careful around him. Except for Gus. Shawn pushed that thought away, down into the 'Do Not Touch Under Pain of Pain' box. “House rules. If my nephews can follow them, so can you. Read them, know them, and most of all, obey them.”

Shawn took the printed list, hiding the small smirk that threatened to break free. “Rule 1: You will do as I say and follow my rules. Rule 2: Shoes off at the door. No exceptions. Rule 3: No glasses on unprotected surfaces. (Always use a coaster.). Rule 4: All dishes go into the dishwasher immediately... No CSI? Do you give your mom these rules, Lassy?”

“Yes,” Carlton said, glaring at Shawn. Shawn shot Carlton a disbelieving look. “Most of them. Your room is this way.” Shawn grabbed his duffle and followed Carlton up the stairs. The guest room was pretty modestly decorated in greens and browns. Shawn glanced around. It felt...like a guest room.

“There's a bathroom attached,” Carlton pointed out awkwardly.

“Better than the Ritz,” Shawn said sarcastically. “Well if that's all...”
“Take a shower, Spencer,” Carlton ground out. “And give me your laundry.”

“Have you turned into a pod person, Lassiter?” Shawn asked, voice turning into a lazy drawl. Carlton steeled himself for an onslaught; he was beginning to recognize the set-up of Shawn's pointed comments, meant to rake his target over hot coals and leave them whimpering. “Your maternal instincts come as a surprise to me. Is doing laundry in your purview? Couldn't you intimidate Buzz into it, or has he become such a doormat you're looking to break someone else?”

Carlton narrowed his eyes and for a moment Shawn thought he'd gone too far and he was going to get decked. Good. Physical pain would give himself something to concentrate on. Shawn stood his ground as Carlton stepped closer.

“Here's what's going to happen, Spencer.” Carlton's voice was gravelly and edged with anger. “You're going to give me your bag. I'm going to wash whatever needs washing because this is MY house and I don't want your stench contaminating my air. YOU are going to get in the shower. When you get out, you're going to brush your teeth and go to bed grateful that I'm still talking to you because right now? You don't have anyone else.” Carlton paused for effect, satisfied when he saw the flash of genuine pain and regret cross Shawn's face. Good to know he was still in there somewhere. Then the mask was back and Shawn nodded once in understanding. “Good.”

Shawn disappeared into the bathroom, door closing with a loud click. Lassiter sighed and dropped onto the bed. This wasn't going to be easy. Then again, nothing with Spencer ever was.

****

Things were weird the next morning. Shawn stumbled down around noon, well after Carlton had already gotten up, gone for a run, showered, and tidied the house. So Carlton couldn't blame the way he froze up on not being awake enough. Shawn's hair was skewed ridiculously to one side. His shirt was old and threadbare; Carlton could see the dark shadow of a nipple and puff of chest hair. His basketball shorts hung low on his hips. Shawn reached into the refrigerator and lifted the orange juice to his lips.

“Spencer!” Shawn turned so he could see Lassy from the corner of his eye. “Rule number eight!” Shawn tilted his head back and drank from the container.

Lassy looked ready to kill him, but Shawn just shook the empty jug. “Don't worry, Lassy. I won't give you cooties,” Carlton resigned himself to glaring; there would be plenty of fights with Shawn in the future, he'd let this one go.

Carlton studied Shawn under the guise of reading the newspaper. He hadn't slept much, that was obvious. His eyes were puffy and red, and he moved carefully. He hadn't shaved, but at least he no longer smelled like he hadn't showered in weeks.

“What are you doing today?” Shawn blinked. Well that answered that. Carlton dodged into his laundry room and grabbed the sander, some paint, and brushes. He plopped them in front of Shawn who looked completely flummoxed. “Since you've got nothing to do, you can start painting the shutters. Long smooth strokes, I don't want to see any imperfections.”

“Been smoking the fun stuff, Lassy?” Shawn asked dryly.

“Do I look like I'm joking, Spencer?” Shawn glanced from the paint to Lassiter's stony face. Though come to think about it, Lassy stoned would be awesome. “I expect you to be done with the front when I get back.”
“What are you, channeling my dad?”

Lassiter paused in putting on his jacket, eyeing Shawn speculatively. “I don't have a dog, but if you'd like to build a small toolshed in the backyard I wouldn't say no.” Shawn scowled and Carlton smirked. “End of the day, Spencer.”

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Shawn stared at the sander and cans of paint on Lassiter's kitchen table until his eyes burned. He blinked, but they were still there. Seriously? Did Carlton know him at all? Leaving him...chores.

*So what are we going to do today, Brain? The same thing we do everyday, Pinky?*

Shawn scowled at his uneaten toast. He was not going to do Lassy's grunt-work for him. He didn't accede to his father's ridiculous morals-couched-in-physical-labor BS when he was growing up, he certainly wasn't going to give into Lassiter.

*It's not like you have anything else to do,* a twisted voice whispered. *Though Gus is always great for a shenanigan or two. Why don't we call him up?*

Lassiter's plate was in shards on the floor, a beat-up piece of toast lying amidst the wreckage.

*What an awesome way to thank Lassy!* that increasingly annoying voice piped up, complete with a hefty dose of sarcasm. Shawn picked up the shards of porcelain, his movements filled with anger. He sliced his thumb on one of them but ignored it. A little pain was a small price to pay for destroying Carly's plate.

He tossed the whole mess into the trash, angry and irritated with himself. At this point, the least he could do was help Lassiter out a little. He hefted the sander and balanced the paint cans in his arms. He was going to do this and feel insanely proud of himself afterwards. Lassy was going to owe him and Shawn would...still owe Lassy more. He dumped everything on the ground and looked at the wall.

Well. The voice that kept accusing him of doing nothing with his life and being a lazy lay-about should be appeased. He was going to be busy for the next couple of days.

*"You're a pretty one, Police Boy."* Larry leaned in, his breath rank on Shawn's face. *The barrel of the gun ran across his chest and down to his groin. Shawn fixed his gaze on the wall across from him. There were cracks all along it, fractures in the moulding and building material. "Bet they're achin' to get you back."* Shawn flinched and gasped when Larry fired two shots into the ground beneath him; his ears rang with the retort. *The gun's hot muzzle pressed down against him, and Shawn couldn't help but whimper. Larry laughed, an ugly sound. Shawn didn't see the blow coming, but he felt the blood that ran from his head into his eyes.*

*"You never answered my question, boy. Who sent you? Why're you here?"*

The sound of the sander, turned on by Shawn's death grip, startled him out of his thoughts. Shawn stared at the vibrating machine and wondered absently how sandpaper would feel on his flesh, peeling away the layers until there was nothing but white bone. He shuddered and pushed the morose thoughts aside.

He had work to do.

The voices tried to sneak back. Larry tried to taunt him a second time—his father probably did smelt
of elderberries and could be blamed for the person Larry became, though Shawn hesitated to cast aspersions on the thug’s mother—but Shawn drowned it out with the whirring sound of the sander and the burn in his muscles. He lost himself in the vibrations of the machine, the strain of physical labor and the numbing nature of his task allowing his mind to settle.

He stopped thinking, stopped replying every moment and detail of his ordeal. And there was only peeling paint and fine white dust tickling his nose, the natural color of the wood planks on Carlton’s house slowly being revealed.

Several hours later Shawn’s body demanded a break. Sweat rolled down his brow and neck, and Shawn was surprised to find himself genuinely achy and tired. It was as unfamiliar a state as the hang-dog, emotional exhaustion was becoming an old friend, a constant companion that filled his limbs with lead and cast the world in dank mold and cynical facades.

Shawn shook off his morose thoughts and turned back to the wall. Huh. He tilted his head to one side. Was that...

A smile slowly overtook his face, muscles trying to remember what it felt like. Lassie was going to have one hell of a surprise when got home.

----

Carlton left the precinct at five on the dot. O’Hara almost had a heart attack. Lassiter ignored the crowd that followed him out.

He was not worried about Spencer. No. The reason he was rushing home was to make sure Shawn hadn't done something Shawn-like and sold all his furniture or painted his house teal.

He wasn't concerned about Shawn because Shawn always landed on all fours.

...feet! He always landed on his feet! All...four of them. Like...a, uh, cat.

The first thing Carlton noticed when he pulled up to his house was Shawn. Well, not Shawn, but his back, lightly freckled, and the sheen of moisture glinting under the sun. And then he looked at his house.

“Spencer!” Carlton was momentarily distracted when Shawn's muscles bunched as he ran the sander over the wood. The wood. “SPENCER!”

Shawn cut the sander and turned around, a bright smile on his face. His eyes were more alive than they had been yesterday. “Carly-pants!” Shawn's upper body was covered in sweat and paint flecks. A small drop that Carlton emphatically did not see worked its way down from Shawn’s neck to his chest.

“Spencer,” Carlton said, blaming his dry throat and hoarse voice on anger, “is that my face on the side of my house?” Shawn jumped down from the ladder and Carlton winced at the hard landing.

“Dude! You recognized it! Isn't it awesome?” Carlton stared at the shadowed cut-out of himself, shaded with raw wood and sanded white paint. “I'm pretty sure I got your good side.” Carlton slowly turned his head to stare at Shawn. Shawn blinked innocently, but Carlton didn't let up on his scowl.

“Make it go away, Spencer,” Carlton growled.

Shawn turned to study his portrait. “Can’t we at least take a picture for posterity's sake?”
“I'm making stuffed cornish hens for dinner,” Carlton said out of the blue, his ticking jaw the only evidence he was mad.

Shaw perked up. “With the little garnishes on top and potatoes au gratin on the side?” Shawn asked, mangling the french pronunciation.

“And pineapple pound cake for dessert,” Carlton confirmed. Shawn's eyes went round and glassy. Carlton grinned, but Shawn was too lost in his pineapple-haze to recognize the evil glint in Lassy's eyes. “None of which you get if my face is still on my house in an hour!”

Shawn blinked without comprehension before Carlton's words sunk in. When they percolated in his brain, Shawn made a mad dash for the sander, tripping over his own two feet. He was like an enthusiastic puppy, and Carlton felt a smile tug at the corners of his lips. For the moment Shawn remained free of the demons that haunted him, bouncy and bubbly. A wall was a small price to pay for that. Carlton made sure his back was turned when he smiled.

Though where the hell was he going to get a pineapple pound cake?

“Rosarita's Bakery on the Beach is the best!” Spencer called out cheerfully, the sander starting up with a whirr.

****

Shawn was almost relaxed at dinner that night. His jokes weren't as forced or as pointed, and he'd cracked a genuine smile. And he ate something, which, judging by the way Shawn's clothes hung off him, was not something he'd been doing lately.

Carlton wasn't naive enough to think that this was anything more than a quick high. He'd seen it before but couldn't help the small part of him that hoped it was all going to be this easy. There would be no backslide, no stutter steps, no more self-destructive behavior. No more bleakness that dulled Shawn's eyes and turned him into an empty husk.

Carlton sighed wearily.

No, it wasn't going to last. But Carlton was going to enjoy whatever reprieve they had because he knew Spencer, and the man never did anything by halves. But right now...right now Shawn was holding on and Carlton would do whatever it took to give Shawn what he needed.

So Carlton kept leaving stupid little chores for Shawn to do after the front of the house was done. As much outdoor activity as Carlton could think up, because Shawn still looked pale and drawn. And the sun was supposed to make people happy or something along those lines. Anything to keep Shawn from turning into the closed, unrecognizable person he'd picked up a week and a half ago.

The downward spiral started a couple of days after Shaw moved in. Shawn's step wasn't as light, he mostly pushed his food around on his plate, and, most telling, he hadn't done anything creative with the sander or the first coat of paint on the other side of the house.

The circles under Shawn's eyes got darker as the days went on and Carlton knew Shawn was heading for a crash. Having something to do was allowing Shawn to stave it off. For now.
It's Getting Harder and Harder to Breathe...

“At every crisis in one's life, it is absolute salvation to have some sympathetic friend to whom you can think aloud without restraint or misgiving.”
~Woodrow T. Wilson

Shawn settled on Lassiter's porch to engage in one of his favorite activities before getting to work: people watching. The chick walking the dog was cheating on her girlfriend and her dog was pregnant. The guy in the expensive suite and high-powered job—Shawn was banking on lawyer—was a giant stoner. Larry had been left handed and liked oxycontin.

Shawn wrapped his arms around his body to ward off the sudden chill, so incongruous in the Santa Barbara sun. Random facts about that day scrolled through his brain. The forklift in the corner had a dent and the left rear panel had been repainted recently. There was a spreading water stain on the far wall. Seventeen bullets had rained above his head in rapid succession before he'd been pulled behind the SWAT line. Ben had a girlfriend who liked fire-engine red lipstick and cheap perfume; there was a smear on his collar and a cloying floral scent hanging on him. One of the random thugs only had one contact in; he kept squinting to try and compensate. One of the other random thugs had two kids. And a dog. He'd caught a glimpse of school photos and clumps of hair on his pants.

A sharp pain drew Shawn out of his memories. He looked down, brain sluggishly trying to reconcile the pain he felt and the insect on his arm. His hand came up and batted at the bee, which flew away before crashing to the ground. It buzzed on the ground, wings fluttering ineffectually. It crawled towards the grass, directed by some unknown drive to keep going towards its hive even as it died. Shawn looked down at his arm.

The area around the sting was already swelling up, angry and red, the stinger black at the center of the raised bump. It was shiny and small. Shawn remembered learning in science class how bees had developed the stingers as protection, but it came at a high cost: in stinging its enemy, the bee destroyed itself, it's insides torn out and muddled about.

Shawn's vision grayed out at the edges and his stomach rolled. He was suddenly too hot, couldn't breathe. He stomach clenched and tried to force the food in his stomach back into the light of day. Shawn retched on the sidewalk, body trembling. He caught a glimpse of his watch.

Jesus. It was almost three. He'd lost hours. Thinking about—

There'd been blood on the gun after the first time Larry had hit him.

One of the thugs had laughed when Shawn curled up in a ball.

One of the cracks looked like a lightening bolt.

The smell of cloves, a box tucked away in Ben's shirt pocket, so random for him.

Shawn jerked himself out of the memories and details, but they spilled back over. Too many things to concentrate on, each one tinged with the after taste of adrenalin and fear and pain. He couldn't make it go away.
Shawn stumbled into the house, eyes flickering hummingbird-fast over the house. He can't...he wanted...he needs....

Shawn grabbed the nearly empty bottle of whisky off the counter and upended it. It burned on the way down but he ignored it. His stomach, warmed by the alcohol, was the only place that wasn't cold. He tossed the empty bottle on the counter and started searching for more. Lassy was a Catholic boy, he should have the good stuff.

He found the liquor in the cabinets under the sink, bottles of oblivion lined up rank-and-file. He grabbed the nearest one, something clear. The bitter taste of gin made him gag, but Shawn choked his mouthful down. He was more discerning the second time, rooting around for Jim Beam. He drank until his vision blurred and his mind was foggy. His memories were muted impressions he couldn't hang on to. Shawn drank more.

----

Carlton ignored O'Hara's looks inviting him to talk. He had a report to finish and some paperwork to fill out before he could leave today. No time to answer whatever burning personal or social questions his partner had today.

Though the constant hovering around his desk was beginning to grate.

“I finished the McWellan report,” O'Hara offered. As if he would buy that as an excuse.

“Great,” Carlton said, pen gliding over the paper.

“How's the burglary case coming?”

“Fine.”

He wrote. She hovered.

“McNab brought everyone doughnuts this morning.” Carlton paused long enough to give O'Hara a long, measured look of censure that made her blush. “They were good.”

“What do you want, O'Hara?” Carlton finally asked, tossing his pen on the desk.

“Can't a partner just talk to her partner about partner...things?” she asked with a lame half-smile.

Carlton blinked once, slowly.

“Is Shawn living with you?” she asked in a rush.

“Uh...”

“No, it's just...there was this thing. With Gus. And Shawn. A couple of weeks ago, and they may have said something that neither of the meant and had a fight which I know, it seems like they do that all the time but—”

“O'Hara.”

Juliet sighed. “Gus is worried about Shawn because he doesn't know where Shawn is. He got kicked out of the apartment and they haven't talked in almost a month and...Henry Spencer said Shawn might be staying with you.” Carlton picked up his pen and tapped against his desk, studying his partner.
“O’Hara. Are you shuttling notes between Shawn and Gus during recess?” Juliet managed to look both chagrined and irritated all at once.

“We’re just worried,” she huffed.

He sighed. “Yes, he’s staying with me.” He held up a hand to forestall her barrage of questions. “No, he’s not OK, maybe he’s getting better, and yes I’ll...make sure he doesn’t do anything terminally stupid.” Juliet looked like she wanted to say more, but her expression shuttered and she nodded once in acknowledgment. Carlton was grateful that she didn’t push for more details. The faster he finished these reports the faster he could get home and keep that last promise.

Unfortunately, they’d had a late-breaking lead in a double homicide that had lead to three arrests. Carlton didn’t get home until nine, hot and rumpled from chasing one of the punks who thought they’d escape the long arm of the law.

The vague worry he carried around for Shawn blossomed into fearful concern. There weren’t any lights on in the house.

He threw the car in park and sprinted up the stairs.

“Spencer!” The lights threw the room into shadow. “Spencer!” He thought he heard something from his sitting room. “Damn it, Shawn.”

He was wedged into a corner, clutching a bottle to his chest like a shield. Most of the liquor in Carlton's cabinet was strewn haphazardly on the floor, bottles cast aside during Shawn's desperate search for alcohol-induced numbness. Even passed out Shawn's expression was drawn and troubled.

“Christ, Spencer, what am I going to do with you?” Carlton turned his back on the room, took a minute to compose himself. He’d been expecting this for two weeks but...

Carlton sighed and turned back to Shawn. He needed to make sure Shawn wasn't going to die of alcohol poisoning.

“Let’s go, Spencer. You're going to repaint my whole house for this,” Carlton grumbled. Shawn's pulse was steady, maybe even a little fast. He felt a little on the cold side. Carlton hoisted Shawn over his shoulder, grunting under the deadweight. “You're reseeding my entire lawn.” Shawn moaned and his head rolled forward as Carlton began dragging him up the stairs. “Mulching all the flower beds—with your bare hands.” Carlton propped Shawn up on the toilet in the guest room bath.

“M'sherma,” Shawn mumbled.

“Eloquent.” Carlton pulled off Shawn's shirt, wrestling with lax limbs into doing what he needed. “You reek,” Carlton informed Shawn as he worked, stripping Shawn down to his boxers.

Shawn's eyes fluttered open and focused on Carlton.

“Hey,” Carlton said softly. Shawn blinked in confusion and then, impossibly, paled more. Carlton spun him around and lifted the toilet lid in a practiced move. College frat boy roommates were good for something. Imagine that.

Shawn threw up almost pure alcohol. Carlton held him steady as his body rejected all the poison in it. Carlton was worried with the amount of water Shawn was sweating out and not replacing, discarding another towel. But there was nothing he could do until Shawn's stomach was done.

It took a while, and Shawn was shivering by the end. Carlton leaned against the tub and pulled
Shawn against his chest, trying to warm him up. Carlton needed to get him wrapped up in some blankets, but not before Shawn drank something.

“Shawn,” Carlton sighed tiredly. Shawn, still sloppy and uncoordinated, moaned and turned his head into Carlton's shoulder. “Shawn.”

“Nowa,” Shawn mumbled. Carlton snorted and poked Shawn in the arm. “Sl'p.” Shawn tried to snuggle back into the warmth. He was so cold.

“You don't get to sleep until you drink something, Spencer.” He pushed the glass under Shawn's nose. Shawn recoiled. Carlton held firm and pressed the glass to Shawn's lips. Shawn drank in fits and starts, small mouthfuls that barely wet his tongue. But he drank the whole glass and the second one as well.

“Alright Spencer. We're going to bed. And you're going to keep all that water down.” Shawn moaned in disapproval, which was his only commentary on being manhandled by Carlton.

The sky was lightening by the time Shawn was tucked tightly into the bed, a large glass of water and three tylenol on the nightstand. He'd stopped shivering and there was a splash of color in his cheeks. Not much, but at least Carlton wasn't afraid he was dying anymore. He'd just feel like it in the morning.

Carlton sighed and closed the door behind him. It was early. Tomorrow, he was going to break a 10-year record and call in sick.

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Holy fucktards Batman. There was an entire troupe of Riverdancers practicing in his head. And they were out of synch. And his stomach felt like a black hole of revulsion. Shawn curled into as tight a ball as he could, trying to ease his stomach and go back to his place of blissful unconsciousness. His throat stung and there was a foul aftertaste in his mouth, but movement was in no way an option.

“How's life, Spencer?” Shawn whimpered and screwed his eyes shut, lights dancing behind his lids. Too loud. “What was that? I didn’t quite get it.” Lassiter was getting some kind of vicious satisfaction out of this, Shawn just knew it. Though really, he probably deserved it. The last thing Shawn remembered was rifling through the liquor cabinet. His memories tried to surge forward but the world spun and Shawn concentrated on making the world stand right-side up.

Shawn caught the cloying scent of eggs on Lassy's clothes and dry-heved over the side of the bed. He was vaguely aware of Lassiter's footsteps disappearing. Shawn never wanted to smell food again. Or see it. His stomach heaved at the very idea of anything edible.

Something cold was draped over the back of his neck and Lassiter's hand was warm between his shoulders. Shawn finally managed to roll into a ball and buried his head in the pillows.

“When you're able, drink the water on the bed stand,” Lassiter said softly. He drew the curtains and flicked the light off as he left. Shawn rolled over in bed and tried to not die.

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It took two days for Shawn to recover from his attempt to drink himself into oblivion. Carlton spent his day off checking on his patient and bullying him into drinking water and, later in the day, some chicken broth. Shawn had been bleary-eyed but alert the second day as he shuffled down to choke down some toast before Lassiter went off to work.
So they’d never actually talked about it, but Carlton thought about it. A lot.

He kept a careful eye on Shawn the third day, and again on the fourth. While still subdued and lacking in his usual antics, Spencer didn't seem to be getting worse. Then again, Carlton hadn't realized there was anything wrong leading up the binge-drinking episode either. He was just lucky it was alcohol and not pills or drugs.

Carlton froze at the thought.

Alcohol could easily give sway to drug abuse. Especially as Shawn’s body accustomed itself to the alcohol, started metabolizing it faster. Or if Shawn wanted something different, if the fuzzy swirl of booze didn't do what he needed. The more Carlton thought about it, the more he constructed doomsday scenarios where he came home and found Shawn sprawled on his floor, lips blue, eyes glassy and dead. He'd seen too many crime scenes not to know the harsh realities of an overdose, how painful it was to die even as your stomach rejected the massive amounts of pills and brought everything back up.

Carlton started dropping in at home randomly during the day. He forgot his phone. He needed to change his shirt. Chief Vick strenuously objected to his tie. Lunch was free at home.

The first time Carlton dropped by for lunch, Shawn spent the entire hour staring at him in confusion. The second time, he pushed half his sandwich Carlton's way and made another. The third time, the scent of chicken and jasmine rice greeted him at the door. Soon, Carlton found himself going home every lunch that he could spare. He was pretty sure O'Hara was covering for him and the Chief was turning a blind eye to the slightly longer lunch breaks her Head Detective was taking. Even McNab got in on the action, filling out reports and turning them in for Carlton's signature.

The entire precinct banded together in support of Shawn, which both touched and irked Carlton to no end. These people didn't really believe Shawn was psychic, right?

He drew the line at the six basket homemade cookies Desk Sergeant Idelette tried to foist on him. He was an officer of the law, it was illegal for him to accept gifts. Even from other officers. That Shawn may have made a comment about magically expanding tummies the night before had nothing to do with it.
Leaps and Bounds

“Do not fear risk. All exploration, all growth is calculated.”

It was complete happenstance that Carlton came home early one Thursday night and found Shawn with an open beer in one hand, the TV murmuring in the background. Carlton froze in the doorway for a minute, memories of near-comatose Shawn coming back.

Carlton grabbed the beer out of Spencer's hands. He collected the rest of the alcohol and put it all in his liquor cabinet, which had a very sturdy, never used state-of-the-art lock. Shawn watched the entire process with bemused shock.

“What the hell, Lassiter?” Shawn demanded when he found his voice.

Carlton arched an eyebrow. “Until you can prove you're a responsible adult, Spencer, all alcohol is banned from the premises. I won't tolerate your drunkenness.” The lock closed with a loud click.

Shawn blinked and his mouth twisted into an angry frown. “It was one beer! I'm 31, Lassy. The law you're so dedicated to upholding says I'm allowed to drink. It's not even on the Big List of Anal- Retentive Rules.”

Carlton stepped into Shawn's space, eyes hard. “I say you can't, and it's just been added.”

“Should have figured you'd ban anything fun.” Shawn's face warped into sneer. “I was planning on jerking off later in the shower. Am I allowed to do that?”

Carlton refused to rise to the bait. He folded his arms and kept his cool. If Shawn wanted to play that game, Lassiter wouldn't disappoint. “No.” Shawn gaped. “Not until you prove you're more mature than a ten-year-old. When you've done that, we can talk.” Lassiter stepped closer to Shawn, serious and intense. It took everything in Shawn not to shrink away. “I'm not kidding.” Shawn gulped and his eyes dilated at the unspoken threat of what would happen if Shawn failed. “Got me, Spencer?”

Shawn swallowed and nodded his head. Carlton held his gaze for a couple of seconds before spinning on his heel and stomping up the stairs.

Shawn slowly sat on the couch, eyes trained on the stairs. He was...kind of ashamed and really aroused. Well that was unexpected. He shifted in his seat, the rough denim of his jeans rubbing against his penis. He stifled his gasp. Lassy's display had been hot—unbelievably so. And this was the first time he'd been hard since...oh FUCK.

Shawn collapsed back against the couch and considered the evidence.

Carlton had shown up out of the blue and ordered him around—and he obeyed. He never obeyed. Anyone. Ever. He hadn't even scoffed at all the rules associated with living at Chez Carlton. Rules that, under normal circumstances, he would have broken within the first five minutes of walking in the house...except he didn't want to. Carlton's appreciation when Shawn did what he asked—or cooked or did the dishes—was like a drug. The praise, always hard-earned and sincerely meant, soothed something as of yet unacknowledged in Shawn. Lassiter curtailing Shawn's private habits and expecting to be obeyed...well, that Shawn couldn't ignore. He could already feel a new flush of arousal at the memory.
Well fuck him sideways, he wanted to be Lassy's bitch. That revelation was definitely worth further exploration. And seduction. Lots of seduction.

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Carlton was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because Shawn had been on his best behavior, which was terrifying and setting Carlton on edge. He snapped at his underlings so much even O'Hara looked frazzled and avoided him. In odd counterpart, Shawn was acting more like his old self—perfect adherence to the rules aside.

For ten days.

Carlton was losing his mind. Shawn had even fetched coasters from other rooms so as not to break Rule # 2. He was almost ready to snap when Shawn made his move.

“So Lassy,” Shawn said breezily. He placed a medium sized Pinkberry original flavor yogurt with dark chocolate chips and fruity pebbles on top in front of Carlton. Who eyed it suspiciously.

“What's going on, Spencer?”

Shawn pouted and put on his most innocent look. “Why Carly, this would be so much easier if you called me Shawn. Besides, we've bonded over the shoddy police work on CSI and Law & Order.” So maybe not all of the rules had withstood Shawn.

Carlton glared. “What's going on, Shawn?”

Shawn fidgeted and pushed the Pinkberry further towards Carlton. “Eat your Pinkberry. It's a great social lubricant.” Carlton looked Shawn skeptically, but the lure of Pinkberry soon won out. He took a tentative bite, attention fixed firmly on Shawn for any hint of a joke. His expression remained open and earnest. “I would have used alcohol, but that's a no-no, unless...” Shawn trailed off slyly, leering at Lassy.

Carlton nearly choked at the reminder of that night and what he still couldn't believe he'd said. Or implied.

“No drinking in the house, Spe—Shawn,” Carlton restated.

Shawn grinned. “Not the edict I want lifted, Lassy-face.”

Carlton froze, spoon halfway to his open mouth. The tips of his ears turned bright red, which then slowly spread down his face and to his neck. His blue eyes were huge, and Shawn was enjoying himself immensely. He pulled his own (bigger) Pinkberry out of the bag and started munching on his Cap'n Crunch. It was several minutes before Carlton regained the ability to talk.

“You mean...you haven't...uh...” Carlton made an elegant gesture that involved twirling his hand in a distinctly unenlightening manner.

Shawn's grin widened. “Rule number one: You will do as I say and follow my rules. Sound familiar?” Carlton seriously considered breaking the no-alcohol rule. “So can I?” Shawn's tongue snaked out and licked his spoon clean.

“Can you what?” Carlton asked, distracted.

Shawn rolled his eyes. “You know...choke the chicken? Beat the bishop? Do the crafty ham shank? Polish the nightstick? Do the beaver bop? No wait...”
“Spencer,” Carlton growled, eyes narrowing.

Shawn pushed his lip into a pout. “But it's been ten days!” Longer than that, really, but ten days since he'd rediscovered that he had a sex drive and it was all tied up in Carlton Lassiter. Shawn licked his lips; he'd thought about it and decided he wanted this, and he didn't do things by half. Maybe half-way, sure, but he gave that first half his all. And Carlton hadn't punched him or reacted in any negative way so far. So Shawn dropped his eyes to the table, took a deep breath, and added and slightly strained, “Please. Sir.” The sir would take some getting used to, but it wasn't anything he hadn't done before, and Carlton inspired him.

Carlton studied Shawn carefully, taking in the lowered eyes, bowed head, and death grip on his frozen yogurt. Shawn was asking for something beyond the superficial, he was sure of it. This wasn't just a joke, though Carlton could certainly choose to read it that way. Whatever Shawn was asking for, Carlton had a feeling his answer would have a deep impact on Shawn's healing process.

Shawn opened his mouth to say something, anything that would break the tension.He could shake the whole thing off as a crazy joke and they could go back to being antagonistic minor-nemeses. Lassiter held up his hand to forestall Shawn. “Don't speak.” Shawn scraped together every ounce of willpower he had and closed his jaw with a click.

Carlton watched Shawn for a moment, and when Shawn had managed silence for three minutes—he watched the seconds tick by on the clock—Carlton realized that Shawn really was asking for...that. But why he felt comfortable asking Carlton for that kind of...oh. Oh god. Carlton thought back to the last few weeks since he'd dragged Shawn home to live with him.

Christ. He'd been...with the...he hadn't done anything like this since he'd gotten married. Oh holy baby Jesus. Carlton got up and went to the liquor cabinet.

Shawn watched as Lassy pulled out his key ring—seriously, what did he use all those keys for?--and poured two glasses of fine scotch whisky. Shawn got two fingers, Carlton got double. Shawn's expression articulated his question as clearly as if he'd spoken it.

“Just enjoy it,” Carlton growled. Shawn smirked and savored the first sip of his drink—Carly really did have good taste in whisky. For a Catholic. Carlton drained his in two smooth gulps and set the glass on the table.

“Once.”

Shawn paused, drink halfway to his lips. “What?”

“You've earned one,” Carlton enunciated. He wasn't quite looking at Shawn, but it was a close thing.

Understanding dawned on Shawn, who felt himself start to blush. Carlton cocked his head to one side because Shawn Spencer blushing was an interesting sight (and not just because Carlton thought the man had no shame). Shawn nodded his acceptance and drank the rest of his scotch, one eye trained on Carlton the whole time. A feeling of warmth and anticipation stole over him, and it had nothing to do with the alcohol.

“Was there something else?” Carlton couldn't keep the slight strain of arousal from his voice, and Shawn's grin came back in full force at the sound of it.

“Nope! That was it. For now.” Carlton couldn't tell if that last bit was a promise or a threat, though knowing Spencer it was a weird combination of both.

“Alright,” Carlton said with a wave, dismissing Shawn.
Shawn got up and gathered their trash and both empty glasses to take to the kitchen. “Night, Carly! I'm going to go relieve myself now!” The tips of Carlton's ears turned red again and Shawn grinned. Oh, this was going to be fun. His grin widened when he heard the thump of Carlton's head hitting the table. So much fun.

When Shawn's footsteps disappeared up the stairs, Carlton let himself press the heel of his hand against his erection to give himself some relief.

Shawn Spencer was going to be the death of him.

****

It was like a game that Carlton almost knew the rules to. Shawn would ask for his permission—in a very roundabout, almost tacit fashion though they both knew what he was doing—about the most random things, and actually seemed to abide by Carlton's decisions. In addition, Carlton kept leaving lists of things for Shawn to do, most of it around the house or close in the neighborhood since Shawn hadn't seem inclined to leave the sanctuary of the house yet.

Shawn was also scarily solicitous. Dinner, either homemade (provided Carlton does the shopping) or from Carlton's favorite takeout places, waited for him when he got home. (Carlton had actually started to miss making his own dinners, which was weird because he didn't particularly like to cook, nor was he very good at it.) If they were watching TV and Carlton finished his drink, a new one would find its way into his hand almost before he realized he needed a refill.

And sometimes, Carlton caught Shawn watching him with heat in his eyes—especially after Shawn pestered him to the point of snapping off an order just to occupy the other man. And Carlton. Well, he watched back. Got a little thrill every time Shawn's eyes went hooded and his breath came a little sharper. Enjoyed seeing Shawn respond to his very presence, how he gravitated towards Carlton, his body shifting so he faced wherever Carlton was in a room. Really liked the way Shawn's eyes dropped to the floor, posture subtly compliant.

Christ, he needed help.
Carlton was only collecting his thoughts. Honestly. He wasn't nervous. A knock on the window startled him. He looked up, heart in his throat, into deep brown eyes. Swearing under his breath he rolled down the window. “Don't do that, Esme!”

“Do what, head detective Lassiter? Sneak up on a preoccupied man?” Esme asked, eyes dancing. Her light brown hair had grown out since he last saw her. She'd gained more piercing in her ears and on her face. A bright tattoo spilled down her arm in a riot of colors. She looked like a hooligan. “Don't judge me, Carlton Lassiter. Ah yam who ah yam!”

Carlton climbed out of the car. “That is appallingly clear,” he said, but they were both smiling. Carlton let Esme pull him into a light hug.

“So you gonna tell me why you're here? Haven't seen you in a while—that wife of yours come back?” “Uh. No,” Carlton winced.

“Good. She wasn't right for you,” Esme said breezily. Carlton scowled at her back. A small bell sounded over the door as she led him into the shop. Carlton tried not to glance at the various toys and objects scattered in the aisles of the sex shop. Esme gestured to the check out against the wall. “That's Chris and Erika. They're new since you were here last.” Carlton glanced at the two just-out-of-high school punks and dismissed them. He had more pressing concerns.

“Carlton,” Esme warned. “This is a safe space. None of that.”

“Yes, yes, OK.” Carlton turned and gave the two cashiers a strained smile. He heard Esme chuckle beside him.

“Thank you, Detective Lassiter,” she said, sugar-sweet. “Now why don't you tell me what brought you here today.” Carlton felt his face start to heat. Esme gasped delightedly, and it took everything in him not to turn around a walk away at a fast clip. “New...special friend?” Esme grinned; the uptight detective—who was not quite as uptight in the bedroom as one might suspect—was fun to tease.

“I was wondering if I could get your, uh, opinion on...things.”

“Things?” Esme asked skeptically. Carlton glanced at the collar around her neck and a blush stained his cheeks. Oh. Things. “Carlton Lassiter! I'm proud of you!” Esme slugged him in the shoulder. “You've gone all toppy on me, haven't you?”

“Uh, well...I...don't actually know.”

Esme folded her arms and fixed Lassiter with her best Look. “How do you not actually know?”

“Um. Well. The thing about Shawn is...he's...Shawn,” Carlton fumbled.

“He's Shawn? Of the magical abilities to turn you into a dominant gay man, Shawn?” Esme guessed.
“Um.” Esme's expression stated in no uncertain terms that Carlton was to answer her if he wanted this conversation to continue. And Esme was the submissive one in her relationships. “Yes?”

Esme rolled her eyes. “Darling boy, I know you're out of practice, but if you're going to do this—and the fact that you even came here to talk to me says you are—you have to be able to talk about it. It's actually rules number one through ten. Communicate. A lot. Are you...taking notes?”

Carlton looked up from his notepad. “Yes?”

“That's adorable,” Esme said with a sappy smile. “I love new Tops. You're all such saps. Come with me.” Carlton flipped his notepad closed and trailed after Esme, who snatched random things up as they moved through the aisles. “Hold these.” Carlton found himself with an armful of books.

The pile of stuff grew as they moved through the store, Esme adding things that Carlton couldn't identify much less use. The more he carried the more freaked out he was getting.

“Alright, that should do it for now. Come on, we'll talk in the back. CHRIS! I'M IN THE BACK!” Carlton winced at the decibels Esme managed to hit.

Esme spread out the boxes and books on the table and laughed at Carlton's overwhelmed expression. “Don't worry, Detective Lassiter. I'll make everything easy for you. Now, what you're considering is a big responsibility. Don't interrupt me,” she scolded. Carlton shut his mouth with a click. “All of this isn't for you; you're both going to have to figure out what works and that will take time. There is no right way to go about this.”

“You have a script or something?” Carlton groused.

“I could just kick you out of my store,” Esme said sweetly and Carlton mimed zipping his lips. “Right, there are all sorts of fun things for two consenting adults to get up to, so I'll give you some primers for your edification.

“Now both of you should read SM 101, Different Loving, Consensual Sadomasochism, and the BDSM Beginners Kit. For you we have The Master's Manual, The Loving Dominant, and Screw the Roses, Send me the Thorns—though it can't hurt for your boy—Shawn, isn't it?—to indulge in those too. It's healthy for both of you to know where the other is coming from.

“For him we've got some informative pamphlets I've printed out. Journey into Submission is a good collection of essays and musings by experienced subs. Headspace is a pretty good documentary if you're in a movie kind of mood, though I have a few problems with it. And here are some printouts from AssociatedContent'sSubmissionpage. Justlikewiththedomstuff,youshouldalsoreadabout submission. Everything's a two-way street. You look overwhelmed, beautiful.”

“Uh...I didn't have to do this for Taylor.”

“Taylor?”


“Dabbler.” Esme said knowingly. “And probably experienced for what her boundaries are. If you're serious, you need to know all of this.”

“It's...” Carlton swallowed at a picture in one of the books, one person arching off a bed, hands and feet bound as another dripped hot wax over sensitive flesh. He saw himself and Shawn in those positions.

“Worth it?” Carlton asked gruffly.
“You have no idea,” Esme said with a grin. “Yet. Now why don't you tell me about Shawn.” “Oh. Well I don't—"
“Everything, Carlton. Seriously, if I'm going to help you, I need to know what's going on.”

Carlton, after some wheedling and pointed questions from Esme, told her everything he thought might be pertinent. He had to fight with himself to do it; he was a private man not predisposed to discussing his sex life with anyone. Even someone he'd known as long as Esme. And this wasn't just about him. But he'd seen Esme at her lowest point; she'd trusted him with that and he knew without doubt that she'd do everything in her power to help him out.

And he had a distinct feeling that if this thing building between him and Shawn actually happened, he'd need a friend. Esme listened attentively as the story poured out of Carlton—Shawn's crash landing in the Santa Barbara police department, his 'psychic' episodes, his increasingly dangerous stunts and casual disregard for his own safety. How not even Guster's presence was much of a deterrent anymore. He felt exhausted when he was done.

“OK, Carlton. Keeping in mind I haven't met Shawn—though I'd very much like to—may I offer some observations based on what you've said?” Carlton nodded; he'd appreciate some advice. He hadn't realized how much he'd been carrying around with him. “He's spiraling.” Carlton started at the pronouncement. He'd known that, but to hear another state it so bluntly, someone who hadn't ever met Shawn... “It's not just because of the incident either, but that's definitely triggered an increase in the self-destructive behavior. He's the kind of person who finds themselves adrift in the world. I bet he's brilliant. Maybe even almost genius-level smart. At the very least, smart enough to see through the system and mold it to what he wants. Great for getting on in this world, but for himself? Personally? He has no boundaries, no structure. He's looking for something and he'll keep going until he finds it or he hurts himself.” Carlton paled. Esme leaned forward and brushed her hand over Carlton's. “He's looking for you.”

“What? How...I don't...”

Esme laughed at him. “You are my absolute favorite, Detective Lassiter.” Carlton felt his face heat up again. Christ, he needed to stop blushing. This was not good for his reputation. “Darling, you've got structure to spare. In fact, if you could take a dose of Shawn's exuberance and laissez-faire, and give him the balance of that sense of responsibility you carry around with you...well. You might stop in to see me more often at the very least.”

Carlton rolled his eyes and Esme punched him in the arm again. “Ow!”

“Please,” Esme said with an unimpressed look. “That's nothing.” Carlton believed her. “Now, let's discuss your...Shawn's kinks.”

“What? You can tell those? How?”


“The nightmare. The way you described it, how he reacted when he came out of it—most people would freak the fuck out if they came out of a nightmare with a fully-grown man pinning them to the bed. For some of the tied-down types, it can work like a safety blanket when you trust whoever is doing it, as Shawn obviously trusts you. Giving up control like that...it creates a powerful mental safe
space. If Shawn's still suffering, it can be an intense feeling that cuts through all the confusion and pain.”

Carlton sighed and lowered his head to the table, thoughts and impressions swirling too fast for him to track. He let Esme run talented fingers through his hair, soothing the surface tension away.

“He trusts you, Carlton. That much is obvious. And that's the biggest thing. You can't do anything without trust, and it's not something you can manufacture.”

“I'm going to fuck it up,” Carlton said with foreboding certainty, disgruntled when Esme laughed.

(Of course you are! You're human. So's he, but it will be much more fun when he makes a mistake.” Carlton felt himself blush. Again. This was worse than discovering he had no control over his erections as a teenager. “You care about him. Never forget that, and you'll both find your way.”

She let him sit in silence, absorbing that for a little while. He was still confused, but at least he had a starting point now. He pulled himself off the table and smiled at Esme, who grinned back widely. “Wonderful! Now. Let's go shopping!”

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Carlton rooted through his giant bags of purchases. He'd managed to get them in the house without Shawn seeing. His brain swum with everything Esme had told him, his crash course on what it would really mean to do this, with Shawn Spencer of all people, banging around in his head.

He divided the books into piles, one for Shawn, one for him, and one for when they were both done with their respective reading. Fuck, what if he was reading this all wrong? Shawn could be playing him for a fool. Carlton wasn't used to doubting himself.

It didn't stop him from running down the hall when Shawn started yelling.

Shawn was straining against some invisible force, his muscles chorded and face red. Carlton grabbed the bedside lamp and flipped it, base-side out. “Shawn!” he called. He used the lamp to prod Shawn, trying to wake him up without getting too close; he was afraid if Shawn came at him swinging, one of them might get hurt. Shawn snapped out of his paralysis and grabbed hold of the lamp, hard enough to crack the pressed-wood shaft.

“Carlton?” Shawn was still panting, sweat beaded on his brow. He stared unseeingly at where his hand wrapped around the broken lamp.

“You were dreaming.” Shawn abruptly released the lamp and drew in on himself.

“Sorry about that. You can go back to...whatever you were doing,” Shawn said with a self-depreciating smile. “I'll try to find the mute button on my remote control.” The joke fell flat. Carlton knew that Shawn wouldn't go back to sleep, whether to avoid the nightmares or to avoid waking Carlton up. He'd come down the next morning looking haggard, dark circles under his eyes. Esme's advice firmly in his mind, Carlton made his choice.

“Move over, Spencer,” he said gruffly. Shawn moved over and watched Carlton from under his lashes. Carlton settled on to his side, facing Shawn, inches away. It was up to Shawn whether he wanted to close the distance between them.

“I thought we agreed we'd moved past that Spencer stuff,” Shawn finally said. He shifted over just enough so Carlton could feel the heat from his body.
Carlton rolled his eyes. “Move over, Shawn.” Shawn obliged and edged over another inch. His threadbare sleep shirt rubbed against Carlton's arm.

“See, but now the moment's gone. Over. We need to get you more practice.” Carlton sighed and rubbed his eyes; Shawn used the unintentional opening to tuck his head in the curve of Lassy's chest, inhaling the familiar scent. Was there such thing as an eidetic sense of smell?

Carlton hesitated a moment before lowering his arm around Shawn's shoulders and pulling him closer. Shawn sighed and settled his own hand on the small of Carlton's back, tucked just between his shirt and flannel bottoms.

With Carlton wrapped around him, he could sleep.
Carlton woke up slowly, which was unusual enough to pull him to full awareness faster than he wanted. He was usually the kind of person who went from asleep to awake without much in between. But today, he was relaxed. There was a warm body pressed against him giving off delicious heat. His nose brushed against the nape of Shawn's neck and fine hairs tickled his nose. This was the way he liked to wake up, wrapped around someone he cared about, with nothing pressing to do for the rest of the day. Victoria had been the kind of person who didn't want to 'waste the day' like this. Carlton didn't see it as a waste; he couldn't do it all the time, but sometimes it was nice to just be. He smiled and nuzzled into the back of Shawn's neck.

Shawn's breathing hitched and he pulled away, a tiny reflexive jerk.

"Shawn?" Carlton's voice came out sleep-rough and gravelly. Shawn tensed and Carlton waited to see what he would do. Shawn rolled to the other side of the bed and settled on his stomach, face turned towards Carlton. He was smiling, but there was a guardedness to it that set Carlton's teeth on edge, and Shawn's body language was open but not inviting.

"Hey Lassy, how's it going?"

Before responding, Carlton pulled one of his interrogation tricks out of the bag: he looked at Shawn for a few seconds longer than strictly necessary, waited until wariness crept into Shawn's eyes. He spoke only after he was sure Shawn knew Carlton was on to him. "Peachy, Spencer." Shawn flinched and Carlton raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'well, what did you expect?' Shawn's eye flicked away from him.

"I, um." Shawn cleared his throat. "I'm kind of like James Bond."

"I can see the resemblance."

"You can?"

"NO."

"Heh, right. By that, I mean I spend the whole movie sleeping with women who either die pretty immanently after we do the nasty, or don't show up for the second movie after I finally seduce them."

"Did you just call--"

"Yes, yes, I had an unfortunate upbringing. I was raised by a man who thought Archie Bunker was the highest word on intimacy. Be happy I can even think about sex without cringing." Carlton tried to imagine Henry talking—no. "See what I mean?" Shaw's lips were twitching in an effort to retain his look of mock affront. Carlton's own expression lightened of its own accord, and soon he and Shawn were grinning at each other like idiots, tension broken.

"So yeah. I can do the morning after but not, you know, mornings after. With, uh, possibilities."
Carlton rifled through everything he knew about Shawn—much of it offhand comments from Guster—and concluded that Shawn, in his roundabout way, was admitting that he wasn't good at relationships. Which was fine, because Carlton wasn't so sure he remembered how to be in one. Shawn's stomach grumbled, which delayed the rest of their conversation.

“Brunch?”

“Waffles?” Shawn asked hopefully.

“Bacon, coffee, and bagels,” Carlton countered.

“Where’s the g?” Off Carlton's blank look he clarified, “Of BCBG. You need a g.”

“Get out of my bed, Spencer.”

“Technically, this is my bed.”

“Out. Now.”

“Sir, yessir!” Shawn bounced up with a huge smile on his face. Carlton rolled out of bed without Shawn's level of enthusiasm. Mornings were tolerated, not embraced; a function of life that was to be endured. Shawn grabbed yesterday's shirts and tugged them on. “C'mon, Grumpiter! Bacon!”

“We need to talk,” Carlton countered. Shawn paused, panic flashing across his face before being replaced by Shawn's implacable smile.

“After the bacon!” Shawn thundered down the steps, feet heavy on the wood flooring. Carlton rolled his eyes and dodged into his room for a button up and his jeans.

Shawn had spent his days familiarizing himself with Carlton's home, particularly the kitchen. They worked together seamlessly, putting together a modest brunch without word or direction. Shawn laid out the butter and assortment of jellies (he hadn't yet managed to convince Lassiter that it was worth his time to drive twenty minutes out of his way to get the fabulous pineapple-mango jelly they sold at World Market) and started the coffee. Carlton busied himself with toasting the bagels and browning the bacon; he liked his burnt to a crisp, Shawn was more of a light brown kind of guy.

By the end of their preparations, if Shawn never got to touch Carlton Lassiter ever again he'd have enough fodder from the small, fleeting touches they exchanged in the half hour it took to get everything together to fuel many a fantasy. Under different circumstance, most of the touches could be written off as friendly, casual brushes. Except Lassy wasn't given to 'casual,' and the hand he rested on Shawn's hip as he eased towards the refrigerator was anything but friendly.

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By the time they actually sat down to eat, Shawn was ready to explode. Cooking with Carlton Lassiter: A Recipe for Seduction. Who knew?

Shawn drew the meal out as long as he could, trying to distract Carlton with delicious bacon and well-buttered bagels. He avoided Lassy's eyes at all costs, even though he could feel them tracking his every move. It was only a matter of time before—

“What do you want, Shawn?”

—that. Carlton leaned forward, intense and serious. Shawn felt the familiar panic and fear of serious, life-altering conversations rise up. “The same as any guy,” he said disarmingly. “A million dollars, Ben & Jerry's pineapple flavored ice cream...” Shawn trailed off; Lassiter looked disappointed. Shawn coughed and glanced away. He could do this. He wanted this. A lot. He could put it into
Carlton frowned. “I can give you what you need, Shawn. But you have to ask for it first.” God, that tone bypassed Go and went straight to the bank. Even bypassed the huge wall that rose up every time Shawn had to contemplate something that would last longer than a weekend. Lassiter's sigh made a whole new kind of panic rise in Shawn—he could miss out on the entire thing before he even had it.

“I want...” Shawn shifted in his seat. He felt hot and uncomfortable, the words sticking in his throat. There were bright spots in his vision. A warm hand settled on the back of his neck, thumb rubbing soothing circles on his spine.

“Shawn. Breathe. Slow and steady, through your nose.” Shawn leaned into the pressure of Lassy's hand and concentrated on Carlton's voice, the gentle rhythm of his voice and strokes soothing his body.

“A panic attack, Spencer? That's extreme, even for you.”

Shawn smiled thinly and didn't open his eyes. “You inspire me to try new things, Lassy. And it's Shawn.”

Carlton snorted and waited for Shawn to pull away. He didn't, just leaned into Carlton's hand, trembling slightly. Esme's lecture about watching body language and reading what wasn't being said flooded back to Carlton and he realized that Shawn might not be able to articulate what he wanted right now. It might be too raw and new, particularly in light of the lingering effects of Shawn's trauma. And sometimes, he had to take the situation in hand. He tilted Shawn's head up towards him.

“Shawn. Look at me.” Hazel eyes fluttered open. Carlton let his hand linger on Shawn's jaw. “If you want me to stop—” Shawn whimpered and lunged for Carlton's lips. Carlton growled into the kiss and hauled Shawn onto his lap. Shawn's legs wrapped around his hips, trying to get closer. Shawn's hands skittered along Carlton's chest, like he couldn't quite figure out where to start. It was distracting.

Carlton surged up, tumbling Shawn onto his feet. He backed them up until Shawn was pressed against the wall, their bodies pressed flush together. Shawn arched up into Carlton, his erection pressing into Carlton's thigh. Carlton responded by driving his own hardness into Shawn, hips twitching. Shawn tried to increase the friction, but Carlton was having none of that. He tightened his grip around Shawn's wrists and pressed his body flush with Shawn's, limiting the other man's movements.

Something primal flared in Carlton's chest when Shawn went pliant beneath him. Carlton's hips snapped forward driving into Shawn, who whimpered. Carlton released Shawn's lips in favor of biting small hickeys down the slender column of his neck. Shawn's eyes rolled to the back of his head. The nerves in his neck were attached directly to his dick and Carlton was taking his goddamned time with the teasing.

Then Carlton's weight was gone, and Shawn blinked blearily up at the figure towering over him. “And we were just getting to the good part,” he mumbled. Carlton's blue eyes narrowed and he yanked Shawn's off the wall, pushing him towards the door. It was an incredibly hot show of strength and dominance, and Shawn felt heat pool in his groin.

“Bedroom. Now.” Shawn shuddered at the commanding tone of voice, his feet skittering across the hard wood floor without his conscious consent.
“Yeah, that’s. Keep...keep doing that,” Shawn muttered, tripping backwards in an attempt to get at Carlton's chest.

“Yeah?” Carlton growled and slammed Shawn against the wall again. He used his height and training to pin Shawn upright. Carlton unbuckled Shawn's belt with one hand and pulled it off with a snap. Shawn's eyes glazed over. Carlton pulled Shawn's hips towards him, rubbed against the hardness there. Shawn moaned and his fingers scratched against the wall.

It wasn't enough.

Carlton stepped closer, slid his hands around to Shawn's ass, and pulled him up. Startled, Shawn clutched at Carlton's shoulders before he regained at least a little brain function and wrapped his legs around Lassy’s waist.

“Fuck!” Carlton pressed against him, as close as they could get with clothes and other annoyances in the way, but every place Carlton touched tingled. Carlton slipped his hand inside Shawn's pants and the world swirled away, disappearing into a haze of pleasure, tinged with a vibrant blue.

Carlton pulled back to watch Shawn's face. The shadows and worries of the last few months were nowhere to be seen. Shawn's head arched against the wall and his eyes fluttered beneath their lids. Shawn without any masks, one of the few instances he wasn't manipulating the world around him.

He wanted to see more of this, Shawn cracked open and panting for him.

Carlton buried his face in Shawn's neck, breathing in his scent and trying to get his libido under control; if he didn't, this was going to be over embarrassingly fast. Shawn's hips thrust shallowly into Carlton's fist, accompanied by short, breathy gasps. Carlton laughed against Shawn's neck. He was eager in life, no reason to think he wouldn't be eager in bed too.

“Shawn,” Carlton said, pitching his voice low and dangerous. He actually felt Shawn's entire body ripple against him, felt the muscles of Shawn's neck convulse as he swallowed. Carlton tightened his grip around the base of Shawn's penis, grinding down so Shawn's couldn't thrust anymore.

“Shawn.” Hazel eyes fluttered open, glazed and unfocused. Shawn's lips stained red, swollen from Carlton's kisses; his face flushed with arousal; his heart beat fast in his chest; his erection strained towards Carlton. And Carlton thought, absurdly, I did that, with so much pride he felt a little ridiculous.

Carlton eased Shawn's feet to the floor, his back twinging in protest, a far away pain that Carlton push aside in favor of slipping his hands under Shawn's shirt. Shawn moaned when Carlton found his nipples, a loud and uninhibited sound. It didn't do anything for Carlton's self control, but that didn't stop him from doing it again.

“Jesus fuck, Carly!” Shawn banged his head against the wall.

“We need to talk about how you attach a 'y' to all of my nicknames,” Carlton murmured, sucking a bruise into Shawn's skin. Shawn tilted his head in encouragement.


“Hhhmmmm,” Carlton agreed absently, surveying the dark bruise he was very precisely working to bring up. He wanted it to stay, and he wanted it to be pretty, as befitted Shawn Spencer.

“And there's...” Shawn trailed off. Carlton had started moving his hand again. Just a little twist, not enough to give Shawn any kind of relief.
“And there’s...” Carlton prompted.

“God!”

“I like that one,” Carlton said with a laugh. Shawn giggled and captured Carlton's mouth.

“Right,” Carlton said when he pulled away. His hair was a wild and his eyes more black than blue now. “Upstairs.”

Their move upstairs was less than graceful. Neither one of them was willing to stop kissing, so Shawn ended up backing up the stairs, Carlton tripping after him. Feet made clumsy due to a lack of blood to the brain, Shawn ended up on his ass, sprawled on the stairs. Carlton fell on top of him, their lips smashing together almost violently. They made out on the stairs until Shawn's back couldn’t take it anymore.

“Bed good. It's, there are, um. Soft. Feathers and, mmmhm, springy.”

“There's that 'y' thing again,” Carlton grumped, but he was smiling softly down at Shawn. A total shift from the prickly hardass he was at the precinct.

“I'm sure I could come up with better words if I were properly motivated,” Shawn hinted with a roll of his hips. Carlton couldn't agree more.

He hauled Shawn against him and propelled them both towards the master bedroom. Carlton pushed Shawn on to the bed. His hair was wild(er), his shirt crumpled and rucked up, his stomach showing. His pants were open and half way down his hips already. Shawn propped himself on his elbows and regarded Carlton, lips cocked in a half-smile. He started to push himself off the bed, but Carlton stopped him with a curt, “No.”

Shawn stilled, his eyes widening, and then he settled back on his elbows obediently.

“Your shirt. Take it off,” Carlton ordered thickly. Shawn sat up and shrugged out of his plaid over-shirt. He played with his teeshirt, running his fingers along the edge of the material, teasing Carlton with glimpses of more skin. Carlton was almost ready to rip the damn thing off by the time Shawn got the tee off. He looked vulnerable without his layers, wide open to Carlton's perusal. The hickey on his neck stood out in sharp relief.

Shawn watched Lassy watch him, the other man clearly enjoying the scenery. With an impish smile, Shawn stretched and preened for Carlton, putting on a show that should drive Carlton wild. When he glanced coyly up through his lashes, Lassy seemed only mildly amused. Hardly the reaction Shawn was looking for. He felt his control slipping away, he couldn't get a good read on Carlton.

Carlton kept his eyes riveted to Shawn, who slowly settled on the mattress, watching Carlton just as intently. He was learning about Shawn Spencer, one instance at a time. If he let Shawn play a little, didn't feed into the machine, Shawn would drop the act—just for him.

When he had Shawn's undivided attention, Carlton's fingers moved to the top button of his shirt, circled the pearly button with a pad of his finger. Shawn watched every movement with rapt fascination. Carlton unbuttoned his shirt one button at a freakin' time, drawing out the suspense, revealing each inch of chest to Shawn's hungry gaze.

“You're killin' me, Smallz,” Shawn groaned, reaching for his erection.

“No touching!” Carlton ordered. Shawn's errant hand snapped back to the bedspread. “Lay back.” Shawn obeyed, a goofy smile on his face. Carlton ran his hands across Shawn's chest, to his
stomach. He pressed a kiss just beneath Shawn's bellybutton. Shawn touched his hair tentatively, which Carlton encouraged as long as the touch remained light and didn't try to control. Shawn had talented fingers; Carlton was sure he'd find a stint as a masseuse in Shawn's past.

Carlton dipped a finger below the waistband of Shawn's pants, teasing him, drawing it out. The harsh need from when they started had faded into a dull, building ache. Carlton knelt on the floor and pulled Shawn's shorts down.

Shawn was thick and curved, long enough to make Carlton pause, and utterly perfect. Carlton blushed and pushed his schmoopy thoughts aside in favor of playing with his newest toy. He blew cold air across the head of Shawn's penis, making it twitch up off his stomach. It left a shiny smear of pre-come on Shawn's belly. Carlton placed his hands on Shawn's thighs and stroked them lightly, playing with the fine hairs there. Shawn groaned and thumped his head against the bed.

Carlton chuckled and raked his nails down Shawn's inner thighs, causing the man beneath him to jackknife up with a shout.

“Down, Spencer,” Carlton warned, laughter making his words shake.

“Warn a guy first, woncha?” Shawn croaked, sweat starting to bead on his skin. He took a deep, shuttering breath.

“Where's the fun in that?” Carlton wondered, leaning down and nipping at Shawn's stomach. Shawn whimpered, raising his head so he could see what Carlton was doing.

“Oh there's plenty of fun in th-hat!” Carlton gently rolled Shawn's balls in hands, rubbing against Shawn's perineum. “Mother fuck,” Shawn panted when his brain kicked in.

“That's more disturbing than your boy cat.”

“Low blow, Lassy,” Shawn said, covering his eyes with his arm. He was completely unprepared for the hot, wet mouth that bobbed over his cock. He thrust up involuntarily, but Carlton was ready for him, a strong arm holding him down. He lost his words at Albuquerque—he didn't go left or right, more like catty-corner sideways—and Carlton didn't give him time to find them again, suctioning hard and dragging the flat of his tongue across the tip of Shawn's penis.

Carlton kept up the pace, relentlessly driving Shawn further and further towards orgasm, building him up to a dizzying, towering peak that left Shawn breathlessly panting for air. Carlton tightened his grip and sucked hard and Shawn—

“SON OF A PEPSI BLANKET!” Carlton's mouth was made of fire, liquid lava. Shawn was pretty sure he'd never felt anything like it wrapped around his cock.

“That was...creative...” Carlton said, letting Shawn go with a lewd popping sound. Shawn whined high in his throat and pounded his fists into the mattress. Carlton had a death grip on the bottom of his dick, stopping him from coming and it hurt so bad.

“Please,” he moaned, trying to hitch his hips into Carlton's grasp. Carlton held him down, evil evil man that he was. Carlton grabbed one of Shawn's hands and guided it down, pulled himself up so Shawn could reach his cock. He and Shawn fumbled with his zipper, Carlton groaning when Shawn's hot hand wrapped around him. He let his head drop to Shawn's shoulder, panting as he thrust in time with Shawn's strokes.

“Up,” Shawn panted. “Here...like this...” Carlton gasped and threw back his head. Shawn wrapped his hand around them both, pressing their cocks together. He jacked them off, rubbed them together.
Carlton sank his teeth into Shawn's neck, moving his hips in short stuttering jerks.

“C'mon Shawn,” Carlton panted. He nibbled on Shawn's ear encouragingly, tugging on the lobe with his teeth. Shawn gasped and sped his movements, moaning and whimpering.

“Show me what you've got, Spencer,” Carlton growled challengingly. “You can—fuck!” Carlton shook as his orgasm ripped through him, hot come splashing between them. Shawn followed him soon after, arching into his, spendings burning Carlton's skin.

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Carlton woke up late, Shawn curled on his chest sleeping peacefully. Carlton took a moment to savor the silence. A glance at the clock showed that he'd overslept and he needed to get moving. Carlton started detangling himself from his human octopus.

“Five more minutes, Daddy,” Shawn murmured, snuggling further into his man-pillow. Carlton rolled his eyes but stopped trying to get out of bed. Shawn sighed his contentment and wound his limbs more securely around his Lassy-face, hands drifting over newly discovered curves.

“Shawn. I've go to get to the station.”

Shawn's sleep-mussed head popped up and he took in the light from the window—or lack there of. “What time is it?”

“6:15.”

“Where does the day go?” Shawn yelped when Carlton flicked his ear, then rubbed the offended appendage against Carlton's hirsute chest.

“I have things to do before I go in,” Carlton grumbled. Shawn's hands took a decidedly naughty detour. “Shawn!”

“You said you had things to do, Lassy. What am I, chopped liver?” Shawn propped himself up on his elbows and grinned down at Carlton.

Carlton's chest constricted at the soft, open expression on Shawn's face. Five mile run and protein shake...or Shawn. In his bed. Disheveled and willing. Carlton growled and pushed Shawn to the bed.

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“You never learned the fine art of playing hooky as a young boy, did you?” Carlton straightened his tie and glanced at Shawn in the mirror. He got distracted by the long line of Shawn's back, skin pale against the dark maroon sheets of the bed. Shawn tempted Carlton in ways no one had before. But he had a duty to the people of Santa Barbara and Shawn had reading.

Carlton grabbed Shawn's stack of books off his dresser and dropped them next to his head. Shawn stared at the books sprawled across Carlton's pillow. “What—”

“Homework, Shawn.” Carlton dropped a legal pad and pen on Shawn's chest. “Read those and make a list.”

“Lasstastic, I didn't do homework in high school. Why would I take it up now? And a list of what?” Carlton let some of his lust bleed through as his eyes wandered over Shawn's body. He lingered suggestively on the smooth curve of Shawn's ass and the play of muscles across his back. Shawn
flushed with arousal.

“A list of things.”

“Things. I can make a list of...things.”

“Good.”

“Reading, however, might be a little beyond—”

“Nothing happens until you read those books.” Shawn's jaw dropped and he rolled over, giving Carlton a good view of what he'd been hiding.

“What exactly does nothing entail?” Carlton raised his eyebrows and finished fastening his cuffs. “I mean, we can negotiate nothing, right?” He straightened his tie and checked his holster. “Because nothing doesn't mean anything.” Carlton aligned his tie so it was perfectly center. “Reading. Right.”

Carlton smiled and kissed Shawn, tasting victory.
Shawn had to go to the internet to make his list. Not the real list—Shawn took his pleasure as serious as anything else in his life, and he knew what he wanted, so that was fairly easy. He had a long list of fantasies, many starring Lassy himself, that he wanted to enact. His real list—minus the various and sundry celebrities that had a tendency to crop up—had already supplanted Carlton's bookmark in *The S&M Primer*. 

*This* list was just for fun. Though really, he should have known Lassy would research this whole thing. They could be having tons of hot sweaty man sex right now instead of reading and making lists. Carlton needed some help getting his priorities in order.

Oh, doraphilia! That looked promising.

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Carlton read Shawn's list twice. What the hell was Medolalia? Tripsolagnia? Gerontophilia just sounded scary.

Christ, this might as well be written in Greek.

Carlton scowled at the list and put it aside in favor of finishing his book. A thin slip of paper fell out, covered in Shawn's now-familiar writing. Son of a bitch!

“Spencer!” Carlton growled to himself.

“I saved the best for last,” an amused voice called from the doorway. Shawn was propped up against the jamb in his utterly illegal t-shirt and slinky twink shorts.

Carlton held up the fake list. “This is not a joke, Spencer.”

Shawn pouted. “While I'm all for daddy kink, I don't want you to actually sound like my father. And I thought we agreed on Shawn, though I'll also respond to Honeybunch, O masterful Psychic, and God.” Carlton glared. “You are way too tense for someone contemplating getting laid.”

Carlton’s brain turned sluggish when Shawn climbed onto the foot of his bed and started crawling towards him. Shawn shimmied up his legs until he was kneeling, grabbed Carlton's book, and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Shawn...” Carlton's mouth felt dry.

“You know, I've always preferred *practice* over theory.”

Carlton tried to gather his wits. “Shawn—“ His protests were cut off when Shawn's mouth pressed against his own, words waylaid by Shawn's tongue. Carlton moaned when Shawn's hips brushed against his own rubbing against the burgeoning hardness he could feel there. He gasped and grabbed
Shawn's hips, forcing him down harder.

Shawn pulled away to murmur, “That's the spirit, Lassy!” Carlton silenced him with another kiss and pulled his shirt off in one smooth move. He attacked the nipple that had been playing peek-a-boo with him all week. Shawn's hands tangled loosely in Carlton's short hair and he arched up into Lassy's touch.

Carlton let Shawn get away with it for a moment before catching up both of Shawn's wrists and twisting them back. Shawn struggled instinctively, wanting to touch, but Carlton forced them back further, riding the point where uncomfortable became pain. Carlton bit down on Shawn's nipple and growled his displeasure when Shawn kept struggling.

Shawn finally stilled, though Carlton could feel the pounding of his heart...and the heavy erection against his thigh. Shawn's face was flush with arousal, his eyes almost black. Carlton nuzzled against Shawn's chest in approval. He was distracted by the livid red mark around Shawn's nipple, the barest evidence of Carlton's teeth imprinted in his skin; something undeniable and possessive swelled at seeing Shawn so marked.

OK, Carlton could admit that this whole 'doing' thing was a lot of fun.

Shawn started getting restless above him, muscles bunching against the hand holding his arms captive, so Carlton gently rolled them over. He settled into the cradle of Shawn's hips, cocks rubbing against one another, arms pinned beneath Shawn's body. Shawn was watching him closely as he figured out what he wanted to do next. Carlton thought about all the possibilities, everything he wanted to do with Shawn. Something must have shown on his face, because Shawn's breathing quickened and his erection twitched.

Carlton grinned and pulled Shawn's hands out from under him. “Don't let go,” Carlton ordered, guiding Shawn's hands to the headboard. Shawn nodded mutely, eyes wide. Carlton smile softly and started kissing his way down Shawn's chest, mixing the soft brush of lips with harsher bites that made Shawn whimper and his cock leak.

Shawn was trembling by the time Carlton made his way to the spot where Shawn's skin disappeared under the basketball shorts. Carlton teased his tongue underneath the elastic eliciting soft whimpers from his captive. Shawn tried to arch up, get closer, and Carlton bit his hip bone in warning.

“Don't. Move.” Molten heat surged through Shawn's veins and his mind whited out everything but Lassy's terse command. Carlton continued stroking Shawn's torso, running his hands over the smooth skin. Shawn relaxed with each pass. “Good boy.” Shawn heard the genuine pleasure in Carlton's voice and it eased something inside him.

Carlton's hands brushed against Shawn's pants, thumbs dipping below the waist line. “Up.” Shawn arched his hips and let Carlton shimmy his pants off leaving him dressed only in the shirt, rucked under his armpits, cock swinging in the air.

Shawn's grip tightened around the headboard. He felt exposed and open on display for Carlton. He had to fight his natural inclination to run as far and as fast as he could, or somehow devalue what was happening. His heart rate sped up, respiration came faster as the enormity of what was happening, what he was promising, caught up with him.

“Shawn.” Carlton said his name with such reverence and looked at him with such open concern that Shawn couldn't do anything but smile reassuringly. Carlton rubbed a hand across Shawn's belly, playing with the fine hairs on his stomach leading down to the coarse curls between his legs.
“Fuck me,” Shawn breathed. Carlton's fingers stuttered briefly in their exploration before returning to their task, mapping every inch of Shawn's skin, wheels turning. Lassy was considering his request. Not just giving in or letting the moment take him, but deliberating before giving Shawn his answer. It was really hot.

“No,” Carlton decided. “I'm not going to fuck you.” Before Shawn could pout, Carlton kissed him silent. While Shawn was distracted, he reached over and rummaged through the bedside drawer. He made a triumphant noise when he found the brand new tube of KY warming lube.

Shawn pulled away to see what had distracted Carlton. “You really know how to treat a lady, Lassy,” he said with a smirk.

Carlton lazily coated two fingers with lube and smiled wickedly. “I'm going to gag you tomorrow.” Shawn whimpered at the thought and Carlton slipped two lubed fingers into him. They burned and stretched, tight as he was, but Shawn pushed back wanting Carlton deeper. He had trouble keeping still when Carlton's long, long fingers shifted inside of him, his other hand pressing his hips into the mattress. “I'll tie you down too, since you can't seem to keep still.”

“Oh god!” Shawn squeezed around Lassy's fingers. He liked that idea. A lot. Carlton, the bastard, chuckled knowingly. He slipped a third finger into Shawn, scissoring and spreading him open. The stimulation felt awesome, but Carlton always seemed to stop just short of Shawn's prostate. Every time Shawn tried to shift his finger closer, Carlton would stop or pinch him. So Carlton was touching everywhere around it, but never quite—HOLY PINEAPPLE IN THE SKY BATMAN.

Carlton used his free hand to squeeze the base of Shawn's cock, staving off his orgasm. “We're going to have to work on your control,” Carlton said smugly.

“You could always warn a guy,” Shawn grumbled, albeit breathlessly.

Carlton smirked, humor glinting in his eyes. “I thought you were psychic.” Shawn was about to respond when Carlton hit his spot again, cock head dragging along it and sending him spiraling towards orgasm again, evil fingers keeping him from coming.

“Please,” Shawn gasped, nearly incoherent. All he knew was the brush of Lassy's fingers in him and the need to come as soon as possible.

“What’s the matter?” Carlton asked mildly, as if talking about the weather or Juliet's new purse. He sounded almost disinterested.

It took Shawn a long moment to process the question, and an even longer one to come up with an answer that bordered on coherent.

“I...I need...” Shawn trailed off into a whine of need, more eloquent than any request, but Carlton still stopped. “No! Please!” Shawn came back to himself, vision realigning and making sense once again. Carlton was studying him seriously.

“I already told you, Shawn. I'll give you whatever you need. All you have to do is ask.” Shawn couldn't escape the naked truth in Carlton's eyes. This was a side of Carlton he'd only caught glimpses of before.

He whined high in his throat and thrust against the fingers buried in him. “You! I need you. Carly-Carlton, anything, just...come on!” Carlton cut him off with a brutal kiss, teeth scraping along plush lips, and Shawn redoubled his efforts when he felt the head of Carlton's cock line up with his entrance, eager and wanton.
Carlton took a deep breath and let his hands follow the line of Shawn's arm up to where his fingers were clutching the head board like a life line. He gently detangled Shawn's stiff fingers and laced them with his own, pushing into Shawn with one smooth stroke. Shawn, tight and hot, tensed against the initial intrusion. Carlton nuzzled his neck and panted dirty words of want and need in his ear. Shawn gradually relaxed, adjusting to Carlton's presence in his body.

When Shawn was sure he was all adjusted to Lassy's cock—which was awesome and they should totally have had sex sooner—he pulled his legs up around Carlton's waist and dug his heels into the dip of Carlton's back. Shaw moaned as Carlton's cock slid farther and Lassy's body went tense with the deeper angle. Shawn felt him mumble something incoherent and awed into his neck.

“Used to be a yoga instructor,” Shawn said smugly. Carlton pulled away, eyes narrowed dangerously. Shawn gulped as his legs were unceremoniously looped over Carlton's shoulders.

“I'm going to make you scream for me,” Carlton promised. His hips snapped forward and Shawn was inched up towards the headboard with the force. Shawn believed him. Every thrust pushed Shawn further up until his head was brushing the wood of the bed frame. Carlton shifted his hips until he found the spot that made Shawn's face go slack and throw his head back in a silent scream.

That wouldn't do—he wanted Shawn screaming aloud where anyone walking by could hear it. He wanted people to know exactly what he did to Shawn and how much it affected him.

Carlton wrapped his hand around Shawn's cock and sunk his teeth into Shawn's chorded neck. Shawn arched up and swore profusely in several languages. Better, something to take note of for the future, but still not what he was looking for.

Carlton ran his hand from the tip of Shawn's dick to the base and angled his hips so his cock dragged against Shawn's prostate with every twitch. Shawn whimpered and trashed against the bed, nails digging half-moons into Carlton's palm.

“Lass—Lassy...Carlton!” Carlton laughed and picked up his pace, smug as Shawn went nonverbal and need-crazed. Shawn's face was red with strain and the sounds pouring from his lips ranged from pathetic whimpers to strangles moans. Carlton felt his orgasm unfurl in his belly, hot and encompassing. It licked at the edged of his vision as Shawn's body sucked him father in. Carlton leaned close to Shawn's ear and gave it a long lick that made Shawn moan and shudder underneath him.

“Come.”

Shawn came with a hoarse shout, all vowels and bitten-off consonants. His body bowed back, head pressed into the mattress, ass clenching around Carlton's cock. His release spilled hot and thick between them, and Carlton finally succumbed to the fluttering of Shawn's inner muscles.

Carlton lost time after that; he didn't remember much after the orgasm washed over him, but he came to panting into Shawn's neck, waiting for his mind to finish putting itself back together. He tried to move his hands, but one was trapped between them, still loosely wrapped around Shawn's cock. The other was held tightly in Shawn's uncompromising grip. He shifted his hips and grimaced at the stickiness between them.

“Shawn,” Carlton said, nuzzling at the pliant body beneath him. “Shawn. SHAWN!”

“Dumbeldore's pajamas,” Shawn said as he sat up abruptly. Or tried to; he really just succeeded in banging his forehead against Carlton's.
“OK, ow,” Carlton grumbled, though he couldn't hide his amusement at Shawn's sleepy befuddlement. “Shawn, I need to go get a washcloth.”

Some of the sleep was shaken away and Shawn settled into a ridiculous-looking pout. “OK.” The unspoken part of the sentence went 'And you woke me up why?'

“I need you to let me go,” Carlton said with an eye roll, lifting up their conjoined hands.

“Oh.” Shawn didn't let go, just stared at their hands with an inscrutable expression. Carlton shifted his weight so not as much of it was on Shawn and rested his head against the warm chest beneath him, letting himself drift. Shawn showed no signs that he'd be letting any time soon, intently watching his thumb run across Carlton's knuckles. Which was fine, Carlton was pretty content to lay here and listen to the beating of Shawn's heart. He was almost asleep when Shawn flicked him in the shoulder. Carlton opened one very annoyed eye.

“My third eye says duct tape impersonations are very last year. I'll take that washcloth now, Lassy. Chop chop.” Shawn smiled angelically and then ruined it by fluttering his eyelashes. Carlton tried to save face by grumbling darkly as he got out of bed, but it lacked his usual surliness and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

When he got into the bathroom, his reflection caught him by surprise. He had a silly half-smile on his face that reached all the way to his eyes. His hair was in disarray (as much as it could be) and he looked...content. Happy. Christ, Shawn Spencer was responsible for that.

“Lassy! Here boy!” Carlton rolled his eyes and grabbed a fresh washcloth from the rack.

So much for the afterglow. Though he was pretty sure Esme slipped some floggers into his giant sack of necessities...
Carlton felt like a teenage kid the next morning. He'd woken up to the smell of coffee and pancakes. He snuck downstairs and propped himself against the door jamb, staring at the incongruous sight of Shawn Spencer dancing around his kitchen in a frilly apron. Carlton did not, in fact, own a frilly apron. Ergo, his finely honed detective skills informed him, Shawn had brought the apron into the house. Voluntarily.

Shawn hummed some horrible 80s song as he made weirdly contorted pancakes, going out of his way to make sure none of them resembled a circle. It helped him ignore how aware he was of Lassy standing in the doorway, watching his every move. It was disconcerting; Shawn liked to do the staring, thankyouverymuch.

And if this was normal morning-after behavior, he really needed to brush up on his post-sex etiquette. (Though if this was Lassy's normal MO, it explained so much about the man.) Shawn got so lost in his thoughts he started when Carlton appeared at his side, looking way too intense as he grabbed his coffee cup.

Carlton rinsed out his favorite mug so he could use it for more coffee. Shawn casually brushed their shoulders together and Carlton coughed to hide his grin. He could feel Shawn's eye roll and the 'Yeah, not buying it' vibes rolling off him. Carlton wandered over to the pantry to retrieve the syrup while Shawn finished cooking.

"Deliciously fluffy pancakes of awesome, right here!" Shawn announced, plopping a plate of four at Carlton's place. His grin was infectious, and Carlton was sure he looked like a complete idiot grinning back at Shawn.

This felt...nice. Carlton couldn't help but sneak small, hidden glances at Shawn. His eyes constantly strayed towards the other man, cataloguing the mussed hair and dark bruise that peeked out of his shirt collar. Carlton remembered putting there (along with the sounds Shawn made as he bit down, the way Shawn arched into every nip and moaned for more).

"Is that a pineapple in your pocket or do you just reeeeally like my pancakes?" Shawn's voice broke through Carlton's haze.

"I, uh..." Carlton blushed, just a tinge of red in his ears, but Shawn didn't miss it. "Malformed pancakes need love too, Spencer."

Shawn blinked. "Was that a joke, Lasstastic?" He let the Spencer slide; Carlton had earned a pass or two after his performance last night. And what a performance it had been.

Carlton took a huge bite of pancakes, stuffing his mouth until his cheeks bulged. He looked ridiculous and Shawn was really, really tempted to smash Carlton's cheeks in just to see what happened. Something must have shown on his face because Carlton quickly swallowed what was left and glared at Shawn.
“You really don’t want to do that,” Carlton warned, his voice dropping in warning. Shawn let his grin turn lecherous.

“Do what, Lassy?” he asked. He ran his tongue across his lower lip chasing an errant (mostly nonexistent) drop of syrup and enjoying the way Carlton’s blue eyes zeroed in on the spot.

“Whatever you were thinking, Shawney.”

“Dude. Do I look like a stripper with electric blue hair and a pink feather boa who dances to Flo Rida in go-go boots with a Hello Kitty tattoo on my ass?” Carlton cocked his head to one side and looked entirely too contemplative for Shawn’s tastes. “The answer is a very emphatic no.”

Carlton leaned back with his cup of coffee and grinned, eyes traveling up and down Shawn's body. Electric blue might be a little much. Green would go much better with Shawn's complexion.

“Were you asking from personal experience, Shawn?” This time Shawn grinned and stuffed his own cheeks full of pancake. Carlton rolled his eyes and started reading the paper, wondering what kind of surprises he’d find in the office on Monday. Being Head Detective had its perks, amongst them opting out of weekend shifts.

Shawn propped his chin on his hand and studied Carlton. He looked different in the light of his kitchen, reading the Saturday morning paper. Relaxed and informal. The tension lines around his eyes and lips had eased, and his mouth quirked up in a natural smile. Gus would never believe this version of Carlton. The memory of his friend brought a sharp stab of shame a condemnation that Shawn quickly pushed aside.

“This is way easier than I expected,” Shawn mused aloud. Carlton glanced at him from his newspaper.

“What is?”

“This whole morning after thing. I'm great at it.” Carlton snorted and rolled his eyes. “No, really. If I had known it was this easy I would have done it ages ago.” Carlton arched a brow.

“With who?”

“Oh, you know. Carla, Doris, Sammy, Chris, Gus, Erika—”

“Gus?”

“Short for Augusta.”

“I'm sure,” Carlton said placidly, refusing to give Shawn the satisfaction of reacting. Shawn pouted (which didn't make Carlton thinks words like 'cute,' 'adorable,' or 'lip, lip, get the lip!').

“Thanks, Carly. I was hoping for an awkward-free morning and you had to go and ruin it by casting aspersions on my dearest Burton 'Gussie-pants' McGustersen. Hey, where are you going?”

“Ooooooh Lassy, I love it when you get all lawful. It makes you seem more manly. Very CHIPS.”

“Shut up, Spencer.”

“Now Carly-poo, you know I mmmphf!”
They were both sweaty and sticky and utterly satiated.

Carlton tucked one hand behind his head and ran his fingers through Shawn's hair. Shawn was doing a fantastic impression of a blanket. Or a parasite, sucking the warmth from Carlton's body. Shawn nudged his head further into Carlton's hand when he stopped rubbing.

Carlton rolled his eyes and reminded himself to pick up Princess Shawn's tiara from the jewelry store, but he started rubbing again, scraping his nails against Shawn's scalp.

“Shawn,” Carlton rumbled.

“Mmmmmm,” Shawn managed, burrowing further into Carlton's stomach. It was warm here, so nice and relaxing. Even the rumble of Carlton's chest was nice.

“What...” Carlton had to fight against his natural inclination to be brusque. He wasn't good at these things, personal questions—either asking them or answering them. But Esme had made him promise to open his mouth and painted bleak pictures of a lonely life with ten cats and sympathetic calls from Juliet, a grandmother with a gaggle of kids she told Carlton about so he can vicariously live though her and not be a sad, shell of man for thirty minutes out of the day. Esme could be very persuasive and imaginative when she wanted to be.

“Carly?” Shawn mumbled sleepily. He bit down on Carlton's stomach to get his attention.

“Spencer!” Carlton tightened his grip in Shawn's hair and pulled the annoyance's hair to get him to stop. Shawn laughed and pressed a kiss to the abused skin.

“Sorry,” he chirped. “What were you saying?”

“What have you done?” Shawn stilled for a moment, so Carlton knew he understood.

“Bungee jumped. Swim with sharks. Joined the Blue Man Group, but that didn't last long, they wanted to get rid of my hair. Prospected. Twins.” Carlton kept his mouth shut and let Shawn ramble on. He was tempted to get annoyed, but he'd just been spectacularly laid and he'd come to learn that Shawn would eventually talk himself out. Where Carlton went quiet and scowled to deflect—well, not so much deflect as scream 'back the hell off'—Shawn talked around people until they'd lost their line of questioning. “Raised a seeing eye dog—smartest person I ever met. Made wine. Twins.”

“You said that.”

“Some things you have to do twice.” Carlton snorted a laugh. “Isn't there a rule against talking about ex's in bed?” Carlton kept silent and let Shawn go when he rolled to his side of the bed.

“I've always just...I like ropes. Ties, bondage.” Shawn was mumbling, staring up at the ceiling. His recitation sounded more clinical than Carlton thought it should, but he was willing to give Shawn some leeway here. “Some pain can be nice, nothing too extreme. You're really hot when you're ordering and manhandling me.” Shawn glanced at him and grinned. Carlton rolled his eyes, but his own lips were curved in a smile.

It faded and his expression closed off and his eyes focused on the ceiling as he continued, voice straining for light and missing by miles, “I don't really...humiliation.”

Carlton stiffened, mind conjuring up scenarios where humiliation and degradation were heaped upon Shawn. It pissed him off, made his most primal protective urges rise up and demand retribution.
Instead, he pushed it all aside and hauled Shawn over so he draped blanket-like over Carlton's chest. Shawn tensed and his fingers burrowed into the sheets. He his his head in the crook of Carlton's neck.

Carlton traced the path of Shawn's spine, up to his neck and down to dip of his ass, every stroke a promise to cherish and protect. Shawn eventually relaxed, one muscle loosening at a time, as Carlton wrote his vows into Shawn's skin.

"If you...if you need to talk, or, or anything..." Carlton may not be good at these things, but he meant every word, spoken and not.

Shawn lifted his head and smiled wickedly, distractingly, and Carlton lost the ability to think for a few hours.

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"So?"

"I'm not going to kiss and tell, Esme."

"But...but Carlton! You've just consummated your tragically epic love! That's precisely what you're supposed to do!" Esme put on her most innocent, earnest face. "How else am I supposed to help you, favorite Carlton?"

"Esme, I'm dating Shawn Spencer. You'll have to do better than that."

"Carlton!"

"We...talked. And we're fine." Esme crossed her arms and pursed her lips, unconvinced. "We did. Shawn knows what he wants. And what he doesn't." His words were tinged with anger, tight and to the point.

Esme's expression fell. "Shit. Was he—"

"Not mine to share," Carlton said, steel in his words. Esme dropped it, though at the expense of their conversation, tension thick between them. Carlton didn't want Esme's well meaning sympathy anymore than Shawn would have. Carlton fiddled with something weird-looking on the table just to keep his hands busy.

"You know you're playing with a Gates of Hell, right?" Carlton dropped the rings like they were on fire. He should really know better by now. "Do you even know what it is?"

"It's called a Gates of Hell, Esme."

"Well yeah, because it's a--"

"I don't want to know."

"But it's--"

"I don't. Want. To know."

"You spoil all my fun." Carlton smirked while Esme pouted. "Well fine, then I'm not giving you your gift."

"Shawn gave me a list of things he knows he likes," Carlton said primly.
“Well that's a good start.” She pulled something wrapped in a cloth bag from under the table. “Sam sent you a present too.”

Carlton stared at his gift, trying to imagine a man who felt comfortable sending a leather bondage harness to a man he'd never met as a 'hello how are ya?' gift.

“Well that's a good start.” She pulled something wrapped in a cloth bag from under the table. “Sam sent you a present too.”

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“Am I ever going to meet the infamous Sam?”

“Of course, young padawan,” Esme said, patting his arm. “But we've got to get you out of the beginner's classes first. I'll teach you some cool Japanese rope bondage ties to go with your pretty new Sam-approved harness. Oh, and there's this.”

“What's this?”

“My present. Climax Fruit Bomb Coco-Pineapple lube. Way better than Sam's gift, right?”

“I hate you.”

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Shawn felt better than he had in ages. His body hummed happily, aches and afterglow and the small reminders of last night littered around his body blending into an awesome state of sexed-out contentment.

It was a well-needed change from the constant barrage of dark memories that had plagued him.

Thoughts of Larry and bullets and ugly questions tried to intrude, but Shawn cut through the darkness with memories of laser-blue eyes and gruff commands. Shawn called up memories from the night before, replayed every sound and touch. Carlton teasing him with his ridiculous button-up shirt (they needed to work on Carly's 'relaxed' wear). The first brush of his breath against Shawn's cock, followed by the hot, wet slide of his tongue and mouth.

A buzzer went off, startling him out of his musings. Shawn adjusted himself and realized he'd been off in Lassy-land for almost an hour. Really, he'd been floating around in a Lassy-induced haze for most of the day.

Long enough for his salmon fillets to bake. Shawn very carefully removed the tinfoil. Salmon, red peppers, and couscous wafted through the steam. Perfect. (He'd learned to cook from this crazy French guy named Geoff who had been the chef at a four star restaurant. Apparently his 'cooking lessons' were really 'dates' and Shawn had been 'leading him on' by accepting. He'd had to hi-tail it out of Chicago, but he had a hundred gourmet recipes floating around in his head now.)

Shawn quickly scooped the salmon and rice up when he heard Carlton's car pull up. A couple of candles, some seductive music, lube stashed discreetly within reaching distance. This was Shawn Spencer Grade A Seduction at its finest. He'd never failed to get some after this particular meal.

“Hey Lasstastic,” Shawn called over his shoulder. Carlton's footsteps made it into the kitchen and then stopped. Shawn craned his head around. Carly had stopped in the doorway and was staring at the scene before him.

“What—is this?” For a second Shawn thought Carlton was angry. But his tone was the same one he used when Shawn brought something random into an investigation--a boy cat or he climbed on Lassy's lap (with no intent to follow through)—stunned, a little turned on, and hiding it with gruffness while he gathered his wits and talked down his erection.
“Food. It’s something you cut into bite-sized pieces and then stick in your—you know what? I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

“Funny.” Carlton glanced at the table like it might bite him.

“It’s a candle lit dinner, Carly. It’s not going to attack you or spontaneously turn you gay. I already did that.”

Carlton slowly pulled off his jacket and removed his holster. He’d never had a candle lit dinner. He’d arranged them before, sure. Victoria had expected them on anniversaries and birthdays and high holy days in between. But she’d never done it, nor the equivalent, for him.

He walked towards Shawn, who turned at his approach. Carlton bracketed Shawn's body, leaning against the counter and pressing Shawn back against it. Shawn caught the light scent of lavender under the usual scents that clung to Lassy's skin—gun powder and Mitchum and Irish male—and wondered where Carlton had stopped before coming home. Then Carlton kissed him, soft and thankful, and Shawn had better things to think about.

“You're welcome,” Shawn said with a grin when they finally broke apart. Carlton laughed and peeled Shawn off the counter.

“Time to eat, Sp-Shawn.”

“Oh yeah? I've got something I bet you'd love to eat, Carly.” Shawn punctuated his words with a little thrust of his hips. It looked so ridiculous Carlton had to laugh. He smacked Shawn on the butt.

“Maybe later, if you ask nicely.”

“How nice is nice?” Shawn asked, dropping his voice and wiggling his eyebrows. “Are we talking Catholic schoolgirl nice, or Tijajuana hooker nice?”

Carlton paused, fixing Shawn with a calculating look.

“Please don't tell me that was one of your former jobs.”

“Which one? Because while being a professional schoolgirl is fantastic, it's very exhausting. Though strangely life affirming.”

Carlton found it very hard to concentrate on the game with Shawn staring at him. Carlton tried to catch him in the act, but Shawn was good, always looking elsewhere by the time Carlton turned around. And then as soon as Carlton looked away, he could feel Shawn's beady little eyes boring into his head. For a minute he mourned his no alcohol edict.

Carlton gritted his teeth and shot Spencer annoyed looks that the other man caught if his widening smile was anything to go by.

“You've got a pretty interesting bag from The Big Tease under your bed, Lassy.”

“What have you been doing under my bed, Spencer?”

“I think the better question would be what haven't I been doing.” Carlton paused and contemplated all the potential ramifications of that sentence. There wasn't much he'd put past Shawn.

“...and?” Carlton prompted, keeping his eyes glued to the TV.
“Wanna play Secretary? My Maggie Gyllenhaal to your James Spader?”

Carlton hesitated, because while he wanted nothing more than to give Shawn exactly what he asked for, part of him (that sounded suspiciously like his mother) had reservations. But Shawn looked at him with such earnestness, practically bouncing in place with excitement.

“Maybe,” Carlton said, taking a deliberate sip of his coke. Shawn wilted, just a little bit. “Depends on if you like your present.”

Shawn perked up. “Prezzie? For moi?”

Carlton grabbed Esme and Sam's combined gift from the hall table and handed it to Shawn who nearly ripped the cloth bag in his excitement to get to his gift. The harness spilled onto Shawn's lap, supple leather and cold steel rings gleaming in the light.

“You got me pineapple lube?” Shawn gaped at Carlton, eyes shining with awe and bottle clutched to his chest. Shawn flipped it around and started reading the ingredient and nutrition information. “With real pineapple!”

Carlton shook his head and reached for the harness, but Shawn snatched it back, eyeing him suspiciously.

“They're part of a package deal, right?” Shawn asked. “I get to use them both. You're not going to make me choose are you?” Carlton lost the ability to speak when his brain conjured up a vivid image of Shawn in the harness and nothing else.

“No. You don't have to choose,” he said faintly. Shawn's smile could have lit up rooms. “Unless you're not in the harness within the next five minutes, that is.”

Shawn gaped.

“Four minutes and thirty seconds.”

Shawn scrambled off the couch and sprinted for the stairs, still clutching both his presents. Carlton tossed his can in the recycling and tidied up before following Shawn up the stairs at five minutes exactly.

“Oh fuck.” The expletive slipped unchecked from his mouth.

Shawn knelt at the foot of the bed, head down and naked except for the harness glistening dark against sun-kissed skin. The black leather wrapped around Shawn's neck, thick D-rings dangling at the front and back of the collar. In the front it carved a thick line down the center of Shawn's chest, where it ran into the bands which wrapped around Shawn's torso, one just above his belly button and the other just under Shawn's pecs, the leather drawing the eye to Shawn's nipples. There were O-rings at each meeting point, just waiting to hold Shawn down, and silver buckles that bit into Shawn's skin where the leather pulled tight.

Carlton cleared his throat and glanced away; Shawn wanted something from him and Carlton wouldn't be able to deliver if he kept looking. That's when he noticed the thick straps tied to the headboard and the baseboard, more of Esme's gifts. He wandered over and let the soft restraints fall through his fingers. He tested the ties, noting that Shawn knew a couple of secure but easy-to-release knots, the same ones Esme had been drumming into his brain for the past couple of weeks. His eyes travelled to the bedside table. Shawn had pulled out some of the toys.

If Carlton had any lingering doubts, the speed with which Shawn had dressed this scene allied them.
Carlton picked up a light paddle (“Scary bark, gentle bite,” Esme had told him) and swung it experimentally. Shawn drew in a sharp breath at the sound, his muscles tensing in anticipation. Curious, Carlton selected a suede flogger (“Warmth with just a touch of sting”) and hit it against the bed spread. A sharp, truncated sound slipped free of Shawn's control.

“Come here, Shawn.” Carlton kept his voice low and steady. Shawn surged to his feet and practically skipped to where Carlton stood, eager and turned on. “You get a word—”

“Azerbaijan,” Shawn interrupted.

“Shawn!” Carlton said, whip-crack harsh. Shawn froze and deliberately lowered his eyes, shoulders slouching forward just a little. “You get a word,” he repeated, “and if you use it, this stops. No repercussions. What is it?”

“Azerbaijan,” Shawn repeated respectfully.


“On your stomach,” Carlton commanded softly, their lips brushing together. Shawn backed up, eyes never leaving Carlton until they had to. Carlton watched as he arranged himself, legs spread and head pillowed on his hands until ordered otherwise. It was heady, the sense of power and possibility. Carlton had a blank canvass in front of him, and lots of pretty toys to play with.

Carlton ran his hands along Shawn's arms, just touching. Shawn sighed contentedly, a small smile curling at the corners of his mouth. Carlton drew his hand down the length of Shawn's body, over his shoulders, over the round curve of his ass, over hairy legs to Shawn's wide feet. Shawn jerked a little, ticklish on the soles. Carlton did it again just to hear Shawn choke back a giggle.

Shawn didn't choke back the moan when Carlton fastened the first cuff around his ankle, fingers tracing the place where skin met leather, his body relaxing instinctively.

“You want more?” Carlton asked teasingly, fingers stroking Shawn's calf.

“Laaa-ssssy!” Shawn whined. Carlton climbed on to the bed and straddled Shawn's legs. He traced the play of muscles along Shawn's back, taking his time getting to know Shawn's body. This entire night had been fantastic. From dinner, to now, Carlton felt full. Complete. He sounded like a bad romance novel, but for the first time in a long time he hadn't thought about the world outside his house. No criminals waiting in the dark to commit unspeakable acts. No ex-wives lurking in the shadows to remind him of his failures and shortcomings.

Shawn groaned when Carlton dug into his shoulder muscles, fingers digging into the knotted tissue. He hadn't realized just how tense and tight they'd gotten. The smell of pineapple wafted through the room, then Carlton's talented, amazing, best-in-the-world hands were back.

Carlton started with Shawn's shoulders, working outward from the spine before digging into the fleshy muscles and tendons that connected neck to shoulder. Shawn groaned in thanks (sometimes in pain) and Lassy left bliss in his wake. He systematically tracked down and destroyed every knot, like they were perps who needed to get taken off the street. By the time he was done, Shawn was a relaxed puddle of boneless goo, muscles kneaded into submission.

When he was done with Shawn's shoulders, Carlton moved to his arms. Long, languid strokes that eased the muscle. Shawn found himself breathing in tandem with Carly's touch, in on the up stroke,
out on the down. Intimate. Putting them both in tune with one another. Shawn would have run with that thought, but his brain spun lazily away, too caught up in the massage to contemplate the deeper meaning of life.

Lassy moved on to Shawn's back, following the play of the muscle from spine out. Shawn's skin was smooth and moved easily under Carlton's hands. Shawn squeaked when Lassy followed the line of his scapula and down his ribs.

“Magic hands,” Shawn mumbled.

“That better not be my new nickname,” Carlton rumbled, laughter coloring his words. Shawn snorted and shifted on the bed, but his leg jerked short. The cuff and leash tied to the post kept him from changing positions, and the massage took an abrupt turn from relaxing to seductive.

Carlton paused momentarily. His own body had gotten caught up in the rhythm of the massage, slow and sleepy. His erection had receded to half-mast, but now lengthened with need. Carlton kneaded Shawn's back, settling his hips against the swell of Shawn's ass, movements taking on a decidedly sexual bent. He touched with intent, replacing Shawn's stress-induced tension with a different kind of tension all together.

Carlton bent over an placed a series of kisses on Shawn's spine, one for each vertebrae, until he reached the gentle curve of Shawn's ass. Shawn sucked in a breath, waiting for what came next. Carlton hovered, not touching, letting the heat of his breath tease Shawn's skin. Shawn moaned and wiggled beneath him, which earned his a surprisingly sharp smack. The sound reverberated though the room, so different from what had come before. Shawn moaned and buried his head in the mattress, the sensation arousing him to the point of pain.

Carlton massaged Shawn's ass, digging his thumb in the fleshy globes. His touch had Shawn thrusting against the bed, short jerks of his hips that he couldn't stop. Carlton teased him, parted his cheeks and taunted Shawn with soft brushes against his entrance. Trailed a lube-slicked finger to his perineum and laughing when Shawn whined.

“Did you want something, Shawn?” Carlton asked. He slipped a finger inside his captive, warm and tight. Shawn gasped and tried to thrust back. Carlton held his hips down, made him lie still as he worked Shawn open as slowly as he could stand it. Carlton sat back on his knees, enjoying the view of Shawn spread out before him, his to touch and mark and enjoy. His erection gave a small throb of need but subsided, something relegated to the background.

“Lassy,” Shawn slurred, hitching his hips up. “Please.” Carlton chuckled and pressed a kiss to the back of Shawn's neck. He smeared more lube on his fingers, a fresh burst of pineapple scenting the air.

“What do the spirits say about this?” Carlton asked, voice dropped into its lowest registers. “What am I going to do to you?” Shawn cried out as three fingers breached him and Carlton's long fingers found his prostate.

Shawn clawed at the sheets, desperately trying to get his bearings. Carlton didn't let up, as relentless in his pleasure as chasing down a lead. He stretched over Shawn, chest-to-back, and whispered in Shawn's ear.

“Did they tell you how I'm going to finger-fuck you open?” Shawn whimpered, feeling Carly do just that. His voice was low and gravelly, commanding. Carlton's massage had left his body unbearable sensitized, and every point of contact—every gust of breath—left Shawn breathless. “Did they show you how I'm going to bend you in half and fuck you till you can't walk, make you scream for me?
Fuck, Lassy's mouth. Who knew he had it in him? Lassy wasn't the most verbose of detectives and it seemed Shawn had underestimated his ability to dirty talk in bed.

“Did the spirits warn you about this?” Carlton hissed, and pushed in. Shawn let out a high-pitched yelp, his body stretching around Carlton's cock. He clenched around Carly, shuddering at feeling so filled and taken. Shawn tried to raise up to meet Carlton's thrusts, but Carlton snarled at him and held his hips steady. Shawn could only submit, let Lassy take what he wanted, how he wanted. Carlton growled his approval and rewarded Shawn by swiveling his hips and dragging his cock head along Shawn's prostate.

Shawn gasped and yelled, panted into his pillow and tried to convince his body it didn't want to come; not until after Carlton (who wasn't making it easy by pegging his prostate with every stroke. Shawn grit his teeth, and choked back a sob, trying to keep himself together.


Shawn came with a gasp, vision swimming and muscles trembling. Carlton followed moments after, his dick milked by the pulsing of Shawn's muscles. He rested his forehead on the slick curve of Shawn's shoulder, trying to catch his breath as the tail end of his orgasm drifted through him. He could feel Shawn's aftershocks, quick twitches of muscles that travelled from Shawn to Carlton, almost too pleasurable. Carlton kissed the back of Shawn's neck in thanks, and because he could. He could.

“Thaznice,” Shawn mumbled languidly. Carlton smiled and nuzzled Shawn's skin, feeling pleasantly giddy in the aftermath of phenomenal sex. For now, his world consisted of the bed he lay on and Shaw. Nothing else existed, and Carlton dozed lightly with his head pillowed on Shawn's back.

They lay there, Carlton draped over Shawn like a blanket, until the wet spot started irritating Shawn's skin. He stirred, trying to wiggle away from it but still keep Lasstastic on him, which only succeeded in waking the man in question.

“Shawn?” Carlton slurred, blinking sleepily.

“schwhet.” It took Carlton a minute to unravel that one. He laughed and laid another series of kisses to Shawn's shoulders before searching around for a shirt. He rolled Shawn onto his back and cleaned him up, pausing to steal quick kisses every few moments. Shawn indulged him with a fond sleepy smile, and brought his hands up to card through Carlton's hair. Who knew the fearsome Carlton Lassiter would be such a cuddler? Shawn couldn't stop the ridiculous giggle that bubbled inside him when Carlton buried his face in Shawn's chest. He could feel Carlton's answering grin pressed into his skin.
“What we don't let out traps us. We think,
No one else feels this way, I must be crazy.
So we don't say anything. And we become
enveloped by a deep loneliness, not knowing
where our feelings come from or what to do
with them. Why do I feel this way?”
~Sabrina Ward Harrison

Shawn wandered downstairs to send Carlton off to work with a lip-tingling kiss and a swat on the
ass. It was all such a 50’s cliché, with Shawn cast as the well-sexed wifey who didn’t mind cleaning
and puttering around the house all day because the sex filled her in ways her mother had never
warned her about. (Homosexuality aside, of course.) Shawn leaned against the door with a smile,
contentment saturating his being.

He could really, happily, get used to this.

Shawn meandered through the house putting things back where they belonged and taking in the
general ambiance of the domicile de Lassitero. Carlton’s home was...homey. There were pictures on
available surfaces, snapshots of Lassy’s life that Shawn had already memorized.

Carlton’s mom looked like a true Irish lady, with hair that never darkened despite getting on in years
and eyes as blue as Carly’s smiling out of the photo. She wore a saint’s medal around her neck and
carried a rosary in her pocket. Carlton had an older sister and a nephew who lived near a beach. Not
Santa Barbara, father up the West Coast, Oregon or Washington. His nephew had the family eyes
but that was the only nod towards his Lasstastic heritage. Lassy also had a brother, a single man who
might be in a serious relationship he hadn’t told anyone about. Shawn would have to meet him to
make sure.

There were also pictures of Carlton with his ex-wife, academy and college buddies, various functions
and events. Together, they all painted a picture of the Lassiter Shawn was just starting to know, the
person his blue-eyed detective was outside of work. The kind of guy who really liked wild and crazy
sex with Shawn Spencer. And was really good at it.

He wandered into their room—Carlton’s room. It was too early to call it theirs, right? Shawn glanced
around. Maybe not.

Carlton had let him in here and Shawn had left his mark, imprinted himself irrevocably in this place.
He smirked at the leather restraints still attached to the bedposts and tucked them so they were more
discreet. He stripped the bed since the previous night’s activities had transformed it into one giant wet
spot. He dropped the linens on the floor and the updraft carried their combined scent towards Shawn.
It was hot, and memories of their encounter flooded Shawn's mind. Screw it, he’d leave the pillows,
scent-mark his new territory as effectively as he’d psychically marked it. Shawn giggled. Wow, he
really did find that train of thought entirely too amusing.

He gathered the unused toys and stowed them under the bed with the others. Damn, Lassy had quite
the collection—all new and never used, presumably bought for use with him—and Shawn couldn’t
wait to try them out. The things they could do with a vibrating dildo...

Shawn floated through the rest of his morning chores and found himself completely done shortly
before noon. He usually struggled to get through them all before Lassy got home, but today they seemed... different. Lighter. Easier.

Shawn considered the evidence and tried to figure out why. The constant buzzing restlessness that followed him around was absent. The world seemed sharper, cleaner—like he’d slowly lost his eyesight without realizing it, and put on glasses that threw the world into sudden clarity.

So Shawn found himself with time to spare and the urge to go out. Except he hadn’t been out in...too long. He peeked out the window and saw that, yes, his bike was still parked in front of the house. Right where it had appeared a few days after Carlton had brought him home.

It looked like a beautiful day for a ride.

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Shawn found himself in front of the Psych offices. He hadn’t planned it, but after a blissful hour of riding he’d found himself staring at the familiar building on the beach.

Everything looked...the same. He let himself in the front door, smiling at the familiar green lettering, his joke on the world.

Inside, the air smelt stale and the office felt dark in spite of the bright sunshine streaming through the front window. The life of the offices was missing, but he supposed that could only be expected. He and Gus made this place, and Gus wasn’t here and Shawn...well, he wasn’t really here either, was he?

Gus had been here recently. No doubt about it. The lack of dust on any surface, the mail neatly stacked, phone messages cleared and written down. A small tendril of hope unfurled in Shawn’s chest because it meant that Gus wasn’t done. With them, with Psych, with him.

Despite Gus’s constant, unwavering presence in his life, a part of Shawn knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Gus would leave him eventually. Everyone did. Some people came back, but everyone left. One day Gus would grow up and move beyond his frenetic friend whose brain couldn’t forget and who made rapid-fire pop culture references as a way to relieve the constant barrage of trivia and facts that flitted through his consciousness.

But this? Gus taking time out of his own schedule, without Shawn’s insistence, to come here? Especially after everything Shawn had said? (That day still haunted him, even when Larry and Ben had been shoved to the recess of his mind.) This was as good as a pinky-promise. Gus marked Psych like Shawn had marked Carlton’s bedroom. Gus was waiting. Shawn hoped he’d wait a little longer.

Shawn sat in his seat, twirled around and propped his feet on the desk. Remembered old cases and prank wars—his favorite by far was when they prank-called Carlton. Good memories, so many good memories, so why couldn’t he shake off the bad?

Shawn caught sight of his father’s portrait hanging on the far wall and his good mood evaporated. He’d forgotten about Henry. About dad. He’d certainly have noticed Shawn’s absence by now. They had worked out some weird, tacit truce that had them sharing meals once a week or so, hours filled with civilized conversation that hid the worst of Shawn’s barbs. He hadn’t really thought about the man since...

The familiar tightening in his chest started up. Fuck, not again—not now. Shawn sprinted out of the
office, barely remembering to lock the door behind him, and ran for his motorcycle. (One of the Goons had had a Harley—one boot more worn down than the other and a tattoo on his left arm.) The vibrations of the bike weren’t enough to drown out his thoughts, driving not taking up enough of his concentration. He wove through traffic, complicated near-disastrous maneuvers that required all of his concentration so he didn’t end up as Ma and Pa Clampett’s roadside special.

He sucked in a huge breath when the house finally came into view. His lungs burned and his vision spotted; it felt like he hadn’t breathed the whole trip back. He tripped his way up the front stairs, gulping in a lungful of air. Home. Safety, Carlton. Home. cycled through his head, the mantra that held all the bad thoughts at bay.

He fumbled with the keys, scratched the door trying to get it open, stumbled across the threshold. This place was safe. He’d found peace in this very house just this morning. Nothing bad could touch him here.

Except for his memories.

****

Carlton was tired but content when he went off shift. He hadn’t caught the bad guy (yet), but he’d had a major breakthrough so it was only a matter of time and criminal stupidity. He looked forward to getting home and ‘relaxing’ with Shawn. It felt nice to have something to look forward to after work again.

He shifted in his seat, imagining all the various and sundry things he had to look forward to. Esme was a good deal more...colorful that he was used to, but she had some great ideas and suggestions. Though it would be wonderful if she wouldn’t text them to him while at work.

“He called, dropping his keys in the bowl by the door and briefcase on the ground. He loosened his tie and top button as he went in search of his resident ‘Psychic.’ He found Shawn sitting in the kitchen, tracing something on a large legal pad. “Shawn?”

Shawn jumped.

“Lassy! Hey!” His grin came a touch too slow to be genuine and his eyes looked wild around the edges.

“What are you drawing?” Carlton asked. Shawn frowned at the piece of paper in front of him. A series of jagged lines spidered across the page, random tendrils of dark pen against the white-and-blue of the paper.

“A wall,” Shawn answered nonsensically. He tore the page off and crumpled it up. “So I thought we could, um, have some fun.” Shawn grinned at Lassy impishly and glanced down at the table. Carlton followed his gaze to the strip of leather lying beside Shawn’s hand.

“Oh.” Carlton’s mouth went dry and his pants were traitorously arousing against his growing erection. “Yeah.”

Shawn grinned and held the collar out. Carlton took it reverently. For such a small thing it held such symbolism, represented all the power and trust Shawn placed in him. Not a symbol given or taken lightly.

Shaw must have read Carlton’s hesitation as reservation because he said, softly, “We don’t have to, it’s not —”
“No,” Carlton interrupted thickly. “It’s fine. Perfect.” He smiled at Shawn, who smiled back. Something niggled about that smile, relieved where it should have been joyous. But then Shawn stepped into Carlton’s space, throat bared submissively.

Shawn sighed as the cool leather wrapped around his neck, supple and binding. It fit comfortably, just tight enough to remind him of it every time he swallowed. The general feeling of anxiety washed away and he could breathe again, think without tying everything back to Larry and his Goons.

Carlton pulled him into a hug and Shawn relaxed into it, snuggling into Carlton’s chest. Carlton was home. With him. Carlton bowed his head and rubbed against Shawn’s cheek, their 5 o’clock shadow rubbing together. Shawn tucked his hand into Carlton’s pants, copping a blatant feel. Carlton’s laugh reverberated through Shawn and lit up the dark places.

“What’s for dinner?” Carlton murmured.

“I didn’t make anything,” Shawn confessed. He never wanted to move from this spot. Ever.

“Leftovers it is,” Carlton said breezily. He pulled out of the hug with some reluctance and cupped the back for Shawn’s neck. “Why don’t you set the table while I nuke the food?” Shawn simply nodded, trying to control the sudden surge of emotion. He felt rubbed raw and frayed. He kept his eyes down even as Carlton hooked a finger under his chin so they could kiss, so sweetly exuberant Shawn had to smile. Carlton was such a surprising mess of contradictions sometimes.

Shawn very deliberately set one place at the table. He bit his lip, trying to figure out if this might be too far. Carlton’s presence and the collar helped ground him, but he wanted—needed—more. Needed the stillness from this morning, the peace he’d almost forgotten how to feel. Shawn did what he did best—threw caution to the wind and trusted everything to work out as it should. He snagged a pillow from the den and put it beside Carlton’s customary chair, then headed into the kitchen to help with the food. Their meal ended up being a mix of Thai and Chinese take-out and homemade sides.

“Shawn,” Carlton ventured in confusion, “there’s only one place setting.” Shawn put his two dishes down and kept his eyes averted.

“Yes. Sir.” He could feel Carlton watching him, weighing him with his Detective hat on. Shawn tried not to fidget while he waited for Carlton to make his decision.

Carlton’s soft, “Alright,” made Shawn positively giddy. Smiling like an idiot—which had never bothered him as much as Lassy thought it should—Shawn waited until Carlton say down and then knelt on the pillow. Carlton paused, absorbing this new situation, and then served himself. He heaped his plate with Shawn’s favorites; at least this way he could ensure Shawn actually ate something as opposed to watching him push food around his plate. Or build to-scale models of famous monuments.

Shawn let himself sink into the place where the voices were silent. It felt kind of like dreaming (everything went a little indistinct and fuzzy around the edges), but with a deeper sense of stillness and warmth. It usually wasn’t a place he usually found easily, but Carlton broke all the rules and brought out the best in him.

Carlton ran his fingers through Shawn’s hair and rubbed at some knots he could feel underneath taut skin. Shawn leaned into Carlton and enjoyed the contact. He accepted the bits of food Carlton slipped him, running his tongue along the pads of Lassy’s fingers.

Carlton rubbed his knuckles against the side of Shawn’s face before going back to his meal. Shawn
occasionally rubbed his head against Carlton's knees, sighing contentedly. Carlton found himself enjoying this more than he expected. Shawn was focused on him, waiting for Carlton to decide when and what he ate. Carlton trailed his hand down and hooked a finger in the collar and pulled Shawn's head back.

He'd discovered a thing for Shawn's neck, strained and vulnerable. He traced the line of Shawn's tendons, traveling over the length of Shawn's collar and back to skin. Enchanting.

The hint of desperation that had suffused Shawn since he'd gotten home slowly dissipated under Carlton's touch. He sighed in contentment, feeling like he dodged a bullet. Carlton offered him more orange chicken, which Shawn accepted with a pleased sound.

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Carlton hated being late. He found it tacky and disrespectful. Though he thought the same of garish, visible tattoos, so he supposed this made him and Esme even. Carlton nodded to the two new cashiers—Erika and Chris had taken off for parts unknown ages ago; this place had a high turn-around—and made his way to the back.

“That's way too complicated,” Esme's voice carried through the store. “It's really not,” a slightly exasperated male voice replied.

“He's a beginner!”

“You said he's ready.”

“I was wrong. What are you doing?” “Writing down the day you admitted it.” “Fuck you.”

“Esme.” The man's voice was low and warning; Carlton didn't like the sound of it, so he quickened his steps and swept aside the curtain that blocked the back room from the rest of the store, protective instincts rising. Carlton took in the scene with a cop's eye: Esme was on her knees, head bowed, no bruises or signs of distress, though he couldn't see her face. The strange man standing over her, arms folded, had sandy hair, a surfer's build, and just topped 6'1”. The man turned his head and Carlton changed that to model's build; the man was straight out of a catalogue.

“You must be Detective Lassiter.” The man crossed to him, leaving Esme kneeling on the floor. “I'm Sam.”

Carlton warily glanced at Esme before shaking the man's hand, his grip stronger than it needed to be. Sam looked more amused that anything at Carlton's posturing, shaking his hand wryly.

“Have any problems getting here?” Carlton's eyes flicked to Esme again, but Sam's attention stayed on him.

“A little traffic,” Carlton said neutrally. “Could be worse.”

“I lived in LA for a while. Things can always get worse.” Carlton filed that information away in case he ever had to hunt Sam down. “So I was hoping you could show me a few of the knots you know, so I know where to start today.”

Carlton's gaze once again drifted to Esme. He opened his mouth to say something, but Sam grabbed his wrist. Light enough that Carlton couldn't ever mistake it for aggressive, but it drew his attention.

Sam shook his head and raised his left hand. Carlton looked at it, puzzled, before it clicked. He wore a bracelet of the same material and design as the collar on Esme's neck. He replayed the conversation he'd walked in on and realized Sam had taken offense at Esme's language and was letting her know in a, uh, mutually agreed upon totally consenting kind of way. Carlton smirked and nodded his
understanding—he really, really understood—and Sam grinned at him.

“I was hoping you could teach me some hand bindings and rope harnesses. Shawn, uh, likes that kind of thing.” Sam grinned knowingly.

“Oh yeah? Y’all like that little thing I sent your way?” Carlton felt his ear heat and he cleared his throat. “I, uh.”

“It’s cool, man,” Sam said, slapping him on the back. “Let's get a look at your knots.”

Sam didn't call Esme over until Carlton had run through all of the knots, twists, turns, and weaves he knew.

“You're meticulous; that's good. Makes a prettier picture.” Sam snapped his fingers and Esme rose gracefully from her kneeling position and moved to stand by Sam, still silent. Carlton watched, fascinated by the change. Esme was usually vibrant and commanding, her presence filling the room. Now, her exuberance was reigned in; not crushed, but controlled and directed towards Sam. Carlton would be hard pressed to cite any one thing, but he could clearly see how attuned they were, subtly focused on one another above all other things.

“Alright, this is a kotobu ryo-tekubi. This is a basic form to bind the wrists behind the back. We'll move up to some harnesses and a couple variations on the prayer-ties.”

Carlton nodded as if that all made complete sense to him.

“Don't worry,” Sam laughed. “You'll pick up on the terms of art eventually.”
Shawn started feeling restless when Carlton wasn't around. He had trouble focusing, and he could feel something anxious and tense building in his chest. His mind strayed to topics he'd avoided: namely, his fight with Gus and how he was trying to start this thing with Lassy while he was so fucked up.

He hadn't even left the house since he got here.

Carlton deserved better than some agoraphobic fake psychic who mooched off of him.

Shawn took a deep breath. The SBPD building loomed in front of him. He wasn't predisposed to nerves of any kind. If he was scared of something, he went out of his way to do it. If he was nervous about speaking to someone, he talked a lot to cover. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath—that's how other people got over their nerves, right? He could do this, surprise Lassy for lunch.

Shawn almost began walking towards the building when Juliet and Gus came out of the doors. Juliet's blond hair glowed in the California sun. Gus grinned widely at something she said, one hand settled on the small of her back. Gus, ever the gentleman, held the car door open for Jules before jogging around the front and settling into the driver's seat.

Shawn watched them drive away with his heart in his throat. They looked so happy and carefree. Easy. He imagined how they got together, with long looks and slow kisses. Gus would have been a consummate gentleman and formally courted Juliet. A bouquet of flowers here, a small present there. She'd have been aching by the time he actually, fumbling endearingly, got around to asking her out. They would have gone to the perfect restaurant: just classy enough that Juliet could dress up and feel pretty, and Gus could wear his special pants and matching purple top. Soft lighting, classical guitarist playing, the ocean visible out of one window.

They probably had sex like in the movies, Shawn thought sourly. No awkward hands or inappropriate laughter. No potential freak outs or nightmares to interrupt their post-coital naps. Perfect Gusiet-sex. They'd never hurt each other. Juliet would never throw Gus's failure in his face with a grin on her face.

Shawn turned away from the building and walked to the nearest coffee shop, a hole-in-the-wall dive that catered to wannabe poets and goth kids. He got a cup of the blackest coffee he could and sat in the corner staring at it.

This wasn't going to work. Lassiter probably felt sorry for him. Despite his prickly exterior, Carlton's insides were made of sticky loyalty and soft mushiness. Somehow, Shawn made it in there and Carlton was just helping him out, doing what any friend would do.

That's bullshit and you know it, Shawn's psyche tried to scream, but Shawn pushed it away. No one wanted to be with someone as fucked in the head as him. Not a new relationship, at least. People
wanted Gus and Juliet, sunshine and flowers. Someone who would leave the chocolate covered cherries in the assorted mix and eat the coconut ones just so their beloved wouldn't have to. Shawn wasn't any of that. And he didn't know if he'd ever be again.

You're not Carlton's pity case, a scornful voice said. And you're insulting him by thinking that. Shawn whimpered and fist his hands in his hair. He was fighting with himself, conflicted and torn in two different directions.

Somewhere near him, someone started playing with their click-pen, rapid-fire.

Click click click click click click...click click...click click click click

Every sound reverberated in Shawn's skull, multiplied and grew until they resembled the hammer of a gun cocking for the next shot. He went back to that place, the dank warehouse by the ocean with bullets flying overhead. One hundred eleven, to be precise. One hundred eleven rounds fired into walls and hitting bodies and Shawn could place every single one.

He couldn't take it anymore. He stood, toppling his chair, and bolted for the outside. The sunlight hurt his eyes but he didn't care. He took off down the street, ran until his legs wobbled and his lungs burned and then ran some more. His feet had automatically taken him into Carlton's neighborhood. He shook with the effort and sweat soaked his shirt.

“Fuck you, pigs! You'll never take me alive! I'll kill your fucking rat first!”

“STOP IT!” Shawn screamed at the Larry in his head. He saw the man point his gun at him before a red spot bloomed in the center of his forehead. Larry had time to smile, cruel and twisted, before he toppled sideways, the back of his head blown off.

Shawn needed to forget. He couldn't take this, the scene replaying over and over. He stumbled into the house, not registering the fact that it was unlocked.

He grabbed a knife out of the kitchen and headed towards the den. He hacked at the wooden doors when he couldn't get them open, tried to pry the hinges off. He didn't hear Carlton's voice through his panic.

“Shawn! Shawn!” Strong arms pulled him away from the cabinet. “You can't do this, Shawn!”

“No!Letmego!” He started struggling to get away, fighting wildly against his demons. Carlton wrestled Shawn to the ground with his body.

“Stop it now, Shawn.” Shawn responded to his tone of voice, movements turning into spastic jerks and half-hearted struggles. “Shawn,” Carlton warned, and the last hints of movement stopped. When Shawn's breathing evened out and he seemed in control of himself, Carlton eased off.

Shawn anchored himself in Lassiter's presence, giving over to his orders and the press of his body. As soon as Carlton moved, the discord returned. Shawn tensed against it, tried to ignore it. Carlton tried to talk to him, but his voice combined with all the others in his head and Shawn just wanted it to stop.

“Shawn. What happened?” Carlton had left the office to grab a quick lunch and noticed Shawn's bike in the parking lot...but no Shawn. He hadn't answered the house phone or the pre-paid cell phone Carlton insisted he use, so Carlton had returned home in hopes of finding Shawn. This was not what he had in mind. “Shawn?”

Shawn jerked into a sitting position and crossed his arms over his chest. He glared at Lassiter.
“Shawn?” Carlton tried again. “You want to tell me what this was all about?”

“Fuck. You.” Shawn smirked at the dumbfounded expression on Lassiter's face before it closed off and turned cold. Shawn felt a momentary pang of regret and unease but it got swept away by the avalanche of recriminations. He was broken. He kept Lassy up at night. He couldn't turn his brain off long enough to forget what had happened. He and Lassiter would never have what Jules and Gus did.

“What happened, Shawn? What were you hoping to accomplish?”

“Don't see how that's any of your business, Lassy-face.” The words were said lightly but Shawn's expression was a grotesque parody of his usual good-will.

“You made it my business, Shawn. No drinking. Those are the rules and you will respect them.”

“Yeah, or what? You gonna spank me? Or maybe ground me so I can't go to the big dance?”

Carlton ground his teeth together in an effort to keep from shaking Shawn.

“This isn't a joke,” Carlton spluttered, choking on his own rage and fear. If he hadn't gotten here, if Shawn had been inclined to escalate his self medication, if if if...

Everyone hits a point somewhere in situations like this. The point where they do what it takes to get better or they slide downward where no one can reach them. Carlton could see Shawn hitting that point and leaving him behind. Whatever he'd been doing wasn't enough and Shawn wasn't going to wait around for him to figure it out.

“What are you joking about, Lassy?” Shawn demanded viciously. “From where I'm standing, the only joke here is on me.”

“You think I'm laughing?” Carlton demanded, blindingly angry. “That I enjoy coming home to you sprawled in a puddle of your own vomit, comatose and two sips away from alcohol poisoning? I've seen someone die of alcohol poisoning. It's not a pretty or a fun way to go. But please, by all means, tell me how this is a joke, Shawn. How I'm not treating this seriously or busting my hump to try and help you when all you want to do is sulk and snap at me and feel sorry for yourself.”

“I'm sorry,” Shawn said, adopting an air of contrition. “I didn't mean to keep you from your riveting nights in front of the television, or 'historical reenactments,' or weekly trips to the gun club. If I can get a look at your social calendar, I'll schedule my bouts of self-pity in between the reenactors who put up with you because you buy a round for everyone at the bar and the put-upon range attendant who thinks you're stingy with the tips and always cuts off eight minutes of your time.”

Carlton tried to reason with himself. They were both angry and lashing out and it was up to him to be the bigger man. He took a deep breath and looked up, saw Shawn was smirking at him, and Carlton saw red. He spun around and grabbed his keys, resisting the urge to slam the front door behind him.

He had a couple of hours to kill before his coffee date with Esme.

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“Ow! Ow, what the—ESME!” The rolled magazine smacked him on the head again. Carlton growled and grabbed Esme's wrist. “Stop it.”

“Oh there he is,” Esme said with a smile.
“Esme,” Carlton said warningly. Her eyes dropped to the table and she seemed to take up less space. Her wrist rested lightly in his hand, pliant and biddable. Carlton dropped her hand like it burned and retreated to his side of the table, shifting uncomfortably.

“Oh favorite Carlton,” Esme sighed, “he wasn't being bratty. He was asking you for it.” She shook her head at Carlton's continued confusion, her expression twisting into self-recrimination. “Crap, I'm so sorry Carlton. We've been talking about Shawn all the time—I totally forgot about you.”

“Yes, I've felt sorely neglected with all the meetings and you so kindly letting me tie you up.”

“That's all been for Shawn, beautiful. We haven't really discussed you, and I've failed to impart something very important: This. Is. Not. A. Game. Not to him. He's not joking about these things.”

“You've said that. Several times.”

“Yeah, I've said it, but you don't believe it.” Carlton let his head thump to the table. Esme patted him consolingly on the head.

“Yeah, I know. Let me see if I can, once and for all, get this through your thick yet well-coifed head.” She pulled Carlton's head up and made him look at her. “This isn't a game like you've played in the past. This is something you've both agreed to, and I get that it freaks you out a little, but you've got to stop being so afraid that you're only half-assing it. Shawn's asking you to be strong and tough. You're not doing him any favors by cutting him some slack or giving into him. In fact, that's probably the worst thing you could do right now.”

“I understand what you're saying, but—”

“Carlton, do you remember what it took to drag me back to the real world?” Carlton paused, eyeing Esme warily because he sensed a trap hidden in her words. “Carlton.”

“Yes.”

“What did it take?” Carlton sighed and stared at the tabletop.

“I—” he winced.

“You kicked my ass. You hauled me into the SBPD gym, strapped me in some padded gear, handed me a stick, and beat the crap out of me.”

“You beat me too!”

“You let me get angry and smack you around a little before you put me on my ass and told me to, and I quote, 'Stop letting a scumbag asshole run your life and keep you from doing what makes you happy.' This? Is no different.”

“This is so completely different!”

“Well. OK, yes, but it's also not. Shawn's asking you for something that I know you can give him if you'd just let yourself go.”

“I can't see Shawn living this way,” he admitted. “He's not that kind of person.” Carlton winced at how condescending that sounded. Esme just shook her head and let the comment slide off.

“We're not talking about forever, Carlton,” she said softly. “We're talking about now. Your boy's in crisis and he's looking for help. What he needs right now is going to be different than what he needs
in a few months or a year, and that's OK. You'll figure that out when you get there, but you have got to stop thinking about the future so much and concentrate on the now, otherwise you'll never get to that place.”

“But it's...it doesn't...” Esme could taste Carlton's confusion, his fight with himself. He didn't have a roadmap for this, no cut-and-dry answer to the situation he found himself in. And one thing she'd gleaned about Carlton Lassiter over the years was that he hated to flounder: he liked to win, and everything he did he did well. But this took the cooperation of another person and faith in oneself, and Carlton was constantly striving to prove his own self-worth to himself and those around him. She didn't think he'd done the simple thing and just asked Shawn what he thought.

“Think of it this way: when people get in trouble, with drugs or alcohol or whatever, we ship them off to halfway houses and military schools and the like, where every minute of everyday is accounted for. You don't have to think about anything but the next chore. You don't have to make decisions. It's an institutionalized form of submission. You're Shawn's halfway house, Carlton. You're the one he's looking towards to help him get his head back on straight. You can't meander through this; that's going to do more harm than good, no matter your intentions. You've started working this dom-sub system out, but Shawn needs more that you're giving. If you can't give him that, then you both need to figure something else out. Fast. But if you can...well, you've got draw the lines, set the boundaries, and stick to them.”

Carlton frowned at Esme, head cocked to one side. “Why'd you quit?”

Esme paused mid-sip and gave Carlton a look filled with amused exasperation. “Asking a potentially loaded and painful personal question to change subjects, Detective? Amateur.”

Carlton blushed and started stammering, “Oh, no, I didn't mean...that is, it wasn't—”

“I'm teasing you, Carlton. I'm more than aware of your lack of interpersonal skills.” Carlton glowered at her. “But to answer your question, I realized I was using my patients as a way to avoid my own issues and problems, and I wasn't really happy being that kind of headshrinker. I didn't like the job, and let that color the whole situation with...you know. I find my shop more fulfilling, and I still counsel people, just in a very specific kind of kinky way.”

“You mean...you do this for a living? Tell people how to, um...” Carlton trailed off and fidgeted in his seat.

“Oh my God, I swear one day I'll get you to say BDSM, submissive, and dominant without turning into a blushing virgin.” Carlton glared, an expression he was becoming exceedingly familiar with in her company. Esme propped her chin on her hand and smiled at him dreamily. “You know, you're really hot when you're all growly and commanding.”

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“Even though I have no idea what I'm doing?” Carlton asked in disbelief.

“You know more than you give yourself credit for. You've got good instincts.” Carlton's lip curled up and one eyebrow rose in skepticism. “No really. You've got an overwhelming urge to protect the people you care about, this deliciously toppy voice, a dominating presence, and you read body language really well. Everything else is just toppings. Um, maybe not the best ice cream metaphor, though very true. Sprinkles? Everything else is sprinkles.”

“That's not—”

“Carlton, you knew the second I gave in to you earlier. You read all the submissive signals and backed off because it made you uncomfortable. I wasn't being obvious, most people would have
missed them. And you're not attuned to me the same way you will be to Shawn. Quit worrying. You've got to face up to your fears.”

“I don't even know where to start! With any of it! Do I tie him up? And how do you do that without hurting him? I've seen rope chafe and it's not fun. And some of those toys you snuck into my bag—yes, I caught that, I'm a trained detective, Esme—look vicious and I don't want to hurt him, well only when he has one of his visions with—”

“Wow, you are just filled with the angst,” Esme said dryly. “Carlton, when I said I'd help you and teach you, I didn't mean just in theory. I'll help you and teach you. We've already started; these meetings haven't just been for Shawn's benefit. And we hold classes for this kind of stuff!” She rolled her eyes at Carlton's horrified look. “No, I'm not going to ask Head Detective Carlton Lassiter to come to the 'How to Beat your Lover' beginner's class. You're my friend, we'll continue our private arrangement. And a little rope burn never hurt anyone. Besides, I'll make Sam help.”

“Hasn't he helped enough?” Carlton demanded sullenly. “He's not exactly invested.”

Esme grinned. “Of course he is! I'm invested, so he's invested. And he likes you. Besides, he can tell you...whatever it is you tops tell each other. I'm, frankly, completely stumped.”

“I really doubt that,” he muttered. “And you're going to ensure his cooperation...how?” Esme picked up her coffee cup and looked at Carlton primly.

“The other subs of the world would never forgive me if I told a top our little secrets.”

“Oh good God, you're never meeting Shawn.” Esme smirked and Carlton eyed her warily. She was going out of her way to help him—and by extension Shawn—in ways most people paid her for. Carlton felt guilty for cutting into her business, getting for free something that was probably keeping Shawn from the brink. “So how much do these sessions cost?”

Esme arched her eyebrow at Carlton and he got the feeling he'd said something very, very wrong. He held his breath until grabbed the bill and plonked it down in front of him. “ Twelve oh-six. And I'll see you Thursday at the shop, 7:13 sharp.”

“7:13?”

“What? It's a perfectly good time.”

“Sharp?”

“Keep talking and I'll ask you how your mother's doing.”

“7:13 Thursday it is.”

“Now let's talk about how you're going to reign your boy in. I've got an idea...”

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Shawn sat on his bed and stared at his hands, knuckles red and raw. He'd punched the wall in his bathroom, cracked one of Carlton's tiles and his bones in the process.

He could very well have fucked this up. Shattered it into a thousand pretty little pieces. He could just imagine what would happen when Carlton came back. (He'd have to come back, this was his house.) Shawn would find himself out on the streets, alone with Larry and his memories with no place to hide or find refuge.
Shawn wavered between his natural inclination to do them both a favor and cut out the painful altercation and get the hell out of dodge. Leave and go very, very far from here. The weird, new part of him wanted to dig its heels in and throw a temper tantrum until he wore Lassy down and they were OK again. Not that that would work.

Shawn got up and started throwing clothes into his bags. His entire life cut down to two duffles. He'd survived with just one, held a dozen jobs around the world while Gus had gone to college, and been happy. His college had been various stints slinging drinks in South American bars and sleeping his way around the US.

He kind of liked Santa Barbara. Shawn threw his half-packed duffle across the room. 'Liked' in that he'd been here for the better part of two years doing the same job and hadn't thought about taking off until, well, now. Maybe that was a sign.

His bags were half-full with the rest of his belongings strewn haphazardly around the room when Carlton came home and found Shawn sitting on his bed with his hands in his hair. Shawn didn't notice Carlton come into his room.

Carlton glanced around, took in the haphazard packing, the clothes strewn everywhere, and Shawn hunched on his bed. He was so mad he couldn't see straight.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, voice dangerously soft. Shawn started, eyes wide with surprise.

"Oh you're...I..." Shawn trailed off, eyes flicking to the mess around the room. "Was thinking about taking a vacation."

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Thinking. You're not allowed to anymore." Shawn blinked. He'd driven Lassiter crazy; after all this time, this was what it took? "You want to walk, you do it now, Shawn. Go wherever you want. But I'm warning you right now, if you stay, I'm going to kick your ass so hard you'll wished you'd signed up for the SEALs instead."

Shawn tried to find a coherent thought between 'So sexy right now!' and 'Oh. Shit.' Carlton radiated authority and power like he hadn't before; this was a new level to what they'd been doing.

"Shawn," Carlton growled warningly.

"I, um."

"You have ten minutes to think about it. If you want to leave, pack your stuff and go. If you're staying, your ass better be in the kitchen before the ten minutes are up. With that Carlton spun on his heel and marched downstairs, pushing everything away. He needed to face this with a clear head and whatever calm he could muster up. Dealing with perps had trained him well.

Ten minutes. Carlton pulled out the tea Esme had sent along. It would at least keep him busy while Shawn made his decision.

----

Shawn sank onto the bed and tried to wrap his brain around what had just happened. Lassy had gone uber-Dom on him. The idea was both enticing and terrifying.
The familiar part of himself urged him to run, take the out and go. Shawn surprised himself when his feet took him to the kitchen where Lassy sat at the table blowing on a hot mug of tea. Lassy didn't own any tea, much less drink it.

“Sit down, Shawn.” Carlton's words were cool and controlled. Shawn couldn't figure out how to get his feet to move. They were stuck to the floor, superglued in place. “Now.” Shawn lurched forward on autopilot and took his seat woodenly. Carlton had some papers sitting beside him, turned so Shawn couldn't read them. He pushed a mug towards Shawn.

“Carly, I—”

“Quiet.” Shawn snapped his mouth shut with a click. “Good. Drink your tea.” Shawn stared at the incongruity of tea in the Lassiter household. It just went to prove that he had to be dreaming. Or gotten sucked into an alternate reality where Carlton drank tea and qualified for Top Top of the Year.

“Now, Shawn,” Carlton ordered, a touch of wary annoyance entering his tone. Shawn dutifully reached for the mug, watching Carlton over the rim, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Carlton looked like the head detective he was, unruffled and collected sipping at his tea. Shawn blew on the liquid and then sipped daintily. Huh, not bad. Probably someone's home brew judging from the myriad of subtle flavors that wouldn't make it in a grocery store setting.

Shawn glanced up and caught Carlton watching him, blue eyes not giving anything away. He'd never appreciated just how much Carlton let him in until he got shut out. Yeah, cutting and running would be way better than this torture, sitting here in silence, waiting for Carlton to get to the point. This could go anywhere. Shawn started fidgeting, brain conjuring up all the ways Carlton could break up with him and kick him out, starting with the clichéd clothes scattered outside on the lawn and moving on to sky writing and geocaching.

“Calm down, Shawn. We're just going to talk.” “I can totally tell,” Shawn sniped.


“Things are going to change,” Carlton started. Shawn nodded; he'd figured that out pretty fast. “We'll start with an apology. I'm sorry, I haven't given you what you needed the past couple of months.”

“You've given me everything I've asked for!” Shawn protested. Carlton glared, and Shawn shrank back. He couldn't help the sullen, “You have.”

“What you've asked for and what you need aren't the same.” That sounded scarily ominous. “You've been lying to me, Shawn.”

Shawn bristled and jerked up. “I have not!”

“When I ask you what's wrong, you say 'nothing.' When I ask if you're OK, you say 'yes.' Clearly, there is something wrong and you are not OK.” Shawn blushed and looked away because when phrased like that...

Shawn took a deep breath, shoved the voices yammering at him to run away like Brave Sir Robin into a deep abyss of Not Going There, and apologized. “I'm sorry.” Carlton reached out and covered Shawn's hand, his large one wrapped around Shawn's.

“We're starting over,” Carlton announced, “and we're going to get it right this time.”

“Wasn't too bad last time,” Shawn said flippantly, but his words rang hollow.
"I can't watch you destroy yourself, Shawn." Carlton's careful veneer of control cracked, fear and worry breaking through. "I'm not...you can't ask me to do that." Shawn swallowed, his throat clicking dryly, as he watched Carlton visibly pull himself together, their hands clutched together.

"So, we're going to do this right," Carlton said with renewed determination. He reached for the sheafs of paper and handed one to Shawn. "This is it."

Shawn's mouth dropped open. Carlton wanted...was offering to...

"There are three copies, one for me, one for you, and one for a trustworthy third party. The terms are nonnegotiable." Shawn glanced back down at the contract trying to sort through the chaos in his head.

"Carly, this is..." his voice came out thin and reedy. "It's a promise," Carlton said.

"You're asking me to—" Shawn shook his head. The only thing keeping him from bolting was his death grip on the coffee mug.

"I'm asking you to trust me," Carlton replied. "I'm asking you to let me help."

"This isn't what—24/7? You'd own me, Carlton."

"For the next four months," Carlton said, as if he did this every day. Shawn stared at the contract. Bound by my freely given signature, I give myself to the ownership of Carlton B. Lassiter, to love and cherish as he sees fit until the time this contract expires or comes to its natural conclusion.

One sentence that took away his rights, his freedom, and placed him future in the hands of a surly Santa Barbara police detective. It was crazy. Absolutely insane. He didn't even have a bill of rights attached to this thing. They hadn't really built up to it or discussed the wide ramifications or—Shawn snatched up the pen and scrawled his signature at the bottom. His hand shook and he realized he was breathing hard, gasping for air.

"Shawn." He flinched. "This isn't—"

"Don't," Shawn pleaded, voice ragged and low. He didn't want an out; if he got offered an out, he'd take it and never come back. He couldn't think about this too much. The impulse to run already pounded through him, his heart racing and adrenaline spiking. Without another word, Carlton picked up the pen and signed underneath Shawn's signature, pledging to "treat Shawn Spencer with the care and love his station afforded, and ensure his continued well being" for the duration of their contract.

Staring down at the rapidly drying ink, Shawn felt...content. His heart slowed, as did his breathing. There, in black-and-white, was proof that Lassy wasn't going anywhere. Shawn swallowed the rest of his tea in shell-shocked reflex. When he set the empty mug on the table Carlton replaced it with a pen.

"Two more." Shawn signed without protest, hand steady as a surgeon's. Carlton collected the papers, stacked them neatly, and then tucked them to one side. So important, just swept to one side for the time being. Shawn felt numb and overwhelmed.

"Bed time," Carlton said, extending his hand to Shawn. He took it, letting Carly pull him to his feet. Carly. Who owned him now. Shawn felt unbalanced.

"Sleep in the guest room tonight," Carlton ordered gently. "I'll wake you up in the morning." He peered carefully at Shawn, taking in the addled expression and unfocused eyes. Shawn shook his
head and his eyes cleared.

“Yeah. Yeah, OK.”

Carlton grabbed Shawn by the shoulders and pulled him into a possessive, hungry kiss. Shawn melted into it with a groan. “Tomorrow we start over,” Carlton growled. Shawn pressed closer and Carlton slipped his hands into the pockets of Shawn's jeans. He let them enjoy it for longer than he should, but he couldn't make himself pull away. Not yet.


Shawn took a small, stuttering step back. Then another. He backed out of the room, eyes never leaving Carlton, running into the wall when he misgauged the door. Carlton smirked. Shawn made it through the door, and with a final look, turned and ran up the stairs.

Christ.

Carlton fell into his chair, relief and terror and sheer adrenaline leaving him shaken. He owned Shawn Spencer.

Carlton needed a moment to absorb the impact of that. And a drink would be perfect, but Esme had been uncompromising about Carlton holding himself to a higher standard. Esme, who was completely responsible for his newest possession.

“I've got an idea. It's unusual, even in the kink community,” Esme warned. “But you're in unusual circumstances.” Esme scribbled something down on a pad and handed it to Carlton.

“Esme! I can't do this!”

“Sure you can.

“This is...this is slavery!”

“Well. Yeah. But not how you're thinking.”

“This is huge.” Two sentences.

“Epic,” Esme agreed without irony.

“If it doesn't work—”

“If it does?” Carlton glared at her. “If you go into this expecting failure it'll be bad. Very bad.”

“I'm not—” Carlton dropped his head in his arms and took time to compose himself and his thoughts. He took a deep breath and sat up. “I'm not qualified for this. I haven't lived this life—I don't want to live this way. Not for the long term.”

“But for the short?”

“I'll do whatever Shawn needs,” Carlton said seriously.

“Spoken like a true Dom,” Esme said with a gentle smile. “And why you're going to sign a separate
contract with me.”

“I am?”

“You are. A contract in which you vow to continue our after school lessons for the duration of your contract with Shawn, as time allows. That you tell me—or Sam, if you'd rather—what's going on in your head at least once a week so we make sure you don't implode. That outlines the steps you're planning to take to get Shawn the help he needs, outside of your personal relationship.” Carlton stared at her. “Basically, I'm your kink-therapist. Now call in to work. You're taking some vacation time.”

Carlton looked at the handwritten list, Esme's signature tight and precise compared to his informal scribble. He placed it in a drawer next to Shawn's contract and set the alarm for late morning. Two weeks to start this thing off right.
Carlton reviewed his list of Things to Talk--

“Tell!”

--Tell Shawn About.

“Really, Esme? This is all very...paternalistic.” Silence drifted over the phone. Carlton steeled himself.

“Favorite Carlton,” Esme started in her most saccharine tone. Crap. “Darling. If my third-wave feminist, mostly Native American ass can reconcile being submissive to a blonde white man from the upper middle-class, I think you can get over your 'paternalistic' issues. *Promise.*” Carlton sighed heavily. “GodDAMN Carlton Lassiter! You're a cop! You growl fire and shit nails! You strike fear into the hearts of Santa Barbara's underground! And you can't psych yourself up to give orders and lay down the law for someone who signed up and asked for it?”

“Please don't use that word.”

“What word?”

“Psych.”

“You are the weirdest person I know.”

“Hey!” Carlton protested. He’d seen some of the people Esme knew. “Look, it's--”

“Ding ding ding! School's out detective. You're on your own now. Time for you to grow up and deal. Call me when it's over.” The dial tone hummed in Carlton's ear.

“Thanks so much *Esme.*” Though she may have a point. Or two. Carlton reviewed his list and went upstairs to wake Shawn up.

----

Shawn was happily snuggled in his bed when someone rudely interrupted his beauty sleep.

“Time to get up!” Shawn rolled over and buried his head under his pillow. Carlton rolled his eyes. Seemed Shawn was only perky in the mornings when sex was involved. Carlton ripped the covers off, smacked Shawn on the ass, and bellowed, “UP!”

Shawn cursed and rolled out of bed, blinking blearily. “What the hell?”

“Quiet,” Carlton snapped. “You have ten minutes to shower, shave, dress, and get downstairs. Don't be late.” Carlton left the room without checking to see if Shawn obeyed. He would or he wouldn't.
Carlton was prepared for either eventuality. Regardless, he’d given Shawn an impossible task.

(“This is wrong.”

“It's not.”

“I'm tricking him.”

“You're proving things are different in a way that you can control so you don't have to later on when the stakes are much, much higher and things have the potential to go wrong. Trust me, this is the fastest way to ensure his cooperation, and you're not going to make a habit of it. You're not, right?”

“No!”)

“I'm trusting the advice of a tattooed sex store owner,” Carlton bemoaned to himself. Shawn was officially late. The minutes ticked by. Three minutes past Shawn skidded to a halt in front of Carlton, shaving cream on his chin and shirt clinging to wet skin. “You're late.”

“Your request wasn't exactly—” Carlton drew himself to his full height and glared down at Shawn. His submissive. Mindset was very important here. He was in charge, Shawn was not. It worked because Shawn went silent and took a step back.


“I'm sorry,” he blurted out of the blue. Carlton didn't reply, just let the silence stretch between them. Interrogation tactics 101. Shawn's shoulders dropped lower and lower until he was taking up the least amount of space possible.

“First change: disobey me and you'll be punished.” Shawn sucked in a sharp breath of air. “Disrespect and backtalk will be similarly punished. One swat for every minute you were late, five for questioning me.” Shawn's head flew up in alarm even as his body clenched in anticipation.

“That's not—”

“Wanna add five more?” Shawn glared mutinously but stopped talking. Carlton kept his expression neutral and gestured to his knees. “Pants down, let's go.” Shawn stared, aghast. No way, Lassiter had lost his mind! Carlton arched his brow but Shawn remained rooted to his spot. Fuck, this was exactly what he'd wanted for weeks—months even. But now that it was right in front of him...

“Now.” He jerked towards Lassy but couldn't bring himself to move. He let himself go lax when Carlton upended him. Shawn pressed his face into Lassy's thigh as his pants were tugged to his knees. He expected Carlton to lay into him, rapid fire. Instead, he rand his hands over the curve of Shawn's ass, his touche reverent and light. Shawn thought he heard Carlton whisper 'beautiful,' but that couldn't be. Carlton Lassiter would never say something so—Shawn cut that thought off before Carlton turned into the psychic and Shawn found himself in even more trouble.

The first swat caught him off guard, quick and vicious. It stung. The next three followed in quick succession, overlaid with one another. Carlton's hand moved on, covered Shawn's ass. He gripped Lassy's leg through it all, eyes clenched tight. He fought with himself, struggled against falling into the pretty places Carlton could show him.

He belatedly realized the spanking had stopped and Carlton's touches were trying to soothe the
trembling in his muscles. Carlton stroked the length of his back, hand tucked under his shirt. Shawn let go of his death grip on Carlton's leg after regaining some of his poise. Carlton helped him stand and rearrange his clothes, keeping the fragile silence between them. Shawn felt fragile.

“Don't you have work?” Shawn asked, voice gravelly and strained.

“ Took some time off,” Carlton said softly, brushing his thumb across Shawn's cheekbone, ignoring Shawn's surprise. “Come on, I'm hungry.”

Carlton guided Shawn with a hand on his lower back. Shawn watched him gather together bowls for a fruit salad and plates for warm bagels. The silence between them felt heavy but not overpowering. He put a huge bowl of fruit in front of Shawn with a silent command to eat. All of it.

“No pineapple?” Shawn said with a sad frown. Carlton flicked his ear. “Eating, I'm eating!”

Carlton watched to make sure Shawn ate everything in his bowl and the bagel he'd liberally smeared with cream cheese. Shawn had lost weight despite Carlton's best efforts. That would be changing soon enough. So far, Shawn had been biddable and fairly cooperative. Carlton was too much of a realist to think it would last for long; Shawn was still reeling from their new arrangement and the harsh truths of what he'd agreed to hadn't yet settled in. But he couldn't help thinking that maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

He glanced at the clock. Pushing towards ten. They needed to talk; Shawn had places to be. Carlton leaned back and figured out his best course of action while Shawn cleared the table, putting the dishes in the washer. Shawn returned to his seat, hazel eyes watching him expectantly. Carlton leaned forward.

“Things are different now, Shawn.” Carlton kept eye contact and made his voice even and neutral. “I took two weeks off to help you get used to this, and to show I'm very, very serious about what's going on. You're mine now, and I'm going to take care of you, and you're going to obey me, understand?” Shawn nodded. “I didn't hear that.”

“Yes.” Carlton pursed his lips. “Yes sir.”

“First, if you're ever in distress, you will tell me. I'll never get mad for you telling me the truth. If I find out you didn't tell me, you will not enjoy the consequences. If you ever let things get as bad as they did again, so help me I will use every implement I have up there on your ass.” The fear and anger adding an extra layer of vehemence to Carlton's words.

“I understand, sir.”

“In fact, if you hurt yourself in any way, I'll take it as a personal insult. Guess why.” Shawn swallowed in the face of Carlton's intensity. “Because you're mine. The only bruises and marks that go on your body are the ones I put there. Say it, Shawn.”

“I-I belong to you,” Shawn whispered. The words caused feelings of anxiety and release.

“Again.”

“I belong to you,” he repeated, stronger this time, but just as conflicted.

“Good. We'll get this out of the way then: no more sex.”

“WHAT?!”
“Shawn!”

“Sorry, it's just...sorry.” Shawn folded his arms and sulked. Carlton waited for the predictable outburst. “But that's not--”

“It's a privilege you can earn back,” Carlton interrupted. “But it'll take some time and a lot of work on your part.” And a lot of cold showers on his. Shawn pouted. “You don't get a say in this, and acting like a child is not the way to win me over. Do you understand?”

Shawn nodded once, curtly.

“I'll spank you as many times as it takes--”

“YESSIR.” Carlton added another tally to his mental list of infractions. Shawn would hate him tonight.

“I'll take care of breakfast,” Carlton continued blithely, “but you're responsible for lunch and dinner. You can cook or carryout as you chose. You'll eat kneeling beside me, and you will eat everything I give you. You're also responsible for making the grocery lists.”

“I..”

“Go on.”

“Who will do the shopping?” Shawn didn't acknowledge his agoraphobic tendencies often.

“You can come with me if you want, but I'll take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

“You get an hour every night that's just for you. You can say anything you want with impunity. I won't interrupt, just listen.”

“Anything?” Shawn asked, a devilish smirk pulling at his lips. Carlton repressed a sigh.

“Anything.” Shawn was going to make him regret this. “The rest of your day is mine to do with as I wish, and you'll do what I say. Any questions?” Shawn shifted because, yes, he had like a billion, but he wasn't sure how they'd be received. “Shawn? I'm not going to get mad if you ask questions. I'm pretty sure you'd go pineapple-side-up if I tried to stop you.”

“Can we still sleep together?” Shawn blurted in a rush. He didn't want to go into his reasons, and he wasn't sure what he'd say if Carlton asked him to explain.

“You're moving all your clothes into the master bedroom today,” Carlton told him. Shawn took that as a yes and sighed in relief. “After today, I'm going to decide what you wear,” he added, taking in Shawn's attire. At least he could impose some style on Shawn for the next four months. Maybe swing by Henry's and pick up the stuff they'd left behind at Shawn's old apartment. Carlton reached into his pocket and pulled out the braided length of leather.

“This is for you,” Carlton said, leaning close to Shawn and holding the collar up so he could see. It was made of thin, dark brown strips of leather woven together with an eternity knot at the front. Shawn forgot how to breathe as Carlton buckled it on, pulling it just tight enough that he would never forget it was there. “You are not allowed to take it off unless I give you permission. I want you to remember that you're mine.” Shawn tried to think around the so sexy mantra repeating in his head. Carlton was growly and possessive and commanding. He could only nod mutely, giving in to
Carlton's dominance. Carlton grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him in for a searing kiss, tongue demanding and confident. He pulled away abruptly, leaving Shawn wanting more.

"Go move your things now. Be back here by eleven twenty. We have somewhere we need to be." Shawn got up to go, but Carlton caught him before he got very far.

Carlton looked down at him with hooded eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind and kissed Shawn again, letting everything he couldn't say spill into the press of their lips. Shawn smiled goofily as he made his way up the stairs.

-----

Shawn stuffed his clothes into his duffle, already half-full from the day before. The day before. It felt like a lot longer than that. So much had happened since that fight. He paused.

He'd signed a slave contract. Carlton hadn't put it in those words, but that was exactly what he'd done. Signed himself over as Carlton's slave. Shawn frowned. He couldn't see Carlton as the kind of guy who really got off on that kind of thing. Topping and submission play sure. A slave agreement was something else.

Shawn shook his head, trying to clear it. Carlton hadn't called it a slave agreement as such. In fact, Shawn couldn't see Carlton thinking of anyone as a slave without serious reservations. It just didn't make sense with what he knew of Carlton Lassiter.

But however out of character and unusual it struck him, it didn't change the fact that Shawn had signed it. That thought lifted some invisible burden that Shawn hadn't realized he'd been carrying around. His life wasn't his own anymore.

He belonged to Carlton. He belonged.

****

Shawn glanced at Carlton and ran his finger over his new collar. He hadn't been able to figure out where they were going, and he wasn't sure he should ask. He didn't want to see those little lines that appeared between Carly's eyes when he was disappointed, or the small downturn of his lips when he was aggravated. He'd catalogued Lassy's looks over the time they'd worked together, neatly stored in a file labeled "Lassy-Face."

"You can ask," Carlton said, torn between amusement and dread.

Shawn startled out of his thoughts; he always forgot Carlton's own skills at reading people. Probably because he was so bad at social interactions and obfuscation. Shawn still hadn't managed to bridge the gap between Carlton's abilities to read people versus his inability to put that knowledge into play. He assumed Carlton read the people he socialized with.

"Where are we going?" Shawn asked dutifully. As if it wasn't killing him not to know. Pursed lips, squinty eyes, white knuckles on the wheel. Shawn was NOT going to enjoy this.

"We're going to talk this guy." Amongst other things, Carlton sucked at subterfuge, undercover work, and anything that involved 'pulling one over' on someone else.

"This guy? The one with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth?" Shawn asked, bouncing in his seat. Carlton threw him a nasty look and Shawn figured he may have over done it.

"And a degree in mental health sciences."
“You're taking me to a shrink?!” Shawn ignored how whiney he sounded.

“A licensed therapist, yes.” Shawn stared at Carlton, wondering just when his least favorite head detective had LOST his MIND. Shawn opened his mouth to snap out a quick rant on the uselessness of such things, but Carlton cut him off. “You don't have a choice.”

“Therapy only works if the therapee wants to be there and, I dunno, likes the person they're talking to.”

“We will go to every therapist in the greater Santa Barbara area until you find one you can live with.” Shawn turned away and smirked out the window, an ugly, twisted expression. A stipulation easily taken care of. “And if you lie to me or don't give them a fair chance, you won't sit down for a week.”

----

Carlton sat in the wait room and flipped through out dated magazines. *People* and *US Weekly*. Christ, what were the kids reading these days? Mindless drivel about celebrities who broke the law and got away with it because they had money and one name.

The doors banged open, startling in the quite of the office. Shawn stalked out, face tight and drawn. Carlton followed him out to the car, unlocking the door and slipping into the driver's seat. He cranked the car and pulled out of the lot.

“That's a no then?” he asked lightly.

“He's fucking half his clients,” Shawn said disgustedly. He was also a crackpot, getting off on his patient's dirty secrets and personal angst. “Home's the other way.”

“Yes it is. Your next appointment is not.” Shawn stared at Carlton. Seriously? Carlton appeared to take no notice. Shawn sank further into his chair and glared out the window. This was going to be a fucking long day.

“How many 'next appointments' do I have?”

Four, as it turned out. Shawn found something legitimately wrong with each one. Carlton assumed he wasn't lying. Shawn was a consummate bullshitter, but he rarely ever flat-out lied when it counted. Not that Carlton had discovered. Save for the whole 'I'm a psychic' thing.

Shaw had another four appointments tomorrow, three the day after, and ten more on a list in Carlton's pocket. Shawn would either find one he could work with or get so tired of intake interviews that he'd break down and find someone he could work with.

Shawn would talk to a professional if Carlton had to drive him to every appointment and sit outside to make sure he stayed.

After their fourth appointment, Carlton pulled into an Indian restaurant. Shawn stopped sulking long enough to perk up at the thought of food. Indian food, to be precise. It was something Shawn loved but, as far as Carlton had figured, didn't allow himself to indulge in much. Shawn practically skipped through the door.

Shawn grabbed his menu, but Carlton took it away. He kept his cool as Shawn scrutinized him, playing absently with his water glass.

“May I take your order?” the waiter asked, turning first to Carlton.
“I want the lamb frankie with raita and naan. He wants lamb vindaloo with raita, garlic naan, and,” Carlton smirked at Shawn, “a lassi.” That was...exactly what Shawn had planned to order. Especially the lassi. He leaned back, a slow grin chasing the last of his sulk away.

“Is this a date?” Carlton sipped his drink, but Shawn caught the smile he tried to hide and felt inordinately pleased. “But you didn't leave me flowers.”

Carlton rolled his eyes. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Shawn smirked and hooked his foot around Carlton's ankle. “Maaaaaaaaaaaybe.”

Despite having to sit through four intake evaluations from four incompetent shrinks—each one inept in different and stunning ways—the meal had put Shawn in a much better mood.

****

“Yeah, you'll just keep doing this until I learn my lesson, right?” Shawn sighed, sleep already dragging him under. It had been one hell of a day.

“The beatings will continue until morale improves,” Carlton intoned. At first he thought Shawn was crying, his shoulders shaking against Carlton's chest. Then a loud belly laugh ripped from him, deep and joyous and completely uncontainable. Shawn laughed, clutching his belly, tears leaking out of his eyes with the force. Soon Carlton was laughing too, his jaw aching from muscle strain, nose buried in Shawn's neck.

For the first time the both believed, without doubt or reservation, that everything would be OK.
it's a Game of Inches

“Healing takes courage, and we all have courage, even if we have to dig a little to find it.”
~Tori Amos

Carlton sighed and read about what Angelina had been doing around this time last year—somehow she'd managed to convince the world she wasn't crazy and unbalanced, a feat even he had to appreciate. He got wrapped up in an article about stunt people in Hollywood (a wonderful way to channel potentially deviant behavior), and missed the person standing in front of him until they pushed his magazine down.

“Those People, they are the backbone of America.” Carlton blinked.

“Did you last a full session?” he asked in disbelief. Shawn smirked and tucked his hands in his pockets.

“Isn’t it lunch time?”

“Shawn--”

“Mr. Spencer! Good, I caught you. You forgot your appointment reminder for next time.”

“Why thank you, Francine. I do declare, Ah'd be just looooost without you!” Dr. Kagan's secretary blushed and tittered at Shawn's horrible Southern accent and absurd fawning.

“I'll see you in two days Mr. Spencer,” she said with a vapid giggle, fluttering her ridiculously fake eyelashes at Shawn. A small voice pointed out that Carlton may be overreacting here.

“It shall be the highlight of my appointment,” Shawn said with a gallant bow. The secretary retreated, and Shawn turned dancing eyes on Carlton. He tried to tamp down the jealousy, but Shawn's wide grin told him he hadn't managed it in time. Shawn hooked his arms through Carlton's like an escort. “But you will be the highlight of my day Lassy-wassy-woobiekins!”

“That's it, twenty for every God-awful nickname you give me,” Carlton pronounced, smacking Shawn playfully on the ass and then leaving it there, tucked in to one pocket. Shawn wiggled into the hand with a laugh. And Shawn thought he was joking. Behind his sunglasses, Carlton's eyes glinted evilly. When they got back to doing things—he could hear Esme and Shawn laughing at him for not even thinking the word 'sex'—he had a few surprises for Shawn.

But thank God they'd finally found a therapist. He'd seen more of Santa Barbara in the last two days than he had during his stint in vice.

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Carlton enjoyed the last of Shawn's lemon-garlic chicken. He really was a fantastic cook. Carlton almost believed he'd learned from a four-star chef. Almost. He saved the last piece for Shawn, who took it with a small sigh of protest. Carlton ignored it; Shawn needed to gain at least ten more pounds.

“Knees?” Carlton asked, cupping Shawn's chin and running his thumb over Shawn's lips.
“I could go for hours,” Shawn said with a leer, eyeing the bulge in Lassy's jeans. He sucked Carlton's thumb into his mouth. Lass may have laid down the crazy no-sex law, but that didn't mean Shawn would make it easy for him. He twirled his tongue around Carlton's thumb, teased it like he would if there were far more interesting things in its place.

“Shawn,” Carlton warned, though his voice held a breathless quality. Shawn smiled and released Carly's thumb with a lewd pop.

“Yes, sir?” Shawn asked, looking up at Lassy through his lashes. He saw the flash of desire cross Carlton's face before it got replaced with the firm countenance of Dom Lassiter.

“Clean the kitchen, then meet me in the den.” Shawn shuddered at how freaking hot Lassy looked at when he went all commanding.

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Carlton clicked off the TV as soon as Shawn came in.

“This is your time, Shawn. You have an hour to say whatever you want.”

“Shouldn't we have a big box with a finely worked iron screen between us, a rosary, and vestments for Confessional Hour?”

“Confessional hour?” Carlton asked skeptically.

“You'd make a really hot priest, Lasstastic,” Shawn said thoughtfully, mentally dressing Carlton in all black with a white collar peeping out. And then taking it all off.

“I'd have taken a vow of celibacy,” Carlton pointed out.

“I don't mind if you call me God in bed,” Shawn said flippantly. Carlton rolled his eyes, but Shawn had long since figured out the difference between save-me-from-Spencer and I'm-hiding-my-amusement-and-Shawn-is-brilliant-slash-dead-sexy. “So, uh. Where, how?”

“Whatever you want, however you want,” Carlton said. It felt weird to have that freedom. Carlton had been micromanaging his life for the past few days, telling him what to do and when to do it. He hadn't had to wonder about anything or make a choice in 160 hours and 43 minutes. Carlton already had the answers.

Shawn considered his options and figured snuggles with Lassy-face could never be wrong. He climbed onto the couch and laid his head in Carlton's lap. Carly laid one hand on Shawn's chest and started running a hand through his hair.

“What should I talk about?” Shawn wondered, turning into the hand scratching through his head.

“Whatever you want,” Carlton murmured softly, enraptured at he way Shawn's hair sprung straight up when he pushed it down.

“Like what? My philosophical take on Rocky and Bullwinkle? How Scooby Doo is the most brilliant argument for the legalization of marijuana and shining example of both the sexual revolution and the homosexual agenda?” Carlton didn't say anything, just let Shawn figure it out. He lapsed into silence, but Carlton knew it couldn't last. Shawn and silence were arch nemeses, the kind which hadn't been seen since Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer.

“Well, I really hate that you're making me go see a therapist.” Shawn said the word with tones and
Carlton usually reserved for serial killers, rapists, and various combinations of the two. Carlton wondered where his distaste for them came from.

A couple minutes later, he added, “And I could do without the spankings.” Carlton snickered but that was his only response. Shawn filled the rest of his hour with mindless prattle, jumping from topic to topic with barely a stop in between. It turned into a frightening trip through Shawn's mind, though Carlton had to admit it gave him a unique insight into the world according to Spencer.

Shawn wound down as the minutes ticked by, closer and closer to the hour. When Shawn stayed quiet for three whole minutes, Carlton started getting worried. After revisiting the 80s through a Shawn Spencer filter the silence seemed oppressive.

The clock clicked to 10:59 and Shawn pushed himself into a sitting position, turning towards Carlton. Back lit by the table lamp, Shawn looked incredible. The dark brown leather collar gleamed, reminding Carlton of why they were doing this. Shaw cleared his throat and Carlton's attention snapped back to his face.

“Thanks,” Shawn said with an intimate little smile Carlton had never seen before. Carlton pulled Shawn back into his chest.

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“Get up, Shawn,” Carlton ordered. Shawn grumbled and pushed himself up...only to flop back down with a groan. Carlton started a mental count in his head; Shawn had five seconds to get out of bed, then Carlton was going to wake him up the hard way.

Yep, Shawn's grace period was up.

Carlton pulled the sheets off.

“T'm up, I'm up!” Shawn grumbled, moving into a sitting position. Not good enough. Carlton sat on the edge of the bed, grabbed Shawn by the scruff of the neck, and upended him over Carlton's knee. “What the--”

Carlton smacked him through his boxers.

“Don't question me.” Shawn groaned and wiggled on Carlton's lap, his morning erection pressing into Carlton's thigh. Carlton laid two more swats just to make sure he had Shawn's attention. When Shawn was still, he yanked the boxers down. Shawn's ass glowed light pink where he'd been hit.

“When I tell you to do something you do it immediately,” Carlton said harshly, eyes tracing the swell of Shawn's ass. It was...really a fantastic ass. He pulled his brain back to the task at hand. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Shawn said, voice muffled by the mattress.

“Good. Stay still.” Carlton set out to turn Shawn's beautiful ass bright red, bringing his hand down sharply. He admired his hand print, perfectly outlined, on one pale cheek. Shame he had to mar it. “Don't forget again.” He brought his hand down right through the top of the hand print. Shawn gasped and squirmed, then settled down for the next strike.

Carlton kept up until Shawn's butt radiated heat and glowed red. He ran his finger lightly over the sensitized globes. Shawn gasped and shuddered under the sensual assault, the feeling so very different from the sharp sting of a swat. He clenched his fists in the bed sheet and whimpered, trying to keep still as commanded.
“Good,” Carlton praised, laying both of his hands on Shawn. He cupped and fondled the warm flesh, took his time to play. The no sex rule still firmly in place, all Carlton did was touch. He could feel Shawn heavy and leaking against his thigh; a shame he'd get no release today. He scraped a nail against the underside of Shawn's ass, right here the leg met. Shawn shuddered and tensed and kept still. “Very good.” Carlton grinned when the back of Shawn's neck briefly flushed red enough to match his ass.

“In a minute,” Carlton said softly, “we're going to get up an take a shower. When I tell you, I want you to go to the bathroom and turn on the shower and kneel on the floor and wait for me. Understand?”


“Good, Shawn. Very good.” He couldn't resist a playful brush against Shawn's hole, a move which wrenched a guttural moan and violent twitch from him. Enough torturing them both; they still had to get through the shower. “Go, Shawn.”

Shawn righted himself and looked completely fuckable with his boxers around his knees, sleep-mussed hair and tanned butt. He shimmied the boxers the rest of the way off, cock bouncing as he walked. Fuck. Carlton fell back on the bed as he heard the water start up. He was going to combust of sexual frustration before too long. To have Shawn right there...no. He had to remember why he put that rule into place, because of things like Shawn's mental health and easing in to the more advanced aspects of their arrangement. Fuck.

Carlton ignored his insistent erection and grabbed his special toy from underneath the bed. Shawn should enjoy this.

As instructed, Shawn waited on the mat, head bowed. Carlton touched his head in acknowledgment before he tested the temperature and made adjustments. “Give me thirty seconds and then follow me in.”

Carlton quickly fastened his shower cuffs to the wall and grinned. Pretty and blue and made for Shawn. The curtain shifted as Shawn stepped in.

“I bought you something,” Carlton said, stepping into the spray so Shawn could see. The moment Shawn figured out what they were his eyes dilated and his cock twitched. “I thought you'd like them.” The plastic cuffs suction-cupped to the wall, placed high enough so Shawn would have to stretch into them and couldn't get enough leverage to pull them free.

Shawn grinned. He stepped towards them and plastered his back to the wall, hands above his head, looking at Carlton impatiently. Carlton laughed and buckled him in, testing the suction and their fit. Nothing rubbing. He had a Shawn-shaped playground at his disposal.

Carlton stepped back and angled the spray to Shawn's chest. The water droplets cascading down over his nipples caught Carlton's attention. He wanted to lick it off, to suck the nubs in and...what was stopping him? He could do that! So he did, running his tongue along water-warm skin, around Shawn's tight nipple. He teased it to a peak, then turned his attention to the other one.

“God, Lassy, you're killing me!”

“You're alive enough to complain,” Carlton pointed out like the bastard he was. Shawn groaned and squirmed but he couldn't go very far. He had to put up with Carlton's torturous touch for as long as Carlton wanted him to. By the time Lassy got around to actually washing him, Shawn was panting and half gone. His cock ached with the need to come—he'd been hard for his entire life by this point.
—and Lassy just kept touching him. With soap. Then the spray hit him, tiny pricks of water that slid down his body and swirled around his cock and fuck. He couldn't take much more of this.

Except it was infinitely worse when Carlton stopped. Took away his magic fingers and soap and water and just left Shawn cuffed to the wall, panting for more. He was vaguely aware of the water turning off and the curtain opening. He slowly pulled himself together, dick still protesting Carlton's ridiculous edict. No sex was the worst idea he'd ever heard of.

“Shawn, are you back with the living?”

“Murgh.” Carlton laughed at him. “znot funny.”

“It is a little.

“Hate you,” Shawn said without any heat, hanging his head down and taking deep, steadying breaths.

“Means I'm doing my job right. You ready for breakfast?”

“Murgh.”

Carlton had left out a ratty pair of jeans and a worn t-shirt for him to wear. Shawn tried to figure out if that was a good sign or not. Lassy wasn't a ratty clothes kind of guy. A glance at the clock had him running towards the door; he had two minutes to get in position for breakfast.

He slid to his knees beside Carlton's chair with seconds to spare.

Keeping silent through the meal, while Carlton read the paper and fed him eggs and toast and bacon, was killing Shawn. He didn't have anything to concentrate on and he was bored bored bored. He noticed a crack in the baseboard under Lassy's kitchen cabinets; his mind layered another series of cracks on top of it and Shawn pushed it away. He started fidgeting, could feel his body moving restlessly. When he closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly, the pattern of the wall crack crawled across his eyelids. He needed to move, something to focus on, anything—

Carlton put his hand on the back of Shawn's neck, fingers splayed over the leather of Shawn's collar. His thumb rubbed at the sensitive point where leather met skin and Shawn shuddered, then quieted. He did have something to concentrate on.

With Carlton's hand as a reminder, Shawn slowly found his center. He rested his head on Carlton's knee, rubbing against the rough denim of his ratty jeans. Carlton's fingers invariably tangled in Shawn's hair, pulling at the crazy mess. Shawn glanced up and caught Carlton smiling softly, ostensibly reading his paper but he eyes weren't moving the right way.

Shawn smiled and nuzzled Carlton's thigh, his mind singing Carlton is a softy! Carlton is a softy! (His butt, still sore from last night, begged to differ.)

“Still hungry?” Carlton asked, cupping Shawn's chin and running his thumb along one cheek bone. Shawn shook his head. “Great. We can get to work.”

“You mean I've found a job you haven't done?” Carlton snarked.
“As you can see,” Shawn grunted, tossing a heavy branch aside, “landscaping doesn't agree with me!” He pouted and showed Carlton the giant, deadly scratch the mean nasty plant had given him. The plant was probably poisonous. The wound would get infected, his arm would turn black, and he'd die a withered, limbless shell of a man. Very tragic.

“It's a scratch,” Carlton said. He didn't sound as if he understood the gravity of the situation.

“I've been mauled practically beyond recognition!” Shawn cried.

“It's already fading,” Carlton said placidly, propping himself up on his shovel.

“I've been mangled.”

“You're not getting out of this.”

“Aren't I responsible for lunch?”

“It's 10 am.”

“But—” Carlton dropped his shovel and hauled Shawn around, delivering two sharp swats to his ass.

“I'm using the flat end of the shovel next time,” Carlton warned. Shawn pouted, rubbed at his abused bum, and got back to the back-breaking work of clearing the brush in Carlton's backyard.

Lunch had been an absurdly torturous affair. Shawn was pretty sure his union might have something to say about the way they tore through it. Then, it had been back to the yard. More clearing, more cutting and shoveling and digging and other tortures that ended with -ing.

Shawn had been so sore and tired at dinner Carlton had relented and let him sit in a chair and feed himself, though at that point Shawn had been so exhausted he would have loved for Carlton to hand feed him.

“Come on, Shawn.”

“Bed?” he asked hopefully, blinking up at Carlton.

“Confession,” Carlton countered. Shawn sighed and hauled himself out of the chair, stumbling after Lassy. He wasn't going to last an hour. His eyes drooped and his limbs felt heavy.

Shawn laid on the couch like last time, head on Carlton's lap. He tried to think of something to say, anything, but his mind was blank. Blissfully, amazingly blank.

And that, he realized, had been the point. Carlton had arranged the entire day to keep him busy, to give his mind a break from the constant barrage of memories and traps.

“It was a good day,” Shawn finally said, words slurred at the edges. He fell asleep before the hour was up, but Carlton let him.

“I always thought Lou Bega got a bad rap,” Shawn mused. “He was more talented than 'Mambo No. 5' lead the world to believe.”

“It's hard living life as a one hit wonder,” Dr. Kagan said sagely. Shawn glanced around the room,
taking in the changes since last time. A couple of books missing and the box of toys in the corner wasn't well packed away. Someone had spilled something on the couch, there was a business card stuffed between the cushions, the lamp had been moved two inches to the left, the good doctor had used close to seven post-it notes from the pad by his phone--

“Shawn?” Shawn blinked. Dr. Kagan wasn't behind the desk where he was supposed to be. “Shawn?” He was kneeling beside Shawn's chair, looking at him with concern. Crap. He hadn't phased out in front of anyone before.

“What happened, Shawn?” Kagan reached for his hand, but Shawn snatched it away before he could touch. “You were unresponsive for almost ten minutes. Are you OK? Does this happen often?”

“I'm fine.” Shawn wouldn't have believed himself either.

“Do you want me to get your boyfriend? The man who accompanies you here?”

“Carlton isn't my boyfriend. He just ties me up when I'm bad.” The words made Shawn feel slimy and cheap. He didn't believe them; if anything, Lassy was far more important than a mere boyfriend. Maybe he was fishing for a reaction, something he could hold against the good Doctor Daniel Kagan. It didn't work, he just looked concerned and troubled.

“Would Carlton agree with that assessment?” Dr. Kagan asked. When Shawn didn't answer, he sighed and slid in to the chair beside Shawn. “Look Shawn. I know you don't want to be here. I could tell the moment you stepped foot through the door. I could also tell there's something bothering you, but I can't make you tell me what. I don't want to.”

“I'd try not to waste your time, but Carlton thinks this is good for me and I'll get a spanking if I try to ditch class,” Shawn said, baring his teeth in an unfriendly smile. His leg bounced up and down in agitation.

“It's not a waste of my time, Shawn. You're paying me, I'd be more than happy to sit here and get paid to catch up on my reading or paperwork.”

“So you're just going to let me sit here?” Shawn asked disbelievingly. Kagan nodded, wondering what had made the young man in front of him so jaded. He hid it behind a wall of jocular reposts and a blinding smile, but there were shadows behind his eyes. “And you won't...you won't tell Carlton?”

Kagan smiled, amused with Shawn's sudden anxiety. Today's power plays had been sloppy and haphazard, nothing like the subtle games they'd engaged in their first meeting. This was defensive maneuvering, pure and simple. Throwing his relationship with Carlton at him, testing his reactions and prejudices.

“If you won't tell Francine.” Shawn drew back distrustingly, trying to figure out how sincere the offer was. Kagan breathed a mental sigh of relief when Shawn relaxed and nodded. “Wonderful.”

He grabbed his book of sudoku puzzles and flipped it to a hard one. Time to play the odds. Shawn didn't like silence, and he didn't like to be bored. He also possessed a sharp intellect, definitely above-average. The koosh ball he'd just grabbed wouldn't hold his attention for long. Kagan started filling in the puzzle, taking more time than he needed. He got to one square; should be a seven. He filled in a nine.

“You might want to recheck that,” Shawn said offhand, feigning disinterest. Kagan squashed his grin.

“Hhhhhmmmm?”
“The spirits tell me you wrote a nine where a different odd number should be. Preferably a prime.”

“Huh. I think you're right.”
Their first week went fairly smoothly. Carlton structured every minute of Shawn's day, from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to bed, usually with backbreaking yard work. The only break Shawn got was when Lassy frog-marched him to therapy with DK. (Carlton insisted Shawn call him 'Dr. Kagan' during their Nightly Confessionals as a sign of respect. Carly just didn't grasp the understanding that he and DK had come to during their every-other-day meetings. Which Shawn thought was overkill—once a week would be fine—but Carlton held firm.)

Oooh, Lassiter was a crafty detective. He was playing psychological mind games with him, making therapy the lesser of two evils. Making Shawn look forward to therapy as a way to get out of yard work. Twisted.

But if he was very, very good, Carlton would tie him up.

Shawn had almost died of over-lustification when Carlton had pulled out some ropes and started to tie him up with an intricate knots. Shawn wasn't a connoisseur of Japanese rope bondage, but if Carlton was willing to teach him, Shawn was more than willing to learn. And offer his body up for practice any time Lassy wanted.

As a Sunday special, Lassy had bound his hands behind his back after lunch and made Shawn go through the rest of the day like that. Shawn had quickly learned not to say anything that might annoy or irk Lassy right before he needed help. Carlton liked to use big words like humility in conjunction with such epiphanies; Shawn preferred to call it survival.

Shawn's days were easier, with both their energies geared towards keeping Shawn busy and engaged. Nights were different. There weren't evil shrubs of doom or pretty ropes or sharp blue eyes to block his thoughts. Shawn didn't have any defenses in his own head. Usually, Carlton could shake him enough for Shawn to wake and realize he was safe, drifting off with Carlton curled around him.

Tonight was different.

“Shawn!” Carlton dodged an elbow as Shawn jerked awake. Sweat soaked through his cotton sleep shirt and his breath filled the room with harsh sounds. His eyes were wide and scared. “It's OK,” Carlton murmured soothingly, rocking Shawn to him. Shawn made a high-pitched noise in the back of his throat, trying to fight the tremors that wracked his body.

“It's OK, Shawn, it's OK.”

“It's not fucking OK!” Shawn yelled, pushing away from Carlton. He got tangled in the sheets and hit the floor with a whump.

“Shawn—”

“Don't.” Shawn freed himself from the sheets and kicked them away. Carlton watched him from on the bed. Shawn could feel Carlton's concern and it just ratcheted up his tension. He didn't want Carlton to feel bad or concerned or fucking anything! He wanted to stop waking Carlton up every night, to stop thinking about Larry and Ben and cracks in the walls. To stop remembering.

Shawn shook his head and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.
A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and Shawn scrambled to get away, reacting as if attacked. He hit the wall, breathing harshly. Carlton crouched in front of him, hands held up non-threateningly.

“Alright, Shawn. I need you to calm down. Can you do that for me?” Shawn's focus drifted past Carlton to the shadows on the wall. One of the branches from a tree outside looked like one of the cracks from the wall, gnarled and twisting. “Shawn.”

Shawn shook his head, drawing in on himself. He tucked his head between his knees, hands clenched tightly around his legs. Carlton could see Shawn growing more and more desperate. He needed to do something, anything. An idea came to him, something he'd only discussed in theory with Sam and Esme, but that he knew he could pull off. He thought about the lengths and types of ropes he had. Enough.

“Shawn,” Carlton called. Shawn twitched, but didn't respond. Carlton mentally shrugged; Shawn reacted better to direct orders when he was like this. “Shawn!” His head jerked up and he stared at Carlton with haunted eyes.


“On the couch in a comfortable position.” Carlton pulled out lengths of ropes he'd never used and ran through knots in his head. He saw the first glimmer of interest in Shawn's eyes. “I'm going to wrap you completely, from neck to toe, completely immobile.” Shawn made a soft whine, his eyes riveted to the ropes in Carlton's hands.

“Sit up and put your arms behind your back.” Shawn did as he asked, looking disappointed, until Carlton put a quick down-and-dirty harness on him. It looped around his chest and over his arms, securing his wrists behind him. It wouldn't bear weight or work for the long term, but Carlton hoped it grounded Shawn while he started on the complicated mummification.

It worked. Shawn relaxed with his hands bound, some of the shadows disappearing as he watched Calton work on his feet. Carlton pulled Shawn forward so his butt was barely on the couch, his upper body laying down. He braced Shawn's feet flat on his chest, running his hands along the hairy ankles and delicate foot bones. Carlton took a length of rope and wrapped his ankles like cuffs with medium-sized ropes, stiff and unyielding.

“This is called a hishi,” Carlton said into the silence, keeping his tone of voice low and even, emulating how Sam talked to both him and Esme when he demonstrated a particularly complicated procedure that could get away from both the dom and the sub if the two parties weren't in synch. With a thin rope he tied pretty diamond over the top of Shawn's feet, finishing it with both of Shawn's big toes bound together. He checked to make sure the ropes weren't too tight, especially given the length of time he intended to keep Shawn immobile. Satisfied, he dropped Shawn's feet into his lap.

He worked his way up Shawn's legs. He bound Shawn's knees together with a simple figure eight. Carlton and showed off along Shawn's thighs, creating pretty patterns and working on his more intricate knots.

“I'm going to put a kikkou on your thigh,” he told Shawn, concentrating on the intricate design. He only had to redo two, and with every inch of skin he covered Shawn relaxed more and more. “It's a
design that leaves a tortoise shell pattern in the skin when the ropes are removed. They're beautiful, and will leave imprints on your body. I can see it already, the texture of the rope and the kikkou on your skin.” Shawn moaned and his cock stirred, Carlton's hands traveling higher and higher. Carlton rubbed his thumb along the crease of Shawn's leg.

“I haven't decided what to do on your chest,” Carlton said conversationally. He picked up Shawn's legs and laid them back on the couch. “Perhaps a shinju. Mostly used for women because it brackets the breasts, but I wouldn't mind access to your nipples.” Carlton brushed Shawn's chest, considering. There were so many options, so many things he could do. Shawn gasped and arched up, begging for Carlton's touch.

“Or maybe a hishi-karada. Diamonds to match your feet. I can tie your cock up with that one, anchor the harness to it.” Shawn shuddered and gasped. “You like that, huh? Yeah, me too.” He released Shawn from his take-down harness, and pulled him into a seated position.

He retied Shawn's hands over his head and bound his wrists with a quick, simple series of loops. With Shawn sitting up, hands over his head, Carlton could start on chest harness diamond weave, continuing on from where he'd left off at Shawn's thigh.

“The ropes look beautiful pressed against your skin,” Carlton murmured as he worked. He wrapped his rope around Shawn's slim hips and wound it up his body, crisscrossing Shawn's torso and back, up to his neck. He brushed against Shawn with every pass, tantalizing touches that aroused them both.

“I love doing this,” Carlton confessed, tightening another knot and twisting the rope into an elegant loop. “There's an order to it. A structure. The different elements that combine into one, disciplined and neat.” Shawn twitched as Carlton brushed against a nipple, securing the chest section of Shawn's full body dress, and Carlton flushed. He wasn't good with words. Describing the sensuality and the erotica of the ropes, how they felt sliding through his fingers, laying and positioning them against Shawn...he couldn't do it justice.

He sat back on his heels and looked at what he'd done so far. The diamonds drew attention to Shawn's nipples and bellybutton, lead the eye down his body to his cock, fully hard now.

“Arms,” Carlton ordered. Shawn obediently lowered his arms. Carlton took a stiff length of rope and created cuffs for Shawn's wrists, threading them through the weavings on his legs, binding his arms to his body. He kept the knots simple: a main line down the center of Shawn's arm with bands coming off. Each band looped through the ropes that already bound Shawn's legs and torso. Carlton finished with each arm and took a small, thin tie and bound each of Shawn's fingers to his legs.

Shawn's eyes were glassy and unfocused when Carlton checked on him, staring up at the ceiling. His breathing remained slow and steady.

“Shawn? Are you alright?” Carlton frowned when he got no response. He shook Shawn slightly. “Shawn? I need you to answer me, you need to let me know that you're alright.”

“mfin.” Shawn was looking at him, but not quite focusing. He looked drugged out, and talking was difficult.

“You need to do better than that, Spencer,” Carlton coaxed. He rubbed the skin on Shawn's collar bone. “Are you alright.”

“Yeah.” Shawn's eyes were a little clearer, but they still seemed far away. “Good. L’ssy.”
“Alright.” He smoothed his hand through Shawn's head, lips quirking up at the way Shawn arched in to his touch like a giant cat. “I'm going to finish now.”

Carlton considered his problem. Shawn was hard—really, really hard—and had been through most of the binding process. Carlton didn't want to tie him that way; he planned on keeping Shawn like this most of the day. Well, that limited his options.

Shawn moaned, loud and uninhibited, when Carlton wrapped his hand around Shawn's cock. It was heavy and hot in his hand, familiar and tantalizing. He rubbed his thumb over the crown, pushing his thumb into the weeping tip. Shawn jerked in his harness, his hands straining against Carlton's ropes. His head arched back in pleasure, mouth open and panting.

Carlton took his time, touching and exploring. He touched a spot underneath the head that made Shawn's entire body arch and tense, a longing keen filling the room. God this was intoxicating, the power, the control. He could play with Shawn for the rest of the day if he was so inclined.

A flash of an idea had Carlton bending over to grab a few discarded lengths of rope. He rubbed the soft material against Shawn's erection, teasing him with the different texture. Shawn moaned and jerked, head lolling. Perfect.

Carlton made a quick wrap and slid it over Shawn's cock. He used the sheath of rope to jack Shawn off, alternating the feeling of the rope with his hand. Shawn moaned and shook, tension rippling through him. His neck stood out, muscles chorded and strained. He gasped for breath and twitched with ever pass. Carlton started speeding up his strokes, hand moving faster and faster. Shawn's face hid nothing, every wave of pleasure and emotion showing clearly on Shawn's features. Carlton rarely realized just how much Shawn hid from the world at large, how little he gave away during his slap-dash schemes and frenetic activity. But here, bound and without his defenses...

“Come for me,” he whispered in Shawn's ear. He watched, fascinated, as Shawn did just that, body going stiff as he came. His cock pulsed its release, sticky strands of milk-white crossing his carefully constructed ropes.

Carlton cleaned Shawn up with reverence, watching his penis slowly return to its flaccid state. Carlton was thankful for the task because he was feeling...unbalanced after watching Shawn come undone so freely.

“Shawn? You OK?” Carlton asked. He got no response. “Shawn? I need you to answer me.”

Shawn was almost unresponsive to questions that weren't yes or no or that required brain function. It was freaking him out, though he kept his cool because whatever was happening, Shawn was completely relaxed. Not straining against the ropes or breathing hard. Maybe this was one of those things he should call Esme about. He stepped just outside the room, where he could keep an eye on Shawn's mummified form, and dialed an all-too familiar number.

“Hello?” Carlton was temporarily thrown by a man answering Esme's phone until her realized it was Sam.

“Hi. Sam?”

“Hey, Carlton! How are you?”
“I need to talk to Esme, is she around?”

“Um, she's a little tied up at the moment. Can I help?”

“Ah, well. Shawn had a really, really bad morning.”

“Shit, everything OK?”

“Well, I wrapped him up. A full body dress.” Sam whistled. “It took a while.”

“You should take a picture. Sorry, didn't mean to distract. What's the problem.”

“I can barely get a coherent response out of Shawn. His eyes are glazed, he can't or won't move his head...”

“Can you see him right now?” Sam asked, an undercurrent of alarm in his voice that made Carlton's heart rate speed up.

“Yes.”

“OK. OK, good.” Sam let out a long breath. “I thought Esme had talked to you about subspace.”

“She did. Shawn's done it before. This is different.” There was silence on the other end of the line. “Sam?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was thinking about what you said. I think Shawn's gone deep into his headspace. Like, really deep. Possibly in part a counter-reaction to whatever was freaking him out earlier. Stay with him, monitor him. Talk to him and touch him. If you need him to come up, start telling him that, over and over. He'll follow your voice up. Same if he starts struggling. You have a safety knife near you, right?”

“Of course.”

“He should be fine, but be careful bringing him out of it. Take it slow. He may be a little shaky and disoriented in the aftermath. Just don't leave him alone, while he's tied or after. A lot of subs who go that deep need their tops around after to help them transition to the real world. Trust your instincts.”

“Alright. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem. Call if you need anything, yeah?”

“I signed a contract.”

Carlton hung up the phone and made his way back to Shawn.

He ran his fingers across Shawn's brow, quickly checked his pulse to make sure it was even and steady. Good, good. He picked up his thinnest rope and started weaving a rope cage around Shawn's flaccid penis. He wrapped it tight enough that Shawn wouldn't get hard again, encasing the entire length and attaching it to the base of the chest harness.

He sat back and admired his handiwork, the way the ropes sat snug against Shawn's chest.

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Shawn floated on a river of warmth and serenity. The outside world swirled around him but didn't touch him.
He could hear the murmur of a voice, familiar and warm and secure. It gently worked its way into his cocoon, calling him. Shawn followed it, chased it through the layer of his consciousness until the sounds turned into words and the words made sense. They were asking him a question, asking him to respond. Shawn had to concentrate to get his own voice to work, spit out an affirmative.

The voice came back, called him back to reality time and again. He remembered something in his mouth, sliding down his throat, careful instructions to *eat* and *chew* and *swallow* even though those words had no real meaning in this place.

His thoughts spun lazily, sliding through his mind without touching down or anchoring anywhere. Everything in his world right now was perfect and quiet. He breathed lightly, drifted in his private space.

The voice came back, low and constant. It started peeling back the veil of carefree timelessness. His body started coming back to him, heavy muscles and ungainly limbs. Words permeated the quiet, heavy with meaning and context. Shawn gasped as sharp, stabbing pains broke through the euphoric nothingness; he'd forgotten touch-sensation.

“Sssshhh, it's alright,” he was assured. Something warm and gentle rubbed away the pins, massaged the feeling and mobility back into his arm. It was dark and he wanted to see.

His vision was fuzzy for a moment, the lights too bright and the images swimming in his protective tears. He blinked them away, let them fall, and focused on the dark head bend over him.

“L'assy.” He frowned; that wasn't right. He opened his mouth and licked his lips, trying to remember how they worked.

“Hey Shawn. Back with me?” Shawn blinked because all he could see was blue.

“I'm...kinda.” He liked the sound of Lassy's laugh, rich and fun. He didn't laugh enough. Shawn blinked lazily and watched Carlton go back to work, slowly unknotting ropes and freeing Shawn's body from its hemp bindings. His nose itched, and Shawn found his hand heavy and clumsy; he punched himself in the face trying to scratch. Carlton grabbed his hand before he could anymore damage and gently lowered it to the couch before scratching Shawn's nose for him.

“Thanks,” Shawn mumbled drowsily. He felt pleasantly tapped out, like he'd just played the sports game of his life and all the emotional and physical energy had leeched out of him and he could sleep for days, curled up beside Carlton. Shawn dozed as Carlton worked the knots around his thighs loose. He had pretty patterns on his skin, tender places where the rope had dug in a little. Carlton paid attention to every inch of his skin, kneading stiff muscles and soothing red patches, talking all the while about anything that came into his head.

By the time Carlton finished untying him, Shawn felt considerably more alert, if not completely part of the world.

Carlton draped a blanket over Shawn—who hadn't even realized he was completely naked and kind of cold—and moved to the top of the couch. Shawn obligingly lifted his head and let Lassy slip underneath him, letting Shawn use his thigh for a pillow. They sat like that a while, Carlton running his fingers over Shawn's head and shoulders.

“Can you walk?” Carlton finally asked, keeping his voice soft in the warm silence. Shawn did a mental inventory of his muscles. They still felt oddly heavy and nonresponsive, but with Lassy's help he could probably manage to get to the bed.
“Yeah.” Carlton helped him up, wrapped the blanket firmly around him, and tucked Shawn to his side. Shawn rested most of his weight on Carlton.

Lying in bed, body relaxed and mind clear, Shawn came to a few realizations and made a few decisions.

For starters, he’d eventually have to tell Carlton the truth about his abilities. And his shrink, but he was more concerned with Carlton.

He also needed to grow up. He couldn’t keep expecting Carlton (or Gus or Dad) to bail him out; Carlton couldn’t be there 24/7, one day he’d be a minute too late, or Shawn would get a little too desperate. No, it was time for Shawn to start taking back control of his life and his own head.

Tomorrow. He’d start his new resolution tomorrow.

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Something was different with Shawn. Dr. Kagan had long ago learned to pay attention to his instincts when it came to his patients. He studied Shawn, trying to pinpoint the difference.

Shawn sat in his customary chair without his customary restlessness. Instead, Dr. Kagan found himself on the end of Shawn's complete, undiluted focus, startling in its intensity. He didn't know what to do with it.

“I remember everything,” Shawn said without preamble. Dr. Kagan frowned, trying to decipher what Shawn was talking about.

“Of your ordeal?”

“Of everything. Perfect recall.”

“Like eidetic memory?”

Shawn settled back in his chair with a twisted smirk. “Let me tell you about my Dad.”
“A confession has to be part of your new life.”
~Ludwig Wittgenstein

Their two weeks had passed faster than Carlton liked. Since the one episode, Shawn had held at an even keel, but this had happened one too many times for Carlton not to think there was a pattern. A calm in the storm for a little while, then a crisis; some sort of reset, and then clam again. He'd caught it early this time, managed to offset it, but what if he was in the middle of a case and Shawn needed him? If he couldn't get back in time to keep Shawn from doing something stupid?

“I'm not going to do anything stupid.” Carlton jerked and glared suspiciously at Shawn. The man was not psychic, no matter what he and anyone else said. (Though there times, few and far between, where the tiniest of tiny little small petite doubts lit up like a 10-watt bulb.)

“If you feel ANY kind of distress, you will call me,” Carlton ordered gruffly, slipping into his holster. Shawn stepped up behind him and straightened it, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

“I promise, sir.” Shawn's attitude since the day Carlton had tied him up had also changed. He was more serious about certain issues, quieter and more sedate. But unlike before, when he'd been drawing into himself and away from the world, it didn't feel wrong. It was nothing Carlton could quantify, and he had mixed feelings about it.

“You're to call me every two hours,” Carlton reminded. Shawn handed him his coat and followed him out of the room. “If I don't answer my land line, call my cell. If I don't answer my cell--”

“Can I guess this one? Please?” Carlton stopped and turned to face Shawn, who dropped his gaze and hunched his shoulders defensively. He was surprised when Carlton crowded him, forcing him back against the wall.

Carlton looked at Shawn, whose eyes were leveled at his sternum, and tried to think about what he could possibly say that might begin to encompass what he felt, why he needed Shawn to call him, that assurance. Then Shawn looked up and caught him out, saw everything and a flash of comprehension flared at the back of Carlton's mind, a profound understanding of Shawn that slipped away from him as soon as he grasped at it.

“Every two hours. I promise. Sir.”

Carlton cupped Shawn's cheek, rubbing his thumb across the bone beneath, the tip of his finger just brushing soft eyelashes.

“I'm still taking you to Dr. Kagan's on Thursdays,” Carlton reiterated. “You're not getting out of it.”

“Wouldn't dream of it.” Shawn closed his eyes and turned into the touch, lips pressed to Carlton's palm. Soon. He'd come clean about everything soon. His secret was eating at him, the reason he couldn't let go. He wanted Carlton to understand that it wasn't any failure on his part, that he was doing everything right. Going above and beyond.

He'd already told Carlton he wouldn't do anything stupid again. No more self-harm, no more destructive tendencies. He also knew Carlton didn't believe him, and Shawn could think of no way to convince him than to prove by action. He'd always been best at that anyway.
“You said you want to tell Carlton; why haven't you?” Shawn stared down at his hands.

“It's complicated.”

Kagan sat back and studied the man before him. That Shawn wasn't a crippled, barely-functioning hermit was a testament to his adaptability and personal fortitude. The way he described his ability to recollect information, lesser people would have shut down long ago. But somehow, Shawn had managed to deal with the vast amounts of information his brain processed and regurgitated. Until this incident had disrupted his system; Kagan had to find a way to help Shawn reclaim his equilibrium.

“May I bring him in?” Dr. Kagan asked, an idea forming. Shawn blinked, startled.

“You want to...”

“I'd like to ask Carlton to join us.” Shawn hesitated. “It's not my place to tell him your secrets, Shawn. I just want to ask him a question.”

“Is this a twisted Simon Gruber question or more like a whiny Sarah Williams question?” Kagan's eyes went squinty and it became clear he didn't understand. “Sure,” Shawn resignedly agreed. He sat back with a frown, wondering what DK had up his sleeve. Carlton came in looking no less confused than Shawn.

“Please, have a seat.” Carlton settled into the chair next to Shawn, tense and unsure. “As I told Shawn, I'd like to ask you a question.”

“A question?” Carlton repeated dubiously.

“Just one,” Dr. Kagan confirmed. Carlton and Shawn glanced at one another in almost perfect synchronicity, exchanging information and taking cues from one another with a glance.

“Alright,” Carlton allowed, turning his attention back to the doctor.

“How did you feel during Shawn's capture and rescue?”

Carlton opened his mouth on reflex, totally taken aback. When Shawn's head snapped around to stare at him, eyes round and inquiring, Carlton shrank back into his chair. He snapped his mouth shut and swallowed heavily.

“Isn't this Shawn's therapy?” he asked, wincing at how thick his voice sounded.

“I believe this is something Shawn needs to hear,” Dr. Kagan said gently. “And perhaps something you need to tell him.” Carlton dropped his head and took shaky breath in.

“We got the call at 5:23 pm. Gus...Guster called O'Hara's cell. She went pale, put it on speaker phone. He said, Gus said ‘They’ve got Shawn.’” Carlton clamped his jaw shut, fighting back the rush of emotions the memories called forth. The blankness as he processed, the I told you so on top of the terror that they'd be too late, that he'd never get to yell at Shawn for his ridiculous stunts or figure just how he pulled of his 'psychic' stuff. Or the way he'd never crowd Carlton's space again, pushing against the walls that kept everyone else away.

“Carlton,” Dr. Kagan began, but the detective held up a hand. He took another deep, shuddering breath.
“It was the single most paralyzing moment of my life.” Shawn’s hand slid onto his knee, gripping painfully tight. “I remember every second of it. Dispatch told us shots were reported at 5:37. We pulled in to the docks at 5:42, SWAT right behind us. We went in shooting; the perps were armed with automatic weapons and handguns. Shawn...there was blood on his shirt, I didn't know if he'd been hit. SWAT formed a barrier and I grabbed him. Pulled him to safety, and the paramedics took him away. They wouldn't give us updates.

“I cleared the scene, took reports. Then I went home and...” Carlton cleared his throat and shoved aside his natural reticence. “Everything I hadn't...felt, the disconnect, the terror, it all caught up at once. When you're a cop, you always know you might not come home. Your friends know it, it's why they're normally all cops too. Your lovers dread it, their heart races every time an official number calls home during or after shift.

“Every partner you get you think, 'What'll I tell their family'? But...” Carlton glanced at Shawn, “the civilians, the people who didn't take the vow to protect and to serve. You never expect them. That. They're your responsibility. When they get hurt, that's your failure. You didn't work hard enough, didn't get the perp off the street fast enough. It wasn't...shouldn't...”

Shawn got out of his chair and knelt down, wrapped his arms around Carlton's waist and laid his head in Carlton's lap. He held on. He hadn't thought about Carlton. Or Jules. Hadn't thought that they'd been terrified, worried that he'd been hurt. Gus had told him, berated him in the hospital for his foolish behavior. Carlton hadn't, which should have been the first sign that this was different, the rules had changed. Carlton was always first up to berate him, to count the ways Shawn had broken procedure, endangered himself, done something unbelievably stupid. Shawn always took it as a sign that he cared, exhibited in a dashing and manly fashion.

They hadn't talked about what had happened once.

“I'm sorry,” Shawn mumbled into Carlton's lap. “Sorry sorry sorry.” Carlton folded himself over Shawn's hunched form, trying to reassure him—reassure them both—that they were OK.

Dr. Kagan let himself out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him, leaving the two men to themselves.

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They were both quiet and subdued in the aftermath of Dr. Kagan's office. Carlton still felt raw from dredging up memories he'd rather have left buried. Shawn was trying to figure out how to tell Lassy the truth.

They ordered Chinese food by unspoken agreement; neither of them was up for cooking. Shawn couldn't seem to let Carlton out of his sight. He always drifted into the same room after a few minutes, hovering in the background but keeping his distance. Carlton had no idea where Shawn was headed. It didn't really matter, because Carlton would be with him no matter what. So Carlton let Shawn have his space, made it easy for him. Helped Shawn set the table and serve the food. Didn't push for the answers the cop in him demanded to know, quieted the questions buzzing through his head. He made sure the silence between them wasn't strained or uncomfortable.

“It's Confessional Hour,” Shawn said into the quietude. Carlton jerked like he'd just woken up. He stared at Shawn for a moment before pulling himself together.

“We don't have to--”

“Yes. I mean, I...I need to.” Carlton nodded and extended a hand to Shawn to pull him out of the
chair. He escorted Shawn into the den, one hand on his back. The touch was comforting.

Carlton sat on the couch as customary. He looked up, confused when Shawn didn’t join him. Instead, Shawn pushed Carlton's knees apart and knelt between them. Like in Dr. Kagan's office, Shawn laid his head in Carlton's lap and wrapped his arms around Carlton's waist.

“Shawn?”

“Sssshhh.” Shawn squinted his eyes closed and tried to remember what it felt like to be brave. Carlton had done it, and Shawn knew for a fact he'd much rather chew glass than talk about his feelings. For a long minute, Carlton sat stiffly on the couch, trying to figure out what was up with Shawn. Eventually, the sane voice in his head got through to him and pointed out this was Shawn and everything he did eventually made a twisted kind of sense.

Carlton threaded his fingers through Shawn's hair, his favorite past time these days. Odd because Shawn's hair had driven him absolutely crazy before in its studiously unkempt way. But here, his fingers breaking up the stiff gel and Shawn going boneless and relaxed, it was his favorite thing. Along with pretty much all the rest of Shawn.

“I need to tell you something,” Shawn started in a shaky voice. Carlton paused in his stroking, feeling the faint trembling of Shawn's body. He started up again when Shawn tensed. “You said this was safe, and you wouldn't get mad or...just, just don't leave.”

Carlton gently coaxed Shawn's head up, needing to see his eyes, for Shawn to see him and realize that wasn't going to happen. He cupped his hands around Shawn's head and ran the pads of his thumbs over his lips. Shawn swallowed and closed his eyes, lashes dark against his cheeks. When he spoke, his lips moved against Carlton's skin.

“I see everything. I remember everything. I can't forget. I can't call up with perfect clarity the smallest detail of anything I've ever seen. It's how I...” Shawn choked on the words, the rest of his confession, but Carlton had figured it out.

“That's how you've convinced the world you're psychic,” Carlton said automatically, his mind racing through the implications of Shawn's confessions. He dropped his hands and leaned back, his body secondary as his brain went to work. It made so much sense now. The tiny little clues that had been prodding at his brain, the almost-realizations. None of it had come together because he hadn't even known the answer was in the realm of possibility.

With one appalling realization his entire train of thought came to a screeching halt.

Shawn watched with trepidation as thoughts and emotions flashed across Carlton's face in rapid succession. He never settled on one long enough for Shawn to get a good read on his overall state, but judging by the way he'd pulled back and diminished contact between them...well, Shawn wasn't holding his breath. Then Carlton's face twisted into something angry and stricken, and he sat up straight, eyes staring at Shawn intently. Shawn steeled himself for the worst.

“You can't forget. Jesus. You can't. Forget. Shawn.” Carlton reached for him, understanding evident in his expression. Shawn felt himself slide off the edge he'd been balanced on since Dr. Kagan's, the tenuous control he'd had over his emotions gone in the aftermath of Carlton's realization and acceptance. Everyone said talking to others in the aftermath of trauma helped. Shawn had never believed them until now.

A sob wracked Shawn's body, tore him apart from the inside out, loud and painful. Carlton slid off the couch and wrapped his body around Shawn, arms and legs curling around him. He tucked
Shawn's head under his chin, still trying to process the enormity of Shawn's confession. Little things made sense—he bet if he looked at the scene photos he'd find the exact series of black lines Shawn had been doodling since he got here hidden somewhere. A wall, Shawn had said it was a wall. God, if Shawn really couldn't forget anything, could see the whole sordid ordeal in technicolor every time it intruded on his thoughts or something reminded him...

That Shawn could function at all impressed the hell out of Carlton.

“God, Shawn.”

“I'm sorry,” Shawn whispered brokenly. For lying, for not being whole, for putting this all on you. For Gus. “I'm sorry I'm sorry i'm sorry im sorry imsorryimsorry.”

Carlton held him through it all, there and not letting go. Never letting go.

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The next Thursday session, Dr. Kagan waved Carlton in with Shawn.

“I want to try something with both of you,” Dr. Kagan said. “Shawn, the average human forgets over time. Details become fuzzy, emotions numb. Since you don't, we're going to try and train your brain to deal with the information in a more positive way, to put you in a headspace where you can deal with the memories without the negative reactions.”

“Because I haven't tried to do that yet,” Shawn said snidely.

“Shawn,” Carlton warned. Shawn sighed and shook his head, casting his eyes towards the ceiling. Carlton didn't understand, it wasn't that simple. He couldn't just stop thinking about things. He couldn't stop the connections his brain made between that smell and this one, the time he saw that exact shade of red somewhere else.

“I know you've tried such solutions before, Shawn, but this is different. I want to tie your memories to something external—to Carlton.” That got him confused looks from both men. “If you would lie down on the couch?”

Shawn stretched out on DK's wonderfully comfortable couch, staring up at the ceiling.

“You told me about a time where the memories got overwhelming and Carlton managed to free you from them. I want you to immerse yourself in that memory, where you put your trust and safety in Carlton's hands. I want you to fall into it as far as you feel comfortable; Carlton is here to keep you safe and pull you out if you go too far.”

“You think this will work?” Carlton asked dubiously.

“It stands to reason that if he can do it with the bad memories, he can do it with the good,” Dr. Kagan pointed out. “Shawn, whenever you're ready.”

Skeptically, Shawn closed his eyes and remembered the day Lassy tied him up, from toe to neck. He could sketch the pattern of the ropes on his body if he thought about it hard enough. Could be a hot picture. Something to think about for later. He remembered the wrappings, the feeling of going deeper and deeper into himself. A brief moment of Ego death. His awareness of Carlton, the only thing outside of himself that mattered (except Carlton wasn't exactly outside of him, either, which was weird). He could feel it all, but it wasn't encompassing.

“Talk to him,” Dr. Kagan whispered to Carlton. “Remind him.”
Carlton glanced at Shawn laying on the couch, brow wrinkled in concentration. Carlton could see frustration lines forming around Shawn's eyes. Carlton lifted Shawn's feet and slid underneath them. He tugged on Shawn's ridiculous toes (he didn't even own a pair of sandals, but Shawn owned enough for both of them) and slid his hand to the delicate bones of Shawn's ankles.

“I started at your ankles,” Carlton said, tracing imaginary ropes. He trailed down to the top of his feet, tracing the crossing diamond patterns. “Then down to your feet. I tied your big toes together. I was proud of that one.” Shawn drew in a shuddering breath, his eyes fluttering beneath his lids.

“When I was done there, I started on your legs.” He traced the pattern he'd woven over Shawn's jeans. “Made sure you couldn't move, tied your legs together here, and here, and here.” He knew the second Shawn dropped, the way his body went lax and his breathing slowed. Shawn's body arranged itself in the position he'd been bound, legs pressed together, hands resting on his thighs. His heart rate dropped and his face went slack. Carlton glanced at Dr. Kagan, who nodded slightly and then left.

“Shawn?” Carlton called. “Shawn, I need to know how far down you are.” He caressed Shawn's face, leaning close. “Shawn, I need you to come back. Follow me out, alright? Come on, Shawn.” It took about ten minutes of gentle coaxing before Shawn opened his eyes, alert and tracking.

“Hey,” Carlton said with a smile. Shawn blinked drunkenly and smiled, still hazy around the edges. “How are you?”

“Al...” Shawn shook his head and cleared his throat. “Alright. Where's DK?”

“Doctor Kagan,” Carlton stressed, smirking. “is waiting for us outside.”

Doctor Kagan was doing sudoku but pretending it was work when they stuck their heads out of his office.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, gathering up his papers and stepping back in.

“Peachy!” Shawn said, smiling lazily. He had a hold on Carlton's leg; Carlton's hand rested possessively on the back of Shawn's neck. Their chairs were pushed together as close as possible while still maintaining a respectable distance. “Can I also shortcut to the extra-fun parts?”

“You'll have to take that up with your significant other,” Dr. Kagan laughed. “But I have homework for you both.” Shawn opened his mouth to complain or make a smart comment about homework but Carlton squeezed his neck warningly and he snapped it shut.

“What would you like us to do, Dr. Kagan?” Carlton asked solicitously. Kagan repressed a smile; Carlton tended to be rigid and focused where as Shawn was unpredictable and relaxed to the point of being aimless. But Carlton relaxed in Shawn's presence—minutely in public, though Kagan thought it was probably more apparent at home—and Shawn focused in Carlton's. They complimented one another nicely.

“What I want to do is get Shawn to the point where he can supplant one headspace for another. When he feels the memories of his ordeal surfacing and threatening to overwhelm, he can access an equally powerful memory to help manage and mitigate the side effects. It's like your brain has been programmed to respond to the memories of your ordeal in a way that causes panic attacks, dissociation, feelings of terror and danger. We're going to try and reprogram it by calling up an equally powerful yet vastly more positive memory—like Carlton tying you up.”

“Isn't that dangerous?” Carlton asked. “If I'm not there to help him?”
“It can be, which is why I want you to experiment together first, and I'd like you to join us for our Thursday sessions. This will take time. Don't look so glum, I'm ordering you to have more sex!” Shawn pumped his arm and hissed out a triumphant 'Yeessss!' Carlton scowled at him in lieu of gaping at Dr. Kagan. “You've both entered into a very defined relationship, and discovered a way to bring Shawn relief for a period of time and generate a positive headspace. As your relationship grows, you should be able to bring him in and out of his headspace with greater dexterity. There are those who even posit you can, together, shape and guide the experience. So that's your homework. Practice.”

“Practice sex,” Shawn reiterated, a little too giddily. He elbowed Carlton in the ribs. “See? It does a body good.” Carlton rose, eyes glinting.

“Thank you, doctor. Shawn and I have a few things to go and practice.” He turned his gaze on Shawn, smiling predatorily. Shawn swallowed and stilled in his chair, expression turning innocent

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“We're not having sex, Shawn,” Carlton said again, through gritted teeth.

“But DK said--”

“Doctor Kagan said we should practice controlling your subspace. We are still taking it slow, we will not be having sex.” Shawn huffed and sank back in his seat, pouting. Lassy was being totally unreasonable.

“But what if we--”

“No. Drop the subject.”

“But Lassy-face, I--” Shawn cut himself off when Carlton hooked a finger through his collar and jerked.

“I said no,” Carlton reiterated evenly, voice tight and controlled. “That means no. It does not mean continue discussing it, it does not mean whine about it, and it certainly doesn't mean try to change my mind about it. When we get home, you will go up to our room, pick three instruments, and wait on your knees for me to come and spend my valuable time disciplining you. Am I clear?” Shawn nodded, heart racing and cock throbbing. Carlton jerked him by the collar again.

“Yes sir!” Shawn groaned. Carlton released his grip from Shawn's collar and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

Shawn disappeared upstairs with alacrity. Carlton planned to leave him kneeling on the floor for a while yet. He picked up the phone and dialed Esme's shop.

“The Big Tease, head flirt speaking, how may I spank you?”

“You run a business with that greeting?” Carlton asked, appalled. Esme laughed.

“Caller ID, favorite Carlton. What's up?”

Carlton quickly filled her in on Dr. Kagan's therapy plan and their 'homework.' It all sounded great, but Carlton had no idea how to go about 'sculpting' Shawn's subspace experience.

“Oh cool! That's a really good idea. I love kinky shrinkys! Oh, later on, he'll probably have you put Shawn into a light headspace and then call up the bad memories to see what happens.”
“Yes, well, I have to get Shawn into a 'light' headspace first. I don't know how to do that.”

“Sure you do. Don't let him fall far.”

“Thank you Esme. You never fail to enlighten me.”

“Carlton. No need to get snippy. What I mean is, if he goes further than you want, bring him back up just like you would when he's deep. You're in charge. When he gets to the point you want, tell him to stay there. Ask questions he has to respond to, keep him cognizant and vocal. Don't over think it. And test out a few of those ties Sam and I showed you. See what gets to him.”

“Alright.”

“Seriously, beautiful, don't over think this. Have fun, trust yourself and Shawn. You'll get there.”

“I know.”

“Could you try that again, only without the long sigh and defeated tone?”

“I have to go spank Shawn now.”

“Much better.”

“Goodbye, Esme.”

“Give him a—” Carlton hung up with an eye roll, but couldn't deny he felt a bit mollified by his conversation with Esme. And he did have a punishment to administer.

Shawn as kneeling right where Carlton had told him, naked with his head bowed and hands clasped behind his back. A crop, a rubber whip, and a paddle lay in front of him. Carlton adjusted himself before moving towards Shawn.

“Why are we here?” Carlton asked silkily, hardly recognizing his own voice. Shawn shivered at the sound and goosebumps rose on his skin.

“I was disrespectful,” Shawn answered.

“And?”

“I challenged your authority.” Carlton snorted and Shawn's lips twisted into a quick smile before he chased it away. “And I forgot my place.”

“What is your place?” Carlton asked, curious to see what Shawn's response would be.

“I'm yours,” he answered simply. “I belong to you, to love and cherish as you see fit.” An unexpected swell of emotion clogged Carlton's throat momentarily.

“Yes,” Carlton said. He picked up the whip. “Fifteen. And you'll thank me for them.”

Shawn stretched over the foot of the bed, ass raised for Carlton. He tensed automatically, waiting for the first strike. Instead, Carlton trailed the rubber whip over the curve of his back, down his ass and back up. He gently flicked the switch, the rubber barely striking Shawn's skin, relaxing and preparing.

The first real hit stung like a bitch and had Shawn surging into the bed with a whimper, jaw clenched against the swell of pain.
“Shawn.”

“Th-thank you, sir.” The whip whooshed as Carlton brought the whip down again, against the join of Shawn's leg. Shawn gasped and fisted his hands in the bed spread. “Ah! Thank you sir!” Jesus that whip stung when Carlton wanted it to!

Carlton switched it up, laying strikes all over Shawn's ass. Sometimes he'd wait for Shawn to stop squirming and tensing, taking his time to plot out where the next strike would land. Other times the thanks had barely escaped Shawn's lips and he was swinging again, strikes building on one another. Shawn gasped and yelled through it all, sixteen strokes in total after Carlton had to give Shawn an extra for taking too long to thank him.

“Alright, it's done. Good boy,” Carlton soothed, running his hand down Shawn's sweat-slick back. Shawn pushed himself up, standing a bit unsteadily on his feet. Shawn glanced at him with barely concealed longing, and Carlton spread his arms wide. Shawn stepped into his embrace with a relieved sigh, accepting the warmth and affection Carlton gave so freely. Carlton thought he might just be getting good at this topping thing.
How to Make Friends and Alienate Lovers

“Love involves a peculiar unfathomable combination of understanding and misunderstanding.”
~Diane Arbus

Their lives settled into something of a routine. Shawn kept himself busy replanting the back yard, keeping Carlton's house cleaner than it had ever been before, and going to see Dr. Kagan (who Shawn was kind of growing to like). He called Carlton every two hours on the dot.

The check-ins helped keep Shawn focused throughout the days. Whenever he found himself slipping, he'd call Carlton. The few times he'd lost himself in his memories, stared off into space without marking time, the shrill ring of the phone cut through and the tightly controlled fear and worry in Carlton's voice catapulted him out of his funk.

Three weeks and their efforts were paying off. Life was far from perfect, and far from easy, but for the first time Shawn saw the light at the end of the tunnel and it was getting closer. He should have known it wouldn't last.

“Shawn!” The door banged against the wall as Carlton burst through it. Shawn had missed his last check-in and hadn't answered any of Carlton's subsequent calls. He'd gotten home as fast as he could. “SHAWN!” Carlton checked everywhere: not in the back yard (the reason for the last missed call and one of the most harsh punishments Carlton had delivered yet), no where on the first floor, liquor cabinet intact and untampered with. Carlton took the stairs two at a time. He could hear the shower running. Carlton shouldered into the bathroom.

“Shawn!” He ripped the curtain back, steeling himself for the worst. Shawn was huddled under the spray, staring at the far wall. Carlton felt the water and yanked his hand back; it was freezing. He shut it off and climbed into the tub, ignoring the dampness. “Shawn?”

Shawn looked up at Carlton, dazed, as Carlton wrapped a large towel around his shaking shoulders.

“I...”

“Shhh,” Carlton quieted, trying to rub some warmth back into Shawn's shaking body. “Let's get you out of here first.” Shawn was pliant and biddable, following Carlton's lead as he got bundled into bed, Lassy stripping down and climbing in after him. Shawn could feel the tension in his body.

“M sorry,” Shawn mumbled. Christ, he couldn't do anything right these days. First he pushed Gus as far away as he could, now he was dragging Carlton away from his job in a panic. Carlton tightened his hold on Shawn, loosening his grip only enough that Shawn could roll over and curl into his chest. Shawn stuttered out an explanation. “I would've...I was in the shower and it hit and I couldn't...I knew you'd come.” Carlton squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in Shawn's hair.

“What happened?” he made himself ask. “I thought the visualization was working.”

“This wasn't...different. There was...Gus,” Carlton hummed wordless encouragement. “There was a drip, in the background. A busted pipe.”

“A new trigger,” Carlton said with a sigh. Just when he thought things were getting easier...

“But I was doing OK, thinking about you and then. Then there was Gus and I--” Carlton hadn't
asked Shawn about his fight with Gus, or what had driven them apart. But he'd been convinced the two of them were eternal, two halves of an annoying psychic coin, and whatever drove them apart would have had to be bad. “I hurt him.”

“He'll forgive you,” Carlton said, sounding completely certain. Shawn wasn't as convinced.

They got a break in the aftermath of Shawn's freak out, time for everyone to catch their breath. Shawn was responding well to Dr. Kagan's visualization technique. He'd gone shopping by himself while Carlton fretted in the car. The giant, triumphant smile Shawn wore when he skated out of the Whole Foods on his shopping cart made every nerve wracking second worth it.

Shawn had found himself on the receiving end of a very enthusiastic blow job. Carlton believed in positive reinforcement.

“So. Favorite Carlton.” Carlton dragged himself out of his musings and eyed Esme warily, who failed miserably at sounding nonchalant. Sam chuckled and slapped Carlton on the back in solidarity before getting as far away from their conversation as he could.

“Yes, Esme?” he sighed. She smacked him in the shoulder with a laugh.

“You don't have to sound so dour, Head Detective.”

Carlton rolled his eyes, pasted on a wide, fake smile, and in his most chipper voice said, “Yes, Esme, how can I help you this beautiful day?”

“Yeah, please never do that again.” Carlton smirked. “It's just, I haven't gotten many panicky calls from you lately, and you've had this smile plastered to your face for the past couple of weeks...”

“Isn't that a good thing?” Carlton asked suspiciously. Esme huffed and glared at him. “What?”

“It's great, Carlton. Grand. Wonderful! I assume your boy—his name's Shawn, right? What does he look like, by the way? Is he—”

“I get it, Esme.”

“He's cute, right?”

“Esme,” Carlton sighed.

“It's just that—”

“You'll get to meet him.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?”

“Soon enough,” Carlton growled, putting enough strength into his tone to warn Esme off. She pouted, but backed off.

“I'm holding you to that,” she said sullenly. Carlton huffed and pulled her into a quick, one-armed hug.
“I know you will.”

Shawn carefully plated Lassy's favorite meal from his favorite Chinese place. He should get home in a couple of minutes and Shawn wanted to surprise him. Tires crunched in the driveway and Shawn checked everything one last time. Perfect!

Shawn bound up to the door and opened it enthusiastically. “Lass-Master-Flex!” Carlton made the face that meant he was amused with Shawn but trying not to show it. Shawn wrapped his arms around Carlton, ridiculously pleased when Carlton just laughed and reciprocated. This was so easy, so...Shawn stiffened when he got a whiff of Lassy's scent. That lavender perfume was back, mixed in with the usual scent of Carlton after a day's work. A woman's scent that wasn't Jules, Chief Vick, or anyone else Shawn had ever met.

“Shawn?” Carlton looked and sounded so concerned and Shawn felt a vicious stab of anger. He shoved Carlton away from him. “Shawn, what—”

“Who is she?”

Carlton blinked. “I don't understand.”

Shawn stepped into Carlton's space and made a show of smelling him. “Lavender with a hint of white rose.” Carlton swallowed thickly, caught. Disappointment made Shawn turn away because fuck. He hadn't wanted it to be true. He'd thought he'd hit rock bottom months ago. He was wrong. That had been nothing compared to what he felt like right now.

“Shawn, it's not—” He jerked his arm away from Lassiter's grasp. Carlton looked completely crushed for a second before determination took over. “I haven't been cheating on you, Shawn.” Shawn crossed his arms and glared his disbelief. He knew he looked childish and petulant, but he didn't care. Lassiter looked right back.

“That's it. I haven't been cheating on you,' and that's the end of it?” Shawn asked in disbelief.

Carlton let some of his hurt bleed through. “You shouldn't need more than that.”

Shawn snorted contemptuously. “Pshyeah, since I've been smelling her on you for months. And for the first time I got tired of playing the fool so if you'll excuse me, Detective Lassiter, I'm going to go pack my things.” Shawn spun around and started walking away. He felt shaken and unmoored. Part of him whispered that Carlton had changed his entire life for Shawn; the least Shawn could do was let him have his fun. Shawn shook it off and moved towards the stairs, ignoring everything else.

“Shawn!” Carlton called out, fear creeping into his voice. Shawn kept walking. “Shawn! Stop!”

Shawn flipped Carlton the bird.

Carlton snapped out, “SHAWN,” in that voice he'd been conditioned to obey. Shawn stopped walking on instinct, but stopped his knees that wanted to bend and his head that wanted to bow. He wanted nothing more than to submit to Carlton, to let him chase away the bleakness and this whole situation. But he couldn't; this wasn't the sum of what he was and Lassiter had...he'd...

Carlton moved around to Shawn's front, concerned with the internal battle he could see waging across Shawn's face. He wanted to shelter Shawn from it all, especially considering this whole situation was his fault and could have been easily avoided. “Shawn,” he said softly. Shawn glanced up at him, lightning-quick. “I'm going to make a phone call. Just...whatever you do, don't leave. Please.”
Shawn thought about it. He could always agree and change his mind later. As long as it got Carlton away from him. He couldn't think while Carlton was around. He nodded once and winced at the relief in Carlton's posture. Shawn brushed past him and went upstairs to pack his things.

He sat on the bed, leather ties wrapped around the bedposts from their activities last night. Still no real sex, but they both got off and it was fun. Fun. Fuck.

This was why he didn't do relationships. They were messy and entangling. They didn't understand that there was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in Bogota that he had to take. Shawn couldn't find the strength to go through their things, meshed together as they were. Shawn had, somehow, become mired in a serious relationship without even trying. One that was crumbling around him by the second.

The doorbell pulled Shawn out of his morose thoughts. Time to face the muzak.

A tall, gorgeous brunette stood in the foyer, glaring at Carlton. Shawn hated her the second her lavender and white-whatever scent floated to him. He must have made some kind of noise because they both turned to look at him at the same time. The woman's scowl turned into a large grin.

“Oh my God, you must be Shawn!” Shawn found himself hugged half to death by an enthusiastic strange woman he hated. He pulled back, trying to figure out what the hell was going on, and she noticed Shawn's unenthusiastic response. She stepped back and studied Shawn for a second before understanding dawned and she rounded on Carlton. “You didn't tell him? I took me twenty minutes to get here and you didn't talk to him?” She closed the distance between herself and Carlton in two steps and slapped him upside the head.

“Esme!” Carlton yelled.

“Carlton Lassiter, what were rules one through ten? Huh? You—I'm so disappointed in you. Ugh!” Esme grabbed Carlton by the ear and dragged him into the other room leaving Shawn confused on the steps.

“What...just happened?” he wondered aloud.

“Your boyfriend got on Esme's bad side,” an amused voice said. Shawn whirled around; somehow, he had missed the extra person hanging in the background. The...really hot guy hanging around in the background. Wow.

“Um...” The guy had to be an actor, with that smile and flawlessly tanned skin. His eyes actually sparkled.

“I'm Sam,” the guy said. Shawn shook his hand by rote.

“Shawn.”

“Yeah, I know. Carlton's talked about you.”

“He's...what?”

“Yeah, uh.” Sam glanced around the empty room. “Guess I get to explain what's up. Esme and I are together. In the same kinktastic way you and Carlton are together.” Shawn stared at him, who shifted and continued. “Carlton felt a little out of his depth when he realized what you needed, so we've been teaching him. You know, knots, some rope bondage, and how to use some of the toys.” Shawn's jaw dropped. “What, you just thought he was magically that good?”
“I...never thought about it.”

“Good,” Sam said smugly.

“But how did—I mean, you didn't...Carlton didn't...”

Sam frowned, trying to decipher what Shawn was trying to say. “Oh! Oh, no. Esme and I are exclusive. He's only ever practiced some knots and restraints on her. It's always good for beginners to work with an experienced bottom who knows what's up and can give feedback. We're like...kink mentors.”

“Esme's the sub?” Shawn gaped. “Wow. That's like finding out John Bender was really a rich socialite slumming it.” Shawn shook his head to clear it—because whoa, unexpected—and turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

“So how'd you teach Lassy to do that thing he does so well?” Shawn made a whipping motion with his hand, complete with sound effect.

“He bruised a lot of fruit,” Sam said with a smile. “Apples, oranges...” his gaze flicked down Shawn's body, “bananas.” Shawn swallowed, both terrified and aroused at the insinuation.

“Pineapples?” Shawn squeaked.

“Um. No?”

Shawn breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. So...why didn't I get to know about these play dates?”

Sam shrugged and his face pinked. “Honestly? I think he wanted to keep you to himself. Once Esme gets a hold of you...” Their conversation was interrupted by the door banging open and Carlton slinking out.

“Now, Carlton!” Esme commanded, manhandling her reluctant charge into the room. Carlton looked like someone had kicked his puppy. Repeatedly. His normally immaculate hair was mussed where Shawn deduced Esme had smacked him. Repeatedly.

Shawn took pity on his Lassufulgus—because really, Shawn had added to the whole situation by overreacting and it was only fair—and stepped between him and the irate little sub-woman (who was not acting very submissive at the moment).

“Lassopolis! Your hair's all mussed, let me help!” Shawn scrubbed his fingers through Carlton's hair turning it into a wild-looking mess. “MUCH better.” Esme giggled and Shawn decided he might not hate her completely.

“Shawn?” Lassiter looked so confused and hopeful.

“I met Sam,” Shawn said pointedly, gesturing to the man in question. He fixed Carlton with a serious look. “Apples are people too, Lassy.”

Carlton stuttered and choked on a response and Esme cracked up. “Oh, you are just FANTASTIC aren't you?” She sighed, her expression easing into a sappy grin. “You are so cute, I can see why he hid you away. I've been telling him to bring you by for ages but nnnnoooo, Carlton kept finding excuses--”

“Esme,” Sam said sharply, his voice firm and unyielding. Esme quieted immediately; her back straightened and her eyes dropped. The abrupt silence held for a few moments before she glanced up
at Sam.

“Too much?” she asked sheepishly.

Sam smiled gently. “Just a little.” Shawn watched the whole interaction in fascination.

Esme turned back to Shawn, her enthusiasm reigned in to something more manageable and less like word vomit, and offered her hand. “I'm Esme.”

“Shawn,” he replied, bowing over her hand with extravagant formality and kissing the back of it. Esme laughed at his antics. “Ehn-chan-tay. So tell me. How did you meet...The Lassiter?”

“I am not a superhero, Shawn,” Carlton groused, hand settled possessively on Shawn's hip.

Shawn turned to Lassy, eyes huge and wet. “You're my hero, Lassy. You're the wind beneath my wings.”

“You and I are going to be great friends,” Esme said confidently, grinning sharply at Carlton.

“Oh, God,” Carlton muttered, face a picture of abject horror. Sam slapped a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“And people think it's the tops who are in charge,” Sam commiserated. Carlton groaned again.

“Boys, do you mind?” Esme asked sweetly. She linked her arm with Shawn and started walking towards the kitchen. “I met Carlton a few years ago when he was wearing a very nice-fitting blue uniform. I'm glad he got rid of the mustache, though.”

“You were mustachioed, Lassy? How very Burt Reynolds of you.” Carlton scowled, but refused to rise to the bait.

“Oh yes. He was very manly,” Esme said with a straight face. “But I was...in a bad way. I was with this guy who abused the trust I'd placed in him. He had my head twisted so many ways I couldn't find up. One night...well, it was bad enough that it snapped me out of it long enough to file a police report. Carlton was one of the investigating officers. Most of the other officers didn't approve of my, ah, lifestyle. It was...”

“Not the finest example of the SBPD,” Carlton said tightly. Shawn picked up on the undercurrent of anger in Lassy's voice, even after all these years.

“Yeah, but when he showed up on the scene it was different. He talked to me, seriously, and I felt...safe, y'know? He gave me his number and helped me get counseling and came over a couple of times when Eric—that was the guy—had problems with the restraining order. I got my life on track, opened my own business, and we've kept in touch off and on through the years.” Shawn gave Lassy his sappiest 'you old softy' smile. Carlton's cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink before he looked away. “Oh, we have got to get together some time.” Esme's smile was wicked and calculating.

“I'm free tomorrow, the ball and chain willing to let you out for a pineapple smoothie or two?”

“She's not a slave, Shawn,” Sam huffed.

“Only to love,” Esme deadpanned, sharing a mischievous grin with Carlton's boy. “But really. We should do lunch. I know some wonderful stories about Carlton and the Rope of Doom.”

“Oh God. This is hell. I am in hell.” Carlton felt his life slip away as Shawn escorted Esme into the
kitchen for some tongue-loosening snacks.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Sam said with a sigh. “Retaliatory lunch tomorrow?”

“If by ‘retaliatory' you mean bitch, moan, and worry about what they're talking about, then yes.”

“Dude,” Sam said with a confessional air, “that's all tops ever talk about.” The sound of Esme and Shawn's laughter drifted from the kitchen.

“Wanna stay for dinner?” Carlton offered, though he felt the invitation was more ceremonial than anything at this point.

“We'd love to!” Esme called from the kitchen.

“Are you half bat or something?” Sam marveled, scowling in the general direction of his wayward sub.

“You'd be one to know!” Esme called back. Sam groaned. “And we're making more dinner.”

“Wait—Esme's cooking?” Sam asked in horror.

“Shawn's cooking,” Carlton assured him; he'd had a run in with Esme's cooking before. “Esme's probably teaching him new ways to torture me.”

“Always remember you have a cane,” Sam said sagely.

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“You so do not.”

“Signed by the original cast. Even Meat Loaf.”

“Oh come on. An original Rocky Horror poster? Susan Sarandon, Tim Curry? Barry Bostwick?”

“Do not doubt the power of the Spenstar.”

“I want to see it.”

“Every time you doubt me, a fairy looses it's wings,” Shawn informed her, adding a few spices to his patented leftover gumbo.

“And every time you do Carlton, a thousand fairies die of jealousy.”

“Touche.” Shawn glanced at his gumbo. It was almost done. He turned it down to simmer. “Follow me if you want to truly live.”

Carlton and Sam were still commiserating in the hall when their exuberant lovers skipped up the stairs.

“Dinner's in five!” Shawn yelled over his shoulder.

“He's exactly like you described him,” Sam observed.

“Unfortunately,” Carlton groaned, but there was a pleased smile softening his features. Their talk turned to baseball and the upcoming NFL season. (Sam was a Cowboy's fan from way back, but there's no accounting for taste.)
Five minutes turned into fifteen, and Carlton thought it might be a good idea to check on the food. He turned off the strove and poured the gumbo into a bowl.

“Hey Carlton?” Sam asked, voice deceptively mild. “Could I borrow a pillow?” Carlton followed his gaze to Shawn's kneeling pillow. Sam was looking at him smugly, and Carlton felt his own lips stretch into an answering grin.

“Be my guest.” They set the table with two plates.

“Dinner!” Carlton called up the stairs.

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“Dude. It's beautiful,” Esme breathed. She touched the poster reverently.

“Yes,” Shawn agreed.

“You even got Magenta's signature!”

“England's a dreary place,” Shawn said blithely. Carlton's call to dinner carried to them. “Sweet, food!”

Shawn glanced at the table where only two plates sat in front of Carlton and Sam, to Esme, to Carlton, and back. To know Carlton had been getting 'lessons' from these two people and seeing evidence of both relationships in front of him...it was a little much. He wasn't sure of the protocol, or if he should just go kneel by Carlton or...

Sam snapped his fingers and Esme immediately went to him, dropping to the pillow at his side. Carlton didn't react or look at Shawn, passing the orange chicken to their guest. Shawn got the hint and crossed to his customary spot, dropping to his knees less gracefully than Esme. Carlton ran his knuckles down the side of Shawn's face in approval, picking up his conversation with Sam.

He couldn't help the way his eyes slid shut and he leaned into the touch. He accepted a morsel of orange chicken from Carlton's fingers and opened his eyes. They landed on Esme, who smiled widely at him. Her arm was hooked around Sam's leg, hand caressing his ankle. Shawn smiled back and settled more fully into Carlton.

She smirked and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Shawn arched his one cooperative eyebrow and leered.

She suppressed a laugh and jerked her head towards Sam, then gave him an exaggerated wink.

Shawn rolled his eyes, not buying it.

Carlton and Sam both paused in their meal when the people at their feet simultaneously burst into laughter without a word passing between them. Sam gave Carlton a 'What're you gonna do' shrug and went back to serving himself.

Carlton grinned and ran his fingers through Shawn's hair.
Chapter Summary

I finally got around to fixing the weird out of order/random deletion thing that happened on AO3. So this should be fixed, complete, and in order! :) 

“*The friends who grew up with you*

deserve a special respect- the ones who
stuck by you shoulder to shoulder, in a
time when nothing was certain, all life
lay ahead, and every road led home.”

As much as he was enjoying the lack of dramatics in their life, as well as the return of his full paycheck and lack of interruptions at work, Carlton knew they were building up to another crisis. Shawn carried his guilt about Gus like Atlas; replayed every biting word over and over until his shoulders drooped with the weight of his guilt.

Self flagellation wasn't a good (or healthy) look for Shawn, and he started having nightmares every night again. He was jumpy and skittish, only calming if Carlton took him down or set him on some errand. Shawn was headed for free fall, and this time Carlton was going to catch him.

Carlton polled his assembled helpers about how to deal with the building storm. Dr. Kagan thought Shawn was ready to face his issues with his best friend, but Shawn shied away from anything Gus-related in therapy. And Carlton would never betray Shawn's trust and bring it up when he was in subspace. Which only really left Esme, so Carlton decided to broach the subject during one of their regular meetings.

Esme pushed Sam at him and ran away, leaving the two of them staring after her.

“That's new,” Carlton remarked.

“Yeah, well. She's...well. I don't know what her deal is,” Sam sighed. Carlton arched a brow at him and Sam shrugged. “I think it's a sub solidarity thing. One of those 'weird I agree with what you're doing but I can't say so' situations.”

“Um. What?”

“When you punish Shawn, how does he react? Like a real punishment, not one of the ones he—or you—engineer for fun.”

“He...” Carlton frowned and thought about it. “It depends on his state of mind when we go in, but...there's this moment. Where he changes. The mood changes? I don't know.”

“You do. You just don't know. So let me tell you why Esme left.” Sam pulled out a chair, and Carlton took the seat across from him. “Once upon a time, Esme done fucked up. A lot. Big time. Not on her own, but shit happens, y'know?

“She's hard on herself. She'll rehash even the smallest events over and over, work herself up into
sleepless nights. She doesn't mess up in such a huge way often, but this time...well. I put my foot down after the third sleepless night. I punished her for what she'd done.” Carlton opened his mouth to protest, but Sam held his hand up. “I did it because it was cleaner, easier, and safer than the way she beat herself up with her guilt. Kept replaying what she'd done, how things could have been, what should have happened over and over. She was punishing herself, and yeah, eventually she would have gotten over it. But until that point, she would have continued with her sleepless nights and emotional yo-yoing. So I called her in, took her down, and punished her until she was ready to forgive herself.”

Carlton started at the table top.

“The hardest thing for most people to do is to forgive themselves,” Sam said. “And sometimes, they need a little help.”

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As the nightmares got worse and Shawn started showing more and more signs of breaking apart, Carlton made his decision.

He hadn't had to throw his weight around as Shawn's Dom that much. After the first week, Shawn had been fairly cooperative, which had proven to him how much Shawn needed this arrangement. So Carlton made a few calls on Shawn's behalf and formulated a plan of action. He anticipated Shawn's reaction to his announcement and prepared himself—and the room—accordingly.

“Shawn.”

“No. I'm not going to do it.” Shawn's voice was flat and emotionless.


“I'm not ready,” Shawn tried, eyes wide and wet, voice trembling. But Carlton had prepared for all eventualities, and steeled himself against Shawn's puppy dog eyes and wavering voice. The truth was, Shawn would never think he was ready to talk to Gus. Not without a dozen countries and several years between them.

“You are.” Shawn whined in frustration, eyes darting around the room for an escape that wasn't there. Shawn was going to talk to Gus in...4 hours, 23 minutes.

Carlton was ready for when Shawn made a break for it. Carlton caught him quickly and wrestled the smaller man to the ground with a ex-vice cop's efficiency. He pulled a set of leather cuffs out of his pocket and slipped them around Shawn's wrists then clipped them together. While Shawn tested their strength, Carlton quickly bound his ankles in the same way.

“This is not a punishment, Shawn,” Carlton told him, holding him still. Carlton took in a shuddering breath, steeling himself. He'd told Esme he would give Shawn whatever he needed, even if it was a physical manifestation of the pain Shawn carried around inside him. “You've got to forgive yourself.”

When Shawn started struggling, Carlton stepped back to let him fight against his fetters, tiring himself in the process. Carlton took the time to dress the scene, running some leather restraints from the back of the couch to the front, a shorter set tied around the front legs. He had a little under four hours to get Shawn into the proper mindset to talk to Guster. There was no doubt in Carlton's mind that Gus would give Shawn every chance he wanted to apologize—as long as he kept wanting those chances. But Carlton believed in doing things right the first time.
Carlton just didn't know how to convince Shawn that neither he, nor Gus, were going anywhere.

Shawn made a truncated, strangled noise of frustration and anger, then relaxed on the floor. Carlton pushed off the couch and went to stand over him, looking down at Shawn even as the bound man glared up at Carlton.

“Are you done?” Carlton asked. It really didn't matter, Shawn was done if he said so, but this would go faster if Shawn was too exhausted to fight much. Shawn kicked out with his bound feet and glared at Carlton; in that moment, Carlton truly believed Shawn hated him.

“I asked you a question,” Carlton reminded.

“No,” Shawn said testily, eyes flashing defiantly. Behind the glare, Carlton could see fear and pain and guilt tangled together in one giant knot. Carlton brushed his fingers through Shawn's hair. He'd help Shawn straighten out those emotions, unknot them and help him let go. Carlton turned his caress into a painful yank, grabbing a fistful of Shawn's hair and pulling up.

“Wrong answer.” Carlton rolled Shawn over and pinned him to the floor. He grabbed the wooden paddle he'd stashed on the coffee table and brought it down on Shawn's jean-clad butt in quick succession. Shawn shouted and fought, straining against the ground, but Carlton held him down until he stopped struggling. Shawn stayed unmoving on the floor ever when Carlton's body weight disappeared.

“On your knees.” Shawn processed the order, but didn't obey it instantly like his instincts told him to. He wasn't going to give in to this. He didn't want to talk to Gus. Wasn't ready for that, and Carlton was wrong for forcing the issue. He ignored the little voice in his head that dangled his safe word in front of him mockingly.

He heard Carlton move behind him, paddle swishing threateningly, and scrambled to get into position. He didn't have much leverage, so balancing on his knees was a challenge, but he managed it without Carlton's help. Shawn settled onto his legs and glared at Carlton; he could deal with anything the bastard threw at him.

When Carlton reached for his neck and began unbuckling the slender collar Shawn had worn almost continuously for the past three months, he forgot how to breathe. He hadn't meant it! He'd signed the contract, he'd do whatever Carlton wanted just...just...

Carlton ignored the look of shocked despair that froze on Shawn's face as he removed the slender day collar. He hated that look, never wanted to see it ever again, but he was making a point here. Two steps away from Shawn. He laid the collar on the side table with the reverence it deserved and picked up the heavier play collar they hadn't touched since before the contract had be signed.

Shawn watched his every movement, eyes fluttering shut with relief when he buckled the wide, black strip of leather around Shawn's neck. Something eased inside of Shawn's chest, and Carlton laid a reassuring kiss on his lips before snapping a leather lead on the front D-ring. Shawn tried to follow Carlton's lips even as he backed away to the couch.

“Here.” Shawn looked at Carlton dubiously, because that would require a really humiliating shuffle-crawl and...Carlton's look grew more thunderous the longer Shawn took. Shawn pushed down a fresh surge of irritation—a mask for the trepidation he felt at facing up to the horrible things he said to Gus—and shuffled towards Carlton, following his orders without protest.

Shawn remained pliant as Carlton unhooked his ankles, stripped his jeans, and attached him to the couch; his ankles were connected to one another by a short spreader as well. His hands were next.
Carlton stretched him over the couch so his bare torso was pressed into the cushions and his ass was on display. Shawn tested the bonds and found them tight and restrictive.

“You are going talk to Gus today,” Carlton told him softly. Shawn tensed instinctively, mind screaming out no. For a thousand million reasons. He did keep his mouth shut. “You will talk to him civilly, without grandstanding or obfuscation. I'm going to help you get there, Shawn. I'm going to forgive you.”

Shawn fought back an unexpected upwelling of tears. No. This was...he wasn't...he couldn't do this. Didn't...didn't deserve this. He'd said so many things, this wasn't, Carlton couldn't—didn't have any right to forgive him. Panic and the age-old urge to flee surged within him, and Shawn lashed out.

“Like your forgiveness means something,” Shawn scoffed, pulling against his tethers. “I'll let you fuck me, but that doesn't mean I actually care. What makes you thiirk—”

Carlton pulled on the lead and arched Shawn's neck back, cutting off his ability to speak before Shawn gave himself more things to feel guilty about.

Shawn let out a muffled grunt when Carlton used the end of the leash to spank the fleshy part of his ass. It didn't hurt, really, just a little sting, but it made Shawn's emotions swirl dangerously.

“My forgiveness means everything,” Carlton said, punctuating his point was another strike, harder this time. “And you don't let me do anything.” Shawn shuddered at the darkness in Carlton's voice, the tone sending him sliding towards subspace.

Carlton used the leash as a warmup, getting Shawn's attention and reinforcing his position in their dynamic. Shawn's ass was a light pink by the time he got done, and Shawn's muscles were knotted and tense. Shawn wasn't the most verbal of people during a spanking, but he didn't bear them with the grim stoicism of a man sentenced to die. Carlton sighed internally; he knew it would take more than this, but if he could've stopped at this that would've been nice. Carlton ran his hand over the curve of Shawn's ass.

“Forgive yourself,” Carlton ordered.

“No,” Shawn ground out, eyes squeezed shut. “You can't make me.”

“I can,” Carlton disagreed. He brought his hand down unexpectedly with all his force. His hand left a dark imprint against the lighter pink flesh surrounding it. Shawn inhaled sharply, but didn't make another sound. A second slap resounded through the room, and then another. Shawn glued his eyes shut but was unable to stop the loud, high-pitched whine that escaped from him. The feeling of Carlton's hand, the sound, the emotional upheaval...

Shawn could do it. He could let it go. He could tuck the Gus memories in the same place he stored the Larry-Ben ones, packed away for a rainy day. He could chalk it all up to a bad day and wipe the slate clean. Give in. Fuck, did Shawn want to give in. Wanted to let Lassy take all the crap clouding his mind away but...this was Gus. Gus, who Shawn had hurt in unforgivable ways. He'd thrown his best friend's most painful moments at him, poked at them until the scars gave way into open wounds. Paraded them around because he wanted to see the same amount of hurt in Gus as Shawn felt. Fuck, tried to hurt Gus the way Larry-Ben had hurt him. How could Gus forgive him that?

Shawn buckled down, ground his teeth and let the pain roll through him. Fought against Carlton's order until Carlton's hand was as hot as his ass.
“I’m switching to the crop,” Carlton told Shawn, satisfied at the anticipatory clench that got him. “Let go, Shawn. Just...let go. Forgive yourself.” Shawn squinched his eyes and steeled himself for the bite, shook his head.

“You need to move on,” Carlton tried again, picking up the crop. Shawn twisted his hands and wrapped them in what little slack he could find, braced for the pain. Carlton stared at him for a long moment, wishing this was easier.

The first blow landed on the top of Shawn's ass, almost on his back. The sting of it made him gasp and tears gather in his eyes, but he kept them back. Carlton took a methodical approach, laying the blows rhythmically, working his way across. No surprises, just a punishment Shawn felt he richly deserved. An eye for an eye, pain he’d delivered unto Gus returned. The tears managed to make it out of Shawn's eyes, but he remained stubbornly silent, only the barest hints of sound making it through. It wasn't enough. Shawn clung to his guilt and fear, like it was the only thing keeping him afloat in tumultuous water instead of the thing drowning him one torturous breath at a time.

Carlton tossed the crop aside and ran a soothing hand over Shawn's blistered ass. Shawn was shaking, tears leaking through clenched eyelids. He was close, but Shawn's ass was going to take more abuse before he found whatever absolution he needed. And Carlton would be strong enough to give it to him.

Carlton picked up the cane and laid it down beside Shawn's face, right where he could see it. He'd never used the cane on a person before. Never even jokingly suggested it. He let it sit there, in Shawn's line of sight, more ominous in Shawn's head than it was in practice. A fine trembling started in Shawn's arms and worked its way through his body, but he still refused to make a sound.

“This cane will sting as much as you need it to.” Carlton stepped back and picked up the implement. “Forgive yourself.”

Shawn tensed and buried his hands in the cushions, shaking his head. His butt hurt, pulses of dull pain racing through him. He tried to shut his eyes, but every time he did he remembered invoking Natalie. Remembered the way Gus refused to date for a year afterwards he was so broken up about it. Shawn had broken every friend rule in the book by bringing it up.

Instead of hitting him, Carlton tapped the end of the case against a particularly red portion of Shawn's butt. Shawn tensed. Carlton let the end of the cane ghost against Shawn's heated skin, light and pleasant in contrast with the sharp, fiery pain it would bring.

Carlton kept up his gentle torture, cane stroking Shawn's inflamed skin. No pain, just sharp shivers of pleasure that wrecked Shawn more than the most painful beating. Carlton could just get on with it, hit him, punish him, get it over with. He felt his arms and legs shaking, how close to losing it he was.

When the first strike finally came, he both expected it and didn't. The pain lanced up his back, took away his breath, chipped away at the dam he'd built. He exhaled with a loud, guttural moan. Carlton gave him time to recover before laying the next strike, right over the first one. Shawn shouted out his pain, jerked with it, and stopped trying to control his tears.

The third hit broke him, shattered the dam he'd kept shored up and impenetrable.

Shawn screamed at the force of it, everything he'd been keeping in pouring out. Fear and self-recrimination, hate and love and need and want and hope and anger. It's all there, tangled together. Carlton drew it out of him, prolonged Shawn's catharsis, with three more light strikes laid at random. Shawn cursed and shook, bitten off bits words tumbling from his lip.
Shawn didn't even register Carlton releasing him or pulling him off the couch. Carlton held him while he cried, let the maelstrom rage and kept Shawn safe.

“I didn't...wanted to, but I couldn't and he-he-he...” Shawn choked on a sob, his tears soaking into Carlton's shirt. “I'm s-s-s-s-sorry.”

“I know,” Carlton murmured, petting Shawn's head. “And I forgive you.” Shawn broke down more at that. Tears stung Carlton's eyes and he let them slide down his cheeks unchecked while Shawn mumbled apologies for slights imagined and real, old and new. Carlton forgave them all, offering Shawn the solace he couldn't find in himself.

When Shawn's tears dried up and he could breath again, Carlton helped him up. He got them into a shower, soaped Shawn from head to toe, and didn't require him to think at all the entire time. Shawn coasted along, working through his feelings and thoughts from the safe place Carlton had created for him.

Carlton tucked them into bed for a little while, just holding Shawn. No demands or expectations until Gus and Juliet arrived. They settled into silence, Shawn's breathing slow and steady.

“Shawn,” Carlton called quietly. Shawn stirred against him. “Time to get ready.” Shawn pushed himself up and Carlton studied him. His eyes were a little puffy and his vibrant energy was subdued, but the haunted look had gone. For the first time in months, Carlton could see the brash man who wrote his own rules lurking beneath the surface.

Shawn leaned down and kissed him, slowly. Carlton smiled against Shawn's lips. They touched at every opportunity while they got dressed, sharing kisses and caresses. Before the ventured downstairs, Carlton tugged Shawn into a hug.

“You ready?” Carlton asked softly, running his fingers through Shawn's hair. Despite what he'd said, they wouldn't do this if Shawn really wasn't ready. Shawn tilted up so he could see Carlton.

“Yeah. I think I am.”

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“You look fine.”

“I know that.” Gus pulled on his collar. He always looked fine.

“It's going to be OK,” Juliet continued. Gus grimaced. “Seriously, it's just Shawn.”

“Just Shawn? Just Shawn? Nothing is ever just Shawn.”

“Gus——”

“No. No, you don't understand. I half expected Shawn to be in Andorra by now. He doesn't hang around when things get bad. He doesn't hang around period. He's got this two year cycle he goes through that starts and ends in Santa Barbara.”

“Well that's good,” Juliet pointed out. “It's home base.”

“It's not home base. When he gets bored he stops in for as long as it takes to find his next job or random stop. The last time he was here for three days on his way to Anacapa Island as a park ranger.”
“I don’t think that’s true,” Juliet said, pulling into Carlton’s driveway.

“Oh, it’s true,” Gus said, lip poking out as he sulked.

“Santa Barbara may not be Shawn’s home base, but you are.”

“Say what?”

“Gus, Shawn comes back to see you. You’re both...epic. Forever. You’re Psych-man and Magic Mouth.”

“Magic Head,” Gus corrected.

“Oh. Well, they’re both pretty accurate.” She watched while it percolated in his head. “Shawn isn’t nearly as cool without you. What would Psych-man do without Magic Head?”

“Or the Super Smeller.”

“Or your car.” Gus glared at her, but it wasn’t one of his best. She leaned over and cupped his cheek. “You’ll do great.”

They both had to take a moment and absorb the impact of Lassiter in worn jeans and a zip-hoody. He looked...relaxed.

“Guster. O’Hara.”


“He’s inside.” Carlton glanced at still-zombified Gus. “Waiting.”

“Hi, Detective Lassiter, looking good,” Gus caught up, pointing at Lassiter with imaginary ‘guns’ and winking. Carlton stared at him, and Gus froze again.

“Um, how about we go inside?” Juliet suggested.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Carlton agreed, shooting another disturbed look at Gus.

“Thank you for inviting us!” Gus called to their backs.

“Just keep walking,” Juliet whispered.

Shawn was seated nervously (and gingerly) at the kitchen table. He stood up when Juliet entered, eyes flicking past her to Gus, still in the shadows.

“You look good, Shawn,” Juliet said with an inviting smile. Shawn glanced down at his clothes; his outfit looked significantly more put-together than he’d normally wear, the effects of Lassy rubbing off on him.

“Thanks. You, uh, look great. As usual. Very fierce.” Gus took that moment to fully return to the world, lurching between Carlton and Jules. He stood in the kitchen, staring at Shawn, who waved nervously and held up a tray of hour d'oeuvres. “Pineapple tartlet?”

“O’Hara, have I ever showed you my collection of pre-Civil war guns?” Carlton asked.

“Why no, I don’t think you have. I’d love to see them.” They beat a quick retreat, leaving Gus and
Shawn staring at one another.

“As you can see, I've imparted the skill of subtlety to Lassy-Face,” Shawn tried joking. Gus kept staring; he couldn't think of anything to say. Shawn studied Gus' face to try and determine if this was a freeze up or something more.

“You're not—” Gus started, but cut himself off before the thought could fully form.

“I'm not...what? The most awesome baron of awesomeness ever?” Shawn mentally kicked himself. Flippancy was probably not the best way to start of an apology.

“You're not gone.” Shawn felt his face heating and looked away. Gus studied his oldest friend, things clicking into place.


“Gus—”

“How'd it go down? Did you have to—” Gus glanced to the left and the right “—seduce him?”

“You mean like Casanova?” Shawn asked, amused. Gus pursed his lips and scowled at Shawn.

“You are not Casanova, Shawn.” Shawn pouted, and Gus relented. “You may be Lothario.” Shawn brightened considerably. “Don't let it go to your head.”

“I won't,” Shawn said soberly, a promise that had nothing to do with the conversation they were having and everything to do with the one they weren't. “You won't let me.”

“You know that's right,” Gus said with a grin.

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Shawn snuggled up to Carlton, tucking his head underneath the strong Irish jawline. His mind was quiet and his world was right for the moment.

“Your dad next week?” Carlton suggested. Shawn huffed a laugh into his chest.

“Absolutely. 'Hey dad, how've you been? Oh me? Well, I let Lassy tie me up and strap me down and he does wicked, nasty things with my poor defenseless body.'”

Carlton hummed as he thought. “You think that'll work?”

“In the deserts of the heart
let the healing fountain start,
in the prison of his days
teach the free man how to praise”
~ W. H. Auden

End Notes

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